

NAIIVE

in Love

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****TRIGGER/CONTENT WARNING****

This book contains a main character who is emotionally abusive. This may pose a trigger for some.

Content Warning: Underage drinking, marijuana use, foul language, and sex.

Just your friendly reminder that
YOU ARE GOOD ENOUGH!



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1

I DON'T WANT TO GET OUT OF BED, IS THE ONLY THOUGHT running through my mind. How long can I stay here? Do I really need to go to class? What will I miss? How many classes have I missed so far? These are my thoughts almost every morning since I began at South Texas State University in San Antonio. Nothing about the past month has been what I thought college would be like. It is so much harder than I imagined, from the classes to making new friends to the adjustment of living on my own.

I never imagined college life would be so depressing. Life before was easy. I had attended a small private high school, didn't study much to keep my A average, had an active social life and a great group of friends. My friends, Brianna and Paige, the hot girls all guys fell over themselves to get their attention and Preston and Josh, my guy friends who were more like protective big brothers. I assumed college would be the same way, but on a bigger scale, with fewer rules and no curfew.

I am stuck. I don't know what to do anymore. The past several weekends, I've spent alone. I've walked the mall and Target aimlessly and driven around the city, just to leave the apartment. Most of the time, I'm holed up in my room binging every show imaginable and even rewatching favorites.

After contemplating and wallowing for several minutes, I roll out of bed since I skipped out last Wednesday. Explaining to my dad how I failed a class is not something I want to do.



I SCAN THE ROOM, finding a seat in my usual area—the middle, where I can blend in. A couple of minutes later a good-looking guy sits next to me.

“Hi, I’m Caleb,” he says smiling extending his hand to me.

“Hi, Sophia Mora,” I take his hand, shaking it. He’s cute, with light brown hair and amazing caramel-colored eyes.

“I noticed you weren’t here on Wednesday. Want to borrow my notes?” He gives me a sly smile, raising a brow.

“I didn’t realize we had truancy cops. I thought no one cared if you came as long as your tuition was paid,” I answer too excitedly, my starvation for attention and social interaction glaring.

“Work study program...you know, keep an eye out for cute girls and make sure they come to class. Don’t worry, no ticket for you though.” He nudges me with his shoulder, smirking. My stomach flutters at the attention. I am not accustomed to being hit on, because it was always my two gorgeous friends in high school who drew the male attention.

“Well, since you’re giving me a warning, I guess I’ll take the notes. It’ll help with my cover story that I was here.” I giggle. It feels good talking, joking, and flirting with someone. I am so hard up for conversation and friends.

Just then, the professor walks in and begins class. The time passes quickly with us whispering and chuckling at silly comments. I catch him stealing a couple of side glances at me and his hand grazes my arm a few times. I do my best to hide how it’s affecting me. I’m trying not to act like a fool desperate for attention.

When the professor ends class, Caleb hands me his notebook. “Go ahead and take it so you can make copies. I’ll get it back on Wednesday.”

“Thanks. See you Wednesday.”

I watch him stand and walk away. I thought maybe he was flirting, but he leaves so suddenly. But what do I know? I'm probably overthinking it because I'm needy for human interaction. Hot guys like that do not go after cute girls like me; they go after the hot, sexy ones. As depressing as the thought is, I still can't wait until Wednesday!

WALKING ON CLOUD NINE, I get back to my apartment and grab a snack, heading to my room to get some work done. It is amazing what one person can do to lift another person's spirits. Just as I settle in, my phone chimes with an incoming text.

Briana: Fiesta this wkend in ATX!! **wink emoji** comin?

Me: Sure...when?

Briana's invitation couldn't come at a better time. I miss my high school friends, and I don't know if I could take another weekend alone in my apartment. My roommate sucks and never leaves her room. All she does is study. I have absolutely no friends here.

Briana: come on Sat. morn so we can hang b4. Ok?

Me: text u when I leave my apt.



WEDNESDAY ARRIVES, and I change my outfit a few times, wanting to look good when I see Caleb again. Maybe today I can keep his attention.

I walk into class and scan the room, not seeing him anywhere. I take a seat, fidgeting nervously while waiting—pop the pen cap off and snap it back on. The professor walks in, and Caleb still hasn't shown. I glance around during the lecture a couple of times, hoping to find him.

Class ends, and I stand, looking around the room to see if he sat somewhere else. Disappointed he's not here, I collect my things. I walk out of the classroom, and my stomach drops

when I see him casually leaning against the opposite wall with his arms crossed. Our eyes meet, and he waves me over.

“Isn’t it against the rules for truancy cops to miss their own classes?” I tease with a smile. My heart is pounding against my chest.

“Nah, we can excuse ourselves. One of the perks.” He winks with a smirk that has my stomach doing flips.

I can’t believe a simple action can evoke jitters that run from my head all the way down to my toes. I nervously grab inside my bag to retrieve his notebook.

“Thanks, I made my copies, so I should be safe from a ticket, I think.” I shrug and hold my smile, not wanting to seem desperate.

“No worries. I’ll cover for you anytime. But...I was wondering...why I didn’t hear from you?” His playful expression falls as his brows pull in.

“Huh?”

He continues, “Didn’t you see the note I left you?”

“No...uh...where?” I bite my lower lip.

His lips pull a fraction. “So you’re not a nosy kind of girl, huh?” He opens his notebook and tears out a page. “I like that. Most girls love to snoop.”

He hands me the page he tore out, and I read *Call me later 210-444-4649. Caleb Martin* I look up at him, trying hard to give him a flirtatious look (remembering I am cute and don’t ooze sexiness).

“Maybe I will.” I finish with a flirtatious eye roll I have seen my friend Briana do hundreds of times.

“Come have coffee with me.” He takes my free hand.

“I wish I could, but I have class and should go before I’m late. But thanks. Rain check?” I desperately want to take him up on the offer, but I need to start getting my life together.

“Sure, but now you know to call or text later. See ya.” He smiles and squeezes my hand before walking away. I am

officially a big ball of mush.

I walk into my next class, finding a seat in the back so I don't disturb anyone, and settle in for the next hour. All through class I keep thinking about Caleb. I can't believe a guy gave me his number. That he came to see me because I didn't call him. With my thoughts everywhere but on the lecture, class ends quickly, and I head back to the apartment.

I debate whether it is too soon to text him. I go back and forth in my mind until finally I decide to send him something quick so that he has my number.

Me: How was the coffee? Now u have my # - sophia

Caleb: pretty lonely...ur class?

Me: the usual...busy?

Caleb: nope...just wondering if I would hear from u

Me: glad I didn't disappoint

Caleb: wanna go out sat?

He's asking me out? Oh my gawd! This is a serious change from my normal. I would love to say yes, but I already told Bree I would go to Austin. Maybe it will be good to say I have plans; I won't look lame with nothing to do.

Me: cant...out of town

Caleb: where 2?

Me: ATX...visit a friend

Caleb: have fun...talk later

Me: Sure



FRIDAY NIGHT as I'm lounging and watching TV, my phone pings an alert. It is a request on social media from Caleb. I smile to myself and open the app up to accept and follow him in return. I open his profile and am greeted with pictures of him with people; the majority of them are different girls. I

begin to wonder who they are. While scrolling I receive another alert from another app that I have a new follower. Caleb has followed me on a couple of apps. I'm scrolling around when a text comes through.

Caleb: What r u up to?

Me: Watching TV, being lazy. U?

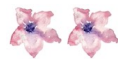
Caleb: chillin before I head out. Just wanted to say hi before u left.

Me: have fun tonite.

Caleb: Be good tomorrow!

Me: I always am.

Caleb: Talk later



WHEN I ARRIVE at Briana's apartment, I am surprised to see Paige, the third person in our friendship trio. Filled with so much excitement and relief at the sight of them, tears fill my eyes. All the loneliness of the past few weeks weighs on me. I give them each a huge hug.

"No more sniffles, Sof. We got to get going to make it in time for brunch." Briana takes my bag, throws it into her room, and drags us out.

I force a smile, not wanting to explain my sudden rush of emotions. "Let's go." I chime in cheerily.

WE ORDER MIMOSAS AT A HIPSTER, trendy restaurant Bree suggested, using the fake IDs we purchased at the end of the summer. Bree assured us this place was a safe spot for us to use them.

"Tell us, Sof, how's everything's going? We don't hear from you at all, you *never* post anything anymore," Briana starts after the waitress delivers our drinks and we order.

I think about her question and whether I want to answer honestly.

“What’s wrong? Why are you making that face?” Paige says with narrowed eyes.

How can I not be truthful? My eyes begin to water.

“It hasn’t been the easiest transition. I don’t get along with my roommate, I don’t know anyone yet, I haven’t made any friends...I’ve been ignoring the world the past couple of weeks. I don’t snap or check socials anymore because it’s depressing to see everyone loving their new schools,” I blurt out and drop my head on the table, embarrassed by my admission.

“Why didn’t you tell us? You know you could have been coming to hang with me on weekends. I know it wouldn’t have helped during the week, but at least you could have been looking forward to the weekends.” Briana gets up from her chair to hug me, and Paige follows closely behind. I feel a huge sense of relief being with them.

“I don’t know. It’s embarrassing admitting it. I seemed to be the only one having trouble adjusting to college life.” I shrug, not knowing what else to do or say. “But something just happened, and I do have some juicy stuff to share,” I say giving them a small grin.

They sit back down, and Paige widens her eyes at me, giving me the “spill it” look.

“Well... I met this guy in class.” I take a quick sip of my mimosa. “Or, actually, he introduced himself to me.”

I sit back wiping the remaining tears and begin to tell them about Caleb. I, of course, start out with his yummy looks and continue with how we met and the few texts.

“He already found me and requested me on Snap and IG,” I continue.

“Then show us a pic!” Paige interrupts before I can say anything else.

I take my phone out and open his page before handing it to them.

“He’s a hottie, Sof. I need someone that yummy chasing me!” Briana says while making her sexy, come-hither look, which only cracks Paige and I up.

“Really, Bree, you had several hotties in high school. Give me a chance for one.” I continue to laugh at her.

We talk about Caleb, their new friends, school, and everything we missed the past month while enjoying our drinks and food. It feels so simple and natural to be with them.



WE ARRIVE at a house that is already in full swing with people dancing in the living room, drinking games on the kitchen table, and a beer pong table set up on the outside patio, close to the keg. We serve ourselves and click our plastic cups, toasting to a great night. I feel like my old self with them, able to talk with new people and have fun.

Bree introduces us to a few of her new friends and sorority sisters while we make our way through the party. Several glasses of beer later, thanks to a couple of games of beer pong, we make our way to the makeshift dance floor in the living room. Paige drags a couple of guys with us and more follow. A guy comes in close to me, grabs my hand, and spins me. He seems harmless, so I bask in the attention.

Paige hands her phone to a random girl and asks her to take our picture. We all gather around, and the guy I was dancing with wraps his arm around my shoulder and kisses my cheek.

“Idea!” Paige yells over the music, “Let’s head down to Sixth Street. Sophia and I did not come to Austin to miss Sixth Street!”

I chime in, “Please, Bree!”

“I’ll get the ride.” Briana says taking out her phone.

LOOKING AROUND, I cannot believe the amount of people that are walking up and down the bar-filled street.

Knowing Paige and I are already buzzed, Bree tells us, “Y’all act chill at the door, or we’ll be losing the fakes.”

Paige and I look at each other. “Yes, Mom.” We giggle.

We make our way to a bar Briana and her friends found recently and hand the bouncer our IDs. He barely glances at them.

“Have fun, ladies,” the bouncer announces as he waves us through the door.

“I need to go to the ladies’ room,” I inform them as we are waiting for the bartender to take our order.

“To the back and left.” Briana points in the direction.

A text from Caleb awaits as I take my phone out to browse while waiting in the line that is out the door.

Caleb: looks like u r having fun

Me: yup, a blast. I missed my girls. How did u know?

Caleb: ur IG pic

He saw the picture from the house party. He’s social stalking me! I can’t help the smile that takes over my face knowing this.

Me: We left that party and came to 6th str. What r u doin?

Caleb: out with friends

Me: have fun...TTYL...bye

Caleb: dinner tmrw?

Me: sure, I’ll call u when I am back

Caleb: bye

I run back to Bree and Paige, not able to hold my excitement.

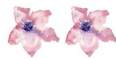
“He texted.” I shimmy my shoulders and roll my eyes.

“And?” Paige asks.

“I got a date tomorrow.” I stick my tongue out playfully.

“That calls for a round of celebratory shots.” Bree waves the bartender over. “Three shots of something fruity and strong, please.”

We each grab one tapping them on the bar before shooting them back. The rest of the night is spent talking, laughing, dancing, and meeting new people.



THE NEXT MORNING, we are waiting on our breakfast tacos, slightly hurting from the excess of alcohol the night before.

“Y’all need to come for Halloween.” Briana tells us. “I have been hearing stories about all the craziness on Sixth Street during Halloween. It will be so much fun! Say y’all will come. We can think of some great match-y, slutty, costumes to wear. Please!”

Paige and I look at each other, smile, and respond in unison, “I’m in!”

“What to wear, what to wear...” Paige starts chanting softly and tapping her fingers on the table. “Playboy bunnies?”

“Too cliché.” I shake my head and wrinkle my nose. “I’m sure there will be dozens upon dozens of Playboy bunnies out that night.”

“Charlie’s Angels,” Bree chimes in while holding her two hands together forming a gun with her fingers, just as the food arrives.

Laughing I respond, “That might work. Let’s think on it.”

After breakfast we walk outside for our goodbyes.

“I’m serious, Sof, if you need anything, call or come up every weekend. No more ignoring the world. Let us know what’s going on.” Briana hugs me tight.

“We also need to plan a trip to San Antonio next month for your birthday. Start thinking about where you want to go and what you want to do.” Paige hugs me as Bree lets go.

“Y’all are the best. I would be lost without you two.”

2

THE DRIVE HOME IS TRAFFIC FILLED AND TAKES A WHILE DUE to the stop-and-go stretches, but it gives me time to think. I have been so focused on the negative, I had completely forgotten the good friends I have. I had a blast last night even though I didn't know anyone at the party. I need to find the courage to put myself out there on my own.

It is just after one when I get back to my apartment. I head to my room to unpack, get settled, and text Caleb.

Exhaustion settles in after the late night and drive home, so I lay down for a quick nap.

A text from my mom wakes me, and I'm surprised it's already after four and there is still no text or call from Caleb. I contemplate texting again but don't want to seem desperate. One more text, that's it.

Me: still on 4 tonite?

I talk to my parents for a few minutes, complaining again about my roommate, venting about us not getting along—or more accurately, her ignoring me. I tell them about my trip to Austin. It is a few minutes past five when my phone rings with Caleb's name across the screen.

“Hey, stranger, what have you been up to?” I try to hide the annoyance and disappointment in my voice at his lackadaisical approach today.

“Sorry I didn't respond earlier, but I've been busy.”

Really? A quick text takes less than a minute.

“No problem.” I fall back into the bed, disappointment enveloping me at his unenthusiastic tone. Regret for sending the second text eats away at me. “Want a rain check?”

After a short pause he says, “No way, I just need an hour to unwind, and then dinner with you is just what I need. Where do you live?”

“At the Village Apartments on campus, but I can meet you wherever we go, if that’s more convenient.” I try to give him an out in case that’s what he’s looking for.

“I’ll pick you up, what apartment number?”



TIME SLOWLY PASSES as I pace around my room, waiting on Caleb to get here. Footsteps on the stairs outside and a knock on the door announce his arrival. I open the door and struggle to keep my jaw from dropping. He has on shorts, flip-flops, and a vintage concert tee that is stretched across his chest and shoulders.

“Hi.” I catch myself smiling a little too big.

“Hello, there,” he says as he brushes my cheek with the back of his hand, pushing a couple of loose layers behind my ear. “Ready?”

“I am... Let me get my purse. Where are we going?”

I walk back into the living room to pick my purse up from the coffee table. When I turn around, he’s standing right in front of me. I jerk, slightly taken by surprise. He gives me a cocky grin as he brings his hands up to my cheeks and gives me a gentle, short kiss.

“I just figured we could get the first kiss taken care of and relax the rest of the evening.”

The way he kissed me was so sweet, but his control of the situation makes it oh so sexy. I really wish it had lasted longer.

“Good thinking...so...um...where are we going?” I clear my throat, feeling a little flustered.

“Burgers and beer sound good?” I walk to the door with him close behind.

“Sure.”

We walk down the staircase from my second-floor apartment. When I hit the landing, he places his hand on my lower back, guiding me to his car. Shivers run up and down at the feeling of his hand and the slight command I feel by the pressure of his hand guiding me.

During the drive to the restaurant, we fill the uncomfortable silence with superficial stranger talk.

THE RESTAURANT IS a small shack with a large, covered patio and a long bar at one end with a wide variety of beers on tap. There is a stage on the opposite side of the patio from the bar. Beer signs and old license plates hang on every inch of wall.

“I know it doesn’t look like much, but this place has the best burgers in town.”

We place our order at a window, and as I reach into my purse for my wallet he tells me, “I got this.”

We find a table, and he pulls a chair out for me. “What would you like to drink?” he asks, still standing.

“Bud Light.”

His eyes widen. “You’re 21?”

I give him my most innocent smile. “Yes.”

The corners of his mouth turn up into a slight grin. “I’ll be right back.” He winks at me before heading toward the bar.

He returns with two pints that look darker than Bud Light. “You need to try this.” He hands me one glass, sitting down.

“I don’t like darker beers,” I’m trying to be gentle. I actually hate darker beers.

“Just try it before you turn your nose up,” he insists.

I bring the glass up to take a whiff. It smells stronger than what I am used to, but I take a sip. It has a stronger flavor, but

not the bitter aftertaste darker beers usually have. I don't really like it, but I'll drink it to not seem ungrateful, I guess.

"Not bad. What is it?"

"Indio, a Mexican beer. So, how was the trip?" he asks after taking a drink of his.

"It was good. I've missed my friends...I haven't seen them since before we all left for school."

He gives me a quizzical look for a couple of seconds, then grins like the cat that ate the canary. "This is your first year in college?"

I nod smiling.

"How are you twenty-one?" His smile broadens, but his lips are sealed tight, trying to keep himself from laughing.

I feel the heat on my cheeks, so I drop my face a little and begin nervously biting my bottom lip. "I may not be, but an ID says I am," I whisper.

"You are just an all-around rule breaker, huh?" He laughs, and I start to smile, seeing he isn't angry I'm using a fake ID.

"How old are you?" Curious about his age after being called out on mine.

"Twenty-one...but I'm telling the truth."

Our attention is pulled to the runner dropping off our order, then he begins again, "That's the reason I wasn't in class Wednesday...I didn't wake up in time after a night of birthday celebrations."

"Happy belated birthday." I pause feeling thoughtless for letting him pay so close to his birthday. "I should have bought you dinner and drinks for your birthday."

"No way. I already celebrated my birthday, woke up with a hangover to prove it, and now all I want to do is have a good time with a beautiful girl."

Surprised by his compliment, I have trouble keeping my smile under control. "If you didn't wake up in time for class, why were you outside the classroom on Wednesday?"

“To see you, of course, especially since you hadn’t called,” he answers quickly and very honestly. It is somewhat disarming.

We begin eating, and the conversation flows much easier.

“You decided to stay closed to home instead of go away to school?” I ask after finding out he grew up in town.

“Yup. It was my best option. I got a decent scholarship and financial aid package. I’m close to my mom, and the tips from bartending are good.”

“You bartend?”

“Sure do. At Spike’s. It’s a grill-slash-sports bar.”

His sexiness level goes up a couple of notches as I imagine him behind the bar flirting with me.

“How long have you been there?”

“Since I started college.”

We continue talking about his job then about his mom raising him on her own. He speaks so highly of his grandparents and his mom, I can’t help but swoon a little.

When he returns from the bar with another round, he asks me about my night in Austin.

“Who was the guy in the picture?”

“Some frat guy at the party...some guys photobombed us.” I feel the need to explain why there was a guy kissing me in the picture. “Paige asked someone to take our picture, and the guys who were dancing with us jumped in. It was just a quick peck on the cheek.”

Caleb reaches over the table, taking my hand, his eyes narrowed. “So you aren’t dating him, and y’all didn’t hook up?”

“Nope, I didn’t even get his name. We didn’t even stay there long after the picture was taken. Paige and I wanted to hit up Sixth Street.” I continue telling him about my friends and yesterday’s outing.

“Do you go to Austin often?” he asks.

“No. This was my first visit. I plan on going again, just not sure when. I miss my friends.”

“You would leave me here in town all alone?” He juts out his bottom lip playfully.

“Not if you wanted me to spend time with you.” I scrunch my nose and bite my bottom lip, excited he wants to spend more time with me.

HE WALKS me to my door, and I instinctively look up at him, wanting the kiss I assume will come. He takes my face in his hands, leans down, and gives me a gentle, and much too quick, kiss. He pulls away, looking me in the eyes for a couple of seconds before I stand on tiptoes and go in for another. His hands slide down and wrap around my lower back as I slide my arms around his neck. Just as I’m getting lost in the moment, the door opens, surprising us.

“Excuse me,” Diana, my roommate, says as she walks past us.

“I...uh...guess I should go in... See you tomorrow?” I say, a little breathless.

“I’ll be there. Good night.” He brushes his hand down my cheek and rubs his thumb over my bottom lip. The sensual look I see in his eyes before he brushes his lips quickly past mine sends goose bumps down my arms.



AS I WALK into the classroom, I scan the room for Caleb. Not seeing him, I find a seat and take out my phone to keep myself busy and focused instead of constantly looking around. A couple minutes later, he sits next to me. I look up just as he runs his hand from my shoulder down my arm and lightly kisses me right below my ear, sending shivers down my neck.

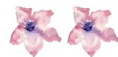
“Well hello, stranger,” I smile at him as he interlaces our fingers together.

“Good morning.”

When the professor walks in, he releases my hand and gets his things out, as do I. A comfortableness exists that was not there last week. Throughout class we look at each other’s notes and whisper side commentary.

He walks me to my next class, and we make plans to meet up later. When we get to my next classroom, he leans in and gives me a barely-acceptable-for-public kiss.

“Later.” He smirks before walking away.



I WALK to the University Center after class to find him. Nervous knots have taken up residence in my stomach as I walk into the building. I’m instantly overwhelmed by the size and the number of students milling around. I have never had a reason to come in here, so the layout of the area is foreign.

I didn’t mention to Caleb that I had never been inside the University Center. My lack of a social circle made visiting this building pointless. Hoping I found the correct area he mentioned to meet him, I take a seat. Pulling out my trusty e-reader, I settle on a couch.

“Hello again.” I hear his voice.

I look up as Caleb takes a step before sitting next to me. A couple of guys and a girl follow him and sit on the empty chairs and couch around me.

“Hey,” I respond and look around at his friends while clutching my e-reader tightly.

“This is Jason, Wes, and Emily,” he says as each nod and smile when introduced, “and this is Sophia.” Caleb sits back and places his arm around me.

“Hi,” I give a small wave, feeling more uncomfortable as the seconds go by, especially with Emily sending me weird

looks. I look down at my e-reader again, trying to not look as uncomfortable as I feel. They begin talking around me, so I stare at the screen as I listen intently.

Jason pops up. "I need something to get me through my next class. Anyone want anything?"

In unison each guy announces some sort of snack.

"Then get your asses up and buy your own." He laughs and walks away.

Caleb turns to me. "Want anything?"

"Diet Coke." I grab into my bag for a couple of dollars.

"Got it. Be right back." He gives me a quick peck before getting up and walking quickly to catch up with his friends.

I look toward Emily, scrambling to think of what to say, when I notice her scowl.

"YES?" I blurt out, brain-to-mouth filter too slow to catch my outburst.

"Nothing," she huffs and gets up and walks in the opposite direction the guys went.

The boys return and take their seats.

"Where's Emily?" Caleb asks.

I shrug my shoulders. "She just got up and walked away."

The guys continue talking, eating, and joking, drawing me into their conversation until it's time for them to go to class. Just as we exit the building, Caleb motions for the guys to keep going and grabs my upper arm to stop me.

"I'll call you tonight." He leans down and meets his lips with mine as his hand slides down my arm, coming to rest at my hip. He pulls away and smiles.

"Okay." I grin and move to walk away, but his hand grips my hip tighter. I look back at him, and he has one brow cocked mischievously.

"Another for the road." He grabs my other hip and brings me flush against his body. He kisses me more sensually than I

am comfortable with in public, invading my mouth with his tongue. He pulls away, and I place my forehead on his chest to catch my breath. I am equally turned on and embarrassed at the same time.

He places his hand under my chin and lifts my head.
“Sorry, couldn’t help myself.”

I smile shyly, not having a response.

“Later!” He turns walking away.

3

LATER IN THE WEEK I DECIDE TO CHECK OUT THE STUDENT recreation center. I read it is an amazing facility with workout classes, free weights, machines, and cardio equipment. As I walk in, my phone chimes.

Caleb: we r going out tonite. Be ready by 8. See u then

I smile at the text. With him assuming our plans, we in the couple category—internal girlish giggles ensue.

Me: k...where?

Caleb: country bar

Back at my apartment after a quick workout, I take my time dressing while listening to my country playlist. I am just about to slide my boots on when there's a knock on the door. I drop my boot to open the door and am greeted by a fine sight. Caleb has the perfect balance of a preppy/country look with worn boots, a pair of faded-in-all-the-right-places jeans, and a vintage snap-button shirt, which is un-ironed and untucked.

He walks in, sliding his hands around my waist, leaning in close to my ear, and whispering, "Well, hello there." Shivers explode up and down my back.

"Hello yourself." I slide my hand down the buttons of his shirt. "Let me put on my boots, and I'm ready."

"You look great...but..." He leaves his statement hanging.

"What's wrong?" Insecurity is like a punch to the gut.

“No, nothing’s wrong with how you look. You look wonderful, but...”

“Just spill it already.” My self-conscious tendencies are screaming.

“It’s just that...the skirt is really *short*,” he blurts out.

I giggle, relieved. “Not really, you should see when Bree wears it. She’s a few inches taller than me. Now that’s short!” I slip my boots on and walk up to him. “Ready?”

“Yeah, okay,” he mumbles, but he seems put off.

“What’s wrong?” I stand in front of him and slide my hands down his arms to interlace our fingers.

“Nothing... You look great. I just know how sleazy guys can be, and I’m going to be afraid to let you out of my sight.”

I’m momentarily stunned because I have never thought of myself as a girl who turns heads. I love this outfit, but a small doubt appears on my choice of clothes.

“It’s what everyone wears. I’m sure there will be many, many scantily clad girls there for the boys to ogle.” I take my hands out of his, placing them around his neck. I rise up on my toes and pull him in closer for a soft, slow kiss. “I’m with you,” I whisper against his lips and go back in for another.

His arm wraps around my lower back as his other hand slides up my back, then cradles my neck. Soft and slow turns hard and passionate, but too quickly, he pulls away. He kisses from the corner of my mouth down my neck, where he pauses and keeps his head in the crook of my neck, catching his breath.

“We need to go.” He lets me go, walking to the door.

IN THE CLUB, Caleb leads me to an area on the side of the dance floor, where bar tables and stools are scattered about. Jason and Wes are with a few other guys and girls, including Emily. He introduces me to everyone before walking away with Jason to get a round of drinks at the bar.

When Caleb gets back, he takes me out on the dance floor, and we two-step our way around. He knows how to dance, but only basic steps, unlike my friends back home. After a couple of songs, we are back at the table laughing and talking. Emily ignores me, but everyone else is welcoming.

I am basking in his attention—holding my hand, laying his hand on my thigh, or draping his arm on the back of my chair. I lean into him, the effect of the rum and diets I have been consuming hitting hard.

The girls scream with excitement when the music changes from country to pop. They head for the dance floor, and one grabs my hand, pulling me behind her. After a few songs I head back to the table and let Caleb know I'm going to the ladies' room.

Walking back to the table, I see Emily being led to the dance floor by Caleb. A pang of jealousy hits, but I swallow it down as I take my seat.

Jason grabs my hand and says with a huge grin, "You're my next victim."

"I'm ready, if you can handle me!" I laugh.

Jason is a much better dancer than Caleb, exuding confidence, grace, and natural ease while leading me in very difficult spins and twirls. I am having so much fun dancing with him. Another fast-paced song begins, and we stay on the floor. After the second song, Jason leads me back to the table.

I reach for Caleb's hand as I sit next to him, and he slides it away without looking in my direction. Confused by his behavior, I play it off, grabbing my drink, downing the remainder, and listening to everyone's conversations. That's when I notice Emily looking in our direction, smirking. My blood begins to boil, so I quickly turn my focus to the conversation and try my best to mask my feelings.

As a new song begins, Emily walks up to Caleb. She extends her hand, asking him to dance. Caleb takes it, stands up, and turns to me. "I'll be—"

Jason interrupts him by coming to my other side, grabbing my hand and saying, “Another round?”

I am about to hop off my stool when Caleb lets go of Emily’s hand, grabs mine, and drags me to the center of the dance floor.

We begin to dance, but it is forced. His body is rigid as he grips my hand almost painfully while glaring at me. My blood heats right back up remembering Emily’s smirk earlier and his indifference toward me at the table a few minutes ago.

My buzz doesn’t help me keep my mouth shut. “What the hell is your problem? If you don’t want to dance with me, you should’ve just come out here with Emily like you were about to!”

I try to pull away, but he tightens his arm around my waist.

“What the hell is my problem? You have the audacity to ask what my problem is when you were flirting with Jason in front of me? Really?” he whispers forcefully in my ear.

“I was flirting with Jason?” Confusion sweeps over me.

“Yeah, you were laughing and all over him on the dance floor earlier.” he sneers.

All I want to do is get away; tears threaten to make an appearance. How can he say I was flirting when he was dancing with Emily? Completely embarrassed by the spectacle, I drop my head, placing my forehead on his chest and hiding my face. I wiggle and pull my hand out of his, feeling the pressure of his grip lingering, to dab the corners of my eyes. I take a long, deep breath trying to get control of myself.

I look back up. “Look...I don’t want to fight with you... I’ll call an Uber, and we can call it an evening. And for your information, I wasn’t flirting with Jason, I was dancing. Just like you were dancing with Emily, just like you were going to do again until Jason asked me to dance. I don’t—”

“Emily is a friend. I was dancing with a *friend*. Jason is not your friend. He was flirting with you. I should know. I have known him for years. He’s not someone you want to let your

guard down with. He doesn't treat girls with respect." Caleb brings up his thumb to wipe away another tear that has escaped from my eye, then he places his hand over mine, which is sitting on his chest.

"But *I* was dancing, not flirting. I thought I was dancing with your friend. I thought we were all having good time. That is until I came back to the table, and you ignored me. If you don't trust your friends, that is on you, not me. You should probably let me know things like that before going off with another girl."

"You may have thought it was only dancing, but Jason is infamous for his one-night stands. The girls seem to fall for his charisma and suave dancing. You even looked impressed with those dancing abilities."

"To be honest I was. I have been dancing for years, and I knew I could keep up with him. But that was it. I just wanted to let loose on the dance floor because it's been a while since I've been dancing. I'm here with you. I never once forgot that."

He leans down, nuzzling our noses. "I'm sorry. I just know how Jason is, and I didn't like seeing you with him. I don't want to lose you to him." He presses our lips together. "Forgive me." He gives me puppy dog eyes.

I simply nod, unsure of what happened but not wanting to continue fighting. He glides his arm around my waist, encircling me tightly, and kisses me deeply.

He pulls away, kissing the tip of my nose. "Let's get a drink."

We spend the rest of the night joined together, fingers interlaced, only dancing with each other until Caleb asks me, "Ready to go?"

"Sure." I respond, relieved to end this evening and all the emotions that went along with it.

"We're heading out," Caleb announces to the group.

"Wait, can you give me a ride?" Emily asks.

“Didn’t you come here with the boys?” Caleb responds.

“Yes, but they aren’t leaving yet, and I’m ready to go. Is that okay?” she continues.

“Come on,” Caleb tells her.

I internally frown at the thought of being in that same car as her.

We walk out of the club, my hand laced with Caleb’s, which eases my feelings about Emily coming with us. The drive is quiet except for the music on the radio.

“Why are you exiting here? I thought Sophia lives on campus?” Emily asks.

“To drop you off,” he responds.

“Why would you drop me off, go to campus, then come back to the apartment?” she continues.

My curiosity goes into overdrive wondering if she lives with the guys. I wait with bated breath to hear his response.

“Because that is what I want to do.” His response is flat.

She stays silent until she exits the car with a quick goodbye.

I’m debating whether I should ask more about her when Caleb says, “She doesn’t live with us, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

My cheeks burn with embarrassment as if he could read my thoughts. “Oh” is the only response I can muster.

“Emily is a neighbor. We met her at the pool at the beginning of the semester. She lives in the building next to ours.”

We arrive at my apartment, and Caleb walks me to the door. I want to invite him in, but my emotions are jumbled. I unlock the door, then turn to face at him. We stand looking at each other, not touching, for a few seconds before Caleb slides both of his hands around my waist, pulling me toward him and planting his lips on mine. Still nervous but wanting things to work, I reach up and interlace my fingers around his neck,

falling into the kiss. Caleb's lips move forcefully against mine. He leans down and picks me up, and I wrap my legs around his waist. He opens my front door, walks us to my bedroom, closing the door behind him, and sits on my bed with me straddling him. His hands slide up my back, brushing my hair off my left shoulder, pushing my neck slightly to the side, giving his mouth more access as he trails kisses down to my collarbone.

His hand glides around my waist, exploring underneath my shirt, rubbing my back and up my waist to the outside of my breast. He brings his mouth to mine, invading it with his tongue. It intensifies quickly as he begins to tug my shirt off. He stands up with me in his arms turning around and laying me on the bed. I unbutton his shirt and let my hands glide down his strong back. We are exploring, touching, tasting, and caressing. He trails kisses down my neck to the swell of my breast. He moves my bra cup aside, taking my nipple into his mouth and sliding his other hand up my thigh to the edge of my panties. I am caught up in the moment, a yearning between my legs growing. When his thumbs hook the waistband of my panties, my brain registers what is about to happen.

“Wait, wait, wait...” I say breathless. “Sorry, sorry...” I feel stupid, but slow things down.

Caleb lifts himself on his forearm, looking down at me. “What’s wrong?” he asks frowning.

“I’m sorry...I just...” I take a breath, not wanting to admit I am a virgin but knowing I’m not ready to go all the way. I exhale. “Can we slow down?”

“Is something wrong?”

Caleb slides off me and lies down beside me, propping his head on his hand. Feeling too exposed, I move the bra cup back in place.

“No...it’s just...” Why am I having such a hard time explaining? I am by no means a prude but have never felt the urge to go all the way with any of the guys I have fooled around with. “We’ve only had a couple of dates. I don’t want to move too fast. We had a misunderstanding tonight, and I

just think we need to get to know each other better.” I look toward Caleb, trying to read his expression.

“Fine, you call the shots.” He sits up quickly. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

As he is about to walk out of my room, I panic. I didn’t expect him to leave. I thought we would just make out—without sex. I jump off my bed and wrap my arms around his waist to stop him.

“Why are you leaving?” I rub my hands up and down his back, walking backward pulling him with me toward the center of my room.

“You put a halt on it, and now you’re trying to seduce me? I gotta go.” He pries my arms away from him and walks out of my bedroom.

I follow him to the front door. “Fine. I’ll be out of town this weekend. I’ll call when I get back,” I blurt out as I begin to shut it behind him.

He turns back around glaring at me, “Where to and when did you decide this?”

“Bree called earlier and asked me to come up. I told her I would let her know,” I quickly lie.

“Austin, huh, so you can throw yourself at all those frat boys again? Nice...” He turns and walks away.

I’m furious and more than a bit tipsy. I can’t think straight. All I want to do is hide all weekend and forget about tonight’s drama. I grab a tee, wash my face, and crawl into bed to sleep off the night. Before I can get comfortable, though, I hear my phone chime a text. Caleb’s name pops on my screen. Too exhausted to fight, I use all my willpower and shut my phone off.

4

I WAKE NOT FEELING ANY BETTER ABOUT LAST NIGHT'S events, so I decide to check out a yoga class in the rec center. I arrive a couple of minutes before it begins, so I quickly lay out my mat and sit in an easy pose, trying to clear my head.

Class begins, and I am grateful it is a power vinyasa and we are moving through flows swiftly, which means my mind doesn't have any time to wander. As soon as class ends, a girl says, "Namaste, bitches! My weekend has started!"

She is gorgeous, with fiery red hair, a pale complexion with a hint of freckles, and a curvaceous figure. She seems so carefree and open, I would love to befriend her, but she dashes out the door.

As I reach my apartment building after the yoga session, I see Caleb sitting on the top step of the stairway to my apartment. My body tenses as I climb halfway up the stairs and lean against the railing.

"What are you doing here?" I tense up, ready for an argument.

"You haven't returned any of my calls or replied to any of my texts. I want to talk to you. I'm sorry for last night. I was a dick, and you have every right to be mad at me, but I want to explain." He sighs, wringing his hands together nervously.

"Explain..." My eyes roll, as my anger and hurt feelings take over.

"Do we have to do it out here in the open?" His lips pull down as he glances at a couple of students gawking as they

walk by slowly.

“Fine, come in.”

As soon as I close the door, he grabs my waist, pulling me to him and hugging me tightly, whispering, “I’m sorry...” He places soft kisses on the top of my head. I take a deep breath and melt into his arms.

“What happened last night?” I ask, not moving away.

He pulls away, grabbing my hand and leading me to my room. He sits down on my bed, patting beside him. I sit cross-legged facing him.

“I guess it comes down to jealousy, and I didn’t handle it well. I’m sorry.”

“Jealous of...” I push, still a bit agitated.

He hesitates. “I guess it started with seeing guys eyeing you at the club, then you having a good time dancing with Jason. And then when you stopped us last night, it made me wonder whether you wanted me as much as I want you.”

“I can’t believe you would think that. I do want to be with you. I was with you last night, but I can have a good time dancing with someone without it meaning more... And about me stopping us...” I contemplate how to admit my virginity to him. His eyes narrow after a few seconds pass.

“I was nervous about us last night...because...I haven’t...”

“You’ve never had sex?” He cuts me off.

I shake my head, looking down. I hate to admit it. He places his hand under my chin and lifts it up. A small smile pulls at his lips, then he moves in and kisses me lightly.

“You should have told me. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable with me. Ever. We never have to do anything you don’t want to.”

All the uneasiness melts away, and I smile back at him. I climb onto his lap, straddling him, and wrap my arms around his neck, ignoring the fact I am a sweaty mess and desperately

need a shower. I kiss him and let go of all the apprehension from last night's events.

Then I pull away. "I have to jump in the shower." I get up, grabbing his hands to lead him out.

"Breakfast...or seeing the time, lunch?" Caleb asks, "And are you still going to Austin?"

I'm reminded of the lie I told last night. "I haven't called Bree back yet. My phone is still off. That's why I didn't know about all your calls and texts." I want to spend time with Caleb, so I decide to ask, "What are your plans?"

"They depend..."

"On?"

"Whether I have a girl to hang out with."

"What girl?" I ask coyly.

He gives me a wicked grin before kissing my neck then answering, "You, who else?" His touch and his breath on my neck send goose bumps all along the side of my body.

"I guess I'm staying in town then, just so a certain guy isn't bored all weekend."

"Take a shower. You stink," he teases me and smacks my behind.

I walk him to the door with plans for lunch.

I finally turn on my phone to dozens of calls and texts all saying similar things like, *I'm sorry, I fucked up, I'm a dick, forgive me*, etc.... I can't help but believe him. He wouldn't be so persistent if he didn't care.



WE SPEND FRIDAY EATING, hanging out at my place, catching up on homework, and watching a couple of movies. We were together, but the naturalness seemed strained and forced, with superficial kisses and touches. Saying goodbye for the night was awkward. A part of me wanted him to stay but the other

didn't want to make things more uncomfortable than necessary. Instead, he invited me to go over to his place tomorrow for a party.



WALKING up to Caleb's door, I'm nervous. I can hear music and people talking. I knock loudly, not knowing whether they can hear it over the music. No answer, so I decide to open the door, hesitantly walking into the living room. I glance around to find a familiar face and notice Wes.

"Come on in and make yourself at home. Drinks in the kitchen, help yourself, and come back out for the next game," Wes tells me with a friendly smile, pointing in the direction of the kitchen.

Jason eyes me up and down. "Hi, beautiful. I'll save you a seat." A sexy smile spreads across his face, and he winks at me.

The action around the coffee table is intense, with laughter and people shouting, "drink up." I round the corner to the kitchen and immediately see Caleb leaning against the counter with his arm wrapped over Emily's shoulders. She is pressed up against him with her head on his chest. My stomach drops, but before I can turn around and walk out, Caleb sees me.

"You made it. I was just about to call and ask when you were coming." He moves away from Emily and walks over to me, lifting me off the ground with his hug and kissing me sweetly. "I'm glad you're here." As he sets me down, I glance at Emily, who is frowning.

"Let me get you a drink. What are you in the mood for—cocktail, beer, shot, margarita? But be warned, if you join the game in the living room, beer will be the safest. They are ruthless."

"I play to win, meaning I'm not passing out first." Wes chuckles as he walks into the kitchen.

"I'll stick with beer. Thanks."

The night is filled with drinking, games, music, jokes, and the more everyone drinks, lots of off-the-wall conversations. Caleb is being attentive— touching, hugging, and kissing me freely. This is what was missing the last day and a half, the openness and comfort.

After playing circle of death and drinking all evening, I feel the effects of the alcohol hit me as I stand to go to the bathroom. I stumble and catch myself on Wes, who is sitting on the armrest next to me. He gives me a knowing look, then turns back to the game.

Returning from the bathroom I find Emily sitting in my spot, leaving no room on the couch for me. Annoyed, but feeling brazen with the liquid courage I've consumed, I walk between the couch and coffee table to sit on Caleb's lap. He wraps his arms around my waist, pulling my body closer to his.

As I pick yet another crappy card for him, he murmurs in my ear, "You know...you don't have to get me drunk to take advantage of me. I'm yours whenever you say the word." He trails kisses along my neck. I turn to face him and am greeted by a sexy, seductive smirk.

"I'll keep that in mind," I whisper brushing my lips past his teasingly.

THE PARTY HAS DWINDLED DOWN to just us, his roommates and Emily. Caleb announces, "we are heading to bed. Goodnight."

He shuts and locks his door, then pulls open a drawer, retrieving a T-shirt.

Handing me the shirt, he says, "You can change in the bathroom." He points toward the bathroom door. "You call the speed. We will only do whatever you are comfortable with."

I shut the bathroom door behind me, thankful for this moment of privacy to digest the evening. Caleb has been thoughtful, attentive, caring, and most importantly, very flirtatious. I undress, placing my clothes on the bathroom counter, and pull the T-shirt over my head.

Walking out, I see Caleb lying in bed on his back, illuminated by a bedside lamp. He smiles, points in my direction, and crooks his finger in a come-hither motion. I crawl into bed next to him, placing my head on his chest. My heart is racing thinking about how much I consumed and not wanting to lose my virginity in a drunken stupor.

“Do you realize how beautiful you are?” Caleb asks while rubbing his fingers up and down my back gently. Not knowing how to respond, I kiss him. The feel of his firm, bare chest under my palm is tempting. Our hands begin to explore each other as the kiss deepens with each second that passes.

Suddenly, Caleb pulls away and takes a deep breath. “Slow down, beautiful. You drank a lot, and I need you to be sure you’re ready. No regrets.” He kisses my forehead and pulls me back down to him.

I place my head back on his chest. “Thank you,” I whisper while dragging my fingers over his chest and stomach in random patterns.



I WAKE the next morning tangled in Caleb’s sheets, his arm and leg draped over my back. I have a slight headache but am content remembering last night’s events.

“Morning, beautiful.” Caleb takes his leg off me and pulls me to his chest. “I like that you stayed the night.”

“Me too. I’m glad you asked me to because...honestly...I was debating driving home.”

“I know the past couple of days were off. It was my fault...I was...” He hesitates. “Never mind. We are here now.”

“What? Finish.” I push.

“I wasn’t sure how to act. You are...the first virgin I’ve been with, and I didn’t want to screw it up. I was an ass, and you didn’t deserve that.”

“Last night was perfect,” I pause, “and I won’t be a virgin forever. I just don’t want to rush into it either,” I admit shyly.

Caleb makes me feel things so much more intensely than ever before, and we have only known each other a couple of weeks. I need to be smart because I have seen my friends get hurt, falling, and moving too fast, only to have guys dump them to move on to the next.

“I know. Like I said last night, you call the shots.”



MY MIND SHOULD BE on the textbook in front of me, but instead, all I can think of is Caleb and my muddled feelings. Jealousy and guilt don’t mix well.

I stopped by to surprise Caleb a few nights ago while he was working, but I was the one who ended up stunned. I know he’s a bartender, but I wasn’t expecting the extreme flirtation that happens between him and the female patrons. I sat around nursing my drink as the green-eyed monster continued to build each time he smiled, teased, and winked at the female customers. I had to leave after the first drink, not able to stomach the sight.

When I brought it up earlier today, he blew up and claimed he was only working. He claimed I didn’t understand and was being insensitive about the fact that he needs to work since my parents were wealthy and paid for my school. I was hurt he called me spoiled but hate that I was so blind not thinking about those who have to work to be able to afford to go to college. He explained the more he showed interest, the better his tips. I apologized, feeling horrible and embarrassed, but still a little bitter about how he acts at the bar

5

HALLOWEEN ON SIXTH STREET IS THE ULTIMATE PARTY! WE arrive at Briana's apartment, and I ask Caleb and the guys to come in so they can meet everyone. Jason's eyes rake over Brianna slowly when she opens the door. I predicted that would happen but didn't expect Caleb to do the same. I am used to Briana's beauty and the attention she receives from guys, and I have never felt jealous over it, until today. While Caleb may not be openly flirting, his attention is definitely on my gorgeous friend.

"Who's all in town?" I ask Bree as we all settle to relax before getting dressed.

"Paige has some friends from school that are meeting us, and Preston called and said he was in town with friends." Bree answers.

"Preston came in town?" I ask excitedly.

"Yup." Bree smiles. "It's almost a reunion!" She laughs.

"Who's Preston?" Caleb asks.

"One of our friends from home." I answer. I didn't realize how much I missed him until Bree said his name.

After about a half hour of chatting, Paige tells the guys while pulling on Wes's and Jason's hands. "We gotta kick you guys out now," "I don't care where y'all go, but you can't stay here."

"Looks like you've got to go," I tell Caleb, standing up and grabbing his hand. "I'll walk you out."

Outside, Caleb pulls me into a hug and kisses me. “I’ll call you in a little while to find out where we’re going to meet up.”

“Okay.” I settle into him, the jealousy from earlier subsiding with his tenderness. “I’ll see you later.” I pull him toward me for a deeper kiss.

“Let’s go!” the boys shout at Caleb, so he pulls away and follows them to the car.

Back in the apartment, the girls are already chattering about Caleb and the boys.

“You’re in trouble, Sof! The pictures didn’t do Caleb enough justice. He’s a *hottie*.” Paige exaggeratingly licks her lips while everyone laughs at her. “And what’s up with his friends, huh? They’re gonna be trouble. I can feel it.”

I give them a tight-lipped smile, unable to squash my feelings of inadequacy.

“What’s with the face, Sof?” Paige asks.

My facial expression has betrayed what I wish to keep private. I shake my head, but Briana continues, “And please don’t hide anything. Didn’t we cover this last time you were in town?”

“It’s just that...” I sigh in defeat. “I’m beginning to hate being the cute one. I want to be the hot one that guys fall all over for once. Did y’all notice that even Caleb was smitten with...” I wave my hand in their general direction a bit too dramatically. “I just don’t want to be invisible to him tonight.”

“Well...I can certainly help with that. You still haven’t seen what I got for you to wear.” Briana goes to her room and brings out a large bag.

All she told me was that she was going to be a devil and I was going to be an angel and she had found the outfits.

“We’ll transform you tonight so you will no longer be seen as,” she air-quotes, “the cute one, as you like to call yourself. Although I think you’re hot as hell.” Paige interjects as Briana takes clothes out of the big shopping bag.

“I know you think you are going to be cute as an angel, but you are going to be anything but cute.” She pulls out a white corset.

“Oh, my freaking—” I begin.

“Love! It!” Paige exclaims.

I am given limited mirror views of myself while they do my hair and makeup. I slip on the outfit Briana laid out and finally look in the full-length mirror. My eyes widen as I take in my transformation.

I have a dark smoky eye with a translucent glimmer, black eyeliner around the tops and bottoms, thick, bold lashes, and a nude lip. My long, chocolate hair is half pulled back, with large loose curls hanging down my shoulders, topped off by a halo headband. But the icing is the outfit. I have on a white, lacy, tank corset that ties up front and pushes my breasts up for maximum cleavage, and there are small wings attached to the back. The white vinyl mini hangs low on my hips, showing my midriff, and I’ve got on white vinyl go-go platform boots.

Excitement begins to stir looking at a new me. Bree outdid herself with the devil costume she put together. She is wearing skintight red pants, a strapless red top, and black heels. She has attached her devil tail and of course has horns. Paige has on cave girl costume to match friends that are dressing cave men and women.

“Picture time! We need proof of Sophia looking like a vixen angel.” Paige says while taking out her phone.

We arrive on Sixth Street, and I can’t believe the mayhem. The street is blocked to traffic, and there must be thousands of people walking around drinking and laughing in costume. The street seems to be its own party, ignoring the rows of bars that surround us. It is a sight to take in.

“You weren’t kidding about Halloween in Austin, huh, Bree,” I yell at her over the crowd, laughing and soaking up all the sights and sounds.

We make our way into The 504, the club we agreed to meet at, heading straight to the bar. Bree orders lemon drop

shots and our drinks. When the bartender drops everything off, we tap the bar with our shot glasses and down them. We grab our drinks and walk around to find Paige's friends who arrived earlier. We find them standing around a couple of tables toward the back corner of the room, and I text Caleb, letting him know we arrived and where to find us.

Several minutes later I hear Caleb say, "where's Sophia?" I look to the girls, who are smiling and pointing at me.

Bree gives me a wink, and I turn around, "Right here. What do you think?" I cock my hip, shrug my shoulders, and give him my most innocent smile.

His eyes widen as his lips pull down, but Wes fills the silence with, "Damn girl, that's—"

"Fuck off, and put your eyes back in their sockets, shithead!" Caleb cuts off his statement, taking the couple steps to me, encircling me with his arms, and planting a deep kiss of possession on my lips.

"That's all you're wearing?" he asks in my ear.

"Yup. You like?" I search his expression for acceptance.

"I do, but so does every other guy in here."

"But remember, I am here with you. As long as you like, I'm happy. Now come and meet Paige's friends." I turn back toward everyone to introduce Caleb. No surprise, Jason and Wes have already introduced themselves.

Jason and Wes are so easygoing and relaxed, even their costumes match their personalities. Jason came as Hugh Hefner in pajamas and a smoking jacket, and Wes came in a toga, made of a sheet. Caleb came as vampire in black with a cape and fangs, which matches his often-brooding personality.

While Caleb is at the bar getting more drinks, I feel a pair of arms come around my waist and a loud smack kiss on my cheek. "You are giving me a fucking woody, Sophia!"

I turn around to hug Preston. He picks me up for a huge hug and a friendly quick peck.

"Eww... Is that what I am feeling?" I reply, laughing.

He still has me in his arms when I hear, “Get your fucking hands off her!” Caleb’s demeanor is menacingly, his eyes narrowed, and chest puffed out.

I quickly move out of Preston’s embrace, saying, “Caleb, this is Preston Hayes, one of my best friends from home. Preston, this is Caleb Martin...” I leave the statement hanging because I’m not sure what Caleb is to me; we haven’t talked about it.

Caleb just nods his head, so Preston makes the first move by extending his hand to Caleb.

“Nice to meet you.” Preston’s stance is confident, almost arrogant. Caleb takes his hand and shakes it. Briana and Paige come over to hug Preston, then introduce him to everyone.

Preston is from the wealthiest family in our hometown. He is a big guy, about six feet tall, with a football player’s large, lean frame. He’s incredibly handsome with brown hair and brown eyes. He was the quarterback and most popular guy in school, the one that every girl wanted. Briana dated him our junior year, but they eventually broke up and remained friends.

Caleb takes my hand and pulls me into the hallway leading to the restrooms. “What the fuck, Sophia. You just let guys grope you?” His anger is now directed at me.

“No, I don’t. Preston is my best friend. I was saying hi. That’s all!” I raise my voice in return.

“It looked like more than hi to me. And when he picked you up, your skirt rode up. You gave a free show of your ass to everyone around!” His glare is murderous.

“He’s just a friend,” I reiterate. “I’m sure he didn’t realize my ass was showing.” I muster up the courage to place my hands on his chest and tiptoe to meet his lips. “Let’s have fun tonight. No fighting. Okay?” I desperately try to defuse the situation, hating confrontation.

“Fine, but he better keep his fucking hands off you.”

“Fine,” I respond back, smiling, hoping this doesn’t ruin our night.

We get back to the group, and Wes is watching me with sad eyes. I give him a tight-lipped smile back and shrug my shoulders. He walks away and returns with a test-tube shot girl.

“It’s shot time, kids!” Wes declares while pulling test tubes off her tray and handing them out.

I grab two from Wes and turn around, handing one to Caleb. Once everyone has one, we cheers and down them. The tension slowly evaporates, but Caleb stiffens each time Preston talks to me or jokingly touches me.

ON THE UBER RIDE HOME, Briana’s phone rings, and I notice Preston’s face on the screen.

“Hey, Preston! What... Sure... No problem... NO, nuh-uh... Okay. See you in a bit.” I can only hear Briana’s side of the conversation.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Preston’s friends decided to take girls back to their hotel room, so he asked if he could crash at my place.”

“Oh...what was the exaggerated ‘NO’ for?”

“He asked if Caleb and the guys were at my place too.”

I nod in understanding, knowing Preston wouldn’t want to come over if Caleb and his friends were staying there. A sense of sadness swirls that Caleb jumped to a conclusion and doesn’t like one of my oldest friends.

THE THREE OF US are in Briana’s living room settled in for the night when Preston starts, “What’s up with you and the ass, Sophia?”

“What do you mean?” I know what he is talking about but hesitate to admit it.

“The way he looked at me like he wanted to kill me but was also staring at every girl in the bar. What’s that about?”

It feels like someone is squeezing all the air out of my lungs. I didn't notice him looking at other girls. Bree nods her head in confirmation and frowns. I'm numb; a blanket of stupidity draped over me steals any and all words. I turn sideways and lean my head on the top of the couch, closing my eyes to hold in tears that are trying to escape.

Preston pulls me to him, placing my legs over his lap and leaning my head into his chest. "I got you, baby girl," he whispers and kisses the top of my head.

I don't remember falling asleep, but I wake up lengthwise on the couch held tightly around my middle by Preston. It is comforting waking up with Preston— familiarity, safety, and friendship. I know he would never do anything to hurt me.

I shift myself around, waking him up. His lips pull into a sad smile. "I'm sorry about last night. It's none of my business, but know I am here for you." He kisses my forehead.

I nod. "Thank you." I snuggle closer, hiding my face and the shame I feel in the crook of his neck.

"Don't let him be a jerk to you. Understand?"

I mumble, "Okay."

"And just so you know, you looked sexy as hell last night. But I like the regular you too."



BACK IN MY APARTMENT, after we settle in, I ask Caleb, "What happened last night? Why were you being a jerk to my friend?"

His anger appears instantly. "Your friend couldn't keep his fucking hands or eyes off you. That's what happened!"

"How many times do I have to say he is my friend? I don't say shit about your friend Emily. He was just surprised by my look last night. No one has ever seen me be so daring." I pause, smiling as I recall how I looked. "I am the 'cute one'

everyone always looks after.” I air-quote to emphasize the point.

“Well, with how you looked last night, he wanted to fuck you! And there are pictures of you like that for everyone to see.”

Shocked at his statement, knowing full well that was not the case, I reply, “Not every guy wants to fuck or gawk at every hot girl that walks by... Or do they?” I push him, thinking about Preston’s comments about Caleb.

“I don’t like when you’re so flirtatious with everyone. You are giving guys the wrong impression. You look like a slut when you do that.” He backtracks, maybe realizing my meaning, and his demeanor softens.

Stunned, my mouth pops open. *A slut*. Not able to formulate words, all that comes out is, “Huh?”

“Especially last night, with your outfit leaving nothing for the imagination and all the laughing, smiling, joking, brushing your hands over guys’ arms...you really had the part down. If that’s the look you wanted, you succeeded.”

I am hurt and confused. I wanted to look sexy for him, to get the attention he gave Bree, but it backfired. “I asked the girls to sexify my look up for you. I saw the way you looked at them, and I wanted you to look at me that way too.” I say, my voice barely above a whisper, hanging my head in embarrassment and confusion.

Caleb takes a long breath in. He releases it slowly before he starts. “I have only wanted you...just you, not the slutty version of you. I’m sorry for the looks at other girls, but they only have my attention briefly. They want attention dressing like a slut? Fine, I’ll look, but I don’t want them. I don’t want other guys to think that way about you.” He comes in closer to me, brushing my cheek with the back of his hand. “You’re better than that. I love you, and I don’t like others wanting what I have.”

He said he loves me, but the hurt and embarrassment of his calling me a slut linger. I feel scattered.

“I can’t believe you called me a slut. That’s really shitty of you.”

“You’re right, it was shitty of me. I’m sorry,” he says bringing his face in closer to mine. I can feel his breath. “Like I said, I love you, and I don’t want people to get the wrong impression of you.” He holds my face in his hands and kisses the tip of my nose. “Do you forgive me? Because I want so badly to kiss you right now.”

“I love you too.” I say, knowing I do have such strong feelings for him.

The way we exchanged this important sentiment feels tainted. I want to kiss him, to erase all the doubts I have of him from last night and today, but I decide to address another concern.

“Hold on, one more thing,” I place my index finger on his lips to stop his advance. “Preston is my friend. We have been friends since middle school, and he is a part of my life. I hope you can accept that.”

“I can accept that as long as he knows you are mine.”

“If I am yours, does that mean you are mine? And does Emily know this too?”

“Emily is just a friend. That’s it.”

“That didn’t answer my question. Does she know that you are mine? Fair is fair.” I am trying to read his face, but his expression is unwavering. He is dancing around the question without answering directly.

“Yes, she knows I am yours.”

That’s when I move in. Our lips connect, and our arms quickly encircle the other. I want to hold on tightly, not wanting to let this feeling go. When we are alone, he is gentle and caring, but I have trouble gauging his temperament when we are drinking and with others.

“I am taking you out tomorrow for a real date. We are going to spend the day together to forget last night and today.” Caleb says smiling.

6

I ARRIVE AT THE GYM JUST AS A YOGA CLASS IS ABOUT TO begin and notice the girl with the fiery red hair talking with a couple of people in the class. When class ends, I'm distracted by thinking of a good introduction, and I run right into her as I turn around to exit the supply closet.

"Sorry, I don't know where my mind is today," I apologize quickly.

"No problem. I'm the one creeping and invading space," she says smiling.

I extend my hand, introducing myself.

"Lena," she says taking my hand.

As I debate whether I should ask her for coffee or a smoothie, she says, "I'm done for the day and going to grab a bite to eat. Wanna join?"

"Sure. Where to? Do you want to be bad or good?"

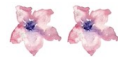
"Bad, of course! Why work out if we are going to be good?" she says jokingly with a guilty grin.

We decide on a small restaurant a few blocks away. Talking to her is easy. She is outgoing, open, and friendly, so we never have a quiet moment. We talk about everything from celebrity gossip to classes, families to our current living arrangements.

"Oh my god! We need to live together! I don't have a roommate and you don't like yours... It's perfect!" She says loudly, bouncing in her seat. "What do you think?"

A smile creeps on my face. “I would love to!” I answer honestly. I get a good vibe from her, and I miss having girlfriends around. “I guess we need to talk to the housing department. Huh? Do you think they will be okay with the move?”

“I don’t see why not. They aren’t moving shit around...we are! Let’s go to my apartment so you can see your new room.”



“Looks like I’m moving and getting a new roommate,” I say to Caleb before class.

“Why?”

I tell him about meeting Lena in my yoga class and her empty second bedroom, reminding him I don’t like my roommate. While I recount the events of yesterday, he is shaking his head frowning. Before I can finish telling him about Lena, the professor walks in, cutting my story short.

After class Caleb walks me to my next class as usual, asking questions about why I want to move and live with an unknown person, whether she is trustworthy, etc.... He is trying to change my mind about moving, making it clear he disapproves of my decision.

“I really want to do this. I love spending time with you, but I miss having girlfriends around. I like Lena, we got along famously. We just clicked. I’m going to move in with her.”

“Fine,” he says abruptly.

“Why are you mad?”

“I’m not... Sorry, I just don’t want you to go through all the trouble of moving then find out that you don’t like this girl. Then you are stuck with someone who you don’t like and can’t avoid. At least Diana is never around, or she locks herself in her room. I just thought you would want to give yourself some time to see if you get along before jumping to a decision.”

Relief spreads as I realize he is worried about me. He just wants to make sure I am going to be happy. I want to put him at ease with my decision, so I invite him to meet up with Lena and I later at my place.



THE WEEK PASSES QUICKLY with Lena and I adjusting to each other and creating our routines. I enjoy the easiness of this living arrangement, having someone to share my day with and cook dinners with, and most importantly, knowing someone cares I'm around.

When the weekend arrives, we head to Caleb's for another one of their parties. The first thing I notice when I walk into the apartment is Emily sitting on Caleb's lap at the table, where a drinking card game is going strong. Internally I'm seething, but I plaster a smile on my face, waving at Caleb as I walk into the kitchen. Lena's brows pull together once we are away from inquisitive eyes. I shrug my shoulders and shake my head, letting her know now is not the most opportune time to discuss.

As we make our drinks, Caleb comes up behind me. He wraps his arms around my waist, nuzzling his head in my neck and kissing me.

"I've missed you this week. I am going to have to steal you from Lena a few nights a week," he whispers in my ear.

I turn around to face him. "You can steal me anytime."

The anger that had just flared to life evaporates with his attention on me.

Lena and I grab our drinks to join the drinking game. I introduce Lena to everyone sitting around the table, including Emily. Emily gives us a hasty hello, and I return the sentiment with a sassy smile.

Wes comes in with a couple of folding chairs. "For you, my ladies."

Before I can grab a seat, Caleb sits down and pulls me onto his lap, wrapping his arms around my middle. Lena and I join the game in progress, even though Wes complains about the unfairness of us starting mid-game. According to him we will not receive the full torture. A couple of rounds later, he is laughing hysterically at our expense because somehow we have managed to pick the worst cards, drinking every time. I've had to refill my drink once already, and the game was more than halfway done when we joined.

Everyone is more boisterous during the second game—screaming for drinks to be taken, pointing, laughing, and name-calling at those unable to take their required drinks. After two games, we call it quits and make our way into the living room.

Lena and I are in the kitchen mixing another round of drinks when Emily comes in and stares at me. Tired of her and her pissy attitude, but not comfortable with confrontation, I ask, “Can I make you a drink?”

“No, I'll wait till y'all are done.” She leans against the counter, frowning.

“Not a problem. What can I get you?”

“Aren't you done? I can make my own drink,” she snaps.

Lena grabs my hand, pulling me out of the kitchen, telling her, “It's all yours.”

Lena drags me outside onto the balcony. “Don't sweat it. She's a bitch, and she's jealous that Caleb is with you.” She hands me a cigarette.

“What the hell, she has been like this since the first time I met her. You would have thought she would be over her crap already. If you're going to act like a bitch and be miserable all the time, why hang out with the person making you feel that way? Fucking stupid!” I begin to rant.

The door slides open, and Caleb walks out.

“Smoke?” Lena asks Caleb extending the pack in her hand to him.

“No, thanks,” he tells Lena then turns to me. “Come in when you’re finished.”

“He is with you, and that’s why she’s pissed,” she continues after he slides the door shut.

“I guess.” We stay outside a few more minutes before heading back in. I look around, noticing Emily is nowhere in sight. Relieved to not have to deal with her, my mood lightens, and I’m able to enjoy the rest of the evening.

I walk into Caleb’s room exhausted, grabbing a T-shirt from a drawer. I wash my face before getting into bed and snuggling on Caleb’s chest. I reach up to kiss him, but he turns his head. “Smoking isn’t attractive. Lena is such a good influence on you already, huh?”

“I didn’t know it bothered you. I’ve smoked before, but only when I drink and if there is a smoker around. Sorry.”

“Okay. Goodnight.” He kisses my forehead and turns away from me. I lay there confused, somehow having unintentionally upset him yet again.

“Goodnight.”



I WAKE up in the morning with Caleb sleeping soundly next to me. Without the fuzz of alcohol, anger builds at the way he handled last night. I don’t tell him squat about hanging out with Emily, who no doubt is crushing on him, but he can give me an opinion about everything. I sneak out of bed and grab my clothes to change and wash up in the bathroom. Walking back into the bedroom, I hope he is still sleeping, but my luck has run short. He is sitting up in bed.

“I’m gonna see if Lena’s awake so we can head home.” I wave as I walk to the bedroom door.

“Wait, why are you leaving so quick?” His brows pull together.

“You seemed like you didn’t want me here last night, so I’m just gonna take off,” I explain.

“Why wouldn’t I want you here?”

“You didn’t even kiss me last night. You turned over and fell asleep.”

“I’m sorry, but I explained that I don’t like smokers. It’s nasty kissing someone who has just been smoking. Come here.” He motions for me to come back to bed. Unsure, I hesitate for a couple of seconds before I sit on the side of the bed. “Come on, don’t be mad at me. I didn’t want to kiss you tasting like an ashtray. I started dating a nonsmoker, remember. I’m the one that should be mad, false advertising and all that.” He wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me toward the center of the bed. He lays me down and crawls on top of me.

He has a point. I have never smoked around him, so the issue never came up. I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him down for a long, lingering kiss. The intensity is beginning to build when there’s a knock on the door.

“Sof, are you up?” Lena calls through the door.

I roll Caleb off me. “Come in, I’m up.”

He scowls at me, clearly unhappy that we were interrupted.

She walks in and sits at the foot of the bed. “Sleep well?” She smirks at me.

“Like a baby...and you? Did Wes keep his hands to himself like he promised?” I ask, giggling.

Just then Wes walks in and plops himself on the desk chair. “How can you even doubt, Sophia? *I’m* the gentleman of this apartment.” He smiles proudly.

“This is my room...everyone out.” Caleb says jokingly, so I begin to roll out of bed, but he stops me, saying, “Except you. Lena, give us a few.”

Walking out she announces, “Hurry up, I’m starving.”

I roll over on top of Caleb, kissing him, then say, “I gotta go. Breakfast is calling our name.”

“I’ll talk to you later, but I won’t see you tonight. I’m working.”

“Okay. I’m sure Lena and I can find some trouble to get ourselves into,” I say, smirking.

He rolls me over again, laying on top of me. He holds himself on his forearms and spreads my legs to fit his body in between. He begins to kiss my neck, moving up to my chin then pressing his lips firmly on mine in a deep, all-consuming kiss. We pull apart, breathless.

“I love you. No getting in trouble tonight. I’ll call you later,” he says with a bite in his tone.

I get up and blow him a kiss. Mouthing *love you*, I close the door behind me.



LENA and I spend the afternoon catching up on homework, heading to the gym, and organizing the last of my things in the apartment. We are just settling in to watch some guilty-pleasure reality TV when Lena’s phone chimes. She fires off a text, and the phone chimes again. This goes on a few times before she finally looks at me and says, “We are heading out. Time to get dressed.”

I laugh at her for assuming I’ll be willing to go, because we both know I am.

“Where to?” I ask excitedly.

“The Shack, you know, the bar across the street. We can walk there! There’s a band playing tonight.” She pulls me up off the couch and pushes me into my room, telling me, “Now get dressed!”

WE WALK INTO THE SHACK, a cozy bar that caters to the college crowd with cheap drinks and a laid-back atmosphere.

There is a stage in front of a small dance floor, and in the back, a few pool tables and dart machines.

We find her friends at the pool tables. They have pitchers of beer and tell us to pour ourselves a drink. I'm people watching, looking around, when my eyes lock on a gorgeous guy. He is tall, over six feet, with a strong, muscular build, the perfect scruffy five o'clock shadow, and dark-brown, shaggy, messed-up-on-purpose hair. He is wearing a white V-neck T-shirt with a tattoo partly showing on his bicep, and worn, hugging-all-the-right-places jeans. He notices me gawking and smiles. I feel my face heat up, so I quickly turn around before I make an even bigger fool of myself.

Lena's brows pull in, and she mouths, *what happened*. I shake my head and mouth *later*, not wanting to say anything when he could still be watching me. I decide to jump into a pool game and give my full attention to the table. After a few shots, I feel someone watching me. I look up, and my gaze lands on the same guy, who's now staring at me. He smiles as he continues in our direction, but just before he approaches, someone taps his shoulder and says something to him. He looks at me again, smiling, but walks away. How can one smile turn my insides to mush?

A band begins playing a couple of minutes later, so Lena and I find a table to watch the set, and I notice the guy yet again, this time on stage playing guitar. He looks absolutely amazing. My stomach is doing flips watching him. I know every other girl in the bar is watching him with as much lust as I am feeling. Watching his hand glide up and down the neck of his guitar and the intense expression he wears while moving his body to the music is turning me on more than I'd like to admit.

"I was blushing earlier because the guitar player caught me staring at him. He is freakin' gorgeous!" I tell Lena in her ear.

She starts laughing and says, "Every other girl in this bar thinks so too, me included!"

I laugh, looking back up to the stage, right into his eyes. I swear he is looking directly at me but know my imagination

has run wild.

After last call, Lena and I walk home, laughing and talking about the evening. Our drunken talk is interrupted by my phone chiming. Pulling it out, I notice I missed a few texts from Caleb. I was so carefree, I didn't bother looking at my phone.

Caleb: where r u

Me: walking hm from the bar

Caleb: u went out tonite?

M: yes, to the shack.

My phone rings just as we are about to climb the steps to our apartment.

"Hello," I say, even though I know it's him.

"You went out?" Caleb says tightly.

"Yes. I went out with Lena to have a few beers and listen to a band. We met some people from her bio class."

"And you didn't bother to let me know?" he snaps.

"You were at work. And besides, you don't hear me upset when you go out with the boys," I respond as my shoulders tighten.

"Whatever. I'll talk to you tomorrow," he says and hangs up the phone before I can respond.

"What was that about?" Lena asks, as we make it to our apartment.

"He's mad I went out, I guess." I plop down on the couch, and she follows.

"Why?"

I shrug, not knowing how to explain. "He'll call tomorrow and apologize." I frown.



SURE ENOUGH, morning rolls around and I have several texts from Caleb telling me how sorry he is and to call him when I wake up. Deciding to make him wait, I take my shower first. When I finally call him, he expresses his regret and tells me how much he worries when I'm out alone. There are too many assholes waiting to take advantage of innocent girls. He says he'll make it up to me by picking me up for lunch.

Lunch has been perfect—he's sweet and attentive. And just as I'm wishing Caleb acted like this every day, he asks, "Are you sure you like living with Lena?"

Taken by surprise, I say, "I'm more than positive. Why?"

He drops his head a tad and whispers, "I just worry that she may be a bad influence. She seems like the loud, party-girl type. I don't want people to associate you with that." He grabs my hand from the table, kissing it.

"I have one friend here, and you dislike her. I have to start building my circle of friends. I'm sorry you don't like her, but I do. If you gave her a chance, you would like her too." This over-protectiveness is thoughtful, but at the same time, irritating.

"You know I love you. If I didn't, I wouldn't give a shit how people saw you or what you were doing. Don't be mad at me because I love you." He pouts with a small grin.

"You know you worry too much, right?" I lean in to kiss his pouty bottom lip. "And I love you too."

7

LENA AND I ARE BUSY IN THE KITCHEN WHILE CALEB SITS AT the table talking with us about the plans for my birthday weekend.

“Bree, Paige and Preston will be coming in town tomorrow.” I inform Caleb.

“That dick is going to be in town this weekend? The one that couldn’t keep his fuckin’ hands off you?” Caleb exclaims.

“He’s not a dick. He’s my friend, and he is like a big brother to me. And yes, he’s going to be in town, and I don’t want any drama,” I calmly explain.

“And let me guess, he’s staying here?” he says as his forearms begin to tighten.

“Nope, he has a cousin in town that he’s crashing with, but if he needs to stay here, he is welcome.”

“He is welcome in my bed any day,” Lena breaks into our conversation laughing, “He’s hot so I may insist he needs to stay here!”

I roll my eyes, laughing the instant crush she developed after seeing his picture. I walk over to Caleb, straddling his lap and giving him a quick kiss, then whispering in his ear, I plead, “Please don’t get mad at me for anything this weekend. I want to have a good time with my friends for my birthday.”

“Fine, but those guys better know that you have a boyfriend. I’m not kidding, Sophia. I don’t want their horny-ass hands rubbing all over you.”

“They know I have a boyfriend. No drama or fights, please,” I beg.

“Fine.” He gives me a chaste kiss.

CALEB’S PHONE pinging wakes me. I can hear him typing messages, and I try to ignore him because I’m not ready to get up.

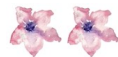
“Will you be terribly disappointed if I don’t go out with y’all tonight?” He turns over to look at me with a somber half smile.

I wonder why he won’t join us but am secretly relieved at not having to worry about drama with him and Preston tonight. Is it wrong for me to feel this way?

“Yes, but if you can’t make it, I understand,” I say, not wanting him to be angry if I give the wrong response. “What’s going on that you can’t make it?”

“Someone from the bar wants me to cover their shift tonight. They’ve covered me, so I should do this for them,” he explains.

“That’s fine, anyway we are not celebrating tonight. We’re just going to watch Preston’s cousin’s band play. Tomorrow is my day.”



THE DAY HAS BEEN FILLED with gossip and laughs. Briana and Paige welcome Lena into our circle with open arms. We are getting dressed for the evening with music blaring around us. Preston called to let us know he was at his cousin’s and would swing by to pick us up. There’s a knock at the front door as we are running around the apartment trying to figure out what to wear. I open it, assuming it’s Preston, but am surprised to see Caleb. The smile on his face quickly fades.

“This is the way you answer the door?” His eyes scan me from head to toe. I’m in boy shorts and a tank. He looks past

me into the apartment to catch Paige walking out of Lena's room in bra and panties. She turns around and dashes back into Lena's room when she sees Caleb.

"We're still getting dressed, and I was the most decent, as you can see."

"You call that decent? Who did you think was at the door?" His body stiffens.

"Preston. He's seen us like this before, so I didn't think anything of it. When we go to the beach and stay at his parents' beach house, we're all there getting dressed. I didn't think it was a big deal." I'm rambling.

Lena walks into the living room wearing only a towel wrapped around her and exclaims, "Hey, did your plans change? Are you coming with us after all?"

"No, just wanted to see Sophia before y'all left." He gives her a once over and returns his attention back to me. "Please put on clothes before he gets here. It will make me feel a whole lot better."

"Fine but give me a kiss and get going, or I'll never be ready." I smile up at him, wrapping my arms around his neck.

He releases me, demanding, "Go put on clothes, now. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Bye."

As he turns to leave, I notice Preston walking up with a huge smile. Caleb stalls.

Preston extends his hand out to Caleb. "Good to see you again."

Caleb just nods his head, refusing to take his hand.

Preston turns his focus to me. "Happy early birthday, baby girl!" He opens his arms to me. I wrap my arms around his neck as he picks me up in a friendly bear hug. I look at Caleb standing behind him glaring.

He puts me down, saying, "I should have known y'all wouldn't be ready. I'm always having to wait for y'all. I'm

going to rush the girls.” He heads into the apartment and straight into Lena’s bedroom, I’m assuming because he can hear the chatter.

“I’ll go put on clothes,” I say to Caleb because I can tell he is barely containing his temper. I place my hands on his chest and lift up on my toes to give him a kiss. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Fine.” He walks away.

I close the door behind me and walk toward my room as Preston comes out of Lena’s looking concerned. I continue to my room with Preston behind me. He closes my bedroom door and sits on the bed, motioning for me to sit with him. I am torn between wanting to sit with him for comfort and getting dressed to please Caleb. I can’t pass up the safety and familiarity I have always felt with Preston. I sit next to him, and he wraps his arms around me, pulling me close as he kisses my temple.

“Still with the asshole, huh?”

“I’m sure you know the answer to that question.”

“Sorry. It’s just every time I see him, he’s being a dick. You deserve better.”

“Thanks.” I force a smile and kiss his cheek. “But you don’t have to worry about him tonight. He won’t be going out with us.”

Preston’s lips spread into a shit-eating grin. “Amen!” he exclaims laughing. “Now get your lazy ass up and get dressed. Ethan and the guys are waiting on us.”

I get up to search my closet. “You’ve never really talked about him. Ethan, I mean.”

“He didn’t go to school with us, I guess that’s part of the reason. He’s a couple of years older and went to public school. He likes to rile the family like that. Doing shit that they don’t approve of like going to public school, playing in a band, not picking an Ivy League or a family-approved university... I could go on, but I think you get the picture.”

“Are you close?”

“Getting there. I’ll admit, I’m jealous he has the balls to buck family tradition.”

“Why don’t you rebel a little then?”

“Won’t happen, I want my trust fund. My dad holds the money over my head. My sister is perfect and always does what my dad wants, and I am expected to follow in her footsteps.”

“Ethan doesn’t care about his trust fund? Brave!”

“Nah, my uncle lets him do all this shit, even if the rest of the family disapproves. Only child syndrome, I guess. Or guilt from divorcing his mom.”

“Oh, well, I can’t wait to meet him,” I say, smiling.

“Stop talking, and get dressed,” he says as he walks out the door to rush everyone else.

WE WALK into The Shack and look for a good table to watch the band. Lena takes sharp breath, and her eyes widen with mischief as we are about to sit. I mouth, *what*.

A huge smile spreads across her face before she comes to me, whispering in my ear, “It’s the same band as last weekend!”

“Are you sure?” I whisper back, not knowing how she figured it out.

“Yes, the band name is on the drums,” she says in my ear. My heart feels like it is going to jump out of my chest thinking one of these guys is Preston’s cousin. What are the chances? I can feel my face turning a deep shade of red thinking of *him*. It can’t be, can it?

“No secrets, now you have to tell all of us. And it’s a good one by Sof’s face,” Preston teases us.

“It’s nothing. Something stupid that happened last weekend.” Lena returns to her stool, grinning guiltily.

We begin talking about plans for tomorrow when I hear a guy behind me say, "It's about time you got here. What the hell took you so long?" His deep voice has a light, teasing quality to it.

"Shut the fuck up! You try and rush four damn girls when they're getting ready." Preston teases back. "Blame these beauties!"

I turn around to see the owner of the voice. It's the guy I couldn't get enough of last weekend. My face heats back up, and all I want is for the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

"This is my cousin Ethan. Ethan, meet Briana, Lena, Paige, and Sophia." He points at each of us as he calls our name.

We all chime in our hellos. Ethan grabs a stool from the next table and pulls it up, sitting in between Paige and I.

"Which one of you is the birthday girl?" Ethan asks.

"That would be Sophia." Preston informs him before I find my voice.

I smile shyly, nervously biting my bottom lip. I don't want to say anything for fear of what will come out.

"Happy birthday," he says as his eyes narrow. "You were here last weekend, weren't you? I saw you playing pool."

I nod my head, building the courage to say something to the gorgeous guy sitting so very close. "Yes, we enjoyed the show." I continue biting on my bottom lip holding back any useless babble that may escape, but overjoyed he remembered me.

Paige jumps into the conversation leaning closely into him, one of her trademark flirting techniques. "We can't wait to hear y'all play."

I instantly get jealous of her ease with gorgeous guys and the beauty guys love.

"Hope we don't disappoint." He winks at her, smiling. It looks like I can disappear, as I just became invisible next to

Paige.

Instant regret follows my thoughts. I have never been jealous of my friends, and here I am insecure and feeling resentful. This is not like me. But I would like to be the one who gets noticed. Not sure how long I can hide my emotions, I excuse myself to the restroom.

I hate myself for the feeling jealous. I was immediately drawn to my friends because of their charisma. In all our years of being friends, I saw guys throw themselves at Paige and Briana, and it never bothered me. I had my fun and enjoyed our social life. So why now? Especially with a guy I don't even know.

I am in a stall, leaning against the door, thinking about how I wish Caleb was here. I was relieved earlier knowing he wasn't coming, but now I miss him and his attention.

The door to the restroom opens, and Lena calls out, "Are you still in here?"

"Right here," I say as I step out, not wanting to draw attention to my emotions.

"Wait for me," she says as she walks into a stall.

On the way back, we stop at the bar to buy a round of shots. When we arrive back at the table, I hear Preston say, "Yeah, I think he's a douche."

"Who are you talking about?" Lena asks setting down the shots she was carrying.

"Caleb," Preston says, looking at me apologetically.

"We were talking about Halloween, and it came up how he acted with Preston hugging you. He really did overreact, Sof," Briana tells me as my face falls in embarrassment.

"I leave for a minute, and y'all talk about me?" Wow. Ethan looks at me with brows furrowed.

"We weren't talking about you, Sof. We were talking about Caleb and how he reacted. *Big* difference," Paige insists.

I roll my eyes. “Never mind. Lena and I bought shots. Cheers!” I grab one of the glasses, tap it on the table, and chug it down, not waiting for anyone else. Needing to get away from everyone, I grab the cigarettes and lighter from Lena’s purse saying, “I’ll be back.”

I burst through the side door leading out to the patio. Zeroing in on an empty table, I plop myself in the chair, sighing in defeat before lighting up. I have never felt my emotions so out of control before. A couple of minutes pass, and the rush of nicotine has calmed me a tad. Arms come around my shoulders in an embrace I know well—Preston.

“What happened in there, baby girl?” Preston looks at me as he sits on a chair besides me.

“Nothing...I don’t know...” I can’t explain if I don’t understand it myself. “Never mind,” I say, not even wanting to force a smile.

“Talk to me,” he pushes.

“Y’all are shitting on him, and you don’t know him. I put up with all the people y’all’ve dated and never said crap about them. First guy I date and y’all...never mind.” I sigh, looking away and take another drag.

“You’re right. I’m being too protective. I’ll ease up.” He pauses. He grabs my chin and turns my head toward him. “Okay?”

I nod. I crush my cigarette in the ashtray, not wanting it anymore.

“You know I’d do anything for you.”

“I know,” I say as he grabs my hand, pulling me up, then bringing me close for a hug.

“You just *want* to piss her boyfriend off, don’t you?” Ethan says, laughing. I pull back and watch him light a cigarette.

“Boyfriend...uh...maybe. But, baby girl, never.” Preston keeps an arm around me as I slap him in his chest playfully, wanting to remind him of our conversation.

“You better go check on your girls in there. They were having way too much fun once I introduced them to the rest of the band.” Ethan smirks.

“Thanks, asshole,” Preston jests back.

Ethan grabs my hand, sending shivers up my arm. “Why don’t you stay out here and keep me company?”

Preston looks at his cousin pensively, nods, then continues walking inside. I look at Ethan, unsure what we have to talk about. He offers me a cigarette, and I decline, not needing another head rush.

“Where is this infamous boyfriend of yours?” Ethan takes a drag.

“He has to work tonight,” I answer simply.

“And he wasn’t with you last weekend either.”

“Nope, working again. I came out with Lena, my roommate.” I pause then add, “But he is coming with us tomorrow.” I feel the need to explain his absence.

“Fun... Maybe I can get him riled up too.” He smirks then says, “Just kidding.”

“Ha ha. You’re so funny.” I roll my eyes at him.

“Why does Preston call you ‘baby girl’? With that kind of nickname, I would’ve thought you two were together.”

I shrug, “He’s been calling me that for years.”

“Have you dated my cousin?” He narrows his eyes.

“No. He’s like a brother to me.”

“Good to know.”

His response catches me off guard, but we are interrupted by a guy yelling out the door to Ethan that they are about to go on. He grabs my hand, interlacing our fingers, walking me back to the table. I hop onto my stool, and he comes in close to my ear and whispers, “By the way, you have beautiful eyes.” I feel the softest kiss on my ear, which sends goose bumps all over my body.

The band starts playing, and we continue to drink, laugh, and talk. We watch the band, sing along to the songs we know, and dance. I love watching Ethan on stage. He's confident, graceful, with a commanding presence.

The band finishes up their first set and returns to the table carrying another round of shots. They pass the drinks around, and my friends yell, "Happy birthday, Sophia!" We tap our drinks on the table and chug.

Ethan places his hand on top of the one I have resting on the table and says, "Let's play some pool until I need to be back up on stage."

"Anyone else want to play pool?" I ask the table while trying to tamp down the excitement flowing through me with Ethan's hand on mine.

Lena and Preston hop off their stools, challenging us. My body tingles with pleasure as Ethan guides me to the tables with his hand on my lower back. Ethan racks the balls, and I can't help but stare at his every movement.

"Who wants to break?" Ethan asks.

"Go ahead." Preston challenges his cousin with a cocky grin.

As soon as he breaks, I know Lena and I won't be doing much because the boys have the game all by themselves. Ethan bends over the table, lining up the cue stick, nodding his head in the direction of a corner pocket and calling the shot before he takes it. I am so distracted by his ass in those jeans, it takes Lena bumping me slightly to divert my attention back to the game.

He makes another shot before missing, giving Preston his turn. Preston gets a couple shots in before my turn. I look around the table, not seeing an easy shot. Ethan comes up behind me placing his hands on my hips and moving me slightly to the right.

"I'll lead you through this shot. You are going to go for the green stripe, banking it there, and it will come back to the corner." He points at the different locations on the table.

I turn around, smiling. “You sure do have a lot of faith in my ability.”

“Bend over and focus,” he says, smirking. I do as he says, lining up the cue stick on the white ball and paying attention to the angle he wants me to take. “Now I need you to hit the ball with some force, but don’t wail on it... Go.”

All I can focus on are his hands lingering on my hips. I bring my mind back to the game and take the shot. I make it! I jump up and down like an idiot. Not thinking, I wrap my arms around Ethan’s neck pulling him down to kiss his cheek, thanking him.

I realize my arms are still around his neck when Preston asks, “Really, Sof?”

I quickly let go, stepping back while my face heats up. “Oops, sorry... I got too excited, huh?”

“It’s adorable. Come on, let’s take your next shot.” One word—*adorable*—and I’m brought back to the reality of my cute status.

We finish the game just as his drummer walks to the table and announces their next set.

The lead singer tells the crowd there is a special lady in the audience. The band starts a rock version of “Happy Birthday,” and this time I know Ethan is looking directly at me and smiling. I can’t stop the smile that takes over my face. The band finishes my birthday serenade and begins their set.

I reach into my purse for my lip gloss when I feel my phone vibrate. I pull it out and see Caleb’s name on the screen. I answer the phone, asking him to hold while I walk out to the patio so I can hear better.

“Hey, babe, what’s up?”

“What the hell are you up to?” His anger is radiating through the phone.

“What are you talking about?”

“Really? The picture of y’all where some asshole is holding on to you, then you have a picture of that same guy

holding on to you while you shoot pool. What the fuck are you doing with this guy?"

"That's Ethan, Preston's cousin. We took a picture, and we were playing pool. That's it."

"Fuck, Sophia. If you don't want to be with me, then tell me. I'll be glad to walk away."

I panic at the thought. He chose me, and here I am screwing everything up. "No, I do want you. Really, nothing is going on. Please don't be mad." I can't help the tears that start to fall. Maybe this birthday weekend was a bad idea.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow. Come over when you wake up," he orders.

"I'll be there."

I stay outside, thankful everyone is inside watching the band. I must look like a fool standing outside a bar crying. I contemplate walking home but don't know how I would explain it to everyone. I open up my socials to find the pictures posted. Paige, the queen of attention, has posted and tagged all of us in a couple of carousels of our night. She's been doing this for so long, I never pay attention when she's taking pictures anymore. She loves to post and delete a few days later. I compose myself, hoping my mascara hasn't smeared. I dash through the crowd toward the restroom before going back to the table.

I hear the song end and the jukebox music begin as I'm wiping the mascara from under my eyes. I'm confused because they just started this set. I finish fixing my face and walk out into the hallway leading back out to the bar, only to find Ethan leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest.

"What happened?" His voice is full of concern.

"Nothing, why?"

He shakes his head at me, moving closer standing right in front of me cupping my face in his large, strong hands. "Please don't say it's nothing. When your friends saw you walk in, they were all ready to jump up and follow you. Preston won

out, but we finished the song, and I came. I asked Preston to let me talk to you. Now...what's wrong?" His touch is gentle, and I want nothing more than to fall into his chest.

"It's nothing you need to be concerned about. Everything's fine."

"Try again. I'm going to continue asking until you tell me."

"Caleb's mad. He saw pictures of you and me that Paige posted."

A half smile creeps on his face as he says, "Ah. So he's pissed at me. Don't worry about it. Things will be better in the morning when the anger leaves his system."

I smile back as his hands leave my face and wrap around my shoulders, bringing me close for a hug.

"I am going to give you my number, and you can call me anytime you need me. I can be your Preston in town," he says still holding me. I nod against his chest as he kisses the top of my head.

He lets me go, guiding me back to the table. Everyone gives me sympathetic smiles.

"Sorry guys, I guess I kinda ruined—"

Briana stops me. "Don't even finish that thought. We're all having a great time." A true smile now on my face, I mouth *thank you* to her.

"I have to finish my set. Sit, relax, and have a good time, please," Ethan tells me as I hop back on a stool.

8

I WAKE EARLY SO THAT I CAN GO TO CALEB'S BEFORE THE girls want to start the day. I let Lena know where I'm going and to text me when everyone wakes up. I jump in my Mustang and call him to make sure he is up to answer the door.

"What's up, Sophia?" He sounds groggy and annoyed I called.

"I am heading over to your place, and I wanted to give you a heads up so I don't wake the guys. You told me to come over last night," I explain.

"Fine. I just didn't realize you'd be up this early," he huffs.

I walk into Caleb's apartment, and the remnants of a party are all over the living room. Caleb is not in the living room or kitchen, so I go into his room, but he's not there either. Confused I walk back into the living room, just as he walks through the front door.

"Emily called me over to her place. She needed help with a couple of boxes on the top of her closet." He explains, not even saying hello or good morning.

"Oh... Did you finish helping her with everything?" I'm instantly annoyed that he can get out of bed to help her but seemed angry I woke him.

"Yeah, it was just a couple of boxes. So how was last night?" He sits on the couch.

I follow, sitting on the opposite side with my back against the armrest, pulling my legs up. “It was fun except for thinking you were mad at me again. I’m sorry you saw those pictures of Ethan and you didn’t know who he was, but he’s just a friend. You need to start trusting me when I’m out without you. I don’t call you pissed when Emily is over here and I’m not.”

“I do trust you...and I’ve told you, it’s all the assholes out there I don’t trust. And how can you say he’s just a friend when you just met him?”

“I know he’s just a friend because he’s so much like Preston, and he already treats me like a little sister.”

“He puts his hands on his sister like that. Really?” Skepticism drips from each word.

“I don’t know because he doesn’t have a sister, but he didn’t hit on me.” I stand my ground. “And I need you to be nice because he is going to be there tonight. I love you, and I want to be with you. Please be nice to my friends.”

“Fine, I’ll be nice.” He grabs my hand, pulling me close to him, then takes my pouty bottom lip in a kiss, sucking gently.

“No pouting to get your way.” He smiles.

“I won’t pout as long as you’re nice,” I counter, smiling back. My phone rings, and Briana’s face is on my screen.

I answer and after a quick conversation I tell Caleb, “The girls are ready to munch. I’m going to meet them for tacos.” I get up and kiss him. “I gotta go.”



“WE’RE WAITING on the guys too,” Paige says as I wave at the empty seats.

“Ah!” I smile. “Sorry I was gone when y’all woke up, but I needed to go straighten things out with Caleb before tonight. Forgive me?”

“Of course, but what was up last night?” Briana asks. “You were on some serious highs and lows, Sof.”

“I don’t know...” They are giving me disbelieving looks, so I continue, “No seriously, I really don’t. It was maddening for me too.” I take a deep breath and try to explain it to them and myself.

“First when y’all were talking about Caleb, it frustrated me because I’ve never said shit about the guys y’all have dated, even if they weren’t my favorites. It hurt my feelings. Then I got even more frustrated when Caleb called and got mad at the pictures Paige posted. It’s like he just confirmed what y’all were saying about him.”

“You know Preston is very protective of you. He always has been. He was telling Ethan about Caleb. We weren’t really saying anything. Not to throw Preston under the bus, but he worries about you,” Paige says. “I wish he would worry about Bree and I like that. But for whatever reason, you became his baby sister, and it won’t stop.”

I smile at her words because I know it is true. Just then Preston, Ethan, and his drummer, Mike, pull out chairs and sit down.



PRESTON, Ethan, and Mike arrive as we are finishing dressing, so they don’t have to wait on us too long. Ethan leads me to his Range Rover with Lena and Mike, while Paige and Briana head to Preston’s truck.

Ethan opens the front passenger door for me to get in, and I quickly say, “Mike can sit up front. I can sit in the back.”

Ethan shakes his head, smiling. “Just get in. Mike is fine in the back.”

The drive to the restaurant is filled with laughter and conversation.

The restaurant is a casual, loud establishment catering to tourists. Briana lets the hostess know we have arrived. While we wait to be seated Ethan excuses himself to the men’s room.

Caleb and his roommates arrive, and as I'm introducing everyone, a pair of arms come around my middle and Ethan whispers in my ear, "So which one is he?"

I'm confused why he would do that, until I look up and see Preston smirking in Caleb's direction. I pull away from Ethan's embrace and turn to Caleb, watching him carefully control his reaction.

"Caleb, this is Ethan Hayes, Preston's cousin. And Ethan, this is my boyfriend, Caleb Martin." I watch as they size each other up.

Having them here together is a surreal experience. I was so taken by Caleb when we first met, with his boy-next-door-good looks, but seeing him standing next to Ethan, there is no competition. Ethan is in a class all by himself. His clear hazel eyes are mesmerizing. He's got a tall, muscular build, and his bad-boy edginess is panty dropping.

Later, after everyone has finished their meal, the waiter comes out with a small chocolate cake with candles and sets it down in front of me. All my friends begin to sing "Happy Birthday," and at the end, they wait for me to make my wish and blow out the candles. Caleb leans into me saying "Happy Birthday," and kisses my neck.

Thankfully, dinner ends peacefully. I can tell Caleb isn't happy with the guys around, but he is keeping his cool. Thankfully Jason and Wes kept the table talking and laughing with their natural ease and sense of humor.

We walk a couple of blocks to a piano bar Ethan suggested. The energy of the room is contagious. There is a small dance floor in front of the pianos. On each side of the large room is a long bar with several bartenders, and there are tables everywhere. Everyone is singing along to "American Pie," dancing and waving their hands.

The guys go to the bar for drinks as we scan the place for a table. Briana notices people starting to leave, and we rush over to snag their spot. Caleb hands me my drink and turns to Wes behind him, grabbing a tray full of shots.

Wes yells over the music. “Happy Birthday, Sophia!”

Wes takes the shots off the tray for Caleb and hands them out. He places his glass in the middle, waiting for everyone to join. Everyone clinks glasses and taps the table before slamming them down. My eyes shoot open when I swallow. It tasted fruity and sweet, but I’m breathing alcohol out of my nose.

We are singing and enjoying the music when they begin to play “I Will Survive.” Lena jumps out of her seat, pulling each of the girls to the dance floor. We squeeze our way to the small, crowded floor full of drunken girls singing at the top of their lungs.

After the song ends, we go back to the table, and Caleb grabs my hand, pulling me onto his lap. I turn to kiss him, feeling the alcohol flow through my system. He has his hand on my thigh and slowly begins to slide it up my leg, stroking under my skirt. I turn to him, about to mouth *behave*, but he isn’t paying attention to me. He is glaring at Ethan, goading him. Ethan’s jaw is ticking, and he has a fist tightly clenched on the table. I immediately stand, announcing I’m going to the ladies’ room. I grab Lena’s hand, pulling her with me.

I rush toward the restrooms, weaving around all the people and dragging Lena behind me. We reach the ladies’ room, where we are greeted by a line out the door. We head to the back, and then I turn to Lena.

“Do you know what Caleb was doing?” I look at her, my eyes wide. Not waiting for a response, I continue, “He was rubbing all up in my business right in front of Ethan, giving him an ‘I dare you’ look.”

“Oh no, he wasn’t?!” Lena exclaims.

“Oh yes, he was. First, he doesn’t want me to look like a slut, but he can make me look like one shoving his hand up my dress to make sure another guy sees. What the hell!”

“I don’t know what to tell you, but I wish I’d seen that exchange. I’ve noticed how protective Preston is of you, and you have known him forever. Ethan seems to be just as

protective, and he has only known you a day. You have such a juicy life!!” she says while giggling.

“This is so NOT funny.” I say, trying to hold a serious expression, but a smile quickly shows through, and I roll my eyes at her, shaking my head.

“Oh yes, it is! BUT... I have to admit, I am in love with your bestie! He is hot, so sweet, and did I say HOT?!” Her face is glowing.

“Yes, he is all of that. If you like him, go for it.” My lips pull out knowingly.

We return to the table, and Caleb tries to pull me back onto his lap, but I move to sit in the chair next to him. He glares at me but doesn't say anything.

The piano players start calling people to the stage. We laugh and try to guess what embarrassing thing they are going to make them do, when I hear my name called. I look around at my friends, and they point at me, laughing. Paige jumps out of her chair, pulling me up and pushing me in the direction of the stage. I climb on stage and look back at my friends, pursing my lips and narrowing my eyes at them. This just makes them all laugh louder—that is, all except Caleb, who is shaking his head with his lips pulled down.

The piano player wishes everyone on stage a happy birthday, then informs us we will be doing the Hokey Pokey. The song starts innocently with a leg and an arm, but soon everyone is told to put their butts in, and the next thing I know, we're putting in breasts and cocks. Everyone on stage is participating while laughing at our own humiliation.

After my time on stage Paige asks if we should head out and finish the night at The Shack since it's close to home. Preston tells us to all meet at The Shack. Caleb insists I ride over with him, so I let everyone know I will see them there.



WE WALK into the bar and claim an empty pool table while we wait for everyone. I know the instant they arrive because their laughter drifts through the bar over the music. Preston is guiding Lena in, keeping her close.

Caleb challenges Ethan and Preston to a game against him and Jason. Although no outright remarks are being made, I can feel the tension. They are serious while playing, but once Ethan knocks the eight ball in, Caleb chooses not to play again.

Caleb sits beside me at the bar, where the girls and I are chatting. He wraps his arm around me, pulling me close. In my alcohol haze, I lean into him, enjoying the lack of conflict. I know he's uncomfortable, but he is keeping himself in check. I turn to him, placing my lips on his and murmuring, "Thank you for tonight."

I pull away and notice Ethan watching me. When our eyes meet, he looks away, back at the table and game.

The end of the night comes quickly and Mike heads for another after party, while Caleb and his friends go back to his apartment. The rest of us walk back to our apartment where Ethan and Preston had left their cars.

We walk in and everyone heads in different directions. While Preston, Ethan, Bree, and I flip through channels, Lena and Paige head back to Lena's room to change.

"Are y'all staying or going?" I ask Preston.

"We'll stay. We shouldn't be driving after tonight's drinking." Ethan answers before Preston.

When Paige comes out, Preston smiles, gets up and heads into Lena's room.

"If he is sleeping in there, you two can have my room." I point to Paige and Bree, then look at Ethan and add, "You can have the couch, and I'll make my bed on the floor."

"I'll sleep on the floor, Sof," Bree tells me.

"I can't let my guests sleep on the floor. Y'all take my room. I'll get a couple of blankets and pillows."

I lay out a blanket and pillow on the floor for myself, then hand another set to Ethan.

“Sorry we don’t have a more comfortable couch for you,” I tell Ethan.

“It’s not a problem.”

He takes off his shirt, keeping his wife beater and jeans on, before lying on the couch. I lay down, trying to get comfortable. I hear him squirming too.

“Mind if I join you? The couch is not going to work.” He sits on the floor and lays back with his pillow.

“Of course not. Sorry for the sleeping accommodations.”

“No worries. By the way, happy birthday, baby girl.”

“Thanks.”



I OPEN my eyes and realize my head is on someone’s chest and there are arms wrapped around me. I’m confused how and when during the night Ethan and I found our way into each other’s arms. I try not to move because I don’t want to wake him. If he wakes and doesn’t want me here, I’ll be so embarrassed. And to top it off, I have a boyfriend. Guilt. I’m feeling safe and comfortable with someone who isn’t my boyfriend and wishing I was the kind of girl Ethan could fall for. But I am the friend. He made that clear on Friday night when he said he wanted to be there for me like Preston.

I feel him start to stir, and he tightens his arms around me. I take a deep breath in and start to roll out of his arms, but he stops me, not loosening his grip.

“Where are you going?” His morning voice is deep and sexy.

“Giving you your space. Sorry, I don’t know how I ended up practically on top of you.” I’m glad he can’t see my red face.

“I don’t need space. I’m comfortable here. Amazingly, the floor was more comfortable than your damn couch.”

I relax, wrapped in his arms, my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat. This close to him, I can feel his strong chest and six-pack abs. I want to run my hand over his chest and abs but keep still. We lay listening to each other’s breath in comfortable silence.



“So...TELL me about you and Preston.” I begin to taunt Lena after everyone finally leaves that evening.

“When he came into the room last night, he asked if he could sleep with me.”

I’m shocked. I can’t believe he would come right out and ask that. She notices my surprise and starts laughing. “No, not ‘sleep,’” she air-quotes then continues, “Sleep, sleep.”

I giggle, waiting for her to continue.

“He was really a gentleman, and my gawd, he is hot!! That is such a dangerous combination. He said he wants to come down and see me again and for me to try and make it to Houston to see him. I figured I could give seeing him a try. What have I got to lose?” I watch her talk about him as her face takes on a dreamy quality. I wonder what I look like when I am talking about Caleb. Do I get that dreamy expression?

I head to my room early, sleepy from the long weekend. I lay in my bed, reflecting on the weekend and realize how erratic my emotions have been. Caleb is still a work in progress, but I appreciated the way he conducted himself on Saturday. He was definitely not perfect, and there was still some hostility, but he kept his temper in check.

9

DRIVING HOME LAST NIGHT AFTER MY LAST CLASS AND getting ready for Thanksgiving, has been a whirlwind. My mom and I are cleaning up after Thanksgiving lunch when she asks, “So how is everything going with Caleb?”

“It’s fine.”

“What’s wrong?” she pushes.

“Nothing.”

She looks at me with inquisitive eyes, knowing there is more to my response.

“It’s just that Caleb doesn’t like some of my friends. And he is overprotective when it comes to me and other guys.”

“That doesn’t sound good to me, Sophia. You’re young and have plenty of time to settle down. Right now, you should be having fun, not committing to someone trying to hinder your growth and experiences. Think about that, please.”

“I know, but he is different when we are alone than when we’re out among friends. He is sweet and generous when it’s just the two of us.”

“Be careful is all I am saying,” she says, smiling.

My phone begins pinging with text messages.

“What’s going on?” my mom asks.

“Party at Leslie’s land. Paige and Bree said they are headed here in an hour to pick me up.”

“Go get dressed, and I’ll finish up.” She hugs me with wet, soapy hands. “But not too late, so we can spend the day together tomorrow. Shopping and getting our nails done?”

“Sounds perfect. Thanks, Mom.”



WE GET out of the car and walk toward the party. There is a DJ set up in the large, covered carport area and a couple of kegs and tables, where people are playing beer pong and flip cup. Familiar faces are mixed in with quite a few new ones I have never seen before.

As I’m talking with an old friend, Jamie, I notice Ethan standing by one of the kegs with a couple of girls.

“What’s got your attention?” Jamie asks. I hadn’t realized I’d stopped listening to what she was saying.

“Huh? Sorry.” I shake my head. “You were telling me about rush.” I continue to listen to her sorority stories when someone hugs me from behind, kissing my neck. I spin around to find Ethan smiling down at me, his arms still around my waist.

“I was waiting for you. When did you get here?” Ethan says happily.

“Just a few minutes ago. Paige and Bree picked me up. Who did you come with? I’ve never seen you at Leslie’s parties.”

“Preston texted me earlier and told me you would be coming. I wanted to see you, so here I am.” His smile lights up his face.

“It’s good to see you too. But didn’t you leave your friends over there?” I nod in the direction of the girls he was talking to. Then, remembering I was talking to Jamie, I take a step back out of his arms and face her. “Sorry, Jamie. Jamie, this is Ethan Hayes, Preston’s cousin. Ethan, Jamie.”

“Hello, Jamie.” He turns back to me. “I came here to see you, or didn’t you hear me when I said it before?” A sly grin takes over his face. I glance behind him and notice the girls staring in our direction.

“Excuse me, Jamie,” I tell her, taking Ethan’s hand to pull him away to talk privately. “You came here to see me?”

“Yes...I came here to see you. I enjoyed spending time with you last weekend, and I wanted to do it again. Why, is that bad?”

“No...of course not. I... I just thought that you were here with those girls. It looked like you knew them really well.” I bite my bottom lip.

“I do know them. I went to school with them, but that doesn’t mean I want to spend my time with them.” His lips turn down slightly. “Come on...let’s go refill our drinks.” His eyes search mine.

“I’m glad you’re here.” I wrap my arms around his waist and place my head on his chest. He hugs me and sets his chin on my head. A peace washes over me, a sense of safety and joy. He kisses the top of my head, then lets me go and takes my hand, interlacing our fingers, leading me to the keg.

After refilling our cups, Ethan stays by my side mingling. He introduces me to some of his former classmates, and I introduce him to mine. He continues holding my hand or guiding me through the crowd with his hand on my lower back. I’m surprised when he turns down a game of beer pong with two very attractive girls.

Making our way to refill again, we notice Paige and Bree at a beer pong table close to the keg. They yell, challenging us to a game. Ethan looks at me, smiling. “We can take them. Come on.”

Ethan lets them go first, and it’s apparent they have had quite a bit to drink because their aim is completely off. They are laughing and getting distracted by everyone around them.

“How many games have y’all played?” I ask confused at how they are completely wiped.

“Just a one, but Jess and Cody started the first game with tequila,” Paige answers.

“Slow down, then...I’ll drive us home.” I say as Ethan stops the game because they have no business drinking any more.

Ethan takes my cup, tosses both our drinks in the trash, and says, “Dance with me.” He leads me to the center of the makeshift dance floor.

We begin dancing, somewhat awkwardly, until I am bumped from behind and fall into Ethan’s chest. He catches me and being so close to him feels very intimate. He keeps me close, moving our bodies together as my hands roam his chest. He turns me around placing my back against his chest, his hands firmly on my hips, keeping me close. I can feel his breath on my neck, sending chills all over my body and making me want to melt into him. We are entwined with each other through four songs, and each time I look up at him, he is watching me intently.

The bubble we’ve created around ourselves busts when Bree comes stumbling up to us, slurring, “Paige is puking. We gotta go!” She grabs my hand and pulls me.

When we get to Briana’s car, Paige is sitting on the ground with her head between her knees. I’ve never seen her this out of sorts, and I burst into giggles.

Paige looks up at me scowling, “This is not funny! Help me up, and let’s go.”

I calm the giggles and turn to Ethan, “I have to go. See you later.”

“I’ll follow you to drop off the girls. Drop Bree and her car off at her house, and I will take you home.”

“That’s really sweet, but you don’t have to. I’ll take Bree’s car home, and she can pick it up tomorrow. Thank you, though.” I smile at him and his offer.

“I want to make sure you get home safely, so I’m following you,” he says firmly.

“Okay.” I give in.

“THANKS AGAIN FOR TAKING ME HOME.” I say getting into Ethan’s car at Bree’s.

“Not a problem. I wanted to do this for you. So where am I headed?”

“I live off Manor in West End.” He pulls out of Bree’s driveway, and I continue, “If Preston told you about the party, why didn’t you ride with him?”

“I didn’t think about it. I just heard you would be there, so I went. I wanted to see you.”

“I’m glad you came. You know we can see each other at school too.”

“Are you sure?” he says skeptically, “Won’t your boyfriend be mad?”

My heart drops at the mention of the boyfriend I had not thought of once tonight. I love Caleb, but it is so hard to be with him sometimes. With Ethan, it’s easy.

Stopped at a red light, Ethan turns in his seat. Reaching over, he cups my chin and turns my face to his. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, why?”

He rubs his thumb along my jaw line. “Please tell me.”

The moment is interrupted when the car behind us honks, alerting us to the light changing. He takes off, and I stay silent. We make it to my parents’ house, and he pulls into the driveway, putting the car in park. As I open the car door, he reaches for my hand.

“You haven’t answered the question.”

“Which question?” How can I answer him honestly? This situation is screwed up. I have a boyfriend who does not like me with other guys, but I want to continue spending time with Ethan.

“What was wrong earlier? You looked upset.”

I shake my head slightly.

“Tell me.”

I take a deep breath. “Caleb probably won’t like our friendship. He’s jealous of other guys around me. But yes, we can still hang out.”

“Good.” He pulls me across the console and places a lingering kiss on my forehead. “Good night.”



I RUSH to finish getting dressed when I hear the doorbell ring. Ethan is here to pick me up. A couple of minutes later, my mom walks into my room with a huge smile on her face.

“So, why haven’t you told me about McCutie out there?” She plops herself on my bed, sighing dramatically.

“He’s a friend. He’s Preston’s cousin. He sees me as a little sister. Yes, he is *really cute*, but he is out of my league.”

“Why would he bother taking you out if he didn’t like you?” Her brows furrow.

“I told you he is a friend.” I slip on my shoes and say, “Goodbye.”

We are in the media room at Ethan’s dad’s house, with a floor picnic of Chinese takeout and a comedy playing in the background. The room is amazing, with three rows of oversized couches facing a huge TV. Each row is lifted higher than the one in front of it, just like in the theaters. The room is decorated in muted colors and a few pieces of movie memorabilia and classic movie posters.

“There wasn’t anything else you wanted to do or someone you wanted to see tonight?” I ask while slurping noodles into my mouth.

“Nah... I usually don’t see anyone other than family while I’m here. I spend Thanksgiving with my mom and then see my

dad for a day or two before I head back home.”

“You don’t go out with your old high school friends while you’re in town? It seems like the whole town knows you. Some random girl stopped me at the party to ask about us, and my phone blew up today with questions about why I was with you last night.”

“Sorry about that.” He takes a breath and shrugs. “I guess I have a reputation. I stopped going out in this town after my freshman year. Too much pressure being a Hayes kid here.”

Not knowing what to say, I blurt out, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It is all on me and my anger about my parents splitting. Especially with my dad. I rebelled. Everything my dad or his family expected of me, I refused... Don’t get me wrong, we never wanted for anything, and I could have gone to school with y’all, but that would’ve been like me accepting my dad leaving, and I didn’t know how to let go of the anger.”

His voice quivers a tad, so I interject, “You don’t have to tell me if it’s uncomfortable for you.” I reach for his hand, squeezing it and attempting a lame, comforting smile.

“It’s fine. I want to tell you. I just don’t talk about it often, and only a couple of people know the truth.” He stands, pulling me up with him and sitting us on one of the oversized couches. I lean against one of the arm rests, and he sits facing me with one leg bent under the other. “People talk, and there are rumors out there, but not the truth. So...uh... I chose to go to public school. My mom couldn’t change my mind, so she let me go. I always made good grades, so my mom never worried about what I was or wasn’t doing. I was partying through high school, had friends and ‘girlfriends,’” he air-quotes with his fingers, “and thought everything was great. I wasn’t innocent, if you know what I mean.” He pauses, waiting to make sure I’ve caught on.

“So you’re saying that you were ‘active.’” I mimic his air quote, smirking.

“Yes, that is what I mean.” He rolls his eyes at me with a hint of a smile. “So anyway, my freshman year in college, I

came home for Christmas and hooked up with a girl I graduated with. She told me she was on the pill, and I believed her. I was drunk and didn't think. The next time I was back in town, I got a visit from her and her mom saying she was pregnant and asking for money for doctors' visits and child support..." My jaw drops, and I shake my head. He smiles at me, then says, "Yeah, I was as shocked as you are."

I quickly cover my face with my hands, embarrassed by my expression. "Sorry," I whisper through my hands.

He leans over, pulling my hands away and holding them. "Don't be sorry. Seriously, it shook me. I was pissed, so I told her and her mom to leave. I went to a friend's and got shitfaced. I passed out sometime that evening on his couch. When I woke up, I heard his girlfriend and another one of her friends talking about me. I froze, wanting to know what they were going to say. They started talking about a rumor about the girl hooking me by getting pregnant on purpose. They were jealous because she would be set for life because I was a Hayes."

My eyes pop wide open. "Oh my god!" shoots out of my mouth. My mind races with all the information, then I ask, "So...you're...a dad?"

He slowly licks his lips before continuing. "No, she had a miscarriage soon after. I was relieved she lost it, but then felt bad for feeling that way. I hated her. I hated that she made me question everyone's intentions. That experience changed everything. I was furious at myself for not taking my life or my name seriously. Before that I despised my name and what it represented. Now I want to show my family I am worthy of my inheritance." He pauses. "But I still want to do it on my terms."

His cocky smile melts me in ways I cannot describe.

I crawl to him sitting on his lap, wrapping my arms around his neck and whisper in his ear, "You're a good guy. And you are worthy."

He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me closer. I place my head on his shoulder and we stay like this for a

couple of minutes before I lean back to look at him. The way he looks at me makes my stomach to tie in knots.

He leans in, and I think he is about to kiss me. My heart races...and he places a quick kiss on my nose.

“What do you want to watch?” he asks.

Sighing as my ego deflates, I answer, “Whatever you want.”

I am so stupid! My mind races with the new information. Of course he wants to hang out with me. I am safe. I am, literally, a friend.

He scrolls through the options before stopping on a horror movie. I sit on the opposite side of the couch from him, but about halfway through the movie, I find myself leaning on him with his arm around me.

I AM WOKEN up by my phone chiming. We fell asleep on the couch, and he is holding me tightly. He stirs behind me when my phone chimes again. I pick it up and am surprised at the time and the fact that my mom is texting me. It is after three in the morning. I send her a quick text.

“We fell asleep. I’m sorry to wake you up, but can you drive me home?” I try to sit up, but he flexes his arm holding me.

“Slow down,” he says in a calm voice. “Yes, of course, I will take you home.” He pulls me closer, holding me for a minute before letting go.

On the drive to my house I say, “I’m sorry for falling asleep and making you drive me home so late.”

“No worries. We both fell asleep. It just shows how comfortable we are with one another. I love being with you.”



LENA and I are back at the apartment, sharing stories from our time at home. I tell her about Ethan and all the talk our being together started.

“Duh, have you not seen how gorgeous he is? I’m sure all those skanks wanted a piece of him, and they were pissed that he only has eyes for you.”

I roll my eyes. “He does not have eyes for me. He thinks of me as a friend. Hello, like a little sister. Those skanks can have him.” My shoulders sag. “I may want him, but I will never get him because I’m the friend!” My eyes shoot open at my raw honesty, admitting I want Ethan. “Shit!” I drop my head in my hands mumbling a few more choice words under my breath.

“I knew it. I knew you liked him. Are you just now realizing that you do?” She smirks.

I shake my head and slowly look back up at her. “Yes. No. I don’t know. When I am alone with Caleb, I want him, and everything is great, but then when I am with Ethan, I want Ethan. It’s so easy being with Ethan. No drama. No fights. But the reason we don’t fight is because we’re friends. We’re not romantically involved to fight the way Caleb and I do.”

She frowns. “Because you’re in a relationship, that’s why y’all fight? Really? Most couples have a honeymoon period where it’s all rainbows and unicorns because it’s new and exciting.” She pauses, then adds, “And... Ethan does want you as more than a friend.”

“No, he doesn’t. He has made it perfectly clear that we are friends. And that’s ok. I would rather have him as a friend than not at all.”

“You don’t see the way he looks at you when you aren’t looking. It’s like he’s mesmerized by you. I would bet anything he wants you.” We sit quietly for a couple of minutes before she begins again. “So did you see Preston while you were at home?”

“Yes, I was waiting for you to ask me about him.”

10

CALEB GIVES ME A QUICK PECK BEFORE TAKING HIS SEAT IN class. He does not talk to me during class, even when I ask him a question. Then when I try to grab his hand, his arm stiffens, and he pulls it away. Class ends, and he waits for me to collect my things before dragging me out of the room and hiding us in an empty corner.

I glare at him, spouting off, “What!?”

“Don’t start with me right now, Sophia! I’m not in the mood for your shit!” He is seething, but the words are quiet.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re so mad?” I ask as calmly as possible, not wanting to attract attention.

“You have to ask?”

“Yes. Why are you mad?”

“What the fuck is this about?” He pulls his phone from his pocket, opens up the photos, and shows me a picture of Ethan and I dancing at Leslie’s party. My mouth drops at the sight of the picture. Ethan and I look like a couple, his hands grasping my hips securely, my hands on his chest, as we stare at each other. I remember the feeling when we were dancing, like there was no one around. The picture captured the moment exactly as I felt it.

Confused, I ask, “Where did you get that picture?”

“Really, Sophia, you are going to ask where I got the picture, not explain the damn thing? It’s over. I will *not* be

made a fool of!” His voice increases with each word. He turns around and begins walking away.

I move quickly to stop him, panicking, “Please stop! Let me explain. Nothing happened between us. We were at a party dancing. That’s it. I didn’t do anything.” Caleb stops walking, standing in place with his back to me as I hold his hand. “Please look at me,” I plead. “Ethan is a friend. That’s it. Nothing except dancing happened between us.” The thought of losing Caleb is freaking me out.

He slowly turns around to face me, his jaw clenched, and neck muscles strained.

“He is a friend. I swear. We were only dancing.”

He loosens the hand I’m holding. “I feel like a jackass. I’m here, and my girl is all over another guy at a party.”

“I’m with you. How many times do I need to remind you? I’m. With. You. I love you.” I place my hands on his strong chest, sliding them up to his shoulders, waiting to see if he will respond.

He takes a deep breath in, holding it a second before releasing it, long and slow. He finally looks down at me, his eyes softer. “I love you too. That’s why I’m so mad. I was hurt you were with someone else, especially when you know I don’t like you to be with other guys.”

“I’m sorry. I really am. We were only dancing, and they caught us at a weird moment, I guess.”

“Where were you?”

“A friend of mine had a party on her parents’ land.”

“Who did you go with?”

“Paige and Briana.”

“So why are people asking if you are with Ethan?” I look at him confused. I still don’t know where the picture came from. How could he know that Ethan and I were the talk this weekend?

“I really don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Someone posted this and asked if you and Ethan are the new couple.”

What the hell! I can’t believe people are so fucking interested in my relationship with Ethan.

“It seems like a lot of girls are interested in him, and since he was hanging out with Paige, Briana, and me at the party, and I danced with him, girls got jealous.” I think that covers it sufficiently to keep Caleb from disliking him. “I left my phone at home this morning. I was running late and ran out the door. I haven’t seen the post. I’m sorry.”

He doesn’t say anything, just wraps his arms around me, pulling me close and kissing the top of my head. “Looks like you missed class, baby. How about we go back to your place, just you and, me and spend some time together?”

“I’d like that.” I pull his shirt bringing him closer to place a soft kiss on his lips.

AFTER CALEB LEAVES, I look to see what was posted. Sure enough, there is the picture of Ethan and I with the question, *Is Sophia Ethan’s new hook up?* This was from an anonymous rumor mill account that I never in a million years thought would be interested in me. Thankfully Paige saw it early this morning and posted, *We are all friends with Ethan. And? I adore her boldness, and everyone who knows her knows you don’t mess with her. Which is probably why hers is the only comment. I am glad she posted before anyone else could.*

Ethan texted me apologizing for the picture, especially if it had caused a fight between me and Caleb.



ETHAN ANSWERS the door in workout shorts and a black muscle shirt, barefoot with his signature perfect five o’clock shadow. He has a couple of tattoos covering his right upper arm—a large tribal-looking band around his bicep and vines

strangling a heart. There is also another on his left chest and shoulder area, but his shirt is covering the majority of it.

“Come on in. It’s cold out there,” he tells Lena and I. “The pizza just got here.”

We step inside, and I am in awe of his house. This is not the typical run-down college house or even a bachelor pad. It is clean, decorated nicely in shades of tan and mocha with splashes of color in the accessories. His drummer, Mike, and lead singer, Jake, are in the living room with plates, pizza boxes, and drinks scattered across the coffee table.

“What do y’all wanna watch?” Mike says as he pulls a slice of pizza out of the box.

Lena and I grab plates and pizza slices, then sit down with the guys.

“I vote for a comedy,” Lena says, taking a bite of her pizza.

“What about you?” Jake asks me.

“Comedy is good with me too.”

“Comedy it is then.” Jake fiddles with the remote.

“Who lives here with you?” I ask Ethan.

“Just these two fools,” he says, smiling.

Mike starts the movie as we all get comfortable on the couches. The movie is hilarious, which makes Jake and Mike even more determined to be obnoxious throughout, cracking everyone up with their additional commentary. Once again, I end up curled into Ethan, with his arm draped over me. It’s strange how we’re constantly finding ourselves in these intimate positions.



CLUB REMIXES ARE PLAYING throughout the apartment as Lena and I dress to go clubbing at The Falls with Caleb and his roommates. I decide on a pair of black skinny jeans with a red

spaghetti-strap crop top that has sequins and beads sewn in abstract patterns, and a pair of black platform heels.

I open the door for Caleb, giving him a huge smile while cocking a brow. He gives me a slow once over before looking me in the eyes again. His smile calms any nerves I had about him objecting to my outfit.

“What have I got here?” He places his hands on my hips and leans in for a passionate kiss.

I pull away, catching my breath. I am completely taken with his greeting and appearance. The tailored, slim-fit button-down gray shirt he is wearing shows his fit, muscular body.

“No complaints?” I give him my most innocent pout.

“None, but you are staying by my side all evening.” He winks at me.

“I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.” I slide my hands up his chest, enjoying the feel of him while leaning in for another kiss.

“Get a room!” Lena says giggling. Caleb takes my hand, leading me to my room. “Never mind, don’t. I’m ready to go dancing!” She laughs harder.

THE MUSIC IS THUMPING, and the dance floor is packed with bodies as we walk through the club. Caleb pulls a bar stool out for me and stands behind me with his arms wrapped around my waist. Caleb is relaxed, like his easygoing roommates. He’s by my side, stroking my arms, kissing my neck, or just wrapped around me. I’m breathing easier with no conflict, and while I’m enjoying his attention, I can’t help a strange feeling—is it possessive or affectionate?

“Let’s dance,” Caleb whispers in my ear, trailing a line of kisses down my neck to my shoulder before grabbing my hand, pulling me up, and leading me to the dance floor.

He brings me flush against his body, holding me close. I look up at him, and he captures my mouth hungrily. He pulls away with a fire in his eyes. I enjoy the feeling of his chest

under my hands while his hands caress my back and slide down to my hips. I feel his fingertips trace the band of my jeans on my bare skin, and this sends shivers up and down my body. He turns me around so that my back is against his chest. One hand glides around to my stomach while his other slides down my hip as his lips and tongue explore my neck.

I haven't seriously considered sex because of all the fights and his temperament, but tonight my resolve has begun to slightly break. Am I ready?

After a few of songs, my feet begin to protest the heels I'm wearing, so we head back to the table for drinks. I look around for Lena but don't see her anywhere. I tell Caleb I'm going to look for her. I find her talking to a couple of guys in a smaller bar on the side of the club. As I approach the group, I notice Lena's eyes are not focused, and she slurs her words when she welcomes me. One of the guys at the bar tries to place his arm around me and pull me toward him, but I move away.

I grab Lena's hand. "We're leaving. Sorry."

"Back up, sweetheart. She's staying here with us," one of the guys says.

While I don't want to leave her, I can't get her away by myself.

I rush to our table to get Caleb. He, Jason, and Wes walk over with me to where Lena is barely standing.

"Sorry, guys, but we need to take her home," Caleb tells the guys while taking her arm to help her walk.

"I don't think so, asshole. She's with us," one of them tells Caleb removing his hand from Lena and bringing her closer to him.

"Look I don't want to start shit with y'all, but this is my girlfriend's roommate, and I need to take her home."

"Then leave, and I'll take her home." He places his body in front of Lena. Jason and Wes are standing close, ready if necessary. Lena is swaying, her eyes glazed over. With the guys focusing on each other, I step around him, taking her

hand tugging her away. The guy sees me and grabs my arm, stopping me.

Caleb's fists clench at his sides, his body tenses, and his jaw ticks with a murderous look in his eyes. "Don't you put your hands on her!" He growls, "We're leaving!"

Caleb pushes the guy aside, grabbing my arm and yanking me as I drag a stumbling Lena behind me. Wes places his arm around her waist to keep her steady as we head to the door. The guys make no attempt to follow.

Wes helps Lena into Caleb's car, shutting the door and walking around to get in. I look back and see Lena lay down in the back seat, her head on Wes's lap as he holds on to her protectively.

I gently stroke Caleb's arm. Leaning over, I whisper in his ear, "Thank you for coming to her rescue. I love you." He nods and gives me a tight-lipped grimace.

We arrive at the apartment just in time for Lena to quickly open the door and puke in the parking lot. I hold her hair back until it passes. The guys wait patiently so they can help me get her up the stairs and into her room. I'm secretly glad she vomited, purging some of what she drank out of her system. After Lena stumbles on the first step, Wes leans down and picks her up, carrying her into the apartment. He sets her on the bed, and I tuck her in. Wes and Caleb wait in the living room while I care for her, and when I'm done, I ask Wes to sit with her while I change.

"This is why I get nervous about you going out without me, babe. Look at what happened to Lena. She's out of it. I have a feeling they slipped something into her drink." A pained expression mars his face.

"I know you worry, but you can't keep me locked in a box. I love that you worry about me. It makes me feel cared for and safe. Thank you." I hug him tightly. He wraps his arms around me, kissing the top of my head.

"I love you," he says into my hair.

I sigh, biting my bottom lip. “I was feeling a bit hot and bothered when we were dancing. I think we may need a solo date for us.” I look up at him, and the longing I see has me tingling.

“I’m holding you to that.” He kisses me, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. We are getting lost in each other when Lena’s door opens, and Wes clears his throat, interrupting us. I pull away ducking my head into Caleb’s chest.

“Just wondering if you were ready or if we were spending the night so I can get to crashing on the couch,” Wes inquires.

“I want to sleep with Lena tonight and make sure she’s okay.” I respond. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Take care of her. Call me when you wake up.” Caleb cradles my face in his hands and kisses my forehead.



LENA’S GROANING WAKES ME.

I sit up to look at her. “How are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” she moans rolling over, hiding her face in her pillow.

I get out of bed to fetch her some pain relievers and juice. I come back with my offering. “Take these.”

She gives me a shaky smile and takes the pills.

“What happened last night?” I ask, climbing back in bed with her.

“I don’t know. It’s all real fuzzy. I remember going to the bar to get another drink when you and Caleb went to the dance floor. I took a shot with two guys I met, and everything after that is choppy. I sort of remember standing at the bar talking to those guys, but not what we talked about.”

“Caleb thinks those guys must have slipped something into your drink. You looked really out of it, and we weren’t gone that long.”

“Really? I’m so grateful you came for me.”

“I’m happy I found you when I did. That’s what friends are for.” My mind races, thinking about what could have happened, but I give her a genuine smile to calm the fear. “You want something to eat?”

“No...I just need to sleep a little more. Can you wake me in a couple of hours?”

“Sure. Call me if you need anything.”

I leave her to sleep and go to my room to call Caleb.

Caleb walks into the apartment and places a bag and a couple of coffees on the table. He turns back around, wrapping his arms around my waist. He picks me up and nuzzles his face into my neck, fluttering soft kisses on my throat and tightly.

“I am so glad I was with y’all last night. I don’t want to imagine something happening to you if y’all were there by yourselves,” he whispers into my neck. I pull back to see his eyes so full of emotion.

I kiss his cheek and whisper, “Thank you for looking after us.”

He places me down, grabbing the coffees and handing one to me. “Your favorite, a vanilla latte with nonfat milk.” He grabs the bag. “Let’s veg in front of the TV.”

“Sounds perfect.”

As I’m laying in his arms, I begin to think about last night. I was ready to have sex, not wanting to wait any longer. He was everything I needed him to be—patient and attentive. We didn’t fight. I was able to enjoy myself. His chivalry also played a big part in my decision. My mind is made up. I’m ready for us to take the next step. But how do I tell him about it? This is something I want for just us—something private, especially for my first time—and we both have roommates.

Lena wakes up a few hours later and comes into my room.

“How is your head?” I ask as she sits on the foot of my bed.

“I just have a slight headache now. I can’t believe I was out of it for so long... I slept the day away. Everything from last night is still a blur.”

“What is the last thing you remember?” Caleb asks her.

“I remember when you all got up to dance, I headed to the bar to get a refill, but even that has a dreamlike quality to it. Like I remember it, but I’m not sure if it is real. The rest just feels like snapshots.” Just then her stomach growls loudly.

“Hungry?” I ask, laughing.

“I’m going to get something to eat. Do y’all want anything?” she asks.

“I’ll go pick something up.” Caleb insists.

LENA COMES into my room after Caleb leaves and I’m getting into bed.

“I just got off the phone with Preston!” she says with a gleam in her eye.

“And...” She jumps on my bed, grinning like the cat that ate the canary.

“He wants me to go visit him!” she exclaims.

“You’re going to Houston? When?”

“I’ll leave Friday morning and come back Saturday, maybe Sunday.” She lets out a long breath and gets a dreamy look on her face. “I’m amazed Caleb left. Especially after y’all’s performance last night.” She pinches her lips together trying to hold a smirk.

“What?” I ask innocently.

“You were all over each other. I thought for sure he was gonna get some action.” She giggles.

“No action yet, but maybe that will change.”

“If you give it up, does that mean he will be over more often for sleepovers?” she asks sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

“Get out so I can go to bed,” I say jokingly.

“Good night.”

Suddenly, all I can think about is the possibility of having the apartment to myself.



CALEB IS WAITING for me in class the next day. I brush my hand over his back before sitting down and kissing him longer than I normally would in public.

His eyes narrow. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing...” I say in a sing-song voice and roll my lips over my teeth, biting them to keep from smiling.

“Spill it.” He places a hand on my shoulder and glides his fingers down.

“I’ll have an apartment to all to myself on Friday.” I whisper low so only he can hear.

“Really?” An amused expression takes over. “What are you going to do all by yourself?” He stares at me, a storm of desire brewing in his eyes.

“I was hoping to have company.” I look away from him, pulling my eyebrows together and pursing my lips. I tap my forefinger to my lips. “Who should I invite over?”

“You’re inviting me over.” The intensity in his words has me clenching in excitement.

Emboldened by his interest, I flirtatiously say, “Are you sure about that?”

He leans into my neck, licking lightly then kissing me, sending goosebumps all over the side of my body. “Pretty sure,” he whispers, brushing his fingers over the chill bumps on my arm. “Actually, I’d bet on it.” He traces his nose along the rim of my ear, making my breaths short and unsteady. Waiting for Friday is going to be hell with the way I am feeling right now.

EXCEPT FOR OUR TIME ON CAMPUS, I HAVE NOT SEEN CALEB. He has been working or is tired from all the shifts he's picked up. Lena and I have had dinner at Ethan's house every night this week.

But tonight, I came alone since Lena is with a study group. My frustration level is increasing by the second as I struggle with a chemistry problem. Overwhelmed and tense with the knowledge I still have several problems left, I squirm in Ethan's oversized, cushy chair.

The music that fills the air surprises me. I look up to see Ethan softly strumming on an acoustic guitar. His head is bowed, with his gaze on his fingers plucking the strings. The melody is soft and soothing and helps ease the tension that began to settle in my shoulders. Mesmerized by his serene yet focused expression, I watch for a couple of minutes. His fingers are agile as they move; his forearms relax and grow taut with each chord he strikes.

Ethan looks up, continuing to play, and asks, "Aren't you supposed to be doing homework?" A mischievous smile pulls his lips.

"Yup, but I'm stuck." The chemistry problem has defeated me.

Ethan leans his guitar on the side of the couch and joins me on the oversized chair pulling my book and notes away from me. He's patient as he walks through the first problem, never making me feel dumb as I make mistake after mistake

until it finally clicks. Cuddled together, he spends the next hour helping me through the chemistry block.



FRIDAY NIGHT HAS ARRIVED, and Caleb will be here in less than an hour. The butterflies in my stomach have intensified with each passing hour, waiting for the unknown. I've had too much time to think about things, and the doubts are coming fast. Ethan called earlier to see if I wanted to come to his place since he found out I'd be alone. I told him that I was staying in, and Caleb was coming over.

Caleb walks in smiling with Sonic drinks and food. He places everything down on the coffee table.

“Do y'all have vodka?” he asks taking the lids off the drinks.

“Yeah, why?”

“It makes the cherry limeades better,” he smirks, cocking a brow.

He takes the drinks to the kitchen and pours a hefty amount in each cup. He comes back, and we get comfortable watching TV. We finish eating, and the longer we sit and watch TV, the more my unease grows. I suck on my drink, hoping the vodka helps ease the reservations that are beginning to blare. It's my first time, and we're not even talking about it. He just continues to stroke my arms and legs. Nothing different. Nothing special.

It's now or never because if we wait much longer, I might change my mind, and that will probably cause a huge fight. I suck down the last of my drink, gathering the strength to be bold and stand up in front of him.

“Are you ready to go to my room?”

I grab the hem of my tee, slowly pulling it over my head and dropping it on the floor at my feet. He gets up, grabs the back of my legs lifting me up off the ground, kissing me deeply. I wrap my legs around his waist, and my arms around

his neck while kissing him with nervous, desperate need. This is what I want, right? He walks us to my room, placing me gently on my bed and laying on top of me. His kisses are rough. Demanding. He trails kisses down my chin toward my chest. His hands are roaming my body firmly, finding their way to my breasts, cupping his hand on one and squeezing it.

I pull his T-shirt over his head and run my hands all over his upper body, enjoying the feel of his strong chest and hoping I can get out of my head. I feel his erection through his jeans as he rocks himself into me. He slides my yoga pants down along with my panties. He pulls a bra cup down and sucks my nipple into his mouth, almost painfully. The excitement I once had is fading...

He stands up and slides his jeans down, exposing his full erection. He lays back down next to me, kissing me, his tongue pushing its way into my mouth. He pulls my other breast out of the cup and pinches my nipple, then slides his hand down my stomach and between my legs. I begin to close them, but he grabs one thigh pushing it out. He skims it back up and rubs my sex with his fingers, then slides one inside me. He pumps it in and out a few times, then takes it out. I don't feel any pleasure. He pushes himself off the bed reaching to the floor for his jeans and pulling a condom out. He rolls the condom on then lays back down on top of me.

“Ready?”

I nod my head once as doubts continue to nag at me, but I'm too scared to say them out loud. He holds himself as he adjusts his penis at my opening then thrusts in hard and fast. A sharp pain shoots through me, forcing me to hold my breath, catching a scream. Caleb places his head in the crook of my neck and begins thrusting in and out, not giving me a chance for the pain I'm feeling to subside. This continues for a few minutes until I feel him tense and drop all his body weight on top of me. I don't move, unsure what happens next because obviously the steamy sex scenes I have been reading about and watching in movies are completely fictional. I never thought it would be this painful, quick, and awkward. There was nothing pleasurable about this.

Caleb pulls out of me and rolls over. I'm relieved the feeling is gone. He gets out of bed and walks into the bathroom. The shower turns on.

He comes out with a towel wrapped around his waist and says, "You may want to clean yourself up. It was messy."

"Huh?" I'm confused and disappointed in his demeanor.

"You were a virgin, so you bled." He picks up his boxers from the floor sliding them on.

"I'll take a quick shower," I say and wait for him to walk into the living room before looking out of sheer embarrassment. I close the bathroom door behind me and stare at myself in the mirror, unsure what I'm expecting to see in the reflection. I look the same, but sadness is brewing. I take off my bra and step into the hot shower. When I'm done, I dress in pj's before walking into the living room. He is sitting on the couch in his boxers, drinking a cocktail. I make myself a stiff rum and diet before joining him.

Caleb pulls me closer whispering, "I'm so glad Lena left tonight. We really needed this time together."

I'm unsure how to respond because I don't feel the same. I smile and curl up under his arm to hide my face.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"I'm fine. Why?"

"Look at me." He moves and pulls me to sit up.

"Really I'm fine." I look at him, mustering the best smile I can.

"Tell me what's wrong."

My mind scrambles with what I can say that will not ruin tonight completely. "It's just that it hurt. I wasn't expecting that."

As soon as the words are out, I feel a tightness in my throat announcing tears are not far behind. I bite the inside of my cheek, hoping I can hold them back.

“Oh, babe, I’m sorry. I should have warned you about that. I thought you knew. It’s usually only the first time that it hurts like that. After the first time it gets better, and you enjoy it more.” He brings me closer to him, hugging me tightly. I take a couple of deep breaths to calm myself. “Do you still hurt?”

“It’s just an uncomfortable feeling.”

Caleb gets up and heads into my room. He brings me back a couple of pain relievers and hands them to me.

“Take these. They will help.” He sits down, bringing me to snuggle closer with him.

A couple of hours later, I wake as Caleb places me in bed. He kisses my forehead. “Good night, babe.”

“You aren’t staying with me?” I want him to sleep with me. I need him to sleep here with me.

“I thought I would head home. Why? Do you want me to stay?” He asks as his lips pull down.

“Please.” I whisper, not wanting to seem pathetic. He looks at me, smiles, undresses, and climbs into bed with me.

Now awake, I’m unable to sleep, struggling with the feelings and thoughts swirling in my mind. I blame my confusion on all the flirty, steamy novels I have been reading. I was expecting so much more—tenderness, time to get ready, passion, and most of all no doubts. Or maybe I’m not good at this, so he rushed through it. I wish I could talk to him about it, but how much more awkward would that be.

My mind wanders to Ethan and what he is doing. As much as I try not to compare Caleb with Ethan, I can’t stop myself. My feelings for Ethan have grown the more time I’ve spent with him. And as hard as I try to stop myself, I feel like I am pulled to him. *Stop. Stop. Stop.* Ethan only sees me as a friend, and I need to stop thinking about him as anything else. That is what is screwing with my head and my feelings for Caleb.

I don’t know what time I finally drift to sleep, but I am awoken by small kisses all over my shoulder. This is the gentleness that reminds me why I made my decision last night.

I quickly decide not to judge sex on this first experience. I will keep an open mind and shove Ethan out of it.

“Good morning.”

“You’re awake. And here I was wondering how you could sleep through all my kisses,” he teases.

“I just thought if I continued faking sleep, I would continue feeling those kisses and maybe a little more.” I roll over, facing him, and I’m hopeful that my words will help me believe everything is how it should be.

“Well...more kisses you can definitely have, but a little more...that will have to wait.” My self-esteem takes a nosedive wondering if he doesn’t want to because I’m bad in bed. “You need time. It will probably hurt more if we tried again so soon. Not because I don’t want to, but I don’t want you to hurt again this morning.” Relief rushes through me.



LENA GETS home as I’m studying for finals. She is glowing from her night with Preston. I feel a small twinge of jealousy that I don’t have the same feelings.

“I’m guessing you had a great time because it looks like you could float away on a cloud of happiness,” I joke.

She drops her bag in the middle of the living room and plops herself on the couch beside me. She lets out a long sigh.

“Well...” Now I really want to know about her weekend.

“It was great. He is...oh my god...I can’t even put it into words.” She pauses before continuing. “I got there early, so we just hung out until dinner. We talked about everything. He is so easy to talk to, and he really listens. He made dinner reservations for us, and it was delicious. Then he asked if I wanted to go to a party, and I said sure. We got there, and I noticed he wasn’t drinking, so I followed his lead. And I am so glad we didn’t.” Her face gets that dreamy look again.

“Did y’all...?”

Her smile and silence is the answer. “I really like him, Sof. I know I can fall deeply and madly in love with him. I feel like I’m already falling fast.”

“I’m happy for you.” And I truly am. Preston is a wonderful guy, and Lena deserves someone like him. But her story has me thinking of my night with Caleb. He wanted to drink, even knowing that it was my first time ever, not just my first with him. I wasn’t drunk, but I did have a buzz.

“So how was your night? What did you do?”

“Not much.” It all seems so wrong now, dirty. I don’t want to share.

“Did you stay home or go out?” she pushes.

“I stayed in, and Caleb came over.”

“And?” She tilts her head, and her brows pull together.

“We...uh—”

“Y’all had sex!” She exclaims, interrupting me. I nod my head. “Then why do you look so...?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug, not wanting to talk about it. At the same time, I need to. “It really wasn’t what I was expecting, I guess.”

“What do you mean?” She frowns.

“It’s just... It hurt...a lot. It was awkward... I think I was just expecting more. My fault, I guess, for expecting life to be like the steamy books or movies.”

“Explain, please.”

I tell her everything: the vodka drinks, how fast it was, the lack of foreplay, my asking him to spend the night—I leave nothing out. It was like a dam broke and a flood of information followed. I even told her about my feelings for Ethan and the confusion I was having with my feelings for both.

“Sophia, I don’t know if I can be much help with what a first time is supposed to be like. Mine was when I was sixteen in the backseat of a car. Neither one of us knew what we were doing. It hurt and was everything you described... But, again,

I was sixteen, and it was both our first times. I would have expected more too if I had waited. I will give you my two cents on the drinking and foreplay though. Caleb is old enough and probably has enough experience to know better, and I don't think he put enough thought and prep into your experience. Please don't take that the wrong way, though." She shifts in her seat, shrugging.

"No, I won't hold anything you say against you. I need someone else's opinions because I am tired of debating all these feelings in my own head." I reach for her hand and squeeze it. "Please, go on."

"I know you have feelings for Ethan. Y'all gravitate to each other. I watch y'all when we're together. If y'all are not right next to each other, y'all are sneaking looks at each other, and slowly you make your way to each other. The way he looks at you confuses me, though. He looks at you like he is interested in being more than a friend, but never acts on it."

"You're saying that you're as confused with my love life as I am. Thanks!" I roll my eyes at her and let out a frustrated laugh.

"Sorry, babe. You are the only one that can decide who is right for you." She gives me a reassuring smile. "But if you need to talk about it, I'm your gal."



TAKING A BREAK FROM STUDYING, I decide to stalk social media. When I open my page, I am surprised to find a new picture of me posted from last weekend at The Falls with Caleb. It is of Caleb and me dancing and is eerily similar to the picture of Ethan and I. Caleb posted the picture with the caption, *me and my babe getting dirty*. I'm horrified he would post this picture with a caption like that, and even more embarrassed at the comments. A few high school friends commented about me making my way through hot guys, congratulating me on coming out of my shell, and telling me

to “get it.” My humiliation and anger escalate with each comment I read.

I call Caleb to ask him about the picture and why he would post it, but it goes to voicemail. I hang up without leaving a message and text him to call me when he has a chance.

I storm into the living room, yelling, “Look at this! I can’t believe Caleb just posted a picture of us like this!”

Lena looks up. “Huh?”

I show her the picture, and her eyes widen before she starts laughing.

“What the hell are you laughing at?” I ask frustrated.

“That’s the equivalent of Caleb pissing on you!” she says through fits of laughter. “He is marking his territory!” She continues laughing.

Still confused I ask, “What are you talking about?”

She takes a deep breath, controlling herself. “He wants everyone to know y’all are together. Just think about it, you can’t delete the post because that’s like saying y’all aren’t together. And if you bring it up to him, why would you be mad at this pic when you had the other one of Ethan that you weren’t mad about?”

I begin to wonder if he planned it. Who would have taken the picture? Now that Lena told me about why she thinks he posted the picture, I am glad he didn’t answer. I would have screwed things up getting pissed at him about it. I need to figure out a way to broach the subject without it starting a fight.



ETHAN CALLS and invites us to the band’s last show of the year at The Shack. They will be playing Friday night before most of the students leave for winter break. I haven’t seen Ethan in over a week. We’ve talked and texted, but he didn’t ask us to come over for dinner like he usually does.

Lena gets us a couple of beers as I scan the bar, looking for Ethan. The guys are in the back playing pool, and I find it strange Ethan isn't with them.

"Let's go say hi to the guys." I say to Lena.

The patio door opens, and Ethan walks in with his arm around a girl. She is tall and beautiful with a killer body. I immediately feel foolish for crushing on Ethan when he sees me strictly as a friend. I dash toward the bathroom to collect myself before saying hello.

I walk out of the stall to Lena waiting on me. "Are you sure you want to go over there?" she asks with sadness in her eyes.

"I have to. If I don't, Ethan will think something's wrong. I don't want him to know about my stupid crush. He can't know."

"Fine, then let's go." She grabs my hand, leading the way. I watch Ethan as we walk toward their table. He is sitting on a barstool, and the girl is standing between his legs, watching the game. His arms are wrapped around her, holding her close as he kisses her neck. Seeing him with this girl has my chest tightening so much it's hard to breathe normally.

"Hi!" Lena exclaims a little too cheerfully. Ethan looks up at me.

"Hey, guys. Just wanted to wish y'all a good show before we leave. I thought we would have time to watch your first set before we head out, but we have to go. Sorry," I say, not wanting to stay any longer than necessary. I am trying to keep my face as neutral as possible until we leave.

"Don't leave. What can be more important than watching us play?" Mike says jokingly, giving Lena and I a hug.

I force a smile. "We promised some friends we would hang out before we left. Sorry. We said we would stop by, so here we are, wishing everyone a great break. We'll see y'all when we get back. So sorry we can't stay." I'm nervous rambling, so I stop while I am ahead. I quickly glance in Ethan's direction, waving to him, and turn around. I grab Lena's hand, pulling

her with me when I feel a set of hands on my shoulders turning me back around. Ethan looks down at me with a strange look on his face.

“Don’t go. Stay.”

Is it panic in his voice? He reeks of alcohol. He pulls me to him, wrapping his arms around me tightly. I give him a quick hug in return before placing my hands on his stomach and pushing him away.

I shake my head at him, biting my bottom lip before saying, “I’m sorry. We can’t. I have to go.”

He continues holding on to me even after I push away. He looks directly into my eyes. I get lost in his gaze, wanting so much to fall back into his arms.

“Who is she?” Our connection is broken by the tall bombshell.

I turn to face her, plastering a fake smile. “Sophia, friend. No worries, he’s all yours.”

Ethan grabs my hand and drags me a few steps before Mike places a hand on his shoulder to stop him, saying low enough for only Ethan and I to hear, “Let her go, man. You don’t want to get into it here and now.”

Ethan looks at me again, his eyes sad. “Fine, go.” He releases my arm.

I walk into the cold night air, and the tears begin to fall. Lena is by my side, placing her arm around me, in silent unity.

“I can’t be around him anymore. I knew I was confused by my feelings for him, but seeing him with that girl... I just wanted to claw her eyes out. I’ve fallen for him. It hurt so much seeing him with her. And what did Mike mean by saying that Ethan didn’t want to get into it with me?” The tears continue to fall as I try to catch my breath.

“I can’t believe I was so wrong. I could’ve sworn he liked you too. I would’ve bet on it. Wait... When did Mike say that?” She squeezes my shoulder.

“When Ethan tried to pull me away. He whispered it to Ethan.”

“I’m not sure, but he looked drunk already. Let’s forget about it and get you cleaned up and we’ll head out somewhere else. Where do you want to go?”

“Anywhere that does not have Ethan or Caleb,” I answer honestly.



I WAKE the next morning feeling just as confused as when I fell asleep. What am I doing? What did I get myself into? I need to stay away from them in order to clear my head. I pack and head home a few days early.

My mom is surprised when I call to let her know. She questions me about it, but lets it go after I tell her I’m not ready to talk. Not yet at least.

When I arrive home and get settled in my room, I check my phone for the messages I missed. The first text was from Ethan, then a couple from Lena telling me Ethan called her a couple of times, but she didn’t answer. Another from Ethan again asking what’s wrong. And finally one from Caleb asking if I was home already. There are a couple of missed calls from Ethan, but no messages. Turning off my Bluetooth was a smart decision.

I call Lena to let her know I’m home.

“Thank god you finally called. Are you okay?” she answers the phone exasperated.

“Would you believe me if I said I’m fine?” I huff out a fake laugh. Curiosity getting the best of me, I ask, “did Ethan leave a message?”

“No...but he didn’t have to since he came by the apartment.”

“He what?” My thoughts scramble. Why would he have gone to our apartment?

“He came by. He looked like shit too. Like he drank way too much last night and didn’t sleep. At all. He still smelled like an effing brewery with bloodshot eyes.” She pauses, and when I stay silent, she continues, “He asked to talk to you. When I told him you left for home, he was surprised. He told me you weren’t supposed to leave until Monday morning.”

“And?” I want to hear every single detail of their exchange. She continues telling me about their conversation. He said he was sorry for last night, that he was really drunk.

“So...do you want my two cents right now or do you need time to process?” she asks.

“Tell me.”

“He seemed really sorry for last night. He looked pitiful... So I have to ask, why be sorry for last night? If he didn’t care about you...and I mean in a ‘more than just a friend way’... then why apologize? We’ve all been drunk, so why apologize for that? The only thing I can think...is that...he’s apologizing for being with another girl. And why apologize for being with another girl unless he knows he hurt you? And if he cares that he hurt you, he cares about more than friendship with you. Now, did you follow that crazy logic?” she finishes with a laugh.

“I follow your janky logic...but I can’t believe it either.” I sigh heavily.

“Can’t believe or won’t believe? There’s a difference.”

“I don’t know.”

“You sound frustrated...so I’ll drop it. But before I do... please stop selling yourself short. You are gorgeous and fantastic, any guy would be lucky to have you, friend. Call me when you want to talk again. I’m leaving in the morning.” I can hear the smile and genuineness in her voice. We hang up, and I am left with so much more to think about.

I send a quick text to Ethan letting him know I am home and I will call him later.

12

BEING IN THE COMFORT OF HOME IS JUST WHAT I NEED. EVEN my younger sister, who is usually a pain in the behind, is a nice distraction to my inner turmoil.

I've spoken to Caleb the past few days but mainly through texts. Our conversations seem forced and slightly uncomfortable, so text is best for us right now. Ethan and I have only spoken via text, and they have been superficial and brief. He's called, but I haven't answered, too scared of what I may say.

After avoiding my mom's question about why I came home early, I decide it is time for honesty. I tell her about Caleb and Ethan and my feelings for both—leaving out my lost virginity.

She stays silent for a few moments before asking, "Who do you like more?"

"I have no idea," I say, not hiding the frustration in my voice. "If I knew, I wouldn't be this confused!" I snap, extremely irritated she would ask such an asinine question.

My mom smiles, frustrating me further. "Think about a couple of months from now...if either of these guys wasn't in your life, how would you feel? Because I don't think that you can continue with both."

"But I can't continue with Ethan anyway... Remember, he doesn't like me. I just need to get over this stupid crush. I can't be around him right now."

“I trust that you will figure it all out. As soon as you figure out what love means to you, everything will make sense. You are the only one who has to live with who you love. And I mean really love...truly, madly, deeply.”

I thought my mom would have better advice for me, but her last statement does stick. Figuring out what love is. What is love? It can't just be the stupid knots or butterflies-in-your-stomach feeling or caring about someone or lusting or wanting to be with someone. I know I have feelings for both guys, but are my feelings for them more than superficial BS?

Lying in bed with my earbuds in, listening to music, I'm still consumed with thoughts of the guys. Suddenly, I'm startled by someone jumping on top of me.

“What the hell, Sophia! You can't hole up in your room all break long,” Paige declares, overly dramatically.

“Argh... And here I thought I was doing such a good job hiding!” I smile at her persistence to get me out of my funk.

My mom is standing in my doorway. “I just thought you'd done enough hiding out and thinking. You need your friends around.” She gives me a knowing smile, turns, and walks away.

“So,” Paige drags the word out, and when I don't say anything, she asks, “Boy troubles?”

I let out a nervous laugh and nod my head. “Let's get out of here, and I'll fill you in. Do you want to get a bite or a mani/pedi?”

“Is that even a question? Both!” She pulls me up off the bed.

THE FLOOD GATES open when we begin talking and I fill her in on the drama surrounding Ethan and Caleb. I hold nothing back. She gives me a sympathetic look when I finish my story but stays quiet. I wait for her to give me her opinion, and when she does not respond, I give her an exasperated look and ask, “Well?”

She raises her eyebrows. “What do you want me to tell you?”

“What do you think?”

“You know who I like better out of the two. But the way you tell the story, you already know who you are choosing based on who you think *you* are good enough for... And that, to me, is just plain stupid. If you don’t let Ethan know how you feel, then how will you know if he really only likes you as a ‘friend’?” She air-quotes with a roll of her eyes.

“I told you, he had a girl with him at the bar last weekend. He was all over her! You should have seen her... She was tall and Barbie-like.” I feel frustrated I can’t compete with that.

“And?” She looks at me and pauses before continuing, “You had sex with Caleb the weekend before. Both of you are with other people. You don’t want him to be with any other girl, but it’s okay for you to flaunt your relationship with Caleb in front of him? You’re being the hypocrite now, sweetie.” She shrugs her shoulders and frowns tapping me on the nose.

My face falls at this realization. I hadn’t thought about it that way, and Paige is the only one blunt enough to throw it in my face when I need it the most. I shake my head at her, not wanting to admit the truth she just made me face. She nods her head with a tight-lipped smirk.

“So...” I take a huge breath in and let it out slowly. “I guess you’re right. But...what if he really doesn’t like me? I will lose his friendship.”

“Can you really be friends with him right now anyway? Can you see him with other girls?” I shake my head. “Then it is a moot point.”

OUR PHONES CHIME with incoming texts as we are getting our nails done. A friend of ours sent a group text to meet at the Setter Bar tonight. Paige turns to me cocking a brow.

“What?”

“Don’t try and get out of it. We’re going!”

“I know. There’s only so many nights I can spend with my sis before I strangle her anyway.” I smirk.



PAIGE and I walk into the Setter and find a few of our friends at a pool table. I sit next to Josh, another good friend of ours, beginning to relax and enjoy myself. No Caleb or Ethan to worry about or focus on. The night progresses with a few drinks and stories of our first semester.

I get a strange sensation that someone staring at me, so I look around finding Ethan at the bar looking directly at me with a sex kitten hanging on his arm. She is wearing a skimpy, barely-covering-necessary-parts dress with bold, glittery makeup. I look away as my heart pounds hard against my chest and my breathing becomes shallow and fast. Shit, why the hell is he here? I need to leave.

“Paige.” I scurry to her at the other end of the pool table. “Ethan is here with someone. Can we leave?” I plead, eyes wide.

She glances to the bar then says, “Preston just went to buy us another round. What are we going to tell him?”

Before I can think of an excuse I hear, “So...this is where you’ve been hiding?” Ethan’s voice is dripping with disdain.

I turn toward Ethan, and I work a smile onto my face. He continues almost sneering, “I haven’t seen you around lately. As a matter of fact, I haven’t heard from you either.” His body is tense. The sex kitten is standing next to him looking lost and out of place.

My smile fades as I respond, “Well, hello to you too. Excuse me.” I push past him, walking away to avoid any further confrontation. I make my escape and head straight into the bathroom. As soon as the door closes behind me, I let out a breath I didn’t realize I had been holding. After composing myself, I walk out and run right into him standing by the door.

“Why do you keep running away from me?” he asks, stopping me in my tracks. The angry guy who was at the table now looks sad and confused.

I give him a small shoulder shrug. “What’s that supposed to mean? I haven’t run away from you. Why would you think that?”

He steps closer to me, placing his hands on my waist. “You didn’t stay for the last show, and I get here and I barely get a hello before you walk away. I’ve been calling and texting, and you respond with one-word answers. What’s going on?” I don’t know how to answer honestly without giving away my feelings.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for you to think that. I’ve been in a funk and avoiding everyone. Paige barely got me out of the house today.” I want to be wrapped in his arms.

His brows furrow with concern. “Why are you in a funk? Did something happen?”

I shake my head as he brings one hand up, cupping my cheek and staring at me. I forget where we are, focusing only on him, until Josh breaks our connection.

“Dude, that chick you brought is looking for you. You better head back before she hunts you down.”

And just like that, I remember he came here with someone else. I step back, and he drops his arms by his side. He looks at me for a couple of seconds, then this time, he walks away. Watching him go to her, my heart physically hurts as it pounds in my chest.

Josh wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me close and whispering, “Are you okay?”

I nod my head. “Thanks.” I lean my head on his shoulder.

Back at the pool table, Preston tells me, “We’ve been waiting on you. Your turn.”

I watch Sex Kitten sitting on the other side of the table looking out of place at this casual bar, better dressed for a strip club. I bend over the table to take my shot when I hear her

whine in a baby-like voice, telling Ethan she wants to leave. I take my time looking around the table, stealing glances in their direction. She hands him a folded napkin. I take my shot and walk over to the counter, grabbing my beer and taking a long swig, watching out of the corner of my eye as Sex Kitten walks out of the bar. I am beyond curious where Ethan met her, and angry he would put himself in a predicament he said he didn't want to be in again. Luckily, Josh and Preston don't hold their tongues.

“So, Ethan, what club have you hit tonight?” Josh begins.

“Like we really have to ask if he's been to *the* club!” Preston winks, finishing the jab toward his cousin.

Ethan's face turns slightly red. “Shut the fuck up, assholes! So I hit up The Blaze before I came over. And what?”

The guys double over laughing.

“You hit up The Blaze to pick up a skank?” Paige throws out to Ethan. I know she says this for me, but her brash comment still catches me off guard. The conversation is quickly turning into a train wreck you can't help but watch.

Ethan throws her an evil look. “Fuck this, I'm outta here!” He chugs his beer and walks to the door. Preston catches up to him, and I watch as they have a heated conversation. They do the male one-arm hug, before Ethan walks out of the door. My heart drops watching him leave because part of me wanted to spend the rest of the evening with him.



WE ARE HEADED to Preston's to plan the New Year's Eve party he wants to throw at his family's beach house. Bree picks me up, and on our way to Paige's, I share everything that has happened and my jumbled-up thoughts and feelings.

Briana parks in Preston's parents' expansive driveway. His mom answers the door looking immaculate as always and tells us to head out to the game room.

Walking into the enormous room, the first person I notice is Ethan, who is lounging on one of the couches, watching TV. My stomach clenches at the sight of him. I miss how our relationship used to be: easy, comfortable, and safe. I wonder if he notices the change too, and if he cares. I sit on the couch opposite him. Preston hands us each a beer before he starts talking about the party he wants to throw.

“And I need your help, Sof,” Preston tells me.

“At your service.”

“I am going to call Lena and invite her...I need your help convincing her she should come.”

“I doubt you will have a hard time with that, but yes I will guilt her into coming if she gives you problems.” I laugh at his ridiculous insecurity. If he only knew how much she liked him already.

I text Lena to call me or Preston tonight when she gets a chance. As soon as the message is delivered, Preston’s phone starts to ring. He smiles when he sees Lena’s name on the screen and walks to the other side of the room to speak with her, abandoning his party planning.

Ethan volunteers his dad’s cabin since it’s next door to Preston’s. He leaves the room to call his dad to let him know. As soon as Ethan walks out of the room, the girls turn to me and give me a sympathetic look. I know what they are each thinking, but I focus my mind on Caleb and the relationship I have with him.

Ethan finishes his call and returns, sitting next to me. After all the plans are made, Preston turns on a movie. I’m hyperaware of Ethan next to me and the tingly sensation I feel being so close to him. But tonight is wildly different. Unlike every other time we’ve been together, we stay apart and don’t touch once.

On the drive home, the girls ask how I felt about tonight and how I’m going to handle being at the beach with him for a couple of days.

“It’s fine,” I lie. “It just feels strained, but that’s okay. The beach will be fine. It’s even better that he has his dad’s house because then he won’t be in the same cabin.”



WHEN LENA GETS TO TOWN, we spend the day eating and hanging out. Josh and I are watching TV alone since Lena and Preston have pulled a disappearing act. I forgot how much I enjoy hanging out with Josh. Like Preston his friendship has always been purely platonic.

“Can I ask you something personal? You can say no if you want. Or you don’t have to answer.” His eyebrows pull together as his leg bounces.

“Sure.”

“Is there something going on with you and Ethan?” I’m caught off guard.

“No, why do you ask?” I answer, keeping my voice as neutral as possible.

“The other night at the bar when I came looking for Ethan because stripper girl was looking for him... It looked like I interrupted something. And y’all were acting weird the other night when we were over here planning New Year’s. Y’all kept stealing glances at each other.”

“It’s nothing like that... We’re friends... It’s just been weird lately. That’s all.” I’m freaking out a little. Am I that obvious? And why would Ethan be looking at me?

“Just don’t let him be a dick to you... I have heard of him doing it to other girls, and you don’t deserve that.” He places his arm around my shoulder, pulling me into his side for a quick hug.

“He has no reason to be a dick to me. We’re just friends. I have a boyfriend, remember?” I say, hoping he doesn’t push further.

“Why didn’t you invite the boyfriend?”

“I was going to, but he’s working on the 30th and the 1st. He would have to drive up here on the 31st and drive right back the next day. He was actually a little upset I wasn’t going to be with him.”

I downplay his reaction because the phone conversation we had a couple of days ago was not fun. Caleb was worried and pissed I was going to the beach and spending New Year’s without him with guys he doesn’t know.”

“And who will you be kissing at midnight?” Caleb spits out.

“No one! And who will you be kissing?”

“Would it bother you if I had a midnight kiss?” he sneers.

“What do you think? Of course, it would. Why are being like this?”

“Why? Because my girlfriend is choosing to spend New Year’s Eve without me.”

“I’m sorry. It just came up, and my parents don’t want me to leave town just yet.” I sigh with the white lie I throw out to calm the conversation. I’m torn between wanting to spend a New Year’s with my boyfriend and the comfort of my friends.

“WELL THEN...I will be your date for the night. I won’t have anyone there either.” He smiles extending his hand. “The solo friends.”

I take his hand, “Perfect. Thank you.” I’m grateful for his friendship, and it eases my concern at being a “third wheel” if everyone starts coupling off.

13

ETHAN'S ROVER IS PARKED NEXT DOOR WHEN WE ARRIVE AT Preston's cabin. Paige yells at everyone to help take in all the groceries and drinks we brought with us. Ethan shows up out of nowhere offering to help. Every time I see him, my emotions run high, and I don't feel like myself. I tear my eyes away from him and take a calming breath.

The Hayes's houses are a couple of the nicest and largest on the strip. They are waterfront properties on stilts with a small boardwalk down to the beach. Ethan goes back to his cabin after helping us unload, and the guys leave to buy ice for the coolers.

"Aren't y'all curious what Ethan's cabin is like? We've never been over there." Paige raises a perfectly sculpted eyebrow at us.

"Now that you mention it..." Briana chimes in.

"I think we should go check it out." Paige gives Briana a wicked smile, then glances briefly in my direction.

"Y'all go. I'm staying here," I state calmly as I plop down on a couch and reach for the remote.

"I don't think so..." Paige says to me shaking her head and grabbing for my hand. "We should all go. Aren't you the least bit curious what his house is like?"

"Not really," I lie, my heart feeling too large for my chest. I want to see it, but I want to see him more. Avoiding him is my goal. "Go ahead." I widen my eyes, not wanting to have to explain.

“I’ll stay with you,” Lena says, about to sit on the couch with me.

I smile at her. “You don’t have to. This is your first time, go on.” I take a deep breath and continue, “Let me get my bearings, then I will be fine. Just give me a few.”

Lena gives me a quick hug and quickly leaves to catch up with Briana and Paige, who have already walked out the sliding glass door. I am flipping through the channels when I hear the door slide open again.

“What are you doing here all alone?” Mike’s teasing voice fills the room.

I smile to myself, suspecting he came over to check on me. “Nothing, just relaxing before everyone gets here and it becomes more like a zoo.”

“Come next door.”

“Nah, I’m fine here.”

Mike sits on the couch, grabbing the remote from my hand and saying, “If I’m going to keep you company, I get to choose what we’re going to watch.”

I laugh and shake my head. “I don’t need anyone to keep me company, now...give me back the remote!” I grab for his hand.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk...” Mike shakes his finger at me, “Silly girl, tricks are for kids!” He lets out a boisterous laugh at his own joke. I give up, lounging back into the couch, pouting. We have been silent a couple of minutes as he flips through channels when he turns to me and asks, “How has Ethan been?”

I freeze, not knowing how to answer him. “I don’t know. I haven’t spent time with him since we’ve been home. Why?”

He shakes his head. “Never mind. It’s nothing.”

“What did you mean that night at The Shack when Ethan grabbed my arm and you whispered to him that he didn’t want to get into it. He let me go after.”

Mike looks at me with a pensive expression. Silence surrounds us for a few seconds, then he shakes his head. “You’ll have to ask Ethan. I’m sorry. It’s not my story to tell.”

I want to continue prying but feel bad. So instead, I ask, “How many people did Ethan invite?”

“Just the band and any girls we wanted to bring. He said Preston needed overflow beds, so it’s just us, and Jake is bringing a few girls. He and Rob should be here soon.”

The sliding glass door opens with a chorus of voices and laughter. Preston and Josh walk in with the girls right behind them, followed by Ethan, the rest of his band, and three girls I don’t know.

I plaster on my best fake, but believable, smile and stand up to greet everyone. Rob and Jake introduce the three girls to everyone. They seem nice, but I start noticing how one of them keeps flirting with Ethan. She’s pretty, I guess, a bleached-blond-groupie-looking type, but she carries herself with such confidence it is hard to overlook her. It doesn’t seem like he knows her by the way they are talking and how aggressively she’s flirting and trying to keep his attention. I continue watching from afar, torturing myself. My phone chimes, and I leave the room to answer Caleb’s text— *Did u make it to the beach?*

I walk into a bedroom, where I have some privacy. I respond, and we continue texting for a few minutes before he leaves for work. I walk back out into the living room and notice Ethan leading groupie girl out onto the patio with his hand on her lower back. I stand frozen, staring, not realizing how obvious I am until Josh comes over and nudges me with his shoulder. He whispers, “You didn’t tell me the truth, did you?”

I turn my gaze to him and barely shake my head, biting my lips. He grabs my hand and leads me to the kitchen. He makes me a drink and hands it to me as he grabs a beer for himself. He says in my ear, “I won’t say it again, be careful.”

I nod my head and whisper back, “Was I really that obvious?”

“I noticed because you’re my date,” he smiles at me reassuringly. “I think everyone else is paying more attention to their drinks or flirting to have noticed anything.” I mouth the *thank you* before he leads me back to the living room.

The night progresses with more drinking and games, and I am extra careful not to look in Ethan’s direction, for fear I will fixate on him again. Everyone finally starts making their way to bed, and Ethan, his band, and the girls head back to his cabin. As Ethan is walking out to the patio, he turns around, looks at me, and mouths *good night*.



I WAKE up to the smell of coffee and bacon. I turn over to see Paige starting to stir. She opens her eyes smiling, then says, “I love it that the boys wake up early and cook breakfast for us!”

I cannot stop the smile spreading across my face knowing Preston and Josh are in the kitchen right now.

“I’m going to brush my teeth and check on Lena,” I say, slipping on a hoodie and Uggs and grabbing my toothbrush.

“Bring me coffee,” Bree shouts from the other bed, refusing to move.

“Yes, your highness,” I retort sarcastically. I pick up my phone to check the time and realize that it is almost noon. The rest of our friends will be making their way to the beach in the next couple of hours.

After brushing my teeth, I head into the kitchen. Preston and Josh are busy cooking breakfast, and Lena is sitting at the table watching them. She smiles when she sees me and asks, “This is what you girls are used to? Waking up to breakfast made?”

I nod my head in confirmation, and her eyes widen.

“I didn’t believe Preston when he told me. I thought he was trying to show off. No wonder y’all love it here.”

I laugh at her. “But we do clean up and fix lunch.” I turn to the guys in the kitchen and announce, “By the way, your highness is requesting her coffee in bed. Who wants the honors?”

Preston, Josh, and I bust out laughing at the same time, knowing no one is taking her coffee and she will gripe about it all day long. Happens every time.



LENA and I take a walk along the beach while the guys gather firewood and get it ready for the bonfire. The sound of the waves surrounds us as we walk in silence for about a hundred yards.

Lena is the first to speak, asking, “Are you going to be okay tonight? With Ethan here, I mean.”

“It’ll be fine.” I hope saying it makes it real.

“Last night, Preston asked me what was going on with you and Ethan. He started telling me how Ethan has been acting weird, then he said you looked like you had seen a ghost last night watching Ethan with that chick the guys brought. He was very persistent.”

“You told him!” I almost yell.

She shakes her head. “No, of course not. But I did tell him that if he had questions about you and Ethan, then he should ask either you or Ethan.”

“If he’s asking, he knows there’s something. I’m sorry for putting you in the middle.”

“Don’t be sorry. You just need to figure things out before everyone knows there is something to question.”

“I’m with Caleb. I’m going to keep it that way. I just need to get over this stupid crush on Ethan.”

She purses her lips, then asks, “Are you sure it is only a stupid crush? Are you sure there is nothing more to your feelings for him?”

This is exactly what I am terrified of finding out. My feelings for both guys are so mixed up I don't trust myself. I can't answer the question truthfully because I don't know the answer.

I shake my head and say, "I really don't know."

By the time we get back to the house, more people have arrived, and Preston introduces Lena to everyone. Ethan and the band are hanging out in the living room with the new girls. Groupie Girl is stuck at Ethan's side, continuing to incessantly flirt. I feel myself staring in their direction, so I walk out of the living room and into the kitchen to grab a snack.

Paige comes out of the bedroom with my phone in her hand, talking to someone. She yells at me, "Come get your phone, Sof, if you want to talk to your boyfriend!"

Ethan's head snaps up as I rush over to her, leaving my unmade sandwich. As I place the phone on my ear to say hello, she begins making loud smacking kiss noises then finishes her spectacle with, "No phone sex, Sof."

I turn to her responding, "I'll keep that in mind."

That's when I hear Caleb respond jokingly in my ear, "What! No phone sex! Damn, then I gotta hang up right now!"

I laugh and tell him, "Save it for another time!"

Just as I was about to leave the room, out of the corner of my eye, I see Ethan get up off the couch, his body tense and fists clenched, and walk out onto the patio.

OUR BONFIRE HAS ATTRACTED a large crowd, including lots of people from the surrounding houses, so our small party has increased significantly in size. It made for a nice mix, with lots of flirting and mingling, and everyone is having a great time. A couple of guys have hit on me, and it feels nice, but my mind isn't in it. Josh is by my side, running off the guys that try too hard. I am enjoying his company and the safety his presence creates.

I've been able to avoid Ethan and Groupie Girl for most of the afternoon. Thinking that they were there all alone made me nauseous, but it was better than watching them. I have a buzz from the day drinking, so my ability to ignore and avoid Ethan is becoming hazy. I also have Caleb on my mind because every time I stick my hands in my hoodie pocket, I feel my phone. I'm waiting for his call.

We are sitting around the bonfire, music playing, when I see Groupie Girl stand up and straddle Ethan. I begin to feel physically sick as I watch her kiss his neck. Josh, who is next to me, gets up and grabs my hand, pulling me up and back toward the house.

He stops halfway up the boardwalk, standing in front of me and holding my shoulders. "I'm sorry for pulling you away so quickly, but if I didn't..." He stops his sentence and looks in my eyes.

"I need a few minutes. I'll be back down in a few."

He hugs me. "Call me if you want me to come up to the house with you."

I lay down on my bed, pulling out my phone. I'm surprised Caleb hasn't called yet. It's already after ten o'clock, so I decide to call him. As it's ringing, I wonder what he's doing when I hear, "Hello?" from a female voice.

Confused, thinking I may have called a wrong number, I look at my phone and see Caleb's name on my screen, so I ask, "Is Caleb there?"

The female on the line begins giggling, then slurs, "You should have called about thirty minutes ago. He's passed out!" She continues giggling. Where is he? And who is this chick?

"He passed out? Where did he pass out?" My anger begins to build.

The girl stops laughing before answering, "In his room."

"I'm confused."

"Blame the drinking games. Caleb was hilarious, thinking he could get Emily and I to pass out first. He's the one that had

one too many, so I brought him back here.” She is still slightly slurring but doesn’t sound as drunk as before.

“And where are Jason and Wes?” I ask, wondering why some girl is there with him while he is passed out.

“They are back at Emily’s. Who are you?” I’m shocked that they let a stranger stay with him while they continue partying.

“His girlfriend. And you are?” My blood boils, and I want to strangle this girl through the phone. I can’t believe I’ve had to endure watching Ethan with Groupie Girl and now some bitch is with my passed-out boyfriend.

“Huh...I’m sorry...a friend...I should go.” She hangs up.

I sit on the bed for a minute, stunned, but the anger quickly reappears. All of the jealousy and insecurity that has been building the past couple of months hits me like a ton of bricks, shattering what little trust I have.

I storm out of the bedroom and go straight to the freezer, pulling out the bottle of Patron we have stashed there. I serve myself a shot, cut up a lime, and take the shot alone. I feel the burn as it goes down. I place the lime in my mouth as a chaser. I want to rage but am fixated on the heat in my stomach from the alcohol. Josh slides the glass door open and walks over to me.

I smile sweetly to try and hide the murderous thoughts floating around my mind. I turn around and get another shot glass from the counter. I pour two shots. He cocks his head and raises a brow when I slide a glass across the table to him.

“What are we drinking to?” he asks cautiously.

“Well, let me see...” My control is rapidly fading. I raise my index finger to him, “One...having a stupid crush on someone who doesn’t like you back...” I raise my middle finger. “Two...having a boyfriend pass out before midnight and having some strange girl answer his phone and be alone in his apartment with him...” I raise my ring finger. “Three... being the cute one! Always being the friend that guys want to take care of, but never the one they want!” I grab the glass

from the table, clink it on Josh's glass he has not touched, and nod at him, smiling. "Cheers!" I take the shot, the burn not as bad the second time around.

"Sophia..." Josh speaks like he's trying to calm a skittish animal, "Why don't we go for a walk? Let's get out of here."

"Right, good idea. Let's go out to the bonfire, and maybe I can catch the attention of one of the guys you chased away earlier," I say, not caring what comes out of my mouth, my filter obliterated.

"You know that's not what I meant...just, talk to me." His eyes plead with me to calm down. "What's so bad about your friends caring about you?"

"Josh please...I'm not in the mood. Tonight has gone to shit, and I just want something or someone to get my mind off it. Please." My frustration is building.

He comes around the table, taking me into his arms and hugging me tightly. He rests his head on the top of mine and holds me for a few seconds before he murmurs, "Please be careful. I don't want you to do anything that you'll regret in the morning. Stay in here with me."

I wrap my arms around his waist, happy I have friends who care about me, but too pissed and drunk to act smart.

"Thanks Josh, but..." I don't know how to explain. So much is clouding my judgment, the alcohol, my anger at Caleb, my love/lust for Ethan. I pull away from him, leaning up to kiss his cheek, and walk out to the patio. I grab a beer from the cooler before walking down the boardwalk. I approach the bonfire and see the party still going strong.

I look around for the guy from Houston who hit on me earlier. He was cute with a nice smile. I find him standing in a group with Paige. I walk up, nodding to Paige, and stand next to the Houston guy. I place my hand on his upper arm and slide it down to get his attention. Paige tilts her head and raises her eyebrows. I smile at her, letting the liquid courage lead me.

I lean into Houston and tell him, "How about that walk?"

He looks down, giving me a devilish smile, “Are you sure? That guy you were with earlier seemed pretty certain you couldn’t take a walk with me.”

“He was confused. I’m free now.”

Paige grabs my hand, pulling me away and gesturing to him to give her a second. I turn and look at her. “What the hell, Paige? Please don’t. Just let me be. Ask Josh what’s happened and just...stop.” I pull away from her and walk back to Houston, a smile spreading across my face.

He takes my hand and leads me away from the group. I take a quick glance back at Paige, and she’s shaking her head. I give her a small reassuring smile, not sure if it was for her sake or mine. We walk a couple of cabins down the beach, but close enough for us to hear the music. We talk, and I am enjoying myself, letting my mind go numb. He grabs my hand, leading me back to the bonfire to get him a refill.

All of a sudden, I feel a large hand around my upper arm yanking me backward. I fall back into Ethan’s familiar chest. Surprised by the jerk and my hand leaving his, Houston turns around to see Ethan pulling me behind him and staring him down.

Groupie Girl starts to whine, “Ethan...” She drags his name out. “What are you doing? Sit back down with me,” she slurs. Standing up, she grabs his upper arm and tries to pull him to her.

He looks at her and says with a steady, controlled voice, “Get the fuck off me.” He shrugs his arm until she releases him. He turns his glare back to Houston and says in a low but menacing voice, “I got her from here. Now run along.”

Houston, not ready to back off, replies, “I think that’s up to her. Don’t you think?” He takes a step to the side to get a clear look at me and asks, “What the hell is up with these guys dictating who you talk to? You need new friends.”

Without letting go of my arm, Ethan steps to the side, blocking Houston from getting to me. “Just walk away, dude. Just. Walk. Away.”

Houston's expression changes, and his body tenses. Houston is not as big as Ethan, but something in the way he is standing confidently and not backing down from Ethan gives me the impression he is no stranger to fights.

Houston moves to the side again and extends his hand to me. "Let's get out of here. I have more beer at our cabin."

I feel Ethan's back tense under my hand. Trying to deescalate the situation, I pull away from Ethan's grasp and come around to stand in between the two. Houston takes my hand, and Ethan grabs my shoulders and pulls me back into his chest, wrapping his arms around me.

"She's not going anywhere with you." Ethan pulls me behind him again.

Preston suddenly announces loudly, "Show's over folks! Back to drinking and fun!" He and Josh step in between Ethan and Houston, trying to defuse the tension.

Preston turns to Lena and says, "Take Sophia back to the cabin." Houston skulks away, muttering obscenities, and Preston pats Ethan on the shoulder telling him, "No worries, Lena and I got her from here. Go back to your chick."

Preston's statement pisses me off. What gives them the right to jump in and "handle" me? And knowing Ethan is going back to Groupie Girl is too much to stomach.

"I can take care of myself, thank you." I'm so embarrassed, tears begin to stream down my face. I quickly walk toward the cabin.

"Preston, please don't. Not tonight. I have her," Ethan says, his voice strained.

Footsteps come up behind me. Ethan's calloused fingers take my hand, interlacing our fingers.

I jerk my hand away from him. "Just go back to that chick and leave me alone!" The embarrassment overwhelms me, and I start to run. He catches up and grabs my arm to stop me.

"You're coming with me." His voice is steady.

“No.” I pull away again and cross my arms in front of my chest like a petulant child.

“Fine,” he tells me before he bends down, grabbing my thighs and throwing me over his shoulder.

“Put me down now, Ethan,” I yell at him as I hit his back. He continues striding down the boardwalk, heading to his cabin.

He walks us up to his patio and into his living room, where he finally places me back on my feet and grabs my hand. I look around at his spacious, modern cabin. I pull my hand out of his, but he grabs it again and leads me down a long hallway to what looks like the master suite. He stops us in the middle of the room and says nothing.

He grips my shoulders firmly, holding me in place, before beginning. “What the fuck were you doing?!”

My eyes widen at his remark and tone. His grip loosens as he drops his head. I’m reeling from the turn of events, so I stay silent.

I hear his intake of breath before he begins again, “I’m sorry.” He looks into my eyes. “This is not the way I envisioned this happening.”

My mind reels with what is happening. I try and pull my hand away again, but he holds on to it tighter, pulling me into his chest. My body instantly reacts, sending a warming sensation all over. I look up, and his face is marred with fear. He cups my face with his hands swiping the tears that had fallen with the pads of his thumbs. He takes a jagged breath and slowly brings his face down and places his lips on mine for a gentle kiss. He pulls away, and I get lost in his hazel eyes. I’m scared to say anything and break the moment, but I want to know why he kissed me.

“Uh...what...uh...di...did you—,” I stumble, unsure how to ask what just happened.

His lips spread into the smallest of smiles before he kisses me again with more passion. A soft moan escapes me and as the shock melts away I sink into the kiss with him. I place my

hands on his chest as he slides his hands down to rest on my waist, holding me firmly.

He pulls away again. “I’ve wanted to do that for too long. You don’t understand what it has been like to spend time with you and not be able to touch you like this.”

“You...uh...wanted to kiss me?” I ask, stunned.

“I’ve wanted to kiss you since the first moment I laid my eyes on you, that first time I saw you at The Shack, before I even knew who you were. I was going to talk to you, but they pulled me on stage. I was watching you through the whole set, but you didn’t seem interested. You kept looking at the rest of the band, so I pussied out.”

“I noticed you too, but I didn’t think you would notice me.” I admit my fears.

He gives me a sad smile then says, “How could I not?” He hugs me tighter, sliding his hand up my back to rest on the nape of my neck, holding me to his chest. He brings my head back and places another kiss on my lips, shorter this time, then says, “We need to talk.” He leads us to the loveseat in the room and pulls me down to sit with him.

Thinking about how he has been treating me lately and the girls he has been with makes my mind race, and confusion sets in. I stand, up remembering he has a date on the beach. “Wait, you left someone on the beach. You might want to go get her.” My heart drops, and a feeling sadness looms as I think about him with her. I’m also a bit disturbed since her lips were on him not so long ago.

Before I can walk away, he grabs me by the waist. “No, don’t leave. I’m not dating her. I just met her. She’s not important right now...you are.” I turn to face him. “Please stay. We *need* this.” I nod.

I hesitate before I sit down and ask, “Where do we start?” He runs his hand through his hair, nervousness radiating off him.

“I am going to start by apologizing to you for being a dick the past few weeks. I’m not proud of it. I was trying to forget

about you.”

My eyes widen at his admission. “What do you mean you were trying to forget me?” I blurt out.

“You’re with Caleb, not me. I want to be the one with you. I was having a hard time seeing you with him and knowing you’re with him. I want you with me. I want to be able to hold you, protect you, and kiss you. It hurt knowing you were with him, especially the night Lena left to visit Preston. It kills me thinking of that night.” He stops, rubs his hands on his jeans roughly, then continues, “I thought focusing my time and energy on other girls would get you off my mind. It hasn’t worked.”

“I hated seeing you with those girls. After you told me about trying to change after everything you went through, I was disappointed to see you with them.” I say, knowing I have no right to feel this ever-present jealousy.

A frown forms on his face, and his brows pull together as he says quietly, “You were disappointed in me? Really? You’re telling me I’m not the only one who feels this?”

Can I admit I have feelings too? What if my feelings are so much more than his and I make a fool out of myself? He’s watching me as thoughts swirl around my head. I take a huge gulp of air and let it out slowly, shaking my head. “No, I wasn’t only disappointed. I... I was ... I think I was jealous too.” I drop my gaze to my hands resting on my lap.

His hand cups my chin lifting my head up. A sexy grin spreads across his face. “You were jealous?”

“Yes.”

He grabs me by the waist lifting me and placing me on his lap. I turn to straddle him, and he crashes his lips to mine without hesitation. His tongue brushes across my bottom lip, and I open my mouth to deepen the kiss. My hands wrap around his neck, and I slide them up, running them through his messy hair. I can feel his perfect five o’clock shadow rubbing me with the intensity of our kiss. We pull away, breathing heavy, gazing into each other eyes.

“Having you here in my arms, I don’t want to let you go again,” he admits to me, then continues, “but... I need to know what happened with you and Caleb. Why the hell were you with that guy on the beach? That probably should have been my first question.”

His eyes search mine. How can I tell him what happened when I don’t know the whole story myself? If I thought I was confused before, I am even more so now.

“Well...honestly... I’m not sure if Caleb and I are still together.” I’m uncomfortable talking about Caleb while straddling Ethan, so I slide off and sit on the couch with my back against the armrest. I bend my knees into my chest, wrapping my arms around my legs protectively.

“What do you mean?”

I explain the whole story, about calling Caleb and the girl who answered his phone. As I talk, his body tenses and his jaw ticks.

“So...I really don’t know where that leaves me and Caleb.”

“Did you try and call his friends to ask them about this?” His voice is steady, but it’s laced with anger.

I shake my head.

“Good, because they’ll probably just lie to you. Cover up for him.” We sit in silence for a couple of minutes before Ethan continues, “Sophia, this doesn’t change anything I’ve said. I want to be with you. I want you to choose me, not him.” He grabs my hands, which were clasped over my shins, and tugs me to him. I scoot closer, and he grabs my waist again, placing me on his lap. One hand stays on my waist, holding me firmly, and the other comes up to my face and strokes my bottom lip. All I see are his beautiful, clear hazel eyes watching me.

“I know we’re not done talking, but right now I want to ring in the New Year with you. Come on, before we miss the fireworks.” He lifts me off him, and I instantly feel the chill without his body next to mine.

My thoughts and feelings are completely jumbled, and my mind is still trying to process everything that has happened. I follow Ethan as he leads me by the hand back down to the beach. All I want to do is follow Ethan wherever he leads me.

We approach the bonfire, and as everyone sees us holding hands there is a mix of reactions: smiles and relief or looks of worry and anger. Ethan seems immune to everyone watching us.

Ethan pulls out his phone, looks at it, and telling the boys, “We only have a couple of minutes left. Is everything ready?”

I look out toward the water, where the fireworks are stuck in the sand. He pulls me into him, placing my back against his chest and wrapping his arms around me.

Paige walks up to us and says, “We need a minute with her, please.”

“No can do, Paige. She stays here with me at least until after midnight.” He squeezes me a little tighter, bringing his lips to my neck and placing a gentle kiss. She looks at me, so I give her a small frown and shoulder shrug, and she walks away.

“Actually, I changed my mind. I’m not letting you go tonight.” He nuzzles in my neck as he whispers in my ear.

Someone says, “And the countdown begins,” and people join in, from twenty to one. Everyone around the bonfire simultaneously yells, “Happy New Year!”

I see the boys head to the line of fireworks to light each one. Ethan does not move away from me to help. He holds me as we watch the fireworks begin to explode in the air above us. I hear blasts as different colors and designs fill the sky.

After the last firework explodes, Ethan turns me around in his arms and brings his lips to meet mine in a deep, passionate kiss. I reach my arms around his neck, not wanting it to end, afraid what will happen if I let go.

He places his forehead to mine and says, “Happy New Year, baby girl.”

“Happy New Year.” I take a deep breath.

“We’ll figure out the rest later. Tonight...let’s enjoy being with each other.”

He lifts me, my legs dangling as he kisses me.

“So you played the part of overprotective friend to get her to spread her legs? Good move. Looks like it worked,” Houston huffs behind me.

Ethan puts me down and takes two large steps in Houston’s direction. Houston still looks pissed. Ethan swiftly pulls his arm back and takes a swing at him. Houston is ready for the encounter and tries to duck, but Ethan still makes contact.

“Get the hell away from here. I don’t want to see your pussy ass here again.” Ethan has an extremely large presence, and a couple of other guys rush over, followed by Preston and Ethan’s bandmates.

“What the fuck?” a guy I assume is friends with Houston says, standing tensed, ready to intervene.

“Your boy doesn’t know when to call it quits. I helped him figure it out. Problem?” Ethan taunts the new guy as Houston holds his jaw.

“Back off,” Houston directs to his friend. “Bitch isn’t worth it.”

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, Ethan lunges forward again, but Preston and Mike catch him and hold tightly.

“Y’all should probably get out of here,” Josh tells the guys. “Party’s over.”

Once the guys start walking down the beach, Preston and Mike let Ethan go. He comes back to me where I’m standing frozen. He takes my face in his hands. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“We need to talk to Sophia *now*.” Briana interrupts us, taking my hand and dragging me behind her to the boardwalk. I turn around to look at Ethan and see Paige and Lena

following us. We are in Preston's cabin before anyone says anything.

"Spill!" is the only word that comes out of Paige's mouth. I look at each of the girls, and each one is wearing a different expression. Paige looks slightly upset with a hint of relief, Bree seems to be really pissed, and Lena looks absolutely giddy. I take a seat on a couch as each follows my lead, sitting around the living room, waiting for me to tell my story.

"Y'all already know about my feelings for Ethan." They nod. "Tonight I found out that he feels the same," I say, hoping this will be enough to keep them happy until Ethan and I can finish talking.

"But..." Briana begins cautiously. "You already have a boyfriend?"

"Yes, but my *boyfriend*," I say the word with a bit of sarcasm, "was supposedly passed-out drunk before ten, and some random girl answered his phone and said she was alone with him at his apartment. I don't know about y'all, but that really doesn't sound like boyfriend material to me." The shocked looks on their faces reminds me of how I felt earlier.

"And what happened when you left with Ethan?" Paige asks.

I hesitate, not wanting to share just yet. What if he changes his mind? Everything tonight has happened so fast. "He... uh...he said," I begin, but get distracted by the sliding of the patio door. Ethan walks in, followed by all our friends. He comes directly to me, sitting down and wrapping me up in his arms, kissing my forehead.

"Is the inquisition over yet?" he directs his question to the girls with a confident smirk.

"Not even close," Paige exclaims, rolling her eyes at him. "You better not hurt her!"

"Paige!" I exclaim, widening my eyes.

A somber expression takes over Ethan's gorgeous face before he tells her, "Never." He shakes his head and pulls me

closer. Something in his answer and expression calms them because they let it go.

“You belong in my arms.” Ethan whispers while placing small kisses behind my ear and down my neck. My body trembles with excitement.

The party continues, but I don’t drink any more, enjoying being wrapped in Ethan’s embrace. One by one, people begin to fade and go to bed.

“I’m tired.” I tell Ethan, disappointed to leave him.

“Then let’s go.” He gets up from the couch where we have been sitting and pulls me up.

“Where?” I ask, confused.

“To my cabin. I told you earlier I wasn’t letting go of you. Come on.” He takes my hand, pulling me behind him. Instant relief settles in me knowing I’m staying with him.

We walk to his cabin in comfortable silence. We get to his room, and I realize I don’t have my things.

“I left my bag at Preston’s.” I frown.

He opens his bag and pulls out a T-shirt. “Will this do?” he asks as he hands it to me.

I smile and walk into the bathroom. I wash my face and pull his shirt on. I walk out to him lying in bed with the covers coming just to his waist, showing his bare muscular chest. A nervous energy washes over me, unsure about what might happen. Noticing my hesitation, he gets up and walks over to me wearing nothing but a pair of boxers. My focus on is his well-defined bare chest and the ripples of six-pack abs. He stands in front of me rubbing his hands slowly up and down my arms.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nervous, I guess,” I admit, wrapping my arms around myself.

“All I want to do tonight is hold you. That’s it. Nothing more. I’m scared if I let you go, I’ll lose you.” He verbalizes

my fear. I climb in, and he gets in behind me. He lies down on his back as I place my head on his chest and my hand on his stomach. His usual clean scent mixed with the salty, beach air calms me.

I can't seem to settle the thoughts floating around my mind, but I know now is not the right time to have a conversation. I fall asleep feeling Ethan's hand gliding up and down my side.

14

I WAKE UP TO THAT SAME SENSATION. I CAN'T CONTAIN MY smile at the feeling of safety and security of being wrapped in Ethan's arms.

“Good morning, sleeping beauty.”

“Good morning.”

Ethan kisses the top of my head. “I can get used to this real fast.”

I lift my head to look at him. The emotion in his eyes shows. “I can't think of any other way I would've wanted to wake up this morning.”

“I guess we need to get up, huh?” Ethan kisses the top of my head again.

“Nuh-uh, you need to get up. If I'd stayed at Preston's last night, I would have coffee and breakfast ready for me when I decided to make my way out of bed.” I lift my head to look at him, smirking.

“Is that so? What can I get for my girl?” He rolls me over and sits up, breaking our physical contact. I don't know why but, it sets off a nervous sensation. I desperately want to be back in his embrace. “Coffee?” he asks, turning around to look at me. I must have a pained look on my face because he leans back down, lying half on top of me, holding his weight on his arm. “What's wrong? Did I do something?” With his free hand, he begins running his fingers down the side of my face.

I shake my head, my emotions jumbled.

“Tell me.” His voice is soothing.

“I...uh...I was so comfortable in your arms...I...just didn't like it when you...when you pulled away.”

His lips pull out to a huge grin. “Baby girl, I was only getting up because you wanted coffee. I am absolutely, positively content staying here in bed with you all day.” He brings his lips down, pressing soft kisses on my lips. He brushes his nose against mine then pulls away, “So, coffee or me?” A panty-dropping smirk follows his question and stirs an excitement between my legs.

A knock on the door interrupts our moment. “Who is it?” Ethan asks, annoyed.

“Paige. I need to give Sophia her phone. It's been going off for a few minutes.”

“Come on in.” I tell Paige as Ethan rolls off me, getting out of bed, then heads to the bathroom. Paige opens the door and walks in, sitting on the bed next to me.

Paige doesn't say anything, just looks at me, raising an eyebrow and pursing her lips. I mouth to her, knowing exactly what she is asking, *Nothing happened*. I hear the bathroom sink turn on, so I know Ethan can't hear what I am about to tell Paige.

“I am in heaven, Paige, but I also don't know what the hell I am doing. When I am with him, it feels right. Do I even make sense?”

“All I am going to say is for you to be careful. You don't know what happened with Caleb, and you are already jumping in wholeheartedly with Ethan. And...you need to call Caleb. Your phone kept going off, and it was frustrating the hell out of me...so I answered it. I told Caleb you were already down on the beach, and I would get your phone to you. When you call him, that is your story.” Her lips turn down in an apologetic frown.

“Ugh... I'm not ready to talk to him. I don't even know what to say.”

We hear the sink turn off, so Paige whispers, “Follow your heart, Sof.” She tosses the phone on my lap, gets up, and makes her way to the door, yelling goodbye to Ethan.

There is that damn statement again about following my heart. I wish people would stop saying that, because my heart is not speaking loud enough for me to hear.

Ethan walks out of the bathroom, and my eyes automatically sweep over his toned physique. He saunters over to the bed, crawling over to me, laying me back down and kissing random parts of my body until his lips find mine. He pulls himself up wearing a crooked smile, “Like what you see?”

My face instantly heats up in embarrassment, so I cover it with my hands. Ethan lets out a soft laugh.

“I enjoy you checking me out. I want to be the only one you ogle.” He pulls one hand away from my face, bringing it to his lips and kissing it before placing a kiss on my cheek. I take my other hand away from my face, grabbing him behind the neck to pull him forward for another kiss. Just as our lips meet, my phone begins ringing.

“Argh, what now?” I growl as Ethan falls to his back on the bed. I pick up my phone and see Caleb’s name glowing on the screen. My stomach free-falls. I send the call to voicemail, sit up, and look at Ethan. I can see by his expression that he saw the name on the screen also. His defeated sigh and flat eyes cause a tightening in my chest. I’m torn, not wanting to leave Ethan but knowing I need to make this call.

“I...uh...have to call him back. Paige answered earlier and told him I was on the beach.” I continue watching him as he sits up and turns away from me. I place my hand on his bare back, feeling it tense. “Ethan, please...” I don’t know what I am asking of him, pleading for him to do.

“What do you want me to do, baby? Please tell me.” His words are whisper soft but filled with desperation.

I scoot closer to him and place my cheek to his back, feeling safe here knowing he cannot see the torment on my

face. “I...I need...time. I think. Let me call him back, and then we can talk. Okay?”

“He’s going to lie to you. What else is he going to say? Yes, a girl was with me while I was passed out?” His voice is increasing in volume with each word he says. “He’s going to lie... I know it... I can feel it.” He pulls away and turns around to face me. He cups my cheek, and I see the pain in his eyes. “Please, just tell me...” His sentence drifts into nothing.

“Tell you?” I ask, leaning into his hand.

“Never mind, I knew you had unresolved issues to deal with. I may have jumped the gun on this one.” He stands up, leans down, barely meeting his lips to mine, then says, “Come find me when you finish the call.”

He pulls on jeans and grabs a shirt as he walks out of the room. I rush to get dressed, tie my long hair in a messy bun, grab a pack of cigarettes and lighter from the dresser before speeding down to the beach to call Caleb before his next call.

My emotions are crashing around like the waves I’m watching—fear, doubt, pain, but mostly nerves. The line begins to ring, and my stomach churns. I swallow hard and light a cigarette, hoping it will calm the nerves.

Ethan’s last words are lingering. What is Caleb going to tell me? All he can do is lie or make up an excuse. But then what am I going to say I did last night? I’m a hypocrite.

“Hey, babe! Happy New Year! I’m sorry for passing out early and not calling you last night. I can’t wait to give you your New Year’s kiss. Forgive me?” He sounds happy, with not a care in the world. I feel like I am in an alternate universe. What does this mean? I take too long to answer him, and he asks, “Are you still there, babe?”

“Uh, yeah, I’m here... Happy New Year,” I respond, confused.

“When are you coming home?”

“I’m not sure yet. We haven’t even left the beach.”

“Well, call me when you get back to your parent’ house. I just wanted to hear your voice this morning since I missed you last night.”

This is my opening. “Uh...speaking of last night...what happened?” I ask carefully.

“I drank way too much and way too fast is what happened. Jason and Wes told me they had to walk me back to our apartment and put me to bed. I’m sorry that I didn’t call you before I got stupid drunk. Completely my bad.” That’s part of the story.

“And that’s it? You woke up alone this morning?” I probe.

“Woke up alone? What the hell are you getting at, Sophia?” His anger rears its ugly head.

“It’s just that I called you last night—” I begin, but before I can say anything else, he interrupts me.

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember us talking. Was I a dick?”

“No, not really because I didn’t talk to you. Some girl answered your phone and was alone with you,” I spill as quickly as I can.

“Shut the fuck up. I was not with anyone last night, nor was anyone with me.”

“I don’t know about that, but I do know some girl answered your phone last night because I talked to her.”

“You didn’t talk to anyone. Stop fucking lie to me. It’s pathetic, trying to make shit up to see if I did anything last night.”

“Don’t call me a fucking liar. I’ll show you I talked to someone on your phone.” I pull up my call log and take a screenshot of my calls showing his number with the amount of time I was on the phone. I send him the picture through text and then tell him, “Check your text. I sent a picture of my call log, and it shows the call lasted almost a minute. Who did I talk to for almost a minute? Please tell me.”

The line is silent for a few seconds, which makes me uneasy. Caleb begins, “I don’t know who you were talking to.

I was passed out, remember? I don't know who Jason and Wes had over at the apartment last night."

"Well, the only problem with that is the girl told me she was there alone with you because Jason and Wes were at Emily's. When I asked who she was, she hung up on me. That was unsettling," I tell him frankly.

"I was passed out! What part of passed out do you not understand?! How the hell am I supposed to know who this girl is?!" he yells at me.

"I don't know what the hell to believe!" I yell back. "If that was me, and some random guy answered my phone and I gave you this excuse, you would have a huge problem with it. So excuse me if I question what was going on!"

The silence is unnerving and drags on. The only thing I hear is his breathing.

"You're right. I would've been pissed," he starts, a little bit calmer. "I just don't know how to answer you because I was passed out. You have to believe me. Ask Jason or Wes." My mind runs over all kinds of scenarios that seem plausible, but if I believe that he was passed out, then I have to believe he has no recollection of who was on his phone.

"Fine... If you were really pass—"

Caleb interrupts me. "I was passed out!"

"Please let me finish. If you really were, then you don't know who or what was going on at your place. The problem is I don't know what to believe. I didn't like talking to some chick and having her tell me that you were in bed and passed out. Why did she have your phone? I just need some time to think." I need time to figure out what I want and need.

"What the hell do you mean by time?" he responds with controlled rage.

"Just time to think... That's all. I am not saying a break. I just..." I wish this was like one of the romance novels I read where the girl feels who she is supposed to be with and there is no doubt in her mind. Her heart leads her on this amazing journey to the love of her life. All that is running through my

mind is fear of making the wrong decision. “Time. I need time to think about everything that happened last night.”

“What all happened last night that you need to think of?” His curiosity edges too close to what I want to reveal.

“A random girl answering your phone. That is what happened last night. I’ll call you later.” I desperately want to get off the phone with him. I’m not thinking straight and don’t want to slip up about my own transgressions.

“Fine, call me later. But I’m telling you now, I’m not waiting around for you to decide. You either believe me or you don’t. That’s the way that it’s gonna be.” He hangs up, not allowing me to respond.

I am stunned by his ultimatum. I was not expecting that. How can he turn the tables and make me the “bad” one for being suspicious that a random girl answered his phone?

Defeated, all I want to do is curl up and cry. I take a drag from the cigarette, not enjoying the taste or the rush it’s giving me, so I drop it. Confusion seems to be my constant companion lately. My heart refuses to lead, and my brain is scared of making a decision. What good is the saying “follow your heart” when your heart stays silent? I plop down on the sand, pulling my legs up. I wrap my arms around my shins and place my head on my knees. I hear someone coming up behind me, but I am too consumed with my own thoughts to see who it is.

Ethan sits behind me, placing me between his legs and pulling me back into him. The safety I feel as he wraps me in his arms is immediate. The pull I feel toward him is undeniable, but is it enough? Feeling the warmth emanate from him makes me aware of how chilly I am. Goose bumps cover my body. But is it Ethan and his touch or the chill in the air?

After sitting for a few minutes in silence he asks me, “Wanna talk about it, baby?” I shake my head. “Tell me what you need. I don’t want to lose what we had last night,” he says softly, and I can feel his breath on my neck.

“I’m confused. I have feelings for you, but I have a boyfriend that I have feelings for too. I’m one hundred percent to blame for everything last night,” I admit, and my stomach churns with guilt.

“How can you blame yourself for what happened last night? He was the ass that got so fucking wasted and started everything. He’s also been an ass to you. I’ve seen him in action. Don’t forget that. What asshole feels up his girlfriend in front of another guy on purpose?” His voice is controlled and steady but filled with disdain for Caleb.

“What are you talking about, feeling me up?” I try and defend Caleb by pretending I don’t know that he’s talking about the night of my birthday celebration.

“Please don’t, baby girl. Don’t act like you don’t know he was mauling you all the while smirking in my direction.” He begins to rub my shin with his hand and squeezes me just a hint tighter. I stay silent, not knowing how to proceed. “I want to be with you. Only you. You are beautiful, sweet, and so full of life. The first night I saw you, I was mesmerized by your big, green eyes. They were so full of innocence, it was unnerving. I looked around, seeing guys watching you, biding their time to hit on you, and I was instantly jealous. I wanted to protect you from them before I even knew who you were.” Hearing his feelings pulls at my heart, and I’m getting lost in him again.

Ethan takes a couple of deep breaths before he continues. “And then there are your lips. Every time we were together, I thought you could tell that I would sometimes get lost looking at your mouth. When I kissed you last night for the first time, my dreams of your lips didn’t do them justice. They fit perfectly with mine.” He places the softest kiss on the back of my neck. “Please, Sophia, talk to me,” he pleads.

“I don’t know what to say.” Silent tears begin to fall. “I feel like everything is my fault. You and I wouldn’t be hurting if I hadn’t acted like a drunken fool last night trying to hit on that random guy.” I pause, trying to collect myself, breathing deep to hold the sobs. “I cheated on my boyfriend. That’s a fact. I got you in a fight. That’s another fact. Nothing can

change that. I acted impulsively. I've hurt you, and I could hurt Caleb if he found out."

Ethan grabs my waist and turns me sideways to face him, holding on to me. "Please look at me." He waits for me to look up. His somber expression saddens me because I have done this to us. "It's not your fault. Do you hear me? Nothing. If you need to place blame on someone, place it on me and Caleb. Me for kissing you, insisting on staying with you last night. Caleb for being an ass, in more ways than just him being with a girl last night. You are the casualty of us wanting to be with you." He places one hand on the side of my face, then says, "What do you need? Tell me what you want me to do. But please don't tell me to stay away from you. I can't."

I tuck my head under his chin because I cannot look at him. "Honestly, I don't want you to stay away. But we can't... you know. Not yet. Not until things are settled."

"Are you saying it's going to be us?" He pulls back to look at me.

"I don't know." I shake my head as I bite on my bottom lip anxiously before I continue. "I told Caleb I needed time to think about what happened last night. I have feelings for both of you, and I need to figure out what those feelings mean. It isn't fair to you or him for me to be going back and forth. Can you give me that?"

"I will give you whatever you need. I want you in my life. And when I say in my life, I don't mean as a friend." He pauses, then adds, "But if as a friend is the only way I can have you, I will take it. Better that than nothing because I don't think I could make it without knowing you are safe." His lips pull into a sad, strained smile.

I turn my body to face him, wrapping my arms around his neck and bringing myself tight to his body in a hug. My head rests on his shoulder. I can't seem to get close enough to him. It feels natural to be in his arms, like I fit perfectly in them.

I slowly stand, extending my hand to him.



THE DRIVE HOME has been a nonstop conversation about my love life. Each of my friends gives me their opinion and overanalyzes my behavior around each of the guys. The hardest thing to explain is how pulled I feel by both of them.

I stare out the window trying to tune out their incessant chatter about the guys and the pros and cons list they decided to create. While I appreciate their willingness to help, this is a decision I will have to make solo.

Caleb chose me. He pursued me. Not the me I can be with my friends, but the shy, quiet me. He saw me in a sea of others, and that alone speaks volumes. But my mind drifts back to our first time. I thought it was going to be special, something I would never forget, with passion and love. I won't forget my first time, but not because it was exceptional. Disappointment and shame sets in.

Ethan. It's so easy being with him. He provides the safety I was so used to with Preston. But it's so much more. I'm drawn to him like a moth to a flame. The pull is invisible but intense. We always come together, find each other, and sense each other. But he can have anyone, so why me?

Hey!" Brianna throws a M&M at me.

"Huh? What?" I'm so lost in thought I didn't hear what they are saying.

She smiles knowingly. "Let's take off to Austin and hit up a spa for a couple of days. We relax, get pampered, and you have an excuse not to see the guys while you continue the internal torture and blame you placed on yourself."

"Ha. Ha." I roll my eyes. "But it is the perfect place to avoid guys. Y'all would really hide out with me?"

"Really, Sof? Like we would turn down first-class hiding out. You are asking so much of us," Paige teases.

"Okay. Okay. So y'all won't be roughing it, but it's still thoughtful. When do y'all want to leave?" I say, relieved I

don't have to decide right away.

By the time Paige drops Lena and I off, Briana and her mom have already booked a three-day trip.



MY NERVES RUN wild as the phone rings.

“You finally decided to call,” Caleb almost snarls.

“Hi,” I respond, as I pick the fabric balls off old pajama bottoms. I don't know what to say to him. He says nothing, so I continue. “What are you doing?”

“You called to ask what I am doing?” he says in a clipped tone.

“No...uh...I just don't know what to say since...uh...you hung up angry earlier. I don't know if you're still angry or if you even want to talk to me.” I stumble over my words.

“I *want* to talk to you. I *want* to see you. I *want* to hold you. But you want to doubt what I did, and that pisses me off. Do you believe that I don't know what happened last night when I was passed out? That, my dear, is the question,” he sneers.

Do I believe him? I don't think so, but I can't admit that to him either. So instead, I lie. “I believe you, but it hurt to hear some girl tell me about my boyfriend.”

“I know it must have seemed suspicious, but I promise you, nothing happened. Jason told me this afternoon that it was a friend of Emily's. Jason gave her the key to pick up some bottles from our place to take back to Emily's. That was it. Why she answered my phone is a mystery.”

He sounds so convincing, and the story is plausible, but there are still too many emotions to delve right back into a comfortable relationship with him. There is still too much to consider. The guilt of my own lie plagues me. “It's okay. I believe you.”

“When are you coming back?” The relief in his voice is noticeable.

“Well, that’s another thing,” I begin timidly. “I’m going to take a spa trip to Austin with the girls.”

“What?” he raises his voice.

“We are going to spend a couple of days at a spa in Austin. It’s only for three days.”

“When are you coming back?”

“I’ll be back day after tomorrow, to pack, pick up Lena, and leave for Austin.”

“You won’t be back for another five days? Do I have that right?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Cancel. You’re sticking to the original plan that you would be back tomorrow,” he commands.

“I can’t cancel. I already paid for the trip.” I stretch the truth. “We want to spend a couple of more days together before we head back to school. I miss my friends.”

“How can you miss your friends when you have been with them nonstop for the past couple of weeks? Don’t you miss me? You haven’t seen me in that long, and it seems like you don’t even give a damn about that.”

“I do miss you, but I went from seeing my friends daily to maybe once a month. I will see you all the time once I get back. It is just a few more days. Please don’t be mad,” I beg. “Besides, I can see you for a few minutes before I leave for Austin. I will call you when I am on my way.”

“Whatever, do whatever the fuck you want. Call me, and if I can, I’ll stop by.”

“Really? That’s the way you’re gonna be? Do you really have to act like this?”

“What? You blame me for wanting to see my girlfriend? Jesus, I am such an ass of a boyfriend. There are so many girls that would love to have a boyfriend pay attention to them and

want to see them and spend time with them. But mine? Mine wants to hang with her friends and gets pissy that her boyfriend wants to see her. Damn, I'm such a dick!"

How can he turn something innocent I want to do around on me and make me the bad guy?

"I do want to see you, but we planned a trip. A girls' trip. What's wrong with that? Please don't be mad. I don't want you to be mad at me." I can't believe I'm begging.

"I'm not mad at you, I just want to see you. There's a difference, you know."

"I know. That's why I want to see you when I get home to pack. Please."

"Fine. Whatever. I'll see you day after tomorrow. Call me later." I can hear a change in his voice. It sounds almost mechanical, without feeling.

I lay down, brooding about our conversation and our relationship. It is so hard. I think of Ethan, and I try to find something wrong with him, but I am at a loss. But my mind does not comprehend why Ethan would be pursuing me when he could literally have his pick of any girl he would want. As if he knows I am thinking of him, my phone chimes a text from him— *call me if you can*

I hit call and wait. "Hi, baby!" I hear the excitement in his voice right away. "I wanted to see how you were doing."

"You don't need to worry about me. I'm sorry for everything." My chest tightens.

"I already told you, you have nothing to be sorry for. I placed you in a difficult position because I was drinking and didn't think before acting. I shouldn't have been so careless with you." The sincerity in his voice intensifies the guilt I feel.

"Ethan, please...you can't shoulder the blame for what happened last night. It's my responsibility, and I'm sorry. I'm the one who's in a relationship, and I should have been more responsible. Please don't blame yourself."

"Can't help it. I'm also to blame."

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

“When are you headed back? I thought I would leave when you do. I can follow you if you want.”

“Well...uh... I am heading back day after tomorrow, but I’m not staying there. I’ll just be passing through to repack my bag,” I say timidly, nervous about his reaction.

“Repack your bag to go...” He leaves the sentence hanging.

“The girls and I are going to Austin to spend a few days at a spa. I want to drop off my overstuffed suitcase and pack a smaller bag,” I reply, preparing myself for another argument.

“Sounds relaxing. I’m glad you’re getting away with the girls. It’ll be good for you to get away and focus on you.” I am surprised by his reaction after Caleb’s earlier outburst. Would Ethan react like Caleb if he was my boyfriend?

“Yeah, I think it’s good idea. To be honest...I don’t want to be around either you or Caleb right now.” I tense, wondering how he is going to take that.

“I understand. And to be honest, I’m glad it’s not just me you are staying away from.” Relief fills his voice.

Feelings were revealed last night, but they were fueled by vast amounts of alcohol. Were they exaggerated?

“So...I was wondering...if you wanted to meet up tomorrow afternoon for lunch maybe?” I ask him out, wondering if he will still feel the same in the light of day and sober.

“I would love to, but I thought you said you were staying away from us. Not that I’m complaining, though.”

“I do want to stay away, but after everything last night I thought...being together sober...is important. We said a lot of things when we were drunk...” I do not want to admit I’m hesitant to believe his feelings are real.

“You think I only said those things because I was drunk?”

“No...uh...not really,” tumbles out of me.

“Then I think tomorrow’s lunch is needed. I don’t want you to ever doubt my feelings for you.”

“Tomorrow then.”



ETHAN IS ALWAYS a sight to see with his laid-back, casual attire he wears with confidence. He oozes bad-boy sexiness without trying. The drive to the restaurant is quiet and unnatural; it reminds me of the week before New Year’s Eve. It seems neither of us knows how to act or what to discuss. The small talk we attempt is almost painful.

He parks at the restaurant, turns to me, and asks, “Why does this not feel the same between us? We have never struggled being with each other.” His brows furrow in worry as he continues to grip the steering wheel with one hand.

I’m not sure how to answer, so I shrug my shoulders.

“How can I fix this? What can I do to get us back?” he asks me seriously.

“There is nothing you need to do. We are fine. I was quiet because...I guess...I’m worried that I’m asking too much of you. I still have a boyfriend, and I am asking you to wait for me to clear the craziness in my head. That’s not fair to you.”

“Just answer me this...” He pauses until I nod in confirmation. “Do you have feelings for me?”

I nod my head again. “Yes, I do.”

“That’s all I need to know. We are fine...more than fine.” He lets go of the wheel and reaches across, brushing my cheek with the back of his hand and placing it behind my neck to pull me toward him. He meets me halfway and places a small, gentle kiss on the corner of my mouth. He gives me a devilish smile as he gets out of the car.

15

JUST AS PROMISED, CALEB IS PARKED OUTSIDE OF MY apartment when I drive up. His smile is wide, like he's hiding something. I have never thought of him so negatively. I blame these unpleasant thoughts on my tangled web of emotions. He pulls me out of my car into a long embrace followed by a passionate kiss. I melt into his kiss as I always do and instantly feel guilty for kissing him.

"I missed you...so much," he tells me as he pulls away. "I can't believe you are leaving again."

"I missed you too, but the girls and I haven't had a girls' trip in forever. This used to be one of our rituals," I try and explain again.

"I know, I know." He backs away from me, heading for my trunk. He helps me bring my luggage up and sits on my bed, watching me pack while we talk about break. What bothers me about his time on break is the amount of time he spent with Emily. Based on the stories he's telling me, she was with him every day. Is the green-eyed monster showing? What does it say about my feelings for him?

Lena yells from her room that she is ready. I finish up and am zipping my bag when Caleb grabs my hand and pulls me to stand between his legs.

"I have a surprise for you!" His eyes brighten with a mischievous smile.

"Surprise?" I ask confused.

"Yup!"

“Well?” His excitement, for whatever reason, is grating on my nerves.

“I’ll see you tomorrow night. The guys and I are driving up to hang with y’all.”

“Uh...that’s sweet,” I begin, not wanting to anger him. “But this is a girl’s trip. No guys allowed.”

“But,” he stresses as his eyes narrow, “I’m not just some guy. I’m your boyfriend. Aren’t you excited I made plans to see you?”

Shit, how does he have the uncanny ability to turn situations around on me? “Of course, I’m flattered you made plans, but we all agreed, no boys. Lena and Preston are together, and we told him he couldn’t come,” I lie because he never asked to join.

“I don’t fucking believe this!” He raises his voice as he pushes me away to stand. “My girlfriend would rather go off on a girls’ trip than spend time with me. Here I thought I was being the nice guy and compromising while my friends called me a pussy. And my ‘girlfriend,’” he air-quotes with his fingers, “doesn’t fucking appreciate a damn thing.”

Tears begin to flow at his outburst. His take on the situation makes my guilt explode. I would not be leaving right now if I didn’t have feelings for Ethan.

Lena opens the door and walks in without knocking, looking directly at Caleb. “Don’t you ever talk to her like that again. What part of ‘girls’ trip’ do *you* not understand? I didn’t invite Preston, even though he asked to come, and you can’t come either.”

Stunned by Lena’s performance, it takes me a moment to jump in since she always tries to remain neutral. “I’m fine. Really, Lena. I got this. Give me a minute, and then we’ll go.” I look at Caleb and his clenched fists make me uneasy, so I do not approach him.

“Look, I have to go. We have an appointment scheduled for this evening. If you are mad at me, I’m sorry. I don’t want to leave with you angry, but I’m going.” My body is trembling

in fear of his reaction. He does not move, just stares at me. I'm grabbing my bag to walk out when he grabs my upper arm and grips it so tight it hurts.

“So that’s it? You’re leaving?” he asks through clenched teeth.

I barely nod my head before whispering, “Yes, and you knew I would be leaving.” I look toward the ground, scared of his reaction.

He drops my arm, bends down, and hastily places a kiss on my lips before walking out without another word.



WE ARE LOUNGING in the suite Briana’s mom booked for us. We changed into our comfortable clothes, ordered room service, and checked for movies we could rent. We mindlessly flip through channels as we wait for our order.

Lena has not broached the incident with Caleb since we left, so when my phone chimes with an incoming text, she looks at me with a raised eyebrow. The look on her face tells me that she already suspects who is trying to contact me. I quickly look away from her to retrieve my phone, frowning when I see Caleb’s name on the screen. I swipe the message and read *I’m so sorry, please forgive me*. I sigh—part in relief, the other part in frustration.

I quickly type out a message and hit send— *We’ll talk later*.



AFTER A DAY FILLED WITH MASSAGES, facials, and yoga, Briana suggested an awesome restaurant right on the lake to kick our girls’ trip up notch.

“We’ve all been really good keeping our mouths shut about your love life, Sof, but I think it is time to talk about the elephant in the room.” Briana looks at me skeptically. I look

around the table to Paige and Lena, who are giving me similar expressions.

“I don’t know. Y’all know about my crush on Ethan, which I find out is not one-sided, but I have feelings and care for Caleb too. I just don’t know who I care for most...or not most, because they are different feelings, just...who I want to...be with only. I can’t even explain what the hell I want and need.” Frustration sets in as I stumble over my words, not sure how to explain myself. I rub my face roughly with both hands, trying to collect my thoughts and calm down.

“What are you trying to figure out exactly, Sof?” I remove my hands from my face as Bree continues, “What is making this so hard for you to figure out?”

I stir my drink and collect my thoughts before I begin. “I have feelings and care about both Caleb and Ethan. I don’t want to hurt anyone, but I feel like I am already hurting Ethan by telling him I need time away to figure things out. I feel guilty for what happened at the beach, and if Caleb were to ever find out, then he would be pissed and hurt too. I feel pulled by both.” I watch my friends’ expressions and am surprised none of them have an opinion about my comment.

“But Ethan was fine with you taking time away. Correct?” Paige says after a minute or so of silence.

“Yes, but that isn’t fair to him,” I answer.

“It is fair to him. He’s a big boy, and if he wasn’t okay with it, he didn’t have to agree. He did so willingly,” Paige continues matter-of-factly. “Tell us about Caleb. You have feelings for him, and I’ll admit I don’t get it. Yes, he’s easy on the eyes, but he hasn’t always left us with a very good impression.”

“He can be so sweet. I guess he is...” I pause, trying to figure out how to explain. “Or y’all’ve...seen his jealousy. He’s not always like that, though. I didn’t have any friends before he asked me out. So he wasn’t used to seeing me with guy friends. Halloween night was the first time he saw me with another guy other than his friends. And y’all have to admit that Preston is no normal looking guy, and I was

wrapped in his arms when Caleb walked up.” I watch their expressions as I speak.

“So he isn’t always jealous?” Paige asks a loaded question. He gets jealous often, but it is because he is protective. Or is he possessive? I glance in Lena’s direction, knowing she has been a witness, but her face shows no signs of how she feels about him.

“It isn’t all the time. It happens more often when we’re out drinking, and other guys are around. And it’s because of how much he cares for me. He worries about me and my safety. Like what happened the last time we went clubbing.”

Lena and I share the story of us suspecting the guys at The Falls of drugging her and how protective Caleb was toward Lena. I am relieved I have this story to share with them. During the conversation, Lena brings Emily up.

“So let me get this straight. Caleb is all over Emily, and you say nothing, but he has everything to say about you being with your guy friends. How does that even seem right?” Briana asks, raising her brows so high, her forehead crinkles.

“He’s not all over her. She tries to be all over him. There is a difference.”

“But that’s where he was and who he was with on New Year’s Eve, drunk as fuck,” Paige says. “He can tell you who to hang with, but you can’t tell him the same?”

Paige silences me with that observation. I’ve had that thought, but he always explains everything away by telling me that he wants to take care of me. He is the male and should be protective of his girl. He always worries about the ill intentions of bad guys. I like the feeling of being taken care of, but not to the extent of being made a fool of.

“But he noticed me. Just me. This is the first time any guy pursued me.”

“What are you talking about? Guys have hit on you. You just never showed any interest in any of them. Even Josh has tried, and you shooed him away,” Paige exclaims loudly.

“No, he hasn’t! And if he did, it’s probably because we were the odd ones out.” I shake my head at them. “Everyone before doesn’t count. You two,” I point my index finger and sway it between Briana and Paige before continuing, “get the attention. We’re swarmed with guys because they are all vying for the two of you to pay attention to them. Then whoever doesn’t get y’all’s attention will come my way. I didn’t want a guy that way. That’s why I always kept things casual. I wanted to be someone’s first choice. And Josh is sweet, and I love him to death, but I think of him as a brother.”

“I’m sure there were plenty that wanted you first. You just never gave them a chance,” Briana adds. “But let me get this straight, you are with Caleb because he chose you?”

“Not the only reason. I have feeling for him. I’m attracted to him. But I have them for Ethan too. You know that. But I can’t have both.”

Our conversation is interrupted by a group of guys who come over to join our table. They are a fun distraction from my friends’ inquisition.



BACK IN TOWN I don’t contact Caleb right away, wanting to settle in. Not knowing what to do, I’d rather avoid him. Only problem is he knows I’m back today, and eventually I’ll have to let him know.

After slowly unpacking and cleaning, I send him a quick text.

He texts back right away. *I’m at work. Can I come by after*

Knowing I have no good reason to decline, I text *yes*.

It is after 1:00 a.m. when a knock on the door wakes me. I pull myself off the couch and open it.

Caleb takes one look at me and says, “You were asleep. Go back to bed. I’ll call you in the morning.” He steps up to me, pulling me into his embrace and placing a short kiss on my lips.

“You’re leaving?”

He was furious I was leaving for a couple of days, and now I am here and he leaves.

“You were asleep, and I am still wired from work. I am not ready to go to bed. I’ll pick you up for breakfast tomorrow morning. I’ll call you.”

I begin to shiver from the cold coming in from the open door. He gives me another quick kiss and walks away. I shut the front door and lean against it, baffled but relieved.



THE NEXT MORNING, just as he promised, Caleb calls and picks me up for breakfast.

“What did you do last night when you left?”

Caleb shrugs his shoulders, “Not much. I went home, and the guys had people over, so I stayed up with them for a couple of hours.”

“Oh.” I’m hurt he chose to leave me to continue drinking. “Who was there?”

“The guys, and Emily had a couple of friends over too,” he answers casually.

Bitterness begins to rise at the mention of her name. I don’t like feeling this way. Should I step away? End things now?

“Do you have a problem with that?” My displeasure must be evident.

I shake my head. “No, I just thought you wanted to see me.”

My mind is reeling—should I stay, or should I walk away?

“I did, but I wouldn’t really see you if we were sleeping, and I wasn’t ready to go to sleep.” His tone is patronizing. I wring my hands in my lap nervously because it feels we are on the verge of another fight. “So now you aren’t going to talk?”

I shake my head out of the stupor. My heart begins to race thinking about actually ending us. “I’m talking... I just didn’t want to make you mad again. That’s all I seem to do lately. All we do is fight,” I say just above a whisper.

Caleb shakes his head at me. “That’s not all we do.” He reaches across the table and takes my hand in his. “We just haven’t seen each other in forever. Long-distance relationships are hard, and that’s what we had.” He brings my hand up to kiss my palm, then grips it with both his hands as he looks in my eyes. “It’ll be better now. You’re back, and we can pick up where we left off.” He gives me a sexy smirk with a wink, one that should have dropped my panties but instead made me uneasy. Again, my face must reveal too much.

“What’s wrong? You don’t want to continue where we left off?” He narrows his eyes.

“No, it’s not that. I’m sorry.” I drop my gaze to the table. “I guess I still have that girl’s voice in my head telling me about you.”

Caleb’s glare scares me. “Really? You want to continue dwelling on that shit when you were in a cabin full of guys. How do I know what you did? I have to trust you’re telling me the truth and that you slept by yourself.” My eyes widen at his outburst, and my shoulders tense. The shame sweeping through me is excruciating. “And let’s talk about people not answering their phones. I seem to recall Paige answering your phone after I called a few times. I was also sent to voicemail. Hmm...let’s think about how bad that could look. Where were you when you didn’t answer your phone?”

Panic sets in. This conversation is not where I need it to be. It was an omission, but now, backed into a corner, I have to lie.

“I was on the beach. Didn’t Paige tell you where I was?” I ask as calmly as possible, hoping this can end the discussion and we can move on to something else.

“Yes, Paige said that, but she could lie for you.”

I shrug, not wanting to say anything else that could be held against me. “I’m sorry. I was hurt hearing that girl on your phone. I just need to push it out of my mind.”

He brings my hand up to his mouth again, kissing it, then pulling me gently and meeting me in the middle of the table for a sweet kiss.

“Babe. I’m sorry, too. It’s stressful being away from the one you love. I was thinking about you the whole time you were gone. And worried. I don’t want to lose you. I need you.” He rubs his thumb on the back of my hand. “I’ve missed you so much. I love you.” His tone, full of emotion, brings tears to my eyes. “Come here.”

I slide out of my side of the booth and join him. He wraps an arm around me and tucks me into his side.

“I love you so much. I was going crazy without you.” He kisses the top of my head. “You’re back now. We’re back together. It’s all going to be okay now. I promise. How about I take you on a date tonight? Just me and you.” He squeezes me, teasingly.

This. This is what I’ve missed about Caleb. This gentle side. I’m so unsure about my next step forward, but this is what I’ve been needing to hear from Caleb. Choosing between Ethan and Caleb just got harder.

“Where?” Calm sets in.

“Not sure yet, but I’ll figure something out.”

16

ITCHING FOR TONIGHT'S DATE, I NERVOUSLY CLEAN MY ROOM while waiting for him to arrive. At the knock on my door, my excitement, and nerves, heighten. If tonight crashes and burns, I know what I need to do.

“Hey, babe, ready?” He takes a step closer, pulling me to him, lifting me in a hug and crashing his lips to mine. The kiss is filled with all the passion we haven't had since before the winter break. “Let's go!” he says with childlike enthusiasm.

Tonight's adventure is a secret. All day when I asked, he would not tell me where we are going, so when he pulls into a small entertainment venue, I'm surprised.

“We are taking it old school. Ready to have fun?” The smile on his face says it all.

“Bring it!” I say, giggling.

The place is filled with high schoolers. Game noise and lights galore surround us. The place has a small five-hole putt-putt area, go-kart racing, and an indoor area with all kinds of video games.

“Pick your poison, doll!” he says loudly.

“Get ready, I'm about to leave you in my dust.” I laugh and grab his hand, pulling him to get in line at the track.

“Really?” He looks at me surprised when we settle in line, hugging each other to keep warm in the winter night chill. Surprisingly, there is still a line of people braving the cold.

“Are you kidding? I love this.” I bounce on my toes.

He brings his head down to meet my lips, kissing me softly. "I'm really glad."

Our race is fun, but we are beat by a couple of teen boys. Back inside, we play several games and eat too much junk food. A group of kids yelling at the indoor basketball hoop attracts our attention. A couple of guys are shooting baskets at a moving hoop, trying to win a giant stuffed animal. We watch them for a couple of rounds until they finally give up and return to their dates empty-handed.

"My turn." Caleb lets go of my hand, heading to the guy manning the game. He hands money to the guy and takes a ball from the holder. I step closer toward him as he spins the ball in his hands.

The guy asks him, "Ready?"

Caleb turns to me, winks, and says, "Let's do this."

I watch Caleb bring the ball up, and concentration covers his features before he lets the ball go. It swirls through the air and goes in the hoop. He bends over and picks up the next ball and does the same thing. I watch closely as his eyes move with the basket, his concentration never broken by the noise surrounding him. The ease and grace with which he sinks the next four baskets excites me.

When his last ball goes in, he turns to me with a cocky smirk and an arched eyebrow. "Ever a doubt?" He takes a couple of steps to me, enveloping me in his arms. "Which one you want, babe?"

I pick a huge classic teddy with a red bow tie.

Our date is easy, fun, and filled with laughter and conversation, everything that has been lacking between us. As perfect as it was, there is still something nagging me in the back of my mind. On our way home, he asks if I want to meet the guys at a bar. I tell him no, not wanting to add alcohol to our date, especially when things have been so good. He seems surprised but doesn't say anything as he drives me home.



I'M LAYING in bed waiting on Ethan to pick me up for our lunch date. A knock on the door announces his arrival and Lena beats me to the front door. I hear Ethan's voice greeting her as I walk into the living room to see him, with his signature sexy smirk, which makes my stomach tighten. I walk to him, place my hands on his chest, and lean into to him as he envelopes me in his strong arms. I am instantly soothed by his unique scent.

Ethan kisses the top of my head, then whispers, "I've missed you."

I pull back to look up at him. "I've missed you too." He places his hand behind my head and pulls me closer to him.

He finally lets me go, and we head out to lunch. He takes me to a quaint gourmet sandwich shop that's bustling with people.

We eat and chat, avoiding the conversation about our pending or doomed relationship. Even so, it's easy. Not forced. No tension. Wanting so much to be with him, but with Caleb and our date on my mind, I can't commit either way.

After he pays the bill and gets his card back, Ethan asks, "What are we doing? I didn't kiss you earlier because I still don't know where we stand."

"I don't know. Caleb apologized. He's trying to be better." I pause, confused, not knowing what to say or how to explain. "I haven't done anything...you know...with him. We fought about the girl who answered his phone, and he laid his feelings out for me. He said he needs me. And I told you I have feelings for him. But I have them for you too."

Ethan nods his head, and I can see a question forming in his eyes. "You haven't decided who you want to be with yet?"

I shake my head.

"But you've kind of already decided, haven't you?" He shrugs.

“What do you mean?”

“If you’re still with Caleb, you’ve chosen him. If you can’t or won’t break up with him, then I think that’s who you’re choosing.”

I shake my head slowly as I think about his statement.

“You’re still holding on to him.” He cocks a brow. “I’m sorry, Sophia. I never should’ve put you in this predicament.” He places his hand over mine, squeezing it gently. “Let me get you home. Don’t worry about trying to choose. You already did.” His tone cool, almost unaffected.

I am speechless. He is giving me up. A single tear runs down my cheek as we walk out to his car. I quickly wipe it away, embarrassed I feel so much for him while he can give me up so easily. I should have known better; a guy like Ethan would never be interested in someone like me.

Ethan parks, and I give him a quick *bye* and jump out, not knowing how long I can keep my composure. I walk into the apartment and head straight to my room, falling onto my bed before letting the tears fall freely. Lena comes in and sits next to me.

“What happened? You looked so happy earlier.”

“He told me not to worry about choosing. He took himself out of the equation!” I vent. I am so angry at myself for believing he cared for me. Why the hell would he tell me all those things about wanting to be with me if he didn’t mean them? The sobs come out stronger now, and I am having trouble catching my breath.

“What the fuck?” Lena exclaims then pauses to ask. “Wait, what exactly did he say?”

I try to respond between the sobs. “He said that if I’m still with Caleb that I pretty much have made up my mind. That he’s walking away.”

“I’m confused. I’m calling him.”

I grab her arm, shaking my head. “No! Don’t. Please. I’m embarrassed enough. I just want to forget this whole mess.” I

bury my face in my pillow letting the tears fall and emptiness take over.

I stay in bed for the rest of the afternoon, napping and waking to cry a little more before passing out again. The ringing of my phone wakes me, and I realize it is dark outside.

I pull my phone out of my purse, checking the screen to see who it is before I answer. Briana's name appears, so I hit ignore and drop it, staying in bed and not moving. It rings again, and I pick it up to see Briana's name again. I ignore the phone again and drop it beside me. It begins ringing a third time, and I see Briana's name, yet again. If I don't answer, she will continue calling until I do.

"What's up?" I try and clear my throat inconspicuously since it is dry and raw from an afternoon of crying.

"Don't what's up me. What the hell happened? Lena called me worried. She said you have been in bed since you got back and have been crying all day. Tell me what happened."

The emptiness and hurt come back full force, and I begin to cry all over again. "I can't. Not right now. It hurts too bad. I'm sure Lena told you everything anyways."

She sighs over the phone as she responds, "Fine. But if you are hurting this bad, then doesn't that say something? Isn't your heart telling you who you want?" The statement makes me start crying even harder. Was my heart choosing Ethan, and I was too blind to see it? "Sof, talk to me. What did I say?"

"You're right. I do want Ethan. I've always wanted him. But he's let me go. He doesn't want me." I walk to the bathroom to grab tissues and see my reflection. I have makeup streaks down my cheeks. My eyes and nose are red and swollen. I look horrible. I laugh at how ridiculous I look, and I have no one to blame except for myself.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I just saw myself in the mirror, and I look absolutely horrid." I take a long, deep breath to calm the sobs still threatening to take over. "Time for me to get up. I hate that I didn't realize what I wanted sooner. I hate that I hurt. I hate

that things will probably never go back to how they were, and I lost a friend in the process.”

“You don’t know that. So what now?”

“I need to get up and do something. Anything. Especially before Lena decides to call anyone else worried. I’ll call you tomorrow. Let me go tell her I am up and ready to face the day, or what’s left of it.”

Reluctantly, I admit to myself I have turned into a cluster fuck of emotions. The extreme highs and lows are completely uncharacteristic of me. But before now, I had never put myself out there, never left myself be vulnerable.

I wash my face with a washcloth soaked with cold water, hoping it will decrease the puffiness. I walk out of my room to find Lena sitting on the couch flipping through channels.

“Sorry to worry you, friend.” I sit next to her and place my head on her shoulder.

She places her head on top of mine. “I’m just glad you got up. I probably shouldn’t have called Bree, but you scared me. I kept hearing you cry, and you didn’t want me in there with you.”

“I know. I needed her to kick me in my ass. No one does it quite like her.” I take a deep breath.



CALEB and I are at a new swanky martini bar that just opened. Jason and Wes keep everyone at the table entertained with stories of their escapades during the break. I’m already feeling a buzz and Wes has just brought another round of shots.

Just as I throw back my shot, I notice Mike and Jake walk in with the girls from the beach. Panic courses through me, and I cough, choking when the liquid goes down the wrong way. What if Groupie Girl is still mad about what happened and says something to Caleb? What if the guys go back and tell Ethan I was out and enjoying myself with Caleb? I feel Caleb’s lips on my neck as he rubs my waist, pulling me

closer. I straighten myself up a bit, pulling away, while trying not to make it noticeable. He tugs me toward him more forcefully, so I excuse myself to the ladies' room, my mind reeling with excuses to leave.

As I walk out of the bathroom, I see Mike leaning against the wall. He smiles and waves me over. I smile nervously, giving him a hug.

“What’s up?” he asks stoically.

“Not much. What are y’all doing here?” I shrug, trying to sound casual and hide my unraveling nerves. I am curious to know whether Ethan is coming but know I cannot ask.

“Same, I guess,” he says, clipped.

“Have a good evening.” I sidestep him, but he moves, blocking me.

“What happened with you and Ethan? He won’t talk about it, but I know something went wrong. Then seeing you here with your boyfriend proves it.” His jaw ticks.

“You have to ask him. I can’t get into it.” My throat clenches thinking of Ethan, so I try and walk away again, but Mike grabs my arm to stop me.

“But he won’t talk about it. That’s why I’m asking you. We’ve tried. Please. We saw how happy he was with you at the beach. Then...”

“Who was happy with you at the beach?” I hear Caleb behind me, his tone menacing.

I turn around to see him glaring at me. I stumble back, but Mike’s grip on my arm holds me steady. Caleb’s glare moves from me to Mike.

“Do you mind taking your hand off my girlfriend?” He pushes his shoulders back and clenches his fists at his sides. Mike drops his hand from my arm, turning his back to me and coming chest to chest with Caleb.

“We’re talking. Mind if we finish our conversation?” Mike takes a small step, blocking Caleb from me.

“The conversation with you is over,” he spits at Mike. Then he takes a step to look me in the eyes, extending his hand to me. “And you can answer my question. Who was so happy with you at the beach?”

I place my hand on Mike’s back to grab his attention. He turns his head to the side, watching me step around him. “I’ll see you around. I have to go.” My lips turn down.

I take Caleb’s hand, walking away. I walk toward the door, pulling Caleb behind me, when he tugs my hand. I stop, turning to face him. He’s glaring at me, body rigid.

“Can we talk outside?” I ask quietly.

“After you answer the fucking question!” he seethes. I wince at his tone, letting go of his hand and stepping back.

“Please. Let’s talk outside,” I plead.

“ANSWER. THE. FUCKING. QUESTION,” he says through clenched teeth.

“Ethan.” I whisper, bracing for the explosion. He grabs my upper arm and begins to drag me outside. I look around to see if anyone is watching and see Mike and Jake begin to walk in our direction. I shake my head at them, and mouth *Don’t, please*. There’s confusion and uncertainty in their eyes, but they stop and watch as I am dragged outside.

We get to my car, and he finally stops and drops my arm. It’s throbbing where he gripped me. I look up at him, not knowing what to say next. After a few seconds of tense silence, he says in his most controlled voice, “What exactly happened at the beach with Ethan?”

“Nothing really,” I say calmly, trying to buy myself time to think about what to say. He raises his eyebrows in disbelief and lets out a puff of air while shaking his head.

“You really think I believe that shit? Do you think I’m a fucking moron?” His stance is stiff and his look cold and calculating.

“No, I don’t. I...uh...I am... I’m just saying that nothing really happened.” I pause. I know I am going to have to share

something, so I continue. “Ethan told me he had feelings for me is all,” I blurt out quickly.

“What the fuck, Sophia! You have your panties in a wad because I’m passed out, but you have a dick declaring his feelings, and you want to be pissed at me! Fuck you!” The tears stuck in my eyes start to flow. He takes a couple of steps to storm away, so I follow and grab his arm.

“Talk to me! Please,” I beg.

“Talk about what? The fact that my girlfriend lied to me. I’m out!” He tries to pull his arm out of my grasp, but I am holding on. He jerks away and pushes me forcefully, causing me to stumble and fall. I watch as he walks into the bar, leaving me on the ground outside, crying in the cold night air.

I pull my keys from my purse, needing to escape quickly. I hop in my Mustang, speeding out of the parking lot. I’m having trouble seeing the road with the combination of tears in my eyes and the alcohol I have consumed. Less than a mile from home, my phone rings, and Caleb’s name pops up on my display. I hit the button on my steering wheel to answer.

“Hello?” I mumble.

“Are you still sticking with the story that nothing happened?” he yells over the phone. I am terrified and do not know how to respond. My mind races.

“Yes,” I answer, crying, as my hands tremble and grip the wheel harder.

“Then why are these pricks at the bar so worried about you? Wondering where the hell you went and if you’re okay?”

“Because we’re friends.”

My sight is completely obscured by tears.

“What the fuck ever!” he says, then silence. The background bar noise I heard before is gone now, and I realize he hung up on me.

I’m having trouble controlling my trembling hands. My body jerks upward as my seatbelt tightens around me, and I hear a loud crashing sound. I slam on the brakes, looking

around unsure what exactly happened. My car is tilted to the side. I quickly unbuckle and step out of the car to see I jumped the curb. The passenger front end is up on the curb with a flat tire.

I begin to freak out because I have been drinking and driving. I could get arrested. I jump back in my car, throw it in reverse, and drive very slowly to the apartment complex entrance. The car is making an awful scraping sound, and the ride is bumpy. I park, grab my purse, and run up the stairs to my door. All the lights are off, so I assume Lena is already in bed.

I throw myself in bed, thinking about everything that went wrong tonight. I never should have been driving drunk. The adrenaline that has kept me going since the confrontation with Mike leaves my body, and I feel an overwhelming sense of hollowness. The things I have done, stupid decisions I have made, and people I have hurt in the process rip me up inside.

I am startled out of my thoughts when my phone rings. I look at the screen and see Ethan's face sexily smirking. My body starts shaking again with the unfinished pain of his leaving. I ignore the call, silencing the phone.

"Sophia?" Lena yells through my door.

"I'm here," I call out to her, sitting up.

She walks into my room, takes one look at me, and rushes to my bed, asking, "What happened?"

She is clutching her phone. I cringe at the thought of who could be on the other end of the line. I look her in the eyes and glide my sight down to her hand, raising an eyebrow in question. She silently mouths *Ethan* to me. I raise my hand waving it back and forth by my throat indicating for her to hang up.

She brings the phone up to her ear and says, "She's here. I'll talk to you later." I am expecting her to hang up, but she keeps the phone to her ear and turns her back to me.

"No...I don't think that's a good idea... But...No... I'm not sure... She hasn't said anything yet... Hold on." She turns

around facing me and extends her hand, holding the phone to me. “He wants to talk to you.”

My eyes widen, and all I can do is shake my head furiously back and forth. She shakes her arm and hand, bringing the phone closer to me. I continue shaking my head, pleading silently for her to hang up.

Her lips turn downward in a frustrated frown before bringing the phone back up to her ear and saying, “Let me talk to her first. I’ll call you tomorrow... Okay... Bye.”

“Spill.”

“Caleb and I fought at the bar tonight.” I pause, not wanting to relive the whole evening right now. The pain and embarrassment feels too raw. She continues watching me curiously, so I recount the events of the night. When I tell her about jumping the curb and blowing up my tire, she cringes.

“Show me!” She jumps off my bed and pulls me to follow her. I am curious to see the damage and worry about how I am going to explain this to my dad. We inspect my car and notice the damage is contained to the front end on the passenger side. I’ll need a tow truck to come and pick it up, because there is no way for me to move it.

THE NEXT MORNING, THE ONLY THOUGHT LOUD ENOUGH FOR me to hear over the chaotic mess of emotions swirling in my head is how stupid I was to drive in that condition. All I did, again, was react to my emotions.

The phone call to my dad was not as bad or as hard as I expected it to be. Luckily, he believed my explanation that another car veered into my lane while I was driving home last night. I swerved to avoid them and jumped a curb. My parents were upset I didn't call the police to report the accident and questioned me about it. I explained it was late and I was shaken up because I was by myself, so they let it go.

I finally decide to emerge from my room, knowing I need to face the day. When I open my door, I'm surprised to see Lena sitting on the couch reading on her Kindle.

"How long have you been up?" I ask.

"For...uh...about ten chapters." She gives me a sad, small smile. "Wanna talk about it yet?"

I make my way to the coffee pot, glad to see she's already brewed a pot.

"I'm sorry," is the first thing that tumbles out of my mouth. "I never thought I would be that girl." I pour myself a cup. Lena follows me and sits at our table with a perplexed look, so I add, "You know, the girl who surrounds herself with nonstop drama. I need to get myself together. I'm sorry."

"No sorries are necessary. We all end up being that girl at one point. It's what guys do to us. They make us stupid.

Speaking of boys...what do I tell Ethan? He's called a couple of times and texted."

"I'll call him. I just need him to know he doesn't have to worry about me. He let me go..."

"But he didn't." Lena interrupts.

I shake my head, raising my index finger at her to let me continue. "He chose to take himself out of the equation. Whether that means he let me go, was being noble, changed his mind, whatever, he made that decision, and I gotta live with it. I can't keep going back and crying on his shoulder. Did I want him to? No. But he did, and I can't change that. Did I figure out too late I wanted him? Yes. But I can't change that either. I have been acting impulsively and reacting to everything around me instead of taking the time to really stop and digest my decisions."

Everything that has happened has made me reconsider my actions these past few months. I was proud of myself and my ability to make sound choices, not allowing my emotions to dictate me. But the romantic, intense emotions somehow shut rational thought from my brain. I thought I was overthinking the two relationships, but really, I've been reacting. The feelings for each are completely different, but just as intense. Is this healthy? I'm not sure.

"So, then, what now?" Lena asks, bringing me back to our conversation.

I sit down, shrugging as my lips turn down, "I straighten out the mess I've made so far. I call Ethan and apologize for not being smarter, stronger—I don't know, for being selfish. It's a good thing he stepped away. I'm nothing but trouble at this point. I'll try and make it up to Caleb. I'm the one that cheated and hid it. I get all pissy and drunk and fall into Ethan's arms before I even knew Caleb's side of the story. That was pathetic. I hurt both guys because I could only think of myself and my insecurities."

"You're too hard on yourself. Caleb hasn't been a saint in all this. Since I met you, y'all have had issues. And Ethan is a big boy. You didn't pursue him, he pursued you. He knew you

had a boyfriend, even though you were off flirting with that other guy.” She smirks at me as I let my head fall on the table, conveniently forgetting I was also hitting on Houston. Shit! She continues, “If I remember correctly, Ethan picked you up and dragged you away. That’s on him.”

“Sure, he did, but I could’ve stopped it before it started. And I didn’t. I let myself fall.”

Her face softens as she nods her head slightly, knowing I need to make these decisions. “Then make your call so I can stop ignoring my phone. What are we doing about your car?”

“The tow truck should be here soon. After, can you take me to get my rental?”

“Of course. Tell me when you’re ready.” I give her an appreciative smile and nod before I get up and give her a huge hug.



ETHAN ANSWERS the phone on the first ring. “Are you okay? What happened last night?”

I take a deep breath before telling him an abbreviated version. I fluff as much as I can, knowing he heard some things through Mike and Jake. I don’t want to purposely lie to him, but I don’t want him to worry unnecessarily about me either. It’s not his job; it never was.

“And when he came back into the bar without you?” he asks after I gloss over our fight outside the bar.

“I came home. That’s it.” I try to sound casual.

“Sorry, baby girl, but I call bullshit. The guys said he was in a rage. When they went up to him to question him about you, he lost his shit on them. So if he lost his shit on them, I can only imagine what he said or did to you outside where no one was watching. And Mike said you were pretty tipsy when y’all were talking. Said you had just taken a shot.” His anger toward Caleb mixed with his worry for me is ripping my heart in two.

“You don’t have to worry about me. Really. I can handle it. But thank the guys for watching out for me. It was sweet. But I do have to tell you because you will probably hear it from someone else anyway...” I take a deep breath. “I kind of... uh...messed up my car.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I...uh...jumped a curb last night on my way home, and I busted a tire and probably effed up the rim too.” I cringe thinking about it again.

“Did you get hurt?” His voice is full of worry.

“No, I’m fine. My car, not so much. But I’m fine.” I hear a knock on my door announcing the tow truck has arrived. “Hey, I have to go. The tow truck is here to pick up my car, and Lena is taking me to pick up a rental. Talk later.”

“Fine, but this conversation isn’t over. Call me when you get back.”



AS I DRIVE HOME from the car rental agency, I take a detour, wanting space and time alone. I pick up a latte and head for a park. The cold winter air means it’s deserted. It is the perfect place for me to think and wallow, alone. I make my way to the swings, placing my latte on the ground as sit, pushing myself off. The cold air on my face is uncomfortable, but I secretly feel like I deserve the punishment.

Only questions, no answers, keep wandering around my mind, and I am useless at stopping them. The one thing I am certain of is I need to talk to Caleb. I need to see where we stand. Do I still have a boyfriend? My guilt over everything I have done persuades me to solidify my decision to talk things out with him.

I jump off the swing and pick up my latte, thankful it is still warm. I climb into my car, grabbing my phone. When I click the screen, a text from Caleb is waiting for me. I stare at

it for a few seconds, nervous about what it says, before I swipe to read— *Can we talk?*

CALEB LETS the door swing open and pulls me inside into a tight embrace. His arms hold me tightly as his hands roam over my back and into my hair. I bring my arms up around his waist and hold on to him.

“Come on.” His voice is low, as he grabs my hand and leads me back to his room.

I stay silent, fearing if I say anything it will ruin the calm. He sits on his bed and pulls me down beside him. He takes a long breath in, exhaling slowly, then turns to me.

“I’m sorry about last night. I was out of line, but I hate to see other guys hitting on you. I’ve had my fill of Ethan wanting you even though he knows we are together. He hasn’t hidden his feelings at all. I guessed them a long time ago. I was frustrated last night, and I took it out on you.”

He looks at me, waiting for me to respond. I’m not sure what to say. I’m confused. How did he see it? “I’m sorry for not telling you what happened at the beach. I was mad about the girl answering your phone.”

“Come here.” He pulls me closer, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me down to lay beside him. He brushes loose strands of hair out of my face. His look has softened, and he brings his face closer until our lips meet in a gentle kiss. He pulls back. “Are we okay now?”

“Yes.” I say, knowing that I’m lucky that it was this easy for him to calm down and forgive me for hiding things from him.

He kisses me, then lets his lips wander to my neck. His hand roams under my sweatshirt and glides over my chest. He pushes my bra up and massages my breast.

“Let’s get you comfortable.” Caleb purrs as he grabs the hem of the sweatshirt and pulls it up.

I tense, not wanting or ready to have sex. But I know stopping us will cause another fight. Full of dread, my stomach churns, but I smile and sit up to pull it over my head. He unclasps my bra and pulls it off.

“These are mine,” he says, pushing me back down and licking my nipple.

His other hand squeezes one breast as he continues to kiss and suck the other.

“You’re mine, and he can’t have what’s mine.” Caleb slides his hand down my stomach and cups my sex. And when I don’t say anything, he looks up at me and says, “And I’m yours. Only yours.” He brushes his lips tenderly past mine. “I love you.”

I bob my head slightly, my feelings a chaotic mess.

His fingers begin to stroke me through my yoga pants when my phone chiming surprises us. I grab it and see a text from Ethan.

“What the hell does he want?” Caleb asks angrily, sitting up.

I am unsure how to answer without upsetting him. I sit up, crossing my legs in front of me and grabbing my sweatshirt to cover myself. “He called Lena after the guys told him what happened at the bar and that I left alone, upset, and drunk. He was worried. He tried calling me, but I didn’t answer.” I catch myself trying to defend him.

“What are you trying to say? That I wasn’t worried about you?” A fight is brewing.

“I didn’t say that. You asked what he wanted, and I told you.”

“Then, please, continue,” he says tightly.

“I refused to speak with him last night when he called Lena. Then this morning he kept calling her, so I called him back to let him know I was okay. When he found out I messed up my car—”

“Wait, what? What happened to your car?”

“I kinda wrecked it. I jumped a curb and blew out a tire. I was drunk, so I kept driving on the flat tire, which probably fucked up the rim. The front fender is also damaged,” I nervously explain.

“When did this happen?”

“Right after you hung up on me. I started crying again, and I couldn’t see.” I mumble.

“Are you saying this is my fault?”

“No. You asked when it happened, and I told you. That’s it,” I reply frustrated we are fighting already. I am tense and just want to go home. I pull on my sweatshirt, grab my bra, and climb off the bed, but he grabs my arm, stopping me.

“Where are you going?” he demands.

“Home. I don’t want to fight with you again. I can see we are heading in that direction, and I would rather not.” I lean in to give him a chaste kiss and pull my arm out of his grip.

“Please don’t go. I’m sorry. It’s just the mention of his name that pisses me off.” His expression changes to sadness.

“I can’t. I don’t want to fight. I’ve had my fill, and I need time to breathe.” I stand next to him.

“What does ‘time to breathe’ mean?” he asks, controlled. His jaw is clenching.

“Just that I don’t want to fight with you again, especially when we had a major blow out last night. I would rather leave on a semi-good note than leave upset again and stress all night long. To be honest...”, I pause, unsure how my next statement is going to be received, “I’m tired of fighting with you. I’m never sure what is going to upset you. I just don’t want to fight with you anymore.”

“I know it has been rough. I’m sorry. I never meant it to be that way. I just hate all the time you spend with Ethan, especially now that I know my suspicions were correct. I always realize too late I’m being a dick to you when you haven’t done anything. That’s why I’m the one that’s always apologizing. I wouldn’t act this way if I didn’t love you.”

I am surprised by his confession and taken aback by his honesty. But Ethan is a part of my life. How am I going to do this? “I’m sorry too. Look, Ethan is a part of my friend group. My roommate is dating his cousin. He’s going to be around, but I’m with you,” I say, not knowing how else to handle this situation.



WHEN I GET HOME, I text Ethan to call me and receive a response right away telling me he is coming over. I tell him that isn’t necessary, but he doesn’t respond.

I nervously open the door to Ethan looking tired and worried, but incredibly handsome. We stay at the door for a few seconds just watching each other until he takes a step forward, pulling me into his strong arms. I fall into them as always, relishing the feeling of safety and comfort. My body betrays my mind. He holds me tightly against his chest, his breathing shallow and uneven. He finally loosens his grip on me and pulls back to look at my face, still not saying anything. Without a word, he lets me go and pulls us into the apartment, then into my room, where he sits on the bed and gestures for me to sit next to him. I choose to sit away from him with my back against the wall and my legs pulled up to my chest.

“I told you I was fine. See? You really didn’t need to come all the way over.” I try to sound convincing so that I can make the situation easier on us both.

“If that’s true, why don’t you look like everything is fine?” I begin to shake my head, and he continues, “Please don’t lie. I know you, and I can see it. Besides, with what the guys told me and what you told me about last night, it wasn’t a good one.”

“Everything’s better now. Promise.” I plaster a smile on my face and hold up three fingers mimicking a scout’s honor.

Ethan watches me; his head slowly shakes back and forth twice.

“What?” I ask, my frustration rising. What is he doing here? What does he expect from me? What does he want to hear?

“I know that you aren’t telling me everything. There is more to the story than what you’ve said.”

“Tell me what you think you know? Huh? What am I not saying? I’m tired. I didn’t get much sleep last night. You said you were stepping away and yet, here you are! Why? Tell me! What the hell do you want to hear?” I get off my bed to stand in front of him, yelling the last couple of sentences out of sheer frustration.

“I know that you didn’t tell me everything that happened,” he states calmly, continuing to sit on my bed while he watches me.

“Like?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Like how he cussed at you.” I flinch, wondering how he knows. “And by your expression, I know I’m right.”

I freeze. Did he just guess? Maybe my expression gave it away. That would be the only way he could know. I refuse to answer either way, instead asking, “And what else do you think you know?”

“That he pushed you. He actually laid his hands on you.” His body tenses as he leans his arms on his knees, clenching his fists. He drops his head. I watch him in horror. He knows. He takes a deep breath, exhaling before he looks up at me.

“He didn’t mean to. It got way out of hand last night because we were drunk. He apologized and felt really bad.”

“Don’t make excuses for him. He never should’ve placed a hand on you.” His body tense, he is struggling to maintain his composure.

“It was my fault. I grabbed his arm and wouldn’t let him go,” I try and explain away Caleb’s actions.

“Don’t.” He shakes his head. “No reason is good enough.”

I sit back down on the bed where I was before. He drops his head again and grabs the back of his neck with both hands.

I watch the muscles in his forearms tighten and flex.

Neither of us speaks for several minutes until I break the silence. “Why are you here, Ethan? The last time we were together you said I didn’t need to choose and walked away.” Why am I terrified of his answer?

“Because I care. Plain and simple.” I watch as he releases his neck and turns around to face me. “How can you let Caleb off the hook so easily? How can you defend him?”

“I’m not! But I’m not exactly innocent either. I’ve made mistakes, and just because he doesn’t know about them doesn’t make them nonexistent.” I drop my head to my knees, hiding my face in embarrassment. I was kissing him a couple of weeks ago. And a part of me wants to kiss him again.

“What we did and what he did to you cannot be compared. How can he say he cares for you, then physically hurt you, and *then* allow you to put yourself in a predicament that could have gotten you seriously hurt, either physically or legally. He’s a selfish prick!”

“I’m the one that drove drunk, angry, and crying. I should’ve known better, but I wasn’t thinking. He didn’t make me.” I continue defending Caleb, but wonder, *Why am I fighting so hard to let him off the hook?* “How do you know about what happened outside the club?”

“The guys followed y’all outside to make sure you were okay. They saw how he was speaking to you in the bar. He made Mike real uncomfortable. You jumped in your car and took off before they got to you. They ran into Caleb and exchanged words. They called me soon afterward.”

“Ethan, I’ve never been more confused in my life. I don’t know what to tell you. I wish I did. I told you I had feelings for both of you, and I needed time, but you walked away last time we were together. I still don’t know why you’re here. You say because you care, but if you did or do, why did you walk away? It doesn’t make sense. I feel like a fool being sucked into what you say.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just creating more of a mess again. Please take care of yourself. I keep making your life more difficult. I’ll see you around.” He stands up and walks to where I am sitting. He places a hand on my cheek and rubs it with the pad of his thumb before he bends over and places a small kiss on the corner of my mouth. “I’m sorry.”

He pulls away and walks out of my room. I hear the front door open and close, then complete and utter silence.

I’m stunned. He walked away again, with no explanation of why. He says he cares, and his actions mirror his words, until he walks away. I didn’t know it could hurt just as bad the second time around, but this time the tears do not come. I am empty.



THE WEEK PASSES QUICKLY without further incident. I continue to avoid social areas on campus, not trusting how I will react if I see Ethan. My life feels off not talking and texting with him.

Thursday night rolls around, and we end up at The Shack. Caleb and Wes chose to come here, and I didn’t want to start a fight trying to convince them we should hang out someplace else. It is overly packed with students back from break. We luck out, walking by a table of people getting ready to leave. My body is rigid as I look around to make sure Ethan and the band are not around.

“I checked the schedule. They aren’t playing. You can relax now.” Lena places her hand over mine to get my attention. I look at her as a frown mars her beautiful face. I feel guilty for having her worry along with me.

Caleb has been attentive and sweet, making sure Lena and I have drinks and seats as we move around the bar playing pool and darts. We have fallen back into a comfortable flow. His attention and physicality feel gentle and warm.

It is after midnight, and several rounds later, when we decide to play our last game of pool.

“Your shot, Sof!” Lena announces, annoyed she missed hers.

I hop off my stool and out of Caleb’s hold to take my shot. I miss, and Lena declares she needs a restroom break. She grabs my hand, pulling me away. Her urgency startles me.

“Ethan just walked in!” Lena exclaims as soon as we walk into the bathroom. My chest constricts just hearing his name. My breathing picks up, and I’m unsure how to proceed.

“I knew we shouldn’t have come here.” Panic sets in. “Did he see us?”

“I don’t think so. I saw him walk in the door and pulled you away. What do you want to do?”

“We need to leave. Ethan and Caleb in the same bar will not work. At all. You know something will happen.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” I drop my head in frustration. “I’m just gonna tell him we should leave because Ethan got here. There’s no way to avoid it.” With my mind made up, we walk out of the bathroom. Ethan and Caleb are already in a heated exchange, so I grab Lena’s hand and pull her toward them.

As we approach, I hear Ethan’s voice boom, “I will fucking break your hands off before you ever lay a hand on her again!” They are standing a few steps away from each other—murderous looks on both of their faces, bodies tense, ready for any unexpected movements.

“What Sophia and I do is none of your fucking business. She is with me, so back the fuck off!” Caleb says through clenched teeth.

“You’re a real badass, right? You can push a girl around. Try pushing someone bigger around, asshole,” Ethan retorts.

“What part of she is *my* girlfriend do you not understand?”

“If she is your girlfriend, then take care of her! You let her drive drunk? What the fuck? She could have wrecked!” Ethan taps his forehead with his hand sarcastically before continuing,

“Wait! She did wreck. Because you sent her off upset after pushing her.” Ethan points at Caleb maliciously.

I stand with Lena just outside the pool table area, frozen, listening to the exchange. They are so focused on each other, neither realize I am watching and listening to their exchange.

“Fuck off!” Caleb clenches his hands into fists.

“What if she had gotten hurt? What would you have done then? Huh? You can’t take care of her! You *do not* deserve her!”

An evil smirk forms on Caleb’s face before he says, “Why the hell are you even in my face? She told me what happened at the beach.” Ethan’s eyes widen as Caleb continues. “You tell her you like her or have feelings for her or whatever, and she’s still with me. When are you gonna get a fucking clue? She obviously doesn’t want you.”

Ethan’s eyes narrow before he takes a large step forward, putting less than a foot between them. “If you like the use of your hands, I suggest you never touch her again.” I barely hear him growl at Caleb before he turns around and sees me. His expression changes immediately from pure anger to sadness. He walks to me and places his hand on my cheek, brushing off an errant tear, mouths *I’m sorry*, and kisses my forehead. I watch him walk to the door.

I turn to Caleb, and he motions for me to come over. I fill my lungs with air before my legs move. He pulls me into an embrace.

“What the fuck, Sophia? The next time he decides he wants to butt in, I am knocking the shit out of him!” His embrace is not tender and caring; it’s possessive and rough.

Silence is my friend. If I say anything, it will make matters worse. I pull back slightly, his hold on me uncomfortable.

“Where are you going?”

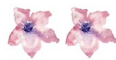
“Nowhere. You’re holding me really tight,” I say softly.

“I’m just fucking holding you. Or is it you don’t want the asshole to see?” His expression is utter disdain.

“He’s not even here. I told you. You’re holding me too tight. That’s it.” I keep my tone soft, trying to avoid another fight.

“Whatever.” He pushes me, and I stumble back, catching myself on a stool. Caleb turns to Wes and says, “Let’s get the fuck outta here.” He storms toward the front door. Wes gives me a small, sympathetic shrug before following him.

This evening crashed and burned, and I was the only casualty from it. I wonder who initiated the exchange?



I WAKE WITH A MIGRAINE. A whole day in bed ignoring the world seems to be in order. I pop a few ibuprofens and hop back into bed.

I wake to my stomach growling and my head much clearer and pain free. I look at the clock and realize I spent half the day in bed.

I make my way to the kitchen after freshening up to serve myself a bowl of cereal. I sit at the table and look at my phone, which I turned off last night. I take my first bite of cereal as I consider powering it on, not knowing if I am ready to face what is or isn’t waiting for me. I take a deep breath and press the button and wait. With my phone powered on it begins to ping several text messages and a couple of voicemails. I decide to listen to the voicemails first.

*I’m really sorry you had to witness that. I didn’t know you were there. I never meant for you to get caught up in it. I just lost it when I saw him, knowing what he has done to you. I didn’t mean to make things any har—
FUCK! I gotta go. I’m sorry.*

It was painful hearing Ethan’s message with his voice was so distressed. It was rushed, and I could hear it break.

The next two are from Caleb. The first was to let me know, yet again, how pissed he was. But the second one...

I really wish you would answer your phone babe. (He sighs). I just want to make sure you got home safely. I effed up with you again. (Silence). I was a jerk. Please call me.

I continue taking bites of my cereal when my phone begins to ring and Caleb's name pops up on the screen. Not ready to talk to anyone yet, I send the call to voicemail. I patiently wait to see if he leaves me a message, and when my phone pings, I quickly open it up to listen.

I understand if you don't want to talk to me, but can you let me know if you're okay? I am worried about you. I fucked up. I'm sorry. Please call or text. I love you. I just wanted to make sure you knew that.

A few tears slide down my cheeks as I listen to his message. He sounds remorseful and hurt. Before I realize what I'm doing, I am listening to one ring and Caleb's voice on the other end.

"Babe?" he answers the phone sounding tired.

"Uh-huh. I'm here," I answer in a hushed voice, nervous this will end in a fight.

"Are you at home?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry for last night. I should never have acted that way with you."

"Okay. I just wanted to let you know I got home fine. I should go." I'm hit with a pang of regret for calling him.

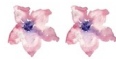
"Fine. Call me when you're ready to talk. I do want to talk to you. I really feel bad about last night, and I want to make it up to you. But when you're ready."

"I will. I still have a migraine and am ready to nap again. I'll call you later," I reply, torn between wanting to tell him to come over, needing to feel safe, and wanting to curl up in bed alone.

We hang up, and I am more confused than before. He sounds remorseful, and I truly want to believe he is tired of the roller-coaster ride that has become of our relationship. My heart and head have not been agreeing on much of anything lately, and I need to figure out why that is.

18

SITTING IN A PEDICURE CHAIR WHILE A WOMAN WORKS ON MY feet, my phone pings a message. I am greeted by a group text from a couple of new friends Lena and I made. They are going out tonight and invite Lena and I to join. A new message comes through from Lena, giving her apologies since she left town for the weekend. I jump in, accepting the invitation. Caleb is working, and I'm tired of drowning in thoughts of the guys.



KATE DRIVES us downtown to a gay club Becky swears by. When I question Becky why we are going, she says, “Are we going out to pick up guys?”

“No.” Kate and I answer in unison.

“So then, dancing and drinking, without skeezy guys trying to feel us up on the dance floor, it is.” She answers us casually, as if everyone was privy to this secret. I think about this for a few seconds, and it makes perfect sense.

The club is huge—a couple of stories with different areas and dance floors. We make our way to the bar for our first round of drinks and find a table nearby, not wanting to take our drinks on the dance floor. A couple of drinks later, we're ready to dance. I cannot believe how many amazingly hot guys are on the dance floor, shirtless and sweaty. There is eye candy everywhere.

We spend the next couple of hours dancing and drinking. I can't remember having so much fun with guys. No expectations. No fakeness. No masks. Just plain laughs and fun. When we walk out of the club, I feel the effects of the alcohol hit me along with the cold air.

Hungry from a night of drinking, we stop at a late-night taco place, popular with the after-club crowd. Sitting at our table, waiting on the food, I hear Jason's loud, obnoxious voice boom. I look around and see him and Wes with a couple of other guys.

The guy at the counter calls our number, so I volunteer to pick up the order. I stop at the salsa bar to grab condiments when Wes comes over, serving himself some too.

"Caleb just texted he got off early tonight. You should stop by and surprise him," he says quietly.

"Really? How did he manage that?" I ask, confused, because he didn't text me. He just shrugs his shoulders before heading back to his table.

We finish our tacos, and instead of going back to my place, I ask Kate to drop me off at Caleb's. I figure if he's not home, the guys will be close behind, and I can wait and surprise him. I get out of the car and thank the girls for a fun evening.

The door to the apartment is unlocked, so I walk into the dark living room. I make my way in and down the hallway of the bedrooms when I am assaulted by a female's laugh. My heart stops. There's no reason for a girl to be here when the guys aren't home. I reach Caleb's door, and I hear voices on the other side and a giggle that's too familiar.

I grab the door handle, turn it, and push the door wide open. I'm confused by the sight in front of me. Caleb is lying in bed naked with Emily straddling him. I freeze, unaware of an appropriate reaction, not able to move my eyes from Emily and the pleased smirk she is wearing. Time moves unprecedentedly slow. She makes no move to cover her exposed boobs.

I'm finally brought out of my stupor when she asks, "Can I help you with something?"

I look at Caleb. His eyes are wide, his lips pulled down. He pushes her off and jumps out of bed, grabbing the sheet and wrapping it around himself before coming toward me.

"Babe...uh...what...when..." He stands in front of me, stumbling over his words.

"I've gotta go." I begin to back out of the room, but he grabs my arm, holding me in place. I am too shocked and drunk to say or do anything but stand there like a fool.

"Let the bitch leave!" Emily yells at him from the bed sitting up.

"Get the hell out!" The roar that leaves Caleb causes me to jump, and again I try to retreat to no avail; the grip he has on my upper arms is too tight.

"I'm trying," I squeak, my voice faltering.

"Not you." He squeezes my arms tighter, pushing me against the wall. He turns around again, sending Emily a ferocious look. "I'm not going to ask again. Get. The. Hell. Out," he threatens with a quiet, disturbing tone.

"Really?" Emily moves to sit against the headboard and with bent knees, she opens her legs. She brings her hand to her center and purrs, "You know you want more."

He releases me and takes a step toward her. In that instant, I flee, running out the door, down the stairs, past a couple of buildings until I see the complex pool. I sit on one of the lounge chairs and pull a cigarette out of my clutch. I light up, taking a couple of drags, letting it ease my nerves. I look around, afraid Caleb will find me. I get up and continue to walk around, thinking about what to do next. My feet are killing me from dancing in heels all night.

I walk past an apartment where people are standing around drinking with the front door wide open, music drifting out.

"Why the long face?" a guy asks.

I continue to walk lifting the cigarette to my mouth.

“No answer?” he walks toward me.

“Me?”

“Yup, you’re the only one wearing a frown around here.”
The guy smiles.

I shrug my shoulders. “Bad day, I guess.” I don’t want to admit what I just encountered.

He stops in front of me and extends his hand out. “Bradley. And you are?” He waits for me to answer then says, “Looks like you could use a drink. Come on.” He turns me back toward the apartment.

There are so many people congregated in a small space. He grabs me a beer, and I take a few drinks before I ask if he has anything stronger. The image of Emily on top of Caleb is burned into memory, and I need something to rid me of it. I see a bottle of tequila—cheap stuff, but still tequila—on the counter.

“Can I get a shot?” I point at the tequila.

“You’re kidding, right? That’s shit for shots. To mix in a margarita, maybe, but not to shoot.” He watches me carefully.

“Not kidding. Yes or no,” I demand rudely, frustration getting the best of me.

“Help yourself.” I don’t know who lives here, but I make myself at home, pouring a few shots and taking them with a beer chaser. The warmth settles in my stomach.

I make my way out of the kitchen and plop myself on the couch. I pull out my phone and text Lena.

Guess what

I hit send.

I just saw Caleb and Emily doing IT

Send again.

I get an immediate response.

Lena: What? Where r u?

Me: Not sure. A party?

Lena: R u driving?

Me: nope

Lena: Where's the party

Me: at Caleb's apt complex. Nice guys.

Lena: What apt #

I ask the room loudly and get an answer.

Me: 3020 u coming?

Radio silence. I text her a few *hellos*, but no response.

“Wanna hit?” A guy sits next to me, offering me a joint. Why not? The tequila has not done its job yet, and I *need* to forget.



I OPEN my eyes to the brightest light I have ever seen, wishing someone would rip my head off my body because the pounding is excruciating. I roll over, trying to remember what happened last night and why I feel like shit. Pieces of the night begin to pop up in my memory, but it's all jumbled.

I sit up to look around my room, not remembering how I got here or why it is trashed. There's stuff everywhere—clothes and shoes and random belongings—and that's when I notice Ethan lying next to me. What is he doing here? I am still trying to figure out what happened when my mouth goes numb and begins to water; I am going to throw up. I rush out of bed to my bathroom, just in time to hurl in the toilet.

I can feel Ethan behind me, holding me, whispering I am going to be fine and that he has me. I am in pain, embarrassed, and most of all, confused. When the dry heaves stop, I sit on the floor, still trying to piece together last night's events. Ethan sits next to me, quiet, just watching.

“Go lay down, Ethan. I'm going to wash up,” I say, not wanting to admit I can't remember what happened last night. I need a few private minutes to process the few images I have.

“Are you sure? You okay? Do you need anything?” He’s anxious, and I feel awful not knowing what’s causing it.

“I’m fine... Go lay down. It doesn’t look like you got much sleep either.” I pull him up off the floor and gently push him out of the bathroom.

I realize I am still wearing last night’s clothes, minus shoes. I brush my teeth and pop a couple of ibuprofens before getting into the shower. I sit down in the tub, letting the shower stream fall over my head and back, trying to remember. I get a flash of Caleb with a wicked look. I remember. I am sad, pissed, and humiliated all over again. I cannot believe I trusted him, that I believed that he loved me, that I cared for him... These thoughts and many more keep swirling around my head. How could I have been so trusting and stupid? How could I not know what was happening right in front of my face?

A knock on the bathroom door brings me out of my thoughts.

“Are you okay?” Ethan asks through the door.

“I’m fine. Give me a few,” I respond hoarsely. I remember Caleb and Emily but am still foggy about the rest of the night. All my mind sees is them in bed and her satisfied smirk. He asked her to leave. Why would he ask her to leave? Nothing makes sense. He was busted, and he tried to stop me. Why? I let my mind go numb, the pain not fading.

I am not sure how long I have been sitting in the shower when I hear another knock breaking through my oblivion. That’s when I notice the water is cold. The bathroom door opens, and Ethan walks in, pulling the shower curtain aside.

“Baby girl, the water is cold. Let’s get you out of there.” He turns the water off and grabs a towel off the rack, wrapping me up in it and helping me out. I feel empty. Not the least bit ashamed of him seeing me naked. He leads me out to my room and sits me on the bed, heading back to the bathroom and bringing another towel back to me. He wraps it around my dripping hair. He grabs my robe, which is laying carelessly on the floor, and helps me put it on.

His phone pings a text. He picks it up, reading and typing out a quick response. I feel like I am watching from the outside in. My mind is working overtime trying to piece the whole night together and how he came into the picture. It is exhausting. I need to sleep. I lay down, curling myself into a fetal position, tears starting to flow.

I feel him come behind me, whispering, "I'm going to get you something to eat. Maybe it will help settle your stomach. I'll be right back."

I cannot let him continue taking care of me. It is not his job.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. Go home," I say to the wall, not moving to face him.

"I'll be back. No arguments." I feel a gentle kiss on my temple and the bed shift as he gets up to leave.

I decide not to stay in bed long after he walks out. I get up, and that's when I notice the giant teddy bear torn apart. I throw on some yoga pants, a tank, and hoodie before I get the courage to look at my reflection in the mirror. What I see looking back at me is ghastly. My eyes are bloodshot, and I still have remnants of last night's makeup smeared down my face.

Upon seeing my reflection, I turn the faucet on to wash my face. I take a brush to my tangled mess of hair, pulling gently since my head still hurts. I am finishing blow drying my hair when I hear Ethan's voice call for me. How did he get in?

I walk out of my room to the kitchenette table full of food. "I wasn't sure what you'd want, so I brought a little of everything." I pick up a bagel. "Feeling a little better?" His brows raise, accentuating the lines on his forehead.

I take a good look at him. He is still gorgeous, but worn down. His usual sexy five o'clock shadow has turned into a scruffy, unkempt beard. His eyes are hollow, and his usual stylishly disheveled hair just looks messy.

"A little." My headache is now just a slight throbbing sensation. I pause, thinking about whether I should ask him

how I ended up at home and how he came into the picture.

Before I can formulate my question without sounding stupid, he asks, “Confused?”

A small, embarrassed smile creeps onto my face before answering, “A little.”

“A little or a lot?” A slight tease creeps into his voice, but the concern doesn’t fade.

“Confused about...parts of the night...specifically...the end.” I pause grabbing a Gatorade from the table. He watches me, taking short drinks from his coffee. “How did I get home...and...what happened...” I wave my arms toward my bedroom and the torn bear. “And...how did you end up here?”

“All good questions. But let me ask you something because I didn’t push for information last night. I just let you wait for a bit before I stopped you because you scared me.” A haunted look crosses his face. My heart rate picks up, anxious about what could have happened.

“Okay,” I say, unsure I want to answer his question.

“What is the last thing you remember clearly?” His voice sounds timid.

What is the last thing I remember? I am still putting together the timeline; everything feels fuzzy. Club, check. Restaurant and Wes telling me Caleb was home, check. Showing up at Caleb’s apartment, check. The sight, check. A feeling of stupidity creeps over me. And then another house party, although the memories are vague.

“I went to some party, I think. That’s the last thing I remember.” I cringe, worried he will ask why I was at that party.

“Whose apartment was it?” His question seems careful and controlled.

I shrug my shoulders and shake my head.

“Then why were you there?”

And there is the question—the one that brings up the horrific experience of the previous night. He watches me closely, patiently waiting for an answer. I take another small bite of my bagel to buy a little time.

“Because,” I start but stop, unsure if I can say it without breaking down. “I saw something I didn’t want or expect to see,” I explain vaguely.

He continues, waiting for me to elaborate, and when I refuse, he asks, “What didn’t you want to see?”

I shake my head at him. I can’t explain. Especially not to him.

“I want to hear it directly from you. Not what I think happened by listening to you scream at the world.”

I drop my head on my arms, which are crossed in front of me on the table. My breaths come in short gasps, panic beginning to set in. I hear Ethan get up, and I am lifted from my chair. He walks over to the couch and sits down, pulling me into his lap and holding me tight in his arms. He shushes me and whispers that things will be okay. The irony of me feeling safe and complete with him is not lost on me.

I am not sure how much time passes, but I decide it is time. He is not leaving without an explanation, and I am the only one that can even partially explain and then get some answers to my questions. I move away from him, pulling my knees to my chest as a shield. He turns his body to face me.

“I went to Caleb’s unannounced last night and walked in on him and his neighbor, Emily having sex.” I drop my forehead onto my knees, wanting to hide my embarrassment. I continue my story from there. “He jumped out of bed and apologized. He started yelling at Emily to leave, and she wouldn’t. When he finally let me go, I ran.”

“What do you mean, he let you go?” he asks softly, but I can hear his frustration.

“He was holding me.”

“Where?”

“Where what?” I’m not following him.

“Where the hell was he holding you?” His anger is growing, and I begin to worry it’s going to be directed at me.

“My arms,” I answer, fear setting in.

“Take off your hoodie, baby.” His voice is controlled and caring, but still dark. When I look up at him, but I don’t make a movement, he pleads with me.

I grab the bottom hem of the hoodie and slip it off. His hand brushes my upper left arm. That’s when I notice a bruise, which was not there yesterday. I remember it hurting when Caleb was holding me, especially when I tried to wiggle out of his grasp.

“He did this to you?”

“I...uh...I’m... uh...not sure. I don’t remember having it yesterday.” He continues to gently rub his hand up and down my arm and stare at it, his face sullen. He stops, grabs my hoodie, and begins to help me put it back on.

“Continue. You ran out.” He prompts me back to where I’d left off.

“Some friends had dropped me off at his place, so I had no way of getting home. When I ran out of his apartment, I just walked around until some guy...Bradley, I think, asked if I wanted to come into the party I was walking past. And that’s when everything gets fuzzy. Now your turn.” I brace myself for more humiliation.

He gets up from the couch, walking to the kitchenette and picking up his coffee and my Gatorade. He comes back and sits down exactly like he was before.

“I was out, and I got a text from Lena. I ignored it. I got a couple of more and continued to ignore them.” I am beginning to feel like it is about time I hide under a rock for the foreseeable future. He doesn’t want to have anything to do with me. Lena forced him. Shit! I am not in the mood to hear any more.

“Then my phone started blowing up with texts from Preston, so I checked the messages. Every one of the messages from him and Lena just read ‘call me ASAP.’ I called Preston back. He told me that you were in trouble and I needed to pick you up. When I asked him why, he just said that I better leave NOW and pick you up. He told me the apartment complex and number. I was supposed to call him when I had you.” Now the level of humiliation has reached new heights. Even Preston knows something happened. How did Lena know? Any new information I hear will probably just make me even more mortified. I should just stop him and live in ignorant bliss. But how blissful will I actually be if my friends know what happened and I don’t? I continue to listen.

“When I got to the apartment, I knocked on the door and asked for you. The guy who answered didn’t know who I was talking about. I asked if I could come in and look for you. Fortunately, he was baked and let me right in. The whole place reeked of weed. And there you were, almost passed out on the couch. I am incredibly pissed at you right now for being there, but it’s shelved for now. Just know we *will* have this conversation later,” he says sternly, but with gentleness.

“Almost passed out?” I ask, avoiding the subject of him being mad at me.

“Yeah. When I picked you up, you woke up and thanked me. When I asked for what, you mumbled something about a bubble. Know what that was about?” He watches me, raising an eyebrow in question. I do know exactly what the bubble means, but I would never want to admit it to him. What else could I have said?

I shrug. “Did I say anything else?” I ask, hoping I continued speaking in unintelligible phrases.

“Not really. You just kept calling Emily a bitch over and over and asking if I knew she was one. Then you passed out in the car. When we got back to your place, I carried you up and got you in bed. You had been in bed just a few minutes when I heard you moving about and found you in the bathroom, puking.” He has the audacity to chuckle at my expense. I

really can't blame him though; I made a complete fool of myself last night.

"Did you smoke out last night?" His concern is apparent again.

I nod. "I think so. In addition to a few tequila shots. And everything else we drank at the club." We sit in silence for a few moments before I begin again. "And the mess?" I wave my hand toward my room.

A small smile appears. "That was all you. After you puked, you got a second wind and started raging. That's how I pieced together what happened last night, but I wasn't sure." His lack of information is irritating. What did he mean I was raging?

"Raging?"

"Yes. Raging. First you started cussing out Caleb like he was standing right in front of you. Then you walked to your closet, taking crap out and asking me questions like, 'Does this make me look like a slut?' 'Is this what guys want to see?' Then you would toss or throw it. I was lost at that point, not understanding what clothes had to do with anything."

Caleb really got to me. I have been so worried about what he would want me to wear, even in my extreme inebriated state, I was still thinking about that.

"Then you were thirsty and went to the kitchen and saw that poor bear. You grabbed a knife and went to slice its head off. That's when I intervened, and you directed your rage at me."

I wish I could remember what happened. What could I have said to him? At this point, the only thing to do is apologize and let him leave. "I'm really sorry you had to come get me. That they called and bothered you. That you had to deal with my theatrics...I'm getting a good picture of what happened last night. No need to worry about me anymore. Why don't you go home? I think I need more sleep." I yawn, wanting to temporarily forget about last night again.

"You're not getting rid of me that fast. Come on." He stands up, extending his hand toward me.

“What are you doing?” I place my hand in his.

“Putting you to bed. I also had a late night and could use a nap. Mind?” He walks me to my room, directing me to climb into bed. He is waiting for me to answer whether he can take a nap with me. As much as it will hurt when he leaves, I want him here now.

“Get in.” I move closer to the wall, and he slides his shoes off before climbing in next to me. He lays on his back, then pulls me close, placing my head on his chest and wrapping his arm around me. And just like that, I feel safe again.

“Please don’t ever go into a random apartment again. You could have called me last night, and I would’ve picked you up. I can’t bear thinking about what could’ve happened to you passed out in a strange guy’s apartment.” His arms tighten around me while he kisses the top of my head. “Promise?”

I was lucky again last night. That is not a hard promise to keep. “I promise.” I grip his T-shirt tightly, not wanting this moment to end.



I WAKE to a hand rubbing my back gently. I don’t remember falling asleep, but I can tell it is late afternoon by the lack of light coming in through the window shades. I am contemplating how long I can stay here with Ethan, our bubble reinstated, before he leaves and chooses not to come back. Lena and Preston forced his hand, but he stayed with me all day, even when I told him he could leave. I wish I understood why.

A knock on the door interrupts my thoughts of never wanting to leave this bed and the safety he magically places around me. I lift my head to look at him. His smile when I look up melts me—genuine and cocky, his perfect mix.

“I need to get the door,” I tell him as a begin to sit up.

“Let me.” He pulls his arm out from under me and pushes me gently back down. I think who it could be; my brain still

running slow. Caleb. OH, HELL NO. I cannot let Ethan answer the door if Caleb could be the one on the other side.

“NO, I GOT IT!” I raise my voice and begin to scramble to beat him out of bed.

Before I can leave the bed, he has me by my waist and calmly asks, “Why do you need to answer the door?” He watches me carefully.

“Uh...cause...” I pause, not wanting anyone hurt. I don’t care if Caleb sees Ethan, but I don’t want them fighting, and I have a feeling it would happen. “If...uh...it’s Caleb...”

“If it’s him? What?” His voice remains level but with a hint of annoyance.

“I...If he sees you, he will be pissed, and I don’t want you having to defend me. I should do this on my own.”

“I will defend you any day of the week and twice on Sunday. Good thing it’s Sunday.” He winks at me and begins to stand up again.

“Please, let me do this. Stay here,” I plead, knowing I will have to face Caleb eventually. Another knock, heavier and longer.

I open the door to a random guy holding a beautiful bouquet of roses. I am dumbfounded, not expecting this. My first thought is that they are for Lena, but she isn’t home, and Preston knows that.

“Sophia?” the guy asks.

“That’s me. Who are they from?”

“Don’t know. I just deliver. The card is in the flowers. Sign here, please.” He hands me a clipboard to sign, still holding on to the bouquet. I feel Ethan’s presence behind me. I sign, give the clipboard back, and when the guy tries to hand me the bouquet, I grab the card and read:

I’m sorry for last night. Please turn on your phone and call me. We need to talk. I love you! Talk to me. I made a horrible mistake.

Love, Caleb

I drop the card, shaking my head. “No, I don’t want them. Please take them back.” I try to shut the door on the guy, but he puts his hand out to stop the door.

“I can’t take them back. If you don’t take them, I’ll just leave them here.” He bends over to place the vase on the floor.

“TAKE THEM AWAY!” I yell at the poor guy.

Lena is walking up the stairs, her brows pulled together.

“I’ve got them.” She looks at me. “Take them away as in throw them away?” she asks.

I nod. She picks them up and follows the delivery guy back down. He jumps in his car while she walks down toward the dumpster. I turn around to find Ethan watching me.

“From Caleb, I’m guessing.”

“Where’s my phone?” I ask, a bit bitchy, without answering his question. How could I have not thought about my phone all day? Now that I think about it, I don’t know where my clutch from last night is either. I had my credit card, IDs, cash, and phone in there. Shit!

He continues looking at me, not answering, until I get even more frustrated and ask, “Well?” with my hands on my hips and my eyebrows raised.

“Fuck it,” he mutters to himself as he walks into my room. “Look under your bed,” he says to me over his shoulder. I follow him and watch as he sits on the bed to put on his shoes.

I get on all fours, looking under my bed. He stands and begins walking out of my room, and it finally dawns on me how rude I was to him. There is so much I should thank him for, and I have avoided those two simple words. I jump up and grab his arm, which tenses under my grip. He stops but does not turn to face me.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that.” I feel his arm relax. “And I haven’t said thank you either. You saved me last night, and I...uh...I’ve been selfish. You really

didn't have to do all you did for me, but you did. Really, I mean it, thank you."

He finally turns to face me, his expression soft. "Baby girl, all you have to do is ask. I will never tell you no." He brings his hand to brush my cheek. I can't stop myself from leaning into his touch. "I'll let you turn on your phone in private. I turned it off last night. You had just fallen asleep after your rage, and I heard it going off. I checked it, and it was Caleb. I didn't want you waking up and having to deal with that yet... so I turned it off. I'm sorry if I crossed a line for you." There's sadness in his voice and expression.

"No. Please don't apologize. You did what you thought was best in the situation I placed you in. You were looking out for me. I wasn't in my right mind. Thank you." I take the tiny step toward him, closing the space between us, and wrap my arms around his waist, burying myself into him. I breathe in his scent, trying to hold it in my memory, knowing this will probably be the last time I have this.

19

AS SOON AS ETHAN LEAVES, I SIT ON MY BED CROSS-LEGGED and stare at the phone for a moment before I summon the courage to hit the power button.

The phone powers up, and it begins pinging uncontrollably. It intimidates me, so I take another moment before I begin the search for last night's debacle. The texts may be a little easier to swallow, so I open them up first. There are over thirty of them. I hit the app, and all the messages are from Caleb. They essentially say the same things: *I'm sorry* and *call me*.

Why would I even want his apology? And why is he even bothering? I'm just mad I was blind to it. I believed him. Anger begins to make its way to the surface again. He strung me along. I am having a hard time admitting I could be so stupid and naive.

With the hurt and fire I'm feeling, I open my call log. Another ten missed calls and five voicemails. I hit play on the last message:

Babe, please call me. I don't know if you're okay. I've been calling all night, and your phone is still off. I'm worried about you. I love you. I'm sorry you saw what you did last night, but I swear it will never happen again. It was a stupid mistake. We haven't been together in so long, and I fell for her advances. Please bab—

The message cut off. I wonder what the rest of the messages say, but not enough to actually listen. I swipe my finger over each message and delete them. I dry the tears that had begun falling and numb myself.

I send a quick, simple text to Caleb so that he stops trying to contact me. *I'm home. I don't want to talk.*

I hear Lena in the kitchen and try to figure out how to start the very uncomfortable conversation that will occupy the remainder of the evening.

I scroll through my phone again and find another clue from last night. I don't remember texting Lena, but clearly, I did. I know why she contacted Ethan. It's time to face the music.

I walk to the refrigerator and pull out a water before sitting at our small table. She doesn't acknowledge me, which makes me nervous. Maybe I've screwed up our friendship with my stupidity.

"Thank you for everything you did last night. I don't know what would've happened if you hadn't stepped up." She finally turns around and faces me with tears in her eyes.

"You're welcome." She brings her hand up, signaling to give her a second. She turns back around to the stove, turns off the burner, and moves the pan before sitting at the table with me. She grabs a napkin from the holder and dabs under her eyes.

"Do you know how scared I was last night?" Her tears start falling faster. "Stupid Ethan wouldn't answer any of my texts. I was texting him one right after another, and he wouldn't respond. After about five minutes, I couldn't take it anymore, and I called Preston. I begged him to call Ethan and tell him to call me. He wouldn't do it without me telling him what happened." She watches me through tear-filled eyes, probably wondering how I'm going to react. But I have no right to question her solution.

"You did what you had to do. It's fine. Everyone would've found out eventually anyway."

Relief crosses her face.

“I gave Preston all the info, and he was able to get ahold of Ethan. Once y’all were back here, Ethan texted me saying sorry for not answering and that he was spending the night in the apartment with you. Once I knew you were safe, I didn’t worry anymore. That’s why I didn’t call or text all day. I knew he would be here with you until I got back.”

“Ethan kept y’all in the loop last night and today?”

She nods. “Do you want to talk about what happened last night?”

I shrug. I don’t want to, but I know have to. “You know I went out with Becky and Kate to a club?”

She nods her head.

“We stopped to eat after, and I ran into Jason and Wes. Wes came up to me and told me Caleb had gotten out early and he was home, and I should surprise him. I was confused because Caleb told me he was closing the bar last night. But in my drunken state I thought, ‘Why the hell not?’” I proceed to tell her the whole gory truth about what I saw and the bits I remember from after I left his place.

Saying all this out loud is cathartic. It’s different than letting it swirl around your mind. I need a break, so Lena finishes making dinner as I process everything.

Once we sit down, Lena begins. “Why in the world would Wes tell you to surprise Caleb if he knew what was going on?” She takes a drink of her diet soda.

“That’s been bugging me too.” I take a couple of bites without saying anything else, letting my mind explore any and all explanations. “Do you think Caleb could be telling the truth? That last night was the first time? That’s what he said in the voicemail he left me,” I ask with a little hope, not wanting to believe that someone who said they cared about me could do this.

“I don’t know. It just doesn’t make sense.” We each take a couple of more bites, sitting with quiet thoughts. “Are you regretting throwing out the flowers?”

I shake my head. “I can’t regret that. It was my first reaction. Even if it was one time, he did it, and I can’t stop seeing them together.”

“So...uh...you’re not taking him back?” Her voice shakes.

I shake my head, “No, I can’t.”

I LAY DOWN, letting the tears I held in all day fall. I’ve kept my emotions in check, but now they come out full force in the dark, quiet confinement of my bedroom. I continue letting the *what ifs*, *hows*, *whens*, and *whys* race through my thoughts. It all comes back to one thing—I’m not good enough.

Of course, Caleb would want to be with someone else. I’m lousy in bed. It hurt like hell, it was over in record time, and he wanted to leave. I was blind and should have seen the signs. Thinking about my first and only time brings a new onslaught of tears. I was cheated on. I should have known. I’m humiliated. I’m pissed off.



THE WEEK IS uneventful except for the several texts Caleb continues to send me. He continues to apologize, asks to be forgiven and for me to respond. I read the texts, not able to ignore them, but I refuse to text back. He does not deserve my attention.

I am walking to my last class on Thursday afternoon, proud I made it through the week without incident, until I hear my name. My shoulders instantly tense.

Wes reaches me. “Hey, thanks for stopping.”

“I don’t want to talk. Sorry.” I shrug.

I turn to walk away, but he places a hand on my shoulder and says, “You really want to hear this. I promise.” I face him, and his face is pale. “Can you give me a couple of minutes?”

The vibes he is giving off make the red flags in my head stand at attention. Knots in my stomach begin to form. My

voice is lost, so I simply nod. He points to an area out of the way of the student foot traffic. I follow him a few yards, far enough from nosy ears.

“I’m really sorry about what happened. Please know that. I wish I had said something sooner.”

I am confused and skeptical of his motivation.

“If you are here to plead Caleb’s case, I’m not in the mood. I will contact him if and when I’m ready.” I stand firm.

“Not even close, Sof. I’m here to tell you to stay away. But if you ever say I said that, I will deny it.” He sways back and forth nervously.

“Stay away? Why?”

“Can I trust that you will never repeat this to Caleb? I’m still friends with the prick. I just don’t want you caught up in his damn games. You’re too nice for that.”

He has piqued my interest. “I won’t repeat anything. What games?”

“Look. Caleb is Caleb. He’s always been like this. He was a damn god at our high school. Girls were always throwing themselves at him, and he always had his pick. He has never kept any one of them very long.” He pauses and takes a deep breath before continuing. “And I don’t think he would’ve kept you around either, but he loved the competition and the fact that he thought he was winning.”

“Competition?” My eyebrows scrunch together trying to follow.

“Ethan. He knew Ethan wanted you from the get-go. Caleb has been toying with you, staying with you to stick it to him. That’s all he’s doing. Well, that and...”

“But...uh...” I’m trying to grasp some semblance of understanding with this new information.

“Look. I’m not sure what he told you or if he was even able to feed you his BS before you left, but it got really ugly. Him and Emily have been at it since she moved in. She let him use her, so I don’t feel bad for her. She could’ve walked away

at any time, and she still can, but she thinks she can change him. She knew the game he was playing, and she played right along with him. But you...you...were in the dark.”

“If he wanted Emily, why be with me?” I’m having a hard time following.

“He wanted to be your first. He was bragging about bagging a virgin. Sorry, but those were his words.” His shoulders fall. “He had you in a game you didn’t know you were a part of.”

Stunned, I stay quiet for a moment, then decide to ask, “Why are you telling me this?” My voice cracks with the tears that began to flow during his confession.

“Why can’t any of you assholes stay away from her?” Ethan’s voice is low, but full of threat. His body is tense, his jaw clenching.

I quickly grab his arm, pulling him away as I tell Wes to give me a sec. “Ethan, please,” I whisper. “It’s not what you think. Please stay here and let Wes finish what he’s telling me.” I pause for a few seconds to read him. “Please. You can watch me right here. Just...I need to hear this.” He crosses his arms and tilts his head in Wes’s direction.

I walk back to Wes and quickly apologize. Wes turns his back to Ethan before continuing. “You can’t tell him anything.” He waits for me to confirm. “I’m telling you this because I don’t think it’s fair to you. That’s it. Is Caleb still trying to get back with you?”

“Yes. But why? Like you said, the game is over.”

“I’m not sure. Maybe he does feel bad, but he should’ve thought about that before he decided to mess around with Emily.”

My thoughts drift back to the past. “What happened New Year’s Eve?”

“Emily. Well, Emily and a friend of hers, if you catch my drift. She pretty much lets him do whatever to her.”

“Thank you.” It’s all I could think to say. He gives me a small shrug and turns to walk away. I wipe the last tears as Ethan walks over to me.

“Are you okay?” His worried expression is so reminiscent of the one he wore Sunday.

“I’m getting there.” Needing the comfort, I step into him and wrap my arms around his waist, hoping he holds me back. I feel warmth when his arms encircle me, and I let out the breath I’d nervously held. “I’ve got to get to class. I’m late.” I mumble into his chest a few moments later.

He pulls back, keeping his hands on my waist as his hazel eyes search mine. “You sure?”

“Yeah. Thank you... Again.” He brings his hands up and cups my face, placing a gentle kiss on my forehead.

“Go on then.” He releases me. The hollowness I feel walking away from him is immediate.



FEELING COMPLETELY OVERWHELMED, I rush to my apartment as soon as class is over. I grab a cigarette out of the clutch I used Saturday night and walk outside before lighting up. My nerves, which have been wound so tightly, slowly begin to unravel as I take the second drag.

How did I let things spiral out of control? When did I give up my control? Why did he feel he could do this to me? Why did he choose me? How did I not see it? Did I choose to ignore it? Were there signs? Did I love him? Why did I stay with him after New Year’s? The weight of the questions begins to suffocate me. I need to slow down. I may not be able to answer all of them, but I need to work through some to give myself peace and closure.

How did I let things get so out of control? I didn’t, at least not on purpose. I was swept up in the thought of romance, not what a relationship, respect, and love should be. I gave up my power from the beginning. I can see it now. He made all the

decisions, and I conceded. I avoided tension and fights; that was my rationalization. I gave it up, willingly. He is a master at this game. Early on he made me believe I was wrong when I disagreed with him.

He did this to me because I let him. Plain and simple. He was able to manipulate everything to satisfy his motives. I always felt guilty for everything I did, even when I did nothing but hang out with a friend. He made sure of that. But why me?

Love. This simple four-letter word is the most complicated. I get up from the couch to pour myself a cup of coffee, not wanting to focus on it. I pace around the apartment, full of frustrated energy, picking up our clutter. I become so focused on cleaning, I don't realize how much time has passed until Lena walks in from her study group.

"Wow! I can't remember the last time our place was this clean." She is half smirking, half curious.

I look around, proud of my work but surprised I did so much. "I know." I shrug my shoulders and walk to the couch, falling into it. "I was desperate to shut my brain off. This worked. I was so focused on cleaning that I was able to distract myself from all the bullshit."

"Bullshit? Same bullshit or did something else happen?" She makes herself comfortable on the side chair.

"New." I know Wes asked for secrecy, but I can't hold this in. I need a sounding board. "I talked to Wes today. But before I tell you... He asked me not to tell anyone. But I can't keep it to myself. You can't say anything. Even to Preston. I'm only going to tell you. Not Bree or Paige. Just you. This will have to stay with us." I wait for her to agree.

She nods and says, "Go on."

I tell her about the conversation with Wes. She listens, never interrupting.

"I can't believe he really sold his friend out." Her eyes are wide.

"I know! He was the one that told me to go to the apartment that night. He wanted me to bust Caleb. But it's

weird. Why would he want to protect me?"

"I think you're going to have to believe his story about it not being fair to you. If the slut knew all along, screw her. Screw him for thinking he could get away with this shit." Lena's voice is full of frustration and anger. "Fuck him!"

A smile escapes my lips. "Fuck him," I concur.

"What did you tell Ethan?"

"Nothing. He didn't ask me anything after Wes walked away. I didn't give him a chance. I went right to him and hugged him. I needed safety, and he was able and willing to provide me that. I still don't know why he keeps coming to my rescue. It's not fair to him, especially when he decided he didn't want to be with me."

"He's doing it because he wants to. Did you ask him to step in while you were talking to Wes? No. He did it on his own. So let it go."

"Fine. But I really need to do something this weekend. We need plans."

"Already done. I've already called the crew, and they are coming in tomorrow." She's chewing the side of her lip, waiting for me to respond.

"Good."

20

MINUTES FEEL LIKE HOURS WAITING FOR JOSH, THE LAST TO arrive from out of town. I refuse to say anything about what has happened. I want everyone present because I'm not going to repeat the story again after this. I'll speak of it one last time to my friends and rid my memory of it, and Caleb, for good.

As soon as Josh walks through the door, tears fall, and I start my story, not waiting for him to sit down. I want to purge myself of the humiliation. It goes as well as expected. They are mad for me, worried about me, and sad I had to experience it. The guys, being who they are, are ready to kick some ass to protect me.

The hardest part for me is admitting my weaknesses and that I became his doormat. I shut my eyes and let him walk all over me. They are supportive and tell me I am being too hard on myself. They all agreed he is a predator. He was looking for someone he could easily control. Their analysis does nothing to make me feel better. I was a weak link.



PRESTON AND JOSH are playing pool at The Shack with a couple of guys they challenged, while the rest of us sit around a bar table, talking and laughing. It feels good to relax. The guys win the table, so the girls jump up, wanting to play. Still in a slight funk, I bow out of the game. I stand on the side by the wall, and Preston volunteers to play in my place.

Josh brings me a stool. I shake my head. “Thanks, but I’ll just stand here.”

He sits down on the stool and pulls me back into him. I stand between his legs as he wraps his arms around my waist, placing his chin on my shoulder.

“If you don’t want to be here, we can leave. You don’t need to put on a front for us. You know that right?” he says quietly in my ear.

I turn my head and kiss him on the cheek. “I know. But I need to do this. I need to be out, to feel normal again. I don’t want to wallow.”

And then I hear a sneering voice. “Not even a week has gone by and you’re out whoring yourself?” Caleb walks toward me.

I turn around and press myself into Josh’s chest, closing my eyes, not wanting to face him.

“Stay the fuck away from her!” Preston roars. I bury my head in Josh’s neck, feeling his arms tighten around me. Caleb’s voice brings back so many bad memories.

“Back the fuck up. Take care of your own fucking girlfriend and let me talk to mine.” Caleb says coolly, with a superior, confident quality.

His girlfriend? I’m not his.

“Let’s go,” Bree says.

Josh lets me go and pushes me back so he can stand.

I refuse to turn around until I hear Ethan’s voice. “I’m going to say this once, so it would behoove you to listen carefully.” He says it evenly, with confidence but also venom.

Caleb stands a few steps away from where I am, and Ethan is on the opposite side of the table, near Preston. The girls are at the end of the table closest to me.

“Leave Sophia alone. Plain and simple,” Ethan finishes.

“And again, pretty boy, she’s not yours. She’s mine. And this has nothing to do with you.” He faces me. “Let’s go.

Now.”

I feel Josh move behind me, and this makes me snap, scared something more severe will happen. I move forward, placing my hands on Caleb’s chest, pushing him backward away from Josh. I watch as a smug, smirk appears on his face. He thinks I am going with him, the cocky son of a bitch.

“Leave! Now!”

His smirk instantly turns angry, and he grabs my upper arm to drag me away.

“We’re talking now.” Caleb grips my arm tighter.

I turn to look at my friends and see Ethan take large strides toward us. I tense, trying to pull away, not knowing how this is going to turn out.

Ethan stops in front of Caleb. “Let. Her. Go,” he says through clenched teeth.

Caleb releases my arm and turns to face Ethan. They size each other up.

Without looking at me, Ethan says, “Go with Lena.” I’m watching them nervously, blaming myself, and unable to move. “Now. Please.”

I walk backward, not taking my eyes off them, guiding myself along the table until I feel the corner.

“I suggest you walk out of here,” Ethan commands.

“Nah, I’m thirsty. I need a drink. I knew my girl would be here, and I need to watch over her,” Caleb taunts, nodding in my direction.

“You don’t have a girl here. Get the fuck out.” Ethan’s jaw muscles twitch from the pressure.

“I’m staying.” I wonder what game Caleb is playing. “I need to make sure my girl stops whoring herself out to get back at me.” He looks at me and winks with a smirk.

So many things happen simultaneously, but all of them seem to happen in slow motion. My stomach revolts at the thought of him thinking he has control over me. Preston and

Josh make their way to Caleb and Ethan. Ethan's fist comes up and makes contact with Caleb's face. Caleb's head sways to the side, making him lose his balance, but he catches himself on the wall.

"Don't ever call Sophia that again!" The hardened rage that is consuming Ethan at this moment is terrifying. Preston and Josh get to Ethan and stand at his side.

Caleb stands up straight, looks at the guys, clearly outnumbered, and storms away. Ethan continues to watch him until he walks out.

Something about this moment, Ethan always being there when I need him the most, has the pieces falling into place. He cares. From the moment I met him, he has been trying to protect me. All he has ever been is protective. I don't understand why he chose to walk away, but now I intend to find out.

Ethan turns around and looks at me with a haunted, worried expression marring his face. I immediately go to him, scared to death he may reject me but needing him. I wrap my arms around him, burying my face in his chest. How blind and self-absorbed I have been. I feel his arms tighten around me. One hand lands on the small of my back and the other under my hair, clutching my neck. He lays his head on top of mine.

"I'm sorry for causing a scene," he whispers.

I should be the one apologizing. I brought the jerk into our lives. I try and pull back to look at him, but his grip on me tightens, so I mumble, "I'm the one who should be sorry. Not you."

He loosens his grip, and he pulls back, looking down at me.

"Let's blow this joint. Where else can we go?" Paige asks loudly.

"Can we talk? Please." My stomach flips nervously waiting for him to answer.

He simply nods, and says to the group, "Let's head to my place." He looks at me and whispers, "Coming with me?"

“Yes.”

“Come on.” He grabs my hand and leads the way.

“Let me close my tab,” Preston says behind us.

Ethan stops, turns around, and tells Preston, “I’m taking Sophia with me. Stop and pick up drinks. And while you’re at it, pick up something to eat. I’m starving.”

As we walk out to the car, my mind races with how to begin this conversation. Can I admit how strong my feelings for him are? Will he believe me? Would I believe him if he had done what I did?

He opens the Rover door for me and closes it, then walks around to the other side. He climbs in and starts the car. He grabs for the gear shift, but before moving it, he looks at me.

“You sure?” The doubt swimming in his eyes saddens me.

I need to do something to show him I am ready. Ready for the talk, ready to be with him, ready to work on myself, ready to live. Summoning all the courage I can muster, I lean over the console. Reaching out, I place my hand on his scruffy jaw and pull him in for a soft quick kiss. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

A smile pulls at his lips, erasing most of my nerves. The drive is quiet except for his music filling the car.

We walk into his house, and he opens the refrigerator to a shelf full of beer. I turn my attention to the counter and see several bottles of liquor.

“Want anything?” he asks standing in front of the open fridge.

“Sure, but why did you send the guys for drinks if you’re stocked?”

“To give us time alone. Same reason I sent them for food.” He points to his head. “I was thinking ahead. I’m not starving, but I’m sure we’ll scarf it down later.”

“I guess we better not waste time, then. They’ll be here soon.”

He walks into the living room and sits on the couch. I follow. He hands me one of the beers.

“I should start.” I pause, breathing through the nerves. “I’m sorry.” He opens his mouth, so I place my index finger over his lips. “Please. Let me finish. I need to say this.”

He clutches my hand softly, kissing my finger and giving me a silent go-ahead.

“I’m sorry. Sorry for not seeing things clearly. For doubting. For not trusting. I know it may be hard to believe, but I care for you. More than you know. More than I realized. And if your offer from the beach is still open, I want to take you up on it.”

My chest pounds and echoes in my ears with each second of his silence. What does it mean?

“Why now?”

He’s doubtful, and I can understand why. I have to earn back his trust.

“Because I’m seeing so much clearer now.” I take a drink from my beer, and he does the same. “When you dropped me off that day after our last lunch, the one when you told me I didn’t have to choose. I was hurt. Gawd. I was gutted. I’ve never felt that kind of pain in my life.”

“Why did—” he interrupts.

I place my finger to my lips. He takes a breath and gives me a small smile.

“I knew I had feelings for you, but I didn’t realize how strong they were until you told me to stay with Caleb. To save you the dramatics of that day, I’ll just say that my feelings for you—”

“Then why didn’t you say anything then?”

“Because I thought you walked away because you didn’t mean what you said at the beach.”

“Bu—”

I cut him off. “I couldn’t believe because I doubted myself. I doubted you because I didn’t believe in me. The past couple of weeks have, in a sense, been a journey of self-discovery. I know I’m an introvert, but it’s more than that. I guess some of my insecurities have come from having Bree and Paige as best friends. I always thought guys talked to me when they couldn’t get their attention. They are the ‘typical beauties.’” I air-quote with my fingers.

“Did you not hear anything I told you? You attract your own attention with no help from anyone else.” I place my hand on his chest to stop him.

“I did hear you, but at the time, I didn’t believe it. I was so confused. Caleb had me thinking in crazy circles. He was controlling me, but more importantly, I let him. Without realizing it though. In a weird way, I thought he was the real deal because he chose me when I wasn’t with the girls. Then when you said you were taking yourself out of the picture, I thought what you said at the beach was just the alcohol talking.”

“How co—” he attempts to interject, but I continue.

“There is just so much to try and explain. I will tell everything if you want to hear it, but right now what I need you to know is I’ve fallen for you. Fallen hard. Caleb has nothing to do with this except that it took him cheating for me to finally start seeing everything more clearly. And for the record, when you walked away, it hurt so much worse than finding him in bed with someone else. With Caleb, I was embarrassed and mad at myself. But when I lost you,” I pause and take a breath. “I felt empty. That’s when the pieces began to slip into place. Lena told me to go to you. To tell you I was hurting, but I couldn’t because I would’ve been completely humiliated if you sent me away because you didn’t feel the same or because you’d changed your mind. That’s why I didn’t chase you. I was scared.”

He stays in the same position, unmoving. The knots of nerves tighten, and I take a drink, waiting for him to respond. Something. Anything. I need him to talk. Let me know how he feels, what he’s thinking.

Just as I'm beginning to think I risked it all too late and wishing for my friends to arrive so they can take me home, he says, "So you like me? You really like me."

My stomach instantly relaxes, and I answer, "Yes." I nod my head enthusiastically. "So much. I'm not too late?"

He takes the beer out of my hand and places both our bottles on the end table closest to him, then reaches out to me with open arms. As soon as I see my invitation, I scramble to him, wrapping my arms around his neck and holding tightly. I sit back to look at him.

"That day at lunch, why did you walk away?" His features take a sorrowful turn.

"I was scared too." He takes a deep breath, pulling back and dropping his gaze to his lap. "You have to understand, I haven't had a relationship with any of the girls I've been with." He looks up at me again before continuing, "I didn't believe in 'love'..." He air-quotes with his fingers. "...because of my parents and their fucked-up marriage. And I didn't trust girls after what happened with..." The sadness in his voice guts me. "So when you were unsure about him and me...I got spooked. It looked like you had doubts because you couldn't decide. You had to be one hundred percent sure I was who you wanted. I didn't want there to be any *what ifs* on your part about the decision. I thought I would feel better about being the decision-maker. Turns out I felt like shit, even if it was my decision."

I know we have so much to talk about, but time is short with our friends on the way. I take his face in my hands, hoping he hears my sincerity.

"I'm sorry I put us through this. I was lost. But I think I've found myself again."

He pulls me onto of his lap and kisses me tenderly. When his tongue swipes my lips, I open, inviting him in. The passion we have bottled for too long is ready to explode. And much too soon, he slows us down and places his forehead on mine as we catch our breath.

“No more apologies. We’re here now, and that’s all that matters. But I do have a question... Why was Caleb still calling you his?”

“I don’t know. I can’t believe he thinks I would still want to be with him after everything.” I shrug.

“You broke up with him? Right?”

Shit, Shit, Shit. I haven’t! I have been avoiding him, but I never officially broke up with him.

“Uh...”

I hear the front door open, and the girls announce their presence.

“What’s happening?” Paige says in her most annoying voice, trying to torment me. I watch them in the kitchen putting beer in the fridge.

“What the fuck. The fridge is full!” Josh yells, laughing.

I look to Preston as him and Ethan exchange a knowing nod.

“We’ll be back,” Ethan says as he gets us up grabbing my hand, pulling me with him.

“Where ya going?” Paige continues in her teasing way. I widen my eyes at her, and she giggles.

Once in his room, he sits us on his bed. “This is it. Right? No more questions. No more trying to figure shit out. It’s us.”

“If you want me, then yes, it’s us.” I smile reassuringly. He pulls me to him and meets his lips with mine in a quick kiss.

“Then you have to call him and make sure he understands it is over. I can’t continue this until I know it’s you and me. No misunderstandings.” I pull my phone out of my back pocket.

After a couple of rings, I hear bar noise in the background. “Yeah? What’s up?” Caleb says arrogantly, void of any emotion.

“Uh. I need to talk to you. Have a moment?” I ask, not sure how to proceed.

“Oh. Now you want to talk. Well, I’m busy. Maybe I’ll stop by later.”

His attitude gives me the boost I need. “Don’t bother. I’m done with you. It’s over. You and I are over.”

“What the fuck? That’s what you think. No. You haven’t even given me a chance to explain. I’m on my way.” His statement is laced with threat.

“First, I’m not at home. Second, I don’t need an explanation. Third, it. Is. Over. It has been. I just wanted to make sure you knew.” Ethan watches me closely, listening to the one-sided conversation.

“NO. It’s not over! Where the fuck are you?! I’m coming to pick you up!” Caleb yells.

When Ethan hears his booming voice, he places his open hand out in front of me. I place the phone in his hand, unsure what will happen next.

“Stay away from her.” Ethan states very calmly, with authority. As he takes the phone away from his ear, I hear Caleb yelling, but Ethan ends the call, stopping the verbal tennis match that could have ensued.

“Should we join everyone?” He looks at me.

“I guess.” I shrug.

He strokes my cheek gently with the back of his hand. I take his hand and wrap it around me as I climb into his lap, tucking myself into his muscular chest. His hand strokes my back. After a few moments, he clears his throat. “Do you want to stay in here and make them wonder what we are doing, or do we join them?” he teases.

My cheeks heat and my body hums at the thought, but before I can get lost in the fantasy, I remember my lack of experience. I stand up and walk to the door, not wanting to think about it.

Everyone looks in our direction when we step into the living room, and Paige asks, “So do we ask or...um...make up our own story...”

I look to Ethan, knowing Paige will continue until we say something. He raises his brows, and I respond with a shoulder shrug and a gesture for him to take the lead.

“Well let’s see...” He pauses for dramatic effect. “...where to begin... Ah, hell, I’m sure whatever you make up will be way juicier than what I’m about to say. So have at it, make up a story. Just let us in on what sordid details you add to the mix.”

A mixture of eye rolls and laughs come from our friends as Ethan goes to the kitchen to grab us fresh beers from the fridge. He takes a seat in the oversized side chair and pulls me down into it with him. And before any more questions could be asked of Ethan and I, Preston takes the attention away from us by saying the magic words, *Spring Break*.

Everyone jumps in and has an opinion on what we should do and where we should do it. We’re all throwing out ideas—Mexico, Florida, Colorado, The Keys, South Padre.

Lena jumps in. “It won’t be Mardi Gras, but what about New Orleans? All-day parties, shopping, haunted tours, food, no last call.”

Everyone looks around, smiling and nodding.

Preston pulls Lena to him, kissing her. “Perfect! That’s where I’m going.”

“We in?” Ethan asks me.

“Of course.” I answer enthusiastically at the same time everyone else chimes in with their approval.

The rest of the evening goes by quickly, and when it’s time to go, I don’t want to leave him. I want to stay but am also nervous about rushing things. I am not ready for our time together to be over.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Ethan whispers as he runs the tip of his nose along my ear and neck, his hand running up and down my arm.

I shake my head—trying to deny that anything is bothering me—and lean into his touch.

“Talk to me,” he says, softly enough for only me to hear. How do I begin to explain? That I want to stay with him, but not rush things. How I feel when I am not with him. How I fear waking up and tonight being a dream.

I decide to keep it simple and honest when he gently squeezes my arm, raising his brows in question. I tuck my face in his neck to hide my words from the others. “I want to stay with you, but I don’t want to rush things, and I don’t know what you want to do.” I sit up and look into his eyes.

An oh-so-sexy smirk greets me as his voice drops an octave. “If I get to make the decision, you are staying here.” He leaves a trail of kisses along my jaw. “But...” He pauses while he trails the tip of his nose along my ear. “...do you think the girls will let you stay? I think they are going to drag you back to the apartment so they can play twenty questions.”

He’s right.



AS SOON AS we all walk into my apartment, Paige starts throwing out a million questions in a single breath. I am taken aback and unsure what to answer first. Everyone takes a seat around the living room and turns their attention to me, waiting for answers.

“Hmmm...well...y’all pretty much know everything. And some I need for me. But to answer a couple, yes, Ethan and I are together. There was so much miscommunication. Well, not so much miscommunication, but just not communicating...at all. Fear took over us. Different reasons, of course. And the rest is for him and me. But I do want to thank y’all.”

“For?” Paige asks quickly just as Bree says, “Why?”

“For being my friends through the mess.” My lips turn down into a disgusted frown. “I even turned into the girl I always said I would never be. The one that lived the life of drama.” I drop my head into my hands, embarrassed to admit it.

“Oh, please, we all get sucked into drama because of guys.” Paige quips. “The key is learning not to stay in it.” She gives me a genuine smile when I peek my head up.

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ETHAN AND I ENJOY A LAZY SUNDAY MORNING WITH OUR friends at our apartment—eating, lounging, and watching TV. The ease and comfort that we feel around each other comes naturally. This is what it has always been like when we are together.

Once the afternoon comes around, everyone begins to leave for their drives home. Lena goes to the library to meet a study group, and Ethan goes home to pick up clothes and his backpack for tomorrow's classes. I am sitting in the middle of my bed, organizing everything I need for a paper I have yet to start and is due soon. A knock at the door surprises me. I wonder how Ethan made it back so quickly.

I swing the door open saying, "That was—" Caleb is in front of me with a scowl.

"Expecting someone else?" he sneers.

I'm dazed, frozen in place. "What are you doing here?" I manage to croak out.

"We have to talk." He states matter-of-factly, pushing me aside and stepping into the living room. I turn around, watching him make his way in and comfortably take a seat on the couch.

"Are you gonna close the door?"

I am at a loss for words, dumbfounded by his extreme arrogance thinking he can waltz in and command me.

“We don’t have anything to talk about. I was in the middle of a paper. So please leave?” I continue standing at the open door.

“I told you last night we had to talk. You’re avoiding me, and that’s not fair to me. You haven’t even given me a chance to explain what happened. I deserve more than that. We had something really good,” he responds, his demeanor softening.

It’s getting cold standing in the open doorway, so I hesitantly close it. I walk to the side chair and lean against the armrest, not able to relax with him in my living room.

I have nothing to say to him, so I spur him to continue. “You want to talk? I’m waiting.”

“Aren’t you going to sit down?” He pats the sofa next to him.

I shake my head back and forth, frowning.

“Why not? We’re talking.” His frustration is growing, but he’s controlling it, which makes me anxious. I sit on the edge of the chair, leaning my elbows on my thighs, hoping it will calm the situation. If Caleb’s mood starts swinging back and forth quickly, it would not be good. I glance at the clock in the kitchen, dreading yet hoping that Ethan will be back soon.

“Look, Caleb. I’m listening. If you have something to say, then I’m all ears. If we are just going to watch each other silently, then I have a paper to get to.” I want him to begin so I can hurry and tell him we are still over, and he can leave before Ethan returns.

“What’s the hurry?” he stalls.

“I told you already. I’m in the middle of a paper,” I huff.

“Fine. What do you want to hear? That I’m sorry. I am... I really am. I’ve told you a million times already. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t give a shit about us. If she meant anything to me, I would be with her. But I’m not. I’m here begging you to listen to me. I’m begging you. I love you.” His tone is so full of emotion, I could almost believe him.

“I don’t know what you want to hear from me. I can’t go through that again. My mind hasn’t changed,” I respond carefully.

“But... you wouldn’t go through that again. I would never do that to you again. It was just that once, and I was confused. Emily had been after me for so long, and I fell for it. But I know now. Hurting us is not worth a sloppy piece of ass.”

Not that I feel sorry for her, but the degrading way he speaks of Emily is just...wrong.

“I can’t. I can’t trust you. What I saw is burned into my brain.”

“But as time passes, you’ll see that I’m being honest.” He gets up and moves closer, sitting on the coffee table in front of me. He reaches for my hands, which are clasped together on my knees. I pull them close to my body, sitting up straight and pushing myself back into the chair, putting space between us. He lifts a brow as he narrows his eyes at me.

“I can’t even hold your hands. Really? What the hell, Sof. You aren’t even giving us a chance. You’re doing this to us.” His voice remains level, but the strain in the muscles of his neck tells a different story.

“I’m doing this to us?” I point at myself. “Are you serious? I wasn’t the one in bed fucking Emily!” My frustration boils over when he tries to manipulate the situation again. I try to stand, but he grabs my shoulders and forcefully pushes me back down in the chair.

“Why can’t we talk? Why are you so adamant on send me packing? What about forgiveness? I would think Miss Catholic School Girl would want to forgive someone important to her.” Fear courses through my body. He glares at me, placing his hands on the armrest, closing me in. “You said you loved me.”

I said those words, and at the time I believed them, but I know better now. So much has happened and changed. I made mistakes, but I also learned a lot of lessons. I scramble for something to say that will defuse and end this conversation.

“I know I did. And at the time I meant it...but...I can’t go back. I need to move on from that night.” I shake my head, frowning. I keep the discussion focused on us.

He sits back down on the table in front of me, giving me space.

“Please understand, I need to move on. Right now...I need space.”

He drops his head into his hands, just as someone begins opening the door.

Panic grips me. I watch as the door opens, not able to do anything but wait for fireworks. Lena pauses at the open door when she sees Caleb sitting in front of me. He has not bothered to look up, so she gives me a silent *What’s going on*. I return it with a silent plea for *help*.

“Sooo...” Lena begins, and Caleb looks up. “I think it’s about time for you to go home. Thanks for stopping by.” She plasters on a fake smile.

Caleb glares at her but gets up and walks to the open door she is holding. He stops and turns around. “We’re not over. I’ll prove to you that we belong together.”

Lena closes the door behind him, then turns and raises her eyebrows at me.

“I don’t know. He just came over. A knock on the door, I opened it, and there he was. He wouldn’t leave. I asked, and he kept trying to get me to forgive him. To get back together with him. It’s absurd. I don’t understand what game he’s playing.” I spill it all in one breath.

The tension of the past few minutes begins to melt, and my eyes begin to water. I am able to identify the fear I usually felt with Caleb. The worry I constantly carried because of his reactions to situations was not healthy.

“Wha...Uh...wait.” She stumbles over words. “He wants to get back together?”

I nod my head. “Yup. Freaking insane.”

The front door opens, and Ethan walks in asking, “Was that Caleb driving off?”

I nod, not able to speak because the tears have started to flow.

“Baby girl.” He comes to me and sits on the coffee table. The urge to be safely tucked in his arms is overwhelming. I stand up and sit in his lap, wrapping my arms around him and tucking my head in the crook of his neck. He holds me for a few seconds, then stands up with me in his arms and walks us into my room.

He places me down on the edge of the bed then closes my computer and collects all the papers I have scattered. He places everything neatly on my desk before positioning himself on the bed, sitting against the wall. I watch him, knowing I need to tell him exactly what happened while he was gone, but before I can organize my thoughts to begin, he asks, “Is there anything I should be worried about?”

His question pierces me. He still doubts us and where we stand. I crawl over to him, straddling his legs and holding his face in both of my hands, “You have absolutely nothing to be worried about. I meant what I said last night. It’s you and me.”

His lips pull out slightly as relief spreads through his rigid body. My hands slide back to tangle in his hair as I place my forehead to his.

He brushes his lips against mine ever so gently. “Then why was Caleb leaving?”

“He came over wanting to get back together.”

“He wants you back?” he asks.

“That’s what he said. I don’t know why?”

“Maybe because he just realized what he gave up. Because he’s a jackass. Because...shit, I don’t know. But I’m not giving you up. You know that right?”

I meet his lips with my own. He slides his tongue slowly, sensually across my lips, and I open, letting our tongues dance. I need him more than I need my next breath. I feel his erection

growing through his jeans and my tight yoga pants. He tightens his hold on me, crushing my chest to his, one hand cupping my ass and the other holding my neck. The feel of him under me is intoxicating. A moan escapes my lips as I rock my hips, grinding into him. Suddenly, he releases me and pushes me back, separating us.

“I’m sorry,” he says through heavy breaths.

“What did I do?” I panic and want to hide.

Memories of my first time flood my mind, and I begin to wonder what I could have done wrong. I spiral into self-doubt, and I scramble to get off his lap.

“Woah!” He grabs my hips, keeping me in place. “Where do you think you are going?”

“I...uh...I was...giving you space.” My gaze drops to my hands as I knead them together, wanting to be anywhere else but here.

“No you don’t, baby girl.” He places a finger under my chin, lifting my head. “I don’t want space. I want you. Too much. But I’m in no hurry. I’m not going to screw things up.”

I try to drop my gaze again, but he holds it steady. “Talk to me. What are you thinking?”

Self-conscious, I choose silence.

“We’ll sit here until you talk to me. How the hell do you think we are going to make it if we can’t talk to each other? Openly and honestly.”

He’s right. But how do you go about asking, *Do I suck at making out?*

“Why did you pull away?” I ask instead, not ready to reveal my insecurities.

“What do you mean? We just got together last night. After all the craziness and misunderstandings, I don’t want us to rush into something before we’ve had time to talk. To make sure we’re on solid ground.” I try and get off him again, but he holds me to him. “Baby girl, look at me.” He waits for me to look up at him again. “I’m not exactly innocent—”

“Exactly,” I interrupt him. “And you pulled away. With others, you can, but with me, you can’t. I get it.”

The memories of him with other girls who are so different from me, flood my mind. My confidence plummets to a record low. My throat is closing in. I try again, with more force this time, to get off his lap, but he continues to hold my hips firmly, making my attempt futile.

“Exactly is right. But not what you’re thinking. I’ve had my fair share of hookups, but that’s not what I want for us. With us, it’s more. I’m not just going to ‘hit it and quit it’ with you. I’m in this for the long haul...with you.”

My heart is pounding against my chest, and the white noise in my ears is too much.

“Talk to me. Tell me what’s wrong.” His voice is soothing.

I drop my gaze to his chest. Looking him in the eyes is too difficult. “I don’t know how to start.” I stop. I can’t admit this to him. To anyone.

“You can tell me anything.” He holds my face in his hands and swipes the tears that have fallen with the pads of his thumb. He kisses my lips softly and says, “Trust me to take care if you.”

He pulls back, watching me as I struggle to find the courage. I just need to say it and be done with it.

“It’s...embarrassing. I don’t want to ask or...admit...” I drift off, trying to formulate thoughts in the least humiliating way possible.

Unable to look at him while sharing, I scoot over to sit next to him with my back against the wall, hugging my legs to my chest. He patiently waits for me to begin.

“Well...I guess I’ll start by saying I was a virgin until right before Christmas. I...well...” I glance at him from the corner of my eye before looking back down at my hands again. “...now I’m not. But, uh...it only happened that one time.”

I take a long, slow breath, calming myself, knowing that is only the tip of the iceberg.

My silence prompts Ethan to say, “While I like that you are being honest with me about this, I still don’t understand.”

“I didn’t like it. And I don’t think he did either because it was over as fast as it started. And I saw with my own gawd-damn eyes that he can enjoy it. So I’m thinking...it’s me. There must be something wrong with me because it wasn’t like anything I’ve read or seen, or the way people talk about it. I must suck at it. And you just stopped us, which...” I blurt it all out before I can think too hard. I never once look up from my hands, which I have been wringing incessantly.

“Baby, uh,” he pauses for a second, then continues, “that was a lot you just threw out at me. Give me a sec.”

When I refuse to look up, he moves in front of me kneeling on the floor next to the bed. He grabs my legs, pulling me toward him. When my eyes make contact with his, he says, “Now I need you to listen to me. Really listen.”

He waits for me to give him the okay before continuing. “First and foremost, you do not suck at making out. That was not the reason I stopped us. I already admitted to wanting you. Really fucking bad if I’m honest. But I’m not going to screw us up by jumping the gun. Next, while the honesty thing is good, and I asked for it, I don’t want to know about you and the douche. Mental pics of y’all together suck.”

He comes up, meeting our foreheads together. “You and I...we’re different.” He rubs my nose with his. “While I wish I was your first, to show you how amazing it can be, it wasn’t in our cards. You and I will write our own story.” He brings his lips to mine mumbling, “I’ve never felt this way with anyone before. I fell in love with you before you were even mine.”

Did he? Did I just hear? Am I delirious? “Did you...”

“Yes, I did. I love you. I have for some time now. I know I’m breaking all the dating rules telling you this now, but I can’t let any more confusion about feelings keep us apart or break us up. You have no idea what it has been like for me these past couple of months.”

“I love you too. I just had a harder time admitting it to myself than you did.” Our lips brush as I say the words.

I make my way to the floor with him, wanting to be wrapped up in him. I listen to the thump in his chest where I rest my head.

“Baby, I don’t like that Caleb came over here unannounced. The guys told me what he was like that night you were fighting outside the bar. I don’t think it’s safe.” He rests his chin on the top of my head.

“I didn’t like that he wouldn’t leave even when I asked him. It took Lena getting home for him to walk out the door.”

“What?” He pries us apart. “What do you mean, for him to walk out the door? He was inside the apartment?” His face fills simultaneously with anger and worry.

“When I answered the door and opened it, he just walked in uninvited. I asked him to leave a few times, told him we were over, but he kept insisting I needed to give him another chance.”

“Baby girl, please, please do not open the door to anyone before asking who is there. Like I said, the guys told me how he was handling you that night. It makes me uncomfortable for you to be alone with him. Especially if he is mad. It’s not safe.” The pleading in his voice sounds desperate.

I can’t tell him about how he grabbed me again. Ethan will lose it. “I promise. I don’t want him in my apartment either.”

“Good. Please always ask who is at the door. Especially if you’re here alone. I don’t want him coming in uninvited again.” He holds me for a few more moments before he says, “You were working before all this. Get your stuff and back to homework.”

He pulls a book out of his bag and lays it on the minuscule portion of the bed that is clear of my research mess. He reads and I work for over an hour before I decide to call it quits for the night. I have been completely consumed by my project and had not looked in Ethan’s direction. When I look at him casually laying on my bed, I realize how normal this feels. Us

being together has always felt right. The unspoken ties that bring us together when we are apart are becoming more pronounced.

He lowers his book just a bit for his eyes to catch me watching him. A cocky smirk slowly emerges before he smugly asks, “What are you staring at?” He places his book down beside him.

“You. As if you didn’t know.”

“What are you thinking about?” he asks, seeming to be genuinely interested.

“Us,” I answer while I begin to gather my things, clearing the bed.

“What specifically about *us* are you thinking about?”

“How comfortable and natural we are with each other. It’s always been like this between us.” I get up from the bed to place my work on the small desk.

He waits until I sit on the bed again, then continues. “I know. From the first time I was around you at The Shack on your birthday I have felt this ease around you. To be honest, it weirded me out at first. Then I just wanted to be around you. I wanted to feel the calm you bring.” I crawl closer to him, laying down on my side and propping my head with my arm.

“I’m sorry.” The decisions I made fill me with sadness. I was the one that caused us so much unnecessary pain.

“No more sorrys. Let it go, baby girl. You and me, we will not live in the past.” He pauses for a moment before continuing. “I may regret asking this, but...what you mentioned earlier...about your first time.” His jaw is working and clenching. I let him take the time he needs to ask whatever is on his mind. “When you said it wasn’t what you expected... did he hurt you?”

“No... Well, yes. But...do we have to talk about this? It’s in the past. Don’t worry about it.” I cannot believe he just asked about it.

“But I am worried about it. When you brought it up earlier, well, I was caught off guard. I didn’t want to hear about it and have the images. But I can’t get it out of my head, worrying he hurt you. What do you mean by yes?”

I roll onto my stomach placing my arm over my face, hiding. “Pain in the physical sense. I was expecting it to be maybe uncomfortable, but it downright hurt. And I guess I was put off because...” I catch myself, almost divulging too much.

“Finish.”

I refuse to move my arm. How can I admit this to him without putting pressure on him when we are in that situation?

“It’s just that he was so nonchalant about it. Kind of like he didn’t care. Which now I know he probably didn’t.” I’m embarrassed at my inexperience.

Ethan is trailing soft kisses down my arm mumbling, “Will you please look at me?”

I slowly move to rest my head on my crossed arms.

“I didn’t ask you this to embarrass you. I asked because I don’t trust him. I never have.” I just nod my head in understanding. “And I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you. It may never have happened if I had just admitted my feelings to you. But I didn’t want to scare you or have you pull away. And then I was a jerk about it. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not responsible for what happened. You’ve never had to be responsible, yet you still jump in. Please. Can we talk about something else?”

“Sort of. Last night you mentioned he had you thinking crazy. What did you mean?”

I pause, wanting to tell him but barely understanding it all myself. “I’m not sure how to explain and it make sense.” He remains unmoving, his features perfect. “It was all little things I guess, but when you put them together, I guess there was a pattern. He was always in control.”

“Go on,” he prompts. “I’m listening.”

“Caleb was really good at turning situations around and making me to blame. His logic seemed to make sense but was completely unfair to me. I would be mad at him for something he did, and then all of a sudden, I was to blame, and he was forgiving me for whatever he did. He was a master at that. Then I would walk on eggshells so I didn’t upset him, trying to avoid fights.”

Ethan does not show any emotion as I’m explaining. I begin to wonder if I am making more of the story. Is it bigger in my head?

“What did he turn around on you?”

I think about all the times we fought, looking for a good example. I close my eyes, scared of judgment. “I guess you are a good example. I stopped telling him when we would hang out because he would get mad. Yet when I would get mad about Emily, he would say that they were friends and I was overreacting. But he was never overreacting when he was mad because of you. Or my clothes. He would get mad because I wore something he didn’t approve of. Guys would flirt with me, and I was to blame because what I wore, or I looked in their direction, or some other insane reason like that. But when he flirted with girls at the bar, he was only increasing his tips. He couldn’t stand I chose to live with Lena. He said after the first weekend that she was a bad influence. Most things were small like that, but it was a constant thing.”

Ethan brings his hand up, brushing loose strands of my hair back away from my face. I hadn’t opened my eyes, frightened of judgment.

“Baby girl, look at me.” I open my eyes slowly. “I kinda figured as much. I just didn’t realize how bad it was.”

His belief in me and everything I went through sends a wave of relief. It triggers me to continue with things left unsaid last night.

“I know you said no apologies, but I do have to apologize. I knew I had feelings for you almost from the beginning, but I never admitted it. The girls knew and would ask, but I would deny it. I didn’t...or couldn’t believe you could have feelings

for me because I didn't think much of myself. My insecurities were dictating my actions. And it didn't help that I was always walking a tight rope with Caleb. Juggling his moods was a full-time job." I take a deep, cleansing breath, letting go of all the negative thoughts about myself.

Another lesson through all of this is that I need to believe in myself. I am good enough. I do not have to settle just because someone chooses me. I have to choose them in return.

"We are here now. I am happy with where we are. Whatever it took for us to get here, may not have been fun, but got us here."

"Are you sure? No regrets?"

"Maybe one." The pause lasts forever. "I couldn't protect you. You still got hurt."

"But it wasn't your job to protect me. I have to protect myself. While I love you for wanting to, I have to do it." I say it with as much conviction I can muster.

"Yes, you do have to do it on your own, but if you are with me, I want to be there for you. However you need me to be."

I place my hand on his scruffy cheek, wishing we could clear this hurdle. "Let's move on. Leave the past and our mistakes there. Be happy we're here now. Please."

"Anything you want." He closes his eyes, rubbing his face against my hand. "Let's get ready for bed, baby. It's getting late, and we have classes tomorrow."



I WAKE to Ethan's long, deep breaths. I am tucked in his embrace. Opening my eyes to his perfectly chiseled chest is too tempting for me not to touch it. My hand begins to explore his defined stomach, tracing the lines and ridges. His muscles tense under me.

"Mmmmm. What time is it?" He murmurs, his voice filled with sleep.

I lift my head, glancing at the clock.

“Crap.”

“What?” he asks, refusing to open his eyes as my hand is still lazily running along his chest and stomach.

“We have to get up. We’ll make it just in time for class.” I groan as I drop my head back down on him. His hand begins to rub my back, sliding up my arm to tangle in my hair as his fingers expertly massage my scalp, an instant relaxer.

The conviction I had about getting up just a moment ago leaves my body.

“Didn’t you just say something about getting up?” he teases.

“I know. I know. But if I’m going to move, you need to stop massaging me. It feels too good to want to move.”

“Now you know how I feel, then.” He brings his free hand on top of my hand running it all along his chest and stomach.

“Oops. My bad.” I place a kiss on his chest, savoring the feel of him before I get up and make my way to the bathroom.

22

CALEB'S ATTEMPTS TO REACH ME ARE CONSTANT. HE HAS BEEN calling every day, begging me to return his calls. Midday he sends me a quick *hello, I luv u* text. I don't respond and always erase them as soon as they come in. I don't want Ethan to have to worry about them.

I get home after my last class and see Caleb sitting against our door. I stay at the bottom of the stairs, not wanting to enter my apartment since Lena will not be home for over an hour.

"What's wrong?" he calls down. "Come on up so we can talk."

I shake my head. "We can talk down here." I remain on the sidewalk.

"We need privacy, Sof. Come open the door," he commands.

"No. If you have something to say, you can come down, and we can speak out here." I hold my ground, speaking a bit louder than necessary.

"You're making a scene, babe. Calm down so we can talk." He's doing it again. He is blaming me for causing a scene when he is here uninvited.

"We can talk down here."

He walks down the stairs, and when he reaches me, he places his hands on my waist, pulling me to him.

I jerk away. "What the hell, Caleb?"

“What?” He acts surprised by my reaction. “Babe, I just want to hold you. It’s been too long since I have been able to hold you.”

Flabbergasted at his audacity I tell him, “You lost that right. You can’t just come in and pretend that everything is fine and dandy.” I place my hands on my hips, infuriated I have to deal with him again.

“I may have fucked up and hurt you, but I have been groveling. Enough is enough. It’s time we got back together, don’t you think?” The forceful way he demands this is astonishing.

“No, I don’t think. We are not getting back together.” I try and sound just as strong. He steps closer to me again, trying to embrace me, and I step back again. “Don’t! I do not want your filthy hands on me!” I yell.

“Seriously?! Why not?”

“You cheated! That’s why!”

“I told you. It was a fuckin’ mistake. She’s out of my life. I haven’t talked to her since. I can’t stand that she did this to us.” He pleads, but his jaw is ticking with anger.

“She did nothing to us. I wasn’t with her. I was with you. *You* did this to us.” Wanting to release my pent-up anger, I push him hard in the chest, hoping he’ll to leave.

His eyes widen as my hands strike his chest. He grabs my wrists and pulls me into him.

“Then tell me, princess, if you’re so dead set that we’re over, why haven’t you told me to stop calling and texting? Because you crave the attention. You want to see me beg. That’s why. But I’m putting an end to your little hissy fit.” He kisses my neck, and sucks my earlobe before growling, “I popped your cherry. Your pussy is mine now.”

He releases one wrist and slides his hand down. My stomach revolts at the feeling of his lips and hand on me. He cups my sex and rubs me roughly.

“Because I love you, I will give you a little more time, but you’re mine. We’re not over.”

He comes down and places a firm kiss on my lips forcing his tongue into my mouth. He releases my wrists and walks to his car, driving off.

I run up the stairs, get into my apartment, and immediately lock the door behind me. The horror of what just occurred is on replay in my mind. My legs give out, and my back slides down the front door. I can still smell him on me, and I think I’m going to be sick. I scramble off the floor and run to the bathroom, stripping out of my clothes and diving into the shower. I don’t even wait for it to get warm, desperate to wash him away. The water goes from cold to scalding hot. I’ve scrubbed my body and rinsed several times. I still don’t feel clean.

My phone begins to vibrate on the floor, where it’s still in the pocket of my jeans. I ignore it, scared it’s Caleb. It begins to ring again, so I turn off the shower and grab a towel. By the time I get to it, the ringing has stopped. Ethan was calling me.

I collect myself to call him back, not wanting to tell him what happened. How do I expect him to want to stay with me when Caleb’s lips and hands were all over me again?

I hit his name and wait for him to answer.

“Where are you?” The dread in his voice is evident.

“Taking a shower. Why?”

“Wha...uh...”

Confused why he seems troubled and unable to speak, I ask, “What’s wrong?”

“I talked to Preston...”

“Okay. And?”

“Let me ask you something.”

“Okay.”

“Did you see Caleb today?” Shit. How could he possibly know?

“Yes.” I whisper. “I tried to make him leave, but he wouldn’t. Kept saying we were going to get back together.” I fear Ethan will be angry with me.

“Is that all?”

Embarrassed tears begin to slide down my cheeks, I answer, “No.”

“What else happened?” His voice is steady.

“He...uh....” The tears begin to fall faster, and a sob escapes me.

There’s a pounding on my door, and Ethan’s says on the phone, “Open the door for me.”

Walking to the door, the sobs come faster. I unlock the deadbolt and open the door. Ethan rushes in, enveloping me in his arms. I drop my phone, thankful to be in his arms.

He pulls back and takes my face in his hands. “What else happened?”

As I’m trying to control my breathing through the crying, he walks us to the couch and sits down, bringing me onto his lap.

“He...uh... I can’t. I don’t want you mad at me.” The sobs begin again, and I look down.

“I need you to talk to me. What happened?” he says gently.

“He kissed me and...” I blurt out and stop, not able to say the next part.

“And? What else did he do?” He hugs me close.

“He said I was his because he popped my cherry. And he rubbed me,” I mumble into his chest.

His body tenses under me, and his arms tighten around me. I continue to cry, all the emotions jumbled. He continues to rock me and hum while rubbing his hand up and down my arm. When I finally relax and the tears stop, he gets up with me in his arms and walks us to my room. He slides my robe over me and yanks off the towel I’m wrapped in.

“Can we talk now?” he asks me gently.

I nod. Filled with shame, I go to my bed and curl up in the corner.

He lays down, giving me space, and asks, “Tell me exactly what happened?”

I look at my comforter, not able to look him in the eyes as I tell the story. “When I came home after class, he was sitting at the front door. I didn’t want to come inside and him follow me, so I made him talk to me outside. He just kept saying we were getting back together, and I kept telling him no. He was frustrating me, so I pushed him, but he caught my wrists and pulled me to him. That’s when he...said that about...you know. He rubbed on me and kissed me. He was holding my wrist so I couldn’t get away. And I...I was scared. I froze. I just stood there like an idiot letting him. I’m sorry.”

“No. Don’t you ever be sorry for that. He...” Ethan growls as he moves closer, bringing me back into his warm embrace.

After a bit, my mind clears, and I ask, “What made you call and come over?”

“I spoke with Preston. But Lena has the full story. Get dressed, she should be here soon.”

As soon as Lena walks in the door, we bombard her with questions.

“I was on the phone with Preston when our favorite neighbor saw me on campus.” She is referring to the girl who lives below us. She is never friendly and always in everyone’s business. I can guess what happened now. “She walked up to me and made a snide remark about you having so many guys over. I asked her what she meant, and she goes on about you making out with a guy outside. Preston heard, and I knew Ethan wasn’t with you because he had class. We got worried, and Preston called you.” She looks at Ethan. “Are you going to tell me what happened?” Lena asks.

I share the story with her, feeling dirty every time I repeat it.

“I don’t like that he just comes by,” she says after I finish.

“You and me both,” Ethan agrees with her as he runs his hand through his hair, frustrated.

We decide to make it a quiet evening at Ethan’s house after today’s events. He has me pack an overnight bag so I can stay at his place this weekend. He doesn’t want me at my apartment in case Caleb tries to come over again.

LYING IN BED, Ethan sighs. “I want to ask you something. But if you don’t want to, I understand.”

“Okay.” I drag out the word, unsure what he wants to ask.

“We have a family thing happening next weekend, and I want you to go with me. You know the uptight, country club functions my family likes to flaunt.”

“Really?” A smile I can’t contain spreads across my face.

“Of course. I haven’t been to one since I was in middle school, before the divorce. Until now, I refused to go. But now that I’ve mended the relationship with my dad, he really wants me to be there.”

“Of course I’ll go with you. I need to go shopping this week.”

“I’ll take you to get a dress. Lena will be driving in with us.”

“Okay.”

The Hayes events are the talk of the town and always make the social page of the newspaper.

He brings my face to his, kissing me with passionate force. My mouth opens, giving his tongue permission to explore. His hands slip down, grasping my butt and hips. He pulls away and places our foreheads together, then slowly comes back to meet our lips together for a gentler kiss.

“I love you,” he murmurs against my lips.

“I love you too.”



I HEAD STRAIGHT to Ethan's room after their gig while the guys unload the equipment. Seeing one of his shirts thrown across a chair, I pick it up, bringing it to my face and breathing in. I love the way it smells of him and decide to slip it on.

I exit the bathroom as Ethan walks into the bedroom. He stops and he gives me a slow once-over.

"I think that's my shirt." His voice is low and deep.

I smile at him. "Yes, I think you may be correct."

"I like it on you." He walks toward me.

"You do?"

His hands land on my waist, gripping me as he stares down at me. "You have no idea how sexy I find you right now. In my room with only my shirt on." His face comes down slowly until our lips touch. I slide my hands up his torso, amazed by his reaction. Our lips barely brush as he says, "You're incredibly sexy."

He presses our lips together, and our tongues explore. He trails kisses down my neck. I am lost in all things Ethan. My knees become weak, so I grab fistfuls of his shirt, holding on.

He pulls back, our breathing erratic. "You are making this extremely difficult, you know."

"Making what difficult?" I place my forehead on his chest, catching my breath.

"Going slow with you. You have no idea how much I want you, but I promised myself that I would let you set the pace."

"Oh," I say a bit embarrassed, wanting to admit I don't want to go slow, but the fear of my limited experience prohibits me from speaking. His arms slide around me as he kisses the top of my head.

"Get into bed. I'll be right there." He lets me go, smacking my butt lightly before walking into the bathroom and shutting

the door behind him.

I tuck myself in, bringing the covers up to my chin and curling up on my side, hoping to hide all the lingering insecurities. I wish with everything I am that I could gain the confidence to end the second-guessing and doubts. The way Ethan stared at me moments ago was not only intense, but for me, shocking. This is new to me, extremely erotic, but intimidating.

Can I admit I want to do so much more with him? That I have thought about it, dreamed about it, but fear disappointing him? The bathroom door opens, and he walks out in only boxers. The sight of him makes my core tighten. I need this. I need him. He lies down and curls his body around mine, spooning me while trailing gentle kisses on my neck and ear.

“I love you in my bed. You need to spend more nights here with me.” He whispers as his hand roams up my thigh, under my shirt, and lands on my stomach.

His words are pulling my heart closer to his. “You sure about that?” spills out of my mouth before I have a chance to think about it.

“Positive. But only if you want,” he responds sincerely. I breathe in the nerves that are beating against my chest.

“I do want.” I turn around to face him. “And...” The words get stuck in my throat. All I can hear is the thumping of my heart.

“And?”

“And...more. But—”

He interrupts me, “If you have a ‘but,’ you aren’t ready. It’s fine. I’m waiting.” I place my hand on his cheek, with my thumb over his lips to quiet him.

“The *but* is that I am nervous it’s going to be obvious I have no idea what I’m doing.” He puckers his lips, placing a small kiss on the pad of my finger.

“No nerves allowed, baby. You’re amazing.” He nips my bottom lip, and his hand moves up, cupping my breast and

giving it a soft squeeze. My breath hitches. He kisses down my neck and pushes my shirt up.

“As much as I love seeing in you my shirt, I need it off.” He lifts it, and I lean up, pulling it over my head.

My body heats up watching him eye me hungrily. His fingers are gliding all around my chest with a featherlight touch.

He comes down and takes a hardened nipple in his mouth sucking gently and squeezing the other. I moan, arching my back trying to press it closer. My core is tightening, and as scared as I am, I want to feel him.

“I want...” I don’t know how to voice what I want.

“I know what you need,” Ethan says and licks my nipple before blowing cool air on it.

His hand slides down and glides over my panties between my legs. I shamelessly open them wider.

“I’m going to make you come,” he growls and moves my panties to the side, then slides a finger between my wet folds.

“Ethan.” I don’t know what’s coming, but I need him. I’ve never felt this good.

He’s rubbing and working his fingers around, and I’m rolling my hips, wanting more. He licks and nibbles down my stomach until I feel his breath on my center. He licks me, and I buck my hips. He places his elbows on each thigh, holding me down.

He slides a finger in and continues to lick and suck my nub. He slides it in and out, then adds another finger. I feel lightheaded, dizzy, and then I explode.

“Ethan!” I groan.

He kisses up my body and lays on me with his weight on his arms.

“And that, baby, is just a preview of what’s to come.” I taste myself as he kisses me. I never would have thought that

would be sexy, but knowing the intimacy we just shared, I want more.

ETHAN DROPS LENA AND I OFF AT MY PARENTS' HOUSE LATE Thursday so I can visit with them before they leave town tomorrow.

My mom, Lena, and I stay up late talking. I fill her in on everything that has happened recently. She's upset that Caleb has not stopped trying to contact me.

"Sophia, what he's doing isn't normal. People break up, they go their separate ways. Some try to make amends, but there comes a point when you walk away. It doesn't sound like he understands boundaries. It makes me nervous."

"I know. I just don't know what else to do. I have told him over and over that we are over. He just keeps saying I need time to forgive him." I respond as Lena sits quietly, listening to our exchange.

"Why does he think all you need is time when you're dating Ethan?"

Lena lets out a grunt, holding in a laugh. My mom looks at her, raising her brows.

"He doesn't know they're together. Sof hasn't told him," Lena answers my mom frankly.

My mom throws me a look before asking, "Why haven't you told him?"

"Because...I thought it would make it worse. Ethan is the reason he stayed with me. I figured it would piss him off

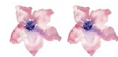
worse. If I just made it about him and his cheating, I thought it would be better.”

“Why are you so worried about making him mad? He wasn’t worried about your feelings when he was with that girl.”

I take a deep breath, not quite ready for this admission. “Because...he scares me when he’s mad. That’s why.”

“See. I knew it. I knew there was more. I need you to be honest about these things. I can’t protect you if I don’t know.” My mom’s voice cracks.

I nod my head, succumbing to the reality of Caleb’s actions and his inability to keep boundaries.



LENA WENT to Preston’s so she could spend some time with his parents before the event tomorrow. I’m reading when the doorbell announces a visitor. I open it to Ethan wearing a mischievous smirk.

I give him a hug and kiss before asking, “What are you doing here?”

“Picking you up for an early dinner to meet my mom.”

My eyes shoot open immediately. “What do you mean dinner with your mom? A heads-up would’ve been nice, you know.” I am tempted to say no because I’m nervous to meet her and have not prepared myself for this introduction.

“Figured I would surprise you. Go on and get changed.” He walks into the living room and takes a seat, grabbing the remote. “Hurry up. We meet her in less than an hour.” I watch him with my mouth slack.

“I’m seriously going to kill you for this.” I run up the stairs to change and freshen my makeup.

I am already nervous about meeting Ethan’s dad tomorrow. I’ve been to these family functions, and I know Preston’s parents and a couple of his aunts as well. Their kids went to

school with us. I have seen Ethan's dad but have never been formally introduced. I rush, not wanting tardiness to be his mom's first impression of me.

"Okay, I'm ready." I puff out a breath.

He laughs at my uneasiness before standing up.

He looks at me and grabs my hand, saying, "You have absolutely nothing to worry about. She's going to love you, just like I do." He kisses my forehead and laces our fingers together before walking us out.

"Are you as nervous about meeting my dad tomorrow?" he asks as he drives to the restaurant.

"Yes and no." I shrug my shoulders answering honestly, but vaguely.

"And what does yes and no mean?"

"I am. Really I am, but since I know some of your family, it doesn't feel quite so bad."

"I guessed you may have attended one of these things with Preston, but how many have you been to?"

"Throughout high school? Umm..." I think back. "Three. But I've also met your aunts a bunch of times at school events."

"Sometimes I forget how well you know some of my family. You probably know my family better than I do." His voice sounds sad and distant.

"No, I really don't. Don't forget how guarded your family is. I know the public persona. The only ones I really know are Preston and his parents. I spent a lot of time at his house." I pause, wondering what he is thinking. "Do you ever think how weird it is that we never met?"

"No. I am the family's dirty little secret. I was doing everything they despised."

We arrive at the restaurant, and he escorts me inside. We follow the hostess to the table his mom is occupying. As soon

as she sees us, she stands and opens her arms to give Ethan a hug. Then she turns to me and hugs me softly.

She whispers in my ear, “I’m so glad he’s found you,” before letting me go. It brings a smile to my face. If she only knew I feel like the lucky one.

“Sophia, it is so good to finally meet you,” his mom begins. Ethan looks like his dad, but he gets his eye color from his mom. She has beautiful hazel eyes.

“It’s nice to meet you too,” I reply as we all sit down.

“I feel like I know you already, but everything I know is from my son.”

“Mom, please. I don’t talk about her that much,” Ethan retorts.

She looks at him pointedly. “Are you being serious right now? All you’ve talked about is this pretty little thing.” She giggles, knowing she is annoying him.

He huffs in frustration. “Fine. I’ve been a bit obsessed. Is that better?” Her giggles turn into a full laugh that has me giggling. I am touched he has spoken about me to his mom.

“Better. So how are you liking school, Sophia?”

Dinner is nice and am glad I met her. Another stepping-stone in our relationship.

As we drive away from the restaurant, he surprises me again.

“We are heading to my dad’s house now.” He stares straight ahead, trying not to laugh at my discomfort.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope. Dad would like to meet you before the party, away from all the hoopla.” Wow, I can’t believe he just tricked me into meeting both his parents without any notice.

“I’m considering jumping out of the car and running home. Just so you know.”

“Ah, baby. I’m sorry, but I didn’t want you getting yourself worked up unnecessarily. It’s going to be fine. Just know you have already passed test one.”

“Test one?” My brows furrow in confusion.

“Yes, test one. Fitting the Hayes mold? You fit perfectly. Me? Not so much. You are doing me the favor. Making me look good.” I remember back to earlier in the evening when he mentioned that I know his family. He doesn’t really think I am the one who is making him look good, does he? I am lucky to have him.

When he stops at a red light, I turn my body toward him, holding his arm draped over the middle console. “You, you are amazing. Patient, kind, loving, smart, dedicated. You are a Hayes. Just because you are finding your own way does not make you any less. I’d want to be with you even if you didn’t have that last name.” He continues to stare straight ahead, so I grab his chin, turning his head in my direction. “Talk to me. What’s going on?”

The light turns, so he takes off, still quiet and not answering my question. He pulls into a parking lot and stops.

“I’m just uneasy about tomorrow. I’m still not conforming, even though my dad and I have made amends. He has never held the money from me, most likely out of guilt. But I don’t think the other family members feel the same way.”

“Why?” I ask.

He shrugs his shoulders.

“Then don’t worry about what you don’t know.”

He nods his head. “Let’s go before my dad starts wondering where we are.”

His dad lives in the same neighborhood as Preston’s parents, where the homes are mansions. He is a single man living in this huge home.

We walk up to the door, and Ethan rings the bell before opening it. We walk through the grand foyer with marble floors and a sweeping staircase to the rear of the house into the

kitchen. It is modern with sleek lines, white granite counters contrasting the dark mahogany cabinets and stainless-steel appliances. A large island sits in the middle with bar stools. His dad is mixing drinks as a beautiful woman sits watching him.

“Hello. Welcome. You must be Sophia.” His dad says.

“Hi,” I respond smiling.

“Please call me Rick. And this is Evelyn, my girlfriend.”

I reach my hand out to her. “It’s nice to meet you.”

She is flawless—thin with dirty-blond hair and blue eyes. She reminds me of a celebrity or model, with perfect makeup, not a hair out of place, and what seems to be an enhanced chest. Her wardrobe choice is not what a Hayes woman would wear. Now I may be putting together the pieces of why his dad is allowing Ethan to walk his own path. If this woman’s wardrobe is as trendy at the party tomorrow, his dad does not follow the “family rules” either. I wonder how Ethan has missed this.

“What can I get you?” his dad asks. “I’m making a couple of vodka martinis.”

I look at Ethan for guidance. He is of age to drink, but I’m not.

“I’ll make us vodka tonics.” He pulls out a stool for me before going around the island to where his dad has a small, stocked bar.

“Sophia, have we met before?” his dad asks as he brings Evelyn her drink.

“Probably. I have been to your family functions,” I answer honestly. She raises her eyebrows in gossip-style curiosity.

“You have?” Evelyn says.

Ethan stills from mixing our drinks, watching me.

“Yes. I’ve been to a few of these functions with Preston.” My heart is hammering in my chest wondering what Ethan’s dad thinks of me.

“You dated Ethan’s cousin?” Evelyn asks with a hint of judgment.

I immediately shake my head back and forth, but before I can respond Ethan jumps into the conversation.

“Of course she hasn’t. Preston is one of her best friends. How do you think we met?” His annoyance with her question is apparent.

“Oh, sorry,” she replies insincerely. “I just don’t know why a guy would take a friend to this type of family function.”

She begins to remind me of a social climber. His father is quiet during this exchange, watching things unfold.

“Because he didn’t have a girlfriend and didn’t want to go alone. I went to school with several of Ethan’s cousins, so I also know Mr. Hayes’s sisters,” I add, simply wanting Evelyn to know I am not out for the money, whether she is or not.

“Yes, Charles mentioned you in conversation earlier,” Ethan’s dad says. “He and Diana speak very highly of you. You grew up with Preston?” I nod my head, smiling slightly, the tension that had been building dissipating with the help of Preston’s parents.

He knows and has been asking about me. Ethan walks over with our drinks, placing them in front of us. He stands by me and rests his hand at the small of my back. I can feel his thumb running small circles, trying to help comfort me.

“Yes, sir. We’ve been friends since middle school.”

“So proper and polite. Nice change, son.” His comment rubs me the wrong way.

“Nice of you to approve.” Ethan’s response is curt.

“Settle down, son. I know we had our rocky years, and you had some questionable moments, but I’m happy you have found someone like Sophia to make you happy. Just testing the waters because you know we need thick skin to come out unscathed in this family.”

Ethan nods, conceding his father’s point. “Do you ever get tired of it?”

“We’ve been through this. The only reason I’m allowed to call my own shots is Charles and I are equals in running the company. If I was of no use in the company, I would probably be shunned too. That is why I tell you, get that business degree so that you are always a part of the family business, not just a trust fund brat.” I am surprised by this revelation. His dad really is ballsy, and now I see where Ethan gets his determined mindset.

Rick then looks at me with a caring smile. “You know my family. You’re not just arm candy for my son. From what I’ve heard, you’re also proper and smart. I’m glad.”

“But—” Ethan starts, but his dad interrupts.

“Ladies, if you will excuse us.” He motions with his head to the door, and Ethan follows him into the other room.

As soon as they leave the room, Evelyn begins, “So what year are you?”

“I’m a freshman. This is my first year.”

“Do you have a major in mind?” She seems to be trying to be pleasant and polite. I wonder if she knew Rick was trying to push buttons.

“No. To be honest, I’m floating right now. I’m not sure what interests me enough to commit a lifetime career to.” I decide to be honest since it’s not a secret. “And you, what do you do?” I’m curious about her.

“I’m a realtor. That’s how I met Rick. I found several properties for them.”

We continue chatting for just a couple more minutes before the men come back into the room. I notice a complete change in Ethan’s demeanor as he walks toward me. He seems at peace. I hope the talk with his dad helped him. We stay for another drink before saying our goodbyes.

LYING IN BED, we can hear Preston and Lena in the bathroom that joins mine and my sister’s room. The shower is running, and the sounds of sexual activity are somewhat disconcerting.

I want to give up all my inhibitions, but the self-doubt makes me pause.

Ethan rolls to his side facing me with a sexy smirk. My heart rate picks up, wondering what he's thinking. His hand lightly grazes my thigh, coming up over my hip and under my shirt. He stops right below my breast, but his fingers continue to rub small patterns. My chest rises and falls while I squeeze my legs together to try and ease the ache beginning to build. He leaves a trail of kisses from my shoulder up to my neck.

I need him.

I turn my head, meeting his mouth with mine. He shudders as I run my hand from his chest down to his abdomen. His hand runs over my breasts with lightness. My body is pulsing for more. He slides his hand down, gripping the bottom of the oversized shirt I'm wearing, and he slides it up. We separate long enough for him to pull it over my head and toss it to the ground.

I roll to my side, and he pulls me against his chest. Our bare skin touching lights another flame within me. His caresses my skin, and his roaming hands send electrical currents all over my body, making every nerve ending oh so sensitive. He kisses his way down my chin to my neck as he continues to palm and squeeze my breast. He rolls me on my back as he begins to lick and kiss his way lower. He takes my pebbled nipple with his teeth, biting it gently, then licking it softly. My hips buck up of their own volition, ready and wanting to feel him.

His hands move with control but are gentle and caring at the same time. I want to watch. I want to run my hands down his strong torso. But I squeeze my eyes shut, lost in all the sensations.

He hooks his fingers in my panties, then asks, "Are you ready?"

I nod yes, and breathless, I say, "Please."

I begin to wonder how people can speak during sex because I'm having trouble remembering to breathe. He slides

my panties down and glides his fingers back up my leg, grazing my sex. My breath hitches in anticipation. He kisses me and pulls back. I open my eyes, which had been shut tightly, to watch a storm brew in his as he holds himself on his forearms.

“Do you want to stop?” he asks softly as he runs his nose along my jaw.

“No. Please don’t stop.”

“I love you,” he says between kisses.

“I love you too,” I answer before he devours me in a hungry kiss.

I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him down on top of me, relishing the feeling. His hardness is pressing against me, so I push my hips up, trying to get more friction. I run my hands down his back, sliding my fingers under his boxer-brief waistband. The guttural moan in his throat excites me.

I struggle to slide them down.

“A little help here.”

He gets out of bed, and I lean up to watch him strip out of his boxers. My gaze travels from his handsome face down to his full erection. Wetness gathers between my legs at how hard he is. He pulls a condom out of his bag and places it on the nightstand before slowly kissing his way up my leg again.

He kisses and massages as he climbs higher. I can feel his breath on my warm center. My breathing is heavy and labored, and my heart feels like it is going to thump right out of my chest.

“You’re so beautiful.” His voice is deep and raspy.

His fingers are on me, and I roll my hips. His tongue strokes my clit, and I push myself up, wanting more.

He lets out a deep chuckle, his breath teasing me further. “Patience.”

“Please. I need you,” I groan, wanting all of him.

“And you’ll have me. I’m just making sure you’re wet and ready,” he growls, and I feel his mouth on me again as a finger slides inside me.

I moan loudly, too absorbed to be embarrassed. My hips roll with pleasure.

“That’s it, baby girl. Come for me.”

I can’t get enough. He pulls his finger out, and I instantly miss the feeling until I feel him slide two in. The way he’s moving his fingers, stroking, pumping, is perfection. His tongue licks my nub then he sucks it into his mouth and a feeling so overwhelming builds, I feel like I am free-falling.

I’m finally able to open my eyes, and I see Ethan watching me with a conceited smile.

“You back with me?” I bob my head, unsure of my speaking ability. “Are you still sure you’re ready?”

“Please.” How many times have I told him please tonight?

I watch him slide the condom on and position himself over me. “Tell me if you need to stop.”

“Okay.”

He slowly slides himself in, and I feel that same uncomfortable stretch I felt before. I gasp, and he stops.

“I’m gonna go slow.” He pulls out a bit then slowly pushes in again. This continues until he fills me completely.

I’m trusting him completely with my body. We begin moving in rhythm. I can’t take my eyes off him as he continues to pump into me. This gorgeous man is mine. His shoulder muscles flex as he holds himself above me. He rolls his hips, and the building starts again. I close my eyes, squeezing his shoulders as I begin to see stars.

“Look at me, beautiful,” he demands.

I open my eyes.

“Finish with me,” he groans.

My core is clenching around him. Each stroke feels better than the last. I grab his shoulders, gripping tightly. I'm hit by such an intense climax, then fall into oblivion. He collapses on top of me, kissing my lips. He rolls off, taking a few deep breaths. I run my hand along his torso, wanting more of him. I look at him, and he kisses me, sitting up. My heart stops, I grab his arm.

"I'll be right back. I need to take this off." He points to the condom and kisses my forehead.

He gets back into bed naked, pulling me to him, holding me tightly. Sleep begins to pull me down with a peace I have never experienced.

WAKING up to an empty bed was not what I was expecting this morning. It's after nine o' clock. I get up and find some pajamas to slip on before brushing my teeth and heading downstairs, curious where Ethan went. I smell breakfast as I make my way down the stairs and hear Ethan's and Preston's voices in the kitchen.

I walk straight to the coffee pot, and Ethan comes up, standing flush behind me. He brings his lips to my neck.

"Good morning, love." A blush creeps up my cheeks with images of last night.

24

AS I STEP INTO THE LIVING ROOM AND ETHAN TAKES ME IN, his eyes sparkle. The dress I bought is floor-length, plum ombre fabric with a jeweled waistline. A single strap wraps over and connects to the waist, exposing my back.

Ethan's tuxedo is tailored to perfection, enhancing his broad shoulders. His usual messed-to-perfection hair is styled neatly, and his infamous five o'clock shadow transformed into a smooth face. While I drool over his bad-boy looks, I think I love this look just as much.

WE WALK into the grand entrance of the country club and find our table assignments. Ethan and I are at Rick's table along with a couple of his colleagues and their spouses. Rick and Evelyn are sitting at the table speaking with another couple. Evelyn has toned down her appearance to blend with the Hayes's women's style. She is still strikingly beautiful but classically elegant. She and Rick seem to be masters of this game. The conversation is business oriented, and Rick works Ethan into the conversation.

After the salad course, a couple of the wives redirect their husbands, reminding them it's supposed to be a relaxing night out. When conversation turns lighter, questions are directed my way, mainly about school and my family. I am grateful during this exchange for my private school education and my mom's constant Miss Manners lessons. It eases some of the discomfort the attention causes. The few other times I've attended Hayes family functions, I was able to blend into the

background, rarely speaking to anyone other than the cousins I knew and Preston's parents.

I excuse myself to the ladies' room after the main course as Evelyn does the same. As soon as we walk through the door, she looks around and checks the stalls.

She takes a breath then says, "I'm sorry about last night. Rick is desperate to ensure Ethan's spot in the company, and he knows how hard it's going to be for him coming back in. Did you know he hasn't socialized with the Hayes family since the divorce?"

I nod my head.

"Rick wants him in the business. He doesn't want the others to push him out. With this much money and power, all those cousins are fighting for a piece of the pie. Rick wants to make sure you're thick-skinned enough to withstand any attacks that may come your way because of your relationship with Ethan. You have an advantage no other girl would have though. You are best friends with one of the people in line to take over when Charles and Rick decide to retire."

I am stunned silent. I know his family is powerful, but knowing Preston and his parents, it all seemed normal.

"Why are you telling me this?" I ask quietly.

"Because Rick wasn't sure if Ethan would. He and I didn't want you blindsided tonight. Ethan is still wrapping his head around all this. Rick just started these conversations with him recently, making sure he was ready and that Ethan had time to let all the anger go."

"Oh" is the only thing that comes to mind. Confusion with information overload is setting in. I will myself to keep it together, breathing in all the emotions.

"Don't worry. Maybe nothing will happen. But be prepared, just in case." She offers me a smile and a small hug. I guess she's not the social climber I first thought.

"How long have you been dating Mr. Hayes?" I ask, wondering whether she has been on the receiving end of this.

“A couple of years. And yes, I had a very rocky beginning. I was not raised a debutante in this town. I wasn’t accepted. But we stuck it out. You, my dear, have been, so use that advantage.”

The door opens, and a couple of women walk in. We touch up our lipstick and walk back to the table.

Ethan watches me intently as I sit down. He places his arm on the back of my chair and lets his fingers drift on my bare shoulder before coming close to my ear and whispering, “Evelyn talked to you, didn’t she?”

I barely move my head to answer, not wanting to bring attention to us.

“Are you okay?”

I answer the same.

He places a small kiss on my temple, and when he pulls back, I turn to look at him, hoping my expression relaxes him.

This secret, intimate exchange solidifies us for me. His protectiveness, passion, love, just everything about him is what I want and need. I will handle myself accordingly and stand by him through any family drama that may arise.

Dessert is served, and the conversation at the table is light and fun thanks to the wine and champagne flowing throughout the different courses. Wanting to keep my wits about me, I have been sipping on the same glass.

After the meal, everyone begins to move about the ballroom socializing. Couples make their way to the dance floor as the music begins. Ethan and I are about the head to the bar when his father comes up asking for a minute with him. Left alone, I decide to check on Lena and say hello to Preston’s parents. As I walk to their table, Chad, another Hayes cousin I went to school with, stops me.

“Sophia, it’s good to see you.” He gives me a brief hug.

“Hi, Chad. It’s nice to see you too. How are you?”

“I’m good. Dance?” He extends his hand to me. I place mine in his, letting him lead me to the floor. We stop in the

middle, and he wraps his arm around me.

“So how have you been?” he begins as we dance.

“Good. Adjusting to college life.” I smile and answer pleasantly.

“I know how that is. Last year living away from home was an adjustment, especially being out of state.”

“I didn’t want to be that far away. I like San Antonio. Is this year better for you?”

“It is. So who are you here with? I saw Preston brought his new girlfriend.” Is he fishing for information? I am sure everyone has already seen me sitting with Ethan at Rick’s table.

“I’m Ethan’s date,” I answer.

“Don’t you mean my girlfriend?” Ethan says behind me.

I turn to look at him, my lips pulling out at my new title.

“May I?” he asks Chad as he extends his hand to me.

Chad tips his head and lets me go. Ethan wraps his arm protectively around my waist, his hand on my bare lower back. The skin-on-skin contact sends electric sensations throughout my body.

“Vultures coming in already?” He looks down at me smirking, then places a small kiss on my lips.

I roll my eyes. “You know I know him,” I answer sarcastically.

“Yes, I do know, but I’m sure he knew you were here with me. As much as I am trying to mend things, I’m not sure I want all this.” He lets my hand go and flicks his hand in no particular direction.

“Do what you want. I only want you.”

“You sure? I don’t want to ask this of you. And I don’t want to be without you.” His features turn serious.

“I’m positive. I’m with you no matter what.” I pause then ask, “Why are you so worried?”

“Because according to my dad, it could get ugly.”

The song ends, and he escorts me to the bar. He gets us a drink, and we find Lena and Preston. We talk for a couple of minutes before Charles and Rick approach, asking to see Preston and Ethan.

“What do you think of all this?” Lena asks.

“Of the gala?”

“That and all the networking. You should have heard his dad at the table. All business.”

I nod my head and refuse to speak of anything, not knowing how many ears may be listening.

“The usual.” I shrug my shoulders, trying to seem unaffected by her observation.

“How about we finish that dance, Sof?” Chad comes up to me, hand extended. I agree, my ingrained manners not allowing me to say no.

“So really?” he begins as soon as we are on the dance floor.

“Really?” I ask.

“You’re really dating Ethan. How did that happen?” he asks with a hint of disgust in his voice.

“Yes, I am. We met. And now we’re together,” I answer, knowing no one needs to know any more than that.

“Why? Haven’t you heard about him?” His brows come together.

“I have.” I keep it simple.

“And you’re still dating him?” The surprise sounds honest, but now I question it.

“What would I have heard that would keep me from dating him?”

“You know, he’s a player. I’m sure you’re not the only one he’s dating at the moment. He just brought you because his other girls would not fit in.”

I can feel the heat building around my neck, and I'm hoping it is not physically noticeable.

A tap on my shoulder startles me. "How about that dance?" Relief washes over me hearing Preston's voice.

"Why haven't you warned her about Ethan, man?" Chad asks Preston.

"No need to." Preston grabs me and sweeps me away from Chad.

I am confused, wanting to talk to Preston, but scared because of all I heard this evening.

Preston notices my unease, so he picks my chin up to face him. "Sof, I'm on Ethan's side. In case you were wondering."

I trust Preston. I always have. I give him a tight smile, and we finish the song before we walk toward Ethan. He is tense, posture stiff, jaw clenching. As soon as he places his hands on my shoulders, his frame relaxes.

I take a seat next to Lena, and he sits beside me, placing his arm protectively around me and bringing me close.

He comes close to my ear whispering, "Did you get a dose of it already?"

How do I answer him? I hate to tell him his own cousins are speaking badly of him, but I cannot let him trust the wrong people either. I turn to look at him, our faces so close I can feel his breath. "I did, but it was more about you and your reputation, not me." I frown.

He brushes his lips gently across mine. "You sure about this?"

"Absolutely." My smile spreads wide with my new sense of determination. I was always so unsure of what I wanted to do and floundered, not making any true decisions. Making this one gives me a new sense of purpose. I know and trust he will do his damndest to protect me, and I want to do the same for him.

The evening goes on with more mingling and dancing. I notice Chad and his mother watching us on several occasions.

Ethan also seems more at peace throughout the evening now that he knows I am supporting his decision to pursue the family business. His posture relaxes, he smiles more and works the room with confidence.

Back in the limousine with Preston and Lena, the weight of the evening begins to dissipate. While I'm ready to take on this responsibility, it did not make it any less stressful.

"I guess I need to fill you in now." Ethan looks at me, then at Preston.

Preston tips his head, and Ethan continues. "My dad has been talking to me about wanting me to join in the family business. It's all been somewhat hypothetical until recently because I wasn't sure I wanted it. Preston and I never really lost touch the way I did with the others, but we weren't close by any means. We started talking much more this year.

"Building my relationship with Preston made me slowly come around. Uncle Charles isn't always a fan of my decisions, but he and my dad are close. You know Preston and Christina are being groomed for the company, and if I want it, my dad will help prepare me. But the problem comes with the others. They want to take over, but since their moms just draw money from their stocks, they are ready to claw their way in. That would mean too many cooks in the kitchen."

"Both of you have known this and have been planning?" I ask.

"Not planning, but aware," Preston chimes in.

"So you're working together to stay in the company's top positions?"

"Yes, but more than that. We want to build and expand. We would continue the vision our dads are proposing. But not everyone is on board." Preston is taking the lead in answering. I can see Ethan watching me as I absorb the information.

"Okay." This is enough information for me. I know I can trust one of my best friends the way I always have, and I will support my boyfriend.

“Just okay? No other questions?” Ethan asks as I look at Lena and sense all of this is new to her also.

“Yes, your family business is your business. I am happy knowing I can continue trusting my best friend. Have nothing to hide from the best roommate ever. And I will stand by my boyfriend come hell or high water. Not saying there may not be tears, because I’m really not thick-skinned, but I want,” I look directly at Ethan, “you to be happy.”

His hands come to my cheeks and pull my lips to his.

“So...what about you?” Preston asks, looking at Lena.

She is silent for a few seconds, then she agrees. “Sof is right. This is all your business. As long as we,” she waves her hand between herself and I, “don’t have to hide stuff from each other or be on opposing teams, I’m good too.”

25

ETHAN HAS AN EARLY MORNING LAB, SO I DECIDE TO GRAB A coffee and read in the humanities building in one of the lounge areas before my first class.

“Where the hell have you been?” Caleb’s voice breaks through the silence.

My body begins trembling. I look behind me, and he is standing behind the couch, sneering at me. My voice is stuck in my throat.

“Well? I’ve been calling you. You fucking blocked my number. Fucking childish. How the hell are we going to fix things? Where have you been?”

I stand up, but fear paralyzes me. No words leave my mouth. *Walk. Just move your feet.* My heart pounds loudly in my ears. I take one step.

“Oh no you don’t.” He grabs my elbow and pulls me into a corner. “If you don’t want a scene, you better talk to me.”

My breathing is shallow. “There’s nothing to talk about. Let me go.” My voice is weak.

“Bullshit! I’ve had enough of this. I’ve given you time. Come on.”

He grips my arm tighter and is about to drag me with him when I hear, “Hey, Sophia! Ready for the quiz?” My classmate, David, greets me.

“Hi. I am.” I pull my arm from Caleb’s grip, gaining courage in the presence of another person. “Do you have the

notes from last Wednesday? I forgot mine.”

“Sure. Come on, and I’ll give them to you.” I ignore Caleb and turn around, walking with my classmate, my heartbeat racing like I’d just sprinted.

We take our seats in the classroom, and he finally asks, “Are you okay?”

I shake my head, and the adrenaline that was keeping the tears at bay melts, and I am left with moisture flooding my eyes. I drop my head on the desk, trying to hide.

“Do you need me to do anything?” Concern emanates through his words.

“Not anymore. Thank you. What you did, that was enough.”

I think about how he purposely stopped and talked to me. He could have walked by, minded his own business, but he checked on me. I am utterly grateful for this. I run through every scenario during class, and it’s clear to me that there is no safe way for me to leave class if Caleb is still waiting on me. With about fifteen minutes left of the lecture, I decide my only option is to text Ethan to come escort me.

I hate the idea of placing him in this situation, but I’m scared.

Me: can u leave class early and come get me?

Each minute ticking by has my chest tightening a bit more. Finally, three minutes later, his text comes through.

Ethan: whats wrong

Me: caleb is waiting on me outside my class. Pls come get me. humanities bldg. #318

Ethan: on my way

I’m able to breathe just a little better but am worried about what will happen when Caleb sees Ethan.

Me: don’t do anything. I don’t want u to get in trouble

I text him nervously, hoping to avoid further difficulty.

Ethan: I'm coming to get u. if he stays away things will stay cool

I whisper to David next to me, "Can you walk with me? At least until I see my boyfriend. He should be out there."

Me: r u here yet

The professor is getting ready to dismiss class.

Ethan: around the corner tell me when you're walking out

A couple of minutes later, she dismisses us, and I send the text letting him know I am coming out. My heart is racing. David walks behind me, his hand on my back as we follow everyone out. I see Caleb standing—arms crossed, glaring in my direction—right outside the door. My legs feel like they might give out on me at any moment. I look to my right, where the next hall intersects, and see Ethan leaning against the wall.

I turn to him immediately, praying my legs get me to him. I can still feel David's hand on my back, which gives me some comfort since my back is to Caleb now. I walk into Ethan's chest, and his arms encapsulate me.

"Hey, I'm David." I hear him speaking to Ethan, but it begins to sound far away.

"What the fuck are you doing here, pretty boy? Haven't I already told you to stay out of our business?"

My body begins to feel like jelly, and I'm lightheaded and dizzy.

"Hold her." I feel arms.

"You have no business here. She's mine now. She's *my* girlfriend. Come near her again, and you're going to have a real big problem."

Arms are holding me up, voices, but my eyes aren't focusing.

"Fuck you. She and I are back together. That's why I'm here. She texted me begging me to forgive her for her childish behavior. I'm taking her with me."

I feel a hand on my arm and horror hits me like a ton of bricks.

“BABY GIRL. I need you to wake up.” Ethan’s voice is far away.

Where am I? My head is throbbing, and my body is weak. I need to open my eyes. Slowly, my eyes open, and I focus on Ethan, who is right in front of me.

“Baby. Shit.” He presses a soft kiss to my lips and takes a big gulp of air. “Can you sit up for me?”

I can’t answer, all I want to do is sleep. Why does he want to wake me up?

“Where am I?” I croak.

“Come on. Sit up, slowly.” He grabs my shoulders and pulls me up to a sitting position. I look around, recognizing my surroundings.

“What happened?”

“Let’s get out of here, then we’ll talk.” He helps me stand.

I’m still dizzy, and my legs are unstable, so he holds me. My steps are timid, but my strength and bearings slowly come back with each step.

BACK IN MY APARTMENT, he sits me on the couch, then goes into the kitchen. He brings back a glass of orange juice, handing it to me as he sits beside me. I take a drink, then place the glass on the coffee table.

“What happened?”

“You fainted.” He confirms my suspicions. “I asked your classmate to hold on to you as I dealt with Caleb, and all of a sudden, he calls me to me and you’re sliding down out of his grip.”

“Oh.” I run my hands through my hair, pulling it to the side. “How long was I out?”

“A couple of minutes. As soon as you passed out, Caleb left. Which was good. I don’t know what I would’ve done if he tried to touch you.”

I take a moment to let everything process. I can’t believe Caleb and his actions affected me that way. I am disgusted; he does not respect me and my decision for him to stay away. No means no.

Ethan once again came to my rescue. The strength and confidence he emanates saved me. I hate to think about how this morning would have turned out if he had not come.

“What happened today, baby?” His eyebrows pull in, framing his eyes, which look so sad and overwhelmed.

“As I was about to go to class, he showed up. He pulled me into a corner. He was furious I had blocked his calls and he couldn’t find me this weekend. Said it was enough time for me to think and we were getting back together.”

“Why would he think you are available?” There’s an annoyance seeping through his words.

“Because he doesn’t know we’re together. I thought it would piss him off more, and I just wanted him to stay away.”

“You were worried about pissing *him* off?”

“Yes...I mean, no. It’s that, I’m not going to get back with him because of him. His actions and the way he treated me. Even if we, you and me,” I wave my index finger between us, “didn’t get together, my answer to him would still be no.”

“So the fact that I told him we were together...?”

“Is fine. I don’t care if he knows I’m just—”

He interrupts, “Just what, Sophia?”

“Just that I’m scared of him,” I admit.

“You are scared of him because of us?”

I’m doing a poor job of explaining myself.

“Kinda. Because he stayed with me to piss you off and to prove he could. So knowing I am with you now...I don’t

know, may make him even angrier. It makes me nervous. When he came by the apartment that last time, he wouldn't leave. Even when I asked him. And today, I tried walking away, and he grabbed me and pulled me. Even with everyone around us. I don't trust him." My voice drops to a whisper. "I'm scared of him."

I register everything I just said and realize I confessed Wes's secret. I never meant to, but Caleb's actions have caused so much turmoil. I watch as Ethan processes what I admitted.

"Explain what you meant when you said he stayed with you because of me."

"Remember the day on campus you saw Wes talking to me?" I wait for him to answer. "Wes was telling me things about Caleb that I didn't know. He said Caleb had a reputation of going through girls, never staying with one long. He said Caleb stayed with me because he knew you were interested and wanted to win the pissing contest. He was competing with you by using me."

"Dammit!" Ethan's rubs his face roughly in frustration. "Fuck! I knew it. I fucking knew it. I should have said something." He drops his head back hitting the wall behind him with a loud thud. His hands are still covering his face as he continues cussing and berating himself. I need to put a stop to this. While I am touched he is so passionate about protecting me, there is nothing that can change the past.

I crawl up on his lap and pull his hands away from his face so that he can look at me.

"We can't change what happened, so please do not beat yourself up for this. Please. Don't let him come between us now."

I wrap my arms around his neck, placing my head on his shoulder and hugging him tightly. His body is rigid with anger and annoyance, but as I hold him, he begins to soften. A couple of quiet minutes pass before he wraps his arms around me tightly. His lips leave a few soft kisses on my neck between a couple of *I'm sorrys*.

I sit up and say, “There’s more.”

He nods. “Go on.”

I try to move off him, but he holds my hips, keeping me on his lap.

“The incident I saw between him and Emily was not the first time. Supposedly, it had been going on for some time. So now you see. He did it all. You still wanting me after everything, coming to my rescue...is more than I expected or deserve. I love you.”

“I love you too.” He places a soft kiss on my lips before he asks, “Why did Wes tell you?”

“That’s the one thing Lena and I never figured out. He asked me to never repeat what he said because they were still friends and roommates, but he said that he felt sorry for me because Caleb was playing me. I told Lena that day, but no one else. He risked his friendship telling me, so I wanted to respect that by keeping my mouth shut. So please don’t say anything.”

“Of course not. You’re mine now. I have nothing to gain by saying anything. But tell me why you’re scared of him.” His last words are careful and controlled.

“There’s no one thing I can put my finger on, but he scares me. He pushes too hard and doesn’t listen to me. Like when he grabs me, holding me so hard it’s painful, or doesn’t let me go or corners me. I don’t like it. He’s been this way the whole time, but he gets worse when I’m not doing what he wants.” Ethan’s body begins to tense.

“Baby, wh...no never mind. We’ll figure it out.” He leans me into his chest again, holding tightly. “I’m going to walk you to class from now on. If I can’t, one of the guys will. I don’t want you by yourself right now. Especially because you don’t feel safe. I hope you don’t mind.”

I don’t mind. I’m actually relieved at the offer. As much as Ethan doesn’t want me by myself, I don’t want to run into Caleb on my own either.

“I’m fine with that. Actually, I would prefer it. I was just thinking how lucky I am to have found you.”

He gently pushes me away from him. “I am the lucky one.”

26

ETHAN LEAVES THE APARTMENT TO PICK UP SOME THINGS FROM his house with the promise of returning later. Home alone, I begin to dwell on the situation I am in. It is ridiculous I have to be escorted to class so I can feel safe. It is absurd. The more I stew on it, the angrier I become.

I work myself into a tizzy, so I call my mom to vent. My mom answers, and I do not give her time for pleasantries before I spew out everything that happened this morning.

My mother is quiet except for the occasional sounds or mumbles letting me know she's listening. I finish with Ethan's plan to walk me to and from class.

"Sophia, you are not going to like what I have to say, but I am your mother." She pauses, ensuring she has my full attention.

"Okay." I answer meekly, nervous about what's to come.

"I want you home. Now. I told you just a few days ago I was uncomfortable with you there. We will be there tomorrow, and we are bringing you home."

The shock of what she says has me temporarily speechless. "But Mom. I can't. I have classes. I don't want to fail. Please, Mom, don't. Not yet." I begin pleading, begging for her to change her mind.

"Sophia, stop. You call me with this, and what did you expect? For me to listen and hang up with no qualms? You and your sister are our lives. I can't protect you from here." I can hear her soft cries.

“Mom, I promise I won’t do anything to put myself at risk. I can’t let him rule my life. He already did for too long. Not anymore.” I continue trying to persuade her.

“I’m going to speak with your father tonight, and we will call you. I’m not making any promises.” I sigh a minuscule breath of relief. I know my mom means well, but she sometimes jumps the gun. My dad is the reasonable one who carefully plans before committing to anything.

“Okay.” I concede, knowing this is my best option.

The front door opens just as I hang up. I walk out of my room to greet Lena. I follow her into her room, sharing the events of the morning and ending with the call to my mom.

ETHAN AND MIKE return with grocery bags in hand.

“Taco dinner tonight, ladies.” Mike tells us as he begins to take things out of the bags, shoving them in the fridge. I sit at the table watching the guys making themselves at home in our kitchen.

“Love it. Great dinner, and looks like I don’t have to cook it,” Lena says in her happy sing-song voice.

We all settle in the living room, the TV on as everyone reads or does homework. My mom texts me a quick message letting me know my dad is on his way home and they will be talking.

“Ethan,” I say to get his attention. “I might have made a mistake earlier.” His expression morphs into one of worry mixed with horror. “I got myself all worked up and called my mom to vent, and now she is worried. She threatened to come into town tomorrow and move me back home.” The intense look softens.

“Threatened?”

“She said that’s what they were doing but, I begged to stay. She is going to talk to my dad, and they’re going to call. I expect a call in an hour or less. My dad is on his way home

now. So now, I will have to beg my dad to let me stay.” My chest tightens at the thought of leaving Ethan.

He’s unnaturally calm about the possibility of me leaving. It bothers me, but I refuse to say anything about it in front of Mike and Lena. He continues studying at the table, and I stay on the couch looking at the pages of my textbook, reading the same paragraph a dozen times.

A little over half an hour later, my phone rings. I answer and immediately know I’m on speaker phone. Apprehensive, I feel the tears begin to slide down my cheeks. These silent, sad tears are the hardest to control, no indication they will appear and once they fall, so difficult to stop.

“How are you feeling, Sophia?” My father begins with the calm, controlled voice he uses when he needs to rein in the women in his life.

“About what exactly, Dad? Caleb’s jerk behavior or Mom wanting me to move home?” I say with a bite in my tone.

“Attitude check, young lady.” The simplest of statements makes me revert me back to childhood. This is my dad’s way of informing me there will be no tolerance for the dramatics.

“I’m scared, Dad.” Three words release all the emotions and secrets I have bottled for so long. “I don’t want to go home. I finally found my place here. It was so hard in the beginning. I didn’t have friends. I was lonely. I skipped class a lot. I thought I was going to fail. And now because one jerk can’t take no for an answer, I have to go home? I don’t want to.”

I am so focused on the call, I forgot everyone is around me until Mike and Lena get up and head into her room. Ethan walks over to the couch and sits down, pulling me close to him.

“Sophia, so what—,” he takes me off speaker phone, “—I’m hearing is you were not exactly honest with us. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” I admit wisely, knowing the time has come to tell the truth.

“Talk to me. Tell me what happened this year,” he probes further.

I curl myself into a ball and burrow myself into Ethan’s side. Ethan will be hearing everything along with my dad. “I had a hard time in the beginning. It was so much harder meeting people and making friends than I thought it would be. I spent all my time alone. When Caleb came along, I guess I clung on for dear life, not wanting the isolation I had put myself in. I realize now I stayed with him longer than I should have and ignored some red flags. But I know now. And I won’t do that again.” It is quiet on the other end.

I feel Ethan’s body tense a bit during my explanation, but he stays silent, continuing to stroke my side gently.

“What’s this plan your mom told me about?” he says after a few tense moments.

“Ethan or one of his roommates will walk with me to and from class. We already worked it out. I have Lena here at the apartment with me too.” I try to sound confident, even though I feel anything but.

“And this is one of *the* Hayes kids?”

“Yes, Preston’s cousin.” I throw in Preston’s name for good measure, knowing how much my parents like and trust him.

“Fine. For now. But you also need to look into the university’s policy on stalking. You need to speak to someone. I expect a call tomorrow on what you’ve learned. Also, we need a morning, afternoon, and evening call or text. That is for your mother. Now, is the Hayes boy there with you now?” It sounds like my dad already had this plan formulated and just let me sweat for a while.

“Yes. He and his roommate came over for dinner.”

“I would like to talk to him.” I pull myself away from Ethan’s side and mouth to him *My dad wants to talk to you* as I hit the speaker button on my phone.

“He’s listening, Dad.” I hold the phone in front of us.

“Not on speaker, Sophia. Hand him the phone, please.” My eyes widen at my dad’s stern request, but Ethan gives me a reassuring smile, taking the phone out of my hand and releasing the speaker before placing it to his ear.

“Hello...yes, sir, Richard Hayes’s son...I don’t want her by herself on campus right now, sir...please believe that it is mine too... I intend to... Okay, here she is.” Ethan hands the phone back to me.

My dad gives me a quick goodbye with the directive to call in the morning. He did not even give me a chance to ask what their brief conversation had been. I hang up and look directly at Ethan for answers.

“As worried as I am about you, he’s a hundred times more concerned. I can understand that. You need to too.” His words are filled with an emotion I cannot define.

“I know... I’m just glad I’m not moving home tomorrow.” I snuggle up against him again. The feel of his physical strength, which is usually a complete turn on, provides the safety I need in this moment.

“You guys can come out of the room now,” he yells out loud for Lena and Mike to hear. “Let’s make dinner.”



THE NEXT COUPLE of days go by as normal as they can with Ethan and his friends on high alert. True to his word, Ethan stays at my place at night, Lena and I accommodating him into our daily routines. I especially reveled in having him in my bed each night and waking tangled up with him. Not sure this is exactly what my parents had in mind when they agreed Ethan would walk me to class.

I haven’t had much luck with meeting with a university employee to talk about stalking. This did not bode well with either my dad or Ethan, both knowing his guilt. The problem is, I’m unable to prove it. I learned I need to save everything he does from texts to voicemails.

I'M WAITING in the crowded University Center as Mike buys us a couple of coffees while we wait for Ethan to finish his last class. My phone vibrates in my hand. I assume it's Ethan and smile to myself as I swipe the screen without looking at it.

You look good today. But I don't think red is your color. You look tense. Meet me later and I can help you relax.

Mike turns around to hand me my coffee and asks, "Are you okay?"

I spin around looking for Caleb. It is not a number I recognize, but I know it's him. I just can't prove it. My phone vibrates again, and I look down to see another message.

Looking for me, babe? Lose your bodyguard and come to me. I'm waiting.

He is here and messing with me. He is playing a game I no longer want to be a part of. Once again, the fear of not having control over my life makes my chest tighten.

"Sof? What happened?" Mike crouches to look me in the eyes and secure my attention.

I need to be where Caleb can no longer see me. I grab his hand and pull him toward the front of the building. Mike allows me to lead him without questions until we reach the shuttle area.

"Sof, I have my car. I can take you home if you want." I hear him, but his words aren't registering in my mind.

Too many thoughts crowd my brain, not allowing the simplest of phrases to make sense. He takes my hand and begins walking toward one of the parking garages. I see him texting but am too overwhelmed to think much about it.

He gets me back to the apartment, and I walk into my room.

"I'll be here if you need anything," Mike calls out to me.

I should answer, but nothing comes out.

I'm staring at the ceiling when I hear the front door open and Mike greeting Ethan.

"What happened?" Ethan's voice cuts through my thoughts of gloom.

"Don't know. She was fine. We stopped for coffee at the UC while we waited for you. I turn around to hand her the cup, and she's ghostly white. She pulled me out of the building, so I brought her home. She's been in there since."

"Baby?" Ethan says, walking into the room and sitting on the edge of the bed. "Talk to me. What happened?"

I still have the phone in my hand, and it has vibrated a couple more times, but I chose not to look at it. I hold out the phone to him. His brows come together, but he takes the phone from me.

"Motherfucker!" His exclamation jars me out of my stupor, and I sit up. "I'm gonna fucking kill that motherfucking bastard."

At Ethan's outburst, Mike comes into my room and stands at the open door.

"What did he do?"

"He was there watching y'all. He texted her. He's fucking playing with her."

I am still having trouble participating in the conversation about me.

"Let him." Mike says matter-of-factly, shrugging his shoulders. "That's why he did it. He's pissed I was with her. You think that asshole would have stayed away from her if I wasn't there? Fuck no. He would have tried to bully her to talk to him or tried to pull her away again. He's not going to mess with her if we're around. He knows better. She's safe, dude."

Mike's right. He would have come up to me if I was alone. He just sent the text because I was with Mike. But what about when I am alone? I can't have them with me twenty-four seven. Caleb is going to find a way to catch me alone. Thinking about this makes my breathing labored.

I let out a moan of frustration, and they turn to look at me. “I’m going to have to face him at some point. I can’t keep doing this. He’s going to find me.” Panic grips me, and the need to run is overwhelming.

“No, you don’t. He’ll get tired or bored and stay away after a while. This isn’t forever. Just for now. This was the exact reason why we’ve been with you,” Ethan says confidently. I can see the anger he is holding, but his calm, gentle reaction to my statement settles me.

“But I can’t ask y’all to keep escorting me everywhere,” I respond, defeated.

“You aren’t asking. We’re insisting,” he says plainly. Mike is nodding his head, still standing at my door.

“No worries, Sof. There are worse things in life than spending time with a beautiful, chill girl,” Mike says, smiling.

“What the hell, dude?” Ethan exclaims jokingly.

“Am I lying?” Mike smirks at Ethan. “We’re on campus anyways. Everything’s good.” He says that last bit to me.

I hate they have to do this for me but know there is no way to dissuade them.

THE EXCITEMENT OF VISITING A CITY I'VE NEVER BEEN TO continues to brew as we touch down in New Orleans and catch a cab. The cab driver taking us to our hotel in the French Quarter talks animatedly about the city and the attractions. Ethan and Mike ask him about hidden gems within the that city tourists may not find without the help of a local. He gives us several places to visit that specialize in po' boys or barbequed shrimp or delicious cocktails.

We are staying in an older hotel that holds the classic charm of New Orleans but is restored with modern conveniences and tastefully decorated. Our room is amazing, large with a sitting room, bedroom, and a huge bathroom.

After settling in and freshening up, we meet everyone in the lobby.

“Where are we heading?” I ask to anyone willing to answer in the group.

“Home of the Hurricanes, of course,” Lena answers with a grin that is spread from ear to ear.

We walk out of the hotel, everyone participating in different conversations. I am in awe of everything around me. It's as if I was transported to another country. The buildings are old, but all hold a certain mystical charm. We pass talented locals on the streets performing for everyone walking by—music, dancing, performance art, and even a marching band keep people entertained. People from all walks of life converge around the sights and sounds.

“You are absolutely adorable, baby,” Ethan says with a gleam in his eye. I raise an eyebrow in question. “The way you are taking everything in.”

“Thanks.” I roll my eyes, a little embarrassed I was caught wide-eyed.

We cut through a side street and walk to the entrance. A brick hallway leads to a beautiful patio filled with people enjoying themselves. We scan the area, searching for a table of our own.

“Is everyone in?” Lena asks after we find a table.

“In?” Paige responds.

“For Hurricanes.” Lena responds with eyes wide, shaking her head.

Everyone at the table approves of the order.

“How many times have you been here?” Preston asks her.

“Once, but I didn’t get to do all this.” She waves her hands around her. “Family vacay, and when my parents went out, I got to babysit my brother at the hotel.” She exaggerates a pout for sympathy. “I was so excited to come, I did a little research of things to do.” The pout fades into a devilish smile.

“What do we have to do?” Mike jumps in.

“Well...I would like to do the haunted walking tour. Bar hop down Bourbon. There are a couple of famous restaurants, maybe? I don’t want to shove what I want down everyone’s throat, just suggestions. This was the only place that was a must for me.”

“Haunted tour?” Bree asks.

“Yep, they take you to different places around the Quarter that are supposedly haunted.” The gleam in her eyes tells us she really wants to go.

“I’m in!” I exclaim, excited.

Ethan comes in close to me and whispers in my ear, “Really?”

I turn to look at him. “Scared?” Now I am the one smirking.

He closes the small gap between us and kisses me firmly. “Not a chance,” he says when he pulls away with a cocky grin plastered on his face.

Our waitress returns with the drinks. We all raise our glasses and clink, exclaiming, “Happy Spring Break.” It is just as refreshing and delicious as it looks. We enjoy ourselves, sipping on the fruity drink in the sunny, nice, yet humid, afternoon. The conversation continues to flow as does another round.

After a couple of rounds everyone is ready to hit Bourbon Street. We pay our tab and head out for our next exploit. The amount of people out and about has increased significantly. Many are walking with drinks in hand. Each bar or club we pass has bouncers yelling their specials to the crowd, trying to entice people to enter their establishment. People on the balconies overhead are dangling beads and yelling down to the crowds in the street. A couple of drunken girls and guys raise tops and drop bottoms for the chance to catch the infamous beads.

As we pass a strip club, Mike and Josh tease about the guys making a stop and for us girls to find a place to wait on them. My heart drops at the thought of Ethan going into one of those clubs. As much as I don’t want him to go in, I’m not about to be the party pooper if that’s what he wants to do.

“Hell no! Y’all knock yourselves out. I’m not jeopardizing my chances of getting some tonight by walking in there,” Ethan teases the guys while giving my hand a reassuring squeeze. I swat him across the chest, slightly embarrassed by his brash comment.

“I think I just heard the sound of the whip,” Mike teases.

“Say whatever you will, but Preston is awfully quiet over there. And I’m guaranteed a good time. What about you two?” Ethan defends himself while laughing hysterically as I turn a wonderful shade of crimson.

We come upon a club that excites Paige and Bree when the bouncer yells, “Two-for-one drinks upstairs on the balcony!” We flash our IDs as we walk into the club. Ethan’s hand, which was on my back, guiding me, disappears, so I follow Paige as she weaves through the crowd, following Bree to the staircase that leads up to the balcony. She walks right up to the bar, ordering eight beers for everyone. I look around wondering where we lost the rest of our party. When the bartender starts placing bottle after bottle on the counter, we look at each other puzzled. She begins popping the tops off and spouts off, “That’ll be fifty-four.”

“I ordered eight.” Paige hesitantly replies.

“Two for one, doll.” She replies with a clack of her tongue and a superior smirk.

Bree and I start giggling at the mistake Paige made ordering. Bree and I each grab two in each hand and look for a table to place them on while Paige pays. We find a table, and Bree goes back to help Paige with the others. I take in my surroundings, starting to worry about where I lost Ethan. There are so many scantily clad females bumping and grinding with guys all over. I love and trust Ethan, but my innate insecurity begins to make an appearance. I jump and spin around when I feel hands on my waist.

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” Ethan says, giving me a quick kiss.

Mike and Josh grab a beer from the table, taking large gulps as Paige and Bree join with the rest.

“Thirsty?” Mike asks, his brows raised, looking at the small cocktail table filled with beers.

His question has Bree and I giggling again.

“Shut up!” Paige looks at us, eyes narrowed, then adds for everyone else who is looking at her. “I ordered eight, not thinking about the two-for-one special the bouncer told us about. So y’all can double fist it.” She raises her bottle and mock salutes us.

Ethan grabs a beer and wraps his other arm around my middle, leaning down and kissing my neck.

“Where were y’all?”

“Men’s room.” He leans in again, kissing me firmly.

I hate that my insecurity clouds my judgment and keeps me from trusting him the way I want to. Having confidence in oneself is hard. Saying it and feeling it are on two very different things.

I bring my focus back to the present, not wanting Ethan to see my inner turmoil.

“Let’s go check out the balcony!” Lena yells over the music pumping throughout the club. Preston grabs her hand, leading her out. I look at Ethan, who is talking with Josh. As much as I want to stay by his side, I decide I need to trust and learn independence. I walk behind them with Bree close behind.

There are a few people with a bag of beads yelling down to the street. The view of the street and people from this vantage point is unique. The people next to us are yelling asinine instructions to catch people’s attention. Everyone laughs at the requests, and some even participate for the chance to collect more beads. The group hands Preston a large handful of beads and encourage us to join in.

Lena and I get one guy to stop as we tease him to drop his pants. He is dancing around to the music coming out of the club. He is teasing us back and yelling for us to lift our shirts. We laugh hysterically. Preston teases Lena that he will be the one dropping his pants for Lena. I’m practically doubled over from laughing so hard when I feel arms come around my waist. I stand up to lean against Ethan, holding my breath, trying to control my laughter.

“I leave you for a few minutes and find you cat-calling guys to drop their pants?” he teases. He turns to Preston and adds, laughing, “And please, dude, no one wants to see your white-as-hell ass. Save that shit for your room.”

Preston acts hurt as I swipe a couple of strands from his hand and throw them to the guy we were teasing, just for being such a good sport.

“The next time you need to see a guy’s goodies, just ask. I’ll be happy to oblige.” Ethan says in my ear before sucking my ear lobe into his mouth and trailing kisses down my neck. I close my eyes, relishing the moment. The intensity of his kisses and his body heat pressed up against me leaves me breathless and weak at the knees. I turn around, placing my hands on his shoulders to steady myself, pressing my body tightly to him.

“Go to your room for that shit!” I hear Mike tease.

We are breathless and need space to regain our composure, but we refuse to let go.

“Dance with me,” he says as we gaze at each other.

I let my hand slide down his arm, sliding my fingers between his. “Let’s go.”

“Heading downstairs to the dance floor,” he tells our friends as I pull him behind me. I wiggle through the dense crowd with Ethan close behind.

He grabs my hips, pulling me against him as soon as I find a spot. We begin dancing, his hands on my hips gripping me, holding me close. The heated look in his eyes makes my heart race and my temperature rise. I place my hands on his six-pack abs, sliding one hand up his chest until it reaches his neck. My other hand slides sideways under his shirt along his waist, grazing the top of his jeans.

He slides his hands up and skims my bare skin under my shirt.

“I can play dirty too.” He cocks an eyebrow at me and twitches his lip up seductively.

I’m melting into him, running my hand under his shirt. I turn around, pressing my back to his front. I grab his hands bringing them to my stomach. I can feel his erection, and I rub my ass harder against him as I clench, wanting to feel him inside me. The intimate play that is going on back and forth

between us makes me wonder if it is New Orleans and the strange mystique this city possesses, the amount alcohol I have consumed, or just him, but something is fueling the need I am feeling in this moment.

Ethan kisses my neck and says, “I think it is about time we call it a night.”

Feeling extremely hot and bothered, I nod my head.

He walks up to the second floor with me in tow.

“We’re out of here guys,” he shouts over the music to Mike and Bree, who are hanging on the balcony. Our other friends are lost somewhere in the crowd.

“Already? Can’t believe you want to leave this club. It’s legit,” Mike says.

Ethan shakes his head, smiling. “Sorry, dude. I’ve got a date.” He finishes with a wink at me.

While I should probably be embarrassed, I’m ecstatic Ethan wants me as much as I want him. The doubts about my sexual ability are fading.

WE ENTER an empty elevator at our hotel, and as soon as the doors slide closed, Ethan has me pressed against the wall, devouring my lips. I wrap my arms around his waist, dragging my fingertips along his jean waistband. I let them slide lower, grabbing his ass, pulling him closer. The feel of his erection gets me wet.

The ding of the elevator warns us the doors are about to open. He pulls away, leaning on the wall next to me.



LIGHT COMING in from the crack in the drapes is the first thing I notice when I open my eyes. I feel Ethan’s arm draped over my side and the sheet barely covering my lower half.

I let the thoughts of last night replay, and the tingling between my legs begins again. Ethan's hand begins to move and slides up to cup my breast. I moan, squirming and pushing myself closer to him. His hand glides down my body, reaching my sex. He rubs his fingers through my folds.

"You're already wet for me." His voice is raspy from sleep.

His cock is hard and twitches against me. He slides an arm under me and palms my breasts as his other hand continues to rub my most sensitive spot. My breathing is shallow, and I revel in being spoiled by the attention. A finger slides in me, and I groan loudly, opening my legs to give him better access. He pulses his finger in and out a few times before adding another one and pinching my nipple.

I roll my hips against his hardened cock.

"I want you." I rasp.

He pulls his fingers out, which leaves my insides clenching. He brings my leg back and places it on his side. He grabs his penis and rubs it on me before sliding it in me.

I push back against him, a new sensation with a new position. He glides in and out, and I can feel the beginnings of an orgasm. He continues to palm and pinch my nipple, kissing and licking my neck as the feel of him hitting the right spot inside me has me climbing.

"I'm not going to last. I need you to come with me," he growls in my ear. He slides his hand between my legs rubbing then pinching my sensitive nub.

"Ethan!" Euphoria hits.

He's holding me against him, still buried in me as we catch our breath. As soon as my breathing returns to normal, I want to feel him again. I place my hand on top of his and slide it down my body between my legs just as my stomach lets out an incredibly loud rumble, which causes both of us to laugh.

"Food first, baby." He kisses my neck and begins to push me out of bed. "Go get some clothes on so we can get a bite."

I look back at him, giving him a quick kiss, not arguing because I am starving after our liquid dinner last night.

We walk around the Quarter, trying to find a place to sit and enjoy a meal. We decided this time was just for us and don't call our friends. The streets are busy with people cleaning up, restaurants opening, and even a couple of bars with people in them. In the light of day, Bourbon St. carries a different mood. The boisterous, loud, dark street of last night mellows in the light of day, highlighting peoples' escapades.

We find a small bistro filled with people. We walk in and are seated immediately at the counter.

"What do you think of NOLA so far?" Ethan asks after we place our orders.

"Not quite what I expected. Or, it is, but different too," I respond thinking of last night.

"How so?"

"I expected the drunkenness on Bourbon, stories and all, but it's weird too. It's almost as if people lose all inhibitions. And it can't just be the alcohol. People get drunk everywhere. Just the way people dress, flash, the hookups. All of it... Or is it just me?"

"I hadn't thought about that, but I guess you're right. The spell of the city was even cast on you." He winks and gives me a devilish smirk.

"Huh?" I respond.

He comes close to my ear, "You were brazen on the dance floor. And this morning. That's not my normal, shy Sophia." My cheeks begin to burn at the memory. "Don't get embarrassed on me now. I plan to see if this city's spell continues." I'm on high alert with his breath on my neck as he runs the tip of his nose close to my ear and places a couple of kisses on my throat.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm the need for him that suddenly appeared. "Maybe there is a spell because I want you back in our room. I want the feel of you filling me, right now,"

I whisper to him shamelessly. I am surprised by my forwardness.

He drapes his arm behind my stool, letting his fingers slowly slide down my side. “That can be arranged as soon as we refuel.”

On our walk back to the hotel, we pass a voodoo shop, and the spell on the city comes back to mind. Maybe there is a magic here.

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THE FOUR DAYS SPENT IN NEW ORLEANS WERE GREAT AND memorable, but I am relieved to be home. We are dropping off Lena and Preston at our apartment, and then Ethan and I will head to his house.

As our apartment building comes into view, so does Caleb. He is standing by my car with a baseball bat in hand. My back taillight is shattered. Ethan stops the car and jumps out. I follow behind him, screaming at him to get back in. I'm overwhelmed by the fear that Caleb would take a swing at Ethan with the bat.

Caleb throws the bat down as he approaches Ethan, both cussing at the other. And just that quickly, fists begin flying. The brutal way they are hitting each other is terrifying. I drop to my knees, continuing to scream at them to stop, neither acknowledging my pleas. As Preston is trying to separate them, police car lights approach. University officers reach Caleb and Ethan and are able to separate them. I watch one officer throw Ethan against the hood of my car as he pulls handcuffs from his belt.

I jump up; the panic and fear hitting me is no match for my need to get to him.

“Let him go!” I begin yelling at the officer through tears.

“Move away, ma'am, before I cuff you too,” the officer responds gruffly.

Ethan tells Preston, “Get her back!”

I take a step back before continuing, “Please, sir. Let him go. He didn’t do anything.”

Preston grabs me and tries to pull me, but I refuse to move. His arms circle around my waist, forcing me back.

“Baby, move back. I’ll be fine.” Ethan is staying still, pressed against the car. Tears are flooding my sight. I listen to Ethan’s soothing tone, even in this stressful ordeal. I back away, so Preston releases me. I move until I hit the curb, then sit down, hiding my face in my legs.

“It’s that bitch’s fault.” Looking up, I see Caleb glaring at me as another officer stands in front of him.

Once the situation is defused and another police car arrives, the officers begin questioning everyone. They place Ethan and Caleb in the back of each car. I’m questioned first, my involvement apparent by my actions. I share with them what had occurred when we drove up to my place. When I ask how they arrived so quickly, they tell me a neighbor had called when she heard banging outside and saw Caleb taking a bat to my car.

The officer explained they were arresting Caleb for criminal mischief for my car and disorderly conduct for the fight. Ethan would also be arrested for the fight.

The officer lets me talk to Ethan briefly before taking him. Ethan’s eyes are void of emotion. The look of defeat on his face and the distance he is placing between us speaks volumes.

“I’ll go bail you out. I promise.” I whisper to him nervously, not knowing the first thing to do.

“Nah. Preston will handle everything.” His voice is flat.

“But, I’ll—” I try to argue.

“Go on.” He nods his head toward my apartment, dismissing me before catching Preston’s attention, and an unspoken communication happens. I look at Ethan again, wanting desperately to plead with him to let me help, but all he does is cock his head and raise an eyebrow, dismissing me.

I AM MORTIFIED once we are in my apartment and Preston announces he is calling Rick. Preston walks into Lena's room, leaving us in the living room. I sit on the couch and stare at the television, not able to focus on the program. Preston walks out of Lena's room and announces he is going to a bail bondsman Rick instructed him to see. I volunteer to go with him, but he gives me a sad shake of his head and tells me to stay put. His expression and the lack of eye contact tells me everything I need to know.

Each step toward my bedroom, I feel my heart break a little more. I hear Preston and Lena mumbling, the need to keep their conversation private prompts my retreat.

Preston pokes his head into my room. "I'll be back in a few, and Lena is going to pick us up something to eat. Just rest."

I nod my head, unable to form words. This chapter in my life feels over with the closing of the front door. I lay on my bed trying to bottle the emotions that are bubbling to the surface. The room feels like it is closing in around me, the air being sucked out. All I want is to disappear and hide from all the painful emotions. I jump up, grabbing my purse, keys, and suitcase. I throw everything in my car and take off. My destination unknown, all that is certain is the need to avoid anyone and everyone.

Luckily my car is not too far gone, still drivable, but very ugly. Having a nice, pretty car is the least of my worries right now. Explaining to my dad why I will need to get my car fixed yet again is another stress to add to my ever-growing list of things weighing me down.

My embarrassment at the incident and having Ethan's dad know I dated Caleb, and especially, Ethan's rejection is too much to handle at the moment. I begin driving home to my parents', but my exhaustion and tears have me pulling in at a hotel.

I check in quickly, knowing my appearance is making the person working the desk uncomfortable.

In the room, I open my suitcase grabbing my toiletries bag. I need a shower. I wish I could scrub away the feelings tearing me apart. I dry myself off and wrap myself up in a large towel. I push clothes aside looking for panties and a shirt. When we repacked in New Orleans, I packed a couple of Ethan's dirty shirts. I grab one and pull it over my head, breathing his scent in, not caring it is dirty. I want to be surrounded by him. I pop a Benadryl and turn out every light, crawling into the large king-size bed and willing sleep to take me.

Instead of sleep, thoughts invade my mind. All that has happened is my fault, and I cannot see Ethan wanting to continue in any relationship with me now that it has culminated this way. Preston's attitude was a telling indication of what is to come. Distance. Preston wouldn't even let me do something as simple as go to the bondsman with him. Rick would encourage Ethan to end things because of the bad exposure for the Hayes family. Ethan does not need this in his life with his family already at his throat.

My phone rings with Lena's name, so I turn it off.

How will I handle this? How? That is the last coherent thought I have before finally drifting off.

THE HOTEL PHONE ringing startles me awake. Who could be calling me? I answer, thinking there must be some mistake and pissed I'm awake and thinking again.

"Hello?"

"Sophia Isabella? What are you doing?" My dad's voice travels through the phone firm, his Spanish pronunciation of my name informing me of his anger.

"Uh..." I'm not able to form words.

"Answer me." My dad's tone turns stern.

"I...uh...how did you know to call me here?" I ask, confused.

"I looked at your credit card activity. Now answer me. Why are you at a hotel?" More tears begin to flood my eyes as

I begin the story of our San Antonio arrival.

“Why were you looking at my credit card activity?”

“Preston called us this morning when none of your friends could get a hold of you. We tried your cell, but it’s off.”

I feel awful for worrying my parents, but my need to hide still outweighs everything.

“I’m coming home as soon as I can get myself together. I just can’t drive without crying right now. Can I stay?”

“As long as you need. Call us later and tell us your plans.” He sounds more relaxed.

I lay wide awake now and notice the light peeking behind the heavy curtains. I glance at the clock by the bed and realize I slept all night, and it is already past check out. My stomach growls, so I place a room service order and tuck myself in again, hiding from the world.

I am awoken by a knock on my door. Ready to eat, I jump up and open the door. My jaw drops when I see a disheveled Ethan. I wonder if my mind is so screwed up right now that I am hallucinating, but the feel of his arms around me voids that notion. He picks me up and walks us into the room. He places me back down and holds me to his chest tightly. Frightened to say or do the wrong thing, I stay quiet, relishing the present moment before my world crashes down around me again.

Ethan pulls back, and the emptiness his movement causes is almost unbearable. I will myself not to cry in front of him, knowing I have an infinite amount of time to drown myself in tears once he leaves.

“Sophia, look at me.” I wish he would just walk out and leave me to my misery. Knowing I’m not strong enough to look at him and keep control, I keep my head down. He places his hand on my chin and tries to lift my gaze, but I jerk it out of his grip and walk to the window, keeping my back to him.

“Baby, talk to me. What’s going on?” His presence behind me feels comforting and painful at the same time.

I stay quiet fearing my voice will betray me, that I'll beg him not to leave me. He places his hands on my shoulders and pulls me back against him again. The knot in my throat burns as I fight to hold on to all the emotions rising so very close to the surface. One word or look could send me into hysterics, and I need to be able to control the situation. I need him to leave. I grab his hands, which are wrapped around my shoulders, and pry them apart to attempt the agonizing walk to the door.

"Stop it, dammit! Talk to me! Why are you here?" he demands harshly.

All my controlled effort to avoid this confrontation vaporizes. "To hide!" I yell back.

My fragile ego takes its last hit before shattering to a million pieces. Whatever force that kept me standing and functioning up to this point is obliterated; my legs crumble under me. I hide my face in my hands as a new batch of tears escape.

"I'm so sorry for putting you through this." Ethan's arms come around me tightly again. As much as I enjoy their comfort, I know it will hurt so much more when he walks away.

"You don't have to worry about me. I'm fine. Just go." The words are leaving my lips, but they're void of any meaning.

"I'm not leaving you, baby." His arms tighten just a bit more. My breathing becomes labored with the lack of air I am able to take in through the sobs. "Shhhh. I've got you. I'm not letting you go. It's you and me, remember? Breathe, baby. Slow, deep breaths." He continues to hold me and gently begins rocking his body back and forth with me tucked into his chest.

Why is here? I just need to bite the bullet and ask him so I can move on. "Wha... Why... How..." I stumble, not sure how to phrase my question.

"What?" he whispers as he continues rocking.

"Why are you here?"

“To be with you. As soon as Preston got me out, he told me you had disappeared. He said he called your parents after no one could get a hold of you all night. I called your parents begging them to tell me where you were. I hated being away from you all night. I screwed up, but I will take care of everything. I’m sorry for acting like an ass.”

Why is he apologizing? Everything is my fault.

“You hated being away from me?”

“Of course, I did. I can’t sleep for shit without you. And I really didn’t want to sleep where I was anyway,” he answers easily.

“Wait...so you’re not breaking up with me?” I ask, still trying to understand his and Preston’s distant behavior.

“What the hell? No! Of course not. Why would you think that?” He pushes me away from his chest to look me in the eye. A knock on the door disrupts our conversation. “Who’s that?” he asks, clearly annoyed.

“My food,” I answer meekly.

He stands to open the door. The room service attendant brings in the tray, and Ethan pulls out his wallet, tipping him as he walks out the door. I stand and make my way to the bed.

“How long were you planning on hiding here?” Ethan looks at me after seeing the three covered plates on the table. I just shrug my shoulders as I begin to control the sobs.

“Aww, baby. Why would you think I would break up with you?” He sits down on the bed next to me.

“Because...when,” I pause trying to articulate my thoughts, “I was talking to you when they had you in the cop car, and you were so distant. Then Preston calls your dad in private, and when I asked to go with him, he told me to stay home. It was like y’all were pushing me away. Or that’s what it felt like.”

“I’m sorry. I did push you away, but it was because I was pissed at myself for letting Caleb win. I should never have gotten out of the car. My temper got the better of me. I was

mad at myself for doing that to you. Worrying you. My dad is pissed, but at me, not you. Nothing is your fault.” He is shaking his head at me.

“But it is my fault.”

“Let’s eat while we talk.” He stands up and pulls the covers off the plates before bringing over each of them and placing them in the middle of the bed. “Hungry?” he asks as he sees the burger and fries, waffle, and Cajun chicken sandwich.

“Very. And I was going to comfort gorge myself too,” I guiltily admit.

“May I?” he asks as he goes in for a fry.

“Of course.”

He grabs some fries and sticks them in his mouth as I pick up the knife to cut the burger and sandwich in half to share.

“Everything that has happened is my fault, Ethan. I am the one who dated the crazy person. I introduced him to everyone. Because of me, you were arrested.”

Ethan finishes chewing his food and swallows before continuing. “Wrong, baby. Not your fault. His. And mine. You dated him and trusted him. You never could have known this is how things would turn out. I acted impulsively and let my need to beat the shit out of him control me. I could have driven off, but I didn’t. I’m sorry. But know, I’m not ending us. Are you?”

“No.” I take a bite.

“So can we eat and get out of here? I’m ready to go home. I’m done with hotels.”

As we eat the food I ordered, we continue discussing last night’s events and the short discussion he had with his father and their lawyer. They are not worried about the charges but still fear for my safety. His lawyer is going to try and rush through an order of protection based on the damage to my car and the eyewitness statement. He will try and add all the texts

I have been receiving, but since it is an unavailable number, he isn't sure if he can admit them.

On the drive to Ethan's house, I call my parents to keep them informed of the situation. My dad did not seem surprised by my change of heart to stay in San Antonio. Ethan smirks at me from the driver's seat as I speak to my dad. My parents will be in town at the end of the week to meet the lawyer and escort me to the university to speak with the police department.

When I finally disconnect the call, after my mom gives me an earful, Ethan reaches over, pulling my hand to his lips and placing a kiss on my palm. My heart skips a beat at the feeling of his touch. I want so desperately to build the confidence in myself I need to trust—trust my sense of self, my decisions, my voice, my abilities, my direction.



ETHAN'S LAWYER came by his house to discuss our options. He had me sign some paperwork he would be filing with the university police department, and he made an appointment for me to give my personal statement. He hoped to have everything in order before classes begin next week. He also checked on Caleb and discovered he made bail and was released.

Ethan was not happy with this news, but it is completely out of his control. Rick and Ethan are as worried about my safety as my parents.

Rick called my parents to speak with them about everything being done for my safety. I spoke with them, and they seemed to be taking everything in stride. Surely Ethan's presence has helped immensely. I had planned on staying at Ethan's house the remainder of the week to give Lena and Preston privacy, but now I would be doing it with my parents' blessing. They think I will be staying until the order of protection is approved and enforced.



AS WE LIE IN BED, he holds me tightly against him, his hands caressing me gently, his touch more protective than sensual. We have not spoken since before we crawled into bed.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask, unable to curb my curiosity.

“You,” he whispers quietly.

“Why me?”

“How could I think about anything else? What could have happened to you if you were home alone? What does Caleb think he can gain by his asinine actions? What would I do without you?”

“What would you do without me?” I lift myself up on an elbow to look down at his face, marred by worry. “What would I do without you? You have been here to catch me every step of the way. Thinking about how many times you have caught me is a bit embarrassing. I don’t want to be a burden on you. I want to be able to do the same for you. And in case I haven’t said it enough already...thank you. Thank you for always catching me when I don’t think you should or when I didn’t think you would. Thank you for the patience you show me and my never-ending doubts. Thank you for being you and loving me.” A single tear slides down my cheek now that I’ve given voice to my emotions, which have been in turmoil for the past twenty-four hours. I lower myself to him, my lips meeting his in a tender kiss.

“You will be. There is plenty of time for a give and take. You need me right now, and I’m here. When I need you, I have no doubt you will be there.” He pauses, looking at me seriously. “I do need you to have faith in us though. I know last night was anything but a normal night, but...I don’t want you running away from me. Talk to me.”

I nod my head, knowing that all comes with time and making myself stronger. “I know. I’ll try.” I mold myself to his side, loving the feel of his strong body next to mine.



THE REMAINDER of spring break passes quickly. My parents are still wary because Caleb will still be able to attend school. The order of protection was signed by a judge, but as long as he follows the stipulations in the order, he can continue his education. Ethan and Mike are able to ease my parents' worries a bit with their insistence that they'll be my personal escorts to and from class.

While the week had its stresses, I began to see so many other amazing things. My mom has always told me that everything happens for a reason. She also believes in exercising patience because all will be revealed. For the first time, these begin to hold meaning for me.

I have learned so much about myself this year, things that would have stayed hidden had I not ventured out on my own. While this year has been difficult, the lessons are necessary and beneficial.

My inherent introverted personality will always be with me, but with that knowledge, I know I will have to work on my unease in unknown situations. I will have to believe I am strong enough to succeed in those situations also. I cannot let self-doubt control me. I will have to trust that I am good enough.

If I had chosen the "easy" route and followed some of my friends to college, I may not have struggled this year, but I might still be oblivious to the shortcomings I have to mend. I would still be following on their coattails instead of forging my own path. All of these lessons are priceless. I finally see the benefits of this year and am happy to have lived through it. Would I have chosen this path had I known? Probably not. But that is the thing about life, it leads you through obstacles to build your strength and character.

EPILOGUE

“IF YOU DON’T HURRY UP, YOU’RE NOT GOING TO MAKE IT TO class on time!” Ethan yells through the bathroom door. This is a never-ending morning ritual we have. Mornings are just not my friend, so every morning Ethan bribes me out of bed with a cup of coffee and practically shoves me into the shower.

I squirt shampoo in my hand and start to massage, reminiscing about our honeymoon stage, when he would join me in the shower. Those mornings really got me going, but as we have settled in together, my morning sleep has won out over shower fun, especially when I know I can have *FUN* anytime I want.

We do not officially live together—we both have our own places—but I am here every single night, and my entire wardrobe has made its way into his closet and taken up residence. It happened over time after Lena and I got our own off-campus apartment the summer after our freshman year. I still cannot believe three years have gone by.

My thoughts drift back to our beginning, and I think about Caleb. He eventually gave up his obsession with me and moved on when he saw that Ethan and I were serious, that and that Ethan and Mike never left my side while on campus for the remainder of that semester. The order of protection was enforced, and the one time he tried to get close to me, he ended up arrested again. It was his second strike at the university—one more time and he would be expelled.

The bathroom door opens, and Ethan walks in to stand in front of the glass shower door. With eyebrow cocked and lips

pursed he says, “Seriously, babe, your last exam, and you’re going to be late.”

“I’m going!” I respond, exasperated, rolling my eyes. I really have no right to be, but my dramatics are always fun. At least I think so.

I step out of the shower and wrap a large towel around myself. I grab the back of his neck and rise up on my tiptoes, bringing my lips to his. When I pull away, I whisper, “It’s been a while since we had morning shower fun.”

A low growl rumbles in his throat as he pushes me away softly. “Get dressed. If you keep teasing, you will miss that exam and you are here for another semester. Without me.”

I hate it when he is right. Our move back home is already scheduled after our graduations.

“Fine. I’m going!” I take off my towel, giving him full view of my naked body before wrapping up my wet hair. I give him a flirty wink and smirk as I go into the walk-in closet to find clothes. I have built up my confidence over time, and he has helped tremendously. His belief in me and my beauty, inside and out, began to settle the doubts that have a way of creeping in. I still doubt myself sometimes, but I am much better at controlling the reactions.

“You’re pushing it, love!” he says to me laughing and exiting the bedroom.

As I drive to campus for my last exam, my thoughts go back again. Graduation is a big milestone, and so much has happened since I started. We are both graduating. I finally decided to pursue a business degree.

Ethan has also worked hard. He got an architecture degree and has just finished his MBA. The path to his family business clearer, but still not definite, with his family’s inner turmoil. I listen to him vent his frustration, I am his escort to all functions business or family, and I am his rock when he is overwhelmed. I am proud that I can do this for him since he has done so much for me.

Lena and Preston are still going strong. He transferred to a private, dad-approved university in San Antonio to be closer to her. This came as a surprise to both Lena and myself. He announced he would be moving in with Ethan when the spring semester ended. Preston's transition to living full-time with Lena in our apartment happened just as my move did.



“I’M HOME!” I yell as I walk in the door after my exam. I drop my purse and keys on the entry table, making my way to the kitchen and pulling a water bottle out of the refrigerator.

Ethan comes up behind me, and when I turn around, he grabs the back of my thighs picking me up. I wrap my legs around his waist as he begins kissing my collarbone. “Planning on finishing what you started this morning?” His voice is filled with promise.

“Not really.” I pull away playfully, smirking.

He walks to the living room, then sits on the couch with me straddling him. “We have never had fun in here,” he rasps, his eyes smoldering with longing.

I nod my head in agreement as I wiggle my hips to cause a bit of friction. “And as much as I would love to continue this here, there’s no telling when someone will walk in.”

His hands have made their way under my shirt, one splayed on my back and the other cupping my breast.

I am slowly melting into him as I do every time his hands explore my body. The attraction for him has grown over the years, not diminishing the way some people talk about long-term relationships. The intense looks of want, his hands teasing me, his lips on me send electric tingles all over my body.

My brain slowly registers that he is pulling my shirt off, and that’s when I jerk my hands down and cuddle my face in his neck to control my breath. I feel his silent laughter.

I sit up to look at him and feel his cock twitch. I wiggle a bit for pleasure but still say, “Oh my gawd! Anyone can walk in!”

All our friends have a key to Ethan’s house, and the traffic of people coming and going is nonstop. He officially has two roommates, Preston and Mike. Lena and Preston have keys, as do all the guys in his former band. He and the guys gave up on the band after the summer of my freshman year.

He responds through laughter, “No one is coming in. Tonight we have the place to ourselves. Everyone was given full warning that they had to stay away for one night.” He winks at me.

“Huh? So you threatened our friends to stay away? Good job.” His hands come up to my face and pull me into him for a long, lingering, sexy-as-hell kiss.

Love should never hurt

This story reveals the turmoil anyone can go through when in an emotional abusive relationship.

The following websites have more information on dating violence and emotional abuse.

National Domestic Violence Hotline

<https://www.thehotline.org/>

800.799.SAFE (7233)

Break the Cycle

<https://www.breakthecycle.org/learn-about-dating-abuse>

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Steamy Novella

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many thanks need to go out for my debut novel. I never thought to add acknowledgements when I first hit the publish button. To tell the truth, I was too scared to hit publish, so my daughter did it for me. I didn't tell anyone for weeks what I had done.

Anyway, here's to my family. To my husband who encouraged me to finish what I had started. To my daughter for doing what I was too scared to do. To my mom for reading my book and enjoying it.

To all the wonderful readers who gave a new author a chance. Thank you for reading and reviewing.

This was what I wrote back in 2018 when I published the paperback version of *Naive in Love*. When I first hit publish on the ebook and then months later on the paperback, I was an ignorant newbie. I didn't have it professionally edited. I knew nothing about marketing. It was a dream of mine and I was following it.

Do I regret my beginning? Absolutely not. And this is why — “*To my mom for reading my book and enjoying it.*” My mom had been diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer in 2017 and something in me woke up. I had been sitting on this dream for about 4 years. The story was written except for the epilogue and sitting on my computer. When my mom was diagnosed, I decided now was the time. This was the only book of mine she was able to read before her passing. She gave me the strength to follow my passion. Mom, you are always on my mind. ☐

And now...THANK YOU!

First I have to thank Andrea (aka, @chula.is.reading.romance). She read *Naive in Love* and with

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THANK YOU!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tori Alvarez is an educator by day and author by night. She spent her days daydreaming different stories and scenes so she finally took the plunge and began putting them down on paper.

She writes real, honest romance with a hint of steam. She is a sucker for happily ever afters, so you will always find them in her books too.

Tori is a Texas girl, born and raised. She lives in South Central Texas with her husband, teen daughter, dog & cat.

You can follow her at:

Website & Newsletter Sign up:

<http://www.torialvarez.com>



A TEXAS SIZED THANK YOU!

Thank you for spending time with Sophia. I hope you enjoyed her story as much as I loved writing it.

Love the book? Please review!

As a small indie author, I appreciate any reviews. Reviews help future readers decide on the next book they will be picking up. Please take a couple of minutes to drop your review. Please visit [Goodreads](#), [Bookbub](#), and/or Amazon to leave your review.

If you post on social media, please tag me. I LOVE to see all the beautiful pictures and mentions.

Thank you, Thank you, Thank you!

☐ Tori