

HE ONLY WANTS HER...

MISSED
NOTES

A RIXON HIGH NOVEL

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MISSED NOTES

A RIXON HIGH NOVEL

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CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Playlist](#)

[About the Author](#)

You are braver than you believe. Stronger than you seem. Smarter than you think, and more loved than you know.

UNKNOWN

PROLOGUE

I ENTERED Bell's and spotted her immediately.

Sofia Bennet.

My best friend's sister.

She laughed at something her brother said. God, she was beautiful.

Beautiful and one hundred percent off-limits.

Approaching their booth, I paused when I noticed her go pale. Her eyelids fluttered as she started to slump to the side.

Fuck, I knew that look.

She slipped right off the bench and crumpled to the floor with a thud.

"Shit," Aaron leaped up and crouched beside her.

By the time I reached them, she was beginning to come to.

"Sofia, Sofe... it's okay," Aaron said. "I'm going to call Dad."

"N-no," she murmured. "Don't, please. I'm fine."

"Sofe, this isn't normal." His concerned gaze found mine and then settled back on her. "They need to know."

"I'm fine, Aaron." Sofia tried to shove him off her. "Stop babying me."

"Babying you? You fainted again. You're lucky you didn't crack your head open."

I stood back, watching as Aaron helped her into a sitting position. Someone handed him a glass of water and he offered it up to her.

“Here.”

She took a sip, bringing a hand to the back of her head. She was going to have a nasty lump tomorrow.

“What’s that now?” he asked. “Five times since the first time?”

Eight.

It was eight times. I knew because she’d confided in me. Sofia didn’t want anyone to know it was happening more and more regularly and I was the idiot who’d agreed to keep her secret.

I moved closer, meeting her weary gaze. “Again?” the words spilled out before I had a chance to stop them.

“I’m fine,” she hissed.

“That’s some bullshit, Sofia, and you know it.”

“Whoa, Kandon,” Aaron glowered at me. “Watch your mouth. That’s my sister you’re talking to.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you should ask her how many times she’s really fainted in the last few weeks.”

“Safe?” Aaron said, but she only had eyes for me.

“You promised.” Her voice cracked, disbelief washing over her expression as if she couldn’t believe I’d told them.

But I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t lie to Aaron. Not about this. Not when it was clear that she wasn’t fine.

“Yeah, well I’m done keeping your secret.”

Ice blazed in her eyes, and I knew what she was thinking—that I’d betrayed her. Chosen Aaron instead of her.

But it wasn’t that at all.

I cared about her, and it was obvious that something was wrong.

And I wasn't going to stand around and pretend everything was fine—that Sofia was fine—when she clearly wasn't.

Even if she hated me for it.

CHAPTER ONE

Sofia

“HOW DO YOU FEEL?” Mom asked me as we sat in the hospital waiting for Dr. Peters to call me in.

“Honestly, you guys, I’m fine,” I said, forcing a smile I knew didn’t reach my eyes.

Mom and Dad didn’t buy it.

They didn’t buy it at all.

Probably thanks to my brother Aaron’s unnecessary fussing after I fainted again in front of him and all our friends a few days ago.

I’d been doing that a lot lately. Fainting. Checking out for a few brief seconds thanks to my low iron levels.

The doctor said it was anemia. But as I sat there staring at the whitewash wall while my parents watched me with worry in their eyes, I knew something was wrong. The way you could feel a storm brewing on the horizon, that slight change in the air.

Something was coming.

Something bad.

“Well, better safe than sorry,” Mom said, upbeat and full of hope.

“You know, sweetheart,” Dad added. “You should have told us sooner. We could have—”

“Ash,” Mom cut him off. “We’re here now. Dr. Peters will get our girl fixed. She might need a blood transfusion or maybe...”

I tuned them out.

Mom wasn’t a doctor, the same way I wasn’t a doctor or Google wasn’t. It had been tempting to research my symptoms, to study the lists of possible conditions, but

everyone knew that usually resulted in mass panic with the amount of scary possibilities.

No, it was better to get a professional medical opinion.

Except, I already knew.

Deep down in my soul, I knew something was wrong with me.

Of course, I hadn't told anyone. I didn't want them to worry or fuss or suffocate me. It was senior year. I had my whole life ahead of me.

Except, what if I didn't...?

I shook those thoughts away.

It was no use borrowing tomorrow's problems.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket, and I dug it out, hardly surprised to see Aaron's name there.

Jerk Face: Any news yet?

I TEXTED MY BROTHER BACK.

Me: Still waiting for Dr. Peters.

Jerk Face: You're going to be okay, Sofe. You know that, right?

I DIDN'T. But I didn't want to worry him anymore than he already was.

Me: I know.

Jerk Face: Poppy says hey.

Me: Hey, Poppy.

I SMILED. My best friend and my brother had finally gotten over themselves and declared their feelings for one another. Some people might have found it weird to watch their best friend and twin brother making out—and to a certain degree, I did—but I was also happy for them.

I'd spend years watching Poppy pine after Aaron. Spent the same amount of time watching him pretend he didn't feel the same. Not that it was any surprise. Guys were kind of clueless that way.

My cell vibrated again, but this time it wasn't Aaron.

Cole: I said I'm sorry.

INDIGNATION BURNED THROUGH ME.

Cole Kandon.

My brother's best friend.

A perpetual thorn in my side.

It was his fault I was here. Stupid boy couldn't keep his mouth shut; couldn't keep the secret I'd trusted him with.

You see, I had fainted enough times to be concerned since the first time it happened.

I just hadn't told anyone that.

I didn't want people to worry—I didn't want to acknowledge what was happening to me.

So I lied.

Only Cole found out. He'd found out and he'd promised not to tell anyone. But he'd called me out in front of our friends. In front of Aaron. And of course, Aaron had told our parents and they'd totally freaked out, leading us to Dr. Peters's office today. He wasn't my original doctor. No, Dad

had ruled that we needed a second opinion. So here we were at University Hospital in Allentown.

My cell vibrated again.

Cole: You can't ignore me forever.

I COULD AND I WOULD.

For a second, I'd stupidly hoped that sharing my secret with Cole, trusting him with it, meant something. That he was choosing me over Aaron.

Stupid. Foolish girl.

The second he had the chance; he'd sold me out.

COLE: **Sofia, please...**

I SWITCHED off my phone and stuffed it in my pocket, dropping my head back against the wall and exhaling a weary sigh.

"Problem, sweetheart?" Dad asked.

"Nope." I didn't open my eyes. I didn't want to see the worry shining in his. The constant shadow that hung over him and Mom these days.

"Sofia Bennet," the secretary called, and my eyes snapped open. "Dr. Peters is ready for you."

My heart plummeted. Down, down, down, dropping into my stomach, then my toes, and then the ground beneath me.

This was it...

The moment I'd tried so hard to avoid.

Because denial was my friend. And truth... truth was my enemy.

“Ready?” Mom smiled as I dragged myself out of the soft leather chair.

Dr. Peters’s waiting room was nice, comfortable, and homey. I couldn’t help but wonder if it was a way to soften the blow of all the bad news that no doubt followed a wait out here.

Dad went first, knocking on the door and going inside at the request of Dr. Peters.

“Ah, Sofia, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. It’s nice to see you. Come in, take a seat.”

Every inch of me vibrated with nervous anticipation as I sat in yet another stylish looking chair.

“So, Sofia. Tell me what’s been going on with you?”

Silence.

It hung in the air like a thick, oppressive cloud. My fingers curled into the soft leather as I fought to look anywhere but at the doctor with kind eyes. Because kindness wouldn’t help me here.

“Sofia,” Mom urged, covering my hand with hers. “You need to tell him, sweetheart.”

“It’s okay, Sofia. I’m here to help. But I can’t fix you if I don’t know what’s wrong.” He gave me a reassuring smile, but it did little to ease the knot in my stomach. “I’ve read your notes from Dr. Levosky, but I’d like to hear your take on things.”

“I’ve been fainting.”

“Okay.” He leaned back, steepling his fingers. “The blood work that Dr. Levosky ran showed that you’re anemic. Did he talk about a low iron count being part of this?”

I nodded. “It’s been getting worse.” The words spewed out in a rush of breath.

“How often are we talking?”

“Eight times since I saw Dr. Levosky.”

Mom flinched, and I couldn't look at her. As if she knew too—knew that something was wrong deep inside me. Something more than a bad case of anemia.

“Anything else?” he asked, studying the notes before him.

My notes.

My medical record.

Blood work and vitals from my visit with Dr. Levosky.

“I'm tired all the time. But it's not like when you have a late night or early morning. I don't know how to explain it, but it feels bone deep.”

“Okay.” His brows furrowed. “Any new unusual bruising?” I shook my head. “New lumps? Night sweats?”

“No.”

“Headaches?”

“Sometimes. I find it hard to concentrate in class now and again.”

“What are you thinking, Doc?” Dad asked, a slight inflection in his voice.

“I want to run some more tests, make sure nothing was missed on the blood work they ran last time.”

“You don't think it's anemia?”

“Sofia has a low red blood cell count which is indicative of anemia, but she also has a raised white blood cell count,” he said, tapping the keys on his keyboard. “I'd like to get a full picture before we jump to any conclusions.”

“How long will it take?”

“We should be able to get the tests organized immediately. We'll have the blood work back within twenty-four hours and go from there.”

Mom and Dad shared an apprehensive look. “Whatever you think is best,” Dad said.

“How does that sound, Sofia? Do you have any questions?”

I shook my head, unsure what he wanted me to say.

“We’ll get you all booked in, and we can find out exactly what we’re dealing with.”

“Thank you, Dr. Peters, we appreciate it.” Dad rose to shake his hand.

“That’s what I’m here for. We’ll talk again tomorrow when I have the results. It was nice meeting you all.”

“Thank you,” Mom said, and I murmured my own farewell.

I didn’t want to be poked and prodded with a needle again. I didn’t want any of this.

But here I was.

Barely eighteen, in my senior year of high school, my world on the precipice of being ripped apart.

I just knew it.

“HEY, HOW ARE YOU FEELING?” Poppy plopped down beside me on the couch.

“Okay.” I shrugged, picking at the zipper of my Rixon High hoodie. After getting back from the hospital, Aaron had asked—okay, dragged—me to join him in his beloved man cave at the bottom of our yard.

He’d promised me a night of candy, snacks, and some of our favorite movies. He’d obviously forgotten to tell me the part about Poppy, Cole, and our brother Ezra and his girlfriend Ashleigh joining us.

“You’ve been quiet.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” My eyes flicked over to the guys playing pool while Ashleigh cheered them on from her stool.

“I thought Dr. Peters said it was a precaution?”

No, that's what Mom and Dad had told Aaron. They didn't want to worry him unnecessarily and I was inclined to agree. He needed to focus on school, on the team and their bid to get to the playoffs and defend their football championship.

"He did." The lie rattled through me.

"Hey, Sofe." Poppy touched my arm and I looked at her. Her lips curved in a soft smile. "You know everything will be okay, right?"

Ah, that little lie people told themselves when the truth was simply too hard to imagine.

"Yeah."

Another lie.

Another dent in my heart.

"Can we talk?"

Cole appeared, looming over me like a dark thundercloud. A storm I'd rather escape.

"No," I said, glancing away. Refusing to look at him, to let him see what his betrayal had done to me.

"Sofe, come on—"

"Cole." Poppy sighed.

"Yeah," he gritted out. "Whatever."

I looked up right as he walked away.

"You know, he only did what he thought was right." She pinned me with a knowing look, but it didn't penetrate the ice around my heart.

"It wasn't his secret to tell." Lifting my chin defiantly, I stared her down, daring her to argue.

"Sofia..." She sighed.

"Yo, Poppy Star, get over here and give me a good luck kiss."

Her cheeks pinked and I rolled my eyes.

"Sorry, I—"

“Go. You know he won’t stop until you do.”

“But I—”

“Just go, Pops,” I snapped, guilt bubbling inside of me, but I wasn’t good company tonight.

In fact, I probably needed to go and leave the happy couples and Cole to their night.

The second she left me, I got up and moved toward the door.

“You’re leaving?” Aaron called, pouting like a child as he hooked his arm around Poppy’s neck and pulled her close.

“I’m not feeling very sociable. You guys have fun though.”

“Sofe, come on...” His expression softened, a silent question there.

“Honestly, I’ll be fine. Nothing an early night won’t fix.”

“We can watch a movie?” Ashleigh suggested.

“Not in the mood. But catch you guys tomorrow at school. Night.” I gave them a small wave, avoiding Cole’s piercing stare as I slipped into the cool night air.

I’d almost made it across the yard when his voice gave me pause.

“Sofia?”

“Go back inside, Cole,” I said, hurrying toward the door.

“Will you just wait a second? Talk to me... let me explain.”

I whirled around and glared at him. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“That’s some bullshit and you know it, Sofe. I only told them because I—”

“Because you what? Huh?” I got right up in his face. “I told you about... things because I trusted you. Because I thought... Forget it. I was wrong to trust you. Stay away from me, Cole.”

I stormed off, but he snagged my wrist, holding me there.
“Sofia... I—”

“Yo, Kandon.” My brother’s voice went through the air and as if my skin burned him, Cole jerked away.

“Yeah?” He called back.

“Grab us some extra bags of chips while you’re in there.”

“You got it.”

Cole glanced back at me, panic dancing in his eyes.

Pressing my lips together, I shook my head a little and went inside.

I was stupid for ever trusting Cole.

He was my brother’s best friend. Of course, his loyalty would always side with Aaron.

But just for a second, I’d hoped—

Oh, what did it matter now?

Cole had shown me exactly who he was, and I didn’t have time to waste on a boy who would always choose my brother over me. Not when I was almost certain my life was about to implode.

“Sofia...” he called after me, following me into the house.

“You heard Aaron,” I murmured. “Better not keep him waiting.”

“Come on, that isn’t fair, and you know it.”

My brows pinched as I glanced over my shoulder at him, “Didn’t you know, Cole? Life isn’t fair.”

Then I walked away from him.

Because let’s face it, I had bigger things to worry about.

I DIDN’T MAKE it to school the next day. Dr. Peters called Dad. My blood work was back early, and he wanted to see us.

He didn't have to fill in the blanks—it wasn't good news.

But of course, they never told you that over the phone. No. They went through an entire rigmarole of inviting you to an appointment, of surviving the long agonizing wait until you finally got in the doctor's office.

“Sweetheart?” Mom squeezed my hand and I blinked up at her. I'd mentally shut down somewhere between leaving Rixon and driving to Allentown. I was numb. Hollowed out. And I hadn't even heard the words yet.

But I knew.

Call it instinct or intuition or some higher power. Or maybe it was the simple fact that I felt wrong. On the inside. In the deep, dark places you weren't supposed to feel.

“It could be nothing,” Dad said, his expression full of worry.

“Ash,” Mom whispered.

They knew.

Deep down, they knew it too. But it was their job to remain upbeat and positive. To play down the gathering storm.

The secretary informed us Dr. Peters was expecting us, and we made our way down the hall to his office.

Every step felt like wading through quicksand, my heart crashing violently in my chest.

“Sofia?” Dad touched the small of my back, gently ushering me forward through the open door. Mom glanced back and smiled. Uncertainty glittering in her dark eyes.

“Sofia. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, it's good to see you all again.”

“Dr. Peters.” Dad shook his head. “We weren't expecting a call this quickly.”

“I got Sofia's blood work back from the lab and wanted to move on this sooner rather than later.”

“Move on what exactly?” Mom shifted in her seat, grabbing my hand.

“We ran a complete blood count with differential. Where a CBC tells us the total number of white blood cells in your blood, a CBC with differential measures the specifics of your white blood cell count, plus all your other blood cell levels, including red blood cells and platelets.

“Sofia’s results indicate an abnormal white blood cell count.”

“Okay, what does that mean?” Dad asked.

I already knew what it meant.

Thanks to Dr. Google, I knew far too much.

“It means, I’d like to schedule Sofia for a bone marrow biopsy today—”

“B-biopsy.” Mom choked over the word. “You think she has... cancer?”

“I believe Sofia may have Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia or CML for short. We won’t know for definite until we run the biopsy. But I suspect that’s what we’re dealing with.”

“Oh God, this can’t be happening.”

“Mya,” Dad reached across me to grab her hand while I sat there, numb.

I didn’t know what I’d expected to happen when I heard the word.

Leukemia.

Cancer of the blood.

Cancer.

It rattled around my skull like nails.

“Sofia, do you have any questions?” Dr. Peters said. “I’m sure this is a lot to take in.”

“Will it hurt?”

“The biopsy?”

I nodded.

“You might feel some brief discomfort. We’ll also perform what’s called a bone marrow aspiration while we’re doing the examination. This means we’ll draw a sample of fluid from the bone marrow. It’ll help us see exactly what we’re dealing with.

“I know how overwhelming this must all sound, Sofia, but I want to reassure you that you’re in the very best hands here. We’re going to do everything we can to make you better.”

His words were white noise against the roar of blood between my ears.

Dad cleared his throat, his face ashen as I peeked over at him. “Thank you, Dr. Peters. Promise me, you’ll take good care of our girl.”

“You have my word.”

His word.

That wasn’t going to save me though...

Was it?

CHAPTER TWO

Cole

“ANYTHING YET?” I asked Aaron as he checked his cell phone before we headed out onto the field for practice.

“Dad said they’ll fill me in when they’re home.”

“That’s good news, right? If it was bad news, they would have called.”

“Yeah.” The word was at odds with the expression in his eyes. “Come on, Coach will have our asses if we’re late.”

Grabbing his helmet, Aaron headed out of the locker room. But I stayed back a second, my cell phone taunting me.

I wanted to text Sofia, to ask if she was okay, but we hadn’t exactly ended things on a positive note last night.

I knew she was pissed at me for telling Aaron and the rest of our friends about the number of times she had fainted. But I hadn’t known what else to do.

When she’d slumped onto the floor at Bell’s, the sports bar we liked to hang out at, I’d panicked. Part of me had expected her to come clean then, but she hadn’t. She’d been ready to cover it up with another lie.

Well, fuck that.

Something was wrong.

I felt it in my gut. Sensed that Sofia knew it too, if the way she was lying to everyone was anything to go by.

If breaking her trust meant getting her the help she needed, then I could live with that.

Even if she never talked to me again.

Defeat rolled through me as I grabbed my helmet and jogged outside to the rest of the team.

“You good?” Ezra asked as I joined the huddle.

Coach Ford wanted to go over some plays for our game against Tulliver High on Friday night. It was at their place, and he expected a win.

He always did.

Coach Ford had been one of the best, back in the day. An NFL legend forced to retire early thanks to an injury. A lot of fans thought he was too good to be coaching high school football at Rixon High, and they were probably right. But Coach Ford loved his job. It showed every time he stepped foot on the field. Every time he commanded us to his will. He pushed us, molded and shaped us. And he'd named me his starting quarterback.

I still couldn't quite believe it, and I definitely hadn't wanted it. But here I was. The entire team's focus on me as Coach beckoned me in closer.

"Now Tulliver will come at you Friday, and they'll come at you hard. I need you to keep your eyes open and your heads clear, you hear me?"

A chorus of, "Yes, sir," echoed through me. But it barely touched the gnawing pit in my stomach.

How the fuck was I supposed to concentrate when Sofia was at the hospital being poked and prodded by the doctors?

"Kandon?" Coach barked and my head whipped up.

"Y-yeah?"

"I said, are you ready to run some plays?" His brows furrowed as he studied me.

"Uh, yeah, sure."

"Everyone, warm up. Coach Macintosh will take the lead. Kandon, you're with me." He beckoned over to the sideline.

"What's up, Coach?" I jogged after him.

"What's going on with you?"

"Nothing."

His brow lifted. "Is this about Sofia?"

“What? No! Why would—”

The knowing look he gave me made the denial die on my tongue.

“I’m just worried.”

“And so am I, and so is Aaron and Ezra. We’re all worried, son. But I need you to leave it in there.” He tipped his head toward the door leading to the athletic building.

Easier said than done.

Because I’d hurt her. I’d hurt the one girl—the *only* girl—that tied me up in knots.

But she was Aaron’s sister.

His twin sister.

Fuck, she was so off-limits it wasn’t even funny. But she was also interesting and kind and loyal, and despite having a serious case of the smarts, she didn’t take herself too seriously.

I liked her.

The truth was, I liked her a whole lot.

And I’d fucked things up.

I’d do it all over again though, if it meant that she finally pulled her head out of her ass and told her parents how sick she felt.

“Look, Cole.” Coach squeezed my shoulder. “I get it, I do. But we have a job to do. And we need to be there for Aaron. If he’s managing to hold it together, then we—”

“I got it, Coach,” I snapped, hating the defensive edge to my voice. But I knew what he was getting at.

“Hey, is everything okay?” Aaron appeared, slinging his arm around my shoulder.

“Fine,” I said. “Ready to run some of those plays we’ve been going over?”

“You know it.” He gave Coach an eager smile, but when his eyes found mine again, they narrowed with concern. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I lied. “Come on, let’s get out there. We have some Tiger ass to kick Friday night.”

“COLE, IS THAT YOU?” Mom called the second I stepped foot in the house.

“Yeah, Mom.” I toed off my sneakers and dropped my bag onto the small bench in the hall.

“I’m in the kitchen,” she added, and I smiled.

As if I’d find her anywhere else at this time of the day.

“Something smells good.” I went to her and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“I’m making spaghetti.”

“Sounds good.”

Grabbing a can of soda from the refrigerator, I hopped up onto a stool and watched as she stirred the sauce.

“How was practice?”

“I took a few hits.”

My head hadn’t been in the game. Coach knew it. Aaron knew it. The whole damn team knew it. But I couldn’t stop thinking about Sofia, about whatever it was they had to tell Aaron.

“Well, dinner won’t be long, sweetheart. It’s just the two of us tonight.” Her smile thinned.

I flinched. “He’s not coming home?”

“Staying over on business.” The tightness in her voice made the hairs along the back of my neck stand to attention.

“I see.”

“Cole, please—”

“I’ll be upstairs doing some homework.” I got up and walked away. “Shout for me when it’s ready.”

“Okay,” she murmured, going back to the sauce.

My father was a contentious subject in our house. On the one hand, I was glad he wasn't coming home. It made my life easier when he wasn't around, doling out his opinions on how I needed to live my life. It was Mom who suffered when he was gone though, and I hated that for her, I did. But she'd made her bed and now she had to spend her days miserably lying in it.

I headed up to my room, closing the door behind me. Diving onto my bed, I grabbed my cell and pulled up my chat history with Sofia.

Cole: How did it go?

ON A GROAN, I deleted it. She didn't want me to text her. She'd made it pretty clear that she wanted nothing to do with me. But I couldn't let it go.

I couldn't let her go.

Fuck. My head was a mess.

For as long as I could remember, it had been me and Aaron. He was my best friend, my ride or die. But Sofia had always been there too. We'd been friends. We'd grown up together. And somewhere along the way, friendship became longing looks and secret smiles.

At least, it had to me.

Needing to get out of my own head, I scrambled off the bed and grabbed my guitar, and dropped down on the floor. The Little Martin LX1 was a familiar weight in my hands, offering me a kind of peace and solitude that holding a football never could.

I was a Raider, sure.

But before I'd known football, I'd had this.

Music.

Closing my eyes, I strummed my fingers over the strings a couple of times, to test the tuning. It had been a while since I'd played. Holding my guitar, making music, it stirred something inside me that had the power to consume me. It had always been this way, but my old man didn't appreciate my musical talent.

Never had, never would.

So I'd all but given it up. I'd walked away from the band I'd played in with my friends—Jude, Mikey, and Travis. I'd ruined our friendship. All for him. A man who cared enough to assert his wishes for my future but didn't care enough to consider what I wanted.

Asshole.

I slipped into the rhythm, my fingers carving out the chords with easy familiarity. It wasn't something you forgot just because you hadn't played in a while. No, it all came flooding back, lighting me up inside. As easy as breathing.

God, I loved to play guitar.

More than I'd ever loved anything else in the world.

But music didn't pay the bills; it didn't put food on the table and money in the bank. It wasn't a solid plan for the future. It wasn't the right career path.

To my father, music simply wasn't an option.

And it was all I wanted.

Well, that and for Sofia to forgive me.

Fuck.

Life was a mess.

Senior year, college applications looming, a future I didn't want awaiting me if I didn't find a way to stand up to Curtis Kandon. Whoever said this time was the best time of your life, had clearly never walked a day in my shoes.

It could be worse, asshole.

Guilt flashed through me. Here I was overthinking my future, when Sofia was dealing with the possibility of something being wrong with her.

Fuck.

I dropped my hand, the vibration making the strings plink. Reaching behind me, I patted the bed for my cell phone. Only this time, I didn't type out a message for Sofia.

ME: Just wanted to let you know I'm here for you if you need to talk.

Aaron: It's all good, dude. False alarm.

MY BROWS KNITTED.

Me: False alarm? What does that mean?

Aaron: Her iron levels are still too low. She might need a transfusion.

Me: So everything's okay?

Aaron: Yeah, bro. You can relax now. I'm fine. Sofia is fine (anemia notwithstanding). Everything is fine.

Me: That's good news.

Aaron: Damn right it is. Now I'm going to celebrate with my favorite snack.

Me: Seriously? Just because you don't actually say the words doesn't mean I don't know exactly what you're talking about.

SINCE HE AND Poppy made it official, he had been like a dog with a bone. Literally. He couldn't keep his hands off his

girlfriend and didn't care who knew it or was around to witness it.

But I guess that's what happened when you saved yourself for each other.

I envied him. Getting to experience it for the first time with a girl he loved. Learning what she liked and how she liked it.

My first time had been a fucking disaster. So much so, I hadn't done it again for months after. Jude and Mikey had given me shit about it that whole summer. Before I quit the band. Before everything changed.

Aaron: You're just jealous you're not getting any Kandon. I'll see you tomorrow, bright and early for practice. Four games to go.

I GROANED. Aaron's enthusiasm and passion for our final season as Raiders hadn't diminished, not even after his three top pick colleges had all turned him down for a football scholarship. But I guess gaining Poppy softened the blow. They were set to go to West Chester next year, while I was putting off my applications. Dad wanted me to follow in his footsteps and go to Drexel for pre-law.

I couldn't think of anything worse.

I wanted to apply to the University of Michigan's School of Music, Theatre, and Dance. One of the best in the country, and somewhere I'd had my heart set on it since college was on my radar. But my old man refused to accept it.

So we were at an impasse.

Him insisting I fill out the forms for Drexel, and me putting it off until I found a way to convince him that Michigan was the right choice.

The only choice.

To make things worse, Syracuse and Penn State had offered me athletic scholarships. Something I would need if my old man refused to compromise.

But time was running out.

And he'd never been on my side before, so I wasn't holding my breath that he was about to start now.

AFTER A RESTLESS NIGHT'S SLEEP, I traipsed down to the kitchen. At least Dad had stayed away last night. I wouldn't have to face—

“Good morning,” his gruff voice stopped me dead in my tracks.

“I thought you were out of town?”

“Nice to see you too.” The muscle in his jaw pulsed.

I made a beeline for the coffee machine, leaving him to his emails or case notes or whatever the fuck he was doing while he drank his coffee.

“How's that application for Drexel coming, Son?”

“I told you, it's not what I want to do.” I met his severe gaze with my own.

“And I thought I told you that I won't fund an arts degree so you can spend four years wasting your time on that pipe dream of yours.”

“Nice, Dad, real nice.” Turning my back on him, I made a fist on the counter, fighting the urge to give him a piece of my mind.

It wouldn't help.

It never did.

Curtis Kandon was a formidable man, used to getting his own way in and out of the courtroom.

“Cole, look at me, Son.” An order not a request. Reluctantly, I glanced back at him, waiting for whatever bullshit was about to spew from his mouth. “I thought we’d straightened all of this out. I will fund your college tuition so long as you take a pre-law course. If you want to broaden your horizons away from Drexel, we can discuss that. Temple has a great program. But the clock is ticking, Cole. You need to get a move on.”

“And if I don’t want to take the pre-law course?”

His expression darkened as he flattened his hands on the counter. “That is not an option, Son. Your mother and I—”

“Cut the bullshit, Dad. You, you decided this for me. Not her. She doesn’t even—”

“Enough, Cole.” He banged his fist down, making his coffee cup rattle. “I won’t keep doing this with you. It was always the plan for you to follow in your old man’s footsteps. Most kids would be counting their lucky stars that their parents were offering to pay—”

“I get it, okay. I get it.” Frustration bled from every word. But there was no reasoning with him when he was like this.

“Enjoy your senior year at Rixon High, Cole. Help the team win state, get your little hobby out of your system, then head to college and focus on your future.”

A future that, if he had his way, didn’t include music *or* football.

“I’ve got to go,” I said, unwilling to stick around and listen to any more of his bullshit.

But in typical Curtis Kandon style, he had to have the final word.

“You can’t outrun your destiny forever, Son. It’s time to stop fooling around and step up and do what needs to be done.”

I sucked on the inside of my cheek as I blew down the hall, desperate to escape from him. From his dismissive, cruel words. Before I said something I might regret.

Something I couldn't ever take back.

CHAPTER THREE

Sofia

AARON BREEZED into my room and dropped down on the end of my bed. “You look like crap.”

“Good morning to you too.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Exhausted, but I’ll be fine.” The lie sounded convincing enough.

“You’ll be back to being a pain in my ass in no time.” He grinned. “You think you’ll be up to going to school tomorrow?”

“Hopefully.”

Emotion clogged in my throat.

I hated lying to him, but I wasn’t ready to tell him. Not when everything was going so right for him.

This was my burden to carry, not Aaron’s.

Not yet.

Not until things got... desperate.

Leukemia.

The word clanged through me again. It still didn’t feel real, and yet, I’d known. Deep down, some part of me had known what Dr. Peters was going to say before he’d even said the words.

“I’d better go. But I’ll tell everyone you say hi.”

“Thanks.” Strangled laughter bubbled out of me.

Aaron walked to the door, but paused at the last second, glancing back. “I love you, Sofe.”

“Love you too, jerk face. Now get out of here. I need more beauty sleep.”

He gave me a salute and slipped into the hall, leaving me alone.

I inhaled a shuddering breath, fighting back the tears threatening to fall. But I wouldn't cry, I couldn't. Because if I started, I might never stop. And the fight hadn't really begun yet.

Until we knew exactly what we were dealing with, Dr. Peters couldn't give me a prognosis beyond that my blood markers pointed to leukemia.

When we'd left the hospital yesterday, I'd been numb. The ride home had been some of the hardest minutes of my life, listening to Mom sob while Dad tried to comfort her. But instead of breaking, I'd pulled away. Shored up my defenses. And when they'd asked if I wanted them to tell Aaron, I'd told them I didn't want to tell him at all.

"Sweetheart?" A knock at the door followed, and Mom poked her head inside. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay."

"Sofia." She came inside. "You don't have to do that. You don't have to put on a brave face around me."

"I... I don't know what to feel."

Perching on the edge of the bed, she took my hand in hers. "Aaron stopped by?" I nodded. "You know, I don't like it, sweetheart. Keeping this from him. He has a right to know." She gave me a disapproving look.

"I'm not ready, Mom. We don't know... what it means yet." I choked over the ball of emotion lodged in my throat. "Once we have more information, I'll tell him."

"Okay." She squeezed my hand. "It's a lot to digest, I understand that. I still can't—" Clapping a hand over her mouth she caught the sob there.

"Mom, please..." I couldn't do it again. See her break. See the tears streak down her cheeks.

"It's so unfair, sweetheart. You don't deserve this. You don't..."

"No one deserves this, Mom." I gave her the best smile I could muster, but it felt hollow. Empty and weak.

She dried her tears and took a deep breath. “Well, whatever the results show, I want you to know we’ll fight this thing head on, baby. You’re young and healthy, and you can beat this. I know you can.”

“Hey.” Dad appeared in the door wearing a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “How are my two favorite girls?”

“Dad,” I choked on the word.

“What? A man can’t check in on his girls now?” He came over and sat on the other side of my bed. “How are you feeling?”

“A little sore but okay. Don’t you have to get to work?”

“I figured I’d take the day off and hang with my girl.”

“No, Dad. You don’t need—”

But he was already swinging his legs onto the end and lying back against the headboard. “Hmm, this is nice. Comfy.”

“Oh my God, Mom, tell him.” I looked to her for support, but she was wiping more tears from her eyes.

“I wish I could stay too.”

“No. No way. I need you both to stop.”

“Sofia—”

“No, Mom, I can’t do this. I can’t have you both acting like I’m—” The words got stuck in my throat as pain lanced through me.

“Shh, sweetheart.” Dad wrapped me in his arms. “I got you, Sofia. I got you.”

Mom snuggled me from behind, the two of them sandwiching me, hugging the life out of me while I tried my hardest not to break.

“We love you, sweetheart, and we’re going to get through this.”

“I love you too, Mom, Dad,” I murmured, my bottom lip wobbling. Refusing to let them see me cry, I buried my face in

Dad's chest, letting the two of them cocoon me. Wrap me up in their love and comfort.

It was going to be a few days until Dr. Peters got the results of my bone marrow tests.

Until I knew what lay ahead.

God, just the thought of it had my stomach churning like a stormy sea.

"Shh," Dad soothed, tightening his arm around me and Mom. "It'll all be okay, baby. We're here. We're right here." His voice cracked and I sobbed harder.

Because hearing my dad—the one man who would do anything to protect me—break, broke something inside of me too.

"We love you, Sofia. We love you so freaking much, sweetheart. You can fight this." He kissed my head.

And I held on tight, letting myself have this moment of weakness, knowing it wouldn't be the last time I did.



"SOFIA?" Aaron's voice rang out through the house.

"In here," I called from my position on the living room sectional.

I'd been here all day, lying under a blanket, snacking on Oreo minis and Cheetos while I binge-watched Netflix.

Dad stayed with me the first couple of hours, trying to keep the mood light and the jokes flowing. But after a while, he began to get on my nerves, so I'd banished him to his home office.

My brother appeared. "What are we watching?"

"Just some docuseries about— oh, it's you." My eyes narrowed on Cole who stood awkwardly in the door.

"Hey, how are you feeling?"

“I’m fine,” I snapped.

“Come on, Sofe. Cut Kandon some slack.” Aaron chuckled, diving over the back of the couch and patting the space next to him. “Get over here, bro.”

“Maybe I should just go,” he said.

“Nah, Kandon. Sofia will behave. Besides, I can’t have my two favorite people arguing all year. It’s not good for my feng shui.”

“Your feng shui? Wow,” I balked. “You are such an asshole.”

“And you’re such a cranky bitch lately, but you don’t see me complaining.” He grinned at me, and I flipped him off.

“Can’t you two go and hang out in the man cave or something?”

“And leave you here all alone? Not gonna happen, Sis.”

“Whatever.” I rolled my eyes and laid back down, refusing to look at either of them. But I felt Cole’s heated stare, feeling everything he wanted to say and wouldn’t, not in front of my brother.

“Can you come back to school tomorrow?” Aaron asked, scrolling on his phone.

“Yeah, I’ll be back.”

“Good. Place isn’t the same without you.” He smiled at whatever had his interest.

“Let me guess, Poppy?” I arched a brow and he smirked at me.

“Correct. We have an away game Friday in Pittsburgh. You’re going to come, right?”

“Is everyone staying over?”

“That’s the plan.”

“I don’t know.”

“What? Why? You have to come. I thought Dr. Peters said ___”

“I’ll see how I feel.”

“Yeah, of course.” He gave me a strange look.

Did he feel it?

The lie hanging between us.

The big, life-changing secret.

Guilt coiled around my heart, but I ignored it. Telling Aaron wasn’t an option, not yet. Besides, if I told Aaron, he would tell Poppy and most likely Cole. And before long, everybody would know, and I’d no longer be Sofia Bennet.

I would be Sofia Bennet, the girl with leukemia.

I didn’t want, or need, that kind of attention.

This was my business and I wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible.

“I can’t believe there are only four games left until the playoffs.” Aaron kicked his feet up on the coffee table.

“Don’t let Mom see you do that,” I said.

“What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.” He leaned over, grabbing a handful of Cheetos.

“Pig,” I muttered. “Can’t you go and annoy someone else?”

“Yeah, come on, Aaron. Maybe we should leave her to it,” Cole said.

“Is this how it’s going to be now? The two of you, unable to be in the same room together?” Aaron pouted in that overdramatic way of his. “Because that’s not going to work for me. It’s senior year, guys. Senior fucking year.”

His words struck something inside me, and I sat up, inhaling a sharp breath.

“Shit, Sofe, you good?”

“Y-yeah.” I gave him the best smile I could muster. “Just feel a little nauseous. I’ll be back.”

“You need me to come—”

“I can manage to go to the bathroom, Aaron.”

He held up his hands, concern pinching his brows. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine.” Another smile. Another lie. “I’ll be back.”

I left them in the living room, slipping into the hall and going to the small downstairs bathroom at the back of the house. Aaron’s words had cut deep, slicing through me like a serrated blade.

Senior year.

Senior fucking year.

God, how was I going to do this? Paste on a smile and lie to him and everyone else around me?

But it was for the best, wasn’t it?

Better than sharing the burden and ruining their final months at high school.

Eventually, I’d tell them—I’d have to. But if I could protect them for at least a little bit, that was better than nothing.

Sure, Mom and Dad thought it was a bad idea, but they had to know that Aaron’s life, our friends’ lives, would be upended too once they discovered the truth.

Ashleigh and Ezra had already been through enough. Aaron and Poppy too. Then there were our friends already away at college. Poppy’s sister Lily and her boyfriend Kaiden.

My stomach dipped as I entered the bathroom, locking the door behind me. I didn’t really need to puke. I just needed a minute to catch my breath, to steady myself to face Aaron once more. I had to be more careful because if he looked too closely...

I couldn’t do that to him.

Not yet.

Splashing some water on my face, I stared at myself in the mirror. It was strange. One minute you had your whole life

ahead of you. Prom. Graduation. College. First love. First heartbreak. First apartment. First job. And the next, the future was no longer guaranteed. Murky with darkness. The unknown. So many things you dreamed of doing but might never get to do.

I was eighteen. Life was supposed to be for living. For experiencing things and learning from your mistakes. Yet here I was, on the cusp of fighting for my life.

It wasn't fair.

Emotion welled inside me again. A tumultuous storm of anger and disbelief, of frustration and terror.

I didn't want to die.

I wanted to live.

To follow my dreams, to chase them down with both hands.

“Sofia?”

I flinched, the loud bang on the bathroom door startling me.

“You okay in there, sweetheart?” Dad asked. “Aaron said you got sick.”

“False alarm, Dad. I'm fine. I'll be out in a second.” My lips wobbled again, tears rolling down my cheeks.

“Okay, well if you need any—”

“I'm fine,” I snapped, instantly regretting it. But I didn't know how to do this.

There wasn't a rulebook I could follow.

I dried my eyes, waiting another minute or so before going out to face them. I didn't expect to come face to face with Cole.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

“N-nothing, I'm fine.” I went to brush past him, but he gently touched my arm.

“Sofia, please... Talk to me.”

“So you can run off and tell Aaron? No thanks.”

“That’s not fair and you know it.”

“Cole, I—”

He reached for me, cupping my face and brushing his thumb under my eye, catching the tear there. “You’re crying.”

“I’m not.”

His brow lifted, doubt shining in his gaze.

“I’m fine.”

“I know you’re pissed with me.”

Understatement of the century. I bit my tongue, unwilling to do this with him again.

“But I’m here, Sofia. I can help.”

“No, Cole.” I gave him a sad smile as I pulled away from him, hating that things weren’t different. “You can’t.”

Because the stark truth of the matter was...

No one could.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cole

I COULDN'T SHAKE the feeling Sofia was hiding something. She'd been too cagey the other day, when Aaron had insisted I hang out with him at their house.

At school, she put on a smile, laughing and joking with everyone as if she hadn't spent the beginning of the week getting tests at the hospital.

But Aaron and the others seemed to buy her story. I'd barely spoken two words to her since she was mostly avoiding me. If our paths crossed, she walked the other way. If our eyes met across the cafeteria, she looked away.

It was starting to piss me off.

I'd only done what I had to help her.

It had royally backfired on me though and I didn't like it. Sofia had always been a part of my life. A good friend.

Now, it was like we were strangers.

There would be no escaping each other tonight though. We had an away game in Pittsburgh and since it was an eight-hour round trip, we were staying over. I'd heard Sofia telling Poppy and Ashleigh she was going to come, but only because Mr. and Mrs. Bennet were making the trip too.

Something didn't add up.

At least, that was what my gut was telling me. But it wasn't like I could call her out on it.

"Kandon, get your head on straight, son," Coach warned as we watched game play tapes of the Tigers in the media room.

"See their defensive tackle," he said. "Goes in hard every time. You'll need to use your wide receiver, Cole. Use Ezra. Their defense is big, but he's fast. Get the ball to him and he'll do the rest of the work."

I nodded, trying to act interested.

“Okay.” Coach Macintosh paused the tapes and hit the lights, plunging the room into brightness. “Bus leaves at two.”

As I got up to leave, Coach Ford cornered me by the door. “Have you given any more thought to those college applications? Syracuse and Penn State won’t wait forever.”

“I know, Coach. I just need a little more time.”

He gave me a small nod, clearly disapproving at me dragging my ass on the decision. But the truth was, I didn’t know what the fuck to do.

I wanted music.

I wanted music so much it hurt. But my old man was going to be a problem.

I left the media room and headed for my locker, not expecting to run into Jude Landry.

“Hey, man, what’s up?” he asked.

“Just getting ready for the game later.”

“Ah, of course. The Tulliver High Tigers, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well good luck, and listen, I’ve been meaning to ask you something...”

My heart lurched into my throat.

“Paul is out. It’s a long story but he had to walk. We have a gig next weekend, and since you already know all our material, I was thinking—”

“Come on, J, you know I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“It isn’t that simple.”

“Seems pretty simple to me.” He shrugged. “You either want to do us a solid and play with us again, or you don’t.”

Disappointment flared in his eyes when I didn’t answer. “I see. Well, thanks for nothing, Kandon.” He stalked off before I could try to explain.

Fuck.

It had killed me to quit the band, but I couldn't make it work alongside playing football. And football meant possible scholarships; scholarships I might need one day if my old man decided to withdraw my tuition.

But now I had the scholarship offers and I still wasn't any closer to making a decision.

Because the decision was bigger than just me.

BY THE TIME we reached Pittsburgh, my mood was in the fucking trash.

“Seriously, man, you need to pull yourself out of it,” Aaron grumbled right as Tulliver High Stadium came into view.

It wasn't as impressive as Dawson Stadium, but it was still pretty sweet.

“Got just the cure for that,” Dylan, one of our safeties, shoved his head over the seat and grinned. “Fresh pussy.”

“Nah, it's all about the steady pussy. I'm telling you, Dyl, there's nothing like fucking your girl—”

“Bennet,” Coach Ford looked from the front of the bus.

“Yeah, Coach?”

“Word of advice, son. It's a small bus, voices carry.”

“Fuck”, Aaron muttered under his breath, heat creeping into his cheeks as our section of the bus exploded with laughter.

“Seriously? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What?” Aaron balked. “I didn't know he could hear me.”

I rolled my eyes at that. “You're an asshole.”

“Sounds like someone is jealous if you ask me.”

“No one did ask you, Dylan, so keep your opinions to yourself.”

“Shit, Kandon, I’m just busting your balls.”

The bus chose that moment to ground to a halt.

“Okay, ladies,” Coach stood up at the front. “I don’t need to remind you of my expectations tonight. But I’ll say it one more time anyway. While we’re here you are representing not only yourself and the school but our entire town. Do not let yourselves down. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” went up throughout the bus.

“Okay, get off the bus and head inside. Not you, Bennet. You, I want a word with.”

“Oh, shit,” someone snorted.

“Me and my big fucking mouth.” Aaron shot me a look of pure panic.

“Serves you right, man.” I shrugged, laughter rumbling in my chest as I stood up and grabbed my bag off the overhead rack. “I’ll see you inside.”

“Yeah, if Coach doesn’t murder me and hide my body.”

We all piled off the bus and headed inside. Ezra fell in step behind me. “You good?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

“You know, she’s going to be okay.” He gave me a sideways glance.

“So everyone keeps telling me.”

“He’ll understand—”

“Nothing to understand.” I cut him off, unwilling to do this right now. We had a game to win. I needed to focus, I needed to get all thoughts of Sofia out of my head.

But it was almost impossible. She was inside me. Buried deep.

Distractions on the field could cost you the game. I needed to remember that. Besides, she was coming tonight. She would

be right there in the crowd, cheering us on.

Except she's still not talking to you, asshole.

“You’re a good guy, Kandon.” Ezra’s big hand landed on my shoulder, squeezing. “She’s lucky to have a guy like you in her corner.”

“I’m not—”

“Yeah, I know.” His lips twitched. “But you want to be.”

It wasn’t a question, so I didn’t answer.

“Fuck, that was intense.” Aaron jogged up as we reached the rest of the team gathered in the foyer.

“At least he let you walk off the bus in one piece,” Ezra snorted. “You need to watch what you’re saying about Poppy around him.”

“Yeah, yeah, Coach loves me.”

I slung my arm around his neck and guided him over to one of the huge leather sectionals while we waited for instructions. “But does he love the fact you’re banging his daughter?”

“Fuck you, Kandon. Fuck. You.” He smirked.

A couple of guys nearby laughed at our exchange, but we all knew the deal. Coach Ford pretended to ride Aaron about dating his younger daughter, but the truth was, Coach just wanted Poppy to be happy. And the one thing that made her happier than anything is... Aaron.

“Okay, ladies,” Coach said, passing us. “Follow me.”

“Hey, Bennet.” Deacon came up beside us. “You think we can win tonight?”

“Didn’t come to lose, Faris.”

“Yeah, I know. But the Tigers are looking strong.”

“We’re stronger.”

There was a reason Coach had named Aaron captain at the beginning of the season. He might not have Ezra’s natural skill or my stats, but Aaron was a born leader. And even though

football wasn't it for me, I was real fucking glad to have this season with him.

LESS THAN AN HOUR LATER, we were bathed in the harsh glare of the Friday night lights. It was a full house, a small section of blue and white standing out against the Tiger's telltale colors spread out in the bleachers.

Coach Ford and his assistant coaches were busy going over last-minute strategy, but I was too busy searching the crowd for Sofia.

Most of the guys usually searched for their family, but I'd long given up looking for my mom and dad. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time they'd come to one of my games.

I found her, wedged between her mom and dad. Coach's wife was also with them, along with Ezra's girl, Ashleigh.

A strange pang went through me.

They were all so close—the Bennets, Fords, and Chases—like one big extended family. In some ways, as Aaron's best friend, that mantle had extended to me over the years.

But it wasn't the same.

Didn't stop me craving it though. Imagining what it would be like to have a big, supportive family.

“Cole, son,” Coach Macintosh called. “Get over here.”

I shook the intrusive thoughts from my head and jogged over. “What's up, Coach?”

“Your head on straight?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, glad to hear it. Now get out there and show us what you're made of.” He clapped me on the shoulder, and I jogged off to the rest of my team.

Aaron tipped his head when he saw me coming. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, ready to kick some Tiger ass.”

“Damn right.” He grinned. “Get in here, QB.”

We all closed in, shoulder to shoulder, teammate to teammate. Coach had given us his pep talk in the locker room. Now it was Aaron’s turn.

“Okay, listen up. We’re five games in. Now I don’t know about you all, but I plan on bringing that championship home again this year. I think I speak for all the seniors here when I say no one wants to graduate a loser.”

The guys grumbled their approval, a ripple of energy going through the huddle.

“So we go out there and show these pussies why we’re still the best. Why we’re the ones to beat.”

“Hell yeah,” someone yelled.

“Okay get in here. Raiders on three. One... two... three...”

“*RAIDERS!*”

Our crowd echoed the sentiment back at us, hoots and hollers filling the air as we broke apart and jogged into position.

We’d won the coin toss and Aaron had opted for us to kick off.

I watched my teammates get ready. We knew the drill. Could recite Coach Ford’s playbook in our sleep. Being a Raider wasn’t just about playing football; it was about living and breathing the damn thing. And while part of me loved it—couldn’t help but get swept up in the thrill of it—part of me resented every second I was out here. On the field. Commanding the team. I hadn’t asked for this. I’d been happy playing wide receiver until this season when Coach needed to replace his star QB.

I didn’t particularly like the spotlight, and nothing said spotlight like the quarterback’s position. But it was working.

Me and Ezra made a formidable duo. Playing together came naturally. His speed and precision down the sideline and my surprisingly accurate throwing arm meant we were 4-1. It meant I had two scholarship offers on the table and a career in college football laid out right in front of me.

All I had to do was take it.

“Ready?” Aaron called, yanking me from my reverie. I gave him a curt nod, waiting for the referee to blow his whistle. I called the play, my voice ringing across the field loud and clear. The second the whistle blew, Aaron snapped the ball with a grunted, “Hut.”

I caught it with ease, dropping back to search the field for Ezra. He was right where I expected him to be, flying downfield. My running back cut across me, feinting the pass and took off around the scrimmage while I hiked the ball. It flew like a bullet.

Clean. Precise. Tracking a trajectory right toward Ezra as he ate up the yard markers.

A couple of their defense barreled toward him as he pushed down on his knees and leaped into the air ready to catch the ball.

“Shit, he’s good,” I murmured.

He managed to duck and dodge the Tigers defensemen to make it all the way into the end zone.

“Touchdooooown,” the announcer yelled over the PA system.

Our section of the bleachers went wild, everyone on their feet, clapping and screaming. Adrenaline pumped through me, an undeniable rush of endorphins.

This... *this* I loved. Whether it was the football crowd, or a crowd gathered to watch our band back in the day, I loved the thrill of performing. It wasn’t about the spotlight or the glory or even the win, it was about feeling connected for those few seconds or minutes. Being a part of something.

Without meaning to, while our team all jogged over to Ezra to celebrate, I searched our section of the bleachers for Sofia. She was on her feet with her friends and family, but she wasn't smiling. She wasn't even cheering.

She looked... sad.

And I knew.

I knew everything was not all right.

Not by a long shot.

“FUCK YEAH.” Aaron slapped my ass as he passed me in the showers. “Three games left and we're so damn close.”

A few of the other guys cheered but I didn't join in. I couldn't get Sofia's somber expression out of my head.

I couldn't get her out of my head period.

And I couldn't confide in the one guy I'd always told everything to.

Well, maybe not everything. But Aaron had and always would be my best friend.

How could I tell him that a) I was having serious non-platonic thoughts about his sister and that b) I was pretty sure there was more to her meetings with the doctor this week.

The answer was, I couldn't. He was high on life. His girl. The team's winning streak. Sofia getting the all-clear. He was on cloud nine and I didn't want to burst his bubble.

“Turn that frown upside down, Kandon.” He grinned. “What's stuck up your ass?”

“Nothing. I took a couple of big hits. I'm just cranky.”

His brows knitted tight. “You're good though, right? You don't need checking over by Doc or anything?”

“Nah, I'll live.”

“Thank fuck for that because we're sneaking out later.”

“What?”

His brows waggled. “Me and E were talking earlier and figured we should make the most of it.”

“Coach will shit a brick if he finds out.”

“Relax, Deputy Dad. We’ve got it covered.”

“I’m not sure—”

“You’ve got to come, otherwise we’ll be an odd number.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sofia won’t come if she has to play fifth wheel and she needs this, man. After everything that’s happened lately, she could do with letting loose.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, but once Aaron got an idea into his head he was like a dog with a bone.

“Sofia’s going?” I tried to keep my voice neutral.

“Well, yeah. Why wouldn’t she?”

“I don’t know. I just thought—it doesn’t matter.”

“You’re coming,” he said. “As your captain and best friend, I’m pulling rank.”

“Fine.” I switched the shower off and grabbed my towel, hoping he couldn’t see my expression.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to go. Sneaking out after a game was part and parcel of the senior year football experience.

But I knew Sofia wouldn’t want me there.

And that was a problem.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sofia

“WE’RE GOING TO A FRAT PARTY?” Poppy shrieked as we piled into the Uber. The one that had met us around the back of the hotel.

“Relax, Jordan Handell is good people. Besides, it’s not a frat party. It’s just a few people.”

“What is going on right now?” Poppy protested again, flicking her wide gaze from Ashleigh to me and back again.

“I think what Aaron means is, we’re going to a college frat party.” Ashleigh smirked, burying her face into Ezra’s shoulder.

“Like I said Handell is good people. He graduated last year and plays for the Pittsburgh Panthers now. He heard we were in the area and invited us to hang out.”

“At a college party,” I added.

“Correct.”

“And you didn’t think to tell us this before?” Poppy said.

“Babe, relax.” Aaron dropped a kiss on her forehead. “Your dad and my parents will be in the bar all night. Coach Macintosh already did room checks. Everything is good.”

“It’s senior year.” Ashleigh grinned. “I say we seize the moment. It’ll be graduation before we know it.”

Seize the moment.

Guilt snaked through me, shredding my insides with its thorny branches.

Ashleigh had her own reasons for wanting to seize the moment. After all, she’d lost ten months of her life after the car accident, and it was looking like she might never get them back. She was all about making new memories to replace her missing ones.

But it was different for me.

My clock was ticking.

Ever since Dr. Peters had dropped the leukemia bombshell, my life felt like it was flashing before my eyes. And it had only been days.

Days.

It still felt like a dream.

“Hey, babe.” Poppy nudged my shoulder. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” I forced a smile.

I did that a lot lately. Plastered over the cracks with a smile or a strangled laugh.

Aaron bought it easily. A little too easily. Poppy and Ashleigh had more questions. What was the plan? Would the transfusion work? What happened if it didn’t?

But Cole... well, I couldn’t even look at Cole.

Things were too weird between us. And being crammed in the Uber with him and our friends was almost too much to bear. But the truth was, I needed to get out. I needed to do something—*anything*—to try and get out of my own head.

So here I was, off to some college football party, trying to pretend I was just a normal senior, and that my life wasn’t falling apart.

“I guess we’re here?” Ashleigh chuckled as we pulled up outside a big house. People were already gathered outside, and the front door was open, music blaring from inside.

“Fuck yeah, let’s go.” Aaron pushed the door open and helped the girls out. Me and Ezra climbed out last, thanking our driver.

“This is... wow.”

“How does it feel, man, knowing you might have been here next year?”

“Nah,” Aaron said, slinging his arm over Poppy’s shoulder. “Pittsburgh was always a long shot. I’ve made my peace with

it. Besides, West Chester is going to be epic. Right, babe?” He gazed down at Poppy and my heart clinched.

They had it all planned out. College. The future. Their future together. So had I until recently.

God, I couldn’t even wrap my head around that. Would I have to withdraw from college or could I—

“Sofe?” Everyone stared at me while I blinked at them, trying to figure out what I’d missed.

“Ready to go in?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

Aaron glanced up at the front door and back again. “We came together, we leave together.” His gaze flicked between me and Cole.

“What?” Cole asked.

“You and Sofia are the only single ones. If you hook up with anyone—”

“Seriously? We didn’t come here to hook up, asshole.”

“Might help remove that stick out of your ass.” Aaron shrugged.

Poppy and Leigh snickered. But I wasn’t laughing. I was too hung up on the idea of Cole hooking up with somebody.

“What about you, Sofe? Ready to meet some college hotties?” my brother teased, and I rolled my eyes at him.

“Grow up, Aaron.”

“Oh jeez, would you two relax already. It’s a college party. A fucking frat party. This will be us next year. Yee-haw.” Aaron lassoed the air and galloped around in a circle.

“Way to act cool, Bro.” Ezra brushed past Aaron and we all followed, walking straight into the frat house.

It was loud.

Really loud. Bodies were crammed everywhere. Music blasted out of hidden speakers, drowning out the various conversations going on all over the house.

A beefed-up guy in Panther blue and gold appeared, drinking out of a Solo cup. “Bennet, my man. Didn’t think you’d make it. And you brought friends, nice.” His eyes moved past everyone, lingering on me.

“Eyes off Sofia, asshole,” Aaron greeted Jordan, the two of them fist bumping.

“She your girl?”

“Try sister.”

“Oh shit.” He chuckled, the deep, throaty sound reverberating through me. “And your girl?” He nodded to Poppy, and she smiled.

“Hi, thanks for inviting us.”

“Anytime. Come on, let’s get you all a drink.”

Aaron and Poppy went on ahead, Ezra and Leigh following. Leaving me trailing behind with Cole.

“You’re seriously just going to freeze me out?” he said as we wandered down the hall.

“Let’s not do this tonight.”

“So when? When are we going to talk—”

“Bennet’s sister, get over here.” Jordan grinned. “Just because you’re off-limits doesn’t mean we can’t have a little fun, am I right?” He held up a bottle of cherry sours.

I wasn’t a party girl.

I didn’t usually get drunk or high. But tonight, I wanted to forget.

I wanted to be somebody else.

“I’m in,” I said, moving around my friends to get to Jordan. He gave me a wide smile as he twisted the cap and poured us each a shot.

“To new friends.” He winked, pushing a cup toward me.

“New friends.” I brought it to my lips and braced myself.

“Sofe,” someone said from behind me. “Maybe that’s not such a good idea.”

But I was already downing the shot, wincing at the sharp burn as it slid down my throat.

The burn was good though.

It meant I was alive.

Feeling something.

“You good?” Jordan asked, his eyes heavy-lidded as he watched me.

“Yeah.” I grinned back, sliding my cup toward him. “Another.”

“Fuck yeah.” He chuckled.

It was a bad idea, getting drunk at a college frat party, with our parents less than a mile away in a hotel.

But sometimes bad ideas were the best kind.

The only kind to get you through.

“SERIOUSLY, Sofe, you need to relax on the drinks.” Aaron’s eyes narrowed as he tried to snatch the drink out my hand.

“Get your own drink, *Dad*.” I waved him off as I turned to keep dancing. I loved this song. In fact, I’d loved almost every song since I finished off the bottle of cherry sours with Jordan.

He was fun.

Charming and hot... so freaking hot. But Aaron had ruined any chances of him making a move, laying on the sister card so thick I could feel the invisible wall between us.

Besides, I wasn’t even sure I wanted Jordan to hit on me. But after my week of hell, as I was now referring to it, everything seemed urgent.

I hadn’t lived enough for an eighteen-year-old. I hadn’t made out enough at parties or hooked up with enough guys,

and I *definitely* hadn't hooked up with enough guys who looked like Jordan Handell.

Seize the moment.

Right?

Right?

"Sofe, I'm not joking." Aaron leaned in closer, his jaw clenched tight. "You need to calm down."

"Relax, Bro. Relaaaaax. It's a party." I threw my hands up in the air waving them wildly as I rolled my hips to the beat.

"You're going to give him a heart attack," Poppy whispered as she danced beside me.

"Who, Aaron?" I snorted, waving her off. "He'll get over it."

"Not Aaron, babe." Her brow arched as she slid her gaze to where Ezra and Cole were chatting to some guys in Panther football jerseys.

"Ezra doesn't care. He's not—"

"Are you really that dense?" Poppy snapped. "Cole, babe. He hasn't taken his eyes off you since we got here."

A fact I was choosing to ignore.

I glanced at him and sure enough, he was watching me. Something crackled in the air between us, the invisible thread I so often felt around him stretching taut.

But it was frayed with betrayal now.

His betrayal.

And maybe it was petty, but I couldn't let it go, I couldn't —

"There she is." Strong arms wrapped around me from behind and lifted me up.

"For fuck's sake, Handell, put my sister down," Aaron groaned.

“Nah, Bennet. She’s the hottest girl in the room, and she promised me a dance.”

I had, but it had been the cherry sours talking.

Seize the moment. The words rattled through my hazy mind.

I was drunk. Enough to giggle when Jordan carried me through the kitchen into the huge living room where most people were dancing. He lowered me to the floor, and I turned in his arms.

“Fuck, you’re hot.” He toyed with the ends of my hair, one hand anchored around my waist. “It’s a real shame you’re Bennet’s sister—”

“Twin sister,” I corrected.

“Shit, so kissing you would be like kissing him, huh?” Mischief sparkled in his ice-blue eyes, sending a shiver down my spine.

“We’re not kissing,” I stated with a smirk.

“No? But it would be so fucking good.” Jordan tugged me closer, our bodies pressed together while his hands slid down to my ass. “This okay?”

I nodded, lost in the way I felt cocooned in his arms. My eyelids fluttered as he moved us to the heavy beat. Boy had moves, rolling his hips and grinding up on me. Sweat trickled down my back as we lost ourselves in the music.

He dipped his head, brushing his lips over my bare shoulder, tasting my skin and I dove my fingers into his hair, loving the way his mouth felt.

“Yeah, not sure I can stop,” he rasped, his voice thick with desire.

For me.

Jordan wanted... *me*.

Because I was hot and sexy and of all the girls here—and there were a lot—I’d captured his attention.

Liquid confidence coursed through me as I threw my arms around his neck and pressed closer.

“Feel that?” he whispered, his lips moving closer to my mouth. “I’m rock fucking hard for you.”

He rolled his hips and I felt him hard and thick at my stomach. Heat blossomed inside of me, making my stomach curl.

I’d never danced with someone as bold and brash as Jordan before. Unapologetic and more than willing to go after what he wanted.

“Kiss me,” I breathed, touching my head to his, gazing into his heavy-lidded eyes.

“Bennet won’t like—”

“I don’t care about my brother. And I don’t need his approval.”

“Shit yeah, okay.”

My body trembled as Jordan cupped my face, his fingers sliding over my jaw to angle my mouth right where he wanted it. But the second his lips touched mine, my head spun.

And not in a good way.

“Whoa there.” He gripped my shoulders as I swayed. “You good?”

“I... I don’t feel—” I yanked out of his hold, panic slamming into me as the room began to close in on me.

Breathe, Sofia. Just breathe. I tried repeating the mantra over and over as I stumbled through the sea of bodies, desperate to get out of here.

Usually, when the world spun, I woke up on the floor in a heap of confusion and embarrassment.

This was different.

You drank too much.

Maybe I had gone a little overboard. But I’d needed to get out of my head. It was too much. Dr. Peters’s life-changing

news. The lies and secrets. The overpowering fear I felt every time I let the word sneak into my mind.

Leukemia.

“Watch it,” someone snapped as I staggered through the door into the hall.

“Sofia, wait,” a voice called.

Not any voice.

Cole.

“Go away,” I murmured, right as my stomach churned.

Shit.

Picking up the pace, I staggered toward the front door, spilling out of the frat house with my hand clapped over my mouth.

No, no, no.

Not here, not—

I managed to rush over to a nearby bush just in time to puke up my insides.

“Fucking gross,” someone muttered.

“Take a walk, asshole.” Cole gathered my hair away and gently rubbed my back. “I got you,” he said. “I got you.”

“Ugh,” I retched again, my stomach turning inside out as my body purged itself of all the liquor.

“Fuck’s sake, Sofe,” Aaron shouted from somewhere behind us.

“Babe, not now.” That was Poppy. My best friend. My brother’s girl. God, part of me hated that she had to be loyal to him now.

“Guess I’ll call an Uber,” he grumbled.

“Sorry, I—” Another wave of nausea crashed over me, and I retched into the darkness.

“Somebody get me some water,” Cole said, still rubbing my back. I wanted to tell him to get the hell off me, but the

truth was, I wasn't sure I could stay upright without his steadying hands.

Finally, I stood, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. Cole kept one arm around my waist as he offered me the bottle of water.

“Here,” he said. “Little sips.”

“Thanks.” Shame flooded my cheeks, but I was too out of it to care. Everything was spinning still, the ground uneven beneath me.

“Uber's here,” someone said, and Cole guided me gently toward our ride.

“How do you feel?” Poppy asked me, and I mumbled some incoherent response.

Truth was, I felt drained. Completely exhausted. I just wanted to get into bed, pull the covers over my head, and forget this ever happened.

Everyone piled into the SUV. Ezra waited, helping Cole get me inside and then Cole climbed in behind.

“Well, that was a fucking shitshow,” my brother muttered.

“Babe, cut her some slack.”

They obviously didn't realize I could hear them or didn't care. Cole turned to me and captured my chin in his fingers. “You think you can manage the ride back to the hotel?”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

Not sure I could.

Everything was hazy, spinning around me.

“Come here.” He gently eased his arm around me and tucked me into his side. I wanted to tell him I didn't need his support or offer of comfort. And maybe I would...

When the world stood still again.

“SHH,” someone hissed. “We need to make it past Coach Mac’s room.”

“Maybe we should stick to our own room assignments?”

“Not happening, Poppy Star. I need you in my bed.”

Someone snorted. I tried to open my eyes, but everything felt heavy. My eyelids, my arms and legs. But my stomach... God, it felt like something had crawled inside me and died.

The air shifted around me as I clung to Cole as he carried me down the hall.

“Someone needs to watch her,” he said, his deep voice rumbling through me.

“I can.” It sounded like Ashleigh’s voice, but everything felt distant. Like trying to hear under water. “And Cole can room with E.”

“I’ll watch her.”

“You sure, bro?” Aaron asked. “Maybe I should—”

“It’s fine. No point in ruining everyone’s night. I’ll make sure she’s okay, I promise.”

“W-what?” I murmured, trying to come back to the land of the living. But it was too difficult, too easy to give in to the heavy pull of exhaustion and intoxication.

But I heard his voice somewhere on the edge of my consciousness.

“Shh, Sofe. I got you.”

I got you.

CHAPTER SIX

Cole

I MANAGED to get Sofia into my room, the one I was supposed to be sharing with Aaron.

She was a dead weight in my arms as I carried her over to the bed and laid her down.

“C-Cole?” she murmured, her eyelids fluttering.

“Shh.” I brushed the hair out of her face, my chest tightening as I touched her.

Fuck, she was beautiful. Big blue eyes, tan skin, and those soft pink lips. Lips that had been two seconds away from kissing Jordan Handell while I stood there, wishing it was me.

But it was more than that. I’d seen past her party girl effort right to the lingering pain in her eyes. Sofia was hiding something. The more I watched her, the more I felt it. And the more I thought about it, the more I came to the same conclusion. If she was hiding things from Aaron, it was bad news.

Really fucking bad.

My cell vibrated and I dug it out of my pocket.

Aaron: You sure you’re okay with her?

Me: Yeah, don’t worry. Enjoy your night with Poppy.

HE TEXTED BACK A WINKY EMOJI.

Lucky bastard. He had the girl of his dreams in bed with him.

I had—

“B-bathroom.” Sofia bolted upright, a strange gurgling sound coming out of her as she staggered off the bed, almost losing her footing.

Without thinking, I scooped her up and rushed her into the bathroom, gently lowering her down onto the tiled floor.

“Oh Go—” She started puking again, the sounds making my own stomach churn.

Grabbing a small hand towel, I dampened it under the faucet and crouched down beside her. Gently pulling her hair over one shoulder, I placed it on the back of her neck.

“That feels good,” she groaned, reaching up to pull the flush.

“What do you need?”

“To never drink again.”

I smiled. “Famous last words.”

“I don’t think I have anything left to puke up.”

“You want a shower?”

“Yes. God, yes. But I don’t think I can stand; my whole body is trembling.”

Scanning the bathroom set up, I rose to my feet. “Don’t move.”

“Cole, what are—” Sofia groaned again, dropping her head onto her forearm over the toilet bowl.

Shucking out of my hoodie and T-shirt, I kicked off my sneakers and hit the shower button. “I’m going to help you up, okay?” She nodded, letting me pull her to her feet. “Arms up,” I said.

Sofia complied, letting me strip her out of her puke-splattered clothes.

“Hold tight.”

Before she could protest, I scooped her up and carried her into the walk-in shower.

“Cole, what the hell?” Her protests were drowned out by the stream of water blasting down on us.

“Think you can stand now?” I asked her, and she gazed up at me through surprised eyes.

“Yeah.”

I gently lowered her to the floor.

Reaching around her, I grabbed the mini bottle of complimentary shower gel and flipped the cap, squeezing some into my palm.

“Cole, you don’t need to—”

“Let me take care of you.”

The fight in her eyes flickered out as she nodded slowly.

It was impossible to keep my eyes off her body. Even though she was still in her underwear, the way the water ran off her ample curves was enough to make my dick ache behind the confines of my jeans which were now plastered to my legs.

Inhaling a sharp breath, I slathered my hands together and then began to clean Sofia up, taking care not to linger in places I shouldn’t.

“Turn around,” I said, my voice thick with lust. Because she was half-naked and wet, standing before me like every guy’s fantasy.

There was no telling how many times I’d imagined Sofia like this. But I’d never tried to act on it, and I wasn’t about to start now. That didn’t stop me from drawing her body back into mine as I soaped her skin, rubbing away the evidence of the night.

Sofia’s head dropped back on my shoulder as she gave into me, her body melting against mine. I wasn’t a player. I didn’t sleep my way through class like some guys on the team. But I wasn’t a saint either, and having Sofia so close, her soft curves taunting me, was a serious test in restraint.

Until I remembered the reason we’d ended up here.

“Let me do your hair, okay?” I said.

I took her silence as compliance, reaching around her to grab the shampoo. Sofia hadn’t inherited her mom’s thick spiral curls, but her dark hair was thick and wavy.

“Mmm, that feels good,” she moaned as I ran my fingers through it, massaging her scalp.

I’d never washed a girl’s hair before. Never showered half-dressed with one either. But I was starting to realize there wasn’t a lot I wouldn’t do for Sofia Bennet.

Except keep her secrets.

A bolt of guilt went through me. But that was different. She was sick. She’d needed help.

I did the right thing; I didn’t doubt that. Even if she hated me now.

Once I’d rinsed off her hair, I reached around her again and turned off the shower. A shiver went through her, and I said, “Wait here. I’ll grab you a towel.”

Sofia let me drape it around her body and help her step out of the shower. “How do you feel?”

“A little better, thanks.” She could barely meet my eyes.

“Come on. You can take the bed.” There was one queen and a couch.

I hadn’t turned on the main light, only one of the nightstand lights, so the room was bathed in a soft amber glow. When her gaze found mine, there was so much swirling in her dark depths that I wanted to beg her to tell me all her secrets. But she didn’t trust me anymore.

“I’ll get you some water and find you a clean t-shirt to sleep in.”

“Why are you doing this?” Her voice cut through the stilted air like a knife.

I glanced back at her and gave her a thin smile. “Because we’re friends.”

Nothing.

She said nothing.

My stomach dropped.

After giving her the water and t-shirt, I excused myself to clean up in the bathroom. Really, I needed a second to catch my breath. Being with her like this wasn't easy. Not when all I wanted was to pull her into my arms and tell her everything was going to be okay.

I shucked out of my soaked jeans and dried off with a towel before padding back into the bedroom. Sofia was already under the covers, curled up on her side.

“You need anything?”

“No, I'm good.” Her voice was small. Cracked with something I didn't want to decipher.

I grabbed an extra blanket and pillow from the closet and threw them down on the couch.

“Cole?”

“Yeah, Sofe?”

“Will you lie with me?”

Fuck.

She was still drunk. She didn't know what she was asking, and yet...

“Please,” she whispered, and my resolve crumbled.

“Yeah, okay.” I swallowed, padding over to the bed. Pulling back the covers, I got in beside her, keeping a safe distance.

Just because she wanted me to lie with her, didn't mean she wanted me to touch her.

But Sofia had other ideas. Rolling over to face me, she crept closer, until she was nestled into my side.

“Sofe?” I asked, my blood heating at her sudden proximity.

“Hmm?”

“My offer stands. If you ever want to talk—”

“Cole?”

“Yeah.”

“Go to sleep,” she murmured, burying her face into my chest. Her hand snaked over my stomach, making my dick twitch.

I wasn't a dog, but I was an eighteen-year-old guy, and I had the girl of my fucking dreams wearing my t-shirt in bed with me.

It was impossible not to be affected.

Minutes ticked by as we lay there in deafening silence. Sofia was asleep, her gentle breaths at odds with the violent crash of my heart beneath my rib cage.

I lay perfectly still, soaking up the moment. Imagining that we were here under different circumstances. Because I didn't doubt that when she woke up, sober and lucid, Sofia would shut me out quicker than I could say, ‘Go Raiders.’

But that was tomorrow, and it could wait.

For now, I'd pretend. I would pretend she needed me, that she *wanted* me here.

I would pretend that this was real.

I WOKE ON MY SIDE, spooning Sofia with my arm slung possessively over her waist. But I wasn't the only thing awake. My dick was too, comfortably nestled against her perfect ass.

I needed to extract myself from the situation before she—

Sofia yawned, arching her body away from mine slightly. “What time is it?” she asked.

“Uh, like eight. How are you feeling?” I rolled onto my back, putting even more space between us as I willed my dick to stand down.

“Like I purged my soul.”

“You drank a lot.”

She let out a heavy sigh. “If this is the part where you scold me, save your breath. I know I screwed up.”

“Actually, I was going to ask if you wanted to talk about it.”

“I don’t.” She went rigid.

“Sof—”

My phone chimed and I leaned over to grab it.

“It’s Aaron,” I said, scanning the text.

Aaron: How is she?

Me: Alive.

Aaron: Gee, thanks. Asshole.

Me: Don’t think she’s ever going to forgive me.

Aaron: Nah, she’ll come around eventually. You did the right thing and now that she has the all-clear we can put it all behind us.

“TELL HIM TO GO AWAY,” Sofia murmured, rolling over to face me.

Fuck, she looked adorable, eyes heavy with sleep, her hair all mussed up and sexy.

She looked real, and I’d always loved that about her.

Sofia and Poppy weren’t Barbie bitches like some of the girls at school. They didn’t climb over other people to get a leg up the social ladder. They didn’t care. Which was something given that Poppy’s dad was an NFL legend, and Sofia’s brothers both played for the football team.

I read my next text out as I typed it. “Sofia said go away.”

“Asshole,” she whispered, but I caught the smile tugging at her lips.

“How do you feel, really?”

“Nauseous. Embarrassed... Confused.”

“Confused?” I turned onto my side to face her.

“You were kind to me last night,” she said.

“I’m always kind.”

“You’re...” She pressed her lips together and I inched closer, reaching for her. My fingers brushed away the stray hairs around her face and Sofia’s breath caught.

“I’m what, Sofe?”

But she crushed the hope building in my chest by saying, “I almost kissed that guy.”

“Yeah. Probably a good thing you didn’t.” Her brows furrowed, and I added, “I would have had to kick his ass.”

“Cole...”

“Too much?”

“I’m not your friend right now.” The twinkle in her eye was at odds with her somber words.

“I can make it up to you.”

“I’m Aaron’s sister. He won’t—”

Pressing a finger to Sofia’s lips, I silenced her. “In case you hadn’t worked it out yet, the reason I told everyone the truth about how many times you’d fainted was because I care about you.”

“I...”

“Shh. I’m not asking you for anything.” *Not yet, at least.* “I know shit is complicated with Aaron. Just... don’t shut me out again. I kinda like having you around.”

“Cole...” She bit her lip, peeking up at me through her long, dark lashes.

Jesus, she was beautiful.

Looking at her took my breath away. But lying here with her, alone... well, it did things to me. Made me want things I wasn’t sure I’d ever get to have.

I toyed with the ends of her hair, leaning in a little more. Until my lips brushed her forehead. “Sofia, I—”

The blare of my cell phone killed the moment.

“You should get that,” she said with a sigh, pulling away.

I sat up, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed and hit answer. “Yeah?”

“Breakfast is in twenty,” Aaron barked. “Coach expects us all to be there.”

“Okay.”

“Is she—”

“Okay,” I said, glancing back at Sofia. Her brows furrowed as she watched me.

“We’ll meet you downstairs in fifteen.” I hung up and said, “We’ve got to join everyone for breakfast. Poppy is going to sneak you some clean clothes.”

“Okay, I need to freshen up.”

“Go for it. I’ll be here.”

Sofia got up and padded toward the bathroom. But when she reached the door, she paused, looking over her shoulder at me. “Cole?”

“Yeah, Sofe?”

“Thanks.”

WE ALL HEADED down to breakfast together, hardly surprised to find Coach Ford, his wife Felicity, the other coaches, and the Bennets already down there.

“Just act cool, remember?” Aaron whispered as he grabbed Poppy’s hand and pulled her toward an empty table.

“Morning,” Coach said, and we all grumbled a reply.

“If I didn’t know better,” Sofia’s dad Asher said. “I’d say they were hungover.”

“Ash,” Mrs. Bennet warned with an amused smile.

“Relax, Mom, Dad... Coach.” Aaron dipped his chin at Coach. “We didn’t get into any trouble.”

“We’ll see about that,” Coach grumbled. “Get your breakfast. We want to leave in an hour.”

“You got it, Coach.”

We all sat down and ordered coffee. I felt surprisingly alive, but then I’d barely drunk last night, too obsessed with Sofia and what she was doing.

Speaking of Sofia. I realized she hadn’t joined us. Instead, she was standing behind her parents at their table, all speaking in hushed whispers about something.

That trickle of unease went through me again as I watched Mr. Bennet’s expression darken as he talked to his daughter.

“Dude.” Ezra nudged me. “You want coffee? Juice?”

I blinked up at the server and apologized. “Orange juice please.”

“I’ll get your drinks brought over right away. Feel free to help yourself at the buffet counter.”

“Thank you,” Poppy answered for us, and everyone wasted no time heading to the buffet.

But I stayed behind, still watching Sofia. Her strained smile and sad eyes. She’d had the perfect opportunity to tell me the truth and she’d chosen not to.

Because she doesn’t trust you anymore.

As if she felt me, Sofia looked up, finding me across the room.

She might not have trusted me anymore, but I didn’t miss the slight hitch to her breath, the flare of emotion in her eyes. I affected her. I’d felt it lying in bed with her in my arms, and I felt it now.

But Sofia was right. Shit was complicated.

Maybe too complicated.

But I wanted her.

I wanted Sofia Bennet—I wanted to see where this thing between us might go.

She had to want it too though.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sofia

“HOW ARE YOU FEELING?” Poppy whispered as we sat in the back of Ashleigh’s car.

Thankfully, Mom and Dad had ridden up to Pittsburgh with her mom, so I didn’t have to survive four hours of my parents lecturing me about my antics last night.

They’d known; of course they had.

One look at me at breakfast and they’d recognized I was hungover. But rather than chew me out at breakfast, they would no doubt wait until we got home.

“I’m fine,” I said, sipping on my bottled water, trying to abate the nausea rolling through me.

“So last night...” She went on.

“What about it?”

“You stayed in Cole’s room.”

I groaned. “If you’re trying to make a point, Pops, make it.”

“Jeez, you’re happy this morning.”

“Sorry, I feel like ass.”

“And who’s fault is that?” She gave me a pointed look. “I’ve never seen you that—”

“Can we not do this? I need to sleep.” Closing my eyes, I pressed my head against the glass, trying to block out the motion of the car.

“So you’re saying, you shared a room with Cole and nothing happened?”

“I can hear you both, you know?” Ashleigh chuckled. “The car isn’t that big.”

“Nothing happened,” I replied.

“Did he at least hold your hair while you puked your guts up?”

“Ew, Poppy,” Leigh chided.

“What? I think it’s romantic. He carried her into the hotel. Wouldn’t let Aaron near her.”

“I... nothing happened.”

“Oh, it did. It so did. I know you, Sofia Bennet.” Poppy poked my arm. “I know you better than anyone and you’re hiding something.”

“It’s not a big deal, okay?” I met her inquisitive gaze and sighed.

“Give me something, anything.” She pouted, batting her eyelashes at me in a way that told me she wasn’t going to give up.

“Ugh, fine. He showered me.”

“He... showered you. Like you fooled around in the shower?”

“No, like he stripped me to my underwear and carried me into the shower and then washed me.” Heat flooded my cheeks as I remembered how it had felt to be in his arms, the water cascading down on us.

“Was he naked?”

“No, he kept his jeans on.”

“Boring.” She grinned and I rolled my eyes.

She was insufferable.

“So, he washed you off, then what?”

“Then he gave me a t-shirt to sleep in and offered to sleep on the couch.”

“No, no, no. Tell me you didn’t make him sleep on the couch after he looked after you.”

“I didn’t.”

“Because you know, Sofe, that’s low even for— *what?*”

“I didn’t make him sleep on the couch.”

I probably should have. Because now things were even more confusing.

“Oh my God, you slept with Cole.”

“We didn’t *sleep* together, Pops, we just slept together.”

Her brows knitted. “No touching?”

“Definitely no touching.” Except when I’d felt him this morning. Hard and thick pressed up against my ass. There was no mistaking Cole’s morning wood. But that was simple biology, it didn’t mean anything.

“Kissing?”

“In case you forgot, I spent half of last night retching into the toilet bowl.”

“Good point. But surely there was something? Any sexual tension? A smoldering look or two?”

“Oh my God,” I spluttered. “What is wrong with you?”

“You’d be so good together. I know you both think Aaron won’t like it—”

“Because he won’t,” I said. “Cole is his best friend.”

“I’m your best friend and he didn’t seem to care much about that.”

“Actually, I distinctly remember him repeatedly using me as a reason the two of you shouldn’t be together.” I gave her a pointed look and she narrowed her eyes at me.

“Oh hush. He just wants you to be happy, and if a certain star quarterback makes you happy then I don’t see what the problem is.”

“I can’t trust him.” It came out a murmured whisper.

“Sofe—”

“Just drop it, Poppy. I’m not in the mood.”

I didn’t want to think about how I’d trusted Cole with the truth, and he’d betrayed me, ratting me out to my brother the

first chance he got. Even if he maintained he only did it for my benefit, he'd still broken his promise. And now the truth was even more dangerous.

How could I ever trust Cole with this?

I couldn't.

I wouldn't.

No matter how good it had felt to be in his arms.

Even if I did lower my defenses long enough for him to infiltrate my heart, what was the point?

My life was about to get a whole lot complicated. If Dr. Google was correct, I had a future of chemotherapy and various cancer treatments to look forward to.

It was senior year.

Cole would run the other way when he realized what my future looked like, and I couldn't blame him for that.

What eighteen-year-old guy wanted to spend their senior year standing beside their sick girlfriend?

I didn't want that for him.

I didn't want to be anyone's burden.

It was bad enough that eventually I'd have to tell Aaron.

"I don't care what you say, Sofe. Cole likes you; he always has."

He did.

I didn't doubt that.

But it wasn't enough to withstand the storm blowing my way.

And I didn't intend on dragging him into the trail of devastation it would no doubt leave in its wake.

I SLEPT ALL DAY.

I didn't know if it was the hangover, exhaustion, or a bad case of the morning after blues, but I slept through lunch and dinner, and by the time Mom managed to wake me, it was almost seven thirty.

“How do you feel?”

“Will you freak if I say tired?” I asked.

“Oh, sweetheart.” She reached for me, brushing my forehead. “We get it, you know. Your dad and me. You're scared and freaking out and wanted a night of pretending you're just a normal eighteen-year-old. But that's not your life now, Sofia. That's not—”

“Mom.” A tremor went through me as I tried to keep my voice even. I didn't want to cry. I was so fucking tired of crying.

But she was right.

Of course she was right.

Nothing was the same anymore.

Nothing was going to be the same ever again.

“We need to focus on fighting this thing, sweetheart. I've been reading up about it, and staying healthy and getting good nutrition are important during treatment. It can really help minimize side effects.”

“Please don't tell me you're going to put me on a special diet. I'm going to need comfort foods, Mom. All of them.”

“No, I'm not going to put you on a diet, baby. But we need to do everything we can to face this thing head on. Good nutrition, a positive mental attitude, and—”

I tuned out at that point. We didn't even have a treatment plan yet. Dr. Peters expected it would be mid-week before we got the results from the biopsy.

Another few days at least.

Might as well have been five years.

“I am worried you’ve slept the day away without anything to eat or drink though.”

“I ate at breakfast.”

Her brow arched, and I shrank under her disapproval.

“Why don’t you come down for a bit? I’ll make you something to eat and we can watch something on the TV.”

“Fine. I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Good.” She leaned in and pressed a kiss on my head. “Do you want pancakes? Omelet? Pizza?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Okay, I’ll rustle something up and see you downstairs in five minutes.”

“Yes, Mom,” I called as she headed for the door.

God, it was like being a child all over again. I got it, I did, but it didn’t mean I was looking forward to how overbearing and all up in my business they were no doubt about to become.

Reluctantly, I dragged myself out of bed, grabbing my cell off the nightstand and checking for messages.

I was hardly surprised that Poppy had sent me three. I had one from Ashleigh too. And one from Aaron saying he was spending the afternoon over at the Fords’ house. My brother was a total goofball, but he was nothing if not loyal and protective.

And yet, he let Cole look after you last night.

I silenced the little voice. She was dangerous. An unwelcome whisper in my ear. I needed to keep my distance where Cole Kandon was concerned. Because it would be so easy to let myself fall for him. To lean on him the way I’d leaned on him last night.

But it wasn’t fair to him or me to do that.

It wasn’t going to be easy though, not when he was so persistent.

I opened the text message from him.

Cole: How are you feeling? I can't stop thinking about last night... we need to talk.

TALK.

Bitter laughter bubbled out of me. Before Dr. Peters's unexpected bombshell last week, I might have agreed. I might have texted Cole back and given him another chance.

But what kind of person did it make me if I dragged him into my life knowing I might not be around in a year or two or five. I'd researched the survival rates. Approximately seventy-five percent of teenagers my age with CML survived. Which sounded like pretty good odds, but it still meant out of every ten kids almost three didn't make it.

My stomach dropped, the gnawing pit of fear growing every second.

Ignoring Cole's text, I washed up, then went downstairs in search of Mom and some sustenance. Not that I felt much like eating. But she was right, I needed to keep as healthy as possible.

"I went with an omelet," she said the second I stepped into the kitchen. "Eggs are an excellent source of protein as well as vitamin D."

"Can I expect a nutrient breakdown of all my meals from here on out?"

"Sorry, I'm just trying to get a handle on things. This helps me feel in control." Mom motioned to the pile of ingredients beside her. "I've got spinach, cheese, onion."

"Sounds great, Mom. Is Aaron still over at Poppy's house?"

"He was but I think they've gone out. Date night."

"Lucky them," I murmured.

“Hey now, you’ll get your time.” She gave me a reassuring smile.

I struggled to return it. Maintaining a positive outlook was getting harder by the minute. I could only imagine what it would be like when Dr. Peters confirmed the leukemia.

Dad came into the kitchen. “There she is. How’s my hungover girl?”

“Dad,” I groaned, trying to shuck out of his reach as he hooked his arm around my neck and kissed my head.

“Feeling better?”

“I’m fine.”

“You need to eat. Your Mom’s been reading up and—”

“Ash,” Mom warned.

“What? I thought we were attacking this thing head on.”

“We are babe. But Sofia is still feeling a tad delicate.”

“I’m not... that’s not... you know what, forget it. You two clearly aren’t listening to a word I say.”

“Oh, sweetheart, don’t be like that. We just care and we want to make sure you’re getting all the goodness and nutrition you need so your body is primed and ready to fight this thing.”

I dropped my forehead onto my arm and tried to block them out.

“Do you think she’s okay?” Dad asked Mom, the two of them launching into a discussion about me, while I was sitting right there.

I didn’t come up again, not until Mom pushed a plate toward me and the rich smell made my stomach growl.

“Eat,” she ordered.

“Fine. But you two need to stop acting like I’m a child.”

“Sweetheart, we’re not—” I pinned her with a dark look, and she held up her hands. “Fine. But you need to promise not to make last night a regular thing. We have enough to worry

about, Sofia. Without worrying about where you are or what you're doing.”

“Mya, we should cut her a little slack. It's been a hard week.”

And it was only about to get harder.

“The important thing is, she's here and she's safe and she knows that looking after her mind and body is going to go a long way to—”

I tuned out again.

They meant well. They only cared. But I didn't want to hear it.

I didn't want to be here in the first place, gearing up for my cancer fight.

God, just saying the words broke something inside me. It had only been a few days. Hopefully, my positive mental attitude would kick in soon because all I wanted to do at this precise moment was crawl back into bed and sleep.

So when my cell phone started ringing, I shot off the stool and excused myself. “I need to take this,” I said.

“But we're talking—”

“Sorry, Mom. Leigh said she would call to discuss the assignment for English. I really need to take it.” The lie came easily.

Too easily.

But I guess that's who I was now—the girl who lied to her brother and friends and parents.

“Fine, but take some water up with you. You need to stay hydrated.”

“Sure, Mom.” I grabbed the bottle from her and ducked out of the kitchen, instantly relieved to be alone once more.

Cole's name taunted me. It wasn't Ashleigh calling at all.

It was him.

The boy I'd decided to avoid at all costs.

I guess he'd grown tired of me ignoring his texts and so had resorted to trying to call me.

I slipped into my room and closed the door, waiting for it to stop ringing. It did, but a text came straight through.

Cole: You can't avoid me forever.

Me: Who says I'm avoiding you? Maybe I just don't want to speak to you...

Cole: Ouch.

GUILT SNAKED THROUGH ME.

Cole: Look, I'm sorry, okay? I know I hurt you, but I only did what I thought was best. I was worried about you, Sofia. I'm still worried...

I CHEWED MY BOTTOM LIP, at war with myself. On the one hand, I wanted to tell him to get lost and never text me again. But on the other...

Well, the fact he cared. The fact that he refused to give up, it meant something to me. But letting him in was foolish, for both of us.

Sofia: I can't do this, Cole.

Cole: See that's where I think you're wrong. We're friends, aren't we? Ezra has Ashleigh now. Aaron has Poppy. Seems to me like we're all the other has left...

I FOUGHT A SMILE. Cole was persistent, I'd give him that. But it was more than that. There was something else there. There always had been but we'd never acted on it out of

respect for my brother. Because everyone knew things had the potential to get messy when you hooked up with your brother's best friend.

I needed to stay away, no matter how easy it was to get pulled into his orbit.

Another text came through and my heart leaped.

Cole: Be ready tomorrow at six. There's somewhere I want to take you.

Sofia: I am not going on a date with you.

Cole: Who said anything about a date? We're friends, right? And friends hang out...

Sofia: Friends?

WE BOTH KNEW the lines between us had blurred past friends.

Cole: Friends. See you tomorrow, Sofe.

IT WAS A BAD IDEA. The worst. But strangely, I found myself texting back one little word that would change everything.

Me: Okay.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cole

IT WAS A BAD IDEA.

Telling Sofia I'd pick her up and take her on a non-date. Bringing her to the one place that meant more to me than I could ever put into words.

"Uh, Cole... what is this place?" she asked, staring at the run-down bar on the outskirts of Halston, the town over from Rixon.

"It's not as bad as it looks, I promise. Come on." I climbed out and went around to open her door.

Sofia had been quiet on the ride over. Part of me had expected her to call me with excuses for not coming out, but when I'd pulled up outside of the Bennets' house, she'd been waiting for me.

She let me help her out of the car, a zap of electricity going through me the second her hand slid into mine.

"You're good at this," she murmured.

"At what?"

"The non-date stuff." A hint of a grin tugged at her mouth. Those soft plump lips that I was having a real hard time not staring at every five seconds.

I wanted to kiss her.

I'd wanted to kiss her last night at the hotel, and I wanted to kiss her now. But I also wanted to know what had put the shadows under her eyes. And I was hoping bringing her here would help her open up to me.

"You haven't seen anything yet."

"Oh really?" Sofia laughed, and fuck, if it wasn't like music to my ears.

She didn't do enough of that lately. Smile. Laugh. Get that gorgeous twinkle in her eyes.

“Hang on a second,” I said, closing the door behind her and going around to the trunk to grab my guitar.

“What are you—”

“Come on, or we’ll be late.”

Roadhouse was already crammed but I found us a booth at the back of the room. It had a prime view of the stage, but the curved banquette seating also gave it enough privacy that I hoped we could talk.

“Who are you and what have you done with Cole Kandon?” Sofia chuckled as I ushered her into the booth.

“You want something to drink?”

“Soda is fine.”

“Soda it is. You hungry? They do—”

“No, I’m good. Thanks.”

I nodded. “Sit tight and I’ll be back.”

Weaving my way through the crowd, I perched at the end of the bar.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

“Tony, it’s been a while,” I said.

“Too long.” He grinned. “Didn’t think we’d see you around here again.”

“Neither did I.” The admission hurt, but it was the truth.

Between the ages of twelve and sixteen, I’d spent a lot of time here. Tony was family. Or at least, he was by blood. But the familial ties ended there. When my old man found out I’d been getting up on the stage and performing at Roadhouse’s open mic nights, he’d soon put a stop to it.

I’d never hated him more than when he’d turned up and frog-marched me out of the bar and issued me with an ultimatum where Roadhouse was concerned.

Asshole.

“How’re your folks?” he asked.

“Same old.”

“Say no more, kid. Say no more. It’s good to see you though. Was a damn shame when you stopped coming around. Are you here alone?”

“No, actually, I... uh, I brought somebody with me.”

“You did, huh.” He smirked. “What’s her name?”

“Sofia.”

“She cute?”

My lips twisted into a faint smirk. “She’s waiting on me. I’d better get back to her.”

“Keeping your cards close to your chest. I can respect that. What’ll it be?”

“A soda for Sofia and I’ll get a beer.”

One wouldn’t hurt. Besides, I needed something to settle my nerves.

Tony nodded and went to get our drinks. When he came back, he slid them across the bar and said, “On the house. Should I add your name to the roster?”

“Yeah.”

His face split into a wide grin. “It’s good to see you, kid. Real good.”

“Thanks, Tony. I’ll come say bye before we leave.”

“You’d better. I want to meet this girl who’s got you all twisted up inside.”

I waved him off as I made my way back to Sofia. The second her eyes found me, a streak of lust went through me.

She looked good. Wearing skintight jeans with a pale-green cashmere sweater that hung off one shoulder, revealing her smooth tan skin. She’d loosely braided her hair, soft curls falling around her face like a waterfall.

Sofia Bennet was hands down the most beautiful girl I’d ever laid eyes on.

“One soda for the lady.”

“Thanks. So what’s the deal with this place?”

“My mom’s cousin is the owner. I used to come by a lot when I was younger. He’d let me hang around and watch the performers. When I got a bit older, he started letting me get up and play.”

“Seriously?”

I nodded. “The first time I played, I almost puked all over myself, I was so fucking nervous. But the rush was like nothing else I’ve ever felt.”

“Not even your first game as quarterback?”

“Not even that. I love playing with the team, I do. But football isn’t my passion, Sofe.”

“Music is,” she finished for me.

“Yeah, it is.”

“So why did you quit the band if you love it so much?”

“Because football is my shot at getting out from my old man’s claws. He’ll only pay for my tuition if I follow in his footsteps.”

“He’s an attorney, right?”

“Yup.” I took a long pull on my beer. The first band were just setting up, the clink and clatter of their instruments a sound that both comforted me and filled me with a deep sense of regret.

Because I missed that. I missed playing with Jude and the guys, creating something great together. I missed the thrill of performing, the high of the crowd.

“I can’t imagine you as an attorney,” Sofia said.

“No? What can you imagine me doing?”

I was right, the booth offered us a fair amount of privacy. Enough that I felt comfortable shuffling closer to her. Her breath caught as she gazed up at me.

“Cole,” she warned.

“I just want to be close to you. Is that such a bad thing?”

“What are we doing?”

“Well, I thought we were on a non-date. But we can upgrade it, if you want.”

“I don’t.”

Disappointment sank into me. She was a tough nut to crack. But I was a patient guy.

“What?” I asked her. Because she was looking at me, studying me like a puzzle she’d yet to solve.

“You’re not making this easy.”

“Care to elaborate?” My brow lifted.

“Actually, I don’t.”

Damn, she was good.

“You realize this is the first time we’ve ever done this, right? Hung out just the two of us?”

Sofia shrugged. “Like you said, we have to stick together now we’ve lost our best friends to that pesky thing called love.”

“Pesky thing? You sound a little bitter there, Sofe.”

“I’m not.”

“Sure, you keep telling yourself that.” I chuckled, sipping my beer. The band introduced themselves as Tyranny State and launched into their opening song.

“Wow, it’s loud,” Sofia shouted over the music.

“Rock music is supposed to be loud.” My laughter grew.

“It just occurred to me. I’ve never seen you play.”

“Then you’re in for a treat.”

The air crackled between us, thick with tension and tainted with betrayal. But there was something else. She felt it. I knew she did. But something was holding her back.

Shifting even closer, I slid my arm along the back of the booth, basically putting my arm around her.

“Cole.” There was less resistance in her voice as if I was wearing her down. But I didn’t want to force Sofia into this. I wanted her to want it. The way I wanted it.

And fuck, did I want it.

“Aaron, won’t—”

“Aaron isn’t here.” I toyed with the ends of her hair. “It’s just you and me and a bar full of people who don’t know us.”

“Why?” she whispered, her eyes full of hesitation and wonder.

“Because I like you, Sofe. I’ve always liked you.” I dipped my head, putting us eye to eye. Her lips parted on a soft ‘O’ as I focused on her mouth. That kissable, tempting mouth.

“You’d risk your friendship with Aaron for this?”

“Not for this... for you.” I slid my hand along her neck and brushed my lips over hers. Just once.

A test.

An invitation.

Sofia inhaled a shuddering breath. “You kissed me,” she said, touching a finger to her lips.

“If you think that was a kiss, you haven’t been doing it right.” I smirked.

“Asshole.”

“You didn’t throw your drink at me and storm out of here. Should I take that as a good sign?”

“I don’t know. I might need to get a second opinion.”

Holy shit.

Was she into it?

Please, God, let her be into it.

I sat as still as a statue. I’d made the first move, pushed her toward the idea of exploring this thing between us. But the

next move had to come from her.

Somewhere between watching her dance with Jordan Handell, to waking up with her in my arms yesterday morning, I'd decided she was worth it.

Sofia was worth the risk.

Aaron was my best friend, and yeah, he was her brother. But if he cared about us—both of us—he'd come around eventually. Besides, he knew me better than anyone. He knew I would never willingly hurt her.

He could trust me with her.

And if Sofia gave me a chance, I wanted to talk to him as soon as I could, face to face. Friend to friend. Teammate to teammate.

Sofia moved in, curling her slender fingers into my hoodie and gently yanking me closer.

I liked it—I liked it a whole lot.

“Hi,” I said, grinning.

“Hi,” she breathed. “What are we doing, Cole? This is crazy. You're... and I'm... I mean, we're...”

“Don't overthink it. We're just two people who happen to like each other. That's not so bad, is it?”

“It's more complicated than that, and you know it.” Her expression turned sad, the strong emotion rolling off her.

“You're hiding something.”

“Cole, don't do that. Don't try to get in my head.”

I brushed the stray hairs out of her face and touched my head lightly to hers. “Don't push me away. I'm here, Sofe. I'm not going anywhere.”

She took another shuddering breath, leaning into my touch. “I wish it was that easy.”

“What does that mean? What are you—”

“Okay, everyone,” the emcee's voice went up around the room. “Next up, we have one of Roadhouse's very own. Give

it up for Cole Kandon.”

The room broke into a chorus of cheers, a noise that usually fueled me. But I was too focused on Sofia, on the violent thud of my heart beneath my chest.

We were finally getting somewhere. I could feel the shift between us. The frenetic energy.

“Uh, I think that’s your cue,” she said around a tentative smile.

“Talk about bad timing.” I let out a frustrated breath, glancing over to the stage, the solitary stool and mic stand calling to my soul.

“Go,” Sofia urged, shoving me gently. “I’ll be right here.”

“Good.” I kissed her again, the flash of surprise on her face worth the risk. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Go.” She chuckled, touching her lips again. Like she needed to feel it to know it was real.

“We’ll resume this conversation the second I’m back.”

I didn’t give her a chance to argue, grabbing my guitar and making my way to the stage. The last time I’d performed here had been the summer before junior year. I’d been so amped to try out some new original songs. Then my dad had turned up and ruined everything. God, I’d hated him that night.

Still didn’t much like the guy. He’d never understood me. I was nothing but a big disappointment to him and his dreams of a cloned version of himself.

The emcee spotted me and beckoned me up on stage. “Give it up one more time for Cole Kandon.”

The harsh glare of the lights licked my skin as I sat down and got comfortable, hooking the strap over my neck.

“Hey there,” I said into the mic. “It’s been a while since I got up here, but it feels good to be back.”

Adrenaline pulsed through me as I adjusted my posture. After so much time away, it felt a little awkward to be up here, but then I found her across the room.

Sofia.

I could just make out her smile, the way her eyes seemed to say, ‘you can do it.’

“This first song is called Seven Minutes in Heaven.”

I strummed the opening chords and closed my eyes, letting my muscle memory do the work. It came as easy as breathing, the way the lyrics poured out of me, how smoothly my fingers ran over the frets and plucked at the strings.

The bar fell into hushed silence as my voice rose, singing about first kisses, first touches... first love.

Not that I knew much about that. The only girl I’d ever had a crush on had always been off-limits.

Not anymore though.

My gaze landed on Sofia again across the room. She had shuffled to the edge of the booth, watching me serenade the crowd. But I wasn’t singing for them, I was singing for her.

To her.

Jesus, I was in deep.

Too fucking deep, and nothing had really happened yet.

But it was Sofia.

And I wanted her so much.

That want had only grown since finding out about her illness. It had become urgent. Like the clock was ticking on our chance at being together. I couldn’t explain it. It was just a feeling.

But then everything felt finite now we were in senior year. My time with the team, deciding what the hell to do about college, the impending fight with my father when I didn’t choose his dream. The walls were closing in around me, and soon I’d have to make a decision. One that could shake my entire future.

Yet all I could see was Sofia.

All I could think about was her.

My voice faded as I held the final note, the crowd breaking into a raucous applause. The noise vibrated inside of me, giving me a short burst of endorphins.

I'd planned to do a five-song set. But I was already itching to get back to Sofia. She'd been about to kiss me back, and I wanted to pick up right where we'd left off.

Two more songs and I was calling it a night.

I had a girl waiting on me.

The girl.

At least, I hoped she would be soon enough.

CHAPTER NINE

Sofia

COLE WAS GOOD.

Really good.

I didn't know what I'd expected, but it wasn't those deep, gravelly lyrics about first love and heartbreak. His voice was hypnotic; smooth and rich it fisted my heart, holding me captive as he sang to the crowd.

Part of me had been so relieved when the emcee called Cole up onto the stage.

He'd kissed me.

I'd almost kissed him back.

Almost.

I was walking a dangerous path, letting myself fall deeper. But he made it so damn easy. And part of me wanted all those firsts.

God, everything was so confusing.

Suddenly overwhelmed, I slipped out of the booth and made a beeline for the restrooms at the back of the bar. I needed a second to catch my breath and figure out how I was going to let Cole down gently.

He'd done such a nice thing bringing me here and sharing this part of himself with me. But I had suspicions as to why.

"Blowing me off already?" His voice made me pause and I turned slowly, guilt flooding me.

"Sorry, I just needed—"

"Hey, relax." He closed the distance between us, gently gripping my chin and tilting my face up to his. "What do you need?"

"A girl's minute."

“I have a better idea.” He grabbed my hand and said, “Come on.”

Cole led me down the hall and to a door marked ‘private.’

“Are we supposed to be back here?”

“Tony won’t mind. I used to come up here all the time.”

We climbed the metal stairs leading to the roof. Cole gave the door a firm shove and motioned for me to follow. The cool fall air whipped around my face as I took in our surroundings.

“Pretty neat, huh?” Cole smiled.

“This is... did you plan this?”

“I’d like to take the credit, but no. Tony let his girlfriend Gianna decorate up here, and well, this was the result.”

We sat on the pallet sectional underneath the wooden pergola. Fairy lights were strung up above us, creating a soft amber glow. But the real focal point was the view.

“That’s Halston over there.” Cole said. “And over there, in the distance, is Rixon.”

“It’s beautiful.”

But Cole wasn’t looking at the view, his eyes were fixed firmly on me.

“What?” I blushed.

“I was just thinking about where we left things earlier.”

“Look, Cole, I like you. It’s just—”

He let out a low whistle. “What every guy dreads hearing when he’s sitting there, thinking about kissing the girl.”

“There’s just too much going on. I don’t think it would be wise to complicate things.”

“If this is about Aaron, I’ll talk to him and—”

“No, no. Don’t do that. Why would you even suggest that?”

“Why?” He frowned, sounding a little incredulous. “Because I like you, Sofia. And I want us to try and—”

I pressed my finger to his lips. "Please, don't."

"What are you so scared of? You like me. I know you do."

"It doesn't matter."

"Stop saying that." He reached for my hand, threading our fingers together. "It matters to me."

God, this boy. He was going to be my undoing. I'd always managed to keep him at arm's length, separating him as the boy I had a crush on and my brother's best friend. I could look and lust but never touch.

Everything was different now.

"You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Nope. There's something here, Sofe. And I'm tired of fighting it."

"I have leukemia," I blurted out.

I hadn't planned to tell him. Not here, not now. But there was no taking them back now they hung in the space between us.

Cole stared at me, his expression one of utter confusion. "W-what?"

"The doctor thinks it's leukemia. I'm waiting for my biopsy results to confirm it, but he seemed pretty certain."

"Leukemia... you have... fuck." The blood drained from his face as he snatched his hand away.

Ouch.

That hurt.

As if he thought it was catching or something.

Cole stared out at nothing, rubbing a hand down his face.

It was silly. I'd told him my awful news, and yet, I was the one with the urge to comfort him.

"Maybe we should go," I said after another minute passed.

It was getting awkward.

“Do you feel okay? Do I need to call someone? I can—”

“Relax, I’m fine. Better than fine actually. Today has been a good day.” I gave him a small, playful smile, hoping to lighten the mood again.

But Cole didn’t smile back.

In fact, he barely looked at me.

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes.

This... this was what I’d feared. Telling people and them totally freezing up on me. But it was different with Cole. Before the words had spilled out, he’d seen me as a desirable, beautiful girl he wanted to be with.

Now, all he saw was hair loss, nausea, and endless hospital visits.

I couldn’t blame him for wanting to run far, far away.

It didn’t stop it from hurting though.

“Look, you don’t owe me anything, so quit looking at me like I’m damaged goods and take me home. We can pretend tonight never happened.”

“Does... does Aaron know?”

Bitter laughter caught in my throat.

Of course it came back to Aaron. Because he was the real hurdle between us. Always would be.

“No, and I’d appreciate it if you could keep it that way. He doesn’t need to know yet.”

“Sofia, come on, this is—”

“My business,” I snapped. “My parents have agreed to honor my wishes, so I hope you can too. If you can’t, well I guess I made an error in judgment trusting you with this.” My chest squeezed.

“Sofe, that’s not fair—”

“Nothing in life is, Cole.” I got up and headed for the door. “I’ll meet you by the car.”

The sooner I got out of here, the better.

THE RIDE back to my house was suffocating. Cole barely said two words to me, and I didn't have the energy to reassure him.

I'd given him my truth, and he'd crumpled under the weight of it.

But strangely, I didn't regret it. Because at least now, we were both clear about where we stood. I couldn't get into a relationship with someone right now, and he clearly didn't want to be involved with someone who was sick.

The second my house came into view, relief slammed into me. Cole pulled up outside and I grabbed the door handle. "I guess I'll see you at school." I forced myself to look at him. But he was still staring straight ahead. As if he couldn't even look at me.

Damn you, Cole.

"And please, don't say anything to Aaron. I will tell him, of course I will. But I need more time."

He nodded.

An imperceptible, barely there nod.

Well, then.

I guess there wasn't much more to say, so I ducked out of his car and headed up to the house.

In a cheesy rom-com movie, Cole might have burst out of the car, swept me up in his arms, and kissed me under the stars while the music rose to an emotional crescendo and fireworks went off around us.

But my life wasn't a movie.

If it was, it definitely wasn't a rom-com; it was a tragedy with no surprise happy ending.

And as if I didn't need any more reminder of that fact, the rumble of Cole's car pulling off and disappearing down the street really hammered it home.

He left.

Just like that.

What had started out as a non-date with so many possibilities had quickly become the worst non-date in the history of non-dates ever.

I never should have gone with him.

But deep down, I'd wanted it.

I'd wanted one night of normalcy. I'd wanted to experience the teenage girl dream.

And for as much as I tried to fight it, I wanted it with Cole.

A tear slipped free, but I wiped it away as I entered the house and went straight up to my room.

"Sweetheart, is that you?" Mom called.

"Yeah, Mom." I paused, waiting for the third degree she was no doubt about to unleash on me.

"Did you guys have fun?"

"Yeah, but I'm tired, Mom. So I'm going to head up and get some rest."

"Okay, sweetheart. I'm down here if you need anything."

I traipsed up to my room, trying my hardest to stuff down the ball of emotion lodged in my throat.

I still couldn't believe things had gone so badly. Well, I could. I wasn't a naïve foolish girl with dreams of a white knight swooping in to save me. Life didn't work like that.

But it was Cole. I'd thought—

Ugh.

Get a grip, Sofia.

Stripping out of my clothes, I pulled on some clean pajamas and went into my bathroom to wash my face and

brush my teeth. But I couldn't get the stupid kiss out of my head. How confident he'd been, taking the decision out of my hands as if he knew I wouldn't take that step.

Then everything had gone to shit.

I guess that was my life now.

One shit day after another.

I didn't want to be the girl who let her illness get the better of her. I didn't. But the truth was, I was scared.

And I had never felt more alone than I did now.

“GOOD MORN— WHAT’S WRONG?” Aaron frowned.

“Nothing. Just tired,” I said, helping myself to a mug of coffee. I was surprised Mom hadn't insisted I switch to green tea or something yet. But I needed caffeine or there was no way I would make it through the day without it.

I'd barely slept. Tossing and turning all night, replaying things over in my head, wondering if I should have done anything differently.

But every time, I came to the same conclusion. Cole deserved to know the truth. What he did with it was on him.

At least, no one could say I trapped him into a relationship knowing I was sick. Knowing that I might not...

Don't go there. Don't even think it.

I inhaled a deep breath and pasted on the best smile I could muster.

“What did you get up to yesterday? Mom said you went out?”

“Nothing exciting. How was West Chester?” He and Poppy had driven down there to check out the campus together.

“Amazing. I can't wait until next summer.”

“That’s great. I’m excited for you both.”

“Don’t sound so glum. You have college to look forward to, brainbox.”

“We’ll see.” I murmured, not realizing I’d said the words aloud until Aaron balked, “We’ll see? What the fuck is that supposed to mean? The plan was always to study psychology at Columbia. It’s all you’ve ever wanted.”

“It was. I mean, it is.”

“You’re acting weird.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” His cell phone vibrated, and he checked it, smiling at whatever was on the screen.

“Poppy?” I asked.

“Actually, it’s Kacie.”

“What does she want?”

“Kandon, apparently. She’s been hounding me to get her an introduction.”

“Kacie Goodman likes Cole?” My stomach dipped. Kacie was exactly the kind of girl I could see him with. Popular but not mean, she was a cheerleader with an exemplary academic record. Beautiful, smart, and athletic.

It was the perfect trifecta.

“I’m going to set them up.”

“Y-you are?” My fingers tightened around the mug.

“Yeah. She seems cool and Poppy knows her. I figured we could double date. It would be nice to have another couple to hang out with. E and Leigh are too all up in each other’s business.”

“Like you and Poppy don’t subject everyone to endless streams of PDA,” I said, trying to ignore the fact that my brother, the clueless idiot, was going to set Cole up on a date.

“Do you think he’ll say yes?”

I regretted the words the second they left my lips.

Aaron smirked. “Knowing Kandon, probably not, but I’ll talk him around. It’s time my boy got some. And Kacie is exactly his type.”

Cole had a type now.

And if my brother was right, then it obviously wasn’t me.

Kacie was tall and slim with a typical cheerleader’s body. Pale skin and blonde hair. We couldn’t have been more different.

“Sofe, are you sure everything is okay? You look a little green.”

“Me? I’m fine.” Another forced smile. “I think I’m going to walk today, get some fresh air.”

“Walk? You don’t have to do that. Me and Poppy aren’t that bad.” Aaron smiled up at me with that puppy dog grin of his, but it barely touched the ice around my heart.

His life was just beginning. He had this exciting future to look forward to. I’d had it all too. But now I didn’t know what the next few months would bring me, let alone the next four years.

“You should let me set you up with someone too, then we can all go out.”

“No! Absolutely not.”

Oh God, I couldn’t think of anything worse.

“Come on, Sis, it’ll be fun. And I know Leigh and Poppy would love it if we all hung out together more.”

Because obviously I needed a guy for that.

“What about—”

My cell pinged and I dug it out of my pocket, tensing at the sight of Cole’s name.

“Who is it?” Aaron asked.

“My lab partner. No big deal.” I shoved it back, praying to God that my expression didn’t betray me.

I'd thought Cole might text last night, but he hadn't.

I should have known he would eventually, once he figured out a way to let me down gently.

He could save his breath. I didn't want to hear his excuses, and I sure as hell didn't want to look him in the eye when he gave them to me.

"So what do you think?" Aaron said, and I blinked at him.

"Sorry, what?"

"About Simon? He's a good guy. I think you two would get on—"

"No."

"No? But you didn't even let me get to the good bit."

"There's a good bit? I don't need your pity, Aaron. Nor do I want it." I grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl and headed for the door. "I'll see you at school."

"Safe, come on. You don't need to lea—"

But I was already gone.

CHAPTER TEN

Cole

LEUKEMIA.

Fuck, I hated that word.

Hated it so much I never wanted to hear it again as long as I lived.

But there was no escaping it. Every time I stopped, every time I gave myself a second to catch my breath, it infiltrated my mind like poison.

Leukemia.

Cancer.

Sofia had *cancer*.

I'd known something more was going on with her, but even I hadn't expected this. Or maybe part of me had, but it was one of those scenarios where thinking it and knowing it were two entirely different things. Because the second she'd blurted out the words—the truth—I'd gone into complete denial.

She couldn't have cancer.

Not Sofia. Beautiful, funny, smart Sofia.

And what had I done?

I'd checked out on her.

I'd regretted it the second she'd bolted from my car and disappeared into her house, but I couldn't seem to shake myself out of it.

The girl I wanted was sick—seriously sick—and I just couldn't wrap my head around that.

The fact she'd tried to push me away made perfect sense now.

Oomph.

The air knocked clean out of my lungs as I hit the ground hard.

“Kandon, what the hell was that?” Coach yelled. “Jesus Christ, play like that Friday and Limmington will be all over us.”

“Shit, man. You okay?” Aaron loomed over me, offering me a hand.

“Yeah.” I let him pull me up and brushed myself off. “Nice sack,” I said to one of my defensive players.

“Sorry, Cole. I didn’t think you’d—”

“Don’t sweat it. My head wasn’t in the game.”

Because it was stuck somewhere between kissing Sofia last night to hearing the words, ‘I’ve got leukemia.’

“Kandon, get over here, son.” Coach wafted his clipboard toward me.

“I’ll be right back,” I said to my teammates before jogging away. “Sorry, Coach. I wasn’t—”

“What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing. I’m just tired.”

His eyes narrowed, scrutinizing me. “Listen, this thing with Sofia—”

My stomach plummeted into my toes. Did he know?

No, I didn’t believe that. If Aaron didn’t know, nobody did.

“There is no thing, Coach.” I fought the urge to spill her secrets, to beg him to tell me everything would be okay. Because I wouldn’t betray Sofia, not with this.

“She’s going to be okay, son.” He squeezed my shoulder. “You need to focus on the upcoming game and the playoffs beyond that. And you need to decide regarding those scholarship offers, Cole.”

“I know, I’m trying. It’s a big decision.”

“It is. One I know you won’t make lightly. You know, it might help to talk things over with Mrs. Bennet.”

Sofia’s mom? No thanks.

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Just... think about it. I need my star player’s head on straight going into these next few games.”

Easier said than done, but I didn’t argue. Because I didn’t want him to get any closer than he already had.

“Go on, get out there and show me what you got.”

“You got it, Coach.”

Except, I didn’t have it.

Not even a little bit.

“SO I WAS THINKING, what do you think about a double date?”

“What?” My eyes almost bugged out. “Why would you suggest that?”

“Relax, bro.” Aaron chuckled. “It’s not like I’m suggesting you date my sister or anything. I was thinking you could ask Kacie. She’s been hounding me to get her an introduction.”

“Kacie? Why the fuck would I want to go on a date with her?”

“Oh, I don’t know... because she’s hot? Because she wants to go out with your cranky ass? And if Stephan Barton is right, she sucks dick like a champ.”

“You’re an asshole,” I said, grabbing my bag and shoving past him.

Aaron followed, falling into step beside me as we filed into the hall with the rest of the student population.

“And you need to get laid. I’m telling you, man. You need to expel some of that restless energy. Kacie is down for it, so

shall I set it up?”

“You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack. This will be good for you. And Poppy says Kacie is good people.”

“She said that?”

What the fuck was happening right now?

I didn’t want to go on a double date with Aaron and Poppy and some girl I’d never uttered more than a polite hello to.

“I don’t know. We have the game against Limmington coming up, and Coach wasn’t happy with my performance today. I don’t need any distractions.”

“You’re coming at this from the wrong angle.” Aaron slung his arm around my neck. “Sex isn’t a distraction, it’s a necessity. The longer you abstain, the more tense you’ll become.”

“Dude, you were literally a virgin until you and Poppy—”

“Shh.” He nudged me in the ribs. “I’ve got a rep to protect.”

“There is something very wrong with you.”

“But you love me.” He released me with a grin. “I’ll set it up. Saturday night maybe? We could go to Riverside and get some food and take the girls to the arcade. Show them our skills on the games.”

“I’m sure they’ll love that.” I rolled my eyes.

“Yeah, maybe that’s lame. I’ll think on it. Catch you later.” He saluted me and took off down the hall. I rubbed a hand down my face, blowing out a weary sigh.

Just as I turned the corner to head to class, I spotted Sofia talking to Ashleigh.

Ashleigh saw me approach first, offering me a small smile.

“Hey,” I said, stepping up behind Sofia.

Her posture tensed as she moved aside, turning slightly to greet me. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Okay, I’m going to go. Nice to see you, Cole.”

“You too.”

Ashleigh disappeared down the hall, leaving me alone with Sofia who was clearly not happy about the situation.

“Can we talk?”

“There’s nothing to say.”

The hurt in her eyes suggested otherwise but I didn’t know how to do this without causing a scene.

“Sofe, please…”

“Fine. But not here.” She glanced around the hall and then took off toward the doors leading to the athletic field. I followed, keeping a safe distance because it was obvious she wanted nothing to do with me.

What did you really expect, asshole?

I needed to explain things to her. To explain that the shock of hearing her say those words, the images they’d conjured up, had thrown me for a loop.

I cared about her. Both as my best friend’s sister and as the girl I’d secretly crushed on since I was just a boy. I didn’t want anything bad to happen to her. I didn’t want—

Fuck.

The overpowering dread I’d felt yesterday was slithering through me again.

Sofia stopped along the path to the bleachers, a hidden little spot that would give us some degree of privacy.

“So I…” I hesitated, trying to find the right words, the apology that teetered on the tip of my tongue.

“Cole, wait. Let me go first.”

“Okay.” I ran my fingers through my hair and down the back of my neck. It was almost winter, the air turning colder every day. But when Sofia looked at me with those big blue eyes, heat licked my spine.

Jesus, she was beautiful.

“I think you should go on the date thing with Kacie.”

“Wait, what?” I blinked, my ears surely deceiving me.

She shrugged, a dismissive lift of her shoulders as if it didn't matter.

It fucking mattered.

“This, us, it was a mistake. It's senior year, you have a lot on your mind, and I'll be... you know.”

She dropped her gaze and my stomach churned.

This wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to apologize, to tell her that I'd be there for her, whatever she needed.

“Sofe, I don't want—”

“It's not going to happen,” she said, taking a step back. “Just... go on the date, Cole. Live your life. This, us, it has disaster written all over it.”

“You don't mean that.” I stepped forward, reaching for her. My palm glided against her cheek as I gazed down at her, trying to convey everything I couldn't find the words to say.

She was on the defensive. Building her walls so high I couldn't find a way in. But I was a patient guy, I'd find a workaround. I'd figure out—

“Don't look at me like that.” Her eyes shuttered. “Please, I can't stand it.”

My brows pinched. “How am I looking at you?”

“It doesn't matter.” She went to turn away, but I wouldn't let her.

“Hey, Sofe, talk to me. We can get through this. We can—”

“Don't you get it?” She let out a strangled, hopeless laugh. “There is no we. Everything is different now and we don't know what the future holds for me. I won't burden you with that.”

“Whoa, it's not a burden.” How could she say that? “You are not a fucking burden.”

“You say that now. But what happens when I’m puking up every five minutes? When my hair starts falling out from the chemo? It’s senior year, Cole. You don’t want to be tied to a girl who will be too sick to... be with you.” Tears pooled in her eyes, and it broke something inside me.

Without thinking, I pulled Sofia into my arms, holding on tight. “You don’t know me at all if you think any of that matters. I like you, Sofe. I care about you, and I want to be there for you.”

She pulled back enough to look up at me. The air turned thick around us. Heavy with anticipation. I wanted to kiss her again, to finish what we’d started at Roadhouse.

But the light dimmed from her eyes as she said, “My answer is still no.”

“Sofe—” But she was already pulling away.

“You’re a good guy, Cole. And you’ll make some girl really happy one day. But that girl isn’t me. I’m sorry.”

Sofia took off before I could stop her. Before I could pick my jaw up off the ground and make my voice work.

What the fuck had just happened?

I didn’t want to date other girls, to stand by and watch as she went through her treatment and God only knew what else... I wanted to be there for her.

But she’d cut me loose. Before this thing between us even got started, she’d set me free, thinking that she was doing me a favor somehow.

Well, she was wrong.

I just needed to figure out a way to show her that.

IT WAS either the best idea I’d ever had, or it was the worst. But I tried not to overthink it as I knocked on Mrs. Bennet’s door and waited for her signal to go inside.

“Come in,” she called, and I slipped into her office. “Cole, this is a surprise.”

“Hey, Mrs. B. I was hoping we could talk.”

“Of course, take a seat. Coach Ford said you might stop by.”

“Actually, I didn’t come by to talk about football or college.”

“You didn’t?” She sat back in her chair and studied me. “What’s going on, Cole?”

“It’s about Sofia...”

“What about her?” Her whole demeanor shifted. “Is she okay?”

“I know, Mrs. B. I know about... you know.”

“I see. Did Sofia tell you?”

I nodded.

“Have you told Aaron?”

“No, and I won’t. I swear.”

“What is going on between you and my daughter, Cole?”

“I care about her,” I said. “I care about her a lot actually. But she’s shutting me out.”

“That sounds like something Sofia would do.” A soft smile tugged at her mouth. “She’s a lot like me I’m afraid. I didn’t always find it easy to let people in.”

“I just want to be there for her. To help. In any way I can.”

“You’re a good boy, Cole.” She let out a weary sigh. “But Sofia is a tough nut to crack. And I worry this might be too much for her.”

“She’ll be okay, right? They’ll treat her and she’ll be okay?”

Some of the light in her eyes dimmed. “I wish I could say it’ll be that easy, but the truth is we don’t know yet. We’re waiting for some test results. The results will give the doctors

a better—” A heavy sigh rolled through her. “I really shouldn’t be talking to you about this.”

“Sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have come by.”

“No, I’m glad you did. Sofia’s life is going to get very difficult, Cole. She’s going to need friends in her corner. Even when she doesn’t want them. Especially then. But she probably doesn’t need the pressure of hurting someone’s feelings right now.”

Her words struck true, slamming into my chest like a wrecking ball.

“You think I should give her space.”

“I think Sofia has a lot to process and work through.”

“Okay.” The words tasted bitter on my tongue.

Backing off was the last thing I wanted to do, but maybe she was right. Sofia’s life was about to upend. I didn’t want to be another thing she had to worry about.

“My daughter is a lucky girl to have someone who cares enough about her to brave coming in here and talking to not only her mom but also the school guidance counselor.” Mrs. Bennet gave me a warm smile. “But it’s also my job to tell you, you have your own stuff to think about too. I know you haven’t made a decision yet about college, but the clock is ticking.”

“I know. I’m considering all my options, I am.”

“Good. Now get out of here or you’ll be late for next period. And Cole?” she said as I stood up.

“Yeah.”

“I’m glad she told you.”

“I... me too.”

I left there feeling oddly comforted.

Maybe I didn’t get the answer I wanted—or the blessing. But Mrs. Bennet hadn’t told me to give up on Sofia either.

I could work with that.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sofia

“SO WHAT IS THE APPOINTMENT TODAY?” Aaron asked through a mouthful of cereal.

“Dude, gross,” I said.

“You love it.” He gave me a toothy smile.

“I really don’t.”

“Children,” Dad chided, waltzing into the kitchen. He gave my shoulder a squeeze, dropping a kiss on my head as he passed me.

A silent offer of support.

Because today was the day.

Dr. Peters had called him yesterday. The results were back from the biopsy, and he wanted to meet sooner rather than later.

I didn’t need to read between the lines to know what that meant.

I’d barely slept. Tossing and turning all night. And when I had finally nodded off, my dreams were full of nightmares.

But thankfully, Aaron didn’t notice the dark circles under my eyes or the tension in my shoulders.

“The appointment?” he asked again.

“Just a routine thing,” Dad answered. “Dr. Peters wants to discuss treatment options.”

“I thought it was a blood transfusion.”

“That’s one option, yes. You don’t need to worry, Son, she’s in good hands.”

“Who says I’m worried?”

He stuck out his tongue at me and I mouthed, ‘Asshole.’

“You’ll text me when you’re done though, right? Let me know that everything went okay.”

God, I hated this.

The lies and secrets.

But the truth would crush Aaron and I didn't want that for him. I didn't want us both to suffer unnecessarily. Not when I could save him from the anguish for as long as possible.

His phone vibrated and he snatched it up. "Poppy is here. I'll see you later."

I nodded. "Hope practice goes okay. Say hi to Poppy for me."

"I will. Tonight, we're going to Cindy's Grill. McKay invited us to hang out with him and Penny."

"I'll see how I feel."

Gavin McKay was a year older than us and had graduated last year. He'd been a Rixon Raider too, but unlike most of his classmates he didn't go off to college, choosing to stick around and help his mom out with his little sister Millie.

"I know you're feeling like the third wheel, Sis, but I still want you to hang out with us. I'll ask Cole. He can make up numbers."

Mom chose that moment to appear. She was taking the morning off to come to my appointment. She gave Aaron a warm smile and said, "You need to leave if you want to make it to school on time."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm going. Good luck today, not that you need it." Aaron winked and then disappeared down the hall, taking the air with him.

The second the front door shut, Mom turned to me. "I think whatever the outcome of today is, we should sit down as a family and talk—"

"Not now, babe." Dad went over to her and wrapped her in his arms. "We have enough to think about." His gaze slid to mine, full of fear and heartache.

"I left my phone upstairs. I'll go get it before we leave."

Another lie.

It was becoming second nature and a little too comfortable. But if it avoided hurting the people I cared about, I could live with it.

I waited it out in my bedroom for a few minutes before returning downstairs. Mom and Dad were ready to leave, so we all piled in Dad's Jeep.

"Before we head off," he said. "I just want to say whatever today brings, we'll handle it together, as a family. Whatever you need, we're here for you, sweetheart."

"Thanks, Dad."

I tried to swallow down the thorny ball of emotion lodged in my throat. Every inch of me vibrated; it hadn't stopped all morning. A quivering sensation that came from deep inside me.

I was so focused on the tumultuous storm raging in my stomach that I didn't hear the ping of my cell phone until Mom said, "Are you going to get that?"

"Oh, yeah." I unlocked the screen and inhaled a sharp breath.

Cole: I know you want space and I get it, but I couldn't not text to wish you luck. I'm not even sure that's the right thing to say but... yeah. Okay, I'm going now. I won't text again. Unless you need to talk, then I'm here. Fuck, I'm not good at this...

THAT MADE my lips twitch in a faint smile. Obviously, my spectacular speech yesterday had done nothing to deter him.

Do you really want him to stop caring?

I didn't.

But I also didn't want him to end up resenting me for ruining his senior year.

So I texted back but stuck to something simple. Something he couldn't read too much into.

Me: Thanks.

HE DIDN'T REPLY. But what did I expect? It was the most dismissive, disingenuous reply ever.

“Who was it?” Mom asked.

“No one.”

“I find that hard to believe.” She smiled at me in the rearview mirror.

“Mom,” I murmured, glancing out of the window, watching the scenery roll by.

But the further we traveled and the closer we got to the hospital, the more my heart rate spiked. Until I had to press my forehead to the cool glass to try and calm myself.

Eyes closed, I tried to transport myself to another place...

One where I wasn't on the way to the hospital to find out my fate.

“SOFIA, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, it's good to see you again. Please take a seat.”

Dr. Peters' office seemed smaller today. It wasn't, of course. But the walls seemed to close in around me as I took the seat in the middle.

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay, I guess.”

Mom took one of my hands and Dad took the other. Everyone talked about those life-defining moments that shaped your life.

I never anticipated mine would happen in a doctor's office in Allentown.

“We got the results back from your bone marrow biopsy and aspiration. So I'm going to talk through those and then I'll explain the course of action, okay?”

I nodded, unable to find my voice.

“As I explained last time we met, we take a bone marrow sample to look at abnormalities. We can also use those cells to look for the presence of certain chromosomal changes and abnormalities.

“Typically, with young patients like you, Sofia, we expect to see results aligning with what we call the chronic phase. This means that a patient has less than ten percent of blasts in their blood. Blasts are abnormal immature white blood cells. In Sofia's case we found nine percent, confirming she's in the chronic phase.”

“Okay.” Dad shifted uncomfortably. “What does that mean for treatment?”

“Well, we have a few options and at this point, I'd like to invite Dr. Jeffries in if that's okay with you. He's one of our senior oncologists and he'll be taking over Sofia's care going forward.”

“Of course,” Mom said.

Dr. Peters rang his secretary and a few seconds later, a tall, black man with kind eyes walked into the room.

“Hello, I'm Dr. Jeffries. You must be Sofia and Mr. and Mrs. Bennet.”

“It's nice to meet you.” Dad stood, offering the man his hand.

“Has Dr. Peters explained things to you?”

“Yes, but I'll be honest, Doc, it's a lot to take in.”

“Of course. I completely understand. We'll throw a lot of big scary words at you over the coming days and weeks, but the most important thing to remember is, we have Sofia's best

interests at heart, and we'll do everything we can to help her fight this."

"Mr. Bennet is keen to know the treatment options, John. If you'd like to take the lead."

"Of course." He sat in the chair off to the side. "Typically, in the treatment of adolescent CML we use something call TKIs or tyrosine kinase inhibitors. The drugs come in tablet form and in simple terms, they identify and attack specific types of cancer cells while causing less damage to normal cells."

"What are the side effects?"

"Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, muscle cramps, fatigue, skin rashes. Some patients experience a plethora of side effects, others find them to be very mild and manageable with over-the-counter medication. At this stage, it's impossible to tell."

A violent shudder went through me.

"Sofia, do you have any questions?" Dr. Jeffries asked me.

"I... Will I be able to continue going to school?"

"Again, that's something that I don't have a hard and fast answer for."

"Will the TKI drugs cure it?" Mom asked, and his expression turned somber.

"No. Leukemia, like many cancers, is incurable. However, with the right treatment, prognosis is usually good and lots of patients go on to lead healthy lives."

"Okay," Dad murmured, squeezing my hand. But I couldn't look at him. I couldn't look at anyone really. Because if I did, if I saw the fear in their eyes, or the sympathy in the doctors' eyes, I would lose my thin grip of control.

Incurable.

That didn't sound good. Even if he was talking about good prognosis and success rates.

“What happens if Sofia doesn’t respond well to the TKI inhibitors?”

“There are other treatment options available, or we can look for a donor match. Stem cell transplants isn’t a first route of treatment for CML, but it has proven to be successful in a lot of adolescent cases.”

“Shouldn’t we just do that now? If it has a good success rate?”

“The surgery requires the cancer to be in remission, or at least, under control. Which means either chemo or the TKI route. We’ll monitor Sofia closely, see how the cancer responds to the TKI therapy, and go from there.

“I know it’s very scary, and I know that you probably won’t absorb everything we’ve discussed today, but I want you to know that in most presentations of CML, young patients usually respond well to treatment.”

He launched into another lengthy speech about treatment statistics and outcomes, but I zoned out until Mom said, “And what about her fertility?”

“Mom,” I gasped, heat flooding my cheeks.

“Your mom is right to ask, Sofia.” Dr. Jeffries smiled again. “Starting a family might not be on your radar now, but you won’t be eighteen forever. The data on the impact of TKI therapy on fertility is still emerging. Given your age, it’s something I recommend you discuss with your parents before we start your treatment plan.

“If you do decide to go ahead with the procedure it will require two weeks of fertility drug treatment before we can collect the eggs from the ovaries. We have a specialist fertility counselor on hand should you have any specific questions.”

“Thank you,” Dad answered.

I felt like a robot with my stiff head nods and one or two-word answers. But it was too much. The barrage of information, the implications of my diagnosis. How was anybody supposed to absorb all this and then go back out into the world and go about their daily business?

“We’ll schedule an appointment after the weekend. There you’ll meet your care team. There’ll be a few more tests to endure, and you can let me know your decision about the fertility treatment.”

“Thanks, Doctor, we really appreciate it.” Dad stood and shook Dr. Jeffries hand again.

“And I’ll check in to see how everything is going. But you’re in very good hands with John and his team.”

“Thank you.” Mom stood, gently pulling me up with her. “Sofia...”

“Thanks,” I croaked, my voice betraying me.

“It feels daunting now,” Dr. Jeffries said. “But once you start treatment, it’ll give you some measure of control back. Until then, get plenty of rest and look after yourself.”

“Don’t you worry about that, doctor. I will make sure she’s taking care of herself.” Mom chuckled, but it was a quiet, sad sound that ripped a hole in my heart.

“Come on, sweetheart. I don’t know about you, but I could use some fresh air.”

I didn’t make it to the end of the hall before I fell into her arms and broke down in tears.

“HERE YOU GO.” Mom handed me a mug of hot chocolate. “I added extra marshmallows.”

“Thanks.” I took a sip and placed it on my nightstand.

She came around the other side of the bed and laid down beside me. “You know, when you and Aaron were born, I thought my heart would burst right out of my chest. You were these tiny, precious things. Part me and part your dad, I couldn’t believe it.

“But your dad, he was a goner. Barely let you out of his sight for those first few months. Aaron was fussy, always

wanting to be fed or changed or bounced around. But not you. You were quiet, calm. We used to joke and say you'd been here before, the way you just took everything in your stride."

She leaned over, brushing the strands of hair from my face. "You're so much like me, baby. But I want you to know, it's okay to let people in, sweetheart. You don't have to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. You have me, your dad, Aaron, Poppy and Leigh... Cole."

My eyes widened, a strange feeling going through me.

"You know, he came to see me yesterday."

"H-he did?"

I didn't know how I felt about that. On the one hand, it made my heart flutter, a band of wild horses galloping across my chest. But my stomach churned at the thought of him refusing to let this thing between us go.

She nodded. "He cares about you a lot."

"It doesn't matter. I can't drag him into this." I wouldn't. "It's senior year. He doesn't need—"

"So strong and so, so stubborn." She brushed my forehead again. "For what it's worth, I think Cole would be good for you. I think you'd be good for each other."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means we've all got our own burdens to shoulder, baby. And you know what they say, sometimes a problem shared is a problem halved."

"This is different, Mom. I have cancer. I could—"

"Shh." She pressed her finger to my lips, her expression etched with pain and hopelessness. "None of that. We're going to beat this, Sofia. Okay? And you're going to go to prom and graduation and then college next fall. You're going to have it all, sweetheart."

"Okay." A tear slipped free as the weight of everything pressed down on me.

Because although she said the words, although part of her probably believed them, there was still that small part that knew it might not go down that way.

And the reality was, even if the treatment worked, even if the doctors got a handle on the cancer, it wasn't the end.

It would be a dark cloud hanging over me always.

Something I had to learn to live with.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Cole

“NO SOFIA TODAY?” I asked Aaron as we headed to the weight room.

“No, she wasn’t feeling so good, so she stayed at home.”

“But everything went okay yesterday, didn’t it?”

I was fishing, but she hadn’t texted me back last night or this morning, and when I’d realized she was a no-show at school, my mind instantly went to bad places.

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “They said it did. The anemia is kicking her ass.”

“Yeah.”

Fuck. I hated lying to him. Hated that I knew the truth while he had been kept in the dark.

Sofia was his sister, his twin, his blood. I understand that she wanted to protect him, but Aaron would want to know.

He deserved to know.

But I couldn’t betray her trust, not again. Not if there was any chance of her letting me in again.

“So me and Poppy were thinking we could go out Saturday. Kacie is free, I already checked. But she’d probably appreciate an invitation directly from you.”

“You still want to do that?”

“Yeah, I thought we agreed.”

“No, you agreed, and I murmured some half-assed reply.”

He grinned at me. “You need to lighten up... and get laid.”

“You know, it’s worrying that you spend so much time thinking about my sex life.”

“You mean your lack of one?”

I flipped him off, jostling him as we entered the weight room.

“Hey,” Ezra greeted us.

“E. Tell this one.” Aaron pulled me into a headlock and ruffled my hair. “That he needs to get laid.”

“Not my business, man.” Ezra went back to his free weights.

“Dylan, man, back me up. Kacie Hutton, would you tap that?”

“Fuck yeah, she’s hot.” Dylan and a couple of the other guys high-fived.

“Why don’t you go on the double date then?” I arched a brow.

“No way, Kandon.” Aaron scowled. “She wants you, bro. Time to step up and become a man.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.” I shrugged him off and stalked over to the treadmill. I needed to burn some energy.

I loaded a playlist on my phone and shoved my AirPods into my ears and picked a high intensity workout. The harder the better.

I was a fucking mess and the game was in less than two days. Coach was already riding my ass and the guys were concerned my head wasn’t in it.

But that was the thing—my head wasn’t in it. It was with the girl who kept shutting me out.

She’d told me to move on. To go on the date with Kacie and get on with my life. I couldn’t do it though. Even if she was hellbent on pushing me away, I wasn’t the kind of guy to mess around like that.

I liked sex, what eighteen-year-old guy didn’t? But I didn’t feel the need to sleep my way through senior year. Not when just being in Sofia’s orbit gave me a rush like nothing else.

I pumped my legs hard, hitting the incline with everything I had. My calves burned, my muscles zipping and popping as I went harder, faster. Cardio wasn’t usually my thing, but I needed it today. I felt like a pop bottle ready to burst.

Sofia had told me in no uncertain terms that it was never going to happen, and I got it. She had too much going on to worry about dating and boyfriends and relationships. But we were friends first. And friends stood by each other when things got tough.

If only she'd—

My cell phone started ringing and I frowned at the name on the screen. Forcing the program to pause, I slowed my pace to a gentle jog and then a fast walk, until I'd regained my breath.

The call ended and I breathed a sigh of relief. But a second later, it started up again.

“Fuck,” I murmured, dragging a hand through my hair.

“Problem?” Aaron caught my eye.

“Just my old man.”

“You going to answer?”

“Yeah, or he won't stop. I'll be outside.” I hopped off the treadmill and stalked out of the room. “Hello?”

“Cole, good. I didn't know if you would answer.”

“I'm supposed to be in conditioning.”

“I won't keep you long. I just got off the phone with John Lomond at the Kline School of Law at Drexel. They've invited us to attend an alumni mixer. It would be a great opportunity to network.”

What the fuck was I supposed to say to that?

“I...”

“Don't get too excited, Son. Need I remind you that I'm an alumni and a substantial donor to the school?”

“I have a lot on my plate right now, Dad. The playoffs are —”

“Football is a hobby, Cole. It's fleeting. It won't secure you a financially comfortable future.”

Because of course all there was to life was security and money and status.

“I can’t do this right now, Dad. I have to go.”

“I expect you to attend, Cole. Your attitude lately is—”

I hung up, anger skittering through me. “Fuck,” I groaned, kicking the ground with my sneaker. “Fuck.”

A blast of pain shot through my ankle.

“Hey, everything okay?”

“What are you doing?” I asked Aaron.

“I wanted to make sure you were okay.” He looked sheepish. “I’m guessing it isn’t.”

“Nothing new. He wants me to attend some alumni mixer at Drexel.”

“But I thought you’d decided you weren’t going there?”

“It’s not that simple. If I don’t go, he’ll cut me off, and Mom will—” I stopped myself. Nothing good could come from this conversation.

“We should get back inside.”

“Yeah, okay.” Aaron agreed. “But you know you can always talk to me, right? I know I give you shit about girls, but I’m good with the serious stuff. Ask E.”

“It’s all good,” I said.

“I just want you to be happy.” He nudged me. “You need to follow your dreams, bro. And find yourself a good woman.”

I rolled my eyes. “Who says I haven’t?”

“What?” He gawked, his mouth hanging on the floor. “You met someone? Who, and why is this the first time I’m hearing about it? Did you hook up on that new app?”

“What, no! I’m joking, it was a joke.”

Me and my big fucking mouth.

“Bummer. At least, you’ll get some action Saturday.” He wagged his brows.

“I haven’t said yes yet.”

Didn’t plan on it either.

“Fuck that, you’re coming.”

“Aaron—”

“No, Kandon. Give me one reason you can’t come.”

Because I want your sister.

I stuffed the words down.

“Because I don’t want to lead her on.”

“It’s one date. You don’t have to profess your undying love for her.”

“Whatever. We should get back inside before someone rats us out to Coach.”

“Fine. But you are coming, even if I have to drag you there.”

Jesus. He wasn’t going to let it go.

Maybe he was right. It was one date. It didn’t mean anything.

So why did it feel like the ultimate betrayal?

“ARE YOU LOOKING FORWARD TO SATURDAY?” Poppy asked me as we sat eating our lunch. Conversations roared on around us, the team eager to discuss our chances against Limmington.

“I didn’t agree to any double date.”

“No?” Her brows knitted. “But Aaron said... He got carried away with himself again, didn’t he?”

“He thinks he’s doing me a favor.”

“Because he’s worried that you’re all alone now we’re together?”

“Something like that. Hey, have you spoken to Sofia today?”

Her eyes twinkled, and I got the distinct feeling I’d just put my foot in it. Again.

“Actually, I have. We were texting earlier. Why?”

“No reason.” I looked out over the cafeteria, everyone wrapped up in their own business. Thanksgiving. The playoffs. Winter formal. People laughed and chatted and gossiped and it made me realize how oblivious we were to what was going on for someone on the inside.

How many kids sitting in this very room had some internal struggle? A douchebag father like me, or shithead stepparent. Low self-esteem, anxiety, depression... The list of mental health issues for teenagers was never ending. But we didn’t talk about that shit. If it didn’t affect us, we were blind to it.

“Cole?” Poppy touched my arm and I blinked down at where she held me. “Are you okay?”

“I just have a lot going on.”

“Some of that would be about a certain girl we both know and love, right?”

“What—”

“It’s okay. I’ve suspected it for a while...”

“You have?”

She nodded around a knowing smile. “You’re not exactly discreet. You watch her, you know?”

“I try not to.”

“Does she know?”

“I think so, but it’s complicated.” *Because she’s sick, really sick, but I can’t tell you that.*

“You’re worried about breaking bro code, is that it?”

Among other things. I pressed my lips together, trapping the words.

“Guys.” She rolled her eyes. “Why is it you can’t just do things the simple way?”

“Who’s simple?” Aaron decided to join our conversation.

“No one, babe.” Poppy grabbed his face and planted a kiss on his lips.

“Mmm, we should go find an empty classroom.”

“Aaron, we can’t.” She giggled. “Not in school. My dad ___”

“Aaaand instant boner killer,” he grumbled.

“Oh, poor baby.” Poppy stroked his jaw. “I’ll make it up to you later.”

“Damn right, you will. I want you to do that thing—” He leaned in, whispering the request so that I couldn’t hear it.

“I’m going to head to the library.” I stood. “Get a head start on this assignment.”

“Sure, man. See you at practice later.”

‘Think about what I said,’ Poppy mouthed, Aaron distracted by something on his phone.

I gave her a small nod. Because what else could I do?

I couldn’t tell her the truth.

And even if I could, it didn’t change the fact that Sofia had made her choice.

LATER THAT NIGHT, I lay awake in bed, staring at my phone, willing Sofia to text me back. To pick up the phone and do something. Anything to let me know she was okay.

I hated the distance between us.

Hated that she trusted me enough to tell me the truth but didn’t trust me enough with her heart.

Bringing up our chat, I started typing.

Me: How are you feeling? I figured you probably don't want to talk to me, and that's okay. But I'm not going away so easily, Sofe.

Me: I can't even begin to imagine what you're going through, how could I? But I know you must be feeling scared and angry. You must be asking why you? There really are no words that anyone can say to make you feel better, I know that. But I can't do nothing...

Me: A wise person said, life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass, it's about learning to dance in the rain.

Me: If you ever decide you want to dance in the rain, I'm here, Sofe. I'll be right here... waiting.

Me: Night. xo

SOFIA DIDN'T TEXT BACK, but then, I didn't really expect her to. But hopefully, I'd made her smile. Even a little bit.

And hopefully I'd made her realize that I wasn't going anywhere.

My phone, however, did light up with another text.

Aaron: Poppy says you're really not feeling the double date thing Saturday... Kacie is going to be so disappointed. She's thirsty for some QB dick.

Me: Sometimes I wonder how we're even friends.

Aaron: BEST friends, motherfucker.

GUILT SETTLED IN MY CHEST, and I couldn't help but wonder if he'd feel the same if he knew about me and Sofia.

My phone pinged with more incoming messages, and for a second, I assumed it was Aaron with some more wise words of Bennet wisdom.

But it wasn't.

Jude: Hey, man. So listen, I know you said you can't play with us again... but we could really use you. I wouldn't ask unless we were desperate. We got invited to play at Livewire, but we still need a second guitarist. Please, think about it. This could be our shot, Cole. Like we always talked about.

FUCK.

Life sure had a funny way of shitting all over me lately.

JUDE: P.S. Heard you played at Roadhouse. Good for you, man. You're too good never to play again.

FUCKING TONY.

I didn't text back because the next text message made my blood run cold.

DAD: I confirmed your attendance at the mixer. It's a week Saturday on campus. I'm going to personally drive you up there. It will be good to see some old faces.

THE BASTARD WASN'T GOING to let it go, even if he had to physically drag me there. Shit. I needed a get out clause, a legitimate one. But I drew a blank.

Denial seemed like the best course of action. If I pretended it wasn't happening, then maybe it would go away. Maybe I'd wake up and realize that my controlling, piece-of-shit of a father was nothing more than a figment of my imagination.

But the thing with pretending...

Usually, the truth came around to bite you in the ass.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sofia

I DIDN'T GO to school for the rest of the week.

I couldn't.

The gnawing pit in my stomach had developed into full blown nausea and I'd spent the best part of yesterday puking my insides up.

Today, I'd stayed curled up on the sofa, eating ice chips and plain crackers. Mom wanted to stay at home with me since Dad needed to go into the office, but I'd insisted she go to work.

Nothing either of them did was going to help me, and the truth was, I couldn't take much more of their coddling.

Besides, my friends had kept me entertained all day with their many, many text messages. But none made me smile like Cole.

After his dancing in the rain quote, he'd taken it upon himself to send me more quotes, memes, little digital notes, and even some song lyrics.

It was sweet.

Romantic even.

He didn't push me for a reply though. And I didn't text back which left a bitter taste in my mouth. But if I invited him into my life, things would only become even more complicated. This—a few texts here and there—was safe. It kept him at arm's length.

The front door burst open, startling me.

“Yo, Sofe. You in here?” Aaron came bounding into the room.

“Hello to you too,” I murmured.

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay. The nausea is gone mostly.”

“Good, get ready.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me, Sis. You need to go upstairs, throw on a Raiders hoodie, and get your butt back down here. You’ve wallowed enough.”

“Wallowed? Aaron, I’m not... I’ve been sick.”

“And you just said you feel okay now. So jump to it or I’m going to be late and Coach will be pissed. And you know I don’t need to give him any more reasons to hate me.”

“He doesn’t hate you.” I rolled my eyes.

“Of course he doesn’t.” My ridiculous brother grinned. “I’m impossible to hate. But this, you being all sad and mopey at home while the game is happening, doesn’t sit right with me. I need you there, Sofe. The team needs you.”

“The team needs me? Seriously, *that’s* your line?”

“Did it work?”

“Not really.” But it did make me smile.

This was exactly why I couldn’t tell him. Now my brother had gotten his happy ending, he was on some kind of mission to make sure everyone around him got theirs. It was sweet in a totally annoying way.

I didn’t want to dampen his mood or ruin his year.

But it was so hard, pasting on a smile, pretending everything was okay.

And he’d hate me for it. When he finally found out, Aaron would hate me for keeping it from him. But if it afforded him more time in blissful ignorance, I would gladly pay the price.

“Please come. It’s my final season. We’re so fucking close to the playoffs, Sofe.”

My resolve cracked. How could I deny him when I didn’t know how much longer I’d be able to get out of bed and leave the house?

“Fine. I’ll come.”

“Seriously?” He gawked. “Because I had this whole other speech prepared and—”

I got up and headed for the hall. “Give me fifteen minutes.”

“Ten,” he called after me. “And Sofe? You might want to do something with that bird’s nest you’re rocking. I love you, Sis, but the bed hair has got to go.”

Soft laughter peeled out of me, but it was laced with sadness. Of all the things we might never get to do, all the jokes we might never share.

Don't think like that. You can fight this thing. You can.

Swallowing the tears in my throat, I went upstairs to get ready. I didn’t make much of an effort. It was only a football game after all. Just as I was finishing up, my cell phone pinged, and my heart fluttered at the sight of Cole’s name.

Cole: A wise man once said, it always seems impossible until it’s done.

Cole: I hope you come to the game. xo

I QUICKLY GOOGLED THE WORDS, smiling when the search result loaded. It was so tempting to reply and ask him how he knew the Nelson Mandela quote, but I didn’t. Besides, Google was probably his handy little friend.

“Sofe, let’s go,” Aaron bellowed.

The last thing I wanted was to go to the game, but I’d do it for him. My brother. I’d do anything to put a smile on his face and keep it there.

Because soon enough, his smile would be gone.

THE GAME WAS A DOG FIGHT. For every touchdown we scored, they scored one right back. I was pretty sure I had bruises from where Leigh and Poppy had squeezed my hand so tightly as we watched the third quarter.

“God, I’m not sure I can take it much longer,” Poppy said.

“They’ve got this, Pops,” Ashleigh said, cupping her hands around her mouth and yelling, “Let’s go, Raiders.”

“How are you feeling?” Poppy snuggled closer to me.

“I’m okay.”

“Glad you came?”

“Yeah.”

And I was.

I needed to soak up these moments while I could.

“Cole’s looking good out there,” she added, giving my arm a little squeeze.

“Poppy...”

“What? I’m just stating a fact. He does look good.”

“Mm-hmm.”

She peeked up at me and grinned. “You know, he never wanted to come on the double date with Kacie.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does.”

“I think you need to stop.”

“But it’s so much fun.”

Ashleigh chuckled at us, and I scowled. “Please don’t start ganging up on me.”

“Oh, we wouldn’t dream of it.” Ashleigh arched a brow before cheering for the team again.

I watched them huddled around Coach Ford, strategizing for the fourth quarter. If they got the win, their place would be as good as guaranteed for the playoffs.

“God, they’re so close, Sofe, and Aaron wants it so much.”

“They’ll do it.” They looked strong out there. Clean, precise passes and an amped up defense. But Limmington had brought their A game too. They were going into the fourth quarter only two points behind, so there was still everything to play for.

The guys started jogging out onto the field, but not before Aaron searched for us in the crowd. Poppy waved wildly, yelling, “Go, babe. You got this.”

“Oh my God, will you two stop, already?” I murmured, right as Cole found me.

Time slowed down, the roar of the crowd fading into the background. This wasn’t supposed to be happening. We weren’t supposed to be having these big, defining moments. I didn’t want him to get any deeper than he already was. I didn’t want—

“I know that look,” Poppy whispered.

“Huh?”

“Cole, the way he’s looking at you.”

“Shh. He isn’t looking at me in any kind of way.”

“He wants you, babe.”

“He does not.” The lie almost choked me.

“Pops is right,” Leigh added. “He has that puppy dog in love look about him.”

“You cannot tell what he looks like under his helmet. Will you two just stop.” I flushed, my heart careening in my chest.

Because I felt it.

I felt it every time his attention was on me.

But it didn’t matter.

It didn’t.

“I’ve always hoped you two would stop tiptoeing around things.”

“Poppy June Ford, me and Cole do not have things.”

“Whatever you say,” she huffed. “Just promise me I can say I told you so when you finally get your act together and realize the two of you are perfect for one another.”

“I hope you don’t talk to my brother about this.”

“I don’t tell Aaron everything.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Ooh, they’re off.”

I laid my head on her shoulder and watched as the Raiders kicked off. But I wasn’t watching the game, not really.

Not when I only had eyes for Cole, wishing things were different.

“I’M NOT sure we’re supposed to go down there,” I said, but Poppy and Ashleigh completely ignored me, taking off down the bleachers to run and meet my brothers.

I watched with a strange mix of envy and melancholy as Aaron picked up Poppy and swung her around before planting a big sloppy kiss on her mouth. Ashleigh and Ezra were more discreet with their affections. But that didn’t surprise me. Ezra was quiet and reserved. Guarded even. It had taken him a long time to find his feet in our family and our town. But he’d finally found his home in Ashleigh. They were so freaking adorable together.

“You came,” Cole said, sneaking up behind me.

I turned around and smiled. “Congratulations, you played a good game.”

“How are you feeling?” He stepped closer as the celebrations went on around us. “I’ve been worried about you.”

“I’m fine. Things got on top of me after the doctor appointment, but I... I shouldn’t be talking to you about this.

Sorry.” I went to leave, but he gently grasped my wrist.

“Stay, talk. You can tell me anything and it’ll stay with me. I promise. I won’t make the same mistake twice, Sofe.” Conviction glittered in his eyes.

“Cole, I—”

“Here he is, man of the hour.” Aaron jumped on his back. “You fucking killed it out there tonight. I’m proud of you, man.”

“Uh, thanks.”

“Coach has invited us all back to his place to celebrate.”

“He has?” Poppy balked. “He wants the whole football team to come back to the house? Mom will love that.”

“Suck it up, buttercup.” He dropped down off Cole’s back and pulled her in for a hug. “Maybe we can sneak up to your room and—”

I moved away, really not wanting to hear what my brother planned on doing to my best friend.

“Are you feeling up to it?” Cole asked me.

“No, I think I’ll head home. Sounds like too much excitement for me for one night.”

“You should come, Sofe. Everyone is going... even your parents.”

I glanced over to where they were talking to Poppy’s mom and Ashleigh’s parents.

“I should probably get home. It’s been a long day.”

“Do you need a ride?” he offered. “I could—”

“No, it’s okay. You should stay and celebrate with the team. Thanks though. I’m going to go and say bye to everyone.”

But Cole didn’t go back to his teammates, he watched as I told Poppy and Aaron I was leaving, and then Ashleigh and Ezra. I still felt him when I hugged my mom and dad, the two of them arguing as to whether I needed a chaperone.

“I’ll text or call if I start to feel sick again, I promise.”

“We’ll check in. Every thirty minutes.”

“Mom, seriously...”

“She’s right, Mya. We can’t suffocate her, it isn’t healthy.” He turned to me. “Straight home, lock the door, and keep your phone nearby. If you need us—”

“I’ll call. I promise Dad.”

He pulled me in for a hug. “I love you, sweetheart.”

“Love you too.”

“Come here, baby.” Mom wrapped me into her arms. “I can come with you—”

“I’ll be fine, Mom. I’m probably just going to sleep. It’s been a long week.”

“Okay.” She tucked my hair behind my ear and dropped a kiss on my head. “Be safe and text me when you get home.”

“I will.”

I had the keys to Aaron’s car since he’d already planned to go celebrate or commiserate, so I wandered to the parking lot and got inside.

Firing up the engine, I inhaled a shuddering breath as I glanced toward the small stadium. It was so exhausting putting on a brave face when all I wanted to do was sink to my knees and wail, hands on the ground, at how unfair life was. Everyone in there had their whole future ahead of them but mine was hanging in the balance.

Tears rolling down my face, I backed out of the parking spot and headed home.

Alone.

I COULDN’T SLEEP. I lay in bed unable to stop scrolling social media. Photo after photo was posted of the team

celebrating. Everyone looked so happy, it was infectious, and I found myself smiling too. But every photo was like a tiny knife to my heart. My head was a confusing place to be, my emotions swinging like a pendulum.

And I still hadn't started any treatment yet.

My gaze snagged on a photo of Aaron and Poppy laughing, and jealousy surged inside me. But it wasn't them who caught my attention. It was Cole in the background, talking to a pretty blonde. Not just any blonde.

Kacie.

My heart squeezed as all kinds of scenarios went through my head. Had he finally agreed to go out with her?

Did he want—

The doorbell rang, pulling me from my obsessive thoughts.

Shoving back the covers, I grabbed my phone and went downstairs. It was late, a little past eleven. But we lived in a good neighborhood with friendly neighbors.

Grabbing the door handle, I checked the doorbell camera and frowned. The door swung open, taking my breath with it.

“Hi,” Cole said.

“Hi... uh, what are you doing here?”

“I couldn't do it.” He raked his fingers through his hair and ran them down the back of his neck.

“Cole, I don't—”

“I like you, Sofe. Like *really* like you.”

“Cole, I'm sick. I'm—”

“Shh.” He pressed his finger to my lips. “I know and it fucking slays me knowing that you're going through this.” He cupped my face, gazing down at me.

“I... I don't... Aaron...” The words wouldn't come out properly, not that I knew what I wanted to say.

“I'm going to kiss you now. So if you want me to stop, now is your chance to tell me.”

“I...” My body trembled at his words, his sweet declaration.

Cole was here.

Despite everything, he'd come here... for me.

Slowly, he closed the distance, lowering his face to mine. Giving me time to stop him. But I couldn't think straight, my heart beating wildly in my chest.

“Fuck, I've wanted to do this again so badly.” He brushed his lips over mine. Once. Twice. Testing the waters and waiting for me to shove him away.

I didn't though.

Not this time.

This time, I anchored my hand around his neck and pulled him closer, kissing him back with everything I had.

Cole banded his arms around my waist, and we stumbled into the house. He kicked the door shut behind him, not once breaking the kiss.

“Safe,” he murmured, flicking his tongue expertly along the seam of my mouth. A whimper rose inside me, slipping free, and then the wall was at my back, Cole caging me in with his body.

“This is a bad idea,” I whispered, fisting his hoodie.

“You're wrong. I think it's the best idea I've ever had.”

He kissed me deeper, licking his tongue into my mouth and tangling it with my own. I'd never been kissed like this, with such urgency and possession.

With such feeling.

Emotion welled in my chest, making it hard to breathe. This was a bad idea, the worst. But I couldn't stop myself.

I didn't want to.

I wanted to drown in Cole Kandon. To let him be my oxygen and life raft. To let him hold me when it all got too much and pick me up when I fell down.

He slowed the kiss, teasing me with little nips and licks. When he finally broke away, he touched his head to mine and smiled. “Hi.”

“Hi.” I blushed.

“Are you okay?”

“I think so.”

“I’m sorry if I overstepped.”

“You didn’t. I’m glad you came.”

And I was.

Even though it was complicated and a terrible idea, opening the door to find him standing there was exactly what I’d needed.

Even if I hadn’t realized it.

“Yeah?” His whole face lit up.

“Yeah.” I chuckled, and he pulled me into his chest, holding me tight.

And I never wanted him to let go.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Cole

“HAVE you decided what you want to do?” I asked, after Sofia had just spent the last twenty minutes explaining everything to me.

She'd been hesitant at first, and said that it wasn't exactly romantic subject matter.

But I didn't care about that.

I only cared that she knew I was in.

All in.

I wanted to know as much as she was willing to tell me.

“I think I want the procedure. Who knows how my treatment will go? If I don't do it, I'll always wonder, you know?”

I nodded. “Makes sense.”

“But it's so weird thinking about that kind of stuff now. I'm only eighteen. I mean, aren't you freaked out talking to me about all of this?”

Sofia peeked up at me. We'd come up to her bedroom a while ago and now we were sitting on her bed, my arm wrapped around her. Part of me couldn't believe it. That I was here, that she'd kissed me back and invited me in.

But I understood what she was saying.

“I think it's only weird if we make it weird. I've known you a long time, we're friends. This is just an extension of our friendship.” I pressed a kiss to her hair, and she let out a soft sigh.

“You're too good at this, Cole.”

“At what?” I nudged her gently.

“Making me feel like we can do this, that everything will be okay.” Fear glittered in her eyes, and it was like a punch to the stomach. Because I couldn't promise her everything would

be okay, but I could promise her that I'd be here to hold her hand.

No matter what.

“We can do this. We can do whatever we want.” I went in to kiss her again, but she pressed her palm to my chest.

“I want to take things slowly. And we need to talk to Aaron.”

“Whatever you want.”

“So we're really doing this? You want to...” She trailed off, glancing away from me.

“Safe, look at me.” I gently gripped her chin, forcing her eyes back to me. “I want this. I want you. I want to be here for you. I don't care about all the other stuff.”

“But things could get messy, Cole. I'll be doing treatment and—”

I hovered my mouth over hers and whispered, “I don't care. I'm not a coward, Sofia. I won't run away from this. Let me be there for you. Let me do this.”

“O-okay.”

“Yeah?” I fought a grin.

“Yeah.” She nodded, fighting her own smile.

“You're not going to regret this, I promise.” I covered her face in sloppy wet kisses.

“Ew, Cole.” The protest died on her tongue as she kissed me back, pulling me closer. I was in fucking heaven until a voice filled the house.

“Sofia,” someone called upstairs. “We're home.”

“Shit, shit. What time is it?” She grabbed her phone and mumbled something. “We lost track of time.”

“Should I escape through the window or something?” I asked, only half-joking.

“I...”

“Sofia, you awake, sweetheart?” A knock sounded on the door.

“Uh, just a minute, Mom. In the bathroom,” she whispered, nudging me off the bed. “You can hide in the bath—”

“Sofia?” The bedroom door cracked open, and Mrs. Bennet’s head peered around it. “Sweethe— Cole?”

“Hi, Mrs. B.” I gave her a small wave, barely able to contain my chuckle at the look of absolute panic on Sofia’s face.

“This is... unexpected. Aaron said you went home.”

“I, uh... busted.” I cupped the back of my neck, fighting a smile.

“It’s not what it looks like, Mom. Cole just stopped by to see how I was.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t mind that Cole’s here. Although I am relieved to find you both fully clothed.”

“Oh my God, Mom!”

I smothered a nervous laugh. Mrs. Bennet really knew how to increase the awkward-o-meter by a few notches.

“It’s late,” she added. “Cole, should I make up the guest room or will you be going home?”

I gave Sofia a questioning look and she shrugged. “Aaron will—”

“Actually, Aaron is staying over at the Fords’.”

“He is?”

A slight blush stained Sofia’s cheeks.

“If it’s okay with your parents, Cole, you’re more than welcome to stay here. But as your mother who loves you very much.” She pinned Sofia with a hard look. “I would suggest you talk to your brother before this”—she wagged her finger between us—“goes any further.”

“We’ll talk to him tomorrow,” I said.

“Good. I’ll fix the guest bedroom for you, Cole. Lights out soon, okay, sweetheart?”

“Night, Mom.”

“Good night.”

Mrs. Bennet left, but the awkward tension remained.

“That was so embarrassing.” Sofia was still perched on the edge of the bed, hovering as if she didn’t know where to put herself.

“Come here.” I reached over and grabbed her arm, yanking her down beside me.

“Cole, we can’t—”

“You really think she’s going to come back in here after catching us once?”

“Why are you being so calm about all of this?”

“Because getting worked up won’t change anything. And if I’m being honest, I’m kind of glad she knows.”

“You are?” Sofia’s face scrunched up.

“Yeah. Now when you try to push me away again”—because I didn’t doubt it would happen—“I’ll have someone in my corner.”

“Sneaky.”

“I’m not against playing unfair if it gets me what I want.”

“And what do you want, Cole Kandon?”

I gazed down at her; her words wrapped my heart like a fist. If she’d have asked me this a few months ago, I might have said music, to play with the guys again, to get accepted to University of Michigan’s School of Music, Theatre, and Dance. But now there was only one answer on the tip of my tongue.

“You.”

“Cole...”

“What? You asked.” I shrugged, smiling.

“I know, but want to know a secret?” She beckoned me closer, our mouths so close I could almost taste her. “You scare me.”

“I scare you?” My brow arched.

“This, us... I think it could mean something.” Hesitation sparked in her eyes. “And that terrifies me. Because what happens when I—”

“Shh, Sofe. Let’s make a promise to each other. We live in the moment. For the here and now. We take each and every day as it comes and leave tomorrow’s problems where they belong.”

“Live for the moment.” Her lips curved. “I think I can do that.”

“Good.” I kissed the end of her nose, reveling in how right she felt in my arms.

“Cole,” she whispered.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t want to hurt Aaron.”

“He’ll come around,” I said, a sinking feeling going through me. Because I knew she didn’t only mean him finding out about us.

“And if he doesn’t?”

“He will.”

He had to.

Because this girl meant something to me, and I didn’t plan on letting her go.



“COLE KANDON, why are you sitting in my kitchen eating pancakes?” Mr. Bennet narrowed his eyes at me, and Sofia groaned.

“Dad, don’t act like you didn’t know he spent the night. I know Mom told you.”

“She may have mentioned something. Doesn’t mean I don’t have the right to grill him about it though. In fact, maybe we should go outside and have a little chat, man to man. What do you sa—”

“No,” Sofia snapped. “Absolutely not. Besides, you can’t hurt him, Dad. Coach Ford will kick your ass if you hurt his star quarterback.”

“Hmm, this is true.” He rubbed his jaw, studying me. “Okay, let’s get straight to it then. What are your intentions with my daughter?”

“Oh my God.” Sofia dropped her forehead into her arm, and I chuckled.

“He’s only joking, babe.”

“Says who?” Mr. Bennet glowered. “Do I look like I’m joking, son? I want to know exactly what—”

“Ash, behave.” Mrs. B wandered into the kitchen. “Good morning, Cole. Please ignore Ash, he’s grouchy before he has at least two strong coffees.”

She grabbed the back of his neck and kissed him deeply. Enough to make me look away. Sofia caught my eye and mouthed, ‘Sorry.’

“It’s okay.” I smiled back.

I just wasn’t used to seeing such displays of emotion in the kitchen.

“All jokes aside,” Mr. Bennet said. “Do we need to talk about this? You have a right to privacy, sweetheart, but this could hurt Aaron if he finds out before you talk to him. And with the...”

“It’s okay, Dad. Cole respects my wish to hold off telling Aaron.”

“Loyalty and respect are an important foundation of any relationship. And you were Aaron’s best friend before you

were Sofia's boy—”

“We get it, Dad,” Sofia blurted out. “We’ll talk to Aaron, I promise. But not about the cancer; not yet.”

His lips thinned with disapproval. “Fine. I can’t make you tell him. But he deserves to know. Imagine if your roles were reversed and something was wrong with Aaron, and he told Poppy and not you.”

“Ash,” Mrs. B said right as Sofia gasped.

“Shit, sweetheart. I didn’t mean—”

But Sofia was gone, running out of the kitchen and down the hall.

“Dammit, Asher. I should go check—”

“I’ll go.” I stood.

Mrs. Bennet hesitated, but then let out a soft sigh. “Maybe that’s for the best. Take care of our girl, Cole.” She gave me a sad smile.

“I will.” I nodded.

I headed straight for Sofia’s bedroom but didn’t expect to find her in floods of tears. “Sofe.” I slipped into her bedroom and closed the door, going to her. “Come here.”

“I’m okay. I’m fine... I...”

Wrapping her into my arms, I held her close and ran my hands up and down her spine. “It’s okay to not be fine too, you know.”

She peeked up at me, sniffing. “I can’t believe he said that.”

“You know he didn’t mean it the way he sounded. There’s no manual here. You’ve all got to find your way. A new normal.”

“It’s so hard, Cole. I keep telling myself I can do it. That I can be strong and get through this. But what if I can’t? What if ___”

I kissed her.

Not to shut her up, but to try and ground her. To alleviate some of her panic. When she curved her hands over my shoulders and pulled me closer, I figured it had worked.

Our tongues tangled, slow and steady. She got me so fucking hot, but this wasn't about me or my needs.

It was about her.

"Your feelings are valid, Sofe," I said, kissing her chastely. "Your parents understand that. Aaron will understand that."

Her eyes fluttered as she inhaled a shuddering breath. "Thank you."

"Do you want to get out of here? We could go—"

"No, actually I think I'm going to lie down, if you don't mind. My head is starting to hurt a little."

"Of course I don't mind. Do you want me to stay?"

Panic flared in her eyes. "No. Aaron will be back soon."

"I could stay, and we could talk to him together."

"Do you think you could talk to him first? Break him in gently? Then I'll talk to him later, I promise. I just... I'm not sure I can handle all the questions and his inevitable tantrum."

"What do you want me to tell him?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "That we've been hanging out, I guess."

Dejection curdled in my stomach.

"Hanging out?" My voice sounded distant. "Is that what you think we've been doing?"

"No, that's not... Sorry, I'm just getting myself worked up. Dad saying that stuff has messed with my head."

"Okay, okay, just breathe." I cupped the back of her neck and drew her close. "I'll talk to Aaron, and you get some rest."

"You're sure?"

I nodded, because what else could I do? She wasn't ready to own this yet. I realized that now.

“It doesn’t change things, Cole. You know that, don’t you? I still want us to... you know.”

“Don’t worry about me, Sofe. I just want you to focus on you.”

It was her turn to nod. “Will you tell my parents I’m going back to bed?”

“Sure. Text me later and maybe I can come over and we can hang out?”

“Okay.” She pressed a quick kiss to my cheek. “And thank you. I owe you.”

Owe me?

I didn’t want her to feel like she owed me anything. But she was clearly upset and confused about things.

So reluctantly, I left, heading downstairs.

“How is she?” Mrs. B met me in the hallway, as if she’d been debating coming up to find out for herself.

“Upset.”

She let out a thin breath. “Asher shouldn’t have said that.”

“He didn’t mean it.”

“No, he didn’t. But it doesn’t take the words back. I’m worried about her, Cole.”

“She’s had a lot to deal with. It’s going to get harder before it gets any better.”

“I know. God, I know.” She reached for my arm, squeezing gently. “Just... promise me you’ll be there for her. Even when she pushes you away. I know it’s a lot to ask of you, but I can’t —”

“It’s all good, Mrs. B. I get it. And I promise I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re a good boy, Cole.” Tears clung to her lashes, but she managed to hold them back.

“I should probably go. I’m going to try to talk to Aaron.”

“Do you know what you’ll say to him?”

I looked her in the eye and pursed my lips. “I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

“HEY, man, didn’t expect to get a call from you this morning.” Aaron approached the booth at Cindy’s Grill.

I’d figured meeting in a public place might be a better option than going somewhere private.

“Everything okay at home? You bailed early last night.”

“Actually, I didn’t go home.”

“You didn’t? Where the fuck did you go then?”

“I went to see Sofia.”

Fuck, nothing like ripping the Band-Aid clean off.

“Sofia?” He gawked at me, his brows pinched tight with confusion. “I don’t understand. Why the hell would you go and see Sofia?”

“So you know how I said I’d met someone...”

“You said it was a lie.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t.”

“Cole, bro, you’re not making any sense. Wait a second,” Realization dawned in his eyes. “Are you saying Sofia... you and my sister? That’s fucking messed up.”

“Is it? You know me. You know I would never hurt her. You know—”

“My sister, Kandon? You’re fucking my... my *sister*.” His expression morphed from confusion to betrayal to anger until he looked at me like he no longer recognized me.

“Aaron, we’re not... look, it’s new. So new I’m not even sure she won’t bolt yet.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“You know what Sofia is like.”

“Yeah... But really, my sister? This is as weird as fuck, you know that, right? I won’t be able to tell you stuff anymore. You’ll have to take her side all the time. I’ll have to threaten you if you even try to hurt her. Jesus, Cole, *my sister*.”

“Repeating it over and over isn’t going to change the outcome,” I said.

Aaron was handling it well. Much better than I’d expected. But he was good at pasting on a smile and pretending everything was okay.

I guess he and Sofia had that in common.

Silence hung between us. Thick and awkward. The server must have noticed the tension because even she kept her distance.

I let out a heavy sigh, running a hand over my face. “I really like her, Aaron.”

“Fuck,” he breathed. “I don’t know what you want me to say?”

“I guess it would be nice to get your blessing.”

“And if I won’t give it?” He pinned me with a dark look.

“I’m not going to walk away from her.”

“At least you’re loyal. But fucking hell, Kandon, you were supposed to be loyal to me.”

“You and Poppy—”

“It’s not the same.” I cocked a brow, and he made a small derisive sound in the back of his throat. “Girls don’t get as weird about that shit.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“If Sofia had asked you to walk away from Poppy, would you have?”

“She wouldn’t—”

“Humor me.”

He cut me with a murderous glare. “No.”

“Doesn’t seem much different to me at all.”

“It’s going to take some time,” Aaron said. “I don’t want to see you macking on her anytime soon.”

“We can be discreet.” I smirked.

“Fucking asshole,” he muttered, picking up a menu.

“You hungry?”

“Always.”

And that was that. Aaron knew about my intentions for Sofia, and he hadn’t tried to break my face.

I called that a small win.

Until he looked up at me over the menu and growled, “If you hurt her, I’ll breaking your fucking legs.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Besides, something told me it wasn’t Sofia’s heart on the line.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sofia

BY SUNDAY AFTERNOON, I felt a little better.

My family had let me wallow all day Saturday. Mom had checked in on me and lay with me for a while. But Dad was suspiciously absent.

And Aaron, well he was either avoiding me or too pissed at me to come and see me. Cole had told him, then told me it had gone surprisingly well. He'd wanted to come and hang out earlier, but I'd made up some excuse about being nauseous again.

The truth was, I was a coward.

Things were changing too quickly.

My health. My future. My feelings about Cole.

I wanted things to go back to how they were before. When everything was much simpler and all I had to worry about was college applications and acing my finals.

Reaching over, I grabbed my cell phone and smiled at the two messages from Cole.

Cole: Hey, how are you feeling?

Cole: I could grab some dinner and bring it over?

Me: I think Mom is cooking. Rain check until tomorrow?

Cole: If I didn't know better, I'd say you are avoiding me...

DAMN, he was perceptive.

Me: Aaron is home. I don't want things to be awkward.

Cole: Have you spoken to him yet?

Me: No, I think he's avoiding me.

Cole: He'll come around. He loves you.

Me: I don't want to hurt him, Cole.

Cole: Let me take you out later? We'll go somewhere out of town. Just you and me.

I BIT MY BOTTOM LIP. I wanted to say yes. I did. But everything was such a mess.

I was a mess.

Before I could reply, another text came through.

Cole: You can't hide forever.

HE KNEW. Cole knew without me ever saying a word. And it was such a relief that he saw through my lies and pretenses because I needed that. I needed someone to pull me out of the darkness circling me.

Me: Okay. Let's do it.

Cole: I'll see you later, Sofe.

ANOTHER TEXT CAME STRAIGHT THROUGH.

Cole: I'm already counting the hours.

MY HEART SWELLED.

God, I was in trouble.

So much trouble.

I HEARD them before I saw them.

My brother's familiar laugh, mirroring Dad's deep chuckle.

"Hey, there she is." Dad smiled, apology glittering in his eyes.

"Hey," I said, making a beeline for the refrigerator.

"You know you basically slept the day away, right?" Aaron asked, a slight coolness to his voice.

Oh, he was pissed all right, but he was stewing on things rather than confronting them head on.

I guess I couldn't say much there since I was doing the same thing.

"How are you feeling, sweetheart?"

"I'm fine, Dad."

"Sofe—"

"Honestly." I gave him a weak smile. "I'm fine. Where's Mom?" Maybe she could temper the tension between us.

"She ran to the store to get some salad for dinner."

"Oh." I slid onto a stool at the breakfast counter.

"Do you want— Hold that thought." His cell phone started blaring. Dad checked the screen and grumbled, "I need to take this."

He disappeared out of the kitchen leaving me alone with Aaron.

"So..." my brother said.

"So..."

"You're banging my best friend."

I winced at the accusation in his voice. "Aaron. We're not... it isn't like that."

“Yeah, Kandon said the same thing.”

“You’re pissed.”

“I’m... honestly, I don’t know what the fuck I am. I thought I was cool with it. I spent all last night telling myself it didn’t matter. But I don’t know, Sofe. Were you ever going to tell me?”

“You make it sound like it’s been going on behind your back for weeks. It hasn’t.”

“He said that too.”

“Because it’s the truth. It just... happened.”

“You like him? Really like him?”

I nodded, too choked up to reply.

“Shit, Sofe... what am I supposed to do with that? He’s my best friend. If it doesn’t work out or he breaks your heart—”

“Because that’s the only way it can end, right? Him breaking my heart?”

Jesus, boys were so dumb sometimes.

But he doesn’t know. He doesn’t know the truth.

“That’s not what I mean. I just...”

“You think it’ll be any different if you break Poppy’s heart? She’s my best friend.”

“Yeah, well, you never have to worry about that because me and Poppy are endgame.”

I snorted. Aaron Bennet, everybody. Overconfident, self-assured goofball.

But it was also kind of sweet that he felt so secure in their relationship to be making declarations of forever.

“We used to tell each other everything,” Aaron said.

His wounded expression hit me right in the chest.

“We’re not kids anymore, Aaron.”

“No, we’re not. So I guess I’ll just have to get over it. You’re my favorite sister and Kandon is my favorite friend. It could be worse, I guess.” He got up and put his empty glass in the dishwasher.

“Aaron, I—”

But he stalked out of the room without so much as a goodbye.

I was still sitting there, numb, when Mom walked in.

“Sofia, you’re up.”

“Hey, Mom.”

“What is it, sweetheart? What’s wrong?” She helped herself to a glass of water and leaned against the counter.

“Aaron is upset about Cole.”

“He’ll come around. He loves you and he loves Cole. He just needs some time to get his head around it. But you know, it’s probably not a good idea to keep—”

“Mom, please.”

“Okay, I’m sorry.” She held up her hand in surrender. “I wish I could fix this, sweetheart. I wish I could wave a magic wand, and everything would be okay.”

“Me too, Mom. Me too.”

“But you and Cole are good?”

“I guess.”

“You know, baby. It’s okay to keep living, Sofia. In fact, it’s important that you do. Your prognosis doesn’t mean life has to stop. If anything, you need to embrace it. Make it a reason to do all of the things you’ve always wanted to do.”

“Like a bucket list?”

“If that’s what you want to call it.” She came around the island to me and cupped my cheek. “You deserve the world, sweetheart. Nothing can take that away from you. Not even leukemia.”

“Thanks, Mom.” A tear slipped free, but I inhaled a deep, calming breath, refusing to give in to the swell of emotion.

Because if I gave in, it would consume me whole.

“Hi,” Cole greeted me at his car.

I’d spied him from the window heading up the driveway to the house, so I hurried out and intercepted him. Aaron had taken off earlier to go see Poppy, but Mom and Dad were home and I wanted to avoid any more awkward chats.

“Hi.”

He looped his arm around my waist and drew me close, pressing a chaste kiss to my lips. “I missed you.”

“Cole, I saw you yesterday.”

“I know. But being stuck at home with my mom and dad isn’t exactly my idea of a good time.”

“Poor baby.” I teased, bopping his nose. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see. Come on.” He opened the passenger door and I climbed in, waiting for him to get in on his side.

“Will you tell me about them? Your parents, I mean.”

I’d known Cole for years, and yet, he never talked about them. I’d gleaned bits and pieces from Aaron, but Cole kept his cards close to his chest.

Something we had in common.

“There’s not much to tell. My dad is a conceited judgmental asshole, and my mom is a total doormat.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

He arched his brow, a grim smile tugging at his mouth. “I wish it wasn’t.”

“They never come to watch you play football.”

It was an observation, not a question.

“Nope. Dad doesn’t care, and Mom... it’s complicated.”

“He wouldn’t like it if she supported you?”

“Not where football or music is concerned, no.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He shrugged. “I’m used to it. Curtis Kandon isn’t going to win any father of the year awards anytime soon, and I made my peace with that a long time ago. Did you talk to Aaron this morning?” he changed the subject.

“Yup. It was awkward.”

“Yeah, he didn’t reply to my text. But he’ll come around.”

“I hope so. I’m not sure I can handle him freezing me out. Not when... you know.”

Cole reached out and took my hand in his, squeezing gently. “He’ll come around. If he doesn’t, I’ll make him.”

His eyes found mine, twinkling with intensity.

“What?” I asked.

“You look beautiful, Sofia.”

The butterflies in my stomach flapped wildly.

“Thank you. I didn’t know what to wear since you wouldn’t tell me where we’re going.”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“I’m not sure I like surprises.”

“I’m confident you’ll like this one.”

I noticed we were taking the road out of Rixon, but in the opposite direction to Halston, away from civilization and into the canopied area of the State Forest.

“It’s so pretty out here.”

“It is. I found this place by mistake once. I got lost. Took a wrong turn and ended up out here.”

“Hmm, what are you up to, Cole Kandon?” I grinned.

He chuckled. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

I pursed my lips, watching the scenery roll by as Cole drove deeper into the forest. I hadn’t been out here since I was a kid and Mom and Dad thought it would be a good idea to take Ezra on a family camping trip to try and help him assimilate.

It had been a total disaster. It rained nonstop, the tent leaked, and Ezra didn’t speak to us for two days straight.

Fun times.

The trees thinned as Cole turned off the main road down a dirt road.

“What is that?” My eyes strained against the darkness. I could just see the flicker of fairy lights in the distance.

As we drew closer, a big cabin came into view. It had a big wraparound porch and wide stairs leading to a set of double doors that were framed with glass. I could see the tables beyond the amber glow of candles.

“Pretty cool, huh? They have a big bonfire out back and live music. I thought it would be—”

“Perfect.” I smiled at him. “It’s perfect.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I wasn’t particularly hungry, but that didn’t matter. The place was amazing.

No one had ever done anything like this for me before. The couple of dates I had gone on at the beginning of junior year had been huge letdowns.

This was everything.

“Come on, we have a reservation.”

Cole came around and opened my door, helping me out. He caught me by the waist and dipped his head to kiss me. A soft moan slipped free as I ran my hands up his chest, loving the feel of his hard chest beneath my palms.

“Mmm, you taste so good,” he whispered. “But I’m starving. So we should probably get inside before I eat you.”

“Cole!” My face turned fire truck red.

“You’re cute when you blush.” He brushed his thumb along my jaw, placing one last kiss on my lips. “I’m really glad you’re here with me, Sofe.”

“Yeah,” I breathed, “me too.”

“A BUCKET LIST?” Cole asked me as we tucked into our food.

The Nook was incredible. The perfect blend of rustic and bohemian, it was warm and inviting and everyone was so friendly. There was a big open fire on the back wall, roaring away as quiet chatter and laughter filled the air. Our table was tucked in the corner next to the windows, so we had a perfect view of the bonfire Cole had mentioned. People milled about on hand carved benches and swings and there was a wooden pergola covered in foliage that offered some protection from the elements.

I loved it.

“Yeah, Mom said that I shouldn’t let the cancer stop me from doing all the things I’ve always wanted to do.”

“Didn’t Poppy’s mom do something similar in her senior year?”

“Yeah. I’ve heard that story too.”

According to Poppy and Lily, their mom Felicity had had her own bucket list senior year. A list that had ended up with her dating Mr. Ford. She’d even got ‘Property of a Raider’ tattooed on her chest when the Raiders had won the championship. A little fact my friends preferred to pretend never happened.

But part of me admired that. I’d never really taken risks or stepped out of my comfort zone before. I was a good student, a

good friend, a good daughter. And I'd been content being just that.

Now though... now things felt different.

"You should totally do it. Write a list of everything you want to do, and we'll make it happen."

"I don't know where I'd even start."

"No one is saying you've got to make the list right this second, but it could be a good way to focus on something positive when your treatment starts."

"Speaking of treatment, I think I've decided to have the fertility procedure."

"Good. I think it's the right call."

"You do?" I was surprised he'd given it any thought.

"You're still young, Sofe. Becoming a mom might not be on your radar yet, but one day, it might be. You'll regret not doing it."

I nodded, forking some more prime rib into my mouth. "God, this is good."

"I like seeing you like this." Cole watched me, and I arched a questioning brow. "Happy?"

"Thank you for pushing me to come tonight. I'm sorry I avoided you yesterday."

"Hey, remember what we said? No apologies, okay? You needed space, and I can respect that. But I don't ever want you to shut me out because you think you're protecting me."

"Have you always been this amazing?" I asked.

"Yup. I was just waiting for you to notice." Cole winked, finishing off the last of his sloppy joes.

"Do your parents know about me?"

His brows furrowed. "Why does it matter?"

"It doesn't matter." My walls went straight up, the bitter sting of dejection rolling through me.

“Shit, Sofe, I didn’t mean to snap. I just... it’s a sore subject. My dad couldn’t care less about my life if it’s nothing to do with me attending Drexel.”

“I guess he’ll really love finding out you’re dating a girl with leukemia then.”

“Sofia, don’t do that.” His jaw clenched.

“Sorry, that was unfair.”

“I’ve actually been thinking, and I’m going to apply to the University of Michigan. There might be a shot at a football scholarship.”

“Maybe you should talk to your dad again first. He might come around to the idea.”

“He won’t.”

“So that’s it, you choose to apply to UMich and he cuts you off?”

“Yup, but at least he’ll be out of my life.”

I didn’t like hearing him talk like that. You only got one family, even if his dad sounded like a real jackass.

“So that’s the plan, UMich?”

“That’s the dream.”

I didn’t know why, but the conversation killed the mood between us. Maybe it was all the talk of Cole’s dad, or maybe it was the fact that Cole had plans beyond next week, next month... next year.

I’d had plans too, but now everything was different. And the reality was, Cole was starting a relationship with somebody who might not have a future at all.

“I don’t like that look,” he said, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“What look?”

“Like you’re about to run.”

“Are we stupid, Cole? For being here? For doing this when ___”

“Stop, Sofe. I’m begging you to stop doing this. If I didn’t want to be here, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Okay.”

I grabbed my homemade lemonade and drained it.

Trying to ignore the nagging doubt in the back of my mind that we were only setting ourselves up for heartache.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Cole

“ARE YOU COLD?” I asked Sofia as we sat outside on a rattan love seat next to the bonfire.

The heat of the flames burned away the cooling temperature, but Sofia had shivered a couple of times, and I didn't want her catching a cold.

“No.” She smiled up at me. “I'm fine.”

I wrapped my arm tighter around her shoulder, still hardly able to believe that she was here with me. Letting me hold her.

“She's pretty good.”

“Yeah, she's got a nice voice,” I said.

The singer was an older woman with an acoustic guitar. She had a country twang to her voice that suited The Nook.

A server appeared with our drinks. “Two signature hot chocolates with marshmallows, caramel sauce, and Reese's pieces.”

“They look so good. Thank you.” Sofia took hers and settled back against the love seat.

“Thanks.” I dug out my wallet and settled the check.

“Oh my God, so good.”

My heart swelled as I watched Sofia try to navigate her way around the extravagant drink. She ended up with a blob of cream on her nose and caramel smeared all around her lips.

“I'm a mess.” She blushed, trying to clean herself up. But I snagged her wrist and leaned in.

“Let me.”

Slowly, I licked her clean, stealing a kiss along the way. She tasted so fucking good, desire zipped down my spine and straight to my dick.

I wanted her.

So fucking much.

She wanted to take things slow though, and I didn't want to push her for more than she was willing to give me.

"Cole," she breathed as I sucked on her tongue, teasing her.

Like in the restaurant, I'd picked a quiet seat around the bonfire, barely overlooked by anyone else.

"What do you want?" I whispered, letting my hand drop to her waist and squeezing gently.

"I-I don't know."

"No pressure." I dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose. "Do you want to stay a while longer or get out of here?"

"I think I'd like to be alone with you." Her head dropped a little, her eyelashes fluttering as she looked up at me.

"Shit, yeah. Okay. Let's drink these and head back to my car."

Sofia nodded, sipping her hot chocolate. But frowned when her cell phone vibrated.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

"Yeah. It's just Aaron. He wants—" My cell phone went off too. I dug it out of my pocket and read the text.

"He wants us to go to a party?"

"Looks like it." Sofia nodded.

"We don't have to go. I'm happy to do whatever you want to."

"I think I'd like to go."

"Yeah?"

She nodded. "I don't want to get drunk or anything, but I think I'd like to see everyone."

"Party it is then." I grinned.

This was good.

It was definite progress.

But part of me couldn't help but wonder what capacity we'd be showing up to the party as.

Friends...

Or something more?

THE PARTY WAS at Faris's house. His parents were out of town a lot, so he usually got talked into having the team around.

Music pumped out of the house as we approached.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked Sofia.

She'd been quiet on the ride over. The heat between us cooling enough that I was beginning to think bringing her here was a bad idea.

But she lifted her gaze to mine and smiled. "Yeah. Come on."

She took my hand and tugged me toward the front door. A couple of guys from the team spotted us and gave me a nod in greeting.

"Sofia, wait," I said, and she glanced back at me. "How do you want to play this?"

"This?" Her face scrunched in the cutest fucking way.

"Yeah, I mean... shit, I don't want you to feel pressured about this..." I motioned between us, a pit churning in my stomach as I braced myself for her rejection.

But to my surprise, she tightened her hand around mine and grinned. "Stop overthinking things, Kandon."

Rolling her eyes playfully, Sofia tugged me toward the house again.

Fuck me.

I liked her like this.

I liked it a whole lot.

We entered Faris's house and headed straight for the kitchen, the most likely place we'd find our friends.

Just as we reached the door, I hooked my arm around Sofia's waist and spun her in my arms.

"Cole, wait are you—"

Capturing her lips in a bruising kiss, she wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me back, the two of us lost in each other.

"What was that for?" It came out a little breathless.

"In case I don't get to do it again for a while."

She gawked at me like I'd lost my mind; like I couldn't possibly be into her that much.

But I was.

And I wanted to give her the best damn night possible.

Poppy rushed over to us the second we entered the big open-plan kitchen. "You made it."

Her gaze went straight to where Sofia's hand was wrapped around mine. "So." She grinned. "Does this mean the two of you are together?"

Sofia glanced up at me, her gaze questioning. But this was her decision. Her choice.

"We are." She smiled and my heart soared.

Jesus, I was in deep and barely any time had passed. But I'd watched my friends all fall hard and fast for their girls, so I knew it was possible.

Knew love didn't play by any set of rules.

Not that I loved her. It was way too soon for that, but it wouldn't be hard to get there. To fall a little deeper into her every day until there was no coming up for air.

Feeling a little smug, I banded my arm around her waist and tucked Sofia into my chest, dropping my chin to her shoulder.

She turned to me and kissed me, surprising the fuck out of me.

And Poppy apparently.

“Oh my God, you guys are the cutest,” she shrieked.

“Pops,” Sofia murmured. “We’re trying to be low-key.”

“Too late for that,” Aaron called from across the room. Disapproval glittered in his eyes, but I didn’t let it deter me.

Sofia had made her choice and I wasn’t about to throw it in her face just because her brother was pissed.

“Babe, don’t be a dick,” Poppy chided.

“How was your date?”

“Perfect.” Sofia glanced at me again, all dreamy-eyed.

“Of course it was,” he grumbled, draining his beer. “You want a drink?”

“I’m driving,” I said.

“Leave your car. We can share an Uber home.”

“It’s fine,” Sofia said. “We came to enjoy ourselves, right?”

“None for you, Sis. Not after Pittsburgh.”

“Asshole.”

“Says the girl who puked her guts up in the bushes outside Jordan Handell’s frat house.”

“Aaron!” Poppy elbowed him in the ribs. “Ignore him. Come on, let’s get you a drink.” She grabbed Sofia’s hand and led her away from me.

“I swear to God, babe. Get my sister drunk and I’m withholding the D.”

“The D? Wow,” I snorted.

“Oh, fuck off.” He threw me a harsh look. “Your friend-banter privileges have been rescinded.”

“Yo, Kandon.” Deacon called out before he and Dylan sauntered over to us. “Is it true you’re banging Bennet’s sister?”

“Not the time or place, dude,” I said, fighting a smile. Because while I didn’t want Aaron to hate me anymore than he already did, it was kind of funny.

“Fuck off, Faris. Any guy would be lucky to be with my sister.”

“Shit, Aaron, I didn’t mean—”

“Go enjoy the party,” I said, motioning for them to give us some space.

Aaron walked over to the counter and grabbed me a beer from the cooler and handed it to me.

“Thanks.”

“So how did it go tonight?” He looked past me to where the girls were at the island making their drinks.

“You really want to talk about this?”

He shrugged. “Humor me.”

“It was nice.”

“Nice? That’s all you’re going to give me?”

“What do you want to know? That we made out under the stars? Gazed into each other’s eyes with the wind in our hair?”

“Asshole,” he scoffed.

“I know you don’t want to hear it, but I really like her, Aaron.”

“Yeah, I feared you might say that. But she is related to me so I guess I shouldn’t be that surprised you’ve fallen hard.” He smirked and I chuckled.

It felt good to be talking to him like this. Even if it was a little weird.

“Can I ask you something?” he said.

“Sure.” I took a pull on my beer.

“Is she okay? Like really?”

“What?” The word stuck in my throat.

“I mean, I know she’s okay. And thank fuck she is because I could not handle it if she was... well, you know.” He gave a little shrug, running a hand down his face. “But she seems off. I can’t put my finger on it, but it’s like there’s this invisible wall between us.”

Fuck.

I didn’t want to lie to him. Aaron was my best friend. My ride or die. But Sofia was... well, she was my girl now.

“It’s been a stressful few weeks. She’ll come around.”

There. That was reassuringly vague.

“So she hasn’t said anything?”

“I—”

“Hello, boyfriend.” Poppy’s immaculate timing saved me from barefaced lying to my best friend.

Sofia noticed my strained expression and mouthed, ‘Everything okay?’

“Yeah.” I held out my arm and she came willingly, nestling against my side as the party went on around us.

“This is nice,” she whispered. “Normal even.”

“It is. What if we turn it into your first bucket list item?”

“How so?”

“Well, you could go skinny dipping in the pool.”

“Too cold.” Sofia balked.

“No skinny dipping, okay, what about body shots off some poor unsuspecting football player?”

“You seriously want me to do shots off one of your teammate’s naked body?”

“Aaron might not like it if you do them off me.” I winked.

“Aaron would definitely not like it,” he barked. “And what the fuck, Kandon? Why are you trying to encourage my sister to take body shots off someone?”

“It’s nothing,” Sofia said.

“Come on. You can’t not tell us.”

“Babe.” Poppy shook her head.

“Fine. I need another beer.” Aaron skulked off, leaving Poppy sighing after him.

“Give him time.”

“Yeah.”

“You two should enjoy the party. Don’t worry about Aaron. I’ll turn his frown upside down.” She smirked, taking off after him.

“She’s totally going to do sexual things to him, isn’t she?” Sofia grimaced.

“My guess would be yes.”

“So gross.”

“Nah, they’re in love.” I backed her into the counter and placed my hands on either side of her hips, gazing down at her.

“He’s handling it better than I thought he would.”

“It’s Aaron. He won’t stay mad at you for long. But I do think you should talk to him soon about, you know.”

“Cole...”

“I know. It’s your decision. But he knows something is up, Sofe.”

“He asked you?” Panic flashed in her eyes.

“In not so many words, yeah. I didn’t say anything.”

“I hate this. I hate it so much. But I can’t tell him, not yet. The playoffs are coming up and he’ll be crushed, Cole. It’s bad enough that you know.”

“Don’t say that.” I touched my head to hers. “Don’t ever say that. I can handle it, okay?”

Sofia's breath caught.

"Sofe..."

"Yeah, okay."

I stole a chaste kiss. "Now about that list."

"Actually, I thought of something."

"You did? Let's hear it then."

She curled her fist into my sweater and moved her mouth to my ear. "Fool around at a party."

"Seriously?" I pulled back to look at her. Because I needed to see her eyes, to read the expression on her face.

An uncertain smile tugged at her lips, but she nodded. "Take me upstairs, Cole."

"Y-yeah?" I choked out.

"I don't know if I'm ready to have sex. But I think we could probably get to third base."

"We don't have to—"

"I want to." She pulled me closer, letting her lips ghost over mine. I curled my hand around her hip, kissing her back.

"Only if you're sure."

"I am. I want you, Cole. I want you so much it hurts."

Fuck.

This was the last thing I'd expected her to say. But I wasn't about to turn her down. I'd give her whatever she wanted.

"Come on." I took her hand and led her upstairs, praying to God Aaron didn't spot us.

Hopefully Poppy was keeping him occupied.

Sofia trembled against me as we reached the second floor and I pulled her into my side.

"You good?"

She nodded, a faint smile tracing her mouth.

“What?” I asked.

Her smile grew. “Just you, Cole.”

My chest expanded at her words. Did she feel it too? The undeniable connection between us?

Since watching her faint that day at Bell’s, it was like something had snapped into place inside me. I hated seeing her so vulnerable and worried. And all I wanted to do was take that away for her, protect her, and keep her safe.

It’s out of your hands though.

I wasn’t a doctor. I couldn’t cure her. But I could be there for her. I could hold her hand when she got sick and lie with her when her body wouldn’t cooperate. I could offer her a glimmer of light in the darkness.

“What do we do? Just try all the rooms until we find an empty one?” A nervous laugh escaped her.

“I’m the quarterback,” I said. “It comes with some perks.”

“Oh, it’s like that, huh?”

“It’s exactly like that.”

Guiding Sofia to the end of the hall, I opened the last door and as expected found the room empty. It was the one room completely off-limits unless you were Deacon, or one of the senior players on the team apparently.

My heart raced in my chest as I pulled Sofia inside, locking the door behind us. “Hi.” I reached for her, curving my hand around her waist and drawing her into me.

“Hi.” She slipped her hands up my chest, and I wondered if she could feel the wild thud of my heart beneath her palm.

“We go at your pace, okay? There’s no pressure here, Sofe. I need you to know that.”

She gazed up at me and rolled her lips together, swallowing.

“You are so fucking beautiful.” I tucked her hair behind one ear, my thumb lingering on her cheek.

Her eyelashes fluttered as she inhaled a sharp breath. “Kiss me, Cole. I need for you to kiss me now.”

Gliding my hand around her neck, I fixed my mouth over hers. Kissing Sofia was like nothing else. Tingles barreled down my spine as our tongues met: slow, lazy licks that drove me fucking wild.

But I held back, letting her decide how quickly to move things. She made her choice, pulling me over to the bed. Sofia broke the kiss, looking right at me as she shucked off her jacket and pulled her soft green sweater over her head.

Fuck.

I’d died and gone to heaven. That was the only explanation for the vision standing before me.

“Cole, you have too many clothes on.” She chuckled. Hooking her fingers into her pants and pushing them down her hips.

“Shit, yeah, okay.” I made quick work of stripping out of my clothes, my smooth game completely obliterated the second I saw her body.

I’d seen it before, in the summer, swimming in the Bennets’ pool. But this was different. Then, I didn’t get to touch. I only had my fantasies, of which she’d always been a starring attraction.

Now I got to lay my hands on her skin. I got to map her curves with my fingertips, and if I was really fucking lucky, my mouth and my tongue too.

Fuck.

My dick ached behind my boxer briefs. As if she heard my thoughts, Sofia’s gaze dropped to my crotch and her eyes widened.

“Oh.” It was a small, surprised sound.

“I... uh, sorry.” I ran a hand through my hair and down the back of my neck. “But you get me so fucking hot, Sofe.”

“Show me,” she whispered. “I want you to show me, Cole.”

Sofia stepped into me, her hands landing on my bare chest. A bolt of heat went through me, and there was every chance this was going to be over before it even got started. I was only human though and she was a fucking dream.

One of her hands glided down my stomach and I sucked in a sharp breath. “Fuck, that feels— ah,” I groaned as she palmed me through the thin material. “Sofe, babe,” I choked out. “If you don’t stop that, this isn’t going to last very long.”

She looked up at me, lust and longing glittering in her eyes. “Sorry.”

A deep rumble of laughter vibrated in my chest. “Get on the bed,” I said. “I want to look at you.”

“I...”

I cupped the back of her neck. “You don’t need to be nervous with me, okay? You want to stop, we stop. You want to do something else; we do something else. Whatever you need, Sofe, I’ve got you.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sofia

MY BODY TREMBLED as I lay on the bed, Cole's hungry gaze following me.

I couldn't believe I was doing this. But when he'd brought up the list, all I could think about was all the silly teenage things I hadn't experienced yet.

Fooling around at parties.

Staying out all night.

Skinny dipping in the lake behind our house.

Letting a boy go down on me.

That last one was stuck in my mind on repeat. Because from the intense way Cole was looking at me, he was starving, and I was the only thing on the menu.

"Can I touch you?" He crawled over me, letting his arms take most of his weight, but the feel of his warm skin against mine was incredible.

"If you don't, I'll never forgive you." My lips curved, and he smiled back.

His body was a work of art, one I was well acquainted with from spending summer after summer with him and Aaron and our friends. I ran my hands up the hard lines of his stomach and chest, loving the way his cut muscles contracted under my touch.

"Are you trying to drive me wild?"

"Maybe." I smirked.

Who was I right now?

Bold. Confident. Sexy.

It was like Cole had given me the freedom to step into another persona for the night—one who took what she wanted and worried about the consequences later.

Cole kissed me. Only this kiss was different to the ones before. Urgent and desperate, his tongue plunged into my mouth, stealing the air from my lungs as he devoured me.

Letting his weight fall on me a little more, he rocked his hips forward and I whimpered when I felt him hard and thick, right up against me.

“Is this okay?” he murmured, sliding his hand under my thigh to lift me into him.

“Y-yes, don’t stop.”

“Fuck, Sofe. You feel so good and I’m not even inside you yet.”

Desire pulsed inside me. He knew all the right things to say to get me out of my head. To take me away from the living nightmare I’d found myself in.

His mouth trailed hot wet kisses over my jaw and down my throat. I angled my head to give him better access, reveling in the way his lips felt branding me. He licked and nipped, grazing my skin gently with his teeth.

“Cole,” I cried, arching into him. I needed more.

So much more.

“Touch me, please.”

“Shit, yeah, okay.” He rolled off me to the side, his hand sliding down my stomach and hovering at the waistband of my panties. “You sure?”

I nodded, unable to speak as his fingers brushed back and forth along my hip.

God, I was going to combust if he didn’t touch me—

Pleasure saturated me as his fingers dipped inside my underwear and glided over my clit.

“You’re so wet, babe.” He kissed me, flicking his tongue into my mouth in slow, shallow licks, mirroring the way he dragged his thumb over my clit.

“It feels... God, yes. Like that.”

Pleasure rippled through me, gathering low in my stomach. Cole upped his pace a little, pressing two fingers inside me.

“Oh yes...”

“You like that?”

“Mm-hmm,” I murmured, fisting the bedsheet.

“I want to make you come, Sofe.”

“Yes, yes... God yes...”

He lifted his head and chuckled. “I want to make you come with my tongue.”

“Oh.”

Oh.

Heat flashed inside me.

“Can I taste you?”

“Y-yeah.”

He pulled his fingers away and brought them to his lips, sucking them clean. It was so dirty, so freaking erotic, a violent shiver ran through me.

Cole shuffled down the bed, pushing my thighs apart with his broad shoulders. My hand went to his hair, and I ran my fingers through the soft strands.

“Tell me if it gets too much.”

I nodded. It was all I could do because he’d basically rendered me into a big pile of mush.

Sitting back on his haunches, Cole hooked his fingers into my panties and peeled them down my legs. It was a little tricky getting them off, but he managed and then he was back there, his face up close and personal with my most intimate parts.

It was instinct to want to cover myself, to shove him away and press my thighs together, but the second his tongue dragged up the length of me, all doubts melted away.

“God, that feels incredible...”

He used his fingers to spread me open and speared his tongue inside me without warning. Pleasure blasted through me as I gripped his hair. “Cole... God...”

He swirled his tongue over my clit while sliding two fingers back inside me. It was sensation overload, every nerve-ending inside me vibrating.

“You gonna come for me, Sofe?”

“Yes, yes...” I panted, writhing beneath him. It was too much. Not enough. The way his tongue and fingers worked together in perfect synchronicity.

“Ah... don’t stop. Don’t—”

The tight coil inside me snapped and a wave of pleasure crashed over me as I cried his name into the shadows.

Cole licked me through the orgasm, pressing little kisses over my thighs and hips before crawling back up my body.

“Hi,” he said around a smug grin.

“Hi. You look awfully pleased with yourself.”

“That was hands down one of the best moments of my life.”

I rolled my eyes at that.

“What? It’s true. Knowing you trusted me enough to touch you... it means a lot, Sofe.”

“You really are perfect, aren’t you?”

“Far from it.” He kissed me, tangling his tongue with mine. I could taste myself on him, but it was oddly hot.

“How do you feel?” He lay beside me, tucking me into his arm.

“Amazing.” I let out a soft sigh. “Will you let me touch you now?”

“Is that even a question?” He peeked down at me. “I will let you do whatever you want to me. Consider my body yours to use as you so please.”

“I’ve never... you know.” I blushed.

“You’re going to have to be a little more specific.”

“I’ve never given a guy a blow job before.” I rolled my eyes. “Will you show me what you like?”

“Sofe, I’m pretty confident there isn’t a single thing you could do to me that I wouldn’t enjoy.”

His words made my heart swell.

“Okay, I want to.”

I nudged him onto his back and straddled his hips. Cole sat up on his elbows and curved his hand around the back of my neck. “You don’t have to do this. There’s no rush.”

But there was.

Time was ticking.

Who knew how I’d feel during the cancer treatment?

What if I never felt like myself again?

No. I wanted to experience things now. While I was still me.

“I want to.” I leaned down and brushed a soft kiss over his lips before moving down his body.

It took a minute to find a comfortable position. One that let me kiss his abs, run my tongue over the hard ridges.

“Fuck, that feels... *fuck.*”

I smiled against him, gently nipping his hip with my teeth.

He was already hard, his dick straining against his boxers. I ran my hand over it, adding a little pressure.

Cole groaned. “Little tease.”

Why did I like the sound of that?

Dipping my head, I pressed open mouthed kisses along his pelvis while palming him through his briefs.

“Sofe,” he warned, lifting his ass to get closer to me.

“You said I could do whatever I wanted...” I batted my lashes at him, and he shook his head with silent laughter.

Slowly, I pulled his boxer briefs down his hips, enough that I could close my fist around him and pump him from root to tip.

“Jesus Christ,” he hissed.

“Is it okay?”

“More than okay.”

Pushing all my hair over one shoulder, I leaned down and flicked my tongue over the tip as I continued jacking him off.

“Fuck...” The word left his lips on a pained groan.

“It’s salty,” I said, licking again, taking a bit of him into my mouth.

“Yes. Fuck yes, just like that.” His hand curled into my hair, holding it out of the way.

There was something so hot about it, it spurred me on and gave me the courage to slide my mouth further down his length.

The second he hit the back of my throat, I gagged a little, but it was worth it to hear the deep rumble of approval in his chest.

“You are incredible,” he said, as I started to find a rhythm.

“Tell me how you like it.”

“Like that,” he rasped. “Yeah, just like that.”

I’d always been kind of turned off by the idea of putting a guy’s dick in my mouth, but obviously, I’d been with the wrong guys because watching Cole lose control under my touch was the best thing ever.

Hollowing my cheeks, I took him deeper, adding a little twist as I pumped the rest of him. He was big. Too big to take the whole way, but he seemed to enjoy what I was doing.

“I’m close, Sofe,” he said. “If you don’t want to swallow ___”

“I do.”

I did. I wanted to watch as he came, to taste him, knowing it was all because of me.

“Like that... harder...” he instructed, so I worked him faster, tracing my mouth over the vein on the underside of his shaft and then swirling it over the tip.

“Gonna come. I’m gonna... fuck.”

I swallowed him down as he came in my mouth.

His hand slipped to my jaw, his thumb brushing my cheek as I licked my lips.

“You’re amazing.”

“It was okay?” I asked, a little sheepish.

“Okay? Sofe, you blew my fucking mind. Come here.” He pulled me up beside him and we lay facing each other.

“Was it okay for you?”

“I liked doing it more than I thought I would,” I admitted.

“There’s a whole list of things we can do, when you’re ready.” He kissed my forehead.

“We should probably go back to the party before—”

Cole’s cell phone started blaring.

“Ignore it.”

“I bet it’s Aaron.” It stopped, and sure enough, a text came through a second later.

“He’s a pain in my ass.” Cole reached over and grabbed it off the floor.

“What does it say?”

His brows furrowed and he said, “You don’t want to know.”

“Cole.” I snatched it out of his hands and read the text.

AARON: I swear to God, Kandon. If you’re upstairs with my sister, I won’t be held responsible for my actions.

“UGH. Poppy obviously didn’t do a very good job of distracting him.”

Cole pulled me tighter and kissed me again. “He’ll get over it. We could stay up here and really send him over the edge.”

“No, we should go hang out with them. He’s going to hate me when he finds out the truth. I need to make the most of the truce while I can.”

“You know, you could just tell him?”

I went stiff. “I’m not ready.”

“You’re going to have to pull off the Band-Aid eventually, Sofe.”

“I know. But he’s so close to making all his dreams come true. I can’t ruin that. I won’t.”

“Okay.” Cole sat up and pressed a kiss to my shoulder. “It’s your decision.”

“It is.”

And it was the right one.

Even if no one else agreed.

“HE CAN’T TAKE his eyes off you,” Poppy said over the music.

After me and Cole had come downstairs, we’d found Poppy and my brother outside under the pergola. Someone had set up a speaker and some of the other girls were dancing.

When Poppy had grabbed my hand to join them, I’d gone willingly. Because tonight was about all the good things in my life. My brother, my friends... Cole.

“Pops,” I warned.

“What? It’s so freaking cute. He’s falling hard for you, babe.”

My heart swelled and then plummeted. But I brushed off the sharp stab of fear. I might not have known what the future held, but it didn’t change the fact that tonight had been one of the best nights of my life.

“Oh, he’s coming over here.”

I didn’t glance back, keeping my gaze on Poppy as excitement danced in her eyes.

Aaron appeared first, pulling her into his arms and swaying her to the chilled beats.

Strong arms enveloped me. “Hi.” Cole’s lips brushed my cheek.

“Hi.” I looked back at him.

“Are you having fun?”

“I am. All thanks to you.” I wrapped my arms over his, as we danced to the music.

“What were you and Aaron talking about?”

“You and Poppy mainly.”

“Is he still pissed?”

“I think it’s more a case of he thinks he should be pissed because I broke the cardinal rule of bro code.”

“Look at them,” I sighed, watching Aaron lift Poppy off the ground and spin her around, the two of them bursting with love and laughter.

“If I had to bet on anyone getting engaged before graduation, it will be those two,” Cole said.

“Coach Ford would lose his shit.”

I could picture it now.

“Nah, he talks a good talk, but I know how much he respects Aaron. And you know how much he loves Kaiden.”

Kaiden Thatcher was Poppy's sister's boyfriend. He and Lily had fell hard and fast last year in their senior year, but there had been one huge problem. Kaiden was the son of Coach Ford's high school nemesis.

The drama that unfolded around their relationship had made for an interesting junior year. But they'd come out stronger for it, and they were at college together now at Penn State.

"Yeah, I guess. Although, sometimes, I don't know what she sees in him."

Case and point, my brother lowered Poppy to the ground and started covering her in wet sloppy kisses.

"He's such a goofball," I added.

"He's a good guy, Sofe. One of the best I know."

I turned in Cole's arms and smiled up at him. "Well, the best guy I know is you." Going up on my tiptoes, I kissed him. "I need to pee. I'll be right back."

"I'll walk you in. I want to get another drink anyway."

Cole let my brother and Poppy know we were going inside. I left him at the drinks station to go to the downstairs bathroom.

Tonight had been a good night. The best. I didn't want it to end.

I made quick work of peeing and washed my hands, eager to get back to Cole. But when I reached the kitchen, I paused, watching from the doorway.

Cole wasn't alone. Kacie was talking to him, smiling up at him with that dreamy look in her eyes. Jealousy rose inside me, almost choking me. She reached for his arm, touching him. A warm smile on her face. He laughed at whatever she said but made no move to put some distance between them.

My stomach dropped, glum realization settling over me.

This would be my life soon. Standing on the sidelines. Too sick to attend parties or football games. Stuck at home in bed

or the hospital, wondering what Cole was doing, who he was talking to.

Kacie moved closer, so close she was practically pressed up against him. This time, Cole did step away. And whatever he said made her frown with disappointment. She gave him a little shrug and walked off.

He scanned the room, spotting me. The smile on his face should have patched up the hole in my heart, but it didn't.

"Hey." He approached me. "Everything okay? You look a little pale."

"What did Kacie want?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing. She was just saying hey."

I didn't answer.

"Sofe?"

"I'm fine. It's getting late though and I'm pretty tired. I think I'm going to go."

"You're upset."

It wasn't a question.

He rested his hands on my hips and studied me. "You have nothing to worry about where Kacie is concerned. You know that, right?"

"I... it's not even her, Cole. It's the situation. You deserve to be with someone who—"

"Don't. Don't do that. I want you, Sofe. I'm falling for *you*."

I inhaled a deep breath, trying to banish the doubt circling my thoughts.

"Sorry. I'm not good at this."

"We've had a good time tonight, haven't we?" he asked, and I nodded. "Then let's forget about everything else, okay?"

If only it were that easy.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Cole

“MORNING, Cole. Come on in and interrupt the one morning of the week we actually eat breakfast as a family.”

He eyed the flowers and box of donuts in my hand and rolled his eyes.

“Sorry, Mr. Bennet. I can come back later if it’s a bad time?”

“And risk me having to survive the wrath of my daughter? No.” He rubbed his jaw. “You’d better come in. Besides, Poppy beat you to it. She got here fifteen minutes ago. Have kids they said, it’ll be fun they said,” he muttered to himself as he walked off down the hall.

I followed him, my heart kicking into overdrive when I heard Sofia’s soft laughter.

After the Kacie-blip last night, I’d wondered if she would withdraw again. I’d seen the hesitation in her eyes, the sheer panic. So I’d kissed her. I’d pulled her into my arms and kissed her so hard she couldn’t possibly doubt my intentions.

“Sofia, you have a visitor,” Mr. Bennet said, walking into the kitchen ahead of me.

“What the fu— hell, Kandon? You’re going to turn up at my house with flowers and donuts when I—”

“Babe.” Poppy stamped on his foot under the table and Aaron cussed under his breath.

“I brought enough for everyone.” I offered the box to Mrs. Bennet.

“That’s very kind of you, Cole. Take a seat, the bacon is almost done.”

Sofia patted the chair next to her.

“This is an unexpected surprise,” she whispered as I sat down, trying to ignore the daggers Aaron was throwing me.

“I thought I’d surprise you.”

“Oh, it was a surprise all right.” Mr. Bennet snorted.

“Dad,” Sofia murmured.

“One day, sweetheart, when you’re much, much older and you have children of your own, you will understand.” He patted her hand.

“I think it’s very sweet, Cole. And you’re always more than welcome to have breakfast with us.”

“Thanks, Mrs. B. It looks great.”

And it beat being stuck at home with Mom and Dad and the prickly atmosphere that followed him like a bad smell.

The second I’d come downstairs, and he’d tried to bring up the mixer next weekend, I’d made my excuses and gotten the hell out of there.

As if I’d summoned him from the depths of hell, my cell phone began ringing.

I dug it out of my pocket and hit reject.

“Your old man?” Aaron asked, and I nodded.

“If you need to take it—”

“I don’t. But thanks.” I gave Mrs. Bennet a weak smile. She knew a little about my dad. But she didn’t know the full extent of things. No one did. Because when you were a Kandon, you kept your problems swept under the rug and you never aired your dirty laundry.

“That was a big win Friday night,” Mr. Bennet said. “You guys think you can go all the way?”

“Damn right we can.” Aaron grinned.

“I remember it like it was yesterday.”

“Didn’t you sacrifice the playoffs, Dad?” Sofia asked.

“Just because I didn’t play all the games, doesn’t mean I don’t remember what it was like.”

“Your father did a very commendable thing covering for Jase.”

“Coach Ford was a badass back in the day,” Aaron said.

“He’s still a badass,” Poppy corrected him. “Don’t think for one second he won’t make your life hell if you ever break my heart, Aaron Bennet.”

He hooked his arm around her neck and pulled her in for a kiss. “Good thing I don’t ever plan on breaking it then.”

Mr. Bennet cleared his throat, but Aaron ignored him, kissing Poppy again.

“For the love of God, Son. Put the girl down and eat your breakfast.”

“I can think of something I’d like to eat,” Aaron murmured, low enough that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet didn’t hear him, but I did.

I shot him a bemused look and he smirked back.

“Has Jase unveiled his plans for senior’s night yet?”

“Nope, he wanted to focus on the playoffs first,” Aaron said.

“He’s cutting it a bit close, isn’t he? Your last home game is in three weeks.”

“I’d be happy with a barbecue at Coach’s house and some quality time with my girl.”

“We’ve created a monster,” Mr. Bennet grumbled to his wife who smiled.

“You won’t be saying that next year when they all leave for college and we’re all alone in this big house.”

“Sounds damn near perfect if you ask me. I won’t have to worry about how loud I make you scream.”

“Dad!” Sofia shrieked and I almost choked on my orange juice.

“And you wonder where he gets it from.” Mrs. Bennet rolled her eyes, tucking into her breakfast like it was just a

standard family breakfast. And I realized that for them, it probably was. Their house was so full of love and laughter. It was a privilege to witness it, but also a stark reminder of everything I'd never had.

“Hey, you okay?” Sofia gripped my knee, commanding my attention.

“Yeah, I'm fine.”

“Has anyone heard from Ezra and Ashleigh?”

“Yeah, he video called to give us the tour yesterday,” Aaron said, shoveling two pieces of bacon into his mouth.

“College,” Mr. Bennet said wistfully. “Some of the best days of my life.”

“Hell yeah. I can't wait for next summer,” Aaron added. “Football, my girl, maybe even an off-campus apartment.”

“No,” his parents both said in unison.

“But come on, guys. Poppy will be over at my place all the time anyway. It makes sense to get a place together.”

“You owe it to yourselves to have the full college experience, Son. Dorm rooms, roommates, all that stuff.”

“Your dad is right, babe.” Poppy kissed his cheek. “I think we should wait until sophomore year to get our own place.”

“You do? Since when?”

“Since you've shut up long enough for me to have an opinion.”

Everyone snickered.

“You have your whole lives...” Mrs. Bennet stopped herself, eyes full of apology flashing to Sofia.

“Mom's right, you guys.” Sofia drew in a steady breath. “You have your whole lives ahead of you, there's no reason to rush.”

I took her hand in mine and threaded our fingers together. Aaron and Poppy might not have caught the sadness bleeding into her words, but I heard it loud and clear.

From the way Mrs. Bennet jumped in with, “So what are your plans for today?” I figured she did too.

“Aaron promised to come to the gym with me,” Poppy said. “I need to start practicing my new routine, and he’s an excellent motivator.”

“Hell yeah, I am.”

“You two should come,” she added. “We could get you on the trampoline, Sofe.”

“I think I’m good, but thanks. Besides, I have a ton of homework.”

“I could stay and hang out?” I offered.

“I’d like that.”

“Well, we are going to Halston to see Xander and Peyton’s new place.”

“I can’t believe they didn’t invite us,” Poppy said.

“You’ll all be invited to the official housewarming. This is the adults only one.”

“So Peyton won’t be attending then?” Aaron snorted.

“Babe, not funny,” Poppy scolded him.

“We know it’s complicated, but Xander invited us, and we want to support him.”

“Both of them,” Mrs. Bennet added.

“Yeah, but she still can’t legally drink, it’s weird.”

Peyton was Lily and Ashleigh’s best friend. She’d dropped out of high school in her senior year after falling in love with Ashleigh’s uncle Xander. It was a local scandal—the high school football coach falling for one of his students, but they’d made it work. And our families had finally come around to the idea of them being together.

Mr. Bennet wagged his finger between Poppy and Aaron. “You don’t think it freaks me and Jase out that the two of you are doing this.”

“Hey, I’ll be the best son-in-law Coach ever had.”

“For the love of God, never let Jase hear you say that.”

“What? It’s true.”

“Babe, we really need to work on your filter.”

“Okay, okay. Enough of the heavy talk. I want to enjoy breakfast. Cole, son, care to dish out those donuts?”

“Help yourself, sir.”

“Sir? Jesus, Kandon. Laying it on a bit thick, aren’t you?”
Aaron smirked.

“Leave him alone, jerk face.” Sofia came to my defense.

“You could take a page out of Cole’s book, Son. Good manners never hurt anyone.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “We should do this more often, it’s soooo much fun. But next time, we need to make sure E and Ashleigh are here. I don’t see why he gets to miss out on this family bonding time.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Son. Ezra’s time will come.” Mr. Bennet grinned.

“Yes, well, if we’re done talking—”

Sofia shot off her chair and clapped her hand over her mouth.

“Sweetheart?”

But she was already gone, running out of the kitchen.

“Something you want to tell us, Kandon?”

“What?”

“Morning sickness, perhaps?”

“Seriously, not funny, asshole.” My cheeks grew hot as everyone looked at me. “We’re not... we haven’t...”

Wow. This was awkward.

“Relax, Cole. I’m sure it’s just her iron levels,” Mrs. Bennet said. “Do you want to go check on her or shall I?”

“I’ll go,” I said. The sooner I got out of here, the better.

Fucking Aaron and his big mouth.

He had the audacity to smirk at me as I excused myself from the table and went in search of Sofia.

I found her in the downstairs bathroom, slumped over the toilet bowl.

“Ugh, no. Stay out,” she murmured between retching. “This is gross. I don’t want you to see me like this again.”

“What’s a little puke between friends,” I joked as I sat down behind her and gathered her hair out of her face.

“Cole, you don’t have—”

“Let me look after you.”

“Okay.” She sagged against my body. “I think that’s—”

Sofia scrambled forward and purged some more. I rubbed her back in a soothing motion hoping it might help a little.

“You need anything? Water? A cold compress?”

“N-no, I’m good.” A shudder ran through her, and I ran my hands up and down her arms.

“I’ve got you, Sofe.”

“I’m the worst girlfriend ever.”

“Girlfriend, you say?” My heart rate kicked up a beat.

“I didn’t mean that. It’s the nausea talking.”

“You want to be my girlfriend, Sofia Bennet? Because I can’t think of anything I want more.”

“Cole...”

“Sofe...”

“Fine. I’d like to be your girlfriend.”

“Glad we settled that.” A smug smile tugged at my lips.

“God, I’m never going to live this down, am I?”

I pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck and said, “It can be our little secret.”

“YOUR DAD AGAIN?” Sofia asked me sometime later.

The nausea had passed, and we’d spent the day alternating between studying and kissing. Okay, mostly kissing.

I couldn’t get enough of her. Her laugh, her smile, the way her eyes twinkled every time I caught her looking at me.

I was in deep.

Already thinking beyond tomorrow or the day after, or the week after that. It was crazy, to get so carried away. We both knew the risk. We both knew that the future wasn’t guaranteed, and I wanted to savor every second I spent with her.

“Yeah.” I let out a heavy sigh, rejecting my old man’s call for the fourth time.

“You know, maybe you should just answer. He might go away then.”

“You don’t understand...”

“So make me.” Sofia sat up and crossed her legs. “Why would it be so awful if you told him you don’t want to go to Drexel?”

“I...” I couldn’t. I couldn’t tell her. I’d never told anyone. It was one thing to paint my father as the villain, the overbearing asshole who wouldn’t accept any way except his own. But to reveal the truth...

“Cole, talk to me. Whatever it is, you can trust me.”

I jammed my fingers in my hair and dragged them over my scalp.

“Cole, whatever—”

“He’s a mean bastard, Sofe. I hate the way he treats her,” I blurted out. “And it’s always worse if I disobey him. If I don’t go to Drexel, he’ll cut me off, and then how the hell will I protect her from that?”

My chest heaved with the weight of my words. The truth. The secret I'd kept with me for years.

Years.

“Does he... hurt her?”

“Not physically, but he has his other women on the side. Constantly belittles her and walks all over her.” Disgust churned in my stomach. “But she won't leave him. No matter what he does, she won't leave.”

Sofia's eyes filled with tears. “I don't know what to say.”

“Nothing to say.” My shoulders lifted in a half-shrug. “She made her choice.”

Sofia crawled over the bed and climbed into my lap, wrapping her arm around my neck. “I'm sorry.” She kissed me. “And I hate that your dad is such an asshole, but you can't let him dictate your life forever.”

“But my mom—”

“Have you ever tried to get her to leave him?”

“More times than I can count. But she said they took lifelong vows. Her parents, my grandparents, were deeply religious. Mom hasn't stepped foot in a church for years, but her faith is important to her.”

“And what does her faith say about your father's infidelity and emotional abuse?”

“Sofe, come on. It's not that simple.”

“Yeah.” She let out a defeated sigh. “I know. I just... I hate that you're stuck in the middle of this.”

“She's my mom. I can't just turn my back on her.” I was all she had.

She took my face in her hands and leaned in close, so close I wanted nothing more than to lose myself in her. “I get that, I do. But if the last few weeks has taught me anything, it's that you only get one life, Cole. And it's short. In the grand scheme of things, it's so fucking short.”

A tear slipped free, rolling down her cheek. With the pad of my thumb, I brushed it away, pressing a soft kiss on her lips.

“Do you have any idea how much I like you?”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“Maybe. Is it working?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you should try a little harder.” Her eyes danced with lust as she brushed her lips over mine, teasing me.

“Sofe, fuck, I want—”

My phone started vibrating again, and I dropped my head to Sofia’s shoulder, inhaling a frustrated breath.

She held me tight, letting me soak up her comfort. My plight wasn’t anything compared to what she was going through. But I hadn’t realized how much I needed to talk about this until the words spilled out.

The vibrating stopped, but quickly started back up again.

“For fuck’s sake, he’s relentless.” I reached over and grabbed my cell phone. “Yeah?”

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve called you?”

“It was on silent. My bad.”

Dad made a tsking noise. “We need to go over the arrangements for next week and I want to see your application. Your mom said you still haven’t finalized it.”

“Dad, I—”

“I have a business meeting later, but tomorrow after school I want us to sit down and get things ironed out. I may be able to pull some strings and expedite your application if we send it Tuesday.”

Fuck.

Fuck.

I gently eased Sofia out of my lap and climbed off the bed.

“The playoffs—”

“Are not important, Cole. You need to get that into your head. Your mother and I expect to see you tomorrow after school.”

“Can I bring somebody?”

“Excuse me?”

“To the mixer next weekend? Can I bring somebody?”

“Like a date?”

“Yeah.”

“If it means you’ll be amenable, then yes, by all means bring someone. Tomorrow, Cole. Don’t disappoint me.”

He hung up.

“What’s next weekend?”

“There’s a mixer thing at Drexel with some of Dad’s alumni pals. He thinks it’ll be good to introduce me around.”

“Cole, you can’t be serious. If you go—”

“What choice do I have?”

“Talk to your mom. Make her see that it’s okay to walk away.”

“I’ve tried, more times than I can count. It’s a lost cause.”

Sadness bled into Sofia’s expression. “Aren’t you going to ask me?”

“I shouldn’t pull you into this mess.”

“Yeah, well, I remember telling you the same thing and you didn’t listen either. So ask me, Cole. Ask me to go with you.”

“Will you go with me, Sofe?”

“Yes.” She got up and came over to me, leaning up on her tiptoes to kiss me. “I’ll go with you.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sofia

MY LIFE DIDN'T REVOLVE around school, football games, or hanging out with my friends anymore. It revolved around doctors' appointments, fertility drugs, and being a human pin cushion.

I'd had more blood drawn in the last few weeks than in my entire life, and now I was injecting myself with daily fertility drugs so that the doctors could retrieve my eggs.

I'd only started the process yesterday. Dr. Jeffries wanted to start my TKI therapy as soon as possible, which meant starting the fertility drugs this week. I was only on my second day, but I already wanted it over with.

I'd missed school Monday, which meant more lies to Aaron and my friends. Only Cole knew the truth. Which also meant he was lying to them.

I hated it.

All of it.

But I still wasn't ready to tell them. At least now I was still Sofia in their eyes. Sure, I had ongoing complications from the anemia—or so they thought—but as far as they knew everything was fine. And as long as they thought I was fine, they were fine.

"How are you feeling?" Cole whispered as we sat with our friends at lunch.

It was Wednesday and I was exhausted. The kind of tired that got in your bones and made you feel like a zombie, dragging your ass around.

Mom had asked me to stay home again but I wanted to be here.

I needed it.

"I'm fine," I said around a small yawn.

He arched a brow before nuzzling my neck. “If it’s too much, you should go—”

“Kandon,” Aaron barked. “Some of us are trying to eat lunch.”

“You are such a pain in the ass,” I murmured.

“It’s my right and privilege since Kandon broke bro code.”

“He’s right, you know,” Deacon said. “Everyone knows you don’t go after your best friend’s sister.”

“Dude, he’s literally with my best friend.”

“Sorry, but it’s not the same, Sofe.” Deacon shrugged.

“You guys are so full of shit,” Ashleigh added. “My dad married his best friend’s sister, and they are totally couple goals.”

“I bet Coach Ford gave your dad shit for it though?”

“Yeah, but he got over it.” She flashed Aaron a seething look.

“It’s been a few days,” he huffed. “I need more time.”

A few of the guys snickered, and even Cole’s shoulders shook with silent laughter. I’m glad he saw the funny side of it because I really didn’t, and Aaron’s snide comments were starting to irritate me.

A lot of things were.

Cole ran his hand up and down my spine as if he knew I was pissed.

“You’re vibrating,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s my old man.”

“The application didn’t convince him then?”

Monday evening, Cole had sat down with his mom and dad and finalized his application to Drexel.

I didn’t agree with it, but Cole didn’t seem ready to hear it. He was worried about his mom, and about how his dad might react if he found out Cole had applied to UMich instead.

But it didn't sit right with me that Cole was sacrificing his dream for a woman who by all accounts had chosen her cheating husband over her son for all these years.

Maybe that was an unfair judgment. I didn't know Mrs. Kandon. Had only seen her one or twice in passing. But Saturday, I would have to endure the mixer with her, Mr. Kandon, and Cole.

He was enduring so much for me though, so it was the least I could do. Besides, the truth was, the more time I spent with Cole, the less I wanted to be apart from him.

We were on a path to heartache, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. Because he hadn't shied away from my diagnosis.

No, Cole stood strong beside me at every turn. And even though it was far too soon to be falling so deep, it didn't stop me taking the leap.

"Walk you to class?" he asked, and I twisted to look at him.

"That would be nice."

"Oh, will you two stop with the fucking moon eyes?"

Cole flipped Aaron off as he nudged me forward and followed me up. "We're heading out."

"Yeah, whatever," Aaron grumbled.

"You need to get over yourself," I said.

"She's right, babe." Poppy stroked his arm. "You need to let it go."

I didn't hear the rest of their conversation as Cole pulled me away.

"Is it me or is he acting more like a child as the week goes on?"

"I think subconsciously, he knows something is going on."

"You do?" I asked.

"Yeah, I mean you're twins. Don't you have that freaky sixth sense going on?"

“Never happened to us.” I shrugged. “I think it’s more common in identical twins.”

“Still, he knows you better than anyone, Sofe. He’s probably picking up vibes from you.”

“I am not giving off vibes.”

“You give off vibes when we’re together.” Cole pulled me into the recess underneath the stairwell.

“That’s because you make me want things.”

“What things?” He trailed his mouth along my jaw and down my throat. My skin burned at his touch, heat pooling low in my stomach.

“Cole,” I whispered. “We shouldn’t.”

“Shouldn’t what, babe?” He nipped my jaw. “I’ve barely touched you yet.”

My heart crashed against my chest, lust spiraling through me. I liked all facets of Cole. Strong, silent protector, to star football player, to quiet and considerate friend. But this side of Cole was different. This side of him ignited a fire inside me that threatened to burn me alive.

“Fuck, Sofe. Do you have any idea what you do to me?” Cole pulled away to look at me.

“Such a smooth talker.” I curled my fingers into the hair at the back of his neck and yanked him down to kiss me again.

There was nothing slow or soft about this. Kissing Cole was like—

The room spun and I clutched his arm.

“Sofe?”

“I’m okay,” I said, trying to blink away the episode.

“Come on. Let’s get you to the nurse’s office.”

“No, I’m fine. I promise. It’ll pass.”

“Sofe—”

“No, Cole. If we go to the nurse’s office, they’ll call Mom. And if they call Mom, she’ll want me to go home.”

“Maybe you should be at home.”

“Cole...” I sighed.

“Yeah, okay. But can we at least find you somewhere to sit while I get you some water?”

“Fine.”

Cole looped his arm around me as he guided me down the hall and into an empty classroom. “I’ll be right back.” He dropped a kiss on my head and left.

I hunched over, inhaling a deep breath. In and out. In and out.

At the beginning of the year, I’d never have imagined I’d end up here. About to start cancer treatment, my future hanging in the balance, lying to my brother and my friends.

It was a nightmare come true.

But I had Cole.

And that was something to be thankful for, even if the little voice in my head repeatedly whispered that I was selfish for letting him stay.

He came back with a bottle of water and a candy bar from the vending machine outside the cafeteria.

“Here.”

“Thanks.” I took them, going for the water first.

“How are you feeling now?”

“Okay.”

He grabbed another chair and scooted it toward mine, so we were sitting knee to knee.

“I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine.” I glanced at the floor, unable to look at him.

“Hey, don’t do that.” He cupped my face, drawing me back to him. “Don’t hide from me.”

“It’s only going to get worse, Cole. You know that, right?”

“You won’t scare me off. It doesn’t matter what you say, Sofe. You’re stuck with me.”

“Why?” I breathed.

“Because this is real, and I think we owe it to ourselves to see where it goes.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t come to the mixer. I don’t want to embarrass—”

“You could never.” He leaned forward, his hand sliding around to cup the back of my neck. “If you get sick or aren’t feeling it, we’ll leave. Simple.”

“Your dad won’t like that.”

“Yeah, well, he can get fucked. I’ve been thinking about what you said...”

“You have?”

“I won’t do it. I won’t go to Drexel and play the good little lap dog. I’ll only end up hating him more than I do now. And I won’t be there for Mom anyway.”

“You should talk to her.”

“Yeah. It’s weird because I’ve always known my father was a piece of shit. But the way Mom used to excuse his behavior, I thought it was normal. *He’s working too hard, he’s stressed about a case, he finds it hard to show his emotion...* She always had an excuse. And I went along with it because that’s what kids do.

“Jude asked me to play with the band again.”

“What?”

“Yeah, they got invited to play at Livewire but still need a second guitarist. It could be a big deal...”

“What did you tell him?”

“That I can’t.” He shrugged, but I saw the flash of longing in his eyes.

“Cole, you should do it. If it’ll bring you happiness, you should do it.”

“Maybe.”

He got that far away look as if he could see his dreams in the distance but didn’t know how to reach them.

But then his eyes snapped to mine, filled with a strange kind of wonder. “You.” He laid his palm on my cheek. “You, Sofe. You make me happy.”

He leaned in, pressing the lightest kiss to my lips. A shiver ran down my spine, igniting a wildfire in my chest. It still took my breath away at how viscerally his touch affected me.

I’d never had that before.

That spark.

That connection.

I’d always wondered about Cole. About the heated stares we’d sometimes shared, the lingering glances. But he’d never crossed that line before, and I wasn’t going to chase a guy who would always be my brother’s best friend above all else.

But everything was different now.

Life was too short.

I anchored my arms around his neck and kissed him harder, pouring everything I felt into every slide of my lips and flick of my tongue.

I was terrified about what the future held. But Cole made it easier. He made me want to believe it would all be okay.

Because we deserved this, didn’t we?

We deserved our happy ending.

“HEY, SWEETHEART,” Dad said when I entered the kitchen. “How are you— Sofia, what’s wrong?”

“It’s just been a long day.”

“You know, we can talk to Principal Kiln about letting you have some time off. He understands—”

“Dad! It’s bad enough that he knows at all.” Mom had insisted we tell him.

“We’re worried about you, Sofia.” He stood and came toward me, wrapping me up in his strong arms.

“I’m trying, Dad. I’m really trying, but I’m scared, I’m so freaking scared.” Curling my hands into his shirt I buried my face there.

“Shh, sweetheart. I’m right here, I’m right here.”

He didn’t say anything, didn’t offer me any words of encouragement or empty promises. He simply held me and let me break.

My father, the man who had taught me what love looked like every single day I watched him dote on my mom. It was in every single smile they shared, the laughter they created, the way they still acted like lovesick teenagers.

My parents were the epitome of endgame, and of course, it was what I hoped to find one day. But I hadn’t built my hopes and dreams around it because a love like theirs was rare. Once in a lifetime.

“I love you, Dad.” I peeked up at him, wiping the tears away with the back of my hand.

“Oh, sweetheart, I love you too. So much. And I wish I could fix this for you, Sofia. I wish I could take your place.” He brushed my bangs out of my eyes. “But I have watched you grow into a strong, confident young woman, and you’ve got this, sweetheart. You can do this.”

I gave him a weak smile. “I hope so, Dad. I really hope so.”

“Dr. Peters said Dr. Jeffries is one of the best in his field. You’re in good hands, sweetheart.” He kissed my head. “And I’ll always, always, be here for you.”

We stood like that for a few more minutes before he said, “So Cole Kandon, huh? I never saw that coming.”

“Really, Dad?” A small laugh bubbled up inside me.

“What?” He shrugged. “He’s just so... and you’re so...”

“Actually, he’s pretty great.”

“Oh yeah? So this thing between you... it could get serious?”

“I don’t know, maybe.”

“Oh, you like him, don’t you? My little girl is in love.”

“Dad!” I swatted his chest. “That’s not—”

“As long as he treats you right and makes you happy then that’s all I can ask for.”

“He does, Dad.” My lips curved.

He really, really does.

Aaron appeared in the door. “Hey, what’s going on?”

“Nothing, Son. Just having a little heart to heart with your sister.” He smiled, a picture of calm and composure. But Aaron didn’t look convinced.

“Right,” he said, glancing at me and back again. “Well, it’s only a flying visit. I need to get changed and then I’m taking Poppy out. You and Cole want to come?”

“Seriously?”

“Well, yeah. Wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t mean it.” He moved around us to get to the refrigerator.

“Uh, I can ask him if you want.”

“Sure, let me know. I’m leaving in about thirty.”

Aaron strolled out of the room without a second glance.

“That was weird, right?” I asked Dad.

“I think that was his way of telling you he’s good with you dating his best friend.”

“Yeah.” I smiled. “I guess it was.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Cole

“PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS?” Mom asked, pushing a plate of freshly baked cookies toward me.

“Thanks, these smell great.”

“And your thoughts? You’ve been checked out for the last ten minutes.”

“We need to talk, Mom,” I said.

“This is about Drexel?”

“How did you know?”

“Because despite what you might think, Cole, I pay attention. And because your father hasn’t stopped going on about the fact you only just submitted your application.”

“I don’t want Drexel, Mom. I never did. That’s Dad’s dream, not mine.”

Concern flitted across her expression. “You know how he feels about it, though, sweetheart. He won’t pay your tuition if you don’t attend Drexel.”

“Then I’ll get a scholarship or apply for financial aid. Hell, I’ll get a job. I’ll do anything, Mom.”

“You’ve really given this some thought?”

“Yes... no, maybe. I don’t know. I’d always resigned myself to attending Drexel, but always knew that if I wanted to protect—” I stopped myself. But it was too late. Mom’s expression guttered as she pieced together what I’d been about to say.

“Cole, sweetheart, I have never wanted or expected you to make such a big decision because of me. That’s not—”

“Easy for you to say, Mom. You don’t know what it’s like, watching the way he treats you. His total disregard for your feelings.”

“Your father is a complicated man, but he’s a good man. He provides for us; he takes care of us.”

“Mom, please, don’t do that. Don’t sit there and defend him.”

“We made vows, Cole.” She gave me a small, weak smile. And I hated it. I hated that she didn’t want more for herself—for me. “For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until parted by death. Vows I intend to live by.”

“Mom, come on. He isn’t a—”

“Enough. I love you, sweetheart.” She reached for my hand, taking it in hers. “I love you so much. But you can’t ask me to break my faith because your father can be a little difficult now and again.”

Difficult? That was the understatement of the fucking century.

“He’ll cut me off if I tell him I’m not going to Drexel.”

She nodded. “He will.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“Oh, sweetheart. Of course I’m not okay with it. There’s nothing more I would love than for your father to be a compromising man. But God made him in his image, and we must accept him for who he is.”

Frustration saturated me. It was always the same with her. Excusing his behavior. Rationalizing his actions.

I understood that my mom’s faith guided her perceptions and experience of the world. But there was nothing worse than listening to her talk him up.

There was nothing redeeming about Curtis Kandon. Not a damn thing. And if it wasn’t for mom, I would have walked out of his life a long time ago and never looked back.

“When will you tell him?”

Fuck.

Her words stung.

Because it meant she'd already made her choice—and it wasn't me.

It never was.

But Sofia was right, I deserved better. I deserved to go after my dreams.

“After the weekend.”

If I told him before the mixer, he would see that as a serious attempt to undermine and embarrass him to his Drexel alumni friends. For as much as I didn't want to attend, there would be more opportunity for damage control if we went to the mixer than if we didn't.

At least, I hoped so.

Because although I wanted to shake some sense into her, it would always be second nature to want to protect my mom.

Even if she was a lost cause.

I SPOTTED SOFIA, Aaron, and Poppy over by the counter.

“Dude, you're late.”

“It's a long story. But I'm here now.” I slung my arm around Sofia's shoulder. “What are we doing then?”

“Figured I'd kick your ass at bowling and then we'd eat.”

“Bring it on.”

Aaron and Poppy walked off, leaving me alone with Sofia.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“Exactly as I thought it would. She chose him.”

“I'm sorry.”

I shrugged. “It is what it is. At least I know now. Not sure it makes it any easier, but you were right, I can't waste my life

trying to make him happy, when he doesn't care for one second if me or Mom are happy."

"So does that mean we don't have to attend the mixer thing?"

"I, uh, actually, I told Mom we'd still go. It'll only make things worse if I pull out and embarrass him in front of his alumni friends."

"I've never really met the man and I already hate him."

"I'm sorry to drag you into this." I nuzzled her neck, kissing the soft skin there.

"Hmm," she whispered. "Maybe we should have stayed in."

Sofia's hand slid into my hair and my heart crashed against my chest. I loved her like this. As desperate as I was for the intimacy, the connection.

"There is one perk of attending the mixer."

"Oh yeah?" She drew back to look at me.

"My dad booked some posh hotel in Rittenhouse Square. Do you think your parents will let you stay over?"

Her eyes darkened with lust. "Are you going to be on your best behavior and keep your hands to yourself?"

"Do you want me to keep my hands to myself?" I cocked a brow and she smiled.

"I'll ask them. I'm sure it'll be okay. I'll tell them we're getting a room with two beds."

"Like hell we are." I lowered my mouth to her ear. "I want you naked and in my bed."

"Cole..."

"Tell me you don't want that too."

"You know I do."

"So what's—"

“Yo, asshole,” Aaron’s voice pierced the air. “Are you going to suck face with my sister all night or come bowl?”

“Jesus, he’s a pain in my ass,” I murmured. “Come on. We should probably go over before he makes a scene.”

“This is Aaron we’re talking about.” She chuckled. “He always makes a scene.”

We joined them at our lane and Aaron glowered. “Took you long enough.”

“Babe. You promised.”

“Yeah, I know. But then I see them together all... kissy kissy, and it icks me out.”

“We promise to tone down the PDA. Happy?” Sofia said.

“Speak for yourself.” I grabbed her by the waist and pulled her into me, dropping my chin to her shoulder. “I need Sofekisses. I need lots and lots of them.” I started smothering her cheek in them. “They’re like my life source.”

Poppy clapped a hand over her mouth, trying not to laugh while Aaron glared at me.

“You’re not funny, Kandon.”

“I think I’m pretty damn hilarious actually. Are we bowling or what?”

“Yeah,” he said. “But it’s your funeral.”

Sofia flinched and I gave her an apologetic smile.

Aaron didn’t know the truth so I couldn’t blame him for his slip of the tongue. And I loved the guy, I did, but he was really testing my last nerve.

We both chose our bowling balls and stalked closer to the lane. “You know, I get it. You’re pissed at me. I can take it. But would it really hurt you to at least pretend to be happy for us, for Sofia’s sake?”

He glanced back at the girls and let out a heavy sigh. “I’m being a dick, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, you are. And I get it,” I said. “You’re pissed at me for going after her. But it wasn’t like we planned it. Sometimes things just happen.”

And I was so fucking happy they had. Even if I was still lying to him—still keeping him in the dark about Sofia.

But that was her choice. Her decision. I had to respect that. If we were going to work, I had to trust that she knew what she was doing.

Still felt like crap though, lying to my best friend. And I didn’t doubt shit would hit the fan when he discovered the truth.

“What are you two whispering about?”

The girls joined us and Poppy hugged Aaron from behind.

“Just making a little wager with Cole,” he said. I gawked at him, and he added, “I beat his ass, he pays for dinner.”

“We didn’t agree to that.”

“We did now.” He chuckled, stepping up to the line. “Prepare to lose, asshole.”

But I looked down at Sofia and smiled even though my stomach knotted.

Losing the game, I could live with. But losing Sofia, the girl who was quickly becoming everything to me?

I wouldn’t survive that.

“COLE, GOD...” Sofia dug her fingers into my hair as I kissed my way down her throat, squeezing her ass in my hands.

We’d had fun tonight, hanging out with Aaron and Poppy. He’d sulked when I beat his ass at bowling, but like a good sport, he picked up the check for dinner. We’d parted ways after that. Aaron was heading to the Fords’ for... well, we all knew what he was going for.

And I'd offered to give Sofia a ride home.

Except, we hadn't made it home.

Instead, I'd driven us down to the lake because neither of us were ready to say good night.

"I love kissing you," I murmured, licking a path up to her jaw and fixing my mouth over hers.

"Me too," she breathed, tangling her tongue with mine.

I dragged Sofia's body closer, thrusting against her gently. It was impossible not to. She was so fucking soft in my hands, grinding against my jean-clad dick like she couldn't get enough.

"Touch me," she moaned. "I need you to touch me."

"Or use me." I touched my head to hers.

"W-what?"

"Use me to get off. Ride me. You feel so fucking good like this, Sofe."

She rolled her hips, hitching closer, erasing every sliver of space between us. A gasp slipped from her lips as she found a rhythm.

Fuck. I wasn't even inside her, and I already knew she'd ruined me for any other girl.

Not that I wanted another girl. I only wanted her.

Tonight. Tomorrow.

Always.

The word flashed in my mind as pleasure barreled down my spine. This wasn't supposed to be about me; it was supposed to be about her. But she felt too fucking good, circling her hips in just the right way.

"Jesus, Sofe. You're going to make me come and you haven't even touched me."

"Should I stop?" she panted, her movements growing jerkier.

“No, fuck no. Keep going.” I grabbed the back of her neck and kissed her. Hard and deep. Thrusting my tongue into her mouth.

Her body began to quiver, my heart in overdrive as the familiar tingle started at the bottom of my spine.

“Shit,” I breathed, pressing my head to hers. “You going to come for me, beautiful?”

“Yes, yes... Cole, ah...”

Her thighs clamped together, the ripples of her pussy enough to send me over the edge.

“Fuck, fuuuuck.”

I came. I came in my fucking pants while making out with my girl in my car.

But I didn't care because the fact she wanted to do this, that she wanted to trust me with this, was more than I could have ever hoped for.

“I can't believe we just did that.” Sofia gave me a shy smile and I pushed her bangs out of her eyes.

“You're amazing.” I grinned, kissing her.

“I get it now,” she whispered.

“Get what?”

“Oh, nothing.” Her cheeks pinked. “Just something Poppy said.”

“And what did Poppy say?”

“Nothing.” A shy smirk tugged at her mouth.

“Fine.” I kissed her. “Keep your secrets. I should probably get you home before your dad sends a search party.”

“He's all talk.” Sofia clambered back over to the passenger seat and plopped down with a soft sigh.

“Still, not sure I want to take my chances. Are you feeling nervous about the procedure?”

“I'm trying not to think about it.”

“Do you... want me to come with you?”

“Oh no, I wouldn't expect you to do that.”

“Hey.” I took her hand across the center console. “I want to be there. As much or as little as you need me.”

“You'd really come with me?”

“Of course I would.”

Her expression fell. “What would we tell Aaron?”

“Shit, yeah. I guess that could be a problem.”

“I'll be okay. Mom said she can take some time off work. So I won't be alone. But thank you. It means a lot that you'd want to come with me.”

“Sofia,” I chuckled. “I'm in this thing. All in.”

“Yeah.” She grinned over at me. “I'm starting to get that.”

BY THE TIME the mixer rolled around, I was starting to think that I should have told my father before now that I wasn't going to be attending Drexel.

But it was too late now.

At least, he'd agreed to let me and Sofia drive up separately.

We arrived at the hotel a little after five. I pulled into the underground parking lot and found a spot.

“At least we don't have to be there until seven thirty,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“You can still pull out, Cole. We can turn around right now and go back to Rixon and go hang out with everyone in the man cave.”

“You'd do it too, wouldn't you?”

She nodded. “I don't like seeing you so uncomfortable.”

“It’s one night. I’ll survive. I’m just sorry you have to experience Curtis Kandon in all his asshole glory.”

“I’ll survive,” she echoed my words back at me. “Shall we?”

A faint blush traced her cheeks, and I wondered if she was thinking the same thing as me. That even if the mixer went to shit at least we could escape to our room together.

I climbed out of the car and went around to open her door. Sofia climbed out and took my breath away all over again.

“What?” She smiled.

“You look beautiful.”

“So you keep saying.”

“And I’ll keep saying it.” I tucked her bangs behind her ear. “Until you believe it.”

“Wait until you see my dress for the mixer.”

And now that was all I could think about.

Sofia all dressed up for me.

Jesus, I was so screwed.

I got our bags and we headed for the elevator. My cell phone vibrated with a text from my old man.

“They’re waiting in the lobby,” I said. “And I apologize in advance for anything he says that’s out of line.”

“I think I can handle your father. I grew up around my dad, Jason Ford, and Cameron Chase,” she scoffed, right as the doors whooshed open. “Oooh, fancy.”

We stepped into a grand foyer. The Old Royal was exactly the type of place I expected my father to make reservations at. Gaudy, expensive, and full of assholes with more money than sense.

“Come on, they’re over there,” I said, spotting Mom and we walked over to them.

“Cole.” She beamed. “We were starting to worry.”

“We’re barely fifteen minutes late, Mom.” I kissed her cheek.

“Oh, and you must be Sofia. My, how you’ve grown into a beautiful young lady. It’s lovely to officially meet you.”

“Hi, Mrs. Kandon, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Please, call me Cecilia.”

“Where’s Da—”

“Cole.” His voice made my stomach sink.

“Dad,” I said, turning slowly to greet him.

“And this must be your friend.” He pinned Sofia with a cool look.

“Hi, Mr. Kandon, it’s really nice to meet you.”

The air crackled between them as I waited for my father to say something, anything.

After another painful beat, he pursed his lips and said, “Sophie, was it?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sofia

SOPHIE.

He called me Sophie.

Oh God. I wanted the ground to open and swallow me whole. But I shook off the blatant dismissal and smiled.

“Actually, it’s Sofia. But it’s an easy mistake to make.”

Unless you were a successful attorney who regularly had to learn the minute details of a legal case inside out.

“Why don’t we get checked in?” Mrs. Kandon said, breaking the awkward tension.

Cole looked murderous, silently seething next to me. I grabbed his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

Mr. Kandon checked us in and produced a keycard for Cole. “You’re on the fourteenth floor in a two-bed suite. I trust that will suffice?”

“It’s fine, Dad.” Cole snatched it from his father’s hand. “We’ll meet you down here at seven.”

He all but pulled me toward the elevator, not sparing his parents a backward glance.

“He seems... pleasant,” I muttered as we stepped inside. Cole swiped the keycard across the pad and hit the button we needed. “You’re angry,” I said.

“I’m fucking livid, Sofe. He knew exactly what he was doing back there. I’m so sorry. Maybe this was a bad idea.” He let out a frustrated huff.

“Cole, look at me.” I palmed his cheek. “I can handle your father.”

“Promise me, if he says anything offensive, rude, or downright inappropriate you’ll tell me. No, in fact don’t let yourself be cornered by him.”

A nervous chuckle bubbled out of me. “He’s just one man.”

“Yeah, with no fucking soul.”

The elevator doors whooshed open, and we made our way down the hall toward our room. When Cole pushed the door open, I slipped past him and walked into the suite.

“Fancy.”

“Seriously?” Cole’s brow lifted, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Your family owns a penthouse suite in New York. Don’t try and act like this is something.”

“What?” I shrugged. “I was being polite. Besides, you know none of that stuff matters to me, right?”

So we had money. I didn’t flaunt it or abuse it or treat people differently because of it.

“That’s because you’re pretty damn awesome.” Cole wrapped his arms around me from behind and tugged me close. “Want to check out the bedroom?”

My eyes flicked to the door, a streak of lust going through me.

“Come on.” He nudged me forward until we were inside the impressive bedroom.

Sure enough it was two beds, but it was two queens.

“Which one do you want?” I asked, pressing my lips together in a small smile.

“Hmm, let me think.” Cole nipped my earlobe. “I think I’ll take whichever one you’re sleeping in.”

“Sounds good to me.” I turned in his arms and wrapped my arms around his shoulders.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi.”

“I know it’s selfish, but I’m so glad you’re here.” A flash of vulnerability passed over his face.

“Look on the bright side. If the mixer is awful and you need an immediate escape plan, I can pretend to faint, and we can make a break for it.”

“Sofe, that’s not funny.”

“Joke. I was joking.” My stomach dipped.

Cole buried his hand in my hair and touched his head to mine. “Nothing about your illness will ever be a joke to me.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you. Sometimes, when I’m with you and things are so good, it’s easy to forget my situation.”

“All I need is you by my side tonight. That’s good enough for me.” He kissed my brow. “Do you mind if I take a quick shower and freshen up?”

“Of course not. I want to call Mom and let her know we got here safely anyway.”

“I’ll be back.” He kissed me again before grabbing his bag and heading into the adjoining bathroom.

I climbed up onto the bed and dug my cell phone out of my pocket, hardly surprised to find texts from Ashleigh and Poppy.

Poppy: What’s the hotel like? Is it a one-bed scenario? I hope you packed some pretty lingerie.

Ashleigh: So what was his dad like?

I QUICKLY TEXTED them back and then called Mom.

“Baby, you’re there?”

“Yeah, got here not long ago.”

“And...” There was a hint of concern in her voice. My parents had been hesitant to let me stay overnight with Cole, but I’d broken Dad down once I gave him my puppy dog eyes. Besides, how could they say no to me given everything that was happening?

“It’s fine, Mom. His mom seems nice. She remembered me. His dad is... a bit of an ass.”

“Curtis Kandon’s reputation precedes him, so I’m not surprised.”

“He called me Sophie, on purpose.”

She scoffed. “Well, I hope you corrected him.”

“Of course.”

“Atta girl. Is your room nice?”

“It is.”

“And the sleeping situation?”

“Mom!”

“What, sweetheart? I just want to make sure you’re being safe.”

“We’re not... I mean... okay, I’m going to hang up now. Love you, bye.” I hung up and shook my head.

Of course she went there.

It was the mother *and* the school guidance counselor in her.

I was hardly surprised when a text came straight through.

Mom: Sorry! You know I can’t help it. To me, you’re still my little girl. Always will be. I love you, Sofia. I hope you both enjoy your night... but not TOO much. Love you. Mom. xo

I COULDN’T HELP but smile. She really was one of a kind, and I loved her with all my heart.

While I waited for Cole, I grabbed my bag and unpacked my outfit for the evening. I’d just finished hanging it up, when the bathroom door opened, and Cole appeared.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Yup. Just my mom pulling her usual crap.”

“She only cares about you.”

“I know. You look... nice.” My throat went dry. He had changed into black dress pants and a crisp white shirt.

“Yeah, well, gotta look the part.”

Sliding off the bed, I went to him, gently knocking his hands away so I could finish buttoning his shirt. “I like it.”

“I like you.”

A wave of dizziness hit me, and my eyelids fluttered as I inhaled a sharp breath.

“Sofe?”

I waited for it to pass, then opened my eyes, smiling at him. “I’m fine.”

“You’re sure?” Concern etched into his expression.

“Yeah. I’ll go get washed up and changed.” I went to move around him, but his hand went to my hip.

“Wait.”

“Wha—”

Cole’s mouth crashed down on mine. His kiss hungry and deep, our tongues sliding together. He pulled me closer, until the soft curves of my body met the hard lines of his. I curled my fingers into the hair at the back of his neck, loving how the strands felt against my skin, needing to be closer.

“I want you, Sofe. I want you so fucking much,” he breathed.

We kissed and kissed and kissed some more.

It was perfect. *He* was perfect.

Guilt clanged through me. I tried to acknowledge it, but it was impossible.

“Sofe?” Cole pulled away, because of course he sensed it.

“I should get ready.” I pecked his cheek. “I won’t be long.”

I grabbed my bag and hurried into the bathroom before he could try to stop me.

“YOU’RE STARING AGAIN,” I teased as we followed Cole’s parents out of the car we’d taken to the university campus.

“Because you look so fucking beautiful.”

“It’s just a dress, Cole.”

The black mid-length dress hugged my curves like a second skin. It had a modest neckline, but dipped lower in the back, revealing the expanse of my spine and shoulder blades. Cole hadn’t stopped touching me there on the ride over, brushing my skin as if he couldn’t believe I was real.

Mrs. Kandon had complimented me on my outfit, but Mr. Kandon had barely looked twice at me.

Part of me wondered if he sensed Cole’s looming betrayal, or whether he simply didn’t appreciate me being here. It was clear to anyone that his son was smitten with me. He was attentive and never veered far from my side. I was unused to such attention, but it was Cole, so it only made my heart soar.

He brushed his fingers down my spine again, resting his hand on the small of my back. “It is not just a dress, Sofe,” he whispered, dipping his head toward me. “It is temptation and sin and a whole heap of very dirty thoughts.”

His honest words sucker punched me, stealing my breath. He simply smirked as we entered the building to the sound of muted chatter.

“Curtis Kandon,” a deep voice said. “Now there’s a face I haven’t seen in too long.”

A tall, balding man approached us, a glass of whisky in his hand.

“Harry, it’s good to see you.”

“It’s about time you showed up to one of these things. Cecelia, you’re as beautiful as always.”

Curtis bristled at the man’s compliment of his wife, which seemed ironic given his inability to stay faithful to her.

“It’s good to see you again, Harry.”

Cole’s mom was a beautiful woman. Curly brown hair framed her face. She had big hazel eyes, and full lips. But there was something behind her smile. A shadow.

“And you must be Cole,” Harry said, turning his attention on us. “I’ve heard a lot about you, son. And if you’re anything like your old man, I’m sure Drexel will be lucky to have you.”

“Thank you,” Cole murmured, and I didn’t miss the way Curtis narrowed his eyes at his son.

“And who’s this lovely young lady?” Harry leered at me, his gaze like a thousand spiders crawling over my skin.

“This is my girlfriend, Sofia.”

Curtis’s eyes drilled into the side of my head. Obviously, Cole hadn’t told him or Cecilia that little nugget of information yet.

“And will she be coming to Drexel next fall with you?”

“Actually, no. I’ve applied to Columbia,” I said with my head held high.

“Shame.” Harry dismissed me, turning his back to us to ask Cole’s parents about something.

“What a charmer,” I murmured under my breath, and Cole chuckled. But I saw the flicker of anger in his eyes.

A server wandered past with a tray of champagne, so I plucked two glasses off it and handed one to Cole. “You look like you could use this.”

We edged away from his parents and Harry and found a quiet spot by the buffet table.

“How long do you think we have to stay?” he asked me.

“At least until they’ve done the welcome speech.”

“I shouldn’t have gone through with this. It’s horrible.”

“Oh, I don’t know. We have an amazing suite all to ourselves.”

“You’re right. The suite is pretty amazing.” He grinned and my stomach fluttered. “One hour tops and then we leave. Deal?”

As if I needed any coercion.

“Deal.”

“You hadn’t told them,” I said, and Cole stared blankly at me. “Your parents. You hadn’t told them I was...”

“My girlfriend?”

The words made my stomach dance.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t really tell them anything.” He shrugged. “Sometimes I talk to my mom, but not a lot. But me and my dad? Yeah, that ship sailed a long time ago.”

“He doesn’t like me, does he?” A sad smile graced my lips.

“Sofe.” He slid his hand along my neck. “He doesn’t even know you. It’s not you, I promise. It’s what you represent.”

“How long until we can get out of here again?” I asked, half-teasing, half-serious. This so wasn’t my scene, and I was desperate to be alone with him.

“As soon as the welcome speech is over. That’s what you said and I’m holding you to it. Not staying a second longer.”

Heat radiated from Cole’s body. He looked so freaking gorgeous tonight. It would be easy for him to fit into this world. They looked similar, Cole and his dad. The same thick dark hair and strong features. But that was where the similarities ended.

Curtis was clearly a control freak. He liked order and composure and got off on belittling people. Cole was a creative, free spirit. He played guitar *and* football but didn’t

take himself too seriously. As if that wasn't enough, he was good at both of them. Really good. His soul was a beacon of light. Not a pit of darkness.

“Cole, Son,” Mr. Kandon appeared, not even acknowledging me. It stung. Even though I knew the kind of man he was, part of me still wanted his approval, his blessing.

“Dad.”

“I want to introduce you around so you can put some names to faces. Shall we?”

“Sure, let me just get rid of our glasses,” Cole said.

“Actually, I thought your friend might like to keep your mother company.”

Friend. My stomach sank.

“Dad, I don't think that's—”

“It's fine, go,” I said. “I'll be okay.”

“Sofe—”

“Just hurry back.” I leaned in and kissed his cheek. When I pulled away, Mr. Kandon was watching me with a strange look.

“Very well. Shall we?”

Cole hesitated and I blurted, “Go.” The sooner he placated his father, the sooner we could get out of here.

They walked off, disappearing into the sea of bodies, and I drank the remainder of my champagne and went to find Mrs. Kandon.

I found her over by a shaker table, minding her own business. She spotted me and smiled.

“Sofia, there you are.”

“Hi, Mrs. Kan—”

“Oh, sweetheart. Please, call me Cecelia.” I nodded and she added, “I never did much like these things.”

“How long have you and Mr. Kandon been married?”

“We married right out of college.” She smiled wistfully, searching the room for her husband and son. When she found them talking with a group of men, her breath hitched. But I couldn’t quite get a read on whether it was love or regret, or something else entirely etched into her expression.

“All Curtis ever wanted was Cole to follow in his footsteps.”

“Surely a father should support his son whatever path he chooses to take in life,” I said quietly.

Another faint smile traced her mouth. “You would think so. But Curtis is, well, he’s very old-fashioned, Sofia. Gets that from his father.”

“Let me guess, also an attorney?”

“He was, yes. And he was Curtis’s biggest supporter... and his biggest critic. People show love in many, many ways, Sofia. And Curtis learned how to love from a cold, impenetrable man. Oh, they’re about to do the welcome speech.” She flicked her head to the podium in the far corner of the room.

Cole found my eye across the room and smiled, and everything else faded. It hit me then, like a wrecking ball crashing into me without warning. I was falling in love with him. I didn’t need anyone to tell me why my heart raced, or my stomach fluttered whenever he looked at me.

It wasn’t supposed to happen, and yet, here we were. Falling hopelessly, recklessly in love.

I came over hot all of a sudden, panic coursing through my veins, igniting a wildfire inside me.

“Sofia, sweetheart, are you okay? You look a little—”

“I think I’m going to get some water.” I spun around and headed toward the small bar set up on the other side of the room. The edges of my vision blurred as I weaved my way through the small crowd.

“Excuse me,” someone huffed as I barged past them.

“S-sorry.” I kept my head down, embarrassment welling inside me. This couldn’t be happening, not here. Not now, in front of all these people.

“Miss, are you okay?” another voice said.

“I... I’m...” The room spun as I blindly reached out for something to steady me, but it was too late. The walls closed in around me, squeezing the air right out of my lungs.

“Cole,” his name left my lips on a pained whisper.

“She’s going to—,” someone said.

“Oh my God, she’s—”

“Sofia,” a voice yelled, but it was too late. The pull of darkness was too strong, and I was powerless against its lure.

My body crumpled against the floor.

And everything went black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Cole

A COMMOTION OVER by the bar caught my attention, a trickle of unease sliding down my spine.

Sofia was fighting her way through the crowd, panic etched onto her expression.

No.

Fuck no.

Without thinking, I moved toward her. “Sofia,” I called, but it was too late.

Her eyes fluttered as she went down, hitting the floor with a resounding thud.

“Shit, Sofia.” I barged through the bodies and dropped to my knees. “Back up, give her some space.” Shucking out of my jacket, I balled it up and tucked it underneath her head.

“Cole— oh my gosh, what happened?” Mom appeared.

“She fainted.”

At least, I hoped that’s all it was.

“Soe,” I whispered, gently stroking her cheek.

“Oh, Curtis. She fainted,” Mom cried, clutching Dad’s arm as he glowered down at me.

Just what I didn’t need—more questions.

He was already no doubt pissed that I’d introduced Sofia as my girlfriend.

I should never have come tonight, and I definitely shouldn’t have brought Sofia. But I didn’t want things to blow up yet, not when we’d finally confessed how we felt to each other.

Sofia was mine.

My girl.

I didn't want anything to jeopardize that. Least of all, my father.

She began to murmur, her eyelids flickering.

"Sofe," I whispered again.

"Do we need to call an ambulance?" somebody asked.

"The girl fainted," Dad said stiffly. "She'll be fine."

Irritation rolled through me.

"Come on," another voice said. "Let's give them some privacy."

People began to move to the other side of the room, leaving me alone with Mom, Dad, and a handful of waitstaff.

"Are you sure we shouldn't call for an ambulance?" one of them said.

"N-no," Sofia murmured, reaching for me.

I threaded our fingers together, and said, "I'm right here. Can you sit?" I moved behind her and helped her up a little so that she could lean on me.

"W-what happened?"

"You fainted." My chest squeezed.

"How embarrassing."

"You can say that again."

"Curtis," Mom gasped. "The poor girl couldn't help it."

"She's probably on one of those juice diets."

"Dad." I shot him an incredulous look. "Sofia is—"

She grabbed my arm, shaking her head a little.

"She's anemic." The half-truth rolled off my tongue. I had to tell him something. The idea that he thought Sofia was some foolish girl who cared more about her looks than her health didn't sit right with me. Especially when the truth was so much worse.

He made some dismissive noise in the back of his throat, and said, “I’ll be over there talking to Harry if you need me.”

The second he was gone, Mom let out a small sigh. “You’ll have to excuse Curtis’s behavior, Sofia. He’s under a lot of pressure.”

It was no excuse for common decency, but I didn’t argue. There was no point. She would only take his side, try to defend his shitty attitude. Like she always did.

Someone handed me a bottle of water and I offered it to Sofia.

“Do you think you can stand?” I asked her.

“I-I think so. Cole.” Panic glittered in her eyes. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t—”

“Stop.” I leaned in, touching my head to hers. “You’re more important than the stupid mixer, Sofe. Let me call an Uber to take us back to our room.”

“Yes, okay.”

“Do you want me to text your parents?”

“No, don’t do that. They’ll only worry. When we get back to the hotel, I’ll call them. I promise.”

“Okay. I’ll arrange the Uber.” I dug my cell phone out of my pocket and opened the app.

“You’re leaving?” Mom asked.

“Yes. I want to get Sofia out of here.”

“Of course, I just... your father—”

“He can go to hell for all I care. Sofia needs me and I won’t leave her.”

“Cole,” Sofia said, clutching my arm.

“We’re leaving. End of discussion.”

“Okay, I’ll explain things to him.”

“You do that, Mom.” I let out a frustrated breath, turning my attention to the girl in my arms. “Ready to get out of

here?”

“Yes.” She stared up at me with big, scared eyes, and it gutted me.

It splintered my chest that she somehow felt guilty about what had happened or worried about what my old man might say.

He could go fuck himself for all I cared.

I’d never had a reason beyond my own future to fight him on things before. But now I had Sofia. I had our future. A future I really fucking wanted.

If he kept to his word and cut me off, then I’d find a way to live with it. And if Mom decided to take his side, then I’d find a way to live with that too.

I was done being his puppet, and I was done trying to protect my mom when it was clear she had no intentions of ever walking away from him.

“Come on.” I curved my arm around Sofia’s waist, guiding her toward the exit.

“Cole,” my father called after me, disapproval lacing his tone. But I didn’t look back.

I couldn’t.

Because all I could think about was the girl pressed into my side.

The girl that had changed everything.

The girl that I wanted more than anything.

Fuck.

I was so screwed.

Only, I couldn’t find it in myself to care.

“YOU OKAY?” I asked Sofia as we entered the elevator at the hotel.

The ride back here had been quiet, Sofia lost to her own thoughts. No doubt with the reality of everything.

“Yeah.” She barely looked at me and I wanted to give her space, I did.

But I couldn’t stand it. I couldn’t bear that she felt the need to turn away from me.

“Sofe.” I moved closer to her, and her eyes snapped to mine as she stepped back. “Don’t do that,” I implored. “Don’t run from me.”

“I’m not. But I... I embarrassed you. Your dad—”

“Is not important. You are.” I cupped her face, brushing my thumb down her cheek. “I only care about you.”

“He hates me. Now, he’ll probably—”

“Stop.” I crowded her against the chrome rail, pressing my other hand against the glass mirror beside her head. “The only thing I care about right now, is you.”

“Cole.” Her eyes fluttered as she inhaled a thin, shaky breath.

“Sofia, I—”

The elevator came to a stop, the doors whooshing open behind me. I let out a heavy sigh, the words on the tip of my tongue gone.

“We should get inside,” she said, slipping out from between me and the wall.

“Yeah.” My jaw clenched. She was running. And I got it, I did. But didn’t she understand that she didn’t have to run from me?

I was in—all in.

Only, she still didn’t believe me.

Or she was still trying to protect me.

Well, fuck that.

When you cared about somebody—when you *loved* someone—you stood at their side. Strong and steady, you were

their shoulder to cry on. The constant little voice of encouragement. You were the pillar of unwavering support at their back.

Sofia waited at the door since I had the keycard. I pulled it out of my wallet, and leaned into her, slipping my arm around her waist to get to the magnetic pad.

“I’m here, Sofe. And I’m not going anywhere,” I whispered, feeling a shudder roll through her.

The door clicked open, the tension between us snapping as she stepped inside. I followed, emptying my pockets of my wallet and cell phone and dropping them on the sideboard.

“Do you need anything?”

It was a simple question, but when she turned and looked at me, it became loaded.

Sofia’s eyes flashed with unexpected heat. “I…”

“What?” I stepped closer. “Tell me what you want?” I’ll give you anything. My hand curved around the side of her throat.

“I’m trying so hard not to listen to the little voice in my head that keeps whispering this is a bad idea. That I’m being selfish. That you deserve—”

“Stop.” Leaning in, I touched my head to hers. “I choose you, Sofia Bennet. You. And that is *my* choice to make.”

“Cole,” she whispered, her fingers twisting into my shirt. “I…”

“I’ll ask again. What do you want, Sofe?”

The air was thick, crackling around us, coursing through me, making my heart crash in my chest.

I wanted her—I wanted her so fucking much. But it had to be her choice.

Choose me, I wanted to scream. Pick me.

“I want…” She inhaled deeply, as if weighing up every possible consequence of her next words. “I want you.”

Relief flooded me, woven with the smug satisfaction that could only come from a girl you wanted admitting they wanted you back.

She wanted me.

“I’m yours,” I said.

“Show me.” Sofia gazed up at me. “Show me, Cole. I want —”

My mouth crashed down on hers as I buried my fingers in her hair, angling her face right where I needed it to kiss her harder. Deeper. Our tongues tangled, sliding together in a slow dance that sent bolts of desire shooting through me.

“You’re sure?” I murmured the words onto her lips, and she nodded.

“I want this. Before...”

“Shh.” My thumb slid over her lips, silencing the words. The harsh truth of our situation.

The future had no place in this single moment. It was ours. And I wanted to make it perfect for her.

I wanted to give her that.

“I’m scared,” she admitted, her words double edged.

“Shh.” I kissed her softly. “I got you, Sofe.”

When I went to pull away, Sofia anchored her hands around my neck, kissing me back. Her fingers deftly unbuttoned my shirt, slipping inside and painting my skin.

“Your body is—”

“Yours,” I breathed against her lips, smiling. “I’m yours.”

“Cheesy.” She chuckled. “But I like it.”

Grabbing my tie, Sofia pulled me toward the bed, not breaking our kiss. She let go of me and her hands went to the back of her dress.

“Wait,” I said. “Let me.”

Her eyes flared with heat as I brushed her hair to one side and found the zipper at her spine. It glided open with ease, and I gently pushed the straps of her dress down her arms.

“So fucking beautiful.” I couldn’t take my eyes off her curves, the black lacy underwear teasing me.

“Do you have a condom?”

I nodded. “In my wallet. I’ll be right back.”

Jogging over to the sideboard, I retrieved the foil packet. When I reached the bed, Sofia was already lying down, her dark hair fanned out around her like a halo.

Jesus.

I inhaled a sharp breath, trying to rein in the raw lust rushing through me.

“Get naked, Cole.” She smiled.

“Uh, yeah. Right.” In record time, I stripped out of the suit. My heart was a runaway train, battering my rib cage.

Dragging a hand through my hair, I moved my gaze over her body. She was every guy’s fantasy, and she was mine.

Lyrics slammed into me, one after another.

I wanna paint your skin with my hands. Map every scar, every secret with my lips. Watch the rise and fall of your chest as I—

“Cole?”

“Shit, sorry.” I shook the thoughts out of my head. Maybe a song would come later. Right now, I needed to be inside her. Buried so deep, she couldn’t ever let me go.

Crawling over her, I dropped the foil packet on the bed, and hooked my fingers into her panties, dragging them slowly down her legs.

“Fuck, Sofe.” She was pink and wet and glistening.

“Your turn,” she rasped, pupils blown with lust as she dropped her gaze to my black boxer briefs and the obvious bulge there.

Slowly, I pushed them down my hips, fisting myself.

“Does it feel good?” she asked.

“Not half as good as it’ll feel when I’m buried inside you.”

“Cole...” Her breath hitched.

Unable to wait another second, I grabbed the condom and tore it open, sheathing myself. Sofia’s legs fell open as I nudged up against her. “Okay?” I asked.

She nodded, winding her arm around my neck, pulling me down to kiss her. “Make me forget, Cole. Just for a minute.”

My heart stuttered at her sad, desperate words, but I shoved them down, focusing on the feel of her naked and perfect beneath me.

Grasping the base of my dick, I lined up and slowly pushed into her. “Fuck,” I hissed, inching inside. “You’re so tight.”

“Don’t stop,” she breathed, lifting her hips a little.

My hand slid down her thigh to hitch it around my waist, letting me go deeper until I was fully seated inside her. “Jesus,” I hissed as she clenched around me.

“You feel... amazing.” Her fingers dug into my back. “But I really need you to move, Cole.”

“It would be my pleasure.” I smirked, dropping a kiss to her lips as I pulled out and thrust back in.

“God, yes.”

I went again, easing all the way out and punching my hips forward, building the pace slow and steady. I didn’t want it to be over too quickly, and I wanted to make it good for her. Because having her like this, knowing that she trusted me enough to love her, it was every-fucking-thing.

“Kiss me,” she whimpered, shoving her fingers into the hair at the back of my neck.

It was all tongue and teeth and breathless touches. Like we were caught in the eye of a storm, fighting to stay afloat. Our

only hope of survival was each other.

My thrusts became harder, my grip on her thigh tighter as my control began to slip. She felt too good, too fucking perfect as her inner walls rippled around me.

“Are you close?” I whispered.

“I need more. Touch me.” She grabbed my hand and shoved it between our bodies.

My thumb rolled over her clit, and she cried out, but I swallowed her moans.

Jesus, it had never been like this.

Sweat trickled down my back as I fought to maintain control. I never wanted this to end.

Sofia wrapped her legs around my waist, meeting every thrust with a sensual roll of her hips. My hands were everywhere. In her hair, around her throat, squeezing her perfect tits.

“God, Sofe,” I groaned, latching my mouth onto the base of her throat, sucking the skin there, needing more.

Needing everything she was willing to give me.

“Yes, Cole... God, like that.”

I kept working her clit with my thumb as I rode her body.

“I’m close,” she panted, resting her face on my shoulder. “Don’t stop.”

I couldn’t even if I wanted to.

A tingle built at the base of my spine, spreading through me like wildfire as I went harder... faster.

“Cole... more... more... yes.” Her words turned choppy. Fractured breaths as she sucked in air, her eyelids fluttering.

“Look at me, Sofe.” I nudged her nose with mine, resting my hand against the side of her throat. “I want to watch you fall.”

Her eyes snapped open, glittering with ecstasy as her body began to tremble. “I’m coming,” she breathed. “Cole, I’m—”

I swallowed her words, rocking into her once... twice... three more times before pleasure barreled through me.

“Fuck, Sofe... *fuck*...” I choked out, spilling my release into the condom. “That was...”

“I know.” She smiled up at me, shy and uncertain.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi.”

“Are you okay?”

Lips pressed together, she nodded.

“Let me get cleaned up and then we’ll—”

“Wait.” She stopped me from rolling away. “Can we just stay like this a minute?”

“We can do whatever you want.” I brushed my mouth over hers in the faintest of kisses.

I already wanted her again... and again. So much so, my dick twitched inside her.

“Was that—”

“Sorry.” I grinned, nothing about this moment awkward or tense. “If you haven’t already noticed, my dick is kind of obsessed with you.”

“*Cole*.”

“What? It’s true. In fact, we both have it bad for you.”

“Did you just refer to your penis in the third person?”

“Too much?” My brow arched playfully, but her expression sobered. “Sofe, what is it?”

“Thank you. Thank you for... for this. For everything.”

Lifting a hand, I brushed the flyaway hairs from her face and smiled again. “I meant what I said, Sofia. I’m all in. You’re my girl.”

The air turned thick around us as she gazed up at me. And then she whispered eight little words that wreaked havoc on my heart.

“I’m glad you didn’t give up on me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sofia

“SOFIA.”

Someone trailed a path of warm, wet kisses over my shoulder and across the back of my neck.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Wake up, babe. It’s getting late and we need to check out.”

“C-Cole?” I cracked an eye open, his gorgeous face coming into view.

“There you are.” He smiled and my heart fluttered. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m tired.”

His brows furrowed. “You slept for like eleven hours.”

“I did?” I tried to sit up, but exhaustion radiated in every inch of me. “Whoa. I feel out of it this morning.”

“Is that normal?” Cole asked, concern pinching his brows.

“Sometimes.”

“We should call your parents.”

“No, don’t. I’m fine. I’ll be fine. I just need some water and something to eat.”

The last thing I wanted was Mom and Dad worrying. I’d managed to persuade Cole to let me text them last night instead of calling, but I’d kept it brief. Everything was fine. I was fine.

He’d disapproved. But I *was* fine. Exhaustion and fainting were part of my life now. It was nothing to worry about—nothing more than usual anyway.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Almost ten.”

“Why didn’t you wake me sooner?”

“I tried. I’ve been trying for like the last thirty minutes.”

“Oh, sorry. You must have tired me out.” I ran my hand along his bicep and gave him what I hoped was a small, seductive smile.

“You were out like a light before eleven.”

“Cole, I—”

A loud knock on the door cut through the air and Cole cursed under his breath. “It’s my dad.”

“How do you know?”

The muscle in his jaw pulsed. “Trust me.” Cole dropped a kiss on my head before shoving back the covers and climbing out of bed.

I lay back against the plush pillows and drank in my fill of his body. All that muscle and smooth skin still sun-kissed from the summer, the ink trailing up and over his arm.

God, I could look at him all day and never grow bored.

Heat trickled through me, and he flashed me a knowing look as he pulled on his jeans.

“I’ll buy us some time, but you should probably clean up and get dressed.”

I let out a heavy sigh, grabbing a pillow and hugging it to my chest.

I guess our romantic getaway was well and truly over. But what did I really expect?

All good things had to come to an end, and for as much as I didn’t want to, it was time to go back to the real world.

AFTER DRAGGING myself out of bed and cleaning up in the bathroom, I pulled on some fresh clothes and went in search of Cole who had yet to return.

My head was still foggy, but a glass of water had lifted some of the haze. At least, I was standing on two feet this morning. Unlike last night.

A wave of embarrassment went through me. I'd fainted in front of all those people. In front of Mr. and Mrs. Kandon, and then he'd made those cruel, offhanded comments.

My chest tightened. The studious, well-rounded girl with hopes of going off to Columbia wanted them to like me. It was only natural to seek your boyfriend's parents' approval, wasn't it?

But I knew I'd never get it from Mr. Kandon, and once he found out the truth about my situation, I could only imagine what he might say.

Voices beyond the door caught my attention and I crept toward it, Cole and his father's voice barely audible.

They were arguing, that much was apparent, and given how my stomach plummeted into my toes, I had a good idea about what—or who—it most likely was about.

"Whatever, I'm out." Cole stormed into the room and slammed the door behind him. "Safe." His eyes locked on me standing there, listening. "What are you doing?"

"I heard voices."

"He's an asshole."

"Cole, he's your father."

"Yeah, well, sometimes I wish he wasn't." He stalked over to the bed and sat on the edge.

"What did he say?"

"Gave me a lecture about embarrassing him at the mixer. Said... it doesn't matter."

"He's annoyed at me." I approached him and his hand shot out, curving around my hip and drawing me between his legs.

"He can get fucked."

"What did he say?"

“It doesn’t matter, Sofe. I don’t care about what he thinks.”

“Did you tell him you’re not going to Drexel?”

“I may have mentioned it.”

“And...”

Cole shrugged. “He issued his usual threats. I need to speak to your mom and Coach, Monday. If I’m seriously going to do this, I need to figure out my plan of attack. It’s pretty late in the year for UMich to offer me a football scholarship, but not impossible. At least, I hope not.”

I raked my fingers through his hair, brushing it off his face. “I’m sure you’ll figure something out. Maybe you could apply for a music scholarship?”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“It’s something to consider.”

He nodded, leaning into my hand as I pressed it against his cheek.

“I’m sorry if I made things worse for you.”

“Just you being here makes everything easier.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, but I didn’t have it in me to argue.

“Sofe, I want you to know that last night, what happened between us... it was everything.”

“Yeah?” My heart beat faster, blood roaring between my ears.

It had been amazing, the way he’d loved my body. How connected I’d felt to him. But it had also been bittersweet because we both knew that everything was about to change.

Cole slid his hand into the back of my hair, forcing us closer. “I really, really like you, Sofe.”

“I really, really like you too. But—”

“No buts. I choose this. I choose you, okay?”

“I...” The words lodged in my throat, my heart careening in my chest now.

“Sofe?”

“Y-yes.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he leaned in. Sealing his words—his promise—with a kiss.

“I’m going to tell Jude I’ll play with them next weekend,” he said.

“You are? That’s great. You’re too good not to play again.”

“I want you there though, in the crowd. Will you do that for me?”

“Cole, I don’t know.”

“Please. I need you, Sofe. I need you in my corner.”

He’d chosen me.

Cole had chosen me. It seemed only fair—only right—that I chose him too.

“I’ll be there,” I said. One way or another, I would be there to support him and the band.

“Good.” His smile grew. “Who knows, maybe it’ll be my big break and I won’t even need to worry about college tuition.”

“Yeah.” I laughed but it was forced. Because every time I trusted in our connection, something came along to remind me that our paths were headed in different directions.

Cole was so kind, supportive, and loyal. In a short amount of time, he’d already proved to me that I could count on him. That I could lean on him when things got hard. But one day soon, he wouldn’t be here. He’d be off making music, doing great things with his life.

And me?

Well, I didn’t like to look too far into the future anymore.

“MOM, DAD, I’M HOME,” I called out as I stepped into the house.

“Sofe, is that you?”

I chuckled. Who else did she think it was? Unless they had another daughter I didn’t know about.

Mom flounced into the hall, wearing an apron and covered in flour. “Hey, baby. How was your trip with Cole?”

“It was good, thanks—”

“What happened?”

“Nothing happened, Mom.”

“You look pale. Do you feel okay? Did anything—”

“Mom, stop.” I shied away from her touch as she came closer.

“Sofia, don’t do that.” Her tone was a painful mix of disapproval and concern. “Don’t hide from me. Talk to me, sweetheart.”

Lifting my eyes, I let out a weary sigh. “It was a disaster, Mom.” Tears burned my throat.

“What? Why?”

“I... I fainted at the mixer. Mr. Kandon hates me. Cole is going to follow his dreams and I’m... I...”

“Oh, sweetheart. Come here.” She pulled me into a hug, squeezing me tightly. “It sounds like you had quite the night. Come on, the first batch of cookies is almost done.”

Mom gently guided me into the kitchen and sat me on one of the stools.

“Now, start from the beginning. What happened?”

I was relieved she hadn’t latched onto the fact I’d fainted. I hadn’t wanted to tell them because part of me thought she and

Dad would rush me back to the hospital. Or at the very least call Dr. Jeffries.

“Mr. Kandon basically acted like I wasn’t there. Shoved me off on his wife while he paraded Cole around all his old college buddies. Then I... I came over all hot and light-headed, so I tried to get out of there before I...”

“Why didn’t you call?” she asked.

“I didn’t want you and Dad to worry. Cole looked after me.” A flash of lust went through me, and I fought to school my expression.

“He’s a good boy.”

“He is.” I smiled. “He got into it with his dad and told him he doesn’t want to go to Drexel.”

“Good for him.”

“Mr. Kandon will cut him off now though. So he’ll need a scholarship or financial aid. And he wants to go to UMich School of Art and Music so much, Mom. And he’s good, really good. His old band have this gig next weekend. It could lead to big things for them. He’s going to do it.” Tears dropped down my cheeks as the truth settled into me. “He’s going to do great things.”

And I’d be left behind. Forgotten. Alone.

“You think he’ll choose that over you?”

“Wouldn’t you?” Bitter laughter spilled out of me.

“Oh, sweetheart.” She hugged me again. “Does it have to be a choice? Can’t he have both? Can’t he—”

“You don’t get it, Mom. How can I ask him to stand by my side knowing that I might...” I inhaled a sharp, stinging breath.

“Baby, don’t think like that. You’re going to fight this, Sofia.” She pulled away, cupping my face in her soft hands. “We’re going to fight this. I know it’s scary. I know there are a ton of unknowns right now, but you’ve got this, sweetheart.”

“I’m just so scared, Mom.”

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Life wasn't supposed to throw me this curveball. Although this was more like an undetonated explosive that could go off at any moment.

"Once the egg retrieval procedure is out of the way, we can focus on the treatment," she said. "I think that'll help you feel more in control."

"Maybe." A tight smile fell over me.

"Your feelings are valid, Sofia. You're going to feel angry, bitter, and hopeless, and that's okay, sweetheart. But a positive mental attitude goes a long way in these kinds of situations."

"I know, Mom."

"You have so much to look forward to, baby." She kissed my forehead. "I truly believe that."

"I think I'm going to go lie down for a bit."

Her brows furrowed. "We could veg out on the couch and watch movies?"

"Maybe later?"

"Sure, okay." She watched me intently as I grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator. "Sofia?"

"Yeah?" I glanced back.

"I love you, sweetheart."

"Love you too, Mom."

I tried to hold it together as I made my way upstairs. But there was a storm raging inside me. Mom said my feelings were valid, but the dark vortex swelling in my chest felt all wrong. Like it might swallow me whole.

Kicking off my sneakers, I dug my cell phone out of my pocket and laid down. I had texts from the girls and one from Cole.

I opened his first.

Cole: You are braver than you believe. Stronger than you seem. Smarter than you think, and more loved than you know. Thank you for last night. I'll never forget it. xo

MY BREATH CAUGHT at his words, the sentiment behind them. We hadn't said the words yet—it was too soon for that. Besides, I didn't want Cole to ever feel obligated to be with me if we crossed that line. But there had been a moment at the hotel, a split second when I thought he'd been about to say them.

Swiping away the tears in my eyes, I texted him back.

Me: How is it you always say the right thing at exactly the right moment?

Cole: Didn't you know, it's my superpower.

HONESTLY, I was beginning to think it was.

Before I could reply, another text came through.

Cole: How are you feeling?

Me: Okay. A little tired. I see a nap in my immediate future.

Cole: Will you dream of me?

MY HEART FLUTTERED.

Me: You might make a cameo.

Cole: Dammit, I was hoping to have the starring role.

JESUS. This boy. He was everything I never knew I needed, and he was mine.

At least, he wanted to be.

MONDAY ROLLED AROUND, and with it came the looming appointment for the egg retrieval procedure and finally starting my treatment. At least I felt a little more human today.

“You want a ride in?” Mom asked, grabbing her lunch from the refrigerator.

“Thanks, but Cole is getting me.”

“You know, you could carpool, do your bit for the environment,” Dad added.

Aaron breezed into the kitchen and grabbed Dad’s shoulder. “And miss out on a little one on one with my girl before classes started?” He smirked. “I don’t think so.”

“I swear to God, Son. If you get Poppy pregnant before you’re at least twenty-five—”

“Relax, old man. I always wrap it.”

“Aaron!” Mom gasped. “Can you please refrain from ever saying that again.”

“Sex Ed. 101, Mom. I thought you would appreciate knowing your son is being responsible.”

“Who’s being responsible?” Ezra said, slipping around Dad to make a beeline for the coffee maker.

“You don’t want to know,” I said.

“Ezra, surely you and Ashleigh can ride in with Cole and Sofia?”

“No can do. We have a thing.”

“A thing?” Dad’s brow quirked up.

“Oh yeah, the thing.” Aaron grinned. “I love the thing.”

“Sex. You’re talking about sex again, aren’t you?” Dad sighed. “We’re raising monsters, babe.”

“What did you really expect, Ash?” Mom gave him an amused smile. “They’re *your* sons.”

“I wasn’t this bad.”

“You were pretty bad.”

They shared a secretive smile that had the three of us groaning.

“Okay, lovebirds. Nobody needs to watch their parents make moon eyes at each other before breakfast,” Aaron said. “Sofe, you good getting to school?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

“See you losers later then.” He gave us a two finger salute and disappeared.

“I hope he doesn’t talk like that around Jason,” Mom said.

“You know, Aaron.” Ezra leaned back against the counter. “He speaks first, thinks later.”

“Yeah, well, it’s going to get him into trouble one day.”

“It could always be worse, my love.” Dad hooked his arm around Mom and pulled her between his legs.

“And that’s our cue to leave.” I got up and headed for the door.

“No, sweetheart. Wait. You don’t have to leave.”

“I’ll see you later, Mom, Dad.”

“Bye, sweetheart.”

Their laughter followed us down the hall.

“I never thought I’d appreciate that sound,” Ezra said.

“They’re pretty darn cute.”

“Yeah, they are. How are you holding up?”

His question caught me off guard.

It was Ezra.

Even though he'd become a lot more approachable since getting together with Ashleigh, he was still pretty closed off.

"I'm okay."

"You know, if you ever need to talk..."

"Ezra Bennet." I smiled. "Are you offering to be my person?"

"Shit, Sofe. You had to go make it weird, didn't you?" He grinned back. "I'm just saying, I know we don't do the whole heart to heart thing much, but I'm always here for you. One hundred percent."

"Thanks, E. But I'm fine." The lie soured on my tongue as we slipped out of the house.

"What about you, Mr. Football Star? How's things with the team?"

"Things are good. Things are really fucking good."

"I'm happy for you. You deserve it, E."

"I know I don't tell you enough, but I'm really glad you're my sister, Sofia."

"Jeez, don't get all emotional on me, you'll make me cry."

He chuckled, giving a little shake of his head. "Kandon will be here soon, right?"

"Yeah, go." I waved him off, needing a second to myself before I lost the fight to the tears building behind my eyes.

Ezra hesitated as if he felt that I was on the verge of breaking. But I forced a smile and ushered him away. "Go. Leigh will be waiting for you."

His eyes narrowed. "Sofe, are you sure—"

Cole's car appeared and I breathed a small sigh of relief.

"Your chariot awaits." Ezra chuckled.

"See you at school," I murmured, skipping down the driveway toward Cole's car.

I didn't give him time to get out and greet me, climbing inside.

"Hey, what's wrong?" He frowned.

"Nothing. I'm just really glad to see you." I leaned over to kiss his cheek, but Cole turned at the last second, and our mouths grazed.

"Mmm, good morning."

"Hi," I murmured.

"Hi." He pushed my bangs out of my face. "Want to tell me what really happened?"

"It's getting harder, lying to them," I admitted, the truth twisting my insides into a pretzel.

Cole cupped my face. "So maybe it's time to tell them."

"Yeah." I swallowed. "Maybe."

I stared out of the window, trying to rein in the turbulent emotions warring inside of me.

Cole squeezed my hand, coaxing me back to him.

Grounding me.

"They would want to know, Sofe."

I nodded. It was all I could do.

Because he was right.

I just wasn't sure I was ready.

Maybe I never would be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Cole

“JUDE, WAIT UP.” I cut across the hall to catch up with him.

“Kandon,” he said coolly.

“Listen, I was hoping we could talk.”

“I’m kind of busy. We have rehearsals and I—”

“I’m in,” I blurted out. “I mean, if you still need somebody to take Paul’s spot, I’m in.”

He ground to a halt and studied me. “You’re in. What changed?”

“A lot of things.”

“Your old man—”

“You don’t need to worry about my old man. I can handle him.”

Thankfully, he and Mom had gone straight onto some business in the city, so I’d yet to see him after the disastrous visit to Drexel.

“Come on, J. You’re still a guy down—”

“You don’t know that. We could have found the perfect stand in after you said no.”

“Did you?” My stomach sank.

“No, but we could have.” A faint smile tugged at his mouth.

“So, I’m in?”

“Only if you promise not to screw us over. This is a big fucking deal, Cole. It could be the beginning of everything.”

A trickle of anticipation went through me. It had been so long since I’d played with them—too long. I was bound to be out of touch.

“Do you want to come see the guys? We can catch you up on everything and get you up to speed.”

“I’m meeting Sofia.”

Disappointment flickered in his gaze, but it wasn’t like I could tell him the truth. “Unless... how do you feel about rehearsing to a crowd?”

“You want to bring your girl to watch us?”

“Well, yeah, if that’s okay with you.”

He shrugged. “Can’t see why not. Might be good to get some feedback from an objective source.”

“Great. Let me text her and tell her we’re heading to the studio.”

I dug out my phone and pulled up our chat.

Me: I’m in the band. Heading to the studio to rehearse with the guys. I was hoping you’d want to come and hang out? Bring your lunch...

Sofia: Are you sure it’s okay with the others? I don’t want to intrude. xo

Me: Of course it’s okay. Jude is hoping you’ll provide some impartial feedback on their set.

Sofia: I can totally do that. See you in ten. xo

“SHE’S IN,” I said, pocketing my cell.

“You and Sofia Bennet, it’s serious?” he asked as we maneuvered our way through the crowded hall.

“I guess you could say that. It’s still new but I’m in deep.”

“Who’d have thought it. You and Aaron’s sister.”

“He’s cool with it.”

“I’m sure he is.” Jude smirked. “Just what all guys want to imagine. Their best friend boning their sis—”

“Don’t be a dick.”

“I’m only busting your balls. She seems like a nice girl.”

“She is.” *She’s incredible.*

“So, what happened with you and your old man?”

“Told him I’m not applying to Drexel.”

“Shit. I bet that went down well.”

“We haven’t really spoken about it yet.”

Sure, he’d tried to reprimand me at the hotel yesterday morning. But that had quickly escalated, and I’d stormed away.

“Well, good for you, I say. It’s your future, Cole.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“And what’s the plan now? You and Sofia going to ride off to college together and live the American dream?”

We reached the studio and Jude shouldered the door.

God, I’d missed this place. The lingering smell of rosin and polish. The faint hum of the speakers.

“Well blow me, if it isn’t the football superstar. Thought you’d forgotten about us mere mortals,” Mikey said, saving me from having to answer Jude’s question.

“It’s good to see you.”

“You too.”

“Cole,” Travis added.

I gave him a small nod, not immune to the way the air in the room cooled. But I deserved his icy reception. I’d walked away from the band. Me. It didn’t matter that my father didn’t give me a choice. The guys saw it as me abandoning them—quitting on our dreams.

I knew I’d have to earn their trust back.

“Cole’s in for Livewire,” Jude said.

“No shit. Better get him the set list then.” Travis glanced at me again. “We’ve moved on a little since you—”

A knock on the studio door interrupted him.

“Hello?” Sofia stuck her head inside.

“Hey.” I strolled over to her and pulled her into my arms, dropping a kiss on her head. Someone behind me snickered and I flipped them off over my shoulder.

I didn’t give a shit if people thought I was a pussy. Sofia made me happy. She made all the other shit in my head quiet.

Running my hand along her collarbone, I gently closed my fingers around her throat, brushing my thumb along her jaw as I teased her with little kisses. “Missed you.”

“Cole.” She chuckled, the prettiest damn blush staining her cheeks. “It’s barely been three hours.”

“Three too many.” I kissed the end of her nose. “Want to meet the guys?” She nodded. I took her hand and tugged her over to them. “Jude, Mikey, and Trav, meet my girlfriend, Sofia. Sofia, the guys.”

“Hi.” She gave them a small wave.

“Hey. So you and Kandon, huh? Rather you than me.” Jude smirked.

“Fuck you, asshole. I’ll have you know, I’m a great catch.”

Everyone laughed.

“So, Sofia, you heard our boy play yet?”

She gazed up at me and smiled. “Yeah. He’s good.”

“Too good to be out on the football field playing at quarterback,” Travis said.

“Okay, okay, I get it. You’re pissed at me. I deserve it. But I’m here now, and I’m not going anywhere. Now are we doing this thing or what?”

“Fuck, yeah, we’re doing it.” Jude stalked off toward the equipment and started tinkering with the mic stand. “We’ll play the first couple of songs for you, let you get a feel for the new material and see if you can pick it up from there?”

“Sounds good.” I guided Sofia over to the couch and we sat down. “Thanks for coming,” I whispered, stealing another

kiss.

Her lips curved into a shy smile. “I wouldn’t be anywhere else.”

“HOLY SHIT, THAT SOUNDED GOOD.” Jude grinned at me, just like old times.

“Yeah, I gotta hand it to you, Kandon. It’s like you never left.”

Even Travis managed a smile. My jaw hurt from all the smiling and laughing. We’d been at it almost an hour, going on the set list, figuring out my riffs and solos. The guys were surprisingly amiable, letting me make suggestions and bat ideas around to tighten some of the choruses and opening notes of a handful of songs.

I felt alive. Adrenaline pumping through my veins, giving me a high that only playing guitar could.

It was good to be back, with my friends—my band—and it was even better knowing that Sofia was right here, watching. Supporting me.

“Think we’ll be ready in time?” I asked, knowing that the five days we had to prepare was cutting it close. Throw in football practice, the game Friday, and wanting to spend as much time with my girl as possible, the pressure was on.

“Can you come over and rehearse every night?”

“Except Friday.” My gaze flicked over to Sofia, and she nodded. I didn’t want to waste the time we had together, but I really, really wanted to do this.

Shit. Maybe I should have talked to her first.

Guilt rose up inside me. I’d promised to be by her side, and I wanted to, I did. But I also needed a plan B if my old man was about to pull the plug on my tuition for college.

“Yeah, yeah, Mr. Football Hotshot,” Travis teased. “We know the band comes second to the Rixon Raiders.”

“Trav.” Jude shook his head. He knew how hard it had been for me to walk away from the band. But I had no choice. At least, that’s what I’d truly believed back then.

“So we’ll see you tonight? Around seven?”

“Yeah. Can’t wait.” I grabbed my bag and made my way over to Sofia.

“Hey, Kandon’s girl,” Travis called.

“I have a name, you know.” She arched a brow.

“I know.” He grinned. “Listen, you should come by with Cole tonight. You’re good for him.”

“Sure. I mean, if you don’t think I’ll be a distraction.” Her whole face lit up, and I loved it. I loved that she fit into my life so easily.

Jesus, I was so gone for this girl.

And I wanted to tell her, I did. But I also didn’t want to add another layer of pressure to our relationship.

Not when she already had so much to think about.

“Nah, you’re good. Besides, you really helped earlier with the arrangement for Missed Notes.”

“I loved that one.” Her smile grew. “It was just so... deep yet hopeful.”

“You know, your boy wrote the original version of that. We’ve tweaked it since, but that one was all Kandon.”

“What?” Her head whipped around to me. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrugged. “It was a long time ago. I gave them the song when I left the band.”

I didn’t even think of it as mine anymore.

“Well, it’s amazing. You definitely have to include it in the set on Saturday.”

“Come on, we need to get to next period.” I grabbed her hand.

“Class doesn’t start for another twenty minutes,” Jude frowned.

“I know. I’ll catch you guys later.”

I all but yanked her from the studio. We had twenty minutes, and I didn’t intend on wasting a second.

“COLE.” Sofia chuckled as I peppered kisses down her neck. “We should probably—”

“Five more minutes,” I breathed, pressing into her harder, letting her feel exactly what she did to me.

“God, that feels so nice.” She raked her fingers through my hair as I continued tracing her skin with my teeth and tongue.

I would never tire of kissing her, of feeling her soft curves beneath my hands. She was an instrument I wanted to learn how to play to sheer perfection. Until she sang loud enough for the heavens to hear.

“I wish I could get you off, right here.”

“We can’t.” Her body shuddered as I nipped the soft skin underneath her ear.

“I know, but it doesn’t stop me wanting it. You should put it on your list. Sex in an empty classroom.”

“Mom would kill me.”

I pulled back and smirked. “Isn’t that half the fun?”

“You’re so bad, Cole Kandon.” Sofia slid her hands up my sweater and curled her fingers into the material. “I loved watching you play with the band. You looked so happy.”

“I was happy. Music speaks to my soul; it always has.”

“I’ve never had that. A talent, a passion that makes my heart sing.”

“Oh, I don’t know. You’re pretty good at—” I leaned in and whispered the dirty words to her.

“Cole!” she gasped, burying her face into the crook of my neck as she no doubt imagined the night when she gave herself to me.

Laughter rumbled in my chest as I held her close. This was how life was supposed to be.

Easy. Fun. Full of laughter and love.

Sometimes you had to put yourself first and chase your own dreams no matter the cost. Sofia had taught me that. She had shown me that it was okay to want something different to the path laid before me by my father.

“We should probably get to class.” She let out a weary sigh.

“Hey.” I captured her chin between my fingers. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I am. I really, really am.”

The words sounded sincere, but I saw the shadows in her eyes.

“Feeling nervous about Monday?”

“More about what comes after, I think. At least I know what to expect on Monday. But after...”

“Hey, it’s going to be okay,” I said, touching my head to hers.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said, and I think I’m going to tell Aaron on the weekend.” A shiver went through her.

“I’ll be right there, no matter what happens, okay? And so will Aaron once he knows the truth.”

She nodded, moisture gathered on her lashes.

“Hey, don’t cry,” I whispered, brushing her cheek with my thumb. “You’re so strong, Sofia. Beautiful and kind. You’re going to get through this.”

“I hope I can make the gig Saturday.” She changed the subject.

“Me too. I need my girl in the crowd.” I dropped a kiss on her head.

Sofia gazed up at me. A mix of fear and love in her eyes. I wondered if she knew she looked at me like that. The way I looked at her.

There was still so much we’d left unsaid. Things I was desperate to say but scared would be too much.

So I trapped them inside me and kissed her instead. Hoping she’d feel them.

Even if she wouldn’t hear them yet.

I DIDN’T WANT to go home. I’d hung around after practice, using the excuse that I wanted to get in some extra drills, but Coach Ford had eventually told me to get the hell out of there and get some rest.

Rest.

At least Mom had thought to give me a heads up and let me know that he was home.

Dread sat in my stomach like a sack of bricks. This moment had been a long time coming, but it didn’t change the fact, I never wanted it to. Curtis Kandon could be a vicious man. Ruthless to the core and used to getting his own way. But I was done being his puppet, done putting his wishes above my own.

Deep down, I’d thought that one day, Mom would leave him. That maybe if I did as he wanted, she would find the courage to pack her bags and go.

But I realized now, she wasn’t going to. Her vows, her faith, wouldn’t let her. I had to accept that. I had to accept that she was choosing him.

She always would.

His car in the driveway taunted me, the dread inside me growing heavier. Inhaling a deep breath, I slipped into the house and waited.

One... two... three...

“Cole, come in here please.”

Slinging my bags on the floor next to the sideboard, I headed into the kitchen, hardly surprised to find Mom sitting beside him, her expression grim.

“Sit down,” he said, with no air of pretense. This wasn’t Curtis Kandon, loving father and devoted husband. This was Curtis Kandon, the ruthless attorney. All business and no pleasantries.

“We need to talk.” He drummed his fingers on the counter; cool, calm, and collected. A predator biding his time.

“We can talk all you want,” I said, taking a seat. “But it won’t change the outcome. I’m not going to Drexel.”

He blew out an exasperated breath. “Son, be reasonable. We had a plan—”

“No, Dad, you had a plan. I never wanted to follow in your footsteps. I’m not cut out for law school. I love music and sports and creativity.”

“Music is not a viable career option.”

“Says who? I’m under no illusion that I’ll be the next big thing, Dad, but there are hundreds of jobs out there for someone with a passion for music.”

“Curtis, maybe Cole—”

“Enough.” He slammed his fist down on the table, making Mom flinch. Part of me was surprised she’d even tried to intervene on my behalf. She knew he wouldn’t budge. Not on this.

His expression turned murderous. “I will not fund some two-bit music degree that will lead nowhere but to you busking the street like some bum.”

“Nice, Dad. Real nice.” I shot up, the chair legs scraping against the tiles.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I think we’re done here.”

“We’re not done until I say we’re done.”

But I was already backing away, unwilling to spend even a second longer listening to his tirade. We would never see eye to eye on this, and the truth was, I didn’t want or need his approval.

“Cole, sweetheart, maybe you should hear your father out.”

My heart sank. Of course she’d side with him in the end.

“Sorry, Mom.” I met her apologetic stare. “I’m done. I won’t go to Drexel just to appease him. Not when we both know that won’t be good enough anyway.” My gaze moved to him. “You’ve always pushed me to be something I’m not. But do you know what I think, *Dad*?” I spat the word. “I think no matter what I do or achieve, it’ll never be good enough for you.”

Something flashed over his face, but it was gone almost as quickly as it came.

“I’m applying to music school whether you like it or not.”

“And how do you plan on paying your way, Son?” he snarled. “Because make no mistake, Cole. Do this, and you won’t get a penny from me.”

I shrugged, so over his bullshit. “I’ll figure it out. And if I don’t, at least I’ll know I didn’t cave to your unrealistic demands.”

“You’re making a huge mistake, Son,” he called after me.

But I was already gone.

The final nail in our relationship was well and truly driven home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sofia

THE WEEK FLEW BY.

I spent my days at school, sneaking off with Cole to make out under the bleachers or in an empty classroom. Aaron and Ezra were constantly teasing him about it, but he didn't care.

But they didn't know there was a pressing urgency between us. A silent promise to steal as much time together as we could before everything changed again.

We hung out in Jude's garage every night so they could rehearse. I liked Jude and Mikey. They were good for Cole, for his hopes and dreams. I couldn't quite get a good read on Travis, but he always made me feel welcome and valued my input.

I was happy.

Cole made me happy.

But as the weekend crept closer, so too did the moment I finally told Aaron about my diagnosis.

The team were so close to the playoffs. So close to making all their dreams come true. I didn't want to tarnish that, and I definitely didn't want to distract him. But Cole and my parents were right.

It was time.

Besides, once I started treatment, it would be hard to keep it from him anymore.

"Morning, sweetheart," Dad said as I entered the kitchen. "How are you feeling?"

Sick to my stomach. But I didn't tell him that.

"I'm okay."

"Not long now, sweetheart. Monday is a big day for you."

"Yep." I helped myself to coffee and a pastry.

“Me and your mom are both taking the day off to be there for you.”

“You don’t have to do that, Dad.”

“Nonsense, we’re a family. We stick together.” He winked. “You’re going to the game tonight I take it?”

“I am.”

“And will there be a party afterwards?”

“Probably, Dad.” I rolled my eyes. “But I promise to stay off the liquor.”

“That’s my girl.” He chuckled. “Cole is more than welcome to stay over again, in the guest room,” he quickly tacked on. “How are things with him? It can’t be easy, this situation with his father.”

“He’s okay. Throwing all his energy into the band and preparing his submission to UMich.”

“Has he talked to Jase about whether there’s hope to get a football scholarship?”

“Jase thinks it’s too late in the year but he’s making some calls. The school of music has some scholarships too that he might be able to apply for.”

“Good for him. It isn’t easy standing up to your parents like that.” A wistful look washed over him. Dad had done something similar back in the day when he chose to follow Mom to college instead of following in his father’s footsteps.

“If he ever needs to talk things over or vent, I’d be happy to listen.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I hooked my arm around his shoulder and kissed his cheek. “That’s really sweet of you.”

“Gotta keep my eye on my daughter’s boyfriend somehow.”

“Dad,” I grumbled.

“Joke.” He held up his hands. “I’m joking. Now go, get out of here.”

“SO, how’s everything with you and Cole?” Ashleigh asked as she drove us to school. Since it was game day, the guys had headed in for early practice.

“Things are good, really good.”

“You know you two are worse than me and Aaron, right?” Poppy said.

My cheeks heated. “He makes me happy.”

But the burst of happiness was quickly chased off by the sticky feeling of guilt.

It wasn’t easy keeping something so important from your best friends. But I didn’t want things to change. I didn’t want them to look at me differently.

“Sofe, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I met Ashleigh’s gaze in the rearview mirror and gave her a weak smile.

“Are you excited for tomorrow? I can’t wait to see Cole play. Is he nervous?”

“I don’t think so. He’s a natural.”

“I can’t believe you’re dating a football player *and* a rock star.” She chuckled, but the joke was lost on me.

Cole was... he was just Cole to me.

It didn’t matter if he played football or guitar or preferred gaming or building Legos. It was who he was inside that mattered.

“You’re falling for him,” Leigh said.

“I....”

“Oh my God.” Poppy swung around, poking her head through the gap between the seats. “Have you said it to each other yet?”

“Pops, come on,” I murmured.

“We’re your best friends, babe, you can talk to us about this stuff.”

“I know that, but it’s still new, Pops.”

“When you know, you know.” She shrugged.

“Easy for you to say, you’ve been in love with my brother forever.”

“She has a point,” Ashleigh added, taking the turn for school.

The two of them launched into a debate about the exact moment Poppy had realized she loved Aaron, but I tuned them out. Everything was happening so fast, and I was trying to enjoy it. I was. But it was so hard not to look ahead, to think about all the what-ifs and maybes.

Before I knew it, Ashleigh had found a parking spot and cut the engine. “I’m so glad it’s Friday, senior classes are no joke.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask her if she remembered anything from her first time around in senior year, but Ashleigh had decided not to dwell on what she couldn’t remember, choosing to only look forward.

I admired her. Her resilience and strength. The way she’d chosen not to live in the past and to embrace her future.

“Shall we all head there together tomorrow night?”

“Actually, I’m going with Cole and the guys.”

“Quite the groupie, aren’t we?” Poppy snickered.

“We’ll meet you there,” Leigh said. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Jeez, I’m only joking,” Poppy murmured.

Ashleigh shot me an apologetic look. Did she sense it? That something was wrong with me?

That I was lying?

We all climbed out of the car. Poppy got a text and whatever was on the screen had her eyes lighting up.

“Let me guess, Aaron?” Ashleigh asked.

“They just finished practice. He wants to meet up.”

“First period is only like fifteen minutes away.”

“Plenty of time.” She waggled her brows.

“Seriously, you two need to be careful. If your dad catches ___”

“He won’t. We’re careful.” Her fingers flew across the screen.

“I hope for Aaron’s sake you are.”

My cell vibrated and I dug it out, smiling at the sight of Cole’s name.

Cole: Nothing is impossible. The very word itself says I’m possible.

Me: Ooh, I think I know this one. Eleanor Roosevelt?

Cole: Close. Audrey Hepburn. Want to sneak off somewhere and make out before class?

Me: I can’t. I’ve got an appointment with Mom and Principal Kiln.

HE WANTED TO CHECK IN, and I couldn’t get out of it.

Cole: Lunchtime then?

Me: Yes!

Cole: Can’t wait. xo

POPPY AND ASHLEIGH WATCHED ME, their eyes burning into the side of my face.

“What?” I sighed.

“Nothing.” Poppy smirked. “Nothing at all.”

“Ignore her,” Leigh said, lacing her arm through mine. “I think it’s cute. Have the two of you talked about your plans for next year yet? What you’ll do—”

“We’ve been together less than two weeks. No, we haven’t talked about it.”

The constant pit in my stomach churned wider.

“I can see the two of you going the distance,” Poppy said with a knowing smile. “I’m out. See you guys later.” She took off without us.

“You know she doesn’t mean any harm,” Leigh said.

“I know.”

She didn’t. But I wasn’t like Poppy. Even pre-leukemia, I’d always been a little more reserved than she was.

Part of me regretted it. Regretted not living in the moment—living every day like it might be your last. But hindsight was a bitch.

Ashleigh’s phone buzzed and she checked her message.

“E?” I asked and she nodded. “Let me guess, he wants to meet you.”

“Yeah, but I can tell him—”

“No, go. I’m fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course. I’ve got to meet my mom anyway.”

“Okay. See you later, Sofe.”

I watched her go. Wishing things could be different. Wishing that I could live free and reckless.

But it was easy living like there was no tomorrow...

Until you knew there might not be.

“GO, GO,” Poppy cheered, bouncing up and down on her feet.

Dawson Stadium was electric, the crowd amped at the Raiders 27-11 lead. With less than one quarter to play it was pretty much a given that they had the W in the bag which meant the team were guaranteed a spot for the playoffs.

“Run, run.” The entire stadium seemed to take a breath, watching Ezra fly down the field toward the end zone, dodging Lion players as he went.

“Go on, babe,” Ashleigh breathed, clutching my hand. “Yes, yes—”

“Toooooouchdown,” the announcer roared, sending the crowd into a frenzy.

“They’re unstoppable.” Poppy grinned, and I nodded.

She wasn’t wrong.

Aaron, Cole, and Ezra worked like a well-oiled machine, and I knew I wasn’t the only one watching Cole tonight thinking how far he’d come. Quarterback was the most demanding position on the team, and he’d stepped into the role as if he’d been born to do it.

A wave of dizziness hit me out of left field, and I sat down.

“Sofe?”

“I’m fine,” I lied.

“You look pale.”

“It’s just the crowd.”

Another lie.

Two more days.

Two more days and then they would know the truth. If I told Aaron, I had to tell them too. I couldn’t expect him to keep my secret from Poppy. Besides, they would know something was wrong soon enough, once I started treatment.

But the light-headedness didn’t abate, and the crowd only grew more and more raucous when one of the junior players scored another touchdown.

“I’m going to the restrooms,” I said.

“Wait, do you want me to come?” Poppy asked, but I waved her off.

“No, stay and watch the game. There are only a few minutes left.”

Before either of them could argue, I hurried out of the aisle and made my way downstairs into the stadium. The sensation wasn't as intense as it had been at the mixer last weekend, but I needed space.

I needed—

The world spun and I began to fall. Down... down... do—

...

..

.

“Sofia. Oh my God, Sofia.”

Voices rumbled in the distance. What the hell—

“Sofia, try not to move. We're getting medical.”

“N-no,” I croaked, my eyelids fluttering open to stark, bright lights. “What... ow.”

“Sofe, Sofia,” someone yelled.

Cole.

Cole was here.

“But the game,” I murmured, my head fuzzy.

“We won, babe.”

Poppy.

It was Poppy.

“Back up, give her some room,” Cole barked.

“C-Cole.” I searched frantically for him, relief slamming into me when he crouched down beside me, his hair falling into his eyes in damp strands.

“I got you,” he said, grabbing my hand.

“I’m fine. We don’t have to—”

“Let medical check you out, okay?” Concern was etched into his expression.

“Sofia, baby.” Mom’s panicked voice filled the air and icy dread slid down my spine.

We had an audience that included most of the school, its staff, and our parents.

Jesus.

Embarrassment welled inside me.

“I’d really love you right now if you get me out of here,” I whispered to Cole, and a tension bracketed his mouth.

“No can do, babe. You need to get checked out.”

“Sofia, thank God.” Mom and Dad appeared with the medics in tow.

“I’m fine.” I tried to sit, but everything spun again.

“Okay, Sofia, why don’t we take a look at you and see what’s going on.”

My gaze flicked past the medic to my parents. Their expressions were drawn tight, and I silently begged them not to say anything. Not here, surrounded by all these people.

“Can we maybe take this elsewhere?” Dad suggested.

“Of course. Let’s get her onto the stretcher and take her inside.

“I can walk.”

“Sofia,” Mom warned, and Cole whispered, “Just let them help you, please.”

“Fine.” I relented because the truth was, I didn’t trust that I could walk myself. I felt... wrong again. Like my equilibrium was all out of whack.

The medics helped me onto the stretcher, wheeling me away just as Aaron arrived.

“Sofe, what the fuck?”

“Son,” Dad chided.

“You fainted again? But I thought—”

“I’m fine.” I couldn’t meet his gaze because he’d see the lie.

He’d see right through it, and I didn’t want him to find out the truth like this.

“Mom, Dad, what’s going on?”

“Come on,” Mom said. “We should move this inside and give Sofia some privacy.”

Cole stayed by my side as they wheeled me down the tunnel and into the building.

A violent shudder tore through me. All those people watching, witnessing my fall.

“How are you feeling now, Sofia?” the medic asked.

“I’m okay, thanks.”

Aaron murmured something behind us, but Dad answered, the two of them speaking in hushed voices. Something told me they weren’t going to let this slide, and I hated it—hated myself and my stupid body—that I hadn’t been able to make it until Sunday.

Cole’s big night was tomorrow. He needed me there. I had to be there.

I had—

“Sofia?”

“Y-yeah?” I blinked up at one of the medics. We were already in a small room off the hall.

“I’m going to check your blood pressure, okay? While my colleague speaks to your parents.”

Don’t tell them, I wanted to scream. But I didn’t, paralyzed by fear.

Cole gripped my hand, brushing his thumb over my knuckles as I glanced over at Aaron. His gaze snagged on mine and his eyes narrowed. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Aaron, Son,” Dad interjected. “Now isn’t the time.”

“Screw that, Dad. Something is going on. I didn’t think... You’re hiding something.”

“Aaron.” His name was ash on my tongue as the cuff tightened around my arm.

Silence echoed through the room as we watched the medic do his thing.

“Okay, all done. It’s a little low, but nothing to be too concerned about. Are there any other health concerns we need to be made aware of?”

It was like he had pulled the pin on a grenade and rolled it into the room. My heart sped up and then stopped, blood roaring inside my ears.

“Don’t,” I choked out, silently pleading with Mom and Dad not to do it. Not here. Not like this.

Cole murmured. “It’ll be okay, Sofe.”

But it wasn’t.

Nothing about this was okay.

“We need to tell them, sweetheart.” Mom came to my side.

“I... I can’t.” I squeezed my eyes shut, wanting nothing more than for this to be a bad dream.

But when I opened them again, Aaron was standing at the end of the stretcher, confusion and worry bleeding into his expression.

“Sofe?”

“I’m sorry,” I cried. “I’m so sorry.” Tears slid down my face.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” He’d gone pale, as if he knew. Knew that whatever I was about to say would change everything.

I inhaled a shuddering breath, trying to find the words.

“I... I don’t just have anemia, Aaron.”

“You don’t?”

Dad stepped up behind him, laying a hand on his shoulder. A silent offer of support. Because we were a family. We were in this together, whether I wanted to protect Aaron or not.

“It’s...” Another shudder went through me. “It’s leukemia,” I said. The words detonating between us, and I knew no amount of hand holding or hugs or platitudes would prevent the fall out of this bombshell.

“Leukemia. What are you talking about? You don’t have leukemia. That’s not... no. No fucking way.”

Cole gripped my hand tighter.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, my heart cracking, another piece fractured.

“Mom? Dad?” The blood drained from his face. “She’s lying, right? She has to be lying.”

“She’s not lying, Son.”

“You know?” He pinned Cole with a dark look.

“Yeah, I—”

“You fucking knew, and you didn’t tell me?”

“Aaron, you need to calm down.”

“Don’t tell me what I need to do, Dad. Not when you kept this from me. She’s my sister, my goddamn twin and you all lied. You—”

“It was my decision,” I said. “I didn’t want to ruin your season. I didn’t want—”

“You didn’t trust me with it.”

“Aaron, that’s not... It’s senior year. You have so much to look forward to. I didn’t want to take that away from you.”

“So you lied to me. That’s some bullshit right there, Sofe. And you,” he spat at Cole. “We’re done. We are so fucking done.”

“Okay, that’s it. You and me.” Dad grabbed him by the shoulder. “Let’s take a walk.”

Aaron barely looked at me as he let Dad usher him out of the room.

“He’ll come around,” Mom said, tears rolling down her cheeks. “He’s scared and hurting.”

“It’s okay, Mrs. B. I can handle Aaron,” Cole said. “I’m more worried about Sofia right now.”

“I’m sorry you had to witness that,” Mom said to the medics who had stepped away to give us some privacy.

“In light of your situation, we recommend that Sofia go to hospital to get checked out.”

“No, Mom. I’m not—”

“Of course. I’ll drive her there myself.”

“Or we can call for an ambulance.”

“No, absolutely not. I’m fine,” I insisted.

“I’m taking you, Sofia. No arguments.”

“Your mom is right, Sofe.” Cole ran his hand over my hair. “You need to get checked out.”

“Fine.”

Relief etched into both of their expressions. “If you don’t mind, Mrs. B. I’d really like to come with you guys. But I’ll need to quickly change.”

“Go. Be quick.”

He nodded. Dropping a kiss on my head. “I’ll be right back.”

Cole left the room, and Mom thanked the medics. “I’ll make sure she gets seen by a doctor. Thank you.”

They talked for another minute or so, but I was too lost in my thoughts to pay them any attention.

Aaron knew. He knew and he hated me.

I didn’t blame him. I had lied. But it wasn’t because I didn’t trust him. It was because I wanted to protect him.

Surely, he knew that?

When Dad stepped back into the room a minute later without my brother, I had my answer.

He was alone.

Aaron was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Cole

“YOU SHOULD BE AT THE PARTY,” Sofia said with a weak smile.

“No,” I leaned closer, pulling her hand to my mouth, brushing a kiss over her knuckles. “I should be here, with you.”

“I feel so stupid.”

“Don’t say that. It’s not like you have any control over it.”

“I know but in front of all those people. How embarrassing.”

I kissed her hand again, needing to touch her, to know that she was here, and she was okay.

“All anyone cares about is that you’re okay,” I said, immediately regretting my choice of words when Sofia flinched.

“I’m not okay though, Cole. I’m not...” She sucked in a sharp breath, agony radiating from her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

The door opened and Mrs. Bennet appeared. “How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

“I’m more embarrassed than anything.”

“Oh, Sofia. You don’t have to worry about all that.”

“I keep telling her that.”

“Any word from Aaron?” she asked.

Her mom grimaced. “I’m sure he’s just licking his wounds.”

Damn him.

I knew when the truth came out it would hurt him, but I hadn’t expected things to blow up quite so much. I was trying really damn hard to put myself in Aaron’s shoes, but I kept

coming up short. Because he was Sofia's brother—her twin. Regardless of his hurt feelings, he needed to be here for her.

“Your dad will find him.”

“Find him?” Sofia shot up. “What the hell do you mean, find him?”

“I, uh, crap,” Mrs. Bennet flustered. “It looks like he took off after he...”

“Found out.” Sofia let out a weary sigh, flopping back against the stiff hospital-issue pillows.

“Do you want me to go look for him?” I offered. I hated seeing my girl suffering like this.

“That's very sweet, Cole, but I think we should let Ash handle it. Aaron was very upset.”

“It's all my fault. I should have—”

“No, sweetheart.” She grabbed her daughter's other hand. “No one is to blame here, especially not you. This is an awful situation with no easy answers. You did what you thought was best at the time, and Aaron will see that. He'll come around, baby, you know he will. If anything, knowing him, he's more upset that he didn't see the signs.”

Her phone started ringing and she stepped away, digging it out of her purse. “It's your dad. I'll step outside to take it, okay?”

“Sure, Mom.”

“Try and get some rest, sweetheart.”

Mrs. Bennet left us, and Sofia closed her eyes.

“Tell me what you need,” I said.

“I wish it were that simple.” Her eyelids fluttered open, and she gave me a defeated smile. “You really won in the girlfriend lottery stakes, huh?”

“Sofe, don't do that. I've told you before, I don't care about any of that. I want to be with you. You.”

“I probably won't be able to come to your gig tomorrow.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me. I was looking forward to seeing you play. You always look so happy when you’re playing.”

“Sofia, the last thing on my mind is the gig. There’ll be other opportunities—”

“What? No. You have to play. You have to.”

“You really think I’d leave you to go play a gig? Have you not learned anything at all by now?”

Her expression turned determined. “Cole, you are going. If I have to call Jude and Mikey and get them to come and drag you out of here. I’ve already tipped your world upside down; I refuse to ruin this for you too.”

“Sofia—”

“No, Cole. It’s non-negotiable. You will go tomorrow, and you will kick ass, and then you’ll come back here and tell me all about it.”

“We’ll see,” I said, refusing to fully concede. But arguing was pointless. Sofia Bennet was stubborn to a fault, and I didn’t want her to get all worked up.

“The girls can video call me, so I’ll get to see it.” She smiled but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“There are more important things going on in your life than my stupid gig.”

Sofia lifted her hand, cupping my cheek. “Just because I have all... this happening doesn’t mean the things going on in your life aren’t important, Cole. It’s not a competition.”

“God, I lo—” I froze. Shit. I hadn’t meant for the words to slip out.

But now there they were, hanging between us.

“Cole...” A shy smile lit up her whole face.

“I won’t say it. Not if it’s too soon. I don’t want to scare you away.”

“Say it, Cole. I want to hear it.”

“Yeah?”

We’d moved closer. Our heads almost touching as I leaned over the bed slightly. I waited a second, drawing out the sweet anticipation.

“Cole.” She gave a frustrated huff. “I’ll change my mind if you—”

“Sofia Bennet, I love you.”

“Yeah?” It was a quiet, shaky question.

“Yeah. I know it’s probably way too soon to be even thinking the words, let alone saying them. But it’s what I feel, and I want you to know.”

“I love you too.” She kissed me. A gentle brush of her lips over mine. “I really do.”

“Thank fuck.” I chuckled. “Because that would have been really embarrassing if you didn’t say it back.”

“I can’t believe we said it.” Awe shone in her blue eyes.

“Now do you believe me when I say I’m all in?”

“Yeah.” She hugged me tighter. “I think I do.”

I HAD to leave Sofia in the hospital. I didn’t want to, but her mom insisted I go home and get some rest. Only one person was allowed to stay with her overnight and I didn’t expect Mrs. Bennet to hand that privilege to me.

But home was the last place I wanted to be.

By the time I got back, it was late, and I’d hoped that my parents would already be asleep. Unfortunately for me, my dad was home this weekend. And even more unfortunate, he was awake when I slipped into the house.

“I’m in the kitchen,” he said.

It would have been easy to head straight up to my room and ignore him. But I was desperate for a drink and something

to eat, so I sucked it up and went into the kitchen.

“How is she?” he asked.

“Do you care?”

I’d known when I’d texted her that Mom would tell him where I was and what had happened, but his sudden interest caught me off guard.

“Cole, Son...”

I started rifling through the refrigerator, looking for some leftovers. “They’re keeping her in overnight.”

“That’s some anemia.” His brow quirked up.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” My spine stiffened, not liking his tone.

“Are you sure she isn’t starving herself? You hear all kinds of stories these days and she’s a young girl. The pressures to stay thin and pretty are—”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I spat, my body vibrating with anger.

He shot up off his stool and glowered at me. “Watch your mouth, Son.”

“Or what Dad? What are you going to do? Hit me?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Cole.” He glowered. “Be reasonable. This girl has got you all twisted up inside when she’s clearly unstable. Is that really the type of girl you want to waste your time on? Someone who cares that much about her appearance to starve herself. That’s not—”

“Stop. Just stop,” I snapped, my chest heaving. “Sofia isn’t unstable. She isn’t starving herself or on a crash diet, Dad. She’s sick.”

The words landed like a bombshell.

“Sick? I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t. Because she couldn’t possibly be suffering, right? You’re so quick to judge. To fit everyone into

your black and white view of the world. But things aren't always black and white."

"Cole, I—"

"The girl I love is sick, really sick, Dad, and you care more about how it affects me and your plans for me. You know, sometimes I wonder how it's even possible I'm yours."

Defeat rolled through me. He didn't get it—he never would. He cared too much about work, about peoples' perception of him and his family.

"Son, that's not fair. I just want the best for you. I just want ___"

"Newsflash, *Curtis*. We don't always get what we want. I'm going to grab some stuff and go."

"What the hell are you talking about? Go? Go where? It's late and—"

"I can't stay here tonight." I headed for the door.

"Cole, Son, that's—"

"Whatever you're about to say, don't bother. I don't want to hear it."

It felt good to walk away from him, but I knew if I walked out tonight, I might never find my way back.

And strangely, I was okay with that.

I didn't waste any time, shoving some clean clothes and essentials into my duffel bag.

Pulling my cell phone out of my pocket, I opened my text chat to Aaron.

Me: I know you hate me right now, but I could really do with my best friend coming to bail me out, otherwise I'm going to have to sleep in my car for the night.

I DIDN'T KNOW if he would take the bait, but I hoped he would.

A minute passed, and another.

I was ready to give up and get the fuck out of here. I could ask Deacon if I could stay at his house for the night, or maybe I could call Ezra and ask to stay at the Bennets'. If not, then I could always—

A reply came through and I opened it, nervous anticipation coursing through me.

Aaron: I'll be there in ten.

WELL, okay then.

He didn't sound thrilled about seeing me.

But it was a start.

AARON'S CAR pulled up alongside the sidewalk, and I climbed in.

“Going somewhere?” He eyed the duffel bag as I slung it in the back seat.

“Me and my dad got into it. I can't stay there tonight... maybe not ever,” I murmured.

“That bad, huh?”

“He said some things... about Sofia.”

Aaron flinched, his hands tightening on the wheel.

“They're all worried about you.” I sighed. “Your mom said you took off and didn't tell anyone where you were going.”

“I needed some space.”

“How'd that work out for you?”

“Ask me again later.” He met my stare and it hit me how wrecked he looked. His eyes were rimmed with red circles, puffy and sore.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want to believe it... It’s Sofia. She can’t be sick. She can’t—”

“She needs you,” I said.

“Fuck, you think I don’t know that? You think I don’t want to beat my ass at the fact that I ran? I do. Trust me, I want to beat some fucking sense into myself. But every time I think about seeing her, I panic.”

He’d made no move to pull the car onto the road, which was fine by me. Even if my old man was watching from the house. My best friend needed me right now, and the truth was, I needed him too.

Aaron dragged a hand down his face and inhaled a ragged breath. “This is so fucked up. She kept telling me she was fine, and I believed her. What the fuck is wrong with me that I didn’t see the signs? That I didn’t—”

He broke.

Aaron pounded his fist into the steering wheel, his emotions spilling over.

I reached over and grabbed him, hugging him. He collapsed against me, crying into my shoulder.

“I can’t lose her, Cole. I can’t fucking lose her.”

“Hey, look at me.” I grabbed his shoulders and shoved him a little. “We are not going to lose her. She’s strong. She can fight this. But she needs you by her side, man. She needs you to be in her corner.”

“Yeah,” he breathed. And then he said something I hadn’t expected to hear. “Thank you. For being there for her when I couldn’t. For looking out for her.”

“It’s more than that, Aaron,” I said, realizing he deserved the complete truth. “I love her. I’m in love with her.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You do.” My eyes widened. “But how?”

“Because I know you, Cole. And I know you wouldn’t start something with her unless you were pretty damn serious about it.”

“Want to kick my ass for it?” I flashed him a weak smile, trying to lighten the mood.

“Nah, I’ll save that for when you break her heart.”

“Never going to happen, man.”

“Yeah, I know that feeling.” He sank back against his chair, scrubbing a hand down his ashen face. “I guess we should get out of here.”

“Yeah, that would be good. I can call Deacon and see—”

“Fuck that.” For the first time since I got in the car, he smiled. It was weak and it didn’t quite reach his eyes, but it was something. “You can stay at our house. You’re practically family now anyway.”

“SON, THANK GOD.” Mr. Bennet pulled Aaron into his arms. “I’ve been worried sick.”

“Sorry, Dad. I just need some time to think. Found a straggler on my way home though.”

He glanced back at me, and I said, “Hi, Mr. Bennet.”

“Cole, for God’s sake, call me Asher. Come here, son.” He moved past Aaron to hug me.

I couldn’t remember the last time my own father had hugged me. But here Mr. Bennet was, holding me like I was his own.

“So Cole’s dad kicked him out and he needs a place to stay.”

“That’s not... he didn’t kick me out, I left. It’s complicated.”

Mr. Bennet frowned. “Well, you’ll stay with us for however long you need.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And if you need me to talk to your father, I’m sure I can sit down with him.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I can handle my father. But some space from him is probably a good thing right now.” Before I said or did something I couldn’t take back.

He might have been an asshole, but he was still my father —family.

“Well, you’re always welcome here. I’m going to check in with your mom,” he said to Aaron. “Ezra is staying over at Ashleigh’s house. I talked to him and Ashleigh’s parents. Coach Ford and Felicity know too. Do we need to talk about what happened tonight or can it wait until tomorrow? I’m sure Cole can answer most of the questions you have.”

“I’m good, Dad.”

“All right then. You two boys think about turning in soon, okay?”

“We will.”

Phone in his hand, Mr. Bennet went to leave, but Aaron called after him, “Dad?”

“Yeah, Son?”

“She’s going to be okay, right?” His expression guttered. “She’ll get through this?”

Mr. Bennet regarded his son, reflecting back the same agony in Aaron’s eyes. “The doctors are going to do everything they can, Son. And your sister is made of strong stuff. She’s a Bennet, after all.” He tapped the doorjamb before taking off.

It felt like the air had all been sucked from the room.

“Fuck, I need a drink. Something strong.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” I asked.

“Nope. But doesn’t change the fact I’m going to grab a bottle of Dad’s finest and head out to the man cave. You can either come or not come...” Aaron let the words hang as he started rooting in the cabinets. When he found what he was looking for, he slipped out of the back door.

I found some snacks to soak up the liquor and took off after him. Aaron was already inside, drinking from the bottle.

“Aaron, man, come on—”

“She has leukemia, fucking cancer.”

“And drowning your sorrows in the bottom of a bottle isn’t going to change anything. Have a couple of drinks, take the edge off, and then get your head on straight.” I threw the bag of chips at him. “She needs you, Aaron. Your family needs you.”

“Sit.” He motioned to the couch.

“Aaron, come—”

“Sit. The. Fuck. Down. Kandon.” I did and he leaned over, thrusting the bottle at me. “Drink.”

“I’m not sure—”

“I know you love my sister, but right now, I really need you to be my best friend. And I need you to sit here and have a drink with me and pretend that you haven’t known the truth for weeks. Think you can do that for me?”

“Yeah.” I took the bottle, bringing it to my lips. “I can do that. But I’m cutting you off after a couple more drinks.”

“Fine. Now drink.”

I did. Wincing as the top-shelf whisky burned my throat all the way down.

“I want to know everything you know,” he said.

“Maybe you should ask your dad.”

“I’m asking you.”

His glare was biting but I heard the pain in his voice. Aaron wanted to hate me. He wanted to hate his parents and Sofia for not telling him the truth. But more than anything he hated himself for being on the outside. For blindly trusting their lies and not asking more questions. It wasn't anyone's fault, not really. He'd wanted to believe Sofia was okay; had managed to convince himself she was, and no one had corrected him.

He was right though; I was his best friend and if he needed to hate me in this moment—if he needed to paint me as the villain—I'd let him.

I'd do just about anything to try and erase the hurt all over his face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Sofia

A KNOCK at the door cut through the haunting silence. Mom had gone downstairs to get coffee and call Dad, leaving me alone with my thoughts. And I had a ton of those. None of them particularly good company.

“Hello?” I called out when no one came inside.

The door finally opened, and Aaron appeared, bleary eyed and wearing a hoodie two sizes too big, as if he’d grabbed the first item of clothing he could find and pulled it on.

“Rough night?” I asked, extending an olive branch.

“You could say that.” He stalked closer, hesitating when he reached the side of my bed.

“Don’t make this weird, Aaron. Sit. Talk. But don’t make this weird.”

He dropped into the seat and propped his elbows on his knees, resting his chin on his fists. “I’m sorry.”

“You always were the more dramatic twin.” I smiled.

He didn’t return it.

“Did Cole text you?” he asked.

“He might have.”

“Traitor,” Aaron murmured.

“He wanted me to know you were okay. And he wanted to tell me about what happened with his dad.”

“Dad says he can stay with us for as long as he needs.”

“That’s good.”

I wasn’t surprised Cole had walked out after having another argument with his father, but I didn’t know what it meant for his future. He still had six months of high school left.

“Hey.” Aaron reached for my hand. “Kandon will be okay.”

“I know.”

“So, you two are like in love then?”

“He told you?”

That I didn’t know.

“Yeah, he told me. He is my best friend, you know.” Aaron’s lip quirked.

“We can make a schedule. You can get him on like a Wednesday and Friday and I’ll take the rest of the days.”

“Ha ha, funny.”

“I thought so.” I flashed him a grin. But the light dimmed in his eyes, sobering the mood.

“Seriously though, Sofe, how are you holding up?”

“I’m scared. I mean, how can I not be? But I’m okay. I’ll be okay, Aaron.”

He glanced away, staring at nothing, a look of devastation etched into his expression.

“Wait a second.” I studied him. “Were you... *crying*?”

“No! I’m captain of the football team, I don’t cry.”

“It would be okay if you did.”

He looked at me again, his expression softer. “I’m here, Sofe. Whatever you need, I’m here.” He squeezed my hand, a silent promise.

“Thanks. I’m sorry too, you know. I wanted to protect you for as long as possible. That’s why I didn’t tell you. It didn’t seem right that we should both suffer.”

“Shit, Sofe. That’s not... I’m your brother. It’s my job to worry about you. To be there for you.”

“You’re here now.”

“Have the doctors said what’s happening?”

“Not yet. They’re still waiting to talk to Dr. Jeffries to see what he wants to do. They’ll probably transfer me to University Hospital, or maybe I’ll get to come home and go back Monday which was always the plan.”

“For the egg procedure thing, right?”

“Yeah. That’s Monday. And then all being well, treatment starts Tuesday.”

He nodded, his eyes glazing over a little. “Still can’t wrap my head around it. What does it mean for school? For college? Your future?”

“I don’t know. Nobody does yet.”

“It’s so fucking unfair.”

“It is.”

“I hate this for you.”

A sigh escaped me. “I know.”

“I wish you’d have told me from the start.”

“You know now, Aaron.” And that’s all that really mattered.

“Yeah.”

Tension lingered in the space between us. Maybe I’d broken something choosing to keep him in the dark, a piece of us that would never quite heal right. But I couldn’t wholly regret it. Not when it had saved him some of the initial heartache.

“So, what now?” he asked, squeezing my hand again. As if he was checking I was still here. Still alive and in one piece.

“I guess we wait.”

“Good thing I brought reinforcements then.”

“What do you mean?” I realized then he was one-handedly texting someone. “Aaron?” I asked when he smiled, glancing at the door. It swung open and Cole appeared, but he wasn’t alone.

“What are you all doing here?” My eyes shifted from Ezra to Poppy and then Ashleigh while Cole came around to the side of the bed. He ran his hand over my hair, smiling down at me.

‘Hi,’ he mouthed.

“Hi.”

“You think we’re going to let you go through this alone?” Poppy stepped forward, swiping a tear from her eye. “I’m sorry. I promised the guys I wouldn’t cry but I can’t... oh, babe.” She hurried to my bedside and grabbed my hand. “I’m so mad at you for not telling us.”

“Babe, we talked about this,” Aaron said, getting up to move around the bed to her. He sat in the chair and pulled her down on his lap, burying his face into her shoulder.

“I can’t believe you’re all here.”

“We’re family,” Ezra said, dragging another chair over. “It’s what we do.”

“Yeah.” A rush of emotion threatened to spill out.

“We need more chairs,” he declared. “I’ll go ask one of the nurses if they can find some.”

“You’re staying?”

“Of course we are.” Ashleigh gave me a soft smile, full of love and understanding. “We wouldn’t be anywhere else. And I know I can’t even begin to imagine what you’re going through, Sofe, but if you ever want to talk about it. I’m here. I might not understand anything about leukemia, but I do know what it’s like to feel scared and alone when things are beyond your control.”

“She’s not alone,” Aaron gave a little huff, and Ashleigh winced.

“I didn’t mean—”

“He knows.” I gave her an appreciative smile. “And thank you, that means a lot to me.”

“I’m here, Sofe. We all are. Whatever you need.”

I glanced up at Cole and he gave me an imperceptible nod. ‘I love you,’ he mouthed.

“I love you too,” I said, a sense of peace washing over me.

I hadn’t expected them to come, but here they were. My friends and family. The people I loved most in the world.

I’d wanted to protect them. To save them from as much heartache and pain as possible. But really, maybe I’d been protecting myself. Because the idea of leaving them, of losing them... it was almost too much to bear.



“HI, DOCTOR,” Dad stood as the doctor stepped into the room. We waited for him to come almost all day.

After speaking with Dr. Jeffries, Dr. Mackenzie—the doctor at Rixon General—had ordered some blood work. Dr. Jeffries wanted to get a clearer picture of what was going on, if anything, before making us take the journey to Allentown.

“Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. Sofia,” he said. “How are you feeling?”

“The dizziness comes and goes in waves. I tried going to the bathroom earlier and almost went down.” Luckily Cole had caught me and carried me inside.

Before, I might have felt embarrassed that he needed to do such an intimate thing for me, but I was starting to realize that I had to lean on the people I loved a little more. Things were only going to get harder, and I couldn’t do everything for myself.

“There’s also this, Doctor.” Mom glanced at me and I nodded, giving her permission to pull down the sheet covering my body.

The big bruise along my upper thigh was new. It didn’t hurt but it looked unsightly.

“I only noticed it when I went to the bathroom earlier.”

Doctor Mackenzie nodded. “We got the blood work back and Dr. Jeffries has had time to review the results. He’d like to transfer you to University Hospital today.”

“What does that mean?” Mom clutched my hand as Dad scrubbed his jaw, tension rippling through the room.

“The latest blood work shows a marked increase in white blood cells which may signify the disease is accelerating faster than we expected. Dr. Jeffries wants to run some more tests. His team are expecting you.”

“Should we be concerned?” Dad asked.

“The tests will give Dr. Jeffries and his team a clearer picture of what’s going on. I’ve organized an ambulance to transport Sofia within the hour.”

Mom and Dad shared a look that made my heart sink.

This was bad.

Even if nobody wanted to say it.

“Okay, thanks, Doc.” Dad held out his hand and the doctor shook it.

“Dr. Jeffries is one of the best in the state.” He looked at me. “You’re in good hands, Sofia.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, wondering if this is how it would be. Setback after setback. Bad news littered in between every reprieve.

He left us alone and Aaron chose that exact moment to return from the cafeteria. “So, what did he say?”

I glanced at Mom and Dad, and Dad let out a steady breath. “Dr. Jeffries wants Sofia transferred back to Allentown today.”

“Oh, shit.”

Yeah. Oh, shit.

“I’ll miss Cole’s gig,” I said, disappointment sitting heavy in my chest.

I'd known it was a likely possibility. But part of me had hoped this would all be a false alarm, that I could go home and spend the weekend with my boyfriend and friends before Monday rolled around.

One last weekend of normalcy before everything turned upside down again.

But the powers that be couldn't even grant me that.

"Sofe, the gig doesn't matter," Aaron said.

"Yes, it does. It's important to Cole. You have to make him go, Aaron. I mean it. Don't let him do anything stupid, okay? Promise me." When he didn't answer, I added, "He needs it, Aaron. Cole needs to do this, and I need you to make sure he does."

"Fine, okay. I'll get him there."

"Good." A trickle of relief went through me as I grabbed my phone and opened our chat thread.

Me: Bad news—I have to go back to Allentown. But Aaron is going to go with you tonight and I can't wait to hear all about it. xo

Cole: I'm coming up to see you.

Me: What? I thought you went home with the others?

Cole: I lied. I've been downstairs the whole time.

MY GAZE FLICKED TO AARON, and he smirked, but it was chased by devastation. "I told him to go home with the others." He shrugged.

"Why don't we give you and Cole some privacy," Dad suggested. "I'm going to update Jase and Cameron."

It felt weird that everyone knew the truth now. But in a way, it was also a relief. Like a crushing weight had been finally lifted.

They all gave me a kiss before leaving. Cole slipped into the room a second later.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi.” I smiled weakly.

He came over to my side and sat down. Grabbing my hand, he leaned in close, inhaling a thin breath. “I don’t want to say goodbye,” he whispered.

“It’s not goodbye forever, Cole.”

I searched his eyes, hoping he could see that I planned on fighting this thing with everything I had. Because I had too much to live for.

“No, it’s not.” Steely determination glittered in his eyes. “Because I’m not done with you yet, Sofia. I have a whole life planned for us.”

“A whole life, huh?” Butterflies fluttered wildly in my chest. “Sounds serious.”

“Oh, it is.” He brushed his mouth over mine in the barest of kisses. “Late nights wrapped up in each other, lazy mornings in bed.”

“Are you saying you only want me for my body?”

He pulled back slightly to look at me. “Didn’t I already make it clear enough? I want your heart, body, and soul, Sofe. I want it all.”

“Cole...” Tears pricked the corners of my eyes. “This is harder than I thought it would be.”

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and smiled. “You’ve got this, babe. And I’m going to be beside you every step of the way, okay? Whatever happens tomorrow or the next day or the one after that, we’ll deal with it. Together.”

I nodded, feeling a ball of emotion lodged in my throat. “I know I won’t be there tonight, but I’ll still be rooting for you.”

Something passed over his expression, but he didn’t voice his thoughts. I couldn’t stand the idea that he might not play because of me. But Aaron would make sure he showed up.

One way or another, my brother would get him there. And that was enough.

It had to be.

“Will you stay at my house tonight?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Yeah. Your dad said I can stay as long as I need to. I can’t go home, not yet. Not until I figure some things out.”

“You know my family loves you and will support you, whatever you decide.”

“I know.” He dropped a kiss on my head. “I’ll come see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

I couldn’t hold back the tears, but it didn’t matter because Cole was there to wipe them away.

I knew now, he always would be.

“SOFIA, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, we didn’t expect to see you back here yet,” one of Dr. Jeffries’ nurses smiled as they wheeled me up to the desk.

For a second, I’d thought they were going to insist they roll me in on the stretcher, which was ridiculous. I could still walk and talk and control all my bodily functions.

I guess that was the frustrating thing about cancer. Until the chemo or radiation took your hair and literally started poisoning your body, you could appear to the outside world as perfectly healthy.

“We were surprised too, Jennifer,” Dad said, charming her the way he did everyone.

“And you must be Aaron.”

“Is it that obvious?” my brother chuckled.

“Good genes must run in the family.” She winked, making my parents and Aaron laugh again.

But after leaving Cole in Rixon, I was all out of laughter. It was almost four in the afternoon. In a couple of hours, he and the guys would be heading to the gig.

God, I wanted to be there. I’d wanted to be there so much.

“Where do you want her?” Dad’s question pulled me from my thoughts.

“Room three, please. We’ve got it all set up for you.” The nurse gave me another warm, reassuring smile. But a comfortable bed and homey room were the least of my worries.

“Did Dr. Jeffries explain what is going to happen?” she asked, walking beside us.

“Dr. Mackenzie did,” Dad replied.

“More tests and needles,” I murmured. “Yay, me.”

“Oh, sweetheart, you’ll get used to it eventually.”

I grimaced.

“Sweet room,” Aaron said, following us inside.

“I’ll give you some time to settle in and then I’ll be back to draw some blood, okay?”

“If you take much more, I’ll have none left.”

It was a joke, but nobody laughed.

“Way to ruin the mood,” I said under my breath.

Nurse Jennifer left us, and my brother dropped into one of the leather chairs. “You need to go,” I said.

“Relax, there’s time.”

“Aaron...”

“I’ll stay for a little bit and then head back. Cole knows the deal. He knows you’ll string him up by the balls if he doesn’t do the show.”

Damn right I would.

“It’s important for him. I just want it to go well.”

“Sofia, it’ll all work out, sweetheart.” Mom patted my hand. “Any more bruises?”

“No, Mom.”

“Dizziness? Light-headedness?”

“Mya, babe. Let’s not keep doing this.” Dad gave me an apologetic look. “She’s here now and the doctors will figure out what’s going on.”

“Pretty sure we know what’s happening, Dad,” I said.

“Well, let’s wait and see what Dr. Jeffries says before we jump to any conclusions.”

“Why can’t they just give you a stem cell transplant?” Aaron piped up. “I’ve been reading up on it and it can be very successful in cases where the patient is young and otherwise healthy.”

“It’s not that straightforward, Son.” Dad sat down. “Dr. Jeffries said they only go down that route in rare cases when treatment doesn’t work and then there’s the difficulty of finding a perfect donor match.”

“So test me.”

“What?” I balked. “No, absolutely not.”

“What. Why not?” He gawked at me.

“Because it’s a surgical procedure and you have school and football. No, Aaron. It’s not happening.”

I wouldn’t let him do that for me. Not when he had so much to look forward to. Besides, if it didn’t work... he’d never forgive himself.

No, it was too much of a burden to carry.

One I refused to shoulder him with.

“You think I’d prioritize the team over a shot at saving your life?” Disbelief and hurt coated his words. “Do you really think so little of me?”

“I... Aaron, that’s not—”

“Okay, okay, why don’t we all just take a breath,” Dad said.

But Aaron and I were locked in a stare off, both unwilling to concede even an inch.

He couldn’t do it.

If it was an option—and we didn’t even know if it was yet—I wouldn’t let him.

“You’re being ridiculous.” He bolted out of the chair. “If our roles were reversed and I was lying in that bed, tell me you wouldn’t want to do the same. Look me in the eye and tell me you wouldn’t be first in line to get tested.”

“Aaron, Son—”

“No, Dad. I’m right and she knows it. I love football and I want to be there when we win the championship, I do. But nothing, *nothing* will ever be more important to me than family. Honestly, Sofe... it breaks my fucking heart that you can’t see that.”

He stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

Dad let out a deep sigh, glancing at Mom who said, “I’ll go.”

Dad nodded, giving her a brief kiss before she slipped out. “You know, he has a point, sweetheart.” He sat down again.

“Dad, come on. You can’t seriously think this is a good idea.”

“I think every option we have to get you better should be explored. You’re my daughter, Sofia. Aaron is your brother. If there’s even a chance he’s a perfect match, we should consider it.”

“But what about the playoffs? It’s his final season with the Raiders. He’s worked so hard for this, Dad. How can I just strip all that away from him?”

“Sweetheart.” He grabbed my hand and leaned closer. “Football is his passion, sure. But you are his sister. His twin. If there’s even a shot that he can donate stem cells and Dr.

Jeffries thinks it's the right call, then it's not even a choice. Besides, from what I've read, the procedure isn't a big deal."

"You've looked into it too?"

"Of course I have, sweetheart. I have spent hours researching up on things."

"But I..." Words failed me. Because he was right. Deep down, he was right. Aaron was right. I'd do it in a heartbeat for Aaron, so it wasn't fair to not expect him to offer to do the same.

"I just don't want him to end up resenting me," I admitted, glancing away. I'd already tarnished his senior year. How could I ask anymore of him?

"Sofia, look at me." Dad commanded, and I lifted my weary gaze to his. "Aaron loves you, sweetheart. He's your brother. Your family. If there's even a chance he can do this and it might work, then we have to take it. Okay?"

I hesitated, my head and heart at war.

"Sofia..."

"I know, Dad." I relented. Another piece of my heart shattering.

"I know."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Cole

“TALK TO ME,” Jude said as we hung out backstage waiting to go on.

“I... it’s complicated.”

“Does it have anything to do with the fact your girl fainted at the football game last night?”

My jaw clenched. Of course everyone knew. Someone had fucking filmed it and shared it on social media with the caption ‘Raider’s sister goes down hard.’

Assholes.

The majority of comments were from concerned classmates, but there were a few that were cruel.

If only they knew the truth.

But it wasn’t my truth to tell, and even though Sofia’s inner circle knew now, I had a feeling she wouldn’t want it announced to the general student body anytime soon.

“Hey, is she okay?”

I glanced at him and sighed. “No, she isn’t.”

“Shit, I didn’t realize. Are you sure you can handle this? I mean, if you need to go be with her—”

“I’m fine. Besides, she’ll kick my ass if I fuck this up.”

“She sounds like a keeper.”

“You have no idea.”

Aaron burst into the room “Holy shit. It’s wild out there.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He’d been acting strange ever since he showed up forty minutes ago. I got the impression something had gone down at the hospital, but he assured me everything was fine and that I needed to focus on the gig. I’d asked Sofia via text, but she’d only confirmed his stance.

So here I was. Ready to perform in the biggest show of my music career to date.

Granted, Livewire was only a local music event, but it was invite only and everyone in the local circuit knew that talent scouts always came to spectate in hopes of spotting the next big thing.

“Are you drunk?” I asked.

“I may have had one or two drinks.”

“What is going on with you?”

“Nothing. I’m just feeling the pressure on your behalf.” He grinned but it was too wide, too fake.

“You’re lying.”

“Not tonight, yeah,” he murmured. “This is your big moment. You guys are going to rock it.”

“Fuck yeah, we are,” Travis whooped.

“You’re on after the next band, right?” Aaron asked.

“Yeah. We should be done by eight thirty at the latest.”

“But we need to stick around for a bit in case any of the talent scouts want to talk,” Mikey said, pinning me with a look that said, ‘please don’t fuck this up for us.’

“Relax, I know the drill.”

Except part of me didn’t want to be here. It wanted to be back in Allentown with Sofia. But she’d insisted I do this, and I’d give that girl anything she asked for.

“Hey,” I said to Aaron. “The girls know what time we’re on, right?”

“Yep.”

“And they’ll video call Sofe?”

“Yep, they’re on it.” He gripped my shoulder. “Don’t worry, she’ll get to see you in action.” An amused smile tugged at his mouth, but I saw the shadows in his eyes.

“What happened at the hospital earlier?” I whispered.

“We’ll talk about it later, okay? You need to focus on the task ahead. I’m proud of you, Kandon. You know that, right? And listen, I know I was a dick when I first found out about you and Sofia, but I really couldn’t think of a better guy for her.”

“Quick, someone pass me the bucket,” Travis fake retched.

“Asshole.” Aaron flipped him off. “Same goes for the rest of you,” he added. “You’re lucky to have my guy back with the band.”

“Aaron...”

“You know he up and quit on us, right?”

“Well, now he’s back.”

“Yeah,” Jude caught my eye and gave me a small nod. “He is.”

But Travis had to have the final word when he said, “Let’s just hope he doesn’t fuck it all up.”

I PLAYED MY HEART OUT.

Not only because I wanted the band to get their lucky break. Or because I wanted to prove to my old man that music could lead to bigger and better things. But I played my heart out knowing that Sofia was watching.

I’d spied Ashleigh live-streaming the gig from the side of the stage. She’d given me a little thumbs up the second we’d stepped out under the blazing lights and Jude had bellowed ‘Rebel City’ over the mic to the crammed room.

Sweat clung to my faded black t-shirt as I moved my fingers over the frets, serenading the crowd to the opening notes from Missed Notes.

It was my song still with a few extra tweaks from Jude and the guys, but now it was Sofia’s song too.

Deep yet hopeful she’d called it.

Before I realized what I was doing, I'd grabbed my mic. "This song goes out to a special girl. Sofia Bennet, I love you."

Jude shot me a smirk while the crowd went wild, cheering and clapping.

Shit.

Had I really just done that?

But it felt good.

Better than good. It felt right.

She wasn't here but she was still with me. Just like I hoped I was still with her while she watched from her hospital bed in Allentown.

The rest of the set went by in a blur. After Jude thanked the crowd and we ambled off stage, reality sunk into me.

I wanted this—I really fucking did.

But I wanted the girl more.

Shit. I needed to get to Allentown. Stat.

"Kandon, what's—"

Someone cleared their throat and we all turned to find a tall man in a corduroy jacket and jeans. "I'm Denny Hambridge. Talent scout for Razorsharp Records."

"Holy shit," Mikey breathed.

"Nice to meet you, sir." Jude stuck out his hand.

"I just wanted to drop by and say I really liked what you did out there tonight. And if you're interested, I think we could make some music together."

"Uh, yeah, we're interested. Definitely interested."

"Right answer." He chuckled, pulling a card out of his pocket. "I have a couple more bands to watch, but I'd love to sit down with the four of you and talk over some things."

"Yes! Hell yes." Travis blurted out.

“Okay. Give me say an hour and come find me. I have a booth in the back corner of the room.”

We all nodded, and he walked away like he hadn’t just offered us our dream on a platter.

“Did that really just happen?” Jude said.

“Fuck yes, it did. We have a meeting with Denny Hambridge, talent scout for Razorsharp Records.”

They were a big label, representing some of the biggest acts in the world. Mom and Dad had been fans of one of their megastar signings back in the day, Black Hearts Still Beat.

“Holy fucking shit.” The guys jostled each other down the hall toward our small dressing room.

“Kandon?” Jude glanced back. “What’s wrong?”

“I…” Fuck.

“Ahh, shit, you’ve got that look.”

“What look?”

“The ‘I need to go after the girl’ look.”

“I’m sorry, but she needs me.”

He studied me for a second and then said. “Go, get out of here. We can handle the rest.”

“You sure?” Guilt snaked through me.

“Seriously, Kandon. Go get your girl.”

“Thanks, Jude. I owe you.”

“Yeah. Tell me that when we’re rich and famous.” He chuckled.

I rushed back to the room and grabbed my stuff and slipped back into the hall, careening straight into Aaron.

“Where’s the fire?” he asked.

“I need to go.”

“Go? But I thought you needed to stick around and—”

“I need to be with her.”

“You’re going to Sofia?”

I nodded.

A wide grin broke over his face and he clapped me on the back. “Well, what the fuck are you waiting for? Get the hell out of here.”

SOFIA WAS SLEEPING by the time I arrived. She looked so peaceful, her cell phone still in her hand as if she’d fallen asleep waiting for me to call or text. My chest tightened at the thought.

I quietly dropped onto the chair beside the bed, the one Mr. Bennet had vacated when he’d come downstairs to greet me. He and Mrs. Bennet had checked into the hotel across the street so they could be close by after they’d agreed to let me stay the night.

It meant a lot that they trusted me with their daughter.

I reached for her, tracing my fingers across her brow. She murmured softly, her eyes flickering open. “Cole?”

“Hey, Sofe.”

“Y-you’re here?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“But the gig...”

“Don’t worry, I played the full set. But I couldn’t do it, Sofe. I couldn’t stay away.”

“I’m glad you’re here.” She shuffled over a little and patted the space beside her. “Lie with me.”

I didn’t need asking twice.

Kicking off my sneakers, I pulled off my hoodie and emptied out my pockets before climbing up onto the bed with her. “Come here.” I wrapped my arm around her so she could lay her head on my chest. “How are you feeling?”

“Me and Aaron got into it again.”

“I guessed something happened, but he wouldn’t tell me.”

“He’s been researching stem cell transplants and has gotten it into his head that he wants to be tested as a donor match.”

“Is that an option? The transplant?”

“I don’t know. Dr. Jeffries did mention that sometimes they go down that route if the treatment doesn’t work.”

“Let me guess, you told Aaron it wasn’t an option.”

“Something like that,” she mumbled. “I just don’t want to ruin his life any more than I already have.”

“Sofia, you’ve got to stop with all the guilt stuff. He’s your brother, your family. It’s his job to worry about you, to try and help you in any way he can. It’s not a burden.”

“It’s not that simple,” she argued.

“I’d do it, you know. If I was a match, I’d give you whatever you needed if it would make you better.”

I didn’t know much about cancer or stem cell treatments, so I’d Googled it. Aaron was right. Statistically, he had the best shot at being a perfect match. It made total sense he wanted to be tested. If the doctor said it was a viable option.

“I can’t believe you came.” Sofia peeked up at me.

“Did you enjoy the show?”

“It was great. You were great. And that little shoutout...” Her cheeks flushed. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Mom swoon so hard.”

“She watched with you?”

“My dad too. They were very impressed.”

“A talent scout from Razorsharp Records approached us.”

“Oh my God, that’s amazing. What did he say?”

“I... I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean you’re not sure?”

“I kind of left before the chat.”

“Cole!”

“It’s okay.” I nuzzled her cheek. “Jude and the guys can handle it.”

“I’m so happy for you.”

I didn’t want to tell her that I was having second thoughts. That if it came down to the band or her, I’d pick her every time.

So I kept the words trapped, burying them deep inside me.

“Do you need anything?” I asked.

“No, this is perfect.” She snuggled closer. “I apologize in advance if I drift off to sleep. I’m wiped.”

“Sleep, Sofe,” I said. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

“I love you, Cole.”

“Love you too, babe.”

More than you know.

“OH MY,” a voice said, as I cracked open an eye to find a nurse gawking at me.

“Shit, sorry. I must have fallen asleep.” I’d planned to extract myself from Sofia at some point and move to the foldaway bed. But obviously that hadn’t happened.

“It’s quite okay. I won’t tell if you don’t.” She gave me a warm smile. “But I do need to get in there and check her vitals.”

“Oh yeah, of course.” I gently untangled Sofia from my body and slipped off the bed. “She’s out for the count.”

“I can do what I need to do without waking her. But the doctor will be doing his morning rounds soon.”

“Okay.”

“How long have the two of you been dating?” she asked as she went about her observations.

“Uh, not long. A few weeks.”

“When you know, you know.” She winked at me.

I liked this woman. I could have done with someone like her in my corner in the beginning when I was trying to get Sofia to give me a chance.

“Do they know what’s going on yet?” I asked.

“Oh, sweetheart. You know it’s not my place to discuss that with you.”

“Yeah, I know.” I looked down at the floor.

“But know this, Sofia is in the very best hands here with Dr. Jeffries.”

I nodded.

“I’m going to use the bathroom real quick and go grab some coffee from downstairs. If she wakes up, will you tell her where I am?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks.” I shoved my feet into my sneakers and grabbed my wallet off the side before heading out.

The hospital was already a hive of activity despite the time. After using the restroom, I joined the line for coffee at the concession stand.

“Cole, over here.”

I spotted Mr. and Mrs. Bennet walking toward me. “How’s our girl this morning?” Ash asked.

“Still sleeping. The nurse just woke me. She said the doctor will be doing rounds soon.”

“Good. The sooner we know the plan, the better.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Cole.” Mrs. Bennet smiled at me. “And congratulations on the show last night. You were very

good.”

“Thanks, Mrs. B.”

“Mya.” She smiled. “You’re family now.”

My chest swelled, her words hitting me right in the feels.
“Do you guys want coffee?”

“Why don’t I trade places with you?” Mr. Bennet suggested. “And you and Mya can head on back up to Sofia?”

“Don’t forget my extra shot.” She leaned in to kiss her husband and he chuckled.

“Almost twenty years of marriage. I think I can remember how you take your coffee, babe”.

“One day I might change my mind, I like to keep you on your toes.”

I watched them. So much love and trust between them. They were a team. Partners. Equals.

“Come on,” Mrs. Bennet laced her arm through mine. “Let’s go see if our girl is awake yet.”

Fuck, I loved that.

Loved how easily they’d welcomed me into the fold. For the first time in my life, I felt like a part of something. A family who loved and looked out for each other.

“I bet she was happy to see you last night.”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Mrs. Bennet chuckled. “So humble. You know, I remember what it was like, to be in all-consuming love. How easy it is to get wrapped up in another person. Just promise me, Cole. If it ever gets to be too much for you, if you need some space to ___”

“I won’t,” I said firmly. “I love your daughter, Mrs.—Mya. And I have no plans on going anywhere. No matter how tough things get.”

“She’s lucky to have you.” She peered up at me.

“I’m lucky to have her.”

“I always knew I liked you.” Her smile was warm and reassuring. A silent blessing that made me stand a little taller. “Your father is a foolish man if he can’t see how great his son is.”

“Thanks, I really needed to hear that.”

“You can always talk to me and Ash. About school, college, your father, Sofia. We will never judge you, Cole. Treat our daughter right and you will always have us to lean on.”

We reached the elevator, but she didn’t get in. Instead, she pulled me into her arms and hugged me.

“Thank you, Cole. Thank you for loving her even when she was so adamant she didn’t want you to.”

“I wore her down in the end,” I laughed, trying to disguise the emotion in my voice.

“You did. But something tells me she didn’t need that much convincing.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Sofia

“IT’S NOT the news I’d hoped for,” Dr. Jeffries said.

He’d come into the room a minute earlier wearing a grim expression, one that had plunked a heavy stone in my stomach.

“Okay, what are we dealing with?” Dad asked while Cole and Mom gripped one of my hands each.

I’d asked him to be here for this. Not only for me, but for Aaron too.

Mom and Dad had urged me to reconsider but the second Cole realized what we were discussing, he insisted he wanted to be here too.

“Sofia’s blood work indicates that the disease has moved into what we call the accelerated phase. This means the targeted therapy we’d hoped to start her on next week may not be as effective.”

“So what are our options?” Dad ran a hand down his face, all business.

“We can go ahead with the TKI treatment and hope it works. Or we can try and match a donor for stem cell transplant. Sofia is a good candidate for the procedure, but it does carry its own risks and side effects.

“We’d have to give her a high dose of chemotherapy to get the cancer under control and prepare the body to receive the donor stem cells.”

“Could it cure the CML?” Aaron asked.

“It could. But as with any of this, there are no hard and fast rules.”

“What would you recommend, Doc?”

“Given the rate at which the disease is accelerating we may lose precious time if Sofia doesn’t respond to the TKI therapy. But a stem cell transplant is a huge undertaking.” He looked at me. “We’re talking two weeks of conditioning

treatment. You'll have to stay in the hospital with restricted visitation as once you start chemotherapy, you'll be susceptible to infection. After the transplant, it will be at least another month in the hospital while your body grows the new cells, and your immune system strengthens.

"You'll need daily observations, blood work, and other tests to make sure everything is going smoothly. The side effects can be quite unpleasant. Infection, bruising and bleeding, nausea, diarrhea, hair loss, breathing difficulties," he went on and on.

Jesus.

Cole squeezed my hand, and I lifted my eyes to his. He looked as devastated as I felt. But the transplant offered me a chance at being cured. Not long-term disease management—a cure.

"Once your blood counts reach a safe level, we can talk about sending you home. But the strict monitoring regime will continue. Weekly appointments at the hospital, limiting socialization, being extra vigilant with hygiene and infection control. After a year post-transplant, your immune system should be working well. Sometimes, it can take longer."

"A year," Mom murmured.

"That's a realistic timeframe. But every patient is different. Complications and side effects can arise and hinder progress at any step along the way."

She nodded, her face pale.

I felt sick. Completely and utterly out of my depth.

"How fast do we need to make a decision?" Dad asked.

"The sooner, the better. Finding a donor match can take time. There's just you and your brother, correct?"

Aaron and I both nodded.

"He should be tested as soon as possible. One in four siblings are a perfect match for allogenic transplants."

"I'll do it," Aaron said without hesitation.

“Good. We can get that organized. If you’re not a match, we can widen the net.”

God, this was happening.

It was really happening.

“I realize I’ve bombarded you with a lot of information. Take some time to talk as a family. I’m going to leave some literature with you that explains everything we’ve discussed. If you have any questions, one of my team will be happy to answer them. And we can talk over any concerns you have later.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“I know this feels very daunting, Sofia, but we’re here to guide you and do everything in our power to get you better, okay?”

I nodded. It was all I could manage. I was too stunned—too overwhelmed—to speak.

Dr. Jeffries left, but the atmosphere in the room didn’t improve.

“That was a lot to digest,” Mom broke the thick silence first, giving me a huge hug before releasing my hand to go to Dad. He tucked her into his side and looked at me.

“How are you holding up over there, sweetheart?”

“I...” Nope. I had nothing.

“He’s one of the best in his field,” Dad added. “If he thinks we should do the transplant, I’m inclined to agree.”

“Assuming Aaron is a match,” Cole said.

“If he isn’t, there’ll be other options.”

“It’ll work,” Aaron said. “It has to.”

“Aaron...” Dad cast him a warning look. We all wanted to think positive but I didn’t want my brother putting that kind of pressure on himself.

“Ash, you heard the risks. The list of side effects... a year. She’ll have to give up at least a year of her life.”

“As opposed to what, Mya? Pumping her body full of drugs that might not work? The transplant could cure her, it could—”

“Stop,” I cried. “Just... stop.”

“Sofia, sweetheart?”

“I need some space. I... I can’t do this right now.”

My head was one second from exploding.

“Sweetheart, I don’t think—”

“Mya.” Dad shook his head. “She’s right. Let’s give her and Cole some time. We’ll be downstairs in the cafeteria if you need us.”

He steered Mom and Aaron out of the room.

“Sofe,” Cole breathed, the agony in that one word—my name—like a knife to my heart.

The tears I’d fought so hard to hold back broke free, rolling down my cheeks. Cole reached for me, pulling me into his arms. “Shh, babe. I’m here, I’m right here.”

“I knew... I knew it wasn’t good news. But hearing him say all that...” Bone-deep shudders tore through me.

He gently nudged me back to look me in the eye. “What do you need?”

“Hold me,” I whispered over the ball of emotion in my throat. “I just really need you to hold me.”

I needed him to hold me and never let go.

He climbed up onto the bed and wrapped me into his arms and we stayed like that for a while.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked me.

“Not really.”

“Okay.”

“How are you so calm about all of this?” I peeked up at him.

“Because that’s my job, isn’t it? To be your anchor. To be your life raft when things get too stormy.”

“Stormy, that’s one way of putting it.”

“I know it’s not my decision, and I know I have zero medical knowledge, but I think your dad is right, Sofe. Dr. Jeffries is one of the best in his field. If he recommends the transplant, then I think you should do it.”

“It might not work.”

“But it might. Surely, that gives you some hope.”

Hope was the furthest thing I felt right now, but I didn’t tell him that. Not when he’d done nothing but hope enough for the both of us all this time.

“I don’t know what I would have done without you through all this,” I admitted.

“I’ll be with you every step of the way. Even if they have to put me in a hazmat suit to see you.” He smiled, brushing his nose down my cheek.

“We probably won’t be able to do this for a while,” I said, sadness washing over me. “A year is a long time, Cole.”

“You’re worth the wait, Sofe.”

“You say that now...” My gaze dipped, my heart clenching at the thought of losing him.

“Hey.” He tipped my face up. “I’m not going anywhere, I promise.”

“Allentown is a two-hour round trip. You have class. The team. The band. And I’m going to be stuck in here for months. Maybe longer.”

“We’ll figure it out. I can visit on weeknights and stay over on weekends, and we can video call and text all the time.

“I’m going to miss everything. The playoffs. Winter formal. Prom. Graduation. Who knows if I’ll even ever graduate?”

“It sucks, Sofe. I know that. But this isn’t some virus that you’ll get over in a couple of weeks. If you need to be in the hospital, then that’s what you’ll do. Know why?”

“Why?”

“Because I wasn’t kidding when I said I had a whole future planned out for us. So I need you to do something for me, okay?” He leaned in closer, hovering his mouth right over mine, the air crackling between us. “I need you to fight, Sofe. Life will still be there when you’re healthy again. And I kind of like having you in mine, but this is one thing I can’t do for you. I can’t fight the cancer in your blood. If I could, fuck knows, I would. But it’s your fight, babe.”

I kissed him.

Not because I didn’t want to acknowledge his words—the truth behind them—but because he was one of the best people I knew.

And I loved him so much it hurt.

Cole wound his hand into my hair and took control of the kiss, licking my mouth, tangling his tongue with mine. “I love you,” he murmured. “I love you, Sofia.”

“Kiss me,” I breathed. “Kiss me.”

He smiled against my mouth, teasing me with little flicks of his tongue, tasting me. Making me whimper and writhe against him.

“I really wish we weren’t in a hospital bed right now.”

His laughter was like a salve to my broken heart. “We could always sneak into the bathroom,” he suggested.

“And risk getting caught by my parents?”

“Your dad loves me. I think he’d forgive me.”

I pinched his shoulder. “He would not. I’m his sweet and innocent little girl. Always will be.”

“Pretty sure he knows you’re neither sweet nor innocent anymore.”

“Meanie!”

Cole wrapped me closer, breathing me in. “This, as long as we always have this, we can get through anything.”

“It’s going to make me really sick, Cole. I won’t always be this healthy on the outside.”

“You’re doing it again,” he said.

“Doing what?”

“Trying to scare me off. But I’ve told you before, it won’t work. You’re stuck with me, Sofe.”

I gazed at him, wondering what I’d done to get so lucky.

“What?” He frowned, and I smiled. How could I not when he looked so adorably confused.

“Nothing.” My smile grew.

“You, Sofia Bennet, are a terrible liar.”

“But I’m your liar.”

“Damn right, you are. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“SERIOUSLY?” Aaron froze in the doorway. “Not what I ever want to walk in on.”

Cole chuckled, dropping kisses on my head before climbing off the bed. “We were talking.”

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?” He gave us such a Dad-stare, laughter bubbled out of me. “What?”

“You have the same expression as Dad.”

“I do not.”

I nodded with a grin.

“You seem happier,” he said, pulling up a chair.

“You can thank Cole for that.”

A look of disgust washed over him. “Gross.”

“Why? I didn’t mean— seriously, jerk face, not everything is about sex.”

“Isn’t it though?” He smirked. “I bet the hospital is full of places the two of you can sneak off and... why the fuck am I talking about my sister and my best friend getting it on in some hospital closet? Jesus.”

“Hey, you said it.” Cole shrugged.

“I got to say it though, Kandon, whatever you did to her, keep it up. Because Mom is not handling it well.”

“Well, I did make you all leave.”

“It’s okay, Sis. I won’t hold it against you.”

“Aaron...” I rolled my eyes with mild annoyance.

“Yes, Sis?”

“God, you’re annoying.”

“So I need to get the test.”

“Only if you’re sure,” I said.

“I’m sure.”

“Thank you.”

“Sofe, you don’t ever have to thank me. You’re my sister. How soon will we know the result?”

“I’m not sure.”

But I really hoped it wasn’t too long.

“Well, the sooner I get the test, the better.” He stood.

“You’re going now? Aaron, I don’t think—”

“Relax, Sis. I got this. I’ll catch you two later.” He waltzed out of the room as if it was just business as usual.

“That was weird, right?” I said.

“It wasn’t not weird. He’s probably still in a little bit of shock. But he’s going to be pretty disappointed when he

realizes there's probably a wait for the test." Cole smiled at me. "So I was thinking—"

"Careful, you'll hurt your head."

He rolled his eyes. "Let's add something to your list for when you're better."

"Cole, I'm not sure."

"Just hear me out, okay? Obviously, your current situation is going to make it difficult to keep the list in play. So let's focus on after.

"When the treatment is done and you're finally better, what is the one thing you want to do more than anything?"

"I..." I hesitated. "I don't know."

Because planning for beyond the here and now seemed like tempting fate. And fate had already been cruel enough to me.

"Come on, there must be something."

"You choose something," I suggested.

"Me? But it's supposed to be your list."

"You can make one for me."

His eyes clouded over for a second, but then my parents burst into the room with a tray of drinks.

"Wasn't sure what you two wanted so we got pretty much one of everything."

"You do know there are only two of us?"

"Your mom got carried away. There's coffee. Iced tea. Frappuccinos. Some kind of cookie shake thing. Take your pick."

"Thanks." Cole dug in. "I'll never say no to a milkshake."

"Sofia, what would you like?"

"Is there any juice or water?"

"Water? But we got all these— oh."

“Sorry, Mom. I’m just not sure I can stomach all the sugar right now.”

“Of course, sweetheart.” She gave me a weak smile. “I should have thought.”

“No, it’s sweet of you. I’m sure Aaron will want something when he gets back.”

“Where is that brother of yours?”

“He went off to do the donor match test.”

“He did? But surely it doesn’t work like that.”

“Don’t ask.” I chuckled, expecting him to walk back into the room any second wearing a look of disappointment. “Cole thinks he’s still in shock.”

“Does that mean you decided to go through with the transplant?” Dad asked.

“I think so. I’d like Dr. Jeffries to go over it with me again, so I know exactly what to expect. But I think I want to do it. I want the best shot at getting better.”

Relief rolled off him, filling the room with a tenuous kind of hope. “That’s good news, sweetheart. Really good news. I’ll let Dr. Jeffries know and we can go from there. We’re so proud of you, sweetheart.”

He gave Mom a kiss. “I’m going to find Aaron and let one of the nurses know your decision.”

“Okay, Dad.”

He slipped out of the room and Mom rushed to my side. “Oh, sweetheart. Come here.” She pulled me into her arms. “He’s right, we’re so proud of you, baby. So very proud. And whatever happens going forward, we’re all right behind you.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Get in here, Cole. You are part of this too.”

My heart swelled as they both hugged me, filling me up with so much love and reassurance my chest felt fit to burst.

But I would need that in the days and weeks to come. When things got too hard, too scary and painful, I would need to remember this moment. Their unwavering love and support.

Because I was under no illusions the next few months would be anything but the hardest of my life.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Cole

“COLE, SON, COME IN.”

“Hi, Coach.” I sat in the chair opposite his desk.

“How are you doing?”

“I’m okay, Coach.”

“I hear you’re staying at the Bennets’ house for the meantime?”

“For now, yeah.”

“Do you need me to talk to your father?”

“No, thanks.”

“Very well.” He nodded. “I saw Sofia yesterday. She only had good things to say about you.”

I smiled but gave nothing away. At least, I assumed I hadn’t until he said, “Should I be worried about the nervous energy you’re giving off right now?” He sat back in his chair, waiting.

“I need to quit the team, Coach. I can’t give one hundred percent to you and the guys when my mind is always on Sofia. I want to be there for her, as much as I can be. Splitting my time between the team and her... it isn’t an option for me.”

“I see.” He steepled his fingers. “And Aaron? Am I about to lose my quarterback *and* my center?”

“I can’t speak for Aaron, Coach. But if he’s a donor match...”

“Yeah, Ash filled me in on everything.” He ran a hand over his jaw. “You know back in high school at the beginning of senior year, I would have called you all the names under the sun for pulling a stunt like this so close to playoffs. The team was everything to me. Everything. Until my wife made me realize there is more to life than football. I love the game. I will always love the game, son. But there is never a choice

between the girl you love and the game you play, because she will always come first.

“You do what you need to do, Cole. I’ll handle the team. It’s about time Faris stepped up and became the player I know he can be.”

“Thanks, Coach. I was worried I’d be letting you and the guys down.”

“We’ll bounce back,” he said. “And if we don’t, there’ll be other seasons. Sofia needs you. Mya and Ash need you. You have nothing to explain or apologize for. Anyone who thinks differently can take it up with me.”

“That means a lot, Coach.”

“Do you want to break it to the guys, or should I?”

“I’ve actually been signed out of school for the rest of the day. Sofia has the fertility procedure today and I want to surprise her.”

He smiled. “You’re a good kid, Cole. Never forget that.”

I stood. “I really am sorry about the playoffs, Coach.”

“Cole, it’s just a game. Now get out of here and go put a smile on that girl’s face.”

I said goodbye and headed straight to my car because I intended on doing just that.

I KNOCKED on Sofia’s door and pushed it ajar. “Surprise.” I peeked inside and she smiled from her bed.

“I didn’t expect to see you until later.” She sounded a little groggy.

“I got out of school early. Principal Kiln signed me out.”

“I hope you didn’t use your sick girlfriend as an excuse.”

“I may have said something about needing to cheer you up. Here.” I thrust the stuffed bear I’d been hiding behind my back

at her.

“Cole, he’s gorgeous.”

“I figured you need someone to keep you company when I can’t be here. He’s called Milo.”

“Well, hi there, Milo.” She kissed his nose. “He’s so soft and cuddly.”

“I’m glad you like him.”

“I love him.”

“How did it go this morning?” I asked, dropping in the chair beside her bed.

“Good. I now have fourteen eggs sitting on ice.”

“They’re not actually sitting on ice, right?”

“I really have no idea. But it sounded better than the spiel the doctor gave me earlier.”

“So now we just have to wait to find out if Aaron’s a match or not for the stem cells.”

“Yep.”

“Hopefully the results will come in soon,” I said.

“They said they could take up to a week.”

“Do you think they’ll let me sneak you out of here for a few hours?”

“I wish.” She let out a soft sigh. “But they said I need to be on standby in case Aaron is a match.”

“Plan B it is then.”

“Plan B?” She frowned.

“Yeah, scoot over.” I kicked off my sneakers and pulled off my Raiders hoodie.

Climbing on the bed I rearranged Sofia over my chest, my hand resting on the bottom of her spine. “What are we watching?” I grabbed the television remote and turned the volume up.

“Re-runs of *Friday Night Lights*.”

“Ooh, an oldie but a goodie.”

“Cole?” She tipped my head up to look at me.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for coming.”

“Better get used to it,” I said. “Because I intend on being around a lot.”

“What do you mean?” Her brows furrowed.

“I quit the team.”

“What?”

“It’s not a big deal, and no, you won’t talk me out of it. As far as I’m concerned, this is non-negotiable.”

“But you can’t quit the team, you’re their star quarterback.”

“Not anymore. Deacon Faris holds that title now.”

“Faris? He’s not ready. He—”

“Sofe?” I pressed a finger to her lips.

“Yeah?” It came out muffled against my skin.

“It’s done. I choose you, okay. It will always be you.”

“I... fine.” A frustrated huff escaped her lips as she turned away.

“Sofe?”

“Yeah?” she clipped out.

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I smiled. She knew it was the right call. She wasn’t in this alone, I was here. And I wanted to be here as much as I could be.

It was like Coach had said, football was just a game. But Sofia...

Well, she was the other half of my soul.

I SPENT the next four days shuffling back and forth between the hospital, the Bennets' house, and school.

Sometimes I visited Sofia alone, sometimes Aaron and I went together. Sometimes Poppy and Ashleigh were with us. While she was allowed plenty of visitors, we all tried to make sure we kept her busy and distracted from the looming result of Aaron's donor test.

Mr. Bennet started working from home or the hospital as much as he could, and while Mrs. Bennet went back to work at the high school, she was working reduced hours to allow her to travel daily between Rixon and Allentown.

Mom had called me more than once, begging me to come home. It was almost Thanksgiving and she wanted me to be there. But I couldn't do it, and I wasn't sure I'd ever go back. I had bigger things to worry about. Like the girl currently asleep in my arms.

She had been tired a lot this week, which is why, with the help of one of the nurses and her parents, I'd arranged something special for tonight.

"Sofia," I whispered, brushing her cheek. "Wake up, sleepy girl."

"Hmm, what time is it?"

"Like six. You've been asleep an hour."

"I have?" She yawned, stretching her arms out. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. But I kind of have plans for us and we're going to be late if we don't get moving."

"Plans? What kind of plans?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

"Cole, what did you do?"

A smile split my lips. “You’ll see. I think Poppy left you some things here.” I climbed off the bed and grabbed the bag Poppy had left behind when she visited yesterday.

Sofia snatched it from me and peered inside. “Why is there a dress in here?”

“Because, Sofia Bennet, we have a date.”

“A date... at the hospital?” She blinked at me as if I’d lost my mind.

And maybe I had.

“I’m sure for one night you can use your imagination.”

“Fine, I’ll go with it.”

“That’s my girl.” I kissed the end of her nose. “Now go and get yourself ready.”

It was amazing how quickly you got to know the hospital staff when you came and went every day. Nurse Jennifer and her colleague Nurse Tamsin had overheard me talking to Aaron and Ezra about wanting to do something nice for Sofia before her treatment started—or she received the news that Aaron wasn’t a donor match.

Sofia went into her small private bathroom while I pulled out the jacket I’d snuck in here. She was right, we were in a hospital, so I didn’t want to go too overboard. But I wanted to make an effort for her.

Two minutes later, the bathroom door cracked open, and she came out, taking my breath away. The dress was simple. A pale-green sweater dress that hugged every curve and complemented her skin tone and dark hair.

“Wow, you look... wow.”

A cute blush spread up her neck and into her cheeks. “Are you going to tell me what we’re doing yet?”

“You’ll see, come on.”

I took her hand to leave, but I couldn’t resist pulling her into my arms and kissing her. Burying my hands deep into her hair, I held her close, licking my tongue into her mouth.

“Cole.” She shivered, whimpering at the kiss.

Fuck.

I wanted her.

But it was impossible to get a minute’s privacy in the hospital and I didn’t want to be *that* guy, the guy who couldn’t wait.

Because I could wait. I would wait a lifetime for her and then some.

“I love you, Sofe.”

She pulled away a fraction, smiling up at me. “I love you too.”

“Come on, let’s get out of here. We have somewhere to be.”

Reluctantly, I guided her out of the room and down the hall. A couple of nurses waved, a knowing glint in their eyes.

Sofia had yet to really venture out of her room. I guessed it was her safe space, her sanctuary. I guessed in here, she could pretend sometimes that things weren’t as bad as they seemed.

We reached the elevators and she glanced at me, suspicion dancing in her eyes. “Busting me out of here?”

“You know I wish I could.” Every second of every day, I wished I could take her home. But she needed to be here.

The elevator doors opened, and I gently ushered her inside. She squeezed my hand, smiling over at me.

“Are you trembling?”

“No.” Sofia rolled her eyes.

“I’m pretty sure your hand is shaking.”

“Cole, I’m not—”

“It’s okay if you’re nervous. I am a pretty hot catch.”

“Oh, is that right?” Her lips curved in a faint smile.

This was our go-to coping mechanism when the reality of things got too much. Humor. Innuendo. Flirtation.

I dipped my head to brush my mouth over hers again.
“Love you.”

“Love you more.”

“Not even possible,” I argued.

“Hey, do you think we say it too much?”

“Say what too much?”

“Cole! You know what I mean.”

I did. But it was so cute to watch her get all worked up.

“There’s no rule, Sofe. I want you to know without even a molecule of doubt that I love you.”

“You’re such a goofball.”

“But I’m *your* goofball.” I grinned, and she let out a soft chuckle.

The elevator came to a stop and the doors whooshed open.

“Where are we?” Sofia asked, peering into the quiet hall.

“You’ll see, come on.”

We walked to the end of the hall and hit a left, the emergency door right where I expected it to be.

“Cole,” she breathed.

“Relax. I’ve got you.”

The door swung open with a little push, the frigid winter air whipping around us. I spotted the wooden pergola and guided Sofia over to it.

“What is this place?” she asked.

“It’s one of the nurse’s break stations.”

“Romantic.”

“Right.” I chuckled. “We have about fifty minutes before we’ll be inundated with cranky hospital staff.” I smiled when I spotted the little pile of supplies.

“Who did all this?”

“I may have gotten a couple of the nurses to help my cause.”

“And what is your cause?”

“You. Giving you a reason to smile. Showing you that just because this is your life right now, doesn’t mean I can’t make the effort. Hungry? We have a selection of pre-packed sandwiches, chips, and cookies. It’s not five-star cuisine but it’ll taste a damn sight better than some of the stuff they serve you here.”

I looked over at her, but she was paralyzed to the spot, staring at me with a strange expression. “Sofia? Is everything —”

She launched herself at me, anchoring her arms around my shoulders. “Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“You’re quite the fan of pre-packed sandwiches, huh?”

“Cole!” she cried.

“I know. Sofe. I know.” I hugged her tighter.

I’d wanted to do this—to do *something*—before everything got intense. I had a good feeling about Aaron’s results. I hadn’t told Sofia because I didn’t want to get her hopes up. But my girl was due a bit of good news.

“Let’s sit.” I dropped a kiss on her forehead and tugged her over to the wooden bench. One of the nurses had left us some blankets and there were heated lamps attached to the pergola’s roof which took the chill off.

We shared the cafeteria food and talked about anything and everything that wasn’t to do with her treatment or the hospital or the next few months of her life. It was nice. Normal. Well, as normal as it could be sitting on a hospital roof on a date with my girlfriend.

“It’s senior’s night tomorrow,” she said with a hint of sadness.

“I know.”

“You should have been there, Cole. Do you regret quitting the team?”

“No, I don’t.”

And if it came to it, I’d quit the band too.

Jude had updated me about the meeting with Denny Hambridge. He wanted us to record a demo tape and send it to the label. But I’d been upfront with them. My priority right now was Sofia. If I could work it around school and visits with her, then I was in. But if it required a bigger commitment, I was out.

“Cole, how can you say that? You played with them for four years. You were the quarterback. You—”

“Do you know what Coach Ford told me when I went to see him?” Sofia shook her head. “He said to me, ‘there is never a choice between the girl you love and the game you play, because she will always come first.’ And he’s right, Sofia. I will always choose you. Football. Music. Anything I want to try my hand at. They’ll all still be there after your treatment. But this time with you, it’s precious, and I won’t waste a single second of it.”

She wiped the tears out of her eyes. “That almost sounded like lyrics from a song,” she said, her voice thick with emotion.

“Maybe one day, when you’re better, I’ll turn them into a song just for you.”

“I think I’d like that.” She smiled.

I smiled back. “I think I’d like that too.”

WE CAME DOWN off the roof, high on love and laughter.

“I had a really nice evening, Cole. Thank you.” Sofia laid her head on my shoulder, and I kissed her hair.

“Maybe we can do it again sometime. I can find all the hospital’s secret spots.”

“Don’t ever tell Aaron that. He’ll think you mean...” She trailed off. Tension descending over us.

“Hey,” I hugged her tighter. “There is a whole heap of ways to be intimate, Sofia. We can have fun exploring the full range.”

“Oh my God,” she breathed, half-amused and half-horrified. “Please don’t turn up one day with blindfolds and sensual foods. I draw the line at that. There is nothing sexy about tasting new foods when you can’t see what you’re about to eat.”

“Come on.” I chuckled, ignoring the dirty thoughts infiltrating my mind of Sofia, a blindfold, and chocolate spread. I could think of worse fantasies. “Let’s get you back to your room before Nurse Jennifer sends a search party.”

But when we reached Sofia’s room, her parents, Aaron, and Dr. Jeffries were waiting.

“Mom, Dad, what’s going on?” Sofia asked, slipping out of my hold and stepping deeper into the room.

“I got my result, Sofe,” Aaron said.

“And?”

There was a pregnant pause. My heart racing in my chest as Aaron ran a hand down his face. Fuck. Wasn’t he a match? I hadn’t even let myself consider if he wasn’t.

“I’m a match.” He grinned. “I’m a motherfucking match.”

“Aaron,” Mrs. Bennet hissed, but her husband and the doctor were smiling as Aaron tackled Sofia and pulled her into his arms.

“This is good news, Sofia,” Dr. Jeffries said. “Aaron is a perfect match.”

“That’s... I... I don’t know what to say.” A fresh wave of tears cascaded down her cheeks, but I saw the relief there. The hope.

This was Sofia's shot at a cure. At a long and disease-free life.

I folded my arms and leaned against the doorjamb, smiling.

My girl was getting stem cells.

She was getting the transplant.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Sofia

AFTER FINDING out Aaron was a match, things became a whirlwind. We both had to have a series of tests. Me to make sure my body could withstand the transplant, Aaron to make sure he was as fit and healthy as we all presumed him to be.

Dr. Jeffries had explained that the procedure of collecting Aaron's stem cells was quite straightforward. But he would be required to inject himself daily for a few days before the transplant to encourage stem cell growth.

Aaron took it all in stride. He'd already talked to Coach Ford. He wanted to stay on with the team and practice and play as much as he could, but if the timings clashed, I took priority.

I hated that it was impacting his life, everything he'd worked so hard for. But I was done arguing. Everyone was right—I needed this—I needed the transplant. Besides, Aaron and Poppy had their college lives at West Chester to look forward to. In the grand scheme of things, this was a small speck in his life, but it was a huge blip in mine.

“How's my girl?” Dad breezed into my room. They were all like part of the furniture now. He and Cole were on a first name basis with most of the nurses on my ward. I caught a few of their dreamy-eyed stares whenever Dad and Cole were on the floor. But what did I really expect?

They were both charming and exceptionally good-looking.

In fact, it was scary how much they were alike personality-wise. I hadn't really noticed it before, but the more I watched them together, the more I realized Cole and Dad shared a lot of similar traits.

Trust me to fall in love with someone just like my dad. But part of me wasn't surprised. I'd always watched my dad and the way he loved Mom and wanted that. I'd wanted someone to worship the ground I walked on. To love and protect and care for me. A best friend. An equal. A partner.

Cole was all those things and more, and despite the fact we'd only been officially together for almost a month, I already saw a life with him.

A future.

One I so desperately wanted.

But it was going to be a long arduous path, paved with highs and lows and a few road bumps along the way.

“Hey, Dad. Where’s Co—”

“Hey.” He burst into the room.

I was halfway into my conditioning phase which meant visitation was restricted to four people to reduce the risk of infection. They didn’t quite have to wear a hazmat suit to enter the room, but they did have to follow strict sanitization rules to keep my room as sterile as possible.

It sucked that Poppy, Ashleigh, and Ezra couldn’t visit, but Cole and Aaron kept me updated on their lives and having my cell phone on hand meant they were never far away.

“What do you have in there?” I eyed the bag in Cole’s hand.

“Figured Milo needed a friend.” He pulled out another stuffed bear. “Don’t worry, he’s been sanitized, and Nurse Jennifer approved.”

“Good to know,” I chuckled, accepting the bear.

Cole was always finding ways to make me smile. A motivational text. Something as simple as a touch or kiss when I was feeling scared or overwhelmed. The little notes he’d taken to giving me. Sometimes they were little doodles or song lyrics and sometimes they were secrets we only shared with each other. Plans for our future. Promises we made to one another. Things we were too scared to say out loud, but things we desperately wanted to come true one day.

He was the perfect boyfriend. The perfect friend. The perfect partner. And I couldn’t imagine doing any of this without him.

“Everything still on track?” Dad asked as Cole got comfy on the chair beside my bed.

“So far so good,” I replied. “We are Day minus five.”

Which meant if everything went well, in five days, I’d get the transplant.

“You look tired.” He came closer.

“You try being pumped full of chemotherapy drugs, Dad.” I managed a small smile.

The truth was every day was harder than the last. My energy levels were in the toilet, and I barely had an appetite. But it could be worse—it could always be worse. At least, that’s what I kept telling myself.

“Get some rest.” Cole leaned over and kissed my forehead. “We’re not going anywhere.”

“Cole’s right, sweetheart. Sleep if you need to. We’ll be right here.”

Just their presence relaxed me. It was the times I found myself alone in the silence that really sucked. When I had nothing but my thoughts as company.

“I might just close my eyes for a little bit,” I said, already feeling the exhaustion seep into my bones, dragging me under.

But nightmares didn’t find me there.

Only dreams of Cole and the future we deserved.

“OKAY, SOFIA, EVERYTHING’S LOOKING GOOD.” Dr. Jeffries flicked through my notes. “Are you ready to get some new stem cells?”

“I think so.”

“Great. You have a little bit of time before we’ll bring you down for the procedure. So try to relax, spend some time with your family, and then we’ll get the show on the road, okay?”

I nodded, my body trembling with nervous anticipation.

Today was the day.

Day zero.

Aaron's procedure had gone well a couple of days ago. He'd had to miss the first playoff game, but it was a small price to pay.

The Raiders won by one point thanks to Deacon Faris, and Ezra, who was still on the team. Aaron was hoping to play in the Thanksgiving weekend game in a few days.

Thanksgiving.

A pang of sadness went through me. I'd never spent a Thanksgiving away from my family before. And this year, I'd be in post-transplant isolation. I'd miss the holidays too. But as everyone kept reassuring me, if everything went well with the transplant I had an entire life of Thanksgivings, and holiday seasons ahead of me.

"I'll see you soon." Dr. Jeffries slipped out of the room, and Cole, Aaron, and my parents filed inside.

"Everything good?" Dad asked, and I nodded.

"I'll be going down later." My bottom lip wobbled.

"Oh, sweetheart. Come here." Mom came over and hugged me. "This is a good thing, Sofia. The first step to getting you better."

"I know, Mom. I'm just... it's a lot."

"We know, sweetheart. We know."

Cole sat beside me, gripping my hand. He looked pale, his usual playful smile and twinkle in his eyes gone.

"Cole?" I whispered, and he lifted his haunted gaze to mine. "You okay over there?"

"I... fuck, Sofe. I know I've been the one being positive and counting the days, but now it's here, I..." He looked stunned. Fear shining in his eyes.

"I know. I'm scared too."

“We’ll look out for him, sweetheart,” Dad said.

Cole was still living with my family. He’d talked to his mom, but it had ended in another argument, so he’d decided not to go home. Aaron and Ezra had gone with him to collect a bunch of his things last week. Part of me was relieved. He needed to be around people who could support him, and he wouldn’t get that at home. Besides, my parents and brothers already viewed him as part of our family.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Why don’t you give Sofia her surprise?” he suggested to Cole.

“Surprise?” I asked, intrigued.

He reached over to grab my tablet and handed it to me.

“What are—”

It started ringing and Poppy’s avatar appeared. I glanced at Cole and smiled. “Answer it.”

I did and my best friend’s face filled the screen.

“Hi, babe,” she said.

“Hey, this is a surprise. Shouldn’t you be in class?”

“Principal Kiln made a special exception since it’s your big day.”

“Hi, Sofe.” Ashleigh appeared over her shoulder. And then Ezra and Coach Ford and his wife Felicity, and Ashleigh’s mom and dad all filled the screen.

“You guys, what is this?” Emotion surged inside my chest.

“We wanted to wish you good luck,” Poppy said, holding up a sign.

“Oh my God, did you make that?” Laughter rumbled in my chest.

“We may have had an arts and craft session, yes.”

“You guys...”

“We just wanted to say we love you, Sofia,” Coach Ford said. “You’re family and we’re all rooting for you, sweetheart.”

“You’ve got this, babe,” Poppy beamed, tears glistening in her eyes.

“Love you, Sis,” Ezra added. “I’ll be there as soon as it’s safe. But if you need anything... I’m only a phone call away.”

“Thank you.” The words got stuck over the lump in my throat.

“Whatever happens, Sofe. We love you and we’re here for you, okay?” Ashleigh leaned her head on my brother’s shoulder.

“And there’s one final surprise,” Poppy said.

“What—” The camera switched to pan around, and my breath left my lungs.

I hadn’t even noticed where they had been calling from, so many of them crammed in front of the camera. But the second I spotted the football field, I knew.

“What is—”

The football team in their familiar Raiders blue and white jogged onto the field, lining up shoulder to shoulder, each of them holding a piece of card filled with a single letter.

“Good luck, Sofia, you’ve got this,” I murmured. “Gosh, I-I don’t know what to say.”

“Everyone is rooting for you, babe. Everyone.”

I couldn’t even talk, drowning in a sea of tears and emotion.

“Thank you,” I managed to choke out.

“We love you, babe.”

“Love you, Sofe.”

“Think sticky stem cell thoughts,” Poppy added, and everyone laughed.

“I’ll speak to you soon,” I said, not wanting to hang up. Because when I did, life as I knew it would be forever changed.

I would be forever changed.

But hopefully, it would be changed for the better.

Cole thanked everyone and ended the call, handing the tablet off to my dad. He climbed up on the bed with me, not caring that my parents and Aaron were in the room and held me tight.

But then they all piled in, Aaron first. Then Mom, then Dad. Until they were all holding me, hugging me, whispering how much they loved me.

“You’ve got this, Sofia. And we’re right behind you, every step of the way.”

A knock at the door cut through my sobs and my family backed away to give me and Cole some space.

Nurse Jennifer peeked into the room and smiled. “Okay, Sofia. Ready to do this?”

I nodded, squeezing Cole’s hand tightly.

“Then let’s go get you some new stem cells.”

I’D HAD many heart stopping moments over the last few weeks.

Hearing I had leukemia for the first time. Finding out it had accelerated. Hearing the words, ‘your brother is a donor match.’ Waking up after the transfusion with the innate knowledge that a part of my brother now lived inside of me, knowing that it was up to my body to accept his stem cells.

But nothing could compare to the way I felt when Dr. Jeffries arrived to give me the news we’d all been so desperately waiting to hear.

“You can go home.”

It had been seven weeks and three days since my transplant.

Seven weeks of constant tests and monitoring. Of some days feeling so nauseous that I couldn't get my head out of a plastic bowl. I'd cried and laughed and cried some more. I'd spent eight days in complete isolation after contracting an infection. But there had never been a single moment where I'd truly felt alone.

Cole had been my rock. The immovable force in my life. Even when he couldn't physically visit me, he found ways to be present in my life. And I only fell deeper and deeper in love with him.

"H-home?" I whispered, not daring to believe it. I'd missed Christmas and New Year. I'd missed my brother and the Rixon Raiders winning the championship against all odds.

But none of it mattered in the face of hearing those four little words.

Home.

I could go home.

"You'll need to attend twice-weekly visits initially, so you're not quite rid of us just yet." Dr. Jeffries smiled. "But your blood count is looking good, and your vitals are strong. It's time to see how you fare outside these four walls."

"I... thank you." Tears pricked the corner of my eyes.

"My team has briefed your parents and Cole on what to expect."

I smiled at that, hardly surprised that he'd requested to sit in on that particular conversation. Cole was determined to help me in any way he could and given the fact that he'd moved in permanently with my family, he was going to be around a lot.

I couldn't wait.

"I'd urge you to think of any questions or concerns you might have so that we can discuss those before you leave."

“I will.” But not right now, I was too busy daydreaming about freedom beyond the hospital building.

About everything I could finally do, even if it had to be baby steps.

Baby steps was good.

It was enough.

It was a stepping-stone to more.

To the dreams I had.

The life I wanted to lead.

A life with the boy who had stolen my heart and refused to give it back.

A life with the man I knew he'd become.

My best friend. My equal. My partner.

We'd fallen in love not knowing if our future was guaranteed, and there was something so sweet about the fact that my brother, Cole's best friend, had given us a shot at life—at love.

And I didn't plan on wasting a second of it.

I would live for Aaron. For Cole and my parents and my friends.

But most of all, I would live for myself.

EPILOGUE

ALMOST SIX MONTHS LATER...

Sofia

“I can’t believe they’re opening for *Blood and Roses* tomorrow,” Poppy said as she lazed in the chair.

The early summer sun felt so good beating down on me as we hung out in the Fords’ yard. I was almost six months post-transplant, so life wasn’t normal yet, but every day my body—my immune system—was getting stronger.

I still had to be careful and weigh up the risks of exposing myself to lots of people, but life was good. With my family and friends, and Cole by my side, I had everything I needed.

“I can’t believe the asshole over there decided to quit the band again,” Aaron said, giving Cole a pointed look. But despite my brother’s teasing, it didn’t stop the pang of guilt that went through me.

“Come on, man. You know why I walked away.” Cole’s arm tightened around me and I leaned my head on his shoulder.

“Yeah, I know.” My brother’s expression softened. “And I love you for it, Kandon, I do. But it should have been you up there tomorrow night.”

Aaron was only being a supportive friend, I knew that. But it still stung that Cole had to give up his dreams for me.

Because of me.

His band—ex-band—had been invited to tour with rising talent *Blood and Roses*. They were opening for them tomorrow night at the Franklin Music Hall in the city.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” he whispered against my neck.

“Nothing.” I untangled myself from him and stood. “I’m going to use the bathroom.”

“Shit, Sofe, I didn’t—” Aaron called after me, but I was already gone, hurrying into the Fords’ house.

“Sofia, sweetheart,” Poppy’s mom Felicity looked up from where she was cutting watermelon. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I just need to use the bathroom.” I flashed her a weak smile and disappeared down the hall.

I’d barely got the door closed when Cole appeared.

“Sofo, wait.” He curled his hand around the doorjamb.

“I just need a minute.”

“Don’t pay any attention to Aaron. You know he speaks before he thinks sometimes.” Shouldering the door open, he slipped inside, looming over me.

“Do you wish things were different?” I blurted.

Cole let out a steady breath, framing my face in his hands. “Sofia, we’ve been over this. You are and always will be more important to me than the band or football or any of that stuff. I love you.” He brushed his lips over mine.

“I love you too.” I wound my arms around his neck, touching my head to his. “I don’t ever want you to resent—”

“Sofia, listen to me. Do I wish that you hadn’t gotten sick? Fuck, yes. Of course I do. But loving you, choosing you, will never feel like a mistake. I’m excited about what the future holds.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” His thumb grazed my jaw. “The tutoring is going well, and I think I could really build on it. And then as soon as you get the green light from Dr. Jeffries it’s just you, me, Vera, and the open road.”

“I want that,” I whispered. “I really, really want that.”

When Cole had asked me all those months ago to add something to my list for when I got done with treatment, I’d told him to do it.

I’d never in my wildest dreams imagined that he would present me with Vera the day before graduation.

Vera was a VW camper van. A camper van Cole, Aaron, Ezra, and my dad had spent three months restoring. Of course Aaron had named her, and it had stuck.

There had been a lot of tears that day. Not only had I been able to graduate against all odds, but Cole had given me the gift of a future. Together. After everything I'd been through—and with my parents blessing—Cole wanted us to go on an adventure. He wanted me to see things. To experience things.

He wanted me to live.

And despite knowing that Mom and Dad would help us financially, it was important for Cole to contribute. So he'd been giving private guitar lessons for the last four months, saving half of the money for our big adventure, and giving the other half to my parents to help with the groceries.

We still didn't have a date nailed down—it depended on a lot of things—but it was the goal.

And I couldn't wait.

Until my jerk of a brother opened his big mouth and reminded me of everything Cole had sacrificed to be with me.

“Cole?”

“Yeah, babe?”

“I really do want you to go to the show tomorrow. I know you were unsure, but you should be there.”

“We'll see.” He kissed the end of my nose but then fixed his mouth over mine.

“Cole,” I murmured, twisting my fingers into his t-shirt.

His tongue slipped past my lips, tangling with my own. Soft, lazy licks that made my body stir to life. Cole buried his hand in the back of my hair, angling my mouth right where he wanted me as he teased and nipped at my lips. A whimper spilled out of me, and he chuckled.

“God, I love that sound.”

“I love you,” I breathed. “We should probably get back out there before people start to wonder where we are.”

“Okay, but I have a surprise for you tomorrow.”

“A surprise?” My brows furrowed. “But the show—”

“Stop worrying.” He dropped a kiss on my head.
“Everything’s going to be okay, Sofe,” he added with a smile.

My heart fluttered at his words.

His promise.

Because this time, I knew he was right.

Cole

“God, Cole... that’s... ah,” Sofia cried out as I circled my hips, lifting her thigh to change the angle and go deeper.

“You feel so fucking good, Sofe.” My lips dropped to her neck, licking and sucking. Branding and taking her.

It was a rare occasion when the Bennet house was empty, but whenever it was, we liked to make the most of it. If Sofia felt too tired for sex, we got naked and cuddled in bed and watched a movie while my hands mapped every inch of her skin. But when she was having a good day—and they were happening more and more lately—we used the time to love each other.

Sometimes it was quick and hard and fast, both of us desperate for the connection, the release. But other times, like right now, it was unhurried and intense. Until we were a breathless, sated heap.

“More,” she cried, lifting her hips to meet my slow, lazy thrusts.

I kissed the base of her throat, licking up her jaw and plunging my tongue into her mouth. She was close. I’d learned her body, what she liked and the little signs she was about to come. Like the flush to her skin, the way her voice became stilted and choppy. How her pussy gripped me so tightly I had no choice but to follow her over the edge.

“Cole, God... *God.*” She yanked me down, kissing me back harder as her body began to ripple beneath me.

“Fuck, Sofe, you’re so tight.” I buried my face in her neck as I came.

She clung to me, riding out the intense waves of pleasure. “That was amazing.” Sofia smiled up at me, love glittering in her eyes.

“You’re amazing.” I kissed the end of her nose. “Are you ready for your surprise?”

Her eyes flared. “You promise it doesn’t involve you bailing on the show? I really want you to go.”

“Don’t worry, I’m going.”

“Good.” She smiled. “You can video call me.”

“You know it.”

Little did she know I had something much better planned.

I tucked a piece of her hair behind one ear and kissed her again. “I love you, Sofia Bennet.”

“I love you too.”

I would never tire of hearing those words, not even for a second. The guys gave me shit about it all the time, but I didn’t give a fuck. I knew what it was like to almost lose the girl you loved. I intended on making sure she knew every second how much she was loved.

If I didn’t think Asher and Mya would disapprove, I’d put a ring on her finger and make her mine as soon as possible. But we were still young. We had a whole life ahead of us for the big stuff. I wanted Sofia to enjoy life first, to experience things. To make up for lost time. I wanted to give her the world and then some, and when I’d seen Vera advertised on a local online marketplace, I knew she was the inspiration I’d been looking for.

And I couldn’t wait to go on an adventure with my girl.

Sofia

“Sweetheart, your surprise is here,” Dad called, and I went hurrying downstairs.

“Surprise!” The girls shrieked when I entered the kitchen.

“Why aren’t you two at the show?” I frowned.

Poppy rolled her eyes, mildly offended. “As if we’d leave you at home and all go off to the show without you.”

“But—”

“Pops is right, Sofe. We are having some quality girl time.”

“We are?”

“Yep. But we need to leave now if we want to make it in time.”

“Make it where exactly? You know I have to be extra careful—”

“Relax, we’ve got you.” Poppy smiled. “But we really do need to go.”

“You girls have fun,” Dad said. “But not too much fun.”

“Ash.” Mom rolled her eyes. “Sofia is quite capable of acting responsibly.”

“I know. It’s not Sofe I’m worried about.” He pinned Poppy with a knowing look.

“Mr. B. You wound me.” She flashed him a cheeky smile.

“We’ll see you later, bye.”

“Bye, sweetheart. Have fun.”

My parents waved me off in that embarrassing way of theirs, as if their little girl was going out into the big wide world for the first time. But I got it. Things could have ended a lot differently for me. They could have lost me. So I liked to cut them a little slack.

“Are you excited?” Poppy asked as we hopped into her car.

“I would be if someone told me what’s going on.”

“And ruin the big surprise? Cole spent—”

“Pops!” Ashleigh said.

“Oops sorry.” She grinned at me, backing out of my driveway.

I took note of the route, frowning when she headed out of town. “We’re leaving Rixon?”

Huh.

Maybe we were going to visit our friend Peyton in Halston. But we didn’t take the road for Halston. Instead, Poppy turned down a dirt road.

“A drive-in movie?” I asked, realizing where we were.

“You could say that,” she murmured.

But then something caught my eye, and my frown deepened.

“Uh, why is your sister and her boyfriend here?” I asked Poppy, staring at Lily and Kaiden as they stood talking to some of our other friends. Peyton. Carrie-Anne and her boyfriend Bryan. His friend Gavin and his girlfriend Pen. Ashleigh and Ezra were there too, and my brother.

“But... I don’t understand.” I scanned the field half-expecting Cole to emerge from somewhere, only he didn’t.

“Come on.” Poppy cut the engine and climbed out. Ashleigh too. But I was too confused to move.

Someone yanked my door open, and my brother’s face appeared. “Getting out anytime soon, Sis?” He grinned.

“I... What is going on?”

“You’ll see.” He held out his hand and I took it, letting him pull me from the car.

“Sofia,” Lily called.

“Hey, everyone.” I joined them, still in shock at finding them all here. “Can anyone tell me what’s going on?”

“So you know how you couldn’t go to the show?” Aaron said, his arm around Poppy’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Well, Kandon thought we could bring the show to you.”

“Wha—” The movie screen flickered to life and a stage filled it, music pouring out of the speakers.

“That’s Rebel City.”

I’d recognize that song anywhere, after sitting in Jude’s garage for a week listening to them rehearse.

“This is a live feed.” Poppy came over, lacing her arm through mine. “He didn’t want you to miss out, babe. And besides, none of us felt cool about leaving you.”

“Poppy...”

“We love you, Sofia. I hope you know that.”

Someone handed out drinks, beers for everyone who wasn’t a designated driver. I stuck to water thanks to the concoction of drugs I was still taking.

“They’re good,” Kaiden said.

“They are. I wish Cole didn’t... Uh, guys, where is Cole?” I asked.

Aaron smirked and pointed at the screen. “You’ll see.”

The song ended and Jude thanked the crowd.

“And now we want to welcome on stage a friend of the band. Some of you may know, he should have been up here on this stage with us tonight, but our boy is in love.” The crowd cheered, and Jude laughed right along with them. “Cole, my man, get out here. Ladies and gentlemen, put your hands together... for Cole Kandon.”

“Oh my God.” I clutched my throat, my heart ratcheting in my chest as I watched him walk out on stage, guitar slung over his shoulder.

Aaron took my hand and squeezed it gently. “You good?”

“I... I don’t know what to feel.”

Cole was there, at the show.

“Jude and the guys agreed to let me come out here tonight to play you a song about a very special girl. Some of you may know this one already, but we’ve made a few adjustments. I hope you like it.”

When the opening beats to *Missed Notes* filled the air, the air left my lungs.

Jude seduced the crowd with Cole’s haunting lyrics and his gravelly voice. But I only had eyes for Cole as he played his heart out.

For me.

He wasn’t looking at the crowd. Or his friends. He was staring right into the camera.

Right. At. Me.

“God, that boy loves you,” Poppy whispered, pressing closer into my side.

She wasn’t wrong.

Even with a screen and over fifty miles between us, I felt his love wrap around me like a warm blanket. But when he took center stage and sang a brand-new verse, I melted.

“Shit, he’s good.” Someone whistled. “Really fucking good.”

Tears streamed down my cheeks as he immortalized our love story in the flow of the lyrics, the cadence of every note.

I wanna paint your skin with my hands. Map every scar, every secret with my lips. Watch the rise and fall of your chest as I fall to my knees for you.

I wanna kiss every bruise, heal every wound, I wanna lift you up when you fall down. Dry the tears from your eyes and put a smile on your face.

I wanna be there by your side. Hold your hand through it all. I wanna be the one you turn to, be your shelter in the storm...

And when he was done, he smiled at the camera and said, “I love you, Sofia. And that’s the beginning and end of everything.”

“Did he just quote Fitzgerald?” Lily swooned, and laughter spilled out of me.

Because it was such a completely and utterly Cole thing to do.

“Babe, you need to take some lessons from him,” Poppy said to Aaron who grumbled something under his breath about Cole always showing him up.

“I second that,” added Lily.

“Jesus, Bennet,” Kaiden grumbled. “You need to have a word with your guy. He’s making the rest of us look bad.”

I was so overwhelmed; I hadn’t realized Cole had left the stage until my cell phone started ringing. Digging it out of my pocket, I smiled at Cole’s name.

“Hi,” I said, moving away from our friends.

“Hi.”

“Cole, that was... thank you.”

“Did you like the new verse?”

“I loved it. I love you.”

“I meant it, Sofe. Every word. This is our new verse, babe, and whatever comes next, whatever the future holds, as long as I get to do it with you, I don’t care about the rest.”

“What are you saying, Cole?” My voice trembled at the intensity in his words. The way I *felt* his words right down to my very soul.

“I’m saying... how do you feel about forever?”

Forever?

I smiled.

That sounded pretty damn perfect to me.

Asher

“How the fuck did we get here?” I asked my best friends as we sat in the yard, watching the kids goof around in the pool.

Kids.

They weren't kids anymore—they were young adults, going off into the big wide world to live their lives.

Come fall, the nest would be officially empty, and I didn't know how to feel about that.

“We got old, Ash.” Cameron chuckled, taking a pull on his beer.

“Hey, now. Speak for yourself. I've never felt better.” I ran a hand through my hair. Okay, so it was a little salt and pepper in places, but there was plenty of life left in me yet.

“I love your son, Ash,” Jase grumbled. “But if he keeps putting his hands on my daughter's ass, I won't be held responsible for my actions.

“Aaron, Son,” I yelled across the yard. “Quit feeling up Poppy please. Jase is getting cranky.”

“Asshole,” he muttered under his breath. “You know Felicity walked in on them... doing stuff last week.”

“Fuck, she didn't?” Cam almost choked on his beer.

“Did too. Pretty sure she toned down the real version of events for my benefit but they're at it like rabbits.”

“They're eighteen. Remember us at that age?”

Jase's expression darkened. “I'd rather not.”

I snorted. Yeah. He had been a real ass to Felicity back in high school.

“I'm still surprised she decided to go all in and put up with your cranky ass forever,” I said with a smirk.

“She’s the best thing to ever happen to me. And those girls.” He cast his gaze over to his daughters again. “I will end anyone who ever tries to hurt them. End. Them. Ash. I mean it.”

“Yeah, yeah, if Aaron breaks her heart, you’ll break his legs. I got the memo the first fifteen hundred times, Jase.”

“One day they’re just tiny bundles with big lungs lying in your arms, and then they’re... going off to college. Fuck,” he hissed. “I need something stronger to drink.”

“Nah, we shouldn’t be commiserating,” Cam said. “We should be celebrating. Look at them. They’re all well-rounded kids with good manners and values. We should be high-fiving each other and telling ourselves what a great job we did.”

“He has a point.” I gave Jase a pointed look.

“I guess we didn’t screw up too badly.”

“How could we? We’re fucking awesome.” Laughter rumbled in my chest as I watched Sofia smile at something Cole said. I couldn’t even get upset about how wrapped up in each other they were. Because she was here, and she was going to be okay. Dr. Jeffries had finally given her the green light for their trip later this year.

My girl was okay, and she had her whole life ahead of her. That’s all any parent wanted. To see their kids happy and healthy.

“Are you... crying?” Jase snickered, and I flipped him off.

“Fuck you, asshole. Fuck you. It’s my allergies.”

His mouth twisted with amusement but then settled back on our kids again. “We really did good, huh?”

“Yeah,” I looked at them both, my best friends—the men I considered family—and smiled. “Yeah, we did.”

“But I swear to God, Ash, if Aaron puts a baby in her before she’s twenty-five...”

“Oh shit.” Cam chuckled. “Can you imagine? One day, we’ll be grandparents.”

“Speak for yourself. I can’t wait to have a bunch of rug rats running around. The future generation of Raiders.”

“Now there’s a toast I can get on board with.” Jase tipped his bottle toward me. “To the Rixon Raiders.”

“The Raiders.” Me and Cam clinked our bottlenecks with his.

“May they always play hard... fight hard... love hard.”

Thank you for reading Sofia and Cole’s story.

The Rixon High series concludes in *Forever Goals*, coming 2023. [Pre-order here.](#)

PLAYLIST

Remission – Courage My Love

Feel So High – Floods

Like I'm Gonna Lose You – Meghan Trainor ft. John Legend

Lay Me Down – Sam Smith

Everybody Dies – Billie Eilish

Everybody Hurts – Jasmine Thompspon

Someone You Loved – Lewis Capaldi

Put It All On Me – Ed Sheeran, Ella Mai

Like I'm Gonna Lose You – Jasmine Thompson

Say Something – Great Big World, Christina Aguilera

Chasing Cars – Noelle Johnson

Hold You – Nina Nesbitt, Kodaline

The 30th – Billie Eilish

Elastic Heart – Sia

Kiss Me – Ed Sheeran

Perfectly Wrong – Shawn Mendes

Be Alright – Dean Lewis

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angsty. Edgy. Addictive Romance

USA Today and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of over forty mature young adult and new adult novels, L. A. is happiest writing the kind of books she loves to read: addictive stories full of teenage angst, tension, twists and turns.

Home is a small town in the middle of England where she currently juggles being a full-time writer with being a mother/referee to two little people. In her spare time (and when she's not camped out in front of the laptop) you'll most likely find L. A. immersed in a book, escaping the chaos that is life.

L. A. loves connecting with readers.

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