

LIZ LINCOLN

She's a  
Keeper



MILWAUKEE WOLFPACK BOOK 2

# *she's a keeper*

A WOMEN'S SOCCER, ROOMMATES, FRIENDS-WITH-BENEFITS ROMANCE

MILWAUKEE WOLFPACK

BOOK 2

LIZ LINCOLN



[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

*For my good friend Cathleen Brown, aka Lorelie Brown. Your  
light and spirit will always shine with me.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *about the author*

Liz Lincoln has been concocting stories as long as she can remember, and from the beginning they involved two people falling in love. When she's not writing, she spends her time rooting for the UW Badgers and the Green Bay Packers (or yearning for the return of football season), watching the US women's soccer team, stitching sassy sayings, and drinking too much Diet Coke. Or reading one of the many romance novels in her TBR pile. She also works part time as a psychotherapist. Liz lives in Milwaukee, WI, with her husband, two kids, three cats, and a turtle.

Find Liz online at: [lizlincoln.com](http://lizlincoln.com)

And subscribe to her [newsletter](#) for a free copy of the novella *Kiss Me*.



[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# *contents*

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Thank You](#)

[Other Titles by Liz Lincoln](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Gold Medal Match](#)

[\*OceanofPDF.com\*](#)

## *one*

The first thing Rose Olivieri noticed about Cassie were her thighs, long and thick and powerful, with muscle definition sharp enough to cut glass. Next she noticed Cassie's hands, large and equally powerful, as befitting a professional soccer goalkeeper. Rose immediately thought of ways she wanted to enjoy those thighs and hands. Then Rose's gaze had gotten to Cassie's intense blue eyes and it was love at first sight.

Until she found out Cassie was married.

That was four years ago, and Rose had tried, really, really tried, to get over her teammate who became a good friend. Maybe their friendship was the problem, but damned if Rose could keep herself from hanging out with the other woman.

And now Rose had gone and done something really foolish. When Cassie announced she was getting divorced and couldn't afford a place on her own—her ex was getting a ridiculous amount in their settlement and as alimony—Rose volunteered to let Cassie move into her extra bedroom for almost nothing. She had tried to charge actually nothing but Cassie insisted on paying a small amount.

Rose slicked her hands over her wet hair, working the shampoo into her roots. Moving day had been a series of minor disasters. The truck rental place had been running two

hours behind. Greg, Cassie's ex, had refused to take most of the furniture, which meant they'd needed three trips in the small moving truck instead of the one they'd planned on, and Rose's garage was stuffed with furniture she didn't need. Greg had also abandoned the cat he'd promised to take, so there was a surprise extra roommate, a development Rose's cat was thoroughly pissed about. Freddie Purrcury, Cassie's Siamese cat, was currently locked in Cassie's bedroom, and Marie Purrie, Rose's gray tabby, was hissing on the other side of the door. To top it off, it had been 95 degrees and humid, a rarity in Milwaukee, even in August.

At least it was over. Their teammates who'd come to help had eaten pizza and headed home. Cass was unpacking in her room and Rose was alone in the shower, washing the sweat off herself. And for the zillionth time since she invited Cassie to move in, she lectured herself on the need to get over her friend. Cassie had only received and signed her divorce papers last week. Rose couldn't fuck up both their friendship and their roommate situation by jumping in to be the rebound fling.

She was so screwed. In the strictly metaphorical sense, not at all in the sense that she was having sex.

Maybe that was what she needed to start getting over Cassie. A nice fling, some hot sex with a woman who wouldn't demand too much would be ideal. If only she ever met anyone besides her teammates.

She lifted her foot and balanced it on the side of the tub to rub soap over her calves. It felt so good to get clean.

Without warning, the water turned ice cold. Startled, Rose yelped and jumped. Standing on only one foot, she lost her

balance as that foot slid on the wet porcelain and slipped out from under her.

Arms flailing, she went down.

Pain immediately shot through her right hand and arm as she landed with a tooth-rattling thud, followed by a jolt up her spine. The shower curtain rod smacked her in the center of her head, then she was covered in fabric.

She was vaguely aware that she was wrapped in polyester and being pelted by icy water—what the hell happened to the hot water?—but the majority of her focus centered in her hand. It screamed in pain, acute enough to bring tears to her eyes.

The door slammed open. “Rose?”

Rose couldn’t see Cassie, but she could hear the panic in her voice. She must have heard the clatter when the curtain fell. Or perhaps the thump of Rose’s body hitting the tub.

“Oh my god, Rose. What happened?”

Rose tried to sit up, but the pain coupled with the curtain wrapped around her made it difficult. She instinctively pulled her injured arm into her chest.

“Turn off—” She had to suck in a breath through her teeth as another wave of agony rolled over her. She took two more breaths, then managed, “Turn off the water.” A shiver gripped her, making her whole body shake.

As a professional athlete, she’d endured her share of injuries. Torn ACL in college, a couple concussions, strains and sprains, there was always something bruised or sore. And she’d played in just about every weather condition, from ten-below windchill and snow to over 100 degrees.



But somehow, this pain coupled with the freezing water streaming over her was an extra level of hellish agony. Maybe because she was also naked and helpless in front of the woman she'd loved for years.

Cassie did as asked and the water stopped. Relief number one. Rose used her good arm to try to help Cassie lift the curtain rod out of the tub. Which required Rose to move and shift to get the wet fabric off her skin and away from her body where it had stuck to her. The rod kept banging against the wall, then the ceiling, as Cassie maneuvered it away.

Leaving Rose sitting wet and naked in the middle of the tub, clutching her right arm to her chest, and shivering.

“Can you get up?” Cassie asked, her blue eyes daring around, refusing to land on Rose. Did Rose appreciate her friend's discretion? Or did she want Cassie's eyes on her?

*Bad Rose.* No wanting Cassie to see her, really see her, naked. Of course they'd seen each other plenty of times in the locker room, but that was different. That was work. Even lusting after her teammate, Rose could remain professional and not sneak a peek. That was pervy.

But now, now they were in the privacy of their home. In Rose's personal bathroom. Her intimate space. Everything was different.

“I think so.” Rose crossed her ankles and braced her good hand on the edge of the tub. And tried to stand. But her feet slipped and she thumped right back on her ass, rattling her teeth. It shot another bolt of agony up her arm, her hand throbbing. Tears again welled in her eyes and she blinked them back.

Cassie hovered at the side of the tub, arms reaching aimlessly in Rose's direction. "Let me help you."

Rose's whole body flushed hot in mortification. She'd imagined Cassie touching her bare skin hundreds of times, but never could she have imagined the first time—the only time, dammit—would be like this.

Fuck. She wanted to crawl into bed and sleep for a million years until they could both forget this ever happened. But that wasn't possible. Her hand was messed up and she was going to need to contact the team's on-call doctor. She was dizzy with pain, so Cassie would have to drive her.

Fuck a clucking duck.

Rose nodded and immediately Cassie's hands were on her. On her slippery, bare skin. And those big, powerful hands felt as amazing sliding over Rose's shoulder as she'd known they would. They'd touched plenty of times before as teammates, but never like this. Never with this intimacy. Never when Rose was so vulnerable, naked in more than just the lack-of-clothing sense.

Slowly, gently, Cassie helped Rose up so she could sit on the edge of the tub and swing her legs over to the floor. Then as Rose cradled her injured hand, Cassie grabbed a towel and wrapped it around Rose's shoulders.

Leading the way, Cassie went through the door into Rose's bedroom. "I'll get you some clothes while you try to dry off. I can help. Then we need to take you to get an X-ray."

As goalkeeper for the Milwaukee Wolfpack, Cassie was used to taking charge and directing people to where they needed to be. Especially her defense, which included Rose. Off the field, sometimes it could get annoying, but in that

moment, Rose appreciated her friend's take-charge attitude. She was too out of it to think for herself. All she could process was pain and want.

Cassie collected Rose's clothes, then finished drying her damp skin. Her strokes over the towel were efficient and impersonal, but that didn't stop Rose's pulse from speeding up.

Then Cassie grabbed Rose's underpants and dropped to her knees before Rose and Rose almost passed out. She'd never imagined this would be how she'd finally get Cassie in this position.

Because the image was too much, she closed her eyes and Cassie held her panties so Rose could step into them. They repeated the same process with Rose's nylon US Soccer shorts.

"Can you put on a bra?" Cassie's voice sounded odd but Rose couldn't put her finger on why. Probably because her brain had shorted out.

After a moment, she processed the question, then imagined Cassie standing behind her, fastening her bra clasp. Her mouth went dry.

"I'm good," she croaked. "Just a shirt." The medical staff would just have to deal with her D cups bouncing around. No way was she subjecting herself to the added intimacy of Cassie putting on her bra.

Rose's NASA t-shirt proved more difficult, as Cassie held it for Rose to gently put her right arm into. Moving it even a little was agony, and Rose couldn't help moaning a few times. Colored dots danced through her field of vision, and she had to

take several fortifying breaths to wrangle the pain before she could try donning the rest of her shirt.

Cassie was so incredibly gentle as she helped Rose pull it over her head, her fingers ghosting over Rose's sides as she pulled it down to her waist. Now Rose wanted to moan for a different reason, but she swallowed it. Still, she couldn't stop her nipples from pebbling and making themselves very known through her shirt, nor could she help the throb between her legs.

How could she be in this much pain and still be turned on? Bodies were so weird.

"Shoes?" Cassie asked, finally meeting Rose's gaze.

"I have slides by the door."

"Purse?"

"Kitchen table."

"Then let's go."

It was going to be a very long night.



**D**r. Zellweger was cute. Really cute. Not that Cassie was noticing men, or women, or anyone else at the moment. But the new orthopedic resident working with the team doctor was undeniably attractive. Maybe even hot.

So hot that even Rose, a lesbian, could see it.

"You need to ask him out." Rose's eyes were glassy with pain and the Vicodin they'd given her when they first arrived.

"I'm not asking a team doctor out. And I'm pretty sure he thinks we're a couple." Which Cassie could understand. But it

would never happen. Cassie was done with love and romance. Two divorces were enough to get the message across that happily ever after wasn't for her.

“But we're not. So prove him wrong.” Rose gave an exaggerated wink.

Cassie ignored the twinge of disappointment she felt when Rose said they weren't a couple. It was just a fact. As attracted to Rose as Cassie could easily let herself be, it wasn't worth it. She couldn't ruin the best friendship she'd had since elementary school. To say nothing of them being roommates and teammates.

“Two divorces is enough for me. I don't want to be the next Ross Gellar, with three divorces.” Cassie sighed, resigned to her fate. “Love just isn't for me.”

“I'm not talking about love. I'm talking about sex.” Another cheesy wink. Then a wistful sigh. “I miss sex.”

Lust punched Cassie square in the gut. She missed sex too and it was all too easy to imagine it with her roommate. Especially after kneeling at her feet and helping her into her cute little blue-and-white-striped boy short underpants.

She had to bite down hard on her lower lip to keep her breathing even. Damn, that was a potent mental picture.

She would *not* start lusting after her roommate. If she was going to develop a crush on someone, it could not be Rose. It would be best if one of them was dating someone else and inherently off limits. And since that was absolutely not going to be Cassie...

“You haven't dated in a long time,” Cassie said.

“Nope.”

“Do you want to?” It was always possible Rose was asexual or aromantic. Cassie vaguely recalled Rose dating someone a few years ago, but it hadn’t seemed serious.

Rose frowned, her expression exaggerated, like she struggled to think clearly. “Definitely. I kind of like dating. Going out. And I *really* miss sex. Like, I really need to get laid. This has been a hell of a dry spell.”

An idea started spinning in Cassie’s head, but before it could fully form, Dr. Zellweger came back into the room. He smiled his brilliant smile at each of them as he sat down in front of his computer.

“Well, Ms. Olivieri, it appears you have fractured your ring and pinky fingers,” he said, voice smooth and sweet as honey.

If Cassie were in the market for a one-night-stand, Dr. Zellweger would be an excellent prospect. But she was definitely not in the market for anything. Except maybe a new vibrator for her collection.

“I can play soccer with that, right?” Of course that was Rose’s first question. “And I need your answer to be yes.”

The doctor smiled and Rose smiled back in a loopy manner. “Unless you’re the goalie, I don’t see why you shouldn’t be able to play. They’re pretty simple breaks and should heal nicely. But you’ll want to see Dr. Holton on Monday to confirm. We can set up an appointment.” Dr. Holton was the team’s orthopedist.

“No, I’m not the goalkeeper. If you like goalies, you should talk to Cassie. She’s ours and she’s amazing. She’s Canadian, and she plays for their national team too. We both just got back from the World Cup. But I’m on the US team, because I’m from here.”

Apparently Rose ran at the mouth when she was high on painkillers.

Dr. Zellweger cleared his throat. “I hear your team won that. Congratulations.”

Rose beamed. “Thanks.”

“So will she need a cast or a splint or what?” Cassie interrupted, since it seemed like Rose could go on for a long time. And she was pretty sure her friend was trying to steer the conversation toward Cassie flirting with the doctor. Or the doc flirting with Cassie. Neither of which Cassie wanted.

Relief flashed over Zellweger’s face. “Since the breaks are pretty minor I think we just need to tape them together and they’ll act as splints for each other. I’ll have the nurse come in and do that and we’ll get you on your way.”

“What about pain meds?” Cassie asked, since Rose was clearly blissed out on her own meds.

“I would say to start with a combination of 400 milligrams of ibuprofen every four hours and 500 milligrams of acetaminophen every six hours. That should keep it under control. If not, she can come back and we’ll talk about something stronger.” He turned toward Rose. “Because it doesn’t require surgery, it should heal nicely in four to six weeks.”

He went over a few more details on follow-up care for the fingers, then left the room.

Rose exhaled a huge breath. “I can play.”

Cassie nodded, also relieved. Rose was by far the best defensive player on the Wolfpack and made Cassie’s job significantly easier. Cassie had unwavering confidence in her own skill—the only thing about herself she really had

confidence in—but the less the ball got to her, the better it was for the team.

Thinking back to their conversation before the doctor came in, Cassie said, “So, you need to get laid.”

Rose blinked her big brown eyes at Cassie a few times before understanding caught on. “Yeah. Why, you offering?”

Cassie’s stomach see-sawed at the idea. But Rose was obviously joking. “Sure, OK.” She rolled her eyes. “No, actually, I thought I could set you up. Introduce you to someone.”

Her brain started spinning, thinking of all the single lesbian and bisexual women she knew. Amber, a woman in Cassie’s writing group, had been complaining at their last meeting how hard it was to meet a good woman when she was so shy. Shy could be a good balance for Rose’s outgoing, joking personality.

This was perfect. She could set up Rose and Amber, and once Rose had a girlfriend, there would be no chance of Cassie’s mild attraction to her roommate flaring into something bigger.

“I know just the person.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## *two*

**I**t was entirely unfair how gorgeous Rose was. She stood in front of Cassie in a cheeky matching bra and panties set, burgundy lace that looked sexy as hell against skin tanned from all their time outside. It all complemented her dark hair and dark eyes in a way that was undeniably sexy.

It was probably just that Cassie was used to seeing her in sloppy athletic clothes. It was the contrast that had her unable to stop stealing glances at how incredible Rose's cleavage looked or how perfectly shaped her ass was.

Rose turned from her closet, holding up two dresses on hangers. One was a simple black sheath dress, the other a blue floral print sleeveless dress with a flirty skirt. "Which one?"

Cassie had to swallow the extra saliva in her mouth. "Try them on."

Rose turned and slid the black one over her head. She started to wiggle and shimmy, trying to get it down her body.

From her spot on Rose's bed, Cassie swallowed a groan and looked away.

"I think I'm stuck."

Knowing it was a bad idea, Cassie got off the bed and went to her friend. She grabbed the hem of the dress where it

stretched around Rose's ample chest, and started to tug downward. As Cassie pulled gently at the garment, Rose wriggled more. Which made her breasts bounce and sway, right in Cassie's face.

Full, round breasts, gorgeous breasts, lush breasts in sexy lace, breasts that would undoubtedly taste—

Cassie yanked harder than she meant to but it had the intended result; the dress slid the rest of the way down Rose's body and Cassie could step back and suck in a full breath. She felt a little unsteady so she dropped back on the edge of the bed. As Rose wiggled and tugged the dress into place, Cassie stared at the floor and willed herself to stop thinking about her roommate's breasts.

“Ta da!” Rose spun in a circle but Cassie didn't look up in time to see most of it. “What do you think?”

*You look sexy as fuck. But you always do.*

But something made her say “It's nice, but try the blue.” What was she doing? She didn't know if she'd have the willpower to help Rose into yet another dress without copping a feel.

OK, she'd never actually do that. But the wanting to was going to kill her.

“Can you help me out of it?”

So they repeated the process in reverse, but Cassie was much more careful to keep herself from brushing against Rose's body. Fortunately, the blue dress had a zipper and Rose could step into it on her own.

She did another spin and struck a pose, hands in her pockets—a dress with pockets! “So?”

It was tempting to say the blue dress was better solely so Cassie wouldn't have to help again if Rose chose the black. Instead she said, "What look are you going for? The black is sexy." So fucking sexy. "The blue is more casual and flirty."

Rose made a thinking face. "What's Amber like? What do you think would appeal to her more?"

Cassie bit her lower lip as she thought about how to answer that.

Rose made a strange noise, but when Cassie gave her a questioning look, Rose just shrugged. Odd.

Truth was, though she'd known Amber for more than three years, Cassie didn't really *know* her. She was quiet. Shy. Didn't reveal a lot of herself. If anyone could coax her out of her shell, it was Rose. Which was why they'd make a good pair.

"I guess I'd say this one." Cassie nodded at the blue dress. "Still looks fabulous on you, as if there's anything that doesn't." Rose's cheeks flushed an adorable pink. "Plus, if you do end up hooking up with Amber, you can actually get your damn clothes off."

Rose barked out a laugh. "I appreciate your practical analysis of the situation." She turned to the full-length mirror on the back of the closet door and fluffed her shoulder-length brown waves.

Then she turned back to Cassie with a grin that made Cassie's knees feel weak. Good thing she was sitting.

"My hair OK? Make up? I can wear flats, right? I hate heels."

Cassie made herself get up and cross the room to Rose. Her bra strap was peeking out from under the top of the dress,

so Cassie adjusted it, doing her best not to touch Rose's soft skin. Still she couldn't avoid a light brush of finger against shoulder. She willed herself not to shudder.

It was ridiculous how attracted to Rose she was becoming. Unfair and unworkable. It had to end. Rose's date with Amber was a good reminder why Cassie needed to get over it. And Cassie's evening alone with the cats was a good reminder that this was her future.

She just wasn't cut out for love.



“So what kind of writing do you do?” Rose asked her date, a tiny white, blond woman named Amber, with hazel eyes too big for her delicate face.

“I'm writing a memoir,” Amber said, voice almost too quiet to be heard above the din in the restaurant where they were having drinks.

Rose forced interest onto her face. “Really? About what?” For someone around Rose's age of 28 to have material for a memoir, she must have done some really interesting stuff.

Amber fidgeted with the edge of her spoon. “My life.”

Rose waited for her to expand on it while Amber's eyes darted around the table in front of her. It quickly became clear Rose wouldn't get a more detailed answer.

She really wanted to ask what Cassie wrote about. Until two days ago when Cassie explained who she was setting Rose up with, Rose had no idea Cassie was in a writing group, on top of her soccer career. But Cassie had been so bubbly about

telling Rose about the date that Rose hadn't had a chance to ask her roommate about the writing.

Certainly as the member of two professional soccer teams, one that took her all over the world, Cassie had more material for a memoir. It appeared Amber didn't even have the material to get through a conversation, because Rose had used just about every small talk conversation starter she could think of, but had gotten only one- or two-word answers in return.

She'd even spent extra time on her appearance tonight. Rose didn't put a lot of effort into her looks, but tonight she'd used product to emphasize the natural wave in her deep brown hair, taken time to line her brown eyes with black liner and gray shadow. Shit, she'd worn lipstick. Rose only wore lipstick on very special occasions.

And she'd hoped tonight would qualify as a special occasion. She'd decided as she got ready that if there was even a little chemistry between her and Amber, she would be open to a hook-up. But there was nothing clicking with Amber.

Dammit. She really wanted sex that didn't involve batteries. The past five days, since she broke her fingers, had been extra torturous. While she wrote and ate with her left hand, she typically used her right hand for masturbation, whether she was using a toy or her fingers. So her attempts the past few days had been clumsy and frustrating.

She eyed Amber's drink. The other woman was only halfway through her glass of Chardonnay. OK, Rose had a few more conversation topics she could try.

"So besides writing a memoir, what do you do for a job?"

"I'm a CPA." Amber took a delicate sip of her wine. Her gaze flickered up to meet Rose's, then immediately dashed

away.

Rose sighed internally. She took a sip of her ginger beer—she wasn't drinking because she didn't like how she felt when she drank when taking acetaminophen—and brushed a strand of hair out of her face. "I'm sure Cassie told you I play for the Wolfpack with her."

Amber cleared her throat and adjusted herself in her chair. "Yes. You two get paid to play a game."

Anger flashed hot through Rose's body. She'd heard that take plenty of times, but it never failed to flare her temper. She worked her ass off to be one of the best at what she did. To say nothing of all she and her teammates had done off the field to advance equity for women in sports. Amber could fuck all the way off with calling Rose's job a game.

Breathing slowly so she wouldn't go off on her date, Rose opened her purse and pulled out a twenty. She was definitely not having a hook-up tonight, so she might as well cut her losses before Amber said something even worse. Athletes were just as important as accountants. Who were pretty damn important. Rose would be lost without hers.

"Look," Rose said. "I think we can both see this"—she waved a finger between herself and Amber—"isn't happening. So let's not waste any more time and just head home. Clearly you don't respect what I've dedicated my life to, and I can't respect someone who doesn't. So your drink's on me, courtesy of professional soccer, and I'm going to hit the road." She hadn't re-watched *Schitt's Creek* in a while, so it was probably time to do that.

Amber had the grace to look sheepish, staring at the table instead of meeting Rose's eyes. "Yes, this is clearly not a good match."

Heading for the front of the restaurant, Rose opened a rideshare app on her phone and called a car. As it took her through the warm summer evening toward home, the same thought circled round and round in her head.

It was going to be a long time before she got laid.



**B**oth cats hated her. That was the only possible conclusion. Cassie sighed in frustration as she shook the treats at her Siamese cat, Freddie Purrcury. It was understandable that Marie Purrie wasn't too fond of Cassie yet, but she'd had Freddie for five years. He'd clearly always favored Greg, which was why Greg was supposed to take him. But he'd always seemed to like Cassie, or at least tolerate her. Now he refused to come near her, even for some of his favorite treats.

And Greg hadn't responded to any of her texts about either the furniture or the cat.

Off the soccer pitch, everything in Cassie's life was a hot mess—and not the fun kind. But for dumb reasons that probably said a lot about her mental state, it really hurt to be rejected by her own cat. An ache in her chest, burrowing deep into her heart. She knew she wasn't a very lovable person. If her parents basically ignoring her for her entire life hadn't been evidence enough, her two divorces were the icing on that particularly shitty cake.

*I don't know how to love you, Cassie.*

Greg's words from the day he'd served her with divorce papers echoed in her head often. Typically they were followed by the refrain that had played in her head since she was thirteen.

*I guess I love you, Cassandra. Nature says I'm supposed to.*

That was the closest her mom ever got to saying “I love you.” And it was far from the same.

Fuck it. She was not sitting on her bedroom floor and wallowing anymore. She was going to make a snack and binge a show. She hadn't re-watched *Schitt's Creek* in a long time. That was always good for making her laugh.

She really needed to laugh.

She sliced up a green apple, grabbed a jar of peanut butter and a spoon, and headed for the living room couch. She was ten minutes into the first episode when the side door opened, then closed. Rose's footsteps approached.

A quick glance at her fitness watch said Rose had been gone less than two hours. That couldn't be good.

Rose dropped her purse on the coffee table, kicked her black flats off next to it, and flopped into the armchair perpendicular to the couch. She let out a long sigh that sounded frustrated.

“Date went that well?”

“Why did you set me up with someone who doesn't talk?”

Cassie couldn't tell if Rose was confused or upset. “Like, she didn't talk at all?” Cassie knew Amber was shy and took a little warming up, but she'd assumed Rose could get her going. Rose could coax conversation out of a rock if she wanted to.

“Barely.” Rose scrubbed her hand over her face, smudging her eye makeup so she had horrible raccoon eyes.



Rose relayed a quick overview of her date, which didn't sound exactly horrible so much as boring. And Cassie ignored the brief flicker of hope that tickled her belly. It didn't matter if Rose's date went poorly; that wasn't an opening for Cassie to develop a crush. She would do no crushing, especially not on her roommate and, technically, landlord.

All it meant was she needed to find a different date for Rose. She spent a few minutes munching apples and thinking about who else she knew besides their teammates.

Usually when they hung out, even when watching something on TV as they were now, Rose would make comments or interrupt to talk. But tonight she was silent.

Doubt tickled at Cassie's gut. Was Rose mad at her? Did she blame Cassie for her bad date? But she couldn't ask Rose that. That would seem pathetic.

She just had to make sure the next date she sent Rose on was amazing.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *three*

“Do you want deep fried butter on a stick, chocolate-covered bacon on a stick, spiral potatoes on a stick, or fried pickle on a stick?” Lauren Vorski asked Rose and their other friend, Erika Parker-Ward.

“Pickle, definitely,” Erika said. She nodded in the direction of the stand at the Wisconsin State Fair that sold the chosen food.

Not hungry for anything fried on a stick, which seemed to be their only option, Rose followed her friends through the crowd. They had fifteen minutes until they had to report to the main fairway for a short soccer clinic.

“So tell me about this dating you’re doing,” Lauren said as they walked. “Sounds like torture.”

“It’s entirely possible that was Cassie’s goal,” Rose said. She gave them the briefest possible explanation of her date with Amber, a night she’d just as soon put behind her. Amber was probably a lovely woman, but Rose would never have the chance to know.

“Doesn’t this conflict with the crush you’ve had on Cassie for, like, forever?” Erika took her place in line and turned to face Rose, her golden-brown ponytail swinging gracefully around her shoulders.

Rose's feelings for Cassie went beyond a crush, but she wasn't getting into that. No one needed to know how in love with her roommate she was. How hard she would have to work to get over it.

"I'm over Cassie," she lied. "And even if I weren't, it would be supremely stupid to get involved in a rebound fling with my just-divorced roommate."

They waited while Erika and Lauren ordered their deep fried pickles on sticks. "When I retire, I want to go around the country to every state fair and take pictures of their food on sticks, and write a coffee-table book called *State Fair on a Stick*," Lauren said before taking a large bite of her pickle.

Rose snort-laughed. "I'd buy it." She checked her watch. Eighty-nine degrees. Ugh. No wonder she was already sweating through the pits of her Wolfpack t-shirt.

Maybe they could go to the pool after this. Even though they'd been in Australia for half the summer for the Women's World Cup and spent most of August at practice or traveling for games, the three women had joined a local pool and liked to cool off there after soccer practice.

They also had ten minutes until they had to be at their demonstration. Cassie would be there too, along with midfielder Lin Jiang and forward Fernanda Cardoso. Erika and Lauren also played forward.

"So I thought you were done with dating after Liza," Lauren said as they strolled toward the fairway.

"I'm done with relationships. I don't want one. But dating is different. It's going out a few times, making out a little, maybe having sex. Casual. No commitment. No one overly dependent on anyone else."

Liza, the only serious relationship Rose had since moving to Milwaukee, had been too much. A wonderful woman who just needed too much, more than Rose had to give. Rose had felt smothered. That's how all relationships felt to her. Which she knew was her issue and she needed to work it out. And she would. Someday. When she wanted to. For now, she just wanted to play soccer.

"You know, relationships aren't all bad. Some are pretty excellent," said blissfully married Erika.

Rose rolled her eyes while Lauren groaned.

"We know, we know, you and Nate are the picture of martial perfection," Lauren said.

Erika shook her head, used to her friends' ways. "Invite Cassie with us next Friday night, then, if she's finding you hook-ups. She can be your wingwoman."

Cassie with them at a beer garden? Did Rose want that? Did she want to elevate her to that status of friend?

Oh, hell, she already lived with the woman. She'd already been elevated. "Sure, I'll ask."

The friends polished off their food as they joined the other three women on the small grassy area where they would demonstrate some soccer tricks and play two minutes of 3-vs-3 soccer for the crowd.

As they stood while someone from the Fair introduced them, Cassie gently knocked Rose with her shoulder. "Hey," Cassie whispered.

Rose jostled Cassie in return. "Hey."

"Eat anything delicious on a stick?"

“Sadly, no, but the day is still young.” Rose’s voice dripped with innuendo. Though since she preferred no sticks in her innuendo scenarios, she had no idea why she’d made the joke.

Cassie snorted with the effort of holding in a laugh.

“Bless you.” Rose bit the inside of her lips to stop her own laugh.

“Hush,” Cassie hissed.

“...our Milwaukee Wolfpack!” The Fair employee turned toward the players, sweeping his arm wide to encompass them all.

Rose grabbed a ball, pasted on her public persona face of a bright smile, and started juggling. Thank the soccer gods that she didn’t need her fingers. The last two weeks would’ve been torturous if she’d hurt the lower half of her body when she fell.

The women showed off a variety of footwork tricks as the growing crowd watched.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer boomed into his microphone.

*And nonbinary people and everyone else,* Rose mentally added. Why couldn’t people replace “ladies and gentlemen” with something that encompassed everyone?

“You are watching soccer greatness here. All six of these women represented their respective countries earlier this summer at the Women’s World Cup.”

Cassie caught Rose’s eye and rolled hers. Rose had to bite back another laugh as she kicked the ball between Lauren’s feet, then ran around her friend to pick up the ball and start dribbling. Nutmeg.

She dribbled toward where Cassie stood in the small goal set up for her. Grinning, Cassie moved into position. Though she'd never do it in a game, Rose locked gazes with Cassie. Both women grinned at each other.

Rose feinted left. Cassie followed an instant later. Rose moved right. So did Cassie. They danced back and forth, the ball barely moving at Rose's feet.

Something sparked between them, right there on the grass in front of at least a hundred people. The air fairly crackled around them and Rose's breath came in shallow bursts, like she'd sprinted the length of an actual soccer field.

"Shoot it!" a kid yelled from the crowd, bursting the magical bubble that had momentarily surrounded Rose and Cassie.

Rose blinked a few times to clear her head. She still wasn't thinking clearly enough to fake out Cassie, so she simply kicked as hard as she could for the goal.

Cassie caught it easily between her gloved hands. She tossed the ball back to Rose in a chest pass. "Nice try. You're supposed to protect me, not score on me."

*Can I score with you?*

No, bad Rose. She had to stop thoughts like that. When they got home, she'd have to ask who Cassie was setting her up with next.



**W**hat just happened? One minute they were facing off over a soccer ball, the next the world disappeared and Cassie hadn't been aware of anything but Rose. The air around them

changed from hot and sticky to magnetic, the way it felt right before a storm.

It gave Cassie goose bumps. Screwed with her breath. And gave her a powerful urge to grab Rose and kiss her, audience be damned.

Thank god for that kid who'd yelled at Rose and broken whatever weird spell it had been.

Cassie forced the incident out of her mind because she just wasn't going there. She had another date arranged for Rose, next Tuesday. There was no way Rose and Mai wouldn't click. Cassie knew the nurse practitioner from volunteering at Planned Parenthood, where Mai worked. She was smart, compassionate, and took no shit. Perfect for Rose.

And once Rose had a girlfriend, once Rose was having regular sex and Cassie had to hear it through the walls of their house, then Cassie would stop imagining that she had magical moments with her roommate.

They played a quick three-on-three game, the three forwards against Cassie, Rose, and midfielder Lin. Because the goal was much smaller than regulation, Cassie was easily able to stop every shot. But she knew crowds liked goals, so she let two get past her.

The announcer reminded the crowd to go to Wolfpack games, then dismissed the players. A tall white woman with gray streaks in her dark hair came toward them, waving. In her hand, she carried a small plastic food container.

"Hello, girls!" she called.

Vera. Oh boy.

"Hi, Mom," Rose said in a resigned voice.

Cassie wanted to put a comforting arm around Rose's shoulder. Everyone on the team and coaching staff knew Rose's mom could be a bit much. She'd never gotten over being Snack Mom for Rose's youth teams.

"I brought you snacks. I thought you could use some protein after playing on such a hot day." Vera opened the lid and held out the plastic container. It was filled with what looked like her favorite to make for the team—because she often showed up at practice with snacks—peanut butter-oatmeal protein balls. There was also a plastic bag with a separate recipe she used that didn't contain nuts because Lauren was allergic.

Because of course she knew the allergy status of the entire team. Probably the US team too.

Rose's cheeks were pinker than warranted from the heat and sunshine. She was embarrassed. Cassie didn't blame her. While she'd often longed for her parents to give the slightest indication they gave a single shit about her, she wouldn't want this either. Somewhere between her parents and Rose's was the happy balance of how family should be. Or what she thought it should be, anyway.

Lauren accepted the plastic bag from Vera. "Thanks, Mrs. O. We do always love your snacks." There was only a little sarcasm in her words. The food *was* good.

"Mom, you know we're at a fair," Rose said. "We're literally surrounded by food."

Vera waved her hand, dismissing Rose. "That's all garbage. You ladies need your protein and energy."

Cassie kept her mouth shut, but she could've pointed out that the energy would've been more helpful before they had



practice, then this demonstration. But Vera probably wouldn't appreciate that.



The server took the menus from Rose and her date, then headed toward the kitchen. Mai was a petite Vietnamese American woman with a pixie cut that flattered her features. She wore olive green cargo pants and a purple t-shirt that said “Eat the rich” in bold white letters. A sentiment Rose mostly agreed with but not what she would have picked for a first date in a relatively nice restaurant. She felt overdressed in a green sundress that Cassie said made her freckles pop “in a sexy way.”

But at least Mai talked. While they waited for their server, she'd managed to keep up a steady chatter about the book she was reading. It was a literary novel Rose hadn't heard of but it sounded interesting, if a little dark. It seemed like everyone died. Rose read mostly romance novels. She liked everyone getting their happy endings.

“So you volunteer with Cassie at Planned Parenthood?” Rose took a sip of her gin and tonic. Her fingers were still splinted and taped, but she no longer needed painkillers to get through the day, so she could have a drink.

Mai gave Rose a withering look. “I work there. I'm a nurse practitioner.”

“Oh, gotcha. Cassie just said she works with you there. That must be a very rewarding job.”

“It is. It's very important work we do. Seventy-nine percent of our patients are at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level.” Mai sat a little straighter in her chair.

Rose felt a flicker of possibility. She liked that Mai was so confident and proud of what she did. “You don’t have to sell me on it. I think you’re a great organization.”

Instead of taking the hint, Mai proceeded to tell Rose more statistics on Planned Parenthood. Then she went into the work she specifically did, no longer abortions, but STI treatment, pelvic exams, and... well, Rose lost track, frankly. After fifteen minutes of hearing her date tell her how important she was, Rose tuned out. She sipped her drink and let Mai monologue about herself.

That flicker of possibility died. Mai was undoubtedly a great person, but Rose couldn’t drum up interest in someone who didn’t seem interested in her. Conversations and first dates were give and take, not one sided. And considering Mai kept talking about herself right up until their food arrived, and then as they started to eat, the night didn’t show much sign of improving.

Another one biting the dust.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *four*

**A**nother Friday night and Cassie was in her usual spot. The far end of the couch, apple slices on a plate on the armrest next to her, peanut butter jar in her left hand. Marie Purrie was cleaning herself at the other end of the couch and who knew where Freddie Purrcury was. Rose was on a date.

Cassie had a good feeling about this date. Mai was a nurse practitioner and very down to earth. Rose was a little more lighthearted, but to Cassie it seemed like they would complement each other well.

Cassie had even taken the social leap and asked Lauren and Erika if they wanted to come over for a movie night, but Erika had plans with her husband and Lauren also had a date. Cassie had worked up all that courage for nothing.

So it was just her, the cats, and Netflix. There was a new teen rom-com a few of her teammates had been talking about at practice this week, and it apparently had some kick-ass soccer player girls in it, so Cassie decided to try that.

She was a half hour in when she heard the front door open. What the hell? Who the hell was walking in her door? Even if Rose were already home, she would use the side door closer to the driveway.

Peanut butter still in hand, Cassie shoved to her feet. She didn't have a plan or anything, she just knew she wasn't going to sit on the couch and wait for someone to attack her.

Heart pounding, throat closed off, she rounded the corner into the front hall and came face to face with—

Rose's mom, holding a plastic tote filled with multicolored paper.

Vera grinned. "Cassie! Oh, it's so nice to finally officially meet you. I'm Rose's mother, Vera." Holding out her free hand, Vera crossed the small room.

She and Rose had the same facial features, especially their mouths. And she had Rose's same warm brown eyes. Her hair was dark with streaks of gray, and Cassie could almost picture Rose's hair making the same transformation sometime in the future.

Cassie returned the handshake. "Nice to meet you."

"Is Rose here?" Vera held up her box and wiggled it. "I come bearing crafts."

Cassie tried to imagine Rose doing arts and crafts but the image wouldn't gel.

"She's actually on a date." Hopefully that wasn't something Rose wanted kept from her mom.

On second thought, shit, she should have just said Rose was out. Were the tables turned, she absolutely wouldn't want her mother to know she was on a date.

A strange look passed over Vera's face, then disappeared. "That's wonderful she's dating again. It's been far too long."

She moved past Cassie and into the house like she owned the place. Not sure what else to do, Cassie followed her to the

dining room.

Cassie loved Rose's dining room. It was probably her favorite room in the house. It had a built-in buffet that ran the length of one wall, with cabinets at either end. The doors on the cabinets were stained glass, a style she thought was called Craftsman.

Taking up most of the room was a table with six chairs but that could easily seat eight or even ten. It was made of sturdy dark wood with decorative tiles inlaid in the center, the chairs matching. Rose had mentioned it had been her grandparents'.

Vera set her tote on the table and began unpacking her things.

Wait, what?

She was just going to sit down and craft even though Rose wasn't home? Cassie should say something. But how did she throw out her roommate's mom? Her own mom she could easily tell to get the hell out. But Vera seemed like a nice woman.

"Since Rose isn't here, you'll have to help me." Vera pulled out three containers of what looked like glitter.

Oh fuck. Glitter was the worst.

"What, uh, help you with what?" Please not something with glitter.

Vera set out several envelopes, a handful of pens, and some notecards. Then she pulled a printed piece of paper out of the tote.

"We're sending cards to all the members of congress who are supporting the latest wave of anti-LGBTQ legislation."

"You can't just call the office?"

“Oh, I call my representatives almost every day. There’s no use calling anyone else. But sending cards, well, they can’t ignore that. Especially not when we can”—she picked up a container of glitter and shook it—“glitter bomb them.”

Oh hell. This just kept getting better. “Glitter bomb?”

Vera nodded, expression more earnest than Cassie had maybe ever seen anyone. Not one ounce of humor or irony on her face.

And Cassie couldn’t do anything but laugh. It was too absurd. She laughed so hard she felt lightheaded and had to put her hand on the back of a chair.

As she did, Vera pulled out another chair and sat down. She got out a few more printed sheets.

When Cassie finally got herself back under control—her sides hurt just a little—she did the only thing she could. She sat down to join Vera.

“So tell me what to do.” As political causes went, Cassie certainly wasn’t averse to getting involved in LGBTQ+ rights. She identified with the B part of the acronym. And even if she weren’t, denying anyone rights wasn’t OK.

Vera gave Cassie a quick rundown of what she wanted. She had a template for what to write on each card, had a printout with a few hundred addresses to write on the envelopes, and of course, ample glitter.

Cassie could already envision picking the itty-bitty craft supply out of her hair for weeks. Good thing the room had hardwood floors and not carpet.

“Here, you start with the Senate. That’s 48 cards to get you started. And I’ll make a dent in the 205 House Reps who favor the bill.”

Cassie took a stack of envelopes and a pen. She would leave the glitter step until the last possible moment. One at a time, she started addressing the envelopes to the members of the US Senate who were pushing some truly backward, Draconian bills.

After a few minutes of working, Vera said, “So, Cassie, tell me about yourself. I know you’re the goalkeeper for the Wolfpack, of course, and I believe Rose has said you also play for Canada, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cassie said, her cheeks warming. She hated her flushing response.

“Pffft, call me Vera, please. You’re living with Rose, so you’re practically family anyway.”

Cassie couldn’t say why, but that made her cheeks even hotter.

“So what else do you do for fun? Where in Canada are you from? What’s your family like?”

Family. Ugh. That was a subject Cassie didn’t want to bring up. *Well, I’m a massive disappointment to my parents because I’m not prim and proper and demure, so they basically hate me.* Yeah, that just made everyone feel awkward.

“I’m from the Toronto area. One older brother. Started playing soccer when I was seven, came up through the system there a lot like Rose did here. And that pretty much covers my childhood.”

*Please don’t ask about my parents or if I ever talk to that older brother.*

“And you’ve been with the Wolfpack for four years?”

“Seven, actually.” She’d been offered a little more money a few years ago to transfer to North Carolina, but she’d passed it up. She liked Milwaukee. It suited her.

Plus, at the time she’d been engaged to Greg. Lotta good that had done her.

“Seven, wow. You must really like it here.” Vera added another card to her small stack.

“I do.”

“And what do you do for fun?”

“Fun?” Cassie deadpanned.

Vera chuckled. “Yes, I suppose if you’re like Rose, soccer is everything. But what were you doing tonight before I imposed myself upon you?”

Cassie flushed again. “Oh, uh, I was just watching a movie. I like movies. I read some, sci fi and romance. I guess I like stuff where I don’t have to think too hard, since I feel like I spend so much time ‘on’ at practice and games. I just need a break.”

She felt Vera’s gaze on her and looked up to find the older woman smiling fondly at her. The way, well, a mother would look at someone. The way Cassie’s mother never looked at her.

This time the flush was in her chest, a warm rush of contentment seeping into the cold, dark spaces in her lonely heart.

Which was ridiculous. Vera was just being friendly. She already had a daughter. It wasn’t like she was going to informally adopt Cassie and make up for all the years of emotional neglect.



Cassie mentally shook off the notion and went back to her card. She was already to the senator from Iowa. Because of course they were in alphabetical order by state.

“I do some volunteer work,” Cassie said a few minutes later. “I was a patient escort at Planned Parenthood. Figured I might as well use my size for something good. Now I do whatever they need around the clinic.” So asinine that people in Wisconsin could no longer get legal abortion care.

Vera beamed. “That’s wonderful. I keep telling Rose she needs to pick a cause and start a foundation. But I suppose her tutoring with the public schools is enough for now.”

Cassie loved that Rose was outgoing enough to tutor kids. Cassie never knew what to say to kids. The women she escorted usually didn’t want to talk so she didn’t have to do more than introduce herself. Occasionally she got a nervous talker but then they did all the talking.

So asinine that women in Wisconsin could no longer get legal abortion care.

Before Cassie could start her next card, Freddie came in and jumped up on the table. “Marow,” he said.

Cassie gave him a scratch behind the ears, pulled him off the table, and got up to go to the kitchen. She scooped a can of food into a dish and left him to it.

“Is that your cat? Rose didn’t mention you were bringing a cat,” Vera said as Cassie resumed her seat.

“Oh, yeah. My asshole ex was supposed to take him, but he just left him there. The cat doesn’t really like me, but I couldn’t exactly abandon him.”

“That sounds awful. Good riddance, if that’s the way he treated you and his animal.”

Yeah, her divorce hadn't exactly been her walking away in a fit of female empowerment, demanding better treatment. Sort of the opposite.

*I don't know how to love you, Cass. I've tried, I really have. But you won't let me.*

All because she didn't think they needed to air all their problems to a therapist. A therapist who would inevitably want to dig into her childhood—isn't that what they all did?—and no way in hell was Cassie talking to a stranger about that. She didn't talk to anyone about her family.

But none of that mattered now. She'd refused couple's therapy, Greg had asked for a divorce, and now she was single and living with her teammate.

They continued working and chatting. Vera didn't ask anything too personal, at least nothing Cassie couldn't dodge with a vague answer. And it was... nice. Comfortable. And even though she tried not to pay too much attention to it, it made her feel warm inside to have Vera so interested in her.

At least someone's mom gave a shit, even if it wasn't her own.

"Mom, are you here?" Rose's voice interrupted a discussion of favorite romantic comedy movies.

"Hi, sweetie!"

The side door shut, then Rose appeared in the dining room. "What are you—oh no. Mom, no."

Vera gave Rose a mock innocent look.

"You did not harass Cassie into committing domestic terrorism with you."

"Glitter is not domestic terrorism."

“You’ve obviously never tried to get glitter out of carpeting.” Rose dropped heavily into the chair next to Cassie’s.

“Good point,” Cassie said, fighting a smile.

“Thank you.” She turned her face toward Cassie. “You don’t have to do this, you know.”

Cassie shook her head. “It’s fine. I’m having a nice time.”

Rose looked horrified.

Cassie knocked Rose’s shoulder with her own. “Why are you here, anyway? Shouldn’t you be somewhere making out with Mai?”

Rose’s cheeks turned an adorable pink that matched her name. “I don’t want to talk about it. But you’re oh-for-two on picking dates for me.”

Cassie tried to dredge up something approximating disappointment for her friend but somehow couldn’t. “Sorry?”

Rose shrugged. “Maybe next time I’ll just let you decide who to swipe right on.”

“Rose!” Vera looked scandalized, eyes wide, mouth in an O.

“Come on, Mom. I’m joking. Go back to your craft-based harassment.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *five*

The live band at Estabrook Park beer garden was so loud, Cassie could feel her teeth vibrating. Thank god for good dental work.

She felt awkward and overdressed in the shimmery top Rose had convinced her to buy. Cassie wasn't a shimmer person. But Rose insisted she had a nice figure—despite her decided lack of abundance in the chest area—and talked Cassie into the tight, strappy green shirt.

She did look good in green, that she knew. Her mother always told her it was the only color that didn't make her look like a giant freckle because it complemented her peaches and cream skin and strawberry blonde hair. Cassie had never been into fashion or looks, probably because her mother was, so she didn't spend much time thinking about what she wore. Sweats and a t-shirt suited her fine.

“Should we get a table?” Erika yelled over the music.

Rose nodded vigorously, her dark hair swirling over her shoulders. She had really beautiful hair, smooth and sleek without even trying. To get her curly hair that smooth, Cassie had to use tons of product and spend an hour blowing it out. It was rarely worth it.

Lauren spun toward the collection of wooden picnic tables, her beer sloshing over the side of the plastic cup. She licked it off her hand as she walked.

Cassie tried not to feel too awkward as they sat at the table and started talking and sipping their beer. But between her shirt and feeling like a fourth wheel in the group, it was hard to relax. The other three women were all on the US National Team together, while Cassie played for Canada. So despite having played four seasons with Lauren and Rose, and only this season with Erika, she didn't quite feel like she fit in. The three were clearly very close. But when they'd made plans to spend the evening at a local beer garden to catch a reggae band they liked, Rose had insisted Cassie join them.

"How's the dating going, Rose?" Erika asked. "Cassie found you the love of your life yet?"

There was a twinkle in Erika's eye that Cassie couldn't interpret.

Rose groaned and covered her hands with her face. "No comment."

"Apparently I'm no good at the matchmaking thing," Cassie said. "Yet." But she wasn't defeated. She would find someone for her friend if that's what Rose wanted. Just because Cassie had given up on love and relationships didn't mean Rose had to.

Rose gave her friends a quick recap of the dates, telling them about shy Amber and egocentric Mai.

"Does Mai even realize that more than one of the soccer players she disdains donates lots of money to Planned Parenthood?" Lauren asked.

“Mai didn’t seem to have an issue with soccer players,” Rose corrected. “That was Amber.”

Lauren rolled her eyes. “Whatever. People suck.”

Rose and Erika laughed. Cassie felt left out of the joke.

From next to her, Erika squeezed Cassie’s arm. “Let’s pool our resources. Between the three of us, we have to know someone perfect for Rose.”

Cassie had thought Heather, her first ex-spouse, was perfect for her. She’d thought Greg was, if not perfect, at least good. Look how those turned out. She really was the wrong person to be in charge of finding Rose a date.

“How come you want to be set up right now?” she asked. Maybe understanding that better would help.

Rose and Lauren exchanged a look, saying something Cassie didn’t understand. She struggled not to squirm.

“It’s just been a long time. And I’m not looking for true love or anything. Nothing too intense. I just want to go out, make out a little, maybe have some sex.” Rose shrugged. “Just... date. Like I’ve said. And I don’t know why now, exactly.”

Erika took a drink of her beer, watching Rose with a pensive expression. “Describe to me your dream date. The person, not the activity.”

Rose bit her bottom lip. Something inside Cassie’s stomach flip-flopped, something that had no business flip-flopping around her roommate. She took a gulp of her beer to try to settle things down. Thankfully there was a light breeze coming off the Milwaukee River because she was suddenly feeling a little hotter.

“I guess, most important is kind. Personable, someone you can talk to. No ultra right wingers or anything,” Rose started.

“Obviously,” the other three women said in unison.

They all looked at each other and started laughing. Erika again squeezed Cassie’s arm. Cassie couldn’t help wishing she were sitting next to Rose, that it was Rose touching her bare skin.

*Down, girl.* She didn’t even want hookups, let alone dating like Rose wanted. And a roommate was strictly off limits.

When they calmed down again, Rose took a swig of her drink, then said with a dreamy smile, “I’m a sucker for freckles. Clearly someone who respects pro athletes.”

Lauren chewed on her bottom lip. Weird, that had no effect on the equilibrium of Cassie’s stomach.

“I’m thinking...” Lauren said.

“And it goes without saying they have to be an amazing kisser.”

There went the flip-flop stomach again. It was getting damn annoying. Cassie took another fortifying swallow of beer. She was almost through her first pint and she didn’t like having more than two at any time.

“The only amazing kisser I know is my husband and you can’t have him,” Erika said.

Rose looked horrified. “Not even a little bit my type.”

Erika wrinkled her nose at Rose, who responded in kind.

Lauren slammed her empty cup down on the table. “I need another beer.” She glanced at Cassie with a raised eyebrow.

What the hell, why not? She could have one more. Cassie stood up and made herself not adjust her top. *It looks so hot on you*, Rose had said. Remembering it had Cassie again appreciating the cooling breeze.

As she passed Rose, her roommate grabbed her wrist. Cassie's skin tingled where Rose touched her.

"Can you get me a water?" Rose asked.

Cassie smiled and it was only a little forced. "No problem."

She had to remember these were her teammates. She did fit in with them and Rose wouldn't have invited her if they didn't want her there. She just had to keep trying to find a place where she belonged that wasn't the soccer field.



"You know you basically described Cassie, right?" Erika said as soon as Lauren and Cassie were out of earshot.

"Did not." She'd described personality attributes she found attractive. Lots of people were kind, liberal, and accepted athlete as a valid profession. Yes, that described Cassie but it described hundreds of other women in the Milwaukee area too.

Just no one she'd met yet whom she'd also been attracted to.

"Freckles? Really?" Erika leveled a stare at her.

OK, maybe she had been thinking of Cassie for that. Because Cassie was the standard she was looking for. She needed a clone of Cassie who wasn't her roommate and who was actually into her.



“I’ve always liked them. My first crush was Kate DeLittle and she had so many freckles. They’re just cute.”

Rose loved how Cassie’s freckles were all over her body, not just her button nose. Cassie really would have been classically cute and pretty if she weren’t six feet tall and built as fuck. She had delicate features, sparkling blue eyes, a perfect bow of a mouth. And her hair was such a unique color, with soft curls. And—

Erika snapped her fingers in front of Rose’s face. “Wake up. No daydreaming about Cassie.”

Erika knew her too well.

Rose put her face in her hands and dropped it to the table. “What am I going to do?”

“Date everyone we can think of. Which is probably what we should’ve tried years ago.”

Lauren and Cassie returned with fresh beers and four waters. They women sat and joked and dissected Rose’s lack of love life as they drank. Rose made a point to draw Cassie into the conversation. She knew she, Erika, and Lauren could be an intimidating group to hang out with.

They’d met at a US Soccer youth camp when Rose was fourteen and Erika and Lauren each seventeen. Erika and Lauren had already met at previous camps, and had taken Rose in as a third and the three had been best friend since. Having Erika now playing for the Wolfpack was awesome, her two best friends living in the same city.

After they finished their beers, the conversation waned and they listened to the music, a popular local reggae band. “Who wants to dance?” Erika asked.

“Nope,” Lauren said immediately.

Erika and Rose both rolled their eyes. Lauren was the most curmudgeonly old man Rose had ever met, despite her being a 31-year-old woman.

Rose popped up and reached for Cassie's arm. So what if her fingertips instantly warmed when she touched Cassie's skin? She ignored it and tugged on her friend's arm. "Come on. Don't be a grumpy butt like Lauren."

"Wouldn't want that," Cassie deadpanned.

Grabbing Erika's wrist with her free hand, Rose led her friends to the dance floor.

"You know," Erika said, raising her voice to be heard over the music, "maybe we can find someone out here for Rose."

"I could make out with a stranger," Rose said, forcing enthusiasm into her voice. It had been a long time since she'd done that and it would probably be a good step to getting over Cassie.

They joined the crowd of people in front of the small stage and stayed near each other as they began to move.

After a few minutes, Cassie sidled up behind Rose and pressed in close to her back. Everything in Rose went on high alert. The air was too thick to breathe. She needed to swallow but her mouth was suddenly dry.

She closed her eyes and willed her legs not to collapse as Cassie slid Rose's loose hair to the side. She pressed her face close to Rose's, and Rose wanted to melt. This was a horrible idea, their bodies shifting intimately against each other as they danced. But it felt so good. Rose's nipples hardened and she couldn't blame the breeze. One of Cassie's thighs, those amazing thighs, brushed Rose's and she had to clench her muscles to keep from trembling.

“There’s a woman over there who’s been eyeing you. White, brown hair in braids, red shirt.”

It was like ice injected into her veins. Rose could have sworn her nipples pouted. Cassie wasn’t coming to dance with her, she was trying to hook Rose up.

Rose took a step away and turned. She leaned in but not as close as they’d been. “Thanks.” She didn’t meet her friend’s gaze. She couldn’t. She didn’t have any way to explain the disappointment Cassie would surely see. It was summer, the evening still light enough to clearly see each other’s faces.

“You should go over there.”

“Or should I let her come to me?”

“Nah, go to her.”

Rose sighed internally. So much for dirty dancing with Cassie.

It was for the best.



Next there was Kate, who seemed promising but then had horrendous table manners and Rose just couldn’t get past it. She was that shallow, she could admit.

Then Noelle, who spent the whole time turning the conversation back to how awful her ex was. In a way that was just a little bit creepy and made Rose want to find and warn the ex.

Maria smoked, a huge turnoff for Rose. Bonita talked too much about the conspiracy theories she believed. Ana ordered the most expensive thing on the menu, took one bite, then left

the rest; she didn't get a to-go container. Dee she'd actually liked, but apparently Rose didn't make much of an impression on Dee, because she'd flat out told Rose she wasn't interested. Lily was just straight up bitchy and rude, plus they both had flower names and that was just weird. Rhonda showed up thirty minutes late and somehow made Rose feel like she was the one who'd done something wrong.

But really, when it came down to it, the women she went out with were probably good women underneath but they all had the same flaw.

They weren't Cassie.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**T***ed Lasso* was probably the greatest television show ever made. Which explained why Cassie was starting a binge-watch of it for the seventh time. It wasn't just the soccer she loved, though that was great—*football is life!* as character Dani Rojas said. Football, or soccer, was definitely life for her.

Tonight, she needed the heartfelt nature of the show as well, the excessive kindness and humanity of the characters. She was trying not to wallow, but when you were home alone on a Friday night with a lukewarm beer and two cats, it was hard not to. Freddie Purrcurie had curled himself up in a strange position draped half on Cassie's lap, half on her chest. Marie Purrie was warming Cassie's toes. It was the closest the two cats had been and not hissed at each other.

On the television, Jason Sudeikis got his first tour of the Richmond stadium. In Cassie's living room—it was finally starting to feel like hers, not just Rose's—she winced as she took a sip of beer. Warm beer was nasty. She set it on the side table. No point getting a new one and disturbing her feline friends.

Rose was on a date with Rhonda, a woman Cassie knew from her old neighborhood. Rhonda liked soccer, was pretty,

and was also not in the market for anything serious. She was a perfect match for Rose.

Which was what Cassie was supposed to want. She'd agreed to set up her friend. So why did the idea of Rose kissing another woman, sleeping with another woman, make her feel a little sick inside, like her beer had gone down wrong? Why did her throat close for a moment when she imagined Rose and Rhonda holding hands?

It wasn't like Cassie wanted Rose. That was absurd. They were friends. Roommates. Teammates. A million reasons why they couldn't be together. And Cassie didn't want that anyway. She was done with dating and relationships. And, unfortunately, that probably meant sex too. At least sex with someone besides herself.

But going the rest of her lifetime with only solo sex wasn't so bad. It totally didn't make her chest clench and her eyes burn like she was going to cry.

OK, so she hated the idea of no more sex. She'd have to find a way to reprogram her brain and divorce sex from emotions. Then she could have occasional flings. But that would take time. For now, it was much better to avoid the vulnerability and pain of relationships more serious than casual friendship. She knew who she was, knew she wasn't someone people could fall in love with. And she was OK with that.

Her phone ringing startled her out of her thoughts. When she checked the screen, the caller ID had her stomach dropping like a dread-filled brick.

*Mom*

Her mother rarely called her and she never called her mom. Truth was, Cassie kind of despised her mom. Her mom had the unique ability to make her feel like the shittiest person on earth. Who needed that from their mother when they got it from their brain just fine?

Still, if Mom was calling, it must be important. Otherwise she wouldn't waste her time talking to her disappointment of a daughter.

Reluctantly, Cassie swiped to answer the call. "Hello, Mother."

"Cassandra. How are you?"

Because her mom was obsessed with what was proper, she would bother with small talk and niceties, even with someone she didn't like.

"I'm well. And you?" She wasn't well, exactly. She didn't know what she was. Mourning her marriage, if not losing Greg himself. Hopeful about the future, yet a little pessimistic too. Emotionally exhausted.

If only she had the supportive mom who she could talk to about her problems. Share her joys. Last spring, he hadn't even bothered to tell her parents she made the Canadian World Cup team and was the starting goalkeeper during the tournament. She still wasn't sure they knew.

Had she told Mom that she got divorced? That had been a nine-month process, so it must have come up at some point, even if she couldn't remember.

"Your cousin Veronica is getting married," Mom said.

Veronica. The perfect cousin. Tall, thin, pretty, sweet, smart but not nerdy. Polite, demure, a CPA with an equally perfect boyfriend—now fiancée—who worked in real estate

finance. If they played sports it was a light game of tennis at the club or swimming to stay fit. Veronica, the cousin who was everything Cassie's mom wished she could be.

Veronica, the cousin who was perfect in all the ways Cassie wasn't.

"That's great," Cassie said without enthusiasm. "Tell her and Justin I'm happy for them." She didn't wish them ill will, at least.

"You'll be coming for the wedding." It was not a question. It was the voice Denise Dickinson used when she wanted to ensure no one would argue with her.

Mom should have known better. Cassie always argued, even with that tone. The idea of going back to Toronto, of seeing all the people who'd made her childhood so cold and lonely, made her physically ill. Her stomach roiled thinking about spending even one night in the emotionless guest room that had once been hers. She'd been at UNC for all of two weeks when her mom redecorated.

The Dickinsons were all the proof you needed that money didn't buy happiness. Cassie had been miserable living her highly privileged childhood. She still struggled, but she was much happier playing soccer and struggling to pay her bills than wealthy and alone.

"It's the second weekend in November. I've already booked you a flight. We'll—"

"I can't. Sorry." Not sorry. "That's playoffs. We're first in the league right now and almost certainly will be in the playoffs. I can't take a vacation." Thank every god and goddess and deity of every religion.



“Don’t be ridiculous. This is your cousin. This is *family*. You’ll be there. You can’t skip this for a silly little game.”

Anger pulsed in Cassie’s skull, shoulders aching from how stiffly she held them. “I’m not abandoning my team,” she said through her teeth. Since when had Mom given a shit about family? She couldn’t stand her own daughter.

“Cassandra,” Mom practically hissed. “Think how this will look if the whole family isn’t here.”

Of course. It was always a competition between Mom and her sister-in-law, Veronica’s mom. And Denise was always losing because her daughter was a failure as a Good Daughter. Cassie was supposed to wear dresses and have a boring job and date and marry boring men.

“You can even bring that husband of yours, Gary—“

“Greg. We got divorced.” Apparently it hadn’t come up.

“Oh, Cassandra.” Disdain dripped from Mom’s voice. “*Two* divorces? That’s so... pedestrian. And embarrassing. What will my friends think?”

Cassie had not a single fuck to give for her mom’s friends.

“Well, anyway, since you have a few months, please try to get rid of some of that bulk you like to carry around. Nothing can be done about your height, but if you could try to get rid of those man shoulders. Every dress you wear makes you look like a... a boxer or something.”

Cassie shoved Freddie P. off her lap as she started to pace and fury exploded through her. “Way to be transphobic, Mom.” Her mother had shamed her about her height and muscular build since she was a tween and somehow Cassie had never quite developed the thick skin she needed to handle the snide comments. She worked her ass off to have the strong,

powerful body she had. The one that could make even the most difficult saves.

“Maybe my shoulders are those of a professional goalkeeper.”

“Don’t be smart with me.”

“Don’t be a bitch to me.”

Cassie gasped internally. She’d thought it many times, but never before had she actually called her mom a bitch. She generally didn’t like the word, but it was so applicable to Denise.

Denise gasped audibly. “I expect that attitude to be straightened out by the wedding. I will not—“

“I’m. Not. Coming.”

Before her mom could get another word in, Cassie stabbed her phone screen with her index finger to end the call. Then she threw the device at the couch like it could physically manifest her mom in the room.

Hands shaking, she covered her face with them, pressing her fingers into her eyes. She would not cry over her awful mother. She would *not*.

“What’s the matter?”

Out of nowhere, Rose was there, wrapping her arm around Cassie’s shoulder and pulling her body into Rose’s. Cassie wrapped her arms around her friend, rested her forehead on Rose’s shoulder, and let herself be held.

Rose’s hand smoothed up and down Cassie’s back, soothing her frayed temper. Gradually the shaking stopped and her shoulders relaxed. One of the cats bumped against Cassie’s ankle but she couldn’t tell which.

“What happened?” Rose asked again, voice achingly gentle.

Cassie just shook her head even as something inside her longed to tell Rose all about it. But she’d never told anyone how awful her mom treated her, and of course Mom made sure never to make her nasty comments around anyone else. Passive aggressive nit-picking, sure, but never the really mean stuff.

Cassie didn’t want anyone’s pity. Or worse, what if they thought Mom had a point? What if her confidant thought she needed to be more feminine? Or agreed that she didn’t smile enough?

Cassie couldn’t stand it if Rose had even the tiniest bit of sympathy for Mom. So she couldn’t, she just *couldn’t* tell Rose about the conversation.

Rose gently detangled herself from Cassie and led her to the couch. Marie Purrie made a peep as they sat down with the cat between them. Still, Rose kept a hand on Cassie’s shoulder. It was a warm comfort.

“Just a hard phone call. It’s fine.”

“If it has you shaking and crying, it’s not fine. But it is fine if you don’t want to talk about it.”

Why was Rose so perfect?

“How come you’re home so early?” Time to change the subject.

Rose gave a dramatic sigh. “You know those people who do something wrong but are really good at twisting it around and making you feel like you’re the one who did something wrong?”

Mom came to mind. Dad too. And her older brother, Jeffrey. Her whole family excelled at making Cassie feel guilty for what they did.

“I’m familiar with them.”

“Rhonda was a half hour late, and somehow by the end of dinner, I ended up apologizing for it. And she never did.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Now why are you apologizing. See! That’s how strong her power of manipulation is. You didn’t make me wait a half hour.”

“No, but I set you up with her. If I’d known she was like that, I wouldn’t have.” She’d managed to find a whole lot of duds. Rose was going on two dates a week and hadn’t found a spark with anyone. Cassie was terrible at this matchmaking thing. And she was running out of lesbian and bisexual women she knew. She might have to enlist the help of teammates.

Rose shrugged and settled farther into the couch. “Not your fault. Better luck next time.”

She seemed awfully cheerful for just getting home from a bad date. But Cassie wasn’t going to question it. It made her happy to see Rose happy.



**M**aggie Cole was pretty. Very pretty. She was an average-height white woman with thick brown hair that fell past her shoulders, dark brown eyes, and a wide smile. Rose immediately felt comfortable as they sat down at their table together.

They were eating at a restaurant with a patio overlooking the Milwaukee River. The area was decked out with fairy lights and the September weather was cooling off but still warm enough to be pleasant.

Everything was perfect. Maybe this would be it, maybe Maggie would be the one Rose could connect with and finally, *finally* start getting over Cassie. So what if Rose didn't feel that immediate spark? Maybe by the end of dinner she'd feel enough toward Maggie for a little light making out. See where things went from there.

They made getting-to-know-you small talk as they waited for the drinks and ordered. Maggie was a brilliant woman, an astrophysicist and engineer who co-owned a corporation. Erika had actually set up this date, since her husband, Nate, was another of the co-owners.

She asked all the right questions too, not talking about only herself. Her company, thanks to Nate, sponsored the Milwaukee Wolfpack, so she showed an interest in Rose's career that seemed genuine. She'd even watched all the US's games during the recent Women's World Cup, which Rose had played in.

"It's just incredible how your team seems impossible to beat." Maggie smiled almost shyly. "That sort of competence is pretty sexy."

Rose's cheeks warmed. "Thanks. It's an incredible opportunity."

"It's impressive to see someone living their dream the way you and Erika are."

Rose shifted in her seat. She was so comfortable with Maggie, it was on the tip of her tongue to blurt out at truth

she'd never told anyone, not even Erika and Lauren. Hell, she barely acknowledged it to herself.

Soccer had been her parents' dream, not hers. She'd grown to love the sport, and even more she loved her teammates and the bonds they shared, both on the USWNT and on the Wolfpack.

She had actually wanted to study some kind of science in college, but it was too rigorous to work around her soccer schedule. So she'd majored in communications.

But Rose took a drink of her beer before she could reveal her truths. They were a lot for a first date. Hell, they were a lot for a deep friendship of over a decade.

Maggie just had that effect, it seemed. Easy to talk to and genuinely interested. It could have been perfect.

Except that Rose still wasn't feeling the least bit of attraction. The connection she felt was akin to friendship.

Still, conversation flowed easily as their meals arrived and they ate. Once their plates were cleared, Rose took a leap. "You want to get another drink? Or go somewhere and get one?"

Maggie opened her mouth, then shut it. "Can I be honest?"

"Yes. And I will be too. I'm thinking in a completely platonic way, because I'm not feeling anything more between us." It was blunt, and awkward as hell to say out loud, but better to get it out in the open.

Maggie let out her breath. "That's what I was going to say. I like you, just not like that."

"Same." Rose chuckled awkwardly. "And that's one of the weirder conversations I've ever had."

Maggie laughed. Even her laugh was charming. She was absolutely perfect. For someone else. “Agreed.”

They ordered another round of beers.

“I’m gonna confess a secret. It’s one of those worst-kept secrets, so really just looping you in,” Maggie said.

Rose leaned forward. “I love secrets.”

“The reason I’m dating is I’m trying to get over someone who it’s never going to happen with. He’s a good friend and not the least bit interested in me and I’ve been in love with him for years and everyone but him seems to know it and I see him almost every day—he’s another of my company’s co-owners—so it feels like I’ll never have a chance to get over him and it feels so good to say that out loud. Do you know I’ve never once said that to another person?”

For a moment, Rose just stared.

“I freaked you out,” Maggie said. “Too much too soon. I’m sorry, I just—“

“Are we the same person?” Rose interrupted.

Maggie paused with her mouth gaping open.

Rose rolled her eyes, at herself, not Maggie. “I’ve been in love with my teammate—my married until just recently teammate—since I joined the Wolfpack four years ago. She just got her second divorce and is understandably down on love, and when she needed a place to stay I’m the dumbass who offered up my spare room. So we’re now roommates too and I’ve been on a dozen terrible dates. She’s the one setting me up, except for this time. The woman I’m in love with is trying to find me a girlfriend. It’s absurd.” Rose scrubbed a hand over her face. “But I see her every day at practice and,

you know, in my house. And you're right, it feels amazing to say it all out loud."

Like Maggie, Rose being hung up on Cassie was a poorly kept secret. Erika and Lauren knew because they knew Rose so well. And while no one else on the team said anything, surely some of them had figured it out.

"So you're saying you don't have any brilliant solutions for getting over David?"

Rose laughed wryly. "Well, don't invite him to move in with you."

Maggie grinned. She really was pretty. "Noted. Don't start a company with your teammate."

"I'll keep that in mind." Rose sighed. "It would be so much easier if Cassie weren't so perfect. Like, she volunteers at Planned Parenthood. It's like she's trying to make me love her more."

"She does sound dreamy. Maybe I could date her, help me get over David and you get over her."

"No, then I'd just hate you." Rose grinned. "Besides, she's kind of down on love. Two divorces will do that."

"I suppose so. The thing with David is, he's not even close to perfect. He can be such an ass sometimes. And he dates plenty of different people. You'd think I'd have gotten the hint by now."

Rose slumped down in her chair. "So do we keep dating? Keep trying to find someone? Because honestly, I don't even want someone to fall in love with. Just someone I'm interested in enough to have a casual relationship. Some good sex, going out for a good time. Nothing serious."



“I think I’m looking for the whole shebang. I want to get married someday. Still undecided on kids, though being thirty-two and with no prospects, that window gets narrower every year.”

“Then it’s probably best we don’t like each other enough to make out. You’d fall in love with me instead of David, and I’d break your heart next.” Rose grinned.

Maggie leaned back and laughed, her breasts shaking. “Whatever you need to tell yourself to get through the day.”

“Leave me to my delusions. They’re all I have.”

“I like you. I wish we’d found more common ground than pining for people who don’t see how brilliant we are. But we’ll get there.”

“I like you too, Maggie. I think we’re officially friends.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *seven*

Sometimes it would be nice if Rose weren't a professional athlete and didn't have to carefully consider what she ate. Because tonight it would feel great to eat an entire pint of fudge brownie ice cream and not worry that all that dairy would make her feel sluggish at practice tomorrow.

She hung her keys on the hook by the door and tossed her purse into the purse basket.

Maybe it was time to give up dating. Or at least stop trying to hard. Eleven dates in under a month was a lot. Too much. That was probably one reason she wasn't having any success: she inevitably seemed desperate.

She glanced toward the living room where she could hear the TV. Maybe she seemed desperate because she was desperate. Desperate to get over Cassie.

Rose wouldn't have guessed it, but the hardest part of living with Cassie was seeing her all soft and sleepy first thing in the morning. The urge to wrap her arms around her roommate was never stronger than when they waited together for the coffee to brew. Her arms ached to reach for Cassie, and her chest ached with longing.

"Hey, you're not as early tonight?" Cassie paused the TV as Rose entered the living room.

Marie Purrie lifted her head from her paws and gave a *peep*, then went back to sleep. Rose lifted the cat, sat down, and set the animal on her lap.

“It was better than the rest, but still no spark. Neither of us was feeling it. We might become friends, but that’s it.” No need to tell Cassie they’d spent significant time comparing notes on unrequited love.

“That sucks,” Cassie said. “I’m sorry.”

Rose dropped her head to rest on the back of the couch. “I think I’m done. At least with this pace of dating.”

“It has been a little hectic.”

“I feel like I’m on a date every night we’re in town and not playing.”

“You basically have been. I know. I’ve been setting it up.”

Rose huffed out a small laugh.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, each petting their respective cats.

“You know the part I do like about dating?” Rose asked into the silence.

“What?”

“I like having an excuse to go fun places. I mean, first dates are usually dinner or drinks, but second and third dates, at least for me, are more fun. Go to a concert, a brewery tour, paddle boarding. Stuff like that.” She’d had a date take her hang gliding once and that was incredible; the woman less so.

Was Rose too picky? Was that the problem? Except she wasn’t looking for happily ever after. She just wanted a casual fling. She didn’t think she was being picky, but if she didn’t

feel any attraction to someone, how could they have a fling? She didn't want to put in the time to develop a more serious relationship where the attraction came later.

No, she wasn't picky. She just knew what she was looking for.

"Yeah, that part of dating is fun. I mean, it's been a long time since I did it, but I liked it. Dinner and a movie gets old." Cassie looked down at herself. "Sitting on the couch alone with your cat gets old."

They both laughed.

"We're old cat ladies at the ripe old ages of 28 and 30," Rose said.

Silence fell again. Rose tried not to feel pathetic that at 28 she'd apparently lost the ability to be attracted to anyone but Cassie and was in real danger of becoming a cat lady. Because the truth was, she could be perfectly happy staying in with Cassie, watching *Ted Lasso* together and petting their cats. And then heading upstairs for wild monkey sex.

She could at least have part of that.

"What if we dated?"

Cassie's question felt like she had yelled into the silent room. Or maybe it was the hammering of Rose's heart at hearing words she'd longed to for so long.

"I thought you didn't want to date," she managed despite her throat squeezing shut.

"Not like romantic dating. Obviously."

Sure, obviously.

"Platonic dating."

“So... friends?”

“Yeah, but do you go out and do second or third date activities with Lauren and Erika?” Cassie asked.

Now that she mentioned it. “No, we usually do a restaurant, maybe see a movie. Mix things up with the beer garden occasionally. But none of the fun stuff you suggest when you’re trying to impress someone.”

“Exactly.” Cassie punctuated the word with a gesture that upset Freddie Purrcury. He made an unhappy sound and changed positions on Cassie’s lap.

“So you want us to go out and do things like... I don’t know... hang gliding or mini golf?” Rose’s pulse still hammered at the base of her throat. This was a terrible idea. She would never get over Cassie if they did this.

But she really really wanted to.

“Yeah. There are lots of things around Milwaukee I’ve wanted to do but never did. Greg was a complete homebody so the most we did was movies. And I didn’t date a ton between him and Molly. She only ever wanted to do volunteer work together. Which is great, don’t get me wrong. But it would’ve been nice to mix it up.”

“I mean, we do have the same schedules basically,” Rose said. She needed to say no, but Cassie’s expression was so open and enthusiastic, how could she?

“Exactly! It’ll be perfect. All the fun with none of the emotional entanglement.”

Easy for her to say. “Yeah, OK, let’s do it. Let’s platonically date.”

Cassie bounced in her seat, which was very un-Cassie like. “This is going to be so much fun!”

Rose couldn't disagree. And that was why she would undoubtedly come to regret it.

Cassie's right shoulder throbbed and her thighs were screaming at her. Today's game against Seattle had been rough and Cassie had had to make several diving saves. For some reason, every save had been to the right so she'd repeatedly landed on that shoulder. But they'd won the game, remaining in first place. So every ache was worth it.

Freddie currently glared at her from the floor as she sat on the couch with ice on said shoulder, plus both thighs—she'd also had to make a lot of jumping saves.

Rose came into the room with another ice pack for her ankle. She'd rolled it just after halftime. She propped her foot on the coffee table and draped the ice over the joint.

“What were we saying about being old cat ladies?” Rose asked.

“No kidding. And we're not even really old yet for soccer. We're like middle-aged,” Cassie said. She lifted the ice from her shoulder and tested the joint by rolling it in a small circle. It throbbed, though maybe slightly less than it had fifteen minutes ago. She'd take it.

She put the ice back on, then removed the pack from her left thigh. She started working the muscle with her hands, trying to rub some of the soreness out. It wasn't as good as a massage from someone else; the angle wasn't optimal for what

she needed. But until they got to training tomorrow, she didn't have anything better.

“Anything else hurting for you?” she asked Rose.

“I mean, not any more than usual. I'll do some stretching before bed, get some stuff done tomorrow. But nothing I need to ice or anything.”

Cassie shouldn't be jealous but she was. Just a little.

Then it occurred to her, she did have someone who could massage her thighs for her. They did it all the time for each other at practice or sometimes on busses and planes.

“When you're done icing that,” she nodded at Rose's ankle, “think you could massage my thighs? I can't get it quite right and if I wait for tomorrow, they're gonna be horrible.”

A look of shock flashed across Rose's face but was gone as quickly as it had appeared. “Uh, yeah, I guess.” She blinked rapidly a few times.

What was that about?

Rose turned on the news to watch while they iced. They were between shows they were watching together; she must not want to deal with picking a new one tonight. Which was fine. Cassie had no idea what they should watch next. There was a super sexy new series some of their teammates had been talking about but Cassie felt too awkward to bring it up with Rose. Cassie could always watch it alone.

Besides, maybe it would be too awkward watching what were apparently pretty graphic sex scenes with a friend. Not exactly like watching porn together, but along that line.

Yeah, she'd watch it by herself.

The news ended and Rose got up with her ice pack. She took it to the kitchen, then quickly returned.

“OK, where do you need me?”

Cassie’s pulse tripped over itself at those words. What was that about? She had to resist the urge to roll her eyes at herself. She was just in a weird mood because she’d been thinking about that sexy show.

“Both thighs are killing me.”

Both women reached for the same icepack at the same time. Their fingers bumped together, tangling for just a second. As Cassie’s pulse tripped again, Rose pulled her hand back quickly. “Sorry.”

“No worries.” Yes worries. Why was a simple touch of the hand—something she and Rose had done countless times—suddenly getting under her skin like this?

Cassie mentally shook it off. Focus. She tossed aside the ice packs to put in the freezer later, then hiked her shorts up to expose as much of her long thighs as possible.

Rose reached out her hands, started to pull them back, then reached again. She placed both gently on Cassie’s skin.

Cassie was unprepared for how soft Rose’s skin felt against hers. So warm she almost shivered, which seemed backward. She had to tense against the urge.

Rose noticeably swallowed. “Um, try to relax.” Her voice sounded strange.

Cassie looked over at her friend to find Rose staring back at her. Their gazes held for a long, breathless moment. Now Cassie’s pulse went positively wild. She couldn’t look away. Her skin felt hot and tight where Rose touched her and for a



moment, she didn't feel the deep ache in her muscles. Everything just fell away.

Then Rose looked away, and the pain and Cassie's breath returned. She sucked in air, almost feeling a need to pant.

What. The. Hell.

Then Rose's hands started to move, kneading the tight muscles. And Cassie couldn't help but lean her head back to groan in relief. "That feels so good."

Rose laughed awkwardly. "Thanks."

Relief was sharp and painful and so amazingly good. It was also hot and tingly and made Cassie's heart pound in a way none of the team trainers did. So Cassie focused on the sensations rather than what it meant.

She was just a lot more sore after today's game than she usually was. That was why it felt so much... more. More everything.

She was almost dizzy with how good it felt to have Rose's hands on her. Which was ridiculous. She didn't want Rose.

It was because it had been so long since anyone had touched her intimately. And due to her muscle ache's location, Rose was inadvertently touching intimate places. That was all.

Cassie may have been a fool about a lot of things, but she certainly wasn't careless enough to fall for her roommate and good friend. She knew better.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *eight*

**E**very inch of Rose's skin hummed with arousal. Massaging Cassie had been torture. Beautiful, delicious, awful torture.

To get to touch those thighs, the thighs she fantasized about, had nearly killed her. It was amazing she had possessed the willpower not to drop to her knees, press said thighs wide, and bury her face between them. Because that's what she'd wanted to do every second she'd had her skin against Cassie's.

Just in case, Rose locked her bedroom door before stripping off her clothes and tossing them in the laundry basket. She didn't normally lock the door but she would probably have to ask for a trade to a new team if Cassie walked in on her masturbating.

And there was no way she would fall asleep otherwise. She was always keyed up after games anyway, but tonight, well, it had been a long time since she'd been as horny as she was tonight.

She pulled back her covers and lay down on the bed, but didn't pull the blanket over her. She needed the cool air of her room on her overly warm skin. She'd roast beneath even a thin sheet.

Since Cassie moved in, Rose hadn't allowed herself to think of her roommate when she got herself off. It didn't fit

with her mission of getting over Cassie. But tonight, she couldn't see anything but Cassie's face in her mind when she closed her eyes. Cassie's long, powerful body. There was no way she could relieve the sexual tension she felt vibrating through every cell of her body without picturing Cassie. It just wasn't possible.

Slowly, Rose ran her hands over her flushed skin. One hand cupped her breast while the other slid across her stomach. She moved her hands everywhere: her quads, the inside of her thighs, her throat. Anywhere she could touch without contorting herself, she did. Nothing overtly sexual yet, just giving her skin the sensation it craved.

Then she moved her attention to her breasts, first cupping one in each hand, gently massaging. Heat flowed down her arms and up her neck.

She gave her nipples the lightest flick with her thumbs. Sharp sensation shot straight between her legs, ramping up her hunger. From just that brief contact. She could probably make herself come just by pinching her nipples and contracting her pussy.

The thought made her shiver. But no, she wanted this to last longer. Wanted to draw it out.

Or, did she want to get herself off hard and fast now, then go slow for a second one?

Yes. That was the way to do it. She definitely had enough sexual tension built up for twice.

Abandoning her breasts with her right hand, she used her left to pinch first one nipple, then the other. The sensation was so good, she let out a soft grunt. She immediately bit down on

the inside of her lips. Like she wanted to let Cassie know what she was doing in there.

She closed her eyes and slid her right hand between her legs, thighs splayed wide. She went straight for her throbbing clit, using two fingers to rub in a rapid circle. Her stomach contracted as she gulped in air. She was already so close. So—

The orgasm broke sharp and hard, her body jerking, her back lifting off the bed as she curled in on herself. She clamped her thighs together and pressed down hard on her clit, drawing it out.

Before the waves of pleasure could fully recede, she started stroking again. Slower this time, the circles wider. She ran her free hand along the sensitive skin of her inner thigh and moisture rushed from her pussy. She dipped her fingers down to gather it and spread it around her clit.

“Yes,” she whispered.

In her imagination, her door wasn't locked. In her imagination, she cried out the way she wanted to, loud and strong. She let Cassie know exactly what she was doing.

A scene played out on the backs of her eyelids as she continued to stroke herself. Cassie came to the door and, concerned about Rose, she opened it.

Thick, heavy desire rolled through Rose as she imagined how much it would turn her on to have Cassie catch her getting herself off. She could barely catch air, breaths coming in short little pants, the way they did when their coach made them run sprints.

Cassie would be startled at first, but then she would step into the room. She would strip off her clothes, drop to her

knees, push Rose's hands out of the way, and burry her face in Rose's pussy.

Rose could almost feel the slide of Cassie's tongue through her lips. Could feel her flick against Rose's clit. Rose had to bite her lips again to hold in another moan.

She rubbed hard at her clit and pinched her nipple and came again, this orgasm bigger and wider and more satisfying than the last. She shook everywhere; she tasted blood against her tongue where her teeth must have broken the delicate skin on the inside of her mouth.

Skin she wanted Cassie to soothe with her tongue. Maybe after Cassie brought Rose off with her mouth, she would climb Rose's body and kiss her. Let Rose suck her tongue into her mouth as their bodies tangled.

Yes, it would be so so good. Rose could almost taste Cassie's mouth, sweet and hot and thick at the back of her throat. Or maybe that was the taste of her own desire.

It wasn't enough. Two orgasms still wasn't enough.

She rolled to her side and fumbled in her nightstand drawer for her trusty little clit sucker. If anything could make her come a third time, it was the adorable penguin-shaped vibe.

Rose lined it up against her ultra-sensitive clit and turned it on. Hunger pierced straight up her spine and she arched off the bed. It thrust her breasts high into the cool air, her nipples tightening.

So Rose pinched one, then the other, back and forth until she was writhing, pressing her chest even deeper into her touch.

This time she didn't imagine what could be. She let her mind drift back to massaging Cassie's thighs. She shouldn't, it was wrong, but oh god. It felt so good. Rose had of course never touched her there before, and the skin was softer, smoother than she'd expected. Cassie's skin had been warm and silky under Rose's hands. She had wanted so badly to push just a little higher. Just a few inches and she could touch the place she'd dreamed of for so long.

Now she pictured what might have happened if she did. How it would feel to get that first touch of Cassie's pussy. Would she be as wet as Rose was? Did having a friend touch her so intimately turn her on? Did she find herself with unexpected feelings for Rose that she'd never considered before?

With her vibe sucking hard on her clit, her fingers tugging hard on her nipples, and Cassie's imaginary pussy sucking hard on her fingers, the third orgasm rolled up from the depths of Rose's toes, crashed down over her head, surged up from deep in her chest. It came at her from every direction, overwhelming her, pulling her down in an ocean of pure bliss. Fireworks danced behind her eyelids, her blood rushing in her ears, moisture leaking from the corners of her eyes.

As soon as the orgasm receded, Rose collapsed into her pillows. And let the tears really flow.



Cassie was so wet, she barely got her door shut behind herself before she had to shove her hand down her pants and start stroking her clit. She shoved her other hand up her shirt and into her bra, pinching one nipple so hard it edged the line

between pleasure and pain. The right side of the line, the side that made her knees go weak.

What was wrong with her? A friend touching her shouldn't turn her on like this. But she could already tell she was going to come hard. It was ridiculous. She got massages all the time. And this was Rose.

This was *Rose*. She should not be turned on by her roommate.

Yet as she fell face-first onto her bed and started riding her hand, she imagined it was Rose's face. It wasn't Cassie's finger sliding through her wetness and inside, it was Rose's tongue.

It felt so dirty to fantasize about Rose, so wrong and naughty. And so, so delicious.

Pinching extra hard on her nipple and grinding down on the heel of her palm, she came in a monster orgasm. Strong and intense, it pulled a series of grunts from her throat as she rode the sensations and pressed down on her hand.

When it was over, she rolled to her back, shirt askew, pants shoved down past her knees. She stared at the ceiling trying to make sense of what the fuck just happened. Because it seemed an awful lot like she'd gotten turned on by her roommate, then gotten off while imagining said roommate. Cassie only fantasized about people she was attracted to. And she was only attracted to people she was falling for.

And it was absolutely out of the question for her to fall for Rose.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *nine*

The Lakefront area was one of Rose's favorite parts of Milwaukee. It was especially gorgeous tonight, at twilight. The water was a million different shades of blue and gray, the air was warm with a gentle breeze, and she and Cassie were on their first date.

Platonic date. Friend date. Just because she'd lost her shit over Cassie didn't mean her friend felt a single ounce of anything remotely resembling attraction toward her. Cassie was done with dating and relationships for good. Rose had to remember that.

Instead, for the past few days it seemed like all she could remember was the feel of Cassie's thighs. The sensation of digging her fingers into all that muscle. The—

She shook off the thought. She could not go there.

"What?" Cassie asked as they stepped up to the small hut where they could rent a paddle boat shaped like a giant swan.

Rose rolled her eyes. "Just thinking silly things." Like that they could ever be more than friends.

"Like what?" Cassie sounded genuinely interested in what Rose was thinking about.



Too bad Rose could never tell her. “I stubbed my toe at practice today. I was worrying that it’ll still hurt tomorrow when we’re running.”

Cassie laughed.

They paid for a swan boat, which was decked out in white lights, utterly romantic. The cashier showed them to their boat and helped them in. He gave them a solid push out into the lagoon that sat just yards from the Lake Michigan shore, and they were off.

As they started pedaling, Rose absolutely was not watching the play of shadows over Cassie’s quad muscles as they stretched and flexed.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Rose desperately tried to think of something to say, but it turned out that dating a friend could be as awkward as dating a stranger. So she said the first thing that popped into her head.

“We’re almost out of cat food. Did you add it to the list or should I?” To make their lives simpler, they were sharing a grocery app account. That way they didn’t both buy something when they were out.

“I did,” Cassie said. “I used the last of the Greek yogurt and the peanut butter too, so those are also on the list.”

“Great.”

And that was the end of that conversation. *Good job, Rose. Conversational genius.*

Cassie chuckled. “We sound like an old married couple or something.”

Rose’s cheeks flushed. Thankfully the dusk light mostly hid it and the lights on their boat did nothing but cast shadows.

“We need better things to talk about,” Rose agreed. “I suppose this is the problem with friend dating. We already know what the other person does, where they grew up, how many siblings they have. All the stuff you talk about on first dates.” Though Cassie didn’t know about Rose’s sister. But she didn’t want to bring up a dead sibling. Not the mood she was going for.

“OK, so what don’t we know about each other?”

Rose knew almost nothing about Cassie’s family, other than that she wasn’t close with them. But she suspected Cassie didn’t talk about them precisely because they weren’t close. Rose didn’t want to make things uncomfortable, so she didn’t ask about them. If Cassie ever wanted to talk about them, she could bring it up.

“Got any weird hobbies you’ve somehow hidden from me so far? Besides glitter bombing Congress with my mom.”

“Don’t forget volunteering at Planned Parenthood.” Cassie’s voice was light, sending a small thrill through Rose. Cassie was often serious, maybe even a little sad-seeming at times. It made Rose happy to think Cassie was happy.

“What about you?” Cassie asked. “Any fun hobbies?”

“I crochet sometimes. Lauren taught me. Not very odd, but you might not know it about me. It’s not real conducive to bringing on the road with us, so I don’t ever have a chance to get really passionate about it. But I did crochet a Mia Hamm doll once for Lauren.”

Cassie laughed, the sound rich and throaty. Rose’s insides warmed.

“What about you?” Rose asked. “Besides soccer and Planned Parenthood, what entertains Cassie?”

“Well, I’m in that writing group. I do a lot of journaling. And”—Cassie ducked her head like she was embarrassed—“is sort of obsessing about your planner and journal a hobby? Because I spend way too much time drawing layouts for my planner and I doodle and use fancy decorative tape and it’s really silly but—“

Rose put her hand over Cassie’s where it rested between them. “Cassie. It’s not weird. That’s totally a hobby. Do you do that bullet journal thing?”

Cassie shrugged, gaze focused on the water in front of them. Rose tried not to stare, but with the breeze blowing Cassie’s loose hair around her face, all Rose wanted to do was smooth back the strawberry blond strands and run her fingers over the smooth skin on Cassie’s face.

“It’s like bullet journaling, but I sort of modify it for my own thing. I like making it pretty. It’s so silly, but I even took an online class last year to make my writing nicer.”

“That’s not silly.” Rose couldn’t stop a grin. She loved the idea of Cassie doing that. Maybe Rose should take a few online courses. Get really good at crochet or something. “I would love to see it sometime, if you don’t mind showing me. I mean, I don’t want to read your diary or anything.”

Rose would totally read Cassie’s diary if she let her. She would scour every page for mentions of herself.

She really *really* needed to fall out of love with Cassie. This platonic dating thing was a horrible idea, but how was she supposed to put a stop to the thing she’d wanted for years?

Cassie’s freckled cheeks pinkened. “Yeah, I can show you when we get home, if you want.”

“I’d love that.”

The silence this time was easier, more comfortable. More old-friends silence than second-date silence. Which made sense.

Still, Rose didn't love silence. So she struggled to think of another topic.

"So if soccer hadn't worked out for you, what did you want to be? Or was it always just it had to be soccer?"

Shit, that was a terrible question to ask. Because after Cassie answered, she would inevitably turn it back on Rose. And Rose didn't necessarily want to answer it. Her answer was... complicated.

"I want to be a writer," Cassie said. "I've wanted to since before I wanted to play soccer. But then I loved soccer so much, I went that way. Kinda goes along with the journaling, I guess."

"So that's why you're in that writing group."

"Yeah. And the nice thing about writing is, I can still do it when I play soccer. And I can try to make a career out of it when I retire."

"Were you an English major?" Rose asked.

"Yep. A weird combo, I know."

"Not at all. Lots of players have written books. You won't even need a ghostwriter for yours." If they'd been sitting closer, Rose would have bumped shoulders with Cassie. Instead she put her hand on the rudder between them. "You want to go that way?" She nodded south across the long side of the lagoon.

"Sure."

They navigated the turn, then set off down the length of the lagoon.

“So what do you write? Fiction? Essays? Political rants?”

Cassie huffed out a startled laugh. “No political rants.” The pink in her cheeks darkened. “So, don’t laugh, OK? But I... I write romance.”

“Like romance novels?”

Cassie met Rose’s gaze for a split second, then looked away and nodded.

A small burst of hope bloomed in Rose’s chest, like her heart was full of bubbles. If Cassie wrote romance, she couldn’t have given up on love completely.

*Bad Rose.* Didn’t matter. She still needed to get over her friend. Even if Cassie did decide to give love a chance again someday, it would be years. And Rose couldn’t stand much more pining. It was a little pathetic.

A lot pathetic.

“That’s awesome,” Rose said. “I love romance. I read mostly ebooks since it’s so easy to take them when we travel, and my reading app is filled with romance. What kind do you write?”

Cassie bit her lower lip; Rose swallowed a groan.

“I’m writing a contemporary romance right now. Big surprise, it’s about a woman who plays soccer.”

“I love it!” Rose bounced in her seat and clapped. She felt a little silly but it didn’t matter. “And someday when you’re a famous author, I can say I knew you when.”

Cassie laughed wryly and rolled her eyes. “OK, World Cup Winner. I think I get to say I knew you when.”

Rose grinned at her friend. “We each knew the other when, Olympic Gold Medalist.” Her smile turned mischievous. “And I would say maybe you and Canada will win the next Women’s World Cup, but nah. We know the US will win. Again.”

“Nope,” Cassie practically growled.

Rose’s belly went haywire, and a small pulse settled between her legs. Cassie growling was too much for her to be expected to endure.

If she swooned, would she fall over the side of the boat? Probably a bad idea to test.

“So now that we’ve established that I want to write romance when soccer is over, what about you?”

Shit, Cassie was indeed turning the question back on her.

“What would you have studied in college if you hadn’t done soccer, or what would you be doing now?” Cassie paused. “What did you major in?”

“I majored in communications. It was fairly easy and I could fit the classes around my soccer schedule.”

Cassie tilted her head to the side, studying Rose.

“What?” Rose asked.

“You didn’t want to do communications, did you?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you sound a little hostile when you say it.” Cassie looked like she was fighting a smile.

Rose sighed and slumped in her seat. “I didn’t. My mom basically picked it. She’s...” She might as well spit it out. Only Lauren and Erika knew about Rose’s complicated family and soccer history. But a need to share it with Cassie welled up inside, hot and insistent.

“Soccer was my sister’s dream.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister.”

Rose fought the mental image of Marie laying in the street, as broken as the bike next to her. “Marie was three years older than me. She died in a bike accident when she was ten. She was already this incredible soccer player, and she’d decided she wanted to play in the Olympics and World Cup someday.”

Logically, Rose knew it hadn’t been her fault Marie didn’t see the car. But Marie had been scolding Rose, being a bossy big sister, and sometimes, in her darkest moments, Rose felt responsible. Like she owed something to Marie’s memory.

Now it was Cassie’s turn to cover Rose’s hand with hers. It was a warm comfort against cold memories.

“Anyway, after Marie died, my parents sort of threw everything into me and my soccer. They’re *those* parents. Especially Mom, she lives vicariously. And how could I not keep playing?” Tears burned the backs of Rose’s eyes and she willed them not to fall.

“I was even better than Marie had been, and it made them so happy to see me doing so well. So I just kept going.” She pressed the bottom of her right eye, trying to hold the tears in. It was ridiculous to still cry over someone who had been dead for more than two decades.

Before Rose could process what was happening, Cassie reached across the center, wrapped her arms around Rose, and

gave her an awkward hug. “I’m so sorry,” Cassie whispered against Rose’s hair.

Against Rose’s ear. Despite the painful memories, she couldn’t stop a shudder from running through her. Sure, she and Cassie often hugged in games, after a goal or a great save. But this was the first time she and Cassie had hugged when it wasn’t part of a game.

Rose wrapped one arm around Cassie’s back and rested her cheek on Cassie’s shoulder, enjoying the comfort. Enjoying the touch she’d wanted for so long, even if she shouldn’t.

“You don’t have to make your parents happy,” Cassie murmured. “You just have to make yourself happy.”

Rose sniffed. “I know. And I do love soccer now. It was just at the start that I did it for them.” Maybe her parents were a little too involved in her career. In her life. But she was all they had. It was fine.

Cassie gave Rose’s back a final pat, that sent tingles down Rose’s spine, then pulled back. Rose immediately missed the warm comfort of her friend’s touch.

*Bad Rose. No pining.*

Then Cassie reached out and used her thumb to wipe a tear off Rose’s cheek and Rose melted inside. She fought to keep from wrapping her hand around Cassie’s wrist to keep her there. Keep her touching her face.

*I want you so much.*

Why, *why* did she have to be so in love with someone so off limits? First a married woman, now a jaded divorcee. What was wrong with Rose that she couldn’t fall in love with a nice, available woman who could love her in return.



If only she'd felt the slightest chemistry with Maggie. They could've been ideal together.

Rose sighed internally. It was just so fucking unfair she couldn't control her own emotions.

"So, what did you really want to major in?" Cassie's soft, slightly husky voice cut into Rose's thoughts.

"Physics. Maybe astronomy." It was one reason she'd clicked so well with Maggie. In a platonic sense. Maggie was probably who she should be platonically dating. They could go to planetariums and talk about Maggie's aerospace engineering work.

Rose turned to gauge Cassie's reaction. Her friend's blue eyes were wide, mouth parted slightly.

"That shocking?"

"Not shocking. Just a surprise. I wouldn't have guessed it."

Rose gave her a cheeky smile. "Didn't think I was that smart?"

Cassie wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, you're a real dummy."

Rose laughed, the last of her sorrow about her sister dissipating like bubbles in the water.

"So how come you didn't major in physics? UVA has got to have it there." Cassie eased the rudder toward Rose to turn them with the curve of the lagoon.

Rose took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "They do, of course. A really good program. But I let my mom convince me it would be too hard. That I should focus on soccer. She hired private coaches for me, even in college, so I could really improve and make sure I went pro."

God, she'd done nothing in college but practice and play soccer. She'd lived off campus with two other players, and spent almost all her time with private coaches. Or the private tutor her mom hired to help her get through her homework faster.

Vera had been obsessed, and Rose let herself be swept up in it.

"You know there are like three universities in Milwaukee." Cassie tilted her head and gave Rose a pointed look.

"Yes, I'm aware."

"I'm positive they all have physics programs."

"And your point is?"

"So take a class. I bet it's not too late to sign up if you do it, like, this week. Do an evening class so it works around practice."

"I—" Rose's first inclination was to brush it off. She had a full-time job, and she would be traveling with the USWNT soon for their victory tour after winning the World Cup.

"I'm going with the National Team for three weeks in September. I can't do a class from Houston or Tampa. Even the Chicago game is a little too far to make it."

Cassie shrugged like that was no obstacle. "So find a place that teaches it online. Just start doing something so that when you retire, you can go back and get a second major and be a physicist or an astronomer or whatever you want to be."

Retirement? But that was still years away. Rose was only 28. Lots of players didn't retire until well into their thirties.

Still, if she took classes now, even just one a semester, and played until she was, say, 35, that would be... math... seven

years, 14 semesters. That had to be enough to get a second major. Then she could go to graduate school after retiring.

Rose's mind boggled a little. It was so hard to think that far into the future. Most days she could only look as far ahead as their next game.

But what could it hurt to take one class? Just start.

Cassie wiggled in her seat, digging into her back pocket. Rose's mouth watered, just imagining the perfect ass Cassie was groping.

Yeah, she should definitely take a physics class, something to get her mind the fuck off Cassie. Fill her head with equations and constellations.

Cassie produced her phone and started tapping at the screen. Rose frowned. They'd said no phones during their dates unless they had to look something up for the specific purposes of the date.

Then Cassie pushed the phone toward Rose. "Dozens of online physics classes you can take. Or take one at Marquette or UWM and ask if you can get lecture notes for the weeks you're with the National Team."

"I—" Rose had no response. It was a good idea. A great idea, actually.

Her mom would hate it.

"Screw your mom. You're an adult." Cassie said.

Oh, she'd said that part out loud. "I mean, I could."

Cassie tapped more at the phone, then handed it to Rose. "Here's the intro astronomy class. Email the professor when we get home tonight, explain your situation with the National

Team, and ask if you can get virtual lectures or lecture notes or something to make the class work.”

“Text me the link,” Rose said before she could change her mind.

Cassie was grinning as she did it. That smile alone was reason enough for Rose to move forward. She’d do just about anything to get the warm feeling in her chest that she got when Cassie smiled.

Under her butt, Rose’s phone chimed with Cassie’s text. She couldn’t stop a squeal of anticipation from popping out of her throat. She grabbed Cassie’s hand and squeezed.

“Holy shit. I’m really gonna do this. I’m going back to school.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *ten*

**A**nother evening, this time a Tuesday, and Cassie was all alone with the cats. Tonight Rose was at her first astronomy class. She'd been practically giddy as she skipped out the side door with her backpack.

It was a little hot. And Cassie was a terrible person for lusting after her friend.

She should turn that lust toward her book characters. Lucy definitely lusted after Rob. Maybe Cassie should write a sex scene between them to get all the lust out of her system.

But first she had to set up her planner for next week. And lay out the plans for her and Rose's next date on Friday. Rose had planned the paddle boating date, which had been frustratingly romantic. Now Cassie had found a date that Rose would enjoy but that wouldn't fuel the growing and unwanted feelings Cassie had for her roommate.

Cassie slumped down at the kitchen table. She would not fall for Rose. She wouldn't fall for anyone, dammit. She was done with relationships. Heather and Greg had made it pretty clear: she was too hard to love and too broken to show love in return.

No, love wasn't for Cassie. And Rose deserved so much more than Cassie would ever be able to give her. So she had to

stop this ridiculous slide into having feelings beyond friendship.

That said, Cassie did have a perfect idea for Friday. She'd made the necessary calls and arranged everything to surprise Rose. It would be perfect.

Cassie pulled her journal toward herself and picked up her favorite pen from the set she'd spread in front of her. The table was strewn with all the materials—pens, stickers, decorative tape, markers—she used to decorate her journal/planner. Right now, she needed to journal, get some things out of her head.

She was three sentences in when the side door opened.

“Hello!” Vera called.

Cassie slammed her notebook shut like she'd been caught doing something naughty. Which she hadn't. Unless you counted writing all her lusty thoughts about Vera's daughter.

Cassie quickly snapped the elastic band into place to hold the journal shut. She definitely didn't need Vera to accidentally see what she'd written. Cassie's entries were increasingly about Rose. Things no one ever needed to read.

Leaning her elbows on the table, Cassie asked, “More senators to glitter bomb?”

Vera laughed as she appeared in the kitchen, plastic tub of food in hand. She set the food on the counter. It looked like more of her high-protein snacks. She brought them over often. “No, not today. Is Rose around?”

Rose hadn't told her mom about taking a class. Cassie certainly wasn't going to be the one to spill the beans. “No, she's out.” Not a lie.

Vera sat down across from Cassie. “Another date?”

Cassie made a non-committal noise that could be taken as assent.

Vera sighed. “That girl. She’s got more optimism than I ever could have. Dating seems like a nightmare.”

Cassie laughed dryly. “It is. I’m pretty much done with it.” *Except for platonically dating and falling for your daughter, but NBD.*

“Well.” Vera folded her hands on the table in front of her. “I have a proposition for Rose, but I suppose I could talk to you about it too.”

Cassie resisted the urge to make a bad joke about propositions. Her brain really was inappropriate. It was obviously because she’d been journaling highly inappropriate things.

“Has Rose told you what I do? For a living?”

Vera worked? It was terrible, but Cassie had assumed that being Rose’s helicopter mom was Vera’s full-time job.

“I have a masters in counseling, and I work at a center for LGBTQ plus youth.”

“Wow, that’s great,” Cassie said sincerely. If there’d been anything remotely like that at her high school, or just around town when she was a teen, maybe she wouldn’t have felt like such a weirdo being attracted to both boys and girls. She hadn’t known it was a normal thing until college when she had a few bisexual teammates. She’d honestly thought something was wrong with her.

Of course, in her family, the liking girls part was considered wrong. And her family had done a plenty good job of fucking her up outside of sexuality.

“We’re starting a mentoring program for the high school students, and I’m looking for adult community members to work as mentors.” Vera unfolded and refolded her hands, almost like she was nervous. “Naturally, I thought of you and Rose.”

Cassie’s mouth dropped into a startled O. “Me?” What could she possibly have to teach kids? How to be emotionally unavailable? How to get divorced twice by age 31? Sure, great life lessons.

“I think you’d be wonderful. You’re a highly successful professional athlete, living your truth, and, as Rose would put it, kicking ass and taking all the names.”

Cassie snorted an awkward laugh. That didn’t sound like her. She wasn’t kicking anyone’s ass, especially off the pitch. She certainly wasn’t taking names.

Rose, yes. Cassie, not so much.

“I know you’ve had some setbacks, Rose has told me a little about your romantic history.”

Great, thanks, Rose.

“But you’re clearly failing up.”

Failing up? Yeah, so high that she couldn’t afford a place of her own. What a success story.

“You represent your country at the highest levels of your profession. And I keep up with these things, Cassie. I know you repeatedly win NWSL save of the week, you make the big plays. You have the fewest goals scored on you of any goalkeeper in the league this season and last. You’re a huge part of why the Wolfpack is in second place. And that Olympic Gold Medal is hardly something to sneer at.”



Cassie blushed furiously under the praise. She had to tense all her muscles to keep from squirming. She knew she was good at soccer. It was the only place she excelled.

“But do you really want some athlete telling them this is the way to go?” she asked. “I mean, in so many sports, you can’t be out as LGBTQ. Especially for the boys.”

“They don’t need to do exactly what their mentor does. They just need positive role models. And I can’t think of anyone more positive than other LGBTQ people living their lives and succeeding at what they do.”

It sounded like a great program, but was it really Cassie’s place? Vera clearly had a somewhat warped view of Cassie. Though the thought that Rose had talked her up to Vera, had painted the picture for Vera that Vera now held up for Cassie, made Cassie’s chest flush. Rose was mistaken too, but Cassie liked that Rose saw her that way.

A success.

It was almost laughable, but Cassie would take it.

“So, what would it entail?” Cassie’s voice was cautious.

Vera grinned, her brown eyes, so like her daughter’s, sparkling. “The group will meet on Mondays for a few weeks so everyone can get to know everyone.”

There were never NWSL games on Mondays. Which of course Vera knew and had probably planned accordingly.

“After three weeks, the kids will each pick their top three choices for mentors to work one-on-one with. We’ll match them, then after that, the meetings will be more individual. With their parents’ permission, you can meet elsewhere with them, or at other times that fit your schedule. It becomes more

flexible. But mostly, you're just there for the child when they have questions or need to talk to someone who understands."

"And, like, will I be paired with a bisexual girl? Because I'm not sure I'd know how to help, say, a transgender boy. That's a whole different experience and I'd end up letting them down."

Vera covered Cassie's hand with hers. "This is why we let the kids pick who they want to work with. It's unlikely a transgender boy would pick you. We're finding mentors all across the LGBTQ plus experience because we know it's not all the same."

That was reassuring, but Cassie still felt antsy about the idea. Even mentoring a bisexual girl, someone so like who she'd been in high school, felt overwhelming. What if she messed up? What if she screwed up the kid? Made things worse for them?

Vera gently squeezed her hand. "You'll be great at it." She tapped her temple with one finger. "Remember, I have a degree in people. I can tell these things."

Cassie laughed nervously. "Can I think about it?"

Sitting back in her chair, Vera nodded. "We're still recruiting mentors. And I know you and Rose have the international break coming up. So I've got the group scheduled to start after that."

Cassie gave a startled laugh. Vera made her laugh a lot, even if not always the most comfortable laughter.

Which was more than Cassie could say for her own mother. Had Denise Dickinson ever made her children laugh? Cassie certainly didn't recall a time.

Hell, she couldn't recall the last time she'd had a conversation with her mom that lasted as long as the one she was having with Vera Oliviera. That said a lot.

Well, if her mentee had shitty parents, Cassie would certainly be able to relate to that.

“Come to the first meeting. See what you think. If it makes you that uncomfortable, you don't have to come back.” Vera got up and squeezed Cassie shoulder as she passed on her way to the refrigerator.

The casual touch felt nice. Motherly.

Motherly. There was a foreign concept in Cassie's life.

Vera pulled two beers out of the refrigerator, twisted off the tops, and set one in front of Cassie as she resumed her seat.

“I have a good feeling about this, Cassie. You have a lot to give these kids. You're gonna do great.”



**P**rofessor Daniels fit almost exactly how Rose imagined a physics professor would look. He was a balding white man in his 40s, with a salt and pepper beard and a little bit of a gut. He wore a heather gray cardigan with suede elbow patches and corduroy pants. If you were into men, he was cute in an older-man way.

Rose immediately liked him. They'd emailed back and forth, and Dr. Daniels was very accommodating of Rose's needs. He was going to record the lectures when Rose was out of town with the team and she could watch them on her own time. And he always posted his lecture notes online.

As she slid into a seat in the lecture hall for the first class, Rose had a powerful sense of being old. A feeling she wasn't used to. Sure, she played with younger women; the Wolfpack had players as young as 21. But they always somehow seemed on equal footing since they were all on the same team.

For whatever reason, knowing most of the students in her Astronomy 103 class were freshmen, that this was one of their first classes of college, intimidated Rose. Which was ridiculous. They should be intimidated by her. But in all likelihood, none of them knew Milwaukee had a professional women's soccer team, let alone could identify her as one of the players.

She had to get her brain rearranged in so many ways or it was going to be a very long semester.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *eleven*

Rose did not like being blindfolded. Especially when she had no idea where Cassie was leading her.

It was their second date and Cassie had refused to give Rose any hints about what they were doing, except that Rose should bring a sweatshirt. As soon as they got in the car, Cassie had handed Rose a blindfold and insisted she wear it.

Now they were walking on an uneven surface that squeaked just a little as they stepped, and Rose could smell the lake and hear waves lapping. Her best guess was they were walking along a dock.

Another boat date, then. But why all the mystery?

Still, it gave Rose a little thrill in her belly that Cassie was going to such lengths to create a date Rose would enjoy. Tomorrow they both left to play with their international teams and would be gone for three weeks. Whatever they did on this platonic date, it would be a nice memory to get through their time apart.

The fact Rose was already dreading being away from Cassie was proof of exactly how much she wasn't getting over her roommate.

She bit back a groan as Cassie squeezed her hand.

“OK, I wanted to take off the blindfold a little later, but I’m also afraid you’re going to fall... uh, on your face.” Cassie’s voice was hesitant, not the confident tones Rose was used to on the field. The goalkeeper was in charge during a game, yelling directions to the players from her unique vantage point. But as they got to know each other better, Rose became more aware of Cassie’s hesitation off the field. She had every reason for that confidence to come with her when the games ended, but for some reason, it didn’t.

And Rose wanted to know why.

But right now, Cassie stood behind her, fingers gently tugging at the knot holding the blindfold in place. She was careful not to pull Rose’s hair, and the soft ministrations were enough to have Rose’s belly melting. One almost-touch and Rose was a puddle of pining goo.

Pathetic.

The fabric fell away from her face and she blinked to clear her vision. They were indeed at the Lakefront, standing on a dock next to some kind of speedboat. A stocky, middle-aged Black man stood at the wheel.

“Welcome, ladies.” He gave them a warm smile. “I’m Derek, I’ll be your captain this evening.”

Rose and Cassie introduced themselves as they climbed aboard. The boat lurched under their weight, making Rose glad Cassie had removed the blindfold before they got on. Cassie embarked first, then held out a hand to Rose.

Even though she didn’t need the help, Rose gladly slid her hand into Cassie’s. Warm tingles spread up her arm at the small contact.

She was in way too deep. Maybe she needed to accept that as long as they were teammates and friends, there was no getting over Cassie. Given that they'd discussed being happy on the Wolfpack, it was unlikely either would move to a different team. Rose planned to play well into her 30s, provided her body held out. As far as she knew, Cassie planned the same. It was entirely possible they'd be playing together for another five, even up to eight years.

Rose was so fucked. In all senses except the one she wanted to be.

Derek helped them find a place to stash their lifejackets, since they weren't required to wear them, and told them to pick seats. The boat had eight seats, besides Derek's at the wheel, and Cassie led Rose to the back, the seats farthest from their captain.

The seats with the most privacy.

Rose's belly started fluttering. Which was ridiculous. They lived together and had tons of privacy almost all the time. Here they only had relative privacy. And what was going to happen anyway?

"We're heading out to sea, ladies. Well, out to lake, anyway," Derek said as he started the engine and eased the boat away from the dock. "I have a route based on what you requested when you reserved the boat, so I'll stick to that and leave you two alone unless you need something. All we ask is that there be no alcohol consumption."

"Didn't bring any anyway," Cassie said. She stretched her arms across the back of the bench seat she and Rose were on. Which meant her right arm was somewhat around Rose.

Except it wasn't. Cassie was just stretching; she didn't mean to really put her arm around Rose. Not like that.

Still, Rose couldn't stop herself from leaning her head back. Her hair spilled over Cassie's arm and Cassie's fingers touched Rose's head. Her scalp started tingling as she looked up at the stars.

It was a wonderfully clear night, the only thing impeding their view of the night sky being the lights from the city. If they went out far enough on the boat, they could see—

“Did you do this so we could go stargazing?”

Cassie's fingertips moved subtly against Rose's head. Rose wanted to look over and see Cassie's expression, but if she did, Cassie might stop the tiny caresses she was giving Rose's scalp. And they felt so nice. So soft and gentle and perfect.

“I did.” Cassie's voice was as soft and gentle as her touch.

“Soon we'll be able to see the entire night sky. I can show you constellations.” Her heart pounded with excitement. And some arousal. Definitely that too.

“That's what I was hoping for. I can't ever find more than a dipper. Not even sure if it's little or big.”

Rose laughed. Soft and gentle. The breeze was soft and gentle. Everything soft and gentle.

Rose rolled her head to the side and found Cassie looking at her. Now Cassie's fingers were at her ear. She started gently playing with the edge of Rose's ear, and Rose's nipples went hard.

What was happening? Was this Cassie being friendly? Rose and Erika or Rose and Lauren sometimes snuggled and it didn't mean anything. Was this like that?



Or was it more? Rose desperately wanted it to be more. It felt like more, but that could be entirely one sided.

She had a powerful urge to close the distance between their faces and take Cassie's pink lips. Nibble on that full bottom lip until Cassie moaned or squealed or made some other noise of arousal.

Rose's thighs clenched against the wetness and hunger pulsing between them.

Their gazes met and Rose was sure she saw desire in Cassie's beautiful blue eyes. But something inside told her it had to be Cassie who made the first move, if any move were to be made. Cassie was the one giving up on love and relationships. She had to be the one to change her mind; Rose couldn't do it for her. And she wouldn't push Cassie to change it when she wasn't ready. Which was possibly what kissing her could do.

So Rose smiled and said, "Thank you. This is a perfect platonic date." She stressed *platonic*, mostly as a reminder to herself.

Something dulled in Cassie's gaze and her answering smile seemed forced. "Yep. Platonic dates. They've been fun so far."

Because Rose had to somehow return Cassie's touch, the touch that had combed into Rose's hair and was again softly caressing her head, Rose reached over and put her hand on Cassie's thigh. Lower, by her knee. Not anything close to where Rose really wanted to touch her.

Was Cassie wet too? If Rose could slip her hand down the front of Cassie's sweatpants, would she be slick with desire for Rose? Or was it still all one-sided?

Rose swallowed a frustrated scream. She needed to stop torturing herself. Nothing was happening that wouldn't happen with Erika or Lauren. There was no attraction on Cassie's part. Rose was losing her mind.

She rolled her head back so she could focus on the stars. She'd always found so much comfort in them. No matter where she was in the world, she could look up and know things didn't change as much as it sometimes felt like. The sky grounded her, ironically. As huge as the sky was, as the universe was, it should make her feel small and insignificant. She knew a lot of people felt that way. Felt that the vastness of space meant their problems weren't as big as they felt. And she understood that perspective.

But to her, the enormity of the universe made her feel larger, more significant. Everything she did, everything she achieved, was a part of the collective that created the world. And the world was a piece of the galaxy, and all the galaxies together were the universe. And the stars were all part of that. And she was part of that. She was one of nearly eight billion stars on Earth, and every single one mattered.

Yeah, the stars made her feel powerful. Often, the night before a big match, she would stand on the balcony of whatever hotel room she was in, or go out to the parking lot, and look at the sky. Even if she was in a huge city like Los Angeles, with massive light pollution, she could always make out at least a few stars. And seeing them filled her with a sense of power, of purpose.

Soccer gave her purpose, sure. She was confident in her skills, loved the game, was competitive as fuck, and lived for the rush of making a great play. But all that paled compared to

the swelling she felt inside, like her existence was expanding, when she looked to the sky.

“Thank you,” she said.

Cassie gave a soft, gentle chuckle as one finger came back to stroke Rose’s ear. “You already said that.”

“I know. But I meant thank you for pushing me to take a class. I’m not sure I can balance an entire physics major while still playing, but I can at least get started. Then I’ll only have a handful of upper level classes to take when I retire, before I can go to grad school.” It was an immense undertaking. Daunting. But she’d taken on daunting tasks before and slayed them.

Cassie gently slid her hand out from under Rose’s head. Rose immediately felt colder inside. “My pleasure.” Cassie said.

Rose’s chill didn’t last long. Cassie covered Rose’s hand with hers, where it lay on Cassie’s thigh. She didn’t lace their fingers together or stroke Rose’s hand, she just gently set her hand atop Rose’s.

Rose’s heart sang. Stars and Cassie. How could she possibly want more in life? Maybe if she’d just won Olympic gold the moment could be better, but that was about it.

“Does it ever make you sad we can’t win a World Cup or the Olympics together?” The words were out before Rose knew she had the thought.

“I’ve never really thought about it,” Cassie said. She gave a soft snort. “I always assume the US is going to win those things, and Canada will get, like, second or third place. Even though we got gold at the last Olympics. It doesn’t feel real,

still. And winning the World Cup still feels daunting. But, much though I dream about it, we can't seem to beat you."

Rose knocked Cassie's shoulder with hers. "Maybe someday."

"You don't actually believe that."

"Well, no. But it seems like the right thing to say."

Both women laughed. Softly and gently.

Everything was so soft and gentle and easy and it was killing Rose. Because it was easy but it wasn't. Conversation was easy, being with Cassie was easy. Touching Cassie was easy.

But it was so, so hard to have her so close and not have her at all.

"Are we out far enough yet?" Cassie asked.

Rose studied the blackness above them. They were far enough out on Lake Michigan that the Milwaukee skyline was a dim glow on the horizon. Out here, the city lights barely affected the sky. The stars were bright points of light against the black.

"Yeah, it's perfect," Rose said. She lifted her hand and pointed. "There's Cygnus"

Cassie leaned her head back too, her waves spilling over Rose's face. They were so soft, and smelled faintly of Cassie's shampoo—yes, Rose might have taken a whiff once or twice in the shower; was that creepy?—and she let herself fully take in the feel of Cassie's hair on her face before she brushed it away.

Cassie slid her head over so it touched Rose's.

Oh fuck. She couldn't take this. She was absolutely going to lose control and beg Cassie to jump her.

Derek? Derek who? He could watch for all Rose cared. She just wanted her hands and lips on every inch of Cassie.

Rose swallowed hard and resisted the urge to make a fist with her still-pointing hand. Her other hand still rested on Cassie's and Cassie's still covered hers. And now their heads were touching and if Rose turned her head she would be mere inches from Cassie's face. Cassie's lips. She would barely have to move to have a taste.

Dammit, she really had to stop this. Stars. Constellations. Focus.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Can't see anything."

Impossibly, Rose leaned closer to Cassie so Cassie could look straight up her arm to where her finger pointed.

"See that extra bright star that's sort of in the center of the sky? That's Deneb, one of the brightest stars. It means tail, and Cygnus means swan. So Deneb is the tail of Cygnus the swan. Do you see the star?"

"Ummmmmm, yeah? I think so?"

"Then you follow it a little this way, and then over to that star, and here." Rose slowly traced the stars as they formed a shape somewhat resembling a swan.

"See, that's where I get lost. I can't follow where you're drawing and see anything." Frustration made Cassie's voice rough.

It did funny things to Rose's insides. Wobbly, squishy things.

“I used to sort of make up my own constellations, since I don’t see the real ones. Show me all the pictures with lines drawn over the stars, I still don’t really see it.” Cassie shook her head, causing it to gently bump against Rose’s. “Like right now, I see an elephant and four dippers. That’s it.”

Laughter bubbled up through Rose’s chest. “I love that.” With a burst of courage, she turned her hand under Cassie’s, entwined their fingers, and squeezed Cassie’s hand.

Everything was so intimate, heads pressed together, hands laced together, thighs almost touching. Rose’s body yearned like she never had before. She’d never wanted to kiss someone more than she did in that moment. It would be so easy. Maybe Cassie even wanted it too.

Rose couldn’t stop herself from turning to look at Cassie’s profile. She was achingly beautiful, even just as a shadowy silhouette. Rose had to tense all her muscles against the urge to lean in and kiss her.

But what if...

“Thank you again for tonight. This is perfect.” *You’re perfect.* Impulsively, Rose closed the distance between them and brushed her lips gently over Cassie’s cheek. Her skin was soft and perfect. Just that brief, almost chaste contact sent lightning bolts of desire through Rose. She had to pull back right away, before she wasn’t able to pull back at all.

Cassie turned to face Rose and gave her a soft smile. “My pleasure.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *twelve*

They got home later than they'd planned. Derek had given them an extra half hour for free and joined them for a few minutes of stargazing.

Rose smiled as she unlocked the side door. Cassie's inability to see constellations was kind of adorable.

Her hand shook as she turned the key, her whole body strung out on sexual desire. She was fighting a losing battle to resist Cassie. The question was could she wait long enough for Cassie to make the first move?

As they walked through the kitchen, Rose grabbed Cassie's wrist and gently tugged her back. Cassie turned so they stood in the dark room only inches apart.

"Yeah?" Cassie asked, barely more than a whisper.

"I had such a great time tonight." Rose's hand shook as she brushed a strand of Cassie's hair off her face. When Cassie leaned her head into Rose's palm, she forgot to breathe. She couldn't. Not when Cassie's eyes practically begged her to kiss her. For so long she'd wished for that look from Cassie, and now, finally, it was here.

God help her, she couldn't resist it. Not anymore.

Lifting her chin, she stroked her hand over Cassie's jaw to the back of her neck. Rose's other hand gripped Cassie's soft t-shirt. Cassie's face tilted down, toward Rose, their pull toward each other like the moon and the tides.

The first touch was feather light, barely there at all. A pause, then another tease of lips brushing lips. Then gone again. Over and over, Cassie ghosted her mouth across Rose's, each time with a little more pressure than the last. But still so soft it left Rose yearning.

So much yearning.

Her body throbbed everywhere, and just from this barely kiss, desire pulsed between her legs. She clenched her hand into a fist of t-shirt, hooking one finger just barely under the edge of Cassie's elastic waistband.

And Cassie completely unraveled. She shoved her hands into Rose's hair, cradling her head, and dove in. Really, truly kissed her.

Her tongue plunged into Rose's mouth and Rose eagerly accepted it. Her arms wrapped around Cassie's chest, pulling their bodies flush. They fit together perfectly, everything on Rose lining up a few inches below everything on Cassie. And it was perfect. They were like oddly shaped puzzle pieces that only fit each other.

Rose sucked Cassie's tongue deep into her mouth, pulling a moan from Cassie. Which elicited a moan from Rose. Rose shoved her hands up the back of Cassie's shirt, needing to feel skin. She trailed the backs of her fingernails up Cassie's back and Cassie shuddered. Pressing everything more intimately against Rose.



Rose couldn't breathe, her head spinning from lack of oxygen. Or maybe it was just the reality of her long-awaited first kiss with Cassie. She parted her legs to stand on either side of Cassie's thigh.

Without warning, Cassie yanked herself away. She took one, then two steps back. Covering her face with her hands, she said, "Rose. We can't."

Like hell they couldn't. All those dates with other women, then the supposedly platonic dates with Cassie had done nothing but reinforce what she had always known.

She would never love anyone the way she loved Cassie Dickinson.



Cassie's body hummed with arousal everywhere, even the tiny little hidden places she hadn't known were there. Her back teeth were turned on. She wanted Rose with everything she had and everything she was.

But they couldn't. Wanting each other didn't change the fact that Rose was her best friend and Cassie couldn't offer more than a fling. You didn't have flings with your best friend. Flings were anonymous. Or at least with distant acquaintances.

Because if there was a way in which they could have a fling without disastrous consequences, they'd already be flung. Their bodies flung onto one of their beds. Their clothes flung all over the room. Their kisses flung all over each other's bodies, their cries of ecstasy flung through the air.

But she would rather have Rose frustrated with her now than Cassie getting her heart broken down the line. Or worse,

Rose getting her heart broken. Cassie couldn't bear to be the one to break Rose's heart.

She forced herself to meet Rose's gaze, blazing with both desire and anger. Cassie wanted to close her eyes from that anger, wanted to run to the desire. But she couldn't do either. Just like on the field, she was the last line of defense against losing. But what they could lose here was so much more than a game. So much more at stake.

"I'm so sorry, Rose. We just can't." Knowing she would break down if she stayed in the room any longer, Cassie went up the stairs and spent the rest of the night in her room.

Alone.



Sweat dripped down Cassie's forehead and into her eyes. She tried to wipe it away with her forearm, but that was sweaty too. She should've worn long sleeves. But it was over 90 degrees in Dallas, so long sleeves had seemed out of the question. But at least then she'd have had something to wipe her face on.

She missed Milwaukee's more temperate fall weather. Hell, she just missed Milwaukee.

More specifically, she missed Rose. But she'd promised herself she wasn't thinking about Rose during training or matches, so she shoved the thought out of her head and focused on her coach.

She was still getting a feel for Canada's new head coach, Pete Kendrick. His resume was impeccable—he'd been with the US women's team for two years, coaching them to a World

Cup win. He had the winningest percentage ever for them, which was saying a lot considering how infrequently the USWNT lost.

He'd left the US team shortly after the World Cup and been hired by Canada just a few weeks ago. This was the Canadian women's first camp with the England native. She knew her USWNT friends spoke highly of him, except for Lauren. They had some sort of personality clash, or something. But Rose and Erika sang his praises. So far, Cassie liked what she'd experienced. All three days they'd been at camp.

Pete had been a defender when he played in England, so he often worked with the defense while the forwards worked on shooting. Which was what he was doing now, along with assistant coach Melissa Faraday.

Melissa and Pete acted as offense, dribbling the ball to challenge the defenders. Cassie watched, hyper alert, as Analise Carasco and Bethany Tennison lined up to her left, where Pete was approaching. Sidney Horton dropped in tighter to provide a backup for Cassie.

Bethany stepped out and challenged Pete for the ball, so he sent it over to Melissa. Melissa pulled some fancy footwork to get around Analise and took a shot.

Cassie's body tensed with readiness as the ball hurtled toward her. At the last second, Sidney got between Cassie and the ball and cleared it, sending it all the way past the midfield line.

"Nice job, Sidney," Pete said, clapping. "Excellent job protecting your goal. And your goalkeeper."

"Nice play," Cassie echoed to her right inside back.

Sidney flashed a quick smile. “Thanks. Always happy to make your job easier.”

Cassie laughed. “Always appreciated.”

Pete glanced at his watch. “We’re done a little ahead of schedule, so why don’t you all take some shots. Let’s give Cassie and Morgan a good workout.”

Cassie swallowed a groan. Of course practicing saves was a huge part of her training. But she’d landed extra hard on her hip yesterday and had a giant bruise, so today was going to be brutal. It didn’t hurt to move, but if she landed on it again, well, she didn’t look forward to that pain.

“Morgan, you go first,” Pete said to Cassie’s backup goalkeeper.

Even taller than Cassie’s six feet, Morgan was a brick wall of power. She was only behind Cassie in the lineup because her size made her just a little slower.

The defenders lined up to take turns shooting while Morgan jumped and dove and caught. Pete and Melissa called out encouragement and suggestions for improvement.

Maybe it was a little petty, but it gratified Cassie to see Pete giving Morgan more suggestions than he’d given Cassie the previous day. Not that he ever dipped into outright criticism. So far, Pete Kendrick was one of the most positive, upbeat people she’d ever met.

Honestly, knowing how grumpy Lauren could be, and Pete being like a ray of sunshine personified, it was no wonder they hadn’t gotten along.

“Alright, time to put Cassie in the goal!” Pete called after Morgan had taken several shots.

Morgan held up her hand for high five as she and Cassie passed each other.

Cassie took her place at the center of the goal, one step ahead of the goal line. Amy sent her a shot to the top left corner of the net. Cassie had to jump and reach as far as she could, but she managed to tip it with the very ends of her gloved fingers and knock it off course. It bounced right back to Melissa.

Who immediately sent the ball back with a rocket of a kick. Cassie scrambled to her feet and raced to the far post just barely in time to tip it over the net.

Two saves. Cassie's heart pounded both from exertion and elation. Nothing jazzed her like making a tough save.

Except kissing Rose. But she wasn't thinking about that right now.

Her teammates continued taking shots at different parts of the goal, coming at her from all different angles. Cassie scrambled and the balls whizzed at her. In the end, she made all but one save.

Her chest felt full, something akin to excitement and pride stretching her. She wanted to call or text Rose and tell her about her awesome job.

But no. They hadn't talked at all in the time they'd been at their respective training camps. They'd barely even talked the morning they both left, the morning after their kiss.

Cassie shoved it all out of her head and focused on what Pete was saying.

"I hope you all realize what a gem you have here in Cassie Dickinson."

Cassie's whole body flushed hot. Hotter than it already was. At least she was probably already too flushed to blush further.

"I know my old player, Alexis Maas, won the golden glove at the World Cup last summer, but that was because this team didn't get as far. If you'd been in the final, I've no doubt in my mind that Cassie here would've taken home that trophy."

How was it possible to be this hot with embarrassment and not spontaneously combust? The weight of the rest of their gazes felt insurmountably heavy. This was mortifying.

Morgan, standing next to Cassie, bumped shoulders with her. "He's only saying it because it's true."

OK, so it could get worse. Cassie knew she was good at her job. Very good. But best in the world? Hardly.

"One hundred percent true," Amy added. She was the only other player on the Wolfpack who also played for Canada. "You're the reason Milwaukee has a winning record."

"Stop looking so modest," Morgan said. Despite the teasing in her voice, something inside Cassie prickled. She hated all this praise. It was like being ganged up on in a good but awkward as fuck way. "You know you're amazing."

Cassie had to clear her throat before she could finally speak. "I'll accept amazing. But I'm not sure about best in the world. Can we leave it at that?"

Pete cocked his head to the side, like he was puzzled by her. Then he blinked and clapped his hands together. "Alright, enough embarrassing Cassie for now. It's time for a scrimmage."

The team divided in half, with a few extra players on the side. Cassie had the same four defenders in front of her as the

game kicked off. For which she was glad. She played better with them than with the backup defenders. But it still didn't feel quite right. The play didn't flow as well as she was used to with the Wolfpack. Even though she played in Milwaukee with Amy, she was probably least in sync with her. And today, the person she was most out of flow with was the left outside back, Bethany.

Someone else, whom Cassie was not thinking about, played left outside back. And long before they'd even been friends, let alone roommates, let alone whatever the hell they were now, they'd played in perfect sync. Like there was an unseen rhythm between them that flowed almost effortlessly when they played.

It felt awkward to play without that rhythm. In Milwaukee, it often felt like Cassie barely had to make saves because Rose and her fellow defenders were so good at their jobs. But Cassie knew she was part of that, knew she commanded the defense.

Here, everything felt wrong. Awkward and forced.

All because she was missing Rose.



Rose was hot and grumpy and sore. Nineties in September was some kind of bullshit weather. But she didn't bother saying anything about it as she hobbled with her two best friends toward the door to their hotel room. Technically Rose was in the adjoining room with Stephanie Marlin, but she spent most of her waking hours in with Lauren and Erika.

"I have not missed this kind of weather," Erika said as she slid her keycard into the slot. The light turned green and she

pushed open the door.

Before coming to the Wolfpack this season, Erika had played for several seasons in Atlanta.

Lauren pushed past her friend and hurried in to collapse face first on the far bed. “I’ve never had an icebath that felt so good. I want another.”

Erika slumped down on her bed and Rose sprawled in the armchair in the corner. She reached toward the climate control unit by the window and set it as cold as it would go.

“Our northern sensibilities aren’t cut out for this,” Rose whined. Sweat had pooled in all the most uncomfortable places: under her breasts, between her shoulder blades, in the crease where her leg met her hip. Ick.

“Thafeesgoo,” Lauren mumbled into the bedspread. Rose interpreted it as *that feels good*.

It wasn’t cool enough for Rose yet, but it would be.

“OK,” Erika said, after a few minutes, in her *this is business* voice. “You”—she pointed to Rose—“have some talking to do. You’ve been avoiding every question we ask, which means there’s something you’re not telling us.”

Sometimes best friends who knew you as well as you knew yourself were a pain in the ass. “About what?” she asked, as if she didn’t know what Erika was talking about.

Lauren rolled to the side and propped her head on her hand. Her bright blue ponytail cascaded onto the bed behind her. “Don’t play dumb. Where are things?”

Rose sighed. “I told you, we’re hanging out, going on friend dates.” Somehow friend dates seemed less threatening



than platonic dates. She had no idea why but it seemed that way.

And after what happened on Friday, they needed to take several steps back. Or Rose was going to get her hopes up.

Erika scooted up so her back was against the mound of pillows on her bed. “Nuh uh. There’s more. I can tell when you’re keeping a secret because you never keep secrets. You spill everything.”

It was true. Rose was a talker and over-sharer by nature. But this felt... private. Like if she shared it, it would ruin the intimacy and specialness of what she and Cassie had shared. Even if it couldn’t happen again, Rose wanted to savor the memory.

But she had no willpower against the hard stare in Erika’s brown eyes.

Her shoulders sagged and she covered her hands with her face. “We kissed,” she mumbled. It came out sounding more like *e kid*, but she trusted her friends to interpret.

“*You what?*” Lauren yelled as Rose could feel Erika’s stare get harder.

“Say that again,” Erika finally said.

Rose dropped her hands and met Erika’s gaze. “We kissed.” She swung her head around to face Lauren. “Just once. The night before we left. So don’t ask me what it means because I don’t have a clue. She kissed me, and then she stopped it and said we can’t. So I don’t fucking know.”

Tears burned the back of her throat. Fuck. She was trying really hard not to care this much. It was just one kiss. One little kiss. Didn’t have to mean anything.

Except when she'd loved Cassie for so long, for that one perfect moment, it had meant everything.

"Well shit," Lauren said.

Erika scrambled off her bed and came to wrap Rose in a hug. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. I mean, not that she kissed you, but that it's all confusing now."

Rose wrapped one arm around Erika and let herself sink into the hug. She was so lucky to have such great friends.

"Thanks."

Erika pulled back, then sat down on the floor and spread her legs in a wide V. She leaned over the left one to stretch. "Was it at least good?"

Rose let herself remember, just for a moment. The weight of Cassie's lips against hers, the slide of Cassie's tongue. How after so long wondering, she now knew Cassie tasted like ripe berries and desire and the stars. How even more than desire, she'd felt an overwhelming swell of love and affection for Cassie. How for one moment, she'd had everything.

But she couldn't put any of that into words. Would they even understand what she was talking about? Sure, they'd all been in love before. Erika was now madly in love with her husband. But neither of them had experienced this long, unrequited yearning for someone.

She just smiled softly and said, "It was amazing."

Lauren let out a *whooping* sound while Erika clapped her hands together.

Grinning, Erika said, "That's awesome."

Rose scrubbed her hands over her face. "So why did she have to stop it?" Her voice was just shy of a whine.

“I’d offer to kick her ass,” Lauren said, “but I’m pretty sure she’d win that one. Sorry.”

Rose shrugged. “Kind of you to offer.” She sighed deeply. “I mean, I know why she did. She doesn’t want any kind of relationship. She’s done with all that. It’s the whole reason I’m trying to get over her. It’s hopeless for us. And it’s not like either of us is going to have just a fling with the other. Way too complicated.”

“So why are you torturing yourself?” Lauren leveled a stare at Rose.

“What, by letting her live with me? I couldn’t let her—“

“Not that. I get that. Better you pine than she not have a house. I mean why are you going on these platonic dates.” Lauren made air quotes around *platonic*.

“Because dating Cassie is something I’ve wanted for so long, I’m apparently willing to settle for this.” Rose shook her head at her own patheticness. “I just don’t know how to say no to her.”



Cassie added more cold water to her bath, grimacing as she leaned back against the tub wall. She hated ice baths. Hell, she hated baths. All that time just sitting there with nothing to do except think about how much the cold burned.

Tonight it was extra torturous being alone with her thoughts. Because every single one of them starred Rose.

What if Cassie hadn’t stopped that kiss? Would Rose have? Did Rose even feel this same pull, this same attraction

Cassie felt? Rose hadn't pulled away from the kiss, but Cassie had initiated it.

But what if Rose was into it? Would they have stumbled to the couch to make out? Would they have made their way upstairs and screwed each other senseless?

The urge to get her phone from the bathroom counter was strong. Five days now and they hadn't exchanged a single text. Tomorrow Canada played the US, and someone from the media team had already let Cassie know they wanted a photo op of Cassie and Rose exchanging jerseys before the game.

It would be awkward as fuck if they didn't talk before that. But she couldn't quite make herself be the first to get in touch.



At five a.m., the hotel gym was empty. Except for Rose, legs spinning in a bike race to nowhere. Trying to outrun the tangled thoughts in her brain. She probably shouldn't be pushing herself this early on a game day but after a restless night of sex dream after sex dream, she couldn't stand the torture anymore. She'd had to get out of bed.

Six days now since they'd kissed. Since they'd talked. Rose's phone was propped in front of her, providing the music blasting in her earbuds.

She should text Cassie. They were doing a photo op tonight, and just the idea of putting her arm around Cassie as they posed for the camera got Rose's pulse racing faster than the bike did. It would be awkward as fuck if they didn't talk first.

But Cassie had been the one to end their kiss. Cassie was the one who didn't want to get involved. Cassie should be the one to make first contact.

Not Rose.



All around her, her teammates and coaches and trainers talked and laughed as they all ate lunch, but Cassie had a weird sort of disconnection happening. She couldn't cue in to any one conversation. The only thing in her head, playing on an endless loop, was that kiss. That endless, perfect kiss. The endless kiss that Cassie had, in fact, ended.

Had anyone told Rose before that she tasted like happiness? Cassie had never really tasted that before, but for one brief moment, one perfect moment, she'd tasted it in Rose.

She couldn't stand it anymore. She pulled out her phone and opened her text chain with Rose. Heart pounding so hard she could feel it in her throat and her jaw and her belly, she typed.

*Cassie: Good luck tonight. You might kick our ass, but I'll try my best to stop you. Miss you.*

Her throat felt tight as her index finger hovered over the little green arrow to send the message. Was the *miss you* too much?

She shook her head and forced her finger onto the button. With a little *whoosh* sound, it was gone.



*C*assie: *Good luck tonight. You might kick our ass, but I'll try my best to stop you. Miss you.*

Rose's heart started pounding when the text arrived during lunch. Her throat suddenly felt tight and she could barely swallow the bite of chicken in her mouth.

*Miss you.*

What did that mean? It had to be more than just friendly, didn't it? Rose would never say *miss you* to Lauren or Erika. But Cassie wasn't Rose.

Rose barely restrained the urge to drop her face to the table and bang her head a few times. She was being dramatic enough about Cassie without resorting to displays of ridiculousness.

Maybe once she saw Cassie tonight, it would be better. It certainly couldn't get more confusing.



**H**ad Rose really thought seeing Cassie couldn't make things more confusing? What a naive child she'd been. It was definitely more confusing.

When they met near center field for their photo op, Cassie gave her a restrained, hesitant smile. Not the wide, bright, eyes-twinkling smiles Rose was used to. This felt practiced. A little aloof.

Was that because there were dozens of people around? Or because Cassie was now uncomfortable around Rose.

*Miss you.*

No, Cassie had been the one to write that. If only they could talk privately. Except Rose wasn't sure she was ready for that conversation anyway.

“Can you guys exchange jerseys for the photo?” the photographer, a short Black woman with a friendly face, asked.

Stand with her arm around the woman she yearned for while each was wearing only a sports bra? Sure, no problem.

Rose whipped off her shirt, handed it to Cassie, and took her friend's shirt. She flipped it around and held it in front of herself, so it displayed Cassie's name and number. *Dickinson, 1*. Cassie did the same, holding up *Olivieri, 8*.

Because both hands were holding up the jersey, Rose couldn't put her arms around Cassie. Which was both a disappointment and a relief. Still, Cassie leaned toward her until their bare shoulders touched. Skin on skin.

Desire shimmered through Rose and she had to brace herself not to shiver. That would be embarrassing as hell with so many people around. She couldn't exactly blame a chill since it was still somewhere around 85 degrees, even at almost seven at night. Texas weather was bullshit.

“Thanks, ladies.” The photographer lowered her camera and gave them a wide smile. “We're all done.”

Rose turned to Cassie to swap jerseys back. Cassie surprised her by hooking an arm around Rose's shoulders and pulling her in for a hug. Somewhere Rose heard a camera click.

“Good luck,” Cassie said softly, soft enough only Rose could hear.

Reactions slow due to her startling, Rose looped an arm around Cassie's back. "You too." She wanted to snuggle into the embrace. Savor it, revel in it. Deepen it.

For that very reason, Rose stepped back. They had an audience and a game and if she let Cassie touch her a second longer, she'd throw her pre-game focus all out of whack.

So, like she often did, she cleared the awkwardness with a joke. "I hope you have a good game but not so good we lose." She forced a grin she didn't feel.

Cassie laughed awkwardly. "Same to you."

Rose pulled on her jersey and adjusted it so it fell just right. She didn't want to spend the game adjusting her clothes. "Nah, this game is ours."

Cassie's eyes twinkled, no trace of awkwardness in her now. Maybe it wasn't awkward for her because the kiss had meant nothing. Rose's heart squeezed, aching.

"We could surprise you. Your former coach knows all your weaknesses and how to exploit them."

"Yeah, you wish." Rose rolled her eyes playfully. It was almost impressive how she could pretend to banter on the outside while inside she was a squishy mess of uncertainty. She had to fix this before the game started.

"I better go." She took a step backward, toward her team's bench.

Cassie mirrored Rose's action. She gave Rose such a sweet, encouraging smile it broke Rose's heart just a little. No biggie. Who needed a functioning heart to play 90 minutes of soccer?



Back with her team, Rose finished warming up and working on getting her brain back into a game mindset. Fortunately, she'd played so many matches in her life that she was good at pushing out the mental rubble and embracing the singular focus of soccer.

She joined her teammates in jogging out to the field to take their positions for kickoff. "Good luck." US Goalkeeper Alexis Maas held out her fist as she and Rose jogged together.

Rose bumped fists with her teammate. It was weird coming out with Alexis, despite them having done it for so many games recently in the World Cup. But Rose and Cassie had a small routine of walking out together for Wolfpack games, exchanging both fist bumps and high fives, and good luck. So a single fist bump with nothing else left Rose feeling out of sorts. Unfinished.

Just to clear the feeling, she called "good luck" to Emma Jung, and in a display of true ridiculousness, slapped herself high five.

The game started and Rose was able to get herself into the zone, where the only thing she thought about was soccer. Still, she was hyper-aware in some part of her brain that she was playing Cassie. That for her team to win, Cassie's had to lose.

It wasn't exactly an unfamiliar sensation. Some of her Wolfpack teammates played on various international teams. She played them with the USWNT frequently. And her USWNT teammates played throughout the NWSL, so she almost always played at least one teammate in every Wolfpack game.

But none of them were Cassie.

## *thirteen*

Cassie probably should have sucked it up and forced herself to have a conversation with Rose about their kiss. A kiss she could not get out of her head no matter how much she tried. She'd even tried not trying, but that didn't work either.

They'd been back from their international break for four days now. And they'd settled back into their routine of practices and hanging out at home, as if nothing had happened.

Probably because Rose didn't think it was a big deal. She probably was relieved Cassie hadn't forced a conversation so that Rose wouldn't have to find a way to let Cassie know it had been a mistake. Cassie wasn't sure she could handle hearing that from Rose. No, it shouldn't have happened. Rose deserved more than Cassie had to give anyone. But that didn't mean she wanted Rose to regret it.

Cassie definitely didn't regret it.

Tonight they had their next platonic date. They were going out for frozen custard, because Cassie had mentioned weeks ago that she'd never tried the frozen dessert despite six years in Milwaukee. Rose had seen that as a crime against the city and decided they needed to go to her favorite place.

Cassie was both looking forward to it and a little dreading it. Their routine may be back to normal but the dynamic

between them had shifted subtly. Rose no longer sat in the middle of the couch to share a snack while they watched TV; instead she divided it onto two plates. She no longer casually touched Cassie if they passed in the hall or the kitchen. And she couldn't seem to meet Cassie's gaze for more than a blink.

One kiss, one amazing kiss, and now Cassie felt like she was losing her best friend. Maybe she did regret, just a little, kissing Rose.

"You ready to go?" Rose breezed into the kitchen with her purse slung over one arm. She was wearing athletic leggings and a Wolfpack t-shirt, and her long hair was a dark curtain over her shoulder. Her lower lip was glossy and alluring. Cassie wanted to bite into it.

*Down, girl.*

Cassie pushed off the counter she'd been leaning on. "Yep." She snagged her purse and followed Rose out the door.

During the drive to the custard stand, they literally talked about the weather. Specifically that it was supposed to rain for the next few days and that meant getting soaked at practice. They rehashed something funny their coach had said and laughed about it.

Once they reached Moosa, the custard and burger stand at the Lakefront, they'd lapsed into awkward silence. Not once in the four years they'd known each other had they ever had anything but comfortable, companionable silence.

Why had Cassie done something so stupid as to kiss Rose? She'd ruined everything.

Rose parked her car near the beach and they walked to the small building painted white with black cow spots. It was Wisconsin as fuck.

“Have you ever had cheese curds?” Rose asked as they stood in line behind a family of five and a group of what looked like college students. “Say you’ve had cheese curds.”

“I mean, I know curds and whey from that nursery rhyme, Little Miss Muffet. Like that?” Frankly, curds and whey always sounded kind of gross. Like watery cheese soup or something.

Rose closed her eyes and sighed. “OK, we’re getting those too. How have you lived in Wisconsin six years and never had these delicacies? I’m not from here and, like, they were some of the first things people introduced me to. You need better friends.”

What Cassie needed were friends besides Rose. And they hadn’t really hung out much until Cassie moved in. Because Cassie had been getting over her first marriage breaking up, then meeting Greg and trying to make that second marriage work.

She should’ve just been making friends on her team, for all the good working on relationships had done her. Thirty-one and twice divorced was a hell of a track record.

More reasons she never should have kissed Rose.

Summoning every ounce of courage she had, digging deep into the tiny hidden crevices in her soul, Cassie said, “Rose, about... that night.”

Rose’s face went expressionless. “We don’t have to—“

Cassie held up her hand. “I know. But I hate that it’s all awkward now. I shouldn’t have”—she swallowed hard—“kissed you. It was crossing a line and I’m sorry.”

Something like relief passed over Rose’s face. OK, so she was relieved Cassie was apologizing. Clearly she hadn’t

wanted the kiss if this conversation came as relief.

“It’s fine. I shouldn’t have... kissed you back.” Rose cleared her throat. “Let’s just forget it happened and move forward. Yeah?”

Cassie would never be able to forget the best kiss of her life, but if that’s what Rose wanted, she would do it. Much as she longed for a repeat, several repeats, Rose was right. They needed to move on. And Cassie would cling to the memory in secret.

So she forced a smile. “Perfect.”

Fortunately it was their turn to order so the awkward conversation had to end. They both ordered chocolate custard in waffle cones plus an order of deep fried cheese curds.

“Deep fried? So are these like mozzarella sticks?” Cassie eyed the little tan lumps in the paper dish Rose carried as they made their way to one of the picnic tables near the stand.

“Hahaha, you sweet summer child. These are so much better,” Rose teased.

Cassie’s chest went soft. They could tease again. This was good. This was very very good.

The curd was hot when she picked it up. She could see grease beaded on the breading, and the melted cheese was oozing out. Cassie’s mouth watered. She could feel Rose’s gaze on her as she lifted the treat to her mouth. Which made her heart pound harder; Rose was watching her lips.

But not for that reason.

She sank her teeth into the center of the curd and let the flavors wash her tongue. It was hot and rich and greasy and decadent and a little sharp. Perfection.

“Oh my god,” Cassie said as she chewed. “These are amazing.”

Rose held up her hands. “See?”

“Why don’t we have these at every meal?” Cassie reached for another.

“Because the trainers would kill us if we ate deep fried cheese every day.”

Cassie tilted her head side to side in a gesture of agreement. “Fair point.”

“Now try the custard.” Rose was practically bouncing on her seat.

How different from ice cream could it really be? It looked creamier, almost like frozen yogurt.

Cassie stuck her tongue out and swiped it over the custard. Rich, decadent, chocolaty sweetness bathed her tongue. Lacking creativity, she again said, “Oh my god, this is amazing too.”

Rose grinned, then took a lick of her custard. Cassie’s brain shorted out at the sight of Rose’s tongue curling over the frozen custard. She wanted—

Cassie took another lick of custard to derail her thought train. But that didn’t stop the rush of her pulse in her ears—or maybe that was just the waves on the lake?—or the tingle between her legs.

Sure, things were totally back to normal.

“So what were you like as a little kid?” she asked Rose.

They spent a few minutes talking about their childhoods as they ate their custard. Cassie had to brace herself so she

wouldn't get sidetracked by the sight of Rose's tongue. Why did eating frozen custard have to be so sexy?

Though she'd never once gotten turned on by watching Greg eat ice cream. It probably wasn't the eating part so much as it was Rose.

If only Cassie were a completely different person, someone capable of fully loving someone else, capable of letting herself be loved. But she wasn't and Rose deserved more.



They chatted more as they finished the food. Rose ate faster and was done with her cone while Cassie still had the bottom couple inches of the waffle cone left. She started to rise to go throw it in the trash; she was plenty full.

“What are you doing?” Rose jumped up.

Cassie gave her a confused look. “I'm done.”

“You can't... you're throwing away perfectly good frozen custard?” Rose sounded personally offended. “I can't let you do that.” She grabbed the cone out of Cassie's hand and slicked her tongue over the custard.

Cassie's stomach dropped. Why did Rose have to be so sexy in everything she did?

Rose quickly polished off the rest of Cassie's cone. “You know it's like a crime to throw away the end of your ice cream cone, right?”

Cassie laughed. “OK.”

Rose didn't smile. "Ice cream and frozen custard are serious business, Cassie. I'm not joking."

Cassie laughed harder, because it was clear Rose was playing. Cassie loved it.

"I'm very sorry to have committed this grave error. Thank you for rescuing me and I promise it won't happen again."

Rose waved a finger at Cassie. "See that it doesn't."

"You wanna head home?" Rose asked after a moment. "Or we could walk on the beach for a little bit."

It was a warm evening, for early October, with a gentle breeze coming off Lake Michigan. Perfect for a walk. Warm enough, even, to take off their shoes and dip their toes in the water if they wanted.

Cassie smiled, a soft smile she realized she only used with Rose. "A walk sounds great."



The breeze felt nice on Rose's face, a gentle caress on her skin. They stashed their shoes in the car and walked barefoot along the water's edge. The first time it lapped over Rose's toes, she squealed as cold shocked through her feet.

Cassie laughed, the sweet sound squeezing Rose's chest. She wanted to grab Cassie's hand, lean into her body so they could walk close. Like a couple.

But they weren't a couple. Cassie had made that clear when she apologized for kissing Rose. Plus, neither of them wanted to be a couple.



Rose, honestly, didn't know what she wanted. Every relationship she'd ever had had felt smothering, and she'd long ago come to the conclusion that she wasn't cut out for long-term dating. After just a few months she felt suffocated.

But Cassie was different. She'd never been in love with anyone except Cassie. So would being with her seem different? Or would it feel like she couldn't breathe with Cassie too?

It didn't matter, though. Cassie wasn't interested, and was off limits besides.

Still, she couldn't stop the warm tingle moving through her as they walked, Cassie standing so close their shoulders occasionally bumped. It would be so easy, so natural to twine their fingers together.

Would Rose want to hold hands if it were Erika or Lauren? She needed to keep using that guidepost, to keep her and Cassie firmly in the friendship category.

Yeah, she might take Erika's hand. Lace her fingers through Lauren's, maybe even put her arm around Lauren's waist and lean in.

Pulse racing with anticipation, Rose slid her arm over and took Cassie's hand. Instead of pulling away like Rose had feared she might, Cassie gave Rose a gentle squeeze and wrapped her fingers around Rose's hand.

*Yes!* Rose's mind screamed.

*More!* her libido screamed.

*No,* she firmly told her libido. Not tonight, not really ever. It just wasn't going to happen for them.

As they walked, Rose's feet adjusted to the cold and the water started to feel good. Her feet were almost always aching from hours of running and training and kicking, sometimes breaking in new cleats. So the cold soothed.

She scanned her thoughts for a topic of conversation. There was one thing she'd always wondered about Cassie and didn't know. Maybe this relaxing walk was a good time to ask. Beaches were calming.

"So I know most of what happened with you and Greg. But I've always wondered about your first marriage. Who was she and what happened?"

Cassie was silent and her hand twitched in Rose's.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked. I'm nosy. You don't have to tell me." Shit. Now she'd made things awkward again, just when they'd gotten back to normal.

"No, don't be sorry," Cassie said hurriedly. "I just... it was a long time ago, and I don't talk about her much."

"What was her name?"

"Heather."

"How long were you married?"

Cassie looked up at the sky. "Three months."

Oh wow. That was like a crash and burn disaster. "Did you date a long time before you got married?"

Cassie shook her head. "Three months."

Rose struggled to keep any reaction from her face. She wasn't judging Cassie at all, but if she showed her surprise, Cassie might think it was judgement. Which it wasn't. Not at all.

“I was in a bad place when we met. I’d just moved here for the team. I didn’t know anyone and I was lonely, and she was this wild, loud, funny woman who was so much fun, she made me forget how miserable I was.”

“Understandable. It’s hard moving around for teams. I was lucky Lauren was here when I got traded. We’ve been friends for a long time. But I know Erika had a hard time adjusting in Atlanta. It’s part of why she wanted to get the trade here.”

Rose looked over at Cassie, the breeze blowing her gorgeous hair around her pretty face. Her blue eyes looked sad, and it made Rose’s chest ache. She leaned in closer until their shoulders touched.

Cassie turned to look at Rose and when their gazes connected, it was like the world stood still. As far as Rose knew, even the waves stopped lapping at the beach. It was just her and Cassie and everything unspoken passing between them. The sadness mixed with something else Rose saw in Cassie’s eyes. The overwhelming emotions—longing, empathy, love—flooding Rose’s chest. The electric energy in the air around them. The beat of Cassie’s pulse that Rose was certain she could feel in their connected hands. The beat of Rose’s own pulse, so strong it made her throat feel tight.

This moment was everything.

Then Cassie closed her eyes, ending whatever had passed between them. She lifted her chin, tilting her face to the sky as Rose watched, unable to take her gaze away from the gentle slope of Cassie’s nose, the curve of her cheeks, the line of her lips. The slight tilt at the corners of Cassie’s mouth.

A strand of hair blew across Cassie’s forehead and Rose’s fingers twitched with a need to brush it back. To touch

Cassie's face. To taste her again, feel those lush lips against hers.

She closed her own eyes to gather her control. They'd agreed—well, Cassie had said and Rose had no choice but to agree—the kiss shouldn't have happened. Except Rose would cling to the memory of Cassie's tongue twined with hers for as long as she lived.

Opening her eyes, she shook off the thoughts before she went farther down that path. She tugged lightly on Cassie's arm and took a step. It was easier if they kept walking.

Cassie opened her eyes and they kept going, falling in step with each other. The water tickled Rose's skin, grounding her.

“So why the whirlwind of a relationship?” Rose asked. “And again, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to. You can tell me to mind my own business. But—“ Her voice caught on the vulnerability. “I want to know you better.” Her pulse kicked up again, heart hammering against her chest.

Cassie squeezed Rose's hand. “It's fine. Um, like I said, Heather was kind of wild. And impulsive. One afternoon we were bored, and she said ‘Let's get married. It'll be fun.’ So we went to City Hall and applied for a license. And you'd think that in the five days we had to wait, I might have come to my senses. But I didn't. I just...”

Cassie was silent for a few steps and Rose waited patiently. It couldn't be easy to talk about.

Their shoulders brushed with every step, sending tingles cascading down Rose's arm. Yeah, she could be patient and just enjoy this.

“I just really wanted someone to want me. To love me. So we had a judge marry us at City Hall a few days later, and

after that things got bad.”

Rose’s heart squeezed in sympathy. “I’m sorry. That had to be so hard.”

Cassie sighed. “It wasn’t like she hurt me or something. We just started bickering a lot. She kept going out to have fun but didn’t want me to come anymore. So I was home alone. In her apartment while I tried to sublet mine. Fortunately I never did, so when we decided to split, I still had a place to live.”

Rose didn’t know what to say so she simply squeezed Cassie’s hand.

“I run into her occasionally. She’s kind of a disaster, so really I dodged a bullet, divorcing her. I never should have married her in the first place.” Cassie sighed. “But can’t change that now, can I?”

“No,” Rose murmured. “Thank you for telling me, though.”

“Sure.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes, the breeze blowing their hair around. Rose had to continually push hers out of her face. If only she had a hair tie. She usually kept a spare on her wrist but she’d apparently forgotten today.

They reached the end of the beach so they turned to head back to Rose’s car.

“Any wild, sordid relationships in your past?” Cassie asked.

“Not really. I’m kind of commitment-phobic or something. Longest relationship I’ve had was four months.”

“Wow. That’s, uh, that’s short.”

Rose sighed. Sarah was a good woman, but she'd lasted that long only because Rose was desperately trying to fall for Sarah so she would get over Cassie. Which wasn't fair to Sarah.

"I seem to attract needy women. They want more of my time and myself than I want to give."

Cassie laughed humorlessly. "That's what Greg said about me. I didn't let him in. Didn't let him love me."

Rose's chest squeezed. Was Cassie as lonely as she sometimes seemed?

"Mine is more that I feel like they want all my time and attention and I need some space just for myself."

Cassie gave Rose's hand a squeeze. "That sounds hard too."

With a deep breath for courage, Rose leaned her head sideways to rest it on Cassie's shoulder. "I guess there are good reasons we're both single."

"At least we get to go on dates," Cassie said lightly.

Rose chuckled. "That we do."

Several moments of silence later, Cassie said, "You know what I really miss?"

"What?"

"Sex."

Rose almost choked on her tongue. She started coughing and tried to suck in air, because all of it had left her lungs.

She could not talk to Cassie about sex. She didn't have the emotional fortitude.

“I mean, vibrators get the job done. But I miss being touched.”

Rose. Was. Dying. Because now she couldn't stop picturing Cassie laying naked on her bed, holding a vibrator to her clit. Rose's own clit throbbed at the mental picture.

It was completely unfair of Cassie to have started this conversation. Sure, Rose might talk about this very subject with Erika and Lauren, and sure, Cassie was her friend. But Rose wasn't in love with Erika and Lauren. Rose hadn't spent hours of her life fantasizing about Erika and Lauren naked and aroused.

Fuck. She needed out of this conversation before she lost her shit and did something really bad like kissing Cassie. Or begging her to strip her naked and take her seven ways from Sunday.

“Do you miss that?” Cassie asked, oblivious to Rose's torment.

“A lot,” Rose managed to squeak out.

“Maybe we should help each other find a fuck buddy.”

Wasn't that what Cassie had been trying to find for Rose?

“Some good no-strings sex.” Cassie did a little skip. “Ooh, I could really go for that. Wanna help me find a fuck buddy?”

*Pick me!* Rose's clit screamed. But Rose managed to keep the thought from leaving her mouth. Way too complicated. Plus, Cassie may not realize it, but if they were fuck buddies, there were a whole lot of strings.

Plus, inevitably Rose would start feeling suffocated after a few months, and then Cassie would have to find a new place to

live because you couldn't exactly go back to just being roommates and friends after being fuck buddies.

Could you?

No, terrible idea.

"I'm not sure I know anyone eligible," Rose said cautiously. "But I suppose I can help you find someone?"

"I'll just put an ad on Craigslist." Cassie laughed. "Wanted: person of any gender for sex and no strings. Must like tall cis women."

Rose forced herself to laugh along. "There you go. That won't attract a million weirdos."

"It's a perfect plan."

They'd reached the end of the beach, so they rinsed their feet in the water, then climbed across the rocks to get to the parking lot. At Rose's car, they put their shoes back on and got in.

As Rose drove along the Lakefront to get back to their house, Cassie said, "Craigslist aside, maybe we should be each other's wing women. Find hookups."

Rose swallowed past the lump in her throat. "A casual hook up is what I was looking for with all those dates you sent me on. Not sure I can do that again."

Cassie's shoulders slumped. "True."

Rose shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant and like she wasn't totally picturing Cassie naked with Rose's head between her legs.

Cassie leaned her head back on the seat. "Sex with Greg went from decent to meh to nonexistent. It's just been way too



long since I had fantastic sex.”

“I can definitely relate to that.” Rose would give Cassie amazing sex.

Ugh, she had to stop these thoughts.

Cassie made a whimpering sound. “I just really want some good sex with someone besides myself.”

Rose bit down on the insides of her lips to keep from making the proposition that was trying to escape. Because she really wanted some good sex too.

With Cassie.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *fourteen*

Cassie spent the half hour before Vera came over making a page of her planner look pretty, with a rainbow-colored theme. It seemed appropriate for taking notes about an LGBTQ mentoring program. She was just finishing up a rainbow heart when the side door opened.

“Hello, girls!” Vera called. She appeared in the kitchen with a tote bag over her shoulder and a plastic container in her hand.

Her smile faltered when she saw Cassie alone at the table. “Is Rose not here? I didn’t see her car.”

“She’s, uh, out with Lauren, I think.” Cassie hated lying to Vera.

Vera’s face fell. “Oh. She didn’t tell me that.”

Why would a 28-year-old woman tell her mom if she was going out with a friend? Sure, it wasn’t true and Rose had reasons for hiding her class from her mom. Even so, it was weird that Vera expected it.

Vera squared her shoulders. “Well, it’s just be us girls, then.”

Cassie didn’t love being called a girl, but she understood it was default for some people to use the term.

Vera set her bag and the plastic bin on the table, then sat across from Cassie. “I brought protein balls for you two. I know Rose gets so hungry at practice.”

Cassie had never seen Rose eat during practice, other than when the team ate together.

Vera reached into her bag and dug around, then produced a leather journal bursting with papers inserted between the pages. She flipped it open to a page with purple writing. “Should we dive right in? Get started? I made some notes about what I’d like the program to entail, but I want your feedback too.”

Cassie’s heart fluttered. She couldn’t remember a single time her own mother had wanted her feedback.

“That sounds good,” Cassie said. “And I love your planner.”

Vera grinned, the corners of her brown eyes crinkling. “Thank you. I can go a little overboard, but between my stuff and Rose’s, there’s so much to keep track of.”

Cassie literally bit her tongue to keep from asking why she needed to keep track of Rose’s stuff. As far as Cassie knew, Rose kept track of all their practices and games, her camps with the national team, flights, charity appearances, and all her personal stuff on her own.

Then again, it must be nice to have a mom who gave a shit.

“What I don’t want this to become is a homework session,” Vera said. “I don’t want mentors to feel like they can’t participate if they don’t remember trigonometry, and we already have a tutor for any kids who need it.”

Cassie nodded. “Good, because I could not tell you the difference between sine, cosine, and... the other one. I

honestly can't believe I remember that much."

Vera's laugh was light and cheerful. Happy. So like her daughter's, Cassie's heart fluttered again.

"I don't know a lot about mentoring. Nothing, really. But it seems like the kids will be more engaged if it's fun," Cassie said. She wrote *fun* in her journal.

"I couldn't agree more." Vera tapped her own journal with her pen. "And considering we're dealing with teenagers, I think you'll have the most success working one-on-one, rather than in a group. They'll let their guard down a little more if they aren't worried about impressing their friends."

*Merrrow.*

Cassie glanced at the doorway to see Freddie Purrcury sauntering in. He did a figure eight around her ankles and let out another loud meow.

"OK, buddy. I'm sorry." Cassie pushed her chair back. "If you'll excuse me a minute, I forgot dinnertime."

Freddie trotted after Cassie as she got out a can of paté cat food and scooped it into a small bowl. As she worked, he wound around her ankles.

"Now how come I haven't met you before?" Vera asked.

"My ex left the cat when he moved out, even though he was Greg's before we met." Mealtime was still basically the only time Freddie acknowledged Cassie. He'd taken a liking to Rose, though. Even Marie Purrie seemed to be higher on Freddie's preference list than Cassie.

Except when she had food.

"I'm surprised Rose didn't mention that." Vera sounded a little hurt.

Cassie was pretty sure she'd told Vera about the cat when they'd done the congressional glitter, but she didn't want to be rude and point out Vera's memory lapse.

"It probably didn't occur to her." Cassie didn't want Vera to feel slighted. Rose could be a little dismissive of her mom, in her attempt to gain her personal space.

Not an easy balance, and Cassie knew Vera aggravated Rose. But it had to be better than having a mom whose only use for you was to give the delusion of a happy family.

As she was taking her seat again, Cassie's phone chimed with a text message. Cassie checked the screen and her stomach plunged.

*Mom.*

Fuck.

She was ignoring it. "So, fun things to do one-on-one."

Vera cocked her head to the side. "Do you need to get that?"

"It's nobody." If only.

They discussed and brainstormed ideas, and Vera didn't once tell Cassie she was being ridiculous, or roll her eyes, or otherwise belittle Cassie. What a novel experience. Rose didn't realize how lucky she was.

After a half hour, Vera had filled three more pages in her journal and Cassie's page was full. Markers of successful brainstorming.

As they were wrapping up, Cassie's phone rang. Once again the display read *Mom*.

"Oh, your mother. You should get that."

Cassie pressed decline. “I really shouldn’t.” She couldn’t stop an edge of bitterness in her voice.

“Mothers worry about our daughters.” Vera’s tone was gentle, if a little admonishing.

“Mine doesn’t. She’s only calling because there’s a family wedding she wants me to come home for.” When Vera started to respond, Cassie held up her hand. “Not because she wants to see me. But because she wants to keep up the appearance of a happy, functional family. But the truth is, she’s forgotten my birthday the last four years, never bothered to RSVP for my wedding, let alone come to it, and doesn’t say anything to me except to criticize my appearance or career choice.”

Vera’s smooth forehead creased with concern. “Oh, Cassie, I’m so sorry. Any mother should be proud to have you as a daughter.”

Cassie snorted out a humorless laugh. “Not mine.”

“And I don’t know how she can’t see how beautiful you are, inside and out.”

Cassie’s heart squeezed and her eyes welled up. Had anyone ever called her beautiful before? The best she ever got from Greg was “You look nice” on their wedding day.

Cassie’s phone chimed again with a text message. It had to be her mom, so she ignored it. “It’s really nice of you to say.”

“I’m not just saying it. You are a truly beautiful person, Cassie.” Vera shook her head. “But I know it’s hard to believe in yourself when your own mother is so harsh.”

Harsh might be one of the nicer things Cassie could call her mother.

Her phone chimed again.

And again. And twice more right in a row.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Cassie muttered, grabbing the phone and swiping to the text app.

Mom: *We need to talk about the wedding.*

Mom: *Why aren’t you answering your phone?*

Mom: *I expect a response, Cassandra.*

Mom: *I raised you better than to ignore your mother.*

Fury started a slow boil in Cassie’s chest. As if her mother had raised her. That was the job of nannies and tutors. Denise had only taken the bare minimum amount of time to ensure her daughter knew how much Denise disapproved of her. Not like it would’ve mattered. They adored her brother but still hadn’t bothered to parent him.

“Is that your mom?” Vera asked.

Nodding, Cassie sighed. “Yep. Doesn’t get why I’m not jumping on her every word to respond immediately. As if my entire life is so pointless, I can always be available to answer a text the minute it arrives.”

Vera didn’t say anything, her sympathetic expression deepening.

“And the wedding is right during the playoffs!” Cassie’s voice rose an octave at the end. She was getting worked up, giving her mom more energy than she deserved. But she couldn’t help it. It felt so good to talk to someone, especially a mother figure, who listened. Maybe she was the one who needed a mentor.

“Well that’s just ridiculous.” Vera frowned.

“You know she’s never been to a single one of my soccer games? Not even when I was little. My dad too. The nanny would take me, or sometimes they just had a hired car take me and pick me up.” Cassie’s chest felt like it was cracking in half with the pain of those memories. She never got to go out with her teammates after games to celebrate, because her nanny had to get her home. Or her hired car was there. No one had been there to cheer extra loud when she made a great save.

Now there were fans who cheered for her. Total strangers more invested in her career than her own parents.

“Oh, honey.” Vera came around the table and wrapped her arms around Cassie’s shoulder. “If she can’t see what an amazing woman you’ve grown up to be, she’s the one missing out.”

Awkwardly, Cassie put her arms around Vera’s waist. That wasn’t much comfort, but it was a start.



“**A**nd I’ll see everyone on Thursday.” Professor Daniels turned on the lights in the lecture hall as the room filled with the sounds of shuffling feet and backpack zippers. A low buzz of conversation started.

“Hey, Rose, right?”

Rose looked over at the Black woman a few seats over. She had blue braids twisted into a bun on the top of her head and striking eyes.

“That’s right. And you’re... Alicia?”

The other woman nodded, smiling as she rose from her seat. She started down the row toward Rose.



“Nice to officially meet you,” Rose said as she started toward the aisle. She needed to stop at the grocery store on the way home, but if she hurried, she and Cassie should have time to finish the series they were bingeing about modern blacksmithing. It was fascinating.

“How’re you liking the class?” Alicia asked.

“So far it’s really interesting.” Rose held the lecture hall door for Alicia. “What about you?”

“I like it. Daniels seems like he’s a decent teacher, which goes a long way. I’ve had some professors who have no clue how to teach.”

“So you’re not a freshman like most of the rest of the class?” Rose glanced over at Alicia and smiled.

“Senior. I need the science credit.” Alicia tilted her head to the side. “You’re not a freshman either, right?”

Rose shook her head. “I have a degree in communications. But I’m thinking about getting a second degree in physics. Right now it’s just part time while I work.”

Alicia pushed open the door and they stepped out into the twilight. “Oooh, a nerdy type, huh?”

Rose laughed. “I guess so.”

Alicia paused at the edge of the sidewalk. “You ever want to get coffee or a drink after class sometime? Or get together to study?”

Something about Alicia’s tone told Rose she wasn’t just asking for a study date. She was interested in Rose. Possibly she was asking Rose out.

“I’d love to get to know you a little more.”

Yep, definitely asking her out. Alicia was a gorgeous woman and part of Rose was intrigued. She could easily be attracted to Alicia. Alicia could be a potential fuck buddy.

Then Cassie's face popped into Rose's head. Her mouth actually watered with the memory of Cassie's taste.

No, she just couldn't. It wasn't fair to anyone, even a casual fuck buddy, to sleep with them when she would think of Cassie the entire time.

So Rose gave Alicia her kindest smile. "I have a really busy job. I don't really have time for... coffee."

Alicia's smile faltered, but she recovered quickly. "Understood."

They stood in awkward silence for a long, painful moment.

Finally Rose said, "So I'm this way." She tossed her thumb over her shoulder. *Please be going the other way.* Hopefully in a week or two, they could have friendly conversation in class. But right now it was hella weird.

"I'm that way." Alicia nodded in the opposite direction.

"I'll see you next class, then?" Rose asked, hoping her expression conveyed that she was sorry and it wasn't anything personal, she was just totally in love with someone else.

Because a facial expression could communicate all that.

"Yeah, see ya." Alicia turned and walked away.

Rose turned toward where she'd parked, mentally kicking herself. Maybe she should rethink this. She could tell Alicia next class that she had sudden time open up and she'd love to get a drink after class.

And then she'd get to know Alicia during their drinks and she'd inevitably find something wrong with her, like Rose had on all the other dates she went on. And she'd go home frustrated and annoyed with herself. Better to cut things off before they started. Someday she'd find a way to get over Cassie and date other people.

Today was not that day.



“Erika claims she and Nate loved *My Summer in Greece* if you want to watch that,” Rose said. They'd both decided they were too tired to do anything but sack out on the couch and watch TV. They'd had an away game in North Carolina on Wednesday night, then a home game today. Somehow Lauren had been up for a Saturday night out, but they'd turned her down.

Cassie was aching everywhere and it was tempting to ask Rose for another massage. But the way she was starting to feel about Rose, and the fact she'd had to masturbate after the last one, it was best to just ice her thighs and leave it there.

“What's it about?” Cassie asked as Rose flipped through the menus to find the Netflix movie. “I know Fernanda mentioned she and her girlfriend liked it.”

“Erika said it's a woman who spends her summer traveling around Greece and falls in love with a woman she meets there.” Rose scooped Marie Purrie off the floor and onto her lap. “She said it looks like they actually shot it in Greece and it's beautiful.”

“I want to go to Greece someday.” Cassie imagined the pictures she'd seen of the bright blue sea. Idyllic. “Too bad we

never play there.”

“At least we got to see New Zealand and Australia for the World Cup.” Rose selected the movie and set the remote on the coffee table. Annoyed at her daring to move, Marie gave an angry *meep*. “Sorry.” Rose scratched the cat’s ears.

“Yeah, that was cool. France next summer is going to be so mundane after that.” Cassie affected a jaded tone.

Rose laughed. “Been there, done that.”

“At least we’re both pretty much roster sure things. I hated the years I was one of the players on the bubble.”

“No one’s a sure thing on our team. Lauren not making the World Cup team proved that.” Rose looked like she’d sucked a lemon. But it had been a shock when their friend hadn’t been picked for the US team’s World Cup roster last spring.

“You guys just have such an abundance of talent at forward. Someone had to be cut and it was unfortunately her.” Having been the goalie cut four years ago for the World Cup, Cassie understood just how much it hurt. How much it rattled your confidence.

“But that’s why no one’s a sure thing. For us, anyway. But hey, abundance of talent is a good problem to have.”

They settled in to watch the movie, and almost immediately Cassie was swept up in the gorgeous scenery. The main character, a woman named Nicole, spent a lot of time in tiny bikinis on the beach. The actress was gorgeous, with really really great breasts, so Cassie didn’t necessarily hate the lack of clothing either.

Shit, it was really time to do something about how long it had been since she’d had sex... even longer since it had been good sex.

It took a concerted effort not to let her gaze stray to the other end of the couch.

Nicole met her love interest, an older woman named Daisy, almost right away in the movie. Daisy was as scantily clad as Nicole, and from the suggestive dialogue, it was clear they would hook up soon.

Sure enough, Nicole invited Daisy back to her hotel, and they were quickly kissing. Bikini tops fell away, and the camera didn't change angles. Bikini bottoms slid down long legs and still the camera stayed focused on the women's full bodies.

Cassie started pulsing between her legs. It was definitely going to be a vibrator night. Her thighs clenched and her sore muscles protested.

The couple on the TV stumbled to the bed, and Cassie and Rose could confirm that neither actress waxed down there.

OK then.

Daisy's thighs fell open and Nicole's hand slid between them. The camera narrowed in on the hand as Nicole slid two fingers inside—

“This is, like—“ Cassie started. She swallowed hard and clenched against the rush of moisture between her legs.

“Yeah, Erika failed to mention exactly *why* she and Nate enjoyed it so much.” Rose's voice sounded choked.

“At least there's... sort of a plot? Kind of?” Cassie said. Her nipples beaded, rubbing against her shirt.

The characters shifted on the bed and Nicole slid down to put her face between Daisy's legs. So she was going down on Daisy. On screen. In full view of the camera.

A different image flashed in Cassie's head. Same room, same bed, but instead of Nicole with her tongue on Daisy's pussy, it was Cassie. Her face between Rose's legs, licking Rose's pussy and making her moan the way Daisy moaned on their television.

Sharp arousal flooded Cassie as the scenario played out in her head. Her own pussy flooded, her panties damp enough that it had probably soaked through to her yoga pants. Her nipples grew painfully erect and her clit throbbed.

Oh no. Oh, this was bad. She could not be fantasizing about Rose. She just couldn't. Of all the people, it needed not to be her roommate, friend, teammate. Friend.

*Friend.*

On the television, Daisy cried out, holding Nicole's head and fucking her face until Daisy came. Cassie was so turned on, she felt like she could come with just a light breeze across her clit. It was too much. If she didn't stop watching this movie, which was clearly borderline porn, she was going to crawl across the couch and kiss Rose.

Rose. Rose's lips. Her sweet, soft lips that tasted like perfection, like hunger and satisfaction.

Would it be so terrible if they became friends with benefits? People did that, didn't they? What if they could make it work?

She allowed herself to glance over at Rose and was startled to find Rose watching her, not the TV. Rose's eyes were glassy and hungry. Cassie could see Rose's nipples poking against her shirt. Cassie's mouth watered; she wanted those nipples in her mouth.

Rose's nostrils flared, her mouth coming open to sink her teeth into her lower lip.

*Yes.* Cassie's brain screamed for her to crawl across the couch and pull that lip with her own teeth.

*I need you.*

Abruptly, Rose stood. "I don't think I can watch any more of this."

Marie Purrie made an annoyed sound as she was dumped off Rose's lap. Freddie Purrcurie wandered in, hissed at Marie, and wandered out.

Rose tossed the remote at Cassie. "I'm going to bed."

Cassie paused the movie as Rose left the room. Of course she stopped it so that the TV filled with a closeup of Nicole and Daisy kissing. A lusty, passionate kiss.

The kind of kiss Cassie desperately wanted from Rose.

Would it be so terrible if Cassie couldn't give Rose more than sex and friendship? Rose wasn't looking for a relationship either, just sex. They wanted the same thing. Cassie was desperately attracted to Rose, and it seemed fairly clear that Rose felt the same.

Was it a horrible idea? Would it ruin their friendship if things went badly? Was it worth it?

With every passing heartbeat, Cassie believed more and more that it was.



**R**ose: *I hate you.*

Erika: :-) *You watched My Summer in Greece?*

Rose: *I lasted about half an hour before I had to go to my room and rub off.*

Erika: *That's about how long Nate and I lasted the first time. It took us a few tries to get all the way through.*

Rose: *I hate you.*

Erika: *You're welcome.*

Rose: *I thought you were on my side.*

Erika: *I am.*

Rose: *I'm trying to get over her, not under her.*

Erika: *Maybe I think you should go for it.*

Rose: *I... can't. Please don't push this.*

Erika: *You could have everything you want.*

Rose: *No, I can't. Because she doesn't want it.*

Erika: *Maybe you need to give her what she doesn't know she wants.*

Rose: *I hate you.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## *fifteen*

“We’re number one! We’re number one!” Lauren chanted as she led the Wolfpack into the locker room.

They’d just defeated Chicago by three goals, and Cassie had a shut-out. All season, the two teams had jockeyed for first place in the league, and with this win, the Milwaukee Wolfpack was the number one team in the NWSL by more than one game.

The rest of the team joined Lauren’s chant. “We’re number one!” echoed around the room. Erika threw her arm around Rose’s shoulder and squeezed as she shouted.

“I still hate you,” Rose whispered, then resumed the chant. Knocking Rose with her shoulder, Erika grinned. Rose grinned back.

Eventually the chants wound down and Anne-Sophia, their coach, talked to the team for a few minutes.

“Now go enjoy yourselves, ladies. You’ve earned it!”

Another cheer went through the locker room. Adrenaline surged through Rose. She’d played a big part in Cassie’s shut out, blocking shots from Chicago’s forwards, keeping them away from the goal.

She headed across the locker room to her friend, who stood in front of her locker in her shorts. She'd stripped off her jersey and was in the process of removing her sports bra as Rose approached. She turned just as Rose got to her, and Rose was presented with a closeup view of Cassie's breasts. Her small, pert breasts with rosy nipples.

Rose's mouth watered and she forced herself to look at the floor. She made a point not to sneak peeks when they were in the locker room. That was a creeper move. But she hadn't been able to avoid that view, and it had her own nipples hardening painfully, still confined by her double sports bras.

Rose's hands itched to reach out and cup those breasts. Her adrenaline was turning to arousal, familiar and frustrating. It didn't matter if Cassie was in sloppy clothes at home or topless in the locker room; just being near her turned Rose on.

It was so fucking unfair.

She'd planned to hug her teammate, but instead she held her hand up for a high five. She wasn't going to torture herself, or impose on Cassie's boundaries, by hugging her half-naked friend.

Even with contact as casual as a high five, tingles spread up Rose's arm when their skin touched. Her mind flashed back to last weekend, when they'd watched that movie. The movie she'd never forgive Erika for recommending, but also that she loved Erika for recommending.

Rose had been so turned on, she'd had to leave or she would've crawled across the couch and buried her face in Cassie's lap, the way the women in the movie were. If she'd stayed in that living room to watch the rest of the movie, there was zero chance she wouldn't have thrown herself at Cassie. Beside the fact Cassie had made clear she wanted nothing but

sex, and Rose was already in love with her so that pretty much made any sex they could have more than sex, Cassie had specifically said kissing Rose was a mistake.

Which was a damn shame, because it had been an amazing kiss. Probably the best kiss Rose ever had. And it hinted that they could be so much more together.

Maybe Rose should just swallow her feelings and offer to be Cassie's fuck buddy. Hell, maybe it could be a way to get over Cassie. Get Cassie out of her system.

Yeah, because that always worked.

Maybe Rose was just hopped up on adrenaline from the game, maybe big wins made her a little bit horny, maybe she was looking for any excuse to get Cassie's lips on her again.

"Rose?"

Maybe she had zoned out and was staring at Cassie's tits. Shit.

Rose closed her eyes and forced herself back to the moment. "Sorry, was thinking about that amazing save you made in the 65<sup>th</sup> minute," Rose lied. Though it had been a truly amazing save. She moved so she could see Cassie's right shoulder better. Already a bruise was forming from where Cassie landed when she'd launched herself into the air to catch the ball, then landed hard.

"That *was* a pretty amazing save, if I do say so." Cassie grinned; Rose wanted to kiss that smile.

Yeah, she was way too hopped up on adrenaline. She needed to go change so they could get the hell out of there. Rose could lock herself in her room with her vibrator. Like she'd done when she ran out on the movie last weekend. She'd come twice that night. Hard.

Her pussy throbbed with the memory.

Yep, time to move away from Cassie. “I better get changed.”

Rose went back to her locker and stripped off her uniform. Maybe she should ask out that woman from her astronomy class, Alicia. She could probably maneuver that into a no-strings fling, relieve some of the sexual tension her body was full of from living with Cassie.

Because if she didn’t, she was going to do something really stupid. Like convince herself that being Cassie’s fuck buddy was a good idea.



“So, um, one thing I forgot to tell you.” Cassie stood on the zip lining platform, knuckles white where she gripped the railing. Her heart pounded so hard it felt like her ears were vibrating.

Rose’s gaze scanned up and down Cassie’s body; she felt it like a caress and goose bumps popped up on her arms.

Really? She was going to get turned on now? When she was absolutely petrified? Bodies made no sense.

Rose dropped her head to the side. “You’re afraid of heights, aren’t you? Of course you are.” She sighed. “Why didn’t you tell me when I said we were going zip lining?”

Cassie gave a weak smile. “In theory, it sounds fun. I want to enjoy it. It’s just... so high up.”

Rose covered her face with her hand and let out a loud breath. “OK. Well, we’re up here. So I don’t think we can really go back.” She lowered her hand and looked to the

employee on the platform with them, a tall East Asian man named Chris.

Chris glanced at Cassie, then back to Rose, shrugging. “I mean, not really.”

Now Cassie was positive her ears were vibrating. She could barely hear them talking. “But what if...” She couldn’t quite breathe. It was so high up. Was the air thinner at this altitude? “What if we fall?”

Forget her. What if Rose fell? That would probably mess Cassie up more than if she herself fell.

“You won’t fall,” Chris assured her.

Rose ran a hand over the strap running across Cassie’s hip. “You’ve got the harness. You’ve got a helmet, which is more than we have at work. And the liability insurance would be way too expensive if they let us fall.”

Chris laughed dryly. “She’s not wrong.”

Rose covered Cassie’s hand on the railing. “I can go first, or I can go right after you. It’s your choice. But I promise, you’ll be OK. It’s the biggest fucking rush to be flying through the trees.” She gently pried Cassie’s fingers off the railing. “OK?”

Cassie met Rose’s pretty brown eyes. They looked back at her with kindness and sincerity. And Cassie believed her. “OK,” she whispered.

“Why don’t you go first so I’m here to make sure you do it.” Rose’s voice was teasing but her smile was as kind as her eyes.

Sweat beaded along Cassie’s hairline despite it being a cool October afternoon.

Chris hooked a giant clip to the pulley in front of Cassie, and did some other stuff she was too terrified to pay attention to. It was all for her safety. Rose was right, they wouldn't let people do this if it weren't safe.

Somehow none of that calmed her churning stomach.

Oh god. What if she puked in midair?

“OK, you wanna sort of sit down in the harness.” Chris gently pressed on her shoulder so she would follow his direction.

Cassie leaned down and back, and sure enough, the harness formed a chair of sorts. Rose put her hand on Cassie's back, and it was mildly calming. Nothing would truly calm her except putting her feet on solid ground.

“You ready?” Chris asked.

*No.* “Um, I guess?”

Sucking in a deep breath, Cassie lifted her feet off the platform. Somewhere far away, she could tell Rose was cheering for her, but she couldn't hear it over the rush of blood and the pounding of her heart. Someone gave her a push and she was airborne.

Holy fuck. She was... flying, almost.

She clutched the cable tethering her to the zip line like it was a lifeline. Because it literally was. What if she fell out of the harness? What if the cable came unclipped? What if...

*What if you don't look down and try to enjoy it?* She could practically hear Rose's voice in her head as she soared above treetops.

Holy shit. She was above treetops. Nearly weightless. And she wasn't falling. She might even be... enjoying it?

What would Rose do? Rose would spread her arms and legs and whoop with joy.

OK, Cassie could do that too.

Except before she had a chance, another platform came up in front of her. A white woman almost as tall as Cassie stood there, waiting to catch her. The woman was yelling something, but Cassie still couldn't hear anything but blood rushing and heart pounding.

Too soon, she flew into the platform and had to run a few steps before she was jerked to a stop. She was shaking, legs wobbly. But after doing a head-to-toe scan of herself, she realized the shaking was with excitement, not fear.

“OK,” the woman on the platform said. “Let’s hook you in for the next segment.”

*There was more?*

OK, Cassie could admit the first bit had been fun. But she had to do it again?

The woman barely gave Cassie any warning this time. Just hooked her in and gave her a push.

She could do this. She could be Rose.

Tentatively, Cassie stretched her legs out in front of her. Her stomach dipped and swooped, but that was OK. She could handle that sensation. Maybe even like it a little?

She leaned her head back and watched the sky. Whoa, vertigo. Not so much fun. She leaned her head back to a normal position. Much better. She could watch the trees whiz by.

And another platform was in front of her, but this time she barely noticed the pause before she was flying again. She tried

letting go with one hand, reaching it out toward the trees. No fucking way was she letting go with her other hand. She didn't trust the harness quite that much.

Still, she could finally admit Rose might have been right. The wind across her face was invigorating. The flying sensation was thrilling. And as long as she didn't look down, it wasn't terrifying.

She had three more platforms, then the final zip line sloped down toward the ground. By the time Cassie's feet hit the dirt, her heart was pounding from excitement and adrenaline was surging through her system. This felt better than the recent win against Chicago. This felt like every big win layered on top of each other.

An employee helped Cassie out of her helmet and harness, then she turned, bouncing on the balls of her feet, to wait for Rose. She could see her friend speeding down the line toward her and she could barely contain her excitement.

The second Rose hit solid ground, Cassie rushed toward her. Impatiently, she waited until Rose was unhooked, then Cassie threw her arms around her friend, the way she would with teammates after they scored.

“This was incredible!”

Rose's arms wrapped loosely around Cassie's back, the harness clip pressed uncomfortably between them. But Cassie was too excited to care.

“Thank you for forcing me to do it,” Cassie said. She felt effervescent, if someone could feel that way. Like she had bubbles just under the surface of her skin.

Cassie pulled back enough to give Rose a smacking kiss on the cheek.



Rose froze.

Cassie pulled back further to see what was wrong. When she met Rose's eyes, Cassie could have sworn she saw heat there, along with the surprise. Then Cassie froze.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"No, it's OK—"

"I was just so—"

"It's fine, really."

They stared at each other for a long moment that seemed to stretch on. Cassie couldn't look away from Rose's beautiful eyes, from the barely contained flame she was certain she saw there. The cool air around them was suddenly warm with electricity.

Rose lifted her hand but stopped with it cupped a few inches from Cassie's face. Before she touched Cassie, she dropped it back to her side.

Cassie barely realized she was moving as she pulled her lower lip between her teeth.

Rose's eyelids slid shut and she inhaled deeply. When they opened again, the heat was tamed.

But not gone.

And Cassie could finally admit to herself what she'd on some level known for a long time. She wanted Rose. Badly. And she was certain Rose wanted her too.

And the adrenaline pulsing through Cassie might just give her the courage she needed to go for it.



Rose's heart didn't stop pounding the entire 45-minute drive home. Adrenaline had converted to hunger and she didn't know what to do with it.

But she did know one thing: Cassie wanted her. Rose had no illusions that Cassie was in love with her, the way Rose was. But there'd been no mistaking the naked desire in Cassie's flame-blue eyes after they hugged.

When they'd first gotten in the car, Cassie had babbled on excitedly about how much fun she'd had and how they had to do it again soon before the place closed for the winter.

Then they'd fallen into silence. Tense silence, but a good tension. A delicious tension. The kind that had sparks zinging through the air.

But did Rose dare act on what was clearly developing between them? Did she drop subtle hints that she wanted it and let Cassie make the move? Drop unsubtle hints? Flat-out tell Cassie she wanted her and see what Cassie did with it?

All Rose knew was that she felt like she couldn't draw a full breath. And it wasn't going to go away until she either made out with Cassie or got away from her.

By the time Rose parked in their driveway—she no longer thought of it as just her house, but as theirs—she was practically panting. She hurried out of the car, hoping to beat Cassie to the house so she could at least have a moment to catch her breath before facing her again.

But Cassie was right behind Rose, Cassie's long legs eating up the distance between them.

Was Cassie standing just a little too close as Rose unlocked the side door? Rose could feel Cassie's presence, like they were sharing the same air.

Rose hung her keys on the hook by the door and went up the three steps to the kitchen. She started through to the living room, but Cassie's hand around her wrist stopped her.

Cassie tugged gently, pulling Rose toward her, spinning Rose to face her. Before Rose could blink, Cassie framed Rose's face with her hands and bent to brush her lips across Rose's.

Oh god.

The room started spinning as Cassie's lips gently nibbled on hers. Rose's eyes fluttered shut and she let out a tiny moan from the back of her throat. And wasn't that embarrassing?

No, they couldn't do this. Not until they cleared up one thing. Hating it, Rose drew back from Cassie. Eyes closed, Cassie chased Rose's lips but Rose pulled back farther.

"Don't kiss me if it's going to be like last time." She grabbed Cassie's wrists and held them at her side. She couldn't take more of Cassie's gentle caresses if it wasn't going anywhere. She was supposed to be getting over her roommate, and that couldn't happen if they kissed again.

Cassie twisted her hand away from Rose and slid it into Rose's hair. She tilted Rose's face up to her. "It won't be like last time."

Like last time, Cassie brushed her lips so softly against Rose's, Rose barely felt it. Yet she felt it everywhere. Her toes curled inside her tennis shoes.

Cassie lifted her head, then lifted her free hand to trace her finger along Rose's lower lip. Rose darted her tongue out and wrapped it around the tip. Cassie's mouth opened on a silent gasp.

When their gazes met, all Rose saw was fire. Cassie wanted as much as Rose did. That much she was certain of.

“If we take another step forward, we go all the way. I can’t kiss you and not have you, Cassie.” She didn’t know which option she wanted Cassie to choose. Of course on one level she wanted it all. She wanted to touch and taste every inch of Cassie’s body, wanted to swallow her moans as she came all over Rose’s hand. On the other hand, at some point it was going to end. Cassie didn’t even believe in love anymore. Rose would end up brokenhearted.

So which was worse? Pining for the woman you never had? Or mourning the woman you’d loved and lost.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *sixteen*

Cassie leaned down and nibbled at the corner of Rose's mouth and Rose no longer cared if it was the worse option. She needed Cassie to choose sex because she was going to die if she didn't have it at least once.

"I want to taste you when you come on my face," Cassie whispered.

Rose's knees actually went weak. They buckled and she had to catch herself against Cassie's strong shoulders.

Once she regained her footing, she shoved her hand into Cassie's soft waves and sealed their mouths together.

It was even more blissful than last time. Rose was so turned on, she wanted to climb Cassie's body and start riding her like a merry-go-round. Cassie wrapped her arms around Rose and started stumbling toward the stairs. They came apart only long enough to hurry safely to the top, then immediately crashed back together, kissing and stroking each other as they bounced off walls on their clumsy way to Rose's bedroom.

As soon as they stopped, Rose shoved her hands under the waistband of both Cassie's sweatpants and her underwear, palming the perfect ass she had dreamt about gripping, as they writhed together. And while she was at it, she shoved the pants

down Cassie's long legs, hands stroking the backs of those amazing thighs.

Once they got through their frantic first round, Rose was going to spend some serious time loving on Cassie's thighs. Not that she was ignoring them at the moment, but she couldn't focus enough to worship them properly. That was for later. *Please don't let this be just once.*

For now, Rose reached around and slid a finger through Cassie's folds from behind. She was so, so wet and they both moaned. Rose dipped just the tip of her finger inside.

"Fuck, Rose."

"Yes, you are definitely going to fuck Rose. Take your shirt off, and then you're going to fuck Rose's face until you come all over it."

Cassie pulled back and gave the most adorable pout. Somehow, Rose got wetter.

"But I wanted you to fuck my face first." Cassie reached for the hem of her shirt and yanked it over her head. Her perfect, perky little tits didn't need a bra when they weren't playing soccer, so she stood naked before Rose.

Rose's breath caught in her throat. Sure, she'd seen Cassie naked in the locker room. But she wasn't gross, she didn't ogle her teammates. That was creepy as fuck. But now, now she could ogle the long, muscular lines of Cassie's body, the sharply defined muscles in her legs, the way her nipples were dark pink and hard.

Unable to stop herself, Rose dropped her head and pulled one nipple into her mouth. She sucked hard and Cassie moaned. When she rolled her tongue around it, Cassie moaned again.

“No... fair,” Cassie panted. “You need... to... be naked... too.”

Still lavishing attention on Cassie’s perfect nipple, Rose used one hand to shove her leggings and underpants off, kicking them away. Removing her shirt and bra—her tits were annoyingly large—required her to release Cassie’s breast.

Before she could return to her intended task, Cassie bent her head and it was Rose’s turn to have her nipple sucked on sharply. Her turn to have a tongue roll expertly around her nipple and make her gasp with pleasure.

Head swimming, Rose gently pushed Cassie back. “Not right now. Right now I really need to taste you.” In case there was any confusion what she meant, she reached between them and cupped Cassie’s pussy.

Cassie reached for Rose with her mouth and Rose gladly obliged, Cassie’s tongue plunging inside Rose’s mouth the way Rose’s two fingers plunged inside Cassie. Thus entwined, they fumbled toward the bed. Both make sounds of reluctance as they drew apart for Cassie to stretch out on the quilt.

She scooted back until she was propped against the pillows, knees bent, feet spread to leave room for Rose. Rose’s knees nearly buckled again.

“First,” Cassie said hurriedly when Rose put a knee on the bed.

Rose didn’t think she could speak, so she just raised her eyebrows at Cassie.

“Touch yourself. Show me how much you want me.” Cassie’s voice sounded almost desperate.

Rose grinned as she reached between her legs, sliding her fingers through her wetness, dipping one inside to collect a

little more. And because she couldn't resist, she looked Cassie right in the eyes and pressed a finger against her clit, then rolled it in a circle.

"Yes," Cassie whispered. She reached for Rose's hand and Rose obliged. When Cassie pulled Rose's fingers inside her mouth and sucked, she might as well have been sucking Rose's clit. Her nipples got impossibly harder, her pussy got impossibly wetter, and her clit screamed for attention.

But first, Cassie.

Drawing her fingers slowly out of Cassie's mouth, Rose pinched one of Cassie's nipples with the other hand.

"Please," Cassie gasped.

"Please what?" As if Cassie had to beg, or even ask. Rose had wanted this for so long.

"Please put your mouth on me."

"Where?" This wasn't like Rose. She wasn't dominant in bed by any stretch of the imagination, and she couldn't remember ever making a lover ask for what she wanted. But with Cassie it felt right to tease, to demand, to draw it out.

"I need your mouth on my cunt," Cassie said on a groan.

"Fuck that's hot."

Rose wasted no more time getting on the bed and settling between Cassie's thighs. The thighs she'd first noticed, first been attracted to. She pressed a wet, open kiss to the inside of Cassie's left thigh, then the right. Another, a little higher. Then back to the left. Slowly, teasing, she made her way up Cassie's legs until she was a breath away from where Cassie wanted her.



Cassie writhed on the bed. “Now.” It was barely a whisper but it might as well have been a command for how it made Rose’s clit throb.

She ran one light finger through Cassie’s cleft, testing to see how wet she was. Whatever the answer, she would get wetter. She circled Cassie’s clit once, twice, then dipped just inside her.

Cassie moaned and dropped her head back. Pushing her breasts farther into the air. Rose’s mouth watered. She wanted to be able to suck on those tempting nipples at the same time she feasted on Cassie’s pussy. Why couldn’t that be possible?

She’d have to settle for one at a time. Dropping her head, Rose put out her tongue and took one long, slow drag across Cassie’s full pussy, ending with a gentle flick of her clit.

“Oh god,” Cassie gasped.

Rose moaned her agreement into Cassie. She tasted amazing, like heat and sex and desire. And like Cassie. Uniquely Cassie. A taste Rose had ached for.

Tears suddenly burned the backs of her eyes, tears of joy and relief. She was probably going to cry for real when she got her turn to come, but for now she willed them away. Nothing would rob her of focus as she brought Cassie as much pleasure as she could handle.

Rose licked again, slow and thorough. And again, over and over until Cassie was panting and thrusting against Rose’s face, needy for more. Rose slid one finger inside Cassie, who immediately clenched around her. A second finger brought a cry from Cassie’s throat, a staccato sound that was almost a gasp.

It was so fucking sexy.

Slowly thrusting in and out of Cassie's soft wetness, Rose again placed the flat of her tongue against her clit and rolled in slow circles. Cassie starting making her unique staccato-gasp sound with each thrust, coming faster as Rose sped up her ministrations.

“Rose! Yes, oh god.”

Rose lifted her face just enough to say, “Say that again.”

“Rose,” Cassie breathed. “Rose.” Her fingers threaded into Rose's wild hair, not directing her, just grounding her.

Somehow the intimacy of that tore through Rose, splitting her apart in a way the intimacy of having her face in Cassie's pussy hadn't.

Suddenly Rose needed to kiss Cassie. On the lips. The face lips. But she couldn't do that until Cassie came. She needed Cassie to come.

Abandoning all thought of a slow build, Rose sped up the pace of her thrusts. At the same time, she sucked Cassie's clit. Hard.

“Rooooose.”

A harder suck.

“Rose, god, yes.”

Cassie was thrusting against her now as fast as Rose's fingers moved. They were both frantic for Cassie's orgasm. Rose kept pulling on her clit in the same rhythm as everything else.

Then Cassie bowed her back and made a sound that was a moan-groan-cry. And came. Her whole body shuddered, glorious thighs quaking on either side of Rose's head, breath coming in gasps. Moisture rushed over Rose's face and she

gladly tasted it, licking everywhere except directly on her clit, knowing it would be too sensitive. But she kept stroking as Cassie contracted around her and filled the room with her cries.

Gradually Cassie relaxed, her body slowly coming down from such intense heights. Her breathing was still harsh and uneven. Grinning—she did that!—Rose pressed a kiss to the inside of Cassie’s thigh.

Cassie’s hand had gone slack, but now she gripped a handful of Rose’s hair and used it to tug her face up. And what Rose saw in her friend’s expression took her breath away. Gratitude and tenderness and a low flame still burning.

And Rose knew. There would never be any getting over Cassie. Cassie was her one, her person, her OTP. There would never be another. It might destroy her, but Cassie was it.

And Rose would gladly drown.



Cassie could hardly stand to keep looking at the naked vulnerability in Rose’s expression as she stared up at her from between Cassie’s legs.

Holy shit, Rose Olivieri was between her legs. Naked between her legs. Naked between her naked legs. And had just given her the single best orgasm of her life. She might be ruined for all others after this.

Which was a shame, because they couldn’t last. Cassie refused to do something where Rose could end up hurt. When they were done, they needed to have a very awkward, very

frank conversation about what this did and didn't mean. What it couldn't mean.

But first, Rose had to be in agony. "Come here," Cassie said softly. She tugged on Rose's shoulder, indicating she wanted Rose's body flush with hers.

Rose crawled up the bed until she hovered over Cassie on all fours, heavy breasts swaying between them. Cassie caught one in her palm, pinching the nipple between two fingers.

Rose made a sexy little sound, like a gasp and a cry. So Cassie did it again and elicited the same response.

They were definitely coming back to that. But right now she wanted Rose riding her thigh until she came. So she wrapped Rose in her arms and pulled her down on top of her.

Immediately their limbs tangled together, Rose's legs sliding to either side of Cassie's. Leaving Rose's dripping pussy right against her upper thigh. Perfect.

Cassie pulled Rose's mouth down for a kiss, delighting in the taste of her own musk on Rose's lips. They devoured each other, pants and gasps filling the room.

Hands on Rose's hips, she guided Rose to start riding. Rose immediately caught on, rolling her hips in a way that dragged her wetness all along Cassie's leg. Within seconds Rose had to break their kiss to suck in deep lungfuls of air.

Thrusting with single-minded purpose, Rose made her gasp-cry noise once, twice, then halfway through the third, she threw her head back and came. Her body shook above Cassie and Cassie was filled with a sense of tenderness and power all at once. Rose's nails dug into Cassie's shoulder as she ground down hard on Cassie's thigh, drawing a fresh set of shudders.

As Rose's shoulders relaxed, something surged up inside Cassie, a renewed need. It wasn't enough. It had been too fast and she needed more. She needed this to last. She wasn't ready for reality to intrude yet.

So she wrapped her arms around Rose and flipped her to her back. She came down next to, half on top of Rose and immediately thrust two fingers inside. Rose was so wet, adding a third was easy.

Rose immediately picked up the rhythm, writhing against Cassie's thrusting hand. "Yes," she moaned. "Yes, more."

"More," Cassie agreed. She still needed more.

So she dropped her head and sucked one of Rose's beautiful nipples into her mouth.

"Cassie!" Rose nearly screamed when Cassie scraped the sensitive skin with her teeth. She had such beautiful nipples, the color of her name, a delicious contrast between soft and rough all at once.

"Come for me, baby," Cassie whispered into Rose's skin. She didn't know where it even came from, the words just fell out of her mouth. She'd never called someone "baby" before, never told a lover to come.

"Yes."

Cassie pressed down on Rose's clit, rolling it under her thumb with each thrust of her other fingers. Press. Suck. Thrust. Press. Suck. Thrust. Over and over, Rose's hips thrusting back in the same rhythm.

Rose's pussy gripped Cassie impossibly tight, then began to pulse. Rose fisted Cassie's hair and arched her back, crying out as she came again. Cassie backed off her clit as she pressed her fingers deep, letting Rose grind against her hand.

She continued sucking her nipple until the last ripple of orgasm ran through Rose.

She went limp, breath shuddering in and out. Cassie slowly withdrew her fingers, immediately missing the loss of the warmth.

When she looked up to Rose's face, she felt like she'd been sliced across the chest. Panic swelled inside her.

Rose was crying.



**D**ammit, she'd known this would happen. Rose pressed the heel of one hand to her eye and dashed away the stupid tears. Except maybe they weren't stupid. Maybe they were exactly right after wanting for so long.

Then she caught sight of Cassie's horrified face and decided yes, they were stupid. Rose caught Cassie's hand before something awful happened, like her getting out of bed. She used her other hand to cup Cassie around her cheek, then pressed a kiss to her palm.

"These are happy tears. I promise." She held Cassie's gaze, unwavering. "I've wanted this for a long time, and it's just a little overwhelming to finally have it happen. But good overwhelming. Multiple orgasms overwhelming. Thank you for that, by the way. That was... amazing. Incredible. Insert all thesaurus entries for wonderful here. I can't—"

Cassie caught Rose's lips in a sweet kiss that tasted of sweat and tears and sex. And them. The two of them. Together.

When Cassie drew back, she leaned over Rose on her side, rising on her elbow. Rose rolled toward her so they were face-

to-face. So she could run her hand down Cassie's side, over the dip of her waist and the flare of her hip, then down, down, down that amazing, incredible thigh.

“You know the first thing that attracted me to you is your thighs?” Rose didn't know why she said it out loud. It wasn't exactly sexy to talk about her lover—lover!—as individual body parts.

Cassie's brow furrowed. Rose smoothed a beautiful strawberry blonde curl off her forehead and tucked it behind her ear. Then she trailed her hand down Cassie's arm until she could lace their fingers together.

“My thighs?”

Rose nodded.

“They're so huge.”

“Exactly. They're strong and muscular and powerful and they help us win games, which is important to me. And I immediately wondered how good it would feel to ride one.” She gave Cassie a naughty smile.

Cassie laughed. “I guess now you know. How was it?”

“Pretty sure you were there and know exactly how much I enjoyed it.”

Cassie's face went soft, a hint of a smile on her lips. Rose wasn't sure she'd ever seen such a relaxed, open expression on her friend's face. “Yeah.”

They were silent for a few minutes, staring at each other like the pair of besotted goofballs they were.

“I think for me it was your eyes.” Cassie broke the silence.

“You wanted to ride my eyes?” Rose grinned.

Cassie rolled her own eyes. “Besides being beautiful, your eyes are kind. I’ve never met someone with eyes so kind. And they’re a perfect reflection of who you are overall.”

Rose’s cheeks flushed and she had to look away. Too much praise felt... smothering, like something was crawling on her back. She shivered.

“Sorry, I made it weird.”

*You did.* “No.” Rose squeezed Cassie’s hand. She hadn’t meant to make it weird, didn’t know about Rose’s aversion to anything that even remotely felt like too much.

“Anyway, I’m pretty enamored with all parts of you now.”

Rose forced a grin. “Me too.”

They lapsed into another comfortable silence.

Again Cassie broke it. “We’re going to have to talk about this, aren’t we? What this is?”

Rose’s heart thudded in her chest. “Yeah. I suppose so.”

“But maybe not tonight?”

Dropping her lips to Cassie’s shoulder, Rose nibbled gently. “Not tonight.”

Cassie flopped onto her back. Rose followed with her lips, immediately entwining her legs with Cassie’s.

“Maybe tonight we do as much of this as we can handle.” Cassie’s voice had gone a little breathless.

“We do have practice in the morning.” Rose slowly worked her way lower, inching closer to Cassie’s breasts. They were so small and perky in a way Rose’s big ol’ knockers never would be. Hadn’t been since about fifth grade when



she'd just wanted them out of the way so she could play soccer.

“So we'll get some sleep too,” Cassie murmured. “A little.”

Smiling against her friend's skin, Rose said, “Sounds like a plan.”



“I guess we need to decide if this was a onetime thing or if we want to be, like, friends with benefits?” Rose chewed on her bottom lip and couldn't quite meet Cassie's eyes across their dining room table.

Practice had been so awkward. Cassie didn't know how to act around Rose. The locker room had been especially uncomfortable. She couldn't gawk in front of all their teammates, but it had been so hard not to. Despite the hours they'd spent in Rose's bed together the previous night, Cassie hadn't gotten nearly her fill of looking at Rose's gorgeous body. Of admiring all the dips and curves and nooks and crannies and secret erogenous zones.

But all that was inappropriate at work. And every time they spoke at practice, *I still want you* had played in an endless loop in Cassie's head. She'd missed two saves during their scrimmage because she'd been distracted staring at the play of muscles in Rose's thighs as she challenged Erika for the ball.

And it wasn't just horniness. It was Rose specifically. Cassie hadn't given even a passing glance to Erika's muscles, or any other teammate's.

She'd convinced herself it was the undefined nature of their changed relationship. As soon as she knew if it was just the one night or if they would do it again, she would cease being so awkward around her friend.

That awkwardness certainly hadn't ceased yet.

"What do you want?" Cassie asked. She definitely wanted more time to explore the physical relationship they'd started. But if Rose didn't want more, Cassie would find a way to be OK with that.

Rose chewed on that lower lip like it was a wad of gum. Cassie was only dying a little. "Um, I mean, last night was really great."

So did that mean she wanted... "We were saying we could really use a fuck buddy, right?" Cassie said cautiously.

Rose released her lip and something lit behind her warm brown eyes. "Yes. We were. Exactly."

Cassie's stomach fluttered. "So are we...?"

"I mean... we could. Living together certainly makes it simpler." Now Rose pulled her upper lip into her teeth.

"And our schedules are compatible." Cassie's stomach was now dancing a jig. Her heart pounded hard enough she was certain her breasts would start shaking soon.

"So we're... friends with benefits? Like officially that's what we're deciding?"

Oh wow, they were really doing this. Cassie was too wound up to speak, so she just nodded.

The grin that spread over Rose's face was so beautiful, Cassie felt lightheaded. Or maybe that was from the decision they'd just made.

Rose got up and came over to Cassie's side of the table. She put one leg on either side of Cassie and sat down on her lap, facing her. Rose thrust her hand into Cassie's hair, still damp with sweat from practice, and kissed her.

It was a slow, lazy kiss, lacking the urgency of previous kisses when each one could have been the last. Now there wasn't that pressure.

Rose's tongue trailed along the edges of Cassie's teeth, and Cassie could have sworn her teeth had nerve endings. They seemed to tingle.

Everywhere tingled. She slid her hands up the back of Rose's shirt, feeling her warm skin. Rose made her little whimpering-moan sound and Cassie's panties were immediately damp.

Eventually Rose drew back and rested her forehead against Cassie's. There was fire blazing in Rose's eyes, but somehow there was also a calm warmth there. Like Rose could not only curl Cassie's toes with passion but help heal the raw wounds inside Cassie's soul.

But that was dangerous thinking. That sort of thinking would have Cassie falling in love yet again. And that was absolutely no good.

"Do we need some ground rules?" she heard herself saying.

"Like what?"

"I think an obvious one is we don't hook up with anyone else while this is going on."

"Not that it seems to be a problem for either of us, but I agree," Rose said.

“And we should remember that this is just friends with benefits. Emphasis on friends.” *Yeah, Cassie, emphasis on friends.* “We’re not, like, dating and falling in love.”

Something flashed over Rose’s face, but it was gone before Cassie could interpret it. Rose dipped her head down and pressed a kiss to the small exposed part of Cassie’s shoulder.

Cassie shuddered.

“Right, no catching feelings,” Rose said into Cassie’s neck. “Anything else?”

“I mean, obviously this is between us. We don’t need to tell people we’re together or anything.”

“Right, because we aren’t. Just sex.”

“Right.” Why did that sound so hollow? Of course Cassie wanted to keep having amazing sex. And it was best for both of them if they kept emotions out of it.

It was probably because she’d never negotiated relationship terms with someone before. That was all.

Rose dragged her tongue up Cassie’s neck and started kissing her ear. “So are we going to have sex now? Or do we need to eat dinner first?”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *seventeen*

F eeling awkward as fuck, Cassie passed the soccer ball to her new mentee, Mia. Mia was a tall Latinx girl on her high school soccer team, so Vera had suggested they use soccer as an icebreaker for their first meeting.

Theoretically, Cassie knew what she was doing. She'd done a training the previous week and had a good grasp of what her role was. Theoretically.

Mia trapped the ball and passed it back.

Cassie trapped the ball and passed it back to Mia. And Mia passed it back. And they continued and with each kick, Cassie's chest got a little tighter.

Theoretically, she was supposed to talk to Mia. Get to know her. Build a relationship with her. Cassie even had a list of questions in her pocket that she could ask, but how pathetic would she look if she had to read from a sheet of paper?

Thinking hard to remember any of the questions, Cassie missed the next pass. As she jogged after the ball, one popped into her head.

She dribbled the ball back to her spot and as she kicked it to Mia, she asked, "So if you could have one superpower, what would it be?"

Mia's pretty face scrunched up and she looked at Cassie as if she didn't understand the question. Or didn't understand why someone would ask something so ridiculous.

Cassie was about to tell Mia to never mind when Mia said, "Invisibility."

Cassie smiled. "That's a good one. How come?"

"So I can listen in on my classmates and know all the shitty things they're saying about me, or what rumors they're about to start spreading, shit like that." Mia clapped her hand over her mouth and froze. "Sorry, I'm not supposed to say that."

Cassie trapped the ball and rested her foot on it as she gave Mia a level stare. "Remember, I'm not your mom, I'm not your teacher. I'm not going to send you to the principal's office. I don't care if you swear."

Mia grinned, flashing perfectly straight teeth. "Yeah, so I'd spy on specifically the guy's hockey team and the girl's volleyball. They're the worst groups at our school. So I'd figure out a way to stop their rumors before they start."

Cassie chewed her bottom lip as she considered what Mia said. *You can do this. It's the whole point.* "Have they spread rumors about you?"

Mia looked at her feet and nodded. "I'm out as bi at school, so they decided that means I'm a sex maniac. So they spread a rumor about me having a threesome at summer camp last year."

Mia's words hit Cassie like a blow to the chest. How awful. "That must have really sucked. I'm sorry." Cassie had nothing against threesomes for consenting adults, but as a high school rumor, it was damaging.

Mia turned and dribbled the ball toward the goal. She lined up the shot and took it. Goal!

“Nice shot,” Cassie called, jogging over to meet her.

In a burst of inspiration, she remembered a game she used to play with her college roommate. And Mia clearly didn’t want to talk superpowers anymore.

“Let’s play a game. We’ll take turns making shots, and if the person shooting makes a goal, they get to ask the other person a question. If they miss, they have to answer a question.”

Mia’s face scrunched up again, along with another look that said Cassie had no clue.

Vera had said to meet their kids on their level. So Cassie frowned, tilted her head, and glared at Mia.

The corners of Mia’s lips twitched for a moment until she burst out laughing. “Stop,” she bit out between laughs. “Fine, I’m a brat. At least I know it.”

Cassie rolled her eyes. “Self knowledge is overrated,” she mumbled.

Mia rolled her eyes back at Cassie. “Fine, we’ll shoot goals.”

Cassie picked up the ball she’d brought and headed down the soccer field toward the goal. She set the ball at the upper edge of the centerfield circle. “From here.”

“But that’s... so far.” Mia protested as she stood next to Cassie.

“So we’ll be answering a lot of questions.” Cassie side-eyed Mia with a half smile.

“Uuuuugh, fine.” Mia managed to make *fine* a three-syllable word, a feat only a teenager could pull off.

It had been a long time since Cassie had done shots. Being goalkeeper didn't afford her lots of scoring opportunities. Which was fine. She didn't need the glory of scoring goals. The glory of making amazing stops was plenty.

“I'm a little rusty here, but not too bad. I hope.” Cassie stepped back, took a moment to focus and center herself, and approached the ball. Bringing her leg back, she then swung it forward with speed and power. The ball sailed toward the goal. *Yes!*

It tipped the crossbar and spun back over the top of the net.

“Dammit!” Cassie punched the air. She hated losing, even just one point in an silly game.

Laughing, Mia did a victory dance, swinging her hips one way and her arms the opposite. “I get to ask *you* a question now.”

Cassie spread her arms, unable to stay upset for too long. “Do your worst.”

“What's your family like?”

Ouch. The words felt like a punch in the stomach, taking the wind out of Cassie. The smile faded from her face and she dropped her arms.

She could do this. They were supposed to build a relationship, and relationships were two ways. Vera had warned her that some moments would be uncomfortable and this definitely qualified.

“I, uh, I'm from Canada. Outside Toronto. My parents are fairly wealthy and if you think of the stereotypical rich people



assholes, that's them. My dad barely talks to me, and my mom likes to tell me how disappointed in me she is. I was supposed to be a nice, ladylike girl and grow up to marry a rich man and be just like her. And I was definitely supposed to be straight. And my older brother is a lot like my dad. He's married with two kids and I haven't even met my youngest niece. Soccer is a good excuse not to go home very much."

Cassie stared at the ground as she spoke, gaze unfocused. She felt oddly detached from the life she'd described. Like it had all happened to someone else, long ago. Which was... nice?

Raising her head, Cassie refocused on Mia. The fifteen-year-old was flat out staring, a stunned expression on her face, eyes wide and mouth gaping slightly.

"Sorry I asked," Mia said quietly.

Cassie smiled softly, though she wasn't feeling it. "It's OK. You didn't know. They're mostly non-factors in my life now."

She just carried all the baggage they'd dumped on her.

Shaking her head, Cassie said, "Let's get back to our game. I promise, from now on if something is too heavy and you don't want to talk about it, you can tell me to ask another question. OK?"

Mia jogged over to where the ball had landed behind the net. "Sure!" she called in answer to Cassie.

After placing the ball on the spot Cassie had designated, Mia gave it a powerful kick. With a *swoosh* of the net, it was a goal.

"Woohoo! I get to ask another question." Mia did her little victor dance again. "OK, what superpower would you have?"

“Teleportation,” Cassie said without hesitation. “So I could get to matches around the world in an instant. I hate long plane rides.”

“Yeah, it’s a real bummer to get to travel all over the world for your job,” Mia said flatly.

Cassie chuckled. “You make an excellent point. But I still would choose teleportation. Plus, then you can live anywhere in the world and work anywhere in the world and they don’t have to be the same.”

“You don’t like Milwaukee?”

Rose’s face popped into Cassie’s head. How had Rose become the symbol of their city for her? Shouldn’t it be the Wolfpack? “I like Milwaukee plenty. But there are so many amazing cities. I could at least visit them more and still live here.”

“OK, you convinced me.”

They continued getting to know each other as they kicked around the soccer ball, mostly making their shots, occasionally missing. Mia, who played forward on her school team, made more than Cassie.

Cassie really was rusty. Good thing no one counted on her to make goals. Her Canadian teammate may hold the record for most international goals scored, men and women, but Cassie felt no pressure to compete in that world. That was for her superstar teammate, for Lauren and Erika. Cassie measured her career in saves, and she competed with herself. She didn’t need records.

Which had been an answer to one of Mia’s question. And it got her mind spinning on how she could improve her save

statistics. Not because she wanted records but because it was best for her team.

It was approaching time for Mia's mom to pick her up, so Cassie grabbed the ball and they started walking toward the park's parking lot.

"Next time, I can take a shot and you try to stop it. And we ask questions for scores and saves," Mia suggested.

Cassie smiled fondly. She'd quickly grown to like her mentee. Thank god. What happened when mentors and mentees didn't click?

"Can I ask one more question before you go?" Cassie asked. It was one Vera recommended as an excellent way to really understand their teen.

They stopped at the edge of the lot. "Um, sure, I guess," Mia said.

"What are your five best qualities? Not that people tell you are, but what you think." Cassie tensed as she said the words. It was an incredibly personal, vulnerable question. She wasn't sure she would be able to answer it if Mia asked her. "You don't have to answer that if you don't want. Maybe just think about it and we can talk next week."

Mia shrugged. "I kick ass at math, I'm just the right size that I can always find clothes that fit, I make killer homemade pizza, I'm great with little kids, and I'm a super loyal friend."

Cassie huffed out a laugh. "And here I worried it would be a hard question."

Grinning, Mia shrugged. "They may not be my very best qualities, because I have many more amazing ones. But they're like top 20."

Oh to have some of this young woman's confidence.  
Weren't teens supposed to be insecure messes?

Maybe Mia should be the one mentoring Cassie.



Astronomy was annoying as fuck. Rose had expected more stargazing for Astronomy 103 and less formula memorization. She'd been way off on that ratio.

She was not great at memorizing formulas. She was going to have to make flash cards or something and get Cassie to quiz her.

Maybe Cassie could reward her for every right answer. A kiss for one, feeling her up for five, if she got them all, a good long fuck. Rose grinned at the thought as she unlocked the side door and let herself into the house.

As soon as she stepped into the kitchen, she knew something was off. She stood at the top of the stairs and scanned back and forth, trying to figure out what it was.

The coffeemaker was in a different place. The dining room table had placemats and napkins—ones Rose didn't own. There was a container of protein balls where the coffeemaker should be. She sniffed. PineSol.

God dammit. Vera had come over and cleaned. Again.

Anger bubbling like lava under her skin, Rose slammed her backpack down on the table harder than the poor table deserved. She yanked the placemats and napkins, which were bright yellow with big red flowers on them, off the table and shoved them into the laundry chute. She hated yellow.

Even more, she hated when her mom intruded on her life like this. Sure, it seemed nice of someone to clean your house for you for free, so you didn't have to. But it was the fact that Vera never asked, she just did. And she *knew* Rose hated it. Rose had asked so many times for Vera to ask first before coming over, but she didn't listen.

Hell, Rose hadn't even made her mom a key. Vera took it upon herself to take Rose's spare key and make a copy. And Rose's dad was no help. He just sort of existed in life, doing what his wife told him to.

Scrubbing her hand over her face, Rose stalked across the kitchen. She moved the coffeemaker to its proper spot, then growled at it, just because she could. And she was pissed.

So. Fucking. Pissed.

Because she was alone in the house, she let out some of her frustration in a loud sound somewhere between a scream and a growl. She held onto the noise until she'd drained all the air from her lungs and it petered out.

The door banged shut. "You OK?" Cassie called.

Great. Cassie heard that. "No."

"What's wrong?" Cassie appeared in the doorway, her delicate features scrunched up in a frown.

Rose grunted. How to explain it in a way Cassie would get? "My mom came over while we were out and cleaned the house. Or at least the kitchen and dining room. I haven't checked the rest of the house yet."

Cassie's frown deepened. "And that's bad?"

Rose leaned back against the counter, covered her face with her hands, and sighed. "She didn't ask if we wanted it.

She just come over, let herself in, and did it.”

Cassie’s footsteps came closer, then her hand rested on Rose’s shoulder. “I see. It’s like a boundary issue?”

Rose dropped her hands as a modicum of relief cooled her. “Exactly. She has zero concept of boundaries.”

Cassie’s hand started massaging and a stab of desire speared Rose between her legs. Cassie was good. Very good. What a lovely distraction.

“You’re really tense. Let’s go sit down and I’ll work some of these knots out of your shoulders.”

Of course Rose was in love with Cassie when she did things like this.

Cassie gave her a gentle push toward the living room, then followed her. Rose dropped onto the couch and pulled off her Equal Pay sweatshirt. She turned sideways so Cassie could massage her.

Cassie was so getting laid tonight. Rose smiled to herself, despite the frustration still humming through her.

“Have you tried talking to your mom about how you really need better boundaries?” Cassie sat behind Rose and put her hands on Rose’s shoulders.

She dug her thumbs into the tight muscle and Rose groaned as painful relief sliced through her. Damn that hurt so good.

“And keep in mind that I have no concept of setting boundaries with parents because mine set impermeable boundaries around themselves. So I don’t really know what I’m talking about and you can tell me to shove it.”

“No, I appreciate it. And I have talked to my mom several times about how much she meddles in my life.” Rose sighed. Somewhere between her parents and Cassie’s were the ideal parents. Supportive and loving but not overbearing.

“I probably just don’t tell her firmly enough or something. I don’t know.” She had no idea how to handle her mom and it seemed to get worse and worse. It was only a matter of time before her mom just moved in.

She had actually offered to be Rose’s manager. Rose hadn’t known whether to laugh in her face or sob. So she’d just declined and hired an actual sports manager.

Cassie dragged her thumbs up the back of Rose’s neck and Rose moaned. “That feels so good.”

“Glad I’m helping you relax.” Rose could hear the smile in Cassie’s voice.

“I don’t think relax is the word for how I’m feeling right now.” Rose was pulsing between her legs and her nipples were hard against her bra.

“Is that so?”

“Part of me is tempted to cut this massage short and beg you to put your face between my legs. But most of me knows I need this and you’re way cuter than the trainers at work.” Cassie’s hands felt so good, both sensually and sexually. An idea popped into Rose’s head.

“I have an ideal scenario. You give me a massage while I use my favorite vibe on myself.” She was so wet, her clit throbbing.

“I could—“ Cassie’s voice caught. She cleared her throat. “I could probably do that.”

Rose dropped her chin to her chest, imagining the two of them in her bed, naked. Cassie would straddle her hips to massage Rose's back, and Rose would work her little clit sucker under herself.

She felt like she could come just from imagining that while Cassie's big hands worked their way down Rose's back.

Cassie slipped her hands under Rose's shirt and skimmed her fingertips up Rose's spine. Rose's breath caught in her throat and she made a needy sound.

Quickly and efficiently, Cassie unhooked Rose's bra, then stroked up Rose's sides and up her arms until she could lift both garments up and off.

"I can do a better job without all that fabric in the way." Cassie's voice was breathy.

It felt like a damn waterfall between Rose's legs. She never thought she'd be here, with Cassie breathless and touching her intimately.

Exposed to the air, her nipples ached. She wanted Cassie's mouth on them. Or at least her hands. But her hands were busy making magic with Rose's tense muscles. She already felt looser.

Cassie's thumbs pressed into the muscle along the edge of Rose's shoulder blades and it felt so damn amazing, Rose moaned again.

Something wet pressed against her at the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder and prickles showered through Rose's entire body. Oh fuck, that was so good. It took her a moment to realize Cassie was kissing her.

Yes, yes she needed Cassie's mouth on her. Everywhere.



*OceanofPDF.com*

## *eighteen*

Cassie might never get enough of kissing Rose. Of tasting her skin. Her warm, sexy flavor, the smooth texture against Rose's lips and tongue.

The way Rose moaned when Cassie did so.

Need surged up in Cassie and she couldn't stand keeping the massage semi-platonic anymore. She stroked her hands over Rose's sides until she could hold Rose's breasts in her hands.

Fuck, Rose had amazing breasts. Cassie let the weight of them rest in her hands as she lifted them away from Rose's chest. She massaged gently, feeling like a teen feeling up a crush.

Rose sagged back against Cassie, her head resting on Cassie's shoulder. Pointing her breasts up and giving Cassie a perfect view of her hands as she fondled them.

"Cassie," Rose breathed.

Cassie pressed her lips to Rose's temple for a gentle kiss that was probably too tender for the moment. Or for the purely sex arrangement. But she couldn't stop herself. In that moment she felt extreme tenderness toward Rose.

Using her thumbs, Cassie flicked Rose's nipples. Rose whimpered.

"I'm going to come just from this."

"No you're not," Cassie murmured in her ear, drawing on a confident seductress she hadn't known she had in her. "You're going to wait until my face is between your legs, like you said earlier."

"Oh fuck, it's so hot when you do that."

Cassie pinched Rose's nipples and she arched into the touch, crying out. Cassie felt the same as Rose, that she might be able to come just from this. Just from touching Rose's breasts. She had never had sex as good as with Rose.

Shifting Rose's weight, Cassie slid out from behind her friend. "You lay back. Let me do the work." She slid her hands into Rose's pants and Rose immediately lifted her hips so Cassie could remove them. Wearing only Wonder Woman panties—Rose had a thing for novelty underwear—and splayed out before Cassie on the couch, Cassie had never seen anything sexier.

"You're so beautiful," Cassie practically exhaled.

Rose cupped Cassie's face. "Not as beautiful as you." Her eyes were glassy with lust, but there was a sincerity in her words that made Cassie feel short of breath. Not from sex, but because when Rose looked at her that way, talked to her that way, she felt exposed. Vulnerable.

Cassie hated feeling vulnerable, so she pushed Rose's leg off the couch, spreading her thighs. She dropped her face between Rose's legs and inhaled deeply. Cassie could get drunk on the scent of aroused Rose.

The Wonder Woman panties were damp, which sent a rush of pleasure to Cassie's very plain black panties. She ghosted a kiss over Rose's clit, making Rose moan and lift her hips. Seeking.

Damn, Cassie loved the power she felt when she was between Rose's legs. It was similar to how she felt in goal, a confidence she rarely felt elsewhere. A sense that whatever she did, she could do it well.

And damn if she couldn't make Rose come really, really well.

"Please," Rose whimpered. She tugged at a strand of Cassie's hair and wow was that a turn on. Cassie pulsed painfully between her legs. But she was waiting until Rose was done first.

In her sudden frenzy to get Rose's panties off, she nearly ripped them.

"Hey, careful with Wonder Woman. Those are a favorite pair." Rose's words were almost slurred. If Cassie hadn't known better, she would say Rose was drunk.

Just drunk on sex.

Cassie traced her thumbs up Rose's slippery folds, reveling in the shudder that ran through Rose at the touch. She pressed on either side of Rose's clit but didn't touch it.

"Dammit Cassie," Rose whimpered.

Cassie just smiled as she dipped her index finger inside her friend. Just barely, just enough to gather a little more wetness. Then she took that finger and drew slow circles around Rose's clit. Agonizingly slow. Teasing, the way she would want Rose to tease her.

“That’s so good.”

Cassie smiled to herself. “I’m glad.” She kissed the crease where Rose’s leg met her torso. Drew her tongue along the soft skin there.

She switched to the other side and licked Rose there, all the while maintaining her circles.

Cassie wasn’t sure she’d ever been more turned on in her life. It was tempting to slide one hand down the front of her pants to give herself some relief along with Rose.

But no, this was all about Rose. Rose relaxing. Rose’s stress melting away.

“Jesus, Cassie.” Rose lifted her hips, seeking contact.

Cassie couldn’t wait any longer. She put her hands on Rose’s thighs and pushed them back even farther, put her face in Rose’s pussy, and licked.

Rose moaned and Cassie wasn’t sure which was better, her moan or her taste. Both were too amazing.

“Yes. More.”

Cassie moaned, letting her lips vibrate against Rose, then she resumed licking. Long strokes, short flicks, darting explorations.

“Fuck,” Rose moaned. “Cass, please.”

*Cass.* No one had called her that since she was little. She hadn’t loved it, but from Rose’s lips, in the heat of passion, it was hot as fuck.

“Yes,” Cassie whispered against Rose’s skin.

When she had Rose writhing and squirming and making unintelligible sounds instead of coherent begging, she finally

gave in. Cassie put her lips around Rose's clit and sucked. Hard.

Rose's back arched so sharply, she knocked Cassie in the teeth with her public bone. But Cassie didn't let that deter her. She simply sucked harder. She latched onto Rose while stroking her with her fingers. Dipping inside, just a little. A tease.

Rose's thighs started to tremble. Cassie ghosted her fingers across the sensitive skin at her inner thigh. Cassie's breasts felt heavy and painfully aroused, her clit screaming for relief. Once Rose was done, Cassie wouldn't take long herself.

With single-minded focus, Cassie redoubled her efforts. Licking, stroking, sucking. She needed Rose to come as much as she needed to breathe.

Threading her fingers into Cassie's hair, Rose pressed up against Cassie's face. "Now. Now," she panted.

Cassie did her best to oblige, sucking as hard as she could on Rose's delicious clit while shoving two fingers inside to catch her g-spot.

And Rose screamed. Actually screamed. Thank god they didn't live in an apartment or have other roommates.

Rose fisted Cassie's hair and she loved the sting on her scalp. "Fuuuuck. Oh my fuck that's so good. Oh fuck."

Cassie smiled, leaving gentle kisses on Rose's pussy, taking final tastes of the unique flavor of her.

Rose's shaking subsided to fine tremors, and eventually she lay still. Only then did she release her grip on Cassie's hair. Cassie almost missed the pull.

“Oh fuck, Cass. That was...” Rose went limp. “I’m out of words. You know what I’m trying to say.”

Cassie pressed a kiss to Rose’s thigh. “I do.”

“So take your time undressing while I recover, and then you need to get up here.” Rose tapped the back of the couch.

She couldn’t mean...

Cassie’s surprise must have shown on her face because Rose smiled and said, “Yes, you’re going to ride my face.”

Cassie’s whole body went hot. Hotter. “I’ve, uh, never done that.” She was so wet.

Rose lifted her head so she could meet Cassie’s gaze. Cassie still hadn’t moved, remaining kneeling between Rose’s splayed thighs.

Rose’s smile widened to a grin. “No one has ever told you to straddle their face with your fucking sexy thighs?”

Cassie pushed to her feet on shaking legs. She was more aroused than she’d ever been in her life, just from the prospect of trying this new way of experiencing pleasure.

She set a new personal record for fastest undressing. Once she was naked, she climbed onto the couch and straddled Rose’s waist.

“This is not where I want you,” Rose teased.

“Give me a minute,” Cassie said, hyper-aware of her large, ungraceful body. She inched forward awkwardly, afraid she might knee Rose in the jaw or eye.

As Cassie moved, Rose moved counter until Rose lay stretched out along the couch and Cassie was, indeed, straddling her face.

Oh god. It was a miracle she could hold herself up, her body was trembling so much in anticipation. She needed this deep down into her bones.

Rose's hands wrapped around her hips and tilted Cassie's pussy toward her face. Cassie let herself be manipulated. The touch sent shockwaves through her overly sensitive system. Every touch felt like fire. But good fire. A burn that made her feel so alive. Alive in a way she only ever felt on the soccer pitch.

At first, Rose just gently blew across Cassie's hot, wet skin. Cassie shuddered. "Rose," she breathed.

Rose kissed her so tenderly, Cassie's spine went weak. She had to catch herself on the arm of the couch so she wouldn't crash down on Rose. Gently, Rose nibbled at Cassie, making out with her pussy. Teasing her until she started writhing and sobbing with need. Cassie gripped the couch arm and started moving her hips, Rose's loose grip on them a grounding force.

"Please," Cassie whimpered. She wanted this feeling to last forever, but she desperately needed to come. Everything in her pulsed and ached, wound so tightly she knew it would be a massive explosion.

Rose moaned into her and the vibrations set off another shudder throughout Cassie's body. Rose did it again, and again and again. And Cassie responded in kind each time, until she couldn't stop shaking.

The orgasm was there, so close she could taste it. Smell it in the electric air around them. If she could just reach out... and find... the spot she needed.

Cassie moved her hips faster, seeking Rose's tongue on her clit. She made sounds of pleasure but she couldn't have



described them for the life of her. Whimpers, maybe. Sobs, begging, nonsense words, moans. She removed a hand from the couch and lifted it to her breast. Her nipples ached for attention, so she squeezed one and the sensation stabbed straight to where Rose's tongue slid against her.

Rose started gently sucking on Cassie, soft pulls of the flesh all over her pussy. But never her clit. A constant tease, keeping her on the sharpest edge of pleasure but not enough to push her over. Cassie switched to moving her hips in a circle, hoping that way she could catch Rose's tongue on her clit.

Finally the begging worked. Something worked. Rose lashed at Cassie's clit with her tongue and pleasure cascaded all through Cassie. "Yes. Yes, right there."

Rose obeyed. She sucked hard. Fierce pulls that left Cassie shaking and sobbing and overwhelmed and then flying and crashing waves and she felt more amazing than she ever had in her life as she slammed into the peak. She writhed and thrust, riding the orgasm as long as she could, riding Rose's face as long as she could. Clinging to the perfection of this moment.

Rose moaned into her and it sent another shockwave of pleasure through Cassie. She arched into her hand and twisted her nipple. "Yes."

And then she collapsed. All the strength ebbed out of her body and she sagged onto the couch back, careful to angle her hips away from Rose's head. She swung her leg over so she could fall back against the couch and stare at the ceiling without hurting her incredible, sexy-as-fuck friend.

"That was..." She didn't have the breath to finish, splayed awkwardly in the corner of the sofa.

Grinning, Rose sat up and scooted over, motioning for Cassie to do the same. They carefully rearranged their bodies so they were on their sides, face to face. Legs tangled together, Rose's large breasts spilling against Cassie's much smaller ones.

Cassie couldn't quite make herself meet Rose's gaze so she pressed a kiss to Rose's flushed shoulder. Rose murmured her approval.

"That, thank you for that. I needed to clear my head." Rose stroked a hand down Cassie's side, making her shiver.

"Me too." Cassie would not let herself think about what she'd needed distracting from, or she would get worked up again and need another distraction. Though that wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. "You are an excellent distraction."

"As are you."

They remained in comfortable silence for a few moments, idly tracing their fingers over each other's skin.

"Thing is," Rose said eventually.

"Yeah?" Cassie lifted her gaze to meet Rose's. It was brown and liquid and hungry. Cassie's breath got stuck in her chest.

"Getting you off has me all horny again." One side of Rose's mouth quirked up in a sexy smile.

Cassie's pussy responded by throbbing with need. "Is that so?"

Rose rose up on an elbow and rolled on top of Cassie. Cassie moved to her back so she could support Rose's weight. Her pelvic bone pressed deliciously against Cassie's, shooting

pleasure through Cassie's bloodstream. Her thigh dragged against Cassie's pussy and Cassie momentarily forgot how to breathe.

Gentle nips and licks flicked along the edge of Cassie's jaw. "We should maybe do something about that," Rose murmured as she took Cassie's earlobe between her teeth.

"Oh god," Cassie moaned. "Yes. We should definitely take care of that right away."

So they did.



C minus.

There it was in huge red characters. C minus. *C minus*.

Fuck. Fuck shit fuck.

How could Rose have gotten a C minus on the midterm? She thought she'd studied hard. OK, so maybe she and Cassie had spent a little more time on the rewards part of studying than the actual memorization. But still. In college grade terms, C minus was basically failing. And what was the point of working her ass off when she had a full-time job if she was going to fail?

Rose dropped her head against the back of her seat as her classmates filed out, chatting amongst themselves. Between massive muscle fatigue from an extra-grueling practice and now this exam result, she lacked the will to move.

"Is there a problem, Ms. Olivieri?" Professor Daniels asked.

Rose looked over to see him standing at the end of her aisle. His blue eyes were kind behind his glasses. Kind enough to give her a C minus.

OK, that wasn't fair. She'd earned the grade. And she could maybe put a small amount of blame on him for her clearly not understanding as well as she thought she did, but most of it was with her.

Maybe her mom had been right about taking an easy major. If she couldn't handle one astronomy class at 28, she'd never have been able to balance a physics or astronomy major with soccer in college.

Not that she'd ever tell Vera she was right. She'd use that for the rest of her life as leverage with Rose.

*"You said I was right."*

*"Mom, that was twenty-seven years ago."*

Yeah, definitely not admitting it to her mom.

Rose forced her sore muscles out of her seat. "Just disappointed with my exam results. I felt like I knew it better."

Professor Daniels stepped back so Rose could precede him up the aisle to the door. "You're welcome to come to my office hours any time. Lots of students find that helpful."

Rose held the door for her instructor. "I'm usually at practice during your office hours."

"You're welcome to make an appointment, then," he said. "And you could try studying with someone else. A classmate, or a friend who's willing to help."

"My... friend and I studied together but I guess that didn't work so well." It had been on the tip of Rose's tongue to call Cassie her girlfriend, but that wasn't right. Just because Cassie

was her friend with benefits who happened to be a woman didn't make her a girlfriend. Girlfriends came with strings, and neither of them wanted that.

Nope, not a girlfriend. "I guess I'll have to look at my schedule and make an appointment, then."

"Email me some times that work and we'll set something up. And Rose," Daniels said as they stepped outside into the cool evening, "you'll get there. Still plenty of time to get your grade up."

"Thanks." Rose waved as she started down the street toward where she'd parked.

She appreciated Dr. Daniels' words, but she stewed the whole way home.

By the time she walked in the door, she had worked herself into a bad mood. She wasn't used to not being good at things, and she didn't like that. Had her mom somehow protected her from ever doing something she wasn't good at? Or was that just her upset mind being irrational?

Probably she was just doing too much, and taking on the responsibility of a class was past her limit.

She'd just have to spend more time studying and less cuddling with Cassie on the couch. Damn, that would suck. She loved astronomy, but she really loved Cassie.

When she walked into the kitchen, Cassie was standing next to the running microwave. The *pop* of popcorn filled the room.

Cassie's face broke into a smile so beautiful it made Rose's chest hurt. "Hey. You wanna watch that new movie on Netflix?"

*No, I wanna get naked and spend the whole night making love to you so I can forget about this miserable midterm.* “I need to eat more than popcorn, but then sure.”

“I ordered Thai delivery and got you pad Thai with tofu.”

“Thanks, b...ut I... Never mind, no but. That sounds great.” She’d almost said *thanks, babe* and only barely caught herself, turning it into the awkward “but, no but.” The affectionate moniker wanted to roll off her tongue, the most natural thing. But nicknames were for girlfriends. And Cassie wasn’t her girlfriend.

Maybe she should tell Erika or Lauren about her arrangement with Cassie. It was so hard not to talk to anyone about the complicated feelings she was having. Rose had thought it was emotionally messy when she was in unreciprocated love with Cassie and they were roommates. But being in unreciprocated love with Cassie while being her sex buddy was a whole extra level of complicated that Cassie hadn’t anticipated.

Not that she wanted to change things. She certainly didn’t want to go back to being purely platonic. Laying in bed skin to skin with Cassie was the same kind of exhilarating as playing soccer. Orgasms with Cassie were like making a big play. One moment of pure, unfettered perfection.

But every time they were together, *I love you I love you* played on repeat in Rose’s head. One of these days, she was bound to slip and say it out loud. And then what?

Cassie moved behind Rose and took her backpack off her shoulders, setting it on the counter. “You seem tense. What’s wrong?”

“I got a C minus on my midterm. I’m just bummed about that.”

Cassie’s hands landed on Rose’s shoulders. “You need a massage?”

Rose forced a flirtatious smile over her shoulder. “Only if you don’t want to get to the movie for several hours.”

Cassie dug her thumbs into particularly tense spots on either side of Rose’s spine. Rose dropped her chin to her chest with a groan. “So you’re saying you don’t want to watch the movie?”

“I could be persuaded,” Cassie murmured. She dropped a kiss to Rose’s temple. So sweet and tender, Rose wanted to cry.

*I love you.*

The microwave beeped, intruding in the bubble they’d wrapped themselves in. “Food,” Cassie whispered, stepping away from Rose.

“Overrated,” Rose mumbled.

Her stomach chose that moment to rumble, contradicting her.

Cassie laughed and the husky sound made Rose’s rumbling stomach wobble.

Rose reheated her pad Thai and took it to join Cassie on the couch. Cassie started the movie.

“Remember when we were going to go on lots of platonic dates and do fun stuff?” Rose said in a wry tone.

“Yeah, what fools we were. It’s much nicer to stay home and get laid.”

“Is that all I am to you, sex?” Rose made her tone teasing, but part of her was serious. She ached to be so much more than sex.

Why, *why* had she gotten herself into this arrangement?

Rose focused on the heist movie—one of her favorite movie genres—and her food and forced thoughts of her complicated relationship with Cassie, and her class out of her mind. She was just finishing her food when Cassie’s phone rang.

They both made faces. Who called without texting first? Cassie paused the movie and picked up her phone. The unpleasant look on her face changed to outright disdain.

“Who is it?”

Cassie rolled her eyes as she lifted the phone to her face. “Hi, Mom.”

Oh boy. Apparently Rose wasn’t the only one who would need comforting tonight.



“**W**hat do you want?” Cassie asked her mom, not wanting to waste time with small talk. Her mom didn’t want to make small talk with her anyway. She didn’t care about the weather in Milwaukee and Cassie was pretty sure her mom had no clue that she had a cat. Two cats.

Sometime in the past couple months, she’d started thinking of Marie Purrie as her cat too.

“I got a notice from the airline that you cancelled your flight. Cassandra, really, your little tantrum is going too far. Your cousin is getting quite upset.”



If Veronica was so upset, how come she hadn't gotten in touch with Cassie? She was pretty sure her cousin couldn't care less if she showed up at the wedding.

Was Denise this desperate to have someone to berate and harass at the wedding that she was going to such lengths to get Cassie there? It wasn't like she wanted to actually spend time with her only daughter.

"I told you, and I can call Veronica and tell her if you need me to, that I can't make it that weekend." Cassie tried to keep her voice calm and even, despite the churning in her stomach. She had a death grip on her phone that was bound to crush the device any second.

"Cassandra Louise Dickinson, I have had it with this. You are coming to this wedding. Like it or not, you are part of this family and you will be there."

Like it or not? Who was Denise talking to, Cassie or herself? Because Cassie would bet her life savings—which wasn't much, granted—that her mom was the one who didn't like her being part of that family.

So she and her mom at least had that in common.

"One of these days, your little dalliance with soccer is going to be over and then where will you be, Cassandra?"

"Where will I be?" she sputtered. Something inside herself compelled her to shove off the couch and start pacing the dining room. "Let's see, me and my *Olympic Medals* will find a new direction for my career. Maybe I'll coach. Maybe I'll write a book. Fortunately I don't need to decide anytime soon because I'm in the middle of a *career*; not a dalliance. How dare you?"

"Cassandra, stop that this—"

“No, you stop. I will not be coming to the wedding and don’t contact me again about it.”

Before the phone call could spiral even further out of control, Cassie stabbed at her phone screen to hang up, then threw it at the couch. She aimed for the far end so she wouldn’t hit Rose.

“Did I hear that right?” Rose asked, coming to her feet. She interrupted Cassie’s pacing with hands on her shoulders.

“Hear what?”

“Did she call an Olympic-gold-winning, World-Cup-Playing, NWSL-Championship-winning career a *dalliance*?”

“She did.”

“If I promise to be back in time for our next game, can I fly to Canada and punch her in the mouth?”

Cassie huffed out a humorless sound. “I’m not gonna stop you.” Cassie dropped her forehead to Rose’s shoulder and let Rose wrap her arms around Cassie.

It felt so good to be held. So good to have someone who cared enough about her problems to listen and be angry on her behalf. And want to provide comfort. Heather had written family off as useless. Greg had insisted family was everything and pushed Cassie to be more accommodating of her parents. Which was impossible, short of quitting her career and changing her entire personality. Even then, Cassie knew her mom well enough to know that if she turned into Denise Dickinson’s ideal daughter overnight, Denise would never let Cassie forget how much she’d failed as a daughter in previous years. And there would always be something her mom found to pick on her for.

Cassie really needed to get her mind off her phone call. And a heist movie, even one led by five brilliant, kickass women, wasn't going to do it.

No, she had a better and more effective way to get her mind off her mom, get Rose's mind off astronomy and bad grades. "Let's not talk about my mom or your class anymore." She lifted her head and gave Rose her best seductive look. Which was probably more comical than sexy, but it worked, if Rose's answering smile was any indication.

"What did you have in mind instead?" Rose asked playfully.

Cassie stepped back and took Rose's hand. "Let me show you."

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *nineteen*

Rose danced on the balls of her feet, sticking close to Los Angeles's leading scorer, Tamika Blatz, as she dribbled toward the goal. Her focus lasered in on Blatz and the ball, but in the periphery she could see Cassie in the goal, dancing on her toes, ready to make the save.

Another Los Angeles player was coming up on the left, and open for Blatz to make the pass. Amy Lecleric, Rose's teammate, was just behind her but the LA player was faster.

Shit. Blatz was gonna pass to her teammate, who had a perfect angle on the goal. Sure, Cassie might be able to make the save, but if she didn't, that would equalize the game at 2-2, just before halftime. The Wolfpack wanted to keep their lead.

Rose had to stop the pass. She stepped in front of Tamika, challenging her. Tamika feinted left and Rose followed. Then Tamika darted right and tried to do a nutmeg, kicking the ball between Rose's feet and going around her to catch the ball on the other side.

Rose wasn't having it. She kicked at the ball, and her ankle hooked around Tamika's shin. In a flurry of limbs, the two women went down. Rose landed hard on her back, jolting the wind from her lungs. Legs still tangled, Tamika landed half on Rose, half on the grass, with a grunt.

Something popped and pain seared through Rose's right leg. Like someone had dug a white-hot poker into the bone and twisted. She let out a cry, bracing against the horrid sensation. Fuck. She knew this feeling. She'd done it before, in college.

Shit shit shit shit fuck shit.

A tear squeezed out of the corner of her eye as she continued to lie on the ground. Tamika was up and off, but then Rose heard the ref's whistle, officially stopping play for her injury.

Fuck it hurt. Her breath came in halted gasps as she tried to breathe through it.

Cassie was there, bending over with a shocked look on her face. "What's up? What hurts?"

"Hamstring," Rose bit out. "I think I tore it."

"No no no," Cassie said, shaking her head. "No you didn't. You can't." Cassie grabbed Rose's hand, the giant goalie glove engulfing it. "You're gonna be OK."

Two of the trainers arrived with their little bag. But there was nothing they could do for Rose on the field. She was done in this game and it wasn't even halftime. Her ass was throbbing like someone had used it as a punching bag. The white-hot poker was still shoved down the back of her thigh. No, all the trainers could do was help her off the field.

Bev Lockman, the lead trainer, put a hand on Rose's left thigh. "What hurts?"

Rose tried to bend her knee but all it brought was more pain, no movement. "Right hammy. Pretty sure it's torn. I did it in college."

Bev nodded. “You’re not playing on that, then.”

“Help me up,” Rose said to Cassie.

Cassie took Rose’s other hand and gently pulled her to her feet. Well, foot. She wasn’t putting any weight on her right leg. It was just there as a sort of kickstand so she didn’t topple over.

Bev slung Rose’s right arm over her shoulder and the other trainer, Tracy, did the same with the left. Cassie gave Rose’s hand a tight squeeze before the trio hobbled toward the sideline.

They passed Whitney Monterey, who was coming in for Rose. Rose put up her hand for a high five. “Don’t let them get to Cassie,” she managed to say around the agony.

“You got it,” Whitney said, then sprinted over to take her place.

As soon as Rose and the trainers were off the field, the ref blew their whistle to signal to resume play.

Without Rose. Shit.

“Straight to the locker room,” Bev said and Rose couldn’t do anything but nod. She remembered the drill, even if it had been seven years ago. They’d ice her thigh and her ass. She’d get an MRI, probably tomorrow, to confirm the diagnosis but Rose knew it was a torn hamstring. It felt exactly the same, the pop sounded just like before.

In the locker room, Bev and Tracy helped Rose onto a table. Rose lay down on her stomach and Bev set to work poking around at the back of her thigh. It was fine. It was fine. It was—*holy fuck not fine!*

Rose yelped in pain and Bev stopped. “I won’t ask if it hurts.”

“Yeah, little bit,” Rose said breathlessly as her leg throbbed. She could feel her pulse in her ass. That was never a good sign.

Fuck, she wanted Cassie there. Wanted a hand to squeeze as Bev continued gently prodding, wanted someone to say calm, soothing, nonsense words, tell her it would be OK even if it wouldn’t.

Through the fog of pain, she tried to do the math. The playoffs started in two weeks. They lasted up to another three, depending on how the Wolfpack did. Depending on the level of the tear—maybe it was only a bad strain—OK that was wishful thinking—she could be back in a few weeks. She might miss the first round of the playoffs, but if the Wolfpack advanced, it didn’t have to be a season-ending injury.

She’d just have to stay completely off her leg, one-hundred percent, for like a week. Lots of ice. Then intensive rehab.

And lots and lots of hamstring and glute massages. Rose was in too much pain to actually get aroused at the idea of Cassie massaging her ass, but her brain sure loved the idea.

Unfortunately, if she had to stay off her right leg for more than a day, which was likely, she would be almost as much of a figurative pain in Cassie’s ass as this injury was a literal pain in Rose’s.

When Bev was done poking around at the injury, she went to schedule Rose for an MRI. That would tell them how severe the muscle tear was, or if by some miracle it was only a strain. That was best-case scenario, Rose was pretty sure.

A fresh wave of pain wafted over her and she groaned, burying her face in her arms on the table. “Ibuprofen, please?” she asked Tracy. Her voice came out in a whine but she didn’t care.

Tracy got the meds and some water, then set to work wrapping an ice pack around Rose’s thigh. The cold burned, but in a good way. A healing way.

“Just try to relax and let the meds and the ice kick in.” Tracy patted her on the shoulder and walked away.

Rose lay on the table, trying her damndest to do as the trainer advised. She gritted her teeth in pain against each breath, sucking in through her teeth and out through her nose. Every so often her hamstring decided to scream at her and she let out a string of curses.

It had been a hell of a fucking season since the World Cup ended. First her broken fingers, now this hamstring injury. Of all the fucking luck. But at least she’d been able to play with broken fingers; she hadn’t been able to do throw-ins but that was it.

But dammit, she would make it back for the end of the playoffs. The Wolfpack was at the top of the league. Barring some huge upset, they would go far in the playoffs. Hopefully to the final.

At least there were no international games coming up that she would miss. They played again in January, but that was plenty of time, unless this was a stage three tear and required surgery.

*Please don’t require fucking surgery*, she prayed to whatever deity might be listening. Who was the patron saint of soccer? Not that she was Catholic.



She must have zoned out, or hell, passed out from the pain, because it seemed like just minutes had passed when the locker room was suddenly filled with voices and laughter. Almost immediately, Cassie, Lauren, and Erika were at her side.

Rose propped herself up on her elbows as more of her teammates gathered around her. She met first Erika's worried gaze, then Lauren's, then finally Cassie's. Cassie looked most stricken of all, her normally pink skin gone pale, emphasizing her adorable-as-fuck freckles. Rose was overcome with an urge to kiss Cassie's pert, freckled little nose, but she reined it in.

"We win?" she asked before anyone else could say something. She had her priorities.

"Fuck yeah, we did," Lauren said as the rest of the team murmured around them.

"Nice." Rose held her hand up for a high five. Lauren slapped it, then gave her a solid squeeze.

"So what's the verdict?" Cassie nodded at Rose's thigh.

"Hamstring. Something popped. I need an MRI to tell how bad it is. Bev went a while ago to schedule it." Rose shrugged. What had happened to the trainer?

If possible, Cassie's expression got more concerned. "Shit. That's..."

"Fuck, man," Lauren said.

"That fucking sucks," Erika chimed in.

The rest of the team dispersed, off to their lockers to strip down and shower before heading home.

Rose looked up at the three friends remaining by her, gaze connecting with each in turn. She let just a touch of her fear into her gaze. What if it was really bad? It sure as hell hurt like her muscles had been shredded by Wolverine or the wolf in the Wolfpack logo or a werewolf or something.

When Rose's gaze met Cassie's, she almost lost her breath. The deep concern on her friend's—her more-than-friend's—face sent her head spinning. If Rose had been in her right headspace, she might even have thought Cassie was looking at her with something like love in her eyes.

But that was absurd. Rose was just loopy from pain and desperate for Cassie to love her. That didn't make it real.



Cassie kept her hand on Rose's lower back as her friend maneuvered on crutches up the three stairs to their kitchen. Every muscle in her body was tense; she hadn't relaxed since the moment Rose collided with Tamika Blatz and went to ground. She'd barely breathed for the last few minutes of the first half; only Lauren talking her through a calming exercise during halftime had helped her settle into the second half.

A little ironic that it was grumpy-as-fuck Lauren who knew how to help someone calm down.

Now it was Rose who was understandably grumpy as fuck. When they left the stadium, she'd complained about her discomfort, how much she hated crutches, how weird it was to have Cassie drive her car while she rode in the passenger seat, how she couldn't sit right with her butt and the back of her thigh in so much pain. Cassie had driven as carefully as she possibly could so as not to jostle her friend. But their

neighborhood's streets had been ravaged by snowy winters and were in terrible shape. The last few blocks had seemed agonizing for Rose, judging by the moans she made.

Following Rose to the kitchen, Cassie stayed close in case she got wobbly on her crutches. Cassie had used them years ago, in high school when she tore her ACL. They took time to get used to.

Rose stopped next to the table, and Cassie was so close, she almost bumped into her.

“You can stop hovering,” Rose snapped.

The harsh tone stung, but Cassie did her best to let it go. Rose was having a pretty bad day. She could be snappy if she needed to.

Cassie took a few steps back. “Sorry.”

“I’ve been on crutches before. I’ll be fine.” She started toward the living room.

“Should I get some pillows? Didn’t Bev say to elevate it while you’re icing?” Cassie didn’t know where Rose had extra pillows, but she’d be happy to find them.

Rose dropped heavily onto the far end of the couch, lay her crutches on the floor, and swung her bad leg onto the couch. “How the fuck do I elevate my ass? Do an arch or something?”

She had a good point. “I guess just try to get your thigh up as high as you can?”

With a groan, Rose dropped her head against the arm of the couch. “This fucking sucks.”

Cassie perched on the opposite couch arm. “I know. But the more you baby it now, the better chance you’ll have to get

back for the playoffs.” Being injured sucked. Being injured for big tournaments really, really sucked. Three years ago, Cassie had messed up ligaments in her wrist and it felt like it took forever to get back. Most soccer players could still play with a wrist injury, but for a goalkeeper, it was debilitating. She’d only been out seven weeks, but it had felt like eons.

“Are you hungry?” Cassie asked. “I should make us dinner.”

Rose grunted her assent.

“Anything you feel like?”

“All the junk food on the planet. Stuff that’s horrible for me that the nutrition staff would rather die than let me eat.”

Cassie chuckled. She understood the urge to indulge. Their diets could feel restrictive during the season. “I mean, we don’t have a deep fryer so I can’t go that route. I could try something in the air fryer.”

“Blarg. That’s too healthy. I’ll know it’s only kind of bad for me.”

“I think to truly horrify the nutrition staff, we have to order out.”

“Takes too long. I require junk food in my mouth now.”

Rose crossed her arms and made a *harrumph* sound.

Cassie couldn’t help smiling. Rose’s sexy mouth was in a pout and she looked like an adorably petulant child and Cassie wanted to kiss away the grumpiness.

Instead she said, “I’ll try to make the most horrible-for-you thing I can, OK?” The problem being that they kept little in the house that truly went against their regimen.

Rose nodded reluctantly.

Cassie dug around in the freezer and found a thick crust pepperoni pizza. That definitely wasn't something their trainers would recommend, so she turned on the oven and continued looking for something to eat with it. They also had frozen breaded zucchini she could cook in their air fryer, which as Rose had pointed out, was not the same as deep fried. But it was the best Cassie could do. Maybe she could pick up some candy and chips for Rose tomorrow. If she wanted to get back for the playoffs, she couldn't get too far off her training routine, but one day of eating her feelings wouldn't hurt.

As she waited for the oven and the fryer to preheat, Cassie tried to avoid thinking too much. She'd yet to really be alone with her thoughts since the moment Rose got hurt, and she was pretty sure she didn't want to deal with them.

She had honestly never been more terrified in her life than when she'd watched Rose fly through the air, then land hard. When she hadn't immediately gotten up, Cassie had fully understood what cold fear meant. She'd felt like ice, in her veins and poured over her skin. Play had continued for a few more seconds before the ref blew their whistle, and for all Cassie had been paying attention or cared, Los Angeles could've scored. She'd only been looking at Rose.

For one brief, awful moment, Cassie thought Rose had hit her head so hard on the ground, she'd been knocked unconscious. She'd actually gotten choked up a little when Rose moaned with pain. Because it meant she was conscious.

Even remembering it now, Cassie's heart hammered, her pulse throbbing behind her ears and in her neck.

The oven beeped, jerking her from her thoughts. A relief. She focused on unwrapping the frozen pizza and putting it in the oven. Then the air fryer was ready and she focused on

arranging the zucchini. As long as she stayed cued in to the tasks, she didn't have to think about the gut-wrenching pain in her chest that came from seeing Rose in so much agony.

Which didn't mean anything. She'd have been just as worried and freaked out if it had been another teammate she was friends with. Like Erika or Lauren. And they'd both been super worried about Rose too.

Though Cassie had needed Lauren to help her calm down. Cassie was the only one that worked up. But everyone reacted differently. Maybe Lauren was someone who got comfort from helping other people. Seemed unlike her, but maybe. People had layers.

Yeah, it definitely meant nothing that Cassie hadn't been able to take a full breath for the entire second half and that she'd almost whiffed an easy save.

It certainly didn't mean she was doing something awful like falling for Rose. She was just closer to Rose than any of her other teammates. A natural reaction after all the intimacy they'd shared in the past few weeks.

That was totally it. Because it absolutely did not, could not, mean she was falling for Rose. Hell, she probably couldn't even fall in love for real. She'd thought she loved Heather and Greg, but had she really? Greg insisted she didn't let anyone love her, and if that were true, would she be able to truly love someone?

Probably not. Her parents had irreversibly broken her. She wasn't capable of feeling deeper than what she felt for Rose. Which was friendship and a heavy dose of sexual attraction.

So much sexual attraction. Rose was definitely the sexiest woman she knew. But that was beside the point. She couldn't

be falling for Rose because she didn't have the emotional capacity to fall for anyone, period.

And that was that.

The timer on the oven beeped, so Cassie set about getting the pizza out and cutting it. By the time she had it on plates for them, the zucchini was done.

They needed drinks. And since Rose wanted to indulge, they should probably have alcohol. Fortunately Cassie had recently picked up some tonic water and limes. Rose loved gin and tonic with lime. So Cassie made up a G&T for each of them.

Carefully balancing the plates on her arm, a drink in each hand, Cassie went to the living room. Rose grinned when she saw Cassie.

"Pizza! The cure for all the world's ills." She took her drink and plate from Cassie. Then she curled her upper lip at the zucchini. "There's no grease."

"Did the best I could. We can order out tomorrow night," Cassie said as she sat down at the other end of the couch. Rose's leg took up a lot of room, so Cassie was squished against the arm.

Rose grumbled but popped a slice of zucchini in her mouth.

They ate mostly in silence, each focused on their food. The gin helped Cassie relax a little. That had been a good idea.

"Did they give you any pain meds? Maybe you shouldn't be drinking." Shit, she hadn't thought of that.

"Just ibuprofen," Rose said. "Bev didn't offer, but I'd rather hurt than take narcotics. They fuck with my head. You

remember how loopy I got when they gave them to me for my hand.”

Cassie laughed at the memory. She felt the same about narcotics, but she also understood that sometimes the pain was too much. “As long as you’re able to sleep tonight. If pain’s keeping you up, you need to ask them for something else tomorrow.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Ooh, speaking of Vera... “You should probably call your mom. Tell her what happened.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Not tonight. She’ll be here in ten seconds, fussing over me, driving me batty.”

There were worse things moms could do. When Cassie tore her ACL, her mom had gone on and on about how inconvenient Cassie’s injury was for her. As if she was the one suffering, not Cassie. And her mom had acted like Cassie somehow did it on purpose just to upset her.

Still, Cassie understood intellectually that Vera could be too much. Somewhere between their two moms was the ideal mother. Though probably closer to Vera’s end of the spectrum than Denise’s.

“I’ll call her after my MRI tomorrow morning. Then I’ll know how bad it is.” Rose set her empty plate on the coffee table. “It wasn’t the junk fest I was hoping for, but it was still really good. Thank you for making dinner.” She gave Cassie a soft smile.

Warmth spread in Cassie’s chest. “My pleasure.”

OK, maybe she was falling just a little bit for Rose. Who could help themselves when she smiled like that? Cassie’s belly fluttered like she was a teen girl with a crush.



Rose started untwisting her hair from its ponytail and Cassie was momentarily mesmerized by the motions. Entranced as Rose's dark hair spilled over her shoulders, messy, like she'd just gotten out of bed.

Cassie pulsed between her legs. *Down, girl.* It was definitely not the time for that.

Rose slid her fingers over her tangled hair and said, "I need a shower."

Now Cassie was picturing wet, naked Rose and that was not helping tamp down her flaring arousal.

"I'm not sure I can do it on one leg without falling. You think maybe you could, you know, help me?" The words were tight, like Rose had trouble getting each one out. Which, knowing Rose, she probably did.

"Yeah, that's fine." Cassie would figure out how to keep her hormones in check to help her friend get clean.

Rose tossed back the rest of her drink, set the glass on top of her plate, and swung her leg off the couch. She winced with the movement.

Cassie cringed. "You OK?"

Rose sucked in a slow breath. "Mostly."

Cassie tipped her head from side to side. "Fair."

She trailed behind Rose as Rose slowly made her way up the stairs and into her bedroom. There, she sat on the bed to undress. Feeling awkward, Cassie couldn't help watching as Rose pulled off her jersey and wrestled free of her two sports bras.

Damn did she have great breasts. But now was not about sex. It was just that they'd never been naked in front of each

other when it wasn't for sex or in the locker room with a group of other women around. This was a different sort of intimacy, one Cassie wasn't entirely ready for.

Still, her friend needed her help and she wasn't going to wimp out. And there wasn't much she could do clothed and outside the shower to help.

Naked, Rose balanced on her crutches. "This doesn't feel totally weird or anything." Her breasts swung like pendulums with every step and Cassie had to force herself to look away. It was almost pathetic how into Rose's breasts she was.

To keep her focus, Cassie got ahead of Rose and went into the bathroom first. She started the water and set it to her preferred temperature. Did Rose like it cooler? Hotter? They'd never showered together. This was hardly going to be a sexy shower. Bathtub sexy times were precarious under the best of circumstances, and when one of them was down a leg, it could be downright dangerous.

"Can you put any weight on it, just to get in?" Cassie asked as Rose lowered herself onto the closed toilet lid.

"Barely. Not enough to safely get into the tub. And I don't need more broken fingers."

Cassie huffed a sound of agreement.

Rose transferred herself to the edge of the bathtub, swung one leg into the tub, then the next. She looked up at Cassie.

"Get in and help me up?"

"Temperature's good?" Cassie held her hand under the spray. It felt good to her.

"Yeah, it's fine." Rose's eyes slid shut, like she was suddenly too exhausted to muster the effort of keeping them open.

Damn. It was only around eight, but she looked wiped out. Cassie hurried into the tub and put her hands under Rose's armpits. Carefully, they maneuvered until Rose was balanced on her left leg under the spray.

Hands still on Rose, Cassie asked, "Do you need me to keep my hands here?"

"I should be OK as long as I don't have to move. Can you hand me the shampoo?"

Cassie handed her the bottle and watched as Rose lathered up her hair, then rinsed. Then she worked conditioner into her hair.

Before rinsing the conditioner, she asked for the body wash and used it to lather up her arms, shoulders, and chest. "I'm going to need help with my legs. I'll fall if I try to bend over."

"Sure." Cassie poured some of the liquid into her palm, rubbed her hands together, then crouched down in front of Rose. Eye level with her belly button.

Arousal jolted through Cassie but she shoved it down. As much as she wanted to lean in to kiss the soft, delicious skin of Rose's belly, it was not the time. Now was about taking care of Rose.

Thinking unsexy thoughts, Cassie slicked her hands over Rose's left thigh, down her calf, and over the top of her foot. As gently as she could, she did the same to the right leg. Before moving around to the back of her right thigh, Cassie asked, "Is this OK? I don't want to hurt you more."

"Just be really careful." There was a wince in Rose's voice, like she was bracing for pain.

As lightly as she could while still making contact, Cassie skated her palm up the back of Rose's thigh. So so gently. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"It's OK," Rose gritted through her teeth.

Cassie's lower legs started to tingle from her squatting position. "Anything else while I'm down here?"

When she looked up, Rose was arching her eyebrows. Belatedly, Cassie realized how that had sounded.

"I didn't mean something like that. I mean, I can if you think it would help. But I just..."

Rose laughed. "You're adorable when you're flustered."

Warmth spread through Cassie, like the shower spray was suddenly attached to her veins.

Rose skimmed her hand over the top of Cassie's head, an affectionate gesture that twisted Cassie's stomach. For a long moment, their gazes held and something unspoken passed between them. Cassie had no idea what they were saying, only that they were communicating. Connecting.

Oh fuck. She really was falling for Rose. And nothing good could come of it.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *twenty*

Rose's mom was at the house when she and Cassie got back from Rose's MRI. Because of course she was. As soon as Rose saw her car in the driveway, she groaned. Cassie reached over and squeezed her thigh. This on top of the news from the doctor, even though it was largely positive, had Rose so wound up, she couldn't even enjoy the touch.

As was her new habit, Cassie hovered a little too closely as Rose crutched across the driveway and up the stairs. She got to the kitchen to see her mom sitting at the dining room table, folding towels.

"What the hell, Mom?" She didn't have it in her to be polite.

Vera looked up and froze. "I could say the same to you." She gestured with a washcloth at Rose, encompassing the crutches. And the compression bandage squeezing Rose's thigh, but that was hidden by her loose pants.

"I strained my hamstring in the game yesterday." She moved to the sink to get a glass of water.

Cassie cleared her throat meaningfully.

OK, technically Rose had torn her hamstring. Barely. The doctor had said the tear was so minuscule, it was practically a

strain.

Or at least that's how she'd interpreted it. Because a strain meant she had a chance of rehabbing it fast enough to be back for the playoffs. A tear meant a lot longer recovery time. And she wasn't totally deluding herself; the doc had said it wasn't an impossible goal. Tough, but not impossible.

Rose was focusing on that.

Vera shot to her feet and was immediately at Rose's side. She put her hand under Rose's elbow even though she was leaning back against the kitchen counter. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I figured I'd wait until after my MRI." She really had been planning to call her mom after she got settled back on the damn couch.

"And it's bad enough you can't walk? That sounds more like a tear to me."

"We're just using an abundance of caution," Cassie piped up. "Resting a lot so she can start therapy sooner."

"So you're not going to miss the playoffs?"

Of course that was a bigger concern than her child's wellbeing. Soccer always came first.

OK, that wasn't entirely fair. A lot of Vera's smothering behavior was about taking care of Rose. It was just with an end goal of making more time for soccer.

Rose sighed, suddenly bone weary. She wanted a long nap and maybe a good fuck. Either order would do. But she couldn't do either with her mom in the house.

Which brought her back to her original question. "Mom, why are you here?"

“When I was over on Friday”—she’d been over on Friday? —“I noticed you were running low on towels, so I thought I’d do a few loads.”

Rubbing at her suddenly throbbing forehead, Rose said, “We can do our own laundry.”

“Apparently you can’t right now.”

“Cassie still has two functioning legs if we have a true towel emergency.”

“I don’t—“ Cassie started but Vera cut her off.

“I’m not going to make her take care of you. I’ll call your dad right now and have him bring a bag over. I’m staying for a few days.”

“Oh, I don’t think—“

“Mom. Oh my god you are not staying here. Where would you even sleep?”

“In the guest room.”

“That’s Cassie’s room.”

“Maybe we should all sit down in the living room and...” Cassie took a few steps in that direction but stopped when neither of the other women followed her.

“I. Don’t. Need. You. To. Stay. Here.” Rose spoke through clenched teeth. If she weren’t so awkward on her crutches, she’d have stormed out of the room by now. But she was too angry to even attempt the things, so she stayed put with the counter holding her weight.

“You’re not being very grateful for my help, Rose.” Vera all but pouted.

*I didn't ask for it!* Rose wanted to yell. Even if she lived alone, she could manage without her mom moving in. Which was a horrifying idea. She'd rather go crash at Lauren's cramped apartment than have Vera stay. Her mom was already too deeply entrenched in her life.

"The doctor said I need lots of rest, so I'm going to take a nap. Cassie and I can finish the towels. Tell Dad I say hi." After setting her empty glass on the counter, Rose took a chance with her crutches and headed for the living room.

"Rose, wait," Cassie said. Then she turned to Vera. "Vera, we appreciate the help. Really. It's just not necessary."

Traitor. Rose didn't appreciate the help. It was one more way Vera tried to run Rose's life. And she couldn't take it much longer.

Grumpy as fuck and now annoyed with Cassie too, Rose flopped onto the couch and hauled her leg up onto the mound of pillows. She could hear voices from the kitchen but not make out what they were saying. A minute later the side door shut. Cassie banged around in the kitchen, then appeared in the living room with a large icepack.

Rose took it from her and shoved it underneath her thigh, but was still pouting, so wouldn't meet Cassie's eyes. Which was childish, but she didn't really care. She'd earned the right to be childish for ten minutes or so.

Cassie sat at the far end of the couch and rested her hand on Rose's left ankle. "How you doing?" Cassie asked.

Rose grunted, tilting her head back to stare up at the ceiling.

"That good?"

"You took her side."



Cassie made an incredulous sound. “I did what?”

“We really appreciate your help,” Rose said in a mocking tone, lifting her head to glare at Cassie. “No, we fucking don’t. We’re adults and it’s too damn much.”

Cassie’s expression hardened. “I’m going to let this slide because I know she gets under your skin and you’re already in a bad place about your leg. But you don’t have to take it out on me.”

“Then don’t take her side when she’s trying to move in.”

“I said she didn’t need to!”

Fine, Cassie was right. But Rose still wanted to be mad. So she grunted again and crossed her arms.

They sat in tense, charged silence. Rose’s mind bounced from her annoyance with her mom to her annoyance with Cassie to her annoyance with her leg to her annoyance that women soccer players made less than men to her annoyance over the state of national politics to—

OK, time to stop that thought spiral. Nothing productive would come out of that. She looked over at Cassie to find her watching her. When their eyes met, the right corner of Cassie’s mouth turned up in a tentative but sexy smile.

Electricity and hunger zipped through Rose, the way it always did when Cassie smiled at her. When Cassie met her gaze.

When Cassie existed.

“You really want to know whose side I’m on?” Cassie sat forward, hands on her knees like she was about to stand.

Rose screwed up her face. “I know you’re not on her side. I’m just grumpy.”

Cassie stood and reached for the hem of her t-shirt. “We should do something about that.” She pulled the garment over her head and dropped it on the coffee table.

A pleasant pulse started between Rose’s legs. She could get behind sex as pain relief and distraction.

Cassie unclipped her bra, revealing her small, perky breasts. Her nipples seemed to point directly at Rose, and her mouth watered. Shimmying her hips, Cassie worked off her pants and underwear, leaving herself naked in front of Rose.

Rose bit her bottom lip, taking in the sight of the woman she loved. The emotions almost overwhelmed her, how much she both wanted and adored this woman. She held out her hand.

“Come here.”

Cassie’s smile was sweet and seductive. She ran her hands over her thighs, fingers grazing the insides. “You need to get undressed first.”

As Rose awkwardly wrestled out of her clothes from her position on the couch, she couldn’t take her eyes off Cassie’s slightly parted thighs. She wanted to lick and suck those thighs, nip at the skin. Leave marks high on Cassie’s thighs, maybe even one or two low enough that they’d peak out from her shorts when she stretched. So everyone would know Cassie was taken. Was hers.

Divested of her clothes, save the compression bandage on her right thigh, Rose lay back again. “Now come here.”

Instead of climbing on top of Rose like she wanted, Cassie dropped to her knees next to the couch and lifted Rose’s left leg over her shoulder. She scooted closer, settling herself between Rose’s now-spread thighs. With her right leg

elevated, it was a slightly awkward position. But not incompatible with what Cassie intended.

“Now I’m going to show you exactly whose side I’m on,” Cassie murmured before she licked Cassie from back to front, ending with a flick to her clit.

Pleasure shot through Rose, sharp and delicious. Cassie repeated the move several times, and Rose’s pussy responded with wonderful throbs. Her limbs felt like live wires.

She tried to lift her hips to Cassie, but pain pierced through her. She grunted from it. Oof, OK, so no doing that.

Tongue pressed to Rose’s clit, Cassie looked up to her face.

“I flexed the wrong muscle.” Rose’s voice came out strained as she tried to relax the tight, painful muscle and tendons. Slowly the discomfort eased until the only sensation was of Cassie’s hot breath across her throbbing pussy.

“You OK?”

“Yeah. Just go back to what you were doing and I’ll be great.”

Cassie grinned, obliging with another long, slow lick. Rose struggled not to thrust into her. She closed her eyes and rolled her head back, letting the sensations flow through her. Cassie was so damn good at oral sex. Better than anyone Rose had been with. Or maybe that was just how it was when you were in love with your partner. She had no prior experience to compare it to on that front. Sure, she’d thought she was in love with her girlfriend in high school, but that was teen infatuation mixed with lust.

It was nothing compared to how she felt about Cassie.

Pleasure built inside Rose, sharp and sweet. She let her mind go, let her body go, and gave over to the sensation of Cassie's mouth on her. It was bliss, perfection. She was vaguely aware she'd started panting, making sharp little cries from the back of her throat as the ecstasy built. She was going to come so hard.

Her fingers sifted into Cassie's soft hair, cradling her head, holding it against her pussy. She struggled not to rock up into Cassie's face and increase the pressure.

"Fuck, Cassie." A long moan rolled off the back of her throat.

Cassie hummed a response over Rose's clit and that was the breaking point. The orgasm rolled up and created a tidal wave of sensation crashing over Rose. Barely mindful of her injury, she flexed only her left side to lift into Cassie, chasing more pleasure.

Her body trembled as the ecstasy poured through her, wide and expansive and never ending. Was she chanting Cassie's name? Or was it in her head?

Somewhere far away, she heard Cassie murmur, "Yes, baby" but the words only vaguely registered, her mind consumed with the pure bliss filling her.

Finally, it began to ebb away. Rose collapsed back onto the arm of the sofa, panting. She vaguely registered Cassie placing a gentle line of kisses down her thigh as she caressed Rose's calf. Then Cassie rose, only to drop herself at the other end of the sofa. She propped a pillow behind her head so she could look over at Rose, their legs tangled together in the middle. Rose stroked Cassie's knee with her foot.

Cassie immediately started playing with her breasts, cupping one while pinching the other's nipples. Then one hand slid down her body and between her legs.

Rose couldn't look away as Cassie's fingers played over her gorgeous, sexy body. Finger circling the clit Rose wanted to pull into her mouth, to suck on until Cassie exploded. But not now, not yet. Cassie had never masturbated for Rose before and Rose was so damn turned on, she might come again herself just from watching. No way was she going to stop the show, no matter how much she loved eating Cassie's pussy.

She flicked her gaze back to Cassie's face and found Cassie watching her. Her lids fluttered but stayed open, locking her vision into Rose's. Rose's breath caught in her throat. She couldn't have looked away even if she wanted to.

Unspoken messages seemed to pass between them in electrical currents: hunger, longing, tenderness. Maybe even—

No, she was not going there. Just because she'd never seen Cassie look so soft didn't mean she was falling in love with Rose. Great sex was a lot of things, but it wasn't love.

"Touch yourself," Cassie breathed.

Rose barely made out the words in her lusty fog, but when they registered, heat poured through her. Without her command, her hand slid between her legs and found her clit. Pressed hard.

Sharp, sweet relief. So good. She couldn't pull her gaze from Cassie's, and together they rubbed themselves closer and closer to climax.

Rose's hips rocked, rising to meet her hand, each stroke like fire through her veins. "Yes," she exhaled. She was so close again. Already.

Cassie ripped her gaze away, head falling back, spine arching, legs shaking. She made the strangled noise Rose knew meant she was coming. And it was so fucking sexy, Rose's own orgasm tore through her, hard and sharp and intense. So intense she forgot to breathe.

Time suspended as the bliss poured through her, filling every nook and cranny of her body. She wanted to stay in this perfection forever.

Slowly she came back to herself. She reached immediately for Cassie. "Come here. Please." She needed the weight of Cassie's body against hers, needed to stroke her and kiss her. Two orgasms yet they'd hardly touched.

Slowly, not quite gracefully, Cassie shifted around, then crawled over Rose. She settled her big body on top of Rose's and the weight was perfection. Rose wrapped her arms and good leg around Cassie and lifted her head to press their lips together.

The kiss was lazy, both satisfied and satisfying. It went on and on, a gentle exploration and sweet intimacy. It felt so much like love, Rose felt almost betrayed by it. But she wouldn't have stopped it for all the World Cup trophies and Olympic gold medals in the world.

Cassie moved her mouth down Rose's neck, sucking on the pulse pounding at the base. She hummed against Rose's skin, sending a flurry of vibrations through Rose.

*I love you so much.*

She longed to put voice to the words. Her chest ached from holding them in. It felt like holding in tears, like she was keeping a dark, damaging secret.

And that was the problem. She knew how Cassie felt about love. Knew she wanted no part of it. So did Rose's love hold the power to damage them?

Or did Rose dare to let herself believe that the tenderness she saw in Cassie's eyes during moments like this could someday turn to love despite Cassie's best intentions?



**H**omework was the worst.

Actually, it was the second worst. Strained ligaments were the actual worst.

Rose adjusted the ice pack on her leg so it better targeted her injury, then turned her focus back to her astronomy textbook.

It should be a requirement for all scientists who wanted to write textbooks that they first had to take a creative writing class to learn how to make it less mind-numbingly dull. It was fascinating material but somehow Richard Claussen, PhD, managed to explain it in a way that made Rose want to shove pencils into her eyes, because it would be less painful.

She checked her phone to see if it was dinnertime yet. Last time she'd checked it was 4:11, but surely it had been at least an hour ago.

4:17.

Not an hour.

“Stupid fucking boring writers,” she mumbled, trying to focus on black holes.

The back door cracked open and Rose's pulse immediately sped up, her chest going fluttery, like there were hummingbirds just under her skin.

"Hey, you got done with practice early."

"That's because I wasn't at practice." Vera's voice drifted in from the kitchen.

Rose's body stiffened, like a cat arching its back at danger. And shit, her astronomy book. Desperately she looked around for a hiding spot, but the couch cushions were all sewn in place so she couldn't stash it under any of them and there was nowhere else within arm's reach.

So when Rose's mom appeared in the doorway between the living and dining rooms, the book was still open on Rose's lap.

And Vera, being Vera, homed in on it right away. "What are you reading?" She dropped down next to Rose on the couch and reached for the book.

Rose made a half-hearted attempt to keep it but in the end let her mom have it. Holding her place with one hand, Vera used the other to flip the book shut. "*Introduction to Astronomy?* Rose, what is this?"

Rose's face burned with embarrassment. Not because she was taking the class, but because she hadn't been quick enough to hide the evidence from her mom.

"It's pretty self-explanatory." Rose waved her hand over the book's cover.

"What happened to the mystery novels you read?" Vera's forehead creased as she studied her daughter. "Why would you read a textbook for fun? Where did you even get this?"



Rose drew in a slow, deep breath, filling her lungs until they felt like they'd burst. Focused on the discomfort of her overly expanded abdomen, she was able for just a moment to not think about her mom's reaction to her answer. But she might as well come clean. She wasn't quick enough to think of a reasonable lie off the top of her head.

"It's for a class," she mumbled.

"I didn't hear that."

"It's for a class," she said, louder.

Vera went perfectly, eerily still. Staring unblinking at Rose. Rose met her gaze, but it was too intense, so she looked down at her textbook, her hands, her lap, the icepack, back to the book. Anywhere but up at her mom again.

"When do you have time for this *class*?" Vera said it like it was a dirty word.

"It's an evening class. And the professor is very accommodating if I have to miss a lecture for a game. And it's just one class. It's not a big deal." It wasn't. Her play hadn't suffered at all since the semester started. Until her injury, at least.

"Your free time should be devoted to training and adequate rest." Vera's voice sounded rehearsed. Like she'd said the same thing to Rose a dozen other times. Because she had. Or a variation of it.

"I'm more than a soccer player, Mom."

"Of course you are." Vera's tone was now placating, like she was talking to a child who insisted they were a mermaid.

*Oh my god, Mom thinks I'm nothing more than a soccer player.*

“Do you even see me?” Rose spit the words out, barely containing the hurt and anger bubbling up at her realization.

Vera made an impatient sound. “You’re sitting right here. Of course I see you.”

Shoving her fingers into her messy hair, Rose let out a frustrated growl. “I don’t mean physically see me. I mean do you have any clue who I am other than on the pitch?”

Straightening her spine, Vera gave Rose a wounded look, forehead pinched, eyes wide. “Of course I see you, Rose. But I also see the big picture that you often fail to. At this point in your life, you need to be dedicated to soccer and soccer only. If you need a hobby, I’d be happy to teach you to crochet.”

Rose knew how to crochet. Apparently Vera forgot teaching her.

“I don’t want a hobby! This isn’t just a hobby. This is me planning to go back to school and get a second major because I always wanted to major in astronomy and physics but I let you shoehorn me into communications.”

“You simply wouldn’t have had time to do enough studying—“

“Well I have the time now!”

“Sure, with your injured leg. But then it’s the playoffs. How are you going to rehab that hamstring and train for the playoffs if you’re off playing with a telescope somewhere?”

Vera would never get it. She refused to see Rose for who she was. The bitter unfairness of it burned Rose’s stomach.

“You know, if you need something productive to do with your time, I still need more LGBTQ mentors. Cassie’s mentee adores her and I think you—“

Cassie's mentee? Say what?

"Cassie is one of your mentors?" The hot fury in Rose's blood cooled to a cold sense of betrayal. Why had Cassie lied to her? Or at least not told her?

She'd said she was doing extra practices with a goalkeeping coach at Marquette University. Cassie would bet Marie Purrie's life that there were no extra practices.

"Yes, she's been doing it for several weeks." There was an annoying note of triumph in Vera's tone. "A young bisexual girl who also plays soccer. We have another young woman, she doesn't play soccer but she runs track and cross country. I think the two of you—"

Rose held up her hand. "I don't want to be a mentor."

Vera gave Rose her best Disappointed Mom look. "Sometimes what you want and what you need are two different things."

What was that even supposed to mean? It wasn't like Rose wanted to go out and commit murder every night. She wanted to take one measly class in astronomy so she would be in a better place when she eventually retired.

Suddenly exhausted by her mom's presence, and by the realization that Cassie had lied to her when she'd been foolish enough to think maybe Cassie was falling for her, Rose dropped her head back on the couch and stared at the ceiling. "Why are you even here, Mom?"

"I came to drop off some food for you. I don't want you getting off your training diet by ordering lots of takeout."

Rose didn't have the energy to point out that Cassie was perfectly capable of cooking and had the same dietary requirements as Rose.

“Then put it in the fridge and please leave.” She needed to be alone. Needed to sort through the tangled mess in her head, of feelings and revelations and sex and complications and being roommates and being friends. And feelings. Did she mention feelings? So many feelings. All the feels, as the kids would say. Did the kids say that?

Maybe she should have Cassie ask her mentee. The one she hadn't seen fit to tell Rose about.

At the other end of the couch, Vera rose. “I'll leave the food in the refrigerator for Cassie to heat up for you.”

Rose wanted to sneer and snarl at her mom, but she managed to keep her expression neutral.

“I hope you can get your money back for that class, because you'll need to drop it. Now is not the time for these whims of yours.”

Now it took all Rose's energy to hold in the snarl. “Please leave,” she grit out.

With a heavy sigh, Vera left the room. A moment later, the back door opened and shut, leaving Rose in heavy, uncomfortable silence.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *twenty-one*

Rose needed to pace. Damn leg. Instead, she sat on the couch with her stupid-ass icepack under her stupid-ass ass and wiggled her toes in the most antsy way possible.

She should try to stay calm, have a reasonable, adult conversation with Cassie when she got home. But Rose didn't want to be reasonable. Her leg hurt, she was at the absolute end of her patience with her mom, and Cassie lied to her. Because a lie of omission was still a lie.

Why would Cassie keep that secret?

Outside, Rose heard a car pull up. Cassie. Cassie was home. Should Rose get up and meet her in the kitchen? Confronting Cassie from the inferior position on the couch didn't appeal. They should be eye-to-eye for this conversation.

Rose heaved her leg off the couch and used her crutches to push to her feet. She made her way to the kitchen so that when Cassie came in the back door, Rose was leaning against the sink, crutches leaning next to her, arms crossed over her chest. Scowl on her face.

"Hey," Cassie said breezily as she came into the room. Then she pulled up short and frowned. "Something wrong?"

“Where’ve you been?” Rose tried not to sound completely accusatory, she really did. Mostly. OK, a little. But it came out sounding like she thought Cassie was cheating on her.

Why did this hurt almost as badly as if that were true? Why was there such a sharp pain under Rose’s ribs that she felt like she couldn’t breathe?

Cassie frowned, expression suddenly cautious. “Doing errands.”

*Liar!*

“Not with your mentee?”

To her credit, Cassie looked guilty. Her eyes went wide and her lips parted. “I...”

Suddenly the fight went out of Rose. Her shoulders sagged. She didn’t have the energy for this. It was too much. “Why did you lie to me?”

Cassie took a step in Rose’s direction, then stopped. “I... I never lied.”

“Lie of omission is still a lie. I assume you’re also not working with a trainer at Marquette like you told me you were.”

Cassie’s fair cheeks pinkened.

“I thought—“ Rose closed her eyes on a sigh. It didn’t matter what she thought. She’d thought wrong.

“I wanted to tell you.” Cassie held up her hands in a gesture of innocence.

“You know how much my mom drives me crazy. Yet you decided to invite her even further into our lives?”

“My life. This has nothing to do with you?”

“Is that why you kept it a secret?”

“I didn’t keep it a secret, but you’re so damn touchy about your mom, I didn’t know how to bring it up with you!”

“So better to let me find out that you’re working with her behind my back?”

“Why do you care so much? It doesn’t affect you.”

“She’s my mom. You’re my... roommate.” She’d almost said *girlfriend* but it was abundantly clear that that wasn’t true. “It affects me.”

“So what, I’m not good enough for your mom?”

“Oh my god, do not put words in my mouth. I never said that. This has nothing to do with if you’re good enough for her. She’s not good enough for you, OK?”

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

If Rose had been angry before, she was livid now. “My feelings are not bullshit.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Rose shoved off the counter. “You know what? Have her.” She pulled her crutches under her arms and adjusted them. “I’m sick of her.”

With that, she stormed out. Or as much as she could on the fucking crutches.



Cassie groped behind herself for a chair as tears filled her eyes. Did she and Rose just break up? Intellectually she knew that people in relationships fought. And then they made up.

But that wasn't her experience. She and Heather never fought because Heather hadn't been around enough. One day Heather just decided it was over and told Cassie to leave.

With Greg, there hadn't been any fighting either. They just drifted apart, didn't talk, lived their separate lives. Then one day he said he wanted a divorce because she was unloveable.

Sinking into the chair, Cassie swiped away the tear that had escaped to roll down her cheek.

Could she and Rose even break up? They weren't exactly together.

So why did Cassie feel this sense of devastation that Rose had left? Why did everything inside hurt? Why were more tears rolling down her face, faster than she could wipe them away?

Oh no. Cassie folded her arms on the table and dropped her head onto them.

Had she really done it? Had she fallen in love yet again? With someone who couldn't possibly love her back, because how could Rose love her? Rose was right that Cassie should have told her about the mentoring, even if she hadn't quite known how. Rose was maybe overreacting to the situation, but didn't that just prove that she didn't love Cassie in return?

Shit.

How did they get past this? They were supposed to be focusing on the end of the season, on the playoffs. Rose had to rehab her leg. They didn't have time to be dealing with not-relationship, roommates-with-benefits drama.

Something bumped against her ankle and without looking, Cassie reached down to lift whichever cat it was into her lap. She angled her head to see Marie Purrie standing on her legs.



The cat bumped her head against Cassie's hand, asking for a pet. Cassie obliged.

A fresh wave of sorrow washed over her. Would she have to move out? Could they go back to being casual roommates and teammates?

What did it all mean?

She got a mental picture of herself standing in the driveway with a suitcase and her heart squeezed. She didn't want to move out. She loved living with Rose. She loved hanging out and watching movies, or cooking dinner with Rose. She loved massaging Rose's sore muscles, making icepacks for Rose's injury, having Rose take care of her after a long day. She loved making Rose laugh. She really loved making Rose come.

"What am I going to do, Marie?"

The cat settled herself on Cassie's lap but gave no reply.

"I'm pretty sure I'm in love with Rose. And I've ruined everything."



**R**ose: *You home?*

Lauren: *U up?*

Rose: *Haha I'm serious. I need to talk.*

Lauren: *I'm just Netflix and stabbing. Come on over.*



Lauren was an accomplished embroideress, so when she said she was stabbing things, she meant she was stabbing fabric with an embroidery needle. She claimed it was the only way to keep herself from actually stabbing people who pissed her off.

Driving wasn't exactly easy. Rose's right leg was better after several days of rest, but it still hurt. She had to try to rest most of her weight on her left ass cheek and use her right leg as gingerly as possible. A pretty impressive feat, if she did say so.

Lauren lived in a tiny one-bedroom apartment that had needed updating a decade ago. Rose hobbled her way to the door and knocked. She was damn sick of her crutches. Hopefully in a few days the doc would clear her to get rid of them. But the longer she babied her strain—OK, *minor* tear—the sooner she could get back to playing.

“Open!” Lauren yelled.

Rose let herself in and headed for the living room. Lauren was bundled into her oversized armchair, blanket on her lap, embroidery tools spread over the blanket, blue embroidery hoop in her hand. The hoop matched her recently dyed hair, which was blue with two gold streaks. The Wolfpack colors were blue and gold. A documentary on climate change played on the TV.

“What's up?” Lauren asked as Rose lowered herself carefully to the sofa.

“I need to stay here for a few days.” Hide out was more like it. She didn't know what to do with her complicated mix of feelings right now, but being around Cassie would only confuse her more. She needed space.

“And you think an air mattress in my living room is going to help you get your hamstring back in shape?” Lauren leveled a flat stare at Rose.

Rose dropped her head to the back of the sofa. No, her own bed was best for her leg. An air mattress would make her sore and stiff everywhere. Maybe she should go to a hotel.

She was such a coward.

“You gonna tell me why you can’t stay in your own damn house? But also, if you really do need to sleep somewhere else, why come to me? Erika and Nate have a shit ton of space and a guest room.”

“Cassie and I had a stupid fight.” Rose spoke to the ceiling.

“So go home and fix it. I’m positive you’re at least 50 percent to blame.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“And when you apologize, she can too. Unless she did something I can’t even imagine Cassie would do, like assaulting you, you two can fix it. I mean shit, you’ve been in love with her forever. But one fight and you’re hiding at my house?”

Rose’s head snapped up on the word *assault*. “She definitely didn’t hit me. She... she lied to me.”

Lauren sighed as she poked her fabric. “Something’s going on with you two, isn’t it? More than friends?”

They’d promised to keep their arrangement just between the two of them, but Lauren couldn’t help her if Rose didn’t tell her everything.

The way friends did.

“We, uh, we’ve been sleeping together. A friends-with-benefits sort of thing.” Rose’s face and chest flushed hot.

What if she never got to kiss Cassie again? The heat was immediately overtaken by a bone-deep chill.

Lauren didn’t look even a little bit shocked. “Erika and I figured.”

“What? How did you—“

Lauren held up her hand. “You two aren’t very subtle. The way you look at each other is different now.”

“I’ve always looked at her like I’m in love with her because I’m pathetic and have been since we met. And it’s just a stress relief thing for her. Just sex. She doesn’t even believe in love anymore.”

Lauren snorted. “Bullshit.”

Should Rose laugh at her friend’s dismissiveness or get pissed? “It doesn’t really matter what you think. Cassie says she doesn’t believe in love, so she doesn’t.”

“So what did she lie to you about that’s so awful you have to run away?”

Rose briefly explained how Cassie had been mentoring and working with Vera behind Rose’s back.

“And?” Lauren creased her eyebrows as she watched Rose.

“And what? That’s it. She lied to me.”

“She didn’t tell you.”

“Same thing.”

“You didn’t tell me and Erika you were sleeping with Cassie. Should I kick you out?”

“That’s different.” Shit. It wasn’t really. “Cassie and I agreed it was just between us. So telling you would’ve been a betrayal of her confidence.”

“But you just told me.”

Rose shoved her hands into her hair until her fingers got stuck in tangles. “Stop making so much damn sense!”

Lauren laughed. “I flew all the way to Australia to smack some sense into Erika about Nate. You think I’m not going to do it to you from across the room?”

Rose huffed out her breath and crossed her arms. Dammit, she wanted to be in a bad mood, and she’d been positive the perpetually grumpy Lauren was the person to go to for that. Otherwise she probably would have gone to Erika’s and her guest room. She had a damn nice house. The perks of marrying rich. “Someday you’re gonna fall in love too and Erika and I will have no sympathy for you.”

Lauren rolled her eyes. “You know she’s crazy about you, right?”

Rose’s pulse galloped in excitement. “No she’s not.”

“I told you, just because she tells herself she’s done with love doesn’t mean she actually is. You can’t help your feelings for someone. Trust me, I know.”

That was as close to admitting she had feelings for their former coach Pete Kendrick as Lauren had ever gotten, though Erika and Rose had suspected for years. But Rose didn’t want to talk about Pete. If Lauren was even referencing him.

“So what, I just go home, say it’s OK that she hid something this huge from me, and tell her I love her? See what happens?”

“I didn’t say that. You clearly need to work out your anger at her.”

Rose let out a low groan, almost a growl. “It wouldn’t matter half as much if she weren’t doing it with my mom.”

“And there it is. The real issue.”

“I love Cassie, but with this, she’s getting too entwined with my life. Too involv—“

“Nope. Uh uh. You are not doing this.” Lauren tossed her embroidery on the side table and turned to more fully face Rose.

“Doing what?”

“You have been in love with her for years. She is living with you, sleeping with you, and falling for you. You are not sabotaging it because of your mommy issues.”

“I don’t have mommy issues.”

Lauren tossed her head back and laughed. And kept laughing. Deep, long, belly laughs, laughter so contagious that Rose felt her own lips twitching.

“OK, fine. I have minor mommy issues.” She had huge mommy issues. But she had tried to put more space between her and Vera. She really had.

Hadn’t she?

Lauren’s laughter eventually subsided but humor still danced in her brown eyes. “You know that’s why she didn’t tell you,” she said, wiping at the corner of her eye.

Now that she’d stepped back for a bit, calmed down, even smiled, Rose could see that. The question now was, how did she fix everything?



Rose wasn't at practice Monday. At least not out on the field doing drills with the team. She was somewhere inside the facility, working with a trainer to rehab her leg. But Cassie didn't get to see her.

Cassie hadn't seen her in a full day, since she stormed out yesterday. The only thing she'd heard from Rose was a text that said *staying at L's*. All that alone time had given Cassie a lot of time to think.

Too much time to think.

Anne-Sophia had the team start off running laps around the field. Cassie deliberately set her pace so she didn't have to make conversation with any of her teammates. She wasn't in the mood. Running was one way she could get out of her head, focus purely on the physical, and not think. That sounded amazing at the moment.

Erika had other plans. She dropped into stride with Cassie almost immediately. "We need to talk."

Cassie didn't have to ask what she wanted to talk about.

"And know that I'm here on my own volition, not because Rose told me to talk to you. But I was over at Lauren's last night and she told me everything that happened. And as her best friend, I need to know a few things."

Cassie's stomach swooped, an especially unpleasant sensation when running. "OK."

"Are you in love with her? I know you two have been together, and I know she's been in love with you forever."

Cassie stumbled, feeling like she'd been punched in the chest. Rose was in love with her? That was impossible. Sure, Rose had admitted she'd been attracted to Cassie for a long time. But attraction wasn't love.

How could anyone be in love with Cassie?

Erika glanced over her shoulder at Cassie as Cassie regained her stride. "Shit, I'm sorry. She failed to mention that she never actually told you that."

"Um, yeah." It changed nothing that Rose was in love with her.

Except for everything. It changed everything.

"You two need to have a serious conversation."

"She's the one who walked out on me," Cassie snapped.

"I know. But do you get why?"

"She thinks I lied to her. I tried to explain but she doesn't want to hear it." Not that Cassie was bitter or anything.

"I will be the first to admit she's overreacting. And I told her that. But she's already feeling really raw and vulnerable about her hamstring, and being with you makes her feel really vulnerable too. Everything about you makes her vulnerable and she's been off-kilter for weeks. Mind you, this is what I've seen. It's not like she said all this. But I've known her for years."

"She's vulnerable?" Cassie scoffed. Yeah, because Rose had so much to lose. She had family that loved her, no matter how overbearing. A remarkable career. Best friends who would do just about anything for her. Plans for her future. Other than the career, what did Cassie have?

Oh yeah, she had the vulnerability too.



“Look, I told her she needs to get her head out of her ass and apologize. But she thinks there’s no point. So before I tell her the same thing again, I need to know. Is there a point?”

Tears clogged the back of Cassie’s throat. Yes, there was a point. She loved Rose, she really did. Probably had for a very long time. But how did she trust, after all this time, that Rose could truly love her? She’d thought Heather loved her. She’d thought Greg did. At one point, as a little girl, she’d thought her parents did.

“She’s not the only one with mom issues, you know,” Cassie said, deflecting the question. “My mom is a real piece of work.”

“OK. So?” Erika shrugged.

So? *So*? What the hell did Erika even mean. “So how am I supposed to have a relationship with Rose when I have so much baggage?”

“The same way everyone else does. We all have baggage. You don’t have to fix it all to be good enough for Rose. She already loves you. You just have to be honest with her, and let her in.”

“My mom shit is pretty big...” Was Cassie making excuses?

“So let her help you. I dealt with my issues for a long time by myself, and then I met Nate, and now I have someone to lean on, someone to support me, someone to comfort me when it gets bad. And I don’t ever want to face things alone again. Rose will be that person for you.”

Cassie’s heart squeezed in a way that couldn’t be healthy when running. They’d fallen behind the group and were the only ones not done with their warmup.

“Think about it.” Erika squeezed Cassie’s arm. “You have mom issues. So would you rather deal with them alone or with Rose’s unwavering support and love?”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *twenty-two*

Rose was exhausted. She'd started physical therapy for her leg today instead of practice and the therapist had worked her hard. Plus she did upper body strength conditioning. She'd pushed herself just past her limit. Because the more she exercised, the less she thought. And the less she thought, the less she hurt.

She'd thought it hurt to love Cassie from afar for so long. But nothing in her life had hurt more than having Cassie, having everything, and losing it.

She was fully aware she was the one who'd fucked it up. Yes, Cassie needed to apologize for hiding the mentorship from Rose, but Rose storming out was worse. She knew that.

She just didn't know how to fix it. "Sorry, my bad" didn't seem adequate.

Plus, now that she was gone, Rose wasn't sure she could go back to how things were. She was greedy. She wanted everything.

After practice today Erika had said she was pretty sure Cassie was in love with Rose too, but Rose didn't trust that. Yes, she'd been starting to suspect as much. But how could she be sure? And how could she open herself up to anything less than that?

But how could she not?

For the moment, however, Rose needed to put Cassie out of her mind. She had to ignore her desire to collapse on Lauren's couch and sleep for a week. Instead, she had to do something she should've done years ago.

She let herself into her parents' house and made her way to the living room—tomorrow she didn't have to use the crutches anymore!—where she found her mom reading.

“Rose.” Vera grinned. “What a nice surprise. Dad's at his Sherlock Holmes Society meeting. He'll be sorry he missed you.”

That actually made things easier. Dad wasn't the problem. “That's OK.” Rose sat on the loveseat perpendicular to the couch where her mom sat. “I came to talk to you.”

Vera put a bookmark in her paperback and set it on the coffee table. “Do you have an update about your leg?”

Rose shook her head. “I started PT today. We'll see.”

Vera frowned, the ever-present crease between her eyebrows deepening. “What can I do for you then, Rosie? I made beef stroganoff for dinner, do you want some? I can heat up a pl—“

“Mom.” Rose held up her hand to stop her mom as she started to rise.

Vera sank back onto the couch.

Rose's pulse accelerated, like she was picking up speed going down the field. Her stomach felt queasy and anxiety prickled at the base of her skull.

“We need to have a serious talk about setting some boundaries.”

Vera's frown deepened. "I don't know—"

"Mom!"

Vera's lips pursed but she remained quiet.

"I appreciate everything you do for me. Or at least I appreciate where it's coming from. I know you do it because you love me." Even if she only saw Rose as a soccer player and not a full person. But they didn't need to get into that too.

"But it's too much, Mom. I'm an adult. I need more space to live my own life and not have you there all the time, trying to take care of me like I'm still in high school."

Vera's face pinched even tighter, like she was literally biting her tongue to stay quiet.

"We need to set some ground rules. *I* need to set some ground rules." Rose's pulse slowed as the conversation went on. She could do this. And if her mom didn't listen, didn't respect her boundaries, she would set harsher ones. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that, but Rose was done letting her mom treat her like she was still a kid.

And she would never bring up Marie, but she knew some of it was Mom over-compensating for not having her other daughter to give attention to. Rose would hopefully never understand the pain of losing a child, but it didn't give Vera the right to overstep as much as she had been.

"What sort of ground rules?"

"I love when you guys come to my games, but I need you to stop dropping by practice with snacks."

"I just want you to stay properly fueled."

"I know, Mom. And I can. I do. I'm an adult and I have an entire staff dedicated to making sure I stay healthy. Please trust

them and me to take care of me.”

Vera huffed out a breath but nodded.

“And I need you to stop coming by the house without telling me. I can clean my own house, I can do my own laundry, I can make my own meals. You are welcome to come by to see me. But you have to text first and see if I’m home.”

Vera started to open her mouth to protest so Rose held up a hand. “I know you’re just trying to help. But do you get the overall theme of what I’m saying? I need to do these things on my own. I need you to stop helping so much.”

Vera nodded tightly. “Anything else? You want me to have Cassie stop mentoring?” There was a note of bitterness in her words, but Rose couldn’t let herself be weakened by that. Vera would get over it.

Besides, she had her own riot of emotions to deal with just hearing Cassie’s name. But she shoved those feelings down. She would deal with them later, when this conversation was done, the minefield navigated.

“Cassie is her own person and her mentoring is between the two of you. That doesn’t concern me and I don’t have a right to say what she does with her free time.” Rose’s throat closed a little with those words. Right now, nothing about Cassie concerned her and it sucked.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Mom,” Rose said. “But I’ve needed this for a long time, and the longer I’ve let it go on, the more you interfere... no, that’s not the right word. I don’t know what the right word is. The more you involve yourself in my life, I guess. So I need you to take a step back. Let yourself just be my mom like I’m an adult, not like I’m still ten years old.”

With those words, a lightbulb turned on in Rose's imagination, bright and glaring. How had she not seen it before? Vera treated her as if she were roughly the same age as she and Marie were when Marie died. Somewhere inside, Vera was trying to compensate for her daughter dying.

Rose's already fragile heart felt like it was cracking into pieces. She got up from the chair and went to sit next to her mom. Took her hand.

"I love you, Mom. I really do. And I can appreciate that you do these things because you love me. But I need you to let go a little." *Let go of Marie*. "I don't want to do something drastic like take away your key so you can never come over. But you have to stop using it so much."

Vera nodded tightly. "I just love you so much, Rosie girl."

"I know. I love you too. And Dad." As little as Dad was a factor.

"I'll try. It might take some time. I'll probably mess up, so please don't be too hard on me."

"I won't. But I also need you not to use that as an excuse to not do what I'm asking. You need to respect that I *am* an adult and not only can take care of myself. I need to."

Vera reached for Rose and Rose allowed herself to be tugged into a hug. She rested her chin on Vera's shoulder. "Someday you'll have kids of your own and you'll understand how hard it is to let go, even a little."

Rose held in a sigh. She wasn't sure if she wanted kids or not, but it also really felt like Vera was making excuses not to follow through. Hopefully it wouldn't happen, but Rose would handle it if she had to. The next step would be asking for her

key back. If nothing else, it would show her mom how serious she was.

After the hug got awkwardly long, Rose pulled back. “I should get going. I have some exercises to do tonight and I need dinner.”

“I can make you—“

Rose held up a hand. “You know I hate mushrooms.”

Vera nodded. She looked sad, her face drawn and eyes dull. And Rose felt bad about that, she really did. But she need to protect herself first.

As she settled her crutches under her arms and headed for the door, she felt just a little bit lighter. Now to figure out how to fix things with Cassie. And maybe, just maybe, have everything she’d ever wanted.



“Can you tell me a little bit about what brings you to therapy?”

Cassie chewed on her lower lip as she tried to puzzle out a way to explain to Evelyn Markham, LCSW, all her issues. Succinctly. Evelyn was a short white woman with a brunette ponytail and bright, multi-colored cardigan. Her office was painted a calming pale blue, with soothing nature scenes hanging on the wall. Cassie sat on a comfy tan couch facing Evelyn in her white leather chair. The room and the woman instantly put Cassie at ease.

“That could take a lot more than this session,” Cassie said dryly.



Evelyn smiled kindly. “Start with the most pressing thing and we’ll go from there.”

Cassie sighed. She hated talking about her family with anyone, let alone a stranger. But it was this stranger’s job to help her work through and hopefully past all her family issues. She knew this was the best thing for her if she wanted to live a full life. And she did.

More precisely, she wanted to live a full life with Rose.

She drew in a deep breath and said, “The two big things are kind of connected. One is that my parents don’t like me, probably don’t even love me, and that’s obviously done a number on my head.”

Evelyn nodded, expression sympathetic. “I’m sorry you went through that. It must have been very hard for you.”

Cassie closed her eyes. “Yeah, it was. It still is.”

“I can imagine. We can definitely work through all those feelings together and try to help you heal those wounds.”

Cassie rubbed her eyes, then opened them. “Thanks. That would be great.”

“Of course. That’s what I’m here for, to help you work through your difficulties.”

Cassie smiled and Evelyn smiled back. The therapist had a calm presence that instantly put Cassie at ease, made it just a little less terrifying to talk about the deepest scars she carried.

“You said there are two pressing things,” Evelyn prompted. “What’s the other one?”

Rose’s image filled Cassie’s head and she smiled, even as her chest squeezed in longing. “I’m in love with my roommate. My teammate. My best friend. We’ve, uh, we’ve

been hooking up for about a month, and it's amazing, and I want it to be more than a friends-with-benefits arrangement. I want her to be my girlfriend. But I've been divorced twice and I'm terrified to be in love again. I don't think I could survive losing Rose. Which is ridiculous because I don't even know if she loves me. Her friend says she does, but we had this stupid fight and she's stayed with another friend for a couple nights and I have no idea what's going on and I just... How can she love me when my own parents couldn't? When my ex couldn't? He said I don't let people love me and maybe that's true."

The words fell out of Cassie's mouth without her even thinking. She let the emotions control her words.

When she looked up to see Evelyn's reaction, she didn't find pity or disgust. She saw empathy. Her throat closed, like she might cry. The only other person she'd told about her mom was Rose, and she too had shown deep empathy.

Maybe Cassie wasn't a monster? Maybe she wasn't completely unloveable?

"That sounds like a lot," Evelyn said gently.

Cassie barked out a surprised laugh. "You could say that."

"Does Rose know how you feel about her?"

Cassie shook her head.

"And you have only heard from her friend that she loves you? Not from her?"

Cassie nodded.

"Do you think you could talk to Rose about it? Tell her how you feel?"

Cassie's throat tightened even more. That would be an utterly terrifying conversation. "I... don't know. Like I said, we had a dumb fight and she's not coming home. And at practice—we're professional soccer players for the Wolfpack—she's injured so she's with the trainers doing rehab. So I haven't seen her in a few days." And she hated it.

"What if you tell me a little more about your history with Rose, and we'll see if you and I can work out a game plan to talk to her. Does that sound good?" Evelyn's smile was encouraging.

Cassie nodded, taking a deep breath. "Sure."

She could do this. For Rose, she would do it.



“G  
et out.”

Rose looked up at her friend from her position laying on Lauren's living room floor next to the pen that housed Lauren's two pet guinea pigs. "Excuse me?"

Lauren flopped onto the couch with a can of sparkling water. "Get out. Go home. Fix your shit with Cassie."

Rose narrowed her eyes. "You're really kicking me out? Right now? When I just made you dinner?"

"And it was an amazing dinner. Now get out of my apartment and go back to your own perfectly good bed."

Rose sneered at her friend.

"Look, you need to stop hiding. I appreciate that you just had a big confrontation with your mom. That was long overdue. But it is for your own good, and the good of the

team, that I forbid you from spending another night on my couch.” Lauren didn’t flinch as Rose’s sneer deepened.

“How is it for the good of the team?”

“If you keep sleeping on a couch, your leg is never going to heal in time for the playoffs. I don’t care how many therapy exercises you do.

Rose pulled herself up to a sitting position and stretched her legs out in front of her. It was time for some bald honesty. “I’m scared, Lauren.”

Lauren shrugged. “I want you back for the playoffs, but we are capable of winning without you.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Not about my leg. It’ll be fine and yes, the team can win without me. My ego isn’t that huge. I’ll be fine for the next National Team camp and I’ll definitely be OK for the Olympics. That’s what matters to me with soccer.” And she’d gotten a better grade on her last astronomy quiz. Things were looking up there.

“I meant I’m scared about Cassie.” It was physically painful to admit it out loud; her throat ached. What if she lost Cassie forever?

“I know. I’m just shit at emotional conversations so I was trying to avoid it.” Lauren shrugged with her eyebrows.

“I really should’ve gone to stay with Erika. Then I’d have a bed and a more sympathetic friend.”

Lauren shrugged her eyebrows again. “Yet you chose me.”

“Lauren, what if I lose her?”

“What if you never tell her how you feel and never have her?” Lauren tilted her head and leveled a stare at Rose.

Rose looked down at her lap. “I can apologize for running out, and we can go back to friends-with-benefits. Nothing has to change.” Except something had changed. Rose wasn’t exactly sure what, but she knew it was more than their fight. Which she’d blown hugely out of proportion.

Cassie had hit on all her insecurities about their relationship at the same time she poked the exposed nerve that was Vera. And it had been too much for Rose on top of her hamstring injury. She understood all that.

“And that’s what you want?” Lauren asked.

Rose pushed herself to her feet and headed to the kitchenette, only slightly favoring her left leg. Lauren really needed a bigger apartment. The kitchenette was so tiny, it had been nearly impossible to cook something as simple as pasta with sauce from a jar and steamed veggies.

She turned on the water in the small sink and gathered their dishes. Lauren might be kicking her out, but she’d hardly complain if Rose did the dishes first.

Lauren followed her to the tiny space. She opened the refrigerator and got out a bottle of white wine. As she poured a glass, she said, “You’d really settle for being friends-with-benefits indefinitely? That wouldn’t kill you inside?”

Rose swallowed the snarky comment that popped into her head. What did Lauren know about love, anyway? She’d been hate-pining for Pete Kendrick for years. She wasn’t in love with their former coach, exactly. Not the way Rose had been with Cassie for so long. On some level, Lauren and Pete couldn’t stand each other. But that didn’t stop Lauren from wanting to fuck his brains out. At least that’s what Rose and Erika had pieced together after the World Cup. Lauren had

never actually told them why she hated Pete, leaving them to puzzle it out.

But that was Lauren's problem, and Pete was in Canada now, so not much she could do about it.

And really, Rose was only thinking about Lauren and Pete because she didn't want to think about Lauren's question. Could she handle it if Cassie didn't want more? The past few weeks had been amazing. Both the sex and the connection she felt growing between them. But was that enough to sustain Rose? Could she remain in a one-sided relationship?

She rinsed the plate in her hands and handed it to Lauren, who had gotten a towel. "I don't know."

"Points for honesty." Lauren put the plate in the cabinet.

Rose paused with plate in one hand, sponge in the other, and stared out the small window into the darkness outside. "I miss her so fucking much," she choked out around the tension clogging her throat.

"Then fucking go tell her. Apologize for freaking out on her, let her apologize for not telling you about the mentoring, and *fucking tell her you're wildly in love with her.*"

Tears swelled up in Rose's eyes. "What if she doesn't love me? What do I do?" She leaned her elbows on the edge of the sink and let her head sag forward.

Lauren's hand settled in the center of her back. "I don't know. But you've been in love with her for too long not to tell her."

Rose sighed. "You're right."

"I know I am."

Rose rolled her eyes, yet she smiled. "You're the worst."

“I know that too.”

After taking the towel from Lauren to dry her hands, Rose wrapped her friend in a hug. “Thank you.”

Awkwardly, Lauren patted Rose’s back. “You’re welcome.” Lauren was not a hugger.

Rose squeezed tighter. “I don’t know what I’d do without you and Erika. Seriously, you guys are my family, just as much as Vera and Hank.”

Lauren drew back. “Hey now, let’s not put me in a category with Vera.” She gave Rose a playful smile.

“By the way, my talk with her went pretty well, I think. Since you didn’t ask.” Rose returned the smile.

“I’m glad. It’s about time she let you be a grown up. But sports parents are weird. We know that.”

Yeah, Lauren wasn’t without her own family issues. Who was?

“Now will you please get out of my apartment and go back to your own damn house?”



Cassie was sitting in the living room watching Netflix when Rose got home. Just seeing her sitting there, orangeish-blond hair messy, big body swallowed up by sweats and a Canada National Team sweatshirt made Rose’s chest swell painfully. She loved this woman so much it hurt. Made her want to cry. Made her want to crawl into her lap and kiss her and beg forgiveness.

Speaking of forgiveness, it was a good place to start. “I’m sorry,” Rose said by way of greeting.

Cassie startled, disturbing Freddie Purrcury, who was curled up on her legs. She moved the cat to the couch next to her and sat forward, turning to face Rose. “I’m sorry too.”

Relief, cool and sharp, washed through Rose. She wasn’t even entirely sure what Cassie was apologizing for, but it was a good start.

She gestured to the open end of the couch. “Can I sit down?”

Cassie’s expression softened just a little. “It’s your couch.”

As she settled into the cushion, Rose said, “It’s our couch. This whole house is your house too, Cassie.” Please let there be an *our* when the conversation was done.

Cassie’s eyebrows formed a V on her forehead. “Is it? Because the past few days it’s felt like anything but my house, oddly enough.”

Rose bit her lower lip. “I know and I’m so sorry for that.” It was counterintuitive in a way, but Rose got it. Her actions had clearly made Cassie feel rejected, and like she didn’t belong where Rose was. “I overreacted. I let my frustration about my mom and my leg guide me. I wish you’d told me about mentoring, but I understand why you didn’t think you could. And I’m sorry I made you feel that way.”

Cassie curled her lips inward and nodded.

“I talked to her, you know.” Rose gave Cassie a brief summary of her visit with Vera. “She’s my mom and of course I love her. But I need more space.”

“I get it.”



Rose scooted just a little closer to Cassie. She needed to touch her but it didn't feel right yet. "For what it's worth, I think it's awesome that you're mentoring. I bet you're great at it. You have so much to offer a kid, and you're so smart and easy to talk to."

Cassie looked stunned. "I am?"

It broke Rose's heart a little that Cassie couldn't see herself through Rose's eyes. See all the amazing qualities Rose saw. "You're pretty fucking great, in case I haven't told you that."

Something sparked in Cassie's eyes. She scooted the rest of the way across the couch until they were sitting knee to knee. Cassie took Rose's hand, expression as serious as Rose had ever seen it. The contact felt so good, Rose almost wanted to cry. She'd hoped she and Cassie could smooth things over but she hadn't dreamed things would go this well. "I love you, Rose. I know that complicates our arrangement and being roommates and—"

Rose cut off her rambling with a gentle kiss. Eyes closed, she slowly drew back and rested her forehead against Cassie's. "Dammit, I wanted to say it first."

Squeezing Rose's hand, Cassie let out a harsh sound, like she was holding in a cry. She pulled back just enough to look into Rose's eyes. Cassie's beautiful blue eyes were swimming in tears. "You really love me?"

Rose cupped Cassie's cheek, then slid her hand behind her neck. "Since the day we met. I don't remember ever not loving you. When you moved in, I tried so hard to get over it but it only made me love you more."

Cassie laughed and cried at the same time, a tear spilling over to run down her freckled cheek.

Rose caught it with her tongue. The tear was salty, Cassie's skin soft and perfect. She pressed a kiss to the side of Cassie's perky little nose. "I love every single thing about you." She kissed Cassie's eyebrow. Her temple. The hinge of her jaw. The ticklish spot behind her ear.

Cassie sagged into Rose. "Yes," she breathed. She leaned back and Rose followed, covering Cassie's body with her own, still placing gentle kisses all over Cassie's face.

"I don't want this to stay secret anymore," Rose murmured, trailing her lips down Cassie's neck. "I want everyone to know you're my girlfriend."

Cassie tilted her head to the side, making room for Rose. "I'm your girlfriend?"

"Fuck yes, you're my girlfriend. And I'm yours."

Rose dragged her mouth back to Cassie's and kissed her, sealing the promise. Breathless, she again set out to kiss every inch of Cassie's skin.

"I went to therapy," Cassie managed to say as Rose nibbled at her earlobe.

That got Rose's attention. She pushed up on her elbow, balancing herself over Cassie. "Yeah?" This felt too important to keep making out. Besides, before they took things farther physically, Rose needed to know what it meant. Even if Cassie had said she loved Rose—*she loved Rose!*—they needed to agree on what they were. What their future might look like together.

But first, Cassie obviously had something important to say.

“I have no control over how my parents treated me. And I’ll probably always hurt from that. But I do have control over how I let it affect me now. And I’m not going to let her keep me from being with you.” She stroked her hand down Cassie’s cheek. “I want to be someone you can love.”

Rose’s heart melted into a big gooey puddle in her chest. “Cassie. You already are. Didn’t you hear me? I’ve been in love with you for years.”

Cassie’s eyes looked a little misty. “I know. But I want to believe deep in my heart that I deserve it. And that it’s not going to get too hard once you know me better.”

Rose pressed her lips to Cassie’s in a soft, slightly desperate kiss. “Babe, I promise, I’m not going anywhere. You’re it for me. I’m in this for the long haul. I’m going to be right there with you as your work through all this stuff. Whatever you need from me.”

Cassie’s eyes searched Rose’s. “Promise?” she barely whispered.

“Promise.”



**T**hank you for reading Rose and Cassie’s story. I hope you enjoyed it!

Stay tuned for a sneak peak of Lauren and Pete’s story, [\*Gold Medal Match\*](#), book 3 in the Milwaukee Wolfpack series coming May 16, 2023.

**She loathes him. She wants him. And dammit, she just might love him.**

Preorder *Gold Medal Match* now!

*OceanofPDF.com*

*thank you*

Want a sneak peak of what happens next for Rose and Cassie?  
Get that [here!](#)

To stay up to date on sales, new releases, and exclusive content, subscribe to my [newsletter](#). You'll get a free copy of my novella *Kiss Me*.

I would love to hear from you, or connect on social media. You can email [lizlincoln@gmail.com](mailto:lizlincoln@gmail.com), find me in my [Facebook Reader Group](#), or follow me on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) or [TikTok](#).

Honest reviews help authors and other readers. Obviously, I hope you loved the book, but tastes are subjective. I would greatly appreciate it if you left a review, love or hate, on Goodreads or a retail site.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *other titles by liz lincoln*

### *Milwaukee Wolfpack*

[Scoring a Spouse](#)—Erika & Nate’s story

[She’s a Keeper](#)—Rose & Cassie’s story

[Gold Medal Match](#)—Lauren & Pete’s story, coming May, 2023

### *Milwaukee Dragons*

Book 1 On the Line — Seth & Carrie’s story, rereleasing July, 2023

Book 2 Swagger — Marcus & Bree’s story, rereleasing September, 2023 as Delay of Game

Book 3 Home Field Advantage — Quinn & Natalie’s story, rereleasing November, 2023 as False Start

Book 4 Fourth and Long—Matt & Celia’s story, coming January, 2024

### *Rental Rendezvous*

[Friendsgiving Getaway](#)—Annie & Chris’s Thanksgiving story

### *Milwaukee Men at Work*

Prequel novella 0.5 [Kiss Me](#) — Becca and Tariq’s story

Book 1 [Watch Me](#) – Nina & Kam’s story

Book 2 [Make Me](#) – Grace & Josh’s Halloween story

Book 3 [Find Me](#) – Laura & Brady’s Christmas and Hanukkah story

Book 4 [Love Me](#) – Claudia & AJ’s story

[Box Set](#) — all 5 stories for 40% off

### *Audiobooks*

Milwaukee Men at Work: [Kiss Me](#)

Milwaukee Men at Work: [Watch Me](#)

Milwaukee Men at Work: [Make Me](#)

Milwaukee Men at Work: [Find Me](#)

Milwaukee Men at Work: [Love Me](#)

Milwaukee Dragons: On the Line

Milwaukee Dragons: Swagger

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *acknowledgments*

Thanks to all my readers, past, present, and future.

Thanks to brainstorming partners and beta readers Liz Czukas, Carla Cullen, Natalie Caña, Lorelie Brown, Carrie Lofty, and Brandy Shaw. Thanks to the Maywood Mavens, Keri Stevens, Mary Ann Marlowe, Katy Cooper, and Kait Nolan. I'm sure there are a thousand people I'm forgetting to thank, because my brain is a sieve sometimes. So please know I deeply appreciate all help you've given me.

Thank you to my therapist, psychiatrist, and various doctors for keeping me functional.

Most importantly, thanks to my family. To my kids for (usually) cooperating when I say "Mom can't, she has to finish her writing." And to Dan, for taking the kids to the zoo/museum/park/anywhere but the house so I can write, for making dinner or picking up Happy Meals, for accepting that writing will always come before vacuuming, and for just generally picking up all my slack. For always supporting me as a writer, since the day we met. And for giving me some credibility when I write about two people in love.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious way.

She's a Keeper

Copyright © 2023 by Liz Lincoln Steiner

All rights reserved. No part of this publication or portions thereof may be reproduced in any form or otherwise transmitted without written permission from the publisher. You may not circulate this book in any format.

✿ Created with Vellum

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## *gold medal match*

Lauren Vorski was doomed to perpetual second place. And she could never take second place without hearing her father's voice in her head. *Second place is just first loser.*

First loser, that was Lauren. In that precise moment, first loser meant she and her professional soccer team, the Milwaukee Wolfpack, had just lost the NWSL championship. She sat on the uncomfortable airport chair, elbows on knees, hands flopped between her legs, as Coach Anne-Sophia talked to the team about what a great season they'd had and how just making it to the championship game was an honor.

But Lauren wasn't listening. Her head was filled with Dad's voice. *First loser. Tk more disparaging things he's said.*

And once again, Lauren would weather this loss alone. To her right, her best friend, defender Rose Olivieri, leaned against her new girlfriend, goalkeeper Cassie Dickinson. They had each other.

On her left sat Lauren's other best friend, striker Erika Parker-Ward. At least she'd get Erika for the flight home. But then Erika would go home to the comfort of her husband. And Lauren would go home alone.

At least she had Puffball and Patches. The guinea pigs were better than nothing. A little.

Erika's hand on her arm pulled Lauren out of her thoughts.  
"You OK?"

Lauren drew in a deep breath. "I will be." She appreciated her friend's concern. They'd known each other half their lives, tk meeting at a US Soccer youth camp when they were fifteen. So Erika knew Lauren didn't just deal with the usual down of losses like they all did. Lauren had clinical depression and tended to take things harder. Tended to slip into dark places when things happened like losing the championship.

Or getting cut from the World Cup team when she'd thought she was a sure thing.

Not that she was still angry about that several months later.

Anne-Sophia talked a little more while Lauren stewed in her feelings, then it was time to board the plane. She stood in line with her team and did her best to use techniques her therapist had taught her so she could stop stewing in those feelings. Slowly, they inched down the gangway and onto the plane.

Lauren half listened to something Erika was saying about the delayed honeymoon she and her husband were going on as they inched through First Class. Her gaze wandered aimlessly across the faces in the seats. It snagged on a dark-haired white man in the third row. Her heart nearly stopped.

No. It couldn't be him.

"Coach Pete!" Rose exclaimed from behind her.

A chill rode through Lauren, followed by heat. So much heat. And memories. Of his mouth on hers. Of the taste of his skin. Of the sound he made when he came.

She blinked hard and shoved the scorching images away, trying to ignore the sudden pounding of her heart and the pulse

between her legs.

Erika leaned over the seat to give their former coach on the US National Team a high five. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve got three of my favorite players in the NWSL finals. You think I’m not going to come for the match?” He winked at Cassie, who played in goal for both the Wolfpack and the Canadian National Team. Pete was now her coach at the national level; he’d been asked to leave the US team after the Women’s World Cup a few months ago.

“Thanks for coming, Coach,” Cassie said, a quiet smile on her face.

The line started moving again, thank all the goddesses. Still, Lauren couldn’t stop herself from taking one last look at Pete. Why did he have to be so fucking sexy, with his deep brown eyes and dark beard and husky voice and...

He caught her staring, and when their eyes met, his gaze intensified and one corner of his perfect mouth curled up. She felt that smile everywhere, her skin tight and itchy.

“Nice game, Lauren.”

The way he said her name, like it was precious, made her stomach squishy. Made her think of how he moaned it when he was deep inside her, like it was a liturgy.

He made her want. Want things she could never have.

So she simply nodded and forced herself to look away. She followed Erika down the narrow row until they reached their seats. Her friend always wanted the aisle seat, so Lauren scrunched her five-foot-eleven frame into the widow seat.

Soon enough, they were airborne. Erika put in her earbuds to listen to whatever podcast she was hooked on. Across the

aisle, Rose and Cassie leaned against each other, napping.

Leaving Lauren with nothing but her thoughts. Thoughts she refused to let be about Pete Kendrick. Her body may not get the memo that there could never be anything between them, but her brain got it loud and clear.

Time to clear her head. She pulled out her ebook reader and scrolled and tapped through screens until she came to the latest romance novel she was reading, *A Proposal They Can't Refuse* by Natalie Caña. Who happened to be a local Milwaukee author.

For a while, Lauren was able to get lost in the story of meddling grandfathers and a fake engagement. She even laughed a few times. But inevitably, her mind wandered back to Pete. Again and again. She had to force herself to focus on the book.

Eventually the plane landed in Milwaukee and they inched their way back off. When they walked through First Class, Erika's traitorous brain looked for Pete, but of course he was already off the plane.

Lauren and Erika said good-bye to Rose and Cassie, then bypassed baggage claim and went straight outside to where Erika's husband, Nate, was waiting outside in his car. Lauren stood awkwardly as he hugged and kissed his wife like she'd been away for months, not just two days. She truly was happy for her best friends, finding true love.

Part of her didn't even want that for herself. She was too screwy a person to make someone else happy. She'd been treated for clinical depression since she was twelve years old, with medication and therapy. And she didn't see herself as unlovable or anything. Her friends loved her. But she was a lot. She was grumpy as fuck. Her parents certainly made it

clear she was difficult to love. So why would someone else want to take her on?

She sat in the back seat of Nate's SUV, half listening as he and Erika chatted about their dog and her upcoming vet visit. As usual, Lauren was the third wheel. She played with a strand of her brown-dyed-blue hair and stared out the window, watching the city go by.

She couldn't help noticing when Nate reached over to take Erika's hand. He stroked her hand with his thumb. Erika glanced over with a smile so full of love, it bypassed the cynical part of Lauren's nature and went right for the deeply buried sappy part. Just because she didn't think she would make a great romantic partner didn't mean she didn't sometimes want it. Part of her, anyway. She just doubted she'd find someone who tolerated her and intrigued her. Only one person had come close.

Pete had turned her on, turned her inside out in the best way, like no one else had. For the very brief, intense time they'd been together, she'd felt alive in ways she never had before or since. In another lifetime, he could be everything she'd ever wanted in a partner.

It was a damn shame she hated him.

#

Pete Kendrick shifted in his seat, trying to get comfortable. But the truth was, it wasn't the airplane making him uncomfortable, it was Lauren. He had that same itchy, antsy feeling he got every time he was around her. The one that could only be soothed by touching her. That only disappeared when he kissed her.

Too bad she hated him.

But he had no one to blame but himself for that. After the first time they were together—well, the first several times, over the course of the two weeks of the last Olympics—he'd been an ass to her. Had effectively ghosted her. She deserved so much better than that.

He was so ashamed of his behavior, he'd actually considered not taking the job as head coach of the US Women's National Team when it was offered to him a few months later. But apparently he wasn't quite that ashamed, since he'd taken the position. And loved it. Even if he'd had to deal with Lauren's open hostility at every practice.

Even if his attraction to her had only grown, not dissipated as he'd hoped.

But he'd sealed his fate as her lifelong enemy when he didn't put her on the 23-woman roster for the World Cup last summer. He'd had his reasons, even if she was an incredible player. But she would never forgive him that one, even if she knew his justification.

“Something to drink, sir?”

The flight attendant's voice cut through his thoughts. He looked up to find a tall Black woman smiling down at him.

“Just a ginger ale, please.” Flying unsettled his stomach. You'd think after years of a career that flew him all over the world, he'd have gotten used to it. But he hadn't.

He'd started his career at 17, playing in his home country of England, both for their National Team and for Manchester United. After an ankle injury ended his playing years, he'd moved into coaching, quickly moving up the ranks. A series of events at the Women's World Cup had ended in US Soccer asking him to resign, but he'd landed his current position, as

head coach of the Canadian Women's National Team. Which he also loved. They were the reigning gold medalists and he enjoyed the upcoming challenge of defending that position at next summer's Olympics.

The flight attendant set his drink on his tray table. "Let me know if I can get you anything else, sir."

"Thank you."

He sipped his drink and did his best not to think about the woman several rows back, the woman who turned him inside out whether he liked it or not. It would be so much easier if he could simply hate her in return. Or better, feel indifferently toward her. But he had no reason to.

So he yearned. He fucking yearned for her in ways he hadn't yearned for a woman since he was an adolescent. And knowing he'd be spending the next week in the same city as her just made it worse.

It wasn't like he could hang out with her. He'd be with his nine-year-old daughter while his ex-wife was out of town. But he'd be lying if he tried to pretend he hadn't fantasized about having Lauren over after Sonya was in bed, seducing the woman who was the blue-haired object of his fantasies. He fucking loved her wild blue curls. Loved the way they—

Nope, he was not going there.

He finished his drink and pulled out his phone, needing a distraction. He had approximately eleventy-seven-million emails to return. His team had a camp in three weeks, leading up to a two-game series against Colombia. He should be making plans for practices, drawing up game strategies. Watching film of Colombia's team to create those game strategies.



In short, doing his damn job.

Instead, he foolishly let his brain wander back to the last time he'd been with Lauren. She'd shown up in Australia to support her friends and teammates for the Women's World Cup final game. Her friend Erika had been dealing with a media shitstorm and she'd come for moral support, along with Erika's husband.

Pete hadn't known she was in the country until she showed up at his hotel room door, pounding like she inevitably wanted to pound his head. He knew she was furious with him for not putting her on the roster. So when he'd opened it to find her standing there, he'd expected her to punch him or kick him or something of that variety.

He absolutely had not expected her to shove him into the room, down on the bed, and climb on top of him. He'd had angry sex before, but holy shit, hate fucking had blown his mind. Four months later and he still hadn't recovered.

Sensation and heat stirred in his groin. Shit. He needed to stay out of his memories. At 45, he was far too old to randomly get a hard on.

He forced himself to dive into his email, answering several, deleting a few more, marking still more to be dealt with later when he could look up the information he needed to respond. He popped in his AirPods and watched film from Colombia's most recent game against Ecuador.

By the time that was over, the pilot was announcing their final descent into Milwaukee.

Because of all the places for his ex-wife to get a job, it just had to be Milwaukee. Where Lauren lived and played for her club team. The kicker was, Angela, his ex, had been deciding

between jobs in Toronto, where he lived, and Milwaukee. Of course she picked Milwaukee.

The plane landed and he moved on autopilot to baggage claim, got his suitcase, and picked up his rental car. He plugged in Angela's new address in the suburbs and twenty minutes later, he was in her kitchen, hugging his daughter.

"I missed you, Dad." Sonya wrapped her arms around his waist.

This moment, this perfect moment, he let himself feel. Life had enough downs, he made sure to fully embrace the ups, no matter how small. And wrapping his little girl in his arms was as close to perfect as life got.

"Missed you too, love," he said, kissing the top of her dark brown hair. She had Angela's tall, lanky build, but she looked like him. Minus the beard. And while her hair fell nearly to her waist, Pete kept his short. He was not a long-hair guy.

Sonya gave him a kiss on the cheek and pulled away. "I have stupid homework." She made a face as she headed for the stairs.

"Homework makes you smart," he replied with a smile. He was pretty sure that wasn't actually true, but hopefully it would make his girl feel better about having to do it.

Sonya gone, Pete turned to face his ex-wife in the kitchen. Angela gave him a weary-mom smile and shrugged.

"Thanks for coming to stay. We both appreciate it," she said in her crisp Scottish accent. They'd met at university in Leeds and fallen in love almost instantly. But somewhere over the years, the weeks apart when both travelled for their jobs, that love had fizzled out. Fortunately, it had fizzled into a wary

sort of friendship and not the animosity he saw between so many divorced couples.

“Not exactly a hardship to spend time with my own daughter,” Pete said.

“And it saves me money on a sitter.”

“Win win.”

“She’s got a sleepover tomorrow night, so you won’t have to be ‘on duty.’” She made air quotes with her hands. “Feel free to do as you please, just don’t have a kegger in my house.”

Pete rolled his eyes. “OK, Mom.”

Angela rolled her eyes right back. “I really appreciate this.” She patted his hand where it rested on the kitchen counter.

“Like I said, I’m thrilled to spend a few days with my daughter.” He hated living so far away from Sonya. It felt like she was growing up without him. But for her entire life, his job as a soccer coach had taken him to cities where she didn’t live. Even before the divorce.

Hell, the toll all the travel took on their marriage had been its major downfall. He still liked Angela. Part of him maybe even still loved her, as the mother of his favorite person on earth.

“I’m catching a redeye so I need to get going. The timing works out perfectly.” She came around the counter, pulling her rolling suitcase.

She was opening the door to the garage when something occurred to him. “How does she have a sleepover on a Sunday night?”

Angela glanced over her shoulder. “Teacher work day on Monday. No school.” She blew him a kiss and was out the door.

Leaving Pete all alone in his ex-wife’s kitchen.

Preorder [\*Gold Medal Match\*](#) now!

[\*OceanofPDF.com\*](#)