



THE #1 RULE IN THIS BARGAIN: **NO FALLING IN LOVE**

BOYFRIEND
bargain

Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author

ILSA MADDEN-MILLS

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For all the sparkly unicorns. You know who you are.

PROLOGUE

ZACK



When I showed up for tonight's game, I didn't know it would try to kill me.

I picture the headlines now: *D-1 hockey player dies during biggest rivalry event of the year.*

Whatever. I push those thoughts down and skate onto the rink, ignoring my out-of-control heartbeat. The thing is, *I can't die.* Sure, I scored two goals in the first two periods even after some heavy body checks, but that's not enough if I want to break the tie.

I need a hat trick.

I need to be the hero.

But the more I think about the fact that my chest is thumping faster than it should, the worse it gets.

Slow down, I tell my heart. Please.

It doesn't, and I inhale slowly through my nose then out through my mouth. Deep breaths usually chill me out when performance anxiety hits, but the arena spins, and I resist the urge to skate back to the bench and put my head between my legs.

Shake it off, Z.

It's just nerves in front of the home crowd. *Use it as energy.*

But this...this feels different. Like a train about to derail.

My jaw tightens as I clench my fists, physically willing myself to push one skate in front of the other.

Dressed in our black and gold, the team and I move to the center of the rink and up to the faceoff. Briefly, my thoughts go to the people in the stands. Watching. Depending on me to be the hockey star.

He has it all, people say. Number one pick in the NHL. Hobey Baker Award winner.

“Z? You good?” It’s Eric, my winger and best friend. Without even looking, I know the redheaded behemoth is assessing me—probably with a scowl on his bearded face.

He’ll think I’ve lost my mind.

He’ll think I can’t keep my shit together when it really counts.

I’m supposed to be strong.

I’m the captain.

I *am* this team.

“Z?” His voice is more insistent. “You ready for this?”

My chest squeezes and my arms tingle. *Am I dying?*

Don’t look at him. Dude sees everything.

I give him a nod.

Reece, my younger brother and another version of myself—so much so that it’s eerie—skates up on the other side. He slaps me on the back with his gloved hand and points his stick toward the Minnesota-Duluth players. “Ready to kick some bulldog ass?”

“Yeah.” One of the opposing defensemen catches my eye and makes a lewd gesture with his hands. It’s just a regular season game, but the rivalry between our universities goes back forty years. They also kicked our asses last year during the Frozen Four. Cold determination builds, battling with my racing heart as I grit my teeth. If you want to end up a champion, you have to climb the biggest mountains one step at a time, and right now this team is Mt. Everest.

I have to score.

A clammy feeling washes over me.

Shit.

Get. Yourself. Together.

Somewhere off in the distance, a lone female fan yells, “Go, Z!” and chills race down my spine. It’s not *her*, but something about the voice is familiar enough that it sends me back in time to a place when I thought the world was golden.

She’s dead, and I know it, yet...

Panic claws at my body as the cold air around me grows hot and thick. My throat tightens and it’s all I can do to not rip off my helmet. My brain wants to climb out of my head and push the tension away. My stick wobbles as I juggle it, trying to keep it from clattering on the ice.

Wake up, Z. Your heart is going to pop out of your chest.

Coach Swearingen yells something, and I swivel my head to look at him, watching his lips move in slow motion. The lights of the arena blind me, and it feels like a monumental effort, but I somehow manage to put my hand up to shield the glare.

I’m swaying and I think I taste ashes in my mouth. God, this helmet is choking me. My limbs are chunks of lead, and I stop, panting as I hunch over on the ice until I manage to stand again. I’m vaguely aware of the stares of the officials, the calls from my teammates, the wave of silence slowly drifting over the arena.

Reece and Eric call my name.

Someone touches my arm—I think it’s an official—but I brush their hand off.

“Z! Z! Z!”

It’s that girl in the stands again.

I can’t do this in front of everyone.

Zack Morgan is *not* weak.

I'm a goddamn superstar.

Even though I don't deserve it.

That's when I bolt, pulling away.

By the time I make it past the other players on the bench—I can't look at them for fear of them seeing what a total fucking disaster I am—I already have my helmet and gloves off. Chest heaving and gulping in air that isn't there, I dash down the carpeted, darkened hallway, my heart a runaway train.

Just go.

But I don't know where.

I don't know what I'm doing.

I just know I need to make this insanity stop.

You brought this on yourself, a voice says in my head. You should have worked out harder. You should have run that extra mile. You should have done that new age meditating shit. You should have scored three goals instead of two in the first period and then this pressure wouldn't be here.

This isn't normal.

I exhale rapidly, trying to breathe properly, but God help me, I can't...

Dashing for the locker room, my legs pump to get me there. I fling open the door and dart inside, my body shaking as I jerk off my jersey, followed by my pads.

Standing in just my pants, my eyes are wild as I sweep the place, taking in the giant lion painted on the wall with the *Never Give Up* slogan underneath. Dashing to my wooden locker, I reach in and yank out the small silver medallion that's hanging from a hook.

I don't wear it during games, but maybe I should. Maybe I should, just as a reminder.

"Nothing gold can stay," I manage to whisper aloud, the words the title and last line of a poem by Robert Frost.

Cradling the necklace in my palm, my thumb rubs the silver circle, feeling the etching of the letters.

From a distance, I hear pounding footsteps—medics and trainers, always ready.

My chest beats and beats and beats, gaining speed, gaining momentum, and darkness creeps into my vision as I slip the chain around my neck.

My knees buckle and I collapse on the floor.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I whisper to the girl I killed.

SUGAR

*Two weeks later*

Listen, I don't normally hide behind a dusty old support column in the basement of the Kappa house, but when I do, I'm a true ninja. In fact, I've been holding up this piece of wood for a full ten minutes, sipping on disgusting spiked punch as I periodically stick my head out and survey the dimly lit room. It's my first frat party—pretty sad for a senior—and I'm as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of drunk, gyrating co-eds.

Surprisingly, not one person has noticed my furtive glances from my hidey-hole except for the leering frat guy in the corner. Worst of all, he's wearing a too-tight black shirt over his beer gut that reads *Blink If You Want Me*, and unfortunately, sometimes I accidentally *do* look in his direction and we make eye contact. Obviously I blink. I mean, it's not like I can just *not* blink.

He sends me a rather dainty finger wave and motions for me to come over. For the hundredth time.

“Jesus,” I say under my breath. *Never in a million years* my eyes glare.

Besides, it's the hockey player I'm here for—the one who hasn't arrived at this party to celebrate the big win over Western Michigan this weekend.

Cursing under my breath, I check my watch for the second time, as if something might have changed in the last few minutes. Do these party people ever sleep or study? How do

they deal with hangovers the next day? Ten PM already on a Sunday night and I should be back in my room, curled up on my bed devouring Ding Dongs and Doritos while I go over notes for tomorrow's classes.

My shoulders press into the column as a swarm of giggling girls in high heels stagger past me. One of them bangs her elbow into my side but barely gives me a second glance. Rubbing the sore spot, I call out in my sweetest Southern accent, which comes out when I'm pissed. "Don't worry about me, y'all. I'm fiiiiine!"

They never even turn around. Ugh. I sigh. All I want to do is leave this party, put on my sweats and camisole, and veg out, maybe turn on some HBO after my studying is over. It takes a lot of work to attend one of the most prestigious—and most expensive—colleges in the Midwest. Welcome to Hawthorne University.

I blow at a piece of white-blond hair that's come out of my headband. Maybe he isn't going to show.

Then it happens.

An electric current crackles in the air and the partygoers stop talking, looking around expectantly, almost as if they know something big is coming.

It's *him*. Has to be.

No one else has this kind of stupid effect on people.

Standing on my tiptoes, I watch as Zack Morgan, AKA Z, AKA the Heartbreaker, AKA Douchebag (that one's my own contribution to the list) strides through the ground-level basement door, dipping his head so he doesn't bang it on the frame.

Heartbreaker. *Pfft*. In other words, he's a womanizer.

That's a moot point, though. I'm not here to discuss societal stereotypes of future pro athletes. I'm here to bargain.

Two other players—one blond and one a redhead—flank him on each side like chess pieces protecting their king. I squint. I think those guys are his...wingers?

The DJ turns down the music to announce the hockey team has arrived, and a buzz goes through the crowd as partiers clap and cheer.

The players move, the sea of people parting enough that I see the entirety of him in his full-blown glory and a tingle of *something* zips up my spine.

Finer than frog hair is what my southern mama would have said about him, and there's no doubt it's true. He's hot as hell and it slams into you when you look at him, like a great wind in a hurricane.

Without being too obvious, I study him from the bottom of his black motorcycle boots up to the tight jeans that cling to his thighs, all the way to the fitted, super-sleek dark grey leather jacket encasing his well-built upper body. On anyone else, that jacket would come off as pretentious—like a wannabe biker—but he looks like he just stepped off a movie screen.

He's a big-ass Viking.

I examine the six-foot, six-inch frame of the NHL's number one draft pick. Apparently, he's so slick on the ice that the Nashville Predators drafted him this past June, willing to wait a year for him to finish his senior year at HU.

It's definitely not just his toned, athletic grace in the arena that captures people's attention. It's that face. Chiseled and firm and strong, his jaw is spectacular. And his long, wavy, dirty blond hair? Good Lord, I've heard jokes about "hockey hair" and how hot it is—and now I see why. My fingers itch to touch it.

His nose is rather long, fitting for his height, but there's a slight imperfection, a small dent, which I imagine came from a hockey injury. It's impossible to see his eye color in this dim lighting, but I already know from his online HU bio that they're grey.

As if he senses me staring, he flicks his eyes in my direction and I stiffen, part of me terrified he'll find me, the other part hoping he does. It was the same last week when I

showed up for ladies' night at the Tippy Moose to spy on him. (It was right there in his bio that he frequented the popular bar, so I wouldn't call it stalking.)

That night I sat in a back booth, sipping on a shot of smooth tequila, trying to conjure up the backbone to go up to him and introduce myself. I mean, I have to start somewhere, but I'm not a flirty person. I have balls, don't get me wrong, but when it comes to him, nerves abound.

You have to make a move, Sugar.

With a deep exhalation, I take a step toward him just as a group of sorority girls call out his name and run up to say hi, rapt expressions on their faces as if he's the big present on Christmas morning.

Come on...

My hands twist as people circle around him, guys too, clapping him on the back and clamoring to get his attention. I don't blame them, I guess, if sucking up to athletes is your thing.

Doubt creeps in, and I frown, worrying I can't compete with this kind of attention. I'm not bubbly or even a hockey fan.

He moves around the crowd and stalks into the center of the room, his gaze searching the perimeter, and even though I've eased back behind the column, I read the concentration in his gaze.

The rumor is, at certain parties he chooses a new girl to be his for the next month. See? Douchebag. Miss December has apparently been dumped, and he's ready for another one if the throng of females scrambling to get to him is anything to go by. As I watch, one girl crawls between the legs of her friends then jumps up in front of him and throws her arms around his neck. She lets out a squeal, and I roll my eyes. All I need is some popcorn and this is a show.

After a few hugs, he manages to move away from them and takes up residence near the dance floor. His two friends stand next to him as he scans the crowd, arms loose at his

sides, his gaze moving from one face to the next as if searching for something special, much like I do when picking out a good donut.

His attention lands on the column, and his eyes rove until they capture mine. I freeze. *Crap*. My body hums, and I nearly drop my cup as a jolt of adrenaline lights up my veins.

Well.

Maybe this won't be as hard as I thought.

Maybe I *can* get his attention.

But then he frowns.

Wait—why is he frowning?

Am I that awful? Well, yes. I glance down at my black leggings and puffy black North Face jacket. I'm a blob in shapeless clothes, and I guess I could have actually put on party attire before I came, but this extravaganza happened right after my work shift and I didn't have time.

"I can't do this," I mutter under my breath.

He's the king of the ice, and I'm just...no one. I come from nothing. I have nothing, literally. Okay, I have fifty-three dollars in my checking account, but that's barely enough to hold me over until my next paycheck. Thank goodness for scholarships and loans. But man, those loans are big, just waiting for me when I graduate. I twist a strand of hair around my index finger, making it into a tight spiral before letting it go.

I have to be realistic.

This crazy, harebrained idea will never work.

Plus, I don't have time for over-the-top, testosterone-driven superstar athletes.

Until now, that is.

I have to make time.

Because Zack Morgan is the key to me getting into the law school of my dreams. He just has to agree to be my fake

boyfriend.

ZACK



The door to the Kappa house looms in front of me, and I toy with the idea of ditching. I hate the dog and pony show that waits for me inside.

I'm sick of it.

I know what they see—a talented hockey player with the world at his feet—but it's not true. Nothing is true.

I push a hand through my hair. What I should do is get the hell out of here and decompress from our win tonight—which we barely pulled out of our ass.

At least I didn't have another episode.

My gut twists as I think back to the Minnesota-Duluth game and how I lost my shit. I can't let *that* happen again, not when it might get enough press that the Predators catch on.

I touch the necklace that's under my shirt. It's not a magic talisman, but it does keep me grounded—for now—and as my new sports psychologist says, it sure as hell won't hurt.

I grimace. He saw my fuckup all over TV like everyone else.

I've been nervous and anxious during a game before, but that debacle...that was a new animal.

I feel color rising on my face. It was also embarrassing.

That night, the medics and trainers took one look at me and called 911. I came to and told them to stop. Fuck, I pleaded for them to cancel the ambulance, but they didn't and

I ended up at the ER. One EKG and a few tests later, there I was, my heart just fine. Our team lost to our biggest rival, and I walked out of the hospital and told the public I'd had a recent bout with the flu and wasn't completely recovered yet.

Lie.

Only Coach, Eric, and Reece know the truth.

Because if people discover I have real issues with anxiety, I'm *done* in the NHL, all my dreams destroyed.

Thus the new psychologist. The thing is, you can't fix a guy with guilt so deep it cuts like a knife.

"Dude. You going to stand out here in the cold all night? Everyone's waiting." Eric winks and nods his head at the door. "Some girl is dying to get with you."

I throw a look at him, taking in the styled dark red hair and short beard. He's all decked out in his blue dress shirt, slacks, and loafers—his *I'm gonna get laid tonight* outfit. My best friend since summer training his freshman year, he's a year younger than me and sharp as hell underneath that lighthearted playboy exterior.

"It's just a party, man." This comes from my brother Reece, who's also dressed for pussy, his face angular and chiseled like mine. His blond hair is short, though, and he's two inches shorter than me.

He and the team are the reason I decided to finish my senior year when I could have gone straight to the NHL. I want a championship for Hawthorne so bad I can feel it in my bones. We missed it last year, and damn, that sticks in my throat.

Reece gives me a *come on* look, exasperation on his face. "You need to lighten up. Just enjoy yourself."

Enjoy myself?

My lips tighten. He doesn't get that I'm tired of the attention. "You two go on." I stuff my hands in my jeans. "I'll call an Uber, and you can drive my Escalade back." I'm

thinking most of the Uber drivers might be in for the night by the time they leave.

Eric throws an arm around my shoulders. “Fuck that. These people need to see us. We won and they planned this to see you, the king.” He grins, wide and genuine, and I have to smirk at the missing tooth from tonight’s game. He’ll get it fixed in a few days, but right now he doesn’t even care, just riding high on our win.

I look back at the Kappa house. Lately these victory parties just remind me that I don’t deserve accolades.

I’m a fucking *terrible* person.

And I’m slowly losing my mind.

I resist the urge to just take off running, to let my body exhaust itself until I can’t feel anything but the burn of exercise. I wish I could just be normal and take this knot in my gut and make it work for me, not against me.

I know the truth, though, straight from the head doctor: *You have an issue. This is your new normal.*

I inhale several deep breaths and let them out slowly.

“All right.” I give Eric a nod and he opens the door, music spilling out.

We walk in and gaze around the darkened room, and I feel the weight of every person in it staring at me. I straighten my shoulders and give a defiant glare back, putting my mask on, pretending I don’t have a care in the world.

People swarm around us and I push through, trying to feel the excitement I used to from the attention, but all I have is dread in my stomach—

Until my gaze sweeps the room and meets hers as she peers around a column.

Her.

Her.

Her.

I narrow my eyes, my heart accelerating, my brow knitting.

I've seen her before in passing, those wide, intelligent eyes and that full, pouty mouth with the slight indentation in the middle.

I've never seen her here, though, and not with her hair down and glasses gone.

Fuck me.

SUGAR



Inside my small crossbody purse, my phone vibrates, diverting my attention away from the party, and I pull it out. It's been doing this for the past ten minutes, and I've been ignoring it, but now that Zack has arrived and the wait is over, I'm nervous it might be Mara trying to get in touch with me. She's raised me since my mama died, and it gnaws at me that once she's gone, I won't have anyone left at all, except for the relatives in LA—that's Lower Alabama—and I don't want anything to do with my father's people.

It's my ex, Bennett, who's sending me messages, and a long sigh slips out of my mouth as I scroll up to see several texts. My hands tighten around the cell.

I'm knocking on your door. Where are you?

Please, babe, open the door. BTW, this dorm sucks balls.

Jesus...fuck...where are you? I need some closure.

Shit. Just call me, text me. Anything. Please. What you saw that night...I'm sorry! I can explain it.

My heart drops, feeling like someone tossed an anvil on it. We've only been broken up for a month, and here I am, still missing the cheating bastard. Familiar anger rushes to the surface and my gut churns at the memory of seeing him with another girl in the parking lot of the bar where he plays with his band. I recall the steamed-up windows of his Land Cruiser, her legs straddling his in the driver's seat—

Why didn't I see what a liar he was?

Sexy tattoos and a guitar, Sugar. I was blinded. I got sucked in and drank the Kool-Aid. I think back to the phone numbers I'd find crumpled up in his pockets, the long, hungry looks girls gave him when he was on stage, the way they swooned when he sang a slow song—one he supposedly wrote for me. He was a ticking time bomb, just waiting to explode, and well, I guess he did—inside some chick in the parking lot.

I chew on my bottom lip and push thoughts of him away.

Looking around the room, I see my new roommate Julia at the bar. She waves me over, and I respond with a nod.

Julia isn't my favorite person in the world, but she did agree to meet me here so I wouldn't be the Lone Ranger, and I'm doing my best to get to know her.

We met a few weeks ago when I moved into the dorm after Christmas. I originally thought I would be living off campus with Bennett at his apartment, so I didn't arrange a dorm room, which left me stuck in Ellington Hall, an ancient, creaky place with hissing radiators and dark stairwells.

I make my way over to her and plop down on one of the stools.

There's a hard glint in her pretty whiskey-colored eyes as she turns and studies me, the movement accentuating her strapless black pleather dress. Delicate heels are on her feet. Obviously, my frat party attire sucks. "Where were you?" she asks.

I can't tell her I've been hunkering down behind a support beam. Plus, the independent streak in me is annoyed. "Why?"

She shoots me side-eye from underneath her smoky eyeshadow. "You disappeared and never came back. I made an entire loop around the place looking for you."

"I can handle myself fine, Julia. I work at Boobie Bungalow, the finest gentlemen's club in Sparrow Lake, Minnesota," I add with a smirk, quoting the slogan on the faded billboard next to the interstate.

Her eyes flare big as saucers. “You strip? Holy cow. You look so...nice, but I guess you’ve got the boobs for it.”

“Uh, thanks, but I don’t strip. I just run errands and tend bar sometimes.”

She nods. “Is that how you’re planning on paying for law school?”

I take another sip of punch. “I’m counting on student loans for law school.” I can’t ask Mara to foot that bill—being a strip club owner doesn’t make you rich, and she isn’t even technically family. She is the only good friend my mama ever had, and if she hadn’t taken me in, child protective services would have.

“I see,” she says, looking bored. She comes to these parties for random hookups, and I know that because she told me so right before we met out in the parking lot and walked in together. *I’m here for hot sex.* Those were her exact words.

Okay. Good to know, good to know. You have to appreciate her honesty. I mentally filed it away.

A cute girl with pink and white hair cut in a pixie style is in front of me, indicating my Solo cup. “Want more punch?”

I grimace and give Pixie Girl a hopeful look. “Got any top-shelf tequila back there?”

She smirks. “I suppose you’d want fruit with that? This isn’t the Ritz.”

“Vodka? Bourbon? Prosecco?” My gaze is hopeful, but she shakes her head with each question.

“Look, it’s spiked punch or draft beer. You pick.” Her annoyed gaze is calling me a special snowflake, and I sigh. I’m just not quite sure what’s *in* that punch, and I’m a cautious person.

“I’m good,” I say.

She shrugs and moves on to someone else.

I turn back to face the party, and Julia’s gaze bounces over the crowd of people, stopping on the hockey players.

Praise Jesus. This might be a way in. “Please tell me you know them,” I say.

Her lips tighten as her red nails tap against the wooden bar. “I do, and it’s best to avoid them. If you’re here for an athlete, I suggest the volleyball or tennis players—both have great fingers.” She smirks, giving me a look. “Avoid the wrestlers though. Word is they all have the clap.”

I blink. Indeed, she *is* knowledgeable. She also thinks I’m here for a one-night stand. *Whatever.* Let her think what she wants.

“I sense backstory. What happened with the hockey guys? Did you hook up with one?”

I cross my fingers. *Please don’t say Zack.* It will be super weird if my new, bad-girl roomie has slept with my future fake boyfriend—that is, if I can get the nerve up to ask him.

“No. They’re just all assholes.” She fidgets and tilts her head toward the dance floor, clearly changing the topic. “See anyone you know?”

My shoulders slump against the bar. “I see faces I recognize, but this isn’t really my crowd.”

A group of broad-shouldered men in football jerseys saunter past us, headed toward the dartboard in the back of the room, and one of them gives her an eye waggle.

“Now that’s a tall drink of water.” Straightening up, she tucks a strand of sleek brown hair behind her ear. “And I’ve always wanted to score a tight end or a wide receiver.”

I snort. “You just like saying the names of those positions.”

“Maybe.” She downs her punch. “I should follow them.”

My mouth opens. “How do you even start a conversation with a guy you don’t know?” *Please.* I need to know.

She arches an elegant eyebrow. “Girl, you’re just out of practice because you were in a relationship for two years. You just bat those eyes and start talking about whatever he likes—and in this case, it’s how spectacularly he handled that ball.”

I snort, watching her check out the football players at the dartboard. Again. “Go on. I’ll be fine. I know how to kick a guy in the nuts if I have to.”

Considering she was worried about where I was before, it doesn’t take much convincing this time. I watch as she fluffs out her hair and sways away from me, her willowy figure drawing its fair share of looks. She makes her way over to the group of players, steering herself right into the center of the action where the guys are.

She’s good.

A long exhale comes from me as I look around the room for Zack.

Ladies and gentlemen, I’ve put this off long enough.

I gather my resolve. No way am I leaving this party until I’ve at least *spoken* to Zack Morgan.

If Julia can do it, so can I.

SUGAR



Half an hour later, I've made zero progress and haven't budged from the bar. I suck so bad. Julia has disappeared upstairs with a football player and I'm alone. When Pixie Girl does a pee dance, I volunteer to make sure no one steals the punch, even though she was kind of mean to me earlier. She gives me a long look, promises to be right back, and dashes to the restroom.

Feeling like a bump on a log, I groan, surveying the crowd. There are so many people here, I have no clue where he is, and I keep hoping he'll walk by to get a drink, but he doesn't. I picture random girls at his beck and call, rushing to refill his glass and feeding him juicy strawberries on some sofa in the back. Scratch that—it's way too PG. He's probably getting sucked off in a bedroom upstairs.

It feels as if someone has cranked up the heat, and I take my coat off and tie it around my waist.

I'm looking at my phone when a warm, sweaty body appears next to me.

Frat Boy.

He's back and we're only a few feet apart. I get a better impression of him, stocky with a barrel chest and big biceps... like a wrestler. I recall Julia's warning about the clap. *Great. Just great.*

There's a red zit on his forehead and it takes center stage as he shoves back a lock of brown hair that's fallen in his face. Giving me a once-over, his beady gaze lingers on my chest.

“Heyyyyyyy, you. Has anyone ever said you look like an angel?”

Ugh. “I haven’t fallen from heaven, so don’t even go there.”

He squints down at me, his words slurred. “I’ve never seen you at a Kappa party. You new here?”

“Stellar observation. Now if you don’t mind, I have to call my boyfriend. He’s on his way here.” I pull out my phone, wave it at him, and pretend to scroll through my contacts. I could leave and head back to my column, but I’m hoping he’ll take the hint and move on. I’ve become fond of my barstool.

“You’re hot,” Frat Boy mumbles on an exhalation as he slides in closer and tosses an arm around my shoulders. “And I won’t tell your boyfriend if you want to hang out. I won’t tell my girlfriend either. Have you seen her?” He scans the area as if looking for her, and when he seems satisfied the coast is clear, he leans in, giving me a whiff of his alcohol-laced breath.

“I don’t know your girlfriend,” I snap as I edge away until his arm drops. “But I feel sorry for her.”

It’s like he doesn’t hear me. Putting his elbows on the bar, he bends his head down until we’re practically cheek to cheek. “Name’s Harry by the way.”

I stare at my phone, mentally willing him to get out of my face.

“Friends call me Horny Harry. Want to know why?” He does a little giggle and puts his arm around my shoulders. *Again.*

I’ve been described as haughty a few times (I’m really not), but with my height of five ten, I do have a glorious glare. I use it now. “Look, I’m not interested, okay? You should go away.” I poke at his arm a few times until it slips off my shoulders.

His face reddens. “Hey now. You blinked at *me.*” He sounds like a petulant child as he points down at his shirt.

If his brains were leather, he wouldn't have enough to saddle a June bug. I can practically hear my mama saying the words.

“Everyone blinks.” I stand. “Why can’t a girl just come to a barstool and have a drink—even if it isn’t a decent one? Huh? Is that so hard? Why can’t I just sit here and watch the crowd and look for hockey players? That’s a rhetorical question, by the way.”

He leers. “Whatever. My room is just upstairs. I have some beer in the fridge and condoms. Sounds good, right?” He nods his head toward the steps that lead to the upper level of the house. “Come on, babe.”

Babe.

BABE.

Bennett called me that and no one will ever again. It’s a promise to myself. I’m better than *babe*.

Picking up my purse from the bar, I cross the strap over my shirt.

He makes a pout. “Ah, don’t leave like that. We were just getting to know each other.” He moves as if to take my arm, but I give him a little push in the chest. Dude probably weighs about two fifty, and of course, it does no good.

“Are you cheating on me already?” The shrill tone comes from Pixie Girl. I guess she’s back from her pee break. With her hands on her hips, she sends a scathing look at Frat Boy and then turns it on me. “And you? What makes you think you can flirt with my man? Is that why you offered to watch the bar?”

Oh. My. God.

I shake my head at her. “No! This—this isn’t what you think. I’m *not* flirting—”

“Then why are you standing there with your fuck-me eyes on him?” She glares at me.

“There is no eye-fucking going on here!” I feel ridiculous even saying that.

She curls her lip. “You and your top-shelf tequila. Please.”

I inhale a deep, cleansing breath. Harry just grins at me, his gaze bouncing from me to his Pixie Girl. Obviously he’s enjoying the attention.

I swear her nose flares when she says, “Maybe it’s time you left—unless you want to regret it later.”

Is she going to drag me out to the parking lot and kick my butt if I don’t? How have I gotten myself into a chick fight when all I wanted to do was spy on the hockey player?

A few people around the bar stop what they’re doing and stare, and I blow out a breath, angry and maybe a little intimidated. I could have spooked Horny Harry the Frat Boy eventually—I mean, I’ve handled my fair share of leeches at Boobie Bungalow (with the help of a bouncer)—but toss in a catty jealous girlfriend and all bets are off. Women are vicious, and I like all my hair on my head, thank you very much.

A new song comes over the speakers and I feign interest, bobbing my head. “Wait? Is that 50 Cent’s “In da Club”? Yeah, it is.” Fake smile. “Sorry, guys, gotta go.” And I dart for the dance floor. My plan? Shake my ass all the way to the door and get the hell out of here.

The dance floor is a madhouse of bodies, and I boogie along with them, eyes locked on the exit. My purse gets shifted behind me during my exodus, resting on my butt as I push through the crowd. I don’t bother fixing it, but halfway to the door, there’s a tug on the strap that jerks my shoulder. Afraid it might be Pixie Girl ready to pluck my eyes out, I whip around with my fists clenched and raised—my mama didn’t raise no slouch—but it’s only a dancer with her arm tangled in my strap. “Sorry,” she calls out over the music, and I nod. I turn back around and run smack into a brick wall of muscle.

“Whoa there,” says the deep, husky voice.

Holy hockey jackpot.

It’s *him*.

SUGAR



My head looks up...and up...and my eyes widen as I take in the broad shoulders, the thick lashes, and the dark scruff on his perfect jawline. He bites his lip and pushes his wild blond hair off his face. Damn. Just *damn*. His cologne, something spicy and all male, hits my nose, and I inhale deeply.

His full, sensuous lips part slightly as he blinks at me, and there's a look of uncertainty on his face as he stares back. His jacket eases open as he moves to let someone pass by us, and I see the tight black shirt he's wearing underneath, the way it clings to his lower abdomen. Hockey players have notoriously well-developed physiques, and Zack doesn't disappoint. I swallow, imagining the six-pack under the shirt, the V on his hips. I think about the texture of his skin that I can't see. Is it rippled and hard? What would my tongue feel like—

Stop, Sugar. That's not why you're here.

His eyes gleam down at me, the color of molten hot steel as he watches.

Later, I'll blame my reaction on the adrenaline from the incident at the bar and my lack of dinner, but right now, I'm disappointed in myself. Apparently I'm just like those other girls who look at him with rapturous expressions on their faces.

And right there, it happens. I chicken out. I decide I can't ask him for help.

I'll find another way.

“Sorry,” I mutter as I move to walk around him.

He sidesteps, blocking me. “Wait a minute. Were you behind that column earlier...over there?” His head tilts toward the support beam in the center of the room.

“Nope.”

A furrow forms on his forehead. “I could have sworn—”

“Who’s this?” A sharp female voice interrupts from beside him, a stunning petite redhead in a black miniskirt and a red halter top that matches her hair.

I’m not sure how I missed her arriving.

With a slight curl to her ruby lips, she runs a cursory glance over my frame, her eyes widening as if she sees something weird. Feeling paranoid, I pat down my hair where I’ve been twisting it.

I don’t respond to her question about who I am. I’ve had enough of this place and these people.

“Let’s go play darts, Z. It’s too crowded over here.” She dismisses me and turns her attention away, her lashes fluttering up at him as she runs a possessive hand over his shoulders. There’s a familiarity in her touch, as if she’s known him for a long time.

He shrugs, his eyes never leaving me. “You go on, Veronica. I’m sure my brother is looking for you.”

“He’s upstairs somewhere. I thought maybe we could hang out—”

“No,” he bites out.

Her face falls, a sullen expression settling in. She darts a glance at me before looking back at him. “But why—”

“I said *go*.”

She huffs and opens her mouth as if she might say something else but then decides against it, her teeth clamping together. “Fine.” She does a pivot and flounces off.

“Girlfriend?” I ask, watching her leave, trying to suss out what’s going on.

“Fuck no.”

This is when things get really weird.

Zack Morgan just stares. And stares.

Warm tendrils of heat slide over me at his scrutiny.

Then he frowns as if he can’t figure out what I am.

“I’m human,” I say, and it’s such an utterly ridiculous statement to make, but he doesn’t even blink.

We stand in the middle of the floor with bodies dancing around us, neither of us moving as his gaze moves from the top of my hair to the bottom of my black UGG boots, a gift from Mara. There’s a quizzical look on his face as he sizes me up, and a few ticks later, he physically winces as if something about me is...unpleasant.

But I’m *not* unpleasant.

I’m no beauty queen, but I’ve had the attention of attractive guys. Bennett is gorgeous, the little cheater, and according to Mara I look just like Mama did at my age with her pale creamy skin, heart-shaped face, and long blonde hair. Unfortunately, my eyes are my father’s, wide and thickly lashed, a blue-green color.

“You...” His brow knits as he searches for how to finish his sentence.

Someone dances into me with a hard bump, and I lunge forward again, my cheek pressing against his chest. His hands clasp my upper arms, steadying me as he sets me a few inches away from him.

“Sorry,” I say.

His eyes drift over my face, lingering on my lips, and I swallow. He drops my arms as if they’re hot, and I rub them briskly, acutely aware of his touch.

Strands of “You’re Beautiful” by James Blunt come over the speakers, and color rushes from my neck up to my face as I

realize we're the only ones on the dance floor not dancing.

"This place is crowded. I should go—"

"Would you like to dance?" he asks, interrupting me.

I frown. "You want to dance with *me*?"

"I do." Inscrutable eyes rake over me as his expression shutters. His focus is still squarely on me as if I'm a magical creature—or a demon.

Maybe there's something hanging out of my nose or my Pirate Red lipstick is smeared across my entire cheek and I'm completely unaware.

"Okay." My hands reach up and curl around his shoulders, my fingers brushing at the hair there. His hands go to my hips, settling on top of my coat around my waist. We move around each other, almost warily, our bodies aligned in a slow rhythm, not entirely pressed together, yet the small space between us feels...electrified. I wonder how my skin would feel pressed against his if we closed that gap.

We're in a bubble, the two of us, and everyone around us seems irrelevant—or at least that's my perception. I'm not sure what his is, only that his gaze never leaves my face and the intensity makes me jittery.

"What's your name?" he says with a scowl.

I huff out a laugh. Where's the charming playboy everyone said he was?

"Sugar. My mama said it was a name for a girl who would be the life of the party." I lift my shoulders in a shrug, looking away. "It didn't work."

"Ah, I hear a slight Southern accent. How did you end up in Sparrow Lake?"

My accent isn't thick, not after years of living here, but it does stick out like a sore thumb among all these Midwesterners. "Moved here when my mom passed."

"Any other family?"

I stare up at him. "You updating my Wikipedia page?"

He breaks our gaze, a flash of vulnerability in his before it's quickly gone. "You favor someone I knew."

Oh.

"Well, they're not related to me. I don't have any siblings or cousins on my mom's side, and I look just like her. The family I do have is my dad's and they're in Alabama." I pause. "I don't speak to them."

"Why?"

I shake my head. "That's really none of your business."

"Why?"

He gives me an insistent look, and out of sheer annoyance, I say, "They're rich folk who think I'm white trash."

He thinks about this, studying my face. "Sorry. That sucks. I'm Zack, by the way."

I know. I nod.

"My friends call me Z."

"I'm not a friend."

"Yet." His eyes go to my mouth and heat flares over my skin at the interest I see there. A blush creeps across my face.

"I've never seen you at one of these," he says.

"Just trying new things."

"Like stalking hockey players?"

My mouth opens and I almost stumble until he catches me.

"You were at the Topsy Moose last week," he says, a satisfied look on his face as he takes in my face. "You sat in the back. I played darts...you watched. I talked to a girl...you stared. You sat by yourself. Isn't that right?"

My stomach flutters, recalling how packed that place was. The man has magical powers of observation. "Maybe we were just two people who happened to be at the same place at the same time. Maybe my eyes just happened to be on you when you looked at me."

He continues as if I never said a word. “You’re also in my American poetry class. You wear a knit hat and those big glasses. Maybe that’s why I didn’t...” He stops, his voice trailing off. “You sit in the back.”

“And you sit in the front.”

“You would know.”

Shit! I blink rapidly “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Liar. I notice things—it’s one of my skills—and you were lurking behind that column when I came in...waiting for me.” His tone is silky, yet there’s a hint of accusation there. “My guess is you’re a jersey chaser, a new one since I’ve never noticed you here.”

Anger stirs at his arrogance, and my lips tighten. “I’d hardly call it lurking. and *you* were staring at *me*.”

“Maybe I was.” He halts our dancing when the music stops, but his hands are still on my hips and mine are still around his neck. It’s strange to still be holding on to him when it’s clear we’re sparring, but...but I don’t want to let him go. My hands cling to his shoulders, brushing across the soft leather of his jacket, and his fingers are digging into my waist. His touch isn’t unwanted. It’s tantalizing with a hint of dominance, as if he’s not going to let me out of his sight.

I swallow.

My chest rises.

I want to smack that smirk off his face, but I also want to

—

What is happening?

“I’m not a jersey chaser. I’m pre-law.”

He sighs, twisting his lips. “Right. What do you want from me?”

“Nothing.” Lie, lie, lie.

He gives me a hard look. “Please. You wanna hook up with an athlete and brag to all your friends, right?”

He's so off base.

Yet...

My gaze goes to his full lips, taking in the sensual curves, wondering how they would feel pressed against mine. "Do I have a shot?" I don't know what makes me say it.

He gives me a wolfish, knowing smile. "I would love to fuck you, but we might never see each other again. I don't make promises."

I picture us naked in a heated embrace, his powerful body sliding inside me, and my lower body clenches at the thought—even as I cringe. I'm supposed to still be in love with Bennett, and yet here I am, my body pulsating for another guy.

"I don't need your promises," I snap. And even though I'm completely out of my depth with this level of hot guy, my hand is confident and gives his hair a tug. "And if we fucked, I wouldn't want to see *you* again."

The air crackles around us, and his chest expands as his eyes lower. Everyone around us disappears, and it's just us and this...energy. I read his face, taking in the dilated gaze, the way he bites that succulent bottom lip. He doesn't know what to think of me, but he's decided it really doesn't matter.

He wants *me*.

His head dips to whisper in my ear. "Forget this party. Let's get out of here." The scruff of his jawline brushes against the sensitive skin of my neck, and waves of desire curl around me.

He focuses back on my face, waiting for a response, but I can't think. "Now?" I ask, not so brave anymore.

His hands slide under my coat until they're on my ass, guiding me closer until the space between us is gone and our bodies are pressed together. "Yeah. It doesn't have to be complicated. I'll make it perfect for you."

I can only imagine what's perfect in the *Hockey Player Hookup Handbook*. Three orgasms, like a hat trick? And then

there's him, those moody eyes, that big stick he no doubt has...

Without even being cognizant of my reaction, my hands massage his neck, tangling with the thick hair there. A long exhalation comes from his mouth and my heart pounds as I imagine going somewhere with him. Alone. I picture us without all these people. I know he's right there with me because the air grows heavier and thicker, like a fog. I gaze up, trying to read more of him, to maybe see who he really is, but he's a stone wall, a piece of hard granite with hot, smoldering eyes.

Someone in the crowd calls out his name and I flinch.

Clarity settles in slowly as I think over my reasons for being at this party.

I—I can't do this with him.

“What's wrong?” he says.

What's wrong?

Part of me does want to hook up, but the other side is mortified at the idea of random sex. Serious relationships are all I've ever had, more specifically just one.

“You're scared,” he says softly.

“Sex isn't why I came here tonight...” I stop, not sure how to explain.

His broad shoulders shift, shrugging, and his face gets that shuttered look on it again. “I get it. You don't want to be the girl.”

My mouth opens. “So it *is* true? You pick out a girl at parties?”

His eyes rake over me. “Next time, don't try so hard to get my attention, sweetheart.”

Next time? Don't try so hard?

My heart sputters like a car running out of gas as mortification flares. I frown. “Don't call me *sweetheart*, and for your information, I'm not some girl who's out to bag the

sexy and infuriating Zack Morgan. What I need is way more important than some furtive coupling in a frat house with a testosterone-addled hockey player.”

“Sexy *and* infuriating? Testosterone-addled?” He bites his lip to keep from laughing. “You really know how to flirt.”

“I didn’t mean to flirt. I just came to ask you to...” I stop, frustrated as I remove my hands from those broad shoulders and rub one over my face. “I never should have come to this party. It was pointless.”

“Why?” His brows knit together as he studies me.

A long silence stretches between us as I flounder around, my gaze bouncing throughout the basement as if the words might magically appear. Why can’t I think of the right verbiage to explain that my original intention was to ask him for help?

I shake my head, emotion clawing at me as everything from the past month comes crashing down at me. Catching Bennett cheating, losing out on the one law school I wanted, and now this...this guy thinking I’m just out to use him.

You were, a voice reminds me.

But not in a sexual way, I insist, yet uneasiness tugs at me.

And for what purpose? I’ll never get into Vandy with this plan.

God, what am I doing?

I sway on my feet.

SUGAR



“Are you okay?” Zack says, lifting a hand as if to touch my arm but then letting it fall.

My skin feels hot. “I need off this dance floor.” I’ve barely eaten a thing today except junk food and now this loud, gyrating party is about to send me over the edge. Toss in a hockey player with enough virility to get me pregnant just by looking at him, and I’m toast.

“Come with me.”

“Where?” I look up as he takes my hand.

He gives me a concerned glance then leads me off the dance floor and up the stairs of the frat house. “You need air. I know where we can get it.”

And he seems like he does, his fingers laced with mine as he pulls me through a throng of people. Girls glare at me as we pass by, shooting daggers, and several call out his name, but he keeps going. There’s a *get out of my way* pace to the way he moves, his shoulders edging around people as they step aside to give him a wide berth. We pass the second floor, which is just as crowded, and I get glimpses of rows of doors and assume those are the bedrooms where lots of shenanigans happen. Frat Boy lives here, probably. Julia might be inside one of those rooms too. I feel a pang of envy at the way she’s able to just let go and do what she wants.

We head up the steps to the third floor. As soon as we hit the landing, I hear the welcome sound of muted music. He stalks through a common area with a sectional and a TV. Our

hands intertwined, I follow him as he steps out onto a huge screened-in porch along the back of the house. No one is out here, and it's bliss. Quiet and lit with moonlight, it's warmed with gas heaters in each corner.

“Better?” he asks softly.

I let out a huge sigh of relief. “It's paradise. Thank you. I...got too hot down there.”

Indeed.

He shows me to the railing at the edge, and even though it has a screen, the cold air rushes in. I inhale a deep breath, looking out over the lights of campus just a few blocks away. He stands next to me, a few inches to the side, eyes on me and not the view.

A sigh comes from his chest. “Look, I came on too strong down there. I can be a bit abrupt, it's just I get tired of girls...” His lips twist as his words taper off.

“Throwing themselves at you?” I arch a brow. “I watched a girl crawl on the floor to get to you tonight. I get it.”

He shrugs broad shoulders, the movement graceful yet filled with power. “I don't encourage it.”

“Just a normal day for you, huh?”

“Yeah.” He blushes. *Actually* blushes.

I stare down at our joined hands and remorse hits. I shouldn't have stalked him. The entire idea was stupid. “You know...*I'm* sorry. I did go to the Tippy Moose to see if I could talk to you, and yes, I was behind that column waiting for you. I even tried to approach you in class a few times, but I always chickened out. It wasn't for bragging rights.” There. It's all out. Relief flows. “I'm just...shy...and I couldn't figure out how to be a regular person, so I thought I might tag along to where you go and see if we had anything in common.” I grimace. “We don't. I can't even hang at these parties. All I want to do is go home and crawl in bed. Maybe eat some snacks, maybe read some poetry.”

There's silence, and I feel the weight of his eyes on me even though I'm staring at the lights below us.

“Sugar?”

I turn and meet his gaze, and my breath hitches at the heat I see reflected back at me.

“You're not a jersey chaser. I get it. You just...took me by surprise. You're very beautiful.” That last part is uttered with a deep sincerity, and I...I can't stop looking at him.

I don't think I'm beautiful; my nose is a hair too long and my ears stick out more than I wish they did, but the way he says the words makes me believe them. I lick my lips and he watches the motion.

“Your mouth is...perfect.” He steps in closer and rubs a knuckle across my lips, back and forth, until my lips separate slightly of their own accord, and before I can stop myself, I've kissed his fingers. It's completely impulsive, yet right.

His breathing deepens as he continues that motion, tantalizing me slowly as if there's nothing he'd rather do than touch my skin. “There's something going on between us that's...I don't know...interesting. I knew it the moment I saw you.” He pauses. “*I want you.*”

I want you.

His words send a jolt of exquisite pleasure through my body.

He moves, shifting closer, the spicy scent of his cologne and fine leather lulling me.

I feel dazed. My stomach flutters. And my heartbeat—it's so loud I wonder if he can hear it.

The moon is out and the light shows me the sharp granite angles of his face, the way his eyes burn. There's heat there, ready to combust, just waiting to be lit with a match.

I inhale cool air, feeling lightheaded.

“Maybe it was meant to be, you following me around.” His fingers shift down to trace my jawline, outlining the curves

from my cheekbone to my chin. He touches my bottom lip and then tilts my head up. “I want to kiss you.”

“We...probably...shouldn’t.” Is that my voice? All breathy?

“Is that a no?”

“Not no,” I say, my voice strangled.

“Good.” He touches my hair, twirling it around his finger as his face leans down to me, and shit, his lips are close to mine, so close. My face is tingling where he touched it and my body is aching—

He kisses me, and it’s as if I’ve been waiting all night for this, since the moment his eyes found mine. Full and sensuous, his lips fit perfectly, the pressure of his mouth soft yet insistent, almost coaxing. I flick my tongue at his, and he makes a noise in the back of his throat, delving deeper as he takes more of me, exploring. My breasts press against his chest as his teeth nip at my lips gently, then harder, and I give it back to him, my hands coming up to rest on his leather jacket, caressing the softness there before curling around his neck.

Sensations bombard me—his scent, the rough brush of his scruff against my face, the feel of his hard muscles rippling under my touch.

His fingers dig into my waist, each one like a brand on my body. There’s an edge to his touch, a hint of rough—and my body throbs.

“Sugar,” he says, and he sucks on my tongue, his hips against my pelvis, his cock hard.

My hands slide down and grip his upper arms, and my legs shake as his lips move across my collarbone and down to the neckline of my sweatshirt. Goose bumps flare out over my skin, and I fold past the point of making any good decisions when his hand reaches up to my chest, unerringly finding my nipple through my shirt and bra. My breasts feel heavy as his index finger and thumb twirl back and forth, begging my nipples to rise up, and they do, aching. I picture him sucking

them, and as if he reads my thoughts, he turns us around and guides us to the back wall of the porch, his mouth never leaving mine.

His hand is under my shirt and toys with my waistline, spanning the width and breadth, exploring and brushing against my skin, and his touch is hot, so hot. With a groan, his hand settles on my breast, dragging the lace of my bra against the nipple. Sparks of need fly through my body. Bennett always rushed this part to get to what he wanted, but Zack... *please*, I want more of *this*. I cling to his shoulders and rub my hand down his back, wishing his jacket would magically disappear.

The wall is behind me and his hips grind against me as I part my legs, letting him in—

The sound of people laughing in the media room breaks us apart. I pull my shirt back down, feeling color rise on my face.

He looks over my shoulder and then back at me, eyelids heavy, his voice hoarse. “They’re gone, just passing by.”

He leans down to kiss me again, but I stop him, my chest heaving. “Wait.”

He breathes deeply as he studies me, searching my face. “Why?”

Why?

I stare at him, taking in the perfection. The broad shoulders, the roped forearms, the way his hair falls around his chiseled face, and those lips...delicious and perfect and...I want them on my body.

I swallow down a shaky breath.

He ticks all my boxes for men, but he’s too much for my already broken heart.

No matter my bravado downstairs, to me, this wouldn’t be *just* a hookup, and he’s made it clear that he doesn’t make promises.

“Sorry.” Before he can say a word, I brush past him and dart for the exit, dashing through the media room until I’m out

in the hall. Breathing as if I just ran a marathon, I hear voices coming up the staircase and act on a whim. I head to the bathroom, which is just to the right, clearly labeled with a sticker on the door.

I go into the surprisingly spacious room, lean against the wall behind the door, and play back the kiss, remembering the feel of him against me, how my body felt alive for the first time in weeks. He is...so intense and beautiful.

The door opens and I mutter a curse in my head for not locking it, but before I can reach out to stop the progress of the person entering, I see it's Zack, and I stop. The door closes softly behind him and I freeze as I wait for him to see me, but he hasn't. He keeps his gaze lowered as he walks to the sink, a hand deep in his hair, chest heaving as he flips on the cold water, letting it run.

He stares at himself in the mirror for a long time then tilts his head back and stares up at the ceiling for several beats. He closes his eyes and bends down to splash himself with water. Grabbing a clean towel from under the cabinet—who knew they existed in a frat house—he presses it to his face and holds it there for several seconds. Then, he tosses it down and flips the water off with his head bowed, breathing in and out. There's a red flush on his cheeks and his jeans are tented. My gaze lingers there, seeing the fullness of the denim. *Shit*. My body softens, picturing those jeans pulled down and him inside me.

“Zack?”

He flips around, his jaw popping as he takes me in. His hands clench. “I didn't know you were in here.”

“I know.” I take a step toward him, stopping a few feet away.

Neither of us speak, that thread of tension between us building as we stare at each other. I want those powerful, muscled arms around me. I want his emotional eyes gazing into mine when—

“I should go,” he says, moving to open the door, and I put my hand on his arm.

“Wait.” I don’t know what I’m doing, but this moment, this guy—it feels right. “Don’t.” I take another step and eliminate the distance between us. With a hand that trembles, I lock the door, tilt my head back, and take him in. His hair is slightly damp from the water and I reach up and run my hands through it. It feels as good as it looks, soft and silky. I tug on the ends. “Stay.”

His lips part, a long breathy sound coming out. “Are you sure?”

Curling my fingers around his neck, I stand on my tiptoes and press my mouth against his. “Yes.”

His response is instant, an accelerant to a flame, his lips taking control, his tongue an invader as we go nuclear in a millisecond.

His hands cup my face as his mouth ravages mine. He sucks my tongue until I groan, my breaths labored and loud in the small room. He kisses down my neck, retracing his path from before, his lips hot against my collarbone, the back of my ear.

Cool air hits my skin as he eases up my sweatshirt. I help him pull it up and over my head, exposing my black lace demi bra. He throws my shirt on a shelf and stares at me with an almost hesitant look, as if I might change my mind. *I won’t*, my eyes tell him.

I’m a tall girl and my breasts fit my frame. They’re usually the first thing a guy notices, and I watch as his eyes lower. His gaze lingers on my full C-cups, and a long exhalation leaves his chest. My body tingles in response, my nipples tightening at his slow perusal. I bask in the way he stares and then moves up to lock eyes with me.

“Beautiful.” His fingers push the lace down until the bra is under me, lifting my breasts up. My breath freezes when he latches on to one of my nipples with his mouth. I groan, splayed out against the wall while he caresses me, tugging

down on my nipples, sharp sensations reverberating through my body. My hips writhe against his.

He sucks each breast, going back and forth, the scruff of his jaw bound to make my skin red, but I don't care. I grapple with his leather jacket. He leans back for half a second to toss it off, and I've never been happier to see a good piece of clothing gone. Grasping the fabric of his T-shirt, I shove it up until I see his chest, my mouth watering at the smooth expanse of muscled, sculpted skin. He has part of a dragon tattoo on his left shoulder that I imagine curls around to his back. Part of me wants to trace all of it with my fingers, but I'm in a hurry exploring his chest, tasting the muscles there, my tongue sucking on his collarbone the way he did mine earlier. My fingers dig into his waist, pulling him closer. I lick his nipple and eventually he pulls my mouth back to his—it's so divine—and we kiss, our mouths open, licking and sucking, until I can't think.

Until I can't be held responsible for what I do.

“Sugar.”

He says my name like it's a prayer as his hand slips under the waistband of my leggings and plays with the lace of my black panties. He touches my mound on top of my underwear, his fingers dancing over my clit.

“Yes,” I say, and he closes his lids and bites his lip, giving me one, lone finger inside my panties. My back arches involuntarily toward him, aching for more.

His mouth plays with my nipple while he strokes inside me, and sounds build up in my throat, raw and primal. I don't know who I am right now, but I know I'm wired to him, devouring every hitch in his breath, every movement of his fingers.

“Please,” I beg, and he grunts, knowing what I want.

He gives me two fingers, delving inside my wetness then gliding back out. Over and over, he repeats the torture, and my legs open as far as I can get them in my leggings. “Fuck.” He

exhales against my neck. “You’re wet.” He teases his thumb over my clit and I gasp.

My hands are at his jeans, unzipping them and shoving them down just past his hips. He’s commando and his cock is beautiful, long and thick. My heart pounds as I stroke his shaft, rolling the wetness from the top to the bottom. His skin slides over his length like iron as I caress him, brushing my fingers over his tip. Groaning, he kisses me harder, his teeth nipping at my lips, tugging until it hurts and then he kisses me softly, begging.

“I want inside you,” he says, and my entire body clenches.

I. Just. Want. Him.

More, more, more.

I call out his name and clutch his nape when his thumb is back on my nub, playing me, and a swirling sensation builds at the base of my spine, enveloping me in pleasure, rising higher. “You’re almost there.” He stares down at me and those grey eyes are beautiful and dark and full of need that—

I explode, my body pulsating as I come on his fingers. I tighten around him, my legs trembling. I can’t breathe. I can’t think.

With hands that shake, he digs around in his back pocket until a condom appears. Ripping it open, he slides it down. I’m toeing my boots off and shoving down my leggings and underwear. He’s watching me, his hand palming his cock. With a growl, he picks me up, cupping my ass in his hands. He’s rough, his fingers digging into my skin, a man who knows what he wants, and I moan in anticipation. This is the fastest, craziest sex I’ve ever had, but I know what to do. My legs wrap around him and hang on tight. He presses me against the wall and lines himself up. He tugs at my hair, looking into my eyes, and he pushes inside my wet body full throttle, my walls clinging to him. It’s a tight fit and we both gasp, our chests heaving in the silence as the fullness of him settles in. My back presses into the wall, feeling the pressure of a framed picture that’s hanging there, and I ignore it because *shit*, nothing matters but this.

“So goddamn good,” he says in a gravelly voice when he slides out and then right back in again as if he can’t resist giving me every inch.

“Yes,” I gasp, and I don’t even know this wild creature I’ve become. I don’t know anything but this feeling, this sensation, *this man*.

The sounds of our sex and our breathing are loud, *and I don’t care*. I kiss him hard, grinding my lips against his, and he kisses me back, like he needs me to breathe, like he might die without the taste of my lips. He puts his fingers on my clit and rotates, taking me with long strokes, as if he knows my body so damn well, and I tighten around him and fall over the edge into shards of lightning and stardust. I groan, my body stiffening and reeling as I arch forward, the orgasm lingering as he pumps into me, swiveling his hips like a man who’s fucked against a wall a million times. He presses my hands above my head and owns me with his dick, sliding in and out. He gives me everything and it isn’t pretty or sweet, but it’s perfect. He shouts and goes over the edge, pumping and twitching inside me.

Seconds pass and only the sound of our deep breaths breaks the silence. My legs unravel themselves from his waist and settle on the floor. He leans down to gaze at me, his hands on the wall on either side of my face. “*Fuck*. That was...” He stops and swallows.

Yeah.

My cheeks feel red and I rub my face, taking in gulps of air.

Breathing just as heavily, he takes a step back. I watch as he takes the condom off and tosses it in the trash. “You doing okay there, babe?”

Babe.

“Yeah.” No time to even address that. I push the feelings that word evokes down and shake my head, my fingers raking through my hair, trying to find my headband, but it’s long gone. I’m darting around, grabbing my clothes from the floor.

He's quiet, watching me. "Hey, did I misread your signals?"

I look up at him. "No, no, you didn't." I don't elaborate. Honestly, I can't even process what just happened.

I manage to fix my bra and get my underwear back on. My sweatshirt and leggings are next.

"Then why are you running off?" He straightens his shirt and adjusts his jeans, zipping them up.

"I'm not. It's late and I have to get up early." My voice quivers and I cough, trying to hide my...nervousness?

He watches me shove my boots back on. "Come home with me."

"More sex?" My mouth opens. I'm not sure my heart can take it.

"Maybe, maybe not. I might have to fuck you in my car before we get there." His words are silky, promising another round of incredible sex, and he gives me a heavy-lidded, expectant look, as if he knows I'm going to say yes and he's just waiting to hear it.

There's a long pause in the room as we stare at each other.

You know you want to, baby, his eyes say.

You don't know me, mine say.

Yet there's another conversation in my head, one I don't let him see, where I debate going home with him and losing myself in his arms.

But Bennett pops up in my mind, an image of him with girls fighting to get to him on stage. It's not like Zack is my boyfriend—as if—but part of me is smart enough to know that going with him is playing with fire. Zack Morgan is an inferno that will burn me up. There's something about him that makes me lose my breath. And that...that must not be allowed.

"I—I can't. I don't know you. I'm not sure I like you." It's a little blunt, but I think he's the kind of guy who appreciates the truth, and I'm not one to lie.

He pauses and wipes at his mouth with the back of his hand, his brow going low. “I see.”

But he doesn’t. He looks pissy.

Maybe he’s never been turned down for a second round.

I chew on my lips. “This was really...”

“Fucking hot.”

I frown. “Yeah, but you can have that with anyone. I don’t do this kind of thing. This isn’t me.” I clutch my purse.

Those intense grey eyes spear me, cooling from molten steel to a wintry stormy color. “I see.”

My eyes dart around the room. “Look, it was nice to meet you and I hope you have a good hockey season—”

He scowls deeply, looking affronted. “A good hockey season? What the hell?”

He can’t believe I’m cutting him loose.

I pivot and bolt for the door.

“Wait a minute,” he calls from behind me, his tone urgent as he flounders around for his jacket on the floor. “I don’t even know your last name.”

I exit the bathroom and fight my way through the crowd, jostling past people, some of them the same girls who gave me hateful looks. I do a double take when I see one of the wingers—his brother, I think—because they look incredibly similar. He gives me a surprised look then glances past me, and I assume he sees Zack following me. *Go faster, Sugar.* I practically mow people down as I dash down the stairs and plow through the dance floor. Finally, I push through the exit, the biting cold air on my still tingling skin, fresh from his hands on my body.

I run through the parking lot like a madwoman, feeling one part crazy for leaving him and another part terrified he’ll come after me and change my mind.

He has a girl of the month, for God’s sake!

The metal clang of the door opening and closing reaches my ears as I slide into my beat-up Toyota Tundra.

I tear out of the parking lot and head for campus. One glance in my rearview mirror shows him standing in the parking lot, a Viking in the snow.

Taller than a Georgia pine, I hear my mama say, and even though I'm freaking out because *shit, I just had sex with Zack Morgan in a bathroom at a frat house*, an anxious giggle slips through my lips.

ZACK



I t's the same dream. Even as it unfolds in my head, I want to comfort myself, to let my racing heart know it isn't real.

I'm lying in the snow staring up at the sky. The blackness above me is vast and bottomless, and for a moment, I'm afraid it will swallow me whole. Reece is next to me and tells me I can't change anything.

Off in the distance Willow calls my name, and Reece gets up and leaves to go get her. There's sadness in his eyes.

The scene switches and Willow is in a white dress at a party. She's holding herself, arms wrapped around her shoulders. I want to be with her, but I need time, just a little distance to fix the mess in my heart. She leaves the party and drives her convertible on a wet road. Her fists beat on the steering wheel, and I know who she's cursing.

Me. God, it's *me*.

"No, no, no, no..." I whisper. "Start all over. *Go back.*"

But she doesn't.

She plummets off the side of the road, breaking through the guardrail and plunging into darkness. Her screams echo—

"Fuck!" I sit up straight in the bed, my heart jumping. Deep breaths rack my body, and I swing my legs around and plant my feet on the floor. "Goddammit," I mutter, breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth.

My chest aches and I rub it, fighting to get my heart back on track. My hands tremble as I rake them through my hair.

I hate waking up like this.

You deserve it, a voice says.

“Stop!” I yell as I jump up and scrub at my face. *Shit*. I hate these dreams. They don’t happen often, but when they do, it fucks with my whole day, which means hockey practice is going to suffer.

One glance at my phone and I see it’s five in the morning, almost time to get up anyway. Walking into the bathroom right off my bedroom, I turn on the cold water and let it run until it’s icy then fill up my hands and splash it on my face. Once. Twice.

I shove at the hair that’s in my face and glare at myself in the mirror. It might be the anniversary month of when she died, but there’s only one reason that dream chose to visit me tonight.

And, yeah, I want to deny the reality, want to tell myself I wasn’t affected, but I’d be lying.

Sugar.

Fuck.

My hands cling to the sink.

I think back to when I first noticed her at the Topsy Moose last week, staring at me so hard the hairs on my neck rose. It became a game where I would pretend to be getting a drink from the waitress or playing darts but was actually watching her. She sat in a back booth wearing that black coat and a knit hat with her ponytail coming out of the top. Her expression was part earnest, part calculating, and while the earnestness isn’t something I usually see in a girl who eyeballs me, the calculation aspect is. That night, with her hair up and those big glasses on, I didn’t see the resemblance. Maybe something tugged at me, but I couldn’t put my finger on what it was about her.

Then when I walked into the Kappa house and felt a prickling sensation as my eyes found hers behind that column, her long blonde hair pulled back in a headband, draped over her slender shoulders...something hummed.

She looks like Willow.

It's just the hair, same color, same style, I tell myself, but I'm lying. It's the face too, the patrician features, from the hollows of her high cheekbones to the way her brows arch over her eyes.

I scrub at my hair, racking my brain for differences.

First off, she doesn't sound like Willow. Willow's voice was soft with dulcet tones, pleasing to everyone, and she used it to her advantage, while Sugar's is husky with a drawl, not exactly a Southern accent yet distinctly different from the Midwest. Also, Willow was a wisp of a girl I teased would fit in my pocket while Sugar is tall with lush curves and an ass—

Stop.

The thought of her running away from me, the idea that she thought this was over—not one single girl has *ever* done that before.

I know—I *know* I'm not done with her yet.

Stalking back to my bedroom, I grab my necklace and slip it over my neck. I pull out the legal pad of yellow paper from my nightstand. Grabbing a pen, I lean back on the pillows and prepare to write one of my letters. I wrote them almost every week the first year after Willow's death, but I've slacked off. My head has been elsewhere, focused on school and getting that national championship. I've picked it back up since my episode because...well, it's a way to deal.

Willow,

Another nightmare. These dreams of you...I hate them. They tear me up inside. I think it's you from the grave, reminding me to not forget you. I don't know, fuck, I don't know. I'm not a man with a silver tongue and writing is not my forte, and just writing these words to you doesn't convey the many, many times I think about you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I

screwed up and ruined everything. I don't even deserve the things I do have...hockey, my dad, my brother...and you have nothing. I want you to know I won't forget you. I swear to make this life worth what you lost.

I met someone...

I mark through that, scratching it out until the words are blacked out completely.

I chew on the top of the pen, my mind turning to Sugar.

Who is she? What makes her tick? How can I see her again?

At that thought, my pulse jumps up and I heave out an exhalation, recounting last night, the fast, raw sex. She was all I could see and smell and taste, and as soon as she walked away from me, I knew I had to have her again.

I shake myself and look back down at the letter.

My heart is yours and always will be. I love you. Forever,
Z

I fold the paper into a square and set it inside the rectangular gold-painted wooden container I've had since I was a kid. Just a trinket from my childhood, it's the size of a shoebox and battered from use. A picture of us is at the bottom of the pile and I pull it up, running my hands over it. Willow's beautiful in a sundress standing between Reece and myself, her mouth curved up in a secret smile, her blonde hair flowing over her shoulders. Veronica's in a tiny yellow bikini with her bright red hair shining in the background as she lounges by the pool; she probably got pissed later when she realized she missed out on a photo opportunity. Flowers bloom around us, reminding me of the pool party hosted by my parents. I had just gotten my driver's license and spent the day rubbing it in because they all had a year to go before they turned sixteen. This was a singular moment that summer, when everything was green—when everything was golden.

Life was perfect.

Until it wasn't.

I study Reece's face, taking in the minute distance between his hand and Willow's, and I can see how he yearned to reach out and take hers.

I shove it all back inside the nightstand drawer and slam it shut.

I've done all the reminiscing I can handle right now.

Pulling open my chest of drawers, I dig around and pull out what I need to go running: black compression tights and an Under Armour long-sleeved shirt. I grab my Hawthorne black and gold windproof jacket and zip it up. Once my running gloves and shoes are on, I bolt out of the room.

The den and kitchen are dead silent, Eric and Reece still asleep. *Good.*

I grab a Gatorade from the fridge and suck it down. Long John Silver pops an eye open and spies me from her perch on the back of the couch.

"You catch any mice?"

She stretches.

"Lazy cat."

She gives me a glare and trots to the kitchen, looking over her shoulder and yelling at me.

"Give me a minute."

I grab her cat food from the pantry, fill up her bowl, and get her fresh water.

Solid white except for a black patch over her right eye—which is shut and scarred from a fight—she showed up at our back door about a year ago, skinny, full of fleas, and limping. One ear was torn off and the eye was swollen shut. Hell, she could barely move except to lie on our back deck and give me a half-assed hiss when I brought her a can of tuna. I didn't know anything about cats—my family has spaniels—but one look at her and I knew I had to take her to the vet.

Two hundred and fifty dollars later, he gave me the address of the local animal shelter, but when I took her inside, got one

look at the rows and rows of cats and kittens in cages that lined the walls, I walked right back out.

Reece and I own the three-bedroom house we live in, a gift from my dad my freshman year, and figured the place was plenty big enough for the four of us.

“Going for a long run. Hold down the fort while I’m out.”

She gives me side-eye from the food bowl.

“Ah, I know you love me, baby girl.”

Grabbing the duffle bag I put together last night, I walk out the door and stand on the stoop, breathing in the cold early morning air of Sparrow Lake, a suburb outside the Twin Cities where I grew up. The sun hasn’t peeked over the horizon yet, and since it’s still dark, I slip on a reflective vest.

Running—it clears my head, keeps me sane, and gives me fucking clarity, especially since nothing else seems to settle the demons in my mind.

I used to run a few times a week, but since the panic attack, I make it happen every single morning, sometimes just for twenty minutes and sometimes longer, depending on how much shit I need to work out in my head.

I inhale several deep breaths and punch into the air, centering myself and focusing on my body. The rhythm of my feet, the movement of my arms wipes out everything, much like being on the ice does, except with running, I don’t have to think about game strategy or how I’m going to get the puck in the net.

Most of all, I don’t have to worry about fucking up and revealing my secrets to the whole world.

I breathe in a lungful of cold air and take off for the street.

SUGAR



Happy Monday, I mutter as my alarm goes off at five o'clock. Time to get the donuts—literally. It's my job on Mondays to bring in breakfast for the crew who's cleaning the club from top to bottom from the weekend, plus run a few errands for Mara. Blowing out a breath, I get up and grab a towel for the shower. My movements are a bit sluggish since I tossed and turned all night with weird dreams. There was one in particular where I sat in my poetry classroom with a very naked and very sexy Zack Morgan as my professor.

I come out of the bathroom, not bothering to be quiet since Julia never came home. I imagine she's tucked up tight in a football player's dorm room right now.

I look around for my clothes from last night. Everything is littered on the floor where I tossed it as I came in and crashed. My eyes flare. There's only one thing missing: my coat. I let out a cry of frustration and tears well when I picture it on the floor at the Kappa house getting trampled by stilettos and sneakers, or even worse, picked up and put on by someone. That coat cost me over a hundred dollars *on sale*. I blow out a breath and plop on my bed, staring up at the yellow-stained ceiling and the chipped paint on the walls. Not only did I lose my coat, I'm living in dormitory hell while Bennett is basking in an apartment with a fresh coat of paint—that I helped with—and a nice, toasty heating system. There's probably a groupie curled up next to him right now.

I'm still muttering to myself when I put my hair up in a high ponytail a few minutes later. I pull on a bright pink

knitted cap with a hole at the top that lets my hair hang out. After my tortoiseshell glasses are on, I throw on leggings and a Dunder Mifflin sweatshirt. On my way out the door, I walk past my desk, see the waitlist letter from Vanderbilt Law, and grimace.

I replay an old childhood fantasy where I'm driving down to Davenport, Alabama, in my super expensive white Mercedes, dressed in a slick business lady pantsuit with a huge *I told you so* smile on my face. I pull up the mossy tree-lined drive, get out of my beautiful car, and approach the big plantation-style house.

I knock, and someone comes to the door.

Maybe it's one of my half-siblings. Maybe it's his wife. Maybe it's *him*, my father.

Regardless, the person is blown away by my stylish self and invites me in.

But I don't take one step into that big shiny house with the *Southern Living* front porch.

No sir.

I just smile and tell them how great my life is. I show them my fancy law degree and tell them how wonderful I turned out despite the gutter I dragged myself out of.

My hands clench.

"You are enough just the way you are," I mutter, repeating my mama's words, but today it rings untrue and I exhale.

Torturing myself, I pick up the letter to put it away, but before I tuck it between my textbooks on the bookshelf, I unfold the paper and skim over it.

After careful consideration, the selection committee is unable to offer you admission at this time, but we would like to offer you a spot on our waitlist. We realize this is a disappointment, but there were many students with promise who we were unable to admit. It is important you know we do not rank students on our waitlist, and we strongly encourage you to apply to other institutions...

Warmest Regards, William R. Fitzgerald, Dean of Admissions

“Blah, blah, blah,” I say bitterly to no one, and instead of putting the letter away, I wad it up in a tight ball and throw it in the trash. I have a copy of it in an email anyway. Ugh.

I take another look in the mirror and blanch at my paleness. I need more sleep. With a groan, I pilfer through my makeup bag and swipe on my favorite lipstick, Cabernet Crisis. Seems fitting.

I did have crazy sex with a hockey player last night...

“That was a complete lapse in judgment, and I’m going to pretend it never happened,” I say to my reflection. I blot my lips. “And you really need to stop talking to yourself. People are going to think you’re crazy.”

There’s a small bruise on the right side of my neck, and my heart pounds, going back to last night and how...*spectacular* it was.

“Forget him. Trouble all day long, Sugar. His nickname is the Heartbreaker—don’t forget that.” I dab concealer on the hickey and brush powder on top.

Slinging my crossbody on, I open the dorm room door, and a Hawthorne duffle bag that was hanging on the outside of the doorknob falls to the floor.

My first thought is Julia somehow left some clothes out and forgot to bring them in, but then I remember it wasn’t here last night and she isn’t home yet.

Squatting down, I unzip the bag and gasp when I see my black North Face. I hold it up like a dance partner and do a twirl. “Coat, who brought you home?”

Digging a little more, I find a folded note.

It’s too cold in this town for you to go without this. If you want to say thank you, come see me. I’m sure you can figure out where I live.

Z

*PS Here's my phone number in case you don't have it yet:
555-284-6433*

I smirk at his cheekiness. He must have found my coat and seen the address I scrawled on the tag just a couple of weeks ago in case I left it somewhere.

I look down the hallway but the place is empty.

When did he bring it? And how did he get inside a locked-down dorm that doesn't even open its doors until eight in the morning?

I didn't hear anyone outside the door last night and I was up for another half-hour when I got home, so it must have been this morning, which means he was up early.

With a sigh, I slip it on over my sweatshirt and head for the exit.

A bit later, most of my surly mood has vanished, and I feel like a kid in a candy store with my nose literally pressed against the glass case. I'm in the donut shop. "I'll take two dozen chocolate, two dozen plain, and two of those churros. Mara loves those," I tell Joaquin Rios, the owner, as I straighten up.

He grins, eyes dancing. "That's it?"

I groan. "Don't you think that's enough?"

"Ah." He shakes his finger at me. "But I have something special. Made it last night—for you." A small, wiry man with beautiful light brown skin and a lilting Mexican accent, he's a friend of Mara's, and I worked here in high school to earn extra cash, which I socked away for college. He bustles off to the back then comes out of the kitchen holding a tray of chocolate donuts with dark sprinkles on top. He's written *Sugar* in white icing on one of them. "I made these to celebrate you going to law school and to show our appreciation for your help with the paperwork for the zoning regulations for our food truck."

I don't have the heart to tell him I didn't get in.

“Oh, that’s so kind.” I fiddle with the zipper on my coat. “You didn’t have to do that. I liked helping you.”

“But it would have taken me days. You went to town hall and figured it out, and now my donut truck is raking in the money.” He laughs, setting the tray down in front of me. “I call these Ding Dong Donuts in your honor. They have a heavy cream filling.”

I huff out a laugh, fighting a sudden urge to let tears fall. *Dammit, I will not cry!* He’s so nice and I should be thankful and not upset that it’s reminding me I really don’t have a law school to go to in the fall.

He gives me a big pleased smile, and I go around the counter to give him and his wife, Anna, who’s come out of the kitchen, a big hug.

A few minutes later, I’m past the pain—*hello, sugar*—and sitting in my truck cramming the donut in my mouth and sighing in ecstasy when a muscular body jogs past the front of my vehicle. He’s a big dude, dressed in Hawthorne colors with a black knit hat and blond hair sticking out—

My lovely donut goes flying straight to the floorboard. *Zack.*

Immediately I duck down in my seat, mostly because it’s automatic and I’m still unsure about last night. I mean, we had hot sex, and I turned him down for a repeat, and now things are...weird.

I ease back up from hunkering down, peeking over in his direction. *Dayum.* I sigh, taking in the tall body with a trim waist that tapers to muscled legs.

He leans over, breathing in great gulps of air, and I wonder how long he’s been running. Campus is quite a ways away from here, at least five or six miles, though that’s probably nothing to an athlete like him.

He yanks off his hat and shakes out his hair, running a large hand through the strands. A gust of cold air stirs through the morning air and he leans back against the brick of the storefront, his head tilting up to the sky. He drags a hand over

his face, and I suck in a breath at the vulnerability that flashes over his features.

What's he thinking about?

With a deep inhalation, he throws his hat and gloves down on a bench outside the Quickie-Mart and pushes his way inside. The movement is done without thought or worry, as if he's put them there a hundred times and knows nothing will happen to them. He comes here a lot, I think.

I need to get on the road—I have classes today—but I don't start my car.

I'm on the second donut when he bursts back out of the door with a pack of Marlboros.

Well, well, well. Mr. Athlete smokes? He doesn't seem like the type, but then what do I know?

"You only had sex with him," I mutter under my breath.

With a long stride, he heads to the alley of the building, which I have full view of. Propping himself back up against the brick, he twists the pack open, pulls out a cig, and lights it with a lighter from his jacket.

I study his face, surprised he doesn't feel me looking, because the man seriously has a sixth sense.

He holds the cigarette with taut fingers and takes a drag, blowing the smoke up in the air. He closes his eyes and rubs at his forehead, lines etched on the skin there and around his mouth.

I swallow, frowning, feeling a tug toward him, an answering call of sadness, perhaps. My chest rises, and part of me wants to get out of the car and go to him—but I think he wants to be alone.

The red light from the cigarette glows as he sucks on it until he stubs it out with his fingers. With a heavy breath out, he puts his hat and gloves back on then jogs over to a trashcan where he tosses the entire pack of cigs. *Okaaaay.*

He does a few stretches and then takes off, running out of sight toward the street and, of course, I get out of the car to see

where he goes.

Southern girls are better than the FBI.

He crosses the street and heads into the entrance of Memorial Park, a large and rather grand cemetery with huge oak trees, a stone entrance, and purple and yellow pansies in the flowerbeds. An interesting place to run, but it does have paths.

I get back in my car, finish my donut, and crank up the engine. No way am I following him there. As far as I'm concerned, my days of trying to get Zack Morgan to notice me are done.

"Urgent" by Foreigner rings out from my phone and I snatch it up.

"Yeah, I'm on my way," I tell Mara.

"You're fine. Don't rush and drive too fast." Her voice is dry with a slight Southern drawl that's been fading for the past twenty years she's lived here.

I sigh. "I won't."

"Did you get me a churro?"

"Two." I smile, picturing her in her purple velour tracksuit in the back office of the Boobie Bungalow, counting the weekend's take and preparing a bank deposit. Her dyed blonde hair will be in a softly curled Marilyn Monroe style, and she'll be wearing bright pink lipstick and lots of eyeliner with fake lashes.

After my mom died when I was eleven, she was the first person to arrive at my front door in Alabama. Mama's good friend since high school, she arranged for her memorial, packed up the trailer, and flew me back to Minneapolis with her. My daddy wanted nothing to do with me. Heck, his name wasn't even on my birth certificate. Sure, Mara and I could have taken him to court, but if there was one thing I knew for sure at that age, it was that I didn't want anything to do with the man who'd ruined my mama.

“So what’s up? Did you need something else? I can pop by Costco later if you need cleaning supplies, but if you want more churros, I’m still here.”

“No, just checking on you.” She pauses, and I picture her settling into her leather seat and propping her tiny feet up on her desk. “You seemed down this week. You okay?”

“Mostly. There’s nothing to be done.” My tone isn’t optimistic. Very few waitlisted students manage to secure a spot. I have to accept the truth. “I’m a reject.”

“You’re not a reject.” I hear her rustling papers and imagine she’s looking up at the poster of Clint Eastwood on the wall. Whenever she doesn’t know what to say, she always looks at him for guidance. I smile. She loves that man, swears she ran into him at a bar one night and they had a thing. It’s possible. She’s a beautiful woman.

“It doesn’t have to be Vanderbilt,” she says, and emotion tugs at me.

“I know.” My voice is subdued.

“Fuck a duck with a bowtie. It’s because George went there, isn’t it?”

I sigh, cringing at my father’s name. “I just want to prove I’m just as good as they are.”

“You have nothing to prove!” She exhales, obviously pulling out a smoke by the sound of the click of her lighter. “Want me to make you a cake? Or pie? You love that lemon icebox one.”

A smile ghosts over my face. Mara thinks the cure to all my ailments is sweets. She’s not far off, and I don’t blame her. Mama did the same. I cried a lot when I first moved here, a whole new world for a girl from the trailer parks of a small southern town. Kids made fun of my accent, and even the teachers didn’t know what to make of my sadness. I didn’t fit in here, and even now I sometimes feel like a stranger in a strange land. I chew on my lip. Perhaps that’s a tiny part of the reason I want to head back to the South for law school. Even

though I don't have any family to speak of, it's still...home. It reminds me of Mama.

“Sugar? You there?”

“Yeah, sorry.”

My brow wrinkles as I recall reading Zack's bio online last week where he mentioned his favorite things. An idea stirs around and takes hold, and for the first time since I woke up this morning, I'm thinking there might be a way to thank him for returning my coat.

“Hey, do you have the stuff to make a cherry pie at your place?” She lives with her longtime boyfriend Luis in a small apartment above the club. “And do you happen to have a good recipe for cherry pie?”

“Not really, honey. Cherry pie is disgusting. It's just gloopy fruit salad mixed with some dry crust. No thanks.”

I grin. Mara is firm about her pie opinions.

She takes a hit of her cig and I hear her blowing the smoke. “I thought you liked lemon icebox. That's the one I make better than that Pioneer Woman everyone raves about.”

“No, I do, but I know someone who likes cherry, and I was thinking maybe I might whip one up. He...I...kind of...we had this thing...and then...” My voice peters out. I can't exactly tell her how I had hot sex with a potential future fake boyfriend.

“Bennett?” Her voice has sharpened, and I grimace. She never liked him—although I didn't know that until we broke up and she confessed to it after a few too many glasses of wine.

“No.”

“Hmmm, and since when have you ever made a pie?”

“Never, but I thought you might want to help?” I put a pleading tone in my voice.

She sighs. “All right. The club is closed today anyway—but I'm not tasting it. That stuff is gross. Come over after

class.”

I smile. “I love you.”

SUGAR



Zack waltzes into our poetry class, and my stomach flutters.

It's midday and the auditorium is packed with mostly underclassmen and a ton of athletes, probably because it's an easy elective and interesting if you dig American poets—which I do. Hello, Emily Dickinson.

He strides in and sweeps his gaze across the crowded lecture hall, moving his eyes up until he finds me, tucked into a corner in the very last seat next to a wall vent, shivering because the heating is shit in this building. My coat is thrown over me like a quilt and he grins when he sees it.

That smile is...devastating to my ovaries.

Shut it down, Sugar.

But then, instead of heading to the open front seats like he usually does, he takes the steep steps up until he reaches my row.

I wonder if he sees the horror growing on my face. I really, really didn't want to have to face him until I had a pie in my hand and more makeup on my face.

He looms there, looking down the aisle for an empty seat, eyes landing on the one next to me.

“Excuse me,” he says, sliding in to brush past the students already there. He eases past them, uncaring that some of them are having to get up to let him pass. Most of them murmur

hellos and “Great game last week, Z!” as he scoots by, and he gives them a brief nod.

He comes to a halt in front of me and my eyes go up and up, taking in the designer jeans, the way his long-sleeved black and gold HU Lions T-shirt clings to his chest. His hair looks damp and disheveled, the ends curling around his shoulders. He’s just had a shower.

Red colors my face.

I had sex with...that...*him*. My lower body tingles at the memory. My breathing accelerates. He had me pinned against the wall last night. He took me apart and made me come and *oh my God*—

“Hi,” he says.

Dammit.

Why is his voice warm yet so insinuating...as if instead of *hi*, he’s really saying, *I’m sexy and I know it*.

“Hey, yourself,” I say, sitting up straighter and adjusting my coat over my bosom.

He watches me, a small smile tugging at his lips.

The classroom door opens, and one of the TAs rushes in and heads to Professor Goldberg with a stack of papers. They stand and talk among themselves, giving us a little time—which Zack takes full advantage of.

He glances down at the empty seat with my backpack in it. Without asking, he picks it up, sets it at my feet, and takes the chair. We’re in even closer proximity now that he’s sitting, not to mention his leg is pressed against mine.

Here’s the thing about lecture hall seats at Hawthorne: they were probably built in the 60s and were made for normal-sized people without any extra room. Zack’s body is definitely not your average man’s build. I watch—with a bit of amusement—as he wedges his six-foot, six-inch frame in the small seat, his knees pressed against the back of the one in front of him, no doubt the pressure being felt by the girl sitting there.

She looks over her shoulder in annoyance, sees who it is, and immediately smiles. With shoulder-length golden brown hair and a pretty face, she's wearing a Delta sorority shirt. "Oh, Zack, hey. I didn't know that was you. Glad you could join us back here." She invites him to their next party, some shindig they're having next week.

A second later, she scribbles on a piece of paper and passes back her number. Her eyes rove over his shoulders. "You know, in case you want to come. Call me."

"Right," he says with a smile as he takes the note. She turns back around and he tucks it in an outside pocket of his backpack.

I lean over and whisper, "Will she be *the one* next?"

"Maybe. I wonder if she likes Kappa parties."

"Or bathrooms."

"Or anywhere," he says.

I arch a brow. "You like having sex in public places?"

"I'm up for it—with the right person." His gaze grows hot, his grey eyes darkening, and I feel my chest expanding.

Shit.

I clear my throat and tap my pen on the desk. "Word to the wise: phone numbers can be tricky, expectations and all that."

"How so?"

I clear my throat. "I guess it really doesn't apply to you, but if you had a girlfriend and you took that number and slipped it in your pocket, it's cheating, even if nothing ever comes of it, because the intent was there. You thought about it and consciously tucked it away."

An eyebrow shoots up. "You've experienced this type of behavior?"

I nod. "An ex who put numbers in his jacket all night long and lied every time I called him on it."

"Ah."

I give him side-eye. “Are you going to call her?”

“No.”

“Then why take the number?”

He leans in, the smell of his woodsy cologne intoxicating. “I tell you what—I’ll give her number back if you give me yours.”

“Doesn’t mean I’ll answer.”

His eyes glitter. “Oh, you’ll answer. You and I...we have unfinished business.”

Before I can whip out a retort, he leans forward and hands the paper back to Sorority Girl. “Hey, I’m never gonna call. Sorry, babe. Here’s your digits back.”

She huffs and snatches it out of his hand then sends me a glare over her shoulder.

I bite back a laugh.

He leans back and shifts those grey eyes back to me. “And your number?”

“I never said I’d give it to you.”

He bites that bottom lip—on purpose, I bet—and runs his gaze over me. “You will.”

“You wish.” Ugh, I *like* sparring with him.

“Miss Ryan, if you’re finished conversing with Mr. Morgan, perhaps you’d like to comment on the current question?” Professor Goldberg’s voice booms across the room, and I jerk up, suddenly at attention. Apparently the TA has slipped out and he was lecturing.

And that’s what sitting next to Zack Morgan does to a person.

“Um...?” I look up and straighten my glasses.

Professor Goldberg points to the poetry book in his hand. “We’re discussing the poem you were supposed to have read.”

My brain has completely melted.

“You did read the poem?” the professor asks, arching a brow.

My voice is high. “Yes, quite fascinating this one, actually...”

Zack nudges me and I look down at his notebook where he’s scribbled something.

“Yes! ‘Acquainted with the Night’ by Robert Frost, sir. It’s a sonnet, written in strict iambic pentameter. Very lovely.”

“Continue. I’m sure you have thoughts. I hope you do for your participation points. Who’s the speaker?”

There’s a rumble of laughter in the room and I grimace. I did read the damn thing. “The speaker is a lonely man who only walks at night,” I say.

“Why does he do that?” the professor asks, casting his eyes across the room. “Any takers?”

Zack’s leg brushes against mine as he straightens and speaks. “He doesn’t think anyone will understand him. Darkness is his home, where he belongs.”

He points at Zack with a long finger. “Elaborate.”

Zack rubs at his jawline, and I think I see color rising on his cheeks, but that can’t be right because nothing seems to ruffle him. “He’s at the end of his rope, and it gets to the point where he can’t even make eye contact with people. There’s a blackness inside him.” He taps his pen on his leg. “At the end of the poem, he looks up at the moon in the sky and acknowledges that time has no meaning for him because his isolation is unending. He hates himself. He doesn’t deserve anything.”

Shit. The narrator hates himself? I didn’t get all that, but I can see it...

“Buzzkill,” murmurs someone in front of us, and I glare at the offender.

“He’s completely alone,” Zack adds, and part of me wants to pick at those words, at the weight I hear in his voice.

And...

Don't I know how *lonely* feels?

I have three people in my life I can count on for anything—Mara and my besties Taylor and Poppy—but besides them, nada. No family, and now no Bennett. Even when Mama was alive, she was always somewhere else in her head, thinking about my father, wishing she were with him.

Professor Goldberg is complimentary of Zack's analysis and class continues as we move on to discuss each line. I take notes on my small laptop, keenly aware of him as he shifts in his seat beside me.

"Good job," the professor says to us as the bell rings out in the hall. "Next up is Edgar Allan Poe. Get ready to delve into the supernatural."

I smile. After my upper level law classes, this is one I can just...enjoy.

Because we're in the last two seats, we sit and wait for the row to empty out. Neither of us speaks, and Zack's brow is furrowed as he gathers up his backpack and sticks his notebook inside.

"You okay?" I ask, pushing my glasses up.

"Yeah." He rakes a hand through his hair and gives me a broad smile, the same one he gave Sorority Girl.

I frown. "You don't have to pretend with me."

He blinks. "What do you mean?"

I take out a packaged Ding Dong from my coat pocket, carefully opening it and tearing off a piece. I give him a look. "I'm not after your phone number, I don't want to brag to my friends that we banged—in fact, I don't want anyone to know because that is just not their business—and I don't want to invite you to my sorority party. So, if you're not feeling on top of the world, I'm cool. No need to give me smiles that aren't real."

I take the bite and chew.

“Okay.” His eyes take me in, lingering a little bit too long on my lips, and I stop masticating. Is anyone attractive eating? *No.*

I swallow down my bite. “That poem—you liked it?”

He nods, a careful expression on his face. “Yeah. I got it, the darkness in people and how it tears you down.”

I nod. “My mama used to say brushes with darkness are part of every man’s journey. Besides, those real-life Mary Poppins types really piss me off.”

He huffs out a laugh and looks away from me, his face hesitant. “Your mom sounds smart.”

“She had a lot of heartache in her life.” I don’t tell him my father broke her spirit the day he paid us to move away so his wife and kids didn’t have to see us.

He nods.

“What’s your darkness, hockey player?” I ask. My tone is light, but I want to know what makes him tick. He seems so... perfect.

He sighs and stares down at his backpack. “People depending on me to win, Coach wanting a trophy, the NHL wanting a superstar—” He stops, rubs his neck, and stands. “Sorry. TMI.”

“No, it’s fine. I can’t imagine the stress you must be under. You’re practically famous.”

“What’s your darkness?” His eyes are back on my face, searching.

I laugh. “You want a list? It might take a while.”

One side of his lips curves up. “You’re funny.”

I shake my head. “I’m just trying to graduate this May and get to law school, maybe live in a warmer place and have a little house out in the middle of nowhere. That’s all I want.”

“Ah.” He gives me a long look. “I’m headed to lunch. You want to join me in the student center? I swear I won’t talk about poetry.”

“I like poetry.”

“Okay, we’ll talk about whatever you want.” He grins. “Edgar Allan Poe, huh? He’s twisted. I dig *The Raven* a lot, but his short stories are my favorite. Ever read ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’? It’s a classic Gothic horror story. And the sound of the heart beating in the background...damn, gets me every time.”

I feel my lips parting. He talks about Poe like he’s his bestie. A man that knows his literature *and* looks like a Greek god. Well. I clear my throat. That’s a turn-on.

And wait...

Is he asking me out? No, goofball. It’s *lunch*. Right, right. Casual.

But...

I’ve seen him with his hockey friends in the student center before. They’re a loud, gregarious group and girls are always all over them, flitting from one player to the next.

Nope. Can’t do it.

“Uh, yeah. Poe’s cool.”

His eyes get heavy. “Or we can go back to my place.”

And there he goes...

I shake my head. “You just assume I’m ready for a repeat, don’t you? I’m not looking to be your girl of the month.”

“Hmmm. You sure? You like me.” He grins.

I shake my head. “It’s not going to happen.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Stop being so infuriating,” I say, my free hand on my hip.

“But it’s so fun to mess with you. I think you like it.” He reaches out and toys with a piece of my ponytail then pauses, looking at his hand in my hair, as if he’s surprised it’s there.

He drops it and stares. “Can’t seem to help myself.”

My mouth dries. I’m not sure how to respond.

His chest rises as he looks at me, and heat hums inside me.

Maybe he sees it on my face.

“Come on,” he says, his voice lowering. “Let’s get out of here. I don’t care where.”

My lower body clenches, and shit...

I suck in a shuddering breath. “I can’t. I’m going to see someone.” Mara.

“A guy?”

“Pfft. Maybe.”

“No boyfriend though?”

“I have *friends*.”

“Huh. I see. Okay.” He shrugs and takes off down the row, and I follow. “You know, I can walk you to meet your *friend*,” he offers, a glint in his eyes as he waits for me at the bottom of the stairs.

I squint up at him. “Jealous?”

He laughs. “No way, babe.”

Babe. The word sizzles around me and I want to burn shit down.

I give him my own nonchalant shrug as I walk past him. “Oh, yeah, you definitely are.”

ZACK



“Y our cat coughed up another fucking hairball,” Reece calls out as he marches out of his bedroom. Dressed only in snug zebra striped boxers with a pair of pink unicorn flip-flips on his feet—where does he buy these things?—he holds up one of his sneakers and shakes it in the air. His eyes land on me. “Right in my goddamn shoe. Do you have any clue how disgusting it is to feel that shit between my toes?”

Eric, who’s sitting on the couch watching *The Bachelor*, snorts. “Don’t leave your shoes on the floor.”

He shakes his head at Eric. “Where should I keep my shoes? On my bed? On the dresser? You might have a different answer if she puked on your stuff.”

“She likes me.” Eric shrugs, never taking his gaze off the TV as he throws more popcorn in his mouth. “Besides, nobody’s getting rid of Long John Silver. Since she showed up, we’ve had a good run.”

Except for the game where I lost my shit, but I don’t bring that up.

“That’s right, Reece. You can’t mess with a good luck cat. She’s our lucky charm,” I say, holding back a grin as he drops the shoes at my feet and glares. I lean over and pet her, her body currently curled up on the kitchen table while I study. “And she’s not my cat.”

“You named her and she sleeps with you. You, my brother, are a fucking cat owner,” he huffs, throwing his hands up,

moody as hell. It doesn't faze me. Reece is an emotional guy with a temper that flares hot but cools just as fast. I'm the same.

He's also really into shoes.

"It's hard to take you seriously with little pink unicorns on your feet," I say dryly.

He ignores that. "Last week it was my practice jersey. The time before that it was my notebook." He points a finger at Long John Silver. "The little monster has it out for me."

As if sensing he's badmouthing her, her tail flicks around agitatedly and she gives him a scratchy, "Meooooow."

I look from her to him. "She said, *It wasn't me.*"

Eric laughs from his perch in the living room. "Nah, she said, *Fuck off, Reece, you're the pussy here.*"

He waves his hands at us. "Fine, fine, laugh all you want, but you just wait until she's coughing up a loogie in your shoe."

"At least it wasn't a dump," comes from Eric.

Reece glowers, and I give in and stand. "Come on, I'll fix this. Give me the shoe, you big baby. I'll throw it in the wash and it will be good as new."

He sniffs. "I'm not an idiot. I can wash my own shoe, but if you could keep her out of my bedroom..."

I laugh. "Dude, just shut your door. Cats can't reach the doorknobs. No thumbs."

"Smartass," he says. "I'm tired. Just done, I guess." He rubs his shoulder. "And this shoulder isn't doing me any favors. Couldn't sleep a wink last night and all the doc gave me was Aleve."

I nod. We're all paranoid about injuries that keep us out of the game and prevent us from racking up stats.

He heads to our small laundry room where I hear him slamming the lid on the washer and starting it. A few minutes

later he emerges from the hallway and heads to the fridge to grab a Gatorade.

“Let’s hit the gym tomorrow, and I’ll help you with some stretches.” I slide over the box of Cap’n Crunch I’m working on, and he sticks his hand in, pulls out a handful, and munches.

He plops down in the seat across from me. “Forget me—how are *you* doing? Didn’t you have another doctor’s appointment this morning?”

I nod. “Sports psychologist. We’re increasing our sessions from twice a week to three. I’ll have to skip my poetry class to make the appointments, but Coach says he can work it out with the professor.”

“No cure yet, huh?”

A cure?

My hands clench under the table. His obliviousness drives me nuts. Reece may look like me and share a similar temperament, but there’s a barrier between us, one that’s been there since he came to Hawthorne. I give him slack because it’s hard living in my shadow. Growing up, I was always the one in the spotlight, and I have to wonder what that does to a brother who craves being the best just as much as I do.

He gives me a raised eyebrow and stuffs cereal in his mouth.

“It doesn’t work like that,” I say.

He stops chewing. “You don’t think you’ll freak out again, right? Isn’t there a pill for it?”

My jaw tightens. He knows nothing, and part of me is annoyed that this is the first conversation he’s had with me about it when Eric has asked a million questions. He and I have different friends, and we don’t spend a lot of our free time together. “I can’t take pills and keep training and playing like I do. Some of those meds have huge side effects that I can’t chance right now. My guy is using different things with me.” Deep breathing, running, visualization.

His voice lowers. “Do you think it’s this time of the year? When Willow died?”

I stare at him, unsmiling. I don’t like talking about her with him.

Because he knows how I fucked up. He was at that party.

And *I* know he wanted her for himself.

Exhaustion washes over me just thinking about it. “It’s never specifically happened in January before, so it’s probably a combination of things.”

He nods, toying with a piece of cereal in his fingers, deep in thought. “You and Willow...you still wanted to be with her when she died, right? You would have married her someday?”

I frown, wondering what he’s getting at, but I change the topic. “Look, the anxiety thing is real. It comes with being at the top. I was the number one pick last year, and the Predators are waiting on me.”

He exhales, nose flaring as his face grows hard.

I tap a pen on the table, reading him. Part of my success in hockey is my skill in analyzing micro-expressions and body language. Being able to read your opponent *and* your own teammates is key. You learn patterns of behavior to anticipate what’s coming, but with him, sometimes I don’t know what’s going on in his head.

Things are worse between us, have been on and off since our mom passed away my senior year and then Willow died. You would have thought that kind of grief would have brought us closer, but Reece is a loner, like me, and we internalize shit.

“Reece? You got something to say?” Yeah, I’m calling him on his attitude. I don’t need extra stress right now and if he’s got something to say, he needs to spit it out.

He looks away. “I get what you’re saying. I’m not at your level so I don’t have a clue. I’ll shut up.” He moves to stand, but I grab his elbow and pull him back.

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“But you were thinking it.”

“This isn’t about you, Reece. You’re not the one losing your shit. If Nashville finds out...” My voice trails off and I exhale. I love him, but *fuck*, he gets so caught up in how he isn’t as good as I am.

His lips compress and color blooms on his face. “Veronica said you were with a girl at the Kappa house and she looked like Willow. I saw her running down the stairs, and you were chasing after her.”

I rear back. Is *this* what’s got him knotted up? A girl?

“What I do is none of Veronica’s business.” I shake my head. “She’s trouble, brother. Beware.”

I picture the vivacious redhead with her hard green eyes. Veronica only cares about Veronica, and I know that because she’s been after me since Willow died. Last summer she even weaseled her way into a guys’ trip to Mexico, and when I came back to my room one night, she was in my bed stark naked, waiting for me. I sent her away and she’s been with toying with Reece ever since.

Reece frowns. “She’s just worried. Just be sure you aren’t using someone to work through your own shit. Don’t use some random girl to get over Willow.”

I tense up, thinking about Sugar today in her knit cap and cute glasses. Use her? *Did I?* I frown. I haven’t wrapped my head around what’s going on there yet.

“Did I hear someone mention a Kappa party?” Eric says as he stands, stretches, and breaks wind before heading into the kitchen. “Speaking of...who was the hot blonde at the party? There was some talk amongst some of the girls that she literally ran away from you. Damn, wish I’d seen it.”

Reece’s lips tighten, but I focus on Eric. Dude makes me laugh.

“Does everyone know my every move?” I say.

“Everyone wants a piece of the fame. You’re going to be loaded and playing in the NHL,” Eric says with a grin. He has

his own little fandom of girls, so he gets it.

“They want this.” I indicate my upper torso, which is currently encased in a practice shirt from my workout at the gym.

Eric grins. “Ah, the fake bravado—a clear indication you got turned down. Crash and burn, huh?”

I shrug. “Meh. You win some, you lose some.” I’m not one to discuss my sexual exploits.

“Nice tits on her, though,” Eric says, and my brows knit together, irked by his comment.

Just then there’s a knock at the door.

“Pizza’s here!” Eric shouts then glances over at Reece, eyeing his underwear. “You gonna eat pepperonis in your zebra panties?”

Reece huffs and grabs his crotch. “I’ll show you a pepperoni.”

“Mine’s bigger than yours,” Eric calls out as Reece gets up and heads to his bedroom.

“You wish!” Reece shouts back before shutting his door.

“Bickering like two little old ladies,” I murmur, heading down the hallway to get the pizza.

But when I open the door, it’s not the pizza guy.

It’s her.

She’s here, standing at the bottom of the porch steps.

ZACK



My chest feels like it's taken a gunshot, which is weird, because I just saw her a few hours ago.

Sugar. I say her name in my head, and it's just as sweet as she looks.

Tonight she's wearing a pair of black skinny jeans, ankle boots with a heel, and a slightly cropped, snug pale blue fuzzy sweater that hugs the curves of her full breasts. Her face is oval-shaped, her skin perfect with a straight nose that has a sprinkling of freckles across the bridge. Her eyes are slightly upturned with dark brown brows arching over them, giving her an exotic look. A deep wine color accentuates her pillowy lips, the lower one fuller and luscious with that deep indentation right smack in the middle. Blood rushes to my cock at the mental image of her on her knees, taking me into her lush mouth, sliding around me while I—

Get it together.

I open my mouth to say something—maybe *Hello* or *What are you doing here?*—but then I shut it.

My chest squeezes as I take her in all over again.

She must not have heard me open the door, and she's distracted, muttering to someone on the phone as she looks down at a box in her hands. I don't even look at it too hard because she is all I want to soak in, and so I focus on her porcelain face, taking in the long black lashes resting against her cheeks. She's not wearing her glasses, and I wait for those thick lashes to rise and those eyes to meet mine. She raises her

head, and *fuck*, I think my knees might buckle as we stare at each other. There's a hint of green around the blue, something I didn't notice before because, well—

I suck in a steadying breath.

Seeing her again, taking in the similarities between her and Willow...it overwhelms me, a Pandora's box of feelings that pull me back into the past, into memories of a girl I hurt...

How could I have ever missed noticing *her* on campus?

"Who is it?" calls Eric as he pops up behind me and takes a gander at her. "Oh, shit, hey, baby," he says, a silky tone of appreciation in his voice. "You delivering pizza? Remind me to order from Rizzi's every night. Nice, nice."

"Uh, no," she says after ending the phone call. "I'm here for Zack."

I reach back and elbow him, and a smile curls her lips. I follow the movement, jealous of anyone who's ever been on the receiving end of that.

Who has she kissed? Who was the friend she met today?
Who does she fuck?

"Dude, you gonna invite her in or what?" Eric nudges me and I shake it off then clear my throat, opening the door wide so she can take the few steps inside the foyer.

The room feels heavier, more exciting, with her here, and I swallow. "Need some help with Robert Frost?" *Lame—so lame*. I mean, I pretty much challenged her to find me with that note I left.

She indicates her pink box. "No, I meant to say something in class, but I wanted to say thank you for returning my coat. It was kind of you to bring it over, especially after how we left things." She pauses, chewing on her lips. A nervous laugh slips from her mouth. "I thought for sure it was a lost cause to try to get it back, especially since I can never show my face at the Kappa house again."

"Because of me?" I don't want that.

She shakes her head. “God, no. Other people. It’s a long story involving a frat boy who misinterpreted when I accidentally blinked at him—not winked—and his very jealous girlfriend.”

I have to grin at her expression of horror. “Who? Should I kick his ass?”

“No one important, trust me.”

“So...you *do* know where I live. Have to say, I’m impressed.”

She rolls her eyes. “All it took was a visit to one of the sorority girls on my floor. You’ll be flattered to know she even knows your current hockey stats, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she has a picture of you hanging on her wall with a heart drawn around your face.” She sighs. “People are rather nuts over you.”

“Everyone but you?” I grin.

“I do not have a picture of you anywhere. I have better things to do.”

“So you say.” I laugh. Man, I like this banter. And damn, she actually came to see me...

She shifts from one leg to the other, her eyes darting from mine to the box. “I hope you like this.”

“Is it Gwyneth Paltrow’s head?”

She gives me a surprised glance.

I smirk. “Like in the movie *Seven*?”

She nods. “Saw it, loved it—so dark—and no, there’s no head inside.” She smiles. “I know my movies—especially the ones with Brad Pitt.” A small laugh comes from her. “Mara has a thing for him. Well, she has a thing for a lot of movie stars.” She takes in my arched brow. “Mara’s my guardian. She’s family, but not blood, ya know?”

I nod. I’m trying to listen, but shit, she’s so fucking gorgeous, and the way her eyes light up when she’s talking...

Eric is still behind me, looking over my shoulder—nosy bastard—and I turn to see him checking Sugar out. He’s cramming Cap’n Crunch in his mouth at the same time, and the effect is pretty much an overgrown child. I smack him on the arm when we walk past him.

“Ow! What the hell did I do?” he says.

I lead Sugar into the kitchen area.

She eases into the room carefully, taking in my place as if she’s unsure about coming inside. Everything about her screams uncertainty and unease, and absurdly I want to make her feel at home.

She runs her gaze over the space, a small craftsman style house, older but with a semi-fresh coat of pale beige paint on the walls, crown molding in the den, and nice, tall baseboards throughout. Our furnishings are newish and from IKEA, everything clean, modern, and functional. My dad bought all of it for me when I signed my scholarship for Hawthorne, and I think part of him just wanted to make me happy, to fill that black hole of grief I had. After graduation, Reece and Eric will stay here, and after that, my dad will probably sell it for a profit.

“Nice house.” She turns to face me.

“Thanks.” I stick my hands in my pockets. “So if there’s no head in the box, what did you bring?”

Eric starts singing the Justin Timberlake and Andy Samberg song “Dick in a Box”, and I shake my head at him. “Show some restraint.”

He pouts. “But if you ask what’s in the box, that’s where my head goes.”

A slow bloom of color starts at her neck and makes its way up her neck to her cheeks. I watch the pulse that beats erratically at her throat, and my shoulders rise as I inhale her scent, light with a hint of vanilla. “Ignore Eric. He gets excited when anyone comes to see us, even the guy who delivers the mail. He always goes out there and talks his damn head off.”

She gives us a sheepish look. “The box has pie in it.”

“You made me a pie?” I blink.

“Yeah. Stupid idea?”

I shake my head. “Hell, no. I like to eat.”

She bites her lip.

“Score!” Eric says. “What kind? Is it chocolate? I love chocolate. Man, that shit is the bomb.”

She laughs. “I’ll remember that and make you one next time.”

“Cool.” He gives her a fist bump.

“Don’t you have an episode of *The Bachelor* to watch?” I say to him.

He shrugs, gets a good look at my face, and laughs. “I guess so, but I want a piece of that.” His gaze lingers on Sugar and the box before he wanders back into the den and cranks up the TV. Good. Dude is my best friend, but he’s also a horn dog.

I turn back to Sugar. “Thank you for the gift.”

“If I can set this somewhere...”

“Of course, sure.” I’m feeling discombobulated, stiff, and a bit off, and I edge in front of her to clear off the table. My shoulder brushes hers, and I think I hear her breath hitch.

“Sorry,” I say as I grab my books and plop them in one of the wooden chairs.

“Great, thank you,” she murmurs as she leans over and sets the box down, giving me the perfect view of her heart-shaped ass. She’s willowy and curvy in all the right places, and I tug at my collar.

Last night, that ass was in my hands...

She turns to face me, and I blink at the twinkle of a piercing in her belly button, the blue jewel causing my eyes to linger on the creamy strip of skin between her sweater and jeans. *Damn. How did I miss that?* There’s also a half-moon birthmark the size of a quarter to the right on her waist and my

pulse jerks, fantasizing about putting my mouth there, sucking the taste of her between my lips.

“Before you look at it, just know I did the best I could.” She grimaces, pressing her lips together, that blush rising on her cheeks again. Almost shyly, she turns and opens the box, and hell, at this point I don’t even care what’s in it. A head? A dick? Bring it.

“It’s cherry pie.” She says the words with bravado. “I read your HU bio and it said it’s your favorite.”

I blanch.

She pauses, giving me a searching look. “It *is* your favorite, right? I spent the whole afternoon on this thing.”

I recall the bio she’s referring to and the PR girl who did them for us. That meeting ran short and before she could get all of us interviewed, we left for practice and she never came back to recheck her facts. We all assumed she made half of it up. It also says my favorite song is “Dark Horse” by Katy Perry...just no. I’m a dude, not a teenage girl.

“Uh, yeah, thank you. It looks...delicious.”

“You’re sure? You don’t look sure.”

I look at her, taking in her earnest blue eyes. “I’m sure.”

She heads for the kitchen cabinets and pulls them open until she finds three dessert plates. Then she gets a knife out of the drawer and proceeds to cut three slices.

I hold my plate and get a small piece on my fork. “Together?” I ask, and she nods.

I give the bite a long look and stick it in my mouth. My body clenches at the tart taste, at the disgusting squishiness of the cherry. “Very good,” I tell her after chewing, fighting my gag reflex.

She pauses. “You look like you’re barely eating any.”

“Yeah,” I choke out, walking over to the sink to fill up a glass of water then chugging it down.

I turn around and she's staring down at her piece. "You don't like it." She looks back at me. "Did I do it wrong?"

"No, no, it's just...I fucking hate cherries." I say the words lightly, not wanting to hurt her feelings. "Some PR girl made all that up." I explain the story to her.

"What?" Her face is horrified.

I grimace. "Eric likes it."

Sure enough, he's practically having an orgasm in the den as he devours the piece he snagged while we were talking. He waltzes back into the kitchen and gives Sugar an appreciative look. "Damn, girl, you are welcome to bring your cherry pie over any time." He sticks out his hand. "By the way, Z's too rude to introduce us, but I'm Eric—or you can call me E."

"One of the wingers?"

"That's right." He grins and leans back against the counter, his gaze glinting with interest. I know that look. Hell, we invented that *I'm into you and do you want to get with me* look.

I bristle. "Don't you have to call that girl you brought home last night? What was her name?"

Eric grins at me, completely unabashed. "I think it was Eleanor. Might have been Erica, possibly Ellie. All I know is it starts with E, which is like Eric. Easy, you'd think, but shit, I can't really remember. She left me a note on the dresser. Guess I can go check for you."

Sugar laughs and tries to hide it with a cough.

I give him a look. *Get out of here.*

"Touché," he says, straightening up from the counter and easing away from us, heading back into the den. "I'll stop bugging you."

He plops back down on the couch, and we grow quiet and stare at each other. Truth: I'm not a man with a silver tongue although usually I'm better than the current situation. I know how to flirt and tease and pull a girl in, and shit, I tried that with her in class, but she seems a bit impervious to my

charms. She has a wall around her, one I want to take a sledgehammer to. The air vibrates between us, and I'm racking my brain for something to say, watching her as she toys with the hem of her sweater. She nods as if coming to a decision. "Well, I've taken up enough of your time. I'm sure you need to study anyway." Her eyes move to the pile of books I shoved in the chair.

I step in front of her. "Last night you never explained why you've been following me. What was that about?"

She clasps her hands in front of her. "Nothing."

"It *was* something or you wouldn't have said it." I grin. "There's something about me you find fascinating."

Her chest rises.

I run a hand through my long hair. "Must be the hair. Everyone loves it."

She bites her lip, and I think it's because she wants to laugh.

I shrug and splay out my hands, feeling...light around her. "When you're me—"

She points at my face.

"What?" I say, and before I know what's happening she takes a step toward me, wipes at a crumb at the corner of my mouth with her finger, and then sticks it between her lips and licks it off. Her tongue is pink and wet and I—*fuck*. Tingles zip over me, enough to make me dizzy.

She hasn't moved away from me and that connection thing—that scorching heat that's been in the room since she walked in—finally gets to me.

I grab her wrist and lick the same finger, my lips tugging on the skin. "I can play games too, Sugar. Are you back to finish what we started?"

Her breathing deepens. "We did finish."

"And it was spectacular."

"Not denying it."

“But...what do you really want from me? Is it this?” I
press a hot kiss to her palm.

SUGAR



There are two breeds of girls from the South: Southern belles with their debutante balls, cultured pearls, monogrammed napkins, and big fine houses, and then there are girls like me who were raised in a trailer park on the wrong side of town with a strong tenacity to claw our way out. Don't get me wrong, Mama was good to me, and she worked hard even though those last years she got a little lost. She got up every morning, made me a big breakfast, took me to school, and went to work. Week after week, she worked, bouncing from one hotel/motel cleaning position to another. We lived near the interstate, and Lord knows there was a slew of them to pick from. She never stayed anywhere long, though, and sometimes I think maybe that was my fault because she was a single mom and it was hard for her to take care of me. She used to tell me she dreamed of going to beauty school, and it kills me that she never got to fulfill her dreams.

I think back to one of the last conversations she had with me.

You have to live life fearlessly, Sugar. Recognize that things are scary and uncertain but jump in anyway. If you don't, how will you ever know?

And it's her voice in my head as I stand in Zack Morgan's kitchen.

He's just kissed my hand and now he's staring down at me, waiting for me to tell him what I want. "Why are you really here?" he says, his tone soft.

I pull my hand out of his grasp. My heart is beating double time. Part of me is seriously annoyed that he has this pull over me while the other side just wants to throw him down, saddle up, and ride him like the thoroughbred he is.

I take a deep breath and go for it. “I need a fake boyfriend who plays hockey, specifically you.” I let those words sink in.

His brows go straight up, surprise on his face. “Didn’t see that coming. Why?”

I huff out a laugh, struggling for words. “I—I applied to Vanderbilt Law School and was waitlisted.”

He nods, crossing his arms. “That sucks. Go on.”

“And there’s this interview thing in Nashville this spring where you have dinner with the admissions faculty. Mostly it’s to see who still has them on their list and who’s moved on to another school—which I won’t. It’s Vandy or nothing. I can bring a guest. Maybe you?” I hold my breath.

His eyes analyze me. “Why me?”

“William Fitzgerald is the dean of admissions and a huge fan of the Predators.” I twist my lips. “It’s public knowledge from his social media. He’s constantly posting about how excited he is to see you join the team in Nashville this summer...”

He cocks an eyebrow.

“And...if he thought I was your girlfriend, he might give me a shot.”

“I see.” He paces around the small kitchen, his brow knitting. I study him while he isn’t looking, tracing the lines of his angular face, taking in the shadows under his eyes. I pause, wondering what keeps him up at night. There’s more to him, something deep and dark—

He lets out a deep exhalation and rubs a hand over his lips. I think I’ve blindsided him.

Shit. He’s going to say no.

I start talking fast. “It would just be for that event—if you would go with me. Plus, we don’t even have to talk to each other until then. We can just say we’ll do it and shake on it... or something. It’s a trip out of town, but I can pay for it. I’m working extra shifts and I’m not splurging on any extras.”

“Will this plan of yours push someone else out of a place?”

“No, this event is all about who is willing to not apply to other schools and maybe snag the spot of someone who’s dropped out at the last minute. With my scores, I could get in without you, I just...” I sigh, stopping, that familiar anger rising. “Look, I scored a 178 out of 180 on the LSAT. That’s insane, and there’s no logical reason they turned me down. I could snap my fingers and go to Harvard with that score.”

“Then why not go to Harvard?”

I shake my head. “My father’s entire family went to Vandy.”

He scowls. “These are the people who think you’re not good enough for them?”

“Yes, and I want to prove I am. Plus, it’s also one of the top law schools in the country and I want to move back to the South...where I fit in.”

“You fit in here,” he says.

“Do I?”

His gaze drifts over my face. “Yes.”

Oh. I glance down at his books. “I know the idea sounds crazy, and I’d be happy to help you with whatever you need in exchange.”

“Anything?”

“Not that,” I say.

He smirks. “There are other things you can do for me. Let’s figure it out.” He takes a seat at the table and indicates I should do the same. I sit and watch as he grabs a notebook from the chair and opens it, turning the pages. “I think we

need to get some ideas on paper, establish some rules. Sound good?”

My stomach flutters with excitement. I like where this is going. I nod. “Rules?”

“Yeah. We need parameters, what you’ll do for me, etcetera.” He taps the pen against the paper and watches me. “First, going out of town—that’s like asking me to give you a leg. I hate to travel, and Coach will be pissed if I miss any postseason training sessions.” He thinks for a moment and then drops his bomb. “I want you to be the girl of the month, starting today and going for four weeks, which technically puts you in the middle of February.”

I shake my head. “I’m not having sex—”

“So you’ve already insinuated—”

“Because I’m not.”

His face looks unsettled. “No reason to remind me *you don’t even like me.*”

I sigh. That really isn’t true. He brought my coat to me, and I enjoyed our banter in class, and I think...I think I see kindness in his eyes now as he looks at me.

“I do like you,” I say.

“And you did bring a pie, although I can’t eat it.” He gives me a sheepish grin.

“I had no intention of bringing up the fake boyfriend thing until you asked,” I add with a sigh. “If we set up an arrangement, what do I have to do for you?”

“Hang out in public, spread the word that we’re together—that kind of thing.”

Really? “Why?”

He leans in over the table. “I need to focus on my game and training. Women are constantly finagling their way into my life, and honestly, I need a break.”

“Poor you.” I shake my head.

He laughs, and I take him in, enjoying how he looks with a smile curling his lips, the way his hand rakes through his hair. “I want a championship.” He glances down at the pile of textbooks, and I see our poetry book. “And I could use some help in our class.”

“That class is easy!”

“I’ll be missing it for hockey reasons and I may not be back.” He shrugs. “The TA is helping out, but you can keep me updated.”

Oh. Disappointment hits at the news that he won’t be there.

“No fringe benefits?” Geeze. Does part of me *want* him to ask for “extras”?

Another grin. “I wouldn’t throw you out. Whatever happens between us will have nothing to do with our agreement.”

“Fair.” My heart flies at the prospect of him being inside me again, his hands in my hair, his lips on mine—

Stop the madness. I clear my throat.

“So, let’s proceed, then?” His lids have lowered, and I wonder what he’s thinking.

I nod, feeling a little dizzy with excitement, the idea growing. This...this can work.

“Want me to write it?” I ask, leaning over to watch him scribble. “Contracts are exciting to me.”

“I’m in charge,” he murmurs, his head bent over his paper. I hear a little bit of command in his tone, a wisp of authority—and it makes me hot.

What is wrong with me?

He looks up. “I want you to kiss me in public at least a couple times a week—just so everyone knows.”

“What?” I feel flushed. “That’s like eight times.”

His pen stops. “May I write that down?”

I inhale. “Yes.”

“I’ll also need you to attend parties with me. You didn’t seem thrilled about the Kappa house.”

“How about one party?”

He drops his pen. “I want all the parties.”

I hold my hands up. “No! Wait—okay, yes, but I have to study too. Just remember that.”

He gets this triumphant look on his face and scribbles away.

I clear my throat.

He glances back up at me. “Is there something you wanted to add?”

I tap on the paper. “There’s no falling in love.”

He pauses, his lips parting as he gives me a fascinated look. “Do you think that’s even a remote possibility? You, a pre-law student, falling for me, the douchebag hockey player?”

“I never called you a douchebag to your face, and yes, I’d like to have it down. It’s the number one rule.” My voice is firm. “And write down no more *baby* or *babe* or *sweetheart*. Never again. It makes me crazy.”

He chews on the pen. “Boy, you’re really racking up the rules, but I have to have a cute nickname for you.” He gives me a look. “I reserve the right to come up with a nickname later.” I hesitate, and he guffaws. “Seriously, you’re second-guessing this over a nickname? What are you afraid of?”

“Fine. And this girl-of-the-month thing stops at the end of four weeks—strict, no extensions.”

“Girls beg for extensions.”

I narrow my eyes. “Not this one, bud.”

“Y’all working out a sex agreement thing in there?” Eric calls out, his gaze on the TV. “My safe word is coconuts. Use it if you want.”

“No,” we both say at the same time, and then we look at each other and laugh.

A few minutes later, he wraps up his writing and pushes the notebook over to me. I’m reading it when I raise my finger as a brilliant idea hits. “I’ll take *Miss Ryan* as my nickname.”

He grins broadly. “You like that? It’s very lawyery sounding.”

“It’s better than babe.”

“Oh, *Miss Ryan*, I’m so going to enjoy this,” he says softly, drawing out my name, and my body sizzles.

“Or Sugar. Whatever. Nicknames aren’t important.”

“I love nicknames. In fact, I’m going to write down that you have to call me Z. We have to maintain a facade, especially when we’re supposed to be fucking our brains out.” His eyes drift over me. “Right?”

“You’re infuriating.” But there’s no heat in my voice. *I like him. Shit, shit, shit.*

He just smiles and pushes the paper over to me once again. I run my eyes over his quickly scrawled handwriting, noticing it matches the writing on the note he left at my door.

Our little contract doesn’t look official at all, but I sign it with a flourish, and he does as well. He asks for my number and I give it to him just as one of the doors in the back of the house opens, perhaps a bedroom, and another guy stalks into the kitchen shirtless and wearing a pair of unzipped jeans and nothing else. “Z, I found another pile of cat throw-up in my closet—”

His voice comes to an abrupt halt as our gazes meet, his a soft grey with dark brows slashing over them. Of course, he’s Z’s brother, but I see the differences between them. His features are missing that classical, hot Greek god thing Z has going on. He isn’t as tall or as broad as Z either, but he’s handsome in his own way, built with solid shoulders, a trim waist, and an obvious six-pack.

Their gene pool is amazing.

A cat comes out of nowhere, darts at the Z lookalike, hisses, and then dashes off to a back room.

The longer he stares, the more he whitens, and I squirm. “Who are *you*?” he asks.

Z frowns and moves closer to me. “A friend.”

Eric moseys back in from the den. “Dude, this is Sugar and she brought us pie, man. PIE. And all because she dumped on Z last night.” He starts singing, “She’s my cherry pie...” and dances into the kitchen.

At least *he* likes me.

But still, what’s up with this guy? I frown, checking the hem of my sweater to make sure it’s not showing too much skin. It’s not, and when I glance back up, Z’s face is tight, and he and his brother seem to be having a deep conversation with their eyes.

He sticks out his hand, still frowning. “Reece, Z’s brother.”

I take it, but the handshake is brief and hurried. I nod. “Hi.”

The temperature in the room chills and just like that, the visit is over. Z takes my elbow, steering me toward the door, ushering me out.

Okay.

“We’ll talk more soon,” he says as I make my way down the steps of the porch.

He follows me along the sidewalk to my truck. Ten years old with faded paint and a small crack in the windshield, it’s got a dent in the side where someone hit me in the HU parking lot last fall. I’m not normally embarrassed by my lack of money, and I’m not now, but when I take in the new-looking black Escalade parked in his driveway and the silver Porsche next to it, I let out a laugh.

“What?” he asks.

I tilt my head toward the tiny car. “Which one of you guys drives the Porsche? I’m imagining you trying to fit inside it.”

He smiles. “Ah, that’s Reece’s. He likes his flash.” We stop at the truck door and he opens it for me. “By the way, there’s a party here next Thursday for Eric’s birthday. Be here at seven and plan on PDA. I don’t want people catching on that we’re pretend.”

My eyes flare.

“Is the idea of kissing me again so terrible?”

I feel color rising up my cheeks. “I really don’t like college parties. I’m a total introvert.”

He gives me an arched brow. “I need you on my arm to fight off the piranhas.”

My gaze goes behind him and Reece is watching us from the window, a scowl on his face. Eric is behind him, waving. He’s got another piece of pie in his hand.

Before I can analyze Reece and his odd reaction, Z helps me inside my vehicle carefully. Without brushing against me, almost as if he’s being careful with me, he reaches for my seat belt and leans over me to snap it. He smells all male, and his shirt clings to the taut muscles of his chest. My fingers itch to touch him, recalling how hard his body felt, toned to perfection.

“I can buckle myself,” I say, but I don’t mean it. Even though it’s dangerous to my heart, I like him doing this, like being near him. I hear the click of the metal latch.

“You’re my pretend girlfriend, and I need to practice. Plus, Reece is watching, and it’s probably annoying him. He ticked me off earlier.”

“Why is that?”

He rises up and considers me, his gaze searching my face carefully, as if he’s looking for something. We’re close, so close—

He touches my hair. “Just tell me you’ll come to the party.”

I close my eyes then reopen them.

He tugs at a strand, his voice lowering. “Say you’ll come, or I’ll kiss you right here.”

My eyes flare, going to his lips. I exhale. “Fine, but—”

Before I can move, he’s leaning in and barely touching his lips against mine. “Until next week, *Miss Ryan*.” He grins.

“You kissed me anyway! That’s one, with seven left,” I say, but his broad shoulders are already striding back inside the house. He tosses a hand up over his shoulder and walks in the door.

Shit.

My hands grip the steering wheel and I sit for a minute, my lips tingling. I briefly reach up and touch them.

It was barely even a kiss.

So why does it feel so good?

What a risky game I’m playing, yet my elation is real. Freaking Zack Morgan just agreed to help me make my dreams come true—and it’s going to be a battle to keep him at arm’s length in this game of pretend.

SUGAR



Wearing orange skinny jeans and a cream fisherman sweater, Taylor waves his hand as Poppy and I arrive at the booth he's been saving for us at the Tippy Moose. A fashion major with medium brown skin, soft topaz eyes, high cheekbones, and wavy longish black hair, he's the prettiest guy I know.

He air-kisses us both on the cheeks. "Ladies, my loves, it's about bloody time you got here. I'm dying to hear all about Zack."

Poppy returns his air kisses and I smile. The three of us have been friends since a tennis class freshman year where Poppy tripped over Taylor's blinged-out sneakers, broke her foot, and had to wear a boot for three months. That was one of my favorite classes, and I still giggle when I think about Taylor prancing around in his white pleated tennis skort.

Steepling his fingers, he takes us both in and continues talking. "And to prepare us for this rare weeknight out together to celebrate Sugar's boyfriend bargain, I already ordered two pink raspberry Cosmos, a shot of Patron Silver for Sugar, and a plate of cheese fries with bacon. Sugar, guac and chips are on the way too. It's all I ate when Craig broke up with me last year, and I know it's your go-to since you and Bennett are kaput." He puts a hand over his heart. "Wherever Craig and Bennett are, I hope they're both miserable, the little cheaters."

I give his arm a squeeze, recalling how depressed he was last year when his boyfriend dumped him.

“Nice pearls,” he says to Poppy as we get settled. “New?”

“Gram sent them to me for my birthday.” She preens, her chestnut hair shining under the lights of the bar as she toys with the jewelry around her neck.

“Gram’s coming off some of that money, huh?” Taylor says, and she smirks.

I smile at them. They’re both from well-to-do families, like the majority of the students here, but it strikes me sometimes how different we really are. I’ve had to work my ass off to get every stitch of clothing on my back, and their families give them Amex cards and pearls.

I scope the place out, wondering if Z is here. It’s been a few days since our bargain, and I’ve only seen him once walking across campus. He jogged over to me and walked me to my dorm, gave me a kiss on the cheek—right in front of a group of sorority girls—and then left to go to hockey practice.

Our food comes, and Taylor is fascinated by my retelling of Frat Boy and Pixie Girl as we eat. “It’s funnier now that it’s over,” I say with a sigh.

“You shouldn’t go to those parties alone,” he tells me.

“I had Julia with me.”

He and Poppy both frown. “Nothing against your roommate, but she isn’t the best wingman,” he says. “Not when she disappears with someone at a party.”

My face goes beet red. *I* went off with someone at that same party.

I sigh. “I really don’t want to go to the party at Z’s by myself.”

“I have to work,” Taylor says with regret. “I need that job for an internship credit.”

“I wish I could, but my parents are coming up for a quick visit.” Poppy flicks her hair over her shoulder and considers me. “I’ve never actually met Zack. Is he as hot as everyone says?”

Yes. *Hell yes.*

“He’s okay.” I let out a heavy breath and push at my hair that’s up in a tight sleek ponytail.

Taylor dips his chin and gives me a look. “Honey, you and I both know he’s hotter than the devil in hell with no A/C, so don’t even play. You can go to this party. I believe in you. Plus, I will work my magic and do your makeup before I go to work.”

I munch on chips, and the more I think about Zack, the more I eat.

He leans in. “So have you heard from Bennett again?”

I grimace. “I’m avoiding all the places we used to hang out at, the coffee shop, and Remi’s Bar.”

He frowns. “I hate the bloody bastard for what he did to you.”

“Keep talking British to me.” I grin.

“Just thank my beautiful mother for marrying an American and moving us here.” He flutters his lashes, which have several coats of mascara on them.

I clink my glass with theirs. “I might not have said it before, but thank you both for being here for me when things went south with Bennett.” I recall the nights they spent with me over the holidays, crashing with me in my tiny room at Mara’s.

He rolls his eyes. “I will always be here for my LA girl.”

“That’s Lower Alabama,” we say at the same time.

Poppy’s applying a fresh coat of lipstick when Taylor nods his head toward the door of the Topsy Moose.

I turn to see several hockey players making their way inside, but not Z.

“OMG. I don’t see them for a while and I forget how *tall* they are.” Taylor lets out a low whistle. “I don’t see Zack.”

“Does he kiss well?” Poppy asks.

Fuck yes.

My body tingles, and I blush again. “It’s just a pretend relationship.”

“But you have kissed him?” she asks.

Oh, honey, it was way more than that. “Yes.”

Taylor looks at me. “Something is going on with you two.”

I munch on a chip. “Nope.”

He laughs. “Why do you lie when you know I can read you like a book?”

I roll my eyes.

He grins at me. “I’m wondering, Sugar—is his plumbing big enough for the building? Because sometimes those things aren’t built to code, feel me?”

“Who’s a plumber?” Poppy asks, her bright blue eyes locked on the hockey guys. “I’m confused.”

“He means his cock,” I say with a snort. “He’s asking about Z’s, um, size.”

“Un-huh. Z, is it?” he says, looking at me from over his drink. “Have you had...rebound sex...with *him*?” He gasps.

“I’m not answering that.”

“You’re a little minx for being coy, but there’s only one reason you look so happy tonight, and it’s because you got nailed by your new fake boyfriend.”

I toss a fry at him just as Zack walks up to the back entrance, which I have an excellent view of. He seems to take a deep breath then pushes his way inside.

He’s magnificent, his shoulders encased in that fitted grey leather jacket, his ass snug in a pair of weathered designer jeans, his feet in a pair of black Chucks. With his body and face, the man would look good wearing a sack.

With long, purposeful strides, he makes his way to the right side of the room where the bar curls around into a small lounge area with leather couches and a dartboard. There’s a

murmur that goes through the crowd as he passes, and when he walks by a group of girls, they call out his name and send him finger waves. The redhead from the party—he called her Veronica—jumps up and follows him. He sort of drags her along with him as he takes a stool and orders something from the bartender that looks like a soda. She takes a seat next to him, talking animatedly, her hands brushing at his shoulders as if she’s picking imaginary lint off his clothes. He gives her a stern look and eases away.

As if he senses he’s being watched, his grey eyes look in the mirror on the back wall behind the bar and lock with mine.

He arches a brow. *Well, well, well*, says his pleased expression.

I feel a slow blush rising on my face. You’d think I’d be used to the way he looks at me, but I’m not.

Taylor lets out a little whistle. “That man is staring a hole through you.” He brushes at his hair, fluffing the ends. “How do I look?”

Poppy giggles. “Keep dreaming, Taylor.”

He clutches his chest. “You’re breaking my heart.”

They continue their banter, but I tune them out.

Z turns around, away from the bar, and my heart thumps with every second it takes for him to face me.

Tonight his jawline is scruffier, the dark beard in contrast to the caramel-blond highlights in his hair, and I think about how he got those lighter strands. I imagine they’re probably leftover from a summer spent at some exotic location. I picture him on some big fancy sailboat or a yacht with tanned girls in bikinis flanking him on either side.

Protect your heart, a voice says.

My phone pings with a text and I fumble around in my purse, pulling it out.

Hey, fake girlfriend. Want to rescue me from this girl?

My mouth quirks up and I raise my head to watch as he takes a sip of his drink with those eyes leveled at me.

Handle her yourself, is my reply. You seem to know her well enough.

I went to prep school with her. Trust me, not interested. Jealous already?

I look up and he's grinning at me even as she's trying to get his attention.

I once had a puppy who yipped like that, I send.

Please come to me, Miss Ryan.

Come to me. His words are intoxicating and I inhale a sharp breath. Poppy looks from me to him then squints. "He's really focused in on you."

"He's intense," I murmur, thinking back to the Kappa house.

She takes a sip of her martini. "Dang, he's so damn *hot*."

"*Amen*," Taylor says softly. "Watching him stare at you is almost as good as watching Khal Drogo and Daenerys eye-fuck each other. Shit, love, go get your fake boyfriend before those bitches do. Ask and you shall receive."

Fine, fine, fine.

I can do this. I'm not sure why I'm so anxious anyway. It's just pretend. I gulp down the rest of my tequila and stand up.

A slow, knowing, sexy smile settles on Zack's face.

ZACK



After an intensive practice and dinner in the athletic cafeteria, the guys and I head to the Topsy Moose. I park and they get out while I stay in the car for a few minutes, practicing my deep breathing. There's an anxious pit of worry in my gut about our upcoming game. Sure, we won our last one, but the next opponent is a tougher team, which means more pressure. Even with the loss to Minnesota-Duluth, we're still ranked at number five, and that brings its own kind of pressure with trying to stay there.

Another nightmare hit this morning at four. Knowing I couldn't go back to sleep, I went for another run then circled back to the house exhausted and worn out. Then at practice, I gave up several faceoffs, and that shit never happens. I'm the fastest one out there, but you wouldn't know it by the way I played today. I rub at my wrist, nursing the bruise I got from a defenseman's clean check when I cut in front of him to push the puck in. Instead he slammed me into the wall and I landed wrong.

After a few minutes, I'm feeling more centered and walk inside. Eric and Reece and some of the guys are at the dartboard, and I make my way to the bar to meet up with Boone, one of our freshman players who I'm mentoring. All the seniors get a "little brother" and he's mine, a talented center from Chicago. Veronica sees me and follows, asking about Eric's birthday party and what decorations I think would work. I tune her out, telling her she can do whatever she wants, and Boone joins shortly after.

A tingling sensation washes over me as I sit here, and I look up to the mirror then pause mid-sentence.

Sugar.

A few teasing texts later, I watch as she gets out of the booth and faces me.

The first thing I notice tonight is how long her legs are, the way her leggings cling to her voluptuous curves. I'm discovering something new about her each time I see her. My gaze lingers on her tits, and for the hundredth time, I wonder what she'd look like splayed out on my bed naked.

"Sheee-it. Nice rack," Boone says appreciatively, his gaze following mine.

"Shut the fuck up," I say, not taking my eyes off her. "Don't talk about her like that."

I sense him stiffening. "Okay."

She toys with a piece of her ponytail as if she's nervous, and her hands fall to her sides when she straightens her shoulders—as if preparing for war—and walks toward me. She doesn't want this thing we have. I see it in the way she walks, her steps unsure, and at one point she stops in front of a pool table and pivots back around toward her table. But, after a moment, she does a pirouette and marches forward, a look of resolve on her face.

It makes my smile deepen. She's just a tiny bit intimidated by me when she's the one who's got me by the balls.

I'm going to make her mine. She just doesn't know it yet.

"Chick's an Amazon. I like those legs." He whistles under his breath.

"I won't tell you to shut up again, Boone. I'll just plant my fist in your face next time. She's off limits."

He holds his hands out to placate me. "Fine, fine. I get it now—she's yours and you're a little territorial."

Not normally.

But her...

Veronica, who's been texting, has finally stopped long enough to figure out I'm distracted. She turns and watches Sugar approach, her brittle gaze raking over her.

"Reece said she was at your house—*with pie*. That's weird. Who brings pie to a guy's house?" I feel her bristling.

"She's a nice girl. Don't be a bitch," I say.

She inhales a breath. "Me? Why are you being an asshole?"

I sigh, looking over at her. She's a pretty girl with sleek red hair, delicate features, and big green eyes. Her parents died two years ago in a private plane crash, and she hasn't been the same since. I get grief, I really do, but she needs to step off when it comes to me.

"This girl isn't one of those jersey chasers you toy with. Leave her alone."

Confusion flashes over her face. "You actually *like* her?"

My answer is silence and a raised eyebrow.

She sputters and crosses her arms. "She's...not your type."

"What is my type then?"

Her lips flatten. "Reece said she's from the south. Does she even know the first thing about hockey?"

I bark out a laugh. "I don't even care. She probably likes football."

She searches my gaze and gives me a triumphant look. "She's just like all the rest."

My gaze sharpens. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Her giggle grates on my nerves. "Oh, come on, Z. Your heart is cold as ice. You go from one girl to the next, and I don't even think you remember their names. She'll be gone in a few weeks and a new one will come along."

It won't be you, my face tells her.

I lean in, keeping my voice low so no one can hear me. "I've been cutting you slack for a while, putting up with how

you boss girls around, and that's cool. I can deal with that, but don't keep wishing it was you on my arm. I'm not interested. I can't say it any plainer. I know you've managed to wrap Reece around your finger this past year, but don't fuck with him. Don't hurt him."

Her eyes search mine until she drops my gaze. There's a quiver in her lips, but she sucks it up and juts her chin out. "I wouldn't do that. We're all just friends. I adored Willow, and I know everything you went through after she died. I was there for both of you."

She *was* there, but not in a helpful way. No one was.

I study her. "Reece cares about you, Veronica. Do the right thing and either be with him for real or cut him loose."

She swallows and looks over at the dartboard, her gaze landing on him.

"Go to Reece."

"Because she's coming over here?" Her eyes glare at Sugar, who's almost to us.

"Because I want *her*."

She stands up from the stool and sniffs, and I watch as she saunters over to my brother and throws her arms around his waist. He turns and looks down at her, a flash of adoration on his face before he gives her a kiss. *Shit*. I just want him to be happy.

Sugar stops in front of me, her gaze intelligent and blue, the color of a perfect summer sky with a hint of green.

I look at her, getting a read on her. I take it all in, the way she bites at her lower lip, her hand trembling ever so slightly as she plucks at the silver bracelets on her wrist. I inhale a deep breath and smell her, warm and sweet.

When I fuck her again—because I will—it's going to be explosive.

Yeah, we have this boyfriend bargain, and I agreed to it. How could I not? It's a chance to figure her out.

“Why are you smiling?” I lean against the bar, feigning nonchalance though my heart is a jackhammer. Somehow I’ve got to convince her to give me a chance.

“Because I was here first and you showed up. You’re stalking me.” Her mouth curves up in a smile. Then her gaze lands on Veronica. “I guess she ran off before I got here.”

I laugh and take a step closer to her. “Don’t worry about her. Maybe we need a very public kiss so the entire place gets the idea and leaves us alone?”

She mulls it over, a blush on her cheeks. There’s a small hitch in her breath, and her eyes go straight back to my lips.

I think back to the last time I kissed her—really kissed her—and my body tightens. “You with me?”

She doesn’t say anything.

We’re close, so close, and I can feel the heat from her skin. “May I kiss you? Please?”

Her chest rises. “Okay, but none of that fancy tongue work.”

I laugh softly. “Afraid of falling in love with me?”

“No.”

I lean in and lace one of my hands with hers. “Liar. Why else say it?”

She rolls her eyes. “Just get it over with. This makes three kisses if you count the one on the cheek this week.”

“Okay.” I cup her face and kiss her like she’s really mine, like she’s coming home with me, like she’s dying for me to touch her just as much as I’m dying for her.

Our lips move slowly, tasting and exploring, and my hand pulls her closer, until she can feel the hardness in my jeans. It goes on, our mouths taking more and more, and I don’t want it to end. We break apart with small movements, our faces still leaning in, and I brush my lips across hers again. I stare down at her. “Now that will give the gossips something to talk about for a while.”

“Sheee-it, get a room,” Boone calls from behind me, and she huffs out a laugh.

A few minutes later, the guys at the dartboard call out to us, and we walk over to where they are. Eric gives Sugar a hug while Reece hangs back, a reflective look on his face. Veronica just stares at her nails as she sits on the couch.

I introduce Sugar to the players. Boone finds out she’s taking law classes and starts questioning her about if it’s an easy major or not. He keeps a respectable distance between them and keeps his eyes on her face—trust me, I’m watching. She brings out all my alpha male instincts, and I feel protective just looking at her. She sends me little looks under her lashes every now and then as she talks to him, and I wonder what she sees on my face.

Amazement, probably.

She...is...fucking exquisite.

“Yo, you ready to go?” Reece says a few minutes later.

“We just got here,” I say, not able to keep the exasperation out of my voice.

“He’s in a mood. Probably his shoulder again,” Eric mumbles to me before leading Sugar off to play darts.

Yeah. Whatever. I know it isn’t his shoulder.

“Dude, I’ve got a test tomorrow,” Reece says again.

My jaw pops. I wish he’d just driven himself.

“You offered to drive,” he reminds me, holding up the beer he’s drinking.

I did agree to drive everyone because I’m not drinking during hockey season, and I am the captain. It’s up to me to make sure no one does anything crazy.

The calendar on my phone pings with a reminder of everything I have on my plate tomorrow, and I roll my shoulders, feeling the tense and tired muscles there. Truth is, maybe it is a good idea to head home. I have to run, go to class and hockey practice, plus drive to the city for another therapy

session. Frustration eats at me. I want to get over this hurdle of anxiety. I want my life back, and I need rest or my body is going to fall apart.

“Five minutes and we’ll go,” I tell my brother.

“Veronica is coming with us,” he says as she hooks her arm through his. She meets my gaze and gives me a triumphant look, as if somehow she’s winning by being with Reece. *Whatever.*

I shrug. “You’ll be the one bringing her back to her car later.”

He gives me a tight nod.

I walk over to Sugar, Eric, and Boone, who are playing darts, telling them that we’ll be leaving soon.

Eric reads my face. “Sure, man.” He looks at Sugar. “See you at my party, right? You know I wouldn’t be opposed if you brought a pie.”

She grins. “It took me two hours to make that. How do you feel about donuts instead?”

“Sold.” He pats me on the back, walking off with Boone.

“I like your friends,” she says.

I glance over at the table where she came from, a guy and a girl there watching us with avid interest. “Maybe you can introduce me to yours?”

She frowns. “Sometime, yeah, maybe.”

I pop an eyebrow. “You embarrassed of me?”

“Well, this is just pretend, so...” Her voice drifts off.

I exhale. She’s got a fortress around her.

“Come here a minute,” I tell her as everyone else hangs by the door, getting their coats on.

“Yeah?”

I pull out my phone, hold it out for a selfie, and wave it at her. “I don’t post a lot on social media, but it might be good if

we did some Instagram stuff and maybe your guy at Vandy will see it. Priming the pump a bit.”

“That’s a great idea.” She perks up and moves to stand next to me, and I lean toward her until our heads are together then snap the picture. I kiss her on the cheek and snap one more. She’s laughing and taking my phone and looking at the photos.

“We look nice.” Her gaze is bright when it meets mine. “Send those to me?”

I shrug. “Sure.”

She chews on her lip. “Are you really leaving?”

“You’re welcome to come with me.”

She laughs and, just to mess with her and perhaps on impulse, I wrap my hand around her nape and pull her to me, pressing my lips to hers one more time. I kiss her, my tongue sweeping in to taste her, and when I pull back, her lips are red and swollen—and *mine*.

“Just in case that first kiss wasn’t enough,” I say.

She nods, her face pink. “That’s four.”

“You’ll stop counting.”

She smirks. “I’m keeping a tally.”

Reece calls my name again.

I say goodbye and head to the door.

Part of me wants to look back at her, but I know she doesn’t want that. She wants me to keep it simple. Uncomplicated. Yeah, I’m wondering how long that’s going to last...

SUGAR



Both Poppy and Taylor are waiting on the edge of their seats when I come back to the table.

Taylor squeaks. “Fuck a duck in a bowtie. Tell us all the details.”

I laugh at the saying he picked up from Mara, reach over to grab what’s left of his martini, and drink it. Zack Morgan is the most confusing person. I shake my head, still trying to suss it out, replaying the interaction in my head. “Dude bolted out of here like a speeding bullet.” I lean back against the booth. “And Reece wouldn’t even talk to me. Weird.”

“What about that guy they called Boone? I want an intro to him,” Poppy says as she leans forward over the table.

I laugh. “He’s younger than you.”

“And that’s a problem?” she says.

“Poppy, your necktie thingie is in the fries,” Taylor says, giggling. Poppy has a tendency to be a bit spacey.

“Oh!” She pulls back up, straightening her cardigan around her shoulders as she giggles. “Too many martinis.”

Taylor stiffens as his eyes go to the front door and widen. “Bloody hell. Is there a full moon?”

“What?” I say, arching my neck to see who or what he’s looking at.

Tall and handsome with wavy black hair and a trim, lean physique, Bennett has just waltzed in the door. An anvil lands

square on my chest at the sight of him. I can't stop staring, taking him in, the strong chin with a dimple in the center, the way his hair flops in his face. A girl is attached to him like glue.

She's pretty with cropped shoulder-length brown hair and a svelte figure that's draped in a clingy black dress and sleek, thigh-high boots with three-inch heels.

A bitter laugh comes from me. "He always liked brunettes in dresses."

Poppy pats my hand. "He's a dick. He wanted to change you."

I sigh. It's true. He complained about my casual attire constantly. "I wasn't rock star enough for him. He wanted a sultry sexpot."

Poppy frowns. "Girl, you are sultry. He just isn't the one."

Taylor lets out a long sigh. "Ladies and gents, the night is officially over. Let's fix our crowns and be brave—and get the hell out of here."

Bennett's head comes up and he sees us. He whispers something to the girl and starts walking our way.

I watch him get closer and closer, my chest heaving as I think back to the times we spent together. The magical summer at his parents' lake house in Michigan, the time he made me chicken soup when I had the flu...

First love—first *everything*. It cuts you open and flays you alive.

And seeing him again—which is damn hard not to do in a town as small as Sparrow Lake—I feel frozen.

I can't lie. I miss him. You can't spend that much time with someone and not.

He comes to a stop at our table and I take in the expensively ripped grey T-shirt with the black jacket on top. The coat has zippers everywhere, on the sides, the collar, and the cuffs. It fits him like a glove, the material hugging his slender waist. Up close I see he's wearing his hair a little

longer, the raven waves brushing against the skin of his jawline. He's handsome, alarming so, with an easy smile and deep brown eyes. He has this way of looking at you as if you are the center of the entire universe—until you aren't.

“Sugar...”

I stiffen. “Bennett.”

“You never answered my texts or calls. I even went to BB's last week to look for you. Mara wasn't exactly friendly, but whatever, I'm—I'm *so glad* to see you.”

I stare at him.

He swallows. “I've been to your dorm room a few times...”

I know. I've gotten the texts when I wasn't there.

His brown eyes devour my face. “I just want to talk.”

Poppy's back goes ramrod straight. “She has nothing to say to you.”

“Mhmm,” Taylor adds. “And no one invited you over to our table either, so scat.” He makes a *move on along* motion with his hand.

But it isn't easy to dissuade Bennett. His tenacity is one of the things I love—*loved*—about him. He pursued me for three months our sophomore year before I finally gave in and went out with him.

He leans in, his gaze completely on me, as if Poppy and Taylor aren't even here. “I miss you.”

My jaw tightens. “Yet you're here with someone?”

He straightens up. “I'm not a monk, and if you won't even talk to me...what else am I supposed to do? She doesn't mean anything to me, babe.”

“Jump off a cliff,” Poppy says under her breath.

I tilt my head at the girl at the nearby table who's eyeing us with interest over the top of a drink menu. “Is she the one you

were with that night?" I didn't see her face, just long legs and a dress.

He sighs.

"Can't you just admit it?" I say. "I *saw* you."

He darts a look at Taylor and then Poppy.

"They know everything, Bennett."

He holds both hands up to accentuate his words. "It was *one* time, Sugar, one time, and I was trashed. It didn't mean shit. You were caught up in your classes and law school applications, and I was lonely. It was a mistake."

I blink rapidly. The nerve of him to blame this on *me*.

"All it takes is one time, Bennett. *One time*. I trusted you."

"Babe, you know I hated it when you didn't come to my shows." His eyes bore into mine. "I needed you there. You were such a muse to me. It was a moment of fucking weakness."

He looks up at the ceiling as if looking for the right words to explain, but I know he won't find anything there. You can't reason your way out of having your dick inside another girl.

I recall the moment I found a lip-smearred phone number in his pocket and called it, and the girl on the other end had no qualms about detailing her make-out session with Bennett at Remi's Bar, a local music spot where his band plays.

At his next gig, I showed up at Remi's unannounced and saw for myself, both of them in his Land Cruiser, her straddling him in his seat, her dressed shoved up around her waist.

Part of me wanted to pull a Carrie Underwood and take a Louisville Slugger to that car.

But I didn't.

I walked away.

And I haven't stopped.

Maybe it was because of how I watched Mama cry to my father. I watched her beg him every time he left us to go back to his real family. Her tears made me swear I would never be the girl who got her heart broken.

He must read the emotions flitting across my face. "Please. Just give me another chance. Everyone deserves that."

He made me cry for weeks. He made me think I was less than, like there was something about me that wasn't good enough.

And I can't forgive that.

I won't be the girl who accepts a guy who cheats on her.

I won't be the girl who accepts a liar.

Taylor and Poppy follow me as we get up and walk out of the Topsy Moose.

ZACK



“**Y**ou’re quiet, Zack. How do you feel about the upcoming game?” The question comes from Dr. Cole, my sports psychologist. A stocky man with a goatee and discerning eyes, he’s leaned back in his leather chair, pen and notebook in hand. He has a long list of elite athletic clients ranging from NBA basketball players to superstar tennis players. We’re in his spacious office in the city, and he’s been talking for the past few minutes about my progress—or lack thereof.

I think back over these past weeks with him. My therapy is a cognitive behavioral treatment where I practice relaxation training and stress reduction.

I’m staring out the window, my mind drifting to Sugar and that kiss last night. She’s consuming me, the way her lips pucker when she’s thinking, her lashes fluttering against her cheeks after I kiss her. This crazy thing we have is mutual, which scares me and exhilarates me at the same time. I guess what Veronica said is true; my bedroom has been a revolving door of girls since freshman year, but I never lied to a girl or cheated while we “dated”. The truth is, hockey is number one with me, and there’s never been a girl worth sharing that spotlight with.

I know, we just met, we *just* fucking met, but something about her—

“Zack?”

I look up at Dr. Cole. He's giving me a quizzical look, and I realize I've been silent too long. I clear my throat. "I'm practicing my breathing, doing self-talk, setting goals, eating right, running, lifting in the gym, writing letters. I'm doing everything..." I stop and stare down at my hands. "But I'm already dreading the next game. I'm terrified I'll spiral. The dread is always lingering, right there below the surface, and if one little thing sets me off..."

He nods at me. "You're a topnotch athlete, and you didn't get that way with just your physical attributes. You have the good mental control, and now you just have to polish your adaptability. You love a challenge, right?"

I rub my jaw. "You make it sound easier than it is."

He gives me a sympathetic, wry grin. "Life is never easy for a person with anxiety. These feelings may never go away, which is why you need to steel yourself against the dark thoughts, be prepared, and hone your methods of coping like a blade against a stone. Use those things that give you dread. Face them. Accept them. Overcome them."

I take a deep breath. I can face them, even accept that I have a problem, but overcoming? *Yeah, that's the heart of the issue.*

The truth is, part of me has always been anxious; it's just that lately, it's winning.

The first time I took the ice my freshman year at HU, I got dizzy and clammy and thought I might pass out, but I hung on and shoved it away. I used the energy, wrestled it, and poured it into my game and I won, I fucking defeated the anxiety. I've always been able to beat the darkness—until now.

He must see something in my expression. "How are you feeling about Willow this week? Anything different?"

I level my gaze at him. "She's dead because of me. She's never going to college or getting married or having kids..." I halt, my gut churning.

"And you still blame yourself?"

My jaw tightens, anger and grief bubbling. “Therapy isn’t going to fix a mistake I made, sir. I killed her.”

“A car accident killed her.” His reply is swift and sure.

“Because I wasn’t there,” I insist.

He puts his elbow on the desk. “You’re not a mind reader and you can’t control people. Even if you had been at that party, she would have left eventually. She would have taken the same curve in the road. You are not an all-knowing deity who can decide someone’s fate just by showing up at a party.”

But...

I wasn’t there. If I had been, maybe she would have waited until the rain stopped, maybe I would have driven her home, maybe we would have resolved all our shit—

I pinch the bridge of my nose. *Stop. Stop. Stop.*

“Zack?”

I inhale a deep breath and look up at him.

“You deserve hockey. You deserve happiness.”

He’s been saying those words to me since the day we started this.

I look back out the window.

“I want you to repeat those words to yourself when you wake up tomorrow. Then say them again when you go to bed. Say them whenever you feel like you’re spiraling down that hole. Okay?”

I give him a nod, but I’m not sure I agree with him. Magic words won’t fix me.

I watch a couple on the street at a bus stop. They’re young, maybe my age, and there’s a suitcase between them. She leans her head on his shoulder and stares up at him with big eyes. He smiles down at her and kisses her...and I’m wrapped in envy.

I want that, that...that...love.

I could have that.

I could.

But do I deserve it?

SUGAR



The night of Eric's party arrives the next week and I'm getting ready, my mind already on Z. I've seen him a couple of times since the Tippy Moose, but it's been brief. We met in the student center for lunch one day, and he took more pictures of us and posted them to his social media. "This will keep the girls away," he said with a smile, but I knew they wouldn't. He's the kind of guy girls will crawl on the floor to be with. As we were leaving that day, me off to the library and him to hockey, Reece and Veronica showed up and Z visibly stiffened, his entire demeanor changing. There's a weird energy when they're around, and it pricks at me, makes me wonder what the backstory is there.

Don't get your heart broken, Sugar.

Poppy eyes me critically, her lips spreading into a wide grin as she takes in my figure in the dress I picked out to wear. The color is a deep merlot, silky and stunning and clingy, and of course, it came from her closet. She's two inches shorter than me and a size smaller across the boobs, but because it's a halter dress that ties around the neck, we had some leeway. She claps, her face filled with glee. "I wish I had your boobs."

"No, you don't. Have you seen me try to jog? Scary."

She tugs her cardigan around her slim shoulders. "I'm flatter than a pancake. I would die to shake those things in some guy's face and watch him melt..."

"You're beautiful, Poppy!" And she is with her shiny, dark, almost black hair and blue eyes.

She shrugs. “Meh.”

I grimace as I look at my reflection. “This dress is as subtle as a freight train. It practically screams *look at me*.”

“No, that’s the shoes,” she says with a grin.

We glance down at the strappy gold two-inch heels. They match the delicate gold necklace with a glittering rectangular quartz pendant around my neck. My toenails are painted a wine color and my fingernails match, all thanks to Taylor. I huff out a laugh as I look at my long legs in these heels. “I’ll be taller than all the girls and some of the dudes.”

“So? Hockey guys are huge. It’s perfect.”

The deep V of the neckline falls far enough to reveal my considerable cleavage, and I tug at it until she pops my hands. “Just leave it. You look like a siren.”

I twirl around. “If I bend over, my ass is going to show.”

“Don’t bend over.”

“Or do bend over,” Taylor says slyly from his spot on my bed. “Get you a little something when no one is looking.”

I shake my head at them both.

Taylor applies a thin coat of mascara to his lashes, snaps the mirror closed, and gives me a long look. “Honestly, I know you hate dresses, but you look good enough to eat.”

“It’s because I’m so dang tall. Nothing looks right on me, so I just stick with leggings or skinny jeans.”

“Leggings should be outlawed. Just wait until you get that law degree and get a nice job—then you can get your dresses tailored.”

Poppy plops down in the beanbag chair underneath my window, crossing her legs in the air and swishing her feet back and forth. She sends a disdainful look around my dorm room. “I feel horrible you have to live here. I would have loved to be your roomie, but we all assumed you and Bennett...” She shrugs. “Sorry.”

“Where is Julia anyway?” Taylor asks.

“I rarely see her so I assume she’s staying over with someone.”

I touch my hair, which I curled into soft beach waves that brush against my shoulders. My eyes are accentuated with shimmering grey shadow, and the lids are lined in black eyeliner. I inhale a deep breath.

“I’m nervous,” I say, putting on more Bad Girl wine-colored lipstick.

“What’s one party? Just picture yourself in law school next fall, learning all that lawyery stuff,” Taylor says.

“Those classes will be hard, I assure you.”

He waves me off. “Why, you’ll be just like Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*. All you need is a cute little puppy and a friend who’s a manicurist to teach you how to bend and snap.” He stands and demonstrates. “Bend and snap! See? Easy peasy.”

I’m outright giggling. “Dude, I can’t even bend over.”



AFTER PICKING UP SOME DONUTS, I drive to Z’s, and I have a hard time finding a parking place. I end up on the side of the road one block over, and I curse myself for not agreeing to let Z come pick me up. While it was kind of him to offer when he texted me today, I like knowing I can leave when I want to.

The house is lit up as I turn the corner, shivering from the gust of cold wind as I cross my arms over my North Face.

Finally at his house, I walk up the sidewalk and open the door. It’s loud inside with music blaring over a sound system that I can’t see. *Happy Birthday Eric!* is written on a gold banner strung up on the wall near the staircase, and black and gold balloons float around the room.

There’s a coat rack overflowing with jackets, so I fold mine up and tuck it neatly inside the hall closet. “Stay safe, Coat.”

I feel exposed in my dress, as if I’m on display. Several girls are huddled in a pile on the couch in the den, and I search their faces for anyone familiar I might know, but it’s pointless.

I don't know these people. One of the girls turns around to get a look at me, and my eyes narrow. Veronica. She sniffs, turns her nose up, and whispers to one of the other girls.

I'm almost to the kitchen when she gets up and cuts me off, giving me an overly bright smile.

I blink. "Hi?"

Dressed in a slinky black pantsuit with a silver sash around the middle, she looks sophisticated and snooty. She's wearing her *I smell something bad* expression.

She arches a brow and looks down at the donuts.

"They're for Eric."

"I see. How thoughtful. I'll take them and put them on the food table," she says, pulling them from my grasp.

"Okay." *Whatever.* I let them go. I'm sure at some point, Eric will see them, and I feel awkward carrying them around in the crowded house anyway.

I go to step around her but she moves in front of me.

"Yes?"

She gives me a condescending smile, her eyes running from the top of my hair down to my shoes. "Just wanted to tell you to enjoy yourself tonight. After all, who knows how much longer you'll be with Z. He tends to go through girls on a regular basis."

She doesn't know about the agreement we made, and I'm glad.

I bat my lashes, playing her game just as well as she does. I know her type. She can't have Z, and she doesn't want anyone else to get him either. "Oh, I know. Thanks for reminding me that he's quite the player. And his one-month deal? Suits me just fine. Bye now."

Then I'm shoving past her and into the packed kitchen. There's a makeshift bar set up on the table, and a girl wearing one of the player's jersey is pouring drinks for everyone. Easing in between people, I grab a glass of punch and pretend

to drink. Someone jostles into me from the side and some of it sloshes out of the cup, splattering down my dress.

I glance up, but whoever it was has already gotten away. I exhale, trying to wipe at the fabric. At least the dress is a dark burgundy color so it doesn't show up.

"I'm already regretting this," I mutter to myself.

Eric appears at my side, his hair tousled as if someone's had their hands in it. He picks me up and twirls me around as much as he can. "You came! I told Z you'd chicken out." He leans down conspiratorially. "Did you bring me a gift? If not, that's totally fine since we told everyone no gifts, and I'll take a little kiss instead." He points to his cheek. "Right here will do just fine."

I brush my lips against his skin and step back. "I brought donuts, but Veronica confiscated them."

His eyes go around the room as if looking for someone. He shakes his head at me. "Ah, man, Z must have it bad for you."

"Why do you say that?" I ask, sipping my drink, doing my best to relax and blend in.

"Because he's staring at us right now." He grins, a bit maniacally. "I love it when he gets riled up—which doesn't happen much when it comes to girls."

I look around the room. "Where?"

Eric wiggles his eyebrows and tilts his head toward the stairs. "Up on the ledge. I guarantee he saw you when you first came in, and I'm dashing before he kicks my ass." He goes to leave but turns back around, his face serious. "Also, don't hurt him, okay? I'm not sure he can take it."

How would *I* hurt *him*?

"He's the one with a girl of the month," I say.

Eric winces. "Is he really? That's mostly gossip, you know, and I don't know of any girl who has a bad word to say about him—other than maybe Veronica on a bad day—so that pretty much clears that up." He continues, lowering his voice. "He's just got a lot going on with hockey. We didn't win a

championship last year, and it's important to him that we do this year."

I nod, seeing the slightly worried, earnest expression on his face. "Okay."

And then he's off, his head bobbing through the crowd as he makes his way to the back door where people are spilling out onto the deck.

I turn and look for Zack on the steps, my eyes going up to the top of the staircase, and there he is, his face in a bit of a scowl. Wearing a pair of low-slung jeans and a tight black shirt with the HU Lions logo on the sleeve, he draws the eye—straight to his muscled chest and those rock-hard abs below it. He motions with his head for me to come to him.

You come to me, my eyes say, and his nose flares.

Even though I know he's annoyed, even that small action makes my heart jump. He's like dynamite, and I never know what's going to set him off.

Why do I like it?

I lift my shoulders in a nonchalant shrug and take a sip of my drink.

He exhales a breath and eases down the stairs, pushing past the people who've taken up residence there. A girl calls his name and while he gives her a smile, I know it isn't real, because I've seen his real smiles. He keeps moving, coming down, and I eat him up. What man has the right to look that damn good? Lithe and graceful, he jumps the last three steps and lands at the bottom, and never once has he taken his gaze off me. I swallow. It's intimidating to be the center of his undivided attention, and I wonder if all his girlfriends get this treatment. There's an earthy, dominant warrior quality to him, one that calls to the softness in me. He's confident and has purpose, and shit, he wants *me*. I know it in the way he can't take his eyes off me.

I count the seconds it takes for him to cross the room. One, two, three, four, five and here he is. I try to speak—even a hello would do—but nothing comes out.

Why does he make me so tongue-tied?

“About time you got here,” he says in a gruff voice.

ZACK



My cock gets hard the second she walks in the door, her face uncertain as she looks for a place to stash her coat. I've never known someone who was so attached to a coat. Maybe it's a Southern thing. It makes me want to dig deeper into her past, into her family and figure out who she really is.

Her dress blows my mind, tight and short and hugging her tits.

The entire day I've been itching to see her, and my eyes follow her, taking in the long legs and the way her blonde hair spills down her back.

My hand is shaky as I stick it in my pocket. I want her. I *fucking* want her and it has shit to do with any resemblance. She ticks all my boxes. She's introverted and awkward and funny—everything I didn't know I liked—and her luscious lips with that indentation on the bottom are made for kissing *me*.

My breathing deepens, watching her face as she speaks to Veronica, and the male in me wants to jump over this railing and get between them. Something in her expression makes me pause, though, and I watch as she handles Veronica with a smirk on her face. *Good job, babe*. I smile as she flips around and flounces into the kitchen, ass swinging. Veronica glares after her, color rising on her cheeks.

I lean down to watch her walk into the kitchen. Between hockey and therapy, we've spent scant time together lately, but

I want to change that.

I know she doesn't know what to think of me yet, but I'm not giving up. There's no quit in me. I'm a persistent, stubborn sonofabitch, and I'm going to be the last man standing until she's mine and in my bed.

Reece comes up behind me and exhales.

I can feel his displeasure even though I'm not taking my gaze off her.

He leans over the rail with me. "You're playing a dangerous game, brother."

"So you've said a hundred times already."

He sighs. "Look at her. She could be Willow's sister, man, and you don't get a redo with someone who's dead." He pauses. "She makes me uncomfortable."

"I'm well aware that she looks like her. That isn't what this is. If you got to know her like I do, you'd see what I mean."

He holds his hands up. "Really? Are you listening to yourself? I know you've been having nightmares. I hear you. You're willing to do anything to make those stop."

"You don't understand." My hands tighten, and I look over at him. He's been walking on eggshells with me since the night I kissed Sugar in front of everyone at the Tippy Moose, and I've been too busy to address it. Frankly, I have too much on my plate right now to indulge his pettiness. Dr. Cole says I need to remove stressors from my life, and fuck if he isn't one. Sugar isn't.

His hand strokes his scruff. "Look, I'm just worried about you. You carry all that guilt..." His voice trails off and he lets out a long exhalation.

I do feel guilty. I'm the reason Willow is dead. I'm the reason—

Stop. I take a deep breath.

Part of me is tempted to tell him my relationship with Sugar is pretend, and though it might ease his mind, he'd tell

Veronica, and she'd blab it everywhere, so I don't.

“Just mind your own business, Reece.”

“I just care about you,” he says with a grimace, and then he's walking past me and down the stairs.

I focus back on Sugar, who's getting a drink from the bar. Eric runs up to her and twirls her around. I know he's just clowning around, but, dude, stop. She's different...

He says something to her, she turns and looks up, and we have one of our stare-offs. I watch her chest moving up and down in that tight dress, the way her lips part when she sees me.

I make my way down to her, pushing through the crowd, barely noticing anyone.

She's waiting on me.

SUGAR



“About time you got here,” he says in a gruff voice before cupping my face and kissing me. It’s hard and sweeping and possessive.

I shouldn’t like it.

Fire and need all mixed together consume my body and I kiss him back, our mouths clinging. Each time we kiss, it’s as if it’s the first time, and I’m baffled by the intense desire that rises up inside me. Keeping his arm wrapped around my waist, he ends the kiss and stares down at me, his face shuttering, as if he doesn’t want me to know how it affected him.

I swallow, ignoring the stares from the players and girls in the kitchen. Some of the gazes are speculative, and a few are just downright jealous.

My voice is shaky. “Academy Award for your acting skills.”

“Not pretending.” His hand reaches out, toys with a piece of my hair, and he pauses, almost as if he might say something else but then changes his mind.

We’ve been here for a few minutes just talking about our week when a pretty girl comes up to us and throws her arms around Z. With honey-blond hair and a perfect bow for a mouth, she’s dressed in a mini skirt and a flowy white shirt that’s nearly see-through. I wonder if she’s as cold as I am.

“Z! Happy Birthday!” she says, fluttering long black lashes up at him.

He arches a brow. “It’s Eric’s birthday.”

“Whatever. It’s the same.” She titters and rubs his arm. “We can celebrate everyone’s birthday any way you want.”

Z is unsmiling. “Have you met my girlfriend? This is Sugar.”

She swivels her head and gives me an envious glance, her gaze raking over my dress and sizing me up. “Hi, I’m Lola. Cute dress.”

I don’t even speak. I just glare down at her from my taller height and arch my brow with as much disdain as I can muster. *Who the hell does she think she is?* I don’t want her hands on him.

Her gaze sharpens. “Oh, hey, are you the girl who dated Bennett? The singer?” She gives me a knowing look and then smirks. “Lucky you. First him and now Z—you won the lottery.”

Z isn’t someone to win, and I cringe—not that she notices, already turning right back to him, her hand on his arm, talking about hockey and how great he is and how her brother wants to play for HU.

I want to pluck her eyeballs out, throw them on the ground, and stomp.

And that terrifies me.

My heart picks up the pace and I swallow down a wave of fear. Bennett had girls with starry eyes all over him, but this feeling...I might turn into a cavewoman if she doesn’t step off.

But he isn’t really yours, I remind myself.

Right.

She laughs up at him, her breasts straining against her shirt, and the room grows hot and oppressive. I try to get a read on him, to see if maybe he’s slept with her before, and the mere idea of it makes me queasy.

Fuck this.

“I need some air,” I murmur then brush past them toward the back door, but he catches up with me, holding my hand and leaving Lola mid-sentence with a frown on her face.

“Hey, don’t go. I need you next to me to help with this very thing.”

“Z, be honest—you can handle these girls. You don’t need me.”

“I do.”

His voice has softened, and I don’t think he means running girls off.

And that scares me too.

I unlace our hands. “I need a minute alone, okay?”

He frowns and exhales then watches me walk out the door. I suck in the cold air as I press hot hands to my cheeks.

Someone laughs and I look around. There are people milling about on the large wooden deck, most of them keeping warm at one of the gas heaters stationed in various places. What am I doing here? Why is he making me so crazy?

“We built this thing ourselves last year,” Eric calls from across the deck. I didn’t see him when I first came out, but he leaves a group of girls to walk over to me. He frowns as he gets closer. “You having a good time?”

“Of course.”

I guess I wasn’t convincing because he takes my elbow and we drift a few more feet away so we’re out of earshot of the other partygoers. We stand next to a heater.

“Parties aren’t your favorite?”

I exhale. “Nope.”

He nods. “Want to know a secret?”

“Sure.” I cross my arms as a cold gust of wind blows across the deck, ruffling the neckline of my dress. The motion pulls Eric’s eyes to my bust, and he blinks.

He looks back up at me. “Ah, sorry, what was I saying?”

I smack him on the arm and he rubs it like it hurt when I know it didn't.

“Ow, babe. My eyeballs just went there, sorry. I'm a man, but you're with Z and I respect that, so I won't do it again. Plus, I'm thinking you're going to be like the sister I never had, right? I hope so?” He grins.

I shake my head, laughing. I can't even be mad at the *babe* because with Eric, it's just a regular word.

“Anyway, the secret I was going to tell you is Z doesn't like parties that much either. I don't even think he likes all these people here at the house, but it's my birthday.”

He must see the surprise on my face.

“He goes to the Kappa parties because they've hosted the hockey team for decades, and it's kind of cool since we can't pledge a real fraternity. Z knows he's the star of this team, and after a big win, there's always a party at the Kappa house, and you can bet your ass he'll be there. He's got a streak of devotion a mile long in him.” He takes a drink from his beer, his gaze searching mine. “Also, if you have any questions, I'm here to help. I'm your relationship guru when it comes to Z.”

I chew on my lips. “Has he ever had a serious girlfriend?”

“A high school sweetheart. I never met her.” He shakes his head, his face solemn. “She died in a car wreck right before he graduated from prep school...” He stops talking and sighs. “Willow was her name, but he doesn't talk about her.”

My heart drops and I scramble to reinvent him in my head, picturing him with a girlfriend and then losing her. I think about his comments during class, about darkness and being lonely. “Is that why he doesn't get serious with girls?”

He flashes me a bright smile. “Maybe he hasn't met the right one?”

I blush.

He snorts. “Did you know he adopted a cat but pretends he doesn't really care? I mean, she sleeps in his bed with him.

You should hear him talk to her in the morning when he thinks I'm asleep. Dude is whipped by a cat." He laughs.

I nod absently, my mind still on the girlfriend. I'm dying to ask more specific questions, but it feels like an intrusion.

I should just ask Z.

"You say you need a minute and here you are with Eric," comes a husky voice, and we both turn to see him standing there. I freeze, wondering how much of our conversation he heard.

Eric holds his hands up and takes a step away from me. "Just being friendly is all."

Z's face is hard, and his gaze goes from me to Eric.

Some girl calls out Eric's name, and he flashes an *I'm sorry* look at me before heading off. "Babe!" he says to the girl, giving her a twirl, and she ruffles his hair.

I look back at Z, and he's never taken his eyes off me.

"He flirts with everyone," he says. "Don't think you're special."

I frown. "We were talking about you."

"Did you learn anything interesting?"

"No."

"Maybe if you'd stick around long enough to talk to me, you might learn something."

"Lola isn't my cup of tea, and you seemed to have it under control."

He studies my face. "I never slept with her, in case you were wondering."

"I wasn't. This whole thing between us is pretend."

"Right," he says with a frown. He holds up his black varsity jacket. It's black with gold sleeves and has the Hawthorn Lions crest on the back. "I thought you might be cold so I brought you this. You seem to like coats."

I stare at it.

“Put it on. It’s cold out here. Please.” That last bit is added after a beat.

“You like telling me what to do, don’t you?”

“Are you saying you don’t like it? Because, well, I know how to read you, and you *do* like it, *Miss Ryan*.”

He gives me a heavy-lidded look as I take a step toward him and he envelopes me in the jacket. The sleeves go past my fingertips, the length reaching the hem of my dress. I let out a shiver as I huddle inside it.

“Still cold?” he asks, his voice low, his gaze intent.

I shake my head and let out a breath. “Yes, but I—I just like the smell of your coat. It smells like you.”

His jaw clenches, and he stares at me, almost fuming, his eyes hot.

“What?” I ask.

His teeth seem to grind. “I want to fuck you so bad.”

My body clenches.

“I’ve wanted a repeat since the moment you walked out of the Kappa house. And while I’m being honest, it pisses me off when Eric flirts with you. I know he doesn’t mean anything by it, but I’ve had a shitty week and all I’ve looked forward to is this party, which I can barely stand, but I knew you’d be here, and it’s killing me that I can’t have you.”

My heart flies. This is...this is a lot to take in. His brutal honesty, the way he looks at me—*him*.

“You want me too, but you’re in denial.” His hands rise and button the coat up, adjusting the collar against my neck while I’m flailing around inside, trying to figure out what to say. “This looks good on you. It could be the only thing you’re wearing and no one would ever know you’re naked underneath.” His face is serious as he traces the curve of my jawline and moves up to my cheekbone. Soft fingers trace my eyebrows. “You’re so goddamn gorgeous, Sugar.”

My eyes close. *Shit, shit, shit*. His touch...I...I...

“You want me,” he says softly. “Admit it.”

The blood in my veins goes molten, and fuck...it's true. I've been trying to hold him off, hold this crazy thing back, but I can't. There's nothing pretend about how much I want him.

ZACK



“Come with me,” I say, taking her hand.

She stares down at our intertwined fingers.

“Please,” I add, dying to get her alone before this moment passes.

She nods and I steer her through the few people out on the deck.

“Great game last week,” someone calls out, a guy, but I don’t look his way. My dick is so hard it hurts.

She’s behind me, her heels clacking against the wood, following me. I stop at the bottom of the steps and help her maneuver them.

“Where are we going?” she asks as we pass by the flowerbeds at the corner of the deck.

“Garage. Too many people in the house.”

She stops. “Wait, my shoes are getting stuck.”

I whip around, hands shaking more than they should be—shaking with need, with *if I don’t fuck her now, I’m going to get blue balls and die*—and I help her out of the shoes, cursing at them as I drop them in the grass.

Her breaths come just as quickly as mine.

I sweep her up in my arms, and she isn’t light, but I manage to carry her toward the small garage next to the house.

When I get to the door, I kick it open and step into the darkened room, thankful I didn't lock it the last time I came out here.

It's a dark building, but the moonlight shines in through the window, just enough to highlight where everything is. There's lawn equipment and a wheelbarrow in the corner, and I brush past them and head for the large wooden table that runs the length of the back. Tools sit on top, and I shove it all off with one hand. They clatter to the cement floor as I set her down, easing her down my chest until she's on the table, her breasts pressed against me. Her hands pluck at my shoulders, her lips reaching up to mine.

"Z, please."

I maneuver between her legs and slide my hands in her hair and palm her scalp. "Right here with you."

My tongue delves between her lips and there's no going back. Sweeping inside her hotness, I taste and suck at her tongue. Our mouths cling to each other and she gives it back to me, responding with a soft moan as her arms curl around my neck.

"Stay away from Eric," I say as I take a breath, push my forehead against hers, and stare down at her. She kissed his cheek, and fuck, the image is imprinted on my brain. It's irrational to be jealous, and I know this, but she...shit...she belongs with me.

"He's a friend," she whispers before pulling my mouth back to hers.

I lean back and then suck on her neck, my lips and tongue vicious. I hope I leave a large goddamn hickey. "You want me." My lips bite at her earlobe and she gasps, her nails tearing at my shirt.

"Just take your shirt off," she snaps, and I smile as I grasp her chin. My tongue licks at her lips and pulls back.

"Kiss me, dammit," she says.

"After you say I'm *the one*."

She pauses, her tits heaving as she looks at me, hair wild from my hands.

“Say it.”

Her body shudders and she swallows, her throat working.

“Say it so I can fuck your pussy.”

She closes her eyes, lashes fluttering. “You...y-you....”

“I’m the one,” I insist.

She parts her lips and runs her tongue across her top teeth. “If you’re the one, prove it.”

I sweep down and kiss her again, fitting my lips over her perfect luscious mouth, tugging and biting. She’s divine, the smell of her, the flick of her tongue as it battles with mine.

“The coat...” she says, her hands going to the buttons. “Please. Take it off.”

I move quickly, undoing the ones I just fastened until I reach the one at the top. It doesn’t give, and *fuck*, my hands are fumbling like a kid. You’d think I’d never held a hockey stick in my life.

Her hand is on my pants and I hiss when she palms me through my jeans. She unzips them and slips her hand inside and brushes her fingers across my dick, and I yank on the last button, sending it flying off somewhere in the darkness.

I push the jacket off her shoulders and expose her dress, and there’s enough light coming in to see her creamy skin, the way her cleavage moves when she breathes...

Her eyes are low and heavy, and when her lush lips part—

My breath hitches. God, I’m falling so fast...

“There’s a tie that holds the dress up at my neck,” she breathes. “Can you undo it?”

“Soon.” I put my mouth on her tits through the material, my hands cupping them and bringing them to me. She cries out when I nibble through her dress, sucking hard on the outline of a nipple I can barely see.

She leans her head back, her legs wrapping around my hips to pull me closer.

My hands blunder around her neck, pulling on the knotted fabric until it loosens, but not before I hear a small tear in the material.

“This isn’t mine!” she cries.

“Shit. I’ll buy another one,” I manage to say, but I can’t say I’m sorry once I see her bared. I expose her dark purple lace bra and undo the front clasp, and her breasts spill out. Pink and hard, her nipples are erect, stark against her pale skin. I let out a shuddering breath, desire curling, intensifying. I’ve been dreaming about her like this since I had her against the wall.

The weight of her is perfect and full in my palm. I suck one into my mouth, flicking my tongue at the rosy pebble. My hand massages one as I attend to the other, giving it attention with my tongue and lips, switching it up, my instinct reading her body, gauging the little moans.

She cries out my name as I push her tits together and lick them both, sucking on them at the same time, my eyes looking up at her, letting her see that I’m a dirty fucking lover and I’m going to devour every single inch of her.

“Z,” she says, urging me on with little breaths.

Moving up her body, I kiss her neck, sucking hard. She gives it right back, her lips on my jawline, nipping and then kissing me sweetly.

“You’re beautiful,” I murmur in her ear, my tongue exploring the curves and recesses there, my hands still plucking, running my fingers over her nipples, playing her like a piano. I want to spend time here. I want to put my dick between those mounds and fuck her. I want her tits in my face when she’s bouncing on top of me. I want her breasts in my hands when I wake up.

We kiss and her hands are running through my hair, tugging on the ends. “Please.” She claws at my shirt, helping me pull it over my head and toss it to the floor.

She sucks in a breath at my tattoo, and I guess she didn't get a good view of it at the Kappa house. Her fingers brush over the lines on my chest, and I know there will be questions later.

I groan when my fingers slip into her silky panties and she's dripping wet. My forehead goes against hers as our eyes lock. Panting, she writhes against my fingers, her hips rotating against my palm.

She shudders as I make my way down her neck, my lips hard and then soft to make up for it. I want to consume every inch of her, devour her in one big gulp, and I try to go slow... but I can't. It feels like a decade since I last saw her. I want to make up for lost time. I want to own her. I want her begging me...

And fuck...

Fuck...

My dick has never been this hard.

"Z." The way she says my name like it's a benediction kills me.

"You want to come?" My voice is a mangled mess. I don't know if I'm going to come in my pants or pass out right here.

"Yes," she moans.

She smells like vanilla, sweet as I finger her, slick within her heat, working inside the panties. Finally I slip them off, taking them down her legs and throwing them wherever the hell everything else is.

The sound of laughter drifts in from somewhere, I don't know where, but it's either someone out in the yard for a stroll or someone coming or leaving the house.

She doesn't even miss a beat.

I grab her nape, maintaining eye contact, my thumb circling her clit.

Tossing her hair, she bites her lip and leans into my touch, her hips arching toward me, aching for more.

Using one finger, I rub across that tiny bundle of nerves at the top of her channel, knowing it will send her over the edge. “Just wait for it,” I growl. “Open your legs more.”

She leans back, and I flick her nub and finger her at the same time, her face flushing, her mouth gasping as she reaches for that pinnacle.

“I’m going to fuck you on this table when you come,” I say, and the words are the catalyst that sends her over. She twists her hips up to me, milking my finger as she clenches and clamps down around me.

She’s got her hands all over me, on my chest and shoulders, touching me as I reach around to my wallet and dig through the contents until I come to a condom. Dropping my wallet to the floor, I rip it open with my teeth, shove my jeans down past my hips, and slip it on.

Holding on to her waist, I slide inside her inch by inch, trying to go slow until I can’t, pushing in to the hilt. We both groan at the heat and friction and fullness. I bow my head over her.

“Z...” she begs, and I pull out and go back in all the way. With my hands on her hips, I pump inside her, my pelvis thrusting, taking. My fingers dig into her skin as sweat drips off my face.

“Harder,” she moans. I pinch her nipple, and her nails claw into my back.

The table scoots across the floor, and my fingers are back on her sweet spot, rotating to the beat of my hips. Her legs lock around my waist and we fuck and fuck until mine are like jelly. My heart is about to come out of my chest and I’m muttering under my breath, telling her how much I want her. I think I could die with the feel of her around me.

She leans back to catch her breath, watching me, and I use the moment to put my hands on her sex, my thumbs spreading her apart, watching my dick slide in and out of her.

“I can’t get enough,” I growl, hardening more, getting close, so close.

She moans when she comes again, and I'm there, baby. I'm so there. I yell when I come inside her, my back arching, my hips slowing down, wanting more of her but knowing I need a damn minute. I ease out of her channel and push right back in, wanting more, and shit, in about five minutes, I can go again. I want to enjoy her slowly next time, explore the bend of her knee, that little birthmark on her stomach, the hollows in her back, the curve of her ass. I want it all. Again.

Several seconds go by. I don't know how many. She leans against my chest, and my hand is in her hair. We hold each other as the room spins.

Fumbling around on the table, she pulls away from me and gradually moves to standing, easing herself down.

I huff out a laugh, still trying to catch my breath. "Good, babe? Ready for round two?"

She starts and gives me a sharp look as she clasps her bra and adjusts her dress, the bodice gaping even after she ties it. *Shit*. I'm about to apologize, but something is off as she looks around the floor, an unsure look on her face.

I don't like that expression. Unease washes over me.

"Hey, about the dress—I'll get you another one."

Her chest rises. "It's Poppy's."

I don't know who that is but I assume it's one of her friends. I slide off the condom, tie it off, and lay it on the table, intending to get rid of it later. "Introduce us and I'll apologize in person."

"No, it's fine. I was into the tearing of the clothes. I think you lost a button on your jacket." She shakes her head, her fingers running through her hair. "I can't find my underwear."

I pick them up and hand them to her, my hand trailing down her arm, itching to lace our hands together. I want her close. I can't explain it.

But...

Something isn't right.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I ask, and she stops, looking at me then dropping her gaze.

“This...” Her voice trails off as she motions between us with her hands.

“What about this?” I’m sliding my jeans up and buttoning them. Snatching my shirt off the floor, I slip it back on and then rake a hand through my hair, straightening it although I know there’s no fixing it. I pick up the jacket and hold it out to her. “You’ll need this.”

“No.” Her blue eyes are big as she darts them around the garage as if looking for answers there. “Look, I’m not sure this was...” She stops, chewing on her lips.

My mouth tightens.

“Babe, what’s to regret? What’s wrong with seeing what this is? It’s good, right?”

She flushes, the color rising from her throat up to her face. “I’ve told you before—don’t call me babe. My ex did—”

I go from sated to annoyed to pissed off. “Who is this asshole? That Bennett guy Lola mentioned? Fuck him. I’m not him.”

There’s a hesitant look on her face as she opens her mouth to speak but doesn’t. Instead, she paces around the garage, her dress swishing around her long legs.

I’m scared she’s going to leave and I move with her, turning her around to face me. “Wait, Sugar. Look, I—I just had mind-blowing sex and you immediately regret it and bring him up to me. How do you expect me to react?”

She bites her bottom lip. “Not everything is about *you*, Z. I have a history with my ex, okay? I don’t want to get hurt. You...you have girls all over you, all the time, just like he did.”

I inhale. “Right. Next time, I won’t call you babe. Hell, I’ll never call anyone that ever again. Will that make you happy, girl of the month?”

“Now you’re just being an asshole.” Her face is pale as she rubs at her cheeks.

“We *both* knew this would happen. Right?” I’m grappling for words here. Shit, I don’t know how to handle a girl who’s so...closed off after sex. Where’s the giddiness in her that I feel? Where’s the need to do it again, as soon as possible? *Fuck*. Maybe...maybe I read her all wrong and she just isn’t into me. *No*. I know this is good. I knew it at the Kappa party.

“We were supposed to keep this unemotional,” she says quietly.

“I don’t even care about that bullshit bargain. This is about you and me.”

“It’s not bullshit to me.” Her voice is flat.

I look up to the ceiling, sighing. “We’ll go to my room and figure this out, okay? If you’re lucky, I’ll fuck you again. You don’t seem to have an issue as long as my dick’s inside you.” I’m teasing, completely joking, trying to lighten up what is getting to be an out-of-control moment, but it’s a crap thing to say and maybe there’s a small part of me that’s scared too, and when I get nervous, my mouth says shit I don’t mean.

Her nose flares and she shakes her head at me. “I’m leaving.”

“The hell you are. You’re supposed to be here with me.”

“No. I’m here for *me*, Z.” She gives me a disappointed look and marches out the door.

My heart flops around in my chest. *What the fuck just happened? Goddamn.*

She...she left me.

SUGAR



I bolt out into the yard and head for my car, sans shoes and coat. At least my little sequined crossbody purse is draped across my chest. I huff out a laugh that really isn't a laugh but more like a *what in the hell just happened and what am I going to do now* sound.

I feel tears welling up and I fight to keep them at bay.

I wouldn't put it past Zack to chase after me—I've never met a more determined person—so I pull up the hem of my dress and jog, which isn't such a bad idea anyway considering it's cold as hell. I'm insane to be running barefoot across a street in Minnesota at the end of January with no jacket on. Thank goodness we're having unnaturally warm weather, a balmy thirty-three degrees. My feet are chunks of ice as I reach my truck, crawl inside, and crank it up. I sit here, my head resting against the steering wheel, letting the heat kick in before I take off.

My throat feels tight and I want to cry, but I clench my fists, determined to not give in.

Z and I just blew up at each other.

Why?

What the hell just happened?

Why are we so combustible?

Why am I so upset?

Why do I want to go back to him and see where we went wrong?

You can't, my inner voice says, and I hunch over. I think about the girls there tonight, the ones I can't compete with. What if...what if I fall for him?

Fuck.

A tear courses down my face, and I grimace as more fall. Wetness tracks down my cheeks, and I close my eyes and put my face in the stream of hot air that's blowing from the dash.

After a few seconds, I gather myself together and pull out onto the street. Not wanting to go back to my dismal dorm, I end up driving around Lake Sparrow. I contemplate checking in with Mara, but she's in work mode at this hour and I don't want to bug her. Taylor and Poppy...I could call them, but they each had their own thing to do tonight. When midnight looms, I run through the drive-through at the all-night Krispy Kreme—*sorry to cheat on you, Joaquin*—and go back to the dorm. I could have bought extras earlier when I picked up Eric's, but I didn't think about it. I guess I'm jonesing for donuts because I'm sad. Ugh. Someday, I'm going to have to cut back on my treats, but not today. Not today.

I park illegally, near the inner circle where people walk, because I'm shoeless. I drift in through the front door of the lobby and it's mostly quiet, thank goodness. I don't want anyone to see what a mess I am right now. The girl behind the desk arches a brow when I pass by and then calls my name.

"Hey, you're Sugar, right, in 412?"

I plod back over to her. "Yeah?"

She picks up a small vase of daisies and sets them on the counter. I blink down at them and look at her. It's the third one in a month.

She shrugs. "No card, but a really hot guy with dark hair dropped them off for you. He said he was your boyfriend and wanted to come up to your room, but well, it's past visiting hours and all, although I was tempted. He's hot. Nice catch there."

“He’s not my boyfriend. He’s my ex.”

“Okay.” She shrugs and goes back to her desk.

I exhale and pick up the vase. *Fucking Bennett*. Now I have two things to carry upstairs. “Thanks.”

I take off for the steps, my feet heavy as I climb the flights up to my floor. Periodically, I pause and look down at the white and yellow flowers.

I glare down at them. Daisies. They aren’t even my favorite, but he always got them for me because he liked them. “They’re glorified weeds,” I say to no one and keep walking. “If you would have just listened to me, Bennett, you’d know I don’t care for pale flowers with no soul.”

Maybe Julia will like them.

Once inside my room, I see that she’s gone. Typical. I set down the bag of sugary fried dough and flowers, glad I have my entire dorm room to myself.

I yank open my dresser to pull out a Boobie Bungalow pink tank and a pair of booty shorts. For once the stupid radiator in the room seems to be working, but there’s no valve so it’s hot as heck. Once the torn dress is off and hung up nice and neat, I pull out a half-full bottle of Grey Goose from the top shelf in my closet and pour a few inches into a plastic cup. From the fridge, I pull out a club soda and a lime. When you’re a girl dealing with a cheating ex and a creaky old dorm room, these are basic tools of survival.

“I’m sorry you got ripped in the crazy sex,” I say to the dress with a little sigh as I plop back down on my bed. I keep a small sewing kit in my desk, and I make a mental note to see if I can fix the tear. If I can’t, I’ll send it to the alterations place across the street from BB’s.

Annoyed and frustrated, I fluff up my pillows, flop down, and turn on HBO.

“*Game of Thrones*,” I snap into my remote. I need Jon Snow, stat.

I've gone through one drink and an entire episode of my re-watch, and I'm at the part where a zombie shows up—

Someone bangs on my door.

“Great timing! Almost pissed myself,” I mutter. Setting my drink on my desk next to me, I dash to the door.

“Who is it?”

“Z.”

My stomach clenches. He came after me? I put my hands on my hips. “Shouldn't you be at the party?”

“I left. Went for a run.” His voice is low.

“But it's Eric's birthday.”

I hear a sigh. “The last I looked, Eric was with twins, one on either side of him. He won't even miss me.”

There's a long pause.

“Are you going to let me in?”

I chew on my lips. “Not a good idea.”

“Are you afraid we'll have mind-blowing sex again?”

My teeth snap together. “We shouldn't have done that.”

“Why not?”

“Because we said we wouldn't.”

“I knew we would.”

“Well, I thought we were on the same page.”

“We might have been, but then you walked into my house —”

“I have neighbors you know. They tend to listen.”

He lets out a small laugh, but I sense the strain underneath. “Come on, Sugar, let me in.”

But here's the thing—there is no fixing this, because he's hot and sexy and even now my body is practically pressed against the door. I have no control. None.

“Plus, I need to give you your shoes and coat. You ran off without them.”

“You ran with my stuff?”

“I wore a backpack—just for you.”

“Fine. Put them by the door.”

A few seconds tick by and I’m wondering, dying to know what he’s doing.

“What’s all the moving around? You still there?”

“Yep. Just sitting down. Not going away until you let me in to apologize.”

“For what? Be specific.”

He sighs and I hear the clack of the heels as he sets them on the tile beside my door.

“Things.”

“Uh-huh.”

He exhales. “I’m sorry I flew off the handle when you brought up your ex. It’s just...I don’t like to think about you being with him.”

“Why?”

“You know why.” His voice is terse. He sighs. “I’m sorry I called you the girl of the month. There is no such thing, I swear. Some jersey chaser made that up to be cute my freshman year and it just stuck. Now we just make jokes about it.” He pauses. “I’m not the testosterone-addled asshole you think I am. I’m just a mostly normal dude who happens to be really into you.”

I fidget from one foot to the next, my head going back to the dragon tattoo I saw tonight. Placed on his left shoulder with the head lying over that side of his chest, it was massive and colorful, inked in shades of royal blue and yellow with orange flames coming from the mouth.

I chew on my nail. “When did you get your tattoo?”

He lets out a sigh, part weary, part amused. “Truly, it’s a fine story, how I came to have this wonderful tattoo, but it’s one that should only be told face-to-face.”

I cross my arms. “You are not getting into my room.”

“Because you’re too chicken to be alone with me?”

I huff. “I am not—”

“You’re afraid you’ll take one look at my incredibly muscled, naked chest—”

“I’ve seen some chests, and yours is not the most incredible.”

“And you’ll faint like those ladies in the Jane Austen books—”

“How do you know what ladies do in Jane Austen books?”

He sighs. “I know my books.”

I SMIRK. “Quote me something from one of *your* books.”

He clears his throat. “*You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.* That’s Mr. Darcy, speaking to Elizabeth Bennet.”

“You probably saw it on a coffee mug,” I say, but he has my attention. I happen to adore Mr. Darcy.

He huffs. “My mom used to read the classics aloud to me and my brother. She was a high school English teacher.”

I sniff. “Well, fine, you know Jane Austen. Do you know anything else?”

He pauses, and I picture him thinking—

“Are you Googling stuff?” I ask.

“No. I’m racking my brain to come up with some kind of quote, but Jane isn’t my favorite. I know a poem by Robert Frost.”

“The one from class?”

He huffs out a laugh and quotes.

*“Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.”*

His words are wistful as he recites the poem, and it strikes a chord.

“My mom used to say that last line to me a lot, especially when I was upset or working through something. She died when I was seventeen, right before I came to HU.”

I bite my lip. “My mom passed when I was eleven.”

A long, long sigh comes from him. “Mine had breast cancer. She and my dad hid how bad it was from us for a long time, but it got her.” I hear a rustling noise as if he’s really getting comfortable. “She gave me a necklace with the last line from the poem on it before she died. She said it was a reminder that life isn’t always gold, but that green does eventually come back around. It’s the way of the universe.”

“It’s beautiful that you have that.” I swallow.

“How about you? What happened?”

My heart is heavy, even though it’s been years. “I came home from school and she was dead. Seizure, they said. She was epileptic and wasn’t great about taking her meds. She... she was all I had. My father had completely broken up with her by the time that happened. Plus, he already had a wife and kids. I was the love child he never wanted.”

There’s silence for a while.

“Are you still there?” I say.

“Yeah. Just thinking about you being alone...it must have been hard coming here, your dad not being around and all.”

I sigh. “Yeah.”

“Can I come in, Sugar? I just want to hold you. I was an asshole.”

“Honestly, I like talking to you like this. It’s easier.” With a door between us, there’s no risk of me having sex with him. “Tell me about your cat. What’s her name?”

“She’s not my cat. Her name is Long John Silver.”

I smile. “Who named her?”

He snorts. “You’ve been talking to Eric. Okay, okay, the cat is mine. I dig the cat. She curls up next to me when I sleep, and honestly it makes me feel calm, and I need a little of that during hockey season.”

I grin and a few more moments pass of us just breathing.

“Let me in, Sugar. I need...I need to see you. Just let me give you a hug and I’ll leave.”

Another voice interrupts us and I recognize it as the girl from across the hall, a stocky rodeo chick. Whenever I see her approaching in the hall, I always give her a wide berth. “Oh, for God’s sake, open the damn door already, or I’m calling security! A person needs their sleep in this dump!”

Z huffs out a chuckle, and I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

Fine.

I crack open the door and there he is.

He’s standing up now and he leans against my doorjamb, wearing black running gear from head to toe. There’s a serious expression on his face, and his hair is wild and flying everywhere as if it has static in it. Static hair is such a regular human thing and it’s nice to see, because honestly I was beginning to think of him as very non-human with that face and body.

“You look like a burglar who stuck his finger in a light socket,” I murmur.

He shoves a black knit hat down on his head. “You should have seen me when I had this on—cat burglar extraordinaire. I had to slip in through the side door because the girl at the front desk told me visiting hours were over for this floor.”

“Alas, I got housing so late, I have sucky hours. They call this dorm The Virgin Vault.”

His brows go up. “You trying out being a nun?”

I give him a look. “We just had sex in a garage—does that sound nunnish to you? And yes, I know that’s not a real word.”

He grins. “Let me in?”

“CHRIST, LET HIM IN!” comes from the door across the hall.

“You should definitely listen to her.”

“You’ve worn me down at this point, plus I’ve had a drink, so I’m willing to hear your apology,” I say.

I step to the side so he can brush past me. Of course my gaze follows his physique. Mr. Black Spandex is hot and every muscle in his backside ripples. I sigh—I can’t help it. He turns around and catches me checking him out. Moving with a swift athletic grace, he sweeps me up in his arms and hugs me, his voice gruff when he speaks. “See, hugging is good.”

I slide down him, my body pressed tight against his.

He frowns, looking down at my shirt. There’s a white logo on the front of a girl sliding down a pole. “You’re a stripper?”

I stiffen. I’ve learned that some people get weird when they find out where I work. I once had a professor who discovered it and pulled me aside after class one day and got a little too close when he asked what nights I worked. Just no. I was glad when that class ended. “Would it bother you if I were?”

“Fuck yeah. I don’t want anyone looking at you like that.”

I cross my arms. “As it happens, I don’t strip, but if I did, it would be fine. Mara owns BB’s and I mostly do office work and sometimes tend bar.”

His lips compress.

“What?” I ask.

He rubs his face. “Just...I don’t know. It’s not a safe place to work, even if you’re not...”

“It is. Mara runs a tight ship. We have bouncers and our place is clean. Plus, some of the girls are like family to me.”

His chest rises.

“Z, you have no right to judge where I work. Don’t even try.”

“I know, I know. Just...maybe I should come check it out.”

“I can handle myself. You have no clue how I grew up, okay? Hockey in the suburbs is your normal, and hanging out at a strip club is mine. It doesn’t mean I have questionable morals. In fact, Bennett was my first.”

He frowns and holds a hand up. “Okay, just stop and let me back up. I know you’re not a bad person. I’m just...surprised.”

“I didn’t grow up rich.”

His face softens. “And I like you the way you are. I wouldn’t change a damn thing.”

“Good.”

“Nice place,” he says as he walks toward what is obviously my side of the room since the TV is on. He takes in my white duvet and fluffy pillows.

“It’s not, but it’s all that was left. I was supposed to move in with Bennett this semester.” I move to the desk where the bottle of vodka sits. “You want a drink or a donut?”

He surveys the room, taking in my books before his eyes land on the vase of flowers. “Nah.” He picks at one of the blooms. “An admirer?”

I detect a steely glint in his eyes.

“My ex. They were here when I came home tonight.”

His nose flares. “I see.”

“He leaves gifts for me, trying to get me to talk to him.”

His shoulders stiffen. “Are you still in love with him?”

“He cheated on me. He lied.”

He stares at me. “That doesn’t mean you don’t still love him.”

I pause, thinking.

There *are* residual feelings of loneliness, especially hurt, but he tossed me aside to be with someone else on a whim, and that...that I can never get over no matter how many flowers he sends me.

“I don’t love him.”

“Good.”

An easy silence fills the room, as if the tension has dissipated, and his gaze washes over me. I tug at the tank I’m wearing, but really what’s the point? I’m braless and he knows what I look like.

“I have to say, it’s a nice look for you,” he murmurs. “Now we just need a stripper pole in here...”

I roll my eyes, go to my closet, pull out an HU fleece jacket, and jab my arms into it while he looks around the room.

I watch him warily as he paces around my space, taking in the bookshelves bolted to the wall and the attached desk where I have my laptop. He stops a few feet from my bed and takes in the collage of Post-it notes I’ve stuck up above it. They’re all done in hot pink and neon yellow and it’s quite garish, but I get a buzz when I read them.

He leans in over my bed. “Modern art?”

I snort. “More like modern shit.”

He plucks one of the squares of paper and stares down at it.

I shuffle my feet and take a seat on the chair next to the TV. I want to keep as much distance between him and me as I can, and I tug at the edges of my soft jacket, not quite meeting his gaze. “Those are my way of dealing with Bennett. We broke up in December, and coupled with the holidays, it was rough.”

His gaze goes to the daisies in the corner. “Bennett Walsh, lead singer of the Orange Bird band, generally a popular guy and might well be on his way to a big-time music career? Am I right?”

My mouth pops open. “You asked around about me?”

He shrugs. “After he was thrown in my face, I had to go look him up.”

I chuckle. “You can’t keep up with my stalking skills, Z.”

He looks down at the Post-it, his gaze thoughtful, and I say, “Go on, read it. It made me feel good to write those.”

He clears his throat. “Dear Future Boyfriend.” He pauses. “Is this to anyone in particular?”

“No.”

He nods, continuing. “Dear Future Boyfriend, Thank you for not taking mirror selfies of your hot bod and posting them on social media. Also thank you for not sending me the poop emoji when you text me.” He throws his head back and laughs. “He did these things?”

“The man has no boundaries.”

With an intrigued expression on his face, he plucks down another one. “Dear Future Boyfriend, Thank you for not calling me babe.” His eyes widen. “Shit, you really, really do have a thing about that.”

“Indeed.” I take a sip of my drink.

He snatches another one, glee on his face.

“Those are really personal, you know. It’s kind of a big deal to let you see them.”

“How else will I get to know my new girlfriend?”

“*Fake* girlfriend, and are we still together?”

“Miss Ryan, hell yes we are still together. Tonight was just a bump in the road.”

I blush. *Okaaay*.

He clears his throat. “Dear Future Boyfriend, You singing “I Want It That Way” to me last night at the karaoke bar was the highlight of my week. I promise you a blowjob later.” He bends over, laughing.

“What?” I say indignantly.

He grabs his stomach. “The Backstreet Boys? For real?”

I snatch the note out of his fingers. “That song is iconic. It’s got depth and love and angst and—”

“‘*Ain’t nothin’ but a heartache*,” he sings out with a hand over his heart.

“You’re mocking me, and your voice is shit.”

“You’re cute when you get mad.” He takes down another. “Dear Future Boyfriend, Thank you for binge-watching *The Office* with me and agreeing that Jim Halpert is the second sexiest man alive next to you.” He laughs and looks up at me.

I shrug. “All my secrets are revealed.”

“This is addicting,” he murmurs as he takes another one.

“You don’t have to read them all. There are so many.”

“But I like it. It’s like putting a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle together slowly. You’re a complicated person, Sugar.”

“Ditto.”

“Last one,” he says, looking down at the note. “Dear Future Boyfriend, Thank you for forgetting about the Super Bowl and taking a bubble bath with me instead.” He fingers the paper slowly, rubbing it softly, and his eyes are warm when

they meet mine. “We can definitely do this one. I’m not a football fan—”

I stand up to pour another drink. He’s making me nervous. “The Super Bowl already happened.” I indicate the box of donuts on the desk. “If you don’t want a drink, how about a donut?” Food fixes everything.

“I’m not here for a donut.”

He levels his gaze at me.

The tension ratchets up in the room, and I clear my throat and make my way over to the Post-its. I grab one and thrust it toward him. “Read this one.”

“Dear Future Boyfriend, I love that you didn’t freak out when you found my secret wedding board on Pinterest.” A slow grin curls his lips. “Trying to scare me?”

I blink up at him, fluttering my lashes, deepening my Southern accent. “Well, I declare, isn’t that what every girl dreams of, a big wedding outside in a garden with her big, strong, hockey-playing college sweetheart?”

He bites his lower lip. “Keep talking like that and you might be able to talk me into a pretend wedding.”

I place my hand over my heart. “Bless your heart, I have more sayins’ if you wanna hear ’em.”

He rubs his jaw. “Verging on redneck. It’s only good when you talk about how hot I am.”

I roll my eyes at him and grin. *I like him so much.* He gets my goofiness.

He’s moved closer to the TV. “This is that dragon show everyone talks about...” He kicks off his shoes and plops down on my bed, leaning back against my pillows. “You’re a fan?”

I nod. “Duh. It’s got giant wolves, dragons, zombies, and tons of blood and sex.” I sigh softly. “There’s this one battle called the Battle of the Bastards where Jon Snow retakes Winterfell from Ramsay Bolton, who also killed one of his brothers right in front of him and also cut the balls off...” I

stop, not wanting to spoil it for a *Game of Thrones* virgin. “It’s pretty much perfect.”

“You’re more bloodthirsty than I realized. I like this side of you.” He pats the mattress, wanting me to join him. “You need to educate me.”

I arch a brow. “You wanna watch?”

“You said blood and gore and sex. Toss in a dragon and I’m all yours.”

I laugh and ease in next to him. “The guy with the dark hair, he’s about to—shit, I can’t tell you. If you want to be a *Game of Thrones* fan, you have to start from the beginning. You have to know everyone’s backstory and why they do what they do.” I give him a look. “You can’t just start in the middle.”

“Ah, sometimes the middle works out.” His lips curve up as he gazes at me, and his eyes are on my chest, lingering before coming up.

I restart the series at season one, episode one.

“Let us begin,” he says softly.

I swallow, feeling the warmth of his bicep as it brushes against me. “Begin what?”

“The show. What else?” There’s an amused glint in his gaze until he gets serious. He toys with a piece of my hair. “Sugar, I’m sorry for being a total jerk. In case you haven’t noticed, I tend to like control. When I don’t have it, I might say something shitty, but I’m the first to admit when I’m wrong and I’ll apologize for it.”

“Okay.”

And that’s it. I let it go.

I nod and turn to watch as the episode starts. I explain some about the author and the rabid fan base that has made the show popular.

He’s watching my mouth and I elbow him. “Are you listening to me?”

He blinks and looks back at the TV screen. “Totally.”

With a heavy sigh, I settle in, leaning against his shoulder.

ZACK



I stare down at a softly snoring Sugar as the credits roll up. Her head is turned at an angle as it rests on my shoulder, and there's a small piece of sugar from a donut at the corner of her mouth.

I lean down and lick it off, and she shifts against me, the skin of her arms soft as she moves, curling them around my bicep and then snaking up around my neck. As if she's done it before, her fingers toy with the strands of my hair, twisting them around her fingers.

Pulling on my hair is a siren's call.

She says my name under her breath, her lids fluttering as she sleeps, and I know she's dreaming about *me*.

She moans, her leg easing out from under the blanket we grabbed earlier.

She's so gorgeous, all soft and pliant, but I didn't come here for that.

"This is the most agreeable I've ever seen you," I say in a hushed voice, not wanting to wake her yet *needing* to talk to her. I feel entirely content and happy right now, and I'm not sure that's happened in a really long time.

She mumbles something, and a little frown knits her brow. I hold back a laugh. She's probably going off on me in her dream. *Don't call me babe.*

I won't, and maybe, just maybe, I can get her to go out with me—for real, not any of this pretend bullshit.

I shift so the arm she's lying on slides more fully around her.

She sighs when I lean down to smell her hair.

Another mumble and then she chuckles—actually laughs.

“What are you snickering about, sleep talker?” I ask her.

“Take off your shirt.” Her hands tangle in my hair. “I want to see your dragon tattoo.”

“Your wish is my command,” I say, easing her out of the way to lift my tight black running shirt off over my head.

Her lashes flutter as she opens her eyes. “What are you doing?”

I shrug. “You ordered me to take my shirt off. Happy to oblige.”

She straightens herself, scooting her bottom up until our faces are closer. “I did? I must have been half asleep.”

“Just following orders.”

“Oh,” she says as she pats at her hair and throws a glance around the room, squinting as she takes in the time on the desk clock.

“It's three in the morning. I watched a few episodes of that crazy-ass show. There are some sick characters. I like it,” I say, tossing my shirt on the floor and turning back to her wide gaze. “Feels as if we're the only people alive in the world right now.”

Her blue eyes are on my chest and before I know it, her hand is there, tracing the lines of my tattoo, brushing soft strokes along the outline, trailing down to my bicep where the tail curls around my upper arm.

“That feels good,” I murmur.

“It's the most beautiful dragon I've seen on skin. I love the orange and red flames and his scales. Tell me the story of the tattoo,” she says. “You promised.”

“You like tattoos?”

She nods, blushing. “I have a lily inside a cameo on my back—for my mom. Lily was her name.”

“I never saw it.”

“We haven’t actually been completely naked together.” She brushes her fingers across the red and yellow fire that comes from the dragon’s mouth, and I hold back the shudder inside me. My hands clench on the sheets, keeping myself from jumping on top of her.

Fuck.

I can’t stop the words that come out of my mouth.

“Let me make you come again and I’ll tell you all about my dragon.”

Her chest rises as she inhales quickly. She licks her wine-colored lips, and I lean down and nip at them.

She gasps into my mouth and it’s the opening I need, delving into her hot, wet depths, my tongue vying with hers.

“Z,” she moans, her hands pulling me closer. She gives back as good as I give and I go from a soft kiss to full-on fucking her with my tongue.

“Why can’t we stop doing this?” she moans.

“Why do you want to stop?”

“I don’t—that’s the problem.”

“I want you so much,” I say breathily as I nip and kiss down her throat before moving her jacket aside, slipping my tongue under the straps of her tank top, and licking her skin. There’s a small mole next to her breast and I kiss it and inhale her scent, committing it to memory.

“Tell me about the tattoo,” she says, and I laugh as I take her nipple in my mouth and suck. It’s still swollen from earlier, and I’m gentle, nibbling with my teeth and then soothing it by flicking it with my tongue.

“Please, Z,” she murmurs, and I can barely breathe, let alone talk, but I do my best as my hands strip her out of her jacket. Pushing the neckline of her tank top under her boobs, I

groan. She arranges her hair around her tits and gazes up at me, biting that lower lip. I can't even think straight. She's... she's got me in the palm of her hand and she doesn't even know it.

I lean over and kiss her stomach, my tongue dipping inside her belly button as I toy with her piercing, laving it with attention. "Freshman year, I got the tattoo in Minneapolis." I kiss her hipbone and her birthmark, sucking on her skin. "As it happened...I needed some courage that year...hope, maybe. I didn't believe in much. I lost a lot, my mom and someone else I cared about."

I grow tense at the thought of Willow, but I push it aside. It's a conversation for another time, another place. Not here. Not now.

"Oh." She breathes out.

My fingers play with the lace on her underwear, dipping one finger in and then coming back out. She gyrates against my hand, trying to get me to touch her again, but I hold back, plucking at the hem of her panties.

"He's very fierce...your dragon," she says, gazing down at me.

I flick my tongue over her piercing again. "My dragon has horns, which means he's at the top of the pile, the best—like me. He symbolizes protection and power. He's fearsome and makes either a wonderful ally or a fierce enemy."

"Ally," she begs, shuddering as I slide my finger inside her for a quick pump. Her hips rise off the bed for more, but I resist. "Z, do that again. Please."

Shit, just the need in her voice makes me crazy. I ease her panties off, and her legs part as I slide down, my mouth following, kissing her skin, getting to know every inch of her that I've missed before.

My tongue plays with her little clit and she grabs my hair. I keep talking. "Most people have heard stories about the knight slaying the dragon and winning the love of the people, like *Beowulf*, which is a poem I love, by the way." I look up at her

and she's writhing at the loss of my mouth. "It's a bloodthirsty, epic piece and sounds like something you'd like." I lick her slowly, tasting her essence. "Have you read it, Sugar?"

"Yes, yes, it's...great. Maybe...we can read it again later." She wiggles against my mouth, and I laugh against her skin.

"But my dragon isn't like Grendel from the story. He's in his own league."

Her throat works convulsively. "I don't doubt it. Don't stop talking."

I smile and blow on her sex, my fingers slipping inside. My mouth draws filigrees on her skin as I talk in between strokes. "It took me three trips to get the full dragon. All that pain, all that work...and when I look at it, I think about my goals. Being the best. Being number one. Being the one who makes you come." I suck her hard nub and finger her and her body quakes, her breathing loud in the quiet of the room.

"Z!" she calls out as she shudders around me.

"That's it," I growl.

Her body tugs on my fingers, taking them further inside her.

I press a kiss to her center, removing my fingers and stroking her inner thighs until her tremors subside. It takes several seconds and her breathing slows, her hips and body slowly relaxing back onto the mattress.

On legs that shake, I stand up at the foot of the bed and strip out of my running pants and black underwear. I stare down at my cock bobbing, needing *her*.

She eases up on her elbows, eyes wide. I palm myself and walk over to her.

SUGAR



I can't stop looking at his manhood. It's huge and swollen, and I know exactly how tight it fits inside me

"You like my stick?"

I snort. "I can't believe you just said that."

"You were thinking it."

"Oh, you're not only a sex machine but a mind reader too?"

"Sex machine? I like that. Go on, please. Tell me more—and use that deep Southern accent when you say it."

A laugh bubbles up but fades away when his hand cups my cheek, his thumb stroking across my lips, tugging on them. I bite his index finger then take it into my mouth and suck. He curls his other hand around my nape.

A shuddering breath comes from him. "Do you have condoms?"

Breathless, I nod, tilting my head toward the desk. "Top drawer."

His back is to me, and I take the opportunity to rove my eyes over his rippling muscles, watching the way they glide when he moves.

I hear the familiar jingle of keys outside my door.

Julia!

No, no, no!

I jump out of bed and throw myself at him. “Z, oh, shit, hide. I think my roommate is here.”

Looking over his shoulder at me, he gives me a sardonic eyebrow. “And this is a problem?”

I swat him on the arm just as I hear a muffled curse and the sound of metal hitting tile outside. She must have dropped her keys. *Yes.*

“First of all,” I hiss, “you’re naked as the day you were born, and I have no underwear on. Second, we all know you can charm the dew off a honeysuckle, but you can’t charm her. She hates hockey players—”

“You’re ashamed of *me*?” His tone is incredulous. “Have to say, this is a first.”

“I just don’t like people knowing my business.” I’m hustling him to the closet as I speak. “Plus I have no clue where your clothes are right now!” He points to a pile near the end of the bed so I reach over and toss them at his chest. “Get in my closet.”

He looks affronted. “You’ll pay for this later. I’ll want... things.”

I shiver, already thinking about those *things*.

He exhales and allows me to push him in the closet. Before I shut it, I give him a lopsided smile.

I can hear the front door opening into the darkened room just as he whispers, “Do I have to stay here all night?”

I ignore him, straighten my tank, snatch up my underwear, and slide them on just as Julia flips on the tiny lamp on her nightstand. I walk to her side and once she turns, she jumps and screams.

Her hand goes to her heart. “Sugar! I was trying to be quiet. I thought you were asleep.” She takes in my disheveled appearance and probably wild hair. I tug down on my tank top, thankful he at least left that on.

I’m not exactly sure why I don’t want to tell her. I mean, it’s not like a twenty-one-year-old girl can’t have sex, but

avoidance is my answer to everything tonight.

Her hair is as much of a mess as mine, I notice, and it looks as if she might have been crying.

“Is everything okay?” I frown, taking a step toward her, but her look stops me.

She holds her hand up. “I’m fine. Just a long day at work.” She plops her purse down and sits on the edge of her bed.

I nod, leaning against the half-wall that separates our rooms. “I didn’t even know you had a job that went this late.”

She pulls her hair out of a messy bun and brushes at it until it falls in a sleek wave down her back. “Yeah.”

Her voice is taut with tension as if she’s mentally telling me to mind my own business. I forget for half a second that Zack is huddled up in my closet and take another small step toward her. “I’m a good listener if you want to talk... sometime.” *Not tonight though*, I think, crossing my fingers. I have to get him out of here.

She takes off her shirt and jeans and pulls on an oversized T-shirt. With a lingering glance, she looks as if she might tell me something, but then she changes her mind. She crawls into her bed, tucks herself under the blanket, and turns off her light. “Just exhausted. Let’s talk later. Right now I just want to listen to some Beethoven and sleep.”

Okay.

She reaches over to the nightstand, grabs her earbuds, and taps to start the music on her phone.

“Night,” she murmurs.

I mumble a response, but she’s already turning over and facing the wall.

I shuffle over to my side and stand at the door of the closet, debating, moving from side to side.

How am I going to get him out of here? *Do I want to get him out of here?*

As quiet as a mouse, I open the closet door, and Zack is sitting on top of my mini fridge, munching as quietly as possible on a lone Dorito. One of my silk scarves, a gift from Mara I keep in a box on the top shelf, is looped around his neck.

I sigh. A very large and naked man with a dragon tattoo is sitting on top of my mini fridge with a semi, eating chips with a scarf on. Priceless.

“I guess it was too much to ask for you to get dressed?” I hiss.

He licks his fingers clean. “I was too pissed.”

I step inside with him. “It wouldn’t be college if you didn’t have to hide in the closet of a dorm room at least once.”

He puts the chips down. “Is she gone?”

I shrug. “She’s facing the wall with earbuds in.”

“Ah.” He takes my hand and pulls me toward him until I’m standing between his legs. It’s hot in the closet and clothes hang in most of it, but he’s managed to push them all to one side. There’s not much room, but it is bigger than anything I ever had at Mama’s back in Alabama. On the top shelves are my favorite books, extra school supplies, and a few sweatshirts and sweaters. My shoes are in an organizer in the top as well, which gives me plenty of space in the middle for the fridge—and us.

His hand curls around my waist.

“You’re sitting here eating my food with a condom on. Seriously?” I take in the length that’s growing, jutting up at me.

He stands, looming large in the small space. He strokes himself, giving his head a twist.

“A man gets hungry, Sugar,” he says as he towers over me.

Swooping down, he kisses me, tasting like chips.

“Honestly, I don’t care where I am when I’m with you.” The timbre of his voice is husky. “Take your underwear back

off. Please.” His forehead is against mine. “I want to fuck.”

I smile. I’m getting used to his demands. “I did have vodka. It tends to make me take my clothes off.”

He tilts my face up. “Ah, Miss Ryan, don’t blame all this on alcohol. This…” He reaches down, slips his hand inside my panties, and gives me a one-finger touch that’s there and then gone. “This is all you and me.”

I’m already moaning and opening my legs for him before he even stops talking.

I reach down and slip my panties past my hips and off. I twirl them around. “Happy?”

Damn, I like watching his eyes burn.

I tug at a strand of his hair. “I like how you look at me like you might die if you don’t fuck me.”

His lashes flutter. “I like it when you say fuck.”

“Fuck me then,” I say. “Quietly.”

“That’s going to be difficult. You call out my name…a lot.” His voice is raspy.

“Put your hand over my mouth.” My chest rises with a shiver of excitement.

“My pleasure.”

Need vibrates inside me, and part of me wonders if I should be ashamed of my brazenness, but I shove those thoughts away. We’ve gone this far, and I’m a woman and he’s a man, and this is the best sex I’ve ever had.

His shoulders rise and fall as he stares at me, ghosting over my hair and face. He cups my breast, flicking his finger over my nipple.

“Please,” I whisper, not ashamed to beg. Tomorrow I’ll worry about why he has this control over me, but right now, I just want *him*.

“Turn around and lean over the fridge,” he whispers. “I’ve been dreaming about taking you from behind.” I do as he says,

facing the wall, and my legs tremble in anticipation as he parts them with his knee, his chest against my back. “Press your hands against the back wall and hang on.”

He gently traces his fingers down my skin and outlines the cameo with the white lily inside that’s in the center of my back. I shiver.

“I love your tattoo.” He reaches around, pushes my shirt up, and cups my breasts. I groan at his touch.

Then he worships me.

His lips and hands are everywhere in the quietness and small space, pushing my hair over my shoulders and sucking on the skin on my back, playing with the curve of my elbow and then tracing his hands down to my legs. He bites me tenderly and I quiver. My body ignites. Again. So ready, so open. I’ll do anything with him.

“Put your ass up more,” he whispers as he crouches behind me on his haunches, and I obey, gasping when I feel his tongue on me, licking me. His fingers spread me apart and he devours me, touching me, making me moan his name.

“Shhhh,” he whispers against my skin, his tongue hot, so hot against my skin.

When I’m a dripping mess and whimpering, aching to come, he finally stands and strokes down my back.

“I’m going to fuck you slow, Miss Ryan.” His hand covers my mouth, giving me just enough room to breathe, and I quake with excitement, needing him inside me.

Moving to adjust, I’m standing on tiptoe as he slides inside, his fingers on my clit, playing me in tune to his thrusts.

A long groan escapes his lips as he picks up speed, one hand over my mouth and one on my hip. “I love this,” he grunts in my ear. “I feel you around me, and this is the best thing I’ve felt in a really long time. I could fuck you for days without ever stopping. I don’t know why it’s so good, but...” His voice trails off as he clutches my hips, his fingers a brand on my body.

I tighten my walls around him and he lets out a groan, mumbling my name and several adjectives about my anatomy under his breath.

He's incoherent.

And I want more.

My legs are near collapsing, but I don't want this to end. I can barely breathe and I groan as his hips twist to get a deeper angle.

He growls, moving his legs to get a better position inside me. "You make me feel on top of the world when I fuck you. I can win a championship inside you. I could run the whole fucking world." His voice is guttural as he goes deeper. "I want this pussy tomorrow and the next day and the next. Do you hear me?"

I nod, my juices dripping down my legs.

"I'm going to make you see stars." He rubs his thumb across my bum, applying the tiniest bit of pressure there until I squirm.

"You like this, Miss Ryan?" he whispers.

I nod, breathing around his hand.

His wet finger presses inside me, just a little, and then back out. He plays there, so soft, so gentle, until I feel weak. I sway on my feet and his hips stop moving, his length twitching inside me as he adjusts me. Heavy breathing and silence fill up the closet and, shit, I want so much more. I wiggle back at him.

I picture how I must look, bent over and legs apart, my mouth covered by his hand, ready and open for anything. I yearn to see him, to look at his face, to pull on his hair, but right now, I want him moving inside me.

I moan deep in my throat, and he growls behind me, his lips brushing my shoulder as he picks up his pace again, sliding out and back in, excruciatingly slow.

His finger is back and goes in more, slipping inside me deeper and rubbing, tightening everything until I feel every

ridge and vein in his cock. Sharp tingles ripple over me, and my mouth opens, gasping as he plays there, going deeper each time as he thrusts.

He lets out a curse and the hand around my mouth loosens and traces the curve of my cheek before trailing down my back and landing on my hip. I don't know why. Maybe he's losing control just like I am.

He takes my hips and owns me. Time seems to stand still as he grinds against me, twisting his hips and I...I...I can't think. Is it always like this with him? I want to give him everything. I want to...

He whispers my name over and over...and I know...I know he's right there with me. This can't be how it always is. Can't be.

"Mine," he grunts and slides into me, and it's such a stereotypical male thing to say, but with him, shit, it's real and the alpha in him is electric, something I didn't even know I wanted.

Z...he's not like anyone I know, and in that closet, I see it. I see that he's so out of my league, intense and raw and a hot flame, and I know—I just know I'm going to get burned. Like a moth to a flame, I'm going to be incinerated, I'm going to cry someday, but right now, *I don't care*. I'll take it.

The slapping of our bodies, the sound of our sex, the dark confined space, and the fact that Julia might be able to hear us—it sends me over the edge.

I burst apart inside that closet. I see stars and rainbows.

He speeds up, his thrusts alternating between hard and soft, rough and teasing, and I stand up higher and higher on my toes, and I don't mind because he is all that matters and I want him to let go and get that high just like I did.

He lets out a deep groan and goes over the cliff with me, grunting and sweating against me. It's dirty, so dirty and out of this world, and I tremble from knowing I could turn right back around and do the whole thing all over again.

A few seconds later, my hands are numb from pressing against the wall and I'm a mess as he turns my shoulders around, takes my chin, and stares down at me. His chest is going crazy, gasping for air, and he doesn't say a word but leans down and kisses me softly, so softly, his tongue flicking against mine as if I'm fragile and might fall apart. I sag against him and for some reason, tears prick at my eyes. I blink them away furiously.

I see the medallion on his chest and I focus on it, wondering why I've never noticed him wearing it before.

"Nothing gold can stay," he whispers as he hugs me, and for some reason, the depth of emotion in his gaze before we embrace...it scares me even more than the sex we just had.

I send up a silent prayer.

Please, don't let whatever this thing is between us...don't let it hurt me...or him.

SUGAR



I wake up the next day and my first thought is I need ten cups of coffee and a whole lot of Jesus. What have I gotten myself into with Z?

I'm barely functioning in my classes after spending the early hours with him. He left my closet, got dressed, both of us silent, our thoughts to ourselves. Perhaps it was because Julia was asleep, but when I walked him to the stairwell, the tension was thick. I don't know why except that we were tired and a lot has happened between us in a short time.

After changing into ankle boots, skinny jeans, and a cute leopard print sweater, I put my hair up in a sleek ponytail and head to BB's to check in on Mara and see if she needs any help manning the bar tonight. I don't do it on a full-time basis, but if it's going to be a busy night, I'll jump in.

It's around four when I walk into the bar. Dimly lit with a three-sided runway for the dancers, it's your typical strip club, but you can be sure it's spick and span. Mara is also a stickler about only employing girls who are drug-free.

Def Leppard is blaring as I waltz past the runway. My eyes take in the girls already up there, doing their thing for the early crowd. Most of the patrons are businessmen, and there's maybe a professor or two since BB's is only a few blocks from HU. My gaze gets hung up on the familiar curve of the profile of the girl currently sliding down a pole.

I stop in my tracks.

What the hell?

I march over to the front runway so I can get a good look at the petite, bosomy girl who's currently got her eyes closed as she cups her breasts, gyrating to the music. She's wearing a silver lamé corset, fishnet hose, and platform metallic shoes—one of the stock outfits Mara keeps for the new girls who don't have the money to get their own things yet. A guy in an expensive grey suit is watching her with a hooded expression on his face as he sips on a drink.

I move in closer to make sure I'm not crazy.

Holy cow.

“Julia?” My mouth opens. “What the hell?”

Mr. Five-Thousand-Dollar Suit sends me a questioning look, glances back at Julia, and smiles. “Julia.” He says it like he's tasting it, and I want to smack him upside the head for the lascivious way his gaze is eating her up.

But...I know her, and she's barely twenty-one. Most of the other girls have a few more years on them.

Her eyes flare open and red steals up her throat and to her face—which honestly surprises me. She tends to not get embarrassed.

“What are you doing here?”

I know, I have no right to worry about a girl I barely know—especially after my lecture to Z—but last night there was a vulnerable bent to her shoulders.

“Dancing.” She shakes her ass, and the suit stands up and stuffs a twenty in her bikini underwear. I glare at him.

“So this is your new job?”

“You gave me the idea.” Her lips tighten as she returns my scrutiny, her sharp eyes daring me to say anything else, an aura of vicious determination in her features.

“Well, I didn't mean to!”

She does a shimmy thing with her shoulders, which looks hella awkward.

“You’re not doing that great,” I say, frowning. “This isn’t the place for you to earn extra money.”

She blows a kiss at someone.

I exhale. “I’m not judging, you know. I’m just worried. Some girls come here for extra money and never leave. I don’t want that for you.”

Besides, isn’t she a rich girl like everyone else at HU?

She swings around and her corset drops down, revealing a tiny silver bra, showcasing boobs bigger than I gave her credit for.

“I’m fine.”

When a woman says she’s fine, she is not fine.

“She’s beautiful,” the suit says from his seat at the bar where he’s watching her.

“Just go away, Sugar,” she murmurs before turning her butt toward my face and shaking it. “You’re interrupting my routine.”

With a final look at her, I sigh and head to Mara’s office. This isn’t the place to have a real conversation with Julia.

“Did you get back with Bennett?” is the first thing that comes out of her mouth when she sees me. Smoking a Marlboro Light, she’s sitting behind her oak desk, blonde hair rolled up in big curls that frame her face. Wearing one of her velour tracksuits, her legs are jiggling. The computer is open to her accounts, and I figure she’s been working on payroll.

Luis, her boyfriend, sits in a recliner to the side, his eyeballs plastered to the TV as he watches an episode of *Shark Tank*. A little pudgy with a receding hairline, he’s no Clint Eastwood in his heyday, but he’s a nice guy and not once have I ever seen him give one of the dancers a second look.

I plop down in one of the other recliners. Mara and Luis practically live here so it’s all about comfort. “Now why would you ask me that?”

She waves her hands around her face expressively. “You’ve got this glow. An aura.”

“Do I?” I blush.

She takes off her glasses, pushing them up to her hair like a headband. “Was it the fellow you made the cherry pie for?”

I smirk. “He doesn’t even like cherry pie.”

She pops an eyebrow. “Smart guy. I like him already. But did he eat it?”

“For me, he took a bite, even tried to lie and tell me he liked it.” I grin.

She points a long pink nail at me. “You had sexual relations, didn’t you?”

Color blooms on my face. “Do you have to call it that? Whatever happened to s-e-x?”

Luis gives us a look, gets up, stretches, and leaves the room. “I’m going to check on the kitchen staff, see if they’re ready for tonight.”

Mara laughs, her gaze following him as he walks out of the room. “He can’t handle it when we talk.”

“Well, you do tend to say just about anything.”

She waves that aside. “No really...tell me.”

“What?”

“Who he is.”

I laugh. “It’s no one.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “One-nighter, huh?”

“No.” I falter. “Well, not exactly.”

Z and I said we were pretend.

But the sex in my closet wasn’t. That was real. That was something.

And those words he said to you—honey chile. I can hear my mama now.

A long exhalation comes from me. But what did Mama ever know about men and relationships?

I rub at my chest just thinking about it. She wasn't worth anything to my father. She was nothing. What am I to Z? I pull out my phone to see if he's texted me. He hasn't.

Mara watches me, her scrutiny not missing a thing. "Everything okay?"

I nod. "Just thinking about Mama."

She thinks on my response for a moment before settling back in her chair. "Well, maybe it's a good thing to not forget the past and the bad things she went through. Just don't let any man get the better of you, especially that Bennett. I never liked him."

"I know. You've told me ten times. I wish you'd told me earlier." I toy with the straps of my purse, feeling partly annoyed with her—or maybe it's myself I'm frustrated with. There were times I suspected Bennett wasn't being honest with me, nights when he came home later than normal from a gig, moments he wouldn't meet my eyes when I asked about girls who kept coming up and gushing about when was he going to play at the club again. My hands clench. I let him deceive me.

She sucks on her cig. "You say that, but you're just as stubborn as Lily. She said a hundred times she was done with George, but she always let your daddy right back in the door, even fresh from his wife or drunk from a bar and smelling of cheap perfume."

"I'm not her."

It hurts to hear those stories, even though I know they're true.

"Good."

I have no illusions about my father. His "legitimate" family was more important, and it was a huge embarrassment to have his mistress and bastard child in the same small town. When I was eight, he gave Mama twenty-five thousand dollars and a new Mustang, told her she had to leave Davenport and

move thirty miles away to a new town where his wife didn't have to worry about running into her at the supermarket or his kids seeing me at school. He promised to come see her, and I guess he did sometimes. It wrecked her to move away, to leave behind the place she grew up. Her parents were buried in Davenport. But, she put on a bright smile and made the best of it, promising me a new start. Those days are blurry to me, a memory that's out of focus. I knew how fathers were supposed to be with their kids, letting them sit on their laps and ruffling their hair, but he never did those things.

Mara's gaze is soft. "Sug, you okay?"

"Yeah, it's just been a weird month."

"Ah, honey." She pats my hand. "You're going off to law school soon. You have your entire life ahead of you. Don't be down."

I stare down at the cup of tea she set down in front of me.

"Plus, we should take a vacation this summer. Maybe Belize. Belize has monkeys. You love monkeys." She smiles up at Clint on the wall. "I bet Clint loves monkeys. Remember that movie *Any Which Way But Loose*? Damn, that was funny."

I agree. She's made me watch them all.

Sweet Mara. She did her best with me, and she's always talking about vacations, but money is tight, and I wonder if it's even feasible.

I stir the tea, trying to change the subject. "The new girl out there, Julia—how long has she been here?"

"Came in a few days ago and Candi was a no-show, so I hired her on the spot. Kinda young looking, but the suits like her."

How have I missed her? I guess she's here late when I'm not. "She's my roommate and she's practically a baby. You should let her go, Mara."

She thinks on it. "Nah, she's doing good. Ain't nobody gonna lay a hand on her in this place. We run a tight ship. Plus, her drug test was spotless. Slim pickins around here, I tell ya."

I exhale. I knew she wouldn't listen.

She sticks her tongue out at me. "I used to strip and I turned out fine."

"I know, I know, but she was really off last night and I'm not sure she's cut out for this."

Mara sighs. "She could like the attention. Some do it just so they can piss someone off, their daddy or an ex."

I shake my head. "Just keep an eye on her."

"Will do."

Luis pokes his head in. "Hey, ladies, a Mr. Winchester from Birmingham, Alabama, is here to see Sugar. I told him you were talking, but he insists."

Standing behind the barrel-chested Luis is a tall, wiry man with silver hair, small round glasses, and eagle-sharp eyes. There's a flat, somber look to his face, and I get chills when we make eye contact. Sometimes you get a bad feeling about someone right away, and honey, I have one.

SUGAR



“Miss Ryan, your father, Mr. George Mitchell III, passed away two days ago after a long battle with brain cancer. I’m sorry for your loss.”

The words land like little grenades in the small office, stifling everything for several seconds. Mara’s eyes are bugging out and her mouth is a circle of surprise. Even with the heat blasting in the room, I’m cold and rub my arms.

Mr. Winchester is seated in a straight back chair in the corner, his briefcase placed neatly in his lap and a rather flat yet displeased look on his face. I think it’s his *why do I have to be in a strip club* countenance.

“I haven’t seen my father in years.” My voice is thin, vibrating with emotion just under the surface. “A phone call would have been fine.”

He clears his throat and stares down at his briefcase, shuffling through some papers. “I’m the executor of Mr. Mitchell’s will. He’s left you a sum of money and I came here to let you know in person at his request. He left quite a few instructions and it’s my duty to carry them out.”

My heart rate doesn’t even kick up. “I don’t want his money.”

“Hush now. Don’t kick a gift horse in the mouth,” Mara hisses at me.

Mr. Winchester never bats an eye, just gives me another long look. “It would do you well to listen. In fact, I’m here today to give you plenty of notice. You’re required to attend the reading in April, along with his other beneficiaries—”

My stomach drops at the mere thought of going back to that small town. “His wife and *real* kids?” My lips flatten as my stomach drops.

He nods his head. “Yes, you have two half-siblings.”

Of course I do. I’ve briefly seen them in passing before. Nausea bubbles up inside me as a memory surfaces, one of seeing my father on the court square one Saturday afternoon, coming out of the historic Princess Theatre with his wife on his arm. His college sweetheart (from Vandy), she was coolly sophisticated in a way that screamed old money. I once imagined the rather hawkish-looking Mrs. Mitchell as the bad person who kept him from us, but really *he* was just a piece of shit. Two raven-haired twins, a boy and a girl, nearly the same age as me, tagged along behind them.

My hands tremble around the cup. “I want nothing from him.”

Mara blows out a breath and stands up to pace around the small office. She’s muttering to herself periodically, sending me pointed looks that practically scream, *Are you nuts?* “What in the blue blazes are you thinking, honey? This might be the way to pay for law school.” Her gaze implores me to listen. “You know I can’t help.”

“I don’t expect you to. I’ll borrow the money and pay it back later.”

She shakes her head. “You’ll be in debt for years. Vandy will be almost a hundred grand by the time you’re all done.”

Mr. Winchester pushes up his wire-rimmed glasses, studying me. “You have plans to be a lawyer?”

My chest tightens. “I do. It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Mara lights up a cig, and the man physically recoils from the smoke. “Actually, Mr. Winchester, she was waitlisted by Vandy—and for no good reason.” Mara throws back her

shoulders and sends a glare at the lawyer. “Personally, I think the Mitchell family might have had something to do with it since that’s where they went. I’m sure they’ve donated quite a tidy sum of money over the years, am I right?”

He stiffens. “I’m not at liberty to discuss things that are privileged to my clients.”

Mara pokes her cig at him. “And who is your client?”

“The late Mr. Mitchell.” His eyes are flared a bit, and I think he might be just a tiny bit intimidated by Mara.

“Well, he’s an asshole,” she says loudly then points at me. “He hasn’t given this girl one cent since the day she was born, and now she’s in his will? She should have sued his ass for paternity years ago!”

I exhale, getting myself under control as Mara lets her anger out.

His eyebrows shoot straight up. “I see. I’m not at liberty to discuss paternity with you, but Mr. Mitchell kept a tally of gifts and monetary donations he gave to Lily Ryan over the years, and it’s quite a lot of money. I feel there are no grounds for this to be an issue.”

Mara’s angry and fishes out another cigarette, lighting it up immediately.

He’s scribbling away in his notes and clears his throat. “However, on the issue of Vanderbilt, there is a small possibility I can help with that.”

“How so?” My tone is skeptical, and I stand up and walk over to the window.

He taps his pen against his briefcase, a mulling expression on his face. “Miss Ryan, your father—”

“Not my father. Sperm donor.”

He nods. “Right. He left the bulk of his estate to his wife and other two children, but there’s a sizable amount for you as well. You can attend any university you want.”

Curiosity gets to me. “How much?”

“You’ll have to attend the reading with the family to find out the final amount, along with the list of mementos he bequeathed to you, items that may be pertinent to your mother.”

My teeth grind together. “How fucking much?”

He’s unfazed by my profanity but thinks for a moment. “A million dollars.”

Shock slides over me and there’s a gasp from Mara. “Asshole must have gotten soft,” she mutters as she heads to the liquor cabinet and opens it. “Drink?” Her eyes rove from him to me, but it’s me she lingers on, and I guess she’s learned to read my face well enough to know when I’m about to lose my cookies.

“Bourbon,” I say. “Two fingers—and give me the good stuff.”

Her hands shake as she puts it in my grasp. She leans down to my level and gazes up at me. “Listen to me, Sugar, you could really use that money—hell, you could pay for law school somewhere up east, maybe Yale or Harvard. Get out of this town and live the life you deserve.”

I don’t want his regret money.

All I’ve ever wanted was a real family.

Mara reads my face. “A door has opened, Sugar. Now you gotta walk through it. See what happens. Don’t let the past dictate your future.”

I turn up my glass, and the hot fiery taste of whiskey slides down my throat. “I don’t care that he’s dead. I don’t care if he’s trying to make up for what he did. Go back and tell his family that.”

With trembling hands, I set the glass back down on her desk then stalk past them and out the door.

SUGAR



On Sunday, the girl at the desk in the lobby of Ellington Hall has an awed expression on her face as she passes over the vase of deep creamy white gardenias to me—although it’s terribly inadequate to simply call it a vase of flowers. The word decadent comes to mind as I finger one of the huge, velvety blooms with a lush yellow center. The smell is intoxicating; it’s vibrant, rich, and reminiscent of the South. I attempt to pick up the wide crystal vase but have to put down my backpack just to hold it.

I look back up at the freckled, bouncy brunette who caught me as I came in the door after class, practically waving her hands at me to tell me I had another flower delivery.

“What does the card say? Who’s it from? Honestly, I’ve never seen flowers so pretty.” She leans over the desk conspiratorially, all chatty. “I mean, the delivery dude even had a hard time wrangling his way inside. These are gardenias, right? I mean, where do you ever get those in the winter?”

I give her a slight smile as I rip open the envelope, and suddenly the shitty day brightens.

Miss Ryan,

These remind me of you.

Z

My heart lifts and soars—until I remember I haven’t heard a peep from him since I walked him out of my dorm early Friday morning. Two damn days.

“Well?” Lobby Girl is beside herself. “Is it the guy with all the tattoos on his arms, the one who comes by to see you?”

She means Bennett. I shake my head. “Not him.”

“Then who?”

I tuck the card into my crossbody. “Just a friend.”

“Some friend.” She grins.

It felt wrong to say fuck buddy, but I don’t really know what we are.

“Would you mind if I left my book bag down here, took these to my room, and then came back? I can’t carry it all.”

She nods and dashes off to answer her phone, which is lying on the welcome desk.

Vase in hand, the gardenias nearly smothering me, I turn around just as a nasally voice calls my name. I have to peek around the huge arrangement to see who it is.

Veronica. Perfect. A long sigh slips through my lips.

“Well, well, well, looks like someone got the flowers.” A small tinkling laugh comes from her and an expression of extreme satisfaction settles on her carefully made-up face. “How lucky for me that I just happened to pop into Ellington to see a friend and I get to witness...” She waves her hands in my direction. “This.”

My body stiffens. “Excuse me?”

She leans on the counter. “The flowers—they’re from Z, right?”

“And if they are?” The weight of the vase makes my arms ache but I continue to stand there.

She brushes at a piece of lint on her black pea coat before looking back at me with piercing green eyes. “He sends them to all the girls, usually when he’s done.” She pauses, her brows raised. “I mean, for a moment, I thought he was seriously blindsided by you, but guess what—nope.”

My dad died and this is the comment that nearly brings me to my knees.

Is this why I haven't heard from him?

She sniffs. "Hope you didn't think you were special. Lots of girls do, you know. They think they'll be the one to change him, but I've known him since prep school and this is the way he operates. Z is just looking for a good time." She curls her lip. "Don't take it personally, being the slut of the month."

My skin goes white. I can feel the blood leaving it. My teeth clench. "Been called worse by better, Veronica."

"Truth hurts. I just don't want you to get your hopes up that this little thing between you two might last." She shrugs.

I stare at her hard. This is a cat fight, and I smile a little because my mama taught me well. I know all the right words to say to defend myself from bitchy girls who think they're better than someone from the trailer park.

I push out a tight smile. "You're so jealous, and it's sad, truly. My heart actually hurts for you." I make a pout with my mouth. "Want to know why?"

Her confidence falters, and I can tell she doesn't want to ask, but she can't help it.

"Why?"

I smile. "He's never going to pick you. If he were, he already would have." I keep a little Southern in my voice when I say, "And, bless your heart, I would tell you to go fuck yourself right now for being a little bitch, but I don't think you'd even enjoy it."

It's a great exit line, and I'm mentally high-fiving myself when she grabs my elbow, nearly causing the flowers to topple.

Her eyes flare, and if she were a dragon, I'd be seeing smoke. "You're so beneath him, and the only reason he's with you is you look like—"

"Is your drama going to have an intermission soon?" says a taut female voice, and I turn to see Julia standing there, arms

crossed, face tired. “Because my friend and I have better things to do than talk to a backstabbing bag of shit like you.”

They know each other. It’s obvious from the twin set of daggers in each of their eyes. Julia is all up in the hockey stuff.

“Don’t you have some puppies to murder, Veronica? Run along now. No one wants you here,” Julia says.

Veronica, at first taken back by the sight of her, recovers as she leans in and turns to me. “He’s moved on, sweetheart. Face it.”

My heart flops. *He’s moved on.*

She tosses her hair over her shoulder and stomps out of the lobby.

Julia gives me a wry smile. “Ignore her. By the way, I’m a stripper. I almost told you the other night, but it wasn’t the right time.”

“I noticed you’ve been avoiding me. Oh, and I nearly saw your boobs, which might be okay since we’re roomies, but not while you’re shaking them for the suits.”

She sighs, grabbing my backpack from Lobby Girl, who came around the desk with it at some point, probably to see all the action. “She tried to fire me, by the way, but I talked her out of it.”

I study the determined set of Julia’s face. I get the feeling she doesn’t take no for an answer often.

I push Veronica and Z out of my head and focus on her. “Julia, are you sure working there is good for you? Some girls just fit right in and they love it, but the other night you were upset about something...”

She waves me off and looks down at the monstrous vase of flowers. “You going to get those?”

My heart sinks a little as I study the lush petals. My eyes scan around the lobby. “I’m going to chuck them in the trash.”

Lobby Girl nearly faints. “God, no, please. That would be a crime. I’ll take them if you don’t want them. They’re the

most beautiful flowers I've ever seen."

Julia arches a brow. "They'll brighten up our dungeon of a room."

Fine. I give Lobby Girl a smile since she looks so relieved. I glance at Julia. "Maybe they'll mask the dank smell that comes up from the radiator."

She pauses as we make our way to the stairwell that leads to our room. "I heard some of the things she was saying to you about Zack..." Her voice trails off.

I pause mid-step. "Oh, shit, please Lord baby Jesus, tell me you've never slept with him because I'm just starting to like you and I don't know how that would work—"

"Especially since y'all were going at it in your closet. Geeze." She laughs at my mortification. "Yeah, I heard—even with earbuds in—and no, Z and I never hooked up."

I squint. "But it was one of them?"

Her face hardens, a flat, tight look there, and I realize I wouldn't want to be on the opposing side against her in a fight. "There was a hockey player, yeah."

"Which one?"

She twists her lips and shrugs her slender shoulders. "I've vowed to never speak his name."

"That bad?"

She scowls. "Once they cheat, I'm done."

She's my sister from another mister. "Been there, my friend."

She arches a brow. "So. Are you using Zack to get over your ex?"

"Ah, no. My ex has zilch to do with it."

She raises a brow. "So what's going on?"

I open my mouth to answer, but I find that I can't respond. I shrug and she frowns as we walk inside. I set the flowers next to the daisies.

“The sex is incredible, isn’t it?” She gives me a careful look.

“Is it that obvious?”

She nods. “He has quite a reputation.” My stomach clenches at that, but she doesn’t seem to notice. “Just...tread lightly. Don’t fall in love with him.”

No falling in love. That’s the number one rule...

Right.

My gaze roves over the two sets of flowers, one plain and sweet, the other rich and heavy. “He sends flowers to every girl...when he’s done,” I mutter under my breath, trying to reconcile that image of him with the guy who was in my dorm room.

“Exactly.”

I let out a heavy sigh.

How did I get myself in this situation? You know why, Sugar. You wanted him and you let him in and now here you are, just another notch on his bedpost.

SUGAR



What are you doing?

The text from Zack pings on my phone the next day as I'm rushing to class from the student center. I'm late—as usual—for astronomy, which I took on a whim but has turned out to be a pain in the ass. Who knew studying the stars would be so damn hard?

I ignore the text.

I haven't heard from you. I take it you don't like gardenias? You just seemed like a lush kind of girl...

I push my phone down further inside my purse. Part of me knows I need to respond to him, need to address how pissed I am, but right now, I'm not ready.

Inside the little general store at the student center, my hands tighten around my backpack as I pay for my morning sugar, a red slushie drink, and head out to the quad. I brush past a few girls on the way out of the glass double doors, and I'm stunned to see them looking at me and then giving me an assessing, snooty look. I come to a stop right outside the entrance. I swear I heard one of them say *Zack*. I sigh, once again reminded of his social status. They've probably seen his Instagram account where he's posted some pictures of us. Everyone thinks we're an item, and here I am dressed for the role of hot girlfriend in leggings, Chucks, and a baggy *Welcome to Pawnee, Indiana* sweatshirt. My hair is in a messy bun, and all the makeup I had time for was a swipe of Midnight Madness red lipstick. The name is fitting since I

barely slept last night, tossing and turning with dreams of Z and my dad.

They're probably wondering who the hell I am and how I got him. I grimace. I get it; he's a thoroughbred and I'm a mixed breed, short-haired pony.

Whatever.

I push thoughts of him down deep as I trudge through the early morning crowd toward the law building. My anger builds with each step. He was all into me and now nothing?

A male voice calls my name from behind me and I keep on trucking. Bennett. I'd know that deep voice anywhere.

"Wait! Sugar!"

Nope. I throw a glance over my shoulder, and he's moving at a full jog on the sidewalk now, brushing past co-eds with his backpack as he runs.

Everyone is staring at him and then looking at me, and I know him well enough to know he'll just keep calling my name until I stop. Determination is the one common denominator he and Z share. Outside of that, they are completely different.

I stalk over to a bench near an oak tree and wait.

He slows his pace, a smile crossing his handsome face as he approaches. He's wearing jeans and a Violent Femmes shirt I bought him, showcasing his tattoos. Mostly roses and skulls, I'm surprised to realize he's never really told me what they mean—unlike Z.

His hair flows back from his face, deep with color and wavy, brushing the sides of his chiseled jawline. Damn. The man *is* fine. But like my mama used to say, *He's a pretty turd in the punchbowl.*

My shoulders go back when he stops in front of me but I don't return his smile.

"Hey." He eases his backpack down to the ground and leans in to give me a hug—a super awkward hug that I don't

want, but part of me gives in because, well, we're in public and we did spend two years together.

I stare up at him and he looks back, a soft expression in his eyes.

I sigh. "Hey. What do you want?"

"What do I want?" He huffs out a laugh and looks up at the sky. "I wanted to see if you got the daisies."

Daisies...oh. I nearly forgot. I think about them back in my dorm room, collecting dust.

"I don't recall us ever having a conversation about daisies." I arch my brow, curious as to *why* he keeps sending them.

He shrugs, calling attention to his broad shoulders, which I see are without a jacket today even though it's cold. His biceps look bigger and firmer too, as if he's been working out.

He laughs. "We went to the flower market one weekend, and you kept looking at them."

I tilt my head, truly curious now. Is it possible that for two years, he never really knew *me*? "But you never asked if they were my favorite."

He frowns. "I know you better than you know yourself, Sugar."

He does not know me! Betrayal churns, that familiar feeling I get when I picture him in that car. "I'm not a daisy kind of girl, actually."

"Oh?" He brushes at a stray hair that's come loose from my ponytail and tucks it behind my ear. "What flower is your favorite?"

I frown. "I don't know."

"See!"

I shake my head. "Maybe I don't like flowers at all. Maybe I'm a love note person. Maybe I like diamonds instead."

I didn't mean to say that last part, about diamonds, but his face brightens. "Do you want to get serious, Sugar? Are you asking for a ring?"

WHAT? I feel myself recoiling.

"No."

He pauses. "I don't understand what's wrong with you. You're grouchy. Are you PMSing?"

I sigh at his obliviousness. "Bennett, it's not me who's wrong. It's you. Yeah, maybe we weren't right for each other and that's what pushed you to have sex with that girl, but we... we are over."

His expression grows earnest as he comes closer to me until there's only a hair's breadth between us. "We didn't go all the way. If you'd give me a chance to explain—"

"It doesn't matter, don't you see? There is no hardline definition of what cheating is to me. You. Were. With. Her."

He shakes his head, trying to deny it, but I won't stop, not now that words are spilling out, and I think I'm glad to say them. Perhaps I shouldn't have waited so long to have this conversation with him.

"Maybe we worked before, but we grew apart," I say, keeping my voice low. "You want me to be someone I'm not, and when I didn't give you what you wanted, you looked to someone else. Whether or not you actually penetrated her vagina is irrelevant. Eventually you would have gone all the way anyway—with lots of girls, probably—until I found out. I can't... I just can't let that go."

"Please, Sugar." His hand is on my arm, tugging, and my half-empty red slushie spills to the ground.

He barely notices.

I pull back from him and he shakes his head and rakes a hand through his hair, pacing around me, slicing his hands through the air to emphasize his point. "I just need you with me, supporting me. I need a full-time girlfriend. After we graduate, I'll be on the road and I want you with me."

I'm not his main groupie! But I don't say that. I want to keep this civil.

"You need someone to pat your head and tell you how awesome you are."

He stops and scowls, his lips tightening. "That's mean. I don't even know who you are anymore."

I pick up my empty drink cup and tuck it inside my backpack. At least I'm not going to litter. "Have a nice life, Bennett. Truly."

"Don't say that." He walks back to me and grabs my elbow, his grip tighter than it should be, and I look down at his strong, tanned hand, the one that's cupped my face a hundred times. My eyes linger on the silver infinity ring on his finger, the one I bought him for his birthday. His gaze follows mine and he loosens his grip. "Shit. I'm sorry if I hurt you." He caresses my arms and grabs my hand. "And the ring? I still wear it, Sugar. I *still* love you and I'm just trying to prove it. I want to work this thing out—"

"Let her go." The low male voice comes from behind me and we both turn.

Z.

His face is hard as granite, his body coiled and tense as he stares at our joined hand.

Bennett gives him a once-over and stiffens beside me. "Move on, dude. This doesn't concern you."

Somehow in the middle of this, I find it funny that Bennett doesn't recognize him right away. He isn't a hockey guy.

Lightning goes off in Z's grey eyes. Stormy and swirling with anger, they blaze as they bounce from me to Bennett. Two quick strides and he's right in front of us. "She happens to be with *me*, so in fact, yeah, it does concern me."

I let go of Bennett's hand and close my lids briefly, part of me angry with Bennett for putting me in this position and the other side of me pissed at Z for throwing our "relationship" in his face.

Bennett inhales sharply. He's puffed up now, ready to tangle, and his face is as hard as Z's as he looks from me to him.

They face off, and for the first time, I see that they're almost the same height with Bennett being about two inches shorter at six four. If they did tangle, it might be interesting, except Bennett only works out to look good, whereas Z does it so he can squash his opponent.

I see the moment Bennett figures out who Z is. He gets a surprised look on his face and then glares at me. "So this is who you're seeing and why you've been avoiding me? Some jock?"

I inhale a deep breath and pick up my book bag. My gaze sweeps over them. "I'm avoiding you because there's no point."

They both turn to look at me, and I move fast, gliding past Z. I pause in front of him and want to say something, but I can't. Not here, not now.

I take a step back from Z, annoyed, and Bennett gets a look of triumph on his face until I point my finger at him. "Don't put your hands on me again."

Bennett pales. "I'm sorry—"

I don't even wait for the rest.

I stalk off.

I haven't gone ten steps when I feel Z next to me, and I don't make it easy for him. I'm moving at a fast pace, trying to get to class and get myself as far from him as I can. He's hurt me and seeing Bennett just reminds me of that.

He keeps up, his arm occasionally brushing against mine as we walk together. A couple of guys pass us and call out, "Good game!" and we keep going. We even keep moving when a group of girls shout, "Z!" and waggle their fingers at him while giving me the evil eye.

"Are you going to speak to me?" he finally asks.

I speed up.

“The gardenias? What happened? Talk to me.”

Annoyance boils inside me, but still my lips are clamped shut. Taylor and Poppy are ahead of me, coming my way, and there’s a questioning look in their wide eyes as we pass each other, their gazes bouncing from me to Z. I shake my head at them to not interrupt. I *want* to have this fight with him, even if I am a silent participant.

We walk a few more paces and he says, “I really can’t read minds, you know.”

My anger rises to the surface, and that’s it. I come to a full stop, not even caring that people are having to move around us. “I’m just so happy to learn I’m not anyone special to you.”

Understanding dawns in his eyes and his lips compress, a hard look growing on his face. “Someone told you something.”

I laugh. “Yes, and it was so nice to discover my gift is one you send to every girl you date—when it’s over.”

His mouth flattens. “Veronica. She’s the only one who would care enough to be mean.”

“So it’s true?”

He frowns, looking discomfited. “Yes, I sometimes send girls roses, but not gardenias, and not when it’s over. I send them whenever I want. Whatever she told you, I’m sure she twisted it to fit her agenda. She’s wanted me for a long time, and I...” He pauses. “But I’ve never in my life gone to a flower shop and picked out *exactly* the flower that fit a girl, that smell like her.”

He exhales and pinches the bridge of his nose.

Okay, okay, that makes sense, and Veronica does have her own agenda. Even I can see that.

But...

“You haven’t even texted me since we were together...” I stop, my hands clenching.

Don’t be needy, Sugar.

His gaze searches mine. “I know. That night was so... I don’t have words.” He grimaces and looks down at the ground before coming back up to meet my eyes. “I had a game on Saturday, and I just thought maybe I needed some space, you know, a clear head so I could play my best. ”

Well.

Space?

And here I was, thinking about our night and even though I hadn’t really admitted to myself yet, part of me was willing to...I don’t know...see what was going on with us. So stupid. I take off walking again. “Fine. Take some time and process it. I’m done with your bullshit.”

He follows along beside me and several people walk by, staring at us. Even though I’m not looking at him, I feel his unease. It’s in the way he sighs and keeps looking over at me. Whatever.

He keeps up with me, and dammit, he smells so good.

“Look, I was jealous of your daisies, and I wanted to give you something that was more you ...” Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as his chest heaves and he stops talking.

I turn. “I don’t even care about that now. Also, I don’t need you to pretend to be my boyfriend anymore.”

His jaw pops. “What about the dean you want to impress?”

“I’ll figure something else out.”

His face shutters, and he looks off, as if what I’m saying isn’t what he wanted to hear. He swallows and looks up at the sky, as if looking for answers.

“Are you upset, Z?”

I need *something* from him.

He rubs a hand through his hair and his brow pulls down. “Who said I was ever pretending anyway? Go out with me—just me. Not for law school.” His hand reaches out to me but then drops. “Can’t you just give it a shot?”

There's something in the way he looks at me, hope mixed with fear, as if he's hanging on a thread, waiting for me to respond.

I shake my head. "You've never had to work hard for a girl, have you?"

"No."

"You just send flowers and everything's okay. You don't call and everything just goes back to normal and they jump right back in with you."

He chews on that bottom lip. "Usually."

"I'm not that girl."

"I know."

"I don't have sex like that and not expect you to call me. I'm worth more."

He closes his eyes. "I know. Shit. I'm sorry. I wish I had. I really do. I just...get in a zone when a game comes up. I have to focus...it doesn't mean I wasn't thinking about you. I was."

Somehow we're standing closer, and I don't know who came closer, me or him. He reaches up and pulls my scrunchie until my hair spills all around me. He sighs, his eyes roving over me. "Will you at least do one thing for me?"

"What?"

"Come with me. Now."

My body flares. "Every time you say *come with me* we end up having sex until I can't think."

"The truth is, sex is how I express myself because words don't always do it for me." He tugs at a strand of my hair, rubbing it between his fingers. "Come anyway."

I throw my gaze around the path we're on, seeing that he's pulled us over to the side near the trees so our conversation is private. "Why?"

"I want to be alone with you. I—I miss you."

My gaze flies up to his. “I’m pissed that you didn’t call me. That doesn’t just go away.”

His hand trails down my shoulder and ends at my hand. He laces my fingers with his. “You could have called me too.”

“Nope. And don’t send me flowers again. I don’t care if they’re from some special greenhouse in Antarctica and come with a live penguin. In fact, I think I hate all flowers now.”

“Done.” He tilts my chin up. “Will you come with me?”

“Goddammit, I’m not having sex with you.”

“Okay.”

I sigh. “So what are we going to do?”

A flash of a smile crosses his face. “I’m going to show you how to ice skate. You don’t know jack about hockey and you need to learn.”

“Why?”

“You just do.”

He wants to show me something about him, and I feel myself softening. “I have a class.”

He plays with my hand. “I promise not to stuff you in a closet.”

“Don’t bring that up to make me weak.”

“I’d do it again. I’d wait for you anywhere.”

I chew on my lips. “Will this be worth missing astronomy?”

A small grin. “Miss Ryan, I can show you the stars all right.”

“No sex,” I snap.

He tosses an easy arm around me, keeping some distance between us, as if he’s afraid I might run off. “Fine, fine, whatever you say.”

Dammit. *What am I doing with him? Why am I so weak?* A long exhale comes from my lips. “Lead the way.”

We take off across the quad and I know people are staring at us, but I ignore them completely, not caring that he's *all that* and I'm just...me. The world is topsy-turvy, and even though I don't know which way is up or down, I do know that my heart is having a hard time telling him no.

ZACK



“Thank you for the skates. It’s kinda freaking me out that I have shoes on my feet—*with blades.*” She gives me a wide-eyed look. “What do I do now?”

“Just hang on to me,” I say as I lead her around the rink in small glides, my hand in hers as she touches the boards on the side. Her feet slip around, and she sends me an unhappy look. She hasn’t quite gotten the hang of it, but her determination coupled with her infuriation makes me laugh.

I grin. After getting her fitted at a sporting goods store, I bought her a pair of good skates, thick socks, warm gloves, and kneepads. She claimed she had gloves in her dorm, but I didn’t want to wait, afraid she’d change her mind if we made too many stops. I screwed up when I didn’t call or text her. I wanted to, God I did, but...

I hold on to her waist as I ease her away from the side. “Always lean forward slightly, bend your knees, and keep your weight forward. Leaning back can cause you to fall backward, and we don’t want that. Pretend you’re riding a scooter, and when you’re comfortable with the scooter steps, try alternating scooter steps. Go slow to start.”

“Oh, it will be slow.” She gives me a grim face. “These skates are heavy.”

I give her a little push since she can’t get any momentum. “Don’t be afraid of the ice. Falling is just part of it. The key is learning to do it right.”

“Really? Says the famous hockey player who was born with skates on his feet!” She grapples with the ice, her feet slipping.

“Is this the first thing in your life you haven’t been good at?”

She rolls her eyes, her cheeks already pink from the indoor cold that keeps the rink nice and slick. “I’m not an athlete like you, but my IQ is 146. Take me to a courtroom and I can get you out of jail.”

“Little braggart.”

She giggles then bites her lip, arms flailing. “I can’t laugh. I’m afraid of falling again.”

I grin. “Totally normal. If you feel a fall coming, bend your knees and squat into a dip position. Fall sideways, leaning forward, and place your hands on your lap. As soon as you fall, roll over onto your hands and knees. Then, gently push yourself back up.” These are elementary lessons and honestly I can’t even remember how to teach anyone. I’m kind of making this up as I go. My dad just put skates on me and let me loose, and I just *knew*. It was intuition.

“You make it sound so easy.” She lifts her skates and pushes, managing to move a few feet, but then falls flat on her ass, even with me rushing over to try to keep her upright.

She blows at a piece of hair in her face and stares up at me.

I grin.

“Football is so much cooler than hockey,” she mutters.

“Blasphemy,” I say as I pull her up. “And don’t say that too loud. This is hockey country.”

“Maybe you should teach me how to stop.”

I run through my spiel. “It’s easy. Push your feet apart and stick one skate out sideways. This will push some frost off of the ice and cause your body to come to a stop, similar to skiing.”

She exhales. “I don’t know how to ski.”

“We’ll need to take care of that too. My dad does a Christmas ski trip every year. You’ll love it.”

She blushes and then blinks. “Will you be upset if I never get this?”

I lean down and brush my lips against hers. “You will. I’ll help you and we can practice whenever you want.”

She sighs. “Show me how to do those fancy moves where your feet go back and forth.”

That’s all the moves. I bite back a grin. “Ah, you have watched me in a game.”

“I’ve never been to a game, but I have seen one on TV.”

“Was it a good game?”

“I saw you hit the puck and it went in the net thing. Everyone cheered and then they blasted this horn over the speakers.”

I let out a laugh. “You sound thrilled.”

She grins. “It was kind of exciting.”

She skates a little bit ahead of me, looking awkward and close to falling as she leans too far to one side. I hold my breath, but she manages to stay standing.

I chuckle.

“Just show me how you skate up to the net and then stop,” she says.

I skate away from her, getting warmed up. Starting at one end of the rink, I take off, going fast, going backward in the center then forward, doing loose figure eights, moving and zipping around her. I come to a sudden halt at the goal crease, ice flying.

“Now, do you know a football player who can do that?” I say as I whiz past her, skating backward.

“I can ask.” She smiles.

“Nah, best you stay away from them. I’d hate to have to kick their ass.” I lift my arms and show her my biceps as I

skate toward her. “These will take care of those dudes.” I grin and move past her again, tugging on her hair, and when she tries to come after me, her feet go in opposite directions.

She yells and throws her hands up. “I’m going to die out here.”

I skate back to her side, get behind her, and put my arms around her waist. “Just hang on,” I say. She nods and I push off, moving forward an inch at a time, letting her feel the glide. “Don’t be afraid of falling, okay?” I make eye contact with her, and I don’t think I’m talking about skating anymore.

She nods and glides forward a little, using the scooter method.

“See? You’re getting better.”

“I’m terrible and you know it.” She leans forward and heads back to the boards. “Why don’t you show me more hockey stuff and let me rest right here a minute?”

“Giving me permission to show off more?”

She clings to the side as if it’s a lifeline. “Truthfully, I like watching you.”

“Let me show you what my dad taught me.” I’ve already told her he was a hockey player at HU but ended up not going pro because of a knee injury.

She watches as I take off. Getting in the zone, I bend low and put my shoulders forward as I skate from one end of the rink to the other, gaining momentum. My legs move effortlessly across the slickness, and the cold air in my face, the flash of the glass as I fly past...it makes me high. Being on the ice has never felt like work. It’s a religion and I was born to play. I pick up my speed, gliding faster until I’m flashing by her, taking in her parted lips.

There’s no doubt, I have everything it takes *physically* to be the top player in the country. My oneness with the ice, my sixth sense about players, and my shooting game are stellar.

A twinge of darkness tugs at me.

It’s my mental side that might be the end of me.

I shove that down deep and skate over to where she is, shooting up small bits of ice.

I jerk to a stop a few inches in front of her and almost impulsively, she jumps out at me, flailing a little in her skates, and throws her arms around me.

Her arms tighten around my neck, and at first I laugh, thinking maybe I scared her, but then she crawls in closer and her face is resting on my neck as she clings. We stand on the ice, holding each other, and I tighten my arms around her waist.

“Sugar?”

She inhales a deep breath, refusing to let me go, and when I attempt to separate us to look at her, she won't let me. I stroke her hair, my gut telling me something isn't right; the funny girl with a smart mouth that I've come to know would have spoken up by now.

“What's wrong?”

Her hands tangle in my hair, and I think I hear a small sniff.

“Hey, I'm here. Just talk to me.”

Her arms tighten around me.

“Did something happen? Is this about Bennett?” Fuck, the thought of him makes my blood pressure skyrocket, but... “Should I have let him talk to you?”

She shakes her head.

I close my eyes in relief and play with her long hair, rubbing my hand up onto her scalp and massaging. “Then what? Can't you tell me?”

Her nose buries in my shirt. “My dad is dead. I found out Friday.”

Shit. And I didn't even call her. I wanted to, but part of me was frightened by how badly I wanted to see her again, *right then*. But my hockey game is shit right now and I have to focus. Plus, I'm not sure where all this emotion for her is

coming from, and I'm just trying to figure us out. I have baggage, and shit, I don't know if I'm ready to show someone the true me.

"I'm so sorry." I'm at a loss, but I react on instinct. I pick her up in my arms and skate off the rink, removing her skates and mine without speaking. I keep giving her little looks as she wipes her face, but I mostly stare down at our laces, feeling that she needs a minute. Once those are off, I pull her back into my arms as we sit on the carpeted floor in the hallway that leads to the offices and locker rooms. I lean against the wall and place her in my lap, straddling me.

She inhales a shaking breath and bites her lip. "I guess...I didn't even know it bothered me that much, and then you were skating...so beautiful...and your dad taught you that, and I never..." She looks up at the ceiling of the arena.

She clenches her fists and unclenches them, vulnerability on her face. "You'd think I wouldn't care that he's dead, but I do. I'm sad. I'm sad for everything I never had." She blinks rapidly, trying to stop the stream of tears, and I tell her I don't care, to let it all out, and she nods.

My thumbs wipe at her cheeks. "I'm sorry you went through that. If I had known—"

She puts a hand to my lips. "No, don't apologize for him or for you not knowing. I haven't even told Taylor and Poppy. I'm still figuring out what to do."

"I'm here." I lace our hands together and we stare at each other. It's so quiet in the arena and I feel close to her, so close because she's sharing this with me.

She shakes her head and looks away as if gathering her thoughts, but I read her face, taking in the downturned lips, the way her chin trembles.

"Tell me what you're thinking."

A long exhalation comes from her. "Sometimes I get so angry with my mama. I adored her, I did, but why...why did she stick with him? Why did she let him make us move?" She closes her eyes. "The worst thing is, he never ever once treated

me right, like I was part of him, and she just..." A tear falls down her cheek. "By loving him, *she lost me*. And I hate it. I hate how I never really felt like I belonged."

My heart wants to come out of my chest.

She shakes her head. "She loved him too much. And Bennett, what you saw today...I did love him, but..."

My hands tighten.

An angry look grows on her face. "He's a cheater and a liar, and that's enough for me to say goodbye. I don't want to make the same mistakes she did. Please..." She looks at me with earnest blue eyes. "Please don't be like Bennett."

"I won't."

She nods and leans her head into my neck, and I wrap my arms around her, holding her tight.

Later, I kiss her softly, and she sighs into my mouth. Our lips cling, and in my head I'm telling myself she's *it*, and I won't let this tentative thing between us be over. I won't be like Bennett.

I've never been a cheater, but...

But...

We've had a lie between us from the very beginning.

And somehow I'm going to have to tell her everything.

ZACK



The hockey games keep coming, and somehow I'm managing to keep my shit together. I had some close calls when we faced off with a tough Yale team on the road, but in the end the ornery athlete in me that loves a challenge somehow got me through. At one point, when we were down by one goal with two minutes left and the puck was under my stick, I got dizzy and clammy and that dread rolled through me. I had to score. I had to keep the winning streak going. *You deserve hockey. You deserve happiness. You deserve this*, I told myself, and it kept me centered. It pulled me through, and I slung the puck into the net.

And Sugar...

Since the day she told me about her dad, we've grown closer and we're spending time together. During the week, we meet up for late lunches after my therapy, and we've skipped the Kappa parties to hang out at her place or go donut shop hopping.

It's a few days after our last win when we order in pizza and watch *Game of Thrones* at Sugar's. She's constantly clapping her hand over her mouth to keep from telling me everyone's backstory.

"Khal Drogo kind of reminds me of you with his big muscles and *I'm all that* attitude," she muses as she munches on a piece of pizza. "I think for Halloween, you should dress up as him."

I grin. “As long as you’re Dany. They have some pretty hot sex scenes.”

She arches an eyebrow. “I know.”

“Just let me know when you’re ready to resume sex.”

Yeah, she’s making sure sex isn’t all we have. I know it isn’t, but if she needs to know...

“But don’t you want to know if there’s more to life than just sex?”

“No.” I set down my plate of pizza on her desk and grin. “Plus, it’s possible I might die from blue balls.”

“You’ll die from me hitting you upside the head.”

“It was worth a shot.” I kiss her on the lips, quickly, because I know if I linger, I’m going to be jerking off in her bathroom later just so I can drive home.

Someone knocks on the door, and she jumps up to get it wearing a pair of booty shorts and a camisole. Her ass is firm and full, and the way her tits press against that shirt...

Of course her radiator is spitting out heat like crazy and that’s her excuse for being skimpy, but I’m wondering...

I hear her exclaim loudly then a female voice speaks, and I hop up from her bed and walk to the door.

I grin.

It took several phone calls to multiple places today to make this happen, and along with some help from my dad, I was able to find what I needed.

The girl who works the lobby is standing at the door. “I don’t know the guys you date, but if you could hook me up with one of their friends, that would be super cool.”

Sugar takes the donut box and the stuffed penguin from the girl then turns to face me.

The girl sees me, her gaze widening. “Zack Morgan?”

“Yep.” My mask slides into place and I prepare myself for fluttering eyes or a plea for an autograph, but she holds it

together, her stare going from me to a blushing Sugar.

“What?” I say.

She squirms. “It’s not visiting hours. You’re not supposed to be in her room.”

“Oh.” I pause. “Any chance you can just forget you saw me here?”

She twists her lips as if thinking about it, and her eyes go back to Sugar, who’s currently standing between us, holding the gift I arranged for her.

Sugar lifts up her box of goodies. “Donut?”

The front desk girl shrugs. “Meh. Why not?” Then she hits us with a stern look as she takes one out of the box. “Just don’t keep the neighbors up and get me in trouble.” She gestures to the door across the hall.

“Rodeo girl?” Sugar says.

She nods. “Big complainer. Be safe, kids.” She gives us a final look and waltzes down the hall, humming as she chews on her sweet treat.

I move to stand next to Sugar as she unwraps the bow tied around the penguin.

“My, my, my, donuts and a stuffed animal.”

“I hope you like him.”

She takes the card attached to the little penguin’s neck and reads it aloud. “*I used to live in Antarctica until Z found me. He says you hate flowers and he promises to never send them. Please keep me next to you every night.*” A slow blush works up her face as she turns to look at me. “He’s adorable.”

I take her hand and we’re back on her side of the room. “I’ve never given a girl food or a stuffed penguin. I win.”

“How did you find him?”

I laugh. “I got online and found him at this specialty toy store in the city. I ran down there between classes and my dad paid your favorite donut guy a little extra to bring him with the

sweets. Those are the Ding Dong donuts from your shop, right?”

She grins, nods, and falls back on the bed, holding the stuffed animal to her chest. Her hair is everywhere, splayed out over her creamy shoulders, and I kiss her.

Emotions cross over her face as we pull back and stare at each other. I read her features as they shift from uncertainty to concern until finally I can't define her at all. I'm trying to figure her out, but she's up and down, like me, afraid one moment then all in the next.

“Thank you,” she murmurs.

“You know, penguins are pretty special.”

“Really?” She's soft against me, and I snuggle in closer, throwing my leg over her.

“Yeah. The emperor penguin, which is what yours is, mates for life, and when the female goes out to get food, the male stays behind and keeps the eggs warm. She might be gone for two months, but he won't eat or move until she comes back to him.”

Her face softens. “That's romantic.”

I smile. “I know. Penguin love—it's pretty cool, right?”

“Hmmm.”

“They live in large groups too, so it's easy to get separated, but the paired male and female always find each other, like a sixth sense for their mate.” I study her. I know this story is... stupid, but this is my way of telling her...shit, I don't know.

She laces our hands together. “I get tingles when you walk in a room.”

“Me too.” I kiss her again. Softly. Easy. I want her so bad.

By the time eleven rolls around, she's asleep in my arms, and the credits are rolling on yet another episode. Frankly, it's been one of the best days I've had in a long time.

My arms tighten around her, and I lean down and whisper in her ear. “Just wrapped up the last episode in season one.

Those dragons are kickass.”

She murmurs my name, still half asleep, and I grin, leaning down to kiss her. I can't stop myself. She responds, her arms curling around my neck, her mouth pressing harder into mine.

“You need to go,” she murmurs after a few minutes of our lips clinging to each other.

My head rests against hers. “My cock is hard, like Super Dick. It would be a shame to waste all that potential for the orgasm of your dreams.”

“Super Dick? Stop.” She pokes me in the ribs, and I pop out a laugh then roll off her.

“Hey, that's not fair. I'm ticklish.”

“Now I know your secrets,” she says, poking me again until I'm scrambling across the bed to get away from her.

“Help!” I'm gasping, and she's laughing and straddling me, and fuck I can smell her skin. I bite back a moan and freeze, cupping her face.

“What?” she asks, her gaze searching mine, looking for something, but I don't know how to do things like this.

I just want *her*.

“I want to fuck you forever,” I say without thinking.

“Romance at its best.” She huffs out a laugh and moves away to grab a pop.

I exhale and sit up. “I don't know how to say shit.”

She gives me a smile, and I stand up and look at her wall of Post-it notes, moving over the colors. She put a shitload of thought into it, working through her breakup.

I think about Willow, and all the letters I've written her.

“I had a girlfriend once, you know. Willow. She died in a car wreck right after my mom passed away.” The words just come out, and I feel a profound sense of relief.

Sugar freezes, her pop halfway to her mouth. I can feel her rapt attention, the heavy silence.

I hold myself taut. “She left a party because she was angry with me.”

“God, Z, that’s terrible.”

Emotion clogs at my throat and I blink rapidly. “I blame myself.” I rub my chest, touching the ache that’s building. “She was my first...” I stop and my hands clench. I look around the room, purposely not looking at her. “I ruined her life and look how good mine is. Look at...everything I have.” My voice is weird, and I clear my throat to cover it up.

Sugar moves and is standing behind me, her arms around my middle. “Accidents happen, Z.”

I drag my hands briskly over my face. I don’t know where this is coming from, because I never talk to girls like this and tell them about Willow, but my insides feel like I’m ripping them out. I have to get this out—or at least part of it. “She was a year younger than me, and I wanted us to work, but I was going off to college. We were going through some relationship stuff, and that night I was late to the party because I was out running in the park, just working shit out in my head, trying to figure out how to tell her—tell her parents—” My voice breaks, my scalp tingling. “She...she was pregnant.” I’ve never told anyone that but my family and hers. A cold sweat breaks out and the room spins. The oxygen is gone and I can’t breathe.

I tear at my neck, ripping off my T-shirt and throwing it on the floor.

“Z?”

Her voice is far away and my heart pounds, heavy and loud like a sledgehammer, and I’m sitting on her bed, holding my head in my hands. I breathe slowly in and out, and she’s next to me, her hand on my arm, fingers tracing the outline of my dragon.

“I’m sorry.” I push the words out on a gasp.

Her eyes widen. “Don’t be. What’s going on?”

“Panic attack. Not a bad one.”

“What do I do?” She frowns. “Tell me.”

“Just keep touching me, please,” I say. “Don’t...stop.” I need her next to me and I don’t even know why, but if she were to get up and walk away from me right now, I might flip out.

She leans in and does as I asked, continuing to trace the shape of my tattoo, across my left shoulder and down my back. I close my lids.

In and out. In and out.

I think about teaching her to skate, about her in my arms and how good it was. I told her to not be afraid to fall... because I’m falling for her...so hard.

Several minutes pass and gradually, my heart slows to a pace that’s halfway normal.

“Do you want some water?”

I take her hand. “Don’t get up.”

“Want to tell me about these attacks?” She touches my face, tracing my jawline, so sweet and gentle.

I exhale and tell her about the episode when we played Minnesota-Duluth. I explain how I lied to the media. “I’m worried Nashville will figure it out and ditch me. Can you imagine how they’re going to feel when they find out their number one pick has mental issues?”

I hear her thinking. “Are these episodes because of Willow?”

I shake my head. “The truth is, I’ve always been wired tight—maybe it just comes from being the best—and things get to me pretty quick. In the past, I was able to just push it away, but now, I think, really, this might just be *me* forever.” I pause, watching her expression. “I’m seeing a therapist. That’s why I haven’t been in class.”

“I see.” She kisses my forehead. “I’m glad.”

“I think with the NHL looming, I’m losing my cool, but my guilt somehow makes it worse. If she’d lived, I’d be a dad

right now.”

She grows still, and my breathing deepens, worried. She’s seeing it all, all the ugly, awful parts of me, but I can’t stop talking.

“Maybe I deserve the panic attacks. It’s like God saying, *You can’t have the NHL because you ruined her life.*”

“You can’t blame yourself.”

“That’s like telling the night not to be black.” My voice cracks.

She’s got her entire body wrapped around mine, her legs thrown over my thighs, and she alternates between rubbing my scalp and tracing the dragon on my skin. She toys with the medallion around my neck.

I turn to face her, and her eyes are bright with unshed tears.

“Don’t cry for me.”

She shakes her head. “Ignore me and just keep talking. Tell me about Willow.”

I freeze, and here it is—the opportunity. I swallow. “She was pretty and outgoing. She wanted to move to Hollywood and be an actress. Everyone loved her because she lit up a room when she walked into it.” My hands clench in my lap, trying to work up the nerve to finish.

Sugar holds my gaze, sincerity there. “I’m sorry.”

I close my eyes. Sugar has a way of saying the simplest things and they are just right. She doesn’t have to elaborate.

I ease down to lie back on her bed, and several minutes go by as we hold each other. My head—shit, my brain is urging me to tell her the one thing I’m holding back, the one thing that’s going to slay her when she finds out...

But maybe she’ll never know, I think as my hand rests on her stomach, flicking her belly ring.

“Z,” she whispers huskily as she squirms under my hands, her voice breathy. “I’m not sure if this is the right time, but...”

I flip over until she's underneath me and I'm lying between her legs, my jeans already tight.

She's pliant, her skin soft as silk as I remove her camisole and expose her breasts. Soft and round and creamy, they quiver as she breathes, her gaze daring me to take what I want.

I trace my fingers over the outline of her face and kiss her, my tongue dueling with hers, dancing and sparring until the past is gone, until all I see in my head is her. "Fucking you is everything."

"Poetry, Z. Pure poetry." She gives me a hot look and licks her upper lip, and I groan and take her mouth again as she says, "Fuck me. Please."

"I love it when you talk like that. I'll never get enough." I suck on her tits, palming them. "I had a physical after my anxiety attack. I'm clean. Are you on something?"

"I'm on the pill, and I'm also disease-free." She bites her lip. "I got tested after I broke up with Bennett."

"Don't say his name," I growl and shove down my jeans and fight with them until they're finally at my feet. I give them a good kick off to the floor.

Looking back at her with her blonde hair everywhere, my body quakes, throbbing with desire.

"Julia's working," she says as I slide my hand inside her shorts and find her pussy dripping wet.

"Too bad. That closet was hot," I say, watching her squirm under my touch. She's writhing, biting her lip, and her tits bounce as she moves her hips to keep up with my finger moving into her.

I can't breathe for the thought of my bare dick inside her. Fuck, this intensity with her is scary, so new, and what if I do it wrong? What if I messed up already from the get-go with my lie of omission?

"What's wrong?" she says, and I come back and kiss her.

"I don't want to scare you, but I want you rough." I bite my bottom lip on purpose and give her a heavy-lidded look. I

know she likes it. “I want to hold you down so you can’t move. I want to make you come hard while I fuck you...”

Her eyes dilate.

I suck her nipples, moving from one to the other.

“I like it.” She moans as I bite down. “Do it. Do whatever you want, but I refuse to use coconuts as a safe word.”

My cock jerks and I laugh.

“Put your hands up around the headboard,” I say, and she does, excitement flashing across her face. Naked, I get up and dig around in her closet, find the scarf, and tie her wrists to the bed. Slowly, I pull her underwear off and suck in a deep breath as I take her in, her body open and ready. My hand drifts down her skin, from the curve of her beautiful face to the tips of her toes. She vibrates and groans when I stroke inside her.

“Z...”

“Shhh, don’t say anything. Don’t move. Just let me make you come.”

She blushes and nods, seeming to get that I need dark and rough and different and then...then...she will always be mine. I don’t know why I think that, it’s just that she’s so ready for anything I want. I don’t normally engage in sex like this, but I’ve always wanted to, and when it’s with her, it means trust. She trusts me and that means something to her.

I see the openness on her face, a transparency that makes me want to shout to the world. She knows about my anxiety and she doesn’t think any differently of me.

“Just tell me if you want me to stop,” I say as I get on the bed. I push her legs together and up to her chest, parting them just a little as I position her upper thighs until they rest against her torso. It’s a confining position, but she allows the awkwardness.

“Feel like a pretzel?”

She nods.

“I’ll make it feel good,” I growl.

“I know.”

Kneeling over her, I turn her hips so they're pointed to the wall. I hold her prisoner with one forearm on top of her then crouch down, turn, and run my tongue over her sex, the folds pink and stretched and open to me. I lap at her, the taste perfect as I tongue her clit. She gasps and squirms against my mouth.

“I could spend all night in this one spot,” I say. “I've thought about you every day since the Kappa party. I sit in my classes dreaming of ways to fuck you, how to make you come, how to make sure you never want anyone but me.”

She moans.

“I think about how much I want to teach you everything you don't know, and I want to erase every guy from your head.” The fingers of my free hand explore her sex, working her until she's gasping. “You're mine and I want...”

Her—so goddamn much that it terrifies me.

She arches her hips for more but can't really move. Her tits are under her folded legs, but my insistent finger reaches up and finds her nipple, pinches it, tugging it down. She groans, her face reddening as I alternate between her breasts and tonguing her sex from top to bottom. My thumb traces the outline of her rosebud, tapping and using the wetness to dip inside. She's hot and gasping, her head tossing on the pillow.

My eyes take in her every nuance, the little things I've come to expect when we're together, the warm scent of her skin, the way her hair gets in her eyes and she blows it away, the way her body hitches when I touch her pussy. I lick her again and suck her clit into my mouth. Her name is a litany on my lips as I play with her, and I tell her how beautiful she is and how much I love how she tastes. She lets out a deep groan and comes, her body barely able to move as she spasms, clenching around my fingers.

I rise up and hover over her, my arm pressing her down on the bed. “Hang on.”

My cock pushes inside her and goes to the hilt, her sheath slick and sweet, earth-shatteringly tight with her legs pressed together. “So perfect.”

She pants, her body quivering.

I come back out and slide right back in, picking up the pace, my free hand kneading her hip and pinching her nipple as I fuck her, and it’s all me because she can’t move. I hold nothing back, pistoning in and out until the bed scoots on the floor, giving her everything I have left from the deluge of emotions we’ve built up in these past weeks.

My fingers dig into her skin, and the sounds of our sex and her pleading moans build and build, and I feel the tingles in my spine as my hips hit a deep, sweet spot that makes me tremble.

“Z,” she calls out as her body clenches around mine again, and my length hardens, expanding.

I don’t want to come. Not yet. I want to keep taking her, owning her. I love the control. I love that she’s looking at me like I’m her whole world.

I swivel my hips in, going deeper and her lashes flutter against her cheek.

“Z,” she moans, her hands gripping the bedpost.

I lean down and take her mouth and her tongue sucks mine and that’s all it takes. Sweat drips from my face as I roar my release and collapse on top of her then quickly roll away, not wanting to squash her. I reach up and untie her hands, and neither of us speaks, only a quiet hush in the room along with our bellowing breaths. I lean over and look at her outstretched legs, and her skin is tinged red from where my forearms pressed against her. I touch them softly and kiss the lines. I work my eyes over her body, seeing fingerprint marks on her hips and breasts. I lick her nipple.

“Will it bruise?” she asks.

I look up at her. “I don’t know.” I’ve never held a girl down before.

“I’m up for more,” she says, and I huff out a laugh, not knowing how to tell her that doing this with her is the most intimate experience I’ve had with a girl.

I kiss each mark and crawl back to where she’s lying on the pillows. I lie down and she rolls over, easing into my embrace as if she’s done it a hundred times. I rock us, I don’t know why, and I kiss her, exploring the warm recesses of her mouth as if she were a fine piece of china.

Finally it’s her who breaks the silence. “Z...is it...is it always like this with you?”

“Look at me.”

She does.

“Let me set this straight in case there’s any question about how many girls I’ve had or this whole girl-of-the-month thing that keeps popping up. It’s a rumor people like to perpetuate because of who I am. I date girls and we break up and I really don’t think about them much again. This isn’t that. You aren’t them. Never in a million years.”

She kisses me.

And shit, the world is golden.

SUGAR



“Movie drinking games. Wahoo,” I say as I toss back the sip of tequila Z poured for me earlier. We’re standing in his kitchen, barely keeping our hands off each other as everyone—a few of his friends plus Taylor and Poppy—waits in the den. Tonight we’re mixing our worlds together, and we’re laughing about how interesting it’s going to be.

He grins and leads me back into the den. My eyes run over him, taking in the broad shoulders, long legs, and blond hair. He looks relaxed and I feel a burst of joy.

He turns and takes a sip of his water, watching me too, and I shiver as I think about the things we do to each other.

There’s no denying it—we have this whole *when I see you, I want to get naked with you* thing going on, and it’s intense and I’m giving in to all of it. I’ve never wanted a man this much. I’ve never given over so much control, and while a small kernel of me is scared, I don’t care. I’ve pushed my reservations aside for now and just...going with it.

Over the past weeks, February arrived and now it’s almost March, and he spends more time at my place than his. During the day we barely see each other because he runs, goes to class, goes to hockey, and then does more training. Toss in three days of therapy and he’s a busy guy. I’m still popping in at Mara’s in the mornings and grabbing an early night shift here and there tending bar.

But the late nights in my bed...

I'm his.

I own his darkness.

Tonight is Sunday, the guys are fresh from a win on the road, and I haven't seen him since Friday when they left. My body is craving his.

"Get your drinks ready. Who's ready for movie games?" Z says to the small group of people dotted around the den.

They all clap or shout.

Eric is on the couch with Eleanor, a cute girl with bouncy brown hair and a bright smile. Boone is here too, and he keeps giving Z awestruck looks. A pretty girl sits next to him, another freshman, but Boone's all about his hero. Poppy is on his other side, and I see the heated side-eye she gives him, but I don't think he notices. Taylor is sitting on a kitchen chair he pulled from the kitchen. Looking fabulous as usual in royal blue skinny jeans and a cream cashmere sweater that contrasts beautifully with his brown skin, he's all about the man candy, eyes wide, a pleased look on his face as he talks to everyone. Brice, another hockey player, is kicked back in the recliner. I haven't been around him much, but he's familiar from the games I've been watching on TV.

I still haven't made it to a home game, mostly because I've had to work or study. The closer it gets to law school—even though I technically don't have one to go to yet—the more I'm pinching every penny. I'm not taking the inheritance from my father. Mara says I'm being stubborn, says I'm letting my pride get in the way, and maybe she's right. I'd be the first to admit I'm a stubborn person, but when I think back to my childhood, all I see is him not wanting me. I don't need his money to build a life. *I don't*. I've been fine all these years without his help, so why start now?

"What's the movie we're drinking to?" Eric asks, bringing me back.

"*Thor: Ragnarok*, one of my favorites," Z says. "As you may know, there's a strong resemblance between us."

“Boo, hiss.” Eric picks up a glass of vodka he poured earlier. “I’m the Viking here.” He pops up and does some air guitar. Completely random. Poppy’s eyes are wide as saucers. Taylor claps.

Z points at him. “For disagreeing with the game person, you must drink!”

“Bold words from someone who’s only drinking water,” Boone says with a grin.

Z slaps him on the back. “That’s so I can play the best hockey in the world.”

“You’re my Thor,” says Eleanor next to Eric, and he gives her a kiss on the cheek.

Z clears his throat. “Okay, here are the rules: we all have to drink when there’s a fight scene, something explodes, there’s a reference to another Marvel movie, Stan Lee pops up for a cameo, or Thor smiles like the sonofabitch he is. Got it?”

“Who determines the winner?” I ask, relaxing into the loveseat, leaving plenty of room for him to join me.

“We don’t usually have a winner, just bragging rights for whoever is able to keep up the longest,” says Eric. “But if you win, you get to pick the next movie.”

“Done!” I say. “Next time we should do a romantic comedy.”

Boone groans.

“Yes! *You’ve Got Mail* is my favorite! Next weekend,” Poppy says.

I smile. “My future boyfriend will love to watch those movies with me.”

“I’m your boyfriend,” Z quips. “No future about it.”

“I want to see Z watch a rom-com,” Eric says with a snort, and Boone spits his drink out.

Z leans over and kisses me square on the lips. “I’ll watch it with you.”

“Pussy-whipped,” Eric calls, and Z gives him a glare.

“Language, dude. We have ladies present.”

Eric stands and gives us a bow, apologizing very dramatically.

When Z gets up to dim the lights, Eric leans over and gives me a fist bump. “Nice to have you around, babe. I won’t say too much because your man is so jealous of me and my awesomeness he can barely stand it.”

“Stop whispering in my girl’s ear,” Z says, but there’s really no heat there. He plops down next to me and tosses an arm around my shoulders.

Eric holds his hands up. “All we talk about is you.”

“Uh-huh,” Z says. “I know how you work, pulling them in with all the banter and then you pounce.”

“Whatever.” Eric laughs. “But I’m glad to have you back at the house. Been missing your sorry face at night. Long John Silver has even been trying to sleep with me. Crazy cat.”

“I like Sugar’s company better.”

“I bet.” Eric waggles his eyes.

“Watch it,” Z says, his hand on my nape.

Eric leans his head back toward the back of the house where Reece’s bedroom is. “You’ve left me here alone with Reece and Veronica. Not fun.”

“He’ll figure her out soon,” Z says, his expression hardening.

I think back to earlier when Reece and Veronica came in, mumbled brief hellos, and headed to his bedroom. I guess they’ll end up at the Kappa party later, but Z and these guys aren’t going. Those parties create anxiety for Z, and it’s one of the things he’s eliminated.

I don’t want him to eliminate his brother, though. I’m worried about it, trying to put my finger on where it stems from, besides Veronica. It’s deeper than that. At least she’s

avoiding me. After the flower incident, Z told her not to ever speak to me or she'd never be welcome at his house again.

Later, after much giggling and fun, the movie ends, and it's still early enough that we decide to crank up the music and dance. Boone pulls out his phone, hooks it up to Z's speakers, and Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" throbs in the room. Not exactly a great dance song, so they try to lip sync instead.

Z and I sit on the loveseat and watch our friends. I lean my head on his shoulder and he pulls me closer.

"They'd make a pretty good cover band," he says.

"Taylor would be an awesome Freddy Mercury." The guy in question preens as he struts across the room.

Z leans down and kisses me for several moments, his lips soft and sweet. After a while, he pulls back and pushes a strand of hair out of my face, his forehead against mine. "Boone and Poppy disappeared, by the way."

"What? They were just here," I say, looking around the room.

"I caught them leaving out of the corner of my eye."

Sure enough, neither of them are anywhere to be found, leaving Taylor, Eric, Eleanor, the other girl, and Brice dancing. "Where did they go?"

Z grins. "Bathroom, I think. Maybe the garage." He gives me a smirk. "It's a great spot." His fingers slip under the shoulder of the red sweater I'm wearing, toying with my bra strap. "We can sneak off too."

He bites that lower lip, and I feel myself melting.

"What do you have in mind?"

"You on your stomach with me behind you," he whispers in my ear, the scruff from his beard sliding deliciously against my neck.

"What else?"

"I'll take you real slow at first, but your pussy is so sweet and wet and I'll want you hard. I'll want to tie your hands to

the bedposts and push your legs together when I fuck you.” His grey eyes find mine, smoky with heat.

Hell yeah. I stand up, legs shaky. “I’m ready when you are.”

He stands and laces our hands together then we walk out of the room, leaving them to their party.

In his room, he pulls my hair out of its ponytail and arranges it over my shoulders. Moving excruciatingly slow, he slips my sweater over my head and drops it. His gaze darkens, tracing the lines of my pale pink lace bra. His fingers turn me around and I feel the heat of his gaze on my back.

“Is it irrational that every time I see this, I’m pissed at the guy who saw your bare back to give you this tattoo?” he says as his lips brush my shoulder.

“No.” I love how greedy he is for me.

His kisses are soft and achingly tender as he rubs my shoulders, his hands caressing as he touches my chest from behind, not quite in the places I want him, but just enough to keep me squirming. He removes my bra and cups my breasts, making me gasp. I’m pushing at my leggings and underwear and kicking them across the room.

He chuckles at my rush and leads me over to the bed. “Lie on your stomach.”

I do, keeping my head turned so I can see him undress. He watches me watch him, his movements languid and slow as he takes his shirt off. I bite my lip at the sculpted muscles there, the rock-hard abs that lead down to the deep V at his hips. He unzips his pants and pushes them down.

Stalking toward me, he passes by his nightstand and clicks the light off, and for a second, I see a flash of something desolate on his features as he looks at the piece of furniture. Then he blinks and shuts it down.

“Z? You okay?” I prop myself up on my arms.

He gets in next to me on the bed, and my hands take his face, soothing the lines there. He sighs. “Yeah. Just…”

sometimes...I don't know." His grey eyes search mine as if he wants to say more, wants to tell me something.

Instead he kisses me and moves behind me until I'm forgetting that lost look on his face. I'm a limp mess by the time he's massaged his way to my arms and fingers, giving the most finite attention to each body part.

"Do you have any idea how lovely you are?" he says, and something in his voice gets to me. I toss my head back and look at him, and I don't think he meant for me to do so because there's a scared expression on his face.

"What is it?" I turn around more.

He swallows, his throat bobbing. A long breath is released from his chest. "Nothing."

I turn and crawl to him and kiss him. His arms come around me and hold me tight, so tight, and we kiss until I can't think, until that expression I saw on his face is gone. Soon, his hands are pushing me down to my stomach and he's tying me up and I'm breathing hard, waiting for him to make me his...

And that's all we know for a long time.



IT'S hours later when something wakes me up.

My eyes open and blink around the room, getting my bearings as I try to figure out what happened. It's still dark outside, but my body feels as if it must be close to dawn.

There's a groan next to me where Z is flailing around on the bed, his legs jerking. Loud bellows come from him, and I give him a gentle shake.

"Z, you're having a bad dream." I keep my voice low, not wanting to startle him, but he doesn't hear me. My hand touches his shoulder. "Z...wake up."

He flinches, his eyes shooting open wide as he jumps straight out of bed and blinks rapidly.

"It's me," I say, getting up and putting my feet on the floor. Feeling around in the dim light, I grab my glasses that I set on

a chair next to the bed last night. I see one of his HU T-shirts and my underwear so I snatch those up and slide them on too.

He just stands there, looking dazed, his chest heaving.

“You’re shaking,” I say as I walk over and click the lamp that’s on his nightstand.

He blinks at the light.

Fear pricks at me when I see the pain on his face.

“Bad dream?” I ask. *Willow?* is the question on the tip of my tongue, but I don’t bring her up. We’ve spoken about his nightmares, but he’s never had one with me. I have a morbid curiosity about them, but mostly, I haven’t asked. He keeps things to himself, and I trust he’ll tell me everything eventually.

He seems to come to, his eyes focusing as he looks at his phone. “It’s four.”

“That’s super early. Let’s go back to bed.”

An agonized expression crosses his face. “I can’t. Once I’m awake...it won’t get out of my head...” He stops and rubs his jaw.

I sigh, nodding. I pad into the kitchen and head to the sink, fill a glass with water, and take it back to him. He’s sitting on the bed when I return, his head bowed in his hands.

I put the cup in his hands and he blinks at it, as if he forgot I was here, and then he takes a sip and puts it down on the nightstand.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” With a heavy breath, he stands and snatches up last night’s clothes. He puts them in a hamper then goes to his dresser, picking out new clothes. “I’m getting out of here for a while.”

“Where?”

“For a run.” He pulls on a long-sleeved black running shirt and athletic pants.

“The sun isn’t even up.” I know he runs early, but I’m here today and that hasn’t happened before.

“I’ll wear a reflective vest.” He pulls on socks and then shoes, tying the laces harshly. “It clears my head.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” I mean, I can’t skate worth shit, but I can run, and for some reason, I don’t want him to be alone. “I have some clothes and shoes in my car that might work, and if you give me a jacket—”

“No,” is his swift reply. He pauses and brushes his eyes over me. “Look, I’m sorry to leave you, but I want to be alone. You can stay as long as you like. At least your truck is here.”

My fingers pluck at the edge of his shirt, which falls to mid-thigh. “When are you coming back?”

He grabs a knit hat from a dresser drawer. “Later. I’ll probably head straight to the gym and get in a workout and shower. Then I have class, and then...” He stops and stares at me, a frown on his face. “It’s getting to be crunch time with our games, Sugar. I’ve got to keep up the work and keep everything cool. No stress. Feel me?”

I frown. He likes to do things a certain way because it helps him feel more focused. Still, I’m left winded by his easiness at leaving me, especially since I didn’t see him all weekend.

I feel a prick of fear.

Something awful and terrible feels right around the corner, but I just don’t know what it is.

“Sure.”

Then he’s brushing his lips against mine and he’s out the door, closing it behind him. I hear him going out the front of the house, and I plop down back on the bed. “He didn’t even say bye,” I tell Long John Silver when she jumps up beside me. She hisses, stalks off, and claws at the door until I reopen it and let her out.

I mumble under my breath as I dig around on the floor for my pants. There’s no way I can go back to sleep, and maybe I

need my own space.

After going to his bathroom to fix my hair, I shove my arms in my coat and walk out of his door. I turn the corner to the kitchen and see Reece sitting at the table in a pair of leopard print underwear. His face is...weird...and I don't think he sees me, so I clear my throat.

"Don't mind me. On my way out," I say politely.

He jerks his face toward me in the hallway and flinches when our eyes meet. "He woke me up."

"He went for a run," I say, stopping in front of him.

I see an expression on his face, perhaps pity. He shakes his head as if clearing it and narrows his gaze at me. "Do you know where he runs after a nightmare?"

I do, sort of, but I keep my mouth shut. Z likes his privacy.

His gaze is unwavering. "He goes to see where she's buried."

My nose flares.

"You should ask him more questions, you know."

"Like what?" I stand there, waiting, feeling that trickle of foreboding inch up my spine.

"Have you ever seen a photo of Willow?"

"No."

"She was beautiful."

He plays with the HU Lions salt and pepper shaker set on the table, his eyes staring out the bay window next to the table. "I was in love with her, you know. Sometimes I thought it was reciprocated, but you could never tell with her. She'd string me along when she and Z would fight, and I always held out hope..." He stops and grimaces. "She kissed me the night she died, but it was a pissed-off, getting back at Z thing. My lips were the last ones to touch hers." He stares down at the table, the salt shaker in his grip. "She was going to have his baby, but I would have done anything to have her as mine."

I blink, struggling to keep up. Does Z know all this? Is this why they aren't close?

“You're nothing like her,” he grinds out. “I mean, sure you —”

He stops, his lids closing.

My heart drops. I keep my mouth shut and wait. Just wait.

“I hear him thrashing around in there, reliving that night. He...I...we saw her on the rocks. She was thrown from her car.”

Dread gathers within me and questions teeter on my lips, but I know this isn't an appropriate time. “I'm sorry.” No other words are adequate. None. “Maybe you should talk to Z.”

He flinches, his eyes coming back to me. Anger colors his face as he takes me in and opens his mouth to say something but then presses his lips together.

“What?”

He glares at me. “I wish you would go away. You remind me of...everything.”

His words are like bullets and my chest clenches, trying to make sense of them. I tug my coat around me, feeling cold even in this warm house. I shake my head, not knowing how to respond. He's grieving, obviously still working through something, and I can't argue with that right now.

I walk past him to the front door and open it. A sharp, crashing sound breaks the silence as I shut the door. The salt shaker, presumably.

ZACK



I'm doing some early pre-game skating with our team at Concord State University, one of the schools in our conference. They're a smaller university with a string of recent losses, and we're here to kick ass and take names. Every game is a priority, though, especially since we're in the same conference, and a few local reporters and photographers are in the stands already, watching and taking notes. I felt the heat of their scrutiny as soon as I took the ice. An agent from the Predators flew in today, Stan Wilcox, and I spoke to him briefly on the way to the locker room. He congratulated me on our last wins, slapped me on the back, and told me how excited he was to see me in Nashville this summer. He wants to have a quick dinner with me tonight.

Dread pooled the moment I saw him, especially when he asked about my bout with the flu when we lost to Minnesota-Duluth.

I lied through my teeth, told him some bullshit about how I need to get the flu shot next year. I'm sure I'm breaking all kinds of rules by not disclosing the entire truth about my mental health—

Yeah. Don't want to go there.

I inhale a slow breath and let it out.

He's here to see what his team is getting. I need a great game tonight.

I do some warm-ups and shake out my limbs, trying to lose this sense of foreboding, but there's an edge in the air,

something itching to crawl out. Part of this apprehension is because I haven't done the right thing by Sugar. I haven't told her the truth about how she looks like Willow, and the more I fall for her, the more I'm fucking terrified of telling her and losing her.

Stop your whining, I tell myself.

It's been a good few weeks. I'm in control of my body. I've got this.

Eric skates over for passing drills, just enough to get us loose, and we line up in formation. He slaps one to me, and I nearly fall trying to go for it, overextending my reach.

I exhale and roll my shoulders.

"What's wrong with you?" he says a few minutes later when I miss another pass.

"Nothing," I snap.

Reece skates around us, watching, and I see the lowered brow on his face through the shield of his helmet. He had his eyes on me the entire bus ride up here. At one point we pulled over at a rest stop for a break, and he came up to me and said he wanted to talk about Willow, but one of the coaches interrupted us, and I stalked away.

I get it—he doesn't want Sugar around. Maybe she reminds him too much of Willow. Maybe he really is worried about me and how I'm juggling a new relationship and hockey.

But he isn't me, and I make my own damn decisions.

I scowl, not even cognizant of where I'm going when I bump into one of the defensemen on the ice and my stick falls out of my hands. I curse and snatch it up.

The sound system kicks up with a loud pop song, shattering the general quietness of the rink and my body flinches, missing a pass from Reece.

"Wake up, asshole," he calls out.

Asshole?

Anger flares and I glide over to him, getting in his face, my fingers in his chest. “Do you see this C on my jersey? Don’t fuck with me, brother. I’m just here to play a game. Don’t bring your prissy ass out here and talk shit when you and I both know this isn’t about my practice.” I give him a glare and push off, skating away.

Eric has his mouth open. Coach crosses his arms. My gaze goes to the stands and Stan is there, watching.

I keep going. *Just keep going...*

I exhale and touch my chest where I know the necklace is around my neck. I’ve started wearing it during games, hoping it can bring me some kind of calm.

Another group of people with badges file into the arena. More reporters. I skate past where they’re setting up and several of them call out my name. It feels as if the media scrutiny gets more intense with each game we win, fighting our way closer to a championship.

One of them is ballsy enough to wave me over, and I grimace.

“How are you, Z? You know me, remember?” she calls out, giving me a big smile. She’s practically jumping up and down, and she is vaguely familiar. After a few ticks, I recognize her as one of the reporters from ESPN who follow our team. She’s from Minneapolis and covers all our home games, so there’s a bit of a history there, which is why I can’t ignore her and just skate off.

“Great,” I call back. *Please go away.*

But she doesn’t. She’s still waving for me to come in closer.

My teeth grind. I really want to just skate, but it’s nowhere near game time, so obligation tugs at me. I glide over to where she’s standing on the carpet.

“You nervous about tonight’s game?” She’s got her phone out, fingers poised and ready to take notes. “My opinion is the Bears don’t have a shot against the Lions. What do you say?”

I look at her. “Never take any team for granted. Anything can happen.”

“May I take some pictures?” She’s not even looking at me, just pulls up her phone and clicks away while I stand there. One of the photographer guys is behind her, probably with her, and he’s clicking away too.

My head hurts and I frown.

She moves her phone. “Can I get one of you and Eric together? And then Reece? The three amigos, right?”

“Uh...”

She smiles and flutters long lashes, and I swear she sticks her boobs out more and her voice gets all breathy. “I think it’s cool that you were drafted and yet you chose to finish college.”

“Yeah.”

She nods, her gaze going past me and following someone on the ice. “How does Reece handle not being drafted?”

“I don’t speak for him. Ask him yourself.” I scowl, trying to think of a way out of this little interrogation, but I don’t see one.

Eric must read my body language because he skates over to where we are. He gives me a long look then gives her a broad smile.

“Eric! Just stand there, yeah,” she says as he leans in next to me for a picture. She takes a few shots. “Can you get Reece? A shot of you three together for tomorrow’s *Tribune* would be stellar.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her no, but then I see Stan a few feet away, watching us with keen eyes and probably imagining I’m racking up reporter points when really all I want is to get away.

Or maybe he’s wondering if I’m even worth having on their team.

I’m not worth it.

My gut twists.

I'm a bag of shit for what I did to Willow—

Stop! I shake off the negative thought.

The reporter is still asking questions, waving now and then to get Reece's attention.

Eric looks over at me, dropping the arm that was around my shoulder for the pictures. His mouth is turned down. "Dude. You need a break."

"I'm fine."

"Reece," she's saying again, waving, but it's clear he's ignoring her. I can't really blame him when all they want to do is talk about me or ask him why he's not on the same level.

She looks back at us, batting those lashes. "Looks like he's busy. Can I get some video of you two messing around with the puck? Just one?"

My arm is starting to tingle and my chest feels tight.

"Sure, babe," says Eric, giving me a slap on the back. "Focus. Let's do a drill for this nice lady."

My lips compress. "Don't tell me to focus. I know what I need to do."

He stiffens. "Dude..."

"Z and Eric? The video?" calls the reporter.

My teeth snap. *Enough.* "No," I say to her then skate off toward an exit. I step on the carpet, slap on my guards, and walk down the hallway.

"Z! Hey, wait up," says a deep voice behind me, and I don't even have to turn around to know who it is.

I wipe at my face, tucking my gloves under my arms as Stan walks toward me. Dressed in a suit that screams money, he's a former NHL player who retired early with a back injury.

"Sorry, I'm a little off today. Just working the jitters out." I force a smile and try to laugh, but it doesn't sound right.

“I see.” He stops next to me and gives me a critical eye. I know what he thinks he sees: talent and money, his team’s investment.

But...

My heart picks up a notch and that clammy feeling starts a slow rise from my feet to my scalp. My stomach lurches a little, and I feel sweat beading on my face.

I nod as he talks about where I want to eat dinner, but my head isn’t with him. It’s taking all my mental concentration to just...to just...

“...Z?”

I blink.

“Son?”

I lift my hand and wipe at my mouth, pretending like I’m fine, trying to come up with some kind of normal mannerism or response to whatever he’s asking.

His hand is on my shoulder and his brow is furrowed as he looks at me. “Son, you’re shaking.”

I am?

I blink and look down. I look okay. I look fine.

But...

My chest hurts.

I rub at it. “I’m good, sir.”

I don’t know how I get the words out, and I must not do a very good job because he guides me until I’m sitting on a chair. He’s pushing my head down between my legs and barking out orders.

Fuck—ah fuck. Tears, fucking *tears* get clogged up in my throat, and I make this weird sound. *Why is this happening to me?*

I hear people running around me. I hear Coach and Eric and Reece.

I'm coming apart, falling down a deep hole of not being in control of my body.

It's not working. None of that shit I did is working.

Why is my brain jacked up?

I have everything.

I have *her*.

Yet guilt eats at me. Dark thoughts hammer inside my head, telling me I don't deserve happiness.

I put my hands to my face. No matter what I do to make myself better, there's a flaw so cavernous, so deep in the recesses of my mind that nothing will ever be able to repair it.

Her body on the rocks.

My baby inside her.

My fault.

My face is wet, but I can't stop, can't stop, can't stop, can't stop.

SUGAR



I keep checking my phone hoping to hear from Z, but he hasn't texted or called all day. *He's at the game, I reassure myself again. He said he'd call you when it's over.*

Fine. I feel off, but Taylor's giggle brings me back.

I'm curled up in my bed while he braids my hair and Poppy paints her fingernails at my desk. An empty box of pizza sits on top of the TV, an empty bottle of Prosecco beside it.

"Girl. You look like a Viking princess with this crown braid," Taylor says, handing me a small mirror so I can see his handiwork. I twist and turn my head. "Just right for a big old strapping Viking warrior," he adds with a grin.

Poppy wails. "I want a Viking warrior."

Taylor stands up in his bright red skinny jeans and Sex Pistols T-shirt and does a pirouette. "Just tell me which hockey player you want, and I'll put a bug in his ear, love. I'll go to one of those games and hold up a big sign for you and pay someone to put it on the jumbotron. *Call Poppy. She's a goody two-shoes but wants some stick. She might clutch her pearls, but she'll love every minute.*" He gives her a smirk. "By the way, what happened with you and Boone?"

She turns beet red. "Nothing. We kissed and that was it."

"Come on," I say. "Really?"

She shrugs. “Actually the hockey guys kind of scare me. I need a nice, quiet Viking.”

Taylor points a finger at her. “No, you need someone who isn’t like you at all. You need someone to teach you the mighty ways of the sword, grasshopper, and by sword, I mean stick, and by stick, I mean dick.”

Laughing, I get up off the bed to dig around for another bottle of Prosecco in the closet. “Girls, girls, stop bickering. Obviously, we need more alcohol.”

Before long, I’m pouring us all new glasses of wine as I retell the story of Frat Boy and Pixie Girl. Taylor has started what he calls his FBPG Watch where he takes random photos of students on campus and then texts them to me, hoping he’s found them. They are nowhere.

“I wonder if he got rid of the clap,” Poppy muses, and we burst out laughing just as Julia walks in the door, still wearing her silver corset and tight bikini bottoms—with no coat. *Shit*. Her hair is sticking up in crazy directions, and she looks like she’s been mauled.

My eyes widen from my side of the room and I stand up. “Hey. Uh, is everything okay?”

“No.” With a tight headshake, she tries to keep her face averted from us, but I see dried tear tracks on her cheeks.

I frown. It takes a lot to get her to cry.

Taylor and Poppy have both come out of their slouched positions, and I quickly reintroduce them. Julia and I have become...well, maybe a little bit closer since she started working at BB’s.

“Gah, I look horrible,” she says breathlessly, her voice a bit shaky as she looks in the mirror and wipes at the mascara under her eyes. “I don’t even care.” Her shoulders slump.

“What happened?” I ask.

She yanks a cheap tiara off her head. “Football team came in tonight and the guy I hooked up with at the Kappa party saw me—” She shakes her head and bites her lip. “He called me a

slut then got into a fight with one of the suits who was sticking money in my bikini.”

“Dude,” Taylor and Poppy say at the same time, sucked in.

“Can’t a girl just strip and not be called names for it?” Julia grits her teeth. “It’s an honest, hard job and I need the money.”

We watch Julia, who’s moved to stand inside her closet, and we hear her yanking clothes around. A sparkly corset and a pair of bottoms come flying out. Glitter goes everywhere.

“It’s the outfit that keeps on giving,” says Taylor.

She comes out dressed in a Snoopy shirt and leggings and curls up on my bed next to us.

Taylor leans in and strokes her hair. “I know we’re not besties—yet—but you gotta tell us the backstory here.”

“How about some Prosecco? Or Patron Silver?” I ask.

“Both.”

Okay.

I’m getting her drinks and she’s talking, telling them about the quarterback she met at the Kappa house. She picks up a brush on the bed and yanks at her hair, silver and pink glitter falling from the strands. “The worst part is, I think Mara might fire me. Parker—that’s the quarterback—he was throwing tables, breaking glass, and punching shit—”

I grimace. “Julia, he’s a drunk asshole. That’s not your fault, and she won’t fire you for it.”

“I’m not sure he was trashed.” She shakes her head. “What’s ironic about the whole damn thing is there was a girl with him, and just because I dumped him and never called him back, he thinks he has the right to get angry. Men are such fucking douchebags. Football players can suck it.”

“You’re my hero,” Poppy says, her eyes wide.

“I like you,” Taylor says, eyeing Julia’s long sleek brown hair. “Would you let me French braid your hair?”

She looks at my hair. “Did I interrupt girls’ night?”

“We’re celebrating,” Taylor says, giving me a nudge. “Sugar inherited a shitload of money, but she isn’t telling anyone, nor does she want to take it. Crazy girl.”

Julia gapes at me, and I shake my head, regretting my decision to tell them about the upcoming will reading in April.

I pop him on the arm. “I haven’t even been to the reading.”

“You’re like an heiress now,” Poppy says.

No. I’m not.

I clear my throat, feeling uncomfortable. “But, I do have good news. I sent out more applications for law school today.”

“Hold on now—what about Vanderbilt? And isn’t that why you and Z are together?” Poppy asks, hands on her hips.

Taylor’s lashes flutter. “Girl, she is with him because she’s crazy about him. There’s no boyfriend bargain going on anymore. That whole thing was a joke.” He laughs at my expression.

“I can’t even argue with that,” I murmur, feeling my face burn.

Poppy frowns. “Are you really giving up on Vandy? I mean, it’s all you’ve talked about since I met you.”

I stare down at my comforter. The truth stings, but I just wasn’t what the admissions committee wanted. While my grades and LSAT score were stellar, my lack of community service and extracurricular activities may have been the reason I was waitlisted. “I’m moving on.”

Poppy is confused. “But Z is willing to go to Nashville with you and meet the dean at that thing...right?”

“At the waitlist event, yes, but perhaps it isn’t fair to everyone else if he’s on my arm.”

“But he really is your boyfriend!” she exclaims.

I take a sip of my drink and think about our written agreement, which is folded up and tucked inside my box of

keepsakes in the closet. I'll always treasure it, but over the past few weeks, the idea of influencing the dean that way has started to feel...unfair.

How would I know if I got in because of Z or on my own merit?

I keep thinking about my mama and something she told me when I was devastated in sixth grade because I wasn't chosen to be in a stupid social club. *You are worthy, and you don't need anyone else to tell you so. Someday you'll face other obstacles, tougher ones, but you must hold your head high and carry on. Be true to you, Sugar, and happiness will come.*

The truth is, the biggest reason for going there was to shove it in my father's family's faces, but I have to let that go. And perhaps, deep down, part of me knew I was grasping at something I never would have been able to follow through with.

But, I did meet Z because of it, and I can't be upset about that.

Poppy, who's been checking the score of the game online, jumps up from her seat. "Guys! HU just posted an update."

I dart over to her. Concord State University is part of our conference and one of the teams we need to beat.

She's reading quickly. "Holy cow. Hawthorne lost by one goal."

A collective sigh of disappointment ripples across the room—except for Julia.

"We were supposed to blow them out of the water." I stand up and click the TV over to the local coverage of hockey, and the first thing I see is the score: Bears 3, Lions 2.

I adjust the volume to hear the commentators.

"It's a disappointed Hawthorne group leaving the arena to head back home. A tough loss indeed as power center and number one draft pick Zack Morgan practiced with the team this morning but didn't come out for the game, and we still have no word on if there was an injury."

A cute brown-haired reporter is on the TV next, a microphone in her hand. “It was a tight game and you could tell the Lions had heart, but losing a key player was just too much. It’s a huge disappointment for the team.” She levels the camera with a serious look. “We aren’t sure if this is related, but questions are being raised, especially since Morgan wasn’t able to finish out a home game against Minnesota-Duluth earlier in the season. A statement from the team said that incident was the flu, but rumors are swirling that tonight it might be something more serious. Some are claiming Zack collapsed.”

I click the TV off and feel the weight of everyone’s gaze.

“Is he okay, Sugar?” This is from Julia.

I look around at each of them, and I know we each have secret hurts, but Z’s is not mine to share. “I don’t know.”

Was it one of his panic attacks?

I’m dashing across the room to find my phone. *Please, let him be okay.* I have my phone out and I’m calling him.

“Hey,” he says, and my eyes close as I step into the bathroom for privacy. His voice is low and I figure he’s on the bus, teammates everywhere. “You saw the news?”

“Yeah. Are you okay?”

A long sigh comes through the speaker. “I couldn’t hold it together, Sugar. Maybe I could have made it...” His unsteady voice tugs at everything inside me. I picture him leaned back against his seat, eyes closed. “I passed out and Coach wouldn’t let me play.”

“What can I do?”

He sighs again. I can hear his deep breaths through the phone and I want to hold him.

“I need you. Just...go to my house and wait for me. Please.”

“Done.”

SUGAR



A while later, after bidding the party in my room farewell, I'm heading to the Krispy Kreme drive-through and getting donuts for the guys. I'm eating one when I pull up to his house and park on the street. Wrangling the box up to the back deck, there's a bounce in my step at the thought of seeing Z, and I'm hoping I can cheer him up. There's a knot of worry in my chest about what happened at the game, but he says he's more centered when I'm around, and I want to be here for him.

I let myself into the house with a key he told me was hidden under a dead plant. It's about ten at night as I open the back door.

Long John Silver flashes by and gives me a mean meow.

I flip on the lights. "Bad cat," I say back at her, but my voice is sweet. She hasn't quite decided if she likes me yet, and I figure it's because Z and I aren't here enough for her to warm up to me.

She looks over her shoulder, gives me a glare, and then stalks off to his bedroom.

But that isn't the only cat in the room.

I flinch when Veronica comes around the corner from the den. *Dammit*. I must have missed her car parked somewhere along the street.

She frowns. "What are you doing here?"

In full makeup and dressed in jeans and a cropped black and gold HU hockey jersey with Reece's number that looks custom-made, she looks a hell of a lot better than I do in my braid, grey joggers, and black sweater. I have zilch makeup on—Z doesn't care for it anyway—except for a swipe of Make Me Hot red lipstick, which I wore especially for him.

“Why are *you* here?”

Her expression is stark. “I'm here to feed the cat—like I always do when the guys are out of town.” She prances around the kitchen in her stilettos and turns to face me at the counter. I eye the knives next to her. I don't think she'd go for one, but there's so much anger that oozes from her that sometimes I wonder. I get that she's the queen of the jersey chasers, but she isn't in charge of me.

“Z asked me to wait for him.”

She raises a brow. “Do you have any clue how many girls meet him here at this house?”

I cross my arms. “None since me.” And I happen to know Z isn't the womanizer people like to say he is. *I know him*. Sure he has the healthy sexual appetite of a twenty-one-year-old male—hell, I love that about him—but she likes to exaggerate this idea of a horde of females being all over him. And I get it. He's the number one draft pick and he's beautiful and women want that, but over these past weeks, I've seen another side of him. The softness blended with the dark, the man who saves cats and puts up with his brother's hateful girlfriend. Is she even his girlfriend? I don't know.

She gloats. “Oh, I'll give you that. You are the one right now, but if you only knew...”

I take a step toward her, and I'm taller, looming over her. “You've been itching to tell me the dirt on Z since the moment we met, but the truth is, I know him.”

“You know about Willow?” I nod and her gaze rakes over me. Then she smiles. “Did he ever tell you what she looked like?”

I frown. He hasn't, but in my head I see her as a young, pretty high school girl who idolized him. I haven't asked too many questions about her appearance because, well, it felt intrusive. "She was beautiful."

She sneers. "She was way more than just beautiful."

My nerves clang at the insinuating tone she uses.

"You should see your face right now."

"I'm going to his room for better company." I walk down the hall.

"If you really want to know what Z sees in you, just open his nightstand drawer," she calls out from behind me as she follows.

"I don't go through people's private things." But I do recall the look on his face when he looked at his nightstand a few days back.

Before I can shut the door, she comes into his room, circling around me until she's standing next to his bed. She sits on the navy duvet, her hand stroking over his pillow, and I want to jump on her, but I grit my teeth instead.

"What do you want, Veronica?"

She looks around the space and laughs. "That night at the Kappa party when he first saw you, it was like you were a ghost, and then he just had to have you."

Ghost?

"So?" I feign boredom.

"Just open the drawer. See what's there and all will be revealed and you can quit being the stupid dumb blonde who thinks the hockey player is falling for her."

A tingle of dread crawls along my spine. "No."

"Fine. Let me do the honors." She leans over with a flippant attitude and pulls the drawer out, her expression lighting up at whatever she sees, and I guess this isn't the first time she's been through his things. She pulls out a small gold box and dumps the contents on his bed. Dozens of folded

yellow pieces of paper fall out along with a lone photograph that floats around and lands near the end of the bed, closest to me. I don't look at it.

"Afraid?" She smiles.

"No. I assume those are the letters he writes to Willow for therapy."

She shakes her head. "It's sick how he's fooled you."

My resolve cracks, but I trust him. *Don't I?*

"Still not curious about those letters?" she asks, running her hands through them.

"No."

"Chicken." With a sigh, as if she doesn't have a care in the world, she plucks one of the letters out of the pile and unfolds it. "Oh, look, this one's dated a week ago. Let's see what he says to her." She clears her throat and begins to read.

"Willow,

Another nightmare. Remember that time we went camping for the weekend with only a tent, a few bottles of water, and a pizza? Reece was determined to spend the entire night, but somehow you talked him into us ditching the whole idea and taking off for Denny's and you ordered an everything omelet without anything in it but cheese. I still laugh about that night. I'm lost here in the real world, yet you're the one who's dead. I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry for doing you wrong. If you were here, my whole life would be different. I love you. Forever, Z."

Her eyes flash up at me. "Wow. He loves her *forever*, and you're just the poor substitute." She grins. "And if she were here, there'd be no you in his life. I find that hilarious."

"He writes those for a reason," I say, maintaining control, but my hands are wrapped around my stomach. *I love you. Forever.* I hang on to the dresser for support. "You shouldn't go through his private things," I manage to say, but my voice is wispy. Weak.

"Maybe." She rummages through the pile and pulls out the photograph. "See anything interesting?"

I know I shouldn't, but I take it from her.

First, I notice how handsome both Z and Reece are, their faces leaner than they are now, vibrant with youth and vitality. The girl...she's small next to them, petite and gorgeous with long hair that's flowing over her shoulders, the color a shimmering white-blonde.

I finger my own hair, taking in her face, the way it curves, the shape of her eyebrows and how they frame her face. That sick feeling inside me grows, spreading.

"It's eerie, right?" Veronica says softly, watching my face. "You could be her sister."

I tear my eyes from the picture and my hands tremble. "We aren't sisters."

"That's the beauty of it," Veronica says, her face triumphant. "How does it feel to be the B team?"

I look down at it again, and my stomach turns. The truth batters at me, even as I try to deny it, but...her hair color, the length, the way our faces are shaped...my hands curl at my sides.

God. What is happening?

I'm falling down a deep, vast hole...

A bitter laugh flows out of her. "You can't compete with her. You can't be better than a dead girl. Trust me, I've tried."

I let the photo fall to his bed, and I turn and make my way to the kitchen. I hear her behind me as she goes into Reece's bedroom and shuts the door. Mission accomplished, I guess. She's been dying to tell me this since she first saw me, and now...

I'm standing in the middle of the kitchen, my heart pounding like crazy, trying to piece it all together when the front door opens and Eric, Reece, and Z come in with long faces.

"Ah, my favorite blonde—just the welcome home I need," Eric says, making a joke that comes off as forced. He jumps ahead of Z teasingly, gives me a quick hug, and then steps

back, giving me a quizzical look. “Hey, we’re the ones in a shitty mood. What’s your excuse, babe?”

Z’s at my side, easing me away from Eric. A furrow knits his brow as he stares down at me. He tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. “What’s wrong? Did something scare you?”

I wonder what my face must look like.

“Veronica’s in Reece’s room,” I say, swallowing. “But when I got here, she followed me to your room and told me—” I stop myself. I can’t do this in front of Reece and Eric.

Z gives Reece a dark look. “Can’t you control her?”

“Fuck you,” Reece mutters as he drops his duffle and heads back to his room.

Eric is digging into the donuts I put on the table, and Z turns to me and presses his forehead against mine, a needy look on his face, his gaze drinking me in. “Forget them. I missed you so much. What a fucking mess today was. Stan saw everything.”

“Nothing physical going on?” I run my gaze over him, checking for other injuries. My hands want to touch him, but I don’t. I’m barely breathing. I’m barely anything.

“I’m good.”

A long breath comes from me.

Okay. He *is* okay. I can see it for myself.

I try to put a few inches between us, but he doesn’t let me, tugging me back until his body is flush against mine. “Hey you, don’t run away. I’ve been thinking about you the whole way home,” he says in my ear, his nose trailing down my neck. “You smell so good.”

“Gross. Your room is just down the hall,” Eric says with a donut in his mouth.

I move back a bit, keeping my gaze down. “Uh, I just came to bring the donuts.”

Z gives me a hard look and frowns, his eyes narrowing. “What’s going on?”

I stare at the floor for a few more seconds then look back at him and shake my head. “I can’t...”

Eric raises a brow at us and takes off for the den. “Later, sexy people.” I hear him turning on the TV.

Z hasn’t taken his eyes off me.

I move to the table, where I grab the back of a chair. I’m swaying, as weak as a reed in the face of a hurricane.

“Sugar? What the fuck?”

I dig down deep for strength. “I saw the picture of Willow you keep in your nightstand. You never mentioned how much we resemble each other.” I’m amazed at the calmness in my voice.

Maybe I’m just numb. Maybe I always expected the axe to fall on us eventually. I think about Mama and her face all the times she’d cry and tell me my father was once again gone back to his family. Is that what my face looks like now? Devastated and broken?

His chest expands, and he looks at me before stalking by and going into his room, but I don’t follow. I hear him moving stuff around, slamming a drawer, and then he comes back into the kitchen. “You went through my things?”

“You think *I* went through your things? Screw you.”

I turn to the sink to fill a glass to settle my stomach, but water goes everywhere as my hand shakes. I set it back down on the counter then turn to face him. He’s dropped into a chair and scrubs at his hair, a hesitant, almost frightened look on his face.

“This...this isn’t what it looks like.”

My hands clench. “It *looks* like you picked me out at that party because of Willow. It looks like you’re with me because I look like *her*.” I think back to the photo, the eerie resemblance. I want the floor to swallow me whole.

He doesn’t say anything for so long, until I want to scream to get a reaction out of him. “Z, I look like her! Just admit it, please!”

“Yes,” he whispers.

My heart drops as I take that blow. “And you could have told me at any time about the resemblance, but you didn’t. We’ve been together *since January* and you never told me.”

A thick silence fills the room. He swallows and looks away. “I started to a few times, but it never felt right—”

“You knew how this would end.” I shake my head.

He whitens. “I was going to tell you eventually...”

“When?”

“After hockey...shit, I don’t know. I was afraid to say anything. I didn’t want to screw us up...” He bites his lip, chewing on it.

I laugh harshly and press my hand to my lips. “And this is why Reece doesn’t like me.” I close my eyes then open them when I hear Z scooting the chair back. He approaches me, and I step around him, because if he touches me, I might not be able to think. “Don’t you dare touch me.”

He halts and runs a hand through his hair, pulling on it. “You’re... It’s not like that. You are not her. I want *you*.”

“So you weren’t thinking about her? Ever? How about ‘*I love you. Forever.*’ Sound familiar? How about ‘*If you were here, my whole life would be different*’? You wrote that in a letter one week ago.”

His throat bobs. *Good, good.* I want him upset. He reaches out to cup my face, but I jerk away. “Stop.”

He sucks in a breath. “Please, whatever you’re thinking, just stop for a minute and let me explain, Sugar.”

I grit my teeth. He can’t see the forest for the trees. He doesn’t see what’s *wrong* about this. Or he does, but he isn’t ready to admit it. He’s lost, still in love with a dead girl, and I can’t help him.

I move toward the door but his voice stops me, pleading. “Please don’t leave.”

I face him. “You can’t build a relationship on a *lie*,” I say quietly, regaining some control, because I have to get the words out. I have to. “You’re just like every guy who’s broken my heart, Z. At least with Bennett, it was a girl I could see, but you...you picked someone I can never, ever compare to. You deliberately left me in the dark and now here we are—at the fucking end.”

His face reddens and his hands curl. “No, not the end. I refuse to let you go. Don’t walk out on me, Sugar. Not now, not when I’m already losing my shit. *Please*.”

“Goodbye, Z.” My voice cracks and I’m out the door and running to my car.

ZACK



She walks out the door and I don't follow her. I can't. I'm shaking and this feeling of despair might just swallow me whole.

Goodbye, Z. *Goodbye.*

No, no, no. I plop my ass back down on a kitchen chair and take deep breaths, in and out. This can't be fucking happening.

She can't leave me now. I care too much.

I need her. I need her. *I need her.*

I lay my head down on my folded arms on the table and struggle to get a grip, to stop the pull of anguish that wants to drag me under.

A few ticks later, I hear Eric behind me, although I don't know when he came back into the kitchen. There's no doubt he heard most of that. I rise up and look at him, watching as he pulls a bottle of Tito's from the cabinet and pours himself a drink.

"Make me one," I say, my voice hoarse.

He shoots me a look but fulfills my request and sets the glass in front of me. He takes a seat on the other side of the table, a frown deeply lining his brow.

"Thanks." I take a sip, feeling the burn.

"Sugar and your dead girlfriend? What the hell?"

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “She left.” That’s not the answer to his question, but fuck, I can’t think.

“She did, and...” He pauses. “And I’m just trying to wrap my head around all this. I’m your best friend, but you haven’t said a word about a resemblance.”

I slam back the rest of the vodka, the taste bitter. “When have you known me to talk about my feelings?”

He watches me. “You okay, man?”

No. “Yeah.” I rub my face briskly. “I...just need to...” I can’t even finish it before my chest is heaving and I’m up and pacing around the room.

She walked out so easily.

“You adore *Sugar*, right?” He sounds a little angry.

I march over to the counter and pour another drink, emptying the bottle. I turn the glass up, embracing the burn. “How much of this shit do we have?” I ask, tossing the empty bottle in the trash.

He snatches another bottle from the cabinet, another brand—not that I care—and puts it down in front of me. “Be careful with this stuff, man. You’re not a drinker and I’m not sure where you are right now.”

I look up at him, and he isn’t done talking.

“You need to do the right thing. Go after her and tell her ___”

Anger fires inside me, itching to get out. I slap my hand against the table. “Funny how *I’m* your best friend but all your interest is in *her*.”

He exhales. “Dude, chill. You know *Sugar* and I are just friends.”

“Do I? You flirt with her constantly.” My jaw pops as we have a stare-off. I know I’m blowing up at him for no good reason, but I can’t seem to stop.

Everything is falling apart.

He gives me a nod, as if he's come to a decision. "If you want to talk, I'll be in my room."

He grabs his glass, walks down the hall, and shuts the door.

Standing, I shove away from the table and kick the chair back until it clatters against the wood.

Screw him. He's upset about the game. The entire team is. Every single player thinks I've lost my mojo. Pouring yet another drink, I think back to their rumblings on the bus on the way back, and I know I'm not the captain they deserve. I'm not going to lead HU to a national championship.

My fists clench as I recall the embarrassment of waking up in the locker room with a medic beside me. My heart checked out fine—of course—and I begged to go back out there, but Coach told me to cool my jets in the locker room and "*check in with my shrink.*" Those were his words. Stan Wilcox was nowhere to be found.

Cursing, I pick up the bottle and stalk out to the deck, slamming the back door behind me.

The air is bitter cold, the ground hard as I pace around, my feet shuffling, my mind trying to come to terms with a new reality.

I won't ask her to come back. I can't. I can't. I can't. Because if she says no...

I end up in the garage. I'm staring down at the table we made love on, and my heart clenches in my chest. I set the bottle down on the edge of a tool shelf behind me and pick up a hammer, turning it over in my hands. With one arm, I sweep everything off the table and swing the hammer at it, whacking at nothing. The tool reverberates in my grip, the sound of metal against wood sharp in my ears, but I don't care. Over and over I work at it, rage eating at me, clawing, until finally the metal head flies off the wooden handle and I jerk to a stop, my eyes moving around the room, wondering what else I can hit.

But what I want to hit isn't in this garage.

My buzz builds as I take another swig and head back toward the house. I kick open the back door and stalk to Reece's room. Without asking, I push it open and turn on the lights. His room is a mess, clothes and shoes and hockey gear in every corner. Everything is out of place, protein wrappers, Gatorade bottles, books, and a laptop littering the floor.

Just another way we're different. My hands clench.

They scuttle up to the pillows when I barge in.

"What the hell? Privacy, please?" Reece says as he sits up, covering up Veronica at the same time.

I stop at the foot of his bed and it's all I can do to not yell, but somehow I keep my voice calm. "Veronica is not welcome in this house again. She needs to pack her shit and go."

Reece looks from me to her and bolts out of bed stark naked, shoving his legs into gym shorts. "This is not just your house. It's half mine." He glances back down at Veronica, who's clinging to the top sheet. "She won't talk to Sugar again." His eyes come back to me, and I see the knowledge there. Veronica must have told him what happened. "Besides, don't you think it was time she knew the truth?"

"Yeah," she says. "I only told her the truth."

"You told your truth, isn't that right?" I glare at Veronica and rage builds. I would never, ever hit a girl, but I want her gone and out of Reece's life, and there's only one way to do that. I look back at him. "Tell me, how does it feel to screw a girl who wants me? Do you know how many times I've told her to leave me alone? Nice, right? Think about her begging me when you're hitting it."

"You're a dick!" she yells, yanking up her clothes from the carpet beside the bed and trying to put them on under the sheets.

"Get out of my room!" Reece's skin is mottled, going from red to white and back again.

"Make me," I snarl back at him. I'm past the point of caring about our precarious relationship. I'm angry and pissed, and Sugar's *gone*, and someone's going to pay.

His chest heaves as he faces off with me, and I'm ready, my shoulders tense, fists clenched.

"You're losing it, Z!" he yells. "Pretty soon you won't have anything left if you keep this up."

Darkness pulls at me, wanting to wound him and make him feel as low as I do right now. "At least I'll always be better than you at everything." He shoves at me with his hands and I stumble back against his dresser. I laugh and turn back to face him. "That's all you got, little brother?"

His face hardens, but he's not angry enough. He's not there yet, and I need him pissed. I need him livid, and I know how to get him going.

I know his little weakness.

I get in his face and push at his chest. "You loved Willow and I always knew. She told me. She laughed about it."

At first, his mouth opens and he stumbles back, but then he steps forward, his eyes ablaze. "Yeah? So what? I did love her. I loved her more than you did. *I* was there when you weren't. *I* watched her drive away that night."

Pain and guilt slam into me, and my jaw goes slack at the gaping wound he opens.

Then he hits me square in the face and everything goes black.

SUGAR



I want to die.

A week goes by in a blur. It feels like the world should stop and wait for me to catch my breath, to wait for this awful emptiness to ease, but it doesn't. I spend the first two days without him in my bed tossing and turning, angry and pissed off at myself for trusting him. By the time Wednesday hits, I'm curled up with a pillow, trying to smell the remnants of him as I re-watch *Game of Thrones* and cry. Julia calls Taylor and Poppy, and they come over and beg me to leave the dorm room and go to class. But I can't. My room is our place. It's where we made love and laughed. It's where he gave me the penguin. By Friday, I feel empty, a vast cavern of nothing. My anger is back, battling with the grief, but I don't have any tears left, and I vow to be better and throw myself into filling out more law school applications. When Monday rolls back around, I resolve to go to class. I tell all my professors I was sick and when they look at my face, they buy it and let it slide.

Another week creeps by. I live at the library, trying to get caught up on my coursework. I eat real food instead of crap and keep my head down as I work at BB's. Mara keeps asking me what happened and I can't tell her. She gives up and just sighs whenever she looks in my eyes. I know what she'll see there: heartbreak.

And through it all?

I haven't seen or heard from Z.

A whimper wants to rise up inside me, and I push it down.

Which is why when he walks into our poetry class midmorning, I gasp aloud.

I scramble around for my phone and fire off a text to Eric. He's been checking in on me periodically to see how I am, and while I only send him one-word answers—*Fine, Okay*—it's a connection to Z that's hard to give up.

Why is Z in our poetry class? What happened to therapy?

I see the dots across the screen and I clench the phone, anxiously awaiting a response as he comes to a halt in the doorway, looking for a seat.

He rearranged his schedule. Told me this morning.

Why? He's still seeing the sports psychologist?

Yes, babe. Maybe he's there to see you. I don't know.

Whatever. I hit send and look back up.

Z looks magnificent, his shoulders and body in a tight black shirt, his legs in jeans that cup his ass, his feet in gold Converse. His hair is untamed, his face hard as he steps forward and moves his gaze across the auditorium.

I prepare myself for one of his intense stares.

It doesn't happen.

His icy grey eyes ghost over the room and I feel the brush as they flicker briefly on my face, but they keep moving, his expression blank.

And just like that, it's back to the way it used to be: me, invisible to him.

"Dude, Z's back," breathes Sorority Girl a few seats away.

"The TA said the professor excused him for hockey stuff, but he's been doing the work on his own. Maybe he's back for good," another girl replies.

Well. She certainly keeps up. My lips tighten.

"I hope this class improves his hockey game," says a guy a few seats away.

I clench my fists and even though I'm angry and hurt, I can't let anyone drag Z down. I turn around and scowl.

The guy's eyes go wide. "If you watch the news then you know he's losing his shit."

I flip back around and stare at the professor. There has been rampant speculation about what happened at Concord State but no confirmation, and I'd have to be on another planet to not know that they barely won their last game against Denver.

I have an empty seat next to me, as usual, but Z heads to the front where he used to sit. Of course there's a girl on each side of him, gushing.

Class gets started but I'm in a daze. I can't stop staring at the back of his head.

"Miss Ryan, can you read the poem?" Professor Goldberg says, and I blink.

"Sir?"

He raises an eyebrow. "The Emily Dickinson poem?"

I let out a breath. *Right. The one you read last night, Sugar. Get with it.*

I give him a nod, but my eyes are on Z, and I think I see his shoulders tightening as he shifts in his seat.

I lick my lips and stare down at my laptop.

"Miss Ryan? Are you with us today?" the professor asks.

"Yes." I clear my throat and read the poem.

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -

That perches in the soul -

And sings the tune without the words -

And never stops - at all -

I've heard it in the chilliest land -

And on the strangest Sea -

Yet - never - in Extremity,

It asked a crumb - of me.”

“Excellent,” he says. “Elaborate, please, on the meaning.”

Oh.

Several long moments go by, and a few students turn to look at me.

But he doesn’t look.

He stares down at his notebook, pen twirling through his fingers.

Professor Goldberg gives up on me and looks around the room. “Initial thoughts, anyone? What is this poem about?”

“The poem is about a bird,” Sorority Girl says.

The professor lifts an eyebrow. “Indeed. Just a bird?”

There’s a rumble of chuckles.

“Hope *is* the bird,” I say. “The bird is a metaphor for hope.”

“Nice, but tell me more.” He scans the rows of students. “What does it mean? Come on, give me the good stuff, kids.”

Z stares down at his desk, and something shifts inside me, my anger turning to sadness. He’s in a dark place, and haven’t I always known it?

It’s part of why I was drawn to him...

I still want him.

I overhear Sorority Girl whispering to the girl next to her about Z and how he freaked out at the game. They’re wondering if he’ll be able to take the ice at the next one.

My chest rises.

We are over. We *are*—but I still want to protect him. I want him to live out his dreams. I want him to have hope.

I get the professor’s attention and he turns to me. “Yes?”

“The central idea of the poem is hope. Everything might be falling apart, but hope never stops. It’s there when you just can’t get calculus or when you didn’t get into law school. It’s

there when darkness is inside you.” I stop, my voice verging on cracking, emotion threatening. I swallow. “Hope is there when you can’t figure out the fucking answers.”

Professor Goldberg gives me an approving nod. “Your participation point just went up a letter grade, Miss Ryan. I’ll forgive the profanity.”

I settle back in my seat. My heart feels like a block of cement is sitting on it. Hope for the future *is* what sustains a person, not guilt or regrets, and I want him to see that. He mentioned that his mom gave him the necklace for hope, but what if he’s lost so much that—

Stop. You can’t help him.

Class ends a few minutes later and I take my time leaving, moving slowly and giving him enough time to get out into the hall and down the steps. I don’t want to come face-to-face with him. I’m not sure what would happen. I might break down, might beg him—

“Hey, I’m sorry about being a dick,” says a male voice behind me, and it’s the guy who was talking about Z. He slides up next to me and sticks his hand out. His hair is a rich brown, his eyes a brilliant blue, and he’s wearing an HU football practice shirt. Another athlete. “I’m Dallas, wide receiver for the Lions. Been sitting in the row with you all semester. I’m a big hockey fan, and maybe that’s why I spoke out of turn. Just want them to go all the way, you know?”

He’s tall with a charming smile that’s open and honest, and it’s hard not to soften. I pause and then finally take his hand. His grip is firm and light, his gaze appreciative as he takes in my skinny jeans, tight black fuzzy sweater, flats, and hair, which is down and around my shoulders. I’m wearing more makeup than usual these days too, covering up the dark circles under my eyes.

“Yeah, I want them to win too.”

He nods. “You guys were a thing before, right? I mean, I saw you on his social media.”

My chest squeezes. “Briefly.” I exhale, my mouth tightening, and he winces and gives me a lopsided grin.

“Yeah. My bad. I heard about his girl-of-the-month thing...”

Ugh. “That’s just rumors,” I say with a polite smile then turn and walk to the exit.

He follows along next to me. “Sorry, I keep putting my foot in my mouth. Can I make it up to you? Coffee, sometime, maybe?” He grimaces. “Not trying to be forward, but well, ah, we’ve been sitting near each other for weeks and you’re not seeing him...”

I don’t even have to think about it. I’m not ready for coffee—or anything with anyone else. “Maybe some other time,” I say, and a small laugh comes from him.

“I should have kept my mouth shut about the hockey star. Can we start all over? Hi, I’m Dallas and I think you’re kinda cool.” He gives me a sheepish look. “I liked your poem analysis. This class is one of my favorites.”

I nod. “Yeah, it’s fun. I just took it as an elective.”

“Looks like we already have something in common,” he says, throwing in a teasing grin.

I let out a breath and look over his shoulder. No Z in the hallway.

He follows my gaze and gives me a smirk. “Just not into me, are you?”

I grin for the first time. “Not really.”

He lifts his shoulders nonchalantly. “I can wear you down. See ya, Sugar.”

He heads out the side exit with a wave, and I walk out through the main doors.

I take off for the student center to get a slushie, my head down as I replay the class, wondering if somehow I missed him looking at me, but I know I didn’t. I just thought if there

were any truth to him wanting me for me, he would have tried harder to convince me.

He let me go, and I guess that tells me everything.

Julia appears up ahead on the sidewalk and jogs over to me.

“Hey, you doing okay?” she asks, her eyes searching mine.

I nod.

She gives me a sympathetic smile. “You headed to grab some lunch?”

“Actually just a slushie, but I could be talked into pizza.” I pause. “I don’t want to go back to our room because that’s where we always...” I stop. “I’m trying to stay busy.”

Her lips tighten. “I’m so pissed at Z right now.”

“I’ll be okay.”

I’m lying. I’m counting down the days until I’m out of here and in law school—somewhere, anywhere else.

“I know you’re lying, but time will help. Come on.”

We take the steep steps up to the student center and walk into the spacious lobby. It’s filled with students getting lunch, but it’s the gorgeous twenty-foot stone lion fountain in the center of the room that catches my eye. It’s a hub for people to congregate and eat lunch on the fly.

Z sits on the ledge talking to Lola from Eric’s birthday party. He smiles at her and her hand is on his chest, tracing little circles on his shirt as she bats fluttery lashes up at him.

Air whooshes out of my chest.

Something breaks inside me, and I feel the tear, the agony of what it’s like to see the person you love with someone else.

Seeing Bennett with that girl at the Topsy Moose doesn’t even compare.

My legs wobble for a second before I straighten up and square my shoulders.

“Sugar, wait. Let’s leave campus for lunch...” It’s Julia with her hand on my arm, trying to shield me, but I brush her off, my steps moving closer.

I get within about twenty feet of them, and I can’t go any closer. My heart is lead as I lean against the wall next to the pizza place for support. People come and go, crossing in front of me, carrying food and talking and laughing, but I don’t even notice.

I can’t stop looking at them. He’s right there. With someone.

I have no grounds to be angry. I ended it and—

She’s touching him.

And he’s letting her.

The world collapses as his gaze drifts up, so goddamn slow, and when his eyes meet mine...there is zilch there.

My heart stutters.

Lola says something and he looks at her.

My eyes close. How can he be with someone else when I feel like I’m dying inside?

“Let’s go,” Julia is saying, but I don’t budge. Maybe... maybe I need to see this. I need to see that he can just go straight from me to someone else.

I love you. Forever.

He was never really mine.

I turn from them and walk away.

SUGAR



I'm coming out of the library a few days later, and Eric is waiting for me. He texted earlier and asked to see me, and when I told him no, he resorted to sending me every emoji he could type, mostly ones with sweets. He swore he would blow up my phone if I didn't give him five minutes.

I walk down the marble steps and stop in front of him.

He's got workout gear on and a Lions cap on top of his wild red hair. His beard is longer than I've seen it in a while. I figure he's coming from a late afternoon workout session. Part of me is giddy to see him because I miss his smiling face and he's a connection to Z, but the rest of me aches, knowing Z isn't with him.

I force a big smile. "You look like a grizzly bear. Also, please stop sending me the pie emoji."

"Nice to see you too, babe." He swoops down and picks me up for a twirl, and several people stop and stare at us. A few guys call out and two girls run over to say hi. One of them presses her number into his hand, and he tucks it in his jacket pocket, a sly smile on his face.

I shake my head, feeling just...tired. "It just never ends with y'all."

He gives me a look as we take off toward my dorm. "I'm twenty and male. I like chicks."

I hold my hand up. "What if you had a girlfriend? Would you take her number then?"

He rears back. “No, of course not. That’s a hard line. I’d be true.”

I nod. “And that’s why we’re friends.”

He grins. “But I don’t have one, so I can do what I want.”

We walk down the busy sidewalk and Eric has his head down, a thoughtful look on his face.

“Want to tell me what this is about?”

He sighs slowly, and I sense he’s searching for the right words. “Um, Z.”

My stomach knots. “Figured as much.”

He looks off into the horizon. “He’s falling apart.”

“What do you mean?” My legs pick up the pace, almost to a jog, most of it nervous energy, afraid Eric is going to say something that will break my heart even more.

He keeps pace with me. “Can you slow down a minute?”

“Nope. I have to get to BB’s.”

He takes my hand and pulls me off the path.

“What?” I glare up at him and he winces.

“Look, I know he hurt you, but he’s...”

“Yeah?”

“Fucking devastated. I don’t know who he is anymore. All he does is run and work out and sleep. He had this huge fight with Reece and they’re walking around like two bulls. He’s surly and bad-tempered and just...I don’t know what to say. I can’t get in his head.”

He scratches at his jaw and looks around, almost as if he’s nervous.

I narrow my gaze. “Did he tell you not to talk to me?”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure he meant it.” He blows out a breath. “Never have I seen him so strung out over a girl. He took a hammer to the work table in the garage, and shit, he never does stuff like that.”

I flinch at the image. “He doesn’t really care about me.” I’m not looking at Eric, but I feel his searching look.

“Seriously? Get real. I saw how he looked at you.”

I shake my head. “Funny, because he hasn’t tried to get in touch with me. He knows where I live. He has my phone number.”

“He cares about you.”

Then why is Eric the one here making his case for him? I want to smash something. “So you keep saying,” I snap. “Then why not tell me about her?”

“Maybe he was afraid to lose you.”

“He did lose me.”

He sticks his hands in his pockets. “You wanna know what I think? I think you know he’s crazy about you, and you’re scared.”

I frown. *Is that true?* I...I don’t know. At first I was afraid for my heart, but after the ice skating lesson, I was *in* with him. Still, a trickle of doubt drifts in, reminding me of my past, of Bennett and my father and the scared girl who will protect her heart any way she can. I remember the girl who ran away from him at the Kappa party and then at his house after we had sex in his garage.

And, in the end, wasn’t I right?

“You could have listened to him, Sugar. I was there that night, remember? You gave up pretty fast.” He studies my face.

“Thanks, Dr. Eric, but you don’t know everything. And stop eavesdropping on private conversations.”

“You were yelling—kind of hard to not hear it.” Eric closes his eyes. “Fuck, Sugar, I’m afraid he can’t finish the season without you. He’s the most lackluster piece of shit on the ice. He comes to practice, does the minimum, and leaves.”

I don’t like the images he paints in my head and I steel myself against them. “You won the last game—”

“By a hair, and he’s not playing nearly enough. Coach is keeping him on the bench most of the time.”

My hand tightens around my purse strap. “Oh, so I should just ignore his deception so you can finish out your season?”

He lets out a heavy sigh. “I don’t even know if that would work. I’m just coming to you as a friend to another friend who I know cares about him.”

I think about him at the fountain with Lola and—

“Everything okay here?”

We flip around and Julia stands a few feet away. It’s late afternoon and she’s ready for her shift at BB’s, although a normal person wouldn’t know just by looking at her bulky coat and joggers. I know because her hair is up in that Barbarella-style ponytail and there’s pink glitter on her eyelids. Bright pink lipstick colors her mouth, and she’s carrying her duffle, where I figure her shoes and extras are.

Next to me, Eric tenses up.

I look from him to Julia, seeing how his eyes run over her and bounce away, color blooming on his cheeks.

“You guys know each other?” I say, my voice oozing shock.

“No,” they say at the same time, both of their faces shuttering.

“Oh, really? Could have fooled me.”

They both ignore me, but I don’t care. There’s an edge to me lately, and I’m wired, ready to snap.

“Well, in that case, Julia, this is Eric, one of Z’s wingers. He calls everyone babe, likes to sing ‘Dick in a Box’, takes phone numbers from randoms, and eats cereal out of the box with his bare hands. Eric, this is Julia. She’s my roommate and if you hurt her, I will kill you slowly with one of your hockey sticks.”

“Oh,” he says, not even looking at me, his gaze on her. “Hi.”

Julia grimaces and stares down at the ground. “Hi.”

A few moments go by and no one says a word, and shit, I’m a little fascinated.

“So, you’re *sure* you don’t know each other?”

“Sure,” Julia says.

“Ab-so-fucking-lutely,” says Eric at the same time.

A slow blush rises on my roommate’s cheeks as she clears her throat and hooks her arm with mine. “I’m headed to BB’s. You want a ride?”

I won’t actually ride with her because she’ll be working later than me, but I say yes anyway and move away from Eric. I need distance from him.

“Sugar?” he says with a frown.

I look back, seeing the worry on his face, but I know I can’t go to Z. Willow is between us and I can’t...I can’t let that go. I give him a wry smile. “He knows where I am.”

His shoulders rise with a breath.

“I have to get to work, but text me, okay?” I say softly, not wanting to lose that connection, which is counterproductive, but it is what it is.

He gives me a nod, his gaze flickering over to Julia before he turns and walks away.

He gets just out of earshot and I can’t wait any longer.

“You and Eric? You slag.” I feel empty inside but I push out a grin.

“Never happened,” she says as we walk away.

“You lie, but I will get the truth out of you eventually.”

She throws an arm around me.

“This conversation isn’t over, Barbarella.”

She smirks. “I know.”

“WHAT’S WRONG?” Mara asks me a few days later in her office as I file some old invoices in the cabinet.

“Nothing.” I stare down at a receipt from the liquor warehouse and focus on that, ignoring the hole inside me.

“Uh-huh. I hear the Lions won their game yesterday against St. Cloud.”

I file the paperwork and slam the drawer shut. “Nice.” I guess that’s another win for us, and I’m glad. I want Z to succeed.

I feel her eagle eyes on me. “Word is your guy only played the first period.”

“Not my guy, Mara.”

“You only use my name when you’re pissed.”

“I’m not pissed,” I bite out.

She chuckles. “Listen, I know y’all are broken up, but I’ve lived here long enough to know he’s the biggest name to ever play in this state, and when he doesn’t play, something bad is going down.”

She’s prying because she cares, but I feel my defenses coming up. I plop down on the recliner and sip on the vanilla chai tea she made for me earlier.

A few minutes later, I say, “How do you know so much about hockey?”

“Just something I hear the customers say when they’re here.” She gives me a rueful look. “This town loves him. But now, I don’t know. Fans can be fickle, ya know?”

My hackles rise. If anyone bad-talks Z...

“ESPN is saying there’s a rumor he has a mental illness. One reporter claims she saw him break down at one of the away games, but of course, there are no photos to prove it.”

That must have been at Concord State. “Bitch,” I say. “What the hell is wrong with people? Can’t he ever get any

peace?" I rub my temples.

"Ah, so you do care."

I look out the window, my hand clenching my cup.

"I'm worried about you," she says softly. "Do you want me to make you a lemon icebox pie?"

I blink rapidly. She knows the way to my heart.

"Sugar, I know you haven't told me everything, but if you need to talk to me, I'm here. I'm not your mama and we're not blood, but you're mine by choice and I have no regrets. Nothing you tell me will shock me."

I stare at her, taking in the big blonde hair and faded pink lipstick. I love her more than anything and she *is* my family. I don't know why I haven't told her what happened except that maybe part of me is embarrassed that he fooled me. I sigh. "He blames himself for his dead girlfriend's car wreck, and I found a photo of her and...well, we look very similar..." I can't go on. I don't even want to think about the letter.

Mara fires up a cig and blows out smoke. "I see. A doppelgänger situation. Sounds like a good HBO movie."

I huff out a laugh and several moments go by. I feel her thinking, assessing the situation.

"When you were with him, how did you feel?"

"Feel? God, I would have burned the whole world down to be with him, and I thought...I thought he was right there with me."

She takes another toke. "You say you look like her, and I can't answer for Z, but I know you can't fake real emotion. Those cracks always come through when something isn't true. Your heart knows."

My heart doesn't know shit. It's dead. Empty. I never knew a person could reach this level of...nothingness.

I run my fingers over the rim of the cup, and she sighs from her seat, moving on. "Speaking of breakups, I remember

when Clint broke my heart. One night in Vegas and he was off with the wind, but he was upfront about it.”

I sip my tea. She always knows how to make me smile. “Give me his digits and I’ll ring him up. I could use some rebound sex.”

Her eyes flare and I have to laugh.

Julia waltzes in the door dressed in a new sparkly gold corset and booty shorts. She must have heard my comment because she looks straight at me. “That’s true. We really need to get you back in the saddle, my friend.”

“Doesn’t work for me,” I say.

Her hands are on her hips. “And I have the perfect guy—this dude named Dallas who mentioned to me he was in your poetry class. Apparently he saw us talking to Eric and he sent me a text.”

Wow. “He’s quite persistent.”

“Tenacious, which you happen to go for. Plus, he’s hot,” she says.

“Nah.” I raise an eyebrow. “Don’t you need to go shake some ass, Barbarella?”

She snorts. “Mama does need some dollars, but don’t try your passive aggressive shit with me. I’m not giving up stripping, no matter how many jokes you make.”

I arch a brow. “Meow. Someone’s sensitive tonight.” I tap my chin. “Could a certain hockey player be the reason? Oh, wait, you don’t know him. *Riiight*.”

She puffs up. “I’m on a break right now, thank you, and you are not the boss of me. Isn’t that right, Mara?”

Mara smokes her cig, looking at us with a smile on her face. “Oh, she is honey. After me, that is.”

I laugh just as Mara’s office phone rings. She speaks to the person and then waves it at me, her eyes big. “It’s Mr. Winchester from Birmingham for you.”

I motion to her that I don't want to talk to him. He's been calling my cell for over a week and I'm avoiding him.

She gives me an exasperated look when she hands it over. "Take it."

Fine.

I put it up to my ear. "Hello?"

"Miss Ryan?" His tone is dry and wintry and utterly professional. I picture the tall and lanky man who came here in January to tell me my father was dead. "Finally."

I pace around the room, holding the phone tight. "Yes?"

"I just wanted to confirm that you'll be in Davenport for the reading of the will. It's in two weeks."

My chest constricts. Of course I know when it is. I have it saved in my phone and Mara has it circled on her desk calendar. "I will not."

There's a long silence from him and then his voice softens. "Before you make up your mind, I want you to know there is no animosity toward you here."

I huff out a laugh. "I find that hard to believe with the way my father cheated on their mother for years."

He seems to take a breath. "I hope you change your mind. It might...do you some good to come back and see where you came from."

"Please don't assume you know what's good for me. I don't take well to condescension, Mr. Winchester."

"I apologize." He continues, clearing his throat. "I conveyed your waitlist situation to Mrs. Mitchell, and she's sent in a letter of recommendation for you."

My hands grip the phone, and Mara reaches over and pushes the speaker button. It's killing her that she can't hear what he's saying. "My name isn't Mitchell. It never was. And what does she know about me? How can she write a letter?"

The line is quiet as he shuffles papers.

“Does she feel sorry for me?” The thought pisses me off.

Mr. Winchester sighs. “I don’t know. It’s common for former alumni to send in letters of recommendation.”

“But if you had to guess, Mr. Winchester, why would she do it?”

There are a tense few ticks of silence. “Who knows the matters of the heart, but perhaps she sees a young girl who never got the chance her own kids did.”

A sweat breaks out on my skin.

“Will you come?”

Mara is waving her hands at me, mouthing, “YES, YES, YES.”

I close my eyes and push out the words. “I’ll let you know.”

ZACK



I sit up in bed at five on the dot. I haven't had a nightmare in a while, and I wonder if fighting with Reece helped me get past something.

I don't know.

I get dressed for my run. I have to or I'll go crazy from thinking too much.

Right now, I've shoved everything to do with Sugar down so far I'm not sure where it is, locked up tight and stuffed in a black box shoved into a corner of my mind. I've got chains and a padlock around that box, and no way in hell is any of it getting out.

I'm numb inside, keeping my emotions in check and protected.

I trudge out to the hallway and Long John Silver brushes against my legs. I give her a rub. "Hey, baby girl. You hungry?"

She meows and stalks to the kitchen, and I follow.

I don't even notice him until I look up, but Reece sits at the table, dressed in gym shorts and an old shirt. He had his head down but it bobs up when he sees me.

We stare at each other and I mumble a terse greeting as I walk by. We've been stalking around each other for weeks now, barely speaking, but I won't budge about Veronica. She isn't allowed at this house. Once I'm gone after graduation, he can do whatever the hell he wants.

I stop at the fridge to pull out a Gatorade and suck it down. His eyes are on me, and I can't resist asking, "Why are you up?"

He swallows. "So I could catch you and talk."

I drink down the blue liquid. "Veronica isn't welcome back."

He flinches. "I know. I don't blame you. What she did..." He shrugs and looks away.

I set my bottle on the counter and study my brother, taking in his bloodshot gaze, the purple bruises under his eyes, the haggard face. "Missing her, huh?"

His grey eyes find mine. "That's right, good old Reece, always getting what Z doesn't want."

Tension zings through me, but it doesn't have much heat. These past few weeks, I've lost some of the vitriol I spewed out the night Sugar walked away.

One thing is sure: I'm close to losing my brother. And that scares me.

He looks down at the gold box I brought out last night and set on the counter. "Those your letters?"

I give them a brief look and nod. "Yeah."

"What are you doing with them?"

I toss my empty bottle in the trash, grab the box, and stick it inside my running backpack. "Letting them go."

He blanches. "Where?"

Resignation colors my voice. "Where do you think? It's time. I...I don't love Willow, Reece. I haven't for a long time. What we had wouldn't have lasted. I was too young and so was she. You get that, don't you?"

"Sugar, huh?" There's an expression of acceptance on his face, a quiet realization.

My shoulders shift as I turn away from him and grab a protein bar from the cabinet.

“Z?”

I look over my shoulder. “Yeah?”

He licks his lips. “The photo of us...can I keep it?”

I give him a nod. I feel so tired. “Sure. It’s yours.” I open the box, pull it out, and hand it over.

“Thank you.” He takes it gingerly, as if it might fall apart in his hands.

I rub at my unshaven face and look away from him, finding it hard to take in his unhappiness. He’s hurting too. I catch a glimpse of myself in the hall mirror, and I’m death warmed over with my thin face, shaggy hair, and scruff that’s now grown into a thick, dark beard.

I look back at Reece and he’s watching me, pain etched on his features until they contort and his face compresses, his teeth chewing so hard on his bottom lip that blood comes out.

I walk over, grabbing a paper towel from the dispenser and giving it to him. “We’ve got to get past this, man. You’re my brother.”

He blots at his lip and shuffles to his feet. Staring at me, he opens his mouth as if he wants to say something, but then he doesn’t, his teeth clamping together.

“What?”

Misery plays over his face and he pinches the skin between his nose. “I need to tell you something about the night Willow died.”

Dread crawls over me. “Okay.”

An audible breath leaves his mouth. “The night of the party...you told me to tell Willow you needed to think about the baby and figure things out, but I didn’t tell her. I let her assume whatever she wanted about your absence. I don’t know what she was thinking, but she was worried, and I didn’t say a goddamn word.”

I frown. “But you said you did. You said you told her I was just thinking.”

“I lied.” His gaze holds mine.

I swallow. “Why?”

He paces around the kitchen, his hands rubbing at his face. I see a drop of blood forming on his lip again.

“Why?” I repeat, this time sharper. Reece is my brother, but if he’s lied to me or held something back... “Reece? What the fuck?”

He stops, his face white. “We sat outside talking, and I kissed her, man. I kissed her...and she kissed me back. She was so pretty and I wanted her...” He stops, his voice off. “I loved her, and it was my one shot, because I really thought you guys might break up since you were going to college, and she and I would still be there, and I didn’t even care that she was pregnant. I just wanted her.”

I ease down the cabinets until I’m sitting on the floor.

His fists curl. “I’m sorry I never told you.”

I lean my head back against the wood, my head spinning. I blink rapidly.

He pulls at his hair. “*I’m* the reason she ran out of that party. *Me*. She felt guilty for kissing me, and I tried to stop her, but all she wanted was you. She was going to find you.” He squeezes the edge of the table. “You’ve been carrying all that guilt and...I let you.”

I rub my chest. “Why?”

He closes his eyes. “Because part of me hated you for having her heart.”

“Fuck.” A knife stabs me square in the torso.

He flips around and slams his fist into the wall, and sheetrock sprays. “I’m the reason she died on those rocks, not you.”

The silence stretches between us as I grapple, my head spinning.

“It’s taken me this long to get the balls, to man up and tell you. I’m sorry, Z. I’m sorry about your nightmares. I’m sorry

about your game.” A long sigh. “I’m sorry for everything.”

I can’t think straight.

“Do you hate me?”

I don’t know.

I pull myself to standing and weave as I head to the den. I sling my backpack on and start for the door.

His voice is behind me, low and broken. “Forgive me, Z. Please. I’m living with this guilt too. Please, man.”

I pause with my hand on the doorknob, but I don’t know what to say.

“Z?”

I can’t deal with this. I want to stuff it away. I want to bury it down deep where all my other shit is.

I open the door and head out for my run.

Long minutes later, there are a million things running through my mind, and before I realize it I’m at the Quickie-Mart. I stop and take a breather, my head aching.

I think about Reece and Willow. I knew he loved her, but to actually make a move on her and then lie...

My mind is still churning when I buy my pack of smokes and light up in the alley.

The nicotine is sharp and visceral as I blow a puff of smoke up in the air. It tastes good, this little rule break, and I lean against the wall.

I think about fate and how we have no control. People come into our lives and they slip away from us. They make their own decisions. I think about how young we were, the bad decisions we made. Willow drove that car herself. It wasn’t me. It wasn’t Reece. Maybe the outcome might have been different if I’d showed up to the party or if Reece hadn’t kissed her...but there’s no certainty in that.

I suck down the cig, watching the tip of it burn.

Out of the corner of my eye, I think I see a familiar banged-up truck pull up in front of the donut store next door, and my gaze sharpens as I see Sugar get out.

She's got a knit hat on her head, one of those with the hole in the top so her messy bun can spill out. She's wearing her glasses and her black coat.

I immediately light up another cig, but then she always did make me crazy. My body strains to go over to her, to take her in my arms and tell her she's mine, but we're past that. I hold myself back. It's the only way I know how to protect my mind from going off the deep end.

The closer she gets, the more I tense up. I blow my smoke up in the air, making rings, but my eyes are on her, all her, and I wait for her to feel me looking, to know the force of my gaze as she walks toward the entrance of the shop.

It happens.

She glances up, her hand on the door, and halts. Beautiful, intelligent blue eyes widen as she runs them over me. My chest heaves.

All it would take...

All it would take...

All it would take is one indication from her, a crook of her finger, a longing in her eye that she wants me, goddamn just *anything* and I would slay anyone in my path to get to her.

But she doesn't give it to me.

She inhales a deep breath, turns away, and goes inside the store.

And that's why I have to leave her alone—because she will break me—and focus on making myself better.

I stub out my cigarette, throw it in the trash along with the pack, and adjust the backpack. Jogging away quickly, before she comes back out and I change my mind, I cross the intersection and head to Willow's grave. As I have so many times before, I follow the path to her plot, a small one near her grandparents. I was fortunate that her family buried her here,

just a few minutes from where her parents live in the city. There's a fresh bouquet of flowers, magnolias and evergreen inside a stone vase, and I wonder if perhaps it's Reece who's been leaving them all these years. I don't know. He and I...we have more long conversations ahead of us. I take the letters out one by one and place them inside the vase with the flowers. Some of what's written on those pages is an outright lie, and I guess somewhere up there Willow knows the truth.

I think she'd forgive me.

I talk to her. I tell her about Reece and our fight. I tell her about hockey and how I don't think it's going to work out for me. Most of all, I talk about Sugar, my voice gentle. I tell her how someday when I'm ready, I'm going to get her back; I'm going to win this fight with darkness and make her see that it was her all along.

The air brightens and the sun is rising as I stand and stare down at her gravestone. I feel lighter, my shoulders lifting as I kiss two fingers and send it to her. "Rest in peace, sweet girl. I won't forget you."

And then I'm gone with the wind, running, always running.

I run all the way back to the house.

Reece is sitting on the couch, an ice pack on his hand.

I walk over and sit down next to him. He's looking at me, and shit, he looks so young, even though he's only a year behind me. I feel fucking ancient.

He stares down at his hand. "Are we okay?"

"We can deal with this," I say, my voice thick.

His eyes gleam with emotion and he hugs me, and all that shit between us, the tension...some of it eases. Our relationship has a long way to go, but somewhere inside me, I know we'll make it through this. I think about Sugar and the poem about the bird. Like hope, no matter the storm, I'm not giving up on the people around me.

ZACK



Several days later, I sit inside Coach's office. ESPN is waiting in a conference room down the hall, full of reporters, cameramen, and lights. It's a show and we're about to perform. We're huddled together—Coach Swearingen, myself, Eric, and Reece—and I go over my words, running through them in my head, hoping like hell I'm making the right decision.

We lost our conference championship to Minnesota-Duluth, but our team managed to qualify on an at-large bid by the Division I Men's Ice Hockey Committee. Somehow, with me barely playing, we clawed our way to the quarterfinals, and now the semifinals loom in front of us. There's still a chance we can take home the trophy.

I have to finally respond to the rumors.

It's the only way to make everything right and wipe the slate clean. My heart beats erratically. *Shit*. I'm actually doing this, and I don't know what's going to happen.

"You ready?" Eric says, and I nod, gut churning.

Reece slaps me on the back. "We're behind you all the way, man."

A few guys rumble their agreement behind me as we walk down the hallway. I catch Boone's eyes and he gives me a thumbs-up.

"Nothing like baring your soul to millions of people," I say just as we enter the room and flashbulbs burst and people rush

toward the podium.

Hands wave and a cheer goes up from the crowd.

“Over here, Zack! How does it feel to be in the championships?”

I toss a hand up and send a small smile, but it’s hard. Still, I can do this. *I can.*

“Is it true you’re suffering from a mental illness?” someone calls out.

That one stings, the stigma I hear in the voice, and I cringe. I want to change that point of view and make them see that I’m not weak.

I’m just me.

I keep my face straight, stoic as Eric, Reece, Boone, and several other members of the team follow me down the aisle and up to the long table that’s the center of attention.

Coach talks for a few minutes about our season then introduces me. I stand and take the podium, checking the mic.

I straighten my shoulders and run my gaze over the sea of reporters. A deep breath fills my chest. I’m a warrior and there’s no quit in me. And sometimes, just maybe, rock bottom is the perfect place to rebuild.

“First off, thank you for coming out at our request and giving our school the publicity about our upcoming tournament.” I pause, seeing the expectant looks on their faces. “As you know, I’ve had some issues this season that impacted my game, and today I’m here to tell you what’s been going on.”

I clear my throat, my hands clenching the podium. Stan gives me a nod from the back.

“This season brought along the usual pressures of leading a highly ranked hockey team, countless trips out of town, late practices, and the tense games against our most bitter rivals. At the Minnesota-Duluth game, I had an anxiety attack and couldn’t go back out. It was not the flu. I’m here to tell you that this has been an ongoing issue in several games this

season, and my coaches and teammates have done their best to stand behind me, even when I didn't know if I could go on. Through continued therapy and time, I've focused on each game one increment at a time, one play at a time as I tackle this. I'm fighting a winning battle with this illness, and I plan to keep forging ahead."

My voice strengthens. "We've had our ups and downs, but we're a team that can withstand a few knocks to the ice. Sometimes the best leadership comes from the heart, and this team has mine. I want to lead by example, which is why I'm being as transparent as I can. I want to make sure our team reaches the Frozen Four, and there's no doubt we can kick anyone's ass in this tournament. We *are* going to climb this mountain."

"Z! Z! Z!" calls the pep band in the back, and I smile briefly.

A tall reporter from the local station manages to wrangle his way to the front of the big ESPN guys, and I nod my head at him when he points his mic at me.

"I applaud you for admitting you have an issue. Are you worried about how this will impact your plan to play in the NHL?"

Ah. Isn't that the million-dollar question?

"I have an open dialogue with them. They are aware."

Several reporters turn to look at Stan, but he doesn't make eye contact with any of them, just holds his hand up, letting them know he isn't taking questions.

I survey the room, full of these people who live and breathe hockey in our state and even further. "I'm willing to do what it takes to win—and be healthy."

"And how are you keeping yourself ready for the ice, Zack?"

A small laugh comes out. "Training my ass off, running, working out, eating right." I pause, going deeper. "I'm identifying negative thoughts, accepting them, and challenging them. I'm a fighter."

Another reporter noses in. “Will you be able to defeat that Minnesota-Duluth team in the tournament?”

I level my gaze at the camera. “Winners are born to be brought down and their day is coming. Go Lions.”

Cheers go up as the pep band kicks in again.

Flashes go off in my face and cameras swing back and forth, getting the full range of the packed room.

Coach rises to wrap everything up, and I move away and take a seat at the table.

“What else can you tell us about the Predators, Zack? Will you be at summer training camp?”

“Will you be placed on the sick roster?”

“Do you think you’ll have another episode?”

I don’t know the answers to their questions, but I know one thing is true.

Everyone knows what I’m dealing with, and there are no more secrets.

They know I’m not perfect. I have flaws—deep ones.

I may not ever play in the NHL, but at least there’s beauty in this, a kind of peace in admitting the truth.

SUGAR



I stare at the door of the Kappa house. I don't know why the hell I'm at this stupid party. Again.

But I do. Part of me wonders if he'll show. Maybe he's already here.

Let him go, I remind myself yet again.

I let out a slow exhalation. *Just breathe.*

I look down at my taupe ankle boots with fringe and the royal blue spaghetti-strap dress Julia suggested I wear. It's soft and silky, and I'm freezing, but I don't think I'll be here long anyway. I think about my dorm room, already itching to get back to it. These days I rarely leave except for class and BB's, and my friends are right—I'm a sad sack of shit.

I push the door open and the blare of Sir Mix-a-Lot hits me in the face. Nice.

The basement is semi-dark and decorated with tons of black and gold streamers hanging from the ceiling. A poster hangs on the wall: *Take It All The Way, Lions*. There's even a banner with pictures of the players in their uniforms plastered next to the DJ booth.

My friends, who've obviously been waiting by the door, dash over. Taylor and Poppy are decked out in black and gold since we won our game in the tournament last night. Taylor's wearing a glittery shirt with a lion on the front and Poppy matches him in a gold cardigan and black pants. Only Julia is the holdout in a clingy green dress and black stilettos. A

familiar, tall guy in jeans and a grey sweater stands behind her, and she presents him gently as if she's afraid I'll rip his face off.

"Hi," I say as the not-date-but-just-a-guy-I-agreed-to-meet-up-with gives me a grin, the same one he's been giving me in class for the past few weeks. He is handsome, with dark hair, broad shoulders, and a muscular build. I guess it comes from being the wide receiver for the football team. Julia swears she's never hooked up with him, but she did meet him the same night I met Z at the Kappa party. Turns out, they have two classes together, and a tentative friendship has ensued.

Dallas looks at me appreciatively. "Hey. You look beautiful. I'm glad you made it. Some of these guys were doubtful." He throws a glance at Poppy, who snorts.

"Dude, she hates these things," she says.

Taylor smiles. "I knew she'd show. Kappa parties don't scare her."

"I'm only scared of pixie girls who think I'm flirting with their boyfriends." I laugh.

"There must be a story there," Dallas says, and I nod as our friends eye us with interest and sip on their drinks.

I can practically hear Taylor cooing, wanting me to be into this guy.

And I get it.

They're worried about me. They want me to be happy.

I nod, giving them a thumbs-up.

Let them believe it.

But...

Dallas isn't going to fix me. I need out of Sparrow Lake and away from HU. I need distance from Z.

Dallas is charming, though, and I laugh at all the right times, even though my eyes keep sweeping the room.

A few drinks later—yes, I have the punch—and Dallas and Taylor are talking about the next championship hockey game that’s coming up, and my chest tightens. It’s enough that his face is everywhere, even in the news. I think back to the press conference a few days ago, and I feel a sense of relief about him going public.

Julia hooks her arm in mine. “I’m going to the bar. Come with?”

I give her a nod and we tell the others we’ll be back in a minute.

We weave through the crowd and a hand grabs me to spin me around.

My stomach drops.

But it isn’t Z.

Dressed in tight black pants and a Goo Goo Dolls short-sleeved shirt that showcases his nice arms and colorful tattoos, it’s Bennett. The brunette from the Topsy Moose hangs on to him and it doesn’t even make me blink. Not one ounce of pain.

“Sugar!” He takes me in, his eyes brightening, taking in my dress.

“Hey.” My gaze drifts to the girl at his side and she just shrugs at me. Huh. He found someone who lets him do whatever, I guess? Well. Good for him.

He takes a step closer to me. “I’m glad I saw you, actually. I’ve wanted to tell you I’m sorry, really sorry about how I treated you. I didn’t do the right thing by you.”

I nod. “Okay.” Bye now.

Julia says she’s going to the bar, and I want to flip around and follow, but Bennett catches my arm, his gaze pleading, and I pause. “Truly,” he says, laying a hand on his heart, and I briefly wonder if he was always this dramatic and somehow I just missed it.

“I hope you’re good, Bennett.” And I mean it.

He smirks. “Will you forgive me for being a dickhead, babe?”

I laugh and he laughs along with me, looking a little unsure.

A slow song comes on, an Ed Sheeran tune, and Bennett gives me another lingering look.

Oh, shit. Please do not ask me to dance.

“Want to dance?” he says with a cocked eyebrow. “One more time for old times’ sake?”

“Uh...”

A gentle hand lands on my shoulder, and I turn to see Dallas behind me, looking rather awkward, and I get it when I see Julia and Poppy behind him. My eyes narrow. So, she didn’t go to the bar, instead circling back and bringing him over to save me.

“I’m here to see if you need rescuing,” he says under his breath. “Or we can dance?”

I think about it and part of me wants to know what it feels like to have strong arms slide around me and guide me as we move together.

I take his hand and we head to the dance floor. I send Bennett a parting wave.

“He looks like you kicked him,” Dallas says, and I laugh up at him.

“Nah, trust me, he’ll rebound quick.”

He nods, looking down at me until I break our gaze. Dallas is nice, *he is*, but...

We’re quiet as we sway to the music, a few inches between us, and I like his arms around me even if they aren’t the ones I want.

A buzz goes through the air, an electric stillness that hums, and I freeze. The party seems to dampen down a notch, and my eyes scour the room, looking, feeling him.

I find Z near the door, but he hasn't seen me yet.

He's a goddamn fantasy come to life and my breath hitches in my chest. Tall, massive, and looming over those around him, his hair is wild, grown out, the dark beard on his jawline contrasting vividly with the lighter strands on his head.

His gaze sweeps the room, eyeing groups of people and moving on, flitting from person to person as he scans the perimeter and then looks to the dance floor.

Our gazes lock.

The temperature drops as his eyes move from me to Dallas, hardening before flying back to me. Accusing—until that emotion is shuttered.

Some girl I don't know has her arm hooked into his.

"You okay?" Dallas looks down at me and follows my gaze. "Ah, shit."

Bitterness builds within me as I watch them move through the crowd, people slapping his back and congratulating him on the win.

"You good?" Dallas asks, and I turn back to him.

"Just keep dancing."

I feel winded, my body acutely aware of every move Z makes as he strides his way across the room, getting lost in the sea of people. I lean my head on Dallas's shoulder so I don't have to watch Z.

I should leave the party. That's the rational thing to do.

But I can't. It's like I need to see him. I need to see that he's moved on.

My neck prickles as if someone is staring, and I look over.

Z and his date are dancing next to us.

His eyes are on me, and my heart dips.

Dammit.

I never should have come.

This can't go on. *Why am I torturing myself?*

I stop in my tracks, murmur, "I'm sorry," to Dallas, and bolt away.

ZACK



“**A**nd this is Carrie,” Eric says out in the parking lot of the Kappa House as the girl in question gives me a shy smile and walks over.

She’s pretty with long dark hair and...everything else, I guess.

I don’t know. Whatever.

We’re standing in the crisp April night air, and the sounds of the party come from just behind that door. I haven’t been to a party since...forever...and I’m definitely not in the mood to meet a girl, but Eric seems to think I need to jump back in the game with dating. He’s given up on Sugar and me getting back together.

Eric grins, dressed in slacks and a slick button-up shirt. His hair is tamed and he’s got that *I’m gonna party* look on his face.

I arch a brow at him and we have a silent conversation.

Enjoy the girl, he says with his green gaze.

Fuck off.

He rolls his eyes and I blow out a breath. He just wants me to be the way I used to be, pre-Sugar.

I won’t ever be the same.

He throws an arm around the girl in question, and when she smiles, I realize I’ve already forgotten her name.

“Just thought you might like some company after our big win. She’s friends with Eleanor.”

“I’m glad you agreed to meet me,” the girl gushes.

Yeah. This is all Eric.

He gives me a look, an indication for me to be polite, but I think I see something else there too, a reminder that Sugar isn’t part of my world anymore.

Bitterness pulls at me. Maybe dating is the right thing—or at least going through the motions.

Takes one to get over one, Eric told me earlier.

“I’m so glad we’re finally getting together,” she says. “I’m a huge hockey fan and I’ve followed your career since prep school. You’re amazing.”

“Yeah.”

“You know,” she says as Eric goes on ahead of us, “we don’t even have to go inside if you don’t want. It’s been a long tournament and I’m sure you need to just relax.” I get her meaning when she leans in and stares up at me with big brown eyes.

I want blue ones, though, and it makes me antsy. I clear my throat and step away from her, but she’s right there, following.

“The Kappa guys expect us to show. It’s a tradition,” I mumble, glad for once to use it as an excuse.

She flutters her eyes. “Oh. Sure. I get it. Maybe we can pop in, show our faces, and leave?” Her lips curve up, and a few months ago I would have been all about that mouth.

I rub my beard. “I’ll probably stay a while. Do you have your own way home in case you want to leave?”

She nods, frowning.

I guess I’m not the charmer she thought.

She eases in closer, and we walk inside the Kappa House.

I feel the buzz in the air as I look out over the crowd, a vibe that grows. I see Taylor and Poppy and my heart jumps.

She's here. My gaze roves over the room, searching the dark corners, and my eyes widen when I find her on the dance floor.

I'm breathless at the sight of her, the way her hair falls down her back and the short blue dress that sways against her legs. *Shit.* She looks so beautiful...I can't...I can't...

She cranes her neck, searching the room, her eyes wide, and I know, *I know* it's me she's looking for. Right? Or has she forgotten me already?

My hands clench, battling with myself to not rush over and pluck her out of the arms of whoever the fuck she's dancing with and tell her she—

“What's going on?” says the girl next to me, but I ignore her and walk in closer, needing Sugar to see me.

The girl follows, calling my name, but it doesn't register.

I come to a halt near the bar, my chest rising as our eyes collide.

Anger flies over me when I take in the guy she's with. His hand, his motherfucking hand is on her lower waist, close to her ass—

Sugar looks at me, and her face is flat.

My jaw pops. *Fuck*, kill me now. Why can't we get this right?

The girl pulls on my arm. “Let's dance.”

“No.”

She stops and looks up at me, her face slowly reddening. “I feel like everyone's staring at us.”

“They are. They always are.” My voice is tired.

“Please,” she says, and I give her a look, take her hand, and head straight toward Sugar on the dance floor.

We make our way out there, and my eyes are glued on this guy and his arm around Sugar's waist. I slow dance, but I'm barely aware of the girl I'm with. I stare at Sugar until she looks up and sees me.

She pales and takes off, and the guy looks after her with a perplexed expression then gazes back at me, accusation there.

Oh, hell no.

Hell no.

My fist is aching to crush his face—

No. No.

Not important.

Don't screw up now.

I see a flash of blonde hair up on the stairs, and I know exactly where she's headed.

Leaving the girl on the dance floor, I don't even say goodbye. I'm taking the steps two at a time, but Sugar's way ahead of me. I hit the third-story landing, noting the blessed silence, and make my way to the screened-in porch. I burst through the door, pushing it wide open, taking in the landscape of Sparrow Lake, the twinkling lights of the small town and campus.

I hear her breathing before I see her, huddled in the corner, her hands wrapped around her upper arms.

"Go away," she says, and I tremble at the sound of her voice.

SUGAR



The porch pulses as he stalks toward me, his shoulders tense and bunched. He's whipped off his jacket somewhere in the process of getting here, and the sleeves of his button-up are rolled to his elbows. My eyes are hungry.

“Nothing is as bad as that,” I say, swallowing. “Seeing you with someone.”

He paces in front of me, his lips in a hard, yet sensuous line.

I look away.

He strides closer, getting in my personal space, and I smell him, my lips parting slightly. He puts his hands on the wall behind me, one on either side of my head, and his chest hitches.

I close my eyes as he leans in and runs his nose up my collarbone to the hollows of my neck. His shoulders shift closer to me, puffs of air mingling with the touch of his beard against my skin.

Shivers break out over my body. *I can't... God...*

He's spicy and male with a hint of pine, and I put up a fortress around me, trying to keep my heart safe.

His finger tilts my face up.

I think of the girl downstairs.

“Fuck you,” I say, barely pushing the words out, but there’s no mistaking the ache wrapped around the syllables. I jerk my chin from his grasp.

He closes his eyes, a muscle flexing in his jaw. Finally, he just breathes, just fucking breathes in front of me, emotions warring across his face.

He opens his eyes and looks up at the sky, as if he’s done, as if he’s given up.

And I can’t resist.

Maybe I just want to piss him off.

Maybe I just want him to *stay*.

“You lied to me,” I say.

In two seconds he’s back in my space. “You didn’t give it a chance. Was it lack of faith, Sugar? Or just an excuse for you to give up before it got hard? Because you know what? I am hard.”

I try to brush past him, but his hand reaches out and grabs mine, lacing our fingers together. It’s such a simple touch, but it’s his little thing, all him, and I whimper.

“Wait, shit, wait,” he says.

Something in his voice stops me and we stare at each other, the air crackling.

His other hand trails up my skin, skimming my upper arm, drifting to my neck where his fingers curl around my nape. “Always *you*.”

He pushes his fingers into my hair and kisses me hard and it only takes a few seconds—I kiss him back, nipping at his lips and...*yes, yes, yes*...this is what I need, what I want.

His tongue strokes against mine, demanding and assertive, and my body lights up. His lips know how to play me, hitting the perfect notes. I’ve craved the taste of him, the feel of his shoulders under my hands for weeks. His lips wreak havoc on my neck, kissing and nipping, and my fingers dig into his

scalp, tugging on his hair. I commit the kiss to memory so I can replay it a million times in my head.

Trying to catch my breath, I pull away, and his thumb tugs at my bottom lip. “Did you come here to see me?” It’s not a cocky comment; it’s layered with hope, and I’m falling down that hole again. He’s the one pushing and there’s nothing there to catch me.

I inhale, gathering myself. “Did you kiss me because I look like Willow?”

He closes his eyes. “Fuck,” he whispers. “Don’t do that. Don’t put her here. This is about me and you.”

Tears push at my eyelids as I remember that letter, his words—words he never said to me. “Maybe I did run off, but here I am now, Z. Tell me everything. Tell me how you feel.” All I need from him is just an inkling...

His face pales in the moonlight. “I can’t, Sugar. Not yet. Just give me time.”

Time to sit at fountains with girls named Lola. Time to walk into the Kappa party with another girl.

There’s a distance on his face as he looks at me, a pulling away, and I blink rapidly, trying, trying—*shit*, trying to hold myself together and not cry in front of him. The tears fall anyway and I can’t stop them. He’s not who I thought he was at all. I knew I was going to get burned by him, and here’s the proof.

So, I do what I always do.

I untangle myself from him and walk away.

ZACK



The championship game is finally here.

Sitting on the bench in my T-shirt and running shorts, I wrap my stick with methodical precision.

You deserve hockey. You deserve happiness.

Once my stick is ready, I stand and roll my shoulders, relaxing my muscles and shaking out my arms. Tonight's game is about putting everything shitty behind me and focusing on what's ahead, and I've been working on my mental concentration, familiarizing myself with the stats of every player on the opposing team and memorizing every single play I need. What I can't do is think about anything else. Tonight, it's me and the ice. Tonight's the finals, and I'm determined we're going to win that trophy and bring it home.

Eric sits down on the bench in front of me, closes his eyes, and takes deep, even breaths.

"Meditating?" I ask.

He gives me a nod, keeping his eyes shut.

"Copycat. Want me to hum some kumbaya?"

He gives me a shrug and pops his eyes open. "Honestly, it just makes me sleepy."

I'm about to reply, but my breath hitches as a tall young woman with wavy blonde hair walks past the open door of the locker room.

She turns to speak to one of the reporters in the hallway.
Not her.

But still, my head goes to the Kappa party a few days ago.

She walked away from me and this time, I couldn't blame her. I'm not ready to do what she needs. I let her go and once I composed myself, I went downstairs. She was gone, not that I was surprised. I went home alone.

I have to focus on the game, the reason I'm here.

Eric gives me a look that's half grin, half scared-as-shit grimace. "You ready, man?"

"Hell yeah." I look at the silver medallion necklace my mom gave me, and there's comfort in slipping it around my neck and tucking it under my gear.

Nothing gold can stay is true, but tonight, it's going to burn bright.

~

MY HELMET IS in my hands and my gloves are off, tucked up under my arm as I look up at the black and gold confetti raining down on us. I look over at Eric, who's still got a huge smile on his face. He skates up to me and punches me in the arm, and I laugh. We beat Minnesota-Duluth 6 to 5 in a well-fought, tooth-and-nail fight to the bitter end. Four of those goals were mine, but I thought it was over when I took a slap shot to the leg in the second period and went down. Convinced something was broken, the medics whisked me to the locker room, but I was fine and ran back out to score again.

"Congratulations on the championship!" a reporter says.

Reece skates over and we all three stand with our arms around each other, confetti blanketing the rink in the Wisconsin arena. Reporters call out and cameras flash and the music is loud, the fans who followed us all the way here clapping and cheering in their HU shirts. I hear my name being chanted, and I huff out an embarrassed laugh as my eyes scan the seats, checking the rows...needing, wishing, *hoping*.

But I don't see her blonde hair.

Not that I thought she would come since the game was out of town, but many students did, and I guess part of me just wanted her to be here.

A reporter sticks a microphone in my face. “Truly a night to remember, Zack?”

I nod. “Absolutely. Best night ever.”

But that’s not entirely true.

Not until she’s with me.

SUGAR



I'm at the bar in the Topsy Moose and the crowd around me is going nuts, glasses raised as they toast and cheer for the HU win in Madison, Wisconsin. My eyes are glued to the screen, to Z. He's skating around and girls are throwing flowers at him. He laughs and waves, that familiar shuttered expression on his face.

Taylor wiggles in his seat. "Four fucking goals. Huge game for him. Mind-blowing."

Julia thumps him on the head with her finger. "Stop with the play-by-play of the hot hockey players."

"You said hot—do you mean *Eric*?" Taylor says with snark and then turns to me and pats me on the back. "Sorry, love, all that testosterone got me jacked."

Putting on a brave face, I laugh. I wouldn't even be here tonight if my friends hadn't insisted. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror behind the bar and sigh. My hair is lackluster and flat, my eyes have shadows under them, and there's zero lipstick on my lips. I'm empty. And I'm so ready to get the hell out of Sparrow Lake.

Julia slaps a hand on the bar. "I need everyone's attention."

We all look, and I'm thinking she's finally going to spill the beans on boning Eric then falling in love then getting cheated on—or so my theory goes, at least—but she waves at the bartender and orders us a round of tequila shots.

She hands them out and looks at me. “I just want to toast Sugar. She’s had a shit few weeks, but she did get some good news today.”

Taylor and Poppy lean in. “What happened?”

I smile. “I got my acceptance email and official letter from Belmont in Nashville. It’s a topnotch school and the tuition is surprisingly reasonable. I’m headed to law school, bitches!”

Whoops go up and hugs ensue. We toss back drinks and they continue to congratulate me, and I can’t help but smile. What I don’t tell them is that I did indeed get an email from the dean of admissions at Vandy, and he was thrilled to offer me a spot that opened up because someone dropped. I figured it was the letter of recommendation that sealed the deal and even though that is a legit way to get in, the appeal had faded. I told him no.

“Urgent” by Foreigner rings on my cell.

“What’s up?” I ask Mara, infusing my voice with joy.

“Just called to say good luck on your trip to Davenport. Also, I saw they won.”

I draw a doodle with my finger on the bar napkin. I leave tomorrow to fly to Birmingham to attend George’s will reading. I realized this will be my only opportunity to say the things I want to say, to see half-siblings I might never see again. Part of me is torn, nervous about stepping into their perfect little world, anxious about how I compare. But, I know I don’t want any regrets, and if that’s really true, I need to see them.

“Thanks. I’ll keep you updated.”

There’s a long pause. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you? It wouldn’t be a big deal. Luis can hold down the fort for a spell.”

It would be nice to have company on the flight and then especially when I walk into that house, but...

“Thank you, but no. You’re being sweet but you can’t spare the time, and actually, I’m looking forward to getting out

of town.”

She tells me she loves me and I end the call, finish up my drink, and tell my friends goodbye.

“So when you get back, you’re gonna be rich, right?” Poppy says as the trio walks me to my truck.

I huff out a laugh. I haven’t said a peep about the money, and it’s driving them crazy.

Julia smirks at my dented-up Toyota. “Wouldn’t it be nice to drive something else?”

“Mercedes.” Taylor snaps his finger at me. “I know what you bloody like.”

I give them a final hug since I won’t see them until after spring break. I head back to the dorm, and I guess I should be preparing to meet my “family”, but all I can see in my head is Z. I hope...I hope he’s happy.

IT’S MUCH LATER, when I’m asleep, that a loud bang reverberates on my door. I open my eyes, sit up, and grab my phone—it’s one in the morning. *Shit. Julia?* Did she forget her keys? She would have texted, though. I get up and walk over to her side of the room, and sure enough, she isn’t home. I recall Taylor and Poppy wanting to try out a new dance club...

“Who is it?” I call out. All I have on is a pair of blue boy-cut panties and a bright pink tank top with BB’s logo.

“Me.”

I feel lightheaded at the sound of Z’s voice and before I know it, I’m standing at the door. I lean against it. “Why are you here?”

“Let me in, Sugar. Please.”

I swallow. “I’m not sure I should.”

“Please.” His voice is scratchy and barely there and I guess he’s hoarse from the game. *Wait...*

I yank the door open, shocked at his haggard appearance as he leans his arm on my doorjamb.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in Wisconsin with the team? I—I thought y’all didn’t fly home until tomorrow...” My voice stops, eagerly taking him in. He might be a shell of himself, but he looks eased, and there’s a softness around his mouth that wasn’t there at the Kappa party. His hair is everywhere, a tousled mess, but he’s shaved recently. There are still shadows on his skin and that empty look in his eyes, the one I see when I look in the mirror.

His gaze roves over me and he blinks, as if he’s taken aback. “Coach gave me permission to rent a car and drive back. It took four hours, but I had to see you.”

I just...stand there.

Frustration flits through his eyes and he rubs his hands over his face. “I drove straight to the rental place after the game. I haven’t slept, and I think I’m dreaming now that I see you...” His shoulders bunch up, his face weary. “I’ve made some mistakes, and fuck, I couldn’t talk to you, but I’m here. I’m ready.”

ZACK



Fuck. She's achingly beautiful with all her hair spilling around her bare shoulders, trailing down to her chest.

She gives me a hesitant nod and opens the door further. I ease inside, still dressed in the running clothes I put on after my shower in the locker room.

"What's up with the luggage?" I ask, eyeing the brown leather bag sitting on her desk as we walk inside.

"I'm flying to Davenport tomorrow—today, actually."

"Shit." I stare down at her. "The will."

"Yeah." She crosses her arms over her chest and looks away from me.

"I didn't think you were going." I've missed so much.

"I changed my mind." She motions to her side of the room and I head to her bed, falling back on it and sinking into her pillows. *Fuck*, I missed this. Her scent drifts around me, and I close my eyes and inhale.

I'm not looking but I hear her moving around as she opens up her closet.

"Shot of tequila?" she asks, and I shake my head no, shifting my gaze and watching her. "Well, I think I will have one." Her hand trembles as she pours a splash into a paper cup and tosses it back. She looks back at me. "Why are you here?"

I ease up until I'm sitting. I'm fucking beat, my body spent from the series of games we've had these past couple weeks.

“Why am I here?” I huff out a laugh. “For you. Always you.”

“Took you a while.” She studies me and her eyes are bright, as if she’s holding emotion back.

A long sigh comes from me. “I had to finish my season.”

“Hockey is first. I get it.” Her voice is shaky, and I sigh, knowing she’s hurting just as much as I am.

“No, it’s not like that.” I pause. “You gave up on us first, and I knew if I begged you to come back and you rejected me again, that...fuck, I might never go back and play.”

She looks down at her drink. Her lip trembles.

“You crushed me when you walked out, Sugar.” My voice cracks.

She blinks. “You know why I left.”

I let that go for a second, gathering myself as I stare at my hands. “I’ve been thinking about this conversation for weeks, and I need you to listen. God, please...just give me a chance.”

I glance up, and she’s watching me. “You’re here. Say whatever you want to say.”

“You weren’t prepared for how good it was between us.”

She stares at me.

“And when you discovered the truth about Willow, it was the proof you needed that I was just like everyone else.” I sigh. “But the thing is, you love me. You can’t breathe without me. You want me just as much as I want you.” I swallow, feeling panicked and thinking maybe I’m pushing her too far, but I have to. If you want the gold, you have to give it your all.

“It’s killing us both,” I say, pushing myself up to standing. “Seeing you dancing with some guy—I wanted to fucking kill him—” I take a deep breath. *Let that shit go. You don’t own her.* “I need to tell you about Willow.”

She takes a seat near the window and I pace around the room, wanting to go to her to hold her, but I need to get this all out. “Growing up, our mothers were best friends and Willow’s family was always around, hanging out, having dinners. We

even took vacations together. When I turned sixteen, we went from friendship to sex to what I thought was love. But we were just kids.

“My mom passed away right before Christmas and then Willow told me she was pregnant a few weeks later. Two huge things slammed into me and I handled it like I do all things—I pushed it away and withdrew to figure it out. Should I marry her and come to HU and wait for her to graduate high school? Should I give up college hockey and stay with her? Should we get an abortion? What was I going to say to her parents? I wanted to do the right thing so bad, but I also wanted to play hockey. All of it freaked me out, and I didn’t show up to meet her at a party one night. I told Reece to take care of her, said I’d be there later. I was on my way when I came up on the cops and her car.”

Sadness washes over me, but I power through, clearing my throat.

“Listen to me, Sugar. I *never* felt for her the way I do you, not even a sliver of the same emotion. She isn’t you. Yes, you favor with the hair and similar features, but put you two side by side and it’s not even close anymore. Her eyes were brown. Yours are blue. You’re vastly different. It’s like me and Reece—we look alike, but once you know us, we are *so different*. I mean, can you tell the difference between the two of us?”

She nods and looks out the window. “You said you loved her forever. You said how different your life would be if she were here.”

I nod. “And it would be. I’d probably have a kid and be married...I think obligation would have made me do what I thought was right. I wrote those letters—hell, I lied to her to let go of the grief.” My voice shakes. “Grief is a strange, terrible thing, Sugar. It rips you up inside.”

Varying emotions flit across her face. For once, she’s impossible to read, and my hands ache to touch her, to hold her and sooth those worry lines off her face.

“How am I different?”

I huff out a laugh. “You’re tall, feisty, a bit of a sexual deviant, quirky to the point of awkwardness, and a sugar fiend. You’re fucking perfect.”

She chews on her lip. “But when you saw me at the Kappa party...”

“You looked like her, it’s true, and it stunned me, but *you* were the girl in that bathroom. You were the girl I kissed out on that porch. Willow and I...we were just teenagers, and we never had the emotional connection you and I do.” I sigh. “The day you showed up at my house with the pie, it took me a minute to process the resemblance, but as soon as you smiled, it was all you. Your hair, your lips, your face. I never meant to fall for someone who resembles her, but you...you were irresistible. I didn’t feign interest in you for therapy or to work out my guilt. I did it because I couldn’t resist you. I *love* you.” I’m breathing hard, my chest heaving. *What if this isn’t enough...what if...*

She gets up and comes to me, and I exhale as she leans her head against my shoulder. Her arms curl around my waist, and the feel of her against me, the scent of her hair in my nose... I’m home.

“Sugar?”

She shakes her head, her face buried in my chest, and she sniffs.

“Don’t cry, please, babe—shit—*fuck*, I called you babe.” I suck in a breath, my arms tight around her. “Sugar, I’m sorry, so damn sorry I couldn’t come to you sooner and didn’t tell you the moment I knew I should have. I was just so scared. I tremble at the idea of you rejecting me because I’ve never felt this way about anyone in my whole fucking life, and I know I’m fucked up and I need help and I know you get me. You get me, and I can’t live without you. I can’t.” My words are running together and my face is wet and hers is too and...and I can’t wait. I tilt her face up and kiss her.

It’s all we do for a long time.

~

I WAKE up around eight the next morning, and we're on her bed, both of us having fallen asleep after talking until nearly four.

I stare down at her, memorizing her full lips, that little indentation right in the middle.

I told her about Reece and his involvement with Willow, about the girl Eric set me up with and how shitty it was. She asked me about Lola and I admitted to showing up at class to see her. I tell her how I froze up and ended up leaving without talking to her. Lola wasn't anything but a feeble attempt to get a reaction out of Sugar when I saw her come into the student center.

I explained everything going on behind the scenes with the Predators, which is basically wait and see. I'm signing my contract with them as soon as I graduate and I don't think I'll be able to give the team a definitive answer about my anxiety until the season arrives. I'm not quitting though. I can't. It's not in me.

My gaze drifts over the room, once again taking in the duffle.

Her eyes open as if she's hardwired to me, and I give her a tentative kiss on the mouth. We held each other and talked, but shit, I still don't know what's in her heart.

I'm not stopping until she is mine again.

"Give me another chance," I say.

She turns over, grabs her phone, and then rolls out of bed. My eyes drift over her, taking in the tank top and panties. The fact that I kept my hands off her last night is a miracle. But I did.

She's darting around the room, rummaging through drawers and pulling out underclothes. "Ah, I need to get out of here. My plane leaves in a few hours."

"I'm coming with you." I jump out of bed, my adrenaline already pumping.

Her gaze flares as she stares at me. “Don’t you have a parade on campus today or something? Kappa party, etcetera?”

I do, but I’m going to call Coach. The trophy is won and I can’t be without her another day. “Just let me pop in the shower real quick.” I wiggle my brows. “Better yet, join me.”

“You don’t have a plane ticket.” She looks around as if one might magically appear.

“I’ll buy one at the airport.”

She sputters. “But what will you tell your coach and the fans?”

“That I had somewhere important to be—with you. I’m done with HU. You are all that matters.”

She blinks and then takes a deep breath.

I grin. “Is that a yes?”

She nods.

SUGAR



The entire flight to Birmingham, I stare at Z while he sleeps, head laid back, an extra pair of my headphones on as he zones out. We managed to get him a seat on the plane and then arranged to sit together. As people passed by while walking down the aisle, some passengers asked for his autograph and he went along with it, his face blank and shuttered. But when he looked at me, he glowed, and his face—it was open and free and happy.

I think about all the things he said last night, about how much he loves me, just me, and as if he knows I'm thinking of us, his hand twitches in mine, and he gives it a squeeze.

His eyes open and he sits up then gazes down at me. "What are you thinking about?" There's an earnestness in his expression, as if he's been patiently waiting for me to pick up the reins of what's between us.

"You. I've never seen you this chill."

He tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. "I'm happy. Are you?"

I nod.

He leans over and brushes his lips against mine. Emotion wells up in his gaze. "We are so good together, Miss Ryan. I fucking love you. I want this. I want you. If you're not sure, I'll wait. I'm not saying I'll do it patiently or I won't end up fucking you when you look at me with those big eyes, but I understand if you need some space. Shit, I'm not even making sense, am I?"

I stare up at him, taking in the stony features that are drawn up tight as he waits for me to respond. I see a half-wild look in his gaze, hope mixed with tension and strain.

“Tell me what you need, please, just tell me and I’ll do it. I want us to be right.”

And I know.

I know.

He adores me. He has the whole time. The anxiousness of his face slays me. He’s needed me next to him all this time while we were apart, and I let him go, I walked away from him because I was scared I was letting him too close. But not anymore. Love doesn’t work if you don’t commit to it fully, taking the bad with the good. Love doesn’t work if two people aren’t willing to give and take. I should have given him a chance that night. I should have listened. And in the end, I’m not like my mama, I’m not. She made a bad choice, but Z is not a bad choice. He’s opened himself up to me and shown me parts of himself that no one knows about. He chose *me* and it had nothing to do with Willow.

“What?” he says. “You have a funny look on your face.”

“I’m just thinking about the day you taught me to ice skate—or tried to, however you want to look at it. You told me to not be afraid to fall, and I’m not. I’m all in with you.” I rub my hand across his jaw and my fingers feel the pulse between us. “I love you so much, Z. I don’t want to ever be apart from you again.”

He exhales and his eyes close briefly, a long deep breath coming from his chest, one he seemed to have been holding since we woke up. “You, Sugar Rae Ryan. Always you.”

I kiss him.

~

AFTER RENTING a Suburban on Z’s dime because he insisted, we begin our three-hour drive to Davenport. He’s got one hand laced with mine and he can’t stop looking at me, his gaze

taking me in appreciatively, and I have to tell him to watch the road.

I laugh at the giddiness in my heart, at the smell of springtime in the air, at the feeling of hope in my chest.

I check my lipstick in the mirror.

“You’re fucking gorgeous.” His eyes drift over my flowy white skirt and the fitted black shirt with a white pearl-lined Peter Pan collar. It’s a little understated but classy. To make it pop, I splurged on a pair of leopard print heels that Taylor found for me.

I cross my legs, and he looks at them and grins. “Feeling tense, Miss Ryan? I can make all that go away.” He raises an eyebrow.

“Keep your eyes on the road, hockey player.”

“I can pull over if you want. Don’t we have an hour to spare?” He sends me a pleading look, the mere flash of his smile enough to make my pulse flare.

“We do,” I murmur then reach over and kiss down his neck, my fingers toying with the buttons on a dress shirt he grabbed at the airport. It’s pale blue and a little tight across the shoulders, and I wonder if I just pulled on that one button—

He turns off the main road, taking us down about a mile on a tiny gravel road. He throws the car in park, takes off his seat belt, cups my face, and lays one on me. Our lips cling and cling and his tongue is taking and sucking and wanting everything. My hands slide into his hair and pull on the strands as he groans.

In between kisses, he murmurs, “I want to fuck you in this car. Now. Can you please push that skirt up and get in my lap? I’m not sure how it will work, but I’m willing to see.”

“Do you have Super Dick?” I ask him with a little laugh, and he glances down at his tented jeans.

“Uh, yeah. He wants you. I want you.”

“How fast can we do this?” I’m asking as I check around us. It’s quiet out, a two-lane road, just forest and telephone

lines.

“Fast, but you will come.” A squirrel darts out onto the gravel road we’re on, gives us a glare, and dashes off. “He’s the only one out here,” Z murmurs as his hand drifts under my hair. “Come on, Sugar Baby, get over here and ride me.”

I snort-laugh; I can’t help it. “Sugar Baby?” I shake my head. “You know what? I’ll take it. I kinda like it. It’s not babe, and you put my name in it.”

His lips dance across mine. “I know. You like everything I do.”

“Cocky, aren’t you?” My body leans into his as he fumbles over me and unlatches my seat belt. He throws back his seat as far as it will go and I pull my skirt up, crawl over the center console, and straddle him. It’s not easy with my heels on, and there are a few grunts and giggles before I get it right.

His hands are on my ass, pulling me against his jeans, and I murmur his name as we kiss. His hard length rubs against my panties, and I run my hands over his shoulders, through his hair, and back to his chest. He’s mine, all mine, and I never want this feeling to go away. I’ll follow him to the ends of the earth. If he goes through darkness, I’ll go with him and bring him back out every time. I tell him and he kisses me.

Rising up, I give him room to unbutton his jeans, and I laugh as he struggles to push them down a bit, just enough for his cock to pop out. I wrap my hands around him and stroke, rolling my fingers over his blunt head.

“Need you so bad,” he says. His fingers move my underwear to the side, and he gives me one, easing in and back out. “So hot. I’m going to fuck you until you can’t think and later when we find a hotel room, I’m going to do wicked things to you...”

He positions his length and eases in my entrance, barely there and then sliding back out. He strokes in again, going deep, and we groan. His pace picks up, his hands under my skirt and on my hips to hold me steady, and I lean back, arching to give him room.

I ride him and we gaze at each other, eating each other up. My fingers touch my skin, moving across my breasts to my stomach until I'm at my core, my hand brushing against him as he slides in and out.

"Sugar Baby, fuck," he says, staring at me, his hips pumping faster, his hands digging into my hips.

His eyes gleam with heat when I touch myself, massaging my clit as I fall over the edge, my body pulsating around him. He calls out my name and tumbles over with me, his arms wrapping around me, clutching me tight as if he'll never let me go.

~

"WE NEED TO GO," I say several minutes later as I still lie against him, my head buried in his neck. He's stroking my hair, twirling it around his fingers. I know he's probably uncomfortable with me on top of him, but he hasn't said a word.

He tilts my jaw up with care, his fingers trailing over my cheek and to my neck. There's a light in his eyes, and I can't describe the feeling of true elation it gives me. His throat moves, emotion shining in his gaze as he searches my face. "I...I love you so much."

We kiss and I tell him how much I love him.

"This might be the best day ever," he says softly as I slide off him, adjust my underwear and skirt, and crawl back over to my side.

"Better than winning that game?"

He takes my hand and kisses it. "Sugar Baby, you're the best game I've ever played."

Later, using Google Maps, we pull into the long drive that leads to the Mitchell estate. He parks the car in front of the huge white two-story mansion, which looks straight out of *Gone with the Wind*.

He gets out then comes around to my side of the car and helps me down.

My feet hit the ground and he tucks my hand in the crook of his arm. We walk up the porch steps to the group of people waiting for us.

“I’m Barbara Mitchell,” says the lady in a prim black suit and pearls who greets me without even an introduction from Mr. Winchester. She’s just as tall and hawkish as I recall, a woman who’s known grief and heartache. It’s apparent in the bend of her shoulders, in the unsteady set of her mouth, the way her eyes study me and then blink, looking away. “I’m glad you came.”

I murmur a reply. It’s not a huge welcome, but then what would she say? How must she be feeling, knowing that I’m the product of an affair her husband carried out for years?

I wonder what she thinks of me—and then I stop.

What they believe is unimportant. I know who I am, and my self-worth isn’t defined by an approval rating. She doesn’t know my journey or what it’s taken to get me back here.

Two adults step forward, twins about the same age as me, a young woman and man, both raven-haired and beautiful with an air of sophistication to their demeanor. The man is tall and slim, his clothes expensive. There’s a tentative smile on his face as he takes my hand. “Name’s Beau.” His eyes are the exact color of mine...and kind. It’s hard to take in all at once. I suck in a little internal breath. He’s my half-brother. Part of my blood is his.

“I’m Bianca.” The slender girl next to him gives me a once-over and gives Z a long look. I expect a hint of jealousy because Z is Z, but there’s zilch there but deep curiosity.

I nod.

Mr. Winchester says. “We’ll get started now.”

And we do.

I walk inside a house that, as a young girl, I dreamed of burning down.

And it’s a big step.

I don't know exactly what I'm going to say as this day goes on, but I decided to take the money my father left me. Mr. Winchester is insistent that I do, that it was my father's last dying wish. I'm going to accept it and try not to be bitter about how he treated Mama. I guess this is his way of making up for the past. Perhaps knowing he had cancer changed him. I don't know, but maybe these three people do.

What I do know is I've come full circle. I'm embracing courage and I won't be afraid of falling anymore—with anything. I'm here to discover more about them and maybe focus on being wise, judging less, and being kind. After all, I don't know their journey and the weight it must have been to know I was out there in the world, part of them yet not.

In the end, these three people are not my father, just innocent bystanders with a fate they couldn't control.

Z laces his hand with mine and I know that life is right. He is right. And no matter the obstacles ahead, he's with me.

EPILOGUE

ZACK



It must be a hundred degrees in this room, and I tug at the tight white collar around my neck. Shit, I hate these suits, but *damn* I look good. I catch my reflection in the oval mirror in the dressing room and check out my appearance, taking in the perfect fit of the tailored black suit, hoping it's what it's supposed to be. My hair is styled into a semblance of order and my beard is short and clipped. Luckily, I have all my teeth, which is not an easy feat considering the hard-won hockey season we just wrapped up. I adjust my cufflinks—diamond hockey sticks, a gift from my dad when I finished my first season with the Predators.

A lot has happened in the five years since I graduated from HU and went straight to summer training in Nashville. Yeah, that first year wasn't easy. The coaches put me on the third line and just...let me be. In the meantime, I picked back up with therapy with a new doctor, and even though I don't go three days a week anymore, I do check in once a month. Anxiety still eats at me, and maybe it always will, but it's an enemy I've learned to cope with and handle. I haven't had any freak-outs that took me out of a game, and this year, I was on the first line and helped bring the Stanley Cup to Nashville.

The door flies open.

“Dude, the florist is a whack job. Everything's supposed to be lilies, man, fucking lilies, and we all got these stupid pink rosebuds,” says Eric when he pushes inside and nearly topples a chair. “Pink! It's not part of Sugar's color scheme. These people...”

“Easy now,” I say and bite back a grin at his “color scheme” comment.

He straightens himself in the mirror, brushing at his wild red hair, slicking it back. His suit is the same cut as mine, but it’s a pale grey with a soft gold tie. “On a side note, we look fucking good.” He looks down at his hand where he’s holding a small white flower that looks ridiculous in his big hands. “Anyway, the wedding lady said you had to wear this...lily... and not that thing her assistant put on you earlier.” He frowns. “Man, this wedding business is insane. I’m just keeping it on the down-low because no one wants Sugar to know about the screwup, and I don’t either.” He looks over his shoulder to the hallway of the church’s dressing rooms for the groomsmen. “I’m paranoid she’ll find out and it will ruin her day.”

I arch a brow. He adores Sugar, as does most everyone. She’s...perfect. But my gut knows a simple thing like flowers won’t ruin her day. She might be upset for a second, but we’ve been waiting on this day for a while. “Okay.” I work on unpinning the pink thing I’m apparently not supposed to have on my jacket.

Sugar came to Nashville with me after graduation, and we haven’t been apart since. I found a condo downtown near the stadium, and she moved right in. You’d think those early days of us living together would have been hard, me adjusting to the NHL and her going to law school, but just like everything with us, things fell into place and we developed a rhythm of us, *just us*. Plus Long John Silver.

The truth is I can’t fucking breathe without her next to me, and that isn’t anxiety. That’s just her and how she makes me feel, like I’m on top of the world and I can do anything. She’s earned her law degree and passed the Tennessee bar exam. Now she is doing a judicial clerkship downtown. She may join some high-priced law firm soon, or open her own practice; she’s still mulling it over. But whatever she wants, I’ll help make it happen. I’ll be her anchor when she needs it.

“Dude, why are you smiling? We have a flower situation!”

I laugh and shake my head. Nothing can get to me today.
“Sorry.”

Eric rolls his eyes. “Do you ever stop thinking about her?”

“Nope.”

Eric grins. “Lucky bastard.”

I clap him on the back. “And you’re a stellar best man. Now, pin that tiny flower on me with your big-ass hands and let’s get out there.”



WE’RE INSIDE A BEAUTIFUL, quaint church right outside Nashville, in a revitalized area of town with towering old buildings. I straighten my shoulders and face the entrance of the sanctuary, waiting...waiting for her. I gave her a ring a year ago, a three-carat round diamond, on a ski trip at Christmas with Mara and Reece and my dad. She cried tears of happiness, and the memory still makes me feel warm. Of course, I’d asked her every year we were together to marry me, and she always put me off, saying she wanted to wrap up law school and wanted me to get comfortable in Nashville, but I’ve been ready to make us official since the night I showed up at her dorm room after winning the national championship. Even so, I listened to her, and maybe we were too young then, but when I know what I want, I go after it like a man obsessed.

The church is quiet and the guests are murmuring amongst themselves. I run my eyes over them, seeing Beau and Bianca and Mara in the family area on the bride’s side. Emotion pricks at my eyes. She went through so much as a kid with losing her mom and getting moved from her home to Sparrow Lake, and now she has a relationship with her half-siblings. It’s evolved over the years from tentative to deep, and we make sure to spend time with them when we can. It still blows my damn mind that she’s found something she never knew she could really have.

Reece, on the other side of Eric, clears his throat, leans over, and says, “Bro, have you ever smiled this much?” He grins. We dealt with our issues a long time ago and it’s all old

news. I can't let the past dictate my future, not when I have so much to be thankful for. He's coming into his own now with a nice girlfriend and a job scouting for Hawthorne. And Veronica? Reece kicked her to the curb, and she never showed her face again. The thing is, I'm not even bitter about her. I can't be, not when I have...so much.

The classic wedding march booms from the organ, and all heads swivel to the double wooden door entrance.

Fuck, she's so...

My chest hitches.

Her dress is...shit, I don't know—it's white. The front of it is low cut with some kind of lace thing on top of it, the skirt poufy and soft and covered with sequins and lily cutouts along the hem, and with her height in those sexy heels, she's a freaking angel come to life. I half expect white wings to pop out behind her.

She walks down the aisle...to me...to me...to me.

Pent-up emotion that's been building breaks through, and I feel wetness on my cheeks. I don't care if people know that Z Morgan cries.

What did I ever do to get this girl? To have a love like this? To have this kind of hope in my life?

I can't catch a good breath, not until she's right in front of me. Our eyes meet, mine grey and hers that mesmerizing blue-green color. Her hair is up in an elaborate style with curls and a braid and I...I...

I drop to one knee in front of her. It's not part of what we're supposed to do, not what we practiced last night, but I'm in awe of her. She wants *me*. I can't wrap my head around it most days.

I stare up at her and grasp her hands and brush my lips across them.

She's everything.

She's mine.

She's a symbol of me getting life right.

My love, my hope. Always.



DEAR READER,

Thank you for reading Boyfriend Bargain. I hope you enjoyed Zack and Sugar's story as much as I loved writing it. If you want more passion and angst, take a peek at the first chapter of Maverick and Delany's book [I Dare You](#), or just head straight to the Amazon store to get the entire full-length standalone novel. It is currently FREE in Kindle Unlimited!

Enjoy!

Ilsa Madden-Mills

P.S. Please join my FB readers group, Unicorn Girls, to get the latest scoop as well as talk about books, wine, and Netflix:

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EXCERPT FROM I DARE YOU

I Dare You

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Chapter One

Freshman year

Delaney

Welcome to Magnolia, Mississippi, where locusts are as big as your hand and iced tea comes with a double helping of sugar.

It's also home to the best damn annual bonfire party at prestigious Waylon University, which is currently happening right now in the middle of a cotton field.

But...

I shouldn't even be at this party.

It's mostly for Greeks and jocks and popular people, yet here I am, a mere freshman, hanging out with my bubbly redheaded roommate, Skye.

"See?" she says as we take in the bonfire. "Isn't this better than watching cat videos on a Saturday night? What do you want to do first?"

I sigh, feeling nervous. Ever since I moved here from North Carolina, I've been pushing myself to try new things. Might as well put a crazy college party on that list. "Let's get a drink."

She claps and excitedly replies, “Done. Alcohol at two o’clock.” We weave through the crowd, headed in that direction, and eventually we reach the bar, which is really just a long collapsible table someone set up. On top are various bottles of alcohol, and I grab the Fireball to pour shots. I’ve just tossed mine back and set down my cup when a prickling sensation washes over me, giving me goose bumps.

My gaze moves across the crowd, stopping on a tall guy with dark blond hair, broad shoulders, and a cocky smile. *Aha*. He’s been staring at me, and now that he’s caught, he raises his glass as a half-grin crosses his face.

I blush wildly as I adjust my black cat-eye glasses. I’m not used to such blatant male attention.

Skye—who’s followed the trajectory of my gaze—spits out part of her drink. “Oh my God, do you know who that is?”

“Obviously I should,” I say dryly.

Her mouth flops open. “You really need to get out more.”

My eyes drift back to him but keep moving as if I’m not staring. “So who is Mr. Hottie McParty Pants?”

“If you don’t know him, you don’t deserve to know. But, he’s H-O-T—like Chris Hemsworth hot. I dare you to flirt with him.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me, knowing full well that for some reason, I can’t resist a dare. Normally rather reserved, a dare gives me permission to be someone I’m not.

So does Fireball. I sling back another shot.

“I’ll bring you a donut every day for a week if you flirt with him,” she adds, watching me.

My ears perk up. “The ones with edible glitter?”

She nods, and I toss a quick glance back to him. Our eyes collide again, and a zing of connection fires between us. He has a strong, handsome face and a stance that has masculine written all over it. A smile tips up his full sensuous lips, and—

Two brunettes—twins, no less—approach him, one on either side, and wrap their arms around his waist. He smiles down at them. *Oh. Well then.*

I turn back to Skye and frown. “Player. Not interested.”

She waves her hands in my face. “He likes you—I saw it on his face.”

I snort. “Probably gas pains. Your dare is not accepted.”

We hear our names being called from the other side of the party and turn to take in the helmet-haired Martha approaching us, which is taking some time due to the fact that she’s wearing stilettos and a slinky halter dress. She carefully picks her way through the crowd, nudging people out of her way—sometimes rudely—as she focuses on us. *Great.*

“Incoming mean girl,” I mutter under my breath.

Like us, Martha Burrows is a freshman and lives on our floor. Rather full of herself, she announced within a week of meeting us that she’d no longer answer to anything but *Muffin*, a nickname she’d given herself.

She eyes us both, a look of superiority on her pretty face. “I didn’t know you two were invited to this little shindig. Obviously, I know all the right people, so I’m always invited.” Her gaze zeroes in on my outfit and she rears back. “What on earth are you wearing, Nerd Girl?”

“Clothes.” I stiffen at her name for me as I tug on my fitted Star Wars shirt and the pleated red miniskirt I made from a man’s shirt. My long pale blonde hair is up in curled pigtails, and I went a bit heavy-handed with the shimmery eye shadow and red lipstick. It’s not your typical look for WU—which is anything monogrammed—but I’m learning to ignore the raised eyebrows.

Skye, the peacemaker among us three, clears her throat and nods her head at the guy who’s been staring. “Delaney has an admirer, but she doesn’t know who he is.”

Martha-Muffin follows Skye’s gaze, eyeballing the mystery man over my shoulder. She gives me an exasperated look. “That’s Maverick Monroe, you idiot. He’s the biggest football star in Mississippi and the freshman recruit of the year. Word is, though, girls like you aren’t his type—not at

all.” Her hand flicks a stiff honey-colored curl over her shoulder.

My teeth grind together. “Martha, if you think I care what you think about me and whether or not a quasi-famous football player is interested in me, then you are confused.”

Her lips tighten. “It’s *Muffin* now, and why do you have to use such big words? What does *quasi* even mean?” is her cutting reply.

Skye’s eyes get as big as saucers, and I assume it’s because Martha-Muffin and I are about to finally have it out. I can’t stand her, and she can’t stand me. We just...clash.

But that isn’t what has Skye in such a titter.

She points over my shoulder, and I get it.

It’s the person standing behind me, the one I can’t see. I feel a nervous sneeze coming on and—*thank God*—I somehow push it down.

A husky voice reaches my ears. “*Quasi* means *seemingly* or *supposedly*. What she means is I’m probably not a famous football player but rather one that’s been highly touted but is without merit.”

Oh, shit. The voice is rich and smooth with just enough southern drawl to make a girl swoon. He also sounds halfway intelligent.

I turn around slowly. Mr. Tall, Blond, and Football is right in front of me wearing a cocky smile.

How in the hell did he get over here so fast?

You know that moment when everything stops and the next breath you take is the first one of the rest of your life? That’s what it feels like as Maverick Monroe stares at me with his piercing blue eyes.

I glance down and take in the sculpted chest and hard biceps.

I look back up and see a chiseled jawline that’s defined and lined with a slight scruff. I see the thin pink scar that slices

through his left eyebrow, and it does nothing to detract from his appeal.

He's perfection.

He's air.

Which I desperately need right now, because I can't breathe.

He smirks, as if reading my mind, and I scramble to pull myself together. Someone calls his name—it's a girl's voice, probably one of those twins—but he doesn't budge.

His eyes rove over my skirt, glasses, and lips. "The question is...do you even know what makes a good football player?"

"Nice hands?"

His lips twitch. "Hardly."

"A tight end?" I smirk, feeling sassy...which is weird. I don't know who I am right now, but it's like my mouth has a life of its own, saying things I normally wouldn't.

Martha-Muffin chokes on her drink at my remark and Skye watches me with glee, clearly excited that I have the attention of someone who is apparently *very* important at Waylon.

I put my hand on my hip. "The question is...why do I need to know?"

"You don't. All you need to know is I'm the best."

I suck in a little breath at his arrogance.

A guy walks past us and claps him on the shoulder. "Badass game last week, Mav. Rock on."

"Thanks, man." Maverick acknowledges the compliment and lifts his chin, his eyes never straying from mine.

"What position do you play?" I ask. "Quarterback?"

He smirks. "Middle linebacker—defense."

"Sounds fancy."

He laughs.

Skye, who's been eavesdropping unabashedly, sighs with a dreamy expression on her face. "His stats are the best in the country." She clears her throat. "I-I only know that because my brother is a huge fan, I swear."

"Hi, Maverick," Martha-Muffin says as she edges closer to him, nudging me out of the way with her sharp shoulders. "Remember me?"

He focuses on her. "No."

She glowers. "I was in your dorm room with your roommate last week. You said *hello* to me."

He shrugs. "A lot of girls come through. I can't remember them all."

Oh. My. God. He *is* arrogant, but I like how he just shut her down.

Martha-Muffin's face reddens and she mutters something under her breath, flips around, and flounces off. Good riddance.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Skye is drifting away too, giving me a thumbs-up.

Whatever. I am not going to flirt with this guy...am I?

He's definitely got something about him, something that makes my body buzz. I tilt my chin up, taking in how tall he is. He has to be at least six-four.

His gaze drifts over my face. "You know there's a legend here at Waylon about our famous bonfire party?"

"Oh?"

He smiles, a flash of white on his handsome face. "Legend says the first person you kiss at the party is the one you'll never forget. It might be years later, and still their face is the one you dream about."

"Sounds like hocus-pocus."

He lifts that mesmerizing left eyebrow. "I like to believe in legends—after all, I am one."

I smirk. “Probably a game made up by some frat-boy-slash-jock wanting to kiss all the girls.”

He pauses for a moment as if thinking, and then he steps in closer, so close that I can see the varying shades of blue around his pupils. “May I?”

My heart does somersaults.

“May you what?” I ask, my voice low, but I know what he wants. My body is already leaning toward him, wanting it too.

“This.” He kisses me, an almost imperceptible touch as he brushes his full lips against mine. The contact of our mouths is electric, sparks of fire skating along my skin.

As if from a distance, I hear someone calling his name. It’s a female, and she’s pissed.

It’s one of the twins probably.

And I’m jealous.

But, I don’t look. We pull away, and I stare at him as he stares right back. A stillness settles over the party, although I don’t think anything’s actually changed. The music is still playing. People are still talking. Beers are being passed around.

Yet...

We’re connected.

Two stars in the black velvet sky.

Two ships passing in the night.

Oh, fuck, stop the nonsense, I tell myself.

“What was that?” I ask, my voice breathless.

“That’s your first kiss of the bonfire. Now you’ll never forget me.”

And then, before I can think of a reply, he’s gone.

I watch him go back to the twins, frustration coiling inside of me as I exhale.

It would be two years before I kissed him again.

End Excerpt

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wall Street Journal, *New York Times*, and *USA Today* bestselling author Ilsa Madden-Mills writes about strong heroines and sexy alpha males that sometimes you just want to slap. A former high school English teacher and elementary librarian, she adores all things *Pride and Prejudice*; Mr. Darcy is her ultimate hero. She loves unicorns, frothy coffee beverages, vampire books, and any book featuring sword-wielding females.

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