

SINCE *Forever*



LM Maretti



A BOOK ABOUT SECOND CHANCES

Since Forever

An Anders brother's novel

By

L.M. Maretti

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Dedication

This book deals with the sensitive issue of domestic violence.

I dedicate this book to all the people trying to make a change in their life, be it big or small.

It takes courage to not stay comfortable in our misery. To look sadness and pain in the eye and say, "I deserve more than this
"You do deserve more.

May you find what you're searching for.

If you or someone you know is a victim of domestic abuse, please seek help.

Domestic violence support hotline

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

Do you like to listen to tunes while you read? Check out the Since Forever playlist on Spotify!

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3P19GpNIVs9ngGGEFe6EvK?si=982d8a19a07443b0>

Table of Contents

[Chapter One: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Two: Noah](#)

[Chapter Three: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Four: Noah](#)

[Chapter Five: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Six: Noah](#)

[Chapter Seven: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Eight: Noah](#)

[Chapter Nine: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Ten: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Eleven: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Twelve: Noah](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: Noah](#)

[Chapter Fifteen: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Sixteen: Noah](#)

[Chapter Seventeen: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Eighteen: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Nineteen: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Twenty: Noah](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One: Gertie](#)

[Twenty-Two: Noah](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four: Noah](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight: Noah](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Thirty: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One: Noah](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four: Noah](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six: Noah](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven: Noah](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight: Noah](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine: Noah](#)

[Chapter Forty: Noah](#)

[Chapter Forty-One: Noah](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four: Noah](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Forty-Six: Noah](#)

[Chapter Forty-Seven: Gertie](#)

[Chapter Forty-Eight: Noah](#)

[Chapter Forty-Nine: Noah](#)

CHAPTER ONE

GERTIE



“Mamma! Where’s my other rain boot?”

“Cooper, it’s not raining. You need your sneakers, buddy. There will be a lot of walking on this field trip.”

“But my sneakers aren’t cool, Mom!”

I walk out of the bathroom to see my stubborn five-year-old son is wearing shorts, a long sleeve shirt, and only one rainboot on his little foot.

“Coop,” I sigh. “We talked about this last night, remember? Mrs. Applegate said to wear sneakers and clothes you won’t get too hot in. You can’t wear that shirt today; it has long sleeves”

“Moooooooooom!” He whines, “It’s my favorite.”

I look down at his scowl, and big brown eyes filled with frustration. I think back to what I read in my parenting books. *Letting children pick out their clothes builds self-esteem.*

“You can wear the shirt. If you get hot, push up the sleeves. I’m not budging on the boots though, Coop. You’ll get blisters.”

“Fine!” he huffs, stomping back to his room. I watch him retreat with half frustration, half amusement.

I'm afraid I'm going to have an entire bookshelf of self-help books dedicated to the teen years.

Books and the internet are your only option when you don't have parents yourself to dole out parenting advice.

At least if I read up on this stuff, I can pretend to look like I know what I'm doing out in public when he throws a tantrum about a chocolate bar at the grocery store.

I show up four minutes late to work because of a last-minute discussion about the importance of eating breakfast before school. By the time I actually get to work, I feel like I've already worked an entire 8-hour shift.

"Hey, Gertie. Rough morning?" My friend Jules asks as I walk into the hospital, her soft blue-grey eyes full of concern.

Jules and I met while taking nursing classes together and are lucky enough to get scheduled a lot of the same shifts at the hospital. She's a natural redhead with a spitfire attitude to match. Some people find her intimidating. I agree, she can be blunt, but I never have to wonder what she's thinking or pretend to agree with her because she has always appreciated my honesty just as much. I admire her strength. I suppose that also comes with the added years she has on me. You'd never know she's pushing her late forties. She takes care of herself and has killer curves. She's also great with Cooper and one of the few people I trust alone with him.

"On a scale of one to ten, I'd say it was a seven," I reply, sighing.

"Well, that's an improvement from last week, right?" she looks at me hopefully.

Her question makes me chuckle. "Yes, I suppose it is."

"Hey, you want to grab lunch together later?" She asks, as we look over our schedules for the day. "Some place other than the nasty cafeteria. Maybe the deli down the street?"

The thought of eating PB and J for the fifth day in a row causes me to blurt out with, “Yes” before I take into consideration my dwindling pocketbook.

My day flies by, with only one major vomit explosion from a lady in room 203. You’d think after years in nursing and a child who’s had more than one bout with the stomach flu, I’d be immune to the smell, but I’m not that lucky. After a quick scrub change, I hurry out of the hospital and drive to the elementary school to pick Cooper up. I wait in the long line of cars, praying my car doesn’t over-heat.

I watch other moms buzz by me, sipping on tall cups of iced coffee, high on their daily caffeine. I can only imagine the obscene amounts of money they spend on those things every day.

I’ve been cutting my own hair since the divorce. Thank God for YouTube.

“Don’t say it, Mom!” Cooper says, interrupting my thoughts, as he jumps into the car, slamming the door hard behind him. His face is red and sweaty.

“Okay, I won’t say I was right or that you should’ve worn short sleeves.” I tease.

“Mommm!”

I chuckle to myself while looking back at him in the rearview mirror.

“You’re looking at me like that again, Mommy. Are you thinking about Uncle Mike?” he asks, his little face showing concern.

“Sorry buddy, you just look so much like him the older you get.”

“Maybe he can visit us, and I can show him my new airplane book,” he soothes me in the only way he knows how.

“I don’t think he’s going to visit soon, buddy. We can try calling him tonight, though.” I tell him as I pull out of the parking lot.

I miss my brother, my only sibling. I miss when my life was simpler, although I can’t put my finger on when that was.

“Mom?” Cooper says quietly from the back seat. “Do I have to go to Daddy’s house this weekend? We could tell him my tummy hurts like last time.” he asks, changing my wandering thoughts.

“Let’s talk about it at dinner, okay, buddy?.”

“I don’t like to go with Daddy. He’s boring, and he doesn’t like me to bring my toys anywhere,” he pouts.

“I hear you, bud,” I sigh.

The parenting books don’t have a lot of great advice on what to do when your five-year-old doesn’t want to go on his court-appointed visit with his father.

“I’m not going, Mom,” he stomps his foot, defiance ringing in his tone. I like to think he got his strong will from me, and that it would help him get farther in life. I just forgot that it could also be used against me.

“Honey, you have to go. Remember what we talked about? Daddy has his time with you and Mommy has her time with you, so it’s fair.”

“It’s not fair to me,” he tears up. “I want to always stay home with you. Divorce sucks!” he yells, stomping his feet on the way to his bedroom to grab his overnight bag.

I can’t argue with him. It does suck. It sucks even more that I asked for the divorce. Now, I feel responsible for making my child unhappy.

“Coop, Daddy is going to be here in a few minutes. Are you almost ready?”

He comes out of his bedroom dragging his bag along the worn rust colored shag carpet. I stifle a laugh when I see the outfit he’s picked out; blue polka dot shorts, a purple striped shirt, and his red oversized clown shoes from Halloween last year. I hear a knock at the door signaling Elliott’s arrival and turn to let him in.

My ex-husband has a commanding presence, the result of a childhood spent being taught how to act proper and a look of “old money” about him with a sharp jaw, perfectly straight white teeth, and hair that he keeps freshly trimmed every two weeks whether it’s needed.

I open the door and stand back to let him in, smelling his familiar pricy Cartier cologne.

He gives me a sharp nod as a greeting as Cooper comes into the living room, interrupting any chance of small talk we would feel forced to awkwardly share.

“Oh...Wow.” Elliott says, taking in Cooper’s creative outfit. “Is that what you’re wearing today, big guy?”

“I thought the animals at the zoo would like my outfit and laugh,” he innocently says.

Elliott turns to me and we share a knowing look. I have to give him credit. He *is* trying to be more flexible and not so uptight since the divorce. It surprised me when Elliott said he’d thought of taking Cooper to the zoo instead of out to lunch with his mother like they usually do every other Saturday.

“Coop, I think the animals will love your outfit but might get scared if you trip and fall with your clown shoes on,” I say

gently.

“Okay, I’ll wear my boots instead!” he yells, running off to the closet.

“Coop, I’m not sure...” I begin.

“No, Gertie.” Elliott stops me. “It’s okay.” He says, giving me an unconvincing smile.

CHAPTER TWO

NOAH



“Hello?” I grumble into the phone after seeing my younger brother Aiden’s number flash across the screen.

“Dude, it’s almost noon. Are you sleeping?!”

“Dude,” I mock, clearing the sleep from my throat. “It’s my fuckin’ day off. What’s it to you? Shouldn’t you be in bed recovering from your night with the flavor of the month?”

He chuckles, knowing I have a point. My brother gets more ass than I’ve ever thought of.

“Get your lazy butt out of bed. I want to go play some ball and you’re coming with.”

“Aiden, I’m exhausted.”

“From what?” He snickers, “All you do is play with your wood and walk your cat.”

“Don’t fuck with the cat, man.”

“Get ready. I’ll be at your house in fifteen.”

Climbing out of bed, I throw on some red basketball shorts and a white tee before taking Mr. Sprinkles out for a walk in the yard.

My ex, Shaina, and I rescued him from a shelter when we lived in California. I don’t know why she agreed because

shortly after we brought him home; she admitted she wasn't an animal person. So when we split, naturally, I took him with me. I wasn't about to send him back to the shelter.

I'm sure it does look funny seeing a six-foot-two, lumberjack-looking fellow walking a cat on a leash, but it's better than letting him run loose and risk scraping Mr. Sprinkles off the side of the road.

"Moms worried. You know how she is. You've been back a couple months now, not going on any dates and sticking to yourself a lot." Aiden says while dribbling the ball around me in circles. A few inches shorter than me and clearly in better shape, my brother was running circles around me this morning.

"Mom's been worried since we were in the womb." I tell him, wiping the sweat from my forehead. The poor woman had every right to. Between the two of us, we gave her and dad a run for their money. Me more than Aidan, I suppose.

"It's different now, though, since Dad's gone, and she had a rough go with chemo," he tells me, worry lines forming on his forehead, his eyes troubled.

"I know you gave up a lot moving back home, and it's kind of a drag living up above her garage for now but, you could still get a date or two once in a while."

I snatch the ball from him, knocking into him hard as I pass, reminding him who the older brother is. I don't know if I'm ready to get back into the dating game. Granted, I am fighting a close to twelve-month dry spell, but I've never been the type to sleep around, despite my reputation in high school. What a joke it is trying to find someone you have a connection with at a bar or a club.

Aiden stops in front of me with a shit eaten grin on his irritating face, "You know what I think?" He asks.

"Nope, I don't. But I'm sure you're going to tell me." I retort, tucking the ball under my arm. We both stare at each

other, and sweat drips down my face as I catch my breath, waiting to hear his latest plan. I really need to hit the gym again.

“You need to get laid,” he smirks, his brown eyes dancing with laughter.

“Fuck off,” I chuckle.

“Come out with me and the guys tonight. We’re going to McGillicuddy’s. Come with, man. It’ll be a good time.”

“Fine, I’ll go. But you’re buying.” I give in, throwing the ball his way.

CHAPTER THREE

GERTIE



I'm three shots in and feeling it. I haven't been out dancing in forever. When Jules called, I was already in my pajamas and cozy socks for the night. As I snuggled deeper into the blankets, I didn't want to put club wear back on, especially my bra, but Jules sounded so damn excited. With a sigh, I knew I needed to let off some steam... so I couldn't say no.

It had been so long since I'd worn anything even slightly revealing. I probably put on at least fifteen pounds since then, but I sucked my stomach in, slid my ass into my skinny jeans, managed to buckle my black corset top, put my heels on, and out we went to one of the local bars in town.

I let my worries slip away and feel the music pulsating through my limbs as the alcohol runs through my veins. It's sticky in this old bar, full of bodies trying to escape from reality, to chase away their problems with alcohol and music.

Lifting my sweaty hair off my neck, I relish in the freedom of the moment.

"I'm going to grab another drink. You want one?" Jules yells to me over the music. I nod my head yes, looping my arm through hers as we head to the bar.

"I don't know how you're still single," I tell her as I climb up on the stool. *They really should make these things for short people.*

“Half the men in this place are checking you out,” I add. “Why aren’t you taking advantage of that?”

“Because I don’t want any of them!” She laughs. “Men don’t have the same excitement they did when I was younger.” She shrugs her shoulders and pulls her long red hair into a bun on the top of her head. “I don’t know, I haven’t found anyone in quite a while that actually holds my attention for long,” she tells me, looking out onto the dance floor.

“Do you think you’ll ever get married again?” Ever the romantic, I can’t help but ask.

“Not a fucking chance. I mean no offense to anyone who believes in it. I just don’t buy into the whole marriage thing. Maybe we just aren’t built to be monogamous, you know?”

“Maybe. Still, I hope someday I’ll find someone that keeps me interested without controlling my every move.”

“If that’s what you want, Gertie, then you should start looking. Don’t let life pass you by, girlfriend! I’ve seen at least five different heads turn as you walked by. Go introduce yourself to a few!”

“Cooper keeps me busy enough for now. I don’t need another male in my life complicating things and driving me crazy.”

“I get that,” she waves her hand to grab the bartender’s attention. “But you realize women need Vitamin O, right?”

“Vitamin, what?” I ask, as she turns back to me with a grin.

“Oxytocin, nature’s Ecstasy. That’s why orgasms are so important!” She yells over the music as I look around me, cheeks heating. “I’m serious!” She hollers. “And if you’re not going to get a man, I’ve got some amazing toys to tell you about.”

“Jules! Shhh,” I stammer, shaking my head.

“Oh please, these men should take notes. I’ve lost count of the times a guy hasn’t been able to hit the spot. I need at least one big O a day. It relaxes me, I fall asleep easier, I even think my skin looks clearer, don’t you?” She asks, moving closer for an inspection.

“You have nice skin,” I laugh, agreeing.

“Isn’t this fun, Gert? We haven’t been out in forever!” She smiles, pulling me close for a hug.

“I’m having a great time! I’m so glad I let you convince me!” I say squeezing her arm, “Hey, I need to pee. I’ll be back in a minute!”

I make my way to the ladies’ room, moving between the sweaty bodies.

I’d forgotten how walking in heels gets way more difficult after a couple of shots. I’m quickly reminded as I stumble my way to the bathroom, enter the stall and sit down, all while trying not to fall face first. I giggle to myself, remembering the time I used the bathroom at the roller-skating rink as a kid and fell into the door, causing it to fly open with my pants around my ankles and roller-skates on. It had been almost impossible to right myself. I wipe the tears from my eyes. I’m laughing so hard at the memory. Good times.

Oh man, I’m still sober enough to realize I’m a bit over my limit. I’m going to regret this in the morning.

I head over to the sink and wash my hands before taking my phone out of my back pocket. I make sure there are no messages from Elliott about Coop before opening the door and walking into the hallway, heading back to the bar. I’m trying to not twist an ankle between the heels, alcohol and dark hallway. Just as I reach the end, I slam into something warm and solid.

“Whoa there,” a deep voice says, steadying me with a heavy hand. I’m squinting as my eyes slowly try to focus.

Big hands, flannel pulled snug across his large broad chest, knit cap on his head pulled down low with soft brown eyes smiling back at me. The years have been good to him. Sexy as all hell, until he opens his mouth.

Fucking Noah Anders

“Noah,” I say, annoyed.

“Shortstack, how’s it going?”

“No one has called me that annoying nickname since high school, Noah. I’m fine, t... thank you,” my words slur while sticking my chest out. I try not to notice how good he smells. What is that? Lemon and sandalwood? Of course, the jackass would smell amazing.

“You sure about that Shortstack? You look like you may have had more than your share tonight.” He grins down at me, a glint in his eyes.

“I’m a grown woman, Noah. I said, I’m fine.” I shoot back defensively. “Now, if you’ll excuse me. I have someone to get back to.”

“Oh, by all means then.” He chuckles while moving out of the way.

I hold my head high, sauntering away. Glancing back, I see him checking out my ass and raise my eyebrow at him when his eyes make it back up to my face. He chuckles behind his hand and walks away.

“Whoa, who ticked you off?” Jules asks me when I get back to the bar. “You look like you’re ready to kill.”

“Nothing. I just ran into someone,” I say, trying to shake off the annoyance.

“Is that someone, the bearded hottie that followed you out of the hallway?” she laughs.

“How’d you know?”

“He hasn’t stopped looking your way,” she winks at me.

“Jesus, he’s maddening! Is he still looking?” I ask, not turning around.

“Mmm, let me check” She grins, as she glances behind me. “Yep, still looking.”

“Do you know the guy or just meet him?” She asks, eyeing him up and down. “He’s fuckin’ hot as hell,” she licks her lips. I can’t disagree with her. He is hot as hell. I wish I hadn’t noticed the way his plaid flannel fit snug across his chest with the sleeves pushed up, revealing his strong arms covered in ink. Focus Gertie... Good looks don’t change the fact that he’s an asshole.

“He’s a jerk, Jules. I grew up with him. I’ve told you about him before. Remember the kid that tortured me relentlessly?”

Noah Anders was three years older than me, the same age as my brother and one of his best friends. He also lived right next door to us growing up and found a way to irritate me constantly. Whether it was putting gum in my hair in elementary school or tossing me in the pool fully dressed at a high school party.

If I’m being honest, I was jealous. My brother was one of my only friends growing up. Making friends was tough for me.

My name certainly didn’t win me any points on the cool meter. I was named after my grandmother, my father’s mother, Gertrude Bernice Williams. As a child, I wished I had a more modern name, like Krista or Courtney. Besides my name, I was a chubby kid with a flat chest, and painfully shy. I would

rather have my head in a book than play any sports or go to the mall like the other girls.

“I wonder what he’s doing back here, anyway?” I say, while fighting the urge to look in his direction. “He moved away after college.” *Good looking, amazing smelling, bastard.*

“He must have family in the area still.” She looks at him again.

“Yeah, his mom and brother live here, his dad passed away years ago. I heard some ladies at the grocery store talking about his mom being sick. Maybe he’s here to watch over her. Really sweet lady, I have no idea how she gave birth to the spawn of Satan, Noah Anders.” I sneer.

“Okay, well, one more drink, a little more dancing, and we’ll head home, okay?” She asks, downing the drink in her hand. “Don’t want you turning into a pumpkin,” she winks.

“One more, but if I puke in the Uber, I’m blaming it on you,” I tell her, holding up my finger to flag down the bartender. This place is packed. It’s only one of the few decent bars in town and he’s struggling to keep up. I recognize him from high school. Tommy something or other.

“Hey, Tommy. How have you been?” I ask when he finally makes his way over. “Can I get a whiskey sour?”

“Sure Gertie, I’m good. Just crazy busy. I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“I don’t get out much. Work, a kid, you know how it is.”

“Kids, huh?” He wrinkles his nose. “Yeah, I’m not a kid guy. But good for you, you look great.” He looks me up and down.

“Thanks” I nod. “How much do I owe you?”

“It’s already been paid for. Remember Noah Anders from school? He asks, motioning down at the end of the bar. He said

he was picking up the tab for you and your friend tonight.”

I look down the bar to see Noah hold up his drink, while giving me a wink.

“No, nope, that’s okay Tommy, we’ll pay our own tab.” I huff. I’m not owing Noah Anders a thing. No freakin’ way.

CHAPTER FOUR

NOAH



Gertie Williams. Wow, did she grow up.

Back when we were young, she'd try to tag along with us older kids. For years, I thought she was annoying as hell. Then puberty hit and, well, I saw her a little differently. She always was a hot-tempered little thing too. Quiet, until you pissed her off. I'd sometimes I'd see how far I could push her just to see her fire. I think, smiling to myself.

One time I'd caught the quarterback making moves on her at a party after I'd heard him talking about her ass in the locker room. Sure, she was annoying, but I wasn't going to have her hanging around with asshole jocks at school that just wanted to get in her pants.

So, when I saw the two of them talking at a party later that night, I picked her up and tossed her in the pool to cool her off. Man, was she mad!

Tonight, I watched her dancing out on the floor, moving her full curvy hips back and forth. She didn't even notice me until I made sure we collided in the hallway outside the bathrooms.

I'm not a small man by any means and had walked by her more than once at the bar. Even clearing my throat loudly once, I thought she would have noticed me. She was so focused on her conversation with her friend that she didn't

even glance my way. She also didn't notice how she attracted all the men's attention out on the floor, or maybe she didn't give a shit. Either way, I didn't see a ring on her finger or any man with her.

If she was mine, I'd have a hell of a time letting her out of my sight. Hell, she wasn't even mine and I couldn't keep my eyes off her.

She looked so carefree, so happy, and sexy as fuck. I smiled, watching her enjoy herself, feeling the music without a care in the world.

Her light brown skin had a glow to it, and I watched as a trickle of sweat made its way down between her breasts, her head thrown back as she moved. A vision of her riding my cock passed through my mind, and that was it for me. I called Tommy over so I could pick up her tab. Girls back in California ate that shit up. I thought it would make a good impression. *Guess I'm not in Cali anymore.*

"Earth to Noah," Aiden says, waving his hand in front of my face. "Gertie Williams, huh? She's cute, man, you should hit that."

"You sound like a fuckin' teenager," I complain, taking a swig of my beer. "Hit that?"

"Whatever. You talk to her?" He asks.

"A couple words," I say, peeling at the label on my bottle.

"She turned you down, didn't she?" He laughs out loud, patting me on the back.

"Yep"

"Man, the old Anders charm usually gets them. You must be out of practice. I could go talk to that hot redhead she's with and score you some points."

“I don’t need my little brother’s help with a woman. Besides, it’s surprising you get any women in this town with a mug like yours,” I shoot back.

“Oh, I get my fair share of good pu...”

“Alright,” I interrupt him, “I’m gonna head home for the night. See you at Mom’s?”

“You got it. Hey, Noah?” He calls, as I turn to leave.

“It’s nice to have you back home.”

“It’s nice to be here, brother.”

I make my way to my truck parked out front in time to see Gertie and her friend sliding into the back of a car, and I watch as they drive off.

Man, that girl is something. I look through my phone contacts to see if I still have her brother’s number before getting into my truck. His little sister has me curious.

CHAPTER FIVE

GERTIE



I open my eyes, squinting at the bright sunlight coming through the curtains, and glance over in my bed as the events of last night come back to me. I chuckle, looking over at Jules sprawled out next to me. Her red hair is a rat's nest around her and she only has one fake eyelash on. By the time we made it home we just threw ourselves down in my bed and passed out. I'm not used to staying out that late anymore. Honestly, not since my college years.

My head is pounding like a jack-hammer, and I groan as I hear knocking at my front door. What time is it? I glance over at the clock and jump up, seeing it's past eleven. I stumble to the door, smoothing my hair down and trying to wipe the smeared mascara from under my eyes.

"Mommy!" Cooper yells as I open the door. "We was knocking forever!" He yells hugging me tight and darting off towards his room.

I look up at Elliott to see him staring at me. Eyes wide, mouth slack jawed.

"Hey," I laugh nervously, yanking up my corset top, failing to cover myself.

"Jules and I got in late last night." I explain, as his eyes roam over my body, narrowing at the sight. "We went dancing..." I continue.

“I got Cooper this.” He says quickly, while thrusting a fishbowl in my arms, splashing a bit of water on my chest.

“You got him a fish?” I ask, with wide eyes and raised brows. How strange and un-Elliott like.

“I know we should have discussed it beforehand and planned accordingly, but he was so enamored with the animals at the zoo that when he mentioned the idea, I jumped at it. Spontaneously, I guess you could say,” he raises an eyebrow at me.

It’s not lost on me. He uses the word I did when I was asked by our marriage counselor what we were lacking.

“No, that’s fine.” I mutter, looking down at the little fish swimming about.

“I had intended to keep it at my house, but he said he wanted to keep it at home... meaning here with you,” he adds, with a slightly sad scowl.

“Mommy, you met Clowney! Do you like him? He’s cool, right mom?” Cooper chimes in, joining us while dragging Jules down the hall.

“Coop, I think he’s the coolest fish I’ve ever seen, buddy” I smile down at him. Life’s too short to get pissed off about a surprise goldfish. At least it’s not a puppy.

“Why don’t you and Jules set Clowney up in your room and I’ll make you some lunch.”

I head to work Monday morning wearing my worn blue scrubs and scuffed up purple crocs. I pull my thick long hair up into a bun at the top of my head and wash my hands as I look over the schedule for the day.

As a visiting nurse, some days I'm working at the hospital and others I'm providing in-home care for patients. It's a large hospital, one of the best in New York. I provide assessments, administer treatments, and communicate with providers to help develop a plan tailored to each of my patient's needs. I love my job. I love helping people and feeling needed.

It can be tough when you bond with patients that you know aren't doing well, but in the end, I hope I've made their journey easier, no matter the end result. I hadn't always wanted to get into this field, but after my parents passed away in a car wreck at the end of my senior year of high school, it became a mission of mine to help others who were suffering.

I wish I had been able to help my mom and dad. They both died on impact that horrible day. But grief doesn't always think realistically.

After that summer, I threw myself into classes. Determined that if I couldn't help them, I could help someone else. I needed a goal, something to keep me busy. I think they'd be proud of me, which helps with the pain of their loss.

As I'm going through my schedule for the next few weeks, I flip through the pages of patients I'll be working with. Mr. Beans, a sweet elderly gentleman in his eighties. Mrs. Calcutta, a woman with sharp wit and an even sharper tongue, that one should be interesting. Then on the last page, I see Mrs. Anders' name on my list for in-home care. Seems I can't get away from the Anders family these days.

I pack up my things and take the short drive to Mrs. Anders' home, taking in my old neighborhood on the way. The trees are so much larger than I remember, and more houses have been built. I guess that's what happens. Life goes on whether the people you love, have passed away or not.

I pull into the Anders driveway, seeing my childhood home next door. My stomach doing somersaults as bittersweet

memories of my past coming back to me, some good, some not, but today is not the day to dwell on my past.

Nancy is even sweeter than I remember. She always reminded me of Carol on the Brady bunch or the mom on Leave it to Beaver. The kind of mother that has dinner on the table every night at the same time and never misses a sports event her kids are at. My own mother tried to do those things, but her depression won most days, leaving her in bed.

We spend our afternoon playing cards. I hold her frail arm as we walk through her flower garden while she shares memories about her boys. The memories of her sweet little rascals, as she refers to them, are entertaining and I can't help but think of Cooper. It's comforting hearing how a mother's love and adoration outweigh any memories of frustration she felt raising two rowdy boys that tested her patience. I hope to God I'm not screwing this parenting thing up. If she can still feel this type of affection for Noah, there's hope.

"I swear to you Gertie, I left the boys alone for not even five minutes to grab the mail and I find them in the bathroom with new haircuts."

"Oh no!" I gasp, covering my mouth as I laugh. "I've been careful to keep scissors away from Cooper for fear of this very thing."

"Oh Gertie, you should have seen them! Hair all over the floor, a tiny cereal bowl on Aiden's head. He must have seen the idea on TV or something. I certainly didn't give them the idea!" She huffs.

"For some reason Noah, let Aiden cut his first. He's lucky he didn't lose an eye!" She exclaims. "Instead, he ended up

looking like he had a mushroom on top of his head!” she finishes, holding her stomach in laughter.

“Uh, excuse me, are we interrupting something?” I hear a deep voice ask from behind me.

I wipe the tears of laughter from my eyes and look to see Noah and his brother Aiden watching us intently.

“Ma, really, the haircut story again?” Aiden complains, shaking his head, his cheeks red with embarrassment.

“You earned that story being told more than once, Honey. The hairdresser had a heck of a time trying to fix those mushroom cuts,” She smiles, as he bends down to hug her, holding her tight.

I feel that familiar twinge in my heart, missing my own mother’s hugs. As complicated as our relationship was, there’s nothing like your mom.

I watch as Noah comes forward, hugging her next, enveloping her frail frame in his big arms. I watch as he gently kisses the top of her head.

“You’re filthy, Noah. Where have you been?” She asks him, in a raspy voice trying to wipe black streaks of what looks like grease from his worn, tattered white tee.

“I’ve been trying to get Dad’s old car working” he gazes past her, meeting my eyes. Outside the darkness of the bar and not surrounded by so many people I get an even better look at him. He appears the same as he did as a teen, just larger, more handsome even. Broader build, wider shoulders, more defined muscles, a trimmed beard covering his jaw. I snicker, remembering him and my brother comparing the two hairs on their top lips that they called mustaches.

“Shortstack! It’s been a while!” Aidan says, interrupting my thoughts while pulling me in for a bear hug. I can’t help but giggle as he lifts me off my feet, twirling me around.

“How’s my girl?” he asks. Silly and carefree, and the same age as I am, I always liked him better than his annoying brother.

“Really well, thanks.” I answer as he puts me down and I smooth down my shirt.

“I never see you around town. What have you been up to?” he asks.

“Working a lot.” I shrug. “Being a mom, no time for much else.”

I fight the urge to acknowledge Noah standing behind us. I can feel his eyes on me.

“Gertie has a little boy about the same age as you boys were when you got ahold of those scissors. I’ve been trying to convince her to bring him over for a swim. We hardly use the pool these days!” Nancy pipes up.

“I don’t want to intrude; Cooper can be a handful,” I try to argue. “He’s as wild as he is sweet.”

“Nonsense. He can’t be any worse than these two fools.” She laughs, heading back into the house.

“Follow me Gertie, I have some cookies I want to send you home with.”

We all follow behind her, walking slowly so as not to rush her. Aidan puts his hand on her arm to guide her into the house.

Noah has been silent up until now, walking behind me. He feels so close I can feel the warmth coming off his body. The hairs stand up on the back of my neck as he leans down close to whisper in my ear.

“My brother calls you Shortstack and you giggle. He even got a hug. What’s that about Gertie?” His warm, minty breath on the side of my neck, along with his cologne, is a heady mix. “I thought we were friends once upon a time.”

I stop short, looking up at him, towering over me. A mischievous look in his eye. His square jaw and full lips grinning down at me.

“I wouldn’t classify us as ever being friends Noah and what are you, jealous?” I ask, smirking.

“Maybe,” he chuckles.

“Your brother,” I answer, not backing down under his heavy gaze. “Isn’t an asshole.”

I hear his deep laugh as I make my way into the kitchen, leaving him behind.

CHAPTER SIX

NOAH



“Cannon ball!” I yell as I jump off the board into the pool. I can’t remember the last time I had this much fun.

True to her nature, Mom sweet-talked Gertie until she brought her son, Cooper, over for a swim.

Growing up, our pool was full of kids all summer long. It feels nice to be enjoying it again. I haven’t seen my mother smile this much in a long time. She has been sitting poolside for the last hour watching Aidan and I keep up with Cooper, which is no easy feat. The kid has been going full throttle since he walked in the door, pulling a slightly frazzled looking Gertie behind him.

I ignored the fact that I heard her sarcastically mumble something about me fitting in with a five-year-old and I hid my disappointment when I notice she didn’t bring a suit for herself to swim. I’ve been thinking of those curves since that night at the bar and hoped I might catch a glimpse of them today.

“Mr. Noah, can we play submarines again?” Cooper says, doing the doggy paddle over to me.

Between the life jacket, donut thing around his waist, and floaties on his arms, the kid’s wearing enough flotation

devices I'm surprised he hasn't floated away. Back in our day, dad threw us in and hoped for the best.

"Hop on buddy!" I tell him as he climbs on my back, and I gasp for air as his little arms put me in a chokehold.

"Don't worry, little dude, I've got you," I tell him as I look over to Gertie, who's chuckling, watching me gasp for breath from the firm clutches of her son.

"Mommy says I have to hang on real tight if we play submarines."

"Oh, I bet she does, buddy," I tell him, moving through the water with him strapped to my back. She's probably hoping he'll choke me out.

I keep waiting for her to loosen up a little around me. Around Mom and Aidan, she's sweet as pie. As soon as she spots me, daggers shoot out of her eye sockets. She may be a good foot shorter than I am, but man, she's a little firecracker. Seems even more so than I remember.

"Go faster, Mr. Noah!" he screeches in my ear as Aidan pretends to sink our battleship.

"Boys!" Mom hollers from the sideline. "Come dry off and have a snack."

I hope Mom brought juice boxes and animal crackers like the good old days. I glance up and see Gertie watching me. I make a show of drying off my six pack, flexing my biceps, whistling to myself.

I glance up just in time to see her pink tongue peek out, licking her bottom lip. God, she's sexy as hell. My dick gets so hard I have to hold the towel in front of me to hide it. But I'm rewarded for my efforts when I meet her eyes, and she looks hungry, biting her lip.

There's a moment where I think she may be seeing me as someone other than the neighbor kid that gave her grief. And then the moment is gone.

"You're such a child," she rolls her eyes.

But I can tell I've affected her by the blush on her cheeks.

"You're never too old for a good game of water battleship, Shortstack," I say, smiling down at her, her eyes saying something I can't decipher. There must be a million thoughts going through that pretty little head. I wish she'd tell me just one.

"What is it, Shortstack?"

"I just, well...thank you. For playing with him."

"He's a great kid," I answer, glancing down at her ring finger as I have a few times since the night at the bar. I want to ask her about his dad and if he plays with him. Where her ring is, why she never mentions him. I don't dare push my luck when she's actually speaking to me.

"Why are you staring at me like you don't know me, Gert? We've known each other since we were kids."

"I guess I'm just surprised."

"About?"

"You're better with kids than I thought you'd be," she shrugs nonchalantly, as if she didn't just give me a backhanded compliment.

"Um thanks, I think?"

"Well, don't look so surprised, Noah. You couldn't stand me when I was little."

"That's not true," I chuckle, remembering how cute she was in her pigtails and braces with her head in a book.

“Of course, it is. Remember when you stole my bike just to watch me cry?” She accuses, shaking her head at me. “You were a mean boy, Noah Andrews. Don’t pretend you weren’t.”

I know the exact bike she’s referring to. “I didn’t....”

“Stop,” she tries walking away.

“I’ve forgiven you. Don’t worry about it. And I never told my brother. So just let go of your guilt, Noah. I know it’s just eating you alive. I hate to think you’re losing sleep,” she rolls her eyes at me, yet again.

I put my hand on her wrist to stop her from walking away.

Does she feel that shot of electricity? I felt it at the bar the other night too. It’s like static.

“Gert, I didn’t steal your bike.”

“You are such a liar.” She shakes her head, chuckling. “After all these years, just fess up. My god Noah. I even saw you toss it on my front lawn, bent wheel and all. What’d you do, anyway, crash it? I saw your bloody nose, too. You should’ve at least fixed the tire before you brought it back. Forget about it. It’s fine. I’m just teasing.” She waves me off, trying to pull away, but I’m determined.

I may not have given the full story that day when Michael questioned me about why the Stone brothers wanted to kick my ass so badly, but I’ll be damned if she keeps thinking I was some neighborhood terror.

“Gert, listen to me. I didn’t steal your bike. The Stone brothers did. I found out and got it back for you. I may have given you a hard time when we were kids, but I wouldn’t have done that. You cried for days.”

“My dad got me that bike for my birthday,” she whispers sadly.

“Gertie, I swear to you. I tracked them down, kicked Johnny’s ass and got your bike back. Unfortunately, Johnny’s older brother was bigger than me and got a few more licks in than I wanted to admit. That’s why I never told your brother. I knew he’d give me a rash of shit.”

“That’s why you had a bloody nose?” she asks, her voice trailing off. Her eyes searching mine.

“I was looking out for you, Gert. I promise you. I always looked out for you.”

Mom chooses that moment to bring out a tray full of juice boxes and cookies.

“I got grape, just like I know you like, Noah,” she motions down at the tray.

“Nothing like a good juice box,” I say, winking Gertie’s way and I’m rewarded with a genuine laugh. Maybe there’s hope for cracking her shell after all.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GERTIE



“Cooper, put down the iPad, we’re going to be late if we don’t leave now.”

“Mommy, can we go swimming at Ms. Nancy’s house this day?”

“You mean today, buddy. No, we haven’t been invited.”

“Can you call her and tell her to invite us?” he asks, setting his iPad next to the charger.

“It doesn’t work that way. You have to wait until someone asks you.”

“That’s stupid.” He scowls.

“That’s not a nice word, Cooper. Grab your bag and let me tie your shoes.”

“This weekend Mommy is going to teach you how to tie your shoes like a big boy does,” I say, trying to distract his train of thought.

“Mommy, I want to swim and play battleship with Mr. Noah. He’s funny,” he says, changing the subject back. “And Ms. Nancy has cookies.” *Kid’s too smart for his own good.*

“Come on Buddy, let’s get in the car,” I tell him, zipping up his jacket.

I lock the apartment door behind us as we make our way to my old beat-up corolla and buckle him securely into his booster seat.

“Momma, can we listen to the radio on the way?”

“Sure thing, buddy.”

I put the key in the ignition and turn it. Nothing happens, and my stomach turns in dread.

Please, not today. I cannot afford to miss another day of work. It's times like this I think I should have fought for more money in the divorce.

I turn it one more time, hoping for a miracle, but still nothing. Not even the lights turn on in the damn car.

“Damn it!” I yell out of frustration, hitting my palm on the steering wheel.

I've got twenty minutes to get Cooper to school and myself to work and the frickin' car won't start.

I should never have canceled my last tune up, but I had to choose between groceries or the car, so I risked it, canceling my appointment at the garage.

For all I know, anything could be wrong with it. My knowledge of cars doesn't go past fixing a flat tire and even then, I have my doubts since I've only really done it once with my brothers' assistance.

I press my forehead to the steering wheel, taking deep breaths as tears form in my eyes. Every time I get ahead, it feels like something pulls me back. Sometimes I get tired of trying so damn hard. If it wasn't for Cooper, I probably would've given up and ended up depressed and withdrawn like my mother.

“Mommy, what’s wrong?” His worried little voice asks from behind me.

“The car won’t start, Buddy. Don’t worry. Mommy will figure it out.” Trying my best to reassure him.

“Can we call Daddy? His car works and he just got a new one.”

“No, Daddy is busy. I’ll figure it out.” I could call Elliot, I have no doubt he’d come, but then I’d be blurring the boundaries by acting like I still need him.

“Come on buddy, let’s catch the bus,” I say, taking Cooper out of his booster seat. It’s at least a ten-minute walk to the bus station, but if we walk quickly enough, we may make it in seven.

I won’t have the money to even take it into the garage until next week.

Maybe I can take a vacation day to bring it in. I’ll have to find someone to tow it.... I’m thinking all of this as I hold my purse, my lunch bag, Cooper’s hand, and send a quick text to Jules as we walk to the bus station. *Fuck my fucking, fucked, fucking, life!*

‘The stupid car won’t start. I’m going to be late getting to work.’

‘Oh no! Do you want me to leave and come pick you guys up?’

‘No, we’re taking the bus.’

‘Watch out for creeps and don’t touch anything. They never sanitize those seats, you know.’

‘Be there soon.’

I go to put my phone back in my pocket when it vibrates with an incoming text.

'Hey, Shortstack.'

'Who is this?'

'Who do you think? How many people call you Shortstack?'

'Two, and one of them better not be texting me.'

I wait as I see the bubbles appear.

'Wondering when you're bringing the kid over again to swim.'

'Why, are all your big boy friends busy?'

'Good one.'

'Let your mom know I'm running late, but not to worry.'

'Why are you late?'

'Not your business. How did you get my number, anyway?'

'I have my ways. So, can Cooper come over to play or what?'

'Gotta go. Tell your mom I'll be there in about an hour.'

'Will do, Shortstack.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

NOAH



I wondered how it would go over texting her.

I talked to her brother for a good twenty minutes before he told me to man up and get to the point of my phone call. Same Michael as always, forgoing the bullshit and being blunt. It's one of the things I've always liked about him. He agreed to give me her number after I promised not to get in her panties. I promised him, with my fingers crossed behind my back, obviously.

When I tried to nonchalantly mention her husband, his whole vibe changed, letting me know there was no love lost between him and his ex-brother in law.

So, that explains the absence of the wedding ring.

Using her kid as an in, may have been a cheap move, but to be honest, I did have a great time last week swimming in the pool with him.

Mom couldn't stop talking about it for days after, saying how brave he was to jump off the diving board, I have to admit I was pretty impressed myself. I'll do anything to see Mom smile like that more often.

Plus, I'm antsy. Mom's health seems to be improving but it still stresses me out.

I like to keep my hands busy, so I've been spending most days working in my mom's garage. It's not ideal, and it's hot as hell in there, but I've made myself a space so I can do my carpentry business and work on Dad's old Grand Am. The thing hasn't worked right since the 80's, but it serves its purpose while I'm close to Mom.

I even brought Mr. Sprinkles over to keep her company. I swear the cats gained ten pounds with the treats she gives him, I haven't missed the fact that he gives me a snide grin every time she gives in to him despite my protests either, frickin' smart ass.

I'm in the garage tinkering around when I notice Gertie showing up for the day, walking down the sidewalk.

I wipe the sweat off my face with my tee and jog the rest of the way to meet her halfway.

"Hey, where's your car? It's at least 95 degrees out today"

"Oh, I got dropped off down the road. Thought I could use the walk. Clear my head a little," She answers, staring straight ahead.

"On a hot day like this?" I ask, taking her bags. She's clearly lying. She still has that eye twitch she had when we were kids when she was nervous. I noticed it the other day.

"I don't mind the heat," she shrugs me off with sweat dripping down her face.

"You're fibbin'. You hate the heat, Gert. You always complained when we were kids if we didn't let you in the pool with us. You whined so much about melting, your brother finally agreed to let you tag along just to shut you up."

"How's your mom today?" she asks, changing the topic as we reach the driveway.

“Okay, she’s looking forward to seeing you.” That earns me a smile as I hold open the door of the house for her. “Ladies first.”

I watch as she walks into the house in front of me.

“Hi Nancy,” she says, walking to the living room where Mom’s been spending most of her time reading, with the cat curled up in her lap.

Mom’s face lights up when she sees her. I lean against the doorway listening to their conversation as Gertie checks Mom’s vitals.

“How are you feeling today?” Gertie asks her.

“I feel fine,” She answers softly.

I can feel the tension creep up my neck. I’ve learned that means she’s not *really* fine.

“Let’s see if we can’t get you outside a bit today, maybe in that nice wooden chair under the maple tree. Remember us kids climbing that tree?”

I remember, I think to myself. Aidan tried to push me out of it, but I pushed harder, and he fell and broke his arm. The dumb ass. Of course, I got grounded.

“Noah made me that chair.” Mom answers, smiling over at me proudly. “He’s very talented, quite the craftsman,” She praises.

“Who is this furry friend?” Gertie asks her, bending down to pet the cat on her lap, completely ignoring Mom talking me up.

“This is Noah’s cat, Mr. Sprinkles. Noah brought him over to keep me company. He’s such a dear. He loves cuddling and treats.”

“Mr. Sprinkles?” Gertie asks me, glancing over.

She gives me a slight smile. Even her eyes light up when she smiles. I rub at my chest, feeling a weird tightening ache seeing her look at me like that.

Frickin women are either going to give me a stroke or a heart attack.

“Stewart Edward Sprinkles, actually,” I say, giving her a wink.

He doesn't have a first and last name. I just made that on the fly, hoping to make her laugh. I give a little internal fist pump when I'm rewarded hearing a giggle sneak out behind her hand.

“I was telling Gertie how much you enjoyed having her son over last week,” I toss in, never leaving her gaze and hoping mom will catch the bait.

“Oh, yes!” she turns to Gertie. “What a precious boy. I hope you'll bring him over again soon. Maybe next week?” She asks hopefully.

I head back out to the garage, letting Mom work her magic. No one can turn that woman down. I bet Cooper will be back over within a week.

I start working on my next piece, a coffee table made of a solid piece of oak. The tree was hundreds of years old and had to be taken down when the city decided to build a strip mall.

I was damn lucky to salvage a few pieces of the trunk.

This piece in particular has the coolest knot in the wood, right in the center. The man who pre-ordered this piece owns a little coffee shop I frequented back in Cali.

I let the feel of the smooth wood, and the sounds from the radio carry me away.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I answer, seeing its Aidan.

“What’s up? I’m bored as shit,” he says, forgoing a normal hello.

“So you just called to tell me you’re bored?” I sigh.

“No asshole, I called to see how you are. You’re lucky I love you man, you’re such a miserable fucker. How’s Ma?”

“She said she’s fine today.”

“Which means she’s not,” he sighs in a knowing voice.

“Right.”

“Gertie there now?”

“Yeah, she’s helping Mom clean up.”

“She’s been good for her. Good for you too. I even saw a smile on your ugly mug the other day.”

“Fuck off about Gertie, man.” I groan.

“I remember how you were when we were kids.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean. I saw Dean Cushing’s working at the hardware store the other day and his nose is still crooked from you breaking it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Of course I do, the fuckin’ dirtbag.

“Oh yeah? You don’t remember how he said he was going to ask her to the junior prom just so he could pop her cherry and instead you popped him in the nose?” he laughs.

“The fucker deserved it,” I grumble, my hands forming fists. Still pisses me off to this day.

“Not saying he didn’t, he always was a real douche. I’m just saying, you’re single, she’s single. You should go for it man, you deserve a good woman.”

“Aidan, the girl can’t stand me, never could.”

“Dude, get over yourself. Stop being a pansy ass and get yourself a date. You’re not living with me when you’re a miserable old fart. You need a woman.”

“I gotta run. Thanks for the pep-talk, brother. You’re just incredible at it. I’m working on an order,” I tell him, cutting him off and hanging up.

CHAPTER NINE

GERTIE



I pack my medical bag and say my goodbyes as I make my way out of Nancy's house.

I've got to make sure I don't miss the bus to get back home.

As I'm leaving, music from the garage catches my attention. I glance over, seeing Noah deep in thought, humming to whatever's on the radio while sanding a large piece of wood.

I watch as his dirt smudged white-tee stretches across his chest. My heart speeds up a bit when I see his blue jeans hanging off his hips just enough that when he leans down there's a sliver of skin and the top of his boxer briefs pee out. I have to bite my lip to suppress the moan in my throat. No man should be that good looking.

He's so into whatever he's doing he doesn't notice me, so I inch closer for a better look. He's got work boots on and he's covered in sawdust. I tried to figure out what his tattoo says that goes down the length of his arm, but the last time he caught me staring. I'll be damned if I'm caught staring again. I look away quickly and make my way down the driveway. I hate walking alone in the dark with the sun setting.

I've got a couple hundred saved away for emergencies, but my credit card is maxed out. I'm going to need to figure

this out soon. Cooper has soccer practice starting soon. He begged me to play. I don't want to disappoint him and not be able to drive him. Besides, I've already bought the cleats and shin guards he needed and that was already more than I could afford.

"Where are you going?" I jump, clutching my throat, trying to not scream as Noah comes up behind me.

"Shit, you scared me. I'm going home, obviously," I huff in annoyance.

"How are you getting there and why are you walking in the dark?" he asks, his hands on his hips and eyes narrowed. He's a good foot taller than I am and towers over me.

"I'm walking to the bus station," I sigh. "And if I don't hurry up, I'm going to miss it," I tell him, turning around to continue on my way.

"You're not riding the bus. Where's your car?"

"I *am* riding the bus," I argue. "I like the bus, It saves on gas," I lie as I keep walking.

"No one likes the bus. Let's go, I'll give you a ride."

"Noah, I'm good. I'm not some damsel in distress that needs rescuing."

"Walk with me back to my truck or I'm tossing you over my shoulder, Shortstack," he commands, arms crossed across his broad chest, biceps straining in his tee.

We continue our stare off, waiting until one of us gives.

After a few moments, I accept the fact that he's not budging, but I'll be damned if I ride in a truck alone with him, so I stomp ahead in front of him, trying to head back into the house.

"I'll just call Jules to come get me," I toss over my shoulder.

“Get in the goddamn truck, Gertie.” He orders, harshly.

I jump at his tone and get in the truck, slamming the door extra hard in frustrated defeat.

“That was a bit much. There’s no need to yell at me. I see you haven’t changed, thinking you can boss me around.” I glare at him, as I click my belt.

“How long have you been taking the bus late at night?” he asks, his voice softer.

“Are these seats heated?” I ask, ignoring his question and feeling the warmth from underneath me.

“Yes, are you warm enough? I can’t handle watching you fucking shivering anymore,” he shakes his head, putting my address into his GPS. “And answer the question. Stop trying to distract me. How long have you been taking the bus late at night?”

“I can take care of myself, Noah.” I tell him, thoroughly annoyed.

“Answer the fucking question, Gertie.” he whips off his knit cap, tossing it in the back.

“Just today. Jesus, calm down. You’re overreacting.”

“There’s no overreacting when it comes to safety, Gertie.”

“Oh, my god” I roll my eyes. “Are you a PSA commercial now? You’re not my dad and I’m not twelve, Noah. I’m fine. Nothing is going to happen. Women take the bus all the time without the help of pompous, bossy men. Plus, I have pepper spray and a stun gun in my purse.”

He glances over at me. “A stun gun?”

“Yes, Elliott, my ex-husband, got it for me for my birthday.”

“Wow, that’s a.... practical gift.”

“Along with a new blender. He was nothing but practical.” I sigh, looking out the window.

I remember that birthday. After eating the cake I made for myself, and opening my practical gifts, I cried myself to sleep alone as he stayed up late in his office.

The silence in the truck is deafening. I look over at Noah, his shoulders tense, his brows furrowed.

“Do not take the bus from Mom’s house again, Gertie. I mean it.”

His commanding, possessive tone pisses me off. More annoying, it mildly turns me on. I must be getting desperate. I’m going to have to ask Jules what sex toys she suggests. I’m getting turned on by Noah Anders, this is getting ridiculous.

“I don’t need to be taken care of, Noah. I’m fine”

“Maybe you don’t feel like you need to be Gertie,” his voice softer, as he slows to a stop at the red light.

“Everyone deserves to be taken care of sometimes, Gert.” I turn to look at him, his face lit up by the streetlights. He’s looking at me so earnestly, I watch as his eyes roam my face and it makes my heart thud a bit harder. My breath catches in my throat. Until the silence in the vehicle is interrupted by a honk from the car behind us and I look to see the light has turned green.

“Besides, a woman like you walking in the dark alone, it’s just not smart.” he shakes his head.

“What the hell does that mean?” I practically screech, offended.

“Exactly what I said.” He glances over, looking at me up and down.

I huff, cross my arms over my chest, and turn to look out the window, ignoring his gaze.

He pulls into my apartment's parking lot and parks next to my car.

I jump out, determined to get away from him as soon as possible, but he's quick and stands next to me.

"What now?" I demand.

"Keys." he holds out his hand. "What's the car doing? A weird noise or some shit?" he asks.

"I'm bringing it to the garage next week. I don't need you to look at it, if that's what you're suggesting," I argue, clutching my keys.

"Keys, now!" he demands, not relenting.

"I put the key in, and nothing happened." I huff, tossing the keys hard at his chest.

He catches them midair, shooting me a glare. "You're a pain in the ass, Gertie."

"*I'm* a pain in the ass? I didn't ask you for help, Noah!" I yell, throwing up my hands.

He ignores me and hops into my car, turning the key.

"And just like I said, it does nothing," I point out, giving him my best, *I told you so* expression with my hands on my hips.

"When was your last maintenance check?" He questions, through the window.

"I don't know, a few months ago?" I lie. It's been much, much longer. I swear I can feel my damn eye start to twitch.

"Mhmm, I'll see you in the morning." he tells me, getting out to stand in front of me.

"No, you won't," I snap, eyes narrowed.

"Sure will, Shortstack," he bops me on the nose with his finger like I'm a twelve-year-old, before he turns to get into

his truck.

“If you play your cards right,” he grins at me from his vehicle, “I might bring coffee.” he adds, before driving away.

CHAPTER TEN

GERTIE



I wake up an hour earlier than normal in order to leave in time to make it to the bus. If I leave early enough, I should miss Noah attempting to give me a ride again.

I'm just getting out of the shower and wrapping a towel around myself when I hear a knock at the door. For God's sake, no one else would show up at my house at this hour. It's got to be Noah already. I stomp my way to the door, flinging it open to find him standing there holding two coffees and an orange juice.

His eyes are dark, slowly trailing my body, starting at my toes, past my legs, my hips, pausing at my breasts. I squeeze my thighs together when he licks his lips.

"You're dripping," he states, his voice a deep rumble in his chest.

"What?" I ask, feeling out of breath.

"You're still wet." His molten eyes meet mine as he leans toward me. I freeze, anticipating his touch. But he only touches a water droplet dripping off my hair.

"From the shower," he grins. "You're *soaking* wet." he adds playfully.

"Why are you so early?" I snap at him, stepping back.

“As stubborn as you are, I assumed you’d try to get on the bus. I wanted to beat you to it. Go get dressed, I’ll wait.”

“My friend Jules can drive me, Noah. I’m fine.”

“Go, get dressed now.” he shoos me away with his hand.

“You’re so frickin’ bossy!” I snap again, making a conscious effort not to stomp my foot.

“Oh, you have no idea how bossy I can be, Shortstack,” he wags his eyebrows with a hint of playfulness in his tone.

I turn quickly, heading back to my room to finish getting ready and call out for Cooper to hurry up and get ready.

Knowing Noah is in my home is making me jittery. What is it about this man and his effect on the female gender? *It’s ridiculous!* I think to myself, as I run a brush quickly through my hair. *I will not be one of the masses,* I repeat to myself over and over as I throw on fresh scrubs, and practically run out to where he’s waiting.

I find him standing in my small, outdated kitchen. He’s smiling at the photos on my fridge.

“Cooper looks a lot like your brother. But he has your eyes.” he turns to me. “He even has the same long lashes,” he smiles. I feel my cheeks heat up with the intensity of his stare.

“You’re blushing.” He points out, as I feel heat flush through my entire body.

I turn from him, breaking the trance.

“Put your cereal bowl in the sink Cooper and let’s go,” I refuse to meet Noah’s eyes again.

For some annoying reason, he must find that funny. I can hear him chuckling behind me as he follows me out to where his large black pick-up truck waits.

“What time do you and Cooper need to be picked up?” He asks me while I strap Cooper into his booster seat.

“I can find another ride Noah, I’m sure you’re busy.”

“I said, what time, Gert.” He growls.

“Mr. Noah, I really like your truck!” Cooper exclaims from the back. “Does it go fast?”

“Thanks, little man. It probably does, but that wouldn’t be safe.”

“As if I’m going to tell him it’s okay to speed,” he whispers to me. “You thought I’d say differently, didn’t you?” he grins smugly.

“Yep, that’s you, Mr. Safety Anders,” I roll my eyes. “How many accidents did you get in senior year?”

“They’re called accidents for a reason, Gertrude.”

“Don’t you dare start,” I huff, crossing my arms over my chest as he uses my full name.

“What if we were on a racetrack?” Cooper continues from the back.

“That would be different. Cars are allowed to go fast on a racetrack,” I tell him.

“Mommy, remember you said we could go to the derby? But we didn’t go cause Daddy was working and I was sad because I wanted to go to the derby,” he rambles on, “My friend Jayden at school said his Daddy is bringing him to the derby again this year and I told him that’s not fair because then he goes two times and I haven’t been at all.”

“When is the derby?” Noah pipes up.

“Noah...” I warn, whispering.

“Saturday,” Cooper says. “Mr. Noah, you could bring me! My mommy won’t mind. Will you Mommy?”

“Well Mommy, what do you say?” Noah asks, grinning at me while Cooper erupts into giggles.

“You can’t call her Mommy, Mr. Noah. You already have your own mommy, and she makes good cookies. Can we get a hot dog at the derby too?” he asks.

I put my hand over my face realizing there’s no going back at this point.

“Mommy likes hotdogs with just mustard.”

“I remember,” Noah says.

“You do not, you’re so full of it,” I laugh, shaking my head.

“You wound me, Gert. You like mustard on your hotdogs. The only time you eat ketchup is to dip your potato chips in,” he tells me, driving into the elementary school and hopping out.

“You coming?” he asks, pulling Cooper from his seat and heading into the school while I stare back at him, I can’t believe he remembers that.

That afternoon, as I’m warming up soup in the breakroom I’m also scrolling through my phone looking at Tinder. Jules talked me into downloading it a couple of months ago. I swipe left, I swipe right. Slim pickings, and the ones who look promising are too good to be true.

“Divorced four times, that’s a no thank you,” Jules says behind me.

“Jesus, you scared me. Stop reading over my shoulder,” I laugh, shoving her away.

“No potential hotties yet?” she asks, sitting down, biting into an apple.

“I don’t even know what I’m looking for,” I groan, tossing down my phone.

“Well, are you looking for a hookup or more?”

“I’m not getting into another relationship anytime soon. I’ve barely been divorced a year.”

“So, hookup it is,” she shrugs.

“I would love a toe-curling orgasm, that I don’t have to give myself,” I whisper, looking around to make sure we’re still alone. Doesn’t that sound cheap, though?”

“No, it sounds like what men have been doing for decade,” she tells me, pulling her red hair up into a bun. “There’s nothing wrong with having consensual, safe sex, Gertie. Have some fun with your life. You deserve to live your life the way you want, Hun. It can’t always be about other people.”

“I just worry it makes me sound like a shitty mom. Shouldn’t I be focused on providing a family for Cooper? His dad’s already too busy and preoccupied all the time, I can’t be running around with different guys, I need to give him stability.”

“You’re an amazing mother, don’t do that to yourself. You can give Cooper a mom that’s happy and feels fulfilled, which is just as important. Plus, they don’t have to meet your son if you don’t want them to. Go out when he’s with his dad. Listen, I’ve had more single life experience than you have. I’m practically an old woman,” she winks.

“You’re not even fifty yet, you’re not old” I argue.

“Forty-seven is pretty close, I’m not knocking it, I’m still out here having fun. I’m just saying, see what’s out there. Focus on you and have some fun doing it.”

“You do have a good point” I say checking my watch. “I’m going to be late if I don’t leave soon. Can you drop me at Nancy’s?”

“Yeah, let’s go,” she grabs her keys and loops her arm through mine as we head to the elevator and out to her car.

“This is the neighborhood you grew up in?” She asks me, as we drive through.

“Yea, not much has changed, really,” I say, looking out the window.

“Is it hard seeing the house you grew up in?”

“A little, a mix of feelings, I guess.”

“That makes sense,” she nods her head.

“It’s that blue house on the left,” I point out.

“Holy fuck... he’s hot,” Jules says, motioning to Noah, who is working on a car in the garage, when we pull into the driveway.

“He looks the same as he did at the bar the other night, Jules.”

“Right. Hot as fuck. Even you can’t be immune to that, Gertie.”

“He’s annoying, is what he is. Thanks for the ride.” I say, grabbing my bag and shutting the door behind me.

I try to quickly walk by him him, straight into the house, almost running into Aidan in the process.

“Hey you! I was hoping we would see each other! I was hoping you would come to my party Saturday night.” Aidan says, pulling me in for a hug.

“We’ll be busy. I’m bringing Gertie and Cooper to the demolition derby on Saturday,” Noah interrupts, answering for me. He wipes grease off onto his white tee shirt, lifting it to

reveal a sliver of skin. My eyes betray me as I struggle to look away. His skin looks soft, and I see a bit of a happy trail...

“That’s cool,” Aidan says, interrupting my thoughts. “Shit doesn’t start getting fun until around nine o’clock anyway. The Derby will be way over by then. We’re having a bonfire down at the beach. Plenty to drink, good people. Bring that hot little friend of yours from the bar.” I see him glance back at Noah, who has a scowl on his face. It’s obvious he doesn’t want me attending this party, which only makes me want to go more.

“Never too old to be excluded from the cool kids, huh Noah? Just like the old days. I’d love to come Aidan, Thanks for thinking of me,” I reply, ignoring the death glares they’re exchanging.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GERTIE



“That truck went fast!” Cooper yells, shoving a giant wad of cotton candy in his mouth. He’s eaten a hot dog, french-fries, and is now is working on a bag of cotton candy that is bigger than he is.

I shake my head in semi amused horror at the amount of junk food my kid can consume, and pull out my phone to send a quick text to Jules.

‘You sure you’re still up to babysitting tonight? He’s either going to be puking or bouncing off the walls with the amount of sugar he’s consuming.’

‘I don’t scare that easily, you know that.’

‘Okay, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

“Texting your boyfriend?” Noah whispers in my ear, causing goosebumps to wash over my skin as I push him away.

“So, what’s the point of a derby?” I ask him, tucking my phone into my back pocket.

“To break stuff,” he shrugs.

“Mommy, look at that big truck!” Cooper shrieks.

“Wow, cool buddy.”

“Watch what it’s going to do next, Coop,” Noah tells him.

“I can’t see!” Cooper pouts.

“Here, little Man. Climb up.”

“Be careful!” I shout as he climbs on top of Noah’s shoulders. But my voice is drowned out by engines revving and I can’t help but laugh, looking at the two of them. Mouths hanging open in awe as a monster truck drives over another car.

“Yes!” Cooper pumps his little arm, and they high five each other.

We continue to watch as drivers compete by ramming their vehicles into one another, Cooper screaming in delight each time. By the end I’m quite certain Noah must be deaf, yet he surprisingly, he seems unfazed.

“You need a ride to the party tonight?” he asks me, as we head back to the car, Cooper buzzes around us like a hornet.

“See, what you created?” I laugh, pointing at my boy dodging back and forth in front of us. “He looks like a dog chasing his tail!”

“Maybe that ice cream at the end wasn’t a great idea,” he smirks. “But you only live once, right? So, you need a ride or what?” he continues.

“No, a friend is bringing me,” I lie. I could accept his offer, it would save me the cost of an Uber and maybe it’s childish of me, but I don’t want him to think I need to rely on anyone, him especially. Besides, being in close quarters with Noah Anders, the way my body reacts to his, is proving to be... confusing.

“I don’t mind I’m go....”

“No thanks, I’ve got it all figured out.” I say, interrupting him and putting an end to the topic.

“Suit yourself,” he sighs, as we climb in his truck and pull out of the parking lot.

The ride home is quiet, Cooper has settled. Noah looks deep in thought through most of the trip. I watch him from the corner of my eye, the way he drums his long fingers on the steering wheel, hums to the music on the truck radio. The way his black tee fits snugly around his bicep that flexes as he turns the wheel. The cab is filled with his manly scent and the soft music coming from the radio. He glances over, catching me staring, and I quickly turn to look out the window. Yep, an Uber is definitely a good idea.

“I can carry him in for you, Gert” he tells me, as he pulls into my driveway and starts to unbuckle himself. Cooper’s passed out in the backseat, drooling out of the corner of his mouth, safe to say the sugar high crashed.

“Where are my keys?” I mumble, rummaging through my purse as we walk to my front door. Match box cars, gum wrappers, one sock. “I’ve got to clean this thing out.” I grumble.

“The hell you got in that thing?” He laughs, tucking Cooper under his chin.

“Everything but my keys, apparently,” I say, grabbing the spare I keep under the flowerpot on my front porch.

“Thank you for today,” I confess as we walk into the living room, and I watch him set Cooper gently on the couch, tucking a blanket around him.

“You’re welcome,” he says softly, while walking over to me. “I had the most fun I’ve had in a long time. Your kid is a blast.” He smiles down at me, his eyes twinkling. I never noticed he had little green flecks in them.

“Did you enjoy yourself at all? I know it’s not really your thing,” he asks, tucking his hands in his pockets with a hopeful

voice.

“I had a great time,” I answer honestly.

“Yeah?” he asks, breaking out in a smile.

“Yeah,” I watch how his face lights up at my answer. The intensity of his stare and smile make my heartbeat speed up.

“You can smile back at me, you know,” he tucks a stray hair behind my ear. His touch sends shivers down my spine, he smells like lemon, sandalwood and cotton candy today. It’s intoxicating.

“Are you trying to use the Anders charm on me?” I ask, as I swat his hand away and back away a foot.

“The Anders charm is complete hearsay, Gertie,” he chuckles.

“Tell that to half the girls we went to high school with, Noah,” I reply, rolling my eyes.

“Well, if I ever did have any of this ‘Anders charm’ you speak of, you must be completely immune to it huh?” he asks as he moves toward the door.

Please,” I scoff. “Like you could have been bothered to even try to pull that on me. I was just your friend’s little sister, and you had the entire cheerleading team drooling over you.”

I watch as he stills at the door and turns back to me. “That’s the thing about perspective, everyone’s is different. I guess I’ll see you at the party tonight. Let me know if you change your mind about needing that ride.”

Cooper takes a solid two-hour nap. I use that time to primp myself for the party. It’s casual, so there’s no need to

dress up and weather in New England at this time of year is always unpredictable, so I decide to dress in layers. My favorite jeans that fit me just right and mold to my curves in just the right way, a thin tee, my red hoodie, and red converse complete the look of looking *casual* after spending an hour curling my hair into long waves and another half hour on my makeup.

The party turns out to be much more crowded than I expected.

I had the Uber drop me off and arranged to have them pick me up in a few hours. Cooper was staying the night at Jules', so I had the whole night to myself. It felt both odd and freeing. I could count on one hand the number of parties I'd been to. My brother never let me tag along, and Elliott couldn't be bothered with things as trivial as a laid back party where you're meant to have fun instead of some stuffy cocktail party where you're expected to schmooze about business. I shiver at the thought of how many of those I was forced to attend with my only purpose being to look pretty on his arm.

I should have taken advantage of my college years and partied my heart out, but my emotions were such a roller coaster ride after losing my parents and my brother taking off on his own. I could hardly do anything other than keep up with my studies.

I make my way through the crowd looking for familiar faces, picking up a drink along the way. I see a clearing and make my way to the bonfire. Wooden pallets are piled high as the flames reach out to the sky. I nod my head to the music coming from a distance and find a seat on a log in front of the fire. Aiden waves at me before he's swallowed up in a sea of women. Anders charm indeed.

"Hey, mind if I sit here?" I look up to see a guy about my age standing next to me. "This seat taken?" He asks. He's

beautiful, with dark straight hair falling at his shoulders, high cheekbones and light caramel skin.

“No, please, be my guest,” I answer, scooting over.

“I don’t know many people here,” he admits. “I came with a couple buddies of mine. They’re around here somewhere....” he glances around.

“Don’t feel bad, I grew up in this town and don’t recognize many people. Although I haven’t been out in a while.”

“Not a party animal?” he asks. I notice how he glances down at my ring finger.

“Recently divorced,” I say, wiggling my finger, answering his internal question.

“Sorry,” he laughs, his cheeks turning an adorable shade of pink. “I was trying to be discreet.”

“No problem, I’ve decided to try this new “being blunt” thing.”

“I like it,” he shrugs. “It’s honest right? No games, you know where people stand.”

“Exactly. So, in honor of being blunt” I say, taking a deep breath. “I’m Gertie, recently divorced, mom to a five-year-old and not looking for anything serious,” I blurt out. *Clearly the alcohol has set in.*

“Wow, okay, well nice to meet you, Gertie. I’m Steven. Never been married, no kids. Last relationship ended six months ago, not sure what I’m looking for,” he shakes my hand as we both laugh at our boldness.

I feel like I’m being watched and look up to meet Noah’s stare from across the fire, My smile drops at his scowl.

His eyes are narrowed, his knuckles whitened as he grips the bottle in his hand.

I have just as much right to be here as anyone else and he knew I was coming, so what the hell is his problem?

“Well, it was nice to meet you, Steven. I’m going to grab another drink. I’ll see you around,” I say, getting up and heading into the house.

I was just starting to relax and meet someone new when fucking Noah puts me right back in my place as the unwanted, unwelcome little sister.

“Shit,” I mumble to myself, dropping a slippery beer bottle to the floor after grabbing it from the cooler.

I’m looking for a broom and dustpan when Noah walks in.

“You might want to get back out there, tipsy Taunia, that blonde who’s been hanging all over you, she looks pissed you left her high and dry,” I snide. Seeing her peering through the window at me.

“You noticed, huh?” he grins down at me. “What are you doing in here, anyway?”

“I broke a bottle. I was looking for a broom,” I say, bending down to pick up the broken bottle with my hands so I can get out of there quickly.

“Shit, she’s coming this way! Quick pretend you cut yourself!” He whispers.

“What!? I’m not...”

“Quick, Shortstack, I’m serious!”

“Oh my god, you’re ridiculous. *Ouch oh nooo!*” I say, over exaggerating my bad acting skills.

“Let’s get you something for that,” he drags me through the hallway and into the nearest bathroom. He shuts us both in the tiny space.

“You’re an idiot,” I laugh at him.

“It was serious, Gert. I had to get away. If I hadn’t seen you hiding out like a wallflower I’d still be stuck out there listening to her ramble on about shopping or some shit.”

“I was not hiding. I just met a really nice guy, actually,” I say, folding my arms across my chest, desperately trying to remember what he said his name was. “Steven! Steven was his name, and he was really...nice.”

“Wow, Steven sounds...nice,” he chuckles.

“You’re the most annoying person ever,” I sigh. “What the hell are we still doing shut in here, anyway? For Christ’s sake, just tell her you’re not interested. I’m sure the girl will recover from the devastation.”

“Some of us don’t have cruel hearts, Shortstack. I need to let the poor girl down easier than that,” he puts his hand over his heart. “What kind of man do you take me for?”

“Oh my God right, you’re a regular gentleman,” I roll my eyes.

“Stop giving her the sex eyes. I’m sure she’ll see through your fake ass charm.”

“What sex eyes?” He smirks at me, wagging his eyebrows.

“You know the look, Noah. Don’t play stupid.”

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re referring to, Gertie,” his voice turning soft and his stare turning more intense with just a hint of mischievousness. He blinks a few times for effect.

“Stop it,” I plead, looking away.

“What? You think my eyes are sexy, you just admitted it,” he bends down to meet my eyes again.

“I didn’t say I was attracted to you. You annoy the hell out of me. Besides, you’re not my type. Your ego is so large your head is going to explode,” I argue, making for the door.

“Not your type? What is your type, Gertie?” He asks, running his knuckles across my cheek.

I bat his hand away, “I don’t know Noah, that’s what I’m trying to figure out, and I can’t do it shut in a bathroom with you,” I say, trying to get past him.

“Stop walking away from me, Gert.” He says softly.

“Noah, I’m trying to meet people and have fun. I’ll stop walking away if you stop being an asshole.”

“You’re the one pumping me up saying I have sexy eyes,” he smirks.

“That’s not what I said.”

“Sounded like it to me,” he singsongs.

“I’m sure you’re safe to go out there now. Although, why you’re hiding from her, I have no idea, she looks like your usual type.”

“Mmm, let me check,” he cracks open the door, “Nope, nope, definitely not safe to go out there.”

“You didn’t even look!” I argue, smacking him on the arm.

“So now you’re saying I’m a liar and hitting me! Wow, Gertie, I’m hurt.”

“Stop putting words in my mouth, and I barely touched you, you big baby.”

He takes a step closer until his body brushes against my chest, looking down at me, his eyes intent on mine. My body betrays me as my lungs start to work double time. Damn, he’s good at this. He brushes my bottom lip with his thumb. I should back away. I should walk right out that door. What I do instead is stand there smelling his intoxicating smell, looking

up into his pretty damn eyes flecked with green, our bodies pressed together in the tiny space, listening to us both breathe.

“That’s not the only thing I’d like to put in your mouth.” His words catch me off guard, causing me to gasp.

“You’re insane, stop playing around!” I demand, shaking my head, my lip still tingling at his touch. I move around him and yank open the door, breaking free of his trance and return to the party.

I’m working on my fourth beer, enjoying the warm feeling that goes through my bloodstream.

Steven is actually really funny. I found my way back to him after being shut in the bathroom for far too long with Noah. *That man is certifiable*, I think to myself, running my tongue over the spot on my bottom lip that still tingled from his touch.

He’s sitting across from the fire. Row of empty beer bottles at his feet. I don’t remember him being a big drinker back in school. Granted, we were all underage, but that didn’t seem to stop us. I watch as his brother looks over my way while they talk. Noah looks sad, and I can’t help but wonder what’s going on with him lately. Besides his mom being sick, he seems off, conflicted in some way.

Our eyes meet from across the fire, and I give him a questioning glance.

“So, what do you think, Gertie?”

“I’m sorry what?” I ask, turning back to Steven, who I realize just asked me a question.

“Can I get your number?”

“Oh yeah, sure.” I smile, as he pulls out his phone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NOAH



“**W**hat’s your problem, man?” Derek asks, sitting down next to me and handing me another beer. “It’s a party. You look like your cat died.”

“Leave the cat out of it, and I don’t know. My head’s a fucking wreck lately, man.”

“About what specifically?” he asks, as his eyes follow my line of vision to a certain curvy spitfire sitting next to some jackass who can’t stop staring at her tits.

“Aahhh, I see. There’s plenty of women here, man,” he pats me on the back.

“Yep, and the one I want, the one I finally found the balls to go after, thinks I’m a fucking joke.”

“You’re serious about her, huh? You’re sure it’s not about the challenge. You know, maybe because she’s never been attainable for you. Mike would have kicked your ass.”

“It’s more than that bro, she’s different. She’s always been special but, I don’t know, look at her, she’s a woman now. It’s fucking me up man, she’s all I think about.”

“Looks like you’re not the only one checking her out either.” He points out, bringing my attention back to the dumbass trying to make a move on her.

I've had enough when I see him pull out his phone. If I can't call or text her without her telling me not to, then neither can this dumbass. He looks like he came out of a frickin' clothing catalog.

I get up and move around the fire, intent on telling Abercrombie to back the fuck off.

She looks up as I step in front of them. Her eyes full of questions, her face glowing in the reflection of the fire.

"You got a problem, man?" I say, kicking at his shoe to get his attention.

He's practically been drooling over her for the last forty-five minutes.

"What?" He has the nerve to ask me, as if he doesn't know he's a dumbass.

"I said, do you have a problem? Back off her man."

"Excuse me? Do you know this guy, Gertie?" he asks, and has the balls to laugh.

"Barely." She grumbles.

"Barely?" I shout. "I know her better than you ever will. How does she like her hot dog, man?" *What did I just say? How many beers did I have?*

"Oh, Christ." Gertie says, covering her face, which has turned the most adorable shade of pink. I bet he has no idea that when she blushes, it starts at her chest and moves up to her neck, her cheeks, and then spreads to her ears. I'm about to ask him as much when he stands up to face me.

"Her hot dog? Is that some euphemism for something, tough guy?" He shoves me in the chest. I stumble back in the sand. Note to self, *drink less if I plan on fighting.*

"My problem is you trying to get in her pants douchebag. She's too fucking good for you!" I yell, shoving him back.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Gertie yells, standing up and moving in between us. I pin her with a glare that makes her breath catch.

“You’re drunk Noah, calm down.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that this guy is a dumbass.” I argue.

“You don’t even know him!” She yells, looking up at me. She’s so tiny, I should just throw her over my shoulder and be done with this nonsense.

“I know his kind, believe me, Gertie. I should know.”

“Oh, I have no doubt you know all about men who are players, Noah” she scoffs, hands on her curvy hips, an angry pout on her pretty little face.

“See?” I say, turning to Stevie boy douche bag. “She *does* think you’re a player,” I tell him smugly.

“Oh my God!” Gertie yells “That’s not what I meant Steven, I am so sorry about this.”

“Umm...No problem,” he says. “I think I’ll go now.”

“No, don’t!” She grabs his arm. “You stay. Noah was just going. Weren’t you Noah?”

“I want to talk to you!” I shout, throwing up my hands in exasperation. “And you’re spending your whole damn night with this douche bag!” I yell.

“Noah, go home and sober up. You’re causing a scene,” she pleads, glancing around.

“Not until you talk to me,” I reply, holding my ground.

She sighs, relenting. “I’m sorry Steven, it was nice to meet you.”

“Yea, *sorry Steven.*” I grin back at him as she drags me away from the fire.

She stops when we get to the parking lot, turning quickly on her heels.

“How long is this going to go on, Noah?” She yells, storming towards me.

“How long is what going to go on?” I ask backing away a bit.

“This,” she motions between us. “How long until you let me be part of the crowd? I’m an adult, and you kind of are, sometimes. It’s time to let this go and stop trying to do things that make me run off.”

“That’s not what I’m doing,” I say. “How long until you forgive me for shit I did when I was a stupid kid and stop bringing it up every two seconds?” I ask her.

“Obviously, now is not the time for this conversation. You’re drunk and I can barely understand you. You need to learn your alcohol limits, Noah,” she says, condescendingly.

“I know my limits, Shortstack. I just didn’t listen to them tonight. But I still know you shouldn’t be talking to some dumbass that just wants to get into your pants!”

“Now, you listen to me, Noah Anders!” she yells, poking my chest hard enough that I stumble back. “Who gets in my pants is none of your goddamn business. I’m not some teenager that can be told what to do anymore!”

“I’m not...”

“Stop! Stop talking **right now** and listen to me. I will not tolerate it anymore; **do you hear me?!?**” She shrieks. I look anxiously around at the crowd that’s gathered.

“Gertie, I’m sorry....” I start trying to apologize to diffuse the situation. The last time I saw her this worked up she was fourteen and pissed that her brother and I put a snake in her bed.

“You should be sorry! Do not talk to me or come around me until you intend to treat me as an equal! **Do you understand me, Noah Anders!?**” She yells, poking at me again. “You cannot tell me who I can talk to! What the hell is wrong with you!” She screams, stomping her foot onto the ground.

I rub at my chest where I feel like she’s made a permanent indent from poking me and watch as she marches away waving down some car in the distance.

I feel like my balls have shriveled up and disappeared. My own mother hardly ever yelled at me that sternly except that one time I broke the neighbor’s window playing baseball and lied about it.

“Wait, where are you going?” I ask, making my way towards her. “Whose car is that, anyway?”

“I’m going home!” She yells at me as she slams the car door in my face.

“Oh my fucking God” I moan, covering my eyes the next morning. “What the fuck time is it?” I mumble to myself peeking through squinted eyes. “Where am I?” I sit up too fast and grab my head. The pounding is relentless.

There are clothes all over the place, take-out containers strewn about. The couch I’ve been passed out on has one arm missing. Definitely Aidan’s house. I normally try to avoid the place, women coming and going, and parties nonstop are not my scene anymore.

“Dude, you’re up,” Aidan says. “I’m impressed,” he adds, walking into the living room butt-ass naked.

“Put some clothes on, man!” I yell, and then have instant regret as my head pounds harder.

“My house, my rules, man. Freedom, chicks dig it,” he pulls OJ from the fridge. “It’s only nine AM. I figured the way you drank last night, you’d be passed out until noon.”

Memories of my argument with Gertie come back to me as I watch him chug juice from the carton. Man, was she heated. My cock goes hard thinking of her sweaty and red faced. *I’m an idiot.*

“Thanks for letting me stay over, bro. I gotta get out of here. Where are my keys?” I ask, looking around.

“Anytime man, you know that,” he tosses them at me. “Your truck’s out front.”

I drive home making a game plan. I pissed her off royally. I went two steps forward, spending the day with her and Cooper at the derby, and then jumped ten steps behind, getting drunk and pissing her off.

Now the solution. I’ve got to think of something that will wow her.

She’s too stubborn to forgive me with chocolate and flowers. I think to myself as I walk into my apartment and hop in the shower. I’m not giving up this easily though, not when I was finally getting somewhere with that woman. She may be a spitfire, but I can hold my own.

I down a couple Tylenol and chug some strong coffee as the solution comes to me. I grab my tools and head over to her place.

I’ve got the hood open, and the battery removed when I hear my little buddy.

“Mr. Noah! You’re here!” Cooper squeals, grabbing onto my leg. I rustle his hair and look up at the woman standing in

front of me. Fiery red hair and equally fiery eyes. I recognize her as the friend who was with Gertie, the night at the bar.

“The F you doing here?” She asks, hands on her hips.

“F means a naughty word, Mr. Noah. She looks mad at you,” Cooper says, looking up at me with wide eyes. I give him a reassuring wink.

“Hello, I don’t think we’ve properly met,” I say, holding out my hand. “I’m Noah Anders,” giving her my best smile.

“I know who you are. You pissed our girl off quite a bit last night, don’t you think?” She asks, denying my handshake and putting her hands in her pockets.

I don’t know what Gertie is talking about, saying I have charm. If I ever had it, I’ve clearly lost it. I shudder at the thought that I may need Aidan’s help to brush up on my skills.

“Unintentionally, yes. I’m here to make amends.”

“How do you intend on doing that?” She asks, looking around at the car parts scattered on the ground.

“I was going to start by putting a new battery in her car and changing the oil.”

“And?” She asks, raising her brows and challenging me.

“Asking her to dinner...and a movie?” I ask hesitantly, hoping I’ve passed the test.

“Interesting,” she responds, not giving me anything while she heads into the house. Cooper trails behind her and I smile as he stops just before the door shuts, giving me a thumbs up.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GERTIE



“**Y**ou realize you have a sexy as hell sweaty man out there fixing your car, right?” Jules asks me as she walks into my apartment, shutting the door behind her.

“I’m aware. I’m ignoring him. And don’t say anything about him being hot too loudly. The last thing he needs is another woman swooning over him,” I say, handing her a hot cup of coffee.

“I’m just saying, it’s obvious why they swoon.”

“To someone who doesn’t know him as well as I do, yes I suppose he is swoon worthy.”

“Oh God, give me a break, Gertie. You’ve got to see it. He’s got an ass you could bounce a quarter off of and you know there’s a six pack under that tee shirt. I was tempted to rip it off him and check, just to be sure, but I got sidetracked by his beard and obvious killer jawline.”

“Of course, I see it. He’s a very attractive man. Until he opens his mouth. Then he’s aggravating as hell. You should have seen the shit he pulled last night.” I tell her, cringing as I remember the amount of people watching the drama unfold.

“Why don’t you give him a try?” She asks me, leaning up against the counter as I fix myself a third cup of coffee. I will never drink again.

“Give him a try with what?”

“A hookup.”

“A hookup!” I scoff.

“First of all, I’d have to put a gag ball in his mouth, so he didn’t piss me off, and second of all, he doesn’t think of me like that. He never has. I’m just the little sister.”

“Maybe he’s into being ball gagged,” she snickers, “and, I saw his face when I dropped you off at his mom’s house the other day. Plus, he’s out there this morning fixing your car, trying to make amends.

I told him the other day I didn’t want his help with the car, he doesn’t listen!” I argue.

“Still, I’m pretty sure he’s not thinking ‘little sister’ when he looks at you. Anyway, are we still on for next weekend?” She asks, downing the last of her coffee and rinsing out the cup.

“Yeah, Coop is going to be at his dad’s, so I’m free. You still want to go dancing?”

“I cannot wait to move these hips!” She giggles, swaying back and forth.

“Coop!” I hiss, looking into the living room, “get out of the window!”

“But, Mr. Noah is out there, mama!”

“Why don’t you play with your toys? Watch some TV, or read a book?”

“I want to play with Mr. Noah,” he says, frantically waving through the curtain, his face pressed up against the glass.

“Poor guy is probably hungry,” Jules pipes up, peering into my fridge.

“Don’t you start too. I am not feeding that man Jules.”

“A physique like that requires a high protein diet, you know. What if he wears himself thin fixing your car and passes out or something, knocking himself out?” She snickers, head still deep in my fridge.

“Yeah Mommy, Auntie Jules is right. Can I bring him a sandwich? I want to tell Mr. Noah about my new soccer ball.”

“Didn’t you say Noah played sports with your brother in school?” Jules asks me, winking at Cooper.

“Did he play soccer, Mommy?” He shouts, jumping up and down excitedly.

“Noah played all sorts of sports in school with Uncle Michael. I don’t remember what kind,” I answer, turning away from the two of them. I’m totally fibbing. I know he played soccer. I remember my brother and Noah stinking up the car on the way home from practice.

“Thanks for teaming up on me, Jules. Yeah, Coop, make him any kind of sandwich you want, Buddy,” I say, relenting. “I’m headed to the shower.”

I let the hot water wash over me as I try to calm my pounding head. Every sound seems amplified. I can hear Jules and Cooper opening and shutting cupboards, I can hear the water coming through the old pipes, my eyes feel puffy and my body aches. Drinking and partying were so much easier on my body back in the day. I completely took it for granted. I dry myself off and head to my room to get dressed. Through my open window, I can hear Cooper’s little voice through the screen.

“Mommy said I could make you a sandwich, peanut butter is my favorite! Do you like it?”

“Oh, wow thank you buddy, this is really great...” I hear Noah respond hesitantly. “Um, what are the crunchy things?”

“Onions! Auntie Jules said you need vegetables for big muscles!”

I cover my mouth, trying to hold in my laughter, but the sound escapes me. I know Noah heard, because his head tilts and his eyes narrow in my direction.

“It’s the best sandwich I’ve ever had, buddy.” I hear him respond.

“Thanks! My Mommy says you play sports.”

“I did a lot when I was in school. Do you like sports?”

“I like soccer. Mommy bought me a new ball so I can practice. Wanna see it?”

“Sure bud.”

I hear my front door open, the sound of little feet padding down the hall and back, and then the sound of the front door opening and closing again. I take the opportunity to pull on an oversized hoodie and some leggings before I squat down next to the window again to eavesdrop.

“See?”

“Awesome ball buddy!”

“I have soccer practice tomorrow, wanna come watch?”
Shit. Shit. Shit. *Say you are busy, Noah.*

“I’d love to!”

Of course he would.

“Mommy said it’s at three o’clock and we can’t be late. Mommy said I have to have a snack first, and I have to wear knee pads and she wishes I could wear a helmet too, but I’d look silly because none of the other kids wear helmets.”

If I had the choice, I’d wrap him in bubble wrap, at least it’s not football.

“Where is practice? At your school?”

“On the playground. Danny’s father is the coach,” Cooper says, as I hear the engine of my car start up.

“It’s working!” Cooper yells. “Mommy, come look! Mr. Noah made the car work!”

I make my way out to the front porch and see the two of them standing side by side, hands on their hips. Noah has grease and dirt all over his shirt and jeans, and a megawatt smile across his face. He looks rugged, and Jules was right, I hate to admit it, but sexy as hell.

“Hey Gert.” He says softly, looking surprisingly more bashful than I’ve ever seen him.

“Hey, thank you, Noah. Really, this is amazing.”

“You’re welcome. Hey, Cooper, could you give your Mommy and I a minute to talk in private?” he asks, combing his fingers through his beard, never breaking our eye contact.

“I think Jules was waiting to watch that movie with you, Buddy. I’ll be in, in a minute,” I tell Cooper, motioning towards the door.

“Okay!” He runs in the house. I sit down on the steps, waiting for Noah to speak first.

“Can I sit here?” He asks, and I push over, making space on the porch.

“You didn’t have to fix the car, Noah. I would’ve had enough saved up in a couple weeks,” I say, picking imaginary lint off my leggings.

“I know I didn’t have to, but I wanted to.”

“Well, I hope you’ll at least let me pay you for the parts.” I argue.

“Naw, it’s part of my apology gift. I was an ass last night and I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to look out for me anymore, Noah. I know you and Michael did when we were kids, but I don’t need you to anymore,” I tell him.

“You’re always taking care of other people, Gert,” tucks a stray hair behind my ear. “At your job, at home with Cooper. Who looks out for you?”

“Myself, Noah. That’s one of the reasons I got a divorce.”

“What does that mean, Gert?”

“It means, I don’t want to be told what to do and be controlled by having my life mapped out for me. I want to make my own choices. I want to take care of myself.”

“Your ex was controlling of you?” He asks, his voice still soft.

“I didn’t see it that way at the time, I felt lonely. No parents. Michael took off. I had no one,” I say, looking up at the blue sky. The sadness I felt back in those days pulling at my heart. I take a deep breath, trying to keep the tears that are about to sprout at bay.

“Elliott was stable and kept me on the right path, I thought. Now I realize it was his path, not mine.”

I look down, realizing he’s been rubbing the pads of his fingers across the top of my hand while I talked, encouraging me to continue. I’m surprised I opened up, I usually keep those thoughts to myself. Only Jules knows the details of my past, my childhood, my marriage. And even then, her knowledge is limited. It feels oddly comforting sitting here next to him, with him rubbing my hand. Little sparks of electricity cause my stomach to flip flop.

“I joined the military, you know?”

“What? I didn’t know that,” I look at him in surprise.

“Yeah, I only served a year and a half though, until I hurt my knee so badly, they sent me on my way. See?” He knocks on his kneecap, “It’s metal. I’ll have to get it redone in about fifteen years.”

“Your mom never mentioned you were in the military.”

“I’m not surprised.” He chuckles. “She hated it. Scared the crap out of her with me being away and traveling around the world. I needed the structure and the discipline, though. Mom won’t admit it, but I think she was secretly cheering when I had to get my knee replaced.”

“Oh, she was not.” I laugh, nudging him with my shoulder. “Your mother is one of the sweetest people I’ve ever met.”

“She is pretty amazing,” he looks down at our hands that have now become clasped together, he runs his thumb along mine, and just that simplest touch calms me.

“Cancer really sucks Noah, I’m sorry about your mom.”

“You’ve been really good for her. She loved having you and Cooper around when you brought him swimming. She talked about it for days.”

“He does keep things interesting. That kid is something else.” I laugh, shaking my head to myself.

“You’re a great mom, Gertie. Your parents would be proud of you.”

“Thanks,” I say, my voice cracking. “I doubt myself a lot. I want to give him everything, you know?”

“Well, you shouldn’t doubt yourself, he’s the coolest kid I know and clearly knows an awesome guy when he sees him,” he chuckles. “He even invited me to his soccer practice tomorrow.”

“I heard.”

“I *thought* you were eavesdropping,” he grins down at me.
“Is that okay, if I come?”

“He’d love to have you there.”

“And you? How would you feel having me there?” he asks, meeting my eyes. With his face this close to mine, I lick my lips as his eyes glance down at them, pulling me in, yet again.

“How would you feel, Gert?” He whispers, his warm, minty breath washing over me.

“I’d like that too.” I hear myself whisper back, earning another of his megawatt smiles.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NOAH



“So, I went over and fixed her car, hung out with Cooper a bit. He invited me to his soccer practice,” I tell my brother, as we make our way to Cooper’s school.

“Thanks for letting me tag along man, I’m bored as shit.”

“No ladies keeping you busy?”

“I don’t know man,” he looks out the window. “They just aren’t holding my interest lately. I’m in a sex funk.”

“A sex funk, huh?” I ask, while parking the truck.

“Seriously dude, last night I had this hot ass girl naked in my bed and I just couldn’t focus.”

“You couldn’t get it up? I ask, looking over at him surprised.

“Well, I mean, I could and I did, a couple times actually. But I just couldn’t get as into it as usual.”

“Maybe it’s time to settle down, man, find the right woman.” I suggest.

“Fuck that, shit dude. I’m twenty-five. I’m nowhere near ready to get tied down. Fuck. Better stop swearing.” he responds, as we walk over to the soccer field.

I spot Gertie right away. She looks beautiful. Her hair is blowing in the wind; she looks fresh faced with not a bit of

makeup on. Leggings hugging every beautiful curve, until she yanks her long tee shirt over her ass, hiding it from me. I sigh.

“You got it bad, man.” My brother pats me on the back.

“Shut it. Where’s Cooper?” I ask, peering around the field, and then I spot him standing on the edge of the field, arms crossed with a scowl on his face.

“Hey Gert, what’s wrong with Coop?” I ask, walking over to her quickly. I swear if he’s getting bullied, I’m going to throw down. I don’t care if it’s another five-year-old or not.

“Oh, hey guys. Cooper’s upset because the guy coaching didn’t show, so a couple parents are trying to help. He watched soccer games all day yesterday on YouTube and said they aren’t *following the rules he learned*,” she says, making quotation marks.

“What kind of coach doesn’t show up for the first practice?” I ask, my blood starting to boil the more I see the disappointment on my little buddy’s face. He looks so much like his momma when he pouts like that. Just like the times Michael and I wouldn’t let her tag along as kids.

“It’s a volunteer thing, and the guy said he had prior engagements according to another parent.” She rolls her eyes. “I don’t know why he signed up if he knew he couldn’t commit, but looks like they’ll have to cancel and forfeit the game.

“This is ridiculous,” I say, looking over at my brother. We nod in agreement. I pull my hoodie over my head and toss it on the bleachers.

“What are you doing?” She asks, her eyes wide.

“Coaching soccer.” I say, as Aidan and I jog out onto the field.

I'm going to have to ice my knee tonight when I get home, who knew five-year-olds could run me ragged out on the field like that. Even Aidan had to stop and catch his breath a couple times, and the guy's a gym freak.

It was complete and total chaos for the first twenty minutes. The kids all ran in different directions, kicking the ball into the wrong nets. Two kids even started a wrestling match until Aidan and I pulled them apart.

Once we untangled them and I wiped the sweat off my forehead, I glanced over at Gertie to see what she thought about the madness, and she had tears running down her cheeks from laughing so hard. That made it all worth it.

"Mr. Noah, can we get ice cream on the way home?" Cooper questions, as I hoist him on my shoulders, and he bounces up and down with more energy than seems humanly possible.

"Let's ask Mommy, okay buddy? I just got on her good side," I respond, as we walk over to where she's standing on the edge of the field.

"Can you coach next week Mr. Noah? My friend said he likes you, and I do too."

I look at Gertie, trying to read her face as she listens to him ask, but she gives nothing away other than her eye twitching, I wonder what that's about. Trying to read this woman's mind is impossible when she's got her guard up, apparently today is one of those days.

"We'll see buddy. I'll talk to your mom about it." I promise, setting him down, while ruffling his hair. I don't want to make promises to the kid that I can't keep.

Why won't she meet my eyes?

“Tell Noah goodbye Cooper, we need to get home and get you changed before your dad picks you up.”

“I don't want to go to Dad's!” Cooper yells, stomping his foot. His little angry face reminds me of his mother the other night and I bite down on my lip, fighting the urge to smile.

“Well, you need to. Come on, let's go,” she snaps. “I'm sure daddy and you will have fun together.” She tries to reason while reaching for his hand, only to have him pull away.

“Daddy is never fun Mama!” He screams with tears running down his face. “He's mean and I hate him!”

I stand frozen as I hear Gertie gasp “Cooper, your daddy loves you very much and would be sad you said that. You two had fun at the zoo, remember? Now let's go.”

I put my hands in my pockets, they're in tight fists as I fight the urge to step in and help. Instead, Aidan and I stand still, trying to look anywhere but at the five-year-old working himself up into a fit while Gertie desperately tries to get him under control. *What do you do when kids are like this?*

I watch as he throws himself on the ground, angry tears running down his little red cheeks. Dad used to pick us up off the ground and give us an ass whooping. It always made us cry harder and then him and mom would fight. Mom was a talker, Dad not so much.

“Should I ask if I can get him ice cream?” I whisper to Aidan as I watch shit go downhill and Gertie tries to wrestle Cooper off the ground.

“Don't look at me, I have no clue.” He throws his hands up. “I'd like some ice cream, though.”

I ignore him and walk over, bending down to try to help. “Hey Coop, maybe we...”

“Stop, Noah, I’ve got him,” Gertie snaps at me.

“Okay, I just thought maybe I could...”

“You’ve done enough.” She snaps at me again.

“I’m sorry.” She picks him up, cradling his head on her shoulder and patting his back. “He’s just overtired Noah. I need to get him home.”

I nod my head in understanding, even though I totally don’t. I could have picked him up and carried him for her, at least. He’s half the height of her tiny frame and I’m pretty sure I saw his foot collide with her nose while he was flailing all over the place like a fish out of water.

I watch her buckle him into his booster seat and wipe the tears from his cheeks, kissing the top of his head. My chest aches at the sight and how helpless I feel, as I get in my own vehicle.

“What did I do wrong there, Aidan?” I ask, as I drive away. “Seriously man, you gotta help me because I’m batting zero out here,” I tell him, as I head towards home.

“You got me, dude. One minute we were having fun and the next he turned into that kid from Poltergeist.”

“Why did she get mad at me, though?” I ask, running my hands through my sweaty hair. “I thought she looked happy from the sidelines of the field. She even put my hoodie on when she got cold. Girls only wear your hoodie if they’re into you. That’s chick 101. I don’t get it.”

“This is why I don’t date moms, dude. Don’t get me wrong, she’s a MILF.”

“Careful...” I warn him.

“Bro, I’m not going after your girl, I’m just saying. Single moms are complicated. She’s wound pretty tight. She was so quiet and laid back when we were kids. She probably just

needs to let off some steam. Probably needs to get laid.” He shrugs.

“You think getting laid is the solution for everything,” I say, pulling into the driveway.

“Uh, because it is dude. Have you read anything about women needing Vitamin O?”

“Vitamin what? What are you talking about?” I scoff, unlocking my door.

“I was reading Cosmo the other day.”

“Cosmo?”

“Don’t knock it, it’s how I keep up with what women are thinking. Plus the Victoria Secret ads are smoking.”

“Was there a point to this?” I ask, filling Mr. Sprinkles food bowl for the third time today.

“Yeah, women like to fuck just as much as us men.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GERTIE



I watch Cooper sleeping soundly as I pack his bag for the weekend. He looks so sweet and innocent when he's asleep. You'd never guess he acted like a rabid animal just an hour ago. I'm lucky my nose isn't broken. I sit on the edge of the bed and text Jules.

'I'm pissed at myself.'

'What happened?'

'I basically ripped Noah's head off this afternoon.'

'Why did you do that?'

'I don't know Jules. He came to Cooper's soccer game and ended up coaching the whole thing.'

'I'm confused.'

'He looked so happy. Cooper had a blast.'

'I'm still confused.'

'He's acting like the total package.'

'And that's bad because????'

'Because I'm not looking for a relationship and Cooper is getting attached.'

'You're not?'

'Well, are you?????'

'No, I'm not. I want to casually date for a few years and then maybe get in a relationship. Plus, it's Noah Anders. That is totally not who I had in mind as a casual hook up.'

'So, he's an asshole for being the total package at the wrong time?'

'Pretty much, yeah. He's being someone different than I thought he was, and it's scaring me. Gotta go, Elliott is here.'

"Hey," I say, carrying a still groggy Cooper out to meet Elliott, who's waiting in the hallway. I watch as he looks up, seeing the peeling paint on the ceiling and the worn carpet. You don't get much for fifteen hundred a month around here, but it was the best I could do.

"Hi. Sleepy today, is he?" he asks.

"He had his first soccer practice and wore himself out."

"Oh yea, I forgot about that." He looks down at his phone distractedly.

"I've got his bag packed," I say, handing it over. "What are your plans this weekend?" I ask him.

"What?" he asks, tucking his phone back in his pocket. "Sorry stocks are down and Dad is freaking out, you know the drill."

"I was asking what you had planned for the two of you this weekend." I repeat, as I shift my weight from one foot to the next.

"Visiting with my mother. My dad is going on a business trip for a couple weeks, and she's asking to see Cooper."

Great, so I'll have a grumpy boy on my hands Sunday night when he comes home. Visiting Elliott's parents means a

lot of sitting and no hands-on play. The exact opposite of what Cooper likes to do.

“Maybe you could bring his new soccer ball with you?” I suggest.

“You know that’s not my thing. When he’s older, I’m hoping he’ll be a great golfer like his dad.” He chuckles, taking Cooper from me.

“Okay, well, you two have fun and I’ll see you Sunday night,” I say, kissing Cooper’s cheek and following them to the door.

“Bye Mama, I love you,” Cooper mumbles, still sleepy.

“Bye baby boy, I love you too,” I say, closing the door after them. Hands down, the suckiest part of divorce is watching Cooper leave every other weekend.

“What are you wearing tonight?” Jules asks me, while rummaging through my closet as I do my makeup.

“I can dress myself you know,” I say looking at her in the reflection of my vanity.

“Yes, but why do it alone when I’m here to help and I clearly know fashion?” She asks, motioning to herself. I’ll give her that. She does keep up on fashion more than I do. She’s dressed to kill tonight in tight blue jeans, a sheer black top, and higher heels than I’d ever dare wear.

“Don’t take this wrong Jules, but, when my mother was in her forties, like you are, she dressed like a little old lady.”

“Gertie, don’t you know forty-seven is the new twenty-one?” She asks me as she twirls around, shaking her ass. “I

was done giving a shit what others thought ten years ago. Now, I just want to have fun!”

“How do my eyes look?” I ask, batting my lashes. I’ve drawn thick black liner into a cat eye and false lashes that look semi natural, but longer and thicker than my real ones.

“They look hot as fuck girl! You should finish it off with dark red lipstick!”

“You don’t think it’s too much?”

“Absolutely not. What about wearing this?” she asks, holding up a skintight black, low-cut dress I wore once on a dare.

“No way!” I gasp, “I haven’t worn that since college!”

“Even more reason to wear it!”

“Jules, that was before Cooper. I’m still holding onto pregnancy weight five years later. I’d be bursting at the seams in that. Thanks for the reminder though,” I say, sticking my tongue out at her.

“Humor me and put it on,” she holds it out to me.

“You are relentless.” I sigh, giving in, “but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I told you,” I announce walking out of the bathroom and twirling around. “I can feel the jiggle in my ass when I turn, let alone dance.”

“Did you look at yourself in the mirror?” She asks me.

“No, I’d rather not be horrified before I go out.”

She sighs as drags me over to my full-length mirror, “See yourself through my eyes.”

I look at myself in the mirror, tilting my head to the side, “What do you mean?”

“Most of the time, you’re covered up with baggy clothes, Gertie. You’ve got amazing boobs and an ass that women pay good money for.”

“I’ve got stretch marks you can see with my side boob showing and a fupa.” I argue. “Plus, my thighs touch and rub together when I walk.”

“Most of us have stretch marks, and fupas are totally normal for some women. Have you ever had a man complain?”

“Well, no, but to be fair, I’ve only been with two men, including Elliott, and he was the only one to see my body after pregnancy.”

“Did he complain about your body? Why are you shy about it?”

“He never complained about anything. I doubt he noticed during our weekly planned out missionary sex.” I retort.

“Gertie, you’re a beautiful, sexy woman who deserves to have new experiences and to be sexually satisfied! You left Elliott to make that very thing happen. You’re so stuck on being the perfect person for everyone else. Let it go, girlfriend! Don’t puss out on me now, you’re halfway there!”

I look at my reflection. The woman standing in front of me has been through a ton of shit and birthed a beautiful baby. Why am I so hard on myself?

“You’re right, let’s go.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

NOAH



“I thought you were done with the bar scene.” I prod Aidan, as I ice my knee, watching him flipping through the channels.

“It’s Saturday night and you’re going to spend it icing your arthritis? What are you, ninety? You want some Bengay and aspirin old man?”

“Fuck off, I was injured protecting our country jackass.”

“You popped your knee playing volleyball during down time with your uni. Let’s be real here, and call it like it is.” He chuckles.

“You know you’re a real pain in my ass man,” I sigh.

“Noah, you can’t spend your life pining after one girl.”

“I haven’t spent my life pining over one girl, I’ve had plenty of other women.”

“And?”

“And they were.... unsatisfying.”

“Just come out to the new sports bar with me. We’ll kick back and watch the game and have a few beers.”

“I can do that here in the comfort of my own home.”

“Right, but there’s no women here, come on,” he throws me my jacket.

“Fine, but you’re taking your own car and I’m taking my motorcycle. I’m not getting stuck being the driver for you and some woman sucking face in the backseat while I drive your ass home.”

I haven’t been on my bike in a few weeks and I’m missing the feeling I get. Plus, sore knee or not, that old man comment is getting to me, and my bike always secretly makes me feel like a badass.

The sports bar ends up being a decent place. Large screen TVs all around, a small dance floor. “Yo, Noah and Aidan, what’s up? Haven’t seen you two in a while,” the bartender greets us as we sit down.

“Jared, how are you? Don’t think I’ve seen you since that night down at the pier,” I laugh. “Those were some wild times.”

“Don’t remind me man, crazy times back then. You been back in town for a while?” he asks me, as I take a shot and almost drop the glass when Aidan elbows me in the ribs.

I look to where he’s motioning and practically spit my whiskey across the bar. My eyes water and I’m choking, as Aidan pats me on the back, laughing at my expense while I try to catch my breath.

“Dude, you’re so fucked.” I hear him chuckle, but I’m laser focused on the woman who just entered the bar. Gertie. She’s wearing a dress so small I don’t think it counts as

clothing and her lips are deep dark red. My cock twitches, imagining those red lips wrapped around....

“Is that Gertie Williams?” Jared asks, interrupting my thoughts. “Christ, she’s fuckin’ smoking. I should get her number.”

“No, you shouldn’t,” I tell him, shooting him a glare as I stand up, ready to make my way over to her.

“Give her a minute, man.” My brother says, grabbing my arm.

“Look at her! She’s going to get eaten alive out there!” I say, shrugging him off.

“You think she wants you to try to save her again?”

“I’m not some weak teenager that can be told what to do anymore!”

“It’s time to let this go and stop trying to do things that make me run off!”

Her words from the night at the bonfire come back to me. “Fuck,” I yell, slamming my glass down on the bar, and sitting back down.

“So what?” I ask turning to my brother, “I’m just supposed to sit here and watch her getting felt up? Look at that guy next to her. He’s practically foaming at the mouth.”

“You’re going to blow-it if you go over there. You know that just as well as I do. Who’s the chick with her?”

“Her friend Jules,” I tug at my beard.

“What’s her story? She’s hot. Looks like a feisty one,” he says, looking her up and down.

“For fucks sake, I don’t know. Keep your dick in your pants.”

“Have another shot, Noah. Chill out and watch the game.”

“I can’t drink any more than this, I need a clear head. This woman is putting me over the edge! Look at that dumb fucker trying to rub up on her, Jesus Christ, how’d I let you convince me to come out? It’s like a damn meat market in here. These men have no shame!” I shout at my brother, who’s doubled over. “What the fuck are you laughing at?” *Laughing at my expense, no doubt.*

“Nothing bro, I just don’t remember you feeling that way when I visited you in Cali and we were on the prowl.”

“That was different, fuck off.”

I shove my hands in my pockets and continue to sit on the bar stool as I try my best not to walk over and punch the fucker who’s now grinding up on her ass.

The music is blaring, the smoke is thick as fuck, and I just want to get out of here.

I watch in horror as he draws her close to his chest and she wraps her arms up around his neck. *This must be hell. I’m in literal hell.* Her long brown silky hair falls over her face and she moves her hand to brush it away. Just as she does, her eyes meet mine across the dance floor. I see her red pouty lips take a sharp intake of breath as she realizes that I’m watching. His lips whisper in her ear, but her eyes remain on mine.

I’m gritting my teeth so hard I’m surprised they don’t crack under the pressure.

“Breathe, man,” my brother coaxes from beside me.

“I’m good.” I say, exhaling. She turns away, closing her eyes as they move to the music. *I can withstand this; I’ve gone through fucking bootcamp. I can handle this.*

Her dress rises, showing more of her delicious, thick thighs and I feel my mouth water at the sight. I want those legs thrown over my shoulders while I eat her out. I bet she's sweet as honey.... My thoughts are interrupted as I watch his hand climb up the side of her waist, my heart beating faster at every inch until he reaches her plump full breast, palming it in his large hand. Despite the fury raging inside of me at seeing another man touching what's mine....Mine? Jesus, this woman has me by the balls. My cock goes rock hard, I must be a God damned masochist.

She shoves his hand back down to her waist, and I breathe deeply, letting oxygen back into my bloodstream until his hand slowly starts creeping back up and I see her scowl. I've had enough. I watch as she backs away from him just as I'm storming ahead, my brother on my heels. I'm seconds away from grabbing the fucker by the throat and choking him out when I see her hand flying through the air hitting his cheek.

“Watch your hands, asshole!” She shrieks.

“Enough!” I yell, separating the two of them and towering over her. “Let's go!” I take her by the wrist, dragging her through the crowd as she fights me, trying to shake me off. I pull her through a side door and into the alley, slamming the door behind us.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GERTIE



My back hits the hard brick wall of the building.

“What the fuck are you doing, Noah!” I shriek, as he stands bent over at the waist in front of me, hands on his knees.

“Trying to catch my breath,” He gasps.

“What is wrong with you? You can’t just yank me off the dance floor and throw me outside, for Christ’s sake!”

“I know, Gertie, I know.” He rights himself.

He stomps back over to me, his eyes wild. He pins me up against the wall with his large body pressed against mine.

“Noah,” I start to speak, but his fingers go over my mouth.

“I know, you can take care of yourself,” he presses his forehead to mine, with eyes closed. “It was killing me Gert,” he whispers, his breath a heady mix of whiskey and mint combined.

“I can’t stand seeing another man’s hands on you.”

“I don’t need protecting, Noah.”

“I don’t just want to protect you, Gertie. I fuckin’ want you for myself,” he says desperately, as his hand caresses the side of my neck, holding me tight against the wall. “I want you

all to myself.” He repeats, searching my eyes. “Can’t you see that?”

His skin glistens with sweat and he’s still breathing hard. His body feels so good pressed up against mine, I try to make sense of his words. *All to himself?*

I lick my lips as he stares at me with such an intensity, I feel like he’s devouring me.

My legs are shaking, and I have to squeeze my thighs together to control the throbbing between them. A hint of a smirk on his lips tells me he knows the effect he’s having on my body.

“So quiet now, Gertie. Where is that fire I saw earlier?” he asks, running his other hand down my collar bone and lower, still brushing the edges of my exposed breast.

“This fucking dress.” He shakes his head slowly, looking me up and down.

“He touched you here,” he growls, skimming his hand over the side of my breast. He looks me deep in the eyes and runs his thumb over my hardened nipple, raising an eyebrow as a challenge. I gasp at the contact instantly craving his hands between my thighs. My heart feels like it’s thudding out of my chest.

“Do you think anyone can see us?” I whisper, looking down the alley, seeing cars driving by and hearing people laughing and talking, walking through the streets.

“Do you want them to? Are you feeling a little naughty, Shortstack?” he asks, bringing my attention to him as his deep voice vibrates in my ear. His warm breath, hot on my neck. My only response is a whimper as his hand inches up my thigh.

“I watched your dress moving up these delicious thighs on that dance floor for another man,” he breathes. “You were

torturing me. Did you know that?” he asks. I bite my lip to suppress the moan making its way up my throat and shake my head no in response.

His fingers move under my dress, his eyes searching mine, asking permission for his erotic touch.

I’m unable to speak, unable to stop him even if I wanted to, I’m mesmerized by him. I gasp, as his fingers skim the lace of my thin black panties.

“You’re so warm and wet, baby girl. I can feel how much you want this.” His voice rumbles in his chest, so low and sensual I could cum just from the sound of it. I close my eyes and take a deep breath trying to get control of my body but it’s no use.

“Are you imagining my hard cock sliding into this soft wet pussy like I am, baby?” he moans into my ear.

Despite the shock of the words coming out of his mouth, I moan, nodding my head yes.

“Use your words, baby. Tell me you want it. I’ll give you everything if you only ask.” his fingers tease the edge of my panties, begging for access.

“Yes. God yes.” I beg. I’m throbbing and wet. My body feels like it’s vibrating, and I can’t catch my breath.

Hearing my words, he wastes no time as one finger slides inside of me fast and his thumb rubs hard against my clit.

“Not God, baby. Me. This perfect pussy is only meant for me. Can you feel how wet you are for me? No other man can make you cum as hard as I can.”

The pressure of his hand on my throat increases as he bends my neck back, and he pulls at my bottom lip with his thumb, gaining access to my open mouth. His mouth lingers

against mine, his eyes pleading for permission before he devours me.

I lean forward, nibbling on his plump bottom lip and then swiping my tongue across it for a taste. He tastes like whiskey and the sweetest mistake.

Before I can rethink my choices, he pulls me forward claiming my mouth as his own. His sweet, soft tongue swirling along mine. My heart thuds so loud I can feel it in my ears. I'm liquid in his touch, his hard body and hand on my throat the only things keeping me standing.

"I don't know if I can be quiet Noah," I whimper, pulling away from his kiss as he adds another finger deep inside of me. I'm on fire. The passion I'm feeling is so intense I feel as though I might black out.

His mouth descends back on mine, swallowing my cries as he pinches my clit, working me into a frenzy. I'm riding his hand shamelessly in an alley in the middle of the city, my clit pressed against the palm of his hand, his fingers pumping inside of me. I should be appalled at the thought of someone catching us, instead it just makes me wetter. My whole body shuddering at the thought.

My orgasm begins to overtake all my senses. It builds, making its way through my body. I'm completely vulnerable to him. The sound of cars, the people on the street. I hear nothing but Noah's deep commanding voice.

"That's it, baby girl. Give it to me, you naughty girl." My pussy clenches down on his fingers.

"Feel me working that sweet pussy, my hand is drenched in you." His deep voice tickles my ear, his cock is thick, hard, and pressed against my stomach.

"I want your cock, Noah please." I plead, having no control of my words.

“And you’ll have it. If that’s what you want, greedy girl, but first you need to give me what I want. Submit and cum again for me, baby.” His fingers work faster in and out as he increases the pressure on my clit. I feel my knees start to buckle, unable to hold myself up any longer. He holds me tighter against his chest.

“Fuck, fuck.... yes!” I moan loudly, not caring who hears. I pull his face to me, gripping the hair on the base of his neck as my orgasm once again overtakes me. Leaving me shaking and covered in sweat.

I barely register the feeling of him righting my dress. He whispers soft words I can’t quite make out against my ear as I come back to earth. My breathing slows and I look up at him, a smug smirk on his face. I blink as the realization of what we’ve just done comes to me. He merely winks, taking my hand while leading me out of the alley.

“Here, hop on,” he hands me a helmet as my legs still shake from the most intense orgasm I’ve had in my life.

“What?” I whisper shakily, looking up at him. “I can’t ride on a motorcycle. They’re dangerous.”

He comes towards me, brushing his fingers across my lips. “Tonight, Gertie, just live. Let me take care of you. Do you trust me?” he asks. And I nod my head yes. At this moment, against better judgment, I do trust Noah Anders inexplicably.

“Then put that on, baby, and let me bring you home.” He commands, and I do as I’m told.

He revs the engine, and we drive through the streets. I grip him hard around his waist as his fingers skim across my hand comforting me, reassuring me I'm safe with him. I look up towards the sky, seeing the stars and feel the cool breeze against my skin. I feel my body relax and mold against his, resting my head on his shoulder.

I feel sated, safe, buzzed by the alcohol in my system and the most intense orgasms of my life. I also feel taken care of and utterly exhausted.

Soon after, he pulls into my driveway and follows me inside.

I wake up sometime hours later, thankfully I'm in my own bed. I open my eyes, squinting as the sun filters in through the blinds. Noah's arm is heavy around my waist, the pressure on my bladder is enough to raise me from the disarming comfort I feel being in his arms.

I slide to the edge, wincing as the soreness reminds me of last night. Dancing always makes muscles ache that I never knew I had. My thighs burn.

I run through the events of last night, racking my brain for details.

I look back at Noah, his mouth slightly open, his long lashes touching his cheeks. He's shirtless, with tousled hair, and I'm too chicken shit to lift the sheet to see if he's dressed from the waist down. I, however, am in nothing but my black lace panties and what appears to be his tee shirt.

I stand and make my way to the bathroom, locking the door behind me, turning on the water to fill the space with

warm steam before stepping in to wash the night off.

Pressing my forehead against the cool tile wall, I feel the water scald my skin. How could I have let this happen? At least we didn't have sex, I reason with myself. I'm certain I would remember if we had. I remember the alleyway, his skilled hands on me, his mouth....God that was intense.

I barely remember falling asleep. How much did I even drink last night? I only remember two shots and one beer.

This is complicated and messy, the exact opposite of what I'm looking for.

As soon as his dirty talk started, and his magical fingers began their attack, I became a whore for Noah Anders. One of the masses. Damn him!

I hear the door handle rattle and I hold my breath as I wait. He must walk away because all I hear is silence from the other side of the door. Maybe I'll get lucky, and he'll be gone when I come out.

Avoid the confrontation until I can think clearly. He's probably used to this morning after routine, I however am not. Especially with a man that's seen me in a training bra and braces. I can feel my cheeks turning red with embarrassment, and my stomach turns with dread as I stare at the doorknob again.

I dry myself off slowly as I map out what I'll say, if he's even still out there when I'm brave enough to come out.

Surely, he knows last night doesn't change anything. I got wrapped up in his charm, like all the women before me. Caught up in the moment, the music, the alcohol, the motorcycle.... I open the door, peeking out.

The moment I see him sitting on the edge of the bed, arms crossed across his chest, with eyes narrowed, I know he doesn't see things the same as I do.

“Shut me out already, did you, Gert?” His eyes bore into mine, angry and heated.

“Noah, don’t do this.” I sigh, making my way to my closet. “It was a fun night between friends, let’s just leave it at that,” I say, trying my best to sound flippant.

“Of course.” I hear him murmur as he walks up behind me.

“Maybe you need a reminder of how your body responded to me last night.” He presses himself against my back, I can feel him long and hard against me.

I gasp as his hand moves from my hip, making its way between my legs to cup my naked sex.

“I know for a fact that you can still feel my fingers inside of you.... rubbing your little clit....you came so fuckin’ hard, baby girl,” he groans in my ear. “It was the hottest thing I’ve ever felt on my fingers. Imagine my co...”

“It was a mistake, Noah,” I say, interrupting him, turning around to face him and putting space between us while gripping my towel tighter around myself.

I back away from him before my inner whore decides to make her appearance again, she’s already peeking around the corner begging me to give in.

“You didn’t seem to think it was a mistake last night.” Raising an eyebrow at me as he licks his lips. His eyes travel down to where I’m gripping my tiny towel and then move back up to my face. His deep blue eyes look smug, but something else flashes through them, hurt?

“I was drinking.” I try to reason.

“Bullshit, you only had a few drinks. I was watching.” He snaps.

“Of course you were,” I say, frustratedly ripping a sundress off the hanger and grabbing a pair of panties from my bureau.

“We’re childhood friends, who got a bit carried away. And you’ve been great, Noah, really,” I say, turning my back to him and dropping the towel. I pull my panties on as quickly as possible and slide my dress over my head. “You’ve been a big help lately, with the car and helping with Cooper’s game. This is on me, okay? I’m sorry I got caught up in the moment. It won’t happen again. Promise.” I explain, turning back to face him.

“So, you want to pretend it didn’t happen?” He snorts. “I’m not going to be able to do that, Shortstack.”

“I didn’t say that. Obviously, it happened, but listen Noah, I just got divorced, barely six months ago and I don’t want to settle,” I say, while running a brush through my hair.

“You don’t want to settle?” He scoffs. “Settle for me, is what you’re saying. Wow Gert, you’re really something.” Anger ringing harsh in his tone.

“I meant settle down, Noah! Stop trying to put words in my mouth!” I shout at him. “You and I would never work anyway. Look at us, we fight constantly!”

“We don’t fight, we bicker. It’s like foreplay for you and me.” He grins.

“Noah, seriously? Well then, I guess I’m just not looking for that type of foreplay.”

“What ARE you looking for, woman?” he shouts back, throwing his hands up in the air.

“I don’t know yet,” I say, making my way out to the kitchen with him hot on my heels.

“Bullshit, again! You do know. You’re just pig-headed like you’ve always been. If it’s not your ex-husband, it’s not Stewart, Sean, or whatever the fuck his name was, not the guy at the bar, and it’s clearly not me. Then what is it?”

“Maybe it’s not another person, Noah! Did you ever consider that? It’s about me now, and my needs, not anyone else’s for once in my goddamned life! I want new experiences, travel, passion, multiple orgasms, excitement!”

“You and I are never bored together. I have more fun with you and Cooper than I’ve had in ages, and I think we both know I’ve given you four out of five of those other things.” He smiles, looking back at me. The pompous prick.

I feel my cheeks heat, remembering the feel of his hand in my panties last night in the dark alley. I cannot believe I did that.

“I’ll repeat it every day, if you’ll let me, Shortstack. If you want to travel, we’ll leave today. You can have all those things with me. You can’t deny this thing between us, Gertie, and I’m done trying.”

“I already told you how I felt.”

We stare at each other, his eyes searching mine for any sign of weakness. I stand tall and unwavering under his glare, even though my knees are shaking together.

“You need to leave, Noah, please,” I say as firmly as I can, crossing my arms and looking up at him.

He licks his lips as I see his eyes flicker down to my breasts overflowing in my sundress, pushed up by my arms crossed tightly under them, and I make the mistake of licking my own lips as I watch his tongue peek out and skim across that plump, delicious bottom lip.

I’d had just a taste of what Noah Anders could do with my body and I was aching for more. No matter how much I tried

to deny it.

I watched as his mouth formed into a Cheshire grin, “You sure you want me to leave?” he asks in a gravelly, come-hither voice.

My brain spoke up quickly before my aching pussy threw in her two cents. “Yes, yes, I do,” I say, clearing my throat and looking away. “You need to leave.”

He throws his hands up in frustration while making his way to the door.

“Fine, Gertie. You can have your way this time. Far be it from me to force you to *fucking settle*.” He snaps with a bite in his tone.

“You want to test drive a few people out there? Let me tell you something, Shortstack,” continuing with fire in his eyes, “You can fuck half this city. You and I both know you won’t feel even an ounce of the passion you felt last night when we were together. I sure as hell know I won’t!” He shouts, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GERTIE



i Jules. I need my friend.'

“H *‘Hey, what’s wrong?’*

‘Oh, just a mini crisis. Can you come over?’

‘Yea I’ll be there in 20.’

“So, let me get this straight, you had one of the best orgasms of your life, and then he left this morning, like you told him to. Forced him to, basically. Yet, you’re sitting here upset?” she asks me, as we sit cuddled on the couch sharing a pint of ice cream.

“Yep, that sums it up.”

“Girl, I thought I was bad, but you’ve got some issues,” she snorts.

“No shit,” I mumble, cramming another spoonful in my mouth, tears forming in my eyes.

“Well, let’s talk about the pros and cons of Noah first,” she says as I put my head back, staring up at the ceiling, letting the tears roll down my cheeks.

“The pros, he’s great with Cooper,” I tell her, sniffing.

“That’s a big pro.” She hands me a tissue.

“He’s surprisingly good at communicating, which I’m clearly not,” I say, as I rub my temples.

“Don’t forget, and I quote....’he’s got magical fingers.’” She laughs. “I almost died last night when you texted me saying you were leaving the bar with Noah Magic Fingers.” She bursts out laughing.

I giggle, “Seriously Jules, I had no idea I could be like that.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, let myself go, I guess? Give him total control. It was such an intense release! I basically passed out on him after.” I laugh. “Poor guy didn’t even get his.” I snort.

“So, I’m not hearing any cons. What are they exactly?” she asks, scraping the bottom of the ice cream container.

I close my eyes. What are the cons? I think to myself before answering.

He’s cocky as hell and has driven me crazy for years. He has had a different girl of the week since we were kids. He’s jealous and weirdly possessive.

But he’s sweet, thoughtful, generous, and really fun...and then it dawns on me. The biggest con of all, one I’m not ready to risk.

“He’s going to break my heart if I do this, Jules. I’ve seen how he operates since we were kids. And when he does break my heart, he’ll break Cooper’s too, because he adores him already. I know what it feels like to be a kid and lose someone important to you,” I say, my voice cracking. “I can’t do that to my son.”

“Oh, Gertie.” She envelopes me in a hug.

I spend the rest of my Sunday moping around the house. I binge watch TV, leave all the lights off, eat my weight in

pizza, and stare out the window at the dark clouds forming as the rain pelts against the window. I swallow hard remembering a day that seems like yesterday.

“Mommy?” I called, knocking softly on my parents’ bedroom door.

Daddy had stormed out of the house hours ago, he’d be back, he always came back smelling like yucky cigarettes, and smelly perfume with lipstick stains on his shirt that Mommy would cry about as she tried to scrub out.

He was really mad at Mommy and the, “Shitty dinner she’d made for us!” He’d screamed and grabbed her arm hard before shutting himself and Mommy in their bedroom. I’d heard her crying then, I heard crashing and my daddy yelling until Michael came into my room, and we hid under my blankets as he covered my ears real tight so I couldn’t hear much but muffled noises.

I waited until Michael was asleep and Daddy had been gone a long time, so I knew it was safe, and went to knock on her door.

“Mommy, can I come in?”

“Yes honey.” I’d heard her say softly.

I walked in, carefully balancing a plate of peanut butter crackers and cold milk, and shut the door behind me.

“You didn’t eat any dinner, Mommy, so I made you this,” I’d told her, setting it on her bedside table. Her hair covered half her face, but I still saw the blood on her lip and the bruise under her eye. My daddy is a mean man.

“I ate all my dinner, Mommy,” I’d said “It tasted good, Mommy, promise. Please don’t cry,” I’d said, my heart

breaking while I tried to comfort her in the best way my ten-year-old self could.

Thunder cracks hard, making me jump and pulling me from my childhood trauma. I take a deep breath and make myself some tea, trying to clear my thoughts. I start organizing for distraction and, I suppose, some sense of control.

I pull everything out of the closets, reorganizing and putting everything back. I make piles of stuff to give away, clothes Coop has outgrown, shit I'll never use. I label things in little boxes, convincing myself it will make life better.

I'm drenched in sweat when I start on my own closet. Yanking out jeans I've had since high school that I'll never fit into again. I've even got some of my mom's clothes, things I remember her wearing on special occasions.

I argue with myself, pacing back and forth. Why am I hanging onto all this? As though material items are more important than my memories. As though letting go of my mom's old cardigan means letting go of another piece of her.

I pause when I come across Noah's hoodie that I may or may not have *borrowed* from the soccer game the other day.

I hold it up and give in to the urge to inhale his smell as I'm transported back to when I was around twelve.

I had a small crush on Noah, although I wouldn't admit it out loud. I wrote about it daily in this pink diary that had a small heart-shaped lock. I wrote down all my adolescent dreams, my secret crushes, the details of getting my first period while in the middle of science class. I carried the key around my neck like my most prized possession.

Noah and my brother were teenagers; they must have been around sixteen at the time. To me, they were the two coolest people around.

Noah had grown at least a foot over the summer and shed his braces. I knew he'd be coming over to our house that day, so I'd spent the afternoon curling my hair, putting on eyeshadow, and stuffing my training bra with tissues. So I'd look more like the girls Noah seemed to like.

I heard music coming from Michael's room as I crept down the hallway. Seeing his bedroom door was cracked open, I peeked through, watching them as they tossed a baseball back and forth, joking around and talking.

Noah had just begun to get muscles, obviously nothing like his body now, but to my preteen eyes he was the most beautiful boy I'd ever seen.

I must have gotten caught up in a daydream about him, probably about him taking me to prom, or something ridiculous, when my brother spotted me being a creeper.

He'd caught me staring at them before and warned me he'd tell mom. He whipped the door open, causing me to tumble forward and fall to the floor at Noah's feet, tissues falling out of my top. I was mortified as I grasped at them, trying to shove them back in as quickly as possible while they laughed, and Michael stepped over me to go tell Mom I was being annoying again.

It was mortifying enough to dash my twelve-year-old dreams of Noah being my knight in shining armor or having him see me as anything other than his best friend's little sister. After that day it felt like every chance he got, he was trying to find a way to embarrass me, and he succeeded many times.

I'd find a boy that I was interested in only to find Noah whispering to him in the hall. It always ended in the boy never going near me again, like I had some infectious disease or something.

It didn't help that I was a late bloomer and impossibly shy. Other girls my age were starting to date, or having their

first kiss. I was spending all my time with my mom, baking, shopping, or gardening. She was my best friend.

A couple years later my brother and Noah graduated high school and went their separate ways. The summer after my senior year was when we lost Mom and Dad. You might as well say I lost my brother too, because I've only seen him a handful of times since the funeral. I felt abandoned and unwanted like never before. I vowed to never feel like that again.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

GERTIE



“I brought some of your things,” I say, making my way up to Noah’s mom’s garage.

I made the hasty decision to get this over with after a half hour with my head buried in his hoodie.

This is bullshit. I will not open myself, or Cooper, to this type of hurt. I don’t know what I feel for Noah, and to be honest, I’m too afraid to think too much about it. Which was exactly why this needs to end now.

He takes the bag from me searching my eyes as I struggle to keep my face impassive. My head held high.

I see the realization come over his features when he sees it’s packed with his hoodie and a check for the parts I know he purchased for my car. Disappointment, and then what looks like frustration and anger, flash through his eyes as he tosses the bag to the side and turns his back to me.

“That all then?” he asks, turning his back to me and looking under the hood of his car.

“I also wanted to let you know that I told Cooper you might not be able to make it to any more practices. That you were busy and couldn’t do it.”

He turns abruptly, facing me again. “So what? You’re giving me an easy out, Gert? Thanks for the favor I didn’t

fucking ask for.”

“I’m not trying to give you an out, Noah.” I sigh. “I just don’t want him disappointed.”

“And you figured I would disappoint him, right? You really think highly of me.” He shakes his head, wiping the grease from his hands on an old rag angrily. “What the hell did I do so badly that you can’t look past it?” he asks. “I wasn’t the easiest guy to get along with growing up, but I always looked out for you, whether you thought I was or not, Gertie. I was a kid, all I wanted to do was protect you,” his voice cracking. “I’m sorry that I did a shit job. That I couldn’t protect you from the things you really needed protecting from. Somehow, I not only failed miserably, but I made you hate me in the process.”

“I’m not trying to fight, Noah,” I say, my stomach becoming uneasy, the longer this discussion goes on in to dangerous territory.

“That would take some feelings right? You’d have to feel angry to want to fight with me.” He spits. “Do more than shove your head in a book like when we were kids, or work yourself to a bone at the hospital, taking care of everyone else instead of yourself and denying how you really feel!” He says, angrily. “Why the hell is it so much easier for you to deny your feelings about me though? I’ve felt this, Gertie.” He stands in front of me, his hands on either side of my face. Holding my eyes with his. “I’ve felt this, this.....pull. For years. Haven’t you?” he pleads. “Is this all in my head?”

His words slice through me. I feel my eyes filling with tears, rolling down my cheeks in steady streams. “Noah, stop. It’s just better this way.” I argue, pulling away.

“Better for who? Me? Cooper? You? I can’t just shut my feelings off because they’re inconvenient. I’m not built like

that!” he yells back at me, his voice laced with pain, as he pounds the hood of his car causing me to jump.

“I’m not numb, I’m taking care of myself. In the only way I know how, Noah, and I’m sorry you can’t understand,” I sob, my voice shaking. “I need to go,” I whimper, hurrying to my car.

“Gert, wait. I’m sorry.” He follows behind me, but I slam the car door shut before I can hear more and pull out of the drive, squealing the tires as I drive off.

I make it back home just as Elliott pulls in the driveway with Cooper. I wipe my face clean with the sleeve of my shirt, looking in the mirror to make sure I don’t look like I’ve been crying. That’s a frickin’ lost cause. I take some deep breaths, calming my racing heart and get out of the car to meet them halfway across the parking lot, as Cooper jumps into my arms. I hold him tight, trying to soak up all his goodness.

“Did you have a good weekend, buddy?”

“Kind of,” he says. I look over at Elliott, who seems really off. His facial expression hardened. His body stiff. It makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

“Can you carry his bags in for me?” I ask, as Cooper clings to me, burying his face in my neck.

“Sure,” he agrees, following me into the apartment.

“I want to watch TV,” Cooper says as I sit him down.

“Sure buddy, what do yo...”

“Who is Mr. Noah?” Elliott says from behind me.

“What?” I ask, startled. “Cooper, go in the living room,” I say, my nerves on edge.

“Apparently a friend of yours, named Noah. I heard about him all weekend from Cooper, Gertie. Who is he?” he demands, scowling at me.

“He’s a friend, named Noah. Like Cooper said. I grew up with him.”

“And he’s just a friend?” he asks angrily, searching my eyes.

“Yes, even though that’s not really your business, since we’re divorced, Elliot.” Backing away, I make my way into the kitchen as he follows.

“It is my business if he’s around my son, Gertie. I deserve a heads up instead of our five-year-old talking my ear off about some guy. I didn’t realize you’d moved on so quickly. It’s barely been six months for fuck’s sake. I thought I knew you better than that, clearly you’re like the rest.”

“Don’t talk to me like that, Elliott.” I’m taken aback, he rarely raises his voice. I’ve barely ever heard him say anything worse than shit. He stalks toward me as I step back, swallowing hard.

“I’ve been very patient with you, Gertie. You wanted your own place,” he holds his arms out. “To live with my son in a fucking run-down shoebox. You said you were unhappy, *unsatisfied* I remember was your word,” he rambles on. “I will not tolerate a strange man around my son, do you hear me!” he screams, his voice so loud it feels like it rattles my insides. My stomach lurches as bile moves up my throat, but I fight back, determined to be brave.

“What the hell are you even talking about, Elliott? You don’t control me! **I control myself!**” I say, pointing to my chest. My body is shaking. I’m trying to sound strong, but flashes of my mother’s bruised face keep going through my mind. “If I want to have friends, which is what Noah is, that’s my choice, Elliott. I’m offended that you think I would allow someone unsafe around my child.” I add, my voice trembling.

“You’re going to end up miserable and alone, you know that don’t you?” He grits his teeth, grasping my arm. Alarms

go off in my head as I hold my breath. I can feel his fingers digging into my skin. Cold chills run through my body as I'm transported again back to my ten-year-old self watching my mother held tightly the same way.

"Mom!" Cooper says, running into the kitchen between us.

Elliott lets go of my arm and I exhale the breath I've been holding.

"Your phone is ringing a lot again, but I didn't answer it because, remember?" Cooper pauses, to catch his breath, oblivious to the scene in front of him. "Remember when you said don't answer your phone because people call and want our money?" he asks. Elliott has backed away, but I can feel his heavy, accusing gaze on me.

"Thanks buddy," I say, forcing myself to smile at him. "I did say that, didn't I?" I chuckle, trying to talk as normally as possible without my voice shaking.

"Yup! And I listened!" he shouts, pleased with himself. We're interrupted by a loud knocking at the door and Cooper dashes to answer it.

"Coop! Don't answer the door for strangers!" I holler after him.

"It's not a stranger Mom! It's Mr. Noah!"

The room is silent while Noah and I stare at each other. His eyes are questioning, his mouth in a thin line and his body rigid. He's gripping his fists so tightly, his knuckles are white. The sound of my heartbeat in my ears is the only thing I can hear until Elliott clears his throat.

"Our family was just sitting down to dinner, Noah." Elliott says in the voice I've heard him use when conducting business, much different than the tone he just had with me before we were interrupted.

He puts his hand over mine on the counter. I look down at our clasped hands as I feel Elliott's grip tighten possessively.

I feel shaken, stunted, and I don't move my hand from beneath his as I feel it trembling.

I watch as Noah's eyes take in our clasped hands and he looks around at Elliott and I, and then down at Cooper, his eyebrows furrowed.

"Can we help you with something?" Elliott says, breaking the silence.

"I came to drop off your payment for this week, Gertie. You left so quickly I didn't get a chance," Noah says, placing something on the counter. I know it's not the truth, my checks are directly deposited.

I say nothing as I watch him turn and leave.

CHAPTER TWENTY

NOAH



I pause when I get to my truck, gripping my keys so hard they are cutting into my skin.

I heard that fucker raise his voice at her. I couldn't make out what was said, but I know I'd like to punch him in the face. I came here with the intention of talking to her. Asking if...hell, I don't know. Asking if we could be something, anything other than nothing. Until I heard their voices, then I was up those steps in a second.

Her face looked pained, tense.

Gertie Williams is in my blood, she always has been, it's just taken me too damn long to realize it. Now I've blown it.

I call my brother on the way home asking him to come over, needing to vent.

I'm pacing back and forth, wearing a path in my living room, when he walks in.

"So, what's going on? Is she okay?" He rushes in, looking concerned.

"I don't know man, he was yelling at her and when I got in the house, she looked upset. I didn't know what to fuckin' do man, Cooper was there. I knew if I said what I was really thinking there would be bloodshed."

“What do you know about her ex?” he asks me, taking a seat on the couch.

“Not much, really” I tell him, running my hand through my hair and ripping some out at the roots in frustration. “She said he was controlling though, and her brother definitely didn’t seem to like him,” I tell him, grabbing a couple beers from the fridge.

“What do you want to do about it, Noah? I’ll go find him with you if you want, the fucker shouldn’t be that hard to track down.”

“If I go over to her apartment again, I’m going to piss her off. She made it clear she wants nothing to do with me.”

“Were those her exact words bro?” he asks.

“No, but close enough,” I tell him, taking a deep chug of my beer. “Believe me I want to beat the shit out of him for even thinking he can raise his voice at her, but I don’t want to fuck it up any worse than I have,” I say, taking a seat next to him.

“She’s on schedule to work with Mom,” he takes a swig of his beer. “Day after tomorrow, I’m pretty sure. You’ll see her then.”

“What do I do now though? If he lays a hand on her, dude, I swear to God you’ll have to bail me out, Aidan.

“I know man, I know.” He pats me on the shoulder. “Listen I’ve got a buddy, he works on the force, does some shit on the side.”

“I’m not hiring a hitman, Aidan. Besides, I’d do it myself if I wanted him gone.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. This guy is a private investigator of sorts. He can check into her ex for you. We can

see what he can dig up. In the meantime, you may need to sit tight though man, I don't know what else to say."

"Okay, alright. Do that." I sigh. *In the meantime I guess I'll just lie awake hoping he hasn't killed her. Jesus Christ...* "Find out his story," I say counting off on my fingers. "I want to know what he's worth, where he grew up, any ex-wives or relatives that can tell us what he's really like, whatever you can."

"I'm on it."

That night I lay there tossing and turning like I knew I would. Gertie doesn't know that I know about her what her family was like growing up. The shit that went on behind closed doors. The things that families keep from the outside world and fake it to everyone else.

Our homes were close growing up, only a thin patch of grass separated the two.

One night as a teen, probably around fourteen or something, I sat on my bed and listened from my bedroom. The window cracked so I could hear if it got real bad. I watched as she crept out into her backyard and sat under a big oak tree, her arms hugging her knees. I listened as she sobbed. I remember how my heart ached, much like it does tonight.

I wanted to reach for her, comfort her, take her away from all the shit she shouldn't have to deal with as a kid. She should feel safe and loved, not afraid and scared.

The only thing that kept me from going to her was the promise I'd made to Michael. He'd begged me not to get involved, said that it would only embarrass Gertie if I knew, and kids would find out at school.

He said they'd end up in foster care and separated if I told my parents. Some of the kids I knew of that ended up in state care, ended up in worse homes than those they shared with

their parents. If she left, if she got sent away, I wouldn't know what was happening. So I watched her crying that night, and vowed that I would protect her in any way I could. From any bully at school, any asshole jock that just wanted to take advantage of her.

Tonight I laid in bed, picturing her alone again, afraid or worse, hurt, and me, the coward that won't stop it. It kills me.

I go outside, hop on my bike, and drive around. I know where I'm headed, I just need to see if his car is still there, if the place isn't burnt to the ground. I'm losing my fucking mind.

I drive by slowly, the lights are out, and the only car there is her's. That brings some relief, and I take my first solid breath since I left her this afternoon.

I send one text, vowing it will be my last for now.

'Just tell me if you're okay, please Gert.'

I watch as the three dots appear while she responds. I hold my breath preparing to jump off my bike and storm in there if needed.

'I'm okay Noah. I can take care of myself.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GERTIE



After Elliott left, I went over to the envelope Noah had left on the counter.

Inside was the check I had written out to him for the car parts.

In that moment, standing between Noah and Elliott, I felt frozen. I haven't been that scared for a very long time. I was terrified they would fight, and Cooper would see it.

I was still trying to wrap my head around the way Elliott was acting before Noah got added into the mix. I've protected Cooper from violence. I don't let him watch violent shows or even play with water guns.

Only Michael and I truly know what went on in our home as kids. Since my divorce, so many old feelings are coming up, things I haven't let myself deal with. I did go to see a counselor once at college, after my parents died, but I was too hesitant to open up to a stranger. I feel guilty for the feelings I have for my dad. It's hard to be angry at a dead man.

I never saw my dad hit my mom, not once. He was careful to only do it behind closed doors. But she couldn't hide the bruises, and the tear stained cheeks, as much as she tried.

As a kid you want to stop it. I loved my mom. She was my best friend, but she lied to me and everyone else. Anytime I asked about the bruises or asked why they fought, she would

make up a story. Her eyes would plead with me to accept the lies she told, and I didn't want to upset her, so I did.

I knew she was ashamed. I saw the desperate look in her eyes, and I heard the lies she told everyone when they asked how things were. I watched how she pretended to be happy with my dad out in public but saw how her hands shook while she spoke to him, how she flinched when he raised his voice or moved quickly. I didn't want to cause any more pain for her to live with. So, I lived the lie with her. I dove into my books and tried to escape from my reality.

I make a bath for myself, sinking down in the tub, hoping the warm suds will calm my nerves. Elliott really shook me to the core tonight, and I'm not sure how to handle it.

I hadn't even thought of talking to him about Noah, because it wasn't a relationship I planned on pursuing. Am I supposed to inform him? What's the protocol? He likes stability and control, and my guess is that now that I've shaken things up, he's feeling desperate, and out of his element. I get that, but he's not going to treat me like that. I won't allow it. I can't.

My phone vibrates next to me.

'Just tell me if you're okay, please Gert.'

I hesitate with my answer. I type a response and delete it, and then start again. I'm not okay. I didn't know how not okay I was until tonight. I'm grasping for control for myself, for Cooper, and it feels like I'm fraying at the seams.

'I'm okay Noah. I can take care of myself.'

And I will. For me, for Cooper, and for my mom who felt she couldn't.

I refuse to feel weak.

Monday morning, I head into the hospital, thankful to see Jules, needing a friend.

“Your texts were really vague the rest of the weekend,” she says, looking concerned, “What’s going on?”

“I haven’t spoken with Noah since the other night other than telling him I’m fine when he asked.”

“It’s going to be hard seeing him when you do home care for his mom. “

“I know, but I’ll deal with it.”

TWENTY-TWO

NOAH



“**Y**ou’ve been sulking for a week,” Aidan says, dribbling the ball by me and making a basket.

“I can’t get her off my mind.” I complain, shoving him out of the way and taking the ball back.

“You said she seemed fine at Mom’s house the other day. If she’s not in danger, then you might just need to let it go, bro. It sucks it didn’t work out for you two, but there’s plenty of boats in the lake,” he says, trying to steal the ball back.

“It’s fish in the sea you jackass, and that’s your advice?” I say blocking his arms.

“Dude, I don’t have any other advice but to get her out of your system.”

“I don’t want her out of my system, that’s the problem. I gotta run man” I say, tossing him the ball. “I need a few things at the store before I head home.”

I walk into the local grocery store, nodding to a few people I know. This place has been around since I was a little

kid, and desperately needs updating, but still manages to carry Mr. Sprinkles' premium cat food.

I head over to the pet aisle and freeze.

"Hello? Sir? Young man!"

"Oh sorry," I say, moving out of the elderly woman's way before she beats me with her cane or runs me over with her cart.

I'm in the middle of the aisle peeking around the cat food bag I'm holding, watching Gertie at the checkout. She's standing in line flipping through a magazine at the register. Dressed in worn cut offs that hug her delectable ass, a red t-shirt and her hair pulled up, showing off that neck that I know tastes amazing.

I could either continue to hide behind the safety of the pet food bag or go up and try to strike up a conversation. I put Mr. Sprinkles' overpriced chow in my basket and decide to man up.

I walk up behind her, taking in every delicious detail until I'm a couple feet away, and like a crazy man, I inhale her scent before I say anything. She smells like cinnamon and apples. Like apple pie, my favorite dessert. I'd like to taste her and find out, though I know she tastes just as sweet.

I get lost in a daydream, imagining myself clearing the items off the register belt in one sweep of my arm, lifting her up so we're face to face and eating her out to whatever's playing on Turner's grocery store radio.

"Noah?" I'm brought back to reality by her saying my name and looking up at me in confusion. I quickly put the grocery basket in front of the tent in my pants and, clearing my throat, blurt out, "I recently read that people's heart rates, breathing patterns and brain waves sync up while they are in each other's presence."

What the hell am I going on about?

She looks up at me with a smile pulling at her lips. “Where did you read that scientific fact, Noah Anders?”

“I’ll have you know, I’m very well read.”

“I have no doubt,” she giggles. *I’ve made her laugh, that must be a good sign.*

“Fine, I was in the dentist waiting room reading Men’s Health.” I confess.

She giggles again and we smile at each other. I feel that magnetic pull, that static electricity, that spark. I know she feels it too because she glances down at my lips and swipes her pink tongue across her own, a blush forming on her cheeks.

“Ma’am, are you all set?” We’re interrupted by the cashier hurrying Gertie along.

An uncomfortable silence stretches between us as the cashier rings up her items and I try to think of something to talk to Gertie about to stretch out this moment. Keep her talking. Something witty, but not something to make me sound like a moron. The weather? Food? Sports? A popular TV show. I don’t even watch TV unless it’s a football game. What songs are popular on the radio right now?

“Well, nice to see you, Noah.” She walks away, giving me a small wave.

“Yeah, you too! Take care of yourself, Gert.” Wow fucking poetic.

God, I’m an idiot. I mumble to myself as I hop in my truck and head to moms.

“Hey, Ma! I got you something!” I yell walking into the house.

“I’m in the sunroom honey!” she calls. Nothing calms my nerves and sets my head straight more than the sound of my mama’s voice.

“How are you feeling, Ma?” I ask bending down to give her a hug. She doesn’t feel as frail as she did months ago, finally putting back on some of the weight she lost during her chemo treatment.

“I’m doing well today. The sunshine is beautiful shining through the windows.” She smiles, looking out at the bird feeder Aidan and I set up just outside her window.

“I got your favorite ice cream from Turner’s. Did you want me to get you a bowl?”

“Only if you sit and share it with me.”

“So, what is new for you, Noah? How is your wood business?” she asks as I take a seat and hand her a bowl.

“Work is good, Ma. The business is growing fast; I can hardly keep up,” I say, taking a large bite of the creamy, cold, maple-walnut ice cream.

“I’m so proud of you, Noah, doing something you love. It’s all I ever wanted for you boys, to see you happy.”

“Thank you, Ma. And you’re feeling better, right? You look better.”

“I am honey, don’t worry about me. You can’t get rid of me that easily. So, let’s talk about Gertie.”

“Huh?” I cough while choking on my ice cream. “Where is this coming from?”

“Oh, stop it, Noah. You can’t be coy with your mother. I saw you with her when they came to swim and the way you kept on looking her way. There was more sexual tension than I see on my afternoon soap operas.”

“Ma!” I laugh.

“And Cooper is an adorable little boy. You two seem to hit it off so well.”

“Mommm....”

“Don’t whine dear. You’re not getting any younger and neither am I. I want grandchildren and Cooper would be a wonderful start. I’d like at least two or three grandbabies by the way,” she states, taking another spoon of ice cream as though her requests were completely normal and easily granted.

“Ma, please. Gertie isn’t even interested in a relationship with me, let alone having babies for Christ’s sake.”

“Watch your mouth, Noah.”

“Sorry, Ma.”

“She might just need a little convincing. You know her better than a lot of people, honey. You two have a history together. Give her time.”

That night I toss and turn, I haven’t gotten a good night’s sleep since the night I fell asleep at Gertie’s. It feels like she’s got my heart in a vice. Maybe Mom’s right; maybe Gertie does just need some time. I already feel like I’ve waited a lifetime to be with her. It would be easier if my body wasn’t drawn to her the moment I see her. I drift off realizing the only way I’m going to get through this agonizing waiting time is to avoid her at all costs.

How I let my brother convince me to come to this pool party I’ll never know. I’ve spent the last few days sulking in

my apartment, binge watching Grey's Anatomy. In the air conditioning, alone, where it's quiet.

It's fucking hot out here. My beer is piss warm and Karissa Carovena keeps flashing me her tits. I'll admit, they're not bad, but they don't hold a candle to Gertie's. Perfect overflowing handfuls, god I'd like to bury my face in them I think groaning to myself.

"Sorry, Karissa, nice seeing you, but I need to get the fuck out of here," I tell her.

"Do you want company? Maybe go for a drive like we used to in the old days." She giggles, twirling her hair while failing to look sexy.

"Not today, thanks," I say, making my way through the crowd.

I'm just about to make my exit when Gertie walks through the sliding glass door.

I take a sharp intake of breath and feel my stomach knot. It's insane that one small, barely over five-foot-tall woman can make me feel like I've been sucker punched in a matter of seconds.

I take a hard swallow of my beer and almost choke to death on it laughing when I see Cooper following behind her. He's got his arm floaties on, fluorescent pink water shorts, a round donut type thing around his waist, goggles that are far too big for his face, and over-sized flippers on his feet. This kid is hilarious.

Despite my trying to convince myself to stay away, I feel myself being drawn to her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

GERTIE



“Cooper, please be careful. Don’t slip on the water at the edge of the pool.”

“I’ve got it, Mama.” He rolls his eyes at me in typical five going on fifteen fashion. I suppose he learned that from me too. *Cooper, one point, zero for Mama.*

I hadn’t planned on coming today, but when Aidan mentioned having a pool party in front of Cooper it was all he could talk about for days. Finally, I gave in.

“Hi Mr. Noah!” Cooper yells from beside me, I feel my stomach drop and avoid looking in the direction he’s yelling.

I’ve done well not thinking about Noah for the last week. Really well actually. I’m totally lying to myself.

The only time I didn’t actually think of him was when I was sleeping. Then I dreamt of him. I sigh before making my way over to Jules and Aidan sunning themselves by the pool.

“Hey guys,” I say, forcing a smile to my face. “I didn’t realize you’d be here, Jules.”

“Karissa from cardiology told me about it, I wondered if you’d be here.” She leaps up to embrace me.

“Noah is totally staring at your ass, by the way,” she whispers in my ear.

“Thanks, but I’m trying to pretend he’s not here.” I grimace. “Aidan is totally staring at yours,” I whisper back.

“Stop, he is not.” She denies, shaking her head and uncharacteristically, blushing before sitting back down.

“Coop, my man! What’s up dude?” Aidan says, giving him a high five. “You come to party?”

“Yea, I cleaned my room like Mama asked, so she let me come!”

“Good man, good man. Let’s go swimming. Is that okay, Mama?” Aidan asks, glancing at me.

“Of course.”

“Watching him with Cooper is adorable. He has such an easy-going, chill vibe, doesn’t he?” Jules says next to me.

“That he does. You planning babies with Aidan, Jules?” I elbow her teasing.

“Absolutely not!” she whispers. “Oh my god. Keep your voice down! He just seems like a nice guy, is all.”

“He is a nice guy. You should go out with him. See where it goes.”

“He’s way too young for me. Besides, you’re one to talk, Gert. Little miss straight and narrow. Hey, where’s your suit anyway?”

“I’m not swimming. I don’t plan on staying long. I was just trying to appease the mini demon.”

“Lucky for you, I brought two and chose the more risqué one for myself. Follow me.” She drags me along.

“Jules, I’m really not in the mood for this.” I whine as she locks us both in the bathroom and shoves a suit at me.

“Even more reason you need to put this on.”

“What is this?!” I shriek, holding up the small scrap of fabric.

“Gertie, I love you, but you’ve been moping around for far too long. You don’t want to give in to the obvious fire lurking between the two of you, fine. But you can at least torture that man with what you won’t give him. Now put this on.”

“There’s nothing to put on!”

“Stop being a baby and get undressed.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

NOAH



“**Y**ou going to look like your dog died the entire time you’re here?” My brother asks, taking the goggles off his face. “It’s supposed to be a party not a funeral reception.”

“Get off my ass, Aidan. I’m not in the mood.”

“Well with a face like that, you’re never going to get your girl back.”

“She’s not my girl, man,” I say sharply, looking over at Cooper who’s splashing in the pool.

“Whatever you say. I’ve never met two people who like to give each other more shit than you two. I mean, we’re going on decades here.”

“I’m not giving anyone anything.” I argue back. “I’m trying to give her space.”

“For now...” He grins, and I follow his gaze.

“You cannot be serious,” I say, rising to stand. “Is she trying to fuck with me?”

“You can thank Jules for the suit; she wore that at the beach last week and I about had a heart attack. So obviously, I asked my friend Karissa, who works at the hospital with her, to bring her today.” My eyes travel from the tips of her little painted toes, to those luscious thick thighs I can’t stop thinking

about. The thing she's wearing cannot even be considered clothing. I start to make my way over to her, when an old acquaintance from school blocks my way.

"What's up man, you recognize me? Lenard, Lenard Sinese. it's been a while!" He pats me on the back.

"Yeah, it has," I say, looking past him. She looks up, meeting my eyes as if she senses my focus on her. I rub at my chest as it tightens watching a hundred things pass through her pretty eyes. We may have gotten older, gone our separate ways and been apart for years, but those eyes, when she lets her guard down, I can read them like a book. Just like when we were kids. Today, they look sad. I'm not sure what else, because fucking Lenard steps in my line of sight again.

"So, what do you think?" I hear him ask.

"Lenard, I'm sorry I need to go," I say, nudging my way by him as I see her slip back into the house.

I make a beeline toward the door before anyone can stop me. I close the door quietly behind me and head toward the kitchen.

"You found me," she says, as I round the corner.

"I did."

"How are you?" I ask her as I inch closer, drawn toward her like a moth to a flame. *So much for giving her space.*

"Fine," she whispers softly. Looking down at her feet.

"Just fine?" I ask, standing in front of her. My fingers are aching to reach out for her.

I wait for her to look up and meet my eyes. I wonder if her heart aches like mine does.

She smells like coconut and melon today.

Her skin looks sun-kissed, slightly more golden than the last time I saw her. New freckles have appeared across her cheeks. I take in these tiny details as I wait for her to answer, to give me something. Anything.

“I just came in to get Cooper some juice,” she says finally, while turning away from me and rummaging through the fridge. “I’m sure there’s some in here somewhere...” Her voice wanders as she bends forward peering in.

I swallow hard looking at her bent over. The tiny strings of her bikini barely cover the places I’m dying to explore further. The parts of her body I’ve been imagining. My cock twitches remembering how hard I made myself cum in the shower this morning thinking about burying myself in her.

“Fuck me. The things I’d like to do to that ass.” I hear myself mumble.

I realize I’ve said the words out loud, not internally as I’d intended, when I hear her gasp. She whips around to face me, her big blue eyes as big as saucers.

I could deny I said it; I could pretend it didn’t happen. Instead, I simply grin at her and shrug my shoulders. Unable to deny my attraction.

“I just came to get juice,” she stutters, backing away to stand in front of the counter.

“You said that already.” I watch her bite her lip while looking at my mouth. I step closer, so mere inches separate us, so close that I can feel that same energy coursing between us.

She’s got to feel that! How could she not?

“Did you find what you were looking for?” I ask, reaching out to brush a stray hair that’s fallen across her face. Her skin is velvet-soft under my fingertips.

Her breathing picks up at my touch. Her supple breasts moving up and down as she breathes, proving she is affected by me, although I doubt it's as strong as the effect she has on me. It can't be or she wouldn't be able to stay away.

I cup her face, brushing my thumb across her cheek... across each new freckle. I chuckle to myself, remembering not so long ago when she was a young girl, with pigtails, braces and freckles chasing her brother and I through the yard.

"I've missed you, Shortstack." I manage to say, with a lump forming in my throat.

"I should get Cooper his juice," she whispers.

Instead of backing off and allowing her to pass by me, as my head tells me I should, my body reacts to her on its own. Reaching down, I quickly lift her onto the counter so we're face to face, just as I imagined at the grocery store the other day.

"Noah!" she gasps at the contact. "What are you doing?" Looking over my shoulder to the guests outside, I know they are completely oblivious to the two people fighting the urge to rip each other's clothes off and fuck like wild animals in the kitchen. At least that's what I'm thinking. I hope she's thinking the same.

"I locked the door behind me," I tell her, arching my brow in a challenge. She'll either hop down, and bolt for the door, or stay and play a moment longer.

I watch as the battle rages behind her eyes, but before she can fully decide, I take her lips with mine making the decision for both of us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

GERTIE



He takes my lips with his and every ounce of resolve I had left washes away. I lean into him and moan into his mouth as he caresses my tongue with his. His huge hands, soft and firm, move down my sides, grabbing my ass and squeezing.

I have no control over my hips as they start to grind against him. I can feel his erection through his shorts. The length of him against the thin material of my bikini bottoms makes me wet and ache for every delicious inch of him.

“Noah...” I gasp, breaking for air.

“I could so easily pull these strings.” He loops the ties on my hips through his fingers. “I could eat you right on this counter. I’ve been thinking about it for days. I want you so badly, I can practically taste you on my tongue.”

“Noah, someone might see,” I whisper breathlessly, my thighs spreading, my pussy throbbing for his touch.

“You didn’t seem to mind the other night.” Then he’s sucking on my neck.

“I bet you want to cum like that again.” He brushes his knuckles across the thin material separating his fingers from the part of me that aches for him.

“Mm mm..” he moans, licking a trail up the side of my neck and sucking on my earlobe. “I can feel how wet you are through your suit.”

His words make my brain stutter. I’m seconds from letting him do anything he asks with me, when I’m snapped into reality hearing Cooper cry out.

I know that sound. It’s not a cry of anger or frustration. It’s a cry of pain. A mother knows. I fly out the door, back onto the patio so fast my feet barely touch the ground.

“He tripped on his flippers getting out of the pool and hit his head,” Jules says to me. Her voice is calm, years of nursing helping her keep her emotions at bay, but her face is white as a ghost.

“He needs stitches,” Noah says, stepping in front of me to scoop Cooper up.

“Follow me, Gert.” He places a hand on my back, ushering us quickly to his car.

“We have to go to the ER.” My voice is quivering as I watch the blood drip down Cooper’s face.

“I know, baby, we are.”

I slide into the back seat placing pressure on Cooper’s head. His little cries have lessened to whimpers as we pull into the parking lot of the hospital.

“Here, baby girl, put this on.” He hands me one of his hoodies before gently picking Cooper up and holding him tight to his chest. The next half hour is a blur. Cooper ends up needing three stitches to his forehead, right along his hairline.

The doctor said he probably wouldn’t have a visible scar and it looked worse than it was. As a nurse, I knew what he was saying was all true. As a mom, I was losing my mind and could barely breathe.

I hold it together the whole time he gets sewn up. He holds one of my hands in his, and one of Noah's huge hands in his other tiny one.

I hold myself together on the ride home as he sleeps in the car, watching his tear-stained face, and how his tiny chest rises up and down as he breathes. I carry him to his room and set up the baby monitor, knowing I'll only end up crawling in bed beside him tonight. Noah stands in the doorway to Cooper's bedroom watching me as I tuck the blankets in tightly around him like a cocoon, just as he likes. I hold it together as I quietly close the door behind me and head to the living room to sit on the couch.

And then the tears erupt like a volcano, pouring out of my chest. My body shakes uncontrollably as the sobs wrack my body.

I feel Noah's strong arms lift me up, placing me on his lap. He holds me tight to his chest, rubbing my back as my tears flow.

"I knew I shouldn't have let him wear those stupid flippers. I knew he was going to trip, and I still let him wear them. How could I be so careless? I'll never get the sight of the blood pouring down his little face out of my head," I sob, holding on to him tightly. "He could have gotten a concussion!"

"It was an accident, Gertie." He consoles, trying to soothe me.

"One I could have prevented! What kind of mother knows something might happen and lets it happen anyway?" I grip onto his tee shirt and wipe my nose on the sleeve of his hoodie. "He's probably going to have nightmares!"

"Gert, you are an amazing mom. Please don't do this. It was just a stupid accident. It could have happened to anyone.

Don't you remember all the times Aidan and I had to get stitches as kids?"

I can remember at least five trips to the ER between the two of them, but that's beside the point.

"That was you two knuckleheads, this is different," I sniffle.

"Good point." He chuckles. "Are you okay baby?" he asks, wiping my tears away.

"Yes, sorry for my mental breakdown," I say, trying to wiggle off his lap, but he holds tightly on to my waist.

"Wait, I'm milking this while I can." He pulls me closer, rubbing his nose along mine.

"Noah, I can't do this between us." I try my best to explain. "Today is a perfect example. I need to focus on Cooper."

"A perfect example of what, Gertie? An accident that you handled just as well as any good parent would have? Kids get hurt, accidents happen, baby."

"I know accidents happen, but it wouldn't have happened if I'd been paying better attention," I tell him, pulling away to sit beside him on the couch and drawing my knees up to my chest in protection. "I was too busy in the kitchen with you."

"How can you blame yourself for this? And how can you hold this situation against you and I?" he asks, his tone angry and tinged with hurt.

"Don't get angry, Noah."

"I'm not angry, I'm fucking frustrated." He rubs his temples and runs his hands through his hair.

The silence between us stretches until I stand up, "I'm tired and I should go check on Cooper."

“That’s my cue, huh?” He stands, heading to the door.

“Please don’t be mad at me, Noah,” I call to him.

“I’m not mad, Gert. Just.....Just call and let me know how he is in the morning will you?” he asks, opening the door.

“I will.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

GERTIE



“Coop, I mean it. We’re only going to give him the thank you card you made and then we’re leaving. We are not staying to swim, or visit, or go out for ice cream. Only the...”

“Only the card. I know, Mama. You told me this last day.”

“Yesterday, I told you yesterday, is what you mean to say.”

I should have said more than a simple ‘He’s fine’ text after all he did when Cooper got hurt, but I didn’t, and now here I am with a stomach full of knots.

I park behind a car in the drive that I don’t recognize. This could be my saving grace on a fast getaway, he’s got company.

We head through the side entrance and walk through the garage.

“Mr. Noah has cool toys in here!”

“They’re not toys, buddy,” I say, taking his hand. “They’re machines. Some are very sharp, and he uses them to cut wood, to build special things for people.”

“Mama, is that a table Mr. Noah is making?” he asks, pointing to a large piece of wood set up near one of the larger saws.

“Sure is, buddy!” I jump, startled, as Noah greets us at the top of the stairs. He’s smiling down at us, the kind of wide smile that stops a woman in her tracks.

His hair is wet from a shower or a swim in the pool. He’s wearing grey sweats that are hanging low on his hips. No shirt. It’s completely unfair, he shouldn’t even be allowed to own grey sweatpants. No man should be able to look that good.

I know I should tear my eyes away, but I’m also distracted by his bare chest. Noah has the type of body that men get from hard work, not lifting weights in a gym or cardio. Firm biceps, strong hands, smooth stomach, and a soft trail of hair leading down to the place my mouth is yearning to explore.....
What?

“Come on, Mama!” Cooper whines, pulling my hand up the stairs and breaking my daydream. I snap back into reality looking up to find Noah looking at me with a smug smile and a signature Anders flirtatious wink, signaling I’ve been caught ogling. *Damn him!*

“Come on in. To what do I owe this special visit?” he asks, holding the door open as Cooper barrels in ahead of me.

“We can’t stay long, but Cooper made something for you,” I say.

“I made you a thank you card!” Cooper yells, hopping up and down. “And Mama made you brownies! She said they’re your favorite!” His enthusiasm is infectious, and I can’t help but smile and laugh, releasing some of the tension from my shoulders.

“My favorite, huh?” He pulls back the foil, smelling the chocolate brownies with a smile.

I remember Michael and Noah sharing entire trays of brownies while shut in Michael’s bedroom as teens, the music

blaring, although I'd bet my money on it that they were 'special brownies,' not the regular kind I made him.

"Your mama is right, they are my favorite, that and apple pie." He grins, winking at me with a mischievous look in his eye.

"And you made me a card Cooper? Wow, really? You didn't have to do that, buddy. I'm just glad you're feeling better." He bends down in front of Cooper to take the construction paper card he spent all morning making.

"Mama said it's pow lite to say thank you."

"Polite, Cooper," I say, gently correcting him.

"This is the best card I've ever gotten, buddy. And is this you and me?" Noah asks.

"Yea, see we're holding hands. And Mama is there too."

"I see that," Noah says, smiling over at me. Damn my stomach for fluttering when he smiles at me like that. Bright eyed and intense.

"I'm going to hang this right on my fridge because it's so special," Noah tells him, and Cooper puffs up his little chest in pride.

We're interrupted by someone I don't recognize coming in the door behind us from the pool area.

"Wow, who do we have here?" says a squeaky voiced female.

"Hello, I'm Gertie. A family friend," I say looking her up and down.

She's stunning, I think to myself, with a sinking feeling in my stomach. A girlfriend from California possibly? A woman he met in town? She must be new around here.

“Mommy, I have to pee! Real bad!” Cooper yells, hopping up and down and breaking into my thoughts.

“Excuse us,” I say, grabbing his hand and making my way to the restroom as my mind races.

“Mama, who’s that lady?” he asks me as I shut the door behind us.

“I’m not sure, Cooper. She seems like a friend of Noah’s. We should get going so he can visit with his friend.”

“She has long fingernails, Mommy. How does she play with long nails like that?” He rambles.

“Sshh..yes, she does. Go potty please, Cooper. We need to get going.”

A figure like a model, long blonde hair, and talons for nails. Of course he’d be with a woman who looks like that, they make a knockout couple. Magazine worthy.

We walk back out to the kitchen where Noah and Wolverine-nails lady are laughing. Whoever she is, they’re obviously really comfortable with each other. You can tell by how close she stands to him and the way she places her arm on his when she laughs at something he’s said.

“Well, we’re gonna get going now,” I say pointedly, avoiding Noah’s gaze and grabbing Cooper’s hand before he decides to take off on me again, ruining my quick exit.

“I was just getting some burgers off the grill. You could stay for a bite to eat.” Noah suggests.

“We just ate,” I say at the same time that Cooper says, “I’m hungry!”

“Boys are always hungry.” Mystery girl cackles. “I’m Kendall, by the way.” Humph, Kendall. *How original. I’m surprised her last name isn’t Jenner*, I think to myself fighting an eye roll.

“Yep. Great to meet you Kendall, we have dinner at home waiting for us though,” I say, walking quickly towards the door.

“But Mama, I want hamburgers.” My son whines pulling at me. I’m going to need to seriously work on this child’s ability to read a room.

“I have plenty, Gert. Really it’s fine,” Noah says, following behind us.

Between Cooper and Noah, the two of them are an unnerving force making my life more difficult by the day.

“Only If you have enough.” I surrender in defeat.

“Cooper’s your name, right?” Kendall says coming up behind Noah. “Do you like superheroes? I grew up with three brothers, and that’s all we watched on TV.” She smiles down at him. I feel my own Wolverine-claws coming out as she comes closer to us.

“I love them!” He squeals, oblivious to the fact that his mother is fantasizing about tearing the woman’s eyes out.

“Gertie,” Noah chuckles behind me. “Can you help me in the kitchen for a second.”

I huff and follow him to the other room.

“What do you need my help with?” I snap, unable to contain my annoyance at the predicament I’ve somehow found myself in. I mentally go over my conversation in the car in my head. I specifically said we aren’t staying. Quick exit. No drama...

Noah interrupts my inner dialogue. “Gertie, she’s my....”

“It’s not my business who she is, Noah.” I interrupt him while moving over to a cutting board surrounded by veggie toppings waiting to be chopped.

“Not your business at all, huh?” he asks.

I turn to meet his stare. His eyes are narrowed. His arms crossed stiffly across his broad chest.

“No, Noah. It’s your life. Who you spend your time with is none of my concern,” I say, faking nonchalance shrugging my shoulders.

“Right, of course.” He answers stiffly, staring me down as I wait for the words he isn’t saying.

“So, it doesn’t matter that I kissed you days ago?” he asks, looking down at my lips.

I instinctively feel myself lick them remembering his taste.

“And that I may have had wild sex with her last night?” He continues crossing his arms over his bare chest. He really needs to put a damn shirt on....

I refuse to look away from his heavy gaze. His eyes are angry, burning into mine. *Wild sex?* I take a deep breath, schooling my features and the tone of my voice.

“It’s your life, Noah. I’m not going to tell you what to do. And the kiss,” I sigh. “I was upset. You were comforting me. It was a moment of weakness.”

“The kitchen counter, another moment of weakness? And my all-time favorite so far, the alleyway?” He points out.

“I’m not proud of my body’s weaknesses, Noah. We’re just...”

“Say just friends, Gert, I dare you.” He challenges, his eyes narrowing while he continues to stare at me. I can see the thoughts forming in his brain when he finally says, “Woman, you really piss me off sometimes. You know that?”

There’s a knock at his front door interrupting our stare off.

I’m setting the burger toppings on the table as he comes back in, his mom trailing behind him.

“It’s a full house!” she exclaims, coming over to embrace me. “Gertie, I’m so happy to see you, dear.” She squeezes me tight. “Where’s the little guy?”

“I’m right here, Ms. Nancy!” Cooper yells, bounding in to join us, Kendall in tow.

“Aunt Nancy!” Kendall exclaims.

Aunt? Shit. Double shit.

“Kendall, I thought that was your car in the drive!” Nancy says as they hug.

I look to Noah who already has his eyes on me, raising a brow when our eyes meet. I listen to the two women as they chatter back and forth, my eyes never leaving his.

I’d let jealousy take over my emotions, and why? I don’t have the right to be jealous of a woman he spends time with. He’s not even mine and he never will be.

He moves closer to me and I close my eyes as I feel my cheeks heat with embarrassment.

He leans down, close to my ear. His warm breath washing over me, as I inhale his cologne without hesitation.

“I don’t fuck my cousins, FYI. But you sure are cute when you’re jealous,” he whispers.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

GERTIE



“Elliott, I don’t know. That’s a big trip, and he’s never been that far from me before,” I say to him over the phone as I prepare dinner.

“Gertie, I’m not asking. I’m telling you I’m taking Cooper to Florida with my parents. It’s not a fucking request, he’s my son.”

Elliott has been very quiet since our last interaction. I’ve tried to not say much to him, kept communication to a minimum. I’ve basically been trying to avoid anything that might bring a confrontation. Pick-ups and drop offs for Cooper have been quick, with few words spoken. Truthfully, I don’t know how to handle it. He frightened and intimidated me. Put his hands on me. As much as I’d thought I had dealt with the trauma of growing up in an abusive home, the way Elliott was acting brought all my trauma back.

I don’t have much say in his visitation, and even if I did take him to court I couldn’t afford a good lawyer. His family would hire the best to fight me every step of the way.

“Well, when do you plan on leaving?” The thought of being so far away from my little boy is bringing tears to my eyes already.

“Our flight leaves Friday evening, after I pick him up from your house. We’ll be staying for nine days.”

“Nine days!” I shriek “Elliott you really should have at least talked to me about this first!”

“I’m talking to you about it now, as I said, I don’t need to ask you, Gertie. And watch your tone.”

“Watch my tone? What is going on Elliott, you’ve never spoken to me the way you are lately,” I say, my hand shaking while I grip my phone.

“If you’re referring to our disagreement the other day, as I’ve said, I don’t appreciate you bringing strange men around my son. If you intend on bringing random men home, do it on your own time. I don’t want them around my child. It’s as simple as that.”

“As I’ve said, he’s not a strange man, Elliott. I’ve known him since I was a child. We’re just friends, and he’s great with Cooper.”

“You’ve always been so naive, Gertie.” He huffs. “It’s almost embarrassing if it wasn’t so maddening. That man does not want to be just your friend. You were much more agreeable when we were married.”

“I never spoke my mind when we were married,” I snap.

“Well then practice that more often, Gertie, and we’ll get along. I need to go. I have things to do. Have Cooper packed and ready when I get there Friday.”

And the phone goes silent.

I spend the next hour googling lawyers on the internet. I have the sinking feeling I’m going to need one in the near future. Elliott’s family has more money than I’ll ever make in my life. I knew going into our marriage that I would get nothing if we ever divorced. I gladly signed the prenup just

happy that I had found a man that I thought, at the time, was the love of my life. Truth be told when I said I wanted a divorce, Elliott didn't even seem surprised. If anything, he seemed relieved. His father and grandfather had been married multiple times, so I suppose divorce seemed almost natural for him.

The rest of the week is spent working and putting off breaking the news to Cooper that he's leaving for nine days with his father.

Thursday, over pizza for dinner, I finally broach the subject.

"Cooper, I wanted to talk to you about something. Take smaller bites honey, I don't want you to choke."

"It's really good, Mommy," he responds, his mouth full of sauce and cheese.

We'd spent the evening making individual pizzas, his piled high with extra cheese, mine with veggies and sausage.

"I'm glad you like it. So, you have your weekend with Daddy this weekend." I start.

He wrinkles his nose in response and takes a large swig of milk.

"Daddy is going to take you on a special trip, so this time you're going to stay with Daddy for a few more days than normal."

"How many days, Mommy? I don't want to go," his eyes misting with tears.

"Daddy wants to bring you on a special trip to Florida. You're going to be with him for nine days..."

"Nine days is forever, Mama!" He yells, tossing his napkin on the table. "I'm not going, and you can't make me!" He bursts into tears, stomping off to his room.

I clear the table, giving him a few minutes to calm down. How do you force a five-year-old to go somewhere he doesn't want to go, especially when I don't have any say in the matter either? Not to mention that he's going to miss soccer on the weekend and he looks forward to it all week.

I don't know if it's the stress of Cooper's upcoming trip or what, but I've been exhausted the last few days. My body aches, and I've had a headache almost every day this week.

I take some Tylenol, popping two before heading down the hallway to Cooper's room.

I find him hiding under his blankets and hear him sniffing as I sit on the edge of his bed.

"I'm sorry you're sad Cooper. I know this is hard."

"It's not fair, Mama. Benny at school doesn't have a 'vorce."

"His parents aren't divorced, you mean, honey? Families are all different. Some people have two daddies, two mommies, one mommy, or one daddy, even a grandma or a grandfather."

"I don't want a divorce."

"I hear you Cooper, I'm sorry."

"I'm not going, I'll hide under my bed and Daddy won't find me!"

I climb into his bed and pull the blanket over my head so we're both underneath. His little face is red, his nose is running. I wish I knew something to say to make it better. Something to make us both feel better about the situation.

"Come here, buddy," I say, pulling him towards me and cuddling him tight.

"Sometimes we have to do things we don't want to do. Mommy has to do things she doesn't want to do either. But I

think you'll have fun, buddy. Your daddy is going to take you on a fun airplane ride to Florida."

"Where's Florida?"

"If you ride on an airplane, it's about four hours away. So, a little more than two movies long."

"I've never been on an airplane."

"You can see the clouds up there. Sometimes you get to fly right through them," I tell him. "We can read that book you like about airplanes tonight, if you want."

"Can I bring Teddy with me on the plane?" he asks sniffing.

"Of course, you can. Teddy can look out the window with you."

I read him three books that night and we end up falling asleep cuddled up in Cooper's twin sized bed.

Friday evening, I help Elliott load Cooper's things into his car, all the while holding in my tears and focusing on keeping a smile on my face. To make matters worse I'm quite certain I have the flu.

After they leave, I get into my most comfortable pajamas, make some tea and climb into bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

NOAH



“**A**idan, I have a favor to ask.” It’s Sunday afternoon, and we’ve spent the afternoon pigging out on nachos and watching a game on the TV.

“Anything, bro.”

“Are you still texting Jules, working your “game” like you said the other day? I need you to ask her if she’s heard from Gertie.”

“Is she not returning your calls?”

“No, she’s not. Or my texts. Even when she’s pissed at me for something, which is most of the time, she at least sends me a text in response to let me know she’s still alive. I don’t know man, all I know is I haven’t seen her since last weekend when she stopped by the house.”

“You mean when she got bent out of shape about Kendall?” He chuckles. “Jules told me about that. Boy, was she steaming!”

Remembering back to Gertie’s response to my cousin made me chuckle too. “She was stone cold silent the whole meal after. That woman is something.”

“I haven’t heard from her since that day. Granted she was acting pissed, but when I called her, my call went to voicemail.

I waited, I texted, no answer. I called once more and got the same.”

“So, I just texted Jules,” he tells me, taking a drink of soda. “She said Cooper’s with his dad on some trip or something and thinks Gert is just taking some time for herself.”

“I get that, but her phone went straight to voicemail. So, it’s either dead or she’s turned it off. What if there was an emergency with Cooper? That doesn’t sound right. I’m going to go over and check on her.”

“You want company?”

“Nah, I got this, I’ll text if I need you.” I’m not going to relax until I see for myself that she’s okay.

I pull into her apartment complex seeing her car parked in her usual spot. I tuck the flowers I brought as a peace offering under my arm and jog up the steps to her place.

I knock, no answer. I knock a few more times, still no response.

I look around to make sure no one’s watching me be a peeping Tom as I peek into her kitchen window. Other than some empty juice jugs spread out on the counter, there’s nothing out of place. Something is just not right and I’m not leaving here until I see or talk to Gertie. I knock louder for a fifth time until the door flies open.

“You *are* alive!” I say when I see her.

“Barely,” she croaks out and then proceeds to basically cough up a lung.

“You’re sick.”

“Seem to be.” She blows her nose into a tissue.

“Can I come in, please?” I ask, holding out the flowers.

“You’ll get sick, Noah,” she says. “I’m sure these smell great, but I can’t smell anything. Sweet of you though.” She manages a small smile.

“I don’t care if I get sick.”

“Suit yourself,” she sighs, holding the door open for me. “Cooper’s not here, he’s with his dad on a vacation.”

“I heard. I had Aidan ask Jules if she’d talked to you because you weren’t answering my calls,” I tell her as I fill a cup with water at the kitchen sink and place the flowers on the table.

“My phone is dead, and I can’t find the charger.” She sinks down on the couch, wrapping herself in multiple blankets. “I’m freezing, I turned the heat on, I don’t think it’s working.”

“Gertie, it’s like a sauna in here. Do you have a thermometer?” I ask, sitting next to her and placing my hand on her forehead like I remember my mom used to do when I was a kid.

“Somewhere, I don’t have the energy to look for it.” She covers her mouth, falling into another coughing fit.

“Gert, baby you’re burning up. Did you take anything? Tylenol?”

“I ran out yesterday,” she wheezes. “I’ll be fine Noah, you should go. You don’t want to catch whatever this is.”

“I’m not going anywhere. You’re by yourself, you’re sick, and you’re out of meds.” I quickly send off a text before opening the internet to do a search.

“Okay, come here, baby girl,” I say, scooping her up off the couch.

“What the hell are you” ...Cough... “doing?” ... Cough...
“Put me down.”

“Not happening,” I say, setting her down on the bathroom counter. “Stay there,” I order, running water into the tub.

“The internet search says a lukewarm bath will help bring your fever down, and Aidan is on his way with more supplies. How many layers do you have on?”

“Not enough to make me warm up.”

“Let’s get you undressed,” I say, pulling the hoodie over her head. “That used to be my favorite hoodie, you know,” I grin at her.

“I’ll give it back after I wash it,” she tells me softly.

“Keep it, it looks better on you. Get undressed, Aidan just pulled in, so I’ll be back in a minute.”

“I can really do this myself.” I hear her try to holler after me as she coughs.

This woman is beyond stubborn. As if I’d leave her here sick, by herself. *What is she thinking?*

“Hey, bro, I didn’t really know what to get,” he says, handing me enough bags to supply an army.

“Thanks man, I appreciate it. Let Jules know I’ve got this. I’ll call her if I need her. She’s texted me about fifty times since you messaged her for me.”

I head back down the hallway relieved to see she’s left the door cracked open.

“Coming in, Gert,” I announce, softly knocking on the door before stepping in.

I remind myself, well mainly my dick, to calm down. *Now is not the time, at ease, soldier.*

I clear my throat and open the box of meds while I count to ten distracting myself from the naked woman in the tub, not

two feet from me. My team losing the Super Bowl, crying babies...

“The babies on the bus go waa waa waa, waa waa waa, waa waa waa.”

The babies on the bus go waa waa waa, all through the town.

The kids on the bus go up and down, up and down, up and down....”

I hum to myself. I look up when I hear her giggling.

“What’s wrong, Noah? You’ve seen plenty of naked women.”

“None like you, Shortstack.”

“Is that a compliment or an insult? I’m not sure.” She \ cocks her head to the side, narrowing her eyes at me.

I kneel down next to the tub, holding out the two white pills in my hand. “What do you think, baby girl? What effect do you think you have on me?”

Instead of answering, her cheeks turn pink and she swipes the pills from me, downing them with the juice I offer.

“What’s this for?” I ask, holding up some type of plastic scooper.

“I use it when I wash Cooper’s hair, it helps not to get soap in his eyes.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

GERTIE



“Tip your head back.” He says to me, dumping the warm water over my head while shielding my eyes.

“Noah, I can wash my own hair.” I argue.

“Of course, you can. You can also relax and let people who care about you take care of you once in a while. Especially when you’re sick.” He massages the soap through my hair as I try to suppress the groan at the feeling it gives me.

He rinses the soap from my head and wipes the water from my face. His hands are so gentle, his touch so cautious. I bite my lip to keep it from quivering as a tear slides down my cheek at the gentleness of his touch.

I’ve been so lonely without Cooper. That added with being sick, and the weird dreams I’ve been having due to this stupid fever, I haven’t been able to catch a break.

“Are you in pain, sweet girl? Why are you crying?” he asks me in a soft voice, which only causes more tears to fall.

I shake my head no, trying to take a deep breath, which only results in another coughing fit.

“Here, let’s get you dried off and back to bed,” he says, drying me off with a towel. His eyes barely leave mine as he helps me into clean pajamas and back to bed.

I climb in as he pulls back the down comforter and pulls it up to my neck.

“You’re not burning up anymore. Your fever’s come down,” he reads the thermometer, letting out a long sigh. “The meds must have kicked in. How are you feeling?”

“Better, thank you. Really, Noah. Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me. I want to be here, Gert. I see you. I see you struggling, but I’m here. I’m here and I want to help, if you’ll just let me.” He climbs in the bed next to me and we lay side by side. “I understand you’re scared, Gertie. I know you just got out of a relationship, one you said, felt was controlling, and... Well, I’ve been thinking about things.” He runs the pads of his fingers down my cheek. “I remember when we were kids, with your parents. I know you had a tough time. I wish I had done more.”

“I didn’t know you knew. I thought we’d hid it. It wasn’t your job to protect me, Noah. You were just a kid, too.”

“Still, I’ll never stop wishing I could have made things different for you. I can promise you one thing though Gert, I’m not going to do anything to hurt you or Cooper.” He lifts my hand to his mouth placing a small kiss across my knuckles. “Take a risk on me, Shortstack, I won’t let you down. I swear.”

“Are you trying to persuade me while I’m vulnerable and ill?”

“Possibly.” He grins back. “I’ll use whatever resources I have.”

“We have to start slow with Cooper. I don’t want to confuse him.”

“Of course.”

“Things are complicated with Elliott. He won’t be happy.”

He searches my eyes, “Is there something you want to tell me about that, Gert?”

Part of me wants to confide in him, to tell him how I’ve been afraid of the way Elliott had been acting lately, how it’s triggered me and made me think of my parents. How I’m so embarrassed and ashamed that during my marriage I let a man control me. That I’m struggling to find my way, and to find a balance between letting people in and being independent.

Instead, I simply shake my head no.

“Come here,” he pulls me to his chest, kissing the top of my head. “Rest now. We can talk more later.”

I must fall asleep soon after.

“So, Jaws or The Goonies?” Noah asks me while flipping through the channels.

He hasn’t left my side in days. I’m feeling back to myself for the most part. He’s made breakfast every morning. Set the fire alarm off a couple times but who’s counting.

He’s been more than attentive, making sure I take cough medicine and checking my temperature regularly even though I remind him I haven’t had a fever since the first night he stayed with me. I haven’t had someone take care of me like this since my mom when I was a little girl.

Cooper calls every evening. I miss him so much my heart actually aches. The other day Noah found me in Cooper’s bedroom, laying on his little twin bed. He held me as I wept in his arms. I think I’ve cried in front of Noah more than anyone. It’s an odd thing to be vulnerable after needing to be strong for so long. Noah doesn’t seem freaked out by it, he doesn’t try to

fix things or tell me not to cry either. He just holds me and listens. Like, really listens.

We've slept in the same bed every night. Nothing sexual, but intimate just the same. A lot of hand holding, little smiles.

"Jaws for sure," I answer him.

"I feel like I remember a cute little freckled girl who was terrified of sharks." He starts the movie, pulling me close.

"I've matured, thank you very much."

"Does that mean you've finally realized that sharks don't live in Onondaga lake?" He snickers.

I pinch his side causing him to yelp. "I happen to remember two teen boys who put that idea in my mind." I shake my head remembering back when he and my brother fashioned a piece of wood and sheet metal to look like a fin and floated it in the water at camp to scare me.

"In my defense, it was the only way to keep you fully clothed that summer, instead of strutting around in that tiny pink bikini."

"It was the year I developed breasts. I was proud," I giggle.

"You don't need to tell me. I spent half the summer holding a book in front of my crotch so no one could see my response to your new development."

"You did not," I laugh.

"Uh, did so. And your brother socked me a good one when I mentioned that I wanted to take you out sometime."

"Really?" I ask.

"Yes, Shortstack, really." He laughs. "You were what, fourteen that summer?"

“Yeah, I was a late bloomer. Completely flat chested and then overnight, well, I wasn’t flat anymore.”

“That was the year that moron Tom Dickinson tried to ask you out, and Henry whatever his name was.”

“Tom was a nice kid!” I say in defense. “He asked me to the movies and then mysteriously came down with the chicken pox, even though he showed up to school Monday without a spot on him.”

“Yea, nice kid but not the sharpest tool in the shed.” He laughs shaking his head.

“You’re awful, you know that? Would it have been so bad to let me go on a date or two without sabotaging it?”

“Yes actually. If I couldn’t be with you, I wasn’t going to stand around while some other jackass got to date you.”

“I made up for it in college, you know,” I say goading him. It’s not even remotely true, I had two short relationships in college but I’m not about to tell him that.

“Did you now?” he says, buying right into it, his jaw clenched.

“Yea, lots of parties, lots of boys. College was a blast.” I say smiling off into the distance, as if I’m remembering the best days of my life. I giggle to myself practically feeling the tension rolling off of him.

“Are you trying to get me riled up, Shortstack?” he asks me with gritted teeth and eyes narrowed.

“Possibly.” I tease, and then erupt into laughter as he tickles my sides.

“*Ahh* stop, I give up!” I screech after about five seconds as I slide halfway off the couch.

“Where are you going?” He laughs, pulling me back up onto the couch. “You never were any match for the tickle

monster.” He smiles down at me, pinning me to the couch so I’m laying underneath him.

We stare at each other as I catch my breath.

“I wouldn’t have thought it was possible, but you’ve only gotten more beautiful over the years.” He brushes my hair from my face. “Still the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen.”

“Prettier than Kendall?” I ask snickering.

“My cousin? Yea, no offense to her but definitely prettier than my cousin.” He laughs. “You were so funny that day”

“It was not funny. I was pissed.” I pout.

“You are so hot when you’re jealous. I was tempted to keep you thinking she was some chick I was dating.”

“Not nice, Noah,” I complain. Shoving at him.

“You want me to be nice, Shortstack?” He whispers against my lips. “I can be nice.” He gives me a soft peck. “I can be very nice,” he says, while his hands caress up and down my sides. The weight of his body on top of mine is delicious. I move my legs so he can rest in between them. “You’re teasing me,” I say, licking my lips. “And I could still be contagious.”

“You don’t want to be teased, baby girl?” His lips brush mine again, sending shivers down my spine.

I shake my head.

“Words, Gertie. What do you want?” his deep voice rumbles in his chest that’s pressed against mine. I can feel my nipples harden in response.

“Kiss me, Noah. Please,” I breathe.

“You only have to ask, Shortstack. I’ll always give you what you ask for.” He takes my face in his hands and holds me steady as he kisses me. Nibbling my bottom lip, caressing my

tongue with his. He explores down my neck and back up to my mouth.

Minutes later, he's worked me into a frenzy. I tug at the hair on the nape of his neck, moaning into his mouth, moving my hips to meet his, trying to get the friction I'm desperate for. It's like he's released something in me hidden deep inside. I lick down his neck, sucking, scraping my teeth along his skin. I'm grinding against him, wrapping my legs around him and pulling him to me like I can't get close enough.

"Please," I moan in desperation.

"Please what, baby? What do you need?" he asks, kissing down my neck again.

I move to sit up as he looks back at me in confusion, I rip my shirt off over my head and lay down underneath him again, unable to form the words.

"I could've done that for you," he whispers against my lips. "And what about this pretty little thing?" he asks, running his fingertips across the lace of my light pink bra.

"Take it off, Noah," I plead, finding my words. "Make me cum like I did in the alley that night."

He undoes my bra and lays back down on top of me, he wastes no time sucking my stiff nipple into his mouth. My skin pebbles at the sensation and I moan arching my back, craving more.

He licks and sucks on my breasts, feasting on my skin, nibbling, gently scraping his teeth against my hardened buds, driving me wild. I can feel his erection hard against my panties, long and thick. My mouth waters at the thought of what his cock would feel like in my mouth.

"These beautiful tits have taunted and teased me for so long. I'm embarrassed to admit the number of times I've fantasized about you like this," he mumbles, pressing my breasts together while taking both of my aching nipples into

his mouth at once. Sucking and rolling his tongue over the hard nubs, I gasp at the sensation.

“So beautiful, so soft,” he whispers as he rains open-mouthed kisses across my chest, his beard tickling my skin. His hands run softly down my sides, as though he needs to touch every square inch. “More, Noah. Please, I’m aching for you,” I beg. I want him closer, I want all of him.

“Like this baby?” he asks as his large hand reaches down into my dampened panties. He parts the lips of my pussy with two fingers and slides his finger across my clit. I’m so slick, so wet, and we both groan in response as his fingers gliding up and down my folds, coating me in my own arousal.

I gasp as he applies more pressure and writhe under him desperate for more, *more*. I want his cock, big and hard, inside of me. It’s been so long and just from the outline of his cock that I’ve seen through his clothes, I know he’s bigger than I’ve ever had. It makes me ache.

“Yes Noah, please, yes. Just like that,” I beg breathlessly.

“Oh fuck, you’re so wet, baby girl,” he moans into my neck.

“Will you take this off?” I ask, pulling at his tee, “and these?” I ask, reaching down to move my hand along his joggers. I’m dying to see more of him, to feel his skin against my hot skin.

“Can I touch you too, Noah?” I ask, I’m afraid to tell him how badly I want him. How I just want to wave my white flag and surrender myself completely and fully. Let him fuck me into oblivion, fuck me so hard I don’t remember my own name. I just can’t, not yet. I can’t give everything to him. Despite how he’s shown me he can be here for me, the things he’s said and promised me, I can’t give in fully.

“I’m dying for you to touch me, baby,” he groans, interrupting my thoughts.

I run my hand down his length through his boxers, my hand shaking with nerves. This man can bring me back to feeling like an awkward teen in seconds.

“Don’t be shy, Gertie. I want your hands on me. I’ve waited so long. Touch me, baby girl,” he begs, kissing up my neck and sucking on my earlobe.

I move my hand inside his boxers to grip his length. I want to make him feel as good as he’s made me.

I take my thumb and glide it over the tip hearing him hiss at the sensation, but my hand halts when I feel smooth metal just below the tip.

“Is that?” I ask, looking up at him wide eyed.

“A piercing, yea.” He smirks down at me.

“No,” I breathe.

“You think I’m lying, Shortstack? Take it out and check for yourself.” He dares me. His eyes are challenging. His breath ragged.

I do as he asks, grasping his cock in my hand and pulling it from his boxers.

“You weren’t lying. Wow.”

“You’re feeding my ego, Shortstack.” He chuckles.

“Well, it is quite...impressive,” I say as my mouth waters at the sight of him.

His skin feels so hot and smooth, I run my fingers across the slight wetness at the tip of his cock, moving my thumb over the smooth metal balls of his piercing, rubbing it down his shaft, and gripping him at the base. I’m spurred on by the moans coming from him, his quick breaths. His words begging me not to stop. It makes me feel powerful having this effect on him.

“Oh, that’s so good, baby girl, don’t stop. Just like that,” he moans into my mouth.

I listen to his words, how he responds to my touch. He likes my grip firm and he's extra sensitive at the tip.

"Apple pie..." He moans with his eyes closed.

"What?" I pause.

"Nothing, baby, just keep going."

I grip him harder and faster. "Fuck, baby, yes. Oh yes, such a good girl," he moans.

His praise causes me to get wetter. Yearning to hear how I've pleased him.

"I'm so close," he grunts. "Tell me I can taste you after. Please, baby girl, I need to taste you," he begs, as his body starts to shake. "Just a little taste of your sweet pussy."

"Yes," I say, and he erupts into my hand grinding down hard against my center.

He's barely caught his breath before he starts moving down my body.

"I'm assuming that was an actual yes." He catches his breath as he continues his dissent. "Not just the heat of the moment yes."

"It was a please, god, yes," I giggle.

"Thank Jesus," he breathes, pulling my sleep shorts and panties off. He rubs his nose and lips along my inner thigh, whispering sweet words along the way.

"You're. So. beautiful. I've waited so long for you."

He spreads me gently apart with his fingertips. I gasp as the cool air hits my hot, wet pussy.

"So soft, so wet." He runs his fingers up and down through my wetness, and then finally, after what feels like a lifetime of waiting, I feel his mouth on me. Licking, sucking my pussy lips into his mouth.

“Mmmm... sweeter than pie.” He looks up at me from between my legs and takes my clit into his mouth as he slides two fingers inside me. Sucking my clit, flicking it back and forth with his tongue, curling his fingers deep inside of me. He hits that special spot, I’ve only ever been able to hit myself with one of my toys.

“Oh...oh...oh...”

I moan. My legs start to shake uncontrollably.

“Cum on my fingers, pretty girl. Cum on my fingers while I eat your pretty pussy. I could eat you all night.” It’s his words that finally do me in. His deep voice commanding me to cum for him. I explode, gasping for air. I see spots behind my eyelids as he caresses me, and I ride out, yet again, one of the best orgasms of my life.

CHAPTER THIRTY

GERTIE



“**W**hat was college like for you?” I ask him as we lie in bed, perfectly sated in orgasmic bliss.

“It was fun.” He pulls me to his chest, placing a kiss to the top of my head.

“What did you study?”

“I have a bachelor’s in business, but I really had no clue what I wanted to do. That’s why I started bartending.”

“Did you like bartending?” I ask, moving to face him. I run my fingers down the thin strip of hair under his belly button. We’re naked, our legs entangled, skin against skin.

“I liked it enough. The money was great.” He watches my hand move along his body.

“You must have met a lot of different people,” I say, twirling the soft short hairs through my fingers.

“I did,” he clears his throat, continuing to watch my hand moving closer to where I know he wants it most.

“Umm... A lot of people are thirsty, not only for the booze, but to be actors, actresses ...” He pauses, searching my eyes. “What is it you’re really asking me, Shortstack?” he asks, tapping my nose and grinning.

“I want to know how many,” I say, cutting to the chase.

“Are you asking how many women I’ve been with?” he asks, eyebrows raised in question.

“Yes.”

He takes a deep breath, pausing before he answers.

“You said you were busy in college, Shortstack, how many men have you been with?”

“Don’t avoid, I asked first.” I persist.

Noah sits up, I follow, pulling the sheet up tightly around myself, my hands folded in my lap.

“First, why are you asking me this, Gert? If you’re asking if I’m clean, I am. I get tested every six months like clockwork.”

“I’m just curious, I guess.”

“Hmm... you say you’re just curious, but you’re uncomfortable, you’re covering yourself up.” He brushes his knuckles along my cheek. “And your eye is twitching like it does when you’re nervous. Why are you nervous, baby? Talk to me. What are you looking for with these questions?”

I say nothing, we stare at each other as I wait for him to speak first.

“Forty-five, Shortstack.” He answers. “You freaked out?” he sighs. “Disappointed in my life choices? Not surprised? Did I pass the test?” he asks, sounded worried.

“It wasn’t a test, Noah.” I interrupt.

“Well, then talk to me. Explain what’s going on.”

“I lied,” I blurt out.

“You lied? About what, baby?” he asks me, looking confused.

“I was with two guys in college. One, we didn’t even go all the way.”

“All the way?” he teases.

“Fuck off, Noah.” I shake my head at him as I feel my cheeks heat. “You know what I mean.”

“So, you lost your virginity in college to some guy and then you’ve been with Elliott. I get it.”

“Do you?” I ask.

“I’m trying to understand, what is this about?”

“I feel like a teenager again, doing this with you, Noah.”

“A teenager? How? Can you just talk to me, instead of speaking to me in half sentences?” He runs his hands through his hair frustratedly. “Did I do something wrong here? Make you uncomfortable somehow?”

“I’m Sorry,” I say to him, looking up to the ceiling trying to clear my racing brain.

“Don’t be sorry, Shortstack. Just talk to me, so I know if I’m fucking this up already or not.”

“You’re not.”

“Okay, that’s good to know,” he sighs in relief.

“I feel inexperienced. Sexually. That feels uncomfortable.”

“Inexperience isn’t bad, Gert.” He takes my hands in his.

“I don’t like feeling like I’m...” I sigh “Less of an adult than you I guess. I’ve always felt younger than you, not just in age. I mean...left behind, like a little kid.”

“Some of that is my fault,” he says, bringing my hand up to his mouth to kiss across my knuckles. “I was a dick to you as a kid. I’m sorry. I thought I was protecting you in some backwards kind of way.”

“I’m not really talking about that.”

“Well then, what is this Gertie, come on baby, just say it.”

“I don’t want to be played around with, Noah. I thought... Well I thought I wanted to just date, to not get into something serious but...”

“But?”

“I’ve changed my mind. I see the way you are with Cooper, and I...I like being with you.”

“I like being with you too, and I think Cooper’s awesome.”

“So, then what are we doing?” I ask him.

I watch as he pulls back, arms folded across his chest, regarding me.

“I’ve been with a lot of women.”

“You said that,” I snap.

“Don’t get mad, let me finish.” He warns.

“Even though I have been with a lot of women, I’ve never once wanted to actually BE with a woman. I want this Gertie, whatever we’re working towards here, I want it. All of it, all of you.”

“I’m a lot to take on, Noah; I’ve got a kid.”

“I’ve noticed; I like to think I know you at least a little bit.” He grins back at me. “Cooper is a great kid; I’m excited to hang out with him more. I’m telling you I want this.”

I want to believe him; with all my heart I want to believe what’s he’s saying is true.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

NOAH



“**A**idan, you’re killing me.”

“Come on, big bro, it’s just a date. I really like her.”

“So, do your thing. I thought you were a ladies’ man around town? You don’t need your brother helping you date women for fucks sake.”

“I don’t need your help getting dates man, I need your help...keeping a woman. Jules is different.”

“What makes you think I can keep a woman, Aidan? I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing either.”

“You have a lot more experience than I do. My longest relationship was three weeks and that was only because I went away on vacation to the Caribbean for two weeks with her.”

“So, what do you want from me, Aidan?”

“I want you and Gertie to go out with me and Jules. Talk me up a bit man.”

“And say what?” I ask laughing.

“I don’t fucking know! Jesus, Noah! Give me a break here!”

“Okay, okay calm down. I’ll talk to Gertie. Jesus you’re wound tight.”

“You have no fucking idea.” He exhales. “Thank you.”

“So where are we headed on this double date?” Gertie asks me as she curls her hair in preparation to go out.

“You have very pretty shoulders,” I tell her, leaning down to trail kisses along them. “I thought we’d go to that new sushi place you mentioned the other day, and then where would you like to go?”

“If you keep kissing my neck like that, we won’t be going anywhere,” she giggles.

“I’m fine with that,” I tell her, tickling her sides. “Let’s just say you passed the flu on to me.”

“Jules would kill me. She’s been going on about this date for days. She really likes your brother.” She slips on her black heels.

God, she’d look incredible in nothing but those shoes. Bent over the couch, me taking her from behind. I’m aching to be inside her. Warm, soft, wet...

“Are you listening to me, Noah?”

“Huh? What? Sorry, I got distracted.”

“I asked you what you wanted to do after dinner.” She tilts her head.

“You.”

I take her in as she saunters over to me, her hips swaying. Her eyes are bright, her smile mischievous.

“Me?”

“Yes, you, Gertie. Your pink cheeks match this little dress you have on.” I say, running the tip of my finger along the fabric, hugging her breasts.

“Maybe we could spend some time at your place tonight after dinner?” she asks, looking up at me shyly through her lashes.

“I’d like that.” The vision of her spread out in my bed flashing through my mind. “If we don’t leave now though, I’m canceling,” I tell her, I hook my fingertip under the strap of her dress and pull it off her shoulder.

“Come on,” she answers, as she pushes me away and then proceeds to drag me out the door.

“Here, baby,” I say, pulling out Gertie’s chair for her when we arrive at the restaurant.

I’ve been biting my tongue, trying not to laugh at my brother’s obvious nerves since we arrived on our double date. He’s dressed up, slicked his hair back and his hands are shaking like he’s had five espressos on the way.

“So, Noah. Our Gertie tells me you were quite the star athlete back in the day.” Jules asks me, as we all sit down.

“I played a lot of sports in high school, yea.”

“He’s being modest, Jules. He was the star athlete in basically every sport he played.” My girl brags, beside me.

“Aidan kicked ass at rugby. Didn’t he, Shortstack?” I ask, talking my brother up like he asked.

“I was okay,” Aidan says behind his menu. I have never seen him act so unsure of himself around a woman. Interesting.

“Aidan, you were more than okay; I went to some games. It’s dangerous too. No shoulder pads or helmets,” Gertie says.

“You went to Aidan’s games?” I ask. “I never saw you at any of my games.” I pout.

“You wouldn’t have even noticed me if I did, Noah.” Gertie laughs. “Stop pouting. You had your own groupies that followed you everywhere.”

“I would have noticed you, and I did not have groupies.” I argue.

“Dude, she’s right, you did.” My brother chooses this moment to pipe up.

“Really, bro? You want to go there? You want me to bring up Krista Mitley?” I ask.

“Let’s not.” He eyes me over his menu, signaling the waiter.

“Who’s Krista Mitley?” Jules asks.

“A girl that basically stalked Aidan from freshman to senior year. She even left him love notes in his locker.” Gertie snickers. “That poor girl had it bad for you. She had a nickname for you too...hmm what was it? Thumper! Like the rabbit!” She doubles over laughing. “Remember the time she plastered your locker with Bambi stickers?” She continues.

“Didn’t you two have a special song she’d blare from her car when she drove by our house?” I ask, joining in.

“Waiter, please!” My brother shouts from the table as the rest of us all laugh.

“Try this one, baby,” I say, feeding Gertie a piece of Makizushi. I watch as her plump lips fit around the tips of the chopsticks as she takes the sushi in her mouth. Her pink

tongue darting out to lick the bit of sauce on her bottom lip. Christ, we need to get home.

She grins back at me and winks, the little siren.

“Oh, Gertie, when Coop comes back home, I’d love to take him to the Zoo,” Jules says. “If it’s okay with you. They have some new monkey exhibits I think he’d like. When is he coming home anyway, Gertie?”

“Um, in a couple days.” I notice her body tenses at the subject.

“Has Elliott said how Cooper was on the plane?”

“I haven’t really spoken to Elliott,” she says, taking a large drink of water.

“But Cooper seems to be having fun.” I watch as the girls seem to have a silent conversation between the two of them. I look over at my brother, who picks up on it too.

I catch her chin, as she avoids my eye contact, forcing her to look at me. “Hey, you okay?”

“Of course, just a little tired.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

GERTIE



The problem with being in a relationship with someone who has known you for years, is that they can sense when your energy is off.

After the mention of Elliott, I spent the rest of our dinner date quiet for the most part, afraid that Noah would pick up on something being wrong. Truth is, I knew he already had.

As much as I desperately missed Cooper, I was dreading seeing Elliott now that Noah and I had decided to officially start dating.

I knew I had the right to date whoever I wanted, and of course I'd never choose to date someone who isn't safe around my child, but Elliott's behavior lately has made me feel very uneasy.

This confrontation with Elliott seems inevitable. I care for Noah, as does Cooper. I want this relationship and the fact that Elliott forbade me to have another man around Cooper put me in a very difficult situation.

I considered talking to Noah about it. I weighed the pros and cons. Knowing Noah, he would want to handle this head on and speak to Elliott. I didn't trust that would go over well with Elliott, and I don't want to make anything more complicated for Cooper. So far, our divorce has not seemed to affect him that negatively. Elliott and I have an amicable

relationship and it has worked well... until Noah came back into my life that is.

“Do you have everything, baby, or do you need to grab anything from your apartment?” Noah asks me in the car after dinner.

“No, I have everything. Thank you.”

“I wish you’d tell me what’s wrong, Gert.” He reaches over to hold my hand. “Maybe I could help.”

“I just miss Cooper. Everything is fine.” I listen to him sigh next to me. “When you’re ready to talk, I’m here, Gertie.”

“Thank you.” I answer, hoping he’ll drop it for now.

“If you just want to go to sleep, we can. No pressure about anything,” he says, as we make our way into his house. I watch as he runs his hand through his hair, a sign he’s anxious.

I walk over to him and put my arms around him and hug him tight, resting my head on his chest.

“I’m hoping to do more than sleep,” I say, smiling up at him. “But I’d like to take a shower to unwind, if that’s okay.”

“Of course.”

I put some soft music on my phone before I step into the shower, hoping to reset my mood. I hate to waste the alone time I have with Noah being tense and not present. Music and a hot shower always make me feel better. I use my homemade body scrub on every inch of myself and freshly shave my legs. I don’t know how long I spend in there but by the end I’m feeling much better. I’m anxious and excited to get back to Noah and feel his hands on me.

I slip on my nightie and walk into his bedroom, finding him sitting on the edge of his bed in only boxers.

“Hey,” he says, as his eyes travel up my body.

“Hey,” I say back, feeling myself blush at his heavy gaze.

I walk toward him, standing between his knees.

“You look and smell amazing,”

“Thank you.” I smile, running my fingers through his hair.

My skin breaks out in goosebumps as his hands run along the silk of my nightie. Down my sides, gripping my ass in his large hands.

“No panties?” he asks, looking up at me, his eyes full of desire.

I bite my lip and shake my head.

“Naughty.” He smiles. “I like it.”

“I want to try something that I’ve been thinking about all night after seeing you in that dress. It should relax you,” he says, his hands moving up the bare skin on the backs of my thighs. I can feel myself getting swollen between my legs with need at the thought of what he has in mind.

“What’s that?” I ask, my breath feeling short.

He moves to lay on his back in the center of the bed.

“Come here, Gert.” He crooks his finger.

I move to straddle him.

“No, up here baby, on my face.”

“What?” I ask, startled.

“I want you on my face.” He grins and his eyes twinkle with mischief.

“I want to be smothered in you.”

“Um...I’m not sure if that’s a good idea...What if I really do smother you?” I ask, my face heating.

“It would be the best way to die.” He chuckles. “But you won’t, now come here and sit. I want that beautiful pussy in my mouth.”

His words make my heart beat fast and I’m getting wetter by the second.

He raises his eyebrow at me, waiting as I hesitate.

“I promise I’ll make you feel good, beautiful girl.” And I know he’s right.

I climb up his body and pause hovering over his mouth, lifting my nightie, my heat inches from his mouth. He snakes one hand between my thighs spreading my pussy lips apart, running his fingers through my wetness and then I watch as he moans, licking his fingers clean.

“Grip that headboard, baby girl. You’re going to need it.” He grabs my hips and presses me down so his face is buried between my legs.

“Oh, my God!” I gasp.

“Yes?” He jokes, chuckling. I roll my eyes at his ridiculousness and then exhale sharply as he sucks my clit hard. My hips start to move back and forth, the sensation, the pressure of his tongue and the feeling of power riding his face taking over me.

“That’s it, baby.” He slides two fingers inside me moving them hard and fast. “Ride my face hard.” He groans, slapping my ass lightly with the other hand and replacing his fingers with his tongue.

I let my inhibitions go and do as he asks. Grinding myself down on him as he moves his tongue in and out of me.

It feels so deliciously good and the naughtiest thing I’ve ever done. My heart races and my skin prickles as my orgasm builds. He takes my clit again in his mouth, alternating

between sucking hard and flicking his tongue back and forth. He slides two large fingers inside of me and then a third, stretching me wide. He sucks my clit rapidly, and I'm panting and mumbling incoherently, gripping the headboard with white knuckles as my orgasm takes over my body, hard and fast. He licks me softly, licking all my juices and moaning in my core as I shudder coming down from the high.

I roll off of him, sprawling out next to him in the sheets, panting. Will it be this incredible with him every time? I can't imagine it could get any better than this. Although each time I want to scream and yell out, "Please take me, take all of me and make me yours!" and each time I'm too afraid to say it.

"Wow," is all I can breathe. As he chuckles next to me. "That was....wow"

I roll on my side and face him.

I look down seeing his hard cock standing tall. My mouth waters at the sight.

"Can I return the favor?" I ask, as I move my hand down his bare stomach.

"Be my guest, baby."

I've touched myself so many times to the memories of him in my hand. Velvety soft, hard, and the smooth metal of the barbell just above the tip. I run my fingers over his piercing imagining what that might feel like inside of me. I squeeze my thighs together, my senses tingling.

"What are you thinking?" he asks me in a raspy voice. "Tell me, you're blushing so I know it's good," he chuckles.

I clear my throat feeling shy. "I'm imagining how you'll feel inside of me." I answer honestly. I lift my eyes to meet his. "Are you okay, that we haven't had actual sex, yet? I know nowadays people usually have sex almost right away." I

blurt out. “And you’re probably getting impatient, probably wondering why...” I ramble.

“Hey, Gertie?”

“Yea?”

“I’ve already had the best sex of my life with you, and we haven’t even had actual intercourse. So yea, I’m okay with it.” He smiles. “Whenever you’re ready, but not until you are, okay?”

“Ok,” I sigh, content with knowing that he’s okay with this, that he’s willing to be patient with me.

I move down his body and look up at him as he watches me with hooded eyes while biting his bottom lip. His cock stands tall, waiting for my attention. I continue to run my hand softly down his shaft and smile at the girth and weight of him in my small hand.

He groans as I cup his balls and my mouth waters. I surround my lips around the head of his cock and twirl my tongue over the smooth metal of his piercing. I take him as deep as I can, continuing to stroke his balls.

“Baby, that feels so good,” he moans, gripping the sheets.

“I’m kind of obsessed with your cock.” I admit coming up for air.

I rub the head along my wet lips, tapping it against my mouth and licking the precum that has appeared at the tip.

“Baby, please,” he begs.

“Please what?” I tease. “Is this what you want?” I ask, as I take him deep down my throat, moving his cock in and out of my mouth. I’ve never enjoyed giving blow jobs. I did it because it felt expected, but I didn’t look forward to it. Noah Anders though? Holy shit. The feel of him firm against my tongue and imagining him inside of my pussy like this. I

squeeze my thighs together feeling like I could orgasm just from the sounds coming from him. He's panting, moaning, sweat forming on his brow, gripping the back of my head, his fingers woven through my hair.

"Baby, I'm gonna cum," he grunts, as I moan around him. There's no way I'm backing away from him and wasting a drop.

I use my hand to make up for the length of his cock that I can't manage to fit down my throat.

A sexy, deep, guttural moan erupts from him as he spurts hot cum down my throat and I take everything he gives me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

GERTIE



I awake in the morning, in his arms. Our naked bodies intertwined. His strong arms holding me tight. I very carefully unwind myself from him and slide out of bed as to not wake him.

I'm starving. I'm not usually a breakfast person but apparently having mind blowing orgasms will do that to you.

I pick his crumpled tee off the floor where it was thrown last night and pull it over my head. It fits me like a dress, going down below my knees.

I'm whipping up scrambled eggs when I hear him walk into the kitchen. I glance at him over my shoulder, bare chested, top button of his jeans undone. He's stroking his beard looking me up and down. I turn around and smile to myself as I feel him move closer. I'm the first to speak.

"I thought I'd make us some breakfast."

He doesn't respond, but puts his strong arms around my waist. He nibbles on my earlobe and licks a trail up my neck causing me to almost dump over the bowl I'm mixing.

"I'm hungry," I squeak out.

His hands start to move under the tee.

"You're wearing my shirt..." his hands cup between my legs. "And you're still not wearing panties." He slides a finger

inside me, making me gasp.

“I’m hungry for your sweet pussy,” he whispers in my ear, and I can feel him grin. This man and his dirty mouth.

I groan his name as he turns me around, lifting me up onto the counter.

We’re face to face, and he has that devilish look in his eyes that reminds me of when he was younger.

“Lay back, Gert. Spread your legs for me. Let me get my dessert first.”

I lean back on my elbows and spread my legs and watch how he smiles.

“Wider,” he growls, commanding me. I fall back on the counter spreading my legs as far as they’ll go.

“Good girl.” He leans in and puts my legs over his shoulders.

“I want my face between your soft delicious thighs,” he says, spreading my pussy open for him.

“I want your lips pressed tightly to my lips.”

He runs one finger down the center of my aching pussy.

“You’re getting wetter. You like it when I tell you what I’m going to do to you, don’t you, baby?”

All I can manage is to nod my head yes and moan.

“I’m going to lick and tease your pussy. And then kiss and rim your ass.” He runs his fingers down to my ass, making me jump.

“I’m going to make you cum harder than you ever have, while I lick up every drop. I’m not going to stop until you’re begging for my cock, baby girl”

“I’ve gotten to know your body pretty well,” he says, between small licks. “You like it slow and easy at first.”

I groan trying to squeeze my legs together for more friction.

“No, no, baby. Keep them wide for me, I’ve got you.” I feel him flatten his tongue and increase the pressure.

“Now that I’ve got you good and worked up,” he continues, “You like it hard and fast.” He adds, as he sucks my clit into his mouth while sliding his fingers inside of me. My heart thuds in my chest as he works me into a frenzy. I’m trying not to cum, not wanting his mouth to ever leave my aching pussy but my body has other ideas.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I gasp, reaching for anything to grab onto. I grip his hair between my legs and call out screaming his name as my body shudders with my orgasm.

The eggs I was preparing have long been abandoned when he scoops me up, carrying me back to his room.

“I said I was hungry,” I giggle as he tosses me back on the bed.

“I’ll make you breakfast in bed when I’m done with you, I promise.” He then proceeds to nuzzle his face between my breasts.

“I’m not sure how many more orgasms I can have in a twenty-four period, Noah.” I giggle again as he nibbles the side of my breast.

“Is that a challenge, Gertie?” He looks up at me.

“Maybe.” I smile back at him. “Noah,” I say breathlessly as his fingers continue to rub my clit as I come down from yet another orgasm. A sheen of sweat is covering my body and my legs now feel like rubber.

“Can you keep going, baby girl? What are your limits?” he asks, sucking one of my nipples into his mouth with his

fingers inside of me. I can feel myself pulsing around him. His thumb swipes over my swollen clit and I gasp.

“Oh god... it’s so much. I don’t know if I can again,” I moan.

“You can do it. Breathe, baby, ride it out. I’ve got you.” He assures me, as he softly flicks my clit back and forth.

My legs start to shake. And a sensation comes over me, a different type of orgasm than I’ve ever had before.

“There you go, baby, that’s a good girl.... Mmm look at you so wide open for me. You’re so wet you’re dripping.” He applies a bit more pressure and moves his fingers faster over my hard nub.

“That’s it. Oh, does it feel good, sweet girl? You’re such a good girl with your hot, wet pussy doing as I ask.” My heart rate speeds up again and I move to close my legs.

“Uh uh, naughty girl. You know better. You spread those gorgeous thighs wide open for me.”

I had no idea how much I enjoyed kinky, dirty words, but his deep voice saying those things and praising me puts me over the edge and I groan a deep guttural sound as I feel a warm rush of liquid squirt between my legs. I can’t stop it, it’s as if my body has just taken over.

“Fuck, baby girl, that’s so hot.”

I try to catch my breath.

“What was that?” I gasp. “I’m all wet.”

“You’re soaked.” He chuckles. “You squirted, baby. Has that never happened before?” he asks, wiping my hair from my face.

“I’ve never experienced anything like that,” I say, my cheeks turning hot. “I got the bed all wet”.

“Baby girl, that was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.” He grins down at me, kissing my lips softly. “Now that I know you can, we’ll definitely be trying that again soon.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

NOAH



“How’s the sex?” My brother asks me, tossing the ball my way.

“We haven’t had sex.”

He slows to stand in front of me. “What! You said you’ve been spending the night together. You haven’t had sex?”

“No dude. We haven’t.”

“Why not?” he asks me in confusion.

“I don’t know, man. I mean for one thing there’s plenty of other things we’ve done that are close to it, so it’s not like I’m going without. I’m just relieved she hasn’t kicked my ass to the curb yet.”

“I think that’s cool you’re not rushing it.”

“Thanks, how are things with Jules?”

“Good.”

“So, you’re hitting it off then?” I ask.

“Yes man, we are. She’s cool.”

“Hesitant to share, my brother? That’s new,” I say, tossing the ball back his way.

“She’s into art and shit. She’s different from the other chicks I usually go out with.”

He slows down and dribbles the ball in front of me. “I wanted to talk to you about a couple things. My P.I. friend, the one you asked me to ask about Gertie’s ex.”

“Yeah, what’d he say?” I ask, coming to a stop.

“It’s pretty fucked up man. I don’t think Gertie knows much.”

“Okay, get on with it then. You’re freaking me out.” I feel my stomach getting nauseous and my heart beating faster.

“He’s got like three different lawsuits filed against him. Two from women about sexual harassment, one claiming her kid is his. Plus, they’re looking into getting him for tax evasion. He’s not a good guy man.”

“Gertie’s never mentioned any of this. She just acts weird when his name comes up,” I tell him, as I run my hand through my sweaty hair. I wish she felt like she could confide in me, let me protect her, be there for her.

“She probably doesn’t know, Noah. The harassment lawsuits have only happened in the last couple months.”

“So, after the divorce was finalized then.”

“Exactly.”

“The tax shit, my guy said the government doesn’t even know the half of. He did some digging and if you wanted this guy locked up, it’d only take a few phone calls. What do you want to do about it? You gonna tell Gert?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t want to stress her out. For right now I’m just going to sit on it. Makes me nervous having her and Cooper around him, though.”

“I don’t blame you. I’ve got your back no matter what you decide, Noah.”

“Thanks, man. Hey, Ma said to invite you over for dinner tonight you busy? She’s making a pot roast. Gertie and Cooper

are coming. She's picking him up from the airport and then heading over."

"Count me in, after I kick your ass at ball." He runs past me, making a basket.

"Ma! Your favorite son is here, and I brought Coop and Gertie!"

"Ms. Nancy, I came for dinner and I brought pie!" Cooper yells, running into the kitchen.

"Cooper, don't yell!" Gertie whisper yells from beside me. "And you're going to drop the pie!"

"He's okay, baby. Mom's used to yelling."

"You'd think he'd be tired after the flight." She takes her shoes off, plopping down on the couch. "I'm exhausted and he's only been home a few hours."

I sit down next to her, putting her feet in my lap and starting to rub them. "He'll probably pass out early tonight, babe."

"Noah, we're not going to stay together tonight. I mean, we probably should've talked about it before but, I just, I don't want him to get confused if you stay over."

"Okay, I hear you," I tell her. "You want to go slow. Is that all this is though? Going slow for Cooper?"

"What do you mean?"

"Coop is the only reason we're going slow?" I ask her again. I see the hesitation in her eyes, the tension in her body. She's holding back again, not letting me in.

“Mama! Dinner is ready!” Little man yells, barreling back into the room. He flies on my lap, landing with a thud, effectively questioning my ability to bear children in the future.

“Whoa, buddy!”

“Cooper! Be careful! My god, Noah are you okay?”

“Perfect. Let’s eat,” I tell her, throwing Cooper over my shoulder and heading toward the kitchen. I’m going to find a way to get this woman to open up to me if it’s the last thing I do. I just have no idea how.

‘Hey, baby, I know you’re probably really busy with work and Cooper, hoping we could get together this weekend.’ I text, with no response.

‘Hey, baby, haven’t heard from you in a couple days. Hope you and Coop are good.’ I send, trying to reach out again.

‘Gertie, come on. Just tell me you’re alive at least...’ I try again, fighting the urge to drive over to her apartment and force her to talk to me. Finally she answers.

‘Hey, Noah, I’m alive, we’re good, it’s just been a crazy week.’

“Aidan, she’s ghosting me,” I tell my brother at the gym the next day.

“Ghosting you, how?”

“Not answering my texts and then when she does it’s short. I asked her if she wanted to get together this weekend and she just ignored me.” It’s been almost a week since I’ve

seen her. I'm losing my mind. She must not be as into me as I am into her, or she'd be going as crazy as I am." It's a sobering thought.

"So, what do you think is going on?" he asks me while turning up the incline on his treadmill.

"Stop fucking showing off," I say breathlessly, as I turn up mine to match.

I'm not generally a gym guy. I've always been pretty naturally fit but when he called and asked me if I wanted to join him, I jumped at the chance to do something other than check my phone every five seconds to see if Gertie had texted.

"I thought things were going well."

"Yea, so did I, but since Coop got home, I haven't seen her. I don't want to sound like an asshole. She works full time, she's got a kid, I get it. But a couple texts throughout the week or something doesn't seem like too much to ask...why the fuck are you laughing?"

"Sorry, man, you just sound like half the girls I've dated." He chuckles.

"Fuck off, dick head," I shoot back, turning my treadmill up again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

GERTIE



“I know I’m pissing him off by avoiding him, Jules. He keeps texting me and I don’t answer.”

“Why don’t you just try talking to him, Gertie?”

“You didn’t tell Aidan anything did you?”

“Girl, I told you I wouldn’t. But you know me, I’m going to be honest. I’m not going to lie. I don’t think you’re handling this right. I want to deck him for you. I’ll go with you to the police station. You need a restraining order.”

Friday night, after Noah dropped Cooper and I off at home, I thought I saw Elliott’s car out of the corner of my eye.

I brushed it off as nothing and went into the apartment. Cooper was out cold, finally giving in to his exhaustion from the flight home and dinner at Nancy’s house.

I had just put him to bed when I heard a knock at the door.

“Elliott, hi, what are you doing here?” I ask letting him in. Looking back now, that was my *first mistake*.

“I came over to give you Cooper’s jacket that he forgot in my car,” he said, walking through the living room. I watched as he scanned the apartment, scowling as though he was looking for something and was disappointed when he didn’t find it.

“You weren’t home, so I waited for you.” His eyes darkening with every thud of my heartbeat. A familiar dread starts to fill my body.

“Imagine my surprise when I saw that guy drop you off. The one I told you to keep away from my son.”

“Elliott, you should go. I don’t want to talk about this tonight, I’m tired and...”

“You don’t get to make that decision,” he says, his voice eerily quiet.

“Actually, we’re not married. I can spend time with whomever I want.” *Mistake number two*

He pins me against the wall so fast it knocks the breath out of me.

“Listen to me, whore.” He grabs my chin, sinking his fingers into my skin. “I told you, I don’t want another man around my kid. I am in control here. Not you. If you continue to disobey me, I will take you to court and take our son away from you. Do you hear me?”

“Elliott, you’re hurting me,” I gasp, trying to peel his fingers off my face.

“This is only a fraction of what will happen if you continue this shit. You have nothing, you are *nothing*. A nobody, a single mom, no family, no money, *nothing*. I will take you to court and our son will be mine. Am I making myself clear?”

Tears stream down my face as he vocalizes my biggest fears.

“Yes, I hear you.”

He left shortly after and I sunk to the floor and sobbed until I called Jules. I almost didn’t call her, too afraid to tell anyone. But I needed someone.

I knew if I called Noah, he'd come running, only making things worse. For all I knew, Elliott had people watching my apartment now.

“A restraining order is only a piece of paper, Jules. He's got money, a lot of money. The best lawyers. I know since I got nothing in the divorce. Which is fine, all I wanted was custody of Cooper.”

“Well, you can't live in fear like this, Gertie. Why don't you stay at my house for a few days while we try to figure out what to do.”

“I appreciate it, Jules. But I don't want to disrupt Cooper's life any more than it already is. I'll figure this out.”

“When is his next visit with Coop?”

“Next weekend,” I say, tears filling my eyes. Worry filling my body.

“Oh, Gert,” she pulls me in for a hug. “I'm so sorry you're going through this.”

“It's okay. It will be okay. I know what I need to do,” I say taking a deep breath and wiping the tears away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

NOAH



I pull into the parking lot seeing the game has already started. I hesitated in coming today. To just show up like this, but if it's true that the only reason she isn't getting back to me is that she's busy, then she should be happy that I've found a solution. Besides, it's the big man's first game and I've been dying to see him play.

I spot her right away, sitting on the bottom bleachers.

I make my way over to her, going over what I should say.

"Hey. Hi. What's up? How have you been? How's life?"
Christ...

"Hey, baby," I say as I sit down next to her.

"Noah!" She looks up with surprise. Her eyes darting around us instead of meeting mine.

"It's just me. Aidan wanted to come but he was busy," I say, watching her glance around.

"Oh yea, right." She clears her throat.

"What's wrong?" I ask her, putting my hand on her knee that's hopping up and down.

"What? Oh nothing. Just nervous for Cooper's first game."

“He’ll do great! He’s been practicing, he knows what he’s doing. Wasn’t sure if you guys would make it here. You’ve been so busy this week,” I say, trying to sound nonchalant.

She sighs and looks out at the field. “Yea, crazy week.”

“We could go out to lunch after the game?” I suggest.

Her eyes finally rest on mine, and I see them soften. There’s my girl.

“Ice cream maybe? My treat,” I tell her.

“Yea, okay. I should get home after that though. I’ll take my car and meet you there. The diner?”

“Great, sounds good. I could go for a burger.” I sigh, relieved that I’ve at least gotten her to agree to that.

“Me too,” she answers, and I finally get a smile. My heartbeat speeds up at the sight. I am just as bad as one of the girls chasing Aidan. I’m surprised I even have a set of balls.

The game is a riot, the kids are running everywhere, forgetting which goal is their’s, cheering for the opposite team, just happy when a goal is made. They’re having the time of their lives, and it’s amazing.

Gertie and I, not so amazing. I ache to touch her. I inch closer, she inches away. My hand brushes against her’s, she puts her hands in her pockets. How the hell did I fuck this up so badly? I try my best not to stare at her but get in a few glances when I think she doesn’t notice. I can’t read anything from her expressions. She’s blank.

“Are you cold?” I ask her, concerned she may be, but more just wanting to hear her voice.

“A little,” she answers softly while looking out onto the field.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” I tell her, heading to my car. I grab a plaid throw blanket from the trunk and two hot

chocolates from the snack bar before I head back and sit down next to her.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Hey, Gert can we talk about wha...” my voice, drawn out by the sounds of the whistle signaling the end of the game.

“Cooper, that was amazing! Your first game and you scored a goal!” I tell him as he shovels fries into his mouth.

“Mama said she knew I’d do good,” he answers with a mouth full of fried potatoes.

“Your mama is a smart lady; she was right.” I look over at her, meeting her eyes. There’s a sadness in them.

My phone ringing interrupts my thoughts.

“Hello?”

“Hey man, it’s Jackson, Jackson Moore.”

“Jackson, hey I haven’t heard from you in a while. I’m out to lunch right now. Can I call you back?” I say, watching Gertie giggle as she cleans ketchup off of every inch of Cooper’s face.

“I’ll be quick man, I have some good news. Your pieces have been getting a lot of attention around here at the gallery. People are loving the whole unique, custom made, wood thing you have going on. I have a possible investor.”

“Wow, really?”

“Yes, but you’ll need to fly out and come see him. His home base is in Cali, and he’s only in town this week. That’s

why I'm calling."

"This week, huh?" I ask as Gertie's eyes meet mine.

"Yea, I know it's short notice but this guy is loaded man, you don't want to turn this down."

"Alright, let me figure out flights and I'll give you a call back. Thanks Jackson, I appreciate it"

"What's that big smile for?" Gertie asks me. "Good news?"

"Yea," I say. "Really good news. That was my buddy, Jackson Moore. He owns a few small art galleries on the east coast and a large one in California. That's how we met. Anyway..." I say rambling, feeling a little shell shocked. "He's been helping coordinate some of the sales of the pieces I make. I guess there's some big-time investor that wants to meet with me."

"Oh, my gosh Noah! That's incredible!"

"Thanks. It's pretty cool. Only drawback is, I have to fly to Cali to meet with him."

"Where's Cali, Mama?" Cooper asks.

"Far away baby. How long do you think you'll be gone?" she asks. Is that relief I hear in her tone or am I fucking imagining things.

"Probably a few days," I say, trying to search her eyes for any reaction.

"Oh, okay. Well congratulations! That's really great, Noah. I'm happy for you." But her smile doesn't meet her eyes.

"Coop, we should get going. Thanks for lunch, Noah." She gets up from the booth.

The fuck is with this woman. That's it? Goodbye?

“Well, let me walk you out at least,” I say throwing some cash on the table for our bill.

I follow them out to the car and give Cooper a high five.

“Mama, I want a baseball cap like Mr. Noah’s,” he says, as she buckles him in.

“Here, buddy, you can have this one, I have plenty at home,” I say, taking it off my head and handing it over to him. It’s so big on his little head it falls forward covering half his face, but his smile is ear to ear, causing my chest to ache.

I stand back as I watch her buckle Cooper in and shut the car door. I guess it’s now or never because I assume she’ll continue not answering my texts.

“You going to at least tell me how I fucked this up this time, Gertie? Because I thought things were going good, and now they obviously are shit.”

“You didn’t mess things up, Noah.” She sighs, looking down at her feet.

“I’m just not in a place where I can be in a relationship right now. I thought I was but I’m not. That’s just the way it is. It’s got nothing to do with you, promise.” Her fake nonchalant attitude makes my blood boil.

“I call bullshit, Gert.”

“What?” She looks up at me in surprise. “You call bullshit on my feelings?” She snorts. “That sounds like the Noah I remember.” She crosses her arms over her chest.

“That’s right, I said I call bullshit. We’ve already been here. We talked about this. We agreed to move slowly, which we have been, and suddenly you don’t want to be with me now that Cooper’s back home. Why?” I challenge. “What’s changed?”

“I already said why. I need to go.” She glances around at the cars around us.

“Is it something about your ex, Gertie?”

“What?” She jerks her head up in surprise. “No of course not, why would you think that? Did Aidan say something?”

“Why would Aidan say something about your ex?” I grit my teeth. I swear if my brother is keeping shit from me...

“No reason, never mind. I need to go, Noah. I’m sorry.”

“Just wait.” I reach out for her arm, trying to pull her towards me, but she shakes me off, denying my touch. “Fine, you don’t want me touching you.” I make a show of putting my hands in my pockets. She doesn’t even realize she’s now gripping onto the front of my shirt, keeping me close instead of pushing me away.

“Please let go,” she whispers, as I watch tears spring from her eyes. “I need to go now, Noah.”

“Gertie, don’t do this. Whatever this is, I’ll fix it. I swear.” I beg.

But she only looks down at the ground, hiding her face from me. “You can’t fix this. Not everything is something you can fix, Noah, or protect me from.”

“Look at me.” I command. “Look up at me, now,” I say through gritted teeth.

She does as I ask, looking up at me with big, beautiful eyes full of tears. “You’re not getting away from me this easily, Gertie. I know you. There’s something going on and I want to know what it is!”

“Sounds possessive and kind of toxic, don’t you think?” she huffs angrily at me, letting go of her grip on my shirt.

“Possibly, yeah, yes it is. I admit that, but you’ve been under my skin, in my blood, Gertie. Since we were fucking

kids. So, the way I see it,” I tell her putting my hands on either side of her face, forcing her to not look away. “What’s mine is mine.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

NOAH



“Dude, I swear to you. Scouts honor, man. I haven’t said a word to Gertie about her ex,” Aidan tells me on the flight to California.

“I just wish she’d tell me what the fuck is going on,” I tell him, resting my head back and closing my eyes. “But I can’t force her to talk to me, so I just have to sit here like a jackass, not knowing how to fix this.”

“Noah, I know you’re worried but, give her some time.”

“Are you gonna answer your phone or just keep letting it buzz annoyingly in your pocket?” I snap.

“Fuck off. My texts won’t send while we’re in the air. Worry about yourself,” he chuckles.

“Sorry, bro, I didn’t mean to sound like an ass. I really do appreciate you coming out here to help me. Sorry if I haven’t said that enough.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“So, tell me about this thing was Jules,” I say, trying to change the topic for a bit.

“I mean, it’s good.... I guess.”

“You seem pretty into her. What’s the problem?”

“I am, she’s cool. I just can’t quite figure her out. I don’t know if she’s into me as much as I’m into her.”

“Wow, Aidan Anders, you losing your touch? It’s usually the other way around with you and the ladies.”

“No kidding, bro,” he chuckles.

“Is it the age thing, do you think? There’s quite a gap right?”

“She’s forty-seven.” He shrugs. “I’m twenty-seven so, yea, but I don’t give a shit about it.”

“If you get along, then who cares,” I tell him.

“Exactly, that’s how I feel. She’s hard to read, though. She acts like she’s into me when we’re together.”

“So, what makes you think she’s not that into you?”

“She never calls me first, like other chicks do. I’m always the one to reach out to her first.”

“You think she’s seeing other guys?” I ask, flagging down the stewardess for a refill. These drinks are so weak I’ll need five just to feel a buzz.

“She could be,” he tells me through gritted teeth. “The thought of it makes me want to punch something.”

“Calm down there, Rocky. She does seem like a cool person. I know Gertie really values their friendship,” I sigh. It feels like I’m talking about her like she’s gone forever, I think, as I look out the window at the clouds. Maybe she is. “They’re really close. It’s nice that she has someone...”

“She’ll come around, Noah.”

“I’m not so sure, Aidan. She’s pushed me away before. Talk about women being hard to read.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

NOAH



“So, as I was saying, I think this will be a great opportunity for both of us. You’ll need to hire some help, I would assume. I don’t know what you have on hand for inventory, but my intention is to fill the cabins on the east coast with an eclectic mix of handmade pieces, and I think your work would be ideal. I have twenty Airbnb’s in the California area and fifteen more opening in the fall on the east coast. Picture, rustic retreat for the stars. So, what do you think?”

“I think it’s a lot to think about. I’m flattered that you like my work, but I have to admit that I’ve kept this business very hands-on for a reason, Mr. Talbott. I enjoy the personal aspect of my job. The amount of inventory you are requesting can’t be produced overnight.”

“Of course, I understand, and my company appreciates your craftsmanship and attention to detail. Which is why we are willing to not only make this worth your while financially, but we have a few of the best designers on hand, ready to work alongside you.”

I sip the fancy wine he served, while my mind whirls with all the information, he’s thrown at me.

“You would be in charge of overseeing all aspects of design obviously, the designers would only be there to assist

you in the inventory level.” He paused, “Listen, I’ve given you a lot to think about, I can appreciate that. I’ll have my accountant draw up some figures. You’re in town for a couple of days, correct?”

“Yes, I fly back on Friday morning.”

“Perfect, sleep on it and I’ll talk to you before Friday morning.”

I shake the man’s hand and make my way back into a cab. God, I don’t miss the hustle of this town, the traffic, the noise.

I check back into the hotel, throw myself on the bed and check my phone for the hundredth time. No surprise, there’s no messages or texts from Gertie. I close my eyes, visions of my girl float through my head. *What are you doing to me, baby girl?*

I open the hotel door to the knocking of my brother.

“You are back. What the fuck man? I’ve been waiting to hear how it went.”

“Sorry, I’m beat. I must have dozed off,” I say, coughing. “Why the hell does it smell like you walked in with a cloud of cheap cologne surrounding you?”

“Uh, not cheap. This is Dior, and cost me two hundred bucks.” He plops down on the sofa. “So, spill it.”

“Bottom line, they’re offering me a lot of money to semi-mass produce what I like to craft on my own,” I say, sitting on the bed across from him.

“So, you could make a shit ton of money, but you’d have to give up some control.”

“Essentially, yes, nice kicks by the way man,” I tell him, looking down at his shoes.

“They’re pretty sweet, aren’t they? They’re the new retro Air Jordans. Get changed, I want to take my big bro out on the town to celebrate.”

“The last time I celebrated with you, we spent twenty-four hours in the slammer.” I remind him.

“Please, that was all a misunderstanding.” He chuckles.

“Tell that to the LAPD!” I laugh. “They were pretty cool after we explained the situation, though.”

“They were, so get dressed. We leave in twenty.” He stands, heading for the door.

“I told my buddy, Jackson, we’d meet up tonight. Do you mind if he tags along?” I ask him before he leaves.

“Yeah, I remember you mentioning him. Dated that Italian girl right? The more the merrier, man. Now come on! The booze and ladies don’t wait, and I’ve got some steam to blow off!”

“Christ, here we fuckin’ go,” I laugh, shaking my head.

“First up, The Nightingale on La Cienna boulevard,” my brother tells the Uber driver as Jackson, Aidan, and I slide into the car.

“You got a girl waiting on you at home, Jackson? Or you on the prowl like my brother and I?” Aidan asks.

“Who said I was on the prowl?” I interrupt. “And I thought you were digging Jules?” I ask. I lean over, looking at him, surprised.

“Come on, it’s one night, Noah. Loosen up.” He shrugs me off.

“I’ve sworn off women for quite a while now.” Jackson responds, shaking his head. I’m not surprised, the last girl fucked him up big time. Poor guy called me up the night they broke up saying she was still in love with her ex, and it was over.

“Great, you too? What the fuck, man?” My brother asks him. “What happened to you?”

“Long story, she ripped my heart out and stomped on it in the end. Thought she was the one.” He shakes his head.

“Women, am I right? Just when you think you’re doing it right, they come and throw a wrench in it,” Aidan tells him.

“That, I can agree with.”

“Same,” Jackson agrees.

“Good, it’s settled then. Second stop, we’re hitting up Skin.” My brother decides for the three of us.

“The strip club on Robertson?” Jackson asks, looking doubtful.

“This is not going to end well,” I say, putting my head in my hands.

“Making memories, man. We don’t live forever. Come on, we’re here.” He hops out of the car and heads into the building ahead of us.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

NOAH



I watch my brother head into Skin for a lap dance and go sit at the bar.

“What can I get you?” The bartender asks, me leaning over the counter. She’s young, probably mid-twenties. I watch her talking and laughing with the other patrons. She’s really a knockout. Long wavy blonde hair down to her tiny waist. A round, plump ass covered by tight jeans, and a killer rack, barely covered by a white tank. Her name badge says Daisy.

Just months ago, it felt like life was simple. I worked, dated casually and partied. I didn’t give much of a thought to anyone other than myself. I was happy.

But, I wasn’t anywhere near as happy as I was coaching a bunch of kindergarteners on a soccer field and seeing Gertie laugh from the sidelines.

“Well, what’s got you down, Handsome?” I look up to see Daisy looking at me expectantly. “You look like you could use a drink...or more,” she says, looking me up and down.

“Just water for me tonight. Thanks though.” I watch as her face falls, and she pouts her lips.

“I get off at midnight. We could both *get off* if you want,” she coos.

If I thought it would help, I might consider it. I could. I could take her back to the hotel and fuck her until I got Gertie out of mind. Who the fuck am I kidding. The thought of even kissing another woman makes me nauseous.

“Maybe we could just...talk.” I offer.

“You look like a talker,” she sighs, setting my water on the bar.

“How about an extra-large tip if you can explain women to me.” I offer.

“Got some lady problems?” she asks, placing a bowl of peanuts on the bar in front of us and tossing a few in her mouth. “Women are easy. You know why?”

“No, why?” I sigh. “Please, tell me, because I suck at making relationships work, and I think I found a girl that I actually want a solid relationship with.”

“It’s not that difficult if you both want it. Most importantly, communicate. Tell her flat out what you want. If she’s into you and wants to form something solid. She will. But it takes two to make it work.”

“She knows how much I care for her. I just think it might be bigger than that. Unfortunately, she’s not as much of a talker as I apparently am, and I end up feeling like a big pussy.”

“You can’t just assume she knows, Handsome. Women are complex. Besides, if she’s had her trust broken, like most of us have,” she sighs, “she’s going to have a hard time trusting again. And for your information, women can pass an eight pound child or larger through their vagina, but guys can totally get injured just by masturbating too hard. So, using pussy as an insult is completely inappropriate.” She adds, raising her eyebrows at me.

“You’re correct, I apologize.” I raise my hands in defeat. “How am I supposed to earn her trust if she’s projecting on me

how others have treated in the past? Should I just lay my heart out there, with the hopes it doesn't get completely smashed? Should I give her space?"

"Either that or sit here wondering. Make a choice and if it doesn't work out, move on. Life's too short," she tells me. As though it's that fucking easy. As though if she says 'Naw, I'm not that into you,' I'll be fine and just be on my way. There is no forgetting Gertie. I tried that once, tried to move on in life. Joined the Military, moved to California. All it took was seeing her again to make me want her just as much as I always had.

"Just talk to her, ok?" she asks, looking at me in pity.

CHAPTER FORTY

NOAH



“You’ve been really quiet since your meeting, Noah; you want to talk about it?” my brother asks me on the flight home.

“Just a lot to think about.”

“What’s the main reason you’re holding back on taking their offer? Is it because you have to give up so much control over your work, or is it more than that?”

“That” I sigh. “And Gertie.”

“It’s a big opportunity to pass up, brother.”

“I know, I know,” I tell him massaging my temples. “It’s once I a lifetime.... but so is she.”

“I get that, but... and try not to punch me here, but she said she needed space. Maybe this is a good opportunity to give her some.”

“Moving back to Cali is a little more than giving her space, Aidan. It’s the other side of the fucking country.”

“So, what’s the alternative, Noah? You sit in Mom’s garage back home and wait? At least if you take this job In California it will keep you busy. And as much as I love having you around, bro, and I really do, I don’t want to see you miserable and alone, waiting for something that might not happen.”

“That’s a bit harsh,” I say, rubbing at the pain in my chest.

“I don’t mean it to sound harsh, I really don’t, but you don’t know where her head is at and you’re going to put your whole fuckin’ life on hold? Pass up a huge opportunity like this? “

“I don’t know, Aidan. If I leave.... what if...what if I never hear from her again?” The thought feels like it’s knocking the wind out of me. Never holding her again, never being around Cooper. That kid has wrapped himself around my heart.

“If that’s the case, Noah, then maybe it just wasn’t meant to be.”

6 MONTHS LATER

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

NOAH



“Hold on, Aidan,” I say, taking the phone from my ear, as I speak to one of my crafters. “No, this isn’t right. The shape is off. I told you it needs to be more oval.”

“Fucking A, this is turning into a goddamned nightmare man.”

“What’s going on, I thought you had a good handle on things?” my brother asks.

“Well, I did until they ordered twenty more pieces. We’re behind schedule, two crafters have quit and I’m about ready to walk the fuck out myself!” I shout, slamming my office door shut.

“What can I do?”

“Fly here? Just for a couple of weeks. I need some marketing help. I need someone with a brain in their head to organize these spreadsheets,” I say, tossing some papers across my desk. “This is exactly the situation I didn’t want!” I growl frustratedly.

“Then why’d you agree to do it, Noah?”

I run my hands through my hair in frustration and loosen up my tie. *A fucking tie, who am I anyway?*

“I needed a fucking distraction,” I tell him. “Have you heard anything? Anything at all?” I’m so desperate to hear anything about Gertie I’d settle for someone seeing her buying

bananas at the store or getting gas. Just so I can picture her happy and living. The opposite of how I am these days.

“I haven’t, Noah. Sorry man. I mean, besides what I’ve told you before. She goes to work, she’s quiet. Jules doesn’t say much about her. But listen, I can fly in tomorrow night though, alright?”

“Yes, thank you,” I say, relieved. “I don’t trust anyone else, Aidan. You’re the only one who I know truly gives a crap if this whole thing blows up in my face, ruining my reputation.”

“You know I always have your back, bro. I’ll see you soon,” He tells me. Just hearing that my brother is on his way floods me with relief.

I turn off my office lights at the end of the night, the last one to leave the building. The same as every night.

It’s not like I have anyone to go home to, I think to myself as I stop by the local Chinese takeout place and head back to my rental house.

It’s been five months since I rented this house. Six months since I’ve talked to Gertie. Six months and nineteen days, actually. God, I miss her. Is she even thinking of me?

Mr. Sprinkles circles around my legs as I fill his food dish.

“Dude, next life I’m coming back as a cat. A fucking fat happy cat. Maybe you’ll be the human next time and I’ll be the cat. You can clean out *my* litterbox. Don’t think I didn’t notice you kicked litter all over the floor again,” I tell him, and then I head to the bathroom.

The silence feels so loud in this house it’s deafening. So deafening that I’m trying to have a conversation with my cat.

I undo my suspenders and strip off my suit turning the water up in the shower to a scalding temperature. Anything to make me feel.

God, I miss her. My chest aches and my heart literally feels broken. It's cliché, but I can't think of any other way to describe it.

Thank fuck Aidan will be here to help. My brother has been the only person to get me through the last few months. My shoulder to cry on, my support person. I can't burden my mother with my relationship problems like a love sick teenager.

I head to bed, exhausted, both emotionally and physically.

"Sprinkles, man, I wish I was a cat. Sit around all day, waiting for someone to wait on you," I tell him as he purrs and rubs up against me.

Just as I'm about to doze off my phone beeps with an incoming text. I'm positive it's work. I spend twenty minutes tossing and turning, refusing to check it before I give in and check.

I pick up my phone and hold my breath as I look at the text, seeing the words I've been waiting for.

'I miss you'

Without missing a beat I hit speed dial, hoping to hear her voice.

"Gertie?"

"Hi, you called," she sniffles

"Of course, baby girl. Are you okay?"

"Noah, I miss you and I know I shouldn't. I know I should let you move on. But I just can't. I'm selfish," she says, slightly slurring her words.

“Baby, have you been drinking?”

“Just a little,” she slurs. “I couldn’t sleep and Cooper is having a sleepover at his friend’s house. I’m all alone. Always alone.” She sniffles. “I shouldn’t have bothered you.”

“Wait!” I say before she hangs up. “Stay on the phone with me, Gert. Don’t hang up. Talk to me, baby.”

“I don’t know what to say,” she whispers, her voice sounding sad and dejected.

“Gertie, I don’t want to move on. You’re not alone. You have me, baby. I’m still here. And you have Cooper and Jules. You’re not alone, baby.”

“I don’t want to move on,” she whispers into the phone.

“Then don’t, Gert.” I feel like I’m begging for my life.

“It’s not that easy, Noah.” She sighs.

“Why, Gertie? Explain to me what this is about.”

The silence on the other end of the line stretches until I can’t take it anymore.

“Please, baby. Please talk to me.” I beg.

“It’s Elliot. His family is crazy rich, and he’s controlling. He likes things his way, Noah. He doesn’t want you around Cooper. Not just you. Any man,” she tells me as I grit my teeth. It’s taking every ounce of control I have not to get on the first plane back to the east coast and punch that fucker square in the face.

“He can’t make those decisions, Gert,” I grit out.

“But he can, he has. I can’t afford to fight him in court, Noah. I’m no match for his family and their fancy lawyers. You don’t understand. I can’t risk losing Cooper.”

“I’ll help you. We’ll fight them together.”

“I can’t ask you to do that, Noah. I shouldn’t have even told you. I’m sorry. It’s not fair to you and I know that. You’ve always tried to protect me. Even when I didn’t want it. You can’t protect me this time,” she tells me, with defeat in her voice.

“Listen to me, Gert. Aidan is flying out here tomorrow evening. I want you and Cooper to join him.”

“I can’t. He’ll find out, Noah. He has people watching me.”

“Gertie, get on the plane. Bring Jules. We’ll figure this out together.

“Cooper will miss school.”

“Gertie,” I say, practically ripping my hair out in frustration. I take a deep breath, trying to make my voice sound as calm as possible.

“There’s nothing saying you can’t take your son on a vacation. Elliott didn’t have a problem doing it when he took Cooper to Florida, remember? No one needs to know the details besides Aidan and Jules. Come here, baby. Let me help you. Please, Gertie,” I beg her. “Accept my help this time. Don’t convince yourself that you’re alone again.”

“*Okay.*” She finally agrees.

“*Okay.*” I exhale the breath I’ve been holding. *Thank God.*

“Text me the flight details and I’ll pay with my credit card.”

“Noah...”

“Gertie, stop. Just do it okay? I can afford it, my business is doing great.”

She finally relents, giving in and I arrange the quickest flight possible. I drift off to sleep, relishing in the first few

good hours of rest I've had in months.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

GERTIE



“Mr. Noah!” Cooper yells, as he plows ahead of me into Noah’s house.

“Coop! Little buddy, how are you?” Noah asks, picking him up for a hug.

I watch from the doorway, unable to move. He’s dressed flawlessly in dress pants, a white dress shirt, and sexy as hell in suspenders and a soft blue tie. I thought he could fill out a pair of jeans like no other man, but Noah Anders dressed like this? *Be still my freaking heart.*

He still has his signature beard, but it’s freshly trimmed. He looks amazing, other than the ghost of dark circles under his eyes that are currently looking at me with such an intensity that I feel like I can barely breathe.

I watch as he gently sets Cooper down, who promptly takes off through the house to explore.

Noah slowly walks over to me, cautious, as though I may bolt out the door, I’ve barely made it through.

“Gertie.” He breathes my name. His voice washes over me like a soft blanket on a chilly day. Comfort, safety. It makes tears come to my eyes.

“Hello.” I manage to get out, my voice cracking.

He brushes his knuckles softly across my cheek.

I gasp at the contact as though it's almost painful, the tears falling down my face as he grabs me holding me close. And I cling to him exhaling as though I've just come up for air.

"I've missed you so much, Gert," he says, tucking me into his chest.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for not explaining," I cry into his jacket. "For doing this to us."

"Shhhh, baby, it's going to be okay." He comforts me. If only those words were true.

His lips are inches from mine; soft, full lips, with the hint of his minty breath.

I close the gap first, not willing to wait another second, my mouth needing his. His tongue peeks out exploring my mouth as I moan. With every sweep of his tongue I come back alive. I'm wet already, needy, desperate for him.

I cling to him, gripping his shirt like the lifeline I've denied myself.

"Mama, Mama! Look! Mr. Noah still has his kitty!" Cooper screams in excitement, barreling down the hallway.

I pull away from Noah quickly, but reluctantly, before Cooper makes his way in holding a very chunky Mr. Sprinkles.

"Mr. Noah, can I feed him?" he asks. "The kitty told me he was hungry," he says, as he struggles to hold the squirming cat.

"I'm not surprised, Mr. Sprinkles thinks he's always hungry," Noah laughs. "His food is over here buddy."

I sit down in the living room while they're busy and take in my surroundings. All the walls are white, a black leather couch with a matching chair and the TV are the only furniture. No photos adorn the walls. It looks sterile.

“Are you home often?” I ask him, as he comes back into the room carrying Cooper on his shoulders.

He’s taken off his tie, unbuttoned the top few buttons of his dress shirt and rolled up his sleeves. A huge smile spread across his rugged, yet soft features.

“Not much no.” He glances around, his brows furrowed.

I set Cooper up on the couch with one of his favorite movies while Noah and I head into the kitchen to talk alone.

“How was the flight?” he asks me. “Was Cooper okay flying?”

“Yes, he handled it really well, surprisingly.”

“Are you hungry or thirsty? Can I get you anything?” he asks, combing his fingers awkwardly through his hair. He’s nervous. I’ve missed these obvious tells.

“I thought I would be the one who would be a nervous wreck.” I smirk at him.

He chuckles, putting his hands in his pockets.

“Sorry, I just can’t believe you two are actually here,” he says, watching me as I make my way over to stand in front of him.

“It’s lonely here. Despite what Cooper says, Mr. Sprinkles isn’t much of a talker. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

I lay my head on his chest wrapping my arms around his waist. Inhaling his masculine scent. A musky cologne, delicious but not quite, Noah. Not sandalwood and lemon like he smelled like back home. *Is there such a thing as a more ‘professional’ scent? If so that’s what his cologne smells like.*

I don’t know how long we stay like that, wrapped in each other’s arms, listening to each other’s heartbeats...but I do know it feels so right.

“Mama?” Cooper asks, coming into the room. “I’m tired.” he rubs his eyes.

“I’m not surprised, you stayed awake the entire flight, afraid to miss seeing all the clouds, my silly boy.”

“I’m not silly Mama. I’m a big boy now. Member, my birfday is soon too.” He whines at me in a sleepy voice.

“I made up a room down here,” Noah says, guiding us down the hallway.

“The house has four bedrooms. When Aidan and Jules get here I thought they’d want the room across the hall, but this room, Cooper...” he opens the door. “I thought you’d like this one the best.”

The room is painted a bright blue; the only room I’ve seen so far that’s not stark white. A huge bay window sits on one side with a view of the ocean.

“Can we see the shark’s out there, Mama?” Cooper asks me, while holding onto one of my legs, still rubbing his eyes.

“Tomorrow we’ll check, buddy. First, let’s get you a good night’s sleep,” I tell him, picking him up.

“I’ve taken the morning off work so we can explore the beach if you’d like.” Noah offers from the doorway.

“Okay. I like sharks. Mama thinks they’re scary, but not me. I think they’re cool,” Cooper says, his voice drowned out by his yawn as he rolls over.

I listen to his breathing while rubbing his back in slow circles until I can tell he’s fallen asleep and then follow Noah back out into the hallway.

“This is the other guest room,” Noah says holding open the door.

“I made the bed and set some extra pillows in here for you.” He hesitantly looks down at me.

“And where is your room?” I ask.

“Across the hall,” he answers, searching my eyes.

“May I see it?”

“Of course.” He clears his throat.

He opens the door to the massive master bedroom. I step in, looking around; stark white walls like everywhere else.

I walk over to the large walk-in closet running my hand along the many suits and silky ties. The smell of his manly cologne wafting through the air.

“I’m not used to you looking so professional.”

“It’s part of the job.” he admits, eyeing me from the other side of the room.

“It suits you,” I tell him.

He stands against the wall, hands in his pockets, one foot crossed over the other watching me intently. Licking his bottom lip. I watch as his gaze trails along my body.

I smirk as he swallows hard when his eyes land on my breasts.

I saunter over to his side of the room. I can hear his breathing increase as I move closer.

My own heartbeat feels so loud I’m surprised he can’t hear it.

“Your bathroom is the size of my kitchen at home, the tub is gigantic. Oh, and it has jets!” I say looking past the door. “I would read books in there if it were mine. Surrounded by candles,” I tell him, eyeing the tub.

Lastly, I make my way over to his bed. A huge four poster bed loaded with pillows and a soft black velvet comforter that I run my hand over.

“Nice big bed too,” I say, meeting his eyes. I smile to myself looking up at him; he’s almost panting. If his need has been as great as mine these last few months, I don’t blame him.

“You’re quite the seductress.” His voice is raspy and deep. His eyes following the lines of my curves.

I start to walk towards him, but something catches my eye on the nightstand. A framed photo. Noah, Michael, and I.

I pick it up, to get a closer look.

I couldn’t be more than twelve in the photo. The boys are teens. My hair is split down the middle into two messy braids, braces on my teeth. I’m smiling shyly at the camera in cut-off overalls.

Michael stands on one side of me, smiling wide. On the other side of me stands Noah. Tall and gangly. Holding a freshly caught fish in the air, proud as can be.

“I don’t remember this photo.”

“My mom took it. It’s a bit wrinkled. I had it in my wallet for years. Listen, Gertie... If you think you’d be comfortable in here, I’ll take the other room. Or if you want a bath, I can draw you one.” He rambles on.

“Do you not want to share a bed with me tonight?” I ask him.

“Do I want to?” He clears his throat. “Yes, I want to. Very much so.” He sighs, running his hands through his hair. “But I’m not going to fuck this up again, Gert, and if you’re not comfortable then...”

I interrupt him reaching up on my toes to place my lips on his.

“It’s been a very long six months, Noah. I don’t want to spend another night alone. But, I would like to freshen up, maybe we could take a bath together?” I suggest.

“You’d like to take a bath with me?” He raises his eyebrows.

I look down to see his hard erection pressed against the zipper of his pants. I squeeze my thighs together at the thought

of seeing him in the flesh.

“Yes.” I nod my head, smiling.

We make our way to the tub. He fills it with warm, sudsy, water that smells like lavender oil as I undress.

I slide in first, letting the warm suds and calming smell surround my body and relax my muscles. I watch as he undresses, his eyes never leaving mine. Unbuttoning his shirt, he exposes his toned muscle. He unzips his pants and removes his boxers, his erection springing free. I can't help the groan that escapes me, the sight of his rock-hard, pierced cock making my mouth water. Time has not lessened the inner minx who likes to come out at the sight of a naked Noah Anders.

“This is the first time I've used the tub.” He admits, climbing in to sit behind me. “I've only used the shower.”

“Seems an awful waste of a big tub like this,” I say, swirling my hands through the bubbles.

“Baths aren't nearly as fun alone.” He grins, smiling down at me.

I move to straddle his lap, wrapping my legs around his waist. I've teased myself enough, waited long enough. I feel like I'll explode if I don't get more of him.

He begins showering me with kisses across my forehead, my cheeks, my lips, my shoulders. Running his hands up and down my back.

“You are stunning.” He grips my hips. “I want to touch you everywhere. These soft curvy hips,” he says, running his hands over them. “This ass, which drives me wild,” he says, palming it. “These tits peeking through the water at me.” His eyes glaze over and he licks his lips making me feel cherished and adored. “You're killing me, Gert. I've thought of you, us, every hour of everyday.” His words tickle my ear.

I shamelessly grind myself against him, aching for him to be inside me. He's so hard against my swollen, needy, pussy.

With just a shift of my hips he could be buried deep.

“I need you, Gert, so much.” He gives me a soft, unhurried, kiss as we breathe each other in.

“Will you ever understand how much?” he asks, running his nose along mine.

His hands continue to travel along my curves. He kneads my ass as my body is pressed against his smooth skin and hard muscles.

I run my hands over his biceps, down his strong chest to grip his hard, beautiful cock in-between us. He grunts in response, closing his eyes. I run my hand up and down his length, over the tip and soft metal of his piercing. Promising to have him in my mouth soon.

I take his lips in mine, running my tongue along his. Nibbling his bottom lip, savoring him until I’m absolutely wild with need, panting.

“Make love to me, Noah,” I beg. “Please, I can’t wait any longer for you.”

“You’re sure you’re ready?” he asks, and I nod my head, yes, unable to form the words. I’ve never wanted someone so much. I’ve never craved a man as much as I do Noah at this moment. I think I’ve been ready for him almost my entire life.

As I feel him enter me, I gasp. He’s so large and feels so incredibly deep, especially with me straddling him.

“You okay?” he asks, halting any movement, rubbing his nose on mine. “Tell me if I’m hurting you, baby.”

“You’re not hurting me, just give me a minute,” I whisper, letting my body adjust to the size of him. I start to move up and down his length, slowly at first. He feels incredible, filling every bit of me. His piercing makes everything more intense, rubbing against my walls.

I'm gasping for air, sucking on his tongue, exploring his mouth.

He's being cautious again, hesitant with his movements. Making me feel greedy.

"More, Noah. Please, don't hold back."

"I don't want to hurt you," he grunts, straining for control. He's been inside me mere seconds and I can already feel my orgasm creeping up.

"Please, Noah, take me like you've always wanted," I gasp. "Give me all of you, I can take it," I beg.

"Fuck," he groans out, deep and guttural, reaching between us to rub my clit harder with more pressure.

And then, I'm gone.

I grip his shoulders and work him inside me, hard and fast until I'm out of breath. I'm clawing at him, desperate for every inch of him. I see blackness, stars beneath my eyelids.

"Breathe, baby girl." His voice calls me back. "Breathe," he says, pushing the hair out of my face.

"You're such a good girl, taking all of my cock. You did so well. Let's see if you can take more." I could cum again just from his dirty words, his sexy deep voice rumbling in his chest.

"Bend over the edge of the tub for me, baby, and hold on," he commands.

I do as I'm told, bending over the edge of the tub, holding on for support, the pressure of the water coming from the jets hitting my clit, the cool air tickling my hardened nipples dangling over the edge of the tub.

I feel him change positions, kneeling behind me, gliding the head of his cock through the lips of my pussy, making me moan and chant his name, begging for another release.

“This fucking ass, baby” he says, smoothing his hands across the flesh of my ass. “Someday soon, this ass will be mine too,” he promises, as he rubs his cock across my puckered hole.

I clench at the feeling, equaling turned on and terrified, picturing the size of him entering my never explored tight hole.

“Don’t worry, baby, not tonight.” He chuckles, sensing my hesitation.

He enters my pussy slowly from behind, stilling his body to let me adjust to the new position.

“Are you still good, baby girl?” he asks.

“Yes! More!” I plead.

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, he enters me so hard and fast, water sloshes over the sides of the tub.

I listen to his grunts and groans over my shoulder as he loses all control.

“Fuck...fuck, baby! You’re pussy’s so good. So tight, so wet. I want to fuck you, so fucking hard.” His dirty words come spilling out of him as he continues to pound inside of me.

I clench around his hard cock. Pulsing, milking his cock for everything he can give me.

“I’ve waited so long to make this tight pussy mine! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” he yells.

“Baby, I’m cumming, I can’t hold it!” he yells, as I feel him shoot inside of me.

“Sweet, sweet girl. You were so worth the wait,” he mumbles, raining small kisses up my spine as his cock twitches with the aftershocks of his orgasm.

He collapses, pulling me down onto his lap. I giggle as I watch more water splash over the sides of the tub.

“Noah, we have a literal lake around us.”

“Don’t care,” he breathes out, eyes closed. I can feel his heart beating fast as he tries to catch his breath.

“Gert?”

“Yeah?” I grin at the state of him.

“I don’t know if I should say this. It’s probably horribly inappropriate to say this to a woman.”

“Oh God, what Noah?” I ask, rolling my eyes.

“You are the absolute best lay I’ve had in my entire life.”
he vows with a laugh.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

GERTIE



“Good morning, buddy. I made you some eggs and toast.” I place the food on the table in front of him. I’d woken up extra early knowing Gertie wouldn’t want Cooper to wake and find us in the same bed. I made us breakfast and let her sleep. Opening my eyes this morning to find her fast asleep in my bed was incredible. I’d been tempted to spread her gorgeous thighs and have her again, but I wasn’t sure how sore she was after making love three times last night. *Make love to me* is what she’d said to me in the bathtub and I couldn’t get those words out of my mind. *Love*, not *sex*, not *fuck*. I don’t even know if she realized she said it that way or if she took it to heart the way I did, but I was going to hold onto those four letters for as long as I could.

“Are we going to see where the sharks live?” Cooper asks as I sit down next to him at the table.

“We probably won’t see any sharks, but we’ll go see where they live.” One of the few perks of this house was being right on the beach. It’s a beautiful view, but even more lonely when you’re looking at it alone.

“That’s okay, they’re probably scared of me cause I’m a good fisherperson,” he tells me, pushing his glasses up and shoveling a fork full of eggs into his mouth. “I caught a sunfish in the summertime and my mama said I’m the best fisherperson she knows.” He puffs his chest out with pride.

“I bet you are! Maybe you could teach me what you know. I haven’t been fishing in a long time.”

“My daddy doesn’t like to fish,” he says suddenly. “My daddy doesn’t like soccer or to play with me.”

I swallow my food while searching my brain for the right thing to say. Maybe letting Gertie sleep in late wasn’t such a good idea.

“My dad didn’t like to play much either, Coop, but I’m sure your daddy loves you very much.”

He hops off his chair and comes over to me, putting his arms around my waist.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Noah, I’ll play with you,” says the five-year-old, comforting the grown man.

“You have a good heart like your mama, buddy.” I hug him back.

“Thanks! Wanna go play now?”

“Absolutely.”

We roll up our pant legs and run along the beach together. It’s the first time in the five months I’ve been here that I took the time to walk the beach.

Cooper has insisted he’s seen half a dozen sharks by now. I don’t have the heart to tell him they’re just whitecaps on the top of the water.

“Look at this shell, Mr. Noah!” he squeals, holding it out to me.

“Oh, wow, that’s a starfish.”

“Mama! You’re awake, look at the starfish!” Cooper yells to Gertie as she walks toward us. “And we saw sharks!” he says, as she comes to stand next to me. I shake my head no,

when she looks over at me with wide eyes. “Six sharks!” He adds, running along the water.

“It was just the white caps on the water,” I whisper to her.

“I’m sorry I slept so late, I guess I was worn out from yesterday.” She blushes.

“Seeing you naked and asleep in my bed was the best thing I’ve seen in a long time, Gert,” I whisper, rubbing my thumb along her hand while Cooper’s back is turned. “My brother and Jules landed late last night. I thought they were staying with us, but I guess they wanted to stay at a hotel.”

“They’re going to take Cooper to the amusement park while we’re here,” she tells me.

“Have you decided how long?” I ask, dreading the answer, but knowing I need to be realistic. I’d lock her up in this damn house if I didn’t think she’d hate me for it.

“I thought we’d stay until Friday”

So, I have five days with them. “I’m not staying out here forever. I plan on going back to New York within the next month or so,” I say, looking out at the ocean. “I mean, I would stay here if you liked it; if you moved here too.” I add hesitantly turning to gauge her reaction.

“That’s a lot to think about, Noah. I’m not sure. Can we talk about this later?”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

GERTIE



I had one of the best night's sleep I've had in a long time. I laid in bed thinking about how my life had ended up. I married the man that, on the outside, seemed to be the best fit. What a huge mistake. I wouldn't change anything, because Cooper came out of that marriage, but I do wish things were different.

I could hear Noah and Cooper talking in the kitchen about sharks and fishing, and then Cooper brought up his dad. I listened for a few minutes, my heart warming with how Noah answered, and Cooper tried to comfort him. If I could go back in time, give myself time to heal from the loss of my parents, from the trauma of the abuse from my dad, maybe things would be different.

I've fallen for Noah. I finally admitted it to myself last night when I walked in the house, saw how he was with Cooper, and how he looked at me, seeing me for the first time in months. Like I meant something to him. He makes me feel special, like my thoughts matter. Maybe this trip wasn't the best idea. It'll probably come back to bite me in the ass, but I needed to see him. I needed him to hold me and tell me everything would be okay, even though in reality I don't think it can be.

Soon after Noah left for the office, thankfully Jules and Aidan showed up to take Cooper to the amusement park. He'd

been basically bouncing off the walls in anticipation. Aidan's energy level is equal to my five-year-old's and Jules'. Well, she has the patience of a saint, so I knew they'd have a great day and I could relax a bit.

I walk down the beach by myself. I let the sun warm my face, breathing in the salty air, my toes in the sand, grounding me.

If I entertain the idea of moving to California, what would that even look like? Week long visits with his father for Cooper, many more plane rides. Noah living away from his mother and brother.

I know he only suggested it so I could get away from Elliott, and although I appreciate the effort, even with the sacrifice he so willingly suggested, I would still never be free of Elliott. Until Cooper is eighteen, I have to maintain an amicable relationship with a man who wants to control me, even after divorce.

I just don't have the answers. There are no easy solutions. Nothing that makes me feel safe. The only time I've felt truly safe and secure in a long time is when I've let my guard down and been wrapped in Noah's arms.

I change into a light-yellow sundress, curl my hair, and put on some light makeup, savoring the alone time and the chance to pamper myself a bit without the incessant questions of an inquisitive five-year-old underfoot.

I search the address to Noah's office building and call myself an Uber, intent on visiting a certain handsome man at work.

I take the elevator up to the top floor, straightening out my dress and applying more gloss to my lips in the reflection of the elevator walls. *Why is my stomach fluttering with butterflies? I've known this man since we were kids.* I exhale, loudly, making my way out the door. I head down the long

hallway, assuming I'm going in the right direction, until I come to the receptionist's desk.

"Hello, maybe you can help me," I say, clearing my throat, still nervous.

"Possibly," the young woman says behind her desk, not looking up from her computer screen.

"I'm looking for Noah Anders," I tell her, as she regards me over glasses, scanning me from head to toe. "And you are?"

This woman must be twenty-two at the most. Fake tits, fake lashes, fake tan, fake teeth, and real attitude.

"Hello," I say, clearing my throat. "I'm, Gertie. Can you tell me where I can find Mr. Anders?"

"Noah..." she purrs, "doesn't have time for company today. He's a very busy man." She dismisses me.

Now she's just pissing me the fuck off. I'm taken back to being a pig tailed, pimple faced teen while the cheerleaders swarm Noah at homecoming. I take a deep breath, schooling my features.

"If you'll only page Mr. Anders for me, I'm sure he'll..."

"Baby girl!" Noah says, coming up behind me. "This is a surprise." He kisses my cheek.

"Hi," I exhale with relief.

"You okay? Is something wrong?"

"No, everything is good. Could we go to your office?"

"Of course, baby. Denise, hold my calls." He places his hand on my lower back and leads me to his office.

"What's going on?" he asks me. "Your eye is twitching, so don't bother fibbing," He gives me a soft peck.

"I'm fine, Noah, I just have a lot on my mind and wanted to see you. I didn't think I'd get past your security detail out

there,” I say, sitting down in one of his cushy, leather chairs.

“Was she disrespectful to you, Gert?” he asks, his eyes narrowing.

“It’s fine. I think she has a crush on you.”

“That’s not what I asked you. Was she rude to you?” he asks, through gritted teeth.

“Just forget about it, Noah.”

“No.” He holds up his hand to stop me.

I watch as he buzzes her desk.

“Yes, Mr. Anders?” she asks, in a sickeningly sultry voice.

“Pack your things, Denise. You’re dismissed,” he snaps, ending the call.

“Noah!” I gasp.

“I’m not going to allow someone to treat you like that, and you shouldn’t either. She was wrong and had a shitty attitude. I don’t want anyone working for me like that.”

“But what if she has a family and needs the money.”

“Then she should do her job better. Besides, she doesn’t have a family. She’s made it abundantly clear that she’s single without kids. Now,” he says, “enough about her, what’s this?” he asks, taking the paper bag from me.

“I brought you lunch.”

“You did?”

“Chicken salad.”

“Is that a juice box and cookies too?” he asks excitedly.

“Yes.” I laugh at his childlike enthusiasm.

“You look very pretty today.” He walks over to stand in front of me. “You curled your hair, it’s so soft,” he says, holding one of the curls between his fingers.

“Stay and eat with me.” He drags me over to sit on his lap behind his desk.

I adjust myself on his lap, pulling my dress down. I’m aching for him already, feeling his hard muscular thighs beneath me, his intoxicating cologne.

“What if someone comes in? You shouldn’t have a woman on your lap at work.”

He reaches over me to press a button causing a clicking noise, the door locks and shades go down on his window.

“Well, that’s very fancy,” I giggle.

“Convenient too,” he whispers, kissing my neck. “You smell fucking amazing. I should have you sit on my desk so I can eat you for lunch. Would you like that, naughty girl?” he asks me while running his thumb over my hardened nipples. “I can’t stop thinking about last night. Your pussy is so good at milking my cock.”

“You have a very dirty mouth, Mr. Anders,” I breathe.

“I can’t help it. You bring out the animal in me,” He whispers in my ear while moving his hand up my thigh. “Let me touch you, baby.”

“I have something else in mind.” I tell him, sliding off his lap and onto my knees. I’m salivating at the thought of having his cock in my mouth.

“Fuck,” is all he can manage as I unbutton his pants.

“This is what I’ve been thinking about since you left for work this morning,” I tell him, taking his hardened cock out. “You have a beautiful cock,” I tell him, letting it slide over my tongue, banging against the soft sides of my mouth as I lick and gently suck it. I clench my thighs together, wet and desperate for friction.

He moans loudly and tips his hips up, wanting me to take him even deeper.

I let my tongue slide around the soft helmet, the smooth metal of his piercing, tasting his fluid as he grows more excited. I groan at the taste, making it last, stopping each time he's about to orgasm.

I suck his thick, meaty cock with fervor, licking all the way down and back up, learning what he enjoys. He moans out my name when I kiss and suck his balls.

I swallow nearly all of its length, breathing through my nose to keep from gagging. Feeling him enter the opening of my throat is one of the hottest things I've ever experienced.

"Baby girl don't stop. Just like that," he moans, thrusting into my mouth.

I hollow out my cheeks and suck harder, holding his balls in my hand.

"Fuck, baby, yes. Oh yes, such a good, good girl," he moans. "Look at me while you suck my cock. Fuuuck," he groans, as I do as I'm told.

"I can't hold out any longer, I'm going to cum," he gasps. He tips my chin up to look in my eyes while his cock is buried to the hilt down my throat.

"I want you to swallow every single drop," he demands, as I feel the warm liquid hit the back of my throat swallowing everything he gives me, basking in his praise as he tells me what a good girl I am for sucking his cock on my knees in his office.

I let him fall slowly out of my mouth, licking him clean while he watches with hooded eyes.

I stand to my feet and hop up on his desk, opening the lunch bag as he tucks himself back in.

"You look quite proud of yourself," he chuckles. Watching me take a bite of his sandwich.

“I am.” I smile smugly, leaning forward, offering him a bite. Giggling as he growls, taking an oversized bite.

“I could get used to this,” he says, trying to be sweet but only reminding me of my current situation, bringing me swiftly back to reality. The feeling of overwhelming dread coming back, wreaking havoc on my stomach, dissipating any appetite I’d had.

He chews his food while I avoid his gaze until the sound of his phone interrupts us.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

NOAH



“Hey, Aidan, it’s Noah. How’s the park?”

“Good, overpriced, crazy and crowded”

“You need me to transfer some more cash?” I offer.

“No, no man. This is my treat. Plus, I’m having just as much fun as he is. Coop’s having a blast. That kid’s a riot. You should have seen him on some of the rides.” He cracks up, “The kid rides roller coasters like a champ! Jules and I turned green, and he was just screaming, *go faster!*”

“He is his mother’s son,” I chuckle, remembering how much Gertie loved the rides at the fair as a kid.

“I sent a shit ton of pics to Ma too. They should hold her over for a few days,” he tells me. “But listen, um, I wanted to talk to you about a couple of things. You alone?”

“Yeah, Gertie brought me lunch but just left. What’s up?”

“My P.I. guy called me. Had some news on her ex.”

“Okay”

“The chick that was suing him for harassment, the one who claimed her kid was his?”

“Yeah?”

“DNA came back. She was telling the truth.”

“Wow.”

“Yep, and his company is tanking. Stocks are down. Shit’s pretty bad man. I don’t know if you want to tell Gert or what, but I thought you’d want to know.”

“No, yeah, I appreciate it, Aidan. Wow, I don’t know if I should tell her right now. She’s still clamming up whenever I try to work shit out.”

“You want me to have Jules talk to her?”

“No, I’ll figure something out. Thank you, though. Really, Aidan, I appreciate it.”

“Of course. I also wanted to let you know after we talked the other day about finding you an assistant, I think I found a lady that will be perfect. She’s worked for some pretty high-end clientele and has a great reputation. I told her how you want a scaled-back version of what you’ve got going on now. You just need someone to handle the stuff you hate, like the social media crap, so you can get back to being more hands on. Did you want me to set up a zoom call or something?”

“That sounds amazing, bro!”

“Cool.”

“I don’t know how to thank you enough, Aidan.”

“We’re brothers, Noah. This is what we do. I know you’d help me if I needed it. You have, many times. It’s the least I can do. Hey, I gotta get back to Jules. Cooper’s dying to get moving again,” he laughs. “He’s currently circling Jules. How’d Mom do it with the two of us?”

“I have no idea. The woman deserves a medal.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

GERTIE



“Hey, Gertie, just calling to let you know we’re on our way back now.”

“Hi, Jules, how is he?”

“Totally passed out in the backseat, mouth hanging open, face covered in sticky cotton candy.”

“Oh my gosh,” I giggle. “Dare I even ask what he ate?”

“Best you don’t ask. The kid has an iron stomach.”

“Don’t I know it!”

“Okay, well, we will be there soon, love ya!”

“Love you so much, you’re the best auntie ever!”

I hang up with Jules and flip through my photos on my phone, stopping when I come to one that makes me smile wide. It’s a photo taken on the beach where Noah is squatting down in front of Cooper showing him a shell he picked up. The looks on their faces is what gets me. The look of trust and joy on Cooper’s, the look of adoration on Noah’s.

I went from being unhappily married, to divorced, to saying I didn’t want another serious relationship, to wanting to be in one with Noah all within a year. It feels overwhelming and heavy on my soul.

“Mama! I’m here!” I hear Cooper yell from the driveway. Apparently, the power nap was enough for a second wind.

“Hey, sweet boy. How was it?” I ask, watching him try to fit an oversized teddy bear through the door.

“I had fun! This is Mr. Fuzzy.”

“Um, wow!” I exclaim, looking over at Jules and Aidan as they come in holding armloads of other toys, balloons, and tee shirts.

“Did you leave anything for the other kids at the amusement park?”

“Mama, Santa’s elves bring more from the North pole, member? You’re so silly!” Cooper runs over, hugging me tight.

“I missed you, buddy. You are a mess! Go put your things near our suitcases and I’ll be in to give you a bath,” I tell him as he runs off.

“Did he wear you guys out?” I laugh, as I see Jules and Aidan throw themselves on the couch.

“Girl, I don’t know how you do this every day and maintain a life,” Jules says, putting her head on Aidan’s shoulder.

“Well, I don’t fill him up with sugar and run around a theme park with him every day, for one,” I chuckle. “But I can’t thank you guys enough, really. It was nice to have the day to myself.”

“You’re welcome, Shortstack. He was a blast. Hey babe, you want to get going?” Aidan asks. “I’m beat.”

“What time does your flight leave?” Jules asks, peeling herself back off the couch.

“Five PM.”

“Hhmm,” she answers. “Have you heard from Elliott?” she asks, saying more with her eyes than her mouth.

“I sent him a couple texts and photos. I haven’t heard back.” I answer, glancing over at Aidan, who’s busy tying his shoes by the door.

“Do you think he suspects we didn’t come alone?” she whispers, coming closer.

“I’m not sure,” I whisper back, walking into the kitchen.

“How are you going to handle Cooper? Did you talk to him yet?”

“I plan on it tonight. Don’t worry about me, Jules. It’ll all work out”

“I can’t help but worry, Gertie. He’s being an asshole lately. I don’t trust him.”

“I appreciate your concern, Jules. But I’ve got this. I just need to slowly get him used to the idea that I have a boyfriend and Cooper really likes him.”

“Well, you shouldn’t even have to explain yourself. It’s bullshit.”

“I know,” I sigh, “But it’s just the way things are right now.”

“I don’t think you should talk to him alone, Gertie.”

“Jules, you’re overreacting,” I tell her, pulling ingredients for spaghetti sauce out of the fridge.

“Gertie, look at me.” She comes closer and puts her hand on my arm.

“I saw the bruises.”

“What?” I ask, my stomach bottoming out.

“I saw the bruises on your arm. After the first time Elliott got mad about Noah.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, turning to open the cupboard and pull-out pasta. “I probably bumped into something. You know I bruise easily.”

“Gertie, look at me.” She sighs as I turn around to face her, struggling to meet her eyes. “Gertie, you have nothing to be embarrassed about, and I’m not trying to be a bitch. I’m just worried about you because I love you guys.”

“I know. I love you too,” I tell her, as tears start to fall down my face. “I don’t know what to do.” I admit, as she hugs me, and I cry into her shoulder.

“Did you talk to your lawyer, Hun?”

“I don’t have the money to pay her, Jules, and even if I did, his lawyers are better. He’ll take Cooper from me.”

“Listen, I have money set aside. Gertie, listen to me, don’t shake your head no. Let me help.”

“No, I can’t let you do that. I’ll figure this out.”

“Mama! I thought I was gettin’ a bath!” Cooper hollers, running into the kitchen in his underwear.

“I’m coming, buddy. I love you, Jules. We’ll talk more later.” I promise, walking away and heading into the bathroom.

“Mama, why do you look sad?” Cooper asks, as I set him in the tub.

“Mommy’s just thinking, buddy.”

“About sad stuff?” he asks as I hold his head back and pour water over his hair. “Do you want to stay in Fornia like me and not go home?”

“Daddy and Clowny miss you, buddy. We need to go home. I’m glad you had fun in California, though.”

“Can we come again? I want Mr. Noah to come home with us, Mommy. I don’t want him to stay in Fornia. Mr. Noah says he misses us, and he’ll be sad, and I like the beach here, Mommy. I want to find more shells and build a sandcastle.” He rambles as I wash his face and arms. “Clowny can swim in the ocean and daddy can fly on the plane to visit me.” He reasons.

“Buddy, I hear you. Let’s get you washed up, and you can help me make Mr. Noah a nice dinner. I bet he’ll be hungry when he gets home.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

NOAH



I pull into the driveway, shut the car off and take a minute to take in the sight. The lights are on in the house. It's full of life. How many endless nights did I dread coming home to a silent, empty house?

In the last year, I've gone from living in a huge city, to moving back home to help with Mom, being satisfied as a bachelor, to being madly in love with this woman and her incredible kid, and feeling like I can't live without them.

They fly back tomorrow night. I've been dreading it since they got here.

I've got a few more weeks here before I can head home, that's if everything goes to plan. Hopefully this new assistant Aidan has helps. I can be away from her for a few weeks, we can make zoom calls, I tell myself as I head into the house. It'll be okay.

"Lucy, I'm home!" I yell out, walking through the door.

"Who's Lucy, Mr. Noah? Just me and Mama are here." Cooper squeals, as he comes barreling out of the kitchen.

"I'm just being silly, Coop. Wow! It smells amazing here!" I say, picking him up.

"Me and Mama made us dinner!"

“I was just going to eat one of your arms,” I say, pretending to bite as he screeches, wiggling out of my hold.

“Noah, we don’t eat little kids,” Gertie says, smiling and watching from the doorway. She has her hair pulled up, little wisps surrounding her face, and she’s wearing one of my tees and leggings. She takes my breath away.

“What about adults?” I say, wiggling my eyebrows at the double meaning.

“Not adults either,” she says, as a blush spreads to her cheeks. “Come get some spaghetti, you animal.”

We sit down and eat dinner together around the table as Cooper tells us about the theme park

“I wasn’t scared on the ride, but Mr. Aidan was!”

“Was he now? Why don’t you tell us more about that,” I laugh, as Gertie wipes sauce off his face. “Did Mr. Aidan scream like a big baby?” I ask.

“Uh huh!” he giggles.

“Noah!” Gertie scolds, covering her smile with her hand. “It’s not nice to tease when people are scared.”

“Auntie Jules made him feel better. She kissed him on the lips! It was gross!”

“Wow, buddy. That is gross. Sorry you had to see that!” I laugh.

“Yeah, it was really icky.”

“Mr. Noah?” he asks after a moment of rare silence.

“Yeah, bud?”

“Can you come home to our house tomorrow? If you come with us on the plane, I’ll show you the clouds and you can hold teddy if you’re scared.”

I wipe my mouth and look over at Gertie, who's gotten up from the table to start cleaning up.

"Mr. Noah has to stay here for work, Cooper. We talked about this, remember?"

"But I'll miss you and so will Teddy." He looks up at me, all big eyes and pouty lips pulling at my heart.

"I'll miss you too. I can call you on the phone though, okay? And pretty soon, I'll be home and we can..."

"Hey Cooper, why don't we put a movie on," Gertie asks, interrupting me. "That new superhero movie came out today. Let's watch that."

Okay!" he squeals, getting off his chair and heading into the living room.

I wait until he's out of earshot and carry the dishes over to the sink where she is. Sure enough, her eye is twitching.

"What was that about, Gert?"

"I don't want to make him promises, Noah," she tells me as I watch her scrub a pot that looks like it was clean ten minutes ago.

"Of seeing me again? Because I intend on him seeing a lot of me. What are you saying?" I ask, taking the pot from her and drying it.

"I'm just saying, I don't want him to get his hopes up." She shrugs her shoulders. "You're going to be busy with this business, which is amazing. Who knows when you'll be back on the east coast."

"I have all that figured out, Gert. Aidan helped me hire someone and I'm dividing some of the responsibilities up. I'm going to be home before you know it, promise."

"I just don't want us to get in the way of this great opportunity for you, you know? This project has really taken

off for you.”

“Hey,” I say, turning her to face me. “You and Cooper are more important to me,” I tell her as I hold her face so she can’t look away from me again. “You have to know that, Shortstack. Please, believe me when I say you’ve changed everything for me. My life is so much better with you two in it.”

I run my thumb across her cheek as I watch tears form in her eyes.

“Why are you sad, baby? Talk to me. If this is about Elliott, I told you, we’ll figure it out. I have money now.”

“I’m...I’m just going to miss you,” Her voice cracks.

“Mama, the movie is starting!”

“Okay, I’m coming buddy.” I watch as she walks down the hallway, away from me.

Cooper falls asleep fifteen minutes into the movie, and I carry him to bed.

“Are you tired, Gertie?” I ask, as she tucks him in.

“Not really, just glad you’re home,” she says, folding herself into my arms.

She said, *home*.

“You know what else I’m going to miss?” she asks, smiling up at me.

“What baby?”

“That big ass bathtub.”

“Then stay.” I beg.

“Noah...”

“Ok, I have a different idea.”

“What’s that?” she looks at me hesitantly.

“How about I fly back with you guys. I could use a few days off and I’d like to check in on Mom.”

“Are you sure you can just leave? You have a lot going on...I wouldn’t want you to jeopardize anything.” But the excitement I saw in her eyes a moment ago at my suggestion already sealed my decision. “Let me worry about that.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

GERTIE



“So, how was the trip?” Elliott asks, as I let him in my apartment.

“It was nice. Cooper had fun. Jules brought him to the amusement park. Spoiled him rotten, bought him half the park, including a giant bear that we had to figure out how to get on the plane,” I ramble.

“And what did you do in California while you were there?” he asks me, sounding like he’s making some type of accusation instead of a question.

“Relaxed,” I nervously chuckle. “It was nice to get away, get a change of scenery. We slept in a lot.”

“It’s strange that Jules wanted to take this trip with you all of a sudden.” He searches my face.

“It wasn’t sudden; we’d talked about it a lot. We just had never made time to go. Busy lives and all.”

“Huh,” he responds. I can feel his eyes, heavy on me as I quickly pack the last of Cooper’s things into his overnight bag.

“Cooper! Are you ready?” I holler down the hallway. “I love you buddy, have a good weekend with Daddy” I tell him, kissing him goodbye.

“I will, Mama”

“Call me before you go to bed to say goodnight.”

“I never forget, Mama.”

“Oh, Elliott,” I say, heading to the medicine cabinet. “Here’s that cold medicine I was talking about. He’s been coughing at night. Probably just the change in temperature from California to here,” I tell him as he takes the medicine from me.

“Come on, Cooper.” He hurries him out the door.

I exhale as I close the door behind them, but moments later, he’s back knocking at the door.

“Hey, did you forget something?” I ask, letting him back in, Confused, I glance out seeing that he’s already buckled Cooper in the car.

“Yes.” There’s an eerie calm about him as he looks around, shutting the door behind him and walking into the living room.

“What do you need, Elliott?” I ask. “I have things to do, and Cooper shouldn’t be in the car alone.”

“I was very clear when I spoke to you, Gertie.”

“About what?” I ask, my heart starting to beat faster.

I watch as he bends down, reaching between the couch and the end table.

“What are you doing, Elliott? Cooper is probably wondering why he’s out there alone for so long.” I say, my mouth going dry.

“What the fuck is this?” He asks through gritted teeth.

“It’s just a baseball cap. I don’t understand what the big deal is. Whatever is upsetting you, let’s talk about it later when you’ve calmed down.” I try to reason.

He chuckles darkly. “It’s not Cooper’s hat.” He states while walking toward me, grabbing me tightly by my arm, his fingers digging into my skin.

“Do you think I’m a fucking idiot?”

“Let go of me, Elliott! What is wrong with you!” I yell, trying to shake him off as he tightens his grip. “Let go of me, you’re hurting me!”

“All you had to do was listen,” he spits, inches from my face.

“I allowed you to have your own place, a divorce. I was fucking relieved when it happened even! I never wanted to get married in the first fucking place!” he screams, grabbing my chin, forcing me to look into his eyes.

“You women are all the same. You probably thought you’d be rich after the divorce, didn’t you?” He chuckles darkly.

“Elliott, just let go,” I say, trying to pry his hands off my face. “I’m sorry I’ve upset you. I’ll do better.” I beg, trying to placate him. My survival instincts kicking in.

“You want to act like a whore like the rest of the women in my life, fine! Do it! But keep my fucking kid away from the dirtbags you open your legs to!” he screams in my face.

“Elliott, I’m sorry!” I sob. “I wasn’t thinking!” I try my best to reason.

“You’re damn right you weren’t thinking! You’re all fucking liars and whores! My father warned me about you.” His hand moves his hand to my throat, tightening his grip.

“I should have fucking listened.” He grits his teeth, slamming me into the wall. My head cracks hard against the wood, pain searing through my body, stealing my breath away.

“He said, she’s too quiet Elliott, it’s the quiet ones you can’t trust. Here I thought you were fucking different! You played me like a goddamn fool! You were probably fucking around behind my back when we were married!” He rants, slamming me against the wall again.

“No. Never, Elliot,” I cough, gasping for air and clawing at his hands still around my throat.

“Shut the fuck up!” he screams, punching me in the face with his free hand.

Flashes of my mother’s bruised and battered face after a fight with my father flash through my mind.

I feel like I’m going to be sick. I can’t see out of the eye he’s just punched, and my head is now bleeding badly from him repeatedly cracking it against the wall behind me. I can feel the warm blood dripping down the back of my neck.

I gasp for breath as he continues his assault, berating me for things I don’t understand. Cursing at me over and over again.

I just need to get outside to my baby. I need to say the right thing, so Elliott won’t be so angry, and he’ll let me go.

I pull at his hands trying to push him away. He’s so tall towering over me. I’ve never thought of Elliott as a particularly strong man, but in this moment, with the amount of anger and fury, he seems stronger than I could have ever imagine. I whimper at the realization that physically I’m no match for him. I’m completely at his mercy.

I hear my phone ring from the other room, and our eyes meet, anger flashing through his, sheer terror through mine.

I shake from the inside out. I can feel my teeth chattering together. My vision through one eye is gone and the other feels blurry. My head is foggy, and I feel like I’m coming in and out of consciousness.

I have no idea how long the beating goes on for. At some point, he lets go of my neck and I slide down the wall, curling up tightly into a ball. My hands and arms instinctively cover my face and head. My body thrashes back and forth with the impact of his fists and the stomping of his feet pummeling me. I can barely breathe from the pain in my ribs and the throbbing pain in my head. Through it all, I barely make a sound. I swallow down my screams, staying as silent as possible, fearing Cooper will hear me. And, although the pain in my body is agonizing and very real, the true agony comes from the thoughts of my child and what will happen if I don't survive.

I think of my own mama, how she must have felt the same. Silently, I pray that my mama is here with me in spirit, protecting me.

I don't want to die; I don't want to leave my son with this monster.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

NOAH



I'm just getting out of the shower when my phone starts ringing. I pick up, seeing its Aidan.

"Hey, bro, you want to play some ball?" he asks.

"Yea, sure. Meet you at the court in say, thirty minutes? I ask, looking at my watch.

"Perfect"

"So how are things with Gertie since you've been home?" my brother asks, as we head out onto the court.

"Good, I guess. She's been quiet. She told me she might be and that it was best if I didn't go to her apartment, she's freaked out, thinking Elliott is watching her," I say, tossing the ball his way.

"That guy is such a dick." He shakes his head as he tosses the ball back.

"I know. I'd like to track him down and beat the shit out of him, honestly. I have to respect her wishes, though."

"Well, if you decide to track the fucker down, call me so I can help. No one should be afraid like she is. I fuckin' hate

guys like that.”

“Me too. Course, I keep checking my phone because I’m worried about her.” I sigh.

“When was the last time you heard from her?” he asks me, dribbling the ball by me.

“Not since yesterday morning.”

We’re silent as we toss the ball back and forth making shots. Until he stops, turning to me, concern showing on his face. “Do you want me to have Jules try to get ahold of her?” he asks.

“If I can’t get a hold of her by tonight, I’ll have you check on her. She’s probably taking a nap or something. She said she was really tired last night and I’m sure Coop was up early.”

“Okay, no problem, Noah. Let me know either way, okay, and I’ll do the same.”

“Oh, wait a sec, my phone’s ringing...” I tell him, pulling my cell out. “It’s Jules”

“I left my phone in the car. She probably wonders where I am,” he tells me.

“Hey, Jules, Aidan is with me, if you’re looking for him.”

“Gertie!” she gasps.

“What is it!” I ask, as my stomach plummets at the terror in her voice.

“Meet me at the hospital!” she yells, as I hear commotion in the background.

“What happened?” I shout, racing towards my car.

“It’s Gertie, she’s hurt. Really badly!” She continues to sob. “We don’t know where Cooper is.... I looked....I couldn’t find him.... Oh god, Noah, please come fast. She was all

alone. I don't know for how long. I should've checked on her sooner!" she cries.

"Is she breathing? What happened?" I yell, as Aidan and I jump in the car and squeal out of the parking lot.

"We don't know what happened! There was so much blood, Noah. She's barely breathing. I'm following the ambulance now."

"Stay on the phone with me, Jules. I know you're upset, watch how you're driving!" I shout, pressing harder on the gas.

"I can't stay on the phone.... Noah" she sobs, gasping for air. "You need to hurry... I don't know.... I don't know if you'll get here in time."

NINE MONTHS LATER

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

NOAH



“**N**oah, I miss my mama.” Cooper says, coming into my kitchen.

“I do too, buddy.” I sigh, exhausted by his endless energy.

“Can we go see her now?” he asks, looking up at me.

“Yes, I just want to stop and grab some flowers for her at the store first,” I tell him as I pack a bag with snacks and water bottles.

I take the role of being his stand in dad very seriously.

He hasn’t seen Elliott since that horrible day almost a year ago and I’ll be damned if he goes without having a positive role model in his life.

Just the thought of that man anywhere near Cooper makes me want to do things I can’t say out loud. Hopefully, he won’t have to see him again for a very long time.

If I could go back in time to that day, I would do so many things differently. But I can’t, and I’ll forever live with the guilt that I didn’t protect her. I remind myself for the hundredth time, I can only move forward, hoping that the choices I make now are the right ones.

A couple years ago when I still lived in California, if you’d told me my life would look like it does now, I would’ve never believed it.

“Remember that time Mama told us she likes daisies, Noah?” he asks, petting Mr. Snickers, who’s slimmed considerably with his new diet and exercise program.

“I remember.”

“We should get her those. Is Grammie Nancy coming too?” he asks, bounding out to the car.

“Yep, she’s going to meet us there. Buckle up kiddo.”

When we arrive, I find a parking space close to the entrance and take his hand as we walk across the grass.

“Tell me again about the day you first met Mama.”

“Again! I just told you this story last night before bed, buddy,” I chuckle.

“I know, but it’s my favorite.” He smiles up at me swinging our clasped hands back and forth. I can’t help but give in looking at his toothless grin. The tooth fairy made her first visit last week and it was quite an exciting event at our house.

“Okay, here goes. It was a sunny day. A Tuesday I think.”

“Last night you said it was a Thursday.” He corrects me.

“Okay, fine, it was a sunny Thursday. Who’s telling the story here anyway?” I tease. “A family had just moved in next door, and I was excited to learn they had kids because I wanted some new friends.”

“Friends like I made at my new school.” He interrupts.

“Yes, just like that. I saw a boy who looked my age playing basketball in the driveway next door. I was too shy to go out and talk to him at first, so instead I ran to get my basketball out of the garage.”

“The boy was Uncle Mike!” He hops up and down, excitedly.

“You going to let me tell the story, or are you?” I ask, as he giggles.

“So, as I was saying, I was digging through our bin of sports equipment when I heard a girl giggling and laughing. I looked up and saw your mom riding her bike down the sidewalk.”

“She was riding her bike with no hands!” he exclaims, remembering the story he’s heard countless times in the last few months.

“Yep, no hands, her arms were stretched out wide and her hair was blowing in the wind.”

“And you thought she was the prettiest girl in the world huh, Noah?” he asks, looking up at me with eyes just like his mama.

“The prettiest girl I’d ever seen.” I agree, smiling down at him.

“And remember what she did when she saw you staring at her?”

I laugh, remembering her stubborn sassiness even at that age.

“She wrinkled her nose and stuck her tongue right out at me.”

“I stuck my tongue out at a girl in my class cause she’s pretty and my teacher said it’s not nice.” He scowls. “How long have you loved my mama, Noah?”

“That’s a tough question” I think back to when I knew, when I felt that magnetic pull towards Gertie.

“I think I’ve loved your mama since forever, buddy.”

“Hurry Noah!” He impatiently pulls me closer to the finish line. “We’re going to miss it!”

“She’s right there, Noah! See?” He points, hopping up and down as I watch Gertie run with the others. Her limp is still

slightly visible, even with all the physical therapy she's done, but she's come so far in so many ways.

Being a part of this marathon alone is a miracle. But my strong, beautiful woman was determined to run, not only for herself, but for her mom and all the other women, who didn't make it out of a domestic abuse situation and those affected by one.

She's the bravest person I've ever known and an inspiration.

"I see her, buddy." Her hair is plastered to her forehead. Her face red, her white tee shirt with the purple domestic abuse awareness ribbon on the front, drenched in sweat. I smile wide and wave along with Cooper and watch as recognition meets her face, seeing us, giving her that extra push she needs to make it to the finish line.

"She did it, Noah!" he yells, hopping up and down as she crosses the finish line.

She sure did, buddy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



L.M Maretti has a love for romance. When she isn't writing about romance, she's creating floral pieces for weddings in New England.

When she isn't writing, reading or playing with flowers, you can find her spending time with her husband, children, or the many animals on her mini farm located in the green mountains of Vermont.