



THE COMPLETE  
**WARD SISTERS**  
SERIES

KARLA SORENSEN



**FOCUSED**

**FAKED**

**FLOORED**

**FORBIDDEN**

**THE COMPLETE WARD  
SISTERS BOX SET**

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KARLA SORENSEN

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# **FOCUSED**

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*This is dedicated to the ones who've ever felt like they needed  
to prove their worth.*

*I promise, the right people will always know exactly how  
valuable you are.*

## MOLLY

If I'd known that my new boss was Cruella de Vil, I would've color coordinated my outfit for work that day. She matched the colors of the Washington Wolves perfectly. She was all sleekness and shine with her black dress, white jacket, red shoes, red lips, and a silvery white bob that fell just below her glass-sharp chin.

"Molly Ward, is it?" she asked quietly. Like the kind of quiet where I felt like if I answered wrong, she'd press a button, and I'd fall through a secret trap door.

I nodded. "Welcome to Washington, Miss Kelly. I've been looking forward to meeting you."

One perfectly manicured eyebrow lifted like it was being pulled oh, so slowly by someone tugging a string. Briefly, she glanced down at something on her desk, my employment file, presumably. "You've been here a long time."

I smiled. "My whole life, practically. But as a paid employee, for four years now."

I waited for Beatrice Kelly, the brand-new chief marketing officer of the Washington Wolves, to smile back, but she didn't.

As I stood in front of her desk, my nervous fingers twitching together behind my back, she appraised me openly, her gray eyes (because even her eyes matched) traveling from the top of my head to the soles of my feet, clad in sensible brown leather flats.

Personally, I found sensible footwear incredibly sexy because I enjoyed the ability to walk without pain at the end of the day when my shoes came off.

For some reason, those shoes offended her. I saw it the moment her gaze touched the rounded toe and tiny leather bow in the middle.

I glanced down, like the shoes would explain to me what they'd done wrong and why we were now in trouble with my brand-new boss.

*I miss Ava*, I thought for the thousandth time, my heart squeezing over the loss of my old boss, Ava Hawkins. Why they had to up and move across the country to be closer to her husband's family was beyond me.

"Have a seat," Beatrice said, still not taking her eyes off my shoes. I slid into one high-back black chair and folded my hands in my lap, wishing desperately to have something to keep them occupied. My whole life, I was the worst fidgeter in the universe when I was nervous. And this moment right here was sliding right into the top ten moments of all time. "Tell me what you love about your job, Molly Ward."

My brain raced at the unexpected question because I felt very much like I was being tested on some unseen scale. Quite irrationally, I wanted to glare at my shoes as if they'd gotten me into this mess.

"I love so much about my job, Miss Kelly," I said honestly. "I could probably talk your ear off for hours telling you all the reasons."

She hummed. "Marketing liaison suits you then?"

"It does." I took a deep breath because I knew this was one of those moments when false modesty would get me nowhere with my kinda scary, really matchy-matchy boss. "I'm good with people. I make them comfortable and anticipate their needs well. So when I finished my internship, Ava knew that I'd do well dealing with our advertisers, and I believe that I have. For the past four years, I've built strong relationships with our advertisers and we haven't lost a single major

sponsor since I took over that role. They trust me, and I've earned that trust."

For a split second, I held my breath, worried I'd gone too far, based on the speculative gleam in her eyes. My restless hands itched to reach up into my hair and redo my bun for the thousandth time. It was a bit of a running joke among my coworkers that you could tell I was stressed when my hair moved positions more than two times throughout the day. This morning, knowing I'd be meeting my new boss, I'd anchored every strand of my dark hair so firmly into place that only a crane operator would be able to get it to budge.

"May I be honest, Molly Ward?"

"Of course." And also, why did she keep saying my full name?

Beatrice settled back in her large leather chair and studied me again. "I wasn't looking forward to meeting you."

Ever heard the air being let out of a balloon? That slow, sad hiss of air until the only thing left was a droopy piece of crumpled plastic? Yeah, now imagine it happening to an unsuspecting twenty-five-year-old, eager to get to know her new boss.

"Oh," I exhaled. "Okay?" As soon as the words slipped out, I wanted to take them back.

This wasn't okay. Not okay at all. I'd known these halls and practice fields and offices since I was fourteen years old. Everyone here loved me! I was Molly freaking Ward. I was good at my job. No, I kicked ass at my job. "Actually," I said slowly, gathering my nerve and lifting my chin, "I'm sorry to hear that because I was looking forward to meeting you. I love this organization, I love my job, and I'm very good at it. If it's something I've done in the past that I can improve on, please tell me, so I can fix it."

Boom. I saw the spark of grudging admiration in her eyes, there and gone like a flash of lightning.

"Aren't you curious as to why I wasn't?" she asked, resting her jewelry-free hands lightly on the desk in front of

her.

Not particularly.

Okay, fine. That was a lie. If I knew, I could do every damn thing in my power to change it. Change her perception of me. In college, I was a 4.0 student. Any unfocused energy that I'd wasted in high school turned into a bright, shiny red laser trained straight at hitting the dean's list every semester. It took me no time at all to realize that even if I wasn't the smartest person in the room, I could damn well be the hardest worker, and that had my name on the list every single time.

I took a deep breath and nodded. "A little."

Her scarlet red lips curled up in the slightest of smiles, something I'd come to know as the ultimate sign of amusement for Beatrice. "You probably don't struggle with people liking you, do you, Molly? I imagine it comes very easily to you."

Did it?

I suppose it was naïve of me to think she hadn't already answered that question in her head.

"It doesn't *always* come easily," I heard myself saying.

Now the edges of her smile stopped, frozen on a face that showed nary a wrinkle, despite the color of her hair. "I'm sure it's difficult to make friends. You're beautiful. Charming. Privileged. Your brother is a football legend and now a celebrated coach within these very halls. Your sister-in-law, Paige, is a former supermodel who could walk in New York Fashion Week tomorrow if she wanted to. You scored a job fresh out of college that ten-year industry veterans would kill for. Obviously, you're doing something right, Miss Ward."

The emphasis on my last name had me sitting up straight in the chair.

Like she was sitting on my shoulder, I could hear my sister-in-law's voice, the veritable devil with flaming red hair, the one who always battled for my sisters and me when someone came against us.

*This bitch can go screw herself. She doesn't know you, and she sure as shit doesn't know our family,* Paige whispered. My inner Paige wasn't wrong.

But on the other shoulder was my brother, Logan, the man who'd all but raised my three younger sisters and me after our mom bailed. And I knew what he'd tell me to do. Show respect. Do my job. Prove her wrong in the right way.

Inner Logan wasn't wrong either.

"I know what I must look like to you," I told Beatrice. "How my life must look. But you've only just met me, Miss Kelly. I'm a hard worker; otherwise, I wouldn't have this job, no matter what my last name is."

"We'll see," she mused.

Her attention flicked back to something on her desk, and my molars ground together at her flippant tone. She held up a file and handed it to me over the immaculate expanse of her desk. The black and red Wolves logo was stamped on the front, and I opened it up once I had it firmly in my hand. My eyes skimmed quickly over the cover page, eyebrows popping in surprise.

"Amazon?" I asked. "That's ... huge."

"It is. I got this job because I'm bringing this project with me." She sat back and watched me again. As much as I wanted to flip through the pages to learn more, I gave her my full attention.

"How can I help?"

"You told me you're good at developing relationships. That you anticipate problems and make them go away. That people feel comfortable around you. Am I remembering all those things correctly?"

I nodded slowly.

"I think you've been behind a desk for too long."

I took a deep breath, excitement tingling along the edge of my fingers where I gripped the manila. "Where would you like to move me?"

Beatrice pointed at the folder. “All of that is laid out on page two. I’m offering you a huge chance to back those words up, Miss Ward, but I’m giving you twenty-four to give me an answer.”

My eyes scanned quickly, but when I opened my mouth, she interrupted.

“No, I mean, I don’t want to hear a yes or a no for at least one day. If you say yes to this, this is your one chance to prove to me that you’re not just here because of your last name. Got it?”

Carefully, I forced my immediate acceptance down. “I understand.”

Her eyes held mine unflinchingly. “This is a big deal. Working with a company like Amazon opens doors that don’t get opened often, Molly. That job description includes a lot of fine print that you’d do well to read through, which is why I want you to take your time.”

Returning my gaze to the papers in my hand, I saw a lot of familiar jargon. But there were new phrases as well.

No fraternization.

Morality clause.

My attention went back to her. “I didn’t think we had a no-fraternization policy in the Wolves handbook.”

“We don’t,” she answered dryly, “but this one does. I insist on it for anyone who’s assigned to something of this caliber and reports to me. I’ve seen people’s careers ruined for a lot less, which is why I take this so seriously.” Beatrice held up a hand. “It’s for your protection too, if you agree.”

“Got it.”

She searched my face. “Only say yes if you know, unequivocally, that you can do this job. I don’t believe in the three-strike rule, Molly. In life, we get one chance to impress people, and rarely do we get another.”

An hour and a half later, I pulled into Logan and Paige’s driveway, mind chugging like a freight train. It hadn’t stopped



since the moment I flipped over to the second page.

I was the first one to arrive for family dinner, which we gathered for every Tuesday night without fail. We held them on Tuesdays because during the season, it was my brother's day "off," if you could call it that. As the defensive coordinator for the Wolves, he still worked what seemed like a thousand hours a week during the season, but it was the one day a week he could get home before six thirty for all of us to eat together.

Before I walked into the house—the same one I lived in from the age of fourteen until I'd officially moved out after college—I took a second to calm my racing nerves.

My family would have varying reactions to this.

My sisters would think it was cool to differing degrees. The twins, Lia and Claire, would freak simply because it was Amazon. Isabel, my middle sister, would want to shadow me day and night because of her obsession with all things related to sports documentaries.

Paige would be excited for me, once she got over the need to punch my new boss in the throat.

And Logan? I groaned. My big brother would hate it. Unequivocally and irrationally. He'd all but command me to say no. Wait for another boss or another chance.

I blew out a harsh breath before I pushed the front door open.

Screams greeted me, as did the smell of garlic and herbs. The screams didn't faze me in the slightest, and the smell had me breathing deeply.

"I'm home," I called over the chaos. "Hide the carbs because I had a day."

Down the hallway in front of me, the one that led to the wide-open kitchen, dining, and living, came the intensified hollering.

"Molly! We're under attack, go! Go! Go!"

Flattening against the wall, I reached an arm out to snag the small body that hurtled past me across the wooden floor. “Slow your roll, soldier,” I said into my nephew’s hair as I gave him a quick kiss. “Who’s attacking us?”

Emmett peered up at me, his blue eyes huge in his face and his cheeks flushed from running. “The zombies,” he whispered dramatically. “They already got Dad. He’s dead on the couch.”

My heart squeezed at his serious delivery, the kind that only an eight-year-old boy could muster for an imaginary zombie attack. “Ahh, okay. Well, I put on my anti-zombie spray before I came in, so am I safe to proceed?”

His skinny arms squeezed me in a tight hug before he took off again. “Yup!” he called over his shoulder, then tore around the corner and out of sight.

My brother, Logan, popped up off the couch when I came into the family room, dropping a kiss on the top of my head, the same way I’d kissed his son, who was really more like my little brother than my nephew. “How’d it go? What’s she like?”

I grimaced. “I need wine before this story.”

“That good?”

“Just ... unexpected.”

He eyed me, more astute than I wanted him to be. But that wasn’t a surprise. Logan had been my constant since day one. When I was born, Logan was nineteen years old. That was the kind of sibling age gap you had when our dad married a woman a couple of decades younger than him later in life.

Fast forward fourteen years—our dad had passed away from a heart attack, and my mom realized that being a young widow of four girls just wasn’t the funnest life choice she could make. So she decided not to anymore. The *Eat Pray Love* option suited her better than parenthood, so Logan became our father figure in the legal sense even though he’d had that role for far longer.

“You’d tell me if I need to step in and talk to someone, right?”

I rolled my eyes, trying to hide the irritating flush of embarrassment. His comment was exactly why Beatrice was wary of me. “Yes, Coach.”

He bumped shoulders with me as we walked into the kitchen.

“How was your day?” I asked him. “I heard chitchat about some roster changes, but I was too busy with Beatrice starting to really pay attention.”

My job was typically pretty far removed from dealing with the players anyway, so it didn’t affect me too much.

*Or it used to be far removed from the players*, I thought, reminded again just how very unhappy Logan would be with this.

Paige, his wife of nine years and the coolest person on the planet, was stirring a boiling pot of pasta. She smiled at me as I poured a glass of white. “How’d it go?”

“Shouldn’t I just wait until the other three get here so I don’t have to repeat this?”

“No,” they answered.

I sank into a stool and took a slow sip of my wine. “She’s ... different than Ava. Very ...” I searched for the right word that wouldn’t make them hate her right away. “She’s nonsense. Reminds me of Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada* but like, at seventy-five percent. Not all the way intimidating, but close.”

Paige hummed. “Yes, yes, I’m following.”

“I’m not,” Logan said, folding his arms over his chest. “Who’s the devil?”

“We’ve made you watch it at least three times,” I told him. “The fashion internship movie.”

“Absolutely would’ve blocked that from my subconscious. It’s been wiped away by *Captain Underpants* and *Transformers*.”

We all laughed about Emmett's current obsessions. Somewhere in the distance, he roared about defeating the undead.

"Do we like her?" Paige asked.

"I think we might," I answered, glancing back and forth between them. "She's actually giving me a promotion. Or the chance at one, if I want it."

Promotion. Test. Whatever.

Logan smiled. "That's great, Mol."

"Seriously great," Paige said. "What is it?"

I swallowed more wine. "She got Amazon to agree to include Washington in one of their *All or Nothing* documentaries."

Paige whistled. "No shit." Logan pushed the swear jar in her direction, and she pulled a five from her purse and dumped it in. "There, I'm covered for the night."

Logan eyed me again. "We weren't told about that. Who are they filming?"

"They're still deciding. I guess Allie and Cameron knew about this," I said, referencing the team owner—Paige's best friend—and the longtime COO. "So does Coach, but they're holding a meeting tomorrow to tell the rest of the coaching staff before they decide which players to film."

My brother was quiet as he processed that, and Paige smiled encouragingly at me, even as she knew her husband would be pissed that something like this might interrupt practice. We were less than a month away from the start of preseason, and while late roster changes weren't out of the ordinary, it was still stressful for the coaching staff.

The Wolves hadn't won a championship since Logan played, even though their record had stayed strong. We'd won our division but failed in the past few years to make it past the playoffs, despite a tough defense and young offense.

"That's big money for Washington," Paige said, "to land something like that."

“It is. And a huge opportunity for more, when you consider merchandising.” I set my glass down. “It helps in just about every facet—community relations, social media exposure, and new sponsorship opportunities. Players get exposure to a new crowd that may not know much about them other than their field stats. It’s exciting.”

Logan nodded. “I get it. I don’t have to like it, especially if cameras are tripping my players up during practice.”

“They won’t, I promise.”

His smile was small. “Yeah? You gonna be in charge of them?”

“Sort of?” I grinned. “I have to take a day or two to think about it, but you’re looking at the official special projects liaison. I’ll be the point person between Washington and Amazon. I’ll be in charge of making sure everything runs smoothly; that the film crew has what they need, that the players are protected, and nobody gets in each other’s way.”

“Molly, that’s amazing,” Paige gushed. She hurried around the island to give me a tight hug. “She can’t be too bad if she trusted you with something like that.”

Logan looked thoughtful. Not thrilled, but not unhappy either. “And this is something you want to do?”

I nodded. “I do. And I know, Logan, you loved that I never had to deal with the players, but I’ll be fine. I have sixteen years of knowing how to manage stubborn athletes under my belt.”

Paige laughed.

My brother rolled his eyes.

“I wonder if the roster shakeup influenced Amazon’s decision,” Paige said.

Logan stared at the floor but didn’t say anything.

“It’s possible. Beatrice told me they’re looking at a couple of narratives, and one is following the new players as they assimilate into the established culture of a team, college and pro.” I shrugged. “But that’s just one possibility.”

Logan muttered something under his breath. Paige narrowed her eyes at him.

I cocked my head in his direction. “What was that?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I said I think I know who they want to film. Dammit.”

Paige slowly pushed the swear jar back in her husband’s direction, which he ignored as I stared him down.

“Who?”

Logan slicked his tongue over his teeth and stared me down right back. “This is a horrible idea, and you should turn down the promotion.”

“Ummm, no. Why on earth would I do that?”

“Molly.”

“Logan.” I crossed my arms. “What’s your problem?”

“You have worked so hard, kid,” he said, and my arms dropped at the sudden seriousness of his voice. “So damn hard, and I’m so proud of you.”

Paige glanced back and forth between us, and I shrugged.

“Who did we sign, and why does this freak you out so badly?” she asked.

He rubbed the back of his neck, closing his eyes for a long moment.

I grabbed my phone. “Fine, I’ll google it.”

“Noah,” he said. “We signed Noah Griffin this morning. Press had barely got wind of it by the end of the day.”

Paige somehow managed an, “Ohhhhhhh shit,” even though her half-open mouth barely moved.

The phone clattered out of my hand, and I sank back down into the stool.

“Like, *Noah* Noah?” I pointed at the house behind ours, the one he hadn’t lived in for years. “That Noah.”

Logan's look was enough affirmation. Paige covered her mouth with one hand.

My younger sister Isabel appeared around the corner with a half-eaten protein bar in her hand. "What about Noah?"

We all looked at her but didn't answer.

I dropped my head into my hands.

"What about Noah?" Isabel repeated. "I heard Miami dropped him because of some drama in the locker room. Which is weird because he's like ... uber football robot man. I don't think I've seen him smile in three seasons." She whistled. "But damn, his QB sack record is bananas. Off the charts."

Isabel would know. Our resident sports know-it-all.

I thought my mind was racing before. How cute.

"Molly," Logan said quietly. "Come on, think about this. If they're showing up to film him, then taking care of him will be your job. Do you think that's smart?"

I snapped my head up. "I'm not a kid anymore, Logan."

"What in the hell is going on?" Isabel shouted.

Paige pushed the jar in her direction as Logan ignored everything except me.

"Molly—" he said again.

"No," I interrupted. "I'm not turning this down. I was sixteen the last time I saw him. That was forever ago. I'm sure he's forgotten all about it, just like I'm going to."

Paige cleared her throat obnoxiously because we all heard the bullshit in my words.

Like I'd ever be able to forget Noah Griffin.

Former next-door neighbor, the college boy I crushed on for two years before I snuck out, climbed into his bedroom window, and attempted to seduce him before his dad caught us. The same college boy I could've ruined if his dad had

walked in much later, and anyone had found out he slept with a minor while on a full ride football scholarship.

Yeah, that Noah Griffin.

Looking around the room, I noted all three of their faces were frozen into variations of *this is a horrible idea*.

“You guys,” I stated, “I’ve totally got this. They probably aren’t even coming to film him. We have thirty-one other players to pick from. It’ll be fine.”

Oh, how very, very wrong I was.



## NOAH

**A**lmost nothing about my job intimidated me.

A three-hundred-pound offensive lineman could curse me out just before the snap of the ball, threaten my mother and spit through his helmet all the ways he was going to grind me into the turf, and I wouldn't feel the slightest twinge of apprehension.

I didn't become the best at my position by getting scared off easily. I did it by living, eating, breathing football.

Nothing came before it. Nothing ranked above it.

Practice always took precedence over anything I might find fun, which was why my former teammates in Miami used to call me The Machine. I was the first one in the weight room, the last one to leave the film room, the copious notetaker at meetings, and probably one of the only unapologetically celibate football players in the league.

Another thing that didn't come before my job was women, or what anyone around me might think of me.

But when my agent called me two days earlier, and said, "We're sending you to Washington," I felt something foreign lodge behind my chest, somewhere low in my rib cage.

Apprehension.

Nerves.

And worst of all, the slightest, smallest twinge of fear.

Because forty-eight hours later, I found myself standing in front of the closed door of my new defensive coordinator, who was expecting me for a meeting, and I couldn't bring myself to open it.

My hand wouldn't lift to knock, and my feet stayed stubbornly parked in place. I'd clocked in at two hundred and eighty pounds at my last weigh-in, and not one of those pounds, the muscle I'd worked on my entire career, was feeling particularly motivated to move me forward into that office.

My jaw tightened as I stared at the nameplate next to the door, innocuous silver with black letters. *Logan Ward, Defensive Coordinator.*

In the past ten years, I'd only seen him once since I started for Miami, when our teams had played against each other two years earlier. A nod after the game, which they'd won, and that was it.

Prior to that ... I refused to think about. My eyes pinched shut because that one day set me onto a trajectory where nothing, and *no one*, would ever distract me from my goals again.

The door yanked open, and his face greeted me with a scowl.

"Are you coming in, Griffin, or should we yell at each other through the door?"

Whatever trace of fear had been lingering was instantly replaced with annoyance, and I gave him a look of consternation. "Nice to see you, too."

"Let's get this over with because I don't need distractions, and there are already enough of them lining up for the season."

"Are you this welcoming to every guy you coach?" I asked as I followed him into the no-frills office.

"Nope," he answered easily. He sat heavily in his chair and watched me thoughtfully.

His was typical of every coordinator's office I'd ever been in. A desk with two chairs across from it, a whiteboard along the back, and empty walls. Their work took place on the field, their strategies mapped out on clipboards and in the film rooms. And a defensive mind like Logan's, that had been one of the best when he played, had only been honed further now that he coached from the sidelines.

His genius didn't need a fancy office. He just needed players who listened and knew what to do, knew what to look for, and who had that same sense that he did in reading an offense.

"Haven't talked to you in a long time, Griffin."

Just over nine years since we exchanged a single word, but that stayed unsaid, considering my dad sold our house shortly after Logan all but threatened my career in his driveway if I ever looked at his sister again. I crossed my arms over my chest. "I didn't ask to be sent here."

He exhaled a quiet laugh. "Dispensing with niceties, I see."

I swiped a hand over my mouth. This was the part I wasn't very good at. "I guess. I just ... I'm here to work, you know? Yes, you and I used to be neighbors, but it's not like anyone knows that here. I didn't want to leave my team, but here I am. It's not my choice, but I'll be damned if it derails me in any way."

Logan's attention never wavered from my face, and his expression never shifted. It was that razor-sharp focus that every good player had. Every good coach too.

"You've changed," he said quietly.

"In ten years? I hope so."

"Fair enough," Logan conceded. He leaned forward, setting his folded hands on the surface of the desk. "Here's the deal: you've got more natural talent in your pinky finger than most players on my entire defense. And if you tell anyone I said that, I'll deny it until my dying breath."

My face stayed unchanged, even as my heart sped up at his compliment.

“But I will not go easy on you because we knew each other. If anything, I’d take great pleasure in seeing you get knocked on your ass a couple of times, simply because it’s within my power to make that happen,” he said with a grim smile.

I sat back. This was the meeting I’d expected. The warning I’d anticipated. All because his pain in the ass little sister climbed on the lap of a stupid college boy who used to let his dick rule his life.

My thoughts must have been clear on my face because he nodded like he could read every single one.

“I wasn’t allowed to knock you the hell out back then,” he said. “But I wanted to.”

My chin lifted a fraction of an inch. “I know you did, sir.”

“I won’t now. I’ve matured in my old age.”

If he wanted me to crack a smile and lighten the mood, I didn’t give him the satisfaction. Nobody saw me flinch. “You also know I’d hit you back, coach or not.”

Logan’s smile was slow, but it came nonetheless, because he thought I was joking. When my face still didn’t change, the smile disappeared. He shook his head.

“You are one grumpy son of a bitch, aren’t you?”

“I’ve heard that, yes.” Then I shook my head. “I’m not grumpy. I just don’t take any of this lightly. Football is the most important thing in my life.”

“I can respect that.” He tapped the side of his thumb on the desk, looked away from me, then looked back, seeming to come to a decision about something. “She works here, by the way.”

I tilted my head. “Who does?”

A warning siren started low, somewhere in the back of my brain as he said it, and it occurred to me, just before he

answered that maybe this was the reason I felt apprehensive about this change. This was the reason I should've been afraid to come to Washington.

“Molly.” He stared me down, daring me to have any sort of negative reaction about her. Any reaction at all.

Over the past nine years, I'd come to think about Molly with a strange sense of detachment, equal parts harbinger of destruction and the symbol of my shifting focus.

“A lot of people work here, sir. What does that have to do with me?”

His eyebrows popped up. “Not much, I suppose. I just wanted to give you a heads-up, in case—”

I held up a hand. “She a trainer?”

“No.”

“Is she my coach?” I asked.

“You know she's not.”

“Then it doesn't involve me.” I stood from the chair. “I need to get changed and head to the weight room if you're done.”

He leaned back in his chair, and I hated the look of disappointment on his face. That face had aged since I last saw him but not by much. It was in the color of his hair, and the addition of a few lines around his eyes. But I'd changed too. I'd gained about seventy-five pounds of muscle since the day I stood in his driveway, humbled and embarrassed and, quite frankly, terrified.

Sometimes, I hardly recognized the man who stared back at me in the mirror. But I promised myself that day that I'd never feel that way again. One stupid slip almost ruined my life. A mistake that never would've been worth the consequences had the wrong person caught us.

“Anything else you need from me, sir?”

It took a second for Logan to answer, but finally, he said, “No, that's it.”

I nodded and left his office far more quickly than I'd entered. As I walked back down the hallway, trying to remember which one led to the elevator that would get me to the locker room and weight room, I harnessed every ounce of mental discipline in my body to ignore what he'd told me.

The absolute last person I cared to see at work was her.

And more than likely, I wouldn't have to. Players rarely saw front office staff unless they made it a point to. I took a deep breath and refocused. The elevator was down the hall and to the right, and that was what I needed to think about.

Someone on the janitorial staff passed me with a polite smile, which I returned just enough that I wouldn't look like a raging asshole. Making the turn, I saw the gleaming metal doors. I punched the button and waited. My muscles bunched in anticipation of a good workout. If I didn't put in a couple of hours a day, minimum, I felt an uncomfortable buzzing underneath my skin. Energy that had no outlet would start seeking one, no matter what that outlet was.

For me, I chose the healthiest. The one that would make me stronger. Make me faster. Make me better.

Some players drank. Partied on yachts. Raced cars. Did drugs. Slept around.

But they weren't as good as I was. To me, all those things were pointless distractions.

The doors opened, and I strode into the empty elevator car. I hit the button for the correct floor and waited. Just as the doors slid shut, a hand popped through the opening, halting their progress.

Like I had a few moments earlier, she surged inside the car, coming to a screeching halt with a squeak of surprise when she saw me leaning up against the wall.

We were frozen there, staring at each other, her mouth hanging open as the doors tried to close unsuccessfully. She stepped forward, and the doors closed smoothly, locking me in the enclosed space with Molly.

"Hi, Noah," she said weakly.

**NOAH**

Tilting my chin up, I breathed slowly through my nose.

“This cannot be happening,” I muttered.

“Nice to see you too,” she said, voice no longer weak and surprised.

Grudgingly, I dropped my gaze, and for the first time in nine years, I looked Molly Ward straight in the face. The last time I’d seen her, my father had marched us over to her house to deliver her back to Logan and his wife.

The last time I’d seen her, I’d pulled her shirt off and sucked on her enthusiastic tongue while she wiggled on my lap. I didn’t even have a good reason for doing it, other than being a dumb college football player who didn’t question things like hot girls wanting to be with me.

The last time I’d seen her, I was an idiotic nineteen-year-old, completely unaware that the girl with the fantastic rack, the one who eyed me like I was made of chocolate, the girl who climbed into my bedroom window and tasted like Rainier cherries, was only sixteen.

Thank God my dad walked in.

There was a lot about her that hadn’t changed. She was still short—or short compared to me even though she was probably around five feet eight—and her eyes were the same bright blue. Her face had slimmed down because the cheekbones were new, while some of the *other* curves she’d had as a teenager were either effectively hidden behind her

simple white shirt or had melted away as she grew into an adult. Her hair was lighter than it used to be, but the stubborn lift of her chin gave me vivid flashbacks to the last time I'd seen her.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Your brother warned me you worked here."

"I didn't realize I was intimidating enough to require a warning." She smiled, and I had to give her credit for holding it in place as my own mouth flattened into a line. "Welcome to Washington, Noah. I heard about the trade yesterday."

Her polite attempt at conversation almost had me relaxing my stance and softening my tone just a little bit. But as I studied her face again, beautiful and fresh-faced and sweetly smiling, I decided that was the worst damn thing I could possibly do.

The last time I'd been kind to a teammate's wife, giving her a ride home because she drank too much, I was rewarded by her shoving her hand down my pants, a slap on the face when I told her to get the hell out of my car, and the loss of my position on the team when she told her husband that I hit on her.

Just another example that no woman was worth putting my career on the line for.

"It wasn't my choice to be here, trust me."

She watched me carefully, eyes darting over to the elevator panel before she leaned over and slapped the emergency stop button.

"What are you doing?" I hissed. She knocked my hand away when I tried to hit it again.

"Calm down. We have a solid five minutes before anyone in security is notified."

My answering stare was nothing short of incredulous. "How do you know that?"

"The twins tried it once because they were curious," she said calmly. "Paige was pregnant, and they wondered what



would happen if she got trapped in the elevator. We turned it into a labor and delivery drill.” Molly tilted her head, smile spreading as she told me. “Logan was so pissed because they disappeared from the practice field with his stopwatch to time it from beginning to end.”

Rubbing my temples, I felt the beginnings of a headache blooming behind my eyes. Questions, so many questions, sprang to the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed them down.

“Hit the button, Molly. I need to go to the weight room.”

She glanced at a slim gold watch on her wrist. “We have just over four minutes.” Then she pinned me with those blue eyes. “What’s your problem? You’re acting weird.”

I pushed off the wall. “You don’t know me. You wouldn’t know how I act under any circumstances, let alone this one.”

Her face pinched briefly. “Fair enough, but I used to know you. You were a nice guy, Noah.”

“I was a college athlete who let his dick make stupid decisions. I screwed around and wasted my time on video games and parties and women who I don’t remember anymore. Typical player, in more ways than one, and you’d do good to remember that.”

The words were intended to hurt. And I saw the moment they hit their mark, as clearly as if they’d drawn blood from her smooth, pale skin.

Molly rolled her lips in, the edges of her cheekbones turning pink, but she didn’t reply right away. I expected capitulation. Another kindly spoken request. And for the second time that day, she surprised me.

“I was in diapers when my brother started playing professional football. I’ve worked here for four years and interned for two before that. I’m the last person who needs a lecture about asshole football players. I daresay I’ve known more of them than you have.”

“Whatever you say, Miss Ward.” I shouldered past her and hit the button.

The elevator chugged back into motion, and she shook her head.

“There’s no reason we can’t be friends.”

A laugh burst out of me. “There are so many reasons, and I have no desire to explain any of them to you. You’ve known a few players. Good for you. But you don’t understand the kind of pressure I’m under, or the way that I operate, so I’ll tell you this.” I leaned toward her, gratified when she swallowed roughly, and her eyes widened. “I’m not here to make friends. You were a mistake that I narrowly avoided making, and I have no intention of going down that road again.”

For a moment, I expected the crack of another small female hand against my cheek. But that was not what Molly did.

“What happened to you?” she whispered sadly.

The elevator doors slid apart, the area beyond blessedly empty. I gave her one last look. “I grew up, Molly. You should do the same.”

I strode past her, and before I was out of earshot, I heard her mutter, “Dick.”

The apprehension and nerves were long gone, but my jaw clenched at the surprising pang of irritation I felt. I’d been called worse by women. By teammates. Not by someone like Molly, though. Someone kind and friendly.

I kept walking, not a single pause in my long strides, because I was here to do a job, and Molly Ward had nothing to do with it.

## MOLLY

“C onceited.”

*Smack.*

“Arrogant.”

*Smack. Smack.*

“Little.”

*Smack.*

“Prick.”

Isabel raised an eyebrow. “Little, huh?”

“Shut up.” I punched the bag again, grinning when it moved her backward from where she was bracing an arm against it. I pulled back one more time and hit the front of the heavy bag with a right cross, then shook my arm out and braced my gloved hands on my knees.

Isabel handed me my water bottle and dropped onto the floor, folding her legs neatly underneath her. The kickboxing gym didn’t hold any classes during the lunch hour, so it was empty. Paige used to come here when she first married Logan, and slowly, our whole family became involved in one way or another. Isabel, the showoff, had to one-up everyone by taking over as the manager a couple of years ago when the owner was ready to spend more time with her family.

Perks of being sister of the manager was a private place to work out my lunchtime frustrations when my former crush, minor though it might have been, turned out to be a major

league asshole. Flopping onto the floor next to her, I stretched my legs out and hissed at the burn in my quads. “If you do more squats tonight in class, I’ll walk out.”

“No, you won’t,” she said. “That’s the reason your ass looks so phenomenal.”

I sighed. “True.”

“What happened?”

No sigh this time, but a deep, tortured, dramatic groan. “Do I have to talk about it?”

Isabel laid down next to me and folded her arms calmly over her middle. “Yes. I’m bored and have no life outside of work, and I’d like to live vicariously through your drama. Just like I always have.”

And it was true. I was older than Iz by two years, and she was two years older than our twin sisters, Lia and Claire. The small gap in ages between four girls meant that we were up in each other’s business allllll the time.

I shifted, stretching an arm over my chest. “He was so ... mean. And all I did was get onto an elevator. Like I even knew he was in there!”

“And you haven’t seen him even once since, you know, the incident?” she asked delicately. Which should’ve been humorous because it was Isabel. She didn’t do anything delicately.

“Nope.” I pulled my gloves off and tossed them over by my bag. Sitting up, I wrapped my fingers around my toes to stretch the backs of my legs. Isabel sat up too, tucking her knees into her chest and wrapping her arms around them. “I mean, I knew he played for Miami because I hear his name all the time. It’s not like I was clueless about what he was doing, but”—I shrugged—“he was just the guy I used to have a crush on. I had lots of crushes in high school. He was hardly special.”

Isabel pursed her lips.

“Shut up,” I said. “I know what you’re going to say.”

“Do you, though?”

I tugged at the Velcro around my wrist and slowly unwound my sweaty wraps from my hand. “I can make an excellent guess.”

Iz set her chin on her knees and watched me. She used to do that as a kid, too. Watch everything around her. Soak it up and process what she observed. It was what made her a good listener because she saw everything.

“So he’s, what? Been pissed at you for nine years because you did something monumentally stupid as a teenager?”

“Geeez,” I muttered. “Tell me how you really feel, Iz.”

She gave me a look. “You climbed through his window, Mol. It wasn’t your brightest moment.”

Hurt and embarrassment warred for my instant reaction, but I couldn’t bring myself to deny it. At sixteen, I’d been boy-crazy, just like all my friends. And it was just my luck that as a next-door neighbor, I’d been given the ultimate gift. A hot college boy who was home a lot during the offseason.

“I was so convinced that he saw me, that he noticed me like I noticed him.” I pulled off the other wrap, dumping it into a pile with the first one, then flexed my fingers. “I used to blame Mom, you know? Like her leaving us created this insatiable desire to make sure people liked me enough to want to stick around.”

Isabel snorted. “I still blame Mom for a lot. Just ask my therapist.”

My head swiveled in her direction. “You go to a therapist? Since when?”

“Eh, I went twice before it pissed me off. She was a whack job who kept asking me stupid questions. If I *knew* why I was so angry with my mother, would I be paying her a hundred bucks an hour?”

Laughing under my breath, I shook my head. That sounded about right. The thought of my emotionally reserved sister spilling her guts in a comfy chair to a shrink did not compute,

not in any reality I was aware of. It sounded like something I would do. Allow a perfect stranger to untangle my emotions and figure out why the woman who gave birth to us didn't love us enough to want to stick around.

All four of us bore scars to varying degrees, and over time, they'd all healed differently. Mine was a sense of urgency if I knew someone didn't like me, whatever the reason. A niggling discomfort under my skin to *fix it, fix it, fix it*.

I sighed. "I'm sure that's part of it, but it was him, too. I'd completely convinced myself if I just ... had the chance to really talk to him, he'd fall head over heels in love with me, and I'd have the hottest boyfriend out of all my friends, who played college football."

"Not surprising for a sixteen-year-old."

"No, but it was crazy. To do what I did." My face flushed hot when I thought about it. Something I hadn't really done in years. The moments before his dad walked through the door, I'd never felt more alive. More womanly.

It should have been a blazing red warning light that Noah had no qualms about kissing me like he did or touching me like he had after I climbed through his effing window without so much as a single meaningful conversation between the two of us.

That five minutes after my legs cleared the windowsill, I was straddling his lap. I should've worried that his big, hot hands were underneath my shirt, sliding up my back and tugging it up over my head, when we'd barely kissed. That my hands shook where I'd laid them on his muscular shoulders because when he did kiss me, it felt like I was drowning in something so much bigger than I'd been prepared for.

If his dad hadn't walked in, I would've slept with Noah Griffin that day. And he probably would've never spoken to me again afterward.

It was something I had to come to grips with after it all went down.

After Mr. Griffin marched me back home to face my furious brother and my disappointed sister-in-law, I curled up in my bed and sobbed my sixteen-year-old heart out. The look on Noah's face when he realized how old I was cemented the fact that any happily ever after I'd imagined with him would stay firmly planted in my teenage brain.

"You know how every age you're at," I said, "you feel like, this is the most mature I'll ever be. Right now, I have it all figured out."

Isabel smiled.

"And then a few years pass, and you want to slap your past self for ever thinking something that stupid."

She laughed under her breath. "Yeah. I know exactly what you mean."

"I wish I could go back and handcuff myself to my bed, so I never climbed through that damn window. I wish I could go back and get on the elevator two minutes later so that I never realized what a big, dumb asshole he is now." I shook my head. "I really, *really* wish I could take back the moment I said I wanted to be friends with him."

Her face was sad as she listened. "That doesn't sound like you. You're friends with everyone."

"Not Noah Griffin."

Inexplicably, that made Isabel grin.

"What?" I snapped, well aware that I sounded like the human equivalent of a pout.

"How'd he look?"

I groaned, dropping my head into my hands. "Isabel."

"That good, huh?"

Lifting my head, I glared at her over my shoulder. "You know what he looks like."

"Yeah." She sighed. "Sure as hell do. But seeing him in person, being stuck in an elevator with him, that's a whole different thing, and you know it, Molly. Give me the goods."

How did he look?

Oh my stars, I didn't want to think about how he looked.

Angry.

Big.

Beautiful.

More than likely, Noah would've hated that I called him beautiful, but he was. The symmetry in his features, the bold slash of his lips, the rock-hard angle of his jaw, the shock of dark hair, the icy color of his eyes ... everything about that man's face was a gift of genetics, and it pissed me off on principle.

A face that perfect should be smiling. Kind. Warm.

And he'd been the exact opposite. He took me in, judged me, then decided I wasn't worth a single ounce of his kindness.

What a prick.

I sighed. "It was stupid how good he looked, Iz."

"What are you gonna do?"

I rolled my neck. "I'm not sure. I *do not* want to turn down the new job from Beatrice because of this. There's no guarantee that Noah will be involved anyway. More than likely, they'll follow one of the other new guys ... maybe the new running back."

Isabel's eyebrows bent in. "The guy from the New England practice squad?"

I nodded. "It's not like Noah is the only new contract they signed this week."

"He's just the biggest name," she said gently.

"Thanks."

She held up her hands. "Just saying."

"It'll be fine, even if he is the one they want to highlight." I licked my lips as I thought about the rest of my day at work. "I'm going to go meet with Beatrice before we talk to



Amazon, and they start filming at practice. Because I will not let him ruin this chance for me.”

“And if they do choose him?”

My lip curled into an uncharacteristic snarl when I considered what that meant for me. It meant my single chance at proving myself to my boss would rest in the hands of the one person in the Wolves organization who hated me.

Awesome.

I bumped her shoulder with mine. “Maybe you can come beat him up for me if he’s mean again.”

Isabel stood with a grin, holding her hand out for me so she could tug me to my feet. “You got it.”

After I’d dumped all my stuff into my gym bag, I slung it over my shoulder. Iz held out her fist to me, and I bumped it as I passed.

“Go get ‘em, tiger,” she said. “I’d bet on you any day of the week.”

“Damn straight,” I muttered. Noah Griffin didn’t know me anymore either, but he was about to find out exactly what I was made of.

**NOAH**

**M**y reputation as The Machine preceded me, that much was evident. The guys were polite in their greetings but nothing effusive. No violent, back-pounding hugs, nothing outside of reserved happiness that my football talents were now wearing black and red.

There was very little in any greeting about Noah Griffin as a person, and that suited me just fine. Until I got out on the practice field and saw Kareem Jones, outside linebacker and one of my former roommates from U Dub. Before he so much as opened his mouth, I braced myself for the attention I'd been actively avoiding.

He hooted loudly when I cleared the doors, drawing the attention of every damn person on the field. I laughed under my breath as he barreled toward me and lifted me in a massive hug with arms as big as tree trunks. He was two inches taller than me, so my feet cleared the ground for a second before he dropped me.

“Damn, boy, what they been feeding you in Miami?” he said around a wide, happy grin. “The Machine got fat.”

I shoved at his shoulder. “You’re delusional, Jones. I’d still kick your ass at the line every time, and you know it.”

His booming laugh thawed a bit of the icy wall of distance I’d stood behind since arriving. But I still found myself glancing around to see if anyone was watching with suspicion or distrust.

It was ridiculous to think they would. Drama happened in the locker room of every team in the league, and the reason for my hasty departure out of Miami, made up or not, hadn't been fed to mainstream media. What golden boy QB wanted to admit that one of his teammates—bigger, stronger, and more established on the team—had a chance with his *Playboy* Playmate wife? Not the QB I'd left behind, that's for sure.

But still, common knowledge or not, it rankled that anyone might look at me and think it was the truth. It made me wish I could go back and not offer her a ride, that I'd called her an Uber or called her husband or another one of the WAGs who'd been at the event. A drunk woman wasn't my responsibility, even if she'd felt like it at the moment as I came upon her swaying dangerously in the parking lot as she tried to find her keys.

Kareem waved another teammate over to introduce me, and I took a deep breath. No one was judging me. No one was watching with narrowed eyes.

*Except maybe Logan*, I thought as I caught sight of him at the edge of the field, watching me carefully underneath the brim of his well-worn black cap with the Wolves logo stamped on the front.

Turning my attention to the guys who approached, I recognized a few but not all. They all smiled, made small talk, and joked around with Kareem. The kind of familiarity that typically grew between teammates.

Just not with me.

Sometimes, I hardly recognized that about myself, but I'd been that way for so long, it felt like a fool's errand to try to change it. Change myself.

“Relax, man,” Kareem said quietly as the other guys started talking amongst themselves.

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, that's what I do best.”

“You still a virgin? You know that's your problem, right?”

My whole body froze as he said it far too loudly. I leveled him with a glare, which made him crack up. “Kareem, you

asshole. I'm not a virgin—”

His jaw dropped open as he caught sight of my face. “Seriously? You still don't have sex?” His head shook back and forth, slowly, incredulously. “I thought you were just being, like, moody or some shit in college.”

“We are not talking about this right now.”

He hooted again. “Yeah, we are.” One arm came around my shoulders, and we separated from the guys. I wasn't ashamed of the fact that I chose to abstain from women. A woman was a distraction. Sex was not only a distraction but it also came with far too many possible complications. I didn't want kids. Didn't want anything in my life that would fight for the top spot in my life outside of football. “Man, come on, you're killin' me. How do you ... Aren't you *angry* all the time?”

That made me smile, just a little, because the way he said it made it sound like I was attempting an impossible feat. Climbing Mt Everest naked. Bungee jumping over a canyon full of glass with a frayed rope. Jumping from an airplane without checking to see if my parachute was attached to my back.

“And you don't think that helps me?” I asked.

He stopped walking. “I know you're playin' right now. I know you are.”

I held my arms out. “Why? You said you'd be angry, right? Where do you think I put all that energy?” I lifted my chin at the field in front of us. “I put it out there.”

“You are one crazy motherfucker, Griffin.” He shook his head again. “I knew it then, and I really know it now.”

Logan—Coach, as I needed to get used to thinking of him as—whistled sharply from the sidelines, and Kareem shoved me hard enough that I stumbled. I shoved him back, which made him laugh, but he was the only one. Coach Ward glared at me.

“Is this how you paid attention to your coaches in Miami?” he asked, arms folded across his chest. Behind him, I noticed a

couple of suits—one man, one woman—and a guy holding an expensive-looking camera.

Lifting my chin, I clasped my hands behind my back like a soldier facing his commanding officer. “No, sir.”

“It’s my bad, Coach,” Kareem said on a laugh. “Noah thinks his”—I gave him a sharp look, and he grinned—“his *natural state* of repressed anger means he can beat my ass off the line.”

The guys around us laughed, and Coach cracked a reluctant smile. “Yeah? What do you think about that, Jones?”

Kareem slapped a hand on my back. “I think this boy is crazy, and I’m ready to prove it.”

The suits and the cameras aimed their attention fully in our direction now, and the cheers and laughter of my new teammates were just enough to distract me from wondering what they were doing.

I shook my head. “Kareem, don’t embarrass yourself. Let’s just get to work.”

In truth, I didn’t want to line up like this at my first practice and turn it into a circus. As much as I wanted to be the best, I didn’t need the spotlight that came with it. I wanted to break records to prove that I could. I wanted to lift more, run faster, train harder because I was good at it. My body constantly craved that burn, the satisfying edge of pain that told me I was the hardest worker on the field.

But Logan waved at us to do it, so I’d flatten Kareem without a second thought.

Our teammates surrounded us, leaving adequate space in the middle for Kareem and me to face each other. Someone handed us practice helmets, and I strapped mine on while he did the same. The tall, thin woman in the suit pushed some players out of the way so the cameras could see us clearly, and I rolled my neck to ignore them and focused on what I needed to do.

The joke about my natural state of anger fueled the tightening of tension in my muscles as I crouched in front of

my former college roommate. He was two inches taller than me and just as wide.

His body held all the same carefully crafted muscles and knowledge of body mechanics for when you were trying to take out an opponent. He kept his fingers loose where they propped him up in the grass, and I did the same, no hint as to where we might move or which direction we might take.

He grinned behind his helmet, and I narrowed my eyes, letting the full blaze of power unroll through my arms and back and legs when I imagined knocking him over. Our teammates heckled and hollered; most cheered on Kareem, but a few voices were saying my name. Coach stood between us, silver whistle in his mouth, which would be our signal.

Movement from behind Kareem pulled my gaze away for a split second.

Molly. On the practice field.

Her blue eyes met mine and widened.

What was she *doing* out here?

The whistle blew, sharp and loud, but Kareem shoved forward a split second before I did. Because, of course, I hadn't fully been paying attention. That was enough for me to have to dig my cleats in and push against him, our shoulders wedged against each other as we fought for the dominant position.

A bright pulse of anger went unchecked that I hadn't flipped him over yet because of her, and that was enough for me to shove him over onto his back.

The guys cheered, some groaned, and Logan watched us with a slight smile on his face.

"Not bad, Griffin," he said.

I held out a hand, and Kareem took it. He slapped my back in a half-hug when he was back on his feet.

"Asshole," he said, but he was smiling.

"Pansy," I returned, which made him laugh.

The crowd dissipated as they started lining up for drills, and when I was about to do the same, the suits and the cameras—and Molly—approached Coach Ward and me.

He looked about as happy as I was at their presence. The one thing he wasn't was surprised. "Can I help you?"

The woman, statuesque and composed and entirely out of place on a practice field, looked me up and down slowly, like I was under a spotlight. I fought not to curl my lip up at her.

"Noah Griffin?" she asked, holding out her hand. I took it. "I'm Beatrice Kelly, Chief Marketing Officer for Washington."

"Pleasure to meet you," I said stiffly. It wasn't. I wanted to be practicing.

As Beatrice introduced herself to Logan, Molly clutched a black and red clipboard to her chest, face blank, and eyes trained on the bright green turf.

"If you don't mind, the crew will be here filming for the remainder of practice, and then I'd like to steal fifteen minutes with both you and Noah when you're done."

Logan glanced at me, then back at her. "And if I do mind?"

She smiled slowly, eyes about as warm as a block of ice. "Then you can take it up with Cameron after practice, and after we've met with Noah."

I saw Molly take a slow inhale, her cheeks taking on a soft pink color. Personally, I didn't want to meet with this woman after practice, but I'd been playing long enough to know that sometimes, you had to do shit you didn't want to do.

The look that Logan gave Beatrice would've made the biggest, scariest linebacker shrink back, but she was completely undaunted. Even I was glad I wasn't on the receiving end of it.

"I need fifteen minutes, Coach Ward," she repeated. "We can do it now, or we can do it after practice. I'll give you the choice."

He snorted.

I dropped my chin to my chest as he mulled over her offer.

“Griffin, should we get this done now?” he asked quietly.

Pushing my tongue into my cheek, I looked at all the faces in front of me, quick glances as I tried to figure out what the hell this had to do with me. I just wanted to *play*. Was that too much to ask?

The face that snagged my gaze for just a fraction longer than everyone else’s was Molly’s.

Today, she was in a black shirt and bright red jeans. She matched her boss, matched the field, and for some reason, it hammered home just how much more this place was hers than it was mine.

“Let’s get this done now,” I said.

Beatrice smiled again, just a touch of thawing to the cold from earlier. “Excellent. Logan? I assume you know where my office is.”

His answer was a short nod.

“Great. We’ll see you there in ten minutes.”

They walked away, leaving Logan and me with our hands braced on our hips and annoyed expressions on our faces.

“What the hell is that about?” I mused.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Griffin, believe me when I say that I wish there was a way to avoid this.”

My face turned sharply in his direction. “That bad?”

“Yeah,” he said tightly. “For guys like you and me? It’s everything we hate about playing.”

Once he’d given some instructions to an assistant coach, we started walking toward Beatrice’s office, and I thought about what he said.

Everything we hated about playing. Great.



**NOAH**

“Thank you for joining me, gentleman,” she said from where she sat across a massive, gleaming desk. Her ice gray eyes landed on my face, and she smiled, a completely different kind of smile now that we were on her turf. “How’s the transition to Washington going, Noah? It can’t be easy to change teams so close to kickoff.”

The guy holding the camera in the corner had it pointed straight at my face, and the focus, solely on me, made my skin prickle.

“I’m excited to be here.” I answered like I was facing the media and not someone in-house. “And I’m excited to get to work.”

Logan sighed. “Exactly. Work. Practice. Which is where we’re supposed to be right now.”

The grumpiness was so evident that I almost cracked a smile. Only two days into my time at Washington, and I found someone with less people skills than I had.

Beatrice sliced her gaze to the camera and nodded. “A moment, please. We won’t need this. And tell Molly I’ll be ready in five.”

My jaw clenched involuntarily.

Silence cloaked the office as the camera guy stood and gave us some privacy.

“I’ll cut to the chase. Amazon is including Washington in an upcoming season of their *All or Nothing* documentary, and

you're the player they'd like to highlight."

I sat forward, eyebrows tucked in tightly over my eyes. "What? Why?"

Logan rubbed the back of his neck but didn't say anything.

"The narrative for this season is finding and fitting in to the culture of a team. I've been working on this deal since the day I told Cameron and Allie they should hire me, and we just needed the right player." Her smile softened, and it changed the hard angles of her face. "And that player is you."

"I don't want to have cameras on me all season." I shook my head. "Don't get me wrong, they do a great job. I watched the LA and the Michigan season, and they were great. But being under that spotlight is the last thing I want. I'm here to play football."

She took a deep breath. "Let me rephrase this while it's just the three of us in this office, okay?"

Something about the way she said it made me sit back again and breathe deeply to dismantle the brick that suddenly appeared in my stomach. Logan gave me a quick, uncomfortable glance, and I had a feeling he knew exactly what was going through my brain.

This wasn't a negotiation. It was a courtesy.

"You are the best defensive end in the league. By the time this season wraps up, no one will be able to touch the records that you'll break." Her eyes were so intense, words so coldly delivered that I practically saw frost come from her mouth. Not in a mean way, but in a way that I knew, without a doubt, I'd hate whatever she was about to say next. "But all of that will be overshadowed if people think you got kicked off your team because you hit on your team captain's drunk wife while she was unable to defend herself."

I was out of my chair before I took another breath. "That story is bullshit, and you know it."

Logan stood, laying a calming hand on my back. "Of course, she does. We all do."

My heart was thrashing wildly, every iron shred of my will gone in tatters at the mere suggestion that I'd become a salacious headline. Slowly, I lowered myself back into my chair and fought with white-knuckled grip to gain control of my irritation.

"The story *is* bullshit," she said calmly. "I never doubted it. The people in the front office in Miami know that, which is why there hasn't been a single whisper about it to the media."

"Yet you know about it."

She smiled. "Professional courtesy from someone in their offices who I used to work for."

"What does this have to do with the documentary, Beatrice?" Logan asked.

She watched my face carefully before answering. "One part of my job is to facilitate positive brand awareness for Washington. A documentary like this is priceless for what it allows our fans to see. Normally, they wouldn't get access to meetings, film rooms, trips ... the kinds of things that would never make it on social media. But we can give them that, and this way, we're controlling the narrative. Yes, it's documenting the reality of an established player coming into a new organization, but Noah, this allows you to show people the kind of man you are. Behind the helmet and pads and stats."

My hands, loosely clasped between my thighs, tightened briefly as I dropped my head and processed what she was saying.

"The truth is, I don't think what happened in Miami will be an issue. Not now and not in the future."

I lifted my head. "Aren't you supposed to be convincing me that that's why I should be doing this?"

"Probably," she said with a wry smile. "But I'm not trying to manipulate you. I'm simply stating the truth. You're a compelling person, Noah. Your reputation as a machine didn't come from thin air. But the players who matter to people are the ones who inspire devotion because they're heroes, not just record breakers. Look at JJ Watt or Peyton Manning or Drew

Brees. Yes, they've broken all sorts of records, but they are beloved for so much more than that. That is why we'll remember their names and treasure their legacies long after they stop playing."

Logan shifted in his seat. "You're asking him to show the other side."

"Yes," she said. "Show your fans that even for The Machine, it's hard to start over. It's challenging. But you're strong enough to overcome that challenge and find your place in an organization known for its positive culture."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I could already imagine telling my father that I was doing this, could hear the disbelief in his gruff voice.

But my father wasn't here. I looked over at Logan. "What do you think?"

He held up his hands. "This is not my decision. Honestly, I'm not even sure why she needed me here."

Beatrice answered that easily. "Because you're his coach, and this will require your support when we've got cameras on every angle of his life."

Logan grimaced. "That sounds awful."

"Helpful, thank you," I muttered.

He gave me an apologetic look.

The skin on my knuckles turned white when I tightened my fingers again. She wasn't wrong, but I didn't fully believe she was right either. I didn't need to be adored for all of eternity, but I did want to be the best at what I did. I shouldn't need something like this to prove it. Numbers proved it. Rankings proved it. Wins and losses and trophies. The respect that I earned on the field was subjective, based on who was judging me, but all the things outside of it that could be charted and reported and put into history books were cold hard facts.

But if no one remembered me, no one cared about the man behind the helmet, would the numbers matter?

Not being able to answer that question for the first time in my career made me feel like someone just tossed me into a pool of oil, slimy and thick. I couldn't push through it no matter how hard I tried.

"I'll do it," I heard myself saying.

Beatrice smiled. "Excellent." Then she looked past us to the doorway. "Perfect timing, Molly. Have a seat."

It would've been comical—the way that Logan and I froze in tandem at the entrance of his sister. But it wasn't funny ... it wasn't funny at all.

"I need you to stay in coach mode," Beatrice said to the man next to me. The one who was sitting as rigidly as I was. "Can you do that? Because your sister assures me that your role within this organization has nothing to do with hers."

My eyes narrowed at the way she said it, disbelief rife and heavy in the words.

Molly took a seat next to me, and I caught the slightest hint of peaches as she did.

Fine. I didn't need to breathe by her. No problem.

"Molly got this job on her own merit," Logan said tightly. "And I'm always in coach mode."

Glancing quickly at Molly, she was settling in her chair, focused entirely on her boss. For a split second, her chin tilted in my direction like she knew I was looking but she refused to acknowledge me.

"Good," Beatrice said. "Molly accepted the role of special projects liaison for Washington this morning."

Did the earth just open up underneath me? I actually looked at the ground to make sure it hadn't and that my chair was still on solid footing.

Logan exhaled slowly, audibly. "She told me a little bit about the opportunity you've given her."

"I'm so honored that Beatrice is giving me this chance," Molly said with a loaded glance at her brother. "I'm excited to

work with Amazon.” She paused, and her eyes flicked to me for the first time since she sat down. “And Noah.”

My foot started tapping rapidly. I turned to Beatrice. “What does a special projects liaison do?”

“She’ll be your point person. She’ll be the one there every day for filming, get Amazon whatever they might need, finalize filming schedule with you, make sure the brand is protected through the process, and make sure everything goes as smoothly as possible. For Amazon, but most importantly, for you, Noah.”

Every word was like a tiny slash over my skin. By itself, it didn’t open much of a wound, but combine them all and I’d bleed out if I thought too hard about what it meant for me.

I’d be with Molly constantly.

My face was perfectly calm, but inside, a storm raged at the idea, wild and unpredictable. Because all I knew of her was that *she* was wild and unpredictable, something I couldn’t or wouldn’t even want to control. And *she* would be the one making sure everything ran smoothly.

Beside me, Molly kicked at my foot, a silent warning that her boss couldn’t see over the expanse of her desk.

Logan dropped his elbows to his knees and buried his head in his hands.

I pinched the tip of my tongue between my teeth so tightly that I tasted the bright coppery tang of blood.

“Are we excited to get started?” Beatrice asked, as happy as I’d seen her.

“Yup,” Molly said.

Logan let out a muffled curse, then lifted his head.

Beatrice stood. “Excellent. Gentlemen, I have another meeting to get to. Molly, please figure out the next couple of days with Noah before he heads to practice.” With a demure smile toward the woman sitting to my left, she nodded regally. “Dealing with Amazon is officially your responsibility.”

She left, and the thick vacuum of silence at her exit practically pulsed with all the things unsaid.

“This is the worst idea I’ve ever heard,” Logan ground out. “Molly, you cannot be serious right now.”

“You don’t get a say in it, Logan. Coach mode, remember?” She folded her arms over her chest.

He stood, spreading his arms out. “When have I ever been able to shut off being your brother? Never. And I won’t apologize for that.”

I leaned forward with a groan. This was my fucking nightmare.

Molly stood and faced him, jaw set mulishly and eyes ablaze. “Logan, outside, now.” Then she pointed a finger at me. “You, stay here. I’ll be back in thirty seconds, and if you’ve moved from that chair, don’t think I won’t hunt you down at practice. Those guys don’t scare me.”

Logan’s eyes were as wide as mine before she grabbed him by the elbow, and even though she was almost a foot shorter and a decade plus younger, she dragged my coach from the office.

**MOLLY**

Someone from the front office passed us, grinning unapologetically at the way I manhandled my big brother into the hallway.

Logan slicked his tongue over his teeth, ripping the hat from his head with an agitated tug of his hands. “This is a terrible idea,” he said again. Like I hadn’t heard him the first time he complained about it.

“What would you have me do?” I asked him, not even attempting to keep the heat from my voice. “Beatrice is practically daring me to screw this up. You’re not helping me think she’s wrong.”

His mouth fell open. “I don’t think you’ll screw it up, Molly.”

“Don’t you? If you trusted me to do my job, you’d be able to keep all those judgey big brother thoughts in your head.” I swirled my finger toward his face, currently frozen in a frown.

Logan groaned, tipping his chin up to the ceiling. “Cut me some slack, okay? It’s ... it’s him.” He gestured helplessly back at Beatrice’s office. “The last time Noah was around for any extended period—”

“I was sixteen,” I whispered fiercely, my face hot. If he hadn’t dropped his eyes apologetically, I would’ve punched him in the balls. “That’s categorically unfair to assume I’d react the same way. You think I don’t know how stupid it was what I did? How lucky we both were that his dad walked in when he did? I get it, okay? But you need to check your



impulse to remind me of your opinion every single time something big changes in my life.”

I was breathing hard, my chest heaving and my throat tight.

It was hard enough to sit next to Noah, knowing he hated me, knowing he wanted nothing to do with me, and knowing that my big shot with my boss was now partially in his grasp. What I didn't need was my big brother treating me like a teenager again.

Logan sighed heavily and pulled me in for a tight squeeze. “I'm sorry,” he said into the top of my head.

I clutched my hands around his wide back and allowed myself to relax into his embrace for a moment. Logan might not have been my father, but he was better than the one I'd been born to. And for almost twelve years, he'd been the one assuming the legal role.

“I'm sorry too,” I said quietly. Pulling back, I glanced at his handsome face with a shy grin. “Hazards of working together, huh?”

He laughed and slipped the hat back on his head. “I suppose.”

“You're lucky you apologized,” I told him.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I was ready to tell Paige what happened to that picture she bought for the dining room that mysteriously shattered.”

His eyes narrowed. “You promised to keep that a secret.”

“Secrets have a funny way of coming out when big brothers act like overprotective bullies at work,” I said innocently.

“This is Paige's influence,” he mumbled. “You four weren't so savage until she showed up.”

I laughed.

Logan set his hands on his hips and regarded me carefully for a few seconds. "It's hard for me sometimes, you know?"

"What is?"

"Remembering that you're a grown woman," he admitted quietly. "I was nineteen when you were born, Mol. That's not that far off from how old you are now and ..." He paused, looking a little melancholy. "My world changed when you were born. As much as I wish for you and your sisters that your mom hadn't left, selfishly, I'd never want to give you four back. But it's hard for me to forget what it felt like the day you were born. Even as you're standing here, smart and capable and independent, I think about how little you were, all wrinkled and red and wrapped in that ugly hospital blanket."

"I know, Logan. You're the best thing that could've happened to us." I glanced over my shoulder to make sure we were still alone in the hallway. "But you can't protect us forever."

He nodded slowly. "Doesn't mean I won't want to."

I gave him a smile. "I know."

"I'll bench his ass if he messes this up for you," he promised.

Again, I laughed. "No, you won't."

"No," he admitted grudgingly, "but it doesn't mean I wouldn't want to."

My hands swept down my shirt and straightened the ends. "Okay. I should get back to work."

Logan lifted his chin. "You've got this."

The change in his tone and posture, and the pure respect I saw in his eyes were enough to make my nose burn with unshed tears. "I'll be so mad at you if you make me cry."

"No crying in football, Ward," he snapped. "That's an order."

I rolled my eyes. "Go coach your team, please."

He winked and left me alone in the hallway. Before I joined Noah again, I sank against the wall to gather myself.

Noah wasn't my boss, but it was my responsibility to keep this process as painless as possible for him.

And I wasn't his boss, but he'd need to respect my role, nonetheless. Film when I said he needed to film, cooperate with the crew from Amazon, and trust that he'd be portrayed positively. And more importantly, that he'd be reflected honestly.

Those things didn't always go hand in hand, not in our industry. The best player in the world could be a raging asshole to the people around him. But as much as Noah had rubbed me the wrong way in the elevator, he was still respected by his teammates and coaches. Maybe he wasn't universally adored because of the stoic exterior, but even the iciest person thawed occasionally. And at the end of the day, it was up to me to make sure the world saw that.

Sitting in the too-small chair in my boss's office was a man who had dedicated his life to the same game I'd loved for all of mine.

They called him The Machine because the game of football—brown leather and white laces, cleats and turf and helmets and pads and sweat—was the thing he existed for.

“What's behind The Machine, though?” I whispered.

Before I went back into Beatrice's office, I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It might take Noah weeks to thaw to my presence in his life, but thaw he would. He'd have no choice in the matter because the cameras didn't lie, and the reason he agreed was to allow a rare glimpse behind the curtain. It reminded me of my favorite movies, *The Wizard of Oz*.

If Noah Griffin was the wizard, all powerful and too big to comprehend for all that he was able to accomplish, then I'd have to be the unsuspecting Dorothy who unearthed the truth, one day at a time, no matter how out of place I felt doing it.

Ruefully, I glanced down at my nude-colored ballet flats and clicked the heels together. Didn't have the same effect as ruby red slippers that glistened in the light, but it would have to do.

When I opened the door, he stood staring out of the window in the corner, which overlooked the sprawling suburbs where the Wolves training facilities and front offices were located. Off to the southeast, the jagged lines of Mt. Rainier were visible. His shoulders were held so rigidly in place that he didn't give the slightest indication he'd heard me enter, but something at the back of my neck and with the way the hairs lifted on my arms, I knew he was fully aware that we were alone again in the same way I was.

I kept the door open a crack and walked back to my seat. My clipboard was on the corner of Beatrice's desk, and I picked it up so I could flip to the tentative schedule marked out by Amazon. Things they wanted, requests for time and interviews, and insight that they thought would go over well but couldn't be forced.

Setting the clipboard in my lap, I wondered briefly whether I should let him take the lead in this conversation, given he was the one who acted like a giant horse's ass the last time I saw him.

It went against every molecule, every cell in my body not to care what he thought of me. To not try to convince him that I was a safe person for him in this. That our history could benefit us and not make life harder.

But I came to a decision as I sat there in the uncomfortable silence. It didn't matter whether Noah liked me. I just needed him to do his job, and I needed him to let me do mine. We could achieve that whether he liked me or not.

"Beatrice thinks I got this job because of my brother," was the thing that came out of my mouth first. There'd be no filter, not for this conversation. While he and I were alone, honesty was the best thing I could give him.

At the sound of my voice, Noah stilled even further, which didn't seem possible. His massive frame held almost

preternaturally motionless. The span of his back was so broad, emphasizing the way his body tapered at the waist and hips. A true athlete, no one would ever look at him and question that he was born to do this.

I knew the kind of dedication it took, and the sacrifices that people like him made to reach that kind of strength and stamina. It was why I did what I did, worked where I worked, and why I'd overlooked his opinion of me and Beatrice's doubts in order to do my job.

"Is she right?" he asked.

I smiled. "I'm sure it helped me get my internship in college. But they never would've given me a job and they definitely wouldn't have kept me around if I sucked at it."

Noah didn't answer, and he didn't turn to face me. I preferred it that way.

"The only way I'll prove to my boss that she's wrong about me is by doing. There aren't enough words in the English language to convince her that I'm not the sole product of nepotism, and this job, this opportunity, is the platform she's allowing me to do that." I stared intently at his back. "To prove that I earned my place here by my actions."

His face tilted in my direction, enough that the light from the window caught the sharp jut to his jaw. The muscles under his skin popped, and I found myself staring at that little square of skin, marveling at how something so tiny could be so potent.

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

Leaning back in my chair, I folded one leg over the other and chose my words carefully before saying them. Noah wasn't yelling, he wasn't making a scene, but his annoyance at being in this position was loud and clear, like a blinking sign over his head.

"I didn't pick you for the documentary, Noah. That was Beatrice and Amazon. It's not my choice to be stuck with you. I actually tried to tell her I thought the rookie from New England would be a better choice."

That made him turn. A slow pivot with his hands bracketing his hips. “Why’s that?”

Ah, there it was, a bright burst of irritation behind his eyes, probably because I insinuated that someone else would be more interesting than him. If there was one truth in this industry you could take to the bank, it was the competitive nature of these men. God bless their predictability in this single regard.

“My reasons don’t matter because they went with you.”

He must have clenched his teeth because his jaw did that thing again. I tore my eyes away.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” he said.

“You’ll only disappoint me if you get in my way.”

His eyebrows lifted slowly. “That so?”

My hands shook slightly, and I tightened them in my lap. He couldn’t see the frantic bouncing of my foot, but if he had, it would have betrayed whatever badass version of myself I was trying to portray.

I had one shot. I thought about what Beatrice said in our very first meeting. That we rarely had the chance to revisit someone’s first impression of us.

One chance to rework whatever definition he had in his head about me.

One shot at this conversation that would set the tone for us to work together.

To prove Beatrice wrong.

“You think you’re the only person who understands pressure?” I asked. I stood from the chair and dropped the clipboard onto the desk with a sharp slap of sound. He didn’t need to tower over me like an overbearing ... whatever he was trying to be right now. “I’ll forget our interaction in the elevator yesterday because we were both taken by surprise.” I lifted my chin. “But it’s been almost ten years since you’ve seen me, Noah. I’m not the same girl, and you are not tempting enough to risk the opportunity that’s been given to

me. If I can get over what happened, then you need to too. It's not like I'm ripping my shirt off and begging for another chance."

Those eyes flicked down my body, an intentionally derisive motion that took my measure in no more time than a single thud of his icy chunk of a heart.

"Sweetheart," he drawled, "it wouldn't matter if you were."

Heat burned my cheeks, but I refused to drop my gaze. "Glad to hear it."

Noah's eyes narrowed slightly, but he didn't say anything else.

"If you're free after practice tomorrow, my office is two doors down on the right. We'll meet with Rick, he's the Amazon producer, and go over our filming schedule for the next couple of weeks. We'll need on-field and off-field access to you."

At that, he made a sound that could almost be confused for a laugh, if he wasn't a soulless robot with no emotions.

Scratch that.

Noah had emotions. They just seemed to be slight variations of irritation.

"Off-field access to me will be pretty boring," he admitted. "But they're welcome to film it all the same."

"Good." I held out my hand, but he didn't move closer. If he wanted to shake on it, he'd have to come to me, and based on the dangerous gleam that entered his eye, he knew it. "See you tomorrow?"

For a second, my hand was frozen in the air, and I worried that he'd let it stay there. But then he took two steps and enveloped my hand with his. My whole arm tingled, chills slipping up my skin at the dry, hard calluses on his fingers. It had been a minute since a man had touched me, and I hated that he was the one to elicit the reaction.

“Don’t make me regret that I agreed to this,” Noah said, still gripping my hand tightly in his.

I smiled, and for some reason, the sight of it made his face darken like a thundercloud. “Right back at ya.”



## NOAH

“Hope this doesn’t bite you in the ass.”

I grimaced, tightening my grip on the weight ball under my palm, then lowered slowly toward the ground in a push-up until my muscles shook. When I straightened my arms again, I rolled the ball and caught it with the other hand, setting that on top of the rubber surface for another rep.

“It won’t,” I told him through clenched teeth as I did another one.

“I thought you wanted defensive player of the year again. It’s been two years since you won it. Why split your focus on something unnecessary?”

That was my father for you. I couldn’t see his face since we were on the phone, but I knew damn well what his facial expression was doing. Stern set of his wrinkled brow, hard slash of a mouth that rarely ever smiled.

He loved me, but he wasn’t a warm man. But in his concern, and in the way he had always shown it, I’d learned to glean the words he wasn’t saying.

*I love you, and I’m worried about you.*

Another push-up and I sat back on my haunches, rolling my shoulders as the light outside my apartment started dwindling to a bluish purple.

“Because the front offices don’t see it as unnecessary,” I told him.

“Yeah, well, they’re not the ones who have to suit up every week, are they?”

I smiled unwittingly, wondering if the grumpiness he injected into his voice was a hereditary trait. If it was, I’d inherited it.

“No, they’re not. But I don’t think they’re wrong either. In the end, I think it’ll be a good thing.” I couldn’t believe I said it without choking on the words. More than that, I could almost believe that I meant them. “I met with the crew from Amazon today after practice. I like what they’re trying to do. They’re not sensationalizing what life is like for players or creating drama or fake story lines. It’s just a clearer look at what it’s like for us.”

He harrumphed.

“You tell your mother yet?”

I lay back on the ground and stretched my body out as long as it could go. Something satisfying popped in my back, and I groaned. “Not yet. Haven’t talked to her in a few weeks.”

My parents divorced when I was in high school, old enough to decide that I’d rather live with him in Seattle than move with her and her new husband to where he was stationed in Germany. My relationship with her was ... fine. Neither parent was overly effusive when it came to their emotions, and I was the byproduct of a lifetime of that reserve.

In high school and college, it had been my goal to be the opposite.

I’d be fun because my parents weren’t.

I’d enjoy life because they sure as hell weren’t.

I’d be able to do both of those things while succeeding at football because my dad hadn’t been able to.

But in the end, whether through circumstances out of my control or the sheer force of my genetic makeup—probably a little bit of both—I was my father’s son, through and through.

What mattered was my performance.

What mattered was that I did things the right way.

What mattered was that I was the best.

Everything else got shut behind a door that I'd prefer stayed closed.

Somehow, though, that door got cracked open, and I couldn't ignore what was behind it as easily as before.

All I could do was hope that doing this documentary would show that the man I was when the helmet and pads came off was just as driven and focused. I didn't know how many teammates were home alone on a weeknight during offseason, working out more than the four hours of practice I'd done. More than the three hours of workouts I'd completed at the facilities. But I was doing those things.

My dad said something, and I adjusted my earbuds in my ears. "Sorry, I missed that," I told him.

"Wasn't important," he said easily. "Just asking about your new place."

"It's got a bed and a kitchen. That's about all I need for the time being." I glanced around. My agent had found it for me as soon as he got the call from Washington, a sublet from another player he represented. It wasn't my taste, the lines of the furniture sleek and modern and impersonal. I liked dark wood and leather couches, dim lamps and bookshelves and deep chairs that I could actually fit in. The views were amazing, though, with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked Seattle, even if I didn't have my telescope yet.

Watching the stars was my only real hobby outside of football.

"Well," he said, "that's good. Anything else?"

Because I knew it would be exactly a week, down to the minute, before we spoke again, I tried to think of anything he might actually care about. When I came up empty, I shrugged. "No, I can let you go."

"Talk to you next week."

He disconnected the call almost immediately, like he was relieved that we were done catching up. My dad was that way with everything. If his quiet, simple life bothered him, you'd never know it because he didn't dwell on it. The door holding all of that for him had never even been unlocked, let alone opened. I braced my hands on the floor behind me and looked around. Wasn't I similar, though? This was my exciting football player life, and I never stopped to worry about how little it contained.

Working out more than I already had because I was bored, and my weekly phone call with my father.

Amazon would tire of me before the week was out.

With a furrowed brow of my own, I stood and stretched my arms over my head. It was easy enough to recognize the direction my thoughts were going in. I'd agree to do this.

Therefore, I'd do it better than anyone else. If they wanted to follow a player trying to fit in to a new team, I'd show them what the prototype should be.

All the lights were off in my apartment except a small one in the kitchen, and I wandered over to the wall of glass. The oblong shape of the Space Needle gleamed in the distance, and I wished that I'd brought my telescope so that I could look at it more closely.

The skies beyond the city were dark, but I knew with the right equipment, like I had back in Miami, I'd be able to see so much more than met the naked eye. My former assistant was waiting to send me my furniture until I found a place to live, someplace that felt like me, but as I stood there, I found myself wishing I had just a few items to make me feel more at home.

A thought occurred to me, and before I could think better of it, or wonder what in the hell I was doing by contributing to this craziness, I pulled my phone out and found the number I'd saved in it earlier.

**Me: Do you think they'd be interested in "Noah goes house hunting"?**

Not even a heartbeat past before the gray bouncing dots appeared on the screen.

**Molly Ward: YES! That's a great idea. I'll add it to the agenda for tomorrow.**

**Me: The sooner the better.**

**Molly Ward: Got it. Don't you have a place to stay now?**

I sighed, leaning my shoulder against the glass.

**Me: Yeah, but it's not my style. The chairs were made for someone half my size.**

**Molly Ward: I'm not laughing at you, I swear.**

**Molly Ward: If he says yes, and I can't imagine he wouldn't, send me a list of what you're looking for. I can help narrow the search.**

That pulled my face down into a frown.

**Me: Is it your job to help me search for a place to live?**

**Molly Ward: It's my job to make this process easier. If you want to send me some search filters, I'll compile a list and you can pick your favorites. I'll reach out to the listing agents.**

Something about it made me uncomfortable. I didn't want to feel like Molly was at my beck and call. I didn't want to be working with her in the first place, but when I'd shaken her small hand, fingers so much colder than mine, I meant the gesture for what it was. A truce.

**Me: Needs- 3 bed/3 bath, outside of downtown preferred, large yard w/ privacy, space for home gym, pool is a plus but not a requirement. I'd like to stay under 1.5M**

**Molly Ward: You got it.**

I took a deep breath and sent another one.

**Me: Thank you. I appreciate your help.**

**Molly Ward: Careful, Noah, I'll mistake that for being friendly...**

I shook my head slowly, but as I tucked my phone away and stared at the stars again, I had to force away the smile that threatened.

**MOLLY**

“**Y**ou are a badass, and you can do this,” I whispered fiercely. Her lips were petal pink. Her hair was pulled back into a braided ponytail, and the white shirt made her eyes pop. She was me, and she was about to slay her first production planning meeting with Amazon and the big, scary football player who hated her.

I groaned. Not the kind of thought I wanted in my subconscious before I channeled my inner boss bitch.

Honestly, it was time to revise that statement anyway. The text thread on my phone proved that maybe Noah didn't hate me after all. Spending a couple of hours of my night at home searching for a house for him was bizarro but also nice ... in a twisted way.

The search history on my laptop, now inundated with three-bedroom, three-bathroom houses, had kept him at the forefront of my mind.

When my alarm went off, a gentle chiming of bells, I woke from my dream with a start, searching the bed for the warmth of someone else's body because it had been so vivid in my mind that he'd been lying next to me in bed.

Not doing anything, mind you. Just ... there.

Big and warm and solid. If I closed my eyes hard enough, making my own reflection disappear, I'd still be able to feel what I felt.

The complete absence of him in a tangible way.

My forehead wrinkled thoughtfully. Dreams about warm, sleepy Noah were not what I needed in my life, but at least it had been on the platonic side. Like I could have been sharing a bed with a golden retriever and achieved the same thing, if I thought about it critically.

Perfect. I nodded resolutely. Noah was a golden retriever, and he needed a home, and I was helping him because for the time being, my ship was tied to his.

Then I burst out laughing.

Noah as a cuddly, shaggy, sweet dog was just about the worst comparison in the entire universe of comparisons.

There was nothing unassuming or average about him.

The thing I noticed most, as he towered in the corner of Beatrice's office and as he moved through practice earlier, was that he never relaxed. Never allowed the tension to leave that massive body. His eyes were alert and searching, picking apart weaknesses in his opponents, whether that opponent was a teammate he was lining up against or little ole me.

An alert went off on my phone, the reminder I'd set for our meeting, and I took a deep breath.

It didn't matter how I tried to lessen the impact of Noah, he'd always take up more space—physical, mental, and emotional—than the average man.

I left the bathroom with a renewed sense of purpose because if he could reach out with an olive branch, then I could train my brain to view him with the necessary sense of detachment.

He was just a regular football player.

I didn't actually know him, no matter what happened between us.

And because of that, I'd be able to do with my job without any interference.

The small conference room across from my office was empty, so I flipped the lights on and set the stack of folders down, one in front of each empty chair. Beatrice was off-site



for the day working on media stuff, so I didn't need to worry about her lurking in the hallway to judge my performance. Which was good because my pep talk was waning a little bit as the hands on the clock ticked closer, and no one had shown up yet.

The watch on my wrist showed the same time as my phone, as did the digital clock on the wall of the conference room.

Didn't these men know that ten minutes early was on time? Being on time was as good as being late.

Taking a seat, I impatiently crossed my legs. Then crossed them again. My feet already hurt because I'd decided that a couple of extra inches wouldn't hurt for one day. Inner badass and all.

I glared at those inches, encased in shiny black patent, innocently pinching and creating pain and suffering as it wrapped around a foot that'd never done anything to deserve such treatment.

"Screw this," I muttered. I sent a text to Paige to make sure I wasn't crazy for wanting to chuck my shoes across the hall into my office.

**Me: A boss bitch can be a boss bitch while wearing sedate ballet flats, right?**

**Paige: Abso-effing-lutely.**

"Abso-effing-lutely," I repeated and stood resolutely. The heels were off in the next instant, and even though I shrank, my entire body sighed in relief.

"We go barefoot here?"

I jumped, clutching the shoes to my chest when I saw Noah in the doorway. His eyes were trained on my toes, then they moved slowly, oh, so very slowly up my legs, past the gray pencil skirt, and over the white V-neck shirt to my face.

"You guys were late," I said.

Because that explained everything perfectly.

One eyebrow lifted slowly. “I’m three minutes early. How is that late?”

He was also freshly showered in addition to being three minutes early-which-was-actually-late. I could see it in the dampness of his dark hair and smell the sharp, clean scent of soap that filled the room.

Taking a deep breath, I fought against the urge to fan my hot cheeks. This was already going swimmingly, wasn’t it? “It’s ... whatever. I need to grab some different shoes before everyone else gets here.”

“Excellent idea.”

Yet he stood there, blocking the exit. Noah looked at me expectantly.

“You don’t make a very good open door,” I told him.

His head tilted.

“Move, please,” I said slowly. “I need to go across the hall.”

That jarred him out of his stupor. “Oh, sorry.”

He shifted to the side, and when I brushed past him, I heard his slow, steady inhale.

Lord have mercy. If we could get through this first meeting without further incident, I’d be the happiest girl in the world. Down the hallway, I could hear the indistinct chatter of Rick and Marty, the main camera operator. I shoved my feet into my Tiefs and met them just outside my office.

With a smile, I held my hand out toward the conference room. “Rick, Marty, good to see you. We’re over here.”

Noah was waiting in the corner with his hands tucked into the pockets of his dark jeans. Rick and Marty introduced themselves, and I watched covertly at how Noah handled himself. I’d yet to see him smile. Each time we’d run into each other—the elevator, the practice field, Beatrice’s office, and now—his face had been in the same determined, stony expression.

It was almost like he never removed his helmet, that thick layer designed to protect him from the outside world. How were the cameras supposed to capture Noah Griffin, not just the man in the uniform, but the man as he really was, if that never came off?

We took our seats, and Rick looked at me with a smile.

“Rick,” I said, “why don’t you start and talk a little bit about what you and your crew will be looking for from Noah? We have some ideas, but it would be helpful to get some direction from you first.”

He nodded. I liked Rick. In his late forties, he had shaggy gray hair, a big nose, and an even bigger smile. He was easy to talk to, and that probably made him a natural at making people feel comfortable even though they were being filmed constantly.

“My direction,” he said to Noah, and then with a deferential nod at me, “will be to be normal.” He shrugged. “Go about your day as you normally would. Practice, watch film, eating boring meat and veggies and no pizza.”

We all laughed. Well, except Noah. There was a slight warming behind his eyes, but damn the man, he still didn’t crack a smile.

“My life isn’t very exciting,” Noah admitted. “I still can’t understand how this will make for compelling television.”

Rick nodded. “You’d be surprised. The business of football is as fascinating to our viewers as the emotional piece. We’ve found success with this series because it balances both. There are dynamics at play in each arena, the personal and the professional, and it’s my job”—he nodded to Marty, the camera operator, who threw up two fingers in a laid-back gesture—“and Marty’s job, in my absence, to capture those dynamics, no matter how they play out.”

Noah looked at me, then nodded thoughtfully.

Right. My turn. “If you guys look at your folders, I have a tentative schedule laid out, based on when the defense is practicing and when Noah has meetings that you can attend,” I

said. “This covers the next three weeks, and we’ve got a few open gaps in that schedule because I think what we’re missing is the personal piece.” My smile was small because I wasn’t trying to beat Noah over the head with *why don’t you have more friends, give us something to film*. “Noah had a great suggestion yesterday that maybe we could tag along when he’s house hunting.”

“Absolutely,” Rick agreed. His pencil flew across the top of the paper. “If you’ve got someone who can come with you, a parent or a teammate, that’s even better.”

Noah shifted in his seat, face blank. “Not really.”

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Marty shift the camera on his shoulder. Had he been filming this entire time? I guess it made sense if he was. No telling what was worth catching and what wasn’t. That was what the editing process was for. Cut the shit and focus on the good stuff.

“No one?” Rick asked.

“Kareem Jones and I played together in college,” Noah answered, “but we’re not close. Normally, I wouldn’t ask a teammate to help me pick out a house.”

Rick tapped his pencil thoughtfully, and I chewed on my lip as I flipped through a mental Rolodex.

“Can’t I just ... do it by myself?” Noah continued. “No offense, but it’s not like anyone else’s opinion matters when it comes to what kind of house I live in.”

At that, I smiled.

“What?” he asked me. He sounded like a grumpy teenager.

“Nothing.” I shrugged. “You’re just so certain. Usually people like having another person to bounce ideas off. Help them figure out what they want to do.”

Noah looked genuinely perplexed. “Why would I need someone else to figure out what I want to do? I told you what kind of house I want, right? So if I was someone else, would I have asked you, how many bedrooms do *you* think I should have?”

It was probably the worst thing I could have done, and I tried desperately to keep the wide smile hidden. His entire countenance—the set of his jaw, the line of his lips, the downward slash of his eyebrows—was mystified at the idea that some people invited guidance or could possibly want someone else’s opinion.

The battle was officially lost when he narrowed his eyes at my trembling mouth.

My chin tipped up, and I laughed helplessly.

“It’s not funny, Molly.”

Rick wiped a hand over his mouth, hiding a smile of his own.

“It’s a little funny,” I said between peals of laughter. “You look like I suggested you walk naked through Pike Place.”

“Glad my decisiveness is so entertaining,” he mumbled, crossing his arms over his chest.

I breathed out slowly, finally getting control of myself. “I’m sorry.”

He lifted his hand in a gesture of dismissal. “It’s fine. As long as you guys aren’t going to make me pretend I’m friends with someone, we’ll be okay.”

“You can absolutely film by yourself.” Rick kept tapping his pencil, now that the moment was over. “We can do some voiceover stuff. We’ll have to do that anyway. As long as we’re getting your thoughts, whether it’s through dialogue with someone else or through interviews, we’ll be good to go.”

I was flipping through the printouts of the houses I’d found for Noah when something occurred to me.

“Doesn’t your dad still live in town?” I asked before I thought better of it. “I thought he loved it here.”

Every eye in the room swiveled in my direction, and my throat turned to sticky sand.

Well, shit.

Rick's pencil was frozen, hovering over the surface of the paper. "You know his dad?"

I shifted slightly, refusing to meet Noah's steady, unrelenting gaze. "I know he *has* a dad. Doesn't everyone?"

What a blatant non-answer, and Rick knew it. He wasn't good at his job for nothing.

When I felt Noah's eyes boring into my profile, I turned and met them head-on.

*Sorry*, I mouthed. Those eyes closed briefly as he sighed, and that was as good as permission in my book.

"Noah and his dad used to be our next-door neighbors," I told Rick and Marty, who suddenly looked very interested in what I had to say.

"How long ago was this?"

"I was in high school when they moved somewhere else," I said.

Oh, and how complicated that explanation was. For months, I hadn't caught a single glimpse of Noah or his father, and then one day, a For Sale sign popped up in their front yard. At sixteen, it all felt very dramatic. It made me feel like a horrible person; that what I'd done was so bad that they'd moved away. In retrospect, I couldn't really blame his dad even though it had caused more than a few dramatic tears when I thought I'd never see him again.

"Didn't like the neighbors?" Rick asked Noah with a smile.

He was saying it innocently, but it caused my neck to go hot regardless. Noah, to his credit, kept his face completely impassive when he answered. "Neighbors were just fine. The house was too big for us."

I pointed at Rick and Marty. "It's not a big deal, so don't make it one."

Rick held up his hands. "I'd never."

I gave him a look. “Okay, so I’ll schedule with a few of these listing agents and make sure Marty is available to film. Do you need to be there, Rick?”

He shook his head. “I’ll only be around about half the time. Marty is fine on his own for most of it, and you’ll pick up fast what works and what doesn’t in my absence. I’ll be going back and forth between here and Tampa. We’ve got a rookie down there that we’re filming right now too.”

I nodded. “Besides house hunting, do we need anything else off field?”

Rick looked at Noah. “That’s up to him. What do you like to do when you’re not here?”

Noah folded his hands on the table and shrugged. “I work out. Watch film. Go for runs. Swim if I can.”

“So, you work more,” Rick supplied.

I smiled again.

Noah grimaced. “Nothing I do is all that interesting, trust me.”

“They call you The Machine, right?” I asked.

His eyes sharpened, landing hot and fast on my face. “Yeah.”

“Even machines need to be refueled. There has to be something you do, somewhere you go that recharges you.” I kept my gaze on him. “No one here is going to judge you, no matter what it is. But there has to be something that you keep for yourself, that isn’t about football. Everyone has something like that.”

“Your brother did?”

“Sure. He had us.” I shrugged. “My sisters and I were his life, and it was a part of his life he kept private for a really long time. But once the stadium lights were off, and he’d showered off the sweat, he was back home, picking up toys and watching Disney movies and learning how to braid hair. His family refueled him.”

Noah worked his jaw back and forth. The way he looked at me, it felt like it was just him and me in the room as he tried to decide if this was a place he could be honest. “The stars,” he said gruffly.

“What about them?” I kept my voice gentle, like he’d spook at any second.

“I like astronomy. I would’ve minored in it if my dad had agreed.” He cleared his throat. “My assistant in Miami will send my telescope as soon as we find a house.”

*Now this is a surprise*, I thought pleasantly. This was the layer we needed to peel back, even if it took us the entire time to show what was underneath. “Where’s your favorite place to go? To look at the stars.”

“Here?”

“Anywhere. If you could go anywhere to look at the stars, where would it be?”

Noah let out a slow breath, his eyes taking on the hazy look of someone who’d just mentally transported somewhere else. Somewhere they wanted to be very, very badly. “My grandma’s cabin in the Black Hills, South Dakota.”

Rick nodded at me, just a tiny lift of his chin. *Keep going.*

“How come?” I asked.

“It’s so quiet. So ... open. The mountains are different there than they are here. Less people. Less lights. Less pollution.” He closed his eyes, and every line in his face disappeared as he imagined whatever it was that he was seeing in his head. Suddenly, I wanted to be there too, to see what it was like. “The sky is bigger there than anywhere else. It’s the one place where I feel small.”

Noah opened his eyes, and I felt a strange snapping on my heart. Like someone had pulled a rubber band, tightening that statement into place around the thing that pushed the blood through my body.

Without looking away, I knew there was a three-day window in the practice schedule just before preseason started.



“Does our budget include a weekend in South Dakota, Rick?” I asked, eyes still lasered in on Noah.

He smiled, and I saw his head move from me to Noah and back again.

“It does now,” he answered.



## NOAH

“**Y**ou cannot be serious.”

When I tried, unsuccessfully, to duck my head through the opening, her answer was a helpless bout of laughter. It reminded me of a wind chime at my grandma’s cabin, the light tinkling sound of the wind moving through the glass. I used to love that wind chime. Now it would remind me of Molly Ward’s laughter. The thought made me frown. Which made her laugh even harder.

“This house was built for someone a foot shorter than me, Molly.”

“Short people need places to live too,” Marty reminded me, half his face hidden behind the ever-present camera.

I glared at him. “Aren’t you supposed to be a silent observer?”

He grinned. Or half-grinned. “Everything that doesn’t serve the narrative will end up on the cutting room floor anyway. Don’t you worry about me, Griffin.”

Serve the narrative. That kind of PR jargon made me want to rip through the drywall with my bare hands just so I didn’t have to get it stuck in my head.

I leaned toward Molly. “If I start saying things like *serve the narrative*, punch me in the throat.”

She nodded seriously. “Please say it now. I’d like to practice if that’s okay.”

“Hey. We agreed on a truce.”

“Yes, yes,” she said lightly. “We did, didn’t we?”

It took me a moment to realize that the cameras were on us, like it had been ever since we arrived at the first house of the day. It was about thirty minutes east of Seattle, close to Seward Park. From the outside, it looked promising. Trimmed landscaping and a Frank Lloyd Wright architectural style that appealed to me. A little pricey, for just me, but it was close to the water and had a pool.

Then we walked in and realized it was built for someone probably a foot shorter than me. I’d hit my head on three doorframes already. Each hit took my mood from ambivalent, to annoyed, to fully irritated.

She crossed her arms and surveyed the kitchen. “I like it.”

“You would,” I said. “You can walk through all the doors without getting a concussion.”

Her lips, red today, twisted up in a smile. “Isn’t that view worth it?”

I didn’t even glance at the wall of windows. “No.”

Molly rolled her eyes. “Fine. Do you want to go to the next place?” She gave me a winning smile, and her left cheek showed a hidden dimple that I didn’t remember. “It’s got tall ceilings.”

She was handling me. Managing me because I sucked at this. It made my skin feel too tight and my head pound at the base of my skull.

Yesterday, somehow, she got me to confess something that I’d never planned on confessing. And I did it in front of a camera crew.

I’d underestimated Molly, that was for sure. Because as she aimed that sunny smile at Marty, who ate it up with a spoon, I vowed I wouldn’t do it again. Her ability to herd me in whatever direction she wanted was like a kitten backing a grumpy tiger into a cage.

I was the tiger.

And this short-ass kitchen was my cage.

“I need to get out of this house,” I muttered, brushing past both of them. Marty turned to follow, and because I was cognizant of the camera trained on me, rather than where I was going, the smack of my skull on the frame of the door echoed through the room. “Fuck,” I yelled, rubbing the top of my head.

Molly slapped a hand over her mouth. This time, she wasn't laughing when she dropped it. “Are you okay?”

Instead of answering, I strode out of the house, only taking a full breath when I was outside again. The skies were overcast, the threat of rain heavy in the air.

The sudden turn in my mood surprised me, but I didn't want to analyze why.

It probably started when they made the uncomfortable realization that my personal life from an outsider's perspective was about as fun as watching paint dry. That nagged, all night. Even if my dad still lived in town, inviting him to come look at houses would've been a terrible idea. Our relationship was as warm as the highest peak of Mt. Rainier off in the distance.

Behind me, I heard Molly approach. When she walked, she barely made any noise. Something I'd noticed in our meeting. She always wore those shoes ... the ones that looked like glorified slippers. And because of that, her steps were just slightly above a whisper of sound, which made me hyper aware of her movement.

“What was that?” she asked.

Today, she was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved Wolves shirt that fit her too well.

I didn't want to notice that she was wearing a shirt that fit her too well.

It pissed me off.

“None of this feels natural,” I growled. I speared my hands into my hair and stared out to the line of blue water in the sound. “And even though I've heard all these reasons it's fine,

and why people will find it interesting, I don't understand how I'm supposed to just ... wander around these houses and it'll help the team. Or help me be a part of the team."

Molly took another step closer, sighing softly as she did. Her face, delicate and sweet and pretty, was bent in a thoughtful frown. "It's not supposed to help the team, Noah. It's not about winning or about making them better," she said haltingly.

"Then what's the point?"

Her eyes searched my face. "The point is showing the truth. This is the reality of being a player in the league. Sometimes you change teams, and sometimes it's hard when you do."

I clenched my jaw and caught sight of Marty in my peripheral vision. The little shit was even sneakier than Molly, creeping around without anyone noticing.

"Aren't you supposed to be out of the shot too?"

She didn't take my bait, and I felt a moment of shame that I swiped at her in the first place.

"No, I'm not supposed to be doing anything other than this," she said quietly. "I'm helping you find someplace to live because that's what you need. You need a place to feel like home, to have chairs that fit you and walls around you that make you feel like this is where you're meant to be. And if you're upset because you don't have anyone else to call to help you with this, then fix it. If you don't like it, then do something about it."

At that moment, I realized that you didn't have to yell or be the biggest and loudest to infuse your strength into an important moment.

So few people in my life took me on head to head. She was the last person I'd expected to be willing to step up to the plate and do it, this petite woman who barely reached my chest with the top of her head, who I could lift with one hand.

"You're not my friend, Molly," I reminded her. My voice was low, so Marty couldn't hear us. "I don't need this from

you, so stop trying to psychoanalyze me.”

Her eyebrows bent in. “That’s not what I’m doing.”

I leaned down toward her. “Yeah, it is. You keep trying to make me more interesting, more fun, more friendly, and maybe that’s the version of me you want the world to see, but that’s not what I am. Quit trying to turn this into something it’s not.” I straightened, ignoring the hurt, speculative look in her eyes. “I’m done looking for today. I’ll take care of this myself.”

They wanted to film *The Machine*, and that was what they’d get. Starting now.





## MOLLY

“That house must have been worse than I thought,” I muttered. “It’s like that last hit to the head knocked his personality into a coma.”

Standing in the kitchen of Noah’s temporary apartment, Marty and I watched carefully as Noah did his best impression of a man ignoring everyone around him.

By that, he was sitting on the couch with headphones on and watching film on his iPad, occasionally pausing the film to jot notes into a massive notebook.

“So we just stand here?” I asked.

Marty sighed, checking the position of the tripod that held his smaller camera. “Yup.”

“He’s not doing anything.”

“Nope.”

His unperturbed tone had me glancing at him. “How often do you get bored doing this job, Marty?”

He chuckled. “Rarely. Even at times like this.”

“Seriously?”

What he lacked in height, Marty made up for in his huge smile. “Seriously. You don’t go into a job like this because it’s exciting all the time. It’s about finding the moments of interesting in the mundane, you know? I’ve done six-month shoots tracking wolves in Yellowstone, and it’s not like you’re constantly filming them on the hunt, right? They’re sleeping

half the time, pissing in the grass, tugging at a pile of old, dried-out bones to find a last scrap of a meal. If you get lucky, someone fights over a female, and you manage to catch it. But most of the time, it's quiet."

My eyes trailed back to Noah, sitting quietly on the couch that was painfully out of proportion for his large frame. In my mind, I couldn't imagine him as a wolf. He was too large, his frame too dense and weighted down with muscle. He was a bear, tall and broad and ominous, big enough to blot out the sun if he stood over you.

"And you're never tempted to force action?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Like they do in reality TV." I held my hands up when his face pinched with distaste. "I'm not suggesting it, trust me. Just ... trying to understand the process is all. How doing this serves the narrative."

Marty leaned over to check the camera again and changed the angle to account for the setting sun. "Things like today were perfect or would've been if he hadn't had a tantrum at the first house. It's something real and true, something he needs to accomplish to get settled now that he's here." His eyes, astute and keenly observant, moved back over to the man in the other room. "But this is real and true too. He's retreating to something that's safe, something he's good at, and this is just as important to capture."

I nodded, glancing at my watch. We had about an hour left in the filming schedule, and it was about as fun as watching paint dry.

"But if you want to ask him some questions," Marty said, leaning toward me and speaking quietly, "I wouldn't tell you not to. You get a reaction out of him that no one else seems to. And that's good on film. As long as his reactions are his, are true, it's never going to be a bad thing."

The laugh huffed out easily. "But that's not forcing action?"

“It’s not. You know we can edit you out of the shot if that’s what needs to be done, but look at him,” he said. We both did, and my face felt flipped upside down at what a sad picture it was. “He’s alone, by choice, in this place that clearly doesn’t fit him or make him feel comfortable, and he’s supposed to make it feel like home.”

“Seattle was home to him,” I corrected. My eyes zeroed in on my shoes as I felt a flush of heat crawl up my neck. “I just mean, it’s not like this is new to him.”

“How well did you know him?” Marty asked the question just a little too smoothly.

I gave him a look. “Not well. I knew of him. Knew he played football. It’s almost impossible to be a sixteen-year-old girl and not be aware of someone like that living next door.” I shook my head. “But I don’t remember him being like this.”

“Is that hard for you?”

“Hard how?”

He shrugged. “Guy’s pretty closed off. I hope we can get enough good footage off field, you know? Make it worth it to keep his storyline in the final cut.”

A flash of discomfort turned my stomach over, imagining Beatrice’s face if that were to happen. How that would reflect on me if it did. “It’ll make the final cut. I saw the way he tore up practice this morning. You guys won’t cut his footage.”

“It’s happened before.” Marty clucked his tongue. “Be a shame, since Washington put all their eggs in his basket. One he doesn’t seem very motivated to hold onto, if you ask me.”

“Oh, you are a dirty, dirty cheat,” I muttered under my breath, which made him grin unrepentantly. “I’m motivated enough for the both of us, trust me.”

He nudged me with his shoulder and started unhooking the camera from the tripod. “I think your boss is banking on that too, Ward.”

So many people called me by my last name, a hazard of working in the industry that I did, but for some reason, it

reinforced why I was in this position and what was riding on it.

My last name held weight in the halls of Washington and even more on the field. When I walked into a meeting with someone new, there was an undercurrent of established respect. One that I'd be a fool to ignore, no matter how much it rankled that Beatrice didn't think I'd earned my place honestly.

I had earned it honestly. But it also came with undeniable perks. And one of those perks was a knowledge and respect of the game of football that stretched back my entire life. Maybe I hadn't lived with Logan until I was fourteen, but I grew up watching him play. Some of my earliest memories include standing in the stands and cheering him on when he was in college, then more than a decade of him playing professionally.

I could throw down with any man about this sport, no matter how much of a die-hard fan they were. No matter if they were a player either. Marty's words echoed through my head as I approached the couch. It was long and black, low to the ground, with sleek oblong pillows flanking each arm.

Noah pretended he wasn't aware of me coming closer, but I saw the tightening of his jaw, and the way he shifted the iPad away from my gaze. Inexplicably, it made me smile.

That he noticed because his eyes flicked briefly from the screen, over to my mouth, then back. His frown intensified.

It was amazing how, only a couple of days after seeing him again, that frown had lost some of its ability to intimidate me. I folded my legs under me on the couch and leaned close enough that he sighed irritably. It wasn't film of Washington.

It was a game he played at Miami against an opponent we'd be facing in week two and on the road as well. Their stadium was a hostile place to play. Loud and open and unforgiving for any team that didn't call it home. I nodded when he backed up the cursor to watch something for a second time.

“What?” he snapped.

I tapped the space over my ears, and he obliged, pushing the headphones off. “That was week three last season, right? Not the season before?”

His eyebrows curved in. “Last season.”

I nodded. “I could tell.”

Boom.

Noah didn’t want to be interested. That was why his jaw snapped tight, and he closed his mouth after it popped open to ask me a question. But interested he was. That was why his eyes darted back and forth between me and the screen.

“How?”

I shuffled just a couple of inches closer, snatching the headphones from his head so I could turn them off. The sound popped up instantly, and I pointed a finger at the screen.

“Well, last season, their O-line was better, so their QB was able to hold onto the ball about a second and a half longer than the season before.”

Noah’s mouth sagged open before he snapped it shut. Inwardly, I pumped my fist in the air so violently, it would’ve been obnoxious.

“Then there’s you,” I said, letting my voice trail off.

His whole frame went still again, and I was starting to recognize it for what it was: a warning.

You know how the air feels before a tornado swoops down? Everywhere you look, there was a perfect, ominous stillness. Even the color of the sky was different, rosy and warm and pinkish yellow.

“What about me?” he asked, voice all low and grumbly and delicious. I felt that grumble in the soles of my feet, and it made my toes curl up in my shoes.

Deep breath in, deep breath out. “You changed the way you pivoted around the tackle to get to the quarterback. Before, you used to duck more, lower your body mass, which

made it harder to move as fast because your momentum wasn't helping you." I pointed at the screen. "And see, right there, that's how I know it was last season. That's when you started spinning around them, like Freeney and Mathis used to do back in the early two thousands for Indy. You broke the single season sack record last year because of that change. You should have won defensive player of the year. I always thought you got robbed."

Noah's finger punched the screen, pausing the video. He took a second to breathe deeply, and I risked a glance at his face. He was staring at me with such an arrested intensity that I fought not to squirm away from the force of it.

"You—" He stopped, then shook his head as though I'd punched him.

What was it about him that was so entertaining when he was off-balance? Smiling at him, laughing at him, it would be the last thing he'd want from me, especially given his earlier mood. And even more surprising was that it wasn't hard to fight the impulse. I didn't want Noah to think I was laughing at how hard it was for him to adjust to this thing we were doing. I wasn't the one being filmed all the time.

"How do you know that?" he finally managed. "About Freeney and Mathis. You couldn't have been older than ..." He stopped to do some mental calculations.

"I was in middle school." I grinned. "Come on, Noah, my brother was a second-round draft pick the year I started kindergarten. What do you *think* I've been watching every Sunday my entire life?"

Behind the couch, Marty moved on silent feet, but Noah paid him no mind. All his attention was on me, and something about that unwavering focus raised all the little hairs on the back of my neck.

Maybe it was because I'd shocked him or maybe it was because he had to come to terms with the fact that he'd underestimated me, but Noah Griffin was staring at me like he was contemplating ways to devour me whole.

“You gonna tell me how I can improve now, Coach Ward? With your endless wealth of football knowledge.” The edge to his voice wasn’t unpleasant, not in the slightest, and it was taking me some time of my own to realize that I’d underestimated how mercurial his moods were.

If I could anticipate them, it might have felt less dangerous somehow, less like I was standing in the middle of a thunderstorm with a giant metal pole in my hand.

This time, because of that shift, I let my lips curl up in a smile. “Yoga.”

“Yoga,” he repeated.

“You’re strong, and you’re fast, but when you lose your balance, you lose the sack.”

Noah sat back like I’d shoved him with both hands. “You’re serious.”

“As a heart attack.”

“I work out for hours every day, Molly.”

“I know, trust me.” I let my eyes wander over the curves of his shoulders, down the vein that traced his biceps, the muscles bunching like I was touching them with the tips of my fingers. “But weights and strength training and the stuff you do in practice aren’t the same thing as yoga, and I’d bet you a hundred bucks that if you practiced something like that regularly, it would help you.”

His eyes sparked, and for the first time, I saw a teasing glint in those depths. It changed every aspect of his face, and it was hard not to want to curl my hand around his skin and feel the change for myself. “A hundred bucks? That’s a steep bet.”

I exhaled a laugh. “Not all of us have multi-million-dollar contracts, hotshot.”

“Deal.”

My eyes shot up. “What?”

“It’s a deal.” The edges of his lips almost curled up, and I found myself holding my breath.

“You’re going to go to yoga with me?”

“No,” he said firmly. “But I can hire someone. Or if you send me something on YouTube. I’ll try it at home where Kareem can’t see me.”

I bit down on my lip because the smile threatening was so big and so overwhelming that I felt my heart pinch. “Okay.”

“Okay.” He lifted his iPad. “Can I get back to work now?”





## MOLLY

“It’s probably a really, really stupid idea.”

“I couldn’t say one way or the other.”

No matter what my sister said, I knew it was as I drove to Paige and Logan’s house for our Tuesday night family dinner. But as I took the exit, I couldn’t stop thinking about Noah sitting on that friggin’ black couch, his legs too long and his frame too bulky for him to be comfortable. I thought about his fridge, full of boring food filled with vitamins and minerals and zero good carbs.

Good carbs like the bread kind of good carbs.

I thought about the fact that his telescope was being shipped from Miami, and how he never sat at the clear dining room table because he was always eating by himself.

“I’m just going to do it.”

Isabel glanced at me from the passenger seat. “Molly, if you keep overanalyzing, I’ll jump from this moving vehicle just so I don’t have to listen. For the love of all things holy, make a decision.”

My thumb punched the Bluetooth button on the steering wheel.

“Call Noah Griffin,” I said.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Iz sighed and shook her head.

But there were no cameras to be found, and maybe it would be a good way for him to just ... relax. The phone rang and rang, and with each one that went unanswered, I felt even more resolute that he needed someone to step up and be in this role for him.

Noah needed a friend.

He needed someone who could see past whatever trappings were entailed in being The Machine.

After a prolonged beep, the disembodied voice of his phone told me to leave a message after the tone. I debated hanging up but didn't end the call when it came through the speakers.

"Noah, it's Molly. Umm, I know it's last minute, but if you ... if you're hungry, or bored, or whatever, we always do family dinner at my brother's house on Tuesdays. I mean, we do dinner. Sometimes non-family members show up too. Not often, but they do. Lia always brings her friend. I know it's not *your* family, but you're welcome all the same." I pinched my eyes shut. "You know where it is if you want to join us."

When the call ended, I blew out a disgusted breath.

"I can't imagine why he wouldn't want to come," Isabel mused.

"Screw you. Drive yourself next time."

"We live together, Molly. That's a gratuitous misuse of fuel." She wedged her sneakered feet up onto the dashboard before I knocked them down. "Hey, they're clean."

"So's my car. I'd like to keep it that way."

"Don't you think Logan would have an issue with one of his players showing up unannounced?"

That made me sigh. "Probably."

"Yet here we are. For all you know, Noah's going to show up like a grumpy lost puppy on the front porch in twenty minutes."

As I glanced in the rearview mirror, I caught my gaze, feverish and bright with excitement.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

“No, I don’t think he will,” I admitted. “Yesterday was better, though. Sort of. One minor snag, but it’s understandable that it would take him time to adjust. I know I’d feel off-balance in his position.”

“And how do you feel in your position?” she asked pointedly.

“I don’t know, Isabel. I think this is a really weird job, and it’s putting me in a strange position because no matter what I do, Noah could still wake up tomorrow and decide to quit.”

She pointed a finger at me. “*That* is highly unlikely, and you know it as well as I do. These guys are so freaking competitive. They can’t play Scrabble without it hitting Super Bowl level of intensity.”

I laughed. “Remember when Logan flipped the board because he thought we were cheating?”

“I sure do.”

“Okay fine,” I conceded. “He won’t quit. But Amazon could decide he’s not worth the film they’re wasting on him. I don’t know whether Beatrice would be upset at me about that or not. I don’t know her well enough.”

She sighed. “Wouldn’t it be nice if we could read our bosses’ mind?”

The way she said it had me looking at her twice. “What’s wrong with Amy?”

Even though I’d just pulled the car into the driveway, neither of us made a move to leave. Isabel unhooked her seat belt and shrugged as she thought about the longtime owner of the gym she managed. “Nothing that I can pinpoint, per se. But she seems ... scattered. Like she’s not as present when she is there. In some ways, it’s fine because she’s definitely not micromanaging me, but our membership is dipping more than usual, and I don’t feel like I can put that onto her plate.”

I hummed. “Well, maybe it’s just a phase. Everyone goes through them.”

“True. And maybe Noah is in a grumpy loner phase, which is not your responsibility to fix.” Her eyes, just as blue as mine, stared unblinkingly in my direction.

“I know,” I said on a groan. “I know it’s not mine to fix.”

“Just remember that when that alpha asshole thing turns out to be some emotional wound that you desperately want to take care of.” At my eye roll, she clucked her tongue. “Don’t even deny it. Women go stupid over that bullshit, when, in reality”—she punched a finger in the air—“they should take their asses to therapy.”

“Didn’t you think therapy was a waste of time?”

“Yes, but I’m not the one taking on the responsibility of someone else’s happiness.” She laid a hand on her chest. “I happen to think if Noah is bored and lonely on his too-small couch, then he should take his millions of dollars and buy a dog and a new couch. He doesn’t need you to kiss his boobies.”

A sister’s logic was so wildly ill-timed, pretty much at any given moment. I was about to tell her what she could do with her opinion when Lia knocked on the driver’s side window.

I rolled it down.

Lia grinned in at us. “What are we doing?”

“*We* are about to come inside,” Isabel said. “Because *we* have nothing more worthwhile to do with our time than to eat a family dinner and focus on our own issues.”

Lia’s pretty face scrunched in confusion. “A little heavy on the subtext, are we? I feel like I’m missing something.”

Because that was not something I felt like getting into, I waved at Claire and Finn, Lia’s best friend, who were hanging back while Lia leaned next to my car. Finn, tall and lanky and the kind of nerdy cute that always made me hope that he and Lia would hook up, waved back.

“Gawd, when are you two gonna do it already?” Isabel muttered.

Lia’s face blazed red. “He is my friend,” she whispered, just shy of a hiss.

I grinned. “He got bigger over the summer,” I mused. “Didn’t he, Iz?”

“Someone’s working their arms, that’s for sure.”

Lia’s face stayed even, which was annoying, because if you lost the ability to bait your little sister, were you even living your life right?

“I’m hungry,” Claire yelled from the driveway. “Can we go in, please?”

“Oh, did your legs stop working when you got out of the car? No one is making you wait,” Lia said over her shoulder. Finn tucked his hands in his pockets, but I saw his cheeks lift in a wide grin.

Isabel ignored the exchange between the twins. “He’s got that Clark Kent thing going that I am not mad at.”

“Don’t think I won’t make you suffer if he hears you say that.”

I dropped my head in my hands. Probably good Noah didn’t come. The front door of the house opened, and Emmett whooped loudly.

“Hey, Finn! I saved you a seat by me! We can almost beat the girls in numbers now!”

Isabel climbed out as Lia, Claire, and Finn made their way to the door. I took a second to watch them shuffle into the house. Chaos was so ingrained into the normal ebb and flow of my life in various ways. It was hard for me to understand it any other way.

Even the apartment I shared with Iz, small and cute and tucked in an affordably safe building downtown, was never quiet. We always had music playing, the TV on, or an audiobook going while I cooked. If we were home more, we

probably would've had a dog or two that I could take on walks and snuggle on the couch with.

Maybe that was why thinking about Noah made me sad for him, causing a slow, unfurling ache in my chest that I wanted to rub at until it went away.

I didn't want him to be sitting alone in the dark, and it wasn't because I wanted to heal any emotional wounds.

*Liar*, a voice in the back of my head whispered.

I didn't want that man sitting alone in the dark because I liked him, and there was no earthly reason I should've. He was snappish and grumpy. His moods shifted faster than the weather, and for some reason, he refused to acknowledge that there was another side to him than The Machine.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

This was my curse, apparently. Something that made me good at my job when my own feelings weren't on the line, but horribly inconvenient when they were. Without trying all that hard, I had a sixth sense that jangled like a bell when it came to the people I was forming relationships with.

Noah needed warmth and laughter. He needed someplace where he didn't need to be perfect all the time. Where he could just be Noah.

My phone, still connected to the Bluetooth, rang loudly through my car's speaker, and I took a deep breath when I saw Beatrice's name flash across the screen.

"This is Molly," I said.

"Molly, it's Beatrice." Wasn't it fun when we all started our calls like we didn't have caller ID? "Sorry I'm calling at dinnertime. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure, go ahead." Paige opened the door and held up her hands questioningly. I held up my finger, then pulled my hand to my ear to signal a phone call. She nodded and went back into the house.

"I just got off the phone with Rick. He's on his way back from Tampa."

My fingers tightened in my lap. “Yeah, he told me he plans on being there for filming tomorrow. We’ve got everything set up for a defense only practice and some stuff in the weight room.”

She hummed. “Yes, he told me that as well.”

Something about her voice pricked uncomfortably. “Did something happen, Beatrice?”

“He’s thrilled, you know, with how it’s going with Noah.”

“That’s ... good. Right?”

She kept talking as if I hadn’t said anything. “Marty sent him footage from Noah’s apartment last night, raving about your ability to draw him out. Get him to lower his guard.”

I rubbed my lips together and fought the irrational impulse to flee the car. “We were just talking about football. I didn’t do anything special.”

“Molly, I wish you’d been honest with me about knowing him.”

My whole body went ice cold in an instant. “Beatrice, I ...”

“Both Rick and Marty were thrilled that you had previous history with Noah.” She paused meaningfully. “Not something I appreciated hearing from them as opposed to my own employee.”

“I’m so sorry, Beatrice,” I said in a rush. “I should have told you. I didn’t know Noah was even coming to Washington when you offered me the promotion.”

Because she couldn’t see me, I leaned forward and dropped my head in my hands again.

“Is this going to be a problem?” she asked. “Your history with Griffin.”

“No,” I answered instantly.

The question was jarring to just about every part of my brain, like a cloth that was ripping off center away from the main seam. Whatever I was feeling toward Noah, I knew



without a doubt it wouldn't be reciprocated. He had one relationship in his life, and that was football, and I'd do well to remember that.

What mattered was doing my job.

What mattered was keeping my eye trained on that, no matter what instincts he was pulling out from inside me.

"I know I'm being tough on you, Molly." Her tone had softened, which had my shoulders relaxing slightly and the nauseous tumbling of my stomach settling down just a little. "I'm only hard on the employees who I think have potential."

That had me sitting up. "Th-thank you, Beatrice. I kind of thought you gave me the promotion as a ... I don't know ... a test you expected me to fail."

"I'm not as awful as you think," she said wryly. "And if that were true, it's not a very good use of my budget, is it?"

"Probably not."

Would this be a problem? No matter how quickly I'd told her it wouldn't be one, I still had to be honest with myself. It was Noah. And if I closed my eyes, I saw him as he'd stared at me the night before. That look that had singed me straight through. But that look could've meant a thousand different things. Maybe he was pissed that I noticed something he'd done poorly before he fixed it. Maybe he was impressed that I knew what the hell I was talking about.

"You don't have to worry about a thing," I told Beatrice firmly.

"No?"

Isabel was right. Noah's issues weren't my responsibility. I could do my job and still maintain a professional level of distance. Because if I couldn't, then what right did I have to feel frustration at Beatrice's reservations?

"No," I repeated. "I hear you loud and clear."

"Good." She sighed. "Now, I have one more call to make, and if I remember correctly, you have a family dinner to get to."

My eyebrows popped in surprise that she remembered. “I do.”

“Enjoy it. Thanks, Molly.”

“Thank you,” I told her. I meant it too. Her call was a timely reminder that I needed. Noah wasn’t mine to fix, no matter how he’d looked at me, and I’d do well to remember that.



## NOAH

Normally, I didn't think of myself as a slow thinker. Just the opposite, in fact. A defensive player should have the ability to see possible scenarios play out before they happen, in the twitch of a finger, the shift of body position, or the pivot of a foot. But when it came to Molly Ward, I was a little slow on the uptake.

It took me two days of actively avoiding her while we filmed to make the connection that I was not, in fact, the ignorer. I was the ignored. And because it was me, I had to mentally break down, in detail, how the hell that had happened and how I missed it.

Three days after she schooled me on her football history, the crew was at practice, and for the two days prior, I kept my eyes off her at all times. Yes, I cataloged what she was wearing within fifteen seconds of her walking in my peripheral vision, but that was it. I did not give her a second of full eye contact as she tilted her head toward Marty's, and they discussed filming for the next day, and Marty said something that made her laugh. That tinkling, wind chime laughter that made me want to do something ridiculous, like shove my fingers in my ears so I didn't have to hear it. It was the latter part of day three when the wheels started falling off, and it was all Kareem's fault.

They decided to haze me since I'd had over a week to get used to the rhythm of practice and let my guard down a little bit. That was when he started sending the rookies over to me—one by one—each one asking me for a selfie, an autograph,

and a ridiculous question that they would've known their freshman year in college.

About cleats.

Then favorite stain remover for the grass stains.

How to avoid athlete's foot.

I was slow on that uptake too, my irritation rising exponentially with each one who approached me throughout the four hours of practice. By the fourth rookie, and his question about which jock strap I preferred to keep my balls in place, the rein on my temper snapped.

"Jones," I roared, seeking him out between the snickering faces. "Kareem Jones, get your ass over here."

The camera was pointed at me, but I couldn't care less.

When Kareem sauntered over to me, wearing a wide-ass grin on his face, I had a moment when I wondered whether Molly would step in and try to cool me down.

"How much did you pay them?" I asked.

"Oh, watching the look on your face has been priceless enough, Griffin," he said.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "So they get nothing out of it?"

He wiped under his eyes. "No, I told them that if they did this, we wouldn't duct tape them to the field goal after practice."

"I'm too old for this shit," I said, pointing a finger at him. "If you want them to earn their freedom, use someone else. I'm here to work, not run a daycare for rookies."

He knew me too well to be fazed by my temper, but a few of the guys who didn't, rookies and veterans alike, shifted uncomfortably, their laughter dying down to throats that suddenly needed to be cleared.

Kareem whistled, rocking back on his heels like I'd pushed him. "Hear that, rookies? I think he said the magic words, didn't he?"

“What magic words?” I snapped. “Kareem.”

“Don’t you back out now,” he said, glancing carefully into the faces of everyone around us.

Our quarterback, a young guy in his third year with a rocket arm, grinned at me, then looked over his shoulder. “You heard Jones. Get him.”

Before I could blink, every rookie on the Washington roster had me pinned, no matter how much I thrashed, threatened, or shouted. The coaches laughed. Even Logan had a wide smile on his face, and if I hadn’t been betrayed by my entire defensive line, who sat back roaring with laughter, I might have thought it was funny too.

“You nice and sweaty, Griffin?” Kareem asked as he approached.

“You asshole.” I tried to pry my arm away from where three rookies held it. I was pinned to the turf, on my knees with my hands behind my back, and I finally gave up.

“I’d close my eyes if I were you.” That was the only warning I was given before they proceeded to dump black and red glitter down the front of my shirt, then snap my shorts away from my waist and dump it down there too. The cleaning crew would hate them, and I’d be planning retribution for the rest of my life, but from the tear-inducing laughter from every person present, it must have been worth it.

Behind the camera, Marty wiped at his face, and as I stood, shaking as much excess glitter as I could from my body, that was the first that I noticed Molly was avoiding me.

If she’d watched what had happened to me, she wasn’t watching the fallout. She wasn’t approaching me with that big, bright smile on her pink lips, trying to suss out how I felt about what they’d done. She wasn’t eyeing me curiously through my anger. She wasn’t eyeing me at all.

It crossed my mind, as I showered off the mess and changed into clean clothes after practice, that I’d forgotten to return her call from the day before. She had invited me to dinner at Logan’s house, a message I hadn’t received until

hours later because I often didn't check my cell while it was charging. By the time I saw it, by the time I'd listened to it, it was well after eleven, and I wasn't sure what to say.

Thank you, but your brother would sooner poison my dinner than have me show up with you.

I don't know how to do family dinners, so I'd sit there like a freak.

Their family was big and loud and had probably only gotten bigger and louder in the years since I lived behind them. Not my scene, even if I'd wanted to go.

Molly had made no attempt to hide that she was puzzled by the way I acted with the people around me. That "The Machine" was a moniker she didn't deem appropriate, even if everyone else thought it was. I'd had glitter down my ass crack to prove how appropriate the rest of my team thought it was.

But Molly wasn't wrong either.

If I was well and truly a machine, with no pulse or heartbeat or complex emotions, it wouldn't have bothered me that she wasn't speaking to me.

Which was why I sent her a text, late on day three.

**Me: I apologize for not returning your phone call. It was late when I got the message. Thank you for inviting me, though.**

An hour or so later, I received my reply.

**Molly Ward: No problem, it's fine.**

A reply like that from a person such as her was telling, and it still didn't click in my head that something was wrong.

Day four was no better, and that day had been free of pranks, free of tempers, free of anything that could have upset her. Even the fact that I was still pondering what I might have done to inspire this type of reaction in her should have been a warning sign.

I lifted weights, had a meeting with the coaching staff, and watched some film. Between those things, I talked with Rick, giving them something they could use later for voiceover work. And Molly stayed placidly behind the camera, face either pointed at her phone or at the back of the camera screen.

In fact, she was doing such a good job of not looking at me that I was now an expert in the top of Molly's head.

Rick cleared his throat, and I looked back at him. There was a knowing glint in his eye that made me want to punch him.

“Does glitter make you feel like part of the team?”

“Yeah, it's really magical that way.”

He smiled. “You weren't too happy, though?”

The tip of Molly's pencil slowed as she was writing, and something warm flashed bright inside me. She was still aware; she just didn't want me to realize it.

“Would you like to be held down by seven football players and have them dump glitter all over your sweat-soaked body?”

“No.”

I rubbed my jaw. “No, I wasn't happy.” I paused and started thinking about what Molly would have asked me if she wasn't doing a such a good job of ignoring me. She'd want me to flip up the lid on why I felt that way, why my anger at that moment was so hot and so high, instead of being able to laugh it off like a lot of my teammates would. “It's probably a control thing,” I admitted slowly. “Why I got so mad.”

Her pencil stopped moving over the surface of the paper. Her whole frame froze, to the point where I wasn't even sure she was breathing.

“Everything about switching teams reminds you how little is in your control in this league.” I propped my hands on my hips. Trying to unearth the right words for what this reminded me of when I was little and used to dig in the dirt around this bush in our yard. I'd find something that felt small, that I could pull up easily, but inevitably, it was part of a larger,



more stubborn root. I'd tug and tug, and only a little bit would give way before I needed to stop. "I can't control my teammates, no matter where I am. My coaches. My opponents. None of it."

"What can you control?"

For a second, I stared at the top of Molly's head, her shiny hair, and willed her to look up at me. But she didn't, and the pencil in her hand shook for a second before she started writing again.

"I can control how prepared I am," I said. My eyes moved back to Rick. "I can control how in shape I am. What I eat. How I sleep. What I allow as a distraction."

"That seems like a pretty good list," he commented.

I laughed humorlessly. Normally, I'd avoid dwelling on this at all because even that felt like wasted energy. Energy I could harness elsewhere.

It was a trait I inherited from my dad. If it didn't serve my goal, it was a waste of energy. Keeping the door closed to things I couldn't control was the best way to protect myself.

Slowly, day by day since I'd gotten here, this ragtag group of people had turned the knob, but I was the one who had to do the rest of the work. Conversations like this were because I was opening that door.

"If I had a normal job, that list would go further. In this league, doing what we do," I said, "it's a fraction of the whole picture. There are a million things that are out of my hands."

"Like your teammates pouring glitter down your shorts."

"Like that," I agreed dryly. "Even if it's meant as a joke, it's hard to be reminded of the fact that, at the end of the day, the only thing I can control is me."

"A flawlessly working machine," he said quietly.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Makes sense."

“That’s why I almost never stop working on those things,” I told him. “Why going out is less important to me than watching film. Why eating right is more important to me than drinking.” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Perfecting my craft is the best way for me to spend my time.”

“You’re good at it, so you’re doing something right.”

The only way I could explain why I shifted the subject, with a camera aimed at my face, was that part of my personality that refused to back down from a challenge. I allowed one side of my mouth to hook up in a quick smile. “Someone smart told me recently that I could be better, though.”

Her pencil froze again.

Rick glanced at her, then back at me.

“So I’m gonna try yoga,” I announced.

The pencil fell out of her hands, and her head snapped up.

For the first time in four days, Molly’s eyes were on mine. How was it possible that I’d forgotten that color already?

Her mouth gaped open, and I saw Marty smile behind the camera.

“Yoga?” Rick repeated.

“Yup. I like a challenge.” I held her astonished gaze until she blinked. “Do you think you could help me find an instructor? You said you’d come with me, right?”

Molly snapped her mouth shut, just then realizing that Rick, Marty, and I were all staring at her.

Then the strangest thing happened. I expected a smile, a laugh, maybe even a joke about a guy like me actually trying yoga. But as she studied my face, I saw her pull down the hypothetical shutters.

Her expression was blank, and the brightness of her blue, blue eyes dimmed.

“I can send you a link for a YouTube video for beginners. You’ll be fine on your own.”

She nodded at Marty and mumbled something about a meeting, then Molly fled like the hounds of hell were nipping at her heels.

My eyes narrowed on her retreating figure, and to someone like me, she'd just thrown down the most irresistible kind of gauntlet. Something had changed in her head when it came to me and whatever tenuous friendship we'd started forming, one that had been undaunted by my mood swings and prickly nature.

"Uh-oh," Rick said under his breath. "Trouble in paradise?"

I gave him a look, which made Marty snicker.

"Just ... trying to figure out what I did to piss her off."

"Good luck," Marty said with a chuckle.

I didn't need luck. She was about to find out just how stubborn Noah Griffin was when he wanted something, and just then, I wanted to figure out what was wrong with her.



## NOAH

It took a lot for me to get nervous to make a phone call. But there I was, pacing the length of the apartment as the phone trilled ominously in my ear. I should've made the call as soon as Rick agreed to do this in the first production meeting. But I'd waited until right now.

"Hello?" the voice barked.

"Hi, Grandma."

Silence.

"I think I've finally lost my mind."

A reluctant smile ghosted over my lips. "You haven't, I promise."

"I must have. Because I used to have a grandson who loved me and called me regularly, but that grandson just *texts* now, like that's good enough."

At the sound of her voice, my pacing slowed, and the nerves settled. "I'm sorry. I'm not ..." I scratched the back of my head. "I'm not the best at making phone calls."

"No shit, Sherlock."

A laugh burst out of me, and the muscles it used to make such a sound were so atrophied from disuse that it almost hurt.

"How are you, half-pint?"

"Good. Busy."

“Eh, busy is used as a badge of honor these days,” she grumbled. “Doesn’t impress me much. I want to know how my grandson is doing in this thing we called life.”

Before I knew it, I’d sprawled back on the too-small couch to soak in the sound of her voice. My grandma Pearl, my dad’s mom, was one of my favorite people on earth, and the fact that I’d gone months without talking to her made me feel like a giant sack of shit. Yeah, I was busy. So what?

“I’m playing in Washington again,” I told her.

She hummed. “I heard that on *SportsCenter* last week, I think.”

I smiled again. “You watch that?”

“How else am I gonna find out what’s going on? My son has the conversational skills of a yo-yo, and you’re not much better, half-pint.”

The nickname she gave me at three had stuck this long, and even if I gently reminded her that I was a foot and a half taller than her, she’d still use it.

“Well, I’m hoping I can make up for my lack of phone calls.”

“Yeah? How so? You gonna buy me another house?”

It was the first thing I’d done when I cashed my signing bonus from Miami. I flew to South Dakota and paid cash for the place I knew my grandma’d had her eye on for a couple of years but would never be able to afford on her own. She hated that I’d done it. And she loved the house. She’d cried the entire time we walked through after she got the keys. Anything I’d sacrificed for this game was worth it at that moment. Every-fucking-thing.

“Mind if I come visit my investment?” I asked her.

She was quiet, but I heard the quick, sharp inhale of surprise. When she spoke, her voice wobbled just enough that I knew she was fighting tears. “After the season? Or sooner than that?”

“This weekend, actually. I have a couple of days off before preseason.”

It was quiet. Then she sniffed. And sniffed again.

I shook my head. “Come on, Grandma, don’t cry. I’ll think you don’t want me to come.”

“I’m not crying, you dingbat,” she said in a watery voice. “Just caught a frog in my throat.”

“Is that a yes?”

“I think I could have the guest room ready,” she answered.

“Good.” I blew out a breath. “I’ll, uh, have a couple of people with me, if that’s okay.”

“A woman? Oh Lord, please say it’s a woman. Or a man. I don’t care who, as long as it ends with me having a great-grandchild before I die, which is probably going to be soon.”

Molly’s face flashed through my head, there and gone in the same breath, and it occurred to me that introducing her to my grandma was a big deal. A really big deal. Because the only conclusion I’d been able to come to in light of the realization that she was ignoring me was that it bothered me that she was ignoring me. And it bothered me because, in my head, Molly and I had started forming a tentative friendship. Besides Kareem and his glitter bomb, I didn’t have any friends in Seattle. I didn’t want her silence or her professional distance. It quickly went beyond wanting to know why she was doing it to wanting to fix it.

I explained the Amazon documentary to Grandma, who immediately fussed over the fact that her home would be on film, and simply because it was easier, I glossed over Molly’s role in the weekend.

“There will be four of us. Me, the producer, Rick, the camera guy, Marty, and someone who works with me here in Washington. She kind of oversees everything.”

“She your boss?”

The smile was there again, imagining pint-sized Molly bossing me around. To the rest of the world, she probably

wasn't so pint-sized, but she was to me. "Not my boss. Just a coworker, I guess."

Grandma hummed. "Okay. I'll put you in the basement room since you don't need impressing. The camera guy and the producer, you said? Yeah, Marty can go in the bunk room across from mine, and what's her name?"

"Molly."

"Molly can sleep in the main guest room."

That had me rubbing my forehead. The king bed in that room was the one I always slept on. She'd look tiny in the middle of that bed by herself. Under the sheets and underneath the down plaid comforter that I loved because it was soft and light but kept me warm even on the coldest South Dakota winter night. "Right."

Even to my own ears, my voice sounded rough.

A text notification dinged in my ear, and I pulled the phone away. Inexplicably, my heart sped up when I saw it was from Molly.

**Molly Ward: This was just emailed to me. Just FYI.**

I clicked on the link and found myself scrolling through the pictures too fast because I loved what I was seeing. My thumb hovered over the map, and I zoomed in. It was on the east side of Lake Washington, the same place that the Wolves owner, Allie Sutton-Pierson, lived with her husband, retired QB Luke Pierson.

"Grandma, I have something that just came through my phone that I need to look at. I'll email you my itinerary, okay?"

"Sure, sure. You'll fly on one of those fancy private planes?"

I smiled. "Probably. You know I need the extra legroom."

She harrumphed. "Whatever you say, half-pint."

"I'm excited to see you too, Grandma."

"Oh, hush. You know I love you best."



I rolled my eyes. I was her only grandchild “Love you too.”

After I tossed the phone down, Marty shifted from the corner, and I bit back a curse, sending him a glare instead.

His smile widened behind the camera, but he didn’t say anything.

“I actually forgot you were here, you creep.” That made him laugh. “Am I going to get in trouble if I talk to you?”

“Nah. We can edit around anything, you know that.”

I sat up on the couch and grabbed my phone again. The house that Molly sent me was ... perfect. Absolutely perfect.

A little bit more money than what I wanted to spend, but it checked every other box. Tall ceilings, warm tones, a massive kitchen, and sprawling views of the lake and the mountains, greens at every height in the trees that surrounded it. Trees meant privacy, and I liked that too. It was set back from the road, but the house itself wasn’t a behemoth. Four bedrooms and three baths with a fully finished basement and a home gym already installed. A pool for laps in the morning before practice.

It was a space I could actually live in, not just exist.

**Me: Marty is here already. Want to come with us if I can get a hold of the listing agent?**

The fact that I held my breath as she started typing was akin to a blaring airhorn in my ear.

Danger! Danger! Abort!

**Molly Ward: I can’t tonight. The twins are here hanging out. Just wanted to pass the house along, it looked like you.**

She started typing and stopped. Then once again. No other text popped up, and before I realized what I was doing, my jaw popped from grinding my molars together.

“Molly meeting us?” Marty asked lightly. Too lightly.

I cut him a look, then pulled up the number for the listing agent. Something about all of this, the past few days, had me feeling edgy and restless. There were too many circumstances out of my control, and it had my skin humming in relentless buzzing.

It would have been convenient to blame that for how the next two hours of my life unfolded.

The listing agent for the house filled my silence as I walked around all four thousand square feet of the home. Each stretch of wood floor, each reflection of the lights in the granite lining the massive kitchen island, every corner of the large, light-filled bedrooms fell prey to my notice, even if I didn't say much about it.

She must have had a sixth sense for the way I studied each inch of the place.

It did look like me.

It felt like me too. And Molly had known it.

If her inbox was anything like mine, I'd had a dozen houses emailed to me, most of which had only earned a cursory glance because I was too damn tired most nights to try to go see.

The space was large enough for someone my size, the furniture in the home big and comfortable with hefty wood frames and room to spread out. Sprawling views of blues and greens and glinting water. In my bones, I knew it was meant to be my home.

It was one of those times when I never questioned how quickly I came to a decision. It was a trait that served me well on the field, acting on instinct, because I knew my instinct wouldn't steer me wrong.

This place was mine.

If Marty was annoyed by my lack of commentary, he didn't prompt me to say something that would serve the damn narrative. He simply followed me around as we both ignored the mindless chatter of the woman who was about to make a huge-ass commission off me.

“It’s been on the market for a little over a month,” she said, trailing red-tipped fingernails along the custom trim on the windows overlooking the lushly landscaped backyard. “I know I’m not supposed to say things like this, but I’m sure my clients would be”—her eyes trailed deliberately over my chest and arms—“flexible.”

I held her gaze and saw exactly what she’d be willing to give me.

Nothing about her tempted me. Not her long legs or curvy hips, the nipped in waist and generous bust, or the curly dark hair spilling down her back. Most guys on the team didn’t believe me, but it’s entirely possible to flip the off switch when it comes to the desire to sleep with a stranger.

She was beautiful. Incredibly beautiful.

And the last thing I wanted was to see the look in her eyes at how much she’d let me do to her. It was every cliché that I hated about being a professional athlete. Because I did what I did, I was desirable. Because I wore a recognizable jersey and had a familiar face, she’d let me flip her flat on her back with no more than a nod of agreement on my part.

Nothing about that appealed to me, and so, no part of my body reacted.

Instead, all I wished was that she was someone else. Someone shorter with lighter hair and brighter eyes and a bigger smile. Someone who found my temper mildly amusing and schooled me on football. Someone who looked at me and wanted to dig beneath the surface, not worship the façade.

“Could I have some privacy to make my decision?” I asked her.

She glanced at the camera and back at me in question, like she couldn’t tell whether I wanted her or Marty to leave the room.

“I’d like to be alone,” I said more firmly. Her eyes shuttered in an instant, and she gave me a nod of deference.

“Of course,” she purred.

Marty stayed by me, a strangely comforting presence as I braced my arms on the ledge and stared ahead.

“You find a house, Griffin?”

All that restlessness from early uncoiled slowly, sinking into something comfortable. “I think I did, Marty.”

He gestured on the ground, just behind the couch. I didn’t see what it was at first until I crouched down and pulled it out by the edge. A smile lifted my lips when I saw them stacked on top of each other.

I called the agent back in the room.

“I want it.”

Her eyes flared with a different kind of excitement. “Excellent. I’d be happy to present an offer to my clients.”

“I’ll offer their asking price, but I want a two-week close date so I can move in before the season starts.” And I lifted my hand, letting her know I wasn’t done. “I also want to film a segment here tonight if they’d be so kind as to not return home just yet.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “They’re out of town, so that should be fine.”

“And I want to borrow these.” I lifted the other hand.

If I thought her eyebrows were high before, they shot up even farther.

“You ...” She shook her head. “That’s what you want?”

“Do we have a deal?”

“I-I’ll call them right now,” she said cautiously. In her eyes, I must have lost a bit of my appeal and replaced it with a healthy dose of insanity.

Marty chuckled. “You’re serious, man?”

I looked at my hands. “As a heart attack. She won’t say no to this.”



## MOLLY

“Do you think Paige would think it’s weird if I write a paper on the maternal impact she had on older children who have no biological tie to her?”

My hand froze, the bottle of wine suspended mid pour over my glass. “Umm, no?”

Claire typed furiously on her laptop before slapping it shut. “I can’t figure out what to do with this paper, and I have to get started.”

Isabel came down the hallway of our apartment and glared at Claire’s computer like it kicked her in the crotch. “Do you have to type so loudly? You sound like a chicken pounding a mallet on that thing.”

Claire flipped her off.

From my perch on the couch, I smiled at both of them as I took another sip of my wine. It was drier than I usually liked, so I grimaced as I swallowed. Lia and Claire were huddled together on the other end.

Their faces were mirror images of each other, but our family could tell them apart with no problems. It was in the angle of Lia’s jaw and the slope of Claire’s nose. Not to mention, the second they opened their mouth, it would be a dead giveaway to anyone who actually knew them.

Our mom—or as Isabel affectionately referred to her, that selfish bitch who birthed us—might not have won any parenting awards, but she passed down a helluva gene pool

because all four of us bore a striking resemblance to her. I could see her easily in the dark, thick hair, high cheekbones, and shape of our blue, blue eyes.

Isabel's smile was more like our dad's, more like Logan's, and she had the same lanky, athletic build that Emmett promised to have as he grew up. My curves had lessened into adulthood, but the twins still maintained a curvier figure as they tiptoed quietly into their twenties.

"Why wouldn't you write your paper about Paige?" Lia asked, handing Claire a half-finished glass of wine. Claire took it without a word and finished for her. "She basically was our mom."

In the kitchen just around the corner, Isabel slammed the cupboard door shut. "There's no basically about it," she called.

I smiled at Claire. "Which class is this for?"

She was graduating from college with a major in developmental psychology and a minor in sociology with plans to start her master's in the spring after a winter graduation. Dropping her head back on the couch, she sighed. "Sociology of families. I should have taken it earlier, but"—she shrugged—"I was kind of dreading this part of it."

Lia took the empty wine glass from Claire and set it on the end table. "Our family isn't that dysfunctional."

"No, but trying to discuss the structure of it is a bit confusing." She started ticking off fingers. "We had married heterosexual parents with an unconventional age difference. One died, followed a few years later by one voluntarily abandoning us to an unmarried heterosexual male relative. A couple of years after that, he married a single heterosexual female for legal purposes. Neither adopted us, and Paige never had guardianship rights installed, so technically, she's just a cool sister-in-law who helped when she didn't have to." Claire shook her head when Iz slammed something else around in the kitchen. "For all intents and purposes, she was the main maternal figure in our life, but our mother is still around. Just not ... around us."

“Isn’t she in fucking Bali or something?” Isabel muttered from the kitchen. “That’s what her last bullshit email said, what? A year ago?”

“India, I think,” I corrected. “She lives at that center. The weird guru guy who wrote all those books on mindfulness and blah, blah, whatever.”

The wine had me feeling pleasantly fuzzy, not drunk, not even really buzzed, but just happy enough that I didn’t even care that we were talking about Brooke—that selfish bitch who birthed us. Even she was a pleasant distraction from the fact that Noah had invited me to come look at the house. Saying no had been hard. Really, really hard. Like Noah’s biceps hard. Noah’s rock-hard ass hard.

Not that I knew what his ass felt like, but I could imagine. I’d watched him lift weights all week. Do squats. Bend over on the field when he lined up against the offense. I’d touched a few things on Noah’s body back in the day, but his ass had not been one of them.

*What a freaking tragedy*, I thought through my wine haze.

Isabel stormed into the family room, a bottle of tequila in her hand that had me blinking owlishly at her. Were we at tequila level? I missed it. “Paige deserves to have a paper written about her.”

“She does,” Claire said diplomatically.

The tequila bottle waved like a flag. “She stepped in when no one could handle you two little hellions.”

Lia rolled her eyes. “Like you were a walk in the park, Miss Angry Girl.”

“That’s the point of this class, though,” Claire interjected when Iz opened her mouth with what promised to be a scathing retort. “The structure of the family, as we know it, has changed dramatically. Even the phrase family structure itself holds different weight than it did twenty years ago. The rise in single parent families, homosexual parents, even saying things like *nontraditional* implies a bias that we need to be careful of. Our family history didn’t meet any sort of definition of



‘traditional,’ even when our parents were married. Dad was so much older than her, but they still fit the definition of a traditional family structure as it’s been historically defined. It implies there’s something wrong or nontraditional about Paige and Logan raising us when they filled the parental roles to much better success.”

We all stared at her for a beat.

I poured more wine.

Iz unscrewed the top of the tequila and disappeared into the kitchen.

Lia spoke first even though she’d probably be able to stare at Claire and communicate what she was thinking. “So why are you questioning what to do your paper on?”

Claire licked her lips, and her gaze darted to the kitchen. “Because I’m wondering if it’s too easy to write about Paige. I could argue that Mom, and her absence in our life, had a greater impact on us. On how the structure of our family changed, and how that played out on our emotional growth and maturity.”

Isabel stormed back in. Her hair, unbound and tumbling past her shoulders, flew behind her like a flag, and her eyes were blazing in her pink-cheeked face. “No way, that bitch does not get papers. She doesn’t deserve papers written about her.”

“Isabel,” I cautioned quietly. “It’s not your decision.”

“Then why is she asking us for our opinion?”

All four of us fell quiet. Claire, as wild as she’d been as a child, had mellowed more quickly than Lia had once they reached high school. She was an observer of life, of the people around her, like Isabel was, while Lia still held that boundless energy that had been a hallmark of their youth. She was like a live wire, always bouncing, always tapping her foot, always seeking an outlet for the force bound behind her skin. Yet despite that, she was quietly watching our middle sister, eyes bright with unshed tears at how quickly she turned to anger at the topic of Brooke.

“I’m asking your opinion because I love and respect you,” Claire said.

Isabel relaxed, her shoulders losing a bit of their tightness.

Lia looked at Claire and smiled sadly. “But opinion is different than permission, isn’t it? You don’t need our permission to do this.”

Leave it to those two. The thought had flowed from Claire to Lia without skipping a beat. Claire nodded. “It is.”

My eyes fell shut because we all knew what that meant.

“What do you think, Mol?” Claire asked.

Words crowded my throat because as much as I knew moments like this required me to act as the firstborn, I didn’t feel like that was me. But I *was*.

I’d always been content to let Logan assert his role as firstborn, the big brother and father figure we’d so desperately needed when we were younger. So even though I was the oldest of my four sisters, my feet had never filled those shoes. Not really.

I didn’t want to tell Claire what to do because what if I steered her wrong? What if agreeing that doing the paper on Brooke’s impact on our family structure was equivalent to setting off a nuclear bomb in our tight-knit little circle? That was the last thing I wanted. Our family kicked ass. I loved our family. Tuesday nights were the highlight of every single week for me.

The idea that Brooke’s ghost, though she was still very much alive, could punch through that, filled me with dread. But it wasn’t my place to lay the mantle of my opinion on my younger sister’s education.

Because it was only that. My opinion.

“I think I’ve had too much wine for this conversation,” I admitted weakly.

“Cop out,” Isabel said.

I glared at her. Claire sighed.

“Did you ask Logan?” Lia asked.

“Why does he get an opinion?” Isabel shot back. “Brooke is our burden to bear, not his.”

Claire straightened on the couch. “You know, your anger on this particular subject gets really fricken annoying after a while.”

I held up my hands. “Knock it off, you two.”

“Logan is the head of this family,” Lia said. “That’s why he gets an opinion.”

I rubbed my temples, where the beginning of a headache was starting to bloom. To think, I could have been wandering around a big, beautiful house and helping Noah spend all his money on it. But no, I chose my sisters because family came first.

Around me, the noise increased from all three of them. Lia and Claire joined forces, which they always did, and Isabel squared off in the doorway to the family room, not intimidated in the slightest by the two-against-one odds, like always.

No one even noticed that I sat there, eyes closed and wishing I was anywhere else. I didn’t want to talk about Brooke. I didn’t want to listen to my sisters argue about which woman had the greater impact in our life and why Claire’s paper somehow changed the definition of that role.

“You guys,” I interrupted. “Could you stop, please?”

No one listened. Lia had stood from the couch. “You know, I’m so sick of you acting like you carry around some different wound than the rest of us. Brooke left all of us, Iz. Just because you haven’t worked through your own shit doesn’t mean your opinion counts more.”

Claire rubbed her forehead. “Let’s just drop it. I have a couple of weeks to make the decision.”

They ignored her too. The two hotheads went at it, and I gave Claire a commiserating smile.

“I don’t think my opinion counts more,” Iz yelled. “I’m pissed that that woman is somehow getting credit for the way

we turned out. It had nothing to do with her.”

“Ohhhh yes,” Lia drawled. “Look at you. You’re the picture of someone who’s unaffected by your childhood.”

“Hey,” I snapped at her. “Watch it.”

Her face pinked, but she didn’t move her flinty gaze from Isabel.

My phone buzzed, and I sighed heavily before flipping the screen to face me.

**Noah: My savings account just took a pretty massive hit thanks to you.**

The tone of his text, the fact that he texted me at all, pulled a smile onto my face. I missed him, which made no sense. I could talk to him, be friendly with him, and it wouldn’t be fraternization, right? In my wine and family drama haze, I shifted through my mental checklist of why I’d decided to pull back from him all week.

Maaaaybe because when I was around him, my entire body tugged in his direction like he was pulling on a string. The only way I felt like I could combat it was to snip the cord clean through.

But that hadn’t really worked either.

All week I was forced to watch him, and think about him, and wonder what he was doing when we weren’t filming. All week, I struggled with the feeling that he noticed my distance, and that it bothered him.

My fingers flew across the screen before I could talk myself out of it.

**Me: You got the house?! I KNEW it was perfect for you.**

**Noah: It was. I’m glad you sent it to me.**

**Noah: There’s one problem, though ...**

**Me: What?**

**Noah: The yoga mats that came with it are too small for me. Either that or I'm less flexible than I realized and need massive amounts of help.**

He attached a picture that had me laughing out loud. Marty must have snapped it, which had me smiling so big it threatened to split my skin open. Noah was attempting a downward dog, but his feet were a solid foot past the end of the bright pink mat. His form was terrible, and I couldn't see his face, but it was, hands down, my new favorite picture of all time.

**Me: Oh boy. Yeah, you're in trouble.**

**Noah: Will you come help me? I think Marty misses you.**

My face flushed warm and happy and pink, and my chest expanded on a heavy inhale.

**Me: Does he?**

**Noah: He said I was boring to film when I'm by myself. Just think of how embarrassing it will be when I do my first yoga session in my new house, and because I have no guidance, I fall and break my hip, which will put me on the bench for the rest of the season.**

His next text included the address, and I clicked on the map. If I requested an Uber now, I could be there in twenty minutes. The desire to go was so strong, especially when I factored in the chaotic state of my living room.

Two angry sisters arguing about Brooke, or a football player who made my tummy flip upside down when he looked at me?

Tapping my Uber app, I requested the ride before I could talk myself out of it. This was the impulsive Molly I didn't let out often, but in this situation, I wasn't going to second-guess it. Why he was still at the house, I had no clue, but I wasn't second-guessing that either. All I knew was that ignoring him was stupid because we still had to spend a lot of time together. Ignoring him was pointless, actually.

When a driver accepted the trip, I stood and sent Noah a quick text, telling him I'd be there. Instead of waiting to see what he said, I tucked the phone into the side pocket of my leggings.

"I need to go to work," I proclaimed to anyone who would listen.

And just like that, their arguing stopped. Like magic.

"Now?" Isabel asked. "You've been drinking."

"I have an Uber coming."

"Why do you need to work so late?" Claire asked.

"I just ... do."

Isabel's face softened in understanding.

"Quit fighting, okay?" I said gently. "Let Claire do her paper on whatever she wants. It's not up to you two, and it's not fair to make it harder on her than necessary."

Claire pushed up from the couch to wrap me in a tight hug. I kissed her cheek when she whispered her thanks into my ear.

Isabel wiped a hand over her weary face. "Sorry, Claire."

I cleared my throat.

"And sorry, Lia," she mumbled.

"I'm sorry too," Lia added.

I pinched my cheeks and looked down at my Wolves tank top and white sneakers. My hair was pulled back and anchored into place with a few hair pins. I shrugged.

"Be careful," Iz told me.

"I'm just going for some filming they're doing of his new place." When she lifted an eyebrow in disbelief, I propped my hands on my hips. "I am."

As I skipped down the steps outside our apartment to my waiting Uber, I thought about her warning and had a moment of pause.

"Ready?" my driver asked.

I blew out a breath. No second-guessing. “Yup. Let’s go.”





## MOLLY

A bright flurry of nerves popped and bubbled like champagne as I approached the house. The pictures didn't do it justice. As I walked up the covered front porch with solid wood beams holding up the peaked roofline, I got the distinct impression that this house had been built for someone as strong and intimidating as Noah was. Someone tall and strong, who'd fill the space and not be dwarfed by it.

Looking at the massive wood front doors, flanked by custom cut glass windows and artfully dimmed porch lights, I couldn't help but feel a little dwarfed myself. I lifted my chin and knocked, though, because the whole point of this—my job, the promotion, showing up to prove that I could be unaffected by Noah—was to prove that these things wouldn't and couldn't overwhelm me.

Beyond the door, I heard his deep voice tell me to come in, so I tested the door handle carefully. It opened, and I couldn't help but gasp when I walked into the house.

“Holy shit,” I breathed. It was stunning. Even though the skies outside were dark, the soaring ceilings and crisp white walls made it seem bright and airy and welcoming. Rugs covered the floor around the solidly built furniture, and windows facing Lake Washington sparkled with the lights of nearby houses and buildings across the water.

“Thanks for coming.”

I jumped, slapping a hand over my chest when I saw him round a corner. A ghost of a smile graced his lips, and my

fingers itched to push it further, see how the motion would transform his already handsome face.

“It’s ...” I shook my head, eyes still trying to take in the space. “It’s amazing, Noah.”

He approached slowly, hands hanging loosely at his sides. His legs were covered in black track pants with the bright red Wolves logo near a pocket, and stretched over his chest was a white T-shirt so worn, it was practically indecent.

Underneath it, I could see the shadows and lines of his upper body, and a hole in the neckline gave me an extra glimpse of tanned, smooth skin. My entire body swayed toward him. That same tug I always felt.

I guess I was a bit more tuggable after a bottle of wine.

His forehead creased. “Have you been drinking?”

“A little,” I heard myself admit.

Why was his face doing that thing? The swirling, ominous thundercloud thing that made him look like lightning was about to crackle from the surface of his skin. The mental picture made me grin, and his face pinched further.

“You were drinking and then drove here? Are you insane?” he said, voice low and dangerous and deep as he took another step toward.

“What?” I blinked away from his mouth. “No.”

“You could’ve killed yourself, Molly.” His volume increased, the thundercloud face getting darker and darker, and I watched in abject fascination as he came even closer still. “What were you thinking?”

All I’d have to do is reach out, not even fully extend my arms, and my palms would land somewhere in the vicinity of his pecs. Underneath that white shirt, they were the size of dinner plates.

“You need to calm down,” I said. Was I talking to him? I think I was. But maybe I was talking to me. I needed to calm down too. My fingers, in the haven of my mind, tracked over

the entire topography of his chest, memorizing it for future use.

“Calm down?” he roared.

My hand reached out and almost settled on his chest. He snatched my wrist before it made contact.

His fingers were so, so warm.

“I took an Uber, you psycho,” I murmured. “Your hand is so much bigger than mine. Isn’t that funny?”

Noah sighed, eyes falling shut as he dropped my hand. *Boo*. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“You were kind of busy yelling at me.” I turned and hummed in appreciation when I saw the kitchen. “And you had your thundercloud face on, which makes it hard to interrupt you.”

“My ... what?”

Walking along the length of the island, I let my palm glide just above the surface of the granite. “When you get mad, you look like a thundercloud.”

Noah was quiet, and I felt his eyes on my back as I opened a few cabinets.

“Where’s the listing agent?”

His footsteps started following mine as I wandered through the dining area and into the main living space, staring through the sprawl of glass windows facing the water even though I couldn’t see anything other than the moon glinting off the far side of the bay.

“We convinced her to give us a couple of hours to film.”

I smiled over my shoulder. “And she said yes?”

“She was very willing to accommodate, given my offer.”

My smile felt brittle. “Ahh.”

“Ahh, what?”

I shrugged. “Nothing.”

He let it slide, and I was oh, so thankful for that.

“How was hanging out with your sisters?”

The laughter that escaped my lips was harsh and tired and all sorts of tangled emotions. Amazing how much you could wrap up in one puff of air. The argument about Claire’s paper was easier to ignore when I was trying to escape it, when their voices overlapped each other and I just wanted it to stop, stop, *stop*.

But it was quiet in Noah’s house, and he wasn’t searching to fill the silence with meaningless words. Behind me, he was a solid, steady presence, and it was exactly what I needed.

There was just enough wine in my system, loosening my brain and allowing honest words to roll from my tongue.

“We fought,” I told him. “Or they did, I guess.”

“What about?”

“Family structure,” I answered with a sad smile. His eyebrows bent in, but he didn’t say anything. The arm of the couch was close enough that I could sit back on it and still stare out the window into the inky darkness. “Ours is nontraditional even though I’m told by my sister who’s minoring in sociology that’s not a term you should throw around lightly. And the structure we had before this one was sort of traditional but incredibly dysfunctional.”

Noah shifted so he could see my face, his big shoulder braced on the wall just on the other side of the window.

“Claire—the one in school—has to write a paper on maternal influences in nontraditional family structures,” I explained.

“Logan’s wife?” he guessed.

“That’s where we started the discussion, but ...” My voice trailed off. How much of this did he actually want to hear? “Where’s Marty?” I asked, suddenly very aware that we were alone in the big family room.

He tilted his head. “On the phone downstairs. I think it’s Rick, but I’m not sure.”

I nodded.

“The paper,” he prompted.

“Are you asking to avoid your yoga lesson?”

“Absolutely.” His face was all harsh lines and angles in the dimly lit room, and I laughed at his answer. Another flash of a grin appeared, but it was gone just as quickly.

I moved off the arm of the couch and onto one of the end cushions, my hands clasped lightly in my lap. This didn't feel like the kind of conversation you had while sitting in a pseudo-seat. “Paige is the obvious answer,” I said quietly. “She and Logan got married when I was sixteen, the twins were twelve, Iz was fourteen, and since then, she's been our mother in every way that matters.”

With each word, and each moment of precious quiet he gave me to process, I felt the effect of the wine drain slowly from my body.

“I remember when she showed up,” he said.

“I'll bet,” I said wryly. “You know it's really her fault that I climbed through your window.”

His eyes sharpened. “Is it?”

I wondered how long we'd tiptoe around this, and now seemed like as good a time as any.

“Of course, she didn't know how literally I'd take her advice, but at that time, I had such a desperate craving for a person like her in my life. To hear her tell me to take the bull by the horns and go for what I wanted—someone I viewed as smart and strong and feisty and successful and beautiful and just ... everything I wanted to be as a sixteen-year-old. Her words were as good as gospel, you know?”

He took in a slow breath and let it out before he walked toward me and took a seat on the coffee table that faced the couch. Somehow, he didn't doubt it could hold his weight, but it did, and he spread his legs so that his hands dangled between them.

“I always wondered what prompted it.” His eyes never wavered from mine.

I grinned. “Besides a raging crush on the boy next door?”

He exhaled a laugh. “That part was clear enough,” he forced out. I had to close my eyes at the sound of his voice, rough and raw and low.

If I reached back far, so very far, into my memories, I could still remember what it felt like to kiss him. I’d kissed dozens of boys, even slept with a couple who I thought would be something to me, but the memory of Noah Griffin’s lips still haunted me the most.

Slick tongue. Strong hands. Muttered curses as I climbed onto his lap.

My eyes popped open because those thoughts wouldn’t bring me anywhere of value.

“What prompted it.” I sighed. “That would have to be maternal influence in a nontraditional family structure.”

His laughter came instantly, loud and surprising, a sharp burst of sound that had me sitting up straighter. There it was. His elusive smile. Perfect, straight white teeth and lips stretched wide across his face. The lines bracketing his mouth made it look like he smiled often, instead of the reality, which was that it was rare and fast and made you feel fortunate to see one.

“So that’s why you left? Talking about Paige’s role?”

“No,” I said immediately. “No, it was the discussion of how our own mother influenced our family structure by her leaving.”

His smile faded. “How old were you when she left?”

“Just turned fourteen. We were so young, you know? And having three younger siblings to look after, plus an older brother who was just getting his footing in his own way, it was almost like ... I couldn’t dwell on how much it hurt me that she left because I had so many other things to worry about. I

had my sisters to worry about, and they were so much more important than Brooke.”

His eyebrows popped briefly. “I never really ... I never thought about why you guys lived with Logan. Where your parents were.”

“Most people didn’t know. He did such a good job of protecting us. And because he did, we could just be kids. Teenagers who got into trouble and played pranks and were allowed to make normal mistakes because we had him.”

“Sounds like you protected your sisters, though, too,” he said. The look he was giving me, searching and intense, reminded me of the night on the couch when he was watching film. Like I was something worth studying, like picking me apart would help him understand.

That knowledge was like someone pressed their foot on the gas pedal, but I was stuck in neutral until I could explain something to him in the right way.

“I think what I used to do then, and still do now,” I said, leaning forward, my knees almost touching his, “is try to take responsibility for how they feel. And that wasn’t my job. I didn’t want to impose my will, you know? It wasn’t like I wanted them to feel what I felt. I wanted to make sure that everything stayed okay, even if it was to my detriment.”

“Even if it hurt you,” he said slowly.

“Maybe. I don’t know. I wasn’t the teenager who threw tantrums for attention, but if I went too long trying to keep the peace among my sisters, I’d just ... burst. Do something stupid.”

His eyes drifted to my mouth. “I can’t imagine what you mean.”

“Liar.”

His grin flashed bright again, and it made my skin tighten deliciously.

“I still do it, and that’s a big part of what’s made me good at my job, yes, but... some of it isn’t smart for me,” I

admitted, tucking a stray piece of hair behind my ear. “I was doing it with you.”

That had him straightening. “What do you mean?”

It was so hard for me to say things like this and risk what he might think of me, so I stood nervously from the couch and went back to the window. The coffee table creaked when he stood and followed.

“I found myself worrying about how this process, this move, this change was affecting you. Affecting your game, your mood, your frame of mind.”

Noah breathed deeply behind me, and I felt his exhale ruffle the hair on the back of my neck. In my mind, I imagined the string connecting us, wound tight around my hips when I turned slowly to face him.

“Is that why you pulled away this week?” he asked.

My eyes stayed focused on the line of his throat and jaw, sharp as a knife’s edge. He swallowed roughly at my unwavering attention. “Yes. Because I need to worry about how this is affecting me too.”

“H-how was it affecting you?”

Had he moved closer? Or was that me?

I didn’t answer, probably because my mouth went tumbleweed dry at his nearness. My eyes fell shut; my head spun dizzily. No alcohol in the world could’ve affected me like Noah Griffin’s body next to mine.

“Because I can tell you what it did to me,” he continued.

Opening my eyes, I had to tilt my chin up to see his face. “What?” I whispered.

“You became the most unreadable offense I’d faced, and you knew something like that would drive me insane. All I could think about was what I’d done wrong or how I’d upset you to make you shut me out like that.”

The protestation was on my lips instantly. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”



“So quick to defend me,” he said, his mouth curving in a smile. “And I’ve done nothing to deserve that from you.”

My hands lifted, like an invisible puppet master raised them into the air, and I forced them back down. Touching him wouldn’t help. None of this was helping him or me but neither of us seemed motivated to move.

“Why did you invite me here?” I asked.

Maybe Noah had a string wound under his skin too because his hand lifted, and he watched it like he had no control over where it was going, his shaky exhale hitting my forehead in a sharp burst.

“Because you ...” He stopped and swallowed, and so very, very carefully, he slid his hand along the line of my throat until he was cupping the back of my neck. My entire body vibrated dangerously at his touch, like the tines of a tuning fork struck with too much force. “You were the first person I thought of to share this with.”

He dipped his head, and I sucked in a quick breath. We both froze when my breasts brushed the front of his chest. Noah’s eyes searched mine, and I lifted my hands, laying them lightly on his chest. In the span of a heartbeat, I thought about pushing him away, but my fingers curled into the soft fabric instead.

With a tug and a lean, his lips were a mere inch from mine.

Suddenly, Noah shoved away from me, and I swayed forward dangerously. It took me a second to realize why over the roaring pulse in my ears.

“Hey, Molly,” Marty said, ascending the stairs with light steps, camera perched on his shoulder like it always was. “Nice place, huh?”

“Hey. Umm, yeah. I l-love it.”

Noah rubbed the back of his neck, a safe distance separating us now.

If Marty suspected anything, he didn’t show it. “Ready for some yoga?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I said weakly.



## NOAH

I t was rare for me to think to myself, *this was a terrible idea*, but in the first three minutes of starting our yoga lesson, I thought it at least seven times. The first was when Molly rolled out her yoga mat and started stretching forward, brushing her fingers along the ground. Marty was getting his main camera settled on a tripod, his small handheld on his shoulder so he could catch more than one angle at once, and I fought to keep my eyes off the rounded curve of her ass. The way her eyes closed as she breathed deeply. The way her chest lifted on an inhale and the way her waist curved up from her hips.

Muscles I'd never noticed on her before popped in her arms as she moved through her warm-up. When she noticed I wasn't moving, she straightened carefully and gave me a curious look.

"Are you going to join or just watch?"

I swallowed. "Sorry. I'm joining."

*This was a terrible idea*, I thought again when she laid her hand on my back and guided me to drop my hands to the ground.

"We're just going to doing a basic series here before I start the video I found, then she can guide us through. It's specifically for football players, so I don't think anything will be too challenging for your first time."

I didn't answer. Mainly because I didn't trust my voice not to betray the thoughts tumbling through my head.

I almost kissed her.

*I almost kissed her.*

If Marty hadn't walked up the stairs when he did, I would've had Molly Ward pressed against the windows and my mouth on hers. I tried to focus on what she was saying, but I couldn't mute the mental images flashing, one after another, after another. My hands on her. Her hands on me. How soft her lips would've been. The way she tasted.

So easily, I'd slipped from a desire to understand her into just plain old desire. Except there was nothing plain or old about it.

"Noah?"

I blinked. "Yeah. Sorry."

"Tuck your chin and push your weight into your heels."

Once I followed her direction, Molly moved to the mat next to mine. Her toenails were purple, and it pissed me off that I noticed. She exhaled slowly and mirrored my pose.

"Set your hands on the mat and move your legs back into downward dog."

"This is what got me into trouble in the first place," I mumbled but did as she asked.

She laughed. "You probably tried to shift your hands around if it felt uncomfortable, but you should keep your butt in the air and move your feet. Hands stay planted."

Huh.

"Better," she said.

Following her lead and the patient instructions she gave me, we spent about five minutes doing some basic stretches. A few things were clear in those five minutes, and only got clearer as she cued up the video on her iPad that she set up in front of us.

Molly was much better at yoga than I was.

Molly was much more flexible than I was.

And Molly looked like sex on legs as she moved through each position.

Every time she moved, I found myself cataloging a new part of her body, something I'd never noticed before.

Her ears, for example. Even though her hair was almost always pulled back, I'd never noticed Molly's ears. They were dainty and stuck out just a little bit, which I found oddly endearing.

Her second toe was just a hair longer than her big toe.

When she arched her back, she let out a breathy exhale every time. I wanted to hear it in surround sound while she dug her fingernails into my back.

I had to pinch my eyes shut when that one crossed my mind because I hadn't allowed myself to enter that headspace in so long, and it felt like I was doing something wrong.

When she laughed at me because I couldn't stretch as far as she could, the skin around her eyes crinkled up. It was adorable.

Her neck, long and graceful and as I know, as soft as satin, made me want to drag my teeth along the edge when she tilted her chin up to the ceiling when we were in Upward Dog.

"Fuck," I whispered.

She sat up and gave me a concerned look. "What? Did you hurt yourself?"

Yeah. There was a part of me that was hurting all right, and it needed to friggin stop because I had a camera pointed at me.

Was I sweating? I swept my hand along my forehead, and sure enough, a few minutes of simple poses, and I was sweating.

"No, I'm fine," I said from between gritted teeth.

A smile trembled on the edge of her lips as the woman on the screen told us in a soothing voice where to position our legs. Goddess pose or something like that. All I knew was that Molly's legs spread wide, and she lowered herself easily.

She was strong.

“Did you know that Dallas started bringing in a yoga instructor for practices?”

I glanced over at her. “Seriously?”

Molly arched her arms and pushed her legs into a different position, and when I followed a few seconds later, she grinned at my obvious delay. “Seriously. Helps avoid injuries because the players are more flexible. One of their linemen had back surgery, and when he wasn’t working out during the off season, his PT suggested yoga to strengthen his back and core without risking more injury. It worked so well for him that their coach brought someone in for the whole defense to try it. Now they do yoga twice a week as a part of practice.”

For the first time since we started, my mind flipped back into its natural default. Football.

“I never even considered it,” I said, then grunted when I was asked to do something entirely unnatural with my legs. Molly caught a glimpse of my face and laughed, her belly shaking as she laid flat on the mat.

I hated to admit it, but it was harder than I thought. We were supposed to lay there and keep our legs in the air for eight minutes.

Eight minutes.

Molly held her legs straighter than I did. Her fingers wiggled on the mat, and not an ounce of tension existed in her body anywhere I could see. Actually, it looked like she could’ve fallen asleep for how relaxed she was.

Pressing my lower back firmly against the mat, I tried to breathe through my chi or harness my inner sunrise or whatever the instructor was talking about on the video.

“Are we almost done?” I asked.

“Nope.”

I sighed.

“You watch,” she said, eyes still closed when I turned my head to look at her, “this’ll be the season you break the sack record, and when you do, you better thank me.”

I smiled and directed my gaze back up to the ceiling. “You got it.”

My movements were jerky when we shifted position again, whereas Molly looked like her joints were made from water.

“You’re terrible at this, Noah.”

In the kitchen, I caught a glimpse of Marty smothering a smile.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “I’m not terrible.”

She folded her body in half. “Yes, you are.”

“Fine, you come to practice tomorrow, and we’ll see how you do in my world.”

“No, thank you,” she demurred. “Enough of my life is taken up by football. I don’t need to add time on the field into it too.”

“Too much football,” I said quietly. I lifted my arms over my head and mimicked her movements. “Is there such a thing?”

“Maybe not when you’re in the thick of it.” She exhaled slowly through her mouth. “But you can’t play forever. What are you going to do when you’re done?”

A wry smile bent my lips as I straightened and propped my hands on my hips. Whatever the pose was in the video, my big ass body did not bend that way. “They’ll have to drag me kicking and screaming off the field when they want me to retire.”

“Yeah?”

“As long as my body cooperates,” I said, “I’ll be out there.”

“Maybe you can set a new record. Oldest defensive player of the year.”



She pointed at my mat, and I sighed, dropping down to do what she was doing. Cat or cow or cobra. I couldn't remember.

“Yeah, in ten years, maybe.”

“You think you'll still be averaging a sack and a half per game in ten years?” she teased. “Yeah, right. You'll be limping around by that point unless you do some more of this.”

I glared at her, but it didn't dim her smile. It got brighter. Everything else around her faded.

Why didn't that terrify me? That everything in the room except Molly's face became blurry and unimportant, but the way her lips stretched into a smile, how that smile lit up her eyes, was vital and precious. I didn't intimidate her in any way, and that suddenly felt like something I needed to protect. Something I should wrap my arms around and cocoon from the outside world so nothing and no one could change that about her.

It was the only reason I could think of for why I didn't see her reach out to tip me over.

Balancing like I had been, I fell like a freaking oak tree.

She collapsed into helpless laughter while I flopped onto my back.

“Dirty cheat,” I groaned.

Molly wiped tears of mirth from under her eyes and balanced on her knees over me. “Are you okay?”

“Oh sure, pretend you care now. You could've injured me.”

“Who knew The Machine was such a crybaby.”

Narrowing my eyes, I felt my body tense to pounce, but she scrambled backward, laughter coming out in short puffs of air. Before I flipped around to my knees to take off after her, I froze. What was I doing?

Every second of this was on film. And if I laid my hands on her now, I'd be lost. Molly saw the change of mood on my

face, and those bright blue eyes softened in understanding. How could she read me as well as she did? It made no sense.

“That was pretty good for your first lesson,” she said quietly.

Standing, I stretched my arms over head, then held out my hand for her. She slid her palm against mine, and I pulled her up easily.

Her fingers didn’t drop right away, and the impulse to tug her closer was almost overwhelming. I stepped back, and our hands dropped.

“Thanks for coming over to show me.” I looked around. “And to see the house. I suppose we should clear out soon anyway.”

She nodded and leaned down to roll up the yoga mat.

Marty flipped off both cameras and groaned like he’d just done the video with us. “That was great, guys. Rick will love it.”

The way Molly fidgeted as she stood with the yoga mat and the way she didn’t make eye contact with Marty meant she must have felt the same way I did after talking to my grandma. It was disconcerting to forget that he was there, but I still found myself doing it more and more.

“We didn’t do that for show, Marty.”

In surprise, I glanced over at the defensive tone in her voice.

Marty was giving her the same look. “I know. Just saying that it was a good segment. We needed some more stuff like this after a week of filming practice and Noah glaring at his iPad screen while he watched film.”

That brought a smile to her face.

“I don’t glare at my screen,” I argued.

He pointed at Molly’s iPad. “May I?”

“Go right ahead.”

Marty lifted it and did this weird squint face frown that had Molly laughing out loud.

“I do not look like that,” I said.

“Trust me, buddy, you do.” He grinned, handing the iPad back to Molly.

As he packed up, the two of them chatting easily, trying to figure out if it made sense for Marty to drive her back home or if it was out of his way, I had a strangely settled feeling.

Was it sad that these two people—the guy who was being paid to film my life and the woman I should want nothing to do with—were now my closest friends?

They didn’t look at me and see *The Machine*. I was Noah to them, and it had been a long time since that had been the truth for anyone.

Molly said goodbye to Marty as he hefted his camera bag over his shoulder, and I walked through the family room and dining area to make sure all the lights were turned off. Neither one of us spoke as she watched me tidy up and return the rolled yoga mats behind the loveseat where I found them.

I straightened and faced her, very aware of the quiet house, and how it was the first time we’d truly been alone since our moment in the elevator. No one would be coming up the stairs. Down the hallway. Through the front door.

It was just me and her.

Judging by the deepening pink on her cheeks, she was just as aware of it.

Her breath left her in a rush, shakier and louder than when we’d done the video, and I saw her punch some buttons on her screen almost frantically.

“Can I take you home?” I asked.

She shook her head, and a few stray chunks of hair that had slipped from her updo fell around her neck and shoulders. “I just called my Uber. It’ll be here in about five minutes.” Molly looked past me and stared at the lake again. “I think that makes more sense.”

“It probably does,” I agreed.

Me taking her home was a slippery slope. We were already going to spend the weekend together at my grandma’s, and that was complicated enough. In one evening, I felt like Molly took a wrecking ball and knocked down every wall that had been constructed around my life, and she’d done it unknowingly.

Offering to take her home went in direct opposition to everything I’d promised myself after I left Miami, but I couldn’t even care because it was her.

I realized with stunning and simple clarity that I trusted her. This was not someone who’d betray me. Who’d use me or derail me or undermine my career.

And I wanted her.

Those two things, true and real and important, were why I moved toward her.

Admitting that I wanted her was so much easier than I thought it would be. All week, I’d used an array of excuses as to why I fixated on her so much and why her distance from me was so bothersome.

All those excuses fell away quietly, easily. My brain clicked into place, another decision made, one that I knew instinctually was right.

I wanted Molly Ward.

For the first time in years, football wasn’t the first thing on my brain. It wasn’t even the second. Not at that moment. At that moment, the only thing I cared about was knowing more about this woman. About how she felt in my arms and what her skin smelled like underneath the ears that stuck out from her delicate face.

Molly, oblivious to the seamless thoughts in my head, had turned toward the door.

I snagged her wrist before she could.

“Wait,” I said, turning her back to me.

Her face was full of pleading and yearning, the kind that I felt hammering behind my chest in the empty spot under my ribs.

“Noah, I—” Her voice came to a halt when my hand slid up the smooth length of her arm. Her eyes fluttered shut. I cupped her face in both hands and only let out a breath when her hands came to rest on my waist, her fingers curling into the material of my shirt. With that arching of her fingers, she anchored me in place. I’d only leave if she let go. I’d stop the second she asked me to. But as long as she held me to her that way, she was mine.

My mouth was on hers, my face tilting to seek out the taste that had eluded me earlier, the one that made my mouth water and my skin tighten over my frame. Our lips sipped, tasted, and tried, hers were soft and warm and delicious, and I bit gently on the full curve of the middle of her lower lip. Then tugged.

Her sharp inhale punched me squarely in the solar plexus, and my arm tightened around her small frame, clutching her to me desperately. It was the first moment that I realized the magnitude of allowing myself this kiss with her.

For years, I’d chained up the sexual desire for anyone.

Until right now, with her. My hands shook as I touched her because suddenly, it wasn’t enough.

*Faster, more, harder*, my brain screamed, and my whole body shook from the effort it took not to follow that instinct.

I wouldn’t feel this with any woman, not after so long of not having the press of soft breasts to my chest, the natural way her hips cradled me, the rocking of her pelvis against me. It was Molly.

We kissed and kissed and kissed before she pushed up on tiptoes to get closer to me, and it wasn’t enough.

My hands trailed down the supple line of her back and gripped her bottom so I could boost her up in my arms. Her legs twined around my waist, and with one stride of my legs, her back was against the door.

We groaned in unison, the sounds lost in each other's mouths as our movements got messier and the kiss got deeper. My tongue pushed harder against hers when she caught the tip of it with the sharp edges of her teeth.

Her hands dug into my hair and pulled me harder against her. I couldn't get any closer to her, not if I tried. I rocked, pleasure gathering in a ball of flames at the base of my spine, so I gritted my teeth and pulled away from her.

She whimpered when I did, and I smiled against her mouth.

"Patience," I murmured between artless kisses. Whatever I lacked in finesse, I made up for in sheer fervor because she tasted so good and felt so good, and my hands were up underneath her shirt in the next heartbeat.

I wanted to feel the thrashing of her heart under my palm, I wanted to rip her leggings off and know how much she wanted me, I wanted to mark her chest with my mouth and stay with her like this for the rest of the night.

Molly froze completely, her hands pushing against my chest.

I did the same, my mouth hovering over hers as I took in the wide eyes and flushed cheeks and mussed hair.

"Noah," she whispered. "We shouldn't do this."

Four years of playing professional football and four years of college before that honed my discipline into something that was iron sharp, and I had to use every single ounce of that discipline to let her feet drop carefully to the ground.

"Right," I said.

"We can't, Noah," she said apologetically. "You know we can't."

I nodded, swiping a hand over my mouth. I wasn't sure I knew that, but I'd respect her all the same.

"We-we have a whole weekend together after this. It's important," she continued. I wasn't sure who she was trying to convince—me or herself. "And Beatrice would kill me."

Like I cared what her boss thought. But Molly did. I pinched my eyes shut and leaned forward to press a kiss to her forehead.

“It’s okay,” I told her. “It’s okay.”

For a moment, she leaned into me, letting her face fall into the center of my chest as I wrapped an arm around her back.

“It’ll be all right.”

Molly nodded shakily.

“It’ll be all right,” I repeated.

I just broke a woman-free streak that had lasted years, and I was about to spend the weekend with her. And a camera crew. And my grandma. And I was supposed to keep my hands off her now that I knew exactly how she tasted and the noises she made when she sucked my tongue into her mouth.

No problem.





## MOLLY

A few things became clear to me over the next eighteen hours since I walked on Jell-O legs out of Noah's new house.

1- Noah could still kiss

2- I was an idiot

3- I needed an intervention because I tossed and turned the entire night afterward, replaying that kiss like he'd just served me the best sex of my entire life

Number two was the one I needed to focus on the most. It should have told me everything I needed to know that it wasn't in the number one spot in the first place. Rick and Marty wanted to do some editing before we left for South Dakota, and Noah had a big practice before the weekend leading into preseason, so we didn't film the next day.

Work provided a meager distraction, but not enough to quiet my screaming thoughts. The whole day at my desk, my thoughts had done this basic dance.

Did kissing count as fraternization?

No.

Yes.

Maybe, because there was a lot of tongue action.

But probably not.

Fraternization was probably just P into V. Actual intercourse, like the way they'd taught us in middle school. Nothing else counted.

Would Beatrice demote me for making out with him?

No.

Yes.

Maybe, because holy shit there was a *lot* of tongue action.

I called Isabel as soon as I left the parking lot because I knew she was working, and I knew there were no classes scheduled that night.

“Can I come do a training session with you?”

On the other end of the phone, I heard the thumping bass and the mic'd up voice of one of their instructors running a class. She must have closed the door to her office because it quieted considerably. “Sure. I need to be here anyway because Amy is doing a one on one with a client, and we always make sure neither of us is alone when it's someone new.”

“Good,” I exhaled gustily. “I need you to beat the thoughts in my head into submission.”

“I'll see what I can do,” she promised.

By the time I got there, Claire and Lia decided to join too, and I grinned on my way into the building. The mirrored doors swung open, and I saw my sisters stretching in the empty square that was surrounded by steel frames and swinging chains holding heavy one-hundred-and-fifty-pound bags.

Isabel's hands were wrapped in black, her hair slicked back into a sleek ponytail at the top of her head, and her tall, lean body was covered in black leggings and a black halter top.

*I'm nicer after kickboxing* her shirt proclaimed in big block letters.

It was hard for me to recognize sometimes exactly how my little sister turned into such a badass.

Amy, the gym's owner, was in the back corner by the racks of free weights, medicine balls, and jump ropes. She was stretching too, and she waved at me as I joined my sisters.

"Will her client care that we're here?" I asked Iz as I plopped on the ground and started tying my shoes.

She shrugged. "I can't see why. He's still getting a personal training session."

"You don't think Amy could handle some new guy alone?" Lia snorted. "Amy could beat the shit out of Logan on a bad day."

We all laughed.

Isabel smiled. "She could, but that's not the point. It's a safety thing. When we don't know the client, male or female, we make sure we're not here alone with them."

Claire laid back on the rubber mat floor. "I'll just relax here. Someone wake me when you're done."

Lia nudged her as she stood. "Slacker. Come on, we're here for Molly."

When Lia glared at me, I held up my hands. "Don't blame me. I didn't invite you."

"You didn't have to," Claire said. "In lieu of a golden retriever, younger sisters must act in an emotional support assistance capacity."

"We really do need a dog," Isabel said. "Because you two complain too much."

Lia kicked her leg out, which Iz dodged nimbly. Then she shoved her hands into the focus mitts that I'd end up punching the shit out of and slapped them together sharply. It sounded like a gunshot in the gym, and Claire jumped. Isabel chuckled. "Come on, lazy ass, get up. We're not here to waste my time; we're here to work. Let's go. Two laps around the gym, then back to your bags and give me a side lunge into a side kick. Each side five times. If that heel isn't higher than your toes when you kick the bag, you owe me a burpee."

We all groaned but did as she asked.

Thirty minutes later, my mind was clearer, my shirt was soaked in sweat, and my arms and legs were burning.

I loved how yoga improved my flexibility and core, but sometimes, I just wanted to beat the shit out of the bag.

Trying to decide what to do after making out with Noah and dry humping him against his front door was one of those times.

I flopped onto the ground when I was supposed to be doing push-ups and watched with an exhausted grin as Isabel yelled at Lia to move faster.

“I’m done,” gasped Claire as she joined me. “Next time you need emotional support, please go to a dog shelter or something, okay?”

That had me laughing, though it quickly dissolved to a groan when that hurt too.

“Why are we supporting you again?” she asked.

I gave a quick side-eye at her phrasing. “Just ... it’s a big weekend. I needed to clear my head before I’m stuck in a cabin with Noah.”

Stuck in a cabin. Imagining his hands. And lips. And oh, my stars, how big and strong and hard and ... big ... and hard ... he was.

Thank goodness my face was already bright red from the beatdown Iz was giving us.

Isabel came over and frowned at the two of us. “You’re not done.”

“Yes,” I said. “We are.”

“I need to be able to walk tomorrow, Iz.”

She blew a raspberry with her lips. “Walking easily is overrated. How else will you appreciate the body you have if you don’t feel every single ... muscle.” Her eyes went laser sharp, and her voice trailed off as someone walked into the gym. I sat up and turned, and Claire did the same. “Holy shit,” Isabel whispered.

Holy shit was right.

New client was tall and dark and handsome. New client had muscles on muscles, and a dark, forbidding expression that sent a shiver down my spine.

“I know him,” Lia murmured as she came to stand next to Isabel. “He was an MMA fighter. Finn loved watching his fights.”

Just before he approached Amy, he glanced at us, eyes touching briefly on Isabel, before he dismissed us completely.

I heard Iz suck in a breath. “Yeah, he was. His wife just died, so he retired to take care of his daughter.”

That cast a quiet hush over the four of us.

“You okay, Iz?” Claire asked.

She blinked. “Yeah. We’re done, right?”

I exchanged glances with Lia and Claire, who gave me identical shrugs. “Yeah, we’re done. I should go home to shower and pack anyway.”

“When do you leave?” Lia asked.

“I have about three hours. But we’re taking a private plane, so I can get to the air strip right before we take off and be fine.”

“Baller.” Claire grinned.

“Ha. Yeah, I am.”

Isabel started picking up around the bags, and her cheeks were bright pink.

“What’s her deal?” I whispered.

Lia shrugged again. “Who knows. I’d ask but ...” Her voice trailed off, and we all knew why.

We could ask, but unless Isabel wanted to share, she wouldn’t tell us shit.

“Maybe she was a fan of his,” Claire said, pointing at Mr. Tall, Dark and Scary-looking.

“Maybe.” I sighed. “Okay. Tell me that I’ll be fine this weekend.”

“You will,” Claire said. “No matter what happens, you’ll be fine.”

Lia grabbed my shoulders, serious face in place. “You can do this. He’s just a big dumb football player who won’t remember you when he’s gone from Washington, which will probably be soon since players are traded all the time.”

Claire’s mouth fell open. “You are terrible at this,” she told her twin.

My mouth screwed up like I had sucked on a lemon. “Thanks.”

I gave all three of them hugs and made my way home to shower and pack.

As I did those things, Lia’s poorly delivered words banged around my head like it was an empty crate.

She was wrong. He wasn’t dumb, and he wouldn’t forget me.

But she was also right. He could leave at any time, given his abrupt exit from Miami.

That still wasn’t justification enough to put my job on the line. But it did add a certain edge to my thoughts, an urgency that I couldn’t deny as I packed my suitcase.

My history with Noah had started off with a poorly thought out decision, one that was made without heeding any possible consequences, and ended—for me, at least—in humiliation and tears.

We were both older and wiser, but I couldn’t say we were any less stubborn, not in the ways that counted.

Noah was decisive and self-controlled. His journey to making a choice, no matter how big or small, was quick and instinctual. It was why he was a great player. All the great players had that in common. If you took the time to pause and second-guess, someone else would move past you.

In his new house, he'd decided that kissing me was his next course of action, and he never wavered. Kissing him back had felt amazing, but there'd still been a niggling sensation in the back of my head, a voice that I hadn't quite been able to mute.

I zipped up the side of my suitcase slowly.

Could I walk into this weekend and not allow that voice to hold me back?

What I wouldn't do was be a typical football groupie, begging for whatever scraps he'd allow me.

And I wouldn't ask him to sacrifice something he wasn't ready to sacrifice. I respected his drive more than that. Just as he respected me enough to stop when I'd asked.

The choice was mine.

I could take this weekend and own the opportunity for what it was. A chance, even if it was my only one, to finally bring this tangled history with Noah full circle. I could clearly, and deliberately, take a step into action and understand the weight of what I was doing, if he got on that plane and wasn't shutting me out completely.

Noah's career, my career, was so much bigger than anything we were working on that weekend. I wasn't even sure that this Amazon documentary would make a highlight reel by the time he retired. Which also meant my time with him was short within the context of his career.

A window to finish something we'd started a very, very long time ago.

The comparison had me smiling because a window is what got us into this mess in the first place. His behavior back then had guided my own, and as I finished up, I knew I'd treat this weekend no differently.

I arrived at the airfield in jeans, a black zip-up hoodie, and my black Chucks in place on my feet. He smiled at them when I approached.

“I’ll take your suitcase,” he said and lifted it up for me so I could ascend the narrow steps uninhibited.

“Thanks,” I told him. He let me go up into the plushy decorated plane first. A smiling flight attendant stopped and asked if I wanted a glass of champagne. “Oh, just water, please.”

No more wine for me, not in the presence of cameras and Noah Griffin. Marty and Rick had their heads bent toward a laptop screen, and I waved at them before taking a seat in the wide captain’s chair covered in soft, buttery leather.

“You ready for this?” Noah asked as he sat opposite of me. His eyes were warmer today than I’d ever seen them, and I liked the way he studied my face, like he could absorb the details on my skin without so much as a single touch.

“I’m excited to meet your grandma,” I told him.

The way he smiled melted something inside me. If his behavior was going to be my guide, then I was slowly, slowly sinking into an ooey gooey puddle of *I want him*.

“My grandma is the best woman I’ve ever known.” He shook his head. “Just to warn you, she’ll probably call me embarrassing nicknames and fuss over me.”

I smiled. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“No,” he admitted. “There’s not.”

He glanced over at Rick and Marty and shook his head again. “I should probably interrupt them to say thank you.”

“For what?”

When he glanced back at me, his eyes glowed. This was Noah happy. That was why he looked so unfamiliar. It wasn’t that driven, hyper-focused man who kept blinders on to everything outside of the game. It wasn’t the man who frowned at the screen when he watched film. Because no matter what he said to Marty, he did do that. Or who worked out simply because he was bored at night.

This was Noah. The version of him I’d never met before.



I wanted to tie him to my bed and mount him like a cowboy on a bucking bronco.

“For picking me,” he said. “If nothing else, I’m glad I did this documentary thing because it’s getting me out to visit her again. It’s been too long.” Noah shrugged. “I miss her, you know?”

If this was my first glimpse of a carefree Noah, and we were on our way to his happy place, free of the distractions of work, I was completely and utterly screwed, and we hadn’t even taken off yet.



## NOAH

As we left the small airstrip about forty minutes away from my grandma's, it was hard for me to make polite conversation with the three people riding with me in the car. Molly had taken care of all the logistics of getting us from Seattle to Custer, South Dakota, and the stoic driver of the large black Escalade was about as talkative as I was.

Our reasons were different, no doubt, but nobody riding in the vehicle questioned either of us.

As he maneuvered the car along the winding roads toward my grandma's, I stared out the window and felt a foreign pang of melancholy. And guilt.

For the second time in the past week, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd made a sharp turn in the wrong direction of my life. It was unsettling, and I didn't like to feel unsettled in this place that I loved so much.

I wanted to plant my feet and know that where I was heading was right, was correct, because that was how I did things.

If you weren't sure about what you were doing, then you probably made the wrong decision. And in my eyes, making the wrong decision was the same as failing.

But the problem with that was too much had caused me to second-guess things lately, stemming back to offering my teammate's drunk wife a ride home because it was the right thing to do. That was minor even though it had major consequences.

What wasn't so minor was kissing Molly. Even worse was that I was struggling to feel any sort of guilt or regret over it, except for the fact that I didn't know how *she* felt about it.

That was what made its impact so much bigger than the impetus to my presence in Washington. One kiss with her wasn't just one kiss. It was more than knowing how she tasted or how soft her lips were. It was a simple motion that had not so simple consequences because it could undermine everything I'd cultivated.

I woke up earlier that day in Seattle, and the first thought that crossed my mind wasn't about workouts or practice or preseason. I found myself wondering if Molly drank coffee. If she was a morning person or a night owl. If she slept sprawled across her bed like I did mine. And how tonight, I'd go to bed under the same roof as her.

That was why that kiss mattered.

But as difficult as it might be, I had to put it out of my head. At least for the day.

The green hills and black tree-covered mountains rose everywhere, a totally different kind of landscape from Seattle, but to me, it was just as beautiful. And I hadn't been here in years.

Large log cabins set back from the road on generous plots of land gave me something to focus on as the view blurred from the speed of our car. The driver's GPS told him when to turn, which was good, because enough had changed in the three years since I'd visited that I would have missed the turn had I been driving.

I tilted my head when I saw the green metal roof come into view. She was at the base of the foothills, so the gentle curls of smoke coming out of the chimney had a lush green backdrop as the mountains pushed their edges into the skyline.

Molly said something under her breath to Marty, and he laughed, cutting into the thoughtful silence I'd immersed myself in.

"How long has your grandma lived out here?" Rick asked.

My eyes closed briefly because I knew I'd need to shift my headspace. This wasn't just a grandson paying a long overdue visit to his grandma. This was intentional, to show a side of me that no one believed existed. Thinking about the public intruding on this moment, when I already felt guilty enough about not coming to see her more, I had to keep reminding myself why this was a good idea. Why I'd agreed.

"Her whole life," I answered. "But this house specifically, for the last four years."

"When you started in the league." His statement left no room for subtlety.

I glanced back at him. "If you're going to ask something, Rick, just ask it."

He grinned.

Molly's eyes were covered in blue-mirrored sunglasses, and I wanted to rip them off her face because I couldn't tell what she was thinking or if she was even listening in the first place. Instantly, I flipped my attention back to Rick as we approached my grandma's because I shouldn't even be worried about whether she was paying attention.

"It's a beautiful place," he mused when the driveway appeared, as did the sprawling cabin with a massive wraparound porch. Two black and white horses grazed in the fenced-in area north of the house. Who knew where the goats were, probably in the barn that was partially obscured by the house. "Big, just for one woman."

"She didn't want to feel cramped," I said, the edges of a smile starting on my mouth as the car pulled over the gravel driveway. The porch was covered with all shapes and sizes of potted flowers and plants. Along the east edge of the roof, a line of wind chimes swayed in the breeze.

The driver parked the car, and as I unfolded out of my seat, I heard the screen door bang shut.

"That you, half-pint?" she called.

Every head swiveled in my direction.

“I’m so glad I got that on camera,” Marty whispered, and Molly dissolved into giggles.

When I cleared the front of the car, my grandma stood like a sentinel at the top step of the deck. Her curly gray hair was shoved down around her face by a straw gardening hat, and the frayed red ribbon told me it was the same one she’d always had. At the sight of me, her face broke open into a huge smile. I felt that smile clear down to my toes, in a way I probably should have been embarrassed to admit.

I met her halfway when she started down the steps, and her delighted laughter when I wrapped her in a bear hug and lifted her tiny frame off the ground made me feel like the Grinch on Christmas Day.

Two, three, four uneven chugs of my heart, and it quadrupled in size.

“Goodness, you’re big,” she said, tightening her arms around my neck. “Now put me down. I’ll break a hip if you drop me from this height.”

Chuckling, I set her down, making sure her feet were firmly planted before I stepped back from the inevitable grandmotherly inspection. Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

“They’re certainly feeding you enough, aren’t they?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She nodded, and her eyes were suspiciously bright as she gently patted my chest. “Good, good. Now, who are your friends?”

Rick and Marty shook her hand, and when Molly appeared from behind the car with her small silver suitcase, I saw my grandmother study her from head to toe. Her gaze never darted back to me, but it might as well have.

It shouldn’t have felt so important to introduce Molly to this woman, the one who meant the most to me in the world, but it did.

“I’m a hugger,” Molly said with a wide smile, “if that’s okay with you.”

My grandma laughed and opened her arms. “So am I, sweetheart.”

As they embraced, I felt my newly enlarged heart do something strange, and without realizing what I was doing, my hand rubbed at my chest where it was drumming a little faster than necessary.

“Come on in, come on in,” Grandma said, waving us up to the house. “I have supper ready to go. Figured you’d be hungry.”

“Starved,” I said. “What’d you make?”

She winked at me. “Grandpa’s roast and my mashed potatoes.”

My blissed-out groan made everyone laugh again.

The cabin hadn’t changed at all since the last time I’d been there, and I took comfort in that. The couches and chairs, all faded brown leather, still had the same blankets folded along the back. The fieldstone fireplace and long oak mantle held the same photos in shiny silver frames of varying shapes and sizes. That was my grandma for you. If she found one thing she liked, whether it be pots of flowers, crocheted blankets, or picture frames, she’d fill her space to the brim with every variation.

The floor-to-ceiling windows at the far end of the house ushered in a hushed silence as our guests caught the view of the sun setting over the foothills.

“It’s so beautiful here,” Molly said. “I can see why you love it.”

I glanced at her because I couldn’t tell whether she was speaking to me or Grandma. My grandma was the one who responded, and that was probably for the best. “I’ll stay here till I die, that’s for sure. Can’t imagine watching the sunset anywhere other than right here, even when there’s snow as high as my head and the wind cuts right through your bones.” She patted my arm. “That’s what I told Noah when I saw it for the first time. This is the one, and if you don’t mind, bury me

in the back by the pine tree grove. Keep your funeral costs down.”

I shook my head when Molly laughed.

“Where should we bring our stuff, Miss Griffin?” Rick asked.

Grandma showed Rick and Marty to the upstairs guest rooms, leaving Molly and me alone in the family room.

“You bought this for her, didn’t you?”

My exhale was slow and steady. There was no real point in denying it, and at least I could be glad she didn’t ask when Marty was around with his camera. When I turned my head toward her, though, she wasn’t looking at me. She was studying the photos on the mantle, smiling at the varying phases of me in my youth.

“Yeah, I did.” I approached the fireplace and reached past Molly, the inside of my arm brushing her shoulder as I plucked one of the smaller frames. It was of my grandpa and me, and I couldn’t have been more than six. It was a few years before he died, and he’d just taken me fishing. It was the first time I caught a smallmouth bass on my own. It was tiny, and I barely kept it on the line long enough for my grandma to snap a picture, but my grandpa smiled so proudly, you would’ve thought I’d snagged a six-foot marlin.

“When I got my signing bonus from Miami, I came straight here and paid cash for it. My whole life, I’d heard my grandma say she wanted a little plot of land at the base of the foothills, with two horses and some goats to keep her company. The house didn’t need to be fancy, just big enough to hold her family when they came to visit.” My voice got rough by the time I’d forced the last sentence out.

When Molly turned, her big blue eyes full of so much understanding, I had to look away.

How did she know me so well already, that she could instantly see my guilt in what I’d just admitted?

I was setting the photo back when her cool, firm fingers wrapped around mine and wove our hands together.



“You’re here now, Noah,” she said quietly. “That’s what matters.”

My jaw clenched tight, and I found myself nodding. Briefly, I allowed my fingers to tighten around hers, an anchor I hadn’t asked for nor had I expected, but still had a hard time letting go of.

As I extricated my fingers from hers, the brush of skin on skin had me breathing unevenly.

Ridiculous.

That was the problem with choosing a celibate life, wasn’t it? One small touch of her skin on mine had me desperately trying to rein in every caveman impulse galloping through my flimsy veins.

Carrying her suitcase for her, I showed her the main guest room across from the family room but was smart enough not to follow her in. My eyes landed briefly on the king-size bed as she laid her suitcase on it.

And still, I closed the door to give her some privacy as I brought my own things downstairs to the bed my grandma had assigned me for the next two nights. It wasn’t as big, and it wasn’t as comfortable, but I couldn’t help but feel a small sense of relief that there was an entire flight of stairs separating me from Molly.

By the time I came back upstairs, they were all sitting down at the long wood table as my grandma served up fragrant spoonfuls of tender roast and gravy. It was the kind of home-cooked meal that I never got unless I took the time to make it myself.

Upon her firm instruction, Marty had set the camera aside for our first meal. *No gadgets allowed at the table*, she’d said. The way Rick smiled, I knew they’d already planned to give us this one meal of un-filmed interaction, but at least they were kind enough to let her believe it was her idea.

The evening sped by quickly, despite how late the sun started setting in the summers. The five of us talked and laughed easily, my grandma telling stories of what I was like

as a child when I visited in the summers and over spring break with my dad.

Rick asked questions, and even though I knew he was doing it for the purpose of the documentary, whether the camera was rolling or not, nothing felt forced or uncomfortable.

The whole meal, and the cleanup afterward, when Molly insisted my grandma go relax on the couch so the men could pull their weight in the kitchen, had a warm, steady feel to it. Like we were sitting on a docked boat on a calm lake.

There was a gentle ebb and flow to the conversation, instilling such a drowsy sense of comfort that I felt weigh my eyelids down once the kitchen was cleaned and I was able to sprawl out in the recliner that used to belong to my grandpa.

“Who’s getting up with me in the morning to feed the horses?” Grandma asked.

Molly grinned. “I will!”

My gaze sharpened on her face, something I’d hardly allowed myself to do all night. “Seriously?”

“I love horses,” she said earnestly.

“Do you love getting up at sunrise?”

She grimaced, and we all laughed.

Grandma got up out of her chair and kissed Molly on the top of the head. “If you’re up, you’re up, but I’ll forgive you if you decide to sleep in, sweetheart.”

The easy show of affection surprised me, and it clearly surprised Molly because her cheeks pinked as she glanced up at my grandma. “Okay.”

I got up and wrapped Grandma in another hug. “G’night.”

She patted my chest again, probably because she was too short to reach my face. “G’night, half-pint.”

Marty snickered under his breath, and I quelled it with a glare.

Rick made his way to bed too, leaving me, Molly, and Marty.

Molly got up and walked to the windows, where my first telescope was still sitting. She glanced at me over her shoulder. “Yours?”

Nodding, I joined her even though I kept a safe distance between us as much due to Marty’s presence as my own sanity. *Mainly my sanity*, I thought as I caught a whiff of her fruity shampoo. I wanted to bury my entire face in that head of hair.

“She bought it for me when I was twelve.” I leaned over and lined up with the eyepiece, then pulled back to adjust a few knobs on the side to fix the focus. More than likely, it had stayed untouched for years. When I looked through again, I hummed. “Come look. You can see Virgo.”

“Really?” She hurried over and leaned down. “How do I know what I’m looking at?”

“The brightest star, Spica, is the starting point along the bottom. Then you follow one more star up to Parrima. That’s another easy one to spot.”

She hummed. “They all look pretty sparkly to me.”

I laughed. “I’ll show you what it looks like on a diagram. Once you know the shapes, it’s easier to pick them out.”

Molly straightened and gave me a curious look. A silky chunk of her hair slid out of her ponytail and curled down her neck. Before I knew what I was doing, I picked it up with two fingers and rubbed the edge of my thumb against her hair. Her mouth opened with a jagged inhale, and her eyes darted past me to Marty.

Right.

I dropped her hair and stepped back.

“I’m pretty tired,” she said carefully. “And I really do want to help your grandma tomorrow with the horses.”

My hands curled into fists to keep from reaching for her. My mind wouldn’t even allow itself to process what I’d do

once I did. As she said her good nights, I turned back to the window.

In one short evening, it felt like this place had ruthlessly dismantled every mental barrier I kept tied tight to myself.

“Feels like we’re in another universe, doesn’t it?” Marty asked. He was clueless as to what was going through my head.

“It does,” I agreed. “I needed this more than I realized.”

He got off the couch and patted me on the back. “Good.”

Marty bid me a good night as well, and I stood by the window, watching the stars get brighter and brighter as everything around it continued to darken.

Except I wasn’t trying to place the stars or follow lines or find the patterns that I knew as well as the lines on my hand. All I could do was think about Molly in the room just to my left.

The water turned on in the bathroom, and I pinched my eyes shut as I imagined her washing her face, then changing into whatever it was that she slept in before she slid between the sheets of the bed that was normally mine.

Nothing here felt normal.

And most disconcerting of all was how much I wasn’t bothered by it.

There was no checklist and no schedule.

No rules to follow, other than the self-imposed ones. That lack of structure should have made me feel uncomfortable. But instead of discomfort coursing through me, it was restlessness.

An edgy sort of energy that had no outlet. It was the way I felt before a game. On those days, I could strap on pads and my jersey, tape my fingers and tie my cleats, knowing I’d work myself to exhaustion on the turf. I’d tackle and run and hit and find a safe place to put everything that I kept locked down so tight during the week. And those sharp bursts, like a gunshot going off, kept me calm and steady once I was done.

But this ... this was torture.

At least thirty minutes had passed before I heard the slow turn of the doorknob.

My heart took off, and I held myself as still as possible. Maybe she wouldn't see me standing in the dark, given only one small lamp was still left on over the stove.

I tried not to breathe, tried to meditate or calm my energy or whatever that one yoga video tried to teach me to do to relax. Because if Molly saw me, she'd speak to me. If she spoke to me, if I spoke to her, I might touch her.

And if I touched her, I'd lose the tiny, fragile grasp I had on my control.

When had she frayed it down to nothing?

I was around for all of it, every interaction, and I'd hardly noticed her severing each individual strand.

Her soft footsteps padded toward the kitchen when she inhaled sharply.

"Noah," she whispered. "I didn't see you at first."

I dropped my chin to my chest and breathed deeply. "Sorry."

*Go back to bed, go back to bed, go back to bed,* I wished feverishly in my head. I couldn't turn. I couldn't look at her. Not even for a second.

My whole body tensed as the sound of her bare feet came closer.

"I-I couldn't fall asleep."

What strange intimacy was created in moments like that one. Something about a dark room and whispers. Knowing that no one could see us, knowing that she had already stripped herself of the confines of the day, ratcheted that tension coursing through my body higher and higher, something bright and fierce.

My eyes were pinched closed so tightly as she stopped next to me that I saw bursts of white behind my eyelids.

I probably looked ridiculous.

“Don’t you want to know why?” she whispered. “I could hardly sit still wondering if you were out here, if you were alone.”

“Molly,” I begged. I didn’t even know what I was begging for.

Touch me.

Don’t touch me.

Give me permission to do this thing.

Lock the door on your bedroom so I’m not tempted to splinter it to shreds for getting between us.

“Look at me,” she begged right back.

Slowly, I peeled open my eyelids and looked down at her. Her face was bare, and her hair, that glorious hair that I loved so much, was in messy tumbles around her bare shoulders. Bare, save for thin straps of a white tank top. Her legs, bare, save for impossibly small white and pink shorts.

She wasn’t wearing a bra.

My lungs, they’d stopped working properly at the sight of her.

“Doesn’t it feel like ...” She stopped to lick her lips. “Like this is inevitable?”

“What?” I rasped. She was so beautiful in the dim light that my vocal cords stopped working too. I wanted to devour her.

“You and me,” she answered quietly. Her eyes were huge in her face, and they searched mine so deeply that I felt it in the slow turn of my heart. “Even if it’s just ... here.”

I blinked. “Here?”

She laughed quietly. “This may be the dumbest idea I’ve ever had, but I was tossing and turning in that bed, trying to figure out a way to make this make sense in my head. You and me, thrown together like this. And now, in this place that’s so far removed from every complication. I can’t stop thinking about that kiss, Noah, and whenever you look at me, I know

you can't either. I don't see how it's possible to leave it at just that. Not with how good it was."

My hand lifted slowly, and I slid it against the silky skin of her neck, allowing my fingers to tangle in her hair as I cupped the back of her slender neck.

"What are you saying, Molly?"

Molly lifted her chin and hit me with the full force of her gaze, the full force of whatever decision she'd come to before she walked out the door.

"I want you to come back to that bedroom with me. I want us to have these two nights, to get whatever this thing is between us out of our system. I feel like ... like we pushed a wheel into motion ten years ago, and we need this to make it stop."

If I'd grabbed the frayed edge of a live wire, it wouldn't have had as powerful of an effect on me. My whole body shuddered from the force of it.

"These two nights," I repeated.

She nodded slowly. "What happens in South Dakota, stays in South Dakota."

That she could make me smile at that moment should have terrified me, but it didn't. It felt right. And as she'd said, it felt inevitable.

Molly tilted her chin, inviting my kiss, but I shook my head. My thumb pulled at the generous curve of her lower lip.

"If I kiss you here, I won't be able to stop long enough to move to that bed, and if I get an entire night with you ..." I dropped my forehead against hers and took a shuddering breath. "Then I need room to work."

Molly whimpered.

It was the last shred unraveling, the final cord splitting with an audible snap.

Slowly, leisurely, with a measure of control that I did not know I had left, I slid my hand down her shoulder, her arm,

her wrist, and wove my fingers through hers. Then I led her back to the bedroom.





## MOLLY

Everything took on a filmy, hazy, decadent quality when the door clicked shut behind me. Like someone changed the filter through which I saw everything, and it shut my brain off in the same motion. My hands didn't even seem like they belonged to me when I pivoted and pushed Noah up against the door.

His expression was forbidding at the move, and I shivered.

"Take your shirt off," I ordered.

He jerked up his chin. "You first."

There was a moment when we both froze like that, unwilling to give up control to the other person. Then we collided. His mouth took mine, rough and hard and deep. His hands boosted underneath my ass, and I wrapped my legs around his waist.

Lips and teeth and tongue, slick and slippery and messy. I'd been waiting for this, I thought, since the moment I saw him in the elevator. Waiting for the strength of his body against mine, overpowering me in the best possible way.

He tasted minty and cool, and his tongue twined around mine as his fingers dug into my flesh until it hurt.

This wasn't sweet, and it wasn't slow as I tugged at his shirt.

I wanted my hands on him, now that I'd given myself permission for this. Nothing short of that would suffice until we were both gasping and spent and sweaty in the middle of

that exceptionally large bed. He tossed me back onto it, and I bounced with a laugh.

But my laughter died at the look on his face.

This was a man pushed to the edge of his sanity. By me.

I'd done this to him, and it sent such a wet, hot rush of power through my body. Something overtook me at that realization, and I sat up on my knees as he ripped his shirt off and threw it onto the floor. My shirt went with it, and his eyes darkened even further as I laid back and started pushing my shorts down in slow, rolling movements of my hips.

"Stop," he growled.

My hands froze. One finger played idly with the elastic edge.

Noah shoved his shorts down, his boxer briefs with them, and I licked my lips at the sight of his glorious, glorious nakedness.

This was my best idea *ever*.

I didn't even realize I'd said it out loud until a wide, bright smile broke out over his face. That brief pause from the harsh, dangerous version of Noah, the one who looked ready to eat me whole, had a whole different effect on me. One that was just as potent.

"It's been a while for me," he admitted, sliding his hands up my legs as they fell open for him.

"Has it?" I gasped, tilting my chin up when he caught the edge of my shorts with tightly bound fingers and tightly bound strength. "F-for me too."

"That's why this first time will be fast and hard." He leaned over me and took my mouth again in a kiss so dirty, I started squirming for relief.

"Yes, please," I begged.

He smiled again. My shorts were whisked off, and he leaned back to stare at me unabashedly.

“Next time,” he said in a rough, uneven voice. His hands gripped my hips and pressed me into the bed. “Next time, I’ll take my time.” He cupped one breast and rolled his thumb. “Here.” His hand slid between my legs. “Here.” He bit my bottom lip. “Everywhere.”

“Noah,” I groaned.

He prowled between my legs, and as I registered the feel of each slab of muscle on his chest and stomach pressing against my soft skin, my back arched so I could feel more, more, more.

There was a pause before he delivered on his promise of fast and hard, both adjectives equally as exciting to me, and at that moment, his eyes held mine.

*This matters.*

It was hard to remember our promise of two nights, of this protected space to exorcise whatever had been brewing between us when we shared a look, a moment, a breath so heavy and poignant. But then he shifted forward, forward, forward in a long, slow slide, and with a long, slow groan from deep within his massive chest, I forgot everything but him.

He didn’t stop until he was tight against me, and his arms curled under my shoulders and tucked me firmly against his chest. I had to swallow a loud sob of relief at the way he was wound around me, in me, filling me.

For another moment, he held impossibly still, and it had me shift my hips up in a restless, anxious movement. He sucked in a breath through gritted teeth.

“Molly,” he groaned. “I can’t... I can’t...”

I gripped his face and sucked at his lips. “If you stop right now, I’ll murder you in your sleep.”

Noah rolled his forehead on mine. “Once I move, I can’t hold back. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I brushed my nose against his. “Give me everything,” I whispered. “I can take it.”

And he did.

With harsh pants of breath against my skin that felt like he was branding me with hot strikes, Noah pulled back and, true to his word, gave me everything he had.

It was all I could do to hold on as he moved with ruthless, unrelenting snaps of his hips, unleashing his strength in the bunching muscles that had me pinned to the bed. I clapped a hand over his mouth when he groaned loudly, and I had to bite down on my own lips when I felt the cresting, rolling wave of pleasure, the bright burst of ecstasy that split me wide open.

Behind my fingers, he shouted roughly and then slowed his movements. I tilted my pelvis up to draw each last pulse of pleasure and finally opened my mouth to kiss him deeply. He tangled his fingers in my hair and let the full weight of his body collapse onto mine. I wrapped my arms around his back and held on with deep, shuddering breaths.

When he tried to roll off me, I tightened my arms, and he chuckled. His skin smelled like masculine soap, and I wanted to get high off it. I practically already was. In this bed, in this room, I could easily pretend that nothing existed but me and Noah.

“You’re not allowed to leave yet,” I informed him haughtily.

Noah pulled back in surprise. “No?”

I shook my head. “That’s part of the South Dakota agreement. If we only get two nights, I get maximum bed sharing.”

His eyes traced my face, and the sated smile he wore did funny things to my insides. I’d never seen him look so at peace. So happy. “Just running to the bathroom, greedy girl.”

Greedy. *Such an appropriate term*, I thought as I watched him stroll naked from the bed into the adjoining bathroom. He let out a satisfied groan, which had me burying my dumb smile in the pillow under my head. Yes, greedy was right. The dim light from the bathroom bounced off the angles and curved lines of his muscles as he walked back.

I wanted to hoard him. Clutch him to me and impatiently demand more of his lips and tongue and hands. If I could only collect a handful of these salacious memories of Noah Griffin, I'd need them to be good.

He must have been feeling the same way because for the next couple of hours, he was insatiable. More than likely the byproduct of withholding for as long as he had. If the rumors were true, Noah had years of unspent sexual tension that needed to be unleashed somewhere, and oh sweet mercy, I was glad it was me who was benefiting. Again. And again. And again.

By the time I lost count of how many times he brought me over the peak, I was so exhausted that my eyes could hardly stay open, and still his hands didn't stop running over the tight tips of my breasts or the curve of my ass ... he really liked it there. The hollow of my belly button. Noah was storing up memories of his own, and it was past two before we fell into a deep sleep, his arms curled around me as I laid tucked against his side.

I woke briefly when he climbed out, and it was still dark outside.

"What time is it?" I mumbled as he kissed my forehead.

"Early. I just need to get downstairs before anyone else wakes up," he whispered. "Go back to sleep."

Like a good girl who'd been screwed into oblivion all night, I did as I was told.

When I woke, it was bright, and the sounds of the small farm echoed through my room. I stretched and couldn't stop the happy wince at all the places I felt evidence of my night with Noah.

Deliciously sore, as I'd read in almost every romance novel that I loved so much.

It was used so much because it was effing accurate.

I showered and left the room with my game face on.

There would be no sex-drugged looks in his direction.

No daydreaming of how tight his hands held my hips during the third—*or was it the second?*—round.

No staring at him and remembering what he looked like when he pressed my knees up and braced them on his chest.

And we did well.

Feeding the horses with his grandma was as exciting as I thought, and she laughed at me when I bounced on my toes at the thought of brushing them out for her. Occasionally, I felt eyes on me as we worked in the barn, but I never caught Noah looking in my direction.

When Rick suggested they walk around the property, I followed along. And even though I had the thought that my presence was completely superfluous to this entire process, nobody seemed to question it.

Noah didn't need anything from me, especially because his honest reaction to this whole adjustment was the point of the documentary in the first place. Rick and Marty didn't really need me either. They'd done this before and knew that anything negative caught on film would be caught in editing and removed, probably at Beatrice's request.

Why had she thought it necessary for me to be here?

It was strange to come to that realization now, of all places. The place where I'd felt freer than I had in a long time. Where Noah clearly did too. But it was the truth. I watched from behind Marty as they filmed Noah and his grandma fishing in a pond that had been hidden from view behind the barn. I couldn't help but be thankful that I was here, but the truth was that there was no reason for it. My sisters questioned it, but now I wondered if there wasn't another reason.

Rick came up to me and found a seat on the grass. "You're quiet today."

I smiled at him. "Just enjoying the day."

He nodded. His mouth opened like he was going to say something, but he shook his head and stopped.

"What?" I asked him.

“Just ... curious about something,” he said carefully, watching Noah and his grandma laugh. We were sitting far enough away that we were out of earshot, and I liked it better that way. Give them privacy where they could take it. “Why do you think he’s stayed away for so long?”

My eyebrows popped up at his question. This was the first time Rick had asked my opinion about something of this magnitude. But I supposed it was his job to delve into the hidden layers of his subjects. It was what made him good at his job.

“And you want to know what I think?”

He nodded. “I do. You’re intuitive. You’ve got good instincts when it comes to dealing with someone like him, who was clearly hesitant about this. Now look at him. He barely notices when we’re around anymore.”

I laughed. “I don’t know about *that*.” It wasn’t lost on me that I’d ignored his compliment, focusing instead on his observation about Noah. “But thank you,” I said carefully. “I like my job. I always have.”

“You’re good at it.” He nudged me with his shoulder. “That’s why I’m curious what you see when you look at him.”

My face went hot, and I was so incredibly thankful that Rick wasn’t looking at me. I thought so, so many inappropriate things when I looked at Noah, none of which Rick needed to know about. I cleared my head of the more lurid ways I could answer that question and focused on the scene in front of us.

“I think,” I started slowly, “that it’s easier for someone like Noah to stay focused when he keeps blinders on to everything else besides football. Probably to his detriment. Time with his grandma this way, it probably feels like, I don’t know, an intrusion on his process, if it comes at the wrong time. So he ignores it. I don’t think it means he loves her less, but I think he’s so good at compartmentalizing his life that he’s separated himself from everything outside of football that matters.” I sighed. “And that’s sad.”



Rick's gaze was heavy on me, but I didn't turn to meet it. I didn't want to know what he'd see in my eyes, in my face, at my answer.

"I think you're spot-on," he said after a minute.

I looked at him when I felt like my face was into a more controlled mask. "Yeah?"

"But it's more than sad," he continued. "It's heartbreaking. When you observe people for a living, like I do, like Marty does, you see where they're headed. Sometimes before they do. And someone like Noah will let his entire life go by unnoticed by the time he retires. He'll finish playing and have nothing left, except for some trophies that mean nothing. Records that hold no weight, except some arbitrary importance that a single, small group of people put on it. Records that can, and will, be broken by someone else someday."

My eyes welled with tears, and I blinked rapidly to push them back.

"And there's nothing I can say that would change that for him," Rick said sadly. "He has to figure that out for himself." He paused and glanced at me again. "I just pray he doesn't ..." He stopped and exhaled heavily. "Shit, I don't know."

"What?"

Rick pierced me with a serious look. "I pray he doesn't hurt someone amazing in the process."

My mouth fell open.

He knew.

"Rick," I whispered.

He held up a hand. "Just the rambles of a man who's seen a lot. Okay? That's all it is."

Even though my heart was thrashing in my chest, I nodded slowly.

His words flipped and turned and tumbled in my head for the rest of the day. I made it a point to stay behind Marty

because I was so afraid of what he might catch on my face if that camera turned in my direction.

I was quiet through dinner, another delicious carb and meat heavy affair that was made with obvious love. Noah kept glancing in my direction, but I kept my eyes off him because I was afraid it would be written all over my face.

*I could fall in love with you so easily.*

*And you would break my heart if you couldn't love me back in the way I deserve.*

Because Rick was right.

It wasn't my job to fix Noah's priorities. It wasn't my job to show him that he could have it both ways. He could have a life filled with love and family and be the best at his job while he was fortunate enough to do it.

I pretended to read a book while the guys played a card game with Noah's grandma and everyone slowly marched off to bed.

Before Marty went upstairs, I said good night and kept my face even as I clicked the door shut behind me. One single tear slipped out as I washed my face, and I turned the faucet to ice cold to snap myself out of it.

About an hour later, as I stared mindlessly at the screen of my phone where I was huddled under the covers, I heard Noah approach the door. I held my breath, and when he knocked softly, I climbed out from under the blanket and opened it for him.

His eyes searched my face as he walked in. "Are you okay? You were so quiet today."

If one word escaped my lips about how I was feeling, I'd coat the walls with my messy emotional state. So I nodded, my hands reaching for the hem of his shirt to tug it up over his head. He complied but looked concerned as he tossed it to the ground.

"Molly," he said, sliding his hands around my waist. "It's clear something is wrong. Talk to me."

I took a deep breath. “We have one night, Noah. Do you want to spend it talking? Because I don’t.”

Indecision warred in the handsome, chiseled features of his face. “I do if there’s something important on your mind.”

With a self-control I didn’t know I possessed, I slid my hands up his chest and pulled his face down to mine. A groan came from his lungs when I tugged on his lip with my teeth. Goose bumps broke out over my skin at the sound of it.

I pushed down everything except the way he felt under my wandering fingertips, every worry, every doubt, every instinct that told me that this one last time would only make it harder for me when we got back to Seattle.

But I wouldn’t ignore the opportunity when it was given to me.

Making this choice felt important.

I leaned up on my tiptoes and kissed him, digging my hands into his lush, silky hair and tugging. He changed the angle of the kiss, and I felt the moment when his brain switched off and his desire took over.

For the rest of the night, that impulse reigned over us, and we allowed it with every touch and kiss and whispered plea into each other’s skin.

When he wanted to see all of me, I straddled his hips and rose above him, hands braced on his chest, for a slow, sweet round that left my body gleaming with sweat from delayed satisfaction.

When I wanted him to unleash every ounce of his strength, he turned me over onto my stomach where the pillows muffled my sobs of gratification when it finally broke wide open.

And when we knew he should’ve been leaving the room, we allowed ourselves one last time. Not a single word passed between us, but he touched me everywhere, tasted me everywhere, and I did the same. He moved so slowly and with so much purpose, letting the desire grow and grow and grow until I swallowed a scream when we finished at the same time.

A tear rolled down my temple as I lay under him, trying desperately to catch my breath, and he caught it with his lips.

I watched silently as Noah pulled on his shorts and T-shirt, his face an unreadable mask.

The blinders were going back on.

So were mine.

He stood over the bed and looked down at me, and when I thought he'd turn to leave, I scrambled out of bed. He caught me, wrapping his arms tight around me and taking my mouth in a searching, searing kiss.

It came down slowly until he did nothing more than hold me while I breathed him in.

"I know this is the right thing to do," he said into the crown of my head.

My eyes fluttered shut as I snuggled my face into his chest. "I do too."

I didn't, though. I wasn't entirely sure I believed that. Right. Wrong. They were so subjective based on who you were asking, weren't they?

Maybe the statement that I could agree to was that this was the *smart* thing to do instead. The most likely to allow him the success he was still chasing after with both hands and give me the same result.

"But I'll think about this," he admitted in a rough voice. "I'll think about you, Molly, and I want you to know that."

I had to roll my lips together to keep from telling him that I was falling in love with him. Because he had no space for something like this in his life, and I had no room for that kind of complication in mine. So all I could do, knowing we were leaving the next day, back into a world where we'd pretend this hadn't happened, was give him another soft kiss and lie about what he meant to me.

"I'll think about you too, Noah."

He pulled away from my embrace, and in a few strides of his long legs, he was gone.



## MOLLY

The strangest part of returning to Seattle was the fact that no one seemed to notice that anything was different. When I got home, Isabel greeted me with a smile, wanting to know how the weekend went.

When Paige stopped over a couple of hours later because Emmett wanted to show us something, there were no curious, lingering looks at my face, and no one asked if something had happened.

And as protective as I felt over those two nights and what happened in that big bed, I was relieved.

For the first time since I could remember, something happened in my life that I didn't want to share with my family. My sisters were my best friends, and Paige as close as a mother to me, but I didn't want to confide or discuss or pick apart anything about my time in South Dakota.

Normally, we would.

But the rest of my Sunday back in Seattle was just ... normal.

I arrived at work, feeling rejuvenated after a good night of sleep, something I didn't have at all in South Dakota due to one Noah Griffin. And the lack of sleep from that weekend was nothing that couldn't be hidden by a good concealer, which I applied liberally when getting ready that morning.

My office was quiet and tidy when I let myself in, and I'd barely gotten through the items waiting in my inbox before a

message popped up from Beatrice on my phone.

**Beatrice: Would love to hear how the weekend went. I'm free after lunch.**

It wasn't so much a suggestion as a summons. And I got a pit in my stomach as I thought about facing her across the expanse of her desk. Beatrice had been so very, very far from my mind in that cabin in the mountains. Her request for no fraternization had as well, something I'd broken. A few times. But there was really no point in counting how many times, honestly.

Ignoring the ramifications of what would happen if she found out, I'd already begun to formulate the opinion that all this forced proximity with Noah didn't help either of us. Especially not now. I was a glorified errand girl, hanging around the filming crew the way I'd been doing. Maybe that was the sharp, unpleasant edge to Beatrice's promotion in the first place.

Putting lipstick on a pig, so to speak.

She acted like she was doing me a favor, but in reality, the job I'd done before was more challenging, kept me busier, and on the whole, could generate just as much revenue for Washington if I did that job well.

Glancing at the filming schedule tacked to the pinboard behind my desk, I knew that Marty and Rick weren't around today. Probably at their own offices going through everything they'd caught over the weekend. As I tapped the side of my pen on the desk, I thought about the past few weeks. I thought about Marty. And Rick. The pen slowed; my heart rate sped up. And I thought about Noah.

Facing him.

Being around him.

Trying to pretend nothing had happened and watching him do the same.

It was a recipe for disaster, and I couldn't even care what it said about me that I didn't think I could shove it down and do



my job. Nothing was sexy about us trying to sneak around now that we were back to reality in Seattle.

Even if we'd agreed to try, I saw nothing fun or exciting about trying to hide a relationship with him. We were both too pragmatic for that.

I pulled a pad of paper out of the top drawer of my desk and started scribbling things down. Flipping back and forth between that and my computer whenever something came up, I felt ready to meet with Beatrice by the time I'd scarfed some cold leftovers for lunch. Being away from Noah meant my head was clearer, and that was hard to admit.

Something about him scrambled my brain waves, and if I was honest with myself, that had always been true. My breaking-and-entering career kicked off at the ripe age of sixteen because of the Noah effect. And look where that had gotten all of us.

Now I stood to lose something even more precious if I wasn't careful. I stood to lose my heart. Two nights in South Dakota was one thing, but seeing him in front of me, day in and day out, was another.

I pushed back from my desk and shoved my feet back into my flats before making my way down the hallway to Beatrice's office.

Out of respect, I rapped my knuckles quietly against the door even though it was propped open, and I could see her typing away at her computer.

She turned in her chair and gave me a small smile. "Come in, Molly. Perfect timing."

"Yeah?"

Her face smoothed out into that placid, pleasant expression she favored even though I could sense her studying me carefully. Since I got home, no one had looked at me like that, and I fought not to fidget as I took a seat across from her. "I've been trying to get a hold of Rick, and he seems to be ... how do I phrase this ... ghosting me?"

My eyebrows bent down. “Really? That doesn’t seem like him.”

“It doesn’t. Yet I’ve asked for more raw footage, updates on how it’s going, and he’s ignored every request for the past two weeks. Either he evades me with a bland update, or he outright avoids answering my questions.” She steepled her fingers in front of her. “Do you have any idea why?”

“No,” I answered honestly. “Filming has been going really smoothly. They got a lot of great stuff over the weekend, so I can’t imagine why he wouldn’t want to show you.”

When she didn’t reply right away, I got the distinct feeling she was weighing the sincerity of my answer. But no matter what conversations I might have had with Rick, I was being truthful with Beatrice about this. I couldn’t fathom why he wouldn’t want to show her any of the footage they’d recorded.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m glad to hear you say that. It makes me feel better since I know you’re present whenever they’re filming.”

“Good.” I took a deep breath. “But that’s something I wanted to talk to you about, actually.”

She tilted her head, raising an eyebrow in question.

“I’ve been there every day since they started. Very little has been filmed without me being there.”

“I know. That’s part of your job.”

“I’m questioning how necessary that is, though,” I said evenly.

Her face didn’t move. Not a single muscle. Yet I felt a stunned reaction from her like a wave pulsing through the room. “Why’s that?”

I shifted in my seat before answering. “Rick isn’t trying to undermine us. He’s not trying to manufacture drama or instigate something false. He clearly cares about Noah and wants to capture the raw truth of what this is like for him. And Noah ...” My voice wavered on his name, just the slightest hitch, but I covered it up by clearing my throat. “Noah is so

much more comfortable in front of the camera than he was when this started. They don't need me there, Beatrice. I feel like I'm wasting my time, and Washington's money, by hanging in the background to make sure everything is going smoothly. And I"—I blew out a slow breath—"I wonder if that's something you knew would happen when you gave me this opportunity. That I'd feel unnecessary. Like I could be doing more or make a bigger impact elsewhere."

Her eyes narrowed. "Do you think I'd trick you?"

I licked my lips. "Not trick, no. But you were very honest with me about why you were doing this. You felt like I hadn't earned my job, that my last name meant I didn't work as hard as someone else might were they in my position. And even though I know that's not true, not fully, you flat out told me to prove it to you. But continuing with this setup, I'll never be able to do that."

"Why's that?"

*Because I'll fall in love with Noah if you keep shoving him under my nose and will inevitably make more horrible decisions when I know I can't stay away from him.* I blinked the thought back.

"Because this role is a waste of my talent. I can do both things, but I don't need to be with them every day they film. I can meet with Rick and Marty once a week to make sure they have all the access they need within the organization, and if Noah isn't working with them as he should, then I can step in as necessary. I've already proven to be able to communicate with him effectively."

The words were coming out of my mouth when I was slammed with a vivid memory of how effective our communication was for those two nights.

*Yes, just like that. You feel so good, Molly. So, so good.*

My face felt warm, and I kept my gaze steady on my boss.

Beatrice leaned back in her chair and set her hands in her lap. "You're right," she said after a long moment of silent regard. I didn't say anything, but inside, I was deflating with

heady relief. “A good employee will do what’s required. A great employee will find ways they can benefit the company they work for beyond what’s asked of them. And you admitting this is a sign that you’re a great employee.”

“Thank you,” I answered meaningfully.

Already, I felt the burden lift off my shoulders, the one I’d been trying to figure out how to carry ever since Noah walked out of my bedroom in the early morning hours.

“Which is why I hate that my mind immediately tries to connect your request with the timing of Rick ignoring me.”

My brain jerked to a halt as I processed her words.

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“I’m going to ask you this once, Molly. Did something inappropriate happen that Rick doesn’t want me to know about? That you don’t want me to know about, which is why you don’t want to be present for the filming anymore? If someone tried something or has made you feel uncomfortable, then I want to know about it.”

I shook my head, stunned at the turn of the conversation. “I promise you, I’m not asking because *anyone* is making me feel uncomfortable.”

“So the contract hasn’t been violated?”

My mouth opened. Closed. If I admitted what happened between me and Noah, everything I’d worked for, that he’d slowly started creating here, would be gone in an instant. “No, Beatrice.”

Oh, shit. It was out of my mouth. My stomach curdled dangerously, but she seemed to believe me.

Her face was hard, but her eyes were kind as her shoulders relaxed. “I’m sorry that I have to ask this, and that this is the culture we live in, but I understand what it’s like to be a young woman surrounded by powerful, influential men. The absolute last thing I will tolerate is someone taking advantage of your desire to gain my approval.”

And that only made me feel worse.

Guilt was so much more insidious than you realized before the lie slipped out of your mouth. It promised that everything would be fine. She'd never find out, and everything was better this way.

But instead, I was faced with the realization that she wasn't pushing it because she didn't believe me. She wanted to make sure I was safe.

I held up a hand. "Beatrice, please, I promise you that I would never put up with the kind of treatment you're talking about. If anyone under this roof so much as looked at me in a way that was disrespectful, my brother would rip their head off."

By the downturn in her mouth, maybe that wasn't the best answer, given what her initial opinion of me was, but it was the truth.

"And I know this gains me no favors, but I won't deny it either. A lot of the veteran players have known me for ten years. They were rookies when Logan retired, and now he's their coach. They all love me like I'm part of their family. And Allie Sutton-Pierson is my sister-in-law's best friend. Trust me, not only do I have about as good of a work support system in this place that anyone could ever ask for, but I know how to put my kneecap between any guy's legs in a way that would have him singing soprano for a month."

Beatrice exhaled a restrained laugh and relaxed a bit as she let her smile fall. "I get it. And you're right, it's hard for me to get over the fact that you're so entrenched into the fabric of this place, but ..." She shook her head. "But I know now that you don't use it as a crutch. You're a hard worker, Molly. And I'm proud to be your boss."

My eyes burned, my throat swelling with emotion. "Thank you."

"Please don't cry," she said dryly.

I laughed. "Yes, ma'am."

"I may have handled you wrong from the get-go, Molly, and I can't promise that I won't make more mistakes."

“You didn’t handle me wrong,” I argued. “You had every right to be wary.”

“No, it was unprofessional of me to start off on that foot, and even worse when I ambushed you about your past with Noah.”

A rock sank heavy in my gut, slicing neatly through the pride and warm happiness I’d felt just moments earlier, my skin going cold and prickly as it did.

She kept going. “Obviously, certain situations warrant a strong warning, but this isn’t one of them.”

My lips stretched in a tight smile. “Obviously.”

“If you’re telling me that this request to shift your schedule isn’t born from that, from some situation that you don’t want anyone to know about, then I’ll trust you. Because you’ve earned that.”

I felt two inches tall.

This wasn’t the way I wanted her to believe in me. Believe that I was worthy of her respect and trust.

“So,” she continued, “if you’ll accept my apology, then let’s take this as a fresh start, shall we?”

I found myself nodding weakly. “Apology accepted,” I said quietly.

Beatrice nodded back. “Good. Let me know if Rick has any problems with the change in your role, will you?”

“I will.”

On autopilot, I walked back to my office and sank heavily in the chair. I sent an email carefully worded to outline the changes to Rick, and I cc’d Marty. And just before I sent it, I added Noah as well.

After I’d hit the button, I read it over again, trying to reconcile, yet again, the whole concept of smart versus right.

Sleeping with Noah wasn’t smart. But it felt so right.

Separating myself from him now that we were back was smart. But it felt wrong.

Falling in love with him ... the jury was still out on whether it was smart or right.

Every cell in my body was wailing dangerously from the wrongness. That was how strong my desire was to seek him out somewhere in these black and red hallways.

My cell phone rang in my hand, Noah's name appearing like I'd summoned him. I exhaled shakily and then drew a fortifying breath before I picked up the call.

"This is Molly."

"What the hell is that email?"

I sat back in my chair. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. What the hell is that email about?"

Quickly, I stood from my chair and went to close my office door. "You can read just fine, Noah. I don't need to explain it to you."

He made a sound of muted frustration. "I just don't ... I get that it'll be difficult to be around each other for a little bit now that we're home, but that will fade. It doesn't mean you need to hide."

"I'm not hiding," I said fiercely.

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

"Bullshit."

"This has been a really fun chat, Noah. Thanks for calling."

He sighed. "I'm sorry." He gentled his voice. The sound of it, oh, I had to press my hand to my chest from what it did to my insides. "I'm frustrated, okay? I didn't think you'd disappear after what happened. Practice today was shitty, and your brother cursed my ass out for not paying attention this close to preseason, and all I could do was keep watching the doors to see if you'd show up. And it's not your fault that I couldn't pay attention, but hell, Molly, I didn't expect to come

out of the locker room to that email saying you won't be around at all."

I sank back in my chair as I processed what he was saying. And what he wasn't.

In the span of one day, I'd gotten everything I thought I wanted.

Beatrice's approval and Noah's notice.

And it felt all wrong.

I didn't want to make his life harder. I didn't want him to screw up at practice because of me. I didn't want him to be frustrated about it, upset that his attention was split in this way, because he'd never tried to balance his focus before. The only thing that would do was make him resent me.

"I should have told you separately, Noah. I'm sorry I sprang it on you like that." I raked a hand through my hair, pulling the band out and wrapping it around my wrist. "But this is the best option. The smartest choice." I closed my eyes and fought the burn of tears building at the bridge of my nose. "And I think you know that."

He was quiet on the other end of the phone. And even though I ached, oh, I ached to see his face to help me decipher what he might be thinking, I knew that if he was here, if he was in my office, I'd reach for him.

"I do," he finally admitted quietly.

His agreement didn't feel good.

It felt like he shoved a rusty sword through my gut. Irrationally, I wanted him to argue. To tell me it was worth the frustration to be able to see me. But the pain served as a good reminder.

He'd always choose football.

And in turn, I had to choose myself.

"Now what?" he asked.

I leaned back in my chair and stared up at the ceiling. "Now we both do our jobs. If you're having a problem with



Rick or Marty, send me an email, and I'll take care of it. And you kick ass on the field starting this weekend."

The rough sound of Noah letting out a harsh puff of air had a tear slipping down my cheek. I dashed it away with the palm of my hand.

"Okay, Molly," he said. "I can do that, if that's what you want."

"That's what I want," I said in a remarkably, miraculously steady voice. If he'd been able to see my face, he would've seen the lie immediately.

But he couldn't. So he didn't.

And we started the season like that. Him with his blinders on. And me, the liar with the broken heart.



## NOAH

There was a moment at the start of every season when you're standing on the sidelines before the whistle blows and the football was kicked from the flimsy plastic stand. Before it went end over end in the air, and the crowd roared, phones glowing in the stands as they captured another game, another snap, another beginning to their favorite sixteen weeks of the year.

That moment was usually hope and anticipation. It was unruly energy that finally had an outlet after months of practice and preparation. It was what we trained for, suffered for, risked injury for.

And for the first time, I felt nothing at that moment.

For the weeks of preseason that led up to it, I felt nothing. I showed up and played a few snaps, then found the bench for the rest of the game while the rookies and the second string got time on the field.

I felt nothing when I sat at the table with the mics in my face and talked about whatever game we were going to play next.

I felt nothing when we won the first game of the regular season, and I ended it with three QB sacks.

No visceral satisfaction when we won the second game as well, this time with two sacks added to my tally.

No chest-thumping celebration when we pulled out a one-point win during the third, thanks to a forty-nine yard field

goal straight through the uprights as the clock ran out.

Oh, I managed to fake it well enough. I pounded helmets and smacked the pads of my teammates who performed well. Nodded my thanks when they got in my face, and roared their appreciation when I took down the opposing quarterback and ripped the ball from his hands.

Only three people watched me with a bit more interest as the weeks passed. Logan, Rick, and Marty. I saw it in the way their gaze lingered on me after a big play. When I kept to myself in the locker room and during team meetings and workouts. When I went to bed even earlier than usual, which meant the camera crews had to get the hell out of my beautiful home with its beautiful view that I hardly took the time to notice.

Each day that passed, I found less and less satisfaction in the knowledge that while I was achieving everything I wanted on the field, it dissolved like ash in my mouth. Not simply unsatisfying, or impossible to sustain me, but it left a bitter aftertaste that I hadn't expected.

Instead of ripping the lid off why, I buried myself in work. My body was in better shape than it had ever been in my entire career. My performance in game five was one for the record books.

And I couldn't bring myself to care.

The cycle I'd found myself in, with apathy at the wheel, started manifesting in strange ways. The longer I felt nothing about this job that I'd worshiped like a deity my entire life, the more it irritated me.

If irritation was the only feeling I could manage, then I'd channel every ounce of it during the minutes I found myself on the field. And when the clock ran out on our fifth game of the season, just before our bye week, not only did we have another win under our belt but my teammates also buffeted me with violent congratulations.

Kareem laughed at me when he saw the confusion on my face.

“What are they freaking out about?” I asked.

“You seriously weren’t keeping track?”

I shook my head as players milled around us on the field. I didn’t even have to look to feel Marty zoom his effing camera in on my face.

“Man,” he said, slapping a hand against my chest, “you just broke the single game sack record. Seven and a half sacks, Griffin.”

For the first time all season, I felt a tiny kindling of excitement flicker behind my chest. “I had no idea.”

He grinned. “Whatever you’re doing, man, keep doing it.” He tipped his head back and bellowed over the post-game noise, “Beast mode, y’all!”

His words had the same effect as tossing a bucket of ice water on that small flame. Did I want to keep doing what I was doing? Not like this.

I found my eyes wandering through the crowds of people allowed on the field after the game as I absently greeted the team we’d just beaten with nods and halfhearted handshakes and fist bumps.

A skinny young player from the other team approached with a nerve-filled smile. “Hey Griffin, amazing game, man.”

I nodded. “Thanks. You too.”

I had no clue who he was, but my answer inflated his chest all the same. “You’re, uh, you’re kind of my idol. Have been since you played at U Dub. I told my wife if I got the chance, I’d ...” He inhaled sharply. “I’d see if you’d be willing to swap jerseys.”

As Marty moved around us to film, I propped my hands on my hips and really studied the kid for the first time.

He looked like a teenager, and he was talking to me about my college days and about his wife. And the conversation immediately had two incredibly strange, incredibly humbling effects on me.

The apathy tumbled headlong into emptiness. Everything about this game felt empty.

The win.

The record.

And the fact that I invested my entire life into seeking both of those things above anything else.

Without answering, I started tugging my jersey off, and his face broke into a relieved smile. It was all I could do to meet his grateful gaze.

He lost the game, he didn't break any records, hell, he probably didn't stand on that turf for a single second of the game, and here he stood, happier than I'd felt since ... since South Dakota.

The thought slipped into my head, slithering easily underneath the iron brackets I'd kept around my heart since the day I talked to her on the phone.

That should have been my warning, that I couldn't even think her name without feeling like everything around me would tumble down, unprotected and vulnerable to every vivid second with her. Every kiss. Every touch. Every moan I'd unleashed in her. Every quiet moment when all I did was hold her in my arms as she slept.

He said something, and I blinked back to the present in time to take his jersey as he handed it to me. It was pristine—no sweat, no dirt, no grass stains—unlike mine.

“Remind me of your name again,” I said slowly, tucking the jersey carefully under my arm so that I didn't drop it.

“Michaelson,” he said hurriedly. “Eric Michaelson.”

I held out my hand. “It's an honor to have your jersey, Eric.”

“The honor is all mine. I can't wait to tell my wife about this.” The returning pump of my hand was so vigorous, so enthusiastic, that I found myself smiling for the first time in weeks.

“Did she come to the game today?”

He shook his head, still beaming. “No, she stayed home. We had our first baby a few weeks ago.” In the next breath, he pulled out his phone and showed me a picture of a wrinkled, red-faced baby. “Her name is Molly.”

A steel beam to my temple would have had less of an impact. It knocked the breath clean out of my lungs for a second. I patted him on the back and managed a polite smile. “She’s beautiful. Congratulations to both of you.”

He left, and I managed to get off the field and into the locker room uninhibited while Marty trailed me quietly.

Filming had been that way every week.

Quiet. Uneventful.

Boring as all hell, if I tried to imagine it from his perspective.

Before I showered, I spoke to a few people from the press in the locker room about the record, answers I gave by rote about the honor it was, the work I’d put in, and the solid play by our competitors. By the time Rick approached me when I was dressed and clean and packing my bag, I couldn’t even remember a single word I’d said.

“Great game, as usual.” His smile was subdued.

“Thanks.” I shoved my cleats into my duffel. “Can I do something for you?”

“Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

I sighed. “What is it, Rick? I’d like to get home.”

“Why? Need to work out more? Watch film? Stare blankly at the wall?” My jaw clenched, and I straightened to my full height. He smiled, completely unintimidated. “I have something I’d like to discuss with you before I bring it to Beatrice for her approval. We have ...” He paused, clearing his throat slightly before continuing, “I have an idea for the documentary. A new angle I’d like to explore.”

I studied him. “Will I have to be there when you meet with Beatrice?”

“I think you should be, yes. Just giving you the opportunity to talk about it beforehand.”

“When are we doing this? Because I’d rather not sit through the same meeting twice, if we can get it out of the way.”

Hearing myself talk, it was no wonder everyone had left me alone. I could practically see people tiptoe around the invisible forcefield I was projecting. But Rick, that asshole, was undaunted. *She* would’ve been too, if she hadn’t created a forcefield of her own. It was a toss-up whose was more impressive, but I had a feeling I would lose if I went to head to head with her on that.

“If you’re sure,” he said, eyeing me carefully.

“The sooner we do this, the sooner I can go home.”

He held up his hands. “You got it. If you’re ready, let’s head down to that empty office past the press room. She said she had time to chat with us when you were done with the media.”

Since the Wolves headquarters were housed with the practice facilities outside of Seattle, I didn’t have to worry about passing Molly’s office on the way to see Beatrice. My mind only stumbled slightly as I thought her name, and I had the distinct displeasure of recognizing that my heart did the same thing.

The hallways were a blur of glossy red and black, the Wolves logo everywhere we turned. It was strange how even now, months after I’d arrived, I didn’t immediately recognize it as my home team. The press room was still buzzing with activity, our QB taking his turn up at the table, and I kept my eyes on the empty office space where we were headed because I’d given enough sound bites about the game. I didn’t want center stage.

My face creased into a frown as I realized it. The thought was there, clear as a bell and just as loud, and I couldn’t figure



out when that had changed.

But I couldn't pull on the thread any further, not until later, as Beatrice waved us into the room with the phone glued to her ear.

"That sounds great, thank you. Send me a draft of the press release before anything goes live, okay?" Her eyes darted back and forth between me and Rick. "Yeah, bye."

We took the seats across from her as she hung up. Marty took his position in the corner of the room, still filming. Always filming.

Beatrice smiled in my direction first. "Congratulations on your game, Noah."

I nodded. "Thanks."

"Just so you know, we have a press release going out about the record, and we may want to record a snippet we can put up on Instagram thanking the Washington fans for all their support so far this season. We're already editing some footage of Coach giving you the game ball in the locker room."

Again, I nodded.

Beatrice folded her hands and directed her attention to Rick. "I was happy to hear from you, Rick. As you know, I've been salivating for a taste of what you three have been working on, but you've been such a tease."

My attention sharpened, but I kept my face forward.

Rick pulled his laptop out and set it on the desk, angling it so both Beatrice and I could see the screen. "There's a reason for that, as you can imagine."

"I certainly hoped that was the case." Her face was pleasant, but the edge to her voice was clear. "Should Molly be present for this? She assures me that you maintain open lines of communication, and there haven't been any issues since the season started."

My stomach clenched tight, and I fought to breathe evenly. I hadn't been in the same room as her since she left the airplane upon arriving back in Seattle.

“Not just yet,” Rick said. When he sat back, he took a deep breath and gave both Beatrice and me a protracted look. “I’d like to make a change in the direction we’re taking with Noah’s story.”

Her eyes narrowed. Mine didn’t. Probably because I couldn’t bring myself to care much about the documentary anyway. The change he most likely wanted to make was firing my ass from sheer boring footage.

“What kind of change are we talking?”

“An entirely new narrative,” Rick said. “And the season would focus solely on him.”

Beatrice sucked in a quiet breath. “I’m interested.”

I rolled my lips together but kept silent.

“Marty and I found ourselves editing footage every week, and it became apparent to us—pretty much from the very beginning—that the reason we came to film Noah was not the story that we should be telling.” He gave me an inscrutable look. “Noah’s nickname is The Machine. Over his young career in the league, he quickly established himself as something more than human. His stats are beyond impressive. His discipline is well-known, and he’s respected by teammates and opponents alike for the way he methodically dismantles the competition with his body and his brain.”

“All of which we knew,” Beatrice supplied.

“We did,” Rick agreed. “But nobody knows the very human side of him. He’s created his career to mask it. No one questions what’s underneath The Machine because the façade is so impressive. And from day one, Marty and I noticed something. Something that had both of us glued to the screens as we went through the hours and hours of footage from your day-to-day life, Noah.”

I lifted my chin, mind racing but face implacable. “And what’s that?”

His face softened, and there was an apologetic glint to his eye that made me want to clap a hand over his mouth even before the words came out. “We watched her dismantle The

Machine with hardly any effort. We watched you fall in love with her. And her with you.”

The bottom dropped out, and everything I’d been so carefully juggling in the air crashed down with his simple statements. I hardly registered the way Beatrice sat back in her chair.

I was shaking my head immediately, my heart thrashing wildly, my stomach an icy, iron block of denial. I felt like someone had opened a hidden trapdoor, the one I’d worried about on the very first day of this entire project, and now my feet dangled helplessly over an endless black pit. It was all I could do not to plummet inside of it. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Molly? We’re talking about Molly?” Beatrice asked quietly.

Rick nodded. Then he turned his attention back to me. “Noah, don’t bullshit me right now. It is my job to see the stories where they unfold in people’s lives. You can’t tell me it’s not true. We watched the way she was with you, and the way you were with her. Every single day, that woman singlehandedly brought out the human side of you. It wasn’t me, and it wasn’t Marty, even though we’re damn good at working with the people we film. And it was a beautiful thing to watch. It was real and heartbreaking and compelling.”

Bracing my elbows on my legs, I gripped the sides of my head. Over the roaring sound of my pulse, I registered the sound of Beatrice asking him what he caught on film. I lifted my head.

“Did you film us without our consent?” I asked in a low, dangerous tone. “Did you get footage of her without her knowledge?”

Rick started to speak, and I stood, whipping around to Marty. “Turn that camera off.” He didn’t move quite as quickly as I wanted. “Turn it off or I will break it with my bare hands,” I yelled.

Marty clicked a button and dropped the camera. His face was drawn and pale. “I never filmed anything when you didn’t know I was there. I swear to you, Noah. I’d never do that to either of you.”

My chest heaved with jagged, uneven breaths as I struggled to rein in my temper.

“Did you sleep with my employee?” Beatrice demanded.

I glared at her. “Remind me why that’s any of your business.”

Her face went glacial, but she was the least of my problems. “Rick,” I said, “you better start talking now.”

“Beatrice,” he said quietly, “can I have five minutes with Noah, please? I should have insisted I speak with him privately first, and that’s on me.”

“I’m not sure I should be kept out of the loop anymore,” she snapped. “This is unacceptable.”

He pinned her with a deadly look. “What’s unacceptable about it? That Washington stands to make more money if he gets his own season? That we found a story that’s real and true and is the kind of television we dream of making? It’s not up to you to decide whether it’s unacceptable or not. I’m telling you about this as a courtesy, but the decision will be made by Noah and Molly.” He pointed a finger at me. “And you will hear me out before you do so.”

I couldn’t spare any of my rioting attention to Beatrice, but the fact that she stood and walked briskly from the office was answer enough. Silence descended when she slammed the door shut behind her. Closing my eyes, I tried to remember what it had felt like just an hour earlier.

Apathy sounded like heaven.

Not caring sounded like the best kind of escape I could have imagined.

And in that, I recognized it for what it had been: protection. I insulated myself in numbness because without it, I would have had to admit what Rick was telling me now. That

Molly slid through an unseen chink in my armor and planted herself there, right next to my heart. A hole in my rib cage I hadn't known about before she showed up in that elevator. That space inside me belonged to her now.

I wanted to scream.

I wanted to rip down the walls.

I wanted to find her.

"You hate me right now," Rick said calmly. "And I don't blame you."

Slowly, I lifted my head and stared at him. The side of my jaw twitched, and I knew I couldn't let a single word escape my mouth until the rage lessened. But all I could think about was her. How she'd feel when she heard about this.

"If I find out that you got a single second of footage of Molly without her consent, or a single moment we thought was private ... if there's a fraction of a frame on that film that makes her look like she's being disrespected, I will make your life hell on earth," I vowed.

In the seconds after I spoke, it took me a moment to realize that he started smiling.

"What?" I snapped.

"And you still don't see it," he mused.

I shoved my hands into my hair and tugged on the strands. "Quit talking in circles, Rick."

He leaned toward me. "Think about what you just said to me. It wasn't about how *you* look, if you come off bad, or if it tarnishes your reputation. You'd tear my life apart if I did something to *her*."

My hands dropped numbly into my lap.

"She stepped back because she cared more about you being focused going into this season. She stepped back because it hurt her too much to be around you. And you let her. I'm not saying that you care less about her, but holy hell,

Noah, for such a smart man, you are a fucking idiot when it comes to what you feel.”

I swallowed roughly.

He turned his laptop and punched a few buttons. “There, I’m sending you our rough concept trailer. I’d intended to show it to you today before you and Beatrice lost your ever-loving, control-freak minds,” he mumbled. After he snapped the laptop shut, he faced me again.

“H-how did you know?” My voice sounded like someone took a rusty, chewed-up chainsaw to my throat.

“Please,” Marty said. “The day she stopped filming with us, you flipped the switch into Terminator mode. It was like watching a cyborg pretend to be a human.”

I gave him an unamused look.

He tapped his camera. “Can’t argue with me on this, buddy. I have it on film.”

Rick held up a hand. “On film or not, whether you agree or not, I like you and I like Molly. I think you guys are great together.” He leaned in. “But if you can’t pull your head out of your ass long enough to realize what you found in her, then you don’t deserve her.”

Chewing on his words was slow and uncomfortable because the grain of truth was so big that it was unavoidable. I stared at him for a minute before speaking.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to force action.”

He laughed. “You know, my wife was filming a nature documentary a couple of years ago, and a flock of penguins got stuck in a ravine. The crew had to watch, completely helpless, as dozens of birds tried and tried and tried to get out to no avail. And if they did nothing, that entire flock would’ve died. So they broke their rule about intervening and carved stairs in the ice and snow, and the penguins marched right out of that ravine as soon as they had the chance.”

I shook my head. “Not sure that’s a flattering comparison if you’re me.”

He slapped me on the back. “They were smart enough to climb those stairs, Griffin. All I’m asking you to do is open your eyes. Once you do, your life will never be the same.”





## MOLLY

**M**y office was quiet as I typed out a reply to an email that had been sitting in my inbox for all of two minutes. The plus side to absolutely no social life for the past eight weeks was that I was on top of my game at work.

Sure, the dark circles under my eyes were as dark as the movies I'd been bingeing, and I'd accidentally bawled my eyes out watching a holiday romance movie on Netflix when I was too lazy to get up and find the remote, but at work, I was slaying.

Turns out having your heart bruised up was excellent for your professional life.

I was a quick email replier, and Noah was breaking sack records left and right.

Okay, fine, my accomplishment didn't sound as impressive as his, but I'd take my victories where I could get them.

I typed harder, ignoring the impulse to pull out my phone and watch the footage of him getting the game ball in the locker room from the day before. He'd looked ... bored.

In the seven times I watched it the night before, tucked under my covers so Isabel couldn't hear me and hide my phone, I studied his face. He was smiling, but behind his eyes, I saw no spark. Absolutely nothing. And it tore uneven holes in my heart.

Someone knocked on my office door, and I called over my shoulder, "Come in."

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” my boss said quietly.

Something in her tone had me pausing before I swiveled my chair to face her.

“Not at all,” I said, watching her warily as she walked into my office and closed the door quietly behind her. “How was your weekend?”

She didn’t sit, simply curled her fingers around the back of the chair facing me on the opposite side of my desk.

“Enlightening,” she answered cryptically.

“What happened?”

“I need you to answer a question for me, and answer it honestly, Molly.”

Her formality, reminiscent of when she first started, had me sitting up straight. “What is it?”

“How long have you been in a sexual relationship with Noah Griffin?”

My skin prickled hot, then ice, ice cold, sweeping between both extremes in a rush from the top of my head to my toes. “I’m not in one,” I said instantly. “I haven’t spoken to him in weeks.”

Eight weeks and three days and like, six-ish hours. Not that I was counting with every miserable beat of my heart.

Beatrice exhaled slowly. “Then I’ll clarify. Have you ever been in a sexual relationship with him?”

The breath halted painfully in my lungs as I opened my mouth, but no words came out. At her question, all the memories I’d locked tight into a black box in my mind came tumbling out, one after another, after another. The pieces of my time with him that I missed so desperately. And it showed on my face, I knew that like I knew my own name.

“Dammit, Molly,” she said under her breath. “You lied to me. You *lied* to me.”

I stood slowly, hand clutched to my chest. “Beatrice, I’m so sorry.”

“I wish you hadn’t done that.” She shook her head, gripping the back of the chair even more tightly. “I can’t make an exception for you, Molly. I had a rule, and you violated it.”

The reality of what she was saying had my skin rushing hot again, blood pooling under the surface in a way that had my face blazing with embarrassment. “Beatrice, please.”

She held up a hand. “I had specifically laid out the rules in that job agreement that we discussed and that you signed. One was my no fraternization with the crew or any subject of the documentary. And two was the discussion we had about honesty. About trust.” She paused, and her eyes went suspiciously bright. “Do you know how furious I was when I thought someone had taken advantage of you? I looked you in the eye, and I took you at your word when you told me nothing had happened. I trusted you.”

My voice cracked when I interrupted, a messy, inconvenient truth falling from my lips. “I fell in love with him, Beatrice. It wasn’t some meaningless fling.”

It was the first time I’d admitted it out loud, and my heart squeezed painfully.

“And in the process, you broke the trust I had in you,” she threw back. “Now, I look back on you requesting the change in your role, and I question it. I question your ability to set your emotional state aside and do your job. I question your ability to think through your choices before you make them.”

Dashing a tear away from my cheek, I cursed how easily I seemed to cry when it came to anything surrounding that giant brute of a man. “I’ve been doing my job,” I told her. “And I’ve been doing it well. You know I have.”

“Was it about Noah? Your request?”

Slowly, I nodded.

Beatrice dropped her head and sighed heavily. “Thank you for being honest, Molly.” Then she lifted her gaze back to me, and I felt very much like someone about to face a one-woman firing squad.

Ready.

Aim.

And her finger squeezed.

Fire.

“You have until noon to clean out your desk. Your employment with the Washington Wolves has been terminated. Someone from HR will be here shortly to take care of the paperwork.”

I sank back into my seat and dropped my head into my hands, tears falling freely now as she walked quickly out of my office. For my whole life, this place had been a hub, a central figure for my family. Even before my dad died, before my mom walked away. I couldn't remember a time when I hadn't run through the halls like I owned them. And now, I'd be walked out with a box in my hands. The fact that she'd left me alone at all should've made me feel slightly better because even though I'd lied, even though I'd broken her rules, she trusted me enough to give me some privacy.

At a moment like this, a girl would normally call her mom. My hands shook as I picked my phone up from my desk and thumbed down my favorite contacts. The phone rang once before Logan's wife, Paige, picked up.

“What's up, buttercup?”

At the sound of her voice, I broke down, blubbing and crying and failing to get even a few intelligible words out.

“Molly, Molly, calm down,” she instructed. “I'm driving, and hang on, I'm pulling over, but I need you to tell me if you're hurt. Are you okay?”

“Beatrice just fired me,” I got out.

“*What?*” Paige yelled. “Oooh, I will burn that bitch's house down.”

A watery laugh escaped me. “I messed up, Paige.”

“Oh honey, you couldn't have messed up that bad. You're so good at your job,” she said. “Hang on, let me text your brother.”

“No, Paige, don’t interrupt his practice.” I inhaled, slowly getting control over my tears. “I’ll come over after I leave here. I have until noon to clear out my things.”

She was quiet and, knowing my sister-in-law, quiet was dangerous.

“Paige,” I said again.

“Hmm?”

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing. Just ... imagining you having to box up your desk and how that makes me want to rip her hair out.”

I laughed again. “I hope Emmett isn’t in the car with you. You’re way too bloodthirsty to be in mom-mode right now.”

“Hi, Mol,” he piped up in the background. “Mommy looks scary right now. She’s got angry eyes.”

“I’ll bet.” I rubbed my forehead. “I need to start going through my things. And, ugh, someone from HR will be here soon.”

“Bullshit, this is complete and utter bullshit,” she muttered. “What happened? What’s her reasoning for firing you?”

“Can we talk about it when I come over?” I asked wearily.

“Yeah, sweetie, we can.” She was quiet for a second. “I love you. It’ll be okay.”

“Love you too, Paige.”

The call disconnected, and I snatched a tissue from the box behind my computer monitor, noisily blowing my nose. It took me a few minutes of doing my best zombie impression before I started opening drawers and staring blankly at what needed to stay and what I should take with me when I heard two things at once.

The stomp of a man’s feet.

The click of heels coming from the opposite direction.

“Paige,” I whispered. “What did you do?”

Logan arrived at my door just before Allie Sutton-Pierson did.

“What happened?” they asked in tandem.

Logan ripped his hat off and rushed over to me, wrapping me in a hug that had me fighting not to go blubbering again. “I’m so sorry, Mol. This is bullshit.”

I was wiping my face when Allie closed the door to my office.

Allie was just past forty, and as she stood, arms crossed, worried expression stamped on her stunning face, she looked barely over thirty-five. “She wasn’t in her office when I walked down, but I will have words with her as soon as I see her.”

“It’s okay, Allie,” I said. “You don’t have to do that.”

As the owner of one of the most financially successful football franchises of the past decade, Allie wasn’t accustomed to people telling her what she could and couldn’t do. “I know I don’t have to,” she said calmly. Underneath that calm was steel. “But you, your sisters, Emmett, you are part of my family. And I do not like people messing with my family.”

Logan rubbed a hand on my back. “Let her help, Molly. You don’t deserve this happening to you.”

I gave him a sad smile. “You don’t even know what I did.”

“Because it doesn’t matter,” he replied instantly.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, it does. What if I punched her?”

“Did you?” Allie asked.

“No.”

“Did you sexually harass her?”

“Of course not.”

Logan shook his head. “I knew I didn’t like her. Not from that very first meeting.”

“Come on, you guys, people get fired all the time. It sucks, but I’ll be okay.”

Allie propped her hands on her hips, which were wrapped in a sleek black skirt. “People who are phenomenal at their job do not get fired all the time.”

Logan chimed in. “Exactly. And you are good at your job.”

The two of them started building off each other, tossing ideas back and forth. Words like harassment. Unlawful termination. Performance Improvement Plan. Firing Beatrice. I closed my eyes and tried to tune them out, but finally, I held my hands up, and yelled, “Stop, please!”

They went quiet.

“I screwed up, okay?” I looked at both of them. “I-I slept with Noah on a filming weekend, then lied to her about it when she asked if I’d violated her contract, which included a no-fraternization policy.”

Logan’s face flushed red, his jaw clenched tight, and he stared at the floor like it held the world’s secrets.

Allie deflated like a snipped balloon. “Oh,” she said weakly.

“I’ve stayed away from him since then,” I continued, tears building in the back of my throat, “but it doesn’t matter. She knows. I-I thought that I’d thought it through all the way. That I knew what I was getting into. That’s always been my problem, right?” I wiped my face, daring Logan to argue with the look on my face. “How many times have you had to step in over the years when I didn’t think something through? When I did something because I felt like it or because it was fun or silly or ... felt right at the time.”

“Molly,” he said on an exhale. “You’re young. Making mistakes is a part of life.”

“I know. But so is stuff like this, Logan.” I shook my head. “I don’t regret my time with Noah, but I knew it was a risk when I did it. If this is the fallout of the weekend I got with him, then I’ll take it.”

Allie sighed. “It still feels wrong, Molly. There’s no rule in the Wolves handbook that prohibits a relationship with a player and another employee.”

“No, but Beatrice’s contract is different. It’s separate from that.” I swallowed. “It was a stipulation that Beatrice specifically added to my job description, which hinges on the relationship with Amazon.”

Logan glanced at Allie. “So she’s right?”

Allie shrugged. “I’m not involved enough when it comes to those types of situations, but”—she nodded—“I think she’s right. And not only that, as long as Beatrice isn’t firing her for any discriminatory reasons, Washington is an *at will* employment state. She can fire her at any time without providing a reason.”

“That’s dumb,” he said sullenly.

“You sound like Emmett,” I told him with a reluctant smile.

My brother wrapped his arm around me. “I’ll take that as a compliment, kiddo.”

Allie watched us with a sad smile. “Do you want help with your desk?”

I shook my head. “I’d rather do this alone, if that’s okay with you guys.”

“Of course.” She met me in the middle of my office and gave me a tight squeeze. “You’re a rock star, Molly. If there’s anything I can do moving forward, let me know, okay? We’re always looking for help at the Team Sutton Foundation.”

Another job I’d get without blinking because of my last name. I smiled at her all the same. “Thank you, Allie. I will.”

Logan took longer to convince, but after three more hugs and five more offers to stand outside my office while I cleaned up to make sure whoever came from HR was nice to me, I all but shoved him out of the room that wouldn’t be my office anymore.

He was just beyond the corner when I called his name. His head popped back through the open door. “Yeah?”

“Not a word to Noah.”



Logan opened his mouth to argue.

“No.” I pointed a finger at him. “It happened weeks ago. I am an adult, and so is he. You don’t get to interfere this time.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Define interfere.”

After a second, I ticked off the most obvious answers on my fingers. “No yelling, no telling him what happened, no threatening, no embarrassing him or me in front of the guys, because Logan Ward, if you march back in that practice and get in his face about this, I am the one who is embarrassed. Do you understand me?”

Paige had these scary eyes that she used on my brother when she went from *I’m serious* to *I will end you if you cross me*. I’d seen them often over the past ten years, and I gave it my best attempt. It must have worked because he grimaced. “Fine.”

“I mean it.”

He held up his hands. “I promise! Geez. You’re as bad as Paige,” he mumbled before he left.

I was grinning as he went back to practice. And given the current situation, that was pretty impressive. Everything after that went as smoothly as possible.

I signed some papers. Filled two file boxes. And the security guard who walked me out started tearing up because I’d known him since I was five.

“Ain’t right,” he said under his breath.

I wrapped my arm around his thin waist and gave him a squeeze. “I’ll be okay, Rod, I promise.”

He hugged me back, wiping at his face with the sleeves of his shirt after he took my security badge from me. Before I walked out the door into the parking lot, my eyes watered up again as I stared at the red and black logo of the wolf tossing its head back in a howl.

I let out a slow breath and left the building.

Everything held a surreal quality as I walked numbly to my car. Like when you have a cold and your head feels disconnected from your body. Or everyone around you is moving at a different speed. There were boxes in my hands, but I hardly felt them, like someone else's arms were holding them up.

My car was right where I left it, and I set the boxes on the hood so I could dig my keys out of my purse. With the trunk opened, and the boxes set carefully inside, I couldn't get over the strange sense of detachment I felt.

Later, I'd probably cry again at the loss of a job I loved.

I'd probably cry at the knowledge that I wouldn't see Noah anymore. Then I snorted. Please, I hadn't seen him in eight weeks unless it was on a TV screen.

That was when I heard him. "Molly?"

The sound of Noah's voice sent chills racing down the length of my spine, one after another, tumbling on top of each other to see which could go faster. They were powerful enough, those racing, chasing chills, that I shivered. Just once.

For the past eight weeks, I'd fought against every impulse to show up at his door some night. To catch a glimpse of him after a game or when he was sweaty after practice. But I'd been right to stay away. Because I knew, I knew so deep in the darkest, most vulnerable part of my heart that *I* couldn't go to *him*. Not this time.

With my hands still braced on the lid of my trunk, I took a deep breath, dropping my arms slowly as I turned to see Noah, watching me with a careful expression on his face.

If his voice gave me chills, then his face melted me to my core.

"Hi, Noah," I said, keeping my own expression just as neutral.

His jaw clenched. And I held my breath to see what he'd say next.



## NOAH

She looked terrible.

And beautiful.

Her nose was red, and her eyes rimmed like she had a cold or had been crying. There was no messy bun today, the kind I was used to, the one that she'd no doubt done and redone a dozen times, and her hair was down in messy waves.

It was shorter, just below her shoulders.

Molly's eyes surveyed me in much the way that I was her, and it occurred to me, after a few beats of awkward silence, that it was my turn to talk.

"How are you?"

If I'd ever wanted to find the situation in life that I sucked at the most, it was this, right here. I couldn't have sounded more painfully polite. More disinterested. But inexplicably, her eyes softened at my robotic tone.

"It was kind of a rough day," she answered quietly. "Or not nearly as good as yours was yesterday, at any rate."

I grimaced. "Yeah." My eyes searched her face. "What happened? Are you okay?"

When she smiled sadly, I knew she wasn't going to answer me. "Congratulations on breaking the record." She shook her head. "You've looked great out there."

My eyes held hers, and she blushed.

“Or played great,” she stammered. “Not looked great. Not that I can see your face under the helmet.”

“I knew what you meant.” I gentled my tone. “And thank you.”

Molly glanced away, staring hard at the facility behind me. I had to close my eyes for a second and try to formulate a plan. Walking out to my car, I hadn’t expected to see her or have this awkward facsimile of a conversation with the one person I never struggled to talk to. Rick and Marty’s words about her rang through my head, louder and louder until I wanted to smack my temple and dislodge them. Empty my ears like they were water I’d allowed in while swimming.

“Are you still liking the house?”

I nodded. Good plan, Griffin. Stand awkwardly until she felt forced to speak because you couldn’t get out of your own head.

“Yeah, umm, I’m still slow at buying furniture and stuff. I don’t do much besides sleep and eat there.”

That made her look sad. For me.

“Did you get your telescope at least?”

“Yeah.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “It’s still in the box they shipped it in.”

This was getting better and better.

She gave me a tiny smile. “I found a constellation the other day.”

“Yeah? Which one?”

“The Big Dipper.”

I smiled widely, and it felt like that simple motion cracked a concrete mask off my face.

How far had my blinders extended? I’d been so focused on work—eating it, breathing it, sleeping it—gladly allowing it to drown out every other thing in my head so that I didn’t have to dissect what was remaining. And in one uncomfortable conversation, she sliced them off with the neat clips of a blade.

No wonder I never dipped my toes into the ocean of dating and women. I sucked at this. I'd managed one stupid question, the kind you'd ask a stranger.

But this was Molly. The same woman who made me laugh, when laughing was the last thing I wanted to do. Who made me smile, and surprised me when I thought I was beyond surprising. The same woman who singlehandedly obliterated my legendary control because I couldn't imagine not kissing her or tasting her. The only thing I could do was be honest.

But she spoke first. "I should go."

"Wait." I strode forward, stopping just shy of touching her. "Why is this so hard?" I asked.

Molly slumped against her car and gave me a miserable look. "Come on, Noah. You know why."

"No, I don't," I said. I ran my hands into my hair, a helpless gesture when what I wanted to do was tug her into my arms and feel my soul settle again. "Help me understand why it's so hard to see you, why we can't talk like normal."

"What's our normal?" she asked quietly, shaking her head as she did. "We hated each other until we didn't. We slept together, then stopped talking. And here we are."

I raised an eyebrow. "That's a massive simplification of what happened between us."

"I know it is."

"Nor was it my idea to stop talking," I reminded her gently.

That made her eyes flash dangerously. "Can you blame me for backing away? Would it have been easier to try to pretend that weekend didn't happen? Film, work, be around each other every single day and just ... pretend." Her voice sounded thick. "That sounded like hell to me."

"No, it wouldn't have been easier. I hate pretending. I don't ... I don't think I could have." I took a step closer. "But this hasn't been easy either, has it?"

She dropped her head into her hands and exhaled shakily. I got the distinct impression that the only thing allowing her to keep hold on her emotions was if she physically blocked out my presence like that. I took a step back.

“What do you want me to say, Noah?” she asked, voice muffled behind her hands. “I had a shitty day, and I’m tired, and I don’t know what you want me to say right now.”

“I want you to be honest with me.” Curling my hands around her wrists, I gently pulled her hands away from her face. “I know you said that we never had a normal ... but ... I don’t know what to make of that. You were my friend, Molly. I talked to you more than I talked to anyone. I miss you,” I told her fiercely. “It was easy to ignore how much when you weren’t around, but I do. And I hate how weird things are right now. Don’t you?”

I couldn’t believe what had just tumbled out of my mouth.

Unpracticed.

Unrehearsed.

Hell, I’d barely registered how I felt, but standing in front of her, it was like someone took a wood-chipper to whatever I’d been using to block out everything I’d suppressed for the past eight weeks.

It was impossible to believe that only a day earlier, I was able to stand back and monitor just how little I felt about my life. Like someone who’d lost the ability to feel pain. You could set your hand on a stove and not register the sensation of blistering skin. And now, watching her expressive face work through what I’d blurted out, I felt everything.

Every pinch of her lips and every shift of her eyes. When they filled with bright tears, I wanted to do anything, *anything* humanly possible to make it stop. Just the threat of tears on her part, and I felt them like a blowtorch to my gut. But if withstanding the heat, if pressing into it further was what she needed from me, I’d step closer and hold the flames against me for as long as she needed.

Oh, hell.

Rick was right, that asshole.

I'd ... I'd fallen in love with her, and it happened without me realizing it.

"Noah," she started, completely oblivious that my heart had just splattered to the ground at her feet. "Of course I do. But ..." She trailed off, eyes snapping beyond my shoulder. "Shit. I need to go. I cannot be on camera right now. Not after my day today."

I glanced back and saw Marty sprinting toward us like he was about to catch me mounting Molly on the hood of her car. I pinned him with a look and held up my hand, but he just kept barreling toward us. Thank goodness he was so out of shape. He stopped about forty yards away and braced a hand on his knee to breathe for a second.

"Molly," I begged. "Don't go."

"Please don't make me do this right now. Not on camera." Her eyes were huge and pleading. I nodded and stepped back.

I knew at that instant that I'd do anything she asked of me. Anything, even if it meant letting her drive away.

"Have a good rest of the season, Noah," she said, just before she slammed her door shut.

"What?" I went to grab the door handle and ask her why the hell that sounded like a goodbye, but I stepped back when I heard Marty's pounding footsteps and obnoxiously loud breathing behind me. "You rotten asshole," I told him.

"You let her leave?"

I whirled. "Yeah. She didn't want to be on camera, you dick. You think I'd force her?"

Marty sighed, watching Molly's car leave the parking lot once the security guard lifted the gate. "No."

I gave him a dry look. "Your timing leaves a lot to be desired."

"Molly got fired," he blurted out.

"What?" I yelled.



“That’s why I was running out here. I overheard her brother say something about it when I was packing up my gear after practice. You looked like shit today, by the way.”

“Why did she get fired?”

“Why do you think?” He shook his head. “She lied to her boss about what happened in South Dakota. I guess Beatrice had added a no-fraternization stipulation in Molly’s contract for this project that covered the cast and crew.” He pointed at his chest. “And she ain’t sleeping with the crew.”

I ran my hands over my face. “Shit, shit, shit. She said she’d had a rough day.” My hands curled into fists. “Shit,” I yelled. “I really want to punch something.”

Marty gave me a warning look. “Don’t even think about it.”

With fumbling hands, I pulled out my cell phone and tried to call her. It went right to voicemail.

“Her phone is off,” I muttered.

“Probably a work cell. I bet she had to leave it.”

“Do you know how pissed I am at you and Rick?”

“Us?”

“Yeah.” I glared at him. “My life was perfectly fine before you two showed up. And now I have an old man informing me that I fell in love without knowing it, and another old man who can’t run for shit interrupting the first chance I’ve had to talk to her. I hate you guys.”

Marty grinned. “We love you too.”

“I can’t believe she got fired.” My chest pinched tight. And then tighter again. Love was awful. Even imagining what she must be feeling made me want to hurl an unsuspecting vehicle across the parking lot.

I knew how she felt because I went through it. I loved playing at Miami. One stupid choice on one stupid night, and a career I’d been building for years was upended.

Upended, but not ruined.

I liked Washington.

The team was strong.

The coaching was top-notch, even if one of those coaches was probably currently plotting my demise knowing that I slept with his sister.

The culture was accepting and warm. Stable. That was harder to find than you'd expect.

But there was no way I could have known that when I was shipped here just before the season started. And no way for Molly to know right now, caught in the muck and mire of feeling dumped by a place that was so important to her.

"She's a smart girl," Marty said, interrupting my thoughts. "This is a tough knock, but I'd put my money on her any day." He nudged my shoulder. "I mean, if she can go head to head with you without backing down ..."

I smiled. She had, too. Thinking about all those moments now, I was such a fool that I hadn't seen how quickly she got under my skin. But she was there now, and I didn't want her gone.

"I need your help, Marty," I said, still staring at the road where her car had disappeared.

"Anything."

"Before you promise that, it may require you to be chained to that computer for a day or two."

He eyed me. "What do you need?"

I slung my arm around his shoulder, and we walked back toward the building "The way I see it, you and Rick owe me, right? For ambushing me in front of Beatrice. But I guess I owe you too, for bringing it up in the first place. I can be a little ..."

"Blind?" he helpfully supplied. "Clueless?"

"Hyper focused," I amended, "when I'm in football mode. So that little trailer he sent me? I'm going to need more from you."

“I was afraid you’d say that.” He sighed. “If she doesn’t have a phone, how are you going to get in touch with her?”

I glanced back at the Wolves facility. “I know a guy.”

“Just . . . let me film it when you ask him, okay?”

I laughed. “Shall we get it over with now?”

Marty’s face blanched as he looked at the building with me. “Now?”

“Why do you look so nervous?”

His eyes never wavered. “Because I’m worried I’m about to catch your death on film. And Rick will never forgive me.”

I let out a deep breath. “Logan won’t kill me.”

Marty glanced over at me.

“Okay,” I hedged. “It won’t be pleasant. That’s why I’d rather rip off the Band-Aid now.”

He swept a hand forward. “Lead the way.”



I KNOCKED on Logan’s door. Marty shifted behind me, probably making sure he had the optimal angle to catch whatever happened next.

“Come in,” Logan said.

My exhale was slow and steady before I pushed the door open. His head was bent over his computer, face hidden by the brim of his black hat.

“Do you have a minute, Coach?”

Logan’s frame froze imperceptibly at the sound of my voice. As he lifted his head, I braced for what I’d see on his face.

It wasn’t pretty.

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair. Logan’s expression was forbidding, carved from granite

for as little as he gave away.

Right. Another member of the Ward family who would wait me out and force me to talk today.

“I’m assuming you know what happened,” I started.

His jaw clenched.

“And I’m also assuming you aren’t very happy with me right now.”

His nostrils flared. I’d take that as agreement.

“But even if that’s true,” I said, holding his terrifying gaze as steadily as possible, “I have no way of getting in touch with her, and I’m hoping you’ll help me with that.”

His eyes narrowed dangerously, and behind me, Marty shifted uncomfortably.

“Her?” he spoke slowly. “By *her*, you mean my little sister? The one you slept with after I told you to stay away from her?”

“Yes.” I lifted my chin a fraction. “That’s who I’m talking about.”

The line of his mouth flattened.

“Logan,” I told him, hands raised by my sides, “I can find another way to reach her if you won’t help me.”

He tilted his head. “Do you think that’s the best angle to take when you’re trying to convince me this is a good idea?”

“I’m being honest because I respect you enough not to lie to you.”

One eyebrow rose on his forehead, slowly, incredulously. I felt my face flush hot, because disbelief radiated off him in strong pulses.

“Your sister is important to me. It ... it took me a while to realize just how much.” I swallowed roughly. “And I could stand here all day trying to convince you of that, but no offense, I won’t admit anything to you that I haven’t said to her first.”

His face went slack with understanding.

I fell in love with Molly, and now he knew it.

Slowly, Logan unfolded his arms, his gaze searching my face for ... something. Proof. I wasn't sure. Then he ran a weary hand down his face and nodded. "I'll help you. Just tell me what you need."

I glanced back at Marty, who was grinning behind the camera. "Right now, I just need a little time to pull something together."



## MOLLY

When I left, I knew I could've gone home to my apartment with Isabel. But the only thing that waited for me there was the temptation of day drinking and the inevitable crying into my pillow.

So I kept true to my word and drove straight from the Wolves facility to Paige and Logan's house about thirty minutes away. The neighborhood had tall, mature trees and shrubs, and the houses were set back off the road. They were big but not obnoxious. And selfishly, especially at moments like this, when I felt my most vulnerable, I wanted to return to the place that felt like home.

And nothing felt more like home to me than here.

I parked my car behind Paige's and ascended the concrete steps to the solid oak door, opening and closing it quickly since it had started to rain on my drive.

"Back here," Paige called from the kitchen. I smelled garlic and carbs, and instantly applauded my decision to come here.

Emmett skidded around the corner, knocking into me with an oof. His skinny arms wrapped around me in a hug, and I leaned down to kiss the top of his head.

"Hey, bud. No school today?"

"Nope. Mom said you needed the tightest hug ever."

My throat pinched. "I do. Thank you."

He set his chin on my stomach and looked up at me with huge eyes. “Can you help me with my math homework? You’re good at it, and Mom said she doesn’t do that bullshit.”

“Traitor,” Paige yelled over the sound of my laughter. “And that’s a buck in the swear jar, you little potty mouth.”

“It’s not swearing if I’m repeating something you said.”

“Ooh, get her with logic,” I whispered. “I approve.”

He grinned. “Is that a yes?”

I rubbed his back. “I’ll tell you what, you give me thirty minutes of girl time—no interruptions—and then I’ll help you.”

“Deal!” He ran off, feet pounding up the stairs toward his room.

Paige leaned her shoulder against the wall by the kitchen and gave me a small smile. Her red hair was braided over her shoulder, and as usual, she looked so beautiful, it was hard to stare for too long. That was the problem with having a former supermodel for your surrogate mom. “How’s my girl?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

She held open her arms, and I walked into them without further encouragement. Paige sighed, running her hands down my hair. “Tell me what you need from me because sometimes I take my violent, angry support too far, and I’m told by parties that shall not be named that it’s not always the most helpful thing I can do.”

I smiled, burying my face in her shoulder. “Logan said that?”

“He’s such a killjoy.” She leaned back and cupped the side of my face. “You look sadder than I thought you would after talking to you. I mean, I know you’re sad. You loved your job. But your heart.” She swept a thumb over my cheekbone, and it came away wet from the tear that escaped. “It hurts, doesn’t it?”

The canny observation—one that could only be made by someone who really, truly knew me—had me sinking into her



arms again. I sniffed noisily. “I saw Noah in the parking lot, a-and,” I sobbed, “he said he missed me, and I miss him too, but what does *that* mean, right? He’s such an idiot. He hasn’t said one word to me in weeks. Weeks! And then he’s asking me why it’s so hard to see me, and why it’s so hard to talk to me. Ugh. Why do I have to answer those things for him, you know?” I hiccupped as Paige turned us, her arm wrapped tight around my shoulder so she could steer me toward the couch in the living room. “It’s not like I’m sitting around waiting for Noah Griffin to explain things to me now that we’ve had sex. Like, figure it out on your own, you moron.”

“Ohhhhkay, my husband left out a few things when he texted me,” Paige said under her breath. Once I was tucked into the corner of the couch, I tugged my favorite pillow into my lap and toed off my Chucks.

Once the plush weight was clutched to my chest, I watched her over the silky edge. “Logan didn’t tell you about the whole *I slept with Noah and that’s what got me fired* thing?”

Her eyebrows lifted so slowly, so high on her forehead that I worried for a moment that they’d get stuck. “No, no, he did not.”

“Erm, yeah. That was, well, that was why I said maybe we shouldn’t resort to pyrotechnics against Beatrice. I kinda earned my spot in the ranks of the unemployed.”

Paige let out a slow breath, her thoughts stamped loudly over her face. Concern was first and foremost, and the thing I saw most clearly. Very deliberately, she spun on the couch, crossed her legs, folded her hands primly between them, and faced me fully. “What shall we tackle first? The job or the sex?”

When she put it that way, maybe I’d been a little close-lipped with my family since I got back from my weekend away. I frowned. It wasn’t like me to keep stuff from them, not big things like this, but I’d been in survival mode, convincing myself that I was fine with what happened in South Dakota. I stayed in South Dakota.

I'd worked overtime to keep a lid on the part of myself that missed him, missed talking with him, laughing with him, and teasing him until he allowed a crack in his reserve. It had been easier not to talk about him at all than to face the reality that it had only been one weekend, despite what it had meant to me.

Paige shifted restlessly when I didn't answer immediately.

"Please, give me guidance, because my mind is about to explode if I don't get clarification"—her voice rose in pitch and volume—"on the fact that you slept with the boy who used to live next door, and I didn't know about it, and it cost you your job. I don't know what to say about any of it, Molly, and you not telling me is freaking me out," she cried.

I smiled, leaning forward to grab one of her hands. "Deep breaths, okay?"

It was similar enough to what she had told me earlier when I called from my office that we both laughed. "Sorry," she said. "It's just ... you're throwin' a lot at me, kiddo. What do we deal with first?"

My swallow was rough, hard to get down, but it was Paige, so I had to be honest. "This may not be the empowered female answer where I say that nothing matters except my career and he's just a guy, and I don't need a guy to feel complete or happy or to love myself."

"There is a time and place for all of those things," she interjected. "But there's no one size fits all for what makes people happy, okay? If there was, we'd have a black and white checklist to follow."

I nodded.

"We will talk about Beatrice, and your job, and what you'll do next," she promised. "But if Noah—whatever happened with him—is the thing weighing on you the most right now, then let's start there."

The words came easily, like I needed her permission to unload them into the safe space that our couch represented. All four of us girls had cried there through middle school, high school, and college. If Logan ever got rid of that couch, there

would be a mutiny within the Ward family. The cushions sank a little where I was sitting because it was everyone's favorite spot, but that couch was the next best thing to being in a therapist's office.

Paige listened without interruption as I told her everything. She smiled about the yoga, sighed when I got to our first kiss, blushed like only a mom would when I got to South Dakota, and her eyes got suspiciously glassy when I told her about my decision to pull back from him, how I lied to Beatrice, and up to what had happened that afternoon in the parking lot.

My throat was dry when we were finally caught up, but so were my eyes because there was some strange power in the telling of what led to my current predicament. I wasn't angry with Beatrice. I was frustrated with myself. I wasn't mad at Noah for being clueless because the man's longest relationship was with an inanimate object covered in brown leather with white laces and that was just sad AF, in all honesty. I asked for space, and he'd given it to me. It wasn't fair to hold it against him when all he'd done was respect my wishes.

I felt heavy from all those things combined. Weighed down with the various components of what lost me my job but had me falling in love with a man who had the emotional availability of a rock.

"Damn, girl," Paige said when I finished. She was slumped against the cushions of the couch.

"I know." I held my breath as I watched her process everything. Trust me, I knew it was a lot. I'd had weeks, and I still found myself a little confused. "Was I stupid for pulling back?"

"Oh geez, Mol, it's not that simple." She blew out a quick puff of air. "I don't think you were stupid, no. But I happen to think you and your sisters are four of the six greatest human beings to walk this earth, so I'm prone to believe whatever you decide is correct and will thereby defend it to the death."

"Yeah, right." I snorted. "Where was that logic when we were in high school?"

She smiled. “I know, I know. Easier for me to say now that it’s not my responsibility to decide how to weigh the consequences of your actions. Now, my child, that burden is yours. Yours to live with, and yours to work through.”

“I’m so glad I came to you because this is making me feel much better.”

Paige laughed. “Listen, what I will say is this, being in a relationship with an athlete is no piece of cake. But I don’t need to tell you that because it’s been a part of your life longer than it’s been a part of mine. I get it, he’s driven, and he’s talented, and he’s at the top of his game. He’s never put anything ahead of football and that makes him a scary bet. That wasn’t the case for me and your brother.” She smiled. “He had you guys, and nothing, not even football, was more important than the four of you.”

“I sense a but ...”

“But,” she said slowly, “it’s not up to you to make that decision for him when he had an incomplete picture, Molly. And that’s what you did. He respected you enough not to push you on it, and that was before he had any clue that you could lose your job for what you did. What would he have done if he’d known you were falling for him? What would have happened if you talked to Beatrice and told her it was a serious relationship? There’s no way of knowing, not now. Maybe he would’ve panicked, but maybe not. Maybe Beatrice would’ve fired you earlier, but maybe not.” She shrugged.

It was like trying to untangle of knot of multi-colored yarn in my lap, one the size of my head. I couldn’t tell where it started, where it ended, or just how long I’d been looping and looping and looping in the wrong direction. It was hard to say whether the first wrong turn had been as far back as the elevator when I saw Noah for the first time. Or thinking I could be friends with him, kiss him, sleep with him without involving my heart. That I could prove something to Beatrice that she’d never fully believe in the first place.

All those things equaled one massive coiled, complicated mess.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” she asked. “Just ... blurt it out. First thing you wish you could understand.”

“Noah in the parking lot.” I blinked at how quickly the words came out. “I was surprised at how awkward he was. His confusion that the awkwardness was there between us at all.”

Emmett came around the corner, and Paige held up her hand. “Ten more minutes, kid. Back away.”

“But—”

“Ten minutes, unless you want my help with the math instead of Molly’s.”

He disappeared in a flash of mahogany-colored hair, and I laughed.

“Honestly,” Paige said, “that’s a piece of cake. Men are incredibly clueless sometimes. And if you take a man like that, who lives by the x’s and o’s of a playbook, who is in complete control of just about every piece of his life except his opponent, they get really good at reading the competition. You took that away from him by removing yourself from the equation. Not only that, but you are also a woman, and from the sounds of it, Noah has had little-to-no experience with that area for the past few years. His choice, but still. You rocked his world, Molly.” She grinned, and I hid my face behind the pillow with a groan. “And then you disappeared. The fact that he’s still puzzling out how he feels about that means he’s got it just as bad as you do.”

I slumped back, keeping a tight grip on that pillow. “Why does it sound so easy when you explain it?”

“Because I’m old and smart and happily married to an incredibly stubborn man. It’s the trifecta of good relationship advice.”

Curling into my side, I grinned at her. “You’re humble too. Don’t forget that.”

“It’s a terrible burden to bear,” Paige announced gravely. She clapped her hands. “Okay. So now that we understand the man, what do we do about it?”

Unfortunately, I knew the answer to this. “We don’t rush into anything.”

Her face fell. “We don’t?”

I shook my head. “I’ve gone headfirst into so many situations without paying attention to anything other than my feelings. Noah is a perfect example. Twice now, when it comes to him, I’ve let my feelings override common sense. I agree with you, I think Noah does care for me, and I think we could have something amazing.” I swallowed. “But it’s not my responsibility to make him understand that. Or to prove to him that I’m worth a spot in his life. I know that I’m worth it. I know he’s worth more than what he does on the field. But I think”—I breathed unsteadily—“I need him to climb through my window this time. Do something that feels risky and crazy for *me*. I deserve that.”

Paige surged forward on the couch and flung her arms around me. I was engulfed by almost six feet of gorgeous, overwhelming, maternal-influence love.

“You deserve that times a million,” she gushed.

I patted her back with a laugh.

“Can we eat carbs now?” I asked.

Paige disentangled herself from me and held out a hand to help me up. “Yes. Let’s go brainstorm your other issue over garlic bread.”

I grinned. “Oh, I already have an idea for that. I won’t be unemployed for long.”



## NOAH

“This is not what I had in mind when you asked for my help, Griffin,” Marty said. His head was resting on his arms, his whole body slumped in exhaustion. Or maybe it was irritation, I couldn’t really tell. Didn’t really care either because once the plan starting formulating in my head, I dialed in like a ravenous dog onto a medium rare chunk of prime rib.

I crossed my arms and pointed at the massive screen I had mounted above the fireplace of my family room. “Back it up about forty seconds and look.” I swept an arm out. “We need to cut right there.” I rolled my eyes when Marty groaned. “If you watch carefully, you can see what I’m talking about *right there.*”

“If you make me watch this clip one more time,” he growled.

I glanced over my shoulder. “You’ll what? Glare at me to death?” My hands snapped together in a sharp clap, and Marty jumped. “Do I need to mark it up on the diagram again?”

“No,” Rick and Marty answered.

The diagram had been an immense source of joy for me over the past forty-eight hours. It laid on my dining room table, spiral bound with laminated pages so I could mark on it with dry erase markers. My own playbook because I could understand that structure for how to move forward.

Offensive Campaign: M Ward



The title needed work, but what was found inside the pages was nothing short of genius. I'd never fancied myself a filmmaker, but over the past two days, the three of us had honed, hacked, edited, tweaked, and cut my relationship with Molly down to a short film that was fucking Oscar-worthy, if you asked me.

Rick and Marty just didn't appreciate my approach at directing, which looked a bit more like my attempt to channel my inner Bill Belichick. I was ruthless, making them loop the same thirty-second scene over and over and over until we caught just the right cut of the moment that Molly tipped me over when we were doing yoga.

The only reason they hadn't tied me up and stuffed a gag in my mouth was because I'd agreed to let them film the entire thing once she was here. A camera guy from their office came over after Marty and I had our parking lot brainstorm, then cleared everything with Rick.

The parking lot brainstorm was full of excitement and optimism and hope.

Now, they were actively plotting my demise with every request I made to play back another chunk of the footage.

"Okay," I said, "let's move back to South Dakota. I think we can give that more impact."

"No," Rick mumbled.

My eyebrows lifted. "Sorry?"

"No, no, no." He stood from the couch and pressed two fists into his back as he stretched with a groan. "You are the Hitler of romantic gestures, and if she doesn't love this exactly as it is, then holy shit, Griffin, we can't help you."

Suppressing my irritation that they weren't taking this as seriously as I was, I crossed my arms over my chest and faced him with spread legs. "It has to be perfect, Rick."

My tersely spoken words hung in the air as they stared at me. Didn't they understand?

This was my chance. This was the way I could make her see.

Seeing Molly like that—when I was unprepared to speak to her, unprepared for the gut check of being around her, and seeing the way every emotion played out over her face—it flipped on every light that had been dark in her absence.

Maybe I hadn't seen it right away, that every second we spent together, every second she spent gently coaxing me out from behind the wall I'd built, had been us falling in love. But I saw it now.

I couldn't help but see it, in the hours and hours of film I had at my fingertips.

Watching the film was preparation.

Watching the film helped me understand myself and my opponent, and currently, the thing opposing me was the clock. Washington had a bye week, so the time for a big romantic gesture couldn't have been better.

But the time ticked down all the same. Bright, shifting numbers that got closer and closer to some imaginary buzzer going off.

And I was fighting against myself.

Showing Molly that I was capable of allowing room in my life for something other than football—not just something, *her*—would need to be big.

Those were pages fifteen through eighteen of the playbook, which included sketches of string lights across my back deck, a movie projector, and a giant screen stretched through the branches of the trees in my backyard. And some vague idea of moving my mattress onto the grass and topping it with pillows and blankets so we could watch our movie under the stars. My telescope was out there somewhere too, since I'd mapped out precisely what would be visible in the night sky.

This was the way to do it. Everything lined up correctly, the best defense against my own cluelessness. My own ambition blinded me to all the other things that could matter

just as much as my career did. If I could pull this off correctly, if I could do this right ...

My thoughts started stuttering in that same place every time. The *if*.

Rick must have sensed the change in direction in my head because I couldn't entertain the idea that maybe I'd read Molly wrong in all of this.

He laid a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Noah, it's perfect."

I shook my head. "I can make it better. I just need a little more time."

Marty and Rick shared a look.

"Molly won't need perfect," Marty said quietly. "You know that girl. Even when you were a giant horse's ass, she felt something for you. Because she knew the real you was underneath there somewhere."

Rick nodded. "All you need to do is show her that she wasn't wrong about you. That what she saw, what she put her trust in, even for that one weekend, was worth it."

"Worth her job?" I asked dryly.

"Worth taking a risk," he corrected. "She took a risk because you were worth it to her. This"—he gestured to our little command center—"is you taking a risk too. Because you could get through everything you have planned, and she still might not say yes."

Panic was an icy claw that dug straight into my chest, gripped my spine tight, and threatened to tug. "Please never be a coach because that is the worst pep talk I've ever heard."

And I thought that figuring out how to get her to the house would be the hard part. I'd convinced myself up until the current moment that convincing *Logan* to help me was the hard part. But the hard part was letting go of the edge, one finger at a time, until I could fall back freely into whatever happened next.

In my ears, I could hear the hard pulse of my heart because I knew Rick was right.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I yanked out my phone and sent a text to her brother.

**Me: Here's my address. Tell her whatever you need to get her here, but I'll be ready at 8pm tonight.**

**Logan: Understood.**

I let out a slow breath.

Rick smiled. "All set?"

"I have eight hours to get everything set up."

"Plenty of time," he assured me. Then he eyed my face with concern. "You're going to shower, right? Because you look a little ..."

"Homeless," Marty answered. "He looks homeless."

"Will you both shut up? Yes, I'm going to shower. But I have more important things to worry about right now."

Marty's eyes widened. "More than how terrible you look? I highly doubt it."

Rick smothered a smile. "What do you need?"

"Do I have a projection screen?"

He nodded. "Our guy can be here in two hours with everything you need. He'll get all the A/V set up for you. All you'll need to do is hit play."

"Is the mattress idea stupid?"

Marty laid his head down on his folded arms again. "I know now. I know why you didn't get laid for years because you have to question whether a mattress is a good idea."

My exhale was slow and steady. "Fine. Keep the mattress. I just didn't want to be, you know, presumptuous."

"And you're doing the constellation thing, right?" Marty lifted his head. "Stars are some romantic shit, Noah. You can stand behind her, all that touching, show her where to look and everything."

I rubbed my temples. "Yes, Marty, we should be able to see Pegasus pretty clearly. But I thought, I don't know,

shouldn't I tie it in? Make some connection to our love story?"

"That's on you, buddy. I'm just here to run the camera."

"Yeah," I said dryly, "make sure you zoom in properly if she breaks my heart."

"She won't," Rick said. "What's the story of Pegasus?"

I grimaced. "It, uhh, sprang from Medusa's severed head. That's how he was born."

Rick swallowed like his mouth was full of sand. "Maybe ... don't use that." He patted me awkwardly on the back. "Why don't we watch the tape from the beginning one last time, all right?"

Marty groaned. "I can't. I can't do it. He's made us watch it eight thousand times in the past two days, Rick. I see them almost kiss one more time, I'm going to lose my mind."

I glared at him. "And whose fault is it that you got it on film?"

"Like I knew what you guys were doing when I came back upstairs! I didn't even realize I caught anything until I got back to the office."

Rick held up his hands. "Okay. Marty, go take a breather. Noah, you and I can take it from the top. But I promise," he said, "it's perfect. She'll love it."

"This better work," I muttered. He started the video we'd made again, and just like I had every single time we watched it, there was an unsettling sense of rightness in every second. The fact that I missed it, from the very first day, seemed impossible now.

We watched quietly, and I found myself smiling when we got to the snippets from the day we did yoga. Marty fought tooth and nail for the scene where I blatantly checked out her ass, and he was right, it was funny. A chink in the armor, a break in my control, almost as though she'd scripted it herself from the very beginning.

There was a brusque knock on the door, and I sighed, punching the pause button on the remote.

“Want me to get it?” Rick asked.

“No. It’s probably a neighbor or something. I keep managing to avoid the greeting committee.”

I yanked open the door.

And there she was.

“Wha-” I stammered. “Molly?”

Her brother stood behind her, a cunning grin plastered across his face.

She glared over her shoulder at him. “He just ... showed up here and wouldn’t tell me why.”

When she faced me again, her cheeks were flushed bright pink, her eyes bright with nerves.

The fact that my house was a mess, nothing was ready, no lights were strung, and no soft music was playing under a sunset-dim sky or that I looked like a crazy homeless person didn’t matter. There were a thousand details that could have made it the most perfect night in the world, but suddenly, they were completely inconsequential.

The excess boiled away, reducing the moment down to the bare truth, the unbreakable bones of what I needed to know, what I needed to trust in.

She was here. And I loved her.

“Will you come in?” I asked.

Molly blinked. “You knew I was coming?”

I gave Logan a loaded look. “You were supposed to be delivered a little bit later,” I said meaningfully, “but yes. Logan agreed to help me.”

Her lips curled in a smile. “Then I’m sorry I’m early.”

“I’m not,” I answered.

The smile widened, and it blew through me like a veritable wrecking ball. That was always what Molly had been to me. A weapon of mass destruction, testing every limit I’d ever given myself. And I didn’t want it any other way.

Standing back so she could enter the house, I glared at Logan. “What was that for?” I hissed.

He leaned up to smack me on the shoulder. Hard. “That was for sleeping with my sister, asshole.” Then he grinned. “Welcome to the family.”

As he ambled back to his truck, he whistled, and I couldn’t help but shake my head at how this entire thing had played out. Ten years in the making, an inevitable conclusion that was impossible for me to avoid.

I shut the door and tried to regroup because well ... I’d just been blitzed. Outmaneuvered. And I never saw it coming.

Rick was grinning as he greeted Molly. “He’s been an absolute terror to put up with since you left.”

“Is that your way of saying you missed me?” she asked. Marty stormed up the stairs when he heard her voice and wrapped her in a massive, rib-cracking hug that had her laughing. “I guess that answers my question.”

“Don’t leave us alone with him,” Marty begged.

Molly tucked a piece of hair behind her ear and gave me a shy glance that had my heart thudding—big, big, bigger—until it felt stretched over my entire body. “I’ll see what I can do,” she said.

I smiled.

It was so right having her here. This was what made it feel like my home. Her.

Her gaze tracked over the space, and even with how messy it was, she looked happy. Then the smile froze, her eyes widening as she caught sight of the TV screen. “That’s us,” she said numbly.

Rick and Marty shared a look. Rick gave me a thumbs-up and disappeared downstairs. Marty picked up his small camera and moved back into the kitchen, so he could be out of the way and still catch what needed to be caught. It was our compromise.

Just far enough out of earshot that if she and I spoke quietly, they'd struggle to hear us. The other cameraman flicked off his machine and followed Rick downstairs. He nodded encouragingly too. Maybe I ought to learn his name before it was all over.

"It is us," I said, coming up behind her. "It's ... hell, this is not how I wanted to do any of this."

She reached down to the coffee table and carefully picked up the remote. Before she hit the play button, she let out a shaky breath.

But my brave girl, not knowing what she'd see, or what I'd intended, she lifted her chin and started it over.

I'd seen the film enough, the blossoming of our love condensed into eight minutes, so I could unabashedly watch her.

One minute in, she was smiling at the scene where she knocked me on my ass by telling me I could be better.

Two, she had a hand covering her mouth as she breathed out a laugh at the sight of me storming out of the tiny house.

Three, and I caught the sheen of happy tears during our yoga session.

At four minutes, the realization that Marty caught our almost first kiss. She pressed a shaky hand to her mouth.

It was impossible to be so far away from her, so I approached quietly from behind, letting out a slow breath before my palms coasted up the sides of her upper arms. I cupped her shoulders, warm and firm, and her soft hair tickled my fingers. She leaned back against me, giving me her full weight, and I exhaled my relief, wrapping my arms around the front of her chest as she watched the footage from South Dakota.

This was subtle to anyone else watching, but to Molly and me, it was bright and obvious, a spotlight on everything we'd been denying. The camera caught me constantly watching her off the screen. Everything I couldn't understand was right there in my eyes.



I tightened my arms, and her hands came up to grip my forearms. With her tucked against my chest, I could set my chin easily on the top of her head. She dropped her mouth and laid a soft kiss on the tender skin of my wrist.

“I was such an idiot,” I whispered.

She kissed me again, just above my thumb. “Only a little.”

The laugh was out before I could stop it.

“Shhh, I’m still watching,” she chided gently.

I closed my eyes and breathed her in. How had I ever thought I could live a full life, a satisfying life, if I didn’t have this in it?

What a fool I’d been.

She sniffed when she watched the blank, robotic version of me after she pulled away. It was the part I hated most—what I would have accepted, what I did accept, as a normal, healthy life.

Then she laughed when she saw the end. The part Marty caught in his failed attempt at a sprint in the parking lot. The screen went black, and Molly turned slowly in my arms.

“You did this? For me?”

My hand cupped her face, and my eyes feasted on the small details that I’d missed so much. The jut of her chin, the delicate nose, the weight of her body against mine. “I had a little help,” I admitted with a smile. “And there was going to be a much better delivery.”

“Yeah?”

“A screen in the backyard. Lights. A big bed on the grass where we could watch it.”

Her eyebrow lifted, but she was running her hands over my chest, so I figured I wasn’t in too much trouble.

“And the stars,” I continued. “I found Pegasus and had every intention of trying to make it romantic, but ... it’s not. He came from a severed head, so it’s probably best that it didn’t work out anyway.”

The laughter started low in her throat, bubbling out the longer I rambled. Finally, she took pity on me and laid a hand over my mouth. “Stop.”

I kissed her fingers. “Okay.”

“Why’d you make that?” she asked quietly. “The movie.”

“Because there needs to be a record somewhere,” I told her. “There should be proof, undeniable proof, of the very best thing I’ve ever achieved in my life.” I wrapped my arms around her back and lifted her up in my arms so I could whisper where no one but us would hear. “Falling in love with you is the greatest thing I’ve ever done, Molly Ward.”

Her arms were so tight around my neck that I felt the way her body trembled. Within the circle of my arms, she let out a sob of relief. “I love you too,” she whispered back.

In the next moment, her mouth was on mine, hard and sweet and deep. The fierce fullness of the kiss pulled a groan from my chest, and she wrapped her legs around my waist so she could hold tighter and move more firmly against me.

I wanted her.

I loved her.

She loved me.

And, I thought as I froze, we were being filmed. I pulled back, and she followed with a whimper.

“Camera,” I said against her lips.

Molly went still, another bright smile spreading over her face. “Oh, yeah.”

“But as soon as we chase them out of here ...” I promised with a growl.

She hopped out of my arms and called for Rick to come upstairs.

I glanced over at Marty, who was wiping tears from his face unabashedly.

Rick skipped lightly up the steps. “You called?”

“Yes,” she said. “You and I have to talk tomorrow morning. But right now, you need to leave.”

His face creased in confusion. “Tomorrow morning?”

Molly nodded, herding them gently toward the door. “Yes. I have a job proposal to go over with you. I think you should hire me.”

My eyebrows popped up in surprise. So did his.

“He says yes!” Marty interjected as he hastily started wrapping up cords.

Rick gave him a look. “Tomorrow,” he promised. “But can’t we, I don’t know, film a little happy cuddling?”

“No,” Molly and I answered.

“We have other things to discuss,” Rick said. “A lot has happened this week. You don’t even know about our new idea!”

“Out. Or I will start stripping,” she warned. “And that will make my future employment awkward. And you’d violate the nudity clause if you film me in any state of undress.”

My head tilted back on a booming laugh, and Rick gave me an exasperated look.

In another two seconds, she had them out the door, and the deadbolts flipped decisively. I set my hands on my hips as she turned, her back flush against the door’s surface.

“Now,” she said, “let’s recap.”

“Okay.” I stepped closer to her.

“I’m your girlfriend.”

“Yes.” My hands found her hips.

“You’re my boyfriend.”

“Mmmhmm.” My lips found the soft curve of her neck.

“W-we’re finally alone. With no cameras. Or microphones. Or family members under the same roof.” Her fingers pushed under the soft cotton of my shirt, and I hissed when she trailed them along the edge of my shorts.

“That’s correct.” I bit down on the delicate line of her collarbone, soothing it with my tongue when she moaned.

“You love me,” she said quietly.

I pulled back and held her gaze steadily. “I do.”

“And I love you,” she finished.

My voice was rough when I was finally able to speak. “Yeah.”

“That’s good. I like all of that.”

I smiled. “How should we celebrate? Every big win needs a big celebration.”

“Like ...” She dropped her voice like a sports announcer. “You just won the Super Bowl, what will you do next?”

“We’re not going to Disneyland, sweetheart,” I promised. But the fact that she could bring me to the edge of laughter in a moment so laden with sexual tension, so rife with want and desperation to *take, take, take*, was how I knew that Molly was the exact right person for me.

She inhaled with a satisfied smile pulling up the edges of her lips. “Take me to your big bed, in your big room, because we are about to break it in, Noah Griffin.”

I swept her in my arms, relishing in the happy shriek that left her mouth. “You’re the boss.”

We stayed there all day and all night, only stopping briefly for food. A shower. And endless conversations. The playbook was probably still lying open in a useless heap on the dining room table. But that was the point.

I couldn’t have scripted this, couldn’t have planned it, couldn’t have controlled it.

Because sometimes, the best things in life come straight from your blind side.

## EPILOGUE

Six months later

**Molly**

“Oh sweetheart, did you see this one?” Grandma Griffin tossed the *Us Weekly* into my lap as she passed the couch. “You’re way too pretty for my grandson.”

Noah groaned as I flipped to the article she’d dog-eared. “Another article?”

I elbowed him. “People love us. We’re cute.”

It was a quick mention. Never in a million years would I have anticipated having a corner of a magazine page dedicated to me and my hot boyfriend and our red-carpet style.

Amazon had gone all out for the *All or Nothing* season featuring Noah, and to my never-ending surprise, me. Instead of red, we’d done a black carpet, so that my red dress would stand out. And it had.

It was a picture I’d seen a lot. Instagram users seemed to like that particular one. Noah had his tux-clad arm wrapped tight around my waist, head bent toward me, and his nose pressed against my temple.

I was smiling widely, my shoulders angled toward him, and a hand placed against his chest. The Grecian-style dress that I’d chosen was a vivid scarlet that draped over one shoulder and was cinched tight around my waist with a gold

belt. What the camera couldn't see because the length of the dress swept the floor were the spiky gold heels that had only lasted as long as getting our picture taken.

By the time we were in the theater for the screening of the first episode, I'd slipped into some nude flats.

It was our first night as a couple in the spotlight, and social media exploded with the release of the full season of episodes documenting our love story. Since Rick hired me before I even finished pitching myself, I was involved in crafting the finished product of our story from beginning to end. And it was damn good television, if I said so myself.

The last episode was my favorite, the one we'd shot during their final playoff game, which they lost 28-21. It encapsulated everything about Noah and me that I loved so much. Before the cameras moved to follow us through the game, it caught some sweet, quiet moments when he helped me unpack my things. I loved Isabel, but living with Noah was *way* more fun.

When the quiet moments were done, and we saw him play his heart out for four quarters, only to have the opposing defense stop us five yards shy of the end zone as the clock ran out. The devastation and disappointment on his face still made me cry, as it had that day. It was still hard for me to watch even though we were a few months removed from it by now. But the viewers loved it.

They loved how real we were with each other. They loved that the footage of me at the end of the game was just as emotional, that my sorrow for him was so obvious as I sat in the stands with the other disappointed Washington fans. It was what made the closing scene so poignant.

Me climbing over the barrier and into his waiting arms. Him, sweaty and disheveled and dirty, lifting me into a tight embrace on the chaotic post-game field. And he smiled.

Not a sad smile.

Noah Griffin smiled like he'd just won.

His grandma, our host for the week, told me she'd watched every episode three times. She kept every article that

mentioned us and made sure to show me each and every one.

“You ready, son?” Noah’s dad asked from the kitchen.

Noah nodded, dropping a soft kiss on my lips as he stood from the couch. “We’ll be back for dinner.”

“Okay.” I grabbed the front of his shirt and tugged him back down for another kiss. “Have fun fixing fences.”

He rolled his eyes. His grandma and I laughed.

Noah left the cabin first, and I smiled as I caught the embarrassed blush on his dad’s face when he left the kitchen. It had taken a bit for him to get used to having me around and seeing the easy affection that Noah and I shared.

As I spent more time with his dad, it was so clear to see how Noah fell into the patterns that he had. Slowly but surely, his dad was relaxing around me. My goal was one week every summer that Noah, his dad, and I came to South Dakota together. Eventually, I’d break him into the Tuesday family dinners. He just didn’t know it yet.

And that was why Grandma Griffin proclaimed that I was her new favorite person in the entire world.

She rubbed my shoulder as she passed behind the couch. “Need anything while I’m up, sweetheart?”

I smiled up at her. “I’m good, thanks. I have some work to do for Rick while they’re out there unless you need my help with anything.”

“No, no, one set of hands is all I need to do some weeding.”

“I’ll come out when I’m done,” I told her. “It won’t take me too long.”

She set her wide-brimmed hat on her head and paused before she walked out front. “Actually,” she said, tugging her gardening gloves on, “I know how you can help.”

I glanced over. “Yeah?”

She lifted her eyebrows. “A great-grandchild would be *lovely*.”

As she walked outside, I was still laughing because she found so many ways to remind Noah and me that she needed a baby to spoil.

The door swung back open, and my smile softened when Noah strode back into the cabin.

“Forget something?” I asked.

He snatched his water bottle from the counter. “It’s hotter than hell out there.”

“I’ll take another kiss while you’re here.”

He was already sweaty, one of my very favorite looks on the man I loved so much. When he came around the couch to cage me in with his arms and take my mouth in a deep, searing kiss, I felt that desperate urge rush through me, just like it always did.

Honestly, it was a miracle I *wasn’t* pregnant with how often he took me to bed.

Noah had proven that frequent sex did not hurt his performance on the field in any way. Mr. Defensive Player of the Year had proven it well, too.

I licked my lips when he pulled back. “And your dad would notice if you didn’t come back outside right away, right?”

Noah hummed. “Yes.”

I trailed my finger along the edge of his jaw. “Okay. I can wait until tonight.”

His eyes searched my face and landed unerringly on my mouth. “Can you?”

My heart started pounding wildly, and my toes curled up. “Yes?”

“I can’t,” he stated.

My lips spread in a slow smile. “No?”

As usual, my big man was quick to make his decision. “Nope.”



And he scooped me up, both hands under my ass. My legs wound around his waist as he straightened, turning us toward our bedroom.

I loved the bed in that cabin. It was my second favorite bed in the world.

“Noah?” I said breathlessly as he sucked along the edge of my throat.

He growled something unintelligible into my skin.

I gripped the sides of his face so I knew he was paying attention to me.

“Wha?” he said. He already had that dazed look in his eye that he got when my clothes started disappearing.

“Make sure to lock the door,” I said. “I don’t want any interruptions for what I’m about to do to you.”

He grinned. His hands tightened on my body as he walked us into the bedroom, his foot delivering a swift kick to the door.

No matter how our love story started, as long as it brought us right here, it was perfect.

## **Claire**

SEARCHING the internet for glimpses of your mother brought about strange emotional reactions. Unless you’d experienced those reactions, it was hard to put them into words. Occasionally, we’d get a postcard from her with an updated address, or a caption-less picture would show up on the usually quiet Facebook account she still had access to. Those tiny snippets were the only way my sisters and I knew where Brooke was currently spending her days.

My heart and my head warred mightily when I studied the last few pictures she’d posted. I wasn’t furious at the thought of her; it was hard to be when we had such a happy life in her absence. But I didn’t feel nothing either. Sometimes I wanted to punch her. Sometimes I wanted to hug her. Most of all, I wanted to sit across from Brooke Ashley Huntington-Ward

and pick apart her brain. That was the most desperate feeling of all of them, fighting for first place in my head. I wanted to understand why, and it drove me abso-friggin-lutely batshit crazy that I might never have that understanding.

As I scrolled through, counting five pictures posted in the last three years, my twin sister's phone lit up on the desk next to me where it was charging. My eyes cut to the screen, a force of habit because it was often a group text from one of our other sisters or Paige.

It wasn't from any of them, though. What appeared was a text from Finn, my twin sister Lia's best friend, and like I'd trained my body to do it, my heart sped up at the sight of his stupid name.

**Finn: Lia, PLEASE, I'll owe you a million favors if you help me out.**

"I'll help you," I mumbled miserably. It didn't even matter what he needed help with. I'd do it. I'd do it without a million favors. If I closed my eyes, I could picture every detail of his face. The way his smile was a little lopsided. The width of his shoulders that seemed to expand every year. The shy exterior that hid a personality that was so, so funny and dry and sarcastic. But I didn't close my eyes because picturing my twin sister's best friend was another thing that made my head and heart war mightily. And every single time, my head won.

*Leave him alone.*

*It would be too weird.*

*He doesn't even look at you that way.*

Those were all the things I told myself when my crush on Finn flared out of control. And it had helped for years.

"Text from Finn," I yelled.

"What does he want?" Lia called from our kitchen, right around the corner from my bedroom.

I swallowed heavily as I read the text again. "Help. He'll owe you a million favors."

Lia groaned. “He could offer two million, and I still wouldn’t be able to do it.”

“What does he need your help with?”

“Some fancy-pants dinner and award ceremony. He needs a plus one, and since he refuses to find himself a date, his mom practically demanded that I go with. I think she actually put my name on the guest list because she assumed I wouldn’t say no.”

My heart clenched with unwelcome jealousy. “It’s just dinner. Why not go?”

“I can’t. I have something that night, and moving it isn’t an option. He just thinks I’m being stubborn.”

I rolled my eyes. Lia was physically incapable of admitting when she was being stubborn, which was about ninety-two percent of her existence.

The sound of her footsteps approached my doorway, quick and loud. “Wait,” she said.

I spun my chair to face her. “What?”

A devious smile spread over her face.

“No,” I said instantly. Twin telepathy, y’all. It was a real thing.

“Oh, yes.” She rubbed her hands together. “We haven’t done a twin swap in years, Claire. Come on, won’t it be fun?”

While my head tried desperately to wrap around the idea of pretending to be my sister for the first time since high school, it was a faint whisper compared to what my heart was doing.

That particular organ buried in my chest was roaring and thrashing, screaming at me to *do this one thing* that would grant me my greatest unfulfilled wish.

Time with Finn.

“He’ll know,” I argued weakly.

Lia blew a raspberry through her lips. “Nah, he won’t. You know how to be me, Claire. It’s one dinner. Then I’m off the hook, and his mom gets off his back.”

One dinner with Finn. One night to soak up his attention instead of playing the third wheel to the clearly non-romantic friendship between him and my sister. They’d never even hinted that they wanted to cross that line, which was the only reason I was even considering this insanity. Because for one night, I wanted to know what it felt like to have his eyes on me. To wear a pretty dress and spend the evening by his side.

“One dinner,” I said again.

She bounced excitedly in the doorway. “You’ll do it? Seriously?”

I took a deep breath and held it, muting every argument that sprang into my head. “I’ll do it.”

*Claire’s night didn’t turn out exactly as she planned. It would’ve been just fine ... if Finn had been the one to show up.*

*Keep reading after the Focused bonus epilogue to find out what happens when Finn’s bad boy brother shows up instead...*

## FOCUSED BONUS EPILOGUE

A few years after *The End*

**Molly**

“I hate my job.” My voice was muffled by the pillow I’d just screamed into, but my husband got the drift on the other end of the phone.

“No you don’t.”

I whipped the pillow off and turned onto my side, tucking my hands underneath it while I stared at the phone screen. He was smiling, that little amused tilt of his lips that didn’t come out very often. There was no screaming in pillows for Noah Griffin, even though he was just as affected by this as I was.

“Fine. I am *frustrated* with my job. Sometimes,” I amended. “And this is one of those times.”

He was walking through our kitchen, the sounds of the coffee maker breaking through the speakers. “We can celebrate our anniversary when you get back.”

I pushed out my bottom lip, a shameless pout of self-pity and disappointment, and he chuckled.

I didn’t want to wait to celebrate our fifth anniversary. I had things planned. Great things. Exciting fifth anniversary things.

Exciting for us, at least. Most couples would commemorate five years of marital bliss with a grand night out

on the town.

Not us.

Noah and I traveled so much for our jobs—me as a production manager for Amazon Studios, Noah as a gameday commentator for college football. Almost all our meals on the road were eaten in restaurants or hotels, occasionally catered events at someone's house. For *this* husband and wife, until our life slowed down just a little bit—a day spent at home, being pampered within an inch of our life—sounded like absolute heaven.

I'd hired a five-star personal chef.

A masseuse to come in for a couples massage.

I'd coordinated for an early showing of a movie we both wanted to see, but because it came out at the end of the college football season, there was no way we'd be able to make it work.

And in the top drawer of my dresser was a black lace confection that I fully intended on my husband tearing off me sometime after the movie.

Our asses would be in bed by nine pm for glorious sex and early bed time. What could be better?

Nothing.

Our anniversary had actually fallen—quite miraculously—on a rare off weekend for him, and a lull in my schedule as well. But my lull just got a little bit shorter, because of one cranky octogenarian who didn't want to go on camera.

The production on a sports documentary was supposed to have wrapped earlier that day. Normally, I didn't have to be present for everything, but one particular person we needed to interview had been particularly cagey. He was a notoriously private former coach, eschewing media in all forms, but he'd agreed to speak to our crew when I finally got him on the phone about six months earlier.

He'd delayed four times. Rescheduling him for the next day was our last attempt to get him on tape, or we'd have to

run the piece without his input.

“I knew this guy would cause problems,” I said. “I just didn’t think he’d ruin all my perfect anniversary plans.”

Noah settled into his favorite chair, studying my face with that patient look of his. “What was his excuse for missing the interview today?”

“A sore throat.” I rolled my eyes. “Last week, it was dry eye.”

“What if he doesn’t show tomorrow?”

My eyes narrowed. “I will hunt him down.”

Noah laughed, and the warm sound, so big and rich, had me nuzzling into the pillow.

“I miss you,” I whispered. “I wish we could do all the things I had planned for us tomorrow.”

“I miss you too.” He smiled, a crooked tilt of his lips. “Does this mean I still get the private chef for myself?”

When I glared into the phone screen, his grin widened.

“Just asking,” he said, lifting one hand in concession.

“The stuffed French toast he was going to make for breakfast,” I sighed. “It sounded so amazing.”

“It did.”

“Now I’ll be eating overpriced room service while I count down the hours until my flight leaves.”

“You said the room service was good.”

“Not Churro French Toast stuffed with raspberry compote good,” I argued.

“Touché.” He scratched the side of his jaw, and I studied all that dark hair. This was his new thing—growing out his facial hair in the fall and winter. I loved it. “What are you up to the rest of the day? Since you won’t be getting on a plane and all.”

I blew out a hard breath. “I’m going to head back into the filming location in a little bit. There’s some follow up they’re

filming with one of the principles because we need new takes, and I want to make sure they don't get off track." I gave him another pouty look. "I really wish I was getting on that plane, though."

"I know," Noah murmured. "I do too. The house is really empty and quiet, and I hate it."

"Are you saying I'm loud?"

"Yes."

I laughed. "Fair enough."

"Well ... if you're going to go do some work, maybe I'll do the same," Noah said around a yawning stretch.

Mmm. I loved when he was all sleepy and stretchy and tired. It made me want to curl up with him in our big bed for the rest of the day.

"What's that look?" he said.

My face went warm. "Just thinking about you and our bed and things that can't happen until I get home."

Noah blew out a breath. "I hate your job."

I laughed. "No you don't."

He grinned. "Go get some work done. We'll have other anniversaries, okay?"

I nodded, but my throat felt tight and my eyes dry and hot. He gave me a sad smile.

"I'm not gonna cry," I promised. "I just ... miss you."

"I miss you too."

We disconnected the call after saying our I love yous, and I only sniffled for a few minutes.

But I splashed some water on my face, reapplied a coat of mascara and left the hotel room with my laptop bag tucked tight against my side. It was strange, thinking about how fast five years had gone. Our life was crazy, and I absolutely loved it.



We managed all the travel and the competing schedules with the kind of intentional time alone that I'd planned for our anniversary, and we both knew that once we were able to start a family (hopefully soon because the thought of Noah with a baby in his arms made me want to pin him down in bed with regularity), things would slow and steady out.

Still be crazy, of course, just crazy in a different way.

There was no one else I wanted to navigate it with, and even thinking about him—no matter how disappointed I was—added just enough pep into my step as I waited for my Uber to bring me back to the studios.

The distraction of work helped, and six hours later, I schlepped my sore feet back through the hotel lobby, up to my hotel room—the shoes were gone immediately—and fell face first into bed.

When my phone dinged on my nightstand, I blinked awake—I'd crashed for a solid hour without even meaning to fall asleep in the first place—and smiled when I saw a text from my husband.

**NOAH:** Are you back from getting some work done?

**Me:** Yeah. I just crashed for a little nap, but I'm about to order some room service.

**Noah:** I'm having something delivered to your room. I know it won't make up for the chef, but ... I hope it helps a little.

**Me:** Oooh, how mysterious. Do I get any hints?

**Noah:** Nope.

**Me:** Ugh. Fine. HOW EXCITING. I'll let you know when it gets here.

I GRINNED, hopping out of bed to change into my pajamas while I waited for my surprise. Less than ten minutes later,

there was a knock on my room door. When I swung the door open, my mouth fell open.

“Surprise.”

My husband stood in the hallway, a shit-eating grin on his handsome face and a small suitcase next to him.

“You’re here?” I whispered.

His eyes softened, drinking in every inch of me—messy bun at the top of my head, scraggly pajamas that I’d had for a decade. “Where else would I be for our anniversary?”

I threw myself at him, and he swept me up in his arms, slanting his mouth over mine in a ferocious kiss.

One week away from him, and it had felt like a year. My arms clutched tight around his muscular shoulders, and I reveled in the smell and feel and taste of him. The way his lips felt under mine, the hot sweep of his tongue in my mouth, and the strength in his body as he held me to him.

Noah walked us into the hotel room, kicking the door shut behind him.

I ran my hands over his chest and along his side, and he slid his palm underneath my pajamas, cupping my breast as I whimpered. The edge of his thumb tracked a tight circle over the tight flesh, and in less than thirty seconds, I was ready to let my husband bang me against the hotel room wall.

He was here. In Arizona. Because I had to miss our anniversary and was sad about it.

Slowly, I cupped his face and gentled the kiss. Noah’s hand coasted over my waist, and up along my back, holding me tight against the warm frame of his body.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” I said against his mouth.

Noah heard the wobbly tears in my voice and pulled back, sliding his hand over the side of my face.

His smile was small, just a hint of a grin, and it was my favorite of all his smiles.

That was the smile he gave me when he was trying to figure out how to tell me just how much he loved me. I knew that after five years.

“Are you kidding?” His eyes traced over my face, touching the longest on my mouth. “You started talking about beds and the things you wanted to do in them.”

I laughed. “That did the trick?”

He hummed. “Then I went snooping.”

Noah dipped his knees, running the edge of his nose over the line of my jaw and inhaling slowly.

“Did you?” I whispered.

“I found that black lace thing in your drawer. You failed to mention that when you told me about our anniversary plans.” My laugh was watery, because the love I felt for him was just so stupid big and wonderful, and his thumb tracked away the tear that slid down my cheek. “When we got off the phone, I checked the departure times at SeaTac. There was a direct flight leaving two hours later.”

I grinned. “How much did that ticket cost?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. And I didn’t care. All I wanted was to be with you. Nothing else mattered.”

I broke away from our kiss, breathless and heart-happy. “Great answer,” I whispered.

He knelt over me on the bed as he laid me down, and I kissed him again, sighing into the sleek soft feel of his lips.

Maybe nothing went the way I’d planned it, but somehow ... it was exactly, utterly, perfectly us.

**FAKED**

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*To Fiona Cole,*

*Without her willingness to listen to my ranty voice messages  
about fictional people,*

*this book would have turned out very, very differently.*

*#dreamteam*

## CLAIRE

I didn't always have a crush on Finn Davis. There were about ten minutes there, back in seventh grade when he showed up, that he really pissed me off.

Not because of anything he did, per se. Because he's always been the same guy. Quiet and observant when he was in public, a knife-sharp sense of humor and playful personality when he was with people who knew him the best. No, Finn was the recipient of my thirteen-year-old rage for those ten minutes because he was the reason I hated being a twin for the first time in my life.

Lia and I were identical. Teachers and fellow students often confused us if they didn't know us well.

On that day in seventh grade, when the principal brought Finn into our classroom, Lia and I met him at the same time. But there was something about her, some energy buzzing at an undetectable level, that drew his attention and made him feel comfortable.

They'd been best friends ever since.

And I hated that I looked like her—exactly like her—and was still different enough that the sweet, shy new boy in class, the one with a cute smile and long legs, didn't look twice at me.

I didn't think about that day much anymore. It was eight years ago, and Finn was such a fixture in our family that my crush had lessened to a low-lying simmer. Barely detectable unless you held your hand directly over the heat.

But then I opened stupid Facebook. And saw a picture of him in his stupid “I’m going to be a doctor someday and don’t I look good in blue” scrubs, and I felt my heart die all the deaths from how cute he looked.

So now I couldn’t stop thinking about the day he appeared.

Couldn’t stop thinking about him.

Which is why I avoided my sister by locking myself in my room to study. I was so afraid that after all the years of locking up the butterflies that wanted to flutter through my veins at the sight of him, she’d take one look at me and know.

It worked, too, for a while.

When I felt my fingers burn with the urge to pull up the picture again to stare at his smile, at his dimples, and pretend I’d be a great doctor’s wife someday, I pulled up the one thing on social media guaranteed to stop any sort of heart flutters.

I searched for social media updates from our mother, Brooke, which was even more pathetic than my crush on Finn.

Crossing my arms on the surface of my desk, I dropped my forehead down, banging it a couple of times for good measure.

That was how I was sitting when my bedroom door burst open.

“What’s your problem?” Lia asked.

“Nothing.” I kept my head right where it was.

Lia leaned over me, dumped her shit on my desk, and pulled my laptop out from underneath my forearm so she could see it. Honestly, nothing was sacred when you lived with your twin.

Except my crush on her best friend.

“Oh,” she said meaningfully.

“What?”

“Did your neck *break*? Are you incapable of moving?”

“I’m comfortable.”

She chomped on something loudly. Carrots. Or celery. When she swallowed, she spoke again. “Cyberstalking Brooke again?”

Instead of answering, because I didn’t particularly want to lie, I grunted.

“Didn’t we decide she was in India?”

With a sigh, I stared at the wood grain on my desk and tried not to think too hard about how easily we could discuss the fact that the woman who gave birth to us was Lord knows where in the world, and we didn’t even really care anymore that we didn’t know where.

The sound of a clicking mouse preceded a thoughtful hum from my twin sister. “Nope, someone tagged her in ... huh, a concert in Germany. She’s on the move, I guess.”

“Oh, good.”

Lia sighed loudly. “Have fun with that.” With two patronizing pats on the back, she left me alone again.

When I heard cupboards slamming in our postage-stamp-size kitchen, I lifted my head.

“Chicken shit,” I whispered to myself. Like she’d somehow be able to see my “picture of Finn in scrubs” feelings stamped on my face.

This was what happened when my feelings couldn’t be muted by my brain. They were louder than I wanted, and I hid them less successfully.

Turning my laptop back to me, I drummed my fingers along the edge, trying to decide what to work on next.

The paper for my Early Childhood Intervention Strategies class was in desperate need of revisions, but even one of my last classes before I graduated with my Bachelor’s in Developmental Psychology wasn’t enough of a distraction.

But I knew what was, which was why it’d been my default in the first place.



Searching the internet for glimpses of your mother brought about strange emotional reactions. Unless you'd experienced those reactions, it was hard to put them into words. Occasionally, we'd get a postcard from her with an updated address, or a caption-less picture would show up on the usually quiet Facebook account she still had access to. Those tiny snippets were the only way my sisters and I knew where Brooke was currently spending her days.

Not that we ever sent postcards back.

Or reached out to her.

She'd lost that privilege years ago.

Even though I knew it wouldn't actually make me feel better or even distract me much from Finn, I found myself scrolling down her page.

My heart and my head warred mightily when I studied the last few pictures she'd posted. I wasn't furious at the thought of her; it was hard to be when we had such a happy life in her absence. But I didn't feel nothing either.

Sometimes, I wanted to punch her.

Sometimes, I wanted to hug her. Most of all, I wanted to sit across from Brooke Ashley Huntington-Ward and pick apart her brain. That was the most desperate feeling of them all, fighting for first place in my head. I wanted to understand why, and it drove me abso-friggin-lutely batshit crazy that I might never have that understanding.

As I scrolled through, counting five pictures posted in the past three years, my twin sister's phone lit up on the desk next to me where it was charging. My eyes cut to the screen, a force of habit because it was often a group text from one of our other sisters or Paige.

It wasn't from any of them, though. What appeared was a text from Finn, and like I'd trained my body to do it, my heart sped up at the sight of his stupid name.

**Finn: Lia, PLEASE, I'll owe you a million favors if you help me out.**

"I'll help you," I mumbled miserably. It didn't even matter what he needed help with. I'd do it.

But I didn't close my eyes because picturing my twin sister's best friend was another thing that made my head and heart war mightily. And every single time, my head won.

*Leave him alone.*

*It would be too weird.*

*He doesn't even look at you that way.*

Those were all the things I told myself when my crush on Finn flared out of control. And it had helped for years. It had helped all day.

"Text from Finn," I yelled.

"What does he want?" Lia called from the kitchen.

I swallowed heavily as I read the text again. "Help. He'll owe you a million favors."

Lia groaned. "He could offer two million, and I still wouldn't be able to do it."

"What does he need your help with?"

"Some fancy-pants dinner and award ceremony on Friday night. He needs a plus one, and since he refuses to find himself a date, his mom practically demanded that I go with. I think she actually put my name on the guest list because she assumed I wouldn't say no."

My heart clenched with unwelcome jealousy. "It's just dinner. Why not go?"

"I can't. There's this amazing guest lecture that same evening, and I am not missing it. I've wanted to hear her speak for years." She waved her hand. "He thinks I'm just being stubborn, but this is about my *education*."

"Of course, it is," I muttered.

Lia was physically incapable of admitting when she was being stubborn, which was about ninety-two percent of her existence.

The sound of her footsteps approached my doorway, quick and loud. Determined. Those were determined Lia steps, and it made me nervous. “Wait,” she said.

I spun my chair to face her. “What?”

*Don't say it, don't say it, don't say it*, a frantic voice chanted in my head. Because I knew.

A devious smile spread over her face.

“No,” I said instantly. Twin telepathy, y'all. It was a real thing.

“Oh, yes.” She rubbed her hands together. “We haven't done a twin swap in years, Claire. Come on, won't it be fun?”

While my head tried desperately to wrap around the idea of pretending to be my sister for the first time since high school, it was a faint whisper compared to what my heart was doing.

That particular organ buried in my chest was roaring and thrashing, screaming at me to *do this one thing* that would grant me my greatest unfulfilled wish.

Time with Finn.

“I can't,” I told her. “I hate lying. Not only do I hate it but I'm also terrible at it.”

Lia clasped her hands in front of her. “Please.”

“I know you love school, Lee, but it's one lecture. How much more English Lit does one need to be lectured on?”

She gave me a look because even though our majors were sun and moon different, we both loved school with equal intensity. Sometimes, I worried that the youngest Ward sisters would forever be enrolled in college because we just loved learning.

Our brother, Logan, often said if anything put him into debt, it would be the multiple doctorates he feared the two of

us would acquire and never use for anything.

“It’s not just a lecture.” She put on her pleading face. “It’s Catherine Atwood from Oxford.”

“Am I supposed to know who that is?”

Lia shrugged helplessly. “No, but ugh, she’s like ... everything. She’s a freaking rock star to anyone who’s ever studied the Brontë sisters. Her dissertation on Religion, Gender, and Authority in the novels of Charlotte Brontë is basically my bible.”

I rolled my eyes. “Only mildly sacrilegious, but okay. Why do I have to pretend to be you? Why can’t you just tell Finn you can’t go?”

Lia ignored my questions. “She’s from *Oxford*, C. She rarely does guest lectures, and she’s in the States for the first time in years, and she’s here at *UDub*.” Her eyes widened. “It was meant to be.”

“Lia,” I prompted.

From the set of her jaw, she knew exactly how little all that extra information would sway me. She blew out a hard breath. “His parents want to impress some richy rich dude so they can get money for their community center, and they think I’ll help.”

“How exactly?”

Her arms waved around. “He’s a Washington fan. Logan. All that. I guess one Ward is as good as any other.”

Oh, great. My favorite feeling in the entire world was when it didn’t actually matter who I was as an individual because I was being lumped into a crowd. Of course, when your brother was a Hall of Fame football player turned coach, it kinda came with the territory.

Lia’s eyes lit.

Mine narrowed.

“Their community center,” she said quietly, “where they help *all those kids* every year.”

I tsked. “You don’t need to resort to guilt-tripping me by using my major.”

“Really? Because I haven’t heard you say yes.” She assumed a praying position, hands folded together over her chest. “C, please. Finn would never agree to lie to his parents. Think of how many kids this will help if they get this money.”

No, Finn wouldn’t lie to his parents. It was one thing I’d always liked about him. We both sucked at lying.

But he’d also think it was weird if I attended with him. He’d only feel comfortable if his best friend were on his arm.

My brain spun visions of accompanying him into a beautifully decorated ballroom with my hand resting on his tuxedo-clad forearm.

“He’ll know,” I argued weakly.

But my heart ... it muted that argument so fast, my head spun around in place.

Lia blew a raspberry through her lips. “Nah, he won’t. You know how to be me, Claire. It’s *one* dinner. Then I’m off the hook to see Catherine Atwood, and his mom gets off his back, they get all the money, and everyone is happy.”

One dinner with Finn. One night to soak up his attention instead of playing the third wheel between him and my sister.

Not a third wheel like on a date. They’d never even hinted that they wanted to cross that line, which was the only reason I was even considering this insanity. Because for one night, I wanted to know what it felt like to have his eyes on me. To wear a pretty dress and spend the evening by his side.

“One dinner,” I said again.

She bounced excitedly in the doorway. “You’ll do it? Seriously?”

I could do this. One night. One meal. Maybe we’d dance. And if he realized I wasn’t Lia, I could prepare a very convincing argument ahead of time about why he should enjoy the evening with me.

My head settled, swirling with all the thoughts of how I needed to prepare and the things I needed to learn to feel ready.

Their handshake, some weird combination of bumped fists and hand slaps and a few snaps. Inside jokes.

Panic welled up because the thought of trying to harness Lia's energy—that thing that made her *her*—felt impossible.

I had three days to get over that.

So I began muting every argument that sprang into my head. Slapping the words away one by one until my brain was silent of objections.

“I'll do it.”

**BAUER**

“**Y**ou got *fired*, Bauer. You won’t be able to talk them out of it.”

My trainer, Scotty, knew me well enough that saying that kind of shit to me would only make me that much more determined to do it. Like he’d waved a red flag in front of a snorting bull.

“Listen, I had a great relationship with Burton before the ... situation.”

“The *situation*?” he hooted. “You’re talking about when you got caught on camera, drunk—”

“I was not drunk,” I interrupted. “I’d had three beers and was having a good time with my friends, but I was *not* drunk.”

“Whatever. You got caught on camera cussing out Burton’s favorite athlete; the gold medalist snowboarder who’s been with them forever, and everyone loves and adores.” He was quiet, probably waiting for me to argue. He’d known me since I was a punk-ass seventeen-year-old, and I pretty much always had an argument. But because it was Scotty, I stayed quiet. “And you are *not* a gold medalist who everyone loves and adores. You are a few good competitions away from qualifying for the Olympic team, but that doesn’t mean shit in the grand scheme of things.”

I winced. None of that was wrong.

But, in my defense, the other guy *had* been drunk, and the camera didn’t catch the part where he was standing behind my

friend Cassidy making some pretty rude-ass gestures about her figure. So who looks like the asshole on Twitter?

Me.

My main sponsor, the one making it possible for me to keep competing, dumped my ass before I could so much as blink.

They apologized, of course. Told me it had been great working with me for the past couple of years. Just ... not enough.

*Not enough to risk the brand, where the rest of the sponsored athletes have a harmonious working relationship.*

The exact wording of the voicemail on my phone was burned into my brain. So me being me, I'd decided to hop my ass into the car and head down to their offices in Seattle to try to convince them to keep me around.

Because if they didn't, my part-time hours bartending would not cut it as income.

That should've told Scotty how serious I was about this because I hated coming back to Seattle.

The drive from Vancouver down to the Emerald City was as familiar as the back of my hand, which is why I hated making it. The kind of drives that I loved making were the ones where I was a hairpin curve away from the next mountain vista. Not knowing what might happen next was what made it exciting, made my blood pump and my brain hum with bottled-up energy.

That was not the case when I drove from my home base by Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains back down to where my dad and Adele lived with my half-brother Finn. No matter what the circumstances were, I avoided going home like the plague.

"You gonna go home while you're there?"

I snorted. "Gotta stay somewhere."

"Did you warn them?" he asked dryly.



“Nope.” There was a certain level of glee in my voice that had Scotty chuckling despite himself. “Can’t wait to see Adele’s face when she warns me for the thousandth time not to corrupt her angel while I’m home.”

“She doesn’t do that anymore,” Scotty said. “Quit making shit up.”

He was right, but I’d heard my stepmom say something along those lines so many times over the years that it felt like she still said it.

*Finn, don’t listen to a word he tells you, look at where his choices have gotten him.*

Sometimes, I heard it on a loop in my head even though it was close to seven years since she’d said it. She’d leaned down and said that to my just turned fourteen-year-old half-brother as I finished packing my bags to move out. My parting piece of advice had been not to do every single damn thing that they told him to do because otherwise, he’d end up miserable.

“She sure as hell thinks it, though,” I pointed out. “The second my years of teen attitude ended with me in handcuffs, she wrote me off for good.”

Scotty harrumphed on the other end of the phone. “Yeah, well ... without those cuffs, you never would have ended up with me, so consider yourself lucky.”

I grinned. “I do, old man.”

“You still haven’t thanked me for not pressing charges, you ungrateful little shit.”

Destruction of private property (which turned out to be Scotty’s house) hadn’t been my finest moment. But the spray paint on my hands and my skateboard had been pretty damning evidence when the cops caught up with me a few blocks away from the scene of the crime, so to speak.

But it had led me to Scotty, who’d seen my skateboarding skills in the neighborhood and offered to train me, teach me how to snowboard, if I was interested in working off my debt to society. Lucky for him, and me, I had.

“Scotty, love of my life, what would I do without you? When are you coming home again?”

“Next week.” He snorted. “And that is a sad commentary on your love life, which I know doesn’t suffer.”

I scratched the side of my face. “Actually, I think I’ve been in a rut. No one catches my interest these days.”

“Bauer’s having a dry spell?” he gasped.

I flipped off my phone even though he couldn’t see. “Very funny, old man.”

“I think so.” He cleared his throat. “First, I only say that because I know you’re not as much of a manwhore as you like to pretend to be, and second, don’t change the subject from Burton.”

“What do you want me to say? I think it’s a good idea to go talk to them, and you disagree.”

“Just take a couple of days and cool off, Bauer. You’re a hothead and say stupid shit when you’re mad. Give it some time. You’d be amazed what you could accomplish if you just calm your ass down and try being nice to people instead. Schmooze instead of bulldoze.”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Bauer,” he warned.

I punched the button with a sigh, cranking up the volume on my music.

The Bluetooth in my Jeep interrupted almost immediately.

“Fricken Scotty,” I said under my breath.

My thumb punched angrily at the button to answer the call. “Scotty, I’m not discussing this.”

“Bauer?” a different voice responded.

I blinked down at the screen. Shit. Not Scotty. The caller ID proclaimed it loud and clear as my little brother.

Golden Boy, as I’d stored him in my phone.

“Finnegan,” I greeted as formally as possible.

“I heard about your sponsor.” He coughed. “Since you never answer texts, I figured I’d call and see if you’d answer.”

My forehead creased at the sound of his voice. “You sound awful.”

“I feel awful.”

“Let’s talk about you being sick then because I don’t need to rehash losing my sponsor.”

He sighed. “What happened?”

I shifted in my seat. “You saw the video, right?”

“I saw what was posted on Twitter, yeah.”

“Well, then you know what happened.”

Even to my own ears, I sounded like a grumpy asshole. It made it so much harder when Finn was being nice to me because then I actually felt bad. Adele treated me like trash because that was how she’d seen me for years, so I felt no guilt being rude to her. If anything, it brought me *great joy* to rile her up. But being mean to Finn was like ... punching a puppy for no reason. Anyone with a soul couldn’t really stomach the thought of it.

“No, I saw the video clip,” he said, pausing only to cough again, “but I know that’s not always all of it.”

Saint Finn. He sounded like Influenza’s poster child of Yuck, and he was calling to check on his asshole brother.

I rubbed my forehead. “I wasn’t the only one under the influence, and believe me, he did something to instigate my rant.”

“Yeah, you used some combinations of the F word that I’ve never heard before.”

“And Adele says you’ll never learn anything from me,” I pointed out.

He sniffled noisily, clearly not amused by my attempt at a joke.

“I’ll be fine, Finn,” I told him. “I’m on my way to Burton now. I’m going to try to fix it.”

He was quiet. “You’re on your way here?”

“Shit,” I mouthed. “Yeah. I suppose I could’ve warned you before I showed up at the house later.”

“They won’t be home anyway.”

“Why not?” I checked my blind spot and moved lanes.

“They’ve got a big fundraiser to attend tonight for some tennis player’s charity.”

My mind flipped through the mental Rolodex. “Ah, sure. I heard about that. One of my buddies was supposed to go with his agent, but he had to work.”

When he hacked through the speaker again, I grimaced.

“I was supposed to go,” he said. “But I need to call Lia and cancel.”

“Why were you two going? That’s not your usual scene.”

“To help Mom and Dad. They still haven’t secured the funding for the expansion they want. I guess the guy they really want to meet will be there because it’s so sports-focused. Thought Lia’s connection to football would help them.”

Ahh. Of course, Finn and his intrepid best friend would be chipping in for the cause.

My mind started racing, almost so quickly that I could hardly keep up with my own thoughts.

Sports-focused. Athletes and philanthropists, agents and corporate sponsors, all in one room.

There might even be someone from Burton there.

“Just how sick are you?” I asked.

“Sick. If I didn’t have a fever, I might try to tough it out, but there’s no way I can go.” He sighed. “Mom and Dad will be upset because there’s no way Lia will go with them on her own.”

Listening to him think of others first, I had to admit once again that Finn, on his own, wasn't a complete shit.

A little square, maybe. And Mr. 4.0 Everything definitely had me beat in the brains department, where I excelled was more of a physical nature. Which is why he was in the middle of getting his medical degree that would have him working ninety plus hours a week someday, and I was a semi-professional snowboarder who just lost his main sponsor.

I couldn't do math for shit, but I didn't need to. If any one of my frustrated teachers over the years could point me to a single time in my twenty-six years when I'd needed algebra, I'd eat my favorite Libtech snowboard one bite at a time.

But I didn't hold that against Finn. It wasn't his fault that his mom came from a crap marriage, into the connubial bliss they found themselves in with each other, and the fruit of that union (him) was thereby all good and perfect things. My dad had been a sad, widowed, single father before he met Adele, so he viewed Finn in pretty much the same way my stepmom did.

Finn coughed again, the sound so disgusting that I winced like he'd just sprayed his germs over my face.

"You better not need me to come take care of you," I told him.

"No," he groaned. "But I thought about asking Mom for some of her chicken soup."

"And you think that'll help?" I asked under my breath.

Not quietly enough, though, because he sighed.

"Bauer," he chided. I couldn't blame him. If someone spoke ill of my mom, they'd get an elbow to the throat. God rest her soul. I didn't even really remember my mother, but I'd still punch someone if they bad-mouthed her.

"Sorry." I shifted in my seat, the tires on the highway eating up the distance between the place I called home and the place I came from. It might have been only a few hours on the road, but they were a universe apart from each other for how differently I felt about them.

“Speaking of Mom, I better call her next,” Finn said.

“Just ... hang on a second.” I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel as I weighed the idiocy of what I was about to suggest. “Maybe I can help.”

“You?”

Since I never offered to help our parents, I couldn’t even be annoyed at how shocked he sounded.

“What if I went in your place?”

Finn was quiet. “Why would you even offer?”

For a moment, I contemplated telling him I wanted to help. Telling him it was for our parents, but he’d never believe it.

“Maybe I can find someone of my own to schmooze. A new sponsor.”

“I don’t know, Bauer,” he hedged. “I can’t imagine them going for it.”

“So don’t tell them.”

“I have to tell Lia,” he interjected, voice sounding stronger than it had the entire conversation.

“No, you actually don’t.”

“I won’t lie to her.”

“You’re a terrible liar, so I wouldn’t suggest lying,” I told him. “Listen, Finnegan, if Lia won’t go alone with our parents, she sure as hell won’t go with me, right?”

“Not a chance.”

Lia was as much a product of Adele’s brainwashing as Finn was after years at our house hearing about the juvenile delinquent who got in trouble with the law and ran away from home at the age of eighteen.

“And you’re saying that they want Lia there to impress some guy?”

Finn was quiet again. “Yeah. I guess he’s a big Washington fan. They thought maybe meeting Logan Ward’s little sister

would ... I don't know, give them some way to introduce themselves."

I rolled my eyes because it sounded like Adele's idea. But if it gave me an in to that ballroom, I just might have a chance. "Makes sense."

"So you want me to," he paused, "just let them think it's me coming, but you'll show up instead?"

"Yup." Imagining Adele's face when I walked in, I couldn't stop my grin. "I swear, I won't even hang out at the table except to eat. They'll hardly see me while they're off pimping out your best friend to the rich old man."

"That isn't what they're doing, Bauer," he said wearily.

"Mmkay."

"I don't know."

"Finn, think about it. This helps everyone. It helps our parents, and it helps the center," I said helpfully as if he didn't know why they were there. "Lia will forgive you because she'll hardly have to deal with me."

"You know she'll flip out when she sees you," Finn said. "Imagine the F words you used in the video coming back in your direction."

"I will prepare myself as much as possible," I answered gravely. "It's not the first time a woman has cussed me out."

"Just ... be nice, okay? This is a big deal for our parents."

*Don't screw it up.* I heard the message loud and clear, straight from the mouth of the Golden Boy.

"Finnegan, I wouldn't dream of being anything other than a perfect angel."

**CLAIRE**

“**A**bsolutely friggin not.”

Lia slumped back on her bed. “It’s what I would’ve worn.”

I pointed at the dress clutched in her evil hands. “That’s half the amount of fabric I want covering my body.”

My sister sat back up, just as her eye roll completed a full rotation. “It’s floor-length.”

Frantically, my hand waved somewhere in the vicinity of my sternum. “Yes, and there’s a slit the size of Minnesota and a V that makes my belly button feel *preemptively* cold.”

Lia grinned. “I know. You’ll look smokin’. Maybe the guy who they want money from has a thing for twentysomething brunettes.”

Oh, she was so, so unbelievably funny.

“I’m kidding.” She sighed since I was giving her my best Mt. Rushmore impression.

“Well, let’s not kid about sexualizing a philanthropic financial exchange because, current social climate aside, that’s a horrible, prostitute-y idea, and I wouldn’t go for it in a million years.”

Lia nodded seriously. “Noted. Neither would I.”

I looked back at the dress. The thought of wearing that in public—and not just the kind of public where other people with eyes could see me, but with Finn in public—made my



skin feel two sizes too small for my body. Like it was shrink-wrapping my skeleton to protect me from the pretty pale-yellow satin. Couldn't I just go to the black-tie event in my jeans and Chucks? My faded Washington Wolves long-sleeve tee with my last name on the back?

Okay, fine, it was on there from Logan's playing days, but it was still my name too.

Lia, though physically more athletic than I was (how was that for some twin bullshit?), dressed like a well-groomed human being more often than I did. Her wardrobe contained things like beautiful gowns, in case we had to attend a charity event like the one in ... oh, four hours, I realized miserably.

For the past few days, my sister has spent time drilling me on things that *she* would know. As if I didn't already have all facets of Finn's life memorized.

His favorite food was grilled ham and cheese and tomato soup even though she regularly hassled him for eating like a six-year-old.

His favorite athlete was Tiger Woods—rain, shine, infidelity ... whatever. In Finn's mind, his resilience and drive overcame any personal issues.

She even quizzed me on silly things that would literally never possibly come up around a civilized dinner table. Like Finn's most embarrassing moment, how on the day he lost his virginity to Cassie McMahan at the age of seventeen, he ripped the condom with his bare hands taking it out of the package.

Something I absolutely didn't know before and could've lived the rest of my life without knowing because I remembered Cassie McMahan and her long, gorgeous blond hair. Her curvy, hourglass figure and luscious lips. If that was Finn's type, I was freaking screwed.

I glanced down at my body, which I considered on the happy side of average in all things.

Average height, I didn't tower over anyone, except maybe our nine-year-old nephew, Emmett.

Fairly average brown hair, if you asked me, though I always felt like Lia's managed to look glossier than mine.

Basic blue eyes.

A nose, some lips, and some cheekbones that were maybe a bit better than average, gifted to us from Brooke.

Everything about my package, so to speak, felt ill at ease with the slippery material of the dress, and the way it would skim down my body. It was the kind of dress that had people staring, I realized. Lia was never bothered by that. My twin didn't seek out that attention, but she wasn't uncomfortable with it like I was.

I walked over to the bed and ignored Lia's speculative gaze. My fingers reached out and snagged the hanger, lifting it so that the dress flowed down in one fluid column of silk.

"I never wear yellow," I heard myself say.

Lia bit down on a triumphant smile, and I ignored that too.

One night. I would have one night, my chance to experience quality time with the guy I'd been crushing on for years, even if he did think I was my sister. We would eat an overpriced meal that would most likely taste like cardboard and listen to actual adults talk about important things. And maybe, just maybe, I'd take a chance and tell Finn that it was me and how I felt.

Wearing a yellow silk dress that made me look far more than average.

The thought was there and gone before I could stop it.

"There it is," Lia whispered. "You're gonna look killer, little sister."

I gave her a dry look. "By two minutes."

"Still counts." She booped my nose. "Go try it on. I need to leave for my seminar in fifteen minutes, and I want to see how it looks before I go."

As she left me alone in my bedroom, I felt a pang of nerves brighter than the ones I'd been carrying around for the

past few days as we led up to this insane plan. It wasn't that I worried about the dress not fitting. Even if Lia managed to look a bit more polished, we were the same size and had the same coloring.

I could mimic her hairstyle, put on my makeup like she did (she went heavier on the lipstick than I ever dared), and even adopt some of her mannerisms without thinking twice. But it was the quiet moments that I feared most. The times during dinner when Finn might look over at me, expecting to see his best friend and share a look over something they both found stupid or overbearing. What would my face look like at those moments?

Like my oldest sister, Molly, I wore my emotions on my face. Except with Finn. I'd learned to hide them under the mountain of sisterly respect, the undefinable twin bond that had always been more important than how much I loved Finn's smile, and the way he muttered jokes under his breath when he thought no one was listening. The quick way he thought and the way he was able to handle Lia when she was at her most stubborn.

Nothing between them was romantic, I knew that. They'd been friends for too long. But maybe I'd be able to start something with him, if he got the chance, a real chance, to get to know me as more than Lia's sister.

Still alone in my room, with the sounds of Lia banging around the apartment, I undressed quietly. A glance at the bedside clock told me that I had over an hour before Finn would pick me up.

Trying on the dress before doing my hair and makeup might've been silly, but then maybe I was silly to want my sister to give me her stamp of approval before she ducked out and left me alone in this duplicity. As I slid the straps off the padded hanger, I thought about one of the lessons in my last classes.

Children usually start forming the ability to tell a lie around the age of three. It was developmentally appropriate and fairly harmless at that age. It's actually a positive signal, in

some ways. When a child can form the idea that a different narrative might serve them better, it shows that they're starting to process how the mind works. *My mom thinks one thing, and I disagree; therefore, I'm going to tell her something that she wants to hear.*

Strange to think of it as encouraging, but from a developmental standpoint, it's not a terrible thing when kids figure out their way around the truth.

But what Lia and I were doing, that was a signal of a whole different type. I pulled the dress up over my body and inhaled sharply at the feel of the material against my naked skin.

Decadent.

Sumptuous.

And selfish.

There was very little positive for anyone in this, except me. Even Lia wasn't really gaining anything by me going in her place because we both knew she wasn't going to skip the lecture. My lie wasn't on the same level as a four-year-old telling his mom that he would get dressed, and instead ended up in the backyard, stomping through mud puddles in his pajamas. I was pretending to be someone different just to gain time with someone who'd never looked at me twice.

With that gem of a thought, I turned and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror propped up against the stark white wall.

My breath caught unintentionally.

"Whoa," I whispered.

Lia's face appeared behind me, split into a wide grin. "Daaaaaaayuuuum. You look *good*, C."

My cheeks suffused with her genuine praise. "I can't wear a bra with this, Lia."

"You sure cannot." She nudged me with her elbow. "Don't bend over too fast for anything."

“I can promise you I won’t.” I skimmed my hands down the front of the dress. The V was so stupid low, showing a slice of my chest that had never before been shown in public. But besides that, I looked ... I looked like a princess.

Like if Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* got a twenty-first-century upgrade on her killer dress.

A hot, definitely not average looking princess.

“Finn’s mom’s middle name?”

I rolled my eyes. “Robin.”

She hummed. “His half-brother’s sponsor?”

I turned. “I will not need to know any of that stuff. Besides, you told me his brother is a touchy subject. Why would he come up at a fancy dinner where they’re trying to impress someone?”

“You never know,” she said. “That’s my point.”

“He just lost his sponsorship with Burton this week.” I sighed. Like I cared much about Finn’s apparently insane, fully tattooed, snowboarder of a brother. Half-brother, whatever.

She snapped her fingers. “Nice. Didn’t even trip you up with that one.”

“You need to go,” I told her.

“I am, I am.” Lia paused before she left my bedroom again. “You’re gonna do awesome.”

I smiled at her. “Thanks.”

“They won’t even know it’s you!”

My smile fell as she left because as the innocently spoken words fell between us like a deflated balloon, I suddenly didn’t feel so much like a princess.

I felt like a fraud.

The door slammed shut behind Lia as she left the apartment.

Just me, my sad princess reflection, and the yellow dress made for someone else.

It took a second, but I met my own blue eyes evenly and took a deep breath. “C, pull your shit together. You’re a mother-effing Ward.”

So that was what I did.

After carefully covering the dress with my cotton robe, I curled my hair until it fell over one shoulder in pretty waves. Using all of Lia’s makeup brushes, I applied goldish-bronze eye shadow until my eyes looked almost indecently blue in my face. The arms on the clock clicked faster and faster until I was sure someone was playing a cosmic prank on me.

One hour to get ready felt like insanity for the woman who could shower, dress, and be ready for class in less than twenty-two minutes on a normal weekday. What kept me steady was imagining Finn at the door, handsome and clean-shaven in his crisp black tux.

I closed my eyes and sighed happily. Maybe I’d get a dance, if I was lucky. I’d just have to not do something stupid like grab his ass when he thought I was Lia.

My phone buzzed, the phone that now had Lia’s phone cover on it because my sister was nothing if not thorough, with a text bearing her name.

**Lia: Still no word from Finn, but that’s not abnormal if he’s busy. He’s NEVER late, so have that fine ass ready to go in five! \*kiss face\***

I smiled as I typed out my reply.

**Me: PAY ATTENTION. This speaker is important, if you didn’t know. I’ll be fine.**

**Lia: I owe you a thousand favors.**

**Me: Yes, you really do.**

I tucked my phone into my small nude purse and stepped into the open toe heels she’d picked out for me. They boosted my height by a few inches, and I took a few steps around the family room until I felt steady. The clock kept going, a few

minutes past when Finn was supposed to arrive, and I felt a twinge of unease.

Hopefully, everything was okay.

Just as I thought it, and then ridiculed myself for thinking it, the downstairs door to our apartment building buzzed. Lia would never expect Finn to come up, so I took a deep breath and channeled my sister.

“Be right down!”

With a cringe, I released the button. Too chipper, Claire, far, far too chipper.

I locked the apartment door behind me, then took the steps down one flight of stairs to the lobby carefully. Beyond the entry door, I caught a glimpse of broad shoulders encased in midnight black, hands tucked into the pants pockets.

My eyes narrowed. Those shoulders ... they were a bit too broad. A few more steps, and I realized my hand was shaking as it grasped the door handle.

That was when he turned around.

No. No, no, no, this was all wrong.

When I didn't immediately push the door open, his hand came out of the pants pockets, and I caught a flash of ink along the back of his big, rough-looking hand.

My mouth was hanging open when he opened the door.

Where was the smiling face? The clean-shaven jaw? Where was Finn?

“You ...” I whispered. My head was shaking before I could even attempt to mask my reaction.

There was no smiling. No, his facial expression could be categorized as a smirk if I'd ever seen one. His mouth was firm and wide, a hard, smirking slash in his face.

Which was also not clean-shaven. There was a jaw, all right, but the similarities ended there. He was darker, bigger, taller than Finn in all categories. But the eyes, I noted immediately; he had the same color eyes as his brother.

“Not who you were expecting, I know,” he muttered, eyes glancing down the front of my body. “Finn is sick, so you’re stuck with the bad brother for one night, princess.”



**BAUER**

It took me less than ninety seconds to realize that I'd been duped.

The entire drive over to a modest area just outside of downtown Seattle, I'd imagined how Lia would react. The utter glee I felt at how she'd react to being stuck with me all evening—Lucifer's castoff, as she called me whenever I poked at Golden Boy—was nothing short of beautiful.

If the woman who opened the door, the woman wearing the yellow dress clinging to every single curve perfectly, the woman staring at me like she'd never seen another human being of the male variety before was Lia Ward, I'd light myself on fire.

If it was Lia, she would've cursed like a sailor the moment she saw me, reacting in the exact amount of time it took me to realize that I was now bound to spend an evening with her identical twin. What was her name ...?

Clarissa.

No, Clara.

I gave her a sideways look as she walked next to me, trying desperately to pretend she wasn't about ready to lose her mind.

Claire. That was it. Claire and Lia. I'd heard their names said in the same breath often enough by Golden Boy. As we walked in awkward silence, I racked my brain for what I could remember about her.

Not much, I thought with a frown.

A student. Somewhere. Majoring in ... something smart sounding.

I rolled my eyes. No wonder nobody invited me places.

“And you said Finn is sick?” she asked.

Humming my agreement, I stepped behind her so that I could open the passenger side door of my Jeep for her. With furrowed brows, she glanced from the open door, to my hand, to my face, and then did the loop over again.

“Deathly,” I told her. “Not even his mom’s famous chicken noodle soup will be able to cure what ails him.”

As I said it, I gave her a quick glance because Lia would know that Adele was a terrible cook.

“I wonder why he didn’t call,” she muttered.

*Call her sister*, was what she meant, but as she carefully held together the massive slit in the dress that almost exposed the entire length of her tan legs, I decided that this development made for a far more interesting evening than I’d planned.

Why was pretty Claire Ward pretending to be her sister?

Safely ensconced in the passenger seat, she folded her hands primly in her lap and stared straight ahead. Pretending badly at that. It was a wonder that either one of them thought they’d be able to fool Finn, of all people. Sure, their faces might have the same features, but the woman who looked like a princess was nothing like her sister.

And I was okay with that.

As I climbed into my seat and cranked up the Jeep, I decided that uncovering this mystery could be a hell of an entertaining evening. If she managed to make it past my dad and Adele, I’d be impressed.

From my peripheral, I saw her shoulders rise and fall as she took a deep breath and let it out. It made me grin.

“What?” she asked, with a bit more heat behind her tone.

“Just find it funny that you need breathing exercises to spend the evening with the other Davis brother.”

“I wasn’t doing breathing exercises,” she explained calmly. “Just ... wasn’t expecting,” Claire paused, and her dark blue eyes flicked briefly in my direction, “you.”

“Not many people are, princess.”

“That is not my name,” she snapped. Now she sounded like her sister.

“I am aware of that.” I gave a brief glance of my own, careful not to use the name she was wearing for the evening, and not nearly as well as she was wearing that dress. “But you look like one, so it fits.”

Her brow furrowed, but she didn’t answer right away.

We drove in silence, heading into downtown. I sighed when all I saw in front of me was red brake lights.

“Was that a compliment?” she asked. This time, her gaze wasn’t brief. It didn’t move away from me. It pinned me in place, like a bug under a light.

My eyebrows popped up. She might not have Lia’s snark, but this was a banked heat I wasn’t expecting. “Depends on if you like princesses.”

Claire didn’t roll her eyes, but she did let her eyelids fall shut before lifting them slowly. Hiding her reaction made her even more fascinating in my book, which didn’t bode well for her. This stodgy evening, one I’d normally avoid like boiling acid if it wasn’t for my own predicament—was far more interesting with her in it. Even more so than if Lia had been in the seat next to me.

I hooked a wrist over the top of the steering wheel. “I happen to. For the most part. Of course, I have favorites like any red-blooded male.”

She didn’t take the bait, just stared through the front windshield with her hands still folded neatly in her lap.

“Ariel is in my top three, hands down,” I continued.

Claire exhaled slowly.

“As is Jasmine.” I looked over at her.

“This is so very original. I’m not even sure how I’m supposed to react right now.”

At her dryly spoken reply, my grin was instant. “Aren’t you curious who’s in the number one spot?”

“I don’t know if curious is the word I’d pick,” she muttered.

A laugh burst out of me.

I glanced at my blind spot and pulled around the car in front of me. Claire’s face angled in my direction, and I saw her staring at the clover tattoo on the side of my hand. She wasn’t being very careful, the princess in the yellow dress. Lia had seen my tattoos before, so nothing about them would interest her.

For reasons I refused to look deeply into, I threw her a bone before we arrived at the dinner. “Remember when I got this one? I feel like I got mocked for days.”

She blinked a few times at the subtle reminder of who she was supposed to be. “I still want to,” she said smoothly. “Just trying to decide if they’ll kick you out for exceeding the maximum amount of visible ink at an event like this.”

“Nah.” I pulled my cuff up and glanced at the bottom edge of the compass that I’d added about six months earlier. “Enough athletes will be present tonight that they’d be pretty damn hypocritical if they had a problem with me.”

Claire sniffed delicately, and I caught the way her fingers tightened in her lap. Pondering that as I brought us closer to this little performance, I expected her to fail, it only took me a few seconds to place it. Athletes.

Of course.

Princess was an apt name for her when I thought of her in terms of her upbringing. The Wards were absolute football royalty. More than likely, this dinner would have more than one player from the Washington Wolves present. Maybe some

front office staff as well. It was a who's who of the Pacific Northwest philanthropic scene, and that included players from every major professional team in the state. People who'd known Claire and Lia since they were toddlers could be there. Wouldn't that be interesting?

Yet she was risking that for reasons I couldn't fathom.

She cleared her throat as I pulled up to the Four Seasons. The crisply dressed valet opened Claire's door, and I caught the way his eyes widened appreciatively.

Yeah, tell me about it, buddy.

I left the keys in the ignition for him, giving his hand a brief shake as he stood by my side of the Jeep.

Claire was paused just under the lights strung across the entrance to the hotel, and the wavy length of her deep brown hair caught those lights in the fading sun. I tilted my head and watched her for a moment.

It had been a while since I'd spent an evening like this with a woman, especially someone like Claire. Dressed up and out on the town, with a good girl to boot. It almost felt like I was someone else because I'd managed to find myself in such a strange situation.

She was incredibly beautiful in the unaffected, natural way that heavily made-up women hated. There was something about the way she was staring up at the tall slate-colored building with its sprawling view of the sound, something I couldn't define. She had a hint of childlike wonder as her eyes touched on the Ferris wheel on the pier and in the slight curl of her lips.

Watching her, I felt my chest swell with something foreign and warm at the thought I was the man who'd walk into that room with her on my arm.

No one else.

Not Golden Boy or any of the other peacocks under that roof.

Just me.

I came up behind her quietly as she continued to stare at the view with awe.

In every way, Claire Ward was too good for me. She was neat and clean and innocent with no trace of a scar or ink on her skin that I could see. It was obvious in her eyes that she was loved and happy and secure, and that was the kind of woman I had no place feeling any sort of attraction to, but very slowly, I reached my hand out and cupped her elbow with my hand, just so that I could feel her skin against the pads of my fingers.

She startled but didn't pull away.

"Ready for your entrance, princess?" I murmured next to her ear. The edges of her hair tickled my mouth; that was how closely I was standing next to her. Why was she here?

Claire didn't answer right away, but she took another one of those deep, fortifying breaths and turned to catch my stare.

My heart turned uncomfortably in my chest.

"Ready as I'll ever be," she answered seriously.

My lips hooked in a smile, and I held out my elbow. This protective instinct to help her through the evening took me by surprise, more than even her presence had. As her small hand curled around the crook of my arm, I grinned more widely.

"Let's go raise some hell, shall we?"

I was gifted a wide, unaffected smile in answer.

As we walked through the modernly decorated lobby, I felt like a king next to her with the way eyes followed her.

The ballroom doors were opened wide, and tuxedo-clad men and beautifully dressed women filtered in and out, mingling in groups and chatting and laughing loudly. The massive white floral displays topping the tables had sprays of flowers and branches that were probably taller than me. The far wall was made entirely of windows overlooking the water, and in the distance, it was easy to make out the mountains.

Every time I saw a mountain, no matter where I was, my entire soul vibrated with the desire to be hurtling down its

paths. Instead, I had to breathe through the claustrophobic feeling of being trapped in a ballroom.

I felt Claire's fingers curl further into my arm. When I glanced down to see what caused the increase in pressure, I noticed my dad and Adele approaching.

If I was waiting impatiently for Adele's reaction, I was about to be sorely disappointed. Her face, as well as my dad's, showed zero shock at my appearance.

Fucking Finn. Couldn't lie to save his life.

So I pasted a polite smile on my face and glanced at my date.

To Claire's credit, she was far more prepared for this portion of the evening than she had been for my surprise appearance.

"You look incredible, Adele," she said, leaning forward to give my stepmom a brief hug. "That color is killer on you."

Adele preened under the attention. "Thanks, hun. I feel a lot more comfortable in jeans and a sweatshirt, but it feels nice to dress up from time to time, doesn't it?"

Claire grinned, looking so much like her sister that I had to blink.

"You're telling me you don't wear that gown to the center? Come on, you wouldn't need my help getting any donations if that was the case."

My dad laughed, sliding his arm around Adele's waist.

"Bauer," Adele said, her smile slightly more strained.

"You look beautiful," I told her dutifully. I shook my dad's hand.

"Finn told us you offered to step in his place, son," he said. "I know this isn't your scene."

Claire gave me a sideways glance when I laughed.

"No, it's not." I met her midnight blue eyes. "But I can think of worse ways to spend the evening."

An awkward pulse of silence fell in our little group until Adele cleared her throat. She and my dad shared a brief look.

“Lia, would you like anything to drink?” my dad asked. “I was just going to head to the bar.”

She smiled. “I won’t say no to that.”

It was disconcerting how easily she’d slid into her sister’s persona at the appearance of my parents. They walked away, leaving me with Adele.

“We’re honored that Finn’s *best friend* was willing to join us this evening.”

I gave her a small smile. “Lia would do anything for him, wouldn’t she?”

Adele exhaled heavily. “Please don’t make a scene, Bauer. Tonight is important for the center, and your father and I. Lia is a big part of that.”

For the second time that day, someone in my family felt the need to remind me that I better not screw this up for them.

All I did was stare at her.

She stared right back. “Considering what you’ve already managed to accomplish this week, I figured you should be reminded.”

There it was, the ding I was waiting for.

“There are always two sides to a story, Adele.” I kept my tone light.

Her laughter was airy and unaffected, and anyone walking past us would think we were having a grand ole time. “With you? Of course, there is. But tonight, your problem of maintaining a sponsor is not on my list of concerns. Just don’t offend anyone, especially Lia, okay?”

It was a sharp reminder that Lia was off-limits to me, simply because I was the unwelcome stepson.

Always unwelcome.

Always a nuisance.



And unfortunately for Adele, that just made me want to remind her of all the ways I could ruin an evening.

Just as I opened my mouth to do that, I heard Scotty's voice in my head telling me not to be a dumbass, so instead, I smoothed a careful hand down the black tie around my neck. As fun as pissing my stepmom off might be, it wasn't the reason I was there. Keeping my eyes peeled for someone from Burton was.

She narrowed her eyes, more attuned to my thought process than I realized, because even my ability to keep my mouth shut made her wary.

"You've nothing to worry about, Adele. You'll hardly know I'm here."

**CLAIRE**

**H**ave you ever been invited to a costume party? You take the time to plan your outfit, you buy the supplies, perfect the look, and then arrive, only to discover that you're the only one who wasn't in on the secret.

Yes, like Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*.

Sitting at the innocuous round table with overpriced food in front of me and a massive floral display blocking my view of the person directly across from me, I was Elle in her bunny costume.

Everyone had been in on some secret that I was unknowingly dumped into, left flailing without a single person to grasp on to for support.

I always knew, abstractly and from vague hints over the years, that Finn and his half-brother weren't close. That he was kind of an outsider, though I figured Lia was prone to exaggeration when she'd said he was an actual delinquent. From what I could remember, Bauer Davis was at least five years older than Finn and from their father's first marriage. It was a strange thing that Lia had always had in common with Finn, a half-sibling from a parents' first try at matrimony. But if this dinner was any indication, that was where the similarities ended.

*Our* half-brother raised us after Brooke split. He was our brother, our father, and until he married Paige, he had to fill the mother role occasionally. Logan was the most steady, solid

presence in our lives, and all four of us knew he'd take a bullet before letting anything happen to us.

But in front of me was playing out a completely different type of family.

Bauer was the outsider.

The black sheep.

The rebel.

In a sea of black ties and decorum, he was covered in ink and attitude.

What I didn't know, and what I couldn't stop trying to uncover as I watched his parents to my right, and him to my left, was whether Bauer had chosen that role, or if it had been chosen for him.

"This chicken is bullshit," he said as he leaned toward me. I caught a whiff of the same scent from the Jeep, spicy and clean and male.

The bite I was currently working on, and had been for a while, lodged in my throat when I choked.

"Bauer." His dad sighed.

He shrugged. "It is."

I tried to keep the smile off my face at the exchange because Lia would not have found it funny. My initial shock at seeing someone other than Finn at the door had morphed into quiet reluctance, then begrudging fascination.

That fascination was why I studied child development in the first place.

What made children become the people they were?

How much was biology? A coding in our genes that we couldn't fight.

And how much was the environment they were raised in? The words spoken to them, the rules they were given, the praise they received, or didn't as was sometimes the case.

Next to me was a grown man. He was tall and strong, unashamed in who he was as a person. But in front of the people who raised him, I watched the flip in his personality like someone had changed the channel on a television.

It was impossible for me not to imagine what it had been like for Bauer as a kid because two things were abundantly clear as I chewed on the chicken that tasted like cardboard.

His brother, Finn, was beloved by his parents. They were proud of his educational prowess, and the field of medicine he was pursuing. They raved about what kind of man he was turning into, all the things I'd known before walking into the dinner. That he was intelligent and kind, with a huge heart for serving others.

And Bauer was their other son.

There was a clipped way that Adele spoke to him.

A quickness in her glances, like she was put out by having to engage with him for too long.

But she was also clearly bothered by the attention he received from others.

The woman on Bauer's left was far more interested in him than Adele, judging by the way she stared at his biceps straining his suit jacket, the width of his shoulders under the black material, and the hard line of his jaw under all the scruff covering it.

"Snowboarding," she purred, leaning toward him until her cleavage practically fell out of her red dress. "That's so interesting."

He gave her a dry look. "I've always thought so."

"You must have to work out *constantly*."

"I barely have time to eat or sleep," he answered seriously.

My lips rolled tight over my teeth, and I focused very hard on taking a sip of the sweet white wine that Finn's dad bought for me.

Adele scoffed quietly under her breath, and I fought against a flare of annoyance.

Lia wouldn't have been annoyed, I reminded myself. I knew my sister as well as I knew myself, and holy camels, it was harder than I thought to think like her all the time.

"Finn was so sick, honey," Adele whispered conspiratorially. "Otherwise, he never would have stuck you with Bauer for the night."

WWLD?

Lia would've rolled her eyes, so I did. "I've survived worse."

She laughed in delight.

Being in on that joke with her felt slimy because no, he wasn't Finn, but he was still a person. Her stepson.

It was the delight that pushed me just enough over the edge to say something. "But he's not that bad, you know. I could do a lot worse for my date for the evening than a professional snowboarder."

I thought I spoke quietly enough, but Bauer went still beside me.

Adele blinked at my gentle reprimand but waved a hand. "Of course, of course. He's just not used to events like this. Not his crowd," she said delicately. "Finn was practically born to impress people."

Unfortunately, she wasn't wrong. Finn was impressive. He was well-spoken and intelligent. He listened so well to what people were saying and what they didn't. But one thing had nothing to do with the other, and if I thought about Bauer and what that kind of constant comparison could do to a child, it made that part of me that longed to help kids who dealt with things like that light with a righteous fire.

"Don't we all know it, Adele," Bauer interjected. "Trust me, I never would've suggested it if he hadn't included *something* to sweeten the deal." As he said it, clearly taunting her with his tone, he stretched his arm along the back of my

chair. His thumb dipped dangerously, and I felt it brush the edge of my spine. I held very, very still.

Adele's eyes narrowed dangerously, so I cleared my throat. "He could only wish, Adele. Just ignore him."

Bauer withdrew his hand with a low chuckle that made the hair lift on my arms. Normally, it was the kind of male insinuation that would make me want to twist his balls up in a knot—I knew how, too—but it was so obvious that he was baiting her, trying to garner any sort of reaction from this woman, even if it was her contempt. Contempt, when you've been ignored and overlooked, was a preferable alternative, sometimes.

"So," I continued, "the guy with the deep pockets, do we know where he's sitting?"

Adele perked up. This I could understand about her, and why it pained me to see her treat her stepson the way she was. They ran a wonderful community center, helping at-risk youth with access to sports and arts and activities they might not normally be able to experience. I'd scoured their website with glee because some of their programs for kids were amazing. Speech therapy for children who couldn't afford it out of pocket. Tutoring for students with dyslexia who weren't getting the support they needed at school. Expensive tutoring, if their parents had to pay the bill.

"He's at the table behind us," she said quietly. "Don't turn around, though. It's too obvious. I'm trying to figure out how to go over there without being ..."

"Obvious and desperate?" Bauer supplied.

Adele's smile was tight at the edges. "Something like that."

Remembering something Lia told me, I touched Adele's arm to redirect her. "I checked with someone in the front office, and he's been a Washington ticket holder for the past five seasons."

Adele nodded. "He's a huge fan of your brother's."

My smile felt like the first natural one of the evening. “I can understand that.”

“Mr. Harper would be perfect,” she explained. “He owns a Canadian team, and while he’s starting to dip his toe into philanthropic endeavors here in Seattle, he hasn’t made a major step yet. I think with his connection to sports, and how much we work on getting kids involved in athletics at the center, it would be a win-win.”

“Why wouldn’t he partner with a player? There are so many foundations set up for that specific purpose,” I said. Off the top of my head, I could count six current players on the Wolves roster who focused on exactly that and did a damn good job. My sisters and I had taken part of so many fundraisers over the years for various foundations, I’d never be able to count them all.

Adele froze, giving me a strange look.

My heart pounded uncomfortably. Lia didn’t ask questions like that, apparently.

“Well, that’s why you’re here, honey,” she said. Her voice was sweet and smooth, her face guileless, and her eyes wide. “I’ll make my way over there and say hello, and you come bring me my drink. I’ll introduce you, and voila!”

*Voila*, I thought.

Voila, because of who my brother was, this guy was going to hand over a check with a lot of zeros? As a plan, it felt about as stable as a toothpick trying to hold a Volkswagen, but I was keeping my lips firmly shut.

Oh, my sister owed me so, so big for this night. But that, of course, was the irony. Before she asked me, all I could think about was my annoyance that Finn hadn’t responded to whatever it was that made me so different from Lia. And that was held up in strange juxtaposition with our interchangeability in all this.

I could’ve been any of the four Ward sisters, and Adele probably wouldn’t have cared. Who I was didn’t matter to her

in the slightest. The dishonesty in what I was doing faded slightly when I thought about the evening in those terms.

Because even if I'd introduced myself as Claire, told her I'd come in Lia's place, it wouldn't have mattered. Probably to Finn either, sadly.

All I wanted was to have some time with Finn, and now I was basically being pimped out because of my last name. Who I was didn't matter, and sitting at that big table, I suddenly felt very alone.

I took another sip of my wine as Adele turned to speak with her husband. Up on stage, they were explaining ... something. About works of art for sale, displayed around the ballroom. But I couldn't hear a word over the yawning sense of disappointment unfolding behind my chest. I tried to stop it, but it was inevitable. From the moment someone else turned around, to that conversation with Adele, I was just ... disappointed.

Bauer leaned in again, and I gave him a sideways look.

His voice was low, meant to be intimate and secretive. "Now why did that make you look so sad, princess?"

I cleared my face instantly. "I'm not sad," I disagreed. "Just wish it was time for dessert so I could forget this chicken ever existed."

His eyes, a deep greenish gray, searched my face. "Mm-hmm."

What did he see that made him look at me like that? My heart thumped once, twice. Hard.

When Bauer was looking at me like that, I didn't feel alone. I felt exposed.

I found myself pushing my chair back. "I'll be right back."

Adele glanced up at me. "Don't be gone long, honey."

She meant well, and I knew it. This was important to them. Important to Finn.

WWLD.



She'd wink and then promise that it was in the bag. She'd get it done for them simply because they'd asked it of her, this family she was a part of because of her best friend.

And all I wanted to do was leave.

I couldn't dredge up whatever words my sister might have used. "Excuse me," I said softly and walked away from the table, clutching my purse in my hand like it could teleport me away from that place.

Weaving steadily through tables of well-dressed elite who were laughing and drinking, I felt like I couldn't breathe deeply until I was clear of the doors. My hand pressed against my stomach as I felt my diaphragm expand with a slow breath to calm my strange reaction. A few people were milling through the hallways, looking at large black and white photos displayed artfully along the stretched-out hallway outside of the ballroom.

They were a perfect distraction because I didn't really want to dissect why I was so bothered by Adele's—and Tom's—interactions with Bauer. I'd come for Finn. To spend time with Finn. And instead of being disappointed, my wheels were spinning as thoughts of stepchildren and unwanted children and some strange quarter-life crisis about not being seen as my own unique person tangled through all of that.

My steps slowed as I reached the first photograph, and I froze. It was beautiful and sad. Strangely appropriate for what I'd just been thinking about.

A small boy sat on a broken curb, looking down at a dirty, smudged ball in his hands. It was worn from play, clearly overused. His hair was dark and messy, his lashes long against the pale skin of his cheeks. You couldn't see his eyes, but in the background, two other kids played together. They were out of focus, not meant to be the focus of the shot.

Staring at his shoes, also dirty and worn from use, I found my eyes welling up unexpectedly.

"Goodness, that's depressing, isn't it?" a deep voice came from next to me.

I glanced over my shoulder. A gentleman with a shock of silver and brown hair was staring at the photo, his head tilted to the side as he frowned at the image.

I clasped my hands in front of me. “It’s moving, I think.”

He hummed, tucking his hands into his pockets.

The disbelieving sound made me smile. “You disagree?”

“I’m shit with figuring out art, young lady.”

That made me laugh. “I’m sure you’re not that bad.”

He was the kind of man who was hard to gauge how old he was. His face was gently lined, like he laughed a lot, and his brown hair was streaked liberally with gray. But he was tall with broad shoulders, a strong nose, and a wide smile.

“What do you like about it?” I asked him.

He grimaced, staring again at the image. “Not much. It makes me uncomfortable.”

That made me give his face a second look, a longer, assessing one. “Strong reactions aren’t bad, though. The point of good artwork is to make you feel something.”

The smile he gave me was lopsided. “Fair enough. What do *you* feel when you look at it then?”

Staring at the little boy’s face, I answered without thinking. “The role of perceived maternal favoritism in sibling relationships in midlife,” I answered without thinking. I felt my cheeks flush hot when he gave me a curious look. “Sorry, that was terribly specific.”

His gaze sharpened. “And I’m terribly interested in why.”

For the first time since Lia handed me that yellow dress, I felt like myself. My ribs expanded easily as my heart settled into a normal rhythm.

“It’s a, a study that I read recently for school,” I told him.

He nodded, a gentle nudge to continue.

There was no expectation to be someone else or talk like someone else. Just a genuine interest in what I had to say, and

that made the words come easily.

“There’s something very lonely about him,” I said. “There are people—other kids—right behind him, yet he’s separate. That ball, his shoes, he’s obviously very active. Loves sports. But he’s sitting in stillness for some reason. It makes me wonder what his family life is like. How he’s loved, if he feels separate when he goes back in that house too. Or if being outside,” I paused, and Bauer’s face flashed in front of me, “if finding something he’s good at, something physical and tangible and independent, gives him the affirmations he’s craving.”

In the silence that followed, I felt a slow flush of embarrassment crawl up my skin. I might as well scream *Beware of Psych Major* for everyone in the hallway to hear. When I grimaced, he stepped closer to the photo, assessing it carefully.

“No wonder you looked like you were about to burst into tears,” he mused.

Under my breath, I laughed and felt my embarrassment wash away. “I can’t help it, unfortunately. I’m about to start my master’s in developmental psychology.”

“Ahh.” He grinned and looked younger when he did. “An art connoisseur masquerading as a therapist. You’ll be able to fix the world with that brain, young lady.”

I ducked my head, unsure what to say.

“No, no, don’t be embarrassed. It’s a wonderful thing, that you can look at that child and see all of that.” He sighed. “He probably makes me uncomfortable because he reminds me of myself as a young boy.”

His face was distant now, not seeing me or the photo, and I watched him carefully in silence. A few people milled around us, but no one interrupted.

“Maybe if I’d had someone like you helping me understand those sorts of things when I was younger, I wouldn’t be so damn stubborn now.”

“Stubborn isn’t a bad thing,” I said. “Determination is a wonderful trait, especially if you’ve found success.”

“Everyone in this overpriced room has found success, haven’t they?” he asked dryly.

“I suppose.”

He blinked. “My manners, where have they gone.” He turned, his hand held out in my direction. “Richard.”

I opened my mouth, then paused just before I formed my own name. I swallowed heavily. “Lia Ward.”

Richard smiled. “It’s been a genuine pleasure to meet you, young lady.”

Another voice joined us, just as his big hand slid around my waist, settling easily on the bare skin where my dress gaped open.

“There you are,” Bauer said. He grinned widely when I slowly lifted an eyebrow. “Thought you got lost.”

Richard moved his eyes between us. “It’s my fault entirely. I’ve been monopolizing her. She’s quite intriguing.”

Bauer’s eyes touched briefly on my lips when he answered. “That’s one word I’d use.”

I felt my mouth open slightly. What was he doing? Lia had barely mentioned Bauer, except in passing, and always negatively, and he was staring at her lips—my lips—like he wanted to devour them in one bite.

“Bauer ‘the Hawk’ Davis,” Richard said, snapping his fingers together. “I knew I recognized you.”

Bauer’s face lit in surprise at his performance name. “Not many people do.”

“Shame what happened with Burton.”

The man currently holding my waist tensed slightly but nodded. “Indeed.”

“They’ll regret it someday, I have a feeling.”

Bauer's eyes sharpened. "Not many people are this well-informed on the snowboarding scene."

"I have a place in Vancouver, so I'm your neighbor to the south." Richard held out his hand. "If you don't make the next Olympics, I'll riot."

Hand still firmly in place along my back, Bauer smiled. I blinked at the sight of it. It was wide and bright and happy. This was the real him, talking about something he loved.

"Thank you." He tilted his head. "I didn't catch your name."

"Richard," he answered. "I should be getting back in. Horrible small talk must be made, unfortunately."

I smiled as did Bauer.

Richard glanced back and forth between us. "Keep hold of this one, Bauer. She's a keeper."

Neither of us answered, for entirely different reasons, but as Richard walked away, I took a cautious step away from Bauer. His hand slid off my back as I realized we were alone again. Just me and the wrong brother.

**BAUER**

If I was a hunter, pulling back on my bow, then Claire was the deer about to bolt into the safety of the trees.

Before she could move a single muscle to do exactly that, I nodded in the direction of the guy who just left.

“That was him, you know.”

She blinked rapidly. “Who was?”

“Richard.” I tucked my hands into my pants pockets. Maybe it would make me appear non-threatening or some bullshit. “That was him.”

“Yes, it was,” she answered slowly.

I grinned because she clearly thought I was an idiot. “No, that was the guy my mom has been eyeing. Or his money, rather.”

Claire’s face flushed a pretty pink. She wasn’t even trying to act like Lia now, and that felt like a small victory.

“That was Mr. Harper?”

Nodding slowly, I watched her expression change as she processed that.

“Oh.” Claire’s brow furrowed. “Well, I guess that makes it easier to meet him later.”

Under the lights of the hallway, her hair gleamed. Her cheeks were still pink, and she needed to touch up her lipstick after eating, but damn if I didn’t want to mess it up just a little

bit more. It might have been crazy, but I got the feeling that Claire Ward didn't like wearing that blood-red color.

“What'd you two talk about, princess? He seemed awfully smitten.”

Vaguely, she gestured to the photograph next to her, one of many lining the hallway. They were black and white, all boasting ridiculous price tags. The one in front of us was really depressing, if you asked me, but they'd certainly been staring at it like it was a freaking Van Gogh.

“That's it?” I asked.

Claire chewed on her lip as she studied the image again. Ahh. She was nervous to answer.

Everything about this was strange, and inside the safety of my tux pockets, I found my thumb drumming a rapid beat against my thigh as I tried to figure this woman out.

Every woman, from the age of four to ninety-four, was a puzzle. Some were easier to put together, with better guides of what went where, and some were a bit tougher to assess. Honestly, I loved that about women. The beautiful variety of each one came in the pieces that you clicked into place.

And Claire, with her yellow dress and deep brown hair and blue eyes, was as intriguing of a puzzle as I'd seen in a long, long time.

The strains of music drifted out of the open doors of the ballroom into the hallway where we stood, and when I looked over my shoulder into the room I'd just left, a few couples started filling the dance floor, swaying in each other's arms.

She was doing her best to ignore my presence entirely, or maybe she was that lost in thought. I approached slowly, sheathing whatever weapon that might spook her, giving her a small smile as I held my hand out.

“Dance with me?”

Claire's chest fell and rose on an inhale as midnight eyes snapped to my face. “You *want* to?”

“Ouch.” My hand rubbed at the spot above my heart, and I saw her gaze flicker to the tattoos again. “Yes, even social reprobates like myself enjoy dancing with a beautiful woman.”

Even as the pink deepened on her high cheekbones, she was clearly undecided. Time to see if this first corner piece would click into place, or if I was completely off-base.

“Come on,” I said quietly, “the Lia Ward I know is fearless.”

Oh, no, she didn’t like that. Her eyes flashed like an impending lightning storm, and I felt the surge of electricity gather around me like a cloud.

Claire set her small purse down on a decorative table just next to the photo, slid her hand in mine, and stepped closer. But not quite close enough.

Bracketing her feet with my own, I slid my free hand around her waist and brought her flush against me. Just close enough to be improper, considering we were alone in the hallway.

If someone walked past, they would stare. They might gawk at the way I was holding her. And damn if I didn’t want them to.

I knew what they’d see, how they’d judge. The bad boy and the good girl, a strange pairing maybe, but if they saw us like this, swaying in a quiet hallway, they’d assume we were crazy for each other. That something about her had me obsessed. Something about me made her feel dangerous.

And maybe that was true, even if just for this one night.

In my arms, Claire Ward felt incredible. Her body was warm, her skin soft, and she smelled like oranges.

But she was holding herself a little stiffly, so I backed off just a couple of inches as I gently led her in a slow circle. When I directed her in a slow turn out and spin, she smiled.

“I’m full of surprises, too,” I told her.

“Apparently.”



“So ...” I watched her face. “Shall I tell you what else I know about Lia Ward, and you tell me if I’ve been wrong for all these years.”

Her jaw set stubbornly. “That doesn’t sound like a very fun game.”

“No?” I turned her again, pulling her back into my chest. “Agree to disagree.”

“So you’d want me to dissect you right now?” she asked, face flushed from the way I’d just tilted her back.

“Hell no.”

She bit down on the smile that threatened to spread. Oh, I wish she hadn’t.

I wanted to see that smile unfold and know that I was the one to make her do it.

“But I’ll tell you one thing I know is true, and if you want to do the same to me,” I conceded, “then I’ll allow it.”

“Deal.”

We danced quietly for a few moments of the song, and I thought about how to say what I wanted to say, without showing my hand that I damn well knew she wasn’t her sister.

“What I know to be to true,” I started slowly, “is that my stupid brother has never danced with you like this.”

Her eyes flashed again, but I couldn’t pinpoint the emotion behind it. “How on earth could you possibly know that?”

I shifted my hand, brushing my fingers against the knot of bone that I could feel under her soft, soft skin. She shivered.

Instead of giving her the answer she wanted, I lifted my chin. “Your turn.”

As we swayed together, her hand tightened slightly in mine. Forgetful of what it might do to her lipstick—another sign that I was right about her not usually wearing it—she chewed on her lip and thought carefully before saying anything.

“I know that you’ve accomplished pretty amazing things if someone like Richard Harper recognizes you immediately.”

I smirked. “Yeah, recently my biggest accomplishment is getting my ass fired after a drunken tirade that someone caught on camera and uploaded to Twitter.”

She watched my face carefully. “Social media is a double-edged sword for most athletes.”

“It is indeed, princess.” We swayed again, my fingers moving against her skin as we did.

“But that one moment doesn’t negate the career you’ve built.” She glanced over my shoulder into the ballroom, almost refusing to meet my eyes. “I hope you know that.”

Idly, underneath the swell of unstoppable pride that she said it at all, I wondered if she realized that it was the most un-Lia thing she could have said to me.

But she still said it.

God, I wanted to ruffle this girl’s feathers and see her in her full glory when she wasn’t afraid to hide whatever she kept simmering under the surface.

“I do,” I told her, executing another gentle turn. “Not everyone does, but ...” my voice trailed off. “My family just sees it as another piece of proof to indict me, no matter what I did before it.”

“Which is hypocritical,” she interjected immediately.

I stopped our swaying. “Is it?”

“Of course.” She shook her head. “If they care so much about getting kids involved in sports and teams and activities, how could they not be proud of you for achieving what you have? Teaching kids perseverance and grit is one of the most valuable lessons we can give them.”

Laughing under my breath, I pulled my hand from around her waist, sliding it up her arm and letting it hover in the air, just before I used my thumb to tip her chin up.

Claire's breath caught. "Why are you looking at me like that?" she whispered.

"You're not even trying, do you realize that?"

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. "W-what do you mean?"

I dipped my head and took a deep inhale of her hair, before letting my nose graze along her cheekbone so that I could whisper against her ear. Before I did, her hand curled into the lapel of my suit jacket, and I waited to see if she was going to push me away.

"You're not even trying to pretend that you're her anymore, princess."

She was out of my arms before I could blink, her eyes wide and startled, a hand pressed to her heaving chest.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Her voice was steady.

"Yes, I think you do." My eyes never left hers. "Why did you come here tonight?"

Her inhale was sharp, and she blinked rapidly. "Because I'm Finn's best friend."

"Don't lie, princess," I said gently. "That's not very nice."

"And what you're doing right now is?" she tossed back, not so gently.

I grinned.

That grin, innocent though it might have been, was what made Claire snatch her purse and walk quickly away from me. The swish of her dress and the toss of her hair had me chuckling under my breath. The rest of the night would be even more interesting now.

But then she veered away from the restrooms and headed straight toward the hotel entrance.

"Shit," I whispered. I turned toward the ballroom to grab my phone and keys from where I'd left them on the table and almost ran straight into Adele.

“Where’s Lia?” she asked, eyes bright with excitement.

Probably requesting an Uber, but I didn’t tell Adele that.

“Why? What’s up?”

“She met Richard Harper,” she gushed. “We were talking when he came back to his seat, and when I mentioned Lia, he told me they’d met out here! They spoke, and he was so impressed with her.” Her eyes flicked over my face. “He met you too, apparently.”

“My apologies,” I said, “if I managed to screw that up by existing. You’ll be happy to know that he walked away before I could offend him terribly.”

Adele ignored me.

“You won’t believe this. He’s only in Seattle for one night, and he’s booked solid, so when I told him about the center, he invited us—including you and Lia—up to his place in Vancouver for the night!” Adele smiled so widely, I hardly recognized her face. “He wants to hear about our plans for the center, but ...” She paused, her voice fading as she realized exactly what she was asking, and who she was asking it of. The kid she tolerated. The man she basically ignored.

“But he wants the smart girl and the crazy snowboarder to be there too,” I finished for her.

She nodded slowly. “He does.”

I stared down the hallway where Claire had left a trail of dust in her wake. She’d need a hell of a lot of convincing, and I probably blew my chance by calling her out like that.

“Why should I help you, Adele?” I asked. Simply because of the time I’d get with Claire, I’d go, but I sure as hell wasn’t about to make this easy on my stepmother.

While she tempered her excitement, I crossed my arms and tried to decide if I should feel bad for being such an asshole to her.

She slicked her tongue over her teeth, and I saw the moment she decided on truth, not bullshit.

“There’s probably no reason,” she admitted. “You and I have never gotten along, have we?”

“Well, I was four when you showed up, so yes,” I drawled, “I’m sure I was a giant prick from day one.”

My sarcasm wasn’t appreciated.

Adele took a deep breath. “You were never easy, Bauer. Even before you got arrested, you made it painfully clear that you had no room for a replacement mother.”

“Especially one who wasn’t clamoring to fill the role,” I said. The edge in my voice was as sharp as I’d allow, considering we were in public. Wisely, she heard it, acknowledged it, and tried a different tack.

She held up her hands. “This is not the time for family therapy.”

“No shit? That’s why I got all dressed up. Just for you, Mom.”

Her eyes went flinty. “I don’t even know why I try with you.”

“Me neither,” I said. “Didn’t you know I’m a lost cause?”

She rubbed at her temples. “Bauer, please. I’m not asking you to pretend to be some big happy family, but will you come with us? He wants you there ... for some reason.”

“One night,” I said. Not because I cared. If he wanted to shove me and Claire together, I probably would’ve gone for a week, but I sure as shit wasn’t going to tell Adele that.

“One night.”

I set my jaw and stared down the hallway. Claire was probably safely ensconced in her Uber, thinking she’d seen the last of me.

“I’ll go talk to Lia in the ladies’ room where we have some privacy,” Adele said.

“She left.”

“What?” she hissed.

I lifted my chin and held my stepmother's gaze. "She left because I said something that pissed her off."

"Oh Bauer," she murmured. "Of course, you did."

"I know, I wish Finn were here too."

Her eyes lifted. "I didn't say that."

"You're all wishing it. And that's fine. I won't argue he does better in situations like this." I nodded toward the exit. "I'll go and fix it."

"You will?" She shook her head. "Why would you—"

"Why would I help you?"

She nodded.

"Isn't that what families do?" I asked with only the slightest edge to my voice. "We support each other, through thick and thin."

Adele rolled her lips over her teeth and didn't say anything.

"I need to grab my phone and keys," I told her. "Text me the details, if you wouldn't mind, and I'll see what I can do."

It took her a moment to compose her face, but when she did, she actually attempted a semblance of a smile. "Thank you, Bauer."

I looked at the exit again, figuring that by the time I got my car and made it back to her apartment, she would've had enough time to cool down. Hopefully.

"Believe me," I told her, "it will be my pleasure."

**CLAIRE**

“Get off,” I tugged, then tugged again for good measure.  
“You stupid, stupid dress.”

My voice cracked, and I absolutely refused to look at my reflection in the mirror. Earlier, I loved what I saw.

A princess.

Now, I could only hear that word spoken in Bauer’s stupid, deep voice next to my ear.

The zipper refused to move underneath my shaking hands, and I let them drop so I could try to regain control of myself.

My eyes welled up with the frustration building inside me. Like a bucket had filled to the brim and couldn’t contain anything more than what was currently inside, that stupid effing zipper was what tipped it over.

I felt stupid.

Stupid for saying yes.

Stupid for thinking I could pull off being Lia for the night.

Stupid for being excited about time with Finn.

Bauer’s face, so close to mine, flashed through my head, and I pinched my eyes shut. That especially made me feel stupid. How ridiculous he must have thought me.

He probably laughed after I left, the silly sister who tried to pull off a switch and failed. Because she wasn’t fearless like her sister. That was what he’d said, right?

Oh, the irony. I wanted someone to see me for who I was on my own, and he had to choose the one word that would make me feel like the biggest fraud. She was the fearless one, and I faded into the background.

My eyes flashed up, and unwittingly, I caught my reflection in the mirror.

“You didn’t fail,” I said quietly. My chin lifted. “You didn’t fail,” I repeated.

Adele and Robert thought I was Lia.

Okay, so I scored a seventy-five percent, which ... technically, was a passing grade. But to the girl who always got A’s, a C sure felt like a failure. Especially in something like this.

My hands steadier, I wrapped my fingers around the metal of the zipper once again and finagled it past the jam, all the way down, until I could step out of the dress. By the time it pooled onto the carpeted floor of my small bedroom, I went from frustrated to pissed. At everyone.

At Bauer, for seeing through me so easily, which made zero sense.

At Lia, because where the hell was she? She should’ve been home by now.

And Finn. Oh, *freaking* Finnegan Davis.

How could Finn not warn Lia?

So fricken what if he was sick and it was Bauer’s idea to step in tonight? Did he lose the ability to text? Could Adele’s chicken noodle soup not fix his arms?

The ungracious thought—especially about Finn, who’d never done anything to deserve it—brought me up short.

“One night with that man,” I muttered. “One night, and I’m talking crap about Finn.”

Finn, with his beautiful eyes and big smile. Finn in his stupid scrubs. I laid a hand on my stomach as I thought about it, forced it into my head.



I stepped over the pile of yellow satin and yanked open the top dresser drawer with barely restrained violence. I tugged on some cotton shorts, a tank with a built-in bra and my U Dub T-shirt, worn through in spots from being washed so many times.

When I flipped on the bathroom lights, I took a second to remember, again, what I'd felt like before the night began.

Happy. Terrified. Excited. Out of my league.

Now I just felt exhausted.

A makeup remover wipe took care of my face, bringing it back to its normal state.

A brush did the trick for my hair when it was tugged high on top of my head and off my neck.

My hand was just about to flip the light switch off when the door buzzer rang.

I froze. "Nooo," I moaned because I knew. Oh, did I know who it was.

It rang again, and I swore under my breath. It was the kind of language that would've cost me a fortune in our family swear jar.

With a brick of nerves lodged in my throat, I hit the speaker button. "Who is it?"

"Let me up, princess."

"Shit, eff, dammit," I mumbled. I cleared my throat and pressed the button again. "I'm sorry, who is this? Lia is gone if you're looking for her."

I pinched my eyes shut at how utterly ridiculous I sounded. He called me out right before I fled. Like a coward.

"Princess," he replied patiently, the smile evident in his voice. "Let me up, please. I need to talk to you about something."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Trust me, it's a great idea."

I rolled my eyes but hit the buzzer. The faster he came up, the faster he could leave.

The faster he left, the faster I could put this entire evening behind me and pretend it had never happened.

His heavy footsteps approached the door, and I pulled it open, one hand perched on my hip. “Say what you need to say and go.”

Bauer slowed to a stop, his fathomless eyes tracking from the top of my messy bun, across my sleep clothes, and stopped at my naked toes. A grin covered his face when he met my gaze. “This is the real you, isn’t it?”

I shifted uncomfortably. “What do you need, Bauer?”

He didn’t answer right away, which allowed me some studying time of my own. His jacket was gone, as was the tie he’d been wearing. The white shirt was unbuttoned, just at the top, and there was another line of ink under the notch of his throat. Honestly, what was he trying to compensate for with that many tattoos?

“May I please come in?” He held up his hands. “It’ll take me five minutes.”

“You have three.”

“Ouch.” When I pulled the door open and moved to the side to let him in, he grinned down at me when he passed. “You know, you’re a lot nicer to me when you’re pretending to be Lia.”

I shut the door with a frustrated huff, briefly leaning my forehead against the cold surface before I turned to face him.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. “I shouldn’t be taking my frustrations out on you. It was stupid to even try to pull it off.”

He was studying the small family room.

It was a small apartment, as most were for students like Lia and me. But Logan refused to let us live somewhere without a secure entrance or seventy-five locks on the apartment door. Our décor was eclectic because while Lia’s taste was obvious in the teal, pink, and yellow pillows, and the

colorful throw rug, I'd picked the neutral couch and the tasteful prints hanging on the wall.

My face burned when he picked up the small plush kitten sitting on the arm of the couch. I'd always wanted a cat, but I'd yet to get Lia to cave. Watching Bauer study the stuffed animal, I felt invaded by his presence.

With a smile, he set the cat back down.

The lighting was dim because I liked it that way when I was home alone, so only two table lamps illuminated the room. Because of that, when Bauer finally faced me, hands tucked into his pants pockets again, it cast shadows under his cheekbones. He looked dark and terrifying even though his lips were still smiling in my direction.

His head tilted. "Why are you talking as if you didn't pull it off?"

"You knew," I explained. "Eventually, at least."

"Right away, actually."

That had my mouth falling open slightly. "Seriously?"

He leaned in to study the framed pictures on the bookcase next to him, candid shots of me and my three sisters. "Seriously. Lia wouldn't have been so shaken by it."

Great. The unflappable Lia. A girl always *loved* to be called The One Who Was Shook.

"I don't mean that in a negative way, princess."

"Can you stop calling me that?" I asked wearily.

Bauer took a few steps toward me, and I had to fight every instinct to back away.

"Even in those pajamas," he murmured. "You've got that look to you. I can't help it."

"Spoken like a true man. *I can't help it,*" I mimicked his deep voice.

He tipped his head back and laughed deeply.

That laugh made me unaccountably nervous, and I couldn't pinpoint why. Maybe because I didn't want to make Bauer Davis laugh. I didn't want to have him in my apartment, looking slightly ruffled and more casual than he had earlier when he picked me up.

"What do you want, Bauer?" I asked.

His eyes warmed slightly at my use of his name. I didn't want *that* either.

He scratched the side of his scruff-covered face. "Right now, I want to know why you're looking at me like that, princess."

I tipped my head back and sighed. "For some reason, I feel like the quiet little girl on the playground who just caught the attention of the mysterious cool guy in class who never pays attention to anyone."

My honesty took me by surprise.

Not because I wasn't a generally honest person. But I'd barely given the thought any time to process, and boom, there it tumbled out of my mouth.

Bauer hummed. "Not far off, I guess. But you have to admit, the fact that I met you because you inexplicably showed up to a public event trying to pass yourself off as your twin sister makes you pretty intriguing."

I rolled my lips together.

"And you're not going to tell me why you did that?"

"My sister asked me to," I answered honestly, after only the slightest hesitation. "She had a lecture she couldn't miss tonight, but she knew how important this was to Finn and your parents."

The way his gaze searched my face, I felt like I was being subjected to the human equivalent of a lie detector test.

"So you only did this because Lia asked you to." His tone was chock-full of skepticism, and I couldn't blame him.

"Yup."

“Okay then.” He picked up a framed picture of the two of us taken at Logan’s last game as a player. We were just barely stepping into our teenage years, a phase when absolutely no one could tell us apart if we didn’t want them to. It was taken before Finn came into our lives, before there was a single thing my sister had that I wanted. Even if she didn’t have Finn in the way I wanted him, he was still hers.

And I was ending the night exactly the same way as I started it, without any firsthand knowledge of what it was like to be the sole recipient of his attention. My lips pinched tight because I hated the self-pity. It was pointless and ineffective.

Nothing, absolutely nothing was gained from feeling sorry for yourself when it came to circumstances outside of our control. That was a valuable lesson I’d learned from Brooke leaving, and Logan stepping up to take care of us.

What was the point of bemoaning Brooke’s leaving? There wasn’t one.

What was the point of feeling sad because the one boy I liked didn’t look at me that way? There wasn’t one.

Bauer carefully set down the frame. “It must be strange to look at someone else and see your own face looking back at you.”

Was it? I looked at Lia and saw Lia. I knew our family was the same. Finn probably was too. But to someone like Bauer, who didn’t know me at all and really didn’t know my sister well, it must have seemed strange. But that was the thing about being a twin, wasn’t it? We were a novelty.

“I guess I’m pretty used to it by now.”

He nodded.

“Bauer,” I said gently. “What do you want? I know you didn’t come to talk about the ins and outs of being an identical twin.”

“Well ...” He paused and gave me a lopsided grin. “I kinda did.”

My brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I need you to pretend to be Lia again.”

“You ... what now?”

He squared his shoulders and opened his mouth to say something when Lia burst through the door.

Her eyes widened dramatically at the sight of Bauer, then they flipped to me and blinked a few times at the sight of my pajamas.

Bauer crossed his arms over his chest and leveled a dry look in her direction.

She slipped her backpack off her shoulder and let it fall with a thump on the floor. “Shit,” she whispered.

“Welcome home, Lia,” he said quietly. “I bet your night wasn’t half as exciting as mine.”

**BAUER**

As frustrated as I was with these Ward sisters and the conversation I was about to have with both of them, I'd never been so happy to see Lia in all the years I'd known her. Because if she hadn't walked through that door, I might not have been able to keep myself from reaching for Claire again just to see what she'd do.

If I thought she was smokin' in the yellow dress, what she was able to do with cotton sleep shorts and a T-shirt was a fuckin miracle of fabric.

But instead of staring at her like I quite desperately wanted to, I kept my gaze pinned on her twin sister. The one meeting my stare head-on, quite unapologetically.

"Where have you been?" Claire asked her twin. "I thought you'd be home hours ago."

Lia tore her gaze from me. "I-I met Catherine Atwood, and we got to talking ...". She pointed a hand at me. "Can we discuss why this person is in our apartment who's never been in our apartment, please?"

"Yes, let's do that," I agreed. "I'd love to talk about why I'm here."

"Why did you go in Finn's place?" Lia asked, trading a loaded glance with her sister. It was a twin-look if I'd ever seen one, something I was completely unable to decipher. Claire could, though, because she gave a slight nod.

I grimaced at the exchange. “Oh no, I don’t think that’s the first question that will be answered tonight.”

Lia grimaced right back, but she didn’t argue.

With both of them standing in front of me, I had to fight how disconcerting it was to have that mirror image in front of me.

I’d practiced what I was going to say under the assumption that Claire would be my only audience. Add in her sister, who I got along with about as well as a root canal, and this just got a touch more complicated.

“Not that I owe you this explanation,” I said, “since I was the one who got the switcheroo, but Finn is home with a man cold.”

Lia tilted her head. “Can a man call it a man cold? I’m pretty sure that’s just for the women who have to deal with them.”

“Why’s that? I don’t curl up under the covers like a little bitch when I have the sniffles.”

She blew a hard breath out of her lips. “No? What’d you do the last time you had a cold?”

“Won an invitational and got handed a fat ass check.”

Lia rolled her eyes.

Now it was Claire’s turn to grimace, except interestingly enough, she didn’t grimace at me. It was aimed at her sister.

That had a smile spreading wide over my face. “Princess, no need to get upset at her. Lia has always been my biggest supporter.”

“Princess?” Lia asked in disbelief.

Claire’s face colored. “Okay, Lia knows why Finn bailed. Now if you care to tell us why you’re here, we can let you continue with your evening.”

“You won’t like it,” I told her.



“What is it?” they said in perfect, perfect unison. The tone, the tilt of the head, the slight narrowing of the blue eyes.

“That is so freaky.” I shook my head. “No wonder you fooled Adele and my dad.”

Lia beamed at her sister. “I told you you could do it.”

Claire gestured at me. “He knew right away, though.”

“You did not,” Lia said.

“I absolutely did.” I gestured right back at Claire. “You two may look alike, but when someone is put into a surprising position, you can’t mask that immediate reaction.” They shared another look. Claire broke it off when her eyelids fell shut. “She was prepared to fake it in front of my parents. I, however, was the wild card.”

“That’s a role you’re comfortable in,” Lia muttered.

“Lia,” Claire said sharply.

Lia set her jaw stubbornly, her cheeks flushed a slight red at the reprimand, and I actually rocked back on my heels at what that one word did to me.

Her face didn’t give much away when I studied it, and Claire only allowed one quick glance in my direction after she did it.

I was given no smile of encouragement, no wink, no conspiratorial look.

But that word was enough to give me hope that she’d say yes to this crazy plan, and not only that, but we’d also be able to pull it off.

“Regardless of my role in this entire evening,” I continued, “the whole purpose of Lia’s presence was to impress one Richard Harper. And Claire did that in spades.” I held up my hand to quell whatever it was Lia was going to say. “So much so, that he’s invited us—my parents included—up to his home in Vancouver for a night so that he can learn more about the center.” My eyes cut to Claire. “And learn more about us.”

Stunned silence filled the room. Lia's eyes were trained on her sister so intently that I almost felt ... protective of Claire. What was she trying to do? Glare the thoughts out of Claire's head?

And Claire ... her mouth hung open as all the color slowly drained from her face. "What?" she whispered.

"So I have to go with you overnight somewhere now?" Lia asked quietly.

Claire's face snapped closed, like she'd dropped a fence.

That Lia would come to that assumption wasn't surprising in the least. It was a logical place to land. Claire pulled off roughly one hour of pretending to be Lia in front of my dad and stepmom, but overnight was a completely different ballgame.

"You don't," I told her. I pointed at Claire. "She does."

Claire raised a shaking hand to cover her mouth.

"You can't ask that of her," Lia argued.

I cocked my head to the side. "Why not? You did."

The look on Lia's face at my answer was what snapped Claire out of her stunned stupor, and she stepped between us. "Okay, stop. That doesn't help anyone right now." She aimed a look at her sister. "You let him explain." She turned a warning look in my direction.

It was hot. So I grinned.

She was like a princess/teacher combo that was checking every damn box I could possibly conjure up in what made a woman attractive.

Maybe I'd never found that combination attractive before tonight, but hell, I did now.

I wanted to muss her hair. Push her buttons. Get her all riled up to see what she'd do. Maybe she wasn't far off about the playground analogy because something about her made me think of a little kid who tugged on a pretty girl's braids just because he liked her. And I wanted to tug those braids *hard*.

“Not much to explain, princess.”

“Oh my gosh, I’m gonna puke if you keep calling her that,” Lia mumbled. “She has a name, you know.”

Claire pressed her fingertips against her temples like she was stemming a headache.

I ignored Lia. “And there’s not much to explain because the nature of Claire’s conversation with Richard, and the portion of that conversation that I took part in, make it impossible for you to show up there as yourself, Lia.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Why’s that?”

Claire’s face was a sickly shade of white now.

“Do you want to tell her, or should I?” I asked Claire.

She gave me an incredulous look.

“Right.” I turned back to Lia. “Claire spoke to Richard before she knew who he was. And it’s my understanding that the thing she discussed, as Claire, positively blew him away.”

No one said anything because Lia could read the misery etched on her twin’s face and wisely kept her mouth shut. And Claire, she just looked like she was trying not to pass out because she knew she was well and truly stuck.

“Some child development thing, isn’t that right?” I asked. “I caught the tail end of your conversation as I walked up.”

Claire nodded slowly.

Lia’s eyes closed in understanding, and she muttered a curse under her breath.

“Apparently, you hit close to home with what you said. Reminded him of his own childhood, but the way you managed to talk about it had him intrigued how a young woman like you, paired with his resources and that of the community center, could make positive impacts in a child’s life who might have had the kind of upbringing he did.”

Claire’s face sharpened with interest. Pleasant surprise. “Really?”

“Really.”

Her smile was slow to start, slow to build, but damn, it was beautiful when it fully covered her face. “That’s amazing.”

“Adele certainly thinks so.” I winced. “Though I had to tell her which twin you actually were when she couldn’t figure out why an English Lit major”—I glanced pointedly at Lia—“would be referencing childhood development studies.”

“Was she mad?” Lia asked.

“Are you kidding?” I smiled. “At that point, she couldn’t even be upset at *me* for being present when your little twin swap brought her this kind of quality time with Richard.”

Claire looked calmer now, glancing back and forth between her sister and me. “So I get why I need to be the one there, but no offense, why do you have to be there? Can’t I just go with Adele and your dad?”

I rubbed at my chest. “Ouch, trying to pawn me off already?”

“N-no,” she stammered, “I just ... I’m trying to understand your role in all this.”

I pitched my voice low, like we were dancing again. “Don’t you remember what he said to me as he was walking away?”

Her brow furrowed for a moment. Then it dawned. Her mouth opened again.

“What?” Lia asked. “What did he say?”

“Son of a bitch,” Claire whispered so quietly, I could hardly hear her.

But hear her I did. And I started laughing.

“Someone tell me!”

“Nothing terribly exciting,” I told Lia. “I get to go as the boyfriend. The infamous snowboarding boyfriend who Richard is very excited to get to know.”

“You *what*?”

Claire looked desperate. “Why can’t he take a meeting with them like a normal person?”

“Because rich people do weird things, princess.” I shrugged. “He won’t be in Seattle tomorrow, and apparently, a little quality time with you, me, and the parents sounds like his idea of a rockin’ weekend.”

“Why are *you* saying yes to this?” Lia asked me. “You and Adele can hardly stand to be in the same room. You haven’t done a single thing to help your parents or Finn with anything since I’ve been around.”

Claire looked at me with quiet consideration on her face.

I felt it slide up, up, and over my entire body, a suit of iron that no one but I could see. “Who says I’m doing any of this to help them? Maybe I want a weekend at a big ass house in the mountains where I have the hardship of pretending to date a beautiful woman? There are worse ways to spend my time.”

“I’ve heard all about how you spend your time,” Lia tossed back. “The whole internet knows, and trust me, it’s not pretty.”

I answered with a perfectly straight face. “And everything you see on the internet is true.”

“Bauer,” Claire said, “let me walk you out. I need to talk to you about this alone.”

Lia started to argue, but Claire silenced her with a single look.

I whistled. “Damn, I need to learn that trick.”

“Not helpful,” Claire snapped.

Holding my hands up in surrender, I waited patiently for her to slip on a sweatshirt and some fuzzy pink slippers so she could walk me out to the parking lot. Lia picked up her backpack and gave me about as chilly of a look as I’d ever seen.

“Thanks for sending a replacement tonight,” I told her.

She flipped me her middle finger and walked out of the family room.

“She really likes me,” I told Claire as I followed her from the apartment.

Claire glanced at me sideways through long, dark lashes. “I think if you’d been the Bauer I saw tonight, she actually would.”

I rolled my neck. “Doubtful.”

“Why?”

“Too many years of establishing patterns make it hard to break them, princess. We all have our roles in that family, and I know exactly what mine is. Even Lia, as my brother’s friend, has her role.” I held the door open for her as we walked out into the evening air. It had cooled considerably, and even with her sweatshirt, she shivered. “Would you rather talk in the lobby?”

She shook her head. “It’s fine. Just didn’t think it’d be this cold.”

I glanced up into the inky black sky. It smelled cold, and it made me miss my mountains. “Cold front moving in, I think.”

We approached my Jeep, and her steps slowed while I leaned up against the hood.

“I don’t believe you.”

Her voice was so quiet and unassuming, I had to take a second and process what she’d said.

“About what?”

“That you wouldn’t do anything to help them.” Her gaze was direct. “I don’t believe you.”

I clenched my jaw. “It doesn’t matter whether you believe me or not. Making friends with someone like Richard Harper can only benefit me in my ... predicament.”

She hummed.

Internally I rolled my eyes because it shouldn’t surprise me that a nice person would try to pin nice motivations on me. “Will you do it?” I asked. “Because I’m only invited because

the man with the money wants me there as your athlete arm candy.”

Claire rolled her lips between her teeth and glanced beyond my shoulder as she thought.

After an impossibly long moment, she finally shifted her attention back to me. “One night?”

I nodded. “Just long enough for him to show off his mansion, study us like rare specimen, and decide if he’s going to make my parents incredibly happy.”

She let out a dry laugh, then rubbed at her forehead. “Bauer,” her voice trailed off.

What was it about her? Just saying my name like that had me wanting to drop to my knees in front of her and take whatever scraps she’d give me. Apparently, my good girl fetish was marrow deep, and I didn’t realize it until just now.

“I get my own bedroom.”

I blinked, not expecting that. “I will pass that request along to our host.”

“And you can’t grab my ass just because they think we’re dating.”

My smile was instantaneous. “Noted.”

She licked her lips. Her eyes were wide and nervous, and she tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “And you can’t kiss me.”

I tilted my head to the side and studied her. That was a promise I didn’t want to make. The words literally would not come out of my mouth. Pushing away from the Jeep, I took a step closer to her. She held her ground, lifting her chin at my approach.

“What if you ask me to?” I said quietly. “Then can I?”

Claire exhaled shakily. “I won’t do that.”

“No?” Carefully, I touched my thumb to the curve of her chin.

She shook her head, and my hand fell away.

“Maybe you won’t,” I told her. “But hear me right now, princess, I’d love it if you asked for a kiss.”

After a moment, Claire swallowed and stepped away from me. I felt the step, the distance it put between us, like a punch to the balls.

“We leave tomorrow?” she asked.

Ahh, so that’s how this would play out. I dropped my chin to my chest and had to exhale out a hard puff of disappointment.

“Yeah.” I lifted my head. “I’ll pick you up at eight.”

She started walking backward, but her eyes stayed steady on mine. “I’ll see you at eight.”

I didn’t move until she was inside, up the flight of stairs, and I saw her shadow move behind the closed curtains of their family room. I glanced at my watch. I’d see her in less than eleven hours.

Then I grinned. Hopefully, she didn’t kill me when she realized we were driving, but they were all flying.

I wasn’t stupid. If the three-hour drive to Vancouver was the most honest time I’d get with her ... then I’d be an idiot not to take it.



**CLAIRE**

For the seventeenth time that morning, I rolled my eyes as I tucked my fourth unnecessary outfit into my backpack.

“You don’t happen to know his social, do you?”

I answered with the same level of patience that I had her previous sixteen questions about Bauer. “No, Paige, I don’t.”

Whatever she saw on her phone screen made her bring it up closer to her face. My sister Isabel, older than Lia and me by two years, peeked over her shoulder and hummed appreciatively.

Paige, our sister-in-law—but for all intents and purposes, our surrogate mom—glared at her. “We don’t make noises about men who are absconding with Claire overnight to mansions.”

“Yeah, but look at him,” Isabel murmured. “I’d let him abscond with me anytime.”

I swallowed carefully as she said it because it was easy to imagine Isabel with someone like Bauer. Of the four of us, Isabel was the most athletic. For the past four years, she’d managed a kickboxing studio and gym, doing personal training sessions for extra money, and she looked like the kind of woman who would date a professional snowboarder.

With her dry sense of humor, Isabel would easily be able to keep up with Bauer.

Carefully, without allowing myself a shred of curiosity at what they were staring at, I pushed my pajama shorts into the

top corner of the bag. “It’s not like this was his idea,” I told the peanut gallery. “Why is it necessary for you to be here again?”

“Moral support,” Paige said.

“Are you kidding? I want to meet Bauer,” Isabel interjected. “You get to pretend to be his girlfriend, you little punk.”

“Please stop saying that.” When I tugged the zipper closed with a bit too much force, I hissed in a breath. “It’s one night, and as long as I’m not walking around punching him in the throat, the extent of my pretending anything is that I answer to a different name than my own.”

“And if that is all you do with Bauer ‘the Hawk’ Davis”—the emphasis she put on his professional name made me want to gouge my elder sister’s eyes out—“with this one night, I’ll have you checked out for mental deficiency.”

Paige cleared her throat. “I’m right here.”

Iz rolled her eyes. “Like we haven’t talked about worse.”

“I know,” Paige said, “but it’s Claire. She and Lia are my babies. I refuse to believe you two have actually aged beyond the adorable little angels you were when I first married your brother.”

I froze.

Isabel froze.

Paige actually sniffled.

I approached her slowly, this woman we all loved so much. The woman who would fight the world for us if we needed her to, who was crying over a memory of my sister and I that was absolutely, horribly skewed.

We called it cognitive distortion for a reason.

My hand landed on her back softly, and I moved it around in soothing circles. Paige exhaled shakily, swiping her hand over her face. I mouthed, “*Why is she crying?*” to Isabel, and she shrugged.

“Paige?” I said.

She sniffled again.

“Do you ... do you remember me and Lia from when you first got married?”

From the kitchen, Lia burst into hysterical laughter.

Paige smiled, her shoulders sinking as her rare outburst of watery emotion dried up. “You were terrors, created for the sole purpose of destroying my sanity.”

I nodded. “Testing the boundaries of someone new to a parental role is completely developmentally normal and expected for situations like that.”

Leaning her shoulder against the doorjamb, Lia joined us, watching the scene with a grin. “I did some of my best work those first few months you were around.”

“Remember the lizard in the shower?” I asked.

My sister’s face took on a dreamy quality. “Her screams were a thing of beauty.”

Paige rolled her eyes, which made Lia laugh heartily.

At the sight of her smile, I felt something uncoil inside me. A cool sweep of relief because all morning, we’d danced around each other.

When she was on edge, I couldn’t help but absorb some of that energy. It was the same way with her.

Our unease might have been born from different places, but I could tell that we were doing this particular sidestep all last night and early that morning because we didn’t need to add to our current supply by unconsciously adding the other person’s.

Lia was uneasy because a relatively innocent plan had turned into something far larger. She couldn’t help these people she loved, and she was still annoyed at her friend for not giving her (and by extension me) a heads-up. All of that left her feeling uncomfortable and out of control.

I knew because I could feel the edges of it. Like she stepped into water, and that water was lapping up against me.

I was uneasy, because I was about to spend twenty-four hours with Finn's parents, who knew I lied to them. Because a rich dude was impressed with my random yet-so-far useless knowledge of childhood development. And because last night, standing in the parking lot, Bauer Davis basically told me he wanted to kiss me, and that it was entirely in my control to make that happen.

Yeah. *That* was nothing I needed Lia to absorb.

It was hard enough and took enough time to hone my ability not to be swayed emotionally when Finn was around because I didn't want her to feel it.

This was something else. Not bigger—because my crush on Finn, which was hardly the problem right now—but big in a different way.

Paige and Lia started swapping stories, and I slowly lowered my hand from where it was still resting on Paige's back because I hadn't thought about Finn once since Bauer left the night before.

Not once.

His half-brother, bold and unapologetic and tattooed and fearless and completely opposite of him in every way, wanted to kiss me and would probably have the opportunity to if I wanted, and I hadn't thought about Finn *once*.

It wasn't easy, but I tried to keep the confused furrow from my brow as I made my bed, simply to busy myself in a way that wouldn't show my face. My sisters chattered away, oblivious to the way my brain had started spinning in circles, wobbling dangerously off-kilter at the realization.

"Claire," Iz said. "Earth to Claire."

After tugging on one last wrinkle in my bedspread, I smoothed my face as well and turned. "Sorry, what?"

"Do you have thick socks packed?" Paige asked.

I blinked. "Umm. I have normal socks packed, why?"

"It's cold up there, and they're supposed to get snow."

I rubbed a hand across my forehead. “Snow? It’s spring.”

“It’s the mountains,” Paige said. “You should pack wool socks.”

“I’ll be in a mansion, you guys. I’m pretty sure it’ll have heat.”

Iz grinned. “Bauer can keep her feet warm.”

Speaking of warm, my face was probably bright-ass red.

Lia scoffed. “He better not.”

“Damn right, he better not,” Paige said.

Isabel grinned at me. “Pretty sure that’s up to Claire, not you two.”

“Claire does not go for guys like Bauer,” Lia argued. “She likes her men sane and kind and polite and not liable to drunkenly cuss someone out.”

I held up my hands. “Okay, enough. Bauer isn’t needed to keep anything of mine warm. I’ve been keeping my own feet nice and toasty, all by myself, thank you very much.”

Lia smirked. “If you say so.”

Isabel tapped a finger against her chin. “I need a new foot warmer. Mine broke last week.”

“I have your brother,” Paige said around an unrepentant grin.

“Gross,” the three of us replied in perfect unison.

I pressed my hands to blazing hot cheeks. “Okay, he will be here any minute. Please ... just ... don’t embarrass me, Paige.”

“Me?” Her eyes widened dramatically.

“There’s no chance you’d take Iz and leave before he gets here, is there?”

Isabel wrapped an arm around Paige’s shoulders. “She does not have a chance in hell of dragging me from this apartment.”

Paige glanced sideways at her. “I could still take you, you know.”

Iz patted her head. “No, you really couldn’t.”

Lia stared at Iz. “I don’t know why you’re so excited to meet him. It’s just Bauer.”

“Because he’s a *world-class* snowboarder,” Iz replied. “Did you see his triple cork at the X Games last year?”

Lia sighed. “Nope.”

“That’s not a reason to let him warm Claire’s ...” Paige paused with a grimace, “anything. We don’t idolize athletes in this family, remember? They’re just normal people—”

“Who do abnormal jobs,” we finished by rote.

Paige’s phone dinged, and she raised the screen up to read whatever was on it. “Case in point, your brother—the world-class football player and coach—can’t figure out how to use the washing machine.”

Paige was right. Normally, none of us fawned over professional athletes because we’d been around them our entire life. Between my brother and his years playing for Washington, and our oldest sister, Molly, who was dating another famed member of the Washington Wolves roster, Noah Griffin, we’d shared plenty of meals with people who made extremely generous livings by playing games.

When I glanced at my alarm clock, I let out a deep breath because he was a couple of minutes late.

The buzzer at the door went off, and the four of us froze.

“I’ll get it,” I said quietly.

Lia exhaled. “I’m going to hide in my room. I don’t need to witness this crazy.”

“The crazy that’s your fault, you mean,” Isabel whispered under her breath.

As she walked out of my room, she narrowed her eyes dangerously in Isabel’s direction.

Paige gave me an encouraging smile. “It’ll be fine. I promise to be nice.”

I snatched my backpack and pillow, mentally girding my loins for whatever circus show was about to unfold. For a moment, I felt bad for not preparing Bauer for the one-woman firing squad.

That only lasted a second because the other ninety-nine percent of me knew it would be awesome to see her knock him off balance. He’d sure as hell been knocking me off balance since the moment he turned around in that tuxedo.

“Come on up,” I said into the speaker.

“You didn’t even make sure it was him,” Paige hissed. “What if it’s a sex trafficker?”

“Ringing the buzzer at eight a.m. on a Saturday?” I asked. “Do you think a sex trafficker would ring the buzzer of our apartment early on a Saturday morning?”

She sniffed. “A polite one, maybe.”

Isabel was laughing when I opened the door for Bauer.

Then her laughter stopped.

Paige swore.

And my stomach tangled into forty-seven knots.

Because Bauer in a tux was nice enough but not the real him.

Now, I was seeing the real Bauer.

“Good morning, princess,” he said. His voice was gruff and grumbly, like he hadn’t used it much since he woke up.

In faded, ripped jeans, a dark gray beanie covering his hair, and a black Henley stretched tight across his chest, sleeves pushed up to reveal the sleeves of ink on his muscular forearms, I officially got my first taste of The Bauer Butterflies.

“Claire,” Paige whispered in my ear, “go put those wool socks in your backpack, or I will do it for you, young lady.”

I motioned for her to back up. “Come on in,” I told Bauer. “Ignore them.”

“Seems highly impossible.” His grin was wide and charming, and dammit, he had dimples I’d not noticed the night before. With an outstretched hand, I watched Isabel melt like butter, and Paige shift right the frick into overprotective mom mode. “Bauer. Who do I have the pleasure of meeting?”

“Isabel, one of the big sisters.” Iz gave him a friendly smile. “I’m a huge fan, Bauer. It’s nice to meet you.”

He dropped her hand and turned to Paige. “And you, I recognize. Paige Ward, wife of the big brother.”

Paige shook his hand, and I stifled a laugh when I caught the gleam in her eye. “It makes it easier that you recognize me.”

“Does it?”

She nodded pleasantly. “That way, if you hurt a hair on her head, you’ll know exactly who’s going to send you to your painful, bloody demise.”

Bauer froze. “Right. That does make it easier.”

Something about this entire exchange made me want to go hide in Lia’s room with her.

Bauer was too charming in the harsh sunlight that came with this brand new day. He was too big and tattooed and muscular and ... too *Bauer*, for me to go anywhere with him that involved sharing the same roof.

Now I was thinking about Finn. Because he would’ve been polite and sweet. Unassuming. He would’ve taken my bag and called me Claire, and it would be comforting because I knew what to expect from him.

As Isabel asked Bauer some questions about snowboarding, and he gave me a tiny wink, my head and my heart were screaming at me not to leave this apartment with him.

Instincts were blaring like a tornado siren. My hand tightened around the handle of my backpack until my fingers



started tingling from loss of blood flow.

I couldn't do this.

If I wasn't capable of one full evening around him, one full evening of pretending to be my sister, I definitely couldn't do this for an entire night. With him.

"And you have good snow tires?" Paige asked him. "Because you might encounter bad weather."

"That's going north of them," Isabel said. "Ignore her, Bauer. She's like this with all of us."

Bauer set a hand on his chest. "My Jeep can handle anything, I promise. I have excellent tires."

"Do you mind if I quickly grab a picture of your driver's license?" Paige continued. "Just ... in case."

He tilted his head. "Umm, yes?"

"Why? Something to hide?"

"Okay," I interjected. "Paige, I think he gets the picture."

"Believe me," Bauer said seriously, "I'm well aware of how precious my cargo is."

I rolled my eyes.

Paige, however, looked pleased. "You're damned right."

Setting a hand on my sister-in-law's shoulder, I squeezed in warning. "Thank you, Paige."

I gave her a look.

She gave me one right back.

If we didn't leave soon, she'd pull a shotgun out of thin air and start cleaning it in front of him.

"Ready?" I asked Bauer.

His wide grin held the slightest secret edge to it that was meant only for me. It made my heart race inexplicably. My head was still screaming in warning.

"Let's go, princess. I've been ready since last night."



## CLAIRE

The drive from my apartment to Richard's place in Vancouver was roughly two and a half hours. I learned a few things in that relatively short span of time.

1- You could stare at the breathtaking scenery for most of it and live in abject denial about what was waiting for you upon our arrival to Richard's place. Memorize entire mountain ranges, each craggy, uneven peak, and imagine it to such detail that if you actually knew how to do something like ... paint or draw, you'd spend those two and a half hours thinking about how you'd paint or draw them.

2- Bauer was, regrettably, a very good singer. He favored classic rock and alternative as his music of choice, and it took everything in me not to jam my fingers in my ears as he sang along. His voice was low and smooth without frills or fancy embellishments, but it made the hair on the back of my neck rise, and therefore, I didn't like it.

3- He was also freaking relentless in trying to engage me in conversation even though I was doing my very best at ignoring his existence until I had no other choice. It took until the last thirty minutes of our drive before I finally cracked.

"So, princess, when did we start dating?"

Ignoring the unsteady gallop of my heart when he asked that, I kept my voice even and emotionless every time he asked me something that I felt forced to answer.

"Let's go with six months."

“Six months, it is,” he agreed easily.

Two songs later—songs he knew the harmony to—he tried again.

“What changed?”

Tearing my eyes away from the mountains, I begrudgingly let my gaze turn in his direction. Which was a *mistake*, because Bauer, in the shirt and the jeans and the hat, with that scenery and that dark hair along his jaw, was like something ripped out of *Rugged Man Magazine*, and I was not here for that.

Not here for it.

At all.

He gestured back and forth between us when I didn’t say anything. “Between us. What changed? Six months ago, I mean.”

My mouth fell open. “I-I don’t know. Does it matter?”

Bauer’s shrug was careless. “Yeah, it matters. If I’m hanging out with a couple who interests me, and I start asking them questions about their relationship, I’d want to know what changed, considering we’ve known each other for years.”

“Well,” I hedged, “you and I just ... I don’t know ...”

“Thank you for proving my point about why we need an answer.”

I gave him a look. “I’d bet ten bucks that he won’t ask what changed between me and you.”

“Me and Lia,” he corrected lightly. “Remember?”

Swallowing, I nodded. “Right. You and Lia.”

“I mean, there must have been one moment,” he said. “Maybe you were spending the night.”

I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to play this game with him. Didn’t want to imagine whatever he had in his head because it was probably *vivid*. “I thought you never went home.”

“Rarely,” Bauer conceded. “They don’t exactly roll out the welcome mat for me.”

Staying quiet felt like a safer choice because my options were either contribute to the little story he was concocting or allow him to spin a tale of his own making.

“So I probably snuck in late since I needed a place to stay.” He tapped his thumb on the wheel, and the sun glinted off the solid silver ring he was wearing. “You couldn’t sleep, so I found you in the kitchen, staring into the fridge.”

Carefully, I tucked my knees up to my chest and hugged my arms around my legs. I didn’t want to imagine this. Because it suddenly, somehow seemed so much worse if he was placing Lia into his mind, instead of me.

My safe choice didn’t feel so safe anymore.

“No one will ask this,” I said quietly.

Bauer ignored me. “Maybe you offered me a drink because you were going to have one. One turned to two. Just enough that you were willing to lower your defenses around me, princess. First time you ever did that, I’m thinking.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Taking advantage, are we?”

“Hell no. We were relaxed. Not drunk. I don’t sleep with drunk women because trust me, that’s a whole different world of trouble when you wake up the next morning.”

“This story is leading to all sorts of romantic places.”

He grinned. “In my mind, you grabbed me and planted that first kiss on my very unsuspecting lips. A hot kiss too.”

I rolled my eyes, but my cheeks were flaming. “Of course, that’s how it would work in your head.”

Bauer licked his lower lip. “You tasted like cherries. After that, I was all but whipped. I was yours to command, and I’ve never looked back.”

Turning my face back to the window, I tried some deep breathing exercises at the thought of maintaining that particular façade for even one single day. My heart was racing

terribly. “I can’t imagine Richard Harper will be interrogating us.”

He laughed. “Polite conversation is not an interrogation.”

“It sure feels like it,” I muttered under my breath.

Oh, he heard me, and he thought that was hilarious. “You know, I like it when you’re just being Claire.”

No, no I would not feel a flush of warm, gooey happiness at that statement. When you were a twin, particularly an identical twin, there was a strange emotional tangle that went along with it. Inevitably, you’re linked with that person for the rest of your life. In a lot of people’s eyes, you come as a package deal. Friends in high school and even early college when we lived in the dorms were shocked if only one of us showed up to an event.

Claire and Lia.

Lia and Claire.

People taking a second to make sure they knew which twin they were talking to. Like we weren’t completely different underneath the surface of our skin. Half the time, I wasn’t even sure they cared if they knew which one was which.

For some reason, sitting in that car, following my brain along that path, made me think of something Brooke said to us about a year before she left.

We were driving to Logan’s house. It was hard to remember the details now, but she wanted to go do something, so she was dropping us off at his house so he could watch us. Lia and I were bickering in the back seat, and because she couldn’t hear her music over the noise we were making, she yelled back at us to pipe down.

Because she was incapable of keeping her mouth shut, Lia sweetly asked which one needed to be quiet.

*“Like it matters,” Brooke snapped. “I can’t even tell which of you sounds worse right now, or who’s more annoying. Which is the same as every other day, I guess.”*

She'd gotten her wish because it shut us up in different ways. I'd felt like she'd punched me in the stomach. Lia's face went smooth instantly, but I'd felt her anger. I'd felt it humming under my skin.

Childhood wounds went deep, even if you didn't think about them all the time.

"You okay?" Bauer asked. "You went scary quiet on me there."

It was perceptive of him, and it made me give him a curious glance. I'd been quiet most of the trip, but even him, this man who didn't really know me, was able to tell the difference in my silence.

I gave him a small smile. "Just thinking about emotional trauma from childhood, if you must know."

He groaned, leaning forward to turn the music up. "Nope. Not going there, princess. We haven't been fake dating long enough."

After an hour and a half of him trying to engage me in conversation, that was the thing that did the trick. I turned in my seat to appraise his facial expression.

"Come on, I'll share mine if you share yours."

He snorted. "Yeah, right."

"We have an hour left," I said. "What else should we talk about?"

"Literally anything." He changed lanes after a quick glance at his blind spot. "I'd talk politics. Religion. Women I've slept with in the past because I've never done the dating thing. Let's hit one of *those* for fun."

My head tilted. "How old were you when your dad married Adele?"

Bauer blew out a hard breath. "Remember that one time my high school girlfriend cheated on me? With my best friend? Let's recap that in detail instead."

A smile twitched at the edges of my mouth, but I tamped it down. Being charmed by his reticence to talk about his family's obvious dysfunction would do me no good. Even if he was all but admitting he was a man-ho.

"You're gonna make a great kid shrink someday, princess," he said. "Badgering these poor children into sharing."

"You're very skilled at deflection, Bauer."

He sent me a crooked grin. "I'm skilled at a lot of things, trust me. Not talking about my family isn't even at the top of the list."

Rolling my eyes at the innuendo, I turned back to the window. Seattle was beautiful, but as we drove farther north, the views seemed to increase in grandeur. "No wonder you love it up here," I told him. "It's amazing."

Not that my comment necessitated a response, but Bauer didn't say anything right away. Then he let out a slow exhale, the kind you'd make after a good yoga stretch or when you slip into a bathtub full of hot water and it hits your skin for the first time.

It was the kind of sigh that said *my soul is at ease*.

"The mountains are the one place where I don't feel stuck in a cage."

Before I could comment on that, the soothing voice on his phone told us to take the exit. There were buildings off in the distance, the Vancouver skyline visible even from where we were heading off toward the water to where Richard had told us to go.

"When did your parents drive up?"

He glanced at his phone screen, and I thought I saw guilt in his eyes. "They, uh, they flew with Richard on his private plane a little bit ago."

My eyebrows slid up on my forehead. "And how come we didn't do that? We could've gotten there in, like, thirty minutes."



“Beeecause I didn’t want to be trapped in a flying metal tube with my dad and Adele just yet.” Bauer gave me an indulgent grin. “I needed time with my girl before our sleepover tonight.”

I pointed a finger at him. “I told you separate rooms.”

“And if I have any control over that, your wish is my command.” He pointed a finger of his own. “But you know as well as I that if you protest too much, it’ll look weird.”

With a groan, I dropped my head back on the seat. “This is so stupid. Can’t we just tell Richard about the mix-up?”

“Yes, sure we can.” Bauer gave me a look. “I’m sure he’d love handing Adele a check after he finds out we all lied to him, knowing exactly who he was.”

“Eventually, they’ll have to.”

“Why?”

“W-well,” I stammered, “if he’s a major benefactor of the center, won’t he come visit?”

“Sure. Does your sister visit the center often?”

I frowned, which made him laugh.

“Lying isn’t fun, Bauer. I don’t enjoy it. I feel like a fake and a phony and like we’re duping this nice man.”

“All you’re doing is answering to a different name,” he pointed out. “When you talked to him for the first time, were you pretending to be Lia?”

“No,” I admitted.

The houses grew as we traveled around the winding road surrounded by towering trees and glimpses of water.

“No, you weren’t. Listen, the worst part of this is that you have to pretend to like me for a day.”

He said it flippantly, but there was an edge to his words.

For a moment, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine that the night had played out the way I’d dreamt it would. What

would this feel like if Finn were driving us up to Vancouver, and I had to pretend to be his girlfriend for a night?

And my mind went ... blank.

My heart was quiet.

He probably would have been as uncomfortable with this as I was. And the longer I thought about it, I knew we never would've been in this position in the first place because he wouldn't have approached me and slid his arm around my waist as I spoke to Richard. He wouldn't have looked at me the way Bauer had. He wouldn't have danced with me in a quiet hallway.

Bauer turned the Jeep into the entrance for Richard's house, but my gaze wasn't on the stunning view or towering log cabin. It was on the man driving us toward it. The skin around his mouth had tightened a bit, and his eyes had lost some of the spark from earlier. This was hard on him, too, but in a completely different way than it was for me.

After taking a deep breath, I laid my hand on top of where his was resting on the gear shift.

Bauer's eyes snapped to me, then down to our hands.

His skin was warm and rough.

"I like you just fine, Bauer," I told him quietly. "I just don't know you at all."

His eyebrows lowered over his eyes as he studied my suddenly serious demeanor.

"Why did you say what you said when we were dancing?" The question was out of my mouth before I even realized it had been bothering me.

That sparked something behind his eyes. "What did I say?"

"That Finn had never danced with me like that." My face was probably bright red, but it felt ... important. If Bauer was being truthful, and he'd known the whole evening that I was Claire, then he was speaking to me when he said it. Not Lia. "Why did you say that?"

He had to disentangle our hands to move the Jeep into park, and he took a second to stare up at the house.

Then he cocked his head, angling in his seat to face me. “Why did you go to the dinner for Lia? If you hate lying so much.”

Stalemate.

That was what we were in. If I told Bauer right now, before walking into this performance we were about to attempt, then he’d shut down instantly. If I told him that for years, I’d looked at his brother like the perfect man, the prototype of everything I’d wanted, but the men I’d dated had always come up woefully short in comparison.

Not smart enough.

Not sweet enough.

Not kind enough.

Not ... Finn enough.

Here was a man who was the exact opposite of his brother in every single way I could possibly list. And in front of a bunch of strangers, I was going to pretend he was everything I wanted.

I took a deep breath. “I asked you first.”

Bauer smiled cryptically. “That you did, princess.”

The expectant look I gave him made his smile grow wider. I wanted to climb out of my seat and rip the answer out of him. The fact he wouldn’t answer made me feel edgy. like there was a vibration starting somewhere deep inside my body, spreading further and further until he’d be able to see it on the surface of my skin if he didn’t tell me.

“Why won’t you tell me?” I whispered impatiently.

“Why won’t you tell me?” he said back, his face leaning closer to mine in the quiet confines of the Jeep. His eyes fixed on my mouth. “You’re going to drive me insane before this is over, aren’t you?”

It snapped the tightening cord between us, and I sat back, flattening myself against the door of the Jeep. What was I doing?

Movement from the corner of my eye snagged my attention. Richard was standing on a massive deck, waving at us. “We have company.”

Bauer blinked. “Right.”

The air was heavy and strangely charged, though I couldn’t figure out which one of us was sending all that energy pulsing into the space between us.

He gave me a long look. “Showtime, princess.”



## BAUER

Claire, who was quickly becoming one of the most fascinating women I'd ever met, did not get her wish. Richard's housekeeper, a tidy woman in her late fifties, showed us our bedroom at the end of the upstairs hallway, and I tried not to laugh at the disgruntled look that Claire tried to hide.

The room, just like the rest of Richard's place, was, oh ... could I even think of the right word.

Overwhelming.

Though his place was hidden from the road, on the tip of West Vancouver, with trees crowding the lot and blocking the view of the house from the road, once we'd stepped inside, everything about it was overwhelming. And incredibly, mind-numbingly ugly.

Claire and I stood in our bedroom, absolutely speechless.

"It's ..." Her voice trailed off when her eyes landed, wide and round and shocked, on the bed dominating the space.

"It's terrible."

She let out an airy laugh. "I think Richard Harper is overcompensating for something."

"Is that your professional opinion?"

Her slow nod had me laughing.

It looked like a turn of the century French brothel puked up over every surface. Ornate gilded gold was everywhere, on

furniture and picture frames and mirrors. Deep, jewel-toned upholstery had me blinking in disbelief, just like I had been from the moment we walked in the door.

“I don’t know what I expected,” she said. Her hand gestured weakly at the king-size, four-poster bed, complete with blood-red velvet curtains that would completely enclose the sleeping space. “But it wasn’t this.”

I peeked inside our bathroom and let out a low whistle. “Close your eyes real tight before you walk in this room, princess. It’ll make your eyeballs bleed.”

“Rich people are strange,” she said, then glanced over her shoulder at me. “Isn’t that what you told me?”

“Something like that.” I scratched my head and slung my duffel onto the couch framed in the large span of windows. Windows that would fully be covered by the heavy black and gold striped fabric, so overpowering in pattern, I almost felt claustrophobic looking at it.

“That couch looks comfy.”

I glanced back at her, caught the smirk on her face, and shook my head. “You trying to tell me something?”

The moment we walked in the room, I knew I’d be spending the night on that damn couch covered with a horrible, horrible floral pattern. It would be small and uncomfortable, and I’d do it, because as much as I wanted to kiss Claire, do all manner of things, if she was amenable, I’d never forced my attentions on a woman, and I sure as hell wouldn’t be starting with this one.

Besides, I’d caught the look in her sister-in-law’s eyes when she told me she’d destroy me, and I abso-friggin-lutely believed her.

Claire didn’t answer me because she probably knew all of the things I was thinking.

“At least give me one of the good pillows,” I told her. Holding up the small one from the couch, one of those weird pointless ones shaped like a hot dog, I tossed it in her direction. “Because I am not using that.”

She caught the pillow with a smile and climbed up onto the gargantuan bed. “I think I can manage that since he’s given me, oh, let’s see ... fourteen on this one.”

I looked away so that she didn’t catch me checking out her ass, but come on, she was on all fours on a bed, and I was already struggling to keep my hands off her. That was why the pillow hit me in the side of the head.

Her peals of laughter were so damn adorable, I’d probably let her throw a concrete block at my head if I could hear them all night.

“Shit,” I muttered. I was in trouble with this one, and I knew exactly why. My lifestyle didn’t lend itself to being around women like Claire. Don’t get me wrong, I had friends who were girls in Whistler. Snowboarding chicks were strong and badass, and I counted plenty of them as friends. I’d never slept with any of my fellow competitors, just the snow bunnies. The visitors to the mountain who had no trouble with the bartender for a night.

But Claire was different.

Smart, sweet, no-nonsense, and way, way too good for me. Claire checked every box on the hypothetical list that I never paid too much attention to in my head—the Keeper list, which is why it wasn’t hard for me to pretend with her for one night.

Looking down at the couch, I tried to figure out a way to convince Richard that he needed a full-week immersion into learning about the community center because I’d gladly give up seven nights of sleep to that embroidered nightmare if I got more time with Claire.

There was a soft knock on the door.

“Come in,” Claire said.

The housekeeper popped her head in. “Dinner will be served in about fifteen minutes if you’d like to join the rest of the party downstairs.”

“We’ll be right down,” I told her.



After the door closed, Claire flopped back on the bed and covered her face with her hands. “This is insane.”

“You know what’s insane? You could fit fifteen of you in that bed and there’d still be room.”

She sat up, and her hair, shiny and dark, slid out of its ponytail. “True. Which means I’ll sleep very well tonight,” she said primly.

I gestured to the door. “Let’s go, princess. I know you’re excited.”

When she hopped off the bed, fixing her ponytail as she walked, my hand hovered over her back as we left the room. It wanted to fall to that curve, the one just at the hem of her shirt, but I tucked my arm back into my side.

My parents were waiting expectantly at a monstrosity of a formal dining table, the kind that could easily seat twelve people.

“Sweetie,” Adele said in greeting, leaning in to kiss Claire’s cheek. “Just be yourself,” she whispered. “But, you know ... answer to Lia.”

Claire gave her a weak smile. “Got it.”

Richard joined us, handing Adele and my dad full glasses of wine. “What do you think of my humble abode?”

“It’s astounding,” I told him seriously. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

He puffed up like a peacock as Claire echoed the sentiment.

“I’d spend all my time here if I could,” he said. “I feel like a king.”

I nodded. “Understandable.”

Adele gave me a warning look, and my dad swiped a hand over his mouth.

We sat for dinner, Claire to my right, and when she almost knocked over her water glass pulling her chair closer to the table, I laid a hand on her thigh and squeezed.

I gave her an encouraging smile, which she returned weakly.

Richard, from his gilded, ornate chair at the head of the table, caught the gesture and winked at us.

“So, Bauer, what’s this nonsense about you losing your sponsorship? You were spectacular at your past few events.”

Adele’s face turned a pasty shade of white that I was the first up in Richard’s eyes. I swallowed, giving the housekeeper a smile as she set some bread and soup in front of me and Claire.

“Oh, I don’t know if that’s enjoyable dinnertime conversation, sir.”

It certainly wasn’t for me because I’d be scrambling to regain any sort of competitive traction without a primary sponsor. Scotty was working on it, but this crowd was the last one I wanted to dissect it with. Especially in front of Adele.

“It’s such a fickle career,” Adele interjected. “So stressful for the whole family, really.”

I raised my eyebrows at her. “Yes. I can’t imagine how helpless you must feel. You can help all these kids who need you at the center, but your son is beyond your reach.”

Claire pressed her foot on top of mine under the table.

Richard smiled between us, completely oblivious. “My parents wrote me off long ago,” he said. “You’re fortunate to have a family who cares that much.”

My answering nod was grave. “Indeed I am.”

“Speaking of the center,” Richard said between sips of the soup, “why don’t you tell me a bit about it, Adele?”

She let out a relieved breath. “I’d love to.”

And that set the tone for the rest of the three-course dinner. Richard and Adele dominated the conversation with occasional interjections from my father as necessary.

Claire watched it all unfold thoughtfully, nodding a few times when Adele would say something about the positive

impact a place like the center could have on children who wouldn't normally have the opportunities.

"You're quiet, Miss Ward," Richard said, a bit more astute than I'd given him credit for.

She smiled, and I stretched my arm behind her chair. Her hair brushed against my hand, and against my better judgment, I toyed with the silky ends.

"Not much to add, I guess."

"Oh, I find that hard to believe. This is the same young woman who took a simple picture and about made a grown man cry at what she observed in it."

I twirled her hair over my knuckle, and Claire shivered. "Umm, well, Adele and Robert have done such a thorough job, I can't imagine what I'd be able to contribute."

"But you think their reach could be greater," he said. "Help more kids."

She inhaled quietly before she answered. "I think there are a lot of philanthropic endeavors that fall into that category. Services for underserved youth need to be talked about; they need to have the opportunity to reach the kids who need them the most, and that's not always the kids who live in the immediate vicinity to the physical location. That's why a lot of athletes, for example, coordinate with different school districts to bus kids in for larger events. If you're limited to one geographical area, you're limited in the number of kids you can help."

My dad nodded. "She's right. We seem to be plateauing the past few years. We'd love to broaden our reach, but we've just lacked the resources to be able to do so."

Richard watched them both, and his eyes tracking back and forth between the two with interest. "You've probably been to hundreds of those events over the years, haven't you, Lia?"

She blinked at the use of her sister's name, and my hand slid down to her shoulder. She relaxed slightly.

“I have. My brother never started his own foundation, but we’ve supported so many of his friends’, it’s hard to keep them straight.”

“I’d wager he was pretty busy raising you and your sisters,” Richard said. “With your mom leaving like she did.”

Claire swallowed carefully. “He was. Not many people know details of our background, though. He kept our life very private for that reason.”

I increased the pressure of my fingers on her shoulder, just letting her know I was there.

I knew a little bit of what the Ward sisters had been through from Finn, but it sounded like Richard knew even more. Logan practically raised them, and his brother—Claire’s other half brother—wasn’t really in their lives much because he and Logan didn’t get along. But the reasons, well, they’d never interested me much.

Until now.

Richard’s tone was sympathetic, but I still gave him careful study at the fact he knew about it in the first place. He must have seen something in my eyes because he held up his hands and smiled. “Sorry, didn’t know I was stepping into anything I shouldn’t. I thought it was common knowledge, if one cared to dig deep enough.”

“It’s not,” I told him quietly. “And not everyone enjoys talking about the things in their childhood that sucked.”

Claire exhaled slowly and gave me a small smile.

“It’s okay, Bauer,” she said. “And there’s no reason to apologize, Richard. If someone dug enough, they’d know that Brooke decided being a mother wasn’t what she wanted to do. My sisters and I were fortunate to have someone like Logan who loved us enough to be exactly what we needed. But not all kids have that. And I think it’s admirable for people like Adele and Robert to try to help children who don’t have another family member to do what my brother did.”

Richard relaxed back into his seat. “And I’m guessing that influenced your educational choices.”

She nodded. “It did.”

“What do you hope to do someday?”

Adele gave me a look that I couldn’t decipher. Claire shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

Right. Lia Ward was not a developmental psychology major, and the further he got to Claire as her sister, the more tangled the knot might become.

“She’s going to save hopeless wretches like you and me, Richard,” I said, easing a hand up Claire’s back.

He smiled, as intended, spreading his arms wide. A king showing off his kingdom. “Do I need saving?”

“Maybe from your decorating skills, but that’s about it,” I told him.

Adele sucked in a breath, and Claire rolled her lips between her teeth.

After a beat of silence, Richard’s booming laughter echoed off the cathedral ceiling.

And thankfully, that broke the mood while we wrapped up dinner.

Everything stayed fairly surface level with small talk about Seattle and Vancouver as we moved to the family room and the roaring fire. As Richard regaled Adele and my father with tales of his outlandish, over-the-top life, I stared out the windows. Outside the wall of glass, you could practically see the cold front move in.

The water took on an eerie stillness when the air went frigid. Sitting next to Claire on a puffy, horrible loveseat, I kept my arm across the back of the furniture and tried to block out everything except the view out the window and the woman next to me. Her legs were curled up into her chest, so we weren’t touching, but almost.

Almost.

I never should have concocted my little tale about our first kiss. All I could imagine now was a dark kitchen, Claire

tugging me down with fists clenched in my shirt, pushing my back against a fridge door and having her way with me.

Because of that fantasy running through my head, this almost was killing me.

Everywhere, we were *almost* touching. Her hair, again, was just beyond my hands. Her shoulder blades were less than an inch from my forearm. Her hip was close enough to mine that I could feel the heat of her body. And it was torture. For two hours, we sat there, each of us occasionally entering the conversation that flowed easily between my parents and Richard.

For all intents and purposes, we were as useful as all the gaudy decoration that Richard had up on the walls, but he wanted us there, nonetheless.

When the sun was fully set, and the skies dark, Claire yawned behind her hand.

“Ready to head upstairs?” I asked, leaning my head toward hers.

She nodded, turning toward me to meet my eyes, not realizing I’d moved. Her breath caught when my thumb moved to brush a stray piece of hair off her cheekbone.

“You have freckles,” I whispered, quietly enough that no one could hear us.

Her nod was jerky, but she didn’t pull back. “J-just when I get some sun.”

I hummed. “I like it.”

Richard cleared his throat, and his intrusion felt harsh and unwelcome in that little space I was occupying with Claire. “Well,” he said knowingly. “I think it’s time to wrap up the evening.”

Adele stood, giving me a warning look. “Yes, it looks like it.”

Claire got off the loveseat before I did because I had to take ten seconds to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in my head before standing or else I risked embarrassing myself.

“Good night, everyone,” Claire said.

I followed her up the stairs and down the hall.

Neither of us said a word.

The walk to our bedroom was tense, and I imagined all sorts of scenarios as soon as we were behind closed doors.

Her, yanking me against her soft, warm body and asking me to kiss her.

Me, digging my hands underneath the cotton of her shirt and finding out if her lips were as soft as I’d imagined, if her tongue was sweet and cool.

She pushed open the door, and I sucked in a breath, closing it quietly and then resting my back against it while she marched straight for her backpack, pulled out some pajamas, and without a single glance in my direction, walked into the bathroom.

My entire being deflated.

Yeah. *Everything*.

“Of course,” I whispered. “What did you think would happen?”

By the time she came out of the bathroom, clad in another set of cotton shorts, and a well-loved T-shirt, I was sprawled on that stupid couch and staring up at the ceiling.

Of the two of us, I knew who was being smart, and as usual, it wasn’t me.

She could probably sense my aversion to any sort of serious relationship. I wasn’t kidding in the car. I’d had one attempt, and it ended with me feeling like a chump. It was easier with no strings. No repeat faces or expectations. That way, I didn’t even have to worry about a messy fallout, whether caused by me or someone else.

Claire quietly climbed into her too-big bed, and I heard her sigh. “That wasn’t so bad.”

I smiled at her tentatively spoken words.

“No, not too bad.”

“Are ...” She paused. “Is the couch terribly uncomfortable?”

It was worse than uncomfortable.

By morning, my back would be bent in half, and my neck would be so jacked up that the best chiro would need seventeen appointments to fix the damage. Plus, it smelled like mothballs.

“It’ll be just fine.”

“You’re lying to me, aren’t you?”

I turned my head to look at her. Her eyes were wide in her face, and something about being in this room with me made her visibly nervous.

“Good night, princess.”

Her smile, the one she gave me before she disappeared under the blankets, did such strange things to my heart that I knew I’d sleep on that couch a hundred times over just to get a glimpse of it.

And me and Claire, we had no idea that our little adventure hadn’t even begun yet.





## CLAIRE

Waking in that monstrosity of a bed was disorienting, to say the least. It was so, so dark in the room that it took me a solid thirty seconds to get my bearings.

At some point, after he sprawled his big body on the little couch, Bauer must've woken to tug the heavy velvet curtains shut. The tiniest sliver of light came through the separation of the two pieces of fabric, and the way it fell, it cut straight across the middle of the room. Almost like a line had been drawn between the bed where I was lying and where Bauer was sound asleep.

It was impossible to look at him and not smile because his long legs were dangling off the edge of the couch, and he had one muscular, inked arm slung over his face.

The blanket covering his body was a dark color that I couldn't identify, but it was pulled up over his chest. Listen, maybe I hadn't taken Bauer up on the blatant invitation in his eyes, but I was a red-blooded female who hadn't gotten laid in over a year. And the last time had been fast and forgettable, the byproduct of trying to see if anyone could measure up to Finn in my mind.

And the human, red-blooded woman in me leaned up as far as I could, trying to see exactly what Bauer was hiding underneath that cotton Henley from the day before.

When he groaned, the arm covering his face lifting in a stretch, I quietly ducked back down and laid my head on the pillow.

The disappointment I felt at not seeing just a bit more of him was surprising, and I rubbed at my forehead, trying to figure out where the hell it came from.

Bauer was ... fine. He was funny in a clever and self-deprecating way. But I knew a lot of funny men. Guys I'd had classes with or met when I was out with my sister and our friends. That didn't make him anything gawk-worthy.

But he also clearly respected me because he hadn't pressed his luck even though we were sharing the same room. Listening to the undeniably intimate sounds of him waking up, that was the fact that I couldn't ignore.

Beyond his looks, which were ridiculous, if I was being honest, the way he held himself over the line I'd drawn in the sand ... well ... it piqued my curiosity.

The bad boy who maybe wasn't as bad as he liked to pretend to be.

My phone dinged from the bedside table, and I quickly reached over to grab it.

**Paige: Tell me when you and the bad boy are heading home. I don't like the weather system turning your direction the way it has. They're already delaying flights out of Vancouver.**

**PAIGE: Better yet, let me track your location PLEASE. I've only asked seventeen times, and I don't know why you and your sisters feel like I'm invading your privacy.**

Curious, I pulled up my weather app and grimaced at what I saw. *Weather Advisory* in bright red letters scrolled along the top, and when I read what was headed in our direction and north of Vancouver with possible record levels of snow for April, I sat up in bed, not caring whether Bauer was looking or not.

He was.

"Good morning, sunshine," he said. Even though I should have known better, I glanced up at him and then immediately

regretted it.

I wanted to know what the blanket was hiding, and now I knew.

Muscles. And ink. And more muscles.

My eyes went *straight* back to my phone. Sort of. “Morning. Have you seen this forecast?”

He shook his head. “Nope. Why?”

“We should head back as soon as possible.”

Bauer stretched, unfolding his body like a great big cat that had just woken from a nap on a sun-warmed rock. The sound he let out from deep in his chest made my skin feel two sizes too tight, and I stared extra hard at my phone.

“It’ll be fine. They always act like it’s the end of the world if we get a big snowfall in April.”

I gave him a skeptical look. “Bauer, it says it could be well over a foot of snow.”

He yawned. “We’ll get two inches max.”

The radar looping across my screen begged to differ in ominous shades of blues and purples.

“Has anyone ever told you that you look gorgeous when you first wake up and have that worried frown on your face?”

I sighed, tucking my phone under the blankets. Responding to Paige would have to come later because dealing with the flirty man sharing my room apparently had to be dealt with first.

“I can’t say that they have.” Carefully tucking the blankets under my armpits to cover ... anything, I gave him a patient look. “Can you please get dressed? I want to see if there’s coffee downstairs.”

Bauer stood off the couch slowly, and it was pure instinct that had me slapping a hand over my eyes when I caught sight of that big body unfolding, and his black boxer briefs that were the only thing covering him. Slapped a *hand* over my eyes. Like a child.

His booming laughter made my face go hot.

“If you want to look, princess, go right ahead. I’m here for your perusal.”

Behind the protection of my hand, I rolled my eyes. “I’m going to use the bathroom, and when I come out, you better be clothed.”

“I’m clothed now,” he protested. “All the important parts are covered.”

I slipped from the bed and kept my eyes straight ahead as I got to the privacy of the bathroom. When the door was shut, I sank against the closed door with a sigh. Sharing a bedroom with Bauer was hazardous for my health.

But as I’d requested, he was in a T-shirt and gray sweatpants when I exited the bathroom with brushed hair and brushed teeth. Honestly, though, the sweatpants might have been worse—or better, if I looked long enough—than the boxer briefs.

Bauer wasn’t looking at me, but at his phone screen. It was his turn to wear a frown, though I refused to tell him he looked adorable. Men that hot could never, and would never, be described as adorable.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

His face cleared instantly. “Nothing. I just have to make a phone call real quick before we head down. But don’t feel like you need to wait for me.”

I shrugged. “It’s okay. Go ahead, I won’t eavesdrop.”

One hand rubbing the back of his neck, Bauer actually looked ... worried. “Okay.” He shook his head and brought the phone to his ear. After a few moments, he smiled. “No, I didn’t storm the offices. Tried a different tactic, but ... it didn’t pan out exactly like I planned.” He nodded. “Don’t tell me you’re extending your trip.”

He glanced at me.

“Yeah, I’m actually in West Vancouver right now, so I’m about an hour away from your place. Why?” He shook his

head. “No, I was going back down to Seattle.”

I grabbed some clothes and walked back to the bathroom but kept the door cracked. Quietly, as I slipped my shorts off and tugged leggings up over my legs, I heard him mutter a curse under his breath.

“Scotty, I have a passenger with me, and she will not like this.” He paused. “No, it’s not like that.”

I tugged my sweatshirt on and walked out of the bathroom, giving him a questioning look.

He scratched the side of his jaw. “I know, Scotty, but I’m sure she’s okay.” He grimaced. “Yeah, I heard it could be bad, but come on, we’ve lived by those mountains for how long? You’ve been there a hundred years. Don’t tell me they don’t always exagger—”

Whatever Scotty said on the other end of the phone had Bauer letting out a slow exhale.

“Does she have food?”

My hands lowered slowly where I had started packing away my pajamas. Oh geez, was someone stranded? Lost? My mind started racing, my heart hurting for whoever might be in trouble.

“She’s tough, okay? I’m sure Agnes will be fine. Besides, I’m the last person she’d want to have check on her. She hates me.”

I would’ve smiled, if the name Agnes hadn’t conjured mental images of a sweet, little old lady, and now I wasn’t even sure if she had *food*.

“We can check on her,” I heard myself say.

Bauer’s face dropped in shock. He blinked. “Yeah, Scotty, that’s her. But—”

“Tell him we’ll check on Agnes,” I said, more firmly this time. I lifted my chin for good measure. For some reason, that made Bauer grin widely. “We can bring supplies from Richard, if he’ll let us part with some canned goods and produce. We’ll make sure she has food.”

The person he was talking to said something that made Bauer chuckle. “Yes, she is definitely a better person than me. Though she may regret this when she meets Agnes.”

My mouth fell open. Everything nice I said about Bauer, I took it back. He was horrible. And rude. And mean to little old ladies without food stuck in the middle of nowhere before a blizzard.

His eyes were glued to my face, full of mischief and fire. “Okay, Scotty. We’ll leave now, but all I can do is check on her, make sure she’s inside with some food, and then turn right back around. I have a precious package to deliver safely back to Seattle.”

“Oh geez,” I mumbled, ignoring his unwavering gaze as I zipped my backpack a bit harder than necessary. “Laying it on a little thick, don’t you think?”

Bauer said goodbye to whoever he was talking to, probably Agnes’s husband or son or grandson who was worried sick about her, and then watched me quietly. I fidgeted with my backpack until I could fidget no longer.

“Who’s Scotty, and why does Agnes hate you?” I asked.

He smiled slowly. “Scotty is the man who taught me everything.” Bauer sat on the couch, shoving his feet into the hiking boots he was wearing the day before. “I owe him my entire career, and he damn well knows it, which is why he calls me for this horrific task of checking on Agnes. Which I probably would’ve said no to, if you hadn’t piped up and given the poor old man hope.”

“That’s terrible,” I wailed. “You’d leave her out there, completely defenseless?”

Bauer tilted his head to the side. “Yes. Because she’ll be just fine. She always is.”

“Bauer whatever your middle name is Davis, you should be ashamed of yourself.” I propped my hands on my hips. “She’s a little old lady, and she needs supplies. I know you act tough, but come on, even you’re not so coldhearted.”

“I almost don’t want to warn you,” he said cryptically. He leaned forward, letting his forearms rest on the tops of his thighs, and his hands dangle between his knees.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because you are the most frustrating, adorable, mystifying woman I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting, and that’s the only reason I’m going to tell you what you just signed us up for.”

It was impossible not to want to reach my hands up and cover my face. I’d never been called any of those things. Okay, frustrating maybe, by my sisters. But I was an open book. Literally. I spent my life in open books, trying to absorb everything I found there. But for some reason, this man looked at me and saw a version of myself that I never knew existed.

Something about me drew him in.

“What did I sign us up for?”

Bauer stood and sauntered toward me, those gray sweats hanging off his hips in a way that I was *not* looking at, and he stopped just out of arm’s reach. “Agnes is a cat.”

I blinked up to his face. “What?”

“Agnes is Scotty’s horrible, evil, mean-tempered cat that hates every human being except him. And he can’t remember how much food he put in her automatic feeder, so he’s afraid she’s going to starve to death before he can get home.”

“Oh,” I said weakly.

Bauer smiled. “Yeah, oh.”

“So, we’re ... driving out into a snowstorm to check on a cat who lives out in the middle of nowhere.”

His nod was slow. “It looks like it.”

I walked over to the window and carefully pulled back the heavy curtains. Snow was already sticking to the ground. Tree branches were coated white, lending a magical air to the already stunning vista. Like a winter wonderland. Except not wonderful, not anymore.



“He lives about an hour away?” I asked weakly. An hour wasn’t so bad. No reason to freak out.

“Yeah. We better grab some coffee and hit the road if we want to get back to Seattle on decent time.”

I pinched my eyes shut. “I’m sorry. This is ...” I paused. “I should’ve waited until you were off the phone.”

His hands landed on my shoulders, and he gently spun me to face him. He didn’t speak until I pried open my eyelids. “Princess, it’s fine. I still think this storm will blow past like a sweet little kitten, unlike Agnes, who is an awful, awful bitch of an animal.”

My smile came quickly, and he hummed deep in his chest at the sight it.

“Killin’ me,” he whispered.

“Sorry.”

He squeezed my shoulders. “No, you’re not. You just can’t help it.”

Fifteen minutes later, coffees in hand, and breakfast sandwiches wrapped up for us by Richard’s housekeeper, we were bundled into Bauer’s Jeep as big, fat snowflakes hit the windshield in soft little pats of sound.

“You told Paige this wasn’t my idea, right?” he asked, watching me tap out a message to my sisters so they didn’t think I’d been kidnapped. “Because she looked very serious when she threatened my life.”

“She was serious.”

“Helpful,” he said dryly. He cranked the engine to life and sat back in his seat.

**Me: Long story, but we have to detour north a bit to check on something for Bauer’s coach. We’ll be fine.**

**LIA: OMG, don’t let him talk you into something insane. Like he cares about a freaking blizzard.**

**PAIGE: THIS IS WHY I SHOULD BE ABLE TO TRACK YOUR ASSES. I'm making Logan learn how to hack your phone.**

**ISABEL: \*fist bump\* Don't do anything I wouldn't do.**

**MOLLY: Who's Bauer? WHERE ARE YOU? WHAT DID I MISS? I hate traveling when exciting things happen \*sad face emoji\***

I sighed at the immediate barrage, tucking my phone away into the front of my backpack. "Don't worry, she's never actually killed anyone."

Bauer shook his head, pulling the gear shift into reverse. "You Ward women, you should come with a warning label, princess."

As we pulled out of the driveway and headed into the ominous looking storm, I couldn't believe it, but I was laughing.



## BAUER

Someday, I might build a shrine to Agnes, commemorating the fact that Claire thought she was a sweet old woman stuck in a snowstorm as opposed to the devil cat she actually was, thereby granting me more time with Miss Ward.

But today would not be that day because when the drive to Scotty's cabin took almost three times longer than I expected, due to the combination of zero visibility, slick, icy roads, and blustering wind that even had me white-knuckling the steering wheel, I just wanted to get to our destination safely.

April.

It was fucking *April*, and I was not okay with the storm of the century hitting Western Canada while I had to be out on the roads with a woman I didn't really know, checking on a cat that I hated to the depths of my soul for the man who meant more to me than anyone else on the planet.

Claire was quiet in the passenger seat, and this time, I didn't push her.

I'd hit the irrational stage of driving about an hour earlier, where you turn down the volume on the music just in case it helped you magically see the roads better.

When I caught sight of the red mailbox signaling the turnoff to Scotty's place, I breathed out a huge sigh of relief.

"We're here," I told her.

She jumped a little at the sound of my voice. "Oh, good."

I glanced in the rearview mirror, and the swirling blanket of white that obscured my vision. It had been years since I'd driven in something like that, and it occurred to me, with Scotty's place close, that we'd probably be hunkered down for at least one night.

"You doing okay?" I asked her. If I was stressed ... I couldn't even imagine what she must be feeling.

Claire was quiet for a second, and then she exhaled shakily. "I don't think I breathed properly for a solid hour."

"We're almost there," I promised.

She nodded.

I smiled. "You can say it now."

Claire looked over at me. Her face was pale and drawn. "Say what?"

Lifting my eyebrows, I waved a hand at the windshield.

"Ahh." She cleared her throat. "I'll save the *I told you so* for when we're safely inside his place."

The back end of the Jeep fishtailed when I turned down the long driveway. Knowing not to overcorrect, because the last thing I wanted was to end up sliding off the drive and down the slight ditch that I knew lined the first fifty feet or so, I lessened the pressure of my hands on the wheel until the vehicle righted itself. Now that we were protected slightly by the trees that crowded Scotty's property, the visibility increased to something more manageable than it had been on the roads leading us here.

"You gonna miss anything important tomorrow?" I asked her.

She rubbed her forehead. "One class but ... I'll email my professor when we're inside." Claire groaned. "And my family because they are probably freaking out."

Visions of Paige bearing down on me had me shivering. But staying at Scotty's place and risking her wrath for one night was preferable to attempting any stupid-ass drive back down to Seattle too soon.

“I can’t believe how fast this hit,” I said. The peak of his A-frame cabin came into view, and the band of tension around my chest relaxed even further. All I had to do was navigate the long, slight curve to his driveway where there were no tracks to follow. Using the bend in the trees as my guide, I pushed us forward through the snow, easily six to seven inches deep given that it was untouched. When the tires, without snow chains, spun at my acceleration, I cursed. Mightily.

“I can’t believe a world-famous snowboarder is afraid to drive in the snow,” she teased unexpectedly. Amazing how it loosened our tongues to have shelter in sight, even if we’d be stuck with freaking Agnes, who’d probably claw our eyes out the second we walked in.

“I’m not afraid to drive in the snow.” I gave her a look as I pulled up as close to the cabin as the drifting snow would allow me. “But I didn’t exactly want to slide off the road when I have you to think about.”

“You’re a closet sweetheart, Bauer.”

“I am no such thing,” I replied, completely affronted. “No one has ever called me such a terrible name.”

She giggled, and it made my sudden rush of defensiveness worth it.

“Why does that bother you so much?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say that just because I didn’t want to carry her admittedly fine ass through the snow didn’t mean I was a sweetheart. I was a badass, thank you very much. I was an inked, pierced, snowboarding badass who’d never had a woman giggle because she called me a sweetheart, and she could have that etched on my tombstone because that was how much I believed it.

Shoving the Jeep in park and exhaling heavily, I yanked the hat off my head and speared a hand in my hair. “It doesn’t bother me; it’s just not true. Ask my parents.”

She nodded slowly, tilting her head ever-so-slightly as she studied me.

I pointed a finger at her. “Nope, none of that. No psychoanalyzing. I don’t care how you look in your sleep shorts. That’s not allowed.”

Claire smiled slowly.

“Stop it.”

It spread even further, wide enough that her white, even teeth showed behind her pink lips. A dimple popped out. And against the blinding white of the snow, with her dark hair and deep blue eyes, she looked like Snow White.

I huffed. “Let’s go inside, okay?”

“Okay.”

Her agreement was too quiet, too pleased with herself, and that made me swear as much as the shitty drive had.

“The snow will be deep. Do you want me to carry you in so you don’t get your shoes wet?”

Claire’s eyes glowed. “That’s incredibly ... sweet ... of you.”

“Fine. Get your shoes wet, get your pants wet, get hypothermia, see if I care.” I leaned toward her in the cab of the Jeep. “Don’t come to me in the middle of the night and beg me to warm you up when your body temperature drops because you didn’t take me up on my *practical, logical* offer, princess.”

It was a lie because if she came to me and asked that, I’d strip so fast.

Everything.

My thoughts must have been betrayed on my face because the blush spread slowly across her cheekbones.

“I’ll risk it,” she said quietly. “But thank you for being so practical and logical and not sweet.”

I rolled my eyes. “Overkill but you’re welcome. You wait here. I’ll make sure my key works first.”

After trudging my way through the snow and up onto the equally snowy deck, I peered inside the dark cabin to make sure Agnes wasn't sitting in waiting, claws unsheathed and fangs bared.

Underneath the overhang of the A-frame, there was a large stack of firewood, which made me breathe a bit more easily. At least we'd stay warm overnight until we could head home the next day. To the right of the wood was a heavy-duty shovel.

"God bless you, Scotty," I murmured. Quickly, I shoveled the area by the door clear so snow wouldn't fall into the cabin as soon as I opened it. The key worked easily, despite the metal of the lock being cold as shit. Knowing we could get in, I turned and shoveled a single strip so she'd have a clear path once she got on the deck.

And I wasn't doing it to be sweet, but I just didn't want her to have soaked socks when she got in. I hadn't packed for more than one night, so I didn't imagine she had either. And definitely not more than one night that included a record-breaking blizzard.

I turned and waved her in. While she grabbed her backpack and pulled the hood of her sweatshirt up over her hair, I thought about why it bothered me so damn much that she'd said that.

Maybe because I didn't want Claire to look at me like I was a sweetheart. People called Finn sweet all the time, and if that wasn't the kiss of death to getting laid, I didn't know what was.

I'd been reminded my entire life, or all but five years of it, that Finn was the superior specimen in every way that mattered to our parents, and even though I'd moved on from being bothered by it, I didn't want to be lumped into his category either.

As Claire hopped onto the deck and made her way along the path I'd shoveled for her, I knew that being stuck with her in this cabin would undeniably be worse than that gaudy bedroom in the mansion where we were being watched.



She could be herself.

I could be myself.

And we had nowhere to go while she sat there categorizing me as a harmless, fluffy teddy bear.

“Brrrr,” she said as she huddled next to me. “That wind is frigid.”

I shoved the door open and motioned her in. “Let’s go. I’ll get a fire going.”

She preceded me into the dark cabin, lit only by a small lamp along the small stretch of kitchen counter. Of course, Scotty left a light on for that damn cat.

When I shut the door, Claire blew out a hard breath. “This is ...”

“Tiny?” I supplied.

She exhaled a laugh. “Yeah.”

Scotty’s cabin was one room, kitchen counter stretching along the back, a bathroom tucked next to it without much more than a serviceable shower, toilet, and sink crammed into the small room. Separating the sitting area was a tiny, beat-up table with two chairs tucked against it. I’d had my fair share of meals at that table.

The couch and chair—basic and brown leather—faced a small TV on an equally small console table because when Scotty was home, he was outdoors. His property was probably more than five acres of heavily wooded forests, and the entire square footage of his cabin couldn’t have been more than five hundred.

The soaring ceilings of the main room is what made it feel bigger than it was. The old-fashioned wood-burning stove set into the back corner gave it a warm, inviting feeling, which would get even better once I had it lit.

“Bedroom upstairs?” she asked.

I nodded. “The loft.”

She eyed the staircase warily.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “I have a long history crashing on that couch, and I’ve had much worse nights of sleep than that.”

Claire turned and faced the part of the cabin that was all windows. It was Scotty’s, and my, favorite part of his cabin. Yeah, it was small, but one whole side showed the beauty of this place we lived.

Right now, it looked cold and a little savage with nothing to block it from our view.

She shivered. “I feel like we’re being swallowed whole by that storm.”

I tilted my head. “You okay, princess?”

She was quiet, slowly rubbing her hands up and down along her upper arms. “I think, in my head, I imagined that the drive would be the worst part. But there is something terribly disconcerting about being stuck inside a stranger’s home for who knows how long and just praying we don’t, I don’t know, freeze to death or something.”

Approaching her carefully, I set my hands on her shoulders like I had just, shit, done one day earlier at Richard’s. “We won’t freeze to death. Even if his propane runs out, there’s plenty of firewood for the stove, and it gets pretty toasty in here.”

Her eyes were so big and trusting. Trusting that I could help us through this.

Instead of making me feel panicked or trapped, like I might normally, my chest warmed at how quickly she believed me. My hands gently tightened, and I felt the muscles relax under my palms.

Claire nodded. “Okay, so we won’t freeze, but is there food?”

“Oh, yeah.” I squeezed her shoulders again and went to investigate the kitchen. “One thing I know about Scotty is that his freezer is always full of terrible bachelor meals.”

I pulled the small door open and wasn’t disappointed.

“See?” I told her, pulling one black and red carton out. “We might hit a week’s worth of sodium in one meal, but we have plenty to eat. And that pantry will be good and stocked too. He doesn’t run to the store much unless we’re training and he’s in Whistler every day with me, so we won’t have much in the way of fresh food.”

She sighed in relief, and I felt her come up behind me, close enough that her body heat warmed my back. “He likes chicken pot pies, I see.”

“Who doesn’t?” I glanced at her over my shoulder. “Hopefully you do too because that’s what you get for dinner if I’m cooking.”

Claire smiled. “I’ll check the pantry for other options. Maybe I can whip something else together.”

A flash of movement caught my eye, and I turned, hands propped on my hips. “There’s the little asshole herself.”

Claire clucked her tongue. “She can’t be that bad.”

Agnes poked her head out from behind the couch, bared her fangs, and hissed at me.

“Look at those green eyes,” I murmured. “So much violence hidden in those depths.”

My companion laughed, then crouched down and held her hand out. “Hey, pretty girl.”

Agnes gave her a disdainful look and disappeared back behind the couch. I shook my head. “I’m telling you. She’s awful.”

“You shouldn’t talk about her like that. Pets understand your tone, even if you don’t think they do.”

I laughed. “Oh, she understands all right. All evil things can understand the mayhem they leave in their wake.”

Claire straightened. “Where does Scotty keep her food? I can make sure she’s got enough.”

After explaining to her what Scotty had said on the phone, I ducked back out to the Jeep and got my bag along with the

pillow Claire had left in the back seat. Did I tuck it close to my face so I could smell her shampoo on the walk back into the cabin?

Too fucking right, I did.

If I had to be trapped in a small space with a woman I really, really wanted to sleep with but who seemed to overlook me entirely, then I would take the moments where I could get them. Including random pillow sniffing to catch just a little whiff of whatever fruity concoction she used.

More lights were on when I got back inside, and Claire was coming down the narrow staircase that led up to the loft, tucking her phone into the waistband of her leggings. “He doesn’t go crazy living in such a small space?”

I shook my head before I tugged my jacket off and hung it on the coat tree next to the door. “He’s a simple guy. Give him outdoors to explore and a mountain to descend at a rapid pace on a small piece of fiberglass, and he’s happy.”

She smiled. “Does that describe you too?”

Looking around, I realized that my condo in Whistler did look an awful lot like this. The space was small, my furniture serviceable, and there was not much in the way of decoration.

“Yeah, I guess.” I shrugged. “Why spend money on pictures and trinkets and crap that collects dust when I could use it to experience the world instead?”

Claire stopped and stared at the wall next to the stairs. A small framed picture hung crooked of me and Scotty after my first big win.

He was almost a foot shorter than me, tufts of silvery-white hair sticking out from underneath his lucky black hat, but his grin was so big, so proud, it was almost hard to look at now. His arm was around my shoulders, and I was clutching the medal in my hands, a giant-ass grin on my face and goggle marks lining my wind-whipped cheeks. That was two years after I met him for the first time, when my wrists had been in handcuffs, and he’d told the cops he wouldn’t be pressing charges.

“You love him,” Claire observed.

I found myself answering honestly. “He’s my best friend. The only person who’s ever ... believed I could make something of my life.”

Claire didn’t look at me, just kept her eyes on the photo. I wanted to do something, anything, to shock her. Because for some reason, all of this felt too intimate, and she felt too intriguing, too fascinating for me to even contemplate.

“The first time I met Scotty, I was in handcuffs because I’d just wrecked the hell out of the side of his garage.” I kept my voice even as her shoulders tensed visibly. “It wasn’t hard for the cops to find me because the blue spray paint I’d used on the side of his house was on my hands. I’d cut myself breaking the windows on his garage.”

She inhaled. “Why’d you do that?”

“Who knows?” I admitted. “I was seventeen and bored, and my friends probably thought I’d be too chicken shit to do it. Adele was really happy with me then, when the cops brought me home and told her it was only because of Scotty that I wasn’t going to have a misdemeanor for destruction of property and vandalism on my record.”

Claire was a loud thinker, I was coming to realize. Especially when she was trying to figure something out. And right now, she was trying to figure me out. She stared at that picture so hard, I was surprised it didn’t jump off the wall.

“No wonder,” she murmured.

I stepped closer behind her and took a slow inhale. It was stronger than it had been on the pillow, that incredible scent. I had to fight not to bury my nose in her hair, wrap my arms around her from behind, and glory in how warm and soft she’d be tucked into my body.

It was so clear she wanted to put me together like a puzzle that no one had sorted. But eventually, she’d see that it wasn’t as complicated as all that.

I was what my family thought. A screwup and a disappointment.

I was what Scotty thought too. A hothead who didn't think things through.

"No wonder what?" My voice sounded rusty.

She turned and faced me, and I refused to budge even a single inch. But then again, Claire didn't move either.

I inhaled deeply, and my chest almost brushed hers, that's how close we stood. I wanted to kiss her. For a lot of reasons.

Because of how she'd looked in that yellow dress.

Because she still wouldn't tell me why she lied in the first place.

Because she was trying to find something inside me that didn't exist, something good and sweet and thoughtful that meant my parents hadn't completely jacked me up.

"No wonder you turned out to be a good man," she said quietly.

The breath caught in my throat.

She gently laid her hand over my heart, and I slid my palm up her arm to anchor it there. Her skin ... it was so, so soft.

"I'm glad they didn't ruin you, Bauer."

Claire tugged her hand out from under mine and brushed past me, stopping to fiddle with the radio on the kitchen counter.

I braced a hand on the wall, pinched my eyes shut, and tried to figure out what was happening inside my chest after just a few words from her. Because that simply, that quickly, she'd completely ripped the rug out from underneath me.

The station she turned on was news, and she turned a few knobs to lessen the static.

"Well, everyone," the disembodied voice said. "This is shaping up to smash the previous record snowfall for April in Vancouver, and it won't be stopping for the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours. So stay safe, stay warm, and enjoy the snow."

I turned my head to stare at her. Looks like I had some time to figure out the answer to my own puzzle—what the hell to do with Claire Ward.





## CLAIRE

When I woke the next morning, I was hot.

And for the second morning in a row, completely disoriented. No blood-red curtains, no sprawling bed. Instead, muted gray light, a wood plank ceiling slanting up over my head, and when I tried to move and felt something warm on my chest, I blinked down.

Green eyes set in a patchwork face stared down at me from where she was lying and looking quite comfortable on top of me.

“Good morning, Agnes,” I whispered.

She opened her mouth for a plaintive meow, which made me smile.

Her brown and orange spotted tail twitched behind her, and her ears angled over her pretty face.

“I knew he was exaggerating.” Carefully, I lifted my hand and ran it from the top of her head down her back. Agnes shifted into my touch.

“You up, princess?” A voice called from the family room.

“Mm-hmm. A friend joined me in bed sometime last night.”

“No shit?” I heard his feet cross the hardwood floor and take careful, quiet steps up to the loft. Bauer’s head appeared, dark hair ruffled from sleep, and his jaw even heavier with growth, and he grinned sleepily. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

Slowly, so, so slowly, Agnes turned her head in Bauer's direction, flattened her ears and hissed.

My laughter was so loud that the cat took off from the bed like a brown and orange cannonball, disappearing behind the dresser tucked into the corner.

He came up a few more steps until his bare chest was visible.

"Of course, you slept without a shirt," I mumbled, turning on my side and tucking the comforter against my chest.

"Are you kidding? I was roasting by the middle of the night. I told you that fire would keep us warm." His eyes traced my face. "Sleep okay?"

I nodded. "I woke up hot too."

Bauer wagged a finger at me. "See, you leave yourself wide open for comments, princess. I'd like it to be noted when I don't take the bait."

At my groan, he laughed, head disappearing back downstairs.

"I'll make coffee," he called out.

From my vantage point upstairs, my view of the outside didn't suffer at all. Scotty's cabin was small, yes, but there was something incredible about rolling over to see the wild expanse of tall, spindly trees, whipping, white wind, and the large, fluffy flakes that relentlessly fell.

What a strange, strange turn of events my life had taken in the course of one week.

It made me think about school as most things did. One of the most fascinating parts of what I was learning was about the consequences of one's actions and how they could affect the people around you.

Children bore the consequences of how the adults in their life spoke to them, treated them, taught them, loved them. Or didn't love them. For each action, there was a reaction. Sometimes it was big, and sometimes it was small.

I agreed to do something for my sister. In the grand scheme of my life, it was a small decision, fueled by feelings that had lingered for a span of time that could only be considered big.

The consequences of that small action were huge.

And I was still puzzling out in my head what they meant, and how my heart couldn't quite decipher what to do with them.

The sounds of Bauer in the small kitchen, looking for grounds and trying to figure out the "stupid, ancient piece of shit machine" had me smiling, which was a starting place for what I knew in my head.

I knew that our evening had been quiet but still fun. We ate sodium and fat-laden chicken pot pies in front of the fireplace while he searched for something for us to watch in the small drawer of DVDs that Scotty owned. We settled on *Tombstone*, and Bauer knew every single word. Occasionally, I caught a glimpse of him in the firelight, mouthing the lines.

He'd stayed on the chair, and I'd taken up residence under a blanket on the couch.

I knew as I laid in the relative privacy of the loft that I'd felt a twinge of disappointment when he sent me upstairs to bed without anything more than a "sleep tight, princess."

"What exactly do you want, Claire?" I whispered.

Bauer's head popped up again, and I jumped, afraid he'd heard me. "How do pancakes sound? I found a box of mix in the pantry."

I sat up slowly, back aching slightly from the dip in Scott's mattress that I wasn't used to. "I can make some, sure."

"Terribly sexist of you to assume that I meant you'd cook, not me." With a wink, he disappeared.

When I stood, careful not to bang my head on the slope of the ceiling, I caught a glimpse of myself in the dusty mirror hanging over the dresser. My cheeks were flushed and my hair tangled from sleep.

Honestly, I looked like I'd just gotten laid. Well.

Laying a hand on my chest, I took a deep breath, held it in my lungs, and exhaled. Sometimes, you could move forward without worrying too much about the consequences. You could leap without knowing what laid beneath your feet.

Maybe this time with Bauer, unexpected and unplanned, was a chance for me to practice that.

Crumpled on the floor by the bed was a bright red blanket, and I picked it up, wrapping it around my shoulders before I made my way downstairs.

Bauer was expertly pouring pancake batter onto a sizzling griddle that looked like it was older than both of us combined.

“Those smell good,” I told him. “Thank you for doing that.”

He glanced over his shoulder—now covered with a black-T-shirt—and grinned crookedly. “That’s the beauty of having low expectations of men like me, huh? Follow a simple set of directions on the side of a box, and I have the undying gratitude of a beautiful woman.”

“Men like you?” I repeated as I poured a steaming cup of coffee. “Who’s dangling bait for compliments now?”

His answering laugh was a short bark. I watched as he deftly flipped the pancakes. When two were ready, he slid them onto a waiting plate and jerked his chin at me. “Go ahead.”

The pancakes were perfect. Fluffy and sweet and warm, and I watched Bauer make himself a stack double the height of mine. I raised my eyebrows meaningfully before he took his first huge bite.

“What?” he muttered around a mouthful. “I need my energy.”

“For what?” I waved my fork around the small cabin. “We’re stuck.”

His eyes took on a devilish gleam.

“What?”

“How long has it been since you’ve worn snow pants, princess?”



ABOUT AN HOUR LATER, Agnes watched me with green eyes full of judgment and disdain. Her tail flicked lazily as I turned sideways, looking at myself in the bathroom mirror.

“This is not my best look.”

She meowed.

“I know. I know I look ridiculous, but trust me, it wasn’t my idea.”

Bauer came back from outside, stomping his boots on the towel he’d laid by the cabin’s entrance. “You’re still getting dressed? Come on, Claire Ward, this snowman won’t build itself.”

He was so excited about his idea. Even though going out in a snowstorm sounded awful, I knew the fresh air would probably keep him sane.

“These snow pants are huge on me,” I told him.

“For what we’re doing, you’ll be fine. I’m just glad Scotty had something that worked for you.”

Disgruntled, I looked at his perfectly fitted attire. I was drowning in a set of brown snow pants and winter coat straight from the seventies while Bauer looked like he’d jumped from *Snowboarding Magazine* with what he’d rummaged out of the back of his Jeep.

“I don’t know that I’d go so far as that,” I mumbled. While he laughed under his breath at me, I struggled to figure out how to tighten the strap on the waistband of the pants. “But you keep laughing, mister. When these fall off and you have to carry my ass back inside so I don’t freeze to death, you won’t think it’s so funny then.”

The sound of Agnes's disgruntled mewling was my warning that Bauer had slipped his boots off and was approaching me. She held her ground this time, though her ears flattened slightly as he came closer.

I sighed and dropped my hands. "I give up. I think this style was retired before I was born. I'll just have to moon the forest."

"Don't be so dramatic. You're wearing leggings underneath." He stopped and tugged his gloves off with his teeth. His eyes met mine, and I felt an involuntary flip in my belly. "May I?"

I found myself nodding slowly.

Bauer smelled like cold and ice and fresh air, and there were flakes of snow caught in the dark stubble lining his jaw. His hands tugged on the inside of the waistband of the snow pants, and I sucked in a sharp breath when his knuckles brushed my stomach.

He was so much taller than me, he had to dip his head to see the tiny flap of fabric that had evaded me. Though his fingers were larger than mine, thick and long, he found a small slit inside the lining of the pants and twisted his wrist.

My entire body was on fire.

Flames. All over.

If I thought I was hot when I woke up, when he did that wrist turn thing, it felt like Bauer tossed me straight onto the burning logs. To keep my raging thoughts at bay, I focused on his hands. On one hand was a clover. For luck, I was sure.

On the other hand, a lion. My fingers—I wasn't entirely sure when they decided it—started tracing the line of its mane.

Bauer froze.

"Wh-why a lion?" I asked.

His breath was uneven, and he carefully grasped the edge of the elastic strap that would tighten the pants around me. "Lions are the top of the food chain. They fear no one and nothing in their natural environment."

The skin on the top of his hands was warm from his gloves, and the veins that ran along the surface were pronounced. Such a weirdly masculine thing to have veins like that.

“Every time I see it,” he continued in a rough voice, slowly tightening the pants, which tugged my hips closer to his, “I’m reminded to channel that kind of fearlessness.”

My eyes lifted to his, which were trained on my face with such focused intensity that my face flushed instantly. He wouldn’t kiss me unless I made the first move.

He’d channel the lion as he moved through life, except with me.

This, he’d leave in my hands, and it was a heady rush of power to know that I was capable of something like that from a man like this.

Bauer searched my gaze deeply, then moved from my eyes to my lips. “Be sure, Claire.”

I blinked slowly at his rough command.

No, not command. It was a plea.

Since night one, he’d been completely honest with me that this was what he wanted. That was how certain he was.

Exhaling slowly, I broke the gaze and felt the slim tips of butterfly wings as they fluttered through my whole body. Was I ready to leap?

Not just yet. But I also wasn’t sure what I was waiting for.

But what I did know? What my head and heart could agree on was that our time here wasn’t done yet.

“Do you wanna build a snowman?” I said with a small smile.

Bauer clenched his jaw and then dropped his forehead to mine with an exhaled laugh. “Yeah, princess. I do.”





## BAUER

Three hours—and an entire snow family—later, I did something I'd never done before.

I took a cold-ass shower after being outside in the snow.

Eventually, I'd have to start calling this strange reaction to Claire Ward *The Princess Effect* because holy hell, the woman was killing me slowly with one look, one touch at a time.

In that tiny bathroom, fixing those ridiculous snow pants that were about five sizes too big for her, I almost lost the shaky grasp on my control. Because while she might not have asked me to kiss her, she wanted me to. Everything I saw in her big blue eyes was almost certainly reflected in mine.

Maybe I knew what held me back because I wasn't a guy who forced himself on a woman, no matter how she was looking at me, but for the life of me, I couldn't figure out what the hell was holding her back.

For hours, we played in the steadily falling snow, using ridiculous props to make a four-person snow family, and for hours, she avoided prolonged eye contact or accidental touching of any kind.

Not that I would've felt anything good, layered up like we were.

And as the frigid water beat down on me, I had to laugh at myself that I still needed a cold shower. Because no matter how little eye contact or how little touching, I wanted Claire

so badly I felt like I could've melted every inch of snow coating the forest outside of that cabin.

Goosebumps popped on my skin, but still, I braced my hands against the shower wall and took a few deep breaths. My reaction to her defied any common sense unless it was just the fact that she seemed so unattainable. That she evaded me just enough that I wanted to reach out and snatch her to me, hold her close, and feel everything about her that I hadn't felt yet.

Taste her lips to see if they were as sweet as I imagined them.

Grip her skin and see which parts of her body felt the best under my impatient hands.

Not the thoughts to be having when she was less than fifteen feet away from me, cuddled up under a blanket on the couch, which was where I'd left her when I ducked into the shower.

With a violent shove, I turned the water off and shivered. A threadbare towel was hanging along the back of the door, and I scrubbed myself dry as quickly as possible. By the time I'd tugged on my clothes, I felt a bit less crazed and a hell of a lot colder.

Thanks to the fire I'd started again after our time outdoors, I opened the bathroom door to a wave of warm air.

Fragrant, warm air.

"What is that smell?" I groaned happily.

No longer cuddled on the couch, Claire was in the kitchen, stirring something in a large cast-iron pan over the small stovetop. She smiled at me. "I raided the pantry, and he had some pasta and just enough to make a decent tomato sauce. So ... Italian it is. I hope that's okay."

"More than okay." I came up behind her, keeping a few inches between her back and my chest. Her hair was pulled up off her neck, wisps of dark brown hair trailing down the length of her neck. "Paige teach you how to cook?"

Over her shoulder, she gave me a chiding look. “Maybe Logan did.”

I held up my hands with a laugh. “Touché, Princess, touché.”

She shook her head. “It was Paige. Logan managed fine while we were younger, but when he married Paige, dinners got a lot better. She was living as a full-time model in Milan right before moving in with us, so we benefited greatly from her cooking skills.”

Tugging a chair out from the table with my foot, I took a seat and shamelessly watched her navigate around the small kitchen area.

“How old were you when Paige and your brother got married?”

Her smile was barely visible as she stirred the sauce. “Just turned twelve.”

I thought about the picture of her and Lia from their apartment, decked out in Washington gear. “It must have been every girl’s dream to have a supermodel for your new mother figure.”

She snorted. “Not exactly. We were ... oh,” she sighed, “how do I put this? Lia and I were in our boundary testing phase when Paige showed up.”

Watching as Claire tasted the sauce, then added some salt, I laughed at that picture. “Like what?”

Carefully, she set the salt down and turned to face me, one hip hitched on the counter. “I’ll make you a deal, Bauer.”

“What’s that?”

“A question for a question.” One eyebrow raised slowly in challenge. “You deflect every single time I ask about your past, so if you want to know about mine, then I’ll make it an even trade.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and held her stare. “Some people feel more comfortable than others talking about their

childhood. Mine wasn't traumatic or anything, but that doesn't mean I want to spill my guts over spaghetti and candlelight."

At my answer, which was meant to be flippant and casual, Claire's face flashed with disappointment, and a small seed was planted behind my ribs. Something uncomfortable and unwanted. But it found someplace to stick, dig itself beneath the surface of whatever armor I'd erected around the parts of myself that still felt like I needed to prove how unhurt I was by my dad and Adele's treatment.

"Truth or dare," I amended. My version of a peace offering. "I'll play, but I can't guarantee I'll answer everything."

Claire weighed that for a long moment, face thoughtful, body language relaxed. "Deal."

While she finished dinner, I set the table with two dark blue plates I found in the pantry and added some wood to the fire. Outside, the wind picked up, whipping through the trees until they swayed side to side. Still, Claire hadn't said I told you so for the fact that we were stuck here. Because into day two of this ridiculous storm, we were poised to get over thirteen inches. The accumulating snow wasn't even what kept us stuck until it died down. Right now, it was the fact that they were so focused on clearing main roads that places like Scotty's along Lion's Bay were way down on the totem pole.

Claire drained the pasta, releasing a cloud of steam into the air. I got up to find us something to drink.

I crouched in front of the pantry, watching Agnes warily as she slinked across the wall in my direction. "Do you know if he has any alcohol hidden in this place?" I asked the cat.

She sat on her haunches and started licking a paw. But she didn't hiss at me, so I shrugged. I gave it one last look but decided Scotty must hate himself since there wasn't so much as a single bottle of anything in the entire place. Maybe that's why he still managed to do what he did physically even though he was over sixty.

“I couldn’t find anything fun to drink,” I told Claire as she set the bowl of pasta in the middle of the small table. “So water it is.”

“I find proper hydration fun.”

“As do I.” I took a seat opposite her and gave her a smile. “Thank you for making dinner.”

Her cheeks flushed pink. “No problem.”

The food was delicious, and I groaned happily at my first bite of the sauce-covered noodles. “This is incredible.”

“Why don’t you ever go home to Seattle?” she asked without any preamble.

The noodles lodged in my throat when I coughed in surprise. After a hefty drink of water, I was able to swallow. When I was finally able to speak, my voice was rough. You know, from almost choking to death. “Jumped right in, eh?”

“It’s my turn.”

I sat back in my chair and studied her. “Seattle isn’t my home anymore. It hasn’t been for a long time. I moved to Whistler when I was eighteen and never looked back.”

“Why don’t you and Adele get along?”

“Oooh, no dice, you don’t get two questions in a row.”

Claire tilted her head. “You asked me at least four before we agreed to this. I think I’ve earned two.”

Bracing my elbows on the table, I leaned forward and held her gaze. “Why does it bother you so much to figure me out?”

Claire didn’t brush off my question like I expected her to, blaming it on her major or her own background with a mother figure that was no relation, she just searched my face. “I think sometimes I’m just as curious about the people who inflict the damage on children as the children themselves. So, while I don’t know Adele very well, I’d never have pegged her as someone to hold the sins of another woman onto an innocent child.”

“I was never innocent,” I answered easily. “I did some boundary pushing of my own when she and my dad got married, not to mention my absolute hellion years in high school. So don’t think I made it easy on Adele to walk into our family.”

She pointed her fork at me. “And now you defend her. See? This is fascinating to me.”

I exhaled heavily. “Can we move to a dare yet?”

“She was obviously rude to you at the dinner and even at Richard’s, despite the fact that his opinion of her is incredibly valuable to her. I don’t understand how an adult can act like that.”

“You’ve met me, princess,” I said with a shrug. “Everything about me bugs Adele and has since day one. Maybe someone else would’ve tried to gain her approval or love, but the last thing I wanted to do was sit in the shit and dwell on it all the time.”

Reading between the lines of my forced casual reply was easy enough for someone as smart as Claire. And wisely, she dropped it.

We ate quietly for a few minutes until I felt like a complete asshole. It wasn’t her fault, not really. I mean, no, Claire didn’t have to try to understand why my stepmom and I had the relationship we did, and how that bled into my relationships with my father and brother.

I opened my mouth to apologize, but Claire spoke first.

“I don’t like thinking too hard about why our mother left us.”

This didn’t feel like the time to say anything, so I held her gaze across the table and waited.

Claire twirled some pasta on her fork and took another bite. When she was done chewing, she set the fork down. “I’m not angry with her, not really. But when I stop and think too hard about the fact that she left four girls with their thirty-something-year-old brother, I get really, really pissed off.”

Her face was so calm when she said it that I laughed.

“That’s funny?” she asked.

“Not really,” I admitted. “I don’t get angry with Adele. I just have a million other things I could be doing with my time, so why would I choose to dwell on that bullshit?” That was an answer she could understand, judging by the look on her face in the muted light of the cabin. I lifted my chin in her direction. “Truth or dare.”

“Truth, I guess,” she sighed.

Like she was trying not to be seen, I watched as Agnes wound her way around the edge of the kitchen and found a dark corner to sit in to watch us. I decided to go easy.

“Why is there a stuffed cat on your couch?”

She blushed. “I told Lia I wanted a cat once, and since we were still in the dorms at the time, she got me that instead.”

“I bet Agnes would go home with you,” I mumbled.

Claire laughed. “I would never do that to Scotty. But if I did get a cat,” she sighed, “I’d want her to look just like this little angel.”

I rolled my eyes, much to Claire’s delight. When she didn’t immediately ask me a question, I decided to press my luck.

“Why did you go to that dinner as your sister?” I asked her quietly.

After only the briefest pause, Claire stood and grabbed her plate. “I told you, I was doing Lia a favor.”

I took another bite of the spaghetti and watched her jerky movements as she washed off her plate and set it on a towel to dry. “I don’t believe that’s it.”

She whirled. “Well, tough shit, you don’t have to believe me.”

My eyebrows popped up.

Her face immediately smoothed out, and she rubbed at her forehead. “That wasn’t ... I’m sorry. Maybe I should’ve done

a dare instead.”

Why would pretty Claire Ward not want to answer that question? Whatever seed planted behind my ribs started unfurling, spreading wider, spreading further, as though she was imprinting something of herself inside me, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

If this had something to do with Finn ...

I brushed the thought aside instantly, an absolute refusal to entertain the idea. Finn, the Golden Boy who everyone loved. He'd known Claire as long as he'd known Lia, and there was nothing between them.

I smiled slightly. “I don't think you want me to give you a dare,” I told her.

We both damn well knew what I'd dare her to do.

She rolled her lips between her teeth and tried to stem her growing smile. Pushing back from the table, I ignored her when she tried to take my dish. Instead, I nudged her aside with a bump of my hip, and she slid down the counter but didn't leave.

As I rinsed and washed my dish, the fact that we still had an entire night laid out in front of us, and probably at least a good chunk of the next day, stretched ahead of me like one painful exercise in frustration. Like sitting at the bottom of a mountain of fresh white powder but not having a board to ride down it.

“Maybe I do.”

My hands froze in the soapy water at her quiet words. It felt very much like the thing I wanted most was being dangled just out of reach. I could see it and smell it, maybe even brush it with my fingers if I tried hard enough.

I finished rinsing the dish carefully and nudged into her again so that I could set it down by hers. Claire didn't move this time, her head angled in my direction. My hands were gripping the edge of the counter tightly, and I looked at her in the same way.



“Why can’t you just ask?” I stared at her lips, open and inviting and incredible. “Because you can’t lie to me anymore and pretend this isn’t something you want just as badly as I do.”

Claire exhaled shakily. “You’re right, I can’t.”

I dropped my chin to my chest and swore. “What are you so afraid of?”

Her inhale was large, not shaky, but the kind of big, deep breath you took when you were trying to fortify yourself before a giant leap off the edge of a mountain. It’s what I did every single time I strapped on a board before I started moving.

“Will you look at me, Bauer?”

Pinching my eyes shut for a moment before I did, I desperately searched for every shred of self-control that I had, if this turned out to be another night where I laid by myself on a stupid couch. When I felt steadier, I turned away from the counter and faced her, eyes zeroed in on hers.

“I’m not afraid of *you*,” she insisted. Her hands carefully, slowly, softly slid around my hips, up my waist and onto my back, where she curled her fingers into my shirt.

I blew out a slow breath and allowed my hands to coast up her arms until my palms cupped the sides of her neck, my thumbs brushing the edge of her jaw. Inside me, something snarled dangerously, and I barely kept it at bay. But I was able to because of the way she was looking up at me.

“But this,” she continued, her fingers increasing the hold she had on me, like she was afraid I would be going fucking anywhere right now, “this is the most terrifyingly unexpected thing I’ve ever wanted.”

My smile came easily. “Princess, you have no idea,” I murmured, lowering my head over hers.

Just before our lips touched, I paused, and she let out the most insanely erotic whimper, something hoarse with longing.

“You still haven’t asked me,” I told her, lifting my chin just enough my bottom lip brushed against her mouth.

Now I felt the edges of her fingernails in my back. I grinned.

“Bauer, you stubborn pain in my ass,” she whispered. “Pretty, pretty please with sugar on top, will you kiss—”

My mouth took hers before she could finish her sentence, and I knew, unequivocally, how wrecked I was.



## CLAIRE

**B**auer kissed like he was put on this earth for that one singular purpose alone.

My bones melted like slowly heating metal, and he wrapped his strong arms around my body to keep me firmly against him. His lips were sure and firm, and he sucked on my bottom lip like it was candy, growling when I licked into his mouth.

He was strong and hard and warm, and my arms went up around his neck as he tasted me deep, deep, deeper. This was no typical first kiss where he danced around me, or I danced around him.

We moved together perfectly, slick and sweet, as he took my lips again. And again.

His hands were tight against me, fitting along the curve of my rib cage and down, down until he filled his palms with my ass. I rolled closer to him, inhaling through my nose when I couldn't even dream of pulling my mouth away from his to get a breath.

My fingers curled around the back of his head as I held him to me, and he smiled against my lips.

“So good,” he murmured. “So sweet.”

Bauer ran the edge of his nose along mine, and I tried not to whimper pitifully that we weren't kissing because why, why weren't we kissing?

I wanted this feeling to last forever. It was the closest I'd ever come to skydiving, to bungee jumping, free-falling through the air, and my blood sang violently in my veins at how heady it all was.

He went back in with a growl, tilting his head so he could sweep his tongue against mine. We were wound so tightly around each other; my leg curled around him when he used his hand, gripping possessively around my thigh to hitch it higher.

The way that he fit my hips to his, I broke away from the kiss with a gasp.

Shooting, sparking little fires erupted when he rolled against me, pressing my backside against the counter.

It was a thousand degrees in that cabin, and I had the indistinct, hazy thought that with one press of his hand, one movement of his body between my legs, I'd explode like a lit bomb.

His mouth trailed down my neck, sucking kisses that would surely leave a mark, and I hissed my pleasure. My fingers found their way up underneath the soft cotton of his shirt, and I purred at how hot and smooth his back was, how unbelievably strong those shifting muscles felt underneath my hands.

He licked up the side of my neck, stopping to drop a gentle bite against the line of my jaw, which made me smile. "Since the moment I turned around," he murmured in a dark, rough voice, "and saw you in that yellow dress, I've wanted this. And shit, Claire, it's so much better than I thought."

I blinked, so caught up in the maelstrom of what he was making me feel, of how everything that had happened in the past couple of days had led to this inevitable moment that I'd forgotten about why I was here in the first place.

It wasn't really because of Lia. She was the catalyst, not the reason.

For years, I'd imagined what it would be like to kiss Finn. But never once had my imagination conjured something like this.

And I didn't feel guilt, not precisely. Because I was nothing to Finn, and the man holding me like he could hardly keep himself in check, he was touching me and tasting me and looking at me like I was *everything*.

This man, who was the opposite of anything I'd ever imagined.

Bauer paused and pulled his head back, clearly sensing the way my errant thoughts ushered tension into my body.

It just ... wasn't the kind of tension he probably worried about, when he'd cautioned me to be sure.

Kissing him, it made me more sure.

More certain.

This ... him, that was what I wanted.

But I saw the moment he read something on my face he didn't like.

"No, Bauer," I begged, sliding my hands from his back and up the rigid lines of his abs. "I'm not stopping."

Gently, he tapped my forehead. "Something happened here."

I glanced down because I wouldn't lie. "I know, but ... I'm still here. I'm so here with you."

Going up on tiptoe, I sipped on his lush bottom lip, trying to draw him back into that decadent moment with me. His eyes fell shut, and he allowed it.

"So good," I told him. "It's so, so good."

My hands curled up behind his neck, and I pulled his head back down, sucking at the tip of his tongue when it dipped into my mouth. His chest reverberated with a hungry sound that had the hair on my arms lifting.

Bauer slowed the kiss and rolled his forehead against mine. "Princess, I would love nothing more than to take you up into that loft and rip off every single article of clothing between us."

My mouth fell open because *yes, please*.

His eyes bored into mine, and I knew what he was saying to me was important.

“And if you regretted it tomorrow because you got caught up in being stuck here with me, I’d never forgive myself if I felt like I pushed you into this.”

I laughed under my breath, but his face stayed in that serious mask. My palm cupped the side of his face, and I relished the way his dark facial hair felt under my skin.

“Bauer, you’ve done nothing but tell me how much you want this,” I said.

“I do.” He turned and pressed a kiss into my palm. “Trust me, I’m past a hundred percent even though it drives me insane when people say things like one thousand percent because it’s mathematically impossible.”

My loud laughter took us both by surprise, but it broke his face into a small grin.

“Why are you so sure I’d regret this?” I asked him.

He used the tip of his finger to trace a line across my forehead and down along the edge of my cheekbone. My eyelids fluttered shut at the gentle caress, so different than how he’d been kissing me. “Because of how your face looked about two minutes ago. Something stopped you. Something you can’t mute”—he tapped my forehead again—“in here.”

How had I not noticed how observant he was? My mouth fell open slightly at how quickly he’d picked up on the unraveling of my thoughts. The inability to get out of my own head was usually my downfall anyway.

To think and think and think about something until I knew exactly what I felt about that thing. Until my head and my heart were on the same page.

Right now, with Bauer, was the first time that I could remember when I just let myself feel without needing to know how everything might work out, and how this might look

when the sun rose over the small cabin insulating us from reality.

When he pulled away, his hands falling from my body, I instantly felt cold even though the cabin was warm.

“Bauer,” I said quietly.

The firelight in the cabin threw a magical glow on his profile as he paused, and I saw the desire there in the tight line of his jaw, the way he held his hands so carefully at his sides. His big body, so much stronger than mine, was all but vibrating in the dim, flickering light.

“It’s okay,” he said slowly. “I’m not mad. I just ... I can’t handle it if you wake up and look at me with disappointment in those blue eyes, princess.”

My heart broke for him for the first time since I’d met him. No matter what else he’d revealed, what snippets of his past he’d given me, this was the first time I felt just how deeply he’d learned how to protect himself. Him pulling away was so much more about him than it was about me.

“And do you normally give speeches like this to the women you sleep with?” I asked. But I asked it tentatively, with a gentle voice free of censure. “Make sure they won’t regret a night with you?”

Bauer swallowed hard. His eyes searched my face. “They know what they’re getting into. They’re not thinking past one night, trust me.”

“But you think I am?”

The tip of his finger tilted my chin up, and his thumb brushed my bottom lip. “I think you look at me differently than they do, Claire. And if you can’t quiet those things holding you back, I don’t want to be the man they all think I am. Not with you. The one who’ll push where you let me, who’ll convince you with my lips”—he dropped his thumb but still stared steadily at my mouth—“and my hands until you convince yourself.”

My mouth opened to argue with him, but no words would come. Bauer had convinced himself that he was only capable



of casual transactional relationships, maybe for a hundred different reasons that had nothing to do with his upbringing. Reinforced beliefs were hard to break down, and I wasn't expecting this from him. Not once we kissed. A kiss like that, especially.

He was trying to do what he thought was right, what was honorable. The man who tried so hard to pretend he didn't care what people thought of him was placing my own reservations so far ahead of his needs that I couldn't think of a single intelligent response.

Which was why I let him walk out of the kitchen and fall back onto the couch with a heavy exhale.

The sound was so rife with unspent tension that my lips curved into a sad smile.

What a predicament I'd found myself in.

I walked up the stairs to the loft slowly, not because I was ready for bed—it was still early, the light outside the cabin a muted gray as evening fell—but because I just needed a little space to think.

As I perched on the edge of the bed, I touched my fingers to my lips. What a fine time for Bauer to allow his chivalrous side to surface, I thought ruefully.

After *that* kiss.

Twenty-two years suddenly felt like an impossibly long time to go without experiencing a kiss like that. Sure, I had some experience, probably the least of my sisters, but it was a sad state of affairs that even when I had fantasized about kissing someone important to me, my brain had never conjured that kind of furious, fierce hunger. An unrepentant want seizing both of us until we couldn't touch enough, taste enough, or push our bodies closely enough.

I didn't want Bauer to hold back.

I didn't want him to worry that I was overthinking or would regret my time with him.

But I was overthinking. And it needed to stop.

Normally, I'd ask Lia what I should do, but I grimaced when I thought about how patently unhappy this would make her. She'd hate it.

No, for this one, I picked up my phone and tapped out a text to the sister who, above all else, would give me honesty and pragmatism alongside her always blunt delivery.

**Me: On a scale of 1-10, how stupid would it be to sleep with Bauer when we're trapped in a cabin until at least tomorrow...**

I pinched my eyes shut as I hit send. My phone buzzed almost immediately.

**Isabel: IF YOU DON'T, I EXCOMMUNICATE YOU AS MY SISTER.**

**ISABEL: Are you seriously questioning this???? That man looked at you like you were an entire MEAL that he wanted to devour, and I cannot fathom one reason you wouldn't.**

**ISABEL: Wait. Unless you don't want to. IF YOU DON'T ACTUALLY WANT TO, say no, and if he doesn't listen, I'm strapping on my snow boots and I'll rip his balls off and run them through A MEAT GRINDER.**

My laughter was soft, and immediately, my eyes pricked with overwhelmed tears. It was a rare gift to be surrounded by women in my life who would commit such violent acts on my behalf without thinking twice.

**Me: No, no ripping and grinding necessary.**

**ISABEL: Do you even realize how wide open you leave yourself for explicit comments after texts like that?**

**ME: Ha. Sorry. You know what I meant.**

**ME: I like him. More than I thought I would.**

**ISABEL: Listen, C, if you're looking for someone to give you permission to quit overthinking and just DO THE THING, then I'm your girl. He's gorgeous, funny, and there's no denying he's into you. The better question is why wouldn't you?**

**Isabel: Don't think too hard about what happens when you come home. Okay? If today is what you have with him, then let him teach you all the wonderful things that he undoubtedly knows. And if that's impossible for you, then ask HIM out on a date when you AND the roads have been plowed, because holy shit, women can do the asking and there's nothing wrong with it. He'd probably friggin love it if you did.**

I chewed on my lip, trying to stop the smile at the way her advice lifted the slight pressure on my chest at Bauer's self-imposed distance. She was right. He did want this, and he'd wanted it longer than I had. And no matter how badly we tried to ignore the way the bruises deep in our souls affected our relationships, this was the perfect example.

I wanted him.

He wanted me.

But I was overthinking because I wanted to know that everything would turn out okay.

He was pulling away because of how strongly he avoided possible rejection. Yes, he was protecting me, but he was protecting himself too.

We were products of our circumstances, but we didn't have to let those circumstances steer the wheel of every choice we made. A lot of people did, but sitting there in the slowly darkening loft, I didn't want to anymore.

When the sun rose in the morning, there was no way I'd look at Bauer with regret or disappointment. No, I couldn't

guarantee how this would play out, but what I knew about him and how he was making me feel was enough.

I stood and turned on the small lamp on the dresser, casting the loft in a soft yellow glow. With careful movements, I pulled off my sweatshirt and smoothed my hands down the front of my simple T-shirt. As seductive outfits went, it wasn't my top choice, but so far, that hadn't been an issue for Bauer.

The elastic in my hair came out easily, and my hair fell around my shoulders, messy waves left behind from the way I'd had it pulled back after my shower. The girl staring back at me in the mirror wasn't overthinking anything. She knew exactly what and who she wanted.

I took the stairs quietly and paused when I saw Agnes sitting on the corner of the bottom one. She licked her paw and watched me with slitted eyes. Carefully, I scratched the top of her head as I passed, and she gave me a happy, rumbling purr in response.

That had me smiling as I walked around the edge of the couch.

Bauer was still lying there, his long legs sprawled out and one arm flung over his face, his chest rising and falling in an even rhythm. Briefly, I paused because oh geez, had he fallen asleep?

But as quickly as I thought it, he dropped his arm and pinned me with an inscrutable look as I stood over him.

Okay, so this part was one that I hadn't thought out. Like the choreography of my little gesture.

No second thoughts, I reminded myself.

With both hands, I reached for the hem of my shirt and tugged it up over my head.

Bauer sat up slowly as I let it drop to the floor, his jaw tightening, eyes burning furiously over the skin I'd just exposed. Left in my leggings and simple bralette, I took a step forward and swung one leg over his hip so I could settle onto his lap.

His hands slid up my back, and he dropped his head into the crook of my shoulder while he seemed to try to get his breathing under control. Underneath me, he was big. Hard. Ready.

My hands wandered up his shoulders and over the back of his head. I kissed his temple, then licked along the edge of his ear, insanely gratified when his fingers tightened painfully on my back. They moved then, started to tug down the strap of my bralette. His mouth trailed along the skin on my chest, small sucking kisses that he soothed with his tongue.

When he reached the tops of my breast, he used the edge of his thumb to work me into a rolling mass of want. Still, we hadn't kissed. Still, we hadn't spoken a single word.

His head came back, eyes almost black in the dying firelight, and he searched my expression carefully.

I gripped the sides of his face firmly, so he wouldn't—couldn't—look away.

“I want you,” I told him. “I want this, with you.”

Bauer surged forward and took my mouth. Oh, he took it deep and sweet and hot and hungry. Endless, wonderful kisses that had us panting and sighing and moaning as my hands ripped at his shirt.

He took pity, breaking away to tear it off. My hands slid over his skin, wonderful and gorgeous and stacked with muscles.

Using his hands underneath my ass, he picked me up and turned us so that I was underneath him on the couch. Once I was settled, those hands moved onto the waistband of my leggings as he peeled them off. They landed in a heap with his shirt and mine. My underwear came next, his tongue coming out to lick along his bottom lip in a way that had me writhing helplessly while he stood and shucked off his pants and boxer briefs.

Before he came back between my legs, Bauer snagged his wallet from the side table and pulled out a condom.

I widened my legs so that he could settle his hips between them, and our hands greedily swept over all the places now bared to our eyes. After only a few minutes, I cried out because that wrist thing he'd done earlier in the day, the twist of his hand that felt so dirty when I was fully clothed, had me damp with sweat and my toes curling against the couch.

"You're so perfect," he murmured against my chest, kissing down along my ribs.

My hand found him, and he hissed loudly in pleasure from the pressure of my fingers and palm.

"Bauer, please," I begged, arching my hips up.

"Soon, princess," he growled, pushing himself into my hand again. "I have one condom and no intention of rushing through a second of this."

"Please, please," I whispered against his mouth. "I can't handle this anymore."

He sat up, and I raked my fingernails down his abs as he ripped open the condom.

"I guess we'll have to get creative once I get you upstairs, eh?"

I grinned, sitting up to drop a kiss on the edge of his hip bone. "I guess."

Bauer came down over me again, hands bracketing my head on the couch. I pulled my leg up, my knee braced against his chest while the other wrapped around his hips.

Slowly, he moved forward. So slowly, I thought I might die, in wordless, helpless, incredible agony. My mouth was open, my neck arched back, a moan of pleasure trapped somewhere in my throat when he cursed so hoarsely that I found myself smiling.

For a moment, he wrapped me up in his arms and stayed like that. Just ... unmoving and frozen on a precipice that felt dangerous in how big it was. Like neither of us felt like we were ready for what might unfold when he finally started moving.

He lifted his head, and for a moment, I saw the bewilderment of what I was feeling mirrored on his face.

This is different.

This is big.

Gently, he kissed me.

And then, oh, and then, it wasn't so gentle.

It was perfect, full of rough hands and rough hips and seeking kisses and nips of my teeth along his shoulder.

My body fell apart, a blinding, shattering, explosion at the exact moment that Bauer shouted my name.

He slumped against me, his back sweaty, his arms tight and shaking around my overwhelmed body as I clung to him.

When he finally lifted his head, his dopey grin had me laughing out loud.

Bauer shook his head slowly. "We're about to get very, very creative upstairs."

"Are we?" I could hardly form the words around my beaming grin.

"Oh, yeah." He kissed me. "Or we will, when I can move my legs."

I kissed him back. "I hope you know you'll be carrying me up those stairs, big guy."

His eyes were so happy, so satisfied, that my heart burned bright and warm like a coal. "I think right now, I'd give you just about anything you asked for."

"A bed and you," I said simply.

He hummed against my lips. "That I can do, princess. Hold on tight."





## BAUER

Something out of the ordinary woke me the next morning.

It wasn't the sun streaming brightly through the wall of windows, and it wasn't Claire's delicious body draped over my chest. It wasn't that I needed coffee, or even that Agnes was sitting up on the dresser staring at me with her creepy green eyes.

Yeah, that cat probably saw things last night that she'd never seen before.

I grinned as I thought about all of them.

We'd gotten creative all right.

There were so many things the human body was capable of that didn't end in sex. And for hours—I shit you not, hours—we'd explored all those things until she was limp and sweaty and begging me to keep my hands off her.

My back was sore. My thighs were sore.

And if I pulled back the covers, I'd bet good money that Claire had beard-burn over half of her body from the things I'd done to her after we'd moved upstairs.

Honestly, it wouldn't surprise me if, on my death bed, I remembered the sounds she made when I feasted on her entire body until she was cursing at me, clawing at me, begging without an ounce of pride to pull her over the edge.

And turnabout was fair play because once her mouth and hands turned the tables on me, I was just as shameless in the

things I'd begged of her.

But no, none of that was what pulled me out of exhaustion fueled slumber late the next morning.

The sound happened again, and I felt my brow pull down in a grimace when I placed it.

*Thump.*

*Scrape.*

*Thump.*

*Scrape.*

Claire inhaled slowly as she woke, rolling over onto her back, arms stretching over her head.

I turned to my side and grinned at the picture she made. All her dark hair was tangled beyond hope, there were marks all over her chest and neck from my mouth, and the lack of sleep from the night before showed in the dark circles under her eyes.

She was perfection.

I'd never felt this way after spending the night with someone. Not even by half. Somehow, I wanted her even more. Even as my errant thoughts tried to break through, take root, and convince me that there was no way she'd want more with me.

"Morning," she mumbled, giving me a sleepy grin that had my heart twisting painfully in my chest.

"Morning." I leaned down to give her a kiss.

She scrunched her face adorably. "I bet my morning breath is lovely."

"I don't give a shit," I told her. With my thumb, I traced along her bottom lip. "These are worth it."

In the bright morning light, it was a delightful discovery that Claire was unashamed of her nudity because she didn't even attempt to cover her equally delightful breasts using the sheet draped around her waist.

“I hope Scotty has Advil downstairs,” she said.

I hummed. “You sore today, princess?”

“Wipe that smug ass grin off your face.”

My laughter had her smiling.

The smile was the best thing I could’ve woken to. Not only was Claire not ducking out of bed, avoiding eye contact or explaining to me why it could never happen again. Explaining why she hadn’t been thinking when she’d let me do all sorts of filthy things to her incredible body.

*Thump.*

*Scrape.*

Claire frowned, looking up over my shoulder. Her mouth fell open in comprehension.

My palm slid up her arm and cupped the back of her neck. My fingers tangled into that hair and she finally looked at me with a sigh.

“The plows are out,” I said.

“So I hear.”

Which meant we’d have no problem getting back to Seattle.

We both fell quiet, and her eyelids closed when the sound happened again.

If I thought my heart pinched when she smiled at me, it was doing a veritable fist-pump at the disappointment on her face.

“Pancakes for breakfast again?” I asked her, smoothing a hand down the sleek line of her back.

Claire’s fingers traced the clock face inked on my chest. “Why a clock?”

Her evasion made me smile. “Time eventually runs out for everyone. Better make the most of it while it’s on your side.”

That lifted her head, and she stared at me so intensely that I fought the urge to fidget uncomfortably.

Whatever she had turning around and around in that brain of hers, which, in truth, intrigued me just as much as all the other parts of her, had the power to ruin this little pocket of paradise we'd found ourselves in.

I found myself holding my breath at what she'd say next.

"What plows?" she said.

My brow furrowed in confusion.

"I didn't hear anything out there," she continued. "In fact, I'm pretty sure they won't be coming until tomorrow morning."

A slow smile curled my lips, and I not-so-gently gripped her hips and pulled her over me. Claire settled on my lap, the sheet pooling around her waist as she straddled me like a freaking dream I'd conjured.

"Is that so?"

She bit her lip and nodded. The picture she made was so tempting, I could only shake my head in disbelief.

No woman, not a single one, had made me think about the future. About dates and anniversaries and popping out babies and rings and lace.

But after just one night with her, something had me cycling through every single one of those. It made zero sense, but damn if I would waste my opportunity while time was on my side.

"I didn't hear a thing either, princess."

The smile that spread over her face was victorious, and I sat up to take a taste of it with my lips. She kissed me deeply, tugging my hair with her hands.

We turned over, and I yanked the sheets back up over our heads, blocking out the world just for a little while longer. If she was going to give me this day, I'd take it without an ounce of guilt.

And I think I knew, buried underneath whatever physical pleasure she was giving me, I'd give Claire a hell of a lot more

than that if she wanted it.



## CLAIRE

For the entire day, I allowed myself to be immersed in what was unfolding between me and Bauer. Nothing else existed, and there was a strange, beautiful feeling of suspended reality that I'd never experienced.

We ate breakfast slowly in front of the fire, no rush to get dressed.

Once we did, we bundled up again and added two figures to our snow family. The sight of the freshly plowed driveway was summarily ignored by both of us.

There was a brief snowball fight, where I clocked him straight in the side of the face, and he tackled me in the snow.

What I learned in the aftermath was that making out in the snow was a lot like making out on the beach. In theory, it was romantic, something Instagrammable. In reality, the offending natural elements ended up places you'd never want them. Snow ended up down the back of my coat and down my boots when he tried wrenching my snow pants away from my body to get his frigid hands on my skin.

That was about when we went inside.

On the counter of the kitchen, I saw my phone light up with notifications. Those, I also ignored. My family knew I was safe and would be coming home the next day.

Lia and whatever freak-out she was having about me being stuck with Bauer could wait.

I'd never made a decision like this, to purposely pause every single responsibility that waited for me. The sense of liberation it gave me was like bottling the highest high. This was a decision for me. About me.

And Bauer.

The look on his face when I told him I didn't hear the plows still brought a giddy grin to my face. How no one had uncovered that heart of his buried underneath the façade blew my mind.

I wanted to know more. I wanted to see more. Hear more. Touch more.

And so did he, even if he wasn't ready to admit it.

The sound of running water made me smile for a different reason, the heated look he'd given me when we swapped places in the bathroom. He and I decided to shower separately from a purely logistical standpoint—Scotty's shower was tiny.

It was while I was towel-drying my hair and he was taking his turn to warm up that I fought against the thoughts of what would happen when we got back to the real world.

Bauer lived a very different life than I did, and he lived it a few hours away from where my own life was anchored—where my school and family and friends were.

Under normal circumstances, I would've ignored every gut instinct telling me that this man was worth a risky leap and convinced myself that I was better off not even allowing one kiss to tempt me.

The water turned off in the bathroom, and I felt a shiver go through my body, thinking about him naked, wet and just ... naked. I couldn't stop the ridiculous grin that spread over my face because this feeling was so incredibly delicious, so addicting, I could understand why people chased it with two grasping hands once they knew it existed.

I knew why my sister Molly had risked her job to be with Noah when they had every reason to stay away from each other. Sure, it turned out well for them, but at the time, it



mystified me a bit that she'd have knowingly broken the rules to be with him.

Bauer came out of the tiny room with a white towel wrapped around his trim waist and a dangerous glint in his eye.

"You're gonna get cold," I said, pointing at his towel.

"I have someone to warm me up now."

"Agnes wouldn't warm you up if you were dying of hypothermia in front of her."

He laughed, leaning over me to drop a kiss on the top of my head. "True. But she's getting used to me."

"She's not actively hating you," I amended. "Let's not get carried away."

"Thoughts on dinner?" Bauer asked, opening the bare fridge and frowning at what he found.

I stood and approached him, wrapping my arms around his waist, kissing between his shoulder blades while my hands smoothed over the damp skin of his abs. "We'll have to get creative. It'll be a sad picnic, but if you're willing to split the last freezer meal, we'll have enough."

Which was what we did, and after Bauer dragged the mattress down the steps, shoved the couch backward to make room, and laid it on the floor in front of the fire, we decided that for our last night, we'd spend as much time as possible in that bed, including eat dinner there.

With the fire roaring happily, cracking and popping with the firewood that Scotty had wisely stored up, Bauer held up the last bite of a truly bland Salisbury steak frozen meal, and I ate it off the fork.

"Delicious," I mumbled.

He chuckled and moved the plate off the bed, turning on his side to watch me. So far, we'd kept clothes on during mealtime, which was almost necessary, given our condom-less state.

But the way he was looking at me, I felt my internal temperature slowly tick, tick, tick upward. One small degree at a time.

“I never go to Seattle because it sucks staying in that house,” he said quietly.

Carefully, I lowered the fork and set it on the empty plate on the floor, but I kept my eyes on him.

“Adele was never abusive to me, so don’t misunderstand. And as I got older, I was just as much to blame for how things are. But I was always aware of how much I wasn’t her child. Even before Finn was born.”

My heart squeezed painfully, but I stayed quiet.

“She loves children who aren’t her own; she found her calling in that center,” he continued. “But for some reason, I was the one she couldn’t love. And when you have that in your face your entire life, even if it’s unspoken, it takes a toll.”

“I’m sure it does.” I slid closer, picking up his inked hand and kissing the knuckles. I had a thought but rolled it around in my head a couple of times before I said anything. “It must have been hard for your dad when your mom died. Cancer, right?”

He nodded. “We don’t really talk much about those years. He married Adele about a year after my mom died.”

“You don’t look much like your dad,” I hedged.

His eyebrows lifted in surprise. “No, not that I remember my mom—I was too young when she got sick—but from pictures, I look exactly like her.”

“Maybe,” I said slowly, “I could be wrong, but maybe Adele hated that reminder, and that’s why she never let herself treat you the way you should have been treated or loved you the way you deserved to be loved.”

Bauer’s eyes searched my face carefully, and I held my breath that I hadn’t said the wrong thing.

He swallowed. “I never thought of it that way before. I usually just tried my best to piss her off once I got old

enough.”

I smiled. “Color me shocked.”

Flopping onto his back, Bauer pulled me next to him so that I was tucked into his side. My fingers traced that clock tattoo on his chest. As he spoke, the rumble in his chest was a delicious rumble under my ear. “I hate that that makes sense to me, princess. I don’t want to understand because it was easier to just ... dislike and avoid.”

I propped up on my elbow so he could see my face. “There’s nothing wrong with reacting the way you have. And I don’t say it to suddenly make you love Adele or want to have a relationship with her.” I shrugged a shoulder. “I just like to figure people out. Why they do what they do, what the consequences are for the people in their life.”

“Adele doesn’t have much in the way of consequences, considering she never has to see me.” He sighed. “And I think my dad and Finn are just so used to me not being around that they don’t care much either.”

A rebuttal of that statement was right on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it down because I didn’t want to push too hard.

“Did you figure out your mom?” he asked quietly. His hand found my hip, and he squeezed. I loved that he did that. At Richard’s house, when he could sense I was uneasy with our little charade, he’d give me one small press of his hands to let me know he was there, that he was on my side.

Maybe the fact that he did it again at that moment was why I could answer. “Sometimes I think I have.”

“Raging narcissist?” he asked.

My body shook with laughter, and I leaned down to give him a quick kiss. Bauer didn’t even attempt to deepen it, which somehow endeared him to me even further, another fraction of my heart that he claimed by letting me talk about this serious thing. And talking about his own without prompting.

“There’s probably a lot of truth to that,” I agreed. “Brooke was a lot younger than our dad—who we share with Logan. It was a second marriage for him, and I think, I don’t know, Brooke liked the idea of his old-money enough to overlook the age thing. When my dad had his heart attack, she was suddenly a widow with four young girls, and he hadn’t quite left her the money she imagined was sitting in a bank somewhere.” I’d picked apart our childhood from every angle over the years, witnessed the varying ways my sisters and I felt the ramifications of her leaving, yet it still made my throat tighten up to try to talk about it out loud.

His hand moved gently over my back. “We don’t have to talk about it.”

I smiled at him. “No, it’s fine. Just thinking about the irony of what I’m going to school for, and I don’t like talking about my own childhood issues.”

“She left you, princess.” His wandering fingers pushed under the hem of my sleep shirt, sweeping in small circles around the bumps on my spine. “It’s shitty, and she’s shitty, and I think what you’re going to school for is fucking incredible, and there’s something amazing that you didn’t let her ruin you.”

My eyes burned. “She didn’t even really say goodbye when she dropped us off at Logan’s. I think Molly knew she was leaving for good, but Lia and I were too young.”

His eyes looked enraged on my behalf, but he didn’t say anything.

“I think it,” I continued quietly, “it makes you feel really forgettable, you know? And small. How small we must have been in her eyes to be able to walk away so easily.”

I sniffed, tilting my chin up because I would not cry on my last night in this wonderful little haven with Bauer.

He shook his head. “You’re just about the least forgettable person I’ve ever met, Claire.”

One tear escaped. Not because what he said made me sad, but because I’d never admitted that to anyone before. And I

was giving it to him in the quiet stillness of that cabin, and his reaction was exactly what my heart needed to hear.

I didn't want Bauer to forget me. And I didn't want to forget him either.

He gently brushed away that tear that slipped down my cheek, and it unlocked the last thing I'd left unsaid. It had stayed hidden so far back in my head that it was almost impossible to form the words.

"I'm glad she left," I whispered.

Bauer went still. His forehead creased slightly, but other than that, he waited to see if I'd say anything else.

"I love my family," I said fiercely. "The one we've built is so amazing, and because I can see that, see that what I went through can help someone else someday, I'm glad she left. We're better off without her."

My words hung between us, and I could see it on Bauer's face. He knew that I'd just told him something secret, something that came from a quiet part of my heart that I'd never given to anyone else.

His smile was small and sweet, and the way he was watching me made me blush in a different way. It wasn't sexual. Bauer looked ... fascinated. Enamored. Like a man who was falling in love. And suddenly, I found it hard to swallow.

For as long as I could remember, I wanted someone—his brother—to look at me in that exact way. To see beyond the fact that I was just one of a set, someone who happened to look like Lia, and really see me. See what made me different and unique and Claire. Someone who thought I was the least forgettable person he'd ever met.

Knowing what I knew now, ever having feelings for Finn felt like a betrayal of his deepest wound even though I could've hardly known that.

And now, knowing what I knew, I didn't want Finn to see me that way. It dawned slowly, warm and pure and wonderful, that I only wanted Bauer to look at me in the way he was.

“If I doubted how incredible you were before,” he said in a gruff voice. His hand pulled from my shirt so he could cup the side of my face, and I leaned into his palm. “You’re going to do such great things, princess. I probably would’ve turned out better if I’d had someone like you to save me.”

Even though I fought it earlier, another tear escaped, and his face pinched in a pained expression when he swept it away with his thumb.

I dipped my head and kissed him slowly, first his top lip, then his bottom, sucking it into my mouth before pulling back.

His expression was slightly dazed, and I couldn’t stop the way my heart was racing.

Maybe we were a strange pairing, one that no one else would put together, but I could see it. And ... and with the way Bauer was looking at me, I think he could see it too.

“Maybe we can save each other,” I whispered. I held his gaze and watched it slowly ignite and then burn so intensely that I fought not to blink, simply because I didn’t want to miss a second of the way he was looking at me.

After that, we didn’t speak a word for a long, long time.

Bauer tugged me down so he could take kiss after searing kiss. His hands swept up my back, and my shirt disappeared. Mine did the same with his.

We managed gasping, broken sounds, as piece by piece, we were tangled against each other, completely bare.

He kept true to his word, using his hands and mouth quite creatively, but I was the one who pushed him over to his back, after he’d already pushed me past the brink once.

His cheekbones blazed red as he stared up at me, his hands gripping my hips so tightly that it hurt.

“Please,” he pleaded as I rolled my hips, close, closer. Fingers tightened on my skin, and through clenched teeth, he swore.

I dropped down, my hair falling around our faces like a curtain. “I’m on the pill, Bauer. I trust you,” I whispered.

Smoothly, he rolled us again until he was over top of me, covering me with so much strength and heat that I wanted to live there forever.

He whispered a curse, his expression intense and searching. He knew what I was asking of him. Knew what my trust meant.

“Claire,” he said brokenly.

“I trust you,” I repeated.

His hands gripped me tightly. “I’ve never not used one. There’s never been anyone ...” His voice trailed off, and inside, I burned so bright with what I saw in his eyes.

“I know you’re here with me,” I told him, my hand landing on his heart. His wild, pounding, hammering heart.

Bauer didn’t rush, never, ever did anything except bring us both to the edge of our sanity, and the glass sharp edge of pleasure and pain, with how he made us wait.

With patience that I couldn’t fathom, and a tenderness that I hadn’t yet felt from him, Bauer made love to me. It was in every sweep of his hands over my body. Every roll of his hips, every second he held my gaze with his own and refused to look away.

The way he moved inside me was slow, slow, slow, and his control made the burst of pleasure that much better when it finally came. Movements became faster and harder after that, his control fraying as I clutched his sweat-damp back. It was my name he shouted when the dam broke for him. A second wave crested slowly for me when it did, and I gasped for breath when it warmed me head to toe.

I had to fight not to tell him I was falling in love with him, and when he slowly came down himself, he spoke something softly into the skin of my shoulder that I couldn’t hear.

It was easy to imagine that he was murmuring secrets into my skin that I was keeping tight inside me as well.

Maybe because we both knew what waited for us when we got back to reality, and that we were hardly at a place to make

declarations of love after only a few days.

But for the rest of the night, I felt the truth of it in the way he touched me, like I was something he treasured, something he wanted, something he'd protect.

By the time we finally lapsed into sleep, me curled tightly in his arms, I knew I felt the same way about Bauer Davis. But it still didn't mean I was ready for the sun to come up and reality to intrude because after that happened ... I couldn't bear to think about what might come next.





## CLAIRE

We sat in the Jeep and stared at Scotty's cabin. The snow had started melting, coming off the sharp edge of the A-line roof in a steady stream of water. There was no hiding anymore, no ignoring reality, no more excuses to stay.

Plus, we'd just about cleaned Scotty out of food. So, unless we wanted to start eating Agnes's really expensive cat food, it was time to face the music anyway.

"Well," he said quietly and glanced in my direction. "Shall we?"

The lump in my throat was about the size of Rhode Island when I tried to answer, so I just nodded instead.

He slid a hand across my thigh, fingers wrapping comfortably over the top of my leg so he could squeeze.

*I'm right here.*

It was so clear in my head that I could almost hear his voice.

"Why is it so hard to leave this place?" I said. I'd hardly even made the decision to speak the thought out loud, but there it was.

Bauer sighed, removed his hand, and put the Jeep in reverse, navigating through the plowed area that the truck had provided him to back up.

"Because it's nice to hide away every once in a while." He paused again before he pulled out of the driveway, and I

caught the way his eyes lingered on the cabin in the rearview mirror. “Forget about all the other bullshit we have to deal with.”

For some reason, his answer saddened me even further. He’d woken me so sweetly with kisses all over my naked back and hands roaming until I’d been panting his name, begging him to take pity on me. He had, hands clutching mine, his body hot and hard behind me as I found release again, my sounds muffled into the mattress.

Breakfast and packing up our stuff had kept the same tone, slow and sweet, lingering kisses and caresses, until we couldn’t prolong the inevitable anymore.

It was time to go back.

My phone had been left unattended that entire last day, and when I plugged it in while packed, I had to close my eyes when the notifications started rolling in.

Between Paige and Lia and Logan, my phone was blowing up with texts about when I’d be home. But still, I turned it over so I didn’t have to see. Not until I buckled myself into the Jeep and one from Logan had me caving.

**Logan: I SWEAR, CLAIRE, if you don’t answer one of us soon, I’m calling EVERY POLICE OFFICER I KNOW, and dispatching them.**

**ME: I’m FINE! Sorry. Sorry. Spotty service, haven’t been checking my phone.**

**LOGAN: Not amused, kid, not amused. Paige is ready to castrate this guy for kidnapping you.**

**ME: Bauer is hardly at fault for the snowstorm. I’m fine, and I’m on my way home, so calm down, please. Isabel knew I was fine. We texted the other night.**

**LOGAN: YEAH, and I'm still trying to permanently erase the image of what those texts contained when she wouldn't tell me and Paige ripped the phone from her hands. My last attempt of pouring bleach in my eyes didn't do it, so I refuse to talk about this anymore with you.**

“Your family’s freaking, huh?” Bauer asked after he finally pulled the car onto the road.

My phone and all their belligerent texts were safely tucked into my backpack where he wouldn’t accidentally see them. The last thing Bauer needed was to know that Paige, Logan, and Lia were ready to sic federal agents on him.

“They’re ... fine.” I tucked my leg up against my chest and stared happily at his profile. “But they’re on to you, bud. They know the roads were cleared yesterday.”

“On to me?” Bauer glanced at me. “Should I tell them who seduced who into staying for one more day? Because only one of us was topless and begging. With straddling involved, I might add.”

I held up my hand. “Okay, okay. I get it. No, they don’t need to know that.”

His grin was wicked and wonderful, and I wanted to eat him alive. Bauer Davis had turned me into a certifiable addict.

“But,” I said, “be prepared. If you thought Paige’s grilling was bad when you picked me up ...” I whistled.

Bauer hooked a wrist over the steering wheel and draped his free hand over my thigh again. Immediately, I wove our fingers together. “They didn’t act like that with the other guys you’ve brought home?”

I laughed. “I haven’t brought anyone home. Not like ... anyone serious.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I haven’t!”

He peered over the edge of his sunglasses. “I call bullshit.”

“Call whatever, it won’t make it less true.” I shrugged. “I went on a few dates in high school, so sure, they’ve met guys who picked me up, but they never turned into anything serious. And in college ... I don’t know ... my classes were always a higher priority than dating, so I never had anyone serious or even semi-casual who’d want to come home for family dinner.”

Bauer’s head reared back. “Huh.”

“Not all of us are professional snowboarders who probably have women throwing themselves naked on the snow in front of their board.”

Did I sound like a jealous harpy? Yup. Sure did.

Did I sound insecure that I’d been a late bloomer and didn’t feel the need to date my way through high school and college? Yup. That also.

“Naked on the snow sounds awful.” He gave me a sideways glance. “And entirely irrational, if one wanted to look sexy.”

Withdrawing my hand from his, I smacked him on the chest. His laughter boomed through the Jeep, and I found myself smiling.

“Ass.”

Bauer snatched my hand and kissed the palm. “Listen, I won’t lie, there are women who chase snowboarders like we’re a prize, but it can’t be that different from what any football player has to deal with.”

“No, I know. And there are so many guys who don’t chase that life.” I shook my head. “I shouldn’t have implied that you did.”

He sighed. “I wasn’t an angel. But most of that, it stayed behind me in my early twenties. It’s not as fun once you start creeping closer to thirty.” His cheeks were slightly pink.

“Are you saying you’ve had a dry spell lately, Bauer?” I teased.

His shrug was small. “A little. Isn’t this ... isn’t this weird for you to talk about?”

“Is it weird if I told you about guys I dated?”

“That’s not the same.”

My head tilted. “Why not?”

He sighed. “Well ... you’re like ... girlfriend material, you know? Every parent in the world would be thrilled if a guy brought you home.”

Ahh. “And you’re not boyfriend material?”

Bauer licked his lips before he answered. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Hmm, well, let’s see.” Regarding him with a thoughtful expression, I waited until I saw his expression soften a bit. “You’re not terrible to look at.” He rolled his eyes, but he was smiling, so I kept going. “You are an excellent dancer.” My fingers trailed along the top of his hand. “You open doors and make pancakes. You shovel pathways in the snow.” I picked up that hand and pressed a kiss into his palm. “You wake me up in the sweetest, sexiest ways. And you make me feel beautiful.”

Bauer looked over at me, and what I saw in his eyes slayed me completely. “You are beautiful,” he said roughly.

“You make me feel amazing just by being you, Bauer.” I kept my voice even, despite the way my stomach fluttered nervously. “If that’s not boyfriend material, I don’t know what is.”

The man next to me stayed quiet, but I saw the strong column of his throat move on a slow swallow.

“Everyone has a past, Bauer. It doesn’t define who we are moving forward.” I gave a small shrug of my own. “So I won’t hold your past against you if you can promise to do the same for me.”

He tangled our fingers together again. “So I won’t imagine some ripped book nerd in your sociology class mooning over you because you guys dated for five years. Because that would

probably do the same cute pouty thing to my face as yours just did when you talked about snow bunnies.”

I laughed. “Seriously, you’re such an ass.”

As he grinned, I felt my stomach flip weightlessly again.

Some ripped book nerd. No, I hadn’t dated one of those for five years, but in my head ... one had taken up residence for even longer. If Bauer and I stayed together, and oh, my heart wanted that so badly, I’d eventually have to admit my harmless crush on Finn and how that played a role, but I knew this wasn’t the time.

The feeling of suspended reality that we’d enjoyed at the cabin still lingered in the Jeep. We drove through a winter wonderland so beautiful it didn’t seem real. I was with a man who gave me the kind of butterflies I didn’t know existed—like sex-crazed, I want to stay in a bed with you for a week and pluck every deep thought out of your head because your head is just as fascinating as your body kind of butterflies—and I wasn’t ready to pop that bubble just yet.

My gut screamed at me over whatever logic my head told me to just ... keep my mouth shut about Finn.

Finn didn’t even know, so there wasn’t even really a secret to be brought out into the open. It was just, something I used to feel. Something I’d gotten over.

“What’s waiting for you when you get back?” he asked.

I smiled, happy for the change in subject. “Family dinner. We eat at Logan and Paige’s every week. It’s loud and crazy and ... perfect.”

“All right, princess, tell me about them. Any group of people who make you smile like that, I’ve gotta know.”

Turning slightly in my seat, I took a moment to gauge his facial expression. Because his eyes were covered, I couldn’t get a true read on him, not really, but the rest of him looked relaxed and happy. Interested.

This was me and him outside of the cabin. Him getting to know the other parts of my life, and me, hopefully being able

to do the same.

“Molly is the oldest,” I started. “She travels a lot because of her job with Amazon. She’s the assistant director for their documentary series, *All or Nothing*.”

He nodded. “I remember when that came out. She and her boyfriend, Noah, right? The guy who plays for Washington.”

“Yup. So they miss dinner a lot, but whenever she’s in town, they’re there.”

“Next is”—he snapped his finger—“Isabel, right? The only one who didn’t try to glare me out of your apartment, which makes me prone to like her the best.”

I laughed. “Yes, she’s the middle. And the funny thing about that is that Isabel is usually the hardest to impress. She and Paige are two peas in a pod; they always have been. Isabel manages a gym, a kickboxing studio.”

“Nice.” He nodded appreciatively. “Have I heard of it?”

“Maybe. Wilson’s Gym and Kickboxing Studio.”

He shook his head. “I haven’t. Maybe ... maybe we could check it out someday.”

My face felt warm and flushed and happy at how easily he suggested it. He was *trying*.

I licked my bottom lip, watching his face carefully. “You going to be in Seattle more?”

His grin hooked up on one side. “You know, I think I might be.” He squeezed my hand. “Even if the rest of your family hates me, at least I know Isabel is on my side.”

“Lia knows you,” I pointed out.

“Lia has spent more than ten years as best friends with the younger brother who’s gone his whole life hearing what a horrible influence I’d be on him. Trust me, your sister won’t be a fan of”—he glanced meaningfully at me—“this.”

I frowned. “She’s still my twin, though, and my best friend. When she sees ...” My voice trailed off. It felt like a



strange place to say something big and meaningful like when she sees how important you are to me.

When she sees how insanely happy you make me,

When she sees how wonderful you really are.

When she sees that I'm falling in love with you.

Bauer heard something in the pause and pulled his eyes from the road. "When she sees ...?"

"Us," I finished lamely. "I think if she's able to see us," I stammered slightly over my words, "you know, hanging out or whatever. She'll be okay with it."

He didn't exactly look convinced. "If you say so."

"Lia is protective, just as we all are of each other." I didn't want to feel defensive about the way he was immediately writing off her ability to see that I was happy or give him a second chance, but I did. "And yeah, maybe she doesn't know you well, but she'll get to know you. And she'll see that you're more than what Adele's written you off to be."

Sensing my discomfort, he lifted my hand and kissed it. "Okay. You know her better than I do. I've only seen her as Finn's best friend. She's protective of him too."

I sighed. He wasn't wrong. "Lia is ..." I searched for the right words. "She's like ... bottled energy inside a body that can hardly hold it. It's one of the biggest ways we're different. She was always the ringleader when we were young because her brain never stops moving. She's stubborn, and she's strong-willed." Despite my words, I was smiling. "And she's my other half. Because she loves me," I finished quietly. "She'll be okay with you."

Bauer took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't ... I don't know what it's like to have that." His smile was rueful, but I still saw the sadness clinging to the edges. "So I'm sorry if it sounded like I was questioning your sister. You've got a pretty big leg up on this whole family deal."

In answer, I squeezed his hand, and I saw the way his chest and shoulders relaxed.

“You’ll be fine.” At his skeptical look, I laughed. “You will.”

“I’m glad you have so much faith in me, princess.” His tone was wry, but I heard what was buried beneath it. “Don’t know that I’ve earned it, but it’s appreciated.”

My finger traced small circles over the rough knuckles on his big, warm hand. “Will you come with me to family dinner tonight?”

A sweeter, softer kind of butterfly took off inside of my body the moment I asked.

It wasn’t about sex.

It wasn’t about how he made me feel when he looked at me with want and desire.

This was about having him sitting next to me at a dinner table and knowing I could reach for his hand.

It was letting him know that his presence mattered to me.

That I’d crave the normal, in-between things when he wasn’t around me.

Bauer took a moment to answer, but when he did, his voice was a little rough, a little low.

“Yeah, princess. I can give it a shot.”

The rest of our drive was music and easy conversation, and the closer we got to Seattle, I felt a slow tension creeping in-between my shoulder blades.

The scenery was so familiar to me that I couldn’t use it as a suitable distraction over what may or may not wait for us at dinner.

I hadn’t prepared anyone that I was bringing this guy who’d just consumed the past four days of my life.

Bauer took the exit for my apartment as I tried—really, really hard—not to let my brain freak out over the fact that I felt this way about someone I’d known for less than a week.

My heart thought it was freaking romantic.

My gut was all arrows, pointing straight at Bauer.

But for one moment, I had a horrible thought that I couldn't immediately banish in the back of my overthinking brain. Didn't Brooke leave because she felt something this big and all-encompassing? She didn't care what her family thought or what the consequences of her actions were. She just took a leap and never looked back.

My fingers tightened around his hand before I realized what I was doing.

"You okay?"

I nodded furiously. "Fine. Just ... still trying to mentally prepare to be back."

"I miss that cabin too, princess."

Smiling, I thought about something he'd said right before we left. "You gonna warn Scotty that you're shipping him a new mattress?"

"I better." He grimaced. "If I were him, I'd want to sleep on the couch until something shows up that wasn't defiled the way we defiled that mattress."

I was still laughing when we pulled up in front of my apartment building, and my whole body froze when I saw Lia standing next to Finn's car, her arms crossed and a sour expression on her face when she caught sight of Bauer. Finn was next to her, tall and handsome, with something a bit more polite on his face than my sister had managed.

Sitting next to Bauer, I was relieved to realize that Finn didn't cause any sort of reaction at all.

No wings. No flutters. No second thoughts.

Bauer whistled as he pulled the Jeep into a parking spot. "Remind me what you said about Lia again?"

Sighing, I gave his hand another squeeze. "Let me talk to her for a second, okay?"

He pulled off his glasses, and completely ignoring the way that they were both staring unabashedly, he leaned in to give

me a soft kiss on the lips. “You sure you want to face that firing squad alone, princess?”

I nodded slowly, then risked a glance out of the windshield.

Finn was watching us with a curious expression on his face, one that held only the smallest resemblance to Bauer.

When I saw Lia’s face, I decided firing squad was a pretty apt description to how she was glaring at the man beside me.

The bubble of the cabin was well and truly popped.



## BAUER

**B**y the time my booted foot hit the concrete, Lia had grabbed Claire's hand and started dragging her around the front of Finn's car.

"Hey," Claire objected, planting her feet and refusing to be dragged anywhere. "Chill, okay?"

Lia gave me an unfathomable look, which softened when her gaze came back to her twin. "Are you okay? I thought we could talk in private."

Finn shuffled his feet and settled a shoulder against his car. "Bauer."

I nodded. "I see you're feeling better."

Claire watched our stiff greeting over her shoulder and gave me a tiny smile.

Lia said something to Claire quietly enough that I couldn't hear her, and after a second, Claire nodded.

"Give us a second, okay?" she said to me.

I smiled. "I'll be right here."

"Oh, gross," Lia mumbled.

"Lia," Claire snapped.

With interest, I watched Lia take a deep breath, slick her tongue over her teeth, and give me a tiny, tight smile. "Sorry. Force of habit."

I held up my hands. "Forgiven."

The sisters walked in tandem just to the other side of Finn's car where my little brother and I wouldn't be able to hear them.

"Weird week," Finn said conversationally.

My head tilted. "A good week."

He squinted into the sun, and I took a moment to study him. I hadn't been home in months, and my little brother had filled out a bit, clearly spending time with the weights.

"School going okay?" I asked.

Finn nodded. "Eventually, I'll be able to sleep again or have a social life."

It was no surprise that Adele struggled with me. Finn and I couldn't be more different. Like Claire, he'd dedicated all his free time to his studies. Nothing came before it, and it showed in his grades. And lack of a girlfriend.

"Heard Mom and Dad got the money from Richard," he said.

My eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Good for them."

"She was excited."

"Adele should send Claire one hell of a thank-you note when she cashes that check," I pointed out.

Finn looked back at the sisters and grinned crookedly, and it was one of the odd moments that I noticed similarities in us. That smile looked a bit like mine. "Lia would've been able to pull it off too."

"I don't think she would've," I said quietly. My little brother wanted to stand up for his friend, but I held up my hand. "Don't misunderstand me. I know Lia is smart in her own right, but she's not Claire. And the kind of smart Claire is, the way she reads people, that's what Richard responded to. It had nothing to do with her last name, or who her brother is, or how she's connected to Washington. It was her."

"Hmm." Finn regarded me carefully. "Sounds like you got a read on Claire pretty quickly."

My eyes moved to the woman in question, her animated gestures almost had me smiling, but the whole situation was still just a little too strange for anything to be humorous. “I think so.” The whole day still had me feeling off-kilter after leaving our haven in the woods.

It was laughable that I’d worried at one point that Claire might regret one night with me.

Not only did she seem to have zero regrets but she also willingly stayed. Willingly dug inside parts of me that no one had ever seen, no one had ever wanted to before. Those blue eyes of hers came with a superpower, X-ray vision straight through whatever messy tangle I’d kept floating on the surface.

When she looked over at me in the car, kissed my palm, and told me she thought I was boyfriend material—that bringing me home to her family was something she wanted to do—I damn near cried.

One manly, manly tear.

Right on the heels of that was, *holy shit, I don’t know if I can pull this off.*

For her, though, I’d try. Because my little brother was right. I had gotten a read on Claire quickly, and she never would’ve told me the things she did in the car if she didn’t believe them.

Finn turned so he could watch the sisters, his thumb tapping restlessly on the side of his car. “She’s Claire, you know. I guess I never thought much about the ways they might be different.”

I wanted to tell him all the ways Claire was different because what idiot couldn’t see it? Finn might be book smart, but book smart people could still be total dumbasses in the ways of the world.

Something about the way he was watching them, trying to see what I saw, left me feeling edgy. Jealous.

It was a strange sensation.



“She’s nothing like her sister,” I snapped. “I don’t know how you missed it.”

He laughed at my grumpy ass, which didn’t help the green-eyed monster settle. “It’s not like I missed it. I just didn’t ... I don’t know. I didn’t pay much attention.” His smile faded as he took in my glowering face. “Never thought I’d see the day that a woman turned you inside out like this.”

“Join the club,” I muttered.

Finn gave me an assessing nod. “I think she’ll be good for you.”

Couldn’t argue with that. “Thanks for getting sick, by the way.”

“Ohh, it was my pleasure.” His voice was dry humor and tinged in sarcasm, and it lessened a smidge of the tension banding tight around my chest at this entire exchange.

Lia.

Finn.

Whatever her family might say to my unexpected presence.

There was no misunderstanding what a big deal it was, and it was on the tip of my tongue to ask Finn for tips. Tell me what the hell to do at this family dinner. Ask him if Logan Ward was going to punch me in the balls for whatever had gone down between me and Claire in the cabin.

In his mind, I was sure our relationship played out backward.

There was no first official date, where I walked to the door and picked her up with flowers in hand. Where I told her she looked beautiful. Where I had her back home later that night and snuck a kiss in the car. Where I hoped for a second date and then a third. Because if I’d done those things, in whatever way he probably wanted his sisters to start dating a guy, I would’ve wanted a second and third and fourth date from the moment I picked her up.

I would've pulled out her chair, held the doors, done every chivalrous thing I could think of. Not because Claire wasn't capable of holding the door herself or pulling up her own chair, but because I would've wanted her to know how special she was.

No, in Logan's mind, I stole a date that wasn't meant for me. I forced a situation where Richard thought we were dating. I conned her into spending days stuck in a cabin in the remote wilderness with me.

With a dawning sense of horror, while I watched Lia make her own animated gestures back at Claire, I realized that her family had absolutely every reason to be skeptical. The first guy she was bringing home had the reputation of a hothead and a drunk.

"What's that look on your face?" Finn asked.

I blinked over at him. Apparently, Claire wasn't the only one good at reading people. My first instinct was to give him a flippant answer so that he'd leave me alone, reestablish that my little brother didn't know shit about me, because he'd never really tried.

But I hadn't tried either.

It was a tough pill to swallow, but in light of what Claire said about Adele and my mom, who I didn't even really remember except for pictures, I was forced to acknowledge my own part in the rift between me and my family.

What if I had the same effect on Claire and hers? Caused some sort of tension because they couldn't reconcile who she brought home.

"They'll all hate me, won't they?"

He chuckled. "Not all of them."

"Thanks, that makes me feel better."

Finn was giving me a curious look. "I'm surprised you care if they do or don't. You've always made it perfectly clear to us that your own family's opinion doesn't matter. Why does hers?"

Apparently, Golden Boy knew me better than I thought. My family's opinion hadn't mattered, not in any of the choices I made, which is why I never cared too much that they hadn't celebrated in my victories either. In that way, Claire and I couldn't have been more different. Behind her was a veritable army, ready to defend her against the slightest hurt, perceived or otherwise.

Then there was me.

The one who normally held his inked hands, middle finger up, to the people who were supposed to care for him the most.

"I don't have to justify myself to you, Finn," I said. His frame tensed, bracing for whatever was going to come out of my mouth next. He'd heard it enough over the years. For her, I had to remind myself I could try. I took a deep breath and tried to answer more calmly. "It matters because she matters. To me," I clarified.

His jaw relaxed, shock clear in the widening of his eyes. "You've known her for like, five days."

Claire turned back in our direction, and I found myself breathing more easily when her eyes met mine, sparkling with warmth and sweetness. Whatever had been talked about with Lia, Claire felt good about it.

And by extension, I felt something ease inside me. Simply because she looked happier.

Fuck, falling in love was terrifying, wasn't it?

This woman could ask for a knife to flay me alive, and I just might have handed it to her with a dopey ass grin on my face. It was the scariest shit I'd ever experienced in my life, which didn't explain why all I wanted to do was hold her hand, see her smile back at me, and know that she was in it with me.

Finn laughed softly at whatever was on my face.

"Shut up," I mumbled.

When Claire walked straight into the arms I hadn't even realized I'd opened for her, Lia grimaced before she could stop

herself. Finn elbowed her, and instead of trying to figure out what it meant, I buried my nose in the top of Claire's head and breathed in deeply.

She felt so good in my arms, and I hated how much the raised hackles inside me were soothed by her open affection in front of her sister and my brother.

Claire slid her arm around my waist and faced the other two but kept herself tucked into my side. "Where are you guys off to?"

Lia let out a slow breath, and I made sure to keep my expression pleasant.

She was stubborn, I already knew that. And she'd had years of building up an opinion of me that wouldn't be erased with one single conversation in a parking lot.

"I need to run to the store before dinner, and my car's acting up," Lia said.

"Again?" Claire shook her head. "That car is such a piece of shit."

Her sister smiled, as did Finn, so I gathered it must have been a running joke between the three of them.

"I could look at it," I told her.

Lia's eyebrows popped up. "You fix cars?"

My hand curled up around Claire's neck, and I gave it a gentle squeeze. "I can manage a couple of things if you want me to check it out later."

Claire smiled up at me, clearly happy with the effort I was making.

For her, I could try.

Lia licked her lips and didn't answer right away. Finn elbowed her again and gave me a lift of his chin. "She'd be thrilled, thank you."

"Yes, thank you," she managed with only the slightest tightness to her voice. Her eyes went to Claire again. "I'm

assuming you're going to ride with us to dinner? Since you usually do."

Again, whether it was intentional or not, it was a pointed reminder that I was the oddball in this strange little trio.

Lia and Finn, the best friends.

And Claire who always tagged along.

It made me feel protective because Claire shouldn't have to tag along anywhere. Not like she was an afterthought.

"I'm riding with Bauer," she said firmly.

Lia's mouth dropped open. "He's coming to dinner?"

Finn gave her a warning look.

I struggled mightily against my first reaction, which was to say something to piss her off.

Claire slid her hand up under my shirt and tightened her grip. It was proprietary, a signal that couldn't be missed, and holy shit, I loved it. At that moment, she soothed the bull ready to charge. "He is, and I can't wait to introduce him to Logan and Paige," she told her sister. "Which is why you're going to uphold your promise to me, Lia."

Her words had the intended effect on Lia because her body deflated slightly and lost the shocked tightness to it.

"You know I will," Lia answered quietly. Then she looked at Finn, who nodded. "I guess we'll meet you guys there."

Claire looked up at me. "I want to freshen up before we go over."

Finn nodded at me before he climbed into the driver's seat. Claire walked out of my grasp for a moment to squeeze her sister. Lia closed her eyes as they embraced, and it was easier that way to see her in the role of loving, protective sister rather than someone who'd vacillated between hating and barely tolerating me over the years because of my family. Because of me.

I wove my fingers through Claire's as they drove away, and as soon as Finn's car left the parking lot, I turned and

cupped her face in my hands, pressed her against the car, and took her mouth in a deep, deep kiss.

The match lit immediately, and she wound her arms around my neck as I tasted the sweetness on her tongue, the softness on her lips.

Yes, for her, I could try. I still felt unbalanced and about a thousand miles outside of my comfort zone, but when I touched her, felt her touch me back, everything fell back into place.

My hand dug into the back of her leggings, and I groaned happily when she rolled her hips. If it was dark, if we were hidden and out of reach of prying eyes, I'd have taken her there up against my Jeep. Quick and hard, with little preamble, simply to soothe whatever addiction to her had taken over every corner of my soul.

Someone hollered an obscenity out of their apartment window, and I broke my mouth away from hers.

I laughed against her mouth. "Sorry."

Her face had a dazed look on it. "What was that for?"

"For whatever you said to her," I admitted. "And for inviting me to dinner. For being crazy enough for wanting me there."

Claire grinned. "Don't thank me yet."

My forehead pressed against hers, and I breathed her in, trying to wrestle my desire for her under control, given we were in public. "I want to take you out on a date, princess. A real one. I pick you up, and you know it's me coming." My voice was rough, and my hands held her tightly. She must have sensed a change in me because she smoothed her hands up my chest and kept them there. "You can dress up, and I'll take you somewhere expensive and think about kissing you all damn night."

"Okay," she answered softly. "I think we can do that."

Wrapping her in my arms, I kissed her temple. What Claire Ward was doing to me, I wasn't entirely sure, but I was on

unsteady footing. She had me balancing on a beam, thin and wobbly, over a wide-open expanse and no net.

While we were alone, I felt the strongest in what was building between us. Even now, just one hit of her to my bloodstream, and I was calmed. I'd have to share her eventually, and maybe Claire was right when she said I'd be able to make it through dinner just fine.

“Good.” I buried my head in her hair again.

“You know what I want to do?” she asked. Her mouth nipped at my jaw.

“What?”

Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief. “Show you my bed before we have to leave.”





## BAUER

When you begin your drive to a former football star's home, especially one who is now one of the league's most respected coaches, you start getting a certain image in your mind about what the house might look like.

Long, curving driveway.

Lush landscaping.

Arches and large windows and a pool house.

Somewhere I'd feel like a fucking fraud even more than I already did.

But when I turned my Jeep into a packed, normal size driveway, I had to take a second to look around.

Yeah, it was in a nice neighborhood, but the house was ... normal.

Big, but normal.

"Ready?" Claire asked.

"Yeah." I scratched the side of my face. "It's not what I expected."

She blinked at the brick structure. "The house?"

"I was thinking I'd be driving up to a mansion with a code and shit."

Claire grinned. "No codes, no gates, just ..." She shrugged. "Just home."

From the assortment of vehicles parked in front of us and judging by the noise that came out like a blast when a small boy opened the front door and came flying out at us, it appeared everyone had beaten us there.

“Claire!” He flung himself at her, and she caught him on a laugh. “We thought you *died*.”

“No, you didn’t.” She kissed the top of his head, covered in reddish-brownish hair, and in the curve of his smile, I saw a strong resemblance to her. “I was just snowed in, goofball.”

The boy released Claire and gave me a wide-eyed look. “They’re talking about you a lot in there.”

Claire laughed while I frowned. Great. Just what I wanted before walking inside—verification of what I was worried about. But it wasn’t this kid’s fault.

Instead of crouching, I held out my hand and shook his like he was a man. That made his skinny chest puff out. Kid couldn’t have been more than eight or nine.

“What’s your name, sir?”

“Emmett Ward.” He kept shaking my hand, like he wasn’t sure who was supposed to let go first. “I’m Claire’s nephew, but I don’t call her aunt because she doesn’t look old enough to be someone’s aunt.”

I gave Claire a head-to-toe inspection, and her cheeks blushed furiously. “You might be right about that, Emmett.”

“Ooooh, you shouldn’t look at her like that when you get in the house,” he warned.

Claire slapped a hand over her mouth.

I glanced back toward Emmett in surprise. “I shouldn’t?”

Emmett shook his head. His eyes were the exact shade of blue as Claire’s.

Before I asked, I knew it was probably stupid to do so, but I didn’t deal with kids too much. Plus, I figured he was too young to know what any kind of look I’d given her could

possibly mean. “How’d I look at her? Just so I know not to do it again.”

He sighed heavily. “Like you want to kiss her. My mom said she’d rip your ballsack off if you looked at Claire with sex eyes at the dinner table.”

Claire groaned behind her hand, and I grimaced mightily.

Emmett shrugged. “Kissing leads to sex, and sex leads to babies. So ... I wouldn’t do that in there if I were you.”

With that, he was gone, tearing back up to the house, leaving Claire and me in stunned silence. She let out a hysterical giggle.

“Well,” I said. “That was fun. Can’t *wait* to go inside.”

She dropped her hand and planted a soft kiss on my cheek. “You’ll be fine.”

It was clear she believed it as she said it. There was no fake enthusiasm, no false encouragement.

For the hundredth time since we left the cabin, I repeated my new mantra. For her, I could try.

The only time I ever tried to impress anyone was when my feet were firmly planted on the smooth surface of my snowboard, my head covered with a helmet, and goggles down over my face. That was something I knew without a second thought. I could contort my body, shift, and move with the momentum of the mountain so that I didn’t face-plant into the snow and ice.

It was never about my personality. Never about what came out of my mouth or how I treated someone. It wasn’t about what I looked like or proving my worth as a person.

The scores I received, the time I clocked going down a charted course, the tricks I completed—they were about my ability to physically perform.

This—walking through that door with Claire at my side—was about everything else. The one thing I was good at, at this moment, was completely and utterly useless.

So, while her certainty was great, it didn't feel like I'd be fine as she clutched my hand and walked us inside behind Emmett.

But I didn't want to make her second-guess bringing me, so I kept my stubborn mouth shut.

The two-story entryway was bright with athletic equipment scattered around the hardwood floor. The arched hallway adjacent to it led to a bright, big kitchen, which was filled with amazing smells and loud, feminine laughter.

It was a house that was lived in and loved well. Marks on the painted walls were plentiful, and I saw a gouge in the drywall that looked suspiciously like a bike wheel had implanted itself there. The walls were covered in snapshots of a family that had grown together over the years, and each one we passed made me just a bit more ill at ease.

The love in this place was overflowing. In every inch, dominating every sense.

All of it should have made me feel better, but it only made me feel worse. Because this wasn't the kind of home I knew. I tightened my grip on her fingers, and she squeezed them in return.

We came around the corner into the kitchen, which was one large open space that flowed into a massive, comfortably furnished family room. A large flat screen mounted on the wall was frozen on a football game. No surprise there.

Most of the family had their backs to us with how they were crowded around the large marble island where Paige and Logan were cooking.

Logan saw us first, and I took a deep, steadying breath at the look he leveled in my direction.

He was a tall guy, broad and strong, and his slightly graying temples and lines around his eyes were the only sign he was well into his forties. Instead of interrupting the story that Isabel was telling, still oblivious to our entrance, he settled a hand on his wife's back and excused himself from the kitchen.

He came around the island, and something about his gait, his commanding presence had me standing up straighter. Lia noticed and nudged Isabel. Isabel quieted, and threw a towel at Paige, who finally lifted her head.

Now the look I got from *her* made it difficult to swallow. Yeah, she was imagining every nightmare I could've conjured for this family dinner.

Logan gave his sister a tight hug, ruffling her hair as he pulled back. "You made it home safe?"

He looked her over like we'd actually been stuck outside in the snowstorm, and she rolled her eyes.

"Yeah. Roads were fine by the time we left this morning."

"I'll bet," Paige muttered.

Isabel cleared her throat, and it held a warning behind it. Finn smothered a smile, and I wanted to chuck something at his head for the fact he got to be here to witness this.

He turned to me and held out his hand, which I took. I swear, I tried not to cringe at his grip, I really did.

"Logan," he said.

"Bauer Davis," I told him. "Appreciate you having me, sir."

At that, he finally cracked a reluctant smile. "I'm not that old. Logan is fine."

Isabel had turned on her stool, peppering Claire with questions about where we'd stayed, and Lia whispered behind the counter with Paige.

Emmett tore around the house, oblivious to any undercurrents of my visit.

The rolling chatter of the family never ebbed, just stayed at a constant hum. A buzz that seemed to grow louder and louder in my ears.

"That's romantic as shit," I heard Isabel exclaim. "A tiny cabin in the woods? Can't ask for better."

Claire laughed under her breath, reaching for my hand.

Already, the small gesture felt like an anchor, holding me steady. Could she have known that I needed it?

Of course, she could have. She was perceptive enough to know that big families weren't exactly my expertise, especially when two of the people present were probably waiting for me to bolt.

Maybe because I absolutely wanted to. Bolting sounded great. Take Claire and go back to her bed. Better yet, drive her up to Whistler so we could break in my bed too.

Paige turned a burner down on the stove and wiped her hands on a towel that was slung over her shoulder.

It was impossible not to compare her to the only other matriarch I knew in Adele.

The irony was that while Paige had made her living as a supermodel, years earlier, and Adele made hers helping at-risk youth, I knew which woman I'd want in my corner. And which woman was absolutely terrifying to have pitted against you when she was looking at me in the way she was.

She reminded me of a lioness as she came around the island and headed in our direction. Ready to rip me apart with her bare teeth.

"Bauer," Paige said evenly. "How'd you do on your end of the bargain?"

I blew out a breath. "The bargain where you threatened my life if I hurt her?"

Paige tipped her wine glass at me. "That would be the one."

Logan joined us, sliding an arm around her waist. "You being nice, my sweet wife?"

To stop my nervous laughter, I rolled my lips together.

Paige beamed at him. "The nicest."

"Isabel was singing your praises before you got here," Logan said.

I laughed uncomfortably. “Was she?”

“Heard you’re a hell of a competitor.” Logan gave Paige a loaded look. The inquisition was over, at least for now. “Though, to be honest, I don’t know much about snowboarding as a sport.”

“It’s cold, and you don’t make much doing it,” I told him as honestly as I could. “But I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

He smiled. What else would he do? The man got a yearly check with a shit ton of zeros behind it. Even if I could find another sponsor, most professional snowboarders rarely cracked fifty g a year. It was why most of my friends waited tables. Why I tended bar in the off-season. Why most of us found odd jobs as we traveled around to our favorite spots to catch fresh powder.

“Being able to find something you love and you’re good at,” he said, “it doesn’t happen to most people. You’re lucky.”

His reaction was one I could add to a list of what was already so different from what I knew.

Again, I knew it should have made me feel more comfortable in their home, surrounded by all these people who loved Claire so much that they were willing (to varying degrees, obviously) to welcome me into their home. But instead, it made the skin itch under the collar of my shirt.

But never, not once, had I had a woman look at me with such expectation in her eyes. And now, she came with a family, who’d want to know what I did, how I made my living, because that affected Claire too, or might someday. My hands started tingling, and my chest felt tight.

“Excuse me,” I said to them and disentangled my hand from Claire’s so I could head to the bathroom I saw off the kitchen.

Once the door was closed, I braced my hands on the sink and stared at my reflection.

The bolts of panic tightening the muscles along my back were foreign, but the only reason I knew I wasn’t having a heart attack or something was the overwhelming urge to flee.

I wanted to be back at that cabin where it had been simple. Where my feelings came easily, and I could take ownership of them. Where it wasn't hard to put words to what she was doing to me. In that crowded, happy kitchen, I had to face the realization that I didn't know how to be in a serious relationship for shit. I didn't know how to share someone I was falling in love with, with this giant group of people who was just waiting for me to screw up.

Cranking the water on, I cupped my hands under the faucet and splashed my face a few times. When I felt like my heart rate slowed and I could breathe normally again, I walked out. Lia was in the laundry room adjacent to the bathroom, finishing a phone call.

“Yeah, thank you, I'm thrilled.” She held up a finger for me, but because she looked happy, I didn't feel like she was baiting me. “I'll call you tomorrow and let you know for sure. Thanks.”

I tucked my hands in my pants pockets and let out a slow breath.

She did the same.

Before she started talking, I could tell she was trying. Maybe she was repeating the same mantra I'd had in my head all day. That for Claire, she would try.

“I promised my sister I'd give you a chance,” Lia said. “Because she's never ...” she shook her head. “This is new, for Claire. Being in a relationship like this.”

Her candor eased an admission from my lips. “For me too.”

Lia smiled. “I know. I've heard.” When I lifted an eyebrow, she held up her hands. “Sorry. I have almost ten years of thinking about you a certain way, and your brother lectured me about that on the way here. That you and Claire have nothing to do with whatever it is between you and your parents.”

The idea that Golden Boy was defending me at all had me rocking back on my heels slightly. “Did he?”



“Yeah. Finn isn’t like his mom, you know. He doesn’t hold any of that against you. The distance between you and them.”

I nodded slowly. “Finn is a more forgiving person than I am. I guess I should be grateful for that right now.”

“Yeah, you owe me and him pretty big, if you think about it.”

“I suppose I do,” I conceded.

“Not like I can take credit for Finn getting sick.” Lia shrugged. “Though, if he’d warned me, Claire would’ve bailed in a hot second.”

I tilted my head. “You think?”

“I mean, you guys talked about why she went, right?”

“We did,” I hedged. Because we had, just ... not a lot.

“They’re too much alike, you know. That’s probably why I never worried about it.” Lia glanced into the kitchen. “She probably doesn’t even realize I knew she liked him.”

Following the line of her gaze was impossible to resist, and even though it should have been a tiny thing, to realize that she’d gone because of Finn, to spend time with Finn, it suddenly felt really, really big.

Standing on the edge of the mountain big.

If I’d felt like a lost cause before what Lia had said, it was nothing in comparison to how I felt now. If she’d dropped the proverbial anvil on my head, it would have had less of an effect.

Of course, Claire went because of Finn. Everyone, including the woman I was trying so hard for, would’ve preferred him.

The nice brother. The smart brother. The one who wouldn’t embarrass her or himself.

“But you wanted to make sure I knew,” I said in a quiet, dangerous tone.

Lia's eyes jerked back to me, wide and shocked in her face. "Umm, given the giant heart-eyed, lady boner you've turned my sister into, I assumed she told you that's why she agreed, considering you guys had nothing but time to talk for days."

I folded my arms over my chest and tried to stop looking at Finn standing next to Claire in the kitchen. He was pouring her a glass of wine, laughing in a friendly way at something she said.

Lia grabbed my arm, and I pried my gaze away from the scene in the kitchen.

"She didn't tell me."

Her eyes widened even further. "Bauer, I'm so sorry. I didn't ..." She shook her head. "This is not a big deal, I swear."

My harsh, low laughter had her tightening her grip on my arm.

"Hey, I'm serious. The reason this is not a big deal is because I knew Claire would meet someone who was a better fit for her than Finn. They're basically the same person, and she needs someone who will push her when she needs to be pushed." Her fingers tightened. "Her crush was harmless, okay? Finn has *never* looked at her like that."

My silence was starting to freak her out, but my teeth were clenched too tightly for me to try to say anything.

I chose a hell of a way to dive into the dating pool, hadn't I?

With a woman, who was already too good for me, but now I had to come to terms with the fact that I'd only gotten my shot because she'd been pining for my little brother for years. My eyes drifted back to them, a golden couple, with dark hair and big brains and kind hearts.

"Bauer," Lia snapped. "Look at me."

I did, and she immediately started shaking her head at what she saw.

“No, don’t you shut down on her because of this. I will tell her this is my fault, and she will forgive me.” Her voice got wobbly. “She’s my twin, and that’s how I knew, because sometimes we know things about each other that we don’t even want to know, but simply because we feel it, okay? But please, please don’t break her heart right now because of whatever weird dynamic you have with Finn. *Please.*”

It was the wobble in her voice that had me pausing.

My inner skeptic was roaring that Lia did this on purpose, but I didn’t think she’d be able to fake the panic stamped over her face or the emotion in her voice.

“You have five minutes to tell her before I pull her aside,” I told Lia. “Because there’s no way I can sit through a dinner, staring at them, and pretend I’m okay with what you just told me.”

“What are you two doing back here?” Claire asked. She was approaching us with a smile, but I could see the cautious curiosity.

Lia shared a panicked, begging look with me. “I’m just running my mouth, and Bauer is ...”

Claire’s face started falling, and as her blue, blue eyes studied me, I saw her shoulders tense up. “Bauer is what?”

“I told her I’d give you five minutes,” I said flatly. “I’ll wait outside. I can’t go in there right now.”

“Bauer, wait,” Claire begged, reaching out to grab my arm. I stopped because yeah, my mind was racing, and there was no way in hell I could fake anything in front of her family, not the first night I was meeting them, but if I ripped my arm out of her grasp right now ...

So I paused but closed my eyes.

“You’re freaking me out,” she whispered.

“Just ... talk to your sister for five minutes, okay?”

“No.”

My eyes popped open at her firm tone. Lia said her sister's name.

Claire's gaze never wavered from mine. "I want to talk to *you*. Lia, can you please give us some privacy?"

"Claire, it's my fault, I swear," Lia said in a rush. "Please, let me—"

Claire held up her hand. "I never ask you to leave me alone, but Lia, this is a moment when I need you to go away so I can talk to Bauer."

Lia's eyes widened, and even I was surprised at Claire's reaction. But Lia respected her twin, nodding her head slowly.

It was quiet enough in the kitchen that we'd gathered an audience.

"Shit," I whispered. "I can't do this in here."

Claire let out a long exhale. "What's going on? Talk to me."

My chin dropped to my chest. I was going to fuck this up, I could already tell. I wish I'd never come out of that bathroom. I wish I'd told her I could meet her family another time. And I wished that I knew how to do bullshit like this with a woman who already meant entirely too much to me.

So much that the thought of her wanting my brother made me pound his stupid face in, right after I clawed my heart to try to temper this ... feeling.

Staring at her, trying to figure out what I wanted to say and how and where, all I could imagine was her in that yellow dress with the red lipstick painstakingly applied. The look in her eyes when I turned around, and she saw me for the first time that she hadn't been able to mask.

It hadn't been shock that kept her so quiet on the drive. It was disappointment.

Which was why I turned and walked out the door, and I wasn't entirely sure I wanted her to follow me.



## CLAIRE

The wide expanse of Bauer's back had never looked ominous to me.

Strong.

Capable.

Sexy.

But never ominous.

As I gaped at it, at the sight of him walking away from me, out the door that led to the garage, it was the most terrifying thing I'd ever seen. Mainly because I was so confused, so completely and utterly lost, I didn't know what the hell was going on.

Noise exploded behind me when he exited the house, and I refused to give my family a backward glance because it wasn't like I could explain anything. I jogged out of the house and yelled his name when I saw him pace between the parked cars.

"What is going on?" I begged. "You were gone for three minutes, and all of a sudden, you're walking out on me?"

Bauer stopped pacing, his hands propped on his hips, as he stared up into the cloudless sky.

Maybe it was a strange thing to notice, that the canopy above us was clear and bright, but it made me wish we were back at that cabin.

There we'd had blankets of white and clouds and wind to shelter our little space. Suddenly, I wanted that sense of

security back.

“What did Lia say to you?” I asked quietly. It was taking everything in me not to march up to him and shake the answer out of him.

“I can see it.”

My head tilted at his strange answer. I felt like a fish that had been plopped unceremoniously out of its bowl. It was hard to breathe because I had no concept of how to navigate this. “See what?”

He exhaled slowly, finally turning to face me. “You and Finn.”

My stomach was now the thing giving me all the ominous feels because it turned dangerously. What the *hell* did my sister say to him?

“Me and Finn,” I repeated quietly. “Bauer ... I—”

Denial trapped in my throat. Nothing else came up. Because I couldn't lie. And he saw that on my face.

He nodded. “You'd look great together. And it's probably really fucking stupid on my end that I never even considered that you went that night because of him.”

“I don't want Finn,” I argued. Carefully, I approached him with my hands held up. Don't spook the snowboarder, Claire, because he walked out of that house and had his mind halfway made up already. “I don't know what Lia said to you, or what she thinks she knows, but if she inferred anything that makes you think I don't want to be with you, she's wrong.”

“Don't be mad at her.” Ugh, my skin recoiled at his casual tone. The way he tucked his hands in his pockets as if this was no big deal, just any other conversation we might have had, standing under a cloudless sky. “She's just speaking the truth.”

“How would I know? You haven't told me what she said.”

“Fair enough,” he conceded. Bauer braced a shoulder on the side of his Jeep and studied my face. “You would've canceled in a heartbeat if you'd known who was going to show up. No yellow dress. No red lipstick. No lying necessary.”

Because the only reason you did what you did was because you wanted a shot with the Golden Boy.”

Normally, I prided myself on being a levelheaded person.

Seeing both sides.

Understanding differing opinions.

But now, I saw red.

“And you stormed out of my family’s house because I *might* have made a different decision if I’d *maybe* known he was sick, when I’d never even *met you* before that night?” My tone gradually increased in volume, in pitch, in absolute mind-blown anger. “Is this a joke?”

His face slowly hardened into a mask. “I sure as hell don’t think it’s funny.”

“Neither do I, Bauer.” I stared him down. “I didn’t know you.”

“No, but you sure as hell knew him.” He tipped his head back and let out a dry laugh. “Everything you said in the car ... so understanding about my past. You were covering your ass.”

“I was doing no such thing,” I protested. But hadn’t I been? Just a little. Discomfort ratcheted my anger up another notch.

“I have a pretty good bullshit meter, Claire, so be careful.”

“I wasn’t protecting myself, Bauer. I was trying to get to know you, talk to you about normal relationship things. You asked if I’d ever brought a boyfriend home, and I haven’t. Just you.”

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “Because the guy you wanted was here for every damn dinner.”

“And you’re punishing me because I had a stupid, silly crush on him, one that I managed to ignore for a long time. I cannot change what I felt before I knew you.”

No surprise, but the mask didn’t move, and not one word came out of the hard line of his mouth.



I rubbed at my temples. “Bauer, come on, you are smart enough to know that it’s grossly unfair to hold that against me. I didn’t know you.”

His jaw clenched, and his brows lowered a fraction. He didn’t want me to be right, but I saw it in his eyes—the complete and utter inability to argue with me.

“Are you going to just stand there?” I snapped.

That finally cracked the mask. “What do you want me to say, Claire?” He spread his arms out. “That right now, it’s impossible for me to look at you right now, without seeing you with him. That it’s impossible to think about you wanting him—even if it was before me—without wanting to go wreck his pretty-boy face? Would that make you feel better?” he yelled.

I swallowed, tucking my arms around my waist. “No.”

“I have one member of my family who doesn’t treat me like a complete asshole, and that’s him, and now I want to break his fucking nose.”

My eyes pinched shut.

“Maybe it’s not fair. But if I walk in there and say to him, do to him what this makes me want to do, I will sever any and all relationship with my family. Not to mention what *your* family will think of me.”

“Is that a joke?” I pointed back at the house. “Have you met Paige? She’d claw anyone’s eyes out if she thought they were making a play for Logan. I’ve seen her cuss out football groupies so badly that my ears almost bled.”

Bauer slicked his tongue over his teeth. “Groupies are not the same as my brother.”

“Your brother was a harmless crush and nothing more,” I said fiercely. “He never looked twice at me. And now? I’m glad he didn’t. Because I got *you*.”

He clenched his teeth again, watched me warily as I approached. But his eyes took on a warning glint when I moved to touch him.

That was why I stopped. It was like stepping up to a bear about to charge.

We were standing closely enough that I could've lifted one hand and it would land on his chest. I'd be able to know if his heart was pounding and thrashing the way mine was.

A thought came into my head quickly, that maybe this was all Bauer and I were destined to be. Something bright and hot and fast. Nothing that could sustain because of the way we started.

It was too intense, and we burned out whatever heat had lit between us, simply by the nature of how our relationship had begun.

Locked in a pressure cooker.

It was a quick way to get started, but as soon as that lid was opened, everything dissipated into smoke.

"You'll never allow yourself to overlook this, will you?" I said quietly. As soon as I said it, my mad drained immediately to sad.

Bauer dropped his chin and breathed deeply. "Could you?"

"I don't hold your past against you. Because it's irrational and unfair, and you know it."

"That's not what I mean." He lifted his head, held my gaze, and the resolve I saw there chilled me to my core. "Could you overlook it if I told you that I showed up that night to take a shot with Lia?"

Words were gone. My mouth was sand-dry at what that did to me.

He kept talking, quiet, dangerous words that did horrible things to my heart. "If I told you that I thought about being with her, touching her, kissing her, and for even one moment, I was disappointed that I got you instead."

I sucked in a startled breath.

"Yeah," he said slowly, softly. "You couldn't overlook it either. Because that look in your pretty blue eyes, princess. It

feels like I just punched you in the gut, doesn't it?"

My eyes filled with tears, and I hated them. I hated that he was right. And for just a moment, one fleeting, fast one, I hated my sister for whatever she'd said, I hated Finn for being inside the house, and I hated myself for not saying something when I'd had the chance.

Because Bauer was right. The thought that he might have had feelings for Lia, oh, it hurt. Even the idea of it made my bones freeze over, crack dangerously when I tried to breathe too deeply, like I might shatter from the inside out.

Point proven with stunning accuracy, Bauer exhaled slowly. "It's good, though, you know?"

"What is?" I whispered. My throat hurt from holding in tears.

"That she said something." He looked behind me at the house. "I don't fit here any more than I fit in my own home. This isn't my scene, and I don't know why I thought it would be."

The pain I felt was staggering, and it threatened to buckle my knees, if I'd let it.

"Don't do this," I whispered. "I see exactly what you're trying to do, and I don't believe you."

"It's the truth whether you want to believe it or not." Bauer could hardly look me in the eye now. "We had a great weekend, princess, and it's probably best that that's where we leave it."

My eyes dried, and my heart curled in on itself while a roaring, angry beast took over my head. "You are the biggest coward I've ever met."

Oh, he didn't like that. But if Bauer got to fling little darts at me, let them find purchase in my skin over and over, but I would not be the only one bleeding by the time we were done with this awful, insane conversation.

"Feel better calling me names?"

“I’ve met children with more emotional maturity than you, Bauer Davis,” I told him.

He started nodding, pulling his keys out of his front pocket. “Good, get pissed at me, princess. It’ll make it easier for me to leave.”

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped. “I’m not a princess. I’m not some untouchable, pristine thing up in a tower, and I will get *pissed* because I see an intelligent man who means a lot to me throwing away the possibility for something amazing because he’s too chicken shit to work past his problems.” I marched the final steps between us and grabbed his face with my hands. His jaw was granite hard beneath my fingers, that was how tightly he was clenching his teeth. “I’m not trying to make it easy for you to leave, Bauer, because I know that’s not what you really want to do. You felt exactly what I did this weekend, and you are running scared at the first available chance.”

His eyes were zeroed in on mine, and for a moment, I thought he’d relent. He curled his hands around my wrists and carefully tugged until I had no choice but to release his face.

My hands fell when he let go, and quite strangely, I felt nothing the moment they did.

No anger.

No fear.

No pain.

Inside me was a strange quiet, a sudden stillness that could only be self-protective clarity.

“I was a fool to trust you with any piece of me,” I told him. “Wasn’t I?”

He conceded that with a slow nod, and my hand itched to slap that placid mask off his face.

“Finn’s the trustworthy brother, princess.” He smiled, and it looked cruel and cold, and I hated it. “I’m the one you come to for a good time, and I think you got that in spades.”

The ice in my bones hardened to steel, and I lifted my chin as I took a step back from him. “You should be gone by the time I walk inside that house because the second I do, I can’t be held accountable for what happens to you.”

He laughed under his breath, twirling his keys around one finger. “Not a problem, Miss Ward. Your wish is my command.”

This time, it was me showing him my back, and I hoped to hell that he didn’t see the tear that slid down my face when I did. The slam of his car door sounded like a gunshot, and I kept my pace even as I walked into the dark garage. My heart uncurled painfully as I opened the door, and I found myself wrapped into my big brother’s waiting arms.

I never heard the Jeep leave because I couldn’t hear a thing over the breaking of my heart.



## CLAIRE

“**Y**ou can’t ignore me forever.”

My nose stayed glued in my textbook, and I ran a highlighter under a sentence I wanted to remember.

Lia plopped on my bed even though I hadn’t invited her into my bedroom. Forty-eight hours after we’d driven home from Logan and Paige’s—me in stony silence, Lia begging me to talk to her, Finn glancing uncomfortably at me in the rearview mirror—I was proving to my sister that I could, in fact, ignore her forever.

I’d never gone this long without a word to her.

But I was pissed.

At her.

At Bauer.

At myself.

And unfortunately for Lia, as my roommate, she became the most convenient scapegoat for that anger.

“Claire, come on,” she begged. “I don’t know how else to apologize, okay? I’m sorry. You know I run my mouth sometimes, and I shouldn’t have said anything to him, but I swear, I thought he knew. I thought ... I thought you knew that I knew.”

My highlighter froze on the page, and I had to clench my teeth tightly to keep from screaming at her that there was no

conceivable way I could have known that when we'd never freaking talked about it.

Lia, like a rabid dog, saw the pause in my motion and pounced on it. "He said you talked about it, okay? About why you went. And I just ... I was trying to make conversation because seriously, I was trying to be nice to him."

*By telling him I had a crush on his brother!* I wanted to scream. My eyes pinched shut.

This was killing me.

Because no matter how pissed I was, I could feel it seeping through my skin, how miserable Lia was.

She was sad.

She was frustrated.

She was scared.

Between the two of us, I was always the one who caved first. Who tried to keep the peace. Who let things slide.

And I didn't want to let this slide because I was miserable too.

I missed Bauer.

I wanted to punch Bauer in the balls for acting like he had.

Yet I understood. He was a man with zero relationship experience, and not just that, but he wasn't raised in a way where he saw a healthy one modeled for him. Lia and I were young enough when we moved in with Logan, and by extension, Paige, that we knew how it was supposed to look.

We were raised in a home where we saw—day in and day out—love and respect, communication, and structure in the way that kids needed it. Logan was the foundation, the strong timbers that kept the house standing in place. And Paige, she was the walls, the roof, the windows. The thing that completed our family and made it safe.

"I messed up, C," Lia whispered. I'd heard her say it a thousand times in the last day. "And I'm sorry. I love you."



My nose burned, and my hand started shaking. But I pushed the highlighter forward until I felt her stand.

The stubbornness I was feeling was so deep-rooted, I wasn't even sure where it came from. To be honest, I wasn't even entirely sure what I wanted from Lia.

For her to rewind time, maybe?

From the corner of my eye, I saw her pause before she left my room.

"I-I didn't know how important he was to you. It took me by surprise. And," Lia sniffed noisily, "this is killing me, C. You can't shut me out completely. Yell at me, throw something at me, slap me, something! I deserve it."

All of a sudden, she was on her knees in front of me, and I had no choice but to look at her. Her face was wet. So was mine.

"I know how much this is killing you too," she whispered in a thick voice. "You're my best friend, and I can feel how awful it all is for you, and don't you think that's punishment enough for me? I know how much your heart is breaking because I can feel it."

"I ..." I paused. "I'm still so hurt, Lia. Because it feels like you said something on purpose to mess it up for me."

Her face collapsed. "I swear I didn't."

"I know you keep saying that," I cried. I shoved my book aside. "But this is the first time I've had something that was just mine, and yes, I should've told him, and I would've eventually, but it was mine to tell him. Not yours."

"I know." She sniffed. "I'm so sorry."

I stood from the bed and paced my room. "And it's embarrassing, okay? I can't believe you knew I had a crush on Finn that whole time and you never said anything. Why didn't you tell me you knew?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Because ... I don't know! I know the two of you so well, C. You're ... you're the same

person. I love Finn, I do, and I love you more than anything in the entire world ...”

“But?” I crossed my arms tightly over my chest and waited her out. She didn’t want to say whatever she’d been about to say.

Lia shifted from the floor onto my bed. She licked her lips, and I noticed for the first time that she had matching dark circles under her eyes. Looked like neither of us had slept the night before.

“But you would’ve been the most boring couple ever.”

My mouth fell open. “That’s so freaking rude,” I whispered.

“No, I mean ...” She rubbed her forehead. “Okay, I just mean there wouldn’t have been any spark. No fire. You probably would have been perfectly happy, and sweet and blah blah blah, but Finn is the boy version of you.” Her eyes pleaded with me. “Why do you think I get along with him so well? He’s just like you.”

Slowly, I sank into the chair in front of my desk and processed what she was saying. And Lia wasn’t wrong. Finn and I had so much in common. It was weird, though, now, to try to think about him in a romantic sense.

Not just because of what Lia said, but because of what I’d experienced with Bauer—oh hell, would my heart ever not hurt thinking his name?—which was in an entirely different universe.

He was my opposite. Finn’s too.

And as pissed as I still was that he’d stormed out the way he did, I couldn’t help but look at my sister and try to put myself in Bauer’s shoes. Like he said, the thought of him wanting anything with Lia that night, hoping he might cross some invisible boundary, it hurt. Oh, how it hurt.

“I shouldn’t have ignored you,” I whispered. “I’m sorry too.”

She sagged in relief. “No, it’s okay that you were upset. You had every right to be.”

“Maybe I was channeling my inner Lia.” I smiled. “I don’t know where that stubborn streak came from.”

My sister swiped at her face and laughed. “I know, right?”

I let out a sigh that came from so far down in my soul that Lia laughed again.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with all these,” I motioned to my chest, “feelings.”

Lia braced her arms on her thighs and leaned toward me. “Okay, talk to me. Tell me everything. I mean, maybe not like, sex details. But ... what happened while you were gone?”

Then she patted the bed.

My entire being settled back into place as Lia and I braced our backs against the wall. She curled her hand around mine with our legs stretched out straight onto my bed, and I unloaded for the next hour.

After a bit, she leaned her head on my shoulder, and I set my head on hers, and we fell quiet before I got to the scene in the driveway. I didn’t even attempt to wipe the tears coming down my face during that part.

“I’m so mad at him for leaving,” I said, voice hoarse from talking. “But I get it. I don’t want to, but I do.”

“I don’t.”

I nudged her. “I don’t need you to vilify him. Paige did enough of that.”

Lia laughed under her breath. After the driveway showdown, family dinner was a shitshow. I cried in my old bedroom while Isabel and Paige and Lia yelled over each other about what happened. Logan kept knocking on the door, trying to talk to me, and Emmett happily sat at the table with a strangely quiet Finn.

“I’m not trying to vilify, per se.” She nudged back. “I mean, sure, it couldn’t be easy to hear that about Finn, but

literally, nothing ever happened between you two. Not even a single loaded glance. I think if he'd given his hothead temper five seconds to calm down, he would've thought that through and seen that you were still the badass that rocked his freaking world off its axis up in that cabin, and he'd eventually get over it."

"Here too," I heard myself say.

"What here too?"

I glanced down at my bed with a sheepish grin.

"Oh my gosh," Lia groaned. "Seriously? Don't tell me stuff like that. It's Bauer. I'm still coming around to this whole thing."

That made my heart do the weird achy thing again. I missed him. It had been two days, and I missed him.

"Nothing to come around to." I sighed. "He made it clear I wasn't worth the trouble of dealing with that kind of emotional baggage to him."

"Claire, be serious, you know that man was crazy about you, right? Like ... stupid, head over heels in love with you."

"If he was," I said carefully, "he has a strange way of showing it."

"Bauer has the emotional IQ of a six-year-old, C. You know that."

"No, most six-year-olds could communicate better than he did in that driveway. He has the emotional IQ of a stunted twenty-six-year-old who has no freaking clue how to be in a relationship. Combine that with his stupid face and stupid muscles and stupid job, and that makes him the most dangerous creature alive." I banged my head against the wall. "And stupid me, I thought ..."

"What?"

*Bang.*

"I thought he'd be willing to figure it out for me. Because of what we had together." I laughed. "And look where that got

me. Brokenhearted, being irrationally stubborn to my twin sister who really didn't do anything wrong, and missing him like he sawed off a part of my body and took it with him."

"Graphic but okay, I'm tracking." She glanced at me. "Why are you being so hard on yourself about this?"

*Bang.*

"I'm the one who's supposed to be studying human behavior, right? Cause and effect. Knowing how childhood trauma can play out into adulthood. It's like I saw Bauer and every single *I can fix him* impulse was screaming at me. Except the multiple orgasms just made me dumber."

*Bang.*

"Number one," Lia said. "Stop banging your head against the wall. Concussions help no one. And number two, Adele did a number on him. So freaking what? Brooke did a number on us, and you know why we're not emotionally stunted?"

I turned my head to look at her. "Why?"

"Someone who never gave up on us. A group of someones. We had each other, and we had Logan. Then we had Paige." She groaned. "And I can't believe I'm going to say this, but Bauer has never had anyone refuse to give up on him."

A faded picture on a wall of a cabin came into my head. "He's had one person. But I get what you're saying."

Lia's fingers tightened around mine. "If this man is as important to you as I think he is, then show him what it feels like. Refuse to give up on him if he feels what I think he does. He never would've gotten so upset if you hadn't dug your cute little claws into his emotionally stunted heart."

I sighed. "So just ... ignore the bullshit he spouted and tell him I'm not going anywhere? That sounds healthy."

"Noooo way. If he knows what's good for him, there will be copious groveling. But you don't have to decide anything right now, okay?"

Curling into my sister, I let her hug me. It felt like I could sleep for a week after that one conversation. "Okay."

“I know what will cheer you up,” she said.

“Alcohol and a week at the beach?”

“No.” She laughed. “I think you should go somewhere with me this weekend.”

I sat up with a sigh. “Where?”

Lia was quiet for a second. “Adele and Tom are doing a big celebration party at the center on Saturday night, and I think ... I think you should come and see.”

The face that came to mind now was the one I’d lied to, and I found myself grimacing. “Richard Harper will have quite the surprise seeing the two of us.”

“And you will explain it to him, and he’ll be fine. Finn told me he’s been amazing with how involved he wants to be at the center.”

I nodded. “I’d feel better if I could apologize to him.”

“Not that you really have anything to apologize for,” Lia pointed out.

Unwilling to hash that out, I let her think whatever she wanted. “What would I have to wear? Because if it requires another fancy dress, I’m out.”

“Cute casual will be fine. It’s a community center, not a ballroom.”

“Will Bauer be there?” I asked carefully. “It’s not that I’d ... I don’t know, avoid going if he was, but I don’t know if that’s the place I want to see him for the first time.”

Lia gave me a squeeze, and my heart gave a weird hiccup thinking about Bauer doing the same thing. “I’ll check with Finn, but I’ve never, ever known him to show up at an event there. Ever.”

“Okay.” I yawned. “What would I do without you, Lee?”

She was quiet, and I looked at her face.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. What?” she said too quickly.

“Lia,” I warned. “You paused. Why did you pause?”

She scrunched up her face. “Did I?”

I sat forward. “Oh my gosh, what is it? Are you moving out? Are you leaving? Are you *sick*?”

“Slow your roll, crazy,” she said on a laugh. “I’m not sick, good grief.”

My heart settled back into a normal rhythm. “Well, it’s something.”

“I didn’t want to say anything with all the feelings.” She gestured to me. “But I might be going to London.”

“What?” I shrieked excitedly. We’d done a bit of traveling over the years, but we’d never been to England, and for someone like Lia, it was her dream to visit. “When? With who? For how long?”

Lia laughed. “Margaret Atwood sort of ... invited me to study there ...” She paused, gauging my face. “For a semester.”

My face fell. A semester away from Lia. We’d never been apart for that long. “Lia,” I whispered. “That’s incredible.”

Her eyes filled, and so did mine. “It’s a long time, I know.”

The other half of me across the ocean for months. It sounded like an eternity. But oh, the elation I could feel coming from her made me so happy.

She let out a watery laugh. “I haven’t said yes yet. I wanted to make sure you’d ... be okay.”

I grabbed her hands. “If you don’t say yes, I will really never forgive you.”

Lia wrapped me up in a tight hug. “Nothing we need to worry about right now. Let’s get some of that alcohol that will make you feel better, okay?”





## BAUER

“Well, that was stupid.”

I rolled my eyes at Scotty’s tone, wincing as I poured hydrogen peroxide down the road burn on my calf. It hissed and bubbled, and Scotty leaned in to look at the damage.

“It wasn’t stupid,” I told him. “I’ve biked that trail a thousand times.”

His gray eyebrows, bushy and out of control, rose incrementally on his wrinkled forehead. “A few days after a monster snowstorm just melted down, and they’re covered in mud?”

I straightened my leg, satisfied when the muscles stretched without further pain.

“You’re lucky you didn’t break a bone, you moron.”

“Who invited you here again?” I muttered.

Scotty walked out of my tiny kitchen, waving his hand at me like I was a lost cause, only stopping when he saw the empty bottle of Jack Daniel’s sitting on the floor next to the trash can. He shook his head but didn’t say anything.

Which was good, because for four days, I’d been one hair shy of snapping at anyone who came too close.

I felt like Agnes.

“Thanks for checking on my cat while I was gone,” he said as he sank into the leather chair next to the loveseat. He

always took my chair. I really needed to stop inviting him over.

“Oh, it was my pleasure.” My tone was caustic, and I couldn’t stop it. For four days, long and endless and horrible, I’d done my very best to ignore everything that had preceded it.

Eventually, I’d be able to get the thought of her out of my head.

Eventually, I’d be able to drink enough that I wouldn’t dream of her.

Eventually, I’d work myself hard enough that all the blood in my veins would be focused on keeping my heart working instead of screaming at me that I was the biggest fucking idiot in the entire world for how I’d acted.

But it wasn’t happening yet.

When I ignored Finn’s calls all week, I hadn’t felt the slightest shred of guilt.

When Scotty’s went unanswered too, he showed up at my doorstep, and now guilt was all I felt.

“You’re a peach today,” Scotty said. From the end table next to him, he picked up a dirty plate and grimaced at what was left on the surface. “What happened while I was gone?”

I slammed the kitchen cupboard closed once the peroxide was back on the shelf. “Nope. Not talking about it.”

He hooted. “Oh man, whoever she was, she did a number on you, didn’t she?”

Coming around the corner, I pointed a finger at him. “Old man, did I just say I didn’t want to talk about it?”

“Tough shit, kid.” He held up his hands. “I don’t see anyone else lining up to help you with your problems.”

“I don’t have any problems, except that I left half my leg on the road.”

Whistling under his breath, Scotty folded his arms and gave me that stare that I hated so much. It was a stare he

reserved for moments when he thought I was being unnecessarily stubborn, when I wouldn't work on a trick that he thought I was ready for. When I wouldn't push myself as hard as he knew I could be pushed. Normally, it took a while, but I'd begrudgingly admit he was right. Do the trick for the thousandth time until my body knew every tuck and hold, and my muscles burned from the exhaustion. Do a course one more time even though my knees and back burned in protest.

But this time, I met his stare with my own. I knew this man as well as I knew anyone, and when I saw the disappointment in his eyes, I was the first to look away.

The screen on my phone lit up on the battered coffee table that held all my back issues of *Sports Illustrated*, and Scotty leaned forward to squint at the screen.

"Golden Boy," he read. His eyes lifted to mine. "Says four missed calls."

I leaned my head back against the couch and closed my eyes. "Yeah, he's been a real pain in my ass this week. Not the only one, I might add."

"Oh geez, people are worried about you. How rough you have it."

Opening my eyes, I pointed at the phone. "He's not worried about me. He is trying to cover his ass because if it weren't for him, I'd actually be ..." I stopped myself before I blurted it out. If it weren't for him, I'd actually be happy right now.

I'd be with *her*.

I could've spent the past four days with Claire, getting to know her, talking to her on the phone, seeing what she looked like in my bed. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I willed my mind to stop cycling around those thoughts because it didn't matter. It was one weekend of my life, and that was it.

I'd get over it.

I'd get over her.

My phone lit up again, and I sighed. “I don’t know what he could possibly want to say to me.”

The recliner squeaked as Scotty leaned forward. “I’m curious too. Hello?”

“What are you doing?” I yelled. “Give me that phone.”

When I tried to swipe for it, he flipped me off. “Finn? Yeah, this is Scotty. I train the grumpy asshole.”

Even though my leg screamed in protest, I stood from the couch and towered over Scott, holding out my hand and giving him my most forbidding glare.

He ignored me. “Hmm. Sure, yeah. Makes sense.”

“Give me the phone, Scott.”

“Great idea, Finn. Yeah. I like it.”

When he handed me the phone, I exhaled heavily. Then I saw the call was already disconnected.

I blinked. “He hung up?”

“Guess so.”

My eyebrows lifted slowly. “What did he say?”

Scotty leaned back in the recliner and let his hands rest on his stomach. “Gosh, I can hardly remember since I’m so old.”

Muttering curses under my breath, I hobbled back into the kitchen and yanked open the fridge. It was the off-season, so if I wanted to have a beer with my lunch, even Scotty wouldn’t stop me.

“Tell me about her.”

I pinched my eyes shut as the first swallow of beer went down like a brick.

The way she laughed slid like fog through my unwilling brain.

The way she smiled.

How she felt under my hands and lips.

What she did to my heart, that horrible waste of an organ that refused to stop thinking about her just yet.

“I can’t,” I managed.

Scotty got out of the chair with a groan, and I braced myself for the interrogation to continue.

But it didn’t. He walked past the kitchen to the apartment door.

“Are you leaving?” I asked.

“Nope.”

Shaking my head, I took another swig of beer. “You and that crazy-ass cat deserve each other.”

He opened the door, and I almost spit out my beer when Golden Boy walked in.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I roared.

The two assholes in my apartment completely ignored me, shaking hands and introducing themselves like they weren’t completely intruding on my privacy. Finn had never come here. Not once.

“Nice place,” he said, looking around the small condo I’d lived in for two years. It wasn’t big, but I had a bed and a kitchen, and view of the mountains out my window. The village of Whistler was like any mountain resort town, big condo and apartment buildings that housed people like me, who chased the snow, and would give up square footage for proximity to what I loved most.

Neither of them flinched when I slammed the beer bottle down on the counter. “You need to go.”

“Not until I talk to you.” My brother lifted his chin, and I felt a begrudging pang of admiration that he was willing to drive up here and face me.

And I hated, hated that I heard Claire’s voice in my head, urging me to give him a chance. Hear what he had to say. Finn had no choice in who our parents were either. And if I ignored the fact that I still wanted to plant my fist in his face for

having years with Claire right in front of him for years, I had to admit that Finn had never treated me with the reserve that his mother did.

I spread my arms out. “Then say it. Let’s get this over with.”

Finn sighed. “Can we sit?”

“Yes,” Scotty agreed. “Let’s sit.”

“You think you get to be a part of this conversation?” I asked him incredulously.

“Hell yeah, I do.” He patted Finn on the back and led him toward the family room. “You owe me, kid. If it weren’t for Agnes, you never would’ve gotten stuck with her in the first place.”

The string of expletives that I hurled at him made his booming laughter fill every corner of the room.

“What’d you do to your leg?” Finn asked when I yanked a stool from the kitchen counter and sat on it.

“Mountain biking,” I told him. “What do you want?”

He exhaled a laugh. “Geez. You’re in as bad a mood as Claire is this week.”

The sound of her name on his lips lit my skin with suppressed rage, feelings that I’d tried to smother all damn week about her. “If you want to escape this impromptu visit without a black eye, how about you not tell me things like that.”

Finn cocked his head. “I only know what Lia told me,” he explained. “I haven’t seen her.”

My shoulders relaxed, and I glared at Scotty when he badly smothered a pleased smile at my reaction.

Knowing my brother hadn’t seen her soothed that immediate caveman reaction that I’d never experienced before her. And wasn’t that insane? I was the one who walked away from her. I was the one who said things that I still hadn’t

forgiven myself for. And one single mention of how she was doing had every proprietary instinct roaring to life inside me.

They were both eyeing me.

“I just want her out of my head, okay?”

Finn raised an eyebrow. Scotty covered his mouth with his hand.

“What? I do. If dicks like you would stop constantly reminding me about ... Claire,” my voice stumbled over her name, “then I’d be able to forget her.”

So why did my whole body seize up with panic at the very idea of that?

Finn took a deep breath. “Bauer, I’ve been a crappy brother in a lot of ways, okay? And you haven’t been much better,” he pointed out carefully. “But I wanted you to hear from me, that even if Claire had some ... crush on me for a while, I didn’t notice and I’ve never, ever looked at her that way.”

Breath was sawing violently in and out of my chest, but I kept all my boiling thoughts inside.

Apparently, he deemed it safe to keep talking because he nodded slowly. “She’s Lia’s twin. And Lia is ... my best friend. It’s like, trying to imagine me and Lia together and it just ...” His voice trailed off. “It doesn’t make sense in my head.”

“You get why it makes me crazy, though, right?” I asked.

“For about a day, sure.” He shrugged. “But I think what you’re doing now? This has nothing to do with me, or whatever she felt before she met you.”

I hooted with laughter. “Nothing to do with you? Pray tell, enlighten me, Future Dr. Davis.”

“I’m no shrink, but Claire is the first woman to make you want something more. And you’d have to put every part of you on the line in order to make something real with her. It’s scary, and you’ve never done it, and you grabbed the most

convenient excuse to make life easier on yourself. That excuse is bullshit, but you'll hold on to it like it's a life raft."

Well.

I glared mightily at him because clearly someone had used their time driving up here to prepare exactly how to knee me in the proverbial balls.

Scotty murmured like he was hearing a good sermon.

He got a glare too.

Finn leaned forward. "What if she had been the one to show at your door?"

The second he said it, my heart reacted without a single thought on my end. Racing, pounding, thumping erratically at the mere mention of her on the other side of that door.

I wanted it so badly.

Wanted her.

"What if you had the chance, right now, to redo that day you guys came back?" Finn continued.

"You can't erase the past," I interrupted. I stood from the stool and paced the room. "No matter how I'd feel if she showed up, or if I could back up time, I can't take back what happened. What she said. What I said. It's done."

"But it doesn't have to be over," he said. "You're such a stubborn jackass, Bauer. She's crazy about you, and look at you! You're a mess because you reacted badly and had a shitty argument. So what? People argue, and they say stupid things, and sometimes we have to be able to forgive them for those things because we know it's more important to move forward."

My hands speared helplessly into my hair, and I shook my head. The feelings taking over my body were almost more than I could handle because they were loud and overwhelming and terrifying.

Not once, as my board balanced on the icy edge before a race, had I felt like this. No matter what I was going to attempt



or how big the stakes were. No competition or award had ever come close to what I felt like was at stake when I thought about the possibility of fixing things with Claire.

“I don’t know ... I don’t know how to make this better,” I admitted quietly. Finally, I looked him full in the face. “What I said to her—”

“Oh, I heard, trust me,” he answered with a wry smile.

“You heard?”

He held up his hands. “I was not the one to crack the window, but yes, I heard.”

“Shit,” I groaned. Just what I wanted to hear.

“You’ll have work to do.”

“That family will toss me out on my ass with two broken legs if I tried to show up again.”

“No, they wouldn’t.” He sounded so sure.

With a lift of my eyebrow, I tried to wait the truth out of him.

He held up his hands. “They won’t. Because if you mean to Claire what I think you do, they’ll get over it. It won’t take them long, and all you have to do is just ... prove that you mean what you say.”

“That’s all?” I asked dryly.

“Yeah. Once you do that, they’ll be in your corner as much as they’re in hers.”

It was almost too much to bear, the kindling of hope that sprang up. I wanted to squash it with two hands and grind it out with my boot because I’d tried so hard to ignore how horrible I’d felt all week, how much I missed her, and the sad truth that I was so relationship-slow at the age of twenty-six that I’d screwed up my first real shot at happiness. The kind of happiness that made a hopeless wretch like me think about forever.

But maybe, just maybe, I hadn’t screwed it up beyond repair.

Finn watched me carefully, as did Scotty.

I shrugged. “So I, what? Show up and apologize and hope she doesn’t slam the door in my face?”

Finn exhaled slowly. “I have a better idea, if you’re willing to come somewhere with me.”

“Where?”

“You won’t want to go at first.”

I eyed him because I could only think of a few places I’d refuse to go with my little brother who was weirdly, inexplicably, trying to help me with this.

“But she’ll be there?” I asked.

Finn nodded. “She will.”

I held Finn’s gaze. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”



## CLAIRE

“I knew it,” I whispered to Lia. “I told you I’d be the only one wearing a dress.”

People milled around the center, and all those jerks wearing jeans and leggings and cute T-shirts were like one giant taunt when I thought about the fact that I’d shaved my legs for this.

Lia rolled her eyes. “It’s a sundress, calm down.”

Tugging at the hem, I gave her a mild look. “Says the girl wearing jeans.”

She ignored me, and I conceded the fact that she’d gotten me here, and the fact that I was showered and shaved and wearing something that made me feel pretty was still a freaking miracle.

Yes, the week got better when I started speaking to Lia again, but there was no lying to my heart that things were fixed.

All week, I’d turned my head around and around and around what to do about Bauer.

Bauer, who was haunting my dreams now.

Who hadn’t texted or called.

And who was still the first person I thought about when I woke up. The last person I thought about before I went to sleep.

Lia caught me watching snowboarding competition replays on YouTube the night before, and instead of chastising me, she plopped onto the couch, slung an arm around my shoulders, and watched quietly alongside me.

And if there were bags under my eyes to match the blue of my dress, it was because the videos I'd watched triggered some serious sex dreams where Bauer was flipping me around in the snow like we were recreating a Cirque du Soleil on ice or something.

I took a deep breath to get those memories out of my head because hello, it was never appropriate to reminisce about one's sex dreams at a party at a community center that helped little kids.

When Lia saw Finn and touched my elbow to let me know she was going off to talk to him, I took a second to study the space.

It was wonderful. Big and bright and airy with colorful murals decorating the walls and spaces for kids to sit and play and create and learn. The framed photos hung on the walls were easier to focus on than the faces of the strangers milling around the room, so I took my time walking along the perimeter, grinning at some of the gap-toothed smiles captured on film.

Whatever Finn's parents' faults were, and they had them, they'd done good work here. And maybe they were one of those couples who were so focused on helping other people's kids that they couldn't even recognize where they'd gone wrong within the four walls of their own home.

I stopped to study a picture when I felt someone approach. My heart sped up before I heard the voice, which didn't belong to Bauer.

"It seems we need to reintroduce ourselves to each other," Richard Harper said softly.

I turned, giving him a sheepish smile. "Did Adele tell you?"

Hands in his pockets, he smiled back. “She did. Just before I handed the check over.”

“Richard,” I said, “I can’t tell you how much it killed me to lie about who I was.”

He glanced at the photo behind me. “Lie is a harsh word, Claire. And I’m not upset at you because it sounds like you were put into a strange position, based on the decisions of a lot of other people. Your sister, Adele, and Bauer,” he said, watching my face carefully.

There was no controlling my expression when he said Bauer’s name, so I looked down. “That’s true. But I was a guest in your home, and I wasn’t raised to deceive people, so I hope you can forgive me.”

“Already forgiven.” He rocked on his heels. “Adele and Tom might’ve been a little ... overzealous in their approach, thinking I needed someone to impress me in order to listen to what they had to say, but even if they went about it in the wrong way, they’re doing a lot of good here. And you, young lady, will do a lot of good someday too. I hope you realize that.”

“I hope so.” I smiled.

“I told Adele she should hire you, actually.”

“You did?”

He nodded. “Your passion for kids, your background, you’d be a perfect ally for children who could desperately use one.”

As I looked around the space, it was easy to see myself there. Except for the tie to Bauer. Because the truth was, I still didn’t know exactly how to approach that. And working for his parents might be a strange connection if he refused to ever see me again.

Because no matter what Lia said, I could show up on his doorstep, and he still might’ve decided that we were completely done.

One weekend of fun because he genuinely believed that was all he was capable of. And I didn't know if my heart could handle hearing that from him again.

"Is Bauer here?" Richard asked.

Somehow, I kept my smile in place. "I'm not sure."

His eyes searched my face until he nodded. "Ahh."

"Another deception, I'm afraid."

Richard hummed. "Oh, I'm not sure I believe that. Bauer Davis strikes me as the type of man who wouldn't be able to pretend anything."

I sighed. "Maybe he wasn't. But ... either way, it wasn't real yet. When we were there."

"But it became real?" he asked gently.

I nodded. "It did. And now"—I shrugged—"it's hard to think about him." I laughed under my breath. "I'm sorry, I'm sure you don't want to hear about my relationship drama."

He waved it off. "I liked you two. And if you remember, we started this whole thing because you told me what was on your mind."

"True," I conceded.

"I think Bauer has had a hard time of things," Richard said. "He reminds me a lot of myself when I was younger. Maybe that's why I like him so much."

"Stubborn as all hell?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yup. Anyone who's reached success has to be stubborn. Tenacious. Refuse to back down. And I like that fire in him. But it makes it hard to let anyone in when you look at every part of your life that way."

The truth of it made me sigh heavily. "I have my work cut out for me, don't I?"

Richard gave me a kind smile. "I know I said it the first time I met you, Claire Ward, but I'll say it again. I wish I'd had someone like you on my side when I was younger." He

patted my arm. “I laid down all my chips in order to grow my fortune. And I’ve been successful in that, but that money doesn’t keep you warm at night, and there are many days when I’m forced to admit that for a long time, I believed the lie that I was better off by myself.”

“But how can someone else force you to confront that truth?” I asked. “It’s easy for you to say that, but I can’t make Bauer open himself to me.”

Now, his smile was rueful. “Not from here, you can’t.”

I slid my hands into my hair and shook my head. “Everyone makes it sound so simple.”

“Love is always a risk, Claire. Always. Every day, even when you’re together, because the day you stop choosing your partner is the day you risk losing them. That’s the truth in love and relationships and business and life. It translates across every line. We make choices in what matters to us, but not everyone is brave enough to take that step without knowing we have someone ready to take it with us.”

“Richard,” I said slowly, “I think you are the most relationship smart single man I’ve ever met.” He laughed, but I saw the blush cover his cheeks. Impulsively, I went up on tiptoe to give him a soft kiss on the cheek. “Thank you. I needed to hear that.”

“You’re welcome, Claire.” He tucked his hands back into his pockets. “Now what?”

I exhaled slowly. “Well, now I think I need to steal my sister’s car and drive up to Whistler.”

Richard looked over my shoulder and grinned. “Or maybe you should hold off on grand theft auto for now.”

When I turned around slowly, it didn’t take me long to see him.

Bauer hadn’t seen me yet, and my heart clenched painfully when I saw him reach up and tug nervously on the tie he was wearing. He hated dressing up and coming to this place would be hard for him, but I knew, seeing him framed in the entrance, that he was here for me.



My smile was endless, and my heart soared even further than that to a place I wasn't even sure had a name. That was how far it was beyond any definition I could think of.

The only thing that could've tugged my attention away from Bauer was my sister hustling to my side with a devious grin on her face.

"You little sneak," I murmured.

"Guess who's happy about wearing a dress now?"

"You did this?"

Lia shrugged. "I kinda owed you. Finn helped."

I gave her a quick squeeze. "Thank you."

"Go get him, C." Her eyes were bright with tears, and I felt her happiness for me like a sweet wave.

No one paid me much attention as I crossed the room toward Bauer, who still hadn't quite walked inside. Because he wanted to know I was there, waiting.

His gaze scanned the room, then came to rest on me.

Bauer's chest expanded on a deep breath, and his eyes warmed in his handsome face. His dark hair was slicked back neatly, and he'd shaved. The white shirt covering his chest was starched and neat, the tie a color of blue that matched my eyes.

I loved him.

And I knew without a single word exchanged that he loved me too. He never would've shown up if he didn't.

Bauer strode into the room, and I finally noticed that clutched in his other hand was a basket with a long handle.

"Hi," I said quietly when he stopped in front of me.

But for a moment, he was quiet, just drinking me in. His hand came up slowly, and he slid his thumb along my cheekbone.

"I'm the biggest idiot in the entire world."

My laughter was loud, and Bauer smiled as I nuzzled my face into his palm. "No, you're not," I argued. "You were

surprised and out of your element, and you should have heard it from me.”

“Don’t let me off the hook, princess.” He dropped his hand, but his eyes were still fixed on my lips. “I’m so sorry for what I said to you, and I plan on apologizing to Logan and Paige for walking out of their house. I have no excuse.”

“Okay.”

He smiled. “Just okay?”

My hands found their way up his chest, a slow trek, and I relished the heat of his skin coming through the material of his shirt. I only stopped when my palm was over his thudding heart. “Yeah. I don’t think either one of us needs fancy words or big speeches about what happened. I just ... I just need you to know that I’m in this with you, even if you screw up, which you will. Just like I will too.”

Bauer plucked my hand off his chest and pressed a fervent kiss into my palm. I wrapped my other arm around his waist, he slid his arm around my back and tugged me into his waiting embrace.

Everything settled into place, blissful warmth filling all those cold places that I’d not known existed until him. Whatever happened to bring this, him, into my life, I was so thankful, I could hardly think of a way to process it.

“I’m so in love with you, Claire,” he whispered into my ear.

I squeezed him even more tightly, my forehead resting against the side of his neck as I breathed him in. “I love you too.”

Bauer pulled back, his face split in a massive smile. “You really think we can do this?”

“I’d like to see who could stop us.”

His chest rumbled with pleased laughter, and I wished we weren’t surrounded by dozens of people. Half of whom were staring curiously at the little scene unfolding in the middle of the room.

Oblivious to anything but me, Bauer lowered his head and brushed his mouth once, twice over mine. The sound he emitted—from those two small kisses—gave me goosebumps. It was a hum of contentment, a growl of satisfaction, and I wanted to record it so that I could listen to it on a loop for the rest of my life.

Exerting pressure on the back of his head, I deepened the kiss, letting my tongue brush against his just once. I sighed into his mouth happily, which made him smile into the kiss.

“Do you want to get outta here?” I murmured against his lips.

Bauer pulled back and shook his head. “Look at you, ready to bail on the big party.”

“Not bail,” I explained, “maybe just ... leave early.”

Bauer smiled. “Before you open your present?”

In his free hand, he was still clutching the small basket. I smiled. “What is it?”

“The reason I was late,” he told me. “I thought it would be easier to find.”

Brow furrowed, I release his waist to take the basket. It was small, with a small eye hook keeping the lid closed. Something moved inside, and I gave him a quick look.

He was grinning widely.

That was when I heard the teeniest, tiniest meow I’d ever heard in my life.

“You didn’t,” I breathed.

I couldn’t open the basket fast enough. In my haste to get the latch undone, I almost dropped it. He took pity on me with a laugh and braced the bottom with one hand. Carefully, I lifted the lid, and the small patchwork face that popped out had me gasping in delight.

It had bright green eyes and brown ears, long white whiskers, and orange patches on its face.

The kitten mewed pitifully as I lifted it out of the basket and cradled it to my chest. “Oh, my goodness,” I whispered. “Aren’t you the most beautiful baby I’ve ever seen.”

“You said you wanted one that looked just like Agnes,” Bauer said. He smoothed a big hand over the top of its head. “But I had to make sure this one didn’t hate me first.”

“You got me a kitten,” I said.

He shrugged, looking shy for the first time since he set eyes on me. “I’d give you anything you want, princess. Anything to make you smile like you are right now.”

The cat pushed his head against my chin, and I laughed, so full of love, it didn’t even seem fair.

“Just you,” I told him.

“So, I can keep the cat with me in Whistler?”

I kissed its little head. “No.”

He laughed loudly. “You’re gonna have to name her.”

“Ahh ...” I glanced down at the little green-eyed face and grinned. “A girl, are you?”

Bauer scratched under her chin, and she meowed again.

“Belle,” I said.

His answering smile was massive. “How’d you know?”

“Know what?” Belle licked my chin with her sandpaper tongue, and I laughed.

“My number one favorite Disney princess.” His eyes twinkled mischievously. “Why do you think I started calling you that?”

He took my mouth in a slow sweet kiss, and when we pulled back, I felt the eyes on us.

“Should we go say hi?” he said.

I glanced over my shoulder. Lia was grinning like a dope, as was Finn. Next to them was Richard, who didn’t look any less ecstatic.

“Richard didn’t seem very surprised to see you,” I mused out loud.

Bauer wrapped an arm around my shoulders as we started in their direction. “That’s because he called me this morning.”

“He did?”

He nodded. “Apparently, he thought we’d have more time to talk up at his place, which is why we never covered his reason for inviting me in the first place.”

I stopped walking. “Why’s that?”

Bauer lifted a chin in greeting at the man in question. “I guess he’s the primary investor in an up-and-coming snowboarding manufacturer as of about two weeks ago.”

“Really?” I smiled. “And?”

“And he wants a hotheaded, stubborn asshole to be the new face of their company.”

“Bauer!” I exclaimed, giving him as much of a hug as I could with a wriggling kitten clutched to my chest. “That’s incredible.”

“It is,” he admitted. His cheeks were endearingly pink from my praise. “But it’s still not the best part.”

“There’s more?”

He shook his head, eyes tracing every feature on my face. “There’s you. That’ll always be the best part of my day.”

“Total boyfriend material,” I whispered through my face-splitting grin.

When we faced the room together, I grabbed his hand, curled my fingers through his, and squeezed.

## EPILOGUE

Bauer

*Two months later*

“Bauer, this is getting completely out of hand.”

I loved when Claire did that thing. When she set her hands on her hips and looked at me all *I am serious right now*. It was like getting reprimanded by the hot teacher you always had a crush on.

“She needs it.”

“She absolutely does not need it.”

Because she was standing there like she was, looking like she was, I tugged her to me for a hard kiss. “I like spoiling my girls rotten,” I said against her lips, sweet and smooth. “I didn’t hear you complaining last night when I bought that thing from that shop.”

Claire snorted.

When the spoiled girl in question wandered out of Claire’s bedroom, she scampered over to the bag waiting on the floor next to my feet. Her tail twitched while she sniffed along the top edge.

Before I sat on the floor to open it, I smacked Claire’s butt.

Bag cast aside as soon as I had my back braced against the couch, I pulled the box out and started opening the sides. Belle curled around my leg and butted her head against my thigh when I didn’t immediately scratch her head. “Hey pretty girl,”

I cooed. “I bought you something new for when Mommy is ignoring you to do her homework. She’s so mean, isn’t she?”

Claire sighed heavily, which made me grin.

“It’s a master’s program, Bauer, and I’m not ignoring her. Unlike you, I think the cat will be just fine if she’s not doted on every single second of the day.”

When I pulled the wooden contraption out of the box and set it on the floor for Belle to inspect it, Claire dissolved into helpless laughter.

“Where the hell did you find that?” she said as she wiped tears from the corners of her eyes.

“The greatest website ever. Where else would I find a cat whack-a-mole toy?”

Belle studied the setup, cautiously sticking her nose into the first of the holes. Weaving her small body around to the front, she stared at the wooden levers before pushing on one with her paw.

When a small blue mole popped up out of the corresponding hole, she scrambled back. I grinned up at Claire, who was shaking her head.

“See? She loves it.”

“You’re gonna go broke buying her all these toys.”

I stood with a groan.

“Your knee?” she asked. “Should I tell Scotty to take it easy on your poor, poor body? He’s training you too hard.”

Pointing at the offending spot, I leaned in for another quick kiss. “My hip. Which is your fault, not Scotty’s.”

Claire smiled. Given we still lived about two and a half hours apart, we made up the time we missed during the week on the weekends. And we made it up in spades.

But that would change, soon.

“You still okay checking out that apartment with me?” I asked her.

“Yup. I’m done with my paper, so I’m good to go whenever you are.”

Claire finished her bachelor’s and slid straight into an online Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Master’s program with the University of South Florida, and her work ethic blew my mind. The times she did have to finish an assignment when I was over, sometimes I’d just sit back and stare in complete awe of her while she worked on a paper or did research.

Hot teacher fantasy, I’m telling you. I begged her to wear black-framed glasses and stick her hair up in a bun one night, and she did, after only a little persuasion. I broke her desk that night, but how was I to know that it wasn’t meant to bear the weight of two adults?

Given Belle was fully entranced with her new toy, one of about a dozen I’d bought her in the past couple of months, we ducked out of the apartment before she could dart out of the opened door with us.

“She won’t even notice we’re gone,” Claire said. She liked to tease me about being a cat dad, but really, the timing of my gift couldn’t have been better. Lia had left for London a couple of weeks earlier, which meant Claire was living alone for the first time in her entire life.

If either of us had felt ready for the next step, I probably would’ve moved in with her, but hell ... she was only twenty-two, and we’d only been dating for a couple of months. And I needed to wrap up things in Whistler before I could relocate closer to Seattle.

Snoqualmie was a perfect compromise. I had a mountain to keep me busy, and I’d be less than thirty miles away from Claire.

Closer was definitely better.

I couldn’t believe how much I missed her during the week when we were apart. I wanted to be able to grab lunch with her on a Tuesday. Or stop by to take a nap with her on a Thursday. See a movie on a Monday because we both had the day open.



Date things.

Boyfriend and girlfriend things.

Because as it turned out, Claire was right about one thing. I was fucking boyfriend material. I loved doing all that sappy shit for her that I never could have imagined doing before.

Make her breakfast in bed.

Wash her hair for her when we shared the shower at her apartment.

Buy her flowers from the market simply because the color reminded me of her eyes.

And I loved the girlfriend stuff she did for me.

Call me just to see how my day was.

Rub my back and shoulders when I was sore.

Make sure I was eating right since I was training so hard leading up to the upcoming season. Every point I earned at the different competitions got me one step closer to my first Olympic team spot, and she knew it.

Because she cared enough to know.

I was starting to realize, as I began to think about our relationship in terms of the months we'd been together instead of weeks, that the reason I was boyfriend material was because of who my girlfriend was.

Anything good in me that started growing through the cracks, it was because of her.

"What are we seeing today?" she asked as I steered the Jeep onto the highway.

"The two-bedroom by the park." Handing her my phone, I watched her type in the passcode. "It's bookmarked."

"Oh yeah, I liked that this one was on a cul-de-sac."

I nodded. "Closer to the highway too."

Sliding my hand over her thigh as we drove, I did what I always did when Claire and I were on our way to check out a place for me. It was our fourth possibility, and before I even

walked in the door, I thought about how we might use that space.

Because even if she wasn't living with me, I wanted her to feel at home where I laid my head. I already knew the second bedroom would be used as an office/study space for her, though I was willing to concede a fold-out couch in case Scotty crashed at my place.

Or Finn.

Very, very slowly, he and I had been trying to repair years of what our status quo had been. I wasn't ready to pretend Adele and my dad were my new BFFs, but she'd been surprisingly happy for me and Claire. She even hired Claire on as an intern to help build curriculum for certain community programs.

This was what it felt like, I thought, with her hand entwined in my own as we drove to a place I'd imagine for both of us to start building a life with someone.

My fingers tightened over hers, and I caught the edges of her smile as her face captured the sun coming in the open windows.

"I love you," I told her. Simply because I couldn't not tell her. The words just ... refused to stay inside me, now that I knew what they meant.

Claire glanced over at me with a soft smile on her lips. "I love you too."

Most days, I didn't know whether fate or destiny or God or just a bunch of random shit were what brought me to Claire. What brought Claire to me.

No matter what it was, she had me. And she always would.



LIA

*London*

THE RAIN CAME out of nowhere, and like a rookie, I'd left my little umbrella back at my flat.

My *flat*, not my apartment, because I was in London, and we called it a flat, thank you very much.

Even though I pulled the hood of my jacket up, it didn't do much to protect me from the sudden downpour, so when I looked up and caught sight of a dark wood sign for a pub on the corner, I quickly jogged around a group of tourists on a sightseeing walk and ducked through the heavy wooden door.

It was quiet inside, still hours before the post-work rush would have a place like this packed to the brim with men wearing perfectly tailored suits in want of a pint.

God bless London, because really, British men knew how to wear suits. Sure, I'd only been here for two weeks, just long enough to fully recover from my jet lag, learn how to ride the Tube, but it did not take long to recognize how far superior they were to American men in that regard.

An old man wiping down the gleaming wood bar nodded to me as I slid up to a stool. "What can I get for ya?"

I glanced behind him at what was on tap. "I'll have a Stella, please."

He nodded, deftly pulling a glass under the correct tap. "Be wanting anything to eat, dear?"

I smiled. Would the accents and the casual endearments ever get old? "No thanks. Just the beer for now."

He set it in front of me. "Cheers."

After my first sip, I glanced around the pub. It was quiet with only a couple of tables occupied by other patrons. I was by myself at the bar.

Alone.

My first two weeks here had been a whirlwind, yes, but I'd still spent a lot of my time alone. Which was ... weird for me. The busy-ness and exhaustion of getting used to the time zone change had kept that loneliness from swamping me.

But sitting alone at the bar, I felt a visceral pain in my heart, missing Claire. The rest of my family. I started pulling my phone out when I heard his voice behind me.

“Can you put the match on for me, Carl?”

The bartender nodded, giving a quick smile to whoever belonged to that deep, glorious, accented voice.

As Carl flipped on the mounted TV facing the bar, I kept my eyes on my beer, careful not to turn and gawk. Because he sounded hot. Really, really, grade A level ten hot, and I didn't want to pout if he turned out not to be grade A level hot.

Leaving a seat open between us, he slid his tall, broad frame onto a stool and folded his large hands together in front of him on the bar. Ink crawled up his forearms, as did ropey muscles and strong veins.

Have you ever tried to check out a man without him noticing? It takes skill, people.

His attention never once wavered from the soccer game that appeared on the screen, on the emerald green grass and brightly colored jerseys of the players passing the ball back and forth before the start of the game.

Match.

Whatever.

I snorted into my beer.

“Not a fan of football?” he asked.

Instead of turning fully to see if his face was as hot as his voice and hands and forearms, I kept my eyes forward, just like he seemed to be doing.

“Football, yes,” I said. “The *real* one.”

He whistled at the jab. I tried to hide my grin by taking another sip of my beer.

When he replied, his voice was dry, mild amusement hanging off every deliciously spoken syllable. “Hate to break it to you, love, but that sport you Americans call football is *not* the real one.”

Now I did turn, because Mr. Hot Voice and Muscley Forearms didn't want to go down that road. And when I did, I froze.

The face matched everything else. It matched, surpassed, blew the voice and muscles out of the water.

And when I smiled at him, he did some turning of his own.

His gaze studied my face carefully for something. Whatever he saw caused him to relax. "What?" he asked.

I pointed at the TV. "I don't think this is an argument you want to get in with me."

He licked his bottom lip, and reflexively, I felt my thighs clench together. His eyes, an indecipherable color in the dim light of the bar, never strayed from mine. "Carl, put another drink for the lady on my tab, if you please."

I raised an eyebrow. "Who said I wanted another one?"

His thumb tapped the surface of the bar. His lips curved into a devious smile that made my toes curl inside my shoes. "Because I'm about to give you an education, love."

*Keep reading after the Faked bonus epilogue for Lia and her mystery Brit's sexy sports romance.*

## FAKED BONUS EPILOGUE

A few years after *The End*

**Claire**

His shoulders were rock hard. The groan pulled from his chest as I dug my thumbs in had me smiling.

“You’re very tense,” I said lightly.

Bauer grunted in response, dropping his chin to his chest as I moved my hands to the muscles along his neck.

“You know everything is going to be okay, right?”

My husband took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Knowing him, after all the years we’d been together, he was working very hard to measure his response. When I first met him, that was not something Bauer Davis was good at.

Shifting from the massage, I let my hands run up along the back of his scalp, the short dark hair tickling my palms. His frame relaxed at the soft touch.

“I don’t know that,” he said quietly. “What if something happens while we’re gone?”

I smiled again, sliding my fingers along the slope of his shoulder, heavy with muscle—still holding all that tension I tried unsuccessfully to release. “Then we’ll get a phone call, and we’ll come back.”

His head tilted, nuzzling into my arm where I'd wrapped it around his chest so I could press a soft kiss to his temple. Bauer so rarely worried like this, it was a new side to him, something I hadn't seen in him in our dating life, or when we were engaged, and then married. My fearless husband, who hurtled down mountains at breakneck speeds, was doing his very, very best to worm his way out of date night because he was scared.

"I think I have a headache," he mumbled, nibbling along my wrist with soft, sweet kisses.

"You do not."

"Calling me a liar, Mrs. Davis?"

"Yes."

I moved to face him, settling onto his lap while he kept his eyes focused on the other side of the room. The chair we'd chosen for the corner of the bedroom was big and comfortable, and the rocking motion made it an easy place to spend hours of a long night. Bauer's arm anchored around my waist, and he sighed as I tucked my head against the side of his neck.

"You had a headache last week when we tried to do this." I kissed the edge of his jaw. "Be careful using that excuse twice, or I'll think you're avoiding alone time with me."

His mouth finally cracked into a wry grin, and he dipped his gaze to lock with mine. The spark I saw in those depths lit a pleasant swirling sensation in the pit of my belly. "I always like being alone with you," he growled. "But can't we be alone in our room while he's sleeping safely down the hall?"

I smiled softly, my heart squeezing warm and soft and gooey in my chest at how hard this was for my big, fearless, tattooed husband to leave our baby for the first time.

"He will be fine for a couple hours," I promised.

Bauer's eyes closed, and when I slid my hand up the side of his face, he pressed a fierce kiss against my palm. "What if he misses us?"

I exhaled a soft laugh. “At two months old, as long as someone is here to feed him and change him and hold him, Cooper will be perfectly content.”

The two-month-old in question stirred in his crib, emitting the soft, grunting noises that he often did as he started to wake from his nap. Bauer’s face transformed from worry to unrelenting love in an instant, and I clutched his face to mine, because I couldn’t not kiss him when he looked that happy at the mere thought of our child waking up from a nap.

Bauer hummed happily into the kiss, breaking away with a laugh when Cooper made a squawking noise. Based on that noise, we had a few minutes before he became seriously unhappy at not being picked up.

My husband’s hands slid up my back, his tongue sliding leisurely over mine.

The sounds from the crib intensified, a slight wail breaking apart our kiss. I smiled against Bauer’s lips.

“Our son is a cock block,” he whispered.

I kissed him again, short and sweet. “Hence the date night,” I whispered back.

Bauer nuzzled his face into me, dropping featherlight kisses along my collarbone. “Up. He misses me.”

With a laugh, I stood from his lap and settled back in the nursery chair while he picked Cooper up out of the crib.

My heart, warm and gooey earlier, lit with a straight jolt of pure happiness at the way Bauer cradled our son in his big, tattooed arms. He was so gentle, his massive hands holding Cooper close to his chest while he kissed the top of Cooper’s head. His shock of black hair wasn’t a surprise to anyone, and it stood straight out, like he’d stuck his finger in a light socket.

Bauer liked to run his fingers over it, tell Cooper that if he kept it up, he’d have the greatest mohawk that the Pacific Northwest had ever seen.

He was, without a doubt, the most natural dad I’d ever met. There was no hesitation in changing diapers, in giving



him baths (though the sink was still the location of choice), in feeding him during the middle of the night so I could sleep. He sang lullabies and told him about all the adventures they'd go on some day together.

"You keep looking at me like that, princess, and we may not make it to our date night before I get my hands on you," he said lightly.

I laughed. "So we *are* going out to dinner tonight?"

"Fine," he sighed. "You checked that they're CPR certified yet?"

I gave him a patient look. "I did not ask Paige that, no."

His jaw clenched briefly. "What if he starts choking on his formula?" Bauer stared down at Cooper. "Or he spits up really bad and he's not in an elevated position?"

It wouldn't benefit the current conversation to remind my husband that Logan raised me and my three sisters and their son Emmett, and Cooper was not their first grandchild. Babysitting our two-month-old was not any sort of challenge for them.

None of that mattered, though. Bauer—with his giant heart and his fierce protective streak—was having an understandably hard time imagining someone else taking care of our son.

The road to this moment—where I could sit in a nursery decorated with bright art prints of snowboards and ice-covered mountains and watch my husband sway back and forth as he hummed some unnamed tune to the twelve-pound bundle in his arms—hadn't been easy.

We lived together for quite a while before Bauer proposed. And we felt no huge rush to get married once that happened. Despite the patience we had leading up to it, after our walk down the aisle, we were ready to start a family fairly quickly.

But my body hadn't quite been on board. It took a couple years of tracking ovulation and sex on a schedule and two miscarriages before Cooper was born. The first time in our entire relationship that I saw my husband absolutely break

down was the moment our son was handed to him in the delivery room. The moment we heard his wailing cry, and they told us he was perfectly healthy, Bauer finally released all the grief he'd held in over the two early losses—the babies we never got to meet, but loved immensely.

When I didn't answer Bauer's hypothetical questions about all the things that could go wrong, he let out a great, deep sigh.

"I'm doing that thing again, aren't I?" He sent me a crooked grin. "That big fancy word that I never remember."

"Catastrophizing," I said. "And yes. Just a little."

Bauer turned his gaze back down to our son, smiling when Cooper gripped his pointer finger and tried to suck it into his open mouth. "How are we supposed to just ... let him out into the world someday? If it's this hard to go out to dinner, how the ever-loving fuck are we supposed to let him go to school. Or a job. Or college." He stopped, clearing his throat suspiciously. "The world is terrifying, Claire. I just want," his voice trailed off.

I stood from the chair, my throat tight with emotion from watching him struggle with this thing. He slid his arm around my shoulder when I moved into his side. Cooper's eyes zeroed in on me, and I made a soft clicking noise as I ducked in to kiss the tip of his nose.

He smelled sweet and soft, the product of the bath he'd gotten earlier after a particularly juicy spit-up session that morning.

"I know," I murmured. I pushed up on my toes and gave Bauer a soft kiss on his cheek. "You want to protect him."

Bauer took Cooper to the changing table, settling him on the curved cushion while his little legs kicked happily. "I know, I know ... I can't do that forever." He blew a raspberry on Cooper's stomach after he unhooked the onesie he was wearing. "Your mom is smart, little dude. I really hope you have her problem-solving skills and not mine."

I shook my head and laughed. "I'm going to go get ready. Paige and Logan will be here in about forty-five minutes. Can

you give him that bottle of breast milk from the fridge?”

Bauer hummed. “You got it, boss lady.”

While he took care of Cooper, I took a quick shower and braided my hair off to the side, winding it around into a simple knot at the base of my skull. Getting ready these days wasn't something that I spent a lot of time on. I was still on maternity leave from my job at a small private pediatric counseling practice, and would be for another four weeks. The first two months of my time home with Cooper had gone faster than I ever could've imagined. He was a good baby, all in all, sleeping through the night around six weeks and only fussed when he was tired or hungry. And even though I spoke a big game with Bauer about how Cooper would be fine, and there was nothing to worry about—the thought of going back to the office three days a week had my chest tight and achy.

Becoming a mom was something I'd done my best to prepare for. Long before I ever met my husband, I'd spent my entire adult life learning about the way children grew and developed. But the moment they handed me the screaming little bundle of my son, all the research and reading and studying disappeared in a soft, wispy puff. Against my chest, while Bauer and I cried happy, exhausted, relieved tears, I knew that nothing could actually make you feel ready to be a parent.

I didn't feel ready for the sleepless nights or inexhaustible wells of love.

I didn't feel ready to figure out breast feeding, because holy shit it was hard.

I didn't feel ready to get spit up in my mouth or clean my first blowout.

And while I got caught up in the worries of missing Cooper when I went back to work, my husband's worries were more forward focused than my own.

Between the two of us, we had all the facets of Cooper's life covered with parental concern.

Sometimes, like on a night like this, it was a good reminder that there were still so many other parts of our life where we needed to remain vigilant.

Date nights, even if it just meant a forced shower and dinner out at a local restaurant, were just as important.

My husband wanted me, I had no doubt about that. The moment I'd been cleared for sex after giving birth, he took great pleasure in showing me just how much he appreciated the new curves on my body, the stretch marks that may never fade from my stomach.

But it was nice to do this too. Stare at my closet and try to decide if he'd like the red v-neck shirt with the new jeans I'd just bought, or the pretty blue sundress with straps that crisscrossed over my back.

I smiled, thinking about the first time Bauer saw me in a dress, and my hand went straight to that hanger.

For that brief moment in time, all that mattered was picking a dress that made me feel sexy and pretty for a date with my husband.

Cooper, like he always did, snuck back into my head as soon as I'd slipped the dress on and finished applying lotion to my arms and legs. It was enough to make me wonder if this would ever abate, or if Bauer and I were doomed for a lifetime of parental worry.

With a few sprays of hairspray over my braid, I reminded myself that every parent felt these things—to varying degrees.

Nothing we worried about was abnormal or unhealthy. And we had amazing examples of how to deal with it, with my brother and Paige, and all three of my sisters, who were seasoned pros at this point in motherhood.

Every phase of their life, with the normal shifts and changes, brought about a new set of challenges. Hopefully, we'd give Cooper a sibling someday, and the worry and love would start all over again.

There was only so much we were in control of.

I took a deep breath, making sure my hands were steady before I applied a few coats of mascara.

When I closed the cap and set it back into the drawer of makeup, I stared at my reflection in the mirror and tried to decide if I looked like a new mom.

But the face staring back at me was just ... Claire.

All the changes were on the inside, and maybe there was something comforting about that. No one knew all the ways having Cooper twisted my heart around into some new, amazing creation—capable of an entirely different kind of love that I'd never experienced before.

Ruminating on that love, and how it changed all the tiny facets of your personality, was how Bauer found me.

He leaned a shoulder against the frame of the doorway, watching me with a tiny smile on his handsome face.

“Paige and Logan are here,” he said. “She is CPR certified, by the way. *I wasn't too chickenshit to ask her.*”

I smiled.

“You're thinking *very* hard.”

My shoulders sank as I laughed. “A little.”

His eyes tracked over my face, and I turned so that I was sitting up against the edge of the bathroom counter. Bauer pushed off the wall and caged me in there, one hand anchored over my hip, and the other sliding over the length of my neck. His thumb coasted over a sensitive spot underneath my jaw, and my eyes fluttered shut. “So I'm not the only one worried, am I?”

I didn't answer right away.

Bauer leaned in with a soft laugh, wrapping his arms around me until I was completely engulfed in the sheer mass of his body.

He smelled so good, was so warm and strong. And all the worries curling through my brain relaxed ... just a little,

knowing that I wasn't alone in how much I loved that tiny little person.

"It's okay to be worried, even if you are the professional," he said, nuzzling the side of my head.

"I know." My hands clutched at his back. "And I know he'll be fine. It just seems ... so weird to not be around him, you know?" I pulled back and locked eyes with my husband. "But I'm excited to be able to have time with just you, too."

"Yeah?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

He grinned, a dimple popping in the dark stubble coating his jaw. "Think we're still limber enough to manage car sex?"

I laughed. "Maybe."

His brows dipped as he exhaled slow and steady. "I'll put the seat all the way back." He dipped in and tugged at my earlobe with the edge of his teeth. "We'll find a dark parking lot."

"How dark?"

He chuckled. "No one will see anything, princess. You can sit right over my lap," he whispered against the edge of my lips.

"That sounds very, very illegal," I said, all breathy and quiet. "But I could be persuaded."

Bauer kissed the edge of my lips, just a tease of what he was capable of. "Is that why you wore a dress?"

"No." I moaned when his hand flirted with the hem of said dress, tickling the outside of my thigh. "But ... I think we could make the most of the fact that I am."

He hissed in a breath when I split my legs around his hips and kissed his bottom lip soft and sweet. "I love date night."

"All it took was a CPR certification and a sundress, eh?"

Bauer laughed, swatting my butt and then curling his fingers through mine so he could help me off the counter.

“That’s it. I’ve always been an easy man to please.”

With a burst of laughter, and the ache in my chest easing, I followed Bauer out of the bathroom and realized for the millionth time just how amazing this life of ours was. It was amazing, because it was ours.

**FLOORED**

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## LIA

The first time I saw Buckingham Palace, I had a surprising thought.

*This is bullshit.*

Not the palace. The palace was great. It was beautiful, all stately and whatnot with gleaming gold fleur-de-lis on each black iron fence post that protected the royals from us mere mortals.

No, the thing that was bullshit was me.

For two weeks, I'd been in the place I'd dreamed of for as long as I could remember. Great Britain, with its monarchs and history and architecture and ugh, just everything. And as I sat on the steps across from Buckingham Palace, surrounded by people snapping selfies and chattering on with their fellow travelers, I was lonely. I missed home.

How freaking annoying was I?

I should have been ecstatic. I should have been on cloud nine. Ten, even!

After snapping a picture of the building behind me, I sent it off to my twin sister, Claire. She wanted to see everything. And if this had been a normal trip, a week or two to sightsee, she probably would've ditched her snowboarding-god boyfriend to come see the Brits with me.

But instead, I was here by myself because my sightseeing was a package deal with time spent studying at Oxford for the Michaelmas term, which ran from the end of September to

December. I'd arrived a few weeks early to settle in and see all things before my researching began in earnest. It was what I'd dreamed of as I started my Masters in English Literature, this type of immersion in British culture and education with a rock star professor whose work on the Brontë sisters was akin to a religious text to me.

Yet I was the sad sack wandering around London, staring glumly at the beautiful sites.

As I tucked my cell phone into my front pocket, it started buzzing.

Claire.

"Hi! What are you doing?" I winced after it came out because even to my own ears, I sounded cringe-level excited to be talking to someone.

My sister laughed. "Calling you because you're at Buckingham Palace, you bitch."

"I was." I stepped to the side so a group could pass me as I meandered through Green Park. "I'm walking through the park just by it now."

She sighed audibly. "And here I sit, working on my monthly budget. Which sister is cooler?"

My chest ached at the sound of her voice. "How's life?"

Claire laughed. "We talked two days ago."

An eternity in twin-land, especially when—prior to my trip over the pond and her moving in with her boyfriend Bauer—we lived together.

Taking a seat in the grass, I tipped my face up to the sun. "I know, but I miss knowing everything that's going on. No one calls me with random updates anymore because of the time difference."

"Well," she drawled, "it's still early, but so far, I've made my bed, cleaned out the litter box, and now I'm sitting down to work on the budget. Yesterday, I went grocery shopping and got on FaceTime with Logan. He couldn't figure out something on his computer, and he refused to ask Paige for

help because she told him he wouldn't be able to figure it out on his own."

I smiled at the mention of our older brother and his wife, the people who raised us. "See? I'd know this shit if I was at home."

She was quiet, and I knew that kind of quiet from her. She was thinking. Analyzing. And I knew I'd admitted too much. Again, total bullshit.

This—the mopey, wish I was home, missing the mundane normality—wasn't me. It was the opposite of me. And if Claire thought I was undergoing a personality transplant just as I was starting the biggest educational opportunity I'd ever had, she'd worry herself sick.

So, I did a mental reset and flipped the switch.

"And I'll know it again when I get home," I said brightly. "I told you about the gowns we need to wear to eat at the dining hall, right?"

There was a smile in her voice when she answered. "Yes. You told me about the gowns."

"Three-course meals at a frickin' college dining hall. This is the kind of posh shit that only the British would think up." I tilted my head. "Or the French."

"Are you bored, Lia?" she asked.

I pinched my eyes shut. Twins were the worst sometimes. "No?"

"Are you not sure?"

Flopping back on the grass, I stared up at the towering trees. "What makes you think I'm bored?"

"Well, you haven't started your class yet, and you're sightseeing alone, and you're having FOMO for the life you lived for the first twenty-two years of our life. That usually means you're bored."

"I can't be bored," I cried. "I'm in *London*! I've got this adorable flat in Oxford, and the whole town is adorable, and

the campus is amazing, even if they have really strict rules about not sitting on the grass, and how on earth could I be living a life where I can come spend the day in London because why wouldn't I and somehow still be bored and missing the normal life I left behind."

Claire laughed under her breath. My cheeks burned a little hot at my outburst, and I looked around to make sure no one heard me. I couldn't even handle the idea that some lovely Brit who might become my best friend for the next couple of months would hear me and think I was just another crazy American.

"Lia"—she sighed—"promise me something."

"What?"

"Don't be so consumed with what you're missing that you stop paying attention to what's in front of you. Okay? Go eat a scone. Or that beans and toast and bacon thing you told me about."

I smiled. "That's for breakfast."

"Fine, then go get a beer in a pub and enjoy your time. Flirt with a cute British boy. Then go back to your flat in Oxford and get a good night's sleep. Don't you meet with Professor Atwood tomorrow?"

My fingers plucked at a blade of grass. "Yeah. I'm so freaking lucky she's letting me do this." I watched some clouds drift across the sky, a dark enough gray that I frowned. "You're right. I'll go get some food."

"Be careful on the train home, okay? Make sure to head back before it's dark."

I smiled. Claire was so *Claire*, she couldn't even help herself. "Okay, Mom."

"Love you."

"Love you back."

She hung up first, and for a few minutes, I laid on the grass and stared up at the slowly darkening sky. When the breeze

held enough of a chill, I stood and pulled my wadded-up jacket out of my crossbody purse.

I wandered for a while. Taking pictures. Looking up at buildings. Reading placards. I hopped on and off the Tube, allowing for spur-of-the-moment decisions in what I might discover. It helped take that edge off, the one I desperately didn't want to feel again.

As I did, I tried to take Claire's advice to heart. Be in the moment and not think about what I was missing. I did pretty well until the first fat raindrop hit me on my forehead.

The rain came out of nowhere, and like a rookie, I'd left my little umbrella back at my flat.

Even though I pulled the hood of my jacket up, it didn't do much to protect me from the sudden downpour, so when I looked up and caught sight of a dark wooden sign for a pub off a side street, I smiled, thinking of what Claire said. I quickly jogged around a group of tourists on a sightseeing walk, hooked a right onto the quiet street, and ducked through the heavy wooden door.

It was quiet inside, decorated with dark wood, glass-covered sconces, and burgundy booths that had seen better days. It was still hours before the post-work rush would have a place like this packed to the brim with men wearing tailored suits in want of a pint.

God bless London, because really, British men knew how to wear suits. It did not take long to recognize how far superior they were to American men in that regard.

I slipped off my jacket and ran a hand through my hair. After a day of sightseeing, it was beyond tangled. The only other people in the pub were huddled in one of the corner booths, and for a split second, I wondered if the beer was poisonous or something, because honestly ... it was really, really empty, considering what time of day it was.

An old man wiping down the dingy wood bar nodded to me as I slid up to a stool. "What can I get for ya?"

I glanced behind him at what was on tap. “I’ll have a Stella, please.”

He nodded, deftly pulling a glass under the correct tap. “Be wanting anything to eat, dear?”

I smiled. Would the accents and the casual endearments ever get old? “Just the beer for now.”

He set it in front of me. “Cheers.”

After my first sip, I glanced around the pub again, wishing that even one other person would’ve been sitting at the bar with me.

Alone.

My first two weeks here had been a whirlwind, yes, but I’d still spent a lot of my time alone. Which was ... weird for me. The busyness and exhaustion of adjusting to the time zone change had kept that loneliness from swamping me.

But sitting alone at the bar, I felt that same visceral pain in my heart, missing ... well, everything. The rest of my family. My best friend, Finn. Since I’d already talked to Claire, I started to pull my phone out to see who else I could talk to when I heard his voice behind me.

“Don’t tell me my brother’s actually taken the night off, Carl.”

The bartender nodded, giving a quick smile to whoever that deep, glorious, accented voice belonged to. “I’d reckon he never expected you to stop in.”

Mr. Accent made an *oof* sound, full of amusement, and I smiled into my Stella.

“Need anything to drink?”

“I shouldn’t,” he answered dryly, “but after this week, I think I’ll take one.”

“Got a new IPA, if you want to give it a taste.”

“Sounds bloody perfect,” he murmured. “Though anything with alcohol does right about now.”

What *was* it about the accent?

After taking the pint glass from Carl, the nice bartender, Mr. Accent made a noise that was quite delectable.

“Lewis coming back?”

“Not tonight.”

Mr. Accent sighed heavily. “Is he home? Suppose I could pop ‘round there while I’m in town.”

Carl shook his head. “Out to the farm. Had to help your parents with something.”

“No wonder I didn’t know,” he answered.

The sip of my Stella was slow, and I swear, I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop. I couldn’t help the fact they were right in front of me.

Mr. Accent sat back on his stool, spreading his large hands out over the bar. “Well, it’s quiet enough. I’ll stay for a bit. Can you turn on the match for me?” he asked Carl.

Internally, I smiled, feeling a lot less bored and a lot less alone.

*Flirt with a cute British boy.* Isn’t that what my sister had told me? My very smart sister.

As Carl flipped on the TV, I kept my eyes on my beer, careful not to turn and gawk. Because he sounded hot—really, really, grade A, level ten hot—and I didn’t want to visibly pout if he turned out not to be what I envisioned.

Leaving a seat open between us, he slid his tall, broad frame onto a stool and folded his large hands together in front of him on the bar. Ink crawled up his forearms, as did ropey muscles and strong veins.

Excellent signs, all around.

Have you ever tried to check out a man without him noticing? It takes skill, people.

His attention never once wavered from the soccer game on the screen—the emerald green grass and brightly colored

jerseys of the players passing the ball back and forth before the start of the game.

Match.

Whatever.

I snorted into my beer.

“Not a fan of football?” he asked me.

Straight, unfettered energy pulsed under my skin, and it took everything in me not to look too eager for interaction. But honestly, I was. After the icky feelings of the entire day, I probably would have been this excited if Carl, the old bartender, had made small talk.

Instead of turning fully to see if his face was as hot as his voice and hands and forearms, I kept my eyes forward, just as he seemed to do.

What had he asked me again? An exclamation from the announcer on the screen, something about offsides, pulled my attention back.

“Am I a fan of football?” I mused. His finger drummed lightly on the side of his glass. “Yes,” I said. “The *real* one.”

He whistled at the jab. I tried to hide my grin by taking another sip of my beer.

When he replied, his voice was dry, mild amusement hanging off every deliciously spoken syllable. “Hate to break it to you, love, but that sport you Americans call football is *not* the real one.”

Oh boy, Mr. Hot Voice and Muscley Forearms didn’t want to go down that road. Not like he could know the brother who raised me was a Super Bowl winning football player, now one of the best defensive coaches in the league. If he wanted to talk football, I’d run his ass into the ground without breaking a sweat. So, I turned slowly in his direction, and when I did, I froze.

The face matched the voice. The hands. The muscles and ink. It matched, surpassed, blew the voice and the hands and muscles out of the water.



And when a slow smile pulled at the edges of my mouth, he did some turning of his own. It took everything in me not to climb into his lap where he sat on that stool.

I'd been around some hot men in my day. Kissed a bunch. Slept with a couple who I really, really liked.

And Mr. Hot Voice with the Hot Face and dark hair and knife-sharp jaw just made every single one of them fade into oblivion.

His gaze studied my face carefully for something. Whatever he saw caused him to relax. "What?" he asked.

I pointed at the TV. "I don't think this is an argument you want to have with me."

He licked his bottom lip, and reflexively, I felt my thighs clench together. His eyes, an indecipherable color in the dim light of the bar, never strayed from mine. "Carl, put another drink for the lady on my tab, if you please."

I raised an eyebrow. "Who said I wanted another one?"

Under the guise of looking out the street-facing windows, he slid to the stool next to mine, his shoulder brushing my own. "Well now, it's raining out, so I reckon you won't be in a hurry to leave. Besides, I think this is exactly where you need to be right now."

Lifting my beer to my mouth, I took a sip to hide my growing smile, but his eyes dropped to my lips regardless. As I set the pint glass down, I crossed my legs and set my chin in my hand. "Why do you think that?"

"There's a look on your face that intrigues me."

I snorted. "Is there? I can't wait to hear this."

"You're missing something."

My face went slack with shock, but I blinked, recovering in the next breath. "Why on earth would you say that?"

When he lifted his chin in a blatant study of my face, the light of the room caught the hard edge of his jaw. Seriously, a man who looked like him should be illegal.

“Because any time a beautiful woman is drinking alone in a quiet bar, and she has the terrible misfortune of telling me she hates the beautiful game, then she’s clearly missing a screw or two.”

A shocked laugh burst out of my mouth. His answering grin was belly-flipping gorgeous.

I did a little leaning of my own. “And let me guess, you’re just the man to help me find them.”

His thumb tapped the surface of the bar. His lips curved into a devious smile that made my toes curl inside my shoes. “No.”

My eyebrow lifted in question.

What he said next were words I’d replay a thousand times over the next few months, when I had no idea how true they were. In a rough voice that pulled goosebumps up along my arm, he said, “I’m the man who’s about to give you an education, love.”

## JUDE

Things I did not need tonight:

- Beer.

- My brother to be out of town the one night I was in London and felt like stopping by to see him.

- A cheeky American woman with big blue eyes and long dark hair.

Yet knowing the safest course of action would be to not drink the beer, go back home and pretend I'd never stopped by, and ignore the invitation in her eyes, I damn well ignored it.

The woman laughed at my blatant come-on, revealing straight white teeth and a dimple on the right side of her face. But after a shit day, a shit week, indulging in something that I wanted—not needed—sounded perfect.

Like me, she must have been caught in the rain, which was heavier than I'd expected it to be when I came to see Lewis. The ends of her hair looked damp where they curled against her back.

But the smile was all I got in response, which only intrigued me further.

“Educate me on soccer, huh?” she mused quietly, leaning back on her stool and folding her arms over her chest. Those big eyes focused on the match, one I'd wanted to watch from home, except I had an appointment with my agent, something I couldn't ignore. Looking at her delicate profile in the dim light of the pub, I couldn't even regret that I wasn't at home,

watching Tottenham and Bethnal Green, the latter who I'd be playing in short order.

"Football," I corrected with a grin. When she rolled her eyes, I laughed. "Been in London long?"

"About ten days." With graceful fingers, she traced a line of condensation along the surface of her glass. "I'm here to study at Oxford for Michaelmas."

I nodded. A smart, cheeky American then.

"You probably meet many interesting people," she said carefully.

"Why's that?"

She gestured at Carl. "I assumed you worked here or were here a lot or something."

He lifted his bushy gray eyebrows in question, probably wondering if I'd answer her honestly.

I was a footballer, and my brother was the pub owner. And not only did I not spend a lot of time here, but it was the first time I'd ever stopped by without my little brother asking first.

"My brother owns it," I said. "While I do meet some characters in my job, I'm sure Carl has me beat for good stories."

Carl snorted. The American smiled.

"Let's say I'm interested in this soccer lesson," she began, turning slightly on her stool until her knees touched my legs under the bar. I didn't move. Neither did she.

My elbow bumped hers. "For the sake of argument, and since the *rest* of the world calls it football, can we dispense with the s-word, please?"

She grinned. "That really bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Well, it's the wrong name, so yes." And not that I'd say it out loud, but playing that game—the one she was currently disparaging with her American label—was the center of my entire universe. If we sat at those stools long enough, or Carl flipped to the right channel, a replay would likely come on

showing me on the pitch, doing what I did so well. The only thing I did well, it felt like, even as my body was trying to tell me I was getting too bloody old to keep going at it the way I wanted.

Thirty-one felt a decade older some days, especially given the young talent.

She gave a magnanimous wave of her hand. “Fine. When in Rome and all that.”

“They call it football there too,” I pointed out.

Carl walked past and shook his head when he saw how closely we were sitting together—the American and me.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

She licked her lips, pulling my attention to her mouth. It was a bloody marvelous mouth too. When I tore my eyes away and met her gaze again, it was knowing. It was also full of banked heat. The pretty American girl had no problem with me staring at her pretty lips.

“Lia,” she answered.

I held out my hand. “Jude.”

No last names were offered, which was fine by me. If she didn’t live here, and paid no attention to football, my last name wouldn’t mean anything to her. But all the same, I decided not to risk it.

The past few weeks, the pressure of being me—Jude McAllister, who was carrying his team on his slowly aging back and trying desperately to keep them out of mediocrity, who was trying to keep his younger brother from meddling in his life, who was making sure his family knew how wrong they’d been about him—was a slowly growing millstone around my neck.

For one night, I didn’t want to feel any of those things.

Each day that I poorly juggled my responsibilities while balancing a high-demand career was another day that I craved an escape. One night, like this one, where I could pretend no one wanted anything of me. One night when I could flirt with

a beautiful woman, a night when I could indulge in something harmless and only for me.

When she slid her cool fingers up my palm, I felt the charge of it up the length of my arm, like she'd plugged me into a socket.

"Jude," she repeated slowly.

Lia was tasting those letters on her tongue, and fuck all if it wasn't the sexiest thing I'd ever seen. I wanted to hear her gasp it into my ear with her nails digging into my back.

Because I was feeling particularly turned on by every facet of this brief interaction, I did the same back. I licked my bottom lip and met her eyes. "Lia," I murmured. Her pupils dilated, a pulse fluttering wildly at the base of her slender throat.

"We are definitely having a moment here." She glanced down at my hand, still holding hers.

Slowly, I pulled mine away, using the tips of my fingers to curl along the edges of hers, and she swallowed.

I watched her face as she settled her hands back around the pint glass in front of her. "How very American of you to point it out."

She lifted her beer, and I clinked my glass against it.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'm about to ruin it."

"Are you now?"

Lia set her chin in her hand, like she had earlier, only she fully turned on her stool, so I had no choice but to either bracket her crossed legs with mine or be turned away.

I chose the former, stretching one arm along the back of her seat. That long, curling hair brushed against my forearm, and I fought the urge to see how it felt tangled in my fingers.

We both took another pull from our drinks, and as I was setting my glass down, she said, "I think your football is the most boring sport in the entire world."

My entire body froze. "I beg your pardon."

Glancing over his shoulder, Carl whistled under his breath.

She shrugged. “They just ... run all over. There doesn’t seem to be any strategy that I can see.”

Was my jaw on the floor? My heart pulsing in a bloody heap just next to it? That was what it felt like.

I took a moment to recover the absolute heartbreak that anyone would say those words to me, but when I caught a flash of anticipation on her face, I knew she was looking forward to my reaction.

Lia was an unlit match, simply waiting for someone to provide the friction she needed to ignite.

I’d provide that happily.

“I can see why it might be difficult for you to understand the grace and fluidity of the game,” I told her quietly, leaning in just enough that her breath caught. “Given there’s no smash, grab, graceless violence like you lot think is interesting.”

A spark flared hot behind her eyes. “It’s hardly graceless.”

“Do tell,” I drawled.

Lia took the challenge like a relay baton, and oh, did she run with it.

“Have you ever seen a receiver stretched out in the air to make a catch, so aware of his entire body, so in control of it, that he manages to get one”—she licked her lips slowly—“just *one edge* of his toe inside the line so it counts.”

My voice sounded like I’d chewed glass when I answered. “Those games are like watching a car wreck that someone starts and stops a thousand times and you can’t quite stop looking to see where it all went wrong.”

In truth, I had nothing against American football. The opposite, really. As was true of most professional athletes, I had a thorough enjoyment of all sports. Yes, football was my favorite, and it was in my blood, but I watched the Super Bowl almost every year. I tuned in when the league played games in London.

But there was no way I was admitting that now. Not when it was triggering the strangest type of foreplay I'd ever encountered. She'd slid forward in her seat, foot curling around the back of my calf, my fingers were toying with the edge of her hair. It was soft and cool from the rain.

"Ahh," she said triumphantly, "but you can't quit watching. There's a structure to it. A framework that requires critical thinking and forethought." Lia glanced at me underneath her long lashes. "When they line up against each other, they're reading everything about their opponent. Each flinch, each flicker of the eyes, each word that's shouted. Will it be a run or a pass? Is that defender going to blitz? Every answer is a different option, and they're ready for all of them."

It sounded like she was talking dirty, in the hushed secretive tone to her voice. I couldn't tell if I wanted to laugh at what we were doing, or tear her clothes off on top of the bar.

From the look in her eye, she wasn't entirely sure either.

I chuckled under my breath. "Look at the telly," I told her, tapping the side of her leg. She turned her face toward it, jaw set stubbornly. Before I slid my stool closer, I glanced over my shoulder. The pub was still practically empty, which suited me fine at the moment. No one was watching us. My arm curled fully around her back as I moved closer, setting my face just over her shoulder so I could murmur in her ear. "Watch," I instructed. "Not just the ball. Watch all the players move along the field. It's like a chess game, see? You can't move too far forward or you're offside, you have to have total awareness of the people playing against you, and the people playing with you. Total awareness of where the ball is and how your body is positioned." My lips brushed against her hair and her entire frame shivered. "Watch the defenders hang back when the other team has possession. Now look, their striker has the ball, and they'll move up, in case they can help. They have to work as one moving piece."

"Mm-hmm," she managed. "I-I see it." Lia cleared her throat delicately, and from the corner of my eye, I noticed her fingers curl into a fist.



She smelled fresh, and I turned just slightly, placing my nose in the crown of her hair.

I inhaled.

She exhaled, a shaky gust of air as it passed her lips.

“The back and forth of the game is what makes it so beautiful,” I whispered. “It’s like water. There’s an ebb and flow, a movement that never quite stops. That’s what makes it so hypnotizing.”

Her knee pressed against my leg, a helpless gesture she may not have even realized she’d made because her chest was rising and falling so rapidly.

My voice got deeper. “That’s why you can’t look away for a single moment. Because that moment might change everything. See,” I murmured, sliding my hand over her back until my fingers found the curve of her waist under the cotton of her shirt, “that pass was perfection. If one person hadn’t paid attention, if one person wasn’t exactly where they needed to be ...” I paused, watching a player dart up from midfield, watching one of the strikers hook the ball high in his direction, and the other drilled it into to corner of the net with a perfect header. The stands erupted, the players gathered to celebrate, and an unwitting smile curled my lips. Bethnal Green, the arseholes, would gain three points on the table today.

When I glanced sideways, Lia was smiling too.

“There it is,” I whispered. Her face turned, and our mouths were a hairsbreadth apart.

“What?” She spoke so quietly I could barely hear her.

I licked my bottom lip, and her navy eyes tracked the movement. “The moment you see it, how utterly perfect this game is.”

Lia blinked, backing away slightly, and I fought a wave of disappointment.

Her hand reached for her pint glass, and as she lifted it to her mouth, the one I very much wanted to taste, the sound of a loud crash and breaking glass had her jumping. Beer sloshed

over the lip of her cup, dousing the front of her shirt. She cursed, her face twisting up in frustration.

“Hold on,” I said, leaping out of my chair to snag a bar towel from Carl.

Carl headed back to the kitchen to find the source of the sound, and I rubbed the back of my neck as Lia sopped at the mess all the way down the front of her black shirt. It wasn't even remotely supposed to be cut in a sexy way, but it clung to her chest nonetheless, making the line of her bra visible against the wet material

She laughed under her breath. “What a perfect end to this day,” she said. “I'm going to smell like a frat house until I get back to my flat.”

“No spare in that bag of yours?” I asked.

Lia shook her head. “Of course, I decided I didn't want to look like a tourist today and left my backpack behind.” She continued to use the towel to sop up the beer. She looked miserable.

I glanced around again, making a split-second decision before I could think too hard on it. The couple in the corner had only looked up once but returned their attention to each other shortly after Carl had left the front.

“If you'd like a clean shirt, there's a spare room upstairs,” I told her.

Lia's hands slowed, and it took a moment for her to look up. Her eyes studied my face intently.

“Only if you want,” I said quietly. “Or I can get one for you and be right back down. There's a toilet downstairs where you could change if you'd rather.”

She set down the towel and lifted her chin to meet my gaze head-on. “I like the upstairs option.”

Bloody hell, I did too.

I took a deep breath and decided not to weigh the intelligence of walking this beautiful woman upstairs into the empty flat of my brother's pub, where I could close and lock

the door. Where there was a sofa. And a bed. Hell, a kitchen table would do at that point.

Carl returned from the kitchen.

“Everything all right?” I asked.

He nodded. “Vickie dropped a glass. All good.”

“Right.” I tilted my head at Lia. “I’m going to get her a clean shirt from upstairs.”

His eyes narrowed. I narrowed mine back.

He’d worked for my brother long enough to know there was no point in talking a McAllister out of whatever course they were on. He held up his hands. “I’ll be right here. Where I always am,” he muttered.

I smiled.

Lia set her hand on my back, and I turned. Her head just barely cleared my shoulder as she stared up at me. “Shall we?” I asked.

She answered me with a lopsided grin, and I led her upstairs.

## LIA

Two options lay in front of me as I followed the hot man with the phenomenal ass up the narrow stairs that led to the space above the pub.

1- I was going to be chopped into a thousand pieces because he was a murderer.

2- I was going to get epically laid by the most beautiful man I'd ever seen.

And he wasn't even just beautiful. Considering I almost orgasmed just listening to him talk about soccer, I figured my chances of satisfaction were pretty freaking high.

“Do you live up here?”

He glanced over his shoulder, sending me a grin so boyish and delicious that I almost tripped.

Smooth, Lia.

“No, it's mainly used for storage, but there is a place to crash in a pinch.” He stopped on the landing, sliding his hands above the doorframe until he found the key.

The doorknob was beautiful, as was the paneling on the deep red door. “That's beautiful,” I murmured, touching one of the raised edges.

“Have a thing for doors, do you?”

I tell you what I had a thing for. British men named Jude with long legs and broad shoulders, a jaw cut like granite, and

the kind of scruff lining it that made me feel downright naughty. But sure, we could talk about doors.

I smiled. “Don’t you ever look at doors like that and wonder who made it?”

Jude unlocked the door and pushed it open for me. “Not particularly,” he admitted wryly.

The room above the pub wasn’t large, but it was clean. Plaster walls painted a soft gray had boxes stacked along one side. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined in beautiful trim looked out at the street below.

At the back of the room were two identical, white-painted doors with antique crystal doorknobs. He opened one door and stuck his head in, appearing with something large and white in his hand.

“It’ll be big, but it’s clean,” he said, eyes holding mine steadily. Finally, I could see them clearly. They were a deep, clear green.

Honestly, I felt a little relieved I could see all of him clearly, so I took the shirt and walked through the second door, which wasn’t more than a large closet. A closet it may have been, but it gave me a necessary moment to breathe. As I quietly tugged off my beer-soaked shirt, I studied a few pictures taped up on the wall. Jude had his arm slung around a guy with a similar face. Based on how Jude looked now—I’d pegged him in his early thirties—the picture was easily fifteen years old, both men wearing a team jersey in bright green. A soccer jersey, I thought with a tiny smile. No wonder. Maybe he played in high school.

Before I left the privacy of the closet, I took a moment to be completely vain. I tugged my phone out of my purse and used the camera feature to gauge just how shitty I looked after my run in the rain.

With a wince, I caught sight of my hair. Frizz-tastic. The phone went back in my purse, and I did what I could with my hands and an elastic band, trying to wind my hair into a bun and anchor it on the top of my head. With a pinch of my

cheeks and a deep breath to gather myself, I had to take a beat. You know the kind. Where you recognize the ramifications of being alone in a room with a bed and a hot British man who made my thighs squeeze together when he said things like, *utterly perfect*.

“Would you like another drink?” he called out.

A metaphorical door opened with those five words. Sometimes, just by nature of studying what I did, I thought about situations as if they were playing out in a book. Was the character making a sympathetic choice? Could the reader understand why—based on previous history, cultural norms, established patterns in the narrative—why things were decided in the way they were?

In my silence, he spoke quietly. “We don’t have to, of course. But I’d be remiss not to offer the opportunity for privacy in light of our conversation earlier.”

He was giving me an out. We could go straight back downstairs, and he wouldn’t hold it against me. We’d take our places where we sat earlier and probably engage in some heavy, harmless flirting until I left to catch my train back to Oxford. I’d never see him again, but I’d go home with a story about the night I wished I indulged a bit. I’d go back to my small flat, get in bed alone, and I’d wonder what would have happened if I’d stayed for an extra drink.

The strap of my purse bit into my skin where I clutched it in my fingers. On one hand, I was not a *sleep with a guy I’d met that night* kind of girl. No judgment, I had friends back in Washington who were that type. More power to them and all that. It just wasn’t me.

Partially because I’d never met anyone who’d made me want to sleep with them on the night I met them.

And Jude just about had me panting on that stool, whispering naughty soccer things in my ear. Want wasn’t the problem.

If I left, if I took the out, I’d regret it.

I'd wonder. I'd wish. And I'd lament the fact that I didn't take a chance and learn how a man like him kissed. And just about more than anything, I hated feeling like I'd missed out.

"What the hell, right?" I whispered.

I shoved the jacket back into my purse and took a deep breath before I left the tiny room.

His back was to me when I cleared the doorway, and Lord, his frame was glorious. Tall and broad with strong shoulders and slim hips. His hands were big where they held the whiskey bottle, his arms roped with muscle and a few tattoos that I couldn't make out.

"Sounds perfect."

For a moment, he froze, like he hadn't expected me to say that. But when he turned, a pleased grin covered his stupid-handsome face.

"It may be a rubbish drink." Setting the whiskey down, he crouched in front of one of the boxes on the floor. "I have ginger ale and soda water, both room temp."

When I grimaced, he laughed.

"I know," he said. "It's a tragedy, to be sure."

"Ginger ale, I guess."

Jude went to work, fixing two rubbish drinks while I wandered the space and trailed my hand along a small bar cart lined with bottles in all shapes and sizes.

Opposite of the boxes was a daybed, and I smiled at the sight of it.

"A thing for beds then too?" he asked. This question had his voice pitched lower, and the suggestiveness was obvious.

"I wanted a bed like that when I was younger." The comforter was basic blue and white stripes and adorned by a simple white pillow. But the frame, an ornate white and gold metal, was straight out of my ten-year-old fantasy.

"And your parents didn't oblige? The horror," he teased.

I sighed. It didn't feel like the kind of night when you said things like, *well, my dad was a shit ton older than my mom, he died of a heart attack when I was little, she freaked out and decided being a single mom wasn't her jam so she bolted, leaving us in the custody of my older half-brother.*

"I shared a room with my twin sister until we were fourteen, so bunk beds were pretty much a done deal."

He hummed, bracing one of those broad shoulders on the wall. His dark eyes tracked me as I continued exploring. "Twins, eh?"

I gave him a warning look. "If you make a dirty joke right now, I'm out of here."

"I wouldn't dream of it." He held out a lowball glass.

Approaching slowly, I realized that Jude had hardly moved since I changed my shirt. He'd let me move toward him, at my pace, in my time.

Our fingers brushed when I took the drink, and it caused the slightest lift of his chin, a slow inhale expanding his chest.

"The picture in there." I tilted my head toward the space where I changed. "That your brother?"

Jude lifted his dark eyebrows briefly. "It is. I forgot that was in there."

"He doesn't look much younger than you."

"Only about two years between me and Lewis," he answered. No other offer of information, but I suppose that wasn't the point of this little exchange. If all we wanted to do was talk, we could've carried our asses back downstairs.

"You were wearing a soccer jersey," I accused. "No wonder you got so touchy."

The smile that spread over his face after I said that could only be described as predatory. Anticipatory.

Yet again ... my thighs squeezed helplessly. Holding his eyes, I raised the glass to my lips and sipped slowly. Then swallowed painfully.



It was *horrible*.

For someone whose brother owned a bar, he made epically shitty drinks. Or ... maybe I just hated whiskey. I'd never actually tried it before.

Jude took a sip of his own, licking his bottom lip as he lowered the glass. "You must enjoy a good sparring match to keep poking this particular bear."

I grinned. "Maybe I do."

He straightened to his full height, and flutters exploded in my belly. He'd cover me entirely should we stretch out on that bed. He'd blot out the light and be able to dominate me as he saw fit.

"I'm not surprised Americans en masse don't understand," he said. After another sip, he set his glass down. "You're not the best at it, so naturally, it's rubbish."

I took a sip too, but I kept my glass gripped in my hands because the gentle tone of his voice just before he took a prowling step toward me made me feel ... inexperienced. No, I was no shaking virgin at twenty-two, but Jude was clearly older. Clearly better at this than I was.

"Such a tragedy that we're not," I whispered. "All that flopping on the ground, pretending to be injured. Sounds like a tough game to master."

Jude emitted a shocked gust of laughter. But his eyes glowed. My cheeks felt warm.

"You are ..." his voice trailed off, but his gaze tracked down the entire length of my body.

I backed up a step, my shoulders hitting the wall behind me.

"I'm what?" I set my glass down on top of the box.

"Frustrating." He took another step.

"I've heard that a time or two." My hands curled into fists to keep from reaching for him.

“I’ll bet you have,” he murmured. His fingers picked at the hem of the shirt, which skirted my hips. He managed to wind some of it in his grasp without touching me. My skin burned from that lack of touch. I wanted his big hands everywhere. “I’ll bet you love driving people insane.”

My chest rose and fell rapidly.

“Look at you.” He fisted the shirt, yet instead of tugging me toward him, he used that to anchor me in place. “It’s right there in those blue eyes how badly you want to say something else.”

I rubbed my thighs together. He noticed.

My chin tilted up in challenge. “You think you’ve got me pegged?” Now it was me who licked my bottom lip, and he huffed air from his nose, a bull ready to charge if I waved my flag just one more time. “You don’t know me.”

“Isn’t that the appeal?” His other hand rose, just the pad of his thumb landing in the middle of my mouth. “Don’t tell me it’s not.” He dragged my bottom lip down, and oh, my gawd, I was panting audibly. “The only thing you know right now is that you want me over top of you. You want me between those pretty, long legs.” He dipped down and ran his nose along my cheekbone, his mouth ghosting over my skin. Just shy of touching me.

My hand shot out and grabbed the waist of his jeans, my fingers curling over the edge, hot, hard skin against the back of my knuckles. Jude pulled his head back and stared down at me, his forest green eyes unreadable, unfathomably deep.

His jaw clenched. “Am I wrong?”

“Do you have protection?” I asked. That was my answer to his question, and the way his eyes flared, he knew it.

“Back pocket.”

My hand slid from the waistband, and I brushed against his length as it did. He inhaled sharply, and oh, more thigh squeezing because he was not wrong. I did want him over top of me and between my legs. I wanted this night of crazy after a day of feeling inexplicably sad and lonely. I wanted to find

some physical comfort in the arms of this man who I'd just met.

Maybe it was irresponsible. Maybe it was ill-advised. But it didn't *feel* like either of those things.

Every so often, I felt an urge to do something insane like this. Normally, I could cap it. I could seek a safer comfort elsewhere in my life.

But no one was here to stop this impulse and allow me this outlet. Just me and him, about to tip over the edge together.

When I reached into his back pocket, I felt the foil packet. Okay, so he walked around with condoms. But if I looked and sounded like him, I'd probably do the same thing. It was a miracle half of London wasn't here tossing panties at him.

The hand on my lip trailed down my jaw, only stopping when he gripped the back of my neck. Hard.

His eyes flared at whatever he saw on my face. So what if he had a condom in his pocket? It was possible that this night was as strange for him as it was for me. A role was being played by both of us.

It was possible he didn't make a habit of sleeping with bedraggled tourists, just like I didn't make a habit of falling into bed with a perfect stranger.

But tonight ... the role was exactly what I needed. Maybe it was what he needed too.

I tossed the condom onto the bed and met his gaze straight on. "Are you going to stare at me all night or put your money where your mouth is?"

My words were swallowed immediately when he dived, his mouth taking mine in a fearsome kiss.

Arms wrapped around his neck, fingers digging into his thick hair like I'd done it a million times, and Jude angled his head, sweeping his tongue into my mouth like he'd done it the same amount of times. My hips angled out, his angled in, and then he boosted me up against the wall with one strong hand under my ass.

I wasn't entirely sure anymore who was the bull and who was waving the flag because as he sucked my tongue into his mouth and pulled a whimper from my lungs, it felt like we were charging headlong at each other, destined for a collision of epic proportions.

His hands ripped at my clothes, mine did the same.

There was very little finesse as teeth tugged at lips in sharp bites. He gripped the flesh underneath my leggings in big, grasping hands, and he muttered dirty words into the skin of my neck when I shoved his zipper down and wrapped my hand around him.

The clean shirt fell to the floor, and he tugged my bra strap off my shoulder, sucking kisses covering the hot skin he found underneath the black lace.

I writhed against the wall, trying, trying, trying to scramble higher, get closer, touch more of him.

His kisses were dirty, his tongue alone making me see stars as he pushed it rhythmically against mine. I tugged fiercely on the strands of his hair until he pulled back. His hair was a disaster, his lips swollen from my kisses.

“Look at you,” he whispered. With surprising tenderness, he brushed his knuckles along my collarbone. “Bloody gorgeous.”

Was it a cliché to admit in my head that a man like him, with the eyes and the smile and the muscles, saying I was bloody gorgeous in that accent had me ready to do backflips if that was what he asked for?

“Bed. Now.”

At my command, he grinned.

He walked us over, and when my ass hit the bed, he didn't immediately fall on top of me. He towered above the bed, staring down at my half-naked form sprawled over the comforter.

“Leggings. Off.”

I raised an eyebrow at his return command, but my hands slowly pushed them down my hips. He sucked in a sharp breath when I kicked them off. My fingers trailed a delicate circle around my belly button, and he bared his teeth like I'd just shown him something delicious that he couldn't wait to devour.

His jeans were shucked off quickly, and I tried to keep my eyes from widening.

Because hot damn, he was bloody gorgeous. No, it didn't sound as good in my head with my boring American voice, but when Jude covered himself and prowled over top of me, I didn't care if it didn't sound as good in my head.

I stopped thinking altogether and let him warm the parts of me that were cold, let him suck and kiss and taste.

I let him pin my hands down on the bed.

I let him push my thigh up over his shoulder.

I let him roll his hips in sharp snapping thrusts until I screamed in back-arching relief.

Say words and phrases into my skin that I'd never had a man say to me.

And before long, after he shouted my name and stared down at me like he'd just seen a glimpse of friggin' heaven, I let him sag on top of me, sweat-soaked back and muscle-covered arms slick against my own skin.

I let him kiss me softly as we both came down from an impossibly high peak. My heart hammered in my chest, and I had the thought that I should get up. That I should get dressed and go get on the train.

He pulled away from my body, and I winced, which made him grin unrepentantly. I slugged him in the arm, and he laughed, pulling me back into his arms.

"I should go," I whispered even as my arm slung over his abs, and I kissed the skin over his still-pounding heart.

"Just stay for a little," he whispered back. "I'm not quite ready for tonight to be done, love."

My eyes drifted shut. “Just for a little.”

Everything caught up with me when I did. Exhaustion seeped into my bones, from the day and this unexpected evening, a lovely weight tethering me to that bed.

Just for a little.

It was my last thought until the sun rose.

**LIA**

What a cliché.

When you pry your eyes open to an unfamiliar room with the unfamiliar weight of an unfamiliar man's arm over your waist, it's one thing. But when all of those things hit you after you realize that you've spent the night somewhere you shouldn't have, jeopardizing the first meeting with your intellectual idol, it's enough to make a grown-ass woman break down into tears.

"Shiiiiit," I muttered under my breath.

A quick glance over my shoulders revealed Jude, sound asleep in all his naked glory. In the bright light of the next morning, he was so beautiful it wasn't even right.

The blanket he'd pulled over us only covered him to his waist, and Lord, his chest and abs were enough to make me pause when I really didn't have time to be pausing. His pecs were the size of freaking dinner plates, and each neat square of muscle lining his stomach was holy shit perfect. What a waste to spend the entire night with a body like that and only enjoy it once.

I wasn't embarrassed that I'd slept with him because, after that experience, I don't think any woman would have doubts. That was *scream it from the rooftops* sex. But even with that knowledge, I inched my way out of the bed slowly, doing my very best not to wake the sleeping hottie.

What I didn't want was the awkward exchange. He'd said it himself; the appeal of the entire exchange was the

anonymity. He knew nothing about me, and I knew nothing about him. And I wasn't particularly in any position to start anything, even if he wanted.

As I tugged on my leggings and looked back at him again, his big hand sprawled over his muscled chest, I wasn't sure my pride could handle it very well if he brushed me off upon waking. My shirt was in a heap by my feet, and when I bent over to pick it up, he moved, groaning deep in his chest before he rolled onto his side.

The groan. I had to close my eyes when I thought of him making that sound the night before.

Yeah, I'd be retelling the story of that night for generations because I'd earned the right.

At one point, I had a vague recollection of that voice groaning, *bloody perfect*.

A sound from the street below had me snapping out of the post-coital recollection because I needed to get my ass to Paddington to catch a train back if I had any hope of getting to my meeting with Catherine Atwood on time.

She'd offered me this chance when I met her at one of her guest lectures back home in Seattle, and no way was I going to blow it because a hot guy made me see stars.

Not only would I be a cliché but I'd also kick my own ass for my stupidity.

With my purse and jacket tucked tightly under my arms, I paused by the bar cart when I spied a napkin and a pen.

*Just in case you need more sports tips*, I scrawled, followed by my cell number. It was enough finality that I could walk away from the tiny room without obsessing. There'd be no questioning whether I should message or call or casually drop by the pub for another pint because I had no way to reach him. With a deep breath, I closed the door quietly and crept down the stairs. When I turned the corner, I froze when I spied the bartender sitting at one of the stools.

His eyebrows rose slowly, then he cleared his throat, turning his attention back to the white mug sitting in front of



him.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Morning.” I motioned to the door. “I’m guessing you can lock up behind me.”

He rolled his lips, clearly hiding a smile as he nodded.

“Good.” I hitched my purse.

Carl, I think his name was, turned slowly on the stool. His cheeks looked a little pink, and I found his embarrassment more endearing than I should. His eyes could hardly hold mine as he stood. “Coffee for the train, dear? I’ve got a takeaway cup.”

I smiled. “That would be amazing, thank you.”

He nodded, tugging on the door that closed off the bar. He deftly poured the steaming, black liquid into a tan cup before he looked up again. “How’ dya take it?”

“A couple of sugars if you have them.”

He snagged a few packets from one of the table holders, then set them on the bar. Gratefully, I picked it up and tucked the sugars into my purse. “You’re an angel, Carl.”

His smile was soft. “That’s the first time I’ve ever been called that particular name, but you’re welcome all the same.” His eyes darted back toward the stairs. “Far to go?”

“Oxford.”

He whistled. “Best get moving then. It’ll be busy first thing in the morning.”

Holding up the cup, I smiled. “Thanks again.”

For the coffee.

And not treating me like I’d done the walk of shame through an actual bar when, in fact, that was exactly what I’d done.

What a strange turn of events, I thought as I hustled my ass to the train station. The day before, I left my flat expecting a

fairly easy day of seeing some of the sights I hadn't seen yet. I saw some sights, all right.

The station was packed, given it was a Monday morning, and the soaring ceiling of glass and iron was high enough that I never felt claustrophobic as I waited in a jostling line to hop on the train I needed. I was at the back of it, though, so by the time the doors slid shut behind me, I settled on the floor of one of the connecting cars between trains, my head resting on the hard plastic as I listened to the chatter around me.

People visiting. People going off to work. Or like me, on their way to school.

I hadn't traveled much, which most people found surprising, given my brother's job in the NFL. But when Logan played, we were in school, and his mom—our nana—stayed with us. Being in a place like this was a culture change that made my blood hum happily. Days like the one I'd had, feeling lonely, wasn't normal for me.

Maybe the night before, the hours I'd spent with Jude, was the reset I needed because my loneliness was long gone as I sat on the floor of that fast-moving train. I couldn't really see any of the blurred scenery passing because of where I was sitting—the buildings and cars and communities that sprawled out from London—but I felt at ease, all of the ickiness from before a distant memory. I sighed and took the last lukewarm sip of the coffee Carl had so generously given me.

My phone buzzed in my purse and I pulled it out. An email from Catherine Atwood caught my attention on the notifications, and I blew a gusty sigh of relief when I saw it.

*Running behind. Will meet you thirty minutes later than we arranged.*

*BEST, Catherine Atwood, PhD*

Maybe the ghosts of the Brontë sisters, who I thought of as my patron saints if I had any, were looking out for me. They saw my opportunity for the epic shag and helped a sister out. It made me smile to imagine it.

The second notification also had me smiling, but for a different reason.

**Finn: Second date with Keeley went great. We're going out again tomorrow.**

My thumbs flew across the screen as I replied to my best friend.

**Me: OMG I TOLD YOU**

**ME: Didn't I tell you she didn't actually think you were a nerd?**

**FINN: You did. She doesn't even mind that I'm working a thousand hours a week right now.**

**ME: An excellent trait for someone dating a doctor.**

**FINN: Future doctor. I hardly have time to sleep right now. Is it stupid to try to date someone I actually LIKE?**

**ME: Shut up. Go out with her again. I'll just never speak to you anymore because you'll be happy and busy and becoming a doctor and sucking face with her all the time.**

**FINN: True. You'll probably never see me when you get back either. I know how you feel about PDA.**

**FINN: Bauer and Claire are the WORST, btw. I saw them last week, and I swear, he forgot I was there at one point when she kissed him.**

That made me laugh softly because normally, I did hate PDA. I teased Claire about the fact that she and Bauer couldn't

keep their hands off of each other, but in a strange way, her new relationship—and Finn’s, for that matter—made it easier to be where I was. She had someone. Someone who loved her fiercely, no matter how caught off guard we’d all been by my quiet sister’s relationship with the bad boy snowboarder.

**Me: You’ll have to manage them in my absence.**

**ME: Gotta go, my train is approaching the station.**

**FINN: ?? You’re just getting back to Oxford??**

Yeah, not touching that one with a ten-foot pole. I tucked my phone away as I hauled myself back up to my feet, following the flow of people who exited the train along with me at the Oxford railway station. The university of Oxford wasn’t a typical college, centered in one place within a city. Depending on where you needed to go, it could take another forty minutes from the train station until you reached your destination.

After two weeks, I finally felt like I had a handle on the whole “getting around” thing. At home, it was so easy to just ... hop in the car. Here, it was like a whole *thing*. Figuring out the best/fastest way to arrive where you needed to go.

Oxford was smaller than London, obviously, though equally steeped in history. It still felt like I was walking through a movie set as I made my way back to my place. I skipped up the narrow stairs to my second floor flat and unlocked the bright blue door. With a glance at the clock, I had just enough time to change, run a brush through my hair, slap some mascara on, and get to Catherine’s office at Oriel College.

The mirror in my tiny bathroom had me grimacing because *whoo boy*, my hair looked like I’d spent the night having sex with someone and then bolting out the door. With a yank of a brush and a little product, I was able to braid it and wind the full length into a sedate bun at the base of my skull.

My black shirt still held a trace of beer smell, so I stripped that off and tossed it into the hamper in the corner. The leggings stayed, as did the flats, and I topped them with a soft chambray shirt and a simple gold necklace.

I shoved an apple from the tiny kitchenette into my purse, munching on it on my way to her office.

By the time I got there, I beat our postponed meeting time by three minutes. Just enough to have a nervous pit swirling in my belly.

I loved school. Loved learning. And I came this close to blowing off this first meeting with Catherine when she was doing me a huge favor by agreeing to allow me into the research cohort she was overseeing. My advisor at UW about cried tears of joy when I asked for the credits equal to a class for one semester in order to do it.

This was what you called a no-friggin'-brainer.

When I raised my hand to knock on her office door, I took a second to gather myself.

Whatever urge I'd felt yesterday, whatever feelings had swamped me during my day in London, those had to stay the frick away from me. Leaving my family, leaving my entire life for a few months had nothing to do with epic shags or morose palace viewings. I came to learn and get one step closer to figuring out what I wanted to do with all these years of education.

"You can do this," I told myself.

I knocked, and she called for me to come in.

From her seat behind her massive desk, Catherine glanced at me over her black-rimmed glasses. "Morning, Miss Ward. Thank you for being willing to wait for me."

"No problem." I took a seat across from her when she gestured to one of the leather chairs.

She set her pen down and leaned back in her chair, assessing me carefully. "Let me remind you, simply because you're not taking a typical class, this will be no walk in the

park. I'll expect world-class work from you, Lia, because that's what I expect from everyone who learns under me."

"I understand." I took a spiral-bound notebook and my favorite purple pen out of my backpack. "And I am beyond ready to get started."

She grinned. "Good."

As she talked, I listened, I wrote faster than my brain could keep up with, and as I sat in the chair, my memories of Jude faded, disappearing like a fast-moving train.

**JUDE**

The moment I opened my eyes and found myself alone in that awful little bed, I knew the day would turn to complete and utter shit. A glance at my phone, left discarded on the floor in a pile of the clothes that had been torn from my body with surprising alacrity, showed a time that I hadn't slept to in years.

Sitting up, I felt aches in my back and grinned to myself.

Sore from sex at thirty-one. What a joke I was. Not just that but she'd snuck from the room without waking me like I was some drunken tryst she desperately wanted to avoid. I could hardly hold that against her, though, as it had been the driving force behind my impulsive actions. That woman, beautiful and bold and unafraid to challenge me, had no bloody clue who I was.

Not that I was someone who got mobbed on the streets, especially when I came into London. But when she looked at me, those big blue eyes held no expectation, no weighty anticipation of what I might be like because of what I did.

And in my life, it was glorious to have that moment of respite.

Made all the more glorious when I heard the heavy footsteps of my brother tromping up the stairs to the flat.

"Are you decent?" he called from the door. "Or do you have a bird balancing on your balls?"

I rolled my eyes. “Bloody Carl,” I muttered, standing to tug my trousers back up over my legs. “You can come in.”

Lewis shoved the door open, and I glared.

He laid a hand on his chest. “I’m gutted.”

“Are you?”

“Imagine my surprise when I come in this morning, and Carl informs me that my paragon of a big brother took an American up to my flat for a shag in my pub. I’ve never even done that.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Fine. Once or twice before I married Jo.”

“Where were you last night?”

“Had to go help Mum and Dad with something. I didn’t know you were going to stop by. I always ask when you’re here, and you don’t actually come.” He smiled. “If I’d known, I would’ve forced you to come with me.”

Guilt had me grimacing. My brother, though I loved him, did have a terrible habit of trying to smooth over the rough, dysfunctional edges within our little family. I hardly talked to our parents anymore, a fact that bothered him immensely. But in fairness, they weren’t complete arseholes to him.

“I think I like how I spent my evening better, thank you.”

Lewis laughed. “She must have been fit as all fuck if you took a go at her. I haven’t heard about you with a woman in bloody ages.”

A flash of Lia, uninvited, swept through my mind. Back braced against the wall while she waited for me to kiss her. Yeah ... she’d been that and more. Not that I particularly wanted to discuss that with my arsehole brother.

I shoved at his shoulder. “Put a sock in it, Lewis. I’m allowed a night of fun every once in a while, yeah?”

“You’d be a lot more enjoyable to be around if you had nights like that more often.”



Rolling my eyes, I decided not to argue that one with him. It was the great argument between me and my family. Our parents—humble, hardworking stock who came from humble, hardworking stock—couldn't understand sacrificing my life to playing a game. They were farmers, a cog in a wheel that kept the world, the very framework of society moving. And to them, my career was silly. Shallow.

But they'd never understood.

In that game, I found the great love of my life—the black and white ball and the green grass of the pitch kept me centered. Kept me driving forward and gave me purpose when everything else in my life felt uncertain. A place that I could carve out my legacy and make an impact that would far outlast my days playing the game.

Until the past few seasons, where age was catching up with me far faster than I would've liked. Lewis, who did love football, simply wished that I was more present with our family. Or at least put in an attempt, which was the same thing he wished from our parents, who were just as stubborn.

Tugging my shirt back on, I watched Lewis look down at the bottles on the bar cart. “You drinking my whiskey, you prick?”

“Sod off. It was already open.”

He laughed. “I can't believe you actually drank during the season.”

“I hardly finished either,” I said, quite defensively too. “Less than half a beer and probably two sips of your whiskey.”

Lewis shook his head.

“You're here early,” I said.

His gaze snapped from the bottles. “Yeah. When Carl told me my big brother not only visited without being guilted into it but also *slept* here, I decided it warranted investigation.”

My eyes rolled without any conscious decision on my part. “I don't have to be guilted into visiting.”

“Don’t you?” Lewis tapped his chin. “Yes, I vaguely remember that one time six years ago.”

The truth of it pricked, just a little.

“It’s not like you hop over to Shepperton much either, little brother.” I wiped a hand down my face. “I’m pretty busy during the season, you know.”

“Everyone’s busy in their own way, Jude,” he said evenly. “I worked all day on bookkeeping for the pub, then had to drive out to Mum and Dad’s to help.”

“With what?” Guilt, just as he’d said, had me asking.

“They got some new creep feeding pens that needed set up. Two of his workers are sick, so he needed an extra set of hands with that and measuring the lambs.”

All the things we’d had to help with as boys, all the things I’d hated to do. “I tried to send them a check last year, told him to hire more people so they didn’t have to work as hard.”

“Some people like working hard on their own land,” Lewis answered. “Not everything can be handled with a check, big brother.”

“So I gathered when he mailed it back to me,” I said with a wry smile.

My brother finally cracked a grin. “Feel free to toss any money you please at the pub. We need to replace the booths. Can’t have cracks in the seats if your sainted arse is going to grace them now.”

“I need to get to work,” I said. “If you’re quite finished.”

He sighed. “Even a night spent shagging doesn’t relax you, brother.”

“It wasn’t a *night spent shagging*,” I muttered. “We just ... fell asleep afterward.”

Lewis hooted with glee. “Imagine the paps running with that headline. *Shepperton footballer gets a good night of beauty sleep*.” He shook his head.

I shoved at him. “That’s not all I did, you prat.”

Making my brother laugh was a small moment when I had to recognize why I'd stopped at The Red Lion the night before. Why I'd fallen so easily into bed with Lia. Everything in my life that was wrapped up in my job wasn't simple anymore. Not after a decade of being exactly that.

The nature of my relationship with my parents—that was to say, fairly nonexistent—meant I couldn't show up at the farm where Lewis and I had been raised and offer to help them with something like my brother had done the night before.

But I could stop and see my little brother to share a beer and a laugh.

And in his absence, Lia had offered me a delectable alternative, something to reignite that burn behind my chest, the one that used to fuel me on the pitch.

Lewis held the door open for me. “Hungry? I could see if Maggie'd make some eggs.”

“I'm starved. Breakfast would be smart before I go in to talk to Conworth.”

He looked over his shoulder. “Ugly match on Saturday.”

“Yeah.” One-nil against Crystal Palace in a complete and utter slogfest. That was partially why I was sore today, not simply from Lia with the big blue eyes.

Lewis grunted. “Need to do better than that. They're gonna bench your arse for the new French kid. He's bloody fast, isn't he?”

My smile was tight. “I'm aware, Lewis. But thank you for the reminder.”

My mobile buzzed, and a text from my manager flashed across the screen, followed by a few I'd missed the evening before.

**Conworth: Before you work out, meet me in my office for a chat. You need to do better this weekend.**

Everyone in my life wanted me to do better. Do more.

My manager wanted me to be faster.

My brother simply wanted me to try.

A small corner of white caught my attention, a warped image of serviette appearing behind the bottle of amber liquid on the bar cart. I walked over, smiling when I saw feminine handwriting across the surface.

“Brilliant,” I whispered, tucking it into my pocket.

My life wasn't without a heavy load of complications, but just knowing I wasn't the only one who felt what I'd felt, I walked downstairs to my asshole brother and his empty pub with a wide grin on my face.

**LIA**

The next couple of weeks had a rhythm I hadn't established in the first two weeks on this side of the Atlantic.

My body adjusted, and even though I still needed copious amounts of coffee every morning to wake, I no longer felt like a zombie by dinnertime. At home, the chaos of my days involved a larger coverage of space. Running errands and appointments could easily take me across one end of Seattle to the other. At Oxford, I covered a fairly small area. I found places I liked to eat, places I liked to read, places I liked to study, and places I liked to lie on the grass and stare at the sky like my research topic would magically fall from the fluffy white clouds and plop onto my face.

I didn't really make friends with any impossibly fashionable British girls, like I'd imagined I would, which was apparently quite normal when you were studying abroad for a semester. The girl who lived next door to me, Alyishia—at Oxford for a semester focusing on pre-Raphaelite art—was the closest thing I had to a friendly relationship. We'd traded about seven sentences when we passed each other in the hallway.

I ate a lot of bangers and mash and beef pies because I was *in Great Britain*, and obviously, I would gorge myself on all the meat and carbs I could possibly fit into my skinny jeans. Scones with clotted cream were the other piece I might regret once I finally brought myself to step on a scale, but each time I could continue to close my pants, I thanked my DNA for

allowing me to stay slim despite my horrific eating habits while in jolly old England.

I met with Professor Atwood twice a week, and to my utter frustration, she nixed almost every single idea I came up with for my semester project. And among all of that, I hadn't heard a single word from Mr. Excellent One-Night Stand. I annoyed myself with how frequently I checked my phone because I was not that girl. I'd dated casually, and it was fine, no romantic misery attached to anything I'd experienced, but I was not the "omg, is he going to call me soon?" girl.

The most annoying part, though, was what it did to me when I was supposed to be working, supposed to be crafting a research paper on the Brontës to equal one semester's worth of credit, and my annoying brain would drift back to random memories. The way his hand curled around my thigh when he lifted it higher against his side. The way his body caught the light in random glimpses, a bulge in his bicep when he held himself over me, the epic curve of his ass when I slid my hands down his back.

Ladies and gentlemen, it was not the thing to be thinking about when you're meeting with your advisor. My chest felt hot, and I was quite sure my forehead was popping little tiny beads of sex-memory sweat. That was right when Atwood did the thing with my stack of papers that I hated.

*Smack.*

"You can do better."

The sound of papers hitting with a rude slap on her desk would haunt me for the rest of my life. In the past three weeks, I'd heard that sound so many freaking times. Every time I sat in front of her, waiting for her to review my notes on which angle my research would take, I braced myself for when she looked up over the rim of her glasses, flipped the black and metal clip back around the edge of the papers, and tossed it toward me.

I took a deep breath. "Maybe I can't."

Her eyebrows rose slowly. "Pardon?"

I closed my eyes and fought a wave of utter exhaustion. For weeks, I'd circled around and around—unable to pinpoint which aspect of the Brontës I'd spend the next two months immersing myself in—the result without any success at forward movement.

“Maybe I can't come up with anything good.” I huffed loudly, sinking back into the chair. “Maybe I'm just destined to be someone who really, really loves their work, but I'll never pick a thread interesting enough to unspool from the rest of it. Nothing to set me apart.”

Atwood narrowed her eyes in consternation because she never, ever slumped, and I meekly adjusted my posture.

“Better, thank you,” she murmured. “Now as to the other ...” Judging by the look in her eyes, I braced myself. “What complete and utter horseshit, and if I'd known you'd roll over this easily, I never would've invited you here for Michaelmas.”

Oof. I rubbed at my chest because it felt a little bit like she'd jammed the corner of her laptop behind my rib cage or something for how badly that hurt.

When I didn't answer, she prodded a bit more gently. “Why did you say yes to this, Lia?” My mouth opened to answer, and she held up a hand. “No crap answers. This will only work if you're willing to let me push you.”

Every sarcastic answer that crowded my throat was a bitch to swallow down, but I managed it. No part of me wanted to dive into the depths with her because whenever someone wanted to excavate why I felt what I felt, I had the overwhelming urge to go skydive out of a rickety-ass plane just to avoid it.

Thoughts, unwelcome and uncomfortable, flitted just beyond reach, and my mentally shaky hands couldn't grasp onto a single one. If it were Claire sitting across from me, or my other two sisters, Molly or Isabel, if it were Finn, or my brother, Logan, or his wife, Paige, I probably could've come up with an answer for them.

This time, there were no narrowed eyes, just patient understanding on her face as she watched me search for an honest answer.

I shook my head, knitting my fingers together in my lap for a moment. It grounded me just enough to grip one thread as it whirled around in my head.

*I don't know what to do with my life, and I've been running from that for years.*

The thought was a bit too naked to share. Even thinking it left me feeling unsettled because not once had I ever admitted that to anyone.

“Come now,” she said gently. “I see something going on there in your face, Miss Ward.”

My hand rubbed my forehead. Was I sweating?

“There is,” I answered. “I just, I don't know if it helps with the issue at hand.”

Professor Atwood nodded slowly. “All right.”

“I mean, it may help. I don't know.” Focus, Lia, just freaking focus, I willed myself. I was better than this. I flew across the Atlantic to a foreign country by myself without a single ounce of anxiety medication which, let's be honest, was a giant win. I'd done all this unfamiliar stuff alone, and I'd managed amazingly. Yes, sure, I banged a hot Brit who never called or texted like a hot asshole, not that I'd checked my phone eighty thousand times just in case I missed something coming through, but I'd done really, really well. And just because I didn't know what I was doing with my life, or that I was maybe possibly using continued schooling as an escape from facing that reality didn't mean I was a screwup or anything.

I still had choices.

That stopped me short, like someone clotheslined me with a crowbar across the chest. I had choices.

The Brontës didn't.



“They didn’t have choices,” I whispered, my thoughts racing and tumbling so fast I could hardly keep up.

Atwood tilted her head. “Take me down that thought with you.”

I met her eyes. “They didn’t have a choice. The reality they lived in—the death of their mother, that women were still considered the property of their husbands, the modest income of their family, the fact that teaching was truly the only position they could take in order to make money—it was all out of their hands. I mean, we know that Anne enjoyed teaching more than the others, but Charlotte *hated* it. Yet that experience, no matter how powerless or humiliated it made her feel, shaped one of the most iconic feminist characters in classic literature.”

“Our dear Jane Eyre,” Atwood murmured, her eyes bright and excited as I rambled.

“Their lack of choices—the cage they were forced to live in—shaped everything we cherish about them.” My heart raced as I said it, and when Atwood’s face spread into a slow smile, a burst of energy spread over my middle.

“And ...?” she prompted.

Right. This was the part of master’s classes that felt ridiculously pretentious, when we had to frame everything in “super smart people speak.”

I licked my lips. “It was the awareness—the consciousness—of female independence that was impossible for them to recreate in their own lives. They created an accurate reflection of their reality, the social base they knew, but crafted characters that achieved something they had yet to achieve themselves.”

Professor Atwood leaned back in her chair, still grinning. “I like it. All three sisters? Or will you focus on one in particular?”

“I’m not sure yet. Can I let you know when we meet next?”

“Of course.”

No matter what rhythm my days had found, this was the first moment when I felt like I wasn't insane for doing this semester in London. I felt good. Tired, but good. And the exhaustion was ironic because I was sleeping like the dead every single night.

As I stood to leave, pulling my bag up over my shoulder, Professor Atwood spoke again.

“A suggestion, if you're open to it.”

“Always,” I told her.

“Have you made your pilgrimage to Mecca yet?”

Her reference to Yorkshire—where the Brontë sisters grew up, where they lived their lives—made me smile. “Ah, no. But I can't wait to go.”

“I think between now and when we meet again, you should. Spend a few days there, in fact. Immerse yourself in their world, which was vastly different than if young ladies had grown up here or in London. If you want to start outlining your paper, as you're deciding how to narrow your focus even further, I think Haworth is the best place for you to do so.”

I nodded. “Okay. I can do that.”

We set up our next meeting, and the ideas for my paper, the thought of a few days away in Haworth had me so excited, I couldn't even wait to book my train tickets until I got back to my place. I found a glossy black bench along a moss-covered brick wall and sat.

God bless the internet and all the spending money I'd saved prior to this trip because, within fifteen minutes, I had a train ticket and a double-bed room at a hotel in Haworth that used to be an old apothecary shop. And it was across the street from the Brontë Parsonage Museum.

“Now this,” I murmured, “is not bullshit at all.”

It had nothing to do with the scenery I'd see or the size of Haworth, which was a pinprick on the map compared to London. It was the feeling of rightness I had, that I was where I was supposed to be, on the path that made the most sense.

Normally, I was the flailing one, hopping around so no one noticed I had no freaking clue what I was doing half the time. If I just kept moving, I could avoid that thought I'd had in Atwood's office.

*How do I not know what the purpose of my life is?*

That thought. That was what I didn't want to dive into.

And this was the perfect movement. Exactly what I needed.

With a spring in my step, I headed back to my flat because I had three hours to pack and head to the train station.

Just as I was digging the key out for the lock on my door, my phone buzzed in my back pocket.

"Hang on, hang on, dealing with old ass locks here," I muttered, jamming my shoulder into the door.

The phone buzzed again, and I figured it was my sister Isabel because if my family had a pushy texter, it was her. I dumped my bag onto the chair by my small desk and fished my phone out.

Ohhh, hot damn. The excitement at seeing a UK number flash over my screen should've been criminal. *Warning! Reaching critical levels of hope!*

**Unknown number: Would you believe me if I told you that I'd been too busy playing football to text you sooner?**

**UNKNOWN NUMBER: It's Jude, by the way. From the pub a couple of weeks back.**

**UNKNOWN NUMBER: Now I've gone and texted three times, which is excessive, but I am sorry it took me this long. I'd love to see you again.**

As I read the texts one more time, I tried to smother the smile that bubbled up. But like any self-respecting woman

would, I tucked my phone away and packed my bags for my trip.

Jude would get a response, but not just yet.

He may have been spectacular, but his ass waited weeks to message me. Twenty-four hours wouldn't kill him.

After a quick check of the weather showed the same kinda cold, sorta rainy weather, I packed the appropriate amount of layers and waterproof boots, and I hauled my ass to Paddington Station.

It was only mildly difficult to put Jude's texts out of my head as I leaned my forehead against the glass window separating me from the rapidly moving British countryside. As it passed in front of my increasingly heavy eyelids, as the pleasant hum of the train started lulling me to sleep, I couldn't believe how exhausted I was.

Allowing myself to nap was an easy choice as the days I'd held the tired at bay were slowly catching up with me. The four-hour train ride to Haworth passed quickly, though I woke at the train station with a drool spot on my wadded up sweatshirt and a crick in my neck.

From the moment I walked through the center of the small village, I knew this was the perfect place to spend a few days to hone my project. After checking in to The Apothecary Guest House, I freshened up in the bathroom, then took my notepad and slowly wandered the steep cobblestone streets, and I remembered what Claire told me the day I talked to her at Buckingham Palace.

I ran my fingers along the mossy stone walls, damp from the air and musty with history. Closing my eyes, I tried not to think about what anyone was doing at home, what I might be missing, or what might come after this. Instead, I immersed myself. By the time I stumbled back to my hotel room after a dinner, washed my face, and brushed my teeth, my brain was whirring with ideas, and I fell face-first onto the bed. As I drifted off, I had a vague thought I should reply to Jude.

Sleep pulled mightily at me, and his handsome face was the last thing I thought of, which was probably why I had hazy dreams about the way he kissed me, the way he touched me. It explained why I rolled over the next morning and didn't give it a second thought before reaching for my phone.

Wiping the sleep from my eyes, I took a moment and read what he'd said again.

*Would you believe me if I said I'd been too busy playing football to text you sooner?*

"What a dork," I muttered. And what exactly did I want to say to him?

It wasn't like I wanted to adopt a British boyfriend. My time across the pond was finite. I sat up quickly, propping my back against the headboard, fighting a spinning sensation that rocked my head when I did.

Okay. That was weird.

Once that passed, I chugged some water because I did not have time for head spinning shit on my Brontë immersion week. Water back on the small nightstand and head clear, I fought the impulse to text one of my sisters about how to handle Jude.

Molly, the oldest, was always a solid choice for advice.

Exhibit A- her solid as a rock relationship with Washington Wolves football player, Noah Griffin. They'd been together for closing in on a year now, and if Paige didn't get a wedding to plan soon, hell would reign. Molly was the romantic. She'd swoon all over the place if I told her about Jude.

Isabel, the middle sister, might've been the single one, but she had a zero-bullshit policy when it came to men. Her sensibilities about romance were along the lines of "If I pretend it doesn't exist, maybe it won't find me." But she'd still ring my ears if I didn't text him back and see what happened if I met up with him again.

Claire—while she was the other half of my soul—would tell me to be careful. Yes, she was head over heels in love, but

she was also the cautious one. It was so easy to hear her voice. *Just make sure you meet somewhere public. Text us his picture. And don't forget protection!*

A fleeting ache behind my chest blossomed at the thought of my sisters. But part of this whole Oxford thing was being able to get through minor situations like this without them holding my hand. My thumb tapped along the edge of my purple cell phone case.

**Me: Apology is accepted, but I certainly hope that's not your best attempt at an excuse. You should go for "my goldfish died" or "I had to vacuum every day."**

**ME: I wouldn't mind seeing you again either.**

I tucked my phone away, refusing to watch for a reply. And it set the tone for the next few days. Jude never responded immediately, but it was always within a few hours. Interspersed with exploring Brontë County, reading books, scrawling an outline in my notebook, and small updates for my family, I found an entirely different pattern to my day than I'd found in Oxford.

**Jude: Haworth, eh? I grew up not too terribly far from there, but I don't get home often. It's a beautiful place.**

**ME: London isn't a terrible backup, though.**

**JUDE: I don't actually live in London. You just caught me on a night in the city.**

**ME: Where do you live? (Asks the girl who has very hazy geographical knowledge of anything other than the biggest cities in Britain)**

**JUDE: Ha. I live in Shepperton. Takes me less than an hour to drive into central London most of the time.**

My thumbs itched to google Shepperton, but I refrained. The guy hadn't even asked me out again. Between texting with Jude, I found myself wandering the same parts of Haworth over the next couple of days, saving some of my favorite places for the last days—to end on a high note, so to speak. I spent a lot of time outside, reading through *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Agnes Grey*, trying to determine which sister would get my focus. I found quiet spots to sit and stare at the countryside, scribbling furiously in my journal as I put myself in their shoes. I napped ... like three times a day, but whatever.

And it was upon waking from one of those naps that I felt my first unpleasant wave of nausea. Hand pressed to my stomach, I took a few deep breaths until it subsided. Food. I needed food.

I broke off a piece of a granola bar I kept stashed in my purse and heard my phone ding.

**Jude: When do you return from your epic adventures?**

**ME: I have two more days here. I'd like to have a rough outline of my project done before I leave, but someone keeps distracting me.**

**JUDE: Ah, yes. What a prat. Don't worry, I need to go kick a ball for three hours anyway.**

**ME: Someone punishing you?**

**JUDE: That mouth of yours, American ...**

I bit my lip. This was something we'd danced around. I snuggled back under the covers and let the sensation wash

over me. By this point, it had been over three weeks since I'd seen him, and based on the amount we'd texted since I'd arrived in Haworth, I'd see him again when I got back, if we could manage it.

**Me: Yes, I remember how much you enjoyed it, Brit.**

**JUDE: Immensely. Wish I could've enjoyed it again upon waking up.**

**JUDE: And because I have horrible time management skills, by the time I work up a more polite way to ask, I'd like not to wait another month before I get to see that lovely mouth in person.**

**ME: I think we could manage that.**

My belly fluttered until his words sank in a little.

A month.

It had been a month.

"Holy shit," I whispered. Frantically opening up my calendar app, I scrolled back to the little dot on my calendar of when I'd gotten my last period. Five weeks. I should've gotten my period.

I was late.

The kind of late that was really, really bad.

"Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit, holyyyyyyy shit."

I scrambled from the bed, tossing my phone away from me with fumbling fingers, and speared my hands in my hair when it clattered to the floor.

"I'm just late because of stress," I insisted. To myself. Because I was alone.

In a foreign country.



And possibly pregnant.

From a one-night stand.

My eyes burned. My nose tingled. My hands shook dangerously. This could not be happening.

I mean, it could happen. I remember him using a condom. But with a groan, I knew that my birth control taking had been ... hit or miss ... those first couple of weeks while I adjusted to the time difference.

Claire had been telling me for years that I should set reminders on my phone for my medication. But past advice coming back to haunt me was not what I needed.

What I needed was a freaking pregnancy test. As I leaned down to find my phone where it'd dropped on the floor, I knew I needed to call ... I didn't know. Claire. Isabel. Finn ... no, not Finn, he'd be terrible in this situation. Plus, there was the whole *in medical school and has a new girlfriend* thing. Paige. No. She'd hop on a plane and make me pee on a stick. As I mulled over my options, I noticed that the screen on my phone was on the news app, and before I could navigate away from it, I caught a glimpse of a sports headline, the top portion of someone's very familiar face in a picture.

*Hey, Jude, Don't Let Me Down* it proclaimed, a nod to the Beatles song. My hand was shaking so badly as I tried to scroll down to see the picture even though I knew—oh my sweet baby Jesus in the manger, *I knew*—by the messy dark hair and the eyes it was him.

My other hand covered my mouth as his face came into full view. In the shot, he was mid-kick, muscular leg swinging toward a ball suspended midair. His face, just as stupidly hot as I remember, was frozen in concentration, his muscular body covered in a blue and white uniform. Maybe if I wasn't freaking the fuck out, I would've thought about how insane it was that the guy I'd been text flirting with all day—the guy I'd slept with after making fun of the sport that employed him—was apparently a professional soccer player.

Football.

Whatever.

The hysterical laughter bubbled up in my throat, unbidden. I thought of his face when I said how boring the game was. I thought of his texts, telling me he'd been too busy playing football to text me sooner. Pretty soon, I was hunched over, wiping tears from my eyes because I couldn't stop the sounds coming from my mouth.

That was when it happened.

The head spinning.

The nausea.

My stomach roiled slowly, unpleasantly, and I barely made it to the bathroom before I puked.

**LIA**

“It’s fine. It’ll be fine.”

I’d said it a thousand times since I hastily packed my shit and hopped back on a train to Oxford. Sorry, Brontës, but I needed to be back in my own flat if I was going to find out I was carrying a little baby soccer player *inside my body*.

I groaned. Also for the thousandth time.

Maybe I’d just had a bad breakfast. Or lunch. Or tea.

My pace picked up as I booked it from the station back to my place. Yes. I liked that train of thought.

And honestly, I had to stick with it because as I approached the building that I would call home for a few months, I knew I absolutely had to convince myself it was true until I was safely ensconced behind locked doors and out of sight.

Have you ever seen someone fumble with a bottle of champagne? The really big expensive ones that would probably kill someone if you used it as a weapon. Molly got one for a party once, some fancy Amazon shindig for work that we were all invited to. She struggled to open it, and because it got jostled, the bubbles were *angry*, looking for a place to go once the pressure was released.

Once she got the cork off, oh, did they explode.

I imagined that happening inside my poor body. I could hardly pay attention to any aspect of my surroundings, wearing veritable blinders the entire time I left Haworth, the

entire time I was on the train staring blankly out the window, and the entire time I hoofed it back to my flat.

So much pressure was building in me that the moment that cork came out, holy shit, I was going to erupt like a hormonal Vesuvius. Tears. Snot. Splotchy skin.

Somewhere, in that part of me that hated putting labels on shit like this, I knew exactly what this was.

Panic.

It felt like bottled panic.

Even putting a name to that emotion had my skin vibrating at a dangerous frequency as I took the steps up to my flat. My teeth clenched. My fingers curled into tight balls.

As I hit the top step, my breath sawed in and out of my lungs like I'd just run a freaking marathon. Alishiya was coming out of her apartment with a polite smile on her face. I knew the moment she saw all that angry, bubbling panic because her eyebrows bent in concern.

“Are you all right?”

Tight-lipped, I gave her a, “Mm-hmm,” in response because honestly, I couldn't handle anything besides that.

She didn't push, which I would thank her for later. She must not have three sisters and a mama bear mother figure because holy hell, if I was at home right now, they'd be *all up* in my face.

“Shit,” I whispered, my voice wavering, my chin wobbling.

What a stupid thought to have in my current predicament. *If I was at home right now.*

The first tear slipped out, and it took every shred of self-control to hold in the sob that wanted to follow it. My hand was shaking so badly that the key clanged in the door. From behind me, Alishiya laid a gentle hand on my shoulder.

“Let me help you,” she said, in her lovely Scottish accent. The key taken from my hand, I pressed my fist against my

mouth like a fucking cork because all the things had to stay right where they were for just five more seconds.

The door unlocked, and I gave her a grateful look. But honestly, if I tried to talk ... if I opened my mouth even a little ... I'd lose everything I'd held in for the past five and a half hours since I puked up my granola bar.

She smiled. "It'll be all right. Whatever it is."

With a jerky nod, I slid into my apartment and closed the door behind me. For a minute, it served as the only thing keeping me from crumpling down onto the floor. My phone buzzed, and I was slow in pulling it out of my backpack because I had a feeling it was Jude. I'd dropped off our conversation really freaking fast once the whole *I might be pregnant and holy shit, he plays professional soccer* bombshell hit.

I dumped my bag onto the floor and lurched forward to my little couch, fumbling with my purse as I did because I needed one thing.

I needed Claire.

Ignoring the text notifications, I went straight for the FaceTime. We were not even messing around with phone calls. The camera pulled up while I waited for her to pick up, and I winced. I looked like a crazy person.

When the call connected, when I saw her smiling face—identical to mine, but like, not crazy looking—the cork slipped.

Claire's smile disappeared immediately. "What's wrong?"

My chin wobbled.

"Oh my gosh, what's wrong?" Now *her* chin wobbled. "Lia, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I ..." I whispered, but my voice was practically inaudible. "I'm not hurt."

"Okay." She sighed. But her face, it was all scrunchy and worried. "Talk to me because my thoughts are going

everywhere from brain tumor, to you were robbed, to I don't even know."

I exhaled a laugh, but even that sounded pained.

"Do I need to get on a plane?"

I shook my head. "No, I just ... I need you to be here with me while I do something."

"Okay." Claire looked off camera and shook her head, waving her boyfriend, Bauer, away when he said something. "Hang on, Lee, let me move to the bedroom."

Her camera whirled, and I tried not to focus on the movement, pinching my eyes shut when that didn't work because the last thing I needed to do was puke while on FaceTime. Gross. Hearing the click of a door, I opened my eyes, and Claire was sitting on her bed.

"All right, sorry. What are we doing?"

We.

For my entire life, I'd been part of a *we*. That was the thing about having an identical twin. It's a guaranteed playmate—someone to tell your secrets to, someone to get in trouble with, and someone to hold space for you when you need it. Yes, I loved Molly and Isabel, but Claire turned me into something more.

Slowly blowing out a breath through puffed cheeks, I reached over, unzipped my overnight bag, and grabbed the pregnancy test that I'd picked up from a pharmacy that I passed on the way to the train station in Haworth. I lifted the box up next to my face, and it took a couple of seconds for it to register.

Claire blinked, leaning in toward her phone screen, and I watched her mouth form the words. Her jaw fell open. Her eyes widened.

"Holy shit," she whispered.

Another tear escaped, and I wiped it away using the back of the hand holding the box.

“Oh, Lia.”

“Yeah.”

Claire licked her lips, rubbing them together before she spoke again. Oh, it was never, ever good when she was being careful about what words she chose. “What happened? Was it ... did you ...?” She blew out a breath of her own and gave me weird, intense eyes. “Did someone hurt you?”

“Oh, my gosh, *no*,” I insisted. “No, it’s not like that. I-I wanted to. I met him a couple of weeks after I got here.”

Claire’s entire frame relaxed. “Okay. Good. You know I had to ask. It’s not ... it’s not like you not to tell me when you slept with someone.”

I rubbed my forehead. “I know. But I knew you’d worry if I told you I met a guy in a pub and ...” I waved my hand in a vague gesture.

She mimicked my hand movement. “And ...?”

“Shut up.”

Claire grinned. “What’s his name?”

Immediately, I shook my head. “I’ll give you the recap later. Right now, I just need to know.”

She sat up, and I couldn’t help but smile at the change in her demeanor. My younger by two minutes twin was going into Mom-mode. “Okay. Are we doing this now?”

“I think so.”

I hauled my ass off the couch and into the tiny bathroom. Once the box was ripped open, I exhaled. Hard.

“What?” she asked.

Studying the piece of plastic in my hand, I shrugged. “It’s just ... what a weird little contraption, right? You pee on the thing, and it tells you whether you’re pregnant with a hot British man’s baby.”

Claire smiled. “How hot?”

“Really, *really* hot.” My answer was so glum, she burst out laughing.

“Kay, let’s do this thing.” Her phone must have been propped on something, because suddenly, her laptop was in her lap, and she was typing. One shoulder shrugged. “It does say it’s best to wait until the morning when your urine is the strongest. Or something.” The incredulous look I gave her had her holding up her hands. “Fine, fine. We’re not waiting. Got it. I’m sure your pee is spectacular right now too.”

Using the sink and the knobs on the faucet, I did some propping of my own. Once the angle was good, I ripped open the package and set it carefully on the edge of the sink. “Look away if you don’t want to see ass,” I warned her before shoving my pants down.

“I’m nervous,” she admitted.

“*You* are?”

“Yes! I never thought we’d do our first pregnancy test on FaceTime.”

My eyebrows raised slowly. “The fact that you’ve given our first pregnancy tests any thought at all is freaking me out.”

She waved that away. “I know. It’s just ... I’m so far away from you.”

I kept my face averted from the camera, partially because, well, I was peeing on a stick, and also because if I saw her face when she said that ... I’d lose it.

The cap went into place with a tiny click, and I balanced the test on the ledge of the mirror above the sink.

It felt important to leave the bathroom for my eternal five-minute wait, so I tugged my pants back up and went into the bedroom. And with strategic pillow placement, I propped the phone up next to me in a way where I could convince myself that Claire was cuddling in the twin-size bed with me.

“Remember when Paige and Logan first got married?” she asked. She laid down on her bed too, arranging the phone to mirror my position. “You climbed into the top bunk with me,



and we'd lay like this, planning all the pranks you wanted to play on her."

A tear slid down my temple, and my answering laugh was watery. "Yeah. Logan had been both parents for so many years, and I just wanted her to go away so I didn't get too used to her."

"I'm still not used to her," Claire said dryly.

We both laughed at that.

"What's his name?" she whispered.

Before I answered, I filled my lungs, letting them expand fully before I let the oxygen out. "Jude. I met him ... and ..."—I waved my hand—"well, you know that day I was at Buckingham Palace and you asked me if I was bored because I missed home?"

She smiled softly. "Yeah."

"It was that night."

"Ahh." Claire was giving me worried eyes when she spoke again. "Have you seen him since?"

I shook my head. "Just some texting the past few days. He's been busy with work."

"And he was ... is ... nice?"

My shrug was pitiful. "For as much as I talked to him, he seemed like it."

The times I thought about Jude, it wasn't like I was reflecting on his manners.

*Oh, how politely he'd ripped my underwear off!*

"And you used protection?"

"Yup." I rubbed my face.

Claire was quiet.

"I wish I was there, Lee." She sniffed. "This is really hard."

My hands stayed right the hell over my face. "I know."

I wished she was with me too. I'd make her walk the mile into my tiny bathroom. I'd make her check the test against the instructions because she was more patient than I was and she'd actually read them. I'd lay in this bed until she walked out of the bathroom, until she climbed back into bed with me and told me if I was going to have a baby about a decade earlier than I'd ever planned.

"Lia, you have to go look." Her voice was all wobbly, and I pressed my fingers into my eye sockets.

"No, I don't." Why were my palms wet? I licked my lips, and they came away salty.

"Yes, you do." She sounded so gentle. So understanding. If it were me, I would've gone tough love drill sergeant. "You can do this, Lee."

I dropped my hands, and when I pried my eyes open, I saw Claire crying in earnest right along with me.

"I'm scared," I said, my voice hardly above a whisper.

"That's okay. No matter what that thing says, we'll figure it out, okay?"

Before I could think too hard on it—what it would mean, what it wouldn't mean—I snatched the phone and rolled off the bed.

"Read the label first," she said.

I smiled. "I will."

On the back of the box, I skimmed until I saw what I needed to know, reading it out loud to Claire.

"One line is no; two lines is yes."

She nodded. "Okay."

Tossing the box aside, I took a second and looked at the test lying facedown on the metal ledge. It looked eight feet long lying there. In my mind, it grew bigger and bigger until I imagined it squeezing me out of the room.

"You can do it," she said again.

With a hard puff of air out of pursed lips, I snatched the test and flipped it over.

“Holy shit,” I whispered.

Two bright ass purple lines.

Claire inhaled. “Two lines?”

My nod was jerky, and I tossed the test onto the ledge, sinking onto the floor of the bathroom with the phone clutched against me.

“Lia,” she said firmly, “I can’t see you.”

“I don’t want you to see me,” I cried. “Holy shit, Claire, I’m pregnant. I’m *pregnant!*”

“Please let me see you. Not that having the camera smashed up to your boobs isn’t great, but I’d really like to see my sister’s face right now.”

Slowly, I pulled the phone back, resting my hands on my bent knees, but with my head against the wall behind me, I decided that staring up at the ceiling was a better life choice for me.

“What am I supposed to do?”

She was quiet. “I don’t know.”

“I have to tell Jude,” I murmured. “Don’t I?”

Claire sighed. “I think that’s a difficult question to answer when you don’t know what kind of person he is. But if I’m answering in generalities, then yes, I think letting him know is the right thing to do. At least give him the opportunity to support you in whatever way you need.”

Finally, I met her eyes. “And what if I don’t want to keep it?”

She held my gaze, steady as a rock, unwavering as a mountain. “Then we’ll figure that out too. You don’t have to decide anything right now, Lia. Not one single thing.”

A memory popped up, and I emitted a watery laugh. “Remember when Emmett was born?”

She laughed too. “Of course.”

The day our nephew was born was so clear in my mind. But in our strange little family tree, he felt like our little brother. Logan and Paige had been married for a year when she got pregnant, and even though Logan had been the legal guardian to four girls, adding a fifth into the mix felt as natural as breathing. We anticipated the birth of their baby like it was the freaking second coming or something.

Claire and I were thirteen at the time, Isabel fifteen, and Molly was seventeen. The four of us stood in that hospital hallway, ears pressed against the door, waiting for the beautiful wailing sound of what we just *knew* would be another girl. We’d spoil her rotten, the fifth Ward girl, and it was going to be a glorious addition to our girl gang.

Except he didn’t emit a wild, loud wail when he was born. He came out clear-eyed and calm. The most peaceful baby that ever existed. When Logan opened the door to let us in, we crowded around Paige—sweat-soaked and wild-haired and holding a tiny little bundle—only to hear the words, “It’s a boy.”

I looked up at my big brother, and said, “Oh bullshit, it is not.”

But the moment I held him, that perfect, scrunched-up, red-faced baby boy, I fell head over heels in love. We all did. He was *our* baby boy, and the most loved child in existence.

“Remember how we used to fight over who got to hold him?”

Claire smiled. “I got so mad at Isabel that one time she tricked me into setting him down. Didn’t she tell me that someone caught sight of Justin Bieber in our neighborhood?”

I laughed, feeling strangely calm. Probably denial, but whatever. “What a bitch.”

“She had him for hours that day too. Ate dinner one-handed so no one could take him.” Claire fell quiet, and her eyes were heavy on me. “Why the trip down memory lane?”

Have you ever felt like someone shoved a ball of yarn down your throat? That was the closest thing it felt like when I tried to swallow.

“I’m twenty-two with a big, loving family, and a healthy savings account.”

“That’s all very true.”

“I’m going to keep it,” I said quietly. There was time to figure everything else out. But if anyone could count on their family to help them through something like this, it was us. Each one of them would walk through fire for me. Just like I’d do for them.

Her eyes filled. “Okay.”

“But I still have to talk to Jude.”

Claire wiped at her face. “Yeah, you probably do.”

“And,” I said slowly, “I need to tell Logan. And Paige. Oh my gosh, Paige is gonna fly here like, tomorrow, isn’t she?”

My sister smiled. “She might.”

Fingers drumming on my leg, I made a split-second decision. “Can I ask you a massive, horrible favor where you don’t say a word to any of them?”

“Lia,” she said in a warning tone. “You have to tell them.

“I will! Just let me talk to Jude first. I can’t handle them all freaking out and asking me what I need and what I’m going to do. I won’t have answers to any of their questions.”

She conceded with a reluctant nod.

“Thank you. I love you.”

“I love you too.” She sighed. “Do you want to keep talking?”

“No. I should text him and see if he can get together in the next couple of days.”

We said our goodbyes shortly after, and I remained sitting on my bathroom floor for a few minutes longer. How did you even properly try to absorb the magnitude of that discovery?

In one moment, all the choices in my life had shifted, like the clicking letters on a train station arrival board.

My life would quite literally never be the same after this.

Neither would Jude's. I didn't even know if he had any other kids. Or a hidden girlfriend. Or maybe he was crazy. Regardless, he should know. If he chose not to step up, then I gave him the option, and the responsibility was on him.

Funny how being abandoned voluntarily by one of your birth parents colored your judgment on stuff like that. With that thought ... my thumbs flew across the screen.

**Me: I'm actually open the next two evenings if you are. I'd love to see your neck of the woods.**

Jude responded almost immediately.

**Jude: What a very American phrase, but tomorrow evening is free in my 'neck of the woods'. If you're good with eating dinner at my place, I can send you the address.**

**ME: Send away.**

**JUDE**

I never usually gave much thought to what someone thought of my house. Usually being the operative word. My housekeeper, Mrs. Atkinson (whose first name was Rebecca, but I never dared call her that), tutted at me all day while I hovered around her, cleaning behind where she'd just done.

"Bloody footballer," she muttered, swatting at me with a dusting thing/weapon. "Go kick something and let me do my job."

"She's never been here, and I like this one. I told you that, right?"

She rolled her eyes. Yes. I'd told her.

If fans of Shepperton FC, the mighty Shorthorns, had any idea that their midfielder's only friend was his fifty-five-year-old housekeeper, they'd piss themselves.

"If you're so concerned with what the young lady thinks," Rebecca said with the patience of a saint and the advice of a bloody therapist, "go to the market and get her some flowers or buy her some chocolates."

While she dusted the rest of the family room, I sat on the large gray couch. "You don't think that's too cliché?"

"If a man bought me flowers and chocolates, I'd spend the night flat on my back without blinking."

Groaning, I covered my face. "Mrs. A, have pity."

She cackled. “Get out of here while I finish, young man. You should go do drills in the garden. The way you were handling the ball on Monday was a tragedy. You’re slipping in your old age.”

“Et tu?” I asked dryly, standing from the couch. “If I’m old, what does that make you?”

“Well-seasoned and incredibly smart.” She eyed me over the edge of her glasses. “Is that what you’re wearing?”

I glanced down at my white T-shirt and black trousers. “What?”

“You look like you’re going to serve her coffee, not romance her.” Rebecca set down the dusting wand. “And that reminds me, are you inviting this nice American girl over here for a quickie?”

I whistled. “Awfully judgy of you, Mrs. Atkinson. Maybe that’s why she wants to come.” I pointed a finger at her. “Plus, you have no idea. She’s nice.”

“Oh, she’s nice if you’ve invited her to your home.” The dusting resumed. “I’ve seen some of the tarts you’ve wandered off with over the years.”

“Yes, when I was nineteen and stupid and let my first year of playing go to my head. You know I haven’t done that in years.” My phone rang, and Lewis’s number appeared. I sent it to VM but lifted the screen for her to see. “I’m too busy trying not to lose my bloody job to other big-headed nineteen-year-olds to sleep around anymore. Besides, those tarts don’t care as much about you when you’re old and your money’s gone.”

“I know how much you make, young man. It’s nowhere near gone.”

She was right. Even though I was in the last year of my current contract with Shepperton, my payslip had a lot of zeros on it, and I had every reason to believe that I’d get a renewal for at least a year or two, even if it meant they’d transfer me to another interested team. As long as we could stay in the top tier, at least. Our last two wins helped, moving us a bit higher up the table.



I fucking hated disappearing in the middle.

With a glance at my watch, I stood from the couch. “She’ll be here shortly. I suppose I better go change my shirt.”

“Smart boy.” She paused. “You didn’t make her take the train from Oxford, did you?”

“No. She said a neighbor let her borrow her car.”

“I’ll get out of your hair.” She patted my face as she passed. “Use your manners, Jude Michael McAllister. Open doors, pull out chairs, and don’t attack her as soon as she walks in, all right? You ask her questions and listen to the answers, treat her like a normal human being.”

“As opposed to treating her like a non-human?”

“Don’t get smart. You know exactly what I mean. Women aren’t vessels created simply for your enjoyment because you get paid millions of pounds to kick a ball around.”

I felt only slightly defensive when I answered. “I know that.”

While Rebecca put away the last of the cleaning supplies and checked on the dinner she’d popped into the oven, I bounded up the stairs to my bedroom to change. Mine was the biggest room in the house, with large windows overlooking the stretch of green grass in the garden. Smack in the middle was a king-size bed decorated in shades of gray. As I tossed the offending T-shirt into the wash basket, I thought for the thousandth time about the best way to tell Lia about what I did.

It was the part I was least looking forward to. The fact she hadn’t recognized me, that she thought I was normal, was a huge part of the appeal.

Football to her meant a choice, something you might like or you might not. And if you didn’t like it, you simply chose something else.

Football here was embedded in our lives. It was a culture running in your bloodstream, not just a match that you flipped to if you were bored. And as a nod to that, given I’d have to

admit what I did sooner rather than later, I reached into the wardrobe and grabbed one of my bright blue Shepperton shirts. The logo on the chest was small, so it wasn't like I'd be opening the door wearing a full kit with my name on it.

"Jude," Rebecca called. "You have a visitor."

"Oh shit," I whispered, tugging the shirt on. By the time I reached the bottom of the steps, my entire body felt charged with excitement. No, it wasn't ideal for my housekeeper to be the one greeting her at the door, but she was here, and that was what mattered.

Rebecca said something that made Lia laugh, and the sound of it had me smiling.

They stood by the front door, and in the full light of my home, she was even more beautiful than I remembered. Her hair—which had been long and curling down her back the last I'd seen her—was pulled back off her face.

She was wearing something yellow, but to be honest, I didn't really care what she was wearing.

"Don't let him take credit for the dinner, my dear," Rebecca whispered loudly with a hand on Lia's shoulder. "That's my secret recipe, and he's an absolute disaster in the kitchen."

Lia's eyes met mine, the blue of them so deep it was like a gut punch. She smiled. "Duly noted."

"Goodbye, Mrs. Atkinson," I said. "Have a lovely evening."

Rebecca gave me a warning look, and I knew that even in that brief window of time, she found herself just as charmed by Lia as I had been. "It was wonderful meeting you, dear," she said to Lia.

Lia smiled. "You too."

Rebecca left, closing the door quietly behind her. And it was then I noticed Lia's fingers knitted tightly together in front of her and the high color in her cheeks.

She was nervous.

“Come on in,” I told her. “Would you like something to drink? I’ve got red and white, if you want wine.”

Lia tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “I actually wouldn’t mind some water, if that’s okay. Still or sparkling, doesn’t matter.”

“Of course.”

I went to get her a bottle from the fridge, and from the corner of my eye, I saw her wander around the family room, looking at pictures of me and my brother over the years. She stopped at a small white frame and picked it up.

The photo had been taken years ago, after my first game as a top-tier player. I’d changed and showered, so I wasn’t in my gear, but Lewis and I were both grinning widely, showing off our Shepperton shirts. There were no smiling parent pictures along the same vein, so she could look all she wanted for more hints of my family, but she’d not find a single one. Life was complicated, and the idea of trying to tiptoe into that conversation with Lia—about my job or my parents—felt just a little bit impossible.

Knowing what I did, it would change the dynamic between us, and suddenly, I found myself wanting to protect this small piece of reality.

I’d tell her. Eventually.

She set the frame down and met me in the kitchen just as I grabbed a second bottle of water for myself.

“Your house is beautiful,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“My brother was a professional football player in the States.”

I choked on my water.

She kept going as if I hadn’t. “He won a championship actually. And now he’s the defensive coordinator for the same team.”

I rubbed at my chest. “What now?”

Lia shook her head. “I could’ve explained that better. I’m sorry. I’m more nervous than I thought I’d be.”

As carefully as I could, I set the water down, my mind spinning with the strange turn of events.

“I’m telling you because I didn’t want you to think I was just ... making fun of soccer for the hell of it. I really don’t understand it, and that’s not an excuse, but my entire life was centered around Logan’s job.” Her fingers, long and graceful, started picking at the label on the bottle. “Football, American football, is what I watched every single weekend for my entire life. I grew up watching game film with him while I did my homework at night. I grew up knowing defensive schemes and depth charts and what the spread of each game was, and that was my life because he raised me and my sisters.”

Her lips, pink and soft, moved with careful precision as she spoke, and I got the sense she’d practiced every word of what she was telling me right now. The light from the garden caught the side of her face and the length of her neck, and all I could do was stare.

In my silence, she kept speaking. “So basically, I’m trying to apologize if I was rude at the bar for what I said. I know I haven’t been here long, but y’all are really protective of your football, and I shouldn’t have said it was boring.” Her eyes searched mine. “Or the thing I said about flopping on the ground. That was rude too.”

Maybe I’d invited Lia because I would’ve cut my arm off to sleep with her again, but with every word, she dug a strange foothold somewhere behind my chest. If what she said was true—and there was no reason it wasn’t—I managed to stumble upon a woman who would know precisely what the insanity of my life could be like. She’d understand every facet because even though the sports were different and the culture was different, there were very few people who didn’t play who genuinely realized the level of dedication it took to do what I did. She’d appreciate why I’d bleed myself dry for the game.

I walked closer, and she sucked in a breath at my sudden nearness.

My hands reached out, stilling hers where they fidgeted with the bottle. Her fingers were ice cold.

Lia tilted her chin up. She was taller tonight, probably wearing different shoes, and I found that I very much wanted to see how easily I could kiss her from this angle. I wanted to boost her up onto my kitchen counter and step between her legs so I could press as closely as possible.

I barely knew her. Why did I feel like I did?

“Why are you so nervous?” I asked.

“Well, there’s the whole *I’m in a stranger’s house* thing, and I still don’t know for sure you won’t murder me and hide my body.”

I grinned, coasting my hands up her arms, then dragging them back down again. “So suspicious.”

Lia swallowed, eyes huge on my face. “Are you going to do those things?”

“I wasn’t planning to, no.”

“Good.” While she may not have been touching me back, she allowed me to slide my fingers between hers. The drag of my skin on hers, which was far softer, far smoother, felt dirty somehow. Like we were naked, like we were already in bed. Judging by the flush on her cheeks, she felt it too. “You’re not like ... secretly married or something, right?”

My smile was slow. “No wife, no girlfriend.”

“Do you like animals?”

“Depends on which kind. Dogs, yes. Cats, sometimes, if they’re not trying to claw my eyes out. I have a complicated relationship with sheep because I was raised on a sheep farm. I think fish are pointless, and I am out of my mind terrified of horses.”

Lia laughed softly. What was she looking for, as those bottomless eyes searched my face? She looked so serious. What a change from the fiery girl at the pub, pushing and pushing my buttons, simply because she sensed that I enjoyed having them pushed.

I liked her. It was a strange realization to have in the wake of knowing how much I wanted her. But I did. I liked her. I liked that she was asking me simple questions, and that she was sweet to my housekeeper. I even liked the flat way she said her vowels in her American accent.

Her fingers curled tightly around mine, like she was afraid I'd pull away.

That was when I heard myself say, "I play professional football."

Lia's lips curled up at the edges. "I know."

I blinked. "Did you know the night we met?"

She shook her head. "You showed up on my news app when I was in Haworth. When I saw your picture, I dropped my phone on the floor."

"Did you now?" I murmured, slowly tugging her closer. Her face showed no shock, no awe, no clamoring to know more. My entire being relaxed.

She nodded, keeping her eyes trained on my lips. "They used your name in Beatles lyrics."

"Journalists think they're so clever." I tugged one hand free of hers, sliding it over the curve of her waist, then her hips. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

Lia laid her hand on my chest, spreading her fingers wide. "When would you have? After I commented on the way players flopped to the ground all the time?"

Chuckling, I exerted the smallest bit of pressure on her hips. "Fair enough."

"Th-there's a lot we didn't share with each other."

Her slight stutter was triggered by my fingers sliding up under the hem of her shirt, where endless miles of smooth skin greeted me.

"Any husbands or boyfriends?" I asked.

Lia shook her head.

“Do you like animals?” My nose sank into her hair, and I inhaled deep into my lungs.

“Mm-hmm.”

The timer dinged on the oven. There was a perfectly good dinner in there, probably getting burned to a crisp, but we both ignored it.

“Jude?”

My name on her lips did strange things to me. As I hummed in response to that, my lips ghosted over her downy soft temples.

“I ...” Her voice trailed off when I kissed my way down her cheekbones to the corner of her lips. “Holy shit, you’re killing me.”

Ducking my head, I sucked her lower lip into my mouth, covering her curves with my palm when her hips tilted toward me.

Here. I’d take her right here the first time. In the kitchen, with the dinner burning and the windows open, and the bright, airy space holding the echo of the sounds she’d make.

Then we could talk all bloody night.

Lia moaned when I did the same thing to her upper lip, soothing the plump pinkness of her mouth with my tongue when I pulled away.

“I’m taking my time with you tonight, love.” Fuck, I sounded like a madman, like I’d chewed gravel and knives and acid.

“Jude?”

“Mmm?” I nipped at the edge of her jaw, and she sucked in a sharp breath.

Her hand pushed at my chest, and I backed away to look at her face.

Lia licked her lips, hitting me with the full force of her blue eyes. “I’m pregnant.”

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**JUDE**

I t wasn't until I slammed my fifth door of the morning that someone finally called me on my piss-poor attitude.

“All right,” Declan growled, shoving me with his meaty paw, “that’s enough. If you don’t quit slamming all the bloody doors, I’m going to rip your hands off.”

I shrugged him off. “I haven’t slammed *all* of them.”

As our teammates passed us, all headed for the showers or the weight room, I got more than one side-eye.

Declan crossed his arms over his chest and pinned me with his patented *Team Captain stare*. “You made one of the physios cry.”

“My knee is fine. He didn’t need to go poking and prodding at it without being asked.”

“And the new assistant?”

I was clenching my teeth so hard they had to be close to cracking. “I didn’t *mean* to hit him in the head with the ball, obviously.”

Declan sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “McAllister, you have about ten seconds to tell me what your problem is so you can stop taking it out on the rest of us. We’ve got enough to deal with right now without you making it worse.”

I sank against the wall and stared at the glossy blue and white paint opposite me. I’d spent the best years of my career walking this hallway, staring at those colors and a logo that



defined me. No matter what else was happening in my life, I knew who I was the moment I entered this arena.

And today, I didn't recognize any of it. Hardly recognized myself.

He groaned. "This is going to take longer than ten seconds, isn't it?"

"Probably," I admitted with a sideways glance. "You sure you want to hear this? We're not exactly best mates."

"We're not." His massive shoulders shrugged lightly. Declan was big for a goalie and took up so much bloody space, but he still managed to be quick enough. "But we've got a young team this year, and they look up to you. You're the one with your name in the lights, the one who gets to stand in the corner, arms spread wide, listening to the screaming fans when you score. They want to be you, but they'd also take your spot away from you in a heartbeat if you fuck it up for yourself."

The look I gave him was dry, but after five years of playing with him, I knew Dec's style of encouragement pretty well.

"My point is, if you've got something bleeding into your performance, you better figure it out. Because the second you take it onto the pitch, you've got a problem. And you are too valuable to this team for that to happen. I never thought it was something I'd need to worry about prior to today."

"It was one bad practice after a pretty ... life-altering evening."

"Tell me."

I cut him a look. "Can you pretend to have manners for two seconds?"

His steady gaze was what I got in answer, rather than a *please* tacked onto his gruffly spoken command.

Someone on the coaching staff passed us with a murmured greeting, and after he passed, I gestured to an empty

pressroom so we could have some privacy. Declan preceded me in, sprawling out in a black desk chair.

“Oh, bleeding hell, he’s shutting doors and everything,” Declan murmured. “That bad?”

Bracing my back against the door, I stared blankly at the opposite wall for a minute. What I saw there was Lia’s face, drained of all color, when I responded to her bombshell with ... well ... not very much tact.

“A few weeks ago,” I started slowly, “I was in London to meet with my agent and stopped at my brother’s pub. Met a girl.” Closing my eyes, I tried to imagine again how easy it had been between us that night. How easy it had been those first few moments she was at my place. “American, studying at Oxford for Michaelmas. Had no idea who I was.”

“You sure?”

I nodded. It was a fair question, and one I’d asked myself more than once since Lia stormed out of my house the night before. “It was one night. She left her number, and we messaged a few times but couldn’t find time to meet up again until last night.”

Declan’s chest expanded on a deep inhale. He knew something was coming. Something was always hanging in the balance when guys in our positions slept around indiscriminately. We’d seen various types of fallout for years. Men cheating on wives, or girlfriends with groupies or prostitutes, the women going to the paps with their sordid tales.

“She came over last night for dinner, and we made no plans beyond that. Everything was fine—better than fine—at first. Then she told me she was pregnant.”

That brought his chin up slightly, his eyes carefully assessing. “And what did you say?”

“I ...” My throat worked on a hard swallow. “I asked her why she was telling me.”

Declan pursed his mouth.

I held up a hand. “I know, not my best moment, but clearly, I wasn’t expecting her to say that. We used protection. I’m not stupid.”

“It might not have been particularly well-delivered, but it’s a fair question in our position. People lie about all sorts of things for money.”

What a diplomatic answer. Which was why I winced when I told him what I told him next.

“I don’t think that’s why she blew up at me,” I said, scratching the back of my neck.

“She doesn’t like money?”

“More like, I don’t believe she needs it.” My hand dropped from my neck. “Know the name Logan Ward? American football.”

His head tilted. “Sounds familiar, but I can’t place it.”

“Won a championship with the Washington Wolves about ten years back, give or take. Now he’s the defensive coach.”

Declan nodded. “And?”

“Lia, that’s her name, is Logan’s younger sister.”

Understanding dawned. “Please tell me you didn’t know that before you said what you said.” The loaded silence answered for me, and Declan cursed under his breath. “McAllister, you asshole.”

“I didn’t know anything about him, about their family, when she dropped this bomb on me. So no, I shouldn’t have said what I said, but it’s not like I ever expected her to say *that*. I met her once, spent half a dozen hours around her, and most of those were spent sleeping.” It felt like the weight of the entire building was pushing my shoulders down. Kids, a family, a wife were all things I’d thought about in the abstract. Always coming below the rest of the priorities I had in front of me.

When I win a league cup and hoist it up in my hands ... then I’d think about settling down.

When I prove I didn't waste my life on something frivolous and shallow, like my parents always believed ... then I'd focus on my own private life.

When ...

When ...

When ...

A dozen things came before it because it wasn't something I missed. I didn't lay awake at night wishing for someone beside me. I laid awake at night thinking about how I could keep my life and my career going in the right direction.

Staying away from women who only wanted me for my money, for my job was easy.

“When she said she was pregnant, all I could see was headlines and solicitors and DNA tests and soap opera bullshit I never signed up for. And how bloody angry I'd be if we came to the end of it, and she lied because I was a better target.”

Declan studied me quietly. This was part of how he worked, though. He listened well, and he listened to what we didn't say. Those were the best listeners, weren't they? They were the ones who heard all the important things in the spaces of silence.

“It's not like I had time to think through exactly what it meant that she was raised in the world of sports. That the man who raised her was an elite athlete. All I thought—at the time she told me about her brother—was she understands this crazy. And right on the heels of that, she tells me she's preggers. It being mine, Declan, it didn't even register at first.”

He grimaced. “And her reaction?”

I exhaled. “She told me to get fucked, started crying, then stormed off. The way she slammed my front door gave my performance today a run for my money.”

“So you both have a temper then.”

“Apparently.”

Declan leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his thighs, hands clasped together, and pinned me with a serious look. “Do you think she’s lying about it being yours?”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I closed my eyes tightly and conjured an image of her face.

Nerves first, as I tried to kiss her.

Resolve next, as she pushed me away to say the words.

Disbelief. The widening of her eyes.

Hurt. The pinch of her brows.

Then rage. I’d seen fireworks explode with less glittering anger than I saw behind Lia’s blue, blue eyes.

In the span of only a few moments, I saw so many different sides to her—this woman who was still a stranger for all intents and purposes. A stranger in a country that wasn’t her own, by herself.

I dropped my hand and looked at Declan. “No. I don’t think she’s lying.”

“Then fix it, you git.” He stood. “See what she needs and take care of it.”

I must’ve had a blank look on my face because he rolled his eyes.

“Does she need to see a doctor? Does she have the vitamins she needs? Is she living in a safe place? Does she want to keep it? Bloody hell, McAllister, you’re thirty-one years old. Grow a pair, call her, and make it right.”

He slapped me on the back and shoved me sideways, so he could leave the room.

I pulled out my mobile.

**Me: I’m sorry. I was an arse. I’m done with practice, and I’d love to chat if you have a minute.**

My phone started ringing in my hand, Lia’s name appearing in large letters across the screen. My heart leaped into my throat as I answered.

“Hello?”

She was quiet.

“Lia?”

“Yeah. I’m here.”

I sank against the wall again. “I need to apologize for how I reacted last night. I was a total arse.”

“Yes, you were.” She sighed heavily. “But ... I shouldn’t have stormed off either. I guess the insinuation that I was lying didn’t ... sit well with me.” Before I could open my mouth, she interrupted. “And I know, I know why you’re cautious. But that’s why I told you about Logan first. I’d never ever take advantage of someone because of what they do.”

“I know,” I told her. “The truth is, Lia, we don’t know each other. At all.”

“We’re kinda going about this backward, huh?”

I smiled. “A bit.”

“Can we, I don’t know, meet for coffee? Or tea?”

“That sounds like a very smart, adult decision for us to make.”

Lia laughed, and the sound of it, after the past twenty-four hours, finally felt like I was doing something right. It was okay to have my priorities shift, no matter how the conversation went with her or how she wanted to handle it.

“I’m open tomorrow, if you are.”

“Why don’t we meet somewhere in London? Bit of a happy medium for both of us.”

“You can do that without being ... I don’t know ... mobbed?”

It was my turn to laugh. “Yes. In Shepperton, I get recognized far more often than I do when I’m in London. Sometimes a fan will approach, but it’s not common.”

“That’s kinda how it was for my brother too,” she said. “We actually had a pretty normal life growing up, considering

what he did.”

She was an anomaly, and I found that I quite liked it.

Not only that, but I still had to wrap my head around the fact she was pregnant, and it was mine.

Suddenly, I wanted to tell her that. Offer some olive branch to this woman who I didn't exactly know very well.

“I can't get over it,” I admitted quietly. “To be honest, Lia, I've never given it much thought. Having kids.”

She exhaled audibly. “I know what you mean. I'm only twenty-two, Jude. This wasn't in the cards for me for a very long time.”

I closed my eyes. Young, especially compared to me, hardly past the cusp of truly feeling like an adult.

“Lia,” I said, “we'll figure this out together, yeah?”

Through the speaker, she sniffed quietly. “Yeah.”





## LIA

The things I knew about Jude Michael McAllister could fit on my pinky finger. At least, for the time being.

*You're going to be a baby daddy- take two* was already off to a better start as I sat across a tiny table in a tiny cafe, watching him wolf down that English breakfast thing I loved.

Add that to the list of things I knew:

-Jude could eat an entire meal in four bites.

-He looked great in a black knit hat.

-He took his tea with one sugar.

And so far on take two, he hadn't accused me of trying to pass off another man's baby as his.

"Are you not hungry?" he asked, eyeing my plate. "Do you feel all right?"

It was a graveyard of the poor croissant that I'd picked at, and the scone that had gotten similar treatment.

Which was a sad thing, because carbs were my jam in pregnancy.

I sat back and gave him an appraising look. "I feel okay. Morning sickness tends to hit me in the afternoon, but it's only happened a couple of times. When it did, I kinda thought maybe I hadn't eaten enough or wasn't drinking enough water."

He nodded.

The owner of the cafe ducked under the counter and swept away some of the trash from our table. “Will you loves be needing anything else?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” I said, smiling up at her.

“Thanks, Sheila,” Jude told her. “Maybe just a bit of privacy while we chat, if you don’t mind.”

He slid her some cash, and she patted him gently on the shoulder before dashing off to flip the closed sign on the door. “I’m just going to pop over to the market for a few things. Be back in a tick.”

As she slid out of the door and jogged down the steps, I watched her tuck the cash Jude had given her into the cup of a vagrant sleeping curled around his dog at the end of the block.

“She’s nice.”

Jude nodded. “She gave my brother, Lewis, his first kitchen job years ago.”

“Is that your only sibling?” I thought of the picture in the flat, the man who looked so much like Jude.

“It is. The pub where we met, I helped him buy it after I started playing. He wanted a place to call his own.”

My eyebrows popped up. “That’s a generous gift.”

Jude shot me a rueful smile, showing just the slightest hint of a dimple in his scruff-covered jaw. “It was. We grew up on a sheep farm, actually. And neither of us particularly warmed to that life, so I thought I’d help him take a different path.” He took a sip of his tea. “What about you? Brothers or sisters?” At my immediate, wide smile, Jude laughed. “Is that a loaded question?”

“No. Well, maybe.” I set my chin on my hand and took a deep breath. “Claire is my twin sister. Isabel is two years older than us. Molly is two years older than Isabel. Logan, who is actually my half-brother, is the one who raised us from the time I was ten. And his son Emmett, with his wife Paige, is technically my nephew, but he also feels like my brother, because I’m closer in age to him than I am to Logan.”

Jude's jaw was all but unhinged by the time I finished. "That's not a family, that's a bloody army."

I laughed. "It's ... chaos. I love it."

"Do they know?" he asked quietly.

The laughter dried up in my throat, an ache welling immediately behind my chest, like he'd turned on a faucet with his words. "Just Claire. I wanted to talk to you first."

"I'm so sorry I reacted the way I did, Lia." He leaned forward and pinned me with those green eyes. So green that I felt that same swirly feeling in my belly that I did when I met him. When he started kissing me in his kitchen before his stupid mouth and my stupid temper ruined the moment. "It's not an excuse, but it was one of those moments where—because I'd never even given it much thought, having kids, you know—my reaction caught even me off guard. If that makes sense," he added.

"It does. I think I suffered from the same problem." I covered my hot cheeks. "I've never told anyone to get fucked in my entire life."

He laughed, a large, booming sound born from somewhere deep in his broad chest. Oh, that sound set off a series of sparks that should have worried me. Lack of chemistry was not our problem.

It was part of why I reacted the way I did in his kitchen, I came to realize later. The flame between us had simmered the entire time I was separate from Jude. All it took was being in the same room, and my skin went incendiary. It's a terribly helpless feeling, if you think about it. When someone has the power to make you feel that way simply by existing, it's deeply unsettling at first. And my reaction to it—that tidal wave crashing over my head—was to draw my weapons as quickly as he'd drawn his.

He folded his big hands on the table. "What do you want to do next, Lia? Where can I help?"

What I wanted to do next was ask him not to say my name like that, all British and hot. Despite all odds, and some patchy

birth control taking, he'd impregnated me with his super sperm, so hearing my name on his lips made me feel like warm putty.

"I guess ... I guess I need to know if you want to help. If you *want* to be in this with me."

It was the last thing I wanted to ask, but parental abandonment issues were a bit of a hot spot for me. For all my sisters.

Our dad, much older than our mom, died of a heart attack when we were young. I hardly remembered him; other than pictures I'd seen. But our mom decided one day that being a single parent of four after her golden meal ticket was gone just wasn't something she wanted anymore. Brooke had dumped us on Logan's front porch, and in truth, it was the best thing she could have done for me and my sisters. Logan, and later, his wife, Paige, gave us the family we had now. They were my people—the small army, as Jude had put it—who would always have my back.

And just like me, they'd never allow for a child—my child—to be treated as a prop for someone's vanity.

So, if Jude didn't want to play Daddy, he better speak the hell up now before this kid came out.

"I do want to be in this," he said. "I reckon I've got time to wrap my head around it, eh?"

I gave him a smile. "Yeah."

Neither of us brought up the fact that my life was on the opposite side of the world. Or that we'd need legal agreements up the wazoo, due to the nature of his job. That someday, we'd need custody agreements and child support discussions.

All the thoughts made my stomach seize up uncomfortably.

With two hands, I mentally shoved all that shit down.

"Do you need to see a doctor?" he asked.

I blinked. "I don't know, actually. I did some googling, but I can't tell if I qualify for the NHS free coverage since I'm

only visiting for a semester.”

“I’ll make a call.”

His calm assurance was enough to steady my stomach and bubbling nerves at all the unknowns. And when we said our goodbyes outside of Sheila’s cafe, he walked me back to the Tube station with a promise that someone would contact me.

It set the precedent, a small step in the right direction of how the next couple of weeks unfolded. I didn’t see him because his game schedule was packed (apparently they had like ... forty different cup tournaments they played in outside of regular league play. Don’t even ask me because I was still trying to understand).

**Me: Okay, I’ll concede that penalty shootouts are exciting. WAY better than a tie. You have to admit those are stupid.**

**Me: Nice goal, BTW. I like how you faked out the goalie.**

**Jude: Those are the rules, love. That’s why the points matter.**

**Me: Yeah, what’s up with that too? You can like, get DEMOTED. Y’all are savage.**

**Jude: That’s what makes it exciting. I’ll convert you yet.**

**Jude: How was the appointment with the doctor?**

**Me: Good. It’s too early to hear the heartbeat or do an ultrasound or anything, so we just went over good eating and talked about morning sickness and stuff. She took all my vitals. My blood pressure was a little high, though.**

**Jude: Was it? Is that normal for you?**

**Me: Well, I was afraid to touch anything because the office was so FREAKING fancy, and also, I’m pretty sure I saw Victoria Beckham in there. Or her doppelganger. Did you send me to the nicest doctor in England or something?**

**Jude:** I asked our team doctor for a rec. They said they'd send me the bill, yeah?

**Me:** No one asked me for a single penny. Or a pound. Whatever.

**Me:** I do have money, though. I don't expect you to pay for everything.



**JUDE:** Sorry, had to go into training and then meet with my manager.

**Me:** Running into a meeting with my professor. She's about to rip my outline to shreds.

**Jude:** No worries. Maybe we can connect next week?



**ME:** My turn to apologize. This week has been crazy. I was right about the outline.

**Jude:** What does that mean? You start over?

**Me:** No, I just need to dig deeper.

**Jude:** Will I understand your answer if I ask what you're diving deeper into?

**Me:** Charlotte Brontë's educational and employment history and how it influenced the conceptual presence of female independence in her work.

**Jude:** Right then.

**Me:** Basically, she hated her job and wrote about it because she hated that other women were forced into the same situations.

**Jude:** Makes sense.

**Me:** Why are there no commercial breaks in soccer? Football. Whatever. It's not good for people who need to

pee all the time.

**Me:** I waited as long as I could and then missed your goal. **THERE SHOULD BE COMMERCIALS.**

**Jude:** Why do you think American corporations don't push football? They can't make as much money off us because we actually let people play the game.

**Me:** Okay, okay, I walked into that one.



**CLAIRE:** IF YOU DON'T TELL OUR FAMILY SOON, I'M GONNA LOSE MY MIND, LIA. I almost slipped today with Isabel. We were working out and I swear, if she hadn't been at work and easily distracted, she would've pushed me on it.

**Me:** I know. Don't yell at me.

**Me:** Logan and Paige will want to make me come home. And I want to finish the semester.

**Claire:** Le sigh. I get it. **BUT COME ON.** You're asking a lot of me here. I did tell Bauer, though. \*hides face\*

**Me:** I figured you would. You're a terrible liar.

**Me:** I'll tell them soon.

**Claire:** Define soon.

**Me:** SOON. Go make out with Bauer or something.

**Claire:** How are you feeling? Is Jude being nice?

**Me:** Tired, but good. I puked in an Oxford trash can the other day, and you should've seen the faces of the people who passed me. One called me a "drunk American" under her breath. LOL.

**Me:** And yes. We've just been texting this week and last. He's **BUSY.** Did you know football players can play 3+ matches in a week here? That's friggin' nuts!

**Claire:** **OMG, ARE YOU CONVERTED NOW?**

**Me:** I'm just ... learning. But it's not as bad as I thought. It's kinda hypnotizing to watch. Plus ... Have you SEEN their thighs??

**Claire:** No, but you sure have.

**Me:** DAMN RIGHT. <3

**Isabel:** Claire said something weird today about you not being able to do kickboxing class when you come home. Then she made her weird 'I'm hiding something' face.

**Isabel:** WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON.

**Me:** I'll call soon! Sorry, it's been crazy here. Love you. Mwah.

**Isabel:** Don't think I don't know what you're doing. Can I still come and visit before you leave? I need a reason to take a vacation.

**Me:** Yes. Talk soon. <3



**PAIGE:** WHY AREN'T YOU ANSWERING YOUR CALLS, DUDE

**Me:** YOU ALWAYS CALL WHEN I'M BUSY. Does everyone in our family have their phone on caps lock or something?

**Paige:** Sorry. I miss you. I miss your voice. When are you coming home? Haven't you gotten enough knowledge yet?

**Me:** You have three other sisters to pester. And Emmett. Go bug them.

**Paige:** I love you too, L.

**Me:** <3





**JUDE:** Care to come to a match this weekend?

**Me:** Like ... in person? In the stands with all the crazy screaming fans?

**Jude:** That's the general idea. I could give you a pass if you'd rather sit in a box.

**Me:** No way. I love the crazy screaming fans. I never wanted Logan's box passes either. Box seats are for pansies.

**Jude:** That a girl. I'll put the tickets under your name at the window by the main entrance. Make sure you wear blue and white; otherwise, they'll make you switch seats because they'll think you're a Bethnal Green fan. Trust me, you don't want that. They're wankers.

**Me:** You cannot be serious.

**Jude:** I would never joke about it. They don't mix home and away fans.

**Me:** Y'all are crazy.

**Jude:** I'll see you afterward.

**Me:** <3

**Me:** SHIT, sorry, didn't mean to send you a heart. I do that with my sisters and Paige and ... sorry. Awkward.

**Jude:** No worries.

**Jude:** <3 (It took me a really long time to figure out how you did that)



## JUDE

“You seemed frustrated out there, Jude. What did you want more of today that you weren’t getting?”

What I wanted was to smack the microphone out of my face, but I smiled at the journo. “A bit more of everything, I suppose. We were outplayed, and there’s no pretty way to say that. They passed better, defended better, scored more. Makes it hard to win.”

“Do you think Shepperton can pull themselves together once the break is done? Or do you need to see some changes on the roster when the transfer window opens? There’s talk that management is eyeing some younger talent heading into the rest of the season.”

I kept that smile pasted on my face until it hurt. “I think we’ve got a great team right now. We’ve just got to communicate better when it counts. If the management makes some changes this winter, then I trust they’ll do what’s best for the club.” I nodded, then started edging toward the door of the room. “Thanks.”

He wanted to ask more, it was obvious, but honestly, I wasn’t much in the mood for talking.

It was a shit game in shit weather, and all I wanted to do was take a hot shower.

Everything had set up perfectly in the eighty-ninth minute when I got the ball and had a free stretch to run.

But instead of a win, instead of a draw, we went in the wrong direction. That Bethnal Green keeper was a lucky bastard because the one finger he'd gotten on the ball was enough to keep us from a draw. They got three points and moved ahead of Arsenal on the table. We stayed where we were. Like a bloody car that couldn't get out of neutral.

I left the press room and hooked a right toward the showers. One of my newer teammates, an acquisition from Paris St Germain, murmured something in French as he passed. It sounded an awful lot like he was calling me a name that I never would've dared to repeat in front of Mrs. Atkinson. Declan exited another press area and lifted his chin.

"You looked like shit today, McAllister."

I gave him a look. "How in the bloody hell they decided you should be captain is beyond me."

"Because I'm not going to tiptoe around your ego to make you feel better." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I can admit where I fucked up today. Can you?" When I didn't answer, he lowered his voice. "You had someone right behind you who could've taken the ball, could've come at the goal from the side, and instead, you went for the glory shot. It's not always your job to save the day just because you're trying to prove you can still play."

"I'll remember that the next time I get a perfect shot," I said dryly.

"If you get the shot, then take it. But that wasn't it. You were too far away from the goal, you didn't have the right angle, and you were running too fast to bend it the way you would've needed. But if you'd passed to Sebastien, he would've had it."

Pride had me wanting to defend myself, and I fairly choked on the words as I swallowed them back down. "Is that why he's calling me names?"

"Probably." His eyes never wavered. "Pull your head out of your arse, Jude. I mean it."

His words rang in my head while I showered and changed. None of my teammates talked to me, all murmuring quietly after the dejection of another loss when we really needed a win.

In the quiet of the locker room, the heavy weight of a loss felt like all the balls I'd kept juggled in the air were falling one by one.

Maybe it was like this for other players, but I'd never ask. For me, losing felt like unleashing a screaming banshee that tailed behind me until our next game. All I could hear were the things my parents had warned me about when I was an eighteen-year-old, giving up my life to play in Germany.

*Why can't you just be content with a normal life?*

*Why can't you be proud of the work we do and help us contribute in a way that means something?*

*It's vain. Frivolous.*

*Playing games doesn't keep the world turning.*

Every single time we lost, every single time someone hinted that I wasn't valuable anymore, I felt like my parents were watching, nodding their heads because they were right all along.

I sighed. Most games, I never even thought about looking up in the stands, even on the odd game that Lewis came to, because it was simply another reminder of how my family didn't understand me, didn't see exactly what I had accomplished in my life. Those empty seats in my mind lit every fire underneath me. And today, they hadn't all been empty.

Not once, in all my years of playing, had I walked out of a loss with someone waiting for me. There was no telling how she'd react or try to handle me, so I braced myself for whatever it might be. I braced myself to see how she'd react, this girl I was supposed to be getting to know.

When I left the room, I stopped short in the doorway, because across the hallway was Lia, waiting for me with a smile and beautifully flushed face.

“Hi.” I sounded like an idiot.

Her smile spread even further. “That was so freaking fun.”

My head tilted. “We lost.”

“I know, but ... oh man, you know how long it’s been since I’ve been at a game? Any game?” She laid a hand on her chest. “There is nothing like the energy in the stands. And holy shit, you were not kidding about the fans. I heard curse words I didn’t even know existed.”

What a balm she was to all the frayed, edgy parts of me leftover from the game. Not because she was trying to soothe me, but because she saw the beauty in it, even with the loss.

We fell in step as I walked us toward the exit to the car park. Her shoulder brushed mine.

I stopped. “You’re soaked.”

“It was raining out there,” she whispered, like she was telling me a secret.

My face felt hot. “Obviously. But that can’t be good for you.”

She waved that off. “Dude, I’m from Seattle. Rain don’t scare me.”

As Lia started walking, I couldn’t help but marvel. Her hair was a frizzy mess, barely contained on top of her head, she’d sat through that disastrous 1-0 defeat in the cold, bone-soaking rain, and she was acting like I’d handed her a winning lottery ticket.

“Who *are* you?” I asked.

Her smile was sweet. “Isn’t that what you’re trying to figure out? Who I am while I’m trying to figure out who you are.” She shrugged, as if it was so simple.

And maybe it was.

Maybe I was the one complicating it.

Everything in my life was complicated, though, except her. And that was the strangest part of all. I didn’t exactly know

where I stood with her, but suddenly, it felt desperately important for her to be the one thing I should do right.

My team lost, probably because I was being a selfish asshole.

But this was something I could do.

“Are you hungry?” I asked her.

“Yes.” Lia clasped her hands in front of her. “I’m not saying I’d murder someone for some fries right now, but I’d seriously hurt them.”

“Chips.”

“Hmm?”

I set my hand on her back, steering her back toward the exit. “They’re called chips, love. And if you’re okay with coming back to my place for a do-over, I will make you the best bloody sandwich of your entire life.”

Lia stopped walking and pointed a finger at me. “Do we need ground rules for being alone in a house together?”

“I don’t know. Do we?”

Clearly, she’d expected me to give her an actual answer. Lia blinked a few times.

I laughed. “Tell you what, if we make a promise to each other that tonight, clothes stay on ... would that make you feel like we’re being responsible?”

She started walking, a tiny smile on her lips. “Just for tonight, we promise that?”

“For a start.”

Lia nodded. “I like it. Let’s make our own rules, McAllister. After you make me an epic sandwich.”

Close to an hour later, she was curled up on the corner of my couch, chin resting on her tucked-up knees, watching me with expectant eyes.

Before I set the plate down, I pointed at her. “No judgment until you try it.”

“I promise,” she answered solemnly.

Lia had changed into one of my Shepperton hoodies while her shirt was in the dryer, and it positively dwarfed her slim frame. She made a show of shoving the sleeves up while I set the plate in her lap.

Her hands froze. “What the hell is that?”

“You said you wouldn’t judge.”

“There’s bread covering my fries.” She blinked. “Why is there bread covering my fries?”

“Chips.” I handed her a napkin. “This is a chip butty. Buttered bread and chips.”

“Oh my gosh, *why?*”

“You promised.” I plopped next to her on the couch. “And I’d hate to think you’d lie to me, now that we’re making our own rules.”

She grumbled something unintelligible under her breath that had me smiling. It felt good to smile over something so simple. When was the last time I’d done that? I smiled all the time about scoring goals and winning games, but that was it.

Doing something so simple for someone and having it bring me joy was such a novel sensation.

Lia gave me a side-eye as she lifted the sandwich.

She took a bite and chewed.

Her eyes fell closed.

Her entire body sagged.

And then she moaned.

I had to shift on the couch because the last time I heard that sound, I was fairly certain my hand had been between her legs.

“Ohmygawd,” she said. Another bite. “Why is thi so goob?”

I laughed. “Are you going to share?”



Her eyes narrowed. “You’d get in the way of a pregnant woman and her cravings?”

My arm found its way along the back of the couch, my fingers draped just to the outside of her shoulder, and the length of her hair tickled my arm. “No,” I murmured. “I reckon I wouldn’t as long as you look that happy.”

Lia finished chewing another bite, swallowed delicately before she set the plate down. “Are you giving me flirty eyes, Jude McAllister?”

“You tell me,” I murmured.

Instead of answering, she took another bite, lips curled in a smile.

My fingers tugged lightly on her hair. “I don’t quite know what to do with you, Lia Ward, and that’s the truth.”

Her cheeks flushed a lovely soft pink, and I took the moment of quiet to snatch the rest of her chip butty off the plate.

“Oh, you ass!” She laughed, leaning forward to grab it. I was too quick, though, devouring the rest of the sandwich with one massive bite. Before she could resume her original position, I tugged on her arm as I fell backward on the couch.

Quite naturally, she landed tucked against my side with my arm curled around her shoulder. Her head fit perfectly into the crook of my neck, and I inhaled a deep lungful of her clean, wonderful scent. There was no change to Lia’s body, it was far too early for that, and maybe this type of thing was the worst bloody idea I’d ever had, but it felt right.

“We went from hypothetical flirty eyes to cuddling very quickly,” she said, finger tracing circles on my chest.

“That we did.” I closed my eyes. When was the last time I’d felt this bone-deep sense of rightness anywhere other than the pitch? I was always moving, always going, always driving myself forward to fix or do or work.

Rarely did I get quiet moments of peace. The thought of ending this particular one seemed like a crime.

I barely knew her. She didn't know me any better. Yet we'd agreed we could make our own rules. And why shouldn't we?

I wasn't going to ignore how singularly perfect it felt, doing something as simple as lying on the couch with her. Admitting that, though, seemed too fast. Like she could travel along with the strange thread of my thoughts, Lia set her chin on my chest and pinned me with those eyes. Did she even realize what a weapon they were? What damage they were capable of?

My free hand traced the line of her jaw, the edge of my thumb lightly glancing along the bottom edge of her lip. What would she do if I tugged her closer and sipped at those perfectly soft, perfectly pink lips? In the growing warmth I could see on her cheeks, I had my answer. In the reaction of my body, I had clear proof of my desire. And it would be easy, wouldn't it?

But this ... I'd let her edge her toe over the line if she wanted to cross it.

That was when she inhaled shakily and set her face back down on my chest.

Right then.

I closed my eyes and willed the lower half of my body to get the fuck on board.

Voice light and easy, I tried my very best to play it off. "My body is far too tired to move you off me, though, if that's all right with you."

She sighed, her rib cage expanding underneath my palm and spread fingers.

In that sigh, I felt her hesitation to ask any further questions, and truth be told, I wasn't sure I'd know how to answer.

"I could take a nap." With that, her finger stopped its movement, and when I glanced down, I saw the fan of her long, black lashes fall closed.

Settling further into that sense of rightness, paired with a refusal to look too far into what we were doing, I allowed myself to do the same.



## LIA

**H**ave you ever woken up with déjà vu?

*I've done this before.*

Not the sleeping on Jude's couch part. My back ached, and his couldn't be any better, but there we were.

Sprawled on top of his insane body, as the sun crept into the sky, I once again woke up with all my important bits touching all of his.

My leg hitched up over the top of his thigh, like I'd unconsciously tried to hump him in my sleep.

My hand had crept underneath the hem of his shirt, and I couldn't help but smile at the placement of my fingers. Apparently, embedded underneath the skin of my fingertips was a homing beacon for his happy trail because that line of hair and the soft, warm, heavily muscled skin around it had my toes curling from how badly I wanted to explore.

All of him, from the top of his dark-haired head down to his very big and very proportionate feet, was like a freaking jungle gym, and it was hard not to want to play on all the parts when I woke up like this.

Making tiny movements so as not to wake him, I turned my nose further into his chest and inhaled deeply. Was it a pregnancy hormone thing? That he smelled like crack and Christmas and cinnamon rolls and everything good that I wanted to hoard to my greedy little chest. The feeling that

came with his scent, clean and masculine, was something I wanted to cling to with both hands.

It made me realize just how much I missed the easy affection of my family. The hugs. The playful shoving. Wrestling with Emmett. Someone sitting behind me and braiding my hair while we talked in Logan and Paige's kitchen. There had never been a time in my life when I'd gone so long without someone to clutch me tight in a hug or rub my back while I talked.

Just as I had the night before, I set my chin on his chest and studied his face.

It was stupid how handsome he was.

It was also stupid how much I wanted to wake him up and ride him until his eyes rolled back in his head. Maybe not *stupid* because we'd said we'd make our own rules for how this was going to play out, but the impulse certainly came with complications.

A subpar, clinical word for that little, teeny baby inside me (roughly the size of a raspberry, according to Sir Google). Sometimes, if my brain started racing too far ahead into the future—to all the unanswered questions waiting patiently for me to answer—my hands started shaking, and I felt very much like I was standing over a dark pit where I couldn't see what waited for me at the bottom.

It might've been a feather bed made of unicorns and sparkles, and I'd land with a gentle bounce.

Or it was something scarier, something bigger that I didn't want to face, and every single time, I backed away from the edge of that pit with a speed that should've scared me.

*What if I wasn't good at this?*

Oh, that whispered thought was enough to send a slow trickle of ice down my spine.

Would the slight vibration in my limbs wake him?

Could I distract him if it did?

Lurid images danced behind my closed eyes of all the ways I could do that, but I shoved them back. In my clearer moments, when I didn't feel like I was avoiding some big shadowy unknown, I knew better than to dive headfirst into the physical chemistry I felt with Jude. Like the night before when all he did was touch the lower edge of my lips.

Had that reduced me to a throbbing, achy mess? Yes.

Did it solve any of our problems? Nope. (My inner hormone queen who wanted to climb him like a tree pouted very much at that.)

With a resolve I didn't know I had, I carefully extracted my hand out from underneath his shirt, bidding a fond farewell to his happy trail. Jude didn't stir, which was a good thing. If he'd woken, voice all low and rough and calling me *love*, I would've stripped in five seconds flat.

But he was out.

As I eased my way toward the other side of the couch so I could get up, I remembered Logan being the same way after game day. Especially a loss.

The mental toll was massive on my brother, and I wondered if Jude was the same way. Not all athletes were. They could leave their wins and losses and mistakes on the confines of the field. The leaders weren't like that, though.

As I tiptoed into the kitchen, Logan weighing on my brain, I realized how much of my discomfort stemmed from not just missing family but something else entirely. I was withholding the truth from them because it was easier. Somehow, without all their eyes on me, I felt I could skate seamlessly through the hard.

I found my phone in my purse, battery dangerously low considering I hadn't plugged it in the night before, and I saw a text from Claire that had me smiling.

**Claire: If you think I didn't notice that your Find my Friends location stayed in Shepperton last night, you're friggin' crazy. ARE YOU SLEEPING WITH HIM**

**AGAIN?** The stupid happy in love side of me is dying for details.

**Claire:** Also, I'm gonna give you a deadline for telling everyone because I saw Finn and almost slipped again and **HAVE I MENTIONED I'M BAD AT LYING.**

**Me:** Not sleeping with him, though we did sleep last night. Just sleep. They lost their match and he had that "I'm a big tough athlete and I bear the mental burden of the team's poor performance" face (you know the one) and the cuddling that happened after was not planned, trust me. He made me a french fry sandwich, and it just ... happened.

**Claire:** I do know that face. Good morning.

**Me:** It's late there, why are you up??? Good morning. I miss you.

**Claire:** I miss you too. Working on some curriculum stuff for a new reading program at the youth center, and I didn't want to stop. I'm off tomorrow and can sleep. Did you really just sleep? (I'm giving you the serious eyes)

**Me:** Yes. Fully clothed cuddling. He wanted to kiss me, though.

**Claire:** And you resisted? I'm impressed. I **DO** know that face, and it's potent. Bauer had that face after he fell in one of his last competitions. I shocked myself a bit with what I was willing to do to make it go away when we got home. There were props involved.

**Me:** **OMG STOP.** Don't want to know.

**Claire:** Lia, seriously, when are you going to tell them? You've known you're pregnant for weeks. Don't be afraid of their reactions, okay? They love you. Everyone here just wants what's best for you. And don't be afraid of what comes next. That's what family is for. We'll help you.

Sitting at Jude's table, I stared at my phone and marveled over the fact that she could see through me, even this far away. There was comfort in that consistency, even if it still terrified me to try to figure out what came next.



“Good morning,” Jude grumbled, walking into the kitchen with a slight smile on his face. “Coffee? Tea?”

“Coffee would be great.”

He paused in the act of opening a cupboard. “You’re okay to drink it?”

I nodded. “A cup or two won’t hurt anything.”

“Right.”

He measured the grounds and added water to a very normal-looking coffee maker, the kind I used in my apartment back in Seattle.

*My old apartment*, I mentally corrected. The one that wasn’t waiting for me when I came back. That pit opened up again, and I kicked it closed in my mind.

“You were smiling awfully big for someone who hasn’t had caffeine yet,” he said.

“I was texting Claire.”

“That’s your twin sister, right?” he asked.

“Yeah.” When I sighed, he chuckled under his breath. “I miss her,” I admitted.

“That’ll happen.”

While I watched him move around his kitchen with such ease, I tucked my knees up against my chest and thought of all the things I didn’t know about Jude.

“I haven’t even told my family yet.”

Jude gave me a surprised look. “Why not?”

“Claire knows,” I amended. “But I think I’m running out of time on the rest of them.”

Before he said anything, he reached into a small cupboard and took out a small container, then two white plates. On the plate, he put a scone and set it on the table in front of me. Out of the fridge, he produced a container of jam, then clotted cream.

“They’ll want to know everything,” I explained. “How I feel and what I want and what’s going to happen ...” My voice trailed off.

“What happens next is on you and me, yeah?” He took a seat across from me, sliding the cream and jam in my direction. “If we’re making our own rules and all.”

“Yeah.”

His eyebrows lifted. “You don’t sound sure of that.”

“I am.” I inhaled. “But a big family that’s also an opinionated family, and not just big and opinionated, but we’ve always walked through big life stuff together, you know? They’ll have *thoughts*. And I’ll know all of them in less than five minutes of dropping the proverbial bomb.”

“Ahh,” he answered carefully.

For a moment, I waited to see if he’d elaborate, but he simply stayed quiet.

“Is your family like that?” I asked casually.

“No.” He nudged the plate closer, my cue to stuff my face with more carbs. Like I needed encouragement there. “Compliments of Mrs. Atkinson,” he explained. “I try not to eat too many of them during the season, but I figure this is a good morning to indulge a bit.”

There was an undercurrent to his words, and a warmth in his tone as he said them, but in the wake of my messages from Claire, I wasn’t sure I was ready to explore what that was. Making our own rules was great and all, but I still didn’t know what the hell Jude and I really *were*. And for now, I was okay with that. So was he.

But even knowing that, Claire was right. I was afraid to tell my family because it meant I had to face all the questions when none of the questions had answers.

About me, me and the baby, me and Jude and the baby, and me and Jude. Separate categories with lots and lots of unanswered questions.

As I broke open the scone and spread the cream over the surface, followed by the jam, I thought about how rarely I needed to explain the dynamic of my family to someone who had no backstory.

“I’m going to tell them today.”

He watched me carefully. “All right.”

“Have you told your family yet?”

“No.”

I waited for him to elaborate. But again, it was just ... that one word. There was no emotion in it, just like there was no change in his eyes or mouth. Huh.

The bite I took of the scone was indecently big, as was the moan that came out of my mouth as I chewed. His crooked grin in response was a whole lot of things. Endearing. Human. Sexy AF. I managed to swallow. “Holy shit, did she bake these?”

“I reckon she did, but she’ll never admit it if she didn’t.”

“If I could bake a scone like this, I’d tell everyone I’ve ever met in my *entire life*. Don’t ever fire her.”

Jude was so amused, eyes warm and dancing like I’d not seen them since that first night.

“Whu?” I asked, mouth full of happiness. His gaze, well ... it was more loaded than my scone. And I had a lot of cream on that baby.

“I can’t remember the last time I gained so much pleasure from something so small.”

As I swallowed, I imagined that my cheeks were bright as red. This guy had me flustered and quite easily. Normally, I was the fluster-er. With men. Or maybe, compared to Jude, they’d all been boys. There was no way for me to run circles around this man or outmaneuver him to get what I wanted.

And honestly, all I wanted was more stretches of time like the one we’d just had—uncomplicated snuggling, a little flirting, and a side of baked goods. I broke off a corner of the

scone and held it out to him, pulling my fingers back when he tried to reach for it.

Feeding him something delicious when I felt like it. That was one of my new rules.

Understanding lit his eyes with something steamy that I felt right between my thighs.

Jude opened his mouth, and I set the scone in. Before I could retract my hand, he gripped my wrist and held it in place, sucking lightly at the tips of my fingers.

Now that I felt in entirely different areas of my body. If I wasn't nipping out through my shirt, it would be a freaking miracle.

"Delicious," he murmured.

The way he licked his lips as we both settled back in our seats had me feeling all squirmy and restless, and judging by the smirk on his face, he knew it.

"I have to go to the facility in a bit," he told me.

I nodded. I knew the drill, so it wasn't surprising. "Meetings?"

"Not today. I need some work done on my hamstring, and I'm sure my manager wants to make my ears bleed, reminding me why I'm old and slow and can't score goals anymore."

He sounded so deliciously grumpy when he said it that I smiled.

"Oh, that's funny?" he asked.

I swear, I tried to wipe the grin off my face. It was so tempting to climb on his lap and show him exactly how not-old and not-slow he was, and all the different ways he could score, but I also knew this was a bruise for every elite athlete.

"No." I wiped scone crumbs off the side of my mouth. "Should I clear out when you do?"

Jude shrugged. "No rush on my end, unless you need to get your friend's car back to Oxford."

I shook my head. “She doesn’t need it until this weekend. I may work here while you’re gone, if that’s okay with you? Maybe get the phone call out of the way too.”

What a seemingly insignificant thing I was asking. But it wasn’t, and I think we both knew it. Allowing me into his space with no supervision was a big freaking deal.

He stood, taking a moment to tower over where I sat in that chair. Jude lifted his hand, brushing an errant crumb from the corner of my lips. “Whatever you need, it’s yours.”

Well, okay then. If he was trying to make me want to mount him like a bucking bronco, he was doing an excellent job.

That smirk, that warmth, it returned, and I think he knew exactly what was going on in my head.

Maybe we had a thousand unanswered questions between us, but whether we wanted each other was not one of them.

“I need to change and go,” he said.

I nodded. Good. I needed him to change and go too because now that my belly was full of carbs and coffee was hitting my system, I was feeling all sorts of feelings that I shouldn’t be feeling.

All of them complicated.

And I think he knew that too. He asked quietly, “Do you want me to be a part of the call with your family?”

Did I? *Let me contemplate that for all of about one one-hundredth of a second ...*

Absolutely not.

Logan would have a heart attack on the spot. Paige would find a way to become the first human to physically burst through a FaceTime call and appear next to me, simply so she could castrate Jude. Just ... nope.

And he did not need to know any of that yet. *I didn’t need any of that yet.*

“No, that’s okay. I think it’ll be easier if I do it myself.”

“Are you sure?”

“No,” I answered.

Jude smiled. “You have ten minutes to change your mind because after that, I’ll likely be gone until around four.”

“I won’t change my mind.”

Having him there would definitely make it harder. And telling them was already going to be hard enough.



## LIA

Any strong offensive scheme had certain key components, and when it came to me telling my family the news, I was going to approach this exactly like it was coming straight out of a football playbook.

A good offense created smart mismatches, pitting your best offensive player with their weakest defensive player. Maybe I couldn't do exactly that with Logan and Paige, but I could bring in my staunchest ally: Claire.

She was on her way to their house, ready to sit with them while I delivered the news and jump in if I needed backup.

It was also imperative if I had any intention of maintaining control, that I only tell Logan and Paige. At least for the first phone call. Molly and Isabel loved me, but I couldn't gauge how they'd react, so for the time being, I couldn't risk my offense being outmanned and overpowered.

In my head, I could imagine our scheduled phone call at seven in the morning Seattle time (three in the afternoon my time) as a play mapped out on Logan's whiteboard in his office. Xs and Os and arrows, signifying who would run which way, who would run the post route, who would run the fade, and if it was a pass play or a run.

For today, I was the quarterback, and my family was in the strange position of being lined up in front of me, blocking some invisible goal line. I didn't even know for sure what I wanted from the phone call, other than like, I didn't want to end up bursting into tears.



No crying = success.

As the hands on the clock slowly circled closer to three, I felt a nervous tightening in my belly. Maybe I should've waited until Jude could be a part of it and fortify my O-line, if I was taking this sports metaphor even further.

Maybe it was because I'd spent the day in the quiet of his beautiful home, that the slow creeping of time felt particularly ... well, *slow*. No one was around to distract me, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't focus on the work I was supposed to do.

My laptop had sat untouched on his kitchen table all day, and I'd moved from the couch to the teak furniture in his private garden a few times, managing some disjointed scrawling in my notebook. I read a few pages of the book on Charlotte that I'd brought from my flat, but the words bled together, and I found myself reading the same page for a solid hour.

It was that frustration that had me wandering slowly around Jude's home. Was it low-key stalking? Yes.

But come on, I was having his child, so I didn't think it was too strange to peek around a bit when he left me unattended in his private space.

All the rooms were immaculate, and it seemed like as much of a reflection on his personality as it did on the fact he had a full-time housekeeper. Who, he'd assured me, had the day off and wouldn't randomly stop by.

The house was updated but still held the charm of almost all the buildings in England. It was in the slope of the ceiling in the guest bedroom decorated in sedate blues and whites, in the curling wood detail of the crown molding and the wavy spots of the glass in the windows overlooking that beautifully landscaped garden. Jude's garden was separated from his neighbors by tall ivy-covered brick walls, and it gave the space a magical, old-world feeling that I liked very much.

I spent the most time in his bedroom, which was just as clean as the rest of the house, but there was an astonishing lack

of personal details anywhere to be found. I stopped in front of the large dresser and slid open the drawers, finding everything neatly folded. In the bottom drawer were a few faded photos underneath a dingy gray shirt with a farm logo on it, probably his parents' place—based on what he'd told me. My eyes narrowed when I saw something soft and white and fluffy peeking out from underneath the shirt. I tugged it out, smiling when I held the small little sheep in my hand. It was made of some sort of soft wool, and the tiny pink nose and black circle eyes were quite cute.

I found myself clutching it to my chest like a talisman.

“Do you think the sheep is cute?” I whispered to little Raspberry. “Maybe we'll do sheep in your nursery.”

When I left the room, I couldn't stop my brain from whirring with nervous speculation of how this phone call was going to go.

My phone buzzed.

**Claire: I'll be there in ten minutes. How do you want to do this?**

I took a deep breath and went down to the kitchen, where I'd decided to do the FaceTime call on my laptop, so I could see their faces more clearly. Unconsciously, my hand drifted to the nonexistent bump of my belly.

My little raspberry baby was still hiding, invisible to the naked eye, except for maybe the tiniest tightness on the waistband of my pants. A thought zipped into my head, completely unwanted, where I wondered if our mom—Brooke—had shown much, or if she'd been one of those pregnant women who suddenly looked like they'd shoved a basketball under their shirt.

And it was just another question I couldn't answer. I'd maybe seen one picture of her pregnant with me and Claire. Revisiting those parts of our past wasn't exactly high on the priority list. All I remembered of the picture was a giant bump covered by the black lace of some fancy dress she'd worn for a black-tie event she'd attended with our father.

The heel of my hand—still clutching the small sheep—pressed on the sudden spike in pressure on my chest, and I forced that image out of my head. Claire. I needed to answer Claire. How *did* I want to do this?

**Me: Quickly and painlessly.**

**CLAIRE: I know. But I meant more like, do you want me to mentally prep them?**

I sat at the table and flipped open my MacBook. My hand shook a little when I pulled up the FaceTime.

**Me: Just let them know that I'm okay, but I need to talk to them about something and I wanted you there for support.**

**CLAIRE: You've got it.**

**CLAIRE: It'll be okay. I promise.**

**CLAIRE: Heading in. I LOVE YOU, LEE.**

“I think I'm gonna puke,” I whispered. With a quick glance at the clock, I wondered if I could shove another scone down before this circus kicked off. Pinching my eyes shut, I resisted because no matter how delicious it was, the scone would not solve anything. And that was the truth with Jude, as well. Having him with me to do this wouldn't make the words any easier to get out. Not to mention that, despite what he might believe, I wasn't worried about their disappointment. I was worried about their worry.

They'd want me home immediately.

They'd want to wrap me in their arms and help me carry the load, and the worst thing I could ask of my big, chaotic, opinionated family was to stay away.

When the bridge of my nose started tingling, it was the first warning sign that my entire playbook for this call was going to go to shit. I clenched my jaw together and took a deep breath.

“Stupid hormones,” I said in a voice that wavered dangerously. And they were stupid. In my mind, I imagined my emotions like an angry ocean—white-capped waves that had stayed off in the distance until this very moment. My hand went to my belly again, and I felt calmer. It would be fine. We would be fine.

**Claire: They’re worried, but okay. I’m calling now.**

Before I could second-guess it, I stood, darted to the cupboard, and snatched the bag of scones, shoving a piece of one in my mouth before I took my seat again. I set the sheep just beyond the laptop, where I could see the smiling black mouth. The ringing began as I swallowed my scone, and I clicked the touchpad to answer the call. At the sight of Logan and Paige, huddled close at the table where we’d eaten a million meals, I almost lost my grip.

“HI! We miss you. Are you okay?” Paige asked. Logan wrapped an arm around her shoulder and studied the screen with so much intensity that I almost laughed.

“Hi.” I exhaled. “It’s good to see your faces.”

They exchanged a quick look. “You doing okay, kid?” Logan asked.

“I’m eating a scone in England. How can I not be okay?” I lifted the baked good in question, and Paige gave me a tiny smile, but they were not fooled by my answer.

Claire popped her head in behind Logan’s shoulder. “I’m sitting over here, but I can hear you just fine.”

“Why is your sister here for this?” Logan asked.

Right. Okay then.

“Logan,” Claire said, “don’t interrogate her. I’m here because she asked me to be.”

His face gentled, which took a lot because my big brother had never been described as gentle. Ever. He was a bruiser, an iron-willed coach. The only piece of his life that received softness was us.

“You look good,” Paige interjected. “I miss looking at your face.”

“You could always look at Claire and pretend it’s me.” At my joke, her bottom lip wobbled, and her big blue eyes welled. I sighed. “Oh, Paige, don’t cry, please.”

She waved her hands in front of her face. “Sorry. I didn’t expect it to be so hard to have one of you move away.”

“I didn’t *move* away. And Molly travels for work all the time.”

“I’m a big ole hypocrite, I know.” Emotions under control, Paige tucked errant strands of her red hair behind her ears and gave Logan another loaded look. “I think we’re just worried. You’ve called, but anytime we want to see you, you find a reason you can’t. So when you have your sister show up, and you’re in an unfamiliar place”—she gestured to the background—“I think you can understand why we’re a little caught off guard.”

I sat back in my chair and rubbed my face. “I know.”

“Where are you?” Logan asked.

From their vantage point, all they could see was the French doors that led from Jude’s kitchen to his beautiful garden, a far cry from my tiny student’s flat, which they’d seen pictures of.

“I’m at a ... friend’s place.”

Paige visibly fortified herself. “Lia, your brother and I love you, and no matter what it is, you need to tell us. We will still love you.”

“I know you will.” My hand went back to the lil raspberry again. Could it sense my nerves? I let out a slow breath to calm my racing heart.

Paige took the reins again. “And if you’re scared to tell us, like ... you found someone we weren’t expecting and maybe

you think we'll be disappointed, we won't be. I'd love another daughter, and if that's who you love, then I will be the best girl mom in the whole world."

My head tilted. "What?"

I heard Claire clear her throat, but I couldn't tell if she was laughing or redirecting.

Logan pinched the bridge of his nose. "Paige, just let her talk."

She looked at him. "I just want her to know we love her."

"She *knows*. How about you let her tell us."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Claire popped her head in the camera again. "Paige thinks you're coming out. That you're trying to tell them you have a girlfriend."

"Oh." My heart warmed impossibly at how she'd prepped for any and all news. "I'm happy to hear that you'd love me regardless, but I'm not trying to tell you I'm gay."

She swallowed, eyes searching my face. "Okay. Whatever it is ... we're your family."

Lips pursed, I blew out a breath, and ripped off the Band-Aid. "I'm trying to tell you I'm pregnant."

*Silence.*

For four solid seconds, there was nothing but wide eyes and silence.

"Holy shit," Paige whispered.

"You're what?" Logan asked. "How?"

I raised my eyebrows. Claire choked on a laugh.

His cheeks reddened. "Forget I said that. "

Paige blinked rapidly. "Okay. Okay. I'm ... who? Who? What happened? And when?"

Logan's chest expanded on a deep breath, and I could practically see him shift gears, see the helplessness written all

over his face. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “I’m good. And Paige, I’m just about ... nine weeks along.”

Paige pulled out her phone and started tapping on the screen. “So that was ... pretty much right when you got there.”

“Y-yes.”

Logan’s eyes flipped to my sister. “You knew?”

“Yeah. I was on the phone with her when she took the test a few weeks ago.”

He nodded slowly. “That’s why you were acting so weird when I asked about her.”

Claire laughed. “You know I’m the worst liar.”

Paige kept her eyes on her phone, which was when my worry started to grow again. Every second I couldn’t see her eyes, it got worse. “Apparently, you’re a good secret keeper, though,” Paige said evenly.

Logan sighed.

“I asked her to,” I said. “I wanted to tell you myself.”

“Great,” Paige answered. “Now you’ve told us, and I’ve got flights up right now. How soon can you pack?”

“I’m not booking a flight home, Paige.”

Her hands froze. Logan’s eyes closed, but I saw his hand curl tightly around her shoulder.

Paige’s face finally lifted, and her eyes were bright with tears. “You’re staying?”

“There’s no reason I can’t finish out the semester.”

“You’re pregnant, Lia, and in a foreign country and alone. There. That’s three reasons to come home.” A tear spilled over her cheek. “You don’t have any of us there with you. Have you been sick? I got so sick with Emmett; it was awful. Don’t you remember? And I can’t i-imagine you in that tiny flat all alone, with no one to bring you crackers and hold your hair like you girls used to when I was pregnant, a-and”—she stopped,

hiccupping around a sob—“I hate the thought you’re doing this alone when you don’t have to.”

My own eyes watered, and I curled my fingers into a fist, the sharp edges of my nails providing just enough pain to keep my emotions at bay. “I was only sick for a couple of weeks, but it’s better now. I feel okay, Paige, I promise. Just tired. I’m taking my vitamins and eating well and drinking a lot of water.” I leaned in, fighting the urge to wrap her in my arms because it was hard seeing the toughest woman I knew this way, out of worry for me. “And I’m not alone.”

Logan’s jaw clenched. “What’s his name? Does he have a job? Is he ...” He cleared his throat. “Is he treating you well?”

“His name is Jude McAllister, he’s thirty-one, and yes. A very good job, actually. He’s the one who set up the doctor, and I’m at his place right now while he’s at work. We’re ... getting to know each other.”

Logan’s brow furrowed. “What was the name again?”

“J-Jude McAllister.”

His eyes narrowed.

*Heeeeeeere we go*, I thought.

“Why does that name sound familiar?”

Paige glanced at her husband, swiping at her cheeks. “Does it?” Before I could stop her, her fingers started flying across the screen again. The moment she saw it, I knew. Her eyes got huge, and her jaw dropped somewhere to the vicinity of her belly button. “Holy effing *shit*, Lia, is this him?”

“*That* Jude McAllister?” Logan yelled. “The footballer Jude McAllister?”

I nodded weakly.

They both stared dumbly at the phone screen, and I could only imagine what headlines and images had popped up.

I mean, Paige could hardly argue with the *why* of it. He looked (and played) like David Beckham and Tom Brady’s DNA were combined in a lab somewhere. And Logan



definitely couldn't argue about his ability to financially help with the baby. The Brits were generous with their football players, that was for sure.

Logan dropped his head into his hands. It took a second, but he let out a groan. "I swear, you girls have an athlete radar, and it's going to be the death of me. Couldn't one of you end up with a lawyer or a teacher or a dog trainer or something?"

Claire's hand appeared on the camera, giving our brother a condescending pat on the back. "Bit hypocritical coming from you, don't you think?"

"No!" he shouted, lifting his head. "Because I know exactly what goes into this life. The drinking and the drugs and the parties and the women. Do you know how hard it is to be an elite athlete and not succumb to all that bullshit?"

It was Paige's turn to be in the comforter role. She gave me a small smile, even as she wrapped an arm around Logan. "You managed it, though. And we know a lot of guys who do. Maybe Jude is one of them." When Logan turned to her, she cupped the side of his face. "And even if he had a past, we can't hold that against him as long as he's doing right by Lia."

"Thank you," I said quietly. My heart was still hammering, but mainly because I hadn't anticipated this part being the largest hurdle. "Logan, look at me." It took a second, and I could tell my big brother was struggling with this just as much as his wife had but was far more reticent to show it. "I need you to try not to worry, okay?"

"Impossible," he answered, voice a gruff, tortured whisper. "I worry about you four every single day as it is, and not because I don't trust you. It's part of the deal when you love someone so much that you'd die for them. The worst thing you can imagine is them hurting and you can't do anything about it." He shook his head, and that was when I lost the battle.

Playbook was out the window.

I sniffed as the first tear fell. Even with the quick movement of my hand to make it go away, he caught it.

Logan's eyes held mine. "I don't know this guy, and I hope he is doing whatever you need him to do, but the second he doesn't, he has to answer to me, because that is my *job*. The moment you were born—you, Claire, Molly, Isabel, and Emmett—it became the most important responsibility of my life to make sure you're taken care of and loved the way you should be. I won't apologize for that."

"I don't want you to," I told him. There was no disguising the tears in my voice, all thick and wobbly. "It took me so long to tell you guys because I knew it would kill you to be so far away from me."

"We love you, Lia," Paige said.

"I love you too." I exhaled heavily. "It will be okay. I promise."

"But you're coming home at the end of the semester, right?" she asked.

My mouth opened, but no sound came out. I didn't know. Did I want to be an ocean away from Jude when his child was born? Was that even fair?

"That's the plan," I managed, but her eyes narrowed because she heard the pause all the same.

"What about a job?" Logan asked. "You won't have your master's yet, will you? You'll need a semester off if you're due in the spring."

"I don't know." My voice sounded about as big as a church mouse. "I-I haven't thought about it."

Claire appeared behind Logan. "We have plenty of time to figure that out."

That was why I wanted Claire there. Because she could probably sense my inner freak-out building.

Paige smiled. "Can we talk next week maybe?"

I nodded. "I promise."

"You look tired, baby," she murmured. "Why don't you go take a nap while you have some peace and quiet, okay?"

I was tired. I was so, so fucking tired.

The nerves had powered me through the entire day, and in one fifteen-minute phone call, I felt like every ounce of energy had been sucked into a black hole at my feet. “Okay.”

“We love you,” she said.

“Love you guys too.”

Claire waved, and Logan gave me a tiny smile, but I could tell what it cost him. My big brother would lose a lot of sleep over this.

Once the call disconnected, I sank back in the chair, heaving out a giant sigh of relief.

The rest of the scone beckoned, as did the giant bed I’d seen upstairs, the one covered in plush pillows.

If Jude had a problem with me trying out all the sleeping surfaces in his house, he wouldn’t have left me here, a veritable Goldilocks, trying to find the one that fit just right.

Cute little sheep in hand, I walked up the stairs, finished the scone, and smiled as I passed the guest room where I’d laid to read earlier. The doorway to his room, with its big masculine bed and sturdy wood frame, looked just about right. I’d set the timer on my phone and be back downstairs before he got home, I promised myself, as I crawled onto the perfectly firm mattress.

I groaned in bliss, pressing my face into a pillow that smelled like him.

My eyes fell shut, and with the phone call behind me and the smell of Jude surrounding me, I fell fast asleep.



## JUDE

Everyone had left the pitch, dispersed to various meetings or treatments, so before I went home, I found myself standing in the middle of the endless stretch of green by myself.

It was hard to remember moments when this job wasn't complicated and didn't come with a metric ton of entanglements. All day, I'd faced various aspects of exactly how I was slipping from my long-held perch. The physio working on my hamstrings commented on all manner of issues she'd noticed in my play the day earlier. Declan cornered me in the weight room and had a chat with me about my attitude. But honestly, what kind of attitude did he expect when we were playing like shit and all eyes turned to someone new to fix our problems?

He'd struggle too if someone asked him to step down as the captain.

My manager sat across from me, the barrier of his desk impossibly wide as he discussed exactly why I was looking old and slow and distracted, and I was slowly whittling down all my chances at being in the starter position. With our upcoming match at Aston Villa, we had a chance—and a very good one—to earn three points and move higher. Behind me were players younger, faster, and in his words, had the focus that I *used* to be famous for.

Complications.

A hopeless mess that I wasn't even sure how to go about untangling.

The only thing that felt clear was the grass beneath me, the white lines lining the space, and the ball that sat in front of me. Digging my toe underneath it, I bounced it on the top of my foot once, twice, three times, and when the fourth bounce hit the grass, I pulled back my left leg and drilled it as hard as I could toward the goal.

It hit the back of the unguarded net, and the sound of the ball rattling the woven fabric of the net made me smile. Thought fairly innocuous to some, it was one of my favorite sounds in the entire world. Buried in that sound was my legacy.

And as much as I didn't want to admit it, that legacy was fading to everyone except me.

I walked off the pitch, nodding to the security guard stationed at the tunnel, and made my way to my car. The drive from the facility back to my house was less than twenty minutes, and as I got farther away, the knots surrounding my day loosened around my chest. It was the first time in a very long time—maybe ever—since I'd headed home with the knowledge that someone was waiting for me.

Someone I wanted to see, someone I wanted to spend time with, and not only because of the baby.

I was still wrapping my brain around the future, and how the addition of a child inevitably altered it. Lia wasn't just in my future, some concept I couldn't quite grasp. She was flesh and blood, and right in front of me as somehow the least complicated part of my life.

Her easy acceptance of what I needed to do today and the way she was able to face the reality of my life without flinching were attractive options to be presented with. I smiled as I pulled my car next to hers, thinking of how happy that scone had made her. Her ability to find pleasure in those small moments was something I could learn from her. I used to be able to.

Like the sound of a ball hitting the back of the net, normally drowned out by the roaring of the crowds. They were intertwined, to be sure, but maybe the lesson I needed to learn

by this sudden veering my life had taken was to appreciate the building blocks when I was faced with them, instead of stepping my full weight on top in order to get to the next one.

The crowds wouldn't be there without the ball in the net.

I wouldn't either.

Unlocking the front door, I called out her name, wondering if coming home to her on this day was another building block. The house was quiet with Lia nowhere to be seen on the main floor. Tapping my thumb against my thigh, I thought of where she might have gone. It was a bit of a walk to any shops or restaurants, but doable. My phone showed no texts from her, and I was a bit later coming home than I'd anticipated.

From upstairs, I heard a creak, and I smiled. It came from my bed. I knew that sound. It was the sound my bedframe made any time I shifted. I took the stairs quietly, avoiding the spots that made noise. Approaching my room, I decided not to worry so much about what step might come next, what step should come next. I'd simply enjoy whatever place we found ourselves in, whatever place Lia wanted us in.

The rules would be made to our specifications, and I found that I quite liked that. No one could tell us how we should be doing this, whatever this thing was between her and I. This was the one part of my life that felt smooth, felt instinctual in an entirely different way than I was used to.

And lying in the middle of my bed, curled on her side underneath the quilt that Rebecca insisted on putting on my bed, I could understand why. Everything inside me felt drawn to Lia, tugged toward her like she'd yanked her fist inside my chest and refused to let go. No part of me could define why it made so much sense to me to climb quietly onto the bed next to her, so I didn't even try. That morning, she'd been open to the easy affection between us, and for a moment, I'd thought she'd curl her clever fingers around my trousers like she had that first night and pull me closer. It was in her eyes to do exactly that, but she'd resisted.

She was the stronger of the two of us, that much was clear. Because seeing her laid out on my bed like that, nothing inside

me wanted to act along the same lines. The sleek line of her back, the silky fall of her hair down her back, and the perfectly round curve of her arse was the perfect gift to come home to.

She shifted when I carefully curled myself around her, sliding my arm around her waist and intertwining my fingers over top of hers. Of all the places she could have napped, she chose my bed, and as I held my breath to see if that shifting meant she was waking up, I knew she'd done so for a reason.

The hand not laying on hers brushed against something soft, and I lifted my head, eyes widening when I pulled the tiny sheep—made by my mum—from underneath the pillow.

“What the bloody hell? Where did you come from?” I murmured. His pink nose wasn't as bright as it used to be. The gray wool of his body faded with age. I didn't even know why I still had it because almost every single remnant of my childhood was tucked away—out of sight, out of mind.

Lia's fingers tightened around mine when I spoke, and her breathing shifted from slow and steady to shallow, rapid, excited.

The sheep was tossed off the bed, and I heard her chuckle under her breath.

“Poor little sheep,” she whispered.

“He'll fucking survive.” I buried my nose in her hair and inhaled deeply. Her back curved sinuously, and that arse pushed back against me.

I used my other hand to push her hair out of the way, dropping kisses against her neck when I heard her whisper my name. Pausing, I made sure it wasn't an entreaty to stop, and that was when she turned, eyes drowsy with sleep and cheeks flushed with desire. Immediately, she cupped my face, sliding her hands up into my hair.

“I was dreaming about this,” she murmured, and the husky tone of her voice had me shifting my hips restlessly.

“Were you now?”



“Mm-hmm.” She licked her lips. “You woke me up like this. Differently, but like this.”

I tilted her chin up with my thumb and ducked my head down so I could nibble along the line of her neck. Her fingernails dug into my scalp.

“Different how, love?” I spoke into her skin.

“W-with your hands.” She arched her back again when the edge of my teeth found her jaw. “You’d taken off my pants without waking me.”

“Trousers,” I corrected with a grin. Her fingers tightened in my hair, and I hissed at the bite of pain. I sucked on her neck, hard, and she let out a surprised gasp.

“If you mark me, Jude ...” she warned.

I lifted my head and met her gaze. “You’ll what?”

Lia’s lips curled in a devious smile. “Return the favor.”

Given the way she’d yanked on my hair and the length of her nails, I didn’t doubt it. I ducked my head again, sucking the soft lobe of her ear into my mouth. She whimpered. “Would you mark up my back? My arse? Would you use those lovely nails and stake your claim?”

“Yes,” Lia gasped. “You’d love that, wouldn’t you?”

I licked up the side of her cheek, and her thighs split around my legs, making room instantly.

In answer, I gripped her chin and took her mouth in a ferocious kiss. Our tongues tangled instantly, my head tilting so I could deepen it further. The familiarity of kissing her was a stark contrast to our first night, where the novelty of her was what made it so bloody sexy. And in that familiarity, I found a haven that I hadn’t anticipated, a distraction when I’d least expected it. My hands dug into the flesh of her arse underneath her leggings, and I had to keep myself from tearing at her clothes.

Enjoy the small moments, I reminded myself, regardless of what came next.

We kissed like that, hands gripping over our clothes in a way that I hadn't in years. She held me so tightly, her arms around my neck and fingers in my hair. Lia sucked my tongue into her mouth, and I fought the urge to grip her hands and anchor them above her head, sink myself into her like I had before, just to see if I'd imagined how good it had been.

"What else happened in this dream of yours, my naughty girl?" I whispered, pulling my mouth away from hers, keeping just out of reach when she tried to kiss me again.

Her hand slipped up the back of my shirt, and the tips of those nails dug into my flesh, making me grin. Her eyes glinted, and as the sleep cleared from them, I saw a question emerge even before she voiced it.

"Are we making a new rule?" she whispered. The doubt was tempered by the fact she couldn't keep from touching me. From my back, her hand inched around, where she used that wicked fingertip to trace the squares of my abdomen just above the button to my trousers. "Because I wouldn't mind knowing what we're doing here."

I knew what she was asking.

But quite badly, I realized I didn't want to lose the ease of this relationship we'd stumbled into by way of a weak condom and her spotty memory at taking a few pills. Without those two things, I might never have seen Lia again, and at the moment, with her lithe body laid out like an offering, that felt like a fucking tragedy.

So I chose the wider path, the one more easily trod.

I glanced down meaningfully. "*You* are roughly three centimeters away from making me very happy, it seems. And I"—my hand did some sneaking of my own, up the line of her soft stomach and to the warm, overflowing cups of her lace bra—"am about to conduct an experiment."

Her lips curled up. "What experiment is that?"

"Size checks are now mandatory, I'm afraid." I gently lifted the hem of her shirt and placed a kiss above her belly

button. She hissed when I tugged the cups down and continued my delicious journey.

“C-careful,” she whispered. “They’re tender.”

“I can be gentle.”

“Can you?” Her hands moved down, pulling open my trousers and gripping me with unexpected strength, my back bowing in unanticipated pleasure. “Because I’m still learning that particular talent.”

I laughed into her skin.

Lia whispered just next to my ear, lifting the hairs along the back of my neck when it was paired with what she was doing to me with that clever, clever hand. “My size check is happy to report consistently above average sizes.”

With a tortured groan, I snagged her lips once again. Each kiss built upon the last, each time her tongue tangled around mine, frantic energy powered our hands, mine seeking the same intention she seemed to have for me.

“Yes.” She sighed as my fingers slid to their preferred destination. “Oh, oh, I like this rule.”

“Just this, love,” I told her. My breath hitched. I took her mouth again, deeper this time, and she tilted her head.

Lia arched her hips into my palm while I emitted harsh puffs of air against her soft, soft lips.

She found her release just before I did, in the bend of her back and the way she pinched her eyes shut, the utter relief in the sigh she allowed me to taste from her mouth.

*Relief.*

To me, Lia felt like sweet relief.

By the time I groaned into her neck, and I fell like a great weight on top of her, I felt like I was in high school again. Our clothes were hardly even undone, yet the satisfaction spreading like warm caramel through my veins was absolutely brilliant.

For so long, the oblivion found in nameless women, the chasing of yet another goal, another benchmark that only meant something to me did nothing to ease the disquiet clawing at the inside of my rib cage.

But now, here, was peace. And I found that I didn't want to skip a moment of it.



**LIA**

TWO WEEKS LATER

**Molly:** Can you tell your little strawberry that I am the favorite aunt? I feel like subliminal messaging is important right now, and I don't like the leg-up that Claire will get because of the twin thing.

**Me:** It is a strawberry right now. Good sleuthing.

**Me:** What about Isabel?

**Molly:** Isabel doesn't threaten me because I have a MUCH more maternal nature than she does. She'll be like... the cool scary aunt. Not the favorite aunt. It's an entirely different category.

**Molly:** PLUS, Isabel is visiting you in a few weeks. She'll get to plant her own subliminal messages before I get a chance.

**Molly:** I NEED YOUR HELP IN THIS, OKAY?

**Me:** I'll get right on that after I meet with Atwood. About to listen to her eviscerate my first draft.

**Me:** Are you home now? Didn't you just film something in ... Georgia? Somewhere south?

**Molly:** Tennessee. We did a piece on the Titans. If Noah got transferred there, I wouldn't be sad to live in Nashville. DON'T TELL LOGAN I SAID THAT.

**Molly:** He'd probably be more heartbroken to lose Noah from the Wolves than to have me move.

**Lia:** Oh, please. He would not.

**Molly: I know. But he knows it's a reality we may have to face someday. Contracts expire. Athletes change teams.**

**Molly: Good luck in your meeting!!**

My fingers itched to ask Molly about dating an athlete. Yes, we'd grown up with Logan, and yes, I knew all the ins and outs of his life, but that was my brother. Now I found myself in an entirely different position. Most nights, I was in Oxford in my cute little flat and my cute little bed, working on my paper in various places around the city. As I'd learned, the city limits housed ten different libraries, and each had a distinct mood. The Old Library at Oxford Union was my favorite, though. Something about the curved ceilings, lined with beams, the floral-shaped windows that allowed the light to stream in, and the pre-Raphaelite murals adorning the walls, I always felt just a little bit more connected to my material. Less distracted by ... well, by my entire existence.

Even the little strawberry seemed more well-behaved when I was in that building.

When I was curled up in the green leather chair that I'd claimed, I somehow managed not to think about the little piece of ever-changing fruit with its milestones and new body parts that slowly took shape.

I managed not to think about Jude and how we'd somehow slipped into a relationship with no label, the byproduct of whatever arbitrary rules we decided were acceptable. Chemistry had the wheel of that particular decision, considering it was hard for us to keep our hands off each other when we were alone. We hadn't slept together again, not since that first night, but everything else we'd done seemed to make that a friggin' technicality at this point.

But I still wasn't sure how to balance it among everything else.

Or if I should even try. It was completely possible I was borrowing trouble at this point to try to force Jude to put a definition on what we were doing. Or what we weren't.



As I approached Atwood's office, it made me think about Charlotte Brontë, as I often did. *Conventionality is not morality*, she'd written in *Jane Eyre*, and it seemed like an especially appropriate quote for my situation with Jude.

Was it conventional? Hell to the no.

Very little about it was done "normally." But what was normal anyway? My brain started spinning around that question, and I found myself pausing outside Atwood's door long enough that she finally popped her head out.

"Are you coming in? Or are we meeting in the hallway now?"

I blinked. "Sorry. My brain is all ..." I waved a hand around my head.

She smiled. "I was a bit foggy in the early parts of both of my pregnancies, so I can relate to the ..." She did some hand waving of her own. "One evening, I found myself quite parched, and when I started pouring water out of our pitcher, I realized—too late, mind you—that I was pouring it onto a dinner plate, rather than into a cup."

I laughed.

"What were you thinking about?" she asked. "Anything you want to talk through?"

Sinking into the chair opposite her desk, I let the thread of that thought snowball for a moment before I answered. "I was thinking about what Charlotte said about conventionality. How the definition of normal or right changes with every generation. Look at me, for example. In their time, I would've been absolutely ruined if I'd found myself in this position. I would've been forced to marry the man who ruined me, no matter the circumstances that led to it. And if I hadn't married him, I—and by extension, my family—would have been ruined in polite society. No choices would've been offered to me."

"True." Atwood sighed, a soft smile on her face. "And what made you think about that?"

I shrugged. “Everything, I guess. Even now, people would say the way we’re doing things, the father and I, isn’t conventional. They’d equate that to *right* or *wrong*. Similarly, how many people thought the Brontë sisters were wrong for writing their books? They had to publish them under male pseudonyms to even have a shot at making money from what they did. Society would judge them, define them, and cast them into a set category because their choices defied convention.”

“And you worry that people will define you because of your choices?”

“No.” I shifted in the chair. “Or I don’t think that’s what I’m doing. We don’t wear our choices like a scarlet letter. People only know my choices if I choose to share them.”

She hummed. In front of her was the same navy-blue teacup that she always drank out of, and she paused to take a sip. “That’s quite true.”

“We don’t need to talk about it.” My fingers, knit tightly together in my lap, covered the small bump underneath my black sweater, and I saw her eyes drift there. “Really. I just ... I do that sometimes. Anytime I don’t know exactly what I’m doing, or should be doing, I think about them. About the sisters. And how few choices they had, simply because of when they were born, you know?”

As I spoke, I fought a feeling of defensiveness when no one had even called for a discussion on my choices. Professor Atwood removed her glasses and set them on the surface of her desk.

“Lia, I know we need to discuss your first draft—and we shall—but for a moment, would you allow an old lady to give a piece of advice?”

I gave her a look. She wasn’t a day over forty-five. Old, my ass. “You’re not old, but yes.”

She smiled. “It’s natural in this field to fixate quite strongly on the past. We’re paid to do so, aren’t we?”

Slowly, I nodded, not entirely sure where she was going with this.

“I know that you’re still sussing out what you’d like to do with your degree once you finish, but no matter what you decide, I’d give you one word of caution.” She turned the edge of her teacup to line it up with the edge of her desk, and when the angle was right, she glanced back up at me. “Be careful that you don’t anchor your thoughts so firmly on the past that it’s hard for you to deal with your future, especially if part of that future is unclear.”

“That’s not what I’m doing.” But my fingers tightened over my belly, my chest felt a little tight at the gentle delivery of her words. “Isn’t it a good sign that I think of them often? That I’m constantly trying to correlate our societal dilemmas with what they went through?”

“Of course that’s good.”

“Then why do I feel like you’re chastising me?” Oh, my gawd, were my eyes getting blurry? Was I crying in her office?

“Lia,” she said gently, “I’m not chastising you. But I do see in you something that I used to struggle with myself, and I don’t want you to only plant your thoughts on the past when you should be able to look straight to your future.”

My future. My future was one giant foggy question mark.

And there was time to wave those clouds away.

I stood, and I saw the regret in her eyes. “I have to go,” I told her.

“We still need to talk about your draft.” Her chin lifted. “I apologize if I overstepped.”

“I, uh, I can email you about your openings next week.” I slid my backpack straps over my shoulders. “Besides, I have a doctor’s appointment in London.”

In three hours, but she hardly needed to know that.

She raised her eyebrows. “You’re going to London for that? They couldn’t get you into a doctor here?”

Atwood still had no idea who the father was, and explaining that he paid for the friggin' fanciest doctor in the universe to stick a gel-covered wand up my hoo-hah did not sound like a fun time, given what she'd just said to me.

"Yeah, it's a long story." I tucked my hair behind my ear. "Thank you for your advice."

She smiled gently. "I hope your appointment goes well."

She knew, probably just as well I did, that we were both being fake AF with our polite goodbyes. I wasn't feeling all that thankful over what she said. I felt attacked. I felt ... vulnerable.

The Tube ride to London felt too long.

And it felt too short.

Jude was meeting me at the doctor's office for this appointment because we were going to try to listen for the heartbeat, and for some reason, it was the first time in a long time when I didn't know if I wanted to face him.

If I was fixating on the past to avoid my own future, wouldn't I be doing that with my own past? I had a laundry list of items to choose from, if that were the case.

-Father dying when I was young: check.

-Mother bailing when it wasn't so super fun to be a parent anymore: check.

-Brother becoming Dad, which made for a very confusing family tree when we had school assignments: check.

But none of those were even remotely things I wanted to fixate on. Because they were done. Over. Nothing about them could be changed.

I got off, minded the gap and all that jazz, and let the ebb and flow of the crowd leaving the station guide me up onto the street. The trees were devoid of leaves by this point in the fall, and it felt appropriately barren.

There was no lush, pretty scenery to distract me from what Atwood said, and even the grandeur of the buildings didn't

adequately hold my attention.

Always looking for a distraction.

The thought drew me up short, only a block away from the doctor.

Were Jude and I both guilty of what she'd said?

I rubbed my belly, wondering if the little strawberry could sense my unease. "Sorry, lil fruit," I murmured. "I'll try to slow the mental anguish."

Rounding the corner, I spied Jude's tall form against one of the white colonial columns propping up the ornate entryway to the office. He was wearing a black knit hat and aviator glasses that covered half his face. All that was visible was his dark scruff along his jaw and the stern line of his mouth.

Maybe what we were doing was a distraction and nothing more, this refusal to address what was waiting for us, but when he looked up and saw me, I could not help the way I reacted to that slow, sensual curve of his mouth.

I knew what that mouth was capable of.

"Hello," he murmured, sliding a hand over my hip when I approached. Quite naturally, my hands slid up the marble-hard planes of his chest, and I lifted my chin. He took the hint, smart boy that he was. Jude gave me a soft kiss but didn't deepen it. "Good meeting with your advisor?"

A buzzing sound went off in my head, like a game show contestant had hit the wrong button.

Not the topic I wanted to touch on.

"Fine," I told him. "You're early."

He grinned. "I wanted to scope out the building and see if you were exaggerating about how posh it was."

Lifting one eyebrow, I pinched his nipple, smiling in satisfaction when he yelped.

"And you weren't," he finished.

What I thought about saying next was not what came out of my mouth. What I thought about saying was, Of course, I wasn't exaggerating. But what came out of my mouth was, "Have you told your parents about the baby yet?"

Jude froze. Hell, so did I.

Maybe Atwood's advice made me so uncomfortable because she was right. It was a thought I didn't want to dwell on too much.

Jude gently turned our positions, so my back was against the column, his arm caging me in, an effective barrier from any prying eyes on the quiet, tree-lined street.

"Not yet," he admitted. His hand snuck under the back of my shirt, and he traced the bumps on my spine. "Soon."

I opened my mouth, this time not even sure what I was going to say, and he leaned in, sucking my bottom lip into his mouth.

"H-how was work?" I asked, tilting my mouth away.

He kissed down my neck. "I hardly want to talk about work when I could be doing this."

My fingers curled into the material of his shirt, and even as I recognized what he was doing—serving up a delicious distraction—I wasn't able to find the strength to resist it.

Not conventional.

Maybe not even wise.

But I tilted my head and yanked him closer, earning me a grunt of satisfaction when my tongue slid wetly against his. One of his palms spread wide over my stomach, and I felt a warm glow somewhere in the vicinity of my heart.

Wise, conventional, whatever word someone else might suggest ... I decided they were all overrated, and I lost myself in his kiss.



## JUDE

By the time we were back at my house and Lia had curled up in her favorite corner of my couch, I'd sort of stopped hearing that little *whomp-whomp-whomp* sound in my head.

Sort of.

I scrolled the screen of my phone.

“Did you know the average heartbeat is up to a hundred and sixty beats per minute?”

Lia glanced at me, a bemused smile on her face. “I did not.”

“His was fast.”

*Whomp, whomp, whomp.* Like a horse galloping on hard dirt.

Now the smile spread on her face. “His? I thought it was my job to get a feel for the sex.”

“Awfully sexist of you.” I lifted my phone screen and tried to pretend I wasn't a little embarrassed that I'd been the first to admit which gender I thought the baby was. “Sir Google says that boy heartbeats average a bit higher, so you can sod off.”

She laughed. “There are so many girls in my family, it's just weird to imagine having a boy.”

Weird was not the adjective I would've used.

Everything laid out in my head like a road map, all the ways I'd be able to do right by him when my parents hadn't



done right by me. And maybe everyone did that to a certain extent when faced with impending parenthood. The mistakes of our own families felt like blinking beacons, bright and obnoxious. And not just obvious but easily avoided.

My parents, from simple, hardworking stock, couldn't imagine anything other than the life they'd both been raised in. My father was a farmer because his father had been a farmer. He dug his hands in the dirt, day in and day out, because it was what McAllister men did.

Until me.

And Lewis.

Though they accepted the life he lived because my brother still worked his fingers to the bone in his pub. He wiped down dirty counters and cleared tables, if need be. He poured drinks and stayed until the middle of the night if required. To them, it wasn't farming the ground for our food, but it was honorable because it was service. But to them, I was nothing more than a show pony who could kick a ball into a very large, very easily found target. My success, in their mind, was rooted in vanity and excess, a failing on their part that I wasn't more content in the life that they'd raised me.

To them, I didn't serve anyone except myself. No matter that the entire world understood the unifying effects of sport, and the passion and joy and camaraderie of cheering on the same team. The entire world except my bloody family, it seemed.

To them, it was frivolous, this thing I loved and had dedicated my life to.

My son—or daughter—would never feel like that.

Whatever passion they were born with, whatever thing lit them up inside, I'd move heaven and hell to help them hone that into a life. I'd never make them feel like less for loving something different than I did. The opposite actually. If they wanted to paint or draw or write or spin pirouettes or design clothes, I'd tear my hands to blood and bone if I could carve out a place in the world for them to do the thing they loved.

And I could feel that building up inside me with a zealot's fire as I watched Lia flip channels on the telly in my home.

Everything else might be going wrong in my life, branching off into directions that felt crooked and dangerously flimsy, except her.

"A girl is fine by me too," I murmured, sliding a hand up her leg, where it draped over my lap.

Lia rolled her eyes. "I'd hope so."

"It was fast, though, wasn't it?" I asked. "The heartbeat."

Funny, if I laid my hand over my chest, I got the strangest feeling I'd feel it pounding in that same rhythm. *Whomp, whomp, whomp*.

She hummed, moving her own hand over her stomach. When the doctor rolled the wand over it as Lia lay flat on the table, it was hardly detectable. "It was amazing." The graceful length of her fingers spread wide over her stomach, and she smiled softly. "I wish I could feel it."

There was no doubt in my mind she'd be a wonderful mother. If pressed, I might not even be able to articulate why, or not well, at least.

We'd talked about so little, she and I. And the things she did seem to want to talk about were the subjects I wanted to avoid like a kick to the balls. It was instinct, I supposed. The same way I could stand in front of a keeper for a penalty kick and know in my gut that he'd go left, so I should kick right. I knew she'd be the best kind of mum. Fierce and fearless and intelligent.

In Lia's lap was her notebook and a dog-eared copy of *Jane Eyre* that was always in her bag.

"How did your meeting go?"

She sighed, moving the notebook and novel to the side so she could burrow further into the couch. "I kinda ... argued with her. Or she argued with me. I don't even know."

I tilted my head. "What about?"

Lia's eyes, that deep midnight blue, hit me like a punch to the chest when she looked up at me. She'd looked at me for a lot of reasons, out of lust and out of fear and in anger, but this was something different. There was a hesitation that I couldn't make out.

My hand squeezed her leg. "What is it?"

"She said something, and it made me feel a little defensive, I guess."

Gently, I tapped her leg, so she stretched out. Taking a foot in hand, I dug my thumbs into the arch and listened to her groan, an indecent sound that shouldn't have been so sexy, considering I was rubbing her feet, yet it was.

"Was it your paper? I thought you were happy with your first draft?" For ten days, she buried herself on her computer, working on ... something important. The world of academia was hardly my comfort zone, but I was still trying to understand what it was she did. What she wanted to do.

"No, it wasn't my paper. She's still reviewing it, I think." Her back arched when I dug into a spot on her foot. "Oh, holy shit, that feels amazing."

At Lia's age, I'd been just taking the premier league by storm, one year after my transfer from the German team where I got my start. But maybe to her, that paper was the same type of thrill as hoisting a cup over my head was for me.

"What are you going to do with that fancy paper?" I asked. Groggily, she lifted her head, and I stifled a laugh at her expression. It reminded me of when my head was clenched tight between her thighs and she'd just about torn the hair from my head as she came to a screaming release a couple of days earlier. "When you finish, I mean. Take the Brontë world by storm, as it were?"

"If you want me to answer"—she hissed in a breath when I moved to the other foot—"you have to stop doing that." I held my hands up, and she exhaled heavily. "I don't know, really."

My eyebrows lifted. "Meaning ...?"

“Meaning,” she drawled, “I don’t know what I want to do with my degree just yet.”

“Aren’t you close to graduating?”

“Yup.”

“With your master’s degree.”

She tapped a finger to her nose. “You got it.”

The look I gave her was incredulous. “How do you *not* know?”

“Okay, judge, a lot of people in this world go on and get their doctorate while they decide if they want to write or research or teach. It’s not that uncommon.” She sat up and folded her arms over that marvelous chest of hers. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with not knowing.”

Maybe not wrong, but I tried to wipe the look off my face of total and complete lack of comprehension. How did one not know? She’d devoted years of her life at uni studying this subject.

I chose my words carefully—pregnant woman and all. “It certainly seems like you have a lot of options.”

“I do.” Her chin was pointed at a mulish angle, and it was surprisingly sexy, as was the defiance in her tone.

“And once you decide which one, you’ll be incredible. Prove you were right in wanting what you want.”

Lia’s brows lowered over those eyes of hers, confusion clear. “Prove to who?”

I shrugged. “Everyone.”

She hummed.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she answered lightly.

“Bollocks. That’s not a nothing tone. Don’t try to read anything into it.” My entire career was based around proving a point. Every day that I showed up to work my arse off, it was to prove a point. Every time I scored. Every time I left a piece

of myself on the pitch, it was the prove a point. “Come to my match on Saturday?” I asked her.

She smiled. “Of course. Is your family coming to this one? I’d love to meet them.”

To match her smile with one of my own was difficult, but I tried. “I’ll ring and ask. It’s hard for them to leave the farm.”

Lia sat up and swung her leg over my lap until she’d settled nicely on top of me. My hands slid up her back while her fingers played with the ends of my hair. “It’s a big game, though, right?”

“Very.” Adding three points now, with how the rest of the table was shaking out, would be a bloody relief.

“Chelsea’s good, though, right?” She peeked at me under her lashes.

I smiled. “Someone’s been doing her homework.”

“A little. But with their best striker injured, don’t you have a better chance of beating them?”

With a groan, I tugged her closer. “Keep talking, I could get off listening to you like this.”

Lia laughed. “I just mean, wouldn’t your parents want to be at a big game?”

And that killed it.

I kept my face even. “Depends on what needs to be done this time of year at the farm. November usually means rotating the crops for grazing, deworming, that sort of thing.”

She hummed. “And you had to do that growing up?”

“Unfortunately.”

“I like the idea of farmer Jude.”

I didn’t. I hated it, which was why I left. But still, I found myself smiling at the look on her face. “Do you now?”

She nodded, ducking her head down to kiss either side of my lips. What did my heartbeat sound like when she did that?

Was it racing and whooshing and filling the room with the indistinct drumming?

I turned my head to suck at her lips, but she pulled back.

“Are we playing now, love?”

“Maybe,” she murmured. “I keep thinking about you tossing me onto a bale of hay and having your way with me.”

“Oh please, we can do better than that.” My hand came up and gripped her chin so she couldn’t evade me. With the edge of my thumb, I pressed down on the center of her luscious mouth, hissing in a breath when she sucked it between her lips. “That kind of mood, eh?”

She grinned—wickedly, in fact—and my thumb fell away. Underneath her, my body was aching and tight, heavy with wanting her.

“I think it’s my turn in the driver’s seat.” She whipped her shirt over her head, hands diving down to the button on my trousers when it fell onto the floor.

I surged up and took her mouth in a deep kiss, my hands gripping the curve of her hips while she writhed on top of me, chasing the sharp edge of relief that way.

“Thatta girl,” I said against her lips when her movements sped up, her face flushed a pretty pink. “Show me what feels good to you.”

Slipping my hand between us, I hardly had to do much, and Lia cried out, her chest heaving, her body shuddering in a way that made me crave her dangerously. Never before had I ever wanted a single woman long enough that I was willing to follow the path of how we could make each other feel for a long period. The possible complications had never been worth it.

But as I cupped the back of her head and tilted her at the perfect angle for a searching, searing kiss, something that again, had my heart thrashing dangerously, I knew she’d be the one to make me want to risk it. Risk anything.

Lia pulled away, pupils dilated and lips red from our kisses. “Your turn.”

“Is it?”

She slid back until she was on her knees in front of me. My fingers slid between the silk of her hair. This woman, smart and sexy, didn’t need me to prove myself to her. She simply wanted.

Nothing about this was empty or transactional. For the first time in my life, it felt meaningful. I almost pulled her up off the floor because I wanted to be with her in this, but that thought was fleeting, erased by the feel of her mouth and the cool strength in her fingers.

I laid my head back on the couch and shut my eyes, tightening my grip on her hair as she helped me chase the same feeling she’d just had.

Helpless and open was how I felt when I finally shouted her name into the quiet of the room. And my hands shook when I tugged her back up onto my lap.

Suddenly, proving my worth to anyone but Lia felt like a fool’s errand.





## LIA

For my second match, I was far more prepared. This time, I had a Shepperton Shorthorns sweatshirt over my thermal leggings, Jude's jersey on underneath as a second layer, a poncho in my small purse in case it rained, a blue-and-white-striped winter hat emblazoned with Shepperton FC along the folded edge with a giant blue poof sticking off the top, and on my cheek was this friggin' adorable little temporary tattoo that I'd found in a shop down the road from the stadium, the horned logo in bright blue and white.

I walked to my seat, the energy in the building like the best shot of pure, unfettered electricity. Nothing was like the excitement of a live sports event. I'd take it over any concert, any play, any show in the entire world.

A small block of empty seats was located around the one I knew was mine, but the moment I saw the tall man in a solid blue shirt, I knew immediately it was Lewis. He had the same dark hair, the same straight nose, the same broad shoulders. But where Jude's build was muscular, Lewis was husky—the kind of guy who looked like he gave the very best kind of hugs.

I slid down the aisle, smiling at the four old men who stood to allow me to pass.

Lewis glanced in my direction and moved to do the same.

"No worries," I told him, "I'm right here." I pointed at the seat just to his right.

His face lifted in shock. "Ahh. Right then."

I held out my hand. “Lia. I take it Jude didn’t tell you I’d be joining your family today.”

With a rueful smile, he gave mine a brisk, hard shake. “No, but that doesn’t surprise me. My brother is hardly forthcoming about the details of his personal life.”

Because he said it with a warm tone and obvious love in his eyes, I didn’t feel a surge of defensiveness for the man not here to defend himself.

“Are your parents coming?”

Lewis’s smile faded just slightly at the edges. “I expect not.”

Song erupted around us, and I whipped out my phone to take a video. Lewis watched me with an unveiled curiosity. Once I stopped recording, I shot a text off to Molly, knowing she’d get a kick out of it.

Each star player had a little song, and the fans—en masse—knew when to start singing them. Jude had one too, but I hadn’t been able to remember the words once the match was over.

“Our fans in the States don’t do stuff like that,” I shouted over the din, hooking my thumb over my shoulder. “I think it’s so cool!”

He nodded. “It’s different here. Football transcends sport, if that makes sense.” Lewis leaned in because I could hardly hear him. “For good and for bad, in fact. Some of the songs are bloody ruthless. One of the players on another team has a song about his wife because she started some drama passing stories to the papers. Didn’t sit well with the fans.”

“No way!” I laughed. “That’s savage.”

I tried to imagine that happening to Logan because Paige had been famous in her own right as a model when they first got married. He would’ve lost his mind if the fans had created a song about her.

“Jude told me a little about you right after you met,” Lewis admitted, once the raucous song came to a close. “But I didn’t

know you were still ... seeing each other.”

Given the jovial atmosphere, the electric happiness that the mood of the stadium gave me, I tried really, really hard not to let that bother me. I was twelve weeks pregnant with his child, and his brother knew nothing about me. Forced to pause our conversation because of a family of Shepperton fans passing in front of us, I took a moment to breathe out my disappointment in a few gulping breaths.

It was fine.

I'd kept Jude more than a little occupied the past few weeks, and if I was completely honest with myself, anytime his family came up, he changed the subject. He distracted me. And the last time I'd brought them up, I was the one who climbed onto his lap and rode him like a jockey rides a racehorse.

A grimace crossed my face before I could stop it.

I thought about what Atwood had told me, about my tendency to focus on the past to avoid an unknown future. I thought about how Jude had reacted to my lack of clarity of what I wanted to do with my degree once I'd finished it. And I thought about how easily he and I fell into the palpable chemistry between us to avoid the reality of our separate situations.

Hell, my reaction to my meeting with Atwood left me feeling so unsettled that I'd gotten my pregnant ass down on my knees in front of him. In fact, if he'd pushed the door open, I probably would've crossed that invisible barrier we had around having sex again. I would've willingly allowed him to sweep away all the icky feelings she'd planted with that one seed of a thought.

Lewis saw the look on my face, and I tried to erase it with a smile, but he held up his hands. “I'm sorry, that came out rude, didn't it?”

“No, it's fine, really. I've been with Jude a lot, and I've never seen him talk to you, so I should've guessed.”

He smiled again, but this time, it held an edge of discomfort. Great. Excellent first impression.

I laid a hand on his arm. “Sometimes I forget not everyone is like my family. I have four sisters, and we talk constantly. Don’t worry about it.”

Lewis studied me again, and I felt a little bit like an animal in a zoo exhibit. *And to your left, ladies and gentlemen, we have the exotic American female.* The teams walked out of the tunnel, players holding hands with children of various ages, each wearing matching jerseys to the teams.

“Okay,” I said to Lewis. “What’s up with the little kids?”

He grinned. “They do it for a few reasons, but primarily, it’s used to raise money. Parents can pay to have their kids walk out on the pitch with one of the players, but it also helps foster a sense of ... sportsmanship, I suppose. No one can rain down curses or throw cups at the opposing players when they walk out together with innocent British youth, eh?”

“Ahh. See, back home, we’d never take away our ability to be merciless with the away team. I think our heads would implode.”

“How very American of you,” he teased.

“I’m pretty sure your brother said the very same thing to me the night we met.”

He took a slow drink from his cup, only glancing at me once before he seemed to come to a decision. “You’re not like anyone I’ve ever seen Jude spend time with.”

So many questions popped into my head.

About the kinds of women he was with in the past, about the number of women, and if anyone had crossed the impenetrable moat that seemed to surround their family. And like the secure, confident woman I was, I did not ask a single one of those questions.

I simply smiled. “Is that so?”

Lewis nodded, leaning closer so I could hear him while the team captains shook hands in the middle of the pitch. “Don’t

get me wrong, my brother hasn't dated anyone of consequence in years. And even when he did, back when he was first in the league, it was exactly the kind of woman he shouldn't have been with. They fawned over him, and it just ... it didn't help keep his feet on the ground. And Jude struggles as it is to do anything else with life beyond football, so people like that make it worse."

Groupies. Every sport had them. Every celebrity faced them at some point. I'm sure my brother had too. But according to him and Paige, he never wanted anything to do with that lifestyle. It was a house of glass built on the edge of an unsteady cliff.

"Athletes are just normal people who do abnormal jobs." I grinned at Lewis. "It's one of the things my brother drilled into our heads growing up. And the more people who elevate that athlete to a god-like status, the more they believe it."

"That's right." He nudged me with his shoulder. "I'm glad he has you, Lia Ward."

I wasn't able to answer because the ball went into motion, and for the next ninety minutes (plus stoppage time, which ... I was still trying to understand), we yelled and screamed and clapped and stayed on our feet while Jude and Shepperton FC absolutely left their hearts out on the field. As the clock kept moving forward, and Lewis explained that the whistle could blow any time once stoppage was met, I found myself breathless with the rhythm of the game.

It wasn't boring.

It was beautiful.

The stamina of the players, the way they passed with precision and ruthless accuracy, and the strength they were able to hone in their movements, I almost cried when Jude snagged the ball from a Chelsea player and took off toward the opposite end of the field. He kicked it in front of him as he ran, passed to one of his teammates to the left, who handled the ball with his feet so deftly, I almost lost sight of it.

It shot back toward Jude as he charged the waiting goalie, whose arms were outstretched in anticipation of what might come next.

Jude's right foot drew back, and he caught the ball just as it flew in front of him. It arced, perfectly, beautifully, impossibly into the top corner of the net, and the crowds erupted.

Lewis swept me up in a giant bear hug as we screamed, and the little old lady next to me wrapped her arm around my waist while she did the same.

The whistle blew, and the high of the win felt like I'd done drugs or something.

All my senses were heightened, my skin buzzed, and my heart pounded.

And for the first time all match, I saw Jude look up in the direction of our seats. His hair was a mess, and his jersey was filthy, but his smile was blinding.

I waved frantically, and he lifted a fist in the air.

“Want to go with me to meet him when he's done? Maybe we could grab a bite to eat at your pub?”

Lewis smiled, face flushed red from the celebrations. “If you two want to popover later, I'd love to say hi, but I have to get back. Tell him congrats for me, will you?”

He gave me a brief hug and followed the crowds out of the stadium.

When I looked back down at the players on the field, Jude was staring back up at us, but his smile wasn't quite as wide as before.

Maybe he and I were kidding ourselves in our constant search for distractions, but I slid my hand over my stomach and vowed that I'd do what I could to move us forward. No more focusing on the past.



## JUDE

**I**t was the moment when she screamed at the telly that I had my first real moment of pause when it came to Lia Ward.

“Oh, you fucking moron,” she bellowed, hand speared in her hair as she paced my living room. “Of course, they were going to blitz. Block! Come on, get him, get him, get him!”

With a wince, I watched the Washington Wolves quarterback get viciously sacked. Lia groaned, sinking back on the couch with a deep breath.

“All right?” I asked cautiously. Normally, I might have slid a hand up her back to rub in soothing circles, something I’d learned that she liked. Any physical affection made Lia purr like a bloody cat, actually. But as this was my first experience seeing her watch American football, I felt a bit skittish. Mainly because she swatted my hand away the last time I tried to calm her down.

“No, I’m not all right.” She tossed her hands in the air at the next play. “What is he *doing*? Why would you do another pass play? They’re killing us on the line.” She pulled her phone out, frantically tapping out a text. “Idiot. What an idiot.”

“Texting the coach your suggestions?” I teased.

“Yes.”

My eyebrows popped up. “I was joking, love.”

She glanced over at me. “So was I. It’s my sister Isabel.



“Ahh. Does she concur with your game analysis?”

“Yeah, the head coach is an idiot. He should’ve been fired last year. I don’t know why Allie hasn’t stepped in.”

My head tilted. “Who’s Allie?”

“Paige—Logan’s wife—it’s her best friend. Allie owns the Wolves.”

“Goodness,” I murmured, “I had no idea I’d impregnated sports royalty.”

Lia smacked me in the stomach, and I grinned.

“And Isabel is the one visiting in a couple of weeks.”

Before she answered, she watched with a frown as the Wolves offense failed to get a first down. “Yeah. You’ll love Isabel, mainly because you won’t be intimidated by her.”

“Are most people?”

“Oh, yeah.” Lia laughed. “She manages a boxing studio back in Seattle, and I swear, you take one look at her, and you just know ... this chick could kick my ass without breaking a sweat. She’s tough, and smart, and funny. She’s the best big sister because I always knew no one would mess with us when Isabel was around.”

Her family was so different than mine. Listening to her talk about them, I felt a bit like I was a voyeur trying to understand what normal family dynamics were through the very extraordinary group she’d been born into.

“And she’s also watching at home, screaming at the screen like a maniac?”

“Yes,” she answered immediately. “Paige and Claire are at the game, but they’re also probably screaming like maniacs. It’s a family trait.”

“Sounds like it.”

“But”—she held up a finger—“I actually have messaged Logan during the game with ideas.”

“You have not.”

“He ignores me.” She narrowed her eyes as she thought. “Usually. There was one time he said he saw my message during a commercial break and ran the defensive scheme I suggested.”

“You are *joking*.”

Her eyes got big. “I would *never* joke about that. The running back was kicking their ass. Logan needed the inside linebacker to blitz the gap.”

I threw my head back with a good belly laugh. I couldn’t help myself.

It was enough to have Lia’s tense shoulders relaxing for the first time since the game started. Shepperton had the day off, we’d played midweek, and she begged for control of the telly on Sunday night so we could watch her beloved Wolves—the team her brother played for and now coached. The camera panned to him as the defense took the field for a new series.

“Defensive coordinator Logan Ward has made quite an impact on this team’s defense since he took over the clipboard,” the announcer said.

His counterpart hummed. “Indeed. They’ve consistently ranked in the top three for sacks and takeaways, and this season so far, they’re the top scoring defense in the league. That’s largely in part to the addition of Noah Griffin to the roster last year, and how he’s stepped up under Ward’s coaching.”

Lia smiled.

“That’s your sister Molly’s boyfriend, right?” I asked.

She nodded. “He used to be our next-door neighbor when we were younger. Molly had the most obnoxious crush on him, so it was total kismet that they ended up working together at Washington.”

It was interesting, sitting with her while she watched her loved ones play the sport they loved. My parents had never come to a single one of my matches since I became a professional player. My brother came a couple of times a year,

but I'd never see him afterward. No one had ever waited to tell me how excited they were for our win or console me after a loss. Never had anyone tell me they'd screamed like a maniac in the stands. Not until Lia.

“What's it like?” I found myself asking.

When she turned to me with a question in her lovely eyes, I wanted to retract the words immediately.

“What?”

It felt as though I'd rolled over, exposing a soft underbelly that I'd never inspected before. My throat felt dry, and I couldn't quite conjure a flippant response with her looking at me like she was.

“To watch your family do what they love like this.” I gestured weakly at the screen. “Across the ocean, they still hold enough weight in the world that you can sit here on my couch and watch them do this incredible job.”

Suddenly, I found myself holding my breath that she wouldn't brush off my question. I hoped she'd give it proper thought because I wanted to know, quite desperately, what most families must've felt.

“It's ...” She paused, clearly searching for the right words. “It's weird sometimes. Mainly because it's so normal for me to have my brother on camera. I'll admit that I don't think too existentially about it, but other times, like right now ... I'm sitting with you while they talk about my brother and my future-brother-in-law, and honestly, I could cry from how proud I am to call them my family.” She smiled. “I was like, twelve when Logan won the Super Bowl, and oh, man, I was so obnoxious when I went back to school. I didn't appreciate the magnitude of it then like I do now, but knowing that people I love have had such an effect on a game on this scale is pretty fucking cool.”

If I'd been anyone else, less emotionally stunted, less ... British, I probably would've teared up at her words. I tried not to think about when Lia needed to go back to Seattle when her semester was done, but moments like that made it difficult to

ignore because I'd miss her. I'd miss having her around and hated the thought of it, almost as much as I hated the idea of how completely inept I was at trying to have any sort of healthy relationship. Maybe if that was all she'd said, I could've turned back to the game and marveled at how nice it must be to have a family like that. But then she spoke again.

And when she did, she sealed her fate.

She smiled at me, completely unaware of what was happening behind my rib cage, what vulnerable emotions were daring to escape from between the skin and bones. "I guess it'll be that way with me and the little nectarine, huh? We'll be wearing our Sheppertons kits and screaming like maniacs for you next season. We'll be the loudest cheering section you've ever heard."

"Will you?" I said roughly.

Her eyebrows bent in over her eyes. "Of course." Gently, she took my hand and laid it on top of the small bump under her black and red Wolves shirt. "This ... this makes us a family, Jude. We'll always have your back."

What was she doing to me?

Why did the fabric of my carefully constructed world feel like it'd been ripped in two?

Lia's beautiful face softened at whatever she saw in mine, and instead of commenting on it, she turned, muting the game. She cupped my face with her hand and slowly leaned forward, placing a soft, heartbreaking kiss on my lips.

"No rules," she whispered. "Just ... whatever we want this to be."

My body caught up before my brain did. My hands slid up her arms and into her silky hair, where I could tilt her head and take our kiss into a different depth. Somewhere darker, somewhere delicious.

She sighed into my mouth, and I pushed her backward onto the couch, prowling over her and caging her head with my arms while we kissed.

I pulled back, and she blinked slowly.

“*My bed,*” I said. “No couch, no bloody single bed, no worrying about anything except what I’m about to make you feel.”

Lia smiled. “An excellent idea.”

I stood off the couch and held my hand out to her. “Shall we?”



## LIA

When the strength of his fingers curled around mine as I took his hand, I almost stopped.

Not because I wasn't sure about crossing this particular barrier—my hormones were screaming at me to bang the bejeezus out of him—but because I was afraid that ascending that staircase would kill the electric mood.

Weeks ago, I'd stopped trying to figure out what shifted things between us. Sometimes it was a look that lasted just a fraction of a moment longer than was polite. Sometimes, he slid his hand up my back, and I wanted to shove my hand down the front of his pants. Sometimes he breathed, and I wanted to shove his hand down the front of mine.

It was easy, was what I was trying to say. And when those moments happened, we acted on them. We rarely took the time to relocate.

But I was so, so wrong. Because instead of trailing him like a horny lil puppy on a leash, Jude tugged on my hand so that I preceded him up the steps to his bedroom.

“Did you know,” he asked lightly, hands curling around my hips as I took the first step, “your arse is abso-bloody-lutely perfect?”

I almost tripped on the second step. “Is it?”

He exhaled a laugh, and I found myself smiling. Yes, I knew I had a good ass. Genetics were strong in the Ward family, and we might have gotten a healthy share of family

dysfunction, but we'd also gotten high cheekbones, big blue eyes, long legs, and a great frickin' ass.

After my breathy question, he crowded behind me, burying his nose into my hair and inhaling greedily.

"I could fucking inhale you," he murmured.

"Sounds painful." Was my voice shaking? I think it was. My hands were. My heart was. Every inch of me had a slight vibration that spoke to his potency. My legs could hardly hold me up when I felt him behind me, big, so, so big and so ready.

Yes, we'd touched each other and yes, we'd perfected the art of non-sex sex over the past couple of months, but I was also so, so ready to feel him again.

Jude slid his hands up, gripping the hem of my shirt and tugging. I paused, because I was not trying to fall on any stairs right before the big show. He tossed the shirt behind us and fastened his mouth on the base of my neck and sucked.

"Holy shit," I groaned, my hand tightening on the banister when he deftly unfastened my bra as I neared the landing on the second floor. His tongue, wet and hot, dragged down the line of my neck, and his clever hands cupped my breasts underneath the loosened cups. They were so sensitive that I hissed slowly, each gentle swipe of his thumb directly tied to the apex between my legs that was lighting up like a friggin' neon sign.

"Are you ready? Just like this?"

Oh please, if he thought I couldn't orgasm from his voice alone, he was kidding himself. I cleared the top step and whirled, snaking my arms around his neck and attacking his mouth.

The kiss was a strange thing, if you thought about it.

Some were sweet and short and dry, the established motion of lips as a point of connection between two people who knew each other well. And some were in an entirely different category. They transcended the kindling of passion. They transcended the fueling of lust.



This kiss, as he pushed me against the wall and ground himself against me, was one of those transcendent kisses.

This kiss was Jude fucking me.

This kiss was Jude making love to me.

The lines blurred entirely between the two.

I felt his heart in that kiss just like I felt my own. It was in the slick slide of our tongues, the serpentine motion he'd established, rolling his hips as my leg hitched up along his skin. And it was in the strange anticipation I felt to fall backward on his bed, in his home, with his arms wrapped tight around me.

We stumbled from the hallway through the open doorway, and he bent at the knees to boost me up into his arms. I leaned my head back, and he licked across the tops of my breasts, still partially covered by the bra we hadn't quite freed me of.

The moment before he laid me on the bed, everything slowed. He lifted his head and speared me with a look so full of the things he normally managed to hide.

He wanted so much more from this, maybe more than I'd ever realized.

I thought of his expression down on the couch, when I'd told him we were a family now, and I felt only the briefest moment questioning whether this was a good idea or even smart.

Jude was so deep under my skin, and that brief flash of vulnerability buried him even deeper. I wasn't sure I could pull him out, even if I wanted to.

His knee braced on the bed, and with the utmost care, he lowered us until my back hit the mattress. That he'd managed it so gently was a testament to his unbelievable strength. Again, he kissed me, and my back arched up because I missed that slide of his skin against mine. Quickly, he broke the kiss to tug his shirt off, and when his chest and stomach were bared to me, I couldn't help the happy sigh.

Jude grinned, and if I'd been standing, that grin would've made me weak in the knees.

While he worked on his pants, I pushed mine down, only leaving my black lace underwear when he raised an imperious eyebrow. "Let me, love."

I held my hands up. "Bossy."

Before me, he stood completely naked, and why wouldn't he? He looked like a Greek god, carved to perfection. With one finger crooked behind the center bow on my bra, he slowly pulled it down, watching the skin uncovered inch by slow, torturous inch until I laid there in only a small scrap of black lace. That came off next—again, with only two calloused fingers pulling it down my legs.

"Beautiful," he whispered. Jude planted his fists on the bed and prowled up over me like a great big cat, stopping only to drop a gentle kiss on the curve of my belly.

Inexplicably, tears pricked hot in my eyes at that kiss.

No, whatever this moment was between us, it wasn't stupid, and it wasn't a bad idea.

I'd go to my grave remembering him like this. That was the thought in my head when he took my mouth in another searing kiss.

That was the thought in my heart when he brought me up over the crest for the first time with his hand. Then he whispered into my ear that my pleasure was perfect, that I was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life, and he couldn't wait to feel me again. How he'd dreamed of it night after night.

Part of me wanted to reverse our positions, so I could sit up over him and watch as he got his pleasure. Where I could—eyes wide open—see the moment on his face when he let go of all control.

But when he gripped my thigh tight in one strong hand and pushed inside, I lost my breath. I lost any idea that wasn't this one.

Jude moved so slowly at first that I almost screamed at him, almost raked my nails down his back, almost exploded again from unspent frustration.

He whispered things into my skin that weren't clear, things I couldn't make out behind the rushing and roaring in my ears. I arched up, my hands stretching up over my head until I'd braced my palms flat against the headboard. He lifted his head and stared down into my face for one breathless beat.

Jude looked stupefied. He looked confused. He looked like someone had knocked him flat with a two-by-four.

But instead of making some pleasure-loaded confession, I saw the moment he was ready to stop prolonging whatever tight-rope he was walking. His jaw clenched, a muscle popping behind the dark scruff on his face, and oh, oh, he began to move.

By the time I was flung past the second peak, I was practically sobbing, his back slick with sweat and his eyes boring into mine with an intensity that might have scared me if I didn't feel so amazing.

I arched into one particularly brutal snap of his hips, and he yelled my name.

He was, without a doubt, the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

Jude slumped over me after a few more slow movements, and I curled my arms around him, tightened my thighs around his hips, and kissed his shoulder.

"Whoa," I whispered, my heart pounding in a jittering, jangling beat behind my ribs.

He lifted his head and grinned again, and it was such a dopey grin that I burst out laughing.

Jude laughed too, rubbing his hand up and down my back.

After we cleaned up, I snuggled underneath the covers next to him, and the sigh of relief that came from deep within his chest made me smile again.

It was no wonder that sex became an addiction for some. The sense of power, the relaxed euphoria that I felt lying next to him was unparalleled. The ultimate high that I hadn't even known existed.

“Stay the night?” he asked.

I turned slightly, laying my head on his shoulder. “I don't know, my small bed in my small flat sounds so appealing right now.”

He tickled my side, and I laughed into his skin.

Jude was quiet for the next few minutes, doing nothing more than running his fingers through the ends of my tangled hair. When he spoke, I could feel the rumble of his voice underneath my ear.

“Care to take a little holiday this week?”

I grinned happily. “Yeah. You can get away?”

“I can, yeah. We have international break next weekend. No matches.”

Propping my chin on his chest, I rubbed my fingertips along the scruff on his jaw. “Where should we go? There's a lot I haven't seen yet.”

“You had to leave Haworth early, yeah?”

“Yeah. *Someone's* unborn child made me pukey, then I saw that same someone on the cover of a newspaper and cut my trip short to come home and take a pregnancy test.”

He exhaled. “I wish I would've handled all that better.”

I kissed his chest. “I know you do. But I think we're in an okay place now, right?”

Jude cupped the side of my face and drew me up for a soft kiss. “Aye, we are.”

When I pulled back, I grinned at him. “So, you're taking me back to Brontë country?”

“If you'd like. You can make me smart, tell me all the things I need to know about these famous ladies.”

“Okay.” Was it possible to want to mount him again already? Because the man had hardly had any recovery time, but when he started planning trips for me to go back to my literary idols’ hometown because he remembered I had to cut my time short, it made me feel all sorts of things. Sexy things.

“What’s that look in your eyes?”

I bit my bottom lip and watched his gaze track the movement. “Take a guess.”

His hands moved low down my back, one palm slowly covering my bare bottom. “You must have a lot of faith in my abilities. I’m old, love.”

My own hand started exploring. “You feel pretty *spry* right now.”

When he laughed, a sexy, quiet, exhale of a laugh, I pushed on his chest, swung my leg over his lap, and did exactly what I’d imagined earlier.



## JUDE

By the last handful of hours in Haworth, I'd become addicted to a certain look in Lia's eyes. I'd discovered certain things triggered it.

- Scones (good scones, at least. She ate a dodgy one at our first cafe stop and spit it out into her napkin)

- Ancient school buildings where famous literary icons taught the youth of the village

- Orgasms

These were not listed in order of priority, of course, because during the two nights we spent exploring Haworth Village together, I saw that look numerous times. We entered the church building, and she grabbed my hand, squeezing it so tightly I thought my fingers might fall off. When we walked through the Parsonage Museum, the home that the Brontës' lived in, I heard her sniff quietly. In alarm, I'd tugged her round to make sure she was okay, but she had such a blinding smile on her face, I found myself smiling in return.

"Happy tears," she whispered. "Thank you for bringing me back."

I kissed her there, soft and quick, and I remember feeling like it was such a normal thing to do.

A quick kiss in the middle of a normal day.

The way she walked close to me as we strolled through the park on our way back to our hotel room to pack and head back to London.

Our fingers brushing against each other's when we sat and ate a quiet lunch tucked into a small cafe.

For those three days and two nights, with her curled up against me in our rented cottage in the village, everything felt remarkably normal. We didn't rush what we saw or at the places we ate or when leaving the bed in the mornings.

When she worked on her laptop, notes strewn across the sturdy wood table on the stone floor, I worked out in the small garden in the back. There were no major distractions for either of us.

Maybe this was what the rest of the world experienced on a day-to-day basis. But for me, it was bloody foreign. Enjoyable, but still strange. And conversely, it was exactly the kind of thing my parents always told me I was sacrificing to do what I did.

*Don't you want a normal life with a family? A woman who loves you and children to raise? What kind of life do you think you'll have chasing a ball around for millions of pounds every year?*

It was something my mum had asked me back when I was getting my first offers in the premier league. My dad had given up by that point. He knew my success in the German Bundesliga had cemented my path. It was only a matter of time before I came back home and dominated on one of the strongest tiers of play in the entire world.

As we packed our bags and locked up, I watched Lia with a dawning sense of accomplishment. The look in her eyes, with the exception of the scones, were all from things I'd been able to bring to her.

I'd accomplished something that my family never thought I'd be able to.

A good woman, smart and sexy and funny, and children to raise. And still, I was a premier player.

Lia wrestled her dark hair up into a bun on top of her head and faced me while my mind raced. "What's going on up there?"



I blinked. “What now?”

She tapped her temple. “You look very deep in thought.” She approached, sliding her hands up my chest. Quite naturally, my own settled onto her hips. As I pulled her closer, her eyes softened. “It’s sexy.”

I hummed, dropping a kiss onto the curve of her newly exposed neck. “Nothing interesting.”

Lia sighed, melting fully into my embrace. For a few moments, we stood like that, and I tried to remember how long it had been, before her, that someone had simply hugged me for the pleasure of it.

Maybe that was why I was so addicted to touching her whenever she was in reach. Because I could and because it felt fucking great. I wasn’t reading between the lines of those touches, and neither was she. I’d found someone—something—quite remarkable, even if it was quite by accident.

It was in that quiet embrace, and recognizing the power of it, that I had an idea.

“What do you say to a small detour on the way back?”

Lia’s face spread into an excited grin. “I say yes.”

My girl was always up for an adventure. Excited to attend a losing match, simply because the atmosphere was electric, unafraid to stand for hours in the rain to experience it. As I watched that look in her eye again, at the thought of experiencing something new, I desperately wanted to get this right. I wanted to be the parent I’d never had. I wanted my child to know love and support with this beautiful woman to teach him or her about excitement and adventure and loyalty, and hopefully me to teach them about hard work and grit and the beauty of achieving your goals by doing something you loved.

Shortly, we were back in my car and driving down the roads of West Yorkshire under a cloudy November sky. As we approached Stocksbridge, the steel mill looming off in the distance, I couldn’t believe she hadn’t asked me a single

question about where we were going. Lia relaxed in her seat, taking in the sights with a soft smile on her face.

“I always wonder if people get this excited when they drive around my state, you know?”

“What do you mean?” I made a turn away from town and toward the farm where I’d grown up, the roads growing smaller, the houses farther apart in the green countryside.

“This is all normal to you, you know? But every stone house I see, every perfect little green hedge, or rolling hill, it’s nothing like what I see back home, and I just want to soak it all up. I wonder if people drive around Seattle and feel like that.”

I glanced at her with amusement. “I’d reckon so. You have mountains in Washington, yeah?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Then I’m guessing they all gawk out the windows just like you are, love.”

She smacked me in the stomach, and I laughed. It was a good momentary distraction because as I took the final turn, my parents’ house rose up just over the next hill. It looked exactly the same. Mentally, I had to do some calculations to remember exactly when I’d been back last. Typically, we gathered at Lewis’ house or pub so we were both on neutral ground.

The house was all weathered rock and dark-framed windows, probably the same ones that needed to be replaced the last time I’d been there. Five years was what I figured. Wooden fencing stretched along emerald plots of grass, and a few fat sheep grazed near the house. The barn had been painted, a fresh coat of white covered the planks of wood. I could hear the goats, a new addition since I’d been out last, and tried to muster a smile when Lia exclaimed when they crowded the fence as soon as she got out of the car.

“Oh, how cute are you guys?” she said, laughing when one particularly brash one jumped over the group to try to find food in her hand. “Goodness. I wish I’d come prepared.” She

held up a hand to shade her eyes and glanced at the sprawling land surrounding the house. “Where are we?”

A quiet voice interrupted before I could answer. “J-Jude?”

My mum was standing in the door that led to the kitchen, a bright red towel clutched in her hands as she stared at me like she’d seen a bloody ghost. Her hair was still dark, streaked liberally with gray along her temples, something she’d never felt the need to hide.

I came next to Lia and set my hand on her back. She glanced at me with a million and a half questions in her eyes. I smiled down at her, then looked back to the house. “Hello, Mum.”

“Ohhhhh,” Lia breathed. She cut me a glance. “You could’ve warned me,” she whispered under her breath.

“Surprise,” I whispered back.

Lia lifted her chin and smoothed a hand over her hair. Given we had made no plans other than to drive back home, she’d dressed for comfort with a massive hoodie over jeans and tall brown boots. Looking at her, there was absolutely no indication she was pregnant. She looked young and pretty.

“What are you doing here?” Mum asked, eyes traveling from me to Lia and back again.

I curled a hand around Lia’s shoulders. “We just took a holiday in Haworth for a few days. Thought we’d drop by to say hello on our way back home.”

Her hand came up, and I noticed the tremor in it as she laid it on her chest. “Right. Your father is out in the backfields. He won’t be back for about thirty minutes yet.”

I nodded, just as Lia cleared her throat sharply.

Right.

“This is Lia Ward, Mum.”

Lia smiled, moving forward to hold her hand out. “It’s so nice to meet you, Mrs. McAllister.”

“You’re American.”

The smile on Lia's face deepened, a dimple appearing in her cheek. "Your son said that in almost the same tone the night we met."

My mom didn't smile back. Probably because she wasn't terribly happy to see us.

They didn't do surprises well. Any change to their routine, to their schedule, was absolutely out of the question.

Lia's smile faded slowly. "Umm, what kind of farming do you do? Jude hasn't told me too much."

She hummed. "Of course, he hasn't. We have sheep and goats. We sell milk and cheese, the wool from the sheep, and the meat, of course. But we've started doing tours as well. That's where my husband is. He's got a school group here for a tour."

My head reared back. "You do? Dad hates people stomping around his farm."

"There's good money in agritourism, Jude." She glanced at Lia briefly. "We can't all make millions of pounds a year playing games."

Lia's mouth fell open before she snapped it shut.

I may not have reacted on the outside, but the arrow buried deep, even if she hadn't intended it that way. That was the thing about my parents. In their discomfort of what I did, the success I'd found, they managed a razor-sharp level of disdain that I wasn't even sure they were aware of.

"Quite true, Mum." I lifted my chin. "You could cash the checks I've sent you, though, if he hates doing tours so much."

"We're perfectly capable of supporting ourselves, Jude." She did some chin lifting of her own. "Riding on your coattails is best reserved for others."

Lia, as I expected, didn't let that barb slide. She smiled again, but I could see how it cost her. "I certainly hope that wasn't aimed at me, considering I've just met you and you know nothing about me."

My mum's cheeks flushed a rosy pink. "No, not you. I apologize if it sounded like it. Past experiences have taught us that almost everyone who meets him wants something from him, is all."

"Well," I said slowly, "I suppose you'll be pleased to know that Lia had absolutely no idea who I was when we met. Called football—what was it again, love?—boring?"

Lia blinked. "Umm, yeah. Somewhere along those lines. I just ... I didn't understand the game like I do now."

"She's here studying at Oxford for Michaelmas," I told my mum, who was regarding Lia with guarded curiosity in her eyes. "Getting her master's degree in English Literature."

That softened her just the slightest. My mum always loved to read.

Lia glanced between my mum and I. "I specialize in the Brontës. That's why Jude took me to Haworth," she said, looking up at me with a strained smile.

"I was always fond of the parsonage museum myself," my mum said.

I glanced over at her. "You've been there?"

"I do travel some places, Jude," she answered crisply.

It was that tight reply, the defensive snap in her voice that pushed me just slightly over the edge of propriety. "Right. Just not anywhere you might see me do my job, right? And certainly not if I ask you to."

Lia tightened her fingers around mine, eyes focused on the ground.

My mum lifted her chin. "You gave us no notice, Jude. Just like always, you expect the world to stop revolving simply because you've asked it to. But people have lives and jobs that don't bend to your whim."

"I wasn't asking you to bend to my whim, Mum."

"Weren't you?" She shook her head sadly. "You messaged your father at midnight the night before your match without so

much as a *please, it would mean something to me if you came.*”

With my free hand, I gestured to Lia. “I wanted you to meet *her*, Mum. That’s why I wanted you to come to the match. Didn’t Lewis tell you?”

“I haven’t connected with your brother in a couple of weeks. We’ve been busy, and so is he. Doing our jobs.”

Lia lifted her head, giving me an unfathomable look.

I swallowed, wondering why I’d expected this to go any differently. “And who am I to understand real work, is that right?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to,” I tossed back.

My mum exhaled, looking tired and older than I remembered. “Why did you come like this, Jude? What did you think would happen?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her Lia was pregnant, that her first grandchild was on the way, and I’d never, ever make it feel the way they made me feel. But even five minutes with her, and everything went to shit. I might know exactly how to hit the self-destruct button on my relationship with my family, but even I wasn’t so stupid.

“Fuck if I know, Mum. Thought you could meet someone important to me and not have it explode at our feet, but I guess that was hoping for a bit too much, wasn’t it?”

Her chin wobbled, but she didn’t so much as blink.

“Tell Dad I said hello.”

Lia held fast when I tried to turn toward the car, and I gave her a questioning look, but her eyes were fastened on my mum.

“It was nice to meet you, Mrs. McAllister,” she said. Lia refused to budge until my mom’s shocked gaze came back to her face. “And I hope we can meet again soon under better circumstances. I’d love to hear more about what you do here.”

My mum let out a shaky breath and nodded. “Nice to meet you too, dear.”

Then instead of waiting for me to take the lead, Lia pivoted, all but dragging me back to the car, where she let go of my hand in order to climb back in.

She didn’t say a word until we’d driven down the dirt lane that led away from the farm, and when she did, I found myself bracing for a verbal tirade.

“Well,” she said softly, “that explains a lot, doesn’t it?”

I exhaled a laugh. “Yeah. I suppose.”

“At least when I get Isabel from the airport next week, I can tell her I’ve met your mother now.”

Pressing my foot on the accelerator I tried to ignore Lia’s strained tone, and the worried wrinkle in her brow. I tried to ignore the fact she didn’t hold my hand on the drive back. Or that when I dropped her off in Oxford, the kiss she gave me was subdued.

“Thank you for the lovely getaway,” she whispered, smoothing her hands along the collar of my shirt.

“Are you cross with me?” I asked, unable to stand the feeling that I’d just wedged a chasm between us.

“Not cross, no,” she said. “I’m ... sad for you, I think. I don’t know exactly what I feel.”

That helped a bit but not entirely.

The one thing I seemed to do right suddenly felt precarious. I kissed her again, ignoring the way a couple of arseholes whistled as they passed.

She pulled away with a breathless laugh.

“Talk soon, yeah?” I asked.

Lia nodded. “Yeah.”

But as I drove away, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d just laid the groundwork for my own demise.





## LIA

I sabel and I made it three days of blissful sister coexistence after she arrived.

At Heathrow, there was screaming and crying and hugging and soul-deep happiness that one of my people was finally here with me.

There was the requisite touristy stuff and jet lag recovery the first few days. We ate the bangers and mash and did bus tours, and she drank beer (I only snuck one sip because I really, really missed the occasional beer).

“Can we go in there? I think I need a Union Jack T-shirt.”

“You do know that we’ll pass about a hundred different stores exactly like this one.”

She grinned. “Indulge the tourist, please. If this is what will keep me awake until tonight, then you’re going to help me find a T-shirt.”

I held up my hands. “Fair enough.”

She was quicker than me, partially because her legs were longer, but also... not pregnant people were faster than pregnant people.

“Your bump is adorable,” she commented, flicking me a quick glance as she slid hangers down the rack.

I ran my hand over it. “I feel good. My energy picked back up around eleven weeks, but I swear, if I keep eating this many scones, I’m going to gain a thousand pounds.”

Isabel smiled as she held a shirt up to look at it. I could tell in her face she wasn't sure what to say next.

“What is it?”

She carefully hung the shirt back up. “Nothing.”

I held up a white T-shirt covered in a black and white rendering of Queen Elizabeth with a red and blue lightning slash running down her face ala David Bowie.

Isabel grinned and motioned for it. “Perfect.”

We wandered a little bit after she got the shirt. Since Isabel wasn't a student, I couldn't take her inside the Rad Cam (the Radcliffe Camera, also known as one of Oxford's most famous buildings), but I could show her my favorite place to sit and work. We worked our way through Oxford that way during the first couple of days, finding small nooks to sit where she could caffeinate, I could eat, and I'd get tiny snippets of what I was missing back home.

“What about Emmett?” I asked. “How's he doing? He's never around when I talk to anyone.”

Isabel smiled. “The little prince is fine. I already told him he's going to be dethroned as the favorite when you give birth.”

“You did not.”

“Hell yeah, I did. Kid needs to be prepared.”

I rolled my eyes. “You have the tact of a semi-truck, Isabel. He's nine. No one will be replacing anyone.”

She glanced at me over the rim of her cappuccino. “You'll be living there, though, right? When you go home?”

My fingers plucked at the scone, and I took my time slathering cream and jam on it. It wasn't the first probing question I'd gotten from my big sister, but it was just the most obvious.

“I guess,” I said. “I hadn't really thought about it.”

Isabel hummed. The subject dropped. For another day at least.

On day four of her trip, we made our way into London where she'd booked another hotel for a few nights, and at her insistence, I packed a bag to stay with her, working on my paper while she slept in until late morning. We were just around the corner from Hyde Park, a beautiful tree-lined street in a quiet neighborhood, and when she stopped to take some pictures of an overflowing flower cart on a street corner, she poked me again.

“Have you thought of any names?”

My hand went straight to my belly. I found myself doing that more in the past few weeks. It was an interesting sort of reassurance. Yup, the bump was still there, as if I couldn't tell from the aching back and ravenous appetite and massive boobs.

“Not really,” I answered.

We waved goodbye to the woman selling the flowers and pulled our hoods up to turn the corner toward Hyde Park.

“Isabel is always a classic choice for a girl,” she said about a block later.

I nudged her with my shoulder, laughing under my breath. “If it's a girl, there's no shortage of family names I could use.”

“True.” For a while, I thought she was going to drop that subject too. We crossed the street and entered the park through the black wrought-iron gates. “I thought there'd be snow,” she commented as she crouched to take a picture of one of the first fountains we passed.

“It's kinda like Seattle.” I tucked my hands into my coat and shivered. “It can get cold enough for snow, but it's just not common. Lots of rain, lots of clouds, but honestly, I don't mind it.”

She stood and gazed over the park. Now that her jet lag had dissipated, the dark circles under her eyes were gone. I didn't know why I studied her as if I'd expected her to change in the months since I'd last seen her. Maybe because *I'd* changed so drastically. But she was the same Isabel, tall and striking. Her hair, darker than the rest of ours, was braided

down her back, and she had her head covered with a black cap. Even dressed casually, something about her was intimidating and drew the eye when she passed.

“You look good,” I told her when we started walking again.

“So do you.”

“I look pregnant, Isabel. You have to say that.”

“I don’t *have* to say shit, Lia. If I was worried about how you looked, I’d ask you about whether you were eating healthy or getting enough exercise.” She softened her response with a teasing smile. “Your looks are not one of the things I’m worried about.”

I stopped walking. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Iz muttered something under her breath that I couldn’t hear.

“I didn’t hear you.”

“You weren’t supposed to hear me.” She pointed at a restaurant up around a curve in the path. “Need anything?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m okay for now. But if you need to use the toilet, let’s go in and grab some tea or something.”

“Where’s our next stop? I can wait.”

“Kensington Palace,” I told her. “It’s on the other side of the park.”

“Sweet. Maybe I’ll catch a glimpse of William, and I can tell him about the poster Molly used to have on her wall.”

I snorted. “I forgot about that. I told Jude that if I’d come a couple of years earlier and met Harry when he was single, he would’ve been shit outta luck.”

She smiled but didn’t say anything. She’d asked a few questions about Jude, about his job, and about football overseas in general. But I got the sense that my sister was treading very, very carefully. Which was unlike her.

As we curved around the meandering paths, stopping at bridges for pictures, I waffled on how much I wanted to push Isabel on her comment. When you came from a big family, your relationships with each sibling were unique. Claire and I were twins, so ... that was a gimme for reading minds and feeling all the same feels and doing weird prolonged eye contact when I knew exactly what she wanted to tell me without her saying a word. Molly was the warm, friendly sister. As cheerleaders went, she was the one you wanted in your corner. She was the sister I could count on to listen to me cry without judgment, the one who'd wrap me up in a hug and tell me everything was going to be okay.

Isabel ... she was actually a lot like our brother, Logan.

If I burst into tears right now, she'd probably get a panic-stricken look on her face, and I'd get an awkward pat on the back. But on the flip side, she'd dole out pragmatic, no-bullshit advice anytime we needed it. And if anyone, and I mean *anyone*, threatened the people she loved, she was an absolute savage.

And I knew, as we walked and looked at buildings and fountains and bridges and made small talk, that that was the reason I hadn't told her about what happened at Jude's parents' farm.

She'd hate him for putting me in that position—arguably one of the most awkward I'd ever been in—and I didn't want Isabel to hate him. I wanted her to like him because if she did, she'd smooth the way for the rest of my family to like him too.

Yes, my time in London was drawing to a close, and Jude knew I was going back to Seattle for the birth, but what about later? What about when I finished with school?

We approached Kensington Palace from the front, and Isabel grinned the entire time she snapped pictures. "It's so fucking pretty I could puke."

I shook my head. "Such a way with words. But you curse like a Brit, so you'll fit in just fine at the match tomorrow."

“Yeah, about that ...” She turned her camera and snapped a quick selfie of us with the palace in the background. “Tell me more about him.”

“What do you want to know?”

We got in line to go into the palace and huddled together when the wind picked up. “I mean, what’s his deal? You get this googly-eyed look on your face when you talk about him, and I know you’d slept there the last time I called, so don’t even pretend you didn’t.”

I ducked my face into the collar of my coat to warm my cheeks. And to avoid figuring out how to answer the question.

“We’re ... I don’t know exactly.”

Isabel rolled her eyes but softened it with a teasing grin. “What are we, sixteen? You’re having a baby with him, Lia.”

“I know that.” I exhaled. “There’s something there. And we waited to sleep together again. It’s not like I told him about the baby, and we hopped back in bed. But we get along. We’re getting to know each other, and we like each other. Does there need to be some big label on it?”

She studied me with a careful expression on her beautiful face. “Not necessarily. But you’re also going home soon. You’re done with your paper, right?”

I nodded. “Just making some finishing touches on the end. But ... Atwood’s notes on my draft were lighter than I expected, so I think I’ll finish early.”

“Just be careful.” She tucked her arm through mine as the line moved. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt, okay? Being a single parent is hard enough without adding drama with the hot baby daddy footballer.”

I wanted to laugh but didn’t. For the first time in a long time, I thought about our mother. Briefly, at the beginning of my pregnancy, I kept looping around the idea that I might be bad at being a mom simply because I was born to someone bad at being a mom. But the distraction of Jude and our relationship had kept those questions at bay.

“You don’t think being a bad parent is like, in the gene pool, right?” I asked. I tried to say it sarcastically, but instead, my voice sounded reed-thin and wispy, easily carried away by the cold wind. And not like Isabel could know it, but I thought about Jude’s parents too. How hard his mom had been on him. I mean, yeah, stopping by that way wasn’t his best idea, but she could hardly hide her disdain.

My hand went to my belly. Little peach could make facial expressions now, I’d read. How weird, right? Nothing to see, muted voices and jumbled movements, and as Isabel and I stood there, they might be smiling.

“Uhh, no.” She gave me a weird look. “Are you being serious? Lia—”

I held up my hand. “I was kidding. I just meant, you know, sleeping with him when we haven’t even talked about like, custody or any of that.”

I wasn’t actually kidding, but I refused to ruin this day of exploring London with my sister. Impulsively, I leaned in and gave her a tight, bruising squeeze.

“I’m glad it was you who came to visit.”

She pulled back and turned away before I could see her face. She cleared her throat a little, and her eyes were red when she faced me again. “Damn straight. I’m going to be the favorite aunt.”

I laughed. “That’s what Molly said.”

Iz rolled her eyes. “Please. I’ve got this one in the bag.”

We moved closer to the entrance. “Ready for your first football match tomorrow?”

“Oh, my Lord,” she teased, “he’s even got you calling it football, not soccer. He must have a magic penis.”

I shoved her. “Ugh, who invited you here?”

Isabel laughed. “Yes, I’m very ready for my first match. I probably shouldn’t tell him I was rooting for Liverpool last week when they played, huh?”

“Probably not.” I eyed her. “Why?”

“Amy is a huge fan. She always has the TVs at the gym turned to the matches when Liverpool plays.”

I grinned, thinking of Isabel’s boss. “Is she still going to sell the gym?”

Isabel’s shoulders slumped. “Yes. I’m so sad. She’s like my Yoda, you know? And who knows who she’ll sell it to. They could be an asshole or a misogynist or a terrible gym owner. They could fire me because maybe they don’t want a manager, and then I’ll be destitute and angry because I love my job and don’t want to work anywhere else.”

I grinned, looping an arm over her shoulders as we turned into the grand, soaring entryway of Kensington Palace to have our bags checked. “Maybe none of those things will happen, and she’ll sell it to some hot, mysterious man who’ll sweep you off your feet.”

Isabel rolled her eyes. “I’d quit before that happened.”

“Cheer up, Iz. You don’t need to worry about any of that right now.” I hooked my purse back over my shoulder when the security guard handed it back with a smile. “Today, we see palaces, and tomorrow, we watch the Shorthorns beat Tottenham.”

The security guard snorted.

“What?”

He held his hands up. “You’re dreaming, dear. Shepperton is going to get bloody wrecked tomorrow.”

“Geez,” Isabel muttered. “I thought the British were supposed to be nice.”

He winked, tipping his hat at us. “Cheers.”

We entered the palace smiling, and I kept my fingers crossed that the mood would carry us over into the next day.





## JUDE

What's the saying about hindsight? Well, mine was twenty-bleedin'-twenty, because I should've known that everything would go to shit when we got kicked from pillar to post by Tottenham. Yeah, we scored two goals, but that only did so much when they scored five.

Their bloody captain, who I had no problem with when he wasn't running my team into the ground, got in my face more than once, calling me old man and slow. He might have been teasing because the fucker grinned like a clown when he said it, but all I could do for ninety minutes plus stoppage was imagine punching him right in the bloody mouth.

Losing was always hard in our league. Especially when your team hovered only a few spots above relegation. Each loss, each time you failed to add points added a sense of urgency to the time spent on the pitch.

We were fine. For now.

But in a few weeks or another month or two, it could be an entirely different story.

Losing was even harder, though, when your manager pulls you into his office and says, "I'm probably going to bench you next week, Jude, and I want you to know it now before anyone else does."

It took everything in me not to explode. "I can play better," I promised.

“You’ve been telling me that for weeks, McAllister. I’ve got guys younger and faster and hungrier, and that makes them better options for me when I’m trying to win more games.”

I clenched my jaw, practically heard the crack of my molars from the effort it took me to keep the words crowding my throat from coming out. It hurt to breathe through them, breathe through the bruise to my pride, if I was honest.

There wasn’t much worse for a footballer than to feel useless or like a hindrance to their team. And after a wet, sloppy loss on a muddy rain-soaked field, useless was an apt word for how I felt.

Ineffective.

And if I was honest, I couldn’t stop the word worthless when it whispered through my subconscious. If I wasn’t this ... if I couldn’t do this, what was I? What good was I to anyone without this part of my identity?

All the things I used to define myself came straight from the game I played. My drive. My passion. My work ethic. None of those things were in question, which was what made it even worse. Those things were in my control, but the reason Coach wanted to bench me, that was nothing I could grasp onto.

I nodded stiffly and left his office without another word.

I showered. Changed. Packed my bag. No one said anything to me in the locker room, and I was glad for it.

I was supposed to get my head on well enough to go meet Lia and her sister visiting from the States. Lia and I hadn’t even seen each other since I dropped her off in front of her flat after the disaster at the farm and all for good reason.

She was finishing her paper and didn’t want to stop while the work was good.

I was training my arse off to prepare for a brutal stretch of Liverpool and then Tottenham, both games serving us brutal losses.

Fucking red birds and fucking roosters.

All of that to set up the fact that when I walked out of the locker room, I was in a foul fucking mood when my brother sent me a text.

**Lewis: Sorry about the match. Can you swing round after you're done? I'm assuming Lia is with you. I've got something for both of you.**

**ME: I'll ask her. Her sister is visiting from the States, and I don't know if they've got plans for us after this.**

**LEWIS: It would mean a lot.**

I dropped my head back and let out a slow breath. That moment right there was when I should've canceled all of it.

Should've called Lia to reschedule meeting her sister until the next day.

Should've told Lewis to sod off because I was in a horrid mood.

But that useless feeling would've only intensified, and I knew it. The only thing worthwhile I'd done in the past few months was Lia. Just that one thing.

I took a deep breath, smoothed a hand down my weary, old, slow face, and turned the corner where I knew the two women would be waiting for me.

They were leaning up against the wall taking selfies of the Tottenham logo in the background, and I took a moment to study them. Lia's sister was taller than her with sharper cheekbones and a sharper jawline. Her hair was darker, and when she smiled, it didn't spread as widely as Lia's. But the similarities were stunning, and I could only imagine what the four sisters must look like all together.

Isabel saw me first, and the look she gave me reminded me of a flock guard dog that my parents used to have. In one split second, she assessed me with unguarded caginess. *Are you a*

*friend or a foe?* That was what I saw in her eyes, with her arm around her younger sister.

Lia looked over, and the brilliant smile on her face swept away just a bit of my awful day.

“Hi,” she said. “Rough game. I’m sorry.”

If Isabel hadn’t been there, I would’ve wrapped my arms around her to take whatever comfort she may have given me, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that like the guard dog on my parents farm, she’d rip my arm off if I made the wrong move.

I attempted a smile. “Can’t win them all, right?” Lia gave me a curious look, then slipped her arm around my waist. I sighed, kissing the top of her head. I’d missed her smell, missed the feel of her next to me over the past couple of weeks. My hand found her belly. “My how you’ve grown.”

She pinched my side. “Thanks for pointing it out.” She turned, gesturing behind her. “This is my sister, Isabel. Isabel, this is Jude McAllister.”

I held out my hand, which she shook firmly. “Welcome to England, Isabel. I’m sorry we couldn’t have given you a better match today.”

Her smile was small, but her eyes had lost that initial wariness. “Can’t win them all, like you said. Besides, it was a good match for the Spurs fans, right?”

I rubbed the spot on my chest over my heart. “I hope you’re not describing yourself. I can’t take it.”

She laughed. “No. I’m a fan of sports, honestly. Any time I can see someone compete doing something they love, that’s what I’m a fan of.”

“A testament to your upbringing, no doubt. Unsurprising that you’d elevate the athlete over the team.”

Isabel hummed, sharing a look with her sister. “Athletes are just normal people ...”

“Who do abnormal jobs,” finished Lia.

I raised an eyebrow.

Lia grinned. “Something drilled into our heads growing up so we didn’t place athletes on a pedestal. Because when they mess up, and they will, you know they have bad days just like the rest of the world.”

“Very smart,” I said. “I know I said you could plan dinner wherever you wanted after this, but do you mind terribly if we stop by Lewis’s pub after we leave? He asked if we would. Said he had something for us.”

“Of course, we don’t mind.” Lia took my hand as we started walking, explaining who Lewis was to her sister.

“We’re all going to be one big happy family now, right?” Isabel asked. “Might as well meet him now.”

My head snapped in her direction because I couldn’t tell if she was being serious or if she was baiting me. But from the look on her face, she meant it, which meant Lia probably hadn’t told her about our stop at my parents’ farm.

“You don’t need to ride with the team back to the hotel?” Lia asked.

I shook my head. “Cleared it with my manager because of Isabel visiting.”

She smiled widely, and after my day, it was one small, sweet relief that I could still do that.

“Did you take the Tube out here?” I asked, holding the door open for them as we made our way to get a black taxi. Lia nodded. “Wasn’t too bad.”

“I love the whole *mind the gap* thing,” Isabel said, sliding into the back seat. “I swear, in America, it would be like, don’t fall on your frickin’ face, and if you do, no one will help you up.”

I laughed for what felt like the first time all day. “That can’t be true.”

She shrugged. “Maybe it’s a slight exaggeration, but I do think Brits are more friendly than we are back home. To tourists at least. Even when they’re trash-talking the Shorthorns, they’re so pleasant.”

I glanced sideways, and her face held a Cheshire cat grin. Lia nudged me with her elbow. “Ignore her. She’s testing you because she’s obnoxious.”

Their teasing was so natural. And the entire drive to my brother’s pub, it was bizarre to bear witness to how easy their interactions were. They had inside jokes. They laughed at each other and at themselves so effortlessly. They spoke of their family, of holidays, of watching games together. How Isabel flipped a table once when she lost a seven-hour-long match of Monopoly to their nine-year-old nephew. It was a glimpse into how our child would be raised, and it dug like a burr underneath my skin.

When it was just me and Lia inside the little bubble we’d created, it was easy to ignore the dynamics she might have with her family. And even as I recognized that my child would be raised around a loving, supportive family, it only served to dig that sense of uselessness down even further. A splinter I couldn’t pluck out, so much more painful than it should’ve been.

Because of traffic leaving White Hart Lane and just London in general, it took us a while to head back south toward the pub. By the time we pulled up to The Red Lion, we were all quiet—Lia because she was hungry and tired, Isabel because she was still fighting the time change, and me ... well ... because that day was pure bollocks from start to finish. The rain had tapered off, and as I paid the driver, Lia and Isabel huddled together underneath the awning of the pub to ward off the chilly air.

Even that, keeping her warm, wasn’t my job while her sister was around. And it was hard not to feel replaced.

It was a symptom of my day, to be sure, and another glaring reminder that I should’ve canceled. All of it. I stared at Isabel’s arm around Lia’s shoulders, saw her touch Lia’s belly under the coat, and they laughed about something I couldn’t hear.

I held the door open with a smile and waved when someone wearing a Tottenham jersey yelled from his car

window, “Thanks for the win, McAllister.”

Isabel’s eyebrows raised a bit.

“You get used to it,” I told her under my breath.

“Do you, though?”

I thought about that question as they preceded me into the pub. It was busier than the night I’d met Lia, and I slipped a black hat out from where I kept it tucked in an inner pocket of my coat and covered my head. No, I never got used to it.

Fans yelled all sorts of things at players. Some were funny, some were understandably aggravated, some were horrific—racially charged slurs that got them banned for life from the matches of their favorite team. And to a certain extent, no I’d never gotten used to that. On the good days, it was easier to block out the noise, easier to mute the negative voices, and focus on the fans who carried the game in their blood.

But on days like this one, I simply felt really fucking tired.

Which was why I decided to answer Isabel honestly. “Not really, no.”

She paused. “But it’s worth it?”

“It’s worth everything,” I answered immediately.

That made her smile with what was probably the warmest facial expression I’d seen from her. “All the great ones say that.”

“I don’t know how great I am anymore.” I shrugged, gesturing toward the back of the pub where Lewis usually saved a more private table when he knew I was coming.

“I don’t know if Lia told you what I do,” Isabel said as we skirted a long table.

“You’re a personal trainer of sorts, right? At a boxing gym?”

She nodded. “We get a lot of athletes who come to our place, some because of my connection to the Wolves, and some because of my boss, Amy, and the number one thing I’ve learned from watching them is that their greatness never really



fades. I trained someone in his sixties last summer who used to be a baseball player. Hurt his shoulder and had to retire before he wanted to, but that man, even though he's more than twice my age, had a fire in him that blew me away." Isabel shrugged, glancing over her shoulder at me. "I think what makes the great *great* is something inside them. Even when their body betrays them, it's still there."

A burst of laughter behind us made it so I couldn't answer her, but as we approached the back, I couldn't stop thinking about what she'd said, trying to decipher if it even felt true for me.

Ahead of us, I saw Lewis come around from behind the bar and greet Lia with a hug and friendly smile. No surprise that she'd won him over when they'd watched a match together. But I also saw the shock on his face when she embraced him, the way he tried not to look down at her stomach, visible behind the form-fitting Shepperton hoodie she was wearing.

"Bloody hell, fucking shit," I whispered under my breath.

Isabel's gaze snapped to me. "What?"

"I, uh, my brother doesn't know Lia's pregnant yet, and I think he just puzzled it out."

"Ahh." She lifted her chin. "Oh wow, so we get to meet the whole family?"

My stomach dropped out when my parents stood from the table in the back, regarding us warily as we approached.

I glared at Lewis, who held up his hands. "Jude, Mum told me what happened when you stopped by. It's past time you three have a decent conversation."

"And you thought tonight was the best time for it?" I hissed. I waved my hand at Lia and Isabel, who were standing by the bar, waiting to approach my parents until I was with them. "I'm not in the mood, Lewis."

He raised his eyebrows slowly. "Are you ever? I thought with her here, maybe you'd actually manage to be polite, and if they were expecting to see you, they could attempt the

same.” He shook his head. “You’re all so bloody stubborn it makes me sick.”

Slicking my tongue over my teeth, I tried to breathe through what their unexpected presence did to my mood.

Lia gave me a sympathetic smile when I slid my hand up her back.

“Sorry about this,” I told her.

“Don’t apologize to me. I wouldn’t mind getting to know your family better, but ...” Her voice trailed off as she gave my parents a quick glance under her lashes. “I don’t know if this is the best way to do it.”

Isabel looked between us. “What am I missing?”

“You’re about to find out,” I exhaled. “Come on, might as well get it over with.”

Lewis muttered something to my parents, and my dad gave him a tight nod.

My father looked older, just as my mum had, and he gave me the same nod he’d just given my brother. “Jude. Nice to see you.”

My mum was staring wide-eyed at Lia’s stomach. There was no part of her even attempting to hide it.

“Dad, Mum.” I motioned to Isabel with my free hand, the other was occupied by holding Lia’s like she was a bloody life preserver. “Isabel is here from the States. She’s Lia’s sister. Mum, you remember Lia.”

She nodded, giving Lia a small smile. “Hello again. It’s ... it’s nice to see you.”

Lia smiled back, her hand reaching up to rub her stomach. I’d seen her do it so many times but never had I been so aware of it. For her, it was probably a comfort, to be able to reach down and feel that warm curve of flesh as I’d done all the times we’d been in bed together.

My dad’s forehead wrinkled when he watched her. “I was working when you two stopped by the other day. Lewis

thought we should make a trip down and try to ... talk.”

Isabel and Lia pulled out heavy wooden chairs, and I did the same once Lia was seated to my right. Upon sitting, she slid her hand over my thigh and squeezed. Isabel looked at Lewis. “A pint would be great.”

“Of course. Would you care to see our tap list?”

“Nope. Just ... any kind will be perfect.”

I looked away, a feeling of shame coating every part of my skin. On the drive here, they’d been all warmth and ease.

And then there was my family. Dysfunction and discomfort.

My dad whispered something to my mum before he met my gaze. “How was your match tonight? Did you win?”

Lia blew out a slow breath as Isabel hastily grabbed the beer Lewis brought back for her. I inhaled slowly, then exhaled even more slowly. It didn’t help.

“No. We got our arse kicked.”

Mum frowned, and Dad looked away. Lia’s hand squeezed on my leg again, and I looked over at her.

“*Try*,” she mouthed. “*Please*.”

For the first time since I met Lia, I was furious at her. She was asking me for something without any bloody idea of how much it might cost me. But that was the point, wasn’t it? She had no idea because I’d never told her.

It deflated most of the fiery righteousness that fueled my anger. But the frustration, the underlying sense of uselessness didn’t dissipate. Maybe because it wasn’t fire. It wasn’t hot, something that could be stoked and tended.

What I’d been feeling all day was more like a fog. Murky. Dark. Everywhere.

Nothing you could touch, but it absolutely swamped the senses.

Fire could be extinguished, but fog ... it had the ability to destroy everything in its path if you didn't watch carefully enough.

I swallowed, laid my hand over hers, and looked up at my parents.

"This may surprise you," I said lightly, "but football is actually the last thing I'd like to talk about right now."

My parents exchanged a loaded glance. "All right," my dad said. His hands, big and rough and hardened from the farm, curled around his glass of water. "That's fine. What would you like to talk about, Jude? We're ..." His voice stumbled slightly. "We're here to listen."

Lewis finished setting waters in front of Lia, Isabel, and myself and sat in the last free chair at the table, eyeing us carefully.

"Maybe Lewis should tell us why he scheduled this family event," I said.

My brother gave Lia and Isabel a sheepish grin. "Can I blame being drunk at the time?"

I rolled my eyes. "If you drank more than a beer a week, I'd believe that."

"Maybe it was a really strong beer."

"Lewis." Mum sighed. "It's not the time for jokes. Your father and I drove a long way to come down here, took time away from the farm. You said it was important."

"It is." He spread his hands wide. "This is our family, and we're doing a shit job of acting like it. You hate that he plays football, we get it. But he's been playing for over a decade. Bloody hell, move on already."

My brow furrowed at his vehement defense. I'd never heard Lewis—the happy one, the man in the middle of our little mess—speak up for me like that.

He turned to me. "And you, quit walking around like you've got a war to fight every time you see them. They don't understand the game, they don't understand how good you are,

and you don't bloody need them to in order to do your job. Let it go."

I clenched my jaw tight and stared down at the table.

"We understand how good he is," my mum said in the loaded silence that followed. The pub wasn't silent, but our table was like a graveyard for how deathly quiet it was. "But you're right, Lewis, we don't understand his life. We don't understand how you can sacrifice all the things that really matter for a game that won't be there for him. Once he's done, once the crowds stop cheering his name, what will he have left? He's pushed away anyone who loves him for the empty praise of strangers."

My eyes lifted slowly to hers, and I felt that fog cloud over my vision for one moment.

From the corner of my vision, I saw Lia and Isabel trade a look. Isabel's beer was gone already. But I never pulled my eyes away from my mum.

"Is that what you think of me?" I asked quietly.

"It's what we know, son," Dad answered. "You changed. And not for the better. You may be a god to them, but to us, you're just the son we don't even recognize anymore."

"Dad," Lewis said sharply.

Lia leaned forward while I struggled to catch my breath. "How dare you speak to him like that," she said in a frigid tone. Icicles hung from her words. "Shame on you."

My parents stared at her in stunned shock. Hell, so did I.

"I know you're in a relationship with him," my dad said stiffly, "but you've no part in this, Miss."

"She's having my child," I said.

A bomb could've gone off on the table with less dramatic impact than what I'd just said. My mum's eyes fell shut, and my dad's widened. Lewis rubbed his forehead.

"She's a bloody part of this because she's having your first grandchild. Congratulations to both of you," I said smoothly.

“And I’ll tell you why what you’ve just said can’t touch me, Dad. Because that child will have every-fucking-thing that you never gave me. I will give support. I will give encouragement. I will give anything they need or want because I’ve learned from you what not to do.”

I curled my arm around Lia, whose shoulders were stiff as a plank.

“If my child wants to play football, I’ll be at every bloody game. If they want to be a painter, I’ll buy every single print. If they want to dance or sing or ... be a farmer, I’ll be there every step of the way. Because that’s what a good parent does. And you taught me how to be a brilliant one.” I shrugged, feeling the fog roll insidiously off my body with each word I hurled at them. “All I have to do is not be like you, and I’ll be the best fucking father in the world.”

My mum wiped a tear from her face as she stood from the table. “I won’t sit and listen to this.”

My dad followed, as he always did, giving me a stunned look of defeat.

Lewis sat with his head in his hands. Isabel had a hand covering her mouth, eyes closed. And Lia, she was frozen next to me.

“I’m sorry you had to endure them like that,” I told her, rubbing a hand on her back.

I’d hardly had time to blink, and she stood so fast that her chair fell backward.

“Lia?”

“I have to go.” She looked at her sister, and whatever was on her face, Isabel nodded. Lia slipped her coat back on and I noticed her hands shaking.

“Wait,” I stood. “Is it about them?”

She wouldn’t look at me as she hooked her bag over her shoulder. Lewis still hadn’t moved.

“Lia,” I said more firmly. “Talk to me.” When she did look at me, the look in her eyes was haunted. I wasn’t even sure

what word to use to describe it. But it made me take a step back, shaking my head. “Wait, talk to me. What’s going on?”

She turned to leave, and when I moved to follow, Isabel held her hand out, just shy of my chest. I held my hands up.

“You’re going to let her walk away right now.” Her eyes, the same blue as Lia’s, were fierce and bright.

I breathed out through my nose, hard. “I just want to know what’s wrong. I can’t *fix it* if I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“Men,” she murmured, pinching the bridge of her nose, before glancing back up at me. “I don’t judge anyone for having family issues. But I promise you right now, you don’t want to push me on this because you will lose.”

“What the bloody hell are you talking about?” I hissed. “It’s not about pushing or losing. I just want to talk to her. I don’t *want* her to be upset.”

Isabel held my gaze. “I don’t give a flying fuck about what you want, Jude. You will give my sister a minute to breathe, okay?”

My jaw was so tight, I could feel it all the way down my neck. But I nodded.

“We’re staying at the Leonard Hotel by Hyde Park. She’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

It took everything in me not to shout her name again, but I let them walk out of the pub.

Why did my insides feel all twisted and knotted tight? Something was wrong, something yanked in a direction it shouldn’t have been when she turned her back on me. Something that recognized, even before I did, that she and I were supposed to be facing the same direction. But there I was—standing still while she walked away.

If I thought I’d felt useless before, it was nothing to how I felt at that moment. I sank into the empty chair at the table and realized there were worse things than being benched or losing games. There were worse things than having terrible parents.

It was fucking up with the first woman to find herself in my miserable excuse for a heart.





## LIA

Isabel ushered me out of the pub and immediately snagged a passing black cab. She didn't say a word after we settled on the bench, and for that, I was thankful. All I wanted to do was get back to the hotel and crawl underneath the blankets. Once I did that, once I was safe there, I could nudge open the release valve on all the tension that was building, building, building.

Through the panoramic moon roof of the cab, I stared numbly at the beautiful lights of London as we slowly made our way toward Hyde Park. My fingers were the first part of my body to shake, and Isabel wove hers through mine and held fast as though she could give me her strength through osmosis.

How had I made it this long without being by anyone in my family?

The voice that used to whisper questions I didn't know how to answer was right the F there. *You blocked out everything unpleasant, everything hard. You ignored the things that hurt to think about. And you were able to do that because Jude doesn't know you well enough to push you.*

*And you don't know him either,* was the next horrible thought. *I didn't know him at all.*

My legs started bouncing next, and I blew out a slow breath as we curled around the darkened streets. It felt like a womb inside that car, and with my free hand, I rubbed over my stomach. Hopefully, I wasn't transferring my stress or my anger to little peach.

And oh, I was angry.

At myself. And at Jude. Definitely at his asshole parents.

The anger was what was in the slowly growing vibration of my body. It reminded me of when Logan first married Paige. I'd sit on the kitchen island while she made homemade pasta. It was a mess. Noodles hanging everywhere as they dried. But my favorite part, aside from the eating, was watching the water start to boil.

No matter what the temperature of the water was when she set it over the flames, it always started the same way. Tiny little dots, hardly visible, as they moved in dancing lines up to the surface. The dots grew, but only if you were watching very carefully. And that was my job, watch for the big bubbles that finally made the water churn angrily.

Right now, I was the pot of boiling water, and the moment someone lifted the lid, I was probably going to friggin' explode in a mess of tears and hormones and tight-lidded tension.

Isabel tightened her hold on my hand. As different as the four of us girls were, one thing we had in common was that we were very calm and collected. Until we weren't so calm and collected. Then we needed to get the F away from everyone because all the feelings were about to explode in a messy burst. Until Logan, we'd learned to keep those feelings locked down tight because our mom just ... couldn't be bothered.

"Almost there," she murmured.

I nodded but felt the tingling at the bridge of my nose, the burning press at the back of my eyes.

I tried to focus on the lights, the architecture, the arches on doorways and beautiful columns in rows, anything to keep Jude's voice out of my head as he spoke to his parents.

My eyes pinched shut.

"We're here, Lee," Isabel whispered. I got out of the cab while she handed over a crumpled wad of pounds through the window. "Keep the change."

He whistled. “Cheers.”

With her arm wrapped around my shoulders, we ascended the steps into the hotel and made our way through the quiet lobby to the small elevator. Everything—hands, arms, chin—was shaking by the time Isabel got the door open. The first tear was hot on my cheeks. The second came down more easily. My teeth were chattering by the time she had us inside.

“Holy shit,” I gasped, tears slipping immediately down my face. “Oh, holy shit, did you hear them? How they spoke to each other? I didn’t know about *any* of this, Isabel.”

“I heard,” she said slowly. “That was ... that was brutal, Lia.” She pulled off her coat and laid it over the chair by the desk as she shook her head. “I thought we had some awkward family dynamics.”

I laughed, but the sound that came out was pathetic and watery. I pressed both hands to my chest and tried to breathe down my rising panic.

“I c-can’t do this,” I stammered. “I am not ready to do this.”

Isabel stood in front of me, sliding her hands up and down my upper arms. “Look at me, let’s take a couple of deep breaths, okay? In through the nose.”

I did as she asked, but my inhales were shaky and my exhales quick.

“Do you think selfishness i-is genetic?” I asked on a choked sob. “Like, is little peach totally, royally fucked because I come from Brooke, and J-Jude and his parents—” my voice broke.

“No,” she interrupted. “No, you don’t even go there in your mind, okay?”

“How are you so sure, though? It’s not like people *try* to screw up their kids. He and I haven’t talked about anything important. W-We just ... ignored it all, and I don’t know how you’re so sure we’ll be able to do this.”

Isabel's eyes got suspiciously bright, but she blinked a few times, and it disappeared. "The reason I'm so sure is because selfish people don't wonder if they're selfish. They do what they please and don't think about the consequences of their actions. Brooke left us because she thought she'd be happier. She thought life would be easier without us. And fuck that ho, she was probably right. We were little savages sometimes, but I guarantee you she never worried about what damage she left behind, because she was—is—selfish to her core." Isabel pressed her forehead to mine, wrapping me in a tight hug. "You are not like her because right now, after something hard, you're worried about what this means. You will be an amazing mother, okay?"

"Okay." I squeezed her back, letting the hug fortify any part of me that felt ill-equipped for ... well ... any of it, really. I sniffed. "And Jude?"

She exhaled a laugh. "Well ... I think Jude needs two things."

"What?"

"An excellent therapist and a kick to the balls. He should've warned you."

It felt good to laugh, even if it was through my tears. I sank onto the bed, wiping my cheeks. "I think parents need the kicking even more than their son."

She nodded. "I can't imagine saying those kinds of things to your son."

I buried my face in my hands and took a deep breath. "I shouldn't have stormed out like that."

"No, probably not." Isabel was quiet for a second. "Why did you?"

My cheeks puffed out on a hard exhale. "I swear, my body moved before my brain knew what I was doing. I just wanted ... out. I didn't want to face how little I knew about him, and them, and the kind of family this baby is being born into."

She hummed, rubbing a hand down my back as she sat next to me.

“The stuff that was good between us, Isabel, it’s so good. The parts that are just me and him. I was falling in love with him before I even knew it was happening.” She sat next to me, and I lowered my head to her shoulder. “I think that’s what made it so easy to ignore all the things that were ... I don’t know, separate from us. It sounds so immature when I say it like that. A hot guy made my head spin, so I forgot to talk about what would happen when our child was born.”

“You didn’t forget, Lia. You’re barely into your second trimester.” She nudged me with her shoulder. “Go easy on yourself. You’re in a different country, away from family, and he made you happy. Right?”

I nodded.

“Did he ever mention the future?” she asked.

“Not really. I mean, he mentioned the fact that he’d be done with the season and could travel to Seattle for the birth, so we both knew that I’d be home. But I think he counted on my understanding the demands of his career, you know? It’s not like he can just ... press pause on the season and come hang out in America and watch me get puffy ankles.”

“No,” she said cautiously, “he can’t. He must have thought about it, though.”

“I think he did.” I stood, snagging my water bottle off the nightstand to take a long sip. Emotional outbursts made my throat all scratchy. “I remember he asked me something odd, when we were watching the Wolves game a couple of weeks ago. He asked me what it was like to see my family doing what they did.”

Isabel hummed. “That was it?”

“It’s like ... it’s like he never had true support, so he doesn’t understand the family as a unit, you know? And aren’t we our own little team? The Wards?”

She snorted. “The Wards are like their own *gang*. We’ll defend each other to the death, and once you’re in,” she said ominously, “you can never get out.”

I missed them. Our team. With the exhaustion of the day settling in like an iron cloak around my shoulders, all I wished for was the power to blink and find myself back home. Find myself surrounded by all the people who knew me best. Normally, I lived life wanting to see and do and go. But all of this, the newness and novelty, it made me crave home.

For the first time in my life, I craved the routine I had there and the sameness that I'd left.

Even though whenever I went back home, whether it was with Isabel or a couple of weeks later, I wasn't returning to the same life.

Everything, my entire life, would be different. And I couldn't ignore the parts that were hard, the parts that scared me anymore.

"What's that look on your face?" Isabel asked quietly.

"I think it's what Claire would call self-realization, or whatever the counselor speak is." I sighed heavily. "I have to talk to Jude."

She rubbed my back. "What are you going to say?"

I shrugged one shoulder. "I figure it'll, I don't know, magically appear in my head when I see him."

Reaching for my purse, I dug out my phone, and there was his name, in a series of texts.

**Jude: I'm sorry about my parents. They're raging arseholes.**

**JUDE: Your sister asked me to give you tonight, and I'll respect that.**

**JUDE: But I didn't want to be across London at the hotel with the team, so I booked a room at the same hotel you're staying at. If you want, I can come to your room in the morning, or I'm in 327 whenever you want to talk.**

I shook my head. “Pushy-ass footballer, used to getting his way.”

“What?” Isabel looked over my shoulder. “Oh my gosh, he did not.”

Standing up, I risked a glance in the mirror and cringed.

“It’s not that bad,” Isabel said.

I pointed at my face.

She grimaced. “Okay, you get a little splotchy when you cry. But if you plan to talk to him now? A plus for impact, I’ll tell you that.”

Rolling my eyes, I tapped out a text to Jude telling him I was on my way to his room.

“You sure you want to go there?” Iz asked.

I nodded. “It gives me control of when I want to leave. I don’t want to have to ask him to go ... if it goes badly.”

“Want me to come with you?” It was a token invite; I could see it on her face. I knew and she knew I needed to do this myself. “I can wait out in the hall, if you just ... want to know I’m out there.”

I smiled, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. “No, but thank you. I’ll be back soon.”

When the hotel door closed behind me, I took a moment to take a deep breath before I went down the flight of stairs that separated his room from ours. There was no magical moment when I knew what I should say to him, the first moment of reckoning between Jude and me.

Actually, I realized, that wasn’t precisely true. We’d had one before. When I told him I was pregnant, and in that split second before he could filter his reaction, the words that came out were selfish. Thoughtless.

And the words that came out of mine were angry.

Yes, I could understand his reaction, given the nature of his job. And I could understand mine because no one wanted to be called a lying ho. But as I walked down the hallway, I knew



the inescapable truth. Our instincts in this, the desires that ruled our reactions, that ruled our interactions and tangible chemistry, needed work. At least if we were ever going to co-parent in a healthy way.

Co-parent. No more sleeping together. No more making out on his couch. No more holidays in the English countryside.

A few stray tears escaped the corner of my eye when I thought about all of those things, and how I'd allowed them to cloud my judgment for months, simply because we had a talent for making each other feel good. Making each other forget.

When I arrived at his door, I let out a slow breath. Before I could even raise my fist to knock, he swung it open. Jude, in just the short time since I saw him at the pub, looked wrecked.

His hair was a mess, like he'd been running his hands through it.

"Lia," he exhaled, "I'm so bloody sorry."

Without a word, I walked into his room but didn't sit. He stood across from me after the door enclosed us into the space together.

"I'm sorry too," I told him. "I shouldn't have run like that." I tilted my head at him. "What are you sorry for?"

He blinked. "F-for my parents. That was ... well, it was awful."

Nodding, I gave him a careful study. The words, it seemed, were there, right when I needed them. "It was. They shouldn't speak to you that way, and I can only imagine how badly that's hurt you over the years."

He averted his gaze. "Doesn't hurt me anymore. They lost that power years ago."

Denial and shame often went hand in hand. One of the random things I remembered about helping Claire study for some of her psych classes. I was familiar with both because there were so many things I hadn't told him either, all the ugly parts of my own past. The fears I'd confided in Isabel had still

been held out of reach for this man I'd been falling in love with, and I couldn't ignore that anymore.

"Jude, I need to know something important."

"Anything," he answered fervently.

That fervency had me tearing up again. I didn't want him to make this harder by being amenable. I didn't want to ask him these questions, but that was the point. It wasn't about me anymore. I slid my hand up over my belly, and his eyes tracked the movement, almost helplessly, like he couldn't look away.

And when he did watch, he looked miserable. It took me a second to voice the question in my head.

"Do you see where we went wrong?"

His face went blank in part confusion, part shock. "Have we?"

My hands shook slightly, and I knit them together in front of me. "I had no idea what kind of stuff you were dealing with, with your parents."

"It's not exactly my favorite topic," he answered evenly.

"And I get that." I licked my lips. "But ... at their farm, when we stopped, and then tonight, I was kinda tossed headfirst into the fire, you know?"

"Believe me, if I'd known they were at the pub, I never would've come."

I felt my brow wrinkle as I studied him—the set of his jaw, the line of his mouth, the tension in his shoulders. "Yeah, that was ... awkward."

"Again, I apologize for how my parents acted, if that's why you're upset."

He was at a loss, that much was obvious. Jude wasn't entirely sure what he should be saying, and maybe I didn't know either. But what I did know was that we'd done a stellar job of burying ourselves in each other while ignoring all the things that swirled just outside of that bubble.

I ran a hand over my belly. “I don’t even know if upset is the right word, Jude.”

“You looked pretty upset when you walked away from me without another word.” He lifted his eyebrows, and my face warmed in embarrassment at how I’d acted. “And when you did, I saw that side of Isabel you warned me about. She looked like she wanted to feed me my bollocks from a blender, just for going after you.”

It was the kind of thing I wanted to smile about, but even that felt too hard.

“She’ll never not protect her family, even if she disagreed with me leaving like I did.”

He swallowed. “That’s a good trait to have in a family member.”

I nodded.

“I don’t quite know what that’s like,” he said quietly.

“The things your parents said to you,” I paused, shaking my head, “and the things you said back ... it was awful. I wish they could see how selfish they’re being.”

“Me too.”

I chose my words carefully. “But I think it just all felt like a giant blinking sign of how little we really know about one another.”

His jaw clenched.

“My time here, Jude, it’s like ... it’s like being on vacation, you know? It’s fun and exciting, and I’m doing something I love to do, but it’s still not real life.”

“It felt pretty real to me,” he said in a rough voice.

The look in his eyes was full of unsaid things. And maybe my gaze was the same. Something big and important changed when we slept together, and he felt it too.

“I know. A lot of it did. But this whole time I’ve been here, the whole time we’ve been making up the little rules that gave

us permission to do what felt good and right, we were avoiding everything hard and scary.”

He exhaled a dry laugh. “I don’t know about you, love, but I’ve come face-to-face with a lot of hard in the past few months. Do you think it’s easy to get your arse benched?”

My mouth fell open. “Today you did?”

Jude slicked his tongue over his teeth before answering, but eventually gave me a reluctant nod.

“Oh, Jude,” I whispered, “I’m so sorry.”

As he propped his hands on his hips and stared at the ground, my stomach churned uncomfortably because I had to come to grips with the fact that Jude hadn’t confided in me about anything important. Not one thing.

Not about his job.

Not about his family.

On an elemental level, the part of us that was instinctual and immediate, I knew him.

How he looked when he woke up in the morning.

How he smiled when a fan approached him.

How he kissed me.

How he made me feel, how thoughtful he was, how easy he made it to fall in love with him.

But all the foundational things that made him that way ... they were a complete mystery.

“I know not everyone likes to talk about what’s stressing them out,” I said carefully, “or how they feel about it. But Jude, you didn’t even tell your brother I was pregnant, and you like him. I wish you’d see that not everyone is like your parents. There are people who want to know what you’re going through, so we can support you, so we can know you.”

Jude stared at me; his thoughts hidden. “You think you’ve got me figured out then?”

“I want to, Jude.” I held my arms out. “But we’ve talked about nothing. We’ve ignored all the important things, and we ... we just ...”

My speech-making skills faltered, as thunderclouds formed on his handsome face. “We just, what? Got to know each other naturally? That’s how you categorize all the nights we spent together. Wasted. Nothing. Unimportant.”

“No,” I said in a rush, “no, I just mean ... we didn’t talk about anything. Your job, your family, my family, the *future*. What are we going to do when I go home?”

“Well, you’ve got it all cleared up, I suppose. Why don’t you explain to me how this whole *sharing* thing works, and I’ll follow the bullet points as best I can.” He held up a hand. “Just make sure the words are small. Not all of us go to Oxford.”

He was like a lion, sitting back with a bloodied paw, swiping at anything that came close. Maybe I hadn’t been the one to injure him, but in his mind, I was digging straight into the wound all the same. All I could do was shake my head. Anger wouldn’t help right now, even if I wanted to tell him he was acting like a freaking child.

“Tell me what you want to hear, love, and I’ll say it.”

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped. “Not like that.”

He pushed off the desk, where he’d leaned his weight. His eyes had a strange flatness to them. They were cold, behind the normally warm color. “Maybe it’s best you’re leaving soon then.”

I sucked in a breath. “Why are you acting like this? Jude, we have to be able to talk to each other about the hard things, and I-I avoided that because it’s what *I* do. I storm out when I should stay and I don’t push to have uncomfortable conversations. I’m not perfect.”

“You felt pretty perfect to me,” he said silkily. Like he was wearing a mask, his lips curled up in a slight smile, but I wanted to slap it off his face. “Don’t worry, love, all the distractions were my fault. Not the best idea, I’d wager,

considering it just mucks things up now when we have to be adults.”

Disappointment was ... I wasn't even sure what it was. It wasn't a rock in my gut because it felt so, so much bigger and more painful than that. I wasn't a poetic thinker, but all sorts of dramatic proclamations ran through my head because like I'd told Isabel, I'd started falling in love with him before I even realized it happened.

And maybe this, this version of Jude that was smooth and slick and studied—was armor, but I didn't want the man I gave my heart to, the man who I'd made a child with, to use that armor with me.

I rubbed my forehead. “Jude, maybe I came in here wrong, but I just ... I don't want our issues to bleed into this new life. You've got yours, and I've got mine.”

“Oh, I'd wager mine wins, love.”

“It's not a competition,” I said, with an edge of frost in my words, “and you know *nothing* about what my family has been through.”

The mask dropped, just for a split second, and it was the regret in his eyes that tempered my immediate flare of anger.

He held up his hands. “You're right. I don't. Because *you* haven't told me much either.”

Embarrassment and shame warred mightily in my chest, because I had no choice but to concede his point. I was just as much at fault as he was, maybe even more, since only one of us bolted from the pub.

I didn't want it to be like this anymore. And there was only one way to change it.

“My mom left a few years after my dad died.” As I said the words, Jude's forehead creased, his eyes taking on a curious light. I shrugged one shoulder. “That's why Logan raised the four of us. Why my family is so important to me. And I *hate* talking about it, so I get it, Jude. I get it more than you can imagine. I just ... don't want to make things worse by

doing the same things over and over simply because they're easier."

"You're right." He sounded exhausted, and I took absolutely no pleasure in hearing the words.

In the wake of his concession, I deflated. Everything on my body felt like it dropped an inch, simply because I couldn't hold up the weight anymore. "Now what?"

Jude's gaze tracked over my face, which was probably still splotchy and red and awful looking. "I think, love, that you go home and be with your family. I'll finish my season. We'll talk every week, yeah? We'll figure out all those unanswered questions."

I swiped at a tear that leaked out. What a rude little tear, I'd given no permission to cry in this conversation.

It wasn't like I wanted him to know that I'd fallen in love with him, or that I was closing a door by ending things like this.

He watched the tear, which I'd missed, and a muscle clenched in his jaw.

Noisily, I sniffed. "Okay."

Jude's fists clenched, but his face smoothed out. "Do we ... shake hands? Hug?"

I tried not to think about whether it was smart, but I stepped forward. Immediately, he opened his arms. They folded around my back, and while he held me, chin resting on the top of my head, I allowed one more tear.

"You changed my life, Jude McAllister," I whispered. His chest, warm and broad and strong, expanded slowly. "I'm glad I met you."

He didn't answer right away, but I felt the whisper of his mouth against my hair. "I'm glad I met you too, Lia Ward."

If I looked up at him, with the loaded, rough tone to his delicious voice, I'd probably want to kiss him. How stupid I was when it came to this man. So, I pulled out of his arms and walked out of the room.

A few doors down, Isabel stood in the hallway, looking down at her phone.

She glanced up when I exited. “You okay?”

I shook my head.

Isabel held her hand out, and I took it. We walked back to our room like that, and by the time I curled up in bed, she’d booked my tickets home with her in three days time.

I didn’t cry myself to sleep, but I curled a hand around my stomach and promised my little peach we’d be okay. All of us.





## LIA

I did okay packing up my things. No tears were shed as I packed the brand new suitcase I'd purchased to accommodate the new items I'd purchased the past few months. Even my Shepperton hoodie and winter hat made it into the suitcase with dry eyes, which I was pretty ecstatic about. Isabel helped some, but I also forced her to do a few of the touristy day tours she'd booked.

My paper, once it was polished and printed and bound into a hardcover binder, had been delivered to Atwood's office earlier in the week, as well as via email. The beautiful thing about the way we'd structured my semester cohort with her was the flexibility in my schedule. My flat was empty and clean, Isabel gone early from her Oxford B&B to do a day in Bournemouth. Originally, I'd planned to go with her, but Atwood had availability in her schedule and emailed me a cryptically short message that had my stomach twirling with nerves that she hated my paper and I'd end this entire semester with no credit.

When I knocked on her office door, I felt the first stirrings of emotion that I wouldn't be doing it again.

"Come in," she called.

Peeking around the corner, I gave her a tentative smile. "Ready for me?"

Professor Atwood watched me over the edge of her glasses, and I felt the weight of it like a wool cloak, something

that in the right situation could be warm and wonderful. Or hot and oppressive.

I took my usual seat and saw my bound paper on her desk, next to her ever-present teacup. “Well, you didn’t burn it. That’s a good sign.”

She smiled softly. “No, definitely not.”

Nodding, a sigh escaped my lips in relief.

Atwood twirled an expensive-looking pen in her hands, briefly tapping it against her desk before she spoke again. “Your final product was quite lovely, Lia. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you.” I exhaled. “I was worried you’d hate the change I took with the end.”

She shook her head. “On the contrary, I thought it was a wonderful shift in perspective and shows the understandable change you’ve undergone in your time here.”

“It felt right, I guess.”

Atwood picked up the binder, flipping to the back. “This is the part that I highlighted. *Discontent is a powerful motivator for change and a fuel of ingenuity, but only when it’s coupled with an unwavering sense of self. When applied through a lens of the past, the indomitable spirit of the independent female is wonderfully subversive, a concept that only thrived in secret, printed on words claimed by male monikers. But when that concept is viewed in light of the present, with a clear-eyed glance at the future, we find Brontë’s words equally applicable. Not only that, but their intelligence, her own discontent, provides the reader with a timeless benchmark for how to apply change in their own life, even when choices seem few.*”

My face felt warm at her smile when she set the paper back down.

“I’m quite proud of you, you know,” she said.

“Thank you.” I laughed. “I swear, I’ll say something else at some point.”

“It will be incredibly easy to email your advisor at the University of Washington with a rave review and to heartily sign off your credit for this semester.”

My eyes welled up. “I’m so appreciative of everything I learned from you.”

Atwood waved that off. “That’s the beauty of teaching upper-level students. You don’t need as much teaching; you need guidance to see the information you already know at a deeper level. Flesh out the layers of what’s already up there,” she said as she tapped her temple. “I don’t know if you’ve given much thought to what you’ll do when you finish, but I think you’d make a marvelous teacher, Lia.”

“Really?”

“Really.” She took a sip of tea, carefully set the cup back down. “You have the energy students would respond to. Give it some thought as you do your last couple of classes. Whenever you get back to them.” She looked pointedly at my stomach.

“I should be able to finish the last two classes during the spring semester,” I told her. “I’m not due until early June.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” She stood. “Is it inappropriate to ask for a hug before you go?”

I shook my head, getting up and walking easily into her embrace. She patted me on the back, brisk and firm. When she pulled back, her eyes were bright, but her smile shaky.

“Off you go. If I get weepy over every student that came through this office, I believe they’d revoke my tenure.”

“Thank you for everything.” I held my hands out, then let them drop by my sides. “This whole experience ... I’ll never forget it. I could never repay you for the chance you gave me.”

“Catherine is a lovely name for a girl,” she said with a raised eyebrow.

I laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

With a small wave as I left her office, I walked back to my flat from her office for the last time.

I'd never gotten a strong sense one way or the other whether I was pregnant with a boy or a girl, and as I took my time studying the buildings I'd gotten used to seeing, I started thinking about names.

Fourteen weeks in, and I found myself smiling at the thought of a little girl named after an English professor, despite how hard it was to acknowledge that I'd be doing things like that without Jude once I was home.

My phone had been quiet since I left his hotel room in London, which I expected, especially knowing he was playing regular matches, plus additional midweek games for various European cups that I still didn't really understand.

The distance between us was something I'd have to get used to. He said we'd talk once a week, and that was smart, but it might take me a while not to think about him as often in all those quiet days in the middle.

I found myself, as I did the final sweep of my flat and left the key with the building manager, making peace with the fact that it simply would've been too easy of a story if we'd ridden off into the sunset.

"Think about it," I told Isabel the next day as we settled into our seats on the first leg of travel. "This is the connection I needed to make."

She stretched her arms over her head and groaned. "I'm thinking ..."

"I avoided all this stuff, right? I avoided discussions and questions and worries because it felt easier, and I didn't want to face all the things that freaked me the hell out about becoming a mom. But what I needed was the discontent, right? It's like I put in my paper, and it's what Atwood was trying to get me to understand, about fixating on the past as a way to avoid facing the future. I needed the fuel to change. Getting pregnant wasn't a choice I made, but it was what I needed to change."

Isabel grinned. "Look at you, making big girl realizations."

"You do it too. The fixating thing."

Her mouth fell open. “I do not.”

“Oh, please.” I hooked my neck pillow over my shoulders and closed my eyes while people filed past us into their seats for the nine-hour flight to the East Coast. “You absolutely do, but that’s not the point.”

When she grumbled something under her breath, I ignored her.

“Remember when Claire and I were in like fifth grade, and we had to take something to school from our parents’ jobs?”

Isabel burst out laughing. “Like I could forget. You almost got suspended.”

Glancing at her through tiny slits in my eyes, I tried not to smile. “I didn’t almost get suspended.”

“You took a poster-size picture of Paige’s *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition* cover to a fifth-grade classroom. She was topless, Claire.”

“And do you remember what Logan said to the principal when he came to pick me up that day?”

Isabel sighed. “Does this have a point?”

“Yes. Logan said, *I hope you’re not shaming my wife for what she does for a living or Lia for being proud of her for it because she’s teaching an entire generation of girls that you can be beautiful and smart and sexy and respected, and none of those things cancel the other out.*”

Iz smiled. “Of course, he did.”

“The radical and subversive celebration of the indomitable independent female spirit!” I shouted.

She widened her eyes when people turned to gawk at my outburst. “What the *hell* are you talking about?” she whispered.

I started laughing at her expression and couldn’t stop as the flight attendants made their announcements, and the plane took off. Like when you’re in church and you know whatever the thing is, it’s not actually that funny, you just know you

shouldn't be laughing. The entire time, Isabel was regarding me warily, like maybe she should've sat somewhere else.

When I finally got my giggles under control, I was wiping tears from the corners of my eyes.

"Yeah," Isabel drawled. "I wish Claire was here right now because you've lost your friggin' mind, Lee."

I took a deep, cleansing breath and stared at the ceiling of the plane. "I think maybe I have too, Isabel."

She handed me a water bottle from the side of my backpack, stuffed safely underneath the seat in front of me. After I took a sip, I handed it back to her.

It took a couple more minutes for my thoughts to fully form. But when they did, I didn't feel much like laughing.

"When we get to Seattle in a hundred hours," I said quietly, "we will be greeted by a veritable army."

"True."

"But I don't think, until this week, I really ever thought through that I'd be a single mom. Independence is a pretty concept, a topic for speeches and posts and flower quotes, but the truth of truly doing something on your own is ... not always so pretty. It means long days and nights, of facing a lot of battles on your own. Yes, I will have so much help, but in the middle of the night, when I haven't slept well in weeks, I can't roll over and tell Jude to take that feeding or rock the baby to sleep because I'm exhausted." I exhaled slowly. "I can do it. And I will do it. But it's not a fun truth to face, and that's not always something I'm very good at."

Isabel hummed. "Are any of us good at that, though? I think you need to give yourself a little grace, Lee. What you're going through is really fucking tough. And it's understandable that this part—the closing of this door—is bringing up a lot."

The closing of the door. With Jude.

"I still miss him," I said quietly. "And I'm a little annoyed with myself about it."

“Be nice to my sister,” Isabel insisted. “She got boinked by a hot footballer with an accent, resulting in a child that will probably be so genetically blessed that all who gaze upon it will turn into a walking happy sigh emoji.”

I laughed even as I struggled not to go all weepy again. Pregnancy hormones were so weird. “You’re right.”

Isabel leaned her head back and closed her eyes. “I’m always right. It’s my best quality.”

I leaned my head on her shoulder with a smile and tried not to think about the growing ocean of space between me and Jude.

I tried not to think about what it would be like when I talked to him next.

I tried not to think about when I’d see him next, probably waddling around like a giant, puffy-ankled mess.

And as we watched movie after movie after movie, took more naps than I thought capable of in one long day of travel, I tried not to think about how long it would take me not to miss him.

When the plane touched down at Sea-Tac, and I powered my phone back up, I felt my heart skip a beat at the sight of his name.

**Jude: Let me know when you’ve made it home safely. Precious cargo and all.**

“What an ass,” I whispered as my eyes welled up. He was not going to make any of it easy, and he couldn’t even help it. He was sweet and thoughtful and stupid and sorta damaged, and I wanted to hug him as I waited to get out of my seat. I liked it better when I was trying not to think about it. When I was thinking about the army of people about to greet us with screams and tears, and oh, my word, they were going to be so obnoxious, and I couldn’t wait.

But there I was, staring at his text, feeling my eighty-fourth emotion for the day. And a long day it had been.



Isabel helped me stand and kept a tight grip on my hand as we got off the plane and made our way down to where they'd be waiting.

I saw the balloons first. Isabel shot me a grin.

"It's gonna be so bad," she said with utter and obvious glee.

Everything I'd worried about, everything I'd been sad about, everything I'd been trying to hold in poured out of my stupid, pregnant eyeballs as I saw the *Welcome Home Lia and Baby* sign next. The screams and squeals started as soon as Claire and I made eye contact, and by that point, I was openly weeping.

She broke away from the group and reached me in a few long strides, about knocking me over when she flung her arms around me.

"You're home. Oh, you're *home*," she cried into my shoulder. My heart felt complete like it hadn't since the day I left. "We're having a *baby*!"

I couldn't even talk. I made no sense. Whatever words tried to come out of my mouth for the next few minutes were incoherent babbling and snot.

But they passed me around all the same. First Molly, who cupped my face and told me I was gorgeous. Emmett clung to my waist and informed me he'd grown two inches since I left.

Paige came next, tears coursing down her face (which did *not* go splotchy when she cried). "I hope you're okay with me hugging you a thousand times for the next two days."

"Y-Yes, please," I hiccupped, holding her so tight that my arms ached. "I missed you guys so much."

"Oh, sweetheart," she whispered. "We missed you too."

Paige pulled back and slid a motherly hand over my hair. "I think your brother has waited patiently enough, huh?"

I nodded, wiping super attractive ugly-cry snot off my face with the back of my hand and saw Logan behind us, his hands

jammed tight in the pockets of his dark jeans, and his eyes suspiciously bright.

When Paige let me go, he looked at my stomach, and his jaw clenched. Then he held his arms open. “Come ‘ere, kid,” he said in a rough, uneven voice.

He folded me into his arms, and I left about a gallon of *everything* in that hug. All the fear, the disappointment, and heartache went onto my brother’s shoulders. Someone rubbed my back, but I wasn’t sure who. I didn’t care.

“It’ll be okay,” he whispered into my ear, tightening his hold on me. My big brother could hold up the entire world with those arms, and if I’d ever doubted it, I didn’t doubt it now. “You’re going to be the best mom, Lia, and that kid is already so loved.”

I heard sniffing from behind me.

Or maybe that was just me.

I was home. And that was all that mattered.



## LIA

“**B**ut it doesn’t make sense,” Emmett said, staring at the fruit basket.

I grinned at Paige, then finished my bite of oatmeal. “What doesn’t?”

“The whole fruit thing.” He held up an apple and a banana. “How can the baby be compared to these two incredibly different fruits and still have it make sense. One is a sphere, and one is oblong.”

My eyebrows popped up. “Mighty big word for a nine-year-old.”

“We do have to learn 3D shapes, Lia. I’m almost ten.”

Paige snorted, holding out his backpack once she had his lunch finished. “Does that mean you’re going to start paying rent soon?”

“You’re changing the subject.” He pointed at my stomach. “You’re telling me that right now it’s a ...”

“Sweet potato,” I supplied helpfully. “I felt a hiccup yesterday too.”

Paige gasped. “You did? When?”

“Last night.” I rubbed my bump. “Super weird.”

Emmett ignored Paige’s oohing and aahing. “And in a few weeks, it’s going to be a carrot, Lia.” He held out his hands. “A frickin’ *carrot*.”

“You’re right.” I sighed. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Thank you.” He grabbed the backpack from Paige and hugged her around the waist. “Do I need my coat today?”

She pointed at the windows overlooking the backyard. “Do you see the snow outside? It’s January, bro.”

“Is that a yes?”

I laughed into my last bite of oatmeal. Paige walked to the mudroom and shoved his winter coat over his giggling face.

“That’s a yes. I don’t need your school sending your ass back home because I’m an inept parent.” She yanked a winter hat over his head once his coat was over his arms. “Especially since I’m just around the corner from being a non-grandma grandma,” she cried.

I shook my head while Emmett dissolved into laughter at her mock-crying. Paige was having an identity crisis over what her “grandparent name” was going to be, as she’d unilaterally dismissed the actual label of Grandma.

“Language,” I said.

She blinked. “What did I say?”

“Ass,” Emmett answered, pushing the winter hat up his forehead.

“That hardly counts,” said Paige.

The school bus driver honked her horn from the front of the house, and Emmett shouted his goodbyes to us, then disappeared.

“I frickin’ love that kid,” she said, peeking out the windows by the front door as the bus drove off.

“Me too.” I picked up the apple he’d discarded and started slicing it up. My new rule was one piece of fruit for every sweet or carb I wanted to shove in my face.

“What’s on the calendar today?” Paige asked.

“I have some reading to do. I’ve slacked off this week since I finally started organizing all that stuff from Christmas.”

“All that stuff from Christmas,” she mused happily. “Your face was priceless.”

The apple was crisp and sweet and crunchy, and I finished swallowing before I answered. “I’m going to have to move out simply because there’s not enough room in the house for me, little Sweet Potato, and all the shit you’re buying for it.”

Her face shuttered, and I had a momentary pang of regret for bringing it up again. But I made a promise to myself the first week home from England. No more avoiding the hard. It was not allowed.

Not like I minded living back at home for the past month.

The first week had been a lot of naps, a lot of Feelings Baths (where I cried in Logan and Paige’s sunken jet tub in their bathroom, surrounded by mountains of bubbles), and a lot of subpar non-British scones because I swear, they baked differently in the States.

The second week went better. Christmas kept us busy with lots of food and laughter and shopping and cuddling under blankets on the couch while we watched all the movies we loved. I only sobbed once during *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Fine, twice. Claire held my hand under the blankets. And my family spoiled Little (at the time) Avocado with more gifts than should have been allowed, considering the kid wasn’t even born yet.

Blankets and footballs and books and a bassinet with beautifully carved wood that I suspected Logan and Paige spent a fortune on. It would fit perfectly into my old bedroom. But the thing that made me lose it, sitting on the floor by our ten-foot Christmas tree, was the small box that bore marks of being shipped from the UK. Jude hadn’t warned me he was sending anything, but when I sliced open the packing tape and folded back the white tissue paper, I saw the impossibly tiny Shepperton jersey bearing his number, and underneath it, a tiny board book about soccer. I cried quietly while Emmett laid his head on my shoulder and rubbed my back.

That was the first text between us since I’d returned home that gave me the first kindling of hope that we could get

through this in a good place.

**Me: Thank you for the present. It's perfect (a little big this year, but that's okay)**

**JUDE: Whenever it fits, I can't wait to see. How was your day today?**

**ME: Good. More chaotic than usual this year. Molly is home with Noah, and Washington doesn't play this Christmas Day, so they could be home. Claire and Bauer were here too. Tomorrow they'll be with his family, though. What about you?**

**JUDE: Not quite chaotic, but Rebecca forced me to her house for dinner. Her husband is a Man City fan, so it was a rocky start.**

**ME: LOL. Well, we can't all be perfect.**

**ME: It's late for you. Don't you play tomorrow?**

**JUDE: If I play like rubbish again, you'll know why then. I best try to sleep. Merry Christmas, Lia.**

**ME: Merry Christmas, Jude.**

I dreamed of him that night for the first time since being Stateside. Waking alone, in the middle of my old bed, in my old room, was disconcerting. And the hazy memories of how he'd kissed me, dirty and deep, underneath the Christmas tree lingered for days, a strange ache that mixed into finding a new normal with my family.

But as week two slipped into week three, a quiet lull between holidays spent playing games and watching the Wolves beat Green Bay, watching Shepperton tie against Leeds United 2-2, the new year came and went with very little fanfare, considering I found myself sound asleep by ten on New Year's Eve, curled up underneath the bright purple comforter that I'd used in high school.

That was the first time I'd mentioned where I might live after the baby was born.

"Why not just redecorate the whole room?" Paige had asked. "And you know you can turn Molly's old room into a nursery once the baby is out of the bassinet."

Logan glanced carefully at my face when I didn't respond as we'd eaten dinner that night.

*I don't know if I can do this.* The thought came and went quick and quiet. But that was the thing. I would not let those thoughts escape anymore. That was my promise to myself. I'd grab them by the tail and yank them back, so I could take the time to figure that out.

That night, I'd answered her diplomatically since I didn't have an answer yet. "I don't know if that makes sense since I'm not sure what my long-term plans are, but I'll think about it."

And just like she had that night, when I mentioned it again now, fully entrenched in week four with all of us back at work and school now that the holidays were behind us, Paige's hands froze in the middle of what she was doing. It took her a long moment to make eye contact with me.

"Do you want to move out?" she asked.

I took another bite of apple and snagged a stool by the island, thinking carefully as she refilled her coffee. As it was most every morning, it was just me and Paige at the house. Logan was gone to the Wolves practice facility, and once Emmett went to school, it was just the two of us.

"I don't know."



She nodded and took a seat across from me. “I think ... I think I just assumed you’d want to be here to have help with the baby. And I mean, it’s not like we don’t have the space.”

They did, in spades. It was the house that Logan bought when Brooke first dropped us all on his doorstep, metaphorically. He found the five-bedroom house in the suburbs and bought it the same day, a place we could grow into and make our own. And it bore the strong handprint of our family in the way we’d molded it to fit whatever phase of life we were in. It was so much more than four walls and a roof; it represented a second chance for all of us in different ways.

“I know,” I told her. My thumb tapped on the granite, and I fought the impulse to change the subject and see if she wanted to go shopping or go for a walk or go work out. “But I’m almost twenty-three, Paige. I’m in my last semester of school. And ... and I think I need to consider the fact that just because I *can* live here after the baby’s born doesn’t mean I should.”

She sighed. “I hate when you guys make sense about shit like this.”

“I know you do,” I answered with a smile. “You’d have us all here forever if you could.”

“Hell yeah, I would. What does it say about me that the crazier this house is, the more at peace I feel?”

Paige and I were so similar, and it was the kind of shared trait that made my heart grow about two sizes because even though there wasn’t a shred of shared DNA between us, and I was practically stepping into my teen years when she married Logan, she held a piece of my soul. Just like I held a piece of hers.

“I think it says we need to find something to do today,” I told her. “I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

“Deal.” Her face lit up. “Can we start working on your registry?”

“Isn’t my shower supposed to be like, a month before I give birth?”

“What’s your point?”

I laughed. "Let's circle back to that next month, okay?"

That conversation helped bridge a previously untouched gap in my relationship with Jude in our weekly phone call.

Paige had left to run errands, so I sat in the family room under a blanket with my phone on my lap and Jude on speaker.

"Is it stupid to move out if I have a free place to live?" I asked him.

He hummed. "Not stupid, no."

There was a slight hesitation in his words that had me smiling. "But ..."

"But," he said, "I think I'd want my own space. If it were me. But I've been on my own since I was seventeen, so I might not be a good person to help you make that decision."

"Seventeen?"

"Mm-hmm. Moved to Germany to play in the Bundesliga, which is their national league. That's where I got my start."

I shook my head. "That's so young to be thrown into a world like that. I can't even imagine."

"I learned a lot," he said ruefully. "On and off the pitch. And for a kid who came from a bloody sheep farm, it was nothing I could've prepared myself for."

My fingers twisted the edge of the blanket. "Is that when your parents ... started disapproving?"

Jude let out a slow breath, and I found myself holding mine before he answered. "They started a few years earlier than that, when I took a job outside of the farm to make enough money to keep myself in the youth clubs." Jude went quiet, and I held my breath, waiting for anything else he might give me. "My dad, especially. I was the eldest son, yeah? And it was my job to take over the farm, just as he'd done with his own father. But I think ... I think they saw how serious I was, working myself to the bone to play a game they didn't understand."

Relief was sweet and unhurried as I listened to him talk about his time in Germany. What he loved about the independence he found, and what he didn't. He asked me, in a slight subject change, about living with Claire in college and what that had been like. He asked me about Finn, who I'd only managed to see a couple of times since I moved back, busy, busy boy that he was.

"What do they all say?" Jude asked when we fell quiet. Most of our weekly calls lasted around thirty to forty minutes, but I'd been on the phone with him for over an hour. "Do they think you should move out?"

"Logan and Paige want me to stay. Probably because they'll worry less. Claire isn't saying one way or the other, but ... I know what she's thinking."

"Twin thing," he teased.

"Sometimes. I can't like, read her thoughts, but it's like hearing your neighbors talk through thin walls. You get impressions, you know? And I get the sense she thinks it would be good for me to live on my own." I spread my hands over my belly. "So, your vote is to move out?"

"For whatever it's worth," he murmured, "yes, that's my vote. But I'll support whatever you choose."

The gloomy days of January, only a few of them cold enough for snow to stick on the ground, gave way to slightly warmer, just as gloomy days in February. Lia and I turned twenty-three, and split a giant platter of pink and white cupcakes after a family dinner. My class, considering it was one of the last before I finished my program, felt like it was the least of my stresses. I read and wrote and had discussions with small groups. My family, all busy with their own lives, found time to carve out pockets with me when possible.

Molly traveled about half the month, and when she was back, she always took me out for time with just the two of us, considering she'd made it her mission to find me the best scone in the greater Seattle area.

I'd taken to texting Jude updates amid our search.

**Me: This one was pretty good. Not as good as Rebecca's, though.**

**JUDE: It looks dry as cardboard.**

**ME: Maybe not CARDBOARD. But it needed a lot of cream. Can you eat one of hers for me? Or just send me a picture of one? Or a video so I can pretend I'm sniffing it?**

**JUDE: Good Lord, you sound like an addict.**

**JUDE: Here. It's got currants in it.**

I laughed when I saw the picture he attached, him shoving half the scone into his mouth. The sight of him wasn't a punch to the heart or anything, one side effect of being able to see him on TV every week when I got the chance to watch one of his matches. But this was a different Jude than the one I saw on the pitch. Despite the silly picture, he looked tired. It was in the dark circles under his eyes, the lines on his face that hadn't been so prominent when I'd last seen him.

Molly sipped her coffee across the cafe table and watched me. "It's going okay with him?"

I shrugged. "As good as it can, I suppose."

"Do you miss him?"

My eldest sister was the only one who dared to ask me about him. Maybe because she was the most romantic to her soft little heart. She'd tamed her big beast of an athlete in Noah, and I knew she was holding out hope that I'd still be able to overcome ... everything ... when it came to Jude.

Staring at the picture, the scruff along his jaw and the mess of his dark hair, I rubbed my thumb over the image, and then cleared it away so I wouldn't obsess.

“Yeah.” There was no point in lying to Molly. And I wouldn’t have lied to anyone else either if they’d asked, but along with the realization that I was very skilled at moving through life restlessly was the fact that my family was used to that. They probably thought I’d brush them off with a *It’s totally fine, guys, look at how completely fine it all is*. “But I don’t think missing him is the problem. It’s figuring out what we’re like outside of missing each other. He’s finally talking to me about stuff, but it’s not like I can just hop back over to England because the thought of him makes me heartsick.”

“Makes sense,” she said. “No one is perfect, but you already know that, and I don’t think that’s what you want from him.”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t need perfection. I think my problem was that it felt so good when we weren’t worrying about anything else, and now that everything else has surfaced, I can’t think about how good it was between us until those things are better, at least. And they may never be.”

Molly watched with a soft smile when I curled my hand over my stomach. A soft bump greeted me, and I motioned for her hand. She slid her chair closer, eyes widening. “Can you feel it moving?”

“Yeah.” I took her hand and set it along the top of my bump, and we waited. I tried pushing on the side, and then felt it again.

Molly gasped. “Ohhhh, hi little Banana, I’m your favorite Aunt Molly.”

I laughed as she tucked her head down beneath the table and kept talking to my stomach. A couple passed us, not even trying to hide their WTF faces. I waved.

“And we’re going to do so much fun stuff,” she kept going, rubbing the top of my gently moving stomach with her palm. “And I just love you so, so much.” When she sat back, her eyes were bright. “Goodness, that’s amazing.”

“You should have one,” I said slyly.

Her cheeks went pink almost immediately. “Noah said that the other day.”

“Really?” I squealed. “Oh please, please, please, get knocked up so we can have babies grow up together.”

She laughed. “I caught him looking at baby Wolves stuff the other day, and I think it’s Jude’s fault for sending that jersey at Christmas. It got him thinking about, I don’t know, everything. We’re so happy and so busy, but if you wait for life to be the perfect time to do things like get married or have babies or travel, you’ll never do it.”

“Very true.” I thought about Jude, and how if it hadn’t been for our night at the bar, and my shitty memory with birth control, he’d still be alone. I was young, so it was different for me. “Do you think Noah will propose soon?”

Her eyes sparkled happily. “I do. I overheard him asking Paige something about her ring, and he didn’t realize I was in the next room.”

“Molly!”

It was her turn to squeal. “I know!”

“Promise me something,” I said, gripping her hands with mine.

Her eyes got big at my grave tone. “What?”

“Please try not to get married like, the week of my due date. Because then my options are being as big as a whale in your wedding pictures or missing it because I’m in labor and I don’t particularly like either option.”

She laughed. “How about we wait until he proposes first, then I can worry about setting a date.” Molly nudged me under the table with her knee. “Look at you, Lee, planning ahead and everything. Did you swap personalities with Claire?”

“I know, I know.”

“Ready to go?” Molly asked.

“Yeah. I told Paige I’d help her make the dough tonight for family dinner.”

“Oooh. Pizza?”

I nodded. “Little Banana wants some.”

“Another reason me and that kid are going to get along just fine.”

I followed Molly out of the cafe and found myself glancing back at my phone screen. Wanting that glimpse felt a little bit like his tease about being addicted to scones. Two months away from Jude, and I still craved the pieces I could get. Even though the picture was in thumbnail, I stared at his face, wishing that any planning I did could include a clearer picture of what role he’d have in my life, in Little Banana’s life.

But as February came to a close, and March dawned a little warmer, a little less gloomy, we stayed exactly in the same place—getting to know each other—and I knew that I’d have to be okay with that.





## JUDE

I 'd learned a lot as winter thawed into an early spring in England. Not all things I wanted to learn, mind you, but I'd learned them all the same.

First, it was entirely possible to sit out of a game and still feel the amount of pressure you felt when you were starting. And losses hurt just as bad from that vantage point as well.

Second thing I learned was that I yelled. A lot.

The starting players began calling me Boss, and not necessarily as a term of endearment. My manager normally just looked back at me with raised eyebrows as he calmly watched us navigate through the middle of the season in complete and utter fucking mediocrity.

“Get your head out of his arse, Williams,” I bellowed. “Learn how to clear the ball.”

“Do you want to stand here?” Conworth asked dryly with a quick glance over his shoulder.

“No, but if you don't do your bloody job, I will,” I muttered. The young player next to me must've heard me because he snorted.

I gave him a look, and his cheeks reddened.

Third, I learned with complete and utter fucking clarity that Lia might've been thousands of miles away from me, but I couldn't get her out of my head for a single second. It was hell.

And the reason it was hell was because I couldn't do anything about it, except try to forge a friendly truce until the season was over.

In the locker room after the match, a 1-1 draw against Aston Villa, I sat on the bench in front of my cubby and stared down at my phone.

She'd started sending me "bump pics" as she called them. Always right in the middle of our weekly phone calls.

I hated them.

I loved them.

She was changing, somehow getting more and more beautiful with each centimeter she grew, and I felt very much like I was staying the same.

"What's got your balls in a bunch?" Declan asked, tossing his dirty kit onto the floor and tightening the towel around his waist. "You yelled even more than normal today, which is impressive, considering how much you yelled the week before. Conworth is going to be out a job not because he can't win, but because you're going to take it from him."

I ignored that because I didn't want to coach. I wanted to play. I didn't want to be sitting on the bench in any facet of my life, and I seemed doomed to that position.

Waiting on an opportunity to play

Waiting for calls.

Waiting for pictures.

Waiting for something to happen so I could shove the door open and see what was on the other side.

I scrolled back up to the last few pictures she'd sent, all in front of the same long mirror in a big bedroom with a fucking terrible purple cover on it. I stopped, realizing she'd missed a week, and I hadn't even noticed at the time.

"Did you know that a baby at twenty-four weeks' gestation is the same length as sweetcorn?" I asked.

He froze, glancing at me with wide eyes. “Err, no. I wasn’t aware.”

“Well, it fucking is, all right? An ear of corn. I didn’t get a picture that week. I missed the sweetcorn.”

Declan pulled some trousers up and discarded the towel. “And what week are we on currently?”

“Twenty-six.”

He nodded. “Right.”

When I didn’t speak, Declan carefully lowered his big body onto the bench. “And this is the American?”

“Yeah.” I tossed my phone back into my duffel. “She’s back home now.”

“Congratulations,” he said dryly. “Relationship issues are difficult, mate. If you need the name of my therapist, he’s a bloody miracle worker.”

I groaned. “Just what I need. Someone to make me lay on a couch and purge my feelings. I’ve already got one person telling me I’ve got the emotional IQ of a potato. I’m not sure I should add a second.”

“You’d be surprised how much it helps.”

I eyed him.

Declan smiled, completely un-self-conscious. “How do you think I manage you lot without punching people in the face all the time?”

“Never given it much thought, really.”

Declan elbowed me. “Glad to know it’s that, if I’m being honest.”

“Why?”

“Here I just thought you were in a shit mood because you haven’t been playing well enough to start anymore.”

I gave him a dry look.

“Well, you haven’t. If you were doing the job correctly, you’d be out there, not sitting off to the side.” He slapped my

back as he stood. “Nobody ever wants to bench the best person for the job, McAllister, and if that’s you, then bloody prove it.”

I rubbed a hand down my face, wishing I could ignore the truth of his words. “And if it’s not?”

He shrugged a shirt on, his expression thoughtful. “Then move aside for whoever is and teach them what you know.”

Those words, those bloody words from that bloody great grump of a captain stuck with me for weeks.

Every time I got a few minutes to play, I heard them in my head. I scored in stoppage time against Wolverhampton and earned myself more playing time in the next match. And in that game, I played them on a loop when all I managed was a yellow card and an epic yelling match with the linesman.

I heard them in my head all the time, it seemed, like a puzzle piece I couldn’t quite fit into place.

When I practiced.

When I tried to sleep but thought of her instead.

When I worked out, and my thoughts waffled between football and Lia and the baby (now a bloody cauliflower at twenty-seven weeks).

When she and I talked on the phone, about her appointments and class and apartment search and family.

When I’d get a picture or text between phone calls and had to think on exactly how to respond so she wouldn’t realize just how horribly I missed her in my life.

Sometimes I did better than others, matching her tone easily when we’d text about meaningless things. Foods we liked, and things we’d done that day. And others, I didn’t do as well.

**Lia: Are you still awake?**

*Of course, I’m still awake. It’s still early enough that I’m in the lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, contemplating how I’d gotten my life so bloody off course portion of my evening, I almost answered.*

**Jude: Yeah. What's up?**

I almost fell off the bed when she started a FaceTime. Fumbling with the bedside lamp, I answered the call once I had it switched on.

Her face filled the screen, and I almost fucking wept at the sight of her broad smile. "Hi!"

I cleared my throat. "Hello."

Her eyes tracked down to my bare chest, and her cheeks pinked immediately. "Sorry, I know it's late, and I didn't give you any warning."

"You never to apologize for calling, lov-Lia." I caught myself just in time, and she didn't seem to notice my almost slip. "What's up?"

Her eyes glowed. "You have to see this."

Lia pulled the phone away from her body, so I could see her bump from the side. She was lying in her bed too.

My ribs felt tight seeing it. "It looks so different than in the pictures you send."

"Shoot, it stopped." She tugged up her shirt, and my heart started hammering at the sight of her bare stomach. Then something moved. "Did you see that?"

"Bloody hell," I whispered. I practically jammed my nose against the screen to see it better, laughing incredulously when something pushed along her tight skin. "What *is* that?"

She laughed. "I don't know, it feels like an elbow maybe?" Lia's hand drifted over that spot, and her fingers pushed. When she pulled back, the baby moved again, and I found myself laughing.

"Did he just push you back?"

"Yeah." She sighed. "This is the weirdest thing ever." After one more small roll underneath the surface of her skin, Lia tugged her shirt down and moved the angle of her phone so I could see her face. "You said he."

I traced every part of her face, documenting the changes since I'd last seen her. "Did I?"

Lia nodded. "I'm trying not to guess."

"Why not?" I settled back against my pillow, in no rush to end this conversation. I'd talk to her all bloody night if she'd let me.

She tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear. "I don't know. It feels like ... how often do we get this big of a surprise, right? There's nothing else in life, no bigger moment when you could find out news of this magnitude. I like not knowing, not expecting. And when they come ..." Her voice trailed off, and she got a dreamy expression on her face that about had me fucking crying. "Then I'll get that moment, you know?"

"What moment?" I asked, so fully entranced by her.

"When you meet the most important person in your life, and your soul can go, Oh, yes, you're the one I've been waiting for."

This.

This was the danger in us talking face-to-face.

I wanted to spout words, poetic and emotional and impossible to take back. And I think she knew it because she was looking at me carefully in the silence that followed what she'd said.

I cleared my throat. "I like the sound of that moment."

She smiled. "But it's okay if you want to guess what it is."

"Truthfully, I don't care whether it's a boy or girl." I shook my head. "Though I'll probably be a rubbish girl dad."

Lia laughed. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I'll want her to conquer a world that won't make it easy for her to do so."

"Oh." She sighed, her whole body going soft. Then her eyes teared up.

“Shit, I’m sorry, please don’t cry.”

Lia waved a hand. “Don’t mind me. I’m just ... hormonal, you know? I cried yesterday when Emmett made me a fresh chocolate chip cookie because he heard me say it sounded good.”

“I’d cry if someone made me one too.”

She smiled widely.

I decided to risk one small confession. “I miss seeing you eat things you love.”

“Do you?”

I nodded, holding her gaze steadily. “That’s one of the things I miss.”

Lia’s eyes got sad, and her mouth opened, then closed.

At that moment, for the millionth time, I thought about what Declan had said. *Nobody ever wants to bench the best person for the job, McAllister, and if that’s you, then bloody prove it.*

This was the first time we’d done a FaceTime, and in our weekly phone calls, we’d done so well, shared so much of the things that must have been important to her. And if this was my shot, then I’d take it.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have said that,” I started, “but I do miss you, Lia. Very much.”

She let her head fall back with a sigh, against a dark gray upholstered headboard, and her eyes never wavered from mine. “I ... I don’t know what I should say to that, Jude.”

“Why don’t we start with what you *want* to say?”

Her eyes closed briefly, and I saw the struggle in the pinch of her brow and the lines that appeared on her forehead when she was deep in thought.

“I wish I could,” she whispered. “I wish I could tell you those things without worrying about the consequences that might come with it.”

I rubbed a hand over my forehead and again, cursed the distance between us.

“I almost didn’t even call you,” she admitted.

“Why not?”

“Seeing your face ...” She paused, sucking in a slow breath and then letting it out through pursed lips. “It’s hard, Jude. Because it makes me wish we could be back like it was before. And I’m happy being back home. I’m happy to be with my family. I was afraid you’d make me wish I wasn’t. And even though I know it’s the right thing to be home right now, I was afraid you’d make me wish I was still there with you,” she admitted quietly.

Frustration ebbed and flowed inside me, not in any great giant waves, but a low simmer that was out of my hands just as much as it was out of hers. It was the truth of our situation that she couldn’t stay in England forever, and I was in the middle of a season, unable to even contemplate what changes the next season might bring.

But still, there was an irrational spark of hope at her softly spoken confession. Could I yet prove that I was the best man for her? I wanted to. That much was clear.

“And have I made you wish that, love?” I asked. The moment it was out of my mouth, I knew what a selfish question it was. And I saw in her face that it was the perfectly wrong thing for me to say.

She sighed. “Oh, Jude.”

“I’m sorry.” I shook my head. “That was stupid.”

“No, I’m muddying things too.” She covered her face with one hand. I wanted to rip that hand away. I wanted to kiss her fingers and palm. I wanted to taste her mouth again and cover my body with hers, see how it had changed and how it felt now. But even more than that, I found myself wanting to take away whatever brief flash of pain I’d just caused her with my stupid pride.

Wasn’t that always my problem?



My unrelenting need to prove myself valuable, prove myself worthy had cost me so much more than it had gained me. Especially in the past few years.

“Look at me,” I told her gently.

She lowered her hand.

“I won’t do that again,” I vowed. “I think I was momentarily weakened by the mental image of you eating a freshly baked cookie. I know what sounds you make when that happens, and I’m only human, love.”

Lia smiled so brilliantly, bloody hell, it hurt to look at. I’d do anything to see her smile like that, I realized. Even if it cost me.

She bid me a quiet good night, and we disconnected the call. For a long time after, I stared at the ceiling.

Maybe that was what she’d been trying to show me when she walked away all those months ago. It cost her to walk away from me, but she’d still done it. There was strength in putting someone else first, like she’d done with our child. I knew that now. I was far enough removed from the bloody dinner that my own selfish words echoed like a broken bell in my mind, discordant and harsh. Yes, my parents said some bloody terrible things, but in my choices that night, in my complete inability to be honest with people about the things I was struggling with, I’d made Lia suffer as a result.

Lia’s strength had been showing me what love looked like when you asked someone to be accountable for their actions.

If she’d cared less, she wouldn’t have minded half as much how I was acting. Her leaving proved something that I hadn’t been able to see at the time.

And not once in my life had I ever had that modeled for me, not until her.

It was the edge piece I was missing, where Declan’s words provided the full image I’d been puzzling over.

Sometimes, you proved your worth by showing what you were willing to give up.

What Lia was asking of me was a selfless love, not a parade of proof or a litany of accomplishments for why I'd earned her priceless favor. Not even for her, but for our child.

They were both priceless, a legacy that I could never have built by myself and never could have earned. But if I could pull my head out of my arse, I just might yet be able to.

I pulled out my phone and sent two messages. The first asking for a phone number. The second asking for some time.



## LIA

With a very dramatic arm movement, I whipped back the dressing room curtain.

I turned to the side, then the other. “Well?”

Claire grimaced.

“Oh, come on,” I groaned. “That bad?”

“You just look a little bit like ... like Nana’s old kitchen wallpaper puked all over you.”

I glanced down at the dress. The purple and blue flowers on a cream background had seemed so cute on the hanger, and then she had to go and say something like that.

“Shit.”

She winced. “Sorry.”

“I’m so sick of trying on dresses, Claire,” I whined. The comfy chair in the corner of the dressing room held my weight when I sank back into it, sticking my legs out to rest on the poufy ottoman in front of it. Maternity dressing rooms were the shit.

“Hey, we can stop. You’ll just have to show up to your shower naked.”

I rolled my eyes.

She started ticking off options on her judgy little, non-pregnant fingers. “The blue option was cute. It was

comfortable, the color looked really good on you, *and* most importantly, it was machine washable.”

“Only you would list that as the most important feature.”

“How happy are you going to be when you stain it and have to bring your pregnant ass to the dry cleaner?”

“Wellllll, since I’ll probably only wear this dress once ...”

“What about the next time you’re pregnant?”

My gaze zipped to hers. “Holy shit, I never even thought about that. I might have another *kid* someday.”

“People do it all the time,” she answered gravely.

“And my kids might be like, ten years apart for all I know.”

“They might be.”

My eyes widened. “And I have to keep stuff for those ten years, don’t I?”

Claire held her hands out in a magnanimous gesture. “You are welcome.”

“I thought I was doing so good at thinking ahead too.”

She walked into the dressing room and lifted my feet so she could sit on the ottoman, then lowered my feet into her lap. “You are. You looked at that apartment for a second time last week. That’s really good, Lee.”

“I liked it,” I told her. “It had so much light, and the bedrooms were big. Only ten minutes from Logan and Paige’s too.”

Claire smiled. “So why the hesitation? You said that Little Cabbage was moving like crazy while you were in there.”

“Is it so weird that all I can imagine is a Cabbage Patch Doll now?”

She nudged my feet. “You need a dress. Your shower is next week.”

“I know.” I let my head fall back against the chair. “I don’t know why I’m hesitating.”

“Don’t you?”

“What’s that tone?” I asked, without lifting my head. “You’re shrinking me. You know how I feel about that.”

“I don’t know how many times I have to tell you that I’m not a shrink, but a little bit, yes.”

Claire, with her infinite patience and ability to see through me like I was made of Saran Wrap, waited quietly. Truly, it was her superpower.

“The season ended today,” I said. “Jude’s.”

She hummed.

“We’ve been texting a little more during the week. All friendly stuff, nothing too deep, you know. After that FaceTime last month, it was ...” I stopped, shaking my head. There were a host of things I could’ve said.

It was hard because seeing his face turned my heart inside out.

It was impossible because even if he’d changed some, we still had the same issues.

It broke my heart because of how much he tempted me when he looked at me like I was his entire world.

“It was difficult to move past,” was what I settled on. “It was the first time we even tiptoed past our friendly truce since I came back.”

“That makes sense,” Claire said, smoothing a hand over the top of my foot. “How does that tie into the apartment?”

I swallowed. This part was hard for me to admit out loud. The big unanswered question that would only be answered when he and I were face-to-face again.

“What if ... what if he comes here, and I’m making all these strides to move forward, and he’s moved forward too, but ... but I’m still in love with him?”

“Would that be a bad thing?”

My eyes burned with unshed tears. “Not if he loves me back, no. But what if he doesn’t? You know? What if all this distance I asked for, that I insisted on, is the one thing that ends up pushing him away? And at the end of this, he’s like ... fixed and happy and healthy, and I’m just”—I sniffed, trying not to choke on the words as they came up my throat —“alone.”

When I could finally meet Claire’s gaze, her eyes were bright with tears too. “You’ll never be alone, Lee. But I also know that’s not the kind of loneliness you’re talking about.”

“No.” I wiped at my face. “I left and I don’t recognize anything about my world now. So much of it is good, you know? Molly is practically engaged, and you and Bauer are stupid happy, frickin’ Finn is working ninety hours a week in his residency and he still manages to find a perfect girl, and I think, I think I still thought Jude and I would come to the end of this, and it would work out. That this distance would help us get closer.”

“It still might,” she said gently.

“But what if we don’t end up together?”

She reached forward and grabbed my hand. “Then he’s not the one for you.”

“I’m nervous to see him.”

“That’s okay too.” She smiled. “When will he get here?”

“He said he’d try to get a flight out in the next week so he can make it for the shower. Logan is hooking him up with one of the apartments they lease for players when they need a place to stay, said they may have him run some sort of clinic for the players or something so he could get it cleared.”

She stood from the ottoman. “Well, if he’s going to be here for that shower, then the blue dress won’t cut it.”

“Thank you.”

“But we also don’t want wallpaper dress.”

I rolled my eyes as she started digging through the pile that I’d brought into the room.

“Oh, yeah,” she said. Then held the hanger on her pointer finger. “This one.”

“Yeah?”

Claire nodded. “Definitely.”

I touched the hem of the dress with a tiny smile. When I did, Little Cabbage did a massive somersault that knocked my breath away.

“Whoa,” I gasped, rubbing over an elbow or knee or something. Claire pressed her hand down on the spot with a grin.

“See? Cabbage Patch agrees with me.” She leaned down. “Don’t forget, I’m your favorite aunt, okay?”



## Jude

“BLOODY FUCKING BOLLOCKS, THIS IS STUPID.”

The soothing voice came through my car’s Bluetooth system. “It’s okay to be nervous about this, it’s a big deal.”

“Don’t coddle me right now, all right? I need you to tell me I’m not about to walk into a trap.”

My therapist—whose number I’d gotten from Declan—did not make me lay on a couch, but he did make me talk about my feelings, and often in the past four weeks, I’d hated him for it.

“From what you’ve told me, I don’t believe you’re walking into a trap.” I could hear the smile in his voice, the wanker, and I wanted to punch him for convincing me this was a good idea.

I yanked my car to the side of the country road, staring out the windshield at the rolling green hills and hedges. “I’m not ready.”

“Talk to me about what changed then, Jude.” He was always so bloody patient. “Yesterday when we met, you’d had



a good talk with your brother and a good phone call with your parents. Based on what you talked about with both of them, you told me you were ready to go out to the farm.”

I gripped the steering wheel until I could've sworn my knuckles were going to pop out of my skin. “Yeah, it was easy to say I was ready while sitting in your bloody beige office with your soothing music and fucking oils in the air making me relaxed.”

“What’s scaring you right now?”

I pinched my eyes shut. I hated that question. For the past four weeks, twice a week, he'd asked me all these blasted questions that I hated answering. Sometimes more than others.

“Right now? How much I want to punch something.”

He chuckled. “Fair enough. But you aren't punching anything, which is excellent. What else?”

Blowing out a hard breath, I finally opened my eyes. “I'm afraid that I'll go to the farm, and it'll be just like the last time I saw them at the pub. My dad will say something awful like he did, and I'll lash out like I did, and we'll be right back where we fucking started.” I slammed my palm against the steering wheel. My heart was ramming against my chest like I'd just run for a bloody hour. “And if that happens, then all of this was a waste, and Lia was right that I don't know how to talk about shit, and I'll never change, and the woman I love and my child will be halfway across the world, happy without me, and I'll be empty and alone with no one to talk to about anything because I've shown over and over that I don't need it when I really do.”

The car was deathly quiet at my admission. I could hardly believe I'd admitted anything that big.

Quietly, thoughtfully, he hummed. “Bravo, Jude. Excellent.”

I ran a hand down my face. “Bloody hell,” I muttered. “I feel like you just yanked my guts out.”

He laughed. “I didn't do anything but ask a few questions. The truth is that you already have changed. You're seeking

help in seeing the damage that your parents have inflicted, that you've inflicted in turn. You've recognized that Lia's absence, her ability to walk away for the health and well-being of your child and your ability to parent that child in a healthy way, is a boundary she needed to erect in order for you to seek that change."

My head dropped back on the driver's seat, something unlocking in my chest. A pressure eased that I hadn't even been aware of, even though I'd probably been carrying it around for half my life.

"I know. But it's still not a choice I would've made."

"No, but think about what you can choose within this situation."

I rubbed my forehead.

"Jude," he continued, "you can't force your parents to change any more than Lia can force you to change. You can choose to work on these things. So can they. It's all connected. But if your parents are willing to try, then there's hope. Maybe that's the reason Lia and this child are in your life."

His words, even though they were freeing, unraveled a domino effect inside me. I missed her so bloody much and seeing her was just out of reach. My flight for Seattle left the next morning, and this stop was something I had to do before I attempted anything else with Lia.

Terror and hope were so inextricably entwined, and I'd never been so fully aware of it until I was on the cusp of everything I wanted.

A life with Lia, if she'd still have me, gave me so much hope, but I couldn't really achieve it until I faced this monster, one that was partially of my own creation.

"I can do this," I said quietly.

"You are doing this," he affirmed.

"Thank you, Kendrick." I grinned even though he couldn't see me. "You're not so bad."

“High praise indeed. Send me an email if you need to schedule a session while you’re in Seattle. We could do a virtual appointment.”

“I will.”

We disconnected the call, and even though I needed to put the car in drive and finish the rest of the five-minute drive to the farm, where my parents were expecting me, I decided to take a moment longer in the still and calm.

Glancing down at the passenger seat, I picked up the small sheep, dingy with age. But still, it was soft in my hand, and I ran my thumb over the face, imagining it in the small, uncoordinated hands of a child with Lia’s eyes and maybe my smile.

The sheep was set carefully on the dashboard of my car, a symbol guiding me forward to a place where hopefully I would find a small measure of peace in my past and establish a foothold to the future I wanted.

With a deep breath, I eased the car into drive and moved forward.



## JUDE

Eyes gritty and back sore from a long day spent traveling, London to Chicago, where I spent a sleepless night waiting for the first flight out to Seattle, I wasn't feeling my best as I approached the arrivals area at Sea-Tac airport. There would only be one person waiting for me there, and it was up in the air whether he'd greet me with polite reserve, a warm welcome, or a kick to the bollocks.

Were I in his position, it'd probably be the latter.

I didn't have much in the way of luggage, as three large boxes of my belongings were being shipped by Rebecca, who'd made me swear a blood oath that I'd do a FaceTime with her when the baby was born. And I felt like that was a good thing when I turned the corner and saw Logan Ward for the first time.

He was tall—taller than me—and solid muscle, arms crossed forbiddingly over his massive chest. His eyes were shaded, a Washington hat pulled low over his forehead. I found myself swallowing heavily as I approached. We were interrupted briefly, a pause button on our little showdown, when a small boy approached him.

Logan softened immediately, the change in him so profound that I blinked. He crouched down with a smile and shook the boy's hand after they exchanged brief, quiet conversation, then allowed a picture when the boy's mother asked for it. The whole thing lasted only a minute, just a shade more, but it established an immediate kinship.

His grin was wry as he stood back up. “Never know when that’ll happen, do we?”

“We don’t.” I held out my hand, and immediately, he took it. His grip was firm but not overbearing, and I breathed just a tad easier that he’d decided against the kick in the bollocks. “I appreciate you being willing to pick me up.”

“I wasn’t going to at first.”

We started walking, me following Logan’s lead as he steered us through the milling crowds toward the car park

“What changed your mind?”

“Lia’s sister,” he admitted, with a small shake of his head.

“Not Isabel, I’m assuming.”

Logan cut me a look. “Claire.”

“Ahh.”

“Why do you say it wasn’t Isabel?”

“The last time I saw Isabel, she threatened to de-man me, I believe.”

Logan laughed heartily. “Yeah, that sounds like her.”

I pointed at a Starbucks. “Mind if I stop for some coffee?”

“Go ahead.”

While I got the largest Americano they’d sell, Logan waited, tapping away on his phone. The smell hit my bloodstream before I took my first mouth-scalding sip. He eyed me carefully as I approached. “No tea?”

I answered with a wry smile. “Sometimes even the British need more caffeine than tea will give us. And this is one of those times.”

We walked out of the airport and into the car park quietly, and I appreciated him allowing me a few moments to let the coffee hit my system.

Logan’s truck was large and black and carried a Washington Wolves sticker in the back window. He opened the

back of the truck for me, and I hesitated before sliding my suitcase in.

“What’s wrong? Do I need to like, lift it for you?”

I gave him a look. “No, I just want to make sure it’s safe back here. I’ve got ... a gift for Lia, and I’d hate for anything to happen to it.”

His eyes were inscrutable, his facial features all but carved from rock as he gave me a good old-fashioned stare down. It was hard not to fidget underneath the weight of it, but I met his gaze square on.

“I’m in love with her,” I told him. “And I’ll do my best to prove that, even if I have to wait.”

Logan inhaled slowly, then exhaled in a hard puff. “You can put it behind your seat. There’s room.”

“Thank you.”

Once in the truck, he paused before pulling out of the parking space. “Claire told me I have to give you a chance, no matter how wrecked Lia was when she got home in December.”

My jaw clenched, but I kept my mouth shut. I’d not seen the fallout, of course. Which he knew.

“And she reminded me that because we all love Lia—and this baby—so much, that if you are the best thing for both of them, then it would be worse for me to do or say something I’d regret in a moment of anger.”

I should have brought a gift for Claire as well.

“And I feel like it’s important that you know that before I say what I’m about to. This is not coming from a place of anger or thoughtlessness. I don’t know exactly what happened between the two of you,” he continued. “I didn’t ask for the details. They’re not important. But I’ll warn you, McAllister, that this family—my family—is everything to me. If you don’t have the fortitude to stick this out with her, with the baby, then tell me now, and I’ll buy your return ticket home before she’s any wiser.”

Slowly, I turned my head and met his stony gaze. He bloody well meant it.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I told him.

Logan searched my gaze before he nodded resolutely. “Good.”

He put the truck in reverse, and I exhaled slowly.

“Lord, you’re an intimidating lot, aren’t you?”

Logan smiled. “We don’t mean to be. But we’ve learned to close ranks when it’s necessary.”

“Why?”

“Did Lia ever tell you how they came to live with me?”

Feeling horribly sheepish that I didn’t know, I shook my head. “Just the bare minimum.”

He glanced over at me before turning his gaze back to the road in front of us. “We share the same dad, the girls and I do. But my father remarried a woman much younger than him when I was starting college.”

“Lia’s mum,” I said.

Logan nodded. “Brooke. She was—for lack of a better term—a trophy wife for my father. Beautiful, bubbly, the life of the party. Charmed everyone, as long you were only around her for small doses. Our dad died of a heart attack when the twins were young. And Brooke”—he frowned, his grip on the steering wheel visibly tightening—“she didn’t much love the idea of being a single mom when there wasn’t as much money as she originally thought.”

“Bloody hell,” I murmured. I rubbed my forehead, each bit of information offering further clarity. “She left them with you.”

“On my doorstep.” Finally, he smiled. “I probably aged ten years the first six months they lived with me, but they’re the greatest gift anyone’s ever given me. A couple of years later, my wife and then my son got added into the chaos, and now ... apparently ... we keep adding their men too.”



He sounded so disgruntled about it that I found myself smiling despite the terrible story that had led to their family.

“Lia was ... ten, yeah?”

Logan nodded. “Tough time to have your mom bail. Any age is, I guess. I always wondered if they heard her that day she left.”

When he fell quiet, I glanced over at him.

“Brooke always wanted the fun, the excitement, the adventure. But we’d always known that about her. It wasn’t anything new. But leaving them ... I never saw that coming. Right before she left, I asked her why she was doing this.” He shifted in his seat. “She looked back at me and shrugged, then she said, ‘I have one life, Logan, and it’s already been hard enough. Why would I spend the rest of it being miserable?’”

“Fuck me,” I murmured. Even if Lia hadn’t heard her mum, everything made so much sense, looking at her through that lens. “Thank you for telling me.”

“It’s something you have to understand. Anyone who’s going to love one of those girls needs to. You don’t experience someone leaving you like that without scars. And Lia might hide those scars well, but they’re there. She’d never let anyone make her child feel the way Brooke made them feel.”

I mulled that over, each thing he told me only serving to make me love her even more.

“She’ll be an excellent mum, won’t she?”

“I have no doubt about it,” Logan said.

I stared out at the mountain peaks, still capped in white despite the warm May air. I thought of what Lia had said driving through the English countryside, about paying attention to your surroundings when they were unfamiliar, and I smiled. Each mile closer, it wasn’t even so much the scenery that had me overwhelmed, but the idea that I was so near to her after so many months.

“And you’re sure you’re ready for all this change?” Logan asked. He flipped his indicator on to take the next exit, and my

heart raced in anticipation. We were close.

“I am.”

He nodded but didn't say another word as he wove through a few streets, taking us farther from the noise and busyness of the highway. At a small curve in the road, I saw a beautiful building set back in a clearing. Long balconies stretched in front of a dozen sliding glass doors on each of the three stories with parking underneath the building. The landscaping was lush and green against the white stucco.

“2B,” he said quietly. “She thinks I'm picking her up for the shower in a little bit. I told her I'd hit the buzzer three times so she knew it was me.”

Logan parked his truck and held out his hand.

I took it for what it was—an olive branch and a blessing. I wasn't entirely sure I deserved it yet, but I'd bloody well try.

“Thank you,” I told him again. “For everything.”

He clapped me on the back. “You fuck it up, and I'll rip your balls off, Brit.”

“Fair enough,” I answered dryly.

I pulled my suitcase out of the truck and gave him a small smile before I walked to the main entrance. The building had a small entryway behind glass doors, and I was happy to see security cameras affixed all around. Quickly finding 2B on the panel, I gave the button three quick bursts and held my breath.



Lia

I EYED the clock on the wall above the couch, pressing the button to let Logan up. “Come on up. I'm almost ready.”

From my living room window, I'd seen the back of his truck parked in front of the building, so I knew it wasn't a serial killer or anything.

A stack of boxes sat next to the door, and I moved the top one over so he wouldn't knock into it when he came in. The apartment was sparsely furnished and only half unpacked, but it already felt like home. The May sunshine streamed in through the sliders that led to my balcony, and I hummed along with the music playing in my bedroom.

My hand reached down, but I couldn't reach the buckle on my ankle. "Shit," I whispered. Mildly awkward to ask your big brother to do it, but hey, pregnant people had to do what pregnant people had to do. And as I was learning, Baby Pineapple, with its low center of gravity over my hips, made just about everything harder most days.

Including dressing. Thankfully, I'd been able to slip on one of my nude, open-toed sandals, showing off the bright red pedicure that Paige had treated me to in honor of my baby shower. But the other buckle came unhooked when I tried to wiggle my puffy little foot into the left shoe.

I heard the door to the apartment open, and I called out over my shoulder. "In my room. Can you help me with my shoe, please?"

His heavy footsteps slowed in the living room, and I sat back on the bed, adjusting the neckline of my dress. Claire had been right, the deep V, slightly off the shoulder neckline and pale pink color were perfect. The dress hugged my stomach and hips, ending just above my knees.

It was as sexy as I'd felt the entire pregnancy, with my hair curled, a full face of makeup, and a body with curves I'd never, ever had before. Honestly, my boobs were amazing.

As long as Jude's flights weren't late, he promised he'd be there before the shower ended.

Maybe not ideal to see him for the first time after so long in front of my family and friends, but I was just excited to see him.

Logan approached, and I stuck my foot out. "I can't re—"

My voice broke off at the sight of him, big and tall, filling the doorway of my bedroom.

Jude's eyes drank me in hungrily, and in a daze, I stood slowly.

"Jude," I whispered.

The strong column of his throat moved on a visible swallow when his eyes landed on my stomach, his lips curving slightly. "Hello," he said, voice low and sure and oh, his accent saying that one little word.

I didn't dare move when he closed the remaining distance between us because I couldn't believe he was in my bedroom. His hand rose carefully, and when I knew what he was doing, I gently took it, laying it over the top of my sizeable stomach. A gentle roll rippled the surface of my stomach, and he huffed out in amazement.

"Holy bleeding hell," he whispered. "Look at how beautiful that is."

I laughed, my eyes pricking with happy tears. "I wish you could feel it from my end. It's so crazy."

Jude's other hand slid up my back, and he leaned over to press a gentle kiss to the top of my head. "You look incredible, Lia."

My fingers curled into his forearm as we stood like that, his hand on my belly, the other on my back between my shoulder blades. The room was filled to the brim with palpable tension, the kind that slowed your movements and forced you to breathe it in deeply, like the kind of electric, crackling air before a storm or a first kiss.

I turned into him, wrapping my arms firmly around him, and he did the same, exhaling heavily when I was fully folded between those strong arms.

Tilting my head up, I studied his face. He looked good. Tired, but his eyes glowed like I'd never, ever seen. "You're here."

Jude grinned. "I may have fibbed about my arrival time."

"So ... Logan picked you up? I saw his truck out there."

He nodded, carefully pulling away but leaving his hands to smooth up my upper arms so he could look at me again. “I managed to get his phone number through my agent, and then his agent.”

I covered my face with my hand and groaned. “Did he like ... do the scary big brother thing?”

Jude laughed. “Terrifyingly well, yes.”

And still we stood there, my hands resting on his waist, his on my arms, and suddenly, I felt a flurry of self-consciousness. Carefully, I extricated myself, fidgeting with my hair while he looked at my queen bed and upholstered headboard, then smiled at the bassinet in the corner next to the ivory-colored glider that Molly and Noah bought me as a housewarming present. “My apartment isn’t really ... ready yet.”

“Do I get the tour?”

I smiled. “Yeah.” My arms spread out. “My room, obviously.”

“Big windows.”

“It’s what I loved about this place. When we do get sun, I wanted as much of it as possible. And it’s only ten minutes away from Logan and Paige’s house.”

He glanced into the room that would be the nursery, now only filled with the white crib and dresser, a wicker lamp in the corner, and a fuzzy white and tan rug spread along the floor. Boxes of diapers were stacked in the corner, and empty frames sat propped inside the closet in which hung a long row of small white hangers.

“It’s a work in progress,” I told him. “I’ll get a lot of stuff at the shower today.”

He stared at the crib for a few seconds, then blinked, his attention returning to me. “I love it.”

“Thank you.” My face warmed under his praise.

“I, uh, I have something to add to it, actually.”

My head tilted, a smile spreading across my face. “You do?”

“It’s in my suitcase.” Gently, he took my hand, and even if it wasn’t smart, I curled my fingers through his and let him lead me into the family room. I found a spot on the couch and watched him curiously when he immediately crouched in front of me. Then his fingers brushed over my ankle, and I sucked in a breath. So, so carefully, he closed the buckle on my shoes with his big fingers, allowing his palm to rest briefly on my ankle when he’d finished.

“Thank you,” I whispered. Where, exactly, had my voice gone? Apparently, it flew out the window with my reserve upon seeing his face. His scruffy, exhausted, handsome face, which I wanted to grab with both hands so I could kiss the absolute shit out of him. There was something coming from him that made me feel a little bit less crazy for feeling that way.

Something in the way he was looking at me.

Something in the way he was touching me, with such care and such reverence.

Jude, for the first time since I’d met him, was looking at me like I could crush the heart in his chest if I said the wrong thing. And that was the difference, I realized, as he gave me a secretive smile before unzipping his sleek black suitcase. Shifting perfectly rolled clothes aside, he fished out a box, perfectly wrapped in gold foil wrapping paper, then another smaller one.

Taking a seat next to me, he took a deep breath before handing the smaller of the two to me. On the label, scrawled in his masculine handwriting, was my name.

“This is from Rebecca too,” he admitted.

My mouth fell open. “Did she ... is this ...?” I held the box up to my nose and took a whiff. “Oh my gosh, you didn’t.”

Like a kid on a frickin’ Christmas Day, I tore into the present with glee, causing Jude to laugh heartily when I tossed

the paper at him and ripped open the top of the box.

Scones. Beautiful, beautiful scones sat inside the box, enclosed in a plastic bag.

“As fresh as I could manage,” he said. “She finished them a couple of hours before I had to leave for the airport.”

I pulled one out of the bag and held it up to my nose. “Oh, I love her,” I groaned. I took as delicate of a bite as I could manage since I already had my lipstick on. Eyes closed, I sank back on the couch and savored every perfectly not-fresh crumb. “My soul is so happy right now.”

“It would seem so,” he said, voice full of amusement.

After one more bite, I sat up, giving him a shy smile. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t manage some clotted cream in there.” With a smile, he watched me take another small bite and then move that box aside. When my lap was free again, he slid me the second box. On that label, it said Little Pineapple. My eyes met his, and he grinned.

With careful fingers, I pulled open the wrapping paper. It felt more important to go slow with this one, and it was almost never my instinct to go slow on anything. But as I folded the edges back, I knew what he was trying to do. He was trying to create something special. Something meaningful. It was why he came earlier than he told me and why he reached out to my brother.

When I pulled the top of the lid off, three objects were wrapped in white tissue paper, one large and square, one medium and squishier looking, and one flat and small.

“Any particular order I should open these in?” I asked.

His eyes were smiling as he watched me, and I felt it in my heart.

“Left to right is fine.” He pulled out his phone. “I have a video that goes with the second one.”

“My goodness,” I murmured, picking up the first. It felt like books, which made me smile. When I pulled off the

tissue, I laughed in delight. It was a stack of board books, all baby versions of classic literature. On the top was *Jane Eyre* with a bright illustrated cover. “Jude, these are amazing.”

Underneath *Jane Eyre* was *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *The Jungle Book*, and *Romeo and Juliet*.

“So that you can teach our child all the wonderful things you know so well,” he said.

I clutched *Jane Eyre* to my chest like it might contain all the happy I was feeling. “Thank you,” I said, completely overcome.

“Next,” he urged.

I set the books aside and picked up the next package. It was soft but firm. Before I could pull the tissue off, he handed me his phone. The screen was dark, a play arrow in the middle of it.

“Video first?” I asked.

He nodded.

I hit the button. I didn’t recognize the dark table or kitchen where Jude had set the phone. His face filled the screen, and I could immediately read the nerves in his expression.

“Hello, the present you’re about to open isn’t just from me. I had some help in getting this to you and to the baby.” Jude turned the screen, and I saw his mom wave nervously. I gasped, a hand coming up to cover my mouth. I only spared Jude a quick glance through my lashes, but he was watching me with a slight smile.

“Lia,” his mom started in a wavering voice, “Jude’s father and I wish very much we could be there to give you this in person. And I’d like to start by apologizing for what happened at the pub the last night we saw you. We have no excuse for our behavior, and”—she looked over at Jude—“it’s something that we’re working on as a family, to overcome. I hope you can forgive us because we’d love to meet our grandchild someday soon. And if there are any mistakes on the gift, it’s because Jude doesn’t take direction very well. But I did try.”



In the video, Jude gave his mom a smile, and she returned it. It was awkward, and they both looked unsure, but I felt a tear go down my cheek all the same. “Take care of that little one for us.”

The video cut off. I couldn’t even risk a glance at him before I opened the next package.

It was two small creatures made from the same soft wool of the sheep I’d found in his room. One was a similarly shaped sheep with a lopsided head and one leg. Through my tears, I traced the other, a black and gray wolf.

“So our families can teach our child all the things they know as well,” he said in a rough voice.

His eyes were filled with tears, and I cupped the side of his face, smoothing a thumb underneath his eyes. “You talked to your family?”

“We are very much a work in progress,” he said, clasping my hand and pulling it down so he could lay a kiss in the center of my palm. “I won’t say we’re all the way there, but with the help of a therapist,” he said with a wry smile, “and a few tense phone calls before my visit, yes, I’m talking to my family.”

I wiped at my face. “I’m going to have to redo all my makeup, and I can’t even be mad about it.”

He grinned. “One more, love.”

“Oh, geez.” I set the small toys aside with just one more soft touch to the wolf. With a grin, I knew this would win Paige over in a heartbeat. She’d love him.

I found myself holding my breath as I unfolded the last bit of tissue. My forehead creased in confusion when I saw a small jersey. It was a different blue, with different logos, but my heart skipped dangerously when recognition clanged like a noisy bell in my head.

“Seattle?” I whispered. “You ...

He settled his hands over top mine, which were clutching the Seattle Sounders jersey with shaking fingers.

“One-year contract,” he said, holding my gaze steadily. “My agent thinks I’ve lost my bloody mind for doing this, but I couldn’t stand the thought of being across the ocean from the two of you.”

I shook my head. “Jude, I don’t even know if I can say this delicately because my emotions are like ... gone right now,” my voice wobbled, “but isn’t this a massive step down for you?”

“Yes.” His grip tightened. “And while you were gone, I realized there are worse things than not playing in England. There are worse things than not being the player I used to be. There are worse things than not having my family understand me.” Jude cupped my face the way I’d cupped his, and I leaned into that touch. “I will be happy playing here because the worst thing I can imagine is being away from my heart. That’s you, love. Both of you.” He slid closer, resting his forehead against mine, and took a deep inhale. “I don’t know what I did to deserve finding you that night because you were the catalyst, Lia. Whatever hope I’ve found for the rest of my life started with you. I know how closed-off I was, how selfish I’ve been, and reparations begin now. If it takes you a month, a year, two years, for you to trust what we have, I’ll wait.”

A sob escaped my mouth, and I was hardly able to see him through my tears. The warmth of his hand on my face caught plenty of my tears, and I knew he meant it. And my heart was so full of the truth of that I couldn’t find a single word as he held me. My hand gripped his shirt when he tried to pull away, and he laughed under his breath.

“My love,” he said, wiping my tears with sure movements of his hands over my skin, “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re not,” I replied.

“Not as long as you’ll have me.” He grinned. “You were so right about us, Lia. And as much as I missed you, this time apart was good for me. We needed it to do this right. Because now, I know that our future is built on something unshakeable, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I couldn’t stop touching him. “You’d really wait that long?”

His thumb touched the center of my bottom lip. “If that’s what you need.”

When I pulled in a shaky breath, my tears finally cleared from my eyes, and I slid my hands behind his neck and into his hair. “You know patience isn’t my strong suit, right?” I whispered, tugging him closer.

“Is that right?”

I nodded. “Especially when I know what I want.”

As his mouth descended aching close to mine, he laughed. “I’m so bloody in love with you.”

I let his words wash over me in a warm, contented sweep. Our lips touched once, twice, and then he tilted his head with a groan, fitting his mouth firmly to mine.

Winding my arms around him, I slid my tongue against his, relief lighting up every nerve ending in my body. I hiked up my dress as high as it would go and tried my damndest to straddle the beautiful man’s lap.

He laughed into my mouth when I couldn’t pull it up higher. “Look at you,” he murmured. He tugged the dress up over my hips in one sharp tug, gripping my ass and sliding me closer as he sat back on the couch. His hands caressed my thighs, my stomach, and as we traded kisses, his fingers tangled into my hair.

I pulled back and stared at him, one hand over his mouth when he tried to kiss me again. “Is this real? I’m not having one of those really vivid pregnancy sex dreams, am I?”

He nipped at my fingers. “I’d love to hear about those, but no, this is quite real.”

I sighed, running my hands over his chest. “I love you too,” I whispered, his heart thumping strong and steady and sure under my palm.

His lips—those wonderful, talented, devilish lips—curled up into a smile. “Shall we fix you back up now? Or are we

going to be late for your party?”

I ran my nose along his, grinning when he licked at my bottom lip. “They can wait a few more minutes.”

“Bloody right, they can,” he said against my mouth, his hand cupping my breast. My hips started rolling along with the clever circular motion of his thumb, and Jude’s other hand gripped me tightly, fingers digging into my bottom, directing me with a firm motion. “That’s it.”

That ... was when my cell phone started ringing. “Nooooo,” I groaned. The shrill sound, coming somewhere from my bedroom, was Claire’s ringtone.

He looked dazed, his hand pulling slowly away from my chest. “Right. Good. No, we should stop.”

I gave him an incredulous look. “We should?”

“Come on, love, up you go.” With a tortured sigh, he helped me to stand, staring intensely at the black lace underwear I was wearing as he carefully pulled my dress back down.

“What? Why? Why are we stopping?”

Jude laughed, kissing my forehead after he’d stood from the couch. “Because the last thing we need is to miss your shower, and me meeting your family.”

Ugh. I pouted, which made him laugh. He wrapped me in a hug.

“I know you’re right,” I said, my head resting in the center of his chest.

He smoothed a hand down my back and leaned his head down. “We can wait a bit longer, love. We have forever.”



**JUDE**

## SEVEN WEEKS LATER

“This is not going to work,” Lia said between helpless bouts of laughter.

“You doubt me?”

She tried to turn, which was quite a feat in her current condition—one week past her due date. “Yes!”

“What a terrible mistake on your part,” I whispered in her ear once she was comfortably on her side.

On my knees over her, I marveled at the expanse of naked skin in front of me. My hands coasted over her stomach, and I smiled when I felt the hard press of an elbow or knee. When I dropped down to kiss that very spot, I caught her mouth curving in a smile.

Since the day I arrived, it had been like this between us.

Peace, sublime and sweet happiness that rolled from day to day, all wrapped up in a mind-blowing amount of time in bed.

She kept me up later than I was used to, chatting happily about her days, hearing about mine, and most nights ended with us on the couch, her head in my lap, where I could trace my fingers along the gentle lines of her face and body into the soft length of her hair.

We went out to eat, wandered the sights in Seattle, and she shrieked with laughter when I almost turned us into oncoming traffic given that Americans drove on the wrong side of the bleeding road. We talked about her upbringing and mine.

Together, we pieced together our home in the bright apartment and planned for a future one after her initial one-year lease was up. At Lia's insistence, I didn't pay more than half of the rent, but I told her I got to make the deposit on our next home.

And now, a week beyond where our little watermelon was supposed to make its appearance, we were quite preoccupied with hastening their entrance into the world.

Spicy food hadn't worked.

Neither had long walks.

And so far, the sheer maneuverability of sex was becoming an issue, if that was supposed to help.

I kissed the side of her breast, and Lia stretched herself out fully with a soft sigh.

"Still doubt me?"

"Entirely." She exhaled. "I'm huge."

"You're perfect," I murmured into the slope of her shoulder, just as I eased behind her. "Lift your leg over mine, love."

"Shit."

I froze. "No leg? Shall we try standing in the bathroom like last night?" My thumbs coasted lightly over her chest because I knew how sensitive she was, but she smacked my hands away. My eyebrows lifted. "Or not, that's fine."

Lia looked over her shoulder at me, eyes wide. "Either I've lost all bladder function and I just ... peed a little, or my water just broke."

Blinking, I glanced down. "You ..."

Lia sat up. "I think maybe I should put some clothes on." Then a brilliant smile dawned on her face. "And maybe you should too, champ. Nice work." She held out a hand for a high five.

I flew out of bed, stark-bollock naked, and grabbed her hospital bag from where it sat just next to the door. "What



clothes do you need?”

Lia scooted to the edge of the bed, a small smile on her face. “That blue shirt on the dresser is fine. And the soft black shorts in my top drawer, please.”

I tossed them at her and barely glanced at what I pulled over my own body.

Lia paused once, a strange expression on her face. “Oh, hey there.”

I froze as I was shoving a phone charger into the side of her bag. “What?”

She grimaced. “Contraction. Weird.”

It was that grimace that kicked my heart into a gear I hadn’t previously known existed.

Through any doctor’s appointment I’d attended with her, the birthing class—which was terrifying—and all the books she read from, I’d never fully realized how bloody terrible it would be not to bear a single bit of this pain for her.

And with the realization came sheer terror at the reality of this new life we were bringing into the world.

Lia cupped the side of my face and smiled. “It’ll be fine.”

I clutched her in my embrace, pressing a fervent kiss to her lips. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Her face straightened. “But I need you not to be a sissy right now, okay? It will be fine, and if you get that Lost Boy look on your face, I’m going to worry about you, and if you’re going to do that man thing where you pass out at the sight of the epidural needle or my placenta or something.”

“I’m not going to be a sissy,” I said in a completely affronted voice. “Also, I don’t plan on looking at your placenta.”

“Great.” She clapped her hands. “Now, let’s go.”

The drive to the hospital was a blur, and occasionally, she’d let out a slow, even breath when another contraction

tightened her belly. With each one, though they were still fairly spread apart, my hands involuntarily tightened on the steering wheel.

Lia sent a text to her family and made a phone call to Claire, who was planning on being in the delivery room with us.

Quite soon, we'd be overrun with Wards, and in the approach to the hospital, I found that I was okay with it.

It was a surprise that this massive, chaotic group allowed me to slip seamlessly into their impressive ranks.

“Claire is on her way,” Lia said, sliding her hand over my thigh. “She should be here in about an hour.”

I smiled over at her. “Good.”

“Are you ready?” she asked me quietly.

Sucking in a deep breath, I pulled Lia's hand up to my mouth and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “As ready as one can be, I imagine.”

And by that, I felt completely unprepared. I felt inadequate. Humbled. Excited.

“I'm scared shitless,” she admitted.

Laughing, I kissed her hand again. “Feel free to yell at me if it helps distract you from it. Call me names. Break my hand with your grip. Whatever you need.”

As directed, I pulled the car up to the Emergency Room entrance, and she sighed. “I love you, Jude. I'm not going to call you names.”



Lia

*Five hours later*

“OH, YOU SELFISH PIECE OF SHIT,” I groaned. “If you eat one more piece of food in front of me—” My voice broke off when

another contraction knocked the breath from my lungs.

Claire laid a washcloth over my forehead, speaking to Jude in a soothing, quiet voice. “Maybe you should set the apple down, Jude. Or eat it out in the hallway.”

“Or choke on it,” I said through gritted teeth.

Jude tossed the apple into the trash and approached the other side of the bed. He kissed the crown of my head. “Apple’s gone, and I know you don’t want me to choke, love.”

The tension eased from my body, the monitor next to my bed showing the contraction as it eased. “I know. I really don’t.”

Taking his seat on the stool, he smiled, but I saw the tense lines around his eyes and mouth. “In all fairness, I never should have asked that question, so I can’t blame you for feeling ...” He paused, searching for the right word.

“Murderous?” I supplied helpfully.

Claire rolled her lips in to smother her smile.

Jude—who I loved to a scary level, who I trusted with my heart, who I wanted to spend the rest of my life with—about got himself castrated when he asked the pregnant girlfriend on the bed, as she was writing in immense pain, what a contraction felt like.

Folks, he almost didn’t survive it.

Another contraction rolled over me, and I felt my legs draw up helplessly.

It was impossible at that point to talk through them, so I didn’t even try. Jude moved the washcloth and spoke something soft and sweet into the damp hairline of my forehead.

Eventually, it ebbed, and I could suck in another deep breath.

Claire held my hand tightly on one side, Jude on the other, and the doctor entered the room with a smile. “How are we doing?”

“If they don’t get that giant ass needle up here and in my back, I’m going to go find them myself,” I hissed.

Jude grinned. “Bloody hell, you’re marvelous.”

As the doctor laughed, I pulled Jude down for a soft kiss.

“I don’t feel marvelous,” I admitted. “But thank you.”

“You’ve got quite the group out in the waiting room,” the doctor said as he pulled his little stool up right between my spread legs.

When people said you lost your modesty in labor, they were not fucking around, because I would’ve flashed the entire hospital if it would’ve helped get my child out of my body sooner.

“Are they being obnoxious?” I asked, wincing when he measured me.

Claire sighed. “The last time I went out there, Paige was on her *I cannot be called Grandma* thing again. She’s real worked up about it.”

I laughed.

Jude’s brow furrowed. “I thought they decided on Gigi and Papa.”

Claire and I shared a look.

“What?” he asked.

Claire stood to refresh the washcloth. “This is what she does. When Paige is nervous or excited, she gets a little ... twitchy. She hates feeling helpless when one of us is hurting, so she fixates on something she can control.”

Jude gave me a soft smile, his thumb tracing over my knuckles. “Now that I can understand.”

My heart, already totally gushy from the general emotions of the day, swelled just a bit bigger. “Kiss, please.”

He accommodated me happily and spoke against my lips after he pulled away. “I like it better when you’re not threatening my death.”

“Me too,” I whispered.

The click of a photo being snapped had me blinking. Claire smiled at us, her phone aimed in our direction. “Sorry, guys. Couldn’t resist.”

“I hate to interrupt,” the doctor said. “But unfortunately, we’re too far for an epidural.”

I blinked.

Jude leaned toward him. “What?”

The doctor threw away his gloves. “You’ve dilated very quickly since our last check. You’re already at an eight, Lia.”

Claire snapped her mouth shut and gave me a tremulous smile. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. It’ll go really fast, Lee.”

I burst into tears just as the next contraction hit me.



Jude

*Two hours later*

IF I COULD’VE GIVEN every penny I’d ever earned, traded every accolade, every award, every trophy in the entire world to trade places with Lia, I would’ve done it in a heartbeat.

My hands were all but crushed in her bruising grip as my other hand held the back of her thigh.

And my heart, it was a mangled, horrible useless heap behind my ribs from what I’d watched her go through the last handful of hours. How any woman ever did this more than once proved why they were the superior sex in every definable category.

*Don’t be a sissy*, she’d made me promise. And so far, I hadn’t broken that promise.

“Come on, Lia,” the doctor said, face set in concentration. “Give me another push.”

“I can’t,” she sobbed. Her hair was soaked, her face exhausted.

Claire made small soothing noises, moving another washcloth over her sister’s sweaty forehead.

“Come on, love,” I told her. “You’re so close.”

“I’ve heard that for the past two hours,” she groaned.

“Here we go,” the doctor said. The two nurses busied themselves with ... something, but as I’d promised not to look at anything that would make me faint, I couldn’t tell what it was.

Lia gritted her teeth and emitted another soul-shriveling sound of pain and agony and exhaustion, and I shit you not, I could feel the bones in my hand as they were crushed into dust.

“One more, Lia, you’re doing amazing,” one of the nurses said, positioning herself just next to the doctor. “I can see a head of dark hair.”

Lia sobbed. “He has hair?”

I pressed my forehead to hers. “One more, my love. One more.”

And with an effort that had me holding my breath, and Claire emitting an audible gasp when she looked down, Lia gave one more glorious push, and the room filled with the most incredible sound I’d ever heard in my life.

A baby crying.

“You did it,” I told her, eyes and heart and soul overflowing. Lia sobbed openly, and I kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her mouth.

“It’s a boy,” the nurse said with a wide grin. “Congratulations, Mom and Dad.”

In the next moment, we were all crying because they laid him on Lia’s chest as she wept.

With shaking hands, the nurse told me how to cut the umbilical cord.

Everything around me felt like it was moving slower somehow, like my heart now existed in these three separate segments. One behind my ribs, one in Lia, and one in this marvelous, wriggling, wailing thing that was lying in Lia's embrace with a shock of dark hair and button nose.

Claire took pictures as I curled my arm around Lia and kissed the top of his head.

"He's perfect," she said, tears coursing down her face.

"He is." I kissed her cheek. "And you were so bloody incredible, Lia."

The nurse smiled at us. "If you want to help me clean him up and weigh him, Dad, they'll handle Momma."

Lia looked up at me, her chin wobbling. "Take care of him, okay?"

Her thumb was on my face then, wiping away another tear.

"Always," I promised.



Lia

*Twenty minutes later*

"THIS IS SO WEIRD," I whispered. My finger followed the line of his nose and the perfect bow of his lips.

"Right?" Paige asked. "Like they're all slimy and covered in this crazy shit from inside you, and *boom*, just like that, you'd just die for them."

I met her knowing eyes and grinned. "Basically."

Jude smiled at me from where he stood next to my brother.

"Ready to hold him, Logan?" Paige asked, rocking the baby gently. The little man was sound asleep because hey, it was quite the exhausting event to be born.

My brother nodded. "As long as Momma doesn't need him back."

I laid my head back on the pillow and smiled at him. “Go ahead.”

My sisters all crowded in the room, snapping pictures over Paige’s shoulder.

Isabel quietly wiped at a tear she didn’t think we saw. Molly winked, then pointed at herself, “*Favorite,*” she mouthed.

But we all watched raptly as Logan first kissed Paige on the top of the head, then clenched his jaw as his wife stood and carefully transferred the baby into my brother’s huge arms.

Basically, I was just going to cry my way through the entire day. No way around it. I sniffed loudly before I realized that every single other person in the room, save for Jude, was doing the same thing.

Logan stared down at my son and let out a shaky breath. When he looked up at me, his eyes were bright with unshed tears. “You did real good, kid.”

Jude set a hand on Logan’s shoulder before he approached the bed.

“You did,” he said quietly, wiping my face carefully. “A bloody warrior.”

I smiled up at him. “Should we tell them the name?”

Jude kissed me softly. “Go ahead.”

My family looked at me expectantly, except Logan, who was staring at the baby again. I smiled. “We’d like you guys to meet Logan Gabriel Ward McAllister.”

Paige covered her mouth, sniffing noisily. “Welp, here I go again.”

Logan’s eyes flew to mine. “What?” he whispered gruffly. “You named him after me?”

I nodded. “We’ll call him Gabriel.” I slid my hand into Jude’s and smiled up at him.

Logan’s jaw clenched, and he feathered a hand over Gabriel’s fluffy black hair. “Thank you. Both of you.”



Isabel rested her head on Logan's shoulder, Molly held Isabel's hand, the diamond of her newly acquired engagement ring winking on her finger, and Claire was next to Molly, an arm around our eldest sister's waist.

Logan cleared his throat. "All right, I need someone to take him before I start ugly crying."

"My turn," the sisters said in perfect unison.

I laughed as they argued over who got him next.

With Jude at my side, his hand curled around mine, I felt almost impossibly happy and impossibly overwhelmed.

It was amazing, I thought, where you could end up when life gave you something you didn't choose for yourself.

Maybe that was how it was supposed to work. We could make all the plans we wanted, but ultimately, the exact right path for us was the one we'd end up on.

And this was mine.

## EPILOGUE

Lia

*8 weeks later*

“Hush little baby, don’t say a word,” I sang, rocking Gabriel in his nursery, “Momma’s gonna go have private time with Daddy, and I’ll buy you a freaking pony if you stay asleep for the next hour.”

The words didn’t fit with the melody, but I was so deprived of sexy times with Jude and sleep, in general, I could not have cared less what came out of my mouth as long as it got Gabriel to go down for his nap.

My darling little angel stared up at me, but his blinks got slower and heavier, and when he finally, *finally* conked out, I breathed out a sigh of relief.

Honestly, I loved him so much it was terrifying, but he was the worst sleeper in the entire world. As I laid him down in his crib, I smiled. His hair, still as dark as when he was born, stuck straight out from his head like he’d stuck one of his fingers into a light socket.

Just like when Emmett was born, my son was continually fought over by every single member of my family, and the horrible side effect was a child who only got to sleep when someone was rocking him. I blamed Paige because she’d been known to knock people over in order to reach Gabriel first.

I turned on the white noise maker on the dresser in the nursery, and tiptoed out of the room with my newly acquired

ninja sneaking skills, something I was told you inherited upon birthing a light sleeper.

Jude had the day off, and since it had been hard to find time for a little “Mom and Dad alone” time once I cleared the six-week mark, we’d blocked out an hour on our calendars so no one could schedule any meetings and no one could infringe on something we both craved.

With the nursery door closed, I exhaled loudly. “Hallelujah.”

I whipped off my top and grimaced at the sight of my super sexy nursing bra. Then I shrugged because I knew one person who wouldn’t care in the slightest, and that was Jude. He loved the curves I still hadn’t quite lost since Gabriel had been born, something he reminded me of every time he slid his hands around my hips or ducked his head to kiss the tops of my gloriously huge boobs.

The door to our bedroom was cracked open, and soft music played from inside. It had taken me a bit longer to get Gabriel asleep than I planned, but I told Jude to keep the bed warmed up and ready for me.

Slowly pushing the door open with one hand, I peeked in and grinned.

Sprawled in the middle of bed with no shirt on and one hand on his beautiful, beautiful chest was Jude. And he was fast asleep. I wasn’t even too surprised. He’d been working himself hard since he started with Seattle. In the team, he’d found a supportive group of guys. Some, like him, used to play in England. Some were young Americans, and some from other parts of the world who just wanted to play, and were fine with a little less pay and not quite as many people in the stands.

Even though the stakes might not have been as high, Jude found a team that he was starting to love, even if it wasn’t Shepperton, a place that was home for so long. It probably always would be, given he decided to keep his house so we always had a place to stay when we visited.

Ninja-skills activated, I tiptoed into our bedroom and crawled onto the bed. He made a low sound, but his eyelids never opened. Even as I tucked myself up against his half-naked body, he didn't stir. Lifting my head before I laid it down on his chest, I glanced at the clock on the wall of our bedroom. Our hour-long block was almost half gone, and I had plans that night to go wedding dress shopping with Molly, Isabel, Claire, and Paige. Big sister was finally getting hitched, and I couldn't exactly bail on those plans because I wanted to bang my hot British baby daddy.

I sighed, laying my head against his shoulder and my arm over his waist. Even though my movements were gentle, it was enough to ... rouse him, as it were.

"Oh, bollocks," he murmured, turning to me, his muscular arms wrapping around me tightly. "I'm sorry I fell asleep."

"It's okay." I lifted my mouth to his for a soft kiss. He went back in for one more, longer and a little deeper, humming when I pulled away. "You've been working yourself pretty hard."

"I'm still not used to having a giant, crazy family and their giant, crazy plans keeping me busy outside of work."

With a laugh, I slid my hands up his chest. "Oh, come on, building that treehouse for Emmett wasn't your idea of fun?"

He gave me a look. "I'm quite sure whoever puts together those assembly instructions is sent straight from hell, and Bauer agrees with me. He almost lit the thing on fire when we realized we'd done the first half wrong."

I cupped the side of his face, and he turned to kiss my palm. "Thank you for doing that. Emmett will love it. And some day," I said softly, nibbling along the edge of his hard jaw, "Gabriel will play in there too."

Jude hummed. "Maybe he'll have a brother or sister by that time."

His hand slid into the back of my shorts and started pushing them down my restless hips. I laughed into his mouth. "You looking to knock me up again, McAllister?"

“Someday,” he answered ruefully. “But not quite yet. I’d like to marry you first, I think.”

My head snapped back, eyes wide, mouth hanging open. “Are you proposing to me right now? I did not imagine this happening while I was wearing a nursing bra and granny panties.”

He grinned. “No. But make no mistake, future Mrs. Lia Ward McAllister, it will happen. And you won’t see it coming.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I bet I will.”

Jude slid down, placing sucking kisses along my neck, then the tops of my breasts. “No, you won’t. But it will be so fun to watch you try to figure it out.”

With a shove to his shoulders, I rolled us until he was on his back. My leg swung over his hips, and I held him down. His big hands slid up my thighs.

“I don’t think you’ll last another six months, mister.” I leaned down to kiss him deeply. He groaned into my mouth.

“I love you,” he said between kisses. “But I cannot wait to watch you squirm while you wait.”

“I love you too,” I returned, digging my hand down into his shorts, biting onto my bottom lip when his eyes rolled back in his head. “But I think you’re mistaken about who’s going to do the watching right now.”

He laughed, and it was perfect. Everything about the life we were building was. It was exhausting and busy and sweet and perfect. Just how I liked it.



## *Second Epilogue*

Isabel

THE GYM WAS dark when I walked in, which suited me just fine. I’d memorized every inch of the place years earlier, so

the weak light of the sunrise was more than enough for me to navigate back to my office. As it was my day off, I wasn't actually supposed to be there, but my boss, Amy, was never too surprised when I came in. I took a sip of my coffee and stretched my free arm over my head with a wince. Went a little too hard in class the day before, and I groaned loudly when my muscles screamed in protest at the movement.

The groan is what had the door to Amy's office opening, the light of her small corner lamp illuminating the space. The shades were drawn over the glass that looked out over the gym, which I hadn't noticed earlier. Amy's head popped out. "What are you doing here?"

I stopped. "Why do you look nervous about the fact that I am?"

I'd worked for her and known her for too long to tiptoe around anything.

Amy sighed, her face falling in a look that had my stomach falling too. This was it. As soon as she looked over her shoulder and spoke to someone in her office, I knew this was the thing I'd been dreading.

A new owner.

A new boss.

I hated change. It made me all twitchy and uncomfortable.

But that was nothing on how I felt when Amy turned back to me and gave me an apologetic smile.

"I was going to do this tomorrow a bit more formally, but I should've known your ass would show up before sunrise on your day off."

"I needed to do inventory," I murmured, watching as she moved aside, and *he* filled the doorway.

I almost dropped my friggin' coffee, which would have been a shame for how little I slept the night before.

Before either of them said another word, I knew.

Honestly, I knew so much about him, it was ridiculous. I knew he was six-three and in his prime fighting days, he weighed in around two forty-five, tiptoeing him into the heavyweight class that he dominated for years.

I knew what it was like to watch him fight because I'd watched every one.

I knew his eyes were dark, and his mouth never, ever curved up into a smile.

I knew he'd retired a couple of years ago, after the death of his wife, in order to care for his daughter.

Amy cleared her throat, and it broke the connection between his gaze and mine.

"Iz, you might as well be the first to know." She gestured toward me. "This is my gym manager, Isabel. She's indispensable."

He took a step toward me, mouth flat but not mean, eyes dark and curious, and when he held out his massive hand, I inhaled shakily before slipping my palm against his.

When our hands touched, his brow lowered and his gaze held on that single connection point. Slowly, I pulled my hand back, hoping he didn't feel the tremor in my fingers.

"Aiden Hennessy," he said.

Like I didn't fucking know his name.

When he opened his mouth again, I almost slapped my hand over those lips because I didn't want him to say it. But my hand stayed at my side, and he spoke the words anyway, all low and dark, and I felt a shiver of foreboding at how my life was about to change.

"I'm your new boss."

*Want to read Isabel and Aiden's story? Keep reading after the Floored bonus epilogue to binge Forbidden, the emotional, single dad sports romance.*

## FLOORED BONUS EPILOGUE

A few years after *The End*

**Lia**

“**A**bsolutely not.”

I settled against the countertop and narrowed my eyes at my husband. “I’ll split the winnings with you.”

He laughed. “Not a chance, my love.”

“The pool is up to *hundreds* by now. We could go out to a really nice dinner, or buy those fancy pillows that I always say no to because they’re too expensive.”

Jude wagged a finger in my direction. “A good night’s sleep is never a waste of money.”

I dropped my head back and groaned. “You’re so stubborn.”

“Pot, meet kettle.”

He didn’t even look up when he said it, and that intensified my glare. But honestly, I don’t even know why I was trying to convince him of anything, he’d never, ever let this one go.

“You’re fighting a losing battle,” I told him.

Oof. Judging by the incredulous look that crossed his face—even hotter now than when I met him over six years earlier—I knew I’d made a huge mistake.



“He will *not* beat me, and if I let him win, then what kind of example am I setting for our son?” He spread his arms out. “That money is worth sacrificing your morals?”

“You’re not sacrificing your morals,” I said. “This whole thing has gotten wildly out of hand, and you know it.”

As I said it, the words still lingering in the air between us, Gabriel barreled into the kitchen, eyes wide and cheeks flushed. “Grandpa Logan got me a *signed jersey*, and he said we can go on the sidelines when they play Denver.” He bounced on the balls of his feet. “I get to meet my favorite player.”

I crouched down when Gabriel flung himself at me for a hug and tried to muffle my snort of laughter at the look on Jude’s face.

“Gabriel, that is amazing,” I told him. “Why don’t you go try on your jersey and show it to us?”

“Okay!” he yelled, tearing out of the kitchen and racing to the stairs that led to his bedroom.

“He is bribing our son after last weekend.” Jude held his arms out. “He’s a bloody cheat, that brother of yours.”

I rolled my lips between my teeth and gave Jude a patient look. So patient. Like ... I should be up for sainthood because this thing between him and Logan was getting ridiculous. The fact that Paige bet me on the outcome only made things worse.

Then my sisters got involved.

And their husbands.

Someone on the Wolves staff got wind of it.

So did Jude’s former teammate.

Now there was over a two thousand dollar betting pool that they could successfully convince Gabriel of his favorite sport—American football versus British football.

Honestly, I couldn’t make it up even if I wanted to.

Gabriel, to his credit, never seemed to be bothered when the two most important men in his life kept asking him what

his favorite sport was.

He always—and I mean, always—replied with, “I’m not sure yet. I like them all.”

The stakes grew as the weeks went on. My very athletically gifted son—who, for the record, loved both sports—was being wooed by professional athletes with private training sessions and signed paraphernalia from various teams around the world, because my husband and my brother would never be able to settle the debate about which football was better.

The irony wasn’t lost on me, given how Jude and I met.

I gave Jude a kiss while we waited for Gabriel to run back into the kitchen with his brand new Denver jersey on. He sighed against my lips, settling his hands low on my hips in the way he always did.

“I know, you think I’m cracked,” he whispered.

My arms wound around his neck. “I think,” I said quietly, “that you and my brother are the two most competitive men I’ve ever met in my entire life.”

“True,” he conceded with a grin.

Jude’s hands slid down over the curves of my backside, and he nibbled along my jawline. I exhaled a breathy laugh.

I tilted my head to the side, giving him better access to the side of my neck. “I also think our son is playing you both horribly.”

That had Jude pulling back. “You what?”

At his dumbfounded facial expression, I laughed. “Oh come on, he’s a bright kid. If he picks a favorite, all this awesome stuff you two chumps keep handing him will stop.”

Jude blinked. “Bloody hell, that is evil genius, isn’t it?”

I hummed. “Indeed.”

My husband swatted my ass and walked to the fridge. “He gets that from you, make no mistake.”

I pinched Jude's side, and he yelped.

Gabriel ran back into the kitchen, the orange jersey about three sizes too big on him. "Look, Mom," he gushed. "Isn't it awesome?"

"Totally awesome."

Jude shook his head, but still smiled. "So is football your favorite sport then?"

Gabriel didn't answer at first, too enamored with the scrawled signature of his current favorite player. "What?"

"Your favorite sport," Jude repeated. "Is it football?"

"Or soccer," I added.

Jude rolled his eyes. He'd lived in the states for years, and he still hated calling it that.

Gabriel shrugged. "I don't know. I like them all."

Then he was off, running back out to the backyard, so he could toss his football into the air and pretend like he was catching the game winning touchdown. My heart always did strange little flips when I realized just how old he seemed. Likes and dislikes and hobbies that could become a lifelong passion if fostered correctly.

Jude wrapped his arms around me, settling his chin on my shoulder while we watched our son play quarterback and receiver and then the placekicker, running around with his arms raised, reacting to imaginary cheers that only he could hear.

"Did you do that when you were young?" I asked.

Jude hummed. "Oh yes. If I had a dollar for every time I raised the trophy on the pitch of my schoolyard growing up, all the practice I did there after the school day was done ... I'd be able to buy out your betting pool quite quickly, my wife."

If I closed my eyes, I could see it as clearly as if it happened in front of me. He didn't have parents who fostered his love of sports growing up, but he damn well made sure that Gabriel would never experience that.

Anything Gabriel showed an interest in, Jude threw himself into immediately. When Pokémon was the obsession, he watched endless YouTube videos about how to draw the characters, opened dozens of collectors card packages so the two of them could sort the piles. When reading Harry Potter began earlier than either of us anticipated, Jude bought the box set and took over bedtime reading—complete with voices for each character.

Our son—even if he chose American football as his favorite—would have the most supportive father in the entire world.

But this, it was about beating Logan more than anything.

I turned my head and popped a kiss on his cheek. “I still think you should split the winnings with me.”

Jude said nothing, simply watched our son play the other football with a small, proud smile on his face.

Another week went by, a few more Wolves players added their names in the pot—and offered up conditioning sessions with Gabriel. Jude roped in a former Golden Boot winner from the Premier League to send Gabriel a video showing him some dribbling tips.

We arrived to Logan and Paige’s house for a family dinner, and Gabriel shot straight out of the car, running through the garage so he could rifle through the giant lockers full of sports equipment.

A volleyball went sailing out of the corner, followed closely by a badminton birdie.

“Whatcha looking for?” I asked.

Gabriel yanked something out with a mighty tug, whooping with excitement at the sight of the dusty skateboard. My eyebrows shot up on my forehead.

“Do you know how to ride that?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes.”

“Grab a helmet,” I yelled to his retreating back.

Jude did a double take when Gabriel sped past him on the board. “Is this something we’re doing now?”

I shrugged. “Apparently.”

Neither of us thought anything of it.

Until Gabriel asked for a trip to the skate park about five minutes from our house.

Then two visits the week after that.

He left his signed jersey untouched for an unprecedented three days, the same went for the new soccer ball and cleats that Jude got for him. Gabriel pulled money from his own piggy bank to buy the cool kind of helmet and asked if he could get a board for Christmas.

But it was when we managed to schedule a visit up to Whistler to stay at Claire and Bauer’s Vancouver house that my deep-seated suspicions of this new hobby were proven true.

I watched from their kitchen window, flanked on either side by my twin sister and my husband, as Bauer crouched next to Gabriel and showed him different tips on how to flip the board, how to take the curves on a skate park in a faster way.

“So it’s his fault,” I murmured.

Claire laughed. “Apparently.”

It was so close to what I’d said when Gabriel first pulled the skateboard out that Jude shook his head.

“Never thought to keep my eye on the snowboarder,” he said. “That man loves to keep us on our toes, doesn’t he?”

When Gabriel took a tumble off the board, I sucked in a breath, ready to go outside to check on him. Jude settled a hand low on my back.

“Just wait, love.” He was watching with keen interest.

Bauer spoke too quietly for us to hear anything through the open window, and as he tightened the straps on Gabriel’s

helmet, did a quick check of elbows and knees, he said something that made Gabriel laugh.

Then my son popped back up and got right back on the board. His smile was wide, not a trace of fear or worry on his face as he coasted around their circular driveway under Bauer's skillful instruction.

"Our kids have the coolest fucking family," I whispered.

Claire laughed, and even Jude cracked a reluctant smile.

"Admit it," I said, nudging him with my elbow.

He grunted. "If this means Logan loses, I'll admit just about anything right now."

After a few more minutes, Gabriel hopped off the skateboard and raced back into the house. "Mom, Dad," he gushed, cheeks flushed and eyes bright, "did you see that flip I did?"

Jude held out a fist. "Epic. Absolutely epic."

Gabriel bumped his fist against his dad's, smiling so widely that I thought his face might crack. "Skateboarding is *totally* my favorite," he said, then rushed right back out of the house.

I burst out laughing, as did Claire.

Jude shook his head. "Unbelievable."

"And yet," I said slowly, "it's kinda perfect."

"I lost, didn't I?" my husband said on a sigh.

"Yup." Claire and I spoke in tandem.

"But ... so did Logan," he continued, smug grin gracing his features. "I'm calling him right now."

Claire and I shook our heads, then turned back to watching her husband keep on winning the unofficial 'coolest uncle' award, single-handedly dismantling my chances at winning the pot.

"Should we tell them that Bauer bet on himself sweeping the whole thing?" Claire mused.

I laughed under my breath. “Nah.”

My sister wound her arm around my waist, and I set my head on hers.

“I like our husbands a lot,” she said.

“Me too, Claire. Me too.”

**FORBIDDEN**

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*To the person who holds onto their heart tightly.  
It's precious, dear reader, give to it someone who will cherish  
it.*

## PROLOGUE

Aiden

*Two and a half years earlier*

“Does this mean I’ll get a new mommy?”

Amazing how kids could say the most innocent things and make you feel like you’d just taken a knife to the gut.

Shielding my eyes from the California sun, I glanced up at Anya, sitting at the perch of her slide. When I could breathe enough to form words, I tried to keep my face even. “Why would you get a new mom?”

She kicked her legs, staring at the bank of windows where Beth’s hospital bed was set up—at her request—so she could watch Anya play. “If Mommy is going to heaven soon, does that mean I’ll get a new one?”

I’d learned how to explain a lot to a five-year-old in the past few months.

Cancer.

Why Beth had decided against chemo.

Hospice.

Heaven.

But this ... this was new. And I had to pinch my eyes shut to fight the brutal wave of fresh grief as it hit me.

Every day was a new one, despite the reality that we'd been living in for ninety-two days since her diagnosis. And I was convinced every wave was the worst, and the next one might not knock me to my knees until moments like this.

Beth's cancer had forced me to discover a side of myself I'd never known. A wellspring of patience, of acceptance, of realizing that everything I'd dedicated my life to didn't really matter very much in the grand scheme of things. Being good at something didn't automatically make it vital.

Fighting used to be everything. And now, it was simply something I used to do, and in no way did it prepare me to bury my wife before we both turned thirty-five.

Nor did it help me when my daughter asked about a new mommy.

"Maybe we can talk about this later, okay?" I said wearily. Sleep was scarce for me even though Beth was doing more and more of it. Her nurse couldn't give me an exact timeline, but as her appetite waned and her energy decreased, we knew we were down to weeks. Maybe days.

"Okay, Daddy." She swooshed down the slide, running back around to the ladder. Instead of stopping on the platform, she hopped nimbly up to the beam stretching across the top of the swing set. "Look!"

I shook my head. "Anya, you know you can't be up that high."

My fearless girl, she giggled, moving to stand on the beam. I was on my feet in the next breath, holding my arms out. "Come on, big jump and I'll catch you."

If I freaked out, she'd do something even crazier, like trying to land on her feet, and yes, I'd learned that the hard way too. This was the same child who, at the age of three, was found swinging from the dining room light fixture after climbing up on the table.

Anya stood carefully, arms out, tongue trapped between her teeth. "I hope Mommy can see this. I know it'll make her feel better," she said.

I smiled. Another knife. Another knock to my lungs. “I’m sure it will, gingersnap.”

“Ready?”

I nodded.

She jumped, and I caught her, swinging her down toward the ground, then back up into the air as she squealed happily.

“You’re so good at that, daddysnap.” She was a little unsteady on her feet when I set her down, and her tipsy expression had me smiling.

“Glad I’m good at something.”

Anya crouched by the grass and plucked a small weed that resembled a white flower. “I’m gonna go bring this to Mommy!” she yelled, hair flying out behind her as she ran into the house.

I sighed heavily, swiping a hand over my mouth as I tried to get my bearings. The nurse aide was still at the house, so I stayed outside doing yard work, letting my muscles heat, my blood flow into something productive. Something I could control. By the time Anya ran back outside, clutching a paper in her hand, I wasn’t even sure how much time had passed.

“Look! I got a list!” She held the paper out to me, beaming excitedly.

“What’s the list for?” My hands were sweaty and dirty, and I showed her. “I don’t think I should mess up your pretty drawing.”

She dropped to the grass and laid the paper out carefully. I tilted my head and tried to make sense of what she’d written. Kindergartners were not known for their spelling skills.

But I could see a cookie.

Flowers.

A woman with long yellow hair and a big red mouth. She was either screaming or laughing, I wasn’t entirely sure. I scratched my head.

“Why don’t you explain it to me, gingersnap?”

Please, dear Lord, explain it.

“I asked Mommy about my new mommy someday.” She grinned up at me. My heart stopped. Just stopped. No beating. So did my lungs. Anya started pointing at the paper while I simply tried to breathe. “She told me that she’d be sweet and funny and make you laugh.” She tapped the paper. “See? She’s laughing.”

Her finger moved to the cookie.

“And she’d make really good cookies, just like Mommy, because Mommy said you suck at measuring and will need someone to do it.”

My eyes blurred, and I crouched carefully next to my daughter, laying my hand on her back as I stared at the horrifying picture that she worked so hard on. I wanted to rip it up. I wanted to burn it.

Anya pointed at the stick figure. “And Mommy said she’d be soft where you’re hard, and I didn’t know how to draw that, but anyone who’d be a good mommy might already have kids and know how to hold me when I’m scared and sing me to sleep. And I just added the flower because I like drawing them.”

I rubbed the back of my hand over my cheek so Anya didn’t see. “You did really good on your picture, gingersnap,” I said in a choked voice.

She ran her fingers over the jumbled letters that must’ve made sense to her. “I didn’t want to forget. This way you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.” Then Anya carefully folded the paper and handed it to me. “You can keep it, Daddy. So you’ll know who to look for.”

I licked my lips, taking the piece of paper like it was a bomb set to explode. But I smiled at my daughter. “Thank you.”

She flung herself at me in a tight hug, and I stared up at the sky.

When Anya ran back into the house, I stood slowly, paper in hand, and made my way to Beth’s bed.

Her eyes were closed, her chest moving with shallow breaths.

I took the chair next to her, and as I slid her bony fingers into mine, her eyes opened.

“Why’d you do that?” I whispered.

She smiled faintly. “I knew you’d be mad at me.”

“I’m not mad,” I told her. “I’m ...” My voice trailed off when I didn’t have any words. This time, I let a tear fall unchecked, and Beth watched it with a sad expression on her face. “I just hate that she asked you.”

My wife—my funny, outgoing, loud, passionate wife who could no longer muster the energy to get out of bed—tightened her fingers around mine. “She’s worried, Aiden. I just wanted her to ...” She made a small shrugging motion. “I wanted to make her feel better.”

“I know.” I sniffed.

“Promise me something, though,” Beth whispered.

Immediately, I was shaking my head.

“Promise me that, if you find someone like that, you won’t ignore it.” Her voice wavered, and I wanted to rage. Scream. Break something.

I sighed, finally meeting her eyes. “All I got out of that picture was that she has a mouth the size of my face and likes cookies.”

Beth breathed out a laugh. “That’s a gross oversimplification of what I said.”

“What did you say?” I asked quietly. “Who’d you conjure up for me, Beth? Because they won’t be you.” I shook my head again. “I don’t care what list you just gave her. They won’t be you.”

My wife ignored my attitude. She’d known me too long, knew it was easier to brush past it. She’d learned that lesson when we were eighteen, and she kissed me for the first time when she got sick of waiting for me to do it.

“I told Anya that hopefully someday you’d find someone kind and funny, someone who smiles and laughs easily because we both know you don’t.” I held her eyes, unable to argue. “Someone soft where you’re hard, someone who will know how to handle all the things that Anya will need help with. Someone who can bake cookies for her, and sing her to sleep, and teach you how to handle all her big emotions because I know they scare the shit out of you, Aiden.”

I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to hear any of this, but like any conversation I had with Beth these days, I forced myself to soak up every word. Every nuance. Every second.

“And for fuck’s sake, don’t fall for the first tight-bodied fangirl who fawns over you,” she teased. “I’d haunt you for the rest of your life.”

Somehow, I managed a smile. “Would you?”

“I’d make a bitch of a ghost.” Her frame was wracked with a rib-rattling cough.

Lifting her featherlight hand up to my mouth, I kissed her knuckles. She smelled like medicine. Her fingers were cold against my mouth, and all I wanted to do was warm her. Fix her.

And I couldn’t.

The helplessness had me wanting to wreck everything. Especially when she kept talking. Her words were so much worse than the knife; it was like a hundred of them. The girl next door, who I’d known for more than half my life, who’d had my heart for almost a decade was going to leave a gaping hole, and I didn’t want to think about the fact that I couldn’t fill it.

“You have excellent taste, Aiden Hennessy,” she said quietly. “You must if you chose me.”

I gave her a look. “I think it was you who did the choosing. The way I remember it, at least.”

She hummed, eyes falling closed. “That’s right. I had excellent taste.” She slid her hand over my cheek and down the line of my jaw. “That’s why you should trust me.”

“I do,” I whispered.

“Good.” Gently, she exerted pressure on my chin until I couldn’t look away. “That’s why I answered Anya’s question. Because you two will be okay, and she needed to know that. You will be happy again, even if I’m not there.”

“Beth.” My voice cracked on her name, eyes burning dangerously. “Please.”

“You will be okay without me,” she repeated, her own gaze clear and strong.

It was like she pulled the knife out—every single one—and everything they’d held in came pouring out in a messy rush. I dropped my head onto the side of the hospital bed, and while my wife stroked the back of my head, I wept.



**AIDEN**

“It’s a *little* crooked.”

A slow sigh escaped my lips, not that my daughter could hear with the unicorn-covered blankets pulled up past her nose.

Hand on my hips, I stared at the offending item. “I don’t know, gingersnap. It looks like it did last night, right?”

That stumped her for a solid thirty seconds. Her blue eyes stared straight up, unblinking and unwavering, and I could practically *see* her trying to dig up reasons the hot pink tulle canopy was off center and thereby unacceptable. If it was unacceptable, she wouldn’t be able to sleep.

Her eyes darted toward me, then back up to the pink cloud. “Did Uncle Clark measure it?”

“Uncle Clark measures *everything*.”

The sound of her giggle was muffled by the mound of blankets. But nonetheless, I heard it, and something eased in my chest. Bedtime had been our biggest struggle in the two years since Beth died. It began about six months after we buried her and with just little things at first.

*Daddy, can you move that lamp a little closer to my bed? It’s too far away, and I can’t see it.*

*Can I have one more blanket over my feet? They’re cold, and I won’t be able to sleep if they’re cold.*

*Can I get one more stuffed animal from the playroom?  
Four isn't enough, and I think I need five to sleep.*

Over the next year, the things that bothered her got a little bit bigger and a little bit harder to accommodate. But it faded as we rounded the eighteen-month mark. Her bedroom stayed untouched, and I was able to slip out after reading her a story, saying a prayer, and wishing a good night to each and every plush character that filled the queen-sized bed with her.

Then we moved from California to Washington to be closer to my family so I didn't have to raise my daughter completely solo. So Anya could have grandparents and her uncles and aunt around. And the first night in our new home—where we'd been for the last two weeks—it began again.

“How about this,” I said slowly. “I'll go downstairs and see if Uncle Beckham brought his tape measure over, and he can check Uncle Clark's measuring skills. Sound good?”

She nodded, tufts of white-blond hair sticking up around her head.

Carefully, I bent over and dropped a kiss on her forehead. “Love you, gingersnap.”

“Love you more, daddysnap.”

My lips curled into a smile.

“You're coming back after you talk to Uncle Beckham, right?”

“Yes.”

Anya sighed, slipping the covers down a couple of inches, enough that I could see the gap where her two front teeth used to be when she smiled at me. “Okay.”

The bedtime routine was a dance the two of us had performed countless times on our own, and I could do it half-asleep.

Turn on the small lamp on her nightstand.

Adjust the framed picture of her and Beth so that Anya could see it easily.

Adjust the canopy so it enclosed as much of her bed as possible.

Stop just before I left her room, blow her a kiss, which she caught and smacked over her mouth.

But my smile dropped as I descended the stairs down to the main floor, where my brothers Beckham and Deacon waited for me.

They were on the floor of the sprawling family room, assembling something pink and white and covered in glitter.

“What *is* that?” I asked.

Deacon brought a glittery crown up to his forehead. “I think it’s supposed to be one of those vanity things.”

My eyebrows rose slowly. “Who bought her that?”

“Eloise,” they said in unison.

“Ahh.” Our youngest sibling had taken to purchasing anything Anya could possibly want since we moved here. My parents weren’t much different, given she was the only grandchild—which meant the only niece for my four unmarried siblings. If Anya wasn’t a complete monster by the time she turned ten, it would be a miracle.

With a weariness I felt in every bone and muscle, I sank down onto the couch while they continued to work.

“What was it tonight?” Beckham asked.

I sighed. “The canopy. She wasn’t sure it was centered over her bed.”

His face cracked into a smile as he screwed a leg onto the small white vanity bench. “Clark hung it,” he said by way of answer.

Which meant yes, it was centered. Our middle brother, aka genius boy, was never wrong when it came to things like that.

“I should go up with a measuring tape just in case she’s still awake.”

Beckham and Deacon shared a look.

“What?” I asked.

“You sure you should still be indulging her?” Beckham asked. His eyes stayed firmly planted on the furniture, though.

My fingers found the bridge of my nose and pinched tight. “No, I don’t know that. But if either of you have any helpful advice in how to help a seven-year-old girl who lost her mom, then I’m open to suggestions.”

“Maybe you should take her to talk to someone if she’s still doing stuff like this.”

“It was getting better back in LA.” I dropped my hand and studied the crisscrossing scars along my knuckles. “Once she gets used to this house and her new school, it’ll get better here too.”

“It’s been two years, Aiden,” Deacon added.

Like I didn’t know when my wife died. I could’ve counted the days with ease. Without looking at a calendar, I knew how many hours it had been. Maybe even down to the minute, if I had Clark’s skill with numbers. A pervasive emptiness came from losing the person you loved, and maybe that emptiness eased with each passing minute and hour and day, turning into something manageable, but it was always there.

But instead of telling him that, of trying to explain to someone who didn’t have a family of his own and had never loved someone whose loss would carve a hole into his being, I simply nodded. “I know.”

One of the strangest things about being back was moments like this, when my younger brothers helped me. With anything, honestly. Not just that they’d been here every day doing things like hanging hot pink tulle canopies and assembling princess vanities, but they were giving me parenting advice.

The stool assembled, Beckham set it on the floor and gave the cushioned seat a pat. “Not bad. Maybe I have a future in furniture assembly.”

Without looking up from the vanity, Deacon pointed at the front leg. “That’s on backward.”

“The hell it is.” Beckham turned it over, then cursed under his breath.

It was easier to smile than it had been leaving Anya’s room. My brother’s worry only underscored my own. My daughter, seven going on seventeen, was smart and sweet and a complete daredevil. But come bedtime, when the dark took over the skies, she let every fear in her head take the wheel.

“Beer in the fridge?” I asked.

Deacon looked up, then nodded. “Might not be cold yet.”

“Fine by me.”

The house was unpacked, even if it was light on the furnishings. Our bungalow in LA was half the size—and twice the cost—as the home I’d found for Anya and me overlooking Lake Sammamish in Bellevue. And the fridge was no different than the rest of the house. Just shy of empty. Inside was a case of beer, leftover pizza, deli meat, and whatever my mom had bought for Anya’s meals. I moved aside a bright pink water bottle and snagged a bottle of beer.

I didn’t drink often, which my brothers knew, but today was a day I could justify it.

The bottle opened with a twist of my hand, and as the metal top clattered onto the tile floor of the kitchen, I took a deep swallow.

Since the day I retired from fighting, I hadn’t second-guessed any decision I’d made. But today, as I scrawled my signature on a hundred papers in front of a stone-faced notary, effectively making the biggest purchase of my entire life—a gym about to be renamed Hennessy’s—gave me my first moment of pause.

My instincts were always, always spot-on. If I didn’t trust my instincts, I’d never have survived a single fight. Sometimes your body reacted before your mind had a moment to wonder if it was the right move. That was what training was for. Because a shift of your leg in the wrong direction meant you were pinned with your arm above your head. If you didn’t

block an uppercut to your jaw or your kidneys, it was a hundred times harder to win.

When I visited the gym for the first time, about a year after Beth died, I felt a shift when I walked in the door. It was the only way I could explain it. Something in my gut screamed at me that it was the right gym, the right place, the right time for Anya and me.

“What’s with your face?”

I blinked because Beckham walked into the kitchen without me realizing it. “Thinking.”

“Get your paperwork squared away?”

Nodding, I took another sip of beer.

He pointed at me. “You’re doing it again.”

Sure enough, my forehead was wrinkled, and my mouth turned in a frown. I took a deep breath, trying to smooth out my expression.

“I’m fine.”

Because my little brother knew me, he didn’t push on that comment. Grabbing a beer of his own, he cracked it open and took a long drag while he stared out of the kitchen window overlooking the lake. “Remember your last fight?”

I gave him a dry look.

Beckham smiled. “The details, I mean. How well do you remember?”

Over a career that spanned almost a decade, I had a few fights that I remembered every move, every pivot, every fall to the mat, every strike as it hit my body, and that was one of them. I knew it was my last, not that I’d announced it yet.

It was my quickest win, over and done in less than three minutes.

Pure rage, anger that was being funneled through my fists and feet and legs, fueled those three minutes. Inside that ring, I was in control. As I thought about it now, until I decided to

move and buy Wilson's Gym, it was the last time I really felt that way.

But instead of explaining that to Beckham, I simply said, "I remember enough."

"Do you miss it?"

"Yes." I took a drink of beer and sighed. "And no."

Before he answered, Beckham stared through the window by the kitchen sink overlooking the lake. "You sure you want to be stuck at a desk all day?"

I shrugged. "I don't think I will be, once I get the lay of the land. Amy said I could call her if I needed help, and there's a manager that's been running the place for her for the past seven or so years."

"He any good?"

"Don't be sexist, Beckham."

He grinned. "*She* any good?"

"*She* is not aware she has a new boss, so I don't know anything other than what Amy told me," I admitted.

"That'll be fun."

I rubbed a hand over my eyes. "Appreciate you pointing that out."

"It wouldn't be so bad if you weren't so ... you."

My hand dropped. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He tipped his beer in my direction. "Aiden, you have the charm of a rabid porcupine."

"Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

"Nope. Just quality time with my brothers while we assemble bright pink princess furniture."

I rolled my eyes.

Deacon poked his head into the kitchen. "Anya just called for you." He held out a measuring tape, which I took with a sigh.

I took the steps two at a time and schooled my face when I pushed open her door.

“Was the tape measure lost?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Sorry, gingersnap, I was talking to Uncle Beckham about my new job.”

She snuggled back underneath her blanket, and in the dim light of her room, I could see the curiosity light her eyes. The canopy was effectively forgotten, which wasn't a bad thing. Surreptitiously, I tucked the measuring tape into the pocket of my gym shorts.

“Is it your first day tomorrow?”

With a nod, I sat on the edge of her bed. “I signed all the papers today, but I'm going to go just for a little bit in the morning so Miss Amy can show me a few things on the computer. Grandma will be here when I leave, so she'll probably make you breakfast when you wake up.”

Her lips pursed in thought. “Can I have blueberry pancakes?”

“I don't see why not.”

Anya smiled, turning on her side with her arm gripping a small plush dog. “Are you scared for your first day? Do you think they'll be nice to you?”

In the innocently spoken question, I heard her own fears about starting a new school, even if it was still a couple of weeks off.

“Yeah,” I told her. “I think they'll be nice to me. The important thing about meeting new people is making sure you treat them the way you want to be treated, right?”

She nodded. “Mommy always said that too. The Gold Rule.”

“Close,” I murmured, ruffling a hand over her head.

“You're really quiet when you meet new people, though, Daddy.”

“I suppose I am.”



“Does that mean you want people to be quiet with you too?” she asked, completely innocent, and like she did just about every day, she broke my heart just a little further.

But I decided to answer her honestly. “Depends on the person. I like hearing you talk, gingersnap.”

She giggled. “You have to say that.”

“Nah. I only say it because I mean it.”

“I think you should figure out what your new people like, Daddy. They may not be like you.”

“You’re pretty smart, you know that?”

Anya sighed, snuggling her face into the stuffed animal. “Maybe you should take The Mommy List with you,” she said quietly. “Just in case.”

The Mommy List, as she’d started referring to it, was tucked in the frame behind Beth’s picture, at Anya’s request. Over the past two years, anytime I went somewhere new, she asked me if I needed it. Just in case.

I always said the same thing. And she never pushed it.

Like I could forget that damn list anyway.

“Maybe I should.” I smiled. “You ready to go to sleep now?”

She nodded. “I think so.”

I stood, leaning over to drop a kiss on her forehead. By the time I walked into the hallway and pulled her door closed behind me, her eyes were already closed.

Anya’s words rang in my head, and I pulled out my phone and decided to send Amy a text.

**Me: I know I’ll be there in the morning, but so I don’t forget to bring it up, I’ll take any tips on the best way to introduce myself to the staff.**

She responded almost immediately.

**Amy: Most of them were aware this was a possibility, so I don’t think anyone will be too shocked, but we’ll set**

**up a time for you to meet Isabel before we do a meeting with everyone.**

**ME: How do you think she'll take it?**

**AMY: She'll be your biggest ally in this. She's smart and dedicated, and completely unflappable. I swear, I've never seen anything knock her off-balance.**

**ME: Unflappable sounds pretty good right now.**

**AMY: Tomorrow is her day off, but she'll probably show up at some point. Not many surprises when it comes to Isabel.**

I tucked my phone away and sighed. "No surprises sounds pretty good to me."

**ISABEL**

No one in my life knew about it, but my favorite possession in the entire world was a metal box. My Nan—my half-brother Logan’s mom—gave it to me when I turned ten, and she told me it was the best way to keep important things safe. Things I wasn’t ready to share with anyone else or wanted to make sure were taken care of. It came right after a screaming match with Molly because she’d found my diary and made fun of me for something I’d written about a boy in my class. A place to lock things up from my sister’s prying eyes sounded like the best possible gift.

It was sleek and black, a little beat up around the edges, and had a thick lock that had grown dull with age. Along the heavy metal top was a red stripe, and I always liked that surprising pop of bright color. The rest of the box was so forbidding, but that little bit of color gave it personality.

She told me it was vintage, that they didn’t make lockboxes like it anymore. Stamped into the metal along the bottom was 43 Bond, not that I even really knew what that meant.

Over the years, I was very selective of what I put into that box. There were a few keepsakes, some that brought happy memories, and some that served as an important reminder, good or bad.

A silver locket Molly bought me for my eleventh birthday after saving her money for months because she knew I wanted

it. I used to look at it when I wanted to remember why my older sister was, in fact, not the bane of my existence.

A ribbon from my senior prom corsage. The date had been forgettable, but his sweaty man-child hands trying to figure out what to do with me were ... not. That guy—just like the few others who'd made the sad attempts to date me as I stretched my long legs into adulthood—couldn't carry a conversation if it was strapped to his back. That one came out of the box if I ever needed to remember why it was easier to say no.

A bracelet our mom gave me just a few weeks before she left us on our brother's front porch. I'd never worn it. Usually, that one stayed tucked way the hell back because even the smallest glimpse of that delicate silver pattern had my heart racing. People knew when they're going to leave you. The bracelet didn't need to come out of the box in order to remind me of that.

Some of the items weren't that maudlin, don't worry.

The first pair of hand wraps from the kickboxing gym that had been my second home, my life, since I started working there at eighteen. I was fourteen the first time I wore them.

Some were silly, or made me feel silly, which was a little different. I didn't usually pull those out to study them. But I was getting there. All of the storytelling had a point, I promise.

As I got older, I realized the box—strong and secure and protective—was a fitting symbol for me.

How sexy, right?

Isabel Ward, the human lockbox.

I was tough and strong. Everything important stayed safe where no one could touch or ruin it. There was space inside me for a lot more, but the older I got, the less opportunity there was for the lid to be opened.

To be honest, I didn't even really try, which was fine. Nothing that required pity or embarrassment. I *liked* keeping my lid locked, if you know what I mean. No man had pried

that baby open yet, and I was perfectly, one-hundred-percent okay with that.

Not that I judged people who ... let someone open their box with frequency; this was just a better choice for me. Safer. Letting it stay closed was better than having it be mishandled.

The box, stored safely in the spare unused room at Logan and his wife Paige's house, was something I hadn't touched in a long time. Hadn't added anything to it since I was eighteen.

But for some reason, I thought about the box and the silly items I didn't usually look at, before going to bed.

I wasn't claiming to be psychic or anything. But a few times in my life, I'd fought sleep for hours, consumed with the overwhelming urge to look at something in that box. Urge wasn't even the right word. It was so strong, my legs jittered and my fingers twitched restlessly.

The night before my mom left us, I swear to you on my Nan's grave (which I only did when I really, really meant something), I felt that box calling to me like it was *alive*. At that time, it was in the back of my closet where my nosy-ass sisters couldn't find it, and I pulled it out while the sky was dark. There wasn't as much in it back then, so it didn't take me long to rifle through the contents. Checking that the bracelet was still there, it helped, and I'd been able to sleep.

What an omen *that* turned out to be.

A couple of years later, it happened again. A different home housed me and the box—the one Logan had bought for our new makeshift family. Something made me open it again, and I studied a picture that I'd tucked inside. It was the five of us. My sisters, Molly, Lia, and Claire, and then Logan. Our protector, the parent who wasn't a parent, the one who stepped in and righted our world when my mom had turned it upside down.

The next day, he brought Paige home and introduced her as his future wife. This time, the change was good. The red-haired tornado, someone I'd take a bullet for, became the mother I always wanted.

That was the last time it happened.

Until now.

I laid in bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to visualize the box that I hadn't opened in probably seven years. I cataloged everything inside it, trying to decipher what it meant. What change might be on the horizon?

Lemme tell you. Women who likened themselves to metal lockboxes did not like change. We hated change.

It was terrifying, like standing outside knowing that a storm was bearing down on you, but you hadn't yet felt the first fat raindrop.

Even though it was my day off, I showered and dressed to go to work, donning the emotional armor of my favorite dark purple quarter zip shirt with the gym's logo over my heart. Before I left the apartment, I ate strawberry Pop-Tarts, my version of the breakfast of champions. I sipped coffee on my drive with no music on the radio because all I could think about was what proverbial bomb was about to go off in my life.

For months, I knew my boss, Amy, was going to sell the gym, but she'd never actually said anything to me about who might replace her. But still, as I took the familiar route to work, where I'd invested every ounce of my heart since the day she hired me to manage the place, I had a sinking suspicion that my premonition was about this place that was so dear to me.

My headlights cut a swath through the empty parking lot in front of the low, square building that housed the gym. Instead of pulling around to the back where I normally parked, I decided to come through the front.

I locked the door behind me and punched the security code as it beeped on the wall. The gym was dark when I walked in, which suited me just fine. I'd memorized every inch of the place years earlier, so the weak light of the sunrise was more than enough for me to navigate back to my office.

If I could stay busy enough, with the boxes of merchandise I needed to unpack and display, the training schedule I needed to finalize, and the timecards I needed to finish, maybe I could ignore the bad juju feeling.

I took a sip of my coffee and stretched my free arm over my head with a wince. Went a little too hard in class the day before, and I groaned loudly when my muscles screamed in protest at the movement.

The groan is what had the door to Amy's office opening, the light of her small corner lamp illuminating the space. The shades were drawn over the glass that looked out over the gym, which I hadn't noticed earlier. Amy's head popped out. "Iz. You're here like, really early."

I stopped, my heart beginning to tumble over each thudding beat. "Why do you look nervous about the fact that I am?"

I'd worked for her and known her for too long to tiptoe around anything.

Amy sighed, her face falling in a look that had my stomach falling too. She'd been my boss and known me too long to tiptoe around *me*. This was it. As soon as she looked over her shoulder and spoke to someone in her office, I knew this was the thing I'd been dreading.

A new owner.

A new boss.

But that dread was nothing on how I felt when Amy turned back to me and gave me an apologetic smile. It was the apology I saw that set my heart hammering.

My skin felt too tight and my bones too big because I knew whoever was in that office was the thing ... the feeling I'd had.

Suddenly, I wanted to run. I didn't want to face whatever—whoever—it was.

Amy's dark eyes searched my face. "I was going to do this tomorrow a bit more formally, but I had a feeling your ass

would show up on your day off.”

“I needed to unpack those boxes,” I said, but my voice trailed off when she moved aside, and *he* filled the doorway.

Holy. Fucking. Hell. It was even worse than I thought. Like all the things that terrified me were rolled into one big, muscular, better-looking-in-person package sent to make me feel wildly out of control.

I hated that I was right, that my sleepless night had indeed warned me that something like this was going to happen. I knew what item in the box had called to me, and oh, my hell, now I wanted to shred it to bits just so I could pretend it didn't exist.

*It would be fine*, I told myself.

This was no place for the teenage version of Isabel, the one who'd been a little uncertain and a lot terrified of what people thought of me. I was not her anymore. No matter what was in that fucking box with his name on it.

It was the only reason I didn't watch where I was walking, and my foot caught on the edge of the ropes.

With a gasp, I pitched forward, my coffee falling with a wet slap onto the ground, my hand dripping from the mess that was left of my cup after I squashed it to death in my hands.

“I am so sorry,” I said.

Amy laughed. “This is the unflappable Isabel Ward I was telling you about.”

My face burned, but she leaned over to toss me a towel, which I used to wipe off my hand, and toss it over the spot of coffee that I'd undoubtedly be mopping up in a few minutes. As I pushed the towel around the mess with my foot, I felt his gaze on me. Carefully, I lifted my head to meet it head-on. See if I was capable of it.

This could.

Not.

Be.



Happening.

Honestly, I knew so much about him that it was ridiculous. From my years of study, of keeping tabs on his career, keeping tabs on *him*. I knew he was six-foot-three, and in his prime fighting days, he weighed in around two forty-five, tiptoeing him into the heavyweight class that he dominated for years. He'd lost weight since he retired, not that it lessened his impact.

I knew what it was like to watch him fight because I'd watched every one.

Every one.

I knew that his name was scrawled into the pages of fifteen-year-old Isabel's diary because when he had his first fight, I was utterly convinced I'd meet and marry him someday. For years, every fumbling boy who tried to flirt with me, ask me out, anything with me, was held up to the standard of him in my mind. With the stench of my spilled coffee hanging around us, I swear, I could've died from the mortification.

I knew his eyes were dark green, and his mouth rarely ever curved up into a smile.

I knew he'd retired a couple of years ago, after the death of his wife, in order to care for his daughter.

Having him stand in front of me was like having someone hand you the single thing you used to want, used to crave, and now you just had to pray that it was as good in real life as you'd imagined it would be.

If he was anything like what I'd built up in my mind, I was absolutely fucked.

Amy cleared her throat, and it broke the connection between his gaze and mine.

"Iz, you might as well be the first to know," Amy said.

He took a step toward me, mouth flat but not mean, eyes dark and curious, and when he held out his massive hand, I took a step of my own. Unfortunately, I inhaled shakily before

slipping my palm against his. The reason this was unfortunate was because it was loud and impossible for him not to hear.

When our hands touched, his brow lowered, and his gaze held on that single connection point. Slowly, I pulled my hand back, hoping he didn't feel the tremor in my fingers.

“Aiden Hennessy,” he said.

Like I didn't know his name.

When he opened his mouth again, I almost slapped my hand over those lips because I didn't want him to say it. But my hand stayed at my side, and he spoke the words anyway, all low and dark, and I felt a shiver of foreboding at how my life was about to change.

“I'm the new owner.”

It took a few seconds to find my voice, and when I did, it was softer than I would've liked.

“N-nice to meet you.” Gawd, I could've slapped myself for that one single hiccup on the first word. But, honestly, it was hard to speak over the roaring in my ears. Quite easily, I could count on one hand the times I'd met an athlete that gave me butterflies—butterflies!

Aiden Hennessy, my new boss, who I'd see *every single day* unless he fired me for being completely incompetent, didn't just set them off in my belly. From my head to my toes and every inch between was coated in fluttering, fluttering, vividly colored, beating wings.

I wanted to douse them in gasoline and light all those little fuckers on fire.

Amy was giving me a weird look because soft-spoken and me did not go together. Ever.

He studied my face for a second, then nodded. “Amy tells me you've worked here a while?”

Amy laughed, laying a hand on my arm before I could formulate an answer. “Isabel walked through these doors when she was, what, thirteen? Fourteen? I may not have hired her until she was eighteen, but since the day I laid eyes on that

scrappy little girl with a killer right hook, I haven't been able to shake her."

My cheeks felt hot again as he appraised me. I gave Amy a slight smile. "She tried, too."

"Please. I would've been crazy to get rid of you," she said. "She's the reason we're doing as well as we are, and don't let her tell you a word differently. The clients love her, and so do the employees. We all do."

"Yet you're leaving," I heard myself say. My mouth snapped shut because it wasn't exactly the kind of thing one should say in front of the new owner.

Amy's eyes watered, and to my abject horror, I felt mine do the same. "You knew this was coming, Iz."

Slowly, I nodded. "I know."

When she dropped her chin to her chest, her long, black braids fell over her shoulder, and I heard the quietest of sniffs. The big hulking man watched us carefully, without a lick of judgment in his expression at the display of emotion.

"I'll give you two a minute," he said, voice a low grumble that I felt in my bones.

The sound of it, holy hell, I almost shivered. This was so, so much worse than I could've imagined.

Amy lifted her head, teeth white and straight as she smiled gratefully. "Thank you, Aiden."

He dipped his chin, eyes flickering in my direction once more, then disappeared into the office.

As soon as it was just Amy and me, I gestured to the edge of the boxing ring that dominated the center of the main room. She sat first, and I followed.

"I didn't ..." She paused, shaking her head. "I didn't mean for it to happen this way. To take you by surprise like this."

I didn't trust myself to answer just yet, and even worse, I felt my eyes burn at the thought of not working for her.

And Amy, because she'd known me for so long and knew me so well, just kept talking.

"Aiden came in last year. I don't know if you noticed."

I snorted, which made Amy laugh quietly under her breath.

"Of course you did." She shook her head again. "He genuinely wanted a training session, but he was doing some research, too. And when he approached me a few months ago to start negotiating, Iz, it was an offer I couldn't refuse."

The air hissed slowly from between my pursed lips. "How did he know you wanted to sell?"

"I mentioned it to a neighbor because he knows a lot of former athletes. Thought he might have insight as to how I could go about finding someone who would be a good fit."

My hands tightened into fists. "You could've asked me."

Amy glanced at me in surprise. "For your input?"

I swallowed. "To buy it."

She nudged me with her shoulder. "You got that much cash laying around, Isabel Ward? I know I haven't paid you enough to be able to afford something like that."

Lifting my eyes to her, I nodded. "I have a trust fund from Paige that I've never touched. Maybe I'm underestimating how much this place is worth," I admitted quietly, "but I could've probably made you an offer."

Amy sank back against the ropes, mouth slack. "The hell, Ward? You're loaded, and I didn't know? I should've been letting you pay for the coffee all these years."

I smiled. "Maybe. She put the money aside for us, but none of us could do anything with it until we were eighteen, and even then, we needed Logan and Paige's signature to release anything until we turned twenty-five."

She hummed. "Well, maybe you could've made an offer, and maybe not. But his offer was more than what it's worth."

"Why do you think he did that?" My eyes wandered back to the office where he sat quietly, waiting for us to finish

talking.

“He’s got a huge family, like four or five siblings or something. They all live in this area, and it’s close to his daughter’s school. It allows him to take what we’ve already built and just ... make it even better.” She glanced sideways. “And I think he will. He’s passionate about this, and he doesn’t want to come in and redo everything, I promise.”

I nodded.

The sleepless night was perfectly clear now.

Change had come knocking again, and yet again, it was digging a foothold in the one place I felt the safest. The one place, outside of my family, where I felt the most comfortable.

This was the one thing I worried would test any of the metal-strong barriers I’d put up.

He was.

But because I respected Amy, and I wanted her to be able to get an offer so good she couldn’t refuse and be able to travel the world with her wife, Renata, like they’d always dreamed, I nudged her shoulder back.

“I trust you,” I told her.

“Thank you.” She sighed. “I dreaded telling you the most.”

That had me smiling. “Why’s that?” I asked.

“Because you’re stubborn as hell and don’t think I don’t know you probably had his matches memorized because you watched every single one, and you’ll *hate* that now that he’s your boss and you feel like you did something wrong.”

Cue me choking on the bubble of hysterical laughter trying to push up my throat.

She had no freaking idea.

My stupid cheeks burned stupid hot for the eightieth time since I walked in the door, and I refused to look at her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Amy snorted. “Like you’d share if you did. Promise me you’ll give him a chance, all right? He’ll need you more than anyone else here if he’s going to pull this off. I already told him you’d be his biggest ally.”

His shadow, tall and broad, moved in the office, visible behind the closed shades, and the sight of it—the sight of him—had the knots pulling tighter and tighter in my stomach.

Give him a chance.

To what, exactly? My options were slim. Either he was nothing like I imagined, or he was better. I’d already tripped over myself in front of him, so this whole boss/employee dynamic was off to a fantastic start.

“Iz?” she prompted when I didn’t answer.

“I promise.”

And I’d keep it. But it was the scariest promise I’d ever made because the feeling it gave me made it perfectly clear that my sleepless night was just the beginning. Change was here, and his name was Aiden Hennessy.

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**ISABEL**

“**Y**ou’re acting weird, and you’re hiding, and I don’t know which of those two freaks me out more.” Kelly’s voice came from over the large stack of boxes I was sitting—i.e. hiding—behind.

Ladies and gentlemen, the unfortunate side effect of knowing my co-workers incredibly well was that they had no problem calling me on my shit—even if I was their manager.

Without sparing her a glance, I pushed aside a stack of sweat towels and marked them on my inventory sheet. “I’m working, Kell.”

“You’ve been back here since the minute he walked in the door.”

The top of her blond ponytail poked up over the tallest box in the stack, but I couldn’t see her entire face.

What Kelly McKendrick lacked in height, she made up for in boundless energy and enthusiasm. So much so that I wanted to dislike her for it, but I quite literally could not because she was one of the nicest people I’d ever met. “Normally, you work in your office on Wednesday mornings. But since your office is empty ... I figured you were avoiding him, and I wanted to make sure you were okay in case you needed to talk about it.” She sighed. “Not that you ever want to talk about what’s bothering you, but there’s a first time for everything.”

When I rolled my eyes, she climbed behind the boxes with me, bracing her back against the wall and stretching her pink legging-clad legs in front of her as she started folding the

towels. The gym had a handful of part-time employees, and Kelly was the one who'd hung around the longest of that group. "I'm quite sure I don't know what you're talking about," I murmured. Before I reached for the next box, I handed her the inventory sheet.

"I couldn't believe how sad I was after the meeting yesterday." She sighed. "Amy is such a good boss, and he's so ..."

In her pause, I found myself holding my breath. I could certainly think of a few words to fill in the blank, but I wasn't entirely certain how I wanted Kelly to answer.

"So what?" I asked. I took the clipboard back as she began unpacking the box of new gloves.

"Serious," she whispered. "I don't think he smiled once yesterday while she introduced him."

Kelly's comment, which was totally accurate, had me serving myself a stern mental pep talk.

Yes, she and I were the same age.

Yes, I considered her a friend because we'd worked together for five years.

And yes, I desperately wanted to talk to her about this entire thing. I wanted to tell her how I was hiding from the hot man who now signed my paychecks and covered my body in butterflies, and at one point in my life, I practiced signing my name as if we were married. The embarrassment was so real.

It was so bad that I hardly spared him a single glance during Amy's meeting the day before.

Not one.

But I couldn't tell her any of that because I was not in friend-mode for this particular conversation. I was the manager. I also didn't tell anyone anything if I could help it.

I chose my words carefully. "Seems like he's always been a pretty serious guy." When she gave me a curious look, I shrugged. "I watched his fights, so that's my guess, as much as you can judge someone you've never met."



“I’ll have to take your word on that. I can’t stomach watching professional fights, so I didn’t even really know who he was when she introduced him.” Ohhhhh, to have that problem. “Isn’t he supposed to like, win us over?”

“Actually, I think it’s the other way around,” I told her. “He’s the new owner, Kell, and it’s up to us to show him we know what we’re doing.”

“Even if he’s physically incapable of smiling?” she asked in a glum voice.

I tossed her some gloves. “Even if.”

“These are some badass motherfuckers right here,” she said, pulling the plastic sleeve off so she could admire the matte and glossy black design. “Can I try a pair?”

”If you’re paying for them.”

She laughed. “You don’t think Mr. Smiley would let me have them for free?”

As the words hung in the air between us, his giant, non-smiling shadow appeared. My face fell, and Kelly started coughing—a horrible, hacking sound that did nothing to erase the fact that she’d just called our new boss *Mr. Smiley*.

My stomach pitched sideways as I saw the muscle in his jaw—which looked carved straight from a mountain—clench dangerously.

“Morning, Mr. Hennessy,” Kelly said.

His eyes flipped from my face back to hers. “McKendrick, right?”

She nodded.

Because half of his body was covered by the boxes, I didn’t know what he was looking at when he glanced down at his hands. But when he came around the side, he was holding a disposable coffee cup, capped in a white lid, with her name scrawled on the side. He handed it to Kelly, who, after taking it carefully, sniffed at the opening.

In my peripheral vision, I saw her jaw fall open.

He produced another cup, this time handing it down to me. My whole body locked down like someone had poured me into concrete.

His eyebrow, dark and slightly foreboding, rose slowly.

Kelly cleared her throat loudly, and I blinked.

Coffee.

The cup.

Right.

On the side of the cup was my last name in black Sharpie, and I swear, my hand didn't shake in the slightest when I reached forward to take it from him. Our fingers didn't touch because I damn well made sure of that.

His eyes, steady and, *yup*, unsmiling, watched me as I took a wary sip.

My eyes widened when it hit my tongue because it was exactly what I normally ordered.

With a slight dip of his chin, he murmured a short, growly, "Ward," in greeting and was gone. As he walked away, long legs striding easily over the black rubberized floor, I caught sight of another full drink carrier in his massive hands.

"What the fuck," I whispered.

Kelly burst out laughing.

I gave her the side-eye. "You never heard me say that."

She notched two fingers to her forehead in a salute. "Aye aye, boss."

Like I was handling a pin-less grenade, I set the coffee cup onto the floor next to me and kept unpacking boxes with Kelly's help. Only a few regulars were in, using the bags and the weights, so the gym was quiet.

After how long I'd worked there, the noises hardly even registered to me anymore. The clang of weights hitting a rack, the laughter of people talking, the music playing over the speakers, and the rhythmic tapping of someone on a speedbag

in the corner should have all been comforting and made me feel better.

But everything was just ... off. I couldn't find my bearings in the place that was my touchstone.

"How many for your class today?" I asked Kelly.

Her face scrunched up as she thought. "Twenty-five, I think? I checked about an hour ago when I got here."

"Yeah, why *are* you here this early?"

"I wanted to get in a workout."

I glanced at her taking a leisurely sip of her coffee. "How's that going for you?"

"Quite well, as I am helping my beautiful manager unpack these beautiful gloves from her hiding spot," she said with a magnanimous gesture. Picking one up, she studied the design. "Now I get why Amy didn't want the logo on the wrist strap. She knew what was coming."

The pair I was holding lowered slowly into my lap because I hadn't even realized it.

A change had been on the horizon for longer than I realized, peeking over the edge of my days unnoticed. It was me who hadn't been paying attention.

Kelly chattered happily in my silence, but very little of what she said registered. Beyond the boxes, Aiden was familiarizing himself with the computer programs we used and reviewing the policies, schedules, and day-to-day information I knew like the back of my hand.

And I was hiding behind boxes because my reaction to him made me feel like I was bungee jumping naked from the Space Needle. A teenage crush was nothing to be embarrassed about, but there I was. Hiding.

"Iz," Kelly said. By her tone, she must have been trying to get my attention.

"Huh?"

She grinned. "You didn't hear a word I said, did you?"

“I ...” My shoulders fell. “Not really. I’m sorry.”

Kelly waved that away. “I said that you should go in there and thank him for the coffee.” An innocent enough statement, but then she fluttered her long eyelashes.

My head tilted. “Are you high?”

“Never on Wednesdays,” she answered gravely. Her wide smile broke across her face, and I found myself laughing under my breath. “I’m only half kidding. You should thank him, but honestly, that man is gorgeous, and he’s single, and you two have a million things in common.”

I wanted to shove a towel in her mouth to shut her up because hearing her talk about us together had my palms going a little sweaty.

“Kelly,” I said quietly.

She beamed.

“Stop talking about it.”

Kelly sighed.

An alarm went off on my phone, and I cursed under my breath.

“What?” Kelly asked.

“I forgot I have a bridesmaid dress thing with my sisters.” I blew out a hard breath.

“Am I invited to Molly’s wedding?”

I gave her a look.

Kelly sighed. “I *know*. But she’s marrying *Noah Griffin*. He’s Keith’s favorite player on the Wolves, and your brother is his favorite coach, which means half the team will be there, and then my boyfriend could die a happy man.”

I smiled. This was the byproduct of being in a family that was practically NFL royalty. I was constantly surrounded by world-class athletes, but look how it did me absolutely no good when it really counted. The mental image of spilling my coffee at his feet would haunt the hell out of me.

“As fun as that sounds, I don’t think siblings’ co-workers are invited,” I said. “Can you take my session with Glenn after your class? That’s the only thing I had on the schedule.”

She nodded. “No problem.”

I stood, stretching my arms over my head.

Kelly pointed at the untouched cup on the floor. “Don’t forget that.”

I swear, I looked at that cup like it was a snake coiled up around my legs, ready to sink its fangs into my skin.

She laughed, shaking her head as she left to get set up for her class. “You’re so suspicious, Iz,” she said over her shoulder.

Maybe to her, it was that simple. A thoughtful gesture from a serious guy. To me, though, it felt like something else entirely. If I drank that coffee, I’d start thinking about how—in his first week owning a new business—he took the time to figure out what every single employee on the schedule liked to drink. I didn’t want to think about Aiden Hennessy, with his excellent eyes, wide-as-a-house shoulders, and long-legged stride, doing quietly thoughtful things because it would shred my already embarrassed heart into a heap.

What it did was make me feel like that fifteen-year-old girl again, and I hated that.

Not because fifteen had been a bad year. On the contrary. Our family finally felt settled and right when I was that age. Paige was pregnant with Emmett, and I felt safe. Loved. It was why doodling in my purple diary about marrying MMA fighters who were ten years older than me felt completely acceptable.

The reality of my adulthood might look different than the one I’d dreamed up, but everything about it was great.

And what I didn’t need was Aiden making me feel like a starry-eyed young girl whose heart was soft enough to be crushed into bits. Been there, done that, and had a T-shirt and abandonment and control issues to go with it. I did not need to put myself in that position ever again.

And sure, it was great if he didn't turn out to be an asshole, but holding that coffee, it felt far, far more dangerous that he might be more than what I'd built up in my head so many years ago.

That was why I walked that coffee over to the drinking fountain, took off the top, and slowly poured it down the drain. It was a small way to assert control over all the flutteries.

The brown liquid swirled quickly through the holes, and I breathed deeply once it disappeared. Decisively, I capped the travel top back onto the empty cup and tossed them both into the trash can next to the fountain.

“Guess I got your order wrong.”

I froze. His voice came from right behind me, all low and growly. My eyes fell shut because holy shit, I was destined to get off on the wrong foot with this man, wasn't I?

Blowing out a slow breath, I turned to face him. His eyes betrayed the slightest hint of amusement that he caught me, but everything else about his face was even and steady. In fact, every physical feature that made up Aiden Hennessy seemed carved straight from stone.

Not just his face, which was handsome enough, but his shoulders and arms, the veins running down toward his massive hands.

I'd seen the gracefully inflicted violence his body was capable of, the speed and strength.

And as he towered over me, I hated that I had to lift my chin in order to meet his gaze.

“The order was fine,” I told him. “Drank too much already this morning.”

The sound he made in the back of his throat was so ambiguous that I had to physically chomp down on my tongue to stop from defending myself. When the front door opened and a group of members walked in for Kelly's class, his attention moved from me to the sound of their bright laughter. Immediately, the pressure on my lungs eased. There was some

magic voodoo he had going on, and I did not like it one tiny bit.

“Seems like the classes are always well-attended,” he said. His gaze left the group of women and came back to rest on my face.

I nodded. “Especially on the weekends.” I sucked in a deep breath and held his eyes. “I hope you don’t intend on getting rid of those.”

He shook his head. Nothing else. Just a shake of his head.

“Good.”

His lips twitched just a fraction before they settled back in a firm line. “Glad I have your approval, Ward.”

My cheeks were flaming, and I hated it. My hand lifted in a small gesture toward the door. “I have to ... I’ll be back in a little bit.”

Aiden nodded, and as I turned to go, I knew he was watching me.



“SO LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT ...”

“Yes.”

Molly paused. “You don’t know what I was going to say. How can you say yes?”

Even though I was behind a dressing room curtain and she couldn’t see, I rolled my eyes. “I already know what you’re going to say.”

“You just left?”

“Yes.”

“Isabel!”

Angling to the side, I slid the zipper of the sky blue dress up and huffed when I couldn’t get the eye hook closed.

“What? It’s not like I expected him to be standing over my shoulder like a giant hulking shadow, and yes, I just ... left.”

“Guess I know who’s not going to win employee of the month ...” Her voice trailed off. I stuck my hand out from behind the curtain with my middle finger raised. She swatted it back inside. “I never knew you to be a chicken.”

Instead of arguing with her over something so stupid, I simply rolled my lips between my teeth and tugged one last time at the zipper. As I studied my reflection in the mirror, I couldn’t decide if the dress just wasn’t right for me, or if my body was so used to workout gear that it now actively rejected any finer materials.

“Are you dressed yet?”

My hands fell by my sides. “Yes. I don’t think this color works on me, though.”

“One, I find that highly unlikely, and two, show me.” Molly tugged the curtain aside, and when she caught sight of me, her smile was massive. “Iz, I love it. You look so pretty!”

With a skeptical glance at the mirror, I tugged at the drapery things over my shoulders. “There are frills. On my body.”

She laughed. “You don’t have to choose that style. I’m just trying to decide on the colors. I like the blush pink, but it might be too summery for a fall wedding.”

“The blue,” I insisted. “I will feel naked in that pink one.”

“Definitely blue,” Lia called from across the space.

Our two youngest sisters, Lia and Claire, separated by all of two minutes at birth, were sharing a dressing room. “Come on, you two,” Molly called. “Iz is already dressed.”

“Hang on. Lia’s new mom boobs are huge, and she can’t get her dress zipped.”

Molly and I grinned at each other because really, they were. She’d given birth about eight weeks earlier, and honestly, she had the rack of a centerfold if I’d ever seen one.



While we waited, Molly pulled out her giant wedding binder and made some notes after flipping to a bright pink tab. It was no surprise that Molly was the most organized bride-to-be on the planet, and also no surprise that she had zero Bridezilla tendencies so far, something that was making this whole “watch my big sister get married” thing a lot easier.

“Where’s Paige?” I asked.

“She had to stay home with Emmett. He wasn’t feeling well, and Logan is at training camp.” Molly held up her phone and snapped a picture of me. “But I promised I’d send her pictures.”

As her fingers tapped out a text to our sister-in-law, I took a seat on the large ivory ottoman in the middle of the room. No one else was in the dress shop with us, so I leaned back on my hands and listened to the laughter of Lia and Claire as they struggled to close up Lia’s dress.

Out of nowhere, I felt very, very lonely sitting in that room with my sisters.

Molly was getting married.

Lia was living with her boyfriend, Jude. With the addition of their son, and Jude’s new gig playing soccer for Seattle, I knew it was only a matter of time before they made it official too.

Even Claire, the shyest of the four of us, found her person in bad-boy snowboarder Bauer Davis.

And none of this was new; none of their relationships were new. Was I allowed to blame Aiden for this? I tried to imagine his face if I came back to work in a rage.

*Yo, bossman, seeing you has me all twisty inside, and I don’t like it. And when you’re nice and thoughtful, it makes it worse, and I start feeling like a lonely petulant teenager around my very wonderful, happily-in-love sisters because I’d rather gouge my eyes out than explain it to them. Please stop. Thanks.*

“What are you smiling about?” Lia asked.

Belatedly, I noticed all three of them staring at me.

“Nothing.” I cleared my throat.

Molly nudged Claire. “She’s terrified of her hot new boss. Did I mention that yet?”

Lia’s eyes widened. “Oooh, are you?”

“How hot is he?” Claire asked.

Molly held up both hands, all ten fingers wiggling. Claire laughed.

I gave her a steady look. “Are we deciding on dress colors or not?”

Lia held her hand out to help me off the ottoman. “Sorry, Iz. We’ve never been able to tease you about a man before.”

Molly snickered. “Yeah, because normally, she eats them alive once she’s done with them.”

The words I muttered under my breath would’ve set a nun’s ears on fire. Lia was the only one who heard and started laughing. The idea of me as a man-eater, casually licking my fingers after I’d had my way with them was so laughable. But immediately on the heels of that was a startlingly clear mental image of Aiden lying on a bed, spent and wrecked with me equally spent and wrecked next to him. My heart rate jumped at the vivid picture in my head. But that kind of inner-vixen reaction would be welcome after how I’d started off with him.

The tripping, coffee-spilling me was nothing like they imagined me.

It was so much easier to let them think it. Let them believe it.

“Fine.” Molly sighed. “Let’s get this done so she can go back and hide from him for the rest of the day.”

With a deep breath, I shoved down everything they’d just brought up. Way, way down. “You’re going to be missing your maid of honor if you keep this shit up.”

Molly held up her hands. “Fine, fine. I’m done. Ladies, show me what you’ve got.”

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**ISABEL**

Until I started working at the gym, leading classes, and working with clients, I never understood exactly how deep my sadistic streak went. But when one of my favorite clients limped up to me after class, shirt soaked with sweat, it was the only time in my life I was all hearts and rainbows and smiles.

Sally's eyes narrowed in a glare. "I don't know who hurt you, Isabel, but I can't tell whether I should set you up with my therapist or give you a hug."

I laughed, running my sweat towel along the back of my neck. "Is that your way of saying you liked my class today?"

As she dumped her gloves and tangled hand wraps back into her bag, she snorted. "Something like that."

"I added those extra burpees just for you."

Straightening slowly, she rolled her eyes and slung her bag over her shoulder. "Next time? Don't."

"Bye, Sally."

She waved.

My mood felt light, probably because I'd yet to see any glimpse of Aiden. For the day, at least, my office was my own. And it wasn't like his presence weighed me down; it was simply that added awareness and the way my skin vibrated at a different frequency when he was in the building. It was something I was going to have to get over because Aiden Hennessy was here to stay.

A college-aged girl approached as I started wiping down the bag I'd used during class. She slipped in just before I started, so I didn't get a chance to speak with her like I liked to do with new members.

"What'd you think?" I asked her.

She exhaled a small laugh. "That was ... intense. But one of the best workouts I've ever had."

"Excellent." I held out my hand. "I'm Isabel, the manager."

"Brenleigh." She pointed at the ring in the center of the gym. "I was just glad you didn't make us hop up in there for some ass-kicking."

"Nah, we wait until at least your second class for that. You bought the ten-class punch card, right?"

Brenleigh nodded. "I came in yesterday after I saw one of your Insta posts about the special you're running." Her cheeks were already flushed from class, but when she glanced around, the red deepened even further. "Is it true that Aiden Hennessy is the new owner?"

"That is true. We're very excited to work with him."

Excited. Terrified. Hiding from him. Whatever.

She licked her lips and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Is he, like, taking one-on-one clients or anything? You know, like, *private* training sessions."

Ahh. The fangirls were starting to descend. Now this was something I hadn't anticipated. I knew he had plans to do some training sessions, but no formal coaching like some speculated he might after he retired. So a co-ed coming in and asking for private sessions ... that was not in my managerial wheelhouse. It wasn't in my personal wheelhouse either. My ability to fake it with people was about as stellar as my cooking skills.

I sucked at both.

Now that I looked at her more carefully, she was wearing one of those sports bras that wasn't really a sports bra, the kind

that flashed more cleavage than a Victoria's Secret ad.

Gawd, I sounded like such a judgy bitch. So I softened my smile. "Not that I know of, but he's still getting settled. I'm sure in the next few weeks we'll know a lot more. If he decides to take on clients, we'll definitely post about it on our social, so keep an eye out."

There. I sounded polite. Professional. Go me.

Brenleigh and her cleavage leaned in toward me. "What's he like?" she asked, big brown eyes wide.

I paused. What did she want me to say?

"He seems very nice," I answered diplomatically.

"I hope he's not like, too nice." She grinned. "What a disappointment, right? He can be hard on me *any* day."

Then she bit down on her lip and giggled.

And it was the giggle, along with the criminal overuse of the word *like*, that had me imagining what it would be like for Brenleigh if I like, elbowed her in the face.

It wasn't her fault, not really, because what Miss Brenleigh and her strappy bra and her burning curiosity did was nothing more than hold a mirror up in front of my face. Something about him turned me a little crazy and made me feel like I was Brenleigh. A caricature of the worst side of me.

The silly, unsubstantial side.

Even though it killed me to do so, I kept my smile firmly in place. "Are there any other questions about the workout today? I'd be happy to review anything since I didn't get a chance to talk to you before class started. Normally, I'd go over the basic moves if this was your first time."

She waved a hand in the air. "Nah, I'm good. Will he like, be here tomorrow if I come back for your four o'clock class?"

"I couldn't say. He doesn't have a set schedule." I shrugged. "Perks of being the owner."

Brenleigh sighed. "I guess. Well, I'll see you tomorrow. Thanks!"

And she bounced off. Actually, physically bounced. I pinched the bridge of my nose.

As she walked toward the front, where she sat on a bench to change her shoes, I did a lap around the bags, snagging two water bottles that had been left behind and a few wipes dumped just outside the garbage container. Only a few people were using the weight machines, with one person on the treadmills facing the TV Amy had installed a couple of years earlier.

My office was quiet when I walked in, and when I took a deep breath, I caught the slightest whiff of something masculine.

I sank into the chair and dropped my head in my hands. He wasn't even here, and I could smell him. That was when I noticed the sweatshirt folded on the edge of my desk. He was wearing it at the meeting and must've left it. My fingers reached for the edge, tugging it toward me before I thought too hard about what I was doing.

The shirt was well-loved. A faded logo of a California gym on the front, the seams of the front pocket were ripped at the edges.

When I lifted it toward my face and took a deep inhale to see if that was the source of the smell, I shoved it back into place with a groan before I could go any further down this crazy-ass rabbit hole.

*I know you don't know me, but I'm sixteen, and I think you're amazing, and even though I'm younger than you, I know we're meant to meet.*

My eyes pinched shut, and my heart raced uncomfortably when I thought about that silly, silly letter, folded carefully and locked inside the metal box.

I was no better than the bouncing co-ed fangirl and her substandard bra and her giggles and her *like*. Sitting up straight, I took a deep breath and stared hard at my own reflection in the glass overlooking the gym.

*No more*, I thought. No more sniffing. No more butterflies. No more wondering when he was going to come in or obsessing about whether we'd share space or he'd buy coffee. No more tripping at his feet or childish displays to make me feel better about my embarrassment.

"Isabel Ward," I said, "get your shit together. This is fucking ridiculous."

Sweatshirt back in place, I made the chair spin from standing too quickly and marched out of my office. With only one more class on the schedule for the rest of the day and no training sessions of my own, the gym would most likely be quiet for the next couple of hours.

It was easy to keep myself busy, and I popped in one earbud so I could listen to some music without missing anything that might need my attention.

Exiting the now cleaned women's bathroom, I did a quick scan of the gym, something I did constantly when I was the only person working, and noticed that the gym was empty. A glance at the digital clock on the wall told me it would probably stay that way until we got our usual post-work day group.

Which was why I stopped short as a young girl sprinted across the room, white-blond hair flying, and then shimmied straight up one of the heavy bags until she'd hooked her tiny arms over the top and hoisted herself up onto the iron beam that held the entire rack in place.

In no more time than it took me to blink, she'd climbed to the top of the beam, where she now sat perched, legs swinging like she didn't have a care in the world.

It took a concerted effort to close my gaping mouth, but I set down the cleaning supplies and looked around the gym. Not a parent in sight. It was completely normal for a few kids to tag along with their parents if they came to class, but this was not normal.

Nor was it safe.

The last thing we needed was someone's kid falling from an iron beam and breaking her leg. I approached carefully, channeling all my big sister vibes. Her eyes were wide and clear and bright blue, and they tracked every step that I took.

I set my hands on my hips and glanced up at the beam. "Impressive," I told her.

She didn't answer, but her lips quirked in a smile.

"What's your name?"

"You're a stranger, so I shouldn't tell you."

I nodded slowly. "That's very smart."

"What's *your* name?"

"Isabel. Where'd you learn how to climb like that?"

She shrugged. "Dunno. I've always known how."

"And you're not afraid of heights?"

Her hair swooshed when she shook her head.

"Do you think you could hop down to me?" Again, the hair swooshing and the head shaking. Okay then. "It would get pretty uncomfortable sitting up there all day."

Her legs swung. Yeah, she was in no freaking hurry. How nice for her.

"I don't know if I could climb up onto the beam," I said, "but I do have one other trick I could do."

Interest sparked behind those eyes. "What is it?"

I clucked my tongue. "Can't tell you unless you hop down, kiddo."

Her lips screwed sideways as she pondered that.

"Who'd you come here with?"

"My daddy's in the bathroom. I heard him on the phone and got bored waiting."

"Okay, well ... maybe if you hop down now, I can show you my trick, and he won't even see you up there."



“He’s already mad at me because I pretended I had to puke so I didn’t have to go to day camp, but that place is dumb, and I don’t want to go, but my grandparents were busy and couldn’t watch me.”

I blew out a slow breath, imagining all the ways this could go sideways. “Can’t blame you, kid. I’d probably fake sick too.”

Her smile was bigger this time, and I caught a glimpse of an adorable gap where her front teeth would eventually grow in. My nephew Emmett lost his when he was almost eight, so I took that little nugget and ran with it.

“Especially because you’re, what, nine?”

She giggled. “Nope. I’m only seven, but I’m *almost* eight.”

“Yeah? When’s your birthday?”

“In ten months.”

I smothered my smile. “So close.”

“How old are you?” She shifted on the beam, and I fought the impulse to stick my hands out in case she fell, but apparently, only one of us was nervous about her perch, and it was not her.

“Twenty-five,” I whispered. “Super old.”

She giggled again. “You’re only old once you turn fifty.”

“Ahh. Very good to know.”

Her eyes darted to the side and then back to me. “Do you like to sing?”

My head tilted at the change of subject. “I’m not a very good singer, so no... I can’t say that I do.”

The line of her eyebrows lowered.

“Okay, I’ll come down, but only if you show me your trick first.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Bargaining, huh?”

“My aunt told me I should always stand up for what I want, so that’s what I’m doing.”

Well, her fricken aunt wasn't here trying to get her down from the fricken metal beam, now was she? I kept my smile even, though. "Okay, but you've got to promise you'll come down, right?" I held up two fingers. "Girl Scouts honor?"

She nodded vehemently.

"Okay." I pointed at the beam. "Turn your one leg so you're straddling it like you're sitting on a horse, okay? Then hold on with both hands."

I breathed a bit easier when she obeyed immediately.

"What're you gonna do?" she asked.

"I'm going to hang on the bag," I whispered. "With no hands."

Her eyes widened. "No way."

"Way."

With a quick glance back by the bathroom, there was still no sign of her dad, so I shook my head and jumped, grabbing the chain along the top of the bag and pulling my body weight as high as I could go. Hoisted up like that, I tugged my legs up, wrapping them around the upper middle of the heavy bag, and crossed my feet at the ankles.

With a glance in her direction, I let go of the chains and let my upper body slowly fall back.

"Whoa," she whispered.

My braid was swinging toward the ground when I lifted my upper body and did a couple of sit-ups from that hanging position. She clapped excitedly.

"How many more should I do?" I asked her.

"Twenty!"

"Oof. Okay. Then you'll hop down to me?"

"Uh-huh."

"Count for me then, boss lady," I told her.

"One, two, threeeeeee," she stretched out. I groaned as I did number four, and she giggled.

“You should be a trainer here,” I told her. “I pull that slow counting crap in my classes too.”

We made it as far as seven when I noticed someone approach from the corner of my eye, a tall shadow blocking the overhead lights of the gym.

Aiden.

Today, he was wearing a white T-shirt, snug across his boulder-like chest. His arms were folded over that chest, and even though I was hanging upside down, I could see the tightness in his mouth as he surveyed our little scene.

The girl stopped her counting. “Hi, Daddy! Look at the lady’s cool trick!”

That was when my ankle lost its grip, and I fell off the bag, landing at my boss’s feet in a tangled, graceless heap.

**ISABEL**

**M**aybe, just maybe, I thought, *if I pretend that didn't happen, he'll be gone when I open my eyes.* My legs flopped to the ground, and I winced when I rolled to my side, eyes still pinched shut.

“Whoa,” the little girl’s voice said. *Aiden’s* little girl’s voice. “You fell super hard, Miss Isabel.”

Fuuuuuck me, honestly.

“You okay?” he asked. His voice was close—low and rough—and it raised the hair on my arms.

Was I okay? Such an interesting question. Because no ... I wasn’t.

I wanted to erase every freaking interaction I’d had with him, scrub it from my brain with bleach because somehow, they just kept getting worse.

But was I actually, physically fine? Uh-huh, sure, let’s go with that.

I let out a slow breath and took stock of my body, because if I’d hurt anything, hopping up was a terrible idea. “Yeah, I am.”

When I pried open my eyes, Aiden was crouched down, hands hanging in between his bent knees. His face was lined with concern, but he made no move to touch me, thank the Lord in heaven above.

If I was this much of a klutz when he breathed the same air as me, I'd probably spontaneously orgasm if we made skin-to-skin contact.

He nodded, rising slowly as I stood off the mats. Bracing his hands on his hips, his eyes turned toward his daughter, still swinging her legs up on that steel beam like she was at the freaking playground.

"Anya," he said, all steady and calm, but I saw the tension in his jaw. "Time to get down."

Her chin stuck out. "I'm not getting down for you." She pointed at me. "I'm getting down because of her trick."

"Fine," Aiden said evenly.

"Can I jump off the top?"

"Absolutely not."

She sighed dramatically, but reached her arms out. He moved underneath the beam and as I watched those arms extend toward her, I felt this dangerous swelling in my heart. Something I didn't want to touch or poke at, but she hopped off the beam with such ease, such trust, that I almost had to look away.

Before he set her down, Aiden hugged Anya to his chest, her skinny arms wrapped around his neck, and I saw him release a quiet breath of relief.

Instead of watching the scene in front of me, I moved my gaze to the floor and smoothed a hand over my now-wrecked braid—a fitting symbol for my bruised pride.

"Sure you're okay?" he asked.

I nodded.

"She's not a good singer," Anya chimed in. "She told me that."

Aiden closed his eyes, while I ... I tried not to stare awkwardly at his daughter because honestly, could this get worse?

"Anya," he chided.

“I asked her.” She fiddled with the collar of Aiden’s shirt. “But I didn’t ask anything else.”

He gave me an apologetic look. “I’m sorry.” Aiden let out another breath. He glanced around the gym. “There’s a class at six, right?”

Again, I nodded, because this was the signature move in the Isabel Ward library of reactions to this particular man.

“You teaching?”

*Don’t nod, don’t nod.* My tongue unstuck from the roof of my mouth. “Not usually, but I’m covering for Kelly.”

Anya’s eyes widened. “Do you show people how to punch like my dad?”

Aiden’s mouth softened, but still ... it wasn’t quite a smile.

Maybe this little girl with her strange questions and horrible love of climbing could help me ease my way into ‘normal Isabel’ around him.

I tilted my head. “Show me your strongest fist,” I told her.

She curled up her little fingers so tightly that the skin over her knuckles went white.

“Very good.” I showed her mine, then tapped my pointer and middle finger knuckles. “Always aim to hit right here, okay? And don’t tuck your thumb inside your other fingers.”

Anya rolled her eyes. “Everyone knows that. You’ll break your finger.”

I set my hands on my hips. “Maybe I should have you teach class.”

She giggled, glancing up at her dad with an expression so adoring, I could feel every ounce of my body melt like a stick of butter.

“Okay, gingersnap, you can play on your iPad while I get a little work done,” he said, and oh holy hell, *he called her gingersnap*. His eyes came back to rest on me, and I prayed to all the deities in all the religions in all the world that he couldn’t see what that did to me.

Honestly, it was like he was trying to be the most attractive man alive. And the fact that he didn't realize he was made it even more attractive, which was an entirely separate issue. She motioned him down to her own height, and whispered something in his ear. If his face had been angled in my direction, I might have seen his lips curve in a smile, but instead, I simply saw the edge of his cheek move. But he nodded to whatever she said.

Anya gave me a shy smile. "You're really pretty, Miss Isabel. I think you look like Wonder Woman."

Instead of laughing her off, or dismissing it because Aiden was watching, I held my arms up in an X over my chest, and winked. When her face transformed into a wide smile, for the first time, I felt okay about an interaction with my new boss. Sort of.

Each embarrassing moment could get tucked away, in the corner of the box, held in place by each time I managed to take baby steps into something normal with him. I didn't want to fawn over him, I didn't want to study each nuance of each moment, because it felt wretched.

Anya ran off to his office, and to my surprise, Aiden didn't follow.

"I owe you, Ward," he said.

I blinked. "For what?"

Aiden jerked his chin toward the top of the steel beam.

My cheeks flushed hot. Honestly, with the flushing and the falling and the nodding. "No, it's okay. You don't owe me anything."

"Yes," he said evenly, "I do."

There was nothing for me to say, because 1- I was afraid I'd keep arguing because no, he didn't owe me anything for getting the small child off the very high beam, and 2- it seemed safer not to initiate a conversation with him.

Problematic, that.

“Anya,” he said, lifting his chin toward where his daughter had disappeared, “she’s done that her whole life.” At the lift in my eyebrows, he clarified. “The climbing. Doesn’t give me a heart attack like it used to, but every once in a while she goes a little too far.”

The way his voice softened when he spoke of his daughter had all sorts of melty, gooey things happening in my body. At first, all I could do was nod. But when I said nothing in response, I felt his curious regard.

*Promise me you’ll try*, I heard Amy say in my head. At the time, she’d had no clue what she was asking of me, but I’d given her my word all the same.

Before I could form words though, Aiden spoke again.

“You don’t like that I’m here, do you?”

My eyes zipped to his. “What?”

Aiden’s gaze was steady, searching. He didn’t repeat the question. Not to be rude or intimidating, but because we both knew that I’d understood him perfectly.

“I,” my voice faltered, and I shook my head. *Try, Isabel*. “Change is hard for me,” I forced out. Pushing aside all butterflies, all off-kilter feelings with a sweep of my hand, I dug past the embarrassment and found a kernel of truth. “I still don’t know what your presence here means,” I told him.

Handing him that piece of truth, even if I had no clue exactly what it meant, was like tugging out a part of my body. But his reaction ... I’d be lying if I said it didn’t make it just a little less painful.

The way he watched me talk without ever rushing or pushing me helped loosen something tight and uncomfortable behind my ribs.

Aiden tucked his hands into the front pockets of his dark jeans. “How about this,” he said slowly. “I promise I won’t make any big changes without discussing it with you first. New name aside,” he added.



My heart hammered. He wasn't required to do that. And his approach—the calm, the steady—wasn't something I expected.

“You don't have to do that,” I told him. “This is your place, not mine.”

A few people walked in—lawyers from a local firm—and effusively loud greetings came my way as they entered. I waved.

“You sure about that?” he asked dryly.

I hid a pleased smile. Just barely. It'd felt like my place since the first day I walked in.

“All the same.” I kept my reply even, professional. “It's your name on the building, or it will be soon enough. You can make your mark on it without my say-so.”

After I said the words, I wanted to take them back. Or for a moment, I did. Because I'd known so many athletes, ego-driven, prideful, who preened obnoxiously under any spotlight they were given. And still, I wasn't entirely sure how this particular former athlete would respond.

“All the same,” he responded. “I want you to trust me, Ward.”

My eyes could hardly meet his, not with the way he said my last name. If he looked hard enough, he'd see goosebumps rise along my bare arms. The impulse to smooth them down with the palm of my hand was almost impossible to ignore. Before I could react, Anya popped her head out of his office.

“Daddy, my iPad froze. Can you help me?”

With a slight lift of his chin, he walked toward his office, and I breathed out slowly, my cheeks puffing with the loaded exhale.

Back to work. It was the only way I'd survive it.

Soon enough, as I'd told him, the building would bear his name, and the thought had me wandering to the front area.

As I faced the shelves of merchandise by the desk, I thought about what the hell we were supposed to do with all the stuff labeled Wilson's Gym when I knew Aiden had already ordered the new signage to make the switch to Hennessy's. Fortunately, he wasn't champing at the bit to slap his name over everything. He wanted to handle the transition publicly in a way that was smooth. Staring at the racks of T-shirts, sweatshirts, wraps, gloves, all of it, I started thinking through ways to clear the inventory as quickly as possible.

I took a seat at the front desk and yanked open the bottom right drawer.

"There you are," I murmured, tugging on a clear container that held bright-colored round stickers. I eyed the racks of shirts and wondered if Aiden would have an opinion on starting with half off everything or maybe a BOGO sale to see how much we could move.

There it was again, the pause in my entire body when I thought about going to his office to ask him.

This was ridiculous.

I set my elbows on the desk and covered my face with a groan. While I sat in that dejected position, the gym phone rang. I picked it up, but before I could say anything, I heard Aiden's voice coming through the handset in his office.

"Wilson's Gym, this is Aiden."

Gawd, his voice. I rolled my lips between my teeth and allowed, just for one moment, my eyes to fall closed so I could just ... listen to him speak.

"Mr. Hennessy, this is Chandra at the Seattle Youth Sports Foundation. Thank you so much for your call. We were thrilled to receive it."

Slowly, I started setting down the phone even though there was a nagging, naughty whisper in the back of my mind that wanted me to keep listening. Because the way he formed words, the way something simple and innocent came out of his mouth, had me picturing him behind me, whispering in my ear. Things I'd never imagined someone telling me to do.

If I were to text Amy where she was currently exploring Greece, I didn't think this was the kind of trying she'd had in mind.

The front door opened just as I had the phone set back down on the receiver, revealing the smiling face of our newest college hire.

"Emily, how's it going?"

When she sucked in a deep breath, I knew the answer was going to be very, very dramatic. The word vomit started immediately about her boyfriend and another girl, and I'm sure my eyes were so wide in my face that it looked like I'd just been smacked over the back of the head.

"So, you're stressed then," I said when she finally took a breath.

Emily plopped into the chair that I'd vacated behind the front desk. "I just know he's cheating on me."

Early arrivals for my six o'clock class started filtering through the front door, and I greeted them with a smile.

"But you can't be sure," I told her. "You just suspect based on a couple of ... vibes, right?"

My sisters always came to me for no-nonsense relationship advice, and honestly, sometimes I thought my ability to be no-nonsense was because I'd never gotten myself tangled up in any of the dramatics. Or any body parts, really.

Vibes had never been my forte, or at least ... not until Aiden walked through the door. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I was creating all *sorts* of those in my own imagination.

Emily paused to swipe a member's card as he struggled to check in with the scanner on the desk. He thanked her with a smile, nodding to me as he passed. I pulled my favorite black and pink wraps from the top drawer and unraveled the tightly wrapped ball.

"They were strong, though," she said, leaning against the desk. "*Heavy* eye contact."

Yeah. Heavy eye contact. I shifted uncomfortably. “What else?”

Emily hummed. “Really loaded subtext in the things they said.” Her face got serious. “They were saying one thing, but you knew they meant something else.”

“And that’s a sign of ...?” My voice trailed off.

“Sex, *for sure.*”

Sweat popped along the back of my neck because *check, check, and check.* One-sided vibe, courtesy of me.

Someone else walked in, and I stifled a groan at the sight of him. I know, customer service and all, but this guy was the bane of every female trainer’s existence. He stood too close, talked too much, stayed after class too late, and had a seriously annoying tendency to stare at either our tits or ass through the entire class.

Talk about getting a vibe from someone. This guy was the absolute king of inspiring douchebag feelings.

“Mike,” I said politely. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

He slicked his tongue over his teeth. “Where’s Kelly? I didn’t know you were teaching tonight.”

Not surprising. Mike did not seem to stay too late or talk too close with me. He favored Kelly, probably because she was petite, and he could stare down at her chest from his lofty five-foot-six.

Also, Kelly was friendlier than me.

In her absence, he did a thorough examination of the bubbly blond behind the desk. The way he looked Emily up and down had me clearing my throat. I held his gaze steadily when his attention was back on me.

“She hurt her ankle.” I continued wrapping my knuckles, angling the wraps around my wrist, and then back around my palm. Flexing my fingers, I gave him a tiny smile. “You’re stuck with me tonight.”

“You’re new,” he told Emily.

She gave him a friendly smile, but not quite as friendly as the one she'd given everyone else. Emily, apparently, *was* a very good reader of vibes and heavy eye contact. "Started a couple of weeks ago."

He nodded. "Sweet. Another reason to love Tuesday nights."

Because he wasn't looking, I rolled my eyes. "You better go stretch, Mike. I have my angry rock playlist, which means you need to be all warmed up and ready to get your ass kicked."

He snorted as he walked past, and I had to grit my teeth.

Someone was going to get a lot of extra burpees tonight, and it wasn't me. As the manager, I might not be able to be outright rude to him, but I could make him curse the day he was born.

Emily shook her head. "So creepy."

I finished wrapping my other hand and sighed. "He is. Unfortunately, he's never done anything blatant that would get him kicked out. Next week, if you're here with Kelly, and he's the only one left, don't leave until she does. That's one of our unspoken rules. No female trainer here alone with someone new, or someone like jackass over there who's just kinda slimy. Got it?"

She nodded. "Got it. Thanks, Iz."

I picked up my bottle of water and tipped it back to take a drink. That was when I saw her eyes widen again and her back straighten. Mid-swallow of cold water was when he decided to speak from right behind me.

"I hope that rule applies to you, too," Aiden grumbled.

The choke came first, and I slapped a hand over my mouth, but in the process, I tried to exhale.

Which brought water right up my fucking nose.

The cringe on Emily's face was more than enough for me to know just how mortifying I must have looked, but when she

carefully handed me a towel to wipe my face, I knew it was bad.

“Sorry,” he said. “I seem to have a bad habit of taking you by surprise.”

No shit, Sherlock.

I finished wiping my face and glanced at Aiden. “It’s fine.”

He watched me set the bottle and the towel down, and when his gaze returned to my face, I saw the slightest hint of amusement.

And that did nothing to lessen my abject humiliation at how stupid and silly I felt around this man.

I took a deep breath and faced him. “Does what rule apply to me?”

He tilted his head to where Mike was stretching out his arms in front of his bag. “What you just told Emily.”

“Most of the time,” I answered honestly. “But Mike doesn’t bother me.”

“Yet.”

I nodded in concession. “Yet.”

“I can revoke his membership if the trainers are uncomfortable around him.”

My eyebrows lifted slowly. “Even if he hasn’t done anything other than being a creep?”

“Even if.”

His brusquely spoken words did nothing to soothe my feathers that seemed to naturally ruffle in his presence. If anything, they made it so much worse. Something about our exchange earlier, the bag, the daughter, the way he came at me head-on. Aiden made me feel like I was all raw, exposed edges, and there was nothing that I hated more. I turned away briefly to grab the microphone battery pack, hook it onto the back of my leggings, and then attach the earpiece around my

ear so the mic was in front of my mouth. I made sure it was switched off before I spoke.

“I’ll let you know if it gets to that point.”

Aiden clenched his jaw. “Okay.”

Oh, look at that. I managed one whole conversation with him, and the worst thing that happened was spitting water out of my nose. Things were looking up.

“Did you need something?” I asked.

He glanced over at the racks of merchandise. “New merch should be here in about two weeks.”

“I can have Emily mark this stuff down to half off if you want to move it fast.”

But Aiden shook his head. “Just box it all up.”

“Don’t you want to try to sell it?”

He handed me a slip of paper, and along the top, I saw the logo for the Seattle Youth Sports Foundation. “I’d rather just donate it. They’ll disperse it to various foundations across the state for underprivileged kids. They need the equipment more than I need the money.”

For a moment, I stared at him. The hard line of his profile and the slight bunching of smile lines that fanned along his eyes. Honestly, screw Aiden Hennessy and his big heart and protective gestures and cute daughter and biceps that were the size of my head. This was about to get ridiculous.

“If that’s okay with you,” he said lightly.

Holding his eyes to gauge his sincerity, I found nothing to make me doubt what he was saying. Finally, I nodded.

As I took the paper from his outstretched hand and he walked away after a murmured thanks, I knew if I stayed in this headspace for another week, I’d be head over heels in love with my boss.

I couldn’t predict what he was going to do, what he was going to say, and I found myself waiting with bated breath for whatever came next.

He was locked away in a box of his own, and for the first time, I was the one wanting to dig my fingers in and pry off the top.



**AIDEN**

“**W**hat’s your problem?”

I blinked, glancing over at Clark. He was sitting at my desk, sketching out an idea for adding an open loft space over the main workout area.

“I don’t have a problem.”

Which wasn’t a lie because it wasn’t the right word.

“You look like you have a problem,” he said, pencil flying steadily over his graph paper.

“Why do my little brothers always ask me that when I’m trying to think?”

Clark didn’t hesitate. “Maybe because you look perpetually pissed off when you’re thinking too hard.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I turned my attention back toward the middle of the gym where Isabel was leading a class.

She moved in and out of the bags, shouting encouragement and occasionally stopping to help someone. Her hair, as always, was slicked off her face, and when she dropped to the floor to demonstrate something she wanted, it was long enough over her shoulder that it almost brushed the floor.

Wonder Woman, Anya had called her. And she’d asked her if she liked to sing. I knew she was thinking about that fucking list the moment she said that.

“You’re doing it again.”

This time, I didn't look at Clark. "Can't figure out my manager."

In my peripheral vision, I saw his pencil slow, stop, and then start again. He always thought best when he was either drawing or building. "Why not?"

"I can't get a read on her," I said slowly. "But I feel like she's ... uncomfortable around me."

Clark stopped drawing, spinning in my desk chair until he faced me. "She do a good job?"

"Yeah."

As it always seemed to, without my permission and without any approval or forethought, my attention strayed to her. She was an irritation under my skin, not because of anything particularly vexing but simply because I felt like she was hiding something. Hiding herself.

And I didn't like how that felt.

Because it lit the fuse on an urge that I'd long since buried.

Interest.

Everyone else at the gym had made a concerted effort to seek me out and get to know me. And it was the exact opposite with her. Maybe that was why I found my gaze drawn to her.

The softness she'd shown my daughter was the most disconcerting of all. Before that, all I'd seen of Isabel were shifting pieces that I couldn't pinpoint, like she was standing in front of a fun-house mirror.

Clumsy one moment, graceful the next.

Impenetrable with a client, blushing in the next interaction.

Kind with the employees, refusing my kindness in turn.

Warm with those who knew her, candidly wary with me.

She was beautiful, as my daughter had said. Rarely smiled, rarely laughed. Not that I'd seen yet.

And I hated, more than I could've put into words, that I wanted to figure her out.

Hated that I'd checked her employee file, musing uncomfortably over the fact that she was a decade younger than I was yet seemed so much older than her age.

None of those things would I verbalize to my brother, who was already watching me with that analytical brain of his. I'd probably said too much as it was.

Because the second I saw her making Anya laugh, the second I watched them interact, the very first thing in my mind was absolutely terrifying:

*Not this one. It can't be her.*

For a host of reasons. Too many to count.

Before I knew what Anya had asked her, I'd mentally cataloged each piece of Isabel that I knew. When she came up as the opposite of each thing Beth had listed to our daughter a million hours earlier, I felt the impact of it like a blow.

Disappointment.

"Aiden?" Clark asked.

"Forget I said anything," I murmured. "I'll get over it."

I had to.

**ISABEL**

“**C**ould you possibly be more of a bitch?”

Not a single person at the table blinked when Molly glared at me. I smiled because surrounded by the sheer chaos of our family, I was in my happy place.

“Because of this?” I lifted my fork, each tine loaded to the edge with rotini noodles. My gaze stayed right on Molly as I sniffed deeply. “Mmmm, the sauce smells so good, doesn’t it?”

Her eyes narrowed. I shoved the entire bite in my mouth and groaned. Molly picked up her own fork and stabbed her salad like it was a teeny tiny Isabel voodoo doll.

My sister’s fiance, Noah, rubbed her back and set a small piece of bread onto her plate. “You can have some carbs, Molly.”

“Yeah, Molly,” I said, “you can have carbs.”

She threw the bread at me, and I caught it with a laugh.

Paige sighed. “Isabel, don’t poke the carb-deprived bear.”

She set her jaw, my happy, kind, friendly sister who was so carb-deprived angry that she looked like she was plotting my death. “Easy for you to say, you work out for a living.” Then she glanced around the table. “Oh my gosh, half the people here work out for a living. This is bullshit,” she grumbled, spearing a piece of asparagus.

She wasn’t wrong.

Logan held up his hand. “Don’t include me in that. Coaches don’t have to be in shape.”

“You sure expect your players to be, though,” Noah grumbled between bites of his own pasta.

Logan exhaled happily. “Great conditioning today, wasn’t it, Griffin?”

Noah gave him a long look.

“Speaking of people working out for a living,” I said, “where’s Bauer?”

Claire sighed. “He’s up in Vancouver for some training thing that he couldn’t miss.”

I held my fist out across the table. “Hey, now I’m not the only single one at the family dinner.”

She bumped my fist. Our nephew, Logan and Paige’s ten-year-old son Emmett, scoffed. “I’m single too. Thanks a lot.”

Claire fist-bumped him, and I reached across to do the same.

Paige grinned over the rim of her wineglass. “This is the closest we’ve had to the whole zoo at one table in like ... a year.”

“Is that why it’s so loud?” Logan asked.

“Yes,” Claire and I answered.

From the kitchen, Lia walked toward the table, balancing two plates in her hands. Behind her was her boyfriend, Jude, carrying a sound asleep Gabriel. He glanced around the table. “Anyone want a sleeping baby?”

Paige, Molly, and I all raised our hands.

Jude cast a skeptical look at all three of us, then lifted his chin at Molly. “You’re up, then.”

“Rude,” Paige muttered.

I frowned. “You’re just picking her because she’s got that look in her eye like she’ll cut you.”

Noah choked on his food. Molly sat back down in her chair, Gabriel tucked into the crook of her arm, with a beatific smile on her face. “I can’t wait until you get engaged someday, Iz, and we’ll see how *you* act when you’re a couple of months away from your wedding, and you don’t want bread making you puffy because you ordered your dress just a little bit too small on accident.”

*Isabel Ward Hennessy. Isabel Hennessy. Isabel and Aiden 4-ever.*

If I pinched my eyes closed, I could see the purple-inked doodles in my head. That damn diary might not be in the metal box, but it was probably still up in my old bedroom, and oh, my gosh, I wanted to go find it and burn it.

*I may never send this letter, but would you come to my junior prom with me? I have a light purple dress that ~~my brother bought~~ I bought for myself. And I love daisies, if you’d want to get me a corsage made of those. Only if you want.*

Shutting off my brain would’ve been lovely because my face immediately went flame hot. After that, Aiden’s face was what popped into my head like an asshole. And my older sister noticed immediately. “What’s that face?”

“Nothing.” I shoved another bite of pasta in my mouth. “Involuntary physical reaction at the idea of giving up carbs.”

She rolled her eyes.

I could feel the weight of Paige’s gaze on the side of my face, which was why I ignored her.

At some point, I’d always known that the right person would wedge their foot in the proverbial door before I could slam it shut.

But it would have to be a big foot. No pun intended. The thought of big feet and big hands and big ... arms had me shoving food in my mouth again. It was just hard to imagine how everyone else seemed to have such an easy time letting that happen, opening up, and just being normal.

But because it was me, of course it wasn’t that easy.

The first guy to flip all the right switches was part fantasy, part forbidden reality, and all fricken perfect from what I could see.

“How’s the new boss, Iz?” Logan asked.

That delicious pasta turned to ash in my mouth because there was no way he could’ve been following my thoughts. It was my turn to glare now.

“What?” he asked. “Are we not talking about that?”

Paige stifled a laugh.

He sighed. “You’re supposed to tell me when I’m not allowed to ask things,” he said to his wife.

Molly laughed. “Iz is just touchy because she had such a raging crush on him when he first started to fight.”

“I did not,” I protested, but it was a weak one at best. I wouldn’t have believed me either.

Lia laughed. “You used to cut his picture out of *Sports Illustrated* and tape it up on the back of your door. You told us after he was at the gym the first time.”

Hands shaking as I gripped my plate, I stood from the table. I’d rather face a firing squad than that topic. “You know, I think I’m done eating.”

Paige smacked Lia. “Should we remind you of who *you* used to tape up on your wall?”

Her laughter faded. We *all* remembered the Bieber-with-the-long-hair phase Lia and Claire went through. It lasted a solid two years.

“My eardrums are still recovering from that block of time,” Logan muttered.

Jude hummed. “Kate Winslet for me. I met her at a dinner a few years ago, and I about passed out when she shook my hand.”

“See?” I gestured to Jude. “It’s not just me.”

Molly snuck a piece of bread from Noah's plate, pointing a finger at me when she was done chewing. "He's your boss, though. Your ability to separate your past feelings is vital if you're going to keep professional boundaries."

"Are you *serious*?" I asked.

"What?"

Noah gave her a look. "You're one to talk. Do I need to remind you of how our past caught up with us on the job?"

Molly's cheeks turned pink. "No."

I gave him a smile. "Thank you, Noah. You're my favorite almost-brother-in-law."

"I'm your only almost-brother-in-law."

Jude held up his hand. "Hello, sitting right here."

My brother gave him a level look. "Is there a ring on Lia's finger we don't see?"

Wisely, Jude didn't argue. He just slid his arm around my younger sister, who beamed in his direction.

Setting my plate down on the kitchen island, I tried to ignore the way Paige was looking at me from the table. She wasn't even trying to hide it, and when Logan whispered something in her ear, she smiled, but her eyes stayed trained on me.

She saw too much. From the day she showed up in our lives, she had this uncanny ability to see through me like I was made of plastic wrap. I hated it. And I needed it.

My sisters, for whatever reason, and though they loved me eternally, never had the same talent. They saw the same thing that everyone else did. Isabel, the intimidating sister. Isabel, the one you didn't mess with. Isabel, the one who'd fight the world if someone messed with her family.

But every once in a while, I wondered at how they couldn't see what was underneath all of that.

Sometimes I felt like everything truly good I could offer someone was lined in metal and locked under the surface.



Even I wasn't sure how to pry the lid off. Aiden, all of this, it made me realize just how long I'd gone being content with that.

As I cleared my plate, Paige quietly stood and joined me in the kitchen. Nudging me with her shoulder, she leaned in to whisper, "Talk to me."

"About what?"

She sighed. "Are we gonna play that game where you act like there's nothing wrong? Just let me know if we are, and I'll put on my stubborn pants."

I took her plate and rinsed it off, setting it in the dishwasher next to mine. "I just don't know what they want me to say. Yes, teenage Isabel had a ... thing for him. I can't change it, and it doesn't mean anything now."

*Liar, liar, pants on fire.*

"So why do you look like you want to teleport out of here when they ask you about him?"

I closed the dishwasher and leaned against the counter. With a shrug, I gave her a helpless look. "Because I do. And I just ... ugh. All of this makes me feel so ..." I shuddered.

Paige studied me, nodding slowly as I spoke. "He makes you feel off-balance and out of control, which you *would* hate. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen you get like this over a man."

With a groan, I covered my face with my hands. "Can we stop talking about it?"

She laughed. "Okay, okay. I'm done."

Logan joined us. "Sorry, Iz, I didn't know that was a forbidden topic."

What an interesting choice of words. Aiden was certainly that.

Something I wanted but couldn't have. For all I knew, he still hadn't grieved his wife. Who, by all accounts, had been beautiful and kind. His high school sweetheart, from the article

I read one day when I'd felt a little maudlin. He was starting over, taking care of his daughter, and more than likely, he'd remain as he was. An active participant in all my best fantasies until I'd get over it one day. Hopefully.

"It's fine." I sighed.

He glanced at Paige. "Did you ask her about Emmett?"

"What about Emmett?" I asked.

"Paige wants to come to the away game in Tampa," my brother said. Paige gave him a look that had him grinning.

"Can you not, with the eye contact?" I asked.

Paige laughed. "Would you be able to stay with Emmett for a couple of days? He's got a school thing that Friday he can't miss."

"Sure. When's the game?"

As I scrolled through my phone calendar, he named the mid-September date. "Molly going to the game too?"

Paige shook her head. "She doesn't want to use any time off that close to the wedding. I think she'll be gone for work, anyway."

Because we'd already teased her relentlessly about it when she first started her planning, I raised my voice when I replied. "Yeah, what kind of bride plans an October wedding in a family of athletes?"

Molly raised her voice right back. "I knew it was a bye week, *okay*? You try to book the venue of your dreams when half the people in your family play in some sort of professional sport."

Paige laughed.

She wasn't wrong. Juggling the schedules of my sisters and their significant others was a nightmare.

"Lia will be gone at an away game with Jude, and Claire is going to be up in Vancouver with Bauer while he trains."

I waved off Paige's explanations. "It's fine. Plenty of time to request the weekend off."

"New guy won't mind?" she asked.

My gaze stayed locked onto my phone. "I can't see why he would."

Emmett ran into the kitchen and dumped his plate into the sink with a crash. Paige rolled her eyes.

"Am I staying with you when they leave, Iz?"

"I think we'll stay here if that's okay."

He nodded. "Totally. Your apartment is so boring."

"It is not. I just don't require seventy-plus inches of my wall space dedicated to television viewing like some people I know." I gave Logan a look.

"*Yeah,*" Emmett said, "that's why it sucks. You've lived there for two years, and you watch on your dinky laptop."

Paige nudged him out of the kitchen. "Go do your homework before she changes her mind, you little punk."

"And quit saying sucks," Logan called after his retreating back.

"If that's the worst he says at the age of ten, he's doing better than we were," I reminded him.

He rubbed his temples. "I listen to cursing athletes all day at work, and sometimes, I think the worst language I've heard came from the four of you as you were growing up."

"That's why you love us."

"And that love is why I am going prematurely gray." He sighed.

Paige patted his stomach. "My sexy silver fox," she purred, leaning up for a kiss.

I could handle PDA from about two percent of the population, but when he grabbed her ass, I shuddered.

"And on that note," I said, walking from the kitchen with a hand covering my eyes. "Bye, everyone," I said, with a wave

to the group at the table.

“You’re leaving already?” Molly asked with a pout. It did not escape my notice that Noah had slowly ripped off pieces of his bread to the point where she’d eaten his whole slice. No wonder she was nicer now.

“I’m beat,” I told her. “And I have to teach three classes tomorrow with Kelly gone.”

“I’m going to come work out with you,” Molly said after blowing me a kiss.

“K. Just shoot me a text so it goes in the schedule. I don’t want anyone else booking me for a time that works for you.”

Lia made a pouting face. “Aw, I was hoping we could go through boxes after dinner and find all your *I heart Aiden* paraphernalia.”

The look I gave her had Lia cackling, but honestly, if she wanted a guarantee that I’d hightail it out of there, she’d just done it.

Because somewhere just up the stairs, she could find it if she looked hard enough. The metal box, with that damn letter, was in the spare room, no doubt underneath a pile of books and papers that Paige refused to organize. For a moment, I glanced up the stairs and thought about smuggling it out.

Maybe destroying the letter, seeing the ridiculous level to which I’d obsessed over him, would purge him from my system, and I could get back to normal. It sounded so good.

And so terrible.

I said the rest of my goodbyes and got an extra tight squeeze from Paige. But before I left the house, I paused, and without trying to overthink it, I took the stairs two at a time, striding straight for the spare room. It was a mess, but in the large bookshelf toward the back of the room, surrounded by spare furniture, clothes that needed to be donated, piles of toys, and all the random shit we’d accumulated over the years, I saw the black metal edge of the lockbox.

Holding my breath, I curled my hand around it and slid it out from underneath the pile of books that had hidden most of it. It was heavier than I remembered, and when I clutched it to my chest, I wished I could call Nan and tell her about Aiden. She wasn't related to me since Logan and I didn't share a mom, but in all the ways that mattered, she'd taken us under her wing after my dad—her ex-husband—died.

She'd want to know all about what I'd kept in the box in the years since she gave it to me. And why I wanted to hide this one thing away from everyone else.

With the box in my possession, I breathed out a sigh of relief and skipped lightly down the steps, sneaking out the front door before anyone even realized I'd gone up there.

The night air was warm and fragrant as I walked out to my car. The box went into the passenger seat, and for a moment, I studied it like I wasn't sure what it was or how it got there.

My thumb traced the heavy circle of gold where the key, taped to the bottom of the box in a sandwich bag, would slide into place. With my luck, the thing had rusted shut, and I'd go the rest of my life knowing my teenage self could never fully get rid of the evidence of my crush on Aiden Hennessy.

Maybe I'd burn the whole damn box in that case.

Just as the thought crossed my mind and I realized how freaking crazy it made me sound, my phone started buzzing. When I pulled it out, I didn't recognize the number on the screen, but it looked familiar enough that I answered.

“Hello?”

“I'm looking for Isabel Ward,” an unfamiliar male voice said.

“Can I ask who's calling?”

He paused. “Yeah, this is Carl from Punch Fitness. Is this Isabel?”

I pursed my lips for a second. Punch was one of our biggest competitors. We'd never had a bad relationship with them, per se; we just ran a different style of gym. And not

once, in all my years of working for Amy, had the owner ever reached out to me.

“It is. How can I help you, Carl?”

“I don’t really know how to say this any other way than bluntly, but I heard about your shift in ownership, and I’m wondering if you’re looking for a change.”

My head reared back. “You want to hire me?”

He laughed at my incredulous tone. “Yeah.”

“You don’t even know me,” I pointed out.

“I don’t, but I’m aware of your reputation. You seem like someone who doesn’t tolerate bullshit, and I like that. So I won’t beat around the bush. We’ve had enough overlap in members in the past five years that I’ve heard about you. And everything I’ve heard is good, even if it’s bad.”

If I kept up the way I was acting, all he’d know about me was that I tripped over air, fell off bags, and fantasized about my boss.

“Thanks,” I said dryly.

“I mean, if people have a problem with how you run things, it’s probably because they pissed you off, and you held them accountable. That’s how I do things too.”

I ran a hand down my face and could not ignore the way my heart was racing in my chest. This was not something I expected.

Surprises, much like change, did not sit well with me.

The thought of leaving my job, that building, and my co-workers caused actual pain. I’d bleed out immediately if I even tried to dislodge it. The metal box creaked and groaned in protest at the idea of uprooting all the things that made me me, how much of it was rooted in the building where I worked. Change took on a different form, something I couldn’t have imagined when Aiden showed his face. So I answered as honestly as I could without leading this guy on.

“I wasn’t looking to leave Wilson’s.”

“But it’s not Wilson’s anymore, is it?”

Exhaling slowly, I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel. “It’s not. But it’s still the place that I love. And right now, I have no intention of leaving.”

He hummed. “Well, if you change your mind, you’ve got my number.”

With the call disconnected and my brain spinning at an uncomfortable speed about what it all meant, I set my phone back into my purse and started up my car.

**ISABEL**

The next day, everything at work looked different.

Or maybe work was the same, but I was observing it through a different lens. The surprise call from the night before kept me awake for hours as I stared at the ceiling and tried to imagine a reality that didn't include the four walls of the gym that was my second home.

The filter I'd applied started cataloging things that I'd change, if I could.

I didn't like the way that the weight and cardio machines had been set up, but Amy felt it was important to keep a separation from the bags. There was too much dead space around the center ring, and the front desk should be oriented differently. We'd repeatedly had requests for full showers, but the investment was never worth the payoff at the time.

More than once that day, I found myself staring at that side of the gym, mentally rearranging things.

We needed more employees, woefully apparently on days like the ones I was in the middle of, as I wrapped my hands for my third one-hour class of the day. My throat was paying the price as much as my body was because even though we had mics, it was still a solid hour of yelling over the music. And my body, well ... suffice it to say, I was trying to go easy so that I could move the next day.

As I was chatting with clients, I stretched my arm over my chest and caught movement in Aiden's office.



He'd made himself scarce all day, and for that, I was thankful.

If I'd started off with water coming out of my nose, falling on my face, tripping over ropes or something, I might have thought on Carl's offer for too long.

His tall frame filled the doorway, and when his gaze locked onto mine, I felt my cheeks grow warm.

My reaction begged the question, one I didn't want to think about. Could I leave simply because of my reaction to him?

I'd never run from a challenge in my entire life. Not any that mattered.

And if I took this other job, that was what I'd be doing. Even when I didn't see him, I imagined his eyes on me.

I dropped my arms and my gaze because he was still far enough away from me that I should've been immune to his presence.

Shouldn't mean shit, though, not when he had me hooked up to some invisible power grid. Even with the few interactions we'd had so far, that man had all sorts of hidden parts of me lighting up.

Hooking the battery pack onto my leggings, I flipped on the microphone.

"Two minutes until we get rolling, everyone. Make sure you're all stretched out, grab a drink, whatever you need to do. I don't give water breaks in my class, so it's up to you to stay hydrated, okay?"

I walked to the wall where the stereo system was mounted on large brackets and tapped the iPad in the holder on the wall, pulling up the playlist I wanted to use.

Along the edge of the gym, Aiden walked slowly, chatting with one of our longtime members. But I felt his eyes on me as I walked the class through the warmup. My blood hummed warm and fast underneath my skin, and I found myself more energized than I had been in my previous classes of the day.

As I walked around the bags, shouting combinations and directions to the thirty people present, it was the first time I felt a different type of energy coursing through my body while Aiden was around. It was something powerful, something that prowled and purred.

What I allowed myself next was stupid. So stupid. But as I taught, I let my mind race. A different scenario played out in my head to the heavy, pulsing beat of the music. While everyone kept working, while people filled the building, he motioned for me to come into his office. Without a word, he shut the door behind us, approaching me silently, sliding his hand against my hip to turn off the mic, and then I was against the door, his hands hard, his mouth demanding, and to the thumping bass, he took me that way. Hand over my mouth so no one heard.

But it wasn't real.

By the time I finished class, walking everyone through a cool down and stretch, I was sweaty and disheveled, hair sticking to the back of my neck as my braid had started unraveling with my effort and my imagination. Clients thanked me for the class, and after wiping down their bags and picking up their stuff, the gym slowly emptied, save for a few people on the machines.

By then, my heart rate had slowed, and my mind had calmed.

One class member, a fresh-faced young woman, approached me with a tentative smile.

“Casey, right?” I asked.

She nodded. “I really like your classes. You always push me harder than the other instructors. I think it's because you're scarier.”

I laughed. “Thanks, I think.”

“Do you ever do self-defense training?”

I nodded. “Yeah, the setup of these classes is for cardio, but if you wanted something specific, I can get you hooked up with me or one of the other trainers.”

“I-I think I’d prefer a female trainer,” she said quietly.

“Absolutely.” I gentled my tone. “Feels good to know a few moves, doesn’t it?”

Casey’s eyes were wide in her face, and when she nodded slowly, I wanted to rip apart anyone or anything that made her feel like she needed to know how to defend herself.

“How much are the training sessions?” She winced. “College student budget, you know? I grabbed your punch card promo last month, but I don’t know if I can afford anything else.”

I looked over my shoulder and didn’t see Aiden. “Tell you what, do you have a few minutes now? I’d be happy to go over some basics.”

“Really?” she breathed.

“Yeah. Let me get rid of this mic and grab some water.”

As I hooked the battery pack up to the charger, I let out a slow breath. It wasn’t the first time we’d had a young woman ask for self-defense classes, but nevertheless, something about her big brown eyes and tentative nature had my wheels spinning.

Maybe a once-a-month class taught by me or Kelly with a few other trainers helping out with demonstrations. I’d have to ask Aiden if he’d be okay with something like that. Ideas of how we could connect with the University of Washington and other local colleges had ideas tumbling faster and faster in my head.

I walked back to where she was waiting, her arms folded over her stomach. “Ready?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Okay, drop your arms by your side and take a deep breath for me.” I nodded when she complied. “I’ll show you a couple right now, and they’re nothing that requires you to be stronger than an attacker, okay? The most basic self-defense moves won’t require you to stay and fight. The goal is to get away safely.”

Her chest rose and fell rapidly, but she was listening.

I pointed at the bags. “So everything we just did in class, that’s great for exercise. It’s great to know the basics of how to throw an effective punch and use your lower body to your advantage, but you’re not going to hit them with a jab, cross, and a roundhouse, right?”

Casey breathed out a laugh. “I hope not. I’ve always had really weak upper body strength anyway.”

“That’s okay,” I assured her. “If you feel comfortable with it, I’d like you to act as the aggressor right now, and I’ll show you a couple of things.”

“What should I do?”

From the corner of my eye, but out of Casey’s sightline, I saw Aiden lean his large frame up against one of the steel beams that held up all the bags. His face was curious, but he made no move to interrupt.

I swallowed, shifting her so that we were facing each other. “Let’s start as if someone walks up to you and tries to pull your arm toward them, so why don’t you grab my wrist.”

Her hands were still wrapped from class, and tentatively, she curled her fingers around my wrist.

“Good.” I held her eyes. “Now feel how I’m going to put my hand over yours. It’s not about yanking my arm out of your grip. It’s about taking back the control.”

I wrapped my hand over the top of hers and pushed down slightly, her body moved toward me, and I swung the arm she was holding down and around, so I could use that hand to grab her forearm. Once I’d done that, her upper body was forced to turn away from me, and I pushed down gently. Almost immediately, she was down on one knee.

“Whoa.” She laughed.

“Now try to stand up,” I told her, hand still holding her arm in position.

She couldn’t.

“See? I’m not trying to overpower anyone. I just want to put myself in a position where I can disengage and escape. So now that you’re down like that, I’m going to let go and run.”

Casey stood, her eyes lit with excitement. “Can you show me again?”

A bit more slowly, I went through it two more times until she felt like she could try it on me.

We reversed spots, and after one correction of how she was gripping my hand, she had me down on one knee, body turned away from her.

“Excellent,” I told her. “Let’s do that one more time, and we’ll move on to another move.”

Casey did great, pushing me down and away from her with more ease, and her smile was broad when I stood back up.

“Okay, how do you feel about grabbing me by my braid? I can show you a really easy way to escape if someone grabs your hair.”

Immediately, her face went pale. “I ... I don’t know.”

I held my hands up. “We won’t do anything that will make you feel uncomfortable, I promise.”

She crossed her arms over her stomach again. “I could grab yours fine, I think, I just ... I can’t have that ...” Her voice trailed off and she gestured vaguely to her own ponytail. Casey squeezed her eyes shut. “I wasn’t like ... attacked or anything. It was just a drunk guy at a party, and he got a little handsy.”

My heart broke as she fumbled for words, and all that fiery rage I’d felt earlier came roaring back. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

Behind her, I saw Aiden drop his chin to his chest, which expanded on a deep inhale.

I took my own steadying breath. “Would you mind if I brought in someone who can show you how this works?”

Casey blinked, looking uncertain.

“He’ll only grab my hair,” I promised. “He won’t touch you at all, okay? Or we could do another move too.”

“No,” she said. “I can watch. Thank you, Isabel.”

I laid a hand on her arm and squeezed. My gaze found Aiden’s, and I lifted my chin. “Could you help me a second, please?”

He pushed from the beam and walked over, and I had to curl up my fingers into a fist when I felt the slightest tremor of nerves.

Casey gave him a quick, tight smile, and he answered with a small nod.

“Casey, this is Aiden. He’s our owner.”

She waved. “Hi. Sorry for being a chicken about this.”

He dipped his head down because she was so much shorter than him. “Don’t ever apologize, okay? It’s hard to let someone put their hands on you, even if it’s just to practice.”

I had to fight the urge not to think something unfair like, oh, screw him for saying something perfect. I didn’t want Aiden to say and do perfect things. I wanted him to screw up. Do something that made me mad. Do something that made me want to call Carl back and tell him I’d take his job offer.

And that was the thing. I didn’t want to take Carl’s job offer. I’d only do it if I had a really, really good reason. As Aiden faced me, green eyes locked onto my face, I had to make peace with the fact that him knocking my emotions off-kilter was not a good reason.

Imagining us together wasn’t a good reason.

Wondering if he had any room in his life, his heart, for someone new wasn’t enough either.

Acknowledging it was enough to calm something frantic inside me. Trusting that I knew it was right to stay, even if it took me time to move past this, had me breathing easier.

“Aiden is going to grab my hair, okay?” I said to Casey even though my gaze didn’t move from his. “And I want you

to watch how I move my arm.”

He made no quick moves, nothing designed to surprise. As his arm lifted, shifting the muscles underneath the cotton of his shirt, it was just a little bit harder to breathe. Ribs squeezed in when the thick column of his throat moved on a heavy swallow. Because I’d just imagined us so clearly, there was a blurring in my head of what was real and what wasn’t.

Just before he touched me, he hesitated. Our gazes held like that, and I wondered what he saw in my face.

When his hand curled around my braid, his fingers brushed against the nape of my neck. It was so light, barely even there, but I shivered all the same.

And he noticed. His eyes narrowed just slightly.

To the side, Casey moved, and I blinked.

I moved my attention to her. “Don’t ever try to yank away or try to pull their hand off your hair.”

She’d wrapped her lips over her teeth, but she nodded. Two bright pink spots dotted her cheeks.

“Watch where I pull down, just by his elbow.”

I took a deep breath and swung the arm that was between us, hooking it around the top of his arm and yanking it forward in a big C shape. Aiden stumbled forward, and I caught sight of Casey’s huge smile.

Aiden quirked an eyebrow at me when he straightened to his full height, and at his expression, I exhaled a laugh.

“Again?” he asked. His tone was warm, and my toes curled in my shoes.

I nodded.

He grabbed my hair again, his grip a bit more firm. I motioned for him to wait. “Watch what I do at the end now. This is only if you feel like you need it.”

“Do I get a warning of what you’re going to do to me?” he asked.

“Nope.”

Casey laughed.

His hand tightened, my skin humming as it did, and I swung my arm around again—harder this time—and when he stumbled forward, I kicked my foot into the back of his already bent knee, and he immediately fell forward.

Casey clapped. “That was awesome.”

With a grin, I gave her a high five. “And I’m not bigger or stronger than him, right?”

She shook her head.

Aiden straightened again, pinning me with a look that almost, almost could’ve looked amused. Something light and bubbling hit my bloodstream, and I desperately wanted to grip his face in my hands and kiss him when he looked like that.

With all the control I was capable of, I pulled my focus away from him.

“It’s not about fighting them off, Casey. Disengage and escape. That’s all you ever need to worry about.”

“Thanks,” I told him.

“I think we’re even now,” he murmured, pointing at the steel beam where Anya had been perched.

I nodded jerkily.

He gave a quick nod to Casey. “Call tomorrow if you want to set up a free training session with either Isabel or Kelly, okay? It’s on me.”

“Thank you,” she said fervently. “You guys are awesome.”

He disappeared off the gym floor and back into his office, and slowly, my heart returned to a normal speed.

Casey set her hand on my arm. “Thank you. Seriously.”

“That’s my job,” I told her.

And it was.



She waved goodbye, and I sat on the edge of the center ring, leaning up against the ropes when I felt him approach.

Neither of us said anything, and I had to close my eyes to fight the urge to escape. The urge to stay. It was a constant battle when it came to him.

“Ward,” he said.

Slowly, I opened my eyes. I wanted to hear him whisper that in my ear.

He was staring at the parking lot, where Casey was pulling her car out of her spot. “Whatever you need to get some classes like that on the schedule, you make it happen.”

My throat was tight as I nodded.

“If you want,” he added quietly.

“I do.”

“Good.” He exhaled, eyes coming to rest on me for just a moment. But I felt like he’d just wrapped his hands around my hair again, like his fingers tightened in the strands and tugged my head back.

For a moment, we were quiet.

“You taught a lot today,” he said.

I glanced up at him. “I don’t normally do that much.”

“How many more do you need?”

He’d seemingly plucked my earlier thought from my head, and after a deep breath, I said, “Two more would make things more comfortable.”

Aiden nodded. “What else?”

“What?”

“What else do you need?” he asked.

I blew out a breath. What a question.

Heavy eye contact. Loaded subtext. Sex vibes, wasn’t that what Emily had called it?

There was no way he was feeling what I was feeling, and even if he was, it had to be switched all the way to max in my stupid, never-been-unlocked virgin head. This was a man who'd had an entire marriage with someone good. And I was the silly girl spinning scenes in her mind.

"Nothing right now," I answered.

If Aiden felt the need to push me on it, he didn't. But he did watch me for another moment before nodding.

He walked away, and I had to close my eyes again, allowing the charged feeling to settle and then pass.

Eventually, it had to pass, I told myself. I'd go home that night and think about what had just happened, keep the scenario locked away safely where no one could see it. But before I did, I'd play it back over in my head and imagine it unfolding in another way. One where we were alone, and he was holding me in place to do something very, very different.

In that safe space in my head, I'd pretend he had fingers fisted in my hair and his breath hot on my neck while he came up behind me. My heart raced, sitting there in the middle of the gym, and I had a visceral image of Aiden holding my hip with the other hand. My fingers curled into fists, a helpless gesture I couldn't control as I let it play out for just a few selfish seconds.

What had I thought only a handful of days earlier? Skin-to-skin contact might cause me to spontaneously orgasm. Well, apparently, I had pent-up sexual fantasies that had been lying dormant with Aiden Hennessy as the proverbial fucking key, ready to unlock them.

That small brush of his fingers along the nape of my neck was the most action I'd gotten in a couple of years, and I *should not want* to pretend what those fingers would feel like anywhere else on my body. I really, really shouldn't.

But as I stood and walked back to my office, I think, even then, I knew I was lying to myself.

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**ISABEL**

“**Y**ou coming back anytime soon?” Phone wedged between my ear and my shoulder, I waved at the guys leaving as they finished a group training session with Aiden.

Involuntarily, my eyes strayed over to where he was wiping down the equipment they’d just used. Each flex of his arm had my body humming some happy little tune. Gawd, I needed a hobby.

Or a better vibrator.

Or a dog.

Or a new brain.

Kelly sighed, yanking my attention back to our conversation. “Doctor wants me to stay off my ankle for one more week, then I can try teaching. As long as I’m not going crazy.”

“Boo.”

“I know.”

I pulled up the schedule, squinting at the computer screen. “I can probably shift around a couple of people so no one takes on too much to cover you for one more week.”

“You don’t want to pull another three-class day?” she teased.

“Hell no.” I arched my back, which was still sore. “Not when I do two the day before. I’m too old for this shit.”

“You’re twenty-five, Iz.”

“Yes, but my attitude is so, so much older.”

Aiden approached the front desk, eyes on a small piece of paper in his hand. His arms were still sweaty from his session, and I wondered—just a teeeeeny tiny bit—what they’d feel like if I trailed my fingers down the curves of his biceps.

“How many people did you have in class last night?” Kelly’s voice pulled me out of my little stare-fest, which was good because so far, I’d done nothing to abjectly embarrass myself. My current streak felt very, very impressive, all things considered.

“Ummm, hang on.” I clicked the mouse a few times, leaning in to see the tiny numbers. Maybe I needed glasses. “Thirty.”

“Oh, you bitch, my highest is twenty-five for that time slot.”

I laughed under my breath. “Anything else, Kell? I need to get some work done before a training session.”

“Nope! Love you, bye.”

I was shaking my head as I hung up. Aiden’s eyes flicked to my face as he set the paper down next to the phone. “Kelly’s ankle doing better?” he asked.

I nodded. “She can’t teach for another week, but I should be fine with coverage.”

Aiden folded his arms over his chest. “How often do trainers get injured like that?”

“Not often,” I told him. “I think she aggravated an old injury.”

Without realizing what I was doing, I stretched my wrist out and flexed my hands. He noticed.

“What is it?”

My hand stopped. “Oh. Nothing. Still just a little sore from yesterday.”

He looked like he was going to say something, opening his mouth, then closing it with a tiny, almost imperceptible shake of his head. Very slowly, he and I were treading onto more neutral ground.

“My elbow,” he said, after another pause. “Hyperextended this more times than I can count. Worst one was my second to last year fighting. Cortez caught me in an armbar, and that asshole would not let go.” He unfolded his hand and tapped the side of one thumb. “Comminuted fracture in one of my early fights. I swear, I still feel it sometimes when it gets really cold.”

“I remember,” I said quietly before I could stop myself.

He studied me carefully. “Do you?”

Turning the chair back to the computer, I started randomly clicking ... things. “Kind of. I watched a lot of fights.”

My neck went damp with sweat because the injury had ended the fight, and to this day, I remembered worrying about his future fighting after they’d announced the bone had broken in two places.

There was no response from him, but he didn’t move away either.

We weren’t alone in the building. About half a dozen people were working out on the equipment. But even with those people sharing space, I had to *remind* myself that we weren’t alone. Ever since my long-hidden vixen decided to bombard me with all sorts of fantasies involving me and him and dark rooms and whatnot, it was almost impossible to be this close to him.

With the perfectly reasonable amount of space between his shoulders and mine, it felt almost as if he were slowly winding a string. The string, in my mind’s eye, was invisible to anyone but me, which meant I couldn’t sever it, couldn’t apply any boundaries to the way that my body wanted to sway gently in his direction.

“You post about the open positions?” he asked. The clear subject change had me breathing just a little easier.

“Yeah. I’ve already gotten a few applicants.” I brought the schedule back up so he could see. “But unless someone gets sick, we’re good with this until Kelly can come back.”

As Aiden glanced at the schedule that I’d pulled up on the computer, I closed my eyes and let out a slow breath.

If I could manage one entire day without doing something stupid, I’d feel like it was something I could get control of. If only my imagination would cooperate. For a virgin, my imagination was very, very good.

When I opened my eyes, he was squinting at the screen, and it made me smile. He noticed.

“I can’t see these tiny numbers,” he muttered, leaning over my shoulder.

“Me neither,” I admitted.

“Molly Ward,” he said quietly, his finger tapped the screen for the training session I’d popped into the calendar. His arm brushed against mine as it did. “Relation or coincidence?”

“My oldest sister.” I gave him a sideways glance. “She paid, if you’re wondering.”

“I wasn’t.” He moved away from the desk, and I found myself losing a bit of that closely-held tension. “You make your sister pay, huh?”

I exhaled a laugh. “She can afford it.”

Aiden stared out into the parking lot, but I couldn’t tell if he was going to say anything else by the way he held himself.

“My brothers think they should be able to work out for free,” he said. “I thought about being nice and saying yes.”

My attention stayed on the computer screen as I tried to decipher what he was trying to get from me. Small talk was not something we’d mastered. Which made my fantasy life even worse, the more I thought about it. And it wasn’t that I didn’t want to know about him. I did. But it was so obvious that the more I knew of Aiden, the more I’d want him.

But this tenuous thing we were doing by walking a strange tightrope of tension couldn't continue.

Finally, I glanced at him. "Depends on how many brothers you have."

"Too many."

His dry answer had me smiling. His brows dropped, like my reaction confused him.

"Did Amy ever look into getting a key scan set up on the door?" he asked.

At the change in topic, my eyebrows lifted. "A couple of years ago. At the time, we couldn't swing it."

"Okay." He glanced at a big black watch on his wrist, and I had to fight not to allow my eyes to trace along the veins that mapped his forearm. I wanted to lick them like they were candy. "I have to go pick up Anya from my brother's. Your sister is here after open hours are done, right?"

I nodded.

He gave me a pointed look. "Lock that front door."

"Will do," I answered quietly.

It would have been easy to dismiss him or tell him that I would be fine if I was here with Molly. That I'd be fine even if I was here alone. It would have been easy to take his words for something deeper than face value, like they were meant for me alone, but the hard truth was that he would've said it to Kelly or Emily. He would've told our male trainers that too. My heart wanted to soak up his words and let them bring life to the rest of my body, but my pride slammed the wall shut. Because that would help nothing.

While he gathered his stuff from his office, I kept myself busy. One of our members flagged me down, needing help with his form, so I wasn't even watching when Aiden left for the day. By the time the open gym hours concluded and the last person left, the late summer sun was still bright in the sky. Because the glass front of the gym faced west, it was my favorite time to do work in view of the windows. While I

waited for Molly to arrive, I sat on the floor with my back braced against the front desk and started scrawling out ideas for the self-defense class.

Immersed in those ideas, which I'd been thinking about for months before Aiden ever took ownership, I didn't even notice Molly's car pull in. It wasn't until she pulled open the front door and shouted, "I'm so sorry I'm late."

I jumped, hand slapping my chest. "Holy shit, Molly."

She eyed me. "Didn't you see me peel into the parking lot?"

"Apparently not." I tossed my notebook aside and stood.

Her hair was tumbling out of a ponytail, her chest already glistened with sweat, and I tilted my head to the side as I studied her workout tank. "Is your shirt on backward?"

She glanced down. "Ummm ..."

"Oh, my word. *That's* why you're late?"

Molly laughed.

"You know what I keep thinking?"

"What?"

"You're not even newlyweds, and you and Noah are already nauseating. What's it going to be like when you're actually married?"

She blew out a hard breath. "Please. We're basically having our honeymoon before the wedding. He was all worked up after training camp today, so ... " She shrugged. "Gotta get that tension out somehow, you know?"

Nope, sure didn't.

"Honestly, I don't want to think about you and Noah and the kind of activities you get to have right now."

Molly laughed again, sitting on the bench in front of the window as she tugged on her workout shoes. While she wasn't looking, I studied my older sister. Made me wonder about how it must feel to have someone in your life like that.



And because I was me ... I didn't ask.

"Where are we starting first?" she asked.

I blinked. "Umm, I have some bodyweight exercises mapped out. Arm day today."

"Oh, goody," she muttered.

While she made her way over to where the ropes and bands were laid out on the rubberized floor, I cued up some music.

We worked our way through a few things, and like I usually did, I worked out alongside her.

Molly and I were shoulder to shoulder, passing a medicine ball back and forth after twisting to the side, when I asked a question that later, I'd really, really wish I hadn't asked.

"You get all your RSVPs back?"

With a twist, I handed the black ball to her, and she mirrored my movement with a grimace. My quads were burning as I held the squat and waited for her to give it back. But when she turned back toward me, I caught a look ... just a glimpse of discomfort.

"What?" I asked. I took the ball and twisted again.

When it was in Molly's hands, I stood. She did the same, setting the ball down at her feet.

"Nothing."

But she didn't make eye contact when she said it.

"Molly."

"Isabel."

"You had a look, and don't even pretend you didn't. Is Noah still on that *let's invite the entire team* kick?"

She exhaled a laugh. "No. Too many guys travel during the bye week anyway." Molly paused, her eyes finally locking on mine. "But we did end up sending out a last-minute invite this week. And ... and I don't think you're going to understand why."

My head reared back. “What do I have to do with it?”

Before she answered, Molly leaned down to snag her water bottle, and she took a long sip. By the time she set her water down, more than ten seconds could’ve elapsed, but it felt like an hour.

“I know we have some complicated family dynamics,” she said slowly, “but I feel like we can’t avoid some of it.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know. And Logan told me that we had to be nice to Nick even though we haven’t seen them once since they moved to the East Coast,” I said, referencing our other half-brother, who was a total a-hole. Thankfully, we rarely had to see him and his wife. There was about a minute, back when we were younger, when he challenged Logan for custody of the four of us. Gawd, what pricks we’d all be if he’d been the one to raise us.

Molly’s eyes searched mine. “I wasn’t talking about Nick.”

“Okay. Who?”

“Noah and I decided to send an invitation to Brooke’s last known address,” she said, lifting her chin.

My skin went hot. “What?” I whispered.

She nodded, and my skin went ice, ice cold. The change was shocking, bracing, and my heart went wild in my chest. I felt like Molly had taken a crowbar to my rib cage, prying me open like I was on a hinge.

“It wasn’t an easy decision,” Molly said calmly. “But Noah agreed that it was the right thing to do.”

“Why would you *want* her at your wedding?”

“Because ... because this is a big deal! Getting married is a big deal. We’re all moving on to these chapters of our lives, and to me, it felt like an appropriate gesture to make, considering how happy I am with Noah.” Molly set her hands on her hips and exhaled heavily. “Maybe I’m handling this wrong.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have invited the woman who abandoned us.”

Even to my own ears, it sounded like a childish reaction, on par with dumping coffee down the drain, but just like I had with Aiden, the thought of facing her also had teenage Isabel roaring back in charge of my brain. But this was not the teenage Isabel who had crushes and cut out pictures. This was the past version of me who lashed out at anyone who might hurt me, and oh, how good I'd been at that.

It was the version of me who felt like she had no control over any part of her life.

Molly inhaled slowly. "I knew it wouldn't be easy to hear this, Isabel, but it's my olive branch to extend."

"She doesn't deserve an olive branch," I said hotly. "*Last known address*, Molly. She can't even be bothered to update us on where in the hell she lives, but you think she should sit in the family pews at the ceremony?"

Molly held up her hands. "If you want to bait me into fighting about this, I won't do it."

I set my hands on my hips. "I'm not trying to fight. I'm trying to understand why the hell you think this is a good idea. You have no clue how she'll act or what she'll do, Molly. Don't you want this day to be perfect?"

Just the thought of it, of Brooke walking into the room, had my hands and fingers and arms racing with pins and needles. I didn't know how she'd aged. I didn't know what she'd say. If she'd pretend everything was fine. And all of those unknowns snapped and snarled in my head like a rabid dog on a rusty chain.

My temper didn't come out often, but this was the one single thing that would make me explode faster than anything else in the entire world. If my reaction to Aiden made me feel off-balance and out of control, then my reaction to Brooke turned me into a walking nuclear bomb.

The combination of them—the first building up for weeks and the second dropping without warning—wasn't pretty.

To my horror, Molly's eyes welled up. "Yes," she whispered. "Of course I want this day to be perfect. I am

marrying the love of my life. Don't you think I've thought through every angle of this? I'm inviting Brooke for me, Isabel. Not for her."

I exhaled a laugh, shoving my fingers into my hair. "What could you possibly gain from this?"

Molly shrugged helplessly. "Peace, Isabel. I gain peace from knowing I've forgiven her for leaving, and she realizes it. Maybe Brooke has stayed away all these years because she doesn't know how she'd be greeted."

The look I gave Molly could only be described as incredulous. "We're making excuses for her now?"

"No," she answered simply. "I'm not making excuses, but I won't hide behind some arbitrary wall of anger either. I know therapy was bullshit for you, but it wasn't for me. And sometimes, sister, you figure out a way to forgive someone because it's what *you* need. Not because you're letting them off the hook."

With every word she said, I felt this overwhelming urge to flee. I wanted to slap my hands over my ears and stop listening. It was the same sensation I felt before Aiden said he bought the gym, except much, much worse.

This thing Molly had done was, at the very minimum, like yanking open the worst scar I could think of and watching someone pour saline into the torn flesh. And what that felt like ... well ... it brought out the very worst version of myself. I hated this side of me. This hot-wired, reactionary person who couldn't control what she said or did.

I'd worked really hard not to be her. To let that instinct take me over. And everything in my life seemed to be instinct-driven lately, the wheel spinning wildly in a way that I couldn't stop, couldn't get a hold of.

I swooped down and picked up the bands we'd used, then tucked the medicine ball under my arm. "I think we should end here."

"Isabel, come on, don't be like this."

I stopped, spearing her with a look. “How long have you had to process the idea of this?”

Molly swallowed before she answered. “Three weeks.”

“Great.” I nodded. “Sounds about right for me too. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to put this stuff away.”

When I returned from putting the equipment away, my playlist hit the end, and Molly was in the front area, slowly packing her bag. From where I stood, I couldn’t tell if she was crying or not, but I was too upset to stop and ask.

Which was a big deal because anything that made my sisters cry made me want to punch things repeatedly.

And now, it just made me want to run.

Because at the moment, the only thing making my sister cry was me.

Well, me and our mother.

Fucking Brooke and the damage she’d caused with her selfishness.

Molly paused before she left the gym and gave me a long look. Thankfully, her eyes were dry.

“I love you, Isabel. And I hope eventually, you’ll understand why I’m doing this.”

I rolled my lips between my teeth and nodded. “I love you too.”

She exhaled in relief when I said it, but her face was sad as she walked out.

The building pulsed with silence as soon as she walked out, and I inhaled unsteadily. Moving slow, I packed up my bag and turned off the lights in my office. But I couldn’t bring myself to leave. I almost looked up at the ceiling because I could’ve sworn that brick by brick, unimaginable weight was falling on top of me. My hands started shaking, and I curled my fists tight to make them stop.

I needed this tension ... this feeling ... out of my body.

First work.

Now my sister, my family.

Both had me rocked with no place to grab onto. Or that was what it felt like.

And the truth, which I also hated, was that I didn't have anyone who could shoulder it the way I needed them to. To take the brunt of the pressure building and building, no outlet, no valve to release. They all had someone. They all had that person who'd know exactly what they needed at the moment they were most out of control.

My hands shook, and I imagined that metal box splitting angrily at the seams, paint peeling, edges crumpling from what was being held inside.

And what I needed, in the face of all this blistering emotion, was someone to roll with whatever came out of my mouth with no judgment and without trying to soften the blows or tell me I was overreacting, that I was too much for feeling this way.

Striding over to the iPad on the wall, I cued up one of my angry rock playlists and turned the volume up. A moment later, my hands were wrapped and shoved into my favorite black and purple gloves.

If there was no one to be that for me, I'd be that for myself.

I let out a deep breath in front of my favorite bag, stretched my arms out a few times, and started to move.



## AIDEN

It was a mistake to go back to the gym when I saw the lights on and realized her car was the only one in the parking lot. I'd recognize it later, the ramifications full and clear once all was said and done.

But at the moment, I wasn't thinking about that. Even if I hadn't left my wallet on my desk, the sight of her lone car, the bright lights, and the dark sky around the building probably would've made me stop.

Because it was only a matter of time before I recognized something important when it came to Isabel.

Curiosity and attraction were two entirely different things. Interest was so mundane because so many things held my interest.

Football held my interest, which was how I knew who she was, who her family was.

Working out held my interest because it kept me feeling strong and healthy and sane.

When I had the time, reading held my interest if the story was good.

Those were all easy and peaceful things that kept my attention and reduced my stress.

But if I thought my manager would fall neatly into that category once I figured her out, I was kidding myself.



That became apparent when I approached the front door, and with a grimace and a flare of anger, I found it unlocked. Interest never exploded into a bright ball of fiery emotion, something unnameable, at the realization she was inside with the music blaring while the door was wide-fucking-open for anyone to walk in.

Attraction did that. But I wasn't ready to name it. Not until later.

The music was hard and angry—sort of like the rippling waves of emotion I was trying to keep in check—with guitars and drums and screaming rock, so I knew Isabel wouldn't be able to hear the ding of the bell over the pulsing from the stereo system.

Even then, I could've turned around, locked the door behind me with my key, and left her to work out in peace. Once I knew that my state of mind was hardly polite, hardly civilized.

But I didn't do that either.

“What the hell is she thinking?” I muttered.

When she avoided me, I let her be.

When I caught her dumping out the cup of coffee I bought her, I didn't push.

When she continued, over and over, to do things that seemed completely at odds with what Amy had told me, I didn't engage in the way I wanted to.

When I caught myself watching her, studying her, fighting the urge to pick her apart until I understood all these things that I didn't seem to understand, I'd let her be.

But as I rounded the corner and she came into view, I *knew* I should have left. Something inside me screamed to turn and go. Leave her be now when it matters.

Because the first thing that came into my head when I noticed the graceful strength in her body, with hair unkempt, limbs and back coated with the sheen of unbelievable effort was, *I could watch her do this all night.*

I'd been lying to myself that I was only curious about her as my employee.

It wasn't polite or professional as I stood and watched her. This had sharp, snapping teeth and a voracious appetite, something I hadn't tapped into before.

Like shaking a limb that had fallen asleep, wincing through the pins and needles as the blood flow returned because for so long, that side of me had been silent.

I stopped to watch Isabel draw her left arm across her body to deliver an explosive back fist to the bag, followed by a right hook and, with a quick snap of her arm, an elbow strike.

Her technique wasn't perfect, but when emotion took over, it was rare that anyone held their body correctly.

Finally, finally, I was seeing the real her. And I knew the truth of that bone-deep.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I tried to fight the warring emotions behind my ribs.

*Leave now* was the thought battling for dominance, but my curiosity and the completely mesmerizing way she moved held my feet firm on the ground.

No. Not curiosity. Attraction disguised as something far more innocent.

My gaze caught the edge of her high cheekbones and the sculpted line of her jaw. Even from where I stood, I could see how tightly she clenched that jaw, and I wanted to lay my hands on her shoulders and tell her to relax and breathe.

If I tried hard enough, I knew exactly how it would feel if I did. If I drew my thumbs down the line of her neck to unlock the muscles she was holding so tense. She'd go pliant if I did that. If I treated her with softness.

But I didn't want to see her melt. Didn't want to see her go into some sweet, tender place.

The fire in her was palpable, and I knew I was about to walk into it.

It was that instinct that had me leaning down to snatch the focus mitts that laid on the ground next to the ring. The remote for the stereo was on the floor by her bag, and as much as I didn't want to get a roundhouse kick to the face from Isabel Ward, my own seething anger at her leaving the door unlocked had me approaching from her blind spot.

Just to see what she'd do.

Just to see what would happen.

It was stupid. And nothing, not a single thing, had excited me this much in two years.

If this was my chance to see the real, unguarded version of her, I would not waste it. And later, I could curse myself for a moment of weakness.

I shoved my hand into one focus mitt and rolled my neck before sticking the second one on.

When she drew her leg back and kicked the bag with such force that my eyebrows popped up, I held one mitt up to protect my face and touched her shoulder with the other.

With a roar fit for an Amazon, she whirled, glove aimed right at my face. I yanked my hand to catch the right cross on the mitt.

“Not bad!” I shouted over the music. “But next time, go for an uppercut off your back leg.”

Her chest was heaving, her blue eyes wide, and she kept her gloved hands at guard.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” she yelled.

I gestured to the door. “Anyone could've walked in here.”

Her eyes narrowed in a vicious glare, and for just a moment, I couldn't help but glory in how well she wore anger. Isabel tugged off a glove, then reached down and snatched the remote, turning the volume down to a more manageable level.

Neither one of us spoke, but Isabel was breathing heavily. Since I'd seen her earlier, she'd pulled off her gym T-shirt and stood in front of me in a sweat-soaked purple bra and black

leggings. I hated that I noticed, and because I did, I kept my eyes firmly on her face.

This was, without a doubt, the absolute last fucking thing I needed.

And it was the only thing I wanted from her.

No more tiptoeing. No more leaving her be.

Isabel broke the stare first, setting her hands on her hips and letting out a weighty exhale. “This just ... figures, doesn’t it?”

“What?”

“You!” she yelled, lifting her head, eyes blazing. “Of *course* you’d show up right now.”

I stepped around her, and she moved as I did, keeping her front foot centered toward me, just as she should have. “You got a problem with me showing up at my own gym?”

“At the moment? Yeah.”

I held up a glove. “Show me.”

Without hesitation, Isabel hit me with a jab.

“Why don’t you want me here?”

Each strike hit the mitts with a sharp snap. “You want a list?”

What was this? It was so immediate, so unfiltered, and the exact opposite of every interaction we’d ever had. My blood screamed with something hot and pulsing, something new and furious.

“The last thing I need,” she said, chin raised and chest heaving, “is you here to see this.”

“Again.” I held up the gloves.

*Snap.*

*Snap.*

“I almost punched you in the face.”

“You didn’t almost punch me in the face,” I said calmly, which made her eyes narrow even further. “More.”

She gave me more. Three more in quick succession. But she didn’t calm. There were words brewing, and I could see them flaring hot in her eyes. But I knew she wouldn’t give them to me. Not easily.

“What happened to your advice to Casey earlier? I thought the goal was to disengage, not attack.”

Isabel lifted her chin. “For her, that is the goal.”

“And you hold yourself to a different standard?”

She didn’t answer. But watching the flash behind her eyes, like someone dropped a match into a vat of gasoline, I knew I was right. This was Isabel Ward. And she was fucking glorious.

I wanted more of it. More of this. No matter how wrong she was for me, how badly this might go, or how much I might regret it. I wanted more.

That was why I leaned in and whispered, “Lock the fucking door next time.”

Her mouth fell open.

Satisfied that I’d made my point, I nodded, lifting the mitts. “Let’s go. Whatever your problem is, get it out right now.”

Isabel eyed me carefully. “Who says I have a problem?”

“Anyone with eyes, based on how you were treating that defenseless bag.” I hit the mitts together, the sharp snapping sound echoing around the gym. She didn’t so much as flinch. “Come on, Ward.”

For a moment, she just stared at me, and I found myself holding my breath at how she would respond.

And because it was the first moment of just the two of us, it was also the first time I saw how carefully she held herself. The sharp edge of wariness in her gaze. What, exactly, did

Isabel Ward think I was going to do to her to make her look at me like that?

“No,” she said. “Not tonight.”

I nodded slowly, waiting until she’d turned away from me.

“What are you afraid of?” I asked.

Her frame, tall and strong and proud, went perfectly still. It was almost like watching her turn into a statue right in front of my eyes. If an artist somewhere had carved her out of marble, those gloves tucked under her arms, hands still wrapped, she would’ve been called something like, *A Warrior in Repose*.

But when she slowly pivoted back in my direction, the wariness was gone, completely replaced by blade-sharp resolve. Isabel jammed her hands back in her gloves, and I held up my mitts.

“I am not scared,” she snapped.

“Prove it.” I stepped closer, and she held her ground. “I am the only person in the building you hide from, and that ends now.”

“You think you’re going to earn it like this?” She raised an eyebrow. “By fighting it out of me.”

“Hell yes.” I held her gaze, and her eyes went wide at my honesty. “This is probably the only place you feel like you can be yourself, be honest about what you feel. I’d bet the whole fucking gym on that, and if you and I are going to move forward, we work your reservations out here.”

Isabel’s rib cage expanded, the light from overhead catching on the sheen of sweat coating the curves of her cleavage.

“I’ll do this under one condition,” she said, bouncing lightly on her toes, arms up to guard her face. “You don’t get to ask me what I’m angry about.”

Judging by the look in her eyes, like the slightest thing could set her off, it was an easy thing to agree to. I nodded. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

We started simple. I kept just far enough away that she had to throw her weight behind each strike, and I called out what I wanted her to do, counting down until she could take a deep breath or a drink of water.

Isabel and I found a rhythm easily, and once we did, her movements became more precise, less wild. Her chest shone under the lights, sweat dotting her forehead until a few stray strands of her almost-black hair clung to the line of her neck.

After about fifteen minutes, I stepped back, and extended my arm out, tapping by my elbow with the focus mitt. “Watch your form right there, when you go in for the left cross. If I went to block, it would be really easy for you to adjust and hit me with a right elbow off your front leg.”

She nodded, breath sawing in and out of her mouth.

I jerked my chin up. “Show me.”

We started slow, almost like a dance. She came in with the left. I pushed her arm down, and when I barked the command, she pitched her right elbow up, stopping just shy of hitting me in the cheek.

“Excellent,” I told her. “Try again. Let’s move a bit faster.”

She got that down almost immediately, and I stepped back, swiping my arm over my forehead. I caught a quick flash of a grin on her face.

“I didn’t anticipate a workout tonight,” I told her.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have interrupted mine.”

I exhaled a laugh, gauging her facial expression as she said it. “You sorry I did?”

Instead of answering, Isabel tugged off one of her gloves to pull a long drink of water from her bottle. When she set it back down, she did a heavy exhale of her own.

“No,” she said. Then she put her glove back on.

I held up the mitts. “Let’s go again. After the elbow, use your right arm to push my blocking arm down, come up with a knee to my midsection while my momentum is in your favor.”

She nodded.

We practiced once. Twice. Then faster. And again. Her hair smelled like something citrus when her braid whipped past my face. The fourth time, she had her full strength behind pushing me down, and I grunted when her knee had a bit more oomph behind it than I was expecting.

“Easy,” I warned, as I stepped back.

But Isabel didn’t smile. She was watching me set up again.

“What?” I asked, dropping my mitts to take a drink of my own.

Her gaze was heavy on me while I swallowed.

“I got a job offer from Punch Fitness.”

The water stuck in my throat, and I coughed into my hand. She didn’t look very sorry about her timing as I tried to compose myself. After another sip, I was able to breathe normally.

“You taking it?” I asked. My voice was so calm and steady, but inside of my body, something roared and snarled. Another dangerous sign. Another impossible reaction to this woman. I wasn’t ready for something like this. Like her. Something big, something wild.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“That guy’s a hack,” I heard myself say. Because he was. She’d be wasted at a place like that.

I couldn’t read a damn thing on her face, not like earlier, when I’d seen more. This was the guarded Isabel, the collected Isabel. And I found I liked her transparency better. In her anger, no matter how dangerous that was to my well-being, I could see everything she was thinking.

I jammed the mitts back on my hands, even though my forearms were getting a hell of a workout. Holding them up to my face, I barked, “Again.”

She set her feet, and we started the dance all over.

But this time, there was an edge.



Each time she struck the mitts and knocked my arms back, I felt more and more coming from her. I blocked her knee when it came up a little too hard and gave her a warning look.

Her lips, full and pink, curled up in a satisfied smile, even as her upper body heaved with exertion.

“You don’t want that job,” I said quietly.

Isabel’s jaw clenched, and she ducked to the side when I was expecting her to throw the left cross. She came in with an uppercut, and I blocked it easily.

“How the hell do you know?”

I swatted her arm away when she tried to jab. “Because this is not just a job, or a paycheck for you.”

Isabel sidestepped and tried to do a low roundhouse, but I knocked her leg down with the mitts. Her eyes flashed hot, because I wasn’t holding back as much. But neither was she.

“You don’t know me,” she said, striking the left mitt hard with a jab.

“Because you don’t let me.” She hit the mitts three more times in rapid succession, the *pop pop pop* sound echoing around us. “But I see you, even if you don’t want me to.”

She swore.

“You treat the employees like family,” I said. She danced around me, neither one of us making a move. “You do the same to the clients.”

I slapped the mitts and she attacked, *jab, cross, cross*.

“Good,” I yelled. “And you know every inch of this place like it’s your own home. You may think I’m just hiding in my office every day,” I leaned in when she backed up, “but I know exactly what this building, these people mean to you.”

She didn’t say a word, but in only a few sentences, I noticed her movements change again, packed to the brim and overflowing with emotion, whatever my words were triggering in her showing in the ferocity of how she came at me.

“You don’t want that job,” I repeated, and this time, I felt my own reaction coloring the delivery of the words. I sounded, to my own ears, less steady and calm. “And I don’t want you to take it either.”

And just like that, whatever we were doing became less choreography that we were expecting and more instinctual. The moment she broke out of whatever pattern we’d established, the more I had to anticipate what she might do next. This wasn’t about hurting each other because it wasn’t a battle. What it felt like was a test.

But I was at a disadvantage wearing the mitts, not my typical gloves, but still ... I blocked and spun, catching each offensive strike before she caught me. I almost smiled when she missed her opening, and when I saw her eyes flash, I knew I was in trouble.

She yanked my arm out with her own and tried to sweep my leg out from underneath me, and I caught it midair. With her shin tucked between my arm and side, she muttered a curse under her breath and lost her footing.

Isabel hit the mat with an oomph, arms splayed out and her rib cage expanding on deep, greedy breaths. I leaned over, mitts braced on my knees, doing some deep breathing of my own.

“You okay?” I asked.

She nodded, but didn’t move to get up.

I pulled off the mitt and held my hand out to her. Isabel visibly swallowed, and I had a moment of pause about whether this entire interaction with her was the dumbest thing I could have ever done.

Her eyes, in the overhead light of the gym, were a deep, midnight blue, something I hadn’t really registered before tonight.

I didn’t want to know the color of her eyes or the smell of her hair, but the feeling coursing through my veins at what had just happened was too potent for me to ignore.

Because it was *life*. When you lose someone you love, a part of your brain and a part of your heart believes you'll never, ever feel again. That forever, you'll walk around with numbness in this one portion of who you are. And for the past two years, it held true.

When Isabel sat up and slowly tugged her gloves off, tossing them to the side, I almost pulled my arm back. But then she took it with hers, and as I curled my fingers around her hand, that numbness was absent.

Pushed aside.

Completely erased.

In its place was ferocious need.

I pulled her to standing, and it was the closest we'd stood all night. She was taller than average, and when she lifted her chin to stare at me, I noticed that her inhale was a little unsteady. And her eyes, they dropped to my lips.

There was no one around us.

No one to see.

And for the first time in two years, I wanted to slide my hands over a woman's body to see what her skin felt like under my fingertips. No, not just any woman. Isabel. She'd be warm and soft. She'd hold the evidence of how hard she just worked, and it made my skin tighten and my heart pound.

This woman, with all that banked fire inside her, had me holding my breath to see what she'd do next.

Because I would not, could not, be the first to move in closer.

Even if I wanted to. Even if I'd think of her like this later, imagine what we'd be like together, no matter how much I shouldn't.

Not just because she was too young, because she was.

Or because she worked for me, which she did.

Because in two years, no one had ever made me want anything, and in a single interaction, she redefined everything,

had me imagining her split wide underneath me, sharp nails, soft lips, wet tongue, and the taste of her in my mouth.

That was when Isabel licked her lips, eyelids fluttering. I sucked in a breath.

Then she yanked on my arm, sweeping her leg under mine, and I landed like a giant fucking boulder onto the ground.

She leaned over me with a grin, black braid falling over her shoulder. “You’re right,” she said breathlessly. “I don’t want that job.”

I exhaled a laugh as she walked away.

“See you tomorrow, boss,” she called over her shoulder.



## ISABEL

**M**y confident exit—which I was very proud of—lasted as far as the parking lot.

“Holy shit,” I whispered, hands shaking as I unlocked my car and slid in the front seat. For all I knew, Aiden was still lying on the gym floor because I’d *put him there*. “Oh, what did I just do, *whatdidIdowhatdidIdo?*”

But for as much as I wanted to dissolve into panicked laughter in that parking lot, a naughty little voice in my head was patting me on the fricken back because I’d had a glorious twenty minutes where he and I existed in this strange little suspended state of sexual tension.

Was it training? Foreplay? I wasn’t even fucking sure.

All my awkwardness gone.

He was talking.

I was talking back.

He knew exactly what I needed to settle the snarling angry version of me that I hated so much.

It wasn’t the boss and the manager. There was no awkward version of me on display. It was something else entirely. It wasn’t something that just played out in my vivid imagination. It had been real.

Because Aiden Hennessy stood over me, staring at my lips, and I swear on the benevolent spirit of Muhammed Ali, I almost died on the spot.

He was so big and tall and strong, his hands so broad and capable-looking, and if he kissed even a fraction as well as he did anything else, I'd never survive it. Forget sex, I'd perish from his tongue in my mouth.

I couldn't even start the car because I wasn't sure I was steady enough to drive home. Adrenaline let down or something. Whatever the comparable version was when you had unrequited lust pumping through your body instead of blood.

My phone was in my hand before I could blink, words crowding my throat before I could even make sense of what I wanted to say.

Paige hardly managed a hello.

"I need your advice," I interrupted.

"Holy shit, finally," she breathed.

Under my breath, I laughed, but really, I was still just ... freaking out.

"Have you ever like"—I paused, running a hand through my hair—"wanted something, but you never thought you'd have it?"

Paige didn't miss a beat. "Your brother when we first got married."

I folded my arms on the top of my steering wheel and laid my forehead on them, staring down at my lap. I couldn't do this. I closed my eyes and blurted out the first thing that came to my head. "Cake. There's a cake you imagined eating. You know exactly what it looks like, you had every part of that cake's existence memorized, and you dreamed about it for a really long time, even before you knew what cake tasted like."

"I ..." Paige hesitated. "I'm just gonna run with this. Okay, sure. Yes."

Sitting up, I stared at the front of the gym, tried to imagine what he was doing since I'd walked out. "So the cake, suddenly, is right in front of you. You never, *ever* thought it would get taken out of the case. Display only, no touching,

pretend the cake ... isn't yours because it's not," I said. "And then it's just ... there."

Holy hell, I was confusing myself, but I'd committed to the analogy, and I was not dropping it now.

"Cake is there, excellent." She cleared her throat carefully. "And have we taken a bite of the cake yet?"

"No!" I cried.

Paige breathed out a laugh. "Okay. That's okay."

"What if ... what if the cake tastes like shit, you know? What if you've thought of it for so long, and never had it before, and your first bite is awful or just, isn't what you expected?"

Silence dropped like a friggin bomb.

"Wait, you've never ...?" Paige stopped. "Isabel, I cannot even believe I'm about to ask this, but are you a *virgin*?" she whispered.

My face flamed surface-of-fucking-Mars hot. "That's not what this is about."

"I know we're not talking about dessert, Isabel Ward."

"Yes, we are!" I shouted, the tingling edge of panic coloring my words. "I said we're talking about cake, so *we are talking about fucking cake*, okay?" I covered my face even though she couldn't see me. "It's all I can handle, Paige. Please."

"Okay, okay," she soothed. "So, you're worried he—it," she corrected instantly, "will disappoint you?"

Oh, holy shit, I was going to cry. This was *awful*.

"Or worse," I whispered.

"Oh, Iz," she said gently. "How can it be worse?"

Through the windows, I saw Aiden turning off the lights. With each one, he disappeared from view. For a moment, I thought I saw his silhouette by the front desk looking out at my car, but I closed my eyes so that I'd stop trying to see him.



He'd lost something—someone—incredibly precious to him. And I was the fumbling girl with a vivid crush and a temper, a decade younger than him. There were so many reasons I could think of why he might not be seeing that the same way I was.

That was always my problem, wasn't it? It wasn't even really clear what he wanted from me, but there I was, prying open an impossibly big barrier because that was what he was already doing to me.

Aiden was opening me up, and he had no idea.

“What if ...” I swallowed. “What if it's the most perfect, delicious, amazing thing I've ever experienced, and the ... cake ... doesn't want what I want in return? How would you ever get over that?”

Paige exhaled heavily. “Well, I think that if someone shows interest in you—and why *wouldn't* they because you are a fucking treasure, Isabel—then you should trust that. And trust that you know when it feels right.”

Finally, I smiled. “Why does it sound so easy when you say it like that?”

“It's not easy, my dear girl. Relationships are never, ever easy.”

“It's not a relationship, Paige.” I shook my head. “It's a crush come to life. I feel like a child when he's around, and I hate it. Or I did until tonight,” I amended.

“You would,” she said, voice full of love. “None of this surprises me about you, Iz.”

I sighed.

“Look at it like this, having big feelings for someone doesn't mean you're weak or asking to be hurt. But if you don't want to do any *biting* right now, then don't.” Paige's voice took on a soft quality. “You've been hurt, kid. That makes opening yourself hard. But for the right person, you will want to.”

“I don’t know how anyone measures up to him,” I admitted in a quiet voice. The words hurt coming out. “After getting to know him. I don’t see it, Paige.”

Paige answered carefully. “I don’t think we need to borrow trouble just yet, okay? One day at a time.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

For a moment, we were both content to stay quiet, even if my reasons were different than hers. Paige, no doubt, was processing all the horrible baked good analogies I’d just tossed in her lap like a grenade. And I was quiet because I could no longer ignore how far down this rabbit hole I’d gone.

Protecting myself from possible pain came at a steep cost.

Besides my sisters and Logan, Paige was the only person in my life who I trusted with anything. The only other person who’d earned that trust. But tonight, Aiden walked in, and without flinching, he knew exactly what I needed from him to smooth the raised hackles along my back.

The more he pushed me, prodded me, the more I’d calmed.

He met me where I was instead of trying to smother the flames.

And not once, despite my growing feelings for him, had I attempted to reach out in the same way.

What he might need in this new season of his life would look completely different than what I’d just needed from him. And all I’d done was avoid. Deflect. Hide.

As the realization came, Paige spoke again, plucking thoughts from my head. “The only thing I’ll say—my darling girl, one of the great loves of my life—is that if you want to know what he wants, you may have to ask.” She paused, continuing when I didn’t raise a protest. “And I’m not just talking about wanting a bite of your own cake, you know? You may know the version of him from behind the glass case, but is that really him?”

What *had* I asked him in the first couple of weeks?

Nothing.

Because the idea of Aiden—and now, the reality of who he was—had me off-balance and at a disadvantage, even if the disadvantage was in my head.

I tried not to feel ashamed because he'd gone out of his way to make me feel comfortable.

Sometimes you had your guard so far up, you blocked the good stuff too. And I was better than this. I was sure as fuck stronger than I'd been acting. So what if I tripped in front of him and spilled some coffee?

I *liked* who I was, even if it was hard for other people to get a real glimpse.

One of us was a locked box, and the other was on display for the world to see. Neither made it easy to make real connections.

A shadow moved away from the windows, and he walked out of the building. Across the parking lot, even though it was dark, I knew he was watching me.

With a deep breath and pulling from a well of self-control I didn't know I had, I turned the key in the ignition and started my car. As soon as the headlights went on, Aiden dropped his head and walked to his truck.

“One day at a time,” I repeated.



## AIDEN

“Did you hurt yourself?” my mom asked.

Of course, she caught the wince. Anya was sound asleep on their couch, and when I leaned over to make my first attempt to pick her up, I must’ve made a face.

My sister, Eloise, perched on the kitchen counter with a spoonful of peanut butter in her mouth, nodded slowly in agreement. “He did look very old and slow just now.”

I speared her with a look.

She smiled.

Deciding to leave Anya where she was, for the time being, I stood quickly, like I was young. “Just fell hard at work when I wasn’t expecting it.”

My mom’s face wrinkled in concern. Eloise grinned.

“You okay?” Mom asked.

“Yeah. I was ... training with my manager and ...,” I paused, trying to decide if it was wise to even tell them a little bit of this conversation. No part of my interaction with Isabel felt safe for consumption yet. I wasn’t even ready to process what it meant, let alone spoon-feed it to my mother and my younger sister, who’d devour it with the same unfettered glee as she was attacking that peanut butter straight from the jar. “I just fell,” I finished lamely.

Eloise narrowed her eyes, but I knocked her legs sideways when I passed into the kitchen of our parents’ house. She

kicked out at me, catching my hip when I cleared the island, and she was lucky I didn't dump her off the counter.

I'd already been kicked at enough by one feisty twentysomething tonight, and I didn't need my little sister added to the ranks.

And dammit, like I needed the reminder that she wasn't that much older than Eloise.

"When did Anya fall asleep?" I asked.

My mom grabbed a spoon of her own and snuck the container from Eloise. "Bout thirty minutes ago. Colored a picture with El after we had some dinner. Clark was here for a while and played Uno with her. Her forehead was a little warm, and she said she was tired, so I told her to cuddle up on the couch. She fell asleep as soon as I turned the TV on."

I rubbed my forehead wearily. "I wondered if she was getting sick. She was a little off last night too."

Mom's face, as usual, took on that look of concern. "She still getting finicky at bedtime?"

My laugh was dry. "Yeah. Last night we hit a new variant, though. She asked if she could sleep in bed with me, which she hasn't done since Beth died."

Eloise stared down at her lap, and my mom clucked her tongue. The lack of immediate reaction was nothing new to me.

This was my life on a loop.

Sometimes they piped up with suggestions, but for the most part, no one in my family had ever dealt with a loss at this level until my wife died. Their silence was a glaring admission. *This sucks, and we don't know what to tell you.*

It was the largest piece to moving through life-altering grief. Making peace with that unfulfilling truth.

It sucked. And no matter what people said, their words didn't make it better. Better came with getting through each day.

“Did you let her?” Eloise asked. For as much as she gave me shit—that was part and parcel with being the youngest of five and the only girl—my sister always trod carefully in this area.

I shook my head. “I can’t move backward now. I’m not really sure what triggered it, but I’ll keep an eye on it.”

“She climbed up on that armoire in our bedroom,” Mom said. “Had to bribe her with cookies to get her down.”

“How’d she get up there?”

She shrugged. “I think she used the small end table from your father’s side of the bed.”

I sank onto a stool at the island and rubbed my forehead. “That’s happening more again too.”

“Your house?” Eloise asked.

“The gym.” I blinked a few times, an unwitting smile pulling at the edges of my lips. “My manager was pretty impressive in trying to bargain her off the steel beams holding up the heavy bags.”

Eloise cleared her throat delicately. “The same manager you sparred with tonight?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“I don’t know, Aiden,” she said. “You tell us. You just”—she waved her spoon at my face—“smiled. A little. Sort of.”

“I did not.”

“You did,” Mom chimed in. “Sort of.”

I sank my head into my hands.

“Is he crying?” Eloise whispered.

My head lifted just so I could glare at her. My mom laughed.

“I liked it better when you were too young to be involved in these conversations.”

“Welllllll, you can thank Mom and Dad for that. Not like I chose to be fourteen years younger than you.”

Mom held up a hand. “Don’t look at me. It’s your father’s fault. He couldn’t keep his hands out of my pants when we were in high school. Being a teen mom was never in the plan.” She leaned over and ruffled Eloise’s hair. “But it all worked out. We made all our mistakes parenting Aiden, so by the time the rest of you came along, we knew how not to screw you up too badly.”

Pressing the palms of my hands into my eye sockets, I took a few deep breaths.

My mom laid her hand on my back. “What happened, Aiden?”

I paused. “Nothing.”

It was the truth. But it wasn’t.

I’d made peace with the loss of Beth, and what it might mean for my future. Grieving my wife, grieving the absence of her sweet, funny nature, the knowledge that Anya may not remember her when she grew up. Not once in the past two years had I met a woman who stirred up any sort of reaction.

So, while nothing had happened with Isabel, inside me, it didn’t feel like nothing.

It felt an awful lot like someone had flipped a switch whose location had been kept a secret, even from me. It wasn’t like I’d been fumbling around in the dark, trying to force attraction to someone. There was no empty gap in my life that I was looking to fill.

But now, all I could think about was how she would’ve responded if I’d slid my hand behind her neck and took her mouth with mine. How well she’d fit me, how well we’d move together because she already proved she could match me step for step. If I allowed the images to progress with Isabel, I’d never have to worry about breaking her, because the likely truth was that she’d probably have me on my back and at her mercy before we ever got to that point.

“Fuck,” I whispered.



Mom tsked. “Language. I raised you better than to curse in front of me.”

Eloise cackled with glee. “Ohhhh, this is good. Come on, give us the scoop.”

“Is she pretty?” my mom asked.

Eloise sighed. “Mom, we do not reduce a woman’s worth to their physical features anymore. She can be pretty *and* a raging bitch monster with the IQ of a salad, and then it’s all wasted.”

“She’s not,” I heard myself say. At their stunned silence, I wanted to yank the words back in.

“A bitch monster?” Eloise asked.

“No. I mean, she’s not that either.” I kept my gaze down at the counter because, at the age of thirty-five, I’d never had a conversation with my mom and my baby sister about women. “Pretty. Or ... it’s not the right word, at least.”

For some reason, the path of my brain caused a tremor of panic down my spine. Trying to define what Isabel was or wasn’t, in this context, made my chest feel heavy and tight, and my hands held a slight tingle.

No, Isabel was not someone that I’d ever describe as pretty. It was such a weak word.

Even beautiful felt wrong.

I remember taking Anya to the zoo, maybe a year earlier, and we watched the panther exhibit for a solid hour. Something about that animal—sleek and powerful, as it paced and prowled—mesmerized both of us as we sat on a hard wooden bench. Sometimes it would disappear behind some lush greenery, but when it came back out, a flick of its tail or a stretch of its sleek, extraordinary body, and my breath would catch in my lungs.

That was the closest I could come to what Isabel looked like.

Yes, she was fierce and strong, but she wasn’t only those things either. As my heart hammered, I remembered the curve

of her lips when she stared up at me. They were full. Perfectly formed. The softest looking thing about her when I tried to separate Isabel into individual attributes.

“What is the right word?” my mom asked gently.

“Just say the first thing that comes to your head,” Eloise nudged.

My voice came out as a hushed whisper. “I *can't*.”

No one said anything. Neither of them moved. I wasn't even sure they were breathing. When I lifted my head, they were both gaping at me. The admission still hung there, and I couldn't take it back. I wasn't even sure I wanted to. More than anything I could've admitted to them, it was the most telling.

I'd lost the woman I loved and I still couldn't think about her without feeling that bruise, and I didn't know how to wrap my mind around the idea that anyone else could step into her place already.

“Oh, Aiden,” my mom said, her eyes going all watery.

Her reaction set off a small flare of panic, rocking the foundation of this carefully cultivated plan in my head. “All I want is something peaceful, Mom. I came here to make a home for me and Anya, something good and solid that we can settle into. I didn't uproot our life for anything like this. I'm her *boss*.”

Eloise nodded, eyes wide. “Abuse of power is no joke. You gotta know she *wants* it.”

“Eloise,” my mom chided.

“What? I don't want my brother to be one of those douches who thinks because he looks like he looks he can get away with whatever he wants.” She pointed her finger at me. “You can't. Be respectful.”

I gave her a look.

“Sorry,” she muttered. “I'm done now.”

“This is why I don’t particularly feel like talking about it.” I stood with a sigh. “Nothing happened. Whatever I might have thought or imagined or whatever doesn’t matter because nothing happened and nothing will. Moving here was about doing what was best for Anya, not so I can start something with my manager who’s a decade younger than me.”

“Oooh,” Eloise breathed, “Age gap. There are *so* many layers to this.”

“Can you muzzle her?” I asked Mom.

She laughed. “I have twenty-one years of unsuccessful attempts that would say no.”

Eloise ignored us, sighing happily. “I can’t even handle how great of a setup this is. It’s like forbidden looks and accidental touches at work, and you’re looking for a second chance at love even though you’re *way* too old for her, so she’s all young and hot—” My mom slapped a hand over Eloise’s mouth.

Which I appreciated because my brain went somewhere it hadn’t before.

Beth’s tired voice teasing me that she’d haunt me if I fell for the first hot, tight body I met.

My gut churned uncomfortably at the realization.

“Thank you,” I told my mom. “I’m going to pick up Anya. Can you bring her backpack out to my truck for me?”

Mom nodded. “Yes.”

When she went to grab the backpack, Eloise gave me an embarrassed grin. “Sorry, I’m reading some books right now, and I might’ve gotten a little carried away.”

“Might’ve?”

She sighed dejectedly. My little sister was my opposite in just about every way. She spoke without thinking and felt everything so big and loud, and in moments like this, it was hard to extend grace when the last thing I needed was her talking about abuse of power, and Isabel’s young, hot body, and how I was way too old for her.

“It’s fine, El.” I hooked my arm around her shoulder for a hug, dropping a kiss on the top of her head when she gave me a squeeze. “But trust me, I don’t need anyone reminding me of all the reasons nothing can happen between Isabel and me.”

“Nothing?”

I gave her a gentle nudge. “Nothing. I’ll go back to work with my head on straight because that’s the best for everyone.”

“So boring,” she whispered.

I didn’t respond, but it did make me smile. It wasn’t until I was walking out of the kitchen that she stopped me in my tracks.

“Beth would want you to be happy, you know.”

Slowly, I turned. “I am happy.”

She shook her head. “You’re settled. There’s a difference, big brother. And I hope you don’t ignore the possibility for one because you’re so fixed on the other.”

Her words echoed in my head as I moved a drowsy Anya into the truck and drove us home. I got her into her bed and then sank onto the family room couch with a sigh. The words continued to ring, over and over, like a bell I couldn’t shut off.

Even if she was right, it didn’t matter.

Whether I imagined kissing Isabel or not, whether my hands itched to slip over her skin, or how at that moment, my mouth watered at the thought of burying myself to the hilt until we both lost our minds, it wasn’t the point.

No matter what my sister said, this phase of my life was about finding an even, steady foundation. It wasn’t about heat and hormones, about attraction that hid behind the guise of interest.

I’d already married the woman I loved.

Already buried her.

Nothing short of a miracle would make me want to do that again.



## ISABEL

**A** iden: Anya is sick, so I'll be home today, possibly tomorrow. Could you shoot me the numbers of the two clients I had on my schedule today? Thanks, Ward.

The sigh that escaped my mouth as I read his text came without permission. So much for turning a new leaf and extending a long-overdue olive branch. The large black coffee sat on the edge of the front desk, his name scrawled on the side. I took a sip of my own and stared at the cup. The order was a guess because I'd never actually seen him drink coffee.

Before I responded to his text, I picked up the cup, walked over to the drinking fountain, and slowly poured it out. The dark liquid swirling around the drain had me smiling a little at the irony that I now found myself dumping coffee that I'd meant for him.

I tossed the empty cup into the small trash can against the wall and went back to the front desk. I picked up my phone and tapped out the phone numbers for his clients because even though I could call them and offer to cover, I'd quickly learned that the people who wanted to train with Aiden only wanted to train with Aiden.

Not that I could blame them.

**Me:** Here you go. You don't have anyone on the schedule tomorrow, so take whatever time you need.

**AIDEN: I appreciate it. If you don't mind, there's a piece of paper on my desk next to the computer. I forgot to add that client onto the calendar for the end of this week.**

**ME: No problem.**

The three dots on the screen bounced, then disappeared. One day at a time. No matter how impatient I could be, no solid relationship—regardless of the type—was built out of thin air.

**Me: We'll take care of everything here. Tell Anya I hope she feels better.**

**AIDEN: I will.**

**AIDEN: Thank you again.**

**ME: Just doing my job.**

**AIDEN: Glad to hear it, Ward. Even if my back still hurts.**

I was still smiling when I let myself into his office a couple of hours later. The piece of paper was easy to find, and my eyes widened when I saw the name of his new client. The gym already boasted a number of former athlete clients, simply because of my connection to the Wolves and Amy's reputation.

Current elite athletes—including the one I'd watched play US Women's soccer for the past few years—was new.

The connection clearly came from Aiden, and it sent my wheels spinning about what his plans might be for the gym. The day went by in a blink. As did the next.

It wasn't easier without him there because I felt a strange urgency to see if I could act normal around him now. Or as

normal as I was capable of after our sexually charged sparring match.

On day three, I came in to work with another drink holder in my hands. One for me, one for Emily, and another black coffee for Aiden.

When his typical arrival time came and went without a sign of him, I set the coffee on the corner of my desk as I got to work. Emily popped her head through the door.

“Call for you,” she said. “And the delivery guy is here with a huge delivery. Where should they go?”

“How many boxes?”

“Probably twelve or so.”

I glanced at my office. “Stick them right outside my door. I don’t want to crowd the front. I’ll see what they are.”

She left with a nod, and I tapped the button on my desk phone to pick up the call.

“This is Isabel.”

“Ward.”

My eyes closed briefly at the sound of his voice. So maybe I wasn’t doing so hot keeping that reaction in check. “Hey, boss. How’s Anya?”

He sighed. “A bit better, still not back to normal, though. Her fever’s gone but ...”

Leaning back in my chair, I tucked the phone between my ear and shoulder. “We can hold down the fort here if you’re worried about that.”

“I’m not. I trust you.” He paused. “The new merchandise should arrive today or tomorrow.”

“So that’s what’s getting stacked outside my door right now,” I said.

“It came?”

“Just now.”



“Good.” But he sounded disappointed. I probably would’ve been too, if I’d bought the gym and was putting my name on everything.

“Want me to leave them for you to open?” I asked carefully. “It’s a big deal.”

He was quiet. “Would you mind?”

“Not at all.”

“Thank you, Ward.” Aiden sighed. “I wish I could sneak out and do it today, but I can’t leave.”

My eyebrows lowered. “She’s still that sick?”

He hesitated before answering. “Anya hasn’t really been sick like this since ... since Beth. She doesn’t really want anyone but me right now.”

There was a strange fist closing around my heart at how carefully he said it. Like he didn’t want to divulge too much. Like it gave something away.

I licked my lips. “My brother used to buy us these special sticker books when we got sick. He’d put them on a tray with a big glass of 7 Up with a fancy straw and a little bowl of saltine crackers.” My skin felt hot sharing the story, and I rubbed absently at the side of my neck. “I didn’t even like stickers that much, but we never got them because my twin sisters once put hundreds of them all over his bed frame, and he couldn’t get them off.”

Aiden made a sound that could’ve been a laugh, but I wasn’t quite sure. “How old were you?”

“Twelve.” I shook my head. “Maybe it won’t work for Anya. But I know, for us, it was just enough of a distraction.”

“From what?” he asked quietly.

“Everything.”

Aiden was quiet, and in that quiet, I felt naked.

“I’ll see if my mom can find one,” he said after a moment. “Thank you.”

“Do you drink coffee?” I asked suddenly. My eyes pinched shut in mortification.

“I don’t,” he answered, and I heard the confusion clear in his voice.

My hand found the bottom of the cup, still sitting on my desk. “I was ... I got you coffee on my way in this morning.”

Again, Aiden was silent. Oh, silence was bad for me when I wasn’t sure how to proceed. It made for all sorts of awkward babbling impulses.

“I mean, I got some for me and Emily too,” I said. “I just ... I wanted to repay the favor. Because I shouldn’t have dumped the one you got me. That was rude.”

He hummed, low in his throat. I found that I liked the sound. A lot.

“Forgiven,” he replied. There was a smile in his voice, and I wished I could see it.

But that was it. Nothing further. It wasn’t the first time that Aiden didn’t react the way that I expected him to. Maybe, like Paige said, he was just as much of a mystery to me as I was to him.

I exhaled lightly. “Good luck with the stickers.”

He said my name by way of a goodbye, and even if it wasn’t much of an olive branch ... it was something.

The next morning, I had an iced tea sitting on the edge of the front desk when his truck pulled in. There was no way I was capable of breathing normally when he approached.

Maybe it was because I’d only known him—the real him—for such a short amount of time, but the four days without seeing him seemed like a month. In his absence, the old gym signage had been removed from the building, and watching him pause to stare up at the blank space with an inscrutable expression on his face, I desperately wished to know what was going on in his head.

With one last look at the area where the new lighted sign would go, he pulled open the door.

“Ward,” he said in greeting. But he was slower to speak, his voice lower in pitch, and his eye contact was ... a vibe all of its own. The phone call had been such meager practice. This was the real test after our sparring match.

His eyes landed on the cup, and one side of his lips quirked up.

Slowly, Aiden picked it up, studying the contents before he took a sip.

“Still not it,” he said. “Good guess, though.”

Not a single word came out of my mouth when he finally severed that eye contact and walked back to his office.

Not coffee. Not iced tea.

I caught myself watching him throughout the day. Sometimes his gaze tangled with mine, and sometimes it seemed like he was oblivious to my attention.

Like when he opened the first box of new merch and he held up one of the T-shirts for a long minute and just stared at it.

My head tilted from where I absently wiped down some bags with Kelly after her class.

“He really likes that shirt,” she whispered.

I smiled. “Seems so.”

“You know,” she said, “for as much crap as I gave him at the beginning, he’s an awesome boss. I figured he’d be ... I don’t know ... one of those asshole prima donna fighters.”

“He’s definitely not that,” I murmured.

He bought sticker books for his sick daughter and kept a low profile. He got in my face when he thought I was being reckless with my safety and didn’t flinch at my anger. He bought coffees and wiped down weight benches. One moment, he looked like he was going to back me up against a wall, and the next, he was maintaining a polite professional distance.

“If you stare any harder, you’re going to burn a hole in his skin,” Kelly commented lightly.

“Just trying to figure him out.”

“Uh-huh.”

I rolled my eyes.

“You two have been circling each other since the day he started. It’s like watching the two most flirt-avoidant people in the universe trying to figure out how to speak to each other.”

I tossed a used wipe at her, and she laughed.

Aiden’s attention moved in our direction, and with the T-shirt folded in his hand, I felt a little like he was studying me in the same way I was studying him.

The next day, I was off.

And the one after that, I added Kombucha to the list of drinks that Aiden did not drink in the morning.

It wasn’t matcha either, which tasted like dirt, according to him.

The routine we settled into over the next week held a strange sort of tension, different than it had been at the beginning. Maybe because we were on more equal footing, or maybe because I wasn’t doing my very best to avoid him anymore.

And what I found, as I watched him interact with his growing list of clients, with the new trainers we hired, with the rest of us, was that I liked him as much as I wanted him.

His sense of humor was there, hidden underneath the reserve.

“Lemon water?” he asked. He held the cup up and gave it a dirty look.

“Apparently I’m not very good at this.” I watched him over the edge of the computer monitor.

“Tastes like I’m drinking Pledge.”

I rolled my eyes, and Aiden watched me carefully.

“Do you want some help with that?” he asked, nodding at all the boxes I was still unpacking. We’d ordered new shelves,

new racks to match the new branding, and it was taking longer than I thought while I trained the new hires.

I shook my head. “It’s okay. Besides, you’ve got a new client coming at nine. All her paperwork is on your desk.”

“The soccer player?” he asked.

With a nod, I turned to grab another stack of shirts. They were just out of my reach, and he leaned down to push the stack closer to me. I smiled.

“How do you know her?” I asked.

“Same agent. Or my former agent, at least.”

I slid a neatly folded stack of shirts into the correct bin for their size. “You don’t need an agent anymore?”

Aiden shook his head. A lot of athletes, especially if they were high-profile enough, maintained a steady stream of endorsement income after retiring. He was watching me, eyes considering, like he somehow knew how hard this was for me. But he also didn’t share anything further.

I took a deep breath and glanced up at him. “You’d probably make easier money than what you’re doing here, if you still had one.”

Aiden’s mouth softened, but he didn’t smile.

He glanced at the gym, and I liked the way his eyes warmed when he looked at the space, the equipment. Like it was something more. “I probably would, Ward.”

When he disappeared into his office, I buried my face into the shirt and tried to calm the racing of my heart.

Normal twenty-five-year-old women could flirt and laugh and ask a handsome man questions without triggering an anxiety attack, but not me.

Not Isabel Ward, the girl who could handle *anything in the entire world* except those three things.

His new client came, and I did very well not fangirling when she introduced herself.

“Welcome to Hennessy’s,” I told her, handing her a membership card. “Aiden will meet you back by the treadmills in just a minute.”

As I approached his office, I shook the jitters out of my hands.

One day at a time. Even if he was only ever my boss, even if we never repeated what happened in the open space in the middle of the gym, this was how relationships of any kind were built.

Gently, I knocked on the open door.

“Come in,” he said.

Aiden was sitting in front of his monitor, and my throat went dry because he’d slid black-framed glasses over his face. Not once in my entire life had I found glasses appealing, but apparently, I had a new fetish.

Former fighter turned businessman was a whole mood, and I really, *really* liked it.

His eyebrows raised expectantly.

“Right.” I cleared my throat. “She’s here for her session.”

Aiden stood and tossed the glasses onto the desk. I stepped back so he could leave his office, but he paused in the doorway, his frame filling the space. His client stood over by the treadmill, stretching her legs, knee wrapped in a black brace. When she hurt it in the last World Cup, I almost cried.

“It’s a big deal,” I heard myself say.

He wasn’t a world-famous trainer. He wasn’t a loud social media presence or someone whose name was mentioned often anymore. But still, she was here to become stronger.

He didn’t ask what I meant. “It is.”

My gaze lingered on his profile. And when he turned, eyes locked on mine, I didn’t look away.

“That’s why,” he said quietly. “This isn’t easy money. But at this point in my life, I want to build something that matters.”

Then he walked away, and I was left wondering if I wasn't completely making things worse by trying to understand him better.

He was in the middle of his session when the twins showed up, gym bags slung over their shoulders.

"I didn't know you two were coming today," I told them.

Lia hooked a thumb at Claire. "Her idea."

I glanced at Claire. "It's never your idea to work out."

Claire held up her hands. "Not for that."

My eyebrows rose. "For what then?"

Lia held up two fingers. "We wanted a glimpse at him because you're still being awfully cagey, and two, Molly told us about your fight."

"It wasn't a fight, per se," I hedged.

Claire set a hand on Lia's arm. "We get it. And we're not taking sides. I just wanted to check on you because we haven't seen much of you lately."

Standing from the stool, I joined them as they walked back toward the bags. "No taking sides, huh? You're saying I'm the only one not thrilled at the prospect of seeing her."

"If I thought she'd actually come, I'd probably need to medicate," Lia said.

Claire smiled. "I could go either way. But I tend to agree."

Aiden glanced over while I sat on the ground with them as they began stretching. But his client started a new rep, and he pulled his gaze from me and the twins.

"I'd just rather not think about her coming or not coming," I told them. "I hate that hanging over the day."

Claire wrapped her hands around the bottom of her shoe and leaned forward. "Just don't fight that discomfort, you know? Ignoring your feelings about it will only make it worse."

"Thank you, Miss Future Therapist."

She smiled. “Plus, even if she does come, no one says you have to engage with her at all.”

Lia pressed her arm over her chest and stretched. “She’s not gonna show. No way she has the guts.”

When I shifted on the floor, Claire gave her twin a look. “We’ve got plenty of time to figure it out.”

Apparently, my desire to talk about Brooke was stamped pretty clearly on my face.

Lia snuck a look over her shoulder, where Aiden was guiding his client in some lunges. He pointed out something in her form, and she nodded, immediately adjusting. “Holy shit, is that Allie Catalano?”

I nodded.

She whistled. “I can’t wait to tell Jude.”

“How’s it going with him?” Claire asked carefully.

I gave her a look. “Perfectly fine, thank you.”

Claire smiled. “Has he talked about his wife much? I can’t imagine how hard it must be to start over like that.”

“Just once,” I said, watching him again. His eyes found mine and held.

Instead of looking away, like I might have before, I took a deep breath and gave him a small smile.

“Not really the kind of topic you can push if someone doesn’t want to discuss it,” Lia said. “Imagine if Logan lost Paige. He wouldn’t be able to talk easily about her either.”

The three of us went quiet. My heart went a little pinched, a little achy at the thought of it. He’d never be ready. Never.

Maybe that was the kind of marriage Aiden had too. The kind he’d never get over.

One day at a time, I reminded myself.

The twins left.

His client left.



A class started and ended while I continued to work.

And I found myself unable to stop thinking about what Lia had said. What this fresh start might mean to him.

As I thought it, a giant truck pulled up in front of the building and I hopped up off the floor to go to Aiden's office.

"Got a minute?" I asked, popping my head around the corner.

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "For you, yeah."

My cheeks went warm, and in the light of his office, I thought maybe his did too.

"The guys are here to install the new sign." I gave him a tiny smile. "Want to watch?"

He studied me. "If you'll join me."

Carefully, I nodded, and left his office while he followed.



## AIDEN

I'd almost convinced myself that the invitation for her to join me meant nothing. Almost. Because as we walked side by side, a low, humming awareness arced between her body and mine even though we didn't touch.

Nothing more would ever be possible with her, I'd come to realize. But it was tolerable, at least for my own sanity, as long as it didn't progress past this.

It was that awareness that had me stepping just a little farther away from her, because the last thing I needed was to ruin the ease we'd found in the recent stretch of days.

"Lemonade?" she asked.

In my head, I laughed out loud. But I kept my face even as I answered. "Nope."

When I glanced in her direction, she was frowning.

"It's not fair, you know," she said lightly. "I know you asked Amy what to get us."

I pushed open the gym door and gestured for her to exit the building in front of me. "Life never is fair, is it, Ward?"

She snorted.

The men standing in the cherry picker affixed the sign with precision as Isabel and I found a spot to stand and watch. The edges of the H appeared, a vivid blue that would glow brightly when the lights turned on at night.

Next to me, Isabel shaded her eyes and watched them work.

Her frame expanded on a deep inhale, and I found myself waiting to see if she'd speak, what she'd say.

“Before I came here for the first time, I had no idea how to handle all the things I'd shoved down. At fourteen, I didn't know it was just ... anger waiting to get out.” She licked her lips as more of the sign appeared. “Fear too, I guess. I ended my first workout a sobbing mess.” She paused, a rueful expression on her beautiful face, and I couldn't tear my eyes from her. “I hate crying. But this place gave me something safe. Somewhere safe to put all the things that were too big for my body.”

It was easy to imagine her at that age, blazing eyes and emotions exploding out of her.

The workers moved to the other side, half of the sign now visible.

“I have never loved a place more than the home where my brother raised us,” she continued. “Until I walked through those doors.” Isabel turned to me, eyes soft and solemn. “I'm really proud to be a part of what you're building here, Aiden. You're taking something I love, and you're treating it with the same care that I would if it were mine.”

My reaction to her words, her admission, wasn't peaceful or soothing, and it took everything in me to hold still, not to reach for her hand, simply to find an anchor in the moment. “Thank you,” I said in a gruff voice.

Through the sound of the drills they used, the loud tinkering of metal on metal, Isabel and I fell into a comfortable silence.

I closed my eyes as the sun warmed my skin, and I imagined Beth seeing this. She'd be proud, in this home I'd found, this haven I was building.

The workers pulled the last of the protective coverings down, and as the cherry picker lowered, I finally saw the name in full.

“Looks good,” she said quietly.

The words were slow to crawl up my throat, past the hard-edges of emotion crowding the space. “It does.”

Somehow, it felt right that it was just her and I witnessing this moment, and I refused to dig into why.

“You didn’t want to have a big ribbon-cutting or anything?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“You know, you keep surprising me.”

Glancing at her, I found her attention still focused on the sign. “Yeah?”

“I’ve known a lot of athletes, current and former. Even if they don’t love the spotlight, they know how to use it to their advantage when necessary. I figured you’d do that here.”

I hummed, folding my arms over my chest. “A few years ago, I think I might’ve.”

Isabel gave me a quick look, then turned back to the front of the building.

“It might not be like this for everyone,” I continued, “but when my wife died, I hated the attention that came with it. With my decision to leave the sport. Being the center of everyone’s focus at the worst time in your life changed everything. Nothing about it appealed to me anymore.” I stared at the letters in blue. “I know it sounds crazy.”

“Not crazy.” She gave me a look, wisps of her almost-black hair slipping across her face in the breeze. “But you deserve to celebrate this. Your family and friends do too.”

My hands itched to slide the hair behind her ears. I left them where they were. “You think so?”

Her lips pulled at the edges, the start of a sly grin. “Well, if someone were to plan a party, they should have plenty of notice.”

“Ahh. If *someone* were to agree, I’ll let you know.” I raised an eyebrow. “Nothing big though, if we do. I’ve got

someone I can reach out to for a little press though.”

“Okay.” She bit down on her bottom lip, sent a quick glance in my direction. “Hot chocolate?”

“Nope,” I murmured.

Isabel huffed quietly, and as she walked back into the gym, I found myself smiling.



### *Isabel*

THE NEXT MORNING, Aiden looked tired and a little grumpy when he came in, but at the sight of an empty glass filled with ice on the front desk, his eyes warmed.

“So close.”

“Well, I’m running out of options.”

“Maybe you just need to try harder, Ward.”

I allowed a tiny eye roll and turned back to the computer screen, where an email popped up and had me smiling.

“Good news?” Aiden asked.

“Yeah.” I scrolled down the email. “It’s from the dean of student life at UDub. She’s going to work with us on spreading the news about our self-defense class. She thought it was a great idea, and if we get enough people to sign up, we could offer a few different sessions so we don’t overload the space.”

Aiden glanced at the gym, and I could tell he was trying to picture it.

I stood, gesturing beyond the ring. “We could push some of the equipment to the far side, and remove a few bags to temporarily open some space. But I think for the first class, we should cap the sign-ups at twenty to make sure we have enough room to move around.”

He nodded. “Sounds good.”

I sucked in a slow breath. “We charging for the class?”

His eyes were bright and clear when he moved his gaze back to me. “What do you think?”

My lips twitched at his perfectly even, perfectly annoyed that I’d even ask tone. “In general? Or about this?”

“Ward,” he growled.

I felt like I was poking a giant bear, but hell if I didn’t practically feel high being able to get just a little mouthy with him. We’d come far, I realized with no small amount of pride. “I assumed I knew the answer, but I didn’t want to do anything without your permission.”

His eyes flared. “You mean like when you tried to kick me in the head a couple of weeks ago?”

Heart hammering at the warmth in his tone, I was very proud of myself when I coolly, *so coolly* raised an eyebrow. “Not my fault you weren’t paying attention.”

He gave me a long look, and it stretched just long enough that my belly flipped dangerously. Sitting back down on the stool, I cursed the warmth in my cheeks.

Aiden was quiet for a few moments, and I found myself holding my breath for what he’d say next.

It was the first mention of that night, and he’d been the one to bring it up. That had to be significant, right?

“Electrician should be here in about thirty to start setting up the scanning system for the door,” he said. “Feel free to send him back to my office when he gets here.”

I kept my tone light. “You got it, boss.”

My hand had a slight tremble as I clicked on another email, and he was still behind me.

But when he walked away, I let out a slow breath and got back to work.

The rest of the day went smoothly. I taught a class and had a training session. The electrician installed our new system, and Emily and I worked for the next two days to figure out the distribution of the new card system to all members.

I set a carton of milk on Aiden's desk when I returned after a day off, and his lips twitched.

"Oh, come on," I said.

He leaned back in his chair, hands braced behind his head. "Eventually, you'll get it because you'll run out of options."

I narrowed my eyes in a glare, and as I walked out of his office, I heard a low husky laugh that had goosebumps popping along my arms.

It was that sound that had me sliding into vivid imagery, Aiden kissing along the back of my neck, laughing when I turned and tried to capture his mouth.

Just as I contemplated how long it had been since I'd allowed myself into that headspace, the sound of someone swiping a key card at the door registered, and I blinked a few times to clear my face.

With my polite smile affixed, I looked up, only to see Anya smashing her face against the perfectly clean glass. She waved frantically, and I smiled. Behind her was a tall, handsome guy with Aiden's eyes and jaw, but his hair was almost black.

I hated how immediately I cataloged all the ways he was *less* than Aiden.

He was younger, to be sure. If I had to guess, he was probably closer to my age.

He wasn't quite as tall, though when he pushed open the door for Anya, I knew he was still a solid six-one.

He wasn't quite as big, even though he looked strong and muscular.

And he didn't wear that constant broody, grump face that Aiden did, because as he saw me behind the desk, his face spread with a broad, handsome, white-toothed smile.

"Wonder Woman!" Anya yelled, running around the desk to hurtle her small body into my arms.



Emitting a shocked laugh at her effusive greeting, I gave her a quick hug and set her back to study her. “No tricks on the beams today, right?”

She nodded. “Uncle Beckham made me promise too. Only he gave me a giant candy bar.”

“I see the evidence of it.” I gestured to her chocolate streaked cheeks.

“Anya Hennessy,” the man said in a scandalized voice, “that was supposed to be our secret. How quickly you turn on me.”

Her giggle had me smiling again. “Miss Isabel won’t tell daddy.”

He leaned against the wall and gave me a quick study. “Miss Isabel won’t, huh?”

His tone was undeniably flirty, his green eyes were warm and friendly, and honestly, this was the problem. Why ‘going on dates’ was about as far down my priority list as a full body wax. Because that undeniably flirty tone and warm eyes had my hackles up immediately. I felt like a dog who just spotted another dog far off, and instead of waiting to see how they’d act toward me, my instinct was raised hair along my back and the beginnings of a growl in the back of my throat.

This guy didn’t even know me. I’d done nothing to warrant flirty eyes and a flirty tone.

This, ladies and gentlemen, was why I was still in full possession of a hymen.

Why only untouchable, emotionally unavailable men seemed to appeal to me, because things like this didn’t happen.

Anya scampered off to find her dad, leaving the two of us alone by the front desk.

He stuck a big hand out. “Beckham Hennessy.”

I cleared my throat to make sure that an actual growl didn’t emerge. “Isabel Ward.”

“The manager,” he clarified.

I nodded.

“Hmmm.”

My eyes narrowed. “What does *that* mean?”

At first, he did nothing but smile, but then he snapped his fingers like I wasn't sitting there glaring. “Logan Ward is your brother, right?”

“He is.”

“He's a defensive genius,” Beckham said.

“He is,” I repeated, this time injecting a little warmth into my voice. “Though, I never saw him that way growing up. He was just the guy who forced me to do my homework and told me I couldn't torture my little sisters.”

That had him grinning. “I had a picture of him on my wall when he used to play.”

My face was on fire when I thought about the fact that I had pictures of Beckham's brother on my wall around the same time, but boy, did my mouth stay shut.

Beckham strode closer to the desk and dropped his elbows on the bar height counter along the front. Like a weirdo, I pushed backward in the chair so he wasn't so close.

“You and I could probably trade some absolutely killer stories,” he said.

One eyebrow rose. “Could we?” I murmured. Please, not about posters on walls, I thought frantically.

He leaned in a little farther and dropped his voice. “Just imagine how much we have in common.”

My head tilted. I couldn't peg this guy, because his eyes—up close—didn't hold anything except polite friendliness.

“Beckham,” a deep voice snapped.

My back straightened. Because Aiden appeared around the corner, jaw tight and eyes very not-flirty.

Beckham didn't move from his position, with the leaning and the closeness. His smile spread. “Aiden. Lovely to see

you. I was just telling your manager here that we have a lot in common.”

Aiden’s face was stormy. “Maybe you should let her get back to work.”

“Maybe she wants to talk to me,” Beckham said.

“Maybe you should pay attention to how she’s leaning away from you,” Aiden replied.

“Maybe,” I interjected smoothly, “she can speak for herself.”

Aiden’s eyes locked onto mine, and even though all the normal ‘Aiden-induced’ physical reactions immediately kicked off, with the stuttering heartbeat and tingly hands and butterfly-filled belly, I refused to look away.

Beckham whistled. “I really like her.”

My eyes dropped and I took a deep breath.

Beckham leaned back and smacked a hand on the counter of the desk. “See? We could write a book, you and me.”

“On what?” Aiden ground out.

“How to deal with overbearing, athletically-gifted, pain-in-the-ass big brothers.”

The laugh burst out of me so fast, so loud, there was no stopping it.

And the two men had very, very different reactions. As I slapped a hand over my mouth to stem the hysterical sounds trying to escape, Beckham smiled just a little too smugly.

And Aiden ... he looked like a thundercloud.

In fact, I’d never seen him look like that, and as my laughter subsided, I tried desperately to ignore the growing feeling that he looked ... he looked jealous.

“Beckham,” he said, “thank you for dropping off Anya. Don’t you have to go to work?”

“Nope, I have plenty of time.”

My eyes flipped between them.

Aiden glared.

Beckham smiled. “I was having an interesting conversation with Eloise the other day when she was home from school.”

When Aiden made a growling noise, deep from within his chest, my eyes widened. “Beckham,” he ground out.

Beckham leaned toward me again. “Eloise is our youngest sister. She’s a little nosy sometimes, but we all adore her.”

“Debatable at the moment,” Aiden interjected.

“How many of there are you?” I asked.

“Five,” they said in unison.

My lips curled in a smile. “I have a big family too.”

At that, Aiden’s face finally lost its hard edge, and he nodded.

Beckham glanced at his watch, and like he hadn’t instigated this entire conversation, he twirled his car keys on his pointer finger. “Well, I better get going.” He held out his hand to me again, and I took it. “Isabel, it was a *pleasure* to meet you.”

My brows lowered. “I think I’ll withhold judgment until I’m not stuck in a verbal sparring match between you two.”

He laughed. “Aiden, I’ll see you later.”

Aiden rubbed his forehead. “Thanks for watching Anya.”

Her head popped around the corner. “Bye Uncle Beckham, thanks for the huge chocolate bar!”

Beckham winked at her. “Anytime, munchkin.”

Aiden glared at his retreating back, and I tried to smother my smile.

What a strange, unexpected exchange to completely change the trajectory of my mood. I’d seen so many different sides of him now, and none of them—not a single one—were any less appealing.

I liked grumpy, older brother Aiden. And I wished I didn’t.

With Beckham gone, and Anya running back to her dad's office, it was just me and Aiden. I found myself holding my breath to see if he'd say anything. Praying he wouldn't. I wasn't entirely sure.

And wasn't that the problem?

I was in a constant state of push and pull over what I wanted, and what I needed from him.

He opened his mouth to talk, closed it, then shook his head slightly. "You're off this weekend," he commented.

I nodded slowly. "I'm watching my nephew while my brother and his wife are out of town." I gestured behind us at the main portion of the gym. "Kelly is covering for me."

He hummed in assent. "Have a good weekend then."

Aiden started to walk away, and I watched him carefully. I wanted him to be jealous over his brother flirting with me.

Like he heard me think it, Aiden paused and faced me again. "I shouldn't have assumed you didn't want to talk to Beckham. I'm sorry."

My eyebrows popped up. "It's fine."

He nodded.

I took a deep breath, steadily held his gaze, and lifted my chin a touch. "I'm not interested in your brother."

Aiden went stock-still, and I cursed myself up, down, and sideways for feeling like I needed to explain it to him.

In the moment we locked gazes after I said it, I imagined all sorts of things.

Me saying that I was interested in him.

That he was quickly becoming my favorite person to spend time with.

That I wanted him.

Imagined Aiden striding toward me, gripping my face in both hands and slanting his mouth over mine. My hands snaking under his shirt so I could memorize the muscles with

my fingertips. I imagined the way he'd be able to lift me easily, the way he'd be able to move and press and push my body into a knotted tangle of pleasure. Not once, in my entire life, had I fantasized about someone having the strength to hold me down, pin me in place, but sitting in that chair, I knew that I'd let him.

*Let* had nothing to do with it. I'd beg him to.

I'd give up all control to Aiden, and I had a feeling that he'd know exactly what to do with it.

"Good," he murmured, eyes holding mine for just a second longer. And then he turned back toward his office.

It was only when he did that I finally started breathing normally. For a while, it seemed like he and I might have found steady ground, a foothold into a new place that I was enjoying.

Maybe I was kidding myself to think that getting to know him better would ever lead to me wanting him less. Because as he walked away, I knew I wasn't doing so hot getting my feelings for him under control.

And when he glanced back in my direction, I had to wonder if I wasn't the only one.



## ISABEL

“I think we should go out for breakfast,” Emmett said.

We stood side by side, staring into the fridge. Amazingly, our staring did not magically make food appear.

I winced. “We can make *something*. There’s like ... eggs. And bread. And cheese. That’s enough, right?”

He looked up at me. “You’re asking *me* what to do with those two things? I’m a kid.”

“You’re almost ten.”

“You’re like ... twenty-five. If anyone should be able to cook breakfast, it’s you.”

I stared at the shelves with a heavy sigh. “Everyone has talents in this life, Emmett. Cooking is not one of mine.”

“No shit.”

With a determined lift of my chin, I started pulling things out. “I’m going to ignore that.”

He took the eggs when I handed them to him, setting them on the counter with a skeptical look. “Mom’s gonna be pissed if you poison me with your cooking before they get home.”

“Nah, she’ll forgive me.”

Emmett grinned.

This poor kid. He had no choice but to speak fluent sarcasm considering the family he was born into.



A minute later, the kitchen counter was covered in an array of things that should've equaled out to a pretty epic breakfast.

“Don't they have like, fancy cooking gadgets that make this stuff easy?”

His eyes lit up. “They have one of those air fryer things. And a toaster.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I know what a toaster is, Emmett.”

“Are you sure we can't just go out to breakfast?”

“Tomorrow,” I insisted. “It'll be our reward for not killing each other after all this unsupervised time together.”

“If your breakfast doesn't kill me first,” he muttered.

I shoved him sideways. “Get out of here with that bad attitude.”

Emmett sighed. “Just don't use the microwave and toaster at the same time. Mom said a really bad word yesterday when she did that.”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “I know how to work appliances, Emmett. Go watch those awful cartoons.”

After anchoring my hair in a bun at the top of my head, I mentally rolled up my sleeves and got to work. I managed to crack some eggs in a sizzling skillet, with only a few chunks of the shell that I scooped out. Bread went into the toaster, and I jammed the button down.

Pulling a bag of sausage links up closer to my face, I tried to read the reheating directions. The eggs took up the whole skillet, so I ripped a piece of paper towel off the roll and stuck a few links into the microwave.

For a moment, I eyed the two appliances. I'd never heard Paige complain about running them simultaneously, and even though I hadn't lived under their roof for four years, I would've remembered if it was an issue.

With a shrug, I pressed the start button on the microwave.

The whole kitchen went dark.

“Shit sticks,” I whispered.

“Told you that would happen!” he yelled from the couch.

With my hands on my hips, I let out a deep sigh. “It’ll be fine. I can just go flip the fuse. Can you yell when the lights go back on?”

“As long as you didn’t blow the fuse,” he said, sounding so much like Logan I almost rolled my eyes. “Dad said if Mom did that one more time, he was going to let her change it herself.”

I smiled. “And what did she say to that?”

“That he could shove his fuse up his ass because she’d be just fine if she had to.”

I was still laughing when I walked down the hallway and opened the utility closet. But when I opened the gray metal door, my laughter died a horrible death.

Note to self: listen to the ten-year-old when he tells you not to run the appliances at the same time.

Emmett eyed me when I came back to the family room. “What’s wrong?”

“Fuse is blown.”

“Are you going to call someone to come fix it?”

My thumb tapped furiously on my thigh as I thought about my options. “I may not have to.”

I yanked out my phone and sent a text.

**Me: You at the gym yet?**

**KELLY: Probably not for another hour, why?**

**ME: Nothing. Just trying to remember if I had a box of fuses in my office. Remember when Amy was having all those issues last year?**

**KELLY: Someone blew the fuse on the stereo in the middle of a Sunday afternoon class. YEAH, I REMEMBER. You ever tried to teach with only sound of your heavy breathing to motivate people?**

**ME: Thankfully, no.**

With a glance at the dark kitchen, I decided that the very last thing I felt like doing was to wait around all day for an electrician. I went to find Emmett.

“If you don’t mind a road trip to the gym, we actually have some spare fuses in my office. There’s no point in paying someone to do this if I can figure it out myself.”

“Yeah, except if you blow the house up because you put the wrong fuse in.”

“Do you have that little faith in me?” I asked.

“You don’t know how to scramble eggs without burning them, Iz.” Emmett gave me a wide-eyed *duh* look.

I motioned to the front door. “Let’s go, punk. I’ll buy you breakfast on the way.”

Twenty minutes later, he was still inhaling the rest of his breakfast sandwich when we pulled into the parking lot at the gym.

The sight of a familiar black truck at the end of the lot had me utter a curse word under my breath.

Emmett held out his hand. I tossed my entire wallet at him. “Take a twenty, then I’m covered all weekend.”

His eyes were the size of the tires on Aiden’s truck. “Deal.”

I slid the car in park and turned to Emmett. “Okay, so my boss is in there. Be nice, be respectful, and don’t tell him anything embarrassing, okay?”

He shrugged. “What would I tell him that’s embarrassing?”

When we approached the front door, I glanced inside before I slid my new card in front of the scanner. Some lights were on, but not enough for me to see Aiden right off the bat.

As soon as we turned the corner around the half wall separating the front entry from the main gym area, I saw a small body lying like a starfish in the middle of the boxing ring. She was singing a song at the top of her lungs, completely unaware of our presence.

Emmett nudged me with his elbow. “Who’s that?”

Anya jumped up with a startled shriek, white-blond hair flying in all directions. But when she saw me, she smiled. “Miss Isabel!”

“Hey, kid. Nice singing,” I told her.

Aiden’s frame filled the doorway of his office.

Emmett climbed up into the ring with Anya, and they started running in circles. I sighed quietly. Now that there was someone to play with, this would not be a quick trip.

I jangled my keys against my leg as I approached Aiden. “Didn’t think anyone would be here.”

“I could say the same.” His eyes assessed me, head to toe, and I struggled not to fidget. It wasn’t like I got dolled up for work, but this was the first time he was seeing me bare-faced, hair a mess, and wearing the black joggers I’d slid on when I woke up. My white shirt was loose and comfortable, and it constantly slid off my shoulder, so it was *painfully* apparent that I wasn’t wearing a bra.

“Iz!” Emmett yelled from the ring. He’d stuck his body between the ropes and had his knees balancing on the lower one.

“Yeah?”

“Is that the guy Molly was teasing you about because you had his picture on your wall when you were little?”

My eyelids slammed shut, my heart actually stopped beating in my chest, and at that moment, I imagined just how

possible it was to travel back in time and not turn on that fucking microwave.

When I opened my eyes, I glared at him so mightily that his mouth popped open. “Ohhh, is that the kind of embarrassing thing you didn’t want me to say? Sorry, Iz.” He hopped off the ropes and went back to running.

Like he hadn’t just embarrassed the ever-loving shit out of me.

I covered my mouth with one hand when I heard a sound of choked amusement behind me.

I wanted to die.

When I turned, Aiden was still leaning up against the door, but oh, I couldn’t believe it.

He was smiling at me.

This was no wide smile that showed all his teeth or made a surprise dimple appear on either side of his mouth. But it was so, so much worse. Because this smile absolutely devastated me.

I dropped my hand, pointing a finger at him. “It’s not funny.”

“It’s a little funny,” he teased.

Instead of answering him, I strode to my office, head held as high as I could manage when I wanted to crawl under my desk and hide.

With his eyes on me, I unlocked my office and started searching in the corner cabinet where I shoved all the shit I never felt like organizing. My mental peptalk while I ripped through boxes was something like, *it’s fine. It’ll be fine. A poster is not a big deal, and he won’t care because he was a world-class athlete, so he probably won’t even really remember.*

“Which poster?” he asked.

I straightened slowly, clutching a small box in my hands. He was behind me, perched on the edge of my desk.

“I don’t even really remember,” I answered, very *easy breezy*, *I don’t have sex fantasies about you every day of the week*. I swept a lock of hair behind my ear before I turned to face him. “I had a lot of athletes on my wall when I was younger.”

“Okay.” He didn’t believe me, but I couldn’t have cared less as long as he didn’t push it. My heart rate slowed a bit when he lifted his chin, eyes on the box in my hands. “What are you looking for?”

“Umm, a box of fuses.”

His eyebrows lifted.

“I ... sort of blew one out at the house. Didn’t really feel like waiting for an electrician.”

Emmett ran into the office. “She exploded it trying to make us breakfast.”

*Remember how much you love him*, I chanted in my head.

“Did she?” Aiden asked.

“Yeah,” Emmett said. “Isabel *sucks* at cooking.”

Aiden smothered another smile.

“Okay,” I interjected. “That’s enough out of you, or you don’t get your screen time later.”

He sighed heavily. “Can Anya come over and play? I told her about the treehouse in the backyard, and she wants to see it.”

“Oh, umm”—I glanced at Aiden—“I don’t know if today is a good day. I have to get this fixed, and Mr. Hennessy is working.”

Aiden stood from the desk. “You’ve replaced fuses before?”

I slicked my tongue over my teeth. “Not exactly, but I can figure it out.”

“You know how many amps that box is for?”

Glancing down, I caught sight of the edge of the box. “Twenty.”

“And that’s the kind you need? If you replace the bad one with something that’s got too many amps, you’ll do even more damage to the wiring.”

My eyes narrowed slightly, and immediately, Aiden returned the look.

Something dangerous kindled like a lit match under my skin.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“I have a bunch of stuff in my truck, including some fifteen amp fuses,” he said. “I’d be happy to come over and do it. If it’s not the right one, I’ll run to the store.”

“Please say yes,” Emmett whispered. “I don’t want the house to explode. Mom and Dad would be so pissed at you.”

The only reason I had to say no was my pride, not to borrow trouble. Inviting him to our house felt very, very troublesome.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t a reason to say no. Not with this.

“I would appreciate your help,” I told him. “I’ll text you the address.”

He wasn’t smiling anymore, and it had no less of an effect on me when he jerked his chin in assent.

All of my moments alone with Aiden had been accidental. Until now.





## ISABEL

Emmett eyed my hands tapping frantically on the steering wheel.

“Not a word, punk.”

He rolled his eyes. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

I turned the wheel and pulled the car into the driveway of the house. “You mean like you weren’t going to say anything about having a poster of Aiden on my wall? I should take my twenty bucks back.”

Emmett sighed. “I have a poster of Noah on my wall, and you don’t see me going around calling people names if they tell him about it.” Then he shrugged. “I don’t understand why you’d be embarrassed about it. I’ll fight him if he makes fun of you.”

I smiled because as much as he drove me crazy, moments like this reminded me why I’d die for him so fast.

“You’re going to fight Aiden Hennessy?”

“Yeah. It’s not like he actually won the heavyweight title.” He puffed up his skinny chest. “Besides, I hear Mom say all the time that one good fit of righteous rage makes you stronger than someone twice your size.”

“*Why* is she telling you that?”

He thought about that. “One of my friends was getting bullied at school.”

“And she told you to attack them in a fit of righteous rage?” I asked, smiling widely.

Emmett shook his head. “No. But the house rule is you ask them to stop. If they don’t stop, you tell a teacher. If they still don’t stop, you punch ’em, and even if I get in trouble at school, I’ll *never, ever* get in trouble at home.” His eyes got wide. “She has a violent streak, though, you know?”

“Yes, she does.” I turned in his direction, carefully smoothing his hair back from his face. “Your hair is getting darker. Who said you’re allowed to start looking like a teenager?”

Emmett’s cheeks went pink. “How old do you think I look?”

“At least thirteen.”

He grinned widely, unbuckling his seat belt and tearing out of the car like I’d just handed him a check for a million dollars. “I’m gonna go make sure the treehouse is all cleaned up!” he yelled over his shoulder. I waved, slowly getting out of the car after he sprinted around the side of the house.

It was fine.

*This was fine.*

The kids would play outside while Aiden helped me fix the fuse. It would take two minutes, they’d be on their way, and I could go about my day relaxing with Emmett. I’d planned absolutely nothing, hence the pajama-chic look I’d thrown on.

I glanced down and groaned.

Without a bra.

If I hurried, I might have time. A glance down the street showed that it was empty, so I jogged into the house and fidgeted with the key in the front door. Just as I heard the turn of the deadbolt, the sound of Aiden’s truck came rumbling into the driveway. I allowed myself one brief fortifying exhale, then I slid the key out and turned, bracing my back against the door with a smile on my face.

Emmett must have heard the truck because he ran back around into the front yard, skidding to a halt when Aiden unfolded his great big body from the great big vehicle.

Would there ever be a time that seeing him wasn't like a hole being punched through my chest?

He didn't even have to do anything but *get out of his truck*, and I wanted to strip naked, stretch over his body like a blanket, and kiss him until I saw stars. It was confusing. And annoying. And I was starting to have just a little sympathy for why my sisters had all been such headcases at one point over the past couple of years.

Aiden was wearing dark aviator frames that hid his eyes. Even though I couldn't see his eyes, I knew he was staring at me as he waited for Anya to hop out of her booster seat. He opened the rear cab door of his truck and helped her down.

"Hi, Anya," Emmett yelled like they hadn't just seen each other.

"Hi!" She stopped in front of the house and stared up at the brick-front exterior. "You have a way bigger house than we do."

Aiden rubbed the back of his neck, dropped his chin to his chest, and sighed audibly.

At least I wasn't the only one with a filter-free chatterbox in this scenario.

I smiled at Anya. "Well, there were five of us when my brother bought the house. He had to have enough space for me *and* my three sisters. That's a lot of bedrooms."

Aiden lifted his head, and again, I got the feeling he was studying me.

Anya's eyes got wide. "You lived with your *brother*? Cool."

I nodded.

That was when my chatterbox nephew decided to interject. "Really, he's her half-brother. They had the same dad. He had

a heart attack. But when their mom left, my dad bought a bigger house so they could all live together.”

“Thank you, Emmett.” I sighed. Aiden’s mouth twitched like he was fighting a smile. “Anything else you want to share?” I asked the little person next to me.

“Yes.”

I gave him a look.

“Well, you asked!” He took a deep breath and turned to Aiden. “You shouldn’t feel too special that Iz had your picture on her wall when she was fifteen. She had a lot of people on her wall, and there was probably a whole section of athletes she *didn’t* like too, you know, just to remind her who they were.”

“Emmett,” I ground out, “stop talking.”

“Fine, geez,” he murmured.

I raked my fingers into my hair and blew out a breath. “Why don’t you show Anya either your video games or the backyard or ... something.”

“The treehouse!” Anya yelled, then she looked up at Aiden. “Can I?”

He crouched down to her height, sliding off his sunglasses. “Yes, but you treat their things respectfully, and what’s the other rule?”

She sighed. “No climbing up too high.”

“Go ahead,” he said softly. He held out his fist, and she bumped it before running off with Emmett. They whooped and hollered like little savages, and I smiled as the sound disappeared into the backyard.

Aiden straightened.

And we were alone.

“I’ll grab the fuses I have,” he said. “Hopefully, one will work.”

With a nod, I watched him open a steel-plated toolbox in the bed of his truck. Watched the stretch of his back, the way the muscles in his arms bunched as he moved items that I couldn't see. And his ass in the jeans he was wearing. I almost whimpered.

So yes, if I was guilty of anything, it was my complete physical objectification of this man. Yes, he was so much more than a beautiful body, but holy hell, his body was so, so nice to look at.

I wanted to *do things* to that body and let it do even more to me.

I opened the door when he reached the front step and followed him into the entryway. Head tipped, he took in the staircase curving up to the second floor, the wall of framed pictures that covered the wall leading to the kitchen, dining, and family room.

At the end of the display, there was one that made him pause—me, my sisters, and Emmett when Lia and Claire finished their undergrad. The twins in their cap and gown were flanked by Molly and me as Emmett stood front and center, sticking his tongue out at the camera.

“He’s your nephew, you said?”

“Yeah.” Then I laughed under my breath. “But sometimes it feels like he’s our little brother. We have a”—I paused—“unique family tree.”

He hummed. “All that teenage anger you mentioned.”

Slowly, I nodded. “Yeah.”

Aiden studied the line of pictures, and I wondered what he was thinking. His gaze landed on one of me, Logan, and Paige when I was sixteen.

“Your mom left the four of you.”

He stated it so simply, without any inflection, that it didn't knock the breath out of me. Again, I nodded.

When he turned, his eyes held a dangerous edge. “I’d be pretty fucking angry too.”

My smile was wide, my laughter unexpected. But it felt really good. Aiden's expression softened.

I stood next to him and looked at the picture. "That's the anger you caught"—I glanced sideways at him—"a couple of weeks ago. My sister invited her to their wedding, and I ... didn't handle it well," I said wryly. "Maybe I'm still not handling it well."

Aiden watched me with heavy-lidded eyes. Something about my honesty seemed to affect him the most.

"So I don't need to expect attacks like that often?" he asked. "I'll keep my guard up if I should."

"No," I answered around a small smile. "You don't." At his nod, I breathed just a little easier. "I'll show you where the utility closet is."

I brushed past Aiden, my arm grazing his where my shirt had slid off my shoulder, and I felt the small touch down to my toes because his skin was warm and firm. As he followed me, he was quiet, but I got the sense he was studying our home. Studying me.

We passed the guest room and a bathroom, turning by the doorway that led to Logan's office. Aiden paused, glancing inside. Over my shoulder, I saw him peering at the Washington Wolves paraphernalia lining the walls. Two framed jerseys hung centered over the couch along the back wall from Logan's professional career and college. Photos of him and Paige, the sisters, and Emmett adorned the wall behind his desk. On the dark wood surface were two massive computer monitors and neat stacks of books and binders.

"No trophies out," Aiden commented.

I smiled. "I think they're in a box in the closet."

His eyebrows popped up briefly. "Mine will probably end up there too. I can never figure out how to display them without seeming pompous."

"The burden of greatness?" I teased lightly.

One edge of his mouth hooked up in a wry smile. “Something like that. I haven’t set up my home office yet.”

“Probably because you never leave the one at the gym,” I said.

His gaze moved from the office to my face. “If that’s not the pot calling the kettle black.”

“Touche.” I lifted my chin at a nondescript door. “Fuse box is in there. I can go check on the kids so I’m not in your hair.”

“Oh no, you’re going to help.” He was so nonchalant as he said it, opening the door and setting his toolbox down to hold it in place.

One of my eyebrows rose at the evenly spoken command. “Am I?”

He hit me with the full force of those eyes when he turned. “Yeah. Because if this ever happens again, you’ll know what to do.” Aiden jerked his head for me to join him in the utility room.

The small, not at all spacious utility room. The fuse box was on the middle of the wall, flanked on one side by the furnace, the water heater was in the corner, and on the opposite wall was some floor-to-ceiling metal shelving Logan had stacked with tools, light bulbs, and a bunch of other shit I’d never looked at.

All I knew now, as I stood next to Aiden, was that that shelving took up a shit ton of space in that room, and we were forced to stand with our arms brushing as he flipped open the door.

“It’s that one,” I told him.

He nodded. “Can you grab those two boxes on the top of the bag, the small red-handled voltage check next to them, and a flathead screwdriver? Please,” he added when I shot him a look.

Bending over to find the items he asked for, I couldn’t help my grin.

When I handed him the fuse boxes, he started explaining what he was doing, checking the part numbers, and where to check that the main breaker was shut off. Then he unscrewed the cover and set it on the ground by his feet.

“You still have power coming through,” he said, pointing for me to hold the gauge just beyond the wires to see how it lit up. “Now that we know the circuit breakers I had match up, we can replace the old one. But we have to turn off the main breaker first, so go ahead and turn on the flashlight on your phone. There’s not enough natural light in the hallway to be able to see.”

*Yes, please,* I thought. Just what I need. To stand side by side with Aiden in a dark closet. In a house by ourselves.

It wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest if he could hear my heart hammering behind my rib cage. After all, the only thing covering it was one thin layer of white cotton and the flimsy protection of my skin, which hummed like a live wire at his nearness.

If someone held that voltage checker in the scant space separating our bodies, it would have lit up like the Fourth of freaking July.

Aiden flipped the main power off, and we were plunged into darkness.

I let out an audible breath as he shifted slightly, the skin of his arm brushing my shoulder. He smelled like a soapy pine forest which sounded so much less sexy than it smelled. I wanted to crush that scent into crystals and snort it.

“Can you, uh”—he paused—“the flashlight?”

“Right,” I exhaled. I pulled my phone from where it was tucked into the pocket of my joggers, almost dropping it when my hands shook a little.

The light was garish and harsh, and when I glanced up at him, a muscle tightened ominously in his jaw as his eyes were straightforward on the fuse box.

“See that screw there on the far right of the blown fuse?”



I moved the flashlight but had to shift closer to get a clear view of it. “Mm-hmm.”

“That’s what you unscrew to remove the wire,” he explained. “Do you have the flathead?”

Nodding, I lowered the phone so I could reach my other hand into my pocket.

“I’ll take the phone,” he said.

Passing it to him, I willed myself to stop thinking about anything except replacing that motherfucking fuse because the things running through my head were positively indecent.

They got worse when he extended his arm behind me to angle the light so I could see more clearly.

In my head, I had an image of myself as a marionette doll, and he could pull and tug me into the right position simply by plucking a single string. Each corresponding body part would bend to his will. What I wanted was to slide closer and see what would happen if I moved in front of him.

Would he curl one of those big hands around my hip and yank me back against him?

Would he drop the phone, wrap his arm around the front of me, slide it down the opening in my shirt?

Would he slide his arm around my waist? Pluck at the tie of my joggers and shove them out of his way?

In the light, my hand visibly shook when I lifted it to unscrew the fuse.

“Hey,” he said quietly.

My hand froze midair. “What?”

“Take a deep breath.” I did as he asked. “If you’re nervous to do this, I can take over.”

Take over.

I wanted him to take over.

Why was this happening to me? And with this man? I was always the strong one. The together one. The take-charge one.

And in that tiny, dark closet, I wanted him to absolutely dominate me.

Aiden and I were talking about two entirely different things, of that I was certain.

But still, I slid to the side so that my back was to his chest, and when he inhaled, a sharp quick pull of breath, I felt something powerful course under my skin.

“Please,” I whispered. I wanted to turn around and face him, whirl in his arms and press myself against his body. “Please take over,” I begged quietly.

For a beat, the air between us was so thick I couldn’t breathe.

If this was all in my head, I could hardly imagine facing him again.

“Shit,” he grumbled, a delicious vibration of sound at my back. I felt his nose next to my hair, and he inhaled. His chest brushed my back, not accidentally, and not quickly.

The hand holding the screwdriver planted against the wall next to the fuse box, and I arched my neck. His breath hit hot against the skin of my neck. And then, oh, and then, his lips coasted against the shell of my ear. I shivered, and against my ass, he pushed closer.

Not in my head.

Not alone in this.

Because I *felt* him.

“Is—” Whatever he was going to say next didn’t matter.

“Isabel?” Emmett yelled. “I can’t turn any of the lights on!”

Aiden backed up. The screwdriver fell out of my hand with a noisy clatter, and I moved away from him. I couldn’t even make eye contact as I frantically picked up the screwdriver and held it out to him. He took it.

I called out to Emmett, “Hang on, bud. We’re working on it.”

“I’ll finish up,” Aiden said, his voice rough.

I nodded, escaping into the safety of the hallway. I’d just lifted my eyes to look at him when Emmet slid around the corner with Anya right behind him.

“Iz? Can Anya stay and play when he’s done?”

I could hardly even focus on what he said, but I saw Aiden blink rapidly. He might have had shaking hands as he unscrewed the circuit and yanked out the attached wire, but his jaw was tight, his entire frame looked like a string about to break. He was just as rattled as I was.

“Please, Daddy,” she begged. “I don’t want to hang out at the gym again.”

Aiden’s eyes briefly flicked to mine, then moved to his daughter. “They might have plans, gingersnap.”

“We don’t,” Emmett said. “We were just going to hang out here all day.”

The kids turned their pleading gazes to me, and I tried to force a smile. “It’s fine with me, but I’m leaving the decision up to your daddy, Anya.”

Aiden fitted the new circuit into the slot, attached the wire, and quickly tightened the screw. When he flipped the main breaker into the on position, the hallway flooded with light. Along with it, some of my tension seemed to ebb naturally. If I hadn’t felt the way he wanted me, I’d have thought I imagined the whole thing. Because when Aiden tossed the tools back into the bag and turned to us, he looked perfectly normal again.

“You sure she wouldn’t be an imposition?” he asked.

I shook my head. “If she doesn’t mind frozen pizza for lunch, she’s more than welcome.”

He ruffled his daughter’s hair. “You win, kiddo.” The kids whooped loudly as Aiden returned his attention to me. “Thank you. I shouldn’t be more than a couple of hours.”

“She’s doing me a favor,” I told him. “Now I don’t have to entertain Emmett.”

Emmett rolled his eyes. “Come on, Anya. Lemme show you the trampoline we have in the gym room.”

They darted into the room to my left, and Aiden watched with a slight smile on his face.

“You’re sure?” he asked now that they were out of earshot, though his gaze stayed firmly on the kids.

For that, I was thankful.

I kept my tone light and even. “Now I don’t owe you for the circuit breaker.”

His eyes found mine.

“Thank you,” I told him.

Aiden didn’t answer. But he must have clenched his teeth because that muscle popped again. As I walked him out, neither of us speaking, I knew that I had to pull my shit together. Because the more this happened, the wilder I felt anytime I was around him.

At the front door, he paused. “I’ll be here no later than one,” he promised.

I nodded.

With the door firmly closed behind him, I sank against the wall and let out a deep breath.



## ISABEL

Apparently, if I'd ever wanted to delve into the Hennessy family history, all I needed to do was hang out with Anya for a few hours.

Over frozen pizza hot from a working oven, she told me all about her uncles (Beckham, Clark, and Deacon) and her aunt (Eloise). She told me about her grandparents and their favorite foods and how Eloise bought her pretty princess things.

She was a sweet girl and shared information in the way that only a girl well and truly loved could. There was no moment of pause as she talked about how she wished she had cousins, and how she slept with a picture of her mommy by her bed.

"What happened to your mom?" Emmett asked.

I watched them carefully but didn't chastise Emmett for asking. I'd learned, from my own experience, that it was something worse when people avoided the reality you'd grown up in.

Anya finished chewing her pizza. "She's in heaven. She got cancer."

Emmett glanced at me, wide-eyed, and I nodded in encouragement.

"I'm sorry she died," he told her.

"Me too. I only kinda remember her, though." She shrugged. "My daddy tells me stories about her a lot. So I don't forget."

“That’s a good thing for a dad to do,” I told her. I picked at the piece of crust on my plate. Anya and I shared many commonalities, but the way they played out was very different. Brooke never really talked to us about our dad after he died. Only that his absence left her alone and short of funds. My own memories of him were spotty and certainly nothing that would be told as a bedtime story.

“He’s the best dad,” she asserted. “He tries to bake her cookies for me even though he can’t get them right.”

I smiled. “She made good cookies?”

Anya nodded, then studied my face carefully. “Do you bake?”

Emmett laughed. “No way, Isabel is the worst baker in the world.”

“Hey,” I argued.

Anya’s face scrunched in thought. “I don’t really remember her baking. My grandma told me my mom was sweet as sugar and twice as nice. And *everyone* loved her because she was nice to every person she met.”

Her words were so innocent, and no matter how much I was feeling for her dad, I felt the pang of what they’d lost. The absence of Aiden’s wife left a ragged hole he was trying to fill by moving here.

Who was I to think that I could ever attempt to fill it? He’d married this person. Had a child with her. Quit his career at the very peak in order to care for them both, and from what I knew, didn’t hold an ounce of regret in leaving all of it behind.

“Your mom sounds like she was an amazing person,” I told her gently. “I wish I could’ve met her.”

Anya smiled, but her eyes were a little sad.

Emmett pushed his plate away. “Wanna go in the treehouse?”

“I’ll clean up,” I said when Anya nodded.

The two scampered outside, and as I loaded the dishwasher and wiped down counters, I tried to untangle everything I was feeling.

My tendency under normal circumstances would be to hit the bag. To push my body to sweaty exhaustion until I could make sense of what was tumbling through my head. At the moment, it wasn't an option, and it made me feel twitchy and uncomfortable.

Anya's words about her mom had me feeling twitchy for an entirely different reason.

Memories of the one who raised us, they were murky, not all good. But not all bad either. Briefly, I thought of the bracelet in the metal box.

I set the plate of leftover pizza in the fridge, and when the door closed, I found myself staring at a photo of Molly and me at a Wolves game. Suddenly, I couldn't call my sister fast enough, after weeks of not really knowing what to say.

Hopping up on the kitchen island, I brought up her name and started a FaceTime.

It was her last couple of days on a work trip, but when she got home, she'd be in the final stretch before the wedding. I held my breath when she connected the call.

She smiled, but it was restrained, her eyes a little wary.

I'd done that.

I started tearing up immediately. "I'm sorry," I said in a wobbly voice.

"Oh, Iz," she sighed. "I'm sorry too. I dumped it on you. I should have known better."

"Did I ruin your wedding planning?"

She laughed. "No. That's the beauty of having a wedding planner. She's taking care of almost everything."

I nodded. "Good."

"You at home?"



Still, even though none of us lived here anymore, we called it home. I nodded again. “Watching Emmett for a couple of days because everyone has a life except me. How’s work?”

“Good.” She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “Are you okay, Iz?”

I took a deep breath. “It shouldn’t have taken me this long to reach out to you.”

“You say that like I’m surprised it did,” she teased.

I exhaled a laugh. “I’m a little slow to process things sometimes. The twins stopped by the gym, but I think they could tell I wasn’t really ready to talk about it.”

“Well, if it helps, Logan wasn’t exactly jumping up and down for joy about it either,” she admitted. “But he said that as long as he still gets to walk me down the aisle, he doesn’t care who’s sitting in that church.”

“For as much as he and I are alike,” I said, “he’s way more levelheaded than I am.”

“True,” Molly agreed easily.

I glared at the screen, and my sister laughed.

“You know what knocked some sense into me today?”

“So hard to say.”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help but smile. “So much of what I remember about Brooke is just ... muddled. When I actually try to remember what it was like when she was our mom, most of my memories are fuzzy.” I exhaled. “And I was listening to a seven-year-old girl talking about memories of her own mom, and I realized that so much of what scares me about Brooke showing up isn’t even based on what I remember of her.”

Molly’s brow furrowed as she listened, but she didn’t interrupt.

“I cannot predict, no matter how much I try to imagine it, what she might say or do. And there is nothing more terrifying

to me,” I admitted quietly.

“Brooke is something you can’t control.”

Eventually, I nodded. “Maybe it doesn’t make sense, but even hearing you, or Claire, or Lia say that I don’t have to talk to her if I don’t want to made it even worse. Because what if she is awful?” I paused. “What if she’s awful to *you*? Or the twins? I will never forgive myself if I wasn’t right next to you for that.”

Molly smiled. “Even if she comes, and even if she’s not a perfect guest, we’d handle it.” She shrugged. “That’s what we do, you know?”

“I would shank her ass if she ruined your wedding day.”

She laughed. “I know.”

Emmett ran into the house, breathless and red-faced. “Iz? Umm, we have a problem.”

“What is it?”

“Hi, Emmett,” Molly called.

He ignored her, and a pit yawned wide and dark in my belly. “Anya and I were playing in the treehouse, and umm, she wanted to show me something, and ...” He paused, his hands wringing nervously. “She kinda ... climbed out on one of the branches, and now she can’t get down.”

“Oh, shit,” I breathed. “Molly, hang on.”

Her face bent in concern. “Can I call someone to come help?”

I threw the slider into the backyard open. “Everyone’s gone,” I hissed. “That’s why I’m here.”

“Who’s on the branch?” Molly asked.

I gave her a look. “Aiden’s daughter.”

“Oh, shit.”

I walked around the tree and saw her. Anya was on a branch even higher than the roof of the treehouse. She was gripping it tightly, her legs dangling on either side.

“Can you help me get down, Miss Isabel?” she asked, voice wobbly with nerves.

“Yeah, sweetie, I will be *right* there, okay? You are doing great sitting there like that,” I answered with way more fucking calm than I was feeling.

“What can I do?” I heard Molly ask.

I blinked, my hand rubbing my forehead as I thought. “Umm, I need to hang up, but ... listen, if you don’t hear back from me in like, ten minutes, can you call Aiden at the gym?”

“Of course. Love you, Iz.”

Eyes trained on Anya, I replied, “Love you too.”

I hung up and handed the phone to Emmett. Studying Anya’s position, and the size of the branch, I spoke quietly to her as I moved directly beneath where she was. “Have you tried scooting backward, sweetie?”

She nodded frantically. “It made the branch wobble, and I got scared.”

“That’s okay. Being scared is totally normal, Anya.” I sucked in a deep breath. “Even if we’re afraid, we can still do brave things when it counts.”

Anya looked down at me, and I saw tears in her eyes. My heart absolutely turned inside out at the sight of those big eyes.

“If I climb up there, do you think you’d be able to try again?”

Anya swallowed, then nodded slowly.

Emmett looked nervous, and I crouched in front of him. “Okay, here’s the game plan. You hold the phone and keep your eyes on her while I climb up. I think I can reach her where she’s sitting.” I took a deep breath. “Just talk to her normally, okay?”

He nodded, face pale, cheeks red. “I can do that.”

I dropped a kiss on the top of his head and then whispered in his ear. “You remember how to make an emergency call, right? We won’t need it, but I need to know just in case.”

Emmett exhaled. “Yeah. I know how.”

“Okay, good.”

I blew out a hard breath as I climbed up into the treehouse. “How the hell did she do this?” I muttered as I reached the entrance. Using the railing around the edge, I braced my foot on the edge of one window, clutched the line of the roof with both hands, and boosted myself up. The treehouse made an ominous creak as I moved carefully over the roof and found the branch she was on. There was one lower than her, and I pressed my foot against it to test the weight-bearing.

“Okay, Anya, remember when you said I looked like Wonder Woman?” At her nod, I exhaled steadily. “Well, we’re both going to channel her. I’m going to keep my feet on this lower branch right here and hold onto the one you’re on. Once I’m a few feet out, can you try to scoot back a little? I’ll be able to grab your arm and help you come back all the way.”

I kept my movements slow and steady, but each inch I moved felt like a mile. Anya watched me with huge eyes, and I made sure to smile encouragingly as I inched closer. Now that I was closer, I did not really like the look of the branch she was on, which swayed as she shifted her weight. Every time she did, her hands gripped even more tightly.

“Here we go,” I said as I got closer. How I was standing put my head about level with her chest. It wasn’t perfect positioning, but I trusted this branch a lot more than the one she was on. “I’m going to grab your arm, Anya. Keep holding tight to the branch just like you’re doing and slowly start backing up. It’s okay if it’s teeny tiny little movements. Once you’re back far enough, I’ll scoop you right up, okay?”

A tear slipped down her face, and she hiccupped. “O-okay.”

“I want you to look at me.” When she did, I held her gaze. “You can do this, sweetheart. You are strong and brave, and once we get down, we will have whatever treat you can find in the pantry, all right?”

“Even your Pop-Tarts?” Emmett asked. “She really likes you if she’s willing to share those.”

I managed a strained laugh. “I’ll give you the whole box, kiddo.”

Anya nodded. “Okay.”

I took one more shuffle sideways and the branch creaked. With a slow exhale, I extended my hand and gripped her upper arm. But instead of holding onto the branch, like she was supposed to, Anya turned her weight and grasped frantically at my arm with her other hand.

“Okay, okay,” I breathed, “move slow, sweetie. You’re just fine.”

But then she swung her leg over, like she was going to try to clamber into my arms exactly as I stood. The last thing I heard before we fell was the violent snap of the branch, and Anya screaming my name.



## AIDEN

“Thanks, Aiden,” my client said. “Best sparring session I’ve ever had.”

There was a reason I’d worked him so hard, but it wasn’t like I was going to explain it to him.

I nodded. “Glad to hear it. Next time we’ll focus on your footwork. You still have a tendency to want to square up in front of me, you’re leaving too much of your body open.”

He grinned. “After today, that’s the last thing I want. Felt like I was facing you back in your fighting days.”

Somehow I managed a polite smile. There was a reason for that. In that tiny closet, I’d almost descended on Isabel like a ravenous fucking beast. One more second, and without the interruption that had stopped me, I would’ve torn clothes, knocked over shelves, held her still while I lost my mind from want.

It wouldn’t have been slow or sweet or respectful. And if I was expected to share space with her, even for five minutes, I needed to sweat all of it out.

“I’ll see you next week,” I told him.

“Sounds good.” He hooked his gym bag over his shoulder, smiling at Emily as she approached with the gym phone in hand.

Judging by the look in her eye, I was not going to get out of here like I wanted. I was already itching to go get Anya.

“Phone’s for you,” Emily said. “You can take it on the cordless or in your office.”

I sighed. “Did they say who it was?”

“It’s Molly Ward. Isabel’s sister.”

Brows lowered in confusion, I took the cordless from her outstretched hand.

“This is Aiden.” It was still loud in the gym, and I pressed my free hand to my other ear to hear her better. And as soon as I did, my stomach dropped out of my feet. “Shit,” I barked. “And you haven’t heard back from her?”

“No, I’m so sorry. And I don’t want to distract her by trying to call if she’s right in the middle of climbing down with Anya.”

I jogged back to my office and snagged my keys and cell phone. “Unfortunately this doesn’t surprise me. My daughter has a tendency to do this whenever she wants a little extra attention.”

“I’m sure she’s okay,” Molly insisted. “Isabel would never let anything happen to her.”

Words stuck in my throat, because even if I knew Molly was probably right, and the likelihood that Anya was hurt was slim, even the idea of it had my body going cold with terror.

Losing Beth had been awful. Exhausting. Heartbreaking.

But if anything happened to Anya ... I wasn’t sure I could survive it.

“I’m leaving the gym now, but this is my cell,” I rattled off my number and Molly repeated it. “Call me if you hear anything.”

“I promise, I will.” Molly said my name quietly. “Just take a deep breath, okay? Especially before you get behind the wheel.”

I clenched my teeth, but somehow her voice was comforting enough, kind enough, that I was able to do as she said.



Disconnecting the call after thanking Molly, I shoved my phone in my pocket and yelled for one of the trainers. He looked exactly like one of the other guys, and they were both in college, and I still couldn't remember their fucking names.

"I need you to stay and help Emily close up. If you can't, ask the other one." I snapped my fingers. "What's his name again?"

He grinned. "He's Grady, I'm Gavin."

"No fucking wonder," I mumbled.

"What?"

"Nothing. You can stay?"

"Yeah, no problem."

I jogged out of the building with a shove to the front door, my feet pounding on the pavement.

The peel of my tires drew a few dirty looks as I turned out of the parking lot, as did my driving abilities as I broke just about every land speed record from the gym back to the house.

She was probably fine. My daughter, the little shit, climbed everywhere. This was hardly the first time she'd bitten off more than she could chew. But I was used to it. My family was used to it.

Isabel wasn't.

And that was probably why Anya did it in the first place, to gain her notice. My hands tightened uselessly on the steering wheel. Of course she'd want Isabel's notice.

I was no better than my daughter because Isabel's notice was turning me into an animal. At least in my head.

That was something to deal with later, as my foot pressed just a little bit harder on the gas, the roar of the engine matching the energy under my skin.

By the time I pulled onto their street, I felt the same kind of tense, rolling motion in my stomach that I used to get before my fights. It wasn't nerves, not exactly. It was not knowing the outcome of a short, specific window of time. No outlet of the

energy making my feet bounce, no way to take control of the situation yet.

That's when I saw the red and white of the ambulance in the driveway.

"Oh, God," I breathed. I wasn't sure if it was a plea or a prayer or a way to prepare myself for the absolute worst.

The back of the ambulance was open, no one was in sight. I saw a few neighbors standing in their front yard trying to get a glimpse of what was happening.

I yanked the truck up onto the curb and threw the gear shift into park, sprinting around the side of the house into the backyard.

I saw the back of the paramedics first, Emmett standing to the side next. He was wiping tears.

"Anya?" I shouted.

A male paramedic turned and I saw Isabel reclining on the gurney, her arm in the hand of the other medic, blood on her temple, and my daughter wrapped tight in her arms. Anya turned her face to me with a smile, and my panic eased immediately. Her grip never lessened on Isabel.

"What happened?" I asked, running my hand over Anya's back.

"We fell," Anya said.

My heart stopped when I saw the broken branch on the grass.

"Your daughter is fine," the paramedic assured me.

Isabel's eyes finally met mine, and I saw her apology before she even opened her mouth. "I should've been watching them more closely."

I held up my hand to stop her. "It's okay, I promise."

The sight of the cut at her hairline, the way she winced when the female paramedic pressed onto her wrist, it was almost too much.

“Is it broken?” I asked.

The woman turned to me and shook her head. “I don’t think so. But it’s almost impossible to know without getting it checked out at the hospital.”

Isabel’s eyes closed tightly. “I *don’t* need to go to the hospital.”

Judging by the look the paramedics shared, this was not the first time she’d said it.

Instead of arguing with the bleeding woman on the gurney, like I wanted to, I turned and set my hand on Emmett’s shoulder. “You okay, buddy?”

He nodded, but I could tell he’d been crying.

The guy tending to Isabel’s forehead gave Emmett a smile. “He was the one who called nine-one-one as soon as they fell.” Isabel hissed when he cleaned around the cut. “I don’t think it needs stitches, but Miss Ward, you very well might have a concussion, I’d strongly advise you to let us take you in.”

Isabel glanced at me, but her eyes didn’t hold mine for very long. “I don’t feel nauseous, I never lost consciousness —”

“That you know of,” the woman wrapping her wrist interjected.

Anya snuggled her face into Isabel’s neck, her arms tightening to the point that Isabel winced.

“Gingersnap,” I said quietly, “can we give the paramedics a little room to finish checking her out?”

When Anya didn’t immediately get off Isabel’s lap, Isabel turned her head and whispered something I couldn’t make out. Her good hand smoothed soothing circles on my daughter’s back, and Anya nodded at whatever she heard.

The sight of it almost knocked me to my knees. I couldn’t breathe through it, couldn’t even name it if I tried.

“She’s okay,” Isabel said quietly. “I don’t mind.”

Through the roaring in my head, my heart, all I could manage was a slight nod.

The woman finished wrapping Isabel's wrist and gestured for me to step away from the gurney with her. I swiped a hand over my mouth and tried to gather my racing thoughts.

"Your daughter is very lucky," she said quietly.

"You sure she's okay?"

She nodded. "From what the boy said, Miss Ward took the entire impact with how she turned her body. Her side is going to have a nasty bruise, but it seems like her wrist hit first."

My jaw tightened dangerously. "You think she should go in?"

With a sigh, she shrugged her shoulders. "We can't force her. Emmett agreed that she never passed out when she fell. Her wrist and hip took the brunt of her fall, but there's no telling exactly where or how hard she hit her head."

Isabel smiled at something Anya told her, even as the guy finished cleaning the cut, and when he covered it with a butterfly bandage, she never took her eyes off my daughter.

The way my heart raced took on a dangerous edge, a hazardous speed that I couldn't quite pin down.

*Too soon.*

*Too soon.*

*Too soon.*

Isabel as a temptation for me alone was one thing, hidden in quiet moments between the two of us where it was about greedy hands and whispered desires. But Isabel showing me glimpses of a future I'd mourned was something I wasn't prepared for.

"She can't be alone tonight," the paramedic said, interrupting the speeding train of my thoughts. "She mentioned her family is out of town, but I don't know how soon someone could be here. She didn't want to worry them if she could avoid it."

“I’ll talk to her,” I replied.

Like she heard me, or heard the hard-edged tone of my voice, Isabel’s eyes locked onto mine.

No longer did she look apologetic or pale.

Instantly, I was transported back to the night we were in the gym, she had that same combative look in her eye.

As I approached the gurney, Isabel sat up and my daughter finally unfolded herself. Anya held out her arms to me, and I gathered her into a tight hug. Her small body clutched in my arms, I finally let out a full breath.

“Am I in trouble?” she whispered.

I smiled a little. “No. But no more climbing tall trees, okay, gingersnap?”

“Okay, daddysnap.” She leaned back to smile at me, and my stomach turned over when I saw a smudge of dirt on her cheek.

“Can you go watch some TV with Emmett while I talk to Miss Isabel?”

She nodded.

I set her down, and gave a manly nod to Emmett. “Thanks for taking good care of her, bud.”

He smiled, the color in his face looking better. “You’re welcome.”

The paramedic helped Isabel stand from the gurney, and she winced when she brought her full weight to her feet. Both medics watched her carefully as she walked toward me, but her balance seemed fine, even if her progress was slow. I snagged a chair from the patio table next to me and slid it closer to her.

She smiled gratefully, bracing her hand on the back. “I should probably get some coverage for class tomorrow, huh?”

I exhaled in a sharp burst. “I’d say so.”

“I’ll call Kelly,” she sighed. “She owes me. But I’ll be back on Monday.”

Tilting my head, I regarded her steadily. “If you’re making a call right now, it’s going to be someone in your family to see who can come back and stay with you.”

She swore. “I need to call Molly.”

“How long until she can be here?” I asked.

Isabel wouldn’t meet my eyes. “I’ll just ... text her real quick.”

“How long until anyone can be here?” I amended.

She ignored me, pulling her phone out of her pocket and tapping out a text. After she hit send, I snagged it from her hand.

“Hey,” she protested.

*“All good here. Sore wrist and a scratch on my forehead. No need to worry,”* I read out loud. I pinned her with an incredulous look, and she set her jaw. “Are you out of your fucking mind?”

The paramedics were still within earshot, and the guy approached us immediately. “Sir, she cannot be left alone tonight. Someone has to wake her up every three to four hours, and I’d strongly advise against leaving her alone.”

With a lift of my chin, I handed her the phone back. “You have one chance to call someone over here.”

Isabel swallowed visibly but tucked her phone in her pocket. “I am not forcing them home from their jobs, or their trips because I bumped my head. I am fine. I’ll ice my wrist and take some Tylenol and set an alarm.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “You’re going to wake yourself up if you’ve got a concussion?”

She shifted on her feet. “I can ask a neighbor.”

“To stay with you all night?”

Isabel rolled her lips between her teeth and stared past me. “Mmmhmm.”

The paramedic shook his head.

“It’s fine,” I told him. “I’ll handle it.”

Isabel’s eyes narrowed. The paramedic went back to the gurney to help his partner load up their equipment.

“You can do all those things if you want to. The ice, the Tylenol, the rest,” I said evenly. She eyed me suspiciously. I leaned in until less than an inch separated our faces. “But you will do it at my house, and if you argue with me right now, I’ll load you up and drop your stubborn ass off at the hospital myself, do you understand?”

Tense silence stretched like a rubber band, and she opened her mouth to argue. I saw the heat of it in her blue, blue eyes.

“I get it,” I said before she could disagree. “I hate it when people need to take care of me. Nothing makes me feel more powerless.”

Isabel huffed out an annoyed breath.

“This is not just about you, okay?” I gentled my tone. “I owe you, Isabel.”

At the sound of her name, her eyes softened.

I’d never said her first name out loud before, or not to her, at least.

Something switched in her head, maybe I’d never know what, because she pinched her eyelids closed, let out a slow, deep breath, and then nodded.

“Good,” I said quietly. “Do you want to pack your bag or should I?”





## AIDEN

The inside of my truck was separated into two very distinct moods on the drive back to my and Anya's house. The back seat, holding Emmett and Anya, was giggles and laughter, her telling him all the toys she had, all the things they could do during their sleepover.

The front seat was a bit quieter. Isabel stared out the window, her black backpack at her feet. From the corner of my eye, I could see the dried blood on her temple, and my hands tightened on the steering wheel.

Her silence didn't bother me, because I wasn't sure what to say either.

*Guess what? Six hours ago, I imagined screwing you against the closet door, and here we are, on the way to my house, so you can spend the night.*

The words didn't exactly flow naturally off the tongue.

I opened my mouth to say ... something ... and I stopped myself. That indecision rankled. Nails on a chalkboard type discomfort. I never second-guessed my decisions, never doubted what my next move would be.

But this position I found myself in—one of my own making—had me on unsteady ground.

Isabel shifted in the passenger seat, and I caught the way she tried to hide her wince.

“Did you take anything yet?” I asked.

She glanced at me, her eyes holding that same wariness as when we first met. Eventually, she shook her head. “I feel like I got hit by a car,” she admitted. “I think the adrenaline is wearing off.”

“Tomorrow’s going to be even worse.”

Her head angled back, she sighed heavily. “I know.”

I pulled the truck into our neighborhood, and Emmett pressed his face closer to the window. “Cool! You guys are right by the lake.”

“Pretty close,” I told him. “We can walk there after dinner if your aunt wants to take a nap.”

“What are we having for dinner?” Anya asked. “I’m starving.”

“Please don’t let Isabel cook,” Emmett begged.

Isabel turned her head and smiled. “Hey, I didn’t let you starve this weekend, did I?”

“Not technically,” he muttered under his breath.

I caught myself smiling a little at the exchange.

Our house came into view, and her head tilted with interest when I slowed. It looked small, from the front, with the pine trees towering over the top of it. But inside, it opened to the kind of space and view I never could’ve provided for Anya in California. She had a yard to play in. Mountains and water practically in our backyard. It was as idyllic of a childhood as I could give her, as the sole person responsible for her upbringing.

And for the first time since Beth died—no matter what the circumstances were—I was going to walk into the front door with another woman so that she could sleep under our roof.

As I hit the garage door button, I couldn’t help wondering what the fuck I was doing, bringing her here like this. The instinct to do so, standing in her backyard, had been overwhelming and impossible to ignore. I never would’ve been able to walk out of that door if I’d known she was alone.

This, however, was different. Because now, there was no going back from it.

Denying that I was attracted to her was a fool's errand. I could lie to myself about a lot of things, but not this, no matter what had grown between us the last couple of weeks.

But having her in my home, the place I shared with my daughter, after the experience they'd just shared, felt like I was tempting fate.

I parked the truck and let the kids out, watching carefully to make sure Isabel was walking steadily as she waited for me to unlock the door into the house. Her progress was slow, her hip clearly bothering her more as time passed.

As soon as I opened the door, she gave me a subdued smile as she passed into the kitchen through the laundry room.

"Come on," Anya yelled, sprinting for the stairs, "I'll show you my room. I have a pink canopy!"

"Uhh, okay."

Isabel exhaled a soft laugh. "I don't think he'll act suitably impressed." As she walked slowly into the family room, her gaze lit on the wall of windows, pitched in an A-frame, overlooking the sprawling view of Lake Sammamish. "It's beautiful," she said.

"Thanks," I replied. "Do you want to go straight to bed? Or rest on the couch?"

Her eyes flew to mine, her cheeks becoming a shade of pink. "Which room should I use? I wouldn't mind a nap."

I blew out a hard breath because I hadn't thought this piece through. The guest room, which I'd assumed Emmett would use, was across the hall from Anya's room on the second floor. The third bedroom—my own—was on the main floor, along the back of the house with the same view as the family room. I gestured in that direction. "You can sleep back there. I don't want to make you do stairs."

Without argument, Isabel walked in that direction, and when I pulled the Tylenol out of the cabinet in the kitchen, I

had to take a moment. Hands braced on the kitchen counter, I pushed through the feeling that I'd made a massive mistake by doing this.

As soon as I strode through the living room, painkillers in one hand and an ice pack in the other, and caught sight of her sitting on the edge of my bed, I knew I had.

She took the pain meds without complaint, allowing me to pull back the covers so she could slide in. Not a word was spoken as she settled herself onto my pillow, let me set the ice pack on her hip. For that, I was glad because I didn't even know what to say.

Isabel Ward was the blood-red apple, tempting just by being herself. She was the thing I shouldn't want but might wreck the world around me in order to try.

One taste, even the smallest indulgence, and I'd know exactly what I was missing.

If I allowed myself to, I'd want to devour her whole. Because there were no half measures, not with her. There might be a hundred things I didn't know about her. What her favorite food was. If she was a good dancer. If she liked action movies or romances or stories that made her cry. If she liked to read or if ice cream in the winter sounded good to her.

The frantic urge to uncover each and every thing took me by surprise. Because I'd never felt anything like it.

It was impossible not to compare it to Beth, and I hated that too. Beth had been slow, sweet growth. And this ... this was not in the same universe.

I walked out of the bedroom and took a deep breath because I didn't need to figure it out immediately.

While she slept soundly in my bed, I fed the kids dinner, and we walked down to the lake for a little bit.

After we got back to the house, I quietly pushed the door open. She was on her back now, her wrapped wrist laying on her chest, which rose and fell evenly.

"Are you going to wake her up?" Anya whispered.

I ushered her away from the door. “Soon. She’s only been asleep for a couple of hours. I’ll give her another hour and then see if I can wake her up.”

Emmett gave me a nervous look from where he sat on the couch. “And if you can’t?”

“I’ll be able to,” I promised him. “She’ll be okay, bud. You said she never passed out when she ... when they fell?” I almost stuttered over the question because it sparked a dangerous, violent reaction in my head if I tried to imagine her and Anya crashing to the ground. Something volatile.

He shook his head. “No, she said way too many bad words when she hit the ground.”

Reluctantly, I smiled. “That’s a good sign.” I tilted my head toward the bedroom. “Your parents gonna be mad when they find out about this?”

His eyes got huge. “Oh yeah. I was actually supposed to FaceTime with my mom tonight, but maybe I’ll just ignore it so she doesn’t find out and try to get a flight home. My dad has to coach tomorrow.”

If I had to guess, missing a game would be an easy sacrifice for both of them, but I didn’t tell him that.

“Is Isabel’s phone in her backpack?”

He shrugged. “Probably.”

Her pack was still sitting on the floor by the door, right where she’d left it when she walked in. After turning on a movie for the kids, I picked it up, pausing before I unzipped the front pocket.

The phone was right there, and when I touched the screen, I saw a few texts and two missed calls from Paige.

“Do you know her passcode?” I asked Emmett.

“You’re breaking into her phone? Cool.” He motioned for it. “I know the pattern. Up, middle, down, then middle.”

He tapped the screen, the phone unlocking immediately.

“You’re not going to throw me under the bus if she kicks my ass for this, are you?”

Emmett laughed. “No. I’ll tell her I did it.”

With a nod, I walked out onto the back deck and pulled up the missed call. I hit the name of her sister-in-law and took a deep breath.

Paige answered on the first ring. “Holy shit, Isabel, I’ve been freaking out since Molly texted me. You *fell out of a tree?*”

I winced. “This is Aiden, actually. Her ... boss.”

Deafening silence met my announcement.

“You’re ...” She paused again. “Aiden Hennessy?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry to call you like this.”

“Is she okay? Why do you have her phone?” Paige asked, the concern in her voice loud and clear.

“She’s asleep, and I think she’ll be fine. Sore, but nothing broken or seriously injured.”

She exhaled heavily, then I heard her cover the microphone and repeat what I said to her husband. “I’m going to put you on speaker, Aiden. Logan wants to know what’s going on. Is Emmett okay?”

“Yeah, he was a little rattled when I showed up at the house, but he’s the one who called 911 when the branch broke. He’s a brave kid.”

Logan spoke next. “What happened exactly?”

I told them what I knew and what the paramedics relayed to me.

Paige made a tsking noise. “Why am I not surprised she’d be so damn stubborn about this?” Her voice wavered on the end. Then she sniffed, and I heard Logan murmur something quietly to her. She sniffed again. “Sorry, Aiden, I just hate being away when something happens to my babies.”

I smiled a little, imagining the woman in my bed as anyone's baby. "No apology necessary."

"You're sure she shouldn't go to the hospital?" Logan asked. "How do you know she doesn't have a concussion?"

"I don't," I answered honestly. "But I've had a couple myself, so I know what to look for. She's steady on her feet, she never passed out, no nausea, no confusion." I sat in a chair and stared out at the water, thought about the night in front of me. "I'll wake her every three to four hours, and if I have even the slightest worry, I promise I'll take her in."

"What about the kids?" Paige asked.

"My parents live about five minutes away. I can call my mom to come over here if it comes down to it."

She exhaled audibly. "Okay. Before we even talked to you, I decided to switch my flight to the first one out tomorrow. Logan is going to talk to his head coach, not sure if he'll be with me or not."

"I'll text you my address."

Paige paused. "She's going to hate that you called us. Like, a lot."

"Yeah, I figured as much," I answered wryly. "But I'm a parent. I'd want to know if it was me."

"We appreciate you telling us," Logan said.

"Gimme a second, honey," Paige said to her husband, and I heard the sound of a door closing a second later. "Just ... a word of advice, Aiden. If you're open to it."

My brow furrowed at the change in her tone. "Of course."

"Isabel is the most stubborn of the four girls, and that's ... a pretty impressive feat if you've met her sisters." She took a deep breath. "And underneath that is the kindest, biggest heart of anyone I know."

My face went hot. "Paige, I—"

She ignored me. "She will argue with you helping her. She will fight you every step of the way tonight, and I need you to

promise me that you will ignore her when she says she can handle it herself or she doesn't need anything. Because knowing someone is there to take care of her is the only thing keeping me from losing my mind right now."

"I promise," I told her.

"But also," she continued, her tone perfectly polite, perfectly sweet, "if you upset her in any way, I'll make you wish you were never born."

My eyebrows popped up. "Umm, okay?"

"Good talk, Aiden. We'll see you in the morning."

Despite the warning, I walked back into the house with a smile on my face.

The kids were fully engrossed in their movie, and I walked quietly past the family room and down the hall to my bedroom.

The light from the hallway spilled into the opening, and Isabel hadn't moved from the last time I checked on her.

I crouched next to the bed and said her name quietly. Her eyelids fluttered, but she didn't wake.

Even as I held my breath before I raised my hand, I wondered at the intelligence of allowing myself even this slight touch.

Even before Paige had finished saying what she said, even before I recognized the deep swell of emotion in the words, I knew exactly what Paige was going to say about Isabel.

Because somehow, in the midst of all the mundane, I knew exactly who this woman was.

That was why the details didn't matter to me.

Carefully, I slid my fingertips along her cheekbone and let out a slow, shaky exhale. Her skin was so soft.

"Isabel," I said again. "Time to wake up."

She hummed. Her head turned toward my touch. "Wha—" she murmured sleepily.



My fingers trailed the hairline at the back of her neck, and I said her name again. My palm laid gently along her neck, my entire hand now framing her face.

Slowly, her eyelids fluttered, and she woke. “Aiden,” she whispered.

“You know who I am. That’s good.”

“Mm-hmm.” She inhaled, and I saw the slow trickle of awareness in her face at the way I was touching her.

I pulled my hand back even though that awareness told me it was a welcome touch. “You remember why you’re here?”

“That fucking tree,” she said, stifling a yawn.

I smiled. “What about the year?”

She told me. With a dry look, she also told me the president and what kind of car she drove.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

“A little.” She used her good hand to brace on the mattress and sit up. Her hair was a tangled mess, and it was a good thing she was injured. A good thing there were children in the other room. Because she looked so fucking irresistible, I had to step back from the bed.

“I’ll go heat some lasagna,” I told her.

With a slight shake of her head, Isabel opened her mouth, and like an idiot, I laid a finger over her petal-soft lips.

“No arguments,” I said in a gruff voice. My finger slipped away from her mouth slowly, and her eyes were huge when she looked up at me.

“No arguments,” she agreed quietly.

Paige’s words swam through my head as I fixed her a plate and brought it to where she was propped up against my headboard. With perfect clarity, I understood her protective instincts toward Isabel. Not because she wasn’t strong or because she couldn’t handle herself. But because there was some soul-deep recognition that she was mine to protect.

That if anyone upset her, I'd make them wish they were never born.

Only once in my life had I ever felt like that. I'd married her. Loved her. And when I'd lost her, I mourned ever feeling that way again.

But as I watched Isabel eat, drink some water, and as I watched her hug my daughter good night like she was something precious, I already knew that somehow, by some magic, some miracle, it was happening again.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, could have terrified me more.



## ISABEL

I managed every wake-up just fine.

Every three hours, Aiden pulled me from a deep sleep, surrounded in sheets that smelled like him. He never touched my face again, simply called my name or laid a gentle hand on top of the covers over my shoulder. His questions were innocuous—the year, my middle name, where I worked. At one point, he gave me more painkillers and a new ice pack for my wrist, and even with the frigid cold against my skin, I fell right back asleep.

Each time, I managed fine. So did he.

Until the last one.

No dreams were happening because I was too exhausted, too sore. But the last time he woke me up, it was still pitch-black in the room with only a weak path of light coming from the hallway. I'd hardly moved on the king-size mattress, sticking to one side and my back because my hip was too sore to roll to the other side.

His voice, low and quiet, pierced through the haze of sleep, and I found myself humming contentedly. My name on his lips made me want to curl up like a cat in his lap and arch my body into the sound, roll my back into his hands.

“Isabel, come on, you gotta wake up for me.”

This time, his hand was skimming down my upper arm in small circles, and the calluses on his palms felt delicious on my skin.

“Hmm, that feels nice,” I heard myself say.

His hand only froze for a moment but then continued. “Does it?” he asked quietly.

I pressed my face into his pillow and inhaled. I kept my eyes firmly shut because if I was dreaming this, I refused to wake up. I wanted to allow myself this moment of a loose, sleepy tongue, where I could say the things in my head without fear of embarrassment.

“Everything you do feels nice,” I murmured. “I wish you’d do more.”

Aiden was quiet for a moment, and cautiously, I opened my eyes in narrow slits to see his face in the dim light of the room. It was so terribly intimate, how closely he crouched down by the bed. He didn’t sit on the mattress to possibly cause me discomfort. He’d given up his bed so I could get better sleep.

His profile was visible as I studied him, but I couldn’t tell where he was looking. Maybe he was watching his hand on my arm because he moved from my upper arm, down around the curve of my elbow, allowing his fingertips to drag softly over my forearm, stopping just shy of the wrapping of my wrist. Then back up.

“Where did you sleep?” I asked him.

“The couch.”

My lips curled up slightly. “You fit on that thing?”

“Not very well,” he admitted. “But I’ve slept in much worse places.”

I adjusted my head and stared openly at him. “Thank you for doing that for me.”

The thick column of his throat moved in a heavy swallow, but he nodded. “I told you, I owe you, Isabel.”

“No, you don’t.” I paused. “I did what anyone would’ve \_\_\_”

The pressure of his hand increased as it coasted back up over my shoulder, and that was where it came to rest, the blunt edges of his fingertips tangling with my hair.

“I’m not talking about what anyone else would’ve done. I’m talking about what you did for Anya. And me.” He shifted his weight, and I finally got a clearer look at his eyes. He wasn’t looking at his hand; he was looking at me. “Thank you, Isabel. I need you to hear me say that.”

I’d never had anyone look at me like Aiden was, and I had no clue what to make of it.

This wasn’t reality, this tiny moment in his bedroom. And if I thought too hard about how little we knew about each other, I’d question my sanity. But he was looking at me like I was unexpected, and he wasn’t sure how to handle me the right way. Aiden was looking at me like I belonged in his home, in his bed, and he just might be okay with that.

I let out a shaky breath. “You’re welcome.”

“What’s your favorite food?” he asked suddenly.

I blinked at the change in topic, the change in tone. It was the only reason I answered honestly. “Strawberry Pop-Tarts.”

Now it was Aiden’s turn to blink. “No, it’s not.”

“You don’t get to argue with me about it.”

“No one’s favorite food is Pop-Tarts after the age of seven.”

“Well, mine is,” I said indignantly. “They’re delicious, and maybe you just haven’t had one in a long time so you don’t remember.”

The smile that spread over his face was warm, and it made me all gooey inside, and I pressed my now-hot face back into the pillow that smelled like him. His warm smile turned into a low, amused chuckle.

“I had no idea you were this judgmental,” I teased. “You better tell me your favorite food now.”

“You’re very demanding when you wake up.”

That was because my filter was gone. That process had been a slow one, pushing through embarrassment, pushing through the first unsteady weeks, then the tiptoeing into a more balanced relationship. He didn't even realize that this was me, wide open.

But I did. And that was why it mattered, these quiet moments.

"Cranberry juice?" I asked.

He laughed, eyes tracing my features. "Getting warmer."

I had to bury my face into his pillow to hide my pleased smile.

Aiden moved from a crouching position to sitting on the floor, his back braced against the nightstand, and he turned his head to face me. I tucked my good hand up under the pillow and imagined that this was just ... normal. The two of us trading whispered questions in bed. He grimaced, sending a glare over his shoulder at the table.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing. Just the handle digging into my back." His eyes traced my face. "I'm too old to be sitting in places like this."

I pulled in a deep breath and decided not to weigh the wisdom of what was about to come out of my mouth. "You can lay up here," I whispered. "On top of the blanket," I rushed to add when his gaze sharpened.

After a weighty silence, Aiden finally answered. "You know I can't."

My lips pursed thoughtfully. "What if I draw an invisible line you're not allowed to cross?"

His eyelids fell closed, his chest rose and fell on a slow, steady inhale and exhale. "You are dangerous to my mental health, Isabel Ward."

I smiled even though he couldn't see me. I liked knowing that. I liked that he'd said it out loud. Maybe Aiden was just as aware that this wasn't reality, and we were allowed to make whispered admissions that might never see the light of day.

There were a million things I could've said to him, could've told him, in this last conversation of our long, sleepless night together. Things no one knew about me, or things I wanted him to know about me. But I kept all those words inside because somehow, I knew this wasn't the time.

When Aiden opened his eyes and studied me, he seemed to be pondering the same depth of thoughts, judging by the thoughtful look on his face.

"It would confuse Anya," he said after a few seconds. My eyebrows lowered. "If she walked in here," Aiden explained.

Right.

I didn't have to make all my decisions through the lens of a child. And it was a timely reminder that he did.

"You're right."

"She already thinks you're a superhero, especially after today. No matter what invisible line is up"—he paused meaningfully—"if she saw us in bed together ..."

I nodded. "I get it."

My eyes burned hot, though, because it very much seemed like an hourglass had been turned over when I crawled into his bed, and I was watching the last few grains of sand slip through the opening.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

Carefully rolling onto my back, I took a quick assessment of my body. "My head doesn't hurt as bad as it did last night."

He held a hand out. "Let me see your wrist."

I turned again and laid my taped wrist gently in his palm. His face held no expression while he turned it, smoothed his fingers over the area.

"Swelling isn't too much worse, so that's a good sign." He glanced up at me. "No tingling in your fingers?"

I shook my head.



When his fingertip traced the edge of the tape and brushed the skin over my knuckles, I made a discovery that maybe no woman in history had ever discovered: if the right man, with the right fingers, touched the skin on your knuckles, you could feel it spread warm and slow over your entire body.

I couldn't breathe, let alone answer his question.

My lack of speaking didn't seem to draw his notice because his eyes stayed trained on our hands. Slowly, so slowly, and so gently, he found the edge of the tape and started unraveling it.

Over the years, I'd seen him inflict incredible violence. Leave his opponents bleeding and sweat-drenched on the mat.

And watching his hands slowly peel away the medical tape like he was unwrapping a priceless gift almost made me burst into tears.

I hated when people took care of me. The last time I had the flu, I crawled my ass into bed with a veritable drugstore set up on my nightstand and told everyone to give me forty-eight hours to ride out the plague in peace.

All anyone had to do was ask the paramedics who helped me what kind of patient I was.

The worst. I was the worst patient in the world.

What was it about Aiden that made me feel safe to be in this position?

I shifted, bringing my arm to a better position for him, and he glanced up with a tiny smile.

It was easily four o'clock in the morning, and he didn't seem to be in a hurry.

"What's *your* favorite food?" I whispered.

His hands paused in their unwrapping to check the bruising on the underside of my wrist with only the slightest brush of his fingers.

I shivered.

He noticed.

Before he answered, he went back to removing the wrap. “Not strawberry Pop-Tarts.”

I laughed.

His eyes landed on my mouth. “You don’t laugh very often.”

“Neither do you.”

“My brother made you laugh,” he said casually.

Oh, my heart. It wouldn’t surprise me if Aiden heard it thrashing wildly where he sat.

“He said something funny.” When Aiden pinned me with a searching look, I simply raised my eyebrows. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“You still haven’t told me your favorite food.”

His smile was slight and sexy. “I called Paige when you were sleeping.”

As a distraction technique, it was really effective. My mouth fell open. “You what?”

Aiden finished unwrapping my wrist and turned it carefully. But he had no choice but to release my hand when I sat up. My legs swung in front of him on the floor, so I tucked them up crisscross underneath me.

“Why would you call her? The whole point of coming here was so no one knew.”

“No,” he countered, “the point of coming here was so that you didn’t have to go to the hospital. She heard about the tree from Molly and called you multiple times.”

“So you unlocked my phone and called her back?”

An eyebrow rose on his forehead imperiously. “Technically, Emmett unlocked your phone.”

I gave him a withering look. Amazing how knuckle-stroking-almost-orgasms only went so far when he took it upon himself to tell Paige about something without asking. My chin rose a notch. “You had no right to do that.”

“I didn’t have your permission, no.” He got on his knees, hands braced on the edge of the mattress, bringing his face closer to mine. “But whether I had the right is debatable. You are in my home with a head injury, and the worst thing I could imagine as a parent is if something awful happened and I didn’t know.”

My withering look softened into something a little less ... withery because he wasn’t wrong.

“She wasn’t mad,” he told me. “They switched to the first flight out this morning. I think they’ll be here after breakfast.”

My shoulders slumped. “I didn’t want to worry anyone.”

“I know.”

Carefully, I flexed my fingers, turning my hand back and forth so I could see it in the light. It was swollen but not terribly. The bruising would be ugly, but I was so fortunate. Anya was so fortunate.

“But maybe,” he said, “it’s okay to let people worry about you every once in a while. It doesn’t mean you’re a burden. It sure as hell doesn’t mean you’re weak because that is the last thing you are.”

I almost swayed in his direction. Once Logan and Paige got me and Emmett, once we pulled out of his driveway, I probably wouldn’t see him for a few days. Certainly not like this.

In general, I wasn’t an impulsive person. I was decisive, and that was different. It didn’t take me long to decide about ... anything, really, because I always had the sense of which course of action made the most sense.

At this moment, I knew I was going to touch Aiden because I couldn’t not touch him.

“I think I’m done sleeping,” I said quietly. I inhaled slowly, and he was *so* close—even though I was staring at my hand, and he was staring at me. It felt safer that way, to keep my gaze off his. With my good hand, I slid my fingers over his, and relished in the way he breathed out. Aiden’s hand was

so much bigger than my own. It would span so much of my body with those fingers fanned out.

As I moved my fingertips over his knuckles, I couldn't help but wonder if it had the same effect on him as it had on me.

Instead of fighting the impulse that tugged my body toward him, I let it flow through me. A hot sweep of power had me turning my head and resting my forehead against his temple. Underneath my palm, his fingers curled up into a tight fist. The muscles in his forearms flexed, and he breathed out of his nose, a short puff of air that sounded loud in my ears.

And that big man, who caused such big feelings, he didn't move away. Neither did I.

I slid my hand up his forearm, curled my fingers around his shifting muscle and sinew, until I felt the hard knot of his elbow, the tight, hot curve of his bicep underneath his skin. My teeth dug into my bottom lip when I saw, through heavily weighted eyes, the way his jaw flexed and bunched.

*Grab me.*

*Touch me.*

*Kiss me.*

My demands almost fell past my lips, but I yanked the words back in because I didn't dare break the spell.

Maybe it wasn't a spell, I wondered, as my fingers curled, the tips of my nails digging slightly into the surface of his skin. Maybe this was me sticking my hand willingly into the fire, just to see if it would burn the way I imagined.

His whole body trembled when—with the slightest lift to my chin—my lips swept over his cheekbone. If he ever unleashed the full force of himself on me, I'd probably snap in half from the impact.

Aiden sank in, just an inch, his own forehead resting now on my bare shoulder. His exhale, heavy and hot, snaked down the gap in my shirt, and when it hit my breast, a sound escaped from the back of my throat.

His hand, still fisted on the bed, shot forward, and with a hard press of his hand on my good hip, my legs unfolded like he flipped a switch. He curled that big hand along my lower back, under my shirt, and tugged me forward on the bed. My hand slid the rest of the way up his arm, over his shoulder, and my fingers curled around the back of his neck.

And then nothing.

Our heads stayed just as they were—his pressed into my shoulder, mine tucked against his—like neither of us dared to move.

We'd both taken one step up to the invisible line because a touch could be ignored, but the second his lips hit mine, the second I knew what his tongue felt like slick and sliding against my own, the line would be obliterated.

Obliterated.

Such a good word for what he was capable of doing to me. Aiden Hennessy was *huge*, and my toes curled helplessly at the feel of him pressed between my legs. All it would take is a tip backward, a tug of a few meaningless scraps of material, and I'd be his.

*Please*, I mouthed against his cheek.

“Fuck,” he whispered, a tortured whisper that made my thighs clench around his hips. “I can't,” he hissed.

Aiden shoved away from the bed and stood, striding out of the room before I could take my next breath.

I fell back on the bed, hand pressed over my hammering chest, and wondered if it was possible to die from built-up sexual tension.

Even though the door was open, and I heard the bang of a kitchen cabinet, I stayed right where I was. There was nothing to be gained from following him out of the bedroom, from pushing him on why he held up this imaginary line.

Or not now.

This night felt like a crossroads. The moment we just shared was a road diverging into two distinct paths in front of

us.

Admittedly, his was even bigger than mine. He was moving on from a love he'd lost. I was simply taking a first step toward something that large.

Wearily, I rose from the bed and walked into the massive bathroom attached to his room. The sunken white tub looked pretty amazing, along with stretches of gleaming tile and a glass-enclosed shower. My whole body ached, and I couldn't even tell how much of it came from what just happened with Aiden, a letdown of energy that had propped me up for that moment in time.

In the mirror over the double vanity, I leaned in and studied the cut on my forehead. There was minimal bruising around it, which was good. Maybe Paige wouldn't lose her shit too badly when she saw me.

Everything about the past twenty-four hours was hitting me at the same time. The entire roller coaster almost too much for my body to process.

I just wanted ... to float. Feel warm and clean and good.

Decision made, I walked over to the tub and flipped the water on, testing the water when it got to the right temperature. There was no fancy bath soap in his bathroom, but I found some good old-fashioned Epsom salt in the linen closet, which I poured under the running water. It dissolved in the water as I swept my hand around the crystals.

There was no more banging in the kitchen, and I walked back into the bedroom to grab the clean clothes out of my backpack. As I straightened, I caught sight of Aiden sitting on the couch, his head in his hands.

When I paused in the doorway, he lifted his head, and our eyes met.

"If it's okay with you, I'm going to take a bath," I said.

His eyes burned bright, but he didn't answer.

"Unless you feel like explaining to me why you can't," I added. "Because I'd love to understand it."

Aiden dropped his chin to his chest, shielding his gaze from view. “You’re injured, Isabel,” he said quietly.

I shook my head. “That’s not it.”

His head snapped up, but he didn’t argue.

The specter of his wife hung between us. I knew it.

“I know that’s not it.” My voice gained strength. “And I wish you’d explain it to me.”

Those eyes of his, I’d never seen any quite like them. A wordless answer hit me straight in the heart as he stared at me. *I can’t*. It was as clear as if he’d spoken the words out loud.

“Don’t tell me you can’t,” I told him quietly. “You won’t, and there’s a difference.”

My lungs didn’t work quite right as I gripped the knob on the bedroom door, and he disappeared from view, jagged bursts of oxygen making my whole chest ache. The door closed with a quiet click, and I sank against it for a moment.

I pushed off the door and walked into the bathroom, stripping off my clothes and letting them fall haphazardly onto the floor. As I slid into the water, I knew he wouldn’t come in. I wasn’t willing to pretend anymore, like I didn’t have big, scary feelings for this man. Twice now, I’d begged him to do something. And he hadn’t.

I had a feeling I knew why.

But I needed him to open up a little too. Not all the way, and not all at once. But if he was unwilling to give me anything, then I had to decide if I could make peace with that.





## ISABEL

A few hours later, Emmett and I were ready to get home.

Well ... Emmett wasn't.

I sure was. My bath had revived me, and with the help of one more dose of Tylenol, even though my body was still sore, I could manage more easily. And as I'd moved around the kitchen after packing my backpack and making his bed, Aiden acted like there was a six-foot force field surrounding me that he wasn't allowed to breach.

Breakfast was bagels (for the adults) and cereal (for the kids) because it wasn't like Aiden had prepared for guests.

"I'm hungry," Emmett told me, tossing a pine cone into the air and catching it. Logan and Paige would be there any minute.

"I told you you should've had a bagel."

Tongue trapped between his teeth, he tossed the pine cone higher and darted to the side to catch it, but his hand-eye coordination was off, so it bounced off my head.

"Sorry," he said with a grimace.

I brushed flecks of the pine cone off my hair, slicked back in a braid going down my back. "Hey, what's one more head injury?"

Anya flew out of the front door and scrambled on my lap, where I sat on a white Adirondack chair that overlooked the front yard. She studied my face, her mouth twisting up in a

thoughtful grimace when she looked at the bandage at my hairline.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.

“Not too bad.” I gently touched the bottom of the butterfly bandage. “Itches a little, but I need to leave it on here for a few days.”

Her eyes, bright blue, and an entirely different size and shade as her father’s, met mine. Her mother’s eyes. My eyes came from my mother too, and I couldn’t help but think about how differently I might’ve felt if I liked seeing that reminder of her in the mirror. Anya would. And Aiden, every time he looked at his daughter, would see glimpses of the woman they lost.

Gently, I brushed her hair behind her ears.

“You don’t laugh a lot, do you?” she asked.

Her father had asked me something similar, and I struggled not to feel like I’d done something wrong by the repeated question.

I tapped her chin with my thumb, and it drew a smile. “I laugh more once you get to know me,” I told her.

My answer made her happy, and my heart struggled to work past the sweet melancholy ache she brought out in me. If I was already falling in love with her dad, then Anya might have beaten him to the finish line.

I loved her serious questions. I loved her daredevil streak, even if my wrist throbbed in protest. I loved that she laid in the middle of a boxing ring singing at the top of her lungs.

“I went to sleep right away last night,” she told me in a serious tone.

“That’s ... good.” My brow furrowed because it certainly seemed like she was telling me something important. “Is it usually hard for you to get to sleep?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes.”

Her eyes moved from my face down to the letters on my Wolves T-shirt. The worn black fabric wasn't something I would've packed had I known anyone outside of Emmett would be privileged to see me in all my morning glory. There were holes in the hem. I'd ripped the arms off years earlier because I hated sleeves on my shirts when I worked out.

"What keeps you up, sweetheart?" I asked. As I watched her, it was impossible not to think about the nights I'd stared at the ceiling of my bedroom when I was younger.

"I don't know. " Her answer was honest and simply spoken, but still ... it wedged something raw and vulnerable into my heart. "But I liked that Emmett was across the hall. I pretended he was my big brother." Her eyes met mine again. "And you were downstairs. Daddy wasn't alone either. I think it was easier to sleep because I was happy."

It was almost impossible to swallow past whatever was lodged in my throat. I thought of what Aiden said the night before, about confusing her.

"Your daddy was very nice to let us stay because I was hurt," I said gently.

Anya nodded. I found myself studying her more closely than I ever had.

I'd probably seen pictures of Aiden's wife in the past, but if I had, there was no recollection of her face. Nor had I searched the house for her picture the night before, but I had no doubt there were images of her around the space where they lived.

Behind me, I felt him approach, his presence something akin to its own force field. Since I closed the door to take my bath, he hadn't spoken a word to me.

He simply watched, studied me with a wariness that I hadn't seen in him before, like I did him harm in some way that I didn't understand.

Didn't he know? I didn't want to do any unseen damage. I'd love them so easily if he'd let me.

“Will you bring Emmett to play again sometime?” Anya asked, now fiddling with the edge of my braid. “You didn’t get to walk to the lake with us and see me skip rocks. I’m really good at it.”

Aiden came to stand next to the chair, and carefully, I glanced up, but his attention was on his daughter.

“We’ll talk about it later, okay, gingersnap?” he said.

She pouted. “You only say that when you don’t want to say no in front of people.”

I smothered a smile. “I’ll tell you what, Anya, maybe your dad can drop you off at Emmett’s house someday when I’m there.” I tapped her on the nose. “No climbing that tree, though.”

“Can I, daddysnap?” she asked, bouncing excitedly on my lap.

Aiden gave a slight nod. “Why don’t you hop off her lap? I think her brother is here.”

Logan’s SUV pulled into the driveway, and I caught sight of their identical worried expressions.

“Here we go,” I murmured.

“Mom looks pissed,” Emmett whispered.

I gave him a look when Aiden sighed.

Emmett glanced up at Aiden, voice serious. “I don’t know if you’re ready for this, Mr. Hennessy.”

Aiden’s eyebrows lowered. “For what?”

Paige threw open her door, and in a flurry of red hair and long legs and motherly affection, she filled the entire front yard with her presence.

Her hands ran over my hair, my shoulders, and then tilted my chin to the side. “Oh my *gosh*, Isabel, we are going straight to the hospital. What is the matter with you?”

I stood, and when I grimaced at a twinge in my leg, she set her hands on her hips and glared at me.

“You told me her head was fine,” she said to Aiden. Paige pointed at the bandage on my head. “You call that fine?”

His eyes were huge, and he glanced at me for help. “I—”

I shrugged because I’d had more than a decade to get used to her.

Logan approached at a normal speed, and with normal people skills, he held his hand out to Aiden. “Logan. Nice to meet you.”

Aiden shook it, still casting wary looks at Paige as she clucked and cooed over my wrist, which was rewrapped in clean bandages after my bath. “Nice to meet you too.”

“Paige,” Logan said evenly.

She didn’t so much as look at him. “Not the time to rein me in, buddy.” Her eyes were pinned to me. “You’re sure this isn’t broken?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Trust me, if the pain or swelling was worse today, I’d let you take me. But I’m fine.”

“Forgive me if I don’t trust your opinion on that, Miss *I refused to get checked out at the hospital.*”

Anya came next to me and tugged on my good hand. “Is this your mom? She’s pretty.”

“Kinda,” I explained. “I was fourteen when she married my brother, so even though she’s my sister-in-law, she’s my mom in all the ways that matter.” Paige sniffled noisily, and I gave her a look. “Do not start crying right now.”

Paige softened her posture, giving Anya a sweet smile. “You must be Anya.”

Anya nodded. “I’m sorry I broke your tree branch.”

“Oh honey, you don’t need to apologize for that. I’m just happy you’re all right.”

Paige straightened, and Logan slid an arm around her waist. He eyed my wrist. “How bad’s the sprain?”

“Grade two,” Aiden interjected. “If I had to guess.”

“I love when athletes make medical diagnoses like they’re doctors,” Paige said to me. “It’s my favorite thing ever.”

Logan ignored her. “I made you an appointment with the team chiropractor for an adjustment. He’s coming to the house tomorrow.” When I opened my mouth, he held up a hand. “You are staying with us for a couple of nights.”

“I love it when the men in my life make decisions for me,” I told Paige. “It’s my favorite thing ever.”

Aiden swiped a hand over his mouth, and Logan gave me a level look. “Isabel, my sister whom I love and respect greatly, would you be so kind as to stay at our house while you recover?”

I gestured for more.

“Please,” he managed.

In answer, I gave him a magnanimous smile. “Of course. Thank you for asking so nicely.”

“Aiden, it was nice to meet you. Thank you again,” my brother said, then he walked back to the car, muttering something about sisters and gray hair.

Paige laughed. “Emmett, grab Iz’s backpack. She’s injured.”

“I can carry it.”

“No way, let him be useful. It’s good for him.”

Emmett slung it over his shoulder and waved goodbye to our hosts. “Thanks for letting us stay over.”

Aiden nodded. Anya ran up to Emmett just before he climbed into the back seat and squeezed him in a tight hug. Emmett’s face went bright red, and Paige grinned. “I love that kid.”

Anya ran back in our direction and flung herself around my legs. I smoothed a hand along her downy soft hair. “I hope you feel better soon,” she told me. “Thanks for catching me.”

Paige waved a hand in front of her face, and her eyes were suspiciously bright. Mine probably were too. Aiden was

staring at the ground.

“Anytime,” I told her. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

When Anya disappeared back into the house, Aiden finally, finally made eye contact with me. My stomach flipped featherlight at what I saw.

I blew out a slow breath because we both seemed to have lost the ability to pretend anything after what happened in his bedroom.

Paige glanced between us, her eyebrows popping up. “I’m, uhh, just going to get in the car. Aiden,” she said, waiting until he looked at her to continue, “thank you for taking care of my girl.”

He nodded. “You’re welcome.”

“I’ll be right there,” I told Paige.

She squeezed my hand, eyes warm and understanding. Honestly, there was no conceivable way she could understand shit because I’d told her so little. That was always my problem. Hold it just long enough that it pressed the seams of my skin to bursting.

I’d done it with my mom leaving.

I’d done it with Paige showing up.

And now I was doing it with Aiden.

All the big things, the changes that I hadn’t seen coming, the pieces that made me who I was. And now, I knew, he was part of that. Even if he may not be able to say the same.

Neither one of us spoke for a moment after Paige left us alone.

“I’ll probably take a day or two off work,” I said quietly.

His brows lowered.

“I’ll go crazy sitting at home.”

Aiden sighed, briefly moving his gaze to the car where Logan and Paige weren’t even pretending not to watch us. “I’d

feel better if you took the whole week. Definitely no teaching.”

“I’ve already got my classes covered.” I fidgeted with the hem of my shirt because I had nothing to do with my hands. “If I take this whole week off, that means I miss most of the next two weeks.”

He tilted his head. “Why?”

“My sister’s wedding. It’s on the calendar.” I sighed. “And the—” My voice cut off because it wasn’t like I owned the self-defense class. But it was important to me. To him, too.

I saw in his face that he wanted to ask, in the way he opened his mouth, in the searching way he watched me. But no words came out, and the searching stopped when he turned his attention to the car again.

Standing in the silence with him no longer felt tolerable, and that realization could so easily turn to frustration, to anger, if I let it.

He wanted me. I knew he did.

“Thank you, Aiden,” I said.

His jaw clenched. And nothing.

Right.

“You’re welcome.”

There was so much I wanted to scream at him in the wake of that. In the wake of those bullshit, politely spoken phrases. I wanted the Aiden who sat in the dark with me. But instead, I chose to protect what was left of my energy after a really draining twenty-four hours, and I walked to the car with my head high.

Once I was buckled in, Paige turned around and gave me a look.

“Holy shit, girl, you and I are *going to talk* when we get home.”

Logan sighed, pulling the gear shift so he could back the vehicle out of the driveway. “I don’t have to be a part of that



conversation, do I?”

“No,” Paige and I answered in unison.

“Excellent.” He caught my eye in the rearview mirror and winked. “Ready to go home?”

I sank back against the seat and sighed. “You have no idea.”



## ISABEL

“Please?”

“No.”

“Paige, I’m so bored.” I pushed my lip out, but all she did was roll her eyes. I’d never pouted in my life, but this seemed as good a time as any. “I have been doing nothing for the last three days. You can’t keep me here. You heard the Wolves’ chiro, he said if I feel fine, I can do light desk work. Kelly texted me that the schedule is a mess.”

She finished putting away the groceries. “Yeah, I also heard him say you needed to be careful because of how out of whack your hip was. He said ice and stretch and rest, nothing strenuous for a few days.”

“It’s *been* a few days.”

“He was here yesterday, Iz.”

My breath came out in an angry puff, moving into the family room so I could sit on the couch. Emmett tossed me a controller, and I shook my head. “No thanks, bud, I’ve played enough video games to last me for ten years.”

“You know,” Paige said from the kitchen, “this just shows how badly you need to find a hobby. Only workaholics freak out after three days off.”

“I have hobbies.”

She laughed. “Name one.”

“I—” My jaw set mulishly when nothing sprang to mind. “I love hanging out with my family. And ... sports. I love sports.”

“That doesn’t count, Iz.” She pulled a box of Pop-Tarts out of the paper bag. “Admit it or I won’t toss you one of these.”

“That’s emotional warfare,” I told her. “And I’m not admitting anything. There is nothing wrong with loving my job and wanting to be there. I’ve always been like this. It doesn’t mean I don’t have hobbies.”

“Falling out of trees to rescue your hot boss’s daughter doesn’t count, kid.”

Eyes wide, I gestured at Emmett.

“He’s not listening,” Paige said.

“Yes, I am.” He hit buttons on the controller. “You think Mr. Hennessy is hot?”

I gave Paige a look. “Answer that carefully.”

The only way I could describe her smile was *pure evil*. “My, my, someone sounds possessive. You never did tell me what happened.”

“Nothing happened.” Again, I pointed at Emmett.

“*Liar*,” she mouthed.

“So, the wedding,” I said. “Getting close, huh?”

“What an inconspicuous subject change.” But Paige smiled as she glanced down at her watch. “I actually have to go. I’m meeting Molly at her and Noah’s place to go over the last details for the rehearsal dinner. If you’re so bored, you could come.”

I tilted my head to Emmett. “What about him?”

“I’m going to my friend’s house,” he said, eyes still glued to the TV. “His mom is picking me up in a little bit.”

My wheels started turning immediately. “Nah, you go ahead,” I told Paige. “I might nap.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, so I yawned for effect.

“Okay.”

“Still nothing from ... her?” I asked.

Even after so many years, I didn't love saying Brooke's name, and Paige knew it.

Paige shook her head. “Not yet.” Paige knew about my phone call with Molly, but I still hated feeling like I wasn't sure what to expect. “I wouldn't worry about it. If she was going to come, she would've sent in her RSVP.”

I laughed humorlessly. “You guys give her more credit for manners than I do.”

Paige walked around and dropped a kiss on the top of Emmett's head, then mine. Carefully, she traced her thumb by the butterfly bandage. “It's starting to peel up a bit. How long until you can take it off?”

“Paramedic said probably seven to ten days. Once the wound is totally closed.”

She nodded, then tilted her head. “You going to sneak out to work as soon as I leave?”

I held her eyes. “Maybe.”

“Aiden know you're coming?”

“It's his day off, so no. I just want to fix the schedule and check that he did payroll right.” I paused. “And make sure he didn't mess up my storage closet.”

Paige sighed. “No kicking or running or punching or *anything* other than a sedate walk, okay?”

I smiled. “Okay.”

Fifteen minutes later, I was behind the wheel of my car with the warm September air blowing through my hair. It wasn't like I wasn't enjoying some extra time with Logan and Paige and Emmett, but it had been so long since I'd had to account for my time to anyone. And after the night at Aiden's, I found myself craving a little solitude to process it.

It was the only reason I felt sort of okay with the agreed-upon four days off work, tacked in front of my usual day off.

Seeing him, thinking about what I'd say or how to act, I was still tiptoeing around it.

The last thing I wanted to do was make the work environment impossible for either of us, but I was no good at faking. I never had been. My thoughts, for better or worse, had always been stamped clearly on my face.

It was probably why most men didn't even really try with me.

And now—wasn't it so freaking ironic—I found a man I wanted, and his lack of trying stemmed from something entirely different. I just wasn't sure if he'd ever trust me with the truth of why.

After parking my car, and making sure I didn't see Aiden's big black truck, I let myself into the gym and smiled at Gavin, who was on the phone behind the front desk. He mouthed something, but I couldn't make it out.

I pointed back to my office. "Tell me later," I said.

He gave me a thumbs-up.

But as soon as I cleared the front area, I knew what he was trying to tell me.

Aiden was standing in front of a small news crew, an attractively dressed woman holding a microphone in his face. He hadn't seen me yet because he was angled away from the front door.

"And what's the biggest problem you see facing young fighters today, Aiden?"

With his hands propped on his hips, a black shirt bearing the gym's new logo tight across his chest, Aiden looked so serious, so handsome. He shook his head. "No doubt about it, it's the way the weight classes are set up. If they don't add more, you'll just see more and more big guys dehydrating themselves going into a fight so they can make a lower weight class."

She nodded. "And why do you see that as an issue?"

“If you’ve got someone who weighs in at one ninety before the match, but normally weighs two fifteen, and he’s going against a guy who’s a healthy one seventy-five, you will have more injuries. Serious ones too. Not just the injuries that can come from a fair fight. It’s one of the reasons I was ready to be done when I retired.”

She smiled. “No chance you’d ever return?”

“No, my fighting days are over. I’m excited about what we can accomplish here.”

I shifted my weight, and Aiden noticed.

He did a quick double-take, and his countenance went as dark as a thundercloud. Head down, I walked back to my office and hoped it would be a very, very long interview.

The newscaster started speaking again, and I closed my office door.

“Well, shit,” I whispered.

I got to work because I had a feeling my door would burst open, and a very tall, very angry man would be behind it as soon as it did.

As I was staring at the computer screen and clicking through a few things, my phone buzzed.

**Molly: Ooooooooooh, PAIGE TOLD ME ABOUT THE LINGERING EYE CONTACT. You owe me stories.**

**MOLLY: I need something to distract me from wedding stress. Why didn’t we just elope on a beach with our families??**

**ME: It’s not too late, Mol. You still can.**

**MOLLY: Don’t think I don’t notice how you deflect.**

**ME: See? Wedding isn't getting you down. Still sharp as a tack.**

The phone got tucked back into my bag, and when I heard someone knock on the door, I froze.

“Come in,” I said.

Gavin popped his head in. “Got a minute?”

“Of course. What’s up?”

He nodded at the clunky black wrist brace I was wearing. “How long until you can ditch that?”

“Another week probably. Thanks for covering for me this afternoon.”

“Sure.” He pulled his phone out. “I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to take any pictures or videos for our social media with that news crew showing up, so this is all I got.”

I flipped through a couple of shots, stopped to watch a quick video he’d snagged of Aiden demonstrating a few moves in the ring with one of our regulars. “These are great, Gav. Can you text them to me?”

“Sure.”

Gavin was only a couple of years younger than I was, one of our college students working toward a kinesiology degree. Once he had that piece of paper, and whatever else he decided to add to his education, he’d be far more qualified for this job than I was. But moments like this made me even more thankful Amy had taken a chance on me.

Now I just needed the big, angry guy out in the main area to figure out his issues so I didn’t have to worry about my place.

Or my heart.

Standing a few inches taller than my five-foot-ten, Gavin studied my forehead after sending the text. “You’re gonna have a badass scar.”

I smiled. “Totally my intention.”



It was at the moment I was smiling up at him that a very large body stepped into the doorway of my office.

“A minute of your time, Ward,” he all but growled.

Ahh. We were back to Ward.

I’d never had the sound of my last name spark such immediate and hot rage. My bones practically melted from the force of it.

Gavin’s eyebrows lifted briefly. “You okay if I go?” he asked quietly.

Aiden’s countenance darkened even further.

I gave Gavin a subdued smile. “Yes, thank you.”

He nodded deferentially to Aiden as he left my office. I crossed my arms as Aiden closed the office door behind him.

It took him a second to say anything once we were blocked from prying eyes.

Oddly enough, it was the first time I felt no butterflies, no flutters, no walking-a-tight rope feel in the fact that he and I were alone.

No, I was too frustrated with him for that. So even when he walked closer and tilted his head to look at my bandage, I didn’t move, didn’t smile, didn’t break the silence.

“Why are you here?” he asked.

“Fixing the schedule you messed up.”

“I didn’t ...“ He took in a deep breath. “Okay, I probably did.”

My eyebrows lifted. “And making sure you didn’t do the same thing to payroll. If you plan to keep your employees, you kinda need to pay them.”

“They’d forgive me,” he answered simply.

I exhaled a laugh. “Well, at least you’re feeling more confident in your role.”

“Because of you,” he explained. “They’d forgive me because of you.” At my silence, he took a step closer. “But

none of that matters because you should not be here. You're supposed to be off work for at least four days."

"I'm done resting, but I appreciate your concern." I hooked a thumb at my desk. "Is that all? I'd like to get back to work."

My tone remained calm and even, but my heart started to race at his nearness. An unconscious reaction that I had no control over. Born from the frustration of that, I turned my back to Aiden and walked to the storage cabinet in the corner. I wasn't even sure what I was looking for; I just needed space. I needed distance between his body and mine, and my desk didn't provide enough of that.

Aiden's response took a long moment to come, but when it did, it stopped me in my tracks. "You're mad at me."

In the middle of pulling a stack of shirts out of the cabinet, my hands froze.

"Is that it? You're mad about the other night."

Not in a million years did I expect him to push this. Push what had happened—or not happened—in his bedroom. Slowly, I slid the shirts back into place and closed the cabinet.

When I turned, his face was impossible to read. I'd need a chisel and crowbar to get this man's thoughts out of his head clearly. Leave it to me to find someone like this to finally light me up inside. Someone guarded and cagey. Someone who couldn't—or wouldn't—make things easy.

It was ... poetic justice at its finest. I deserved someone like Aiden because this was how everyone, in my entire life, had always felt about me.

And it was the only reason I started laughing. Once I started, I couldn't stop.

Aiden looked at me like I'd lost my fucking mind because I kinda felt like I had.

He clenched his jaw, crossing his arms over his chest, but he didn't say a word as I tried to get a hold of myself. Eventually, I did, and as I wiped away tears underneath my eyes, he shook his head.

“You done?”

“The hell if I know,” I said around a few stray giggles. I never giggled. But this—him and me—it was too much. And if I didn’t laugh about it, I’d probably cry. Finally, I took a deep breath. “You are ... impossible, Aiden Hennessy.”

His face went blank with shock. “Me?”

“I’ve always been that person,” I told him. “The impossible one. Always. And now I understand what it must have been like for the people waiting for me.”

Aiden’s brow furrowed, his chest worked steadily as his breathing increased.

“I wish you’d trust me enough to tell me why this is so hard.” I searched his face. “I want to know. But I won’t keep putting myself in this position, where we *almost* do, we both *want* to, and then you pull back. I won’t do it anymore.”



*Aiden*

SHE WAS RIGHT.

And she was wrong.

I knew a whole lot standing in that office with her.

I wanted to grip the back of her neck and take her mouth, not gently, not sweetly.

I wanted to see what I’d find if I peeled her tiny shorts off her long, long legs.

And beyond all that, I wanted to wrap her in my arms because I knew why she was frustrated. Knew what I was doing to cause it.

But I didn’t know how to stop. How to explain.

Never in my entire life had I felt this sort of barely leashed energy, and Isabel had no idea how close she was to shoving

open the flood gates holding back the snarling beast inside me.

I didn't like that she was frustrated with me.

I didn't like that I'd walked away from her in my bedroom.

I didn't like that we forever seemed to walk this tightrope of soft, stolen touches or immediate combustion.

At my continued silence, she made a frustrated noise in the back of her throat.

"I'm sorry," I ground out. I unfolded my arms and set my hands on my hips. It was the only way to keep from grabbing her, tugging her to me like I wanted. "I'm sorry for the other night. I shouldn't have ..."

But my words stopped there. Because I couldn't make myself apologize for touching her.

I couldn't make myself apologize for one moment where I felt the press of her body against mine. Imagined pushing her back onto my bed and finding slick, sweet comfort with her legs around mine. I'd thought of it a dozen times since she walked out of my house, each time, finding empty release with the shower pulsing hot over me, the bed empty next to me.

"You shouldn't have what?" she whispered. Isabel didn't back down an inch. "Even now, you can't say it."

My eyes held hers because of course she knew what I wasn't willing to say.

I held myself still because this precipice was dangerous, and it wasn't the place for us to fall over it. There was no way for me, not now, to explain how selfish it would be for me to go down this path with her.

How unprepared I was for someone like her.

Her blue eyes changed as I stood there silently, from anger-tinged desire to resignation, and it made me want to rage.

"Isabel," I said, shifting closer to her, my hands lifting toward her.

“No,” she said firmly. Her hand came up, stopping just shy of my chest. I think she knew—we both knew—that if we touched right now, any good intentions would vanish. Not just vanish, they’d explode. “Don’t call me by my first name, don’t act like you’re going to touch me right now, unless you know *exactly* what that means for you.”

I backed up, hands dropping back by my side.

Her chin quivered dangerously, but she sucked in a sharp breath. Watching her ability to get control of her emotions was incredible.

“I’m done being awed by you, Aiden Hennessy. I’m done acting like I don’t want you because I do.”

If a man could remain standing while feeling humbled to his core, without falling to his knees, then I’d just managed it. She was staggering in her strength, and I had my first flash of unease that I was fucking up something big ... something that might not happen to me again.

“And I think the part that makes me so mad,” she continued, “is that I know you want me too.”

I had to look away. I had to get myself under control. Remember why she was so wrong for me.

But even if she was, Isabel was right about this, and I respected her too much to lie to her.

My voice hardly worked when I spoke. It sounded rusty and rough, but the words came out clearly all the same. “You have no idea how difficult this is for me.”

“Then tell me,” she begged, stepping closer. “Tell me.”

I swiped a hand over my mouth.

If I pinched my eyes closed, I could hear Beth talking to Anya. I could hear the words she said. Isabel represented every selfish desire I could’ve conjured for myself. So that was what I did. I tried to tug that memory front and center because it felt like the only way to make sense of this mess.

“I just need you to be patient with me,” I told her, voice taking on a harsh, frustrated edge.

“I am being patient.” Isabel swallowed. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to keep letting myself get whiplash until you decide this is okay. I’ve had a lot of things happen in my life that I had no choice but to push through.” Her voice was unsteady, but her eyes were clear. “But this, I can choose. Until you’re ready to do the same.”

My feelings for Isabel were too big. At that moment, the worst thing I could’ve done was tell her that.

That she was too much.

Too young.

Too beautiful.

Too guarded. I wanted nothing more than to break down her walls and let her do the same to me.

That together, we were too intense, in a time of my life when all I’d been seeking was peace.

The last thing I’d ever do was make her feel that way. And I didn’t trust myself to speak.

Isabel swallowed roughly, her eyes suddenly bright. “Please let me get back to work.”

She turned away, the long sweep of her dark hair making a hushed sound in the quiet of the office, and as she sat at the desk again, I saw her hands trembling.

It was the tremble that had me walking away as she asked.



## ISABEL

One thing I couldn't hold against Aiden was how well he listened.

Like I'd asked, he stayed away.

Like I'd asked, he let me get back to work.

Even though I wasn't teaching, I did just about everything else simply to stay busy. If I slowed, I would scream, just to have an outlet for my frustration. Not that he could've known the type of restless energy this distance caused in me.

Because the worst feeling in the world was falling in love with someone who wasn't capable of returning that love in the way you needed. As I made the finishing touches on setting up for the self-defense class on my last day of work before Molly's wedding, I kept thinking about Brooke.

I thought of the look I'd seen on her face the night before she left.

There was a resolve there that still made my stomach curl up unpleasantly when I thought of it. The love of Logan and Paige couldn't erase it entirely, though it helped as much as anything could.

Telling Aiden how I felt about him was the closest I could come to baring myself to him completely. Standing naked in front of him would feel less vulnerable than this silence did. Because I had no guarantees that he'd ever love me like I wanted him to. Like I knew he was capable.



I'd never had the chance to beg Brooke to stay. So many years later, I knew I wouldn't, even given the chance. But it still triggered the same uncomfortable edginess as if I had.

Which was why I threw myself into the work I could do.

I sat at the front desk, the gym's pleasant sounds behind me filtering into my thoughts as I readied everything for the class. The front door opened, and Casey walked in, followed by three other girls.

"Morning," I told her. "You ready to beat people up?"

They laughed.

"Okay, we won't be beating anyone up, but go ahead and partner up. I marked out spots in the main open area. There should be two of you in each section."

Casey gave me a once-over. "What happened to you?"

I touched the bandage, which was soon to be removed, using the hand still in an ugly black brace. "I had a mishap with a tree branch that decided not to hold me any longer."

"Ouch." She winced. "You won't be teaching today then?"

"I'll be on the mic walking everyone through the moves, but I'll have some help from our trainers."

Kelly, Gavin, and Grady were already warming up, along with a couple of others, and I had a feeling Aiden would be helping too, even though he'd yet to come out of his office.

Casey went to join her friends, and I stayed busy, greeting the girls who came through the front door with their smiles and nervous energy. By the time everyone on the list had arrived, we had a full gym, and the vibe was different than a typical class, that I found myself feeling a little nervous.

Aiden stood in the doorway of his office, watching the energetic buzz in the room with a slight smile on his face. But when his eyes met mine, his smile fell. His gaze sharpened, and even with the distance between us, the intensity of it was like a knife blade. Completely lethal if you pressed on it hard enough.

So I looked down and finished hooking the mic up.

“All right, everyone. Welcome to Hennessy’s Gym, for what is hopefully the first of many classes like this.” The girls clapped excitedly. I motioned for Gavin and Kelly to join me in front of them. “These are my helpers. They’ll be demonstrating all the basic self-defense moves we want to teach you today, and I’ll be walking around helping you guys while you practice. So will Grady and Aiden.” I made eye contact with everyone. “If you only want me or Kelly to help you, please just raise your hand at any point if you’re struggling, and we’ll be right over.”

I held up my wrist. “Unfortunately, I won’t be kicking anyone’s ass today because I got in a fight with a tree and lost, but trust me ... we’ll be able to inflict some damage together, okay?”

The small ripple of laughter eased some of the excited tension.

Over the next hour, I found my new favorite part of my job. By the time we finished, there was yelling and cheering and more than one male trainer hitting the mat with a thud.

I laughed when Casey managed to push Gavin to his knee. “You guys are savage, I love it.”

Some of them stayed afterward to keep practicing, and it was then I noticed Anya sitting on the edge of the center boxing ring. She waved at me, toothless grin bringing a smile onto my face.

I walked over to her. “When did you get here?”

She kicked her legs back and forth. “About halfway through. My uncle Clark dropped me off. He said I should learn how to beat the boys up for when I get older.”

I laughed. “Well, we only use stuff like this if someone is trying to hurt us or one of our friends.”

Anya’s face pinched up thoughtfully. “Have you ever had to do that to someone?”

“Nope. And I’m very thankful for that.”

Her eyebrows were still lowered.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Are you ... gentle?”

My head tilted. “What do you mean, sweetheart?”

Anya’s big blue eyes searched mine, and again, I got the feeling she was trying to figure out something that was much more serious than I could guess. “Do you sing lullabies even though you aren’t a good singer?”

I blew out a breath, glancing over my shoulder to see if Aiden was anywhere in earshot, which he wasn’t. “Not really,” I admitted.

Anya nodded, still deep in thought.

“Why do you ask?” I asked gently.

Oh, her eyes when she looked up at me, I had the strangest sensation that she was about to rip my heart from my chest, and when she spoke, I wasn’t wrong.

“You’re different than I thought you’d be.”

“What?” I whispered.

“My mommy told me she’d be sweet and gentle, and bake me cookies and sing me lullabies when I couldn’t sleep, but you’re different.”

My heart skipped erratically as she spoke, and I wasn’t sure which impulse was stronger—to cover my ears at what she said, or wrap her in my arms and let her know that love came in so many different forms.

At my back, Aiden approached without sound. But I felt him all the same.

“Anya,” he said quietly. “Why don’t you go play in my office.”

She smiled up at me, then hopped off the edge of the ring, scampering off to his office.

I covered my mouth, my eyelids falling shut.

“Isabel ...” he started.

I turned, and his voice faded at whatever he meant to say next.

“I cannot even imagine how hard it must be to think about moving on,” I said quietly. “I’ve never ...” I paused. “I’ve never been married or engaged. Never found someone who made me want any of that until now,” I admitted. His eyes blazed. I forced the words out, and each one felt like glass in my throat. “Losing that”—I pressed a hand over my heart—“it must have been hell on earth.”

His eyes darted away from mine, his jaw tight.

A group of girls said goodbye, and I waved. Aiden rubbed at the back of his neck, but when he lifted his head, I saw the truth buried in his guilty expression.

“And I’d never, ever expect you to leave the memory of your wife, and what she meant to you, behind. But I can’t compete with the wishes of a ghost, Aiden.” My eyes burned with unshed tears. “I won’t.”

“I didn’t ...” He paused, face bent in a grimace.

I rolled my lips between my teeth and begged him silently to give me something. Anything.

When he met my gaze again, his was untamed, unguarded.

“That’s what makes this so fucking hard for me,” he whispered fiercely. My mouth went dry because if we were alone, he would’ve grabbed me to him. I could see it in his eyes. “When it comes to you, Isabel, there is no competition, and I don’t know how to make peace with that.”

Without another word, he turned and marched to his office. Before anyone saw my face, I turned back to the ring and took a few deep breaths.

But my heart, oh my heart. I laid a hand over it, tried to calm its wild, furious drumming.

“Iz?” Kelly called from behind me.

I blew out one more breath and turned. “Yeah?”

“These two would love to sign up for a membership. Can you help them while I finish up here?”

At the two girls, I smiled. “Of course. Why don’t you two follow me up to the desk? I’ll get you some paperwork to fill out.”

I went about my job for the next hour, and by the time I gathered my things to go, I still wasn’t sure if I felt better or worse after his admission.

“That looked intense for a minute there,” Kelly commented mildly, watching as I finished tidying my desk and shutting off my computer monitor.

“Did it?”

“My, my how far we’ve come from you hiding behind boxes.” She nudged me as we walked toward the front. “I think our boss looks a little smitten with you, Isabel Ward.”

I laughed, and the sound was tinged with the slightest edge of hysteria. His office door was still closed, and when I walked out of the building, I wasn’t coming back until after Molly’s wedding. I forced my attention back to Kelly. “Call me if you need anything this weekend. Saturday is the only day I can’t really answer my phone.”

She sighed at my obvious deflection. “It’s not too late to invite me, you know.”

I rolled my eyes. “Goodbye, Kelly.”

“Have a fun weekend off,” she called after me.

When I turned to wave, I saw Aiden watching from the doorway of his office. And just like it always seemed to with him, my heart responded like he’d touched bare wires to my skin.

It didn’t slow until I’d driven away, and still ... I felt him. I was starting to realize that I probably always would.



## AIDEN

The days she was gone were even more difficult than when she was in front of me because I couldn't even attempt to decipher what she was thinking.

Couldn't take the little bit I had of her, even if it was a pale, watered-down version of what I wanted. It made me want to break things, hit things, and put my rage and frustration somewhere. And my anger wasn't aimed at her. I could hardly look myself in the mirror because I hated what I saw when I did.

I was going through the motions in a way that I hadn't since Beth died. More than once, I caught my family watching me, caught Anya talking to me, when I'd only heard half of what she said.

*What if you're wrong?*

That was what I couldn't mute in my head, to distraction.

What if you're wrong?

This—Isabel—was the first time in my entire life that I questioned myself so much, and I hated how much anger it stirred up in its wake.

She was nothing Beth had talked about, nothing like I'd tried to imagine.

And maybe that was part of the problem. I'd never even attempted to imagine the person who would come after Beth. Never wanted to. Her description, her wishes were as good as

any, because I had no desire to find someone else to take that space in my life or in Anya's.

Each day that Isabel upheld the invisible wall that she'd promised, one that I could've launched over with ease if I decided, I slipped a little further into questioning myself.

"You look like shit," Deacon told me when we all ate dinner at my parents'. They'd tiptoed around me all week.

"Didn't sleep well." Not that I planned on explaining why. When Isabel left work the day before, she was off for the next three because of her sister's wedding. And since she'd swept out of the building, I hadn't heard a thing from her. And why would I?

Isabel might've been the one to take longer to gain her footing around me, but there was only one person too chicken-shit to admit what they felt, and it wasn't her.

"You can borrow my special lamp," Anya told me. "It helps me sleep."

I gave her a tired smile. "Thanks, gingersnap. Maybe I'll try that tonight."

Clark stood from the table. "Come on, Anya. Want to help me fix something in the backyard?"

She shrieked when he scooped her up and tossed her over his shoulder. Wearily, I rubbed the back of my neck.

"Anything you wanna talk about?" my mom asked later as I helped her clear dishes before taking Anya home.

My dad set a hand on her back as he set his dish down on the counter. "Don't pry, honey."

She shooed him away. "Asking isn't prying."

He swatted her butt. "It is when you do it."

"Nothing to worry about, Mom." I handed her the dish towel.

Even if they all watched me carefully, no one else said a word. I got Anya loaded into the truck and made my way back home, weariness covering me like an iron blanket. It was



different than losing Beth—so very different—but it still felt like grief.

Like I was mourning something that I'd never really had.

It was a startling realization, one that shook me more than I wanted to admit. But how was I supposed to reconcile everything I'd believed I might need someday to what I wanted when I looked at her.

Anya was drifting off to sleep in the back seat as I pulled into our neighborhood, and I caught sight of an unfamiliar car parked in front of our house. It wasn't Isabel's car, but when someone with her build and long dark hair got out of the driver's seat, my heart started hammering.

But when she lifted her head and smiled as I drove the truck into our driveway, I knew it was one of her sisters. From the pictures I'd seen in the entryway of the house, they all looked similar, and it calmed my nerves to know it wasn't her. Sort of.

Anya had fully drifted off, and I decided to let her stay where she was while I talked to whichever Ward sister was waiting for me.

She was walking up the driveway as I got out of the truck.

“Aiden?” She gave me a small wave, her features so similar to Isabel's that it was almost hard to look at her. “I'm Molly, Isabel's sister.”

“What can I do for you?” I was too tired for pleasantries, too exhausted by cycling through this situation in my head to even attempt to manage them.

She held out a large envelope, edged in gold, and heavy in my hand when I took it from her. “I'd like to invite you to my wedding this weekend.”

My head snapped up. “Why?”

Molly smiled. “Because my sister will never do it.”

Immediately, I was shaking my head. “Trust me, she doesn't want me there.”

“If she knew I was here,” Molly said carefully, “she would be mad at me.”

I extended the envelope back toward her. “Then maybe you shouldn’t be.”

Inexplicably, that made her smile widen. “I know you don’t know Isabel as well as I do, but from the little bit I’ve heard, you’ve gotten really good glimpses of who she is.” Molly tucked a piece of hair behind her ears, the massive diamond on her finger winking in the sun. “She’ll never ask you to come to this wedding, even if she wants you there, because she is as stubborn as anyone I’ve ever met.”

I exhaled a humorless laugh. “I feel like we’re talking in circles.”

“I know.” She licked her lips before speaking again. “I don’t know where your relationship stands with her,” Molly continued. “Because even though she can dish out advice to us like it’s her job, she rarely tells us anything she’s going through. And I think it’s because she’s doing what she did when she was young, when Paige showed up. She’ll give these tiny windows of opportunity, and if you don’t take them, you won’t get another chance. My sister is one of the strongest, most incredible people I know, but she will shut down anyone if she’s afraid they’ll hurt her.”

I swiped a hand over my mouth, regarding Molly with unfiltered curiosity. “Why are you telling me all of this? You don’t even know me.”

Her smile was mysterious. “Because I know my sister. And if she’s refusing to talk about you, then you’ve wedged a foot in the door, and that means you’re important to her.” She stepped closer. “What I’m giving you, Aiden, is a chance.”

I glanced up at the sky and took a deep breath.

“But,” she said carefully, “only take that chance if you can see her in your future. I’d never make that kind of dramatic statement for anyone other than her.” She laid a hand on my arm. “I know you lost your wife, and that puts a lot of extra

pressure on whatever relationship you have next. But if you think it could be her, then don't miss your chance."

If Molly Ward made me start crying in my own driveway, I'd never forgive her.

"I've ... I've done all of this already, and I wasn't looking to do it again," I said quietly. "The big wedding and I have a child, and I don't know if it's even fair to ask her to walk into all of that, knowing the firsts that she should be experiencing with the person who loves her."

It was an oversimplification of the mental hurdles facing me, but enough that Molly gave me an encouraging smile.

"There is one thing I can tell you with a hundred percent certainty, Aiden." She held my eyes. "My sister could not care less about which firsts you experience together. What she wants is forever."

All I could manage was a short nod. "I hear you."

"Good." She studied me. "I hope I see you there. But if I don't, then you never deserved her to begin with."

Even though her parting shot was a gut-punch, Molly gave me a small smile and walked down my driveway like a queen.

With my head spinning, I transferred a sleeping Anya from my truck and into her bed. I walked back downstairs in a daze and sank onto the couch. Down the hallway, the door to my bedroom was open, and if I closed my eyes, it was so easy to imagine Isabel as she'd lain in my bed. Once more, I was struck with the complete pendulum of our interactions.

There was no lukewarm.

No shades of gray to dissect.

I stared at the wedding invitation, and imagined showing up for her there. I imagined staying home, knowing I'd think of her all evening.

Because I couldn't not, I imagined what Beth would say. What she'd tell me to do.

Before I knew what I was doing, I pulled out my phone and dialed my parents' number.

My mom picked up on the first ring.

"Miss me already?" she asked, smile evident in her voice.

"I lied. Earlier." I punched the button to put her on speaker and set my phone down, idly scrolling until I found a picture of Beth on my phone. From before she was sick, before her cheeks hollowed out and the skin shrank over her bones.

Her response took a few seconds in coming, "Okay. What about?"

"When I told you not to worry." I pinched the bridge of my nose. "I don't ... I don't know what to do, Mom. And normally, I can imagine what Beth would tell me, what advice she'd give me, and I can't with this."

My wife's face smiled out at me from the phone, but for the first time in two years, I couldn't hear her voice in my head. My hands started tingling, my neck tight and chest as heavy as if an elephant sat squarely over my heart.

"Talk to me, son," she said gently.

There was no part of me that wanted to recap my relationship with Isabel, so I picked up the proverbial scalpel and cut straight to the heart of what was bothering me.

"What does it mean if my feelings for Isabel are ... fuck, I don't know, bigger? More intense. More," my voice faltered, "everything, than what I had with Beth."

"Oh Aiden," she exhaled heavily, "there's no rule book for this. Nothing that says you can't love someone in a different way than you loved Beth."

"I did." My finger and thumb tightened on the bridge of my nose again until it hurt. "I *loved* her. She was kind and funny and a great mother, and I never wanted this to happen. I don't know what it says about me that Isabel is nothing—and I mean nothing—like the person I loved first." I dropped my hand and forced myself to stare at Beth's picture. The gold of her hair and the deep dimples on either side of her smile. I

pinched my eyes shut. “Isabel scares the hell out of me, and I never had that with Beth.”

She made a soft sound that I couldn’t decipher.

“And I promised her,” I said quietly, “I promised her and Anya, and I don’t know how to break that promise without feeling like I’ve betrayed her memory.”

“Aiden,” she started cautiously, “I loved Beth too. But she never should’ve given Anya that list. I know she was just trying to make a scared little girl feel better, and maybe it made her feel better too, but I don’t think she truly meant to box you into something you didn’t really want.”

A stray tear slipped down my cheek, and I wiped it away.

“You are not betraying Beth by finding happiness, son. It’s horseshit, and if she was here, she’d tell you the same thing.”

I exhaled a laugh.

“You are so honorable. You’ve always done right by the people in your life. It’s what made you a good father, and husband, and son and brother. But the only thing that matters is that you find someone who loves you and loves Anya. That’s it.”

“It’s so soon,” I said quietly. “And when I moved here, I wanted calm. Peace. We’d had so much chaos, so much upheaval.”

“Isabel doesn’t bring you peace?” she asked.

I exhaled a laugh. “No. I don’t think I’ve had a moment of peace since I laid eyes on her. She’s too ... she’s more than I expected.”

My mom sniffled on the other end of the phone. “You know as well as anyone, there’s no rule book you can follow, no plan that is guaranteed. And if this person can bring life into your heart, into Anya’s, then you owe it to Beth to see where that leads.”

It took me a second to find my voice, but when I did, it was hoarse. “You know, I think even if you’d told me to let her

go, find someone ... else, I don't think I could've done it. But I'm glad you didn't say that."

"I can't wait to meet her," she said warmly. "Now how can I help?"

I picked up the wedding invitation, head clear and heart steadier than it had been in a long time.

"Would you be willing to take Anya tomorrow night?"



## ISABEL

“I think I’m going to puke.”

I tucked a piece of hair back into the small diamond clip that held Molly’s hair back. “No, you’re not.”

“I just want to see him.” She waved a hand in front of her face, sweat misting her forehead, even though the day of her wedding had dawned perfectly clear and mild. “You’ve seen him, right?”

Crouching down to fluff the flowing organza of her dress, I hummed in assent. “He sounds about as worked up as you do.”

“Really?” She smiled wide. My sister, as beautiful as she was in the every day, was the most gorgeous bride I’d ever seen. “Tell me. Gawd, I bet he looks so good in his tux. He shaved, right?”

“I believe he did, but I can’t say I would notice if he hadn’t.”

The photographer moved around us, snapping away as I readied Molly to do some shots with Logan in the gardens outside of Cedarbrook Lodge. She’d risked an outdoor wedding at this venue of her dreams, and so far, Seattle was delivering. The hotel sprawled behind us, the indoor reception room already dimly lit and decorated in soft creams and gold.

Off to the side, Lia and Claire chattered happily, snapping pictures of their own. Paige stood between them, red hair swept up off her face, and peacock blue column dress making her look like a friggin goddess.



“It’s not too late to see him now,” Paige teased. “Spare the man the embarrassment of bursting into tears in front of a hundred people at the sight of you.”

Molly laughed. “No way, I can’t *wait* for someone to catch that on camera.”

I stood back, and the photographer moved around Molly, directing her this way and that.

Paige slid an arm around my waist. “You four sure clean up all right.”

“For as much time as we spent in a hair and makeup chair, we better,” Claire said.

Because Molly allowed us freedom in choosing our dresses, Claire and Lia had opted for a dusty shade of blue, and in similar styles that flowed gently away from their hips, off the shoulder straps holding up a sweetheart neckline. All of us wore our hair down and curled, Molly was the only one who kept hers pulled back.

Her wedding dress, with impossibly thin straps holding it up over her shoulders, was fitted to the waist, covered in delicate floral lace before it flowed out dreamily toward the floor.

And after trying on dresses with far too many frills and embellishments, I found one in a deep navy that skimmed the length of my body, crisscrossing fabric covered my breasts, which left a small peekaboo cutout underneath. My back was completely bare.

I looked beautiful, felt beautiful, and so far, could breathe easily that the pre-wedding moments were going off without a hitch.

“Logan is on his way,” the wedding planner told us, tapping her CIA-level earpiece and speaking to someone we couldn’t see.

Nodding, I picked up my small clutch and walked to meet him, careful to miss the cracks in the path with my heels even though they were wedges. The last thing I needed was a rolled ankle. I’d just ditched the wrist brace the day before.

I stopped when I caught sight of my big brother walking my way. Hands tucked into his black tux pants, dark hair starting to show the slightest hint of silver at the temples, he looked handsome, and visibly nervous.

His smile was slow when he saw me. “Look at you.”

“Wait until you see the bride,” I told him.

Logan stopped in front of me and shook his head. “You look beautiful.”

Instead of deflecting like I so desperately wanted, I let out a deep breath. “Thank you.” I tilted my head back where Molly waited for him. “You ready for this?”

“Hell no,” he answered feelingly.

I laughed.

But to my absolute horror, his eyes got bright as he stared over my shoulder. “Shit, I just saw her.”

“Do not start crying.” I glanced up at the sky and blinked. “If you had any idea how long this makeup took, you’d take pity on me.”

Behind him, I saw guests starting to filter toward the adjacent garden, where the ceremony would take place. From where she stood, Molly was protected from view by a large hedge. I clutched my purse tightly, and Logan laid a hand on mine, squeezing gently.

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about, Iz. She’s not here.”

I turned my hand and clutched his. “I know. I think I always knew she wasn’t going to come.”

His eyes, so capable of seeing through all of us, studied me carefully. “From the first day, it’s been her loss. And my unbelievable gain.”

When my eyes watered, I let out a deep breath. “Today is going to be great,” I told him. “Even if you cry like a baby when you walk her down the aisle.”

He chuckled.

“Who’s crying like a baby?” Paige asked. She grinned at Logan when he stepped away from me and slid an arm around her waist. “Is it you, husband?”

“Maybe,” he murmured.

“Ready to go see our girl?” Paige said gently. “She’s waiting.”

Logan nodded, his jaw tight.

I stood in place and watched them walk hand in hand toward Molly. My sister turned and saw Logan, and my big brother had to stop to rub suspiciously at his eyes. Paige rubbed his back, which heaved on a massive breath. He approached Molly, shaking his head. He reached out and swiped a thumb under her eyes, and when they embraced tightly, I had to look down at the grass so I didn’t absolutely lose it.

No matter what happened for the rest of the day, I would be okay.

Or tomorrow, or the week after.

Even if I felt slightly hollowed out after what happened with Aiden, and his continued silence, days like today filled some of that void with pure joy.

It’s the only reason I could smile as I turned toward the hotel.

But I stopped short, the breath knocked out of me like a punch.

Aiden.

He was at the end of the path, waiting for me. Hair slicked back neatly, jaw slightly dark with stubble, and his muscular frame covered in a deep navy suit that fit him so perfectly I could’ve wept. He wore no tie, his hands hanging loosely at his sides.

My hand fluttered to my stomach, and his eyes tracked the movement.

It must have been enough for him because he approached with long-legged strides, eyes confident, mouth slightly curved in a smile.

“Wh-what are you doing here?” I asked.

His eyes traced my face, but he said nothing until he held out his hand. “I’m here for you.”

The sight of his arm outstretched blurred through the tears that filled my eyes until I willed them away. Taking in a slow breath, I slid my palm against his, only exhaling when he wove our fingers together.

Together, we walked down a short fork in the paved path, and he gave me a secretive smile over his shoulder when we turned around a large tiled wall to a small enclosed garden.

I was gripping his hand so tightly when he stopped, I wondered if he would pull away. Instead, he took my other hand in his, gently curled his fingers around my wrist, lifting it up to his mouth so he could press a kiss to where I’d worn the brace.

His eyes held fast to mine, and honestly, I wasn’t sure how I was still standing.

I wasn’t sure how my legs still worked or how my heart was still pounding blood to my body because it all rushed through my head.

Even with my heels, he towered over me, but Aiden gently tugged, pulling me into his arms.

His hands slid over the skin of my back, my arms curled around his middle, and I breathed out shakily when there was nothing but him. Nothing I could smell or see or feel except Aiden.

All the times we’d been alone, I’d imagined heat and the lighting of a bonfire, flames hitting the sky in a sharp whooshing sound.

But this, what a slow, gentle undoing of my heart. His fingers slid up the bumps on my spine, and I tucked my body

closer to his. Those hands, they pushed underneath the veil of my hair until he cupped the back of my neck.

I pulled back to stare up at him. My smile was as easy as breathing, which was sort of how it felt to fall in love with him. It was simply the way I worked, I realized. It was the big picture that I hadn't been able to see until he was in front of me. Loving him was the thing I was born to do.

His big hand slid over the side of my face, thumb brushing the seam of my lips.

"I'm sorry I made you wait," he whispered.

My lips split in a happy smile. "You're worth it."

Aiden cupped my face in both hands and leaned down. But instead of brushing his lips over mine, he kissed my cheekbone. My forehead. The tip of my nose. My hands curled into the lapels of his jacket, helpless fists that did nothing to make him hurry up and kiss me already. Then I tugged, and he chuckled against my temple.

"Impatient," he said.

My nose brushing his, I angled my head so that our mouths were a hairsbreadth apart. "You have no idea," I told him.

"And beautiful." He kissed the edge of my lips. "So beautiful." The other side.

Every inch of my body vibrated dangerously, his lips hovering over mine for a beat. Our eyes met, locked together like that, and I saw the challenge he held in his.

Sliding my hands up his chest and around his neck, I curled my fingers around the curve of his skull and pushed up on the balls of my feet, mouth sealing over his.

It was the only moment I was in control.

Aiden wrapped an arm around my waist, sliding his tongue against mine, angling his head so he could take our kiss deeper. His fingers tangled in my hair, and I tried to scramble closer but couldn't.

He groaned, deep in his chest when I sucked on his tongue. His fingers dug into my flesh as our kiss went on and on.

Sipping at my lips, Aiden tested the way our lips moved together. Our bodies were so close, breath moving from me to him, and when he slid his tongue in a long swipe over mine, I hummed happily.

His body was so strong, so hard, and I stumbled backward, my shoulder blades hitting against sun-warmed tile. He followed me, tilting his head to suck at my bottom lip.

My head dropped back, and his fingers found the curve of my ass through my dress, grabbing hard, tugging me closer to him. His mouth slid along the edge of my jaw, the edge of his teeth pulling at my earlobe until I moaned a curse.

“Iz?” Lia called from the other side of the wall.

Aiden and I froze.

“Hang on,” I managed.

“Yeah, umm”—she sounded like she was grinning—“you’re needed for some pictures.”

Aiden stared down at me, looking very much like he wanted to devour me whole, and when I licked my lips, he clenched his jaw until a muscle ticked deliciously. He pulled his hand from my ass, sliding it up my waist, skirting the side of my breast, stopping briefly to drag his thumb along the small cutout on my midriff.

“I meant to take that a little slower,” he said, speaking into the crown of my hair, dropping a kiss on the top of my head.

I blew out a hard breath. “I’m sure as hell not complaining.”

Aiden burst out laughing, his smile broad and happy, his teeth white and straight, and he wrapped me up in his arms again.

When I pulled away, my cheeks felt hot. “Did you mess up all my makeup?”

“You look perfect.”

With a skeptical lift of my eyebrows, I ran my fingers through my hair, then picked up my clutch where it had fallen onto the grass. I reapplied some ChapStick because not even on my sister's wedding day was I willing to wear lipstick.

I tucked my hair behind my ears and gave him a slight smile. "I'll find you after the ceremony."

He nodded. "I think I'm going to wait here and recite multiplication tables."

I glanced down, pursing my lips thoughtfully. "Probably a good idea."

When I rounded the corner, Lia was grinning like a loon.

"Shut up," I told her.

When I glanced over my shoulder, I saw him watching us. And the promise I saw in his eyes, I couldn't help but shiver.

"Ooooh, baby, Isabel's got a *boyfriend*," she sang. "It's about fricken time."

"I hate you."

With a happy sigh, she slid her arm around my waist. "No, you don't. Now come on, let's go get Molly married."





## ISABEL

Any attempt to save my makeup from Logan or Aiden or whatever man seemed destined to ruin it was a fool's errand.

Once I made my way down the aisle, clutching the small bouquet, it was the last dry moment my eyes experienced for the entirety of the twenty-minute ceremony.

Emmett, dressed in a tux to match Logan's, was pushing a stroller that we'd decorated in Molly and Noah's wedding colors. Strapped inside was Gabriel, wearing the cutest fricken baby tuxedo the world had ever seen, holding a small pillow that said, *Here comes my aunt*. At all of a few months old, he may have started my crying first.

Music cued up over the speakers, and I gave Noah an encouraging smile. The large man looked as nervous as I'd ever seen him, hands fidgeting in front of him while we waited for Molly and my brother to appear. I'd seen her all morning, witnessed her transformation to the bride he was about to see for the first time, so instead of watching the aisle, I watched Noah.

And I knew the moment she appeared because the scariest defensive end in the league, the one who grew up in the house behind ours, absolutely crumpled when he saw my sister walking toward him.

He held a hand over his mouth briefly, eyes shining with unshed tears. His friend and teammate, standing in the mirror position to mine, slapped him on the back and whispered

something to Noah that had him dropping his hand, straightening so that he could watch Molly. A tear slid down the side of his cheek when he smiled at her.

Behind me was joint sniffing from the twins, and in the front row, Paige cried without even attempting to stop the flow of tears down her face as Logan walked Molly down the aisle. When they reached the front—as planned—Paige came from her seat and took her place on the other side of Molly, anchoring her arm around my sister’s waist.

Logan kissed Molly’s cheek and whispered something that made her emit a watery sob. With a brief glance up at the sky, I blinked rapidly. Claire tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a small tissue. I smiled, gently blotting underneath my eyes.

After a short greeting, the minister took his place with a smile, gesturing for Noah to get Molly. “And who gives this woman to be married today?”

Paige and Logan shared a meaningful look. “We do,” they said in unison.

Noah and Logan exchanged a small, secret handshake that had the Wolves’ teammates in the crowd chuckling audibly. And then my sister took Noah’s hand, pausing so he could say something quietly, only audible to her, that had her looking up at him with so much love, the waterworks almost started anew.

It was difficult to stand still, especially in those freaking heels, but once I got Molly’s flowers from her, that was kind of my job. Only once—and I was very proud of myself—did I look out into the rows of seats.

Aiden’s gaze was on me, and when our eyes locked, he sent me a subdued smile that had my palms going a little sweaty.

What a first date.

Bawling my eyes out in front of a hundred people, finally letting go of the emotional weight that had been pushing on my shoulders, and wearing the type of dress that made any

type of undergarment outside of a G-string completely impossible.

Even if I had pictured my first date with Aiden, I never would've pictured this. A hike maybe. Wandering around downtown. Something simple and easy, nothing overdone or fussy.

This was as fussy as I'd ever get. And still, he was here.

Spinning down the mental path of what it meant or what it signified was pointless. Which was why I directed my attention back to the minister, and to Molly and Noah.

I couldn't see my sister's face, but I could see Noah's, and the way he gazed down at her was enough to turn me into a giant pile of mush.

Molly took a deep breath when it was her turn to say vows.

"Today, surrounded by all the people who love us best, I say the words I do, but I am really promising that I will." He smiled, lifting one of her hands for a soft kiss. "I will take your hand and stand by your side in the good and the bad. I will be your guiding light in the darkness, your shoulder to lean on when life is hard. As your wife, I will be your navigator and your best friend. I promise to honor, cherish, and love you through all of life's adventures." Her voice wobbled. "Today, Noah Griffin, and every day for as long as I live, I will choose you as my husband."

Noah grinned down at her.

"Today, surrounded by all the people who love us best," he rumbled in that deep voice of his, "I say the words *I do*, but I am really promising that *I will*. I will take your hand and stand by your side in the good and the bad. I will be the one who supports your dreams more than any other. I will shelter you from whatever storms hit us. As your husband, I will be your partner and your best friend. I promise to honor, cherish, and love you through all of life's adventures. Today, Molly Ward, and every day for as long as I live, I will choose you as my wife."

Rings were exchanged, they were pronounced husband and wife, and when he wrapped her in his arms for a shockingly passionate kiss, a cheer of Super Bowl proportions rang through the gardens. Laughing along with my sisters as it did, I couldn't help but sweep my gaze over the people sitting in the chairs.

I recognized most of the faces, but not all. Out of all those faces, I didn't see the one I was seeking.

It was a strange realization to have amid such overflowing happiness that still ... Brooke hadn't come. Given the choice, extended with grace by someone who'd forgiven her, she'd stayed away.

Molly, I knew, would be fine. As her brand-new husband drew away from her, tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow, and escorted her down the carpet of lush emerald grass to the sound of cheers and whistles, I thought about all the different ways people moved on.

Maybe I held onto the past, held onto anger, or my reserve with men with white-knuckled hands because they were all something I could control, but Aiden showing up for me today was something I hadn't been in control of.

It was his way of moving on too, and I had to recognize the gesture, even if it hadn't come with any big speeches. Yet.

He couldn't have predicted how I'd react, but still, he showed up. Held his hand out to me, gave me a choice.

When I took the arm of Kareem, one of Noah's teammates, and we followed the happy couple down the aisle, I knew my choices would be unfolding in front of me all night.

I chose, as Aiden watched me with a steady, calm gaze, to set aside anything Brooke could've done—or not done—to this day. Like my brother said, it was—and always had been—her loss.

When Molly jumped into Noah's arms for another kiss, I felt lighter than I had in years. Happier.

The wedding planner hustled the wedding party back out to another garden for pictures, and when I glanced over my

shoulder to catch Aiden's eye, he winked.

That wink held me over the eternal length of time it took us to take pictures with the whole wedding party. If what I needed to do was screw a smile on my face for a billion clicks of her camera, then that was what I would do.

Hovering at the edge of the side garden where we stood, I saw a glimpse of his navy suit. The wedding coordinator was talking to the photographer, and Molly and Noah whispered quietly to each other, so I decided to sneak in his direction.

I nudged Lia with my elbow. Both of the twins turned.

"I'll be right there if they need me," I said, tilting my head to where I'd seen him.

"I will make sure to give plenty of warning before I come around the corner to get you," she answered seriously.

As I walked to Aiden, I flipped her my middle finger, which had her and Claire laughing.

He turned as I approached, no smile on his face but warm, warm eyes. It was terrifying how much I wanted to dive into him and never resurface.

Aiden opened his arms, and I walked straight into his embrace. His hands smoothed along my bare back, and I curled into him, burrowing deeper into his warmth.

This cannot be normal, I thought.

When his broad chest started shaking on a laugh, I realized I'd spoken out loud.

Pulling back so I could see his face, I gave him an embarrassed smile. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah," he murmured.

"I didn't even ask earlier, but who invited you?"

"Molly," he said. He drew a hand from my back and smoothed it down the line of my arm, like he simply wanted to touch as much of me as possible. "She stopped by my house."

"Really?"

Aiden nodded.

But then he seemed to struggle to find the words, and I couldn't help but smile. "Okay, the big broody silent man routine is only sexy in certain situations, and this isn't one of them, Hennessy."

In response, he tugged me closer with a subdued laugh, and I played with the edge of his lapel. He smelled so good, but gawd, I'd stop sniffing like a crazy person if he came only because of this.

"Didn't you have time to practice what to say?" I teased.

His eyes held mine, his fingers sweeping into the ends of my hair. "I'm not ... I'm not good at speeches like this. I never know the right thing to say, or how to explain what I'm feeling."

Underneath my hand where it laid on his jacket, his heart was pounding. It was unbelievable how much peace that fed into me, knowing he was just as nervous about this as I used to be around him.

Aiden and I, this entire time, had been sitting on an invisible teeter-totter, and eventually, we'd even out into perfect balance. I had a feeling it would be tonight.

His hand smoothed along my face, and I turned my head to kiss his palm.

"I knew Beth for years," he started quietly. I willed myself not to react as he spoke, simply kept my hand over his heart and my body pressed close to his. "We were friends. She moved in down the street, and the first day I met her, she brought us a plate of gingersnap cookies to introduce herself."

I gave him a tiny smile. "Anya's nickname."

He nodded. "And my favorite food. It felt ... impossible to explain that to you when you were in my bed," he said, voice rough with emotion.

My eyes closed for a moment. "Yeah, I can imagine."

"When we were eighteen, she announced to me that she was going to kiss me, and I would be her first boyfriend

because she saw how I looked at her, and she was sick of waiting.”

My smile widened. I had a feeling I would’ve liked Beth.

“She was my best friend,” Aiden continued. “And I knew everything about her. Loving her, falling in love with her, was something slow and steady and gradual, until suddenly it was ... everything.”

My eyes filled with tears as he spoke. “I’m so sorry you lost her,” I told him.

His own eyes were bright when he leaned down to kiss my forehead. “I am too.” When he pulled back, he studied my face. “She was my first love, and when I came here, I was not looking to replace that, Isabel.”

My fingers fidgeted restlessly, but I refused to look away. “I know.”

“You,” he continued, eyes locked in on my lips, “did not come into my life slow or steady.”

I smiled.

“Because of that,” Aiden whispered, “it became something I felt like I needed to resist. Something too intense for what I was capable of in this second chance of my life.”

Slowly, I nodded. All of that made sense. And my heart, it breathed just a bit easier understanding it.

We were on borrowed time in this conversation, and I didn’t know how much longer I’d have. My fingers trailed the edge of his jaw and followed the line of his lips.

“My sister must’ve given one hell of a pep talk,” I said lightly.

Those lips curled up at the edges, and Aiden kissed the tips of my fingers as he drew my hand away. “She just affirmed what I was a little slow in figuring out for myself.”

“What’s that?”

His eyes held mine, the intensity in them making my stomach weightless. All the butterflies from the first day I met

him whooshed back into place. “That if I could see you in my future, I needed to take my chance.”

The way he said it sounded so simple, so sure.

“She’s very smart,” I answered seriously.

Aiden wrapped his arms around me, and I did the same around his waist.

“Just making sure she didn’t make this a pity date,” I spoke into his chest. “Because if you are here because of my mommy issues, I will kick you in the balls.”

Aiden pulled back in laughter. With a grin still playing over his lips, he slid his hand over my cheek, weaving his fingers through my hair until he cupped the back of my head. He lowered his mouth, his lips brushing mine in tantalizing slowness when he spoke. “The very last thing I feel for you is pity.”

I might’ve said something like, *hey, that’s wonderful*. But it was all I could do to keep from falling as he deepened the kiss into something brimming with unspent tension. His lips moved harder, and my breathing picked up when his hands slid over my body. He and I, we’d need a week locked in a hotel room to feel like the need was sated. It was all I could do to keep my feet planted, my legs holding me up as his tongue swirled around mine.

And right now, all I wanted to do was wrap those around his waist.

One of the twins called my name from the other garden, and I whimpered. Aiden pressed a hard kiss against my lips, then another one.

“Family pictures and then I’m done.” I slid my hand under his jacket and sucked his bottom lip into my mouth. His fingers curled around my hip, and the hot press of him against my stomach had my toes curling up in my shoes.

“Okay.” He pulled back and smiled.

“Don’t smile at me like that,” I said, staring at his mouth.

“Why not?”



My hand curled into his belt, the heat of his hard stomach coming through the material of his shirt when I pulled him closer and spoke against his neck. “Because I’ll end up missing from my family pictures when I start ripping your clothes off.”

Aiden hissed out a slow breath. “You are dangerous, woman.”

I kissed the edge of his jaw. “Just wait.”

“Go,” he said in a rough voice.

Without a backward glance, I did. Because whoo, okay, I thought we were potent in that utility closet or in his bedroom. Apparently, we really found our stride at garden weddings.

Lia smirked as I approached. I gave her a look right back.

Jude was bouncing Gabriel in his arms, and I picked up his chubby hands and kissed each of them.

“How’s my boy?” I cooed. His big blue eyes and shock of dark hair had me grinning as did his gummy little squeals. Dropping a kiss onto his cheek, I laughed when he yanked on a chunk of my hair. “A little help, please.”

Jude carefully extricated Gabriel’s fist from my hair. “Savage little child we’ve got.”

“Then he fits right in,” Bauer interjected as he approached. He kissed Claire on the top of the head.

“Hi,” she said with a smile. “You were almost late to the wedding.”

He grinned. “I was exactly on time, thank you very much. Traffic was a little heavy coming down from Vancouver. I got to sit next to Isabel’s new boyfriend.” Bauer paused thoughtfully. “He’s huge and intimidating, and I find that I approve of him wholeheartedly on the basis that he could probably snap me in half.”

The twins laughed, Jude smiled, and Bauer held out his fist for me to tap.

“Nice work, Iz,” he said. “I think you finally found one who can keep up with you.”

The photographer called us over, and I was saved from having to respond. Jude and Bauer stood off to the side while the four girls gathered around the couple, and we were shifted around Logan, Paige, and Emmett.

I found myself tapping my foot in anticipation while the photographer worked.

Gabriel cried and squawked in Jude’s arms once the guys joined us, which made all of us laugh, but through all of it, I felt a push, an urgency to be by Aiden. The wedding planner pulled us out of the frame so she could set up some shots for Molly, Noah, Logan, and Paige.

Logan appeared next to me while the photographer’s assistant fixed the back of Molly’s dress. At first, he didn’t say anything, and we watched together in silence.

“Looks like we had a surprise guest after all,” he commented.

I smiled. “Looks like.”

He glanced over at me. “Do I need to pull him aside and have a talk with him?”

A hysterical laugh almost burst out of me. If my big brother—the most protective man I’d ever known—knew that my first date with my older-by-a-decade boss would (fingers friggin crossed) end up with me losing my virginity, he’d have a coronary.

“Not to warn him off,” Logan amended.

Turning slightly, I raised an eyebrow. “No?”

He wrapped an arm around me, and I let my head rest on his shoulder. “If you want this one, there’s a reason.”

That had my heart going all warm and gooey, and I tried to smother my pleased smile. “No *I can’t believe another one of you picked an athlete* sermon?”

“Nope.”

“Did Paige yell at you about that after you said it to Lia?”

“Yup.”

I laughed. “What would you tell him in your little talk then?”

Logan took a deep breath and tightened his grip on me for a moment before turning me gently so we faced each other. “For better or worse, you’re a lot like me, kid. You always have been.” He smiled. “We hold back until we don’t have a choice. Paige is the exact right person for me because she ripped through that reserve like a battering ram.”

I laughed.

His face went serious. “But you, Isabel, you are braver than I ever was at your age. I hope he knows that you choosing him means he’s getting one of the best gifts in the world because the way you love the people in your life ...” His voice trailed off. He cupped my face. “It’s a *privilege* to be one of them.”

My eyes burned hot, and the bridge of my nose tingled. “Thank you.”

Logan cleared his throat, dropping a kiss on my forehead. “Love you.”

“I love you too.” I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him like I hadn’t in a long time. Wasn’t that funny? When you saw someone all the time, it became so easy to forget how much you might need their hugs. And nothing, at that moment, felt more like a blessing to move forward than a hug from my brother.

Paige approached with a tiny smile on her face. “You can go,” she told me.

“Really?”

She nodded. “They’re done with the family pictures. You have about thirty more minutes before we’ll need you lined up for the reception.”

Instantly, I kicked off my shoes, only stopping to scoop them up by the strap. I clutched the hem of my dress and ran

across the grass to the sound of Paige's laughter.



## ISABEL

It didn't take me long to find him. I'd slowed to a fast walk, barefoot as I crossed the lobby of the hotel into the reception area. It was dimly lit, tall tables circling the perimeter of the room for guests to mingle and have a cocktail while they waited for the wedding party to arrive. Along the edges and in corners of the room were soft places to sit, some draped in white gauze, lending a magical atmosphere along with the hundreds of candles, the twinkle lights swooping down the ceiling.

Aiden stood toward the edge of the room talking to Luke Pierson, one of Logan's former teammates. Next to them, her arm curved around Luke's waist, was Allie Sutton-Pierson, the owner of the Wolves and one of Paige's best friends.

Allie said something that made the men laugh, and her face lit into a brilliant smile when she saw me. "Iz, you look gorgeous."

When I hugged her, I glanced quickly at Aiden. "Thank you. Did the girls come with you?"

Luke shook his head. "Faith and Lydia decided a weekend at Grandma's was a lot more fun than a wedding."

"How old are your kids?" Aiden asked. I slipped next to him, and my breath caught when he casually folded his hand through mine.

Allie noticed and gave me a pointed look. I had to bite down on my lip so as not to burst into laughter. None of these

people had ever seen me in a relationship, and you could freaking tell by their absolute lack of chill.

“Faith is sixteen, Lydia is almost eleven, and I have never felt older in my life than I do when I say that out loud,” Luke admitted.

Aiden smiled. “My daughter is seven, so I get it.”

It was hard to focus on what they were saying because I was standing next to Aiden, holding his hand and chatting with family friends like absolutely nothing was strange about that. My impatience to be alone with him must’ve shown because Allie gave me a tiny wink and then tapped her husband’s chest. “You know, my glass is empty. Buy me a drink?”

He smiled down at her. “Logan’s buying. Hell yeah, I’ll buy you a drink.”

They wandered off, and I let out a deep breath. “Did you get something at the bar?” I asked.

Glancing at me with warm, humor-lit eyes, he tilted his head toward a table. “It’s over there.”

Aiden pulled us away from the milling groups of people to a corner that held a white couch just big enough for two. His jacket was hanging over the arm, like he made sure to stake a claim to this slightly private spot. He slid into the corner and stretched one arm over the back of the couch. Instead of joining him right away, I took a moment to study him like that, lounging like a great big cat.

His long legs were slightly spread, and it was so easy to imagine if we were alone. Judging by the look in his green eyes, he was doing some imagining of his own.

My skin heated under his perusal, tightening underneath the silky fabric of my dress where I wanted his hands. If we were alone, I’d slide the dress up over my thighs and climb into his lap, smooth my hands up his chest, let those large, capable hands hold me in place, and his mouth find the parts of me that tasted best.

Aiden exhaled a low chuckle, shaking his head slightly. “You keep looking at me like that, and we’re going to cause

trouble.”

I blinked slowly, coming out of my stupor. Carefully, I took a seat next to him, tucking one leg underneath me so I could angle in his direction. His fingers slid over my shoulder blade and toyed with the ends of my hair.

Then he paused, reaching for a tall glass on a table next to the couch. My eyebrows bent in when he handed it to me.

“Screwdriver?” I asked. “I didn’t peg you as a mixed drink guy.”

Without a word, he motioned for me to take it. Our fingers brushed as I took the glass, and after I took a sip, his eyes warmed.

“Orange juice?” I asked, mouth widening into a massive smile.

Aiden retrieved the glass and took a drink. I licked my lips as he set the glass down. He leaned in, angling his back so he was blocking me from view, and he took my mouth in a voracious, toe-curling kiss that tasted like bright citrus and held the promise of sex. I was ready to *climb him* by the time he pulled away.

“Orange juice,” he said.

“I’ll make a note for work.” This level of happiness should be illegal.

“You’re okay with sitting in the corner with me at your sister’s wedding?” he asked.

With a glance around, I saw only a few people who I probably should have been making small talk with. Finally, I looked back at Aiden and studied his handsome face.

“Completely okay,” I told him. “I’d rather talk to you.”

Because I could, I touched my thumb to the bottom curve of his lip and swept it softly over the stubble that lined his jaw. I loved that he hadn’t shaved for this. It made him look a little dangerous, or maybe that was just how I felt being with him like this. The entire thing felt too big to be real, to be safe.



Could two people survive this level of sexual tension? Because I wasn't sure we could.

“What do you want to talk about?” he asked. He took my hand away from his mouth and kissed the tip of my thumb before settling it on his rock-hard thigh, fingers lightly entwined with mine.

So many questions I could ask. Some that could wait, a couple that couldn't.

I took a deep breath and asked the first thing on my mind. “Is this ... our first date?” I looked at him from under my lashes.

“You don't count changing the fuse?”

With a grin, I shook my head. “No.”

“Your night at my house?”

I gave him a dry look.

Aiden hummed. “What about our first training session?”

Slowly, I raised my eyebrows. I know I'd felt like the slightest touch from him that night would've made me explode, but I was never certain if he'd felt the same.

“Maybe,” I conceded.

“First dates are about figuring out the person you're with,” he said. “I learned a lot about you that night.”

“Like ...?” My voice trailed off.

His fingers dragged along my back, and I shivered. “You don't like to burden people with what's bothering you. Talking about it probably makes it worse.” At the accurate statement, I lifted my chin slightly. He kept going. “You couldn't decide whether you loved it or hated it that I'd been watching you that closely and you didn't realize it. Normally you've always got a bead on what's happening.”

“True,” I conceded. “What else?”

“When it surfaces, you harness your anger into something productive, something tangible, probably so that you don't

lash out at the people around you.”

I fidgeted on the couch, my breath coming a bit faster than he'd picked up all of that just from one night.

Aiden leaned in, our knees touching, and he angled his body so that we gained even more privacy. “And me saying this to you makes you want to run, just a little.”

Undaunted by the flutterings of panic that his spot-on assessment caused, I met his gaze head-on. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“No?” he asked in a rough, uneven voice. When I shook my head, he tipped his head down and slid his mouth over mine for a sweet, slow kiss. My tongue slipped to the seam of his lips, but he pulled back. “No more, woman. You’re killing me.”

My smile was full of satisfaction because he sounded like he was walking a razor edge of restraint.

“Second date then,” I said.

“Deal.” He sat back, allowing for a safer distance between us, given we were both feeling the need to mount each other in public.

“Where’s Anya tonight?” I asked.

“My parents’.” He pulled out his phone and showed me a picture that had me laughing out loud.

“Is that your dad?”

“It is.”

I took the phone from his hand and zoomed in on the image. Anya was standing on their kitchen counter behind a man who looked like Aiden might in about twenty years. They shared the same jaw, the same nose, the same build. And his dad, judging by the pleased smile on his face, was perfectly content to let his granddaughter put foam rollers into his slightly graying hair.

“May I?” I gestured to the picture. He nodded. I swiped through a few pictures, studied one of his mom. “Your parents

look young, considering..." I stopped, not sure how to say, *considering how old you are.*

Aiden laughed softly. "You calling me old?"

I bit my lip to smother my grin. "No."

He took the phone out of my hand and found a shot of his whole family, then let me study it. Just like my family, they held such a strong resemblance to each other but still managed to be a perfect balance of his parents.

"My parents were fifteen when they met," he said. "Sixteen when my mom got pregnant with me."

My eyes lifted in surprise. "Seriously?"

He nodded. "They got married before I turned two but knew they were still too young to add more kids into the mix." Aiden pointed at the faces on the picture. "Beckham came when I was ten, then Clark, Deacon was next." And when he gestured to a woman who looked younger than me, I found that I liked her broad smile and the way she looked like she was laughing. "And because she could be nothing other than the youngest and spoiled rotten, Eloise was the Hennessy family grand finale."

"Wow," I breathed. Before I could say anything else, a gentle tap on my shoulder pulled my attention from Aiden. It was the wedding coordinator.

"Sorry to interrupt, Isabel. We're going to announce the wedding party, and then you can come back. Since Molly and Noah just have a table for the two of them, I only need to steal you away for a few minutes."

Aiden smiled, joining me as I stood. The perfect gentleman on an unconventional first date.

And that continued, once I was able to join him at the table we were sharing with my sisters and their men. He kept a hand curled around my thigh under the table, engaging in pleasant conversation with everyone as we ate. Occasionally, he'd lean in and ask me something random, switching his hand from resting on my thigh, to stretching out behind my back along my chair.

“Favorite movie?”

I hummed. “I rarely watch them, so it’s hard to pick.”

“Really?” he said, clearly surprised.

“But,” I amended, “I love a good sports documentary.”

“Me too.” He leaned in for a sweet kiss.

It was so easy to forget other people were at the table when he looked at me that way. I didn’t really care if my sisters were watching with unabashed interest because Lord knows I’d had to watch my fair share of mooning over the last couple of years.

I slid my hand over his, relishing the easy affection. “The questions Anya asked me,” I started. He smiled sadly but didn’t interrupt. “What were those about?”

His chest expanded on a deep breath. Then he told me the story, and I didn’t even attempt to stop the tear that slid down my cheek. He brushed it away. “It was something she looked to for a long time as ... truth, I guess. That if anyone would know, it would be Beth.”

“And you?” I asked carefully.

Aiden shook his head. “It was, I don’t know how to say it right. I wasn’t planning on using it as a checklist, if that’s what you’re asking, mainly because I had no intention of finding someone.” He curled his fingers around my thigh, smoothing it up and down. He gave me a wry smile. “But it probably didn’t help that you were the exact opposite of what she told Anya.”

I smiled. “Probably not.”

He studied me so intently.

“What?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

The thing I loved was that I could wait to ask him more because we had the time, not because I feared the reaction.

People shifted around us, moving to the dance floor as he and I talked.

He preferred winter over summer and broke his leg when he was twelve.

He didn't drink often, and only one beer when he did.

When he went to college, his sister made him take a stuffed animal so he didn't get lonely, and he kept it on his bed his entire freshman year, no matter how much his roommates teased him.

He asked me why I decided not to go to college and how it was being raised by my brother.

When the cake was cut and passed around, he took a piece of coconut, and I chose the strawberry, which we shared. When he held his fork out to me for a bite of his cake, I absently wondered if I'd ever get sick of talking to him. Of hearing what he had to say.

His eyes darkened when I licked at a speck of frosting at the edge of my lip.

When our plates were cleaned of cake, I sat back in my seat and surveyed him carefully. "Not a bad date, Hennessy."

At the use of his last name, he quirked an eyebrow. "We're back there."

"Well," I drawled, uncrossing my leg so that I could turn fully to face him, "I think you still owe me a little bit."

"Do you?"

His dry tone had me smiling. "You didn't have to buy me dinner," I told him. "Or dessert."

He hummed, caging me in by setting an arm on the table, the other stretched along the back of my chair. "How would you normally end a date like this?"

There was no way for me to answer that without giving myself away completely. I had no idea where the night would lead, but I knew where I wanted it to. "I don't think I've ever had a date like this," I told him with complete honesty.

Based on the look in his eyes, he saw the truth of my answer.

“Me neither.”

It knocked the breath from my lungs when he said it, and I didn't realize how badly I craved some sort of sign that this intensity wasn't one-sided, wasn't confined just to my inexperience.

Because I couldn't not, I leaned forward, cupping the side of his face in my hand, and I slid my lips over his in a soft kiss.

We left the kiss there, pulling back at the same time, content not to deepen it further.

Aiden turned, placing a kiss in the center of my palm. “Dance with me?” he asked.

Slowly, I nodded, and he stood, a firm hold on my hand as he led us to the dance floor crowded with people. We stood between a former defensive player of the year and his wife, and an executive from Molly's job at Amazon, and not once did his attention waver.

It didn't matter who surrounded us, I realized.

It didn't matter what he may have experienced in his past, or what I had yet to experience in my future. This was about us. Aiden gathered our joined hands against his chest, over his steadily beating heart, and his other arm curled low around my waist as he pulled me into his body. My free hand slid around his back, and I laid my head on his chest as we swayed.

His fingers strayed slowly, first to the edge of my dress where it wrapped around my body, but he dipped beneath the fabric to strum featherlight touches along the curve of my hip. With a restless exhale, I shifted closer, and he tightened his hand around mine.

The beat of the song was slow and sweet, but in his arms, it became something else entirely. It was foreplay.

All of it had been.

For days and weeks.

My fingers on his back curled, nails digging slightly into the hard, shifting muscles on his back and I lost the ability to

breathe properly when I closed my eyes and imagined how they'd feel when he moved over me. He'd be relentless. He'd be brutal if I begged it of him.

Aiden's chest expanded on a deep inhale, his nose burying into my hair. When he made a restless shift of his own, I felt how much he wanted me. The noise that started in my throat was practically a purr. And he heard it.

"We either need to stop dancing or get the hell out of here," he rasped in my ear.

Tilting my head up so I could lock gazes with him, I licked my lips before speaking. His nostrils flared when I did. "What will you do to me if I choose option two?"

Somehow, he managed to tighten his grip on me, bring me even closer to him so that he could rest his lips against the shell of my ear. "I am going to do everything," he growled. "And trust me, my imagination has come up with a lot since you decided to climb into my bathtub without me."

I was panting when I stepped back, my hands shaking. At first, his face smoothed like he thought I might deny him.

"You have ten minutes to get a room," I told him in a remarkably even voice. "I will meet you by the elevator."

It took six minutes for me to hug and kiss Molly and Noah, who were swamped by people, and to inform the twins that I would be exiting the party early. No one argued with me, and Lia gave me an obnoxious high five.

I marched—shoes and clutch in hand—to the elevator, where I saw him waiting for me.

Calmly, he hit the button and slipped his hands into his pants pockets. I blew out a slow breath while the numbers descended.

In the quiet between us, I wondered a dozen things about how it would be between us, what waited when we opened the hotel room door to complete privacy.

But one thing I didn't wonder was whether I'd been stupid to wait for someone who made me feel like this. There wasn't

an ounce of hesitation anywhere inside me. The doors opened, and we walked in side by side, silent as the grave.

Aiden pushed the button for the correct floor, and as soon as the doors closed, as soon as we were alone, he exploded into action.

Before I could breathe, I was against the wall, his mouth hard and demanding over mine, his hands ruthless as he strained the seams of my dress by pushing his grip underneath to fill his palms with my flesh.

His tongue was hot and slick, and I whimpered when it swept around mine in a tantalizing circle. My arms were around his neck so tightly that when he straightened, I could hardly find purchase on the floor. But I didn't need it. He wrenched my hip up and rolled himself between my legs.

This kiss was a dark prelude that we'd danced around the entire time we knew each other.

It was dirty, and everything I wanted, everything I'd dreamed of from him. He devoured my mouth, tilting his head to deepen it further, and I stole the breath from his lungs because I'd not be the one to pull away.

I'd live there, in that kiss, if he let me.

His body shook from the force of everything he was pouring into our embrace. If we stayed on that elevator much longer, I swear, I would've given it up to him right there.

We arrived at our floor, an inconspicuous ding heralding the gentle stop of the car, and Aiden pulled back, breathing hard, lips red from our kiss.

"Fucking finally," he said, tugging on my hand as I exhaled a laugh.

We rushed down the hall, and when he found the right door, he almost dropped the key in his haste to unlock the door.

Behind him, I couldn't help myself. I pressed my front to his back and started unfastening his belt. A hand shot out,



bracing against the doorframe, and he muttered another foul curse word when I got the buckle undone.

“I’m going to tell you something before we walk in that room,” I whispered against his heaving back. The muscles shifted against my forehead when he lifted his head. My nimble fingers pulled the leather belt from the metal buckle. “For reasons which we can discuss later, I need you to know that I’ve never done this before.” When his whole frame, big and broad, went still as a statue, I smiled. It should have made me feel at a disadvantage that I couldn’t see his face, but I’d never felt more powerful. Never felt so in control of what I wanted.

We were still in the hallway, and I tugged his shirt out of his loosened waistband and slid my hands over the ridges of his abdomen, which was all scalding skin and heavy muscle. When I tried to push my hand lower, Aiden growled my name. I stopped.

“You’re a ...you’ve never—”

He couldn’t say it.

“Never,” I affirmed.

Aiden spun, gripping my face in his hands, eyes burning down at me. “Why?”

I gave him a coy smile, reaching behind his back to finish pushing the key card into the door. “I’ve never wanted anyone like I want you. No one’s hands or mouth,” I whispered, leaning up on my tiptoes to suck his bottom lip into my mouth, “and wasting time with someone who doesn’t know how to handle me has never been appealing.” I kissed down the strong column of his neck. “But I think you know exactly what to do.”

With a tortured groan, he slanted his mouth over mine, fisting his hand into my hair. Our tongues dueled, and I felt him grapple with the doorknob. I exhaled a laugh when he still couldn’t get it open.

Down the hall, we heard the ding of the elevator, and he tore his mouth from mine to face the entrance to the room

again.

The door opened with a click, and he shoved it open so violently that it banged off the wall. Aiden turned, and the look in his eye had me breathless with anticipation, because I knew he was about to absolutely destroy whatever fantasy I'd had of him in the very best way. He reached forward, gathering a fistful of my dress, and tugged me forward as he walked backward into the room.

“You’ll pay for that,” he said, glancing down briefly at his opened belt.

“Promise?”

The door slammed shut behind me, and before he could move, I reached up behind my neck and unhooked the strap holding my dress up. Before it could fall, he stepped up to me, gripping the back of my neck.

“Nothing else comes off unless I do it,” he whispered against my lips.

My eyelids fluttered shut. I wanted to say something cheeky like, *yes, boss*, or *maybe I’ll do it myself*. But no words came. I’d lost the ability.

At my expression, he hissed in a breath through clenched teeth. “On the bed,” he commanded.

I walked into the room, heart thrashing and legs quaking as he locked the door.



## AIDEN

The click of the lock may as well have been a gunshot going off in the room. Red-hot tension coursed through my veins, angry at being pent-up for so long. Before I went to her, I pressed my forehead against the cool metal of the hotel door and attempted to steady my hands. They didn't tremble because I was nervous, but I did feel a slight tremor of apprehension at my ability to keep myself in check.

Maybe it was the way I'd wanted her, or how long I'd resisted something that felt irresistible.

Maybe it was that I'd gone so long without this type of desire—wild and untamed. I wasn't sure I'd ever felt it, and I needed this moment of pause to ensure that I wouldn't unleash a beast onto Isabel in my rib-crushing need to slake what she'd stirred in me.

Very little surprised me anymore.

The fact that she was a virgin almost made me fall to my knees in that sedately decorated hallway. Holding someone's past against them was the sort of hypocrisy that I hated, but the fact that hers brought her to me untouched by any other man humbled me enough that I managed to calmly unbutton my shirt as I turned to where she waited for me. The other option was ripping it open in my haste to touch her, taste her, lose myself in her.

I'd still do all those things.

Isabel sat on the foot of the bed, hands braced behind her, long legs crossed demurely.

The way she held my eyes, the way hers burned as she watched me approach, it was like no image of any virgin I could've conjured.

Again, I was reminded of the black panther I'd seen at the zoo. I might've held a bit more experience than her, but she was looking at me like I was her next meal. And as soon as the thought crossed my mind, her eyes tracked down the front of my chest, and she licked her bottom lip.

Instead of prowling over her and pinning her hands over her head onto the soft mattress, I stripped off my shirt and let it fall in a heap on the floor.

She blew out a slow breath, and I held out my hand for her to stand. Not once did she blink shyly away, did her gaze waver, not a word spoken between us when she smoothed the flat of her hand up over my chest. My nostrils flared at her touch, the wildfire it set off in my blood. It had been so long, and I wanted her so viscerally.

It dawned on me as I drew my fingertips down the graceful line of her neck and carefully tugged her dress forward, that she and I were the same, and that was why I never expected her, never anticipated finding a well of feeling like this. Because I'd never, not in my entire life, met a woman who was my exact counterpoint.

Some people found a soul mate in the one who filled in the gaps and closed in their pieces with one of their own. But she and I, we weren't like that. Isabel and I were the same in the heat that ran through us, and instead of tempering the flames, we burned that much brighter together.

The crisscrossing straps of her dress fell with a whisper, and I sucked in a breath as she was bared to me. Isabel needed no guidance from me as she tugged down the small hidden zipper on the side of her dress, and it slid quietly off her hips until she stood before me in nothing but a tiny scrap of fabric.

I drew the tip of my finger down the front of her throat, whisper-light between her breasts until my hand spanned her waist. She was panting just from that single touch.

“So beautiful,” I murmured.

With the grace of a goddess, she sat back on the bed and quirked an eyebrow. “Your turn.”

I shucked my pants off, and she rolled her lips between her teeth. Her body laid out like that, it was no sacrifice to fall to my knees in front of her. I filled my hands with her flesh and tugged her hips against my stomach, Isabel clutched my head to her as I used my lips and tongue and teeth until she threw her head back with a loud gasp. With a hand on her chest, I pushed gently until she laid back on the bed, and I crawled up and over her, licking a line over her hip bones, nibbling the curve of her ribs.

When I placed a sucking kiss just underneath her belly button, her skin shook with anticipation.

“Oh, please,” she whispered.

“You’ve waited this long,” I murmured against the sleek muscle on her thigh. “You can be patient a little bit longer.”

Her head thrashed on the bed at the use of my fingers, back arching in a delicious curve. “I can’t.”

“Hands over your head,” I instructed. “If you can manage this without laying a hand on me, I’ll give you what you want.”

Instantly, she complied, and I felt the snarling beast inside me shake dangerously.

And then I used my mouth, her legs snapped tight over my shoulders, but she kept her hands fisted in the comforter. When she finally broke, a low moan wracked her frame. Fists planted on either side of her, I slid up the length of her body until I covered her completely. My hand curled over hers where it stayed on the bed as we kissed. As she worked through the aftershocks of what I’d done with fierce, deep kisses, angling her head to take more and more and more from me.

Despite her inexperience, Isabel would take everything from me that I’d give her, and already, I knew I’d serve myself up on a platter just to keep her like this for the rest of my life.

“I don’t know what I did to deserve this,” I whispered against her mouth, and her eyelids fluttered open. One of her hands cupped the side of my face while I pulled one of her thighs close to my side. “To deserve you.”

“It’s not about deserving, Aiden.” She kissed me. “It’s not about being worthy or perfect. It’s about finding the right person and choosing them.”

Isabel moved under me impatiently, but I kissed her again, gathering her body to mine until there was no space, no room for a single breath between us.

“I am falling in love with you,” I told her because I couldn’t not tell her. “And I choose you, every stubborn,” I pushed forward, and she gasped, “frustrating,” forward, “sexy,” more, “smart inch of you,” with a final snap, I let my forehead rest on hers as I tried to catch my breath.

Isabel’s breath escaped in a sob. Then she gripped my hips, fingernails digging into my skin.

“Are you okay?”

She grinned, looking more than a little drunk. “Yes. And just remember who fell in love with who first.”

I exhaled a laugh, pulling at her lips with a kiss. It slid into something deeper, something that had her shifting, tugging at my back. But I held there, allowing both of us to settle into the feeling.

“More, please,” she begged.

“I’m just getting started,” I whispered against her mouth.

As I moved, slowly at first, I wanted to make sure I wasn’t hurting her. Then she bit down on my earlobe, sucking it into her mouth, and the tether on my control snapped in a ragged, messy burst.

There was no thought of finesse or rhythm, no thought of anything other than our mutual pleasure.

Mine started before hers, and I fought to stay with her until the end, even as my chest heaved, my back arched helplessly when heat curled through my veins.

I smothered the sounds coming from my mouth into the curve of her sweat-shiny neck, and when she snapped her thighs against my hips, back curving, my name on her lips, we toppled over the edge together.

I slumped over her. The strength of a hundred men couldn't haven't moved me for how lethargic I felt.

She kissed me softly, running her hands over my back and up into my hair. I rolled to my side, keeping her anchored against me, our legs intertwined as we luxuriated in the taste of each other, the sweet sipping of her mouth against mine.

"I knew you'd wreck me." She sighed happily. I kissed along her jaw, which she tipped so I could reach more of her skin.

"Did you?"

Isabel's fingers traced the features on my face as she nodded. "The day I met you, I think I knew."

The lithe line of her back was damp with sweat, and I touched as much of her as I could manage with long sweeps of my palm. "You've always been smarter than me about this."

She laughed. "Not smarter," she corrected. "More aware, maybe."

I pushed some of her mussed hair out of her face. "If I'd had any idea, I probably never would've walked in the door."

Just like I hoped she would, Isabel smiled at my honesty. "I know."

Even though we were fully enmeshed, as many body parts wound together as humanly possible, I curled myself around her and breathed her in. It was cheesy and poetic, the types of thoughts I was never prone to, but Isabel smelled like the peace that I'd been seeking, that I thought she wasn't capable of bringing. Ironic, given that she blew my life up, resetting it into something that would only work with her presence inside of it.

"I'm glad you did, though," she whispered. "This is where I'm meant to be."



I closed my eyes and held her against me. It was easy to imagine that every step of my life had led to this moment. Not just the moment, but to her.

“Me too,” I told her.

Eventually, we pulled the blankets up over us, whispering to each other as the night wore on. I decided, after sweet, gentle touches for the entire time, we were done being in bed.

“You owe me a bath,” I told her.

Her smile was wide and happy. “Do I?”

I nuzzled into her neck and decided she smelled best right there. “Yeah. Do you have any idea of how hard it was knowing you were in there?”

Her hand slid down between my legs, and I breathed out a pained laugh. “Tell me.”

Pecking a hard kiss against her lips, I extracted her hand and got out of bed. “I’ll tell you in there.”

Once we were under the water, the deep soaker tub filled with a lather of clean-smelling bubbles, Isabel turned and faced me, folding her long legs around my back so she was situated in my lap. I smoothed her wet hair off her face.

“This is what I pictured,” I told her.

She swept some bubbles off my shoulder. “Yeah?”

My hand moved under the water, and she gave me a mock-glare when I merely traced circles just to the side of her chest. “Maybe I pictured something a little more X-rated.”

“I think I was too frustrated with you to picture anything dirty,” she said.

I swallowed, choosing my words carefully. Before I spoke, I pressed my palm against the skin over her heart, nothing sexual in the touch, despite the warm weight of her that I was now intimately familiar with. “I’m so sorry I kept pulling away. I didn’t know how”—I paused with a slight shake of my head—“how to make peace with you. With what you made me feel,” I amended.

Isabel wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me, and we sat like that for a quiet minute, the water lapping gently at our skin.

“Moving on isn’t easy,” she said, pressing a soft kiss to my shoulder, then setting her chin there.

“It’s not.”

She pulled back, and her face was so open, so sweet, I had to kiss her again. But when I pulled away, intent on deepening it, she laid a gentle finger on my mouth.

“I think you and I held onto the things that hurt us because it seemed ... easier, somehow.” She gave me a soft smile. “Yours was your grief, the thing you lost. And mine was”—she screwed up her lips—“sort of the same. I lost something too, but gained something really great in return. But I know I kept a tight rein on the things I could control so that I’d never feel that way again.”

I nodded. “No one can hurt you again if you don’t let them in.” My heart pinched at the understanding I saw in her midnight eyes. For so long and for so many reasons, I’d written her off as wrong, but she was exactly right.

“You have the power to hurt me, Aiden Hennessy,” she admitted. Isabel slid a hand over my cheek. “And I’m trusting you not to.”

My arms curled around her back, and I sighed contentedly at the strength in our embrace.

When she finally pulled away, her eyes looked a little red, but I knew better than to comment on it.

“You know what you owe me?” she said.

“Hmm?”

She leaned in, whispering some of the X-rated things I’d imagined when she’d been in my own tub, and by the time we left the bathroom, wrapped in plush towels and skin wrinkled, I’d delivered every single one.



## ISABEL

“I don’t believe you.”

I set my chin on his chest the next morning before the sun had risen in the sky and grinned happily. “It’s true.”

“You’ve never tried sushi?”

With a shake of my head, I let my fingers walk up his abdomen. “Nothing could sound worse to me than slimy uncooked fish.”

“That is a crime,” he muttered, snatching up my fingers to kiss the tips.

“Your turn.”

He sighed. “I’ve never baked a cake.”

“I’ve never baked one *well*,” I said. “Add it to the list.”

Aiden’s hand swept over my lower back. “What else do we have?”

We’d spent the last hour trying to figure out firsts we could experience together, Aiden’s attempt at trying to wrap his mind around the fact that I’d never slept with anyone before him. In his mind, he owed me a few of those, and the idea of it made me so warm and melty inside that I was not arguing. I’d just experienced the most perfect night of my entire life, even if I would limp out of this hotel, wearing my bridesmaid dress from the night before.

“Never ran a marathon,” I started. “Never successfully baked a cake. We’ve never worn roller skates. And we’ve

never slept out under the stars.”

His face took on a thoughtful expression. “I probably shouldn’t admit this one.”

“Tell me.”

Aiden’s fingers slid through my hair, and I closed my eyes at the feel of it, soaking in the affection like a dried-out sponge. It felt so good that I almost missed what he said.

“I’ve never bought flowers for someone.”

My eyes popped open. “Really?”

He shook his head. “Flowers made Beth sneeze like crazy, so I never got her any.”

It was the first he’d mentioned her since we left the reception, and I spread my hand out over his chest, laying a soft kiss onto his skin. “What was she like?”

Aiden closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Funny. She was always smiling. It was the first thing I noticed about her. Smart. Kind. She did everything easily, it seemed like.”

It wasn’t the time to talk, just to listen.

He wedged a hand under his head and stared down at me. “And she made the best gingersnaps in the world.”

I smiled. “Does Anya talk about her a lot?”

“Not as much since we’ve moved here. I think being in our own house has made a big difference. Being around family. In California, it was just the three of us,” he said. “I think ... I think she felt the loss of her more there.”

Resting my cheek on his chest, I thought about her bright blue eyes, her gap-toothed smile, and found myself smiling too.

He felt it. “What?”

“Just thinking about Anya. She’s a great kid, Aiden.”

There was a brief pause before he spoke again. “You ready to take that on? When we tell her, I mean.”

We'd decided earlier in our conversation to hold off on announcing anything to her just yet. Gain our footing as a couple first. But this was a question I could answer easily.

I rolled up onto my side and scooted higher up on the bed so that I could kiss him. There was no time to deepen it because we both needed to leave soon—him to pick up Anya and me to have a family brunch at Logan and Paige's while Molly and Noah opened some presents before they left on their mini-honeymoon.

"I already love Anya," I told him. "I don't fall out of trees for just anyone, you know."

He laughed. "I hope not."

"That's the thing about my family," I said. Setting my head in my hand, I snuggled up next to him again. "Blood ties don't mean anything in the end, not when it comes down to it. Logan and Paige, my sisters, Emmett ... they are my family because we fight for each other every single day. It was us against the world." I smiled. "We've got a few more bodies now, Noah, Jude, Bauer, and little Gabriel. You and Anya," I said quietly. "She may not know it yet, but she just gained a whole lot of people in her corner."

Aiden tugged me closer for a kiss. "I like the sound of that," he murmured.

I found myself tearing up as he folded me into his arms again. "I do too." I sniffed quietly, but he heard me.

"What is it?"

I shook my head, swiping at my face. "Anytime something big happened to me, I never really understood why. Even if I knew it was coming, even if I hated how I felt, I didn't realize each piece had to happen exactly the way it did"—I pulled my head back so I could see his face—"so I could be here with you. Even the hard things."

Aiden slid his thumb across my cheek.

We didn't have the time for it. I wasn't even sure that physically I could handle more, but he moved over me, gently rocking between my legs, sharing my breath, stealing my

heart, and making me fall even more in love with him than I already was.

In my ear, he whispered all sorts of things that pushed me higher and higher, even as he kept his movements slow and steady. It was the relaxed speed and the inexorable strength of his reserve that finally broke me open in a warm wave.

It wasn't fireworks and explosions, but something even better.

It was forever.

We dressed quietly. He hooked up the back of my dress, and I buttoned his shirt, stretching on my toes to kiss the edge of his jaw when I was done. And because I could, I slid his jacket over my bridesmaid dress. We entered the elevator hand in hand, trading smiles in the shining reflection on the door as we rode down to the lobby.

At my car, Aiden gave me a deep kiss goodbye, and it took us a few minutes to separate.

"I'll call you later," he told me. "Maybe we can figure out something tomorrow if one of my brothers can help with Anya."

I nodded. "I guess we'll have to be careful at work too, huh?"

He hummed, sliding my hair off my shoulder to drop a kiss onto my neck. "Oh, no. The first day we work together, the second everyone is gone, I have a whole other first to take care of in my office."

My smile was massive. "What's that?"

Aiden lifted his head and pinned me with those green eyes. "You on my desk."

"Okay," I answered breathlessly. "Can we work together tomorrow maybe?"

"Maybe we can both accidentally show up an hour early."

"I *love* showing up to work an hour early."

His laughter was a happy booming sound, and if I was being honest, I felt a little drugged at the sound of it. We finally said goodbye, and I hurried to my apartment to whip on some clean clothes and slick my hair back into a ponytail. Snatching a Pop-Tarts from my pantry cabinet, I was back in the car and on my way to Logan and Paige's less than fifteen minutes later.

And I knew I was in bad shape when the newlyweds beat me there.

When I walked into the kitchen, the entire family went dead silent.

My face must've been bright red. "Morning."

Molly was grinning like a lunatic. Lia tried to hide her smile behind her coffee. Claire, on the couch with Gabriel, rolled her lips between her teeth.

Paige approached, wearing a deceptively sweet smile on her face, and handed me a massive mug. "Need some coffee, sweetcheeks? You must be tired."

Logan mumbled something from the table, and Emmett held out his hand. My brother dug into his wallet and handed him a dollar.

I took the mug. "I slept *just fine*, thank you."

Lia snorted.

"Are we opening presents or what?" I asked.

Molly set a box aside. "We already started."

"Aiden didn't want to come over with you?" Paige asked, completely undeterred.

I took a slow sip of the coffee and held her eyes.

"He wasn't hungry?"

"Paige," Logan said in a warning tone.

She blinked innocently. "Yes, husband?"

He gave her a look. "If she doesn't want to talk about it, she doesn't have to."



“You can tell me later,” she whispered.

Emmett shook his head. “This family is crazy. I’m going outside.”

“Coming with you, dude.” Bauer stood from the couch with kisses to Gabriel’s cheek and Claire’s upturned mouth. “Jude, you wanted to show me that thing?”

The big Brit stood with a nod, snagging a soccer ball from the floor. “Be right out.” He kissed Lia.

“Geez,” I muttered. “I sure know how to clear a room.”

“It’s probably all the just-had-sex pheromones,” Lia added helpfully.

“That’s it!” Logan shouted. “I’m outta here.”

My brother stalked out of the house, my sisters’ laughter following him as he tugged open the slider.

Noah grimaced at the giant pile of unwrapped boxes, then gave Paige and Lia a look. “Can you please stop while I have to be in here?”

Paige patted his cheek. “For my favorite son-in-law? Of course.”

“*Now* you stop?” I asked.

Paige sent me a wink, then gestured to Molly and Noah. “Proceed.”

Molly started unwrapping a small box but gave me a warm smile. “We’re just happy for you.”

“I know,” I told her. I took a seat on the couch by Claire and held my arms out for the baby. She handed him over with a tiny smile. His warm body cuddled close, I inhaled the top of his head. “Gawd, we should bottle this smell. We’d make a fortune.”

I held my nephew away from me, laughing when he gave me a coy little smile.

Claire nudged me with her foot. “How was it?” she whispered.

I blew gently in Gabriel's face, grinning when his eyes widened, his gummy mouth opening in happy surprise. "The wedding was great," I answered. "Which you know, because you were there."

She rolled her eyes at my evasion.

"What is that?" Noah asked.

Molly studied something in her hand, but I couldn't make out what it was. "It's a ring, but I can't tell what the design is."

"Is there a card?" Paige asked.

Noah snatched up a small white envelope and ripped it open, tugging out a card. His gaze darted to Molly. "I think you should read this one."

Molly took the card, and her eyes widened. She handed the ring to Noah, then looked at each one of us.

She let out a deep breath and started reading.

"In Spain, you can find orange blossom trees everywhere you look. It's why they're the flower most traditionally used in weddings here. For Spaniards, or those of us who have made this place home, the orange blossom represents joy and happiness, especially for a newly married couple." She paused, and Noah moved his chair closer so he could wrap an arm around her shoulder. "This ring was given to me by my husband's mother on the day we got married, and I asked her blessing to send it to you. I've found happiness in this path of my life, and I hope you have too, Molly. Thank you for your invitation. I know I didn't deserve it. Beyond my wish that you experience the same joy that this flower represents, I think the best gift I can give you is to let you and your sisters live on the path that you've created since I left."

The room went silent, and I snuggled my face into Gabriel's downy soft hair. I wasn't sure how I felt, but I couldn't help but think about what I'd said to Aiden after hearing Brooke's words. *It's not about deserving, about who's perfect or worthy. It's about finding the right person and choosing them.*

I looked around at my family and smiled.

“How do we feel about this?” Paige asked carefully.

“We?” Claire said with a smile.

“Yeah.” Paige gestured vaguely. “You know, the collective we. You. Whatever.”

Molly took the ring back from Noah and studied it. “It’s pretty. I think I’m just finding it a little funny that we kept holding our breath to see if she’d come, but her answer was sitting right here in a pile of presents for probably the last two weeks.”

Lia sighed. “Spain, huh? With a husband?”

“I guess.” Molly studied the note again, then handed it across the table to her.

Claire held her hand out, and Gabriel grabbed it. “I think it’s a good sign that she’s aware enough to know that her presence, even if it was invited, might not be the healthiest thing for all of us. Maybe she’s growing up,” she said with a rueful smile.

I handed Gabriel back to Claire when he reached for her, and then blinked up when I realized everyone in the room was staring at me.

“What?”

“Feel like punching something?” Paige asked.

I took a deep breath, brows lowered. “No, not really.”

Molly smiled.

My fingers picked at the hem of my shirt. “Just seeing the big picture, I guess. We’re all on the paths we were supposed to be on.” I shrugged. “It’s hard to stay angry with her if that’s the case.”

Molly traded a look with Lia, and Lia traded a look with Claire. Paige’s smile curled up slowly.

“Oh my gosh, *what?*” I asked.

“There’s only one reason you’d be so chill right now,” Lia said. “You totally got laid last night.”

Noah threw up his hands and walked outside.

I met her gaze with a lifted eyebrow. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

My sisters dissolved into laughter.

Paige held my eyes. “How many pieces of cake did you have last night, Iz?”

Slowly, I held up three fingers.

Paige grinned, and I hid my smile behind my coffee again. Maybe someday I’d share details, but for now, they were all mine.



## ISABEL

“Mine is still crooked.”

Aiden tilted his head to the side. “It’s not ...”

I gave him a look.

“Okay, yes, your cake is crooked.” He knocked a kiss on my cheek as he moved his perfectly level cake next to it. “It’s a little impressive how bad at this you are.”

“Thanks,” I answered dryly.

He swatted my butt. “You still successfully baked a cake.”

I eyed the baked good in question. “I don’t have to decorate it, do I?”

Aiden came up behind me, big hands curling around my hips. “Yes.”

He couldn’t see my face, but I was glaring.

“We could make it double duty,” he suggested.

“In what way?”

His head dropped, and he spoke against the back of my neck. “First time licking frosting off someone’s body.”

“Sold.” I whirled, gripping his T-shirt in my hands so I could tug his head down for a kiss.

And that was the way of it, the way of us, for a couple of weeks after Molly’s wedding. Because of Anya, we had short windows of time planned in advance so that we could achieve a few firsts together. Only one of those, she’d joined us, not

realizing that he and I were considering it a date because he only touched me when she was in another room.

Logan invited us to a Wolves game, and we watched from the front row, just behind the Wolves' bench. Anya spent most of it, staring wide-eyed at the players and staff. Twice, he'd snuck a kiss, but that was it.

Roller skating had ended in him falling three times because he couldn't keep up with me.

Also, I'd worn short shorts that he said were "categorically unfair" when he was supposed to be keeping his balance.

His family knew we were dating, but I hadn't talked to any of them since we started, mainly because we wanted Anya to be involved whenever I went to his parents' house the first time.

That changed just beyond the two-week mark.

I sat behind the front desk the day after we baked our cakes at my apartment, updating some new member files. Someone opened the door, which was unlocked because I was teaching a class in about an hour's time.

Glancing up with a polite smile, I froze when I recognized her from Aiden's picture.

Her hair was pulled up high on her head, and she had a gym bag slung over her shoulder. "You must be Isabel."

She set her hands on the front desk and studied me unabashedly.

I held out my hand. "You must be Eloise. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I'm taking your class today," she informed me. "Decided it was worth skipping a day of school and driving back into town."

With a grin, I handed her a form. "You here to form your own opinion?"

"Aiden assures me you are a glorious human being, so I'm inclined to believe him." But she smiled. "But yes, I'm here to

make up my own mind about you.”

I stood, started wrapping my hands. “Well, Eloise, by the time you finish here, you will either hate me or love me. There’s not usually much middle ground with me.” I tilted my head toward his office. “He know you’re here?”

“Nope. My brothers bet me ten bucks I couldn’t get him to take class at the same time as me, especially if you’re teaching.”

“I’ll throw in twenty that I can get him to join.”

She laughed. “I don’t think I’d take a bet against you, Isabel Ward.”

“I’ll go talk to him while you fill that out.” I walked into Aiden’s office and knocked softly before I walked in. He was reading some articles about weight training, and on his face were those sexy as hell glasses. “I think you should take my class today.”

He spun in his chair with a thoughtful expression on his face. “Yeah? Why’s that.”

I approached slowly, finishing up the second wrap with a tight yank to the velcro strap at the end. “Maybe I want to torture you a little.”

Aiden widened his legs so I could step between them, sliding his hands up my thighs until he bracketed my hips with his fingers. “You torture me just by walking around here.”

Bracing a hand on the top of his chair, I leaned down to give him a kiss. He cupped the back of my neck and slicked his tongue against mine with a contented hum.

“Okay,” he said against my lips. “I’ll take your class.”

I smiled.

“On one condition,” he added.

“What’s that?”

His eyes held mine steadily. “I want you to come over tonight after Anya goes to bed.”



My eyebrows popped up. “Really?”

Aiden stood from the chair and held my face in his hands. “I miss holding you while I sleep. As fun as office sex is, or in your cramped-ass bed in your apartment, I want to know what it feels like to climb into my bed with you right where I’ve imagined you.”

I let out a deep breath. He kissed my forehead, but let me think.

“You’re not worried Anya will wake up?”

He shook his head. “She hasn’t woken up in the middle of the night in weeks, and the last few times, she always calls for me. As long as we set an alarm, she won’t have any idea.”

I nodded, excitement building as I imagined it. “Deal.”

“You gonna go easy on me in class?”

Up on my tiptoes, I tugged on his earlobe with my teeth, relished in how he tightened his grip when I did. Into his ear, I whispered, “You fucking wish.”

His eyes promised retribution a million times over the next hour and a half. When he saw his sister, when I unleashed all my inner dominatrix on him and had his chest heaving and soaked in sweat by the time I brought the class to cool-down. I probably brought it a touch too far when I got down in front of him and told him to lower his ass another inch in the plank he was holding.

And because Anya was dropped off just before we finished, there would be no desk sex for him to give me payback.

But he held onto it. All evening.

With the skies dark, and my backpack hooked onto my shoulders, I knocked gently. He ripped the door open, and without a word in greeting, he dipped, scooping me up over his shoulder.

“Aiden,” I laughed breathlessly. “Put me down.”

“Trust me, you don’t want that.” He strode to his bedroom.

“I don’t?”

“Nope, because once your feet hit the ground, you are going to pay for that.”

I grinned, hair hanging down toward the ground as he shut the door behind us. He tossed me, and I bounced off the mattress with a laugh.

And oh, did he get payback.

My clothes, practically torn from my body, ended in a heap on the floor next to his. And he proceeded to torture me, bringing me to the edge but never quite letting me go all the way, over and over, until I was shaking.

Aiden kept me on my stomach, forced me to hold onto the comforter.

By the time he put us out of our misery, I was mindless, arching my hips to seek the explosive end to an entire day of white-knuckled anticipation. He covered me with his big body, holding me into place, moving so slowly that I almost wept.

He held still, dragging his lips over my cheek, only stopping when his mouth was over my ear.

“I love you,” he whispered.

Slow was over.

Gentle was gone.

In its place was fierce and brutal. It took no more than five seconds, the bruising strength of his hands holding mine down, and I was flung helplessly to a place I didn’t actually know existed. He came there with me.

My spine practically cracked from the heat he pulled from inside me, and I managed to hold my sounds into the pillow by my face.

We laid boneless and limp for about ten minutes, just trying to catch our breath.

I wasn’t sure how I ever felt complete before this man, before this love.

He watched me pull on my sleep tank and shorts with heavy-lidded eyes, opening his arms for me to climb into bed next to him.

“This is what I needed,” he said into the top of my head. “Thank you.”

I sighed. “Thank *you*.”

His chest shook with laughter.

We talked for a while, and as I started drifting off, his finger traced the bottom edge of my lip.

I hummed. “That’s nice.”

“You said that,” he added quietly. “The night you were here.”

Opening my eyes, I studied him in the dark room. “Did I?”

Aiden nodded.

“I’m glad I got a chance to say it again.” I yawned.

“Isabel,” he said, nudging me back awake.

“Hmmm?”

“You know you’re going to have to marry me, right?”

Eyes still closed, my mouth curled into a smile. “As proposals go, I give that a four.”

He laughed quietly. “Just making a general statement. You’ve ruined me from sleeping alone.”

“Good.” I turned to my side, and he folded his body around mine, burying his nose in the back of my neck. “Because yeah, I’m going to have to marry you, Aiden Hennessy.”

We slept like that, soundly and deeply, until I felt a light stroke on my arm.

When I blinked, I saw a small body standing on my side of the bed. My stomach seized instantly at how she might react.

Anya grinned down at me. “I *knew* it was you,” she whispered.

I sat up, glanced over at a still-sleeping Aiden, sprawled on his back with a hand laying on his chest.

My heart raced as I swung my legs over the side of the bed, and she climbed up into my lap.

“You knew it, huh?” I asked her quietly.

Anya nodded, playing with the end of my braid where it hung over my shoulder.

“Want me to bring you back to bed, sweetheart?”

She nodded again, and without waking Aiden, we walked upstairs, and once in her room, I held back the covers on her bed. She pulled the blankets up to her chin and looked over at the picture of Beth. “It’s behind there,” she said. “You can take it out.”

Carefully, I picked up the frame and studied her face. She was pretty. A big smile and laugh lines that told me she’d done both things often.

“Behind the picture?”

Anya nodded.

I pulled the back of the frame off, and a folded-up piece of paper was wedged behind the image of her mom.

When I opened it, it was hard to make sense of what I was seeing. Anya pointed at the side, letters I couldn’t really make sense of.

“She told me I’d know,” Anya said. “Even if you didn’t match the list, I’d know.”

My throat thickened, and I smoothed her hair back from her forehead. “Yeah?”

Anya blinked slowly, sleep pulling at her. “I wrote it on the side of the paper, but I don’t think Daddy could read that part. Mommy said I’d know because she’d make us all happier. And that’s you.”

A tear slid down my cheek as I leaned down to place a featherlight kiss on her forehead. Her arms snaked around my neck in a tight squeeze.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you, too.”

I stood from the bed and turned, stopping short when I saw Aiden watching us from the doorway. He'd tugged on some cotton sleep pants, arms crossed over his chest, and a small smile playing over his mouth. His eyes were red.

“We're busted,” I whispered.

He held out a hand, and I took it.

“Ready to go back to bed?” he asked.

I nodded.

I was ready for all of it with him. With her. Most of all, I was just ready for our life together to start, and as I fell asleep in his arms, I had a feeling it just had.

## EPILOGUE

Isabel

*Six months later*

“It’s not very pretty.”

Under my breath, I laughed at Anya’s dubious expression. We sat on the bed in my bedroom with Aiden, and in front of her was the pink enamel lockbox I’d found online.

“It’s pink, though, so that’s something.”

She gave me a look. “I might have a new favorite color next year. What am I going to do with all my secret stuff then?”

I hummed. “Well, maybe we can spray-paint it if that happens.”

She eyed mine. “You never changed yours?”

With a shake of my head, I fished the key out of the small bag and jiggled the lock until I could finagle the box open. “It was a gift from my nan—Logan’s mom. She knew I needed a place that was just mine to keep all my special things that should be kept safe.”

“What’s in it?” Anya leaned forward.

I showed her each item, explaining where they came from, why I felt they were important. When I got to the letter I’d written to her dad, I paused before pulling it out.

“Now this is something I’ve never shown anyone,” I told her.

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

Next to me was another envelope I hadn’t shown anyone, but we’d get to that eventually.

Very carefully, I picked up the folded paper and shook my head at the sight of my neat penmanship, the doodles of purple ink along the side.

“I wrote this letter when I was a teenager.”

She shifted to her knees, teeth tugging on her bottom lip in her interest. “You never sent it?”

Pulling open the paper, I shook my head. “I decided it should just stay a secret.”

It was a risk to show her. But over the last year, this young lady had become my built-in sidekick, my ride or die, outside of her dad.

When I handed her the paper, the diamond on my engagement ring caught the light.

Anya took the letter, her eyes widening on the first line.

“It’s for my dad,” she whispered.

I nodded.

“And you kept it all this time?” Her finger followed along with the words on the lined paper as she read it.

“Pretty crazy, huh?”

Anya’s eyes were bright with excitement. “How’d you know you were going to meet him?”

“I didn’t,” I answered simply.

When she finished reading, she carefully folded the paper and set it back inside the black metal box.

I knew her well enough now to know she was processing, so I gently twirled my ring while I waited for her to speak.

He'd given it to me a month earlier, tied onto a ribbon, around the stem of a giant bouquet of daisies.

It was the same day I moved in with him and Anya, after five months of trying very hard to pretend we weren't basically living together.

Anya looked at her metal box again and up at me.

"I'm glad you didn't send it to him."

My eyebrows rose. "Yeah?"

"I think maybe he would've remembered when he met you at the gym. And he needed you to be someone new."

A smile spread over my face at how carefully she chose her words.

"I think you might be right," I said quietly.

She scooted forward on the bed and gave me a tight hug. I kissed the side of her head.

"Love you, Iz."

"Love you too," I whispered.

When she hopped off the bed, box clutched to her chest, she looked at mine again. "Are you going to tell Dad about the letter?"

"What letter?" he asked from the doorway.

She looked at me, eyes wide. "Sorry."

I laughed. "It's okay."

Anya scampered off to her room, the pounding of her feet on the stairs had Aiden shaking his head.

As he shut the bedroom door and approached the bed, I studied the way he looked in his button-down shirt and black dress pants.

"I like this look," I told him.

"Yeah?"

He carefully moved aside the metal box and pushed me back onto the bed. My hands tugged his shirt out of his



waistband as he gave me a mind-spinning kiss. Aiden always greeted me like this when we were alone—like he hadn't seen me in weeks—and I would never, ever get sick of it.

His kisses moved down my neck as I moved under him, unhooking his belt.

“What letter is she talking about?” he asked, tugging the strap of my bra down and placing a sucking kiss over my heart.

“Umm, nothing?”

He lifted his head, spearing me with a look.

“It's silly,” I told him. “But I wanted her to see what kind of stuff I kept in the lockbox from my nan.”

Aiden rolled to the side, snatching the box with one big hand and tugging it closer to us. “Show me.”

With a burning hot face, I pulled the letter out and handed it to him.

His grin was so pleased, so fricken entertained as he got to the part about the purple dress that he started chuckling.

I covered my face. “Now you know why I literally tripped over nothing when I met you.”

He pulled my hands down and took my mouth again. “I love that you kept it,” he murmured. “Just goes to show you've always had great taste.”

I smacked his chest. “Of course you make this about you.”

Aiden settled between my legs as we kissed, his hand smoothing up and down my back, settling on my bottom. Even though we could take it further—Anya knew not to open the door when it was closed—I loved that he seemed just as content to kiss me on our big bed in the middle of the day.

He rolled us, tugging my shirt up so he could reach more of my skin. When I settled onto my back, arching my neck, the crinkle of paper had me freezing.

“What?” he asked.

My hand fumbled on the bed until I found the edge of the envelope. “Something else to show you,” I whispered.

His brows lowered as he took it. My hands smoothed up his arms as he pulled it open, and my heart raced as he saw the edge of what was inside.

“Isabel,” he breathed. His eyes snapped to mine. “Seriously?”

I nodded, eyes watering at the awe I saw in his face. Aiden brushed a knuckle under his eye as he carefully tugged the sonogram picture out of the envelope.

He stared at it, then at me.

“We’re having a baby?” he whispered.

My chin quivered. I couldn’t even nod in affirmation because I’d split wide open into happy, messy tears.

“I know ...” I paused when my voice cracked, “I know it’s sooner than we planned, and I wanted to be sure before I told you.”

He wrapped me up in his arms so tight I could hardly breathe. “We’re having a baby,” he repeated, voice uneven.

I clung to him, tears streaming down the side of my face, disappearing into my hairline. His mouth was on mine in the next moment, and when he broke away, his eyes were red-rimmed and so full of happiness.

“Does this mean I get to marry you sooner?”

I laughed. “I’d marry you tomorrow, Aiden Hennessy.”

Resting his forehead against mine, he breathed a shaky exhale. “Of course we’d do this sooner than we planned.”

I kissed him again. “It works for us, I think.”

Aiden cupped the side of my face, stared down at me with so much adoration, I almost started with the messy weeping again.

“Yeah. It does.”

“Should we go tell Anya?”

“In a few minutes,” he said, resuming with the lifting of the shirt. He reverently kissed my belly, then moved up until he’d tugged my shirt off.

“Just a few minutes?” I asked skeptically.

Aiden sat up on his knees, between my legs, and yanked his shirt off. “You doubt me?”

With a soft smile on my face, I pulled him back down for a kiss. “Never,” I whispered against his mouth.



The End

## FORBIDDEN BONUS EPILOGUE

About a year after *The End*

**Isabel**

**I**t was right about the time that sweat dripped off my temple and hit the ground that I wondered if Aiden and I were incapable of doing the ‘honeymoon’ thing correctly. My arms shook, my abs and quads screaming, but he’d challenged me to hold a low plank for as long as he could do pull-ups, and my competitive ass could not back down from the challenge.

My head lifted so I could watch for signs of him slowing.

Five minutes doesn’t feel long.

Until you were resting all your weight on your forearms and the tips of your toes.

Aiden curled his body up again, sweat glistening over the bunched muscles of his arms, and the low grunt he let out had my eyes closing.

*Focus, Isabel, focus.*

He did it again, but the groan came from lower, deeper in his chest.

I blew out a slow breath.

“You all right over there?” he asked.

He sounded so fucking smug.

“Just fine,” I said, keeping my voice even.

“Can you last another minute?”

I glanced over, eyebrow raised. “Can you, old man?”

Aiden slicked his tongue over his lower lip, clenched his jaw and slowly pulled himself up toward the bar again. His arms shook too, and I saw exactly how much each movement was costing him. When he slid his chin just over the top, he grunted again.

“Oh yeah, that’s good,” he groaned when he lowered his weight back down.

“You are doing that on purpose, you asshole,” I said evenly.

Aiden laughed. “Doing what?”

I closed my eyes and reminded myself that he would not—under any circumstance—win this bet.

“What am I doing, wife?”

When I answered, I kept my eyes closed and my face smooth and even. “You’re making sex noises.”

“Am I?”

“Oh yeah, that’s good,” I mimicked his deep voice. “You said that last night, and you damn well know it.”

Aiden chuckled, the sound tugging goosebumps along the back of my neck. “Did I?”

It would not benefit me to remind him of what I’d been doing when he made that particular comment, because it involved me sliding down over him, his hands tight in my hair, and a swiveling motion of my hips that he particularly enjoyed.

I opened my eyes and glared at him. “Hanging there doesn’t count, you know.”

He shifted his hands on the bar, holding my gaze while he pulled up again.

That was when I let out a breathy moan.

He blinked.

“Oh, right there,” I said quietly. That’s what I said when he’d finally snapped his hips up because I was moving too slowly to satisfy him. “More.”

Aiden’s throat worked on a swallow. “Iz,” he said, warning in his voice.

“What am I doing, husband?”

The door to the resort gym opened, a gentleman in his late sixties walked in whistling a jaunty tune. He smiled at both of us, oblivious to the borderline pornographic exchange we had going on.

Most couples on a romantic, late honeymoon vacation would be lounging out in the sun, drinking pina coladas and working on their tan lines.

Not me and Aiden. We had two nights and three days, and we could hardly sit still, bored by the pool after we swam laps and challenged each other’s time. We ate, changed for the gym, and we were engaged in the strangest kind of foreplay I’d ever experienced in my life.

“Truce,” he said, voice rough and gravelly and tight with tension.

Thank the Lord because my body was about to give out.

“On three,” I agreed.

“Three, two, one,” we said in tandem.

I dropped to the mat with a groan, and Aiden released his hold on the bar, collapsing onto his back.

“I can’t feel my arms,” he said.

“Neither can I.”

I tilted my head to the side, chest heaving on great gulping breaths, and our gazes locked.

Aiden rolled to his feet and stalked over to me, holding out a hand.

I let him help me up, and when he dipped his head down to my ear, I let out a shaky breath.

“Room. Now,” he whispered.

I pulled my head back and held his gaze. “Too far.”

And it was far. The other side of the resort.

Aiden sucked in a breath, his eyes darting over my shoulder to the man in the gym. He’d slid big black headphones over his head, walking at a sedate pace on one of the treadmills. He wasn’t paying us a single bit of attention.

I slid my hand up under Aiden’s sleeveless shirt. “I’ll leave that bathroom door unlocked,” I whispered, lips brushing against the hard line of his jaw.

With a quick pivot and a pounding heart, I wondered for the millionth time how this man brought out a side of me that never seemed to exist before him.

He softened me, gave me love and acceptance for being exactly who I was. He never, ever tried to change me.

He took care of me, tugging a sweetness into our life that I’d never known. He took care of Anya and now three-month-old Violet in the same way.

And without a doubt, he yanked at whatever wildness I kept tightly in check for all the years of my life before he came into it.

My breath was coming in excited pants when I walked into the lush, private bathroom next to the locker room entrances. It was probably meant for a young mother who needed to nurse, and considering I had a baby at home—getting spoiled rotten by Logan and Paige for a long weekend so we could take our delayed honeymoon—it wasn’t too far off the mark that I might have needed it for ... something else.

In my head, I counted to fifteen, and when the doorknob moved down, I backed further into the room. Aiden crowded the space immediately, the sheer force of his will making my head spin.

He wanted me—always.

And when he clicked the lock behind him, my lips curled into a satisfied smile.

“Hands on the counter,” he whispered.

I blew out a slow breath and complied instantly, the quiet command in his voice tempering the hot lick down my spine that wanted me to argue with him.

Maybe against the door, or him seated on the small couch against the wall.

But as my husband’s tall, muscular frame bracketed me from behind, his fingers curling into the waistband of my shorts, I let my instinct melt into anticipation.

He tugged my shorts down with a rough jerk, palming my backside with one hand, sliding the other up the line of my back. His hand coasted up my neck, over my shoulder, cupping my jaw and tugging my mouth to his for a fierce kiss as he pushed two fingers between my legs.

I whimpered into his mouth, the feel of him was so perfect. Aiden knew exactly how to touch me, exactly when to press, when to take things harder and faster, when to coax the pleasure from my body in a slow build.

This was no slow build.

It was immediate and incendiary. His hand moved from my face and pushed into the front of my sports bra, filling his hand with the weight of my breast, thumbing at the tip, still sensitive from Violet’s birth a few months earlier. He loved my extra curves.

He groaned quietly when my tongue slid over his, when I nipped at the edge of his lips.

He curled his fingers inside me, and I rocked my hips.

“Oh shit,” I moaned.

“Quiet,” he instructed. “Or they’ll kick us out of our honeymoon for public indecency.”

Aiden pulled his hand away, gripping my hair in a tight fist after he tugged his own shorts down just far enough. His gaze



locked on mine in the mirror, and I tried—I really, really tried—to keep my eyes open as he pushed into me, but my eyelids fluttered shut at the big, hot press of him.

“Is this what you were thinking about?” he asked. He was moving so slow, and I pushed my hips backward. He stilled them with a strong hand curled around my body. “Ah-ah, I’m choosing today.”

“Yes,” I moaned. “Please.”

“Is this why you like to push me so hard when we’re doing things like that?” he whispered, sliding his hand from my hip, over my waist, and along my back. “Because you know how crazy you make me when you look at me the way you do?”

I couldn’t even answer, my body was shaking again, but this time, from hanging on the razor edge of whatever precipice he was dangling me from.

“When you’re challenging me,” he continued, pulling his hips back until he was almost all the way out of me. I moaned. “When you’re testing me, when you’re looking like a fucking dream—so strong and amazing and gorgeous.”

“Aiden.” I dropped my head, my toes curling helplessly.

He curled his chest over my back, kissing the edge of my shoulder. “I love you,” he said.

And he snapped forward, the sharp slap of his body against mine echoed in the room, only drowned out by the sounds yanked from both of us.

“I love you,” I gasped, my breath stuttering, “too, oh, please.”

There was no finessing this to last long, no slow build, it was a bright, hot explosion. He moved hard, and I pushed back to meet it. It was sweaty and fast and furious, pulsing drums of pleasure that started down in my toes and snapped up in white hot detonations that had my back arching when it finally stretched over my whole body.

Aiden made three more hard pushes of his body, coming with a deep groan, and I had to arch up on my toes to meet the

brute force of it, and when he sank over me, he exhaled an incredulous laugh.

I grinned, wiping my sweat soaked forehead against my arm. He dropped a gentle kiss onto my back, helped turn me around, and with a shit-eating grin on his face, he leaned down to tug my shorts back into place.

“Feeling pretty good about yourself?” I asked, tugging on his shirt until he came down to give me a kiss.

He hummed against my lips. “Damn straight. It looked like you about blacked out.”

We kissed again, slower and sweeter, and Aiden curled his arms around me, exhaling heavily when I was wrapped in his embrace.

I sighed, nestling my head under his chin. “Best honeymoon ever.”

He chuckled. “We don’t know how to relax, though, do we?”

I pulled back and gave him a raised eyebrow look. “What do you think that was?”

Aiden’s smile was broad and big and happy. “Fair enough.”

“And we definitely can’t do things like that at work.”

He pushed some sweaty tendrils of hair off my face. “No, we cannot.”

“And Anya is a bit too observant for her own good, so we can’t do spontaneous bathroom sex at home either.”

“No, we cannot,” he said around a grin.

“I think we’re honeymooning perfectly well,” I told him. “We’re just ... doing things a little differently than most people do.”

“That sounds about right for us.” He kissed the tip of my nose. “You ready to go shower? We could clean up, get some lunch, find a hike to do before dinner.”

I smiled. “You going to race me to the top or something if we do?”

His eyes gleamed.

“Like you’d have a chance of beating me, old man,” I whispered, going up on tiptoe so I could slick my lips over his in a teasing kiss.

Aiden growled, slanting his mouth over mine.

I was still laughing when we walked out of the bathroom, hands intertwined. The man on the treadmill wasn’t on the treadmill anymore, and he definitely didn’t have his headphones on.

He was re-racking some weights nearby the room we’d just exited, his face bright red. He looked up, eyes tracking over my messy hair, then his gaze darted away again.

“Have a great day,” Aiden said smoothly.

He stammered over a, “you too.” And I had to smother my laugh as we left the gym.

“I don’t know,” I said, “I think we’re pretty incredible at honeymooning.”

Aiden wrapped his arm around my shoulder and dropped a kiss to the top of my head. “I think you’re right, Mrs. Hennessy.”



*The End*

*Whew!* What a Ward family binge you’ve been on. I hope you loved these four amazing sisters like I do. If you’re curious how Logan and Paige got their epic start, here’s an excerpt from *The Marriage Effect*.

“SO YOU’RE LIKE ...”

I kept my eyes aimed up when I answered. There was no particular desire to see the look on her face when I told her something I'd managed to keep under the radar for more than two years. "Their legal guardian."

Paige was quiet for a couple of seconds as she processed. "And he wants to be."

"Yeah. He and his wife do."

"And you *don't* want them to be," she clarified.

I dropped my chin so she could see my face again. "Definitely not."

She cupped her cheeks in her hands and stared at me. "And me saying I was your fiancée was ..." *Was what?* I wanted to ask. Because I had a few words I could drop into that particular empty space.

Perfectly timed.

Brilliant.

Crazy.

Fate.

Paige didn't say any of those things, though. "It was really stupid, wasn't it?"

I closed my eyes and wiped a hand over my mouth. I didn't know why I thought Paige would make this easy on me. Why I thought her mind would follow the same path that mine was.

Probably because that path was certifiable, padded cell insanity.

Except it wasn't. Not at all.

"I just ... didn't think, really. I'm so sorry, Logan. I don't blame you for being furious."

I dropped my hand and stared at her.

"Oh my gosh, would you say something? You're starting to freak me out."

"I'm not furious," I told her.

She blinked a few times. “You’re not?”

“Nope.”

Paige sat back and exhaled audibly. “Well, that’s good. I thought you’d flip the hell out on me, tell me I should think things through better, blah, blah. That’s what Allie tells me all the time.”

“Oh,” I interjected, “you *should* think things through better, but I’m not furious.”

“Well, that’s good.” Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Why? You’re not exactly Susy Sunshine, if you know what I’m sayin’. I figured you’d be breathing fire right now.”

I leaned forward and plucked her hand from her lap, turned it side to side so I could study the ring. When she sucked in an audible breath, I kept my eyes down because I didn’t want to know what was on her face. The skin of her long, graceful fingers was smooth and soft. No callouses like the ones covering mine. No scars from broken fingers or skin that had been ripped off by an overzealous lineman.

“Nick is an asshole,” I told her as I studied her fingers in mine. “But he’s married. He works a job with normal hours. During the season, I probably work a hundred hours a week. My housekeeper just quit, the third in a year. And under my watch, my sixteen-year-old sister just got in a car accident driving around with her drunk friend, so he’s going to try to take them from me because of it.”

Paige’s chest rose and fell with increasing speed. Her pink lips were full and open slightly as she watched me. The bridge of her nose was covered with light freckles, and it worked. All of her separate pieces, they worked really, really well together.

“He’s better on paper,” she said. “That’s what you’re trying to say?”

I nodded. “Yeah. He checks a lot of boxes that I don’t.”

A blanket of quiet fell between us, and I saw the wheels turn behind the bright blue of her eyes.

“What is it that you need, exactly?” she repeated, slowly pulling her hand out of my own.

Her eyes held mine. Turns out, I didn’t even need to say the words or try to figure out the best way to say it. She finally tore her gaze away, and it landed on the ring.

“Ohhhh,” she drawled. “You need a fiancée.”

“Actually,” I said slowly, gauging the finely featured face in front of me, “I need a wife.”

Paige’s face stilled, then the last—absolute fucking last—thing I expected to happen happened.

She smiled.

“Perfect,” she breathed.

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## THE LAST WARD WEDDING

*If you've already read Logan and Paige's story, I do have one bonus short story that I wrote as an exclusive for the Nightingale Anthology. It's called The Last Ward Wedding, written from Logan's POV, and before now, you couldn't find it anywhere outside of that anthology. I've decided to include it here for those of you who missed it when it was published in the limited time only anthology. Enjoy!*

*The Last Ward Wedding*

*A Ward family bonus short story*

*previous published in the Nightingale Anthology*

The texts weren't the thing that alerted me that something was wrong. Not even the missed calls. It was when I arrived home, and she didn't greet me. The wedding was forty-eight hours away, being held in the backyard of the house that all the girls had grown up in, and she was nowhere to be found.

"Where is she?"

They all looked up at me, varying degrees of exhaustion on their faces. Molly sighed, flopping back on the couch. "I lost track of her about an hour ago. She said something about ribbons and mints, and ..." Her voice trailed off. "I honestly don't know. I think she's losing it."

Lia tied off a small delicate white mesh baggie filled with ... I wasn't quite sure, but there was a mountain of them on the family room floor.

Wearily, I ran a hand down my face and sighed. My sisters snickered. The only one who remained quiet, watching me with a tiny smile on her face, was the one set to walk down the aisle in two days' time.

"She say anything?" I asked Claire.

Claire shook her head. "Not to us, but we could see it in her face."

I raised my eyebrows. "What?"

Isabel tossed another baggie onto the pile. "The impending mental breakdown."

Molly laughed.

"That bad?" I asked.

Claire winced. "Maybe a little?"

Lia nodded. "A lot. She had the crazy eyes right before she bolted. Kinda like she got last week when she couldn't get the balloon arch just right."

"I *told* her to hire that out," Isabel said. "Those things are a giant pain in the ass."

I sank onto the couch next to Molly, curling my arm around her when she shifted to lay her head on my shoulder. "How many more of these you guys have to do?"

Lia checked her watch. "We're almost done. Which is good because I have to get home to tuck the little man into bed."

"I need to tuck myself into bed," Molly said around a yawn. I kissed the top of her head, and she smiled against my shoulder, running a hand over the twenty-two-week baby bump underneath her black shirt.

My wife was hiding somewhere in our house, wedding-meltdown in full effect, and I knew I'd find her eventually. But I didn't often get a quiet moment with my four sisters. For years now, we'd been slowly adding significant others into the mix. Boyfriends became fiancés as months passed. All but one had become husbands.



Lia was the first to bring a baby into our crazy mix, and damn if that kid didn't steal a giant chunk of my heart that I didn't realize was still up for grabs. Molly got married first. Then Isabel. She and Aiden had two girls and Paige wasn't sure she could handle all the happiness they brought her.

Lia and Jude got married next, a wedding that featured a few international athletes that even had me a little starstruck. Perks of my sister marrying a former British footballer.

And that left Claire. The quiet one who probably caused me the most sleepless nights. Not because she was trouble, or because she broke the rules, but because she didn't. There was so much worry in watching a heart like hers grow into adulthood, because I never wanted her to lose the sweet, soft side of her that made her so special.

To everyone's complete surprise, the man who captured that heart was big and tattooed and had an edge to him that hid what a giant fucking sap he was for my sweet, soft sister who was so good at knowing what everyone needed.

They took their time, and in true Claire and Bauer style, they'd asked Paige and me to hold a small backyard wedding the same day he slid a delicate antique ring onto her finger.

For a few minutes, I watched my sisters talk and laugh, trying to remember what it had been like years and years ago, when it was just the five of us against the world.

Isabel nudged me with her foot, and I blinked out the memory. "What's that face?" she asked.

I sighed. "Memories. Wasn't that long ago we were sitting in this room arguing about who got the pick the movie to watch. Or whose turn it was to get the good seat on the couch."

Lia grinned. "Remember when Isabel dumped a bowl of popcorn over my head because she hated my choice of movie?"

"You made us watch *The Princess Diaries* for six weeks straight, Lia."

“I was finding popcorn in the couch for the same amount of time,” I muttered.

Molly laughed. “Don’t you miss it?”

I closed my eyes at the sound of their laughter, these four bright, funny, caring women who’d been my entire world for as long as I could remember. They were starting families of their own, and nights like this, they were few and far between. I didn’t ever want to forget what a gift they were.

I missed the popcorn throwing.

The screaming matches.

The stickers I couldn’t ever quite clean off the walls.

The way they’d mess up a bathroom beyond any human comprehension.

The long talks we’d have—through their tears—about mean friends and bullies and boys they liked. How they taught me that loving someone that much meant you had to watch them suffer things that you couldn’t fix.

And even though the years had brought us so many new people to love, my own wife and son included, there was something almost holy about those early days when we carved out a path for our family. “Yeah, kid. I miss it.”

My throat must’ve sounded tight, because she lifted her head and popped a kiss on my cheek. “Don’t cry.”

“I’m not,” I said gruffly.

I was.

Claire watched the exchange as Lia tied up the last bag and pronounced their labors complete.

Lia helped Molly up off the couch, laughing as her sister groaned at the ache in her back. Isabel joined them, laying a hand on Molly’s gently rounded stomach. And from the floor, I saw Claire’s gaze linger on her sisters, a melancholy expression stealing over her pretty face.

I stretched my leg out and tapped the side of her thigh with my foot. She blinked away from the scene in front of us,

advice being given about easing pregnancy back pain from the two sisters who'd already done it.

I tilted my head so she'd join me on the couch, and she did with a widening smile.

"You ready?" I asked quietly.

She let out a slow breath. "Yeah."

"No nerves?" I pressed my shoulder against hers. "Because if you want to slip out the back, I can take Bauer."

Her face turned to mine with a disbelieving lift of her dark eyebrow. "Can you?"

For just a moment, I thought about the reality of fighting a professional snowboarder a couple decades younger than me. I glanced down at her. "Maybe."

She laughed. "No nerves," she said. "I would've married him ten times by now."

"I know." I sighed again. "I should go look for Paige."

My sister nodded slowly. "Yeah, you probably should."

"What happened?"

Claire glanced over at her sisters while they packed up their stuff in the kitchen. The dining room table was covered in wedding paraphernalia, as was my office, and the family room. "She was working on the head table centerpiece with Molly," she said quietly. "And Lia and I started laughing because one of the leaf stems looked like a snake."

"Okay," I said slowly. Paige had been working herself to the bone to make sure Claire's wedding was perfect, but nothing about it had made her break down yet. Seemed unlikely that my wife—one of the strongest women I'd ever met—would be undone by a single centerpiece.

"Then Isabel brought up that one time we put a snake in your shower, right after you guys got married." She grinned, and I caught a glimpse of the little hellion she used to be, right alongside Lia. "Remember that?"

I exhaled a laugh. “Yeah. I remember. I’m pretty sure the neighbors heard Paige scream when she found that one.”

Claire’s face smoothed out in a thoughtful facial expression. “Something about my wedding—it being the last one of the four of us—it’s triggering something for Paige. A sense of loss she didn’t have with the others, I think.”

“Have I mentioned how helpful it is that you’re a counselor?”

“For kids,” she said on a laugh. “But yes, you have.”

I smoothed my hands along the tops of my thighs. “Tell me what to do, Counselor Claire?”

“Just ... give her a hug and tell her it will be okay. She’s allowed to feel what she’s feeling and she shouldn’t beat herself up over it. Life transitions don’t always trigger the emotions we expect them to, and my educated guess is that Paige is feeling a little embarrassed that she’s struggling with it.”

I turned to the side and studied her face. “You’re going to be a great mom, you know that? I may have to call you for advice more often.”

Claire, to my surprise, teared up, sliding her hand over mine. “Where do you think I learned how to be a great parent?”

I blew out a slow breath and tried to blink back the burning sensation pressing at the back of my eyes. “You four made it easy,” I said in a gruff voice.

She flung her arms around my shoulders and I heard a quiet sniff. Wrapping my arms around my little sister, I glanced over at the kitchen to see the other three watching us with soft smiles and bright, glassy eyes. I cleared my throat, because any longer and the whole house would be a giant weeping mess and I still had a redheaded wife to track down.

Claire wiped at her face as she stood. “Love you, big brother.”

I ruffled the top of her dark hair, like I used to when she was younger. “Love you too.”

With their stuff collected, and our collective emotions under control I stood at the front door and watched my four younger sisters walk out to their cars lining the street in front of the house. As they drove off, I felt just a little pinch of that loss that Claire mentioned.

The house was silent when I closed the door. With the four girls and their growing families often over for meals, and our son, Emmett, tiptoeing into the teenage years, a quiet house was something Paige and I didn’t experience very often.

I called her name and listened for a response, frowning slightly when I didn’t get one. My office was empty, as was our home gym. She wasn’t in the backyard, already set up for the intimate ceremony that would take place on Friday evening. There were fairy lights strung from the house, anchored in the center of the massive tree in our backyard, swooping in a graceful arch over the place where Claire and Bauer would say their vows. I’d caught Paige staring at it the last few days, making sure everything was exactly the way it should be.

As I climbed the stairs, I called her name again, but heard nothing. Our son, Emmett, was at a friend’s house, so I gave a cursory look into his bedroom, but she wasn’t there either. When I reached our bedroom, and found it dark and quiet, I felt my first tug of worry. It wasn’t like Paige to hide from me when she was upset. In the decade plus that we’d been married, I knew every facet of my wife’s personality.

Her anger when someone she loved was mistreated, which is what made her the very best mother in the entire world. Her humor, when the situation demanded it. Her ability to look at every situation from a perspective so uniquely Paige that no one else could quite master her advice-giving for the girls and Emmett. Not even me.

But emotions like this, the kind that would have her hiding her face, I wasn’t sure when I’d ever seen it. As I stood in the

hallway, I glanced at the door to the room that used to be the twins'. And I heard a small, pitiful little sniffing sound.

My mouth curved in a wry grin as I pushed the door open. It was set up as a makeshift office/guest room. When Lia let little Gabriel sleep over, we had a Pack 'n Play in the corner next to the wall, and a small stack of bins with the kids toys she'd started buying in the couple years since he'd been born. The closet door was open, and her legs were stretched out on the floor, protruding from the dark space.

I tugged my Wolves hat off and ran a hand over my hair. "Care for some company?" I asked quietly.

One of her feet slid backwards, followed by the other, until only the tips of her pink and white sneakers were visible. "Sure."

When I edged around the foot of the bed, I finally saw my wife's face, and even after so many years, it never failed to make my heart race. The most beautiful woman in the world, with the biggest heart, and she was mine.

Her arms were wrapped around her shins, chin resting on her knees, and her big blue eyes were red-rimmed from whatever big feelings she'd let out in that little closet. "I don't know if there's room for you, though. You're really big."

"Thanks," I said dryly.

Paige's lips curved up in a smile.

"Stay there," I told her, when she went to move. I slid to the ground, bracing my back against the side of the bed and stretched my legs out, motioning for her to give me her feet. Paige stretched her long legs out, and I carefully removed her sneakers, setting them next to me on the floor. When I dug my thumbs in the arches of her feet, she groaned. "Why you hiding in here, wife?"

She didn't answer. "Did the girls leave?"

I nodded, keeping my attention on her feet while I gave her the same massage I used to when she was pregnant with Emmett. After working on the balls of her feet, and the arches,

I smoothed my hands around the fine bones in her ankles, moving to the other foot.

“I didn’t mean to hide from everyone.”

My eyes glanced up to hers. They were clearer now. “Wanna talk about it?”

She let out a tremulous breath. “It’s the last one, you know? The last wedding. When the twins started talking about that fucking snake, and the pranks they played on me when I first moved in ...” Her voice trailed off. “And then all I could think about was how fast time went. They were so little when I met them, and now they’re all married and having babies and they’re so smart and kind and amazing and they’re gonna be too busy to see us anymore and Emmett is basically an adult, and he’s going to leave us soon, too—”

My chuckle broke into her tirade, and when she narrowed her eyes dangerously, I did it right back. “Emmett just turned twelve, Paige. We’ve got a few years before he abandons us.”

“I suppose,” she answered quietly. “And I know they won’t get too busy to see us. They’re still here all the time. But ... they were my first babies, you know? I love them so much that sometimes I don’t know whether to cry or laugh or puke.”

“Puke?” I asked with a smile.

Paige nodded. “If someone I didn’t know said that, I’d probably want to gag. How obnoxious, right?”

Her voice wobbled, and I watched helplessly while a tear spilled down her cheek.

“I know what you mean. Claire made me cry downstairs too.”

Paige emitted a watery laugh. “Did she?”

I nodded. “I told her she was going to be a great mom someday, and she told me that she learned to be a great parent from me.”

My wife shifted out of the closet, and when she settled herself onto my lap, I slid my arms up her back. Her red hair tangled in my fingers and she cupped my face in her cool

hands. “You are the best fucking dad in the entire world, Logan Ward,” she whispered. “It’s so hot, I can’t even stand it.”

I laughed.

She leaned forward and pressed a butterfly-soft kiss on my lips. The top, and then the bottom. I closed my eyes and breathed her in.

Paige wrapped her arms around my neck and tucked herself against my body. Where I held her tightly, her rib cage expanded on a deep breath.

“Feeling better?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah. I just needed you, I think.”

I smoothed my hand in soothing circles on her back, let the peace of the moment settle like a warm blanket. Then she told me about what they’d worked on. What was left to do. How beautiful Claire would look in her dress—I’d heard the phrase “garden princess” about seventeen times since she bought the thing and I still wasn’t sure what that meant, but apparently it was good. Something with “deep Vs” and “romantic lace sleeves,” and every time they described it to me, I nodded dutifully even though most wedding dresses looked alike for me.

All I knew was that every penny spent on those dresses, those four weddings, was damn near the proudest I’d ever been to shell out a shit-ton of money for a single-day event in my life. I would give them anything I had, a thousand times over.

“I think I’m gonna sleep for a week when this wedding is over,” she said, nuzzling her face into my neck and breathing deeply.

The thought of a bed and Paige and a stretch of uninterrupted days, it had me closing my eyes. Some guys wanted a beach vacation. Maybe mountains to hike, or big, historic cities to see. I just wanted rest. And her. That’s how it had always been with us though. It didn’t matter where we went, what life morphed into, as long as we had each other.



“Think Emmett can fend for himself if I joined you?”

Her fingers played with the collar of my shirt. “Sure. He’s resourceful.”

“Can you imagine what he’d feed himself for an entire week on his own?”

She laughed. “Cheese quesadillas and waffles.”

My hands pushed up underneath the hem of her shirt so I could feel her skin underneath my fingers. Paige was so soft. She kissed the edge of my jaw, and I breathed in the sweet scent of her shampoo.

We sat like that for a few quiet minutes, and when she pulled back, her lips were curved in a mischievous smile.

“What?” I asked.

She touched her thumb to the middle of my mouth, and I pressed a kiss to it. “We’re alone,” she said.

“We are.”

Her eyes traced over my face. “Like, really actually alone. All night.”

Heat licked down my spine, because that almost never happened. The way my hands had been moving on her back changed. No longer soothing, I pressed harder along the curve of her spine, down below her hips and up the side of her waist where I could feel the weight of her breasts. “We are,” I repeated. “What do you want to do about it, wife?”

She bit her lip, curling her hands into the hem of her shirt and tugging it over her head. Her fiery tangle of hair settled over her shoulders, and I leaned forward to press a kiss to the top curve of her breasts where the simple black satin of her bra pushed them higher.

Her fingers dragged over the plane of my chest, curling over my shoulders and biceps.

“I’d like to start right here,” she said matter-of-factly.

I hummed, tugging a bra cup down and sucking one of her nipples into my mouth with a hard pull of my cheeks. She

gasped, clutching the back of my head.

“Then where,” I said against her skin, licking a path to the other side of her chest. Her hand was between us, frantically shoving at the waistband of my gym shorts. “Tell me what you want.”

“Oh,” she moaned, curling her hand around me while I scrambled to push my hands into the openings of her shorts. “I — Oh shit, like I can think when you”—she gasped when I curled my fingers—“when you do that.”

When my fingers found her ready and waiting, I swore under my breath. Maybe it wasn't the most romantic way to woo my wife, shoving the bare minimum of our clothes out of the way so we could do it on the guest room floor, but even after all those years, Paige still had the power to turn me into an impatient, greedy brute.

The day before, she woke me by sliding her hand underneath the blankets, and we managed to sneak a quiet round in, me moving slow and steady between her legs while Emmett slept. But this ... this was a gift we hardly ever got.

Alone.

All night.

No young ears or grandkids sleeping down the hall.

Were my hands shaking? Maybe a little.

And we started ... right there ... just like that. My shorts hardly pushed past my ass, hers shoved to the side with my greedy hands, and my wife rode me until my eyes rolled back in my head. With my hands wrapped tight onto her writhing hips, she clenched around me with a crying moan.

Paige slumped against me, laughing breathlessly. She moved her hips in a slow circle, and I hissed out a slow breath. When I did, she raised her head, eyes wide in her face.

“You didn't ...” Her voice trailed off.

Surging forward, I took her mouth in a ravenous kiss, sucking her tongue into my mouth and pushing my hands

under the hem of her shorts so I could feel the warm flesh of her ass.

She laughed at my bruising grip.

“We’re moving to the shower,” I told her.

“Oh?” She dropped her head back, and I licked up the side of her neck.

“Yeah. I love how your hair looks when it’s wet,” I whispered. “It’s easier to grab on to when it falls down your back.”

She swore.

“Then bathroom counter.” I sucked on her earlobe. “Because the height is perfect and I never, ever get to anymore.”

She whimpered.

“Then,” I whispered into her ear, “we’re going to bed. And I’m going to finish our night with my head between your thighs, because it’s my favorite place in the world.”

When I pulled back, Paige’s expression was dazed, delirious.

She gripped my face and took my mouth in a helpless, passionate kiss. Our tongues tangled wet and sloppy, and I bit her bottom lip.

“All of them?” she moaned. “It sounds *delightful*.”

With my thumb and forefinger, I took her chin and made sure she was looking straight at me. “All of them. Because I’m not done with you yet, Paige Ward,” I growled against her mouth.

She curled a hand around the back of my neck, resting her forehead to mine. “You better not *ever* be done with me,” she said.

“Never,” I vowed. “Not for as long as I live.”

*The End*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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*Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.*

*Joshua 1:9*

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Karla Sorensen is an Amazon top 10 bestselling author who refuses to read or write anything without a happily ever after. When she's not devouring historical romance, reading Dramione fanfic or avoiding the laundry, you can find her watching football (British AND American), HGTV or listening to Enneagram podcasts so she can psychoanalyze everyone in her life, in no particular order of importance. With a degree in Advertising and Public Relations from Grand Valley State University, she made her living in senior healthcare prior to writing full-time. Karla lives in Michigan with her husband, two boys and a big, shaggy rescue dog named Bear.

*Photo credit: Perrywinkle Photography*