



PIECES OF YOU

Ginger Walls



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“If things are real, they’re there all the time.”

C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

MATTIE

The six of us are parked around the campfire like points on a compass. I'm sandwiched between Huddie and Nick, while Luke is sitting in between Leo and Ace on the opposite side of the fire we expertly started after years of practice. We got here Thursday and have spent the last few days swimming, fishing, hiking, and laying around camp.

It's our tradition to spend the first and last weekend of summer camping by the Rogue River deep in the forests of Oregon. It started when we were kids. Maybe around nine or ten years old.

Leo and Luke came out here once with their scout troop. They went on and on about how much fun they had. We were jealous little brats and conned Leo's dad into taking the five of us back to camp out under the stars and swim in the river just like they got to.

Ever since then, it's become our place. It's sacred. I come out here as often as I can to escape everything that suffocates me. Hiding out between the trees, I feel like I can breathe and stretch. Life feels limitless out here. *I can be myself here.*

"To senior year." Ace lifts his cup over the campfire. His dark chocolate eyes brighten from the flames as they lick toward the sky. Ace is serious and stone-cold unless he's with his girlfriend, Meg.

"To senior year!" The rest of us echo. Leo clunks his cup against Luke's, making the liquid slosh over the edge. Luke's eyes narrow under his curly blonde hair. He could be my twin. We both have a head full of wild blond curls and dark blue eyes. Luke somehow makes his curls a positive attribute, whereas mine have been nothing short of an eyesore growing up.

Huddie helps Ace dig dinner out of the cooler. Another night of charbroiled hot dogs. I can't complain. It's probably better than something I would make on my own at home.

Especially once I drown it in ranch dressing. Huddie packed my favorite condiment just for me. He'd never admit to it, but I'm the only one who uses it on everything.

I still can't believe this is it. The last trip before school starts. Even with their summer football practice, we've managed to spend almost every day together this summer. I know once school starts, that will change. Adding classes, college applications (me), and dating (the guys) into the equation will leave very little time for... well me.

My eyes burn and start to gloss over a little. Probably just the smoke from the fire. *I'm not crying.* I'm not sad we will all be scattered across the country next year. Nope, not sad at all.

Nick has been talking about USC since he was eight. Ace is determined to go to Notre Dame. He watched *Rudy* one time, and that was all it took. Leo and Luke both said they don't care where they go as long as it's together.

They've been neighbors and best friends since birth. They talk without speaking, and when they say actual words, they finish each other's sentences. It's only weird the first couple of times they do it.

Huddie is the only one who wants to stay in Oregon. I'm not really sure why. I could never leave Oregon either, which surprised me. Every day I dream of getting as far away from my house as possible, but I never dream further than the river and the trees.

I blink away the water pooling in my eyes and sigh.

"You okay over there, Mattie?" Nick throws his arm around me and velcros me to his side.

"Yeah. I just can't believe school starts on Monday."

"Finally. It's what we've been waiting for, Mattie. We're the kings this year." He taps his cup with mine.

I've been friends with Nick, Ace, Leo, and Luke since elementary school. A kid on my street spent all summer throwing a football through a tire he had hanging off a tree. It looked cool and a lot more fun than etiquette classes and piano lessons. I wanted to do it too.

After an obscene amount of begging my parents to let me play, I became the newest member of the local youth flag football team. It didn't hurt that my sisters suggested it would be better to have me out of their way. *How nice of them.*

Nick was the first to approach me after I dodged his tackle and threw for a touchdown. He didn't say much. Just a grunt and a trace of a smile. That's the start of our story. We've been best friends ever since.

I love being one of the guys. Don't get me wrong. They are disgusting and have the dirtiest mouths sometimes. But I've never felt more accepted and seen than when I'm with them.

Especially Nick. We come from similar family backgrounds. *Unfortunately.* Like Luke and Leo, we don't have to say words to have a conversation. I can look at him and know if something is wrong or if something happened with his dad. He's my best friend.

I escape Nick's grip and drop into my camping chair so hard it tips over on the back legs. I whirlwind my arms, trying to keep myself from falling over, but fail. Huddie rushes to my rescue and pushes me back into an upright position. My cheeks flame under the hood of my sweatshirt.

"Woah, Mattie. What did the chair do to you? You're going to break it," Huddie says as he pulls his chair closer to mine and takes a seat gracefully. *Show off.*

"I'm not going to break it," I grumble.

"Right. Sorry, Mattie." Huddie's mouth twitches in a downward smile. It's disarming. Huddie's smiles and smirks make me want to surrender and share every secret I keep.

Huddie's favorite *Seattle Supersonics* cap is flipped backward on his head. I keep my eyes trained on the NBA logo on his forehead, which makes him chuckle and me more embarrassed.

Huddie moved here from Tacoma the summer before we started high school. He blended easily with our rag-tag crew. After Nick, I feel the closest to Huddie out of all my friends. Huddie has such a gentle demeanor. He makes it easy to talk to

him and open up. I could tell Huddie (*almost*) anything without the worry of being judged.

Wood crackles in the slow-burning fire sending orange and yellow sparks into the air. I slide further down my chair and stare up at the sky. Huddie's clean mountain scent pollutes my atmosphere as his shoulder squares up to mine.

How is it possible he still smells so fresh? We haven't showered or bathed except for our daily dips in the river. I know I smell as good as an overripe peach.

"Tell me what I'm looking at, Huddie." He releases a breath that tickles the baby hairs on my neck. Huddie's dad taught him about constellations, making him obsessed with Greek Mythology. Then he got into learning about the Roman Empire. His interest in history simply snowballed from there.

I'm the only one who will humor him. I like listening to him talk and seeing his eyes light up when he shares something new he learned.

Huddie points to the stars, and I lean in to follow his line of sight. "That bright star there is Polaris. The north star. It's also the top of the little dipper. Do you see the little scoop?" I shake my head. Huddie takes my hand and rearranges my fingers, so I'm pointing one toward the sky. "Do you see it now?"

I look at him to better grasp where he is gazing. I practically graze his face with my lips. His facial muscles tense briefly before they relax again. I didn't realize how close we were. Clearing my throat, I focus on the stars again.

"Got it. And there's the big dipper!" I point out the bigger scoop while I slap his arm. A smile plays on his lips. He likes that I nerd out at the stars along with him. I don't get into the history stuff, but I am fascinated with the stars.

"You found it a lot faster this time. You're getting better at locating them."

"Huddie, those are the easy ones. Let's not get ahead of ourselves here."

"Do you see Draco?"

“The dragon, right?” He nods. I search for the string of stars that wind around the little dipper. I can sense his eyes on me. I’m starting to sweat from fighting the temptation to look at him. I swallow hard and then roll my lips nervously. “There!” I scream.

Huddie yanks his head to where I’m pointing and smirks. “Close,” he says. Huddie holds my hand and moves it around, outlining the stars. “Right. There.” I yank my hand out of his and grumble about how I tried. “You just need more practice, Mattie.”

“Maybe I need a better teacher,” I retort, lifting my chin. Huddie’s eyebrows scrunch together, and his lips flatline. I push my thumb over the wrinkle between his eyes and smooth it out. “I’m kidding, Huddie. You’re the only one I want teaching me about the stars.” He turns toward the fire and leans back in his chair.

Nick drops into the seat on the other side of me and I turn my attention back toward the fire too.

“I’ve finally decided. I’m doing it,” Nick declares, talking around me in Huddie’s direction.

“Good,” Huddie replies to Nick. Then drifts his baby blue eyes in my direction and back to the fire.

“What are you doing exactly?” I ask, a little irritated that I don’t already know, considering I’m one of his closest friends.

Nick hesitates before answering me. You brought it up, dude. *Why are you scared to tell me now?*

“Asking Everly out.” Oh. “Huddie’s right. This is good. It’s time. I mean, I’ve liked her for over a year. Definitely, time to make a move.” A year? He’s liked Everly for a year, and I didn’t know. How could he not tell me this? We tell each other everything.

Huddie nudges my elbow, knocking me out of my thoughts. I close my mouth and turn to him. His eyes are full of concern for some reason.

“Everly,” I say, absorbing this information. “I didn’t know the two of you even hung out.”

“We don’t, but we will once school starts.”

“What’s the plan? Asking her out to eat? A movie? Don’t do a movie for a first date. You can’t talk and get to know each other. You should find out what she likes to eat. Do you know what her hobbies are?”

“Damn, Mattie. Slow down. I don’t need a plan.” I cut him with a look that makes him think twice. “Do I need a plan?” Nick turns to Huddie for help. I don’t know why. Huddie hasn’t had a girlfriend since freshman year. Which, for the record, lasted all of three days. Huddie broke it off before it even started. Three days and Nick is turning to him. *Puh-lease.*

Huddie shakes his head while I say, “Ummm...yeah. I mean nothing serious but a general idea of what you want to tell her. I will help you,” I offer. I would have been on top of this sooner if I had known. If anyone knows how a girl likes to be romanced, it would be me. *Not that I’ve ever been romanced before or anything.* Sadly, I haven’t.

“How would you know what to say to a girl?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Because I’m a girl.” Nick laughs. I don’t see what is so funny. I don’t dress girly. I’m definitely a jeans, t-shirt, and sneaker kind of girl, but that doesn’t mean anything.

“Sure, but not that type of girl.” I look down at my cup and blow out a breath. “I don’t mean it in a bad way. I’m just saying you’ve never had a boyfriend or anything. You’ve never even kissed a guy before.”

“You can shut up now,” I say, punching him in his bicep. It’s not like they both don’t know, but still. Let’s just make a billboard about it, why don’t we? “Just because I haven’t had a boyfriend doesn’t mean I don’t know what a girl wants.” *I know exactly what I want.*

“I’ll pass. Huddie can help me. He has more experience.” *Unbelievable.*

I whip my head to Huddie. He’s staring hard into the fire grinding his molars. “Right. Mr. Experience. I’ll hang with

Leo and Luke if you two don't need me. The two of you can sit here, not planning anything together. Later."

"Later," Nick echoes. Then leans over my chair, smacking Huddie and asking him how he should ask Everly out.

I spend the rest of the night talking and joking around with Luke, Leo, and Ace. They are all a lot of fun. It's never a dull moment when you are with Luke or Leo. It's even worse when they are together. The two of them feed off each other.

They are total opposites regarding looks, but their personalities are identical. Leo has dark hair, and gray eyes and is very tan, thanks to his Italian heritage. Whereas Luke is a Scandinavian Viking with porcelain skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair.

When we started high school, I was worried they would ditch me for the popularity that comes with being on the football team. It never happened. If anything, we clung to each other tighter.

Especially Nick and me. We both grew up in homes full of rules and expectations. Getting older didn't make it easier. It made everything worse. It brought us closer together to the point we've become inseparable. I guess that's why this whole Everly thing is hitting me hard. We don't keep things from each other. *He's under no obligation to tell you everything.* I remind myself. It doesn't make it hurt any less.

Once it's well past midnight, we decide to call it a night. We pour water on the fire and straighten the campsite before turning in.

Nick is already in his sleeping bag when I unzip the flap to our tent. We've been sharing pillow forts, tents, and beds since we were kids. Some people might frown upon it at our age, but it would be weirder if we weren't in the same tent together. *I'm not a real girl anyways. Why would it matter?*

"Hey," Nick greets me sleepily.

"Hey to you." I take off my shoes and sweatshirt before slipping underneath my navy sleeping bag. It's so cozy with

the flannel lining. It reminds me of another type of flannel I wouldn't mind wrapping around my body to keep me warm.

"I had fun tonight."

"Me too." I turn to him, and he inches toward me like a giant red caterpillar in his sleeping bag. I swallow a grin. I place my right hand between our sleeping bags and offer a pinky. Nick reciprocates and wraps his around mine.

"Why didn't you tell me about Everly?"

Nick sighs deeply. "I don't know. Are you mad?"

"No. I'm sad you didn't tell me. You're my best friend. I want you to tell me everything. You can trust me, Nickie. You've always told me these things before."

He doesn't respond. Just stares at me, making me nervous. I squeeze his pinky. He's never kept his crushes to himself before. The only guys who keep their feelings about girls to themselves are Huddie and Luke. This can only mean one thing.

He's nervous and scared. Nick has it bad.

"She's special?" I question. He nods. "I'm happy for you, and I want to help. Whatever I can do, okay?"

"Okay." He squeezes my pinky tighter.

"I mean, I know I'm not a real girl, but...."

"Shut up! I know you're a girl, Mattie."

"I'm just not an 'Everly' type of girl."

"No. And I'm glad because I need my Mattie. You know that. You know...everything." I swallow hard and nod. I'm the only one who knows all of Nick's secrets, and I will always be here for him.

"You have me. You always will. Now go to sleep. Huddie will be here before the sun comes up, wanting to go to the cliff."

"Goodnight, Mattie."

"Goodnight, Nickie."

MATTIE

As predicted, Huddie plows into our tent while it's still dark and the moon is faint. Huddie drops to his knees and attacks my rib cage with calloused fingers. My threadbare t-shirt does nothing to shield me from his intrusion. I hate being tickled more than I hate Sunday brunch with my family.

Huddie laughs, and his warm breath blankets my skin. The strings of his sweatshirt skim my neck. I squeal and grapple with his wrists to get him to stop or at least pause a moment so I can catch my breath.

"I will get you back," I say in between wheezing breaths when he finally rocks back on his heels.

"We'll see," Huddie smirks, putting a spotlight on the pinprick of a dimple he has in the corner of his mouth. It's understated compared to the craters he has in each of his cheeks. He stands up, and I throw on my sweatshirt and slip on my shoes. I don't even bother tying them.

I give Huddie my murder eyes when he snickers and pulls at a loose curl. My hair looking like an oversized sea sponge in the morning isn't new. Neither is Huddie laughing about it. I've gotten used to his teasing. The same way he's become accustomed to my murder eyes.

I take my hair down and try to tame it again in a messy bun. "What about Nick?" Huddie toes Nick's feet again, but he barely stirs. "He's always sleeping like the dead, huh?"

"Yeah. Good thing Nick has you here to wake him in case there's a fire or something," he says flatly. "Forget about him. He'll join us when he gets up." Huddie leaves the tent, and I reluctantly follow him.

We trudge up the trail side by side. I hug myself tighter as we walk in the shadow of the trees. There is a chill in the air without the fire and the sun to warm our path.

Ace and the guys are already waiting for us at the top of the ridge that overlooks the river. Despite the cold seizing my lungs, I can breathe here. A calming serenity cloaks your worries and erases problems. I can think here. I can dream.

Huddie sits next to Leo, leaving me just enough room to sit between him and a giant cedar tree. There used to be room to spare up here. We barely fit now that the guys have sprouted like sequoia trees.

The sun is starting to ascend, painting the sky in a purple haze. My breath catches like it does every time.

“What are you thinking about?” Huddie whispers next to me.

I glance back and forth between him and the sunrise. “I love watching the sunrise.” *I love being here.*

“Why do you love it?” Huddie is an inquisitor. His brain is always seeking knowledge and information. It’s a trait I’ve always found endearing.

“Hmm... Well, for one, it’s beautiful. My fingers are itching to paint it.” I wiggle my fingers in front of me. “But it’s also a reminder that you get another opportunity to do something you’ve always wanted.” *Like taking a risk.*

Huddie contemplates my answer while the sky fades from purple to orange. “Do you have something in mind?” He asks.

At the end of every summer, the six of us set intentions for the school year. It’s something that Ace started. He is driven and ambitious. Ace has always encouraged us to be the same.

I roll my lip thinking about how I want to respond. “Yes,” I answer simply. I do have something in mind. I have several things. His mouth twists in an upside-down smile. Huddie doesn’t like my answer, but he’s also amused.

“We’re about to have our biggest year yet. Are you ready?” I ask, looking at his profile.

“Born ready, Mattie. I have a good feeling about this year.” He smirks. Then bumps his shoulder with mine.

I pull my legs up to my chest and wrap my arms around them. Resting my chin on my knees, I let out a deep breath. A warm hand glides over my back methodically. The slow rhythm sends my eyelids fluttering.

“You took the news about Everly well.” I jackknife up, surprised by his statement. Huddie drops his hand. I miss it already.

“Why wouldn’t I?” He studies my narrowed eyes and crinkled brows. Finally landing on my pinched lips.

“I don’t know. With your history, I figured it might be awkward or something.” He blunders through the words. *Our history?* What does he mean? I guess I can see how it could be weird seeing your best friend in love, but I don’t see it as a bad thing.

“I guess it’s whatever,” I say, shrugging a shoulder. “Everly seems nice. As long as she treats him well, that’s all that matters to me. If she doesn’t, she will have to face my wrath.”

“Your wrath?” He chuckles.

I smack a closed fist of one hand into the open palm of my other. “You don’t want to mess with the people I care about, Huddie. It won’t be pretty.”

“You are pretty scary. Especially with your hair like that.”

“That’s it.” I grab his bicep with one hand and start pummeling him with the other one. He’s laughing. I know I’m not really hurting him. If anything, my knuckles will get bruised from pounding on his pecs. Sadly, I call uncle first and settle myself down. Huddie rubs a hand down his chest, feigning an injury.

“You know I will throw down for you, too, right? If some girl breaks your heart, you let me know.”

Huddie opens his mouth to tell me something but stops abruptly when someone walks up behind us. Nick lifts me off the ground, then promptly steals my spot.

“Hey! I was sitting there.”

“Mattie, it’s too early for you to jump on my case.” Nick wraps his muscular arm around my thighs and slams me onto his lap with an *oof*. “Turn sideways. Your hair is in my mouth.” He spits and wipes his mouth on my sleeve. *Gross*.

I have no choice but to put my legs on Huddie’s lap. I mouth *sorry* to him and roll my eyes at how obnoxious Nick is behaving. Huddie just laughs. Then begins to tie my shoes.

“You’re going to fall on your face or break an ankle one of these days,” Huddie says gruffly as he pulls the laces tighter. His long fingers move nimbly, making little loops and bows.

“You guys ready?” Ace bellows over everyone ending all the private conversations and initiating a few groans. It’s intention declaration time. They groan, but I’m not the only one who enjoys this exercise. Luke, Leo, and Nick can deny it all they want, but they need this to stay focused.

I don’t want to see Luke without something to tether him to earth. He’s such a loose cannon without it. Huddie is similar to Ace. I think his humble upbringing keeps his eye on the prize.

“Luke, you go first. What are you achieving this year?” Ace stands to the side with his arms crossed over his chest. His sweatshirt shows off his broad shoulders and lean torso.

Luke scrubs his curly blonde hair before hiding it under a backward ball cap. “My intentions, dear sire,” he starts off dramatically in a terrible English accent. Leo snorts beside him. “Avoid Hobbs’ detention,” he says with a growl. Luke and Mr. Hobbs do not get along. *Good luck, buddy*.

“I guess I’ll take a pick-six or two. Nah, make it ten. A punt return would be nice.” His face turns serious. “And get my lucky penny back.”

“Take the season seriously, and it will happen. Totally doable, man. We will double up on some punt-returning drills.” This is why Ace is the captain of the team. He is supportive and encouraging. A true leader. He puts them and his team first every time. “Leo?”

“Dude, I want Thompson’s head on a platter.” Will Thompson is the quarterback of our rival team. Leo and Will

have been battling ever since freshman year. Maybe before. “Until I take him out, I’ll practice on the other guys. Put me down for a sack every game, Ace,” Leo proclaims so arrogantly it makes me laugh.

Huddie cops my calf and squeezes to get my attention. “Something funny?”

“Not really.” He tilts his head in disbelief. “Just suffocating a little from all the ego floating in the air,” I admit loud enough for Leo to hear. He retaliates by untying my shoes. My eyebrows go up. *Really Leo? So childish.*

“Huddie, what do you want this year?”

Huddie lets out a breath. Stares at my feet. Then begins tying my shoes again. Once he’s finished Huddie scrubs his face as if it will clear off the dust in his brain to make him think clearer.

I drop an elbow to my knee and rest my chin on my closed fist. Staring at Huddie’s blue eyes, I wait for his answer. I’m curious about what he’ll say. This year is important to him. *Crucial.* In his mind, his future depends on how well he performs on the field.

I weave a hand through his shaggy brown hair. It’s short on the sides but stays tousled on the top. He always looks like he just woke up when he doesn’t wear a baseball cap.

Huddie locks eyes with me for a moment before he answers. “A full-ride scholarship. Whatever it takes. The stats on the field. The grades. This year is all focus and no fun.” I pout. His brows furrow together.

“I don’t think I like this no-fun Huddie idea very much.”

“Don’t worry, Mattie. I’m sure he’ll make time for you,” Nick says with a crab pinch to my side.

“He better,” I say sternly, but with a playful smile.

“I will,” Huddie promises with a squeeze of my sweatshirt-covered hand.

“Alright, Mattie, what about you?” This is easy for me. I’ve thought about it all summer.

“Finish my art portfolio. Make sure it’s impressive enough to get me a scholarship. I’ve got the senior exhibit this year.” Then there’s the other thing I want that no one knows about. The one I don’t dare share with anyone. *Not yet.*

Ace gives an encouraging nod. Then says, “You got this, Mattie.” At the same time, Nick asks, “Still with the art, huh?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, Nick. Still with the art. And I’m not getting into it with you again about this. It’s your turn. What are your goals this year?”

Nick thinks just like my parents when it comes to my passion. Art is not a practical career. Maybe so, but that fact doesn’t make me want to be a professional artist any less.

I love drawing, painting, and creating. It’s a part of my soul. It’s how I express myself. I wouldn’t expect Nick or any of the guys to understand.

“I’m with Huddie on the scholarship. I want to see the offers roll in, but I plan on having fun and getting the girl.”

Suddenly I have three sets of eyes on me. Luke, Leo, and Ace look at me like I’m *the girl*. I am sitting in his lap. Or maybe they have the same thought as Huddie and assume I will be upset that Nick wants to date someone that isn’t me.

“Go get ’em, tiger,” I exclaim with a punch to Nick’s shoulder. I quickly ask Ace what he wants to get the heat off Nick and me.

Ace wants a successful, injury-free season and for all the guys to go to the school of their dreams. Exactly what I would expect the captain of the team to say. And for Nick to get *the girl*, he added with a smirk.

We lazily pack up our tents and camping supplies, not wanting to return to the real world. At least, I don’t. The guys probably still feel the effects of a late night and early morning.

The drive is quiet on the way home. Nick is behind the wheel with Huddie riding shotgun. Even though I have long legs, too, I’m always in the back folded up like origami.

“You coming over to watch the game?” Nick asks Huddie.

“Nah, man. My parents want to have family dinner and shit since I’ve been gone all weekend.”

“I get it. My dad has already texted me too. What about you, Mattie?”

I haven’t checked my phone, but I doubt my parents have texted. At least not with anything good. They’ve been gone all weekend visiting my sisters in California. They are in their Sophomore and Junior years at Stanford. My father also has a satellite office located out that way. It isn’t uncommon for them to stay weeks at a time now that I’m eighteen.

Do I want to go to Nick’s to watch the game? Not particularly. I mean, I love football, obviously. I just have things I need to do, like showering and eating something other than a hot dog. Maybe take a nap on my pillowtop mattress.

I also need to run errands to prep for tomorrow. If I’m serious about taking a few risks, it starts at the mall, unfortunately.

“I can’t.”

Nick glances at me through the rearview mirror. “Why?”

“Because I’ve got things to do, Nickie,” I retort.

“Like what?”

“If you must know, I need to go to the mall.” It’s the last thing I want to admit. My reasons won’t make sense to Nick.

“For what? You hate the mall.” He isn’t kidding. I do. It’s like the seventh level of hell to me. All those peddlers pushing their skin creams and magic potions in your face. And the crowds of people. *Cringe.*

“Theperfectfirstdayofschooloutfit.” I mumble out and wait for them to start ribbing me.

“Try annunciating this time,” Huddie says, turning to face me. “Or maybe I’ll try reading your lips.” His eyes drop to my mouth, and I blush for some reason. I palm his face and push him away.

“I want a new outfit for the first day of school. Okay? You can start roasting me now. I can take it.” Huddie turns around, disinterested in me and my to-do list. That’s preferable.

Nick, on the other hand, is smirking, and I know he is about to tease the crap out of me. “What qualifies as the perfect first day of school outfit for our Mattie Jane? Don’t tell me you are going to show up wearing a skirt.”

“Um, negative. Unless your name is Meredith Roth, and you can threaten me with taking away my phone, there is no way I will be wearing a skirt. I was thinking of jeans and a cute top. I don’t know. Something different than a t-shirt with a giant bird on it, ya know?” No offense to my seahawks, but it’s senior year.

Neither one of them say anything and now I feel stupid.

“Look, I don’t expect you to care or understand. I don’t make a big deal over what the two of you wear.” Huddie turns to argue, but I cut him off, “Except for the eighty’s tracksuit. It was too much Huddie. You needed an intervention. I’m sorry.” He grumbles but accepts defeat. He knows I’m right.

Nick parks in my driveway, and both guys get out to help me with my stuff. Nick offers me a ride in the morning, but I decline. I want to go to the school art studio and start working on my pieces for the senior exhibit. If I ride with Nick, I’ll have to leave as soon as he’s done with practice.

Plus, I want to make an entrance. It’s entirely out of character for me. Maybe I watched too many teen movies this summer. I have this vision of myself walking into school and turning heads. It’s silly. A cuter shirt isn’t going to change anyone’s opinion of me.

Nick walks out to his car, but Huddie hesitates at the door after we say our goodbyes.

“I can’t wait to see you in your perfect first-day-of-school outfit, Mattie. Don’t hold back on us,” Huddie says, closing the door behind him.

I don’t plan on it. I think it’s time I remind everyone just how girly I can be. Without a skirt, because that is definitely

not happening.

MATTIE

Drumming my fingers on the marble countertop, I take a deep breath. I've never been this nervous for the first day of school before. My stomach is churning my cheerios with every bite I take.

I woke up this morning in a cold sweat. Anxiety is crawling over my skin like hundreds of tiny spiders.

Towards the end of summer, I had this stupid idea to actually put effort into my appearance for my senior year of high school. What if I wasn't the baggy t-shirt and jeans girl? What if I didn't just throw my hair up in a messy bun every day? *Would he see me then?*

All the talk last night about Everly confirms what my subconscious has been telling me. I'm being overlooked. No one sees me as more than a friend. I really am just one of the guys. When it comes to ninety-nine percent of the guys at school, I don't care. It's the one percent I wish could see me as something more.

Today is the day I change that. Nothing drastic, just a slight change in the style of my clothes and doing my hair properly for once. I can't do makeup or wear dresses. My mother makes me do that stuff, and I never feel like myself. I still want to be me. Just a little more *polished*.

I spent a few weeks researching curly hair care. I dedicated hours to figuring out which techniques worked best for me. It was frustrating as much as it was rewarding. And yesterday, I tempted fate at the mall and traded my baggy style for something more fitted.

It shouldn't matter. In my gut, I know this. My dream guy will like me regardless of how poised and put-together I am. But I have this suffocating feeling in my chest that time is running out. If I don't roll the dice and make a move, I will lose the only person I care about.

I take one last look in the mirror at my curly hair. For the first time in the history of ever, it is full of voluminous curls spiraling down my back instead of a nest on the top of my head. My crop top is just long enough to dust the waistband of my dark wash skinny jeans.

With a confident nod, I grab my keys and head out the door.

I park my car in the empty spot next to Nick's. Seniors get their pick of parking spots, and we chose one in the front row next to the sidewalk. Students walk across the lawn, greeting their friends with wild abandon. Meanwhile, my heart is beating savagely in my chest. A hair tie in my backpack tempts me to throw out my entire plan before it even gets off the ground.

The guys are so predictable. I see them in the distance mulling around the school's main entrance in our usual spot. There's a stone wall that surrounds a small border garden. Leo and Luke are notorious for perching on them like crows waiting for prey.

I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. I know they are waiting for me so we can all walk in together. What will they think of my new look? I'm probably freaking out over nothing. *They may not even notice. It's just hair.*

A knock on my window startles me from my inner monologue. I flick my gaze to find a wide-eyed Huddie staring at me with his mouth open. He masks his features before I can analyze them further.

"Don't say anything, Huddie," I warn him as he opens my door. Leaning over the middle console, I grab my backpack off the floorboard. Huddie mumbles something incoherent while white knuckling the door frame.

I remove his hands from the door and slam it closed. Tossing the backpack over my shoulder, I clench my hands to my sides. Huddie's eyes travel slowly from the soles of my feet to the top of my head. "You look..." His voice trails off. Huddie reaches out a hand and twirls a piece of my hair between his fingers.

The intimacy of the act is hard to ignore.

“I said don’t.” *I can’t handle it from you.* My eyes are starting to sting. *What was I thinking?* I can’t do this. I look to the sky and attempt to release this weird emotion caught in my throat.

This has always been a struggle for me. Some days I crave to be seen as a contender, but I don’t want the guys to treat me differently. Well, I do, and I don’t. See? I’m struggling and I don’t know how to handle it, especially with Huddie looking at me like I’m a completely different person. *I’m not.*

“Hey, hey.” Huddie puts his hands on my shoulders, massaging them with his palms. “Mattie, I like your hair.”

“Really?” I force myself to look into his eyes. It’s hard. Sometimes looking at Huddie’s eyes is like staring directly at the sun. You can only look for a second because the blue burns so brightly.

“Really,” he confirms with a genuine smile. “Come on, we’re going to be late, and we still need to go by our lockers.”

We walk toward the rest of our friends. Huddie updates me on the latest prank his little brother Harley has done. Over the summer, he traded cream cheese for Huddie’s deodorant.

There was also the fake snake in the fridge, mayonnaise in the cream-filled donuts (not sure how he pulled that off), and we can’t forget about the exploding ketchup.

I wish I could have been there. Huddie texted me a photo of his dad covered in ketchup. Mr. Monroe tried to look angry, but I noticed a lift on the side of his mouth. Huddie does the same thing when he pretends to be annoyed with me.

“What the hell did you do to your hair? Did you get a *perm*?” Nick asks, his tone teetering between disgusted and humored.

“No. I did not. This is my natural hair. Don’t make it a thing, Nickie.” I roll my eyes at him to blow off his comment. It’s exactly what I expected from Nick and exactly what I was worried about.

“I think it looks hot.” Leo pipes up and gives me a flirty wink. *That* was not the response I was expecting, but I’ll take it. Leo was always my favorite.

“Thanks, Leo.” He nods a ‘you’re *welcome*’ and returns to his conversation with another defensive player Reggie.

“Mattie is not hot.” I flinch at Nick’s words. Although they were spoken lightheartedly, it still felt like a punch to my ego. *And my heart. Ouch.*

“Okay, well, as fun as it is to stand in the spotlight, I’m going to go inside. Surely you have better things to talk about than my hair and how hot it is or *isn’t*.” I narrow my eyes at Nick and then walk away without a second glance.

I navigate through clusters of underclassmen, too cheery for the first day of school. I want to be excited along with them, but my growing rage has a powerful grip on me.

You know what? No! I won’t let Nick or anyone ruin this day for me. And it’s just hair. *My hair*. Why does Nick have to make a scene? I didn’t make fun of him when he thought shaving half his hair off would be a good idea. For the record, it wasn’t. But you didn’t hear that from me.

Someone wolf whistles as I enter the senior hallway. Brennan Abernathy, a point guard on the basketball team, is leaning casually against a bank of lockers, trolling my movements. *Interesting.*

I keep walking until I get to my locker and start entering the combination. The warning bell will ring soon, and my homeroom is at the other end of the hall.

“Are you new here? Hi, I’m Brennan.” I stare slack-jawed at Brennan. He doesn’t recognize me. I don’t know if I should be impressed with my makeover or worried about his intellect.

“She’s not new here. She knows who you are, jackass. Now move, Abernathy,” Nick growls behind his back.

“Mattie? Damn girl.” He moves his eyes leisurely over my legs, my hunter-green crop top, the sliver of exposed skin, and my curly hair. Finally, landing on my eyes.

Brennan's body scan puts me on edge. It feels different than the friendly way Huddie looked me over. I've never had a guy look at me with such *interest*. "I'll see you around, Mattie," he says, raking his teeth over his bottom lip before walking away.

"No, you won't. You can go now," Huddie commands, staring him down. Geeze. Did they add a double shot of testosterone into their Gatorade this morning?

Brennan walks away, and my cheeks slowly return to their natural color. I've seen him around school and watched him play basketball, but we've never hung out. He is easy on the eyes. Tall, dark skin, deep brown eyes, lush lips, and adorable dimples. As cute as he is, Brennan isn't the guy for me.

"I'm sorry." The words are barely audible. "You look really nice."

"How much did that hurt you to say, Nick?" I clip back at him.

"Not as much as you think. I never meant for it to come out bad. You know that." *Do I?* Nick never really had a filter when it came to me. "You just look different. It surprised me."

"Next time, I'll text you a warning when I change up my hair or my clothes. Can we just forget about it?" He nods in agreement. "Good." Nick's eyes stray down the hall to Everly. She is wearing a light pink dress hitting mid-thigh. It compliments her olive skin and glossy raven hair perfectly. She is *perfect*.

Perfect clothes. Perfect hair. Perfect makeup. Perfect smile.

"You should go say hi," I tell him.

"No way!"

"Why not? Huddie? A little help here. You are the expert, after all." I tease. He rolls his eyes, but I don't miss the pink tinge to his ears.

"Go say hi. Ask Everly about her summer or something," Huddie suggests.

"No."

“You are so stubborn.” I go to poke his chest, but he palms my hand and holds on to it. “Do you plan on communicating telepathically or something?” Huddie snickers. “At some point, you will have to actually speak to her.”

“I know this.” Nick grits out, watching Everly walk by. Her smile drops when she sees our joint hands. I immediately let his hand go, and he frowns at me. *He really is clueless.*

“You need my help. I am a great wing woman. Ask Ace and Leo. I have helped them get a date or two. How do you think Ace did so well with Meg? It wasn’t just his charming personality and good looks.” Nick’s face is granite. He doesn’t believe me. “Fine. I’ll stop offering my services. Prepare to beg when you realize you need me.”

“There will be no begging from me. I think you forgot who I am, Mattie. The only one begging will be Everly.” I slam my locker door.

“You’re a pig. I can’t believe you just said that. Huddie,”

“Yeah, Mattie?”

“Please don’t let him say crap like that to Everly. Maybe you should educate your scholar about humility first. Good luck with him, Huddie. You’re going to need it.” I pat Huddie on his cheek and start trudging down the hall.

I do wish Nick the best, but I’ll admit it does hurt to know he doesn’t think I’m qualified to help him. And if I’m really being honest, it hurts to think he doesn’t need me. That maybe we are growing apart in some way.

No, he does need me. I will show him if he doesn’t want to admit it. He’ll see I’m right.

MATTIE

Monday and Tuesday, I heard my name constantly whispered down the halls at school. I caused quite a stir with my curls. Nick wasn't the only one who had something to say. I didn't think people would really give a crap about me. Apparently, high schoolers will talk about anything.

By the end of the week, everyone started gossiping about more important things like who likes who, who kissed who, and how good the football team was going to be this year. Thank goodness! I swear if one more person asked me if my hair was natural or if they could touch it, I was going to lose my mind.

I also officially launched my mission of being Nick's secret wing woman. On Tuesday, I casually started being more friendly to Everly. If Nick wasn't going to put himself out there, I would do it for him. We've got to get this train moving. I started by saying hi and smiling when I passed her in the hall.

On Wednesday, I decided to sit by her in Art class. I complimented her on the pencil drawing she was working on. I sensed she wasn't happy with the direction of her work, and gave her a few tips and taught her my favorite shading hack. Everly smiled sweetly and thanked me.

I felt like I was making headway, so I chatted her up this morning between second and third period. I like her. Once you get past her love of makeup, clothes, and reality television, Everly is sweet and friendly. I can see why Nick likes her and would want to spend more time with her.

"What are you up to?" Huddie asks as soon as I sit across from him at our lunch table. We pack our lunches and always make it to our table first.

"Me?" I feign innocence. "What could I possibly be up to?"

"I saw you talking to Everly this morning." I take my sandwich, chips, and apple out of the brown paper bag I

brought from home. “I also see you smiling at her all the time.”

“I do not.”

“You do.” What else does he see me doing? I wonder. “If you were a dude, I would say you were flirting with her.”

“We’re friends. Or we’re becoming friends.” I shrug a shoulder. *No big deal.*

“Friends? You and Everly?”

I nod. “It’s all part of my master plan. Just wait and see. Maybe take some notes. Once I’m friends with Everly-“

“What are you talking about? Why would you be friends with Everly?” Nick cuts me off, taking the seat next to me. Ace, Leo, and Luke are filing in close behind him. Ace gives me a look that says, ‘*oh boy, here we go.*’

“Why wouldn’t I be? It’s a free country, Nick. I can be friends with whoever I want to be friends with. Also, doesn’t it make sense for your best friend to be friends with your soon-to-be girlfriend? I mean, we will be hanging and stuff at some point. She should know me too.”

“No. It doesn’t make any sense at all. And you can’t be friends with her.” Nick’s leg is bouncing like he’s agitated. His brows are turned down, making him look like Oscar the Grouch. Honestly, does he really think I’m trying to sabotage him or something?

“I can.” He fumes beside me, stuffing ketchup-soaked fries in his mouth. “Did you know Everly went to San Diego for two weeks this summer?”

“I didn’t,” he replies dryly.

“She did. It’s her favorite place to visit. Something about the weather being perfect for the beach. Did you know she loves the beach? She told me all the differences between the beaches in Oregon and California. It was so interesting.”

“Her favorite place, huh?”

“Yeah, she kept raving about this restaurant that she swears has the best tacos.” Luke, Leo, and Huddie riot. I had a feeling they would protest against the idea of any taco joint being better than Tink’s.

“Tink’s has the best tacos,” Luke practically shouts.

“That’s what I told her! She hasn’t even heard of Tink’s before. It’s criminal! Too bad we don’t know anyone who could take her.” I let the thought linger in the air for a few moments while I enjoy a bite of my sandwich.

Huddie is staring at me with pure admiration. He knows I did Nick a solid. Not that Nick will ever admit I helped him. Who knows? Maybe he will surprise me and say thank you.

“Tink’s Tacos, huh?” Nick asks wistfully.

“I think it’s a good place to start. Here.” I pull a piece of paper out of my back pocket.

“What’s this?”

“Conversation starters. A few books Everly has read recently. A movie she saw over the summer. That sort of thing. Maybe learn a little bit about each of them. To be honest, I doubt you will like any of them. You’ve never been much of a reader or rom-com lover.”

“Then what’s the point of this?” He asks, shaking the paper. I smack him on the back of his head.

“The point, Nicholas, is to show interest in what she likes. You don’t have to like it. In fact, I encourage you not to lie to her and pretend to like anything. It’s better, to be honest.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if we had things in common?”

I have five pairs of eyes looking at me like I’m their personal dating Yoda.

“Yes and no. It’s good to have common ground. It wouldn’t be as much fun if you were dating yourself. You want to date someone you can learn from and discover new things.” He looks confused. “Ace, do you want to help me out with this? You and Meg are really different. Yet, you didn’t freak out when I was helping you two get together.”

“Wait, you helped Ace like this?” Nick looks shocked, but I could have sworn I told him this on Monday.

“She did.” Ace gives me a grateful smile. “If it wasn’t for Mattie’s help, it would have taken us a lot longer to get together. I was so nervous to talk to Meg. I’d see her in the hall and just freeze. Then I dragged Mattie with me. She started talking to Meg, and I stood there like a doofus. I don’t know how but it worked.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, Ace.” Meg was completely smitten with Ace. She tried to be cool and keep a wall up, but I could tell she was happy to have him notice her. That was Sophomore year, and they’ve been together ever since. Too bad Meg isn’t in the same lunch period as the rest of us. She would back me up.

Meg would also take advantage of any opportunity to embarrass Ace and brag about how adorable he was back then.

“And no, it’s not better to be agreeable and simply like everything Everly does just to make her happy. If you hate it, tell her. *Nicely*.” Ace cuts Nick with a glare. Even Ace knows Nick doesn’t speak to people in the most eloquent way.

“Mattie told me to always be honest but ask questions. Like, why is *The Notebook* your favorite movie even though it’s a sappy love story and there aren’t any car chases, and nothing blows up?” I roll my eyes. Meg makes Ace watch that movie at least once every couple of months.

“See, it’s okay to have differences,” I reassure him. “You are interested in Everly, not all her hobbies. Just be open to new things, and you’ll be fine.”

“That’s good because I’ve never heard of any of these books.”

“What’s that face? You look worried.”

“What if we have nothing in common?”

“Oh, Nickie, one word. Tacos. It’s a universal love language. Feed a girl tacos, and she’s yours for life. Scientific fact.”

“You did all this for me?” He asks me quietly so the others can’t hear.

“I did. I’m sorry. I know you said you didn’t want my help. I just thought....” I let out a slow breath. “Please don’t be mad at me, Nickie.”

“Mattie, I’m not. I’m grateful. You were right. You are a much better sidekick than Huddie.”

“Hey! I heard that,” Huddie shouts across the table. I throw a chip at him. Of course, he catches it in his mouth. Great, now I’m staring at his mouth. “You are the Queen, Mattie.” He winks and starts bending over a few times, hailing me. *Silly boy.*

“I’m going to ask her out after practice. Maybe you guys can distract the other cheerleaders so I can get her alone?”

“If I must,” Leo quips with a mischievous grin. *Oh lord.*

And with that, my work here is done. I wasn’t planning on watching their practice today, but I might stop by. It will be worth skipping time in the art studio to see Nick smiling when Everly says yes.

I don’t know any girl who would say no to tacos.

MATTIE

After the final bell, I leave my last class and make a pit stop by the art studio before walking out to the football field. I'll be quick so I'll only miss a little bit of their practice. It takes them a while to get dressed into their gear, and I need to pick up some supplies so I can work on my senior project at home.

I know the school year just started, but every minute counts. I want, no, I *need*, this project to be perfect.

The art studio at our school is separate from the art classroom where regular classes are held. The studio is reserved for senior art students working on their portfolios and the Senior Class Art Show and members of the art club.

A few other students are standing behind easels with headphones on, completely in the zone, painting or sketching away. With a wall of windows behind them letting the natural light in, it's a great space to paint.

To the right of the room, there are several large supply cabinets. It's an artist's dream. I swear they hold an entire craft store. I take my time pilfering different types of paper. Everything from origami to plain construction paper.

I've been obsessing over realistic collages. It is fascinating how artists can take all the different paper mediums and create beautiful life-like pictures. I dabbled around with the technique this summer. I managed to create a decent bird and butterfly.

Unfortunately, my senior project is a lot bigger and more intense. I am doing a portrait collage and a landscape watercolor. The portrait is the most significant piece I've ever completed. *I should grab more paper.*

"Hey, Mattie." My hand flinches on the paper I'm searching through at the sound of Tyler's deep voice.

"Hey, what are you up to?" I flick my gaze to him quickly before turning back to the storage cabinet.

“Nothing much. Just sketching a few ideas for my showcase.” He shrugs a shoulder. “What about you? Have you started working on your showcase?” I put another stack of paper in my backpack and close the cabinet.

“I have a little. I’m gathering a few supplies to do some of the prep work at home. The whole project is kind of overwhelming.” Tyler nods, and his dark brown hair falls into his eyes. He pushes the hair away with a graphite-smudged hand.

“I get that. A lot is riding on this.” *You don’t have to tell me. I know. I feel it.* I give him a tight smile while his eyes roam my face.

“Yeah, I’m really banking on a scholarship. If I don’t get one, let’s just say it won’t be good for me.” Tyler doesn’t need to know my life story. He won’t care that my parents will force me to attend an Ivy League school like my sisters.

“Well, we can’t have that,” he says with a smirk. “I know you’re more than capable, but if you ever want help or just work together like those guys,” he nods to Casey and Brian, painting side by side, lost in their craft. “Let me know.”

“Yeah, okay. I should get going, though.” I thumb towards the door.

“Cool.” He rolls his lips together. “Have a good night. I’ll see you tomorrow, Mattie.”

When I find a seat in the middle of the bleachers, the guys are still running laps. It’s my favorite spot, right on the fifty-yard line and halfway up. You can see everything from here.

There are fewer people watching practice than I thought there would be. You can usually count on a girlfriend or two, maybe a reporter from the school paper, and always a group of classmates waiting to flirt with the guys any chance they get.

I pull out the book I’m currently reading for my AP English class and slog through a few pages. My eyes keep darting to the field with every whistle blown.

I miss playing. I miss the game. I miss being out on the field with my friends. I was devastated when I had to stop playing

with Ace, Nick, Leo, and Luke. When middle school started, I officially traded my football pads for a sketch pad.

Thank goodness I had my art. It was the only thing that kept me sane while the guys were at practice every day.

Right now, the offense and defense are divided and running various drills. Ace is throwing to Huddie while he runs through different routes. I've always been impressed with the way they play together.

Huddie only moved here in High School, yet he fits in with the team like he's played with them since pee-wee league.

I search the field for Nick and find him chasing after one of the backup wide receivers trying to cut him off and get an interception. If he reads the play correctly, it should be an easy pick for him.

"What do you think you're doing here?" A screechy voice interrupts my spying.

Three cheerleaders stand before me, and one does not look happy that I'm here.

"Hey girls, how is practice going?"

"Like you care," Whitney snaps back. I'm pretty sure Whitney has never liked me. She's always had some kind of vendetta for me since we started high school. Whitney never fails to call me out or try to embarrass me whenever she can.

"I wouldn't ask if I wasn't interested, Whitney." I close my book and slip it into my backpack.

"You didn't answer my question."

"And you didn't answer mine. If you must know, I'm here to watch my friends practice." I nod toward the field. Huddie just caught another ball and is running it back to Ace.

"Right. Your *friends*." I shift my eyes from Whitney to Bridget and Everly. I try to get a read of them. Everly smiles sweetly but it's far from genuine.

"Come on, Whitney, we should get back to practice. Erin will be mad if we're gone too long," Everly says.

“I’m not leaving until she does.” I scoot over and make room for her to sit. I’m not leaving, so she might as well get comfortable.

“There’s plenty of room for you to sit with me.” Whitney scoffs and rolls her eyes. “If you don’t want to sit, can you please move? You are blocking the field, and I can’t see.”

I can see just fine. I just want Whitney to leave. There is something about the way Whitney is staring me down. The look in her eyes is a special kind of evil. I tilt my head and raise an eyebrow questioning her. *Taunting her.*

I’ve never considered myself a confident person. But I’m bold. I’m not afraid to make brazen moves. I’m also strong and don’t let my feelings get hurt easily. Whitney thinks she can cut me, but she’s a little kitten compared to my mother.

Dealing with mean girls is par for the course when you have the friends I do. Either they try to butter me up to get closer to them, or they want to cut me with mean words to get me out of the way.

A whistle blows, and the four of us jerk our heads to the field. Luke and Leo are walking away from a few cheerleaders taking a water break. Leo was grinning like the Cheshire cat. If I had to guess, they were making plans for tonight’s party at Finn’s house.

Nick and Huddie are standing by Ace while he prattles on about a play he is drawing on a small whiteboard. They are barely paying attention. Every now and then, their eyes flick up to the bleachers where I’m sitting surrounded by my enemies.

They both look concerned. Is it because Everly is here? Nick clearly doesn’t believe that I know what I’m doing. Doesn’t he trust me? I thought I proved my worth at lunch.

And what is Huddie so worried about?

“Ev, Bridge, Whit!” Erin yells from their practice area. “Time to work! Let’s go!”

“Bye, Mattie,” Everly says.

“Bye, see you tonight at the party.” I wave to her and Bridget as they bounce down the bleacher steps.

Whitney looks down at the field where Nick is still watching us. Not us, Everly. His eyes trail her all the way back to Erin.

“He isn’t yours to keep,” Whitney sneers.

“Excuse me?” I ask. I heard her, but I have no idea what she is talking about. I’m not trying to keep Nick to myself. I’m not trying to keep *anyone*.

“He follows you around like a lost puppy. The way he looks at you like you hung the moon. It’s pathetic. You aren’t even on his level. He’s way too good for you.” Now I’m really confused. I have no idea what she’s carrying on about. I don’t like her tone.

“What are you screeching about?” I snap, standing up and putting my hands on my hips.

“You are so naïve, *Madeline*. If you don’t see it, I’m not going to be the one to tell you. But I will put a stop to it. Even if it means letting someone else date him instead of me.”

Wait, does she think Nick likes me? She is going to *let* someone else date him. Wow, she is on more of a head trip than I thought.

I can’t help the grin that passes over my face. Whitney is the clueless one. Nick wasn’t looking at me like that. He was looking at Everly.

“You better go before Erin has a coronary.” Ignoring her feels like the safest option. We are still on school grounds, after all. A punch to her face isn’t worth the suspension. Anyway, Nick and I are the only ones who know what is going on with our friendship. And that’s what it is. *A friendship*.

The last person I will let get in between what we have is Whitney Carmichael. When she realizes I’m not going to say anything else, Whitney turns on her heel and huffs to meet back up with the rest of the cheerleaders. Her long blonde ponytail swings in tandem with her hips.

I let out a steady breath and sit back down. I won't let Whitney run me off. She can't stop me from being here for the people I care about.

Huddie catches my eye and mouths, '*are you okay?*' I nod and mouth back, '*yeah, talk later.*' He agrees, and I give him two thumbs up, making him laugh.

Huddie runs back onto the field, putting his helmet on as he goes. Yeah, this is where I belong. Even if Everly and Nick start dating, I will still be there to support Nick.

MATTIE

“Looks like things went well with Everly last night,” I say to Nick when he returns to the den with a bottle of water and a protein bar. I’m cuddled up with my favorite blanket in my usual spot on the sectional, not wanting to move.

We stayed out way too late last night at Finn’s house. Like most weekends, Huddie and I spent the night at Nick’s place. Nick’s dad travels a lot for work. It doesn’t hurt that Finn’s house is only two streets over, and we can easily walk home.

Nick’s house is like mine, more mausoleum than home. His den is nice to hang out in though. I wouldn’t be surprised if we see Leo and Luke at some point today to watch football.

The den is right next to the kitchen and his dad decked it out with all the trimmings. When his dad is home and not working in his office, he is in this room watching sports, so he made it very comfortable for himself. There is a large gray micro-fiber sectional on one side of the room, two leather recliners on the other, and a ninety-eight-inch television front and center.

Nick plops down in his favorite corner of the sectional, and Huddie takes the other end after dropping a water bottle in my lap. *That was nice of him.*

“I guess.” Nick finally answers me.

“You guess.” I look to Huddie for help, and he drops his head. *Crap.* I don’t like the look of this. “What happened?”

“Well, she’s interested,” he says slowly.

“That’s great, Nickie! So, you are going to take her to Tink’s?”

“No,” he says like it’s final.

“Wait, what? No? You’re going to take her somewhere else?”

“Not exactly.” He winces. That makes me sit up despite the fatigue I feel in my bones.

“Is someone going to tell me what’s going on?” I flick my attention between Nick and Huddie, trying to get a read on the situation. One thing is obvious. Nick has filled Huddie in already, and I’ve been left in the dark once again.

Nick exhales. “Everly won’t go out with me.” He pauses like he has to brace himself for the next part. “Because of you.”

“Because of me? Oh no. No. No. No.” I’m starting to panic. “I messed up. She didn’t like that I talked to her for you. Nickie, I’m so sorry. So, so, sorry.” I move closer to him and place a hand on his thigh. He’s wearing his favorite black mesh shorts and a workout tank with arm holes so big you can see his entire rib cage.

“No, Mattie. That’s not why.” I’m relieved but then what’s the problem? Nick scratches the back of his neck. He needs a haircut. Nick keeps his dark brown hair cut so short it’s practically shaved, and right now, it’s long enough I could pull on it.

“Okay, I don’t understand.” Again, I look to Huddie for help. He’s leaning forward with his elbows on his bare knees, staring at his bare feet. *The opposite of helpful.*

“Mattie, she thinks we’re, I don’t know, too close or something. Like we have more than a friendship going on. Which is obviously ridiculous.” *Obviously.*

I move my hand from his leg, but he holds it instead. Okay, I can see where Everly might be confused about our relationship. Even though there really is nothing going on between us.

Nick and I could never be linked romantically. Too much time has passed between us. We’re too good of friends to ever be more. It’s not something I’m willing to risk. *Right?*

The whole situation makes me question what everyone else sees. Does anyone else think we were or are a couple? The thought makes my stomach sink like an anchor deep in the Pacific Ocean.

“We are close. You’re my best friend. You and Huddie are.” I look over at him. His smile is inverted, but I can still see the mirth in his eyes. “But I would never get in the way of you and Everly. I know how much she means to you.”

“I know that.” He squeezes my hand. “But she doesn’t. I tried to tell her last night that we’ve grown up together, and we can’t help the way we are together. We have a lot of history.” He gives me a knowing look. I shudder. Nick’s mom walked out a year or so after we became friends. It wasn’t good. His dad was rigid and cold, to begin with. After Nick’s mom walked, let’s just say he got worse.

“She didn’t care?”

“Not really.”

“Is there anything we can do to change her mind?” Nick chews his lip. Then looks over at Huddie and clears his throat. Huddie studies his hands, looking distressed. His brows are knitted together in worry. “What? Just tell me.”

“She uh, said, um.” Oh. My. God. Spit it out, man. “She said she would go out with me if you had a boyfriend.”

“She what?!” I screech, standing up from the couch.

“Everly said she would feel more comfortable dating me if she knew you were dating too. Someone else that is.”

What in the actual hell? She wants me to get a boyfriend? I plop down on the couch and snuggle up in my blanket, hiding most of my face. Who does she think she is to make that request? I am furious.

“I know. I might as well forget dating her, huh?” *Excuse me?* I pop my head out of my blanket shell like a turtle. Nick groans in frustration, but I’m about to make him groan in pain when I kick him in his balls. “No way you will find a boyfriend.” He angrily flicks through the channels with the remote.

“Hold up just a second. I can get a boyfriend. Thank you very much.”

“Mattie, let’s be real. You aren’t exactly girlfriend material.” I scoff at his accusation.

“For your information, I would be a great girlfriend! Any guy would be lucky to have me as his girlfriend.” I can’t believe I have to defend myself to my best friends. Out of all people, they should know how great I am. If not, why are they friends with me to begin with? They should be my hype men and give me a ringing endorsement.

“Whatever you say. Anyway, you don’t even want a boyfriend.”

“I never said that!”

“Do you?” Huddie asks. His endearing tone throwing me off.

“I mean, I’m not against it or anything. It’s just never been a priority.” He nods.

“Even if you could find a boyfriend.”

“I can totally find a boyfriend,” I confirm, cutting off his thought.

“Right.” He is pacifying me. *Jerk*. “Would it be by homecoming? Probably not. I want to be official with Everly before then.” Is he implying he can get Everly to like him by homecoming, but I couldn’t get someone to like me? *Whatever*. “I don’t want her to even think about letting another guy take her.”

“Let’s back up. You don’t think I can get a guy to like me in four weeks? Or that it’s possible there is a guy who already likes me like that?”

“No offense or anything, but no.” I huff at him. My fists flex on their own.

“Wow, Nick. Just wow. For the record, there are plenty of guys interested in me. *Plen-ty*. I’m practically drowning over here.” I’m not. I wouldn’t have a clue if a guy was interested in me.

“Who?” Huddie asks sharply.

“Brennan, for one.” I mean, he did whistle at me on the first day of school. That’s *something*. I don’t really want that kind of attention, but I’m not going to split hairs right now. “Then there are a couple of guys in art club with me too.” Tyler is pretty nice, and Brian gives me a head nod from time to time.

“Brennan is still harassing you?” Huddie practically growls.

“He’s not *harassing* me. We talk in history class, that’s all. He’s pretty funny.”

“He’s an asshole,” Nick booms. “Stay away from him.”

“Do you want me to get a boyfriend so you can date Everly or not? If I’m such a hard sell, I probably shouldn’t push away one of my best prospects.”

“I would rather not date Everly than have you date that guy. Stay away from him. And I *will* be talking to him on Monday.”

“Don’t be stupid, Nickie. He probably doesn’t even like me for real,” I say playfully.

“Oh, I’m sure he doesn’t,” he sneers. I’ve had enough. There so much of this I can take.

“Why don’t we all take a minute to catch our breaths? Relax,” Huddie says picking up on my rage. I feel bad. He’s always stuck in the middle of our fighting.

“Fine.” Nick and I say simultaneously.

After a few minutes pass in silence, the two of them start murmuring across the room. I wait for one of them to speak, but it doesn’t happen before my patience runs out.

“Is there something else you need to tell me?”

“Well, we did have a possible solution to the problem. More of a guarantee.”

“It’s not that we don’t think you can find a boyfriend. It’s just we,” Huddie gestures to Nick, “don’t want you to feel pressure and date some guy who won’t be good to you.” *How sweet of you to think of me*. I roll my eyes.

“Yeah, it isn’t fair to you.” *Uh-huh*.

“Okay, what is your solution?”

“A fake boyfriend,” Nick reveals, and I choke on air. *A fake boyfriend*, I scream in my head.

“A fake boyfriend!” It feels so much better screaming it out loud. “Let me get this straight. You two don’t think I can get a decent guy to date me on my own. So, your solution is for me to get a fake boyfriend. Some guy I don’t even have an interest in because.... Why exactly?”

“Because it’s temporary. You only have to date this guy long enough for Everly and me to become an official couple. Do you really want to date the first guy you come across just to help me?”

“It sounds better than asking someone who doesn’t like me at all to pretend to be in a relationship with me. And what if someone finds out? Do you know how humiliating that would be for me? I won’t do it. I’m sorry, Nickie, but the answer is no.”

“No one would find out.”

“You can’t guarantee that.”

“I can because you would be fake dating Huddie.”

“Huddie?” I can’t breathe. I sneak a glance at him, and he’s seething. His hands are in tight fists. He doesn’t seem thrilled with the idea of dating me. My heart tumbles a little.

“Yeah, Huddie is perfect. This way, it stays between the three of us. It would only be until after homecoming. And before you say something stupid like getting a date for homecoming, let’s be honest. You were going to go with Huddie and me anyways. Now it will be with Everly too.” He’s not wrong there. Unless Huddie was going to get a date of his own. *Oof, I don’t like the idea of that at all.*

“How do you feel about this, Huddie?” He has to have an opinion about this ridiculous idea of Nick’s. It’s unfair to take him off the market if he doesn’t want to be.

“I don’t like it, but it’s temporary.” I flinch. I feel like I just had the wind knocked out of me. Huddie is the sweetest

person I know. The quick clip of his words sting. “I mean, it’s fine,” Huddie adds, blowing a deep breath. “I agree it’s better than you forcing yourself on someone.”

“I wouldn’t be *forcing* myself on anyone. I told you I have interested prospects.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he grits out behind clenched teeth. Why is he getting so mad? Wasn’t this partly his idea too?

“You don’t have to do this, Huddie. I don’t have to do this. The whole idea is dumb. And insulting. I realize you two don’t think I’m attractive that way.” Nick rolls his eyes like he’s heard this before, and Huddie scrubs his face before dropping his head.

“But I promise you there are guys who do. No offense Huddie, but I will not be your fake girlfriend.” The words leave a sour taste in my mouth. “I will help you, Nick, the best I can. I have art club on Monday. There’s this guy Tyler who talks to me and is pretty cute. He’s nice too, and we have a lot in common. I can’t promise we’ll be a couple by homecoming.” I don’t really want that with Tyler at all. “But I bet it would be enough to convince Everly to give you a chance.”

“It was just an idea. We didn’t mean to insult you, Mattie.” *You never do.* “But only talk to this Tyler guy because you want to. Don’t worry about me. You’ve already done so much. This was a big ask.”

The room grows quiet again, and I’ve decided I’ve had enough of them. If I stay any longer, I may do something I will regret, like cry.

“Where are you going?” Nick asks when I stand and start folding my blanket.

“Home.”

“You aren’t going to stay over?”

“Nah, I’ve got stuff to do, and my parents will be home tonight. I should probably be home for dinner.”

“Okay. I’ll pick you up for school on Monday.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’ll drive myself. We should, I don’t know, stop some of that stuff, right? For Everly’s sake.”

“No.” Nick stands and grabs both of my hands. “Listen, I understand what Everly is saying. We are close. You are my best friend. I won’t let anyone change that. Okay?” This is why I hold on so tight to Nick. He may not always say the nicest things, but I know he cares for me.

“Okay,” I agree quietly.

“It will all work out. You’ll see.” Nick tugs me into his chest and tightens his arms around me. The scent of the spicy soap he uses washes over me. “See you Monday morning.” I nod in agreement, and he plops down on the couch as if he didn’t just try to push me off on Huddie.

“Bye, Huddie.” He doesn’t move or open his mouth to speak. Fine. Be mad. I’m trying to figure out what I did. Did the idea of dating me, I’m sorry fake dating me, irritate him that much?

It is a terrible idea. I don’t know what Nick and Huddie were thinking. I will attempt to flirt with Tyler on Monday. He has been talking to me more and more each day. He might be flirting with me, but I’m clueless about boys. He’s not exactly my type, but we do have things in common like I told the guys. Tyler would be fun enough to hang out with.

For a little while, at least.

MATTIE

My parents were still away when I got home. I had a feeling this would be the case. I let myself hope for things to be different every now and then. I allowed my heart to wish for a family that ate dinner together every night and talked about their day. I want that, and deep down, I know as much as I crave it. It's not going to happen for me.

Ashley and Brooke occupy too much of my parents' time. They are the daughters they dreamed about. The perfect specimens to groom into high society robots. That's not me.

My Aunt Caroline told me once I was born to stand out. She was right. At least when it comes to my family. I am the black sheep. I'm the only one who doesn't want to get an MBA or a Law degree. I'm the only one who doesn't fall in line.

I keep reminding myself it would be worse if they were home. I wouldn't be alone, but it would still be lonely. Sometimes, I just need someone I can talk to about anything. I have Nick, but he's my quiet, safe space. Nick has never been someone I could count on to solve problems.

If anything, lately he's proven he's only good at creating them. *Fake dating. What the hell?*

Then there's Huddie and the others. As much as they care, they are busy with their own lives. I can't pour all my stuff onto them. That's what parents are for, right? To listen and help you work through your worries and fears?

I could talk to my mother, but there would be a price. She would manipulate every word and use it to get exactly what she wanted from me. And I refuse to do that.

My stomach growls. I walk to the kitchen and open the fridge door and stare. There is nothing except iced coffee, water bottles, yogurt, and leftovers from a meal delivery service my mother has subscribed to. It has to taste better than anything my mother could make on her own. Now that I think of it, I don't think I've seen her cook a day in her life.

I'm about to sit down and eat my microwaved fettuccini when the doorbell rings. I take my noodles with me, stuffing a huge bite in my mouth as I go. I open the door and Huddie is standing on the other side. He stares at me while I slurp up all the noodles hanging from my mouth.

"Hi," I greet him in between chewing.

"Hey," he replies, chuckling and shaking his head. His eyes twinkle with amusement.

"What are you doing here?"

"I want to talk to you. Can I come in?"

I leave the door open and walk up the stairs to my room. I need to remember they pissed me off today. Huddie and Nick are both assholes for thinking I can't get a guy to like me and coming up with the stupid idea to start a fake relationship. Especially with Huddie, of all people.

I drop on my bed and continue eating my pasta while I wait for him to come upstairs. He is taking his sweet time.

Huddie's steps falter when he walks into my bedroom. "Did you clean up for me?" He jokes.

"Shut up. It's not that bad." It is that bad. There are dirty clothes scattered all over the floor. Art supplies are spread out on my desk and spilling on the floor next to stacks of books that line the wall under my window.

"How do you function in this mess?" Huddie moves a pile of clothes on my chair to the floor. Of course, Huddie finds one of my bras. He holds it out on his pointer finger and examines it like evidence that will solve a missing person's case.

"Give me that." I put my bowl of noodles on my nightstand. I snatch a few more bras and panties lying on the ground before he can see them as I make my way to him.

"I didn't expect you to wear something so...lacey," Huddie says, with rosy cheeks and a hard swallow. I pluck the bra from his finger.

“Yeah, well, I do.” It’s one of the things I do for myself that makes me feel feminine and pretty. Even if I’m the only one who will ever see them. “You said you wanted to talk to me.”

“Ahem...yeah. I’ll start by saying I’m sorry. Nick and I weren’t thinking.”

“I’ll say.” But what’s new? I position myself cross-legged on my bed, leaning against the headboard. Huddie joins me and sits facing me, leaving one foot on the ground.

He’s still wearing his favorite Oregon sweatshirt, but he’s ditched his shorts for a pair of gray joggers. Huddie lifts his hat, scratches his head, and places it back on his head backward. This whole move makes my pulse tremor.

“I think Nick feels a little desperate. He wasn’t expecting an ultimatum from Everly. *Especially* not that one.”

“Neither was I,” I grumble.

“Would it really be so bad to date me?” I roll my eyes.

“Huddie, it isn’t you. I already told you. It’s embarrassing. And the fact that you and Nick don’t think I can get a boyfriend is insulting. I won’t do it.”

Huddie taps his thumb on his leg...thinking. “What if I told you this would help me too?”

“I don’t really see how it benefits you at all, but please enlighten me.” I’m skeptical. Huddie lets out a breathy laugh as he plucks a loose string on the cuff of his frayed sweatshirt.

“I really need to concentrate on football. You know how important it is for me to get a scholarship. My family can’t afford to pay for college.” I nod and offer a hopeful smile. “If I had a girlfriend, other girls would back off. I can focus on football and my grades.” I stare at him, baffled, and try hard not to laugh. But I can’t stop myself.

I bend over, laughing so hard tears are rolling down my cheeks. Huddie pushes against my shoulder, and I sit back up.

“Did I say something funny?” He crosses his arms over his chest.

“First of all, it must be tough being you. All those girls just vying for their shot with Hudson Monroe.” I bat my eyelashes and pretend to fawn over him.

“Second, Huddie, nothing will stop girls from flirting with you. It’s funny you think dating me will make a difference. Having a girlfriend will make you more of a challenge to them,” I say, wiping the tears. “Nobody would believe we’re a couple anyway.”

“Why? We hang out all the time.”

“Exactly. We hang out. We’re buddies.”

“Buddies,” he repeats quietly, processing my choice of word.

“I’m not the type of girl you go for, Huddie. We both know that. The girls you date and make out with at parties look and act nothing like me. I’m. Not. Believable,” I say, moving my hand from my head down to my legs.

“You’re wrong. We can make it work long enough for Nick to become official with Everly and for me to get my scholarship to Oregon.”

Great, I’m so glad the boys get everything they want. What about me? What about what I want? I want a *real* boyfriend. Someone who actually wants to be with me for me!

“No.”

“Why are you being so stubborn? It isn’t that big of a deal, Mattie.”

“Because! I don’t want my first boyfriend to be fake! Okay?! You and Nick, you both have dated before. You guys have fallen in love and had your first kiss. And I want that too,” I say, pointing to myself and taking a deep breath. I didn’t intend to get carried away like this. “I can’t do that if I’m fake dating you.”

Huddie drops his head. “You’re right. We’re being selfish.” He takes my hands in his. “I’m sorry.” When he looks at me like this, I want to give him everything he’s ever asked from me and more.

Huddie traces his thumb over my knuckles. The callused skin sends shivers up my arms. It's so quiet in my room. All you can hear is the whirling of the fan.

Can I do this? Can I *pretend* to be Huddie's girlfriend? This is not how I thought my first relationship would start.

I trust Huddie. I know I'll be safe with Huddie. He's my best friend too. He'd never do anything to hurt me or to wreck our friendship.

But there's a risk. No, I can't think about that now. Nick needs me. I promised him I would never let him down and I would always be there for him.

And if it helps Huddie, too, who am I to say no?

"I'll do it," I finally say, removing my hands from his and placing them in my lap.

"Are you sure? Nick can keep talking with Everly. I bet he will wear her down eventually. You know how persistent he can be."

"I know, but if I have a boyfriend, she will say yes by the end of next week. I'll do it for him. And for you, if you think it will help you too."

"It will. What about all you said earlier about wanting a real boyfriend?" He asks cautiously.

"Don't worry about that. It doesn't matter. I was just being dramatic."

"If you're sure."

"I am." I wonder if I'm convincing myself or Huddie.

"I guess we'll start on Monday, then. I'll tell Nick I'm interested in dating you whenever Everly is around to get the ball rolling."

"Sounds good." I roll my lips and survey my room. I feel awkward. I'm not sure what to do with my new *boyfriend*. God. Huddie and I are going to be a couple. Sweat is starting to bead on the back of my neck.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll have fun with it.” He pats me on my leg like the good pal that I am.

“If you say so.” He nods, reassuring me.

“So, are your parents here?” Huddie stands up and walks over to my desk.

“No,” I say with a sigh. “I think they are in California still or again. I’m not sure. They don’t really tell me where they are anymore.”

“Are you serious? They just leave you here alone. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Don’t they want to see you too?”

“Apparently not,” I mutter under my breath. “It’s nothing new. They’ve always been like this. My parents are busy with work, my sisters, charities, you know.”

Huddie stays quiet. The look on his face tells me he doesn’t know. He shifts through a few of the drawings I’ve recently finished scattered on my desk. I rush to his side when he picks up one of my sketchbooks.

“That is private.” I take it and stack it on top of the others on my bookshelf. Huddie raises an eyebrow waiting for an explanation for my outburst.

“It’s just a sketchbook. Drawings and things.” I try to play it off, but it’s more than just drawings. They are basically diaries. I draw and write everything in them. I laugh silently, thinking about some of the silly little poems I’ve written.

“I started in middle school, I think. It’s nothing, really.”

“And you don’t want me to see them,” he says, staring at the stack on the shelf.

“Uh, I don’t want anyone to see them.”

“I guess a person can’t really see ‘*nothing*’ anyway.” Huddie switches his focus to my easel and stares at the landscape drawing I’m in the process of painting. “This one is really good.”

“Thanks. It’s our clearing where we camp.”

“It looks so different without our tents and crap everywhere.”

“Yeah, it does.” I laugh. “I love it there. One of my favorite places.”

“Mine too.”

“I spent a lot of time there this summer while all of you were getting yourselves beat up at football practice and growing your muscles.” Not that I’ve noticed Huddie’s muscles. *Much*.

“I didn’t realize you liked nature so much.”

“I do.” Being outside makes me feel grounded. The smell is familiar and fills me with happiness. I don’t feel alone out there, even when I am alone. It’s strange, but the forest feels more alive to me than my own house. “I don’t think I could live in a tent for the rest of my life or anything. But maybe one of those traveling campers or a tiny house.”

“We should do it. Next summer,” he says with more enthusiasm than I’ve ever seen from him before.

“For real?”

“For real, why not?”

“It would be nice to have one more summer together with everyone.”

“Right. Everyone. Totally,” Huddie agrees.

“We probably shouldn’t think about next summer right now. The school year just started, after all.”

“Probably. But we’re doing it. We’ll go all through Oregon and up to Washington. I’ll show you some of my favorite places up there.”

“Sounds like a dream.” And I mean it. I would love to draw my way through Oregon and Washington with the guys.

“Let’s get through this.” He takes my hand in his. ‘This’ being our fake relationship. Because us being together is

simply something we have to get through now. *A means to an end.* “Then we can plan our epic summer adventure.”

“Okay.” I agree.

“I better get going. I’ll talk to Nick first thing Monday.”

“Alright. And I’ll just. I don’t know what I’ll do.” What is a pretend girlfriend supposed to do?

“Just be yourself, Mattie. It will all work out. You’ll see.” He pats me on the shoulder, and I take a deep breath. “Talk to you later?”

“Yeah, Huddie. We’ll talk later.”

I walk Huddie out and let everything sink in. What did I just agree to? Can I really do this? Can I play pretend with Huddie? This is Huddie we’re talking about.

In what reality does Hudson Monroe date, fake or not, Mattie Jane Roth? He doesn’t. How are we going to convince everyone this is real?

Not everyone, just Everly. And for the love, don’t convince yourself.

NICK

Sitting in first period, all I could think about was how good Everly looked this morning. She is wearing another one of those skirts I like so much. I'm running low on self-control when it comes to her. I want to spend every moment with her I can.

I don't know what to do if Huddie can't get Mattie to agree to their pseudo-relationship. Everly was adamant about Mattie being out of the picture. Her demand took me by surprise.

Everly needs to understand that Mattie will never be out of my life. I will never give her up. Dating other people won't change our relationship. It's never been like that with Mattie. She feels the same way.

I just need to convince Everly that Mattie isn't interested in me and never will be. Or Mattie and Huddie do, rather. I don't care what Mattie thinks. There is no way she would be able to get a boyfriend by homecoming. Mattie spends too much time with us. When would she have time to find a boyfriend?

Don't get me wrong. Mattie is a great girl. She's my best friend. She's funny and intelligent. Mattie's the girl you want to hang out with and watch a football game. Not the girl you take on dates and make out with.

The bell rings, and I book it out of class. If I hurry, I can meet up with Everly by her locker and chat with her before she goes to second period.

As I approach her locker, I slow my steps giving my pulse time to drop to a standard rate.

"Hey Ev," I say coolly and flaunt a flirty smile. I don't smile often. There isn't much to smile about except football, my friends, and Everly.

"Nick," she greets me, smiling into her locker. *I have her.*

"How was class?" *Idiot. That was lame. Ask her something else.*

“Okay. I don’t think I need a math tutor yet.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine. Unfortunately, math isn’t really my thing. I usually have to get Mattie to help me.” Everly flinches at the mention of her name, and I wince. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

“Hey, guys.” Huddie approaches us, offering me a fist. I give it a bump before turning my attention back to Everly. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“It’s fine, Huddie. I’ve got to get to class anyway,” Everly says, adding one more book to her backpack.

“It will only take a second. I know Nick will want to walk you.” I smile at her because I definitely do. *Damn, two smiles in five minutes.*

“What’s up?” I ask.

Huddie scratches the back of his neck. “I’m not sure how to say this, so I’m going to go for it. I, uh, like Mattie.” He what?

“Yeah, I kind of always have since I met her. And with it being senior year, I figure I should do something about it. Ya, know?” No, I don’t know.

“I don’t want there to be anything weird since we’re all good friends, but I wanted you to know. I really like her, and I’m going to ask her out.” Everly bites back a smile, but I’m stunned. Then I realize what is happening.

She said yes. Mattie agreed to date Huddie. Why the hell does he look so nervous and have that goofy look on his face?

“So, you’re cool with it? I mean, she doesn’t know yet. She could turn me down.” Wait, what? She doesn’t know? Did she not agree to this? I’m so confused.

Everly is looking at me, waiting for an answer. The longer I take, the more worried she appears. “Uh, yeah, man. I’m cool with it. If you like her like that. Go for it.” Everly’s shoulders drop in relief.

“I do. She’s...incredible. The most beautiful girl I’ve ever met.” He’s good. Really good. Huddie has Everly looking all dreamy-eyed over here. She is totally buying his act.

“All right, well, good luck, man. You’re going to need it with Mattie.”

“What does that mean?” He asks with an edge to his voice.

“It’s just... it’s Mattie,” I shrug. I don’t know how else to say it. Mattie isn’t a regular girl. Not that it matters since it’s all for show anyways. He doesn’t have anything to worry about. We both know she already said yes, or he wouldn’t be here.

“Right. Just don’t say anything until I’ve talked to her. Everly, that means you too.”

“Me?” She questions innocently. *She’s so pretty.*

“Yes, I know you gossip like a little hen, and you have a class with her next period. Just don’t be all smiley with her. Okay?”

“Ugh, fine. I’ll try. But it will be hard. You two will be so cute together.” Huddie and Mattie cute together? Nah, I don’t see it.

The warning bell rings, and we go our separate ways.

“So, Huddie likes Mattie. That’s unexpected,” Everly muses.

“Yeah. I didn’t see it coming.” I swallow the smile trying to creep onto my face. I can’t believe this plan is going to work.

“Your face looks weird,” Mattie says over Everly’s head.

“No, it doesn’t.”

“It does. What’s going on? Is everything okay?” Mattie looks between Everly and me suspiciously.

“Everything is great. Nothing’s going on, girl,” Everly confirms. It’s obvious she is lying. Mattie is definitely suspicious.

“Right, well, you two have fun with your weird selves. I’m going into class,” Mattie says, giving us a side-eye.

“I better go too. I’ll see you later.” Everly gives me a small wave before heading into the room and taking a seat next to

Mattie.

They start chatting, and I grin. I never should have doubted Mattie for a second. She really is the best friend a guy could ask for.

I will never be able to repay her, or Huddie, for what they are doing. I know it is an even bigger sacrifice for him. He was even more hesitant than Mattie was when I suggested the idea to him. I'm still unsure why he agreed, considering what he would be giving up.

If all goes to plan, Everly will be my girl by homecoming. Then Mattie and Huddie can stage their break-up, and everything can go back to how it was.

MATTIE

HUDDIE: Just left Everly and Nick. They know.

ME: Ahhh. That explains all the hearts in Everly's eyes.

HUDDIE: I told them to act normal.

ME: Fat chance. Everly can't stop glancing over at me. It's freaking me out. What did you say to them?

HUDDIE: What I needed to. Don't worry about it. Meet me at your locker before lunch. We'll walk in together.

ME: If we must.



“You're making that up,” I accuse Brennan as I put my history book back in my locker and grab my lunch.

“I'm serious. The burger is like thirteen pounds or something. It's insane.”

“And you ate it? The whole thing?” The guys can eat, but even they wouldn't be able to polish off a thirteen-pound burger on their own.

“Okay, maybe not. But I tried my very best,” Brennan admits, grinning. “I'll have to take you. They have regular-size burgers too.” Is he asking me out? No way. He's just making conversation.

“What, you don't think I can hold my own against that whopper?” Wait, am I flirting? I duck my head in my locker, pretending to look for something.

“I think you can do anything you put your mind to, Mattie.” Brennan is definitely flirting. *Okay*. What do I even say to that?

I close my locker door and flinch when an arm wraps around me, grabbing my waist possessively.

Brennan’s eyes dart in confusion from Huddie to his hand on my hip.

“Something going on here?” Brennan asks, pointing to the two of us.

“I think I should be the one asking you that. You’re the one talking to *my* girl.” *His girl. Goodness sakes. I’m not ready for this.* We really should ease into the whole ‘we’re together’ thing. No one will believe we are an item out of the blue.

“Your girl? Mattie?” I stare down at my shoes and close my eyes slowly.

“We’re...I don’t know. Talking.” Huddie pulls me in tighter. His fresh mountain scent tickles my nose, and I take a moment to secretly breathe him in.

“I see.” Brennan has a smirk on his face. “Well, come find me when you’re tired of talking.” Huddie growls so deeply it makes my skin prickle. His face looks feral. His upper lip twitches like Elvis, exposing his canines.

“I don’t think so, asshole. You and Mattie, not happening,” Huddie steps into Brennan’s personal space, nostrils flaring. I’ve had enough. I didn’t sign up for this crap.

I remove myself from Huddie’s grip and march toward the cafeteria. They can do this caveman shit without me being present.

Huddie yells my name and begs me to wait while Brennan laughs, mentioning something about there being trouble in paradise already. I ignore them and keep walking until a hand reaches out and yanks me into a deserted classroom.

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on?” Nick asks gruffly. What is with the two of them today? I pull my arm out of his grip and cross my arms over my chest with a scowl.

“Not particularly.”

“Too bad. Explain. Why is Huddie chasing you down a hallway? This is not part of the plan.” I just stare at him fuming. Now I know what people mean by *steaming mad*. I’ve definitely hit a boiling point.

“There is no plan! I’m not doing this,” I whisper through gritted teeth.

“What do you mean you aren’t doing this?”

“I mean, I’m done. I’m out. Find another way, Nick.”

“What are you talking about? It’s the first day, Mattie.”

“I realize that, but it’s not what I want.”

“What about what I want?” He taps his chest.

“What about it, Nick?” I snap.

“You said you would help.”

“I realize that, but I didn’t...” I exhale and shake off this weird feeling in my gut. “Huddie is my friend, and I don’t know if I can make it work.” The way it felt when he put his arm around me. No.

“He’s not happy about it either.” I’m sure. “But he’s being a good friend.” I scoff. *He’s being a good friend*. And what am I being, Nicholas? I want to ask. I can tell you what you’re being right now.

“Don’t make me punch you, Nickie. I swear I’ll do it and won’t feel bad about it either.”

Nick drops his shoulders and exhales a breath. “I’m sorry. I’m a selfish prick.” I nod in agreement. “But I wouldn’t be asking you to do any of this if it wasn’t important. I need you and Huddie to be a couple for a few weeks.”

I drop my head and stare at my feet while I scuff the linoleum with my toe. “There’s no way anyone will believe we’re dating Nickie, and you know it.”

“Well, not when you’re running away from him.” He snickers, and I can’t help but laugh with him. “He put on quite

a show this morning. Huddie is a good actor. Just follow his lead, and you'll be fine." That's basically what Huddie said at my house. I nibble at my lip.

"So, when he's acting like a territorial neanderthal, I should just let him do it?" Nick furrows his brow and tilts his head in confusion. "He told Abernathy I was his girl when he was chatting me up by my locker."

"I told you to stay away from him," he growls.

"Oh my gosh! You are just as bad as Huddie." I throw my hands up in the air. They have both completely lost their minds.

"You should definitely let Huddie do what he needs to when it comes to Abernathy. He needs to know you are off limits." Why? What is their problem with him? This is so ridiculous.

"Look, Mattie, I know this isn't easy for you and not something you want, but I really appreciate it. I'll do whatever I can to make it up to you."

"I don't need anything, Nickie. I just want you to be happy."

"Do you know what would make me happy? Lunch. I'm starving. Do you think you can be nice to Huddie for the rest of the day?"

"I guess, but I'm not making any promises."

Nick and I walk to the cafeteria, laughing about something Leo said this morning in first period. He was talking about how hot he thought Ms. Bennet looked, bending over her desk. He's lucky another teacher didn't hear him. It would have landed him in detention, and Coach would have made him pay for it in sweat and pain.

I stumble when I see Huddie sitting at our table. Nick pats my shoulder and nods his head. *You can do this, Mattie.* It's all the encouragement I need to keep moving forward.

There are a few whispers and glances from other students in the cafeteria. I don't think twice about them. If Brennan shared what Huddie said, it's okay. That's what we want, right? For everyone to think I'm Huddie's girl.

Just saying the words in my head makes my knees weak and a nauseous feeling swim in my gut like slithering eels.

“Hey,” Huddie says as I approach our table.

“Hey,” I reply, taking my seat across from him. He looks disappointed and sad. Did he expect me to sit beside him? He’s lucky I’m here after the show he put on a few minutes ago.

“Mattie.” My name is barely a whisper. I close my eyes tight. I can’t begin to explain what the agony in his voice is doing to me right now. I swallow hard. Then look him in the eye.

“It’s fine, Huddie. I’m fine.” I lie. I’m not fine. I don’t understand his behavior. I’m confused. I don’t know how I’m supposed to respond to his actions. It’s just all very overwhelming right now.

I’ve never had a guy act interested in me, let alone territorial. And knowing it is all fake makes it even harder for me to know what to do. We probably need to talk about this, but I don’t think the cafeteria is the right place to bring it up.

Huddie nods and goes back to his lunch. Neither of us says anything until the guys join the table. And maybe that is what I find the most upsetting.

Huddie and I don’t do awkward silences. We talk to each other all the time or settle into a comfortable, quiet space together.

This isn’t what I want. I’m ready to crawl out of my skin. I don’t want to be weird around one friend just to make the other happy.

Nick and Huddie have a wordless conversation with their eyes. At the same time, the ever-observant Ace watches with keen interest. Luke and Leo are too busy eating cheeseburgers to notice the tension at our end of the table.

Cheeseburgers. I sigh quietly. What would it be like to go out with a guy who actually liked me? A real date. Brennan probably doesn’t like me. I doubt he would have taken me out for burgers in this lifetime. For all I know, he is talking to me

because he knows Nick doesn't like him. Even guys can be petty like that.

But he could like me. Or someone could. Like Tyler. Crap. Tyler. He is really nice and cute. Not to mention a talented artist.

"Ow," I snap, glaring at Nick. "What was that for?"

"Huddie's been talking to you." He whispers in my ear.

I slowly turn to Huddie and wait for him to speak again.

"I, uh, was asking about Latin."

"Latin," I repeat, slightly annoyed.

"Yeah, uh..." He shakes his head to regain focus or shake off his nerves. Is Huddie nervous? "I thought we could study together. For the test next week."

Study? Is that all? Why is that making him nervous? We study together all the time. "Sure. But be honest. You just want to use my flashcards," I tease, and Huddie smiles. This feels right. Normal.

"You know me, Mattie," he says, lifting one side of his mouth in an adorable smirk. *That I do.*

"Ace, you going to join us?" I ask. Ace is the only other person in our group taking Latin. The other three chose Spanish.

Ace looks at Huddie, then says, "Nah, I'm busy this week. But maybe you'll let me borrow those flash cards of yours one night," he pleads. I really do make the best flash cards.

"As long as Huddie doesn't need them." For some reason, they both smirk at that answer before taking another bite of their lunch.

The rest of the day dragged on without incident. Maybe because I avoided Nick, Huddie, Brennan, and the rest of the guys to the best of my ability.

The only person I didn't try to avoid was Tyler. But no worries there. He did a fine job avoiding me on his own. I'm not sure why. If he somehow heard that I was 'Huddie's girl'

and gave up on me, I might kick Nick in the balls for his stupid fake dating idea. *But you don't even want Tyler.*

When art club was over, I waited impatiently by Nick's car, scribbling in my sketchbook. The one I carry that is safe for school. No way would I ever risk bringing one of my real ones to this place. It would be social suicide if it got into the hands of the wrong person.

Nick and Huddie showed up an hour later, looking beat up and exhausted. Their rough practice worked in my favor. Neither was very talkative on the way home.

We dropped Huddie off first. He turned to look at me before getting out of the car. I could tell he wanted to say something but decided against it.

Nick keeps telling me everything will be fine and once he's with Everly everything will go back to how it was before. I'm not so sure. It's only day one, and it feels like everything has already changed.

And not in a good way.

HUDDIE

Being Mattie's fake boyfriend is just as awful as I thought it would be. Maybe worse. If that's possible.

When Nick came up with the idea of Mattie getting a fake boyfriend, I hated it. When he asked me to do it, I hated him too.

I don't know how to do this pretending thing. *Especially with her.* I thought it would be okay. It's not.

The only good thing coming out of this arrangement right now is keeping Abernathy away from her. That guy is a con artist. I've seen his act at parties and overheard him bragging about it in the locker room the next day. He's a little weasel.

I saw red, listening to him ask her out. We told Mattie he was bad news, and she apparently didn't care.

He has yet to talk about Mattie. If he's smart, which I doubt he is, her name will never be heard coming from his mouth. I meant what I said. She is off-limits to him. Period.

I didn't mean to make her mad today. It's the last thing I would ever want to do. I won't apologize for my actions, though. I said what I said to Abernathy. Time to move on.

It's also time to move on from calculus. I've been staring at my homework for the last twenty minutes, getting nowhere. I need to talk to Mattie and figure out how to make this work.

I thought we had over the weekend, but clearly not.

ME: Are you free to talk?

I stare at my phone, waiting. It took Mattie a few minutes, but she read my text.

And left me there. Nada. No text back. Nothing.

I'll call her anyway. She's obviously near her phone.

And straight to voicemail.

I call her again.

“Hey, Huddie.”

“Hey. Are you avoiding me?”

“Madeline, hang up the phone. I’m talking to you.” Someone barks in the background. I assume it’s her mother, but I’ve never heard her voice before to confirm. Whoever she is, I don’t like the tone she is taking with Mattie.

Mattie lets out a long sigh. “Can you hold on a second?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Who’s that?” Mattie must be holding the phone against her leg or something. All the words are muffled now. I can barely make out what they are saying.

“It’s Huddie, mother.”

“Huddie?”

“Hudson.”

“He’s one of those boys you run around with.”

“Those boys are my friends, mother. And yes, Hudson is one of them.”

“I think that has gone on long enough.”

“What has?”

“You are a young woman, Madeline. You should behave as such. Not running through the woods like Peter Pan and the Lost Boys.”

“And how exactly should I behave, mother?”

“For starters, you should dress like a lady. You look messy and disheveled all the time. How are you going to be taken seriously dressed the way you do? And your hair. I will be making an appointment at the salon to get it straightened.” Her mother better not touch her hair.

“My hair is fine. So are my clothes.” Her mom makes a noise I could only describe as disapproval.

“Your father and I never should have agreed to let you play with those boys years ago. He thought it might build character and make you tough. Look at you now.”

The room is so quiet I check to make sure the line didn't go dead. I'm close to hanging up and rescuing Mattie from this evil woman.

"How are your college essays going? Have you sent your applications to Harvard and Stanford yet? Early admissions will be here before you know it." Harvard? Stanford? That's not what Mattie wants. She wants to go to Oregon. *With me.*

"I'm working on it. I've been busy."

"This is a priority, Madeline."

"So is school. Graduating is a prerequisite to college." Her mom might not appreciate it, but I love her sass.

"I don't like your attitude. Watch your tone, young lady." Oh, she's a lady now? *Interesting.* "You need to take this seriously. Do not disappoint us any more than you already have." That's it. I've had enough.

"Mattie!" I yell through the phone. "Mattie!"

"Mother, I need to take this. It's about homework. It's important."

"Fine, but we aren't finished here."

A door slams in the distance. Mattie lets out a whispered scream of frustration. I'm trying to wait patiently, but I desperately need her to say something. I need to hear her voice and know she is good.

"Sorry about that," she finally says between heavy, ragged breaths.

"Mads, take a deep breath with me. Breath in." We inhale together and hold it for a second. "Now let it out. Good girl. Breath in again for me." I listen again to her breath inhale. "And back out." We do that a few more times until I sense her relax.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Mhmm. Fine." Fine. I'm beginning to hate that word. She told me she was fine at lunch. She was nowhere near fine, and we both know it. I'm not fine either. Not even close.

“Does she always talk to you like that?”

“Not always. Just when she is home.”

“Mattie,” I whisper her name.

“Don’t, Huddie. It is what it is. She thinks she has a monopoly on my life, and I refuse to let her. It’s the price I pay for not fitting the perfect daughter mold she’s created in her mind. I push back, and she puts me down more.”

“I can’t help it. I don’t like the way she spoke to you. I didn’t know it was that bad.”

“It isn’t. My parents aren’t home enough for it to be that bad. And when they are home, I go to Nick’s place.” Nick’s place. I don’t think he is much better sometimes, but I won’t bring that up now. It’s a conversation for another day. “Anyway, you wanted to talk?”

“Yeah, I want to talk about us.”

“Us?” Mattie sighs, then says, “Okay, let’s talk about us.”

“What happened today?”

“Before or after you went all caveman on Brennan?” I scrub my face with my hand. I don’t want to talk about Abernathy anymore.

“He doesn’t matter. You were avoiding me today. Why?” I don’t have any classes with Mattie except for lunch and our free period at the end of the day.

Usually, I see her in between classes or in the library during our free hour. Today she managed to dodge me at every turn.

“I wasn’t. I was just-”

“Please don’t lie to me,” I beg.

Mattie is quiet, and I’m not sure she is going to answer me. She mutters words to herself, then finally starts talking to me again.

“I don’t know how to do this, and I’m not sure I want to anymore. Today... Today was awful. We weren’t us today, and I hated it.” I hated it too.

“Every time you looked at me or spoke to me, I didn’t know if it was my best friend Huddie or my pretend boyfriend Huddie. It was uncomfortable for me. It was just easier to avoid you altogether. And I don’t like that I felt that way.” I never want her to feel the need to avoid me. *I want her to come to me for everything.*

“I don’t like that you felt that way either. This is new for me too.”

“But you’re Mr. Experience,” she teases. I’m not, though. I’ve had one girlfriend, and that lasted maybe three days.

“I may have kissed a few more people than you have, but I don’t know how to be a boyfriend. I’m winging this whole thing.”

“How many girls have you kissed?” I can feel her blush.

“Less than you think. I don’t want to talk about other girls. They don’t matter. I want to talk about you.”

“Okay. What are we going to do?”

“Mattie, we’re friends, right?”

“Yeah. You are one of the best friends I have, Huddie. I don’t want that to change.”

“Neither do I. I think we need to take the fake out of this relationship.

“What do you mean?” *What do I mean?* I’m not really sure. All I know is if we are going to pull this off, it has to be believable. We have to start with our friendship and take it from there.

“I think we need to focus on being friends and do what comes naturally. What feels right. We can start small. I can walk you to classes. You can stand by my side instead of Nick’s when we’re all together. Maybe even chat up how great I am to Everly? I don’t know. What do you think?” Mattie lets out a whimsy hum.

“I can do that. And if they don’t believe we’re together?”

“To be honest, I don’t care if they do or don’t. Your feelings and our friendship is more important to me than Nick and Everly getting together. I’m not ruining what we have for him.”

She’s quiet. Too quiet and I’m afraid I’ve said too much. Her relationship with Nick is unique. One I don’t always understand. I don’t know if she will be able to pick me over Nick. I don’t even know if she would pick herself over Nick.

“I don’t want you to question my intentions. If I hold your hand, it’s because I want to. Not because of a favor we are doing for Nick. You should do the same.”

“Okay. Should we have rules?”

“Rules? Like what? I don’t think we should complicate things.”

“That’s the point of the rules. To keep it simple.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Well, we’ve already decided our friendship comes first.”

“Always, Mattie.”

“No kissing,” she blurts out. “I don’t want my first kiss to be fake.”

“And if it’s real?” I ask hesitantly. The hairs on my arm stand on end, thinking about a kiss with Mattie.

“Then I guess...I guess it would be okay. As long as it doesn’t change things.” Doesn’t she know a kiss would change everything?

“I have a few rules, too, now that I think about it.”

“Okay, Huddie, lay them on me.”

“Always be honest with me. And I’ll do the same. If something is bothering you, you come to me. All right, Mattie?”

“Yeah.”

“And no more talking bad about yourself. No more of this ‘not a real girl’ bullshit you do with Nick. If I say you look

pretty, you say thank you. And you believe me when I say it. Understand?" I've always hated her negative self-talk. After listening to how her mother talks down to her, I see where it comes from.

"Whatever, Huddie."

"I'm serious, Mattie."

"Okay. Fine."

"Are we still on for our study date? I have a short practice on Wednesday. Does that work? We can grab something to eat first."

"Yeah, that works."

"Good. And I'll pick you up from now on in the mornings and take you home. I'll let Nick know."

"Fine," she huffs. "I didn't know you would be such a bossy boyfriend."

"Well, I am." We both laugh, and for the first time today, I feel like we can pull this off and come out on the other side unscathed.

"Thanks, Huddie. I'm glad it's you. I'm still not sure about all of this, but you make it better. You make everything better." *This girl.*

"Same, Mattie. I'll see you tomorrow morning, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow."

After hanging up, I attempt calculus again and start a paper I have due at the end of the week for English. However, my thoughts keep going back to Mattie.

We've agreed to do what comes naturally. I hope Mattie is prepared for what that is. I have a feeling what comes naturally to me will be completely different than what it is for her.

MATTIE

After talking to Huddie Monday night, I felt better. Well, as good as I could after my mother's tongue lashing. I wasn't lying when I told him he makes everything better. He does.

The rest of the week at school flew by and was easier than I expected. Huddie picked me up every morning and walked me to class like he said he would.

We spent more time together, but it wasn't any different than we would have as friends. It's almost like the fake relationship isn't in play at all anymore. It's like we both forgot about it.

Or at least I tried to. Nick is a constant reminder. Whenever I see him walking with Everly or smiling at her, or he brings her up in conversation, I remember why Huddie is suddenly spending more time with me than he usually does. *To help out Nick.*

Nick and Everly have yet to become an official couple. It's only been a week, but I can tell Nick is getting impatient. He's been giving Huddie and me suggestions on what we could or should be doing. It's more like issuing orders. For example, insisting I go to all their football practices. This way Everly will see the two of us leave together.

Huddie and I are spending every spare second together. It's not our fault Nick and Everly aren't a couple yet. Sounds more like a 'Nick' problem to me. There is only so much Huddie and I can do. *There is only so much I am willing to do at this point.*

Wednesday, Huddie and I went to a quaint little café in town to study for our Latin test. Our table was tucked in the corner. It made me nervous being in such a small space with Huddie. While I'm completely comfortable being alone with him, he has an overwhelming presence.

We sat side by side with our books and study materials spread out in front of us. Huddie's legs stretched beyond the

table's edge, and his thighs brushed against mine. With our shoulders forged together, we drank coffee and quizzed each other with my flash cards.

After two hours of listening to Huddie speaking words and phrases in Latin with me, my body was humming. As soon as I got home, I took a cold shower and washed the warm humming feeling down the drain.

Nothing is worth risking our friendship. Especially not something silly like romanticizing conjugating verbs. We are just study buddies. It doesn't matter that he laughs more when it's just the two of us or that he looks at me with a new fascination I've never noticed before.

Tonight, we are going to Finn's house for another party. The guys won their first game of the season, and it's time to celebrate. I've been waiting with Meg, Everly, and a few other cheerleaders and girlfriends for the guys to leave the locker room.

As soon as Meg sees Ace, she takes off, running into his arms. Ace picks Meg up and swings her around, nuzzling his face into her neck.

Nick and Huddie are strolling out a few steps behind him. My face lights up in a smile as soon as I see their heads bobbing in between the crowd. I'm so proud of them. They both played really well tonight. Huddie scored two touchdowns and had over one hundred receiving yards.

Nick helped keep the opposing team's offense out of the red zone the entire game. Their receivers didn't stand a chance. He almost had a pick too. It was exciting watching them play.

When Nick sees me waiting, he rushes over and pulls me into a tight embrace. "Not a bad way to start the season, huh?" He asks, holding me.

"You were incredible."

"All right, let me at my girl, Nick. You've got your own." Nick rolls his eyes but lets me go and turns to Everly.

"Hi," he says to her bashfully.

“Mattie’s right. You were incredible.”

“Thanks. You’re going to the party, right?” She nods. “Do you want to ride with us over to Finn’s?”

I tune out the rest of their conversation and put all my attention on Huddie.

He takes my hands in his and drags me into his arms. Huddie props his chin on the top of my head, my nose collides with his chest, and I inhale. Huddie smells fresh. Like clean mountain air on a spring day. *Does air have a smell?* It’s grounding and calming and pure Huddie. He smells the same as he did the first time I met him.

“Hi. You were amazing tonight, Huddie,” I say, still nestled in his arms.

“Thanks, Mads. I heard you screaming for me.”

“You did not.” I slap his back where I’m holding him. The flannel shirt Huddie has layered over his sweatshirt is soft against my skin.

“I did. Your voice carries.” I know I was screaming, but there is no way he heard me over everyone else. Everyone in the stands was on their feet, cheering for them tonight. “You have to come to every game now. You’re my good luck charm. I’m not sure I would have made that last touchdown if you weren’t telling me to keep running.”

“Shut up!” He starts laughing, and now I know he’s joking with me. “I hate you.”

“No, you don’t,” he says, dropping his arms from my waist. I start to move away from him, but I don’t get far before he has his hand in mine with our fingers laced together. I stare at our joint hands until he gives them a squeeze.

I look at him and smile. It’s Huddie, my friend, but my body doesn’t care. It still flips and feels giddy because a boy is holding my hand for the first time.

Nick approaches us without Everly and asks if we’re ready to go to the party.

“Where’s Everly?” I ask Nick as I buckle up in the passenger seat of Huddie’s truck. Nick is squished in the backseat. I stifle a laugh. Serves you right for stuffing me in the back of your car all these years.

“She’s with the girls getting ready. She’ll meet up with us later.” *Oh*. I turn back toward the front of the car and stare out the window.

Why does that bother me? To not be included with the girls? I’ve never wanted to be before. Or is it because Nick doesn’t think of me as one of those girls? Which is crazy because I don’t want to be like Everly. Or even like Meg.

I just want to be me.

Huddie reaches for my hand and squeezes it, knocking me out of my thoughts. I intertwine our fingers and hold his hand in my lap. The move stuns him, but then he eases comfortably in his seat and follows the other cars out of the lot.

We park in front of Nick’s house and walk a few streets over to Finn’s. His place is massive. It’s the perfect party house. Despite the crowd, the parties stay tame. No one wants to wreck a good thing. After a long week at school, we just want a safe place to unwind.

Everyone knows to walk around the back and enter through the walk-out basement. It’s rare anyone goes upstairs. Unless you want privacy. Even then, there are enough dark places in the basement or outside. Not that I have any first-hand experience in needing dark corners made for debauchery.

The basement has a large open rec area with a giant sectional sofa, pool table, wet bar, and an empty space for anyone who feels like dancing.

On the other side of the basement there is a separate lounge area with a big-screen television and a PlayStation. That’s where you’ll find most of the guys. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Luke and Leo leave that room unless they need a refill or to go to the bathroom. It’s like they have to numb their mind with the monotony of shooting people and car chases after football games.

Outside is a pool, hot tub, and a large patio area surrounded by pine trees. Finn's family really lucked out with the location of their home. His street is the only one that backs up to a wooded area.

This is the first party I've ever gone to as a *girlfriend*. Usually, I would get a drink and find a quiet place in the backyard to people-watch. Am I supposed to stay with Huddie the whole time? Should I tell him to do what he usually does, and I'll be fine on my own? What does Huddie usually do at parties? After the first few we went to together, I stopped paying attention.

"Do you want a drink?" Huddie asks.

"Sure." He nods and squeezes my hand lightly before walking away. It doesn't take long for him to be swarmed by a few guys from the team. And a few girls, of course. It's like I don't even exist. I told him it wouldn't matter if he had a girlfriend, but he didn't believe me. I roll my eyes and look away.

My eyes land on Nick as he makes his way to me. He looks irritated. Maybe because Everly isn't here yet? I'm pretty sure he plans on making a move tonight and asking Everly to be his girlfriend.

"You and Huddie don't need to do that hand-holding shit when it's just the three of us." My mouth drops open, and my eyes go wide. *Hello to you, too, Nicholas.*

"I'm sorry. Do you want to try that again?"

"I saw him grab your hand in the car." Nick leans in close to my ear. "It's fake. The two of you. He doesn't need to do that if there aren't people around. And you don't need to either."

I back away from him. Who does he think he is right now?

"Huddie and I can do whatever we want." I throw my hands on my hips.

"Just don't forget what this is." Because he knows? He must see the irritation on my face because he adds, "I don't want to see you get hurt." Nick pulls me to his side and rests his chin on my head.

That's how it always is with Nick. Some sort of insult or jab followed up by a comforting touch. He puts my heart through a spin cycle every time, and I never come out clean.

A throat clears behind us. Nick drops his arm and takes a small step away from me. Huddie hands me a bottle of water with a weary look. I avoid his eyes further and mutter my thanks.

"What's going on?" Huddie asks.

"Nothing. Mattie and I were just talking." Huddie looks at me for a better answer, but I shrug him off. I don't want to hash out whatever Nick's problem is right now.

"Is Everly almost here?" I ask to change the subject.

"Should be any minute."

"There she is now," Huddie says, pointing towards the back door. "Why don't you go hang out with her, and we'll catch up with you later."

Nick stares down at me and squeezes my shoulder before nodding at Huddie and walking away.

Before Huddie can question me about Nick, I ask him what he wants to do. He studies me for a moment. Huddie's eyes darken as he takes me in. I'm not sure what he sees, but I know Huddie well enough to understand this conversation isn't over.

"Let's go outside. There are too many people in here." He motions for me to lead the way. As I walk past him, he grabs hold of my fingers, weaving them together with his.

I steer us to my favorite spot on the pool's patio. There is a lounge chair tucked back in the corner. It's situated on the boundary of their property near the tree line. I like that I can ease my anxiety with the comfort the pine trees give me and still stay on the fringe of the action. You can see everyone come and go from the backyard in this spot.

Huddie flops down on the lounge chair. *My lounge chair.* Stretching out his long legs. He flicks his gaze to me, then pats the small space beside him.

I roll my eyes but I don't hesitate as I take a seat, stretching my limbs until we are hip to hip.

"I can see why you always sit over here. It's nice." I nod. The low timber of his voice warms my skin. I'm grateful for the bottle of water. It gives me something to fiddle with and distracts me from how close we are.

It's not like we haven't been in similar situations before, but this feels different. I strangle the water bottle with my fist to keep myself from doing something dumb, like tracing the veins on Huddie's forearm with my fingertips. It's bad enough I keep tracing them with my eyes. Thank goodness one of his arms is tucked behind my back.

"Are you going to tell me what you and Nick were talking about?"

"It was nothing."

"Mads, you promised not to lie to me. I saw you. It didn't look like nothing to me." A rogue thumb explores the exposed skin between my jeans and t-shirt, making it challenging to form intelligent words. I'm afraid if I attempt to say anything right now, I will sound like a bad Scooby Doo impersonator.

I exhale and ignore the zippy feeling flowing through me as his thumb turns into a full hand.

"He was just reminding me what our relationship is."

"Ours as in yours and mine?" I look at him and nod. "And what's that?"

"Fake." Huddie's face hardens and his hand stalls on my side, gripping a little tighter. "He's just looking out for me. He doesn't want me to get hurt."

"I would never hurt you, Mads. And Nick should mind his own business. He's one to talk when it comes to hurting you."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I hear the way he speaks to you. He's always putting down your art or saying things like..." Huddie's voice trails off, shaking his head. He's the one who exhales deeply this time.

“Like what?” I push after he goes quiet.

“Just things. And it pisses me off.” For some reason, that makes me laugh. “It’s not funny, Mads. I’m being serious. I don’t like anyone talking down to you and making you feel like you aren’t enough.” I drop my head to his shoulder and stare at the party happening around us.

“He doesn’t mean anything by it.” My words are soft and quiet. Just loud enough for Huddie to hear over the din of the party. Huddie gives me a look that asks, ‘*are you for real?*’ “Can we talk about something else?”

With a sigh, Huddie agrees.

We spend most of the night talking about our favorite music, tv shows, movies, and books. I made a list of things we needed to watch together and a few books he mentioned that he liked. It’s weird that we’ve been friends for so long, and I can still learn new things about Huddie.

I know he loves fantasy movies but not to the point he has watched *The Lord of the Rings* a dozen times. And now he is forcing me to read the books.

“It’s over a thousand pages, Huddie!” I scream at him after I look it up on Amazon. “And that’s just the first book.”

“Listen to it while you paint.” I stare at him. We’ve moved to the game room and are sitting together on a bean bag. Huddie sat down first and pulled me onto his lap. *I didn’t complain.*

“Okay, I can do that,” I concede. “I can’t believe you’ve read all of them.”

“Twice,” he says, holding up two fingers, then tucks his hand back between my thighs. I mimic pushing glasses back up on my nose. That earns me a pinch. “Ow!”

“You deserved that for teasing me.”

“I love that you read Huddie. And that you like elves and hobbits. It’s cute.”

”*Cute,*” he repeats, shaking his head with a little smirk. Without warning, I yawn. Huddie taps my leg. “Let’s get you

to bed. Get up, Mads.” As much as I would prefer to rest my head on Huddie and take a little nap, I am ready to go.

We walk around hand in hand, looking for Nick. Huddie spots him in the corner of the main room, with Everly looking very cozy. I didn’t know if we should interrupt, but Huddie didn’t hesitate.

“Hey man, we’re heading out. Mattie’s tired,” he says as he throws his arm around me. “Can we have your keys?” Nick’s eyes bounce around like a pinball to Huddie’s hand, me, Everly, and then back to Huddie.

“It’s cool. I’ll come too.” Everly whines, but Nick whispers something in her ear that seems to please her.

The three of us leave the party and walk back to Nick’s house like we’ve done a million times before. Except for this time, I’m holding Huddie’s hand, and Nick looks ready to punch a wall.

MATTIE

The air mattress wobbles as I slowly stretch, and yawn awake the best I can without disturbing Huddie. For the first time in ten years, I didn't sleep in Nick's bed when I stayed the night.

After seeing him with Everly at the party, I couldn't do it. I know if I were in Everly's shoes, there is no way in hell I would want any girl sleeping in the same bed as my boyfriend.

Nick wasn't happy about it. He didn't think it mattered, even with me asking him how he would feel if it were Everly sleeping in another guy's bed. He obviously didn't want that but insisted it was different with me.

And maybe it is. I don't know. I can only go with my gut. My gut says you shouldn't sleep beside another girl's boyfriend, regardless of the fact he's just a friend. And something else niggles in my gut, that I shouldn't sleep beside Nick anymore because of Huddie.

That leaves me waking up next to Huddie with his arm draped around my midsection. A sleeping position I never took with Nick. When we slept beside each other, we barely touched.

I didn't think it would be different with Huddie. I'm starting to realize it's always been different with Huddie, no matter how hard I've tried to trick myself. I bite my lip to contain a smile as I think back on our conversation last night.

I've been lying flat on my back on this janky air mattress for at least half an hour. I'm worried one false move will have me tumbling into Huddie. We are growing closer, but I think our friendship stops at cuddling in bed. Right?

It didn't take long for Nick to start snoring. It's not loud enough to be annoying. It's soothing in a weird way. Just not soothing enough to lull me to sleep tonight.

“Mads, you awake?” Huddie whispers beside me. I don’t know why. Nick won’t be waking up anytime soon. Once he’s asleep, you will need an air horn to get him up.

“Yeah.” I turn towards him carefully, so I don’t disturb the blankets too much.

It takes me a minute to adjust to the darkness of the room, but I’m finally able to make out the features on Huddie’s face. His eyes practically glow in the dark. I can tell he is smiling, which makes me smile too.

Huddie reaches for my hand and hooks his pinky in mine. “Why do you hold Nick like this when you sleep?” I didn’t know Huddie knew we did this at night. I hesitate to share because the reason leads to secrets I swore I wouldn’t tell anyone.

“You know we’ve been friends since we were little kids.” He nods. “Well, the first time I stayed the night, Nick shared a secret with me. He said he was scared of the dark, but only a little bit.” He trembled as he spoke, but tried to be strong. Knowing what I know now, I realize just how brave seven-year-old Nick really was.

“I told him since he was only a little bit scared that he could hold my pinky while we slept. Then he would know I was there for him if he got scared in the middle of the night. I guess it just became a habit. We do it every time now.” After all this time, it’s more of a secret pledge we made to always be there for each other.

I don’t know why I don’t tell Huddie that part of the story. I’m afraid it will lead to questions I can’t answer.

Huddie doesn’t say anything. His eyes are fixed on our joint hands.

“What if I’m really scared?” He asks. I let go of his pinkie and take his entire hand in mine. Our fingers weave together. “I mean really, really scared, Mads.” I suck in a harsh breath. He’s too close and I can’t deny I want him closer.

“Well, if you’re really, really scared, then I guess I can hold you until you fall asleep.”

That was all the permission he needed to pull me close enough to rest my head on his bare chest and wrap my arm around him.

We didn't sleep like that all night. As comforting as it was, I eventually flipped over on my side, bringing Huddie's arm with me. I wasn't ready to give that up just yet. I slept so well, breathing him in all night.

It dawns on me that Huddie never said what he was scared of. I know the thing I'm scared of is definitely not the dark. I doubt Huddie is, either.

I slip out of his hold and roll gently off the mattress. Huddie's hand searches for me and fails. He settles for my pillow, inhaling deeply as he curls his arms around it. I stand there, hypnotized by the muscles in his back and shoulders flexing as he settles back to sleep.

Quietly I throw on a sweatshirt and grab my sketchbook. After brushing my teeth and washing my face, I head to the den and get cozy under my favorite blanket.

A couple of hours later, Huddie and Nick join me. They are both shirtless, still. Nick is in gym shorts, and Huddie is in joggers. I'm surprised it took Huddie so long. He's usually the first one up. The game last night must have exhausted him.

"Morning," I say hesitantly. I'm worried it might be weird after our new sleeping arrangements. I don't feel weird about it, but maybe Huddie does.

Nick grunts and drops into his usual spot on the couch. I don't think much of it. Nick's never been a morning person. This behavior isn't unusual after a late night.

"Good morning," Huddie chirps. He looks adorable with a sleepy haze in his eyes and disheveled hair. Nick looks up from his phone and eyes Huddie as he crosses the room. Huddie attempts to sit by me, but Nick clears his throat and nods his head to Huddie's usual spot.

Huddie rolls his eyes but sits on the other side of the sectional. I don't like Nick dictating my friendship with

Huddie. I get why Huddie is appeasing him. Sometimes it's just easier.

"Everly is coming over," Nick grunts. "She's bringing breakfast."

"That's nice of her," I say. Nick hums in agreement. "Why do you not seem happy about that?"

"What? I am happy. I'm just tired. It was a long night."

"Yeah, a long night of making out with Everly all over Finn's house." I kick Nick with my blanket-covered foot teasing him. He side-eyes me with a smirk on his face.

"It was a good night." He admits. "Did you two have fun?" I bounce my eyes from Nick to Huddie. I want to hear what Huddie says about last night. I know I had a good time.

"Yeah, man," Huddie says casually.

"When don't we have fun?" I ask. Really, I'm trying not to overthink Huddie's response. Or lack of one. He isn't very talkative with Nick anyways, but part of me wanted him to speak up about how much fun we had together.

"I'm going to grab my phone and put away my stuff. I'll be right back." I start walking out of the den before they have a chance to respond.

I'm barely around the corner when Nick starts talking. "Whitney Carmichael was asking about you last night. She was looking hot too. I felt bad you were stuck with Mattie all night."

"It's fine. I like hanging out with Mattie."

"Yeah, but she's no Whitney Carmichael."

"No. She's not," Huddie agrees.

Their conversation is broken up by the doorbell ringing. Fine by me. I've heard enough. This is not new information. I've always known how I stack up against girls like Whitney. Maybe I imagined everything last night. It's possible it was all in my head, and I'm making something out of

nothing. *Because you secretly wish there was something real here. Shut up, stupid brain!*

Everyone is hanging around the kitchen island when I get downstairs. It appears Everly bought the entire bakery.

“Wow, Everly! This spread is amazing,” I tell her, taking in all the donuts, bagels, and pastries in front of me.

“I didn’t know what everyone liked, so I got a little bit of everything.”

“You did good, babe.” Nick kisses Everly on her cheek. I smile at their cuteness and grab the last chocolate donut while Nick is distracted. Huddie snickers and gives me a look that says he’s on to me.

“Why don’t you and Everly go in the den while I make you a plate of food that isn’t all sugar?”

“But there will still be some sugar, right?” I question. He glares at me. I pop a donut hole in my mouth and grab two more.

“Out, Mads.” He turns me towards the den and slaps my butt to get me moving.

I plop down on the couch, grab the remote, and stuff both donut holes in my mouth. I search for the Oregon game while I lick glaze and powdered sugar off my hand.

“So, did you have fun last night? I saw you and Huddie getting cozy.” Everly asks me while I’m mid-lick, sitting a few inches from me. I peek into the kitchen to make sure the guys aren’t listening. Not that I’m going to spill my guts to Everly.

“Of course. I always have fun with Huddie. I could ask the same about you and Nick.” I waggle my eyebrows, and she slaps my arm lightly, making me laugh.

“What can I say? Nick’s a good kisser. Really good.” I start to fake gag.

“You can’t tell me these things.”

“You’re serious.” Her jaw drops. She’s shocked. “Nick walking around without a shirt does nothing for you?” She

asks while she drools over Nick's chiseled abs. The boy is ripped, but no. He does nothing for me.

"Yes! I'm serious," I whisper shout.

"Huh. I just always thought..." Her voice trails off.

"I know what people think, but it's not like that."

"But you spend the night," she says quietly. "You stayed here last night, right?"

"Yes," I answer honestly.

"And..."

"Everly, I don't know what kind of information you're looking for here. But if you want details about Nick's penis, you are asking the wrong girl."

"I'm...no. That's...Oh God," Everly sputters while her face turns bright red. I start laughing. Then she starts laughing.

"You should see your face right now. I'm sorry. Huddie and I are together. I slept next to him. No worries about Nick, okay? We've been friends a long time, but I've never once seen or thought about his peen. And you will make me lose my appetite if we keep talking about it."

"So, you and Huddie in a bed together."

"A crappy air mattress. And no, I don't know anything about his peen either."

"But you want to?" And now my face is red like Rudolph's nose.

Thankfully the guys enter the room with our food, and I don't have to answer her question.

"What are you two talking about?" Nick asks. He sits down in his spot and lures Everly closer to him with a plate of food.

Huddie takes advantage of the situation and takes the seat Everly was in. He passes a plate of food to me. Then he pulls my legs onto his lap and uses them as a table.

"The wieners at the football game," I answer, tearing my bagel apart. Huddie made it exactly how I like it with extra

cream cheese.

Nick and Huddie look confused. Meanwhile, Everly is struggling to contain a laugh.

“I don’t like the look of this. You two aren’t allowed to gang up on me,” Nick decrees.

“Oh, please, Nickie. We didn’t sit here and talk about you the whole time. Calm down.” I take another bite of my bagel. “Thanks for this, Huddie.” I pinch his bicep sweetly.

“You’re welcome, Mads.”

We ate and chatted about the party. Huddie and I tell them about some of the couples we saw hooking up and breaking up.

Halfway through the Oregon game, Everly announces she has to leave. I thanked her again for the food and gave her my number. Nick protested, but Everly was able to calm him down about it. Promising to use it for good and not evil. I don’t know if we will be close friends, but I’m willing to try for Nick.

While Nick walked her to her car, no doubt to make out some more, I started cleaning up the kitchen.

“Tell me the truth. You are just cleaning so you can eat more donuts.”

“Huddie, it’s like you know me or something,” I say, stuffing half a sprinkled donut in my mouth. Huddie laughs and shakes his head at me.

“Are you going to tell me what you and Everly were really talking about? I’ve never heard you giggle like that before.”

“What? Like a real girl?”

Huddie closes the distance between us and moves stray hairs off my face. “You promised me you wouldn’t talk like that.” I roll my eyes and push him away.

He heads toward the fridge, pulls out the orange juice, and drinks it right out of the carton. *Animal*.

“I already told you. Wieners.”

“Hot dogs aren’t that funny.” He takes another gulp of orange juice.

“They are when it’s yours and Nick’s we’re talking about.” Huddie chokes on the liquid in his mouth and manages to spray orange juice all over my arm, the kitchen island, and his body.

His eyes are wide in disbelief as orange juice dribbles down his chin onto his pecs. I grab a towel and start dabbing at his chin and chest. I can feel heat burning my cheeks and down my neck. I can’t even look Huddie in the eye I’m so embarrassed from trying to clean him off. I clear my throat and then start cleaning the island.

“Mads, are you telling me you were talking about our dicks to Everly?” His voice is deep and gravelly, making my skin flush even more.

“Yes, but it was a short conversation.” He narrows his eyes. “I didn’t mean it like that! I just mean because I obviously don’t know anything. I don’t have any experiences with or knowledge of your dicks to share. Not that I would if I did know anything. I’m going to shut up now.” I put the other half of the donut in my mouth to keep myself from saying anything else.

“You’re adorable.” Huddie kisses my temple and goes back into the den to watch the second half of the Oregon game.

The rest of the afternoon is uneventful. We watch football and eat food. Ace, Luke, and Leo show up for the afternoon game with pizza and wings.

Life is like it always was before.

Like I didn’t spend the night wrapped in Huddie’s arms. Like Huddie didn’t kiss me on the top of my head, making my heart rate take off like a rocket. Like I didn’t go to bed and dream of it happening all over again.

MATTIE

Sunday, I had to suffer through brunch at the country club. Miserable doesn't begin to describe how I felt. Not only was I uncomfortable in my clothes. I was uncomfortable in my skin.

Flitting around the club, my mother told whomever she could about my sisters and how well they were doing at Stanford. I stood beside her like her little puppet the entire morning.

Smiling or nodding my head at the appropriate times and shaking hands with whoever she told me would give me *connections*.

Mother dressed me in some sort of straight jacket disguised as a dress. My hair was brushed and straightened to an inch of my life. We won't even talk about the makeup she painted on my face.

I sent a picture of the final product to Huddie, issuing an SOS. If he didn't hear from me by late afternoon, I instructed him to track my phone and rescue me.

My parents chided me over eggs benedict and a side of toast about my choice of friends, clothing, and colleges. It's a hamster wheel I can't seem to get off of. I want to say they mean well, but I know they don't. My parents want what's best for them. There is no way they can understand what's best for me since they never bothered to get to know me.

I attempted to tell them about the senior art project I was working on for my portfolio. They didn't care. I barely got the words out before my mother told me how *silly* and *juvenile* it is to be gluing scraps of paper together.

And why did I need a portfolio for Harvard or Stanford?

Because I'm not going to Harvard or Stanford! I wanted to scream at them, but I would have wasted my breath.

Instead, I sat silently eating my breakfast. I will fill out the forms and write the essays for their precious Ivy League

schools, but I'm not leaving Oregon. I love it here. It's where I will go to school to study art.

They will have to get over it or disown me. I'm not backing down from this. It's my life. I'm going to do what I want. I'm not like my sisters. I refuse to fall in line like one of their little soldiers.

I'm late getting to lunch. I had to stay back in history class and ask questions about the research paper we'd been working on. Or that everyone else has been working on. I've yet to start mine.

A few feet from my usual lunch table, I come to a complete stop. The table I've been sitting at every day for the last three years is completely full. Everly is in my seat. There is nowhere for me to sit because she is in my seat. *My seat.*

I take a moment to calm down. Once I feel like I can speak without yelling or freaking out, I beeline it to Huddie.

"Hey," I greet him, gently massaging the back of his neck. I don't know why I do it. It's not something I've done before, but I need to touch him somehow to steady myself.

Huddie's eyes flutter closed for a moment before he stands to find me a chair.

I grab his forearm, stopping him. He looks at me, asking *what?* "I thought we could go eat outside. Just the two of us." Huddie smiles big and quickly repacks his lunch.

I force myself to smile sweetly at Everly, Nick, and the rest of our table. Huddie puts his arm around me, and I wrap an arm around his waist and walk away. I don't miss Nick's frown as we leave.

"Are you okay?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" The high pitch of my voice tells him I'm the opposite of okay.

We find a quiet, shaded area by the side of the school to sit and eat. Only a few other students are lying around eating lunch and studying. I'm surprised there aren't more. It's a beautiful day outside.

“Mads, come on. It’s me. You can tell me the truth.”

What does he want me to say? That I’m pissed. I’m hurt. I feel like I’m being replaced.

“Do you think that’s how it will be from now on? Do I have to find a new place to eat? She was in my seat Huddie, and it’s like no one cared.” I shrug my shoulders.

“Of course, we care. I care.” He squeezes my leg above my knee swiftly.

“It’s not fair that *we* have to leave. We’ve been sitting together for over three years. Nick just let her sit in my spot like it was nothing. Ugh, I sound like such a brat.”

“You’re not a brat.” I stick my tongue out at him to prove that I am. *A little bit*. “I’ll figure something out. In the meantime, we’ll have lunch together. Just you and me. Okay?”

“Okay,” I agree. Although I feel the irritation still simmering under my skin, Huddie’s assurance that he will be here for me is a cooling balm.

“How did it go with Coach?” I groan. Coach Evans is the offensive coordinator for the Tigers and our history teacher.

“Oh, fine. Coach convinced me that I would have fun and enjoy the assignment once I started doing the research.” Are teachers allowed to lie so blatantly to students like that?

“He’s right.” I stare at him. “What? I like that kind of stuff.” Huddie pops a pretzel in his mouth. I can’t tear my eyes away from his lips as they lick up the leftover crumbs of salt.

“Why? It’s boring.” I force myself to speak. “Slogging through books, recording references about someone who changed history. No, thank you.”

“You know art is a big part of history, right? Why don’t you write about your favorite artist or an art movement that changed history?” His suggestion stuns me for a second. All I can do is stare at him.

I never would have thought of the idea to use my love of art for my research paper. Of course, Huddie did. Sometimes it feels like he’s the only one who really knows me at all.

“Remember when we had to make those dioramas in ninth grade?” I ask changing the subject. I need to think about something else other than how much Huddie gets me. *No one ever gets me.* Huddie stares at his lunch for a moment, then starts laughing.

“Mine was terrible. Harley wanted to help and just made everything worse.”

“I don’t remember it being that bad. It looked better than Nick’s did.” He chose to do the Colosseum in Rome. He couldn’t get it structurally sound, and it kept falling apart into a hot mess of sugar cubes and popsicle sticks.

“I’m surprised he didn’t ask you to help him.”

“Oh, he did, but I told him no.” Huddie’s jaw drops. “I can tell him no, Huddie. I do have a backbone.”

“I know. I’m just surprised, I guess. Especially back then. You two were together. I figured helping Nick would be an automatic response.” *Together?* What does he mean we were together?

Does he think we were a couple? I’m afraid to ask.

“Yeah, well, it’s not,” I say with a bite. I don’t know why I’m irritated now. “It’s not my fault Nick didn’t prioritize his time. I had my own stuff going on. I couldn’t bail him out.”

Back then, I hadn’t learned that pleasing my parents was impossible. I was bending over backward, trying to keep up with my sisters and their accomplishments. Doing Nick’s project wasn’t going to happen.

“You know, eating out here reminds me of the first time we met. Do you remember?”

“I remember,” Huddie confirms, then mumbles, “like I could forget.”

It was a day I would never forget either.

The field by the park is quickly becoming our spot this summer. It’s a central enough location all five of us can ride our bikes.

Nick carries the cooler with one arm and wraps his other arm around my shoulders. He starts telling me what happened to him this morning at the grocery store.

Apparently, the whole display of watermelons tumbled all over the floor when he went to grab one for our picnic.

I throw my head back, laughing. Nick is laughing too. Tears start to stream down my face when he tells me that every time he went to pick up a watermelon, another one would roll past him.

I can picture it all happening in my mind and how embarrassed Nick probably was at the time. It makes me laugh even more.

“Hurry up, Mattie! Nick!” Luke yells from one side of the field. We drop our coolers and blankets off under the shade of a tree.

“You’re late,” Ace shouts from the opposite side of the field from Luke.

“That’s Mattie?” I hear someone ask, but I don’t get a good look at him with Ace’s big head blocking his face.

“Nick got into a fight with a stack of watermelons.”

“Do we even want to know?” Leo asks.

“No,” Nick states ending the conversation.

I break away from Nick and run up to Leo. “I’ll tell you later,” I stage whisper to him.

“Mattie, Nick, come here!” Nick walks ahead while I lag behind, chatting with Leo about the new racing game he just got.

When we catch up, the guys are talking about football. I’m guessing this new guy also plays or at least likes the sport. I hope he realizes what he’s getting into with this crew. We aren’t ultra-competitive, but we don’t hold back either.

“Mattie, this is Hudson. He just moved here from Tacoma. Hudson, this is Mattie.” Ace slaps Hudson on his back, stunning him for a minute.

I use this opportunity to take in all of Hudson's features. I've been around cute boys before. All my friends are cute to at least one girl at school. You just have to ask the right one.

That said, I've never seen a boy as hot as Hudson. He's a little taller than me, which is nice. Ace and Nick are the only guys taller than me in our grade. I'm sure it will change in high school, but currently, I'm an Amazon woman, and I'm only five foot six.

Hudson has shaggy brown hair. I want to run my fingers through it and mess it up even more. When Hudson looks directly at me for the first time, I'm sucker punched by the prettiest blue eyes I've ever seen.

I stand there like an idiot for a few seconds too long. Leo nudges my shoulder, snickering.

"Hi, welcome to Pine Grove." I plaster a friendly smile on my face. By the cringe Leo gives me, I must look like a scary carnival clown. Truth is, I've lost control of all my motor functions. My knees are rubber. My arms are jelly. I could collapse into a puddle at any moment.

"Hi." He smiles, and this weird sensation erupts in my belly. I don't know if it's the stretch of his pillowy lips or the pop of his dimples, but a swarm of butterflies has migrated through my body and taken flight.

I desperately want to pull him aside and get to know him better, but I know the guys are itching to play a quick scrimmage.

"You ready to play?" Nick asks, throwing his arm around me. Hudson looks between the two of us and nods sharply.

We pick teams, and I end up on the same team as Luke and Hudson. Since Hudson is a receiver and Luke runs better than he throws, it's determined I'll play the quarterback position.

We can't play a real game with only three players on a team. We don't even hike the ball. I will count to three and either toss to Luke or throw long to Hudson. That's the game plan, at least.

Nick covers Hudson since that's the position he plays anyway. It's good practice for both of them. Ace runs after Luke, and Leo is on me.

Leo might be stronger and faster than me, but I'm more agile and taller. I can dart around him to pass to Luke or sail balls over his head to Hudson.

We win because Leo is better at knocking guys to the ground than catching a football.

"I almost had that last one," Leo claims as he collapses onto the grass. All of us are completely spent and close to heat exhaustion.

I dig into one of our coolers and pass out Gatorades to everyone. Hudson grins when I offer an orange and red Gatorade to him. He snags the orange one. I don't blame him. It's my favorite too.

"Don't quit your day job, Leo," Luke quips. "There's a reason you're the best JV defensive end and not a receiver."

We spend the following hour eating sandwiches and the other snacks we brought. I start laughing again when the watermelon gets passed around. That earned me a pinch to my side from Nick.

"Have you talked to Coach about joining the team? We've already started practice, but I bet he would let you walk on," Luke says, then pops a grape in his mouth.

"You definitely know how to catch," Ace adds.

"That's because Mattie was throwing me bombs. She makes me look good." There go those dang butterflies again. Hudson's compliment makes me soar.

"Yeah, Mattie doesn't mess around. She's always been the MVP." Luke punches me in the arm. I roll my eyes at him, embarrassed by the attention.

Usually, I don't mind being in the spotlight, but it's terrifying being under the intense gaze of Hudson. No other guy has ever had this effect on me before.

"So, are you going to play for Pine Grove?" I ask.

“I’m going to try. My dad talked to Coach last week when we got here. I’ll start practicing with the team this week. He said I would have to earn my spot.”

“You will,” I say confidently. “You’re much better than Pete Danvers. He can’t run a route to save his life.” You will look better in the uniform too.

“Is it too hot out here? Maybe we should eat in the library tomorrow.” Huddie’s voice cuts into my daydream. How embarrassing.

“No, uh, I’m fine. The fresh air is nice.” I can’t even look at him right now. I keep thinking how right I was about Huddie in a uniform. He looks even better in it now that he has boulders for muscles in his biceps instead of the skipping stones he was sporting at fourteen.

“What are you thinking about?” He taps me on the forehead.

“Huh, uh, nothing.” *Smooth.* “Just my history assignment.” I lie.

“Don’t let it stress you out. I can help if you want.”

“You don’t have to. I’m sure it’ll be fine. Especially with your brilliant idea.” I nudge his shoulder with mine.

“Well, I’m here if you change your mind.”

That’s Huddie. Always here for me. Ever since we met, he’s always been someone I could count on.

“I’m really happy we became friends that day, Huddie.”

“Me too, Mads. It wouldn’t be the same here without you.” He stands up and offers me his hands. “Come on. We should head back inside before the bell rings.”

We walk back hand in hand. I can’t help but agree with Huddie. It wouldn’t be the same without him, either.

I haven’t thought about the day Huddie walked into my life in a long time. Shortly after we met, I decided that whatever I felt that first day for Huddie wasn’t meant to be.

I stuffed everything in a box and locked it up. It was painfully obvious I would never be the type of girl Huddie

would fall in love with. He was drawn to cheerleaders and girls who wore dresses and makeup.

He didn't want a girl who could throw a spiral forty yards down a field or whose wardrobe was interchangeable with his.

It's easy to forget when we walk through the hallway holding hands, and his touch brings those dormant butterflies back to life inside the bottom of my belly.

But maybe, just maybe, it could be different.

HUDDIE

Do I remember the day I met Mattie? It is burned into my memory bank. I will never forget the day she stormed into my life. Mattie made quite an impression on fourteen-year-old me.

I had a hard time focusing on my classes this afternoon for many reasons. It wasn't just our trip down memory lane.

It was also Nick letting Everly sit at our table. It was his lack of consideration for Mattie's feelings. But it was mainly the burning sensation that lingered on the back of my neck from the touch of her fingers.

I craved more of it the rest of the day. I'm hungry for it.

I have been since the first time I saw her.

Leaving Tacoma sucked. Dad told me we were moving because he had a business opportunity. He's always wanted to host outdoor adventures.

It's a dream he's had since his college days. When his buddy called him up and spit out a business plan, he jumped on it.

Now, here we are. The only good thing about the move is being a resident of Oregon. I want to play ball at the University of Oregon. I have a better shot at getting a scholarship while living in the state. At least, I think I do. I hope I do.

Being new sucks. The last thing I want to do is start high school as a complete loser without any friends. I'll have the guys on the team, but it's not guaranteed.

I miss my friends from back home. I also miss playing football. I can't wait until I can join the practices with the team. I'm just waiting for my physical tomorrow.

"Hey man, you play ball?" I look behind me. Is this guy talking to me?

I was bored and walked to the convenience store by my apartment. If I cut through the park, it doesn't take long to get

there on foot.

“Yeah. I play. Wide receiver.”

“Nice. I’m Ace. That’s Luke, and that guy down there embarrassing himself with the redhead is Leo.” I laugh because he really is doing a terrible job flirting.

“Hudson.” I give Ace and Luke a fist bump.

“You new here? I’ve never seen you around.”

“Yeah. I just moved here last week.”

“Cool. We are going to have a scrimmage with our friends. We could use a sixth man.” I look around for the other two players.

“Mattie just texted. They’re on the way,” Leo says, running over to us. We introduce ourselves and give each other a fist bump too. “I wonder what those two are up to.”

“Nothing but trouble,” Luke answers.

“Nick and Mattie are cool. You’ll like them. We’ve all been playing ball together since we were kids,” Ace adds.

“Cool.” I’m jealous. I had that too. Then I moved here.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m not waiting for them. Throw me the ball, Ace. Leo, you cover me. Let’s show Hudson what we can do.” Luke claps his hands together and starts trotting down the field.

Ace throws a missile at no one. Suddenly Luke changes directions juking Leo, and catches the ball. Not bad. I’m impressed. His touchdown dance is not so impressive.

I can tell this guy is the joker of the group.

Luke stops when a guy and a blonde girl walk toward the field. I can see why he’s looking. She’s laughing at whatever this dude is telling her, and it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

I have the urge to knock his arm off her and spend the rest of the day trying to make her laugh like that myself.

“Hurry up, Mattie! Nick!” Luke yells at them.

“You’re late,” Ace yells too.

“That’s Mattie?” I ask louder than I intended.

“Yeah, she’s cool, though. You’ll like her.” Pretty sure I already do. I chew on my thumbnail to keep myself from saying anything out loud.

Nick comes over to us first, and Ace catches him up on the few facts he knows about me. Nick talks about himself a little, but I’m barely paying attention.

I’m waiting for the blonde with the giant poof of hair to make her way over to me.

She’s wearing a faded Seattle Seahawks t-shirt and cutoff shorts showing off her long legs.

The closer she gets, the prettier she becomes. Ace introduces us, slapping me on my back. He looks at me like he knows exactly what I’m thinking. Is it that obvious I’m into her?

I shake him off and pay attention to the beauty in front of me. Mattie smiles, and my insides detonate. I’m a goner.

Then this lug, Nick, puts his arm around her again, and I realize he’s her boyfriend. Figures.

We split into teams, and I’m with Mattie. I couldn’t be happier, but I was surprised when Luke picked her first.

It doesn’t take me long to figure out why. This girl can throw a football. She looks hot doing it too.

“She’s good,” I tell Nick as we walk back after I catch one of her bombs.

“Not bad for a girl. She’s not Ace. Wait until he starts throwing at you.” Did he really say that about his girl? Wow. Why is she with this guy?

We play until we are all tired and ready to pass out. Mattie and the guys make their way over to a shaded area thanks to giant oak trees.

It feels weird to follow them, but I’m not leaving until I talk to Mattie more. Boyfriend or not. We can still be friends. She

obviously doesn't have a problem having guys as friends if she's hanging out with Ace, Luke, and Leo.

We eat and chat about football. I try not to roll my eyes every time Nick flirts with Mattie. She doesn't seem affected by him, though.

Mattie keeps her attention on me. I like that she keeps asking me questions and seems interested in getting to know me. She makes me feel welcome. All of them are, but I don't care about the guys right now.

After we're done eating, we clean up. The guys decide they want to keep playing. Mattie, however, pulls out a notebook and stretches out on the blanket.

I make the quick decision to stay and hang with her, complaining of cramps. No way would I be able to catch a ball with her laying out like this.

I watch her as she delicately sketches a picture of some trees. Is there anything this girl isn't good at?

"What's your real name?" I ask randomly. Mattie sounds like a nickname.

"Madeline," she answers without taking her eyes off her drawing.

"Did your parents nickname you Mattie?" She looks at me and starts laughing. I don't know why but I love the way she laughs. Full out, without care.

"No, my parents hate the nickname. It isn't ladylike," she says in a fancy accent. "Nickie gave me the nickname when we were kids."

"Nickie?" I question. She points to Nick.

"When we met in pee wee league, he said if I was going to play with the boys, I needed a boy name." She shrugs her shoulders. "Now I'm Mattie. I like it. It fits me." It does fit her. I can't imagine calling her Madeline.

Maybe Mads because she drives me insane, in a good way. I won't call her that until I can make her mine, though. And mark my words. I will one day.

“And the name Nickie?” Mattie grins like an evil queen.

“I told Nick if he was going to be friends with a girl, then he needed a girl’s name. So, I started calling him Nickie. I’m the only one who can get away with though,” she warns.

That’s cool. I don’t plan on calling Nick anything.

Mattie and I spend equal time chatting and sitting silently. After a while, Mattie rips a piece of paper from her notebook and passes it to me.

“Don’t think I’m weird. I draw pictures of all of my friends, Huddie. I’m kind of obsessed with drawing.”

I’m overwhelmed. So many things happened in the last thirty seconds.

Mattie drew a picture of me. A really cool one with the pine trees in the background. This means she’s been looking at me enough to put my face on paper. I smile a little on the inside because of that.

She also called me her friend. And Huddie? Did she just give me a nickname?

“Wow! You’re really talented. Thanks for this.” Would it be weird to treasure a picture of yourself? I’m going to because it’s from her. I wonder if I can convince her to give me a self-portrait. Then I wouldn’t feel like such a loser for staring at it all the time.

And boy would I be staring at her.

“Huddie?” I question.

“Look, Huddie, if you are going to hang with me, which you are.” I dig her confidence. “You need a nickname too. You can’t be the only one with something so formal.”

“The other guys have nicknames?” She giggles, and it’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard.

“Well, Ace’s name is cool enough. No nickname needed.”

“Agreed.”

“Leo’s real name is Leonard. You didn’t hear that from me.” I laugh this time which makes her smile even more. It would knock me off my feet if I wasn’t already sitting down.

“What about Luke?”

“Hey, Luke! Huddie wants to know your nickname.”

“Huddie?”

“Yeah, we don’t call him Hudson anymore.” She smiles at me. “That’s okay, right?” I nod. She can call me whatever she wants to.

“Cool. I like it,” Leo says. “Much better than Lucky over here.” Luke jumps on Leo and tries to get him in a headlock. The rest of us start laughing.

“Lucky doesn’t seem that bad,” I say.

“It’s not the name. It’s the why.” I raise an eyebrow urging her to continue. “Luke has a history of finding trouble.”

“Trouble finds me!” He shouts.

“Right. Trouble finds you.” I laugh at her mocking tone. “Anyway. After giving the slip to our middle school principal a few times, we started calling him Lucky.” Mattie shrugs her shoulders.

As much as I want to keep hanging out, I have to head home. I’ve been at the park a lot longer than I planned.

I will see the guys later this week, but how do I see Mattie again without it looking like I’m making a move on Nick’s girl?

Luckily, I don’t have to think of an excuse. Mattie asks for my phone and starts plugging everyone’s phone numbers into my contacts. Her phone lights up with a text, and she saves my number too.

If Mattie and I can only be friends, I’ll be the best friend she’s ever seen. I’ll take whatever piece of her I can get.

“Yo!” I stop and wait for Ace to catch up to me. We have about twenty minutes before practice starts. Sounds like a lot of time, but we’ll be late if we don’t hustle.

“What’s up, man?” We slap hands once he’s within arm’s reach.

“With me? Nothing. How’s Mattie? I tried to catch her in the hall, but she jetted to art club.”

I groan. “She’s upset, but you know Mattie. She doesn’t want anyone to know.”

“But she told you.” I know what he’s getting at. Mattie is finally letting me in more. It’s something I’ve wanted for a long time. And she is. Every day we spend more time talking and getting to know each other on a deeper level.

Ace knows all about Mattie and me. Well, he doesn’t know about our fake relationship. It makes me sick to even call it that. He knows I’ve liked her since the first day I met her.

“She did. At some point, she will need to talk to Nick.” Or I will, but it needs to be her. This is their friendship.

“Probably. Nick wasn’t too happy when you two walked out.” Of course, he wasn’t.

“He does realize it’s his fault we left, right?”

“Probably not. Nick kind of has tunnel vision right now. Football and Everly. All else be damned.”

“I can’t believe he would push Mattie aside like that. I get doing all you can to get the girl but not at Mattie’s expense.” Especially when Mattie’s doing all she can for you.

We get to the locker room and switch into our pads and practice jerseys. Nick doesn’t say much when we see him. I’m not surprised.

“I need to figure out how to fix this lunch situation for Mattie,” I tell Ace as we run our warm-up laps.

“We can make room for Everly. It’s not the other way around. I hope Mattie understands that. She’s not the outsider here.”

“I’ll make sure she does.”

“Shit! I just remembered. Meg’s schedule changed.”

“Uh, congratulations?” He glares at me.

“Dude, her lunch is the same as ours now.”

“How is that helpful?”

“It’s helpful because I don’t plan on eating lunch with you losers anymore.” He smirks at me. “I will be spending time with my girl. Preferably in a supply closet.” I shake my head. “I’m surprised you don’t want to do the same.”

“Trust me. I would.” Boy, would I. “I think Mattie wants to be with all her friends. It’s the only time we’re all together these days. It’s important to her. She won’t be happy you’re gone.”

“She won’t miss me that much.”

“You don’t mind bailing?”

“Am I sure I want to have an extra hour making out with my girl every day versus watching Luke and Leo stuff their faces? It’s a sacrifice I’ll make for Mattie.”

“How gallant of you, Ace.”

The rest of the practice was brutal. The first half of our season is the toughest, so Coach is pushing us hard.

I forget all the aches in my muscles when I see Mattie sitting on the tailgate of my truck, taking my breath away.

She is engrossed in her little sketchbook she carries around everywhere and doesn’t see me coming. I drop my bag on the ground and slide up to her, nestling myself between her knees.

“Hey.”

Her breath catches when she looks up at me. I will never get tired of that. I’ve noticed it happening more and more lately. It feels good to know I have an effect on her too.

“What are you working on?” It takes all my self-control to keep my hands flat on the truck and not grip her hips or run my hands up the length of her thighs.

“Nothing, really. Just writing out random thoughts. How was practice?” Mattie closes her book and places it beside her.

Then she shocks the hell out of me by tracing her fingers over my forearms, making me shiver.

I know Mattie asked me a question, but I can't concentrate. "That feels good." Her hands freeze. Did she not realize she was touching me? Are her movements as impulsive and instinctual as mine? "Don't stop." *Please don't stop.*

Once Mattie starts moving her hands again, I answer her question. "Practice was grueling."

"The Blazers aren't going to be an easy win. They have really good press coverage. You will have to turn up those afterburners of yours to get ahead of their defense," Mattie says with a sly smile.

"I love it when you talk football to me." It is so sexy. Especially when she is wearing one of her cropped Oregon t-shirts and a flannel shirt tied around her waist. I want to yank on the sleeves and pull her closer to me.

"Oh yeah? I'll have to remember that," she says, raking her teeth over her lip. Holy crap, Mattie is being flirty.

"Definitely. You ready to get out of here?" She nods and shuffles off the tailgate, sliding down the front of my body in the process. I hold back a groan when her chest lines up flush against mine. Her peaches and cream scent takes targeted shots at my brain cells, killing them off one by one. *Good Lord, baby.*

We're inevitable. We are getting closer every day. The night of Finn's party changed everything. Waking up to Mattie was a dream. I thought for a minute maybe I was dreaming. It's not like I haven't dreamt of waking up with her in my arms before.

It's only a matter of time before we both agree our relationship was never fake in any way, shape, or form. I won't rush her. I've waited three years to make Mattie mine.

I've always been hers. Now I just need Mattie to claim me.

MATTIE

It was a bleacher-clearing win for the Tigers tonight. The boys held nothing back on the gridiron. They decimated the Blazers. Ace was throwing rockets at Huddie all night long. And Leo sacked Will Thompson three times.

When the final seconds ticked off the clock, I stayed in the stands and watched the chaos unravel as everyone stormed the field. It wasn't until Huddie was pushing people out of the way, trying to find someone, that I stood in my seat.

Huddie was a sight with his helmet off and dangling in his hand. Skin slick with sweat. Hair disheveled. Uniform dirty with mud and blood.

When Huddie laid eyes on me standing at the top of the bleachers, he stopped dead in his cleats and waved me down. Huddie fought a battle, and he only wanted to get to me. *ME*.

I sprinted down the bleachers. Once I was close enough, his empty hand slipped under my leg and hoisted me into his arms. I wrapped my legs around him, buried my face in his neck, and sang his praises. I told him how well he played and how proud I was of him.

“Thank you, baby,” Huddie murmured into my chest. *Baby*. My heart skipped a beat before taking a freefall. I need to regain control before I get too far ahead of myself.

Everyone might be watching us, but those words were just for me.

Huddie spent the rest of the weekend at my house watching football while I worked on my landscape piece for my showcase. He even helped me rip magazines apart and organize them by color for my collage project.

It was a routine I could do every weekend. I like having Huddie in my space.

Tonight, we are going to his place to study. I've never been to Huddie's apartment before. No one has, except for Ace. I'm

not sure why Huddie has never invited us over. He's never said, and I never asked.

I follow Huddie up the stairs to the second floor of his apartment building. He's been really quiet since we left school. I know he is nervous. Huddie was tapping his thumb on the steering wheel the whole way over here.

When we reach his front door, he hesitates, then looks at me. Before he can say anything, I put my hand over his and turn the key with him.

"There's nothing to worry about, Huddie. Unless Harley is planning some grand prank on me." I point a finger at him and then poke his arm. "If you let him get me, I will never forgive you."

That brings a smile to his face and loosens him up a bit.

Walking into his apartment, I immediately feel comforted. There is soft jazz playing, and the aroma of a home-cooked meal wafting through the air. Huddie's house feels alive.

"Hudson, that you?" Huddie's mom calls from the kitchen.

"Yeah, mom." Huddie takes my backpack and drops it by his in the hallway on our way to the kitchen. He gives his mom a kiss on the cheek, then snags a piece of cheese she just cut from the pile on the board.

His mom turns to push him away and notices me standing there. Her eyes go wide, and she does a double take looking at Huddie and then back to me.

"Mattie, you're here." I nibble on my lip and look down at the ground.

"Is that okay?" I ask. Suddenly worried he's not allowed to have people over, and I'm standing here like an idiot.

"Of course, honey." Mrs. Monroe wipes her hands on her apron, walks toward me, and then hugs me.

Huddie's cheeks turn pink and embarrassment flashes through his eyes. It's gone in a blink and replaced with concern when he sees my emotions parading over my face.

This is the first real hug I've gotten from anyone other than Nick or Huddie in a long time. I knew my childhood lacked love. However, I didn't realize I was near starvation.

I'm currently standing on the edge of ugly crying.

"You are always welcome here. Hudson talks about you all the time. You're already family." I roll my lips to keep them from quivering.

"I don't talk that much," he says sheepishly. His mom rolls her eyes which makes me giggle. "Come on, Mads. Let's go study."

His mom squeezes my hand before going back to making dinner. We are barely past the kitchen threshold when she shoots a warning about being good while we're in Huddie's room.

I want to laugh or be embarrassed, but I'm too shocked by what I see hanging on the wall to do anything.

Every Christmas for the past few years, I've been gifting the guys different paintings I've done. Mainly watercolors of the places we've gone camping or hiking together. Something that reminds me of them and our friendship.

I have no idea what they do with them. I figured they'd be a keepsake or something. Nick never did anything with them. I found them in the back of his closet.

Huddie did. Three of my paintings are matted and framed, hanging on the wall leading to the bedrooms.

"The middle one is my favorite," Huddie says from behind me. I like it too. It's a painting of the view looking down the Rogue River.

Huddie's dad took us tubing one time. It was one of my favorite days. I was having a hard week with my mom. Huddie asked me if I wanted to join him and his dad. It's like he knew I needed it.

We spent the day floating down the river without a care.

"Mads, you're crying." I quickly wipe away the tears I didn't know escaped.

“Sorry, I don’t know why. I-I’m just... You hung my paintings up.” Huddie spins me around and lifts my chin with his finger, forcing me to look at him. Then wipes a few of my tears away.

“Why wouldn’t I? I told you the first day I met you how talented you were. You think I wouldn’t show off your work?” *No one else has. At least not like this.*

I can barely speak. I have so many emotions running through me. I can’t process them. I can only throw my arms around Huddie and make sure he feels how much it means to me. How much *he* means to me.

“Thank you for always believing in me,” I whisper in his ear. He nuzzles deeper into my neck and kisses me where my shoulder and neck meet.

Huddie pulls back and grabs my face, wiping more tears with his thumb. A warm sensation makes a slow trek through my entire body.

“Always, Mads. Always.” Huddie kisses me on my forehead. “Come on, let’s go to my room. Harley will surface soon, and we will never be able to get rid of him.” I nod and follow him down the hall.

“Did you clean for me?” I ask, stepping into his spotless room. It’s a third of the size of mine but a million times neater.

“No, Mads, I didn’t. Some of us don’t enjoy living like complete savages.”

“But this is like white glove clean. There is nothing out of place.”

“There’s not much to have out of place, to begin with.” Huddie flops onto his twin bed in the corner and puts his hands behind his head.

He looks good like this. Well, Huddie looks good all the time. But he looks like a yummy treat right now. His shirt is askew, revealing smooth tanned skin and that sexy ‘v.’

Huddie clears his throat, alerting me that he caught me staring at him. I turn around and try to find anything to look at

so he can't see my blush.

Unfortunately, there's not much except a few posters of constellations on his wall and a photo of him and Harley on his dresser. I decide to go to my backpack instead and fish out my books.

"Scoot over," I push his legs off the bed and make room for myself. It kills me to move him, but I have a lot of homework I need to get done. I'll draw this image of him from memory when I get home tonight.

Huddie hops off the bed to get his books and sits beside me. "Sorry, there isn't much space in here."

"Huddie, you know I don't care. Your apartment is a thousand times better than my house." His face says, *'yeah, right.'*

"I'm serious. Look at me, Huddie, and listen up. I'm only going to say this once. Actually, that's not true. I will say it repeatedly until you believe me because it's true. My house might be big and full of bells and whistles. Do you know what it doesn't have?"

"No," he says quietly, shaking his head. I twist my body, facing him, and then I let it out.

"My house doesn't have a mom making dinner every night. It doesn't have a dad asking me how my day was. It doesn't have a living room couch that you can sit on and watch television." I gesture towards the hallway.

"My house doesn't have the warmth or love flowing through it like yours. Huddie, I felt it as soon as I walked in the door. Shit, my house doesn't even have my art hanging on the walls. I would pick your apartment over my house any day."

Crap, I'm going to start crying again. I exhale and attempt to focus on math problems, but everything is blurry.

"Baby, come here." His soft words crash into me like a tidal wave. It's a losing battle. The traitorous tears fall all on their own.

Huddie takes everything out of my lap and lays it on the floor. “Baby,” he says softly. I’ve decided I never want him to call me anything else again except for Mads. I like it when he calls me that too. *Only him.*

Huddie wraps his arms around me and smoothly maneuvers me onto his lap. I burrow myself into his chest while he begins to rub my back.

My body shudders every time his hand drifts down my spine.

“I don’t like seeing you like this, Mads. It breaks my heart.” I don’t know what to say. I don’t understand why I’m so emotional tonight. He’s punching through walls I didn’t know I had up.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Mads, there is nothing wrong with you. You are incredible. You’re strong and fearless. Talented. Beautiful.” I roll my eyes. “Don’t you dare. You’re gorgeous, Mads. Now, what do you say?” He teases.

“Thank you, Huddie,” I say, mocking his rule. I have to joke with him. Otherwise, I’ll kiss him. My heart can’t handle that today.

I will need EMTs on standby to bring me back to life. Because surely, I would have died and gone to heaven if this boy’s lips ever touch mine.

“I’m sorry I never invited you over before. I didn’t think you’d want to hang out here when you had all the luxuries at Nick’s house.” I want to shake him and tell him he is the luxury.

“I mean, your room is a little too clean for my taste, but I still would have come over here and hung out with you.” That makes him chuckle and shake his head.

“Okay. From now on, we spend time here too.” I nod against his chest then tilt my head just enough to give him a kiss under his chin. The stubble pricks my lips, but I like the way his skin feels against them. His rough edges to my soft.

His hand stops moving against my back. *Crap. I went too far.* I look up at him without moving my head. His cheeks are red, but he's smiling with his dimples on display and chewing on his bottom lip. *I think he liked it too.*

"What are you doing?" A suspicious voice asks from the doorway. It startles me, making me fall off Huddie's lap.

"Nothing. Get out of here, Harley."

"Five bucks, or I'm telling mom."

"Tell mom what? You can't hustle me, Harley, when we weren't doing anything wrong."

"I think I found something wrong with your apartment," I mumble to Huddie, making him laugh.

"Don't you have something better to do?"

"Not really. Mom wanted me to tell you dinner is ready. You're lucky she sent me." Huddie rolls his eyes.

"Whatever, Harley. Go on. We'll be there in a minute." Once Harley leaves, Huddie looks at me. "Are you okay?"

"I am. Thank you."

"Anytime." Huddie hops off the bed, then spins around, holding his hands out to me. "Let's eat. I'm starving."

Dinner was delicious. It was some kind of chicken and rice casserole thing. I had two helpings. Huddie had three.

Sitting through dinner with Huddie's family was completely different from mine. I see where Huddie gets his love of questions from.

His mom and dad went non-stop, interrogating all three of us. I almost lost it when I was asked about my art and how I was doing with getting my portfolio ready.

Huddie placed a hand on my thigh and gave it a squeeze. I felt like I was siphoning his strength. As I answered questions, his parents mimicked my enthusiasm. They didn't think my collage idea was stupid or juvenile. If it wasn't for Huddie anchoring me with his warm palm, I probably would have started crying again.

After dinner, we get serious about our homework. I finish before Huddie and start snooping around his room. I feel his eyes trailing me as I move from the dresser to the small bookshelf.

“I don’t have any secret books like you if that’s what you’re looking for,” he says without looking up from his chemistry assignment.

“Darn.” I move to his closet and start flicking through the shirts, sweatshirts, and flannel he has hanging up.

I pull down one of his football shirts with ‘MONROE’ on the back. *Stealing that.* I scan the sweatshirts for my favorite of his. When I get to the green Oregon Ducks sweatshirt, I yank it off the hanger. *Stealing that too.*

“Baby, what are you doing?”

“Shopping,” I answer without turning around.

“Mads, that’s my favorite sweatshirt.”

“Is it?” I ask innocently. I know it is. He wears it all the time. “It’s mine too,” I tell him, looking over my shoulder.

“Are you taking it?”

“Huddie, this is what girlfriends do. They steal their boyfriend’s clothes. It’s like a rule of dating or something.” I wave my hand casually in the air, brushing off his concern.

“I never heard of that one before.” He folds his arms over his chest. He really loves this sweatshirt.

“Well, it’s true. I would just go with it before I take your Seahawks sweatshirt too.”

He mock gasps. “You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, I would. I’m a really good girlfriend like that.” At least, I want to be. *I’m trying to be.*

His lips form the cutest upside-down smirk. I must be doing all right.

MATTIE

Huddie has a team meeting this morning with Coach Evans to prepare for the upcoming game. He said I could still ride in with him, but he's crazy if he thinks I'm going to school that early. *Hard pass.*

I told Huddie to have fun and I'll meet him by his locker. When I got to school, I expected to see a Huddie in his usual faded jeans and sweatshirt leaning against his locker looking hot with his messy hair teasing his eyebrows. I got that. *I definitely got that.* I can't deny my attraction to him anymore.

I also see Whitney Carmichael trying to flirt with my boyfriend. My fake boyfriend, but that's semantics. As far as she knows, he is *mine*. The fury roaring through my body when she tries to walk her spindly fingers up his chest is immeasurable.

It doesn't last longer than a second before Huddie pushes her hands away. I take a deep breath, compose myself, and start walking toward them.

I'm not one for making a scene, but I'll be damned if I let her think she can put her hands on Huddie. Boyfriend or not. She isn't good enough for him. *I'm not sure anyone is.*

By the time I get to Huddie's locker, Nick and Everly have joined them. It's gotten to the point I don't like being around Nick and Everly when they're together. At least not when I'm with Huddie too. It muddles my brain and my heart. I'm always wondering what he's doing for me and what he's doing for show. I know what we agreed on, but it doesn't stop me from worrying.

"Excuse me," I say gruffly, squeezing between Everly and Whitney. I may or may not have checked Whitney's shoulder when I passed.

Huddie wastes no time pulling me into his side and planting a kiss on my temple. His arm wraps around me, resting halfway on my lower back and the top of my butt.

“Nice sweatshirt,” Huddie whispers, making me smile. “It looks a lot better on you than it does me.”

“I’m not sure about that,” I mumble. This is the first time I’ve worn his Oregon sweatshirt since I stole it last week. I’ve been afraid I’d get it dirty and be forced to wash all the Huddie out of it.

“Are you sitting with us at lunch?” Nick asks me, his eye drifting slightly to Huddie’s hand as it spans my backside.

“Yeah, we should be there.”

“Good. It’s not the same when you aren’t,” Nick tells me. Whitney mutters something to herself. Everly looks like she wants to react to Nick wanting me there, but she doesn’t know what to do without making a scene.

Lunch is still a sensitive topic. Even though Ace gave up his spot for me. I wasn’t happy about it. I know he said it was fine, but I don’t care. Ace needs that time with his friends.

I issued a compromise of alternating who eats at our table. One day it will be Ace and Meg or Huddie and me. Or Meg and I will go to the library or eat outside and let the guys have the seats.

Once all four of us skipped the cafeteria and ate together by the football field. It can get confusing, but it works for us.

We’ve been having fun spending our lunch hour in different places. I’ve also liked getting to know Meg better too. She’s a little out there. The total opposite of Ace, who is always in control.

Nick, on the other hand, didn’t like all the changes. He hasn’t adjusted well to our lunch rotation. I want to feel bad for him, but I can’t. Nick brought this upon himself. He’s getting to eat with Everly, which is what he wanted when he gave her my seat.

We chat a little more before walking to our perspective classes. I make sure to give Whitney a warning look before she leaves. She needs to understand I’m not scared of her. *Do your worst honey.*



“Uh, Huddie, what are those?” Luke asks from his seat at lunch. Feeling ignored, Luke tries again. “Monroe. Tell me those aren’t Mattie’s famous double chocolate chip cookies.”

“These aren’t Mattie’s double chocolate chip cookies.” Huddie smiles smugly with a mouth full of chocolate.

They totally are. I made them yesterday after school while Huddie was at practice. He took home a gallon-sized bag of them. They are his favorite, and I wanted to do something sweet for him. He’s always doing little things for me.

Luke reaches across the table to snag one, but Huddie is faster. “Hey, get your girl to make you cookies. These are mine.” Huddie winks at me. I roll my eyes and shake my head a little bit, smiling.

Everly giggles at the whole interaction while Nick watches the scene intently.

“Mattie, I thought you were my friend. Can’t I get some cookies too?” Luke complains.

“We are friends, Luke. But Huddie’s the only one who will be getting my goodies.” Huddie chokes beside me. Leo and Luke snicker. It takes me a second to figure out what I said that was funny. When I do, I start to panic.

“Not those kinds of goodies. Huddie and I, we’re not.” I look at Everly and think of the relationship show we are putting on for her. The relationship that doesn’t really feel like much of a show anymore. “I mean, we are, but not....” My mind is spiraling, trying to think of what to say. “They’re just cookies. I’m giving him baked goods. Real cookies.” I say quietly, dipping my head.

“Baby, you are so cute when you’re flustered.” Huddie kisses my hair. Nick leans back in surprise. I don’t know if it’s Huddie calling me baby or the kiss. Either way, he looks shocked by it all.

Nick doesn’t snap out of it until Everly starts talking to him. At least Luke and Leo didn’t seem phased by it. They’ve both been really supportive of our relationship. Since they don’t know it’s all for show, I expected them to be stunned that Huddie would be interested in me as more than friends, but they weren’t.

“Sorry, Huddie. That was embarrassing,” I lean close enough to him that no one else can hear.

“It was funny and cute. If anything, they are just jealous they don’t have girlfriends as amazing as mine.” He bops my nose.

“If you say so.” I’m not convinced.

“Mattie, are you excited about Homecoming? Have you shopped for your dress yet?” Everly asks.

“Babe, Mattie doesn’t really wear dresses,” Nick informs Everly.

“Nick’s right. I’m not a dress kind of girl.”

“But you will for Homecoming, right? You and Huddie are going together? I bet you will be nominated for the Homecoming court too.” She’s obviously lost her mind.

“We’re going,” Huddie declares. I look at him and raise my eyebrows. We’ve gone together as a group for the past few years, but he hasn’t asked me to be his date. “You’re my girl Mads. We’re going,” he says like it’s a done deal. I don’t even bother arguing.

“There goes my bossy boyfriend again.” I tease him.

“Don’t pretend like you don’t like it.” He squeezes my knee. Oh, I like it. I like it very much. I like all of it, including the bops on my nose, the kisses on my head, and the squeeze of my knees. Huddie couldn’t do anything I wouldn’t like.

“I wouldn’t dare.” I grin at him. The smile I get in return makes my insides flutter.

“Mattie, did you sign up for the powder puff game?” Nick asks. I must not answer him fast enough because he snaps my name again.

“Uh yeah. All set to play,” I confirm with Nick.

“Cool. Ev, babe, are you going to play too? You and Mattie could be on the same team.”

“Yeah, right. Playing football isn’t really my thing. I’ll stick to cheering on the sideline.”

“Oh, come on, babe.” Nick puts his arm around her and canoodles her a little. “Play so I can cheer you on for a change. I think you would be really good at it,” Nick tells her sweetly.

“You’re delusional, Nickie.” Her eyes roll playfully while mine practically pop out of my head. I’m waiting for Nick to flip out over Everly, calling him Nickie. He does nothing. If anything, he enjoys her using my nickname for him as a pet name.

I’m not sure how I feel about it. Huddie must sense my uneasiness because he places his hand on my lower thigh, getting my attention. He mouths, ‘*you okay.*’ I nod and lean my head on his shoulder. In return, he places a kiss on the top of my head.

“Any idea what the other games are this year?” Leo asks the group breaking the tension.

“Rumor has it there is going to be a scavenger hunt,” Everly says.

Leo, Luke, Nick, and I look at each other and start laughing. The last time we did a scavenger hunt was at summer camp when we were ten years old. It did not end well. Somehow the four of us got locked in the kitchen with our archrivals of the summer.

Before we knew it, a food fight broke out. I’m sure Leo said something to make them mad. It’s usually his fault when things go wrong. We walked out of the kitchen covered in

mustard, ketchup, syrup, and salad dressing. You name a condiment we were wearing it.

“How are we rolling with teams? Are you going to run this with me, Luke? Or are you teaming up with Penn this year?” Leo asks. Penn is Luke’s neighbor.

“Nah, man. I’m all yours.” They double-slap their hands.

“The rest of you won’t stand a chance,” Leo boasts. “Especially since Mattie and Nick won’t be teammates for once.” What does he mean? Nick and I are always a team during homecoming week.

“Keep dreaming, *Leonard*. This year you’re going up against Mattie and me. We’re going to be unstoppable.” Huddie throws an arm around me.

“You and I are partnering up?” I feel stupid asking Huddie. We never talked about it.

“Tradition is couples are always partners during the homecoming games,” Everly pipes up. “So, I’ll be with Nick this year.” *I see*.

“Is that okay with you?” Nick asks me, which is surprising. He rarely takes my feelings into consideration these days. I turn to Huddie, and I can tell he is on edge, waiting for my answer.

“Yeah. I hope you and Everly can keep up. Huddie and I are going to smoke you. *All of you*.” I narrow my eyes on Leo and Luke.

“Are you sure you’re okay being partnered with me?” Huddie asks as we leave the cafeteria and walk to my locker. I look at him like he’s being ridiculous. Because he is.

“Huddie, of course I am. I feel stupid for asking that question. I didn’t know that it was an automatic thing that couples competed together.”

“That’s why you and Nick teamed up, right?”

“Um. No. Nick and I have never been a thing. We’ve always been on the same team growing up.” I shrug my shoulders. “It

made sense, I guess. I don't know. But we've never been a couple, dated, or anything."

Huddie's head dips as he takes in this information. "So, when we met. You and Nick..." his voice trails off.

"You thought we were?" He nods without looking up. I don't know if I want to laugh or cry right now. "No, we've only ever been friends." Huddie looks up at me, and all I see is regret. For what I don't know. Regardless, the realization knocks the wind out of me. *He thought I was with Nick.*

Huddie shakes off whatever he's thinking and asks, "What do you want to do for costumes?"

"Costumes?" The change of subject catches me off guard.

"Yeah, we need to have coordinating costumes."

"Right. Any ideas?"

"Not really. I was hoping you would use your creative brain and put something together for us."

"Oh, you did, did you? I'll think about it, but you have to help me too."

"Whatever you need, Mads." He smiles, then tucks a runaway curl behind my ear. It's a lost cause. It will pop back out, but I'm glad he tried all the same.

"Oh hey, you two. I'm glad I caught you," Everly says from behind me. "I was talking to Nick, and we thought it would be fun to do a double date. What do you think? This Saturday. Are you free?"

Huddie and I look at each other. A double date is the last thing either of us wants to do.

"We'll think about it," I finally tell her, making her pout. "I mean, I'm not sure if I'm free. I might have some family stuff. But we'll let you know." I close my locker door and take Huddie's hand in mine.

"It will be a lot of fun. I can come over and help with your hair and makeup. I'll text you later. Please say yes." Everly puts her hands together, practically begging.

“Okay, let us chat and check our schedule.” I smile at her and start walking to class, dragging Huddie with me. “We don’t have to go. I can make up an excuse.”

“I think we should.” His face is firm.

“You do?”

“Why not? I’m not happy a double date will be our first date, though. I feel like an asshole for not taking you somewhere already.”

“Huddie, we hang out all the time. We went to the café to study. That counts. You don’t have to take me out on dates. I don’t need them.”

“You may not need them, but you definitely deserve them,” he declares, kissing my forehead.

“You’re sweet. And late. You better get to class. I’ll see you after practice.”

“Text Everly yes, and I’ll tell Nick we’re going.”

“Fine,” I sigh.

I’m not sure what makes me more hesitant. A date with Huddie, a double date with Nick, or Everly coming over to do my hair and makeup.

HUDDIE

It still hasn't fully registered that Mattie and Nick never dated. How is that possible? They were always together. And the way they acted around each other. It didn't make sense that they weren't a couple.

Even if they weren't, it seemed obvious that they were interested in each other to some extent. Shit, they spent the night together and slept in the same bed. At least they did. That hasn't happened since the first night we shared the air mattress. We haven't been spending as much time with Nick now that he is dating Everly. *Fine with me.*

Last summer, Nick told me he was into Everly. Until then, I thought Nick and Mattie were playing a game of cat and mouse. Always chasing after each other. I had no idea Nick wasn't into Mattie until he told me about his crush. His confession rocked me. How could you pick anyone over Mattie?

By then, I was so deep in the friend zone I didn't think it was possible to see the other side. I was sure Mattie was into Nick. I worried she would be devastated when she found out about Everly. I was shocked she was so cool about it when Nick mentioned it on our camping trip.

I'm still not convinced a part of Mattie isn't in love with Nick. It's something that's always been in the back of my mind. I asked Ace about it. The only thing he said is their relationship is 'interesting.' Basically, he was zero help.

It's one of the reasons I wanted to go on the double date tonight. I want to see how Mattie reacts around Nick when he's all over Everly. Mattie didn't want to go out with them. But I'm selfish. I need to know.

Maybe it's wrong of me to put her in this position. I'm all in with Mattie. It scares me a little to think her heart isn't available to me like mine is to her.

These thoughts run through my head constantly. Then I remember how she kisses me under my chin or runs into my arms after every football game. Man, do I love those little kisses she gives me.

It pisses me off a little that I never did anything about my feelings for Mattie over the last three years. I should have told her how much I liked her when we met. I could have... Honestly, I don't know what I could have done. Nick and Mattie were always together. The two of them were inseparable.

I don't want to say I wasted time because I didn't.

I used my time wisely by getting to know Mattie, which makes this whole thing so much sweeter. I feel like I know her inside and out. I can tell when she is happy or when she's sad. At least, I thought I could get a decent read on her.

When she was at my house last week. *Fuck*. It killed me. Thank goodness she let me hold her. *Like I gave her a choice*. I knew her parents were tough on her, but I had no idea she felt so lonely.

It breaks my heart to see her like that. I want to fix it all for her. Sitting here in her living room, I get it. These couches suck. They aren't meant to be lounged on. The room is cold and lifeless. It's uncomfortable. And it's not just because I'm sitting here alone with Nick.

Mattie is the heart of everything. She is the warmth and the love. Her parents better hope they don't run into me. They won't like what I have to say to them. I ball my hands into fists as they rest on my thighs.

"You okay over there, man?" Nick asks from across the room.

"Yep. I'm just ready to go. What are they doing up there? Mattie was ready to go before you got here." I've been sitting here with Nick for over an hour while the girls have been upstairs.

"She is getting the 'Everly treatment.' Full makeup, hair, and clothes." He laughs. Mattie's going to hate it, and this guy

is laughing.

“Why? That’s not who Mattie is.”

“You don’t think I know that? She’s *my* best friend.” You could have fooled me. “I couldn’t tell Ev no.”

“You just expect Mattie to do it for you? Or let her be uncomfortable with whatever your girlfriend decides to do to her?” I have to bite my cheek to keep myself from telling him what I really want to.

I want to tell Nick he takes advantage of Mattie’s kindness. I want to ask why their friendship is so one-sided.

“Dude, it’s not that big of a deal.”

“Maybe to you, but it is to Mattie.”

“You know her that well now?” He shakes his head, then narrows his eyes on me. “What’s going on with you two? You do remember your relationship ends after Homecoming, right?”

“It ends when Mattie says it ends.”

“What the hell does that mean?” He spits the question at me.

“It means Mattie is in control. If she says it’s over, then it’s over. Until then...” I shrug my shoulders, letting him think what he wants. I pray it never happens, but if it does, it will be her decision.

Nick’s jaw locks, and the muscles feather as he grinds his molars. He wants to say something else but doesn’t get the chance. Everly bounces down the stairs looking smug, ending our conversation.

“Mattie wants you,” Everly says on the second to last step. Nick starts to move first. “Not you, babe. She’s asking for Huddie.” Nick scowls. I smirk and make my way upstairs.

“Mads? Baby, where are you?” I yell for her, walking into her room. She is nowhere in sight. “Baby?”

“In here,” she yells from behind the closet door. “Wait! Before you open the door, you have to promise you won’t

laugh. Promise me, Huddie.”

“I promise. Ready or not, I’m coming in now.” I open the door, and my brain completely malfunctions. Mattie is wearing a navy dress so short and form-fitting it is hugging all her curves and making her long legs appear even longer.

“I know,” Mattie growls in frustration. “Look, we can laugh about this later.” Laughing will be the last thing I’ll do when I recall this image of Mattie from my memory bank. *Damn, my girl is hot.*

“Right now, I need to find something else to wear. And I need you to be my bossy boyfriend who doesn’t want me to wear a freakin’ hand towel out in public.” Mattie gestures toward her body where the dress barely covers her backside. “I mean, what is she thinking?” I can’t even think for myself right now. Let alone figure out what someone else was thinking. “Huddie, focus.”

“I’m trying, babe. I really am.” Mattie furrows her brows as she tries to figure out what is wrong with me. *Concentrate Huddie.* “Whatever you need, Mads. I can do that for you.” I move closer and give her one last appreciative look. “For the record, you look really hot.” Her cheeks flush under my stare. “But you’re right. This outfit isn’t mini-golf appropriate.”

“Thank you, Huddie. I’m going to change real quick. You can wait in my room if you want.” I nod and leave her alone in the closet.

I need the time to let all the blood redistribute through the rest of my body. Mattie’s room is still a disaster. However, it doesn’t take me long to spot my sweatshirt and one of my t-shirts she stole. I can’t keep the loopy grin off my face.

Mattie may think I care that she takes my clothes, but I couldn’t be happier about it. I feel like she’s claiming me when she is wearing my stuff. Telling the world that she’s my girl. At least, I hope that’s what it means.

Her desk is covered with her latest collage project. I grin when I see the stacks of paper I helped her organize. We spent the day kicked back in her bed, watching college ball on her

laptop, while we ripped up magazines. It wasn't fancy. We were both wearing my old sweatpants and t-shirts. Mattie had on the cutest fuzzy socks, and her hair piled on her head. It was the perfect day. I could spend every Saturday with Mattie just like that.

There are scraps of paper everywhere. It looks like Mattie is painting words on each one. There is one that says *kind* and one with *sweet*. It doesn't make sense to me. It looks like a giant mess. I would pay a lot of money to live inside this girl's head for an hour. I can only imagine the creative chaos that happens in there on a daily basis.

"You ready?" Mattie asks from behind me. Mattie is wearing skin-tight black jeans that are distressed on her upper thighs, a fitted blue tank top, and a flannel shirt tied around her waist.

How is it possible she looks even hotter wearing this? I love that Mattie kept her hair wild and curly, but she has taken off all the heavy makeup Everly plastered on her face.

"Everly is going to be mad I washed my face."

"Don't worry about her. I'll take care of it." I walk up to her and grab the flannel sleeves around her waist. "Is this mine?" I yank her closer to me. She puts her hands on my chest to keep us from crashing into each other.

"Yes," she says breathlessly. I may be asking about the shirt, but deep down, I'm asking about her too. *Are you mine, Mattie?*

"You trying to get me naked?" I whisper. Her eyes start blinking furiously as the question registers.

"W-What? N-no." I love how sweet and innocent she is. Her navy eyes go wide and flicker with light.

"Then you better stop stealing all my clothes." I tease.

Mattie leans closer and whispers in my ear, "Don't pretend like you don't like it." Mattie's biting her lip, and I groan. Damn, she won this round.

When Mattie plays, she plays to win. I should have known she would own me with flirty banter too.

“Come on. We’ve made them wait long enough.” I smack her butt as she turns around. Mattie lets out the cutest little squeak.

“Remember. You hated my outfit and made me change. I don’t want to hurt her feelings and mess this up for Nick.” Why does everything have to be about Nick? Does she base all her decisions on him? This is why I worry.

“I got you, Mads.”

We hustle down the stairs. I’m sure Nick and Everly are tired of waiting. Or not, since they are making out on the couch. Mattie looks away, and I clear my throat getting their attention.

“Sorry,” Everly says, wiping her mouth. “You changed,” she pouts when she notices Mattie’s outfit. “And you took off your makeup.”

“As hot as Mattie looked, she can’t play mini golf in a cocktail napkin.” Everly rolls her eyes.

“Whatever. You still look hot. Doesn’t she, Nick?” I narrow my eyes on Everly. What game is she playing here?

I don’t give Nick a chance to answer. I pull Mattie close and tell Everly, “Of course she does.”

The four of us head outside and get in our cars. I take Mattie in my truck, and Nick is driving Everly. As much fun as it would have been to squeeze in the backseat of Nick’s car with Mattie, I wanted some alone time with her tonight too.

I picked Basil’s Pizza for dinner. It’s a small hole-in-the-wall brick oven pizza parlor. I’ve never been here before, but I read about it online. We made pizzas at my house last week, and Mattie went crazy for the white pizza. When I saw it on the menu at Basil’s, I knew we had to eat here.

We find a quiet booth in the back of the restaurant, place our orders, and do our best to make small talk. It’s pretty painful.

It isn't until Mattie brings up last night's game that the conversation gets going. Football is one thing we can all talk about. Well, not Everly. She didn't know much about the game, except the objective was to score touchdowns. To some guys, that would be considered adorable. Not me. I love it when Mattie talks zone defense and press coverage to me.

If Nick's smile means anything, he likes it too. His eyes light up anytime Mattie mentions a play he made in the game. I would be jealous if it weren't for Mattie's thumb making small circles in my palm while holding my hand under the table.

There hasn't been one minute when our bodies haven't been touching in some way. We are sitting closer together than Nick and Everly too. I know they aren't holding hands since Nick's been talking with his most of the night. I may be overthinking the whole situation, but something is off with him. I don't like it.

Nick and I take care of the bill while the girls go to the bathroom. As I walk out to the car with my arms around Mattie, I forget all my conspiracy theories. Mattie is with me, and I will enjoy her every minute I have her.

NICK

I'm gripping the steering wheel so tight it might snap. I didn't want to go on this stupid double date. It was Everly's idea. I'm more than happy hanging out, watching a game with the guys, and ordering takeout. I thought Everly was cool with that, too, until she mentioned how 'fun' going on a date with Huddie and Mattie would be.

When we went out to eat by ourselves, it was boring. Everly barely talks to me. At least not about anything important. If Everly isn't talking about school gossip or some movie I've never heard of, she's on her phone.

And Mattie and Huddie? The whole thing is weird. It's a joke. I mean, it's make-believe. At least, it's supposed to be. I keep thinking of what Huddie said back at her house. Who is he to question *my* friendship with Mattie? Like I don't have her best interest at heart.

I may not always show it, but Mattie is special to me. She's important. I'll admit this year has been...uncomfortable at times. We haven't been in sync like we usually are. Probably because we aren't spending as much time together anymore. I barely see Mattie without Huddie or Everly around. I know I'm to blame too.

I steal a glance at Everly through my peripheral. She is beautiful with her high cheekbones and pert nose. Her hair is pulled up in a high ponytail showing off her long slender neck.

I ease my grip on the steering wheel and start tapping my thumb to the music on the radio. Everly has been quiet ever since we left the restaurant. It's not unusual. We don't have a ton of things in common. I knew that from the moment Mattie gave me the list at lunch a few weeks ago. I'll admit. I'm not the best boyfriend.

But this feels different. I don't know why there is a strange tension between us. While we've never been huge talkers,

we've at least been comfortable. I've always felt a spark with Ev. For some reason, tonight, I don't.

"Everything okay?" I finally ask. She's been typing away on her phone. Maybe something is wrong with one of her friends or her family.

"Mhmm," she hums without looking up from her phone. "Dinner was nice. I didn't know Mattie knew so much about football."

"Really? All her friends are football players. She played for a long time too. She's also brilliant when it comes to reading plays and knowing how to beat your opponent." I smile. The way Mattie's brain works is impressive. She is constantly coming up with different ways to help us win.

It's a shame she had to stop playing. We could use her creativity on the team. Huh, I never really thought about her artistic side being such a big part of who she is and how it seeps into all aspects of her life. *Fuck, I'm an asshole.*

I've been giving her a hard time for wanting to pursue art without thinking about how it breathes through her. I just wanted Mattie to think practically. The term "starving artist" is said for a reason.

Add it to the list of things I need to apologize to her about.

"I wish you could have seen Mattie with her makeup done and my dress on her," Everly says. "She still looked so pretty. Didn't she? You didn't get a chance to answer earlier."

This is a trick question, right? I'm walking into a trap.

"Why are you asking?" *Again.*

"Just making conversation. Huddie seemed to like it."

"Well, he is her boyfriend." The word tastes like acid on my tongue. "I'm sure you did a good job on her makeup, babe." Complimenting her makeover skills feels safer than mentioning how Mattie looked.

"Thanks. You should have seen Mattie in the dress. Her legs looked amazing." I swallow hard.

“Mattie doesn’t wear dresses,” I state.

“That’s a shame because, with long, sexy legs like hers, she should show them off.” I hold back a grunt choosing silence. I don’t want to think about Mattie’s legs being sexy. I don’t want to think about them at all.

“You really never thought of her as anything other than a friend?” Everly asks as I pull into a parking spot at the indoor mini golf. I scrub my face with my hand. We’ve been through this already.

“No.” The end. No need for further conversation. I met Mattie when girls were gross and had cooties. Mattie was never ‘gross’ to me. She was cool. She liked the same things I did. I could tell she needed a friend, and I wanted to be that for her. Fuck, I really needed a friend too.

As we grew up, I continued to be that friend. I didn’t know what was wrong at home, but I knew something wasn’t right. Mattie was sad when she was around her family. When I learned I could make her smile. I vowed to do what I could to keep that smile on her face all the time. *You’ve really sucked at that lately.*

Being into Mattie was never a switch I turned on. I never saw her as anything other than my friend who can throw a sweet spiral and eat a pizza by herself. *She’s my Mattie.*

Everly crosses her arms with a huff. I roll my eyes and turn towards her.

“What do you want from me, Everly? I don’t know why you are making this a thing.” I place my hand under her chin and gently pull her head towards me. “I like *you*. I’m here with *you*. Mattie is my friend, just like the rest of the guys.” Then I kiss Everly, erasing all her doubts. But leaving some of mine.

Walking into the lobby area, my body jolts at the sound of Mattie laughing. Mattie is leaning against the wall, Huddie is standing closely in front of her, and she has the biggest smile.

My heart pinches at the sight of her. I’m not the one making her smile anymore. It shouldn’t matter that Huddie is making

her laugh. It's not like he hasn't done it before when we've hung out. This is something new and it's getting under my skin. *She was mine first.*

Everly takes my hand and propels me forward. I slap a smile on my face. I want to get this over with. I will make the best of it for Everly. She really wanted this.

"Hey," Mattie greets us with a toothy smile. It isn't real. It isn't like the one she just gave Huddie.

"Have you been waiting long?" I double-slap Huddie's hand. "We got stuck at the light." I lie. I could also lie and say we got carried away in the car, but for some reason, I don't want to.

"No. We just got here too," Mattie says, and I pull her into a hug, not caring what Everly will think about it. This is what I would do if I weren't dating anyone. Why should it be different now?

I told Everly when we started dating that my relationship with Mattie wouldn't change. However, it has been changing. That's on me. I won't let it anymore. Everly will have to learn to trust me. Trust our relationship.

Mattie clings tight for a second and gives me her *Mattie smile* that I've been trying to win every day for the last ten years. Her smile is a hit of dopamine straight to the vein. I'm addicted to that smile like a drug.

Huddie and I go to the desk and get our putters and golf balls. I get Everly a pink ball, and I notice Huddie gets Mattie a green one. Her favorite color. Not sure why, but it irritates me.

Mattie and I have been coming to this place since we were kids. The first time was for my eighth birthday. I'm pretty sure she let me win that day because it was my birthday party, and my dad was riding my ass about being a winner.

When we came back a week later with Luke's family, she smoked me. Mattie got three holes in one. You don't get that good overnight. It's one of many nice things Mattie has done

for me over the years. Sometimes I wonder why she does them. I don't deserve her kindness.

But that's Mattie. She is kind and sweet, and loyal.

"You ready to do this?" I ask no one in particular.

"Do your worst, Nickie," Mattie taunts, punching me in the shoulder. I smirk at her.

"Don't hold back on me, Mattie." Huddie cocks his head curiously.

"Come on, baby. Let's show them what we got." Huddie slaps Mattie's ass flirtatiously, making her gasp and blush. I give him a warning look. He's taking this fake relationship too far. He raises an eyebrow daring me to say something. I won't. Not yet, but I'm watching.

Duke's Indoor Putt-Putt is located inside a giant storage facility. The owner, whose name isn't Duke, created a renaissance-themed mini golf course. It's elaborate and entirely over the top.

We're talking knights, pirates, fairies, gypsies, evil queens, and dragons. It's just as impressive as it was when I was eight. Back then, I wanted to be a knight or a pirate. Mattie and I played pretend more than we played golf. If I wasn't rescuing her, she was saving me. *Not much has changed. She's still saving me.*

The first hole is through a drawbridge entering the Duke's kingdom. There are three cutouts on the bridge door. The smallest one in the middle is a straight shot to the hole. If you go for the holes on the left or right, you can still get a hole in one. You just have to bank it perfectly on the other side.

Everly goes first. Her grip is too tight, and she is lined up all wrong. She swings, and the ball hits the side wall and ricochets back to her. Mattie offers her some encouraging words and tells her to try again.

She hits the ball again, generating the same outcome. I step up behind Everly, sliding my hands down her arms and making her shiver.

We line up her shot and aim for the hole on the left. If she hits it well, this angle will set her up to sink her ball on the second putt. I tell Everly to loosen her grip and guide her movements as she swings.

The pink ball careens across the green, nicking the hole on the left and finding its way to the other side. Everly jumps up and down, enthusiastically cheering for herself. I wrap my arm around her and give her a peck on her forehead when she makes the final shot.

Mattie goes next, effortlessly hitting her ball through the hole on the right side. Then it's my turn, and Huddie takes his shot last.

As we play through the following holes, the tension I felt after dinner and in the lobby dissipates. The four of us were able to relax and have fun. We rib each other for terrible shots and celebrate the good ones.

It's friendly with only a tiny pinch of discomfort. I inwardly cringe every time Huddie and Mattie touch. It's PG enough but clearly outside the lines of the friend zone. *It's what you asked them to do.*

Huddie's hand slides down Mattie's backside beneath the flannel shirt she has tied around her waist. She bites her lip suggestively, and my golf ball flies off the course. I didn't even realize I had taken a swing.

"Damn Nick," Huddie says between his laughs. I flinch when Everly puts her hand on my forearm.

"Are you okay?" I manage to recover quickly and kiss her forehead.

"Yeah. My grip slipped," I explain and stomp away to retrieve my ball.

By the time we make it to the last hole with the fire-breathing dragon, I'm ready to go home. I've had enough putt-putt. I've had enough of Huddie. I've had enough of Everly.

The only thing I haven't had enough of is my best friend. I finally get Mattie alone when Huddie goes to talk to a friend

of his from school, and Everly heads off to the bathroom to freshen up. Whatever that means.

Mattie and I sit on a bench outside the bathrooms while we wait. The back of Huddie's head pops in and out of view from where he is standing by the snack bar. I know he will be watching us. Huddie has always kept one eye on Mattie since we've been friends with him.

"Did you have fun?" It's the only thing I can think to ask. It's not what I want to say at all.

"Yeah. It's always a good time with you and Huddie. Everly too. She gets most improved tonight." I bark out a laugh. The PGA won't be calling Ev anytime soon, but she held her own the rest of the course.

"Sorry about the whole makeover thing. I should have told her no."

"Eh, it's okay. I mean, the dress was over the top. I don't know how Everly wears heels and skirts all the time. But the makeup was okay. I hope she's not mad I took it off."

I examine the details of her face. Mattie's skin is flushed but soft and smooth. Her eyes look brighter than their usual navy under the fluorescent lighting. It's the pink of her lips I can't stop looking at. The color makes her lips look plush and full. *Kissable*.

I shake my head, erasing the thoughts. I don't think that way about Mattie. *Ever*.

"It's not you. You don't need makeup. It doesn't fit who you are." Mattie reels back at my words. My voice is harsher than I intended. I'm only mad at myself. Being an asshole has always been my greatest defense.

"Who am I, Nick? Please tell me."

"Someone who doesn't need to cover up and hide. You've always been unapologetically you. The girl who owns the room without even knowing she has it. You didn't need it." She's silent, and I know I've said too much.

Mattie tilts her head back and looks up at the ceiling. After a moment, she lets out a breath, and her hand reaches for mine. “Thank you,” she says. I nod and lift the side of my mouth to smile. “I miss you,” she mumbles softly.

I squeeze her hand and blow a breath through my teeth. “I miss you too. We should hang out. Just the two of us. Like old times.” Her smile beams.

“I’d like that. We could go to the penny arcade at the old general store. Remember that place?” I nod. “We haven’t been there in years.”

A throat clears, and Mattie drops my hand choosing to stand and walk into Huddie’s arms. A growl works its way up my throat, but I don’t let it surface.

I don’t know why I’m letting Huddie get to me anyway. Mattie was mine first. We’ve been there for each other for so long. Even though I’ve been an asshole taking her for granted lately. I have nothing to worry about. She’s been nothing but a good friend to me. I need to show her I’m still the same Nick she met all those years ago. I’m still the guy who can make her smile. I’m still her best friend.

Friend? It suddenly feels like so much more. *More complicated. More confusing. More consuming.*

MATTIE

It's still dark when I park my car in the student lot. I've never been to school this early. I'm still wiping the sleep out of my eye as I silently make my way to Huddie's locker.

Thank goodness it's also pajama day. I literally rolled out of bed, put on some sweats so I wouldn't freeze, threw my hair up in a messy bun, brushed my teeth, and put on some deodorant. It's way too early to care. Today's about one thing only. *Huddie*.

Who cares if I took pajama day literally this year? I can't be the only one. I laugh at my own ridiculousness. While other girls will be traipsing around in something silky, I'll be wearing a threadbare t-shirt and bedhead. *Typical Mattie*.

After spending last weekend staying up too late, painting and cutting out all the pieces I needed to pull off the decorations for Huddie's locker, I'm too tired to care about my outfit.

Meg told me I didn't have to do anything elaborate. Just something to make the guys feel special. She clearly doesn't know me very well yet. If it involves arts and crafts, I'm all in. There is no in-between. I don't do simple.

Most of the lockers I pass have cutouts of jerseys and helmets, footballs, baseballs, or whatever fits the sport with the player's number on it. A few girlfriends have also put little hearts in our school colors on them. *Cute*.

Maybe I did go overboard. I take a mental inventory of everything I brought and compare it to the basic cutouts everyone else got from the art department. Huddie's locker is definitely going to stick out from all the others. I just hope it doesn't embarrass him.

Everly is hard at work decorating Nick's locker when I pass. Nick's locker is just a few down from Huddie's. I nod as she places another orange heart on his locker.

Exhaling, I retrieve the removable wallpaper I painted from my backpack. *Here goes nothing.* I pull the top of the backing away from the wallpaper just enough to let some of the sticky part show. Then I line up the wallpaper to the top of the locker.

Once I'm sure it's straight, I slowly start pulling the back away, pressing it smoothly as I go. I'm careful not to mess up my painting. It shouldn't smudge, but I worked too hard to risk it.

When I was told it was my duty as Huddie's girlfriend to decorate his locker, I freaked out a little. All I felt was this immense pressure to get it right. I feel honored I get to do this for him.

After hours of deliberating, I went with something I knew would make Huddie happy. I went with something that represents us. Our friendship. At the end of the day, I want him to know how important he is to me. I need him to know.

Once the wallpaper is smoothed down, I step back and look at the scene I painted. It's an aerial view of the Rogue River at night. It's the same spot we went tubing and camping.

The river flows down the center of his locker. On either side, I've painted a lush forest and above a dark night sky with his jersey number and our initials hidden in the constellations he's taught me about. *Geez, I'm making myself gag at my romantic notions.* This is what Huddie does to me.

I squat and dig in my backpack for all the cutouts I created to give the piece multiple dimensions.

"Wow. This is incredible." I look up from where I'm squatting. Everly is admiring my work.

"Thanks. I wasn't really sure what to do." I shrug a shoulder and glue a tree on top of the ones I've painted.

"Well, it's stunning. Huddie is going to be blown away. I should have had you help me with Nick's locker too." Everly lets out a weird, breathy laugh. I look over to his finished locker.

"He will like it because you did it for him. It won't matter what it looks like," I tell Everly while I work. Ignoring the

thought that I should be the girl decorating Nick's locker.

I don't want to be Nick's girlfriend. That doesn't stop all the words he spoke last weekend from spinning around in my head. He was sweet and nice. He was back to being the Nick I chose to be my best friend.

I'm not sure what is going on with him, but something is clearly off. I know his dad is still on his case about football and college. *Some things never change.* But Nick should be on cloud nine. He's having an amazing season, and he got his girl. *He has everything he wants.*

"I hope you're right." Everly sighs solemnly. Then snaps out of it. "I'm going to go change. If he's disappointed with his locker, I know I can distract him with my sleepwear," she chirps, shimmying her shoulders and giving me a wink. I just shake my head and smile at her.

I bite my lip and look down at my baggy sweats. I threw them on before I rushed out the door. Everly wouldn't be caught dead wearing them. Should I change?

If I can find gym shorts in my locker, I could take them off and wear what I wore to bed last night. It might be worth it to see Huddie's reaction.

With newfound confidence and determination, I add the finishing touches to Huddie's locker. A cute little campfire, a tent, some deer hiding behind the trees, and Huddie's truck with the two of us lying in the truck bed looking at our names in the stars. It's cheesy and romantic compared to what the other girlfriends did, but I don't care.

I finish up and dash to my locker. For once, my poor cleaning habits are paying off. An old pair of gym shorts are bunched up in the back of my locker. They are my backup pair from last year. The shorts are two sizes too small, but it doesn't matter. My shirt is going to cover them anyway. The shorts are precautionary. I *want* to appear like I'm not wearing pants.

The hallway is starting to flood with students. There is already chatter about the locker decorations. I tug at the hem

of my shirt. I've never worn anything like this before. My legs feel so naked. This thin t-shirt is far from the sloth onesie I wore last year. *Who am I?*

My phone buzzes at the same time I get back to my locker.

HUDDIE: Where are you?

ME: My locker.

HUDDIE: Don't move.

I busy myself exchanging the books I need for my morning classes.

I feel his presence before his touch. Huddie invades all my senses. My heart beats at a threatening pace. My breath comes in short clips.

"Baby," Huddie breathes behind me. His hands trace over his name on my back. Monroe is spelled out in black. All caps. Huddie runs his nose up and down my neck making me shiver. "What are you doing to me, Mads?" His hands move to my hips and squeeze.

What am I doing to him? What is he doing to me right now? If he weren't gripping my hips, I would float away. I feel like I'm high on novocaine. *Is this real life right now?*

"You're wearing my shirt." I nod. His left hand slips down to the hem of my shirt. I smirk when he lifts it enough to see my shorts. "Why?"

I turn to face him. "It's pajama day, Huddie," I state. When the homecoming schedule came out, I decided to wear my sloth onesie again. Being sexy or scandalous isn't really my thing. Then I woke up late and completely forgot about everything except getting to school. I'm glad I messed up my own plans. Seeing the struggle for control on Huddie's face makes it all worth it.

Huddie's eyes are hooded and dilated as they roam over every inch of me. His hands massage my hips possessively. There are other students all around. I can't focus on anything except how his hand grips my flesh, the look in his eye, and his shallow breath spiking my heart rate.

“You sleep in my shirt?” I nod again. A string of explicit words tumbles past his lips.

“It’s soft and comfy.” *It smells like you.* “I had to be here early to decorate your locker. I literally rolled out of bed and came here. Sorry if I stink. I didn’t shower.” *Gah, why did I admit that?* He sniffs the top of my head.

“You smell delicious. Like peaches. And you’re wearing my shirt. You decorated my locker.” The side of his mouth tilts up.

“Did you like it? I know it isn’t like all the others. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted it to be special. For you to feel special.”

“I love it. You and me,” Huddie takes my hands in his and strokes the tender skin on my wrist, “in the back of my truck, looking up at the stars.” He takes a steadying breath. “It’s perfect.” Huddie steps closer, keeping his eyes on me.

I want him to kiss me. But he won’t because it’s not real. I told him I wanted my first kiss to be for real. And this isn’t.

A locker slams close by, knocking me out of the spell he has me under. I back away slightly and smile. Huddie smiles too, but it’s not a real one. *Quick, Mattie, think of something to say.*

“A-Are you excited about the scavenger hunt? I wonder what we will have to find?” I close my locker door and turn back to him. Huddie grabs my hand and starts walking down the hall toward my first class.

“I don’t know, but we’ll find out soon enough. We’ll have fun with it too.”

“Yeah, we will.” I squeeze his hand. That earns me a full dimpled smile from Huddie.

“Damn, Monroe. Where has your girl been hiding those legs?” Huddie pulls me closer and sneers at Banks, a running back on the football team.

“Watch your mouth, Banksy.”

“Dude, calm down. I’m paying Mattie a compliment. She has nice legs. Sorry if I offended you or your yams, Mattie.”

Banks wiggles his eyebrows causing Huddie to growl. I look at Huddie. *Seriously.*

“You didn’t. I’m not,” I say casually like I get compliments on my body daily. *I don’t.*

“Catch you later?” Banks asks Huddie. He nods and slaps his hand a couple of times.

Huddie gently ushers me into a hidden alcove just before we get to my classroom. In seconds he has me pinned up against the wall with his thigh between my legs. My backpack drops to the ground, and I bite back a whimper that wants to escape.

“I don’t like other guys seeing you like this.” His eyes roam from the mess of curls on my head to the thin t-shirt covering my chest. “You are putting thoughts in their heads that they don’t need to have.” Huddie’s hand slides up my neck to cup the side of my face, and I lean into it. “But I *love* my name on your back. I love that you go to sleep in *my* clothes.” Huddie drops his forehead to mine. He’s so close I can taste the cinnamon candy he had this morning.

“Huddie.” I sound weak and needy. My greedy hands somehow migrate to his hips all on their own. I tug him tighter to me. Huddie feels so good flush against my body.

“The way you say my name, I feel...fuck Mads!” He whisper-shouts. “Are you mine? Because fuck if I’m not yours, baby. For real. None of this fake bullshit. Tell me you’re mine.”

He’s mine? He wants me? He wants this to be real? Huddie’s thumb continues to caress my cheek, rendering me speechless. I need to tell him YES! I’m yours.

“Baby, don’t cry.” Huddie kisses my cheek. I didn’t realize I was crying. I’m not sad. I’m happy. So happy.

I look into Huddie’s beautiful blue eyes and risk the burn. I want him to see the truth reflected in my own. “I’m yours.” Two words. It’s all I can manage.

HUDDIE

I'm yours.

Those two words bring me to my knees. She's mine. Mattie is my girl. I knew she would be. I felt it the moment she came into my life. She was always meant to be mine.

I've tried to wait. To take things at Mattie's speed. I can't wait anymore. I didn't want to fall apart, but Mattie slowly diminished my resolve. Today she completely obliterated it.

It started with the locker. Technically it began four years ago. She's been chipping away at me for years. Mattie squirreled herself away all weekend. I spent Saturday with Ace working on our cars. Then Sunday, I stayed home. Alone. Without my girl while she apparently cut trees and deer out of construction paper.

Mattie always blows me away with her art. But when she creates something for me? It messes with me. It's a jolt of electricity right to my heart. I feel every emotion flowing through my veins, sparking me to life.

Standing there at my locker, I was a live wire. I wasn't looking at a scene of something we'd done. We've never taken my truck to our spot. That's what this place is, *our spot*. We haven't even sat in the bed of my truck together. Let alone stared up at the stars.

No, this is something Mattie has conjured up from her imagination. This is something Mattie wants to do. And fuck if I don't want to do it too.

I want everything with Mattie. *Every fucking thing.*

My mind was made up as I walked to her locker. I was going to tell her how I felt. Then she crippled me. Mattie knocked the wind out of me without even trying. She's a wet dream in my shirt, the hem teasing her sculpted thighs. But seeing my name on her back? Knowing every guy in this school will realize without a doubt she is my girl? I lost it.

Mattie's hands travel up my chest, and I drop mine down to her waist. I'm holding on for dear life. I let out a shuddering breath. I'm clenching every muscle to keep myself from trembling. Her right hand rests on the back of my neck while her left pushes my hair in place. I lean into her touch.

"Mads." Her name is a plea. A prayer. I must have done something right in a past life because my prayer gets answered.

Mattie tilts her head and kisses me under my chin. It's soft and sweet. Then my right cheek. My left cheek. When her lips gently graze mine, I freeze.

She kissed me. Mattie kissed me.

I barely get a moment to breathe before she kisses me again. Her fingers thread through my hair pulling me closer. Her chest presses against mine. I feel her everywhere. I groan, and that only revs her up more.

This time I don't hesitate. I move my lips against hers. My arms tighten around her back, and I snake one hand up to the nape of Mattie's neck, pushing her further against the wall. When she gasps, I take advantage and slip my tongue into her mouth. *Heaven.*

Every taste of her mouth, every swipe of her tongue, has me losing my grip on reality.

I'm flying through the clouds when the warning bell rings, reminding us we're at school. *Shit.*

I nip at her puffy bottom lip before pulling away. Man, my girl is sexy. She doesn't realize it, which makes her even sexier.

"Damn, Mads. I've wanted to do that for so long."

"Me too," she says, and my brow furrows, confused. "Oh, you know. My first kiss." I nod. Right. It might as well have been my first kiss too. Kissing Mattie erases all the memories of the few girls I've kissed before her.

"I don't think I can let you leave me after a kiss like that." I twine our fingers together and place my forehead against hers.

“It was a good kiss?” She asks, and I reel my head back. How can she not know that it was? “I know what I felt, but it was my first one. I have no idea if I did it right.” She shrugs her shoulders. Her honesty is endearing.

“Mads, there aren’t enough adjectives to describe how incredible that kiss was.” I kiss her several times to prove I want to keep kissing. She starts giggling and the melody makes my stomach flip. “We will be doing more of that later. You can count on it. For now, you better go.”

I bend over to grab her backpack and get a closeup of her delectable legs. My imagination takes off running, thinking of making out with her legs straddling me. Wrapped around my waist. Hiked over my hip. My hands clench into fists.

“Get to class, baby.” I practically growl. Mattie rolls her eyes at my demand but the way she smirks and bites her lip tells me she likes it. “I’ll be here when you get out.”

“Yeah, okay.” I know what she’s thinking. I’ve never waited for her after class before. Maybe that makes me an asshole. But hell, if I’m going to starve myself from her until lunch. Yeah, that doesn’t work for me.

I don’t think it will work for her, either. Mattie kisses me again and walks away with the biggest smile on her face.



I follow the trail of seniors into the auditorium for the start of the scavenger hunt. Mattie said she would meet me here since she was coming from the art room on the other side of campus.

My heart rate picks up when I see her standing by the double doors talking to Leo and Luke. I pout when I notice she put sweatpants on. *Pity*. At least she is still wearing my shirt. I

should give her more of them. Mattie definitely wears my clothes better than I ever could.

“Hey, baby.” I wrap my arm around Mattie’s waist and kiss the top of her head. I would kiss her lips, but I’m selfish. We’ve been sneaking kisses all day, and I like the idea of being the only one who has seen her face with that post-kiss glow. It’s mine. I want to keep it.

“Hi.” She beams a smile at me and kisses me under my chin. Damn, I really like that.

“You ready for this, Monroe?” Leo rubs his palms together like he’s up to no good. He probably isn’t.

“Your girl here has been talking *schmack*.” Luke tries to smack Mattie on the head, but she swats his hand away first.

“We’re ready,” I tell them with a confident nod.

“Leo, you better rein him in,” Mattie points to Luke. “He’s going to be chasing squirrels and forget all about the scavenger hunt.”

“Ye of little faith. Leo and I have been training for this day. We have been sneaking around this school long enough to know where to find everything.” There is truth to that.

“Whatever. Let’s go find Nickie and Ace.” Mattie play fights with Luke for a bit before grabbing my hand and walking into the auditorium with me.

Nick and Ace were easy to spot in the back of the auditorium. They are sitting with Everly and Meg, along with the rest of the cheerleaders and football players.

“Mattie, over here!” Nick calls out from the middle of the second to the last row. We shuffle down the row hand in hand. One of the guys jumps over the row in front of us to make room for me. *Thanks for saving me a seat too, Nickie.*

Nick hugs Mattie, and I do my best to roll with it. This is nothing new. They’ve always hugged, held hands, leaned on each other, whatever. It doesn’t make it less annoying. Honestly, it’s always bothered me. I never had the right to say anything. *Do I now? I’m not sure.*

Albeit the touches are fewer and farther in between ever since Everly came along. I think Mattie is sensitive to Everly's feelings. Maybe mine too. Or maybe it's her feelings for me making her pull away from Nick. *Wouldn't that be something?*

Once we take our seats, I waste no time putting my arm around Mattie. I slip my hand underneath the collar of her t-shirt and glide my fingers shamelessly over her shoulder.

I would never do anything Mattie doesn't want, but I feel a sense of freedom knowing she wants me too.

Henry Miller, our student body president, walks up to the podium on the stage. As he starts to talk, the mic makes a terrible screeching noise causing the whole auditorium to cover their ears and groan in pain.

Mattie takes cover against my chest, and I want to start preening around like a peacock. My girl is seeking me out for comfort. I laugh at her to keep myself from claiming her lips.

"Let's try this again," Henry talks into the mic. "Much better. Okay, seniors, in just a few minutes, we will pass out the sealed envelopes with the list of items you need to find in order to win today's game. You and your partner need to take a photo of yourselves with each item. Then text each photo to the number on the paper. You have until three o'clock to complete the hunt. The first team to finish will win a fifty-dollar gift card to Applebee's." Half the room starts clapping.

"The winners will be announced in homeroom tomorrow morning. If you don't have any questions, we'll get started. Everyone partner up. Once all the envelopes have been passed out, we'll begin."

"I'm so excited." Mattie claps her hands at a rapid pace. My girl is adorable. I kiss her on the nose.

"Do you want to work together?" Nick asks. *Uh, no.*

"Nick. You know we can't do that. It's always every man for himself. But if you want, Huddie and I can drop off an Oreo shake from Applebee's on our way home from our victory dinner. Two straws so you and Everly can share." The

little deviant smiles sweetly. I couldn't have said it better if I had tried. I smile along with her.

Nick's a good sport and laughs it off, but it's evident he's irritated. I know because I used to be him. I was the guy who wanted Mattie's attention. *Sucks, doesn't it, bro?*

One of the student council minions passes us our envelope. Nick raises his envelope and says, "Game on, Mattie." He winks at her, and I do a double take because I swear I'm seeing things. I know he isn't trying to flirt with Mattie right now.

"May the odds be in your favor!" Luke yells from behind us, earning a laugh from everyone and diffusing a bit of the rage brewing inside me.

"On the count of three, the game begins, and you can open your envelopes. 1, 2, 3!" Henry blares an air horn, and everyone scurries out of the auditorium like cockroaches.

Mattie and I are one of the remaining teams seated while opening our envelope. There's no point in running off when you don't know what to do.

"Let's take a look at everything and come up with a plan. Then we can systematically find each item instead of running around like crazy chickens." Mattie looks at me like I'm nuts. "What?"

"I'm impressed. My boyfriend is strategic and smart. It's hot," she says, sucking on her bottom lip. I pluck it out of her mouth and then kiss her. Just a quick one.

"I'll never get tired of hearing you call me your boyfriend."

"I'll never get tired of saying it." I groan, then kiss her again.

"Stop distracting me, woman." Mattie smiles in a way that doesn't help me focus on the paper in front of me.

There are over fifty items on this list. Ten or so are items of a specific color. Mattie instantly suggests the art room for all of those. We can find a few things in the field house and gym. I make a note of those.

“These are all books,” Mattie points to three items on the list.

“Good job, Mads.” I mark off a few more things we can find in the music room, cafeteria, and classrooms. Everything else seems to be specific personal items like keys to a Honda, ruby red lipstick, a black jacket, etc. Those will be tricky. We will have to hunt down classmates for them.

Now that we have a plan, Mattie and I head out of the auditorium and go straight to the cafeteria since it is closest to where we are. We quickly find a fork, an apple, a dessert, milk, butter, and an egg. We also get lucky and find a wad of chewed-up gum under one of the tables. I take a selfie and cross that one off. *So disgusting.*

“Remind me to check our table tomorrow. That was nasty.”

“It’s not that bad,” she tells me.

“Says the person who didn’t just take a selfie next to it. Make me forget Mads.” I throw my arms around her.

“You’re ridiculous.” She kisses me anyways.

“And just like that, all the trauma disappears,” I whisper into her ear.

“Now you’re distracting me,” Mattie says breathlessly. “Come on. Where to next?”

“The library. Then we’ll do the music and art rooms. Maybe we can find an empty classroom on the way.” She raises an eyebrow. I shake the paper in my hand. “For the list, baby. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

On our way to the library, we pass several teams running around. Mattie and I should move faster, but neither one of us seems to be in a rush. I don’t want to rush anything when it comes to Mattie. She’s the kind of girl you savor.

In the library, we break apart to find the books and reference material we need. Mattie goes to the fiction section while I stay by the student help desk.

In addition to books, we need bookmarks, tape, a red pen, a sharpie, a stapler, and paper clips. I should be able to find most

of those things here.

“Where’s your partner Monroe?” I grit my teeth at the sound of his voice. I flick my eyes to Mattie. She’s posing with a copy of a book and taking a selfie. *Fucking cute.*

“Where’s yours?” I throw back at Abernathy.

“Whitney is probably lost. I don’t think she’s ever been inside a library before.” Figures Abernathy would partner up with Whitney. That’s a dangerous combination. I need to get to Mattie so we can leave.

“Well, good luck with that,” I tell him as I take my last photo.

“How long do you think it will be until she leaves you for him?” He asks before I get two steps away.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I step up to him. “Quite frankly, I don’t give a fuck. Stop putting your nose in something you know nothing about.” I move in even closer. “All you need to know is you will never have her.” I walk away. He’s not worth it. Just a bug that needs to be squished. I don’t mind doing the squishing.

When I find Mattie, she hands me a book, tells me to smile, and snaps a photo. “I think I’m going to make it my background on my phone,” she laughs.

“Give me that.” I snatch the phone from her. “You are not using this goofy ass photo of me as your background. It’s awful. Come here.” I spin her around and pin her back to my chest. I treasure the little noise she makes when I pull her in tight.

I count to three and snap a new photo. Then I take another one when I kiss Mattie on her cheek. I text them to myself before giving Mattie her phone back.

Whitney and Brennan scowl at us when we make our way out of the library. Mattie asked if I knew what that was about. I told her it was probably nothing and not to think twice about them. It’s nothing. They’re nothing.

All I know is I'm going to spend the next hour with my girl doing a silly scavenger hunt. Then I'm going to make out with her in my truck until I have football practice. Then I'm going to take her home and kiss her some more while we do our homework.

The last thing I'm going to do is worry about Nick. There are only two people in my relationship with Mattie, and Nick is not one of them. Abernathy can say whatever he wants. It won't change how I feel about Mattie or how she feels about me.

It can't. I won't let it.

MATTIE

HUDDIE: Send me a picture of what you're wearing.

ME: I'm wearing the same thing as you. That's the point of a couple's costume.

HUDDIE: Send me a picture anyway.

ME: No. You're going to see me in a few minutes.

HUDDIE: You're no fun.

ME: You better not be texting me while you're driving, Hudson.

"Madeline." My mother approaches me in the kitchen as I finish putting together my lunch and load it all into my backpack. Her face is distorted in disgust. She is practically snarling at me.

"Mother." I'm bored already. Or maybe I'm just numb to her at this point.

"I'm going to ignore your choice of clothing and the markings on your face." I clamp my mouth closed to keep from laughing. I'm sure it's killing her to know I will be out in public looking like this. "I only have a moment before I'm needed at the club."

"Of course." Good thing your daughter doesn't need you.

"The gala is in three weeks. You will attend." There is no asking. This is a direct order. A command. "It's the event of the year for the club. I will have a dress ready." I grunt in frustration. I can only imagine the pretentious dress she picked out for me. "And a date."

I narrow my eyes on her. "No."

"David will be attending Harvard next year. He is-"

"*Not* going to be my date. I will go to your gala, but Huddie will be my date. My boyfriend." A quick laugh erupts from her throat.

“Boyfriend?” I nod. Something clicks in her brain, and her whole demeanor changes. “Lovely dear. Your father and I look forward to spending time with this boy at the gala.”

Without another word, my mother grabs her designer handbag and walks out the door. I’ve never feared what my mother could do to me. She would never do anything to me that would directly interfere with her social status.

It is concerning to think about what she could do to Huddie. The fact that she walked away without showing her usual contempt is not a relief. It’s a red flag. It’s downright frightening. I fear I’ll be leading Huddie blindfolded straight to the firing squad.

My phone buzzes. It’s Huddie letting me know he’s here. Even a simple text from him makes me smile. I’m hopeless. I also can’t wait for him to see my costume. He’s going to laugh. I knew he didn’t have money to waste on a costume and I didn’t want to wound his pride by buying us something extravagant. Not for something silly like homecoming.

Luckily Huddie has more flannel than a lumberjack, and we can both be outdoorsmen. Huddie is a hot outdoorsman in flannel, jeans, a beanie hat, and suspenders. I did kick in some cash for those.

I put a little twist on my costume. I’m still wearing flannel and jeans, but I added some cat whiskers to my face, darkened the tip of my nose, and threw on a cat ear headband to turn myself into an outdoor cat.

I think it’s hilarious.

Huddie is leaning against his truck when I open my front door. I punch the code to lock the door and walk as fast as my legs will allow to get to him. Is it normal to miss him already?

I was over at his apartment until late last night. After everything that happened yesterday, I couldn’t stand to be away from him. I just wanted to be in his presence and drown in him. We stayed up late talking, cuddling, and kissing.

“Hey, baby, you look adorable.” Huddie slips his hands around my hips and pulls me closer to him. My hands glide up

his suspenders, and I snap the one on the left. *Yep, worth every penny.*

“You look hot.” I blush at my admission, even though I don’t feel embarrassed by my words. It is liberating to finally tell him what I’ve always thought about him.

“Hot, huh?” Huddie’s hands dip into the back pockets of my jeans, and my breathing halts for a moment.

“Yes. Hot. It’s the suspenders. Or maybe the beanie. It looks good on you too.” He levels me with a look.

“The suspenders? Not my handsome face or my big muscles?” He flexes, causing the flannel to stretch over his biceps and chest. I hold back a whimper.

“Nope. Definitely the suspenders.” I kiss him under his chin, teasing him. “We need to go, or we’ll be late.” Huddie groans but proceeds to open the passenger door for me.

When Huddie has the truck in motion, he puts his right hand on my thigh. He did the same thing while driving home from school yesterday. It’s an automatic response. Almost like he needs to touch me to know I’m real. I’m here. I’m his.

My stomach flips as we pull into our parking spot at school. Everyone is decked out in costumes. Huddie and I look so simple compared to everyone else.

“Don’t do that.” I look at Huddie with furrowed brows. “Don’t second guess yourself. I love that I’m your lumberjack, and you’re my little kitty cat.” Huddie practically purrs like a cat, then leans over to kiss me.

Will this feeling of weightlessness ever go away? He sends me catapulting every time his lips touch mine.

“How do you always know what I’m feeling?” I ask him when we break from our kiss.

Huddie looks off into the distance and sighs. He opens his mouth to speak, but a bang on the hood of his truck stops him. Leo and Luke are waiting for us, dressed up as Napoleon Dynamite and Pedro.

I look at Huddie and start laughing. Then we both rush out of the truck to get a closer look.

“Wow, you guys look fantastic. I love the hair.” I touch Leo’s curly carrot top head. “So bouncy.”

“Gosh, Mattie,” he says in his best Napoleon impression. I’m going to lose it if they talk like this all day. My cheeks are going to hurt from smiling so much.

We start making our way across the lawn to the main entrance. Luke and Leo banter back and forth in character. Huddie shakes his head at them, but I can’t stop giggling.

“I love hearing you laugh,” Huddie whispers in my ear and squeezes my hand. It’s a small gesture, but it fills me with so much warmth. Huddie is a mixture of sweetness and strength. I love that about him.

Lost in our own bubble, we suddenly run into the backs of Luke and Leo when they stop. I peer over Leo’s shoulder and see a disgruntled Ace standing next to Meg, who has a mischievous smirk on her face.

“Will someone tell Ace to stop being so pissy?” Meg asks dramatically. “I don’t know why you’re mad about this anyway. It’s your fault. You didn’t want to wear a costume. You left me no choice,” she says, pointing a finger at Ace.

“What are you supposed to be?” I ask. Meg is wearing an oversized tee shirt, jeans, and a backward baseball cap. She dressed similarly, if not exactly, like Ace.

“Well, you actually inspired me, Mattie.” Oh great. Now Ace is going to blame me for this. “You looked so cute in Huddie’s shirt yesterday. I thought, what the heck? This guy,” she points to Ace again, “doesn’t want to dress up. Fine. I’ll dress up like him.”

“So, you’re twins?” Huddie asks. I shake my head once her costume makes sense to me.

“No, they’re a pair of Aces.” I give Meg a high five for her creativity. Ace groans and the guys burst out laughing.

“Oh, this is genius,” Luke slaps Ace’s shoulder.

“Laugh it up, Pedro,” Ace quips back at him.

“Don’t be mad because your girl outsmarted you,” Leo tells him. Then he pulls something out of his pocket and puts it in his mouth.

Ace narrows his eyes on Leo. “Did you just eat a tater tot from your pocket?”

“Yeah, So?” We all moan in disgust and walk away. Leaving Leo by himself. “What? I made them fresh this morning. They’re delicious,” he declares. “Just watch. You’ll be begging for my tots.”

The day flies by in a blur. Even with all the commotion from everyone’s costumes, I tried hard to focus on my classes. I need near-perfect grades to get the scholarship I want from Oregon.

The bell rings, ending fifth period, and I run to my locker to stash all of my stuff. I’m meeting Huddie and everyone in the gym for the Homecoming Hide and Seek game.

I pass Whitney and Bridget fixing their makeup and straightening their headpieces in a locker mirror. All of the senior cheerleaders dressed up with a *Great Gatsby* theme along with their boyfriends.

At least, I think that’s what they were going for. Nick was dressed up like an old-time gangster. He could have been an extra on the set of *Peaky Blinders*. Nick looked dangerous and mysterious. He looked good.

“Looks like the lost puppy found his kitten,” Whitney says behind me, flicking the cat ears on my head. I don’t acknowledge her.

“You finally figured out that Huddie is in love with you, huh? How you didn’t see it before, I’ll never know. I guess you were too blinded by Nick to really see him.” Blinded by Nick? What is she talking about? Why does she always talk in riddles?

“When you mess things up with Huddie.” I open my mouth to protest, but she holds her hand up to stop me. “You and Nick can’t stay away from each other. Trust me. You will mess

up.” Trust her? That’s never going to happen. “I will be there to pick up the pieces of Huddie’s broken heart.” *What the hell?*

Whitney and Bridget saunter off, leaving me speechless. Wait, was Whitney talking about Huddie that day on the football field, not Nick? How is it possible for Whitney to notice Huddie’s feelings for me, but I never did?

“You’re late too,” I say to Nick as our paths meet in the main hallway.

“Yeah, I got held up.” I chuckle at his joke.

“Funny gangster.” He looks at me, confused. “Held up. That’s what gangsters do. You know, like holding up a bank or whatever.”

“Huh. Too bad I didn’t know I was being funny. I like it when you laugh, but I want to earn it,” Nick says, leaning into me. I just roll my eyes. Huddie practically said the same thing this morning. No, he said he *loves* it when I laugh. And my body liquified.

“You make me laugh all the time.” He makes a face like he doesn’t believe me. “I was laughing my head off yesterday when you tripped at football practice and biffed it across the field.” I start laughing again, thinking about his arms, windmilling to keep his feet on the ground.

“Mattie,” Nick growls. “I could have hurt myself, and you think that’s hilarious. It’s not funny.” His voice is stern, but I know he’s playing. “I’ll give you something to laugh about.” Nick starts making pinching his hands like crab claws.

“Don’t you do it,” I warn him. Nick has been pinching and tickling me with crab hands since we were kids. I run away from Nick, and he attacks me as soon as I cross the entrance to the gym.

Nick’s hands are on my sides. I’m half laughing, half crying, and drawing an audience. I pull away from him, straighten my shirt, and push my hair out of my face. My eyes dart to the bleachers and find Huddie with a deep scowl across his face.

I walk to him with Nick following behind me.

“Relax, Huddie. We were just playing around.” Nick squeezes my shoulder. “Weren’t we, Mattie?” I nod in agreement. We were just teasing each other. Is this what everyone assumes is us flirting?

I sit beside Huddie and immediately sandwich his hand between mine, reassuring him that it isn’t anything. Nick follows my movements closely. He is still under the impression we’re faking our relationship. That is a conversation I need to have with him sooner than later. Nick needs to know my relationship with Huddie is more. A lot more.

“I’ll catch you later, Mattie,” Nick says before stomping up the bleachers to sit with Everly. She has been watching the whole scene with her arms crossed. I don’t know her well enough to read her face, but she doesn’t look happy.

I switch my focus back to Huddie. He is wound up tight. I rub my thumbs across the top of his hand and the tender skin on his wrist. He drops his head to mine.

“Are you okay?” I speak quietly so only he can hear me.

“No.” His tone makes me flinch. I don’t get a chance to ask him why because Henry Miller is at the podium going over the rules for the game.

Leo and Luke start boasting about how they will win hide and seek too. Somehow the two of them won the scavenger hunt yesterday and won’t let us forget about it.

We can hide anywhere in the school as long as we can hear the PA system when they announce the game is over. Henry and the rest of the student council members are the seekers. We have forty-five minutes to play. If we aren’t found when the time is called, our names go into a lottery for a prize.

“Do you have any ideas on where we should hide?” I ask Huddie. He shakes his head. “Okay, I have an idea if you’re good with me picking.”

“Whatever you want, Mads.” He sounds defeated, and I don’t like it.

“Huddie.” I put my hands on his face and force him to look at me. He grabs my wrists and pulls my hands off him.

“Let’s go. We need to hide. Lead the way.”

Huddie holds my hand as I lead him through the hallways toward the art studio. There is a secret storage closet in the back of the room. Only a few students know about it. I doubt anyone will think of it today since it isn’t used for anything important.

I check left and right in the hallway and behind us to ensure no one is around. I don’t want anyone to follow us or lead the council members directly to our hiding spot.

I quickly open the door to the art studio and pull Huddie inside. He’s still agitated and clearly upset. “There is a storage closet back here that is basically forgotten. I don’t think anyone will find us here.” Huddie grunts his approval.

Huddie follows me to the back of the room, where there is a small alcove with two doors. One is a bathroom, and the other is the closet. I open the door to the closet and stack a few boxes to make room for us to stand. Once inside, Huddie shuts the door enclosing us in darkness.

The closet is deep but very narrow. With all the boxes, there is just enough room for us to stand face-to-face. I can feel Huddie’s chest rise with every breath he takes.

“Huddie,” I barely breathe out his name. I need him to say something. I need him to break this tension and tell me how to fix this. “Talk to me.” Huddie lets out a strangled sigh.

“I don’t like it when he touches you, Mads.” His admission does something to me. It makes me squirm in my hiking boots. When he says things like this, it’s like pouring gasoline on a fire. I just burn more for him.

“It doesn’t mean anything.” He scoffs at me. “I can ask him to stop, but it won’t matter.”

“If you ask him to stop, he better stop,” Huddie says gruffly. My hands search his chest until they find his suspenders. He looks so good today. He rolled up the sleeves of his flannel

shirt, exposing his tan forearms. I spent our lunch hour just staring at them, memorizing every vein.

“He would, but that’s not what I mean. Whether he touches me playfully as a *friend* or doesn’t, it won’t change anything about us. Nick’s actions don’t impact my feelings for you.”

Huddie puts his arms around my waist and holds me tight. I drape one arm over his shoulder and cup his face with my other hand. Huddie didn’t shave this morning and has a good amount of stubble. I run my thumb over it gently.

“You mean that?”

“Yes, Huddie. I’m with you. You never have to doubt that.”

“You and Nick have a history. You’re close. I can’t believe I’m telling you this. Maybe it’s the dark room. Or maybe it’s just you.” He holds me tighter.

“We promised we would always be honest with each other, Huddie.” I wince, knowing I’m keeping something from him. I should confess that I’ve liked him since the first time I saw him. Loved him, maybe. What difference would it make? We’re together now. That’s all that matters.

“I am, Mads. I will be. Always.” Huddie takes a deep breath. “Sometimes I wonder how close Nick wants to keep you. Maybe he wishes you were his girlfriend.” Now it’s my turn to scoff. “You don’t think it’s strange that he’s all over you when he’s with Everly?”

“First of all, Nick wasn’t all over me. He doesn’t act any different than Luke or Leo.”

“Mads, he is. Luke and Leo play around, but it’s never...I don’t know. Flirty.” I laugh at him. He can’t be serious.

“Nick isn’t flirting with me. Second, do you remember why we started fake dating to begin with? Let me remind you. It was so he could date *EVERLY*. He doesn’t think of me like that. He never has.”

“If you say so, baby.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“I don’t believe there is anyone who wouldn’t want to be with you if they had the chance.” I sigh.

“You say the sweetest things. You don’t have to worry about Nick or anyone else. I don’t want them.”

“And what do you want?” Huddie runs his nose up my neck and over my jaw. I capture his face in my hands.

“I want you. And I want you to kiss me right.... meow.” Huddie throws his head back, laughing.

“How long have you waited to say that?”

“Pretty much all day. I thought of it in second period,” I confess. “Are you going to kiss me or not?”

“Definitely kiss you. Come here, my little kitten.”

Huddie’s lips are on mine in an instant. I’m putting all I can into this kiss. I want to erase any doubts that make him think of Nick as anything other than a friend to me. I want Huddie to see I can back up my words with action.

Now that I have him, there is no more hiding. It might be time to confess exactly how I feel about Huddie.

MATTIE

The week has flown by with all the homecoming games and events. Tonight, the guys are playing one of the toughest teams in our division, the Knights, but right now, the girls are taking the field for the powder puff game.

This morning we got our team assignments. I didn't realize how stressed I was at the possibility of being on the same team as Everly and Whitney. The tension in my body dissolved instantly, knowing they were my opponents on the field.

Something changed between Everly and me after we had our double date. Everly went out of her way to prove something. What exactly? I'm not sure, but it made me see her differently. Or it could be the people she chooses to hang out with. I'm sure Whitney is whispering lies in Everly's ear about Nick and me.

"Baby, where'd you go?" I jerk my head from the sidelines of the other team, where Nick, Everly, Whitney, and the rest of their team are huddled. Huddle glances over at them and back to me with concerned eyes.

"Nowhere. I'm here." I smile, but it's not a good one, and he knows it.

"Talk to me, Mads. What's going on?" He pulls me in closer. Fiddles with a loose curl. He makes my whole body explode with color.

"Not now." He worries his lip. I pluck it out from his teeth with my thumb. "It's Everly. I don't want to get into it now. I just realize she isn't going to be someone I can call a friend after all."

"Why do you think that?" He thinks it's because of Nick. I can read it all over his face. *Give him your sketchbook. Let him see for himself.*

"The company she keeps."

"Whitney is just jealous."

“I get it.” I’ve been jealous of girls because of him too. “I’m sure other girls are too. Especially after those suspenders.” His cheeks turn pink, and I feel like I’m winning at life. “But they don’t glare at me or say mean things.”

“What is she saying to you, Mads?” His hands flex on my hips, and his brow knits together.

“Nothing important,” I reassure him. I don’t want him to doubt us ever again. “I can handle her.”

“I know you can, baby, but you shouldn’t have to deal with her alone.”

“Like you’re dealing with Brennan?” I raise an eyebrow. “I know he said something to you in the library the other day. You can’t hide things from me either.” Huddie studies the grass for a minute.

“He did, but that’s because he wants you, and he can’t have you. You’re mine.” Huddie’s forehead drops to mine. I run my fingers through the overgrown hair on the back of his neck.

You’re mine. I’ve waited a long time to hear those words. I waited so long that I boxed up my feelings for Huddie and locked them away. I stopped looking at him as someone who could be my forever and chose to treasure his friendship instead.

“I am,” I say, peppering kisses on his jawline. He lets out a ragged breath letting me know he’s mine too. I drop my head to his chest and hug him tight. Huddie burrows himself into my neck, making a home there.

“Alright, break it up, you two. I’m ready to take people out,” Rach, a killer soccer player, says while she tosses a football in the air.

I reluctantly leave Huddie’s arms. “We’ll talk about this more later,” he whispers. I nod at him, and he kisses my temple.

Our team is pretty stacked. We have a few girls from the soccer and field hockey team, plus me and Meg. Huddie and Ace are our coaches. The opposing team is Everly, Whitney, and the other senior cheerleaders. Plus, a few girls on the

basketball and softball teams. They have Nick and Reggie as their coaches.

Luke and Leo are on the sideline decked out in fluffy orange skirts and black crop tops, along with a few more senior football players. I'm not convinced anyone will be paying attention to the game with them strutting around.

Now I see why most students chose to be spectators and not participate. The guys look *abs-olutely* fabulous. A rough hand covers my eyes, and teeth nip at my neck. "Mine. Stop looking at them, baby. You're starting to drool." I scoff.

"I am not drooling." He swipes a thumb across my bottom lip to prove otherwise. I swat his hand away. "I'm not even looking at them like that. Why would I when I have you?" I place a warm palm under his shirt. I love the feel of his muscles clenching under my touch.

"Damn right!" Huddie smacks my butt and gives me a look that tells me he can't wait until this game ends and we are alone.

I clear my throat and try to shake off this fluttery feeling thrumming through my body. "So, coach, what's the game plan?" Huddie licks his lips. My face heats up, knowing what he wants the plan to be. He breaks his stare and searches for someone. More than likely Ace.

Huddie cups a hand over his mouth when he spots him by Meg, then yells for him and waves them both over. The guys ask us about our skills and what position we feel comfortable playing.

Once we figure all that out, Ace and Huddie teach us easy passes and running plays. We pick them up quickly since we all play team sports. Well, except for Meg. I don't actively play, but I watch the guys practice enough to understand everything they are telling us to do.

Henry gets on the stadium intercom system and announces the start of the game. He introduces all the players and coaches. Luke and Leo lead the powder puff cheerleaders to

the field for a quick routine. It is both hilarious and delicious at the same time.

Huddie scowls during their whole routine, which makes me laugh even more. I tell him he can give me a private show later. He blushes, and his jaw drops in surprise. I like shocking him. I like showing him the side of me I've kept quiet. It's exhilarating.

Coach Evans blows his whistle, informing us it's time to line up and start the game. Huddie checks my belt and makes sure my flags are secure. I think he just wants an excuse to touch me. *I don't mind one bit.*

We lock eyes for a moment before I run onto the field. I see so much in his blue eyes but mostly affection. "Go get 'em, baby!"

I line up opposite Holly. She's the star of the basketball team. I can only assume she has a decent reach. She will be challenging to cover, but I'm confident I can take her. Holly stares me down with a grin on her face. *We're about to have some fun.*

Meg is beside me, chomping at the bit. Ace has already warned her several times that this isn't tackle football. I'm not sure she cares. Meg has never kept her contempt for some of the girls on the cheerleading squad a secret. There is always at least one of them whispering in Ace's ear about her. Saying he should leave her blah blah blah. This is her chance to stick it to them. *A broken nail or two won't kill them.*

Their center snaps the ball, and I take off running after Holly. She doesn't run far, which makes me think their quarterback can't throw or they are doing a running play.

Erin is running with the ball, but Meg is on her. She only gets a few yards before Meg rips a flag from her belt. Ace screams, "that's how you do it, babe," and she blows him a kiss.

In the next play, they move the pitcher of the softball team into the quarterback position. I'm guessing the next ball is going to Holly. Which means it's mine for the taking.

The ball is snapped, and once again, I take off after Holly. I switch my focus from her back to the quarterback, Ally. As soon as she releases the ball, I realize she underthrew it. I keep Holly behind me and run to the ball.

The ball hits my chest with an *oof*. I cradle it in my arms like a little baby and sprint downfield. I miss this. I miss the adrenaline rush from playing football. I zone in and focus on making the touchdown. I can sense someone chasing me, but they aren't fast enough. A few more strides and I'm crossing the goal line.

My teammates crowd around me, giving me high fives, but it's my man Huddie that captures my attention. He is screaming and cheering for me. He looks so proud of me. "That's my girl," he yells over everyone.

I sprint to the sidelines and jump into his arms. He swings me around with a one-handed grip on my butt and worships me some more before putting me down.

Leslie takes my spot for the next few plays so I can catch my breath. They end up running out of downs, and it's our turn to be on the offense again.

Whitney lines up across from me this time. I have to hold back a laugh. Like she is going to keep up with me. *That's cute.*

We aren't doing a pass play anyway. I'm just a decoy. The ball is snapped, and I take off to my left side. I easily evade Whitney. She doesn't even make it to me before the play is over.

The ball doesn't get far, but we manage the first down. That is good enough for me. One thing Nick always told me is football is a game of inches. Luke, of course, added, 'and each one of them counts.' Pretty sure he wasn't talking about football, though. *Perv.*

We repeat the play a few more times until we get to the thirty-yard line. This time we are going to pass and go for the touchdown. Ace maps out the play on a small whiteboard.

As I walk onto the field, I catch Nick's eye. He looks tense. I wave and stick my tongue out at him, which makes him laugh and shake his head. I wonder if it's hard to have your girlfriend on one team and your best friend on the other. Who do you root for? *Does he want to cheer me on at all?*

Whitney looks lethal. She is a bull looking for blood. I won't give her a chance to taste mine. I hear the 'hut,' and I race for the endzone again. The plan is to catch the ball mid-sprint. I look behind me and see the ball soar over my head. *Shit.* She overthrew the ball. I kick up my speed, and the ball drops right in my hands just as I reach the back of the end zone.

By the end of the half, the score is fourteen to zero. Everly's team scores a touchdown and a field goal in the third quarter, while we only get a touchdown. An eighty-yard run by Amber. It was amazing.

"Is that the best you've got, Nickie?" I taunt Nick after I run out of bounds on his sideline. He crosses his arms and smirks at me.

"That was a lucky catch."

"Which one? I've made several."

"Always the showboat." He drops his arms and steps into my personal space. "Always so confident." His voice is low and growly. It sets warning bells off in my brain.

Amber calls my name before I think of something to say back to him. I trot onto the field, a little dazed. Nick is intense, but he's never directed that intensity on me. I don't know how to process it.

The game is almost over. Luke, Leo, and the guys are down to only wearing gym shorts and poofy skirts. They've been doing a good job entertaining the crowd with their Magic Mike-like moves. I haven't paid a lot of attention since I've been playing, but every time I look over, they are doing some type of body roll or pelvic thrust.

We are up by two touchdowns with two minutes left on the clock. All we need to do is run down the time, and the game is

ours. Huddie and Ace decide we should do running plays and keep the ball in bounds. *Fine with me.*

The next play, I run downfield with Whitney hot on my tail since I'm not running full out to make a catch. Before I know it, I'm tripping over a foot and eating grass.

I slowly maneuver myself into a push-up position and do a full body scan. I move my fingers, wiggle my toes, and roll my neck.

Everything feels fine except my face. I spit out the blood and saliva that has pooled in my mouth. There is blood trickling down my cheek from scraping against the ground. Our field is full of plush grass, but there are small pieces of rock and gravel that cut like glass when you aren't wearing a helmet.

Meg rushes up to me, but I pay her little attention. I'm fine. I brush her off and walk to the sideline. I need a band-aid or something to stop the bleeding. Then I want back in the game.

"Mads. Baby, look at me." Huddie tips my chin up. "There's my brave girl. You're so hot when you're mad." With gentle hands, he cleans up my face. He doesn't ask if I'm okay. He doesn't tell me to sit one out. He knows I won't want to give Whitney the satisfaction. *He knows me.*

Ace gives the go-ahead for the last play to throw the ball and score again. Ace knows me too. He knows this is the only way I want to get my revenge. We are similar like that. Ace takes everything out on the field and leaves it there.

It feels incredible when I cross the goal line. It's a big F-U to Whitney and her snobby cheerleader friends. *Take that and my two-finger salute.*

Do you know what's better than running into an end zone? Running into Huddie's arms. Huddie catches me easily under my thighs as I wrap my legs around his waist. My arms go around his neck, and I kiss him with everything I have.

One of his hands moves to the back of my head, deepening the kiss. I marvel over how strong he is to hold me with only one arm. The thought makes me moan and kiss him harder.

Huddie breaks away first, nipping me with a few more pecks before putting me down. “You killed it out there today. You amaze me, baby. Everything you do.”

“Oh yeah?” He nods. “Thank you, Huddie. I think you’re pretty amazing too.” I feel like an idiot just repeating his words back to him. But this isn’t the time or place to spill my heart out to him.

His thumb skims over the scrape on my chin and cheek. “So tough,” he whispers. “So strong,” he says, inching closer. I kiss him before he can say anything else.

I break the kiss when I hear a loud crash. I look up to catch Nick storming off toward the locker room. Reggie and Leo attempt to calm him down, but he shoves them off.

His eyes meet mine, and the storm brewing inside him settles a little. Instead of angry, he looks hurt, and it kills me to think I’m the one who broke him.

MATTIE

I balance an ice pack on my face with one hand and pat around my comforter for my phone. Huddie, Nick, and Meg have been busy texting me all day.

Meg wanted to confirm I was wearing my converse and not high heels tonight. *Obviously.*

Nick asked if I wanted to ride with him and Everly's friends in the limo they rented. I thanked him for the offer but declined. I was more than happy to ride in style with Huddie, Ace, and Meg in Huddie's truck.

Huddie let me paint it after school yesterday for the game and the dance tonight. We are escorting royalty, after all. Ace and Meg were announced Homecoming Queen and King last night during the half-time show.

Huddie's nervous. He has been sending pictures of his suit, his shoes, his tie, and everything in between all day. I told him to lose the jacket, roll his shirt sleeves, and wear the suspenders. I have a thing for his forearms. What can I say?

I've been contemplating a shower for the last hour but have opted for ice time. My face isn't that bad. There's a good amount of bruising on my chin and cheek. It's the scrape that I'm the most worried about. It's jagged, rough, and ugly. I have no clue how to hide it with makeup.

MEG: Are you getting ready yet?

I check the time. I have four hours until Huddie picks me up. Even with calculating the time I need to deal with my hair, I have plenty of time before I need to start getting ready.

ME: Are you?

MEG: YES! Get in the shower. I want every inch of your skin exfoliated, shaved, and lotioned within the next hour.

ME: That seems a little extreme. It's just homecoming.

MEG: It's just homecoming she says. Please just do it as a favor to your Queen.

ME: Yes, your majesty. *eye roll*

MEG: Thank you. Pictures or it didn't happen.

MEG: Use the stuff I got you for your birthday. Huddie helped me pick it out. It was his favorite scent.

ME: What?! Why did he do that?

MEG: I asked, and he said yes. I knew he would know what to get you. I gotta go. The Queen can't have ashy elbows.

ME: I can see this isn't going to your head at all.

MEG: Let me have my moment. I mean, did you see Erin's face? No really, did you? I was too busy waving to all the people of my kingdom.

Oh, Lord.

ME: I did. She was practically crying a river.

MEG: Pity. Muuuuaahahahahaha

MEG: Go. Shower. I can't wait to blow our boys away.

Once in the bathroom, I dig around in the back of the cabinet for the sugar scrub, and body butter set Meg got me in the spring. I used it a couple of times after she gifted it. Mainly so I could say I used it if she happened to ask.

Ahh, here it is. I pull the box out from under curling irons and hair products. The cabinet is a complete disaster now. Not that it was organized, to begin with.

I twist open the body butter and take a quick sniff. *Peaches and vanilla cream*. Just like my shampoo. I've loved the smell of peaches for as long as I can remember. My grandma had peach trees in her backyard. The scent reminds me of her and the days spent drawing under the trees.

I shower, wash my hair, and exfoliate my body until it is pink and supple, as requested. No demanded. I snap a quick photo of myself in a towel and send it to Meg. *Satisfied?*

HUDDIE: Not even close.

OMG! Kill. Me. Now.

ME: Sorry, I meant to send that to someone else.

My phone starts ringing less than a second after he reads the text.

“Baby, you better not be sending anyone but me photos of you in a towel.” I see where he might be mad about that.

“Hello to you too, Huddie.”

“Mads, this isn’t funny.”

“It’s a little funny.” A throaty grumble bubbles up from Huddie’s throat. I laugh some more.

“Baby,” he drawls the word out like he’s in pain. Maybe he is. And if that doesn’t make this little heart of mine flutter.

“It was for Meg. She wanted proof that I’d exfoliated. I’m happy to report every part of my body is smooth as butter.” He moans.

“You’re killing me, Mads. You say things so innocently, but they are really...not.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to. I wasn’t thinking. Sorry.”

“Don’t ever apologize to me for being you. That’s what I love about you.” *He was going to say love.* I love all the things about you too.

“Okay. Not sorry then.” I turn the light off in the bathroom and walk back to my room. “Hey, Hud, I need to go.” I can’t believe what I’m seeing.

“Everything okay?” I don’t answer him. I think I’m in shock. “Mads?”

“Uh yeah. My sisters are here. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Call me if they give you shit.”

“I will. And Hud,”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Don’t forget the suspenders.” He chuckles.

“Bye, baby.”

I end the call and stare at my sisters in disbelief.

“Close your mouth, Madeline. You’ll catch flies.” I don’t even get to respond to Ashley before Brooke walks out of my closet.

“Is this your dress? It’s perfect. The color matches your eyes.” That’s what Meg said too when we went shopping.

“How are you going to do your hair?” Brooke asks.

“We have a bigger problem than her hair.” Ashley nods toward me.

“What happened to your face?” Brooke squeals. “You know what. We can fix this. It’s fine.”

Brooke hangs my dress on the back of my closet door while Ashley heads to the bathroom or maybe one of their old rooms across the hall. She comes back with a large case of what I can only assume is makeup in one hand and hair products and styling tools in the other.

“What are you two doing here?” I ask while I throw on a pair of basketball shorts and one of Huddie’s t-shirts. I’ve managed to collect half a drawer full so far. Some he leaves behind when he comes over after practice. Most I borrow, steal, whatever.

“It’s your senior homecoming dance. Where else would we be?” Oh, I don’t know. Anywhere but here seems like a more logical guess.

“But why? You’ve never been around for one of my dances before. Or one of my anything.” Ashley and Brooke have a silent conversation before focusing their attention on me.

“We should have. I wanted to.”

“We both wanted to.” Brooke corrects her.

“Why now?” I ask, still trying to understand.

“Because it’s your senior year. You have a boyfriend.”

“Mother told you?”

“Let’s not talk about mother,” Ashley grits out.

“We are here because you are our baby sister.” I don’t know what to say. Is this a trick? I think I might be getting punked or something.

“And good thing we are here. Your face. Seriously, what happened?”

“Let me guess. Football.” I nod. “You’ve always been so good at it. I can’t believe you got hurt.”

“It wasn’t exactly my fault. I got tripped.” Both sets of eyes narrow, and Brooke murmurs jealous bitches under her breath.

Ashley swivels my desk chair into the middle of the room. “Take a seat, Madeline. Hair up or down?”

“Down?” I shrug a shoulder. “I don’t know. I want it curly, though. Not straightened out.”

Brooke tells me to fix my hair to get it curly since neither of them know how to handle curls. She promises that they will make it look amazing once it’s dry and set.

I finish setting my curls and sit back on the chair so they can work magic on my face.

“I still don’t understand why you’re here.”

“Do you not want us here?” Brooke smears something cold on my face.

“Keep still,” Ashley requests.

“I’m not sure. I feel like it’s a trick. Like you both have an ulterior motive. It’s weird.”

“I’ll admit. We haven’t been there for you like we should have. Mother...” Brooke sighs. “Mother is a wedge. She has managed to keep us apart.”

“Not because we wanted it this way. It was never intentional. Brooke and I thought we were helping you.”

“Helping me?” I’m even more confused than I was before.

“Close your eyes for me,” Brooke demands, hoovering an eyeshadow brush in front of my face. “Just tell her everything.”

“Why do I have to do it?” Ashley asks.

“Because I need to concentrate on our beautiful little sister.” I open my eyes, and Brooke winks at me. *She called me beautiful.* She’s never told me that before. A wave of emotion rolls through me like a tsunami. “You know what. Talk first. Makeup second. I’m not going to let you ruin my work with tears,” she says while wiping a tear from my cheek.

I really need to get a grip. I never cry like this. First, it’s Huddie, now my sisters. I’ve allowed my feelings to be dormant for so long. It was easier. If I don’t care, my mother’s words don’t hurt. If I don’t love Huddie, he can’t break my heart.

“Madeline, when you were born, Brooke and I felt the need to protect you immediately. It was instinctual. You were ours to look after and care for. As we all got older, it became crystal clear you were different. Special. You were not someone who was meant to be dressed up and put in corners for the social elite to gawk at, like a museum exhibit.

“When you wanted to play football, we talked to Mother and Father. We convinced them it would be better to have you out of the way. Mother could parade us around town if you were busy with football or whatever. Dad convinced himself it might make you tough and give you thick skin. It would prepare you to be ruthless in the courtroom when it was time.” She laughs. “How dare you want to do something just for fun.” Ashley looks at Brooke and sighs.

“It was important to us that you got what you wanted. We also knew it was better if you weren’t around. Otherwise, you would be stuck going to teas and luncheons and taking etiquette classes,” Brooke says.

“The best thing happened to you because of that. You met Nick and the rest of the boys. You found people who could be there for you when we couldn’t.” This is too many truths coming at me too fast.

“We wanted to be there for you. I hate mother for not letting us be good sisters to you. But we knew that it would somehow

allow you room to bloom if we could be the perfect daughters for her.” Ashley cups my cheek. “And bloom you did.”

“But at what price? I’ve felt like an outcast my whole life. I’ve been alone my entire life. I may not be mother’s pet, but what about you?”

“Don’t worry about us. It was our job to take care of you,” Brooke says and pats my thigh. “Plus, I enjoy swimming with the sharks. I want to be a lawyer. And I don’t mind rubbing elbows, and other body parts, with all the suits.” She wiggles her eyebrows, making me laugh.

“Same. It was worth it except for the thought that you feel alone. You aren’t. You have your friends. You have us.” Ashley takes a deep breath before continuing. “When we left for college....” She shakes her head. “I was so worried about you. I knew she would do anything in her power to get her claws back in you.”

“But I told Ash, no way. Not our Madeline. She’s tough. She’s a badass bitch. No way she will back down from what she wants. And I was right. Per usual.” She gives Ashley a pointed look.

“I don’t know what to say.” The tears are threatening to fall. They are welling up in my eyes, blurring my vision.

“There is nothing to say. This is what sisters do. I’m sorry we couldn’t do more. We have been trying to keep mother busy with events while we’re gone. I know that leaves you here alone, but with Nick and Hudson, we figured you would be fine.”

“I am,” I confirm.

“Good. Now, one more thing, and then we’ll get you ready. I have access to my trust now that I’m twenty-one. It’s yours for college. Under no circumstances will you let that woman think she has you under her thumb. Do you understand? She has no power. You are going to the college you want. To study what you want.” *I can pursue my art. This is the best gift. A relief.*

“I’m trying to get a scholarship.”

“And no doubt in my mind, you will. You are so talented. But if something happens. You are still pursuing your art. I need more art for my apartment.” She winks at me.

“We love you, Madeline. When my trust kicks in, you can use it too. That money is from Grandma. There isn’t anything she can do to take it away from us.” Brooke pulls me into a hug, and I wrap my arms around her too.

Ashley joins us. “I love a good Madeline cookie.” *Madeline cookie*. I forgot all about those. We had a lot of those when I was little. “They are always so sweet.”

“I love you both too. Thank you. For everything.”

“Of course. Now let’s get you even more beautiful for that boy of yours.”

We spend the next two hours piling makeup on my face and pinning my hair in an old Hollywood style.

It feels surreal to be here with my sisters. To have their laughs floating through the room. To listen to their stories about college and the cute guys in their classes. To spill secret confessions about Huddie and have them give me advice. Terrible advice, but advice all the same.

Once they’re done, I put on my dress. Deep navy with a sweetheart neckline and a lace overlay peter pan collar. My sisters stand behind me in the mirror while I smooth down the poofy skirt that hits mid-thigh.

“Damn you and your legs,” Brooke murmurs.

“You look gorgeous, Madeline. Hudson won’t know what hit him.”

The doorbell rings and all three of us squeal in delight.

“Don’t move. We’ll get the door.” Ashley has an evil glint in her eye.

“Please don’t scare him.”

“I would never.” She gasps and puts a hand over her heart. I roll my eyes at her.

They race down the stairs giggling. I can't help but laugh a little too. What a weird day. I can't believe they came. I can't believe *everything*.

"You must be Hudson," Brooke says.

"Uh, yeah, yes. Hi." Brooke and Ashley stifle laughter. Poor Huddie.

"Madeline, your date is here."

That is my cue. I tip-toe down the hallway. I take a deep breath as I step down the first few steps. Huddie is in my view now.

Dear. Lord. He is a dream come true.

HUDDIE

Mattie's sisters are frightening. I've never met them before, but Mattie has shown me photos. Ashley is the oldest. She has blonde hair like Mattie. Brooke is a year or two younger than Ashley, I think. They are almost identical except for Brooke's darker hair.

I can't believe they showed up here today. Once I recover from their assessing eyes, I stand straighter and square my shoulders. Without knowing why they're here, it's impossible to trust them. I need to see Mattie. I need to know she is okay. If they did or said anything to her, I will lose it. According to Mattie, they are just like her mother.

Needless to say, I'm suspicious of their motives.

"Madeline will be down in a minute," Brooke says. *Madeline pfft.* I nod and keep my mouth in a tight smile.

The stairs creak, drawing my attention to a pair of white converse sneakers as they slowly make an appearance. Mattie timidly makes her way down the stairs gifting me the time to find every freckle on her bare legs.

Mattie looks incredible in her dress. It's perfect for her. Sweet and sexy. But it's her smile that's really got my heart pumping. She is radiating.

"Hey baby," I say as I reach for her hands. "You are beautiful." Her cheeks blush at the compliment. I'm waiting for her to deny it like she usually does.

"Thank you. You're pretty handsome yourself." Mattie drops my hands. Then slips hers under my jacket. My muscles tighten as her hands glide over my chest until she finds what she is looking for. *Suspenders.*

If I had known this was what it took to turn Mattie on, I would have worn them every day at school starting freshmen year.

“I really like these,” Mattie says, sliding her fingers up and down underneath the suspenders. Driving me wild. That’s what she’s doing. She nibbles her lip, thinking, then flicks her eyes to mine. “I really like you.”

It’s an innocent statement, but her words always pack a punch with me. Everything she doesn’t say with her lips, she says with her eyes. I lean in to kiss her, but an arm blocks my advance.

“I don’t think so, Romeo. Not until we take pictures,” Ashley says, then gestures toward the fireplace. I want to be mad, but then I see how happy Mattie is over her sister’s demand.

I wrap my arms around Mattie while her sisters snap photos on four different phones. Brooke and Ashley direct us to pose in several different positions. I would be annoyed with all the pictures if it didn’t keep Mattie in my arms.

Brooke finally announces that’s enough and shoos us out the door. Ashley lets Mattie know they are leaving before their parents get home but will be in touch soon. *I have questions. Lots of them.*

Ashley stands in front of me with a severe look in her eyes. She hands me a piece of paper. “You call one of us if anything happens with our mother or father. Take good care of her.” I nod in agreement. I would be taking care of Mattie regardless of her request.

We say goodbye and walk out the door. Once it’s closed behind us, I twirl Mattie into my arms. I cup my hands around her neck and rub my thumb against her jaw. I have so much to say to her, but the words are trapped in my throat.

Mattie squeezes my hips encouraging me to make a move. I kiss her gently. I don’t want to mess up her lipstick. She whimpers when I pull back. *I know. Me too.* “More later,” I promise.

“Mattie girl, you look amazing. I told you that dress was killer. And you’re makeup! Did you go get it done

professionally? We said we weren't doing that," Meg pouts as Mattie and I climb into the cab of my truck.

"I didn't. My sisters helped me. I needed all the help I could get to cover up the giant scratch on my face. And thank you. You look very...regal." I snicker, and Ace scoffs.

"Don't encourage her, Mattie," Ace says, looking at his girlfriend.

"One night Ace. I get one night to rub it in their faces. We talked about this."

"I know, babe." He kisses her nose.

"Alright then. Jeeves, to the ball!" Meg shouts from the backseat.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Ace murmurs.

We enter the gym by walking through a canopy of vines. There are tigers hidden among tall grass on both sides of us.

"This is insane," Mattie whispers to me. I haven't let her go since I helped her out of my truck. My gut is telling me to keep her close tonight.

The dance committee upped their game this year. It feels like we are walking through an uninhabited jungle or rainforest. We are surrounded by lush trees, parrots, monkeys, and snakes. There is even a paper mâché waterfall near the gym's back wall.

The four of us get our photos taken in front of the jungle background near the gym entrance. Ace and Meg have to do more photos for the yearbook, so we leave them. I promise Ace I will rescue him if he's not back in ten minutes.

"What do you want to do first?" I ask Mattie. She looks around the gym and stops her search when she sees the dessert table. "I should have known."

"Yes, you should have," Mattie says playfully, then gives me a quick kiss before leading us to a table full of cookies, cupcakes, and brownies.

We make a plate to share and find seats at an empty table. Mattie stuffs half a brownie in her mouth and smirks at me. She's the only person I know who can look adorable while eating with her mouth open. Mattie is the only girl I know who would eat like this in front of her man. I love that she hasn't changed. She's always been, Mattie. Makeup and dresses won't change who she is.

After a swallow, she gives me a nod. Mattie knows I want her to talk, but I'll wait for her to start this time. I'm usually the one to ask all the questions, but I'm curious if she will open up to me without me having to pry it out of her.

"They're on my side." My eyebrows hit my hairline. I scoot in closer and place a hand on her thigh for support. "They sacrificed themselves for me."

"What do you mean? Sacrificed themselves? How?"

"By playing the good daughters. It's an act. Well, partly, I guess. Ashley said she didn't mind because she wanted to be a lawyer anyway. But basically, they told me that they are staying in line, so I don't have to."

"I don't understand." She huffs a quiet laugh.

"I'm not sure I do either exactly." Mattie places her hand on top of mine and rubs a vein on the top of my hand. "They said they saw something in me. They knew I was different from them. They said I wasn't meant to be stuck in that world." She shakes her head like the thought is ridiculous.

"They're right, baby. You are not someone who can be trapped into a corner. Mads, you are too good for that world." Her head drops to my bicep, and I cradle her tighter.

"My grandmother left us each a trust. When we turn twenty-one, we get access to them. Ashley just got hers. She is saving it for me if I need it for school." Mattie lifts her head to look me in the eyes. "I'm free, Huddie."

I press a kiss on her temple. I know what this means. It's art school. It's living the life she wants. And the selfish bastard that I am, it's choosing me if she wants me.

“I’m happy for you, Mads. You deserve to get everything you dreamed of. Everything your heart wants.” *Please want me.*

Her eyes flicker with something I can’t figure out before pure mischief takes over. “Dance with me,” she says. I hate dancing, and she knows it. “That’s what I want. I want your arms around me. Holding me close for the rest of the night.”

“You make it hard to say no,” I tell her as we walk toward the dance floor.

“Then don’t.” Her hands roam my back until they settle between my shoulder blades. I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her close.

“Like I ever could.” I kiss her nose.

We dance to a few songs tangled up together. If the tempo of the music changed, we didn’t notice. It was just me and Mattie and her soft, exfoliated skin.

“I think I like dancing after all,” I whisper into her ear before dragging my mouth down to the crook of her neck. She smells sweeter here.

“You’re going to get us in trouble, Huddie.” I can barely hear her. I’m too busy chasing the goosebumps on her skin with my lips. “Hud,” she says breathlessly.

I pull away and stare at her. “Why the new nickname?” I finally ask. Mattie closes her eyes and nibbles on her bottom lip. I pluck it out of her teeth. “I like it if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I just wanted something that was mine.” She lifts a shoulder. “Everyone calls you Huddie. I should have kept it for myself all those years ago. I didn’t know...” her voice trails off.

“You didn’t know what, Mads?” I encourage her to continue. Mattie’s eyes go wide before I feel the tap on my shoulder.

“Can I cut in?” Nick asks.

“It’s not really a good time, man.” I corral Mattie closer to me and keep a hand on her lower back.

“I think Mattie can decide.” He turns to her. “Mattie, what do you say? Dance with your *best friend*?” I don’t like how he emphasizes best friend like he’s a better friend than me. Like I don’t put her first every damn time.

Mattie looks at me for an answer, but I won’t give it to her. I could be the bigger man and encourage her to dance with her friend. *Fuck that*. She’s my girl, and I want all of her dances.

“One dance,” she says. I mask my disappointment with a smile, but I want to punch Nick’s shit-eating grin off his face. Before Nick has a chance to pull her away from me, Mattie kisses me good.

“I’ll be back before you know it.” Mattie squeezes my hand and walks away with Nick trailing behind her.

I leave the dance floor so I won’t be tempted to shadow the two of them the entire time they’re dancing.

“What’s up, my dude?” Leo asks as I approach their group. He’s standing by a giant tree with Luke, Ace, and Meg.

“Nothing,” I grumble.

“You really like her,” Luke says. It’s not a question but a fact. I’m not fooling anyone, I guess. Not that I’m trying to. “You don’t have to worry about him,” he says with his eyes trained on Mattie and Nick. “I know what people say, but it’s not like that.”

“How do you know?”

“Because if it were, it would have happened already,” Leo answers for him. Ace nods in agreement. We’ve already had this conversation before. Multiple times.

“Look, man, Mattie and Nick have a bond because they both had no one else. Both of their families suck. Nick has all this pressure to be the best at football. And Mattie, shit. Her family is a nightmare.” Luke shakes his head.

“I know.” I want to tell them I think her sisters are cool, but Mattie will do it when she’s ready.

“Huddie, she *had* no one else but Nick. I mean, Mattie had the three of us too, but we weren’t very reliable back then.”

“You aren’t reliable now, Lucky,” Ace deadpans.

“The fuck I am. Whatever.” He waves Ace off like he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Luke is a clown, but he does take the important stuff seriously. “Anyway. All I’m saying. You came around, and everything changed.” Luke shrugs his shoulders like he didn’t just drop a bomb in front of me.

Leo slaps Luke on his back. “He doesn’t know, bro.” Luke and Leo chuckle amongst themselves. Those two have a weird friendship. I swear they talk more without words than they do with them.

“What don’t I know?” I ask more aggressively than I intended.

“Leo,” Ace warns. I snap my head at him. He’s supposed to be my best friend. What the hell? “It’s not our place to say anything. You and Mattie need to figure it out.”

I stare at the dance floor and watch my girl dance under the lights with someone else. His hands are on her hips. Her hands are on his shoulders. He whispers in her ear, and her face pales.

I excuse myself from the guys and start walking toward my girl. Whatever Nick is telling Mattie isn’t good. I’m halfway there when I’m cut off by Whitney.

Whitney puts her hands on my biceps. I don’t know why she thinks she can touch me whenever she wants. I quickly remove them. Whitney starts talking, but my focus is on Mattie. Her hands are now in fists, and there is a deep scowl on her face.

I want to rush to Mattie, but first, I need to handle Whitney once and for all. I catch Ace’s eye and nod toward Mattie. His eyes immediately narrow on what’s happening on the dance floor. Ace whispers something to Meg. The little spitfire rockets herself in Mattie’s direction.

Meg easily maneuvers herself between Nick and Mattie, pushing him away from her. The two girls start dancing together in the middle of another group, leaving Nick alone. Now that my girl is good, I focus on the snake in front of me.

“Whitney. Enough.” She rears her head back at my sharp tone. “You and I are never happening. Even if I wasn’t with Mattie. Never. Happening. Do not touch me again. Do not talk to me again. I don’t exist to you. Understand?”

I don’t give her a chance to answer. I don’t know how to make Whitney understand I’m not interested. Isn’t it obvious? Or does she not care? It’s clear that she doesn’t respect Mattie or our relationship. *I need air*. Mattie is still dancing with Meg, so I go outside.

The night air is cool. It feels good after an hour of dancing. There are a few other kids out here also taking a break. Some are sneaking around to make out or smoke a cigarette.

I’m staring at the sky, lost in thought, when someone stands beside me.

“We need to talk,” Nick announces.

NICK

Everly looks incredible in her blood-red dress. It fits her body and shows off every curve. She looks like a dream.

Just not my dream. *Not anymore.*

I can't believe I'm even having these thoughts. I'm dancing with a gorgeous girl. One that I have been interested in for a long time, yet I feel nothing.

At the beginning of the year, I wanted to be with Everly. I wanted her, or so I thought. We have nothing in common. Not a deal breaker, but I can't talk to her. She doesn't get me. Not like Mattie does.

Everly doesn't laugh like Mattie. She doesn't like football like Mattie. She doesn't smell like Mattie. She doesn't eat like Mattie. My eyes drift to where Mattie shovels a cupcake into her mouth in a single bite. Bottom line, Everly isn't Mattie.

"Are you okay?" Everly stops dancing and waits for my answer.

"Yeah, of course." I plaster a fake smile on my face.

"I don't know. You just seem off. Did I do something?" I shake my head before answering no. Everly lets out a sigh and relaxes in my arms. *It feels wrong.*

Across the gym, Mattie drags Huddie to the dance floor. My body locks up the closer they get to each other. He didn't want to date her. I don't understand why they are suddenly so close or why they're kissing all the damn time. This wasn't supposed to happen.

It makes me sick to see her with his hands all over her. Kissing her. He's going to hurt her. I can't watch them anymore.

"Seriously, Nickie. What is going on? You are so tense." I stare down at Everly. I never realized how short she is.

"Don't call me that. Only Mattie can call me Nickie."

“Okay. S-sorry. You never said anything before.” I let out a deep breath. I don’t know if it’s from annoyance or resignation.

“I’m sorry, Everly.”

“It’s okay,” she says, positioning herself closer to me again. I pull away before she can get too comfortable.

“I can’t do this anymore.”

“Okay. We can get some punch or something and take a break.” I scrub my hand down my face.

“No, I mean I can’t do this,” I gesture between the two of us, “anymore. You’re great. Wonderful. Gorgeous. It’s not you. It’s me.” Everly steps back and crosses her arms over her chest.

“No. You mean it’s not me. It’s her. I knew it. You said it wasn’t like that between the two of you, but I should have known better than to believe you. Gah! I’m such an idiot.”

“This has nothing to do with Mattie.” *Not exactly.* No matter what happens with Mattie, I don’t have feelings for Everly and I don’t want to string her along.

“Right. So, you aren’t going to talk to her tonight? I see you watching her. Don’t lie to me, Nick.” I open my mouth to say something, but Everly stops me. “You know what? Save your breath. I don’t care. But good luck with that.” She points a thumb over her shoulder in their direction.

“Everyone kept warning me that Mattie has always had a thing for you. I thought so too. I mean, how could she not right? But now, after watching Huddie and Mattie together. They had it wrong. It was never you.” With that, she walks away, and I’m left with a sinking feeling that I might be too late.

Mattie’s eyes go wide when she sees me. I smile at her. Then give Huddie a tap on his shoulder. “Can I cut in?” I ask, but it’s a formality. I’m not leaving without at least one dance with Mattie.

“It’s not really a good time, man,” Huddie says before he pulls Mattie in tighter like I’m going to steal her away. Is she even his to steal from? Last time I checked, Mattie makes her own choices.

“I think Mattie can decide. Mattie, what do you say? Dance with your *best friend*?” I expect Huddie to say something, but he surprises me by staying silent and letting Mattie decide for herself.

“One dance,” she agrees, and I grin at Huddie. *Ha! Take that!* Then Mattie kisses him, and I feel a punch to my gut, or maybe a knife to my heart is more accurate. This blow is easier to take than the first kiss I witnessed. The one on the football field made me murderous.

It wasn’t just the kiss. It was the way she jumped into his arms like he was the only thing that mattered to her.

I knew there was a possibility Mattie and Huddie would kiss to keep up their rouse. What I didn’t expect was to feel so hurt by it. For some reason, I felt betrayed by her. I should have been the one getting her kisses, especially her first one.

I have no right to her first kiss or her first anything. It didn’t make me want them any less.

Mattie’s hands are a feather’s touch on my shoulders. I try to control the grip I have on her hips. I want to pull her in closer, but I have a feeling it would end up pushing her away.

“You look really pretty tonight, Mattie.” I tilt my head closer so she can hear me over the slow beat of the music.

“Thanks. You look handsome yourself,” Mattie says, smiling at me.

“It’s just like old times. I really have missed hanging out with you.” I squeeze her hip. “I’m glad everything will be going back to the way it was before.” Mattie stops dancing for a moment.

“What are you talking about?”

“Homecoming is almost over. The deal will be over too. You and Huddie can call off the charade. You both pulled it off

seamlessly, though. I don't think anyone thought you were faking it. I had no idea Huddie was such a good actor." Mattie stiffens. I can feel her fists ball up on my shoulders.

"Right. Acting."

"I really appreciate everything you did for me." Her eyes narrow at me.

"Where is Everly anyway?" I look down at my feet for a moment. "Nickie?"

"We, uh, broke up."

"What? When?"

"Yeah, it wasn't working out. Tonight actually." Mattie loses most of the color in her face. I can tell the wheels in her head are turning. "What are you thinking, Mattie?"

"Nothing Nick. I'm sorry about you and Everly. I know you really liked her."

"I'm not sorry. And I don't know how much I really liked Everly after all." I'm hoping Mattie can read between the lines a little. It's too loud in here to tell her everything. I need to get her somewhere alone where it is quiet.

"So, you and Everly break up, and now you want Huddie and me to break up too?" *Yes! Exactly!*

"You and Huddie were never meant to be together anyway. You should have heard him when I brought up the idea of dating you. It was the last thing he wanted to do." My eyes drift to the perimeter of the dance floor, and I see Huddie and Whitney chatting. *Perfect.* "Look, he's already talking to Whitney."

Mattie's eyes flash with anger. She takes a steady breath and drops her hands from my shoulders. Her fists are clenching at her sides. "Right. Of course, he is. I remember what you both said about dating me, actually."

"Mattie," I breathe. "I'm an idiot." She shakes her head and huffs a quiet laugh. Probably agreeing with how dumb I've been acting.

“Hey, guys. Hate to break this up, but I need to dance with my Mattie girl. Actually, I don’t hate to break this up. Come on, Mattie, time to dance like queens.” Meg cuts in, pulling Mattie away from me without a chance to explain myself. Mattie looks back at me before she submits to Meg and the pull of the music.

I’ve said all I can say to Mattie tonight. Meg will keep her occupied for the rest of the dance, no doubt. There is still one person that needs to hear what I have to say.

I follow Huddie outside. He looks around at all the people doing shit they shouldn’t be doing. Then he looks up at the stars like all the answers can be found there.

I approach him silently. “We need to talk,” I say while standing shoulder to shoulder.

“Talk. I’ve got nothing to say to you.”

“You need to break up with Mattie. It ends tonight.” He finally looks at me. *I’m glad I have your attention.*

“You’ve lost your mind. You are a selfish bastard. I thought I was, but you take the cake on that one. You have everything you want, and now we’re supposed to what? Yield to your commands? I’m done.”

“See, that’s the thing. I don’t have what I want.” Huddie drops his head and shakes it. “Everly and I broke up. You and Mattie were never meant to be together. You said it yourself. You didn’t want to date Mattie.”

Huddie turns to face me and squares his shoulders. “No. I said I didn’t want to *fake date* Mattie. There’s a difference. Don’t spread bullshit lies about me.”

I smirk at him. “What did you say to her? I swear to all things, Nick. If you said something to hurt her, I will hurt you ten times worse.”

“I told her the truth. Something you wouldn’t do.”

“You don’t even know what the truth is!” Huddie gets in my face. I don’t back down. He might have an inch on me, but I have more bulk.

“Well, howdy, friends,” Luke says gleefully, bouncing down the steps toward Huddie and me. “You two buckaroos doing alright out here, or are we going to have ourselves a little showdown?” Neither one of us says anything.

Luke whistles slowly. “This is fun. Huddie, why don’t you go save Mattie from Meg? Or save Ace from Meg. I’m not sure who needs to be saved, but I’m sure the royal highness is in there bothering someone.”

“This isn’t over,” Huddie declares before walking back inside. *I’m fuming*. It should be me. I should be the one saving Mattie. I have always been the one rescuing Mattie.

“It’s not your job anymore, bro. You’ve got to let her go.” I give Luke a double take. When did he become a fucking mind reader?

“The fuck I do. Mattie and Huddie aren’t together for real. The whole thing was a ruse. It’s a fucking joke.” Luke raises an eyebrow urging me to explain more. I sigh before I start explaining. “Everly wouldn’t date me unless Mattie had a boyfriend.”

“Shit. You had the bright idea to have Huddie and Mattie pretend to be dating?” I nod. “Oh, you fucked up,” he says, laughing. “You fucked up big time.”

I know I did, but it doesn’t stop me from asking him how.

“Didn’t you notice a difference with her once Huddie moved here?” I shake my head. “Of course not. I know you have your own shit to deal with, but read the room, bro. The girl turns pink every time he’s around. It’s fucking hilarious. Leo and I started taking bets about it.” I cut him with a glare.

“Look, Mattie is one of a kind. My life wouldn’t be the same without her in it. I suggest you step back and let things ride out with Huddie naturally. Don’t interfere if you want to save your friendship. We both know how much you need her as a friend. Push her too much, and you will lose her for good.”

I hear what he is saying, but if I push for more, I could get all of her. The reward is worth the risk.

Doesn't she have the right to know how I feel about her before she makes her choice?

MATTIE

“Tell me how you’re really feeling?” Meg asks from beside me on the bleachers. We are both wrapped up in blankets trying not to freeze during the guys’ football practice. “You look tired.”

“I am tired.” I’m tired of feelings. I’m tired of overthinking. I’m tired of Nick trying to mess up one of the best things that has ever happened to me.

“I haven’t seen you around much. Are you avoiding us?” I stay focused on the field. Ignoring her. Ignoring, not avoiding. There is a difference.

“I’ve been busy. I’m not avoiding anyone.”

“Not even Huddie?” I exhale and watch the breath of smoke form in front of me and disappear.

“No. I’m busy. The senior showcase is two weeks away, and I have a lot to do. I have all of these scholarship forms to fill out. I’m just tired and overwhelmed with everything. That’s all.”

“It’s a lot.” Meg bumps her shoulder into mine. I know she’s not talking about my art stuff or college. Meg is talking about Huddie and Nick.

I haven’t been avoiding them since the dance last weekend, but I have been dodging certain conversations. It’s been relatively easy to do since Nick and Huddie aren’t talking to each other at the moment. And I really have been busy with my art stuff.

Even though Ashley said she would pay my college tuition, I want to earn the scholarships. I need to earn it. I need to prove to myself and my parents that I’m talented enough to make it on my own.

“You never did tell me what Nick said while you were dancing. Did you at least tell Huddie?” Meg has become my best girlfriend between our lunches, shopping trips, and texts.

My only one, but she says that doesn't matter. *She's still the best.*

"No, I didn't."

"Not even Huddie?" I shake my head. He asked, but I didn't want to fuel his rage even more. "Mattie, you need to talk to him."

"I know. I will." Someday. I'm still not going to tell Huddie what Nick said to me. Leo told me Nick had gone out to talk to Huddie, but I didn't get any details. Just that Luke was handling it. When Huddie found me, we were both on edge. I wanted to ask what Luke 'handled.' It wasn't worth the risk. Huddie looked ready to detonate as it was.

We ended up leaving and going back to his apartment. We changed into some of Huddie's sweatpants and t-shirts. Then spent the rest of the night in silence, holding each other. I didn't mind the quiet. I just wanted to be close to him. No, I needed it after everything Nick said.

I know he wants me to come to him. Throughout our friendship, he has always been the one to ask me first. To come to me. Now that we're dating, Huddie has been pushing me to take the initiative and open up to him.

"Have you talked to Nick?" I glare at her.

"No." I don't understand what is going on with him. The things he said to me were so hurtful. He has to know I genuinely like Huddie. Maybe he doesn't. I could give him the benefit of the doubt.

I could assume he truly believes my relationship with Huddie is fake. I never told him we were together for real and have been for a while. Does that excuse his behavior?

I don't think so. Nick was purposely trying to make Huddie look bad. Nick is acting like my mother. I don't deal with her for a reason. If Nick thinks he can manipulate me with his words, he's delusional.

We've been friends for a long time, but I don't need friends like that.

“I think he knows he messed up with you,” Meg says with her eyes glued on Ace, throwing a spiral down the field to Huddie.

“Yeah,” I agree. “Our friendship has reached the point where being sorry isn’t good enough anymore.” I’m not even convinced he is sorry. Sure, he’s realized he messed up. That’s only because I’m not talking to him.

But he chose this. He picked Everly. That was his choice. He wanted me out of the picture so he could date her. Then he sees me happy with Huddie and decides he misses me? He wants me back?

I need him to explain himself, but the need isn’t so great that I’m ready to sit down and talk to him.

“Do you think they will ever be friends again?” Meg asks. Nick and Huddie square off in the scrimmage they are playing. They’ve been bumping shoulders, pushing, and shoving the entire practice.

“I’m not sure they were ever friends. Huddie and Ace are real friends. Leo and Luke are real friends. Nick and I...” my voice trails off. We were real friends once.

“You’ll figure it out, Mattie girl.” Meg risks the cold and puts an arm around me. “I know you care about both of them.” I really do.

“I don’t like being in the middle like this. Sometimes I wish everything could just go back to the way it was.” Everything was so much easier before.

“You don’t really mean that do you?” I shrug a shoulder.

“It would make everything easier.”

“And empty, and cold, and Huddie-less, and void of the best kisses of your life.”

“You are so dramatic.” I laugh at her. “But also correct. No, I can’t go back.” I can’t lose him.

“I am a truth teller,” she states.

We both sit in silence for a while. Not good for someone who has a lot to think about. The silence is scary. This is why I need art. I need something to funnel all my thoughts into. This is why I have my sketchbooks and write silly little poems all the time.

“Speaking of drama,” Meg says, pointing down to the football field.

“Oh shit.” I jump up to intervene, but Meg stops me.

“You said you don’t like being in the middle. Let them fight it out.” She’s right. Whatever is happening between the two of them shouldn’t involve me. It might be about me, but I don’t need to interfere.

Nick rips his helmet off and gets in Huddie’s face. Huddie wastes no time taking his helmet off too. They are both drenched in sweat, looking larger than life in their practice jerseys and pads.

Huddie must say something Nick doesn’t like because he takes a swing and pops Huddie right in the eye. I gasp and cover my face with my hands. Meg’s hand grips my thigh.

Huddie recovers quickly and punches him back. Next thing I know, they are both wrestling on the ground throwing jabs at each other wildly.

“Why aren’t they breaking it up?” Ace, Leo, and Luke are literally just standing there doing nothing. “Ace, do something!” I shout down to them. Ace pops his head up to me but shakes off my request. *Idiots. All of them.*

Finally, Coach Evans gets involved and yanks Huddie off Nick mid-swing. *Shit.* Huddie’s knuckles are covered in blood. So is his face. When Nick stands up, I see even more blood dripping from his cheek and lips onto his jersey. I wring my hands so hard I’m about to start bleeding too.

What were they thinking fighting like that?

Coach Evans has them both by their collars, yelling at them. It doesn’t stop the anger from stewing below the surface. If anything, it’s bringing things back up to a boiling point.

Huddie gets in Nick's face once more, spitting out words with venom while pointing at me. That's about all I can take. I'm close to asking Meg for a ride home, but I can't leave Huddie like this, either.

Meg and I wait for the guys to get out of the locker room. Leo and Luke are the first to exit. They both greet me with a hug, which is completely out of character for them.

"Keep your chin up, Mattie," Leo says.

"It will all work out," Luke adds. I nod in understanding. "We're here for you if you need us, but we figure you have about all you can handle right now," he teases. I punch him in the arm. Then give them both another hug.

Ace approaches me next. "Don't shut him out." At this point, I don't know which him he's talking about. Never thought that would be a problem I would have.

"Huddie?" Ace nods to confirm. "I'm not."

"You are."

"I'm-"

"Busy," Ace answers for me. "I know. That's what he told me. You've been busy with your art stuff. But I know you. You've closed yourself off again. Just like last time." Ace raises an eyebrow telling me I should know exactly what he means.

He's talking about the last time I let doubt override my feelings for Huddie. Instead of pursuing a romantic relationship with him, I took a step back. I put a padlock on my heart and buried myself in my art.

Is that what I'm doing? Did I let Nick's words get to my head and make me doubt what Huddie and I have?

"Ace, it's different this time." Last time I wasn't ready to risk my heart, so I shut everything down. This time I realized my heart never stood a chance. Before everything started, I had already decided to tell Huddie the truth. I just didn't expect it to happen like this. *I had a different plan.*

“Good. He’s getting cleaned up. They both are. Will you be good here waiting? I promised my girl food.”

“Hell yeah, ya did.” Ace rolls his eyes. “You want to come with us?” Meg asks. I shake my head.

“Thanks, but I need to talk to both of them. What they did today...” I let out another warm breath of air.

“What happened today wasn’t your fault. It was also a long time coming.” My eyes go wide. *A long time coming?* “Just talk to him. Maybe not today. But soon.”

“Fine. I’ll see you guys later.”

“Text me later,” Meg says as I reach for a hug. “I want all the details. Don’t leave anything out.”

“Come on, Meg.” Ace waves her forward.

“I mean I want—”

“Meg!” Ace cuts her off. She just crosses her arms and raises an eyebrow at him. Ace decides to pick her up and throw her over his shoulder fireman style because she isn’t going to leave on her own.

“I want ALL. THE. TEA. Mattie!” She yells as she gets carried to the parking lot.

Nick is the next to exit the locker room. Followed closely by Huddie. When Nick stops in front of me, Huddie’s hands form fists. If it wasn’t for the bandages over his knuckles, I’m sure they would have split open again.

I don’t have time to react to Huddie’s cut-up and bruised face. I need to get this conversation with Nick over with.

“Huddie, will you start the truck? I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Sure, baby.” Nick winces. Huddie pops a kiss on my cheek and has the nerve to smirk. He knows he is rubbing salt in Nick’s wounds. I don’t like that.

Once Huddie is out of earshot, I turn back to Nick and just stare. He’ll crack eventually. He always does.

“I’m not sorry,” he finally says.

“Didn’t think you would be. I thought you two were friends.”

“You should ask him about that. I thought we were too.” I make a mental note to ask Huddie about that later. I have a feeling Nick is the last thing he will want to talk about, though. “Are we still friends?”

“Good question. I thought so, but the way you’ve been acting. The way you speak to me. That’s not the Nick I want to be friends with.” He at least looks remorseful.

“I don’t want to be that friend either. Mattie, how do I fix this? How do I fix us?” I can’t even look at him.

“I need time.”

“Okay, but we need to talk.” He takes a step closer to me. “I have things to say to you.” I want to tell him he’s said enough, but I hold my tongue.

“I still need time. And an apology Nick. You’ve said a lot of mean things to me the other night.” He rolls his eyes back.

“I said truthful things to you. I am sorry if they hurt you.”

“I need to go. We’ll talk later.”

“When?”

“Next week. I’m busy all weekend with my parents’ gala.”

“Monday then.”

“Nick. I said I need time.”

“And I’m giving you the whole weekend Mattie. Please.”

“Fine. Monday, we’ll talk.” He leans in to hug me and kisses me on the top of my head.

“Monday after practice. We’ll hang out at my house just like we used to,” he says, then lets me go. I take long strides toward the parking lot.

I get in Huddie’s truck and take a deep breath of his familiar scent, I feel my heart start settling. *Home.*

I turn my body to him and feather my fingers over his face. He has a few cuts on his cheek and jaw, a split lip, and a black

eye. The fear and worry in his eyes bother me the most.

His face will heal eventually. How do I convince him not to worry about us when I'm just as scared? I give him a quick kiss on the lips. Then drop my hands to my backpack in my lap. I need something to hold on to.

"What did you tell him?" Huddie asks after he pulls out of the parking lot.

"That I need time to think and process. Nick said he wants to fix us." I chance a look at Huddie. He has a death grip on the steering wheel.

"I don't trust him," he says through his teeth.

"But you trust me, right?" The silence speaks volumes. "Huddie, Nick is my friend." He barks out a mocking laugh. "That is all he will ever be. I have to talk to him and try to salvage whatever relationship we have left."

"Why?"

"I don't know." I feel it's the right thing to do in my gut.

"Fine." His fine ends the conversation on the Nick topic.

As soon as we enter the door, I walk to the kitchen and hug Huddie's mom. It's become a part of my routine. She expects it, and I need it. Part of me likes to think she needs my hugs too.

Mrs. Monroe's body tenses when Huddie walks by. Her eyes dart back to mine for answers. "A fight with Nick," I whisper in her ear. She hugs me tighter as if that explains everything. *Maybe it does.*

I put together a few bags of ice for him and grab a glass of water and pain meds before heading down the hall to his room. He's already spread out in his bed with an arm over his eyes.

"Here." I hand him the pain medicine and the water first. Once he's lying down again, I lift his shirt to look for injuries.

"What are you doing, Mads?"

"Investigating," I say. Huddie's muscles flex as my fingers search for any bruising. "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

“Come here.” He extends his left arm and gestures for me to cuddle with him.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” I gently climb onto the bed and snuggle as close as I can. He winces and blows air through his teeth. He probably has a bruised rib or two.

“Here. Put the ice on it. And your face too.”

“You taking care of me, baby?”

“Somebody has to,” I grumble.

“I don’t regret it. He deserved to get rocked.”

“Maybe, but I don’t like it. I don’t want to see either one of you hurting like this.” I need to send a text to Leo and Luke and have them check on Nick. He doesn’t need to be alone right now.

Huddie peers down at me with his good eye. I fight back a laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. I can’t wait to show up at the gala Saturday night with you and your bruised face and black eye. My mom is going to freak out.”

“Fuck. I’m sorry, Mads. I didn’t even think about that.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s going to be awesome. You will look so badass wearing a suit and a shiner to match. I can’t wait.”

Huddie chuckles, and it sounds so deep and sexy. “You’re something else, Mads.” His hand drops down to my butt and gives me a squeeze.

“Are you still going to wear my jersey tomorrow night?” He asks so quietly like he’s scared of the answer.

“Hud,” I prop myself on an elbow to look at him. “I’m still here, okay? Nothing’s changed. Nick can break up with Everly. He can say whatever he needs to say to me. I will still be here. With you.”

“Thank you,” he says, and I can feel the weight of the fear he’s been carrying melt off him.

I kiss him on the corner of his mouth, then burrow myself back into his side. I hate that they fought, but maybe it was for the best.

Maybe that’s what Nick and I need to do. Fight it out with words. I’ve worked so hard to put up boundaries with my mother. I refuse to let him stay in my life if he is going to continue the way he has been.

Monday, I’ll tell him how I feel about him. About Huddie. About everything.

MATTIE

My dress for the Country Club Gala was hanging on the back of my closet door when I woke up this morning. There was a note beside my phone in my mother's handwriting on her personalized stationery, telling me to be on time and that she couldn't wait to meet Hudson. *I bet.*

The dress is actually very pretty, considering who chose it for me. It's black with a classic A-line design, three-quarter length sleeves, a lace overlay, and very low cut in the back.

I've paired it with black open-toe kitten heels, a simple gold chain necklace, and gold earrings. I'm sure Mother will say I should have gone with the pearls.

Huddie and I arrived fifteen minutes before my mother instructed. It's better to be early than late when dealing with my mother. I'm not worried about impressing her or bending to her every whim. However, if I can keep on her good side, maybe she won't annihilate Huddie like I know she can.

Ashley and Brooke texted this morning, apologizing in advance for anything they may have to say tonight. Even though Ashley has access to her trust, she can't risk losing our parent's financial support until she graduates. Otherwise, she will have to use the money on herself instead of me.

It makes sense, but I don't like it very much. As much as I appreciate having Huddie's support tonight, I kind of wish he wasn't here. He's the only reason I'm even considering playing nice.

"Are you ready to go inside?" Huddie asks. We've been standing on the front porch of the Pine Grove Country Club for the past five minutes.

"Let's go home. Or go see a movie. Basically, anywhere but here." I laugh humorlessly. Huddie pushes his arms into my wool coat and wraps them around my back. His eyebrows rise when his fingers reach my bare skin. I smirk. *You like that?*

“Where’s home Mads?”

“Is it weird that I think of your apartment as home?” He swallows. Then shakes his head, causing a few pieces of hair to fall over his eyes. I run my fingers through them before combing them back in place. “Good. Because I really like it there.”

“I like you being there.” Huddie kisses me sweetly. I know there is more he wants to say. There is always more to say. We still need to talk.

“We should go inside. Ace hasn’t stopped texting me to save him from his dad’s friends. Also, I *really* want to get you out of this coat and see the back of your dress.” His fingers dance up and down my spine.

“Fine. But don’t come crying to me when you’re bored to tears, and we could have been comfy on the couch watching a movie...or something.”

“Or something,” he parrots. No doubt, thinking of all the things ‘or something’ could be. “Stop teasing me, baby. It’s bad enough you are tempting me in this dress.”

“It’s just a dress, Huddie.”

“You’re right. But you, Mads, are a temptation in anything you wear. My hoodie, my t-shirt, my jersey cheering for me while I play.”

“I’m sensing a trend here,” I say as we walk through the double front doors.

“What can I say? I like what I like.”

We are greeted when we enter the club by several employees. Huddie is handed a program while another employee helps me with my coat.

“Pine Grove Country Club Annual Art Gala and Auction,” Huddie reads the program out loud. “This is a joke, right?”

“Nope.” My mother may not support her daughter’s art, but she does support *actual* artists. “My mother loves art. She puts this event together every year. Local artists donate pieces for auction. They get exposure to the elite, and the elite gets to

feel like they are doing good things for their community. Win-win.”

“Yeah, for everyone but you.” Huddie leans his forehead against mine. “Say the word, and we are out of here.” I kiss him to keep myself from telling him how much I love him.

The lobby is crowded, with everyone enjoying the opening cocktail hour. If I remember correctly, the smaller banquet room is where all the art will be displayed. My mother is probably in there making sure everyone bids on something.

I lead Huddie to the larger ballroom in the back of the club. Ace is already holding court back there, which means that’s where the appetizers are being served. Exactly where I want to be. Near the food and away from my mother.

It takes me a moment to adjust my eyes to the dim lighting in the ballroom. We make our way through the room with only crystal chandeliers and candles to lead the way.

I would imagine this is what a country club wedding would also look like. Large banquet tables line the room’s perimeter, offering the most pretentious appetizers I have ever seen. You won’t find any hot wings or pigs in a blanket here. Just endless platters of canapes and petit fours.

Round tables are spaced perfectly throughout the center of the ballroom. I will admit they do look beautiful with the over-the-top floral arrangements and fancy place settings.

“They really go all out, don’t they?” Huddie asks as we round one of the tables, looking for our names.

“Nothing but the best,” I murmur.

We weave through a few more tables and cliques of club members in suits and cocktail dresses, sipping on wine and whiskeys.

“Finally,” Ace grumbles when we reach him. “Took you long enough. I swear if my dad introduces me to one more tech guru or hedge fund manager, I will lose it.”

“Summer internships?” I ask. Ace nods. I’ve been getting similar texts and e-mails from my dad.

“Meg wants to backpack through Europe this summer. She’s under the impression she will be fine on her own.” He scoffs to himself.

“She probably would be. Meg would have all of Europe eating out of her hands,” I tell him.

“Exactly,” Ace deadpans. “I can’t have her chatting it up with every Michelangelo, Donatello, and Leonardo out there.” Huddie snickers.

“Your girl have a thing for teenage mutant turtles, bro?” Huddie asks. “Cowabunga,” he says, making the hang ten sign with his hand.

“Shut up.” Ace punches Huddie’s shoulder. “You know what I’m saying. Would you let Mattie go by herself?”

“Not a chance,” he answers aggressively.

“What the hell Hud? I’m an independent woman.” I cross my arms over my chest. “I could handle myself just fine. Maybe I’ll go with Meg,” I say, narrowing my eyes on the two of them.

“Fuck no.” They say in unison. I gape at them both and shake my head.

Huddie kisses my cheek. Then dips his head to kiss the top of my shoulder near my neck. “Don’t be mad, baby. Anyway, you and I already have plans for the summer.” I narrow my eyes trying to figure out what he’s talking about. Then it dawns on me. Our road trip. He’s serious about that. I swallow hard thinking about the two of us alone all summer traveling.

Huddie clears his throat. Clearly thinking the same as me. “I’m going to get you something to eat. I’ll be right back.” He kisses my cheek again and gives Ace a look. Ace just nods. I can only interpret those looks and nods to mean, ‘keep an eye on Mattie.’

“Just like old times,” Ace says, moving closer to me. The room is getting crowded as the cocktail hour in the lobby comes to an end. “So, have the two of you talked yet?”

“Not exactly.” I turn my head away from Ace. I don’t want to see his disappointment.

“Look, Mattie, I know you don’t have a lot of experience in relationships.”

“Gee, thanks.” He gives me a look that asks, ‘is it a lie?’

Ace twists his head back to the buffet tables to check on Huddie. He is chatting it up with an older gentleman with a stern look. Despite the stranger’s facial expression, Huddie appears to be interested in the conversation.

“Huddie likes you.” I open my mouth to say I know we’re friends. We’ve been friends, but Ace holds his hand up to stop me. “I mean, he really likes you. I’m breaking bro code here. He should really be the one to tell you this, but you’re my friend too.” Ace scrubs his face and debates what he wants to say next.

“Do you remember the day we met Huddie?” I nod. “I’m pretty sure he’s liked you since then. He didn’t say, but he didn’t have to. It was all over his face.” I can’t believe what he is saying to me right now. It doesn’t make sense. But it’s Ace. And Ace wouldn’t say something if he didn’t truly believe it.

“I could say more.” *Please do.* “But it needs to come from Huddie. Talk to him, Mattie.”

“Fine. I will. Nick wants to talk too.” Ace curses under his breath. “Do you have any insight on that, oh wise one?”

“No. Nick and I don’t talk about girls like Huddie, and I do.” *Interesting.* “Before your head starts to run with ideas, Huddie and I only talk about two girls in particular.”

My mind is racing with all this new information when Ace asks, “What are you going to say to Nick?”

I don’t get a chance to answer him because Huddie returns with a full plate of appetizers. I’m not sure I could give Ace an answer without knowing what Nick wants to say to me first.

I have suspicions. I can’t think of any reason for Nick to say what he’s been saying to me and physically fight Huddie if he wasn’t interested in me in some way romantically. The idea is

so insane, though. I mean, me and Nick together? That's about as crazy as...*me and Huddie being together.*

"Those are really good," Huddie says, pointing to a generous pile of scallops wrapped in bacon. I pop one in my mouth immediately. As soon as it hits my tongue, I moan in delight.

"So good," I say with a mouthful of food.

"Incoming," Ace warns. His eyes flick behind me. Huddie and I turn to see who Ace is talking about. *My sisters.* I smile. Brooke and Ashley are making their way to us, greeting various people with air kisses.

Brooke gasps and Ashley smirks when they see Huddie's face. "You two are a perfect match. Mother is going to freak," Ashley says, bouncing in anticipation.

"We better get to our seats. The show is about to start." Brooke gestures toward our table. "You look beautiful, by the way, Mattie. Love the dress," she whispers as she passes me to take her seat.

"What was that?" Ace asks.

"Long story, but they're cool." Ace raises his eyebrows in shock. Then he grins.

"Good," he says before sitting at the table behind us.

No surprise. Huddie and I are placed between my sisters and parents. Lucky me, I get to sit by my mother. At least Huddie has Ashley on his side. They may not be able to defend me, but I know they won't be taking their own jabs.

My leg starts bouncing under the table when my mother walks into the room. Huddie squeezes my upper thigh. "Relax, baby. Everything is going to be fine." I want to believe him. I know more than anyone that anything is possible with this woman.

As my mother and father approach the table, my sisters and I stand to greet them. I grab Huddie's arm and pull him up with us. If I have to do this, so does he.

"Mother," Ashley singsongs. "You look lovely as always."

“Thank you, darling. Did you and Brooke say hello to the Griffins? Bradley was asking about you.” Ashley grimaces while Mother leans in to greet Brooke. “Not yet. I didn’t know he was here.”

“They’re members of the club. Of course, they are here.” Ashley and Brooke take their seats, and I immediately feel the heat of my mother’s glare.

“Mother, father,” I greet my parents. “This is my boyfriend, Hudson.” My mother doesn’t say anything. She simply looks him over with a curious eye. My father at least shakes Huddie’s hand before sitting down at our table.

“Nice to meet you both,” Huddie says so politely I want to laugh. My mother doesn’t say anything about Huddie. I expected her to comment on his black eye, which is now a purplish-green color, or maybe the cut that has scabbed over his lip. But she manages to keep everything in. She must be ready to erupt like a volcano.

“Mattie, what are you wearing? That is not the dress I ordered for you.” I look down at my dress and smooth my hands over the skirt.

“It’s the one you left in my room,” I remind her.

“So strange,” Brooke hums. “Mother, you should stop ordering from that boutique. This is the second time they messed up your dress order.” She winks at me. “Remember when they *accidentally* sent Ashley the wrong dress, and she was stuck wearing that little red number at the Holiday party?”

My mother shudders. “It was dreadful. Truly awful.” I have to clamp my mouth shut to keep from snickering.

After the first course is served, I feel a shift in the air. My mother must have been putting together her plan of attack while we were sitting in silence. I’m so tense. I’m worried one small move will trigger her.

“Hudson, tell me about yourself. What do you do besides... street fighting.”

“Street fighting,” I laugh. “Good one. He actually got his injuries on the football field.” Technically not a lie.

“I see.”

Huddie clears his throat and then answers her, “I play football. As Mattie mentioned. I also help my father with his business. I plan on majoring in English with a minor in History next year at the University of Oregon.” Mother hums to herself at the mention of the University of Oregon. The same school I want to attend. I bet she thinks I’m following Huddie there.

I can hear her now. *“All this for a boy Madeline. Really? You can’t throw away everything we’ve worked so hard to give you because of some silly high school boy.”* But Huddie isn’t just a boy.

“And do you see that going somewhere? Football that is. I’m not sure what one does with an English degree,” my father says.

“I expect to see some offers for college. I don’t want to play professionally.”

“Why not?” My father leans on the table. This is interesting to him. He is used to conversations with Nick’s dad, who is pushing for the pros, and Nick, who’s been told that is the only thing he can do with his life.

“It’s not the life I want to live,” he says simply as if it will be enough to satisfy their intrigue. I know why he doesn’t want to go pro. He wants a wife, a family, a dog, a house, a career that fuels his passion, the whole thing. And once he has it, he doesn’t want to do anything to risk losing it.

Football has always been a ticket to the next thing for Huddie. Not the thing for him.

But that is something my parents will never understand.

“Did you get a chance to browse the art in the auction? There are some truly breathtaking pieces in there. We curated a collection from the best artists all over the state,” my mother says proudly after our table has gone silent again.

“Yes, mother. Truly wonderful. I’ve never seen such beautiful work,” Brooke says so sweetly she’s going to give

herself a cavity. I can see now how fake it is. This isn't the real Brooke. I'm trying to figure out how I missed it before.

"Is Mattie's art up for auction?" Huddie asks, and I feel his words flow into my bloodstream right into my heart.

My mother guffaws. Then firmly says, "No."

Huddie tsks her. "If Mattie's work isn't there, you didn't get the best." Huddie puts his arm around me and kisses me on my hairline. "My girl is the best artist in the entire state. The entire country even. You missed an opportunity to make money for your charity and show off how talented Mattie is."

My mother turns her head so slowly to Huddie it is frightening. Her eyes narrow on him, assessing him before she strikes. "Your girl?" She questions.

"Yes. Mine," Huddie snarls. For some reason, I have this feeling in my gut that those are the exact words he spoke to Nick before he got punched in the face. They seem to be having a similar effect on my mother.

Anger is beginning to vibrate off her. Brooke and Ashley, however, are mentally high-fiving Huddie. They are enjoying this way too much.

"Let's go, Mads. We'll get desert on the way home." My mother stands when we do. I don't know if she wants to try and stop us from leaving or if she is finally ready to say the words hanging on the tip of her tongue.

Neither of those things happen. My mother is too worried about causing a scene. I'm well aware she is letting Huddie and me walk out the door hand in hand. I will hear about it from her later.

"Can we hang out tomorrow?" Huddie asks while we're eating ice cream in his truck. "I know you wanted to finish your project, but I'm hoping you might have some time later." I do need to work on my project. The senior art exhibit is next weekend. Then I have to send my portfolio to the University of Oregon for review.

He must sense my apprehension to say yes. Not that I don't want to spend time with Huddie. I always want to spend time

with him. This is important, though. I need it to be perfect. Not just for college but for Huddie too.

Huddie places his ice cream container in the cup holder. Then turns his body toward me and takes my ice cream away. I want to protest, but his face tells me this is serious.

“I need to tell you something before you talk to Nick.” I nod in understanding.

I reach across the seat for his hands. Then ask, “You can’t tell me now?” He shakes his head. “Okay. Tomorrow night after dinner at your place?” Huddie bites his lip while he grins from ear to ear.

“Tomorrow night, Mads.”

I take a deep breath knowing it’s time to tell Huddie everything. If what Ace says is true, he deserves to know that I’ve loved him way before I ever agreed to be his fake girlfriend.

MATTIE

After dinner, Huddie drove us to our spot by the Rogue River. It's probably too far of a drive to take on a school night, but Huddie had his mind set. This is the place we were going to talk.

I didn't mind. I needed the drive to clear my head.

Huddie backed the truck up so the tailgate was facing the river. We hopped out of the truck and silently got to work. He started a fire while I laid blankets and pillows in the truck's bed.

"It's just like my painting," I whisper once we're done. The fire, the blankets, the stars, and Huddie. It's everything I pictured in my mind. *Everything I want.*

I quickly crawl over the blankets and slip underneath them. Even with our beanie hats, several layers of clothes, and the fire in the distance, it's still cold. Huddie opens his arms for me to nestle into him.

"You close enough?" Huddie asks, chuckling at me. I throw a leg over his and eliminate the last inch of space between us.

"Now I am." His hand squeezes my butt, pulling me even closer to him. He sighs like he's content, but I can feel his heart racing through all our layers.

"Did you see your mom this morning?" Talk about a mood killer. He must be nervous if he is asking about my mother.

Huddie's mom asked about the gala over dinner. After a quick recap, the subject was changed. There wasn't much to tell. *Thank goodness.* Either we left in time, or my mother wasn't on her A-game.

"I did," I say slowly. "She was her usual self. Full of criticism and disappointment." Huddie's gentle caress on my thigh comforts me while I consider how I want to handle my mother. "Do you think I'm a terrible daughter if I stop trying?" His hand stops moving.

“What do you mean, Mads?” His words are laced with concern.

I rotate so I can look at him while I speak. I rest an arm on his chest and balance my chin on my hand. “The only way to please her is to do what she wants. I refuse to bend to her will. I don’t want the life she is creating for me. So, I want to give up. Draw a line in the sand. If she wants a relationship with me, she needs to meet me where I am this time. Does that make me a terrible daughter?”

Huddie shakes his head. “No, Mads. It makes you smart. You have to protect your heart. I hate it for you. I hate that she can’t see you, but I’m so damn proud of you, baby.” He kisses the top of my head.

“You have your sisters now. Who knows, maybe one day she’ll come around.” I bob my head. *Maybe. Seems highly unlikely.* “And you have your friends. And my family. Pretty sure my mom wants to keep you.” He chuckles and shakes his head slowly. His eyes catch mine, and we stare at each other for what seems like hours. I can’t look away.

“And you? Do I have you?” My question is barely a whisper. It comes out on a breath of smoke. Huddie sits up and brings me and the blankets with him.

He leans against the truck’s cab and puts two cold hands on my flushed cheeks. “Always, baby,” I squirm under the intensity of his eyes. A low rumbling sound pours out of Huddie’s mouth, and his hands drop to my hips to still me.

I move once more to get comfortable and realize my mistake. Although unintentional, it felt good. *Too good.* I can’t help myself. I do it again. Tingles shoot up my thighs.

“Mads,” Huddie warns. His head drops to mine. “You’re killing me, baby.” He blows out a steadying breath. “I have a lot I want to say to you. The way you keep moving over me like that isn’t helping me focus.”

“Sorry, Hud. You just feel so good. I’m going to move, okay?” He starts to protest, but I kiss him quickly. “I’ll come

back. You want to talk, and I can't talk to you sitting on your lap like this without wanting to feel you." I smirk.

Then I grind down on him once more, on purpose this time. He sucks air through his teeth which has me giggling as I move off his lap and sit beside him.

"Pure evil," he mumbles as he adjusts himself in his pants.

"So what do-"

"Please give me a minute Mads," he cuts me off. "You have my head all kinds of scrambled right now. Come here." He opens his arm to me. "Let me hold you for a minute first."

I trace the pattern on the blanket covering Huddie's thigh while gazing up at the stars and listening to the fire crackling.

He twirls random curls of my hair around his finger mindlessly. Huddie does this a lot when he is working through a problem in his head.

"I'm worried about what happens after tomorrow. After you talk to Nick," he says. "I know what I have to offer you baby, but I'm not Nick." I open my mouth to tell him, *'thank goodness you're not,'* but he starts talking again before I get the chance.

"I'm afraid he's going to tell you what you've been waiting years to hear, and he's going to take you away from me." He drops one curl and picks up a different one.

"There is nothing I want to hear from Nick except I'm sorry for being a complete asshole to you, Mattie," Huddie smirks. "I told him I would hear him out because I can't throw away his friendship without giving him a chance." Huddie pulls away from me, but I don't let him get far. "A chance to redeem himself as my friend, Hud." Huddie drops his head against the back window and looks up at the stars.

"The first time I saw you, I felt like I just went ten rounds with Tyson. You knocked all the wind out of me. But Nick had his arm around you. You were his girl.

"But I knew...I just knew deep down that someday you would be my girl," he tells the stars.

I shake my head in disbelief. “You never said anything. Y-you, dated other girls. Girls who are nothing like me.” I grip his hand tighter, so mine doesn’t shake.

“You were with Nick.” I gasp. “Or at least I thought you were when we met. You two were always together. It just seemed obvious.”

“And when you found out we weren’t? Or did you think he was a big jerk for talking about other girls in front of his girlfriend?” I’m getting mad now. I don’t want to get angry, but...I could spit nails right now.

“A jerk at first. I wanted to punch his face for treating you the way he did.”

“You did punch him,” I deadpan.

“Damn right, I did. And I’ll do it again if I have to.” I shake my head. “Mads, please don’t be mad at me. I can’t take it.

“Besides thinking he was a giant asshole, I thought you were in love with him. I thought he was an idiot for not reciprocating. It wasn’t until we started spending all this time together that I believed you were never together,” Huddie admits. I want to throw up.

“Do you believe that I never wanted to date Nick? That I don’t like him like that?”

“I want to.”

I cover my face with my hands and scream. Loudly with all my might.

“Feel better?” I glare at him. “Okay, this isn’t going quite how I thought it would.”

“Same.” I let out a breath. “Do you remember who Nick kissed at Finn’s Halloween bash freshman year?” He shakes his head no. “Yeah, me either. Do you remember who you kissed at Finn’s Halloween bash freshman year?” He thinks for a minute, then shakes his head no. “Jenny Franklin,” I remind him.

I bring my legs up to my chest and wrap my arms around them. I can’t look at Huddie while I tell him everything. This

is going to be embarrassing, but he needs to know. Resting my chin on my knees, I tell him about his kiss with Jenny. “She was a fairy with purple wings. She even painted her face with glitter.

“I had just finished watching Leo destroy Luke in some racing game. I decided to head outside and sit in my favorite chair. A few minutes later, a purple fairy dragged you out into the woods to show you ‘her magic.’ I felt sick. Later you came up to say hi and your mouth was covered in glitter too.” Huddie curses under his breath.

“After her, you started dating Annie DeMarco. Then you kissed Kate a week after you broke up with Annie. That’s when I stopped paying attention. It hurt too much.” I dip my head between my legs and breathe. I can feel my chest tightening up with each word of my confession.

“They were never you.” His words are muffled with my ears trapped between my arms. His hand trails up my back until it reaches my bicep. He pulls me so I’m facing him again. “They were never you.”

“I don’t understand.” Huddie blows out a breath sending smoke out into the atmosphere. He doesn’t speak until it disappears.

“I thought you were hooked on Nick. I tried to get over you.” He shrugs a shoulder. “It didn’t work. Eventually, I stopped trying. They could never be you.”

“Don’t I know it. All the girls you dated were nothing like me. I told myself there was no way you would ever like me because clearly, I wasn’t your type.” Huddie is shaking his head. I don’t know if it’s because he doesn’t believe me or because what I said isn’t true.

“I’m a fucking idiot. I should have said something. You are more than my type. Baby, please come over here. I need you close to me.” I sit across Huddie’s lap, and he holds me tight.

“I still don’t understand how you thought Nick and I were together. The first weekend we met you we had a sleepover, you should have put it together. We played never have I ever.

Remember?” His cheek rubs against my forehead when he nods. “You knew I’ve never kissed anyone. Wouldn’t I have kissed my boyfriend?”

“You slept in his bed Mads. You held hands. You walked around school with your arms around each other. I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t ask either.” I twist one of the strings of his hoodie around my finger nervously.

“I was afraid of the answer. I wouldn’t have handled it well if you said you were more than friends or liked him and wanted to be with him.” He runs his nose up and down my cheek. “It was hard enough seeing you with him every day the way you were.”

“But you hung out with us all the time. You stayed over at Nick’s house every time I did. You put yourself in the friend zone.” He shakes his head.

“No. You put me there.”

“Because you were making out with every girl but me! And it was killing me!” I poke myself in the chest with every word. My voice rises more than I want, but these emotions need somewhere to go.

“Fuck. Baby. I... I’m sorry.” He kisses me on my forehead, my cheek, my neck, and behind my ear. “It was torture seeing you with him. Just you sitting by him at lunch drove me crazy. He became my enemy simply because he had you.”

“He never had me. Not like that,” I say, looking Huddie straight in the eye. I cup his cheek, and he leans into my touch. “Never like that.”

“Do you know how many times I wanted to drag you out of his bed? I know nothing ever happened. Thank God. But in my mind and heart, you were my girl, and you were sleeping next to him.” He pulls me in tighter.

“When this whole thing started, when the idea of us dating came up, you didn’t want to. You were *mad*, Huddie.”

“I was mad. I hated that Nick was only thinking of himself. He cared more about Everly than you. It pissed me off.” He’s so close. I skim my nose up and down his neck. He smells so good.

“And no, you’re right. I didn’t like the idea of fake dating you. Anything fake with you made me want to punch something. I wanted you for real, Mads. Not under some pretense so Nick could get a girlfriend,” he spits out.

“Why’d you agree to it then? It wasn’t to keep other girls away?” I tease him, and he laughs.

“No, baby, it wasn’t. It’s the same reason I wanted to be your friend when I moved here.” His thumb traces the freckles on my nose and cheeks. “Because I wanted every piece of you that you were willing to give me.”

Because I wanted every piece of you.

This is what I’ve been doing for the last four years. Collecting little pieces of Huddie and stockpiling them for when he wouldn’t be around anymore. His smirks, his laughs, his little kisses, his jokes and one-liners, his questions, his brilliant mind. I wanted to keep it all and stash it in my heart forever.

“Selfishly, if you were fake dating me, you couldn’t date anyone else. Meanwhile, I got to spend time with you,” Huddie continues breaking into my thoughts. His thumb is on my lips now. “Deepen our friendship.” His lips graze mine. “Show you how much I love you.”

I gasp, and Huddie kisses me again. It’s gentle, but I feel it from the top of my head to the tip of my toes.

Huddie grips my hips and lifts me, so I’m straddling him again.

“I love you, Mads. I have for a long time.” Huddie wipes the tear escaping down my cheek. I’m surprised it didn’t freeze before he got to it.

“I think I might have loved you from the first moment I saw you. I was intrigued by you. You were the cutest boy I had

ever seen. I was infatuated with you. I wanted to be your girlfriend. I really wanted to kiss you.” Huddie smirks.

“Now I’m not sure it was love I felt that day.” His shoulders deflate. “Hud,” his fingers dig into my hips. “If that was love back then, then what is this? Because what I feel for you now, love just doesn’t seem to cover it.

“You are my best friend. You are my family. I love you, Huddie. So, so much.” He slides his hand to the back of my head, and I do the same to him, running my fingers through his hair.

“You love me?” He asks and pushes his nose against mine.

“Mmhmm. Very much.”

“Can you go back and do that thing you were doing earlier with your hips? I loved that too.” I drop my head into his neck and snicker at him. I catch him off guard when I roll my hips over him. I drown in the sensations zipping through my body.

“Like that?” I ask.

“Mmhmm,” Huddie mumbles through kisses. “I love you, baby.”

“I love you too, Hud.”

And tomorrow, I will still love you. I think, staring into his eyes. Nothing will change what I feel for you, no matter what Nick says or asks.

MATTIE

I never knock on the door when I go to Nick's house. Once I was old enough to ride my bike over here on my own, he started leaving the door unlocked for me.

Neither of us had parents who were around after school. My sisters were busy with their studies and other lessons my mother signed them up for. The only time Nick's dad came around was to ask him about football practice or lecture him on improving.

Luke, Leo, and Ace weren't allowed to come out much during the week because it was a school night. It was always just Nick and me.

"I brought pizza," I yell as I walk into the den. I want to keep things casual. It's better to treat this visit like any other time I would come over here.

Except for no hand-holding, arms around each other, or sleeping in his bed. How could I have been so stupid not to think how all of that would look to other people? To Huddie. *Stupid idiot.*

"Let me grab plates," Nick says, jumping up from the couch.

"Pfft. Plates. Amateur. When have we ever used plates? Sit down, Nick." I drop the pizza box on the coffee table and flip it open. Nick sits back down on the couch. His legs are so long his shins knock into the coffee table.

I sit on the opposite side of the coffee table on the floor. I can't see the tv well, but I don't need Nick getting ideas in his head by sitting too close.

"How was practice? Punch anyone?" I raise an eyebrow and smirk.

"Damn, Mattie. No. I didn't punch anyone. I didn't even talk to Huddie today if you were wondering. I have nothing to

say to him.” I am, but I won’t admit it. I asked Huddie to leave Nick alone until after I talked to him.

I realized that I was not the one coming between Huddie and Nick. Huddie is the one coming between Nick and me. I need Huddie to back off Nick and let me handle him. Huddie didn’t particularly like the phrase “handle him,” but he’s giving me the space to do it all the same.

“Good. He doesn’t deserve to be hit like that.” Nick’s hands ball into fists and his nostrils flare. “Don’t get mad, Nick. He didn’t do anything.”

“Are you serious right now?” I ignore his question and keep eating my pizza.

“Finish your pizza, and then we’ll talk. I think we both have things to say. This conversation shouldn’t be happening when you are clearly hangry.” I roll my eyes playfully to diffuse his mood. His lip twitches slightly before taking a bite out of a slice of pepperoni.

When the last piece of pizza is gone, I take the box to the kitchen. I grab two bottles of water from the fridge before heading back into the den.

“Here.” I give Nick one of the water bottles and plop down on the couch in my favorite spot.

Nick drains half the bottle in one gulp. Then clicks the tv off. The house is quiet. I want to crinkle my water bottle just so I can hear something.

“Why do you think we never got together?” Nick asks, and I choke on my own spit. I wasn’t expecting that to be his first question.

Nick’s sapphire-colored eyes look sad. He looks defeated and lost. It hurts my heart. Despite all the mean things he’s said to me lately and how he’s behaved. He’s still my best friend. He’s still one of the most important people in my life.

“I have my theories.” I keep my answer vague. This is a can of worms I don’t want to open. I’m not sure he is ready for the truth.

“What are those?” Nick scoots closer to me on the couch. He could reach out to touch me if he wanted to now.

“We aren’t meant for each other like that. It’s impossible.”

“Impossible?” He scoffs.

“Yes, Nickie, it’s impossible.” I surprise myself and reach for his hand first. “You are my Nickie. You told me at the end of summer the same thing. I’m your Mattie. Remember that?” He shakes his head, but I can see in his eyes that he does.

“I need you, Nick. I need my best friend. I need my safe place when I don’t want to talk about anything and I just want to sit in my head. You are the person I go to. At least I used to.”

“Huddie, isn’t that for you?”

“No, he isn’t. Huddie,” I sigh. “Huddie is my fixer. He wants to take care of me.” Huddie is a lot of things to me, but most don’t concern Nick.

“I want to take care of you too.” He squeezes my hand tighter.

“And you do. You take care of me in your own way. Do you know how many times I would come over here feeling so lost and alone? Just sitting in this room with you meant so much to me. You never asked me what was wrong. You understood. You get me like no one else does.”

“That’s because I live through the same bullshit you do.”

“I know. That’s why we need each other, Nickie.”

“I haven’t been there for you. I’ve been the same as them.” Them being my parents. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve been really mean lately. That’s not the Nick I like to be around. It’s not the Nick that I love.” His eyes go wide.

“You love me?” I know it’s a risk saying it first, but if I don’t control this confession, it will get weird.

“I do, but like a best friend. Like someone I need in my life no matter what the world decides to throw at me. Do you understand?” He nods. Then drops his head.

“I’ve messed everything up.”

“How?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“For the past couple of weeks, I’ve been pissed that you and Huddie have been getting closer and spending so much time together.”

“Your fault.” He rolls his eyes. “Just saying. You wanted Everly. You pushed Huddie and me together. Begged me to get a boyfriend. Your choices.” I point a finger at him.

“I get that. I’ll take the blame. Anyway, I thought I must like you, ya know? Because why would I get so jealous if I didn’t want you for myself? I started noticing how pretty you are and how you looked in a pair of jeans. Really disturbing things.”

“Disturbing things?” I question. What the fuck is he getting at?

“Yes. These are not thoughts I wanted to have about you. Mattie you have always been a safe, attraction free, space. The friend I needed so bad the only place I could keep you was in the friend zone. Then here comes Huddie, and you become the perfect girlfriend. It was weird.”

“Weird?”

“Yes, you got in my head. You started consuming all my thoughts. I kept thinking of what it would be like to have you as my girlfriend.” I need to turn this conversation around. “The kiss with Huddie really pushed me over the edge. I saw you kiss him, and I thought, this is it. She’s gone. I’ve lost her, and it was all my fault.” He drops his head and shakes it in defeat.

“I was losing you, and I had to do whatever I could to keep you. I said a lot of mean things to you about Huddie. I told him to break up with you.” I gasp. I didn’t know that.

“W-why would you do that?”

“Because I wanted you for myself!”

“You didn’t pick me, Nick! You picked Everly. You can’t get everything you want. And to try and break Huddie and me

up. I just can't believe you right now."

"I didn't expect you to fall for him."

"I already had! I have liked Huddie since the first day I met him."

"So, by saying you have theories, you mean you could never love me because you love him."

"Yes." It really is that simple.

"And Huddie? Does he love you?"

"He does," I say with a massive smile. Nick nods.

"Thank fuck. Because hearing you say you love me almost made me gag." Is he serious right now? *What. The. Fuck.* "You said the words, and I started to panic before you explained." I playfully slap his bicep.

"Ow! I'm sorry. I was going to tell you I was in love with you today too. I, honest to God, thought I was, but hearing you say the words first." He gags. Like actually gags. "I was jealous. I was losing you. I've done a lot of things I regret. My biggest regret will be losing you for good. Please tell me I haven't lost you for good."

"You haven't, Nick. You messed up big time. Don't do it again. It won't be easy to forgive you next time."

"I know. There won't be a next time. And I'm really sorry for all the trouble I caused between the two of you. But you may have never gotten together if it wasn't for my selfishness."

"Nice try. Huddie and I were going to happen anyway. You need to apologize to Huddie, by the way." Nick grumbles something. "He is really important to me, Nick. I would like for you guys to work things out and be friends too."

"Fine. I'll say I'm sorry after I tell him how much you said you love me." He jokes.

"You do that, and I will kill you. It won't be pretty, either. It will be very painful and very slow." Nick gets his phone out, and I wrestle him for it.

“Chill out. I’m not going to do anything. I’ve done enough. I really am sorry. And not just the stuff with Huddie. I’ve been a shit friend. I’ll do better. I promise.”

“Good. Because I need you, Nick.”

“I need you too. You want to watch a movie or something? Get back to normal?” He turns the tv on and fires up Netflix.

“Sure.” Normal sounds nice. “But Nick,”

“Hmm?” He hums, flipping through the new releases.

“It will never be exactly like it was. I can’t do that to Huddie.” He flicks his head to me.

“I know, Mattie. I won’t ask you to.” I nod. *Good.*

“Do you wish you didn’t break up with Everly?” He immediately starts shaking his head.

“No. I did break up with her because I wanted to get you back...in my life. But we weren’t going to work out anyway. I never should have let her push us apart. That should have been a red flag she wasn’t good for me. I’m fine though. I need to focus on football and getting recruited.” He taps my foot with his. “It will all work out, Mattie.”

The movie starts, and we both fall silent. It’s one of our favorite action flicks we’ve watched over and over. The familiarity is comforting. It makes everything feel right again.

“Sometimes I wonder if I’m meant to fall in love. I think I’m going to end up a grumpy-asshole bachelor,” Nick says randomly.

“Eh, I doubt that. You just need to find your sunshine.” Nick scrunches up his face in disgust.

“Don’t ever say that again. *Find my sunshine.* What happened to you? You fall in love, and now you say all this cheesy romantic shit.”

“Whatever! Don’t knock it ‘till you try it.”

“Yeah. I’m good. Thinking I was in love with you was enough for me.” I kick his leg. My phone buzzes on the coffee

table. “Huddie?” Nick asks when I pick up. “Shit, you don’t even need to answer. It’s written on your face.”

HUDDIE: Are you home?

ME: No. I’m still at Nick’s. We’re watching a movie

HUDDIE: You’re watching a movie?

ME: Yeah. I’m leaving soon. I’ll tell you everything later. I love you Hud

HUDDIE: Love you too, baby

“You should go to him, Mattie. Soften him up for me. I want to talk to him tomorrow and apologize.”

“Are you okay?” I ask when I stand up from the couch.

“I’m okay as long as we’re okay.” When Nick stands, I wrap my arms around him.

“I love you, Nickie.”

“Same, Mattie.” Nick hooks his pinkie with mine. A shudder rolls through my body, and my eyes fill with tears. I’m taken back ten years when we promised to always help each other keep the monsters away.

My house is dark except for a dim glow from my bedroom when I pull up to the driveway. My parents are probably out to dinner. *Again.*

I take my shoes off in the mudroom and go upstairs to my room. The door is closed. I hear muffled voices from the television. I open the door slowly. Huddie is asleep in my bed, with one arm behind his head and the other lying across his stomach. *I’m so in love with this guy.*

I drop my keys and backpack in my chair and tip-toe over to him. He barely stirs when I dip the mattress with my knee. I slip one hand under his t-shirt and tickle the peaks and valleys of his ab muscles until I reach his chest. His whole body shivers. *I caused that.*

Huddie pulls me closer to him when I rest my head on his chest. Our legs tangle together until we settle into a comfortable position.

“Hey, baby.” He kisses the top of my head.

“You tired, Hud?”

“No. I just didn’t want to worry anymore.” I squeeze him tighter than a boa constrictor. “Everything go okay?” I sigh.

“I think so. I think Nick and I will be okay. I told him I loved him.” Huddie’s whole body tenses. I look up at him. “And he said it made him gag.” I can’t help it. I start laughing.

“Mads?” The worry in his voice quiets my laughter. “You love him?”

“I do Huddie as a *friend*. Nick was worried you were taking me from him. In a way, you are. The best way.” I wink and kiss his lips. “But I needed Nick to know I will always need him as a friend. And that I will always be there for him too. As a friend.”

“And how do you love me?” He teases me.

I think about it for a moment. “I’m not sure how to describe it.” I push off the bed and walk over to my bookshelf. Huddie swings around and puts his feet on the ground. I can feel his eyes on me as I run my fingers down the spines of my sketchbooks.

There is only one he needs to read. The one I started when I met him.

“I said I wouldn’t let *anyone* read these,” I remind him as I pick up the sketchbook I want to give him.

“I know. Your eyes only.” I walk over to him and stand between his legs. His arms wrap around me, and he palms the back of my thighs.

“You also said you wanted all the pieces of me you could get.” He nods. “Those books are a big part of me. If you want to know how I love you, look at this one.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I want you to see how much I loved you over the years.” Huddie starts to open the book. I slap it closed. “Not now. I will die of embarrassment if you look at it in front of

me.” My cheeks flush at the thought. “Do it later tonight or tomorrow or next month even.” I joke.

“Mads, it can’t be that bad.”

“Oh, it is. Just remember, I’m an artist, not a writer. Focus on the drawings, okay?”

“Okay.” He stands up and gives me a quick kiss. “I’m going to get out of here.” *What?*

“Are you serious?”

“I have a night of reading ahead of me.” Huddie places the sketchbook on my bed and whips his sweatshirt over his head. He looks hot doing the reverse strip tease. I can’t tear my eyes away from his tapered waistline and the band of his underwear above his belt.

Huddie crowds me, and I drown in his familiar scent. “I love it when you watch me like that, Mads. It makes me want to stay.”

“So, stay,” I whisper. I smuggle my arms under his sweatshirt and massage the muscles in his back. I kiss his neck and jawline gently until I reach his mouth. I lick his lips, urging him to open up. He rewards me with a taste of him.

“Nice try,” he says when he pulls away. “I’m looking at this tonight. Thank you for trusting me. I know what it means to you.”

It only means a lot to me because it’s all about you.

HUDDIE

I've been parked down the street from Mattie's house for the past hour, eating fast food and drinking a milkshake. Her parents left the house about thirty minutes ago, and I'm still sitting here like a stalker waiting for Mattie to get home. Unless she's already home. I don't know how long it will take for Nick to throw a grenade into our relationship.

I promised her I would give her the space she needed to *handle* Nick. I don't like the idea of Mattie handling anyone but me.

I can't sit here waiting anymore. It wreaks of greasy french fries and fear. I grab my phone and keys and hop out of my truck. I've been here alone a few times when she was staying late at school to work on her art. It wasn't hard to figure out the code to the lock. Ace has something similar on his door, so I knew it was a four-digit code.

I tap in the month and date of Mattie's birthday on the keypad. The lock clicks open, and I hurry inside. I know no one is home, but I'm not trying to draw too much attention to myself in case the neighbors are watching.

As soon as I enter her room, I breathe her in. The sweet aroma of peaches lingers in the air. I kick my shoes off by the door, then zig-zag through the clothes strewn across the floor. My girl is a mess, but I love that about her.

I jerk my sweatshirt over my head and plop down on Mattie's bed. Staring at the ceiling isn't helping ease all the thoughts running through my head. Mattie loves me. She said there's nothing Nick can say to change that. I trust her. I believe in us, but it doesn't stop the worry. I don't think I'll be content until she is back in my arms again.

I flick the tv on but keep the volume low. I don't expect her parent's home anytime soon. However, the last thing I need is for them to walk in and find me alone. I check my phone again. She's been over there for a few hours.

Unless she left already and is avoiding me? I wonder what she would say if I asked her where she was or if she was home. Would she lie? No, she wouldn't. I scrub a hand down my face. This girl has me wound so tight she's making me crazy.

ME: Are you home?

MADS: No. I'm still at Nick's. We're watching a movie

ME: You're watching a movie?

MADS: Yeah. I'm leaving soon. I'll tell you everything later. I love you Hud

ME: Love you too, baby

I exhale and shut my eyes. They're watching a movie. Something we've done hundreds of times over there. Mattie curled up in one corner of the couch and Nick on the other.

It wouldn't be different now. Would it? No. *Stop worrying.* I clear my head like I do before a game, and I slowly feel the exhaustion take over.

Cold fingers travel over my stomach, making me shiver. I lift an eyelid, and I'm greeted with a poof of blonde hair. I lower my arm to her butt and pull her in tighter. "Hey, baby." I kiss the top of her head.

"You tired, Hud?" I love it when she calls me Hud. No one else will ever call me that but her, my Mads.

"No. I just didn't want to worry anymore." She holds on to me so tight I shouldn't be able to breathe, but her grip has the opposite effect. I finally feel oxygen filling my lungs for the first time today. "Everything go okay?" I ask.

"I think so. I think Nick and I will be okay. I told him I loved him." I freeze. *She loves him.* Yeah, breathing is out of the question now. At least until her eyes meet mine. "And he said it made him gag." *What the hell? What does that mean?*

"Mads?" I'm freaking out. She loves him, and he's gagging. I want to know exactly what happened over there, but I can't get the words '*I told him I loved him*' out of my head. "You love him?"

“I do Huddie as a *friend*. Nick was worried you were taking me from him. In a way, you are. The best way.” Her lips brush against mine. *It’s not enough*. “But I needed Nick to know I will always need him as a friend. And that I will always be there for him too. As a friend.”

“And how do you love me?” My voice is teasing, but I’m dying to know. This whole situation has been stressing me out. I’ve waited so long to have her in my life like this. I don’t know what I would do if this was over already.

Mattie’s eyes drop down to my chest. Her fingers mindlessly stroke the bare skin under my shirt while she thinks. “I’m not sure how to describe it.”

Mattie taps her fingers across my chest before she pops off the bed and walks over to her bookshelf. I sit up and watch those same fingers run across the spines of her sketchbooks.

“I said I wouldn’t let *anyone* read these,” she says, looking at me from the corner of her eye. She walks back to me with a book in her hand, and I widen my legs for her. I palm the back of her thighs without thinking. Anytime she is near me, I want to touch her.

“I know. Your eyes only.”

“You also said you wanted all the pieces of me you could get.” I nod my head agreeing with her. I hope I will have all of her one day. I’m a patient man. “Those books are a big part of me. If you want to know how I love you, look at this one.” My eyebrows shoot up in shock.

“Are you sure?” I can’t believe she trusts me with one of her private sketchbooks.

“Yes. I want you to see how much I loved you over the years.” I start to open the book up, but she slaps my hand. “Not now. I will die of embarrassment if you look at it in front of me. Do it later tonight or tomorrow or next month even.” She tries to play it off, but she’s obviously nervous about me reading whatever is inside.

“Mads, it can’t be that bad.”

“Oh, it is. Just remember, I’m an artist, not a writer. Focus on the drawings, okay?”

“Okay.” I stand up and give her a quick kiss. “I’m going to get out of here.”

“Are you serious?” Mattie wants to protest. Her face is scrunched up. She looks fucking adorable.

“I have a night of reading ahead of me,” I say as I grab my sweatshirt and throw it back on. Mattie is gawking at my body when I pop my head out of the hoodie. I finish pulling my arms through and move towards her.

“I love it when you watch me like that, Mads. It makes me want to stay,” I say, wrapping my arms around her. Having her eyes on me, filled with fire, turns me on.

“So, stay,” she breathes out. Then works her arms under the layers of my clothes until her hands are crawling up my back. Feeling her skin on mine take a herculean effort to walk away. She kisses my neck and jawline. Then teases my mouth until I open up for her.

She sure has perfected her technique for someone who hasn’t kissed anyone before. Her fingers dig into my neck, and I groan into her mouth. My body is begging for her, but I keep control. I fell for her fast. I want to take my time with everything else and cherish her. I’m counting on forever with Mattie. There’s plenty of time.

Regretfully I pull away. “Nice try. I’m looking at this tonight. Thank you for trusting me. I know what it means to you.” I give her one last kiss on her temple before I leave her for the night.

Once I’m home, I brush my teeth and change into sweats. I drop the book on my bed. Then flick the lamp on. Crawling into bed, I prepare myself for what I’m about to read. Mattie says it’s nothing but bad poetry, but I don’t believe it. How can it be bad when she’s sharing her heart?

Letting out a deep breath, I open up the sky-blue notebook. It has the year on the spine in curly black numbers. The journal has doodles, swirls, and random markings on the front.

I run my fingers over the cover, examining the design with a critical eye. *Constellations*.

I close my eyes, take another deep breath. My hands are shaking, and my chest feels like a cinder block is pressing down on it. "Get it together, man," I tell myself as I rub the knots out of my chest.

When I open the book, a younger version of myself stares back at me. My name, *Hudson 'Huddie' Monroe*, is written down the side of the page with the date we met.

The following page has a giant butterfly drawn on it. The wings are intricately decorated in several shades of blue. Around the outside of the wings, she wrote –

I never knew what a butterfly felt like until the day that I met you.

I turn the page again, and two butterflies fly in different directions. On this page, she wrote -

It started as one, then turned into two.

Curiosity has me flipping quickly to the next drawing. Hundreds of butterflies in all different colors, shapes, and sizes flutter around the paper. It takes me a few minutes to find any words. Finally, I see them hidden in the images.

And when you smiled, the numbers grew.

All the breath whooshes out of my lungs. Mattie felt it that first day too. It felt more like a taser or lightning strike, but butterflies work too.

A head of a lion is on the next page, and I have no idea why. Then I remember I nerded out about my favorite book series, *Chronicles of Narnia*, the next time we had hung out.

The next few pages are filled with more drawings of my favorite things. It's like Mattie took all our conversations and text messages and translated them into pictures. A poster of my favorite movie and the first movie we watched together. My favorite food. Spines of my favorite books. A record with my favorite song at the time.

Mattie even added drawings of Tacoma. All the stories I've shared. She's kept them. Treasured them.

If you didn't know to look for hidden messages, you would miss them. I find our names outlining a few hearts on a page full of doodles in tiny cursive. Emotion clogs my throat. 'Mattie loves Huddie' is written several times in different fonts. *Damn, she loved me.*

I stop turning the pages again when I see a couple holding hands. It's Annie and me. I only know because of the cheerleading outfit and high ponytail. It is her signature look. On my back, she wrote –

Not the one for him

Not sure where to begin

Shattered in pieces

I feel so defeated

He held her hand today

I couldn't look his way

I held my feelings inside

I tried not to cry

No one seemed to care

About this love he didn't share

I want to break something. I want to scream. Punch a wall. I don't know. Why didn't Mattie say something? Why didn't I say something?

The next picture is a giant lock and chain around an anatomically correct heart being buried in a shallow grave. 'RIP Heart' etched into the tombstone. If my heart weren't hemorrhaging at the moment, I would gush over my girl's talent. She's a natural. The details are incredible. But my own heart is ripping in two right now.

The words travel down the page and around the outside of the heart.

Down

Down

Down

Bury it so deep

It can't keep you from sleep

Lock it up tight

Everything will be all right

I can see him again

As long as we stay friends

Down

Down

Down

Keep my love for him locked down

I want to throw the book against the wall or rip it in two. I was such a fucking idiot. I was so stuck on what Mattie and Nick were doing. I didn't see everything Mattie was giving me. All the crap I did with other girls when Mattie was right there. *What a dumbass.* The whole time she was hurting. *Fuck!*

A landscape drawing of *our spot* is painted across two pages. We found this little clearing together after we spent the day river tubing. Everyone else was exhausted, but Mattie wanted to go explore. Who was I to deny her? We started walking the trails and happened upon this clearing by the river.

We spent the rest of the afternoon there. We would sneak back over every time we helped my dad with his river adventures. That's why I took her there the other night. I'm glad it means a lot to her too.

I put all the pages in my fingers and let them slip through quickly to see if anything catches my eye. I stop when I see another portrait of me. I hold back a groan. I'm not sure how much more of this I can take.

I'm winking on one side of the page, and on the other, I have a big toothy grin. I know this is the smile I would only

give her. I wasn't very happy back then. But I couldn't help but smile around her.

Within the doodle border, she wrote out in swirly letters –

Whatever you have to give, I'll take it.

A minute, a second, I won't waste it.

A wink, a smile, I can't shake them.

Big or small

I want it all

Every piece of you I'll treasure

Until you love me too, no pressure

All the little things

Feel like the best things

So, whatever you have to give

I'll take it

There are pages filled with constellations, galaxies, and everything I've ever told Mattie about the universe. *What a dork! How did I manage to get this girl? Lucky bastard!*

Binary stars. Pages and pages of them. *Fucking hell!* At the beginning of junior year, and we went on our end of summer camping trip, I taught Mattie about binary stars. A system of two stars that are gravitationally bound. They orbit around each other.

I didn't know if she thought I was randomly talking or knew I was referring to us. Two people constantly pulled toward each other and bound together. By the hundreds of stars I'm looking at, she understood. *She felt the same.*

I flip through all the constellations and stop when I see September at the top. This is when Mattie and I started fake dating. *Damn, I hate that word.* The first drawing is a pair of eyes. *Mine.* She has drawn my eyes so many times she could probably do it in her sleep.

Below my eyes, she drew waves of the ocean, and in the waves, she wrote out –

Eyes as blue as the sea
I want to swim deep
When they look at me
Eyes as blue as the sky
They make my soul fly
I'm feeling so free
Eyes that burn like the sun
My heart is on the run
Please don't burn me

I'm not sure how many more of these poems I can handle. It isn't just the poems. It's the fact I didn't know. Mattie never shied away from emotion. I always pinned her as someone who wore her heart on her sleeve. But seeing all this...I was wrong.

Unless pouring her heart out in the pages and her art allowed her more freedom in real life. It's like she dumped all her feelings here so she wouldn't mess up and accidentally tell me. I love that she had an outlet, but I hate that she never said anything to me.

I bark out a laugh when a giant Hobbit is looking at me. Mattie may never admit it, but she loves *LOTR* too. I'll get it out of her eventually.

Browsing through a few more pages, I stop at a drawing of the two of us with my hand on her back and another sketch with my hand gripping her hip. It's so realistic. I can feel her next to me. Hidden in the drawing, she's written several phrases. *Hands that scorch my skin. Hands made for sin.* I smirk, thinking of a few sinful things I would like to do.

My heart stutters when the next drawing of me appears. I know it's her view looking up at me. My eyes are hooded as I stare at her. I bet she sees this look every day. My eyes tell her *I want you.* I look like I'm dying to kiss her.

A kiss under the chin

*I want to do it again
The view from right here
I've got nothing to fear
A kiss to my temple
He makes my heart beat triple
A kiss under his chin
I want to do it again
And again and again*

I love those kisses, too, Mads. I love them a lot.

I turn to the last entry she made and let out another slow breath. It has Sunday's date on it. There's another drawing of our spot at the river. The fire is blazing with the starlit sky up above. The two of us are sitting on a log by the fire with a blanket wrapped around us.

The poem is written between stars, in the river bed, over flames, and in tree branches.

*Take me down to the river
To feel the water at my feet
Walk with me through the forest
Of the tall pine trees
Hold me close by the fire
Let me feel your heartbeat
Share with me all your secrets
Tell me all your dreams
Down at the river
Walking through the trees
Sitting by the fire
That's where my lover will be*

I swipe at my face and brush the tears away. I can't believe I'm crying. I've broken bones and never cried before. I close

the book and text, Mattie, telling her how much I love her and that I can't wait to hold her. This week is busy with her art show and scouts coming to see me play. But we have forever.

One day, I will show her how much she means to me. Whatever I've done so far is nothing compared to this.

MATTIE

I'm not hiding. I'm blending. I'm letting everyone enjoy the art exhibit without the pressure of the artist hovering over their shoulder. There is only one person's opinion I care about tonight, and I haven't seen him yet.

I'm not glued to the wall because of nerves. It doesn't matter that part of me is on display for everyone to see and critique. For him to see. *Nope. Not freaking out about that at all.*

If it were another landscape painting, I would be fine. The problem is I decided to show all my cards a few months ago when I started this project. Now it's d-day, and I'm panicking.

I'm not the only one. At least three other seniors are helping me hold up the wall while the others proudly stand by their work. *I salute you. But no thanks.*

Every senior in the advanced art program has at least one piece on display tonight. I ended up doing two different art pieces. One watercolor and one mixed media.

I peel myself off the wall and skirt around a small group of parents getting a tour of the exhibit. Juniors are required to participate in the art exhibit and facilitate all the tours.

To earn a solid grade, they have to be able to explain the type of art and the medium used, the inspiration for each piece, and a short bio on each artist. Things like that.

It sounds like a lot of information, considering there are over fifty pieces on display, but they interviewed us ahead of time and have note cards. As nervous as I was to speak to hundreds of people last year, I prefer that to having my work on display.

It's impressive how quickly the whole exhibit came together. After school on Friday, we wheeled partition walls into the gym, creating aisles and walkways. Then we hung up our work and created a makeshift gallery.

My display takes up two partition walls. My mixed media piece is four large canvases alone. I still feel guilty for ditching Huddle all week to finish it up. Considering all we've been through the last few weeks, being away from him has been miserable. He wanted to sit with me while I worked, but I pushed him away. I needed him to see it tonight when I was finished.

Besides going to his game last night, I haven't seen him all week. After tonight I will have a lot more time. Monday, I will mail my application along with photos from tonight's exhibit and other projects I have worked on.

Then it's a waiting game. Will I get the scholarship to Oregon or not? I will be happy with an early acceptance letter into the program. Thanks to my sisters, the finances aren't an issue anymore.

I clasp my hands behind my back to avoid biting my nails. I'm not even a nail-biter, but the closer I get to my paintings, I'm being converted.

Jesse Bishop explains the inspiration behind my landscape watercolor painting when I approach the edge of the group. I decided to do a massive watercolor of the clearing we camp at every year. While the guys aren't in the painting, they are there in spirit. I wouldn't have survived high school without Ace, Leo, Luke, and Nick. I wanted them to be a part of tonight.

"And this is a progressive piece. Each canvas represents a year. As you can see, we get more of the picture with each canvas. And in the last one, the two individuals in the painting are complete.

"It's titled *Now or Never*. The artist used a combination of various papers sourced from magazines, newspapers, recycled scrapbook paper, and acrylic paint," Jesse explains without looking up from his notes.

"If you take a closer look, you will notice the artist has written hidden messages and characteristics on each piece of paper. Madeline said they represent her finding love in herself and what she loves about the other person in the painting."

Several people take turns walking up to the paintings and then stepping back. Up close, it's almost impossible to distinguish the image. It's like one of those hidden pictures where you stare at it up close and slowly pull it away until the image becomes clear.

A murmur of compliments from the crowd puts me at ease about having a giant collage of Huddie and me on display.

The first canvas is so rudimentary it looks like a kindergartner did it. It's completely random, with little pieces of paper glued sporadically and paint dripping in various places. That's the genius behind the work, I suppose. I'm taking you on a journey. With each painting, you get a few more pieces of the puzzle.

I've added more paper and paint in the second canvas, but there still isn't a clear image of anything. You don't know yet that the blue scraps of paper are Huddie's eyes or the green is part of his plaid shirt. It's impossible to tell that the yellow and gray shreds of paper will eventually be the curls and shading of my hair.

By the third canvas, you can see two people facing each other, but there are still so many holes. *Missing pieces.*

In the last canvas, the picture is complete.

Jesse answers a few more questions, and the group moves on to the next artist. I stay staring at my work. What will Huddie think when he sees himself on display like this?

"It's incredible, Mattie," Nick says, bumping my shoulder with his.

"You came," I reply with wide eyes. I didn't expect him to show up.

"Of course I did. I told you I was going to be better. Be the friend you deserve." He puts his arm around me for a quick side hug. Emphasis on quick. Nick is really trying, and that makes me happy. We are slowly getting back on track.

"The rest of the guys are here somewhere." Nick looks around the room, hoping to spot Ace, Luke, or Leo. "I'm proud of you, Mattie. Oregon would be stupid not to take

you.” I beam. I didn’t realize how greedy I was for Nick’s support of my art.

A new group of art enthusiasts stops in front of my work, pushing Nick and me back a few steps. Nick nudges my elbow and nods to the crowd. A sick feeling takes over my gut.

“Relax, Mattie. He’s going to love it. He loves you,” Nick whispers. Easy for him to say. He’s not the one who basically took his private diaries and transformed them into giant pieces of art for everyone to see.

Huddie is a private person. I’m a private person. And I put everything out there. I wouldn’t say it’s a grand gesture or declaration of love, but it’s something. It’s a clear message. One I’ve fought years to hide.

Apparently, Victoria is the Mario Andretti of tour guides because she is already leading her group to the next display. Everyone but Huddie. Nick squeezes the back of my arm. “Text you later,” he says before leaving Huddie and me alone.

“It’s beautiful,” he says before I’m even in his periphery.

“Of course, it is. It’s you.”

“Mads,” he breathes out my name. “It’s you too. It’s us. When did you start working on this?” Huddie takes my hand and weaves our fingers together.

I was afraid he was going to ask this question. It would be easy to lie and say I started after we started dating or whatever we were doing, but I didn’t.

“I...I turned in my project idea at the beginning of August. We had to have everything approved before school started.” I rake my lower lip through my teeth, waiting for him to say something. He’s standing close to the last canvas reading all the words I’ve written.

His breathing changes rhythm the more he studies the words and phrases I’ve written or the little drawings I drew within the image.

“This was your plan all along?” His eyes wander over the words hidden in his profile. *Strong. Brilliant. Caring. Funny.*

“Yes.”

“Now or Never? What does that mean?” He questions. I sigh. It’s embarrassing to explain. I rub my forehead willing the right words to come out of my mouth without completely humiliating myself.

“I was locked in on the title too. I couldn’t change it.” He nods. I start to fidget on my feet. Huddie is too quiet. He’s overthinking. “One day, I decided it’s now or never. I needed to stop pretending I didn’t have all these feelings for you. Ironic really. I wanted to stop pretending and then agreed to a fake relationship.” I laugh nervously because I’m not sure what else to do now.

He’s so quiet it’s starting to worry me. I may have gone too far with this.

“It was going to happen no matter what,” Huddie mutters. I can barely hear him. For some reason, I need to respond regardless if he is looking for one.

“If you mean us, then yes,” I answer and squeeze his hand. “Well, maybe not. I was going to put myself out there. Put on my big girl panties.” I point to the word brave just under my ribs. “This could have been a complete disaster.” Also known as the most embarrassing day of my life. I laugh nervously again.

“I like your lacey panties, baby.” He smirks.

“Hud!” My cheeks flush.

Huddie shakes his head. “You can’t keep making these grand gestures. The sketches and poems. This.” He points to where our foreheads touch in the painting.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I wasn’t thinking.” I shake out of his grip and wrap my arms around myself. “I was just tired of pretending. The day before I had to submit my proposal, we all hung out together. It was the last week of July. We drove to the beach. Remember that?” Huddie nods again.

“Anyway, the whole way home, I thought about how different it would be if I were strong enough, brave enough to admit how I felt about you. How much better it would be. At

least for me.” I pause, hoping he will agree and say *me too* or give me a grunt. He doesn’t. Huddie just stares at the painting.

“Yeah, so I went home and told myself enough is enough. Now or never. I had to make a move now. Because you were going to leave for college. I couldn’t let that happen without telling you how I felt. I sketched out a plan and sent it to Mrs. Potter for approval. And this is what I came up with.” I shrug a shoulder.

“You kept all this hidden from me. The other night by the river. You never said anything about this.”

“I know. I wanted it to be a surprise. At that point, it was more of a confirmation of feelings, not the declaration I had originally intended. I didn’t plan on giving you the sketchbook. I surprised myself with that one.” I laugh awkwardly, then clear my throat when I see Huddie isn’t amused.

“I loved the sketches. I’m glad you showed me. I love this too.” Huddie kisses me on my forehead, and I feel like I can finally breathe.

“I thought about telling you once we started fake dating. But I wasn’t ready to admit anything yet. Even though I was working on this project, I was still scared. I also thought it could be my trump card if we broke up and went back to friends.”

Huddie’s eyebrows furrow together. “That was never going to happen. Once I had you, I was never letting you go.”

“I didn’t know that,” I squeal.

Jesse ushers another group of parents in to view my work. He glares at Huddie, informing him he needs to move with a stiff nod. Huddie swears at the *little punk* under his breath. Then reluctantly steps back, pulling me with him.

“I also didn’t know how you felt when I started this project. Everything was in motion before Nick and Everly, before fake dating,” he grunts and glares at me, “and before us getting together for real. I couldn’t stop it even if I wanted to.” I move closer to him and slink my arms around his waist.

“Look, I’m sorry if I embarrassed you with all of this. It was an impulse decision at the time. But I don’t regret it. I loved you then, and I love you now. I wanted to share that with everyone, but mainly with you. Please don’t be mad.”

Huddie’s forehead drops to mine, and his flannel-covered arms wrap around me like the warmest blanket.

“I’m not mad, baby. I’m in shock. I can’t believe you did all of this for me. You were willing to take a chance.”

“Sometimes I wonder how much of a chance I was really taking.”

“What do you mean?”

I lift my head from his and briefly look at the painting of us. “Maybe deep down, I knew. You just always felt right.” I nibble on my lip while he stares at me.

Huddie plucks my bottom lip out of my teeth. Then wraps his hand around the back of my neck, pulling me closer to him. “That’s mine to bite,” he says before doing just that and kissing me like no one else is in the room.

“I told you to stop making these grand gestures because I will never be able to create or come up with something as amazing as this.”

“It’s not a competition, Hud.” I pop a kiss under his chin. “If it weren’t for you, none of this,” I point to the collage of the two of us, “would be possible. It’s the little things you give me every day that I treasure. Just keep giving me the pieces, Hud, and I’ll keep painting them.”

EPILOGUE

MATTIE – FOUR YEARS LATER

“Congratulations. We did it,” Ace says, raising a red plastic cup. “Not only did we survive college, but our friendship survived the distance.” We all raise our cups and cheer with him.

“Thanks to me!” Luke claims.

“No way, dude. It was me who kept the group text going while you were preoccupied.” Leo nods his head toward Luke’s girlfriend.

“Yeah, yeah. But who was the one who did all the video chats, huh?” We all groan in unison. “Really? Wow. I thought we were friends.”

“We are,” Nick confirms. “But I still don’t want to get friendly with your backside and help you figure out what kind of rash you have.”

“Seriously, man? In front of my girl?” Luke pops a kiss on her forehead. She rolls her eyes and tucks a piece of red hair behind her ear. “It was a reaction to chlorine, by the way. I was fine. Anyway, it was one time. I still can’t believe between the five of you, no one could help me figure it out. Especially you.” He points to Meg.

“Try me again when I’m done with medical school. I’m in orthopedics, remember? I’m not a rash doctor.” She shivers. “That’s just...No.” Meg decided halfway through her sophomore year of college that she needed to become a doctor in case Ace broke any bones on the field. It was a whole thing after he took a bad hit.

“Luke, you better not be sending photos of your rashy ass to Megs,” Ace says, tightening his hold on Meg. Luke mock gasps.

“I would never...” Luke’s voice trails off as Ace cuts him with a look. “Do it again. You know, just wait until you get an

unidentifiable rash on your backside. Let's see who you come running to. It better not be me." He crosses his arms over his body.

"We'll go to a doctor. A doctor that isn't our best friend's fiance," Huddie adds before Luke can protest that Meg is a doctor.

The six of us have all met back up at our usual spot where we've been camping since we were little kids. Our group has practically doubled in size over the years with the addition of Luke and Leo's girlfriends.

As I predicted, the six of us scattered all over the country for college. Huddie and I were the only two who stayed in Oregon. The six of us promised each other the night we graduated high school, in this very spot, that we would always come back here at least once a year. So far, we've been able to keep that promise.

My eye glaze over the fire as I breathe in the familiar smokey aroma. Luke and Leo are still debating who kept us together while their girlfriends chat. Probably commiserating.

"They must be saints," Huddie whispers behind me, and I snuggle deeper on his lap.

"Must be to put up with the two of them," I agree. My eyes catch on Nick. He came by himself tonight. "I'm worried about him." Huddie knows. I've told him multiple times I'm concerned about Nick and what he's doing with his life over the past year.

"He'll be fine. He's just got some things to figure out still. I know you worry. If something happens, we'll step in. Okay?" Huddie kisses me on my neck. Nick and Huddie were able to patch up whatever differences they had in high school and became really good friends. Huddie might even be closer than I am with Nick these days.

I nod my head and give Nick a soft smile. Ace mentions roasting hot dogs, and my stomach perks up with a ferocious growl. "You hungry, baby?"

"How can you tell?" I joke.

Huddie pats my hip. “Get up, Mads. Let’s get you something to eat.” Huddie takes my hand and leads me in the opposite direction of where Ace is with the hot dogs.

“Hud, food is that way.” I point to a cooler of hot dogs and other goodies. *Oh, is that pasta salad?*

“I’ve got a better idea. Mads and I will be back in a bit,” he tells everyone, and they just nod like it’s not weird we aren’t staying. It’s very weird. We always eat together. We’ve been doing the same routine for years.

I get in Huddie’s truck with a pout. He revs the engine and smirks at me. He knows I’m edging toward a hangry explosion.

The drive to our spot takes about twenty minutes. I started to calm down about ten minutes into our trip, knowing this is where we were headed. I should have learned by now not to complain when Huddie pulls me away from the crowd. Being alone with Huddie is my favorite way to spend my time.

Huddie backs up the truck into the exact spot he did all those years ago. There’s no fire this time, but the stars are just as bright. Silently we work together, spreading out blankets and pillows in the bed of his truck.

After Huddie helps me into the back, he crawls into the backseat and pulls out a giant cooler. I practice my best manners and refrain from tearing the lid off the top once he finally settles beside me.

“Whatcha got in there, Hud?” I ask, batting my eyelashes. It makes him laugh.

“Tacos,” he says, lifting the lid to the cooler. Immediately I’m hit with the fresh aroma of cilantro, lime, cheese, and the unique blend of spices you can only get at Tink’s.

“You brought me Tink’s?” I’m so excited. I don’t know what to do with myself. “Gimme. Gimme. Gimme.” Huddie shoots me a look. “Please,” I add, pressing my palms together to beg.

“What kind do you want first? I have steak and chicken. And there are also a few burritos. I think there are some chips

and queso too.”

“I’ll start with a steak taco.” He digs around until he finds the one I requested. Huddie also pulls out a couple of tacos for himself and napkins. He knows me well.

Huddie watches me closely as I take bites too big for my mouth and moan as the flavor bursts over my tongue. Eating like a lady has never been my thing.

“Have I told you I love you? I do, Hud. I really do,” I tell him with a mouth full of chips and queso. Huddie lets out a shaky breath nodding.

“I love you too. I’m glad you like the tacos, Mads.”

“I would have been happy with hot dogs, too. But this is so freaking good.” I stuff the last bite of my taco in my mouth. Huddie digs around the cooler for another taco for me.

I reach out for it, but he holds it hostage. “You said once that if you give a girl tacos, she’s yours for life.”

“I did?” I say a lot of things. “I don’t remember, but it sounds like something I would say. Tacos are my favorite. Especially Tink’s.” I hold out my hand and make a *gimme* motion.

“I know, baby. But I was wondering if it’s still true.” Huddie finally passes me the taco he’s been holding onto, and the world stops spinning. A green string is tied around the taco with a ring hidden under the bow. “Can I have you for the rest of my life? I love you, Mads. I have since the day I met you. Will you marry me?”

My fingers tremble as I untie the ring. It’s a thin gold band with a small diamond. It’s classic and understated. It’s a ring that Huddie worked summers and weekends to buy for me. All while balancing school, football, and a needy girlfriend. *It’s perfect.*

“Yes! There is nothing I would like to do more than love you forever Huddie,” I answer with tears streaming down my face. “And eat tacos.” Huddie laughs wiping a tear from my face and then pulls me in for a kiss.

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mackenzie

The room is cold. My breath forms a cloud in front of me with every exhale. It smells like bleach and disinfectant. It smells just like the spray Mrs. Harris used on my knees when I fell off my bike once. The lights are blinding fluorescent rods. It's like I'm looking directly into the sun. I have to shield my face with my arm. Then there's the beeping. I follow it into the hallway. It just leads to another room similar to the first one I was in. This room smells different. A little sweeter. It feels familiar. Suddenly the beeping stops, and the room goes dark.

“Mackenzie. Are you still with me? Mackenzie?” Ms. Crawford asks, waving her hand in front of my face. I'm shivering. I can still feel the coldness of the room.

“Yeah, I'm here,” I finally say, shaking off the nightmare and focusing on her face again.

“Where were you just now?” Ms. Crawford asks, sitting up straighter in her chair with a pen in her hand.

I should let her know she is asking the wrong questions. Because if I knew where I was, I probably wouldn't be here every Tuesday afternoon staring at posters of inspirational garbage on her walls.

This is what happens every week. Ms. Crawford wants me to talk about things I don't know anything about. She just sits there with her eyes boring into mine and waits. She waits like a tiger stalking its prey. Only she is hunting for a tidbit of information to analyze. She wants something new to sink her teeth into and mull around in her brain. I've got nothing. I'm blank.

“Nowhere. Sorry. I just spaced.”

I could tell her about the nightmares that keep me up at night. The random places I pop up in at three AM or when my mind starts to wander during the day. I could tell her about the flashes of light that pop up in my brain like an old slide show. I get one second to memorize the image before it disappears.

I don't recognize the faces looking back at me. I can't pinpoint where I am. It's like I've been dropped in the middle of a movie I don't remember watching. How is she supposed to figure out what is happening when I can't even explain it?

"Humph. You know, Mackenzie." Ms. Crawford put her pen and notepad down on the table beside her, covering the top of my file. She clasps her hands together and tilts her head down until she reaches my eyes. I take her bait and lift my chin to look at her.

"One of these days, you will have to talk about it. You don't want to open up to me. Fine. But you need to talk to someone." She says this like I'm a pickle jar that needs to simply twist to the left and remove the lid that has been holding back my words for so long.

I drop my head again and start picking at my cuticles. It's a terrible habit I can't seem to stop. I pick at the cracked skin until they bleed. I don't want to hear this speech again. It is the same conversation every time.

Ms. Crawford is a broken record. Every week she skips back to the chorus. You never get to the melody. It's just the same words every time. Spinning around in your head over and over again until you want to scream.

Mackenzie open up.

Mackenzie share your feelings.

Mackenzie talk about what happened.

Mackenzie I want to help you.

I don't want to hear it. I'm tired of this song. It's overplayed now. I have been meeting with Ms. Crawford every Tuesday during sixth period for the last two years. Before her, it was Mr. Lawrence, the middle school counselor. He smelled like tuna and tobacco. A terrible combination. He had an unruly beard, and his hairline was starting to recede on the sides, leaving one thinning patch in the front. He was the last person I would ever talk to about anything.

Ms. Crawford, on the other hand, has a petite frame. Her dirty blonde hair is styled to fit the current trend. She wears

colorful dresses with mixed patterns and can be spotted immediately in a crowded hallway. I always appreciated that. It made it easier for me to avoid bumping into her between classes.

Ms. Crawford still cares. She is fresh out of college and is determined to save the broken. Unfortunately, she hasn't realized the broken rarely want to be saved.

"I don't see why. I'm fine. Everything is fine just the way it is." I don't see the point anyways. There is nothing I can say to change what happened. There is no going back in time and changing the trajectory of my life. Sitting here every week is just a bad reminder. It's sour milk rolling over my tongue. It's rancid bile stuck in my throat. I want it to end.

I watch as she scribbles away in my file. I wish I knew what she was writing so furiously. My file is thick and full of several years of opinions and test results. My guess, it says something like *Mackenzie Turner is a nice girl. She is quiet but troubled. She is in denial about the trauma she endured and has no desire to make the necessary changes to move forward.*

Ms. Crawford takes a sip of coffee from her monogrammed cup, then changes the subject and asks, "Any plans for the summer? Vacations? Parties?" And after a short pause. "Boys?"

I lean forward in my chair, narrowing my eyes on her, and say, "I don't know. Do you have any plans with boys this summer?" She scolds me with her eyes, and I reign in my contempt. "No boys. They don't like me like that," I say and look down at my white Chuck Taylor shoes.

"Probably because you close yourself off to all relationships, but that is a talk for another day." I try not to look relieved.

It isn't my aversion to sharing my feelings that keep the boys away. I have been interested in plenty of boys in the past. The problem is everyone at this school knows I am a walking head case. No one in their right mind would take me on.

“I have to be honest here. I am worried about you.” Ms. Crawford continues, “I need to know you are going to be okay during the summer. You will be away from most of your peers and a big part of your support system.” My eyes roll so far back in my head I can see the clock behind me. I think I’m better off without this support system she speaks of.

“I’ll be fine. I have a job. And I have Nat.” Nat is my best friend. Some might even say my only friend. Ask anyone, and that is precisely what they would say. “I appreciate the concern, but I’m good. Maybe I will try that journaling thing you keep talking about. I will come back in the fall as my old self.” Ms. Crawford’s eyebrows scrunch up together, and her lips tighten into a thin line.

“Mackenzie, you will never be who you used to be. You are a different person now. You need to understand that the trauma you went through has changed you.” She leans forward in her chair as she speaks to me. I look away and start reading one of the many posters on her wall.

The room is small, almost claustrophobic, and covered in posters of inspirational quotes and how to recognize your feelings. I am always drawn to the one about anger. “There is no going back. Only forward. You will need to accept what happened to you to do it, though,” she says.

I can feel the vein on my forehead start to pop, and I let out a low snarl. “I’ll try it. Can I go now?” I reach for my bag and make my way to the door. She jumps from her seat so fast you would think it caught fire.

Ms. Crawford stands in front of me, puts her hands on my shoulders, and clutches onto them. She sinks the pads of her fingers as deep as she can without causing alarm. “Promise me you will try.” Her plea is sincere. I bite my lower lip and nod once in agreement. I walk into the hallway without a word.

The final bell rings, and the hallway floods with students. My senses are inundated with Acqua Di Gio and Coco Chanel. It looks like a walking Abercrombie catalog. I pull my arms in tight, making myself as small as possible, and push my way through the crowd to my locker. I need to finish cleaning it out

before I can walk out of here. I will be done with this place and everyone in it.

Except for one person, I think to myself as Natalie approaches. “You still coming over later?” Natalie asks, rushing to my side. I peer around my open locker door and smile at her. She is the only good thing about school and my life at the moment.

“Of course. Tradition is tradition.” I put the last of my books in my bag and closed the door shut. “Are you okay?”

“Yep. Of course. Why?”

“Your eye keeps twitching, and you keep biting your lip. You look nervous or something. I don’t know. It’s not the last day of school vibe I thought you would have.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Ms. Crawford. She is rubbing off on you.”

“Ew. Forget I asked.” The thought of being like Ms. Crawford and analyzing people makes me shudder.

“Erased,” she says, tapping her forehead. “I’ve got to catch up with Dillon, but I’ll see you later.” Natalie gives me a quick hug before she disappears into the crowd.

I head in the opposite direction towards the parking lot. I snake my way through clusters of people I don’t know, people I should probably know. They know me. They know my entire life story. It was all over the news. I hear them saying their goodbyes and talking about summer parties I will never be invited to.

I wonder what it’s like to have a normal life. A life where you only have to worry about what you will wear or how you will do your hair, instead of what you will cook for dinner and if you paid the electric bill on time.

I keep pushing my way through, and suddenly the hallway clears. I can see the exit doors in front of me. My pulse starts racing in excitement. It’s the finish line at the end of a brutal marathon. Adrenaline kicks in as I pick up my pace and speed towards the door. I keep my eyes on the tile floor and count my steps to freedom.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, -

CRASH.

I run headfirst into a brick wall. Not a brick wall. A wall of muscle. The impact pushes me back and sandwiches me between the boy and the wall of lockers. My head hits the metal hard, and there is a metallic tang in my mouth. I must have bit my tongue when my head buckled.

“Turner, you okay?” I feel his callused hand on my arm steadying me and pulling me up from the floor.

There is a constant ringing in my ears. I feel like I’m underwater. All his words are muffled. I blink my eyes a few times until I find a face to focus on. It’s Nate, Natalie’s brother, and I feel a rush of heat and embarrassment roll through my body.

“I’m fine,” I say, shaking off the throbbing I feel in the back of my head. I want to run, but I’m too dizzy. I fall back down into Nate’s arms. His amber eyes are staring into mine. All four of them. “I...I... I have to go,” I say, trying to find the ground beneath my feet.

“Yeah, sure,” he says, handing me my notebook that fell on the floor. Neither one of us moved for a moment. We are suspended in time. Locked together in some weird trance neither one of us understands.

“Bye,” I say abruptly and scoot around him.

I elbow my way past Nate’s football friends, avoiding eye contact at all costs. I practically run to the door letting the crowd swallow me. Letting out a deep breath I hesitate before pushing the door open. I turn to the sea of strangers, searching for a familiar face, but he is just a ghost. His touch still haunting me.

I drive home with the windows down and the music loud. I need to drown out my run-in with Nate, but it is all I can think about. After cleverly avoiding him and the rest of his goonies all Sophomore year, I run into him on the last day. It figures. We were friends once many years ago, but things change. Feelings change.

“I’m home,” I yell into the empty kitchen as I toss my bag on the dining table. On the kitchen counter, I see a note and an envelope. Cindy was here. She’s gotten really good at avoiding me. I open the cabinet where I keep the lockbox and drop the envelope of money in with the rest of them. I throw the note in the trash.

The house feels cold even with the burst of heat from outside. I shiver walking into the living room. The curtains are drawn tight, making the room feel like a cave. Dark and claustrophobic. It’s an open space, but it still manages to suck all the breath from your lungs in a panic. The window above the front door is the only source of light. The sun skates across the ceiling and highlights the dust mites dancing in the air.

The dust never settles here. It has nowhere to go. There are no picture frames or tchotchkes to attach themselves to. They spin and spin into a void of nothing. The room is like a museum exhibit with an imaginary rope shielding you from entering and touching the dated couches and deserted side tables.

I’ve learned to ignore the room altogether. I take a tight right turn down the hall leading to my room. The carpet is worn down from years of abuse. This is the only path I take in the house, and it shows.

I read once in a magazine that your bedroom says a lot about you. Anyone can walk in your bedroom and make a snap judgment based on what you have on display for anyone to see and what you keep hidden away in a drawer like a dirty little secret.

I lost count of my secrets. I keep them so hidden, and out of reach even I don’t know what they are anymore. My room is vanilla. Plain with very little flavor. Anyone could inhabit my bedroom. There is nothing in here that would lead you to think it was mine.

There is a bookshelf in the corner surrounded by stacks of books to be read. An oversized reading chair is angled perfectly to catch the morning sun.

I have a wire hanging above my bed with photographs clipped across the front—the only personal item on display. Most of the pictures are candid of Nat and me.

My favorite is the two of us at the State Fair two summers ago. I didn't want to ride the Ferris wheel, but Nat quickly reminded me that *we don't say no to the list*. Before I knew it, we were at the highest point of the Ferris wheel. Nat and I were sitting on top of the world with the carnival lights shining bright behind us. I was scared witless. Call me crazy, but a ride that can be put together and taken apart in less than twenty-four hours doesn't seem safe. Add in my irrational fear of heights, and I was in hysterics. But Nat, Nat was fearless.

The list is our summer ritual. It is our way to keep the break interesting. Otherwise, I would spend every day inside murdering my “to be read” pile and binging Netflix. We started it when we were in elementary school. It was Nat's idea to do it. She loves lists and being a taskmaster.

I remember in fourth grade we decided to stay up for forty-eight hours. I don't know why we thought that would be fun. I ended up falling asleep face-first on my plate of spaghetti at dinner.

The summer before freshman year we started adding riskier choices. We were daring ourselves to make moves and create precarious situations with the opposite sex. As if writing something down on a piece of paper gave you the balls to follow through. I wish it did.

I go into my closet and change into some cutoffs and a t-shirt. I'm sure Nat is already waiting for me. The last day of school tradition is dinner at her house and finalizing the list for the summer.

I grab my notebook from my backpack on the table and start to sprint through the backyard towards Natalie's house.

mackenzie

The sweat is already streaming down my face as I hit the trees that divide our property. I take a moment to catch my breath once I'm hidden in the shade of their branches. At one point in time, these were our woods. Looking at the treehouse with its rusty nails and torn roof, I try to remember life before the accident, but nothing comes.

I make my way across the creek, balancing on the larger slabs of rocks. Nat's house is perched on the top of a grassy slope. It isn't very steep, but it is long and brutal on hot days. My thighs begin to burn halfway up. My movements get slower with every step and sweat is gluing my shirt to my skin. I keep pulling my shirt away, allowing a little air to circulate.

As I suspected, Natalie is already waiting for me by the pool. She is stretched out in the lounge chair in a bikini top and cut-offs like mine. I'm not brave enough to flaunt around her house in a bathing suit. I spot a small cooler in between the chairs, and my body starts begging for water.

"Please tell me there is water in there. I'm dying. Water. Me. Please. That hill. I hate that hill." I try to catch my breath. Each word is stealing the last bits of energy I have.

"It used to be easier, right?" Nat asks as she passes me water from the cooler. I can't speak. I nod and open up the water bottle.

"So, Mack, about our summer plans." I did my best to listen while gulping down the bottle of water. My heart was still racing, and I was now sweating profusely. I always thought it was weird that your body sweats more after you stop moving.

Nat, however, looks like a sun goddess with her pecan complexion glistening in tanning oil. I am more like a shade of pale winter snow. I've already decided '*getting a tan*' will be a top priority for me on the list this year. Nat, however, can go ahead and check it off hers. She is perfect.

“I’ve got the notebook right here,” I say, sitting down and turning to the page with the list we started earlier in class. “I was going to suggest a slip n slide, but I just can’t with that hill,” I say, rubbing the burning sensation out of my thighs.

“Write it down. It would be fun,” she says without looking up from her magazine. She flips another page without making eye contact with me.

“But then we have to do it. Rule number one, remember?” I try to pull her attention back to me. I know this will get her riled up. It does every time.

“I’m sure you will find a way out of it. Break your leg or something. You always find an excuse to not do something on the list.”

“Break a leg. Now that is a good idea. I should remember that. And for your information, I am more than willing to do everything on the list. Some of them are just out of my control.” Like boys. They have a mind of their own. And whatever is on their mind is not me.

I am sixteen, and I’ve yet to have my first kiss. Suddenly my conversation with Ms. Crawford is replaying in my head. *You close yourself off to all relationships.* Nat keeps writing ‘*first kiss*’ down on the list for me. I however have made peace with my virgin lips.

She has seen the other side and knows the euphoria that comes from a good make-out session. Nat has been sucking face with her boyfriend Dillon for the past two years. They met at marching band practice the summer before freshman year and have been inseparable ever since.

“I agree. Some of them are out of your control. There are also things you can do, but you choose to avoid them. Even if you NEED to do them.” Her glare cuts me like a machete. Nat thinks she knows what’s best for me. We’ve been friends a long time, but I don’t tell her everything. I know what she wants me to do, and I don’t want to talk about it.

“SWITCH!” I yell to announce a change of subject. Nat let out a big sigh. Probably mad at her own rule.

She started this a few years ago when I admitted I thought Nate was cute. I don't blame her. If I had a brother, it would be weird to hear my best friend talk about him. Since that moment of my complete lapse of judgment, we are allowed to yell the word switch, and we have to change the subject immediately. No questions asked.

"Fine. I do have something else to talk to you about." Nat's phone buzzed. "Impeccable timing. It's Dillon"

"Tell him you're busy. He will have to wait his turn," I say with a mischievous smile. I like Dillon. He is great. He is perfect for Nat, but it isn't fun being the third wheel.

"Hey, babe. No. Not yet. Hold on a sec." She looks up to me and says, "Mack do you mind grabbing me a snack? I think my mom just got some new chips made from sesame seeds or something." My face twists in disgust at the thought of putting sesame seed chips in my mouth. "I know. Gross, but do you mind?"

"As long as I don't have to eat it." I pick up the notebook and head towards the house.

I yank the sliding glass door open with my notebook tucked under my arm. The metal spiral feels cool against my skin. I quickly survey the dining room and living room for traces of Nate or his mom. I know his dad will still be at work. He is always at work.

The house is empty, yet it feels different than mine. The room is bright. Sunlight pours in through the open windows. Family photos and colorful art line the walls. Small knick-knacks that hold a special meaning to the person who owns them are scattered around the room.

The dining room table is set with a centerpiece of fresh lemons and eucalyptus. There is a giant whiteboard in the kitchen with appointments and schedules written next to the ongoing grocery list and menu plan for the week. Tonight is homemade pizza.

In the pantry, I rummage through bags of seaweed chips and cauliflower crackers. I suddenly feel a pang of sadness for

Natalie and Nate. How do they live under these conditions?

Mrs. Harris was constantly implementing the latest health craze. That meant eating snacks made from chickpeas. Gross. I put back the bag of chips in my hands.

She wasn't always this way. Everyone changed that year. I overheard her telling Nate one time, "*we only have one life. We need to take care of ourselves.*" He, of course, countered with "*exactly why we should eat food that doesn't taste like the bottom of my shoe.*" We were eight, and for the first time in months, I laughed.

I give up on the pantry. It is a lost cause. I can't subject Natalie to such blasphemy. Opening the fridge, I see it isn't much better. There were some grapes and carrots but no ranch dip. Again, how one lives life without ranch, I do not know. Grapes will have to do.

I also snag a few bananas and apples from the bowl on the counter. Now I need peanut butter. I turn back to the pantry, praying there is something that resembles actual peanut butter in here. Apples are so much better with peanut butter. My mouth is watering thinking about it. Sadly, it seems Mrs. Harris has also given up on peanuts. Sacrilegious. I can only find almond butter. I'm skeptical. I walk out of the pantry, reading the label on the jar.

Almonds.

Palm oil.

How is this going to be good?

SLAM!

The jar of almond butter crashes into the linoleum, and my eyes are locked with those beautiful amber eyes again.

"You two really need to stop meeting like this," Connor says as I try to hide my embarrassment. Nate didn't say anything as I made my way past him. "You really are a Mack Truck, aren't you?" Connor asks behind me. I hear a giant smack followed by Conner yelling, "Damn Nate, that hurt!"

“Don’t call her that,” Nate says, glaring at Connor. I attempt to hide my shock as Nate defends me, but he has me reeling. I didn’t think he would bother or care what people said about me.

“You don’t have to hit me, bro.” Connor leans against the kitchen island across from me. “Mack knows I’m just joking around. Don’t you, Mack?” Connor says, batting his eyes.

“Yeah, bro. Totally,” I say, mocking them. I hate that nickname. It has tormented me since middle school. I don’t know who started it, but if I did, I would throat punch them. It took less than twenty-four hours for everyone in the school to start calling me that. Five years later, it still echoes in the hallways as I pass by.

“You’re looking good, though,” Connor says, staring at me while I’m cutting apples. Nate is staring at me, too, waiting for my reaction. I keep my focus on my cutting technique. I perfected it last summer. Thank you, Julia Child.

I don’t know why Connor would compliment me on my looks. It has to be a joke or something. I am nothing like the girls they hang out with. I’m nothing like Olivia, Nate’s current girlfriend, fling, whatever. She was a dream girl with her raven-colored hair and piercing blue eyes. She had legs for days, money, and she had Nate.

“You know Connor. You are one of a kind,” I say, stabbing the knife into my apple.

“Why, thank you.” He’s so smug. I twist the knife in the apple, imagining it is Connor’s eyeball. I’m usually not this bothered by them, but I’m a little on edge after running into Nate twice today.

“That wasn’t a compliment.” The smile fades from his face. “Let me give you a tip.” I ignore my apple and look at Connor with hostility. “Don’t insult a girl and then tell her she’s pretty. It doesn’t work that way.”

“It does for some girls.”

“They deserve you then,” I say, suddenly, feeling pity for any girl who has spent time in his atmosphere.

“Why so bitter? All this time alone finally getting to you?” I know he is trying to get under my skin, and it is working.

“What makes you think I’m alone? Who said I didn’t have a boyfriend?”

“Nat-”

Before Connor had a chance to finish, Nate chimes in. “Nat!” Nate clears his throat. “Nat has never mentioned a boyfriend.”

“I guess Nat doesn’t tell you everything,” I say as confidently as I can muster. I think they believe me. I can’t tell. Nate looks stunned by the idea that I caught someone’s attention. That stings a little bit. I’m no Olivia, but I’m also not a complete mutt.

“You do?” Nate asks. “Who?” Who? That’s a good question. Who is this mystery man? It can’t be anyone from school. There is no way they will believe that web of lies.

“Oh uh.” I shove one of the slices of apple in my mouth to buy myself time to think. “Just some guy I met at work. It’s nothing official. No big deal.” This is a half-truth. Someone came to the bookstore every day during spring break, and we hit it off. Unfortunately, I never saw him again. “Why are you so interested anyway?” I keep my tone casual, but I’m dying to know why there is a sudden interest in my love life.

This whole conversation is weird considering I’ve talked to Nate and Connor at school, I don’t know, never. Now they want to know my current relationship status. It’s bizarre.

“I don’t care who you’re making out with. Nate, do you?” The way Connor asks makes me even more uncomfortable. It’s like there is an inside joke between the two of them. It may have nothing to do with me. Maybe this is just how they act around girls. Either way, I wouldn’t say I liked the thought of the two of them discussing me behind closed doors.

“Of course not.” Nate’s voice is cold. Connor chokes back a laugh, and Nate glares at him. Connor holds both of his hands up and backs off.

“Great. Now that we have sorted all of this out, I’m going back outside.” I gather up all the snacks for Nat and balance them on top of the notebook.

I have known Nate since I was five years old. We were best friends once. Now, I feel like I barely know him at all. I can spend all this time in his home, with his family, but he is still the popular jock at school—the most sought-after and unattainable guy. And I am just his sister’s best friend.

Back outside, Nat is stretched out on a lounge chair, flipping through a magazine again. She sprung to attention once she saw me coming.

“Took you long enough,” she says, grabbing one of the bananas. “I need to talk to you about this summer.” She takes a quick bite from her banana.

“We’ll get to that, but first, do you and Nate talk about me?” She didn’t have to answer. Her face did all the talking for her.

mackenzie

Natalie is stone cold. I poked and prodded, but she wasn't giving me anything to work with. I should have known she would keep quiet. As close as we are, Nate is still her twin. She has the responsibility of holding secrets for both of us.

It doesn't matter. I thought as I set the table. Nate can talk about me all he wants. Everyone else does. I should have expected him to stoop to the level of cockroach like the rest of his friends. That's the way it is with guys like Nate.

I'm smart enough to avoid them and stay off their radar.

It's more complex with Nate considering I practically live at his house most days. I guess avoiding people is a skill I picked up from Cindy. It's rare I see Nate before dinner. And then he is too busy inhaling his food to pay attention to me.

I started eating dinner over here one night a week. That was all I would allow myself. I didn't want to intrude on their family.

I came up with excuses to leave. *Cindy was cooking something special. Cindy and I are going out tonight. I have to study.* Eventually, I ran out of reasons and stayed longer and came over more often.

I wanted to ditch dinner tonight, but Nat convinced me to stay. She said Nate would think it meant something if I wasn't there. Why he would come to that conclusion, I have no idea. I told her what I do or don't do has zero effect on *Nate Harris*. Her eyes went big, and she went back to playing candy crush on her phone.

"I'm getting hungry. It smells so good." I told Mrs. Harris as I got a few glasses down from the cabinet to set the table.

She may buy weird snacks, but Mrs. Harris kills it in the kitchen. She could have her own cooking show or something. It was magical watching her float around the kitchen, juggling everything it takes to pull a meal together. I've never seen

anything like it before. All Cindy ever did was pull back the corner of a cardboard box before throwing the dinner in the microwave.

“Almost ready. You can go get Nathan and Natalie if you want,” she says, as she checks the pizzas one last time before turning the oven off. I run over to the stairs and yell for Nate and Natalie from the bottom step.

“I could have done that,” she says as I enter the kitchen. I shrug and sneak a piece of pepperoni off one of the pizzas.

“Where’s dad?” Nate asks as he comes crashing into the kitchen. I push myself against the wall at the sound of his voice. My arm becomes an extension to the molding as I will myself to become invisible.

“Stuck in traffic. He will be here soon enough. Go ahead and grab a pla-” Mrs. Harris stops mid-sentence as she watches Nate pile four pieces of pizza onto his plate.

“What? I’m starving.”

“At least wait to start eating until you’re sitting down.” She pushes him toward the table. “Come on, Mackenzie.” She waves me over. Nate stops eating for a moment and watches me as I peel myself off the wall. I let out the breath I was holding and curl my lip on one side of my mouth.

“What is taking Nat so long?” I ask. I need a buffer. I don’t want to sit at the table alone with Nate. Not tonight. It feels weird. I feel weird. *Why do I feel so weird?* I shake out my thoughts and add another slice of pizza to my plate.

“Probably upstairs talking to Dillon about their trip,” Nate says with a mouthful of pizza.

I walk over to the table and take my seat across from him. This has been my seat for eleven years. Despite the awkwardness, it is still my seat. “Trip? What trip?” I ask, confused.

“Oh, you haven’t heard? Mom and dad are letting Nat vacation with Dillon for six weeks this summer. Can you believe it? I can’t even have a girl in my room, but they are letting her go across the country with him.” Nate was

indignant and only thinking of himself. I don't blame him. I instantly thought about myself too. The phrase *six weeks* on repeat in my brain. "I'm surprised she hasn't told you yet."

"Hasn't told who what?" Nat asks before I have a chance to process everything Nate just said.

"You haven't told me about your trip. With Dillon." I take another bite of pizza to keep myself from saying anything else.

"Oh. I tried," she says, sitting down beside me with her dinner. "But you had other things to talk about. Remember?" Nat rolls her eyes towards Nate, and my stomach flips over the slice of pizza I just ate like a pancake.

"What did you want to talk about?" Nate asks, staring me down, suddenly interested in something other than pizza and ruining my summer.

I sat there with my mouth open, searching for the words to say when the front door opened. Mr. Harris slugs his way inside the house. He is weary after a long day at work. I am relieved to have a distraction. By the look of Nat's face, she was too.

"Hey, honey." Mrs. Harris greets her husband with a hug, a kiss, and a plate of pizza. She ushers him to his seat at the head of the table between Nate and me.

"You should have told me," I whisper to Nat while keeping my eyes glued to my plate.

"I know. Can we talk about this later?" She whispers back.

"What are you two carrying on about over there?" Mr. Harris asks.

"Nat's trip. She didn't tell her about it yet." A smirk appears on his face. He is enjoying this. Did he intentionally want to hurt me? I'm going to kick his shin under the table if he doesn't watch it.

"It will be a lovely time," Mrs. Harris chimes in. "Won't it, Tom?"

"From what I hear, it will be very educational. A great learning experience," he replies.

“A learning experience? You don’t say. Nat, please fill us in. What exactly will you be learning?” Nate takes a bite of his pizza and stares at his sister.

Good question, Nate. Yes, Nat, please tell us. I would love to know how a road trip with Dillon is a learning experience.

“Um, well, there will be museums and park tours,” Nat speaks cautiously. She either didn’t want to give Nate too much fuel, or she didn’t want to make me jealous and angry. Too late for that. I’m fuming. On the outside, I may appear calm, but inside I’m a raging inferno.

“Sounds amazing, Nat,” I say in a sorry attempt to be supportive. I remember her face at school earlier today and how heavy she felt. This was her burden. She didn’t want to tell me. Maybe she didn’t know how to tell me. Now she just looks sad. As mad as I am, I don’t want to be the reason she feels this way.

Mrs. Harris interrupts my thoughts and says, “Nathan, what are your plans for the summer?”

Nate perks up now that the attention is on him. “Ahem, well, I was thinking about restoring an old truck.” He waits for his dad to say something. He didn’t. “I was driving down Albert Mill Road and saw one for sale. Right in front of old man Cooper’s property.”

“That sounds fun. Tom, don’t you think?” Mrs. Harris asks. She is the padding between her husband and their children. The buffer that is needed to keep everyone happy.

“And where do you plan to restore it? How much will it cost? Are you even skilled enough to restore the truck yourself?” Mr. Harris fires off a full round of questions at Nate.

“Money isn’t a problem. I’ve been saving up all year from mowing lawns.” Nate started mowing lawns a few years ago. He is pretty good at it. I know I pay him fifty dollars every two weeks to mow my lawn and keep up with the landscaping outside the house.

“Okay, and where do you plan to take on this project? I’m assuming this is a big job and won’t be done in a weekend.”

“Definitely not a weekend job. Between work and hanging with friends, it will probably take most of the summer.”

The room was silent waiting for Mr. Harris to respond. Nat and I trade glances. We both knew what the answer would be. They had a good dad. He provided a great life for them, but he wasn’t available. He was always working late and on weekends. We didn’t talk about it much, but I know it bothered Nat. And now I can see the effects weighing heavy on Nate.

“I can’t have you filling up the garage all summer. There isn’t room between the cars we already have.”

“But dad,” Nate pleads. “It’s one summer.”

“I’m sorry, Nate. Listen, if you find somewhere else to do the work, then you can get the truck. Otherwise, it will have to wait until some other time.”

“There’s nowhere else I can do it. There won’t be another time. The truck will be gone. I guess I’ll just lay around and do nothing all summer.” He hangs his head in defeat. I would have felt bad for him if I wasn’t too busy feeling bad for myself.

Six weeks. What the hell am I going to do for six weeks?

Mrs. Harris stands up and starts clearing our plates. When she gets to Nate, she nudges him and says, “Maybe you and Mackenzie can spend some time together this summer. Just like old times.” Nate laughs at the thought.

“Gee, thanks,” I say under my breath. I get it. It’s a terrible idea, but he didn’t have to laugh about it.

“I think that’s a great idea, Andy,” Mr. Harris says, getting up from the table.

“You can’t be serious?” Nate asks. “No offense, Turner.” I muster up the best smile I can and shrug it off, but I was offended even though I agreed with him.

“Why not? You two were a wild pair back in the day. Andy, remember when they caught all those frogs and put them in the bathtub? You two couldn’t have been much older than six or seven.”

“Don’t remind me. I was cleaning mud off the shower walls for weeks!”

“That was a long time ago.” I finally say. I don’t remember this day or any other day I spent with Nate growing up. I only remember one moment we were friends, and with the snap of his fingers, we weren’t. There was no explanation. He just stopped talking to me.

Nat pokes me, melting my thoughts, and asks if I am ready to go upstairs. I thank Mrs. Harris for dinner. Nate is still trying to reason with his dad as we leave the room.

Natalie and Nate own the top floor of their house. You go left for Nate’s room and right for Natalie’s. Keep walking straight, and you will find yourself in their shared bathroom. I turn right down the hall and immediately flop onto Nat’s bed.

“Do you hate me?” Nat asks, joining me on the bed. I didn’t say anything. I focus on the lights strung from each corner of her room. “I bet you won’t even miss me.” I miss her already. “It’s only six weeks anyways.”

“Yeah, six weeks. What, that’s only half the summer?” Nat let out a big sigh beside me. I don’t like seeing her like this. Her face is creased and heavy. She will need botox before she’s thirty if I don’t let her off the hook. I take her hand and lock it in mine. “Educational, huh?”

We both break out in giggles. Nat explained how she proposed the trip to her parents. It wasn’t until Dillon’s mom confirmed sleeping arrangements and itinerary and answered every one of her mom’s questions that she was allowed to go.

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t tell me. You should have told me as soon as Dillon asked you to come with him.” That’s what best friends do. They tell each other everything, but she felt she couldn’t tell me this.

She should have come to me screaming with excitement. The boy she loves wants to travel across the country with her. I should have been the first to know, but I was the last. That hurts.

“I know. I’m really sorry. It’s just...” Stop protecting me! I want to scream at her.

“If you haven’t forgotten, I live my life vicariously through you.” I flip over and get comfortable with one of her pillows under me. “You can’t keep this kind of stuff from me, okay?” I say as I fiddle with one of the tassels on the pillow. “From now on, you tell me everything.”

“Okay. And you too.” She flips on her side and faces me. “Text me every day with what you are doing here while I’m gone.”

“That will be easy. Nothing.” With Nat gone, my summer just got devastatingly dull. I will go to work, maybe dinner with Cindy, and a few late nights reading. My life is on hold until she gets back.

“No, I won’t allow it. You have to do some of the things on the list while I’m gone. I won’t have any fun if you are here sulking and having a pity party for six weeks. I need to know you will be okay.” Nat is the second person who told me that today.

“Now, who sounds like Ms. Crawford?”

“She said that?” I nod. “Shit.”

“And for the record, I will be fine. This does throw a little wrinkle in my plans, but I’ll figure it out. I always do.”

We both twist our heads towards the hallway. Nate was stomping up the stairs. I’m guessing he wasn’t able to change his dad’s mind. Nate slams his bedroom door. I wince, waiting for the loud bang of the door to hit the frame. It never came. A dirty T-shirt on the floor blocked it, leaving it ajar.

“He is the one you should be worried about leaving alone for six weeks,” I whisper. “Is he going to make it here by himself with your dad?”

Nat stares down the hall towards her brother's room. You can hear him mumbling as he walks back and forth across the wood floors that creak a little with every step. Then there was a thud against the wall. He is doing his usual problem solving by throwing a small basketball against the wall.

"Nate's not going to let that truck go. He really wanted to get it. He's been talking about it all week. I wish he could find something quieter than throwing that basketball against the wall. It's so annoying."

She walks over to her door and shuts it. "He will figure out life without me. I won't be around forever. A few more years, and we will both be on our own anyway. Who knows what life will be like after college?"

She is no longer talking about Nate. This speech is for me. "This is what I've known my whole life." Nat was back on the bed next to me. "I want to study art, see what else is out there. I need to know that I will be okay without Nate."

I sat there, taking in her words. I never imagined this situation from her perspective. The idea that she might be afraid to be without me too. I assumed everyone fretted over me because of the accident. It never occurred to me that Nat might need me too.

Something else was bothering her. She was fidgeting with a hair tie, and she never fidgets. Nat is confident and sure of herself. She has always known what her future would be like. It was all written down in one of her diaries. First, it was art school, maybe an engagement, but no marriage or kids before she graduated. She wanted to travel and have a successful career. Her whole life completely mapped out. But now, she is scared and uncertain.

"You know I could probably fit in your duffle bag." She let out a little laugh.

"Part of me wishes you could come along, but I don't think you want to." She was right. I didn't. A road trip with Dillon and his little brother and sister sounds like misery. A road trip with Nat, Dillon, and a hot guy who was madly in love with me? Sign me up. I would even go without the love part. "What

if he decides halfway to Missouri that he doesn't like me anymore? Then I'm stu-"

I held up my hand to signal her to pause. "Let me stop you there. Dillon won't. He wouldn't have asked you to come if he wasn't mad about you. He would have asked one of his band buddies to go with him instead. So, let's stop worrying about what could go wrong and focus on what could go right." I give her an exaggerated wink. "You know I'm right."

It took us a few hours, but we planned out her entire wardrobe for the trip. We picked out pieces that could be worn in multiple ways. That way, each outfit will look brand new even though we were recycling the same shirts and shorts.

I also helped her make a list of everything we still needed to shop for. New underwear, bathing suit, a fancy dress, red lipstick, and perfume, to name a few.

We made plans to get our nails and hair done too. I wanted to do everything I could to make sure she was prepared for this trip. I also wanted her to know that I support her completely.

Walking back home, it was pitch black. The path to my house was lit with solar lights and lightning bugs. I can see my porch light on in the distance. I race down the path ignoring the feeling that someone is watching me.

I lock the door behind me, grab a water bottle from the fridge, and stare at my garage door.

Mrs. Harris' words keep repeating in my head. *Maybe you and Mackenzie can spend some time together this summer. Just like old times.* Is it a crazy idea? Could we pick up where we left off? So much has changed. We have changed. Or have we?

If I did this, it could be the beginning of my unraveling. I've kept it together all this time by ignoring all that's in front of me. If Nate agrees, I will have to face my fears. I should just ask him. Nate's reaction at dinner makes me believe he won't agree to it anyway.

ME: Nate, it's Mack. We need to talk. Can you meet me by the treehouse tomorrow?

mackenzie

I had another nightmare last night. This one started with flashing lights. Then I was back in the cold room. I woke up in a cold sweat, and my hair matted to my face. The nightmares are getting more intense and consistent. I wish I could decipher them.

Nat doesn't know about the nightmares. She thinks I stopped sleeping over because of her snoring. She sounds like a donkey when she sleeps. As loud as she is, I'm worse when I wake up screaming.

I tried to tell Ms. Crawford once. The nightmare left me so raw it stuck with me all day. I was a complete disaster at school. My eyes were bloodshot and puffy. I barely made it through the day with all the teasing. When sixth period rolled around, I just sat there in her tiny office. Ms. Crawford asked me how I was, and I said I was good. I told her I was tired from studying all night. Then I sat silently in her room, memorizing the poster on her wall about how to make new friends.

My thoughts are interrupted by my phone buzzing. I grab it from the nightstand and check the message. It took Nate long enough. He finally texted me back.

NATE: Yeah, sure. 10 am.

He said yes. Shit. I didn't expect him to say yes. I check the time on my alarm clock. I have three hours to overthink this whole thing. I grab a pillow, slam it on top of my face, and scream. I am sinking to a new low today. The amount of shame and pity I feel for myself could fill the Atlantic Ocean.

Why is he so casual? No protesting? No questions? This is called a red flag. The Nate I've come to know would not be so indifferent. The Nate I know would make me grovel and pay for the privilege of a private meeting in the woods.

I look back over my text. *It's Mack. We need to talk.* What does he think I want to talk about? Yesterday? My fake

boyfriend? This is too much. I scream into the pillow again.

Get it together, Mackenzie. You can do this.

The key to this whole thing is to make him realize he needs what I have more than I need what he has. My toes curl at the thought. Note to self, do not say it like that. He will take it the wrong way.

I rush out of bed to the bathroom and turn on the shower. I need to wash these toe curling fantasies out of my head before they take root. It is not what I need to be thinking about right now. Especially not with Nate. I need to be a viper when I talk to him. I grab a t-shirt and the last pair of clean shorts from my closet and quickly get dressed.

It's nine o'clock. My hands are starting to sweat. It's only Nate. I reminded myself. But that's the problem. It's Nate Harris. Captain of the football team. Mr. All American. Every girl's dream guy. *Not mine.* I remind myself again in case my body fools itself into thinking otherwise.

There is no way he will want to spend one minute alone with me. Even if it meant he gets to buy the stupid truck. He could have already found another garage for all I know, and this is a waste of time.

My stomach lets out a gnarly growl, and I search my pantry for something to eat that isn't stale or expired. I manage to find a single honey bun and half a pop tart. The pop tart was borderline inedible, but I ate it anyway.

I grab a small notebook from a junk drawer that hangs slightly askew. It's been a few years since it closed correctly. Cindy broke it one night in a fit of rage. I was in my room when it happened. I heard the slam, and the following day the drawer was barely hanging on, just like Cindy.

The kitchen is outdated and screams 1985. The cabinets are a hideous brown laminate and cracked in several places. The walls aren't much better, covered floor to ceiling in peeling wallpaper. It takes all my self-control not to start peeling the wallpaper off every day. The countertops are chipped on the

edges, and the oven only works when it wants to. It's not much to look at, but it's home.

I jot down a few groceries on the list to get later and head out the door. The grass is still wet with morning dew. The temperature is on the rise. It didn't take long for the sweat to start collecting on my forehead. I regret the choice to wear mascara as my eyelids begin to sweat.

I run until I find refuge under the large oak trees. My favorite tree is the one with branches that grow low and wild. Each limb acts as the perfect step to climb your way to the top and enter the treehouse. I never made it past the second branch, but I've watched Nate do it before. I preferred to use the ladder. This was our tree.

I pace in front of the tree and start planning my approach.

"Nate, I was thinking..." Too desperate.

"What's up, Nate..." Definitely not. I keep pacing in front of the oak tree.

"Yo! Nate!" Nope. Don't ever say that again. Ever.

"Nate, I've got the best idea..." Nothing feels right. I check my phone for the time. He's late. I'm nervous.

"Nate, I need you. I wa-"

"You need me?" A voice says from behind me.

"Shit! What the hell, Harris? Don't sneak up on people like that." I swat at him but only catch air. "No. I do not need you." This is not how I want the conversation to start.

"Then why am I here? It's early, and I'm tired." Nate looks like he just rolled out of bed. His hair is messy, with curly ends going in every direction. The dark circles under his eyes are almost as bad as mine.

"Right, I would hate to keep you from sleeping the day away." I take a deep breath before I start digging my grave of humiliation. "Did you find a way to get the truck?"

"Is that what this is about? You want to rub it in my face that my dad's a jerk and said no?" I've never seen him this

angry. “Look, I’m sorry I was the one who dropped the bomb on you about Nat’s trip, but I don’t have time for this.” Nate didn’t wait for me to respond. He starts walking through the creek again.

“Wait!” Now I sound angry or desperate. It could go either way. “I don’t care that you told me. I would have found out eventually. Just answer the question. Did you find a way or not?”

“No. Can I go now?”

“No.” I spit back with the same venom in my voice. “What if I found a way to save both of our summers?”

“Save it from what exactly? Summer just started, Turner. How is it already in jeopardy of being ruined?”

“Uh, well, for one, Nat is leaving town for six weeks. This is devastating news as we have already established.”

“Speak for yourself. Sounds like heaven to me.” Nate picks up a pebble from the creek bed and tosses the small stone back into the creek. His forearm tightens and flexes as he flicks the rock with his wrist. I blink my eyes hard to erase the image of Nate’s muscular arms. I open them just in time to see the pebble skips across the water three times before sinking to the bottom. “A month of quiet.” He hesitates for a moment while he searches for another rock to throw. “And I won’t have to hear the two of you cackling all day long,” he says, pointing his finger in my direction.

“I do not cackle.”

“Yes, you do. It’s terrible. And then the snorting.”

“I do not snort.” I snap back. He looks back at me. His eyes go wide as he mouths the word okay. “You shouldn’t be listening to us anyway. Don’t you have better things to do?”

“I do, but it’s hard to ignore. The walls aren’t padded, you know. You would be surprised what I can hear from my room.” My face goes slack. The amount of panic rushing through my body is immense. Nat and I talk about everything in her room. What all has he heard?

“You’re bluffing.” I wait for his reaction. He gives me nothing, just a shrug. “Whatever, I have nothing to hide.” I lie.

“If you say so, Turner.” Nate moves closer to me, and heat rises to my cheeks. “Did you only want to tell me how much summer was going to suck, or was there something else?”

I inch backward until I’m against the trunk of the tree. Nate is standing so close. Too close. He reaches up, grabs a taller branch, and starts using it as a pull-up bar. The veins on his forearms begin to pop with every rep, but he makes the movements look effortless.

I clear my throat and say, “Do you think your mom was right?” He hangs from the tree for a moment before dropping to the ground.

“Huh?”

“Do you think your mom was right last night? She said we should spend time together. I was thinking-”

“Well, don’t. No offense, but-”

“I’m not offended.” I cut him off. I am offended. This is the second time he’s said that to me. I get it, Nate. You don’t like me and would prefer to do anything else on the planet if it meant you didn’t have to spend time with me. “You know what, forget about it. I thought maybe you wanted a place to work on your truck. Silly me.” I walk away this time.

“Turner, wait.” I stop and turn on my heel. I have his attention now. “Where?”

“It just so happens I have a garage that no one uses.” I stare at the ground and start picking at my cuticles.

“What’s in it for you? I’ve been an ass to you, and now you want to help me. Why?”

“A trade. You get the garage, and I get you.” He looks at me, raising an eyebrow. Damn it! What’s the point of making mental notes if you don’t remember them? “That...that didn’t come out right. What I mean is, you have to spend time with me.” That still doesn’t sound good. I bite my bottom lip until it hurts more than my pride.

“Do you hear yourself right now?” I do, and I sound as pathetic as I feel. Nate starts to pace, and I mimic his movement. We look like we are about to spar off as we slowly circle the wooded area. “You want to trade your garage for what? My time? My company?” He let out a laugh that hurt me more than any name I’ve ever been called. And I’ve been called a lot of them.

“You are so full of yourself. Do you know that? I should have known better. I’m an idiot for thinking...” I stop myself. I didn’t want to give him any more fuel. “Just forget about it. Have a great summer by yourself, Harris. See if I care.”

“Oh, come on, Turner, don’t go.” He caught my wrist before I could get away. “Sorry. What did you have in mind? I’m listening.”

I yank my wrist out of his grip and rub the heat away from where his hand just was. “Six weeks. Hang out with me for the six weeks Nat is gone, and you can use the garage. That’s it.”

Nate drops his head and thinks about my offer. “That’s it,” he says, meeting his eyes with mine.

“That’s it.”

Nate stares off in the distance. I’m sure he is weighing the pros and cons of the arrangement.

This is something I have already thought about. The pros are you get to work on the truck, and I won’t be alone. The con is obvious. There is only one. We have to spend time together. “What would we be doing?” He finally asks.

“The same thing Nat and I would be doing. Whatever is on the list.”

“Not happening. No way. I am not spending half my summer reading books and learning German or whatever it is you decide to do this year.”

“First of all, you never know when you might need to curse someone out in German. Second of all, that’s not all we do. Say yes, and you can see for yourself.”

He stares me down for a few minutes before he finally says, "I'll do it." I fill my lungs with fresh air, and the left side of my mouth curls into a smile. He said yes. Before I had time to celebrate too much internally, he adds, "But, we need to have ground rules."

Ground rules? This cocky son of a-. You know what? I will hear him out. "Right. Of course. Nat and I only have a few, but I'm sure you have one of your own to add. What did you have in mind?"

"My truck comes before your list."

"No. Equal opportunity. You can fix your little truck whenever I'm at work." Nate rolls his eyes.

"First of all," he says mocking my tone. "It's not a little truck. Second of all, the truck gets priority. I will give you two days a week where you can pick what we do before I touch the truck."

"Fine, but I don't like it."

Nate ignores me and continues with his rules. "The second rule, we keep it private. Our secret."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"You know, we don't go anywhere too public or hang out where kids from school will be."

"Ahhh, I see. We don't want anyone getting the wrong idea. I wouldn't want your real friends to think you were friends with me too. It's probably bad enough for your reputation that your sister hangs out with me, huh?"

"Oh, come on, Turner. It's not like that, and you know it." Actually, I don't. How would I? You never talk to me. "You wouldn't like my friends anyways. They aren't like you."

"What the hell does that mean?" I don't think he meant to say that out loud because his face turns white. "Never mind, I don't care. We aren't friends, and I'm not hanging out with your real friends. Got it. Anything else?" He shakes his head no. "This is your chance. We aren't making rules up as we go."

“Nah, I’m good.”

“Perfect, now my rule.”

“This should be good,” he says, rolling his eyes.

“Do you want to use the garage or not?” He nods. “You have to do whatever is on the list. That’s our only rule. No exceptions. No excuses.”

“I’ve heard about this rule. Nat said there are loopholes.” We are listening to Nat now? And what has she been telling him about the list and what we do and don’t do? “I’m not going to agree to this without seeing the list. Do I get to add things I want to do?”

“Absolutely not. You will have us tipping cows or throwing toilet paper into someone’s tree. The list is already pretty full-”

“Does Nat get to add to the list? If I’m Nat’s stand-in, then I should get a say.”

“I don’t like you right now. Fine, but nothing, you know.” I motion towards his waist.

He laughs and mimics my hand gesture. “I don’t know what that means, but don’t worry. There won’t be any of that happening.”

“Good,” I say as firmly as I can, trying to compose myself. “Nat doesn’t leave for a few days. I guess we can start then?” He agrees, and we shake on it.

This was a business arrangement between two colleagues. Nothing more, I thought as he held my hand longer than he should. His hand was rough from using clippers and shovels all spring. His grip triggers goosebumps that slide up my entire arm.

Nate pulls away self-consciously and says, “I, uh, better go call Mr. Cooper about his truck.”

“Right. You do that. Glad this all worked out.”

“Yep,” Nate says without moving.

“Bye then. I have like so much to do. Huge list. Text you later?” I ask hesitantly since this is not something we usually

do.

He looks down at his feet sheepishly. “Sure, we’ll text later.” Nate crosses the creek and heads towards his house. “Hey, Turner!” He yells once he is on the other side.

“Yeah?” I turn to him.

“What about the garage? All the boxes?” I knew this would be a problem, but it was my problem.

“I’ll take care of it,” I say. “Don’t worry about it.” I am worried about it enough for the both of us. The garage has been a storage unit for the past eight years. Not only will it be a lot of work moving everything out. But where am I going to put it? I can’t just get rid of it all.

“Are you sure? I could help if you need me to. You are doing it for me after all.” As much as I dread moving everything by myself, having help is the last thing I want. If he helps, he will ask questions. I don’t want to answer questions.

“It’s not just for you. If you turn this into the Nate Harris show, the deal is off. Just worry about your truck, okay?” He agrees and makes his way up the hill to his house. He traverses it with ease, jumping from step to step. *Showoff*.

By the time I made it back home, I was dripping with sweat. I catch my reflection in the microwave, and I can’t believe how frizzy my hair is. “Damn humidity. No wonder I can’t get a boyfriend.”

I change clothes and pull myself together. I have a few days before the garage has to be empty—plenty of time. I will start soon, but not today. I can’t face them today.

I grab my keys and some cash from the lockbox. Snacks will help. Today I eat my feelings, and tomorrow I will face them.

nate

On the third day of kindergarten, I showed up at school without my lunch. I sulked at the cafeteria table because I had nothing to eat and I was starving. A twiggy petite redhead with freckles and a missing front tooth showed me mercy that day. She gave me half her ham and cheese sandwich and two Oreo cookies. She only kept one for herself.

I was only six years old, but I knew there was something special about that girl even then. I followed her everywhere. Whatever she wanted to play at recess, I did too.

Rainy days were my favorite. We both would hole up in the reading room. It was a small corner of the classroom flanked with bookshelves as walls. Bean bags and pillows of different sizes covered the floor. I sat there while Mackenzie read to me. She used voices and was so animated. She was alive. Her smile was magnetic, and her laugh contagious. I wanted to spend every second I could with her.

I grab two chairs and my fishing pole out of the truck and walk to the end of the dock. I grew up fishing here on the weekends. After years away, I was finally able to start coming back when I got my license. I forgot how much I missed the water and the view. I forgot how much I missed him.

I had to get away today. My head is all kinds of messed up after meeting with Mackenzie. She was my best friend, and now I barely know her. I don't know how to act around her or what to say to her. I don't know how Nat does it. How does she act like nothing has changed?

"The water is calm." I adjust my line to a new position. "I saw her today. Like actually spoke to her. I know. It's been a long time. So, get this, she asked me to spend the summer with her. The trade-off is the truck I told you about. As predicted, my dad said no, but Mack came through. She offered up the garage, your garage." I stare at the empty chair beside me. I know he will never sit in it again, but it makes me feel better having it there for him.

“I get the garage, but I have to help her do things on the list. Seems easy enough, but one summer, she accidentally waxed half of her eyebrow off and gave Nat first-degree burns.” I grin, thinking back to Mack with half her eyebrow missing. I stared at that eyebrow every night at dinner for weeks. It took all summer for it to grow back. “I’m not trying to mess up my face,” I tell him and rub the little bit of stubble I managed to grow.

The sun is starting to set, and the sky shifts from a bright blue to a sherbet orange, making the lake glow. “I’m going to bring her back,” I say, staring out across the water. “She’s so obsessed with this list. Well, I’m going to use it against her. I’m going to add things to her little list that will make her remember. I’m going to bring her back to you and Mel.”

On my way home, I got a call from Mr. Cooper. He said I could pick up the truck on Wednesday. That only gives Mackenzie a few days to clean out the garage. I suppose I could offer to help her again. Although I doubt she will let me. She is too stubborn.

“Smells good in here, mom.” I swing in behind her and grab a drink from the fridge.

“Unlike you. My goodness, Nathan.” I take a quick whiff of my pits. I shrug. I’ve smelled worst.

“Go upstairs and take a shower before dinner.”

“I can’t make dinner. I have plans with the guys tonight,” I say, taking a sip of my water.

“Where are you going? And how late? Your sister is only here for a few more days. I was hoping we could spend time together as a family.”

“Just out.” I should have known that answer wouldn’t fly. My mother looks at me with lasers in her eyes. “I don’t know. We’ll probably grab a burger at Birdie’s and then go to Troy’s.”

“That’s almost an acceptable answer. Be home by midnight. Now get out of here. You really do smell terrible.”

“I’m going. I’m going.”

The music coming from Nat's room was loud and oozing bad teen bop. Mackenzie was over. I can usually tell what my sister is up to by the music she is playing. If it's country music, she is cleaning. Classical is her go-to music for studying. Breakup songs generally mean Dillon messed up, and you do not want to bother her. I learned that one the hard way.

I walk to Nat's door and start knocking. I can hear them both scurrying across the floor like they are trying to stash something quickly. I reach for the doorknob as it starts to turn from the other side. The door opens slightly, revealing half of Mackenzie's face. Her red hair twisted around in a knot on the top of her head.

"Yes?" She hides her face behind the door and stifles a laugh that triggers Nat to do the same. Usually, I don't let their antics get to me, but today it got me heated.

"Turn the music off. I can hear it down the hall." Mack didn't blink.

"Take a shower. You smell like dead fish," she says and closes the door. The music stayed on.

I slam my hand on the door frame and go to the bathroom to wash the lake off of me. This isn't going to work. I'm not going to last the summer with her. I can forget trying to get her memories back.

I'm glad I'm going out tonight. I need to get out of this house. I need space between Mack and me before I'm forced to spend my free time with her. I hope she doesn't expect me to spend every free moment with her. I agreed to knock an item off her silly list every three days. That's only fourteen actual days. *I can do that, I think.*

I pull a shirt off a hanger and carefully put it on, avoiding my armpits for potential deodorant stains. My shirt is halfway on when I see her standing there. Her cheeks flush a little, and I quickly pull my shirt down over my chest.

"Knock much?"

"Close the door much?" Mack snaps back.

“Still should have knocked.” I guess no one taught her manners. I wince at the thought. I shouldn’t think things like that, no matter how much she irritates me.

“What do you want, Turner?” I ask without looking at her. I pretend to do something at my desk and shuffle around a few magazines.

“Nothing. I wanted to give you this.” She holds out a grocery bag of food. “It’s tradition...” she pauses. “It’s tradition to eat sugar and junk while you make the list.” I take the bag from her and look inside. There’s a bag of m&ms, cheese puffs, gummi bears, and ding dongs. *Funny*. Knowing her, that was a personal dig. “I know we are doing all this in secret, but you should still benefit from all the perks.”

Is she being nice to me? This girl is a real roller coaster ride. One minute she is slamming a door in my face, and now she is...I don’t know. Unexpected.

“Thanks.” It’s all I can think to say.

“Right, well, you’ll tell me when you’re ready for the garage?”

“Wednesday.” Damn it, Nate, use your words. “I can pick the truck up on Wednesday.” Her face looks worried. She hasn’t touched the boxes yet. I can tell. “If you want help, I-”

“No, I got it. Wednesday.” She hesitates for a minute before speaking again. “I was thinking. If you aren’t busy tomorrow, maybe you can come over to finalize the list. Nat and I like to plan things out.”

I want to tell her no. Nat hasn’t left yet, and I don’t have to start spending time with her. In fact, why can’t she leave now so I can go hang out with my real friends?

But the truth is, I’m curious. I want to know what I’m getting myself into.

I’m also curious about her.

I haven’t spoken to her except at the dinner table in seven or eight years. Even then, it wasn’t anything more than an ‘*uh-huh*’ or a ‘*whatever*’ from either one of us.

“Sure.”

“Great. I get off work at 2 PM.” Before I have time to say anything else, she is walking out the door.

“Hi there.” Someone says from the hallway.

“Uh, hi.” Mack faintly replies to him.

My bedroom door closes, and I see my friend Troy frozen like a statue with his mouth open.

“What’s with the face?” I ask him.

He points towards the door and asks, “who was that girl?”

“What girl? Turner?”

“The gorgeous redhead that just left your room.” The gorgeous redhead? I’ve never heard a guy, let alone a friend of mine, talk about Mackenzie like that before.

“That’s Nat’s friend Mackenzie.” He shrugs his shoulders. “Mackenzie Turner.” I’m a little more specific, and he still looks confused. I can’t believe I’m about to say this but, “Mack Truck.” A light bulb went off in his head.

“That was Mack Truck? No way! She looks so different outside of school.” No, she doesn’t. She looks exactly the same. Troy, Connor, and every other guy on campus never looked at her long enough to see her. “So are you guys-”

“Don’t even say it, bro. Not happening. She’s like my sister.” Is she like my sister? I’m not sure why I said that. Mack is at my house more than I am most days, but we aren’t close. I don’t talk to her. I know as much about Mack as Troy does. Well, maybe a little more. I can at least pick her out in a lineup, but she is not like my sister.

“Dude, you’ve got to get me her number.” His eyes are wild with excitement at the thought of calling her.

“You’re joking, right?”

“What, you don’t think she’d go for me?” I don’t actually, but I’m not going to tell him that. Troy has a reputation at school as a bad boy. He doesn’t take anything seriously.

Mackenzie is the exact opposite of that. “I’m your boy, Nate. Hook me up.”

I lie and tell him I don’t have her number, but I will ask my sister to text it to me. I don’t think I’ve seen him smile this much since he caught the game-winning touchdown against our rival bulldogs.

Walking out of my room to grab dinner, I notice him looking through the cracked door of my sister’s room. He was trying to get one last peek of Mackenzie. I was too.



Birdie’s has the best burgers in town. My mouth has been watering since I ordered my double-patty cheeseburger with extra bacon and fries. I didn’t realize how hungry I was until I walked in the door and smelled the grease.

The four of us sat in our usual corner booth. It was the largest in the diner and gave us plenty of elbow room. Connor and Troy both have average builds. Sam, on the other hand, he’s a big teddy bear who likes to eat. Most importantly, our table had the best view of the door. We could see when someone came into Birdie’s and when they left.

I haven’t said much since we got here. I came here to get my mind off of Mackenzie, but she is all I can think about. That and my double cheeseburger. And now all I can think about is her with Troy. I finally relented and gave him her number. He wouldn’t stop asking me about her. The whole table erupted in laughter. I join them, not knowing what the joke is.

“Door check,” Connor says, signaling all of us to check the door to see who just entered. One by one, we take our turn to see who it was. I tilted my head behind my shoulder just enough to see Lily and Olivia. They took their seats at the milkshake bar in the middle of the diner. Which just so happens to also have the perfect view of our table.

“Are you going to go talk to her?” Troy asks me, referring to Olivia.

“I am not moving from this table until I eat. Olivia can wait.” I don’t know what Olivia and I are. We aren’t dating. I’m not her boyfriend. People put us together as a couple because that is what she wants people to think we are.

“Alright, boys,” the waitress says, bringing over a large tray of food. “Who’s hungry?” All our hands shoot up in the air.

I don’t think anyone said a word the ten minutes it took us to devour every crumb of food we ordered.

“Incoming,” Troy says as I inhale my last french fry.

“Hey, boys.” Olivia scans around the booth. “Nate,” she says with a lingering stare that makes me uncomfortable in front of so many people. I just nod at her. I know that will make her mad, but I don’t care.

“So, what are y’all doing tonight?” Lily asks, trying to keep the conversation going.

“Uh, nothing really,” Connor says.

“And you Sam, what are you doing later?” Sam is still busy eating and doesn’t even notice Lily. I can tell his lack of interest hurts her feelings. I kick him under the table and nod towards her.

“Hi,” Sam says before going back to his extra side of fries.

“Well, we are going to the bluffs with a bunch of the seniors,” Olivia says, gauging my reaction. She wants me to be jealous. I’m not. “You can come if you want.” She adds.

The four of us, actually the three of us, Sam is still eating, had a private conversation with our eyes. This is something we do in a huddle on the football field. I can look at Connor, tilt my head left, and he knows exactly what I want to do with the football. It took us a while, but we perfected the same form of communication off the field.

“We’ll consider it,” I say.

“Great.” Olivia lashes back with gritted teeth. “Come on, Lily, let’s go. We don’t want to be late.”

Poor Lily. She stood there looking at Sam, waiting for him to say goodbye. I kick him again under the table.

“Dang it, Nate,” he says, fuming. I nod towards Lily again. “Oh, uh, bye, Lily.”

“By Sam,” Lily says as Olivia pulls her out of Birdie’s.

“Sam! Bro!” Troy says, hitting him on the back of his head.

“What the hell? If you guys don’t stop hitting me, I swear.”

“We will stop hitting you when you finally wake up and ask Lily out. She is hardcore into you,” Troy says, confirming what I saw too.

We all agreed to skip the bluffs tonight. The girls just want us to go to make us jealous. At least, that is Olivia’s motive. She will find some random senior to flirt with while I sit by myself all night. Then tomorrow, she will text me and ask if I had a good time. It’s just a game with her.

The house is quiet when I get home. All the lights are off in the living room except the lamp by my dad’s chair. His book is moving up and down on his chest while he sleeps. I move the book to the table and go to my room.

Faint whispers are coming from Natalie’s room. I ignore the urge to knock this time. Instead, I walk into my room and start planning my timeline for fixing up the truck. I want to be done as quickly as possible. The longer it takes me, the more time I have to spend with Mackenzie.

Natalie’s door creaks open and then slowly creaks again as it shuts. I walk to my window. It only took a few minutes and then I saw her. Mackenzie’s red hair is flowing behind her like a flame of fire in the moonlight. I watch her until she disappears into the shadows of the woods like I do every night she leaves.

ABOUT ME:



I grew up with a wild imagination. I knew that one day I would start writing stories. I just had to find the courage to start.

I live in NC with my husband and three children. We love to travel as much as we love staying home in our own little bubble.

To learn more about me, you can follow me on [Instagram](#) (@gingeralana) or read my blog [GingerAlana.com](#) where I share behind the scenes of my personal life and all the books I'm enjoying reading and the ones I am writing.