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REAL LOVE: FAME & FORTUNE

BOOK 4

JESSICA LEMMON



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PRAISE

“[Jessica] Lemmon delivers purely delicious fun in this lighthearted contemporary. . . . Hot interludes and a Cinderella-worthy ending ensure this story will capture hearts.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“[Lemmon] turns up the friction. . . . [An] ‘opposites attract’ romantic comedy, in which their relationship blossoms after both sides learn that a public persona often hides a more complicated individual.” —*Library Journal*

“No one writes big-hearted bad boys like Jessica Lemmon! *Rumor Has It* is laugh-out-loud fun.” —**Lori Foster, New York Times Bestseller**

“My new favorite Jessica Lemmon book—contemporary romance perfection, with just the right amount of witty banter and stomach-flip romantic moments, plus some seriously hot scenes.” —*New York Times* bestselling author **Lauren Layne**

“RUMOR HAS IT is fresh, fun, and flirty—a must read!” —**New York Times Bestseller, Melissa Foster**

“Barrett Fox is the perfect bad boy with a golden heart. (Among other things.) I loved this book!” —**New York Times Bestseller Gina L. Maxwell**

“Meet your newest book boyfriend and bestie! *Rumor Has It* is charming, fun, and downright hilarious.” —**Serena Bell, USA Today bestselling author**

“The best kind of romantic comedy, with charming characters and whip-smart dialogue.” —**USA Today Bestselling Author Tawna Fenske**

“A delightful book! I loved every moment. If you like witty banter, romance that sparks, and enemies-to-lovers stories, then this book is for you!” —**USA Today bestselling author Kathy Lyons**

“[*Rumor Has It*] is fun, enthralling and I really enjoyed this couple’s journey to happily ever after.” —**Harlequin Junkie (Top Pick)**

“This story was the whole package...a romcom with a little bit of seriousness and a whole lot of love.” —**Guilty Pleasures Book Reviews (five stars)**

“Opposites attract in this fun and flirty gem! Jessica Lemmon has outdone herself with this one.” —**Thoughts of a Blonde (five stars)**

“I loved this book! It’s refreshingly original, laugh-out-loud funny, and left me wanting more.” —**Wicked Reads (five stars)**

“*Rumor Has It* uses the rich, good girl and poor, bad boy trope to full effect. I would love to see what the future holds for Catarina and Barrett.” —**Book Angel Booktopia**

“This book was a *lot* of fun...I recommend it if you enjoy contemporary romance. Heads-up: this is verrrry sexy.” —**Simply Alexandra**

“This is the first book that I have read by Jessica [Lemmon] and I have to say that I really enjoyed this book! She definitely gave me some laughs, some great convos between characters, and some great sexual tension between the two main characters.” —**Lattes & Paperbacks**

“This was such a good read! The characters were well written, likable, and their conversations consisted of a highly entertaining back-and-forth banter. Barrett and Catarina’s relationship was off the charts sexy and is not to be missed!” —**Nightbird Novels**

“Jessica Lemmon does a wonderful job writing a delicious story with great lines and unforgettable characters. I enjoyed every minute of this witty, flirty story filled with banter and sarcastic remarks.” —**Cocktails & Books**

“I loved this book. Catarina and Barrett’s relationship was amusing and so enjoyable to read...*Rumor Has It* would be a

great book to take to the beach or wherever you're relaxing this summer." —**A Novel Glimpse**

"This book was sparks galore from almost word one. The very sexy characters banter well. The book has a great pace and lots of heat to keep one turning the page." —**Kitty's Book Spot**

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CHAPTER 0

PRESENT DAY

BARRETT

The girl sitting across from me crying, that's Beth. Her smooth, walnut-colored skin is half thanks to her Filipino father, the other half her Hawaiian mother. We've split up nearly a dozen times over the course of the last six years, the last time for good.

I hand her my napkin and she dabs at the tears streaking her cheeks. The massive diamond solitaire on her left ring finger is the one she said she always wanted, but it's not from me.

"That's the biggest rock I've ever seen. Bigger in person than in a magazine photo," I say.

It is, which is unbelievable. She smiles sadly down at the ring. I take her hand—a hand I've held a million times in the past. A hand that has cracked across my face twice that I remember. She's left-handed. Both times I'd earned those slaps. I rub my thumb over the diamond and then let her fingers go.

She's not mine anymore. I'm not sad about it. It was headed there from the beginning, but both Beth and I had a serious case of "warm body" syndrome. Love the one you're with and all that.

She sniffs and dabs at her eyes again. The café is pretty dead. Either the three people in here aren't paying attention to us or have noticed and are being polite. Anyway, Beth isn't a drama queen, so she's not doing this for attention. She's the stable one. The part of unhinged, irrational asshole has always been played by me.

"I'm scared." Her tears are dry, her eyes on mine.

"Of getting married?"

She shakes her head, tucking her sleek black hair behind her ears. "Of *ruining* a marriage. You and I never figured it out, and we were together for almost six years."

I tip my coffee mug and study the cooling black liquid for answers. They're not there. I typically go with my gut, but at the moment my guts—along with my chest cavity—feel as if they've been scooped out. I don't *do* heartbreak. Each and every time Beth and I bit the dust, or "took a break," I began dating immediately. I was plenty okay with a one-night-stand that acted as a Band-Aid, and, not to sound like a dick, but there was always a woman around willing to patch me up.

This time my heartbreak can't be credited to Beth, but to a woman by the name of Catarina. I haven't so much as glanced at another woman—no Band-Aids for me—until this meeting with Beth. And I only showed up when she asked because, of all the roles we've played in each other's lives, "friends" was the most legit.

“I mean this with sincerity.” I set my mug aside. “It wasn’t you. Ever. It was always me.”

This brings a sweet smile to her face. The one that dazzled me during my junior year at The Ohio State University. She was a cheerleader, and I was smitten so fast my head literally spun. We’ve been through a ton together. College. My being drafted for the NFL. Surgeries that were futile attempts at repairing a torn rotator cuff that took me away from the game. Us living in Miami. Living in Columbus. Us splitting up.

“It wasn’t all you, Bare.” She consoles me with her right hand. I wonder if she does it on purpose so as not to flaunt her new ring from her new beau. I wouldn’t feel slighted though. She deserves to be happy.

Bare is short for Barrett, by the way. Last name Fox. I have copper-colored hair like the aforementioned woodland creature, but with more brown than red. Still doesn’t keep the girls from referring to me as a “ginger,” which I used to mind until I realized how much tail it got me.

God. I’m a moron.

“Mostly it was my fault. *Is* my fault,” I correct.

A few months ago, I ran into Beth at this very café. She was ordering a coffee. I was picking up lunch. I mentioned that I met someone and she was hurt and happy at the same time. I knew how she felt. I felt the same way when she told me about Mark.

Now I suck in a breath and tell her the abbreviated, updated version of my relationship status. “I fucked things up with Catarina.”

“What? *No.*” Beth reaches across the table and grips my hand, comforting me when it should be the other way around.

Told you I was an asshole.

“What happened?” she asks.

So many things. Mostly, it was me being me.

“Where to start?” I let out a humorless laugh and then decide that the beginning makes the most sense.

So, that’s where I start.

CHAPTER 1

WHERE IT STARTED

CATARINA

To keep from becoming antiquated, the *Columbus Dispatch* newspaper split into two parts five years ago. The *Dispatch* still “dispatches” print newspapers—the kind that line the bottoms of canary cages for our more senior readers—but its online presence has been growing steadily over those five years, thanks in part to new blood in the office.

Thanks, mostly, to me.

Columbus Community Chat, or the *Chat* if you’re an insider, is the online version of the *Dispatch*. Some of the articles I write also run in the actual printed paper, which is fun to see. Even though “seeing it” requires me to flip *waaaay* back to the relationships section of which I’m in charge.

Before you accuse me of writing “fluff”, let me assure you, I know my strengths. Much as I’d like to aspire to landing on the front page of the *Dispatch*, unless Ryan Reynolds becomes our next president, chances are it’s not going to happen.

I don't attempt any feat that I'm not sure of achieving one hundred percent. That includes jobs, relationships, and every other nook and cranny of my highly organized life.

Mia Blakely, my boss, stumbles into our weekly meeting in her usual manner. Her curly hair is barely tamed, a pencil is jutting out of the brown locks just over one ear, and her brown skirt/peach blouse combo is outdated, though, honestly, not *that* bad. I'm not being unkind—just stating the facts. Mia doesn't care about the latest trends or fads. What she does care about, and what she does best, is run this office, manage this newspaper, and keep her journalists paid. She's entrusted me with more large assignments than she has anyone else who writes for the *Chat*, and for that I'll owe her my firstborn son.

“Good afternoon, kids.” Mia eyeballs us over a pair of glasses with half lenses. She flips through a few scribbled-on sheets in her yellow legal pad, finds our agenda, and sits.

Megan, a young and plucky intern, dutifully places a mug of coffee at our boss's right hand. Mia nods her thanks.

While Mia recaps the assignments for this summer, I jot notes into my planner—a black and white beauty with thick, luxurious paper and a posh striped cover—with a black gel pen, appreciating the precision of my handwriting in the “notes” section for June.

I can't believe it's June already. Seems like only yesterday I was huddling over the space heater under my desk in an attempt to ward off Columbus's winter chill, which has the naughty habit of creeping through the walls of this very building.

“The last order of business is Catarina.” Mia smiles and peeks over her glasses again. I smile back. “I'm changing your ‘Fun in the Sun’ column this year to something more focused

on relationships. A personal relationship. *Your*. Personal relationship.”

I rarely blush, but I can feel heat work its way from the placket of my white blouse to my neck. I place a hand to my cheek and press my lips together. All of my fellow co-workers’ eyes are on me.

“Oh?” It’s the only word I’m capable of at the moment.

“Dating in Summer. Summer Fling. Fling into Summer.” She makes a “help me out” motion with her hand, and our writing staff begins scrawling furiously on their notepads in an attempt to come up with an idea she might like.

Carla’s suggestion of “Sex in the Summer” quiets the entire boardroom.

“That. I like.” Mia sends me a saucy wink, and I bristle. “Sadly, we can’t pimp out poor Catarina.”

“Your Sexiest Summer Ever,” Adam blurts.

“Yes, but no,” Mia says. “Catarina isn’t being assigned a self-improvement article. She’s going to date a bad boy and tell our readership about it. In detail.”

I make a choking noise and force out a laugh. “Mia, with all due respect to my boyfriend, North isn’t exactly a bad boy.”

What an exaggeration. Northrop Phillips, III, is as far from a bad boy as you can get. He’s a country club guy who loves golf and finance in equal measures. He’s the perfect pick for a partner, and that’s why I picked him. One hundred percent in everything, remember?

“Not North, Catarina. I’ve scouted a bad boy especially for this occasion.” The gasps around the table suck the oxygen from the room.

“I thought you *weren't* pimping me out,” I reply carefully.

“You don't have to have a *physical* relationship with the guy.” Mia leafs through her papers again. “But you do have to *pretend date* him and write about it. We want our readership living vicariously through you. Think of it as an acting role.”

I blink at her. A heads-up that she wants me to “pretend” date someone before our staff meeting would've been nice. Then again she knows I'd have said no.

“Your cohort will be writing from his own POV on what it's like to be the bad boy now committed to dating. It's a dash of fiction, a dash of romance, and a dash of what you're best at writing: *relationships*.”

“Who is it?” Nanci asks, excitement rounding her blue eyes. I'm not there yet. I'm still in shock.

“Me,” a rough voice announces from the doorway behind me.

I turn my head to look over my shoulder, stunned further into silence by the sheer attractiveness of the man standing there. He's so good-looking it's criminal. But then, he is—

“Barrett Fox!” Nanci says and then bursts into a series of nervous giggles.

“In the flesh.” He bends at the waist to place a kiss on Mia's temple. “Sorry I'm late.”

“I'd expect no less,” Mia says with a smile that—yeah, is a little gooey. She bats her unmasked lashes while she's at it.

Who knew my boss had a sexual bone in her body? I thought she was made of steel beams and asbestos.

Everyone at the conference room table, save me, stands as one and moves to Barrett Fox like he has his own orbit. Mia

shushes the chatter around us.

“Okay, all right. Now that you all have your assignments, let’s leave Barrett and Catarina to theirs.” She makes a shooing motion, and everyone shuffles reluctantly out the door.

I slide a derisive glance to my new “co-worker” and wonder what I did to Mia to make her stick me with this assignment. Except I know exactly why she did it. My boss’s work ethic can be described in two words: bottom line. She knows a prime opportunity to bring money to this paper when she sees it.

She flips to another sheet in her yellow pad before ripping it out and laying it in front of me.

“I’ll let you hash out the details.” Before she shuts the door, she adds, “Barrett. You know where to find me.”

“Sure do, doll.” He winks, then takes her chair at the head of the table, going as far as leaning back and kicking up his feet on the table.

I recoil from the blatant rudeness of that move, but I shouldn’t be surprised. Barrett Fox is known for his rude antics, and this one is tame by comparison. Unlike the photos of him I’ve seen online: sweaty, streaked in dirt, or even dressed in a suit making lewd gestures at the camera.

There’s no way to escape the popularity of the local OSU football player who went pro, especially in Columbus. This paper was built on a foundation made of footballs.

He wears a crisp, white shirt tucked into dark pants, black leather shoes, and because he kicked his feet up and crossed them at the ankles, I also notice a pair of red socks with white polka dots.

“What’s your name, gorgeous?”

I reroute my gaze to his face. Sharp, angular, a deep dent in his chin. His eyelids are narrowed in assessment, but I know under those red-brown eyelashes his irises are so blue they border on turquoise.

Nanci had a calendar of him last year. I've seen this guy in every pose from decked out in full gear to shirtless, to the one where he's lying on a beach, his shorts pulled down past his ass crack.

He's long and lean, and I might have had a passing appreciation for how attractive he is if I didn't know so much about him.

“What if I called you Ginger? Would that upset you?” I ask tartly, referring to the perfectly coiffed reddish hair on top of his head. He's good with gel or has his own stylist. Or maybe he's sleeping with a stylist.

He grins at my question—straight white teeth he didn't lose any of playing ball for eight years—and laces his hands behind his head. His shirtsleeves are uncuffed and rolled to the elbows, the scruff on his face two days past clean-shaven.

“Apologies, beautiful, but you know my name. I don't know yours.”

“You mean Mia didn't tell you my name when she threw me to the wolves?” I have a momentary fantasy where I talk her into reassigning this puff piece to Nanci, but she won't. Nanci mostly helps out with articles. She hasn't honed her journalistic skills well enough to be entrusted with a column.

When ad dollars are involved, Mia's focus is ensuring a climb in readership. Not to brag, but that's the reason I'm in charge of the relationships section. I'm good. Not because of some magic fairy dust but because I work my ass off.

Still, it would have been nice to write a commentary about how to date a *real* man instead of this one. A man who knows how to properly wear a button-down shirt, for example. *Like North.*

“Ouch. I’m guessing you’re not a fan?”

“Of you? I barely know who you are, Mr. Fox.”

“You seem to know plenty. I can read it in the pleat between those two perfect eyebrows.” He runs those blue eyes over my face, down my blouse, and lingers at my breasts.

I lift the paper Mia left behind in front of my chest to avoid further scrutiny.

“Catarina Everhart,” I say as I read over the sheet of paper in my hand. Mia’s shorthand is atrocious but after five years of practice, I can read her hieroglyphics without any problem.

“Do you go by Cat?”

“No. I don’t. Do you go by Bare?”

“Sometimes.” He shrugs, lowers his feet to the floor, and leans over the table. He flicks the back of the paper I’m using as a shield.

“Is this what ‘dating you’ is going to be like?” I sneer.

“Close.” His lips twitch at the corner. “Add in a few slow, long, wet kisses that’ll curl your toes and a little under the shirt/over the bra action, and you’re there.”



BARRETT

There it is. The reaction I was expecting. Catarina's back snaps straight. She slams the paper onto the table and proceeds to lecture me. She's saying I won't ever touch her, let alone kiss her. She mentions a boyfriend and says that even if she didn't have one there's no way she'd allow me anywhere near her. While she complains, I commit to a plan to taste those lips.

Mia told me about this "boyfriend" of hers. He was described to me as a stick-in-the-mud guy who is self-consumed and aloof and doesn't treat Catarina the way she deserves. I'm not sure if Mia has an ulterior motive to break up Catarina and the bozo she's dating, but I'm not getting involved either way. My job is to date Catarina and be myself. That's what I'm doing. Or well, the version of myself Mia's paying me to be.

Catarina is fucking beautiful, by the way. And prissy. Rigid. *Haughty*. But beautiful. Long, dark brown hair with the right amount of weight and wave rolls over slender shoulders. Her white blouse is classy, like her. Even angry, her shaped eyebrows slammed together, all I can think about is winning her over to my side of the field. If she let me kiss those lips, she'd forget her problems. They're the pinkest, fullest lips I've ever seen, and I'm an excellent kisser.

"Mr. Fox, could you do me the courtesy of looking me in the eye?"

"Sorry, Kitty Cat. I'll try." I shrug helplessly. "I like that lip color."

Her mouth drops open before snapping closed. She's decided not to like me, which is par for course where I'm concerned. Most women don't like me but are willing to stoop to hang out with me to get what they want. I'm used to it.

I do as she asks and look at Catarina's eyes. They're as beautiful as the rest of her. Coffee-brown and sparkling. Big and wide and taking in the world around her. Not innocent though. More jaded. This is a woman who's seen a lot of what the world has to offer and has decided not to like most of it.

"...going to talk to Mia about this," she announces as she stands.

I stand with her, and she turns and pokes me in the center of my chest with one short, polished fingernail.

"Alone."

"I'm on assignment here, too, Kitty Cat."

"Stop calling me that. I don't care how much money you'll bring to this paper. I'm not pretending to date you. I can't stand looking at you."

With that she opens the conference room door and storms through the office. I watch her go, admiring the proud way she holds her shoulders back and the flow of her long hair behind her as she walks, and yeah, okay, the wiggle of her small, round ass in a superslim skirt.

I catch the eye of the cute blonde who was in here a moment ago. She's still mooning. She bites her lip and gives me a little wave. I wink at her, knowing that made her whole day. I can tell by the way she blushes fiercely.

Whistling, I amble in the direction of Mia's office in hot pursuit of Catarina Everhart.

Damn.

I love being me.

CHAPTER 2

CATARINA

“**A**nd *then*,” I say after draining my wineglass, “Mia told me that she appreciated my professionalism.”

“Her way of telling you that she wasn’t reassigning you,” North says, reaching for the bottle.

I hold out my glass and he refills it. “Precisely. What am I supposed to do? Sue for sexual harassment?”

“Did he harass you?”

“No.” I wrinkle my nose, surprised by that admission. “He’s a cocky jerk but behaves more like a child in need of attention.”

“Much as I can’t condone you even *pretending* to date Barrett Fox, bad boy of the NFL,” North adds snidely, “Mia is right. You are a professional and you’ll find a way through this. In the meantime, don’t let him rile you. He *is* a child. This is his game.”

North straightens the cuff of one sleeve tucked beneath a perfectly pressed suit jacket before scraping his keys off my kitchen counter.

“You’re leaving? You just got here.”

“I have a late showing, Catarina. I told you this.”

“No, you didn’t,” I say, a tad petulantly. Either I have early onset Alzheimer’s, or he didn’t tell me. This is the third time in two weeks he’s had a late appointment I didn’t recall him mentioning. “When will you be done?”

“Late. The apartment building is across town, and the buyers flew in from Japan. I’m going to have to do the whole take-them-out-for-drinks-and-kiss-their-asses bit. You know how I hate that.” He leans in and presses a kiss to my cheek. I inhale the scent of him—as crisp as autumn with low-key spice notes.

“I like that new cologne,” I murmur, ticking my fingers down his shirt buttons.

“Not now, Catarina.”

I drop my arm with a huff. North and I have been dating for six months now. I didn’t expect the sex to drop off a steep cliff three months in, but it did. Lately, we see each other less and less, which is putting a chink in my perfectionist armor. Our relationship should be stronger, especially this early on.

Now’s not the time to address it. Maybe I’ll dig up some of my former articles as talking points. North does better when he has an agenda for a conversation.

“See you tomorrow,” I tell him as he shuts the door with a soft click.

I sigh into my wineglass, thinking again how it shouldn’t be this hard for a relationship columnist to have a relationship.



THE NEXT DAY at work I search through some of my former articles. “HOW TO LURE HIM IN USING YOUR BRAIN.” Oh, that was a good one. It doesn’t apply to North and me though. He fell for my brain first and foremost.

Oh, here’s one. “THE SEVEN MONTH ITCH: HOW TO SURVIVE YOUR FIRST YEAR OF DATING.” I hesitate a moment before printing it. I’ve had other relationships that have bypassed the seven-month point. Maybe there’ll be some insight in there I’ve since forgotten. The printer at my desk whirs to life as I come across another one I wrote two years ago that, frankly, I forgot about. “HOW TO TELL IF HE’S CHEATING.”

My finger is hovering over the trackpad on my laptop, the pointer positioned over the *x*. I should close the search window. There’s no way North would cheat on me any more than I would cheat on him. In the same manner I told him about Barrett and this ludicrous situation, North would tell me first if he had even a *stir* of interest in someone else. We agreed to that stipulation when we began dating. It was only logical to break up if interest lagged.

I think about our current sex rut and bite my lip. I hate uncertainty.

Rather than click the *x*, I scroll through the article, skimming my own bold, bullet-pointed advice.

- **He stops saying “I love you.”**

Well. North doesn’t believe in saying “I love you,” so I can throw that one out. I scroll to the next bold header.

- **He stops having sex with you.**

Embarrassing, but nonetheless true. I scroll to the next one.

- **He stops spending time with you.**

This one, I read.

You remember when you were first together. The blush of new romance, the way he couldn't take his eyes off you. Now you're in the same room with him and he's checking his phone for incoming texts while you read on your tablet—maybe you're reading this very article. Truth time: He's not working late. He's cheating. And those texts he's waiting for are probably from the woman he's cheating on you with.

“Ouch. A cheater.” A low voice rumbles in my ear.

I slam the lid of my laptop shut and whirl my chair around, coming face to face with Barrett Fox.

“Sneaking up on me now?” My voice is a little crazed, probably because he's better looking than I remember him being yesterday. An odd observation to be sure. The printer stops spitting papers and I make a show of pulling them from the tray and stapling them together.

“You're not the only one quiet on your feet, Kitty Cat.”

I call up North's advice to not let Barrett rile me. It's a smart tactic. I don't have to react to everything he says. I don't have to let him under my skin. He can't burrow under there without my permission.

I stand from my chair. Barrett straightens from his bend to stand with me. He's tall—six-one, I'd guess. North is six-five, so I'm used to looking way, way up. At five-seven and

wearing four-inch heels, I stand nearly eye to eye with the former Miami Dolphins running back.

“I always had a chick willing to cheer me up when I split with my girlfriend, but I was never a cheater.” He makes a *tsk* sound out of the corner of his mouth. “Shame if that’s what your boyfriend’s doing.”

“He’s not doing that. He’s not doing anything.”

“Which is one of the signs. I was reading over your shoulder and spotted the no-sex thing. Is that the issue? Did he stop pleasing you between the sheets?”

My blood isn’t quite boiling but it’s definitely on simmer. *Don’t let him get to you.* I affect a neutral expression for Barrett’s sake, and for mine, too. I have to spend the next month-plus with him, but I refuse to give him attention for behaving badly.

“It’s astounding you have any ‘chicks’ willing to cheer you up given your inability to speak to a woman with a modicum of respect. It seems your vocabulary is terribly limited, Mr. Fox.” I add coolly. “This is the wrong industry for you.”

A shadow stretches over his blue, blue eyes, so brief I wonder if I imagined it. Then his cocky smile snaps into place like it never left, and I’m convinced I did imagine it. Am I supposed to believe that there is a deep well of emotion under his paper-thin exterior? Yeah, right.

He leans close, and then closer. “I asked out of concern for you and me and our dating assignment. I’ve never gone on a date with a woman that didn’t end with her hands all over me.”

North’s cologne smells good, but Barrett’s musky, clean-man scent smells better. I blink out of the unsavory thought

and retort with, “You mean to slap you in the face? That can be arranged.”

I sit at my desk again, opening my laptop and reminding myself it doesn't matter if Fox stands over my shoulder and reads every word of this article. I am not letting him get to me.

He doesn't linger, instead swaggering past my desk to his, which happens to be next to a window. Two tall cubicle walls block him from the rest of the office, but lucky me, I can see him as plain as day. When he sits in his desk chair and smiles sweetly, no one but me is the wiser.

I roll my eyes and return to the article, scrolling down to the next header about cheating boyfriends.

- **He buys new cologne, soap, or starts scheduling manicures.**

One of those isn't cause for alarm, but if your guy is going out of his way to smell great, look fantastic, and step up his manscaping game, look out. Usually that means there's another hen pecking around where she shouldn't be...

Damn. I shake my head and close the article without printing it.

No. No way am I letting this idea take root and bloom into an accusation I'll later regret. North is selling an apartment building to Japanese businessmen. Period. He doesn't have time for another woman. And if our sex life is lacking, I am partially to blame. I've been working longer hours over the last month. Plus, we were in a rut before that month. A boring sex rut. It went from hot and fun when we met to predictable

and routine within a few months. If I want some spice, I can step up my game.

I search through my documents and find what I should have been looking for in the first place. An article I wrote last summer when I'd met North, but we hadn't started dating yet.

“SUMMER SIZZLE! KEEPING IT HOT IN THE BEDROOM.”

I click PRINT after a perfunctory glance to make sure Barrett is still at his desk.

He's hunkered over his own laptop, a look of deep concentration on his face. We're supposed to be coming up with lists of dating ideas—him half, and me the other half. How much do you want to bet he's looking at porn?

I give myself one point for the smug quip as I watch my printer spit out papers.

“Your mood's improved,” Mia says from behind me.

“I'm making everyone here wear bells around their necks from now on.” I tuck the articles into a manila folder to avoid more awkward questions. “Also, I'd like a few cubicle walls. I feel very exposed.”

“You requested no walls in the first place, darling.” Mia gives me a slow blink. *Darling*. She's as bad as Fox is with the sweet talk. She hands me a glossy, folded brochure. “Here's an idea for one of your dates with Barrett.”

“Art in the Park.” I slide her a disbelieving look. “I highly doubt that a Neanderthal would appreciate art or a park let alone the two of them together.”

“Good.” She pulls a smile. “The less compatible these dates are, the better. It'll add to the allure. Everyone will be hanging on your every word—and his—about how my star

reporter and the bad boy of the NFL are figuring out their relationship. Their *fictional* relationship, of course.”

“Mia...”

“Don’t give me that tone. I have championed you from the start, Catarina. You know I adore you. After all, I let you write an entire article on farm animals in a local sanctuary despite the fact it had nothing to do with your column.”

“It was a passion project. I like pigs. And not for dinner,” I say, my voice small. Mia has championed me. I was passed over time and again by my former editors. She alone believed in me.

“Think of this as your *new* passion project.” She gives me a rough pat on the arm and then sends a pointed look over her glasses to Barrett. “He’s as yummy as they come. If I were twenty years younger and had your tight little body, I’d be all over that.”

“I have a boyfriend,” I remind her. She acknowledges that statement with a grunt. “You can’t expect me to pretend to date someone when I’m already for-real dating someone.”

“Someone as exciting as crepe paper.”

“That’s not true.” North might not be exciting, but he’s dependable. Or...at least he was before he started making afterhours appointments.

“The relationship section of the *Chat* is your baby, Catarina. When I asked you to run it, you agreed to keep it alive and kicking. Barrett Fox adds both life *and* kicking.”

“Oh, trust me.” I give her a blithe smile. “I’m tempted to kick him.”

“Perfect. Conflict makes for great stories.” She gives me a Grinchy smile. “If you don’t like Art in the Park find something else. The more local festivities that are in public, the better. We want buzz surrounding these articles. We want lots of online subscribers sharing them on Facebook. We want ad banners for KY lube.”

Okay, that was a little loud.

Barrett lifts his head from his laptop. Mia waves. I snarl. His eyes twinkle with mischief.

Dammit, Mia.

CHAPTER 3

CATARINA

According to YouTube, the video has over two million hits.

That means at least two million pairs of eyeballs have watched Barrett Fox unravel online, more if you count when it aired on live TV. I heard about the incident, but I never actually watched it. When the office was atwitter about what had gone down on the beloved Ohio State Buckeyes field, I mostly ignored it.

I don't watch football. I don't particularly *like* football, though I can honestly say I don't have a weighted opinion either way.

The reason for my pulling up a video marking the beginning *and* end of Fox's field reporting career is simple. Research.

In the video, Fox is on the sideline holding a microphone and wearing a set of headphones. He speaks to the guys in the booth, excitement lighting those impossibly blue eyes.

"That was unbelievable," he says over the roar of the crowd. "That touchdown brought us a much-needed tie—"

Then a whistle blows, and a referee waves her hands over her head. Yes, *her* head. The recent addition of female refs in college ball was another big topic of focus here at the *Chat*.

The ref makes a series of hand gestures and then the men in the booth let me know what it meant. She called OSU's quarterback out at the two-yard line.

“Out of bounds! No way,” one of the older sportscasters in the booth comments. “Barrett, you're down there. What did you see?”

The camera snaps back to Barrett, whose face is nearly as red as his hair. His brow is creased, his mouth pulled into an unruly frown.

“I saw a touchdown, Bob.” A tremor of anger lines his voice. I have a visceral reaction as adrenaline shoots down my arms in anticipation. I know what happens next, but I can't look away.

The female ref walks to the sidelines and Barrett approaches, arms raised at his sides in frustration. “Are you blind? Was your hair in your eyes? Tits blocking your view? Anyone paying attention saw what I saw, and honey, that was a *motherfucking* touchdown!”

That's it. His mic is cut, but Barrett's still yelling. He doesn't get physical, in fact, he lowers his arms and puts his hands in prayer pose while he argues. The ref doesn't cower. Her face is equally creased with anger as she gives him a few choice words of her own. She blows the whistle in his face. Barrett rips off his headphones and throws them on the ground.

And that, my friends, was that.

There's an awkward throwback to our boys in the booth, who attempt to pick up where Fox left off (minus the F-bomb). They change the subject as quickly as possible.

That's where the video ends. I sit back in my chair and pluck my earbuds out before tossing them on the desk.

"Not my finest hour," Barrett says from behind me, and even though I don't mean to, I jerk in my chair.

"Seriously! You need a bell."

He sits on the corner of my desk, legs spread, hands linked between them.

"Get off my desk."

"What'd you come up with?" he asks.

I shove his thigh in a futile attempt to move him. His leg is like a steel beam. Rock solid. I snatch my hand back and grimace, but not before comparing him to North, whose leg has never felt that muscular.

"Harder spots on me than my leg." Barrett grins.

"Like your head?" I gesture to my laptop. "I suppose you're proud of that tirade you delivered on that poor woman?"

"Poor woman?" One of his reddish eyebrows arches high on his forehead. "Santiago could best me in arm wrestling. She's a force to be reckoned with. She's also as blind as a fucking bat if she thought Looser was out at the two. I was standing there, and he was in, and for the record, the Bucks lost that game thanks to her shitty call."

"She's a female ref, which you pointed out with that comment about her...her...chest."

“Tits.”

“Whatever.” I roll my eyes at the offensive word. “She was mailed countless boxes of tampons. She was transferred after that incident. Do you take responsibility for that?”

“Why would I?”

“Because you insulted her on live television.”

“I thought women and men were supposed to be treated the same. You don’t think if that was a guy I wouldn’t have called him on the same shit? You think I wouldn’t have pointed out how his tiny dick was calling the shots, or suggested he reach into his pants and find his balls?”

Since he’s making a crass, but no less valid, point I don’t want to acknowledge, I go with, “You’re an imbecile.”

“Point is, if she was a dude I’d have said something similar. Minus the F-bomb. *That’s* what got me canned.”

“I highly doubt it.” Then again, misogyny is alive and well, so perhaps he’s right. “You should at least apologize to her.”

“Did.” He stands from my desk and starts to walk away.

“What do you mean you did? You apologized to Santiago?” That, I’d never heard. And I know our paper reported on the incident more than once after it happened.

He faces me and shrugs. “Yeah. I asked if she would sit down with me and talk. I brought her a bouquet.”

Oh. Well, that is surprising.

“Of tampons.” Then he adds with another grin, “I’m kidding.”

I'm not sure if he is or not. And I'm back to wondering what penance I'm serving being stuck with this caveman for the better part of my summer.



IN MIA'S office later that week, I'm in one of the chairs opposite her desk and Barrett is in the other. She's reviewing our lists of date ideas and nodding her way through mine. I smile when she gives me a well-earned "Nice choices, Catarina."

I shoot a glance over to my cohort, who's about to be schooled on how to work at a *real* job. I saw his list. It was ridiculous. I also caught a few typos I helpfully pointed out. My fastidiousness wouldn't allow me to overlook them.

Mia reviews his choices and I watch her face carefully. A smile spreads her lips and then she lets out a loud, appreciative "Ha! I love it!"

I frown. She what?

She's shaking her head in amusement when she removes her glasses.

"This is going to be fantastic. Both of you will be in the other's element but out of your own. It's brilliant. Is there any way I can talk you into some platonic PDA? Hold hands. Walk close. Lay your head on his shoulder?"

Since she's directing that question to me, I answer with, "Platonic would imply we were friends." I slide Barrett a look. "I bet Fox can't even spell the word platonic."

He flinches—just the slightest pull of his mouth and narrowing of his eyes—before recovering. What a wilting lily.

So he had a few typos. Who cares? It happened to me when I first started and, don't tell anyone, but it still happens on occasion.

“Damn. I was hoping I could leak a few photos to Twitter of you two being cozy.” Mia purses her lips. “You could explain to your fella it's for the story. North seems reasonable.”

“North?” Barrett asks with a token amount of derision. “You're dating a guy named after a direction?”

“I'm dating a guy named after his great grandfather who was a duke.”

Idiot.

“Since you were reading up on cheaters and lack of heat in the bedroom, I question if you're dating him at all.” Barrett crosses his leg, resting his ankle on top of one thick thigh. The hand resting on that thigh boasts an expensive, stylish watch.

He's arrogant and annoyingly good looking. Shouldn't he be better suited to a hoodie and jeans? What gives him the right to wear trousers and button-downs with such grace?

“Perfect. Perfect,” Mia says. Barrett and I tear our eyes off each other to regard my boss, who is smiling with dollar signs in her eyes. “You two are delightful. Now get out. I have a conference call.”

Barrett and I leave Mia's office, and I do him the courtesy of waiting until the door is shut behind me to lay into him.

“Do not bring up my love life in this office again, Fox.”

“Honey, for the next few months I *am* your love life. Besides, you were the one researching your *own* love life in this office. I happened to notice. I'm a *noticer*.”

“That’s not a word.”

“Sure, it is. I just said it.”

I growl my frustration and pivot on a heel, but I feel him follow close behind me.

“Hang on.” He follows me as I storm for my desk. When we’re behind my lone privacy wall he catches my upper arm and turns me to face him. “I’m sorry.”

I arrow a look at his hand on my arm and he lets go, holding both palms out in front of him in “I surrender” fashion.

“I’m sorry I gave you shit about your boyfriend, West.” I roll my eyes and he corrects with, “I mean South. Southwest?”

“Get out of my cubicle.” It’s a weak plea. He’s exhausting.

“North. I’m sorry I insulted your relationship with North.” He lowers himself onto the corner of my desk again and folds his hands together, giving me a look that’s almost...caring.

Weird.

“If you seriously think he’s cheating on you, you owe it to yourself to kick him in the balls. You’re too beautiful and too intelligent to put up with shit like that from any guy.”

Since I don’t know what to do with what might have been a compliment intermingled with sage advice, I say, “I put up with shit from you. Should I not?”

He gestures to himself. “I’m your job. You have to put up with me. You get *paid* to put up with me. But unless you’re North’s hired honey, I suggest you spell out what you will allow him to do and what you won’t. Guys like that, you give them an inch they take all one hundred yards.”

I shake my head to realign my thoughts. I never said North was cheating on me, or that we were having problems—even though we are, that was something my temporary co-worker assumed.

“Why do you have this job anyway? Can’t you retire on your NFL paychecks?”

“If I expect to have a microphone in my hand again in the future, it’s going to take some really good press. And the approval of a really strong woman.” He dips his chin. “You’re good for my rep, Kitty Cat.”

I snort. “Well. They don’t pay me enough to put up with you, but I’m a professional. You’d do well to remember—whatever your reasoning—that this is your job, too. Next time you set fingers to keyboard, take the time to review your shoddy spelling before you get us both fired.”

I wait for the wisecrack. The smartass remark. None comes. He slides off my desk and walks to his cubicle where he shuts his laptop, stuffs it in a black leather shoulder bag, and...leaves.

I tell myself that he deserved it. That being kind to someone who is unkind to almost everyone is a waste of time.

I feel badly about my assessment on and off throughout the day. Barrett may behave like a cocky ass, but “unkind” doesn’t exactly describe him.

CHAPTER 4

CATARINA

North didn't have to work late last night or tonight. I've shown up at his place both nights and I didn't find any evidence of another woman. No lipstick on North's collared shirt, no left behind scarf or compact. Besides, would he actually invite me over if he'd had another woman here?

Granted he could exclusively go to her place...

Stop. It.

I'm not doing this. I'm not letting my own article and Barrett Fox's assessment fuel a conspiracy theory.

I sip my wine as North clears the dishes from a simple pasta meal that was oh-so-satisfying. It helped that he bought a baguette from my favorite local bakery. That was thoughtful. I'm stuffed, but reach for the final nub in the bread basket, dragging it through olive oil seasoned with grated parmesan and freshly cracked black pepper before polishing it off.

I've been choosing my timing carefully and now, with full bellies and nothing on the agenda, it's prime time to talk to North.

“I’ve been thinking”—I pause to drink from my nearly empty wineglass—“about us.”

“Oh?” He doesn’t look up from stacking our plates in the dishwasher.

“Yes. About our little dry spell.” I say it in a cute way so that he doesn’t think I’m dissatisfied. Though...I am. Six weeks without sex with the person you’re in a relationship with seems excessive.

“Are we having a dry spell?” He clears the empty bread basket and silverware and moves back to the kitchen. It’s a gorgeous setup, with black cabinets and sleek, charcoal granite countertops. Him in it isn’t half bad, either...if he wasn’t being this obtuse.

“Do you remember when we met?” I stand and refill my wineglass as I talk. “You couldn’t keep your hands off me.”

“That’s normal, Catarina. There are seasons in every relationship.”

“Don’t you find me attractive?” I strike a pose in my pencil skirt and blouse, pointing the toe on one of my shoes. I’m wearing sky-high heels and enduring the mother of all blisters on my pinky toe for my efforts, yet he doesn’t seem the least bit turned on by my footwear.

“Sweetheart, you’re beautiful.” He comes to me and lowers his lips for a kiss before resuming cleanup duty. The kiss is similar to the hundreds of others I’ve received from him but lacks something.

“You don’t feel the need to...look elsewhere?” I try. “For companionship?”

He frowns, slowly closes the dishwasher door, and stares at me for a long, uncomfortable beat. Then he presses a button,

and the machine begins its quiet, purring cycle.

“Catarina, I don’t appreciate you accusing me without merit. You’re busy. I’m busy. We’re working professionals who care about our jobs. If I had a spare moment to sleep with anyone it’d be you—not two people. Use your head, sweetheart.”

I wince when he touches his lips to my temple. That was too close to being called stupid— and I didn’t accuse him of anything.

I regroup. Take my own article’s advice. *If you want sex, be bold. Don’t ask.*

“We’re not busy tonight.” I leave my wineglass on the counter and go to him, draping my wrists on his shoulders. He’s much taller than me, and I suffer a little crick in my neck if I stand this way for too long, but he’s worth it. *We’re worth it.*

“What do you say we fool around?” I tug the knot on his tie and then drag my fingers down his crisp dress shirt as his phone buzzes behind me.

He unceremoniously brushes my arms aside and checks the screen of his cell.

“Who’s that?” I ask, stung. Whoever it is, they’re apparently more important than me or what I’m offering. Frankly it’s pissing me off.

His noncommittal utterings leave me with no clue of who the caller might be. He declines the call and pockets his cell.

“Who was that?” I try again.

“Maria.”

“Maria who?”

“My associate. We’re working on closing the apartment building sale and it’s been a real bitch.” He straightens his tie, and since I was the one who tugged it out of place that also irks me.

Is she pretty? I want to ask but don’t. It’s not like me to be needy.

“I’m going to have to cut our evening short. Looks like they’ve asked for another clause in the contract. The seller is fit to be tied.” He grabs his suit jacket off a chair and shrugs into it.

“You’re *leaving?*” My dwindling control of our evening together has evaporated completely.

“We spent yesterday together.” He lowers his lips to kiss me, but I turn my face so that his lips collide with my cheek instead.

“Catarina.” He lets out a sigh of frustration. So what? I’m frustrated, too. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Lock up when you leave.”

I fold my arms and refuse to look at him. He leaves anyway.



THIS TIME when Barrett rounds the corner, I’m ready for him. I arrived an hour early and set up my desk to ensure I’ll see Fox coming.

“Morning, Kitty Cat.” He surveys my new setup. I turned my desk 180 degrees so that it faces the window. “You do this by your pretty little self?”

“You can’t sneak up behind me and I don’t have to look at you while you’re in your cubicle. Win-win.” I shoot him a sardonic smirk.

“Yes, but you also have your back to the rest of the office. Which means if Mills says anything funny, you’ll miss the joke.”

“I don’t find Mills funny.”

“Do you find anyone funny?” Before I can get offended he adds, “Is North’s middle name East? ’Cause that’d be funny. Something like that might manage to crack that façade of seriousness you wear like a second skin. Especially if his last name is Southwest.”

I tongue my cheek, not quite laughing, but decently amused since North isn’t my favorite person of late.

With a satisfied smile, Barrett heads to his cubicle. I realize my mistake as I sit down at my desk—now *not* facing his. I can’t keep an eye on him. Yet I feel the weight of his stare on my profile.

I whip around, prepared to admonish him. He’s bent over his laptop and ignoring me completely. Seems to be a pattern with the men in my life.

Sigh.

Well, whatever. I have a job to do.

I finalize our reservations at La Petit France, which is a fancy French restaurant. According to their website they require a jacket, only serve dinner, and every menu item is pricey and à la carte. Fine by me. Mia is paying.

I’m scrolling through the menu when Guess Who walks up and blurts, “Do they have French fries? It’s a staple of my

diet.”

“I highly doubt your chiseled body sees an ounce of saturated fat.”

“You think I’m chiseled?” He pulls a hand over his button-down white shirt and stands taller, puffing out his (very well-built) chest.

“You know you are.”

“Judging by those legs, Kitty Cat, you do your fair share of working out.” He glances down at my legs, crossed beneath a modest black skirt. I practically feel his gaze like a touch before his blue eyes snap up to mind.

“Runner?” he asks.

“Sometimes,” I answer, willing myself not to feel flattered.

“Those are some seriously hot shoes. How come you aren’t wearing them?” He’s referring to my Jimmy Choos—the same pair I wore for my date with North last night. The shoes lay on their sides under my desk as per my habit to kick them off while I’m working.

“They’re terribly uncomfortable, so I always take them off. I’m not even aware of it when I do it.”

“You have attractive toes, so it works. The Tiffany blue polish is a nice touch. What time is our first date?” he asks.

I’m still reeling from comments like “hot shoes” and “attractive toes” and “Tiffany blue” which, if I’m not hallucinating, just came out of the mouth of Barrett Fox.

“Uh, eight o’clock Saturday night.”

“Cliché but I’ll allow it. You sure South by Southwest is okay with us sharing an intimate dinner?”

“*North* isn’t the least bit intimidated by you. He has your number, Fox.”

Barrett only smiles. “Okay, but no phone calls after midnight. A guy’s got to get his beauty sleep.”

CHAPTER 5

CATARINA

“Tell us about your assignment, darling. Your father mentioned a football player of some sort?”

A forkful of spring greens salad is hovering at my open mouth. I set it aside without taking a bite. My father lowers his cellphone—where he was reading the *Wall Street Journal*—and looks in my direction.

He knows about my assignment. I told him about it in detail earlier in the week. I also asked him to keep it to himself.

“You’re an awful secret-keeper,” I tell him with a frown. He only smiles, which pops a dimple in one of his cheeks. Insufferable old man.

“How do you tolerate him?” I ask my mom.

“You don’t want to know, Catarina.” She sends Dad a wink. I make a gagging gesture, but I love them. I love that they’re in love, too. If they weren’t I don’t know what I’d do with myself. They keep me sane.

“Mia, my editor, wants a schlocky puff piece about dating bad boys, and she nominated me because it’s *so* apparent I’m into bad boys.” I roll my eyes. “It’s all for show.”

Mom laughs. “Sounds exciting. What does Northrop think?”

“He knows it’s for work and couldn’t care less. I’m not sure he has a jealous bone in his body.” I take a drink of my iced tea and consider that I’d *like* it if he had a jealous bone in his body. He’s so damned pragmatic.

“Sensible men make great husbands. And North is right. You’re a consummate professional. You can handle a rowdy sports player.”

Has it become clear yet that my mother knows not a thing about sports? She may as well have referred to Barrett as a “ball thrower.”

“Since we’re milking the fish-out-of-water nature of our relationship, I’m going to bring him here for a round of golf.” I gesture at the backdrop of Columbus’s most prestigious country club—one I’ve had a membership to since I was twenty-one.

“Splendid idea,” Mom says.

“*Superb*,” Dad teases.

“Oh, Hank, stop it.” She shoves his shoulder and then they share a lingering gaze of love and adoration.

My heart squeezes in envy. North and I haven’t looked at each other like that in...well...*ever*. I take a bite of my salad and chew forlornly.

A word crashed into my head yesterday afternoon when he sent a text saying he would be busy for the next couple of

days, and I haven't been able to shake it. What word, you ask? *Passionless*. North has never been particularly warm, but I haven't noticed as much as I have recently. Maybe because, by contrast, my pretend date, Barrett, is passionate to the nth degree. He *loves* coffee. *Hates* olives. Finds lamb gyros "fantastic."

Once the lunch plates are cleared, Dad takes his leave to practice on the putting green while Mom lingers behind to chat. "Are you sure you don't want to play nine with us? It's such a gorgeous day!"

It is. The greens are lush and vibrant, and the sky is an arrogant, disgusting, beautiful blue. The kind of blue that reminds me of a certain former NFL player's eyes.

"I'm sure, Mom, thanks. I have to get back to the office. Big date tomorrow!" I make a rallying gesture: my fist balled while I sweep my arm in front of me.

"Now, dear, I didn't raise you to be impolite. I'm sure this football man has a hidden layer. All men do. When you uncover it, you'll likely find him to be delightful."

Welcome to the world of Celia Everhart, where words like "splendid" and "delightful" make their way into everyday dialogue. I wouldn't be surprised if a cartoon butterfly landed on her shoulder right about now.

"Clearly you haven't met him." I spare her the details of how he lost his field reporting job as well as a few hefty sponsorship opportunities with a fast food chain and a brand of motor oil.

I shake my head in annoyance. How could he have been so reckless? Does he have an anger problem, or is he so full of

himself that he thinks he can get away with anything? Maybe being passionless isn't such a bad quality.

“When you two golf here, call us so we can meet him.” My mom's eyes twinkle. Her jaw goes slack like she just had the best idea ever.

“Um. No.” I bat my eyelashes. “Trust me. You won't like him.”

“I like everyone.” Her top lip curls. “Except for that Matilda Hudson across the street. She's a pill. Yesterday makes the third time she accused me of overpruning my roses.”

“While I can't imagine Barrett reporting to you to the HOA, he is a hot-tempered redhead who has said things in anger.”

“Who among us hasn't?”

I pat her hand. “I'd never let him ruin the world for you, Mom. Your outlook is too precious.”

“I've had my wild days, I'll have you know,” she tells me. And not for the first time. “I wised up and met your father and settled down and had a beautiful daughter.” She stops short of pinching my cheek. “No golf? Final answer?”

“I have to go back to work but thank you.”

We air kiss. I bypass the valet. I'm more able-bodied than many older folks who are members of this club, so I enjoy the walk to my car. Plus, it really is a beautiful day. I'd like to soak in the sun before I venture back into Mordor to confront Sauron.

I'm referring to Barrett, in case you were wondering.



“SHAME WE’RE NOT PLANNING on kissing at the end of any of these dates,” Barrett says as he fiddles with the pens in my pen cup.

I send the email I was typing, unable to hold back a snort. “Why am I not surprised to hear you say that?”

He’s sitting on the edge of my desk, behavior I’ve grown accustomed to and have decided to ignore. He takes up space with everyone in the office. I’ve seen it. I guess it makes sense. He made a living out of “huddling” so maybe his personal space bubble is smaller than most.

I lean over to shove a file into my desk drawer and then sit up, only to be confronted by Barrett nearer than usual.

“It’s impossible to tell whether you like someone or not if you don’t touch them.” His blue eyes skate over my face, taking a brief inventory. I wonder what he sees.

“It’s not impossible.” This close I can’t miss the red and blond whiskers that cohabitate on his scruffy jaw. But I’m not going to fall over myself like Nanci. I don’t find celebrities—even low-grade ones like Fox—that interesting. I clear my throat.

“I haven’t touched you, and I know I don’t like you.” I smile sweetly, but it falls away when he ever-so-gently sweeps a lock of hair away from my face.

“Must just be me, then,” he murmurs.

He has big hands. Nice hands. They’re a little rough and a lot tender, which isn’t what I’d expect from him. Using his thumb, he gently brushes the skin along my cheek, then down

to my bottom lip. I'm frozen in place, soaking up the attention that has been so lacking from the opposite sex.

“You can tell a lot from a kiss, Kitty Cat. Even one without tongue.”

My heart pounds and my breaths shorten. I tell myself it's because I don't like him and his posture is threatening, but my nipples are the first to point out that lie. There's nothing threatening about his nearness or the way he's touching me.

Fine. I'm attracted to him. Or not him *per se*, but to his magnetism. There's a pull surrounding him.

His blues zero in on my mouth. “Aren't you the least bit curious? Your readers will be. I'm an unattainable bachelor, and they're going to expect a full report.”

His voice is low and rumbly like a far-off thunderstorm. The kind best enjoyed while curled under a blanket and cradling a cup of warm tea. That there's a single cozy element about him is more off-putting than the rest of him.

“I have a boyfriend.” A good reminder for both of us.

“I know.” He tips my chin with his knuckles. “Think your guy would mind if you kissed me for the assignment? No tongue. Just so you can fully disclose how it feels to have my mouth on yours?”

His tongue sneaks out to wet his bottom lip and I suck in a sharp breath of...something. Terror. Or want. Could be want. That's pretty terrifying.

Barrett grins—a white, sharky smile.

“Eh, you're probably right.” He drops his hand. “Wouldn't be worth it.”

I blink back to reality and then watch as he swaggers back to his desk. I'm still leaning forward on the edge of my chair, my chin tipped as if I'm waiting for that kiss he promised. With a huff, I tousle my hair, open my laptop, and start writing. Or, well, I start hitting keys and hope that I *look* like I'm writing.

A quick glance over my shoulder at Barrett proves he is looking at me this time. He flashes me one of his smug smiles. His hands are propped on the back of his head, his legs crossed at the ankles and stretched out in front of him.

For one insane, fleeting second I wanted Barrett Fox to kiss me.

And he knows it.

CHAPTER 6

BARRETT

“Ought to do it,” I tell my brother as I drop the hood on his Audi A8. It’s black and was a beautiful car when I bought it for him two years ago. Now it’s boasting a long scratch along the passenger side and a dent in the front bumper thanks to his DUI.

The reason I’m here today isn’t quite as dramatic. He thought the Audi needed “fixed” but it turned out in desperate need of an oil change.

“Thanks,” Aaron says. He’s two years older than me biologically but behaves ten years younger than me—considering I’ve had many immature moments, that’s saying something. “Thought I’d need a new one.”

“You don’t need a new car, Aaron.” I wipe my hands on an orange oil-stained towel. “You need to keep this one serviced. Oil changes. Wash it on occasion. Any of this sound familiar?”

“Oil changes cost money.” His face pinches. “I can’t help it I got fired.”

“You were fired for stealing,” I remind him. “You could’ve helped it.”

“It wasn’t stealing. Everyone swipes the ice cream bars.” He was a clerk at a convenience store for four years running—as far as I know, that’s the longest stretch he’s ever held down a job. Then he started lifting snacks during his shifts.

“Just because everyone does it doesn’t mean it’s right.” I’d add the phrase “like mom and dad taught us” but they never taught us that. They always told us to “get while the gettin’s good” and then they’d add that “no one” would give us “nothin’ for free.”

They weren’t the best role models alive and didn’t die the best ones, either. About two years after I signed with Miami, they went out one night to celebrate. They put away countless shots at a local watering hole and ended up wrapping their car around a tree on the way home. They both died on impact.

Aaron then became my responsibility. The folks didn’t have a will, so I let my brother have everything, including the brick ranch located in an okay but affordable part of town. I sent him money. Bought him the car. Bailed him out of jail a few months back when he crashed the car.

“You could’ve helped getting shit-canned, too, Big Time.” Fuck, here he goes. I hate that nickname. “They shouldn’t allow female refs on the field. Their judgment’s impaired by their hormones. You were right.”

“I wasn’t right. I was mad and saying stupid shit I shouldn’t have.” It’s an uphill climb to continue that lesson, so I stay on topic. “Again. Just because I lost my job doesn’t mean you should lose yours. Were you listening to nothing I’ve said?”

“You could’ve handed me cash to get the oil change, Big Time. I’d have gotten it.”

He’d have *drunk* it, but that’s not a conversation to have right now. I have a date in a few hours. I walk to my car—an older version of the Audi Aaron drives, minus the dents and scratches. She’s a gorgeous cherry red with champagne leather interior.

“Hey, man,” he says as I slide into the driver’s side. “You have any cash on you? It’s for a vacation with my bros.”

“Not sure you should be taking a vacation with your ‘bros’ since you lost your job.” Amazing I have to have this convo with a thirty-one-year-old, isn’t it?

“I knew you’d say that.” He rolls his eyes—green like mom’s. He’s a redhead, too, but I have Dad’s coloring—the ginger softened by sandy, golden brown as opposed to being full-on flame-red like Mom. Aaron has her coloring and about a billion freckles to go along with it. “Can I talk you out of a hundred bucks or so?”

“You expect me to give you one hundred dollars when I changed your oil myself to save you thirty?” He’s always been a leech. First leeching off Mom and Dad and now off me.

Rather than answer me, he straightens his narrow frame and smirks. “I have a date with Carrie Grammar. Remember her? Blonde. Cheerleader. Great rack.”

He holds his hands chest high and gestures like he’s palming a pair of basketballs. I’m not qualifying that statement with a comment.

Aaron leans a hip on my car after I close myself in. “What about you? You go back to Beth for some ex-sex or are you getting it on with a bunch of desperate OSU cheerleaders?”

“Do you have to be such a dick?” Arguably I, at one point, wasn’t much better than my older brother. Thank God I had a great arm and could run fast. A football scholarship might’ve been all that stood in the way of my turning out exactly like him.

Still. He is my brother.

I reach into my wallet and pull out some cash. A fifty-dollar bill and three twenties still leaves me with sixty bucks, but I can use a card if I need more. Tonight’s date is on the *Columbus Dispatch* anyway. I hold the money out for Aaron to take. As he reaches for it, I pull it back. “Take Carrie somewhere nice. I mean it. And pull her chair out for her.”

“Fuck off.” He swipes the cash. “You worry about your own love life, Big Time.”

“Get the hell off my car.” I rev the engine. He flips me off, and I reverse out of the drive, eyeing the overgrown grass, filthy windows, and dead fern in a planter hanging from the front porch.

I hate this place.



CATARINA

La Petit France’s website doesn’t do it justice. There were a few small photos on a black and white background, which hinted at its minimalist style, but when I walk through the door I’m floored by the aggressive elegance of the restaurant.

Jacket required, indeed.

The waitstaff wear white shirts with black bow ties, black pants, and long, black aprons. A sommelier whisks by with a leather-bound wine list, a starched white towel draped over one arm. The host is a beautiful blond woman in a tight, black dress, with a long, gold necklace.

“Reservations for Everhart,” I say as Barrett steps close enough that I can smell his musky cologne. Tonight has become suddenly and accidentally intimate.

“Best table you have, honey.” He places his palm on my back, warming my bare skin thanks to the backless white dress I’m wearing. That wide, rough hand slides around until he’s gripping my waist possessively. “One by a window would be preferable.”

Our hostess taps her iPad and then nods, locking eyes with Barrett a moment later. I watch as her entire face softens with recognition. Admiration. What gives? Shouldn’t women hate him for what he said to Loretta Santiago on that field? Instead they melt over great biceps and seaworthy blue eyes. Pathetic.

“Barrett Fox. Oh my gosh.” She flits a nervous glance around as if she’s aware she’s acting unprofessionally before dropping her voice to a whisper. “Can you sign something for me if I bring it by discreetly?”

He leans in and murmurs, “Honey, I’ll sign anything you like.”

She giggles into her palm before cutting me a look of apology.

I smile patiently. *Yes. I’m still here.*

“Oh, her?” Barrett tucks me closer. “She’s used to my fans.”

The hostess blushes as she collects two menus, and then herself. She straightens as a tall, older gentleman in a smart black tux rounds the corner. “Pierre, please take this couple to table eleven.”

“Certainly. This way.” If Pierre, who doesn’t have a tiny mustache like his name presumes, is impressed by my date he doesn’t show it. He’s the consummate professional. A host with the most. He seats us, hands us our menus, and fills our water glasses without fanfare.

“Swanky.” Barrett is checking out the room: several crystal chandeliers hovering overhead, ironed white tablecloths, low candlelight in crystal votive cups at the center of the table.

“Yes, well, readers want the fantasy.” I unroll my silverware and spread the napkin on my lap. He watches me before doing the same, like he was unsure if that was his cue. I can’t resist a smile, so I hide my face behind the wine menu.

I order a bottle of wine in French. The sommelier’s eyes light with approval, but he only has a dash more personality than Pierre.

“Yikes. Tough crowd,” Barrett says when the sommelier leaves.

“You don’t have to share the Chianti with me, Fox,” I tell him. “Beer is acceptable. You’re supposed to be you, not conform.”

“You think I can’t drink wine?”

“I think you don’t want wine,” I correct.

“I want wine.”

“Fine.”

“I like that dress on you, Kitty Cat,” he says as I study the menu. “I always thought I liked low-cut necks and supershort skirts, yet here you are blowing that idea out of the water.”

The white dress I’m wearing has no sleeves—a good look since I have a tan and nice shoulders. And with the back out, it’s sexy without being overtly pinup girl. My hair is fastened at my nape, a few strands artfully pulled out of the twist to frame my face.

“You cleaned up nicely yourself, Fox.” He’s in his typical black pants/white shirt combo, but he’s wearing a tie. A sleek, charcoal gray tie that looks expensive. I know because North is an impeccable dresser. His tie collection rivals my shoe collection. As restaurant rules specify, Barrett is wearing a suit jacket over those broad shoulders. It’s charcoal in color and perfectly fitted. He didn’t buy off the rack. This one was tailored.

I imagine what his closet looks like only to crash into a visual of him naked and choosing clothes from it. I blink to wipe away the image.

Pheromones. Yeesh.

“Do you have a stylist?” I tell myself it’s my job to get to know my date, but the truth is I’ve been curious about that since I met him.

“Had.” He takes a big drink of water.

He’s leaning back in his chair, one leg under the table, the other leg out in the aisle like the tiny seating area can’t contain him. We’re next to a window as he requested. Downtown Columbus at night is awe-inspiring. Tall, shadowy buildings checkered with golden lights are aglow against a navy blue sky.

“I learned how to dress after a few years of being in the spotlight,” he explains. “Here’s less pressure than Miami. The club scene.” He purses his lips and blows out a breath. “You have to be on top of it to fit in there.”

Our wine arrives. I wave off the option of a taste test. The sommelier pours both glasses and whisks away, leaving Barrett and I alone with our Chianti.

“North and I enjoy this vintage often. I think you’ll like it.” I take a drink of the exquisite liquid, forgiving myself for the white lie. North and I haven’t enjoyed a bottle of this particular vintage in a long while. Probably the last time we slept together.

“Why the frown, Kitty Cat? Does it taste bad?” Barrett takes a drink big enough to fill his cheeks and then makes a show of squinting one eye and swishing it like mouthwash, first on one side of his mouth and then on the other.

A laugh bursts out of me and I have to cover my lips with my fingers to subdue it.

He swallows the drink and grins, leaning over the table. He can’t come far. There are flowers, candles, and four glasses dotted between us. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I believe you’re enjoying an evening with me.”

“The night is young,” I tell him. “You have plenty of time to screw it up.”

As premonitions go, that one is going to end up being a tad too accurate.

After dinner and dessert, I’m wedging my molars together and praying for patience.

“*Barrett.*” My whisper is urgent, my eyes rounded.

“Yes, Kitty Cat?” He answers without looking up from his work: carefully trimming the end of a cigar. A lighter rests on the pristine tablecloth in front of him.

“You can’t smoke that in here.” Smoking is prohibited in public places in Ohio—but even if it was allowed, cigar smoking is a *huge* no-no. Especially in a restaurant without a designated area.

“Why not?” He pockets the cutter and chomps on the end of the cigar, channeling his inner Clint Eastwood.

“Because you’re not allowed.” I shoot a nervous glance to the tables around us and encounter several expressions of distaste.

“*Allowed* is relative,” he says around the cigar. He follows the direction of my gaze and tips his chin at an older couple. “How you doing?”

Then. He lights the cigar. Takes one puff, then another, blowing acrid smoke in a thick cloud over his head. He pulls it from his mouth and regards it with pride.

“Cuban.” He offers it to me. “Wanna try?”

Mouth open, I lean in to reprimand him but the hostess from earlier, who has been bustling around taking inventory of the tables, beats me to it. She’s all smiles and stars in her eyes, but she takes her task seriously.

“Mr. Fox.” Her smile is nervous as she leans close.

“Yeah, doll?” he asks, taking another deep puff.

“I’m so sorry to disturb your dinner, but I need you to put out the cigar. There’s no smoking in here.”

“Is that a rule?” He blows more smoke into the air.

“Yes. It’s a rule.” She positions his half full water glass in front of him. “Put it out, please.”

“Can’t do that,” he says as someone behind me coughs noisily. The older couple to his left fan their faces as my date takes another drag.

“You’re going to get into trouble if you don’t,” the hostess whispers, concern widening her eyes. “I don’t want to have to ask you to leave.”

A wolfish smile slides onto Barrett’s face, equal parts charm and smarm. “In that case, I’ll let you put it out. I can’t. It’s too fine an indulgence to dispose of personally.”

He puts the cigar between his lips, sucks his cheeks in and enjoys one more taste before the hostess reaches over with a shaking hand and takes it from his mouth.

I’m watching her closely, so I witness the exact moment she tentatively licks her lips. “Perhaps you could finish it outside?”

“That an offer?” He raises one rogue eyebrow.

Her eyes sparkle.

And that’s when I stand up and leave.

CHAPTER 7

BARRETT

Kitty Cat's been ignoring me for the better part of this week. I thought by midweek she'd be over my bad-boy restaurant antics. The silent treatment is petty, even for her.

Besides, I paid for the bill out of my own pocket and assured her that while I secured the hostess's phone number, I deleted it from my phone the next day.

I think she believed me.

On Sunday she emailed me a few articles of hers as a sample of how long my portion of the column should be. I didn't open them until Monday. What kind of a masochist works on the weekend? Some boyfriend she has. He should be lounging around with her reading the paper. Refilling her coffee. Stripping her shower-warmed body out of a skimpy silk robe and...

Anyway.

I've studied her articles until my head ached. I've pecked out my own words until my eyes crossed inward. She's good. Really good. Much better than me. But I don't want to be a

writer when I grow up. My goal is to return to the limelight. I want my field reporter position back and for that to happen, I need some attention. You may not believe that my behaving like an asshole in public is a smart route back, but you'd be wrong. Mia *loved* that stunt. She clapped me on the back—*hard*, I might add. She's as strong as she looks. She praised my attention-grabbing ability. So don't go worrying about something crazy like our precious Kitty Cat losing her job. She's aces with the boss.

While I'm not looking to win a Pulitzer with this article, I would like my writing to be at least complementary to my cohort's rather than hers shining for the world to see and mine reading like it was written by a bag of hair with a laptop.

The bar's high, not for my sake but for Catarina's. She takes her job seriously and I take her seriously.

The other notable change on Monday was that she moved her desk to face my cubicle again. Either she was tired of having her back to the rest of the office or it threw off her feng shui. Hard to tell. I helpfully concluded that she missed looking at my face, to which she offered a droll, "Sure, Fox, that's it" without looking up from her computer screen.

I push away from the desk to stretch my arms overhead. I'm not cut out for office work. I've come in here three days out of five this week and it's been torture. I can't take it any longer.

Unfortunately, my writing is as slow as molasses. On a turtle. In a deep freeze.

I've been given an extension through the weekend though Mia made it clear I'll have to step up my game for the future articles. They're running ads online as teasers—the banners are animated and feature one of my shirtless calendar photos

and a professional, arms-folded-over-her-chest, no-nonsense shot of Catarina with the tagline “A Summer Treat with Blistering Heat.”

Lame, right?

The lengths I’ll go to for a job back in front of a camera.

I wave to Mills when I exit my cubicle and then to Nanci, whose reaction to me has dimmed some. No longer does she fidget and blush when she sees me, but she does offer an excited wave and smile so I haven’t completely lost her yet. I prefer when they stay impressed. It’s easier for me if I don’t have to prove myself.

I walk the short distance to Catarina’s desk. She doesn’t look up, but she knows I’m here. I cleared my throat twice on the walk over. Her, I’ve yet to impress. At this rate I may *never* impress her.

“What do you want, Fox?” Her fingers don’t so much as slow over the keyboard.

“Let’s get out of here. Take a walk. I’m going crazy. How do you sit in here all day?”

She glances up at me, a study of impatience and slow blinks.

“Are you seriously still angry about the cigar thing? I have to tell you, it’s immature.”

She stands, shuts her laptop, and rounds the desk. I watch, startled not because she’s walking away from me, but because she’s doing it in flip-flops. A black pair with rhinestone straps. She turns and lifts her arms into an impatient shrug. “Well. Where do you want to walk?”

“That worked? All I had to do was ask you to go for a walk?” I jog to catch up.

“Don’t push your luck. Where to?”

“Outside. I beg of you. I’ll buy you a hot dog.”

“It’s ten in the morning.”

“Coffee, then. A bagel. A gram of cocaine. I’m not picky as long as we can do it outside.”

We step into the elevator and she pokes the ground floor button.

After a few seconds, I have to ask. “You okay?”

“Peachy,” she clips.

“Come on, Kitty Cat. Something’s up. I can tell because your hair’s not as bouncy as usual. Your outfits have been a carbon copy of each other. White blouse. Black skirt. Either you’re taking after Einstein and wearing the same thing every day or else it’s a cry for help.”

She points to me in the empty-except-for-us elevator. “You wear a version of black pants and white shirt every day. Why can’t I?”

“You can. It’s just not like you.”

“Thanks for noticing.”

Between you and me, I don’t think she’s thankful I noticed.

She strolls past the security desk and then exits via the revolving door. I follow, wedged behind a panel of glass for a few seconds before we emerge on the street. Not the best day for a walk. It’s cloudy and the sidewalk is damp from a recent soaking.

“I’ll buy you coffee and you can tell me about it.” There’s a Starbucks on our block and we both aim for it. There’s a line forming, so we’d better hurry.

“I’m not telling you anything.”

“Ah-ha! So there *is* something. What if I throw in a donut? Or one of those cake pop things?” I pace my steps to match her quick stride. “Breakfast sandwich *and* I’ll make your coffee a Venti and throw in an extra shot. That’s my final offer.”

She takes a big breath that lifts her shoulders before sliding me a derisive, but capitulating glare. “*Fine.*”

I open the door for her and we step into line. The guy in front of us does a double-take as he recognizes me.

“Holy shit,” he says quietly. “You’re Barrett Fox.”

“How ya doin’?” I ask, inconvenienced because he’s interrupting my attempt to line-chat with Catarina.

“That touchdown at the championship game a few years back when you played for OSU”—he shakes his head reverently—“was *amazing*. That game replayed on ESPN the other day.”

“Thanks.” It was a great play. I was in the pocket and my current pal, former tight end Dax Vaughn, and I coordinated like we were synchronized swimmers. Touchdown for the win of the championship game. Gorgeous, beautiful play. The best in my college career. A ribbon of pride threads my chest, but snaps when the guy in front of me speaks again.

“That bitch of a ref though. *Man*. What a tough break. I was stoked that you were reporting on the field. Are they going to let you come back?”

Catarina jerks her attention to me. Like it's my fault Mr. Doesn't Know When to STFU is in front of us in line?

I offer a "yeah" to our new best friend and turn my back on him.

"Saw you on Twitter, too. Smoking a cigar in a fancy-ass restaurant." He lets out a loud laugh that draws the attention of a few patrons and the woman ahead of him in line. I'm not bashful, but Catarina is reaching her limits with this dude. What he says next pushes her over the edge. "Sweet little piece you were with, too. Did you hit that?"

Catarina turns on the guy, fists balled at her sides. "Fucking morons. All of you!"

She directs that to line guy and me simultaneously before she turns and stomps out the door.

"Was that her?" The guy has the decency to wince.

I don't answer, instead turning to watch as she flips and flops up the sidewalk toward the office as it starts to rain.

"So did you—"

"I'll buy you whatever you want if you stop talking to me."

"Fuck you, asshole. I was trying to be conversational."

"Seriously? You insult my girl, make her leave, and now *you're* pissed because I offered to buy your coffee?"

"If she's your girl why didn't you chase after her?" The woman in front of the guy in line asks me as we shuffle forward.

"I promised her a coffee and that's what I'm bringing back to the office." I notice more eyes are on me, and they're not on

me in the “I love Barrett Fox” way.

“You work in an office?” Some of the hero worship bleeds from my biggest fan’s eyes.

“Haven’t you seen one of the bajillion ads about him dating one of their journalists?” the woman asks him. “They’re going on a series of dates I’m guessing as a publicity stunt for him. I wonder what that poor woman did to earn that punishment.”

Hello? Have they forgotten I’m here?

“How about because I’m a celebrity and the city needs the publicity?”

“You’re a clown.” She scoffs. “They need the entertainment.”

The guy in front of me extends a hand to her. “Thad.”

“Jane.”

They forget about me and make small talk with each other. She orders her drink, he orders his and pays for both, and then they move away to chat with each other.

I reach the barista, a young hipster who helpfully points out that he shared a gif of me smoking a cigar in a “rigid eating establishment” on his social media. He gloats that it was his most shared post of the week. I groan.

“Anything else, Mr. Fox?” he asks after he reviews my order.

“Yeah.” I reconsider as I pull money from my wallet. “You’d better add a donut, cake pop, and a breakfast sandwich to that order.”

CHAPTER 8

CATARINA

A sack of food is placed on my desk in front of me, and I let out a sigh.

“I don’t want that.” My fingers on the keyboard, I change an adjective in my article from “cocky” to “egomaniacal.”

“Come on, Kitty Cat—”

“Stop trying to cheer me up, okay?”

For a change, his lips press closed. Barrett looks a touch scolded standing there with our coffees—mine the taller one that reads “Kitty Cat” on the side. His reads “Fox.”

He has a great name. Barrett Fox. Three syllables that roll off the tongue and sound at once sophisticated, masculine, and capable.

“Tell me what’s going on with you.” He teases me with my beverage but doesn’t hand it over when I reach for it. “There’s an empty office around the corner where we can talk.”

He points—with my beloved cup of coffee—toward the corridor off which there is, in fact, an empty office. Marge retired last week and they’ve yet to decide who to put in there.

I asked if I could have it. Mia said “maybe” which probably means “no.” So much for seniority.

I stand and Barrett straightens, giving me a cocky—no, *egomaniacal*—smirk. “I’m only coming with you until I can claim my coffee, then I’m out.”

“We’ll see.” He leads the way. He has a nice walk. I’ve referred to it as a swagger before, and it is. His back is straight, his gait easy. He’s tall, long limbed, but muscular. Underneath that fitted button-down white shirt is a sturdy form. Rounded, strong shoulders. Broad chest...

Maybe talking to him won’t be as bad as I think. I should talk to someone. Since it happened Monday evening, I haven’t told a soul.

Inside Marge’s former office, he flips on the light, and I shut the door. If I do end up saying more than I intend, I don’t want the rest of the office to overhear. Mills pilfered Marge’s ergonomic chair, swapping it for a torn one with stuffing popping out of the seat. Barrett pulls out the chair for me. I plop into it and hold out my hand.

He sits on the edge of the desk. “No coffee until you tell me what’s going on with you. You’re always serious, studious, and focused. What you’re usually *not* is blatantly angry. I know I pissed you off on our date—”

“You behaved like a rowdy teenager instead of a grown man.”

“—but you’re not petty or uncommunicative. If you were still pissed about that, you’d tell me.”

“*Fine*. I’m still pissed about it.” I fold my arms and lift my chin into a stubborn tilt.

“What do you have to lose if you talk to me?” he asks, not buying my fib.

“Why do you want to know so badly?” My voice creeps into “whine” territory, but that could be because he’s breaking down my walls. They were stronger earlier this week, but as the long nights and longer days passed those walls have started to crumble.

He doesn’t answer my question, so I decide to tell him the truth—quick and neat and right to the heart of the matter. Or the *heartless* of the matter, as it were...

“Northrop and I broke up on Monday and please don’t use this moment to make fun of his name.” I shoot my arm out to collect my coffee. Barrett, eyebrows bent in what might be sympathy hands me the cup. I take a drink of the delicious, hot, strong Pike Place with a splash of half-and-half. It’s *perfection*.

“What’d you order?” I ask.

“Was he cheating?” Frowning now, he sets his smaller cup aside.

“Worse,” I confess, my voice cracking the slightest bit.

“What’s worse than cheating?”

“I guess we’re really doing this,” I grumble against the plastic lid. After a fortifying drink, I set my cup next to his and slump in the tattered office chair. Literally *slump*. My arms are on the chair’s arms. My knees together, lower legs splayed. I’ve sunk down so far that my neck is uncomfortably bent. I stay that way.

This is what I’ve felt like doing all week but couldn’t. I’m in the bullpen with the rest of the journalists. I’m the no-nonsense reporter with an important job to do. I’m in charge of

writing Mia's pet project and earning the majority of advertising dollars for the quarter.

I chew on my lip while I consider where to start the sordid tale.

"North has been working longer and longer hours tending to one client or the next. Things between us were okay but not great. I saw him, but not enough."

"And the sex?"

"That's none of your business!" I straighten in the chair, the heels of my Louboutins digging into the ugly brown carpet.

"No sex?" He lifts his eyebrows and whistles. "Had it been long?"

"I never said—"

"Was it longer than a week? That's when I start getting itchy."

"I'm not—"

"*Two* weeks? Damn, Kitty Cat."

I shut my eyes and shake my head, trying to will away the flush creeping up my neck. Damn my pale skin.

"When is the last time *you* had sex?" My attempt to reclaim the upper hand has me turning the color of a candy apple.

He considers, his lips moving while he studies the ceiling. "Three weeks ago."

"Three weeks ago? Are you 'itchy?'" I ask with a disbelieving grunt.

"I'm dying."

His tone is sincere, and I can relate so much I don't know what to say.

“Are you?” he asks softly.

“It's been two months, what do you think?” I mumble.

I expect him to overreact to the length of time I've been celibate, but he doesn't. “You saw him but not enough. Go on.”

“One night he mentioned his new associate Maria who was helping him sell an apartment building. I was certain that's who he was cheating on me with.”

Barrett gestures with a hand. *Obviously.*

“Saturday night I decided to show up at his office.” I pick at the material on the chair's arm while I talk, the burn of shame igniting my cheeks. Embarrassment I can handle. Shame is more challenging. “And he was there with Maria. She was pretty, blond, and they were sitting very close.”

“This all sounds like cheating to me.”

“I followed him Sunday afternoon. He picked up Maria at the office and drove to the apartment building where they were supposed to go. I showed up Monday in his office at seven A.M. when he was working early, and she was there again. They were drinking coffee and poring over contracts.”

“The plot thickens.”

“I confronted North that evening. I told him I suspected him of sleeping with Maria and confessed that I'd followed him to work and to the apartment building. He wasn't angry. He was sad.”

“Sad?”

“*Sad*. He said he wasn’t cheating, but he was ready to end our relationship. The only reason he could think to leave me was disinterest, and he didn’t know how to break it to me.” I swallow and force myself to continue, unable to stop now that I opened the dam. “He said the reason he hasn’t had sex with me was less about him being busy and more about him not wanting to lead me on. He was waiting for the right time to dump me, and since I broached the subject he took the opportunity to do it then and there.”

Moisture pricks my eyes and I bat my lashes. I cried Monday and Tuesday. And then I cried more on Wednesday and Thursday. I’m *not* crying today. I have a life without North and I’m determined to live it.

When I’m finally brave enough to lift my face, Barrett’s expression is neutral—he doesn’t appear pained for me or angry on my behalf.

“Need to revenge fuck someone?” he asks.

“*That’s* your suggestion?”

He shrugs. “It works. It helps. We’re both itchy.”

“You’re the one who’s itchy, Fox. Probably from the last hostess you screwed who left behind an STD.”

He chuckles, unoffended.

“Have you ever been in a relationship that lasted longer than two minutes?” I snap.

“Yes.”

I blink. *Really?*

“How long were you together?” Now I’m curious.

“Six years.”

I know I look startled. How can I not? It's startling. "Six years?"

"On and off."

That makes more sense.

"Alternately, you could rub one out while I watch," he offers.

My mouth drops open as his spreads into a smile. "That was a joke. Unless you're considering it, in which case it wasn't." He points to the door. "That knob locks."

I push out of my chair. He wraps a hand around my elbow and turns me. Now I'm standing awkwardly between his spread thighs, face to face with a man I am trying not to like.

But damn, does he smell good. With gentle fingers, he holds each side of my jaw. He studies my mouth for a prolonged moment before meeting my eyes.

"You're going to be okay, Kitty Cat. He was holding you back. Guy who doesn't care enough to cut you loose is a complete dickhead who doesn't deserve your time. He was a coward. You're the brave one."

It's such a tender comment, especially following the lewd one a few moments ago. Have I misjudged him? Under that bravado is he all heart—a muscly teddy bear?

"Do you at least want to make out while I have you here?" I swat his hands away but can't hide my smile. He chuckles, pleased with himself at drawing one forward.

Unbelievably, I feel a bit better than before I came in here. But I have a role to play. So, when he slides off the edge of the desk, and hands me my coffee cup I take it, and then march out of the office ahead of him.

CHAPTER 9

CATARINA

Date *numero dos*.

I wasn't sure how Barrett was going to react to being thrust into a stuffy country club—and moreover, I wasn't sure how he'd be dressed. He was a sports guy, not a golf guy. The differences between football and golf are too many to number.

“You look...like a golfer,” I tell him approvingly as we place our clubs into the cart. His bag is pristine. His clubs gleaming. “I take it you don't play often.”

“Your bag is pink. Your shorts are pink.” He lifts his eyebrows. “And you're judging *me*?”

“Men dominated this sport for too long. It's my right as a card-carrying member of this country club to rub their noses in the fact I'm a woman.”

He slides his sunglasses to the tip of his nose as if blatantly checking me out. I stand taller in my pink shorts and white top, making sure to pull my shoulders back and push my breasts forward.

A smile crests his lips before he pushes his sunglasses back up. Men. So weak.

“I don’t play often,” he says, “but I did once play a celebrity tournament with Bill Murray.”

That tracks.

We set out to play our nine holes. Barrett’s swing is atrocious, but his ball consistently lands about one hundred yards farther than mine, forcing me to play catch-up during all nine holes. His short game sucks, so I recoup by sinking putt after putt.

“I’m better at mini golf,” he grumbles, stuffing his putter in his bag. At least he quit swearing.

“I’ve never seen anyone eight-putt before,” I tell him sweetly, smiling as I recall his multiple lip-outs and putts that rolled *waaaay* past the hole.

“You try catching a fifty-yard pass with two defenders breathing down your neck, Kitty Cat, and then we’ll talk.”

It’s easy to forget that the man beneath the butter yellow polo and beige golf pants is a powerful and incredible athlete. Or he *was* anyway, before he blew out his shoulder.

We climb onto the cart, and I reluctantly agree to let him drive. He’s thoroughly ruffled when he learns that the cart has a speed limit and it’s not a high one.

“I imagine it was hard for you to give up football.” I say.

“Players don’t last forever. We know that. Hell, an NFL career for most of us lasts around the time mine did anyway.” He shrugs as if he took the injury and the subsequent loss in stride, but he couldn’t have. He loved to play. He’s told me that several times.

“You didn’t want a career like Tom Brady or Peyton Manning?”

His jaw ticks as he squints out into the distance. The sun catches the red in his hair, highlighting the fiery strands interspersed with the golden brown. Rather than answer me, he asks, “Are we eating here?”

“Fine. Don’t open up. But you might want to write about it in your side of the column so that readers can peek at the real man beneath...whatever this is.” I wave a hand in his general direction.

He floors the golf cart, which doesn’t make it go that much faster, but I still grab the oh-shit bar attached to the roof just in case.

At the restaurant in the country club, Barrett lets out a sound of disapproval.

“What’s the matter, Fox? Don’t see any hostesses you’d like to take home?”

His eyes wander over my face as his lips tilt beneath a thin layer of scruff. His slow perusal causes my heart to pitter-patter in an irritating way. Blue eyes twinkle like there’s a secret he’s not telling me.

Which is ridiculous. Beneath that asshole exterior, he’s an asshole on the inside, too. The whole world knows it, and he goes out of his way to prove it.

Except for that moment when I confessed about North and I breaking up. Then Barrett was really decent... Kind of. In between offering to have sex with me or make out with me. The memory makes me warm. He was oddly comforting in that moment. Something I can’t quite reconcile with who I know him to be.

By the time we're being led to the dining room I've spotted some familiar faces ringing a table in the center.

"Catarina!" A grin splits my mother's face as she stands.

The two other ladies at the table—Sherrie and Bette—wave. I wave back.

"What a happy coincidence." My mother tilts her head in the direction of my date-for-hire. "You must be the football guy she told us about. I'm Celia, Catarina's mother."

"Damn, I guess," he says, his charm cranked to *stun*. He takes her hand and tugs her closer, examining her ring finger before placing a kiss on her knuckles. "Married. Good for you."

My mom, bless her heart, doesn't realize he's flirting with her. "I'm sorry to say Catarina's father isn't here. He would have liked to meet you."

"Is your husband a football fan?" Barrett rolls his shoulders, which only serves to accentuate his broad build.

"He's not," I say. His and my mother's eyes fly to me. "Can't win 'em all, Fox."

My mom frowns at me briefly before recapturing her always-there smile. "I'll leave you two to your own devices. Unless you'd like to join us?"

"We'd love to," I lie, "but this is a working lunch for us. We're going to discuss the column."

That's when I notice Sherrie's eyes on Barrett, her mouth frozen in an awed smile. Bette is leaning over and whispering in Sherrie's ear, and then she draws back and smiles at Barrett in that same awestruck manner.

“Oh Lord,” I grumble through my teeth. His magnetism is irritating.

“One second, Kitty Cat.” He palms my back and then takes my mother’s vacated seat, introducing himself to Sherrie and Bette. Pretty soon, they’re tittering, and he’s signing their white cloth napkins.

“He’s quite the celebrity,” my mother observes. “How was your round?”

“Fine.”

She waits for me to elaborate. I don’t.

“Did he call you Kitty Cat?” Mom knows I don’t care for nicknames. She doesn’t, either. Her name is Celia, and she’s never gone by C or Lia or any other butchered form of her name.

“He’s trying to burrow under my skin. It’s his way.”

Barrett ambles over and inserts himself between us, sliding his palm along my back. He smells like fresh air and sunshine and against my will I lean in his direction.

“Ready to eat, Pussycat?” he asks. My mother’s shock-and-awe expression is one for the books.

“Wow,” I tell him.

“What?” he asks.

“I never thought the moment would come when I’d prefer Kitty Cat, and yet here we are.”

His grin is puckish and charming and has my mom falling under his spell. With a roll of my eyes I move to our table, which is only a few tables away, and we sit down to eat.



“I THOUGHT YOU WERE KIDDING.” I say to Barrett, who is sitting in the driver’s seat of an ostentatious, red convertible. The top’s down since it’s a gorgeous summer evening.

“About what?” He pulls his keys from the ignition.

“About mini golf.” I gesture to the building—a gargantuan three-story glass windowed shrine. We golfed at the country club three days ago. I guess this is the “he said” portion of the column. I’ll write about golf and he’ll yuk it up about putt-putt.

“This isn’t mini golf,” he says as we step from the car. Before we walk up the wide concrete stairs to the entrance, he clasps my hand in his.

“Is this necessary?” I try to sound peeved.

“Date, Kitty Cat.” He slides strong, warm fingers between mine. “Humor me.”

Inside, he checks us in (apparently, we have reservations). The place is busy, and beyond the hostess stand a bar is filled with people drinking cocktails, their golf bags propped next to their barstools.

“Oh, wait. I’ve heard of this.” Northrop mentioned something about the “new” building going up about a year ago. All I remember is “yada yada indoor golf” and at that point I tuned out. North used to golf but swapped golfing for working and then picked up tennis, which I really can’t stand.

The hostess instructs that we’re on the top floor in bay eleven, and that our bay host will be along shortly to take our drink and food order.

“Our what will be where?” I ask Barrett as we climb several flights of stairs.

“This beats the hell out of real golf, Kitty Cat, just you wait.” We find our bay and are greeted immediately by a chipper woman named Gail. She chirps about how we pay for rounds via the kiosk at our table and shows us how to keep score. She urges us to be careful and not tumble off the edge, which is a steep drop-off a few feet from where we’ll be hitting the ball.

We’re indoors, *kind of*. Imagine a long balcony with a roof and floor but otherwise, you’re outside. Nets enclose the golfing area on four sides (the top is open). Neon colored circles with multiple holes are dotted on the green grass a few stories below. She explains that the special golf balls we’re about to hit have a tiny sensor inside, and each colored area on the “green” is worth a certain number of points, with the more difficult holes worth more than others.

“Thanks, Gail, you’ve been most helpful,” my date praises. “I’ll have a tall beer and Kitty Cat will have a dish of cream.”

I slap his arm and order wine. He tacks on an order of mozzarella sticks, buffalo bites, and a quesadilla.

“Hungry?” I ask.

“Starved.” He leans past his barstool and comes closer to say, “I’ll share. But only because I like you.”

I attempt an eye roll but fail. He’s irrationally good-looking for such a cad.

“You didn’t tell me I could’ve brought my own clubs,” I complain as he selects a driver from the bin next to our computer screen. Evidently Fox is “Player 1.”

“That’s because I don’t want you cheating. You have to come out here like the rest of us and hit blind.”

He takes his stance at a square of green Astroturf. Several other guests are doing the same, and the sound of clubs hitting balls is interspersed with laughter and talking.

It’s definitely a different way to play golf, but I admit it looks fun.

Thwack!

His ugly swing is back, but it’s impossible not to admire his athletic form or the way his biceps bunch. He cracks the ball so far I swear it’s going to soar over the net and ding one of the cars in the parking lot. It doesn’t, making its home at the back of the course and sliding into a hole that’s worth one thousand points.

“Seriously?” I’m at a massive disadvantage. I can’t hit that far. If I want a thousand points, I’ll have to be precise and aim for the center of the giant circles. I immediately start calculating how to score more points than him.

“Jealous?” He saunters my way. “You can’t always win, you know. Haven’t you learned that in life yet?” The second it’s out of his mouth, his cocky grin fades some.

I ignore him and pick out a lady’s club.

“Kitty Cat.” A warm palm lands on my shoulder. “You know I wasn’t referring to your situation with East, right?”

I glare.

“West? Southeast? Why is his name so hard?” He stops pretending to be obtuse and grins. “Let’s drop the perfectionism and have a good time. Let your hair down.”

That tenderness again. It throws me off, so I change the subject. “How can you play golf after your shoulder injury? Doesn’t it hurt?”

He rolls his right shoulder. “Sometimes, but it’s better to move it.”

I nod slowly, having a belated realization. “*That’s* why your swing is ugly.”

A frown bisects his brow. “Thanks a lot.”

“Your *backswing*.” It makes total sense. “You tuck your shoulder to protect it. Use your hips to help with the momentum. It’s ugly but effective.” I pat his scruffy jaw. “Just like your face.”

I let out a squeak of surprise when his arm lashes around my waist. He leans in, bowing my body back. My leg is pressed against one of his and my torso and my left boob is smashed against his solid chest. I grip his arm to keep from toppling over, finding my breath as his blue eyes drill into mine.

“Scuse me,” he says, before sliding his club into the rack from whence it came. Then he straightens, sets me on my feet, and leaves me to take my swing.

“Effective.” He drops the ball on the Astroturf at my feet. “Your turn.”

I take one practice swing before hitting my little electronic ball right into the center hole of the neon pink area. It’s only five hundred points, but I can do this all day. I make sure to tell Barrett as much.

CHAPTER 10

BARRETT

Kitty Cat's cute when she has a few in her.

I've never seen her quite this loose. She's been jabbering since we left Hole in One about how golfing indoors was "way more fun" than she would've imagined. She's also been giving me tips about my swing, which I find even cuter. Whenever she's explaining how to achieve a goal, she gets this serious look on her face and moves her hands a lot. The art of success is one Catarina Everhart has mastered. Weirdly enough I don't think she cares that I won both rounds.

"I appreciate the tips," I tell her as I arrive at our destination. In the parking lot of my apartment building, I turn off the ignition and lean my head back. I left the top off my Audi, so it's a perfect opportunity to check out the stars.

"Where are we?"

"My place." I gesture to the tall building. "It'll make a good story. You describing my apartment will be far more interesting than if I do it."

I put the top up and then climb out of the convertible before she can argue. She follows suit, meeting me outside of the car. Again I admire the slim pair of jeans that make her legs appear a mile long. Her tank top stretches across her breasts—black with shiny gold dots.

She pulled her hair into a low ponytail for the ride. I mean, of course she did. Like she's going to allow her hair to go wild? She finger-combs back a few stray strands that have escaped and smooths them against her head. Truth is, she looks cute either way. Smooth and sleek or with a dab of disarray.

“No funny stuff, Fox.” She slings her handbag over her shoulder. “And I'm not drinking more alcohol.”

“You don't have to drink more alcohol,” I promise as I open the door and let us into the building.

We bypass a quiet lobby that leads to the bank of elevators, but not before Mack in security calls out a “Good evening, Mister Fox.”

I wave to him and hold the elevator doors for Catarina. She steps on and offers a smart-aleck echo of my security guy. “Mister Fox.”

“I'm kind of a big deal.” I smile, pleased when her own smile holds fast. I have a feeling she doesn't hate me as much as she used to. Typically, I don't give a rat's ass if someone hates me or not, but Kitty Cat's different. I don't crave approval—never have—but earning hers is a perk.

The elevator stops at floor thirty and she steps off, inspecting the doors lining the hallway. “Which one's yours?” She points at a door with a sunflower wreath hanging over the peephole and wrinkles her nose.

“Yeah, not mine. I’m not on this floor. Come on.” I walk to the end of the hall and use another key to open a separate entrance to a stairwell. “The elevator’s programming is screwed up. We normally would’ve been able to take it directly to my front entrance.”

“You have a private floor?”

“Yes.” I pop open the door for her. “It’s a short flight of stairs.”

Since I asked her to dress casual tonight, she wore flat black shoes instead of tall, spiky ones. She walks ahead of me up the stairwell as the door shuts behind me. I trail behind, watching her butt wiggle in jeans that hug her hips, thighs, and calves.

“Enjoying the view?” she snaps.

I reroute my gaze to her frowning face. “I was, actually. You have a great ass.”

“Is that what you tell all your dates?” Her lips twist into a bemused smirk.

“Only the ones with nice asses.”

Another eye roll. I *excel* at getting her to do that. She steps on the landing and tugs on the metal door, but it won’t open. “This is locked, too? What if there’s a fire?”

“It’s locked from the outside only. Can’t be too careful with crazed fans.” Using my key, I unlock a door that enters the laundry room at the side of my penthouse apartment. A light is on in the foyer, illuminating our path and throwing dim shadows into this room as well.

“Nice Samsung.” She strokes the charcoal gray washing machine as she walks by. “This is terribly neat for a bachelor.”

“I don’t like clutter.” I hang my keys on a hook in the foyer before flipping on a few more lights for the living room and kitchen. It’s not overly bright. Just enough so that we can see our way around.

“Wine?” I offer.

She’s taking slack-jawed inventory of my penthouse. I’ve yet to witness Catarina amazed by anything. Not gonna lie, I’m proud to illicit that response from my prickly co-worker.

“Like it?” I decide against wine and pull a beer from the fridge for myself.

She unshoulders her purse strap, plunking it on one of my breakfast bar’s stools. “I like it. Who decorated? Ex-girlfriend? Designer? Your mom?”

I grunt at her assumption. “If my mom had decorated this place it’d closely resemble the inside of a Cracker Barrel.”

“I like Cracker Barrel,” she says kindly. Who knows if that’s true. I can’t picture elegant Catarina Everhart in the country-style restaurant famous for its sawmill gravy.

“Wine, Kitty Cat?”

“I said no more drinks.” She wags a finger at me, looking damn sober on top of damn cute.

“Is that what you’ll write in your article? ‘He took me up for a nightcap that I refused.’”

“Yes. And after that, I’ll advise ‘Never have a nightcap if you don’t intend on kissing him goodnight.’” One eyebrow hitches. “I’ll have a bottle of water though.”

I grab her a Smartwater. She drinks from the bottle, her delicate throat moving as she swallows each cold sip.

“Would kissing me be that bad?” I’d totally make out with her. She has a mouth that looks both plush and soft, and I’ll bet that sharp tongue would soften once I stroked it with mine.

“I’m not kissing you!” she says around a laugh. “Again, is this what you say to your dates? If so, it’s not hard to figure out why you’ve been single ‘on and off’ for so long.”

She rounds the white leather sofa and sits primly on the edge. I take the middle, sitting so close that my jean-clad thigh touches hers.

“Seriously, Fox.” She gives me a mild glare before scooting a few inches away from me. “Okay. The column. You’ve been hiding your summary from me, and I want to see it.”

“I decided to turn it into Mia directly.”

“What? Why?” She sounds sincerely disappointed.

“I don’t want to flavor your views with mine. We see the world differently, Kitty Cat.”

“You’d better not lie and say we made out tonight.”

“I’m not going to lie.” A stubborn strand of hair has wrestled its way loose from her ponytail again. I reach up and slide it behind her ear. “When I write that we made out, it’ll be true.”

She watches me carefully.

“But not tonight,” I tell her, backing off abruptly. “You’ve had too much to drink.”

A choking sound exits her throat. “Have not.”

I smother a smile at the lip of my beer bottle.

“I’m in control of my faculties, Fox. If I wanted to kiss you after a few glasses of wine, I would. And you couldn’t stop me.”

“Hey, hey.” I hold up my palms. “Don’t make me report you to Mia for sexual harassment.”

“Me! You were the one offering to have sex with me in Marge’s old office.”

“An offer that still stands.”

She takes an exaggerated gulp from her water bottle and regards the label. “Oh my goodness, it works. I’m not going to have sex with or kiss Barrett Fox. Thank you, Smartwater, for making me smart!”

“Hilarious,” I grumble.

“Eh. I can do better.”

“You really can, Kitty Cat. You have sharp wit. That was bland.”

She shrugs off my compliment-insult combo.

“I mean it. I read your articles. You’re funny. Concise. Sharp.”

“Sharp and concise and funny.” She says this to the living room window overlooking the river and the cityscape beyond.

“Those were compliments. Do you prefer I compliment your body instead?” I don’t wait for her to answer. “You have a great ass, hair I want to run my fingers through, and I bet your lips are heaven on earth.”

She swallows, appearing more than a little stunned. I lift her hand. “You have pretty fingers, too. Elegant. Ever play the piano?”

“When I was twelve.”

It’s a rich girl hobby. I’m not surprised.

“Did you?”

“No.” There weren’t a lot of pianos available at the trailer park, unless the keyboard had a Casio logo on it and took five double-A batteries.

Her lips hitch into a small smile before she tugs her hand from mine. She stands and walks to the mantel over a fireplace I never use. I moved here when the weather was warm. I haven’t had the chance to kick back in front of a fire and sip whiskey yet, but it’s a goal.

She picks up a framed photo of me running a touchdown for the Bucks. My buddy Dax had it framed for me the day I was drafted for the Dolphins. Catarina examines the photo then sets it down next to a grouping of shells I took from the beach in Miami before I flew back to Columbus for good.

“Why ‘bad boy of the NFL?’” she asks of my stupid nickname.

“You say that like it was intentional. Like I picked it.”

“You do things that land you squarely in that category, Fox. Are you telling me it’s accidental?”

“Not accidental.” I shrug. “Just not intentional. Guess I never shook my roots.”

“Were you a rule-breaker as a kid?”

“I was a shit,” I tell her honestly. “Until I became interested in sports. I played a lot of touch football with my friends. When I was finally old enough to work, I saved up to join the high school team.”

“Did scouts find you and offer a scholarship like in a movie?”

“Something like that.”

Her head tilts like she’s considering. I shift on the couch, uncomfortable with the attention. I don’t mind attention for being an asshole, but attention for doing well has always made me uncomfortable. Probably we could blame my upbringing, but let’s not go full-on therapy session here.

I roll my shoulder and wince. I’m paying the price for too many swings and honestly, I pushed past my comfort level to win that last game.

“You hurt yourself.” She sounds concerned.

“Eh, it’s just sore.”

She rounds the couch and stands behind me, brushing her fingers along my shoulder. I flinch, air hissing through my teeth in preparation for the pain. Instead of digging her fingers into my muscles, she tenderly touches here and there until she finds a spot to the right of my spine. With her thumbs, or what *feels* like her thumbs, she manipulates the tissue there, working it this way and that with gentle but firm presses to my flesh.

“There,” she announces a few minutes later.

“There?”

“Yeah. That should help. There’s a muscle right here”—she touches the spot that she’d been working on which is surprisingly sore now—“that will help your shoulder release. Make sure you ice it later. Twenty minutes on, forty minutes off.”

When she rounds the couch, my eyebrows are at the top of my forehead. “You a voodoo doctor or something?”

“I dabble in acupuncture. Mostly for my dad’s benefit. He’s always had back trouble. I work out a few kinks for him when I can.”

Her comment suggests closeness with her father. I definitely never had that with mine.

“You seem surprised.”

“I can’t imagine shaking my dad’s hand let alone doing acupuncture on him.”

“Are you two not close?” A tiny frown bisects her brow.

“We didn’t have a lot in common.” Except that we both liked the money I was paid as a professional football player.

“I’m sorry. You don’t see him much?”

“My parents passed away about five years ago.”

“Oh.” She lowers to sit next to me, as close as I sat next to her earlier. Her fingers twitch but she doesn’t reach for my hand. “Do you have any other family around here?”

“Yeah.” I leave it at that, and she takes the hint, her brown eyes softening on my face. Her skin is satin smooth and porcelain pale. Her eyes ringed with lashes, her mouth full and expressive.

“You are so beautiful.” It’s out of my mouth before I mean to say it, but like most things I don’t mean to stay, I commit to my path. “North was crazy to let you go. Gorgeous, smart, and able to administer acupuncture.”

I roll my shoulder and a dart of pain shoots down my arm. It must show on my face because next she hops up and offers

to make me an ice pack. I watch her moving around my kitchen and accept that whatever chance I thought I had at kissing her tonight has been quashed by talk of dead parents and/or her ex-boyfriend.

Sure enough I'm left with nary a hug upon her departure. What she does leave me with is advice dressed up like a command.

"Don't stretch the truth in your column, Fox. Readers can tell."

"So don't mention sex in Marge's office or the serious hot and heavy make-out session we just had on my sofa?" I joke.

She cocks an eyebrow in answer, and then turns for the laundry room.

"Walk you out?" I offer, standing from the couch.

"I've got it." She calls without slowing.

I lean on the doorjamb and watch her exit via the stairwell, admiring that fine ass as much as the confidence that straightens her small shoulders.

CHAPTER 11

CATARINA

Tuesday afternoon. Two thirty. My eyelids are heavy. A case of “the slumps” has plagued the entire office. There’s no sign of anyone bustling about. Likely everyone is at their respective desks riding out the sleepy afternoon hours over a mug of super strong coffee.

Barrett’s cubicle is empty. He came in yesterday, so I don’t expect to see him today.

I open a new page on my web browser and rest my fingers on the keyboard. My index finger hovers over the *B*. I indecisively tap the *A* key with my pinky’s fingernail. I’m tempted to research Barrett Fox—beyond the video he’s infamous for—but not for his past accolades as a Miami Dolphin’s quarterback. I’m curious about his parents. Specifically, how they died.

Morbid, right?

I can’t help it. I’m a journalist. I’m hungry for facts. The problem with the Internet is that you can’t know for sure if what you’re reading is fact. Plus if we were *actually* dating, looking up his parents online would be an invasion of privacy.

But we're not actually dating... I shut my laptop and rest my hands on the lid. I'm not doing it.

Saturday *felt* a lot like a date. We had drinks. Food. I went back to his place. He held my hand. Complimented me.

All factoids I plan on seeding into my column. It's important to remember that Fox is focused on gaining public favor. He knows I'm going to be writing about my experience. The better he treats me, the better he'll be perceived. As far as I know, he could be orchestrating each and every element of our dates with public reaction in mind.

I quirk my lips to one side, doubting my jaded prognosis. If Fox is anything, he's genuine. *Genuinely* a horse's ass at times, sure, but he's also the real deal.

When I first met North, I was taken by the air of propriety surrounding him. By the regal way he held himself. The way the wind on the golf course lifted his thick brown hair. On paper, he was perfect. He was attractive. He had direction. He liked me. He was romantic when we started dating. I recall the delivered roses and expensive dinners less fondly than I used to. Did I *really* enjoy the pomp and circumstance? Lately I've had more fun with Barrett.

At least if Barrett became bored with me he'd *tell* me. North was bored for several months and yet kept it to himself. He could've said something and saved me—hell, saved us both—a lot of wasted time.

I open my laptop again as an email from Mia comes in. Attached is the column for Barrett's and my first date. I peruse her comments and type a quick reply asking to read his side. I press SEND and drum my fingers while waiting for a reply. It comes sixty seconds later.

*Sorry, Cat. That's between the NFL hottie and me!
Great work as usual. Keep 'em coming.*

Drat.

I'm about to type out a stern reply to convince that her I need to see it when a paper coffee cup appears by my right arm. My eyes travel past the cup, over the masculine hand, and up a bare forearm to the rolled sleeve of a white button-down shirt. It takes more than a little control to withhold my excitement.

For the coffee, of course.

“Have you been outside today, Kitty Cat?” Barrett’s attractive mouth lifts on one side.

“Sure. I was outside before I walked through the front door this morning.”

“Uh-huh.” He takes my coffee and starts walking away from me.

“Wait!” Desperate for caffeine, I deplete my energy reserves catching up to his long-legged gait. He keeps walking, forcing me to follow him to the elevator.

He doesn’t turn over my cup of Pike Place until we’re sitting on a shaded bench at the grassy area across the street from headquarters. It’s gorgeous today. Sunny and, compared to the frigid, air-conditioned office, incredibly hot. But there’s a breeze on the air that warms my bare legs beneath the knee-length white-with-flowers dress I wore today.

After a heavenly sip of my coffee, I hum and lean heavily on Barrett’s shoulder. “I love you.”

He chuckles, low and rumbly. “Does that mean I’m getting closer to a kiss?”

“Not on your life.”

“Tough crowd.”

“What are you doing here anyway?” I sit up. “I figured you’d take the day off.”

“Mia sent edits for my column.”

I brighten. “Can I help?”

“Dying to see it, aren’t you?”

“No.” I’m a liar. I’m dying to see it.

“I have a lot of work to do on it and I couldn’t focus at home. Or in the car. Or at the park.” He offers me a wan smile.

“Are they that bad?”

“She’s right” is all he says.

“She usually is. They can’t be *that* bad.”

“Stop fishing. If I need a bailout, I will come to you first. Okay?”

“Okay.” I sag, defeated. “What are we doing out here if you have a bunch of work to do?”

“Procrastinating.”

“Where’s your coffee?”

“I drank it on the way to the office.”

We hold each other’s gazes. I like him like this. He’s slightly vulnerable and carefully honest. And he delivered a gift of coffee when I needed it the most. My favorite coffee.

“Thanks, Fox.”

He spreads his arms wide and rests them on the back of the bench. When I lean back with him he curls a hand around my

shoulder.

“All part of the plan to get in your pants.”

I grunt in good humor rather than kicking him in the shin. This, I’m learning, is the most genuine part of him. The part that has been labeled the “bad boy” by the public is actually Barrett being Barrett.

“I’m immune to you,” I tell him. But when his fingers trail along the side of my neck, goosebumps lift to the surface of my skin. Electric tingles dance over my arms when he tunnels those fingers into my hair.

“Soft as I thought.” His voice is low bordering seductive. Then he pulls his hand from my hair and stands so abruptly I’m left sliding down the bench without a strong, firm torso to catch me. “Ready to go to work, Kitty Cat?”

He takes my hand to help me up and just as quickly drops it. We’re not going to talk about the bizarro flash of disappointment that occurs when we walk *not* hand in hand back to the office.



BY FIVE THIRTY, I finish my edits and shoot them back to Mia. I hadn’t planned on finishing them today, but I was on a roll.

I stretch my arms overhead and crack my neck, my attention going over my laptop screen to Barrett. He’s hunched over his own laptop, leaning close like he’s attempting to crack an uncrackable code. The office is dark, everyone having left to tend to their assignments or clocked out for the day. There’s always someone here working late on a deadline. I guess today that someone is Barrett.

I shut down my laptop, tidy my desk for tomorrow, and then walk over to check on his progress. He doesn't flinch, his fingers poised over the keyboard, his wrists glued to the edge of his desk.

“How's it going?”

He jerks to attention, glassy eyes blinking.

“Hey, Kitty Cat.” His voice is slightly craggy. He must notice because he reaches for his water bottle and drains the scant few ounces left. “You outta here?”

“I'm done with the edits Mia gave me, and I jotted down a bunch of notes for the Hole in One date.” I shrug. “I'm ahead. I'll start writing that column tomorrow.”

“Good. That's good.” His eyes return to the screen, his shoulders resuming their hunchback position. I feel sorry for him. He's obviously struggling. I glance at the screen and spot several corrections within the text, and a few comment bubbles from Mia off to the side.

“You know, sometimes it's good to walk away for a while so that everything looks fresh when you come back.”

“Nah, I'm good.” He says this without moving a muscle.

“At least sit up straight in your chair.” I put a hand on his back. He recoils, sending me a glare. I snatch my hand away and instead reach for his water bottle. “I'll refill this for you.”

The bottle is ripped from my hand and he's on his feet so fast I'm practically eye to eye with him a millisecond later.

“I've got this, Kitty Cat. Go home.” His eyebrows are a pair of angry slashes, his mouth pulled into a frown.

“Fine. Be stubborn.”

He says nothing as I turn and huff to my desk. I'm aware that I'm huffing and truly wish I could stop. Once my bag is over my shoulder and I'm tromping through the dark office, I call over my shoulder "Enjoy your suffering!"

He doesn't reply to that, either.

I tell myself I don't care what he thinks or how hard he has to work, but it niggles at me on the drive home, while I shower, and when I pull on a casual pair of drawstring shorts and a baggy tee sans bra. It's still there while I'm chopping lettuce for a late dinner salad, and when I uncork a bottle of pinot grigio.

"No wonder he doesn't have any friends," I grumble around a mouthful of spring mix lettuces. "Or a girlfriend," I add before sipping my wine.

As if on cue, my cellphone rings. I let it chime for three full rings while deciding what to do about the caller. Curiosity wins.

"This is a surprise."

"Catarina. How are you." North's inflection is flat. This isn't a question but an extension of his greeting. Since he didn't ask, I don't answer.

"What can I do for you?" I feel a vague, but no less present *hurt* radiate through me. Not surprising, I suppose. We didn't break up that long ago, though some days it feels like ages. My lingering anger is more muted than it should be. *Why'd I stay?* is my favorite question to ask myself lately.

"I wanted to check in." His voice loses its edgy abruptness. "To see if you needed anything."

"Like what? A gallon of milk? Loaf of bread?" I shovel the last bite of salad into my mouth and chew like a bored cow.

“Don’t be sarcastic. It’s displeasing.”

“It *displeases* you,” I say as I walk my salad bowl to the sink. “Oh, dear.”

“Are you in need of...companionship?”

I shut off the faucet. “Companionship?”

“Friendship?”

“Friendship?”

“Are you going to repeat everything I say?”

“No.”

He’s silent for a few breaths.

“I’m trying to figure out why you care if I’m *companioned* or *friended*,” I admit.

“Because... Because I didn’t do a very good job of... things.”

“You mean of ending things?”

“Right.”

“North, are you feeling guilty?”

“No. I wouldn’t change the outcome, but I wish I’d have handled the breakup better.”

Ouch.

“Well, I’m fine and no longer yours to look after.” My heart sags at the word *yours*. I used to belong with him and now I don’t. Everything has changed. A season has ended. That could be where the hurt is coming from. Endings are usually sad. The sad part isn’t necessarily because I miss North, but because I’m home alone. I often ate dinner alone, wondering when he would return from work or if he’d call or

stop by. Now I eat alone and never wonder where he is, because it doesn't matter. That's sad every which way you cut it. I liked having someone to wonder and worry about.

"We're friends though," he says.

"We are?" I can't help blurting. "I generally like my friends."

"Catarina. There is no need to be cruel."

"I'm not being cruel. I'm stating a fact. I don't want to hang out with you. We ended. We're done. You moved on."

He says nothing.

"Haven't you? The pretty blonde from work?"

"I told you she's married."

"That doesn't matter to a lot of people."

"It matters to me." His voice is laced with pain. Enough that a sliver of guilt creeps along the back of my neck. "I was thinking we could grab a bite to eat sometime this—"

A series of hard knocks on my front door interrupts.

"Who could that be at this hour?" I mutter.

"Catarina?" North asks as I check the peephole. "Is everything all right? Who is it?"

"It's Barrett Fox," I tell him as I unlock the deadbolt.

"A little late for work, isn't it?" North growls.

"Not in your handbook." I end the call, delighting in the zing of satisfaction I feel at hanging up on him.

When I pull open the door, Barrett's face looks like North's voice. Hard and unyielding.

"Should I ask how you found my address?"

“12C.” He points at the number and letter on my door as if I don’t know they’re there. “You mentioned it.”

“No, I didn’t. I met you out front when you picked me up.”

He blows out a sigh of defeat. “I sweet-talked it out of Nanci.”

“She wasn’t at the office when I left.” I narrow my eyes.

“I called her.”

Before I can ask why he has Nanci’s number, my cellphone buzzes in my hand. North’s name is displayed on the screen. I show my houseguest.

Barrett’s face is a predictable mask of disapproval. But I’m my own woman, so I answer it anyway.

“Hi, North.” I step aside and sweep an arm inward to invite Fox into my humble abode.

“Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m okay.”

Barrett walks into my apartment, looking out of place in here. His laptop is under his arm, his hand raking through his reddish hair and then down over the scruff on his face. He studies the floral rug at his feet and the many birds adorning my living room. There are metal ones in mid-flight hanging over an antique sidebar. The encaged statuette of a canary, beak frozen open in song sits on my coffee table. The pillows on my dark brown leather sofa are turquoise and lime green with black bird-shaped silhouettes.

“...or if he’s not treating you well, say the word and I’ll be right over,” North is saying.

“Barrett, do you intend to treat me well?” I ask Fox. “If not, North says he’ll be right over.”

The intensity fades from Barrett’s face and is replaced by a confidently sexy smile. I grin at the exasperated sound coming from my phone.

“Talk to you later,” I promise North before ending the call.

“What’s he going to do, challenge me to a duel?” Barrett asks drily.

“Chess, most likely.”

“He’d win.”

We hold each other’s gazes comfortably. “May I offer you something to drink?”

“Am I staying?”

I gesture to the laptop. “At least long enough to show me what’s on that hard drive.”

“I saved it in the cloud.”

“Cloud drive,” I correct.

“Beer,” he requests.

That I can do.

CHAPTER 12

CATARINA

Barrett's expression is pure anguish.

"It's bad, isn't it?" He nervously chews on the side of his index finger. I've never seen him less than confident, cocky, or in control. It's weird.

"*Shh.*" I pull his finger away from his mouth and scroll through his column. I navigate the menu to show the document's history and inspect his changes.

"Kitty Cat."

A sensual shiver runs up my neck at the way his low, soothing voice says my pet name.

"How bad is it?"

He's sitting next to me on the sofa, his leg bobbing as fast as a sewing machine needle. I reach over and pat his leg. Beneath my palm is stiff denim and taught thigh muscles. I pull my hand away before I cave in to the temptation to run my hand up the length of his hard body.

Odd reaction on my part. Must be the wine.

I reclaim my glass and finish reading his column, then set aside the laptop to give it to him straight. “It’s good.”

“Good?”

“Good, not great. You over-edited in a few places. Scrubbed your voice right out of it.” I show him where he swapped a casual word for a more proper one. “The word ‘crap’ sounds like you,” I tell him. “The word ‘garbage’ sounds more like my grandmother.”

A frown pulls his lips, and my gaze lingers on his mouth a second longer than it should. “You’re the bad boy of the NFL, Barrett. People will expect you to sound like one. Want me to tweak it back for you? It’ll only take me a minute.”

“No.” He snatches the laptop, closes the lid, and tucks it under my turquoise pillow. “I’ll do it.”

“I know this isn’t your life’s work. It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s a big deal to me. You do your work. I’ll do my own.”

I meet his glare. “You’re blowing away the idea of the jock who cons the smart girl in school into doing his homework for him.”

“I didn’t do that, either.”

“Not even when the girls at OSU were salivating over your big weekend play?”

A sparkle lights his blue eyes, which are steadily trained on me. “Not even then.”

My wineglass wobbles in my hand. I set it aside. North’s unexpected phone call could be what has me wound tight. It’s not Barrett. I’m not attracted to Barrett. At most I find him tolerable.

“This is work time, not date time I’m assuming,” he says.
“None of this goes into the column?”

“I don’t typically work during dates so that’s a safe assumption.” I cut myself off mid-laugh when Fox pushes off the couch and scoots an inch closer.

“Good.” His gaze is on my mouth. I lick my suddenly dry lips. His smirk makes a brief appearance before his fingers rake into my hair. He palms my nape, tips my chin. His breath fans over my face as my eyelids sink to half-mast. Closer and closer his lips come as my heart thunders.

Our mouths meet in the briefest brush before we’re jerked out of the moment by a knock at the door.

Seriously?!

My shoulders stiffen but Barrett’s posture grows more languid. He pulls me closer as another knock accompanies a bellow.

“Catarina!” calls my visitor. An angry, *jealous* sounding version of my ex-boyfriend. That’s new.

“I have to get that,” I am way too close to Barrett’s mouth to think clearly. His delicious mouth.

“Do you?”

My heart ticks out a few hectic beats. Temptation is a hungry, fanged beast.

“Yes,” I state firmly.

He lets me go and that beast howls in disappointment. I straighten my clothes on the walk across my apartment, and then jerk open the door to find North wearing a suit and a harried expression. His eyes snap over my shoulder and clash with my houseguest’s.

“Barrett Fox. Northrop Phillips the third,” I introduce lazily.

“There are three of you?” Barrett props his hands on his hips rather than stride forward to offer a hand in friendly greeting. Not that North is offering a hand, either. He mirrors Barrett’s superhero posture, and now they both look ridiculous.

“Did you need something, North?” I ask.

“I don’t trust this Neanderthal,” he says, pointing at Fox. “I came to make sure he wasn’t planning to club you over the head and drag you to his cave.”

“At least I didn’t lead her on and then dump her way after the fact,” Barrett returns.

North’s eyes seek mine and in them I can read his every thought. *How could you tell him about us? That was private.*

I shake my head at his silent theatrics.

“That’s none of your business,” North tells Barrett. Then he calmly says to me, “Catarina, would you like me to ask him to leave?”

A loud *Ha!* comes from Barrett, whose arms are now crossed stubbornly over his chest. Comparing them is like comparing apples to sledgehammers, but I do it anyway. North’s tidy, uptight clothing and fussily styled dark hair over a strong nose versus Barrett’s wrinkled white shirt and jeans, reddish hair and scruff. Both attractive in their own way, but one of them is leaps and bounds more attractive than the other.

“Catarina, answer me,” says the one who’s not winning.

“No,” I state.

“No what?” North asks, flabbergasted.

“No, I don’t want you to ask Barrett to leave.”

“Surely you didn’t invite him over.”

“I didn’t invite you over, either, and yet here you are.”

His eyelids narrow. “The dating is still pretend, correct? Just for the column. This hasn’t morphed into some debased attempt at a rebound relationship.”

Adrenaline shoots down my limbs in response to my ex-boyfriend’s insulting assumption. Barrett approaches me from behind, his body heat blanketing my back.

“North, I’d like you to leave,” I say. “I would thank you for checking on me, but I have a feeling your barging in was more about you than it was me.”

“It’s about you, Catarina.” North’s voice gentles. “The way it should’ve been about you before I let you go.”

Um.

What?

“You heard me,” my ex continues as if I spoke aloud. He glances at Barrett in challenge before lifting my hands with his. “I made a mistake. I came to apologize and ask you to give me another chance. I was confused.”

I must be hallucinating.

“Confused?” Barrett snaps.

“Stay out of it,” I tell him before this situation reaches Popeye and Bluto proportions. This Olive Oyl can take care of herself.

“You heard her,” North gloats. I’ve never seen him gloat before. Before I can tell him to go home, Barrett brushes by me so quickly my hair lifts on the breeze he creates.

“Thanks for the assist,” he mutters as he walks to my front door.

“Fox, you don’t have to—”

But when he turns, I notice his laptop under his arm. He dips his chin in a goodbye to me and then glowers at North. He heads down the hallway toward the elevators without another word.

North turns back to me.

“Smug isn’t a good look on you.” I shut him into my apartment but shatter his hopes a second later. “I’d like you to stay right in this spot until Barrett is gone. I don’t want you two scuffling in the parking lot.”

“Don’t want me to hurt your boyfriend?” More smugness. I can’t remember a time North was smug about anything.

“I don’t want *him* to hurt *you*.”

He lets out a disbelieving laugh.

“Can I at least get a drink?” But he’s already in my kitchen. He knows where everything is. The vodka in the freezer, what refrigerator drawer holds the limes, where I keep his favorite rocks glass...

“Help yourself.” Whatever keeps him from tromping downstairs and earning a black eye and a fat lip from the bad boy of the NFL. I carry my empty wineglass to the kitchen and North refills it for me.

“I meant what I said.” He’s trying for nice after behaving like a complete ass.

“I know you did,” I reply flatly. I take a guzzle of my wine. “I’m not interested.”

“In a relationship or my friendship?”

I’m not feeling magnanimous at the moment, so I answer, “Neither.”



Barrett

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel as I watch the front door of the apartment building and wait for North’s grand exit. I also have my eye on his pretentious, rich-boy Cadillac. The vanity plates read: *NORTHROP3*

What a prick.

Showing Kitty Cat my fucked-up column was humbling and a little embarrassing, but I was desperate. After pecking away for nearly six hours, I wasn’t sure which was crossed—a wire in my brain or my eyes. Probably my brain.

Dyslexia’s a bitch.

No, I’m not exaggerating. I have it. It’s like I always imagined people who wear glasses feel. The letters literally trade places after I’ve stared too long and I can’t tell if I typed it that way or if my brain is interpreting it wrong. I came over here expecting her to tell me I’d written the word *three* instead of *there* or renamed her *Catrina* instead of *Catarina*.

I was diagnosed when I was a kid, so I can’t blame my affliction on a hard hit on the field. In college I routinely pulled all-nighters to do what most of my friends did in an hour or two. I missed a lot of keggers which is probably why I was recruited by Miami. If I’d gone to half the parties I was invited to, chances are I’d be sitting in jail...or lying in a morgue.

Kitty Cat said I over-edited. Who knew *that* was a thing? Something else for me to Google, I guess. Not tonight, though. Everything reads like hieroglyphics.

The revolving door spins and deposits a couple into the parking lot. I hold my breath, but no one else comes out. I tell myself I only care for Catarina's sake, but I'm pissed about North's horrible timing as much as I am my own.

Why did I kiss her?

Simple. I was towed in by caramel-colored eyes, and the pink tongue wetting her lips. By that soft-as-sin hair and the way she shushed me as she read my column. The way she let me in and offered me a beer. The way she hung up on North and smiled at me, so damn proud of herself.

I didn't plan on the kiss as a way of staking territory or getting her into bed. I was dragged in by every elemental, beautiful nuance about her.

And then her dickhead ex stormed in behaving like...well, like me.

I did that once when Beth and I were "on a break." She'd been ignoring my messages and I knew she had a late test. Before I knew it, I was standing in the doorway of her college dorm room. She was in there with a guy from her psychology class. His shirt was too rumpled for my taste, so I balled my fists into his rumpled shirt and shoved him into the hallway so hard he fell on his ass. Then I decided Beth and I *weren't* on a break and doled out a punishing kiss. Sex followed because that was how we solved problems.

I bob my foot impatiently as the door circles again. This time a man exits...who isn't North.

Fuck.

Several weeks' dry spell plus a vulnerable Catarina, plus her territorial ex doesn't add up to a patient Barrett Fox. Are they in there right now, working things out the way Beth and I used to?

I can either sit here until he exits an hour from now, with his shirt untucked and his hair crimped in the pattern of her fingers, or I can put myself out of my misery and go home. I have no claim over Catarina. The kiss I gave her barely qualified as a kiss.

But *dammit*.

It was a good one.

CHAPTER 13

CATARINA

I expected Barrett to be in the office the next day toiling away at his laptop, but he wasn't. The day after that was a skip day for him, too. I managed to tuck away my irritation long enough to ask Mia if she'd heard from him.

"He's working from home. Why?"

No reason. Just wanted to ask him why he kissed me and then ran out.

My boss was suspicious, so I made up something about the column.

So here we are. Friday morning and Barrett isn't here again. Not that I expected him. If I was going to skip work—

Wait. Do I spy a tall, ginger-haired, grouchy ex-NFL player? Why, yes. Yes, I do. It's eight minutes after ten, so he's not exactly *late*, but it feels late to me.

He's smiling his easy, carefree smile and carrying a short cup of coffee. I straighten expectantly in my seat. When he spots me his smile drops. His gaze is as piercing as a dagger's tip when he drinks from the cup.

I guess that particular Starbucks wasn't for me. I look to his other hand. Empty.

He's dressed in jeans and a navy T-shirt tight enough that I make out the outline of firm pecs and rounded biceps. I shift in my seat as I remember how close we came to making out. That would've been a better ending to the last evening we spent together.

"Casual Friday," I quip, and then realize that wasn't much of a quip. More of a bland observation. He takes inventory of my pink button-down top and white skirt.

"Not for some of us, apparently." In his cubicle, he unpacks his laptop bag. I pretend to read my own screen while surreptitiously checking out his ass. He is *wearing* those jeans.

Once his laptop is open, he slaps a notebook and pen onto the otherwise barren desk and begins his work.

I try to ignore him. It works for about a half hour, and then I can't take it any longer. I grab my gone-cold office coffee. I don't want another drop, but I need an excuse to walk by him en route to the break room.

"How's it going?" I ask, my second annoying comment of the day. I might as well finish out the trifecta with *Are we having fun yet?* or *Any plans this weekend?*

Except I know that he has plans this weekend because they're with me. We forewent the Art in the Park idea in favor of a beer tasting at the museum. That seemed more apropos.

"Fine." He takes his eyes off his work to peg me with a blue stare that makes my knees tremble. My attention trails down to his mouth where I notice a tiny freckle at the edge of his upper lip. Either that or it's chocolate. What I wouldn't give to taste it and find out. "Need something?"

I frown at his gruffness. You'd think he'd be at least friendly since I let him kiss me.

"I need coffee," I lie. "And we need to discuss our plans for tomorrow."

"Noon at Columbus Institute of Art, or CIA as the horrible acronym goes."

"Are we driving separately?" I ask my coffee mug, scuffing one of my ballerina flats into the nubby carpet.

"Yeah."

"Are you sure? Maybe we should take a cab in case we have too many beer samples and—Hey!" I bark, startled because Barrett has shot out of his chair. His hand wraps firmly around my upper arm before I finish my thought.

"What are you doing?" I whisper harshly as he leads me across the office. Cold coffee sloshes onto my shoe. He stops, takes the mug and places it on my desk calendar where it leaves a big, wet, coffee-colored stain, and then finishes marching me into Marge's old office.

He shuts the door behind us and releases me, swiveling around to burn me with a dark look.

"What the hell are you doing?" I point at my shoes. "You owe me a new pair of flats."

He takes in the splatter on my shoe. "No way. Those are hideous."

"I don't know what your problem is, Fox, but you can't expect to come in here and act like this after what happened Tuesday night."

"I can't, can I?" He advances a step and I back up two. "What about you? How are you doing after Tuesday night?"

I match his next forward step with a retreating one of my own. “I—I don’t know. I thought we could talk about it.”

“So. Talk.” His jaw saws back and forth in irritation.

I back up another step and bump against a bookshelf. It’s lined with dusty magazines and three-ring binders and a fat dictionary I can’t imagine anyone in this day and age using for anything other than killing spiders.

“You kissed me on Tuesday,” I remind him, my voice less firm than I’d like. “I thought—”

“So?”

“So?” I repeat.

“Yeah. *So?* You were the one swearing we’d never kiss. I always knew it would happen.”

“You initiated it!”

“Again: *So?*”

“So...so...why are you acting like you hate me? Why did you avoid me this week?”

“I wasn’t avoiding you, Kitty Cat,” he says with a mocking smile that suggests I’m overreacting. “I had shit to do. I have a life that involves more than your silly column and a forgettable kiss at your apartment.”

Embarrassment warms my neck. Not because he downplayed the kiss we shared or that he was genuinely attracted to me in that moment. I was there. That wasn’t a forgettable kiss. But it’s the “silly column” part that cuts deep.

I work hard. I spend my life hunched over a laptop, my wrists aching and fingers stiff from typing for hours upon hours. I don’t do it because it’s “silly.” I may have categorized

this assignment as a puff piece early on, but I'm committed to an outcome that is nothing short of *amazing*.

"My column isn't silly." I hear my own hurt feelings in every syllable. Evidently, so does Barrett. His eyebrows soften in sympathy.

"I shouldn't have said that." He glances at the ceiling, then back at me. "I worked more on the column. Took your advice."

"Mia said it was really good."

"It's okay."

"It's better than okay—it has to be. It was better than okay when I read it. I may have been too harsh. I should've—"

"Did you sleep with North?"

"What?" I scrunch my face, legitimately confused.

"You heard me."

"We dated for six months. Of course I slept—"

"On Tuesday night," Barrett interrupts, impatient. "Did you sleep with him on Tuesday night? I didn't see him leave."

"You waited for him to leave?"

"For a while." He won't look at me.

"Why?" Confusion is my only ally.

"Because. *Because*." His eyebrows meet over his nose.

Oh, *hell no*. He's not allowed to clam up. He dragged me in here, he can damn well confess what's rankling him.

"Tell me why you waited for North to leave." I grab his forearms and force him to meet my eyes. Fox licks his lips. His Adam's apple bobs in his throat. Finally, he speaks.

“When he walked out of there with his third-generation nose in the air, I planned on telling him to leave you alone or he’d have to deal with me,” Barrett says, his teeth bared.

“Why do you care? Especially after some stupid little smooch that was ‘forgettable.’” I let go of him to air-quote the word and then wait for him to explain.

He does.

In the best way possible.

His lips slam into mine, the force of that move pressing me against the bookshelves. My shoulder blade meets one shelf, the back of my ribcage another, and yet another is leaving a bruise on my hip.

Barrett notices. Never halting the kiss, he cups the back of my head protectively, his arm resting vertically along my spine. Now I’m cradled by muscle and the fresh scent of cotton and clean man. Much better.

He pulls his lips away from mine, and a heavy breath exits his lungs. “Fuck.”

I study him through drowsy lids, my lips still tingling from the kiss. Satisfaction resonates from everywhere we touch when I realize he’s coming apart because of that kiss.

Chin tipped, I tell him, “You taste like the cup of coffee you didn’t buy me today.”

He shakes his head, seems to debate a response, and then commits to, “If you’re back with North, I’ll stop.”

He’s in a holding pattern, his arms stiff, knees locked. My arms are wrapped around his torso just above his hips, which he’s purposefully distancing from mine.

“Kitty Cat... Do you want me to stop?”

I've gone from hating that nickname to being turned on by it.

"Kiss me, Fox." Fingers in his belt loops, I pull his hips against mine. I'm rewarded by the feel of the hard length of him pressing into my belly. "Like you mean it this time."

He doesn't hesitate. This is the kiss I wanted at my apartment before we were rudely interrupted. I both feared it and wanted it to go on. It's the sort of kiss that can only end with us wearing zero items of clothing.

He lifts me, hands cradling my ass and props me against one of the bookshelves. It creaks and shifts. A few books splat to the ground, their pages now hopelessly creased. His teeth rake over my bottom lip before abandoning it for my neck, where he suckles the skin there until it's damp.

That's not the only part of me that's damp. I drag my flats uselessly along the backs of his thighs wishing I'd have worn my high heels. Then I could hook onto him and anchor myself while his talented mouth committed its delicious assault.

He returns his mouth to mine, one warm hand sliding behind my knee as my breath catches. Arms wrapped around his neck, I unseal my lips from his and regard him with wide eyes.

"I won't venture any higher," he swears, his wicked smile in full force. "But someday." He gently brushes the inside of my knee with his thumb. "I'll take my time kissing this part of you."

On a sigh, I touch my lips to his and give him a hot, slow, tongue-tangling, mind-erasing kiss that has us both panting when it's over.

I end our lip-lock with a sad hum and rest my forehead against his.

He disentangles me, sets me on my feet, and then tugs the hem of my skirt down to my knees. My (apparently) hypersensitive knees.

Someday I'll take my time kissing this part of you.

Le swoon.

He adjusts his length so that it's standing upright behind his fly, the outline of his erection obvious and mouthwatering. I fail at suppressing a shiver.

“Eyes up, sweetheart, or else it'll never go away.” His voice is sandpaper. Every gritty word rakes over my sensitized skin. “Get going. I'll follow after I collect myself.”

I steady myself before bending to retrieve the downed books. He catches my elbow and straightens me.

“Let me get it. Please. I cannot watch you bend over right now.” His desperate expression matches his plea.

“Okay.” Feeling a zing of excitement at having behaved like a rule-breaking teenager, I smile and turn to leave.

“Did you though?”

My head is a wad of turned-on fuzz when I ask, “Did I what?”

“Sleep with North on Tuesday?”

The fuzz sharpens to needles that I shoot from my pupils directly at him. Is he kidding right now? But he's not. He waits, lips pressed into a flat line, fists at his sides.

“Idiot,” I say before I yank open the door, slam it behind me, and march to my desk. I spot the coffee ring on my

otherwise perfectly pristine planner and grow angrier.

“Asshole.” I’m fuming as I hastily pack my bag. Does he *actually* believe I’d sleep with North on Tuesday and then make out with him on Friday? Who does he think I am? *Him?* I shove my laptop, charger, and cellphone into the bag next. *How could he ask me something like that?* I think as I angrily cram my notebook into the bag. By the time I pull my purse from the bottom desk drawer, I have an audience.

“Bad timing?” Mia interrupts, a steaming mug of coffee in her hand. “Where are you off to?”

I have not a single clue. There’s no good excuse for my actions save the truth and I sure as hell can’t tell her that. Or can I?

“Barrett Fox. Mia, honestly, what were you thinking with this story? Why me? Why him?”

“Come on, sweets.” She grips my arm and once again I’m being dragged off to parts unknown. My deflection worked a little too well.

I’m now sitting in her office, my butt in a chair while she leans over her desk, her hair frizzy and frightening.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and my response is naked shock. “I hope this isn’t what caused you and North to break up.”

“How do you—?”

“Is it?”

“No. Not at all.” It’s not a secret, and it’s not hard to guess she overheard me on the phone with him or mentioning it to Nanci.

“This assignment is a marketing ploy. You and Barrett are opposites in every way. It makes for a great story. His writing

has this blatantly clumsy edge, and yours has this sharp, pinpoint snap. Readers are going to eat this up.”

I rub an aching spot over one eyebrow as I come to a conclusion. “You knew we wouldn’t get along.”

“Of course! It’s great fodder for advertising and for your reporting. If you two were simpatico the whole time, who the hell would read that? Conflict sells.”

“What if you were wrong?” I mumble, hoping I don’t look like I was pressed against Marge’s bookshelf and ravaged by him not sixty seconds ago.

Mia assesses me, and I begin to worry that she knows exactly what happened sixty seconds ago.

“Like you’d ever be wrong!” I cover with a nervous laugh. I don’t want her to have the wrong impression. Or, well—the *right* one. I stand and tug my skirt down, remembering Barrett doing the same. “Anyway. I’m going to the coffee shop to write for a few hours. Unless you need me here for some reason?”

“Go home.” Mia waves. “Take the day off.”

She’s stopped assessing me and is shuffling through a pile of folders on her desk. Crisis averted.

“Will do.”

“Date this weekend?” she asks just before I make my escape.

“Yes. With Barrett.”

“I know. That’s what I meant.”

“Right. We’re going to a beer tasting.”

“I’ll pay for your cab or Uber. Whatever way you kids travel nowadays.”

“We’re driving separately.”

“No!” she practically shouts. “You’re going to drink and do something worthy of our advertisers’ dollars. Especially now that you’re single.”

“That’s not—”

“Your next column is due Monday, Catarina. Fit in some work alongside your play.” Her sweet smile is anything but.

Day off, my ass. She’s made sure I have plenty to do.

I close her office door behind me and find Barrett standing in front of my desk.

“Going somewhere?” He lifts the strap of my bag.

“Working from home,” I reply. Calmly, since I’ve slowed my roll. “Mia insists we take a taxi or an Uber to the beer tasting. She wants us to be drunk enough to do something questionable, but not so drunk that we blackout. Our next column is due Monday.”

“Fuck.” His expression is a touch of anguish with a dash of dread. Good. He deserves it.

“Better brush up on your technique, Fox,” I tell him, still sore over his accusation that I boinked my ex. “You don’t have time to tinker.”

I turn on my ballet flat and leave the office.

He doesn’t follow.

CHAPTER 14

BARRETT

Tickets were a hundred bucks each, meaning the beer tasting is a high-end affair. Assuming you're allowed to call wealthy people getting shit-faced "high-end."

I ponder my brother's choice of drink as I sip a tart IPA brewed with goji berries. He's more often than not drinking from a can of Natural Light or Milwaukee's Best. Whatever's cheap and available.

Catarina's all business today, reminding me of the way she was when I first met her. She's wearing a brightly colored sundress which I referred to as "pink" and she corrected me with "It's coral, caveman." Underneath that "coral" frock, she's as cold as ice.

At least where I'm concerned.

"Catarina Everhart!" exclaims an older woman who walks up to us. "I was hoping I'd run into you this year." She peruses me briefly but doesn't recognize me, which is rare in this town. "Your friend?"

“This is Barrett Fox. He’s an OSU alum and used to play for the Miami Dolphins. We’re on assignment together.”

“Oh.” The woman extends a hand, her smile painfully polite. Either she doesn’t know about the referee incident, or she knows and has chosen not to stab me in the eyeball with her cross necklace. “Paula Partridge. Pleased.”

I give her hand a brief shake. “Same to you, Paula.”

Paula loops her arm with Catarina’s and whispers in her ear. I don’t know what she’s saying, but I heard “North” which is enough to make me guzzle the rest of my goji berry beer. While they chatter about Kitty Cat’s obtuse ex, I believe I’ll order a refill.

I meander over to the booth and hand them my punch card. Up to thirty samples are included with the admission price of the ticket, which is insane. Even with four-ounce pours, I wouldn’t know my own name if I filled that card. There are plenty of people here rapidly approaching that state.

“I’ll try the coconut porter.”

The barmaid is dressed festively in a German-styled off the shoulder dress with a frilly skirt. Her red-mouthed smile widens along with her green eyes. “Hey. Aren’t you—”

“My boyfriend, Barrett Fox.” Catarina finishes for her, stepping up next to me and wrapping her arm around mine. “Isn’t he dreamy?”

Sarcasm drips off the word *dreamy*.

“I need a refill, please,” she tells the barmaid. Then to me: “Schnookums, what’d you order?” If she thinks I’m not playing along, she’s in for a surprise.

“Coconut porter.” I unhook my arm from hers and take her hands, weaving our fingers together. “Same for you, honey?”

“Same,” she breathes, her smile wobbling. By the time the barmaid begins pouring our beers, my Kitty Cat is squirming. I don’t let her go, tightening my fingers in hers and gently wrapping our linked hands behind her back. I step close enough that her breasts brush my chest.

I lower my face to hers and whisper one word. “Trapped.”

Caramel-brown irises wander over my face and like that, I’m smitten. I don’t know what it is about this woman, but whenever she locks eyes with me I go as gooey as the candy her eyes resemble. Being this close to her reminds me of the explosive kiss we shared in the abandoned office yesterday, right before she stomped out.

“Why are you mad at me?” I forgo the opportunity to kiss her, taking advantage of her nearness to squeeze the truth from her instead.

“PMS.” She wiggles in my hold, but I don’t let go.

“Try again. The truth this time.”

The barmaid sets our beers down and moves to help another customer. I don’t bother looking over since my eyes are already resting on the most beautiful woman here.

“I wouldn’t sleep with North and then kiss you, you moron.” Slender, perfectly angled eyebrows meet over her cute nose. She may be frustrated but I’m elated now that I know she didn’t screw that douchebag.

“The dry spell continues.” I lower my lips leaving barely a whisper of air between us. “Let me know if I can bring the rain.”

“Barrett Fox!” booms a male voice belonging to a guy about to get punched in the junk.

“Your fandom calls.” Catarina smirks, the simmering lust in her eyes dissipating like steam from a hot kettle. I release her and she grabs our beers, handing over mine before taking a sip of her own.

I turn to find none other than Jackson Burke standing in front of me. The “SS Kick Your Ass” as we used to call him.

“Holy shit!” I grin, no longer wanting to murder him for interrupting. He grins back and opens his arms. I give him a huge hug, pounding him on the back as he lifts me off the ground.

The big, brawny asshole. Of course he can still lift me off the ground.

“How the hell are you, man?” Burke slaps my upper arm. His dark brown hair is chin-length, and his beard is in need of a trim. He flashes a white-toothed smile over my shoulder. “Jackson Burke,” he introduces. “What’s your name, beautiful?”

“There are two of you? Fantastic.” Catarina shakes his hand tolerantly. “Charmed. My name is Kitty Cat Everhart and I’ll be over here looking for a man who *didn’t* crawl out of the Paleozoic era if you need me.” She flashes a siren’s smile before she turns away to watch the band performing on stage.

“She’s a pistol,” Burke says. “How new is that?”

“Brand spanking new.”

He smirks at my choice of phrase.

“She’s my co-worker and we’re pretend dating for a column.”

He hoists one dark eyebrow. “That didn’t look like pretend. I thought you were going to fuck her right there in the grass.”

“It’s not like that,” I say a little harshly, my tone a warning.

“That’s cool.” He points with his beer to the stage where a band is playing. “We’re going next. I know those guys. Was over there when they set up and they invited me up to play guitar. Now that I’m looking at you, change of plans. You’re coming with me. We’ll do the thing.”

Catarina leans on the trunk of a maple tree at the rear of a seated crowd as the band plays Whitesnake’s “Here I Go Again.”

“The thing,” I repeat, watching as she casually crosses one foot over the other. She’s seriously gorgeous right now. That high ponytail. The way she peers into her beer glass before she takes a drink from it.

“We have to do it!” Burke gestures to the stage. “The crowd won’t recognize me, but they will *definitely* recognize you. Come on, Fox. For old time’s sake.”

“Old times. Burke, we aren’t even thirty yet.”

“I’m thirty. Yesterday.”

“No shit?”

“It’ll be my belated birthday gift. Don’t make me call you up on stage because I will do it.”

He would.

“Think it’ll win me the girl?” I swallow the beer in my glass and reconsider.

“You have to ask? That song’s a panty dropper. Especially with you singing lead. Let’s grab a refill and hit the stage, brother. It’s been too long.”

I can’t believe it, but the next word out of my mouth is “Okay.”



CATARINA

When fingers skim along my elbow, I jump, startled. Luckily my beer glass is empty or else I’d be wearing the contents. Barrett doesn’t stop walking. He passes by with a wink, his friend Burke trailing behind him.

“I’ll return him to you shortly, Kitty Cat Everhart,” Burke tells me with a crooked smile that is strangely charming. I don’t find guys in slashed jeans attractive any more than I do red-haired, bad boy former NFL players, yet here I am admiring both of them as they cut through the crowd.

I lose sight of them when they reach the front, suddenly frustrated that I’m standing here alone while my date is doing...I don’t know what. I begin mentally writing that paragraph in my head.

Dating tip, gentlemen: Don’t abandon your date for an old college buddy to play wingman. One, this is poor form, and two, that kiss you were expecting at the end of the night? Not going to happen.

I turn for the beer truck when a familiar voice crackles over the speakers. I turn to find Barrett and Burke on stage.

“How’s everyone doing?” Barrett asks, his husky baritone sending a ripple of awareness down my spine. “This is my buddy, Jackson Burke.”

“Hi, ladies,” Burke says, his voice dipping suggestively. It earns him more than a few approving female screams. “You all know my friend Barrett Fox.”

The screams increase tenfold. Despite the mild disgust I feel at how easily he earns positive attention, I swivel in my flip-flops and crush in with a crowd that is not only growing in size but is also pushing toward the front.

“This is an oldie, but goodie,” Barrett tells the crowd as Burke tunes the guitar looped around his neck. “It’s a little cheesy, but a lot effective. Kinda like Goose and Maverick singing ‘You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’” in *Top Gun*.”

More howls of appreciation come from the crowd.

“Oh my God, he’s hotter in person,” slurs a drunk girl standing next to me. I turn to see if she’s talking to me, but she isn’t.

Her equally drunk friend giggles and adds, “What about the bearded one? He’s cute.”

“Huh-uh,” the first girl argues dreamily. “The ginger is *mine*.”

Yikes. I lift my glass to my lips, but it’s empty. No way can I go to the beer truck now. I’ll lose my place in the mid-to-rear of the crowd. Burke clumsily plays a few chords, chuckles, and apologizes into the microphone as he tightens a string. Then he tries again, and applause breaks out. Slowly at first and then rippling outward.

It seems that everyone recognizes the opening notes of the familiar ballad: Extreme's "More Than Words."

"Is he going to sing?" I ask no one in particular as Barrett accepts a beer from one of the band members who sacrificed his microphone.

"If he does, I'll die," the first girl answers.

Well, get ready for her to drop dead, because Barrett sets his glass down, approaches the microphone, and sings the first line.

Burke bobs his head and strums the guitar while Barrett continues singing about how he doesn't want to hear the words I love you, but instead wants to be shown.

Damn. This song *really* holds up. And *damn*, Barrett Fox can *sing*. Who saw that coming?

Burke croons backup as Barrett hits a high note like his vocal cords were designed to do just that.

The women next to me sway, their arms wrapped around each other. I'm frozen solid in shock, and I'm pretty sure I haven't inhaled for a good while.

Barrett's eyes sink shut while he sings, his hand gripping the microphone stand casually, as if he does this every day of the week. Loose, but in complete control. The same way he held on to me when he kissed me in that empty office.

"Help me out," he invites and then sings the chorus again. Every last one of us sings along with him.

No one can take their eyes off him, including me. The buzz of excitement is palpable. It's the same buzz that follows him wherever he goes.

He and Burke softly sing the final notes. Applause interspersed with cheers swell on the air. I'm grinning, slapping my wrist with one hand since I'm still holding my beer glass with the other. Women of every age rush the stage when they descend the steps.

I lose sight of them in the melee.

Still smiling and—I'll admit it—pretty damn impressed, I walk to the beer truck for the refill I need more than I did a few minutes ago.

Barrett escapes his pop-up fan club and waves his apologies to them as his head turns toward the tree where I was leaning. I decide not to wave him over. Let him look for me.

Burke is caught in a tangle with the two girls who were standing next to me earlier. He yells for Barrett, and the one who wanted "the ginger" sends him a flirty smile. Barrett shakes his head and almost walks right past me.

"Fox!" I shout, giving in.

His head snaps around and the smile on his face turns into a wily grin. Half of me wants to check to see if his newest fan is watching him stalk toward me, but I can't seem to free myself from the eye-lock.

He stops in front of me, his chin dipped, eyes still burning mine. "Hi."

"Hi." I raise my beer and take a sip, and then offer him a drink. He polishes off the entire thing. "Hey!"

"I worked hard up there. I needed a drink." A light sheen of sweat decorates his handsome face. "I'll buy you another one. Unless you want to make those girls jealous and lay a big, wet, sloppy kiss on me."

I force a laugh but a kiss—sloppy or otherwise—doesn't sound like a bad idea. Like, at all. "In your dreams, Fox."

"In my reality, too." One hand slides across my lower back and he tugs me until I have to grip onto his arms or lose my balance. "Remember?"

How could I forget?

"Come on, it'll be good for ratings."

I lift onto my toes, touch my nose to his, and whisper, "Buy me some French fries."

I push off his chest, intending to walk to the food truck with a hand-painted banner that reads FRESH CUT FRIES! but I don't make it that far. He lifts my heels off the ground, lowers his face, and kisses me. The kiss is hard and firm...and far too brief.

"French fries it is," he says against my slightly ajar mouth. "And more beer. God, Kitty Cat, our job sucks."

Before we start for the den of saturated fat, he shouts, "Nicely done, Burke!"

His cohort is still standing near the two girls, appearing to flirt with the one who wanted him. I receive a dirty look from the one who wanted Barrett for herself.

I'm not petty. I don't play games. But I can't help flashing her a smile as I put my hand in Barrett's and walk with him to the food truck.

CHAPTER 15

CATARINA

After inhaling our salty, heavenly fresh cut fries, Barrett and I wander over to an outdoor patio for some real food. The area is typically reserved for drinks for some of the ritzier events at the museum but has been modified to accommodate diners specifically for the long day of imbibing.

We pick one of the wrought-iron tables outfitted with cushioned chairs. Barrett's kicked back, legs stretched out in front of him, sunglasses on, elbow resting on the chair's arm. The sun sits hot on my back. The gentle breeze from earlier is a memory. I order an ice-cold glass of water and the lunch special: grilled fish tacos with fried plantain chips. Barrett follows suit.

I take a long gulp of my water. "*Ahh*. I needed that. Drinking beer in the sun is tough business."

He rests his glass on the coaster in front of him, his lips quirked. "Mia won't like that we've given up."

"Given up? I don't follow."

“I thought we were supposed to get tanked and reenact a reality-show hot tub scene. Here we are, eating and rehydrating like responsible adults.”

I can't help laughing. “How many reality-show hot tub scenes have you witnessed and/or participated in?”

“Several on both ends.” He grins, the big bad wolf.

“What about this alleged long-term on-again-off-again girlfriend? Did you skirt around when you were ‘off’?”

“Excuse me. I've watched my share of *The Bachelorette*.”

“That wasn't an answer.”

“Well, the answer is none of your business.” He drinks his water and I wait. He takes another drink.

“Tell me about the girl who held the heart of the bad boy of the NFL for *six years*.”

“On and off,” he interjects.

“Still.”

“Kitty Cat.”

“I'm a reporter. I can't help my natural curiosity. Indulge me.”

He sits up and leans across the table, his ocean-blue eyes hidden behind the mirrored lenses of a pair of expensive sunglasses.

“Her name's Beth. We started dating when we were kids.”

“Kids, as in the fifth grade?”

“College,” he corrects. “I sat next to her in Applied Sciences. She smiled at me, and I was a goner.”

“So, she's pretty.”

“Very.” He dips his chin.

“And you two argued enough to break up several times?” I guess.

Either frustration or regret flattens his mouth. I’m surprised when he answers. “We argued a lot. Over stupid shit. Then I was drafted by Miami and the move to Florida prompted another breakup. Six months later, she moved down there.”

“She moved in with you.”

“Yep.” He leans back again, face pinched, head turned. Topic over. But I’m not done yet.

“And that was it?”

He shakes his head gravely. “Why do you want to know? You’re not writing about it.”

“I’m shamelessly nosy. Comes with the job.”

He huffs in agreement.

“Please?” I press my palms together. A few silent seconds tick by before he gives in.

“She lived in Florida for a while, and then we had another argument and she moved back to Ohio. I stayed in Miami and ultimately injured myself. Once I was out of the game permanently, we reconciled, and I moved into her apartment here in Columbus.” He spins his water glass on the table. “She booted my ass out, so I lived with my buddy Dax for a few months. Helped him redesign his new bar until I found a place of my own.” He shrugs. “And that was it.”

“Are you sure? You two have found your way back to each other every other time. Why not now?”

“Trust me. I’m sure.”

“Did one of you stray?”

“Cheat? No. I don’t cheat. Neither does she. Things just became...hard.”

I know exactly what he means. North and I had our share of dumb arguments and avoidance, and neither of us cheated, either. Sometimes breaking up is as easy and as complicated as two people who can’t work out their differences.

Our lunch arrives and we dive in.

“Maybe our story should revolve around you and Beth reconciling,” I say. “Readers love a second chance.”

He finishes his tacos, swipes the cloth napkin over his mouth and, still chewing, watches me from behind mirrored shades.

“Maybe our story could revolve around the way you want North back.”

My stomach pools with disgust. “I don’t want him back.”

“I don’t want Beth back.”

Put in my place, I forlornly nibble a plantain chip.

“Thought the story was about us,” he says a few minutes later. “About you and me.” He pushes the sunglasses onto his head and spears me with those hypnotizing blues.

“It is.”

“You’d rather write about Beth and me than you and me?”

“There is no *you and me*, Barrett. We’re dating for an article. Our boundary lines are a little blurry but—”

“You like kissing me.”

“I...do not.” *Lie.*

“Yeah. You do. I can tell by that whimpering, mewly sound you make in the back of your throat whenever I do it.”

“That... I don’t... That’s not what I do.” I’m flustered. Embarrassed. And lying through my teeth.

“Okay, Kitty Cat.” He reclaims his relaxed posture after shoving his empty plate aside. “You keep telling yourself that. I was there for each one of those lip-presses and I know what I heard. You. *Mewling*. I also know what I felt: You. Climbing me like a ladder.”

I toss my napkin onto my plate, prepared to stand and storm off for another episode of *I Can’t Even with Barrett Fox*.

“Don’t turn tail for once,” he says. “You wanted the bad boy of the NFL as a date, sweetheart, you got him. Stick around and see where it goes. At least you’ll have somethin’ fun to write about.” He returns his sunglasses to the bridge of his nose. “Want me to do something outrageous so you have some fodder?”

“Ha!” My laughter is a touch loud and draws attention from the surrounding tables. A few gazes linger on my ginger-haired date. “Your performance on stage is plenty of fodder.”

“Oh yeah?” He grins, a cunning fox in a coat of red.

“You know it was impressive,” I mumble. “You have a nice voice.”

“Sure you wanna write that? Sounds awfully flattering.”

“Could you be more conceited?”

“Used to be,” he states. “Then I blew my shoulder and learned a lesson in humility.”

He's serious. And for a scant, and rare, moment I catch a glimpse of the heart hiding under his laid-back, cocky exterior. Like the day I told him North dumped me, I sense that there's more to Fox than overblown charm and lewd comments.

"Now what?" he asks, his voice tempting and suggestive.

I point at various booths dotting the grounds. "Funnel cake? Face paint? Temporary tattoo?"

He crunches on a piece of ice from his glass. I wish he'd take those sunglasses off so I could see his eyes again.

"Face paint," he decides.

It's either face painting or I admit that I'd like another of those deep, wet, delicious kisses he's so good at surprising me with. Is it hot out here or is it me?

He throws money on the table without waiting for a bill, but fifty bucks will more than cover our tacos, and then he takes my hand and leads me from the patio area.

I relax, confident that the bout of crazed lust that hammered me earlier has receded. He tugs me in the direction of a photo booth with a line stretching around one of the sculptures that permanently sits outside. A tall, red, curvy... whatever it is. Sort of looks like a deflated ampersand.

"Let's do this first."

"That line is probably forty minutes long," I whisper, taking in the many, *many* people patiently waiting their turn.

"Hey, 'scuse me, buddy," Barrett says to a younger guy standing hand in hand with his girlfriend at the front of the line. "If I give you twenty bucks, would you let my girl and me cut in front of you? We're pressed for time."

The guy recognizes Barrett and his face splits into an awed smile. “Uh. Yeah. Yes. Sure. Go ahead.”

“Perfect.” He fishes a twenty from his pocket. The kid stares at him in awe. “Can you sign it? Or... Can you sign my shirt?”

“I’d love to, kid, but I don’t have a—”

“Here you go.” I thrust a black Sharpie into Barrett’s hand. He levels me with a narrow-eyed glare.

“You happened to have this in your bag?”

“Yep.”

He makes quick work of signing the kid’s T-shirt, and the twenty. When an older couple steps from the photo booth, Barrett drags me in. He taps the touchscreen as we get cozy on a bench that’s barely big enough for two.

“Tight quarters.” I wiggle my hips into place. “At least it’s air-conditioned in here.”

“I bought three sessions.” He faces me, sunglasses on his head again. We’re so close the freckles dotting the bridge of his nose are visible. “Make ’em good, Kitty Cat. Mia might want these for the column.”

A flash of light blinds me and in a blink and Barrett’s mouth is on mine. Just as I’m sinking into the kiss, the flashes barely registering, he pulls his lips from mine and tucks me close. “Smile if you can.”

“Damn, I missed it.” I smile for the next one, though, and then the one after that. We quickly change expressions for each photo: the typical eyes-crossed, stick-out-your-tongue poses as well as a surprise one from me when he tucks his finger into the top of my sundress and peeks down it. By then I

was caught up in the silliness and tossed my head back to laugh.

He pulls the three strips of photos from the developer, thankfully located *inside* the booth. We step out and into a flurry of people with stars in their eyes, all waiting for a piece of Barrett Fox. I offer him my Sharpie and slide out of the way.

Fox sends me an apologetic smile, hands me our photo booth strips, and starts signing for his myriad fans.

CHAPTER 16

CATARINA

Our driver turns into my apartment building's parking lot and my heart *ka-thumps* in my chest.

Barrett rattled off my address and now here we are, about to say goodbye for the evening before he returns to his own apartment.

“Mind if I take this shit off before I leave?” He gestures to his face, painted to resemble a fox. Thick white paint covers his eyebrows and slopes down his nose, ending in a black circle. The artist was very good, choosing colors that complement Barrett's golden brown facial hair.

“You can't scrub your face at home by yourself?” I ask, giving him a hard time.

“I can, but I bet you have makeup remover that would cut this job in half.” He arches a foxy eyebrow. “Plus, I can help you take off yours.”

He taps my nose—which is painted bright pink. Since I didn't have whiskers of my own, my face painter drew them on. I'm a kitty cat. Of course.

“What’s it going to be? You taking him up or am I taking him home?” Our driver, a sixty-three-year-old retiree—he told us—asks with a kind smile. “He seems safe enough.”

“Well, you don’t know him.” I smile at Barrett. “Come on up.”

“Am I waiting for him to come back down?” the driver asks.

My eyes clash with Barrett’s heated ones. It’s crystal clear what this date is leading to. If tonight doesn’t end with us in bed, we both know it’ll end with us in a knot on my sofa.

“No need to wait,” I tell the driver.

The elevator ride is a quiet one. We press our backs to the wall. Look at our shoes. We do not reenact any of the elevator make-out scenes from any number of books I’ve read or movies I’ve watched.

Inside my apartment, I flip on some lights and then toss my purse and keys on the kitchen table. “Master bathroom is through here.” I lead, Barrett follows. When I flip the light on in the master, he stalks toward me in a way that’s as animal as his face paint.

“Will you do it?” he asks.

“Sure. Sit.” I point to the closed toilet lid, and he obediently lowers himself onto it. I shove a brush, a bottle of lotion, and my curling iron into the vanity drawer. Luckily the rest of the bathroom is clean. I grab a pack of makeup remover towelettes and tug one from the packet. Holding his chin, I swipe one over his right eyebrow. “Photo evidence of this will definitely make the column. Mia loves to embarrass me.”

Barrett forked over his cellphone and asked our artists to snap photos of us. Later on he took a few himself, including

one of me eating an ice-cream cone.

“I’m so full, I’m no longer buzzed. What a waste of a designated driver.” I’m talking to fill the tense air.

Barrett’s eyes are closed, his reddish-brown lashes shadowing his cheeks, his skin pink from my scrubbing. He looks like a boy, save for the prominent stubble and masculine angle of his jaw. He’s almost painfully gorgeous.

“All done.” My voice is tight with lust, the innocuous act of removing face paint somehow nearly as sensual as removing clothing. When his eyes open, I fall into them like pools. I toss the used towelettes into the wastebasket.

“Anything else?” I clear my throat, suddenly and strangely nervous.

“Your turn.” We trade places and he carefully swipes the paint from my cheeks, forehead, and chin, his eyebrows lowered in concentration. I enjoy the pampering, and the attention.

When he’s through, I slowly open my eyes, chin elevated. “Thanks, Fox.”

“You’re welcome, Kitty Cat.” He looks at my mouth with a longing I feel but doesn’t kiss me. I can tell he’s about to leave. I don’t want him to, but it’s the best idea for both of us... Isn’t it?

I don’t know anymore.

“I’m going to go,” he says, those four words as distancing as they sound.

“Can I drop you at home?”

“You’re already home, honey. I’m not making you go out.”

“Well, you shouldn’t go out, either. It’ll take too long to get a car,” I argue and then desperately add, “Hey, we could brainstorm on what we’ll be writing this weekend.”

At that suggestion he grows visibly tired, his shoulders slumping. “No thanks.”

“Guess I’m the workaholic out of the two of us, huh?”

“Depends on what kind of work you’re talking about.” He offers a palm and helps me stand, then he leads me through the bedroom and (I’m guessing) to the front door.

With each step we grow closer and closer to him walking out. I’m racking my brain for an excuse to keep him here. The *why* doesn’t matter any longer. I’m not interested in *whys*, only my body’s needs.

“It’s our third date. Technically. If you count both golf dates as one,” I say.

He pauses mere feet from the exit and raises his eyebrows.

“How shall we write that it ended? With face paint removal?” I take a tentative step closer to him and then another. “Or a kiss goodnight?”

His eyes darken to navy, his pupils growing with interest. His fingers feed into my hair, tearing down my ponytail and coming out with the elastic. He doesn’t take his eyes off mine as he drops the band on the floor. His lips hitch with interest and, I hope, in surrender.

He arranges my hair over my shoulders, leaving it in a big wavy mess around my face. My beer buzz has long faded, but my head swims. I might be drunk on Barrett Fox.

I mentally fast-forward past the kiss, the sex, and to the morning after. “This would be a disaster, wouldn’t it?”

“A beautiful disaster,” he murmurs.

“You can sleep on the couch.” I step so close my toes bump his. “Sneak out in the morning. Or you can stay, and we can spend the morning writing our columns.”

“God, woman. You know how to kill a mood, don’t you?” A rocky laugh leaves his chest. I smile up at him, smitten. Then his expression grows serious. Everything around us crumbles to dust when he lowers his lips to mine.

The kiss is sweet. Soft. Then hard and needy.

His fingers return to my hair, sending shivers down my spine. I stand on my toes, claw at his shoulders. My will is weakened from the long day, from hearing him sing, and by the gentle way he has when he’s not playing famous.

The hand in my hair grips a fistful and he tips my head back so that I’m looking up at his shadowed face. “I’m not sleeping with you tonight, Kitty Cat.”

“Why not?” I whine.

He grins. In control and loving it. “You saw all the best parts of me today.”

“Yeah, well I’ve seen the worst parts of you already.” I wad his T-shirt in my hand and yank it up to reveal a panel of defined abs interspersed with golden-brown hair. Another whimper edges from my throat.

“You haven’t. Not yet. I don’t want you to regret anything.”

“I won’t. I’m *itchy*,” I say, referring to our discussion about how long it’s been since we’ve each had sex. “Assuming you haven’t slept with anyone since that conversation, I bet you’re itchy, too.”

“Like I’m covered in fire ants,” he mutters, and somehow manages to make that sound sexy. “But the timing’s off.”

Like a teenager who’s been told “no” I pull a sulky expression.

“Ah, ah.” He shakes his head. “I’ll still set you off, sugar. I just don’t have the time to kiss to the insides of your knees like I promised. Or tickle that space where your thigh meets your ass with the tip of my tongue.” His kisses my bottom lip, tasting sweet from the ice cream we shared earlier.

A sharp *ziiip!* sounds and my dress sags at the front. I snap my spine straight when his warm palm touches my bare skin.

“Let’s see how far we can get you by only taking off your bra.” He wears a predator’s smile as he steers me toward the couch.

“Frustrated. That’s where you’ll get me.” I sit with a graceless *whump*.

He leans heavily against my body, his lips devouring, his tongue stroking mine. I forget what we were arguing about and kiss him back. He pulls my dress down to my waist, baring my upper half. I arch toward him, trying desperately to rub against the erection that has to be there. It *has* to.

When I reach for his belt, he grabs my hand and pins it over my head. The other follows when I reach for his shirt.

He rains kisses down my throat and over my bra, biting the fabric and gently grazing first one nipple, then the other. I let out a sharp “Oh!”

His expression is no longer cocky ease, but pointed, eager longing.

“We can go fast this time, slow the next time,” I say.
“Just... Let’s do it. Sex now. Please?”

“She begs.”

I growl low in my throat and struggle futilely against his hands acting as shackles.

He silences me with another kiss, and once I’ve capitulated, slips his hand behind my back and removes my bra. When that pesky material is out of the way, he swirls his tongue over my nipple. My growl of frustration morphs into a pleading moan.

My hips pump, my fingers feeding into his thick, short hair. Wordlessly, I beg for whatever he’ll give me.

But he has no intention of making me wait. His fingers vanish beneath the skirt of my dress and trail up my inner thighs. Once past the barrier of my damp cotton underwear, he strokes my folds. My cries of delight are lost in his mouth.

When he moves his tongue to my breasts again, I’m panting, gasping, about to explode into a million tiny cosmos. He finds my clit easily and delivers one debilitating stroke after another. With a breathy cry, I grip his shoulders and come.

My head slams back onto the pillow. My fingers dig into his shoulders as a thoroughly satisfied moan crawls out of my throat. I’m limp, my muscles jelly. My lips tingle, and the very satisfied part of me between my legs thumps happily in time with my erratic heartbeat.

After a few buzzy moments, I lazily open my eyes.

Barrett kisses my nose. “How was that?”

“Phantasmagoric.”

“Is that a word?” He looks amused and so handsome I can’t stand it.

“It is, though I’m not sure I used it right.”

His laugh is warm and welcome. He starts to stand but I cling to his neck, emitting a pathetic “nooooo.”

“You sure you didn’t have too much to drink, Kitty Cat? You’re not typically this wanton.”

“Wanton. Color me impressed on that two-dollar word, Fox.” His posture relaxes and I use it as an excuse to tighten my arms around his neck and pull him close. “Lay here with me for a minute. Or an hour.”

“I’m in no hurry.” He tugs my dress over my breasts. The sex buzz fades, and my eyelids grow heavy.

“Good,” is the last word I say. I’m not sure how much time passes. I’m vaguely aware of him leaving the couch, sliding a pillow under my head, and walking around my apartment. If only I had the strength to open my eyes to ask him to stay.

But I don’t. Not when the soft flutter of a thin blanket covers me. Not when I hear my door open and close.

CHAPTER 17

BARRETT

The second cup of coffee didn't help with the writing. Neither is the third.

I push off my couch and stomp into the kitchen to dump the brew down the drain. If anything, the extra caffeine has made it *more* difficult to concentrate. What's with writers and coffee? How do they sit still?

I drink a glass of water, and then tip my neck to the ceiling. It cracks in protest. Sitting on the couch with my head bent at an awkward angle is not exactly a chiropractor-recommended posture. My brain rewinds to last night, to a different couch. Catarina's pert nipples tasted like candy. The sounds she makes when she's coming still echoes in my ears.

She was begging me to go to bed with her and I told her no. That wasn't like me. I frown as I refill my glass. When a girl wants it, I give it to her. Period. End of statement. Anytime Beth and I were "off" or "on a break" and I met a girl who wanted a quickie, I could have my pants around my ankles in record time.

So what's up with Catarina wanting it and me telling her *no*? It wasn't a power play. I lean a hip on the countertop and stare blankly at my sparkling tile floors while I think. Definitely not that. I don't get off turning her on and walking away. I nearly got off on turning her on and snuggling next to her on the couch. I could've drilled a hole in the drywall with the hard-on I had last night.

I meant it when I said I didn't have time to do what I wanted to do with her. There are curves that need exploring. Knees that deserve my undivided attention. Her brown eyes went as black as ink when my fingertips grazed her inner knee. There's *no way* I'll skip over that part next time.

My cellphone lets out the jangling ringtone I assigned the front desk specifically. I press the screen and answer, "Barrett Fox."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Fox. I have an Aaron Fox requesting to come up."

My brother. If he didn't call that means he wants something and doesn't want to be told no. It's usually money, which means I can transfer some to his account and have him out of here in five minutes. Sometimes though, like the time he dove into a bottle of Jack Daniels after finding out his girlfriend was pregnant, the visits are longer.

"And Mattie!" comes a little boy's shout and my heart pinches. That girlfriend who was pregnant gave birth to a red-haired kid I fell in love with in the maternity ward of the hospital four years ago.

"Send them up."

"Will do, sir. By the way, the elevator is now in working order, so you will be able to meet them in your entryway."

I thank the security guy and pocket my phone, waiting the few minutes it takes for the elevator to ding on my private floor. When the doors slide open, my heart melts.

Matrix Barrett Fox is a tornado. He crashes into my legs, craning his neck to send me a huge smile.

“Mattie!” I bellow, bending to thump his back and hug him in return. “What is up, my man?” We cover a lot of ground in the conversation that follows. The zoo. The arcade. Swimming at Grandma’s pool. Spider-Man. McDonald’s. I can barely keep up.

“Jenni dropped him off because she has a job interview today.” Aaron slouches his way into my apartment. “Fuck, your place is nice. I can’t get over it.”

“Aaron.” I gesture to my nephew who’s already found my laptop. “Language in front of the kid?”

He grunts.

I swipe the laptop out of Mattie’s hands and swap it for the iPad standing on a nearby counter. The last thing I need is the kid erasing three hundred words I absolutely bled for today.

“What are you two troublemakers up to?” I ask, my voice in Mattie-tone. “Picking up girls?”

I nudge his arms and he predictably responds with “Yuck!”

Mattie was born right before I left for Miami. It killed me to leave. In just under a year Jenni was threatening to never let Aaron see Mattie again, and every last phone conversation with my mother at that time was an exhausting replay of what “that bitch, Jenni” did or said. Since then, Aaron and Jenni have had a rocky relationship, but one that permits him to see Mattie more often if he wants. In typical Aaron fashion, he doesn’t keep a regular schedule.

“What’s up?” I ask my brother, my tone grave. He has to have a reason to show up without calling.

“Need you to watch him for a few hours.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why?”

“I mean do you also have a Sunday job interview or are you going to a car show?”

“Why the fu—”

At my stern glare, he cuts himself off.

“What the *heck* do you care if I go to a car show?”

I gesture to Mattie. It’s obvious why I’m asking. A chance—and trust me, it doesn’t happen that often—to spend the day with his son and he wants me to babysit?

“Why not take Mattie with you?” I nudge my nephew’s small shoulder. “You like cars, right?”

“Yeah!”

“He’s hell on wheels, you know that.” Aaron shoves his hands into his pockets. I follow his freckled arms up to his screen-printed T-shirt and equally freckled, frowning face. “Two hours, Bare. Gimme a break.”

Mattie peels his attention from the iPad to look up at me with hazel eyes.

“Do you want to hang out with boring Uncle Barrett?” I ask him.

“Yeah!” My chest fills to capacity with love for my nephew. No way can I tell this kid no.

“I’ll be back.” Aaron says. “Be good to your uncle.”

“Bye, Dad!” Mattie’s already found a game on the iPad. It seems whenever he’s around Aaron, he’s around me. I’m like an extension of his dad. I don’t mind. I really don’t.

And anyway, what’s two hours?



CATARINA

Cartoon sound effects are coming from the entryway of Barrett’s apartment when the elevator doors slide open. I arrived uninvited, but the security guy downstairs made a quick phone call before unlocking the top floor and sending me up.

If Barrett minded me stopping by unannounced, he didn’t convey it via the front desk. He didn’t even ask why I was here. Which is good since I’m not sure why I’m here.

I wrote my column this morning, finished a load of laundry, took a walk to Starbucks and then ordered two cups. A tall, black dark roast for Barrett and my typical Pike Place with cream. Cups in hand, I call out “knock knock!” from the ajar front door.

The cartoon sounds are interrupted by a child’s voice calling, “Who’s that?!”

I stop in my tracks when I’m confronted with an adorable little boy. His face screws into a question mark, nose wrinkling. “Who are you?”

“Mattie, that’s not nice.” Barrett, open laptop balanced on one hand, swaggers to the door looking tired. He sounds it,

too. “Hey, Kitty Cat.”

“I was in the neighborhood.” I hand over his coffee, and he shuts the door behind me.

“Your name’s Kitty Cat?” Mattie’s laughter is adorable—and I don’t consider myself a kid person. Imagine my surprise when I’m giggling with him.

“My name is Catarina. And you’re Mattie.” I extend a hand and he slaps it. I shake out the sting on my palm, wincing while Barrett watches me with a half-smile.

“Buddy, why don’t you try calling your mom again?”

“Kay!” Mattie takes the offered cellphone and punches the numbers before putting the phone to his ear. He’s wriggling on the couch, then moves to the chair, his sneakers leaving dirt marks on the white leather. I grimace.

“Not used to tiny humans?” Barrett asks, his gaze going from Mattie to me.

“I’m never around them.”

“She’s not there!” Mattie chucks the iPhone onto the couch where it bounces once and lands on the carpet with a muted thud.

“We’ll get ahold of her, buddy.” Barrett looks over his shoulder to check the clock on the stove. “Late as usual.”

I inspect Mattie thoroughly, and with mild alarm. His red hair is redder than Barrett’s and his hazel eyes aren’t Barrett’s true blue. But they have the same strong chin, and though Mattie’s a child, I can tell he’s going to be tall.

“You never mentioned...” I start, gesturing to the little boy.

Barrett's eyebrows pinch. He swallows his coffee, follows my gaze to Mattie, and then tracks back to me.

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

"I didn't think you'd care."

My mouth drops open in offense. "Of course I care!"

"We don't share that many friendly factoids."

"He's a human being. Hardly a factoid."

"You're thinking about the column."

"No, I'm not." Except I sort of am. "Not in an exploitive way," I add in a small voice.

Barrett lets out a knowing chuckle.

"He looks like you." I cock my head to the side and study Mattie, who's rolling around on the floor with an iPad. The loud music has started again, interspersed with electronic explosions to which he adds his own sound effects.

"Everyone says that. I don't see it."

"What are you working on?" I walk to the laptop that is now sitting open on the counter. "Your column?"

"There's no working with him here," Barrett mutters quietly. "I like having him here—don't get me wrong, but whenever Jenni pulls this shit, there's no warning. And Aaron isn't much better."

Jenni. Aaron. I assume Jenni is...an ex-girlfriend? The math doesn't work out with Beth since they dated on and off for six years. Unless, during an "off" period, Barrett impregnated this Jenni person. No clue who Aaron is though. Maybe the stepdad?

“If neither of them shows up soon, we’re going to have to order pizza.”

“Pizza!” Mattie shouts, not too steeped in the world of war on the iPad screen to miss an offer of the perfect dinner.

A doorbell chimes through the apartment at the same time the door swings aside, depositing a tall, lean red-haired man into the living room. “Sorry I’m late.”

“You said two hours. It’s closing in on five,” Barrett says. “I called Jenni.”

“Jenni?” the other man snaps. He has a mean, unfriendly look about him. “I told you I’d be back.”

“Yes. In *two* hours,” Barrett replies tiredly before blinking at me like he just remembered I was here. “This is Aaron, my brother.”

“Aaron, your *brother*.” My tone is surprised with a dash of relief. I offer a hand. Aaron shakes it as I inspect his wardrobe. Denim shorts covered in grease stains and a dark blue T-shirt screen printed with an eagle carrying a banner that reads: FREEDOM.

Conversely, Barrett wears a soft-looking pair of jeans that are worn at the thighs and a black T-shirt with nothing on it at all. His hair is styled, and his scruff is neat. His muscles play and flirt beneath the material, whereas his brother’s lean build doesn’t allow for shifting muscle. Aaron’s scruff is scraggly and bright red, his hair fuzzy from lack of hair products. They look the same but not. By the time I register that Aaron has the greenest eyes I’ve ever seen, I push two rather obvious puzzle pieces together.

“Mattie’s *your* son,” I say to Aaron. Then I turn to Barrett. “Your nephew.”

“And who are you, pretty lady?” Aaron’s expression borders on lecherous. I tighten my grip on my coffee cup and take a step closer to Barrett.

“She’s Kitty Cat!” Mattie hops over to his father. “Where’s mom?”

“We’re going to go see her now.” Aaron flicks a look to me and Barrett, hesitating. “Say, bro, do you have twenty bucks? I need to fill up the tank. Might need you to check the engine, too. Something’s rattling.”

Next to me Barrett is a wall of tension. The air practically vibrates with it. He pulls his wallet out and slaps a twenty into his brother’s hand.

“Uncle Barrett said we were getting pizza!” Mattie grins at me. “I love pizza.”

“Well, unless Uncle Barrett is buying, we ain’t getting pizza,” Aaron says, obviously hinting for more cash. Cash Barrett delivers with minimal reluctance. Giving his brother money appears to be commonplace.

“Thanks, man. I owe ya. Nice to meet you, Kitty Cat.” Aaron’s voice is slimy.

“It’s Catarina.”

He ignores me and leads Mattie to the door.

“Hey, kiddo. I need that.” Barrett holds out a hand for the iPad which Mattie returns, though part of me wonders if Aaron wasn’t aware that his son was walking out with it.

“Big hug.” Barrett kneels, and Mattie loops his arms around his uncle’s neck and squeezes, growling when he squeezes harder. Barrett fakes choking and falls to his side

while Mattie giggles excitedly. It's so sweet. "Love you, bud. Be good, okay?"

Mattie yells "Okay!" and Barrett shuts the door.

He jerks a thumb over his shoulder. "You thought Mattie was mine?"

"What was I supposed to think?"

"I guess I didn't consider that. Thought it was obvious that he wasn't."

Silence hangs in the air for a few seconds before he folds onto his couch and runs a hand through his hair. Outside, the sun sits low in the sky, making room for the moon though it's not dark yet.

I sit next to him and swipe at a dirty shoe smudge on the couch cushion. "Do you have any leather cleaner?"

"No, but my housekeeper does."

Housekeeper. Right. Of course he has a housekeeper. A vision of a cute blonde in a tiny black-and-white maid costume clatters into my head. I shove it out.

"I take it you're not big on kids." He's leaning back, deliciously sprawled with a cup of coffee hanging from his fingers.

As a woman who just edged over thirty years old, I take immediate offense. Why is it that women are always answering for the whole not-having-kids thing?

"Are you 'big on kids?'" I ask, peeved.

He shrugs. "I love kids. That kid especially."

"But you never had any of your own." I continue poking.

“Beth and I weren’t stable. My career was all over the place.”

“If not for that you’d be a dad?”

“Yeah. Hell yeah.”

I study him anew—like he’s a rare find behind museum glass. With a card to the right reading “Bad Boy Who Loves Kids.” It fits him and doesn’t at the same time.

His hand slides into my hair and plays in the strands. I make a concerted effort not to purr.

“My brother’s...” He trails off and shakes his head. “Do you have siblings?”

“No.”

“We grew up in a...less pretty part of town than you did, Kitty Cat. One with trailers instead of mansions.”

“I hardly grew up in a mansion.” I’m almost offended though I don’t know why.

“Did you have a big house? Big yard? Nice neighborhood where the kids could play in the street?”

Reluctantly, I nod.

“Mansion.”

“And you grew up in a trailer?”

“For a while.” His face turns to granite.

“You seem to have done okay for yourself.” I glance around his apartment.

“It comes with a price.” Every rigid angle of his body tells me to stop talking. I’m insatiably curious by nature, but with him it’s a compulsion.

“You were the one in your family with money,” I guess, further assuming, “The *only* one with money.”

He looks away. It’s as good as a confirmation.

“Does Aaron lean on you a lot?”

He fiddles with the lid of his coffee cup instead of answering.

I decide to tread lightly. “Is there more you can tell me?”

His blue eyes are as hard as sapphires when he meets my gaze. Like he knows I’ll keep pushing until he shares.

“Mom and Dad liked to party, which is a nice way to say they were drunks. Aaron isn’t as bad as they were, but close. When I was younger, he and I used to do stupid shit like bash in mailboxes with baseball bats and run around egging cars. I stopped to play ball; he didn’t. I was a horrible kid and a worse teenager and if I didn’t have the arm I had, I’d probably be in jail.”

When he looks away, it’s in shame. My heart swells, every cell in my body leaning closer to him. Wanting to comfort him.

“There was no country club for us, Kitty Cat. No fancy cars or golf lessons. I didn’t know food came from anywhere other than a cardboard box labeled Kraft until I was thirteen.”

I don’t know what to say, so I say nothing.

He lifts his hand and drops it on his lap before absently picking at a frayed hole in his jeans. “My brother’s like a kid. He needs a handler. He always needs money. I made sure he had a car so he could pick up his son and, hopefully, he’ll go back to work. When our parents died, I gave him the house, but I paid the back taxes or else he’d have lost it, too. I have

money. It's not a big deal." He shakes his head like he isn't sure why he's upset. "First-world problems, right?"

"It's not about the money. I can see that," I say in his defense. "You work hard and don't want to be taken advantage of, but you care about him, so you don't say no. It's unfair and he's entitled."

"I don't want Mattie growing up like we did." He lets out a gusty sigh and pinches the bridge of his nose. "He has it hard enough. If I didn't help Aaron out he'd be living in the car I bought him." He grunts, understandably frustrated.

It's a double-edged sword. Leaving Aaron in the dark is one thing, but he has a son who Barrett loves with all his heart.

"You're a good brother." I rest my hand on his and squeeze. When he looks over at me, I smile. "And a good uncle."

His heated gaze holds me captive and my skin tingles. I pat his hand and move to stand. He pulls me back down next to him. "You didn't tell me why you were here."

"Partly because we have to decide on our next date. Partly to check on your progress on the column." I hazard a glance at the laptop on the counter. "I'm guessing not great since you had Mattie today, huh?"

"Going to miss my first deadline unless I pull an all-nighter." He goes back to playing with my hair, his fingertips lost in the strands. "What about you? Get it done?"

I nod.

"Probably had it done by lunch."

I nod again. "Sorry."

“Don’t apologize.” He lets out a tired laugh. “I love that you’re good at what you do.”

He looks exhausted and sad and tired in a way that a nap won’t fix. I hate seeing him like this. “Let me help you, Fox. I can have your column done in an hour. Afterward, you can read it and make sure it sounds like you. I’m really good. I bet I could mimic your voice.”

I drop my voice as low as possible. “There are three things I know about Kitty Cat Everhart. One, she eats everything in sight. Two, she’s hopelessly impressed by my singing on stage. Three—”

“Her lips taste better than a funnel cake and an ice cream cone rolled into one,” he draws. “I miss that taste already and it hasn’t been twenty-four hours.”

His eyes are locked on mine. As if on cue, we both lean forward. Seconds before our lips touch, he asks, “Why did you really come here tonight?”

Truth? Or lie? I chew on the edge of my lip, debating.

“I wanted to tell you our first column ran today.” That’s the truth. But it’s not why I’m here.

“You could’ve texted me that information.” His finger swipes my cheek.

“The response is really good. Mia says the sooner we have the second article up the better. That’s why the deadline’s so tight.”

“Are you trying to turn me off?” His eyebrows sink in mock contemplation.

“Sorry. I’m nervous.”

“Why’s that?” His fingers stroke down my throat and play along the scoop neck of my shirt. His tickling touch is sensuous.

“I’m afraid you’ll tell me no again.” *Whoa*. Truth. Bomb. I blink in surprise, hardly able to believe I said that out loud.

“Where do you see this going, Kitty Cat? Other than to my bedroom.”

I can’t repress a shiver at the mention of his bedroom. I offer a meek one-shouldered shrug. “I didn’t expect you to care where it went. Aren’t you the love-’em-leave-’em type?”

“If you believe the tabloids.”

“What about the other girls during the ‘off’ days with your girlfriend?” I suck in a breath as his fingers whisper over my chest and then to my ribs. He takes my coffee and sets both of our cups on the low table in front of us.

“Talking about work and my ex-girlfriend are surefire ways to erase the chubby I’m working on.” He smiles. “Guessing that’s not the direction you want it to go.”

I grin, averting my gaze from his. He’s too close. The moment is too intense. Maybe this is a bad idea...

“Up,” he instructs, tugging my shirt to my bra and nudging my arms.

Obediently, I raise my arms and my soft cotton shirt is on the floor a moment later. His eyes linger on my black lace bra.

“Tell me you’re wearing matching underwear.”

“It’s a secret,” I whisper, my nerves fading.

So what if we work together? So what if my feminist friends throw me off a bridge? I can’t think about

repercussions now. Not when everything feels this right. We're acting on instincts alone—or at least I am.

“Fox? Why do I have the feeling you're the one who's overthinking?”

“I don't want you to wake up in the morning with regrets.”

“Hello? I don't regret last night.”

“That was just a warm-up.” His words are a warning. I clinch my thighs together in delicious anticipation.

“Are you so potent that I won't be able to resist you after one night?”

A smile curls his lips. “I sure as fuck hope so.”

CHAPTER 18

BARRETT

In a black bra and jeans, her dark hair tumbling over her slight shoulders, Catarina Everhart is a fucking knockout. I don't say that lightly. It's true I have a broad appreciation for the opposite sex, including the female ref I spouted off at during an intense moment of the game.

I did mail Santiago a bouquet, by the way. *Three*, actually. All of them were roses and included cards with my handwritten apology. When I returned to the flower shop for the third time, the elderly lady running the joint said, and I quote, "You're in hot water with this one, aren't you?"

I don't think Santiago ever forgave me, but then I'm accustomed to that. Beth forgave me but shortly after she'd inevitably bring up the shit I did "wrong" in our relationship, and then we were back to yelling at each other again.

I like women. I *appreciate* women. They don't always like and appreciate me. I may seem like an asshole, but there's a guy buried beneath the tabloid fodder who loves kids and wants forever like any heart-eyed sap with a gold band on his finger.

I *like* Catarina a hell of a lot. I'm not saying it's the mother-of-my-future-Foxes or put-a-ring-on-it kind of *like*, but who's to say a few years later things won't turn out that way?

Conversely, it could turn out a different way. A yelling match that precedes a breakup that leads to a hopeful reunion that ultimately crashes and burns.

Wow. That was depressing.

"Catarina." Her eyes widen when I say her actual name. "You sure about this? One hundred percent?"

"No. Are you?"

"No," I admit.

"We're going on an adventure. That's from *The Hobbit*."

"Has anyone ever told you that you act dorky when you're turned on?"

Her smile widens.

Total knockout.

I catch her hand and she stands with me, keeping her eyes glued to mine the entire time.

"Why not, right?" she asks.

"A million reasons why not," I confess. "But I can think of a few great reasons why." I weave her fingers with mine and, holding her arms wide, pull her close until our bodies touch.

"A few *really* great reasons why." Her smile's back and I know I don't have to ask again if she's sure. I feel it in the weight of her stare and in the way she squeezes my interlocking fingers with hers.

I kiss her. *Deeply*. Then soft. Then firm.

Sweet mercy.

I'm rock-hard and ready after less than a minute of exploring her incredible mouth. I disentangle my hands and push them into her hair, and then tilt her head to kiss her more thoroughly than before. As our tongues slide, the stress of the day melts away, leaving nothing but the heady sensation of being lost in her mouth.

And, *oh yeah*, there's that whimper again. It's a tiny, pleading sound that causes my muscles to go taut. I pull my hands from her hair, my lips from hers, and reach for the zipper of her jeans. She wriggles free of them while I wrestle with my own belt and zipper. Next, I clumsily pull at my T-shirt with her help.

We're frantic, hands everywhere. We strip each other naked in record time.

My mouth slams into hers. I back her into the kitchen rather than throw her on the sofa. I can't deal with her the way I want to on that narrow strip of leather. I'm vibrating with tension and need a release more than my next breath. When her ass bumps the counter, I hastily apologize.

She grabs my ears and yanks my face to hers. We resume kissing. *Touching*. Her hands slide from my face to my chest, from my ass and then around to cup my cock. Her touch elicits a guttural plea from me—and I don't tend to be a beggar.

"I like this part of you," she whispers against my mouth. She massages my cock and I hover over her, teeth bared.

"It's yours, Kitty Cat. Knock yourself out."

That brings forth a saucy smile before she places an openmouthed kiss on my chest. Her teeth scrape my nipple. I buck against her palm. Her tongue lashes across my chest as

she continues to stroke me below. The closer her mouth gets to my throbbing erection, the more my mind blanks.

Seriously.

I got nothin'.

By the time she covers the tip of my dick with her plush lips, I'm gripping the counter behind me so hard I might crack it. I use my other hand to scoop aside her hair, holding it away from her face so that I can watch her take my length into her eager mouth.

Out. In.

Out. In.

Fuck.

"Come up for air, honey." I grind my teeth as she pulls her lips away slowly and places a tender kiss on the head. My mouth is dropped open, my chest heaving. I blink to reset my brain.

Doesn't work.

She rises from the floor. I stare at her naked body and try not to drool. Breasts, perky and full. Hips, narrow but curvy. Slim waist. Long legs.

"You're so fucking gorgeous," I croak.

"You're pretty hot yourself, Fox." When her smile goes crooked, I regain my composure and come up with an award-winning idea.

"Turn around."



CATARINA

Barrett makes a circle motion with one finger in the air, directing me.

I follow orders, having no interest in arguing or putting off what I came here for. I wanted to kiss him. Have sex with him. Be near him. The excuses I made while I bided my time today were just that: excuses. My body is calling the shots now. I'm helpless to resist the call of the wetness between my legs—or the pucker of my nipples.

I spin and face the cabinets, resting my hands on the countertop and pushing onto my toes.

My hair is swept to the side and then Barrett's lips land on my shoulder. He places another kiss on my neck. Then he nibbles my earlobe. I don't mean to shudder, but it happens, a full-body shiver that's brief but powerful.

"My Kitty Cat likes her licks." There's a sensual humor in his voice. "Don't worry, honey. We're not going to rush. I promised you attention and you're getting it."

He smooths both hands down my arms as he continues tonguing my neck and kissing his way to my shoulder again. Goosebumps spring to the surface of my skin. My nipples tighten. He thumbs one, notices I'm ready, and shifts his touch to a leisurely stroke.

Pinch. Pull. Rub.

Unf.

I open my mouth and a soft moan falls out of it. He slides the flat of his other hand down my stomach and straight to the *V* of my thighs.

He's pressed against me, inches of hardness nudging my ass, as he strokes my folds with the same leisurely motions as he does my nipple. I'm pressing my ass harder against his front, holding onto the counter for all I'm worth, and squeezing my eyes closed. I concentrate on the feel of his talented fingers bringing me closer and closer to release.

Release that comes *fast*.

I whimper the word "yes" over and over. By the time I snap out of my daze, his hand is wrapped around my breast, his other hand applying pressure to my sex— just enough to ground me and help guide me back to earth.

"If you promise not to move," he says into my ear, "I'll grab a condom and fuck you against this countertop and give you a couple more of those."

My exhalation is sharp. I want that. So badly.

"Yeah?" He leans close to hear my answer.

"Yeah," I breathe.

He places a kiss on the corner of my mouth and returns a moment later, sheathed. I peek over my shoulder and admire his muscular form, the reddish gold hair on his chest leading down to the manscaped thatch at the base of his throbbing cock. I'm gifted that wicked tilt of his lips. Then he does that circular motion with his finger again, beckoning me to face him.

"Not from behind?" I squeak, making it clear that was what I was hoping for.

"Can't bear to look at me?" He's amused.

"No, it's just... I thought..."

“That’s your problem, Kitty Cat. You don’t have to think. Just do as I ask.”

I face him, bracing the counter behind me with both hands. It has the added bonus of pushing my breasts forward, which is where Barrett’s stare is currently resting.

“Up.” He grips my waist and gives me a little lift. I assist by pushing my palms into the counter, but I don’t have to strain much. I’m in the air a second later, my legs wrapped around his naked hips. Sliding my ass on the edge of the counter, he positions his cock and nudges it forward, seeking, until—

“There!” I helpfully instruct.

“Yeah, I know where it is.” He chuckles. Then I’m off the counter and my back is pressed against the wall. “I know what you’re thinking. Can I hold you, fuck you, give you an orgasm, *and* have one myself? And the answer is...probably.”

I start to laugh—but it fades when he slides those inches home. He’s in deep. I’m anchored, having taken him to the root. He pauses, blows out an exhalation, and hits me with more honesty.

“I’ve wanted this.” Blue eyes fastened on mine, he begins to move. My back is flat on the wall and he’s bending, pushing, maneuvering back and then forward, and *oh God* I don’t even care how he’s doing it.

I hold onto him, my legs around his hips, my arms resting on his shoulders, my fingers linked at the back of his neck. I deliver a clumsy kiss.

“Working for you?” he asks between pants.

“Yes,” I answer, followed by a few more yeses, because friends, he found the *spot*. The spot North found once, maybe

twice. The spot I found myself but didn't often bother with.
"There. Oh God."

"How about...?" He shifts his hips, plunges in harder, and I swear I see stars. They obliterate the air directly in front of me for a few dazzling seconds. A cry I didn't mean to let out accompanies the second time he does it.

"Found it. Here we go, honey." He renews his efforts. Straining, a thin layer of sweat slicks his body. My eyes squeeze shut when I tumble over again, my pussy hugging his cock as he drives deep again and again. I claw at his arms, pull his hair, and scream in his ear.

His release that follows is as feral as mine. His shout of completion comes on a growl, his grip on my ass cheek bruising.

He drops his forehead on my shoulder as I lean my head back against the wall. He's still holding me there, but there's a slight shake in his arms.

"Fox."

"In a minute," he murmurs against the skin of my neck.

"You don't have to hold me here." I kiss his temple. "I can stand on my own."

"Good." He lifts his handsome face, eyelids at half-mast, blue eyes cloudy with spent desire, hair a wreck from my merciless pulling. "One problem."

"What's that?"

He puts a quick kiss on my lips and then whispers, "You feel nice."

"You feel nice, too." We grin like dopes before he relents and leaves my warmth. I lower my toes to the ground, and he

makes sure I'm steady before releasing me.

He doesn't walk away. He stays where he is, his palms flattened on the wall on either side of me, and then lowers his lips for a sweet kiss.

CHAPTER 19

CATARINA

The tapping of a keyboard trickles into the forefront of my groggy brain. Sleep's tendrils are slipping away but I try and hold on to them. The gauzy, fuzzy state of my brain feels too good to abandon.

The tapping continues. The clearing of a throat. And then the vestiges of a *really* nice dream slip away completely.

I lazily open my eyes to find that the dream I was having—about having sex with Fox against a countertop and his kitchen wall—wasn't a dream after all. It couldn't have been. I'm in his darkened bedroom, wearing nothing but bedsheets, feeling naughty and nice at once.

What a luxury *that* is.

Barrett, shirtless, the sheet covering him to the waist, is squinting in concentration. His angled face is lit by the laptop's screen, his lips moving as he reads the text before him. He taps a few more keys, unaware that I'm watching. He types the word "there," backspaces several times in a row, and then pecks out the word "their" instead.

“T-H-E-R-E is the one you’re looking for,” I tell him.

He starts at the sound of my voice, studies the screen, then grumbles “It looked wrong” before angrily pounding the delete key again and again.

“Probably because it’s the middle of the night.” I curl my hand over his biceps and then rest my chin there. “Can I help?”

“No.”

“Please?”

He turns his head and raises two thick eyebrows at my request. “You already helped. A little too well. You have no idea how badly I want to dive under these sheets with you.”

“Mmm. Sounds great.”

“*No.*” His perfect mouth overenunciates the word before he studies his screen again.

“Discipline is unbecoming on you, Fox. Aren’t you supposed to be the rule-breaker?”

“Maybe you’re rubbing off on me.”

“Maybe I could rub you off instead of you working all night like a spoilsport.” I run my hand beneath the sheet and laptop to cup his balls.

His eyes shut, and he lifts the laptop to hold it away from his body. I give his balls more attention and watch, delighted, as the bedsheet springs to life.

“Well, at least one of you is happy to see me,” I tease.

He sets aside his computer on the nightstand and throws the sheet off both of us. “Trust me, honey. We’re both glad to see you.”

I'm caged beneath him a moment later, covered by his heat and weight. I lift my face to kiss him, but he pulls back. "I'm screwed if I don't finish that by morning."

"Nonsense. I'll tell Mia we need an extension. I'm sure I can talk her into pushing it to tomorrow afternoon."

His brow wrinkles.

"You'll be fresher when you wake up."

"Not if you keep me up all night." He nudges me with his growing erection. I can't help grinning. I know what's in store for me.

I lift my chin a fraction of an inch more. He gives in, kissing me as one of his hands finds my breast. His tongue moves to my neck and then down to my nipple, where he draws circles around the tight bud.

My back arches when he continues south. He slicks my skin with his tongue, placing kisses on my ribs, on my belly button, and at the junction of my thighs. I blow out a tormented breath, and arch deeper.

"Guessing you want a coupla kisses somewhere specific?" He teasingly kisses my thigh. I swivel my pelvis toward his mouth. "Been a while, Kitty Cat?"

"It's my favorite." I pull my head off the pillow to make sure he sees me pouting.

"Lucky for you," he says as he scoots away from the Promised Land, "I'm good at it. But I have a vow to keep first." He drags his tongue along the inside of one of my knees. "Done right, this can be just as good."

I grunt—half in disappointment, half in disbelief. He notices, of course. He notices everything.

“Don’t believe me?” Another lick and then he closes his lips over the same spot and suckles.

My toes curl. My nipples grow hard. “Oh my God.”

He finishes me off with a soft smooch but doesn’t offer a smart-ass comment or cocky eyebrow raise. Instead, he lowers his head and makes out with the sensitive spot behind my knee again.

I’m writhing by the time he moves to my right knee. About to beg by the time his lips graze my right thigh. And I nearly come on contact when he finally, *finally* licks my center with unerring devotion.

I yelp. A helpless, pleading sound. I fist the sheets as he pushes his tongue against my clit over and over again. He wasn’t exaggerating. He’s *really* good at this.

Sparks dance on my skin as a fireball blooms in my stomach. Tingles shoot down my legs—legs I’ve thrown over his shoulders. He’s made himself at home between my thighs and is making a five-course meal out of me. He takes a brief break that I take advantage of to catch my breath.

“Give those nipples a tug,” he instructs.

He wants me to...what? I manage a subtle shake of my head. I don’t make a habit of pleasing myself with an audience.

“Don’t get shy on me, Kitty Cat. Not with my face buried in your pussy.”

I stab my bottom lip with my top teeth, loving the harshness of his command. I reach up to give my nipples a quick tweak but stop when I notice Barrett watching. “Don’t look!”

“Honey. I’m looking. Do it again.” He offers a devilish smile, his handsome face framed by my spread legs. As if my body’s been taken hostage by his desires, I tug my nipples again.

“That’s it,” he encourages, still watching. He strokes my seam and then slides a finger in deep. I continue to tweak my own nipples, which sends a throbbing ache south. I keep my eyes locked with his.

“Keep going.” He doesn’t break eye contact when he lowers his head to suckle my clit. I nearly shoot off the bed from the surge that electrocutes my body.

I pause, my eyes wide. He grins.

He adds another finger, filling me. He continues to pleasure me while I touch myself. Soon I’m lost in a sea of powerful thrusts and sharp riptides of pleasure. My mind blots into mirrored abstract images as my most intense orgasm yet crashes over me.

I have no idea how long I lay there, sweat cooling on my temples, my breathing going shallow.

Eventually, I taste his kiss. He pushes the hair away from my forehead, and then he’s inside me, sliding deep and bringing me to the pinnacle yet again.

CHAPTER 20

CATARINA

At five A.M. I climbed out of Barrett's comfortable bed, hustled out of his apartment building, and drove home. I barely managed to arrive at the office by seven. I'm sleepy as hell from our activities last night but staying awake was oh-so worth it.

I'm blinking tired eyes and nursing my first cup of coffee when he arrives fifteen minutes behind me. The office is quiet—save a few early arrivals in the back corner. And Mia, who arrives at sunup, usually stays behind closed doors until at least nine.

“Hey,” I greet Barrett as he walks by.

“Hey, Kitty Cat.” He looks as tired as I am, but also incredible. His hair is mussed, reminding me of having my hands in it. His smile is barely there, likely thanks to my attempting to kiss it off his face in the wee hours of this very morning.

“You're early.” Every inch of me leans toward him, my elbows on my desk, my body bowing in his direction. I link my fingers together to keep from literally reaching for him.

One night with the man and already my greedy body wants seconds. Or would that be thirds? *Fourths?*

It's understandable how one could lose count.

"I didn't get much sleep," he drawls, swaggering over to me, his black leather bag in hand. "Went to bed with this wild vixen." He pauses to whistle. "She wore me out."

I'm beaming. And blushing. And I'm considering dragging him to Marge's abandoned office and showing him my vixen side again. Until Mia emerges from her office looking like Gollum crawled out of the cave.

"Mia." I sit up straight and wipe the smile from my face, worried that I'm totally busted.

"About your email." She's frowning. Not good. I hammered out a request for an extension the second I set foot in here. Before I poured a cup of coffee. I had hoped she would've put off checking her email until later in the day. Guess not.

"You *both* need extensions? Is it too much to ask that, while I foot the bill for you to party all weekend, I receive one measly column in return?" She flashes me a displeased look and then that same look to Barrett, her eyes narrowing in consideration. Before she's overcome by the pheromones that have leaked into the office like carbon monoxide, he speaks up.

"It's my fault, Mia. Catarina's half is done."

I round my eyes, communicating *Shut up!* but he simply gives me a lazy smile.

"She's covering for me."

“He had to babysit his nephew unexpectedly,” I blurt. Mia’s expression morphs from angry to curious. “He, uh, he told me about it. That’s how I know.”

Oh, yeah. That was smooth.

“I can’t give you until three P.M. as requested,” she says sharply. “Noon.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Barrett says.

Mia lets out a little harrumph like she’s offended at the “ma’am” but I notice she fluffs her hair before trudging back to her office. The door closes behind her, and I slump in my chair.

“Can I help?” I ask. “Pour you a cup of coffee? Do it for you?”

“Not necessary. Gotta get to work, Kitty Cat.” Then he gives me a wink that sends my heart aflutter. “You look pretty today. I like you in black.”

I pull my shoulders, draped in a fifties-style little black dress that skims down my body to just below my knees. My incredibly sexually satisfied knees.

When he sits at his desk and unpacks his laptop, I stand and shuffle to the break room, deciding to fetch him a cup of coffee anyway.



BY QUARTER after eleven (aka forty-five minutes till deadline), I’m ignoring my work and staring worriedly at Barrett over the top of my laptop. He’s pecking away, unbelievably slowly, before swiping the touchpad to look at a different screen. He

lingers there for a while before going back to his one-fingered hunting and pecking.

I force my attention back to the article I was reading promising “wild dating ideas” but it doesn’t hold my attention for long. Barrett folds his hands at the back of his head and stretches, elbows wide and biceps flexing. He closes his eyes and blows out a breath. A subtle head shake precedes him standing up.

When he comes my direction, I put my fingers on the keyboard and start tapping random keys. Google doesn’t know what to make of my gobbledygook.

“Kitty Cat.”

“Yes. Hi, Fox. What’s up?”

“Want some lunch? I have to get out of here.” He pulls a hand over his face and shoots a longing glance at the window.

I glance at the clock. “It’s almost 11:30.”

“Right. Lunchtime. I’m starving.” His heated gaze trickles from my face to my chest. I squirm in my seat at the memory of what he was starving for a few hours ago. *Me*.

I shake off the X-rated thought. “You only have thirty minutes to finish your column. Are you close?”

“Sure.” He laughs.

I don’t laugh. I’m not amused.

“Come on. Lunch.” He tilts his head toward the exit and starts away from me. “My treat.”

“Barrett!”

“I’m going. With or without you.” His playful smile is missing. He’s serious.

“Wait.” I slip my bare feet into my high heels and run after him as quickly as my tight-around-the-knees skirt allows. He watches my approach, his eyes hooded.

“I really like that dress.”

I ignore the suggestive husk in his voice.

“I know I’ve been acting like a besotted idiot in every other aspect of our relationship,” I whisper, sending a cautious glance around the empty-ish office, “but I refuse to let you walk out of this building before your column is done. Mia said noon.”

“It’s going to take longer than that.” He shrugs. Shrugs!

“It...it can’t!”

“Well. It is.” He turns away again.

“Fox, you can’t leave when you’re on deadline!” The pleading inflection in my voice doesn’t slow him down a bit.

“Watch me.” He punches the elevator button. I start to chase after him before stopping myself. I said I *wouldn’t* act besotted. I owe myself the decency of keeping that promise.

Once he’s inside the elevator, waving goodbye for effect, I turn back to my desk and try and think of an excuse to appease our harried editor.

Or...

I could try and hack his password and finish the article for him. The clock says I have twenty-seven minutes. That’s plenty of time to review what he wrote, polish it, and email it to Mia.

Depending on how quickly I can figure out his password.

I hustle to Barrett's cubicle and sit in his chair. I barely contain a "Yay!" in celebration when I discover that his screen saver is on, but the screen isn't locked.

Hallelujah!

Hurrying, I begin reading the words before me, realizing after a few sentences that I'm reading a starchy, dry paragraph from an e-book and not the Word document Barrett was working on. I tap the screen and then scroll to the top of the page.

Dyslexia and You.

I tap a few pages back, noting several highlighted sections. This chapter is called "In the Workplace."

I close the book's window to find a menu listing other e-books sitting behind it.

Writing with Dyslexia.

How to Thrive with Dyslexia.

Dr. Fields's Guide to Adult Dyslexia.

Realization dawns as shame heats my face. Every rude comment I said or thought about Barrett's skill or writing style or slow typing lines up in front of me like a firing squad.

My attempts to help him were met with nos. Not because of his stubbornness, but likely his *embarrassment*. I made it a point to pull him away from his work last night, and he suffered through a four-hour writing session this morning as a direct result.

"I am such a bitch," I whisper to his laptop.

"You're not all bad," comes a low, gentle voice behind me.

I jerk away from the screen feeling (and probably looking) as guilty as hell.

“Forgot my money.” He leans around me, pulls open a drawer, and grabs his wallet. “Change your mind about lunch? Now’s your chance.”

“Barrett.” I’m not sure what to say. I don’t know why he’s not shouting at me for invading his privacy.

“Now you know my secret. Quite the plot twist, huh?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask, my tone flat. “Why didn’t you explain this was going on?”

“Didn’t you see the book entitled *Dyslexia: The Silent Shame?*”

“Don’t joke.”

He pockets his wallet and squats in front of me. He’s looking up at me with gorgeous blue eyes, his expression one of patience. “I’ve lived with it my entire life. It’s not news. Lunch?”

“You should tell Mia. She’ll extend your deadline. She’ll —”

He places his finger over my lips and shakes his head.

“I’m not telling Mia. I’m not letting you finish the column for me. I’m going to do it myself and it’s not going to be done by noon.” He stands and I tip my chin to take in his height. “Lunch. Let’s go.”

When I turn longingly back to his laptop, he shuts the lid and offers a palm. I take his hand and stand, then stop by my desk to grab my phone and purse. We walk to the elevator in companionable silence.

Twenty minutes later, we're sitting inside a café a few blocks from work, enjoying the A/C in quiet company with other professionals on their lunch breaks. The café serves chicken salad sandwiches I can't pass up, so I'm enjoying every calorie of the buttery croissant drenched in mayonaisse goodness. Conversely, Barrett ordered a salad, but it does have a medium-rare filet on top.

He chews, swallows the bite, and then says, "If you don't stop looking at me like an abandoned puppy on the side of the road, I am going to stand from this chair and announce to everyone here that you're my wife and I caught you cheating on me with our dentist."

"What? Don't you dare!"

"Don't dare me."

"Dammit, Barrett."

"I like the anger." He points to me with his fork. "Keep that."

"You're not funny."

"I'm not kidding."

"I don't believe you." I fold my arms stubbornly.

"Well, excuse me, sweetheart!" he shouts, bursting out of his chair. "I expected you to have a tooth filled, not your—"

"Barrett, please!" I stand and reach over the table to grip his forearm. Every pair of eyes in the café swivel to us.

"I promise I'll stop," I whisper.

"Okay then." He waves at the diners around us and announces, "My apologies for the interruption." Then he sits down and tucks into his meal like nothing happened.

I sit, too, earning a few admonishing glances from our neighbors.

“You are unbelievable.” I push my plate aside. Half my heavenly sandwich is left, but I’m no longer hungry.

“I’ve been told,” he says around a bite.

“Can you at least explain it to me? Can we talk about it?”

He sighs, a weary sound, and swipes his mouth with a napkin. “Take that pitying tone out of your voice, and I’ll explain. *Briefly.*”

“Deal.” I agree quickly, barely hiding my excitement.

“Curiosity killed the Kitty Cat.” The amused twitch of his lips transforms his entire face for the better.

“Being curious is my nature.”

“Being an asshole is mine.”

I shake my head. It’s not true and we both know it. But I don’t argue because I don’t want to stray off topic. “Dyslexia. When did you know?”

“Fourth grade. Spelling bee. There was lots of laughing coming my direction for hastily spelling the word *dumb* d-u-m.”

My heart aches for that embarrassed little boy, but I don’t show it. “Honest mistake, that’s how it’s spelled on the lollipops.”

“Exactly.” He gifts me with a warm smile that drops a moment later. “I can write, and I can spell, but it takes a lot of concentration to do either with any proficiency. Unlike you who puts her fingers on the keys and out it comes right the first time.”

“It’s not right the first time.”

He eyes me with suspicion.

“Not always,” I mumble.

He leans over our cozy table to tip my chin with his knuckle. “Don’t apologize for being an incredible writer.” He holds me there until I agree with a nod, and then he returns to moving his salad around his bowl with his fork. “I do my own work. I’ve always done my own work. But I’m not turning in a shoddy, half-assed piece while you turn in the equivalent of Shakespeare.”

“You can still do your own work, I’m offering to beta read. And make a few edits. Professionals do it all the time!”

“I’m not a professional.” He sips his water.

“Barrett—”

“Catarina. I don’t want you to do it for me. I’ve got this.”

I close my mouth when he uses my full name. It’s rare that he trots it out.

“I respect your right to improve on your own merit,” I say. Reluctantly.

“I don’t know what that means, but thanks.”

Beneath the table, I kick his shoe with the toe of mine. He sends me a smile, another wink, and then goes back to eating his lunch. I guess we’ll deal with the consequences when we return to the office.

I pull my purse into my lap and dig around for my cellphone, coming up empty.

“Looking for something?” he asks.

“Yes. My phone. I could’ve sworn I tossed it into my purse before we left.”

“You did. I have it.”

“When? Why?”

“I lifted it while we were in the elevator and put it on silent. I knew Mia would call. I didn’t want you to have to deal with her.”

Rage hits me like a runaway train. “Tell me you’re joking.”

He pulls my phone out of his pocket. I stand and snatch it, noticing several texts from Mia and three missed calls.

“Great. Just great.” I read the texts, my mind a tangle of panicked thoughts.

“I take it she’s mad,” he says, calm as ever.

“Of course she’s mad!” I earn more unwanted attention from nearby tables. “How dare you? This is my work!”

“You’ll be fine. I’m the one who’s in trouble.”

“Not now that I’ve ignored her *and* you’ve missed your deadline!”

A suited man rushes to our table. “Excuse me, folks, but does there seem to be a problem?”

“Yes...George,” I say after reading his name tag. The word “MANAGER” is under his name. It’s no surprise we’ve summoned him. Trouble shadows Barrett Fox’s wherever he goes. “But it’s my problem. You’ll be glad to know I’ll be dealing with it far away from your fine establishment.”

“I’ll behave myself,” Barrett promises George. Then to me, “See you at the office, sweetheart.”

“Don’t sweetheart me.” I march away, purse on my shoulder, head down as I peck a text to Mia letting her know I’m on my way.

CHAPTER 21

CATARINA

Around four o'clock, Barrett walked into Mia's office. I heard him knock and say her name. I stood up in time to watch over my privacy wall as she opened the door for him and he invited himself in. Then the door shut.

That was thirty minutes ago.

I passed by a few times, pretending to go to the restroom, then pretending to fill my coffee cup. I've now dropped all pretenses, taking to pacing back and forth in front of the slatted blinds covering her windows. I can make out the outline of their figures, but the angle of the blinds prevents me from seeing more.

Just as I gather my courage to knock on Mia's door, it swings aside, and I'm greeted with a tall, handsome Barrett.

"Hey, Kitty Cat."

"Hello, Catarina," Mia says when Barrett steps aside. "Do you need something?"

"Um. No. I mean, yes. I was looking for Barrett."

“She can’t stay away from me.” Mia laughs—a trilling, swoony sound before he accuses her with, “That’s your fault, by the way.”

“I’ll take credit for that,” she responds with a husky laugh. Was it me, or did she totally flutter her lashes? Unbelievable.

Her door shuts again, and I race after Barrett, who is meandering to his cubicle like he’s in less of a hurry than before.

“What happened?” I ask him.

“What do you think?” He shoves his laptop into his bag. Then a pen and notebook. Then the stapler. When he reaches for the tape dispenser, I grab his wrist.

“Were you...fired?”

“You’re so easy.” He places the tape dispenser and the stapler back on the desk. “*No*. I am not fired. I turned in my column and then sat down to talk with her.”

“What did you tell her?” Whatever he said must’ve been flooring. When I returned from lunch, Mia wasn’t happy with either of us. A minute ago she looked ready to dance a jig. When I texted her to explain, she texted back “talk later” and stayed in her office the remainder of the afternoon. I noticed she went to the ladies’ room, but I stopped short of chasing her in there to apologize for my insubordination.

“I told her everything.” He lays a hand on my jaw and bends his face very close to mine. I jerk my face away.

“We’re at the office, Fox.”

“My little rule-follower.” He lays his lips on mine. I push against his chest, but he finishes the kiss before releasing me.

“Everything,” I repeat. “What does that mean? Fox, *what does that mean?*”

“Breathe.” He rests one large hand on my shoulder. “I handled it. It’s fine.”

“Oh.”

“You didn’t think I’d tell her about us, did you?”

I send a cautious glance to the left and right. No one is around.

“What are you doing tonight?” he asks.

“I’m... I don’t know. Going home.”

“Want me to come with you?”

There’s an invitation.

“No.” My eyebrows crash down. “I’m mad at you.”

“That may well be, but we have work to do. More dates. I have a few ideas.”

“You can share them now. You don’t have to follow me *home*.” I fold my arms over my chest. Partially to appear obstinate and partially to conceal my troublesome nipples. Parts of me would love if he came to my house tonight. I know what would happen. Sex. Lots of yummy sex. I send an appreciative gaze over his chest and sigh.

“You do like to tell yourself no,” he observes with a smile. “Drinks, then? I’ll take you to a public place.” He holds up his hands. “I won’t touch you.”

I roll my eyes. Mostly at myself for considering his offer.

“Unless you ask.” He leans forward and whispers in my ear. “But you have to tell me where to touch you or all bets are off.”

I drop my arms and let out a huff of frustration. Barrett only grins.

“Come on.” He elbows my arm. “I’ll walk you out.”



BARRETT

That night I managed to talk her into a drink at a local bar. Kind of. She drank iced tea while I slugged back a bottle of light beer. She jotted notes about our dating plans into her iPhone while I tried to make her smile. I succeeded—twice—but we didn’t go back to her place or mine. We returned to our respective homes and then we finished out the week apart—me writing (or attempting to) mostly away from the *Columbus Dispatch* office.

Mia was okay with the timeline I’d proposed, and for that I was grateful. To prove to her that I wasn’t a total slouch, I showed up Friday to work at my cubicle like a good little newspaper-column writer. She appears in the doorway of my cube at five minutes till five, right when I’m packing to leave.

“You two have quite the evening planned, I hear.”

“Yeah, well. You said readers wanted to see my world.” Since running into my former OSU running back at the beer festival, Jackson Burke and I have kept in touch. Tonight he’s throwing a huge bash at his house and Catarina and I are invited. Given the kinds of parties Burke used to throw, I expect this to be the kegger to end all keggers.

“The second article runs Sunday. Readers are already clamoring for more. Catarina’s rigid country club golf against your beer-and-cheese-fries night.” Mia’s excitability is scaring me. “Tomorrow night’s cocktail party for the *Dispatch* at the governor’s house will make for a nice wrap-up.”

The what now?

“Uh, right,” I say, not wanting to sound like a moron.

“Wear a tux.”

“No problem.”

“Catarina, see you tomorrow evening,” Mia calls and then steps out from between us. I clash eyes with my date for the evening.

She shuts the lid on her laptop and studiously ignores me. I call across the empty office, since I’m not one to be ignored. “Kitty Cat!”

“Shut up, Fox.”

“You didn’t tell me you’re taking me to a soiree for the paper tomorrow.”

“I’m not.” She’s stuffing things into her purse and refusing to look at me.

“Mia said I’m going.”

“Okay.” She gives me a bland blink. “You can be her date.”

I sigh and stroll over to Catarina’s desk as she stands. She dressed down today in a slim pair of dark jeans, and a red shirt that shows off both of her creamy, bare shoulders. I could take a bite, she looks so damn good.

“Missed you this week.” I glide my finger along the swell of one of those shoulders.

“That’s nice.” She shifts away from my touch and rounds her desk. I stand in her way. She’s wearing a pair of black-framed glasses that make her eyes look twice as large, her eyelashes twice as long. She looks like a sex-kitten librarian, and my dick throbs in approval.

“Need a reminder?” I ask, my voice husky.

“Of what?”

“Of how compatible we are?” I step closer, lowering my head, but she takes a deliberate step back.

“No, thanks. What time should I meet you tonight?”

“I’m picking you up.”

“Again: No, thanks. I can find Jackson’s house on my own. Text me the address when you have a second.” And she’s off, clipping her way to the elevator in her practical, flat shoes.

I snag my leather bag before giving chase and manage to dive into the elevator as the doors are sliding shut. We glide down two floors before I punch the red emergency button. We jerk to a stop.

Her expression is one for the books. Anger, shock, and irritation vie for first place. When she reaches past me for the button, I cage her into a corner. “Kitty Cat.”

“Get away from me.”

“Forget it.”

She puts her palms on my chest and shoves. I stand over her, refusing to move. I use every pound on my frame to plant myself squarely in her personal space.

“I like you angry. I like you passionate. I like you, period,” I let her know. “But I don’t like this aloof thing you have going on.”

“Big word for you.” She lifts one eyebrow.

“I also don’t like you *mean*.” I tip her chin and she lets me, her expression softening with her tempting parted lips.

“Can we do this later?” she asks. Her eyes are downright hypnotizing when magnified behind those lenses. “Please?”

“I’ll pick you up at eight.”

She sighs. I take it as a yes.

I cancel the emergency stop and we bump to a start again. Catarina loses her balance. When she lashes out a hand to steady herself, she reaches for me. Before she can move her hand off my arm, I cover it with my other hand and place a kiss on her knuckles.

She doesn’t smile. She doesn’t blush. She doesn’t look angry, but cautious. Maybe nervous. I’m going to find out why.

When I arrive at her place at eight o’clock.

CHAPTER 22

CATARINA

I'm swiping lip gloss over my bottom lip when there's a knock at my apartment door. That's Barrett, who promised he'd arrive at eight.

I pull the door open and let him in, floored by how good he looks. His dark gray T-shirt is made to look worn but is new, his jeans fit snugly at the thighs, with a couple of stylish tears slashing the legs. I continue down to his gray sneakers and back up to his striking face. Scruff, pursed lips, and styled coppery hair. Just freaking gorgeous.

"You're too dressed up," he tells me.

"Thanks a lot. You look nice, too," I grumble, before turning and stomping away from him. It's my favored pastime of late.

"It's a lawn party, Kitty Cat. Beer pong. Cornhole. Bonfire."

"Bonfire!" He's right. I'm overdressed. The navy-and-white floral summer dress is casual, but not right for lounging in front of a bonfire. "I'll change."

In my bedroom, I pull open my closet door and inspect the contents, indecisive. I'm aware of a presence behind me a moment later. "I don't need your help."

"You promised me an explanation." He's right. I did. "What's with the bitchy attitude?"

I swing around, jaw dropped. "Did you just call me a bitch?"

"No."

"You kind of did."

"Cut the shit, Catarina. What the fuck is the problem?" He holds out his arms in question.

"Don't yell at me."

"I'm not. I'm just... Are we okay?" A worry line bisects his eyebrows.

Are we okay? There's a question. I didn't know we were a "we." His cologne—a combo of mountain pine and fresh mint—tickles my nostrils. God, he smells good.

"The more time we spend together, the more rules I break." It's been bugging me all week. When I met Barrett, he frustrated me, perturbed me, and refused to conform. Now I'm behaving just like him. Not returning my boss's texts, for example.

The issue with Mia was Barrett's fault directly, but it was mine *indirectly*. I never should've gone to lunch with him when he had a deadline to meet. Then when Mia came out of her office incensed, I would've been at my desk and *not* with him. Not to mention, but let's, that during our lunch, I stood up and raised my voice in a public place. I've never done that in my life.

“So?”

“So?” I stop rummaging through my closet. “I don’t want to be fired for going off the rails with the bad boy of the NFL.”

“Catarina Everhart,” he says around a chuckle. “You are not going to be fired. You’re too damn valuable.”

“You’re a bad influence.”

“Let me help you out of that dress.”

“You’re proving my point!”

He unzips my dress slowly, raking a knuckle down my spine as he does. Then he slides his hands along my bare back and around my ribcage where he gives me a tender squeeze. Temptation is a snarling beast—he feels nice, smells better, and now I’m tempted to shed my entire wardrobe and have sex with him in my closet.

I feel cool air on my skin when he backs away. “I’ll give you a minute to change. Unless you want me to help you remove more of your clothes.”

“I don’t want to be late,” I sort of protest, knowing I’m not making much sense to either of us.

“It’s a yard party, honey. We can’t be late unless we show up first thing tomorrow morning. Even then it might be raging.” He lays a kiss on my cheek. “Tell you what. Rain check on taking your clothes off. I’ll wait in the living room.”

Before he goes, I turn and call his name. He leans back into the bedroom, hands braced on either side of the doorframe.

“Are we a ‘we?’” I ask.

“Meaning?”

I debate whether I want to ask the question of the hour, and then come out with it. “Are we dating for real? Not only for the column?”

“You want to?”

I blink. Open my mouth. Shut it again.

“I haven’t been seeing anyone but you since we met.” With that bomb dropped, he pats the doorframe and leaves me alone in my room.

I *was* seeing North, but since Barrett kissed me I haven’t kissed anyone else. I haven’t *wanted* to kiss anyone else. After not hearing from him since Monday, I nearly threw confetti when he stepped into the office this morning. He waved, then went to his cubicle and sat down and...nothing. Then I decided I could ignore him, too.

Enough. We’re grown-ups and we’re dating. If it’s up to me, we may as well make this official.

I change into fuchsia shorts and a white T-shirt before slipping my feet into a pair of canvas sneakers. When I step into the kitchen, Barrett lowers the beer bottle he helped himself to without taking a drink.

“Wow.” He sounds awestruck. “Those legs.”

Pleased by his reaction, I check my matching fuchsia wristlet for the essentials: lip balm, cellphone, and mints.

“I don’t have to be your girlfriend.” I take the beer bottle from his hand and set it on the countertop. “But I expect a proper greeting whenever I see you. Since we’re dating. Since we’re a ‘we’—at least for now. Can you do that for me?”

“Hell yeah.” His smile breaks free and so does mine. He kisses it off my face a moment later, his hands sliding around

to squeeze my ass, his tongue taking the long way around. By the time we part, we're both a little breathless, and his eyes are clouded with lust.

"After the party—" I start.

"Yes."

"You don't know what I was going to ask."

"Doesn't matter. Still a yes if it involves you and me and more of that."

"It does."

"Good."

We grin at each other for the count of three and then share one more lip-lock before we leave.



JACKSON BURKE'S backyard party is in full swing when Barrett and I arrive. There are about twenty people packed into a small, tidy yard, and a privacy fence makes the space feel even smaller. Barrett had to park about a block away on the car-lined street.

Several partygoers are packed into Jackson's modern-on-the-inside, traditional-on-the-outside brick home. The remainder are scattered in the yard, either tossing bags at cornhole boards or standing around the bonfire, beers in hand.

Burke recognizes me from the museum last week. I'm given quick introductions to a slew of people. Random names are still bouncing through my head. I'm mentally matching them with faces as I stand off to the side of the backyard.

“Try this.” Barrett hands me a bottle of beer—not a light beer but a hoppy, bitter IPA.

I take a sip and try my hardest not to make a face. I fail miserably. I even cough. “That’s a serious beer.”

“Right? Jackson’s cousin brewed it. Here.” He hands over a different bottle. “This one’s not as harsh.”

“You tasted it for me, I presume?” I tip the bottle to my lips. Citrusy and delicious. Much better.

“Now that we’re *dating* that’s included in the package. Along with my package,” he adds with a wink.

“Barrett Fox,” calls a warm female voice. A second later, she is standing next to him. Straight, brown shoulder-length hair, large chest, legs poking out of denim shorts so short, the pockets are hanging past the frayed hem.

“Stacie. How are you?” He bends to accommodate her petite frame and hugs her. I make the catty but no less accurate observation that she looks like a girl who should be draped over a motorcycle on a poster hanging in a mechanic’s garage. When he raises to his full height, he introduces me. “Catarina Everhart. Stacie Bates.”

“Brown,” she corrects, waving at me rather than offering a hand. “I’m divorced.”

“Sorry to hear that. Bo and I don’t keep in touch,” he tells her.

They chat a minute longer about old times while I stand and awkwardly hold my beer. I’m trying to be gracious—after all, Barrett had to face North not so long ago—but it’s not easy.

“See you around.” Stacie waves and backs away from us.
“Bye, Catrina.”

“Catarina,” I say between clenched teeth after she’s gone.

“Stacie used to date the team,” Barrett tells me.

“All of them?” I ask flatly.

“Pretty much. She and Bo were married after college.”

“Did she date you?”

“Ohh, Kitty Cat.” He grins. “Put those claws in.”

“Don’t be cute.”

“Can’t help it.” He touches the frown line on my forehead.
“You’re hot when you’re jealous.”

“Did she?”

“We went out once or twice in high school.”

I roll my eyes, feeling like I’m back in high school.

“Damn!” He’s still grinning when he tucks my hair behind my ear. “I *like* this side of you.”

“Stop enjoying this.” I swat at him, but he catches my hand.

“Oh, we’re going to enjoy this.” He slides his fingers into my back pocket, grabs my ass, and pulls me flush against him.
“Let’s show Stacie what she’s missing.”

I’m not sure what cavewoman wire that comment tripped, but a second later, I’m kissing him for everyone to see. It’s not chaste, or short, and we don’t stop until Jackson interrupts us.
Loudly.

“Break it up, lovebirds. I’m not running a brothel.”

I step away from Fox and brush my lips with my fingers.

“How about a little three-on-three?” he asks Barrett. “Mike, Terry, and me against Joel, Billy, and you.”

“So, you *want* to lose.” Barrett’s tone is cocky and happy at the same time.

“*So* not happening.”

“Where are you going to play football?” I look around the postage-stamp yard. The grassy area that isn’t taken up by the cornhole board and bonfire is clogged with human beings.

“The street,” both men answer in tandem.

“Rich girl.” Barrett tips his head in my direction.

“Ah.” Jackson nods his understanding. “Well, I like her.”

“We’re exclusive.” A note of possessiveness outlines Barrett’s playful tone. “Kitty Cat, will you be okay here by yourself?”

“And miss watching the bad boy of the NFL in action? Forget it, Fox, I’m coming with you.”

“I *really* like her,” Jackson amends with a shit-eating grin. “Sure you like him better than me?”

“No,” I answer on a small laugh. “I’m not.”

Jackson laughs and wanders off to gather the rest of the guys. Barrett slips his hand into mine.

“You’re sure,” he tells me, then ducks his head for a kiss.

I am, but I’m not admitting it.

We walk around to the front of the house. I lower my butt onto one of the steps off the concrete slab front porch. Everyone else is either sitting on the porch or standing in the lawn, watching the game that has already begun.

So far one car has been bonked by the football, sending the shrill car alarm into fits. It was Barrett's doing, and he's fast to apologize. Luckily, it's Billy's car. A few seconds later he beeps off the alarm and returns to the game.

I settle in and watch Barrett in motion, noticing whenever he rolls his shoulder. The injury that stole his career is bothering him. Bum shoulder or no, he moves like he was meant to cradle a football. The pigskin in the crook of his elbow is at home there. Whenever someone comes after him, he twists, spins, and runs out of harm's way and right into the end zone.

I can't watch an actual football game for long—the announcers and crowd fade into white noise after a few minutes—but I could watch Barrett do this all day. It's like watching a talented dancer move. He's truly gifted.

I feel a ping of sadness that he's no longer able to play professionally. I couldn't imagine if something happened and I could no longer write. It'd be a cruel joke, like the way Beethoven lost his hearing.

“Shot?” A hand with bubblegum-pink fingernails holding a shot glass hovers in front of my face. I turn to find Stacie smiling down at me. She sits next to me onto the step.

“Sure, why not?” I take the tiny plastic cup filled with dark liquid. “What is it?”

It smells awful.

“Best not to ask. Jackson mixed them up.” She taps her shot glass against mine and we down the liquid. I manage to swallow it but can't help wheezing and coughing after.

“That's terrible,” I croak.

“It really is.” To Stacie’s credit, she didn’t wheeze *or* cough. “We’ll have to do another one.” She bumps my shoulder with hers and I give her a synthetic smile. “I wasn’t hitting on your man.”

“I didn’t think...” I trail off rather than lie.

“It’s okay. It’s hard to be the new girl. We’ve all known each other since junior high.” She points at one of the guys in the street. “Except for Mike. Jackson works with him.”

“What does Jackson do?”

“Construction. He’s good with his hands.” Stacie reaches behind her for her beer and takes a drink. “You and Barrett. Has it been long?”

“Not long.” I drink my own beer, mostly to loosen the film sticking to my tongue from the shot.

“What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a journalist.”

“Sexy. I’m a nurse. I can’t believe I have a Friday off. I think Jackson invites me because someone always gets hurt at his parties. I’ve put broken noses back into place. I’ve dressed wounds. A few years ago, Billy went out for a pass and ran into Mrs. Mart’s cast-iron planter. He damn near tore his ear off. That was messy.”

“Oh my gosh.”

“You’re not from Little Town, are you?” she asks, slang for the neighborhood we’re in.

“Bexley.”

“I could’ve guessed. Your outfit is definitely not from Target.” She touches my arm. “I did not mean that as an insult

by the way. You look like you come from money. I didn't mean you don't work hard for what you have." She winces. "I didn't mean *that* as an insult, either. Ignore me."

Dammit. Now I like her.

"It's okay. I know what you meant." I think back on Barrett telling me about his trailer-park childhood. Little Town is a far cry from a trailer park, but it's equally a far cry from the country-club area where I grew up.

"I feel like a snob sitting here by myself," I confess.

"I saw you sitting alone, but I wasn't sure if you wanted to be alone." She waggles her empty shot glass. "This was an excuse to approach you. It's hard to mingle with a bunch of people you don't know."

"Thank you." I'm struck by how kind it was of her to think of me.

A shout precedes Barrett lifting another guy onto his shoulder. A third guy musses Barrett's hair in celebration.

"Looks like your guy won," Stacie tells me. "Be prepared. All that testosterone has to go somewhere. He's going to want some tonight." At my stunned reaction, she blurts, "I never had sex with Barrett by the way. I was talking about Bo. He was a big guy. Insatiable appetite for sex."

She continues, talking about a college game during which she and Bo sneaked off to have sex in the woods. I listen, entertained, but mostly relieved. It's good to know that Stacie never had Barrett in her bed.

But it's better knowing I'll have him in mine tonight.

CHAPTER 23

BARRETT

By the time we break up street ball in favor of water and food, I find Catarina sitting on the porch swing next to Stacie, several empty plastic shot glasses scattered at her feet. They're looking chummy and are both snort-laughing.

"Hey, Fox," Catarina says, her smile loose and wonky. "Have you had one of Jackson's shots?"

She had trouble with the transition from one *s* to the next, hinting that she's had *several* of Jackson's shots.

"I have indeed. Enough to know that one is too many." I peg Stacie with a meaningful look. "How many has she had?"

Stacie gives me a sloppy shrug. "Four or five?"

Ah, hell.

"Okay, Kitty Cat. Let's get you out of here." I bend and take her hands. "Do you feel sick yet?"

"Not at all!" She stands, wobbles, and I lock an arm around her waist to support her.

“You mean not yet.” I hate to break it to her, but she’s not going to feel this good in an hour.

Jackson climbs his porch steps, takes one look at Catarina, and says, “Uh-oh.”

“I’m told she’s had four or five of your shots.”

My buddy doesn’t laugh. He cringes. Then he bends to meet Catarina’s eyes. “I’m sorry, gorgeous. That’s a lot of Burke-bombers for any woman.” To me, he says, “I have a spare bedroom that’s free if you want to get her into bed. I mean to sleep.”

Catarina’s hands are rubbing my torso, her nose nuzzling my neck.

“I think I’ll take her home before something awful happens,” I tell him.

“Like puking in my rosebushes? Or on my shoes? Both have happened before.” He shrugs, not the least bit alarmed at the possibility. “She’d have nothing to feel embarrassed about.”

“Yeah, but she would.” I know her well.

“She’s from Bexley,” Stacie pipes up. “She’s classy.”

She *is* classy. And a hell of a lot different than my friends from Little Town. “Thank you for keeping her company, Stace, though you could’ve left out the shots.”

“She’s looking forward to post-game sex,” Stacie says to me. “I told her how you boys are.”

“Let’s take you inside. I have a slice of pizza with your name on it.” Jackson sends me a meaningful look as he helps Stacie off the swing.

“I like her,” Catarina tells me as we half-stumble our way across the yard. I’m steady. She’s not.

I wave at the rest of the guys as they pass by. Joel takes one look at my girl and concludes, “Burke-bombers.”

“Stacie’s good people,” I tell Catarina.

“*You’re* good people. I want post-game sex.”

I laugh, a sad sound because *sweet mercy*, I want post-game sex with her. The idea of her this relaxed while naked is a tantalizing thought I’ll be sure to store in the spank bank. But...

“I don’t think tonight’s going to be the night, honey.”

“Why not?” she asks in a petulant whine as I haul her a block to my car.

“I don’t want you to hate me in the morning.”

“I won’t. I can’t hate you. I thought I did but now I really like you. Really, *really*. Even though I don’t fit in with your friends and even though I’m rich and even though I’m a snob.”

“You’re not a snob,” I tell her with a smile. She’s fucking cute. “Snobs don’t know they’re snobs, so the fact that you pointed that out means it’s impossible.”

I unlock the car and help her sit but as I’m buckling her in, she grabs my neck and forces my attention on her. “I’m glad we’re dating, Fox. I was afraid we’d have sex and then you’d lose interest.”

It’s so honest, I’m dumbfounded for a breath or two.

“I was tired of resisting you for all the right reasons.” She drags a finger across my lower lip. “Now I want to glom you for all the wrong ones.”

“Well, Kitty Cat, I’m not sure what ‘glom’ means, but I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It’s a compliment.” She had trouble enunciating that word, too, and it was adorable. She taps her own lips. “Kiss.”

I deliver a soft peck before shutting her into the car and climbing behind the wheel. As I pass by Burke’s house, I honk and wave at the people littering the porch before driving my date back to her apartment.

At one time in my life I wasn’t a catch. I wasn’t anywhere near being looked at twice by a polished woman like Catarina. She’s not a carnival prize to be won, and I don’t see her that way, but I recognize that winning the attention of a woman who dated an uptight toad named “Northrop” is no small victory.

As we say in Little Town, it’s a big, honking deal.

Once I hit the highway, Catarina is out. *Out* out. Like, I couldn’t tempt her with greasy hashbrowns and cheese eggs from Waffle House *out*. I make a swift decision and exit the highway toward my apartment instead. I’m not dumping her off at home. I have hangover remedies at my house. Strong, black coffee, breakfast accoutrements, and Advil.

At my building, I park and step out, waving at the security guy at the desk. He comes jogging outside, ready to assist.

“Andre. Can you park this for me?”

“Sure thing, Mr. Fox.”

He’s cool. I like Andre. I twist the car key off my keychain and hand it over.

“Thanks. Drop the key through my mail slot when you’re done.” I gesture to my passenger seat and the pretty brunette

slumped there. “I’m going to have my hands full.”

“No problem.”

I lift my date into my arms. She stirs enough to bury her face in my neck and mutter, “Dizzy.”

“If you feel sick tell me,” I say.

She responds with a snore.

In the elevator, I punch in the passcode to my floor and say a prayer that the woman in my arms isn’t motion sick. We reach my penthouse floor incident-free, thank goodness.

She’s deadweight, and I’m in shape, so it’s not an insult to her that I have trouble juggling her in my arms while sliding a key into the lock. The second I succeed in letting us into my apartment, she wakes up with a jolt.

“Oh God.”

Oh shit.

“Hang on, honey.” I rush her to the bathroom and deposit her onto the floor in time for her to make an incredible retching sound and puke into the toilet. A pitiful groan echoes in the toilet bowl. I gather her hair in one hand and rub her back as she does it again.

Another pathetic whimper precedes a few dry heaves, but I’m just glad that’s over for her.

After she flushes, she reaches for the toilet paper. I turn away to give her privacy as she blows her nose. A muffled groan follows. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m sorry I left you at the mercy of Jackson’s Burke-bombers.”

“Ugh. Don’t say it.” She grabs another toilet paper wad and dabs the mascara from under her eyes. Then she looks around, acquainting herself with her surroundings. “Bet you’ve held a girl’s hair a time or ten.”

“Mostly my mom’s,” I admit sadly.

I help her stand and then pull open a drawer where I keep spare, unopened toothbrushes. “Towels in the cabinet if you want to grab a shower. Or if you feel like falling into bed, that’s fine, too. I’ll get you settled. Just yell.”

She’s standing there in her cute shorts, her hair ruffled, lipstick gone, complexion a little green. All I can think about is how beautiful she is. Even now. Even in pieces.

“Thanks, Fox.”

“You’re welcome, Kitty Cat.” I pull the door to, but before I shut it, I warn her, “I’m going to check on you every five minutes to make sure you don’t pass out in here.”

“Believe it or not, I’m feeling much better.”

“I believe it. I’ve been Burke-bombed before.”



CATARINA

Parts of last night come to me in strobe-light fashion. Some of it blessedly black. Like: How did I end up wearing Barrett’s T-shirt? Did I have help washing my hair? Other parts I remember way, *way* too vividly. Stacie and the porch swing. Shots. Puking while Barrett held my hair.

Groan.

Why do I have to remember that part?

I swallow the two Advil with a swig from the water bottle on Barrett's nightstand. I do a double-take at the clock. Eight A.M.? I couldn't even sleep in for a hangover? I accept my fate and climb out of bed. I dress in last night's shorts and T-shirt, grateful that I didn't puke on my clothes.

Shuffling from the bedroom to the living room, I spot Barrett in the kitchen. He's leaning over his laptop, squinting, his lips moving as he reads the words. Wonder how long he's been up? I take in the scene since he hasn't noticed me yet. White countertop and cabinets, dark gray backsplash and stainless steel appliances—and him sitting in the center of that elegance, bare feet, cargo shorts, T-shirt.

He's a sexy specimen, and despite everything we've done together I feel a wave of shame for him having to deal with me drunk.

"Tell me you're not detailing last night in there," I say, only half kidding. He turns, his eyes hazy like he was in deep concentration.

"Morning, Kitty Cat." His lopsided smile causes my heart to flutter.

"I'm going to slip into the restroom. Brush my teeth one more time." I point at the adjacent doorway. "Then I'll be back for coffee if you've got it?"

"I've got it," he says.

I make quick work of my morning routine and then return to the kitchen to find Barrett pulling a full mug of coffee from beneath a one-cup coffee maker. He hands it over as I sit on a

high-top stool. His laptop is open, a Word doc cued up. Before I can start reading, the lid snaps shut.

“Cream.” He sets the half-and-half container next to my mug.

“You still won’t let me read it?”

“Nope.” He hands me a spoon. “Breakfast? I make a mean omelet.”

At the mention of eggs, my stomach does a somersault. I rest my forehead on my hand and blow out a tortured breath. He rubs circles on my back, reminding me of my clinging to the toilet like a barnacle.

“I’m so sorry about last night,” I say as he takes the stool next to mine.

“Me, too. Missed the chance to get laid.”

“Don’t joke.”

“Don’t be sorry.” He reaches for the seat of my stool and pulls me forward until our knees touch. “You forgot to kiss me good morning.”

He doesn’t give me time to argue—not that I would have—and lights me up with a slow kiss.

“Mmm,” he hums. “You taste good. Now I want coffee.” He takes a drink from my mug. “Ick. Tastes girly.”

“Why do you have half-and-half if you drink black coffee?”

“To make the omelet I told you about.”

“Maybe I’ll eat tomorrow morning.”

He chuckles at my plight. “You’ll be okay. Just a touch of cocktail flu.”

“Well, I have to attend a *cocktail party* for the *Dispatch* tonight, so my ‘flu’ had better not last past the afternoon.”

“*We*,” he corrects.

“Right. We. Wear a tux if ya got one.”

“I got one.” He winks, purposely teasing me about my bad grammar. My gaze lingers on the contoured shape of his lips, but I sip my coffee instead of leaning in to taste his mouth again.

“Did you... Where did you sleep?”

“Next to you.” He shrugs. “You asked me to.”

Oh, right. That I do remember, though it took him mentioning it to call it up. I take another sip of coffee. “I should go. I have a lot to do today.”

“Nope.”

“Um. Yes. I do.” I rub my forehead and try to remember what’s on my list of to-dos, but my brain feels like a smashed watermelon. “I think.”

“You’re going to spend the day with me, and then I’ll bring my stuff to your place, and we’ll change for the party. Eventually I’ll get some food into you, even if it’s dry toast.”

“I can’t spend the day here.”

“Why not?”

“I’m in yesterday’s clothes.”

“That is a problem. I prefer you in no clothes.”

“Ha-ha.”

“Stop worrying, Catarina.” Whenever he uses my actual name, I soften. I’m not sure why. Everyone calls me Catarina,

yet when I hear my name in Fox's rough, gruff tone, I absolutely melt. "I'll be in charge of taking care of you for the next twenty-four hours."

"Twenty-four hours!"

"You said I could make you breakfast tomorrow morning. I'm holding you to it."

CHAPTER 24

CATARINA

Two cups of coffee and a slice of toast with raspberry jam has me feeling more human than when I first awoke in Barrett's bed. More memories from last night surface throughout the day.

Me rolling over and colliding with a firm leg. Rough fingertips gliding down my arm. The soft reassurance of, "You're okay, Kitty Cat."

I'm coming to the bizarre conclusion that Barrett Fox is a lot better boyfriend material than North. I can tell you this: North *never* would've carried me into his apartment and held my hair while I retched.

I'm not a big drinker, but once North and I attended a fundraiser where I drank too much champagne. On the drive home, he sternly reminded me that I wasn't a teenager and that I was a lady and that if I had to throw up, he'd pull over so I could puke on the road rather than ruin the interior of his new car.

Gosh. I'd forgotten about that.

“Why the face?” Barrett asks. He’s on the sofa next to me, elbows on his knees, eyes on mine instead of his computer screen. I’ve been flipping idly through my phone. Okay, *not* idly. I was reading comments on our article from last weekend.

Rather than share my conclusion about Northrop (what could Barrett tell me that I didn’t already know?), I scroll through the comments and start reading out loud. After I read five of them, I notice Barrett is making the same sour face I was earlier.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. “You don’t find several comments from women saying they’d like to do...well, lots of interesting things to you...flattering?”

“No.”

“I guess that makes sense. If these comments were from men saying they wanted me, I wouldn’t be flattered, either.”

“Haven’t you heard not to read the comments?”

“I read *all* the comments.”

“Poor form.” He shakes his head. “Don’t you want to keep your edge?”

“I like being informed.”

“Informed is one thing. Inundated is another.” He closes his laptop lid and then leans over to take my phone away. Now that he’s abandoned his article, he’s prowling to me on his fists, knees on the couch, wicked intent flashing in his blue eyes.

“I have another hangover remedy you can try.”

“What’s that?” I’m grinning already.

“Me.” He kisses me, and I close my eyes and kiss him back.

“You’re right,” I say when he comes up for air. “This seems to be helping.”

“I know my stuff,” he opens the button on my shorts. “Shimmy out of those and underwear, too. Want to do it on the couch or the bed?”

“Be still my heart.” I pat my chest for effect. “So romantic.”

“Fine. Would you rather *make love* on the veranda or in the servants’ quarters?”

The first notes of my laughter are lost when he kisses me again. He helps divest me of my burdensome clothing and I, in turn, help him as well. Soon it’s hot skin and wet mouths, and naked bodies.

We split the difference of his request. We “did it” on the couch, but it felt a lot like making love to me.



“CHAMPAGNE?” A waiter approaches with a tray and Barrett politely shakes his head. I take one of the flutes filled with bubbly and enjoy a sparkly, delicious sip.

“You must be feeling better.” Barrett accepts a beer in a pilsner glass from a different member of the waitstaff.

“Champagne wasn’t what downed me last night.”

He leans close, hand at my waist and lips to my ear. “Champagne wasn’t what downed you a few hours ago, either.

Seems your weakness for shots is equal to your weakness for me.”

I crane an eyebrow. “Wrong. I’ll never drink a shot like that one again, but I plan on having *you* several more times.”

The heat in his eyes mingles with mine. I wonder if anyone else has picked up on the serious eye-banging we’re doing in the center of the governor’s grand hall.

“Darlings,” Mia, in rare form tonight, glides over in a silver and black sequined sheath. Her hair is smooth and straight rather than its usual bird’s nest.

“You look great.”

“Don’t sound so surprised, Catarina. I’m not you with your nipped waist and perfect calves. Not to mention the pink apples of your cheeks.” She downs the rest of her champagne and burps under her breath, gesturing to Barrett with her empty flute glass. “If I looked as good as you, I’d fake-date him, too.”

She smiles at her own joke, then assesses us. I have the irrational worry that she can tell that Fox and I had sex today.

“When you dated North you were hyper-focused on work,” Mia continues. “Very serious about your job. Now you’re meeting deadlines but with half the intensity. I’m not sure if I like it. Guess it’ll depend on the number of advertising dollars your articles earn.”

I’m not sure how to take her remarks. Was that a threat or an honest assessment?

“Tomorrow morning will be a big determining factor. If your column does well, I’ll need to post the others closer together.”

“No problem,” I agree, belatedly realizing I’ve spoken for both Fox and myself. “As long as it’s okay with Barrett. I don’t want to rush him.”

“It’s not a problem.” He jerks his chin, his expression made of stone.

“None at all?” Mia asks with a head tilt. The challenge in her eyes doesn’t intimidate him in the least.

“No, ma’am.” He pulls me close, a possessive arm around my waist.

“Very well. I’m off to hobnob with the governor. Have you said hello yet?”

“Not yet,” I answer. “But we’ll make our way over there.”

“See that you do.” She turns on her square-heeled shoes and clicks off, leaving us alone in a sea of black and white formal wear.

“Yikes.” I let out a breath. “Either my job’s on the line, or she’s feisty tonight.”

“Your job’s not on the line, Kitty Cat. I won’t allow it.” He glances around the room while that promise warms my belly. Being the modern, capable woman I am, I can take care of myself, but damn, I appreciate his support. “Dance with me?”

“Dance? *Here?*”

The four-piece band is playing softly in the background, but no one dances. Everyone’s too busy eating or drinking or bitching about work.

“Unless you want me to sing. I know a Sinatra tune.”

At the mention of him singing again, I let out a soft hum. He notices, and a low laugh rumbles through him.

“To think that you used to hate me.” He leads me to the center of the room and places his hands on my waist. My fingers naturally link at the back of his neck, my arms draping on his shoulders as I look up at him.

“I didn’t hate you. I didn’t understand you.”

“So I’m just misunderstood?”

The same man who stood on a field during a football game and disrespected a female referee is the same guy who apologized to her in private. Repeatedly. That guy is the same guy who foots his brother’s bills, cares for his nephew, loves kids, and held my hair after I drank too many Burke-bombers.

“Yes,” I tell him. “If the world knew what you were struggling with, they’d have a hard time labeling you as a bad boy. They might start referring to you as Saint Barrett Fox.”

Another laugh—deep and rough—vibrates up my arms and curls around my heart.

“You’re kind,” I tell him.

“*Kind.*” He says it like it’s an insult. “I’d rather be sexy.”

“Kindness is very sexy. You don’t find that quality in every man. Hell, I haven’t found it *any* man.” I think of North. He wasn’t kind. He was...what’s the word? *Tolerant*. Tolerance isn’t the same as kindness. Kindness is an action. It’s for the brave souls of the world. It’s for the Barrett Foxes of the world.

“I won’t let you down on the column,” he says.

“You’re proving my point. I’m complimenting you and you’re worried about my job.”

“I’m not worried. I’m setting your mind at ease.”

“That’s very considerate.”

“Now I’m considerate *and* kind?” He winces. “Not the best recipe for getting the girl into bed.”

“It is for this girl.”

“You’re different from any woman I’ve known, Catarina.” He turns with me on our made-up dance floor. “I never imagined I’d have a chance with a woman like you, yet here you are. Giving me one.”

“Knowing you has changed me. *Is* changing me.”

“You’d have dumped North without me around,” he says.

“Yes. I would’ve.”

I was putting the pieces together on why North and I didn’t fit when I met Fox. It’s clear now that North and I were on the outs. I’d begun to notice the neglect. A cobweb or two could go unnoticed. Dust settling lightly on the surface could be overlooked. But by the time one broken window turns into two, you’d have to be blind not to question if there’s a problem.

I am not blind.

“Who other than you would’ve offered to have sex with me out of pity in Marge’s former office?”

“That was not pity, honey. That was me using my strengths. I thought I could bad-boy you into sex. It’s sort of what I’m known for.”

“Now bad-boy is a verb?”

“Duh.”

“Let’s not talk about it.” I squeeze my eyes shut as we sway to the music.

“You do *not* like to think about the women I’ve been with, do you?”

“Don’t be smug.”

“You’re jealous and it’s cute.”

“I’m not cute.”

“You’re fucking adorable. I promise you, mostly it was Beth and me. I didn’t break up with her and immediately bang every chick in a ten-mile radius. Most of the women who brag about sleeping with me haven’t.”

I make another face.

“Celebrity,” he says in explanation. “Lies about my life are not uncommon.”

“And yet you give me the real you at every turn.”

It might be the closest we’ve come to laying out what is happening between us. He can be himself around me. I know his secrets. The things no one else bothers to scratch the surface to find.

“If Beth knew all these amazing things about you, why aren’t you still together?”

“Eh. Lot of water under that bridge.” He shakes his head. “Same way it didn’t happen for North and you, Beth and I had a hard time making it work. We liked each other, maybe even loved each other, but not in an enduring way.”

Hearing that he loved her isn’t unexpected. What kind of stunted male would he be if he didn’t love the girl he returned to over and over for years? I loved North, too. Or I thought I did.

“I guess I fell out of love with North as quickly as I fell in. It sort of...evaporated before either of us realized it.” I frown. “That’s not true. He realized it before I did. *Way* before I did.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. You’re a finisher. You finish things.”

“And you don’t?”

“Not relationships. Not careers. They end up on pause—a still screen that never changes.” He blinks a few times like he’s having an epiphany. Once his gaze is on mine, it stays there. “Until you. With you, I’m in a state of becoming.”

The shock of that simple statement radiates across my chest. *I’m in a state of becoming*. Is there any greater compliment than knowing someone is growing and *becoming* someone they wouldn’t be without you?

“I don’t know what to say,” I finally mutter.

He pulls me closer and kisses my temple. “Don’t say anything. Just keep dancing with me.”

CHAPTER 25

BARRETT

By the end of the evening, I want Catarina so bad my chubby has a chubby. We met the governor. We danced. We ate. We drank. She had more champagne. I stuck with beer. She's chatty and happy and crazy beautiful.

One glass had her smiling, the second had her grinning, and the third has put a sparkle in her eye that shines whenever I slide into her frame of vision.

She's irresistible.

I've never felt such an overwhelming pull of attraction for another person before—not even Beth. In part it's physical, but there's more to it than that. Catarina is intelligent, strong, and she knows who she is. Whenever she looks at me, she *sees* me, you know? She sees the man beneath the man, but she also sees the man I could become.

Trust me when I say not many people have examined me that closely.

The catch in my chest should be a warning to back off. Instead of backing off I give it the finger.

“Now’s the perfect time to leave,” she tells me as we step out of the way of an oncoming dessert cart. “Everyone will be preoccupied with sweets and won’t notice if we’re not here. Unless you want to stay?”

“Are you kidding?” I take in her lithe body draped in a formfitting black dress that only reaches the middle of her thighs. “I need to examine what’s under that dress.”

Her grin is wily, which is typical. Her shrewd intelligence might be the most irresistible part of her.

She takes my hand and pulls, and I follow her across the ballroom. When we arrive at the coat closet, she peeks down the hall in both directions, then opens the door and steps inside. A switch is flipped, dimly illuminating the space.

Remember that chubby I mentioned? Now it’s more like a flagpole. I don’t hesitate stuffing myself into the coat closet next to her and shutting the door behind us. It’s a walk-in, so it’s not tiny, but it’s not exactly big once we’re in there. It’s mostly empty save for purses left behind by a few trusting souls, and a shawl someone must’ve changed their mind about. If that someone returns to retrieve it, they’re going to get an eyeful.

A row of neglected heavy furs and trench coats line the other wall. They must belong to the governor and his wife—it’s way too warm for guests to have worn those tonight. I reroute my date, hiding her behind them. If anyone comes in, they’ll see me, but I don’t give a shit if they find me clothed, or with my pants dropped past my bare ass.

She slides her long hair over her shoulder and turns around. “Zipper, please.”

“You’re sure about this?” I don’t wait for an answer before I slide the zipper south, revealing a red—yes, *red*—bra strap. That flagpole is more like the Empire State Building. If we’re interrupted, I’m going to have to limp out of here.

“You are so beautiful,” I murmur, smoothing my hands around her ribs. I nestle my erection against her ass.

“Want to see the rest?” She tips her head back and smiles.

I choke on a laugh, which she correctly takes as a yes. Then her dress is off her shoulders and sliding down her waist. Voices outside the door sound and she turns around, dress at her ankles, breasts bursting from red lace, her matching thong’s skinny straps crisscrossing her hips.

“Who is that?” she whispers.

“I don’t care if it’s Mia, the governor, or God Himself.” I nestle her against the nearest fur coat, my hands on her hips. “I hope you’re not allergic to mink.”

“It’s faux fur,” she says as the voices move away. “The governor’s wife is an animal lover.”

“Even better. No dander.”

I kiss her. Hard. Like I’ve been wanting to all evening while we danced and ate and drank and shook the hands of people whose names I’ve already forgotten. Every taut muscle in my body coils as her sweet tongue strokes mine. She has the most incredible mouth—she takes the lead, scraping my bottom lip with her teeth as I groan and grind against her. Her hands grip my belt, undoing it and opening my tuxedo pants. My dick pushes against the confines of my briefs, begging to be touched.

“What have we here?” she coos.

“Present for you.” My breathing is hectic, my brain on vacation.

“I love presents.” She strokes me while kissing my neck. I flatten one hand against the wall, my hips rocking in time with her hand. “I want you, Fox. Here. Now. Tell me you planned ahead.”

“Shit.” I didn’t plan ahead. So far our sexual encounters have happened at my place or hers. I mutter another curse, frustrated by my lack of foresight.

“Lucky you.” She reaches into that red lace bra and comes out with a condom.

“I could kiss you.” I snatch the foil packet from her hand and do just that—lighting her up with kisses while my free hand roams over one of her breasts. I tweak her nipple as she sags against the wall. I push her legs open and palm the gusset of her thong. She thrusts against my fingers.

Voices come close, then closer, and this time don’t recede. When the closet door opens, I press Catarina’s back against the wall, hiding her behind the coats. Her eyes widen and she bites down on her bottom lip. I wink to let her know I’ve got this.

“Barrett, is that you?” It’s Nanci from the office. Her date pokes his head in behind her. “What are you—”

“Get your shit and go. We’re busy.”

After sending me an affronted look, Nanci opens her mouth like she might say more.

“Close the door,” I tell her.

She does and I return my attention to Catarina, half expecting her to reprimand me for being rude. Instead, she bursts into laughter.

“You like that?”

“I *love* it. She’s been wanting to put her hands on you since you started at the paper.”

“Whose hands are on me now, Kitty Cat?”

She peeks through a fan of thick, black lashes, her expression both demure and shameless, a tantalizing combination. She runs her hands over my chest. “Mine.”

I roll on the condom, my hands shaking since she’s kissing my neck again. I’m also starting to sweat. Faux fur is fucking hot and it’s summer and we’re in a closet.

No matter. I’m not stopping.

“How do you want it?” she asks. Sweetly.

This woman.

“I want it slow and sweaty. How about that?”

“Ohh, just what I was going to suggest.”

I pull aside one cup of her bra and suckle a nipple, earning a sharp yip of surprise followed by a sigh of sheer bliss. I move to the other while I work on rolling the thong from her legs. Then I’m bending at the knees, lifting her halfway up the wall, and hanging on tight.

“You like this position,” she observes with another grin.

“So do you.”

“Yeah, other than that time in your kitchen, this position is a new one.” She surveys our surroundings. “So’s the coat closet.”

“Your idea.” I tilt my hips and nudge her entrance. She crosses her ankles at my back and digs her high-heeled shoes

into my ass. I slide in slowly, blowing out a harsh exhale once I'm rooted to the hilt.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, mussing it as I set us into motion. The heat in here is killer. I'm doing my best to hold onto her, but her body is glistening, and my shirt is damp with sweat.

"It's fucking hot in here." I tear the fur off the hanger and chuck it aside. Already, I can breathe better. That thing was insulated. "Now where was I?"

I slide deep again, and she tosses her head back and lets out a moan.

"There," she says. "*Theretherethere.*"

Pleased to have found what I was searching for so quickly, I home in on that magical spot, and pull her down onto my cock. She flattens one hand against the back wall of the closet while her other hand wraps around the bar overhead.

"Taking you there, honey," I huff between pumps. "Do it."

Her face screws into satisfied pleats as I screw her. Then her channel grips me and I tumble over with her. A bolt of pleasure grips my balls and electrocutes my spine.

Her arms loop my neck. I shut my eyes, letting my other senses take over.

I feel her fingers stroking my hair, hear her breathing into my ear, and luxuriate in the now familiar feeling of being nestled inside her.



CATARINA

After a pair of spectacular orgasms, Barrett and I need a minute. My nipples are still peeking out of my twisted bra, my ass pressed against the wall. My thong is curled into a lace ball on the floor next to my feet, which are still encased in a pair of sky-high heels.

Barrett's hand is flat on the wall by my head, his forehead resting on my shoulder, his breathing ragged.

No one came in after Nanci left. No more voices are echoing down the foyer. I smile as I stroke his hair. This was...crazy. And fun. Like everything else I've done with him.

Finally, he raises his head and I have my first good look at him since our tryst in the governor's coat closet.

His eyes are hooded, thick lashes hiding the blue. His hair is a mess thanks to my tugging fingers. His mouth is a flat line, his forehead creased.

He runs his fingers along my jaw, stroking his thumb over my bottom lip. His open eyes follow the motion from my lips to my chin, down to my chest and to my breasts. Rather than tweak my exposed nipples, he adjusts my bra cups so that I'm covered. Then he buttons up, tucks in his shirt, and drops to his knees in front of me.

He unknots my thong and I use his shoulders to hold myself steady while I step into it. Then he places a soft kiss next to my belly button before bending to retrieve my dress. Carefully, quietly, he finishes dressing me.

My clothes straightened and in place, I study him and try to figure out what's causing his deep contemplation. Or...

regret? I'm not sure which.

“Fox?”

He blinks out of his stupor and meets my gaze. I'm not sure what to ask. If he's okay? If he's ready to leave? If he's worried about walking out of here looking thoroughly sexed up?

“Ready to go?” he asks, saving me the trouble of deciding.

“Um. Yeah, sure.”

He tips my chin and kisses me as chastely as a first time. When he whispers “Catarina” against my lips, it sounds like a prayer. “You wreck me.”

The words are achingly sincere. His eyes sink shut before he drops his forehead on mine.

I palm his neck and hold him there. We stand like that for a few minutes, not saying a word. Me gently rubbing his neck, him breathing me in, his lips closing over my pulse with a gentle kiss every so often.

When we finally exit the closet, we do so with our heads held high. No one is in the governor's foyer waiting to bust us. Our steps echo on the marble floor leading to the front door. Only then do we encounter a woman in a prim black dress who opens the door and thanks us for our attendance.

After retrieving Barrett's car from the valet, we climb in—him at the wheel. The air conditioning sends chills over my skin when I lift my hair off my damp neck.

“That was a workout,” I say to break the silence.

I notice a half smile, but his attention stays to the road. Once we arrive at my apartment and step out of the car, I take his hand.

“Wrecked,” I repeat—belatedly, but I can’t get the word out of my head. “Is that good or bad?”

“I guess that depends,” he says cryptically as he opens the building’s door for me.

“On?” I ask in the elevator.

His back against the wall of the elevator, he tugs me to him and kisses my nose. “On you.”

I chew on my lip for the remainder of the elevator ride, curiosity—and frustration at this point—getting the best of me.

At my apartment door, I thrust my arms into the air. “I don’t know what any of that means!”

He chuckles as he takes the keys from my hand and lets us in. Then he tosses my keyring onto the kitchen table before undoing his cufflinks.

“Have any men’s T-shirts lying around, or are you opposed to me sitting around your place shirtless?” He starts unbuttoning.

“Are you staying?” I ask.

“Do you want me to?”

“Do *you* want to?” My tone inches into hysterical and his smile turns lazy. Shoulders slumped, I traipse to where he’s standing and pout up at him. “Please tell me what’s going on in your head. Did I do something wrong? Did we cross a line?”

“We crossed a couple of lines, Kitty Cat.” He tucks my hair behind my ear and drops a kiss onto my lips. “You’re becoming...irreplaceable.”

My heart *ka-thuds*, skips a beat, and jerks to life again.

He unbuttons his starched white shirt and drapes it on the couch, untucking his undershirt and propping his hands on his hips. He looks exhausted.

“That sounded like a compliment, but you look like you’re about to break up with me.” Which sends my heart into an altogether different rhythm.

His eyes widen. “Are you shitting me? I’m not breaking up with you. I’m hoping like hell you’re going to let me stay around a while longer. Tonight. Tomorrow. Couple of weeks or months following that.”

I rest a hand over his heart. It pounds out the same hectic rhythm as my own. “You’re worried I’ll break up with you? After what happened tonight?”

“Hot sex is often a fast track to the end, Kitty Cat.”

Understanding comes like the morning dawn. “For you, you mean. The in-between girls who wanted you for your body.”

He lifts his eyebrows in confirmation.

“I’m not like those girls.”

“Honey, you’re not like *any* other girl. That’s what I’m telling you. You’re a comet. A rare coin. A new species.”

I wrap my arms around his waist. “Then I guess you’d better start acting like the man who’s earned me.”

His head jerks slightly, his brow crinkling. I’m on the edge of a cliff overlooking jagged rocks and crashing tide. May as well take the dangerous yet exhilarating leap to the bottom.

“I never pictured myself falling for a cocky, former NFL player that I took on as an assignment.” I shrug. “But I am.”

Confusion colors his handsome face. After a false start on the word, he finally manages to repeat. “Falling?”

I make a whistling sound while pointing to the floor. “I haven’t hit the ground yet, but yeah. *Falling.*”

“What if I don’t let you hit the ground?” His hands frame my face.

“That works for me.”

His chest expands and, like that, his confidence floods back. It fills his cheeks with color and his blue eyes with certainty. It’s so odd to see him less than confident. No wonder I was thrown.

“I need a shower,” he announces as he unzips my dress. “So do you.”

“Only if you’re staying the night.”

“And do the walk of shame in my tux in the morning?” He tugs off his undershirt while I take off my dress. “Works for me. I will need a photo for my Instagram feed, or else no one will believe me.”

“A photo of your walk of shame?” I ask with a laugh.

“Bragging rights.” He shucks his pants, socks, and shoes and stands in his briefs in the center of my living room. He looks amazingly fit and sexy—and like he belongs here. Here, in my apartment and here, in my life.

“Okay, but you have to say that you’re leaving the house of the woman who ‘wrecked’ you.”

He lifts me into his arms and carries me into the bathroom. “What if I say the woman who’s ‘falling’ for me instead?”

Wrecked.

Falling.

We're using synonyms for the word that often leads to marriage and a baby carriage. The word that has led to disaster in our very recent histories.

In spite of that, when he kisses me again, I fall a little further.

CHAPTER 26

CATARINA

Monday morning, Barrett and I arrive at the *Dispatch* together having dropped the pretense that we're not dating. After the party Saturday I'm certain it escaped no one's attention that we were stuck to each other like wallpaper to unfinished drywall.

He's carrying both our coffee cups when Mia's office door explodes open, and she rushes out of it. Her smile is Joker insane, her eyes crazed.

"Our readership tripled since yesterday's column posted. *Tripled!*" she exclaims.

I exchange glances with Barrett, who looks less excited than he should. "That's unheard of, Fox."

"You two are sensational," Mia continues babbling. She informs us on our revised due dates (soon) and the additional advertising dollars added to our online revenue (many). She jabbars a while longer, telling us to keep up the good work, and then gives us a round of applause, before disappearing behind her office door.

“That was terrifying.” Barrett hands me my coffee. I laugh at his accurate word choice.

“It’s unprecedented. Your celebrity helped.”

“Your good writing helped.”

“It’s the two of you together,” chirps Nanci. I turn to find hearts in her eyes, her cheeks glowing. She’s hugging a manila folder looking very much like a high schooler standing by her locker. “I love the way this is unfolding. Tell me you’re actually dating? Is *any* of it real?”

Realer than any of us anticipated.

“Guess you’ll have to read and find out,” I answer with an uncomfortable laugh. No one cared who I was dating before this minute. It’s strange.

“Sorry for the closet interruption,” she stage whispers, and then winks as she backs away.

“Wow, who knew that could get weirder?” I mutter.

“Never been part of a celebrity couple, Kitty Cat?” Barrett asks as I sit and unpack my laptop. “Enjoy the novelty.”

“Is that what I am? Taylor Swift to your...whoever she’s dating now?”

“Evidently. We’ll have to come up with one of those combined versions of our names. CatarBarrett. Barrettina.” His expression is uncertain. “I’m not very good at this.”

“FoxyCat,” I say.

“Damn. I like that.”

I point to myself. “Writer.”

“Speaking of, I’d better start writing. Our editor just shaved several days off our deadlines and a few years off my

life in the process.”

“Don’t stress.”

“Triple the readership.” He points at me with his cup of coffee. As he walks away he calls over his shoulder. “Triple!”

He really does have a great ass, I think, snickering under my breath.



BARRETT and I have been dating off-the-record this week.

Mia said it’d optimize the advertising if we capped the columns at our original goal number of five. Number three comes out tomorrow, with number four on Wednesday, and a final, wrap-up column on Sunday.

The time Barrett and I are spending together now is ours. Tonight I’m being introduced to another part of his world, perhaps the biggest part: football.

The Buckeyes are playing a practice game at Woody Hayes Athletic Center rather than the Horseshoe, and since he’s alumni Barrett was invited to watch. As his plus-one, I have an invitation, too. One that didn’t require a press badge.

It feels like our first real date, which is strange to say. Barrett and I have been naked together fairly frequently. But the pressure of the column and a deadline aren’t present for this date. The concession stand was closed, so he brought a box of Cheez-Its, which taste incredible paired with my vending machine bottle of Coca-Cola.

He explains the calls and rules to me when I ask. I’m not sure I’ll ever understand what a sack is, and “horse collar” sounds made up, but whatever.

He's *vibrant* in this setting. He talks a little louder and a lot faster than usual, gesticulating with his hands. I'm not sure if he knows he's doing it, but whenever one of the guys throws the ball, he sits taller in his seat and rolls his bad shoulder. Like his mind is walking his body through the play.

At the end of the game, we toss the empty cracker box and soda bottles and make our way down to the field. He introduces me to a bunch of very large, sweaty guys and a coach I've seen on television a time or two.

After the *great to see yous* and the *nice to meet yous* and a couple of *way to go, Barretts*, we leave the stadium and walk back to his car.

"You come alive in there," I point out as he opens my door for me. He offers a half shrug like he doesn't want to admit I'm right. "You miss it, don't you?"

"Like you would a perfectly creamed Pike Place from Starbucks, Kitty Cat."

I don't sit, instead leaning on the open door between us. "Our column has traction, and you have a lot of positive comments from fans. Is there any chance the network would consider putting you back on the air?"

"Haven't received that invitation yet."

"Have you tried reaching out?"

"Are you going to get in the car?" He leans in, his playful smile closer than before.

"Not until you kiss me."

He does. I grip his shirt and tug him closer.

"Dinner, sweet cheeks. Park that round ass in the seat and we'll head out. I have a surprise for you."

With the promise of a surprise dancing in my head, I obediently buckle in. Soon we're pulling up to a building with a sign that reads: North Street Bar. After Barrett parks at the curb, we walk inside where we're greeted by a friendly bartender who introduces himself and tells us to sit anywhere.

"Can you grab Dax for me?" Barrett asks the guy.

"Sure thing," our trusty bartender answers. He disappears into the back and emerges a moment later, a hulking guy with dark blond hair trailing behind him. Dax is wide, with big arms and a bigger smile.

"Hey brother." Barrett slaps him hard on the back when they hug. Despite Dax's size, he's not much taller than Barrett. He's every bit as good-looking, though. Silver-blue eyes, muscles taking up most of his wide frame. He walks in a lazy slouch that doesn't lessen his strength.

His smile is genuine when he says, "Glad you stopped by. I'm not working today—just checking on a few things."

"Catarina, this is Dax."

Dax aims his friendly smile at me and clasps my hand in his larger, warmer one.

"The wife here?" Barrett asks.

"Yeah, Becca's in the kitchen. She's vigilant about keeping an eye on the place. I'll tell her you guys are here."

"You'll like her," Barrett tells me. It's exciting to meet his friends. I suppress a grin at the idea that he brought me here for that purpose. He takes my hand and pulls me off to the side near the kitchen. The restaurant is fairly busy. Twice we have to step out of the way of hustling servers with trays of food.

“Barrett, who have you brought me?” A tall, cute, short-haired blond woman steps from the kitchen. Her round pregnant belly appeared before she did. She surprises me by wrapping her arms around me in a strong hug.

“Becca, meet Catarina Everhart. Catarina, Becca Vaughn.”

“And you two are...” She wiggles a finger between us.

“Dating,” Barrett finishes.

“I read your column every week, Catarina. I know exactly who you are. I love the charity case you’ve taken on.” She pokes Barrett in the arm. “Shall we sit? Does everyone like chicken quesadillas?”

“Yes,” Barrett and I answer at the same time.

An hour later, after enjoying the most delicious quesadillas I’ve ever tasted, Becca chatters about the restaurant business and being pregnant and how she’s planning on dancing on open mic night after the baby is born.

“Barrett should sing here sometime,” I blurt. His warm blue eyes hit mine.

“I didn’t know you could sing!” Becca exclaims. “Did you know that, Dax?”

“Unfortunately, Princess,” he answers, “I know lots of things about Barrett Fox.”

Princess. That’s adorable. They’re adorable.

“How’d you guys meet?” I ask.

“Dax took a vacation to Tennessee at the resort where I worked,” Becca answers with a reminiscent smile. “We were flooded in together.”

Before I can ask for more details, she turns back to Barrett.
“So? Will you?”

“Will I what?” Barrett lifts his beer glass.

“Sing!” Becca says.

“No. I will not.”

“Please.” She folds her hands.

“Yeah, please?” I mimic Becca, also folding my hands in front of me.

“Help us, they’re in cahoots.” Dax shakes his head.

“Not *now*,” Barrett answers, but he’s smiling as he swipes the condensation off the edge of his glass. “I’ll give you a private show if you want, Kitty Cat. But I’m not up for performing here tonight.”

“Hmph.” Becca crosses her arms. “You owe me.”

“I’ll do it sometime. Just not tonight,” Barrett repeats with finality.

“*Fine*,” she concedes.

“Tell me something about Fox I don’t know yet,” I say.
“Off the record.”

“I *apparently* don’t know him very well.” Becca lifts her glass of sparkling water.

“I can crochet,” Barrett quips.

“No, you can’t,” I challenge.

“No. I can’t.” He grins and winks, a combo that makes me want to fast-forward to the private show he promised me tonight.

“He’s neat,” Becca offers. “Dax said when he lived with him, he’d always fold the sheets he slept on and tuck them into the closet. Every single day.”

“Neat, I’ve seen. I’ve been to his place a few times.”

She grips my arm. “Tell me this will be detailed in the upcoming columns.”

“Parts of it,” I say, coy. “But probably not the parts you want to read about. Dax, what about you? There’s nothing embarrassing you can divulge about your friend, here?”

Dax sweeps his gaze to Barrett and then back to me. When I think he’s going to spill the tea about a rowdy college party, he surprises me by saying, “Barrett’s a good boyfriend.”

Our four-top table falls silent. I shift my attention to Barrett. “Is that true, Fox?”

“I don’t know, Kitty Cat. Is it?”

“I don’t know. Is that what we’re doing? The boyfriend/girlfriend thing?”

He downs a gulp of beer, licks those tempting lips, and then gives me a curt nod. “Okay.”

“*Okay?*” Becca repeats. “You guys are too much! I’m witnessing history. This is amazing.”

“Speaking of history,” Barrett interrupts, “Catarina and I have homework to do.”

“It was great to meet you both,” I tell the Vaughns as Barrett helps me stand. He’s in a hurry all of a sudden.

“Details in your column, please,” Becca says sweetly.

“Don’t be a stranger.” Dax stands and shakes Barrett’s hand, then eyes me. “Either of you.”

“We’ll be back but we’ve had a long day. Gotta get this girl home to bed.”

“Aww,” Becca coos, smoothing a hand over her round stomach.

“I expect a baby announcement,” Barrett tells her. “Text. Video. Something.”

“You got it, Uncle Barrett,” she says.

“Ready for me to put you to bed?” Barrett mutters into my ear as he guides me to the door. Every part of me below the belt zings to life.

Am I *ever*.

CHAPTER 27

CATARINA

“You promised!” I remind Barrett as he peppers kisses down my neck. We’re on his sofa, where he maneuvered me before promptly sealing his lips over mine.

“I lied.”

I reroute his head, my hands on either side of his face. I tighten my hold, squishing his cheeks and put a smacking kiss on the center of his lips. “It’d mean so much to me.”

He expels a put-upon sigh, pulls my hands away, and kisses each of my palms. “Fine. But I’m doing it with a boner.” He gestures to his pants. “And this thing isn’t going away anytime soon.”

“I vow to take good care of it after.” I mime crossing my heart.

His eyes sear right through my clothes. “Now it’s not going away *ever*.”

We left Dax and Becca and came back to Barrett’s place like we’d planned. He’s been staying with me lately, so I decided to give him a break and let him be in his own space

tonight. Neither of us are interested in sleeping alone any longer. I did on Tuesday, and it sucked.

He clears his throat. I grab a pillow from the couch and curl up with it. Then he opens his mouth and sings a Michael Bublé song as I melt into a puddle of longing.

He sings to me without theatrics, sweetly brushing my hair from my eyes during the chorus. When he finishes serenading me with that golden voice, he concludes with, “That’s it.”

“You’re exceptionally talented. Why the football aspirations? You should start a band.”

“Had a band,” he says. “We weren’t that good.”

“You and Burke sounded good to me.”

“No offense, but you’re a journalist, not a record producer. That’s like me saying I decided to be a writer because I wrote a few columns.”

“You could.”

“No, thanks. Some struggles are fun—like training and practicing nonstop for a big game. Other struggles are not. Like willing your brain to read words the right way instead of shaking up the letters like a game of Boggle.”

“I love Boggle.”

“You would.” He ends our banter by kissing me. My eyes sink shut and aren’t quick about reopening. “You’re tired.”

“I’m okay.”

“Go to bed, Kitty Cat.”

“But your boner.” I push my bottom lip forward. “I promised.”

His laugh shakes his shoulders. He rubs one hand over my bare thigh, then tugs the edge of my shorts. “It’s been a long day. Grab some Zs and I’ll join you in a few.”

“But—”

“We can turn each other inside out in the morning. You’re not going anywhere except to my bed.”

Isn’t that the truth? I don’t want to *be* anywhere but Barrett’s bed. Or my bed if he’s in it. Or at work where he’s sitting across the office from me.

“As someone who recently bombed in the relationship department, it’s hard to believe I’d enter another one this soon.”

“Preaching to the choir, honey,” he agrees.

“Dax said you were a good boyfriend. How does he know? Did you used to date him or something?”

That earns me a smile.

“He knows I delivered my share of flowers and candy to Beth. Talked my way back into her life a number of times. We always found our way back out. I’m not blameless. I did a lot of dumb shit.”

“I can’t imagine you doing anything shortsighted, Fox.”

“Don’t sass me or you’ll earn a slap on that firm ass.” His eyebrows lift when my jaw drops. “Ever get kinky in the bedroom, Kitty Cat? A little slap and tickle?”

I’m sure my cheeks are turning pink. My face feels warm. “North wasn’t much of a slap-and-tickle kind of guy.”

“Yeah, I’m guessing you’re not that kind of girl, either.”

I curl my fingers into the pillow against my chest. “Is that...what you want?”

“I want you,” he says. “Whatever involves you is what I want.”

He rewards me with another kiss, then against them whispers. “I’ll wake you in the morning. You’ll like how I do it. Go to bed.”



BARRETT

I stroke my fingers down Catarina’s body and she rolls to her back, eyes still shut. Sleep has a tight hold on to her.

“Kitty Cat,” I whisper.

“Mmph,” is all I get in return.

It’s early. The birds are up. The sun isn’t, but I promised to wake her. Like I kept my promise to sing to her, I’m keeping this one as well.

I lift the sheet and take off her underwear. She slides her long legs together, tempting me to take my time at her knees again. But I have something better in mind. I lift her T-shirt, kiss the tip of each nipple, and meet her eyes when she opens them.

“Hi,” she croaks in a sleep-warmed voice.

“Wake and shake, honey.”

“What?”

“I’m going to give you an orgasm or three. I’ll know you’re done when you’re shaking.”

Her smile is crooked and fucking adorable. “Sounds good to me.”

“Shirt off. You’re on nipple duty. I’ll be busy down here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I like that.” I toss her legs over my shoulders and settle in. Licking, teasing, suckling. She tugs her nipples and then moves her hands to my head, guiding me to the perfect spot.

We don’t make it to three.

On her second orgasm, her legs are shaking, her body writhing, her lips begging me to stop. I reach for the nightstand and a condom, holding it up in an unasked question. She snatches it, tears open the packet and hands it back.

“That’s not a yes. That’s a hell yes,” I point out.

“Hell yes. *Hurry.*”

Nothing’s more beautiful than Catarina post-orgasm. Her long lashes draped over her cheeks, her face rosy, her lips swollen and parted. Her nipples are standing on end, tempting me. So as I slide into her warmth, I take the time to make love to one with my mouth.

She comes instantly.

I don’t lag far behind—I’ve been wanting this woman since the wee hours and only acted on it just now.

Once we’ve each taken our fair share, I collapse next to her, breathing heavily for a few before winding down. I kiss her breasts—I can’t help it—and then her face.

I'm overwhelmed by her. By the potential we have. Which is probably why I ask, "Still falling, Kitty Cat?"

She offers a half smile. "Still wrecked, Fox?"

"Gone, honey," I admit without saying *The Words*.

"Gone." She smiles, her eyes holding a secret she's yet to tell me.

"Coffee?" I ask as I head to the bathroom. "I can make French toast."

"Both, please." She rolls to her side, looking like my fantasy come true. Like a woman I'd like to have around for longer than a few sweaty nights and rushed mornings. Like a woman I'd like to have around on a permanent basis.

Provided we make it that far. Not to be a Debbie Downer but the odds aren't in my favor.

"Oh! The article!" Her face lights up and she scrabbles out of bed.

"No work today." I step in front of her and hold out an arm. She pushes against my chest, but I don't let her pass. I tuck her against me and kiss her instead. "Shower. Coffee. Spend the day with me."

"Don't you at least want to check for likes or comments?"

"No. And neither are you. I hid your phone."

"Barrett!"

I smooth the crease between her dark eyebrows. "You work too hard. Today I want you to myself."

"I didn't work yesterday."

"You checked your email on your phone. Several times."

She twists her lips guiltily.

“Give me a day, Kitty Cat. No work. No screen time. Just you and me and everything revolving around us. You can check on work *at work* on Monday morning. And I mean *at work*. No scrolling through your phone in bed.

“Fine.” An eye roll pairs with the slump of her shoulders.

“Your gratitude wore off fast. What happened to those thank-yous after you nearly brought the roof down a few minutes ago?”

“There *is* such a thing as too much confidence, Fox.” She hoists an eyebrow, unhappy that she didn’t get her way.

“Yeah. There is.” I slap her ass, a stinging spanking that pops her eyes wide. She liked it. I can tell by the way her lips tip to one side. “Stick with me, honey.”

Please, I add in my head.



CATARINA

We spent the morning sipping coffee and nibbling on sugary donuts from a local bakery. Barrett insisted on running out to pick them up. They were decadent and delicious. I’m typically a lot more careful about my breakfast choices.

Then again I’ve been doing a lot of things I don’t typically do. Like dating a former NFL player. Sleeping at his house. All but admitting I’m falling in love with him way too hard and way too fast.

Dax claimed that Barrett was a good boyfriend. All of the evidence I've gathered thus far points to *yes*. Maybe some relationships are doomed from the start. Maybe Barrett and Beth were destined to end up apart but kept returning to the familiar.

I won't deny that after North left, I had a lonely night or two where I was tempted to call him and try to reconcile. I wonder if he's seeing someone now. I wonder if he's okay. Other than a random text from him last week, where he concluded "it's better that we're no longer friends" I haven't heard from him. Luckily for me, I had Barrett. I was too preoccupied with work and with him as an extension of my work to give North's rude text further consideration.

After Barrett and I crashed from our donut high, we snuggled on the sofa. When it came time for dinner, he talked me into pizza. I just finished my third slice.

"Ugh, are you trying to make me fat?"

"Gimme a break, Kitty Cat."

"Okay, let me rephrase. Are you trying to raise my cholesterol?"

"I'm doing what I always do." He grabs another piece of pizza for himself and takes a huge bite, commenting around it. "I'm influencing you to loosen up. Like me."

This brings forth a belly laugh. "So, you want to date a bad-girl journalist?"

"I want to acclimate you to being with me so that you won't be tempted by upper-crust country club boys."

There's enough sincerity in his tone that I believe him. "You think I would leave you for a 'country club boy'?"

“You were dating one when I met you.”

“That doesn’t mean I’d leave you for one now.”

He wipes his fingers on a napkin before balling it into a wad. “We’re pretty new.”

“Every relationship starts out new. I’m game to make it last if you are.”

“Depends.” He reaches for another slice.

“On?”

“On how good the sex is in a few months.”

I punch him in the arm. He drops the pizza slice and tackles me before giving me a kiss. With his arms around me it’s easy not to worry about the future. As a chronic worrier, embracing his way of life is refreshing.

“Don’t go home,” he tells me.

“I have to work in the morning.”

“Yeah, and I saw you hang a dress in my closet.”

“That’s a sundress for wearing to a park or a summer concert.”

“And Mia would kick you out of the office for wearing it tomorrow?”

I say nothing, and he knows he has me.

“Live on the edge with me tonight. You’re already here. I don’t want you to go.”

With an invitation like that, there’s only one response. “All right, Fox. I’ll stay.”

CHAPTER 28

CATARINA

It's Monday morning and I'm lingering in the passenger seat of Barrett's car like a besotted teenager who can't leave her boyfriend behind.

The weekend was singular, the crown jewel belonging to last night. We went to bed and made love—slow and unhurried. I slept like the dead and woke this morning refreshed. I slept in, too, which is why a mediocre coffee from the break room is in my future rather than a delicious Pike Place from Starbucks. No time to buy one unless I want to be late.

“I'd better go.” There isn't a cell in my body that wants to obey.

“Okay, honey. Get in there.” He kisses me goodbye. I close my eyes and savor his taste.

Rarely have I received kisses goodbye while being dropped off at work. I'm not sure North *ever* dropped me off at work. On the odd occasion he stayed at my place, he probably kissed me before he left. I don't remember feeling

like this—like I never wanted it to end. Like I couldn't bear the idea of sitting at my desk for eight long hours missing him.

God, I'm so screwed.

"One more thing." Barrett opens the center console and pulls out my cellphone. "It's charged, but the ringer's off."

I reach for it eagerly and he *tsks* me, shaking his head. He opens my purse and drops the phone inside. "No looking until you're sitting at your desk. Not standing inside the building. Not riding the elevator. Your desk is officially 'at work.'"

"That's asking a lot." I frown.

"You can do it. Just think about this instead." He kisses me again, this time with tongue. I practically climb out of my seat and into his lap trying to access more of his incredible mouth. I don't care who walks by on the street and sees us. I don't care that this started out as a dreaded assignment. We've morphed into something more. Something...meaningful.

He palms my jaw and drops another kiss on my temple. "Go."

"Okay." I unbuckle my seat belt. "See you later?" *Tonight, I hope.*

"You'd better see me later."

Well, that made me smile. "I'll call you."

"Deal."

I step out of the car and into the building. My newfound freedom tempts me to reach into my bag and check the myriad messages, emails, and phone calls I've had to have missed.

I don't. Instead I float through the lobby, glide up the elevator, and practically skip to my desk.

“Good morning,” I chime as I breeze by Nanci’s desk.

“Hey, Catarina. Amazing column.”

“Thank you.”

“Have you read any feedback yet?”

“Not yet. I’ve been electronically barren for over twenty-four hours, so give me a moment to settle in.”

“Oh. Okay.” Her expression is a mystery. I can’t tell if she’s nervous or bothered. Or maybe she didn’t like me putting her on my timetable. Well, too bad. Barrett was right. Most things can wait. I had my first stress-free day on Sunday in as long as I can remember.

I thought I’d go crazy during my screen fast, but it was actually relaxing. Now that I’m at my desk, and logging into my laptop, I’m not looking forward to plugging back in.

While my email inbox fills with—*Wow*—a lot more emails than usual, I turn on my phone’s ringer and check my texts. There are several.

Most of them are from friends and are some version of “Great article!” One is from my mom that reads “He’s so brave. Amazing column, dear.” I chuckle when I read it. Does she mean he’s brave for attending the governor’s party? Or is his bravery being commended because he’s dating me?

I set my phone aside, smiling as I scan the emails. My smile falls as I read the subject on several of them—they have an eerily similar theme.

Dyslexia.

Email after email reflects sentiments like:

“I had no idea Barrett suffered from dyslexia...”

“I’m dyslexic, too, and understand how harrowing this is...”

“I’m beyond moved that he overcame such great odds...”

One nastygram accuses Barrett of doing anything for publicity—even pretending to be dyslexic. I delete it with an angry tap of a key.

“There are phone messages, too,” Nanci interrupts gently as I’m poring over the many, *many* letters from readers. She hands over a stack of Post-its scrawled with notes and phone numbers. I don’t bother reading them. I have a good guess what they’re about.

“Where do I start?” I mutter. “I had no idea Barrett shared about his dyslexia in the column. It’s brave and amazing and...” *Not like him at all.*

“It’s in *your* half of the column.” Nanci frowns. “I thought you two planned it that way.”

My heart sinks to my toes. My cheeks grow cold as the blood rushes from my face.

Nanci walks back to her desk, and I numbly open the *Chat*’s home page. I skim Barrett’s half of the column. It’s everything I remember it being the first time I read it. Funny, charming, and blunt—like him. Then I skim my half of the article and stop breathing.

I read every column I write at least ten times. I read and *reread*. Edit and then read it again. I know every word in it and can usually recite parts from memory. The words that stop me cold are words I *didn’t* write.

What Barrett Fox doesn’t want anyone to know is that he works harder than I do on this column. He sweats

over every word thanks to a lifetime of fighting dyslexia. As a hardworking college student who had to keep his grades up to play football, I can only imagine how taxing this must have been for him. He's an amazing specimen physically, and knowing he's been fighting this mentally has added an entirely new, fascinating layer to our relationship.

My hand covering my mouth, I stare in disbelief at the screen. From that paragraph it transitions back to my original column, wrapping with my summary of the elegant evening at the governor's mansion where we all but leave in a horse-drawn carriage.

My mind races, spinning for an explanation, but there's only one.

Mia. A woman who treasures readership numbers and advertising dollars over the well-being of her employees. I march to her office and bang on the door until she opens it.

"Good God, Catarina. Yes, yes. Won't you please come in?" She yanks her glasses off her nose and scowls, but I don't give her the chance to intimidate me. I lay into her.

"What the hell did you do?"

"Excuse me?"

"No, no. You don't have the luxury of acting offended. Tell me why the mention of Barrett's dyslexia appears in our column *under my name* when I didn't write about it!"

She exhales, her lips pursing. "Because it's a damn good story and you should have put it in there."

I blink, stunned that she's admitting to it. "How did you ___"

“That day that you were talking in his cubicle. I overheard. I was walking out, and I *may* have slipped behind a wall to eavesdrop. It was a seriously juicy bit of information. I thought for sure I’d read about it in one of your columns. You never pass up a scoop.”

“I do when it hurts someone I care about!” I practically shout. “That’s his private business.”

“Catarina. You are a journalist. Information isn’t privileged when it’s shared in a newsroom, for the love of God. Have you seen the response? He’s a hero!”

“You sold him out.”

“I did him a favor. He’ll probably be asked to be the face of a local charity. Maybe he’ll be offered another job as field reporter. That’s why he took on this assignment in the first place. It’s not my fault you were swept up in the fairy tale and didn’t prioritize your column.”

“I pride myself on my integrity, Mia. Can’t you understand that?”

“I have a paper to run, sweetheart, and that means when we have dwindling readership I make a brilliant plan to increase it. And if it starts to flag at the end of a segment’s run, then I do what it takes to revive it.”

I shake my head, hardly able to believe this woman used to be my mentor.

“What you did to revive this column is reprehensible.” I turn and walk out of her office, ignoring her when she calls my name. My mind is on Barrett—and reaching him before he reads the article.

I pray I’m not too late.



BARRETT

I'm in line at Starbucks when I cave and check my phone. I almost went straight home after dropping Catarina off, but I know how my Kitty Cat likes her morning brew. Besides, I like surprising her.

One glance at the screen and my mind spins. The coffee shop chatter recedes into the distance, and what's left is a faint ringing in my ears.

I have a lot of missed calls. I have a lot of new texts.

Several from people I haven't talked to in *years*.

Words like "Dude" and "I had no idea" and one "My brother has dyslexia" decorate my screen.

I scroll through my call log next. I have a voicemail—I never have voicemail. Anyone who calls me either hangs up and texts me or texts me, period. I shakily lift the phone to my ear and listen to the short message from Tom Lawson at ESPN.

"Barrett, man. Tom at ESPN. I read the article in the *Columbus Dispatch* this morning and you *have* to give me a quote. Let's get you on the air ASAP. We'll pay for the exclusive. I'm thinking we wrangle Santiago into a split screen. The sympathy on the dyslexia thing is through the roof. Side note, that journalist you're working with is hotter than hell. Call me."

By the time I finish listening to the voicemail, my blood is boiling, my spine a pillar of stone.

“May I help you?” the barista asks, blanching as she concludes that the last fucking thing I need right now is coffee. I burst out of Starbucks, vision red with rage, and climb into my car.

Without turning over the engine, I open the website and find our column. I scan through my half and then through Catarina’s, my hands shaking.

What.

The.

Ever-loving.

Fuck.

My phone rings before I have a chance to fully digest what I read. The screen reads “Kitty Cat.”

My blood boils. I ignore the call. If I answer nothing but yelling will exit my mouth. Better yet, I shut off the phone.

I blink blindly at the windshield and take a shallow breath that barely fills my lungs.

The world knows I have dyslexia. A secret I kept from everyone, save Catarina. A secret I never chose to share with anyone—not even Beth. I let her believe I was tired of socializing whenever I needed an excuse to finish studying or writing a paper.

And Catarina, the woman I am developing deep feelings for, sold me out.

“Fuck!” I slam a palm on the steering wheel before gripping it with both fists. I stare at my white knuckles for the

count of three, and then close my eyes and force myself to calm down.

When I'm confident I can drive without mowing down a pedestrian, I back out of the parking spot.

CHAPTER 29

CATARINA

I tried calling him and then I tried texting him and then I repeated that process for most of the afternoon. What I didn't do was stick around the office. I took a cab home to retrieve my car, and then drove to his apartment. The security desk swore to me (after I palmed the guy twenty bucks) that Barrett wasn't home.

Then I drove around town like a lunatic looking for his car.

Now I'm home, pacing and doing a fine job of wearing a rut in my patterned rug between the television and couch. I've nearly gnawed my fingernails to the quicks.

Either he read the article and has decided he hates me, or a less likely scenario: he doesn't know. We planned on seeing each other tonight, so I pray that when he does check his phone, he reads my texts first.

My heart emits a dull ache. I received several calls from ESPN today asking for a response from me or Barrett. I'm 99.9 percent sure they called Barrett first.

If that's how he finds out... I shake my head, unable to stay here and worry and pace the floors any longer. I'm trying his house again.

I step out of the elevator of my apartment building, head down as I dig through my purse for my phone. A few text messages sit on my screen but not one of them is from Barrett. I know it's futile, but I can't help trying his phone again as I step into the summer heat.

That's when I spot him climbing out of his convertible. I'm relieved to be looking right at him. I can explain in person. When he pins with me a glare, I stop advancing toward him, my skin prickling in spite of the humid air. He doesn't look happy to see me.

In fact, he looks angrier than I've *ever* seen him—including when he threw away his on-air career as a field reporter. I rush to him, but he speaks first.

“Don't come any closer.”

“You know.”

“When Dax's wife, Becca, referred to me as a charity case, I knew she was kidding. Apparently, you didn't.”

“Barrett, listen to me.” My voice shakes.

“Wasn't it enough for you to tame the ‘Bad Boy of the NFL?’ Or did you use my dyslexia as an excuse to help explain why you'd date an asshole from the wrong side of town?”

“That's not what I think, and you know it! I told you how I felt yesterday. I *showed* you this morning.”

Some of the rage bleeds from his face, hurt replacing it. “Did you mean any of it? Or was this for the article?”

“Fox.” My nose tingles as tears press the backs of my eyes. “*None* of it was for the article.”

His laugh is bitter and completely devoid of humor. “Come on, Catarina. You know as well as I do that the dates were all for show. Why else take me to a country club, or put me in a tux and parade me in front of the governor, if not to humiliate me?”

“Barrett. This is ridiculous.” I’m starting to get angry along with really, really afraid that he isn’t going to hear me out.

“It’s worse than that. It’s a betrayal.”

My anger steps into first place. “You’re damn right this is a betrayal. How can you believe I faked anything with you? I resisted you as long as I could. You were the one chasing me!”

“You’re right. I chased you around like a desperate puppy. You kept me on a very short leash. You found my soft underbelly. And then you exposed me.”

“I turned my life upside down for you!” I’m vaguely aware of a few passersby watching our argument. Hot wind blows against my face, and only then do I notice the dampness on my cheeks.

“Was it hard for you to fake your feelings for me, Catarina? Or was it part of the job?”

“Fuck you, Fox!” The world swims out of focus.

“We did that already,” he replies coolly.

I lean forward, practically standing on his shoes. “It was Mia, you stubborn asshole. She was the one who outed you in the column. I had nothing to do with it. I didn’t know what she wrote until I read it this morning!”

“Mia?” His eyebrows lower in confusion as some of the rage seeps from his expression. “How?”

“That was a question I would’ve answered before you accused me of faking everything we did together. Before you pointed out that I’m a heartless workaholic who’s too good to fall in love with a dyslexic football player!”

I now understand what dating him must have been like for Beth. Having experienced that gentle part of him only to have him rip it away is agonizing. He didn’t give me the benefit of the doubt or the courtesy of explaining myself, even after what we’ve been through together. It’s not only insulting. It’s heartbreaking.

“I didn’t wreck you, Fox. You wrecked me. Just now. All the way.”

His eyes mist over, his mouth frozen open in silence. I ignore him and stomp to my car. I have no idea where to go, but anywhere’s better than here. Fox follows me across the lot, but I shut myself in the car.

Once I’m settled into the sun-soaked interior, I’m forced to put the windows down or suffocate.

“Kitty Cat.” He leans on the edge of the passenger window. “Hang on.”

“I hung on, Barrett. I hung on for dear life during this ride. You were the one who kicked me off. You were the one who came here with fire in your belly, and only yourself in mind. You wanted to make sure I hurt the way you’re hurting. Congratulations. You did it. I thought I knew you. I convinced myself that your ex-girlfriend was the crazy one.”

The pain in my heart doubles when his face hardens. “It’s a two-way street.”

“I suggest you contact Mia and get your facts straight.” I start the car and jerk it into gear. “Now get the hell away from my car.”

To my surprise he pulls his hands off the window frame. I tear out of the lot, with no destination in mind and fresh hurt ripping apart my insides.

CHAPTER 30

PRESENT DAY

BARRETT

“So now you’re caught up,” I tell Beth. Her expression is pure sympathy with a healthy dash of—

“Oh, Bare.”

That.

“Told you I fucked up.”

“You really did.”

“Thanks. That’s helpful.”

“How long ago was this?” Her tone is half disappointment and half understanding. We’ve been down this road before. Only...we haven’t. What I feel for Catarina is ten times what I felt for Beth. It was somehow more real in spite of us faking it.

“Eight days.” Feels more like eight years.

“Did you call her?”

I nod. “Called. Texted. Went to her house. Visited the newspaper’s office. I’m banned, by the way.”

I took Catarina's advice and went to talk to Mia that day. I did some more yelling, accused Mia of outing me, and then I threatened to sue her. My tirade was detailed on the *Chat* the next day in an article written by Mia herself with the headline: BARRETT FOX LOSES HIS COOL.

She wasn't exaggerating when she said what happens in the bullpen is fair game.

Beth shakes her head again, pitying me for reasons I deserve. Not because I'm a formerly broke, currently dyslexic man from the ugly part of town, but because I'm a shallow, stubborn, jerk who didn't give my girlfriend the benefit of the doubt.

"This should set your mind at ease." I lean back in my chair. "Now you know our problems were my fault."

"You are a terrible listener. *And* you have a temper."

"Seriously?" I grumble because if there's one thing I don't need it's a pile-on.

"I'm sorry. It's just... This is so sad."

"Tell me about it." Every night I suffer from insomnia. I stare at the ceiling and rack my brain for ways to win Catarina back. My flowers were returned. My messages ignored. I have no idea how to convince her to listen. I think about her constantly, and it's paired with a pain so acute I wonder if it'll ever cease. I also wonder if she'll forgive me after enough time to passes, or if it's one-and-done with her.

I think of her ex-boyfriend Northrop and my heart sinks. Catarina is a one-strike-you're-out kind of girl.

There's another conclusion I've come to—one I knew all along but chose to ignore. "She can do better."

“Barrett Fox,” Beth hisses. “Now *that’s* bullshit. She sounds like a woman who can choose anyone she wants. She’s smart, she’s beautiful, and she’s successful. She chose *you*. You may have been on her radar because of the assignment, but what about what happened when you weren’t? What about when you were off the record? Were you pretending then, too?”

Not even a little.

“You’re making me sound like a catch.” I give her a wan smile that literally hurts. I’m miserable as hell.

“You are. To her. But you’re also an arrogant, stubborn jerk.” She amends with, “Which means you should be chasing her down not sitting here with me talking about the one who got away. This isn’t you, Barrett. You go after what you want. Do you want her? Like, for real? Not because you want to win but because there’s something there worth pursuing?”

She twists the engagement ring on her finger so that it catches the light.

“Is there a future that’s uncertain, but you want it all the same?” Her voice takes on a reflective quality like she’s asking herself that question. “A thrill ride that scares you but you can’t resist buckling in for it?”

Her focus returns when she snaps her eyes to mine. “I know what I choose. What about you?”

“Food for thought, I guess.”

“Stubborn.” She stands from her chair, comes to my side of the table, and leans down to kiss my cheek. “I’ll invite you to the wedding.”

“I’ll come,” I warn her.

“Bring Catarina with you.” She pushes open the café door, leaving me and my new pal Misery sitting at the table.

CHAPTER 31

CATARINA

“Everyone. Conference room. Now.” Mia snaps her fingers as she marches across the office. “You have to see this.”

It’s late on a Saturday night thanks to an “all hands on deck” request from our fearless editor. Mia is pulling together another one of her brilliant ideas, but I’ve opted to stay put in my relationships column and keep out of the limelight. Nanci’s been wanting to make a play for lead journalist. My stepping out of the way will allow her that chance.

A day after I left Barrett eating my dust in the parking lot of my apartment building, I came to Mia with a resignation letter. I told her that while I may not find another job I love as much as writing for the *Chat*, I couldn’t condone her behavior by staying here and supporting her.

The next day she called me into her office where I sat down with not one, but *two* bigwigs who run this very newspaper. Mia apologized in front of our audience, approved a pay raise she accurately assumed wouldn’t be enough, and then admitted that she overstepped and would never alter my column again.

Far as I could tell, she was sincere. I left, promising to think about it, and after a sleepless night in bed determined that giving up wasn't my style. So here I am. Not giving up.

Go me.

In the conference room, Mia flips on the flat screen television which is already tuned in to ESPN. "I just received a call from Tom Lawson's assistant. Look at our boy."

Barrett's on screen, not on the field but at a table with a pair of sportscasters I recognize. Tom Lawson and Sean Simmons. Their smiles are as plastic as their hair.

"Sports Center was fortunate enough to land an exclusive with Barrett Fox, former quarterback for the Miami Dolphins," Sean says. "After a shoulder injury devastated his career, he made his way back onto the field announcing games for his alma mater, The Ohio State University..."

Barrett is clean-shaven, his hair in a neat, stylish part. His half smile is relaxed and easy. If there is any pain in his blue, blue eyes over losing everything we had together, I can't see it. I didn't know I could feel any more devastated by our breakup until now.

"Barrett, thanks for agreeing to sit with us," Tom says. "We've been clamoring for a reaction to the column that ran in the *Columbus Dispatch* two weeks ago—" The rest of what he says is drowned out by the applause and cheers of my co-workers.

"Shh! Shh!" Mia gestures for everyone to keep it down, but she's smiling. She loves this shit.

"What everyone wants to know is how much of what ended up in the column was real and how much of it was for show?" Tom asks Barrett.

“The dyslexia is one hundred percent real. I didn’t intend to share it, but it came out. I didn’t want the attention. It wasn’t a publicity stunt.”

“Come on,” Sean says with a laugh, “Barrett ‘Bad Boy of the NFL’ Fox doesn’t want attention for something?”

A web page featuring our column, and Barrett’s and my headshots, appears on the screen. More cheers and applause come from my co-workers while my stomach flips. The headache creeps from the back of my skull to the front and curls around my eye sockets.

“Eat it up, honey!” Mia nudges me with an elbow. “Part of you *has* to be enjoying this. Your beloved column made national news.”

I’m tempted to ask “at what price?” but I don’t have the energy for that conversation. Instead I say, “I thought you were mad at him.”

“We go where the dollars take us,” she says, and that pretty much sums up Mia.

I watch the TV for a few seconds longer, until Barrett mentions my name—not Kitty Cat, but Catarina, my nickname one of the few details that managed to stay out of our column—and says what a “pleasure” it was to work with me.

Arms folded, I face Mia. “Looks like you and Barrett Fox have everything you ever wanted.”

“Unfortunately, Catarina Everhart and I don’t speak any longer,” Barrett’s talking head says. I turn back to the screen, aware of my co-workers watching my face for the slightest muscle tic. I remain mannequin-still, refusing to give them an ounce of satisfaction.

“Did something go wrong?” TV Tom asks.

“Yeah. I went wrong.” Barrett’s mouth forms a frown. “I went way wrong.”

“Come on, man, you can’t leave us hanging,” Tom chides. “I read the articles. Unless you were faking it, there seemed to be a spark there.”

“Like you know anything about sparks, Tom.” Sean emits a canned laugh, but my focus is on Barrett.

The way his eyes lower to his folded hands. For a split second his for-television façade slips, and sadness seems to consume him.

“We’ll be back after the commercial break with more from Barrett Fox on ESPN.”

Mia mutes the TV and everyone in the room trains their gazes on me—most of them wide-eyed, expectant.

“What?” I ask.

A few of them smile.

“What happens next?” Nanci asks, her smile bigger than anyone’s.

“My guess is they come back from commercial break, announce that Barrett has been offered his field reporting gig again, and then—”

“He shows up to tell you how it ends in person,” a low voice rumbles from over my shoulder.

I turn around slowly, my emotions a hectic tangle of anger and regret and love. Barrett Fox stands in the doorway of the conference room wearing the same suit from his ESPN interview.

“It’s prerecorded, Kitty Cat. I’m fast, but not that fast.” His sideways smile wrings out my already spent heart.

“How did you get in?” I ask numbly.

“Mia owed me a favor.” He spears her with a glare. “And this better be on the record.”

“I’ll report every word,” Nanci aims her iPhone at us, probably video recording this for posterity.

“I don’t think so,” I tell Barrett as I start for the exit. “You had your chance.”

“I know.” He blocks the doorway with one arm. “I blew it. Big time.”

“I remember. I was there.” I steel myself against the smell of his cologne, against his very presence. Despair has been swamping me since the day I left him standing on the boiling hot asphalt. Since I blocked his number on my cellphone, and ignored a voicemail from Dax’s adorable wife, Becca. I added Barrett’s name to the “no entry” list at my apartment building and instructed everyone in this office not to patch his calls through to me.

“We can’t be done,” he tells me. “*I’m not done.*”

“That’s too bad.” Self-preservation is my only ally. Two heartbreaks this summer were plenty. “I am done. We are *so* done.”

“I’m not used to things working out in my favor,” he continues like I didn’t speak. “When they do work out, it’s jarring. The good is...unbelievable. When I was picked at the draft to play with Miami, I was certain bad news was around the corner. Bad always follows good. Sure, you get to play ball in college, but you have to lose sleep and miss parties with friends thanks to your pal dyslexia keeping your grades low.

You move to Miami, earn your parents' pride, and then they die in a collision with Jack Daniel's riding shotgun. Your brother pulls his shit together, then he fucks up and you don't see your nephew for a year." He pauses, lowers his voice. "You land the girl of your dreams by being yourself, and then lose her for exactly the same reason."

"I heard you won back a particular girl several times over a spotty period of six years."

"Wrong girl," he says with a shrug.

"You thought she was the right one at the time."

"I didn't know she was the wrong one until I fell in love with you."

I miss what he says next because the words *I fell in love with you* echo in my ears.

"...and I was too much of a coward to use the big *L* word," he's saying when I tune back in, my lashes fluttering. "But that's what I meant when I told you that you wrecked me the night we made love on the governor's wife's faux fur coat."

Gasps lift on the air. I gape at our audience. Barrett only smiles.

"He's kidding," I say to Nanci's iPhone.

"I haven't said a single word that's untrue tonight." Fox's eyes have yet to leave mine. "But I said several I didn't mean the day I accused you of outing my dyslexia to the world."

I have no words. It's too much. I've been packing my heart with stones and my stomach with carbs since he walked away. Grieving has seven stages and I'm determined to advance through each one as quickly as possible.

“You never needed an excuse to date me,” he says. “You needed a reason. A really good one. I managed to give you a good enough reason to date me, but I failed to give you a good reason to stay.”

“Accusing me of sleeping with you for the assignment didn’t help.”

“No. It didn’t.” He points to the television. “You’re going to want to see this part.”

Mia, remote in hand, turns up the volume on the TV. The newsmen are laughing and Barrett’s next to them, smiling. He looks good—but not as good as he does standing next to me.

“Thanks for the exclusive, Fox. Is there anything you want to say to Catarina Everhart that might land you back in her good graces?”

TV Barrett blows out a gusty breath and shakes his head. “Man, I don’t know.”

“How about this? Look into that camera right there, and give it a shot,” Sean says.

Real Barrett takes my hand, his fingers weaving with mine, and we watch his onscreen image look into the camera. He squeezes my fingers and says the words at the same time.

“Catarina, if you can find it in your heart to forgive me, I’ll serenade you every night for the rest of our lives. And we’ll do wake and shake every morning.”

My cheeks prickle, the burn of embarrassment infusing them with warmth.

“What’s ‘wake and shake’?” Nanci asks, sweeping her iPhone from the television to Barrett and me.

“Sounds intriguing,” Mia purrs.

Barrett grins. I'm tempted to slap him but he's holding my dominant hand.

"You did *not* just say that on national television," I whisper.

"Bad boy comes with the package, honey." A second later he drops the cocky smile. "I'm lost without you in my life. I'm lonely. I'm sad. And I'm tired of sitting around feeling like shit because I lost the best thing that ever happened to me. You have a right to be angry. What I did was unforgivable. I'm begging, Kitty Cat." He gently squeezes my hand. "Forgive me even though you shouldn't. Give me a second chance even though I don't deserve it. You're the toughest woman I know. The most independent woman I've ever met. I don't want to lose out on the love of a lifetime because you're trying to prove to yourself that you're okay. Gimme a chance to show you that you're not okay without me. I'm a hard worker. I've overcome several hurdles in my professional career to stand here in front of you. Give me a chance to leap a personal one, too. Please?"

I hear a tearful sniff from behind me, and then another. Mine rounds out a trio.

"That"—I clear my throat—"was a good speech."

"I've been writing it for a week-plus."

I let out a watery laugh.

"What else can I say? What can I do? I'm quick on my feet on the field, Catarina, but I'm at sea when it comes to you. I've already screwed up, and I don't want to do it again."

"What's the song you and Burke sang on stage at the festival?"

“‘More Than Words’? Want me to sing it?” He casts a quick look around at our audience. “I will.”

“No. I want you to follow the advice. If you want to win me back it’s going to take more than words to win me. You have to *show* me.”

“I can do that.” He pulls me against his body. My breasts press his chest as he bends, his lips hovering over mine. “I need to know one thing first.”

“There’s a caveat?”

“Afraid so. You said you were falling. Did you hit the ground yet?”

I feel the tear trickle from the corner of my eye. My voice cracks when I admit, “So hard. Broken-bones hard.”

He winces. “Can I fix it?”

“Fox”—I bat my eyelashes, but it’s no use. I’m a sniffling mess—“You’re the only one who can.”

He lays his lips on mine. Drinking in his kiss is like breathing after being underwater for a very long time. My lungs burn, my heart ratchets up a few notches, and my brain races to process everything that’s just happened.

Everything that’s *still* happening.

He drops his forehead on mine, his breathing uneven, his arms still holding me tight. “Can I follow you home?”

“You mean like a puppy?”

“Like gum stuck to your shoe. The really nasty kind you find at a fair with a cigarette butt in it.”

I laugh. Only he could say something like that in the middle of a romantic gesture and remain completely likable.

“Holy crap! Quarterback Joe Noll just commented!” Nanci exclaims. She offers a sheepish smile. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“Commented on what?” I ask.

“You’re live, kids.” Mia, who’s standing behind Nanci with the rest of our co-workers, waggles her fingers in a wave.

“*Live?*” I gulp.

“On the *Chat*’s social media feed,” Nanci confirms.

“In that case”—Barrett grabs me again, this time lifting me into his arms—“let’s not let Quarterback Joe Noll down. Gimme some sugar, honey.”

Oh, what the hell. I grip his neck and kiss him again. No music swells, but I feel like we’re at the end of a movie—in the closing scene before the credits roll.

“Show’s over,” Barrett announces. With me in his arms, he leaves the conference room—it’s a grand exit.

“What did we do?” I ask as he carries me past the darkened cubicles and down the hall to Marge’s former office.

“We made the news.” He sits on the edge of the desk with me in his lap.

“Are you going to put me down?”

“Not yet.” He nuzzles my nose. “I love you like mad, Kitty Cat. If it takes a lifetime, I won’t stop until I win you back.”

“I don’t know about this groveling version of you.” I stroke the soft hair at the back of his head, watching as his expression grows the slightest bit worried. “I like cocky, confident, too-big-for-his-britches Fox. The one who knows that when a woman allows him to kiss her on live social media

and possessively carry her out of a room, that she's obviously still in love with him."

His mouth softens as he searches my face. "She is?"

I whistle while pointing down at the ground, but this time make an exploding sound. "I hit hard, Fox. But I stood back up. And when I did, I was more in love with you than before."

"Ah, Kitty Cat." He gives me a quick kiss. "Say it. Please."

"What about 'More Than Words'? Isn't that our new motto?"

"You can show me later. Hell, you can show me in two seconds. This desk is sturdy." He wiggles his hips, and the metal legs squeak in protest. "Sort of. I'm a dying man begging for a stay of execution. Please, honey. Say it once."

"Just once?"

"Just once today."

I put the tip of my nose on his, close my eyes, and hug his neck with my arms. "I love you, Barrett Fox."

"Those are the words."

I kiss him, teasing my tongue along the seam of his lips. His hands roam over my body and mine return the favor.

"I missed this," I say as he unbuttons my shirt.

"There's nothing like it."

"There's no one like you."

"There's no one like *us*," he corrects, palming the back of my head.

“About this desk...” I say when he sets me on my feet.
“Think it’ll hold us?”

“I don’t care.”

I grin. He grins.

And then we start shucking clothes.

For my Facebook group, the Lemmondrops.

You take the (lemon) cake!

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Huge thanks to my readers for reading and loving the Real Love series. I have enjoyed sharing these books with you! Last but not least, thanks to my agent, Nicole, for your wise advice. I’m so glad we’re friends.

AMERICA'S SWEETHEART - EXCERPT

Don't miss the final installment of the Real Love series—Jax and Allie's story—which reunites the disgraced Hollywood starlet with the man she left behind in her hometown...

xo, Jessica Lemmon



PRESENT DAY, THE MURPHY HOUSEHOLD

JACKSON

Daryl and Tommy had the flu this week, which put us behind schedule.

Between you and me, I'm betting the illness they have is "whiskey" flu. I gave them bonus checks on Thursday. They

each called in on Friday.

To make up for lost time, I'm at the job by myself, on a Sunday. When you're the owner, shit runs *uphill* not down.

The "job" this time around is at my ex-girlfriend's parents' house. My ex and I were over so long ago that it shouldn't have any sting left, but I'm not sure I ever shook her. Not because I'm pining, but because after we ended, she became famous.

Famous famous.

I'm talking walk-the-red-carpet-who-are-you-wearing-can-I-have-your-autograph famous.

How's that for a kick in the nuts?

The Murphy house is quiet. There are no interruptions distracting me from sawing a hole in the wall where we're expanding Cheryl's walk-in closet. Allison's mom "joked" to her husband (Allison's dad, Stephen) that he could have the hall closet, but I don't think she was joking. Stephen shrugged like the nice guy he is and said, "Whatever you want, doll."

Whatever you want, doll.

Even I think that's sweet and I'm a guy.

I'm remodeling Cheryl and Stephen Murphy's bedroom. They're celebrating their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary in style with an extended trip to Italy. My team and I are taking care of the remodel while they're gone. Makes it easier for everyone to work in an empty house. We're knocking out a wall, extending the deck, and expanding the closet into a sizable walk-in. Their house is on the ritzy side of Columbus. A far cry from the brick ranch I grew up in, or the smaller one I live in now.

Since walking into this house, I've been struck with the oddest sense of déjà vu. The memories don't shout so much as whisper. And being here has triggered more memories than I care to admit.

Allison and I broke it off within the first year of her fleeing to California. Long distance relationships are as hard to maintain as they say. I dropped out of college when my football scholarship money ran dry and then I went back to work for my dad's construction business. Took me a few years to learn the ropes, but I quickly decided that I didn't want to erect personality-free new-builds for the rest of my life. I was also tired of working for someone else.

Last year I filled out the paperwork for a business loan, and now I'm the owner-slash-operator of Burke Builders LLC. Remodeling is my favorite part of the job and the one I try to do most. It's rewarding to take what isn't working and make it work. Knocking down a wall to widen a living room or adding on a screened-in porch not only changes the physical space but infuses it with new life. It changes the *feel* of the place, is what I'm trying to say.

I know, I know. I'm a blue-collar poet. I continue sawing, drywall dust blowing around me like a sandstorm.

Sawing done, I tug off my mask and safety glasses and toss them on the floor. The bedroom furniture is crammed into a guest bedroom while we work. During moving that furniture, I couldn't help peering into the bedroom across the hall. Allison's bedroom.

It's not exactly like it was when she lived here, but the bed is one and the same. And while holding the ass end of a bureau I was bracing, using my legs to lift while Tommy backed into

the other guest room, my eyes lingered on that double bed, and I remembered the things that Allie and I used to do on it.

My phone buzzes with a text from my sister, Julieann. I had a feeling she'd call me today— not that she calls often, but sometimes I have a sense that she will. We're twins and have that weird superpower of finishing each other's sentences and reading what's on the other's mind by simply sharing a look.

There are only two words on my cellphone's screen.

Holy shit. OMG follows.

OMG pops onto the screen again before the phone rings in my hand. "Hel—"

"Holy shit. Oh my God," Jules says into my ear, the words bursting from her mouth. She's out of breath like she's been running a mile.

"So I gathered from your texts," I reply flatly. "Nina stole an Oscar from Millie Duncan!"

I understand the words individually, but I'm having trouble with them together in one sentence. "What?"

Also, let me catch you up: Allison's internship in California turned into a walk-on role that became permanent for the Emmy Award-winning drama *America's Sweetheart*. She changed her name when she went to Tinseltown to Nina Lockhart.

"I know you don't like to hear news about Nina—er, Allison, but that part isn't *new* news. I'd heard about it when it happened last week, but I made Mom and Dad swear they wouldn't say anything to you in case it was gossip. I didn't want you to have to deal with it, you know?"

"Jules—" But she's on a roll and doesn't stop talking.

“Well. Get this. Xavier McCormack gave a statement and Millie was standing *right* next to him. Like, supporting him! The accusations they’re making about Nina are—”

“Jules,” I repeat more forcefully. She’s like an active volcano spewing lava and I’m the ill-prepared villager at the bottom of the hill. “Back up. Way up. I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about.”

My sister takes a deep breath and blows it out. “Okay. So, you know how I feel about her because of what she did to you.”

“Over ten years ago,” I say, less in Allison’s defense but in my own. I’m not a fragile piece of china. A guy can get his heart decimated and live to tell the tale.

“Since this Oscar thing has blown up on the internet, I didn’t want someone to mention it to you and catch you off guard. I know how well you’ve trained yourself to ignore magazine covers at the checkout lines.”

Like a Jedi. I stare at gum instead to avoid spotting Allison’s face splashed across a cover. “And the news again is...?” I prompt.

“Nina stole an Oscar from Millie Duncan,” Jules says, calmer now. “You know, *three-time-Academy-Award* winner, Millie Duncan? The original America’s Sweetheart, Millie Duncan? Everyone loves her and now Allison’s become the town pariah since McCormack turned on her.”

That pinch of pain in my chest is general empathy. I’d feel that for anyone.

“Last Saturday night, McCormack and Nina were at her house for a party, and she swiped one of Millie’s statuettes.

There are pictures of Nina via the paparazzi. She was hiding it under a coat the whole time. It's alarming."

"I'm alarmed we're having this conversation," I say drily.

"I wanted you to be prepared."

"For what?"

"Anything!" she exclaims, exasperated. "McCormack gave a statement—"

"Stop saying his name," I warn between clenched teeth. In the restroom in the hallway, I balance the phone on my shoulder and rinse the drywall dust from my arms. The mention of Xavier McCormack makes my neck muscles go tight. I don't know what Allie, or the rest of the world, sees in that douchebag. Doesn't the fact that he won his own Oscar only prove he's a good liar? The press calls them McNina, which is as stupid as McCormack himself.

"Jax. They broke up."

I pause, towel in hand, my eyes on my reflection in the mirror. My hair and beard are dotted with white dust, making the brown strands appear almost gray. My face is drawn and pale—partially from the dust and partially from this conversation. I towel off my hair and face and turn from the mirror, cellphone in hand as I repeat what my sister just told me.

"They broke up?"

"Yeah. He said that Nina admitted stealing the Oscar in a fit of jealousy and that she boarded a plane this morning for a rehab facility. I don't like her and even I felt sorry for her when he disclosed that. It wasn't his story to tell. Plus, he seems full of shit."

“Because he is,” I snarl.

I’ve always hated Xavier, and not only because he’s dating my ex. From the second I saw his smug, pretty-boy face in the movie *Legends and Bygones*, the title that won him that treasured statuette, everything about him rang false.

“She’s better off without him,” I add, walking to the stairs. My stomach interrupts with a mighty roar. I tug my too-long hair out of the elastic holding it back. I’ve let it grow, and as a result it’s in my way a lot. Since I’m doing it to impress no one at all, I’m considering a haircut.

“Thanks for the update. I have to grab something to eat. Call you later?” I ask as I jog down the stairs.

“Yes. But...you’re okay?”

Since I know what she’s really asking, I answer the unspoken question instead. “Jules, I’ve been working in her parents’ house for a week. This isn’t the first time I’ve thought about her.”

My sister is less concerned about someone telling me about what happened and more concerned that I’ll catch a magazine cover or an entertainment blip on TV and lose my shit.

“For a while you wanted her back.”

“Yeah, well, that was a long time ago. It’s not like she’s here, Jules.

“I know. I just worry.”

“You don’t have to.”

She sighs in defeat. She loves to worry about me.

“Okay?”

“Okay,” she mumbles. “I should go. I have a million things to do. Bye, Jax.”

“Later, sis.”

I shove my phone into my back pocket, smiling to myself. Jules, as tough as she acts on the outside, has a gooey, caramel center. Don’t tell her I told you that.

As I pass by the front door, the lock disengages. I step back as it swings open, my head tilted in curiosity. I can’t imagine Tommy or Daryl showing up voluntarily. Then the door widens and the subject of mine and Jules’s phone call stands at the threshold. The blood drains from my head to my toes so swiftly, I wobble a little.

Allison Murphy is silhouetted by sunshine. She looks a lot like she did when we were together—petite, her dark hair curling over her shoulders. She’s wearing huge sunglasses, her full mouth open in a stunned gape and her thick eyebrows arched in surprise.

I open my mouth to speak, but it’s my sister’s words that come out. “Holy shit.”



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jessica Lemmon is a former job-hopper who resides in Ohio with her husband and rescue dogs. She holds a degree in graphic design currently gathering dust in an impressive frame. When she's not writing emotionally-charged stories, she spends her time drawing, drinking coffee, and laughing with friends. Her motto is *Read for fun*, and she believes we all should do more of what makes us happy.



Jessica Lemmon's romance novels have been praised as "purely delicious fun" and "lavish, indulgence-fueled romance" by *Publisher's Weekly*, as well as "wonderfully entertaining" and "a whole lot of fun!" by *RT Book Reviews*. She is the bestselling author of over forty books that have been translated into a dozen languages and sold in over 30 different countries worldwide, with her debut novel releasing in January of 2013.

Her work has been honored with awards such as a *Library Journal* starred review, an *RT Top Pick!*, *Apple Books Best Book of the Month*, and *Amazon Best Book of the Month*. She has been recommended by *USA Today* and *NPR.com*, and has achieved the rank of #1 bestseller on *Nook* as well as earned a seal of excellence nomination from *RT Book Reviews*.

Through witty banter and fun, realistic situations and characters you'll want to "sit down and have a drink with," Jessica tackles tough relationship issues and

complicated human emotions while delivering a deep, satisfying experience for readers.



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