

THE *Wrens* PITCH

BRITTANY TAYLOR

THE WRONG PITCH

NORTHEAST REBELS

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Brittany Taylor

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I couldn't possibly have been more wrong the night I'd tackled Hunter Moore to the ground in the middle of the night.

To be fair, the street was pitch-black, the wheel to my suitcase had popped off, and I found myself face to face with a stranger charging at me.

My instincts had kicked in, and instead, I'd landed him straight on his back with my knee pressed to his chest. Turns out, the stranger I'd tackled to the ground was my brother's roommate... which meant he was also mine.

With my dreams coming to a screeching halt, I was left with no other choice than to move in with my brother and his roommates.

Hunter Moore was star pitcher for the Northeast Rebels. Although I'd found his incessant talk of baseball obnoxious, I couldn't help but relate to how deep his passion ran. Even if our dreams were completely different.

With a shared bathroom and a single wall between our bedrooms, we couldn't resist pushing the boundaries.

Potent green eyes.

Perfectly sculpted muscle.

I was inevitably drawn in.

But the closer we became, the more I learned just how dedicated Hunter was to his dream, no matter the cost.

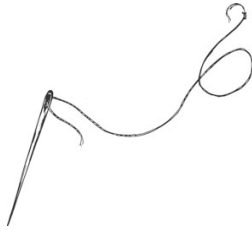
Only I was unaware, he'd already traded mine for his.

DEDICATION

*To the lovers and the dreamers who have been knocked down,
yet still managed to claw their way back up.*

This is for you.

ONE



OPHELIA

Today is quite possibly the worst day of my life.

Moving in with my younger brother at the ripe old age of twenty-two isn't exactly what I had envisioned for myself. I always imagined living in a high-rise apartment in the center of New York City, owning my own fashion design company. I wouldn't rely on anyone other than myself, and my success would all be owed to the work I'd put in over the past four years.

I was well on my way there. My path had been free and clear. Nothing could stop me.

Until I woke up this morning and my life was catapulted in a completely different direction. It feels as if within the matter of a few words, my life came to a screeching halt, and now I'm left with next to nothing.

I'm walking down a lonely, dark road, heading to my brother's house with nothing but the clothes on my back and a suitcase trailing behind me. The eerily quiet street is deafening, sending chills down my spine from the moment I stepped off the bus half a mile back. But I was left with no other options. My life dissolved before I'd even had an opportunity to realize what was happening. Between work and school, I hadn't taken the time to invest in buying a car, which led me here. Forced to book a last-minute bus ride from New York City to the tiny town of Eden, Maine.

My hometown. The last place I ever wanted to return.

I'm dragging my suitcase behind me with the small plastic wheels beating against the asphalt. Every now and then, I run over a few pebbles. The constant bumps cause my suitcase to wobble, including the sewing machine resting on top of it. I refused to leave it behind in New York. The only thing that could make this day worse is if I were to lose it.

I grunt in frustration and grab the handle of my sewing machine as well as my suitcase handle in the hope that it'll stabilize it more as I march down the long, deserted road. Normally, I wouldn't complain about being dropped off one block away, but considering it's nearly midnight and there are only two streetlights on this road, I'm annoyed and irritated beyond belief at the circumstances that have led me to this point.

Chills prickle their way down the back of my neck. It's silent and uncomfortably quiet—something I'm not used to, coming from a city such as New York. I pull my phone out from the back pocket of my jeans and call my best friend. At least she can keep me company while I head toward Reed's house.

“Ophelia?” Claire whispers into the phone. Her voice is low and gravelly, as if she's trying to sleep... or she was on the verge of falling asleep. “What's going on? Did you make it to Reed's yet?”

“Claire, shit.” I place my hand against my forehead and wince, remembering the plans my best friend had gushed about non-stop earlier. “I didn't interrupt your date, did I? How did that go?”

“No.” She snorts, her voice clearing slightly. She groans. “I'm in my bed. The date was going great until the end when he asked if I was interested in a foursome.”

“No.” I stifle a laugh. It's a contradiction to how I was feeling only moments ago, but this is exactly why I called my best friend. “He didn't.”

“Hey,” she's quick to defend. “Still nowhere near as bad as the one guy who asked me what wine I drank at dinner, and when I told him I liked white, he still proceeded to order a

one-hundred-dollar bottle of red. Then, by the end of the meal, claimed he had left his wallet out in the car and didn't even offer to go get it. Worst and biggest waste of two hundred dollars I've ever spent."

"Oh my God." I grin. "I do remember that."

"I'm telling you, Ophelia, dating fucking sucks."

"Tell me about it," I mumble. "At least you're going out on dates. I'm currently walking down a creepy, dark road all by myself. Not to mention that I'm moving in with my brother."

"It's only temporary, Ophelia."

"Doesn't feel like it." I sigh, then inhale a deep breath, hoping it'll make me believe my own words. "At least I hope it's not."

"It's not," she reaffirms. "Besides, it's a good thing you took that self-defense class a couple years ago when we joined that sorority freshman year. I can't believe you have to walk."

I nod, even though she can't see me. She's right.

Claire's been my best friend ever since I met her in one of those speed dating sessions our college organized. I was only nineteen at the time. I didn't have any intention of finding my soulmate or my future husband, but apparently, she did. She has been searching for as long as I've known her.

I don't know where she gets her drive from when I decided to give up a long time ago. Not that I haven't dated over the years, but I haven't been dead set on finding my perfect match.

As far as I'm concerned, love is for the birds.

"It's a good thing I still remember some moves," I tell her. "I guess joining the sorority wasn't completely useless."

"You're right," Claire mumbles, her words dragging into one another. "Are you almost there? Why exactly are you walking by yourself? Reed couldn't pick you up?"

I groan, still trudging down the street. Reed's house comes into view. There's a light turned on the front porch, but otherwise, it's dark. All the windows are pitch-black.

“He had to work tonight. Shouldn’t surprise me, though, considering he’s always working. Working or playing baseball.”

“None of his other roommates are home?”

“No. I don’t think so.” I sigh again, knowing my luck hasn’t been the best this past week. “I’m not really sure where they are. Reed told me one of them had to work. I guess the other is out training or something.”

“If no one is home, how are you going to get in without a key?” Claire asks. “I’m guessing he didn’t leave the house unlocked for you.”

“No. I hope not, anyway.” I snort. “Reed told me he left the spare key under the doormat.”

“Good.” Claire sighs.

I survey the neighborhood, gauging the kind of environment I’ll be living in for the foreseeable future. Well, at least the time it takes me to find another place to live.

“I don’t get it. This is supposed to be a college town,” I tell Claire. “The school is only a few blocks away, but I’ve never seen a college town so... dead.”

“Didn’t you grow up there?”

“Yeah.” I laugh. “But I didn’t grow up around this neighborhood. Our house was on the outskirts of town, and I never had a reason to come over here.”

“Well.” Claire sighs. “It’s not forever, right? You’re only there for a few months.”

The hope in Claire’s voice is enough to bring tears to my eyes. Warm liquid wells behind them, and I sniff, attempting to keep them at bay. I look down and kick at a few pebbles dotted along the street.

“I don’t know to be honest.” I bite down on my bottom lip. “I’d like to go back to New York City, but I don’t even know how I’ll be able to do that. It sounds impossible right now.”

A silence follows my words, and I know exactly what Claire is thinking.

She reads my mind. “I’m sorry you couldn’t stay with me.”

“You’ve already apologized.” I shake my head.

“I know, but it still fucking blows that I couldn’t even take in my best friend. My roommate isn’t moving out for another six months, and there’s no room here. There’s barely enough room for the two of us as it is.”

Take in.

Hearing Claire use those words only makes me feel worse. Like I’m some sort of stray begging for a place to stay. As if I have no home.

“Seriously, Claire. Renting in the city is next to impossible and, well, add in no job on top of it, I get it. I was barely scraping by as it was. I didn’t expect you or anyone else to have a place for me to stay on demand. None of us saw this coming.” I pout. I can’t help it. I still haven’t gotten over how drastic my life has changed in the past two days.

The worst two days of my life.

Day one: get laid off from my coveted internship. Day two: my roommate inexplicably disappears, doesn’t renew our lease, and I find an eviction notice taped to my door. I begged my landlord to give me time, but she wasn’t hearing a word of it. She had stood in the doorway only long enough to allow me to pack whatever I was able to take with me.

My sewing machine and my suitcase.

She had offered for me to come back and pick up the items she was going to leave out on the curb, but at the time, the task seemed impossible. My life had crumbled quickly. I couldn’t think straight.

Bad circumstances usually happen in threes.

At this rate, I’m worried that the saying is true.

Claire's voice softens. "I'm still shocked they pulled the rug out from under you the way they did. Is it even legal?"

"It is." I tilt my head to the side, pressing the phone harder against my ear. "Everyone I talked to says they had the right to lay everyone off. I was just the start, apparently. Interns usually are. It was all in the hands of this shareholder company, anyway. They control everything. Andrew Turner had the largest slice of investment in Travis Sterling's design firm. He pulled all of the company's funding. Travis panicked and immediately started laying everyone off—no warning."

"Shit."

"Yeah, well, money talks. I never met Andrew, but I've seen enough pictures of him to know the kind of person he is. Fucking asshole." I bite down on the side of my cheek. The familiar sickness I've been experiencing all day returns. Landing the internship at Travis Sterling Designs in New York City was a fucking dream come true. I'd dropped practically everything in my life to work there. Only to have it stripped away from me in the most brutal way.

Andrew Turner is now considered my number one enemy.

Claire offers me nothing but her silence in response. She knows I'm right about the money and she doesn't bother trying to convince me. My entire situation is bullshit.

"It's fine." I inhale a deep, cleansing breath, willing myself to believe the words I'm speaking out loud. So far, it hasn't helped. "I'll figure something out."

Uncertainty ebbs its way into my bones, burrowing deep inside me and making a home there.

"I know you will," Claire reassures me.

I look down and kick at the rocks again. They fly out in front of me, skittering out several feet.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Claire asks.

I abruptly stop, leaving Claire's question unanswered. I'm only a few houses down from my brother's but I can't move. I yank on the handle to my suitcase, but it won't budge. The

bottom corner is stuck in a small pothole, and the wheel has popped off. It rolls down the street, landing a few feet away from me.

I guess, I was right. Bad circumstances do happen in threes.

“Shit.” I groan, still holding the phone to my ear. “Could this night possibly get any worse?” I let go of my suitcase, gently placing my sewing machine case on top of it. I want to laugh. I want to cry.

My body can’t decide which emotion to feel. My throat swells, yet I find the urge to laugh at how different my life is in this moment. I swallow down the tears I know are threatening to come, and I move to pick up the wheel.

“What happened?” Claire asks, but I don’t answer her.

I’m mid pick-up, bending down to grab the wheel, when an unfamiliar sound stops me. A quick succession of pounding comes from my right. It gets louder as if it’s growing closer to me. It’s a noise I haven’t heard, aside from my own feet and the wheels of my suitcase grinding the pavement with every step. It’s the rhythmic beat of another person’s footsteps on an otherwise desolate street. The air catches in my throat. I look up to see someone charging in my direction. He’s running at full speed. Directly at me.

His face is covered in shadows and darkness. The hood of his sweatshirt is pulled up over his head, hiding him from me.

My heart races in my chest, and the blood drains from my face. My neck prickles with nerves, and my stomach flips.

His footsteps grow louder. I use every instinct in my body when he reaches me.

I immediately let go of my phone and drop it onto the street. I have no idea where it lands. All I hear is a loud smack, the sound of crushing metal hitting asphalt. I have no clue if Claire is still on the other end. I lift my arm, stopping the man before he has the chance to attack me. He stops, his eyes growing wide, realizing I’m prepared to fight back. I haven’t

been able to see those eyes until now. Not until he's inches from my face, realization replacing his determined expression.

Not today, asshole.

I wrap my hand around his wrist. With my other hand, I grip his bicep and push him backward with as much force as I can muster.

His yell echoes across the otherwise empty street. The deep guttural growl that erupts from his chest as he falls back onto the street shoots straight through me. Adrenaline immediately courses through my veins. I tackled him. I *actually* tackled him to the ground.

I kneel over him, pressing my knee into his chest, holding him there and pinning him to the asphalt. He begs for me to get off him.

“What the fuck?” he grits out.

“Wrong girl, asshole!” I grit between my clenched teeth.

He tries to grab my knee with his free hand. I have the other held down on the ground. His hood has slipped back off his head, exposing his face. The lone streetlight above us highlights his features, and I immediately make a mental list of all of them. You know, in case I need to call the police afterward. If my phone still works.

Dark-brown hair has been cut short on the sides, and long strands at the top fall back away from his tan forehead. His thick eyebrows are knitted. He opens his eyes. They're a bright shade of green with golden flecks, igniting with anger. His near-perfect sculpted jawline is clenched tight.

My heart continues to hammer in my chest. I lean down, bringing my face closer to his.

“What is wrong with you?” I ask him.

He stops moving, still grunting against my knee pressed into his chest. His eyes widen, and he inhales a sharp, tight breath.

“What is wrong with me?” he asks. “What is wrong with *you*? What the hell do you think you're doing?”

“What did you think, huh?” I ask him, my eyebrows arching across my forehead. “Did you think I was an easy target? Woman walking alone in the dark?”

“What?” he asks, frowning. Shock is written across his regrettably gorgeous face. I hate admitting it to myself, considering the man tried to snatch me off the street. “I wasn’t trying to attack you.”

“Yes, you were.”

He groans, squeezing his eyes shut before he opens them again. “I was not,” he insists. “I was running. Like I do every night. *You* were the one who attacked *me*.”

Normally, I wouldn’t pause to consider an attacker’s excuse, but the softness in this man’s eyes urges me to listen. It’s not that I immediately believe him, but I take my chances anyway.

Aside from the fact that his skin is covered in a thin film of sweat and his hair is equally just as drenched, there is one white earbud resting in his ear, while the other sits on the concrete beside his head.

The distant, faded sound of drums and guitar flow from the one small plastic bud. I don’t move my stance, but I glance over my shoulder at his feet. He’s wearing a pair of worn running shoes. Printed in the corner of his black T-shirt is a baseball with a patriot hat on top of it. The same logo as my brother Reed’s baseball team.

I realize none of this equates to proof that this man wasn’t intending on attacking me. He was clearly heading in my direction, but my intuition urges me to give him the benefit of the doubt.

He rests his head back on the concrete as soon as I loosen the pressure on his chest. I move my leg and let go of his arm, bringing myself to a stand. I’m cautious, moving slowly... Just in case.

The man bends to pick up his lost earbud. He fishes inside his pocket and grabs his phone, tapping the screen to stop the music.

My heart is still pounding, and my cheeks are warm. The man catches my eyes with his. He hasn't changed his expression. There's a permanent scowl written across his impossibly gorgeous face. If we didn't meet in this way, and if I didn't think he was trying to snatch me up on the street, I might have immediately fallen for him. It'd be impossible not to with a jaw cut like his.

I don't let my guard down, though. Even if I might catch myself staring at him longer than I should.

I swallow the heat in my throat and take a moment to steady my breath.

"What?" the man asks, impatient with my silence. The obvious anger inside him is now spread across his gorgeous face. "Are you going to tell me why you thought I was attacking you? I think you at least owe me that much."

I place my hands on my hips, biting back the tears behind my eyes. I can feel them swelling and threatening to spill at any second. My chin quivers. Today is quite possibly the worst fucking day of my life.

"The wheel of my suitcase broke off." I gesture toward it resting on its side in the middle of the street. The wheel sits along the curb several feet away.

The man turns to look where I'm pointing. He sighs, then slowly walks over to the wheel, bypassing my suitcase to pick it up.

"So..." He holds it up between two fingers. "This is your justification for attacking me?" He frowns, glancing between the wheel and me. He rolls it over in his hand several times. "Who knew a wheel could do so much damage?"

My anger boils to the surface, keeping my sad tears at bay. My cheeks inflame and I tighten my hands into two fists. "I was bending down to pick it up when I saw you charging at me. What else was I supposed to think?"

My teeth grind together, and the side of my head pulsates. I just want to leave this man, grab my suitcase, and get to Reed's house.

The man steps closer, narrowing the space between us. My suitcase is still several feet away from me.

I keep my guard up, aware the man could be bluffing. He could be pretending to be innocent, placing all the guilt on me. Maybe he suspects I'll fall for his charm and allow my defenses to slip long enough for him to attack me again.

I take another look around the neighborhood, checking to see if anyone else has come out in the time I tackled the man to the ground to now.

There's no one. It's just as silent as it was before.

The stranger extends his arm, holding the wheel out to me. I slowly open my hand, never taking my eyes from his.

The corner of his mouth curls into a sly grin. For a moment, I think he might tell me he understands why I thought he was attacking me. For a moment, I'm naïve, thinking we would trade apologies, then go our separate ways. I'm silently hoping this stranger will see the exhaustion and defeat in my expression. My feet are throbbing, and my head is pounding as if it's been beaten against a wall. Honestly, my body aches in places I didn't know existed.

But the second he opens that mouth of his, I realize I am wrong. He isn't sympathetic toward me.

"Maybe you should have bought a better suitcase." His eyes narrow, and the muscles in his jaw harden.

The anger from earlier boils up again. Only this time, the tears from today's events stay. They don't waiver. One spills over my lashes, sliding down my cheek. I quickly swipe the warm liquid away, not wanting this stranger to see how his words have affected me.

He doesn't flinch. He places his hood back over his head and backs away, leaving me standing in the middle of the street holding a single broken suitcase wheel. I stand there with my feet bolted to the pothole-ridden asphalt, watching until the man has disappeared back into the shadows.

Welcome to your new home, Ophelia.

TWO



HUNTER

“Hunt! Over here!”

I narrow my eyes, hoping it will magically make it easier to find my roommate in the darkness. Music pounds through the open doors of a truck backed up onto the shore of the lake, parked on the outer edges of the crowd circling the enormous bonfire. The orange and yellow flames flicker across their faces. The moon on the opposite end of the lake peeks through the large oak trees, the white glow sparkling across the surface of the water.

The town’s lake is a well-known party spot for my baseball team, the Northeast Rebels. Every night after every game and scrimmage for the past however many years, this has been tradition. Even on the nights we haven’t played a game, the lake is used as an excuse for everyone to get ridiculously drunk. For me, I’ve never been too fond of coming to these foolish parties. Some believe it’s superstition not to attend. I believe it’s a waste of time ... most of the time.

I elbow my way through the crowd, catching my roommate Dawson on the other side of the bonfire. The orange light from the fire illuminates him and his blue Rebels uniform. Asshole didn’t even bother changing after practice.

I wipe the sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand and massage the spot on my chest where the woman in the street tackled me earlier. The echo of the pain she inflicted on me still lingers.

I don't want to admit she hurt me, but I'd be lying if I said she didn't. She was fucking gorgeous kneeling over me with the swell of her breasts only inches from my face. They were nearly spilling out of her tank top. Her small hand gripped my wrist as I grunted in pain. She had more strength than it appeared. I can't deny how my dick sprung to life at the sight of her over me. It didn't care what type of situation she'd put me in—that she was basically the one to attack me. Her tight, smooth thighs were clenched around my waist, and that was all it took.

I don't know why she was walking down the street dragging a suitcase behind her in the middle of the night, and up until the moment she was straddling me on the hard asphalt, I'd never seen her before.

I massage the lingering pain away when I meet Dawson. The scented mixture of weed and liquor wafts through the air. I scrunch my nose, sniffing the familiar scent, deciding whether I want to indulge or not tonight. It wasn't part of my plan when I first showed up, but I might reconsider now. Dawson tries to pass me one of his famous tightly-rolled joints, but I decline his silent offer and shake my head. I grab the plastic red cup of beer from his other hand instead. I guess I've decided on my weapon of choice tonight.

Dawson eyes me up and down. "Did you seriously run all the way here from our house?" His words seep between his clenched teeth. He holds his breath tightly, his chest puffing and hardening before he blows out a cloud of smoke.

"Yeah," I say. "It isn't that far." It's true. Eden is ridiculously small. Especially considering it has one of the most popular colleges in New England.

"It's four miles," Dawson mutters. "*And* we played a scrimmage today."

"I'm fine." Dawson isn't truly concerned for me. He's simply stating a fact.

I don't mention the woman who attacked me on the street.

“I’ve always known you were crazy, but that’s insane, man.” Dawson shakes his head in disbelief and hands me a shot glass filled to the top with a brown liquid.

Without hesitation, I toss it back, then chase it with the beer still in my hand. I hiss between my teeth. The burn from the alcohol spreads across my chest. It dissolves into the pain still lingering there from where the woman had pressed her knee.

“I think I needed this more than I thought I did.” I swallow back the burning sensation in my chest.

“We practice six days a week, Hunt,” Dawson points out. “Don’t you think you take it a bit overboard?”

“No,” I tell him, blowing a hot breath through my nose. “Don’t you think it’s ridiculous you show up to these ridiculous lake parties every weekend?”

“It’s bad luck if I don’t.” He shrugs. He’s serious. He believes the parties are the trick to our winning record. “You put the team in jeopardy every time you don’t come. You don’t show up, it’ll ruin the season come early spring.”

I press my lips together and clench my jaw. I hate when he tries to question my dedication to our team, as if me going to a lake party will somehow jeopardize our chances of winning. We all have our own superstitions, even me, but getting hammered after every game is insane.

Baseball has been my life ever since I learned how to walk. I can’t speak for anyone else on my team but I fucking live and breathe the game. The way my hand feels as it slides into my glove. The way my arm tightens as I swing my arm, throwing the ball as fast and hard as humanly possible. Velocity. Distance. Accuracy. It’s a thrill I have yet to match with anything else in my life.

So, listening to Dawson get on to me for not going to as many lake parties baffles me. As if he’s cared as much about the team’s success as the rest of our teammates.

“I could say the same for you by coming to these parties.” I make a point, gesturing to the crowd. “Every time you get

drunk, you put the whole team in jeopardy. Remember when you were hungover and showed up to practice the next day? You couldn't hit a ball all day, and you struck out more times than I cared to count.”

I ignore the anger growing on his face. His eyebrows slant and his mouth shifts to a frown.

“You're here tonight.” He crosses his arms over his chest, staring at me through his glassy eyes. “You ran here all the way from our neighborhood. Why?”

I snatch one of the bottles of whiskey scattered across the table and refill my shot glass. I lift it in the air in an imaginary toast to Dawson before kicking it back. The liquid slides down my throat easier than it did with the first shot. I set the glass down on the picnic table beside me, and I squeeze my eyes shut and hiss when a sharp pain stabs the back of my head. It lasts long enough to cause me to lift my hand, massaging it the same way I massaged my chest. It must be from when my head hit the concrete.

“Are you okay?” Dawson slurs. He's already tipsy.

“I told you,” I grunt. “I'm fine.”

His concern for me stops there, seemingly satisfied with my answer. It fades just as quickly as the pain at the back of my head.

“In fact, there is a reason I decided to come.” I give him a dark grin, ignoring the aches in my body. I sniff and roll my shoulders, thinking about my future. Knowing my future is wide open and completely in my hands sparks a firework in my chest. *I'm free. I'm fucking free.*

“Oh, yeah.” Dawson nods. “I forgot that was today. You signed the paper, then? You're free?”

“Yep.” I smile. I can't help myself. “I'm officially out. I actually signed the paperwork earlier this week, but Jamie emailed me the official copies a few hours ago. It's done.”

Dawson knows how important this was for me. Him and Reed, our other roommate, know how this one condition from my family has kept me tied down. It's been a burden weighing

on me ever since my mother passed away. But that stopped today.

“So...” He grins, realizing this is a rare occasion—me willingly coming to a lake party. “I say we fucking drink to that!” he yells, but it gets drowned out by the crowd surrounding us. No one gives a shit about my small celebration. We both toss back another shot.

This is usually the point when I stop myself from taking it too far. Three shots are always my limit. It’s just enough liquor to warm my insides and relax the thoughts that threaten to constantly cloud my brain. Any more than this and I’ll barely be able to lift my arm high enough to pitch at practice tomorrow.

Responsibilities and limitations.

Tonight, though, I’m considering loosening the reins. It’s been months since I’ve given myself permission to truly be carefree. Toeing the line between control and losing it is a thrilling game I find myself playing every time I show up to these types of parties. However, I figure I could break away from my routine. Just a bit. If there were any reason to relax, today would be it.

Which brings me to the woman staring at me from across the fire.

She’s sitting at the edge of the dock with her feet dipped in the water. She leans back on one hand as she uses the other to bring a perfectly rolled joint to her swollen pink lips. She shakes her head and tips it back, blowing out a large cloud of smoke. She’s a mess. Same as always.

Dawson catches onto my shift of attention. He glances over his shoulder. “When was the last time you talked to Penny?”

“It’s been a while,” I mumble.

“I’ve seen her around but she hasn’t mentioned you.”

“I guess I’m sort of surprised. She’s never been shy about voicing her opinions. Especially when it comes to me.”

“I’m surprised, too.” He laughs. “I know you’ve always had a thing for each other.”

“Let’s get one thing straight: Penny and I never had a thing.” I remove the cap on my head and run my fingers through my hair. I put it back on and take a sip of my beer. “She just wanted to fuck a baseball player. I was hoping she had her fill after me.”

“Huh.” Dawson nods. “Makes sense, but I don’t think she had her fill. I heard Ben talking about how she came over to his dorm the other night.”

“See?” I lift my drink. “She doesn’t give a shit about me. Good.”

Dawson turns around, grabbing the bottle of whiskey again. He stumbles and catches himself before falling on top of the table. He’s more drunk than I thought.

He refills our shot glasses. “Have you ever been interested in anyone?” He slurs his words. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you actually date before.”

I glance over my shoulder. Penny is still sitting on the edge of the dock. This time she’s lifted her cup, chugging her drink as if she hasn’t had one in months.

“No, not at all.” It’s the truth. “I was never that interested in her.”

It’s odd to be having this conversation with Dawson. Especially when it sounds like we could be having it about him.

“I’ll tell you the same thing I’ve said repeatedly for the past year: the last thing I need is a relationship.” I point a finger at him, driving the message home.

“I know.” He fishes a pretzel from an open bag on the table and pops it in his mouth. He chews on it, then lifts his half-crumpled plastic cup of beer to his mouth. He dramatically swallows with hooded eyes. “You’ve said the same shit for the past three years.”

It’s true. I have.

“Exactly, and that shit still hasn’t changed.” I laugh. “It won’t.”

“No one is saying we have to go pro.” He shrugs, popping another pretzel. He knows going pro is my biggest reason why I never take anything with women further than I do. “I’m still not sure what I plan on doing with my career.”

“Right.” I nod, finishing off my beer. I refill it, starting to feel the effects of the liquor and beer coursing through my body. “I never said it had to be your plan too. But it’s always been mine. Go pro.”

“Go pro,” Dawson says in unison. He rolls his eyes. “I know.”

“Don’t do that,” I warn, reaching for another cup of beer. I didn’t plan on drinking another until I saw Dawson rolling his eyes. I don’t give a fuck if he cares how dedicated I am to my training. Getting drafted for a spot on a Major League team has been my dream since I was a kid. I’m not going to let anyone or anything stand in my way.

“Don’t do what?” Dawson asks.

I ignore his question and glance over my shoulder, following Dawson’s gaze over my shoulder. When I turn around, I’m staring back at Penny. She’s looking directly back at me. Her eyes glint with the reflection of the fire. She sticks her tongue out, swiping it across her mouth.

Fuck.

The liquor and beer I’ve hastily consumed in the past ten minutes isn’t wasting any time. I’m about to hit my perfect spot. Not drunk but loose enough to no longer feel the pain from the woman who attacked me on the street earlier. The stabbing pain that echoed across the back of my head has now faded to a dull thud.

“Penny is staring at you,” Dawson mutters from behind his cup.

“Yeah, I noticed.” My cheeks warm with heat, the effects of the alcohol hitting my veins. It feels as if a switch has been flipped inside me. The once tight and aching muscles are now

relaxed. I should get home before I take it too far. “I don’t plan on staying. In fact, I came to grab my glove from your car.”

“I don’t have it.” He shakes his head. I’m losing him by the second, the alcohol now settling into his veins. “I saw it in the locker room and figured you’d left it there on purpose.”

“Well, damn.” I’ll just have to find it at practice tomorrow.

“Hey.” Dawson gestures toward me and slaps the back of his hand against my chest. “Look at it this way. You got a few free drinks out of hanging out for a bit.”

I laugh. He always has a way of twisting a situation to look at the bright side. “True.”

“Hey, Hunt.”

Dammit. I didn’t get out of here fast enough.

Dawson’s eyes shift to my side, moving along with Penny as she interjects herself into our conversation. She swiftly sidles up to Dawson’s side and rests her elbow on his shoulder.

They look fucking ridiculous considering she’s nearly a foot taller than him. Her cropped halter top is wrapped loosely around her chest. With the way her arm is bent to rest on Dawson’s shoulder, her tit nearly pops out from the side of her shirt.

She grins as if she’s caught me jerking off.

“Long time, no see.” She twists her mouth and slides her tongue across her bottom lip.

She’s expecting me to react. I don’t want to.

Honestly, fucking Penny is the last thing I have on my mind tonight.

I truly only came to grab my glove from Dawson and to tell him the good news. Now that I know I won’t be grabbing my glove, I figure it’s my time to head back home. Hopefully this time it will be minus the woman with the broken suitcase.

“I was just about to head out, actually.” I give Penny a closed mouth smile.

“Oh.” She frowns. “Come on.” Her bottom lip pops out to a pout. The feeling it gives me is a conundrum. It both turns me off and on at the same time. I fucking hate it. Stupid fucking alcohol.

“Sorry, Penny. I think Dawson would make better company than me right now.” I fake my apology, waving my hand out to the crowd. “Or take your pick of any one of my teammates. I’m sure you’re familiar with all of them by now.”

Penny scowls. Dawson’s jaw drops.

“Damn, man.” Dawson giggles. I can see the alcohol swimming in his eyes. He’s fucked tomorrow. I’m already expecting him to miss practice. “I’m not sure if you meant that as a compliment or an insult.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I laugh and tap him on the shoulder. I start to back away, chucking my plastic cup in the trash bag sitting at the end of the table, but Penny is quick to stop me.

She snatches my empty cup before it leaves my hand and adds more whiskey to it. It’s the same whiskey Dawson just poured into his. She’s grinning the whole time until she hands my cup back to me. I take it from her and see she’s poured nearly two inches of liquor into it. That’s double what Dawson was giving me.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to ignore what you just said. Have a drink with me.” She holds her cup high and taps it against mine. She brings it to her mouth and smiles against the rim, peering over the edge with narrowed eyes.

I know better. When someone says one drink, it never is. I’m also not naïve enough to disregard the fact that she has probably fucked nearly all of my teammates. Apparently, she doesn’t care.

“I’ve already had one too many drinks tonight,” I tell Penny.

“But you haven’t had one with me.” She bounces on her heels causing her breasts to jump.

“Not tonight,” I tell her. “I have early classes tomorrow. If I fuck this up, I fuck up my season, and there’s no way I’m doing that by wasting my time with you.” I can’t help it. Penny is fucking hot, but she isn’t worth it. She isn’t worth the risk.

She pouts and stares at me like a wounded puppy.

“Hey, man.” Dawson claps his hand on my shoulder. “We can grab a rideshare home later. You should celebrate tonight.”

I shake my head and sigh. Dawson isn’t exactly the best influence.

Maybe it’s the adrenaline still coursing through me from my run in with the woman on the street earlier, or the alcohol now fully settling into my bloodstream, but I lift my cup to my mouth and swallow before I have a chance to convince myself to stop.

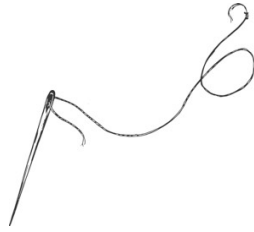
I’m not doing this for Penny.

No. Fuck that.

My split-second decision has everything to do with today. The ties and chains are broken. I am responsible only for myself. I’m a free man.

The second the familiar fire blazes across my chest, I grin. Nothing, not even this, will keep me from putting baseball first. The real work begins tomorrow. Tonight, I’m fucking celebrating.

THREE



OPHELIA

“Wait. I don’t think I understand. You moved in with Reed and his roommates?”

“It’s only temporary. A month or two, tops.”

I can tell my mother isn’t convinced, but I don’t care. The concern she is feeling for me is practically pouring through the phone. Her voice is the perfect combination of softness with a hint of disapproval. It’s a tone I learned to identify growing up, being the only girl out of my siblings. I absolutely love my mother, but she’s always been unfailing in voicing her opinion. It’s not that I don’t love my parents—I’ve been lucky to have been raised by the two most generous people I’ve ever known—but I refuse to move back in with them. Somehow, moving in with Reed is infinitely better than moving to their retirement home down in Florida. After the three of us moved out after high school, my parents quickly sold our childhood home and moved to the state where nearly every transplanted New Englander moves when they retire.

Like Reed, I know my parents wouldn’t care if I had showed up at their front door in the middle of the night. But unlike moving in with my younger brother, an ache in my chest tells me moving in with my parents would, in a way, be admitting defeat. Even if all the circumstances that have led me up to this point haven’t been in my control.

I sigh and lay back on my new bed. My head hits the pillow, and it sinks straight through to the mattress. I wish I had thought to grab my own pillow before leaving my apartment. I guess I’d been so caught off guard by my landlord

kicking me out, I didn't think to grab it. All the other furniture inside it, including my bed frame, were included in our lease. I bite back the tears welling inside me, realizing I own next to nothing. Everything I own is shoved inside the broken suitcase sitting in the middle of my new room.

"All I'm saying is..." My mother sighs. "You're always welcome to come stay with us."

"I know, Mom." I smile, her love for me replacing the ache in my chest. "But I think this is the best place for me. If I find another job in New York, I'll be available for an interview if they need me. I wouldn't be able to do that if I were in Florida."

"Well, I'm thankful Reed had room for you to stay at his place."

"Me, too." I sit up and bite down on my bottom lip, looking around my new room. Aside from the mountain of baseball equipment shoved into every corner, it isn't too terrible. I have a bed and a small table beside it. Oh, and the small detail of having a roof over my head. It may not be my dream room, but it'll do for now. I try to remind myself I'm only passing through. Living with my brother is only a pit stop.

"What will you do now?"

My mother's question weighs on my heart like a bag of wet sand. It's an impossible question to answer, and I know if I tell my mother this, it will only make her worry more than she already does. I don't want to give her more ammunition to use in a second round of convincing me to move down to Florida instead of attempting to salvage what's left of my life and career.

"I'm not sure." I sigh and look down at my lap. I'm still wearing the same clothes from last night. By the time I made it into the house, I was too tired to change. I headed straight for the room Reed told me was mine and crashed. Dirt is still scattered and smeared across my knees from tackling the man who I had mistakenly thought was attacking me. Three large red scratches stretch across the skin of my knee. I drag the pad

of my finger across them and tilt my head to the side, trying not to let doubt settle in the back of my mind.

“I’ll figure it out, Mom. Don’t worry. My dream is still my dream whether it was ripped away from me or not. The Travis Sterling internship wasn’t the only design firm out there. There will be others, and there are plenty of companies for me to apply to. I just need to do a bit of research before applying to the right one.”

“You should apply to all of them, dear,” Mom suggests. “You’re so talented. I don’t think it matters where you work.”

I bite down on the inside of my cheek. My mother has spent years trying to understand how the fashion industry works. I can’t fault her for her lack of knowledge on the inner workings of my job—and although she means well, it doesn’t magically turn her words into reality—but considering I’d quit college specifically for this position with only a year left to graduate, the gut punch from losing this job seems to be hitting a lot worse.

“I know you think that, Mom, but I can’t apply to all of them. Only to the ones that fit with my line of work.”

Travis Sterling’s paid internship had been the perfect fit.

I hear my mother’s thoughts before she utters them out loud.

I shouldn’t be picky when I’m in the position I’m currently in. Or I should go back to school—her next suggestion, no doubt.

But despite her wish for me to apply anywhere and everywhere that would even consider me, I still feel the truth in my gut. I need to do what’s best for me.

“A job is a job, sweetheart. Or you could always go back and get those last classes done.”

It’s exactly what I expected her to say.

I snap my head to the right when I hear what sounds like a door closing from beyond my room. The dull sound of wood slamming against wood echoes down the hallway, and I

internally sigh with relief. It's the perfect excuse to get off the phone with my mother. It's not that I don't enjoy talking to her. The wounds are simply too fresh for the kind of conversation she's offering me right now.

"I should go," I tell her. "I think Reed is up and I haven't seen him yet."

"I hate that he works at that bartending job. I don't know how he manages it between classes, practices, and games."

I love my mother, but I can already feel her shifting the conversation to Reed. Subtle criticism disguised by concern.

I run my hand across my knee and the dirt dusted across my skin. I scrunch my nose. "Mom, I need to go take a shower."

"Okay, sweetie." She exhales. "I just want you to know your father and I are still very proud of you. I know you'll find something."

Her words ignite a warmth across my chest. "Thanks, Mom."

I hang up the phone and set it down on the nightstand beside me. The screen goes black, and I sit up from the bed, rifling through my suitcase. I grab a sports bra, my favorite pair of leggings, and I lay them out on the bed before crossing the room and locking the door. It's a habit I've forced myself to be conscious of while I'm staying here.

It's a habit I had growing up.

After clicking the lock shut, I remove my T-shirt and shorts before stepping out of my underwear. I toss them onto the bed and head toward the bathroom. Even though I'm basically staying in Reed's storage room, I can't deny how relieved I was when he told me I would have my own bathroom.

I was under the assumption I'd be sharing it with three men. This is another silver lining to add to my incredibly short list of positives in my life at the moment. Nonetheless, it's there.

I had no trouble falling asleep last night despite the fact I feel like I'm living in a stranger's home. In a way, I am. I haven't met either of my brother's roommates, and I still have yet to see Reed. I've spent the better part of my morning contemplating the fact that I might be the only person to have stepped foot inside this house in the past twenty-four hours. I feel dirty. The shame and regret for how the events of yesterday unfolded are sticking to my skin.

I need a steaming hot shower.

Once I'm completely undressed, I swing open the bathroom door, ready to wash away all the dirt from yesterday, but my body stiffens as the blood shoots down to the tips of my toes in shock. A high pitch yelp squeezes up my throat and out of my mouth. It's a sound I didn't even know I could make. My arms harden, and my legs suddenly feel as if they were made of lead, refusing to move. I swallow and stare at the person in front of me. I can practically feel my eyes widen and my chest tighten as I hold my breath.

Every inch and plane of this man's back is on full display for me.

At first, when I catch sight of him, he has his back turned toward me. But when he hears me bursting through the door, he turns half of his body my way, twisting at the waist. That's when I eye his familiar face. Heat blooms across my cheeks.

It's the man from last night. The one I mistook for attacking me. Only this time he's covered in dirt. Oh, and the small detail of him being completely and utterly naked.

The same intense green eyes that widened in shock when I tackled him to the ground. The same curl to his lips when he'd handed over my broken suitcase wheel.

Time has slowed. I'm certain of it, because the man from last night just stands there, allowing my eyes to roam over his body as if he's part of a museum exhibit, and I've just purchased my ticket.

As if I've lost all control of myself, my eyes wander south. I study and survey every inch of his body. Every defined

muscle, each speck of dirt sprinkled and smeared across his skin, all the way down to the smooth, round curve of his ass cheeks that connect seamlessly to his muscle-defined legs. I try not to look but my eyes naturally fall in that direction as a tingling sensation blooms between my thighs. I swallow the heat filling my throat and ballooning in my chest.

Get a fucking grip, Ophelia.

I force my gaze to pull away from below his waist. Drops of moisture dot across his tan skin, several creating lines down his tattoo-covered arms. My eyes land squarely on his.

My brows knit, and I'm confused as to how he's already covered in drops of water when it looks as if he's about to step into the shower, not out of it.

My stomach does a summersault the second it registers that he's doing the exact same thing as I am. His eyes are pinned to mine. He hasn't spoken a word. But unlike me, his body isn't frozen. He slowly turns around, a knowing expression transforming his face. One side of his mouth curls into a crooked grin. He's waiting for me to react.

Then, as if a vacuum has been switched off, all the air returns to the bathroom. The sound of the running shower hits my ears at the same time the steam slams against my face. Hot, thick moisture sticks to my skin, and I breathe in a sharp burst of hot air as I swing my hands up to my chest. They slam against my breasts. I'm now fully aware of just how naked I am.

How naked we *both* are.

Why am I still standing here? I should have stormed out the second the man saw me. I should have turned back around as fast as humanly possible.

But I didn't. And I haven't.

I know we've only been standing here staring at one another for less than a minute, but it feels like an eternity, and I feel like an idiot.

I blink several times, forcing the words to pour out of my mouth. "What are you doing in my bathroom?"

The man tilts his head to the side. His arms are still crossed over his chest, shielding me from his perfectly sculpted muscles. “Your bathroom?”

“Yes.” I nod once, quickly looking to either side of me for a towel or anything I can use to cover myself.

My heart nearly drops into my stomach when I don’t find one. The only towel I can find is the hand towel draped over the metal bar beside the sink. I snatch it from the rod and cover my chest the best I can. The bottom hem barely reaches my belly button. My breasts are still exposed on either side of the towel. Using my arm, I pin it to my chest.

I blink and shake my head, turning my attention back to the man in front of me. “Yes. This is my bathroom.”

“Huh.” He frowns. The corners of his mouth turn down as he considers my answer. His eyes roam over my body. His mouth presses into a thin line, clearly holding back his amusement at my ill attempt to cover myself. “Well then ...”

“Well, what?” I ask him, feeling my eyebrows arch in anticipation. My heart hammers inside my chest. If I thought my life has absolutely turned upside down and I’ve found myself in an alternate universe, this moment would be it. I’m simply not the same woman I was yesterday.

Today, I’m a woman holding a hand towel against her naked body, attempting miserably to shield herself from an equally naked man.

“Are you going to join me?” He nods back to the shower behind him, the steam already filling the square space. Water rushes out of the shower head, filtering through the man’s thick voice. “Or are you going to stand there and watch me? To be honest, I think I’m good with either option.”

My lips part, and I gasp. It isn’t audible above the streaming water, but I feel it, nonetheless. My thrashing heart only pounds harder as his question sinks in.

His eyes survey my body once again, and although his question is enough to spark anger in me, I remain silent. I step backward and then again until my feet move from the tile to

the hardwood of my bedroom. I keep the towel pressed to my chest and use the other to hold onto the door.

I open my mouth even more while I decide what to say, only to come up empty. There's not a single word. He is still staring at me, waiting for a clever response to his question.

With my heart still pounding away at my ribcage, I slam the door in his face.

FOUR



HUNTER

I should have known.

Smack.

Reed cracks the baseball I just hurled down the field. I sigh in frustration as I follow where it goes, down center right field. I squint against the morning sun before turning back to see him sporting his best shit-eating grin. I shake my head and bend down and pick up another ball. I roll it in my hand, rubbing my fingertips across the red strings.

“What happened to your arm, Hunt?” Reed laughs. “Did you somehow lose some muscle mass in the past hour?”

“Of course not.” I narrow my eyes. “Nothing happened to it.” I turn, shifting my hips to the side, and settle into my usual routine before throwing another pitch. Pinching the brim of my cap with my fingertips, I adjust it to where it sits just above my eyebrows. I dig the balls of my feet into the dirt, bending my knees just enough to ground myself onto the mound. I look up from my hands and stare at Reed, releasing a heavy breath.

I’m not going to lie, I am off, and the fact that Reed notices is enough to drive the irritation sizzling under my skin even deeper.

I stare at the brick wall of the building behind the field. In large blue and red letters, the team logo for the Northeast Rebels is painted across it. The sports building and the team field is located on the far side of campus. Right now, Reed and I are the only ones out here practicing.

I straighten my back and take another deep breath. In one swift movement, I hitch my left leg and swing my arm back. The ball launches from my hand toward Reed.

His eyes follow the ball before he swings his bat, cracking it against the ball once again. It flies straight down the middle of the field, and the corners of his mouth curl into a smug grin.

“Fuck” I mutter, swiping my hand across my mouth.

I should have known. I should have known my incident with Reed’s sister fucked me up. Shit, I should have known she was Reed’s sister last night when she tackled me to the ground. It’s messed up my game.

Other than the obvious fact she’d been rolling her broken suitcase down the street toward our house in the middle of the night by herself, she also shared *some* resemblance to her brother. My best friend. My teammate.

Other than their share of a deep shade of thick brown hair, their noses seemed to have the same pointed tip. They didn’t share too many features, but fuck, there is enough to know they are related.

“I thought you’d trip me up with some pitches today considering you’re now free!” Reed shouts from his position on home base, bringing me back to our training session.

We’d already practiced earlier this morning with our team, but while the rest of us had gone home to shower, Reed had stayed behind to get in some extra batting practice. While I was gone, he’d used the automatic pitching machine but begged me to come back. I originally said no, which is why he was shocked when I’d stormed out onto the field without a word and started throwing from the pitcher’s mound.

“Trust me, Reed, I’m just getting started.” I rotate my arm dramatically like a windmill.

“You’re lying.” He laughs. “You weren’t pitching this bad earlier with the rest of the team. You’re throwing as if you just learned how to play yesterday.”

“I’m fine,” I mutter. “I’m just a bit tired.”

I usually throw Reed's insults back at him with ones better than the kind he's dishing out, but I don't have the energy for it now.

I haven't told him about the incident with his sister this morning. There was no fucking way I was going to tell him I'd already seen his sister naked... Even if it wasn't intentional. And I didn't tell him about last night, either. As far as he knows, I haven't met her.

Reed is my best friend, but he also keeps his personal life to himself. For the most part. Other than a few details.

He's the catcher for our team. Without him, half of my pitches would be absolute shit. He's originally from Eden. His parents moved to Florida a few years ago, and he has a sister.

The one I met last night.

Her coming to live with us was a spur of the moment decision on his part. Dawson and I haven't been told the whys or the hows. We weren't even given the choice to say yes or no. He didn't ask permission, but then again, I didn't give a fuck. I have my own life to worry about. I didn't give a shit about the circumstances leading up to his sister's reasons for needing to stay with us for a while.

That was for Reed and her to figure out.

"Come on." Reed's smile fades. "I'm serious. I thought you'd be relieved to be free."

"I am." I draw my eyebrows together. It's true, signing on the dotted line has definitely been a highlight of my life, but I hate talking about personal shit when we play. Reed doesn't talk about himself, yet he doesn't shy away from digging his nose in *my* life.

"Then, act like it." Reed lifts his bat, rotating it in small circles above his head. His elbows are bent at the perfect angle. "Remember, the three of us are trying to go pro by the end of the year. It's the beginning of fall already and we don't have much time before the season starts."

"You mean you and I want to go pro. I think Dawson has other plans." I chuckle and bend down to grab another ball

from the bucket. I think back to last night at the party when Dawson was taking shot after shot. He didn't quit until long after I did. When he'd shown up to practice looking like he'd rolled around in a pile of shit, Coach sent him home.

But Dawson's lack of dedication doesn't surprise me. That's where Reed and I differ from our roommate. Dawson has always been the more relaxed player on the team, only doing what he needs to do to get by.

Reed's passion for the team runs just as deep as mine. At times, I wonder if his dedication is greater than mine sometimes. He's been out here practicing for at least five hours now.

"If Dawson doesn't want to go pro, that's on him. I just wish he'd admit it to himself and to the team. It's tough when he only puts in fifty percent of the effort."

"Especially when Coach wants to push us harder, and especially after last season."

"Don't remind me." I roll my eyes, refusing to think about last season. Our team lost nearly every game with the exception of three. And of those three, Reed, Dawson, and I were the only ones to produce scores for the team. After the last game, Coach basically did a complete overhaul. The three of us stayed on. Although we're still unsure why Dawson even bothers.

I nod without saying a word. I love Dawson but I agree with Reed. His lack of effort is a drag on the team at times.

"What's the plan now that you're out from under your brother's thumb?" Reed asks.

"Shit." I huff a humorless laugh. "I can basically do whatever I want. I'm still hoping to get drafted by Boston before the end of the year. Isn't that still your plan?"

"Of course." He continues stretching and rolling his shoulders.

Good. It'll be nice to have a training partner just as dedicated to getting drafted to the Major Leagues as I am. I

shift my hips to the side, preparing to throw another pitch. Reed hasn't even lifted his bat in the air yet.

I watch Reed from where I'm standing on the pitcher's mound, realizing something myself. "Hey, Reed."

He looks up from his bat, still unconsciously swinging it back and forth as if to keep his arm warm. He lifts his chin. "Yeah?"

"When was the last time you went home?"

Part of me is asking because I know between classes, his job, and practice, Reed hasn't bothered to go home.

Second, I'm testing him. He hasn't bothered mentioning his sister, and I'm wondering if it might be the fact that he's been too busy to remember. We tend to get wrapped up in our training and games to notice what's happening around us.

"I was there last night," he answers.

"Really?"

"Of course," he says as if it's the obvious answer. It's not. "I remembered Ophelia was showing up last night."

"Ophelia?" My eyebrows slant, not recalling a time he mentioned her name. He might well have in the past and I was just too busy to take note of it.

"My sister. I sent you a text yesterday letting you know she was going to be there. Remember?"

Damn. He did. His quick declaration of his sister staying with us took a back seat to my news yesterday.

"I meant to get home before she did, but I didn't make it in time," Reed continues. "I stayed late in the library, studying. I texted her a few minutes ago, though, and told her I'd be home in a bit."

"She's an adult." I shrug. "I'm sure she can manage."

"It doesn't matter how old she is, I've always been protective of her. I feel like shit for not being there when she came in, but it was last minute. I appreciate you agreeing to let her stay at our house for a bit."

I stifle the scoff threatening to escape me. From my experience, Ophelia doesn't need protection. She can handle her own shit. My bruised shoulder and ego can attest to that.

I don't say a word, though. I don't let on that I've already met her—twice now—especially the details involving our second encounter. The one where we stared at each other completely naked.

I settle on giving him a nod.

“What about Penny?” His shift to focusing the attention on me surprises me.

“What about her?”

“I saw her leave the house when I got home from the library.”

“Damn.” I shake my head. “She's never been too great at being subtle. I'm glad she didn't wake anyone up.”

“Right?” He laughs. “Could you imagine what Ophelia would have thought if she'd seen her before she'd met you and Dawson?”

“Shit.” I hiss. “That wouldn't have been good.”

I didn't want to fuck Penny again, but I'd had one too many shots, and the more I had taken, the easier it was for me to ride my wave of celebration. Sleeping with Penny and bringing her back to my house wasn't the best decision I've made. I was thankful when I woke up this morning and she was gone. It reaffirmed my decision to never let it happen again.

I guess Ophelia must have been passed out hard enough not to notice her leaving, either.

“Come on,” I tell him, not exactly eager to get back home. The idea of seeing Ophelia again isn't at the top of my list, even if my arm feels like it might pop out of my shoulder at any moment. “Let's throw a few more.”

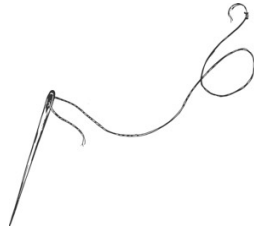
“You think you can handle it?” Reed asks, laughing.

“Fuck you.” I narrow my eyes and dig the balls of my feet into the dirt, once again. I start my routine of twisting to the side and adjusting the bill of my cap. “Let’s just play.”

“Fine.” He holds his hands up in surrender before getting into position.

Hopefully, I can get through the rest of this practice without imagining Ophelia standing in front of me like she was this morning.

FIVE



OPHELIA

It takes several attempts before I can bring myself to step out of my room. I want to explore my new house. Part of me is nervous about running into my new roommate again, the other part of me is nervous in general. My heart cracks at the realization I'm now living in a place that isn't mine.

This house is unfamiliar.

Considering I arrived at nearly one in the morning, I didn't take the time to look around. I'd followed Reed's instructions on where to find my room and headed straight there.

Growing up with Reed, I could only imagine how he and his roommates live. When I open my bedroom door, I fully expect it to be the typical college frat house, minus the fraternity part. Make it three baseball players instead.

I attempt to give them the benefit of the doubt when I step out into the hallway. The house is quiet. I stop at the top of the stairs and hold my breath.

I'm not entirely sure why but my nerves might have to do with what happened with my new roommate earlier. The one I'd caught standing in front of me, completely and deliciously naked. Even though every cell in my brain was telling me I shouldn't have stood there as long as I did, I couldn't help it.

The image of him standing there surrounded by nothing but steam, asking if I was going to join him has been seared into my mind ever since. I can't get him out of my head.

Afterward, I stayed locked inside my room until I was one hundred percent positive I'd heard the front door shutting. It

wasn't until then that I'd gathered up enough courage to finally take my shower. The embarrassment hasn't completely dissolved, even though it's been a couple of hours since I've seen him, but I know I can't stay locked up in my room forever. I need to start figuring out what I'm going to do about finding a new job. And I know I also need to see Reed, especially after he dipped out this morning before I'd even had a chance to wake up.

I'm surprised when the scent of clean laundry fills my nose the second I get to the bottom of the stairs. I look around, shocked at what I see. It's definitely not what I pictured when I think of three college baseball players living together. Every corner of the house is organized and put together. A blanket is folded over the arm of the soft gray couch situated in the middle of the living room. Scattered across the coffee table are only two sports magazines and the TV remote. It's quiet. Peaceful. Clean.

Stunned, I head through the living room and toward the kitchen near the back of the house.

My stomach grumbles. I step through the threshold but come to an abrupt stop when Reed walks through the back door.

Followed by the roommate I've met twice.

I have yet to meet Reed's other roommate, Dawson.

"Ophelia." Reed grins.

He spans the kitchen and pulls me in for a hug, wrapping his arms around my smaller frame. I've never considered myself petite, but next to my baby brother, I feel like I am. He's tall, towering over me by at least a foot. When my face meets his chest, he rests his chin on the top of my head. His body sighs against me.

"I'm sorry I wasn't home when you got here last night," he apologizes. "I got lost in studying."

"It's okay. You've always been the neurotic one." I give him a squeeze and scrunch my nose as I push him away from me. "You smell like dirt and sweat."

“I’m going to try and not take offense to that.” He laughs, moving around me to reach inside the refrigerator. He pulls out two bottles of water and hands one to the man beside him.

Up until now, I’ve avoided eye contact with him. I don’t allow my gaze to linger on him too long, forcing myself to focus on my brother instead.

Reed laughs, cracking open his bottle of water. “We had training with the team this morning, then I begged Hunter to come back and practice a little more.”

Hunter.

That’s his name.

Reed’s mention of Hunter meeting him for practice after they’d already practiced with the team causes me to finally look at him. He’s leaning against the counter, standing beside Reed with his arms crossed over his chest. His expression is blank aside from the subtle twitch of his eyelids as his gaze lingers on me. He’s pretending this is the first time he’s laid eyes on me.

We both know it isn’t.

I hate him simply for the fact that he knows exactly what my body looks like underneath my jeans and tank top. The longer I wonder whether he’s remembering the way I look beneath my clothes, the more I notice *his* body.

Hunter is covered in sweat from head to toe. The tips of his hair are wet. A small bead of sweat drips down from his cheek to his chin.

The insides of my thighs heat, and my muscles twitch, watching it slide over his tan skin.

His shirt is wet from the collar down to his waist. Even his forearms are wet. His shower from this morning was completely pointless.

He keeps his green eyes pinpointed on me even though Reed is standing in the kitchen with us. I curl my bottom lip in and bite down, resisting the urge to blurt out the details of our

little mishap this morning. I doubt Reed would be thrilled to hear about both times Hunter and I have met.

“What are your plans for today?”

I break away from Hunter’s gaze and turn to Reed. He’s sitting at the base of the stairs, wiping the dirt from his hands onto his thighs.

“Um.” I inhale a deep resolving breath. “I wanted to see what you were doing first but at some point, I need to crack open my laptop and search for a new job.”

“Are you looking for something around here?”

I shrug, thinking back to the conversation I had with our mom earlier. “Maybe for a temporary job. But I want to try and get back to New York for something permanent.”

“Okay.” Reed nods in agreement. “Whatever you need.”

“Thanks.”

“Well,” Reed sighs. “I figured we could grab some lunch in a little bit after I shower ... If you want.”

“Of course, I do.” I move my attention back to Hunter. I’m uneasy with his stare burning a hole right through my chest. I almost forgot he was here., but I’m quickly learning that’s impossible any time I’m within five feet of the man. I turn back to Reed, eager for reprieve. “It feels like forever since we’ve seen each other.”

“I know.” Reed rubs his fingers across the palm of his hand, zoning out. “I feel the same way. I hate that you’re here under these circumstances, though.”

I bite back the emotions threatening to claw their way up my throat. I’m exhausted from being upset about my circumstances. I’m here at my brother’s. I have a roof over my head, and I will find a new job.

Reed bringing up my situation in front of Hunter makes me wonder whether he knows why I’m here.

Did Reed tell him?

My brother has never been one to divulge too much of his personal life to others outside his family, so I wouldn't expect him to, but I don't know how close Reed is to Hunter. He could be different.

Hunter's blank expression makes it impossible to tell.

If Hunter doesn't know, he doesn't ask.

He stays silent, covered in dirt and sweat.

"I'll go shower now and meet you down here in a few." Reed stands up from the step. He taps his fingers on the wood before he jogs up the stairs.

Hunter and I stay silent in the kitchen, listening to Reed's footsteps above us. The wooden planks creak and whine until they suddenly stop on the other side of the house.

I shift my attention from the ceiling to Hunter. He's still in the same position he's been ever since he walked in with Reed. He's leaning on the edge of the counter with his arms bent backward, gripping the edge. He's staring at me with that same blank expression.

I eye him, waiting for him to open his mouth to make one of his smart-ass remarks. He always seems to have a mouthful of them. Or at least he had the two other times I've run into him already.

He doesn't open his obnoxious mouth. He doesn't bring up this morning when we were standing in front of each other completely naked.

He pushes off the counter and crosses the room to the bottom of the stairs. Before he lifts his foot to place it on the first step, he removes his shirt. Even though his back is facing me, my skin burns as if he were seeing me naked again.

But now I'm seeing him shirtless. His back, at least.

He's doing this on purpose. Taunting me.

He pauses, bunching his T-shirt in his clenched fist. His triceps tighten and swell, the muscles taking shape under his skin.

The burning sensation spreads across my chest until it covers every inch of skin between my shoulders.

He carries his sweat-riddled shirt and ascends the stairs. He doesn't speak a word to me, but he didn't need to.

His message is loud and clear.

Asshole.

BY THE TIME Reed is finished with his shower, I try to reign in my frustration.

“Not a single fucking thing.” I slam my laptop shut and bury my head in my hands.

I try not to get too discouraged at the fact I haven't found one single design company willing to hire a design school dropout. Not even a paid internship similar to the one I had just two days ago.

Raising my head out of my hands, I check my phone. Before I had started my search on my laptop while I was waiting for Reed to finish getting ready, I emailed the secretary of what used to be Travis Sterling's office.

Travis's office had been bought out, and nearly everyone had lost their job. I'm hoping Tracy the secretary wasn't one of them. She's worked for Travis longer than I've been alive, so I'm hoping she'll pull through with a fashion design recommendation for me.

She hasn't messaged me back.

I wish I'd had the sense to ask her before I walked through those tall, double-glass doors one last time.

I drop my phone on the table. Reed stands beside the couch, drawing my attention to him. His hair is damp from the shower, and the dirt streaked across his skin earlier is now gone.

“You still up for lunch?” he asks me.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?” I grab my phone from the table and walk across the living room, grabbing my purse from the small table by the front door. I wrap it around my shoulder.

“Looked like you were stressed there for a minute.”

“Seriously, Reed.” I try to suppress my annoyance. Reed is simply playing his role as the concerned brother. I swallow my pride and give him a weak, unconvincing smile. “Please stop worrying about me. I may be struggling a bit to find something right this second, but it’s only been one day since I lost my job. I’m not giving up hope yet. Plus, you know me. I always try to look on the bright side.”

I’m not entirely sure I’m telling the truth. I can’t tell if I am, in fact, the ray of sunshine I like to tell myself I am, or if I’m bullshitting my way through it, hoping if I say it enough, I might actually turn into that person.

A walking beam of blinding yellow sunshine.

Or it might just be the yellow sundress I’ve changed into.

Close enough.

“I believe in you, Ophelia.” He wraps his arm around me, leading me through the front door.

Less than an hour later, Reed and I are standing outside a deli located on the other side of town. I peel back the parchment paper wrapped around my turkey sandwich and take a large bite. It tastes exactly how I remember it.

Back in high school, Reed and I would sneak out during our lunch break to grab a few sandwiches from this deli. I’d always grab the same sandwich: turkey and avocado.

A flood of memories wash over me.

“Okay, I know you don’t really want to talk about it, but I have to know,” Reed says.

I turn toward him, squinting against the midday sun.

“How exactly was this legal?” he questions.

“What do you mean?” I swallow my bite. “Which part? The part where I was evicted from my apartment or the part

where I was laid off from my job?”

I laugh but there’s hardly any humor behind it. Again, I’m pretending to be a big ray of fucking sunshine.

Reed’s expression saddens. “I guess both.”

“Well,” I sigh. “I guess I’ll start with my apartment. I was subletting in the city, so I wasn’t technically on the lease. Any time I made my rent payment, I just gave it to my roommate. It’s impossible to find anything in the city that doesn’t cost a fortune. It was easier for me to have the arrangement I did. I was under the impression my roommate was going to renew the lease, but apparently, she didn’t. She didn’t even warn me she wanted to move out. That’s when I came home and all my stuff was sitting outside the front door. I wanted to ask the landlord if I could stay but he wouldn’t let me. He didn’t even know who I was.”

“Shit, Ophelia.” Reed’s blown away. His eyes widen and he huffs.

“Listen, Reed. I get it.” I close my eyes, not wanting to hear a lecture like the one our mother gave me. “I was stupid to trust my roommate, but I was desperate at the time and needed a place to live. Besides, she and I had a few design classes together. I thought I could trust her.”

“I wasn’t going to lecture you. You don’t need to defend your decisions to me. I was just curious. You never told me how you got the apartment in the city.”

I nod and inhale a deep breath. The air is sharp against the back of my throat. It fills my lungs, urging me to forget about my incredibly poor decision to trust my old roommate.

“As far as my job—” I start, but Reed cuts me off.

“It’s okay. We don’t have to talk about it right now. What matters is that you’re here. Remember you can stay as long as you need to. The guys and I aren’t moving out until after we graduate.”

I wrap my arm around Reed, bringing his side to mine. “I appreciate it more than you know, even though I don’t plan on staying an entire year.”

I let my arm fall away and take another bite of my sandwich. We're standing outside the restaurant, watching cars driving past us. We aren't in the center of town but we're still near it. I'm thankful it isn't tourist season yet, otherwise I would have avoided eating here.

"You never know, Ophelia. Plans don't always stay plans. They constantly change."

I resist the urge to bend over with laughter. "This coming from the man who lives his entire life with a plan."

The longer I look at Reed, the harder it is to contain my amusement. My brother is the epitome of a person who lives their life planned out. Every hour of his day is booked. Not a single minute is wasted. He gets it from our mother.

Me, not so much. Apparently, I live my life by the seat of my pants. Sort of.

"I'm glad to see you laughing."

My laughter subsides the second Reed points it out, but I still keep the smile on my face. "I needed this. Thank you."

Laughing with Reed isn't enough to make me forget the mess of my life, but it's a decent enough distraction.

"Let's keep the momentum going."

I raise an eyebrow, my suspicion growing when Reed takes the last bite of his sandwich and chucks it into the trash.

"Whatever it is, I'm going to have to say no," I say.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Shut me down before I even have the chance to tell you what it is."

"Sorry." I frown. Reed's right.

"There's a party tonight."

I immediately shake my head. "No. Nope. Absolutely not."

"Hear me out."

“See? I knew I wasn’t going to like it.”

“Listen,” he urges. “Once a month, the team throws a party out by the lake. We invite whoever we want, but usually it’s a bunch of people from the university.”

I scrunch my nose. “I’m not very big on parties, Reed. I rarely ever went to the ones in the city. If I did, it was only to make contacts in the fashion world.”

It’s true. All three years of college, I’d dedicated myself to fashion design. When I wasn’t sewing, I was sketching, and when I wasn’t sketching, I was talking to anyone who would listen to me talk about fashion.

“Come on. I’d like it if you could meet the rest of the team.”

I wince, still unsure. “I don’t know.”

“You like the lake.”

This is true. When Reed brings up the lake, I know exactly which one he’s talking about.

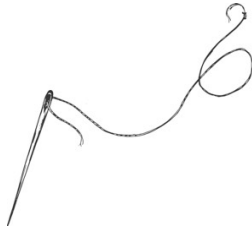
It’s the only one in town.

The same lake I used to go to nearly every weekend.

“I’m not sure if this will help persuade you to go, but Dawson and Hunter will be there, too.”

I agree with Reed. I’m not sure whether knowing Hunter will be at the lake party is persuading me to go or not.

SIX



OPHELIA

The path leading to the lake weaves between the tallest trees I've ever seen in my life. I don't ever remember them being this large the countless times I've been here.

Every bit of this place is different than I remember. The trees are taller, the water is darker, and the amount of people surrounding the fire near the edge of the lake shocks me.

I resist the urge to turn around and leave, refusing to put myself through the torture of another college party on the lake.

"You promised me." Reed says.

I snap my head to my left, still allowing my feet to carry me toward the crowd.

"I did not. I only agreed to come. I didn't make a promise."

Reed's walking beside me with his hands shoved in his pockets, and he's wearing his team hat backwards. The red, white, and blue logo is stitched onto it.

"More than half the team is here. I'd like to introduce you to them. Don't bail."

I chew on the inside of my cheek and keep walking. I'm only doing this for my brother's sake.

"Maybe this will get your mind off things for a bit," he suggests.

My brother has a point. It doesn't mean I want him to be right. I agree. This party would make for a great distraction.

But is a distraction what I need right now?

All I can think about is wondering if Tracy emailed me back or if a job might have popped up. Anything to get me out of this town before it chews me up and spits me out.

The sun is starting to set behind the tops of the trees on the other side of the lake making the water dance with orange and white sparkles. The party stretches from the outer edge of the trail we took to get here, all the way to the edge of the lake. One single wooden dock juts out onto the water. Some people are swimming, some are sitting on the edge of the dock with their legs dipped in.

“Are they crazy?” I ask.

“Who?” Reed eyebrows knit.

“Them.” I point to the groups of people swimming in the lake. “It’s not exactly the middle of summer. The water can’t be that warm.”

“Oh.” Reed continues walking. “I’m sure their bodies are numb at this point with how drunk they probably are. Besides, these parties are huge. It’s bad luck not to come... no matter what time of year it is.”

“I guess,” I mutter, forgetting just how superstitious the world of baseball can be. Especially college baseball. I still think this is a terrible idea.

Reed points to the fire. “Come on. I see a few of the guys from the team.”

I inhale a deep breath and follow my brother, anyway.

“Hey, guys,” Reed says once we’ve reached the circle.

I look around at the group. Every single one of them is wearing their team logo one way or another, whether it’s a T-shirt, a cap, or even their pants. I don’t recognize a single one of them. Reed begins introducing me to the team, and by the time I’m standing in front of Dawson, I realize Hunter isn’t here. In fact, I haven’t seen him at all.

Fuck. I hate that my mind automatically went to him, but it did.

I'm afraid of what it will be like to see him again. He didn't speak a word to me this morning, not even when he had the chance when we were alone.

But will he say something to me now?

Hunter is unwaveringly unpredictable.

"You haven't met Dawson yet, right, Ophelia?" Reed asks.

Dawson is standing in front of me with his back to the fire.

His hair is cut short, nearly buzzed down to the scalp. The increasing orange sunset reflects in his brown eyes. He raises his hand to his eyebrow, shielding them from the sun.

"No." I grin. "I haven't."

"Well..." He cracks a smile. "It's nice to finally meet Reed's sister."

"It's nice to meet you, too." I can't help but giggle. "When you say it like that, you make it sound like you didn't even know he had a sister."

Dawson appears overly excited to see me with the way his grin only grows wider the longer he stares at me.

"I didn't mean it like that." His goofy grin fades. "I just meant Reed doesn't share too much of his personal life with us. He's our best friend and we share a house, but he keeps to himself most of the time."

"Oh, really?" I cross my arms and huff, twisting to Reed.

Reed's jaw pops open. "I've mentioned you before. Dawson's full of shit."

"Sure." I purse my lips and wave him off. Dawson's amusement hasn't vanished. He grabs a beer from the picnic table beside him and hands me a plastic cup. I don't immediately take a drink.

"It's regular beer," Dawson clarifies. "In case you were wondering."

He laughs, and I give him a warm smile.

“Thanks.” I take one small sip. “So, which position do you play?”

“Uh, shortstop.” He nods. “I used to pitch, but not since I started playing for the Rebels.”

“Why not?”

“Because of that asshole.” Dawson nods, gesturing to whoever is behind me.

I turn to follow Dawson’s gaze and find Hunter is walking toward us.

“Talking about me again, huh?” Hunter asks, passing me. He stands in front of the table full of drinks and grabs himself a beer. He twists the cap and tips it back before he turns back around to face the group.

A few of the other guys from the team walk by and acknowledge Hunter. He returns their gesture, but it isn’t enough to pull his attention away from us.

He hasn’t stopped staring at *me*.

“Hunt?” Dawson asks. “Have you met Reed’s sister yet?”

The corner of his mouth twitches, and my stomach lurches.

“Yeah,” he mumbles. My stomach lurches again. It’s as if a bag of feathers has been poured down my throat. They flutter inside me. “We met this morning.”

“Oh?” he asks.

“Yep.” This time Hunter breaks eye contact, and he looks directly at Dawson. “And where were you this morning?”

“Hey,” Dawson’s voice lowers. “I was at practice this morning. Don’t give me any shit, Hunt.”

“I’m not giving you shit, asshole. I was just warning you not to fuck up our season.”

Dawson rolls his eyes. From where I’m standing, it looks like they’ve had this conversation before and Dawson is over it.

“First, if the season is fucked up, it won’t be because of me. Two, just because you’re free now doesn’t mean you can put that pressure on me or the team. That’s on you.”

Free? What does Dawson mean by Hunter being free?

The two men stop talking, silence filling the gap between them. The surrounding party’s chatter grows louder.

Hunter has no comeback. He gives Dawson a quick smirk, then takes another swig of his beer.

I watch him the entire time. He’s eyeing me over the top of his beer, and when my stomach dips again, I immediately look away.

“Is it just Hunter who gives you shit or is it my brother, too?” The words fall out of my mouth before I realize what I’ve said.

Hunter’s green eyes narrow, shooting me a glare. Fire burns behind them, and I fight the thrill sparking in my gut. Dawson immediately begins to laugh, and I feel Reed smiling beside me.

“Reed isn’t as bad as Hunter, if that’s what you’re asking.”

I grin, seeing the relief behind Dawson’s smile grow. He’s thankful I’ve broken the tension.

“I guess you can find out at our scrimmage this week, right?” Dawson asks.

“Scrimmage?” I raise my eyebrows.

“Yeah.” Reed nods. “The official season doesn’t start until after holiday break, but up until then we scrimmage and practice six days a week. If you come to a scrimmage, it’ll feel like a game without actually being a game.”

I tug on my bottom lip, looking at Reed and Dawson with uncertainty. I’m not nervous about going to one of my brother’s scrimmages, but I swallow my uncertainties considering who might be there. Everyone who is anyone comes to the Rebels’ baseball games, no matter what type they are.

Dawson catches on to my hesitation.

“Fine. If you don’t come to see us play a scrimmage this week, consider coming to our big one next month.”

“Which one is that?” I ask him.

“We’re playing against our rivals over in Twin River. It’s the biggest scrimmage of the off-season, and they’re our toughest competition. It may not be an official game, but it definitely feels like one. If you were to come to any game, that one would be worth it. The entire town comes out for it.”

“Umm.” I hum longer than I intend, considering if I should take up the offer to go. Part of me is still holding out on the hope I’ll hear back about a job opportunity. The idea of me staying here long enough to go to a game in several months is enough to make my stomach turn. But the reality of my options hits me hard. The odds of me landing a job with someone willing to hire me without an interview and demanding I start tomorrow is a shot in the dark at best.

I know I can’t put my life on hold while I wait for another opportunity to crawl out of the shadows.

“What do you say?” Dawson asks.

“I guess I can try.”

“Fuck, yeah.” He bounces on his heels. “You’ll get to see the Rebels beat Twin River’s ass.”

If the game is still the same as it was when I was growing up and forced to watch Reed play, I doubt I’ll be as excited as Dawson is right now. But when I see the happiness build behind his eyes, it reaffirms my decision to go.

However, Hunter seems to be a completely different story when it comes to the prospect of me agreeing to go to a game. Even if it’s not technically one.

His stare is laser-focused on me, scorching every inch of my skin. I can’t tell how he feels about Reed and Dawson’s invitation. He stays silent, as usual.

“Well...” I raise my chin and turn to Dawson. “Count me in.”

Seemingly satisfied with my answer, Reed moves the topic of conversation to baseball, once again. Once the three guys have moved on to talking about how they think tomorrow night's game will go, I take the chance to step away. The water lapping against the dock pulls me in the direction of the lake.

The sun has set deeper behind the trees, its rays peeking through the branches and leaves. Golden specks dance across the surface of the water. The crowd surrounding the deck has cleared out enough for me to wander down without elbowing my way through. People are still swimming in the water, but they don't pay attention to me. They're too busy enjoying themselves. I don't blame them.

“Ophelia?”

I turn around, finding someone standing directly behind me.

“Max?” A familiar warmth spreads across my chest when I recognize the man standing in front of me. His hair is a lot longer than I remember from high school, and his face has matured. His blond hair has a bit of a wave, framing his now sculpted jaw. His dark blue, short-sleeve shirt is unbuttoned, revealing a basic black T-shirt beneath it—a signature Max outfit if I've ever seen one. It's the same style outfit he'd have worn when we were seventeen.

“I can't believe you're here.” He wraps his arms around me, pulling me in for a tight hug.

“Me either,” I mumble against his shoulder.

He releases me and tucks his long hair behind his ear.

“I haven't seen you since ...”

“Graduation.” Max nods, and his grin spreads wider. “But last I heard, you went off to school in New York City to work for a huge design firm.”

“I was.” I ignore my sinking stomach tagging onto my confession.

“Oh, are you not there anymore?”

“No.” I frown. “I’m staying here for a bit before I figure out my next move. What are you doing here? I never pegged you as the kind of person to hang out with several dozen baseball players.”

“Trust me, I’m not.” His eyebrows arch, and he tips his chin down. The corner of his mouth curls. “I absolutely loathe the sport, but it helps when you’re kind of seeing one of them.”

“You?” I ask him, shocked. “You’re dating a baseball player?”

“Yep.” He nods. He half turns, almost pointing to where Hunter and Reed are standing by the fire, but closer to the edge of the tree line. “He’s the one wearing the white shirt and in serious need of a haircut.”

I bite down on my lip, stifling a laugh. The irony of Max picking on his boyfriend for his long hair is hypocrisy at its best. “He looks like a nice guy.”

“His name is Trevor. We’ve been dating for about a year. I love him, but get him around his teammates and I consider leaving him sometimes.”

We both giggle, and a bright red baseball cap immediately captures my attention.

I’m still biting on my lip when I see Hunter moving from the corner of my eye. He breaks away from his conversation with Reed and Dawson, staring down at his phone as he heads toward the edge of the lake. I shift my attention back to my old best friend.

“So,” I sigh. “What have you been up to lately?”

Memories from high school and how close we were come flooding back to me. Hanging out under the bleachers after school, waiting for Reed to finish baseball practice, and critiquing each other’s drawings in art class. It’s amazing what a few years of separation after high school can do to a friendship. We didn’t part on bad terms, but the sadness settling into my chest still aches just the same.

“I stayed here after high school.” He scrunches his nose and frowns. “Not that I particularly wanted to, but I made the best of it. I ended up going to the community college here and got my degree in fashion design.”

“No shit.” I playfully slap him on the arm, unable to contain my enthusiasm. “Honestly, Max, it doesn’t surprise me. Remember when we would both pass each other our sketch designs in art class?”

“Of course. Mrs. Brown would get so fucking pissed when we’d turn in a design for a dress instead of a still life.” He laughs. “Besides, yours were always better.”

“Stop.” I shake my head in disagreement. “They were not. Your ideas were a thousand times better. I was always convinced you’d create your own clothing line and move to Milan or Paris.”

“Well, I never made it to Milan, but I did create my own clothing line.”

“Really?” My eyebrows arch.

“Yeah.” He nods, taking a sip of his beer. “I opened a storefront downtown where I sell all my designs. It’s not much, but it’s enough.”

My mouth pops open in awe of Max. Hearing about his success fills my chest with pride. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks.” He grins, raking his fingers through his long hair. “I mean, I don’t know how long you’re staying or what you have going on but feel free to stop by and check it out some time.”

“Definitely. I would love to.”

After all the shit I’ve been through the past few days, the idea of seeing Max’s shop sounds incredible.

Max and I exchange phone numbers. He texts me the name and address of his shop, pulls me in for a hug, and heads over to where his boyfriend is sitting.

Hunter is still standing near the edge of the water, immersed in his phone. The blue and white light projects onto

his face.

Reed and Dawson are still sitting by the fire, surrounded by their teammates. My brother laughs and takes a sip from the drink in his hand. He's happy here.

I remove my phone from my pocket and text Reed to let him know I'm going to walk home. The house is only a few blocks from here, and I want to get home and check to see if there are any new job listings.

Lifting the bottom of my dress, I trek up the hill toward the trail. The sound of the party quietens the farther I go. My feet crack a few twigs on the path leading out of the woods and into the trees.

The orange and yellow light coming from the group's fire peeks through the trees behind me. There's a streetlamp in the distance. Every few seconds, it flickers.

I'm still a good distance from the end of the trail when an arm wraps around my waist, abruptly pulling me to a stop. My feet drag across the dirt, and the skirt of my dress billows around me. The person grabbing me quickly spins me around, pressing my back against a tree. The bark digs and scrapes against my skin.

The straps of my yellow sundress are thin, barely hanging on to the slim fabric covering my chest, all the way down to my toes. I gasp for air, ready to scream, when I find two piercing green eyes staring at me. They stand out against the shadows and darkness surrounding us. His hand grips my mouth, stopping me from being able to speak.

"Don't you dare try to pull that self-defense shit on me again." His deep voice gravels, vibrating against my chest. "*Ophelia.*"

My chest rapidly rises and falls, hot breaths bursting through my nose. The blood has drained from my face, and my chest feels impossibly hollow.

It's the first time I've heard him speak my name, and it drips from his mouth, his tongue savoring every letter. He says

it with purpose, enough for me to notice it's the first time he's said it.

It feels as if Hunter has stolen all my insides simply by shoving me against a tree in the middle of the woods.

"Will you be a good girl?" he asks me.

I want to slap him. I hate how his eyes flicker in the small amount of light we have. There's amusement mixed with impatience. He doesn't trust me.

But, despite the anger I feel in this moment, I simply nod my head in agreement.

"Good." He snarls, clenching his teeth. I don't understand his shift in interaction with me. He seems annoyed. But how can that be possible when he hasn't spoken a single word to me since he invited me to shower with him?

His hand is still pressed against my mouth. Carefully, he slowly loosens his fingers, pulling them away from my lips.

I breathe in, taking a second to register the position I'm in.

His tall frame is pressed against me. He's using his hips to hold my body against the tree. His knee is bent between my legs, the intense heat from the insides of my thigh wrapped around him.

I'm fucking thankful for the thin fabric of my dress attempting to maintain a barrier between us.

Hunter's eyes break away from mine, moving over my shoulder. He's looking back at the party. Half of his face is briefly colored with an orange hue, the other half in shadows.

"Are you fucking crazy?" I whisper, seething with anger. I struggle to shove him off me. It doesn't work. It's a weak attempt, but nonetheless, an attempt.

He clicks his tongue in disapproval, slowly shaking his head. I guess my question isn't following through on my promise to be a good girl.

I switch tactics.

“Risky of you to ambush me like this when you know what I’m capable of.” I narrow my eyes.

“Oh, I know exactly what you’re capable of, Ophelia.”

I tip my chin higher, challenging him. My heart pounds and thrashes in my chest, wanting to escape. I clench my fists at my sides, holding them against the rough bark of the tree. A sense of pride swells inside me knowing Hunter didn’t walk away from last night unscathed.

Good. He deserved it.

He moves his bent leg between my thighs, grazing it across my center.

My body immediately reacts. He notices, and the devious smirk playing on his lips deepens.

“So, what?” I ask him. “It’s suddenly okay to speak to me now that you have me pinned against a tree? Defenseless...”

He leans forward and lifts his hand, pushing a few loose strands of hair away from my face. His touch is both warm and rough. He smells like leather and trouble. Like nothing good can come from the way he’s holding me right now, even if my body is telling me otherwise.

I swallow when he brings his mouth close enough to mine to kiss me. I inhale a short, sharp breath and hold it in.

“Defenseless,” he scoffs and whispers, the ends of that one word lingering on my mouth. “We both know that couldn’t be further from the truth.”

“Then, what do you want from me?”

His eyes roam over my face. Every sound around us is muted, like suddenly being submerged under water.

I struggle to breathe, but it isn’t from drowning. It’s the realization that Hunter draws this feeling out of me—a feeling I didn’t know existed.

“Nothing,” he says, simply. His word, once again, lingers, and I get the sense he isn’t telling the truth.

“Great,” I argue. “It’s great to know you attack me in the middle of the woods for absolutely nothing. Thanks, Hunter.”

He doesn’t say another word. Shocking.

Several seconds pass before the irritation begins to boil under my skin. I can’t read the thoughts brewing behind his eyes.

It’s infuriating.

“Why didn’t you tell Reed we’d already met?” It’s a question I’m certain I already know the answer to. I just want to hear it from him.

His dark eyebrows arch, the top curve touching the edge of his backward baseball cap with the Northeast Rebels logo stitched into the center.

“Which time are you talking about? The one where you attacked me on the street, or the one where you stood in front of me completely naked?” He doesn’t give me a chance to answer. “To be honest, I don’t think your brother would be too happy to hear either of those stories, now, would he?”

I press my mouth into a thin line, breathing through my nose in frustration. I haven’t known Hunter long enough to claim I know a single thing about him, but I get the tiniest inkling that he’s the kind of man who likes to be in control and to be proven right.

He’s thrown the first pitch, and now our secret game has officially started.

I purse my lips and arch an eyebrow, hoping my expression is enough of an answer. I won’t give him the satisfaction of knowing he has a point.

“Well, are you going to let me go or are we going to stay like this all night until someone finds us?”

His leg twitches, causing mine to do the same. My thighs clench and flex around his. My mind is telling me to push him away, but my body is telling me differently. I imagine what it would feel like to have him slide the fabric away from between my legs, pressing his calloused fingers to my clit. My

toes dig into the dirt and the scattered leaves beneath us. I try to anchor myself but it's no use.

Hunter leans forward again. For a moment, I'm convinced he's going to cave and kiss me.

"Reed invited you to the rival scrimmage next month. He doesn't need any distractions."

"Are you trying to say I'll distract him?" I scoff in disbelief.

"I should make myself clear." He clenches his teeth, the muscles in his jaw flexing and straining under his sun-kissed skin. "Don't go to this game. I can't afford for anyone to fuck this up, even if it's a scrimmage, and even if it's you." He traces the line of my jaw with his fingertip. My entire chest blooms and prickles with goosebumps. I can't utter a single word. The letters have disintegrated in my throat, rendering me speechless. Stringing anything together seems an impossible task.

Hunter has shocked me at every turn.

The tip of his finger lingers on my chin. He nudges my chin up, forcing me to look in his green eyes. "Have a good night, Ophelia. Walk home safe."

The sarcasm dripping from his voice is palpable.

I swallow again, urging myself to temper my beating heart. I've had absolutely no success up to this point.

Hunter touching me isn't helping.

Still, I stand in disbelief when he backs away from me. The cool air immediately slams against me, trading places with Hunter's body. I don't move, only tilting my head back onto the tree, making sense of the past five minutes.

I stare at Hunter's back as he makes his way back down the path to the party.

I don't care what he says. I'm going to that fucking game.

SEVEN



HUNTER

Jamie hasn't followed through on his promise to leave me alone.

I type one last text, telling him I'll call him back after practice in the morning, then toss my phone on my nightstand.

I'm lying.

I've already practiced this morning, but according to everyone in my life, I'm always practicing, so it isn't necessarily a difficult lie to tell.

Talking to my brother, once again, about the bullshit he throws at me sounds infinitely more miserable than sitting here dreading the next thirty minutes before my economics class. The business between us was supposed to be severed. A clean cut, ending my involvement completely. What once was a family company is now left solely in the hands of my brother.

I lie in my bed and stare at the ceiling. If it weren't an absolute requirement for me to take classes in order to stay on the team, I would have dropped out months ago. At least I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. In just a few months, I'll be eligible to be drafted, and that's the main goal. The same goal I've had my entire life.

Get to Boston. Go pro.

I roll on my side and close my eyes. The muscles in my arms ache, and my legs are stiff as I shift, attempting to get comfortable. I may practice every day, but my muscles still ache in places I didn't know existed.

A heavy weight tugs on the back of my eyes, urging them to stay closed. I'm thankful for the moment I get to take a break from life.

I need a break from school.

I need a few minutes from training.

And I need a few minutes from my brother Jamie.

My mind begins to fade into sleep when my eyes pop open at the sound coming from the other side of my room.

I'm staring at my bathroom door. Another burst of sound jolts me. This time, I sit up.

It sounds like a staple gun repeatedly firing off. The sound is coming from the other side of the bathroom.

Ophelia's room.

I haven't spoken to her since the night I pinned her against the tree in the woods. In fact, I haven't talked to her much at all.

I can't explain how I feel about her, especially when I found her standing in my bathroom, completely naked, as my new roommate. I'd only just met her that day, but I couldn't stop thinking about her. She's infuriating. Both clearly strong and independent, yet clueless to what's going on around her. Reed doesn't know about the circumstances surrounding the first and second time I met his sister, and although I don't involve him in my personal life, I don't think he'd find my run-ins with Ophelia as interesting as I do.

According to him and Dawson, we didn't meet until the day Reed and I found her in the kitchen.

I still haven't learned exactly why she's here. Only that she'd mentioned to Reed she was searching for a job.

Still, I make it a point not to ask.

Since meeting, I've tried my best to steer clear of her. It's easier to treat her as if she weren't in the same room as me than it is to speak to her. At least it has been for the past week since the night at the tree.

Up until then, I was successful in giving her the gift of my silence... but then she'd agreed to go to a game. And despite how much I didn't want to admit it, I knew she was going to be a distraction. Not only for her brother and for Dawson.

But for me, too.

I couldn't get the fucking image of her out of my head.

Then at the lake, I'd walked up to see she was wearing that damn yellow sundress. Without drawing too much attention, I'd ignored her until I saw her start to leave the party. My cock twitched when she crossed the clearing of the party and headed down the trail. The fabric flowed over her body as if it were tailored specifically for her.

I followed her. Mostly to warn her about being a distraction at the game. I didn't want to risk her ruining all the progress I've made. My freedom is new.

I didn't want to take the chance, so I gave her a warning.

After that night, she's done a decent job staying out of my way. Tonight seems to be an exception.

The pulsating sound fires off again.

Frustration sparking in me, I march across my room. I swing open my bedroom door and march across the bathroom.

I lift my hand and pound on her door.

My fist meeting the dense wood echoes through the bathroom, but it still isn't loud enough to be heard over the noise she's making in her room.

I pound my fist again. The door rattles against the frame.

Finally, the noise stops.

I lower my fist, listening to my breaths fill the sudden silence. There's a short pause and then hushed footsteps draw closer.

The door swings open, and Ophelia is standing on the other side of it.

“What?” The tip of her tongue clicks hard against the back of her teeth, exaggerating the end of the word. Her pale blue eyes are glaring like two polished daggers. Her mouth is pursed, her full lips pressed tightly together.

Fuck. Another reason why it’s smart to stay away from her. I’ve already fucked up by interrupting her, but I don’t care.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask her, craning my neck to look further into her room.

She moves to the side, blocking my view. It doesn’t work the way she wants it to. I’m taller than her by nearly a foot.

“What do you care?”

I widen my eyes in disbelief, then stretch my arm out to prop myself up on the doorframe. “Our rooms are next to each other, Ophelia. I can hear everything you do.”

“Everything?”

Heat expands and spreads down my chest to my waist.

She doesn’t wait for me to respond.

She blinks, and laces her arms over her chest. I like getting under her skin. It’s become a fun game between us.

I make sure to move my gaze from her face all the way down to the tips of her bare toes. “Everything.”

Her cheeks flush. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter. What I do in my room is none of your business.”

“It is my business when it’s distracting.”

“Distracting you from what, exactly? When you’re here, you’re sleeping. When you’re not home, you’re practicing or some shit.”

“Keeping track of me, are we?” I ask her, curling my mouth in amusement.

“No.” She straightens her back and unravels her arms. “That’s not what I meant.”

“What exactly did you mean, then?”

“I was only saying that from what I’ve gathered in the past week, your life contains little other than sleep and baseball.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. She couldn’t be further from the truth.

“As a matter of fact, I do usually practice, because unlike some people, I actually have important things going on in my life. Like a team relying on me to play at my best.”

Silence. It’s not exactly what I expect from her. She doesn’t have a snarky comeback. She doesn’t even have her usual glaring stare. Her expression softens, and the spark in her eyes shrinks away.

She looks as if I’ve wounded her.

“Do you ever talk about anything else?” she asks. “You act as if you’re the only one who wants to be successful in life, Hunter.”

I stare at her, biting back the urge to tell her that at one point in my life, I was forced to make baseball secondary, until a week ago when I was finally able to make it my priority.

I decide not to give her any more information right now.

But if I’m honest with myself, my words are a bit harsh. I don’t know a single thing about my new roommate, and I haven’t exactly tried to find out. Up until now, I’ve fought to keep her at a distance, but she keeps inserting herself into my life. It’s impossible not to find out more about Ophelia when there are only ten feet and two walls between us. It’s only inevitable, I guess.

“Seriously,” I divert the conversation. “What are you doing in here that’s making all that noise?”

She glances over her shoulder, toward the corner of the room. “Sewing.”

Sitting on top of an old end table I shoved in here when we first moved into this house is a large, white sewing machine. Beside it sits a bundle of fabric covered in tiny flowers.

“You sew?” I ask her, intrigued. Now the sound drilling through to my room makes sense. It’s the machine.

“I’m a fashion designer, Hunter.” She says this as if I should have already known. Her brown eyebrows curve across her smooth forehead.

I clench my fingers into a fist. The memory of how it felt to trace her skin the other night hits me all at once. My leg between hers. Her heat pressing against my thigh. Her body instantly melting into mine. I shove the thoughts away, knowing I’ll get carried away again.

“Huh.” I nod once. “Is that what you did in New York? Make clothes?”

“Sort of.” She backs away from the doorway, stepping back into her room. She shields her face from me and walks back over to the sewing machine. She doesn’t sit back down in the chair. Her fingers graze over the fabric covered in tiny flowers. She tugs on a loose thread. “I didn’t make them there. I drew them.”

“Drew them?” I stay where I am in the doorway, careful not to go too far. The room feels different now that Ophelia lives in it. A white blanket is folded neatly over the foot of the bed. Her makeup is scattered across the small table. Her laptop rests beside it. Considering she showed up with only her suitcase the night we met, the room no longer feels vacant. She’s made this her space.

“Yeah.” She clears the emotion thick in her voice. This time she allows me to see her face. “I used to work for a major design firm in the city. I was one of their sketch artists. My job was to pitch ideas to the designers. Then, if they liked it, they would try to bring it to life. I figured Reed would have told you.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Reed isn’t one for sharing, and I never asked. All he said was you needed a place to stay.”

“Yeah, well.” She gives me an extremely weak smile. “Thanks, I guess.” She doesn’t elaborate on why she needed a place to stay as quickly as she needed it. I don’t ask. Something tells me not to go there. The emotion and withdrawal in her voice tells me it’s still too fresh and raw.

“Thank you for what?” I ask.

“For letting me stay here.” She points behind me. “And for letting me share your bathroom. This isn’t just Reed’s house—it’s yours as well.”

“Did I really have a choice?”

She pauses, studying me as if she can’t believe I asked her the question in the first place.

“We always have a choice. Right?” She clears her throat. “In one way or another.”

I nod and lift a shoulder. This conversation isn’t what I was expecting when I came over here, pounding on her bedroom door. It’s the first real conversation we’ve had since we met.

I decide to end it here. I don’t know how long I’ve been standing here, and I can’t miss my class.

“I have to go,” I tell her. Like she would care.

I’m surprised when she walks back over to where I’m still standing. She unravels her arms and grabs the doorknob. “Let me guess.” Her voice is laced with a hint of amusement. “Practice?”

I smile, finding her sense of humor surprising. Apparently, there’s another side to her I have yet to see. Something tells me it has to do with the sadness she attempts to hide flickering in her eyes.

“Economics,” I tell her. My eyes move past her, spotting that damn sewing machine in the corner of her room.

“Huh,” she breathes.

“What?” I swing my gaze back to hers.

She’s standing within inches of me. Nearly being a whole head taller than her, I’m forced to tip my head down. Her long, brown hair frames her face, cascading down in thick waves across her shoulders.

“Nothing.” She frowns, shaking her head. “Just didn’t peg you for the kind of guy interested in money and the economy.”

“Yeah, well, economics was a requirement for me before I was able to put all my attention on training.”

She continues to stare at me with curiosity, but I know I’ve already shared more with her than I intended. Two lines create a crease between her eyebrows as she studies me.

I don’t want to allow her to get too close. I hate how I’m already pushing my limits with her. I’ve revealed too much. It’s best to keep my boundaries with her, reminding her we aren’t exactly friends.

“Is this your way of keeping track of me again?” I ask her, hoping this will push her buttons.

Her curiosity shifts to annoyance. Exactly where I want her.

“Really?” she asks, the spark of anger hitting her eyes. “You’re the one who seems to be keeping track of me. Remember the woods?”

Frustration drips from her pretty little voice, but I can read the truth in her eyes. She isn’t completely angry with me. Part of me knows she enjoyed the moment I spun her around and pinned her back against the tree. The blood drained from her face that night. She was flushed and pale. Completely flustered, wriggling to get free underneath me.

I lean forward, bringing my face close to hers. She instinctively jerks back but I quickly reach out, hooking my finger into the waist of her leggings. She stays where she is and gasps. I can feel when she stops breathing at my touch.

It’s fucking thrilling.

With my finger hooked into the waist of her leggings, I tug her toward me. She bends, leaning her head back and up to look at me. My eyes move between hers. “If you think I forgot what I did in the woods that night, you’re sadly mistaken.”

“Hunter ... Wh—” she whispers. Her cheeks flush red again.

“Don’t think I don’t see the secrets you hide behind those eyes of yours.”

“What secrets?” she whispers again. “I don’t have any secrets, Hunter.”

I tug on the waist of her leggings again, twisting the fabric around my finger, stopping her.

“Don’t lie to me, Ophelia.” I grind my jaw, gritting my teeth. My voice is low and thick.

I’m a fucking hypocrite. I don’t care.

Lying is what I do best to Jamie. Lying is what I do best to everyone in my life who doesn’t care what I fucking want.

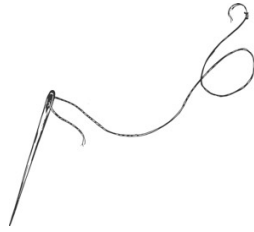
My cock starts to swell underneath my shorts. It twitches when my eyes drop to her mouth. She bites down on her bottom lip, digging her teeth into the full, red flesh. Fuck. The compulsion to pull her impossibly closer and slam her body against mine courses through me. The muscles in my arm swell and tighten, pulsating up my skin to my neck.

I stare at Ophelia and take a step back, knowing I’ve done it again.

I’ve caught myself getting too close. I let go of the waist of her leggings, and it snaps back against her lower stomach.

“I need to get to class.” It’s all I manage to say before I turn around and cross the small bathroom, shutting the door behind me.

EIGHT



OPHELIA

I'm absolutely crazy.

I'm crazy for thinking I can avoid Hunter. He's everywhere and nowhere all at the same time.

We've only ever had a handful of interactions but each of them seems to amount to more than a small incident.

My stomach clenches, and my heart drops into it, rattling and bouncing off my ribs on its way down.

I fist the once neatly folded fabric, and take deliberate steps toward the town square. I've swapped out my leggings and plain T-shirt for a short, hot-pink dress. After my conversation with Hunter, I did everything to rid myself of him.

I still feel where his finger grazed and pressed into my lower belly after I've changed my clothes.

He's done it again.

Played hot and cold with me. Offered me a sweet when it turned out to be bitter. I run our conversation over and over in my mind. He'd let me in slightly before pulling back, reminding me he has the upper hand when it comes to us. I don't know what to make of him.

I hate how he dug the truth out of me when I least expected it.

Against my better judgment, I haven't stopped thinking about him since that night against the tree.

My body begs to be touched by his. The heat from his fingers against my skin has lingered ever since that night, and I fucking despise it. Mostly because I know he knows the reaction he's able to draw out of me. He's been able to do it ever since the moment I tackled him and straddled him on the street.

The fire from my conversation with Hunter hasn't extinguished. At all.

The spot he touched on my stomach from hooking his finger around my waist is still fresh, like a feather has been brushing against it. Back and forth. Over and over.

By the time I reach Max's store, I force myself to forget about my conversation with Hunter.

The store is situated along a string of small shops. Beside it is what used to be my favorite place to grab lobster during the summer. On the other side is a donut shop. Interesting place for Max's boutique to be sandwiched.

If it weren't for the bright white sign above the front door that reads *Max Singletary Designs*, I wouldn't know it was here.

Clutching onto the fabric in my hand, I pull Max's door open and step inside.

I immediately feel warmth. The scent of cinnamon and warm amber lighting greet me the second I step through the front door. If it weren't sunny and nearly ninety degrees outside, I'd think we were smack dab in the middle of fall.

Hushed music plays in the background. I peek over the rows and racks of clothing. Exposed brick walls on either side of the store are covered with a seemingly endless number of black items. Dresses in the back, shirts and pants near the front. Metal, wheeled racks are situated throughout the store, each one featuring a single color.

Red is the farthest away, near the back. Purple is the closest to me.

I stand on my toes, peeking over the tops of the racks, hoping to catch sight of Max's signature long hair.

I find him sorting hangers on the yellow rack.

He doesn't notice me until I peek around it.

"Hey."

"You made it." His grin immediately grows the second he sees me. His eyes survey me from head to toe. It reminds me of how Hunter looked at me earlier when he was standing in my doorway... but the feeling it gives me is magnificently different. The realization doesn't sit well with me. It means Hunter is getting under my skin. It means Hunter was right earlier: I am still thinking about him.

"I told you I would," I say.

Max is wearing a white button-down shirt. The thin, transparent fabric hangs loose around his frame. The front is tucked into a pair of bright yellow slacks.

I look around. "Your store is beautiful, Max. I love the layout."

"Thanks." He grins, looking around himself. He doesn't stray from the yellow rack, still sorting through them and straightening a few of the hangers. "I think you could probably gather the concept I'm going for."

"With the color blocking?"

He nods. "I always wanted to create my own store that was sorted by color. I found myself walking around in searching for a specific item and hated how I would sift for hours looking for the right shade. I figured this makes it easy when you have an idea of what you're looking for."

"I love that." I give him a smile and walk forward, leaving him at the yellow rack. I stand in front of the pink. "I guess this is where I should go."

We both laugh. Max meets me where I'm standing. "I love that color on you."

"Thank you." I hand him the blouse I carried over this morning. "I made this and wanted to bring it over. I remember how yellow poppies used to be your favorite flower. At least they were back in high school."

“Oh my God. They still are.” He gasps, holding out the shirt. It falls open, and he grins, then clutches it to his chest. “I love it, Opie.”

“I’ve been working on it for a few days. I rushed the hem on the sleeve a bit this morning. My roommate stopped me, complaining my sewing machine was too loud.”

“Who’s your roommate?” he asks, heading back toward the register. A large wooden table stretches across the entire back of the store. There’s an opening on either side leading to the back rooms. He stops near the end of the table and slides open a drawer underneath. “I would love to keep this, but is it okay if I sell this here?”

I nod, and he ties a tag around the top button of the blouse. “Hunter.”

“Hunter?” he asks, writing a price down on the small square. I widen my eyes when I see how much he’s charging for it. It warms my chest.

“Yeah.” I blink. “He’s the pitcher for the Northeast Rebels.”

“You mean Hunter Moore?” he asks, walking back around the table. He heads back toward the yellow rack, rearranging a few items to fit my shirt.

“I guess so.” I shrug, following him. “Do you know him?”

“Ophelia ...” He blinks several times, lowering his gaze on me. “Everyone knows Hunter Moore, and when I say everyone... I mean it.” His eyebrows arch as he gives me a knowing look. “Everyone always says the Rebels have a reputation for taking their training to a level of near obsession. Trust me, I would know.” Max clicks his tongue, shaking his head. “But Hunter Moore gives obsession a whole new meaning.”

I nod, remembering Max said he was dating one of the players. If anyone knows the inside scoop on Hunter and the Rebels baseball team, it would be him.

“How is Hunter your roommate?” His eyebrows dip in curiosity.

“He lives with Reed and Dawson in a house near campus.”

“Oh, yeah.” He nods. “I forgot the three of them shared that house.”

“What makes you say that about Hunter?” Honestly, Max’s description of Hunter isn’t news to me. Up until today, I’d never heard him talk about anything else.

“Say what?”

“You said that he took his obsession to a new level. What did you mean?”

“From what I’ve heard, he is obsessed,” Max explains. “I don’t know too much about him, though. I’ve just heard rumors around campus.”

“What kind of rumors?” I try to reign in my curiosity, but it’s nice to focus on something other than my own trainwreck of a life. Plus, I’m interested to hear what everyone thinks about Hunter.

“Rumor has it Hunter was on the verge of quitting baseball.”

“Hunter?” I stifle a laugh. “Quit?” I haven’t known Hunter long, but I don’t need to. I know if Hunter were to quit, it’s something big.

“Yep.” Max exaggerates his nod. “My boyfriend Trevor said he would hardly show up to practice, and half the pitches he’d throw would be shit. He would go to every single lake and frat party. Especially the ones the team threw. He would get trashed, then show up to practice the next day incredibly hungover. I think he even had a fling with this girl named Penny. I’ve seen her around campus and around town.”

“Are they dating?” I immediately regret asking.

“I’m not sure,” Max answers. “I don’t think so. As far as I know, Hunter isn’t exactly a one-woman kind of man.”

My stomach flips. I shouldn’t care if Hunter is dating anyone. But I can’t help the nagging sensation in the back of my head, hoping to hear he isn’t. Especially after the night he pushed me against the tree.

And earlier today.

“But, I don’t know,” Max continues. “Something changed in him a few months ago. No one knows exactly what happened that made him do a one-eighty, but he’s the reason the team is where they are right now when it comes to their position on going to the championship this year.”

“Wow.” I turn away from Max and smooth my fingers over one of the yellow dresses. “Now it makes sense why he gives shit to the guys all the time.”

“How is it having Hunter for a roommate?”

I roll my eyes. “He drives me crazy.”

“Oh,” Max laughs. “It’s like that, huh?”

“Yeah.” I sigh. “I guess it is.”

I don’t give Max my reason for feeling this way. I’m still attempting to wrap my head around it.

“I don’t know,” I muse. “I think I’m spending too much time thinking about it since I’m not working right now.”

I still haven’t heard from Tracy or anyone else in our circle of contacts. There are absolutely no opportunities for me anywhere right now, and if I don’t figure it out soon, my bank account will start to suffer.

“Still haven’t found anything?”

“No, but I have a few connections keeping an eye out for me. Hopefully soon.” I give Max a hopeful smile.

“What about here?”

“What do you mean?”

He frowns, looking around his store. “I could use a bit of help around here.”

“Here?” I ask him, pointing my finger to the floor. “You want me to work here?”

He sheepishly lifts a shoulder. “I mean, I know it isn’t New York or anything, but maybe just while you’re here. It’s still

fashion and in your line of work. You could do it until you find a new job. Only if you want to, of course.”

My heart leaps at the thought of working with my old best friend. It isn't only because I'd be working around Max or clothes.

It's the familiarity of it.

My chest warms immediately at the idea of me working here every day.

“Would I work the sales floor with you?” I ask, nervous as to what my job would entail. I've always worked in fashion in some capacity, but customer service isn't exactly my strong suit.

“You could.” Max fixes a few hangers, then walks over to the front door and flips the sign to *Open*. I didn't even realize he'd left the door unlocked even though he was closed.

“I knew you were coming by.” He points to the sign, reading my mind.

I laugh. “You're ridiculous.”

“So, what do you say?” he asks, lifting his arms. “Wait. Before you answer that, I have another option for you to think about.”

I tilt my head to the side.

“You could design a few pieces and sell them here if you'd like.”

My jaw drops. I shake my head. “Max, you don't have to do that.”

“I don't.” He grins. “But I want to. How fun would it be to have you as a featured designer? We could even put up a special display featuring your line.”

I want to cry. I almost do. Tears well behind my eyes. “Max, I've never put any of my designs on sale.”

He steps closer. “Well, this is a good place to start, don't you think?”

I look around his store. It's full of color. Lately, my life has felt like one big canvas of black and white. Little sparks of color have been able to find their way in but nothing like this. I'd lost one dream, but Max has offered me another. At least until I can get my old one back.

I bite down on my bottom lip, mulling over his offer. It only takes me fifteen seconds to give him my answer. "Count me in."

The second Max leaps forward and wraps his arms around me, I immediately think of my roommate.

There's an added benefit to this job.

It gives me an excuse to be away from Hunter.

NINE



HUNTER

I clench my fingers and stretch them back and forth. I'm rubbing my thumb over the thick stitching of the baseball in my hand, but my mind is elsewhere.

I can't stop thinking about Ophelia. I can't stop thinking about how she pulled her bottom lip under her teeth and bit down, holding her breath.

I find it fascinating how she so easily bends to my will. Considering how she's stood her ground around me since we first met.

The idea of it is enough to spark something inside my chest. Something I haven't yet felt.

I haven't seen her in a few days, though. It's made it easier to put the idea of her aside, but she still manages to seep into the recesses of my mind when I least expect it.

I'm sitting in one of our old patio chairs in the backyard. The plastic is faded and worn thin, but you can't tell beneath the blanketed, black night sky. There are a few stars out tonight. The air is quiet and still. It's allowed me to think in silence, trying to figure out why Ophelia is finding her way under my skin. At first, I thought the feeling would disappear. But I can't help finding myself getting irritated at the smallest things. Catching her talking to Dawson. Listening to her incessant use of the sewing machine through the fucking walls.

In a way, she's been a nice distraction, but I fear there will come a time when she becomes more than that. She's a nice

distraction from the parts of my life I couldn't care less about. Classes. Jamie's constant calls.

But when it comes to me possibly being drafted in a few months, I can't allow Ophelia to get me to that point.

A few minutes ago, I was hoping the cool night air would give me the opportunity to center myself—to stop thinking about Ophelia and those fucking blue eyes of hers. I'm still covered in dirt and sweat from practice, but I don't care.

I need to remember what's important. I need to remember what's at stake.

I'm resting my head on the back of the flimsy plastic chair, staring up at the sky when my phone rings beside me.

I sit up and rotate the cap on my head to face forward. The sun isn't out but something tells me I need the added protection. My suspicion is confirmed when I read the name on my screen. Groaning, I reluctantly pick it up.

"Seriously, Jamie. What now?" I pinch the bridge of my nose and rest my elbow on the arm of my chair.

"Hunter, man, come on. You could at least come up with a better greeting than that. I'm your brother."

"Shit." I breathe out. "Not when you call me every fucking day asking for business advice. I'm no longer in this. I'm off the hook, remember?" Irritation brews inside my chest.

Jamie is only two years older than me, and we couldn't be more different. If it weren't for the obligation our mother had left in her will before she died, I probably would have stopped talking to him years ago. Capital gains and investments aren't exactly my passion. Not like it was to my mother. Not like it is to Jamie, despite his occasional lack of competence.

"You are still off the hook," he grits out., sounding irritated.

Go fucking figure. The man is harassing me but *he's* the one who is irritated.

"Why is it that you're the older brother and the one with the business degree but you're still asking me for business

advice like I'm some sort of fucking consultant? I'm not even finished with college yet. I signed away my fifty percent weeks ago. I don't want any part of this. Not anymore."

"We all know you fucking signed your share away weeks ago, Hunt." My brother's tone has changed. He's seething with anger.

I can't fault him for it. If I were on his end, I'd be pissed, too, but I don't fucking care. The hardest decisions to make are usually the ones for yourself, and this one was for me.

"No hesitation, brother. There was no hesitation when you placed the tip of that pen to paper. You left me with this mess, and now I have to fucking clean it up," Jamie adds, his anger ringing in my ears.

I chew on the inside of my cheek, and curl my fingers into a tight fist. My knuckles burn, and my head pounds. "You can't say you didn't see this coming, Jamie. I don't want it. I never wanted it."

We both fall silent. The tension between my brother and me is like a taut string, pulled to the limit and ready to snap.

Jamie releases an audible sigh. "I know you didn't. But I'm going to tell you right now, Hunt, you're the one who has to live with your decision. I just hope it's worth it."

There's no use arguing with Jamie. We've been over this a million times since I told him my wishes, ignoring the wishes of my mother. I know he resents me for the decision I made but it's useless to keep dragging this argument out.

I get to the point of his call. "What do you want?"

He doesn't waste any more time getting to it. He moves on as if the first three minutes of our conversation never happened. Typical Jamie. "Reese is offering me a ten percent equity to partner with me. I'm wondering if you think it's a good idea."

Reese is an old business colleague of Jamie's from back when they were interning at the same stock brokerage down in Boston a couple years ago. I guess Reese had considered my mother's sudden death an inconvenience. My mother's passing

pulled Jamie's attention from their start-up brokerage and onto the company my mother left to him. And to me.

Until a few weeks ago.

Knowing Reese suddenly wants the piece of the pie honestly pisses me off.

"Why now?"

"You know why," Jamie points out. "He heard about what happened with your last deal and how successful it was. Now he wants in on it. He knows you signed all the ownership to me, and he figured he'd put in an offer to partner with me."

I shake my head. This is why I fucking hate business. It's cheap and dirty. Everyone is out to make money, not caring who they railroad in the process to get it. As long as there are dollar signs, that's all they see.

"What's Reese willing to do for you?" I ask Jamie, prepared to hear him out.

"He's willing to invest two-fifty. He also built a ton of contacts at our first brokerage. He might be able to secure some buyers for any companies we acquire in the next few years. His goal is to acquire and consolidate nearly a third of the companies we own right now." The edge to Jamie's voice has smoothed since the start of our conversation.

He's already made up his mind. He just wants my validation.

I chew on the inside of my cheek some more, seriously considering the information Jamie is throwing at me. Even though I no longer have any say or stake in the company, I still care about my brother. I just wish he'd at least attempt to not consult me on every single issue.

I massage my forehead with my fingertips, the need to run and blow off steam building in me. This is the reason I know I'm meant to play baseball. Moving my body and standing on the pitching mound are the only stress relievers that seem to work.

Everything else in my life appears to amplify it.

“It’s not bad,” I say, sitting up in my seat. “Tell Reese you’ll take him up on his offer, but only if he holds up his end of expanding and getting you those contacts. And helping to capitalize on the companies you’ve already acquired. Also, make sure you draft up a contract explaining the terms and for how long. I know he’s your friend, but you can never be too sure.”

“Okay.” Jamie sighs with relief. “Thanks, Hunt.”

“Yeah.” I grip my phone tighter than usual. I need to end this conversation before I explode. “No problem.”

“I appreciate it.”

My jaw pulsates when I grind my teeth harder. “Listen, Jamie. You own one hundred percent of this company now. It’s about fucking time you acted like it. You can’t keep calling, and I can’t keep doing this. So, unless it’s an emergency, stop calling me.”

I hang up before I allow myself the chance to feel guilty.

I shove my phone in the pocket of my gray sweatpants and start to run. I don’t care which direction I’m headed; I just need to fucking run.

My feet hit the pavement, and I take off, deciding to take my usual route along the neighborhood, starting with the inside streets and working my way out. There aren’t too many houses in this area. Most of my neighbors know my usual route, so when I pass by a few of them and wave, they don’t seem shocked.

Just another night. Just another run.

But the thoughts running through my mind aren’t at all routine.

Despite the annoyance from my conversation with Jamie, I’m still thinking about Ophelia. I find myself wanting to know more about her. Even if she seems to get off on pushing my buttons.

I can’t ask Reed for more information on her, though. I won’t. I need to hear it from her.

I need to know if my suspicions about her are correct. I need to know if I'm right in thinking she hasn't stopped thinking about that night at the tree.

I continue running down the road and take a right, leading me out of the circle of cul-de-sacs. I barrel down the street leading to the main road and swing back around. I put all my strength into the first few blocks, slowing when I've reached the inside of the neighborhood. Once I make another right, I see her.

Ophelia is walking down the middle of the street. She's alone, staring down at her phone, the blue and white light splashing up at her face like a beacon.

Her hair is swinging across her shoulders, and her bright blue, sleeveless dress flows around her legs like isolated ripples of water. The material hugs to the full curve of her round ass. A row of buttons draws from her lower back all the way between her shoulder blades.

My chest squeezes at the sight of her but it might just be from running nearly an entire mile by now.

I remind myself not to sneak up on her. I know precisely what this woman is capable of, and I'm not exactly in the mood to have my back meet the concrete tonight.

I slow my steps far enough back to where she won't be able to hear them. I walk behind her for a few feet before deciding what to do.

I adjust the bill of my cap and tip my chin higher. I close the gap between us until I'm only a few feet behind her.

"Didn't you learn your lesson the first time?"

She immediately stops at the sound of my voice and lowers her phone. She looks up and slowly spins around. The second her eyes land on me, I can already read the annoyance in her expression.

"At this point"—she pins her stare on me—"I truly believe you are following me."

"I'm not following you." My stomach dips.

“Oh, that’s right. You aren’t following me. You’re keeping track of me.” She spins around and continues walking in the direction of our house. She returns to her phone, pulling it back up and sliding her thumb across the screen.

I jog to catch up to her and slow my steps, keeping them at the same pace as hers.

“I’m going to ask you again. Didn’t. You. Learn. Your lesson. The first time?”

“What is that even supposed to mean, Hunter?” She still won’t look up from her phone. “I think you should be asking yourself that question.”

“Why, because you tackled me that one time?”

“Yes.” She stops, spinning to face me again. “That’s precisely why.”

“Seriously, though.” I lower my voice. “Why are you walking out here by yourself this late at night?”

She swipes her tongue across her lips, allowing the silence to settle between us. She inhales a breath. “I worked a little later tonight than I intended. Why are you out here this late?”

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. It’s rare for anyone to show interest in my life. I keep my circle small. The only people who know anything about the inner workings of my life are Reed and Dawson—even then, I keep it limited—but the light brown flecks in Ophelia’s eyes that sparkle beneath the streetlight chip away at my defenses.

“I just had a less than stellar conversation with my brother. I needed to blow off some steam.”

“You have a brother?” she asks with genuine curiosity.

I inhale a deep breath and blow it out. “I also have a mother and a father, but I don’t talk to my mother anymore. I talk to my dad every day.”

She rolls her eyes. “Not exactly what I meant.”

I nod a few times. My tactic to avoid the topic of my brother has failed. “Yeah, I have one brother. He’s three years

older than me and lives in Boston.”

“Boston, huh?” She cracks a smile as if the idea of living in one of the world’s largest cities is the most incredible opportunity.

“Yeah.” I nod, looking down at my feet. “He moved there a few months ago, actually. From New York.”

“Oh.” She nods once and pulls her bottom lip under her teeth. She bites down and allows the silence to fall between us.

I contemplate telling her more about my brother and my contentious relationship with my family, but there’s no way in hell I’ll be giving that up freely. Only if she asks, will I consider it. I’ll never talk about Jamie to others on my own volition. I’m not one for self-torture.

I shove my hands in the pockets of my sweatpants. “You found a job?” Up until now, I didn’t know she was looking for one.

“Yep.” Her lips pop on the ‘p’.

“Where at?”

This time she comes to a halt. My feet stop the second hers do. The light from the streetlamp above her shines across her skin. I clench my fist, curling my fingers and digging them deep into my palm. It takes everything in me not to reach out and touch her.

She arches an eyebrow. Her skepticism is written all over her face. “Do you really want to know?”

I shrug a shoulder. “I’m asking you the question. Why wouldn’t I want to know?”

“Because you’re you, Hunter.” She gives me a pointed look.

I harden my gaze. “If you’re wanting me to convince you I care, I’m afraid you’ll be severely disappointed. I don’t beg.”

Her skin pales but her cheeks blush. I pretend I didn’t hear her small gasp.

“I’m simply asking you to make conversation.” It’s only half a lie.

She swallows and tucks a stray strand of hair behind her ear before moving her feet once again. I follow.

“I got a job working at my friend Max’s store down in the town center.”

“No shit.” I nod, even though Ophelia is two steps ahead of me.

She spins around but continues walking backward. She’s slow and deliberate with her steps, ensuring she doesn’t trip on her dress. She bunches the fabric around her thigh and lifts it from the ground.

Fuck. My eyes immediately follow the slit driving up her entire leg. The slit practically stops at her fucking hip.

It reminds me of the dress she was wearing the night at the lake.

“Is there a problem with Max’s store?” There’s humor in her question. Her pretty pink mouth is curled into a playful smile. I like this side of Ophelia, but I like the other side better—the one where it’s clear she’s resisting me.

“No.” I shake my head, shoving my hands in my pockets. The cool night air brushes across my arms, sending a slight shiver across my skin. “I’ve known Max for about a year now, since he started seeing Trevor.”

“Huh.” Her eyes flicker. “Well, I’ve known Max since high school so ...”

“What?” I laugh. “You think you win because you’ve known him longer?”

“Well.” She twists her mouth. “You like playing games, don’t you?”

“Actually, I do.”

Her smile fades.

I amend my first statement. I’m warming up to this side of her. The side where she thinks she has me right where she

wants me. But I force my heart to calm the fuck down. It's a slippery slope with Ophelia. I can't allow myself to get carried away.

"Seriously... Max's store is nice. I'm not surprised you work there."

"It's okay." She sighs and spins back around. This time she waits for me to walk beside her before she keeps going. We're almost at the spot where we first met. Our house is in the distance at the end of the street. Reed's car is parked in the driveway.

"I'm not entirely sure where my place is there yet, but I'll figure it out."

"I don't necessarily have any advice for you. I have no clue about the fashion industry," I admit.

"Couldn't tell." She arches an eyebrow and laughs. "I didn't think you did."

"Who knows? Maybe I could have. You said the other day you didn't peg me as the type to take economics. Do I surprise you?"

"In some ways." She's quick to answer.

I try not to take her reply personally.

In a lot of ways, I'm predictable. At least to everyone outside my typical social circle. I like to keep it that way. My life tends to stay less complicated.

"Max was the only person I ever allowed to see my drawings. Up until I left for college, at least." She grins. "Every now and then, we'd swap our sketches and add one tiny, minute detail, or change the cut of a piece. Then when we'd hand it back to the other, we'd wait to see if one of us could spot the change. My family never understood my love for this career. The only thing they ever understood was baseball. They immersed themselves in my brother's dreams over mine. In a lot of ways, Max validated and reminded me of my love for fashion. I think he's done that for me again now that I'm back."

The smile on her face has faded, and the flicker in her eyes has dimmed. It's the same expression I've noticed when she talks about her life before she suddenly came to live with us.

"I know what it's like to love something yet feel like it could be ripped out from under you at any moment." My confession weighs on my chest.

"Have you always played baseball?" Her curiosity surprises me. She hasn't shown the slightest interest in me... until now.

"Pretty much." I remove my hat and run my fingers through my hair before placing it back on my head. "I always knew I wanted to play but life got in the way for a while."

Her eyebrows knit. The corners of her mouth turn down into a frown.

"I just mean..." My stomach dips. I hate talking about this shit and have no idea why I've brought it up now. I blame the conversation I had with Jamie earlier. "I've had other obligations that kept me from pursuing what I truly wanted."

"I get it." She nods. "Trust me, I do. You don't have to explain it to me."

We've now made it up to our house and start walking down the driveway. Not a single light is on in the building. The yard is nearly pitch-black. The only light that shines is from the moon peeking out from behind the clouds. It's a subtle white glow, but it's barely visible.

My body hums as Ophelia draws closer. We're walking down the dark driveway. It's nearly impossible to make out her features or the details of her face but she starts walking toward the front door.

I quickly grab her wrist, pulling her around to a stop.

"What are you doing?" She hisses. Her voice is lowered to a whisper.

I don't know why she suddenly feels the need to whisper, but I play along.

“The front door is locked. It’ll be quieter if we go through the back. I left it unlocked.”

“That’s real fucking safe.” She rolls her eyes.

“Reed and Dawson are inside.”

“Dawson isn’t home.”

My stomach drops deeper. Why the fuck would she know if Dawson is home or not? More importantly, why do I care? I’ve never cared what or who Dawson fucked around with. But for some reason, the thought of Ophelia and Dawson being any sort of anything sets my teeth on edge.

My skin heats despite the chill it’s felt throughout tonight. The sweat from my run has left my skin damp, but it nearly evaporates as my thoughts run away with me.

I clench my teeth and pull Ophelia toward the back of the house. Once we’re out of the front yard, I push her backward until her back lands against the side of the house.

She immediately looks up as if she’s not surprised about my move.

“I’m beginning to think you like putting me in this position, Hunter.” She slides her bare leg between mine. There’s a lot less fabric between us compared to the night at the tree.

That night, I was wearing jeans. This time, my sweatpants are a sad fucking excuse for a barrier. The slit in her dress has caused the fabric to fall away from her body, exposing her whole leg to me. My cock swells and hardens as she glides her leg up and down. It’s only a few inches but it’s noticeable, bringing my cock to life almost immediately. She’s doing it on purpose.

The familiar flicker returns to her eyes, peeking through the shadows dancing across her face.

“Tell me how you know that,” I grit between clenched teeth.

“Know what?” she asks with a tilt of her mouth.

I press my hips into hers, not caring how fucking hard she's made me. I don't fucking care if she knows. I want her to feel what she's doing to me.

"How do you know Dawson isn't home?"

"Does it bother you that I know? He's our roommate, Hunter. It shouldn't be a complete surprise if I do know."

"Why can't you ever answer my questions?" I ask her.

"It's only fair." She lifts her leg higher, pressing it harder against my cock. Fuck, she needs to stop doing that. I won't be able to hold back much longer. "You never answer any of mine."

"Bullshit." It's the only word I can think to say. I'm still holding onto her wrist with one hand. She uses her free hand to press against the siding of the house behind her, refusing to touch me.

"You didn't answer me the other day when I asked you exactly what secrets I've been keeping." She makes a point.

"You do have secrets," I tell her. She sure as fuck does.

"What secrets?" She enunciates each word, drawing them out slowly. She's tipped her chin up at me in defiance, daring me to tell her.

I look away from her long enough to make sure every light is still out in the house. When I'm satisfied it's still as dark as the sky above us, I look back down at Ophelia. Her chest is heavy, working fast to keep up with her breaths. Her neck dips as she swallows, waiting for my answer.

I lean forward, barely brushing my lips against hers. I can feel her move under me. She isn't trying to wriggle away like the night at the tree. This time, she's daring me—testing me to see how far I'm willing to go. Outside. Against our house.

I brush my lips against hers, then across her warm cheek before bringing my mouth to the hollow of her ear. Her breasts are pressed against my body, and her thigh is still connected to my pulsating cock. It's begging to know what it would feel like to plunge myself inside her.

“Do you really want to know?” I ask her.

She raises her eyebrows—another dare. “Yes.”

I inhale a deep breath through my nose, smelling her rose-scented hair, then whisper into her ear, “You’ve thought about me every fucking second, minute and hour of every fucking day since I touched you in those woods.” I swallow, begging myself to hold back.

But I take her up on her dare.

I reach down between us and slide my finger over the fabric of her dress. “You’re begging me to touch you now. Your pussy cries out for me.” I press the tips of my fingers to her center, finding her clit. It’s obstructed by her dress, but it doesn’t matter. A small cry escapes her throat when I press harder. The wetness from her pussy soaks through to my fingers. My cock pulsates.

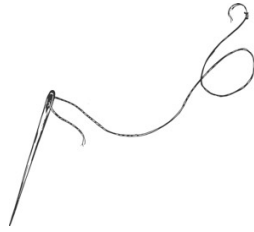
Her gasps brush against me, and her heart pounds inside her chest. It vibrates against mine until I pull away from her. Her eyelids flutter as she tries to regain her composure. It’s impossible with my fingers pressed against her.

“Tell me I’m wrong,” I demand.

She doesn’t say a word. She doesn’t even move. She can’t give me an answer. At first, I wonder whether I’m right, but her reaction tells me everything I need to know. My suspicion is confirmed by the way she’s stopped resisting me. She simply stares up at me with widened eyes. Before she has a chance to get her bearings with my confession, I tell her one more thing before walking away.

“Make sure you go through the back door. You don’t want to wake Reed up.”

TEN



OPHELIA

“I’m coming.”

“Are you sure?” A thousand tiny explosions spread out across my chest and down my arms. I nearly jump up from where I’m sitting on the edge of my bed, but I force myself to stay where I am, wanting my best friend to confirm what she just said.

“Absolutely.” Claire sits back in her chair and pulls the phone closer to her face. We’ve been talking on the phone for the past thirty minutes, filling each other in on the details of our lives ever since I left a month ago. “I miss you, and I could seriously use a break from the city.”

I bite back the tears. I haven’t realized how much I’ve missed Claire these past few weeks. It’s not as if my life here in Maine has been terrible. There have been some silver linings—small details that help me get through the day to day.

Being close to Reed has strengthened our sibling relationship. Working with Max has been a blessing I didn’t know would hit me the way it has. It satisfies a small portion of my soul I’ve missed since I left New York. It’s only been a few weeks, but it didn’t take long for me to feel the emptiness consume me. It threatened to swallow me whole, pushing me off a cliff into nothing but darkness. I reached out, hoping to hold onto anything that would bring me comfort. Reed and Max have done that. Sewing clothes and designing has done that for me.

At least temporarily.

“Is everything okay there in New York?” I ask Claire. I’m thrilled she’s agreed to come visit but I’m hoping there isn’t more behind her reasoning.

“Of course.” She waves me off. “I’m still going on just as many bad dates as ever, but I think I need to take a break from it. You know?”

I nod. “I get it. I love that you’re wanting to come.”

“Are you sure it’ll be okay if I stay there? I mean, I could always check out one of those short-term rentals or something.”

My eyes drift from my phone to the door to my bathroom. The same door that connects my room to Hunter’s.

I’m not worried if Reed or Hunter care that Claire will stay here. Hell, I know Dawson couldn’t care less than they do.

I bring my eyes back to Claire on my screen. “Of course, it is. It would be ridiculous if you stayed anywhere else. They shouldn’t have an issue with it. You can stay in my room with me, anyway. Ever since I started working at Max’s store, I’ve given a portion of my pay to Reed to help with the rent, and I’ve bought groceries a handful of times. I’m sure they’ll be fine with it.”

I swallow down the disappointment of the last several weeks, as far as returning to New York goes.

“Oh.” Claire adjusts her position. She’s sitting on the bench in front of her bay window, looking out onto the city. She tucks her legs underneath her. “I can’t wait to see Max’s shop and to meet your roommates.”

“When are you thinking of coming?” I grin, anticipation building in me.

“I have a couple days off next week, so I was thinking of driving up then.”

“Actually, that’s perfect. Apparently, there’s this big rivalry game the guys have been begging me to go to. It would be nice to have someone to go with.”

If it wasn't for Reed and Dawson's constant reminders of their upcoming game, I probably would have backed out by now. But the pleading in both their eyes tells me it's important I show up. And at this point, I would do anything for my brother. Even though I've helped around the house and made sure I'm not infringing on the life he's built here, I still feel like I owe it to him to go.

Hunter, on the other hand. Well, he's a different story entirely. I can't decide where we stand, and whenever I start trying to figure him out, a headache grows in the back of my head. He's complicated and confusing. Hot one minute, cold the next. At times, he's pushing me, tempting me, and daring me. Other times, he's telling me not to go to this game. He's talking to me as if I'm an inconvenience or I will somehow give him bad luck just by sitting in the stands.

And then there are other moments. Moments like when he pressed his finger against my clit. I didn't want to tell him he was correct in saying I had wanted him to touch me again. But in my soul, I know he sees the truth. My body betrayed me, telling him everything he needed to know.

"That sounds like fun." Claire beams with excitement. Her strawberry blonde hair falls away from her shoulders. "I don't think I've ever been to an actual baseball game before."

"I would love it if you came."

"I'll be there. School spirit and all."

Her excitement causes me to laugh.

"Oh, boy. I bet the guys will love that. Especially Hunter."

The anticipation of seeing my best friend fades the second Claire says Hunter's name. I've told her about the first several encounters with him, and the night he pushed me against the tree, telling me not to go to this rivalry game. But I haven't told her the extent of how I feel about him, or the conflicting thoughts running through my mind. I haven't told her what Max told me about Hunter's past, either.

I'm still trying to make sense of it myself.

I roll my eyes, thankful that Hunter isn't home to hear my conversation.

“How are things with him, anyway?” Claire asks. “Are you guys getting better at becoming roommates?”

“Honestly?” I cringe, ashamed to admit my thoughts out loud. Mostly because I know the second I spit them out, Claire will see right through them. “He drives me fucking crazy, Claire.”

Her reaction is exactly what I expect it to be.

She raises her chin, narrowing her eyes at me “You're falling for him, aren't you?”

“What?” I laugh her question off and shake my head. “No, absolutely not. He complains about my sewing machine all the time. He even followed me the other night when I was walking home from work. Seriously, I can't tell whether he hates me or he's simply tolerating me for Reed's sake.”

I leave out the part where the jealousy of me bringing up Dawson lit a fire in Hunter the other night, causing him to push me up against the side of the house, despite the risk of being caught by Reed. I leave the part out where I dared him to take things a step further with me by purposely sliding my leg between his and rubbing it against his hardened cock. It was solid as a rock and left me completely wet between my legs. Enough so that I laid in bed that night and thought of him, sliding my fingers over my clit, imagining they were his tongue instead. The internal confession running through my mind causes my cheeks to heat with embarrassment. It's a confession I'm not willing to admit out loud—not even to my best friend. I hate that Hunter has brought me to this point.

I hate that every time we've touched each other, I've only wanted more.

He threw the first pitch just to see how hard I'd hit it back.

“You really think he hates you?” Claire asks.

My first instinct is to say no, but I'd be lying if I were to say I was one hundred percent certain.

He could be fucking with me for the thrill of it.

That's a more likely scenario—one I'm convincing myself to believe. It's better than admitting that I've allowed Hunter to grow on me. At least a little.

Hunter Moore has quickly consumed every piece of me, and he thrives on it.

"I don't know." I shake my head, brushing my hair away from my forehead. I've thrown it up into a messy bun at the top of my head, but it might as well be draped around my shoulders like a thick winter blanket. The back of my neck warms with the thought of what's happening between Hunter and me. "It's hard to tell."

I'm not entirely sure what the nature of this relationship is, and the last thing I need to do is bury myself into it deeper than necessary.

"I'll figure it out."

She presses her lips together, giving me a knowing look.

"What does that mean?" I can't help but giggle. It's a nice reprieve from the overwhelming thoughts crowding my mind.

"I'll be able to tell when I see him." She lifts one shoulder and rests her hand in her chin. "I don't know if you're aware of this, but I'm an expert when it comes to sensing these types of situations."

"How so?"

"I've been on enough bad dates to tell when someone is into you or not."

I smile at my best friend. Part of my heart saddens, knowing Claire's dating life hasn't been the most successful. But part of me is glad she's still able to find the humor in it.

"We'll see." I can't help but frown, unconvinced. I'm in no position to care about how or even if Hunter cares about me. In any capacity. That's not what moving here was supposed to be. Living here is only a temporary solution to a temporary problem. Even if I've exhausted all my career options... For now.

“I should go.” I inhale a deep, resolving breath. I need to figure out what this is between Hunter and me before Claire gets here. “I have this blouse I want to finish up before my shift later at Max’s.”

“Oh.” She straightens her back and stands, crossing her apartment. “Send me a picture when you’re done. I love seeing your creations.”

“Will do.” I give her a grin before ending our call.

I toss my phone on my bed, and cross my room. I peek out the window, checking to see whose cars are in the driveway. Most of the time, it will tell me who’s home and who isn’t. More than half the time, Hunter’s and Reed’s are gone. Honestly, they rotate so often and sporadically, it’s impossible to pin down their routine. The three of them simply don’t have one.

Hunter and Dawson’s cars are both here. I lean back, chancing a glance through my open bathroom door. Hunter’s is wide open. I don’t dare take a step inside. The view from where I’m standing tells me he isn’t in his room.

The last time he caught me working on my sewing machine in the middle of the day, he nearly bit my head off. The resolve in me, however, tells me I shouldn’t care. I don’t want to care if my sewing is an inconvenience to Hunter. This is my career and my life, just like baseball is for him.

I sit down in front of my machine and slide the silk fabric under the needle. I adjust the thread, noticing how instinct and muscle memory kick in the second I press the ball of my foot to the pedal. Using this sewing machine was a bit of a learning curve when I bought it back in my first year of college. I’d found it at an antique store in the corner of the village, and I couldn’t refuse. The price was too good for the condition. Now, after three years of use, it’s beginning to show its age, though. Every now and then, the thread will get tangled and twisted. But even with its quirks, my love for it hasn’t faded.

The familiar sound of the needle moving up and down fills the room, and I start to zone out, making my way down the sleeve of the blouse. I remove a pin, sew an inch. Remove a

pin, sew an inch. I repeat this process, thinking of Hunter the entire time.

His potent green eyes.

The warmth that fills my chest.

The heat that seems to swell between my legs every time he fucking touches me.

My thoughts get carried away, and I forget to stop long enough to pull the pin. I slide my finger too far. It glides over the guard, allowing the tip of the needle to come down on my finger.

With a loud yelp, I jerk my finger back. Blood seeps out of the small cut on the tip and I quickly stand up. I'm running to the bathroom as blood starts to drip down my skin.

"Ophelia?" Dawson asks, appearing beside me as I turn the faucet on. "Are you okay?"

I stick my finger under the stream of water, hissing as blood washes down the sink.

"I'm fine," I say between clenched teeth. I stamp my foot a few times, waiting for the stinging sensation to subside. "I was just being careless with the sewing machine. This isn't the first time it's happened."

"Here." He draws closer to me, and grabs my hand to lift it up. "Let me see how bad it is."

My eyes move from my hand to his kind face. There's a concerned expression there as he meticulously inspects my finger. "Seriously, Dawson. I'm okay."

"Wait a sec." He crosses the bathroom and tears off a string of toilet paper. He's about to wrap it around my finger when Hunter enters the room.

"What happened?" he asks, his eyebrows furrowing.

"Seriously?" I roll my eyes and groan.

Dawson doesn't flinch with Hunter's intrusion. He has more control than I do. Apparently.

“Nothing happened, Hunter.” I huff.

I try to pull my finger away. I appreciate Dawson’s concern but he’s seriously overdoing it.

He pulls my finger back and continues to hold the toilet paper to it.

The sharp sting has transitioned to a dull ache.

“What the fuck happened?” Hunter asks again. He’s clearly pissed neither of us have answered him.

“It’s not a big deal,” I tell him, sitting down on the toilet.

“Ophelia cut her finger on her sewing machine,” Dawson quickly adds.

“Well, shit.” Hunter squats in front of the sink. He reaches below and pulls out a box of Band-Aids. “Toilet paper isn’t going to cut it. Move.”

Hunter shoves Dawson aside, his skin taking on a slight pinker shade than usual. Hunter is deliciously tan from his constant training, but there are times when his emotion peeks through his sun-kissed tones.

“You can be such an asshole sometimes,” Dawson bites back at Hunter, still hanging onto my finger. I lunge forward, trying to prevent him from pulling my finger away from my hand.

“She needs a Band-Aid, Dawson,” Hunter insists.

“I know. It was the quickest thing I could think of, and I don’t know where they are.”

Hunter nods. “That’s because this is my bathroom.”

“Whatever, man.” Dawson lets go the second Hunter’s hands are working on mine. He removes the toilet paper. I watch him and then swing my eyes to Dawson’s.

He’s confused. I shrug a shoulder and give him a weak smile. “Thanks, Dawson.”

His mouth lifts into a small smile in return. “Of course.” He lets out a humorless laugh. “Next time, try to stitch the

fabric together, not your finger.”

I giggle. “I will.”

Hunter still doesn’t acknowledge either of us. Dawson leaves the bathroom by the time Hunter is nearly finished cleaning off my finger.

“You didn’t have to do that, you know,” I challenge, breaking his concentration.

“Do what?” Hunter asks, tearing open a bandage. He gently wraps it around my finger.

It’s a side to Hunter I haven’t seen yet. A kind, concerned side.

“Come in here,” I answer. “I didn’t even know you were home.”

“I just walked into my room from practice when I heard you and Dawson in the bathroom.” It’s then I realize he does look like he came from practice. It’s as if he’s been rolling around in dirt all day.

His brow is covered in specks of dirt, smudged and smeared over his skin. His Northeast Rebels shirt is slightly damp, parts of it clinging to his chest and arms. He’s made up of sculpted muscle, sweat and dirt—a concoction I can’t help but be drawn to. A bead of sweat drips down from his hairline, tracing the edge of his sharp jaw. I swallow the golf ball-sized lump in my throat.

“How *was* practice?” I ask. He finishes wrapping the Band-Aid around my finger, then stands. He tosses the wrapper into the trash and walks to the sink to wash his hands.

“You really want to know?”

“Yeah,” I scoff. “I can’t ask?”

“No, you can,” he corrects, turning off the water. He spins around and leans on the counter while he dries his hands. “I just figured you were more interested in how Dawson’s practice went.”

“What?” I stand. I’ve never been more confused than I am now. Hunter’s expression is a clear contradiction to the kindness he was showing me only minutes before. “That doesn’t even make sense. Why would I ask Dawson?”

He shrugs, tossing the towel onto the counter. “No reason.”

He turns his back to me and walks back into his room.

I follow him. The annoyance I usually feel around Hunter returns. He’s doing it again. It’s exactly what I was explaining to Claire. He drives me crazy.

“No.” I don’t back down. “There’s a reason. Why did it bother you that he helped me? He was the one who came in and offered to help. I didn’t ask him to.”

He spins around when he realizes I’ve followed him... *into* his bedroom.

This is the first time I’ve stepped foot in here. I’m standing on the threshold, but it still counts. My feet are touching the wood flooring in his room.

His room is different than I imagined. For the past month, I’ve only seen a small sliver of his room—only what was visible through his doorway, anyway. His walls are blank and painted a deep, dark shade of green. His large bed is pushed against the wall, and a small wooden table sits beside it. Other than a bat and glove sitting in the corner of the room by the door, I wouldn’t be able to get a sense of Hunter’s personality. I wouldn’t be able to tell he lived in here.

He takes a step closer to me, but I don’t waver in my stance.

“Do you and Dawson not like each other? Is that why it bothered you that he helped me?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “You could have caught an infection if that cut wasn’t cleaned properly. He wasn’t thinking.”

“You’re overreacting.” I shake my head and hold up my finger. Truthfully, it’s ridiculous I’m even having this conversation with him. “It seriously wasn’t that bad. I’ve cut and pricked my fingers a thousand times. It comes with the

territory. Injuries are bound to happen. Plus, Dawson was just being nice.”

Hunter crosses the room to stand in front of me. He raises an arm and grips the doorframe. His body is inches from mine as he looks down on me. A shadow covers his face. His eyes spark with the same fire I saw in the yard last night. I step back, but he stops me from straying too far by grabbing my arm with his free hand.

“I wouldn’t be so sure when it comes to Dawson.” He hums, tugging me impossibly closer. “If it wasn’t so pathetic, I would find your naivety endearing.”

I swallow the hot anger sitting on the edge of my tongue. I can’t decide if I want to push Hunter away or slap him. My chest tightens.

Pinning him with daggers, I say the first thing that comes to mind that I know will hurt him just as much as his words hurt me. “Dawson was right. You are an asshole.”

I try to back away, but his grip on me tightens. His fingers press into my flesh. I rise on my toes, challenging him with a glare. His mouth is close enough for his breath to wisp against my skin.

At first, I think he’s going to pull the same shit he did last night. He’s going to pull away at the last second. He wants to watch me squirm. He wants to watch me react to his touch.

But this time, it’s different.

Hunter drops the arm gripping onto the doorframe and grabs the side of my face. I gasp the second he pulls me to him and crashes his mouth to mine.

His kiss is quick and forceful. He’s tasting me, breathing me in. My entire body ignites with heat as my lips mold to his. It feels as if it’s been forever since I’ve been touched this way. Kissed this way. My body stretches to reach him, my feet tensing as they try to hold me up by the balls of my feet.

Hunter doesn’t move his body. His hand stays firmly positioned, his other sliding across the small of my back. Heat radiates from my spine, along my neck, and to my face. He

simply coaxes my lips apart with the tip of his tongue, and I allow him access, catching a small bit of air before he cuts off my supply completely.

He slides his tongue along mine, tasting every possible part of my mouth. I moan against him, curling my body to his. His mouth is warm and soft and hard, all at once. I'm savoring it, wondering how in the hell we've managed to get to this point. My suitcase wheel rolling down the street. Me tackling Hunter to the asphalt. His green eyes devouring me as I stood before him in the bathroom. Him pinning me against the tree at the lake. My thoughts have run away with me—images of the past month spinning through my mind.

Then, just as fast as it happened, he bites down on my bottom lip, tugging on it before pulling away.

“I was right.” He growls. “You are naïve.” His voice vibrates over the hammering in my chest. My cheeks flush as he finally lets his hand slip away. Every single thought I had immediately fades away, dragging me back down to reality.

He stays close to me, staring directly into my eyes. There's a slight smile on his mouth.

“Tell me something, Ophelia. When you touch yourself at night, is it Dawson you're thinking of... or is it me?”

I ball my hands into tight fists, the anger moving from the tip of my tongue down to my feet.

Embarrassment swarms through my body. I allowed Hunter to get too close. I allowed his kiss to spark something inside me. And the problem is, no matter how his words prick and sting like the needle to the tip of my finger, I enjoyed the kiss. I didn't want him to stop. The pain is quickly overridden by disappointment.

Dammit.

I don't bother denying it. He knows the truth.

“Why did you follow me to my room?” Hunter's question settles into the awkwardness between us. Every second I've stood in his room has only made things more unclear between us.

Confused with his question, I quickly glance around his room before directing my attention back to him. The ghost of his kiss still lingers on my mouth. I can still taste his tongue on mine. “I followed you after your odd assumption about Dawson. I was curious to know what led you to ask it.”

“I told you I had no reason.”

“I don’t believe you.” I clear my throat. “But I still want to know why you care if I’m here or not.”

I’m not certain I want to know the answer. He doesn’t immediately answer me, anyway. There’s a hard exterior to Hunter, and I can’t help the feel of this invisible pull I manage to get every time I’m around him. Even when he’s being a complete asshole. Aside from his obsession with baseball, I can tell there’s more underneath. A piece of himself he hides well. Or attempts to, at least.

I’ve only caught glimpses a handful of times since we met. Our kiss a few moments ago is a prime example.

There’s a vulnerability in his curiosity of why I followed him to his bedroom.

“Tell me.” I raise my chin higher, narrowing my gaze. “Tell me why you care so much that I’m here.”

“I don’t care,” he answers, lowering his eyes to mine. “But for the record, if you’re going to come into my room without my permission ... make sure you have a good reason for it.”

I’m not entirely sure what he means, but I don’t deny his answer burns against my skin like a hot iron. My stomach flips.

He watches me, unwavering in his challenging glare. He has me right where he wants me. His eyes still carry the same fire I’m used to seeing. This time, he swipes his thumb across his lower lip, tasting where mine have just been.

I curl my fingers into a fist and take a step back into the bathroom. Out of Hunter’s room.

For now, something tells me it’ll be the last time I’ll stand inside it.

ELEVEN



HUNTER

Up until a few months ago, I felt my life slipping through my hands. It was as if I'd stuck my hand under a steady stream of water, watching as it split and flowed between each of my fingers. Each stream broke off into separate directions before it hit the bottom and disappeared down the drain.

I'd felt broken and misplaced, determined to launch my life in the direction I wanted it to go. Then the day came when I was able to sign my name on a single sheet of paper, granting my freedom.

Even now, though, months later, I don't feel as free as I thought I would. I'm still working as hard as I need to in baseball. I spend every waking minute of my day practicing, going to games, taking on special trainings with my coach and some of the teammates.

It's all exhausting, but I know my end goal will be worth it.

Proving my worth and passion has been exhausting. I've done nothing but sweat and bleed baseball, convincing my brother that I was destined to take a different path than what was forced upon me. The path forced on to me by our mother, whether it was my choice or not.

I remind myself of this fact when I sit at the edge of the dock, overlooking the lake. It's the last night before the big rivalry game against Twin River. I wouldn't normally waste my time coming to a party the night before our largest game of the season, but I couldn't pass it up.

As much as I fought against it, the team wouldn't let me. According to them and every single student who attends Northeast University, it's necessary for us to win. It's life and death in a way, I guess.

I'm sitting on the edge of the dock when Reed sits down beside me. He tosses a baseball into my hands and dips his feet into the water.

"I figured you'd be over near the keg, talking to Penny."

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. I can't exactly blame him for his assumption. Last Reed knew, Penny and I were still fucking. I mean, technically, he isn't wrong. We used to. Back when my life was flowing in different directions, and I didn't give a shit.

"Nope." I shake my head. "I'm good over here."

He leaves it at that, satisfied with my answer.

Reed and I are never ones to share and talk out our personal lives. It's part of the reason he's under the assumption Penny and I are still fucking. It's also the reason why he doesn't know about what's happened between me and Ophelia ever since she moved here.

"Not going to lie." He chuckles. "That's fucking weird to hear you say."

I give him a smile and look out at the lake again.

"Just thinking about the game tomorrow." It's a lie.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about his sister. I toss the ball between my hands, remembering how I'd pressed my fingers into the small of her back, pulling her mouth to mine. It was stupid. It was reckless. But foolishly, I don't regret it.

I should. I don't need to be pushing the boundaries with her, but I can't stop.

I wanted to kiss her. I needed to.

Admittedly, it's getting progressively worse. Especially after our kiss last week. Every day since then, I've done everything possible to forget about her.

I fucking hate it. I've jacked off to the image of her in all different types of scenarios. I'm not exactly disappointed I've resorted to touching myself every day, but at some point, I grow tired of it. I'd rather be with Ophelia in real life.

I clear my throat and look down at the baseball in my hands. I need to stop thinking about Ophelia or else I might not be able to play at my best tomorrow night. If I'm honest with myself, I'm a bit worried—worried she's going to be a fucking distraction. It's the reason I didn't want her there in the first place. The night against the tree, I told her she would be a distraction to Reed. In truth, I suspected she would be for me. And I was right.

“Hey, Hunt. Reed!” Dawson yells behind us. Reed and I both turn our heads to see him walking down the dock. “Are you jumping in or what?”

The sight of Dawson pisses me off. It hasn't always been this way between us. It wasn't the night I'd shown up to the house party the night Ophelia tackled me to the ground. But ever since I've been able to dedicate more of my time to the team, it's as if it's given him an excuse to take a step back. Dawson has always been a slacker, but he's taken it to the extreme now.

Dawson doesn't wait for us to answer back. He quickly removes his shirt and jumps into the lake. He disappears under the water and pops up a few seconds later, wading out a few feet from the edge of the dock where we're sitting.

It's unusually warm, considering fall is in full swing—warm enough for me to think it's still summer, anyway.

“Don't you think we should be celebrating?” Dawson asks us.

“We haven't won yet,” Reed points out. “We haven't even played.” I love how Reed takes scrimmages as seriously as I do.

He laughs, giving Dawson a smile.

Dawson shifts his attention to me. “What about you, Hunt? I bet the water would feel great on that arm you overextended

in practice yesterday.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. I’d stretched the muscle on the back of my arm to the point that it’s been cramping ever since. Anger simmers in my chest, knowing I’d overextended it by throwing the ball toward second base, attempting to stop Dawson from getting there.

“No.” I shake my head. “There’s no fucking way I’m getting in there.” Especially with Dawson. I decide to leave that detail to myself. “In fact,” I add. “That’s my cue to leave.”

The corner of his mouth curls into a sly smirk. His eyes move past Reed and me. His smirk then transforms to a wide grin.

“If these fuckers won’t be getting in—” he starts.

Ophelia’s voice cuts Dawson off before he’s able to finish his sentence.

“Oh, Dawson,” she muses. “You’re always so sweet to your roommates.”

Ophelia is walking down the dock, her usual long sundress blowing around her. A part of me wonders if she makes these dresses herself. I’m certain she owns one in every color that exists. Today’s is a pale purple. The color softens the tanned glow of her skin.

The familiar slit of the dress drives up her thigh, exposing it with every step she takes.

“If I wasn’t, they would think something was wrong with me,” Dawson teases Ophelia, giving her his largest grin.

Walking beside her is a woman I have yet to meet.

She’s a bit taller than Ophelia, and her hair is a light blonde. The complete opposite from Ophelia’s dark auburn.

They appear the same age, though.

“I don’t think I will, but Claire might.” The two women stop behind Reed and me. We both twist to look up at them. Ophelia avoids my stare, only looking down at Reed.

Her lack of acknowledgement of my presence confirms basically every feeling I've felt the past two months. I've allowed her to get closer than I ever expected.

It's hard not to when I consider our living situation... and the conversations we've had.

The night I found her walking down the street was the first time I'd ever gotten close to telling her the details of my life. How my dream to play baseball felt like a pipe dream at best up until two months ago.

Ophelia's darted into my life like a line drive to the chest.

Claire scrunches her nose, looking out at the lake. "I'm not sure." She giggles. "Is it safe?"

Dawson laughs. "Of course, it is. There aren't sharks or anything in here, if that's what you're worried about."

"Oh my God." Ophelia rolls her eyes, her cheeks flushing pink.

"I wasn't thinking sharks," Claire bites back.

"Well, if I can't convince Hunter and Reed to join me, I figured I'd try with you two," Dawson muses, trying to convince them one last time.

"Wait a minute," Reed interjects. "Claire is finally here to visit, and my sister doesn't bother introducing her to everyone?"

Ophelia sighs and gives Reed a small smile. "Sorry. Claire, this is Reed, my brother." She gestures to Reed. "That's my roommate Dawson." She points to Dawson where he's wading in the water. "And this is my other roommate... Hunter." She turns to me and lazily gestures in my direction. Again, her eyes won't meet mine, but despite her continued insistence to not acknowledge me, I can see the thoughts clearly in her expression. She's thinking about the last words I told her the other day when she was in my room.

When I told her I could hear her touching herself.

It's the truth.

I'm looking at Ophelia. My thoughts immediately go to those nights I've heard her touching herself. I've heard her moans and heavy breaths as she's slid her fingers between her legs. I'd admitted to my suspicions of whether she was thinking of me or Dawson. Mostly, my question was to get a read on her.

I wanted to test her, to see how she reacted. For weeks I'd been forced to listen to her between the walls. I figured it only fair she tells me.

"Hunter, Reed," Ophelia continues with her introductions. "This is my best friend, Claire."

"It's good to finally meet you." Reed pulls a small smile.

"You, too." Claire nods. "I haven't had much chance to leave the city since I moved there, but when Ophelia moved up here, I figured it was about time. Besides, she told me about this game of yours tomorrow, so I had to come and see what that's all about."

"Yep." Reed perks up. "It's the biggest game of the year."

"Yeah," Dawson jumps in. "Plus, if you come, make sure you're repping school colors. It's a big deal. If you don't, you might stick out. I can't guarantee no one will give you shit for it."

"Sounds good." Claire giggles. "It's a good thing my best friend is a fashion designer. She'll know exactly what to put together for us to stand out."

Ophelia shrugs, keeping her attention on Claire.

I find this to be the perfect opportunity to push her buttons. She hasn't acknowledged me once since she came out here.

"If she decides to sew you an outfit for the game, make sure you keep an eye on her. She can be a bit clumsy with that sewing machine."

The five of us stay silent. Even Dawson from where he's still stupidly wading in the water.

Although all eyes are darting between Ophelia and me, I don't care. My tactic works.

Claire gives me a tight smile, curling her body inward as if she can't believe she heard what I said. Something tells me Ophelia has told her about me. In what capacity, I'm unsure. Either way, her expression is very telling.

Ophelia's small hands curl into fists as she slowly turns, looking over at me. Reed's attention has shifted to the lake. He's moved on from our conversation. He doesn't see when Ophelia spreads her eyes wide open. She stares at me as if she can't believe that's the first thing I would say when I decided to enter this conversation. She should know me better than that.

She tilts her head, and her eyes flutter shut. I hope she's remembering our conversation from the other day.

Claire blows out a breath, catching Ophelia's expression.

"Ophelia tends to hurt herself. It wouldn't be the first time."

"Claire." Ophelia's mouth pops open. It's almost as if she feels Claire's taken my side.

"It's true." Claire laughs. "I was just agreeing with Hunter."

"Oh my God." Ophelia buries her head in her hand, shielding herself from the rest of the group.

I tilt my head, studying her, wondering why my statement embarrasses her.

"How's that finger healing up?" Dawson asks. He's now in front of the dock. Half his body is out of the water. His arms are folded over the side of the dock, in the same place I was sitting before. Reed still hasn't moved from his spot, but his attention has turned back to the group.

"It's fine." Ophelia holds her finger up. "It finally healed up a few days ago." The Band-aid I'd wrapped around it is gone. There isn't even a scar where she cut herself.

"Good." Dawson gives her a lopsided grin. "I'm glad. It looked nasty."

“It isn’t new for Ophelia,” Reed teases. “You should have seen her when we were kids. She was even more dangerous with a pair of scissors.”

“Now, I would have loved to see that.” Claire beams, pointing to Reed.

Reed laughs and shakes his head. His eyes still appear vacant, but it doesn’t last long.

Dawson splashes water at our feet. I really want to fucking punch him. He’s still making me angry.

“So, who’s getting in?” he asks.

Claire grins, looking over to Ophelia with the shrug of her shoulder. “I guess I will for a bit. When Ophelia said we were coming to the lake, I wore my bathing suit, just in case.”

“What about the sharks?” Dawson asks.

“If you’re still alive in there, holding this conversation, then I’m guessing I’m probably okay. At least for a little while.” She pulls off her T-shirt and steps out of her shorts before jumping in. She joins Dawson in the water and stares up at the three of us. “Oh, shit. Dawson was right. This feels amazing.”

“I’m going to head over to the fire and get a drink,” Reed says. “Anyone want anything?” We all shake our heads as he pulls himself to a stand. “Okay, I’ll be back.”

We watch as he makes his way down the dock and up the small hill to the keg placed beside the fire pit.

“Come on, Ophelia,” Claire begs. “Swim with me.”

“I don’t know.” She scrunches her nose. “I’m not wearing a bathing suit.”

“That’s okay,” Dawson says. “You don’t need one.”

Dawson’s lucky my back is turned toward him. This time I really would have fucking punched him.

Ophelia doesn’t widen her eyes like she did earlier. Instead, she gives me a knowing look, as if she can tell exactly how Dawson’s comment is making me feel on the inside.

She takes a step forward, but I stop her by grabbing her wrist. We're only inches apart, and if I were to bet, Dawson and Claire wouldn't be able to hear us.

"Don't go in there." I growl. It's an order I know she won't obey, but I give it to her anyway. The thought of her swimming with Dawson in her bra and panties makes my stomach nauseous.

She quirks an eyebrow. "Why? Would it bother you if I did?"

"Yes." I don't hold back. Ophelia can tell.

She swallows, her eyes searching mine.

She doesn't say a word. Her chest rises and falls with her quick breaths. My eyes move from her chest and shoulders to her sun-kissed face. "Are you into Dawson?" I ask her. To me, it's a completely legitimate question.

The thought of her fucking that asshole has bothered me ever since she stepped foot inside my bedroom last week. I needed to ask her or else I might fucking explode, *or* sincerely punch Dawson.

I have no right, and it isn't my place. I'm not in the position to be making demands of Ophelia. But I can't deny what I've been feeling these past few weeks.

I blame the fucking tree.

Ophelia leans forward, bringing her face closer to mine. She keeps her chin raised, lining my gaze with hers. I can smell her strawberry-scented hair surrounding me.

"Excuse me, Hunter. You're in my way," she whispers. "I'd like to go swimming."

Her response sends my hammering heart plunging into my stomach.

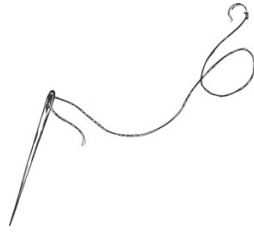
She curls her beautiful mouth, then moves to walk around me.

By the time I'm marching up the dock, I hear a large splash behind me.

When I trudge up the hill, I zero in on the tree hidden in the woods along the trail, my eyes narrowed and fists tightened.

Stupid fucking goddamn tree.

TWELVE



OPHELIA

“I hate him.”

“You do *not* hate him.” Claire rolls her eyes and finishes tying a dark blue ribbon around her ponytail. She fixes it in a bow, then turns to the side, examining her handy work in the mirror. She adjusts it a few times before she’s satisfied.

“Yes, I do,” I insist, sliding the zipper along on my knee-high boots. They are one of the few items I was able to magically shove into my suitcase before I was forced to move. I’d spent entirely way too much on them to leave them behind. It’s the first time I’ll be wearing them out.

“I think I’ll wear this again tomorrow night... at the game.” Claire checks her ribbon again in the mirror. She’s ignoring my insistence on hating Hunter.

I’m telling her the truth. I’ve never felt this much fury and anger toward anyone in my life.

I take that back. There’s only been one time. In the fifth grade, when my first crush Tucker threw his chewed-up wad of bubble gum at the back of my head. After hours of failed attempts at getting it out, my mother was forced to cut a chunk of my hair off. Plus, six inches. Ever since, Tucker has been at the top of my most hated list. Hunter has quickly made his way up there, threatening to take the lead.

I stand from the edge of my bed and look at my reflection in the mirror. I’m wearing black knee-high boots, and a short, flowy, dark-blue dress I’d sewn a few years back when I was

still in design school. I'm surprised it's held up after all these years, especially since I can now pair them with these boots.

Despite my dressed-up look, I leave my hair loose. I don't bother styling it. I run my fingers through the loose strands and dab a bit of lipstick on with the tip of my finger.

"Holy shit, Ophelia. You look hot." Claire beams.

"Thank you." I grin.

She sits on the edge of my bed and crosses her legs. Even though her hair is pulled back into a ponytail, it's still slightly damp from her shower earlier.

After we swam for a bit in the lake with Dawson, Claire and I came back home to get ready for dinner with Max. We'd made the plans even before Claire had arrived. The past few months have been hard to pull through, but the idea of the three of us meeting for dinner makes my heart leap out of my chest. I need this. I can feel it thrumming like a jolt of electricity along my skin.

I'm adjusting the tie wrapped around the waist of my dress, catching myself looking at the door behind me in the reflection of the mirror.

The door to Hunter's room. The door connecting the bathroom to my bedroom is wide open, leaving a perfect view of Hunter's door.

It's been shut ever since last week when I followed him to his room. Ever since our kiss, he's kept it shut, sending me a clear message that he isn't remotely interested in me.

Seeing his door shut, day after day, tells me his kiss was a test, and I failed miserably. Every day since, I've kicked myself for allowing him to see what I've been struggling to hide for the past month and a half.

I'm into Hunter. I feel more for him than I thought possible, which, in turn, fuels the hatred exploding inside me.

"Thank you." I turn, examining Claire. "You look great."

Her long pair of ripped jeans flare at the ankles, covering her black boots. Her cropped black tank top cuts just above her

belly button.

I examine my reflection in the mirror again, working hard not to be drawn to looking at Hunter's door. It's impossible not to feel the invisible pull, like a magnet struggling to stick to its match.

It's no use, anyway. Hunter left the lake before the rest of us did, yet he hasn't been home. His car wasn't in the driveway when we got here, and I haven't seen it since.

"Are you ready?"

I turn my head toward the doorway leading to the hall. Claire grabs her gold chained purse and wraps it over her shoulder. I grab mine off my bed and follow her.

"Yeah, let's go." When we step out into the hallway, I shut the door behind me. From the corner of my eye, I can see that Hunter left his wide open.

"Don't pretend as if I don't know what you're doing," Claire warns.

"I'm not doing anything." I shake my head and walk down the hallway, passing her on the way.

"Your eyes keep wandering in the direction of his bedroom." Claire speculates behind me. "You're falling for him. Admit it."

"I am not," I lie, rolling my head to the side as I take the last step off the stairs. "And I won't."

"Wait a minute." Claire abruptly stops in the living room. "I didn't think to ask you this earlier. How are we getting to the restaurant? Neither of us have a car."

"Max is giving us a ride." I pull out my phone, reading his text, letting us know he's in our neighborhood now. Since Reed was busy with practice when Claire's train pulled in, she'd taken a rideshare to get to my house. We're both without a ride. "He'll be here any second."

"Oh, good. I want to let loose tonight. These papers in my critical theory class have been kicking my ass." She lets out a laugh only slightly laced with humor.

“Have at it.” I giggle. “Max said he’d drive us home, so I think you’re safe.”

“Amazing.” She sighs, closing her eyes. Max’s headlights flash across the front of our house, giving us our cue to leave.

When I shut the front door and lock it behind me, I consider joining Claire as far as the drinks go. I could use a few myself. Anything, at this point, to help get my mind off Hunter.

“SHE KEEPS SAYING she hates him, but I know she’s lying!” Claire yells at Max, over the chatter of the restaurant.

The small space is packed, but that’s only because there are a total of less than ten tables. We’ve been sitting here for a few hours. Our plates are empty, but we’ve kept our drinks full.

“Oh my God, Claire.” I grunt, dragging my finger around the rim of my margarita glass. A mound of salt collects on the tip of my finger. I lick it off and roll my eyes. I rest my chin in my hand and stare at my best friend beside me. “When will you give this up? I don’t have a thing for Hunter.”

I’m lying through my teeth. I blame it on the four margaritas I’ve had.

Max is smiling at us from across the table. He drank a beer when we first got here hours ago but he’s been sipping water ever since.

Max shoves his finger in my direction but looks at Claire. “Clear indication of bullshit, right there.”

“Dammit.” I groan, burying my face in my hand. I’m grinning, even though I’m wishing they’d give this up. It’s exhausting trying to convince them otherwise.

“Before I came, I told her I would get a good read on Hunter. Now that I’m here, it’s more like I’ve been able to get a read on how she feels about him,” Claire explains.

“Oh.” Max grins, leaning close, intrigued. “Do explain. I’ve known Hunter for a while, and that man is hard to crack. He’s as much of a mystery to me as he’s always been.”

Claire lifts the rim of her margarita glass to her mouth. It’s her fifth one. She wasn’t lying when she said she wanted to forget all about her critical theory papers. My chest warms, seeing her happy. I’m thoroughly enjoying my time with her.

“I don’t know,” she starts. “Something tells me Hunter is hiding a part of himself he doesn’t want to share with the rest of the world. Maybe something he’s ashamed of. I could sense this wall almost immediately. That’s why I haven’t been able to get a good read on him yet.”

“Claire is a psychology major, if you haven’t already caught on.” I point out to Max, holding my hand out to Claire. Part of me understands what Claire is saying, though, but another part of me doesn’t. There have been moments when Hunter has shared pieces of himself with me—pieces I know he doesn’t normally share with others.

“I can now.” Max grins. “So, what about Ophelia? Why do you think she has a thing for Hunter?”

“Oh, that’s easy.” Claire grins.

“Hey.” I tap her on the arm, offended.

“I didn’t say *you* were easy,” she slurs. Her eyes are glassy, the few margaritas she’s had clearly kicking in.

Max giggles from the other side of the table.

“Anyway,” Claire continues. “I’ve never known Ophelia to hate someone. Even men like Hunter who constantly give her shit.”

I’ve never told her the story of Tucker and the chewing gum disaster. It’s a shame, really. Maybe then she’d believe me when I say I hate Hunter.

“I’m with Claire,” Max agrees. “I’ve seen the way you talk about him. You pretend to not care and have this distaste for him, but I see it.”

“I do not,” I insist. “Besides, I don’t think he has a wall built up. He’s just obsessed with baseball. That’s all the man ever talks about. He’s been basically warning me not to go to the game tomorrow.”

“Wait.” Max holds up his hands. “He’s asked you not to go?”

“Sort of.” I frown, swirling the remaining liquid in my glass. I want to order another one. “He said he was worried I’d distract Reed.”

Max purses his mouth and twists it, quirking an eyebrow in Claire’s direction. They trade questioning glances back and forth.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing.” Max takes a sip of his water and shakes his head.

Claire waves down our server. She orders herself a shot of tequila along with another margarita for each of us.

“I don’t know.” I finish the last bit of the drink I still have and push it to the edge of the table. “Can we drop this Hunter talk? It’s making my head spin.”

“Oh, yeah?” Claire asks, laughing. She tilts her head back, her cheeks blushing with red. “Your head spins when Hunter is the topic of conversation?”

I groan, resting my forehead in my hands. I stare at the table, wishing they would stop talking about Hunter. It doesn’t matter if I’m starting to catch any sort of feelings for him. It’s not what I need right now. I need to get out of Maine and back to the life I had before. Hunter isn’t necessarily involved in those plans.

“Fine, fine, fine,” Claire concedes, sliding a full margarita glass in front of me. “We aren’t completely convinced but we’ll drop it.” Her gesture forces me to look back up. The waiter must have brought my drink over when I had my head buried in my hands.

“Thank you.” I sigh, giving both Claire and Max a weakened smile. I take a large gulp of my fresh margarita. The tequila isn’t strong in this one. It doesn’t burn as badly as it did with my first. I’m realizing it’s because it’s my third.

Finally in agreement, we all move on from our talk about the convoluted mess between Hunter and me, but even when the subject turns to what our ultimate dream vacation would be, I still haven’t stopped thinking about him. I think about how his green eyes glinted against the sun this afternoon. They flickered and narrowed, ordering me not to go in the water.

No matter how hard he has pushed me, I’ve wanted to push back equally as hard, if not more.

Maybe the harder I push, the more I’ll get out of him. The closer we’ll get to the truth. Then, maybe we’ll stop this little game of cat and mouse we’ve been endlessly playing.

The three of us stay for another few hours until the restaurant starts to slowly die down. The bar near the back has started to fill up for the later crowd, but from the looks of the three of us, it’s time to go.

Max’s eyelids have drooped, the tiredness visibly weighing on him. Claire hasn’t slowed down—a clear indication she’s drunk. She’s scrolling through her phone, dragging her finger across the screen in an odd way. Her finger is hooked, and every now and then she giggles.

“What do you think of this guy?” She holds her phone up, straightening her arm to bring it closer to our faces. Max leans back and quickly narrows his eyes, confused.

“Claire, honey, that’s a picture of you.” He grins.

I stifle a laugh, covering my mouth with my hand.

Max widens his eyes. “I think it’s time I take you two home.”

I nod in agreement, knowing that if I open my mouth, the alcohol might hit me harder than it already has. It might transition from being buzzed to tipsy.

Claire hooks onto my arm as we walk out to Max's car. We both weave our way down the sidewalk, slumping into the seats. The drive home is quick, and the next thing I know, I'm helping Claire up the front steps and through the front door of the house.

I'm convinced the five margaritas Claire drank, and the three I had, have suddenly hit us harder than when we left the restaurant.

We stumble our way through the living room, our arms wrapped around one another's. I know I'm not nearly as drunk as Claire, but walking up the stairs still proves to be a bit of a challenge. At least more so than it normally is.

"Did I tell you about the guy I went out with a few weeks ago?" Claire's slurred words pour out of her mouth like molasses. Each one takes an age to leave her mouth, working their way around her constant snorts and chuckles.

"No." I giggle.

"It was supposed to be a beach date." She snorts again. We're making our way through the second half of the stairs up to my room when I look over. Her eyes are hooded, half-closed. The corner of her mouth is curled into a grin. "He showed up wearing ... get this Opie ... sneakers and a turtleneck. It was ninety degrees out."

She giggles again, this time sloppily raising her hand to her mouth. For a moment, I'm worried she's going to vomit all over the stairs. I'm relieved when she doesn't, using her hand to muffle her laugh instead.

I'm not sure who she's trying to be quiet for. There's no one here. Or at least, I don't think there is.

I don't remember seeing anyone's car in the driveway, and I don't hear anyone. The only light left on is the one Claire and I turned on in the living room on our way out. If there is anyone home, I'm sure we aren't doing a stellar job of being considerately quiet. We're terribly loud when we finally get to the top of the stairs. We treat it like reaching the finish line of a marathon. Claire loosens her grip on me and raises her arms

up in victory. I reach out and stabilize myself against the wall. I drag it across the smooth surface, nudging Claire into my room.

“That’s awful,” I tell Claire. My mouth is dry. It feels as if I’m trying to talk around a mouthful of marshmallows.

“It really is.” Claire nods, still grinning.

We blindly make our way into my dark room. I reach out, hoping to not run into any furniture. It takes longer for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, and by the time I drop my purse on the floor and cross the room, I stumble into Claire’s feet.

She’s lying face down on my bed, her legs hanging off the edge. Her body is stretched out diagonally across my twin-size bed. There’s no room.

She presses her cheek into the bed. Her eyes are closed, and her legs remain stiff and straight. Her words are slurred and muffled into the mattress. “I love you, Opie. I know Hunter is a dick asshole, but something tells me he isn’t the kind of guy to wear sneakers and turtlenecks to the beach. He’s a keeper.”

I inhale a deep breath, attempting to get my bearings. Claire keeps her eyes shut and her breathing quickly evens out. She’s passed out. There’s no moving her now.

I sigh, thinking of the last words she said. Hunter doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy to wear sneakers to the beach, either. In fact, I can’t even picture him at the beach. He barely tolerates the lake. Or so it seems.

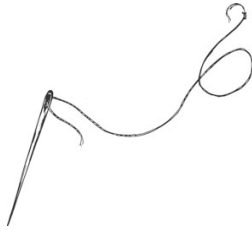
With my arms still feeling like Jell-O, I turn around and walk to the bathroom. I don’t bother tiptoeing, knowing it’s nearly impossible for me to wake Claire up. She’s going to wake up with a wicked headache in the morning.

I step into the bathroom and open the medicine cabinet. Hunter fished the Band-Aids out of the day I’d cut my finger.

I’m searching for headache medicine to no avail. Maybe it’s because I’m still tipsy. It’s too hard to focus when I’m practically seeing double. I close the medicine cabinet, but the open door to my right catches my eye.

The door to Hunter's room is wide open.

THIRTEEN



OPHELIA

Hunter's gray bedroom walls are even darker at night, casting shadows across the forest green sheets on his bed.

I step in the doorway, carefully bending at the waist to peek inside. His door to the hallway is left wide open, too. It was shut when Claire and I left for dinner. It was. I may not remember seeing anyone's cars in the driveway, but this I'm certain of. I know his doors were shut. They have been ever since the day he kissed me.

The second I step into his room, blood rushes to my cheeks, spilling down my neck. I can't help it. I start laughing. A giggle erupts from my throat, imagining how angry Hunter would be if he knew I was in here. I cover my mouth as if he or one of my roommates can hear me. I don't know if Dawson is home or where Reed is, but I know for certain that Hunter isn't home. If he was, he'd be in here with me.

My laughter bursts between my tight fingers. My cheeks heat, and my body hums with the thrill of knowing I'm doing something that would probably irritate the shit out of him.

Being inside Hunter's room without him here does something to my insides. It's exhilarating, knowing the rules he has put in place.

If you're going to come into my room without my permission ... make sure you have a good reason for it.

I close my eyes, hearing his deep voice in my mind, and seeing the way he'd looked at me with those piercing eyes.

It's true. I'm falling for Hunter. I've fallen for Hunter fucking Moore, and I can't continue to carry on like this. I can't keep pretending every time we're together that his presence doesn't draw out the pieces of me I've buried for so long.

My entire world has fallen apart, but being around Hunter has made it easier to grapple with the truth.

I've spent years pushing all my dreams to the forefront, and where has that got me? Absolutely nowhere. Back to square one, living in my brother's house with his two roommates.

Hunter has pulled out the part of my body that vibrates to life whenever he's nearby.

When I open my eyes, I'm standing in front of his bed. I drag my finger along the edge, touching his meticulous, wrinkle-free sheets. "Someone likes a neat bed," I mutter to absolutely no one, curling the corner of my mouth into a mischievous smirk. "It would be a shame to ruin it."

I'm still wearing my knee-high boots. I sit down on his bed and take deep breath, allowing myself to gain my bearings before moving. The margaritas are still swimming in my veins, taking control. I feel bold. I feel in charge of myself for once.

I kick my boots off and sit back on Hunter's bed. My head softly falls back onto his pillow. The second it does, his scent surrounds me: clean laundry and leather. Resting beside his pillow is a worn baseball glove. I pick it up, tracing my finger along the laces.

"I wonder how many times you've struck out throwing this ball?"

I'm tipsy. Or drunk. I can't tell at this point. Either way, I've moved into the phase of talking to myself.

Setting the ball down beside me, I bend one leg and close my eyes. I think about Hunter and all the times he's touched me since we met. I play each event out in my mind, forcing myself to remember how he makes me feel.

The slit in my dress falls down my thigh, exposing me. The air in Hunter's room is cool, brushing across my pussy. I'm already wet.

I slide my fingers between my thong, slipping them between my folds. It doesn't take me long to find my clit. I gasp, the alcohol warming every inch of me. It's intense and incredible at the same time. I reach up and fist Hunter's pillow. I circle my fingers, lazily opening my eyes every few seconds. The ceiling is white and bare. If I didn't know I was in Hunter's bed, I wouldn't be able to tell where I am. It looks the same as my room and all the other times I've touched myself thinking of Hunter. But this is different.

Hunter isn't here. He can't stop me. He can't pull away from me at the last second, teasing me with his fully erect, swollen cock. Maybe that's why I'm on Hunter's bed, fucking myself with my own hand... Because he dared me. I took it as a challenge. In this moment, I don't care what he would think if he were here.

The inside of my thighs heat. I slide my feet across his sheets, my impending orgasm building inside me. I can't stay still even as my circles grow larger and faster. I think about our kiss. The way he'd crashed his mouth to mine—the way his tongue tasted. My thoughts then move to what it might feel like to have that same tongue circling my clit instead of my fingers.

"Oh, fuck," I breathe out, biting down on my bottom lip. "Hunter."

I'm almost to my orgasm when I open my eyes.

My breath gets caught in my throat, and my hand immediately stops.

"Well, fuck, Ophelia."

Hunter is standing over the edge of the bed, looking down at me with a sultry curl to his mouth.

Heat flames across my cheeks. My chest bursts with embarrassment. Or exhilaration. I can't decide.

Fuck.

I wasn't exactly prepared for this moment when I decided to fuck myself on Hunter's bed.

I blame it on the margaritas.

I open my mouth, ready to come up with any excuse as to why I'm on his bed, touching myself. I'm ready to defend myself. Give him a bullshit reason.

But I don't. I can't.

The expression on Hunter's face is not what I expect.

It's dark in his room, the shadows from the night covering all four walls. If it weren't for his green eyes staring straight into mine, I would think he was angry with me. Instead, he looks as if he's admiring me. Devouring me without even touching my body.

My mouth is still open, my panting breaths still moving through me as I start to fall away from my orgasm. I didn't quite get there. I was close, teetering on the edge.

Hunter has stolen it.

"You're in my room." It's a simple statement. His voice fills the darkness, his thighs pressed against the edge of the bed.

I swallow, taking a moment to catch my breath. "I am."

He leans down, bringing his face closer to mine. The sharp planes of his jaw come into focus. It takes my eyes a second to adjust. I blink several times, searching his face. I'm still stunned by his reaction. It's thrilling.

"Why?" he asks.

A slow smile grows on my lips. I can't help myself. I want to test Hunter. Tease him a bit.

"Claire is passed out in my bed."

"That's not a good answer." His jaw is hard as stone. He's done playing games. I can see his resolve in his eyes. He wants the truth.

Fire ignites in my chest with my confession. “You weren’t here.”

“Still not good enough.” His voice is lowered to a gravelly thick tone. He slides his hand along my arm and drags his fingers along my skin, stopping long enough to circle my wrist.

My pussy is still humming from my near orgasm only seconds ago, but Hunter has managed to keep it going, drawing the sensation out again. Full force. I’m suddenly moving my hips, lifting them slightly off the mattress.

I still have my hand pressed between my thighs. The slit to my dress is still wide open, both pieces of fabric resting on either side of me.

Hunter firmly wraps his fingers around my wrist. He presses into my flesh, urging me to give him a better answer.

“No more bullshit, Ophelia. If you’re going to give me the privilege of seeing you fuck yourself on *my bed*, I need to know the real reason for your decision.”

He slides his hand over mine. He rests his palm against the back of my hand, threading his fingers between mine.

“Own. It,” he growls.

I tilt my head back, pressing it into his pillow. I’ve raised my chin, exposing my neck to him.

“I’m only doing what you said,” I start, firming my voice. “If I ever came into your room, it had to be for a good reason.” I start to wedge my fingers under the line of my thong. I tug against Hunter’s grip, pulling his hand with mine. I tilt my chin higher, whispering against his mouth. “Besides, I thought I’d finally answer your question about whether it was you or Dawson I thought of when I was fucking myself in my bedroom. I think this is a definite answer. Don’t you agree?”

“Hmm ...” he hums. He doesn’t move from beside the bed. He’s still bent at the waist, his face close to mine. “Finish what you started,” he adds.

“Are you going to help me?” My breathing has turned to short, hollow gasps. His fingers have already slipped against my skin.

He teases my clit several times, dragging the tip of his finger down and in circles.

“No,” he grates, abruptly jerking his hand away. “I’m going to watch.” He pulls himself to a stand.

Doing as he says, I keep my hand pressed against myself, working my clit.

I watch him as he removes his T-shirt and tosses it onto the floor beside him. He unbuckles his belt, the metal clangs in the darkness. My heart leaps at the extra blood pumping through it. The sound of Hunter removing his belt and unzipping his jeans in front of me almost brings me to orgasm.

I moan and bite down on my bottom lip when he slides the last remaining piece of clothing down his legs. His hardened cock springs to life, sticking straight out. Hunter stays close to the bed, the tip of his cock suspended over my stomach.

“Did you make this dress?” he asks. He reaches out and fingers the fabric resting on the bed beside my hip.

I nod, unable to answer him verbally. I’m still working my clit. Every now and then, I reach down and plunge my fingers inside myself, rubbing my thumb over my swollen bud.

“It would be a shame to ruin it.” His eyes are still two bright bits of green flashing above me. “Slide it above your waist. Lift it up.”

I remove my hand from between my legs and quickly lift my hips slightly above the mattress. With quick hands, I shove the fabric over my hips and above my waist. At first, I wonder if I should remove the dress altogether, but I decide against it, knowing it would take too long. Besides, there’s a zipper running along the back. Once my dress is pulled up, I remove my thong, completely freeing myself.

“Good girl,” Hunter praises me. “Now, go back to what you were doing before.”

Watching him above me, I return my fingers to my clit. Hunter grabs onto the base of his cock and begins pumping it.

At first, his movements are slow, but the quicker I move, the quicker he moves, too.

Heat spreads across my body as I realize the situation we're in. Hunter's full body is on display for me. It isn't the first time I've seen him naked, but that time was nothing like this. Hunter's looking at me as if he wishes he were touching me instead of his own cock. Part of me wonders why he isn't. Does he see something wrong with me? Is he afraid to touch me? Is he afraid of what that might mean if he did touch me?

I push the doubt away, determined to enjoy this moment. This is further than we've ever gone with each other. Finally, Hunter is showing me a piece of himself he has yet to show anyone else. A vulnerable side. His reaction to finding me in his bed isn't what I expected. But then again, I didn't exactly have an idea of what his reaction might be because I wasn't thinking of that when I stepped in here. I was living in the moment.

I still am.

My legs begin to tingle, reaching my orgasm. Hunter is still standing over me, pumping his cock.

"Fuck, Ophelia," he hisses, tilting his head back, and squeezing his eyes shut.

"Show me, Hunter," I breathe out. "Show me what watching me does to you. Show me how it makes you feel to know I imagine fucking you every time ..." I work to catch my breath before finishing my sentence. "I circle my fingers over my clit and plunge them into myself, wishing they were you. *Tell me.*"

"Oh, fuck, Ophelia." With his free hand, Hunter reaches down and grips the top of my head. He grasps onto my hair, fisting it and twisting the strands between his long, calloused fingers. "I want to fuck you so bad."

"Then, fuck me," I breathe. "I want you inside me." I wish he were inside me. I wish he'd crawl over me and plunge

himself inside my body without another thought.

“Not tonight,” he rasps. “I want to watch you fall apart.”

My legs tingle as my orgasm swells inside me. It vibrates across my body, my legs quivering under my touch. My clit pulsates as I finish the last few circles around it. I’m still watching Hunter pumping himself above me.

Faster and deeper until he’s standing over me.

His cock is as stiff and hard as a rock as he pumps it one ... two ... three more times. His cum spills out from his tip, shooting across my bare stomach. I look up and stare into his eyes as the warm liquid pools over me. Hunter still has his fingers threaded through my hair when he finishes, his eyes never leaving mine. He’s panting and takes several moments to catch his breath. He doesn’t say a word before he walks away, heading toward the bathroom. I lay in silence, the reality of what just happened hitting me. Hunter Moore just watched me finger-fuck myself, and his cum is all over me.

I hear the faucet turn on and run for several seconds before he turns it off. His footsteps fill the quiet stillness of the night. Then suddenly, Hunter’s back standing over me. He sits down beside me, turning to face me with a small white washcloth folded in his hand.

“As much as I enjoy this view of you, I think I should help you clean this up.” He places the hot washcloth on me, wiping it in slow, gentle strokes across my skin.

I watch him, my chest swelling. He doesn’t look up from his work.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“You’re welcome.” His voice is flat and resolute. “You should get some sleep.”

“Do you want me to go?” The question is almost painful to ask, but I need to know. I don’t know how this changes things between us... If at all.

He thinks on his answer. “No.”

Satisfied, I nod, half-expecting him to make another move on me—he hasn't kissed me since he showed up here—but he doesn't.

When he's finished cleaning me, I readjust my dress back to normal and scoot to one side of the bed. He tosses the washcloth into his hamper, then lays beside me.

I roll over, facing Hunter. He folds his arms over his chest and studies me. His eyes roam over my face. At this point, all the alcohol has evaporated. I'm simply here in this moment with Hunter.

I open my mouth to tell him goodnight. Or something. Anything.

But he stops me. He unravels his arms and lifts his hand to my face, tracing an invisible line down my jaw. He starts at my temple, working his way down to the bottom of my chin. The corner of his mouth tilts into a smirk.

“Goodnight, Ophelia.”

I hold my breath. The lack of oxygen burns my lungs. I breathe in once he allows his hand to fall away, folding his arms over his chest again.

He closes his eyes, and I simply watch him until my eyes grow too heavy to stay open.

FOURTEEN



HUNTER

I left Ophelia in my room this morning when I woke up.

I didn't intend on leaving without waking her, but I didn't want to be late for practice.

Today is the day of the big rivalry game with Twin River, and I can't risk fucking it up. The last thing I need is coach screaming down my throat about how I'm letting the team down by being selfish.

After practice, I take my time going home. Finding Ophelia in my room last night was like receiving a gift from the gods. She laid there on my bed in the dark, but there had been this light shining down on her, showcasing everything she was doing to herself. On my bed.

Instinct kicked in, begging me to accept the gift she was so willingly offering.

Her purple dress was stunning against the dark green sheets on my bed—her hair sprawled out against my pillow.

I've replayed last night in my head more times than I can count.

I don't know what this means for us. If Ophelia was any other woman, I wouldn't give it another thought. I've been with other women before and certainly done more than Ophelia and I did last night, but this is different.

Ophelia has always been different.

When I first told her I didn't want her coming to this game, I told her I didn't want her to be a distraction for Reed, but I

was fucking lying through my teeth. Intuition, whatever the fuck you want to call it, was eating at me. In my gut, I knew she would distract me.

And now I've fucking proven myself right.

When I get home from practice, Ophelia and Claire aren't home. Maybe she was scheduled for a shift at Max's, and Claire went with her to hang out. In fact, no one is home. I can't even text her if I wanted to. I don't have her number.

With the uncertainty between me and Ophelia settling in my chest, I take a quick shower before gathering all the things I'll need for the game tonight. I grab my duffle bag and shove my uniform inside it, along with my glove. My stomach wobbles with nausea at the thought of how important tonight is. Not for my career but for my reputation. The entire town is relying on us to pull off this game with Twin River.

When I get to the field, the stands are already packed. Fans for both teams fill every single seat. A sea of dark blue and red covers one side, yellow and green on the other.

When I'm in the locker room, I drop my duffle bag onto the bench in front of my space, and Dawson stands beside me.

"Glad to see you didn't chicken out, Hunt." He's wearing a shit-eating grin as he pulls his pants from his bag.

"Seriously, Dawson. Do you ever shut the fuck up, man?" I ask him, pulling my own uniform pants from my bag.

I step into each leg, keeping myself turned away from him. I can't look at him. Even though Ophelia confessed to me last night it was me she was thinking about, I can't get over the anger I hold toward him. He may not be outspoken about it, but I can see the look in his eyes. He wants to fuck Ophelia.

I clench my fists and dig inside my bag for my shirt. Anger simmers beneath my skin, and I can't allow it to overpower me. I need to stay focused on this game.

"You know, Hunt," Dawson says, his voice growing louder. "I'm getting real tired of *your* shit."

I drop my shirt into my locker and spin around. Dawson is standing directly behind me. I look behind him, hoping Reed has shown up as well. I spot him on the other side of the locker room, talking to our third baseman.

I stare daggers at Dawson, ignoring the way the rest of the team has turned their attention to us. A few of them move on, resuming what they were doing before Dawson opened his big, fat mouth. Reed is too far away to notice or hear the conversation between us.

The last thing we need is Coach coming out here, yelling at us before the start of the game.

“Wow.” I glare at Dawson. “If you didn’t already know, you’ve always been the one dragging everyone down. We practically have to pull teeth to get you to give a fuck about anyone but yourself. You’re so goddamn selfish, it’s disgusting.”

“No.” Dawson grits his teeth. He steps forward, pressing his finger to my bare chest. “I’ll admit, you’ve always given me shit. But this is different. At first, I thought it was because you were adjusting to your bonds being cut from Jamie, but then I thought about it some more. You’ve been different ever since Ophelia moved in.”

“Leave her out of this.” I curl my fingers into a fist at my sides. The muscles in my arms tighten with every smug expression Dawson lays on me.

“I don’t think I will.” He pauses and tilts his head. “Does it bother you when I talk to her? I bet it would fucking piss you off to know I gave her and Claire a ride to the game tonight.”

His question hits me harder than I expect. It’s the same question Ophelia asked me about Dawson.

Does it bother you that I talk to Dawson?

Then again, I think about last night with Ophelia, and her answering the question I’d ask her a while ago. She confessed she thought of me when she touched herself... but was that the truth?

“You know what?” Dawson holds his hands up. “I don’t need to know the answer to that question. I don’t give a fuck if it bothers you. I’m going to talk to Ophelia whether you give a shit or not.”

“Fuck you, Dawson.” My voice catches the attention of the rest of the team. Even Reed, who is now crossing the locker room, heading in our direction. “Stay away from her.”

Dawson doesn’t respond. He simply stands in front of me with a knowing expression. He knows I’ve fallen for Ophelia but haven’t said it out loud. I haven’t admitted it to anyone. Especially Reed.

“Hey, guys.” Reed stands beside the both of us. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” I blow out a hot breath and spin around, back to my locker. I grab my shirt and slip each of my arms in, beginning to work the buttons on the front. “We’re fine.”

“Yeah,” Dawson says, his voice lower now. I look up as he backs away, moving back to his locker and slamming it shut. “We were just discussing the game.”

“Okay,” Reed says. His expression tells me he doesn’t exactly believe us, but he doesn’t question it. He nods his head.

Dawson leaves Reed and me, heading toward the stalls near the back of the locker room.

Reed claps me on the back. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I’m quick to tell him. “I’m fine.”

“Good.” Reed smiles. “Because I was just talking to Coach, and you’re up for pitching first tonight.”

I chuckle, not understanding why he’s telling me this. I’m never up to bat first. I start every game on the mound. “Reed, I always pitch first.”

“Yeah, I know.” He laughs. “But it gives me a boost to confirm it. Makes it easier for me to catch.” Reed used to play third baseman until last year when he switched to catcher.

Now it's his favorite position, especially when I'm lined up to pitch most of the game.

"Okay." I smile at Reed.

"Yeah." He presses his lips together and nods before swinging his eyes back up to mine. "I just wanted to remind you that, basically, it's on us not to fuck this up. So, no pressure. Oh," he adds before walking away. "We also invited the girls out for a late dinner after the game. Assuming it'll be a celebratory one afterward."

"It better be," I mutter, my muscles growing tense the closer I get to the field.

When I step out onto the field with the team, the entire stands erupt into a roar of cheering. The sound vibrates across my chest like an enormous bolt of electricity. The pressure and enormity of what this game means to me hits me like a barreling train. The amount of people and fans counting on me is enough to make me want to vomit.

I'm walking along the inner wall of the field, in line with the rest of the team. I immediately start to look for Ophelia.

I haven't seen her since this morning, in my bed, sound asleep. Her eyelids were closed, and her breathing was slow, deep and heavy. It's a sound I haven't been able to forget.

We're nearly at the dugout when Reed points his finger up at the stands and nudges me with his elbow. "There's Ophelia and Claire."

Dawson is walking beside me, but we haven't spoken since we were in the locker room. We've been too preoccupied with the pressures of the game to deal with our personal bullshit. That's the amazing thing about playing for the same baseball team.

Dawson and I look up, following the direction of Reed's finger.

Ophelia and Claire are sitting only three rows up from the dugout.

From where they're standing, I can only see her from the waist up. Ophelia has traded her usual dress for a Northeast Rebels baseball shirt. It's white with dark blue sleeves. In the corner of her chest is our logo. Her hair is tied up into a high ponytail, and a hat similar to mine is resting on her head. The bill shadows her brightly painted eyes. Red eyeshadow and red glitter surround her gorgeous eyes. Her lips are painted a bright red. They make me wish I had kissed them last night.

I swallow the nerves in my stomach. She hasn't bothered glancing in my direction. The rest of the crowd surrounding her is loud, yelling at every player out on the field, including me. But Ophelia doesn't acknowledge me. I'm watching her, waiting until she does. She wraps her hands around her mouth and yells. "Go, Reed!"

She waves her hands enthusiastically above her head, clearly attempting to embarrass Reed. It works. He rolls his eyes and steps down into the dugout, his cheeks flushing a pale red.

It's strange. I've never seen Reed embarrassed. His face is usually too stiff to be anything but stern. I turn back to Ophelia. I don't wave or give her any indication I'm watching her other than my stare. I hate the way my eyes casually dart in her direction every few seconds. I can't help it. They're magnets, forcing me toward her. But I don't want her to know I'm watching her.

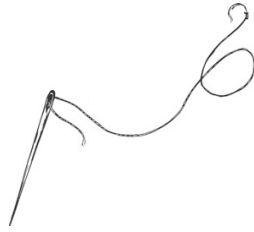
I keep my attention on the field and my pre-game warmups. They're crucial to a well-played game. Movement from Ophelia catches the corner of my eye. Claire subtly nudges Ophelia and leans closer. She mutters something to her, but there's no possible way I can read her lips or know what they're saying.

Ophelia simply shakes her head, then sits down in her seat.

"Moore!" Coach yells. "Time to get out there."

"Yes, Coach." I look away from the stands. With my glove in hand, I jog out onto the pitcher's mound, hoping I don't allow the one thing I've feared since Ophelia agreed to come to this game to happen. I hope to fuck she doesn't distract me.

FIFTEEN



OPHELIA

It's hard to believe this is a scrimmage. I've seen hundreds of baseball games since I was five years old, but none of them have come close to tonight's. I fix the bill of my cap and watch Hunter take the pitcher's mound for the last inning of the game.

He's covered in dirt and sweat, exhaustion written all over his body. Seeing Hunter in his element is different than any other game I've watched. Earlier, he'd hit a ball straight down the right side of the field. Bolting for first, he'd barely made it there by sliding to the plate. Eventually, that play led them to gaining a run. Now, Hunter is back on the mound.

Dawson is standing in his usual position of shortstop, between second and third base. He trades looks between the batter and Hunter.

Reed started the game in his specialty position as catcher, but he hasn't been on the field since the previous inning. He'd scraped his arm hard enough across the dirt, it cut the skin and he needed it to be cleaned up before he would even be considered to go back out to bat.

After Reed's injury, I'd made my way down the stands and called to where he was in the dugout. He'd sent me a wave, assuring me he was okay.

Now, it was up to the rest of the team to pull out this win.

The guys weren't kidding when they said the rivalry between Twin River and Northeast was intense. We're sitting on the home side of the stadium, but there are a few fans

sporting yellow and green scattered between us. Several of them have shouted to our own players. Some have even thrown popcorn at the dugouts, causing them to be escorted from the stands.

It's Hunter's last pitch, determining the outcome of the game. A bad pitch, allowing the batter to get a hit, will cause Twin River to get a leg up over the Rebels. He needs this out.

The fans in the stand relentlessly shout Hunter's name. "Hunter! Hunter! Hunter!"

I close my hands into two tight fists and hold them up to my mouth. My shoulders tense and I cringe, holding my breath.

"Oh, shit, Ophelia. I don't know if I can watch this." Claire squeals beside me. She's covering her eyes with her hands, her teeth clenched with nerves.

"Oh, stop." I laugh. "I'm shocked you're enjoying this."

"Are you kidding?" she asks, lowering her hands. She keeps her arms held to her chest, but she points to the field. "Who knew baseball could be so exhilarating?"

"Every now and then it can be." I grin, remembering all of Reed's games in the past where I fell asleep in my mom's lap before the fourth inning.

"Well, this one is completely unexpected. I'm just glad I'm over that miserable hangover from this morning. I'm sad I'm leaving tomorrow, though. I knew I would have a good time visiting you, but this is better than I expected it to be. In a way, I'm not ready to go back to the city." She frowns and scrunches her nose.

I'm sad, too. I don't want her to leave. Spending time with Claire makes me feel like I have a slice of my old life back. She feels like home. I love her determination and never-ending sense of optimism in a world insistent on keeping others down. Claire isn't like that. She's relentless, unwavering in her pursuit for love. I love my best friend, and the thought of her returning to the city without me leaves a big hole in my heart—a hole I was hoping I'd have filled by this point.

I'm not completely content with my life here. Far from it. I still don't have a car or my own place. I haven't found a new dream job to replace the one that was ripped out from under me. But I find comfort in knowing I'm still here, figuring it all out.

I look out at the field, watching as each player gets in prime position for this last batter's turn to swing. I shake my head, not completely disagreeing with Claire on her desire to stay here in this small town, but the pull I still feel toward the city is strong. The grass isn't always greener, I guess.

"I kind of see what you mean," I say.

"The city can be stifling sometimes." She shudders as if she's recalling what it feels like.

I purse my lips and sigh, nodding my head. "I don't disagree with you there."

A small sliver of grief and sadness over the life I once had still has a home in my brain. I haven't fully pushed past it yet.

"Besides, I'm considering a change and I think this has reaffirmed my decision."

"What do you mean?" I turn to her and widen my eyes.

She shrugs and purses her lips. "I don't know. Living in New York is tough, and for someone majoring in psychology, it's too big for me. I'm thinking of leaving the city."

"To go where?" My heart sinks into my stomach, worried she's going to move thousands of miles away.

"I'm thinking maybe Boston." She winces, knowing where my mind will immediately go.

I roll my eyes and swing my gaze back to the game. "Why does everyone want to go to Boston?"

"Right?" She snorts. "Maybe it's because it's a good balance. It isn't as overwhelming as New York, but not as stifling as it is in towns like this one."

"Hmm." I twist my mouth. "You may have a point."

“It’s okay. I haven’t decided quite yet. I’ve just been weighing my options.” Claire frowns, letting the sadness in her tone dissolve. “And as far as you’re concerned, you’ll find a job soon and be back in New York before you know it.” Her constant reassurance gives me a miniscule sliver of hope. I grin, my chest warming at the idea. But even with Claire’s reassurance, I can sense a slight shift from two months ago. Every day that passes, the less hope I have, leaving me worried I’ll eventually give up on the idea of going back altogether.

We watch the game for a few moments before Claire cups her hands around her mouth. “Go, Hunter!” Her voice booms across the two rows of fans in front of us.

I didn’t tell Claire what happened between Hunter and me last night. After my conversation with her and Max at dinner, I told myself I’d only tell her if she asked. She hasn’t, and when I woke up this morning in Hunter’s empty bedroom, I’d tiptoed back into my room to find her passed out in the same position I’d left her in last night. After dragging her out of bed, I’d convinced her to shower and change before we would go shopping for tonight’s outfits. Unlike Hunter’s suggestion at the lake, I didn’t have time to sew Claire an outfit. Instead, she’d picked a black and blue pinstriped mini skirt to go with her Northeast Rebels T-shirt.

As for me, I’ve settled on a simple baseball shirt and frayed jean shorts. I’m casual compared to Claire, but I don’t care. I pick one of the loose threads at the top of my thigh, the memory of Hunter’s flesh on mine creeping into my thoughts.

Watching Hunter tonight has been an experience I wasn’t expecting. Frustration for what happened between us last night has lingered since I woke up and found him already gone.

Shame has settled into my gut, taking place of all the progress I thought we’d made. I assumed last night had somehow magically changed things for us, but when I’d found him gone, it left me feeling slightly regretful. Did he think of me as all the other women he’d slept with? Was I just another to add to his list?

I'm hoping not.

Max had told me about Hunter's reputation before the summer. Maybe he'd settled back into his old habits.

Even if my relationship with him is convoluted at best, I'm still on edge watching him play. Every now and then, I've caught him staring up at me: on his way to the pitcher's mound, when he steps out of the dugout to bat, right before he twists his hips to the side and hitches his leg up at the start of a pitch, his eyes are on mine. All the time. Every time. I can't fully see them from where I am in the stands, especially considering the bill of his cap perfectly shadows half of his face, but I *know* he's looking at me. My body gets the overwhelming feeling it might spontaneously combust every time his head even rotates in my direction.

He tips his chin up slightly, letting me know he's watching me, then looks down.

The stands erupt into a rhythmic chant.

"Let's go, Rebels! Let's go!" They stomp their feet and clap, cupping their hands over their mouths. Claire and I do the same, my chest squeezing with anticipation. Hunter squares his shoulders and twists to the side. Without warning, he steadies himself and catapults the ball into the air. The shot is straight, like an arrow shooting from a bow. The batter for Twin River swings but misses. The ball lands squarely in the hands of the catcher behind him.

Third strike.

This was Twin River's last chance to get a home run and tie the score against the Rebels, but their batter couldn't make it. All due to Hunter's pitch.

The Rebels have won three to two.

The entire crowd erupts into a deep and heavy roar. Their booming voices pound against my body. The stands vibrate, and the Northeast fans buzz with their win. The team jumps and runs out onto the field, surrounding Hunter.

"Oh my God!" Claire screams. She jumps up and down beside me, bouncing on her heels. "They won!"

“They did!” I yell back, only so she can hear me over the crowd. They repeat their chant several times, and a sea of fan waves rolls across the stands.

After the third time, the stadium finally quiets down, the excitement from the win still evident on their faces as they start to filter out of the stands. Claire and I stay where we are. Dawson and Reed said the five of us were going out to dinner to celebrate so we waited for them to come out from the dugout.

The rest of the team filter back to the locker room, and Dawson runs up to the fence, looking up into the stands. Claire and I walk down the three rows to meet him.

“This means we’re still on for dinner, right?” Dawson asks. His grin is impossibly wide. It stretches tightly from one cheek to the other.

I spot Hunter from the corner of my eye. He’s wiping his face with a rag and helping clean up the dugout.

“Of course, we are,” I say to Dawson, even though I’m still watching Hunter. “Didn’t you say it was a celebratory dinner?”

“Yeah,” he answers.

Hunter steps out of the dugout, slinging a large duffle bag over his shoulder. His game winning glove rests in his free hand. He looks up at Claire and me.

I smirk, watching him standing in all his game-winning glory. “You’re coming too, right?”

It’s the first time we’ve spoken to one another since last night. The moment the words leave my mouth, I remember the feeling that settled in my chest when I woke up this morning. I don’t know where we stand, but I wish I did. I hate the unknown with Hunter. Every time we take two steps forward, we take one hundred back.

He clears his throat and rubs the back of his hand across his chin. “Yeah, I’ll be there.”

“Great. It’s settled, then.” Dawson beams, not looking in Hunter’s direction. “Reed is already in the locker room, but we’ll get cleaned up and meet everyone in the parking lot in about twenty.”

“Sounds good.” Claire bounces on her heels in excitement.

Hunter and Dawson walk toward the locker room, leaving Claire and me in the stands.

“I wanted to stop by that gift shop on our way out.” She spins around, leaning back on the fence. “I want to take a few souvenirs back home. Do you want to check it out with me?”

I frown, the idea of shopping when I’m already this tired sounding terribly unappealing. “That’s okay. I’ll meet you out by Reed’s car.”

“Okay.”

When we make it out from the stands, Claire and I separate. She heads toward the souvenir shop while I stop at the restroom before making my way to the parking lot.

After I finish up, I walk out to the parking lot, remembering where Reed had dropped me off earlier.

Dawson offered to give Claire and I a ride earlier, but considering I wasn’t quite ready, I rode with Reed instead.

After Claire asked me if I was okay with her leaving ahead of me with Dawson, I didn’t argue. She was enjoying her trip, and as far as I could tell, her and Dawson were getting along well. Then again, it’s impossible not to get along with him.

The parking lot has emptied quite a bit since the beginning of the game, but I’m still having trouble finding Reed’s black sedan. It looks the same as the other fifty black sedans out here. I’ve already edged out toward the back of the parking lot when I see Hunter leaning against his truck. I glance around. This part of the parking lot is more isolated than the rest. We’re practically by ourselves in this corner.

He has his arms crossed over his chest and his legs crossed at the ankle. He grins under the shadow caused by the cap he’s still wearing. It’s the same one he wore out on the field.

“Having trouble finding your ride?”

“No.” I stop about ten feet in front of him and smile. “Convenient to acknowledge me now as opposed to when you walked out onto the field before the start of the game.”

“I don’t like to get distracted before the game. I usually wave once, then turn away from the crowd. I thought you gathered that by our conversation at the tree.”

No, I didn’t. I narrow my eyes and purse my lips. “Huh.”

“Baseball players are known for their superstitions. The lake is everyone else’s. That one is mine.”

“What, to not acknowledge your fans?” I quirk an eyebrow.

“To not get distracted,” he clarifies.

I cross my arms over my chest. His answer stirs a sensation inside me I’m not willing to recognize. At least not in this moment.

“Don’t you remember where Dawson parked?” he asks, switching the conversation. “Considering he’s the one who gave you a ride.”

“No, he didn’t.” I shake my head, confused as to why he would assume that. “Who told you Dawson gave me a ride?”

Hunter pushes off the side of his truck and takes a step toward me. “Dawson.”

“Ah.” I tilt my head back and giggle. “I’m sensing a theme here.”

“You know...” He lowers his voice, drawing closer. Or maybe it’s me. Suddenly Hunter’s truck isn’t as far in the distance, and Hunter is close enough to touch me. “I think you might be right.”

He grabs my shirt, twisting it around his finger, and he tugs me toward him. My sneakers scrape across the pavement before I stumble into him. My hands land on his chest, and I gasp involuntarily. Every ounce of shame from last night

disappears in this moment. It was worth it to be able to feel this from Hunter.

“I thought you regretted last night,” I confess.

“Why? Because I left?”

“Yeah.” I bite down on my bottom lip, nervous to dive into this conversation. I’m not sure I’m prepared for the answers I might get. “You also didn’t say anything to me at the game.”

“I told you before. You would be a distraction.”

“No, you said I would be a distraction for Reed.” I think back to the night at the tree when he’d told me I could put the fate of the game in jeopardy simply with my presence.

“I wasn’t talking about Reed, and I didn’t leave this morning because I regretted last night.” He releases my shirt and steps back, putting distance between us again. “I just need answers.”

“Answers?” I knit my eyebrows, stepping back toward him. “What kind of answers?”

“The real reason you came into my room.” There’s a vulnerability to him. One I’ve rarely seen. But I can see it in his eyes, he wants honesty.

I sigh and close my eyes. “Claire and I had dinner with Max last night. I had a few drinks at the restaurant. When Max dropped us off, I helped Claire to my room, but she passed out on my bed, and there was nowhere for me to sleep. I went to the bathroom, and the door was open to your room. It made me think of the last thing you’d said to me... after we kissed that day.”

Hunter scratches at his chin, then his eyes darken. The vulnerability has faded. “You were drunk?”

“No,” I insist, shaking my head. “I was barely buzzed or tipsy. I only had a few margaritas.”

“A few?” He crosses his arms below his chest again. His demeanor has changed. Again, I think we’re taking two steps forward, and now we’re one hundred back. “Apparently, you

drank enough to make you feel bold enough to go into my room and touch yourself on my bed.”

“I figured the open door from the bathroom was an open invitation. It had been shut every day since we kissed.” I shrug. “I assumed you left it open on purpose.”

“Would you have done it if you weren’t drunk?” he asks. There’s a hint of worry in his question, but he hasn’t wavered his hard-hearted gaze.

“Let’s get one thing straight, Hunter.” I place both hands at my hips and march over to him. Anger from our lack of honesty boils over. I no longer care to hold back when it comes to him. Last night gave me all the confidence I’ve been missing. It answered every question I’ve had whether Hunter cares about me more than he lets on. I stand in front of him and lift my chin, shooting him a glaring look with narrowed eyes. “The fact that I had been drinking had nothing to do with what happened last night. It just gave me the confidence to do what I’ve wanted to do ever since you pushed me up against that fucking tree. I wanted you to touch me. I’ve been begging for it.” The words are pushed from my chest and out of my mouth in one long breath. My breathing is suddenly fast, and my throat goes dry. The blood drains from my face, realizing I’ve just spilled my entire guts to the ridiculously hot baseball player I’m hopelessly falling for.

Scratch that.

I’ve already fallen for him.

“And one more thing,” I continue. “I don’t have any sort of fucking feelings for Dawson. It would be nice if you could stop insinuating that I’m fucking him.”

I begin to cross my arms over my chest as anger simmers and heats my body, but Hunter stops me. He reaches out and grabs my arm, slamming my body against his.

“I’m going to ask you one more time and then I’ll drop it. I just need to know before we go any further.”

I wait for his question.

“So, you haven’t been fucking Dawson?” The same humor I saw on Hunter’s face when I first found him leaning against his truck has returned. But the seriousness in his shadowed eyes tells me he still wants the truth.

I’m not entirely sure where this idea came from with Dawson, or why he’s concerned we’ve slept together. Dawson and I have had less interactions than Hunter and I have.

I hold my hands up, exhausted by his unrelenting questions about Dawson. “That’s it. I can’t anymore, Hunter. If you can’t trust me then this isn’t going to work...”

I spin around on my heels to leave. Hunter grips my arm again, pulling me to another stop. His fingers press into my flesh, and my entire body tenses at his touch. Like when he was out on the pitcher’s mound, staring up at me, I feel like I’m going to spontaneously combust.

He yanks me toward him, pulling me as hard as he can to keep me pressed against him. I land hard against his chest.

“You can’t run from me this time, Ophelia,” he grinds out in a low voice.

“I’m not running. I’m here, Hunter. I’m just tired of answering the same question, over and over.”

“Answer it,” he instructs. His eyes are dark. “Are you fucking Dawson?”

I stand on my toes and stare him directly in the eye. “No.”

“Good.” It’s the only word he says before he swiftly wraps his arm around my waist and ushers me toward his truck. My hands land against the cool, damp metal, my back to him. I glance over my shoulder, wondering why he’s put me in this position. Usually, when Hunter pins me against an object, he ensures I’m facing him.

I whimper when his hand slides around my waist and down to my bare thigh. He isn’t shy about his movements even in the open parking lot. I don’t know where Reed is. I don’t even know where Claire and Dawson are. My phone hasn’t pinged or vibrated inside my pocket. I internally sigh with relief.

I want to see where our confessions have taken us. We're on a whole new level now.

I feel it down to the sensation tingling at the tips of my toes and the heat swelling between my thighs.

Hunter manages to slide his fingers up the leg of my shorts, finding my clit. I moan, thirsty for breath, swallowing to regain my bearings. He presses against my folds and brings his mouth to the hollow of my ear.

“No underwear?” He growls.

“No,” I whisper.

His chest vibrates, and I swear I hear another growl pass his lips. “Get in the truck.”

The sound of his heavy voice behind me is quickly followed by the sound of the driver's side door being pulled open. Hunter backs away from me, and I step in without looking back. I don't need to. I know this is what I want. I've been craving it ever since that first touch.

I climb into Hunter's truck and slide over to the passenger side. It's the first time I've ever sat in his truck, and honestly, I never thought I would. I've hardly ever seen it in the driveway, considering how busy his life is. His truck is immaculately clean. There isn't a speck of dirt or mess, the new car smell overwhelming me. It quickly replaces Hunter's freshly showered smell. His skin is still damp when he clutches my waist, dragging me back to him. I swing my leg over his lap, resting both legs at his sides. His swollen cock strains against his jeans. It presses into my near-bare pussy, hard as stone. I'm thankful I decided against underwear tonight. There's barely anything separating me from Hunter. I feel almost every bit of him, and a delightful shiver breaks across my skin.

Hunter reaches up and traces his finger across my collarbone, allowing it to linger on his team logo on the corner of my chest.

“I must admit, seeing you in this shirt does something to me.”

I lean forward, bringing my chest closer to his face. He grabs onto the hem on the bottom, lifting the shirt over my raised arms. He tosses it into the footwell, and I lean forward, once again.

My breasts are close enough to feel the brush of his hot breath dancing across them. I'm wearing one of those bras with next to no lining—a thin, sheer cut piece of lace being the only thing covering them. Hunter's eyes glance over my breasts, his eyes lighting under the darkness. The tip of his cap is pushed up, revealing his hungry gaze.

"In fact, I think I like this view better," he admits. He reaches up and palms one of my breasts. I moan against him, moving quick to rock my hips against his cock.

"Fuck, Hunter," I groan, pressing my hips into him deeper.

The material of my jeans slides against my clit.

"Is your cunt crying out for me yet?" he asks with a low, gravelly tone. It vibrates through his hand to my hardened nipple. I buck my hips again, breathing out.

"Yes." I tilt my head back, thankful Hunter has tinted windows. Not that I'm particularly concerned if anyone can see what we're doing inside his truck. I don't know if the others are waiting on us. I don't know if they've left. I'm hoping they don't know where Hunter is parked and come looking for us. I quickly glance out the driver's side window, just to be sure.

"Don't worry about them." Hunter lures me back, reading my thoughts. He shoves the straps of my bra down my shoulder, freeing my breasts. He cups one in his hand again, this time twisting my nipple with his fingers. "I texted Reed and told him I was giving you a ride to the restaurant."

I shudder when he twists again. I keep my pace of rocking my hips as he works my nipple with his calloused hands. The sensation of his rough fingers against my smooth skin magnifies every move he makes.

"You're an asshole." I smirk. "Assuming I'd let you give me a ride."

He pinches my nipple one more time, as if he is delivering a message. I hiss between my teeth, the sharp pain jolting me against him once more.

“If there’s one thing I know for certain, it’s what I want, and I want to fuck your cunt so hard, you won’t ever question me again.”

“I think you were questioning me more than I was you,” I point out.

“Let me set the record straight, then.”

I wrap my hand around Hunter’s head, digging my fingers into the nape of his neck. I make the first move. With my other hand, I undo the button to his jeans and slide down his zipper. Finding the gap in his boxer briefs, his cock springs to life and presses against my clit.

“That’s it,” he encourages, shoving my shorts aside with his fingers. He twists his hand and hooks two of his fingers, quickly sliding them inside me with ease. I gasp, digging my nails into his skin. I grip the back of his seat, clenching my thighs around him. “I see you’re already soaking wet for me. Your pussy clenches every time I move inside you.”

I nod, squeezing my eyes shut. I bite down on my bottom lip, knowing it won’t take long for me to orgasm like this.

“I fucking need you now.” Hunter grunts and stops moving his fingers immediately. He hastily removes them and wraps his hand around his cock, centering himself in front of me. With a firmer grip on the headrest, I lift myself up before lowering down.

Hunter grips my hips and slams me down, filling me completely. I yelp, the full length of his cock sliding all the way in. He’s impossibly deep but it feels so fucking good. It’s as if every strand of tension between us over the past two months has suddenly snapped. It’s a clean cut, both of us relishing in the feeling.

“Ophelia.” Hunter pulls my attention back to him. I hadn’t realized I’d been still, keeping him inside me without moving. “Keep your eyes on me.”

He lifts one hand and swipes his thumb across my bottom lip. He pulls me down, bringing his mouth to mine. He kisses me quickly before biting down on my lip. I shift my hips, rocking back and forth, then lifting myself up before going down again. His cock slides around me, my insides clenching with every pass.

We keep our mouths close to one another's, not quite keeping them locked in a kiss. Our hot breaths exchange between us. The spot Hunter had bitten down on swells slightly.

"Take me, Ophelia," Hunter breathes against me. "Take my cock like I know you've been wanting to for the past two months."

I do as he says, lifting myself and then slamming down, once again. I fuck his cock hard. The sound of our bodies moving together fills the cab of his truck. The windows fog over, blocking our view to the outside world even more. Both of our phone's ping with a text message but we ignore them.

"Oh, God, Hunter." My muscles clench, and his cock pulsates inside me. "I'm going to fucking come." He grabs my hips tighter and rolls them along with his. He covers my mouth with his hand, stifling my cries.

We fuck each other. Hard.

Putting all our frustration and tension toward one another, we lock eyes.

Heat spreads, swelling throughout my body. I shudder and fall apart around him. I tense as his cock follows, pulsating against my walls with his orgasm. His cum spills inside me. I'm grateful to have the birth control implant in my arm.

After riding out our orgasms, I fall onto Hunter's chest. My bare breasts press against his damp skin, but I don't care. Exhaustion slams through me, chills breaking down along my spine. Hunter wraps his arms around my body and drags his fingers down my back, then to the nape of my neck. He pulls me to look at him.

He kisses me before pulling away, dragging the tip of his tongue across the swollen corner of my bottom lip. He's soothing the wound he inflicted, and the gesture makes my heart feel like it's about to leap out of my chest.

After, he pulls away, resting his head back on the headrest. He hasn't pulled himself out of me yet. We both stay the way we are for a few moments, catching our breaths.

With a playful grin, I lift up the edge of his cap, revealing his green eyes. "By the way, congratulations on your win tonight."

SIXTEEN



HUNTER

Ophelia: You're distracting me. I'm forcing myself to eat so we don't look suspicious.

Me: I could eat you.

Ophelia coughs, quickly dropping her phone into her lap. I laugh, looking down at my plate. I pick up an onion ring and take a bite.

“Are you okay?” Claire turns to Ophelia. She's sitting beside her in the booth of the diner we're currently eating at.

“Yeah.” Ophelia presses her hand against her chest. “I'm fine. I just swallowed a fry wrong.”

Ophelia picks her phone back up when Claire returns to her conversation with Dawson and Reed. She keeps it under the table, hoping it won't be obvious.

My phone pings with a text seconds later.

Ophelia: Is this how it's going to be from now on? You teasing me? I think I liked it better when you were an asshole.

Me: I still am. I can be both.

Ophelia: We should space our texting back and forth. The others will start to notice.

I only wait thirty seconds longer than I would otherwise.

Me: Do you care if they find out?

Ophelia looks up from the table and locks eyes with me. She shrugs a shoulder, then looks away to pop a fry into her mouth. I shift in my seat, trying not to let my cock react to her sitting across from me.

After Ophelia and I fucked in the parking lot, we exchanged phone numbers and raced to the restaurant. No one questioned us or asked why we were late.

I wipe my hand across my mouth, attempting to put the memory of fucking Ophelia in my truck out of my head. I can still hear her moans and cries as she rode my cock. They aren't the sounds I should be imagining when trying to eat dinner at a table full of friends. Especially when one of those friends is Ophelia's brother.

This is exactly what I was worried about when it came to her: getting too close.

I've gone mad. I'm obsessed. I can't stop thinking about her. I was hoping if I fucked her, I'd be able to move on—get it out of my system. She'd become another Penny. Another woman I've slept with. We'd part ways and move on.

But she isn't Penny, and Ophelia isn't at all the same.

Ophelia has been an obsession since day one, and I'm only now giving in. She's innocence and sin. All I can do is sit across from her at this cheap diner, imagining all the sounds I could get her to make again, whether it be with my mouth, my cock, or my texts.

"Who are you talking to?" Reed asks. He's sitting beside me, shoving his empty plate away from him. He crosses his arms over the edge of the table, twisting his Rebels cap backwards. "Is it Jamie again?"

I look up from my phone, quickly tapping the button to make my screen turn black. "Yeah," I lie.

It isn't a complete lie. Jamie still hasn't left me alone. After our last conversation when he'd asked for advice about Reese, he finally backed off for a few days, but his silence didn't last a week before he was relentlessly calling and texting me again.

So, technically, I'm not lying to Reed. I'm just not talking to Jamie at this exact second.

I look over at Ophelia. She's carefully trading glances between Reed and me, pretending to pay attention to the other end of the table.

"Man." Reed sighs, then inhales a breath. "He doesn't ever let up, does he?"

"Nope." I shove my plate aside, wishing Reed would drop the topic of my brother. "I figure he'll stop at some point. I mean, this transition is still fresh. He's learning to handle everything on his own."

"Well, damn." Reed laughs.

"What?" I ask, smiling.

"Nothing." He shakes his head. "It's just fucking weird to hear you defending your brother."

"Oh, trust me. I'm not defending him." I laugh again, taking a sip of my soda. I wish it was a beer. "If I don't believe he'll change, I'll fucking lose my mind."

Reed nods, finishing off his water. "Some people never do. He might never back down from asking you for business advice. What matters is you standing your ground and staying firm. Don't put up with his bullshit if you don't want it."

"Thanks." I tell him. It's odd that he's offering me this amount of advice. Usually, Reed is cut and dry with his counsel. He's never been a 'lead with the heart' kind of man.

He takes a final sip of his drink and slides out of the booth. He grabs his keys from the table. "I should go. I have a big exam tomorrow and can't afford to fuck it up, so I'm basically spending the whole night at the library again." He leans down and kisses Ophelia on the cheek. "Thanks for coming to watch us play."

"Of course." Ophelia grins, looking up at Reed as he backs away. "Congratulations on your win."

Claire twists in her seat. She places an elbow on the table and rests her chin in her hand. "You just played an entire

baseball game and won. Don't you think you should take longer than a breath to appreciate your win?"

Reed smirks and gestures toward the table. "I did."

Claire rolls her eyes. "Okay, fine. Well, why not hang out a bit longer since I head back home tomorrow?"

"I'm sorry. I can't." Reed frowns. "I'm heading out to Texas next week and need to finish up my last few papers that are due before class ends."

There's hurt in Claire's eyes, but she's quick to push it aside. Who knew Reed's decision to dip out early would offend Claire? In fact, I'm learning Claire takes everyone's words to heart.

I chance looking at Ophelia. Her eyebrows are knitted in confusion as she stares up at her brother. "Texas?" she asks him. "Where in Texas?"

"It's not a big deal."

"What's in Texas?" Claire asks. Her question is innocent enough, but the rest of the table looks at her as if she's just asked a question that will ruin us all.

Digging into Reed's personal life just isn't what any of us do. Claire's ignorance makes us all hold our breath.

"It's seriously not a big deal." Reed shrugs a shoulder. "I won't be gone long."

The entire table stays quiet. Not one person opens their mouth.

Ophelia narrows her eyes, then blinks her confusion away. She turns to me and grins.

I shrug. From the expression on our faces, I can tell we're on the same page. We had no idea Reed was going to Texas.

"Okay," Claire chimes in, shattering the quiet. "I guess I'll see you next time I come to visit."

"Definitely." Reed gives the table one last smile and tosses his portion of his cash beside his plate before heading out. He

leaves us with the lingering silence, processing what just happened.

Dawson shovels the last bit of his eggs into his mouth and tosses his own cash onto the table. He finishes chewing and swallows before he speaks.

“You guys coming to Ray’s party after this?”

Ray is our third baseman, and the owner of the house I went to meet Dawson at a couple of months ago—the last time I’d seen Penny. His reputation on the team and around campus is being known as the go-to party guy. If we win a game, his house is the place to go afterward. Tonight isn’t any different.

Ophelia locks eyes with me, waiting for my response. If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t go.

“No,” I turn to Dawson. “I’m fucking exhausted, man. Sliding through to second base in the fourth inning got me.” I twist my arm, showing him the fresh scrape. I’ve washed the dirt off, but my skin is still raw. I’d forgotten the pain of it when I met Ophelia out by my truck.

“Fine.” Dawson waves me off, shifting to Ophelia and Claire.

“It’s Claire’s last night here,” Ophelia explains. “It’s up to her if she wants to go, but I don’t think I want to. I have a dress I need to finish designing tomorrow.” She watches me from the corner of her eye.

“I’m not sure,” Claire says. “My train doesn’t leave until the afternoon, so I don’t have to get up early.”

“The house is only a few blocks from ours if you don’t want to stay long,” Dawson offers.

“If you’re worried about me, don’t be.” Ophelia turns to Claire. “We can have brunch before you head to the train station.”

“It’s settled, then.” Claire gives the three of us her largest grin. “I’m going to a party.”

“Fuck, yeah.” Dawson claps his hands at the same time I snap my eyes to Ophelia’s.

I tap her foot under the table with my boot, nudging her. She grins and tugs her bottom lip under her teeth.

I pick up my phone and send her a text.

Her phone pings from her lap. She picks it up and reads it, the blue light glowing across her skin.

Me: Thank God we'll have the house to ourselves. I'm fucking starving.

"I'M surprised you were able to contain yourself through the entire dinner." Ophelia smiles up at me.

I pushed Ophelia back onto the couch in the living room the second Claire and Dawson walked out the front door. I didn't even bother waiting until they'd disappeared down the street. I took the risk, knowing if I didn't get my fucking hands on Ophelia, I was going to explode.

She's staring up at me with a heated gaze, her body laid out on the couch. The lamp in the corner of the living room blankets her in an orange-yellow hue. I'm seeing her in a different light than I did in my truck. Here, she's vulnerable. She can't hide from me. She can't play innocent. I can see and touch everything.

We're free from the constraints of the cab of my truck.

Her legs are bent over the arm of the couch, dangling off the edge. The blinds are shut, but my heart still hammers in my chest. I've never been with anyone outside of my room. Especially my roommate's sister. I consider taking Ophelia upstairs, but I don't want to waste time. I don't want to ruin this moment for her.

I want to savor Ophelia the way she deserves to be savored.

I unbutton my jeans and step out of them. "I almost didn't make it through dinner," I admit, removing my shirt. I step out of my boxer briefs. My cock immediately springs to life, and

Ophelia's eyes widen. It's the first time she's laid eyes on me. Her eyes roam over my entire body, taking in every scrape, bruise, and scar.

I lean down and press my hands on the arm of the couch. Her legs are already spread for me. I ghost my fingers along the insides of her thighs until I reach the top of her shorts. I'm quick to unbutton them. I have yet to see her on full display for me. "Did you feel the same way at dinner?" I ask her, sliding her shorts down over her hips. She lifts herself up, allowing me to remove them completely.

"What do you mean?" she whispers.

She removes her shirt, too. She leaves her bra on, and I immediately shake my head. I 'tsk' at her in disapproval and crawl over her. My chest rubs against her body. She gasps, watching me as I roam over her. I hover above her and hold myself up by gripping one hand around the back of the couch.

I stop over her breasts and blow across her nipples. They peak and harden under the thin lace. She's fucking stunning. She tilts her head back, closing her eyes as I move from one breast to the next.

"Look at me," I tell her.

She obeys. My cock twitches.

"I almost didn't make it through dinner because it wasn't what I wanted." I move my hand from the back of the couch and tear through the lace of her bra. It rips easily, becoming two shreds of fragile pink fabric. She gasps again. Her chin pops open, and her full pink lips part.

"What did you want?" she asks me. I lean down, pulling her breast into my mouth. I bite down on her full, soft flesh. She moans, arching her back off the couch.

"I'm hungry for you." I pull her nipple into my mouth, lapping my tongue around it. I circle it, and circle it again. When I pull away, I gently bite down. Her heated body writhes beneath me.

"I want you inside me," she pants.

I shake my head, gazing up at her with hooded eyes. “Not before I get a taste. Not before I satisfy my hunger.”

“Fuck.” She hisses, threading her fingers through her long, brown hair, and squeezing her eyes shut.

The way my heart hammers in my chest as I watch her reassures me that Ophelia is different. Different than any woman I’ve been with. I want to savor her. I want to appreciate every curve of her body and every reaction I elicit from her with a single touch. There’s something about the way my insides jolt at the idea of what I do to her. She bends to my will, so easily begging for it... But I’m the same.

I know I’m begging for her now, but my hunger will only be satisfied for so long.

With her other hand, she fists onto the ends of my hair, too. She tugs on the ends but allows me to make my way down her body. I drag my tongue across her ribs, then to her stomach, stopping every few inches to bite down. She twists her hips one way, lifting them from the couch. She twists the other way, never quite settling into one place... until I’ve made my way down to her clit. I reach between her legs, sliding my fingers between her folds.

“You always make it so easy,” I tell her. “So fucking wet for me every time.”

“Hunter.” My name falls from her pretty pink mouth so effortlessly.

I slide two fingers and hook them inside her. I place my mouth to her folds, blowing a hot breath across them before sliding my tongue down it. I find her clit almost immediately.

I work the tip of my tongue over it. She arches her back, once again, grasping onto the ends of my hair even harder than before.

She bucks her hips against me, pressing my face against her.

I pull away from her long enough to talk, still pumping my fingers in and out of her. “That’s it. Just like that.” I return to her clit, working my tongue in circles.

She drapes her legs over my shoulders, and digs her heels into the small of my back. She yells my name, tugging and yanking on the ends of my hair as she rides out her orgasm. Her legs strain against me, but her hips keep moving. She tries to pull away but I don't stop. I'm relentless.

When she finishes, her legs fall slack, touching my back. I don't waste anymore time. I move out from between her legs and wrap my arms around her.

I pull her up, hoisting her over my shoulder. She yelps as I drape her over me, her arms falling to my back. Her long, brown hair sways as I carry her over to the stairs.

"Hunter!" she yells. "What are you doing?" Her body is still heated from her orgasm. Her skin is damp and warm.

"I'm not finished with you yet." I grunt, taking the steps as quickly and carefully as I can. I'd feel like an asshole if I were to drop her.

Ophelia's legs are pressed to my chest, her bare ass on full display for me. With my left hand under her cheek, I press my thumb into her flesh. She releases a heavy breath, relishing the way my hands mold to her supple skin.

"Oh, fuck," she moans. "You can't touch me like this if you aren't going to do anything about it."

I reach the top of the stairs, but I stop. The door to both of our rooms are open, but still, I stay where I am.

I smirk, knowing exactly where I'm going. I need to make a point first, though.

"Who said I wasn't going to do anything about it?"

Ophelia squeals and lets out a sharp yelp when my hand smacks against her full, smooth cheek. My fingertips sting from the contact they made against her tanned flesh.

"Answer me," I demand between clenched teeth. My cock is begging to be inside her, but I hold out. I love teasing Ophelia. I love drawing all the parts out of her she attempts to suppress. She makes me feel like a king. A king hungry and starving for the power she gives me.

I slap her ass again. *Smack.*

“Hunter ...” She groans with pleasure. “I don’t know ...”

“I never said I wasn’t going to do anything about it, Ophelia,” I add when she doesn’t respond. I march us to my bedroom, slamming the door shut behind us. The sound echoes and vibrates around the frame and into the room. I don’t know why I shut the door, knowing we have the entire house to ourselves for at least the next few hours. I just need to remember to grab our clothes from the living room before our roommates come home.

For now, I plan on devouring Ophelia.

I drop Ophelia onto my bed. She pulls herself up onto her elbows, staring up at me. Waiting for her next instructions.

She’s beautiful against the sheets of my bed, every inch of her on display for me. Every curve of her hips to the curve of her breasts. I reach out and pull on the back of her knees, dragging her closer.

I spread her legs and plunge my fingers inside her again like I did downstairs. But this time is different. Her eyes glint under the light pouring in from the window above my bed. This time, I study her face as I pump my fingers slowly inside her. We lock eyes. She refuses to look away, tipping her chin up. She bites down on her bottom lip and moans.

I had planned to keep going, but an invisible pull inside me is telling me to bend down and place my mouth to hers. So, that’s exactly what I do.

I keep my fingers inside her and bend down. I grip her chin with my other hand. She gasps, still maintaining eye contact.

“You drive me insane,” I confess.

Ophelia’s softening gaze tells me she knows exactly what I mean. “It goes both ways, Hunter.”

I smirk, electricity pumping through my veins, shooting directly to my chest. Then I slam my mouth to hers.

She raises her chin even higher, diving all-in on my kiss. She pours herself into me, moaning as I slide my tongue

between her lips, tasting her entire mouth.

She lifts her hands and wraps them around my face. She digs her nails into my jaw, keeping me pressed against her.

I begin to pull my mouth away from hers, biting down on her bottom lip before I tear myself away from her completely. Her chest rises and falls with every quick and heavy breath she releases.

She gasps when I slide my fingers out from inside her and lift them to my mouth. I place both on my tongue, sucking on them before pulling them out. Her eyes grow wide, igniting with fire.

She's sweet, the taste of her coating my tongue. My stomach twists, and my cock aches to be inside her.

"For the past two months, I've wondered what you taste like," I tell her, sliding my fingers over my hardened cock. They glide over me easily, and the longer I pump my cock while staring at Ophelia naked on my bed, the closer I am to coming all over her. I don't want to do that tonight. "I've had the privilege of tasting you twice tonight, but now... now I want more."

Without hesitation, I grip my length with one hand and tug on Ophelia's leg with the other. I grab the back of her calf, dragging her a few inches. I lean down and bring my face closer to hers.

I pull back my hips, lock eyes with her, and I plunge myself so deeply inside her, she gasps for air and tilts her head back. She lets out a deep groan—one that vibrates up and out across her chest. This time is different.

It's the feeling I was afraid of. I've had a taste of Ophelia—I've finally gone all the way with her, burying myself inside her—but the hunger is only satisfied for a short amount of time before I need my next fix. It's a theory I'm certain I've proved tonight.

Her eyes flutter closed before she opens them again.

I slam my hips against her, pounding into her over and over. I'm relentless, savoring the way my cock slides into her

without effort. She grips my shoulders, digging her nails into my skin, tightening herself around me. She lifts her legs, giving me unrestricted access. I can pull my hips back farther, slamming into her harder. I move faster.

A frenzy explodes inside me, spreading from my chest down to my stomach to my cock. Getting close to coming herself, Ophelia screams my name, lifting her head and squeezing her eyes shut as she prepares herself for the power of her orgasm and how it'll rock her to her core.

“Open your eyes,” I tell her.

She does as I say.

“Hunter ...” My name falls out of her slack mouth.

“Say my name like you mean it,” I pant, slamming my cock into her harder. Her lust-filled eyes darken and intensify. I grip the headboard above her, shoving into her again and again. Sweat drips down the side of my face, but I don't care. I want to hear her scream my name. I *need* to hear it.

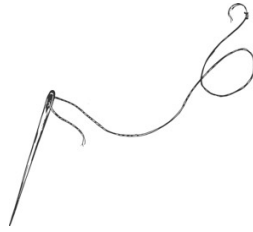
“Oh, fuck, Hunter!” She yells each word louder than the last. Her body quivers beneath me as she comes. She presses her fingertips into my tense shoulders. My stomach clenches, and my cock throbs inside Ophelia's clenching pussy. She's still riding out her orgasm and I feel every bit of it. Her cunt pulsates around my cock, and it's all it takes for me to come undone. I explode inside her, not caring that all my cum spills into her. She pants and catches her breath. I drop my head to her chest and attempt to catch my breaths, too. She lifts her hand and combs her fingers through my damp hair. It's back to the way it was before I took a shower in the locker room after the game.

My cheek is pressed against her sternum, and the curve of her breast touches the tip of my nose. I lean forward and place a kiss to it, pulling her soft flesh between my lips. Her skin is just as damp and sweaty as mine. Her heart pounds in her chest, beating against the side of my face.

It's enough to prove my theory from earlier. I've had a dose of Ophelia, but I'm already wanting my next fix.

I'm fucking screwed.

SEVENTEEN



OPHELIA

My life has been completely flipped upside down. All because of Hunter.

I'm throwing my hair up into a messy bun as I stand in front of the mirror in Max's store. There aren't any customers on the sales floor. I'm thankful. I can't stop thinking about Hunter and how we've crossed into this unknown territory. It's a concept I haven't yet wrapped my mind around. Two months ago, I wouldn't have dreamed of gaining this kind of access into Hunter's world. I still don't know him. Not really.

I know he lives and dies by baseball.

He takes economics.

And he hates that I walk alone at night, even if he knows I'm fully capable of handling myself.

There are probably a few other things I'm unable to think of off the top of my head but in comparison to the things I don't know about him, it doesn't compare to what I do know.

“Why do you look like that?”

In the reflection of the mirror, I catch Max standing behind me. He's leaning on one of the black metal racks in the middle of the floor, using an elbow for support. He's wearing a dark blue, short-sleeve, button-down shirt, and his hair is styled neatly to one side.

I scrunch my nose, making sure he can see me in the mirror. “What do you mean?”

“I didn’t mean for that to come across badly.” He grins, resting his head onto his bent arm. “I’m just wondering why all of a sudden you’re wearing this expression I haven’t seen on you since the day you found out our high school got rid of the two-inch above the knee rule on skirts and shorts.”

“Hey,” I quickly say, raising my finger. “That was a big deal. I had a closet full of skirts that were at least three inches above the knee. Everyone knew the two-inch rule was ridiculous.”

“That’s besides the point.” Max waves me off, pushing away from the rack. He stands beside me and crosses his arms. He’s challenging me. “Clearly, I missed something big at the game. Spill.”

Max couldn’t make the game because his sister was scheduled for surgery out in Portland. She’d asked him to dog sit her two puppies. I figured he would ask me how the game went or what happened afterward.

“The Rebels won,” I say dully.

“I know they won.” Max narrows his eyes.

Right. His boyfriend is on the team. Shit.

I look at Max through the reflection of the mirror.

I can’t help it. The corners of my mouth draw into a smile, teasing Max. He immediately catches my shift, reading my expression as if my face has suddenly turned into a flashing neon sign.

Ophelia Reynolds has slept with Hunter Moore!

His mouth jaw drops. “Shit. You gave in with Hunter, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t give in.” I laugh, surprised by his choice of words.

“Yes, you did.” He points to my face, his mouth still wide open from the news of my juicy gossip. “You have that look. The one we get when we’ve just had incredible sex for days.” He pauses. “You’ve been having sex for days, haven’t you?”

“Oh my God.” I roll my eyes and back away from the mirror. I spin around and stand in front of the checkout counter, swiping the list Max had written out for me from beside the computer. I wave it in the air, grabbing my purse off the hook on the wall in the hallway. “You still need me to go to the fabric store, right?”

I weave through the racks, messing with Max who follows me as I make my way to the front of the store. I’m hoping it will slow him down. It doesn’t. He’s hot on my heels.

It’s not that I don’t want to talk to Max about my decision to sleep with Hunter, but I still have so many unanswered questions myself, I wouldn’t know exactly how to answer his.

It’s been almost three months since my life was torn apart, and even now, I’m still picking up the pieces.

I’ve almost made it to the front door when Max pulls me to a stop by gently grabbing my hand.

“Ophelia, wait.”

Dropping my shoulders, I turn around, deflated. The concern on Max’s face only deepens that feeling. The entire atmosphere of the shop has shifted.

“I shouldn’t pressure you to tell me.” He tilts his head to the side, still holding my hand. It’s warm and soothes the uneasiness that has settled in my chest.

I drag my teeth over my bottom lip. “I want to tell you but ...”

He squeezes my hand. “I get it. I just want to make sure you’re being careful ...” He sighs. “What I told you about the way he was before ... well, I just want to make sure you know what you’re getting yourself into. Hunter often has a problem when it comes to thinking of anyone but himself. He’s a shark in a pond full of goldfish. Just be careful.”

My stomach twists with uneasiness. “I know.” I nod, looking down at the paper still pinched between my fingers. “But seriously, I’m good, Max.” I give him an unconvincing smile.

He simply gives me a weak smile in return. “I know you are.”

There’s honesty in his soft eyes.

He points to the paper in my hand. “Don’t forget to grab an extra yard of that green crushed velvet we saw the last time we were there. I want to make a dress out of it next week.”

I’m relieved he’s dropped the subject of Hunter and me.

“I will.” I leave Max in the store and head in the direction of the sidewalk. I tug my phone free from the back pocket of my skinny jeans, opening up the Rideshare app, when a hand wraps around my arm, pulling me to a stop.

“Hey.” Hunter’s deep voice makes my heart nearly jump from my chest.

“Shit, Hunter.” I press my hand to my forehead and grin. “You scared the fuck out of me.”

“Do you need a ride?” he asks, nodding to my phone.

“I do.” I step closer to him. “Why? Are you offering?”

“Depends on where you’re going,” he teases. “I might have time to swing it before practice.”

Realizing what time of day it is, I look at what Hunter’s wearing. He’s sporting the same baseball cap he wore the night of the game. He has it on backward, allowing the sun to reflect in his intoxicating green eyes. He’s wearing his well-worn, dark blue Rebels T-shirt—the one he’s worn almost every time I’ve seen him around the house after practice. His black sweatpants hang low on his hips, narrowing at the ankles, above his dirt covered sneakers.

I arch my eyebrows. “You have time? Are you sure?”

I try to hide the way I’m feeling inside. Doubt and hesitancy migrate from my brain to my bones, Max’s concern for me shifting to the forefront of my mind. I try to suppress the questions, the same questions Max was wanting to ask, and not read too much into it.

“Yeah,” Hunter answers, as if it isn’t completely unreasonable to question him.

I give him the benefit of the doubt. He still has his hand wrapped around my arm. Excitement replaces the doubt and hesitancy. I hold up the piece of paper in my hand. “I have to run to the fabric store for Max.”

“Okay.” Hunter releases my arm and begins backing away from me. He hitches his thumb over his shoulder, pointing to his truck parked farther down the street. “I’ll go with you.”

I follow Hunter to his truck without questioning him any further. He tracked me down here at work, wanting to see me before heading to practice. I know Hunter’s time is valuable. He doesn’t waste it on anyone who he doesn’t deem worthy.

I think.

I hope.

When we make it to his truck, I head for the passenger side and reach to open the door, but Hunter stops me. He spins me around, and a familiar jolt flutters in my stomach.

“Before you get in the truck...” He lifts his hand and wraps it around the side of my face, pulling me toward him.

I stand on my toes, thinking he’s going to kiss me. Instead, he hesitates. His eyes swiftly move between mine, flickering as if he’s trying to send me a message in morse code.

Max’s last warning before I walked out the door is still at the forefront of my mind. I hate that I’m letting it burrow its way in, settling in and making a home. I can’t let it. I won’t let it. Simply for the fact that I think my heart wouldn’t be able to take it. Not that I’m in love with Hunter.

I don’t think.

I haven’t quite figured out where we stand or what this all means. One day Hunter is giving me the silent treatment, barely gathering up the courage to look at me. The next he’s dragging me into dark corners, demanding to know if I’m fucking his roommate. Now he’s offering to go with me to the fabric store.

He still hasn't made the first move on kissing me, and he isn't pulling away. He just stands here with his hand wrapped around my cheek.

It's as if a balloon is inflating inside my stomach. Every second that passes, it grows, pressing against my throat as I'm straining to take in even an ounce of air.

"What is it?" I ask.

He adds pressure to his fingers, gently pressing them into the side of my face. Maybe he's hoping he can get answers to questions I'm unaware of.

"Nothing," he says, resolutely. He gives me a small smile. "Come on."

He reaches behind me and pulls on the door handle. He swings the door open and waits for me to climb in. "Let's go before we run out of time."

When I sit inside Hunter's truck, my mind immediately floods with memories of the last time I was in here. My cheeks inflame, and my thighs involuntarily clench. The sound of Hunter's door closing and the rumble of his engine turning over pulls me out of my thoughts before I get too carried away.

"All right," he says, backing out of the space. "Just tell me where to go."

I point to the left, shoving away the disappointment creeping up on me. "It's a few miles down this road, off the highway."

He nods, and we don't speak again until we're walking down one of the aisles of the fabric store. I don't know why he didn't kiss me there on the street. Normally, I wouldn't question it. Understanding how Hunter operates has been a steep learning curve. He's a myriad of hot and cold flashes. Maybe it's naïve of me to believe sleeping together would suddenly change the way he interacts with me. I try not to read too much into it. After-all, he was the one who sought me out at work and offered to run this errand with me.

It's an odd sight to see Hunter walking in a store surrounded by nothing but fashion and rolls of fabric. He

stands out in his practice gear, the bright red letters of his team logo clashing amongst the endless amount of leather, velvet, and silk. I bite down on my bottom lip to stifle the giggle threatening to erupt from me. Hunter catches it, finally breaking our silence.

“How do you know what you’re looking at?” he asks, glancing around at the ten-foot-high shelves on either side of us. “There are so many to choose from.”

“Each aisle is categorized by type of fabric. It makes it easy to navigate when you know what you’re looking for.” I bend down and type the item number onto a blank message on my phone to show the clerk at the front counter. “I’d go to these types of stores all the time when I was in college.”

“You got your degree in fashion design?” he asks.

I pull myself to a stand and look up from my phone. I hold back every ounce of lingering regret threatening to rise to the surface, reminding me of the consequences I’ve dealt with ever since. Every decision I’ve ever made for myself is suddenly staring me in the face with Hunter’s innocent question.

I play the ‘what if’ game, imagining all the scenarios.

Biting back the disappointment I have in myself, I shake my head, blinking away the oncoming tears. “No. I never finished my senior year.”

I turn away from Hunter and continue walking down the aisle, keeping my attention focused on finding the next fabric on Max’s list.

“What made you leave before graduating?” he asks.

“I intended on finishing. The fashion industry is competitive enough on its own. I knew if I didn’t have the degree to go along with my portfolio, I didn’t have a shot in hell at getting to the places I envisioned for myself.”

“I kind of get that.” Hunter’s mouth twists. “What did you envision?”

“A high-rise apartment in the center of Manhattan.” I grin like a fool. “I never wanted to leave the northeast. I just wanted to get out of Maine. I wanted to design and build my own line of dresses. Only dresses—nothing else.”

“Sounds like a fair vision.”

“It was.” I sigh. “It was before I was offered something better.”

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“During my junior year, my classmates and I went to a bridal expo in Manhattan,” I explain. “I never planned on designing wedding gowns but it’s a great place to get a feel for the latest trends and make connections. I ended up meeting this designer, Travis Sterling. He was one of the biggest names in New York and had an entire office in one of the buildings facing Central Park, dedicated to his fashion line. We talked for several hours before he offered me a paid internship to work at his company. Right there. On the spot. He hired me to draw sketches. I would get his feedback on the first draft, tweak it, then bring it back to him for his final approval. I didn’t exactly love that I was never able to turn paper into reality, and nine times out of ten, I never saw my design materialize. But I knew it was an opportunity I wouldn’t have gotten otherwise. Working for Travis Sterling was the fast track to my dream.”

Hunter looks down, crossing his arms under his chest. “I know what you mean.”

I consider pushing him. I want to know more about him than how he hates my late-night walks and how he feels at home when he’s standing on the pitcher’s mound.

“What do you plan on doing when you finish school?” I smirk, nudging him with my elbow. “Do you always plan on playing for the Rebels?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “The plan has always been to go to Boston. I never intended on living here longer than necessary.”

His admission steals the air from my lungs. Our dreams may reside on opposite sides of the spectrum, but I understand the drive to live somewhere bigger than the constraints of small-town Maine. Boston is different than New York City, but I understand the pull just the same.

“Necessary?” I ask, continuing to walk down the aisle.

“I’m originally from Arizona.”

I stop dead in my tracks. I’m pretty sure my mouth hits the damn floor. “What?” I ask, stunned.

He lets out a humorless laugh, fingering each of the fabric swatches that are level with his waist. We’re standing in the last aisle in the farthest corner.

“Yeah.” He adjusts his cap. Part of me is disappointed. I don’t get to see his piercing green eyes unless he’s standing closer to me. “I grew up there with my dad. When I graduated high school, I moved out here to be closer to Boston.”

“What, so you could be drafted when you were done with college?”

His eyes narrow under the shadows. “Sort of. Well, it wasn’t the whole reason.”

“What was the whole reason, if it wasn’t to go pro?” I pull another swatch of fabric out and rub it in my fingertips. It isn’t on Max’s list, but I add it anyway... for myself.

“My brother Jamie. He lives in Boston.”

“Oh, right.” I nod. “He’s the one you mentioned before. Two years older than you, right?”

“Yeah,” he mumbles. “We used to share the family business. We don’t anymore.”

“May I ask why?” I’m hoping Hunter will let me in a little more.

I lose the air in my lungs, once again. This time it isn’t from an answer Hunter gave me, though. Suddenly, he’s standing directly in front of me. I look up, my heart racing in my chest.

My back is pressed against the giant rolls of fabric, but I don't care.

Hunter presses his hips against mine, sliding his hand to the back of my neck. He tugs on the end of my ponytail, urging me to look up at him. "What's with all the questions, Ophelia?"

His voice is low and full of genuine curiosity. I can tell my questions have pushed him, like I hoped they would.

At first, I'm worried I've pushed him too far, but then his cock presses into the space between my thighs. He twists the end of my ponytail around his long, calloused fingers, tightening his grip on me.

I stare up at him with wide eyes. "I figured it was only fair to ask a few questions."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah." I don't hesitate. "I've let you touch me. I've let you taste me. I think it's only fair I get to learn about the man who has that privilege, don't you think?"

"Tell me something about yourself... other than your love for fashion design."

"What?"

"I told you about my mother and the family business."

"Barely." I raise an eyebrow.

"Just tell me."

I sigh and flash him a glare. "My parents have been hopelessly in love with each other for thirty years."

"And ...?"

"And... I envy them, but not in the choices they made. They weren't always the best. They made mistakes."

"Then, what are you envious of?" he asks, his eyes flaring with intrigue.

"I'm envious that no matter how many times their opinions seemed to differ, they always stuck it out with one another."

They moved as one instead of letting life split them apart.” I shrug a shoulder. “I envy it.”

“Being envious isn’t a good way to live life,” he points out.

I raise my chin and hold his gaze. “Being envious of them has only pushed me to live out my dream. But I’m afraid I’ll never make it happen.”

“You will.” He sounds so confident.

“Every day that passes of me being stuck here makes me think otherwise. I don’t think it will ever happen, Hunter.” It’s the first time I’ve admitted it out loud.

“Why?” he presses. His voice is impossibly deeper, his eyes boring into mine. It feels as if he’s cut me open and exposed me for all the world to see, but that’s impossible. We’re in a tiny shop in the middle of Eden, Maine. The only people in this shop are me, Hunter, and the girl we saw working the counter when we walked in.

I swallow, harshly. Tears sting behind my eyes, but I refuse to shed them. “Because I’m not good enough. I lost my opportunity when I handed everything to Travis Sterling on a silver platter.”

The muscles of Hunter’s jaw tick more than I’ve ever seen before. His eyes churn with heat and anger, fueled by my words. Maybe he understands the self-doubt that automatically comes with failure and the fear of continuing to fail.

“What you’re looking for is down here.”

We turn our heads to the left. The voice is coming from one aisle over. It’s the woman we saw at the counter in the front of the store.

Hunter places his finger over my lips, looking over his shoulder. We both hold our breath, waiting to see if she will see or hear us in our little corner. There are gaps in the shelves between the giant rolls of fabric—like a library but without the books.

Hunter and I wait, his finger still pressed to my mouth, and we peek through the gap.

“Thank you.” The other person beams. “This is perfect.”

We hear footsteps padding across the carpeted floor until two people stop in front of us, on the other side of the shelves.

I widen my eyes, catching a glimpse of a familiar pattern through the tiny gap. I keep staring at the women on the other side, wondering if I’m maybe imagining it.

“Just write down the item number and how many yards you’re wanting. I’ll grab it up front,” the employee says. She takes a step back but stops and turns herself around. “If you don’t mind me asking, where did you get your dress?”

“Oh...” The customer looks down. “I bought this at Max’s Boutique, downtown.”

“Huh,” the employee says. “I don’t think I’ve seen Max design a dress like that.”

“He didn’t.” She shakes her head. “This is a limited line from another designer he’s featuring. Her name is Ophelia something. I can’t remember the last name.”

The tears building behind my eyes give way. One spills over my lashes, landing on my cheek.

“Well, it’s beautiful,” the woman says. “I might have to go down there and see if I can find something like it.”

“Thank you,” the customer answers.

The tear continues to slide down my cheek, and Hunter’s finger doesn’t move from my mouth. We wait for the customer to finish browsing the aisle, waiting to see if she comes over to our corner.

She doesn’t.

A few minutes later, she’s making her way back to the front before she disappears.

I keep my head turned, afraid to look at Hunter. I don’t know what his reaction will be.

I don't know how to describe the way I'm feeling. I don't know anything other than there is shock pumping through my veins.

I blink away the tears and inhale a sharp breath between my—now free—lips.

Hunter leans closer, pressing his chest against mine. His mouth ghosts across the hollow of my ear. “If that isn't a fucking sign, then I don't know what is,” he whispers.

Chills prickle and dance their way across my skin. My eyes are still lined with unshed tears, but a small smile tugs at my mouth.

I roll my head to face him, still pressed against the fabric. “We should probably go. The woman at the front will start wondering where we went.”

Hunter slides his hand between my legs, his fingers quickly finding my wetness. He plunges his fingers into me quickly, hooking them, then sliding them out and between my folds. He strokes my clit. I squirm against the rolls of fabric, a small whine escaping my throat.

He uses his entire body to add pressure to his hand, working me without wasting any time.

“Well,” he whispers.

He pulls his hand away, hastily lowering himself to his knees. He shoves my knees apart and slides the fabric of my dress away. His hands grip my thick thighs, keeping me open for him. Peering up at me, his eyes find mine from under his Rebels hat. “We should make this a quick one, then.”

And then his tongue is on me.

EIGHTEEN



HUNTER

The door to Coach's office has only been shut a handful of times since I joined the Northeast Rebel team years ago. When the door is closed, you know it's for something important.

I'm sitting on the bench stretched out in front of the team's lockers, watching a replay of our game against Twin River last week on one of the team's tablets. It isn't unusual to rewatch the games or my pitches. I review them for any signs of weakness. My position on the mound. My stance when throwing the pitch. The outcome of the pitch. I take in every detail, mentally making a note of what needs tweaking.

There's always room for improvement. It's what my father used to tell me when he'd drop me off at Little League practice.

Remember, Hunt, it's not about how you fail today. It's what you do with those failures tomorrow. That's what matters.

My father wasn't exactly a model citizen, but he could give one hell of a fucking good speech.

The man had his moments.

"Moore."

I snap my head up, hearing Coach shouting my name from across the locker room.

"Yes, Coach?"

His hands are planted on his hips and his face is set into a stern expression. Under other circumstances, it would worry me, but he always looks that way.

I've never seen the man smile. Ever.

"I'd like to see you in my office." He removes one of his hands and hooks his finger, gesturing for me to follow him.

"Sure." I nod, closing out the replay of the game.

I swallow the nerves twisting and aching in my stomach. I'm suddenly replaying the past few months, thinking of all the ways I could have proven my new commitment to this team to Coach. Then I think of all the ways I haven't, praying to fucking hell it isn't the reason why he's pulling me into his office.

An even sharper pain twists in my gut when I sit down in the chair across from Coach's desk and he closes the door behind me, the sound echoing off the painted brick walls.

I'm fucked.

Coach sits on the other side of his desk. He leans back in his chair, lacing his fingers in his lap and lifting his legs onto his desk. He crosses them at the ankle. He's wearing the same team cap I am. His eyes are shadowed under the bill, but I can sense the seriousness of our meeting through his sharp, narrowed eyes.

"We're about to start the season," he states.

I nod, acknowledging the obvious. I don't have a clue where this conversation is going. All I know is that it's serious. The door is fucking closed.

"And you're in your junior year," he adds.

I nod again. "I am."

"What are you majoring in?"

That's a question I wasn't expecting.

"Business."

"Huh." Coach nods, then swings his legs off his desk. He leans forward, resting his elbows on the edge. "Why business?"

The nausea returns to my stomach. First, Ophelia. Now, my coach. I thought when I'd signed the agreement with Jamie months ago that it would magically erase my past. But now, as I'm continually forced to bring it up, I'm realizing what a foolish notion it was to believe it could be that simple.

"I guess you could say it runs in the family. My mother was a business owner. My brother is now a business owner."

I used to be.

My back lands against my seat with a heavy, weighted breath escaping me. My shoulders immediately fall with the weight of my past.

A past I haven't been able to run from.

"Sounds like a family trend." The wheels turn behind Coach's eyes. He's usually a fairly stoic man. It's hard to determine what he's thinking

"It is. Well, for me it *was*. It isn't anymore," I correct myself.

"Huh, you didn't want to follow in the same footsteps?" he asks.

I'm still wondering where this conversation is heading. If he's wanting to let me go from the team, maybe he's searching for a reason. Maybe he's wondering if I at least have a back-up. But it doesn't make sense that he would ask these questions, considering the record I've had for the past six months. If anything, I've only gotten better.

"No." I shake my head. "All I've ever wanted to do is play ball."

"Huh." He nods again, twisting his mouth in thought.

"Going into business with my family is no longer an issue," I quickly explain, hoping his mind isn't going where I think it is. "I was able to back out of some obligations several months ago."

"That must be what it is." Coach rocks back and forth on his heels. "I've noticed a change in you. I've always

considered you dedicated, but you've taken it to another level these past few weeks. I'm proud of you, Moore."

"Thank you, sir." I nod, pride swelling in my chest like a rapidly inflating balloon. It's the exact words I need to hear in this moment.

Every sacrifice I've made makes this moment worth it. Well, almost.

"The reason I pulled you in here is to remind you of where you are." Coach clears his throat. "I needed to see where your head is at in terms of your dedication. You're nearing the start of the spring season of your junior year. Prime time to be drafted or picked by one of the pro teams."

"Okay." I nod, chewing on the inside of my cheek. "What do you need me to do?"

"Oh..." He holds his hands up. "*I* don't need *you* to do anything for me. This is all on you, Moore. If you still want it, keep up what you're doing. Keep your pitches fast and accurate. You've thrown some great fastballs and cutters this season."

"Thank you."

"I just wanted you to know that I noticed your shift in dedication."

"I am dedicated to this team. I live and breathe it." I nod, pressing my lips together. Every sacrifice I've made with Jamie and my family has led to this. Coach has noticed a difference. Hopefully that means Boston will, too. "I've been able to put all my energy into the team now."

"By backing out of your family business?" he asks.

I nod again.

He hardens his stare. "Okay. But I need you to keep the momentum up. Don't slow down."

"I won't." I shake my head.

"Good." He nods once. "Then, you'll know scouts have already started looking out for new players despite the season

having just started. From what I've heard, you've been eyeing the team down in Boston. Is that right?"

"I have, sir." I shift in my seat again, resting an elbow on the arm. "I've been wanting to join their team for as long as I can remember."

It's true. I've dreamed of playing for a Boston team ever since I threw my first baseball in the abandoned field behind my house outside of Phoenix. The weather was normally unbearably hot, but I didn't give a shit. I dreamed of colder winters and the center of the baseball world. My obsession grew the older I got. I'm still obsessed.

"Well," Coach starts. A small smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. "They're a tough team to get into but they have a reputation of coming out here at the end of every season. If my team weren't already holding their breaths, I'd be doing the same. Every year, I hope one of my players gets picked up for a Major League team, and this year might be one of them."

It takes more than ten seconds before I realize what he's hinting at. He's insinuating that the player could be me. That's why he pulled me into his office with the door closed.

"Okay... I adjust myself in my seat, unable to sit still any longer.

Coach shrugs his shoulders. The smile tugging on his mouth has now grown. "I may know a couple of the members on the staff, and I've heard your name has been thrown out a few times."

"You're kidding." I rub my fingers over my mouth in disbelief. "Already?"

I adjust the bill of my cap and hold back the emotion building behind my eyes. This doesn't mean I'm in by any means, but to know Boston is fucking talking about me is enough to make me want to hurl with excitement. I've sacrificed a life of guaranteed success for this. I've put everything I've ever known to be secure on the line for an opportunity like this.

“I’m not kidding,” Coach says, his face hardening with seriousness. “Of course, you’ll need to keep up with your batting and runs. They look for pitchers who stand out—ones who perform well under pressure and take calculated risks.”

The fact Boston is looking for a pitcher makes me fucking excited. It’s perfect fucking timing.

“That can be me.” I’m confident it can be.

Leaning back in his chair, Coach points his finger at me. “That *can* be you? Or that *is* you?”

I lift my hand to my chin and lean back in my chair, mimicking Coach. His words barrel into my chest.

“It is me.”

“No distractions?” Coach asks, lacing his fingers and resting his arms on his desk. “You said you are no longer tied to your family business, but is there anything else that might pop up and pull you away from this?”

My mind immediately darts to Ophelia. I don’t know where we’re heading, and her living situation is only meant to be temporary with us, even though she hasn’t mentioned any plans on leaving anytime soon. As far as I know, she’s still searching for a way out of here.

My heart and mind are being pulled in two different directions. It’s only a matter of which direction I want more.

“No.” I press my lips together and release a hot breath through my nose. I grind my teeth together, the pressure beating against my temples. “No other distractions.”

“It’s settled, then.” He sits up in his chair and gestures toward his closed door. “Get to practicing. You don’t want to fuck this up come June.”

“Yes, Coach.” I nod once and stand. “I won’t let you down.”

“Don’t let yourself down,” he adds before I turn to leave his office.

His response sours my stomach in a way that makes me want to hurl.

No fucking pressure, Hunter.

“Oh, and Moore?” Coach asks, urging me to stop and look over my shoulder. “Don’t shut the door behind you.”

NINETEEN



HUNTER

Ophelia stands in the batter box with her legs spread and her chin raised. She's staring me down with narrowed eyes to where I'm standing on the pitcher's mound.

She's wearing my favorite Boston hat. The red 'B' in the center is worn and faded. It's one of the first caps I ever bought for myself when I moved after high school and started my first semester here at Northeast. I don't think I've ever seen it look better than it does now.

Her brown hair is pulled up into a high ponytail, the end dangling behind her as she swings her head back and forth, adjusting her body to get into the perfect position. Her long dress billows against the breeze. It's one of her signature dresses in a bright shade of yellow, making the pair of worn Converse on her feet stand out.

She looks perfect out on the field.

"I told you, Hunter!" she yells, grinning. "I know how to swing."

I laugh. She looks smaller from where I'm standing. She's nearly a foot shorter than I am, but even I know from experience that she packs a punch despite her small appearance.

Maybe it's the large fence behind her, stretching a dozen feet higher than her, that makes her look so small.

"I believe you!" I yell back. "I just want to see if you can put your money where your mouth is."

She lifts the bat, holding it up and circling it, preparing to swing. I admit, she has good form. “I can definitely put my money where my mouth is.”

The curl to her lips makes my dick practically jump and twitch against my sweatpants. That’s a part of Ophelia I’m learning to love more and more. Her smart-ass fucking mouth.

I relax my arm, giving her an equally devious smirk back. “I wouldn’t mind seeing you try.”

She lowers her bat and shrugs her shoulders. Taking a step out of the batter’s box, she keeps her fingers loosely wrapped around the handle of her bat. “Okay.” She grins.

“Wait.” I groan. If she comes over here, I’m fucking her right here on the dirt.

“What?” she asks, swinging the bat at her side. *Fuck*. I’ve never seen a woman look so goddamn sexy.

“Go back to where you were.”

“Why?” Innocence floods her stare.

“Because if you come over here, Ophelia,” I warn her, “I will have no choice but to fuck you right here on my pitcher’s mound... In this wide-open stadium.”

“Hunter,” she laughs. “You say that like it will stop me.”

We stare at each other for a few seconds before she gives up. She lifts her shoulders and dramatically drops them one more time before she makes her way back to the batter’s box.

I’m watching her walk away, thinking about how far we’ve come in the past several months.

We still haven’t established what we are or who we are to each other, and I wouldn’t even know where to begin, but the more time I spend with Ophelia, the more I realize how alike we are despite our differences. Ophelia has the same amount of drive as I have to leave here, with nearly everything to lose if we don’t make it. We’ve spent nearly all of fall and winter just enjoying our time with each other, skirting around the topic of what we mean to each other. Avoiding it has been

easier than confronting it—a concept that I’m sure will bite us in the ass down the road.

Ophelia’s internship being ripped out from under her tore her apart in more ways than one. Even though she’s been able to bounce back and build a small life here, she didn’t allow it to break her. But I’m no fool. I see the sadness in her eyes every time Boston is brought up. I know it’s her dream, just like it’s mine, too.

I haven’t talked with her too much about my chances of getting drafted by Boston at the end of the season—the season has barely even started— so I don’t know how she’ll react. Part of me believes she will be happy for me, but another part wonders if she’ll resent me for it. Not that I should care... technically.

Ophelia’s dream is different from mine. It shouldn’t matter what I do, but knowing I could be handed mine while she’s still clawing her way back to hers hasn’t settled well with me. My instinct is telling me it would hurt her. Whether it would hurt worse for either her or me, I’m unsure.

I can’t deny this fucking magnetic pull I have with her every time I’m around her. Even when I’m standing here on the mound, staring out at hundreds of fans in the stands, I want her near me. I want her mouth on mine and her legs wrapped around me. I constantly want my cock buried into her so deeply, it’s impossible for her to forget what it feels like when I’m not inside her.

My chest squeezes, watching her set herself up in the batter’s box again.

I’m fucking falling for Ophelia when it’s the last thing I should be doing. I can’t stop. I want to be around her more than I should.

“Okay, Hunter!” she yells. “Give me all you got.”

I laugh. “Maybe we should have started with the machine.”

“You mean that stupid thing that chucks the balls at you?”

I nod. “After I throw this ball to you, I don’t think you’ll say it’s stupid.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I want to experience what it’s like to have a pitch thrown at me by the famous Hunter Moore.”

She readies herself again.

I roll my eyes at her statement, and I hesitate, hoping this doesn’t go badly. I know Ophelia was raised in this environment. She never picked up the sport, but she’d spent years living with Reed, and from the way she’s standing, it’s clear she knows what she’s doing. Mostly.

I rub my thumb over the stitching of the ball, considering my next move. I can either stop it right here or give in to what Ophelia wants. I already know which direction this will go.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” she offers. She lifts the bat in the air and points it in my direction. “If I hit the ball, you have to do something for me, but I’m not telling you what it is until it happens. If I miss, I’ll do whatever you want.”

I consider her proposal. I find her seriousness amusing. I only brought her down here to the practice field because she’d insisted on watching me pitch. I just didn’t realize she wanted me to throw pitches toward her.

“Anything I want?” I ask, arching my brows.

“Yep, anything. Come on. Reed taught me a few swings growing up. I think you’re underestimating me.”

“Oh, Ophelia!” I yell. “I learned the hard way to never underestimate you.”

She grins, lifting the bat into position, once again.

“You have a deal,” I tell her, shifting my hips to the side. I ready my pitch, knowing I won’t hurl it in her direction at full strength. The last thing I need is to clock the ball directly at her chest or head.

“All right.” She shifts her feet in anticipation. “I’m ready.”

Her eyes are narrowed, laser focused on my hands. She’s staring down at me, preparing for my pitch, but she might as well be staring directly into my soul. I’m sharing a part of my life with her I’ve never shared with anyone. I’ve never gotten

this close with anyone I was sleeping with. I've never gotten this close to anyone. Period.

I ignore the pinching sensation growing in my chest the longer I stare at her. I try to put her out of my mind but it's impossible when she's standing in front of me.

I throw my arm back and release the ball with about half as much strength as I normally use. I hold my breath when Ophelia's eyes follow it. The sound of her bat cracking against the leather and lace echoes across the empty field. She hits the ball, and it flies out toward the left side of the field.

She fucking hit it. The ball rolls and bounces off the dirt, sliding into the grass in the far end of the field.

We aren't playing a standard game of baseball or even practicing seriously, but still, she starts to jog toward first base.

Slowly, I step off the pitcher's mound, heading in her direction. I don't even bother chasing the ball first. I chase Ophelia.

She's casually running when she notices me charging after her. I've made it several feet in her direction when we both pick up speed. My sneakers dig into the grass and dirt. It's strange running this fast without my cleats.

Ophelia makes it to second base. She looks over her shoulder, her dress waving behind her.

"Come on, Hunter." She laughs. "I thought you were fast."

"Oh, baby!" I yell. "You don't know how fast I am."

I pick up my speed, gaining on her. I'm only a few feet from her, stopping her from gaining third base.

She's only a few steps away from it when I finally reach her.

"Not so fast, Ophelia." I grab her arm and pull her to a stop.

We're still sprinting at full speed when I dig my heels in the dirt. I slide back onto the ground, pulling Ophelia down with me.

She lets out a loud yelp. Her feet fly out from under her, and I move to wrap my arm around her waist, even in our shuffle, but when I fail to do so, I realize what she's doing. She's still trying to make it to third base.

"It..." I grind out, "doesn't... work that way, Ophelia."

"Yes..." She laughs, twisting her body back around to where she's on her hands and knees. "It does." Her round ass is in my face. My dick twitches and hardens. Digging her fingers into the dirt, she claws her way to third base. I sit up, wrapping my hand around her ankle. She slips, and her body falls against the dirt.

Fighting for third base reminds me of the night we met. Ophelia is strong, and has no issue defending herself. This time is different, though. She isn't defensive. She's giving into me. Giving me slack. She wants me to turn the tables on her. She's getting off on this just as much as I am.

Stretching her body out, she reaches up, barely touching the tips of her fingers to the white plate, grunting and groaning as she moves. She rolls over, and I climb over her body. Both my hands rest on either side of her head, and my knee is bent between her legs. Her dress is covered in dirt and grass stains, her face smudged, but she doesn't care.

Her body quakes with laughter, and her smile spreads from cheek to cheek. It's an expression I haven't seen on her very often.

Her laughter subsides but she holds her grin as she narrows her eyes. "Safe."

I disagree, shaking my head. "It doesn't count. I already grabbed you before you reached the plate."

"I know how the game works, Hunter." Her breathing is ragged. She fists my shirt and lifts one of her legs, sliding it across my obvious erection.

I groan, closing my eyes and gritting my teeth. "Then, you need to play by the rules."

"I didn't realize we were."

I ignore the burning in my chest and attempt to catch my breath that stings as if I've laid over a bed of hot coals.

"Are you still considering fucking me on the field?" she asks, tugging me down to her. My mouth hovers above hers.

"Maybe." I bend down to kiss her.

The moment our lips meet, I inhale a deep breath through my nose. My body is still starving for oxygen. Ophelia both feeds me yet leaves me hungry for more.

I pull away from her and wipe a smear of dirt from under her eye with the pad of my thumb.

"Or we could go home," I suggest.

"Maybe we should. Reed isn't supposed to come home until later, and I'm sort of enjoying having the house to ourselves." She reaches up and traces her nail down the side of my face.

I agree with Ophelia. It's been nice that it's been just the two of us in the house ever since Reed left for Texas. I still don't know the reason for Reed's sudden trip. I assume Ophelia still doesn't, either. She hasn't mentioned it. In fact, she hasn't mentioned Reed at all. Dawson has been MIA this entire week, probably out fucking partying as usual. The only time I've ever seen him is at practice.

"I'm guessing Reed still doesn't know about us," I mutter.

Ophelia's gaze flickers. I can see the surprise in her expression at my use of the word *us*. Fuck, I'm surprised with myself.

"He doesn't," Ophelia says. "I don't exactly know how he would take it."

"We're both adults. His reaction can't be that bad." I can't even convince myself of the words coming out of my mouth.

"When I was in the seventh grade, Reed caught me kissing Tyler, one of his teammates, behind the gym before one of his games."

“So, you’re telling me this isn’t the first time you’ve been with one of your brother’s teammates?” I tease.

“I wasn’t with Tyler the way I am with you.” She giggles. “We just kissed. He might have slipped his hand under my shirt a time or two.”

“Oh.” I nod. “Then, that doesn’t count. But what did Reed say when he saw you?”

She laughs playfully, shrugging her shoulder. “He didn’t exactly say anything. I just know when Tyler rode up to school the next morning, he wasn’t riding his black bicycle anymore.”

“What?” I ask, surprised with this story. I can’t picture Reed being anything but nice. Even if he was protecting his sister. “Did he break his bike or deflate his tires?”

“No.” Ophelia nervously bites down on her lip. “He spray painted it a bright, glittery shade of pink.”

I roll my eyes and chuckle. I can’t help it. Imagining Reed repainting his teammate’s bike out of spite seems out of character for him. Even for a teenage Reed. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I’m not,” she insists. “I’m serious.”

“So, what?” I ask her. “You think he’ll repaint my truck if he finds out about us?”

“He might. He might not. I’m just not sure I’m prepared to take the risk.”

“I might be.” I lean down again, pressing my mouth to hers. This time, I drag my tongue across her pink lips, tasting each one before pulling away.

I don’t want to move from where we are but I know we can’t stay here too long. A few of my teammates will be coming out onto the field any minute now.

I pull myself to a stand and hold my hand out to help Ophelia. She grabs it, and I pull her up until her body is pressed against mine.

“Hey,” she pipes up. “I hit the ball, which means I win.”

“Okay.” I tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear, adjusting the bill of my hat that she’s still wearing. I lift it higher to get a better view of her eyes. “What do you want me to do for you?”

She pushes her hand against my chest and backs away. “Since your team will be out here in a few minutes, I won’t ask you to fuck me on your pitcher’s mound. But I think your truck will do. Or your room. In fact, I think anywhere will do as long as it’s with you.”

I nod, chewing on the inside of my cheek.

I should have known Ophelia was trouble the second I met her. A small sliver of my mind registers that I already knew, but I can’t help this sense of dread—dread of knowing my dream to go to Boston is coming true when Ophelia’s is slipping between her fingers every day she’s still here.

I can’t think about the future now, though. Not when Ophelia is looking at me the way she is with rosy, dirt-smudged cheeks, and her lips swollen and pink from my kisses.

She’s all I can think about right now. I grab her hand, quickly tugging on her arm, dragging her toward the direction of my truck. “I think we can work something out.”

We leave the field, but my hand falls away from her arm the second her phone pings inside the pocket of her dress.

I smirk, watching her slide it out easily.

“What?” she asks with a smile. I want to kiss the smile right off her pretty pink mouth.

I shake my head. “Nothing. I just never knew that’s where you kept your phone.”

She giggles. “I make all my dresses with pockets. Makes it easier to carry your phone without needing a purse.”

“Smart.”

She swipes her thumb across the screen, reading the message she received. I step away from her, leaving her to it

and taking the opportunity to toss my bat and glove into the back seat of my truck.

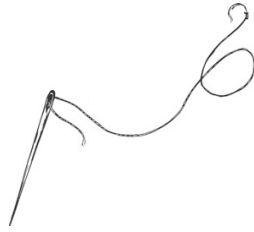
Ophelia is already climbing into the truck by the time I'm done. I join her in the front seat. She's grinning again, the dimple in her cheek deepening.

She climbs over the console and straddles me.

"Is everything okay?" I ask her.

"Oh, yeah," she assures me, bringing her mouth to mine. She grabs my hand and slides it between us. She gasps and presses my fingers to her wetness. "Everything is perfect."

TWENTY



OPHELIA

I'm sitting in front of my sewing machine, fixing a hem to another dress I'm making for Max's shop. Overhearing the woman at the fabric store mention my name has lit a fire under me. It's the fifth dress I've started in the past month. The ten dresses I've already completed are hanging on a rack in the corner of my room. I haven't decided if all these dresses will go to my collection at Max's or not.

I can't help but develop an attachment to the ones I've created. Each one is a piece of me, representing the way my life has been shattered and broken. They're both heartbreaking but beautiful.

Maybe I'm holding on to them in the hopes I can take them back to New York with me.

Thirty minutes.

Only thirty more minutes until I'm supposed to get a call from Tracy.

Finally, after months of absolute silence, she messaged me to tell me she might have an opportunity for me back in New York.

With Hunter's hand wrapped around my arm when we were leaving the practice field, I'd come to a screeching halt when my phone went off in my pocket. Needless to say, the air I'd just had returned to my lungs after my game with Hunter was stolen once more.

Tracy has found me a job.

Well ... possibly.

I swallow down the excitement. My mind is telling me not to get my hopes up—not to put too much stock and hope into whatever Tracy has managed to scrounge up for me. For all I know, it could be a temp job—one lasting shorter than my internship at Travis Sterling.

For the past few hours, I've considered the options. Could it be better than my internship or worse? Would I pass up an opportunity if it was some shit, bottom of the barrel job?

My breath is tugged from my lungs the second a large, rough hand slides down my chest. First, he places his fingers over my heart, feeling it beating against them. He slowly moves it farther down. My eyes flutter as he ghosts his fingers along my flesh.

It's been weeks since Hunter and I have started whatever this is between us, and I still haven't been able to wrap my head around it.

When I first met him, I barely saw him. I knew he spent most of his time in class, practicing, or going to games, but now we've crossed into this unfamiliar territory, he's suddenly been able to make time for me. I consider the possibility that he's stealing his time from somewhere else, but truthfully, it isn't any of my business. I'm focusing on our time together, hoping we'll figure it out soon. Especially with his season starting shortly.

It's hard to think of anything outside of what we are when he's touching me the way he is now.

He's the fastball I didn't see coming.

He's still standing behind me, towering over me. Hunter slides his hand to the straps of my dress, his fingers hooking under them. He moves them off my shoulders, exposing my breasts. I glance over my shoulder, hoping the bedroom door isn't still open.

Reed sent me a text earlier letting me know he'd be home soon. Ever since he took his mysterious trip to Texas, he's

been in constant contact with me. Not exactly every day, but more than usual.

I haven't spent too much time considering the whys of it all. I'm too wrapped up in what I have going on in my own life.

Working at Max's monochromatic boutique.

Searching for a way to get back to New York.

Oh, and sleeping with my roommate. Scratch that. Falling for him.

I swallow down the truth I've been working hard to ignore and focus on Hunter standing behind me. Thankfully, the door is now shut.

"What are you working on now?" Hunter's deep, husky voice pours out from above me.

"Just another dress. Nothing too important." I can't think straight. Not when his hand explores my body.

"Don't say that," he says. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" I ask. I'm already squirming in my chair. It's a position I've learned Hunter gets off on. He indulges in the way my body reacts to his.

"Talk about yourself as if you aren't as talented as everyone knows you are."

My eyes snap open. Him stating the obvious is a slight pinprick to my chest.

"I don't mean to," I tell Hunter. Tracy's call brings life to my lost sense of hope.

"Maybe it's something we can work on." Hunter leans down and presses his mouth to the hollow of my ear. The rumble in his voice sends chills down my spine. I already feel myself growing wet as his voice skims across my skin like velvet.

My eyes flutter, once again, my lungs starving for air. "Don't get me started. I'm expecting a phone call and don't want to miss it."

“A phone call, huh?” He slides his hand back across my chest, moving his fingers to the front of my chest.

“Yeah.” I lick my lips. “The secretary at my old job said she was going to call me. She might have some news about a job opening. I’m not sure, though. It could be anything.”

His hand stills on my chest, feeling my heartbeat, the same as before, only this time it’s with his whole hand. My heart thrashes against my ribs, pounding against flesh and bone to Hunter’s hand. I sit still, waiting to see what he does next.

He moves it across one of my breasts. The tips of his fingers graze across my nipple. He pinches and twists it.

I let out a loud yelp.

“Hunter ...” His name falls from me on a heavy, heated breath. The corner of my mouth curls, nerves and heat bundling in my lower stomach. It takes work to get a single word out. “I know Reed isn’t home yet, but Dawson might be here.”

He keeps his mouth to my ear, speaking into it again. “I don’t give a fuck if Dawson is here.”

I sense the bitterness and venom in his voice even when I’ve reassured him a million times that Dawson and I never fucked.

Hunter pinches my nipple again. This time, I bite down on my bottom lip and jump up in my seat. His hand grips my shoulder, keeping me seated in my chair.

“When did you say she was calling?” he asks.

I lick my lips again, foolishly hoping it will help me regain my train of thought. I fail. Miserably. “In about thirty minutes.”

He clicks his tongue against his teeth, followed by a sharp hiss. “Leaves us plenty of time, then.”

He uses his other hand to reach around me. He slides it across the side of my waist, moving to my center. He drags my dress away from my thighs, exposing me to him. He hisses

against his teeth again. “This is a sight I will never get tired of seeing.”

I’ve barely had time to register what Hunter’s hands are doing before he glides it across the top of me and plunges his fingers inside me.

His other hand is still gripped around my breast. He’s using his arm to keep me pinned to the chair.

“Don’t move,” he commands. His fingers move in and out of me quickly. He doesn’t waste any time.

I tilt my head back and press it against his chest. I moan, not caring if anyone is home. Even if it happens to be Reed.

Hunter’s hands feel too fucking good for me to be quiet.

I open my eyes and find Hunter staring down at me.

I grind my hips against his hand, his palm sliding effortlessly against my clit. We move together despite Hunter holding me down. His eyes shift to a darker shade of green.

“I told you not to move.”

I grind my hips even more, relishing in the sensations Hunter’s hand is providing me.

He sneers, the corner of his mouth twisting with both frustration and delight. “Typical Ophelia. Never listening.”

“I thrive on it,” I admit. My orgasm is already building inside me. It’s quite possibly the fastest orgasm of my life.

I’m staring into Hunter’s eyes. He wants to watch me unravel. My heart stops mid-beat when I realize I want him to watch me, too. I want him to know exactly how easy and fast he makes me come. I want him to see the power he has over me. I want him to see that I’m falling for him.

All it takes is a few more pumps of Hunter’s fingers and another pinch of my nipple before I’m quivering. My legs tense around the legs of the chairs, pinning me even harder against the chair.

He refuses to move his stare or his body until I’m done rolling through my orgasm.

I swallow the lump forming in my throat. His green eyes meeting mine steal my sense of gravity. He slides the hand on my breast up to my throat. My neck is completely exposed to him. His fingers grip my throat but not enough to steal the air I'm barely able to intake as it is.

There's pain and uncertainty behind his eyes despite the pleasure he's so willingly given me.

My mouth spreads into a grin. "Now, how am I supposed to concentrate on my call with Tracy after this?"

Hunter doesn't answer. A small huff of breath comes out of his nose as he slowly cracks a smile in return. "I have to meet the rest of the team back out on the field. Now, when I leave, it will be impossible for you to not think about this."

I fight the frown threatening to steal my shadow of a grin. The balloon in my chest has deflated. I don't know why I'm disappointed that Hunter is going to practice. He always practices.

The more days I spend with him, the harder it's becoming to be apart from him.

I study his face, every inch of it, from the sharp line of his jaw to the steep angle of his nose, and even the dirt and dried sweat dusting his tan skin. After our mini game on the field, Hunter and I fucked one more time in his truck before he had told me he was going to drop me off before going back to practice with the team. Even after we came home, though, he followed me up to my room, telling me he had a few minutes to spare. The thought of him wanting to spend every spare minute with me inflated the hope in my chest more than it should have. I shouldn't be feeling this way. Right?

I shove the worry aside. I need to keep sight of my goal.

"Was that your plan all along?"

His fingers are still wrapped around my throat. The top of my head is pressed against his stomach. He leans down, bringing his face inches from mine. The ends of his dark hair hang above his green eyes, covering them in shadows.

“Consider it my mission, Ophelia. I won’t allow you to forget about me.”

He hasn’t tightened his grip on my neck, but he’s still managed to rob the rest of the oxygen from my lungs with his words. His hold on me spreads to my chest, all the way down to my toes still pointed against the hardwood.

He pulls me impossibly closer, crashing his lips to mine. It’s the first time he’s managed to pull his eyes away from mine only to steal a kiss. He presses his fingertips against the side of my neck, deepening our kiss.

His mouth is warm and soft, quickly consuming me. The urge to force him to stay and not go to practice builds inside me. I start thinking of possible ways to convince him to skip practice, but my thoughts stop when my phone rings on my desk.

The shrill sound and vibration of my cell moving across the hard surface forces Hunter to pull away from me.

Cold air brushes across my still-wet lips. His sudden absence is a shock to my system.

He keeps his hand around my neck, peeks up to where my phone is, and looks down. “You should probably get that.”

My heart beats erratically.

Hunter kisses me on the forehead. The ghost of his lips still lingers on my skin when he leaves my room, and the sound of his steps fade down the hallway.

My phone is still ringing by the time I snatch it up from my desk.

“Tracy?”

“Ophelia,” she cries. “I was worried you weren’t going to answer. I almost hung up.”

“I’m here,” I’m quick to say. I stand from my chair, peeling the back of my legs from the wood.

I stumble over my own steps. My legs are wobbly and weak, the aftereffects of the orgasm Hunter gave me still

evident in my body.

Consider his mission a success.

I eye the open doorway where Hunter left, then sit on the edge of my bed.

“How have you been, Tracy?” I’m truly curious how she’s doing. She was always the first face to greet me when I pushed through the double glass doors in the morning, and the last to say goodbye when I left. It’s been months of silence. Months of patiently waiting to hear a word about any job opportunity. I’ve been here six months longer than I intended to be.

She releases a heavy, audible sigh. “Things are ... okay.”

I scrunch my nose. “Just okay? That bad, huh?”

“Eh,” she wavers. “Personally, I’ve been good. Professionally, not so much. The office and firm just haven’t been the same.”

“How many people were laid off?” It’s a question I’ve wanted to know for the past several months.

“About a hundred.”

“Ouch.” I wince. “Did it save the company, though? As far as budget is concerned?”

“Sort of.” Tracy doesn’t sound certain. “It’s been a struggle for Travis to regain stockholders and his funding, but he’s been able to maintain a few of his investments since the loss of the ones he had before.”

“I guess that’s good.” I nod, pursing my lips and holding back the tears building behind my eyes. It’s tough to hear the company has been saved when I wasn’t a part of it. “It’s taken me a while to wrap my head around it. But it’s getting easier.”

“I guess it’s time I ask how you are?” she asks.

I look around my room, the heat from Hunter’s touch still branded over every inch of my body. “If you’re comparing it to my first day here, it’s a thousand times better. It hasn’t been easy, though.”

“You said you moved to Maine, right?”

“It’s where my brother lives and goes to school. Actually, it’s my hometown. Not exactly a place I ever imagined coming back to after living in New York.” I release a heavy sigh. “I’m hoping something pops up.”

“That’s actually why I wanted to call you today.” My heart leaps at the possibility of what she’s planning to tell me.

“Were you able to find something?” I square my shoulders and fold my legs under me.

“I think so,” she breathes out. “As much as I believe in you and others who have worked with you in your time here, it hasn’t been easy finding someone who would be willing to give you an interview.”

“I know,” I mumble, my choices in career coming back to twist the knife already lodged in my gut. “I dropped out of school before I got my degree, and I don’t have any designs to personally show for what I did at Travis Sterling’s. Technically, everything I’ve ever designed is Travis’s. They were only turned into reality with his name on the tag, not mine.”

“It wasn’t all for nothing,” Tracy disagrees. “Your sketches counted for something. I just needed to find the right person who understood your situation. Have you ever heard of Emma Roe?”

I narrow my eyes and twist my mouth in thought. The name doesn’t ring a bell. “I haven’t.”

“Okay.” She exhales. “Well, I was connected with her through a few colleagues, and I heard she’s looking for an apprentice designer to help her kickstart her new line for the next year.”

“Wow.” I straighten my back even more. I place a hand on my chest, hoping to calm my erratic heart. It’s the first bit of hope I’ve felt in I don’t know how long. “Sounds like a strong lead.”

“It is. In fact, I talked with Emma, and she said she’d love to see your designs but wants to see them in person.” She pauses. “You do have designs, right?”

I immediately look up, eyeing the rack of ten dresses. “I do.”

“Great.” Tracy sighs. “She’s asked you to meet her in a few weeks and to show her some of your pieces. Would you be able to make it?”

“Um...” My mouth falls open. I eye the rack of dresses on the other side of my room. Some I’ve already promised to Max. “That’s soon.”

“Very soon. But isn’t that exciting?” Even though I can’t see Tracy, I can imagine the wide-mouthed, toothy grin she’ll be wearing right now.

“It is.” I can’t help but smile, too.

“So, what do you say?”

I’m in no position to turn down any chance to get out of Eden. As much as I’m enjoying my time with Hunter, I can’t throw away the only shot I’ve been given. I can’t make the same mistake. Living with Reed is only meant to be temporary. Hunter and I can figure out the details later.

“I’ll be there,” I tell Tracy, confidently.

“Yay!” She squeals. “I’ll send you the address and what day it is in an email.”

I want to cry. I press my fingers to my cheek and try to steady my shaking voice. “Thank you, Tracy. Thank you for helping me after all this time.”

“Of course, sweetie.”

After I hang up with Tracy, I wait for her email to come through with nervous anticipation.

I try to research Emma Roe, but my hands are too shaky, and my brain is too scattered to focus.

It’s the first taste of hope I’ve been given, and when I look up at Hunter’s open doorway, the uneasiness settles in my stomach, turning like sour milk.

The hope I’ve been gifted is tarnished, but as much as I know I’ve fallen for Hunter, I can’t let my dream slip through

my fingers.

Not again.

My hands are still shaking when Tracy's email containing Emma's office address comes through, and when I open it and read it, my hands only get worse.

TWENTY-ONE



HUNTER

“All right.” Reed raises his chin and scratches at the stubble lining his jaw. He’s holding two cards in his hand, studying them as if they’re going to change before his very eyes. He frowns and rolls his head to the side, closing his eyes as if he’s in pain. “I fold.”

“Motherfucker!” Dawson yells. He slams his fist down on the table. “I knew it.”

The three of us laugh, Dawson and I more so than Reed. I knew he’d fold. Reed has never been good at holding a poker face... Except for his trip to Texas. That has been a mystery to all of us, and still he’s managed to bluff his way through telling us. Dawson, Ophelia, and I haven’t been able to coax it out of him. Although we haven’t exactly cared enough to keep pressing him on it.

“What about you, Hunt?” Dawson leans back in his chair, narrowing his eyes.

I twist my mouth, looking down at my cards. Two aces.

The five cards lying face up on the table are absolute shit. I can’t use them.

Which is why Reed probably folded.

His hand wasn’t worth a damn compared to the cards on the table.

I swing my gaze back over to Dawson, and sneer. I grab a chip worth twenty and toss it into the pile in the center of the table.

Dawson snorts in disbelief. He shakes his head and matches my bet without hesitation. The three of us have managed to set aside enough time to play a few rounds of poker. A rare night considering the only other times we are together are centered around training, but these nights never last long, either because one of us is too exhausted to continue or two of us have been robbed of all our money.

Dawson arches his eyebrows. He's amused, wanting to see my reaction.

Since the night of the rivalry game when we had our argument in the locker room, Dawson and I have been civil. We've kept our distance, but still, he hasn't mentioned Ophelia to me. Neither have I mentioned it to him.

I still haven't decided how I'm going to tell either of my roommates about us. It's a topic I should probably talk to Ophelia about first. I make a mental note to cross that bridge with her.

Thinking of Ophelia makes me glance at my phone. I haven't talked to her much since I left practice and she started her shift at Max's.

I keep my phone below the table and quickly unlock the screen, reading Ophelia's text.

Ophelia: Should be home in about twenty minutes.

I rush to send her a reply.

Me: Why twenty? Don't tell me you're fucking walking again.

"Dude," Dawson complains. "Are you going to show your cards or what?"

I snap my head up. Dawson and Reed are staring at me, wide-eyed. I glance at the table.

Dawson's already flipped his hand over.

A pair of twos.

I immediately grin. *Fucker.*

I flip over my pair of aces.

Dawson rolls his eyes, and Reed stays in his seat with his arms laced under his chest. He's eyeing me without saying a word.

"Dammit." Dawson shakes his head, frustrated. "I should have known better. You always have a better poker face than Reed."

He gathers the cards while I scoop up my winnings. I quickly begin organizing them. My phone vibrates on top of my leg.

Dawson begins shuffling the deck, and I look down to check my message.

Ophelia: I don't have a car, Hunter. What do you expect me to do?

Me: Ask me to come get you. I hate when you walk home.

Ophelia: Kind of hard for you to do anything when you're playing cards with Dawson and Reed.

Me: I could always punish you later.

"Hunt," Reed grumbles. "What the fuck, man?"

"What?" I ask, sliding my phone into my pocket.

"We've dealt the cards." He points to the two laying in front of me.

"Sorry," I mumble. I pick them up and read them. A three and a seven.

Shit.

I internally sigh, trying not to be obvious as I pick up my phone. Ophelia hasn't texted back.

"Hey, Hunt," Dawson complains again. "Are you playing cards with us or messing around on your phone?"

"I'm playing," I tell him, trading glances between him and Reed.

Skepticism is written on their faces.

“You’re talking to someone,” Reed speculates. He rests his arms on the table and leans forward, disregarding the game we’re playing.

“No one.” I clear my throat.

“Bullshit,” Dawson chimes in. “You’ve been on your phone all night. Is it Penny?”

My stomach turns. I haven’t thought about Penny in a long time. Not since the night I brought her back to the house after the party down the street. The night I first met Ophelia.

I can’t explain the nausea in me. The idea of being with Penny sickens me.

“It’s not Penny,” Reed suggests.

I’m still staring at my cards, and I chance a very quick glance up.

Reed’s expression is serious. Dawson’s is intrigued. My best-friends and roommates have never put much stock into my personal life. Their sudden interest is intriguing to say the least.

“He looked repulsed when you mentioned her name,” Reed tells Dawson.

I look up, brushing him off. “I did not. You’re making that shit up.” I nod my head to the table. “Come on. Let’s keep playing.”

“I’m not lying.” Reed laughs. He reveals his teeth with his wide grin. “You looked fucking grossed out man.” He points to his mouth. “Your lip twitched and curled.”

I shift my eyes to Dawson. He doesn’t say a word... for once.

His mouth is completely shut. Silent.

For the first time, I wish it wasn’t.

“I’m going to grab another drink.” Reed stands from his chair and heads into the kitchen. My phone chimes with

another text, but it isn't Ophelia this time.

Jamie: Keep ignoring me all you want. We need to talk about Mom. We can't continue to put this off. You've already signed away your share of the company, the least you could do is this one thing for her.

I don't give a shit what Jamie says, I ignore him. With my stomach twisted into a knot, I click my phone screen off right when Reed returns with his freshly opened beer.

"Hey," Dawson diverts, straightening his back in his seat. "I heard Coach pulled you into his office the other day. What was that all about?"

Wow. I'm surprised Dawson is shifting the topic. His eyes fall to my phone sitting on top of my leg under the table. My gut tells me he knows something is going on with me and Ophelia. We just haven't put it out into the world yet.

"Oh..." I wave him off. "He said a few staff members from Boston will be coming down at the end of the season. My name has been brought up in conversation. He wanted to make sure I'm not letting up."

"Shit, man." Reed sighs. "Everyone knows Boston will most likely come out at the end of the season, but to have your name mentioned ..." His forehead creases, and he lifts his eyebrows. "That's awesome."

"Thanks." I smile. "I'm sure you'll have a shot as well."

"Possibly." Reed turns over the next three cards. "I would die if Boston picked me to try out."

We're looking over our hands and tossing out our bets when the sound of footsteps coming into the kitchen draws us to look up.

Ophelia drops her purse onto the counter and moves across the room. She plants her hands on her hips. Her eyes catch mine for a brief moment before she looks at Dawson and Reed.

"Well, look who's home." Dawson beams.

“Hey, guys.” Her smile makes my dick twitch. She studies the cards laid out on the table, recognizing the game we’re playing. “Who’s winning?”

My chest pounds and my adrenaline amps up. It’s as if we’d been sitting in complete and utter darkness until she walked in the room. Her presence is fucking blinding. I’m glad she made it home safely.

“Hunter,” Reed mutters.

I smirk, and Ophelia grins. She places her hand on the back of Reed’s chair. Her eyes land on mine, and my chest swells.

Fuck. Why does she have to do this to me here? In front of her brother.

“Nice.” She nods. “I overheard someone mention Boston. What are you guys talking about?”

“Oh,” Reed answers. “We were just talking about how Hunt’s dream might finally be coming true.”

“What?” Ophelia’s head snaps up. She’s staring at me with wide, blue eyes. Enough to make me melt.

I haven’t mentioned my conversation with Coach to her. I swallow the lump in my throat, nervous about her reaction.

Neither of us have established where we are in our relationship. Neither of us have confessed the seriousness of how we feel about one another. For all I know, Ophelia couldn’t care less whether I leave for Boston or not. Her goal was to always head back to New York. It’s a fact we haven’t faced yet, but tonight may finally be the night.

I hold my breath, anticipating her reaction.

“Boston?” she asks, her voice noticeably quieter.

“Yeah.” I try not to sound too eager. “Coach pulled me into the office the other day and said the staff in Boston have brought up my name.” I shake my head. “But it isn’t a sure thing. It isn’t a guarantee.”

I place my cards on the table and chance a look up at Ophelia. The rest of the table is silent. Both Dawson and Reed are watching us.

They must be clearly confused, considering that months ago, Ophelia and I couldn't stand to be around one another.

Ophelia bites down on her bottom lip, her white teeth digging into her full, pink mouth. A flicker of disappointment is evident in her eyes, but it's quickly replaced. I'm reading the thoughts on her face. She's wondering why I haven't told her about my chance to go to Boston. Guilt settles in.

Her bottom lip pops out from under her teeth. She looks around the table, her body visibly shifting in anticipation. She presses her fingers into the back of Reed's chair.

Reed hasn't bothered to turn around and face Ophelia since she joined us. He's staring at me with a blank expression.

"Well, I guess Hunter's not the only one who is one step closer to his dream."

My stomach flips completely upside down.

The three of us square our shoulders and straighten our backs. Reed spins around in his chair, finally looking up at Ophelia.

Her brown hair frames her face, accentuating the toothy grin she's giving us. The dimple molded into her cheek is pressed impossibly deeper. Her cheeks flush a pale red.

"You got a job?" Reed asks. I can hear the excitement in his voice already.

"Not yet," Ophelia blurts out. "I mean, I have an interview with a designer in a couple weeks."

"Who is it?" Dawson asks, as if he'd fucking know.

"Emma Roe," Ophelia answers, anyway. "I haven't met her, and I'm not familiar with her work, but after Tracy explained my history at Travis Sterling, she was interested in meeting with me."

The screeching sound of Reed's chair gliding back across the wooden floor echoes throughout the kitchen. He wraps his arms around Ophelia, pulling her in for a hug. "Congratulations, Ophelia."

She rests her chin on his shoulder. Again, her eyes find mine.

Dawson hasn't said a word, and neither have I.

Despite the uncertainty overwhelming me, I manage to muster a grin for Ophelia.

"I haven't gotten the job yet," she mutters into Reed's shoulder.

"Doesn't matter," Reed says. "Your designs speak for themselves. She'd be crazy to not hire you."

Reed pulls away and sits back down on his seat. Ophelia stays where she's standing.

Her happiness is evident on her face.

"Congrats, Ophelia," Dawson offers. He clearly isn't as ecstatic as Reed was to hear this news, but his words are genuine.

I open my mouth to echo the other guys' sentiments, but Reed stops me before I get the chance.

"Do you want us to deal you in the next hand?"

Ophelia tilts her head to the side and purses her mouth. "Um, no. Between work and the excitement about this interview coming up, I think I'm going to crash."

"You'll be missed," Reed says.

"He's not lying." Dawson laughs. "Deep down, I know he was secretly begging you to say yes."

"Why?" Ophelia giggles. She knits her eyebrows.

"Because he keeps losing," Dawson explains. "He's hoping if you join in, it'll switch up his odds."

Reed waves Dawson off. He retreats and stares at the two cards in his hand.

Ophelia stretches her arms above her head, yawning. “I’m off to bed. I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

Dawson and Reed both mumble their goodnights while I keep my gaze pinned on Ophelia.

I don’t know where we stand. Both of us just revealed major moves coming up in our lives in front of our roommates. I clench my hand under the table, digging my nails into the palm of my hand. It takes every ounce of energy in me not to follow Ophelia upstairs.

“Good night,” she mutters, pinning her gaze on me.

“Good night,” I tell her.

The corners of her mouth turn down. She presses her lips together and slides her phone out of her pocket.

I watch her take the first half of the stairs before she disappears around the corner, taking the rest of the steps up to her room.

“Come on, Hunt.” Reed slaps me on the arm. “Don’t get distracted this round. I’d like to go to bed with enough time to wake up and study before practice.”

“You’re so full of shit, Reed,” Dawson says. “If you were to do that, you’d have to wake up in three hours just to get to the library in a decent amount of time to study.”

I tune my roommates out, expecting a text from Ophelia to come in at any moment. It doesn’t.

I check my phone, just in case I might not have heard it ping or felt it vibrate.

Nothing. I swallow the disappointment. I also don’t reply to Jamie’s text. The asshole can wait a little longer. I have more important issues to deal with than the guilt trip he’s always trying to push on me.

“Whatever, guys.” I shift in my seat and rest my elbows on the edge of the table, holding my cards in front of me. “Are we going to play this game or what?”

TWENTY-TWO



HUNTER

I close my bedroom door behind me and lock it—a habit I've made ever since Ophelia and I have started doing whatever it is we're doing.

After our game of poker, Reed insisted on sleeping on the couch. He gave us some bullshit about how it helped him wake up in order to make it to the library in time. According to him, our couch was less comfortable than his own bed, proving less of a risk of him hitting snooze a million times.

Dawson, on the other hand, went up to his room before I finished cleaning up the mess we'd made. My winning streak ended on a high note, wiping both of my roommates clean of the money they'd thrown in for the entire night. And since I was the winner, I was tasked with cleaning up—a house rule we'd made when we first moved in.

Dawson's snores can be heard from the hallway, so I'm confident he won't hear me when I walk through the bathroom and into Ophelia's room.

I stop when I hear water running from inside the bathroom. I look at the clock on my nightstand.

It's two in the morning.

Ophelia is taking a shower at two in the morning?

I step over the threshold to the bathroom and watch her. She hasn't heard me or noticed me. Her back is facing me.

The glass door to the shower is covered in drops of water and steam. I have the perfect view of her silhouette.

One by one, I start taking off my clothes. I stay quiet so she doesn't hear me. Once I'm fully naked, I swing open the shower door.

"Shit," Ophelia squeaks out.

She spins around, clutching her arms to her chest.

"What are you doing?" she asks. Her breath is heavy. Water splashes onto her shoulder. Her dark brown hair is slicked back, pressed to the top of her head. My cock stands up, hard as stone.

I crack a smile. "I wanted to ask you the same thing." I lift my hand and swipe my thumb across her bottom lip. "Taking a shower this late?"

"I couldn't sleep," she admits. Her eyes soften, and fuck me if it doesn't make my insides shuffle. The combination of the water splashing across her impeccable tan skin and her perfect round blue eyes is enough to make me go weak at the knees.

"Why couldn't you sleep?" I place my hand at her hip and turn her around to face the wall. When I stepped into the shower, she was holding her soapy bath pouf. I steal it from her grasp and begin washing her back.

I start with one shoulder and work my way to the next.

She turns her head. Her eyes peek through her eyelashes as she looks up at me. She lifts her shoulder, pressing it to her chin. "I have a lot on my mind," she confesses. "I was thinking about this interview, then I was thinking about you and what you said downstairs about Boston."

"It might not happen. The season has just started." I press my mouth into a thin line. My father always raised me to never expect your dreams to be handed to you. "Expectations set you up for disappointment. I don't have any expectations."

"No, but you can still have hope."

"I can." I nod, still rubbing her sponge across the middle of her back. "But hope isn't going to change the minds of the Boston scouts."

“I guess you’re right, but you think they’ve already made their mind up.”

“No, not at all.” I sigh, dragging my fingers down her side. “But the scouts are going to do what they want to do regardless of what I think and hope. It’s a matter of how I perform.”

“That’s a pretty negative line of thinking.” She frowns, batting her eyes up at me. She closes them and turns back to face the wall.

I drag my finger along her hip, pressing it into her slick, wet flesh. My nail scratches along her skin.

I watch Ophelia’s neck dip as she swallows. Her chest heaves, expanding and contracting deeper with every breath.

I drop her pouf at our feet. Her back is still covered in soap, and I press my entire body to her spine, and my hard as stone cock presses into the small of her back. I lean forward and smell her freshly washed hair.

“Why didn’t you tell me Boston has been eyeing you?” she asks.

I close my eyes and I breathe her in. Steaming hot air fills my nose along with Ophelia’s scent. Roses? She smells like a fucking garden. I fight back a groan, relishing in the warmth she brings to my chest.

“Tell me why you didn’t tell me about the interview when you found out about it.” I pry my eyes open. She’s spun around, her back now pressed against the wall. Drops of water slide down her cheeks and the tips of her eyelashes.

“Same reason you kept Boston from me, I suspect.” She doesn’t smile. The corners of her mouth turn down into a ghostly frown. Her bottom lip pops out as she stares up at me with wide eyes.

The vulnerability in this moment is enough to make me want to jump out of my skin. I already know I’ve shown Ophelia pieces of me I haven’t shown anyone else, ever, but something about the way she’s asking me why I didn’t tell her about Boston tugs on my chest. I’m sad that she’s sad.

She's hurt I didn't tell her. No one has ever cared whether I kept them in the dark. No one has ever cared if I shared my life with them or not. Ophelia cares.

"It's easy to let go of the expectations," I tell her. I press my hand to the space in between her breasts. "It's hard as fuck to give up hope. For most, it's all we have."

Her gaze softens. A drop of water falls from her bottom lash onto the top of her cheek. I don't know if it's from the shower or if it's from her. The sadness buried inside her is deep and heavy. I have the strongest feeling it's bigger than I ever expected. Her heart is a tangled web of betrayal and regret.

Ophelia and I couldn't be more opposite. Our interests are completely different, yet when I look into her eyes, it feels as if I'm looking in a mirror. Her pain is the same as mine, cut from different cloth, but cloth, just the fucking same.

"Why do I get the feeling you're going to break me?" Her words linger in the steamy air between us. They slam against my chest, sucking the oxygen out of my lungs.

"I won't break you." I exhale. "I don't think you understand the power you have over me, Ophelia. If I have the power to break you, it means you could break me, too."

Her lips part, and she breathes in and out. I count the amount of times her chest inflates and deflates. Seconds pass before she moves.

She wraps her hand around mine and removes it from her chest, placing it in front of her mouth. Her lips press against my calloused and scar-riddled fingers. They're wounds and imperfections she's never mentioned or pointed out.

Her full, pink lips wrap around the tip of my finger. She pulls it into her mouth and laps her tongue, keeping her eyes on mine the whole time.

The water is relentless against her delicate skin. Small pellets beat and bounce off her flesh. Water drips from her black lashes, coating her face. My cock pulses and twitches. It

always comes to life whenever I catch her looking at me this way, as if she's been begging for me for far too long.

I hold my breath when her mouth creates a perfect 'O' around my finger before she pops it out.

"Come here," I order, sliding my hand to her cheek. My fingers dive into her wet strands. I pull her to me and crash my mouth against hers. She tastes sweet and full, her lips fitting against mine perfectly.

I start to slide my other hand along the front of her stomach, creating a path between her legs. I'm almost to her clit when she stops me.

She pulls back her hips at the same time she ends our kiss.

"What's wrong?" My eyebrows shoot up.

"Nothing." She shakes her head. A devious smirk curls along her swollen mouth. "But I do believe it's my turn."

She lowers herself in front of me until she's down on her knees. She presses each of her hands onto my thighs and looks up at me with those same wide eyes as before. This time, the sadness has faded. This time, they're only for me.

And fuck, if this was the last sight I ever saw, I'd fucking die right here.

Her hands are like hot irons to my legs. She pierces my skin with her nails and pulls me closer. The tip of my cock is in front of her mouth. I lean forward and press my hands to the warm, wet tile. I look down at Ophelia. She doesn't hesitate before she brings my cock into her mouth.

She isn't subtle, and she isn't slow. She takes all of me in one go. Within seconds, the tip of my dick slams against the back of her throat. I tilt my head back, the threatening sensation of an orgasm hitting me.

If this is the way she's going to play it, I won't fucking last long.

I close my eyes and tilt my head back, relishing in the way her mouth feels wrapped around my dick.

I'm gasping for air when she pulls her mouth away just as fast as she'd put it there.

I snap my eyes open and look down. "What—" I swallow on a breath. "What are you doing?"

"No, Hunter. I want to do this right. If we're going to do this, I want you looking at me. Only me."

Her eyes tell me she isn't just talking about her sucking on my cock. She's talking about us.

I twist my mouth, delighted with her orders. "I agree."

"Good. Like I said, don't take your eyes off me."

"I won't." I reach down and drag the tip of my finger across the side of her face.

Her fingers dig into my flesh again. I hiss. The pain of her nails cutting my skin sends a shiver down my spine. My legs quake under her touch. She opens her mouth and wraps her lips around the tip of my swollen cock.

I bite down on the tip of my tongue when she puckers her cheeks. Her mouth makes a popping sound, and she pulls away before she's quick to bring me back. She slides me into her mouth, all the way to the back of her throat again. She's only just started, but I already feel myself on the verge of coming.

Heat brews inside my lower back and my stomach. My dick grows impossibly harder. Ophelia is working me with her mouth, puckering her cheeks, lapping her tongue, and swirling it around the tip—the tip of my cock hitting the back of her throat like a wall.

She gags the deeper she pulls me in.

She pulls back and grabs onto the base. "Keep going, Hunter. I want to taste you."

"Fuck, Ophelia. Your mouth ..." I hiss again and grab the top of her head to fuck her mouth. She allows me to take control. My fingers wrap around her hair and press against her head. She falls back and steadies herself against the wall behind her.

I jerk my hips back and forth until I orgasm. My cock pulsates and hums along with her tongue. I come in Ophelia's mouth. She keeps her eyes on mine as I spill into the back of her throat. It's warm and all consuming.

I groan and press my hand to the wall again. I don't bother catching my breath.

Once I've finished, I pull myself out of Ophelia's mouth and help her stand. She swipes her thumb across her bottom lip and cracks a smile.

"You're fucking beautiful." I grab the back of her thigh and lift her up. "And mine."

"Yours?" Her eyebrows rise.

"Yeah," I breathe. "Mine. I want to bury myself in you and never let you leave."

"I won't leave." Her eyes hood over, and she wraps her legs around my waist. The corner of her mouth curls into a smile, her eyes sparkling under the pelting water. It isn't as hot as it was before, but she doesn't care.

I kiss her once, then pull my hips back and slip into her.

Effortlessly.

TWENTY-THREE



OPHELIA

I asked Hunter if he wanted to take this trip to Boston with me but said he couldn't. The Rebels had a baseball game scheduled the same night, and if he weren't there, they would have lost out on their opportunity to make it to the National Championship. Every game counted.

I understood. Considering every move Hunter makes from here on out matters more than it ever has in his baseball career. Boston was keeping an eye on him. He couldn't waver now. Not even for me.

But even with his reasons to stay behind, I can't help but feel the absence of him the second I step into Claire's new apartment. I wanted to stay in his bed and hide from the rest of the world. Sometimes our lives are heavy and all consuming. They're savage. Between Hunter's grueling training and my relentless search for a job, it's nice knowing we have each other. We've created a bubble around us. We're an escape from the unknown of our pressure-driven lives.

"Don't mind all the boxes." Claire waves a hand around her new apartment. "I'm still getting settled in."

"It's okay." I find myself grinning. This place is absolutely stunning. I've been to Boston a million times, but I've never stepped foot in an apartment like this one.

"I moved in four weeks ago, Ophelia." She spins around. "I mean, technically it isn't okay. I should have had it done by now."

“You’re only one person, Claire. Give yourself some grace.”

“Right.” She snorts. “I’m one person who has too many things.”

She bends down to dig through one of the boxes at the far end of the living room. I take the opportunity to look around her new place.

Claire decided to take the plunge and move to Boston a month ago. She finished her last semester in New York and immediately grabbed a graduate spot at one of the University’s around here.

Each wall of her apartment is painted a pure shade of white. Crown molding is wedged into every corner. When I cross into the kitchen from the living room, I find myself staring at a perfect view of the sidewalk. The street is quiet. Surprising, since we’re on the outskirts of downtown Boston. I guess that’s one difference between New York and here.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Claire asks, her voice growing louder behind me. “The University leases it out to any student in their graduate program they deem worthy.” Her grin spreads from ear to ear when she points to her chest. “That would be me.”

I giggle. “It’s gorgeous, Claire.”

“It is.” She plants her hands on her hips and stares out the bay window in the kitchen. “You don’t get views like this in New York.”

“At least not with this great of a deal,” I add.

“Nope.” Claire sighs. There’s a sparkle in her eyes I didn’t realize was missing when she was in New York. This is a happier version of Claire.

“I wish you could stay. I’d love for you to explore the city with me—show me around a bit,” she says.

“I know.” I frown. “I’m sorry but I promised Max I’d meet him at the Rebels game. I’m hoping to catch the end of it.”

“I get it.” She twists to face me, her hands still on her hips. “What time is your interview again?”

“Two.” I ignore the way my stomach somersaults. I’m only staying in Boston long enough to take my interview with Emma and grab an early dinner with Claire before heading back to Maine, but I’ve packed an entire week’s worth of clothes. Last night, I was a complete wreck. Doubt and indecision riddled my brain. I’m afraid I’m not good enough. I’m afraid Emma won’t like my designs.

Aside from the address Tracy sent me, I don’t know much about Emma. After a little research, I found her social media page. Her designs were like mine, but only in that we both design dresses. Emma’s designs are more streamline and edgy. Mine are more casual with floral print.

“Maybe we can grab something to eat before you head in?” Claire suggests. Bending down to open the boxes she shoved in the corner of her living room, she grabs a handful of books from one of them and places them on an empty shelf bolted to the brick wall. Claire has always been obsessed with romance novels. She’s a hopeless romantic. It’s part of the reason I love her.

“I’m not sure I can eat.” I wrap my arms around my middle.

Claire shrugs a shoulder. “Maybe afterward? Make it a celebratory dinner?”

I curl my bottom lip and bite down. “Assuming I get the job, but either way, I had planned on spending a little time with you before heading back.”

“Man...” She laughs. “Does Hunter know you’re being this pessimistic? It doesn’t sound like you, Ophelia.”

I’d finally caved and told Claire about Hunter and me after she’d come home from her trip to visit me. Aside from inflating her ego and proving her intuition right, she was happy for us. Skeptical, but happy.

“I’m not being pessimistic,” I mutter. “I’m being realistic. There’s a difference.”

“Sure.” She nods, adding the last handful of books of her collection on the shelf. “I can’t blame you. I guess I would be,

too.”

“Thanks.” I give her a flat smile.

My phone chimes from the table.

Hunter: Just finished morning practice and wanted to wish you good luck. How are you feeling?

I send him a quick reply.

Me: Nervous. I'm having a hard time focusing. Besides, my interview isn't for a few hours. But thank you anyway for the good luck sentiment. I'm going to need it.

Hunter: Don't be nervous. You've got this in the bag. I'm about to head into the shower before my afternoon statistics class and then I'm going straight back to the field to get ready for the game. I wanted to be sure I texted you before you went into your interview.

Me: Aw xx Thank you. Good luck at your game tonight! You're going to kill it. As always.

I let my fingers hover above the screen. My stomach flutters like a cage filled with butterflies.

Me: I have a question.

Hunter: Ask away ...

Me: Since I'm gone, and I'm assuming you're missing me ... are you going to think of me while you shower?

I giggle to myself. Hunter makes me absolutely ridiculous.

Hunter: Listen, Ophelia ... I'm about to step into the showers in the locker room with nearly half of my teammates, and you're on my mind. My cock is already practically straight up.

Hunter: I'm fucked.

Me: Good. I just wanted to check.

Hunter: Check all you want. But you'd better be prepared for what I have planned for you when you get home.

“That good, huh?”

A sharp, high-pitched yelp escapes my throat. I jump back and look up to see Claire standing in front of me. All of her books are now stacked neatly onto her shelves like something straight out of a bookstore.

“What the hell, Claire?” I press my hand to my chest, forcing my nerves to calm down.

“Sorry.” She laughs, throwing her head back. “But I like seeing you this way.”

“What way?” I blow out an exhausted breath. The blood returns to my neck and face.

Her grin reveals her perfectly white teeth. “Satisfied.”

My face heats.

My best friend has an uncanny ability to observe me in a way I can't.

Hunter has satisfied a portion of my life, that much is true, but there's a deeper part of me: the part that controls my passion and the love I have for fashion and design. It's a part of my life Hunter can't and will never satisfy through no fault of his own.

And now, going into this interview for Emma, I feel pulled in two different directions. There's a number of possible outcomes.

What if I get the job with Emma here in Boston but the scouts decide to pass on Hunter this year? What if he lands his position playing for Boston but Emma rejects me?

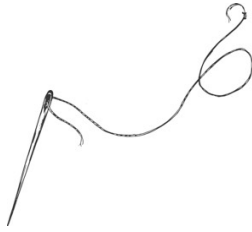
Then, there's a third possible outcome.

What if we both make it to Boston? Will there still be an us? If that's what we are.

“I am satisfied,” I say to Claire, grabbing a fistful of dresses from my suitcase. I need to take a shower and pick out an outfit before I head to Emma's office. “I'm halfway there. I just need to figure out the rest.”

“By the way...” Claire motions to my suitcase. “Do you mind if I borrow one of your dresses? I’d love to wear it on my next date.”

TWENTY-FOUR



OPHELIA

Emma Roe's office isn't an office at all. It's a studio located on the top floor of one of the oldest brick buildings in the city.

It's nearly night and day from Travis's office in New York City.

The exposed brick wraps around the outside and inside of Emma's boutique. When I step out of the elevator and into her store, I'm stunned.

Loud rhythmic club music pounds through the large open space. The bass vibrates up through my feet with every step I take. The floor and ceiling are a blinding shade of white. The space is polished to perfection, not a single speck of dirt or dust in sight.

I feel like I'm back in some downtown club in New York.

I nearly make it to the far end of the studio when I finally spot her on the open patio. Large tables have every type of black fabric sprawled haphazardly across the gleaming tops. There are scissors, tapes, pin cushions... every supply needed to make a garment looks as if it's been thrown, then abandoned.

I pass the remaining tables and come to a large opening leading to the patio. Open, metal garage doors line the farthest wall of the studio, allowing the fresh spring air to blow in. Every few steps, I glance from one side to the other, nervous that Emma will suddenly pop out of nowhere.

My feet meet gravel, and the air slams against my skin.

I peek around the corner to see Emma standing there taking a long drag of a cigarette. A puff of white smoke shoots out between her red painted lips. She tilts her head back and raises her face to the sun.

“Emma?” I tentatively step forward.

Her black-lined eyes swing to the left, spotting me. “Are you Ophelia?”

Her voice sounds small compared to the still pulsating music coming from inside.

“I am,” I respond.

“Great.” She waves me over to where she’s standing. “I knew you’d be here any minute. Figured I’d take a quick break.”

“That’s okay.” I give her studio another once over. “Your studio is great.”

“Thanks.” She pulls another drag of her cigarette. “Rent is expensive as shit but it’s a great location. You get what you pay for.”

“True.”

Emma inhales one last drag, then drops the last bit of her cigarette on the gravel. She stubs it out with her toe.

“Come on.” She motions for me to follow her. “We’ll talk inside.”

The nerves I felt the entire ride over here are attacking me again, full force. The back of my neck tingles, and my throat swells. I’m not sure I’m going to make it through this interview. Emma shoves a pile of fabric to the other side of the table, and she slides onto a stool, patting the one beside her.

I’ve never met a designer like her. I can tell she has a very different way of working than most I’ve met. Including myself.

She swipes her finger across the screen of her phone and taps on it a few times until the music completely stops.

“There.” She sighs. “Now we’ll be able to hear each other.”

She cracks a smile.

My ears take several seconds to adjust to the piercing silence.

“Thank you for meeting with me.” I place my portfolio on the table between us.

“Before we get into that,” Emma says, drawing my attention back to her. “Tracy tells me you used to work together... at Travis Sterling?”

“We did.” I nod.

“Travis is a big name in the fashion world, and you seem young. What type of work did you do there?”

I swallow that big fucking ball of nerves. I straighten my back, remembering what’s at stake. “I was hired in my junior year of college and worked as an intern to draw designs for Travis.”

“No way.” Emma beams. “That’s incredible. It takes years before anyone is even considered good enough to work for Travis. Even interns.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “I only left after I was laid off, otherwise I would have stayed.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did. Travis’s name on your resume is a gold stamp of approval. It’s part of the reason I wanted to interview you today.”

“Really?” I perk up. “Thank you.”

“Of course. I don’t know if Tracy told you but I’m looking for another designer who can help me with the finer details of my pieces. I have several collections planned, and it would be nice to have an extra pair of hands. But I’m not looking for just another skilled designer—I’m looking for someone who shares the same vision as me.” She presses the tips of her fingers on the top of my portfolio. “Now, do you mind if I take a look?”

I shake my head. “Of course not.”

Emma’s grin fades the second she unzips the leather case and flips over my first sketch.

A familiar feeling vibrates across my body. It’s like I’ve smelled my mother’s perfume, and every memory from my childhood has come back to me. But this feeling isn’t as warm—this one is cold and aching. This one is a tight bundle of nerves, stretching and pressing against my insides. I feel like I’m suddenly back in college, standing in front of the entire class displaying my latest design.

My work is being judged. I’m being judged, and in the harshest way.

I study Emma’s expression, hoping to pick up a sign of what she might be thinking.

She flips to another sketch.

I study her again. She nods once, then turns to the next one. We sit in silence. I wait, she flips.

My hands are laced in my lap but I keep wringing my fingers together. My knuckles ache against the pressure. My thoughts wander to Hunter. I wonder what he would say to me in this moment.

I tried to follow his advice. Expectations only lead to disappointment. I should have left my expectations in the elevator. Instead, I dragged them in here with me, kicking and screaming.

Intuition tells me Emma and I don’t share the same vision.

“Do you only draw designs, or have you turned any of them into reality?” she asks.

“Since leaving Travis’s, I’ve created a few of my designs.” I show her the bag I have draped over my arm. “I brought a few of them to show you, if you’d like to see.”

“Sure.”

I hang the bag on the hook attached to the table and tug down on the zipper. I hold my breath and remove the three

dresses I'd picked out of the six I'd brought with me from home.

I hold the light blue dress out for Emma to see.

"This is the most recent one I've designed," I explain. "All of my dresses come with built in pockets, and nearly all of them have a thigh-high slit."

"All of them?" Her eyebrow rises. She studies my dress with narrowed, pensive eyes, and terse, pursed lips.

"Most of them." I hang the dress on the hook on the other side of the one I'm using before I pull out my next dress. "But not all."

Emma remains silent. I internally cringe. I'm wishing she'd left the club music on. It is somehow infinitely better than this ear-splitting silence Emma is causing. The seconds tick by slowly, one melding into the next. My body runs on autopilot, and my heart echoes in the chamber of my chest.

I'm panicking. I shove the panic aside and describe the next dress from the top to the bottom.

Does Emma hate my designs? Is this how she runs all her interviews with a sharp, pointed eyebrow and permanent scowl?

The scrutiny is glaringly obvious. Leaning forward on her stool, she rests her chin in her hand and eyes me. She presses the tip of her finger against her mouth and continues to silently judge my dresses. I can already tell she isn't a fan.

"Um." I clear my throat, placing the second dress on the same hook as the first. I gesture to the bag. "Do you want me to bring out the third?"

"Oh." She scoffs and waves her hand. "Yeah, go ahead."

"O-okay," I stutter. My gut is already telling me what is happening. My dream is slipping between my fingers.

I force a smile and turn around, pulling out the last one. I saved my favorite for last. It's the purple dress I was wearing the night Hunter walked me home after he found me walking

alone after a shift at Max's. It was the first decent conversation we'd ever had.

"This one is an older design from the other two, but I believe it speaks the most to my personality and my vision. I wanted you to get a sense of what I like to create and for you to see who I am through this dress. The neckline is cut slightly lower than the others." I slide the fabric through my fingers and hold it out for her to see. I spin it around to show her the back. "But the back is the main focal point."

"I do like the color. Beautiful shade."

"Thank you." My chest cracks with the small bit of warmth she's extending to me. I swallow my nerves.

My first compliment.

She is giving me a compliment. Right?

I manage to crack another smile despite the doubt settling in my bones. "Would you like me to put it on? I can show you how it looks on someone with my body type."

I've always been a bit curvier around the hips, and I'm shorter than most women. I'm hoping they're traits Emma could appreciate.

"No." She frowns. "It's okay. I think I've been able to get a feel for your aesthetic."

"Great." I inhale a sharp breath and carefully tuck each dress back into the bag.

Emma slides off her stool and crosses the room. I'm closing the bag when I glance over my shoulder. She returns with a leather dress draped over her arm.

"Here's a dress I'm just now finishing up for my next collection." She holds it up and runs the back of her arm across the back, lifting up the bottom of the dress. It's all black leather and metal accents. A long cord of leather is braided and sewn into the neckline and sleeves.

"The detail is incredible," I whisper. I feel the need to keep my voice down with all the silence.

“Thank you.” She lays her dress on top of the table and plants her hand on there, too. She leans into it and stares up at me. “Listen, Ophelia. I appreciate you coming down here to talk with me and show me your pieces. They’re beautiful.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.”

“Of course.” She gives me a tight smile and nods once. She looks down at her dress and picks up a pair of scissors. “I have a showing coming up at one of the boutique stores downtown later this week, and I have a few dresses to finish up here. I’ll get back to you when I get a chance.”

“Oh.” I’m confused. I get the dreadful feeling Emma hates my work. The expression on her face speaks volumes. She’s giving me the brush off, hoping I won’t pick up on her not-so-subtle hints.

I fight back the emotion rising inside me. I inhale a deep breath and grab my bag from the hook. I drape it over my arm and start to step away from the table, but then I stop myself.

I’ve spent the past several months waiting for another chance to find a job even close to what I had with Travis Sterling. Emma was my shot. This is my Boston. I can’t leave here without an answer from Emma. I won’t let her drag this out. I’d rather know now than waste an entire week waiting to know whether she wants to hire me or not.

I turn around. “You’re not going to hire me, are you?”

Emma slowly looks up from her work. She places a firm hand on her hip and leans back against the table. She purses her red lips and narrows her gaze. “No, I don’t think so.”

I nod, chewing on the inside of my cheek.

Ouch. Rejection fucking stings when you’re staring it directly in the face, but I guess I invited it in when I asked her an equally direct question.

I clear my throat. Tears build behind my eyes, lining my bottom lashes. I inhale another deep breath and keep my focus on Emma. All of my time and effort is wasted. I won’t leave here without an explanation.

“May I ask why?”

“When my friend told me a friend of hers knew someone who’d worked at Travis Sterling, my ears perked up.” She sighs. “Tracy told me all about you and your background. How you dropped out of your third year of college to work for Travis.” She pauses, giving me a weak smile. A glimpse of admiration. It only lasts three seconds. “I mean, that took fucking guts, Ophelia. In an industry like this one ... well, it’s risky, and I respect that.” She shakes her head in disbelief. “That’s the biggest reason I wanted to interview you.”

“But?” I raise my eyebrows.

“But...” She glances to the side and drops the scissors on the table. She stands from the stool and leans against the table again, this time with her arms crossed beneath her chest. “But the one detail Tracy left out is what type of designer you are.”

“I thought that’s why I came to interview with you. To show you my designs.” I’m still confused. I won’t deny that Emma’s rejection is stirring up the cobwebs of self-doubt. As a creator, it’s easy to get in your own headspace. As the old saying goes, we’re always our own worst critics. I haven’t felt this way since college.

It’s as if all the work I’ve accomplished and the praise I’ve gotten in the past year and a half means nothing. Emma’s rejection speaks louder than all of it. My ego and confidence take a major hit to the gut.

“It is why I asked you here.” She points out. “I saw your work and, well ...” She clicks her tongue and winces.

Another punch to the gut.

I curl my fingers into a fist under my garment bag. Emma can’t see the frustration I’m attempting to hide.

“Well, what?”

“I don’t want this to come across harsh.” She sighs. “But we’re two completely different artists. I hope you understand.”

“I do.” It’s true. I get it. Emma and I have completely different visions, but I assumed it didn’t count as much as my

technical ability.

“Don’t get me wrong,” she continues. “You have great sewing skills. I can tell by your stitchwork. Your fabric choices are of quality, and your hemlines are impeccable. Your designs are pretty, but I’m not looking for pretty. We’re two completely different designers with two completely different visions. You just aren’t the right fit for my studio.”

She delivers her rejection casually as if she’s ordering her morning coffee.

I swing my eyes to the leather dress she has laid out on the table. Despite the anger simmering under my skin and the tears pricking the back of my eyes, I get what Emma is saying. I understand her. But I won’t lie... it fucking sucks to have your dream ripped out from under you. Again.

“I get it.” I inhale a shaky breath. “I see what you’re saying. But do you think maybe you could hire me on a trial basis? I will create whatever designs you sketch. We may not have the same vision with our own designs, but I don’t need to design my own work. I can create yours. In a way, that’s what I did for Travis.”

Her eyebrows dip into pity. She pities me. She’s looking at me as if I’m the stray puppy she found on the side of the road, begging for a home.

It makes me feel pathetic on the inside. I’m begging at this point. It’s a ridiculous notion, and completely unprofessional, but I’m desperate.

“I’m sorry.” Her frown deepens. “I don’t want someone to work for me who’s willing to sacrifice themselves for me. I don’t think you want that, either.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. I’m drowning; that’s how this feels. I’ve paddled too far out into the ocean, and I have no idea how to swim back. The tide has taken me over. It’s made me theirs.

“But, hey, if you’re ever in the city, be sure to stop by. I’d love to meet up with you,” Emma offers.

I swallow my ego, pride, and hope. “Thanks. I would like that.” I give her the weakest fucking smile I’ve ever given anyone. It literally feels as if I’ve had the rug pulled out from under my feet and I’ve crashed down on my back, left staring up at absolutely nothing. The wind has been knocked from my chest and there’s nothing left. I have no direction. No plan.

And it all started with Andrew Turner and his grubby, money-hungry appetite.

I leave Emma’s studio and walk the several blocks back to Claire’s apartment in disbelief. I’d walked into my interview with hope. Hope I’d get my dream returned to me. Maybe a different version of the dream I’d once had, but my dream all the same. I should’ve remembered what Hunter told me about holding onto hope. It was never going to change Emma’s mind, and it was never going to change the outcome of my interview.

I’m leaving Boston feeling the way I should have when I arrived.

Hopeless.

TWENTY-FIVE



HUNTER

“Damn, Moore. That was a fucking good game.” Will, one of our outfielders, walks past me in the dugout and claps me on the back.

“It was.” I laugh. “Your save in the last inning was perfect. Changed the whole game, man.”

I grab my glove from the bench and follow him out of the dugout.

“I guess.” He shrugs a shoulder. “But we all know that out you caught in the eighth inning made it possible.”

“I don’t know about that.” I shake my head. In the eighth inning, I was preparing to throw a pitch, trying to strike out the batter for the third time. Streaks of dirt already coated my once clean uniform. A large scrape spanned my entire left side. Sweat dripped from every pore down the side of my face. I was bending over, staring up at the next batter with a heated stare, reading Reed’s signals from where he was squatting when, from the corner of my eye, I spotted the runner on first base attempting to steal second. Without hesitation, I quickly threw a fastball to Trevor, our first baseman, in time for him to stop the runner. The fucker was out. He’d cost his team the entire game because of it.

“No, really,” Will adds. “You killed it again, Hunt. It’s going to suck when you leave.”

“*If* I leave.”

“You will.” He raises his chin in confidence, then turns to leave me on the field. “Don’t worry. You will.”

I shake my head and gather up the rest of my gear before heading out. I look up into the stands, hoping to see Ophelia.

I haven't talked to her since before she left for her interview with Emma. I'm already hoping it went well for her, but the more I think about it, the more I'm hoping she gets it. The job would be in Boston, exactly where I've been dreaming of going.

For the past few months, I've been hesitant to push the boundaries with Ophelia. At the start of the season, I'd already told myself I wasn't going to get involved with anyone on a deep level—if at all—but no one has tested me more than Ophelia. I knew I was doomed the second I met her.

With her long, brown hair draped around her face, and her piercing blue eyes shooting daggers at me as she straddled me in the middle of the street the night she moved in, I was fucking done.

I'm in love with Ophelia.

Panic and fear have lived in me ever since I realized the truth. I couldn't sacrifice the game. I couldn't sacrifice baseball. I've spent my life fighting for it, and when the opportunity to prove myself was in my full control, I got thrown a curveball.

A curveball disguised as a curvy, gorgeous brunette in brightly colored dresses.

Now, with her interviewing for a job in Boston, I have a little hope. Hope for us to consider continuing our relationship if both of us end up in Boston. It isn't a guarantee, but I wasn't lying when I told Ophelia I don't have expectations. It only sets me up for disappointment, and I can't bear the thought of the other option in front of us.

The one where I lose Ophelia.

She's the only person I ever give a fuck about being around.

The way her lips perfectly fit mine, the way she allows me to grab her and bend her to my will. She lets me take charge without ever making me feel like I'm taking it a step too far.

She gets off on my bullshit, and the same goes for me with her. I'm fucking obsessed with the way she pushes my buttons.

It's a twisted game we play, but it's a game we love.

I'm searching the stands for Ophelia, unable to find her. She said she would be back home in time to catch the end of my game. Maybe she got held up in Boston. Maybe she decided to stay with Claire longer than planned. I wouldn't put it past her.

Disappointment settles in the pit of my stomach. I'm anxious to get back to my phone, hoping to find a text from her.

I'm walking along the front of the field, in the direction of the locker rooms. Fans continue to flow out from the stands, but one catches my attention. Max is sitting in the front row, his feet propped up on the wall in front of him.

"Hey, Max," I greet him. I walk a little closer and look up at him.

"Oh, hey, Hunter." He seems shocked that I'm speaking to him. His eyes move around as if he can't bring himself to look at me. His eyebrows arch, hiding beneath his blond hair. He finally brings himself to look at me. "Congrats on winning the game."

"Thanks." I sigh. I don't know how much Max knows about Ophelia and me. I assume he knows a little considering the closeness they share—best friends in high school, and now co-workers.

"You haven't seen or heard from Ophelia, have you?"

"No." He shakes his head. "I sent her a text a while ago but haven't heard from her. She was supposed to meet me here, though. I'm guessing she got held up hanging out with Claire."

"I considered that. Figured I'd ask." I look up into the stands once more, hoping to catch her walking down the steps in one of her colorful dresses.

"She deserves the best."

I turn back to Max. He's pulled his legs back and he's leaning forward. His elbows rest on his knees.

"What?" I ask.

"Ophelia has been through some shit." He narrows his eyes at me, making a point. "If she had a choice, she wouldn't ever have come back to this town for the rest of her life. She deserves the best for the shit she's been put through."

"I know." I swallow. Max is talking about Ophelia as if I haven't seen her pain or understand it.

"I'm sorry." He isn't truly sorry. I can see the lack of sympathy in his eyes. "I just wanted to make sure you knew."

"I do. Have a good night, Max."

"You, too." He gives me a weak smile, playing friendly with me for the sake of his best friend.

I push aside my conversation with Max. It doesn't matter what he says or what he thinks. My feelings for Ophelia are unlike any others I've felt for anyone else. I just want to get back to my phone.

With my glove clutched in one hand, I make it to the locker room. Almost all my teammates are done showering and have changed into fresh clothes. I'm still covered in dirt and sweat. I stand in front of my locker and reach for my phone, but I'm stopped when Coach calls my name.

"Moore! Meet me in my office."

A few of the guys standing around glance in my direction. They each shrug, letting me know they have no idea what I'm being called in for.

I get the sickening feeling he's calling me in there to tell me the exact opposite of the news he pulled me in to tell me the first time.

Standing in front of Coach's partially open door, I shove it open, but Coach isn't the only one inside.

"Close the door, Hunter," he orders.

I let it shut behind me, eyeing the two men sitting in the chairs opposite to Coach's desk. They stand when they see me. One is a bit older than the other. His hair is graying on the sides, and wrinkles crease the top of his forehead. The other is a little younger. Once he starts to chew on the piece of gum in his mouth, I recognize the two men immediately.

"Hunter," Coach says. "This is Derek and Bill. Derek is the manager for the team down in Boston. Bill is one of their scouts."

"I know who both of you are." The breath has completely left my chest. "It's great to meet you." I squeeze out my greeting, my throat tightening, shocked to see the two men I admire most in this world. They're sitting here in my coach's office, asking to speak with *me*.

The two men reach out to greet me.

"Nice to meet you, Hunter."

I shake Derek's hand. "I'm sorry. I haven't had a chance to shower yet. It was a rough game."

"We saw," Bill chimes in. "How's the leg?"

He nods toward my left leg. I look down, twisting it to the side. I'd nearly forgotten the slide I'd pulled in the early part of the fourth inning. A large streak of dirt spans my entire leg and torso.

"It's fine. Pain wore off by the eighth."

"You played some great moves tonight." Bill draws my attention back up to him. "Especially that move you pulled when you caught the runner trying to steal second base."

The reality of this moment hits me. "I didn't realize you were watching the game tonight." The Boston execs weren't waiting until the end of the season. They've been watching me this entire time. They were watching me tonight.

"We've been eyeing you for some time, Hunter," Bill admits. "Well before the season began."

Heat expands down my neck to my chest. I've never felt more nervous than I do now. I've prepared myself for years for

this, but this is different. Now that I'm here, I'm not sure I want to be. The pressure expands and pulls the air from the room like a vacuum.

“Coach Robbins tells us you've been a fan of the Boston Revolutionaries for quite some time.” Derek grins.

“I have. It's the only team I've ever imagined playing for. Even back when I lived in Arizona, I never pictured myself with another team.”

“Hmm,” Bill hums. He scratches at his chin. “Could you tell us a bit about who you've played for and what positions you've played over the years? We've seen your batting average, and you do quite well.”

“Of course.” I rub my hands together, thinking back to when I first started playing. “I've played ball since I was six years old. My parents divorced when I was four, and once my dad moved us out to Arizona, he started out with me playing T-ball.” I have no idea if this is the information they're asking for, but I give it to them anyway. My mouth starts to run away with me, but they don't stop me. I talk them all the way through my stats, the championship games I won in high school, and how I got my start here at Northeast.

“Well...” Bill breathes in and claps his hands together in front of him. “Sounds like you've had quite a journey.”

“I have.” I grin. The sweat from the game earlier has now dried on my skin. I'm a sticky mess, and the longer I stand here stuffed into Coach's office with the door shut, the more I'm aware of how unexpected this meeting is.

“I do have to ask...” Derek shoves his hands in his pockets. “Looking back on your previous year here, compared to now, I've seen a large jump in your stats and your performance. What made you change?”

I swallow my nerves. I never did message Jamie back when he texted me about our mother. It's been easier to ignore him the longer it's been since I signed my stake in the company away. “I was able to get rid of some other obligations and focus solely on school and the game.”

“Excellent,” Derek exclaims. He scratches at his chin in thought. A slow grin appears on his face. Wrinkles press into his aged skin. Three lines crease the corners of his eyes as he grabs an envelope from the edge of Coach’s desk. “In this envelope is a contract to play for the Boston Revolutionaries. You don’t have to look at it tonight.” He shifts his gaze to my dirty uniform. “We realize you still need to change.”

“Wh—” The words get lodged in my throat. I grab the envelope from Derek’s grip with a shaky hand. My name is written on the front of it. *Hunter Moore*. The Boston Revolutionaries logo is printed in the top left corner. “Will you, um, need me to come down and try out?”

“Nope.” Derek shakes his head. “All we need is for you to look this over and give us a call. You can even come down to the stadium when you’re able.”

“But not for a try out,” Bill adds. “This is a straight offer for you to read over.”

“Um...” I breathe. Or rather, I force myself to breathe. My vision blurs in the corners of my eyes. “Thank you. I will.” I snap my head up to the two men standing in front of me, then I look at Coach. Pride is evident on his face.

“If you do decide to go ahead and sign, you’ll just finish out your season here, which I understand is another week,” Derek adds. “Then you’ll start your spring training with us.”

“Oh, shit,” I blurt out. My cheeks heat with embarrassment. “Sorry.” I laugh, shaking my head. “I’m just excited. I wasn’t expecting it to happen so soon.”

“We’re excited to have you.” Bill grins. “That’s if you agree, of course.”

“Well...” Coach exhales. “You should probably go and get cleaned up. We don’t want to keep you here all night.”

“Right,” Derek agrees. “We need to head back home tonight, anyway. My daughter has a show in the morning, and she’ll kill me if I miss it.”

I grin. I’m standing face to face with a man I’ve admired for years, and he’s just handed me a contract.

An offer!

My feet feel like they are stuck to the carpet in Coach's office, but I force them to move. I don't breathe again until after I've shook all three of the men's hands, said my goodbyes, and stepped out of the office.

With my vision still out of focus, I cross the locker room on autopilot, the envelope firmly in my grip.

"Oh, fuck," I finally breathe out.

When I reach my locker, I lean forward and plant my hands against it. I inhale a steady breath through my nose, then I move fast. I don't go to the shower. I don't change my clothes. I grab my glove and stuff it into my duffel bag. I'm messy and disorganized, but I don't give a fuck. I need to get out of here. I need to find Ophelia. Other than what happened back in Coach's office mere seconds ago, she's all I can think about.

It's an amazing feeling to know everything I've bled and sacrificed for has come to a head. This is it. This is what I've always wanted. This is the dream I bargained for when I willingly gave up the dream I was forcibly given by my mother before I was even out of grade school.

My hands are impossibly shaky. Somehow, I manage to gather all my belongings into my bag. I don't wait for Dawson, and I don't look out for Reed. I sling my bag over my shoulder and swipe my phone from my locker. Before I forget it, I fist the envelope and grip it as if my life depends on it. In one hand, I carry the contract. In the other, I hold onto my phone.

I click the side button to turn on the screen. There's no message from Ophelia. There's no missed call.

The only message I have is from Jamie, but I don't give a shit about him right now. I only care about reaching Ophelia.

I race across the locker room and shove the door open. The loud metal echoes as I push through it. The warm spring air slams against my face. The dried sweat coating my skin gets sticky, once again, from the humidity lingering in the air.

My thumb hasn't stopped shaking. I unlock my phone and dial Ophelia's number. If she isn't home and she isn't back in Maine yet, I'm hoping she's safe with Claire. It doesn't hit me until now that it's odd Max hasn't heard from her, either.

I'm jogging, weaving through the remaining cars in the parking lot. My cleats beat against the pavement. The clicking sound vibrates against my ears. I find Ophelia's name in my phone and call her.

I lift the phone to my ear on the first ring, but I hang up almost immediately.

My feet slow when I see her standing against my truck.

A large black suitcase is parked alongside her; the one she took this morning when she left. Her arms are crossed over her chest and her head is down. She's looking at her feet as she drags her toe across the hard surface. Her long, purple dress flows around her. The humid breeze brushes against her body, exposing her bare thigh. Ophelia and those thigh-high slits in her dresses get me every time.

Her long, brown hair shields her face. I can't make out her expression beneath the streetlamp I parked under. She looks up when she hears my cleats tapping against the pavement.

"Hey," I huff. "I was just trying to call you. I thought you might still be in Boston."

I still can't see her face, even when she reaches up and tucks her hair behind her ear. I keep talking, unable to contain the excitement. It builds inside of me like a lit fuse. Once it reaches the end, it explodes. "You won't believe what just happened back there." I hold up the envelope. "The Boston Revolutionaries scouts just made me an offer. They want me on their team, Ophelia. They want me. I did it."

I'm struggling to catch my breath, even as I close the gap between us, but when I'm finally close enough to Ophelia to touch her, I realize something isn't right. She's off. Dried tears streak down her smooth, full cheeks. Fresh tears line her lashes, quickly spilling over, covering the old. She's been

crying for a while. Her black eyeliner is smudged around her eyes.

My chest tightens at seeing her this way.

Her bottom lip quivers. I lower my hand and slide my phone into my pocket. I lift my hand to cup her tear-stained cheeks.

“What’s wrong?” I bend at the knee, my gaze meeting hers. “What happened?”

Panic sets in, and I think of all the terrible things that could have happened between the last text she sent me and now.

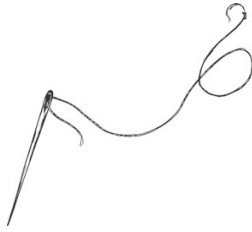
She lifts her wide, sad eyes to mine. “I didn’t get it.” Her voice squeaks at a near whisper.

“What?” I swallow.

“I didn’t get it, Hunter. I didn’t get the job.”

Just like that, all the air is sucked out of me, and I’m left still struggling for breath.

TWENTY-SIX



OPHELIA

I seem to have a knack for losing. When I get knocked down, I plant one hand on the ground and attempt to pull myself up only to get knocked down again.

Losing the job with Emma Roe stung. Hunter running up to me to tell me he was finally offered a spot with the Revolutionaries, only hours after losing out on my job with Emma, stings a thousand times more.

“I don’t understand,” Hunter says. “How could she not hire you?”

I close my eyes and swallow. My throat burns. I haven’t spoken much since I left Boston, and my voice is weak. After leaving Emma’s studio, I rushed back to Claire’s apartment. She’d left the key for me under her mat in case I came back from my interview before she was finished at the grocery store. I did. I’d quickly left her a note, then called for a rideshare. I didn’t care that I was an hour away from home. I just needed to get back as quickly as possible.

“She said... She said we didn’t have the same vision.”

“She doesn’t know what the fuck she’s talking about.”

I open my eyes and stare up at Hunter. His expression is soft and concerned. Completely different from when he emerged from the shadows in the parking lot. Guilt for feeling like shit when we should be celebrating Hunter’s offer seeps its way into my bones, but I still can’t bring myself to be happy for him. Not yet.

“She’s right, Hunter,” I mutter. “She has a point. I don’t know why I ever thought she would consider working with me. She only wanted to interview me because I’d worked for Travis Sterling.”

“Stop,” he begs. “Don’t give her credit where it isn’t due. Don’t doubt yourself now.” He hooks two fingers under my chin.

“What else am I supposed to do?” A tear spills over. I didn’t think I’d had any left in me.

Hunter doesn’t have an answer. His green eyes stare into mine as he searches for the right words. He doesn’t have them, though. My heart swells like a balloon about to burst. I’m absolutely in love with Hunter, but without my job in Boston, and him getting an offer from the Revolutionaries, our future is unknown.

In a way, it’s always been unknown.

My eyes fall to the envelope still clutched in his hand. “I’m happy for you.” I inhale a shaky breath and look back up. The corners of my mouth manage to curl into a smile, but it fades before Hunter has noticed it. “I really am.”

“Thanks.” He sighs, pressing his lips together. I can see the anger and frustration building in his stare. He’s angry he got his shot and I didn’t. He’s going to Boston and I’m not—at least not under the circumstances he was hoping we would. If there is another way, I’m unable to see it.

“All I can say is that you were right.” I shrug in defeat. “Hope wasn’t going to change the outcome of today. It didn’t sway Emma’s decision to hire me.”

“Ophelia ...” He sighs again. “I shouldn’t have said that. I was wrong.”

I raise my hands, wanting him to stop. I don’t think my heart can take any more for tonight.

“You said what you said because you meant it,” I tell him.

He doesn’t argue.

“Can we go home?” I ask. “Please?”

“Yeah.” He nods and opens my door. It’s the first time I notice him still wearing his uniform. His entire left side is scraped with dirt and grass stains. Dirt and sweat cover his bare forearms and his face, too. He didn’t waste any time showering before attempting to find me to tell me about the contract.

I climb up into Hunter’s truck. My body hurts. Everything hurts. I lace my fingers in my lap and sit in silence. Hunter tosses his duffel bag and my suitcase into the back seat, then joins me up front. He slides behind the steering wheel and drops the contract envelope on the dash. With an unsteady finger, he holds it in front of the start button. He hesitates, sighs, and looks down in his lap. His dark eyebrows dip under the bill of his hat. It’s rare for him to ever take it off when he’s in his uniform, but he does for me. He sets it in the empty space between us.

“Ophelia, I really am sorry.”

“Stop. I don’t want to talk about it. I’d rather talk about you.” My chest tightens at the thought of me taking away his excitement about the offer. All he’d wanted to do was tell me he had been offered a spot on the Boston team, and I’ve completely glossed over it with my disappointment. “I’m serious, Hunter. This is incredible.”

“Thank you.” His shoulders fall with a sigh. He leans forward and grabs onto the side of my face. His dirt-covered palm meets my dried, tear-stained, sticky cheek. He presses his lips to mine, breathing every ounce of energy he has into me. My heart jumps... as it always does around him.

When he pulls away, he finally starts up the truck.

“What did they offer you?” I ask, eyeing the envelope when he pulls out of the parking lot.

“Honestly...” He sighs. “I haven’t looked yet.”

“Oh.” He truly was in a hurry to find me. The thought brings warmth to my chest.

We drive the rest of the way home in silence. I think about all the work Hunter has sacrificed to get this offer from

Boston. All the years of training. The risk he took when he backed out of his family business, leaving his brother to run it without him. He still hasn't explained the details of what kind of business he inherited from his family, or what he had to do to back out. He keeps that part of his life locked and buried away. He doesn't dare touch it, and neither do I. We've spent the past several months living in our own bubble, but now reality is staring us right in the face in the form of a crumpled envelope on the dash of Hunter's truck.

Hunter turns his truck onto the main road once we hit town. The golden lights above us shine across the vehicle, covering his face in light. He clicks the signal on for us to turn into the neighborhood, but I place my hand on his thigh once we're on the street.

"Wait." I point to the corner. "Stop there. Don't turn onto our street just yet."

He does as I ask, slowing his truck in front of the intersection leading to our street. The neighborhood is dark and quiet. The entire town is still out celebrating the Rebels win. I didn't watch the end of the game, but I could hear the cheering from the stands from where I was standing out by Hunter's truck. I couldn't bring myself to show up at the game and face Max or face Hunter playing out on the field when I couldn't hold back a single tear.

"What are we doing?" Hunter asks. His voice is soft. I slide over the gap between us.

Hunter allows me to take the lead the second my hands are on the belt of his uniform.

"I need you." All the loss and pain of today hits me like a punch to the chest. My stomachache hasn't subsided. I feel like I'm kicking and screaming, attempting to stay afloat in a vast, never-ending ocean. There's no shore in sight. No clear direction for me to swim.

I need Hunter to help me forget.

"I need you inside me, and I'm not waiting any longer."

I don't care that he's still covered in dirt and sweat. I unbuckle his belt and unbutton his pants. His erection immediately stands up. I shove my dress up around my waist and straddle Hunter.

I reach down, guiding his cock inside me. He tilts his head back and groans as I slide down. I'm soaking wet for him already.

When he's fully inside me, I stay still. I press my chest to his face. He wraps his arms around my waist, keeping his hands pressed to the small of my back. I was right. I need this.

I need Hunter.

My entire body swells. It's as if each touch and each thrust heals an injured part of my soul. I don't care if it's temporary. It's healing all the anger and resentment inside.

My fractured heart is slowly stitched back together. I rock my hips, savoring every inch of Hunter's cock inside me. He kisses my neck, and his fingers slide along my back.

I think about Emma and her pretend sympathy. Hunter bites down on my lip.

I think about getting evicted from my apartment. Hunter kisses me.

I think about Travis pulling me into his office and telling me I was being laid off. Hunter massages his tongue against mine.

I think about Andrew fucking Turner, and how he single handedly destroyed my life. Hunter presses his fingers into my hip.

I lift myself and slide back down, reaching my orgasm faster than ever before. I tilt my head back and squeeze my eyes. I bite down on my lip, attempting to stifle my cries.

Hunter wraps a hand around my throat, pulling me down to look at him. He stays inside me. I slowly continue to rock my hips. He's staring into my eyes as he tenses beneath me. Our tangled breaths are heavy and weighted as they mix together.

Hunter's cock pulses inside me as he spills into me with his orgasm.

A deep groan grates against his throat. I don't look away from his eyes.

The pain from Emma's rejection and the loss of hope I feel today hasn't completely disappeared, but I know this is the closest I'll be able to come to it.

"Ophelia..." He grabs onto the side of my face, digging his fingers into my hair. "I need you to know something."

Tears spill down my cheeks. I didn't realize I was still crying. Emma's rejection has been a devastating blow—one I'm going to have a difficult time getting over.

"It's okay." I close my eyes. "You don't have to say anything."

"No," Hunter insists. "I do."

I open my eyes. His eyes flash in the darkness, but he hasn't looked away from me. "I love you, Ophelia."

"You love me?" I raise my eyebrows. I never thought I'd hear Hunter utter those words ever, let alone to me.

"Yes," he whispers. "I fucking love you."

I swallow my nerves. There's truth in what Hunter is saying. I feel it in my core. "I love you, too," I whisper back. The words hang in the air, much like my life at the moment.

He grips the side of my head and pulls me down to him, crashing my lips to his. His tongue slides into my mouth, taking possession of me.

We kiss for a long time, and I stay on top of Hunter until my legs go numb. When he finally brings himself to let me go, I climb off him and return to my seat.

Hunter fixes his pants and belt before he starts his truck back up. He turns to look at me with a smirk. He rests his hand on my thigh and turns onto our street.

My heart is still racing in my chest when Hunter leans forward, narrowing his eyes. I follow what's caught his

attention. There's a silver sports car parked in our driveway. It isn't Reed's, and it isn't Dawson's.

Hunter falls back against his seat with a thud. He purses his lips, and his nostrils flare as he blows out a hot breath. "What the fuck?" He groans.

"What?" I ask.

He ignores my question and pulls into the driveway, behind the silver car. It has a Massachusetts license plate. He rests his elbow on the inside of the door, staring at our house with daggers.

"Who is it?" I ask, hoping for answers.

He keeps his eyes on our house. He runs the back of his thumb over his mouth. Finally, he sighs and reaches for his door handle before he starts to climb out. "It's my brother Jamie."

The loud sound of metal on metal from Hunter's door slamming shut echoes in the now-empty cab. I jump out of Hunter's truck and jog to catch up with him.

I wipe my fingers under my eyes, attempting to clean them up. Just when I thought this day couldn't get any crazier.

Hunter waits for me on the front porch but doesn't stop for a breath before he's already pushing the door open.

We step into the living room and find Jamie sitting on the couch. He seems to have already made himself comfortable. He's sipping on a bottle of beer—one I recognize from our fridge.

"Jamie?" Hunter growls. "How the fuck did you get in here?"

"Your roommate let me in." He casually grins. "He told me you were finishing up your game, so I figured I'd wait here until you got back."

I only take two steps into the living room before my exhausted eyes finally let me truly see the person staring back at me. The longer I look at him, the more I see the resemblance between Hunter and him.

Long, pointed nose.

Bright green eyes.

Sharp jawline.

The similarities stop there.

“Jamie?” I say, making it sound like a question. I look at Hunter, confused. Why is he calling the man on the couch Jamie? My stomach plummets. Or maybe it’s my heart. Whatever it is that I’ve lost leaves me feeling utterly sick and empty.

Hunter seems confused as well. He glances in my direction before swinging his attention back to his brother.

I do the same. It makes me want to vomit.

“You’re Hunter’s brother?” I ask the man sitting on the couch. He’s wearing a fucking smug ass grin and is dressed in a sharp black suit with not a speck of dust or hair on it. He straightens his tie as he stands.

“I am.” He raises an eyebrow and cocks his head to the side. His disgusting mouth curls into a grin. “And you are?”

He doesn’t know me. Of course, he wouldn’t fucking know me.

“This is Ophelia. My girlfriend.” Hunter gestures toward me. His lip quickly curls in, and his jaw clicks with anger. “Why the fuck are you here, Jamie?” His yell booms across the living room.

“I tried to text you, asshole.” Jamie seethes, and his face reddens. “It’s the two-year anniversary of Mom’s death. We need to drive out to her grave.”

“Fuck,” Hunter mutters. He presses the tips of his fingers to his forehead, cursing himself for forgetting.

I feel sick. I struggle to catch my breath. It feels like I’m breathing through a straw—one that has one of those stupid tears in the side.

“No.” I shake my head and back away. Instinct takes over my body. I need to get the fuck away from the man in front of

me.

“Ophelia.” Hunter reaches for my hand. “Where are you going?”

My back hits the front door. With wide eyes, I look up at Hunter. “Your brother is Andrew Turner?”

I hold my breath. Maybe I’m not seeing straight. Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe in my soul-crushed, emotion-filled day, I’m confused.

But the expression on Hunter’s face tells me I’m not. “How do you know his real name?” he asks.

“Wait,” Andrew jumps in. “How do you know who I am?”

I bring myself to look in his direction. Nope. My eyes aren’t deceiving me. It’s the man I’ve seen countless images of. The man I saw staring back at me on my computer screen when I found out he was the reason almost half the staff were getting laid off. The fucking asshole.

“Jamie is Andrew’s middle name,” Hunter explains. “It’s what I’ve called him his whole life.”

“But, Turner?” I ask him. “Your last name is Moore.”

“Same mom,” Andrew explains. “Different dads.”

“Jamie and I barely lived together when we were kids,” Hunter explains. “I grew up in Arizona with my dad. Our mother raised Jamie on her own after my parents split.”

I blink several times, processing what Hunter is telling me. All of it makes sense, despite how hard it is for me to wrap my head around everything.

I’m piecing together the small bits of information Hunter has given me since we met. He was only willing to share a tiny portion of his life, barely expanding on his life before he’d given up his ties to the business.

The truth I’m now hearing stings. It pricks and pries its way under my skin. It shoots straight up my arm and blooms across my chest, digging into my heart.

Andrew is Jamie. Hunter’s brother.

When I haven't spoken up, Hunter turns back to Andrew. "How do you know Ophelia?"

Andrew takes a step closer to me. He slides his hands into his pockets. His perfectly kempt black hair is slicked back, exposing his perfectly smooth forehead. *Asshole.*

"I'm serious, Hunter." Andrew points to me and flashes Hunter a smug grin. "I don't know this woman."

"Of course, you wouldn't." My throat burns with anger. I choke out the words I've been bottling up inside ever since I lost everything back in New York. "I used to work for Travis Sterling, and you ruined my life."

TWENTY-SEVEN



HUNTER

I've never experienced pain like the stabbing in my chest right now. Not even when I witnessed my teammates getting drafted to the Major Leagues straight out of high school. Not even when I heard of my mother's death. Those moments were painful. They were life changing. It may sound cruel, but in a world where no one considered me a priority, I was forced to choose myself repeatedly.

The side effect of constant rejection and a neglectful mother.

Now, when I finally have everything I've ever wanted, I'm losing the one person who has the ability to crush me with a single glance. Looking at Ophelia may as well be equivalent to getting my heart carved out my chest and served on a platter.

"What do you mean?" I finally ask Ophelia with a measured tone.

The pain and betrayal in her expression is evident. Her unshed tears have now spilled over, coating her cheeks, once again. She hasn't stopped crying all night. Maybe all day. I don't even know how long.

I take a step closer to her, but she holds out her hand, stopping me as if I might wound her by simply touching her.

The sight of Jamie has triggered something in Ophelia. I don't understand the connection between them both, but I plan on getting to the bottom of it.

"What does Jamie have to do with your job at Travis Sterling?"

“Travis Sterling was one of our accounts,” Jamie says as his hardened eyes stay focused on Ophelia.

I trade glances between the two of them. Ophelia stands still with her back pressed against the door.

“Was?” I ask him. “Or still is?”

“It was.” He shifts his eyes to mine. “Until you signed the contract removing yourself from the company.”

I shake my head. “No. No, I think you’re confused. I never signed away the investment for Travis Sterling.”

“Oh my God.” Ophelia whispers.

“You did,” Jamie tells me. “When Mom was alive, she originally invested in Travis’s company, along with countless others. At first, it was a twenty percent stake, but Travis’s business was starting to plummet despite his popularity. His customers were there but his lack of adapting to the new generation is what cost him. In turn, Mom cut back her stake to only ten percent, hoping it would help him earn more profit.”

“How do you know all of this if you said he was one of hundreds of companies Mom invested in?” I ask.

“I had to look into it when you came to me saying you wanted to back out.”

“But I don’t understand how me signing away my stake cost Ophelia to lose her job,” I counter because none of this makes sense.

Jamie tilts his chin down and looks up at me and Ophelia with narrowed eyes. It’s a look of warning. As if he knows how the words will be received once they leave his mouth. “When you came to me saying you wanted out, I had to find a way. I couldn’t handle all the accounts Mom was running on my own. I took a look at the companies we were investing in. I cut out all the ones who weren’t proving their worth. Travis Sterling was one of them. When you signed your rights away, you also pulled funding on countless companies.”

“What the fuck, Jamie?” I shout. My heart pounds in my chest. “You didn’t tell me that’s what I was agreeing to when you gave me the out.”

“You signed.” Jamie shrugs a shoulder, frowning in thought. “It was in the agreement. You may not remember it, but it’s there. I assumed you knew, anyway.”

My mind spins, trying to remember the day I signed the agreement. I was elated Jamie had found a way for me to step aside. I must not have read the part about cutting back on funding. Fuck.

I turn my head toward Ophelia. She’s been oddly silent considering the conversation we’ve been having. She has one hand pressed against the door, steadying herself. The other is held against her stomach as if she might vomit at any moment.

Her watery eyes are focused on the floor, but when she gathers the strength to look me in the eye, I’m gutted.

“Ophelia, I...” but the words get lodged in my throat. My mind is a jumbled mess. I can’t form one string of thoughts together. This night has become a complete and utter disaster.

“No.” She holds her finger out, stopping me again. Her arms shake and her chest heaves with her heavy breaths. “You’re the reason I’m here in the first place, Hunter.”

“No,” I insist. “I’m not.”

“You are!” she yells. “As much as you want to deny it, you are, Hunter.”

Her words are like a knife to my heart.

She grabs onto the door handle beside her and twists it. Her eyes move past me to Jamie standing behind me.

“I’m sure Hunter didn’t realize. He was doing what he thought was best for him,” Jamie chimes in. “It’s only business.”

I close my eyes, wishing Jamie would shut the fuck up for the first time in his life. The hurt in Ophelia’s expression is enough to tell me my brother’s only making matters worse.

“It isn’t business,” Ophelia sobs. “Not to the ones like me who were hurt in the process. It isn’t business when it involves people’s livelihoods. It isn’t business when it involves losing their entire careers with nowhere else to turn.”

“Ophelia, please let me explain.” I hold my hand out to her again. This time, I’m only able to brush her fingers before she recoils from me.

“I can’t,” she whispers sternly. “I’m fully aware there are people out there who make a fortune cutting others down—it’s part of the society we live in—but it’s an entirely different feeling knowing you were a part of it. You had a hand in it. I can’t look at you without knowing what you’ve done. It’s all I see now.”

She slowly backs away from me. Her eyes are lined with tears. They have been all night. She doesn’t pay attention to how far she’s gone until her heels hit the first step at the bottom of the stairs. Her chest shudders with her heavy sobs.

“I can’t,” she whispers, and her eyes move past me to Jamie. “I can’t.” This time her voice cracks. She turns around and starts to make her way up the stairs.

I’m watching her and when she disappears behind the wall where the stairs turn, I hear Jamie behind me.

“Hunter.”

I turn around and attempt to catch my breath.

“She’ll be fine,” he adds.

I stare at my brother with disbelief. “Fuck you, Jamie.” I scoff. “You don’t know shit about her, and you sure as fuck don’t know shit about me.”

I leave Jamie in my living room and go after Ophelia. I run up the stairs, hoping to catch her before she makes it to her room halfway down the hall.

She’s just past Dawson’s room when I catch up to her.

“Ophelia,” I whisper.

She keeps walking.

“Ophelia. Come on.”

“Fuck you, Hunter. Fuck you and your money hungry family.” She spins around. Her voice has shifted. It’s softer. Like she’s too exhausted to continue our conversation. I’m losing her.

Tears flow down her cheeks. Her eyes are swollen from crying, covered in black smudges. She’s still beautiful, even if I know I’m the one causing the pain she’s in. Even if I unknowingly caused her pain.

Her insult to my family is a punch to the gut. “I’m nothing like my family and you know it.”

She does. She knows very well it’s the reason I separated myself from them.

“No.” She shakes her head. “You are exactly like them. Your goal may be different but your means of getting there are one and the same.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I take a step back into the hallway.

“It means you don’t care what it takes or who you trample on to get there. Your brother invests in companies and discards them the second he sees fit. He throws them away when he sees no more monetary value in them for himself. You did the same fucking thing when you signed away your rights to the family business.”

“I didn’t.” Anger starts to beat against my chest. “I broke from the business in order to focus on baseball. I never wanted that company, Ophelia. When my mother died, she left it to me and Jamie in her will. It took months for me to convince Jamie to let me sell my portion, despite him knowing the truth. It never should have been mine in the first place.”

She wipes her cheeks and inhales deeply. “Exactly. You didn’t care who you might hurt in the process. All you cared about was what you wanted.”

I curl my hands into fists at my sides. Ophelia comparing me to my mother makes me sick, but it feels like a knife to the gut more than anything. I’ve never thought of myself in the

same light as my mother... *or* Jamie. It hurts worse, hearing it fall from Ophelia's mouth. "I didn't know me signing away my stake in the business hurt you. You can't blame me for something I did before we even met."

"You're right." She hiccups. "I can't. But how am I supposed to look at you the same way? I dedicated my whole life to fashion design. I grew up here, in this small fucking town, afraid I'd never escape. I was afraid it would chew me up and never spit me out, but then I made it out. I found my way to New York. I scratched and clawed my way through fashion design school, and when I was offered the internship with Travis, I had made it. I *made* it, Hunter." A sob escapes her. Her mouth turns upside down, and fresh tears spill over her eyelashes. "Working for Travis was *my* Boston, and you traded it for yours."

"You think it was easy giving up my stake in the company?" I ask her. "I didn't know me giving it up would hurt you or anyone else at Travis's company. But I was suffocating under my mother's hand and she wasn't even fucking alive anymore. She took a secret holiday with a married man she was having an affair with and died in a skiing accident. Her death was a complete shock. It was even more shocking when we found out she'd left everything to Jamie and me. I don't fucking know why, considering the woman barely took care of me growing up. Aside from the one phone call a year on my birthday, she didn't give a shit about me. I knew she never wanted me to be involved with it. At least not in the way she wanted Jamie to be. I always knew the company belonged to him. Keeping my name tied to that business was killing me. My family built the reputation of the company on investing in various businesses across the northeast. Then, when they see even the slightest decline in their investment, they'd back out. They cut all ties to that company. I wanted nothing to do with it."

Ophelia's sobs have quieted, but her chest still hiccups. She swallows as if it causes her pain. Her eyes flutter shut, and she takes a breath.

I hold mine while I wait for her to speak. The silence tears at my already open wounds. I feel awful for what's happened. I feel awful that me sacrificing my part in the company caused Ophelia to lose everything she's ever loved.

Her home. Her job. Her dream.

I want to close the gap between us. I want to place my arms around her and kiss her mouth with a thousand apologies. I want to wrap her up and steal her away from here, somehow pulling us into an alternate universe where I wasn't the one who tore her heart from her chest and stomped on it.

But I see the distance growing in Ophelia's tear-ridden blue eyes. She steps away from me again. Her foot backs up over the threshold, into her room.

"You know," she chokes out. "I thought the day I was let go from Travis Sterling was the worst day of my life. But this ... finding out you were behind it, is profoundly and unbelievably worse."

The final blow. This is the final blow. The one where I feel Ophelia sealing her decision to let me go with her final words... but I can't leave our conversation here.

Not like this.

"I love you, Ophelia."

"Love?" She scoffs in disbelief, and her eyebrows knit across her smooth skin. Her chin quivers. "You don't destroy the lives of the people you love, Hunter."

I was wrong. This is the final blow.

I gasp for breath when she takes another step back and grips onto the door.

"Ophelia," I beg. "Please."

"No." Her eyes flutter with pain. "I understand you didn't know me then. But how can I look at you the same? I think I need space." She's sobbing again, and my heart splinters. "Please, don't stop me this time."

She places her hands on her chest, begging me to agree. I'm not certain I can. But she doesn't wait for me. She simply shuts the door.

I struggle to breathe. I place my hands against the doorframe and hang my head, staring at my dirt-covered cleats.

The drastic shift in this night causes my head to spin. When I gather the strength to do so, I lift my head and walk back downstairs.

"Well?" Jamie holds his hand out and points toward the stairs. He's back to sitting on the couch, sipping his beer.

"Don't," I warn him.

"Hunt, man." He waves me off and lifts the glass of beer to his mouth. "I wouldn't worry about it. She'll get over it."

My vision turns red. Spots form in the corner of my eyes. "Fuck you, Jamie."

"Why are you so angry? It was business."

"You can keep telling yourself that, Jamie." I grind my teeth together. "But we both know it's all bullshit." Pressure pounds on either side of my head.

"If only you could look at the bright side of the business. What we do helps small businesses get their foot in the door. We help others, Hunt. We give them money so they can expand. Do you think the owners of these companies go into business with us not knowing the risks? It's a gamble, Hunt. It's a gamble they're all willing to take."

"See? That's the fucked-up part. You don't give them any warning. You simply rip it away from them!" I yell. "People lose their jobs because you lost interest. You did the same to Ophelia. I did the same to her."

I leave Jamie in the living room and head toward the back door. I don't exactly know where I'm going, I just know I can't stay in this room with my brother when he's acting like the asshole I've always known him to be. I can't argue with

him again. We're talking in circles. Every word I say doesn't make a difference.

I almost make it to the door when I hear Jamie's voice behind me.

"Let her go."

"Don't give me advice like you know me." I spin around and pin him with daggers. "You don't know shit."

His eyes narrow, and his nostrils flare. He doesn't speak. His mouth presses into a tight line. I've pissed him off. Good.

"Hey." Jamie and I both turn to see Reed stepping out of the kitchen. I didn't know he was down here. His arms are crossed over his chest.

"Reed." My mind scrambles for an explanation. I don't know how much he heard or what he knows. Maybe Jamie told him when I was talking to Ophelia out on the lawn. "Um ..." I swallow, attempting to catch my breath.

"Don't worry." He sighs. His eyebrows slant in... anger? Frustration? Concern? I'm not exactly sure. "I've only been here for about ten minutes. I came in through the kitchen when I heard the last bit of what Ophelia said before she went upstairs."

"Reed, I'm sorry." An apology is all I have the strength for right now.

"No." He steps toward me, closing the gap between us. His cheeks have reddened, and his eyes have transformed. The anger is practically pouring out of him now.

I've never seen him angry. He moves through the kitchen, closer to where I'm standing by the door.

"You don't get to destroy my sister's life, use her, and then apologize like you fucked up a pitch in the last inning." He seethes with a tight glare. "You have no idea what she's been through."

"I didn't realize the consequences that came with signing that paper. I didn't use her, Reed."

“Right. You use that excuse like your brother does about your family’s business.” He scoffs, gesturing toward Jamie.

Him comparing me to Jamie stings.

“Honestly,” he continues. “People like you who come from families like yours always get what they want. It doesn’t matter how or why, they just do. But I get it. You had to do what you had to do, and I haven’t exactly been an open book, either. You might not think Ophelia and I are close, but you’re sorely fucking mistaken if you don’t think I’m willing to do whatever it is to protect her. She’s my sister, Hunter.”

“I know she’s your sister.” I sigh. “But I love her.”

“You love her?” His eyebrows shoot up before it changes to an angry scowl. “Stop fucking lying, Hunter.”

His body goes rigid, and he shoves me backward until my back lands against the wall. I don’t land flat against it. The end table near the sliding door is the only thing preventing Reed from completely pinning me. The porcelain bowl Ophelia placed on top wobbles and drops to the floor, shattering everywhere.

I catch Reed’s anger-fueled eyes as I reach behind me, gripping onto the edge of the table. The muscles of his jaw tick. He fists the front of my jersey.

Reed has never been an aggressive person, but I’m sure there are exceptions. Defending his sister being one of them. He has every reason to punch me if he wanted, and with how fucking awful I feel, I might just let him. I won’t deny that I deserve it.

“You don’t fucking hurt the ones you love, asshole,” he spits out.

They’re the same words Ophelia said to me before she disappeared behind her bedroom door.

“You don’t think I know that?” I ask him. “I backed out of the business before she moved in here. I didn’t know I was the reason for it.”

“Put aside the fact that you were fucking my sister behind my back;” he seethes. “I should have known you would hurt her. I should have known you would find some way to use her. I should have known you hadn’t changed.” His words hurt like pouring salt on an open wound. He’s comparing me to how I used to be—before I signed away my rights to the business.

“I’m not that person anymore.”

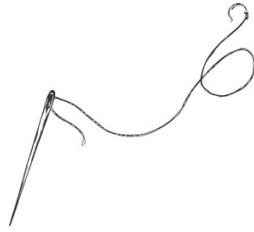
“You sure have a great way of proving it.” He scoffs and loosens his grip on my jersey but doesn’t let up on the way he’s pinning me against the table. My lower back aches from it pressing against the edge of the wood. He presses his mouth into a hard line, the muscles in his face hardening like stone. He lifts his fists to my chest and shoves me hard. He backs away from me as I draw in a tight breath.

He points a finger directly at me. “Ophelia doesn’t need another asshole to chew her up and spit her out. The world is cruel enough as it is.”

Reed leaves me by the back door, and heads up the stairs. He lets his words hang in the air to suffocate me. He’s right.

My family’s business is part of a vicious cycle, and Ophelia got caught up in it. The world is fucking cruel.

TWENTY-EIGHT



OPHELIA

My soul was crushed when I left New York City behind. Finding out the truth about Hunter has turned my crushed soul to nothing but dust.

I couldn't look at Hunter without thinking of losing my internship at Travis Sterling. The logical part of my brain knew he didn't know me at the time he signed away nearly half of his family's investments in order to back out of his share.

But my heart refuses to listen to logic.

How do you love the person responsible for ruining your career? How do I ever look at him the same?

Because the truth is, I do love Hunter. Or at least, I did. For the first time, I allowed myself to completely fall for someone against my better judgement. I didn't care that Hunter had pushed me to my limits. I didn't care that he dedicated over eighty percent of his time to training. His drive to go pro was as deep as my passion for fashion design. Our dreams were separate, but our paths were the same.

The truth of the means Hunter took to get to his dream have left me utterly broken, though. The questions jumbling around in my brain are left unanswered when I curl under the sheets on my bed.

I briefly consider going out and finding Max, hoping he'll be the perfect way to get my mind off Hunter. I haven't been able to get the vision of him standing in the living room, beside his brother, out of my head. The way his eyes had

saddened when he learned he'd been partially responsible for letting me go.

My mind starts to play the what if game. What if Hunter and I had met before he'd given up his stake in the company? Would he still have chosen to give it up? Would he have still gone through with it if he knew what would happen with me?

My answer is yes. I do believe he would have still gone through with it. Hunter's dedication to going pro was vicious and cruel. He would have sacrificed it all to make it, and he did.

By the time I play out another scenario in my head, my eyes have grown too heavy to stay open. I'm staring through the bathroom into Hunter's empty room when my world fades to black.

I WAKE up the next morning with exhausted eyes and a broken heart. When I roll over, the memory of last night plays back in my mind like a movie on repeat.

Hunter racing toward me with the clutched envelope in his hand.

Me telling him I didn't get the job with Emma Roe.

Straddling him after he pulled his truck off to the side of the road.

Walking in and seeing Andrew sitting on our couch.

Finding out he's Hunter's brother.

I crack my eyes open, prepared to be met with the glaring morning sun pouring through my small window, but I'm surprised to find my room covered in shadows—the very early sun just beginning to rise. A faint shade of yellow peeks through my window. It stretches across the floor, in front of my open bathroom door. I have an unobstructed view into Hunter's room.

The door has been left wide open. The veil of morning sunlight is stronger in his room, shining down across his bed. He doesn't appear to be in there because his bed is meticulously made. Contrasting against his black blanket is a small white rectangle. An envelope. Sitting on the edge of the mattress is the crumpled white envelope the Boston scouts had given him. The contract.

I recognize it from when he placed it on the dashboard of his truck.

My stomach turns. That contract inside that envelope was what Hunter gained from my loss. He'd traded my dream for his. A white piece of paper folded into an envelope.

Fresh tears sting at the corner of my eyes. I close them before I give myself a chance to cry, once again. It isn't long before my body grows heavy. Sleep starts to swallow me, replacing the ache and pain I feel in my chest. I roll to my other side, turning my back on Hunter's room.

I don't know where I'm going from here or what the future holds for me, but now I'm certain Hunter won't be a part of it.

That realization is enough to split my heart completely in two.

WHEN I WAKE UP AGAIN, I call out of work and head straight for the lake. I need time and space to think. The trees often have a way of healing me. Back in high school, they often did. I'm hoping they'll do the same today.

This time, the sun is shining fully. It's approaching midday, and the warmth it's giving me wraps around me like a blanket, comforting me in a way I know work won't. I couldn't face customers, and I couldn't face Max. Not now, at least.

I avoid walking down the usual path and head for a different side of the lake. I avoid the dock, the bonfire pit, and the tree where Hunter tracked me down the night of my first

lake party. It's hard to pass the tree without remembering what it was like to have him touch me for the first time, his leg between mine. He brought out a feeling inside me I didn't know existed. I hate that I allowed myself to fall for him.

He hurt me.

I fell for him.

Only for him to hurt me a second time.

Avoiding the more popular side of the lake, I sit down on the farthest edge from the bonfire pit. This side is more peaceful. A flock of ducks effortlessly paddle through the water. They don't make a sound as they continue swimming in circles. This is the peace I needed. I tuck my legs under me and stare out at the lake.

Working for Max has been a blessing, but I couldn't bring myself to show up today. The thought of walking into a store full of clothing that wasn't mine didn't sound appealing. Although Max has been allowing me to sell my own dresses at his store, it isn't the same as if it was a store of my own. My dresses were sequestered to only one rack positioned near the front corner of the floor. The dresses were mine, but otherwise, my name meant nothing. The boutique was rightfully Max's, but staring at his success while I was faced with the shattered remains of mine was going to be a tough pill to swallow.

I've been thankful to Max for allowing me to sell my small collection. My job there was an offering and a favor. He didn't need me. He was doing it because he cared for me. I'm fully aware it isn't permanent, and it never was.

I stare out at the sparkling lake, wondering what my next step is. The thought of staying home in bed all day, staring at Hunter's door sounds like torture.

I left before I gave either of us a chance to run into one another. I honestly don't know what Hunter did after I'd shut the door on him—he went to class, mostly likely. Baseball practice even more likely. Either way, I'm thankful I was able to escape before I had the chance to find out.

I don't think my heart can take seeing him.

Then, there's Andrew... or Jamie, as Hunter calls him. Whatever the fuck his name is, I haven't seen him. He could be staying in Hunter's room. His door was shut when I woke up the second time. He could be staying in a hotel room. Wherever he was, I didn't care, as long as I didn't and don't have to see him again.

My phone rings beside me. I pick it up and answer.

"Ophelia." Claire gasps for breath. "I've been calling you since yesterday when I got your note. I don't even know how your interview went. Max also called me a few minutes ago and told me you weren't coming in today. What is going on?"

We aren't on video call, and I'm grateful. I know I look like shit, and I know if Claire sees me, her responding expression will be enough to make me cry. Again.

"Hey." I sigh. "I'm sorry. It's been ..." I hold my breath, wondering how best to explain it. "It's been crazy."

"Are you okay?" she's quick to ask.

"I don't know." I bite down on my lip. I don't want to explain what happened yesterday to Claire, but I also can't keep it to myself. I could use my best friend, right now.

I start with the biggest blow. "Andrew is Hunter's brother."

"Who's Andrew?" Claire asks. I open my mouth to answer but she realizes before I get the chance. "Wait." She gasps. "You mean the one who cut the funding to Travis's company?"

"Yep." I tilt my head to the side and close my eyes. I bend my legs and pull them against my chest.

"Oh, shit. How did you find out?"

"I met Hunter after his game last night, and when we went home, Andrew was sitting on the couch. When I tell you I wanted to throw up when I realized it was him..."

"I bet that was tough."

"It was. The worst part is when I found out the reason why Andrew cut the funding to Travis's company was because of Hunter. It was agreed that they would drop a substantial

amount of their investments if Hunter was to back out of the company. He did, and I lost my job. It only makes it worse that Emma told me only hours before that she didn't want to hire me."

"Where does that leave you and Hunter? Have you talked since last night?"

"No," I croak. Fresh tears spring behind my eyes. "I think it's safe to say it's over between us. Or at least, I think it is."

"Damn, Ophelia." Claire's concern for me is a balm to my soul. I didn't realize how much I needed her right now.

I leave out the part about Hunter's offer to play for the Revolutionaries. I've been caught up in a pendulum of emotions ever since he ran up to me in the parking lot, envelope clutched in hand. Hunter's business dealings have been disastrous for me, but it doesn't take away from how big of a deal it was for him to get the offer. Trying to understand it has been convoluted at best. Quite literally.

"Look," I start, holding back the tears threatening to spill over. "I'm here at the lake, and I'm thinking it's all happened for a reason."

"Which is?" There's warning in Claire's voice.

"All of it. Losing my job. Getting evicted. Falling for Hunter when he's the reason I'm in this position to begin with."

"Don't do that, Ophelia," Claire urges. "Don't go down this path."

"It's the truth. Anyway, I'm wondering if maybe I should do something else with my life. Fashion design clearly isn't getting me anywhere."

"Stop," she clips. "Listen, I get that you're feeling discouraged. I don't blame you. It's awful what Hunter did, and I know you loved him... or still love him. Either way, I need you to take a minute to think before jumping into something crazy."

“What am I supposed to do?” I ask. The tears have already started again. The hopelessness in my chest grows, creating a giant hole that feels as big as the Grand Canyon.

I slide my hand across my knee. The soft fabric easily skims against my palm. My heart belongs to fashion design. I desperately want to make my own clothes. But it just doesn't seem sensible right now.

I run through all my options in my head. I avoided calling my parents down in Florida. As much as the warm, sunny weather sounds like a nice break from New England, I can't bear the thought of facing Mom. She'd only rant about how she was right about my career choice. How Reed's career in playing ball is just as uncertain, and how I should consider a different path. Possibly go back to school in another field.

None of it sounds appealing. But neither does here, begging for people to accept my work like I did when I was interviewing with Emma.

But who am I fooling? My heartache isn't from losing out on the job with Emma. It's from losing Hunter.

The more I think about him, the more I realize my desire to run from design is from the heartache Hunter left me with, because maybe if I sever my ties with fashion, I'll start to heal from Hunter's heartbreak. And if I do stay here in Eden, how am I supposed to face Hunter? I don't know exactly when he's leaving for Boston, but I know it isn't today. Not even tomorrow.

He'll only be a walking reminder of the possibility of what we could have been.

“How am I supposed to go back to that house, Claire?” I wipe my fingers across my cheek to brush away a tear. My head is already pounding. I'm exhausted from the constant crying. Heartbreak is a bitch.

“Listen, Ophelia, I know it's hard to face him after finding out the truth of what he did, and I know you think you've messed up in some way when it comes to your work, but you've always been in control. You still are. You need to do

what's best for you. I don't think there's a right or wrong answer here. What Hunter did was awful but if I think about it, he was doing what was best for him at the time. I'm not suggesting you forgive him, but I'm just pointing out the fact that he made that decision before he knew you. You both have passions that run deep, and sometimes you're willing to do whatever it takes to get there. Hunter did the same. You have every right to be upset."

She's playing Devil's advocate. I get it. I truly do.

But it's hard to see past heartbreak. It's dark, bleak, and incredibly fragile.

"Yeah..." I exhale. "I just don't think I can look at him without seeing the pain of what I've lost.

"Why don't you come stay with me?" She perks up.

I lower my legs and trace my finger through the dirt beside me.

"What?" I ask. The prospect of staying with Claire isn't as thrilling as I initially thought it would be. Somehow it feels the same as when I moved in with Reed all those months ago. Like I'm starting over, even if she is suggesting it's only temporary.

"I have the room now in my new apartment, and I have no roommate," she explains. "It doesn't have to be forever, but you can check out the city, and maybe it'll give you time to figure something out. Think of it as a getaway with your best friend to draw up some inspiration."

For the past year, I feel as if I've been living without roots. I can never truly settle down. Staying with Claire will only drive home the notion further. But maybe it *can* be temporary. At least until Hunter heads to Boston to play for the Revolutionaries, and I can move back in with Reed for a bit.

My fractured heart hasn't healed—not in the slightest—but Claire's offer could be a distraction from the pain.

For now.

“How soon do you want me there?” I ask, pulling myself to standing and brushing the dirt from my dress.

Claire snorts. “How soon do you think you can get here?”

“I’m heading home to pack right now,” I tell her.

The problem is, I barely make it out of the thick trees lining the outskirts of the lake when the pieces of my fractured heart begin to crack.

Only this time, I’m fairly certain this type of pain isn’t temporary.

TWENTY-NINE



HUNTER

Ophelia's already packed her bags. I stand in the doorway to her room, taking note of how empty it is now that she's gone. The walls are bare. A single clock sits on the nightstand. The bed is made. Her sewing machine no longer sits on the table in the far corner of the room.

I didn't expect her to leave this soon after our fight.

It's an idiotic notion to believe she would have given me another chance to explain myself, but I foolishly hoped she would.

I'd hurt her in the worst way possible. It didn't matter that I'd done it before I met her. She was right; what I'd done affected hundreds of people. But knowing I hurt Ophelia in the process of finding my own success hurts worse than all the others who might have been laid off.

I've fallen in love with Ophelia.

I tap my fingers on the edge of the doorframe and pull my phone out of my pocket for the hundredth time. I have no messages from her. No missed calls. She's gone completely silent.

I haven't asked Reed where she's gone, and he hasn't told me. For all I know, she could be far away from here. Maybe she went to go stay with her parents in Florida. Maybe she went to Claire's. Maybe she's down the street, staying with Max.

It's been two days since she left.

I leave Ophelia's old room and jog downstairs to grab something to eat before I head out for class. Sitting in class for two hours, listening to my professor drone on about statistics in stock trading, is the last thing I want to do, but I figure it beats sitting at home sulking about losing Ophelia. It's a temporary distraction, at least.

I find Jamie sitting at my dining room table. He's eating a plate of scrambled eggs. I haven't seen him since the night Ophelia left. I've been avoiding him.

"You're still here?" The anger I feel for my brother is at an all-time high. He's lucky I haven't kicked him out at this point.

"I'm not leaving until we go to Mom's grave. You know full well that's the reason for my visit."

"Really? Doesn't appear that way to me." I raise an eyebrow and search my refrigerator. I don't search for long before I shut the door, suddenly no longer hungry.

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that." Jamie shoves another bite of eggs into his mouth. Man, I fucking hate him.

"Of course, you are." I lean against the counter.

Jamie drops his fork onto his plate. It clinks against the porcelain, and bits of egg fly off the end. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"You know exactly what my problem is." I growl.

"Oh, please." Jamie rolls his eyes. "I can't believe you're still angry about this. It was a fucking business deal, brother."

His indifference is driving me up the fucking wall.

"You're unbelievable." I shake my head and turn back around to open the fridge again. I grab a bottle of water and crack it open. Arguing with my brother gives me a dry mouth, and it's exhausting.

He shoves his plate forward and leans back in his chair. His eyes are fueled with an equal amount of anger. They remind me of our mother's. "Do you want to know what's unbelievable?" He raises his eyebrows and clicks his tongue. He crosses his arms beneath his chest, and it truly feels like

I'm looking at my mother—a memory from my childhood unlocked. A stern mother, never truly seeing me, obsessed with only herself. Jamie seems to have inherited the same traits. “What’s unbelievable is how you don’t seem to care about anyone but yourself.”

“What?” I scoff. “Seriously?”

“I’m not kidding, Hunter. You act as if I’m the one being selfish. Mom left her business to us, and we had a responsibility to carry it out when she died, but you were the one who wanted an out. I fought hard and tried to convince you to stay, and you wouldn’t hear it. You begged me to let you out. Now you’re trying to place the blame on me. It’s not my fucking fault you fell for someone who happened to work for one of the companies we dropped.”

“That’s not the point.” I press the heels of my hands against my eyes. “Sure, you can say that me backing out of the business was selfish, but I don’t see it that way. I never have. To be honest, Mom was selfish for giving me fifty percent. I never should have been put on there in the first place.”

There it is. I’ve laid it out there. The dirty, dark truth of how I’ve felt about my family.

I never deserved to inherit the company.

“You were Mom’s son, too,” Jamie points out. “Why wouldn’t she give you fifty percent of the company?”

I’m not at all surprised by his answer. He’s keeping the iron curtain up, much like our family has done ever since my mother divorced my father.

“Because you were a different son to her than I was.” The realization that my mother never treated me the same as Jamie hits hard. He was the golden boy in her eyes. I was the one left behind. I take another sip of my water, knowing I need to keep my distance from Jamie. “The problem is, Jamie. You wanted us to share the business equally, but Mom never treated us that way when she was alive. After she divorced my dad, she poured all of her energy into the business and you. You were right there at her side. Every day. But me? Mom knew I had

my dad, so she left me in Arizona. She held him responsible for my upbringing.”

“You still had a responsibility to carry out the duties of this family.” He stands with his tight fists at his side. The chair scrapes against the floor. He shoots me a glare. I know I’ve triggered him with the truth. My brother has never been fond of the truth, especially when it involves him... and our mother.

“I didn’t owe her shit!” I roar. I can’t help it. The words spill out of me like a breaking dam. The words rush and crash, breaking every object in its path. Jamie being my number one target.

It isn’t until Jamie’s eyes widen that I realize I’ve finally spoken the words I’ve wanted to say since the first time my mother missed calling me on my birthday. She claimed she was caught up with work, but months later, I overheard her talking to my dad about how she’d taken a trip to Hawaii with Jamie to celebrate the first time he’d done his own load of laundry.

No kidding.

My mother celebrated the stupidest bullshit for my brother.

The craziest part is, I don’t think Jamie ever noticed.

Seems like times haven’t changed.

Jamie’s eyes narrow, and his cheeks redden. His chest heaves. “Take it back,” he demands.

“What?” I scoff. “Are we eight years old again? Are you offended by the truth?”

I stare at my brother, wondering how in the hell we made it this long without having this conversation.

“I’m offended when you talk about Mom that way.” He frowns.

“Honestly, Jamie, I’m surprised you haven’t seen it.” I pause, staring into my brother’s heated glare. “Or maybe you have, and you’re afraid of saying it out loud because somehow it’ll make it truer. You’re not stupid. You know Mom didn’t

treat us the same. That's why I was shocked when she left me the business."

I stop again, thinking about the harm my mother's company has brought to me. Maybe even Jamie, too. Behind the anger in his eyes, I can see the hurt. He's hurt we aren't closer. He's hurt I didn't stick with my mother's wishes. He doesn't say another word. He just stands in front of me like a deer caught in the headlights.

"This can't come as a complete shock to you." I hold my arms out.

Still, silence.

The longer I stand staring at Jamie, the more I realize the bad that comes with the type of business he runs. I realize the bad that comes with my family. The pain my family caused Ophelia.

"What you did ..." I swallow, the memory of Ophelia's pained face playing back in my mind. I shake my head and look down at the floor. "What *we* did to Ophelia. It just goes to show I can't be a part of a business that treats people that way. Not in good conscience. Wouldn't matter if Mom was right in giving me my share or not. It's fucked up and I couldn't be a part of it. I can't be a part of it. I won't be."

"You're right." Jamie nods. "I'm not surprised. I know Mom didn't treat you the same, and I spent years saying and doing nothing. I guess when the lawyer told us you were given fifty percent alongside me, I hoped it would bring us together. But it only pulled us further apart. In fact, so far apart we don't tell each other when big things happen." He reaches into his back pocket and slaps a white piece of paper on the table beside his half-eaten eggs.

It's my contract.

"When did you plan on telling me you got an offer to play for the Revolutionaries?" he asks.

"How do you have that?" Just as Jamie isn't surprised I quit the business, I'm not surprised he went snooping through my stuff.

“You left it on the counter.”

For once, he doesn't hesitate to speak the truth. I forgot I carried it out of my room yesterday and left it in the kitchen.

“Have you answered them?” Jamie asks.

I shake my head. Breaking Ophelia's heart hasn't exactly left room for me to read over my contract.

“How long have you been sitting on this contract?” Jamie asks. So many fucking questions.

“I got it the same night you showed up.”

“Three days?” His eyebrows shoot up. “You've sat on this for three days?”

“Yeah.” I snatch my water bottle from the counter, not wanting to stand here and have this conversation with Jamie any longer. I need to get to class. “It hasn't been that long. I still have time.”

“Hold on.” Jamie stops me.

I spin back around. “What?”

“You're telling me you backed out of the business, then got exactly what you wanted from doing so, but you aren't jumping at the chance to tell them yes? I don't get it.”

“You wouldn't get it.” I growl. “Yes, I backed out of the business so I could train harder and win more games. I did that. I did exactly that, and it brought me to that deal.” I gesture toward the worn-out envelope crumpled on the table. “But what else did it cost me? It cost me Ophelia. I fucked her over, and there's no erasing it. I can't take it back, and I can't change it. That envelope represents everything I did to her.”

“I get that you loved her, man.”

“Do you? Do you really? Because when you watched her fall apart when she found out who you were, you acted as if it wasn't a big deal. You acted like I shouldn't care.”

“No,” he disagrees. “I could tell you loved her. I knew it the second you left to follow her, begging her to stay. I've never seen you that way with someone. We may not have

grown up together, but I can tell when my brother knows who and what he loves when he has it. You become a different person. A better person.”

“I did love her... And she made me realize, even if baseball was all I’d ever had in this life, it wouldn’t have been enough. I needed her and I didn’t even know it.”

“Listen.” Jamie slaps his hand over the envelope. He grabs onto it with a tight fist. He crosses the room and slams it against my chest. “I’ve kept quiet for years about the way Mom treated us differently. I never spoke up when I should have. It might be too late, but I don’t give a fuck. I get that you hurt Ophelia, and I’m sorry I had a hand in it as well, but I will not fucking stand by and watch you throw your dream away.”

“I don’t think I can do it.” I wrap my hand around his. He lowers it and allows me to take the envelope. The ink on the front has faded. My name isn’t as bold as it was the night Bill and Derek handed it to me.

“I don’t have any sage words of advice when it comes to Ophelia. I’ve never been good when it comes to relationships. Ask me about investments and business and I could talk all day. But if you don’t take this...” Jamie warns. “It’s all been for nothing.”

I stare into my brother’s eyes, wishing we had been closer growing up. I’m wishing my mother didn’t treat me as someone other than her son. I’m wishing she hadn’t given me the company knowing I never would have wanted it in the first place.

Now that I’m thinking about it, that might be why she did leave it to me. She knew I’d never be happy working in the corporate world. It was my mother’s way of having the last word.

“If you don’t come with me to visit Mom’s grave, I understand,” Jamie mutters.

His peace offering gives me a foreign feeling. My first instinct is to call bullshit. He is a businessman, after all. He’s

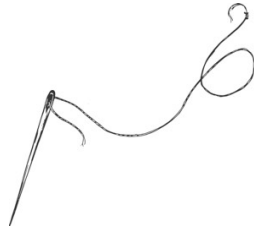
known for his smooth talk and negotiations, but there's a sincerity in his eyes that I haven't seen in a long time.

He leaves me standing in the living room as he returns to the kitchen and his plate of eggs.

“You can think about it while I finish my eggs.” He points toward me with the tip of his fork. “And for the fuck of it, you can think about that while you're at it, too.”

Man, I fucking hate my brother.

THIRTY



OPHELIA

After living with my brother and his roommates, I didn't want to be a burden to anyone else in my life. When I told my mother I was going to stay with Claire for a while, she begged and pleaded with me to go down to Florida and stay with her and my dad. I couldn't do it.

I don't want to be surrounded by sprawling palm trees and tourist-filled beaches. I want the warm New England brick and my best friend at my side. Staying with Claire gives me the comfort of knowing I'm not too far away from my prospects, because even if my future in fashion design is uncertain, I know Florida would only make me feel like I'm farther away from my goals. Whatever they may be.

I sit in front of my sewing machine with a heavy breath. I grab the hem of the blue dress I've been working on and slide it under the needle. With gentle pressure, I slowly press my foot to the pedal and push the fabric through.

The color reminds me of the Rebels. It's the same deep, rich, royal blue. It makes me think of Hunter.

It's been three weeks since I've seen him, but the sting and pain from losing him hasn't faded. Not in the slightest. I'd hoped the small amount of distance between us would have made the process of getting over Hunter easier. I know now, though, that it's a love I'll never get over.

In the months Hunter and I were roommates, he managed to unleash a part of me I didn't know I had. Although I'd hated the circumstances that brought me back to Eden, I'd never felt

more alive than when I was with him. He'd followed me in the dark. He'd kept me on my toes. He challenged me. His touch set my skin on fire, shooting life straight into my soul.

Tears spring in the corner of my eyes. My vision blurs, and before I know it, I'm adding more pressure to the pedal. The needle pounds against the blue fabric faster, and my fingers slip over the guard. The needle pricks the tip of my pointer.

"Fuck." I hiss between my teeth.

I press the tip to my lips, sucking on the end of it. When I stand, I find a bandage in Claire's bathroom. Slumping back down into my chair, I wrap it around my finger before getting back to work. Pricking my finger makes me think of Hunter and the day he'd rushed in after thinking Dawson and I were fucking behind his back.

"See, that's why I could never become a fashion designer."

I spin around in my chair. Claire is standing in front of my rack of dresses. She sifts through them, slowly examining each one. She holds one out at an angle, studies it, then drops it and moves on to the next.

"Why couldn't you?" I ask her.

She drops a dress again and then holds out another. "Because there are too many needles involved. Thousands of pins shoved into those little cushions. Pins used to adjust hems. Needles in sewing machines. Scissors. I'm clumsy enough as it is." She glances over her shoulder. "Need I say more?"

I laugh. There are still tears in the corners of my eyes. I quickly wipe them away. I loosen the thread attaching the needle to the fabric and snip it. I'll fix it and redo it later when the tip of my finger no longer burns, and my heart doesn't ache for a man I no longer have.

"Can I help you find something?" I rest my arm on the back of my chair and tilt my head.

"I was wondering if you had a dress I could wear tonight."

"Where are you going?"

Claire pulls a bright purple dress off the rack and holds it against her body. “I have a blind date.”

“I should have known.” I grin. “Where did you meet this one?”

“I hired a matchmaker. For fun.” She shrugs. “I figure it couldn’t hurt. Besides, I doubt she’s going to find anyone I’m compatible with. Let’s just say I don’t have too much confidence in the reliability of a person whose sole job it is to match up strangers.”

I rest my head on my arm and watch Claire studying herself in the mirror. I don’t think too hard on Claire’s choice to hire a matchmaker. It’s a first for her, but not surprising. The woman is determined to find love. I can’t fault her for it. Love can be exhilarating.

Or it can be brutal and heart-wrenching.

I’ve been lucky enough to experience both. More recently the latter. Claire deserves the same.

“Where are you guys going on your date?” I ask her.

She turns toward me, still holding the dress against her body. Her blonde hair is draped across her shoulders in large curls, and her eyelids are painted a deep, smoky gray, almost black color. She has her hand pressed to her stomach, holding the dress against her. She looks down at her feet, then back up to me. “He wants to go mini golfing. I figured I could wear one of your dresses with a pair of strappy sandals.”

“I agree. You’ll be comfortable but not too casual.” I stand and grab the purple dress from her. I place it back on the rack and reach for the green one. “You should wear the green one. It’ll compliment your hair and bring out your eyes. Especially if you’re playing at night when the course lights will be surrounding you.”

She grabs the green dress from me and puts it against her body the same way she did the purple one. She tilts her head to the side and grins. This one is a bit lower cut on the chest, too. A feature I figure Claire would appreciate.

“You’re right,” she agrees. “This one will work perfectly. Thank you.”

She eyes me in the mirror and turns back around.

“You’re welcome.” I nod and move around her to sit back down in my chair. My finger still stings but I need to get this next dress completed. Not for any particular reason other than to get my mind off Hunter and my shattered heart.

“I have to say, Ophelia,” Claire continues behind me. “You’re growing quite the collection here. What do you plan on doing with all these dresses?”

I lift the hem of the blue dress closer to my face and pick at the thread, adjusting it until it’s just right for me to slide back under the sewing machine. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“You should sell them.”

“Are you kidding?” I scoff. “That’s what I was doing when I worked at Max’s.”

“That was at Max’s, though, not your own store. Besides, weren’t you selling a ton of them at Max’s?”

I drop the dress and move to stand next to Claire. I finger through the dresses, remembering how I made each one. One of the red dresses on the rack is made from the swatch I’d bought when Hunter followed me to the fabric store the day that Max sent me out to run his errands.

“There are at least thirty dresses here,” Claire points out. She places the green dress for her date at the end of the rack and slides through each one again.

I haven’t been counting. Or keeping track.

“I know.” I slide my fingers along the red dress. My chest twists and aches again. “What am I supposed to do with them?”

“Did you like working at Max’s?” She sits down in my chair, twisting to face me, not paying any attention to my sewing machine.

“I did.” I manage to crack a smile. “I liked being around Max and reigniting our friendship. His store was fun and creative. I’d love to do something like that.” I look at my dresses. “Maybe with flowers, though.”

“Flowers?” Claire’s perfectly kept eyebrows pull together.

“Max’s store was monochromatic. In color blocks. Most of my dresses are floral prints.” I scan the entire rack. “I guess I never truly noticed until now.”

“You should try it,” Claire proposes.

“Try what?”

“Selling your own line the way you want it.” She rises and crosses the room to stand beside me again. “Whether that be in a store front or online. You should do it. I could even help you set up a website. Maybe you can do it that way.”

“I don’t know.” I shake my head. Uncertainty mixes and mingles with my aching heart. “I don’t think it’s for me.”

“Why not?” Her eyebrows slant. “You’re too hard on yourself, Ophelia. I think you’ve spent so long thinking you aren’t worthy, when the truth is, you’re doing the world a disservice by not selling these. They’re impeccable.”

Moisture returns to my eyes, lining my lashes and blotting my vision again. “It’s just hard to envision me in a similar place others have been able to get to.”

“Does this have to do with Hunter?” Her eyes have widened. She’s looking at me with sympathy. It makes my stomach turn.

I bite down on my lip.

“You still love him.” Her statement is plain and simple.

The pain I feel isn’t.

But when I look into Claire’s eyes, I agree. Forget the pain. It’s as plain and simple as loving him.

“I do.” I exhale. “But I don’t know if we could have ever gotten to a place of understanding. I still don’t know if I would

have ever been able to look at him without seeing the man he truly used to be.”

“I’ve told you before, I don’t blame you for feeling betrayed by Hunter.” Claire’s voice is softer than it was when she was sifting through my dresses. “But I think at some point you have to realize all the parts of you that are missing. You might be in denial, but I can see it in your face. I can hear it in your voice. You still love Hunter. You still love designing. You’ve lost the two things you love most in the world, and if they’re what you want, I think you need to figure out a new way of having them. I’m no expert at love, clearly, but I do know love when I see it, and you two had it. I knew it the second I saw you two interact at the lake. The man was obsessed with you.”

I don’t know how much weight to bear on Claire’s words. I want to believe she’s right. In fact, I believed Hunter, but it’s hard to love someone when you know they single-handedly destroyed your life. He watched the fallout, then found out he was the one who caused it.

I turn to my dresses and scrunch the material between my fingers. There’s a pull inside me. Designing and sewing are my escape. A dream gently tugs me, leading me in a direction I haven’t yet ventured. Claire is right. The longer I stay here sulking around, I’ll always stay that way. Somehow, I’ve managed to lose both design and Hunter. Now I need to find a path from here. I need to fill the emptiness carved out of my chest and stitch it back together.

I’m staring at the dress in my hand, wondering if there could ever be a life where Hunter and I could be together. I left without a word. I haven’t spoken to him in weeks. He hasn’t reached out or called. He’s giving me the space he thinks I’m wanting, and by now, I’m sure he’s moved on. I’m sure he’s perfectly content playing in the stadium of the Revolutionaries and living out his dream.

I realize I was living in ignorant bliss back in Eden, hoping Hunter could somehow let me be a part of his dream. Now I realize I was only payment for the transaction.

Life is easier when you tackle your pain in baby steps. Start with the path that hurts the least of the two.

I let the dress fall away and I stare into my best friend's eyes. A tear slips over my lashes. "I think it's best to start with the dresses."

THIRTY-ONE



HUNTER

Training with Boston has been a dream come true. Literally.

It's an odd feeling to know I've spent my entire life working toward playing for this team, and now I'm here.

Bright red chairs sit far and wide in a perfect circle. The grass is impossibly green. Shit, the dirt is even immaculately maintained. The stadium is about a thousand times larger than the one back in Eden, and so is the pressure.

My neck and throat are swollen with nerves, enough to make my stomach growl with hunger yet feel full at the same time. The warm air sticks to my skin, a reminder of where I am.

“Good job, Moore.”

My new coach crosses the field, joining me at the pitcher's mound. He's been watching me for the past thirty minutes, demanding I show him one hundred pitches. Training has been brutal to say the least, but it's a bit easier now that I'm finished with school. Finals were equally as brutal as training with the Revolutionaries, but I'm thankful they're over. I'm done with school, and I can now focus all my energy on my new team.

The day Jamie slammed my contract against my chest, I agreed to visit our mother's gravesite. Losing Ophelia was hard enough. The last thing I wanted to do was drag out the pain of my family's toxic dynamic. Well, I wasn't going to contribute to it any longer. Jamie and I still have quite a bit of repairing to do of our relationship, but we're heading in the right direction. At least for now. He agreed to step back from

asking my opinion on any business dealings, and I agreed to not hold our mother's choices against him. He was raised as an only child, and we spent years ignoring that small detail, but now that we've been honest with one another, we're able to take a step forward.

"Thanks, Coach." I bend down and pick up another ball.

He rubs his fingers across his mouth in thought. His eyes move past me, and he plants his hands on his hips. "You missed opening day, which is unfortunate. I hope you didn't take it personally that I haven't placed you first in the lineup to pitch."

"Not at all." I shake my head.

"Good." He cracks a smile. "Because I'm starting you first tonight against San Francisco."

"Really?" I arch my eyebrows. My stomach aches the same way it's been aching all morning.

"Yep." He claps me on the back. He's chewing on a large wad of pink gum. He spits into the grass, then resumes his chewing. "You can throw a few more to Rob, then you can both head for the showers. I don't want you wearing out that arm before you've had a chance to show our fans what you're made of."

I laugh and wait for Coach to walk back to the dugout. He stands at the top of it with his hands planted on his hips, still smacking on the same wad of gum.

Disappointment weighs heavily on my shoulders. I should be thrilled Coach is offering me the chance to pitch first in tonight's game against San Fran-fucking-cisco, but for some reason, my body isn't thrumming with excitement as I expected it to.

I shift my focus back to Rob and brush the thought away. He's been batting for me ever since Coach asked me to practice my one hundred throws. I stare down the line to the batter's box, but my eyes immediately catch the person walking down the steps in the stands. He makes his way all the way down to the front row and chooses a bright red seat near

the middle of the aisle. When he sits down, he rests his foot on the front slab of concrete and rests his chin in his hand. Two familiar eyes stare back at me. He doesn't wave. He doesn't move.

He sits in his bright red chair with his dark blue Northeast Rebels baseball cap.

I haven't spoken to Reed since the day I'd packed up my room and moved out of our house. We're no longer roommates, but I still consider us friends. I always have, even after he'd slammed me against the wall after he'd heard about what I'd done to Ophelia.

I'm surprised to see him here. He didn't say much to me the day I left. I'd handed him my copy of the house key and told him I'd send over my portion of the electricity bill to his account. Then I walked out the door.

Seeing Reed leads me to think about Ophelia. Scratch that, I haven't stopped thinking about her, but seeing her brother causes me to think about her more. Since moving to Boston, I've wondered where she went after she'd moved out. I hoped wherever she ended up, she was happy, even if it isn't with me.

I move my attention from Reed and focus back on Rob. He taps the end of his bat against the bottom of each of his cleats, then squares up to bat. He gives me a sly grin from beneath his cap. I do the same, twisting my body and readying myself for the pitch. I lift my leg, swing my arm back, and launch the ball in his direction.

Strike.

I chuckle under my breath. Rob groans.

He repeats the same move, tapping the end of the bat to the bottom of his cleats. I repeat the same ritual before throwing the ball. Second strike.

Rob groans again.

We repeat this process until I've emptied the basket beside me. I couldn't strike Rob out completely, but it was close. He struck out more than he hit the ball.

After Rob and I are finished, Rob immediately heads back toward the locker room.

Reed is still sitting up in the stands in the same seat he chose when he arrived.

I cross the field and stand in front of him. I shake my arm, hoping to get rid of the tightness already building inside my muscle. I stretch my fingers and bend them back and forth. Fresh callouses have already formed on the top of my palm.

“Hey.” It’s all I can manage to say to Reed. What do you say to your best friend after you’ve hurt his sister in more ways than one? I not only stole her dream; I crushed her heart as well. There’s no going back to where we were after this.

“Looks like you’ve made yourself at home.” He nods his head toward my white shirt with red stitching and blue letters outlined in red across my chest. Revolutionaries.

“It’s going pretty good.” I say pretty good considering I’m not finding myself as settled as I thought I would be. It’s strange to have a dream fulfilled yet still not be fulfilled.

“Huh.” Reed sits back in his seat. “I can’t say I’m completely convinced, but I’ll give it to you.”

Guilt bears down on me. I hate the way Reed and I left things. I admit I’ve been a dick in the past, but I never meant to hurt him in the process. I stare down at my glove in my hand, then look back up. The bill of my cap shields my eyes from the midday sun.

“Hey, man, I wanted to tell you I’m sorry about that night,” I tell him.

“Actually.” He exhales. “That’s part of the reason I came down here. I wanted to apologize to you.”

“What for?” I jerk my head back. “I’m the one who was a fucking asshole.”

“Trust me, I definitely think you deserve what happened, but honestly, I only made it worse. I know you causing Ophelia to get laid off from her job was before you even knew her, and I also know you were broken that night when she

found out. She left, and I could see it in your eyes. I've never seen you that way before. I could tell you loved her."

"Thank you." I nod and press my mouth together. "I don't deserve it but thank you."

"Good." He laughs, his eyes darting around the stadium. His eyes glaze over as if he's never been here before or seen this stadium. I know he's been here a million times, though. "Can I tell you how fucking awesome this is?"

"What about you?" I ask him. "Have you heard from any pro scouts?"

"Not yet." He shrugs a shoulder. "Maybe closer to the end of the season. Or next. Not all of us can get picked as quickly as you." His quick, joking sneer makes me laugh. I've missed having my best friend around.

"It's not a big deal," I mutter. "But thanks." I try to hide the way I'm feeling on the inside, but I can't. I'm glad Reed is here but I hold back the urge to ask him about Ophelia. She left without leaving a single clue as to where she would go. It's been eating me up inside.

I know I don't have the right to know, either. Not with the way I hurt her, and not with the way we left each other.

"I can see it on your face."

"You can see what?" I ask him. Reed has never talked to me this way before. The night of the fallout must have changed something.

"I can see you aren't as happy as you thought you'd be," he points out. "Is it the team?"

I chew on the inside of my cheek. I'm suddenly wishing I was chewing on gum like Coach was earlier. I press harder against my cheek. I hate the feeling of knowing I'm so easily readable.

"It's not the team. It's hard to put my full attention into baseball when I know that isn't what's missing. If that makes any sense." I shake my head and remove my cap. I groan and rake my fingers through my hair and push the sweat off of my

forehead. I'm fucking frustrated as hell. Why am I such an asshole? Probably one of the few traits I inherited from my mother. "Who am I kidding? I don't make any fucking sense."

"No, you do," Reed says with a nod. Once again, his eyes move past me. This time in the direction of the pitcher's mound.

My stomach aches and twists again. Now I know it isn't from baseball. I fucking miss Ophelia. Hard core. Straight up. My soul is fractured and bruised, longing for my one and only.

"How is she?" Fuck it. I'm weak. I don't care, either.

"I was wondering when you would ask." He moves his eyes to mine. "She's good, but she's like you."

I tilt my head, confused by his comment.

"She looks like shit when she thinks no one is watching, then tries to pretend everything's okay when she thinks everyone is watching."

"Damn." The thought of Ophelia still hurting because of me only makes me feel worse when I thought it couldn't get any worse.

"She's here, though," he adds.

My heartbeat jumps. "She's here? You mean in Boston?"

"Yeah." He sighs, casually. "She's staying with Claire for now, but she just closed on an apartment downtown and is set to move in next week. She opened her own clothing line online and plans on building a small storefront in her apartment."

"I'm glad." It's true. "That's good." My chest warms at the thought of Ophelia finally doing something for herself. I'm content knowing Jamie and I didn't completely break her spirit. She isn't at the mercy of Max, my brother, or even Travis Sterling. She took control and didn't give up.

But I can't deny the sting of knowing I wasn't there to see it. I wasn't there to see the smile on her face as she realized her love for fashion hasn't faded. I wasn't there to wrap my arms around her and crash my mouth against hers.

I miss the way her body molded to mine. I miss the way her lips pressed to mine and the way she'd immediately swallow her nerves the second I walked into the room. I miss the way I melted as I stared into her blue eyes. I miss the way she loved me despite all the times I proved myself unworthy. My love for her hasn't faded.

"I bought tickets to the game tonight," Reed blurts out. "I was thinking of inviting Ophelia, if you're okay with it. I thought it might be time for her to see a real professional game."

Fuck. My heart literally drops into my aching stomach. Only it no longer aches. Now it's filled with hope. Damn that fucking hope. I can't explain it, but seeing Reed sitting in front of me reassures me of one fact:

Ophelia feels exactly the same as I do.

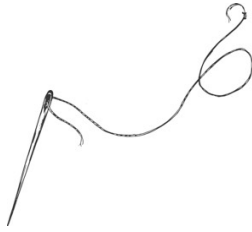
Both of us are living out only half our dreams.

I don't know whether Ophelia will take Reed up on his offer to go out tonight, but the idea of seeing her makes my heart nearly pound out of my chest.

"Where are your seats?" I ask. I can't help but crack a smile. It's the first real smile I've made since I was with Ophelia.

The corner of Reed's mouth curls, and his eyes light up. "Right here."

THIRTY-TWO



OPHELIA

I've wasted the past few weeks foolishly believing I could replace my love for Hunter with my love of design.

Don't get me wrong, my passion still runs strong. It's the kind that runs through my veins, keeping me alive. But it's doing just that: keeping me alive. I don't feel the same spark I felt when I was around Hunter. I long for the feeling of his hands around my thighs, lifting me up to wrap my legs around him. I long for the way his tongue glided across my skin so effortlessly, it was as if he was meant to taste me for the rest of my life. My chest has been a hollow shell of what it used to be. I can't help playing our last night over in my head. The way his green eyes filled with regret. His gorgeous mouth had turned permanently downturned, and he was shocked to find out that he was the reason I'd lost everything.

However, the longer we spend apart, the more I understand the choice he made. I understand it wasn't a choice at all. He did what he had to do, just like I did when I was standing in front of my empty apartment, staring at an eviction notice taped to my front door.

I'd made a choice to live with Reed when I was given no other choice. It's complicated yet simple at the same time.

"I know you better than you think I do."

I drop the dress I'm attempting to slide onto a hanger and eye my brother from the opposite side of my worktable.

"I have no idea what you mean by that," I mutter when in fact, I know exactly what he means by it.

“Are you happy here?” His brown eyebrows arch beneath his favorite Rebels hat. The edges are faded and frayed.

“You mean here, in Boston?”

“Sure.”

I drop my hands again and exhale. I look past Reed, through the large paned window. The view from here isn't as great as it was at Claire's, but it's still nice. Brick buildings line each side of the street, and wrought iron railings adorn each patio. It's quintessentially Boston.

“Surprisingly, I like it,” I say, focusing on Reed again.

The corner of his mouth lifts into a smirk. “I'm proud of you.”

I roll my eyes. I've never heard Reed tell me he's proud of me. It's a foreign feeling. “Stop. You sound like our parents.”

“Wow.” He laughs. “Remind me to never pay you a compliment again.”

“Sorry.” I laugh with him. “Thank you.”

Today is the first day Reed has taken the time to come visit me since I moved out of his house. I didn't blame him for his sudden silence. He was working on his last few finals and ending out his season with the Rebels. He hasn't talked much about whether he's won his games or how the team has managed training without Hunter. He's been careful not to mention him.

“What are your plans for today?” He runs his finger across the fabric splayed out across my table, as if he's even remotely interested.

My large white worktable is about six feet long and three feet wide—the perfect size—allowing me to lay out all my work and cut fabric. Essentially, I've converted the kitchen island. It definitely beats the small table I had when I lived in Reed's house.

After Claire suggested I sell my dresses on my own, I went out on a limb and listed them online. Within hours, I'd sold my entire collection. I even received a few comments saying how

they'd seen my designs when stopping at Max's store as they passed through Eden. The idea anyone knew me through my designs was a balm to my wounded soul. The temporary, half-filled satisfaction I've felt since I broke off my relationship with Hunter.

After selling my entire collection in less than a day, I got to work. With Claire's blessing, I'd taken over her living room and turned it into my workshop. I may have lost my dream, but it suddenly transitioned into a new one. A possibility that became reality.

In a matter of a few weeks, I'd saved enough money to put down a security deposit on an apartment within walking distance to Claire's. The size wasn't as large as Claire's, and the rent was at least double hers. Regardless, I've started fresh and on my own. I've taken control of my dream and am forging ahead.

But the empty hole in my heart still remains. The part of me that still loves Hunter.

I run my knife along the bottom swatch of fabric I'm working on.

"Well?" Reed asks, drawing my attention back up. He bends his knees.

"Well, what?"

"I asked what your plans were for tonight. I'm heading back to Eden tomorrow. I have a shift at the library." I guess Reed picked up a job at the library.

"Um ..." I twist my mouth. "Nothing. This is what I have planned." I gesture toward the table.

"No." He pulls the fabric out from under my hands. I snap my head up and let my jaw fall.

"What the fuck, Reed?" I reach across the table, but he snatches it farther away.

"There's no way you're staying here." He grins. "We're going to a game."

My heart stops, and my stomach plummets. My hands grow clammy before Reed has muttered which game he's referring to. I already know the answer.

Part of me was curious if Hunter had ever taken up the offer from the Revolutionaries. I avoided asking Dawson, and again, Reed hasn't bothered to mention Hunter at all. In fact, he's rarely mentioned him. I'm shocked he's suggesting we go to one of his games tonight.

"I don't think that's a good idea." My words croak from my suddenly dry throat.

"Come on," he begs. "It'll be fun. You've always enjoyed going to games."

I did. Especially when they were ones Hunter was playing in, but I'm not sure my heart could take it. Seeing him up there on the pitcher's mound, surrounded by thousands of fans...

Something tells me watching him play for the Major Leagues won't be the same as watching him play a college game. At least not a Northeast game.

"I do like going to them but ..." I look down, ignoring the way my heart is swelling ten times its original size. I'm afraid I'll have a heart attack right here. I look up at my brother with wide, pleading eyes. I need him to tell me the truth. "Did he accept his contract?"

It's the first time I've pried for information from my brother. I hate that I've stooped this low, but if I'm agreeing to go to a Boston Revolutionaries game, I need to prepare for what I'll potentially be getting myself into.

"He did." Reed's expression softens.

"Does he know we're going?" I ask. I might consider going if Hunter doesn't know I'll be there. Thousands of cheering and adoring fans all wearing the same red and white colors means I shouldn't be easy to spot.

I'm not sure my heart could handle seeing him. But him seeing me? I'm certain my heart couldn't handle it.

“No.” Reed clears his throat. “I figured it would distract him if he knew I was there watching him.”

He has a point. I’m sure playing for the Major Leagues is enough stress as it is.

“And as far as I know,” he adds, “he isn’t starting pitcher yet so we might not see him play. If at all.”

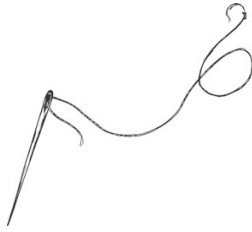
The thought of Hunter not knowing I’ll be there is enough for me to consider going. I’ve never been to a Revolutionaries game. All the times my father took Reed down to one, I never tagged along. I always argued my way out of it.

I twist my mouth in thought, mulling over my decision. Going to a Revolutionaries game is basically a rite of passage, right?

Who am I kidding? Hunter is the only reason I’m going. Even I can’t convince myself otherwise.

“Fine.” I groan. “Count me in.”

THIRTY-THREE



OPHELIA

I could kill Reed. Not literally, but the thought of punching him in his batting arm has crossed my mind a thousand times since we sat down in our seats.

First row.

Directly left of the pitcher's mound.

The team hasn't come out onto the field yet, but my stomach is already twisted into knots. It has been ever since we pulled into the parking lot. I was right. The Northeast Rebels field pales in comparison to the Revolutionaries stadium. Shiny, bright red seats encompass the entire stadium. Rows upon rows reach higher than the Rebels field. The grass is a bright green, impeccably manicured. Every piece of this place is over the top. Fans have quickly filled the stands. They're all wearing their white jerseys with red letters across the front. It's a sea of white and red. Not having a Revolutionaries jersey or shirt myself, I went with a simple red tank. I figured I'd blend in easier.

Reed is sitting beside me, keeping his eye out to the side of the field. He's waiting for the team to start filing in.

We both shift our attention to the other side of the field, watching as the visiting team walks out. Between the sea of white and red, there's the occasional orange jersey. San Francisco walks out onto the field. Half of the crowd boos, while a fraction of them cheer.

I lean forward and rest my elbows on my bare knees. I opted to wear my favorite pair of jean shorts. The weather is

unusually hot and humid. The back of my thighs sticks to the plastic seat, and sweat already prickles the back of my neck.

My stomach flutters at the thought of Hunter walking out onto the field at any moment. I only agreed to come to the game in the understanding Hunter wouldn't be able to spot me in the massive crowd. Reed clearly failed to mention our seats were front and center. We're in the direct line of sight by Hunter. There's no way he'll miss me.

I wrap my hand around the back of my neck, forcing myself to steady my breathing. I close my eyes and count to ten, imagining all the different scenarios and possibilities of how this game will turn out. Maybe Hunter won't see me. There's a very large possibility he'll walk out onto this field and be completely preoccupied with the fans. I'm certain there are a million other things on his mind besides me. At Northeast, Hunter took his pitching career seriously, as if training hard enough was a case of life and death. I can only imagine what he's like now that he's playing in the Major Leagues.

I snap my eyes open. Hunter and the rest of the Revolutionaries team still haven't come out onto the field. Out of the thousands of fans here, Hunter won't see me. I'm sure of it. At least I think I am.

I force myself to believe he won't see me, considering the alternative. The alternative being that he will see me and be unaffected. Fear settles in alongside the butterflies still raging within me.

I rub my palm across my bare knee and inhale. I need to consider the alternative might be the reality, no matter how hard I wish it wouldn't happen.

"What do you think so far?" Reed asks beside me. His elbow is resting on his knee, and his body is half turned toward mine. I can sense the anticipation radiating off him. He's nervous, too.

"It's ..." I breathe and look around the stadium. "Huge. And Reed, these are expensive seats."

I stare at my brother with wide eyes, wondering how in the hell he was able to afford these. “Don’t worry about how much they cost.” He clears his throat, a signal for me to let it go. I do.

Reed follows my gaze, taking in the stadium as if he’s seeing it for the first time. I know he isn’t. He’s been here more times than I can count.

His attention falls back to me, and he hitches his thumb over his shoulder. “I’m going to get a hotdog. Do you want one? Or maybe something else?”

I’m too nervous to eat. “No.” I shake my head. “Maybe just a soda.”

“Okay.” Reed grins. “I’ll be right back.”

I give him a nervous smile and watch as he bounds up the stairs. I twist back around in my seat and look out at the field. How in the world am I supposed to enjoy this game? Why did I ever think it was a good idea to sit here and be forced to watch Hunter playing for hours?

I bite down on the corner of my cheek, wondering what I got myself into. Reed did the same shit the night he’d invited me to the lake. He’d dragged me along, where later I was forced back against a tree and interrogated by a hot-headed baseball player with potent green eyes.

Same situation this time around. Minus the lake ... the tree. And Reed.

Regardless, it’s giving me the same feeling. I run my fingers through my loose curls and stare out onto the field.

“Here they come!” a fan behind me yells.

I turn and watch as the Revolutionaries take the field. I tell myself not to search for Hunter, but I already know I’m looking for him the instant the first player reaches the field.

Nerves start to take over my body. Prickles sprinkle across the back of my neck. My heart hammers in my chest.

The players continue to file onto the field, waving at their fans. They’re starting their pre-game warm-ups.

I glance over my other shoulder, up to the steps leading out of the stands.

Where the fuck did Reed go?

I consider leaving and going to find him, but an invisible thread forces me to turn back around. I'm grounded and glued to my seat. My brain is telling me to run. My heart is telling me to stay.

I prepare myself for heartbreak yet again. Professional baseball could have completely changed Hunter, even in this short amount of time.

Then I see him.

Hunter's unmistakable gait can be seen all the way from where I'm sitting. His broad shoulders fit into his white Revolutionaries jersey perfectly. The bright blue shade of his belt contrasts against his all-white pants. Not a single stain or smear of dirt has tainted his impeccable uniform yet.

He's walking beside another player but keeps his attention out on the fans. They stand and cheer for him. Their shouts growing louder the second he takes his hat off, waving it at them. It's a signature move I saw Hunter make time and time again, but he only does it once before placing it back on top of his head. At least he hasn't changed that part of his routine. He continues making his way down the field, stopping only long enough to grab his glove from the dugout.

I hold my breath when I see him step back out. He looks over his left shoulder. No second is wasted. Those potent green eyes that captured me from day one are staring directly at mine.

At first, I think Hunter will ignore me. He's a professional ball player now. Why would he single me out when I'm surrounded by thousands of Revolutionaries fans? Not to mention that I remember what he told me the night I'd gone to the Twin River game about how he only ever waves once. That's it. No exceptions.

But my heart bursts from my chest the second the corner of his mouth curls into a smirk. I want to fucking melt right here,

in the stands.

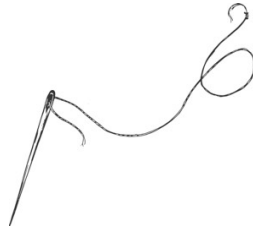
He sees me. His eyes meet mine, and he removes his hat, waving it in the air. With his hat still clutched in his hand, he places it against his chest. Over his heart. I want to cry. I want to jump down from my seat and wrap my arms around him. Tiny bursts of electricity spread across my body. I knew I missed Hunter, but I didn't realize how deeply until now.

It's in this moment I know I've completely forgiven him.

His green eyes flash under the stadium lights. My heart stops for the hundredth time and he quickly mouths, "*I'm sorry. I love you.*"

And before I have a chance to say it back, he jogs toward the pitcher's mound.

THIRTY-FOUR



OPHELIA

Dreams come and go. They shift and they change. Sometimes, they're completely unexpected.

I didn't see the moment my dream shifted from living in a high-rise apartment in the center of New York City to living a life filled with loving Hunter Moore.

Now I'm here, though, and I couldn't imagine myself anywhere else.

I haven't spoken to Hunter yet. The game ended less than an hour ago, but I haven't left the stadium. Paying attention to the game was a struggle, and not watching Hunter proved even more difficult. I'm standing in the middle of the tunnel leading from the field to the front of the park. Double doors are at one end, a wide-open field at the other.

I'm only standing here because of the text Hunter sent me after he'd waved to his fans on the way out of the stadium. I'm assuming when he'd made it back to the locker room to shower and change.

I'd told Reed he could go ahead to my apartment. I knew he needed to get back to Eden tomorrow. He didn't argue. My intuition tells me he knew this would happen all along.

I lean against the cement wall and stare at the text Hunter sent me.

Hunter: Meet me in the tunnel to the left of our team dugout.

I didn't waste any time getting myself to the tunnel. Most of the fans have cleared out now. Even the stadium staff. No one batted an eye when I simply found my way down here. I'm not entirely sure where this one leads. From what Reed has told me, every stadium is different.

I'm holding my phone when I hear footsteps to my left. Hunter is walking toward me. He's changed. His pair of gray sweats hang low on his waist. His white Revolutionaries T-shirt clings to his freshly washed skin. The ends of his hair drip with water. He was quick to come find me.

He waits until he's standing only an inch away from me before he greets me. "Hey."

"Hey." I grin. The butterflies from earlier have returned. I lift my arm and gesture behind him to the field. "Congratulations on your win."

"Thanks." His eyes stay on mine, shifting between each one. They flash in the shadow of the tunnel. It's as if his brain is still registering that I'm standing in front of him.

"I noticed you were first to pitch." We're making small talk, but I know this isn't what Hunter asked me to meet him for. I can't help it. I feel the same way I did the night he'd pushed me against the side of the house when he thought I was having an affair with Dawson. We're covered in shadows.

"It was the first time Coach put me up to pitch first."

"Wow." I can't help but smile. "You were incredible out there. Congratulations."

"You've told me that already." He takes a step forward. "I heard you've started your own collection and are selling it from your apartment here in Boston."

He cocks an eyebrow, and his familiar dimple presses into his cheek with his smirk. I swallow and press my back into the concrete as if it will suddenly give way. It doesn't.

I smirk, wondering who told Hunter about my collection. Was it Reed? Claire? My gut is telling me it was Reed.

“You heard?” I give him the side eye. “Were you asking about me?”

He doesn't answer. He takes another step closer. “I miss you.”

It's an admission that shoots straight to my beating heart. It's an arrow stopping it dead.

His chest vibrates with a chuckle. “I played this conversation out in my head a million times, and my delivery was a little more tactful than that.”

Fuck, I might as well be a puddle on the floor.

“Hunter ...”

“No,” he cuts me off. “You don't have to say anything. I just needed you to know I truly loved you. I'm sorry for what my family did. I'm sorry for what *I* did. I was an asshole before I met you, and I won't make excuses. I could probably send you a million apologies for the rest of my life and it will never be enough. You deserve more than that. You deserve more than me.”

“Oh, Hunter,” I warn. “You know me better than that. I'm fully capable of handling myself and knowing what I deserve.”

He smirks again, and that damn dimple reappears. “I just needed you to know that.”

“I do.” I nod and rest my head against the concrete. “After I found out about you and Andrew, I realized you didn't intend to hurt anyone when you backed out of your mother's business. In fact, I already knew. I was just shocked when I found out the details of how it went down. She gave you something you didn't want, and you wanted an out. Someone was going to get hurt, regardless. I just happened to be unintentional collateral damage.” A tear slips from my eye and spills over, sliding down my cheek. Hunter catches it with the pad of his thumb. “I can't fault you for fighting for your dream when I was doing the same.”

Hunter clears his throat. His eyes widen, and if I didn't know any better, I would swear they were beginning to well with tears. I've never seen him this vulnerable. “Still, if I had

to do it all over again...” He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. He sniffs and lifts his hand to my face, dragging the pad of his thumb across my cheekbone, under my eye.

“You don’t have to say it,” I whisper.

“I do.” His fingers thread through my hair, brushing it away from my face. He presses the tips of his fingers against my head, urging me to match his gaze. “I need you to know something, Ophelia, because I think for a long time, others have had a skewed perception of me. While skewed, some of it does hold some merit. I stumbled through my first few years of college, mostly because I never thought I’d ever be able to turn baseball into a career. A business finance degree was forced on me by my entire family, including my father who supported a baseball career but knew the odds weren’t in my favor. Everyone was in my ear, telling me finance was the right decision. I was miserable. Drinking. Partying to get my mind off my future. Sadly, when my mother died and the lawyer read Jamie and me her will, I was given an opportunity. An opportunity to back out.” He swallows, the corners of his eyes pricking with fresh tears. The greens of his eyes sharpen. “But that opportunity cost you, and no matter the good that came with it...” He gestures toward the field through the tunnel. “I’ve hurt people. I hurt you. And I think it’s going to take a while before I can forgive myself. I thought this was all I would ever want. I thought the moment I came here, my life would be fulfilled. But it hasn’t been. You crashed into my world, and it changed everything for me.”

I tilt my head to the side, leaning into Hunter’s touch. My heart swells inside my chest. It fills with air, expanding. “Listen to me, Hunter.” I grip the side of his shirt, tugging him toward me. His hips press into my stomach, waking the butterflies still inside. It’s the closest we’ve been since that night in his truck. “You can spend the rest of your life feeling guilty for what you’ve done but I choose to think of it differently.”

“How so?” There’s a hint of a smile on his mouth, but he holds it back. Fear lingers in his expression. He’s worried I won’t ever be able to forgive him.

“You might think it was the wrong move when you traded your dream at the cost of others, but it led me to you. If you hadn’t signed that day, I wouldn’t have been walking down the street with a broken suitcase.” We both chuckle. “Your wrong move led me to you. You were the dream I didn’t know I wanted until I had it.”

“Fuck, Ophelia.” He sighs. His eyes widen. “I fucking love you.” His shoulders shift with relief as he presses his whole body into me.

I search his eyes, letting him know that I meant what I said. It’s true. Despite all the horrible unlucky events that unfolded after losing my internship at Travis Sterling, it led me to Hunter. And I have him to thank for that.

“I love you, Hunter.” I tug him impossibly closer.

I inhale one sharp breath before Hunter pulls me close and places his lips to mine. He steals the small amount of air I managed to squeak in. Instinctively, I moan against his lips. I want to laugh. I want to cry.

I’ve never felt more at home than I do here, standing in the tunnel of the Revolutionaries stadium, kissing Hunter Moore.

Every kiss Hunter gives me is another stitch closing the remaining open wounds of my heart.

I inhale one more breath before he kisses me again. He slides his tongue between my lips, opening my mouth. Maybe it’s the distance we put between us or the time we spent apart, but Hunter’s kisses and touches are different than before.

They’re deeper, made with purpose, as if he’s pouring his entire soul into mine. His hands move to my waist, and he unbuttons my shorts. The tunnel is dark from where we’re standing. We look out onto the field. The main lights are shut off. If there were anyone here, they wouldn’t see us down the tunnel unless they purposely walked down here.

“Everyone is gone,” Hunter quickly adds, reading my thoughts. “This tunnel leads to the parking lot.” He tips his head to the side, toward the double doors.

“Oh.” I’m still catching my breath. “That’s good.”

When I turn back to face Hunter, his eyes are already on mine. His grin spreads as wide as it was when he saw me sitting in the first row of seats before the game. My insides completely melt.

“It is,” Hunter whispers, leaning into the hollow of my ear. His lips graze my skin, sending prickles down the back of my neck. My thighs clench. “Makes it easier, since I want to show you something.”

Hunter and his dirty mouth. My heart hammers in my chest, bracing me for what he’s about to say.

He doesn’t waste any time. He unbuckles his belt and unzips the front of his uniform pants. He frees himself, and his cock is already hard as stone. The tip of it presses between my thighs, against my center.

“What are you wanting to show me?” I swallow.

His fingers graze the inside of my thigh before they shove my shorts aside. He slips the tips of his fingers inside me. He pumps them a few times, then pulls out. He uses my wetness to rub along his cock. He’s still sliding his hand over himself when he brings his mouth to the hollow of my ear again. “To show you I’m yours.”

I hardly have a chance to catch up with Hunter when he wraps his hands around the back of my thighs and lifts me up. He pins my back to the wall, and I wrap my legs around him. Fire burns in my belly, spreading like wildfire across my skin.

Reaching between us, he slides my shorts aside again, leaving space for him to enter me. The tip of his cock presses against my wet folds. With one move, he pulls his hips back and slides himself inside me. He doesn’t pull back when he pushes himself all the way in. He fills me, then stills. I tilt my head back and gasp. My mouth falls open, and I take a moment to revel in the way it feels to be with Hunter again.

I wrap my hands around his head, raking my fingers through the hair peeking out from beneath his cap.

“Look at me,” he orders. He places his hand on my cheek, pulling me down to look at him. “I’m yours.”

He repeats the same words he whispered into my ear, but this time is different. This time is a promise. A deal.

“And I’m yours.”

Hunter may have traded my dream for his, but the best part is ... he gave me a new one.

EPILOGUE

Ophelia

Eight Months Later

“I showed you how I play. Now you show me how you work.”

I spin around in my chair to find Hunter standing on the opposite side of my worktable. He’s leaning against the edge of it with his arms outstretched. His muscles and veins swell under his skin. His Boston Revolutionaries jersey is still unbuttoned, revealing his toned chest and stomach.

Damn. How is this man so perfect?

There are a few scrapes and cuts still scattered across various parts of his body. An unfortunate symptom of being a star pitcher for Boston’s Major League team. Especially when they’re on track to play in the World Series. Only a few more games in the regular season. With Hunter busy between his training and games, it’s left time open for me to work freely on my next collection.

I’ve spent the past eight months intensely creating an entirely new collection apart from the ones I was making for Max’s store. This one is more elaborate, but I’ve stayed true to myself. In fact, I think this new collection speaks to me more than any other designs I’ve made. I’m still selling pieces online, but my production has cranked up with the impending opening of my storefront. Since Hunter has a place of his own closer to the stadium, I’ve been staying at his place and working on transitioning my apartment into a small boutique.

It isn't big, and there are a million tasks I still need to do, but I know this is what I want. I feel it in my bones. Plus, there's a perk. I get to live with Hunter again. Minus two roommates this time.

I spin back around in my chair, facing my sewing machine. I adjust the fabric under the needle and glance over my shoulder. "You didn't show me how to play baseball, Hunter," I mutter. "I already knew how to play."

I can feel Hunter move around the worktable and stand behind me. He presses his waist against my shoulders and leans down.

"I'm fairly certain you weren't playing by the rules that day."

"You keep telling yourself that." I roll my eyes, even though he can't see me.

I make one final adjustment before pressing the tip of my toe to the pedal but Hunter's mouth beside my ear stops me. "Are you going to show me how to use this contraption or not?"

I giggle. "I mean, if you really want me to."

"With the amount of pin pricks and cuts I've seen you get, I'm not sure I do."

"I'm not entirely certain you have room to talk," I point out. "The bruises I've seen you come home with ..."

"Huh," Hunter quips behind me, still bent over, his face close to mine. My chest swells and my heart pounds. It always does when I'm around him. "Does it worry you?"

"Sometimes." I shrug.

I gasp when his hands slide across my shoulders and down the front of my chest. He stops on my heart, feeling it pound under his large hand.

"You told me I became your new dream." His words fall on a statement. He's right. Eight months ago, we stood under the tunnel of the Revolutionaries stadium when I told Hunter he'd become the dream I never knew I wanted.

It's still true. More so now than ever.

"I did." I grin, my body warming as he moves his hand from my heart, down my arm. He lifts my hand and holds it out. With his other hand, he reaches around me and holds a single diamond ring above my ring finger.

I don't move. I hold my breath, my chin quivering immediately.

Hunter speaks into the hollow of my ear. "You told me I became your new dream, but there's something I didn't tell you. You became mine, too."

Goosebumps spread down my neck and arms.

"Will you make my last dream come true?" he whispers. "Will you marry me?"

Hunter drops the ring and allows it to slip halfway down my finger. I spin around and hold my hand close to my chest. I grab the ring and slide it the rest of the way, staring into Hunter's green eyes.

"I will."

And when he leans down to place his lips on mine, I know we've both finally got what we really wanted. We just needed to do a little trading to get there.

A NOTE FROM BRITTANY

Thank you for reading *The Wrong Pitch*!

I hope you enjoyed the start of the boys of the Northeast Rebels. As a thank you, I've written a fun and spicy special bonus epilogue from Hunter's POV!

Read [Here](#)

The Northeast Rebels series has just begun and continues with *The Close Call*, a hot second chance, next-door neighbor romance. Any guesses on which player you think it might be?

I'm excited for this one as second chance romance holds a special place in my heart!

You can grab your copy of *The Close Call* [Here](#)

Flip to the next page to start the Heartbreak Series, featuring a group of friends working and living in Austin, Texas and finding love through Heartbreak.

Keep reading to start with [The Rules of Heartbreak](#)

THE RULES OF HEARTBREAK - SNEAK PEEK

Rule #1

When you catch your fiancé having an affair with your best friend, start your life completely over.

Chapter 1

Sloan

“It’s so fucking hot.” I tip my chin up to the clear blue sky and squint my eyes against the bright sun. Sweat drips down my face, sliding its way down the back of my neck. My back aches and my skin heats with the mid-June sun scorching across every inch of my body. I swipe the back of my hand across my wet skin.

My chest has transformed to a light shade of pink, highlighting the faint freckles dotted across my skin, and my hair is saturated with sweat. I inhale a deep breath and crack my eyes open, dreading the last box I need to finish loading into my house. I don’t even bother picking it up. Instead, I stick my foot out and scoot it across the threshold of the front door. The box scrapes against the pavement before sliding across the hardwood of the front entrance of my mother’s old house. Or, I guess I should say my new house—a fact I still haven’t been able to wrap my head around. I leave the box sitting on the floor with the rest of the boxes I’ve already stuffed inside.

“Exhausted?” Liam passes me with his arms wrapped around a box, carrying it inside. His eyebrows arch across his

forehead, the corner of his mouth curling.

“A little.” I smirk, wiping my hands on the front of my shorts.

Liam walks back outside, headed for the truck parked in my driveway. I lean against the door jamb and stare outside, taking in my new neighborhood. My eyes dance across the street, taking it all in. It’s surprising to me that up until three months ago, I never knew my mother lived in a place like this. In fact, I shouldn’t be surprised at all. I never knew a single thing about her, not even so much as her hair color, until her lawyer showed up at my doorstep. It’s funny how in the twenty-four years since she gave birth to me, she never made any effort to get to know me. Instead, she decides to leave me her house in Austin, Texas. Nice touch, Mother.

In a way, my mother’s dying wish to have me inherit her house has become a blessing. I didn’t realize how bad I wanted to get out of Minnesota until the opportunity presented itself.

Life in Minnesota was colder and more isolating.

Not here.

The hot Texas air warms my body, burrowing itself deep in my bones. The people here seem to be happy. It feels as if I’ve transported myself to a whole different world, away from the life I was living, opening up the possibility to start a new one.

I cross my arms over my chest and rest my head against the door frame of my new home. The sun shines across my driveway as my brother steps out of the back of the moving truck.

He rakes his fingers through his damp hair. “Are you sure this was a good idea, Sloan?”

“What?” I ask him, faking a smile. It’s the thousandth time he’s asked me this question. “Liam, we’ve already loaded everything into the house. There’s no way in hell I’m taking it all back out even if I wanted to.”

“I know, I know.” He holds his hands up. “I’ve probably asked you too many times.”

“Only about a *thousand* times.”

He dramatically sighs, following it up with a shrug. He moves past me and bends down to pick up a box labeled *Kitchen*, carrying it down the hall.

I don't follow him. I'm enjoying the view of my street too much from where I'm standing. The neighborhood is nice, definitely a few steps up from the cabin I grew up in back in Minnesota.

The exterior of the houses are covered in brick, each one a different shade than the one beside it. The yards are large, giving each house a good amount of separation. Even though the grass has turned a light shade of brown under the scorching summer sun, the neighborhood is still beautiful. The two-story houses are full of life, home to families of all kinds. An older couple walking their dog passes by. They smile and wave before continuing on their way.

Liam returns from the kitchen a few minutes later. This time his arms are empty. He catches my attention, and I glance over my shoulder long enough to see him walking down the hall.

“I'll never stop asking you if you still think this was a good idea,” he says with a heavy breath. “This place is fucking hot as hell.”

I laugh, pointing at his clothes. “It is when you're dressed like that. Leave it to the man from Minnesota to still be wearing jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt when it's nearly a hundred degrees out.” This time I give him a genuine smile.

“Hey, I'm not the one who decided to move to a different state where they know absolutely *no one*.” Liam arches his eyebrows, sarcasm dripping from his tongue. I let his comment slide, knowing how hurt he is that I've decided to leave Minnesota.

I look down, keeping my arms crossed over my chest. I frown, dragging the tip of my sandal across the concrete. “There's nothing left for me up there, anyway.”

“That’s not exactly true.” Liam frowns. “But I can understand how you would feel that way.”

I can sense part of him is still angry about what happened between me and my ex. He’s always been protective of me. While Liam’s anger still boils, mine has been reduced to a mere simmer. To some degree, I still feel what he did. Don’t get me wrong—finding my fiancé fucking my best friend on our dining room table was enough to make me carry an entire life of hatred, but I decided to move on, to attempt to start a new life. The past few months have allowed me to transform the knots twisted in my chest into nothing but loose unraveled tendrils. My old life has now become a memory, a recollection of what used to be. The pain doesn’t cut me the same way it did when I found out about Cole’s affair. I’ve simply learned to live with it.

Liam’s eyebrows knit, sadness pooling in his irises. “You still have me and Mark.”

Liam is my brother, but not in the traditional sense. His mom married my dad when I was three years old and Liam was four. Since we were so young when our parents married, I don’t remember a time when he wasn’t in my life.

I nod but can’t bring myself to look at Liam. I’ll miss him and his husband, Mark, but I know deep down this was the right choice. For the first time, I feel like I’m finally grabbing my life by the horns, directing it exactly where I want it to go. Which is here, in Texas.

“I promise, this is where I’m supposed to be. I may not know anyone yet, but I will. I have plenty to do around the house, and I’ll start looking for a summer job to pull in extra money. I’ll be good, don’t worry.” I cross my arms over my damp chest and nod my head back toward the house.

“I’m sorry I keep asking you.” He sighs. “I’m just going to miss you, that’s all. I’m glad you were able to find a job quickly.”

“It wasn’t too difficult to get certified here in Texas. I’m just thankful I was able to snag the third-grade teaching

position in this school district. My commute doesn't seem too awful."

This coming school year is the first year I'll be teaching out of college. It was only a week after graduation when I found out about Cole and Brenna's affair. As horrendous as it was, Cole's indiscretion came at the most opportune time. Finding a job such as this one in Austin is nearly unheard of for a teacher fresh out of college, and I consider myself lucky—lucky and relieved. I truly am starting my life over in every sense.

"That's good." Liam nods, pressing his lips into a thin line. The corner curls into a smirk. "Plus, you're right about this place. You'll have plenty to do around here. It's missing that Sloan Montgomery touch."

I shrug. "I'll see what I can do. She might not have had the best taste in design, but this is a nice house." I clear my throat. "At least it's one thing I've learned about Ellie that I didn't know before. In fact, it's the only thing."

"You have a good point." Liam nods in agreement.

I narrow my gaze, attempting a smile. Standing here with Liam has become more weighted and emotional than I expected it to be. "The offer still stands, you know. You and Mark are always welcome to move down here. I bet Mark would love it here."

"Maybe." He frowns, considering the idea. His eyebrows dip and the thoughts clearly swirl in his eyes, but disappointment fills his expression when he tilts his head. "I don't know, Sloan. It's a big deal. I'd have to talk to Mark."

I nod, unraveling my arms and sliding my hands into the front pockets of my shorts. "I understand, but you will both have to at least visit. I won't accept anything less." I smile, hoping this offer cheers him up.

"Are you kidding me? Of course we will." He grabs my hand and holds it between us. Tears well in his eyes. After a heavy sigh, he clears his throat and releases his grasp. He bends down to pick up another box, but I stop him.

“You don’t have to do any more, Liam. I’ve got it from here.”

He straightens his back, swiping his hand across his forehead the same way I did a few moments ago. “It feels like you’re trying to run me out of here.”

“I’m not, but I know Mark needs you back at home, and you only have about two hours before your flight leaves.” I place a reassuring hand on his shoulder. My fingers stick to the sweat on his back, and I immediately regret placing it there. I move it away and wipe it across the front of my shorts. Liam’s eyes follow my hand before he looks down at his shirt, scrunching his nose.

“Do you mind if I take a quick shower before I head out? I don’t think I should be going on a plane when I feel and smell like this.” The corners of his mouth dip in disgust.

I laugh. “Of course you can.”

“Okay.” He gives me a small smile and runs out to the truck to grab his bag. When he comes back inside, he heads for the stairs but stops when he lands on the second step. “I can still reschedule my flight. I can leave tomorrow instead.” He’s grasping at straws.

Liam and I both drove down here in the moving truck, my car attached to a trailer behind it. We made it just in time for his return flight home. The longer he stands here, the more I realize how much I’m going to miss him.

“Seriously, Liam. I’m fine.”

A dot of sweat slides down his cheek, or maybe it’s a tear. I can’t tell at this point.

He clears his throat. “Right.” He doesn’t offer up any other reasons for me to question my move here before he disappears upstairs. Once I hear the shower running, I start to dig through one of the boxes piled in the front entrance. I start with the easy box, labeled *Blankets*. I lift all of them out of the box and carry them to my bedroom.

Not only did my mother leave me her house in her will, she also left me everything inside of it as well. This includes

her bed. Part of me feels odd using it, not knowing a single thing about the woman who slept in it. The same applies to every bit of furniture in this house. Eventually I'll replace it all with my own furniture, but I don't have a choice tonight, at least not until I have the time to take a trip down to the mattress store. Cole kept ours after our breakup, and I've been sleeping in Liam's guest bedroom. It will feel good to have a bed of my own. For tonight, this will have to do.

On the way back downstairs, I avoid looking at the pictures lining the wall in the upstairs hallway. There are only a handful framed and nailed to the wall and only one containing a picture of my mother. The other pictures are all scenic. Mountains, palm trees, beaches, you name it. It's an odd, eclectic collection of photographs, but so was my mother it appears. The one picture of her is the only time I've ever come close to seeing what she looked like. Her head is tilted back in laughter, leaving only half her face visible. Although her eyes are closed, it's her smile I notice first. I only know the woman in the picture is my mother because it's the same as mine. I stare at the photograph as a pit grows in the bottom of my stomach. I take a deep breath then walk away, hoping the feeling will pass.

When Liam is finished with his shower, he finds me sitting on the couch in the living room. I have my feet propped up on the coffee table, and I've been scrolling through social media on my phone, the reality of my new life staring me directly in the face. He grabs a glass from one of the boxes in the kitchen and fills it with water from the tap without speaking a word. We both know it's time for him to leave.

"Are you all set?" I carefully ask him. Even though Liam and I are adults, it still saddens me to know he won't be a quick five-minute drive away anymore. We've never lived so far apart.

"I think so." He smirks, glancing around at all the boxes scattered throughout the first floor of my house. "Are you?"

I follow his gaze and study each box, taking in all the work I have ahead of me. There's no denying there's a lot for me to go through and set up, but part of me is looking forward to it.

I'm building a life of my own, one without anyone else. I look Liam in the eyes and nod. "I am."

"Good." After grabbing his bag, he tosses it over his shoulder and heads to the front door. I follow him out to the driveway and catch up to him. He wraps his arm around me, keeping me close. We walk quietly, listening to our feet drag across the pavement.

Once we make it to the truck, Liam opens the door but abruptly stops. I wince when his elbow jabs into mine, his stare focused out on the street. "Oh my god." His jaw drops and I follow his gaze, trying to see what he's looking at.

"What?" I ask him, scanning the yards across from mine.

"Is that your neighbor?" he asks me, his eyes open wide. His voice is a sharp whisper. "He definitely wasn't out here earlier, and there is no way we would have missed him."

My eyes widen when I spot the man Liam is talking about. In fact, he's hard to miss. His wet brown hair dips across his forehead as he bends down, digging into what looks like a tool bag. The muscles of his bare back stretch with every movement, his tan skin glistening under the sweltering sun. His faded jeans are worn, covered in several grease stains and torn across his knees. The man doesn't look up, focused on working on the motorcycle parked in his driveway. He carries the wrench over to the bike and bends down again. Liam is right—there's no way we wouldn't have seen him out here earlier.

Liam jabs me with his elbow again. "Maybe moving here wasn't a bad idea after all," he mutters under his breath, acting as if the man can hear him from where we're standing in my driveway.

I roll my eyes at his comment. "You're married, Liam."

"Hey, that man is *gorgeous*. Don't lie and tell me you don't see it too. And being married doesn't mean I can't still appreciate an attractive man when I see one." He points his finger at me. "And you can too."

I shake my head. “I don’t think I’m ready to jump into that pool. Not for a long time, anyway.” I’m still staring at the man, studying his profile. He looks around my age, maybe a bit older. His eyes are intently focused on his bike as he twists the wrench, music playing from the phone halfway stuffed into his back pocket. My eyes make it back up to catch the features of his face. There’s a sharp plane to his nose, stopping above his full lips. Sweat drips down his jawline, slithering down the tan skin of his neck. I swallow and press my lips together, heat rising up my throat. Maybe Liam has a point. There is no denying that my neighbor is obnoxiously good-looking, but I have rules and promises I’ve made to myself.

“You will be at some point.” Liam finally breaks his gaze away from my neighbor. His eyes sadden again when he pulls me in for a hug. His strong arms wrap around me, and I bury my face against his chest. He smells clean, and although he took a shower here, he still smells like home.

I scoff and roll my eyes. My brother’s optimistic outlook on my love life is quite the opposite from mine.

“Wait.” I pull back, keeping him at arm’s length. “I just got my sweat all over you.”

“I don’t care.” He shakes his head and chuckles.

I smile, pulling him back toward me. “Call me when you land.”

“I will.” He kisses the top of my head and hops into the truck. A tear slips down his cheek, and this time I don’t have to wonder if it’s sweat. I know he’s truly crying.

I swipe away a tear of my own as Liam starts the engine and begins backing out of my driveway. I don’t move to go inside the house until Liam turns and drives out of my neighborhood. In a way, his absence brings out two different feelings. A weight lifts off my shoulders and I feel ready to take the next step in my new life, but the other piece of me aches for my family. I know I’ll miss them, but I also know it’ll fade with time. This is now my new home, and I intend to do everything I can to make it feel that way.

I stand in the middle of my driveway until the sweat starts to run down my cheeks the same way it did earlier. I peer up at the sun, squinting. It may be hot, but I can feel the sunshine pouring into my soul. I've never felt the sun this way before, at least not somewhere I call home. The only other time was when I took a vacation to Florida with Cole for spring break our junior year of college.

I look down at my feet, already noticing how my skin has started to tan. I smile, but my eyes widen when I catch the ring of sweat around the collar of my tank top. Dots of sweat bead my chest, and I frown. The frayed ends of my shorts cling to my thighs. I wrap my hands around my neck and sigh, tipping my head back in exhaustion. I trail my fingers across my skin, attempting to wipe away the sweat gathered there. The sun dips behind the trees lining the street. It's getting late, and a shower and bed sound like the perfect way to finish out my first day in my new home.

I spin on my heel, ready to head back into my house, but quickly stop. My feet tangle, the tip of my sandal scraping across the pavement. I stumble forward, reaching my arm out toward the hood of my car. My hand slaps against my black vehicle, catching me before I fall flat on my face. My neighbor, the one who was too busy focusing on fixing his motorcycle to notice me and Liam, is now staring directly at me. His dark eyebrows slant, studying every inch of me. It's as if I can feel his stare burning a hole through my chest.

My breath catches in my throat and I stare straight back at him. I stand, clearing my throat, wondering what about me has caught his attention.

He's standing beside his bike, running a rag across the palms of his hands and through his fingers. Black smudges streak across his sculpted arms, all the way down to his wrists. Sweat drips down the front of his chest. He's still shirtless, his bare chest exposed for all the neighborhood to see.

The music is still playing from the phone in his back pocket. I swallow, my throat starting to dry from the intense heat. At least that's what I'm telling myself.

My cheeks blush, mostly from my embarrassing stumble in front of this stranger.

Great first impression, Sloan.

The man's eyes don't move, and his expression catches me off guard. He doesn't smile and he doesn't wave. He does nothing. His face and body are still, as if he's been caught in a trance. He simply stands in his driveway with a blank stare.

I stare back at him with confusion. I don't know this man and have never seen him, but I can't help feeling like my heart might burst out of my chest. All from the intensity of his stare. The awkwardness of our situation leaves me clueless as to what to do. I start to think of all the reasons I know moving here was a good idea. I'm determined to start this new life of mine off on the right foot. I take a step forward, ready to walk over to him to introduce myself, but then I stop. Nerves rise inside me, my stomach fluttering. I'm covered from head to toe in sweat, and from the expression on his face, my neighbor doesn't appear too eager for me to walk over to him.

Instead, I stupidly lift my hand and wave, giving him the largest grin I can muster. "Hi." My voice wafts across the sweltering air between us. There's a considerable distance as we're both standing in the middle of our driveways. For a second, I'm unsure if he heard me.

But the heat in my cheeks intensifies when the man lifts his hand and swipes the pad of his thumb across his bottom lip. His eyes narrow and his jaw tightens. He doesn't respond to my greeting, at least not verbally. Instead, he turns around and walks back up his driveway. His boots beat against the pavement as he makes his way to his front door, shutting it behind him.

I awkwardly stand in my driveway, trying to decipher what just happened. Why was he staring at me? And how is it that I could feel his stare burrowing its way into me as deep as the sun's rays have been?

My first interaction with my neighbor isn't quite what I expected. I hope my new co-workers won't react the same way.

I turn around and head back into my house, refocusing on building this new life of mine. The second my eyes land on the mountain of boxes still piled in the entrance, I groan. I walk past them and slowly head up the stairs.

I take a quick shower then throw myself onto my mother's old bed, and before I'm able to even think about the million things I still have to do, I close my eyes and let sleep take me away.

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XOXO



ABOUT BRITTANY

Brittany is a New Adult, Contemporary romance author best known for writing steamy, heart-clenching love stories. Her love of reading started at a young age. Finally deciding to fulfill her lifelong dream, she took the plunge into the writing world and published her first book when she was twenty-eight.

Although she grew up all over the world including places such as California, England, and Texas, Connecticut stole her heart. After living there for fourteen years, her husband took a new job and she reluctantly moved but plans on moving back.

Currently, she resides in Maine with her two sons and husband. She loves reading spicy romances as well as writing them and is a self-proclaimed Starbucks addict.

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