

A FORBIDDEN GAME OF LOVE

Ruled
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MORGAN PAIGE

RULED OUT

MORGAN PAIGE

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CONTENT WARNING

This novel is intended for readers 18+. It follows a taboo relationship between a college athlete and her coach. If you are uncomfortable with age-gap relationships or explicit sex scenes, this book may not be for you.

For those of you who enjoy forbidden and taboo romance, I hope you love Phoebe and Knox as much as I do. In my opinion, the best kind of love stories are the one's worth fighting for.

Thank you for giving my debut novel a chance. I appreciate you more than you know.

- *Morgan Paige*

PLAYLIST

- “Halley’s Comet” by Billie Eilish
- “Coast” by Hailee Steinfeld, Anderson .Paak
- “Getting Older” by Billie Eilish
- “Wildest Dreams” by Taylor Swift
- “The Heart Wants What It Wants” by Selena Gomez
- “Dangerous Woman” by Ariana Grande
- “Moon Song” by Phoebe Bridgers
- “Happiness is a Butterfly” by Lana Del Rey
- “Nothing New” by Taylor Swift, Phoebe Bridgers
- “Older Than I Am” by Lennon Stella
- “Safety Net” by Ariana Grande, Ty Dolla \$ign
- “Never Be the Same” by Camila Cabello
- “Sex With Me” by Rihanna
- “Uh Oh” by Tate McRae
- “I’m Yours” by Isabel LaRosa
- “Labyrinth” by Taylor Swift
- “Illicit Affairs” by Taylor Swift
- “Favorite Crime” by Olivia Rodrigo
- “Rubberband” by Tate McRae
- “I miss you, I’m sorry” by Gracie Abrams
- “I Love You” by Billie Eilish
- “Daylight” by Taylor Swift

LINKS

Spotify Playlist

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6qcPTWRQEvxfvzUYtlVPBx?si=c5c24f6551d34dbd>

Pinterest Board

<https://pin.it/4k6hLqR>

“I don’t want it, and I don’t want to want you. But in my dreams I seem to be more honest, and I must admit, you've been in quite a few.”

Billie Eilish, *Halley’s Comet*

ONE

PHOEBE

“You gonna be okay, kid?” my uncle Corbin asks before handing me the last of my boxes from his truck.

I mockingly roll my eyes at him before responding. “For the millionth time, yes. Everyone has to live on their own at some point, right?”

I appreciate his concern, but I really am excited about this new stage in my life. It’s comforting that at least one of my family members is looking out for me. My parents probably won’t even notice I’m gone.

“I know, I know. I’m always a phone call away if you need anything. You’re going to love college, Pheebs. Some of my best memories are from my college years. I’ll let your parents know you’re all moved in. You should probably give them a call too; I’m sure they’d love to hear from you.”

I try to not scoff at his presumption. We both know my parents would be here if they really wanted to be. I’m nothing but a prized possession to boast about to their “prestigious” friends.

Corbin helped me pack my life into my Mercedes GLC and followed me in his truck to my new on-campus apartment. Not everything fits in my car, so he packed the bulkier items in the bed of his truck. The drive took us about six hours, from Wakefield to my new home in Coral Cove. I’m happy to be staying in the state of Florida, but I also know the distance will be good for me. I feel like I’ve been living as my parents’ trophy for the past eighteen years.

Coral Cove University is one of the top colleges in the country. More specifically, CCU is known for its softball team. The widely-acclaimed CCU softball team has won the Women’s College World Series eight times in the past fifteen years. Growing up, my parents made sure that I had no social life

in order to train, practice, and one day secure a spot on the CCU softball team. Well, here I am. I've made it, Mom and Dad.

"I hope your charity event was worth it," I think to myself as I replay my mother's pathetic excuse as to why they couldn't show up for freshman move-in day.

"What was that?" Corbin asks with a puzzled look on his face. *Shit, did I say that out loud?*

"Oh, nothing! Thank you again for the help, Corbin. I promise I'll call if I need anything. You should probably start the drive home before it gets too late." I give him a half smile as I prepare to tell my one family member who would do anything for me goodbye.

As soon as Corbin heard I was making the trip alone, he immediately rearranged his schedule to make sure I had help. Time and time again, he's moved mountains to be there for me when my parents decided work or social gatherings were more important. I know Corbin is just as frustrated with my parents as I am; he just doesn't want to add fuel to the fire.

"I love you, kid. Seriously, don't hesitate to call. Can't wait to cheer you on at your games. Until then, work hard and stay focused." Corbin wraps me in a hug before getting in his truck and driving off. He smiles and waves through the passenger window before disappearing down the road.

After I say goodbye to Corbin, I gather my last box from the pavement and make my way back to my apartment. Luckily, this last box contains my comfy throw blankets so it's super lightweight. I have an unhealthy obsession with cute coffee mugs and throw blankets. I'm convinced you can never have enough. I walk up two flights of stairs to my apartment and transfer the box to one arm as I unlock my door.

"Hi! Are you Phoebe?" an enthusiastic voice greets me as soon as I walk through the front door. Startled, I drop my box where I'm standing and take in the girl who just scared the shit out of me. She looks to be around my age, with a tall, athletic build. Her chestnut hair is tied up in a messy bun on top of her head, and she's staring at me with kind, emerald eyes. She has one of those faces that just exudes friendliness.

"Sorry if I startled you. I've been so excited to meet you! I was going to add you on Instagram, but then I thought that may weird you out. Full disclosure, I definitely creeped. That's totally normal, right? Also, I tend to ramble and talk a lot. Please feel free to tell me to shut up at any time. Anyways, I'm your new roommate *and* teammate! In case you didn't look at

your welcome email, my name is Maisie Lewis. It's so nice to finally meet you!"

Oh god, the welcome email. I've been meaning to read it since I received it a month ago. Now, I'm standing here like a deer in headlights. Meanwhile, Maisie has done a full social media search on me. Thank God she's a talker and mentioned her name without me having to ask.

"Phoebe Rhodes," I say with a smile as I reach out to shake her hand. "Well, I guess you already knew that," I add, standing there awkwardly. "I'm the definition of a social media creeper, so no need to apologize." We both chuckle at my comment. "In all seriousness, I'm really excited about freshman year. It'll be great rooming with a teammate, especially with our hectic schedules."

I'm not sure if roommate is the right word for what we are, because technically we have our own rooms. Most of the living quarters on campus were built as apartments rather than dorms. I guess that's a perk of being at a school like CCU. Our apartment is modern, with gray tile flooring and white walls decorating the open-concept floor plan. The best part is that we each have our own ensuite bathroom. The kitchen is furnished with marble countertops, a small island, and stainless-steel appliances. I knew CCU was going to be bougie, but I had no idea my freshman-year apartment would be this nice. As weird as it sounds, I was kind of looking forward to slumming it in a dorm room.

"I'm probably going to spend the rest of the afternoon unpacking," I say as I retrieve my box from the floor.

"Same!" Maisie replies with a smile. "Want to grab a bite to eat after?"

"Yes, I'm starved! Food is always a top priority in my book." I don't want to speak too soon, but I feel like this year is off to a great start.

After a few hours unpacking, we decide to go to a local diner in town called Sunset Café. We were going back and forth between the diner or a pizzeria but decided to go with the healthier option since we have our first day of off-season training tomorrow. The café is beach themed with driftwood floors, white shiplap walls decorated with tropical photographs, and turquoise

tabletops the color of the Caribbean. You can even see the Coral Cove shoreline in the distance, bustling with beach bums, runners, families, and people walking their dogs.

“So, are you excited about the first day of classes tomorrow?” Maisie asks between bites of her meal.

I shrug. “I don’t know if excited is the right word. Does anyone really get excited for class? I think I’m more anxious than anything. First days are always so nerve-wracking.” I look down at my barely touched sandwich, my lack of appetite confirming my feelings.

“I’m more nervous for our first off-season workout,” she replies. Softball season is in the spring, so most of the fall is training and a few practice games.

“Can you believe we already have a new coach? I literally know nothing about him... or her,” Maisie corrects herself. “I have no idea what to expect. I was looking forward to playing for Coach Cook. It’s a bummer he decided to retire early.”

Coach Cook had been the CCU softball coach for twenty years. He’s famously known in the softball world, and it’s every young player’s dream to one day be coached by him. Unfortunately, he decided to retire over the summer, but no one really knows why. One thing’s for sure; his legacy will live on for generations. He gave his all to this sport and impacted so many lives. Coach Cook recruited me last fall, and I couldn’t be more thankful he believed in me. I can only hope his replacement will be half the coach he was.

“Apparently, he had a tremendous say on the new coach. There’s no way he would leave this team in the hands of someone he doesn’t fully trust,” I respond, hoping my statement is true.

“We’ll see... I’m a pitcher, so I’m sure I’ll be working with a pitching coach most of the time anyways. You’re a center fielder, right?”

“Yup, the outfield has always been my comfort z-” I lose my train of thought mid-sentence as the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen walks into the café.

He looks like he just got done with a run in his gray t-shirt and black running shorts, AirPods resting in his ears. Sweat beads down his temples, dripping from his short, raven-black hair. My gaze tracks the drops as they slide down the strong veins adorning his tan neck. The man is absolute fucking perfection. He’s tall, probably around six-three if I had to guess, with

a lean, muscular build. *Holy hell.*

When I'm done ogling his body like a creep, I drag my eyes up to his sun-kissed, chiseled face to find him staring back at me. *Oh. My. God.*

A curious gaze flickers in his golden-brown eyes. I feel my face flush with heat and I quickly tear my eyes away. I know without looking in a mirror that I'm as red as a tomato right now. He totally just caught me checking him out. *Fantastic.*

"Phoebe? Hello? What are you... Oh..." Maisie's jaw drops as she angles her head to catch who is undeniably the hottest man to walk the earth.

"*Holy shit.* Who the hell is that?" Maisie asks, obviously not caring if the entire world hears her.

"Maisie! Keep it down," I say through clenched teeth. "He already caught me staring."

"Oh, calm down. He looks like he's older. He's probably married with two kids. Plus, it's a big town; I'm sure we'll never see him again. With our schedules, I can pretty much guarantee that," Maisie says with absolute certainty.

God, I hope she's right. I glance at him again to see that his back is turned as the cashier takes his order. I can only pray he's already forgotten about our embarrassing stare-off.

TWO

KNOX

Who the hell was that? I rake a hand through my disheveled hair and rest the other on the steering wheel, willing myself to focus on the road. The entire drive home, I'm plagued with images of the girl who just eye fucked me for a good thirty seconds at the café. I have no room to talk, seeing as I wasn't discreet about getting a good look at her either. You want to look? Go right ahead, baby, but don't be shy when I return the favor. When she saw me staring back at her? I'm certain that all the blood in her body rushed to her face the moment she realized I'd caught her. I can't lie, her reaction was kind of cute.

Most of my encounters have been with women who are experienced, comfortable with their sexuality. Don't get me wrong, I love a woman who's bold and isn't afraid to make a move, but there's something about the girl in the café that intrigued the hell out of me. She was looking at me like I was some kind of forbidden desire she could never have. *Why did her lingering stare turn me on? Why did she look so familiar?* The more I think about it, the more I feel like I know her from somewhere.

I pull up to the townhouse I rented in Coral Cove and stare out the window of my Jeep Wrangler. I take a few minutes to sit in silence, processing how much my life has changed in just one short month. Coach Cook called me unexpectedly over the summer to announce he was retiring. In the same breath, he offered me the coaching job. Imagine my shock when the top softball coach in the nation called and asked me to take his place.

"I've known you since you were in diapers, Knox. Hell, I practically raised you. No one works harder than you. No one is more loyal than you. Please know, I'm making the decision to leave for a good reason. I'm not

ready to share why, but you're the only person I trust to lead this team. I know this is a big ask, but I wouldn't want anyone else to take my place. What do you say?" I still remember the phone call like it was yesterday.

It was a no brainer for me. I said yes before we even got off the call. Dan Cook has been best friends with my dad since they met playing collegiate baseball together. He's my godfather, practically a second father to me. He taught me everything I know about baseball, teamwork, commitment, integrity, and life. My dad worked his ass off to provide for our family, but that meant he couldn't always be present when he wanted to be. If he couldn't make it to one of my games or school functions, he made sure Dan could be there to support me. There was never a game where I didn't see my parents or Dan in the stands, cheering me on.

Snapping out of my thoughts, I sigh and slide out of my Jeep, locking it as I walk up the steps of my new townhouse. I only moved in last week, and I'm already thinking about re-signing the lease. The exterior is red brick and there's a shady oak tree that adds a nice touch to the small front yard. The first floor houses the kitchen, dining room, and living room, while wooden stairs lead to my bedroom and bathroom on the second floor. I've cursed the polished steps for almost bruising my ass multiple times while getting water in the middle of the night. The house is nothing special, but it's perfect for just me. I'm not one to decorate, so I guess furniture and my flat screen tv will have to do for now. If my first year coaching at CCU goes as planned, I'll look into buying a home. It's not like I have roots set in one specific location - my parents are both retired, spending their time traveling, and my sister took a marketing job in New York.

Once I'm upstairs, I strip out of my sweat-drenched clothes and step into the steaming shower. The shower is my favorite feature of the house - it's fairly large, with glass walls, a built-in bench, and a rain shower head. I can taste the salty sweat from my run washing away under the heat of the water.

My favorite thing to do when I'm stressed or anxious is go for a run. I'm a very physical person and when my emotions are strong, I feel them everywhere. Running forces me to expel my bottled up anxiety in a physical way. I can release my energy and racing thoughts all at once. *There's nothing more freeing.*

The anticipation of starting my new job tomorrow and meeting the team has been taking its toll on me. I decided to drive down to the beach and go for a run in the sand today. Running in sand is a whole different ball game. That

shit makes running on pavement seem like a walk in the park.

I release a deep sigh as my mind circles back to tomorrow. I need to study the team roster tonight. It's important I know everyone's name and recognize their faces at the workout tomorrow. I glanced at it this morning, but I got sidetracked planning the off-season training schedule.

Finishing my shower, I towel off, and slip on a pair of gray sweatpants. I make my way downstairs and grab the roster sheet from the coffee table. It's a photo spread of all 25 players, along with their name, position, and classification.

"Might as well make myself comfortable," I mutter to myself as I grab a beer from the fridge, sink down onto the couch, and prop my feet up on the coffee table.

After half an hour of studying the roster, I come across a headshot with an unforgettable face that makes my heart beat out of my damn chest. She's staring back at me with piercing blue eyes, freckles lightly dusting her nose and cheeks, and a smile stretching across her full lips. Her wavy blonde hair falls beneath her shoulders with hints of bronze gleaming through. My eyes trail down her face to her neck, and I wonder what her fair, smooth skin would feel like.

No no no no, I think to myself. I can't be thinking about *my athlete* this way. I'm her fucking coach, for Christ's sake.

Now I know why the girl in the café looked so familiar. I'd seen her face hours before when I glanced at the roster. *Fucking hell*. I knew she looked young, but I was thinking she was at least in her early twenties. As a freshman in college, she's probably only eighteen or nineteen. Feeling sick to my stomach, I know any thoughts about her have to stop now. I'm a 31-year-old man and her goddamn coach.

Phoebe Rhodes, Center Field. I read her name and position for the first time beneath her photo. Phoebe... Dammit, why do I keep reciting her name in my head? The way she looked at me in the café sent lightning straight to my cock. I shouldn't have even acknowledged her. Now, when I see her at training tomorrow, it's going to be awkward as hell for both of us.

"*You're the only person I trust to lead this team.*" Coach Cook's words echo in my head, and I feel like a thousand bricks are crushing my chest.

If he only knew I'm sitting here lusting over one of his recruits. I see beautiful women when I'm out all the time, but I've never been this fixated on someone after just once glance. *What is it about her?* Before I have a

chance to answer my own question, my phone rings.

“Hi Bud! It’s your two favorite people,” my mom chirps happily when I answer the call, and I immediately know Dad is with her too.

“Hey! How’s Yellowstone treating you?” My parents both retired a year ago, bought an RV, and plan to travel to all the US national parks.

“It’s fantastic! Cell reception is a little spotty. We just wanted to call and wish you a great first day of work, in case we can’t reach you tomorrow. We’re so proud of you, Knox,” my dad says, his voice cracking a little at the end. “Dan couldn’t be happier that you said yes to his offer. We plan on driving down for a few games. You’re gonna do great, son.”

I have a feeling my dad knows why Dan decided to retire, but I’m not going to push him to tell me. Dan has his reasons; he’ll tell me when he’s ready.

“Thanks, Dad. It would be great to have you guys come out here for a bit. Hopefully by then, I’ll know the town better, and will have mapped out the best spots to eat. We can make a weekend out of it.”

“Sounds great, bud!” *Bud*. It’s been Mom’s nickname for me for as long as I can remember. “Let us know how your first day goes!”

“Will do. Send me pictures from your trip when you can. Love you both.”

“We love you!” Mom responds. “If you speak to your sister, tell her we love her too,” she adds before disconnecting the call. *Damn, I miss them*. It’s a pipe dream, but I can only hope to have a relationship like theirs one day.

Hours later, I toss and turn in bed, unable to sleep. I grab my phone from my nightstand and open up Instagram. I mindlessly scroll for a little bit before my mind registers what I’m doing. My pulse hammers in my neck as I realize I’d typed “Phoebe Rhodes” into the search bar.

Just this once, I tell myself. This is the last thing I should be doing, but my curiosity wins and I tap on her profile, noticing immediately that it’s public. Half of me wanted her account to be private so I wouldn’t have the opportunity to creep, but the other part of me is dying to know more about her. A round circle in the left-hand corner shows her profile picture, a selfie of her beaming smile. I curse Instagram for not allowing me to zoom in to see

the full photo.

“I’d like to be my old self again, but I’m still trying to find it.”

The quote in her bio is confusing to me. Does she feel lost? Is it just a random quote? I google the sentence to find out its lyrics. I wonder if the words hold more meaning to her than just a song.

I put two and two together once I start scrolling through her feed. She has multiple photos with her friends at Taylor Swift concerts. Okay, so obviously she’s just a diehard fan and isn’t sad and depressed. Why does this bring me a sense of relief? I don’t even know the girl, yet her feelings are weighing on me.

I notice she hasn’t posted anything related to softball. To play at the collegiate level, a sport has to be your life. She seems to share a lot about herself on social media, so it’s odd to me that Phoebe hid that she’s signed to play college ball with one of the top teams in the nation. You’d never know she even played a sport from just looking at her social media.

“*Holy shit,*” I draw out. I should have stopped scrolling – hell, I shouldn’t have even clicked on her profile because what I’m looking at now has me wishing I wasn’t her fucking coach.

She’s sitting on the beach, wearing a light pink bikini. Her blonde hair is flowing in the sea breeze, her skin painted gold from the sun. *Fuck...* her perfectly round tits are on full display, pushed up by her bikini top. I finally allow myself to admit it; she’s the most beautiful human I’ve ever seen.

My dick thickens in my boxers and reality hits me like a train. I lock my phone and throw it across the room, not caring if the screen shatters. *What the hell am I doing?* I can’t allow myself to feed into this attraction.

Throwing the covers off my sweaty body, I walk to the bathroom for my second shower of the night. I usually prefer hot showers, but right now, I’m in need of a damn ice bath. My dick finally settles down with the sting of cold water, and I convince myself I just need to get laid. I’ll go on a date, have a night of hot sex, and forget this ever happened. My infatuation with Phoebe Rhodes stops now.

THREE

PHOEBE

The smell of coffee brings me to life as I pour oat milk creamer into my insulated travel mug. I barely got any sleep last night, thanks to first day jitters. I finally decided to get out of bed at six and go for a jog around campus.

Even in the dim morning light, CCU is absolutely stunning. Palm trees border the Victorian-style campus, and a beautiful bell tower stands tall in the courtyard. The ocean sunrise twinkles from the east side of campus, allowing rays of morning light to flicker across the horizon. I had to stop mid-run to take in the view of the sun ascending above the sea. I've always loved the symbolism of a sunrise, the notion that each day is a fresh start.

"That smells heavenly," Maisie says with a yawn as she emerges from her room. "Please tell me you made enough for two."

"What type of roommate would that make me if I didn't? Help yourself," I answer as I swipe a banana off the counter for breakfast.

"You're the best," Maisie groans as she pours herself a fresh cup of coffee. "Why do you look so hot?" she questions as she looks me over, bringing the steaming mug to her lips. "It's an unspoken rule that the college dress code consists of scrunchies and oversized t-shirts."

"Maybe I'll meet the love of my life today. You never know," I say with a smirk. My first class doesn't start until nine, so I had a few hours to myself after my run. After reviewing my class schedule for the hundredth time, I spent the rest of my morning getting ready. I curled my hair in soft beach waves and settled on a pair of high-waisted jean shorts, a sky-blue tank top, and white converse. Casual but cute is always my go-to style choice.

"Mmmm," Maisie hums as she sips her coffee, holding a finger up in

thought. “Can you take a picture of me? I promised my mom I would send her one. It’s a tradition she started when I was in kindergarten, and we’ve never skipped a year. I swear to God, she’ll make me take one until we graduate,” she jokes.

I can’t help but feel a pang of jealousy at her comment. My parents haven’t so much as called me. I thought about trying to call last night, but quickly decided against it. Screw that; it’s their responsibility to call their only child to check in. If it wasn’t for Corbin, I would have moved with no help. Hell, my parents would have happily paid a moving company before they did any physical labor.

“Okay, now it’s your turn,” Maisie smiles after five minutes of posing for photos.

“Oh no, I’m good. Thank you, though.”

“It wasn’t a question. Shut up and smile,” Maisie commands as she holds up her phone, snapping a few photos. “Perfect! Now you’ll always have something to remember your first day at CCU. I’ll text them to you.”

“Thanks, Mom. Did you pack my lunch for me, too?” Maisie rolls her eyes at my joke and gulps down the rest of her coffee. “Really though, thank you,” I say with a sincere smile.

“Anytime,” Maisie replies as she slings her bag over her shoulder and grabs her bagel from the toaster. “See you later!”

I take a seat near the middle of the lecture hall for my first class, English 101. I’m a communications major, minoring in marketing. My senior year of high school, I was in charge of the planning, marketing, and social media promotion for our Winter Wonderland Formal. I remember spending hours making graphics for flyers, drafting social media posts, coordinating with vendors, but it didn’t feel like work at all. Becoming an event planner or public relations coordinator would be a dream career for me.

My parents are both lawyers, in fact, they met in law school. For years, they boasted to their peers about how I would become the next lawyer in the Rhodes family. However, as I got older, I realized I didn’t want to be anything like my parents. I didn’t want to live a life where work is more

important than family, status is more admired than character, and money is valued over happiness.

I never want my family to feel like they are in constant competition with my career. In my eighteen years of life, I've experienced lavish vacations, dined in expensive restaurants, and driven luxury cars. I've been given almost everything someone my age can want. Yet, I don't think I've experienced the one thing I've always yearned for; raw, unconditional love.

"First class of the day?" A deep voice pulls me out of my thoughts. I look to my right to find alluring, blue-gray eyes staring at me. The owner of the voice makes my eyes widen; he's gorgeous, almost like he walked straight out of a magazine. He looks like a Calvin Klein model with his tall frame, light brown hair, and chiseled jawline.

"Unfortunately, yes. English isn't exactly how I want to start my Mondays," I respond with a chuckle. "What about you?"

"Same, but hey, at least we don't have an eight a.m.," he says with a wink.

"Oh God, you're one of those *bright side* people," I laugh. "I need another cup of coffee before I can start seeing the glass half full."

He smirks before leaning closer. "Want to grab some after class? Coffee's on me."

Woah, that was fast. He catches me off guard with his offer. He's clearly a nice guy, but I also just met him.

"That's nice of you, but I have a crazy schedule today. Rain check?"

"I'll hold you to it," he says with a grin. "I'm Colin, by the way." He hands me a piece of paper he tore from his notebook with a number scrawled across it. "I mean this with the best intentions, call me if you need anything. It's nice to have a friend."

"Thanks, Colin," I reply with a soft smile as I grab his note and slip it into my bag. "My name's Phoebe." He stares at me like he's trying to memorize each line of my face before we're interrupted by a deep voice.

"Happy Monday and welcome to English 101," our professor announces from the front of the room. The soft chatter of students goes silent as we turn our heads to face him. I try to keep my attention focused on the lesson, but I can't ignore the way Colin glances at me throughout the remainder of class.

I rush back to my apartment after my last class to get changed for practice. After pulling on my CCU Athletics shorts and t-shirt, I tug my hair into a ponytail, grab my water bottle, and make my way down to the parking lot. My psychology professor got carried away with his lecture, hence the reason I'm now taking the stairs down two at a time. I remind myself to sit near the back of class from now on, in case I need to sneak out early. I'm still going to make it to practice with plenty of time to spare, but I was hoping to meet some of my teammates and explore the athletic facility beforehand.

The CCU Athletic Facility is one of the top collegiate training centers in the country. It's a modern building, with glass panels covering almost the entire exterior. It holds a state-of-the-art weight room, Olympic sized pool, and treatment rooms with ice baths and thermotherapy rooms. I'm pumped to have a look around and get the lay of the land before everything kicks off.

Once I make it to the parking lot, I tilt my head to the side and stare at my Mercedes. Either I'm deliriously tired, or my car is significantly leaning to one side. Upon further inspection, I die a little inside when I notice my back right tire is completely flat.

"You've got to be kidding me. Please no, not today. *Oh my God,*" I mutter under my breath, pacing back and forth, trying to figure out what to do.

Here I am, going out of my way to make sure I'm on time, and my fucking tire is flat. It's not just low on air, but completely flat. My rim is *literally* touching the ground. I've never been in this situation before, and my parents sure as hell never taught me how to change a tire. I'm so screwed. The only people I vaguely know in Coral Cove are Maisie and Colin. *Colin.*

"*I mean this with the best intentions, call me if you need anything.*" His offer replays in my head. I can't believe I'm about to do this, but I have no other options at this point. I search through my bag until I find the crumpled piece of paper and dial Colin's number.

"Hello?" Colin answers on the second ring, clearly confused at the unknown number.

I let out a whoosh of air in relief that he actually answered. "Uh... Hey, Colin. It's Phoebe. Are you busy right now?"

“Phoebe?” He pauses to think. “Oh, Phoebe from class! I’m not gonna lie, I totally thought I weirded you out after giving you my number. Glad I didn’t completely blow it,” he chuckles. “But yeah, I just finished up my last class. I’m free for the rest of the day; what did you have in mind?”

“Actually, I kind of have an emergency. I have a flat tire, so I’m running late to softball practice, my first one of the season. I’m freaking the hell out. I’ve never had to change a tire before, and I don’t really have time to learn right now. Is there any way you can help if you’re still on campus? I live in the Zion apartment building, right across the street from the library,” I rush out, panic-stricken.

“Wait, you’re on the CCU softball team? That’s badass,” he answers. Did he not hear the *latter* part of my spiel?

“Yeah, but I may not be for much longer if I don’t hurry the hell up. This is just my luck... God, I don’t know what I’m gonna do,” I sigh, running my hand through my hair in frustration.

“I’m on my way,” Colin responds without hesitation. “Does your tire need air or is it completely flat? I have tire changing tools in my truck.”

“It’s completely flat. Like my car is doing the ‘Lean Wit It, Rock Wit It’ right now.”

“I cannot believe you just said that,” he laughs at my lame line. “Good thing you’re cute, or else I might have ended our friendship already.”

“*Good thing you’re cute.*” I feel a slight blush crawling up my cheeks. I think Mr. Colin is a bit of a flirt.

Colin arrives no later than five minutes after our call and gets to work on changing my tire. In between handing him tools, I check my phone to find a string of missed calls and texts from Maisie.

Maisie: Where the hell are you??

Maisie: You can’t be late for our first team workout. Get your ass here, now.

Maisie: Are you okay?!

Maisie: OH MY GOD. Hot guy from the café is our fucking coach!

I swear, my heart bypasses my stomach and drops straight down to my ass as I read her last text. She has to be joking. This cannot be real. I’m going to be at least half an hour late to my first ever college workout, and as if that’s not enough hell for one day, my *coach* is the man I casually eye-fucked

yesterday. *I think I'm going to be sick.*

"Phoebe, you good? You're white as a ghost," Colin notes as he wipes his greasy hands down his jeans.

"I'm fine; today just didn't go at all how I expected," I answer honestly, not about to explain to *Colin* why I'm internally freaking out.

"Well, on the upside, your spare is secure and you're good to go. You'll need to go to an auto repair shop and get a new tire put on when you have the time. Do you want me to go with you?" He looks at me, almost...hopeful? Oh, dear.

"I should be able to take care of it," I say with an unconvincing smile. "I gotta get going; I'm already so late. Thanks, Colin. I owe you big time."

Gravel flies behind me as I slam on my breaks in the facility's parking lot, taking the first parking spot I find. I jump out of my car and run like my life depends on it. Once I'm in the lobby, I immediately spot the weight room in the back. Through the glass windows, I see the team already hard at work, rotating between interval training and weightlifting.

As soon as I walk through the door, I spot *him*. He's turned away from me, and I immediately notice the muscles in his back and shoulders tense, almost as if he feels my presence. He seems so much taller than when I saw him in the café. He's wearing black joggers and a white long sleeve t-shirt that accentuates the hell out of his back muscles. I inch closer, nervous to face him, especially since I'm running noticeably behind.

"You're late," he says, his eyebrow quirking and his arms folded across his chest. He stares straight ahead, not daring to look me in the eyes. He looks fucking furious.

"I'm so sorry, um... Coach. I had a..." He holds up his hand and cuts me off mid-sentence.

"It's Coach Moore, and I don't care about your excuses. Save them for after practice. Every single one of your teammates managed to get here on time today. They're the ones who deserve my attention right now, not you. This week, we are focusing strictly on strength and conditioning. Next week, we will add field practice. Start with weight training and interval circuits." He

points at a whiteboard on the wall with instructions and reps for today's workout.

“You will stay until you complete the full circuit. If you slow down or try to stop, I will ask you to leave. I have zero sympathy for people who are late.”

What an asshole, I think to myself. Wide eyed, I stare at his profile in disbelief until he finally turns his head and looks directly at me. Correction: *what a beautiful asshole*. How do I still find him so attractive when he's clearly a jerk? His golden eyes blaze with angry fire as he burns a hole through me.

“What are you waiting for, Rhodes? Get your ass out there before I send you home.”

Having enough of his piss poor attitude, I turn and walk towards the exercise mat. I hope he doesn't miss the “asshole” I mumble under my breath as I walk away. He may be my coach, but he doesn't get to treat me like shit just because he has a fancy title.

As I start my pre-workout stretches, I notice Maisie's looking at me with a troubled look on her face. I also don't miss the judgmental glances I get from a few of my teammates, whom I've never met. *Great first impression, Phoebe*.

“*What the fuck*,” Maisie mouths, not so discreetly.

I shake my head and narrow my eyes at her, as if to say, “I'll fill you in later.” I quickly go through my stretches and get to work.

Five, four, three, two, one. I count down in my head as I finish my last set of pushups. Exhausted, I let my body relax and rest my forehead against the mat. After five sets of ten pushups and a full-circuit workout, I'm beat. I feel the sweat pouring down my face, and I know my body is going to hate me tomorrow. I pushed myself extra hard today, hoping to finish with the rest of the team. Even with being late, I still finished only ten minutes behind the last person. Everyone is free to go after completing the workout, which leaves me alone with Coach Moore.

I pull myself off the ground to make my way towards the exit, purposely avoiding eye contact. Before I make it to the door, he steps in front of me, blocking my exit. *Dammit*.

“I should make you do another set for being late,” he says, staring down at me. “Do you always breathe this hard, or are you just *that* out of shape?”

He's clearly trying to get under my skin, and I'll be damned if I give him

the satisfaction of knowing it's working. I'm in phenomenal shape, and he knows it. If I would've started the workout with the team, I easily would've been one of the first to finish.

I keep my eyes glued to the ground, refusing to look at him.

"Phoebe, look at me." My head snaps up at my name coming from his lips for the first time. I hate that I love the sound falling from his smug mouth. "We both know you're not shy when it comes to staring," he continues.

And there it is. As if belittling me for being late isn't enough, he also feels the need to embarrass me by bringing up the café. Any hopes he'd forgotten about me ogling him at the café went completely out the door with his statement. Once our eyes are locked, he continues his interrogation.

"I'm sure you have an excuse, so let's hear it. Why were you late?" he asks.

"I had a flat tire. If you don't believe me, go look at my car. It's in the parking lot; the donut adds a nice touch to my ride," I quip, referring to my spare tire. I arch my brow, my lips turning up in a smirk as I wait for his response.

"You think you're funny?" he asks and narrows his eyes at me. "You were just late to your first collegiate workout and you're making jokes? If you don't want to be here, then don't show up tomorrow. I have no time for ungrateful, disrespectful little shits. Do you know how many people would die for this opportunity? To be part of this team? I'm glad you can laugh off your mistakes," he scoffs while shaking his head.

"You're exactly right, *Coach.*" I draw out the last word for emphasis. "It was a *mistake*. You're acting like I rolled up half an hour late with a Starbucks in my hand. Jesus Christ, I had a flat tire. I got here as fast as I could and busted my ass once I did. I don't know what else you want from me," I say, not breaking eye contact.

"Watch your mouth," he grits out.

"You certainly don't watch yours," I argue back. I shouldn't be fighting with him, shouldn't be arguing like he isn't my superior, but I can't help it. He's *infuriating*.

"I want you to act like you care. Instead, you're cracking jokes about being late. Show some respect," he growls, lowering his voice and stepping closer to me. We're only inches apart as he closes the distance. He's so close, I can feel the heat radiating off his body.

“Respect works both ways,” I add softly. His closeness is suffocating, my words coming out as a whisper.

“Respect is also earned,” he replies. “As of right now, I owe you nothing. Tomorrow, you will show up an hour early and run laps at the track until practice starts. Make sure you leave with plenty of time, in case another ‘accident’ happens. Don’t be late again.”

Done with this conversation, I step to the side and try to walk around him to leave. Before I make it past his large frame, he grabs my forearm and glares down at me. I should be pulling away, but all I can think about is the electricity running through my body from his touch.

“Oh, and Phoebe,” he continues. “Don’t think this is just about you being late. I heard your ‘asshole’ comment, loud and clear. You think I’m an asshole now? *You have no idea.* I like to think of the off-season as a time to weed out the weak. This is college. Mommy and Daddy aren't here to win your spot for you anymore.”

That was a low blow. I feel angry tears start to build behind my eyes, but I refuse to let him see me cry.

“I’m guessing that’s your Mercedes out there,” he says, looking through the glass wall, gesturing towards the only vehicle in the parking lot with a spare tire. “Looks like you’d get along just fine without your athletic scholarship.”

God, he’s such a dick.

“Go to hell,” I respond, not caring anymore that he’s my coach. He doesn’t know the first thing about me, or what kind of family I come from. I can’t hide the lone tear that slides down my cheek at his stabbing comment. I yank my arm from his grip and head for the door, not stopping to look back.

He might be the most gorgeous man I’ve ever laid eyes on, but his personality is rotten.

FOUR

PHOEBE

Exhausted and pissed off, I slam the door of my apartment and plop down on the couch with a loud exhale. I'm still in shock over how Coach Moore treated me. I've had plenty of strict coaches who weren't pleasant to work with, but never has a coach talked to me the way he did. *Who the hell hired this guy?*

When he grabbed my arm and glowered at me... his glare made me feel things I shouldn't have felt about my *coach*. I keep asking myself why I didn't instantly pull away. In some sick and twisted way, I liked the way he held on to me, how his large hand wrapped around the entirety of my forearm. Did he notice the goosebumps that peppered my skin when our bodies connected for the first time?

"Finally!" Maisie shouts as she barrels out of her room. "I've been trying to call you! What the hell happened, Pheebs? Showing up late to our first practice was a bold move."

I groan loudly. "I don't want to talk about it. My day has been a complete shit show. I just want to go to sleep and forget it ever happened."

"You think I'm letting you off the hook *that* easily?" she replies, rolling her eyes. "You're not going to show up late to practice, come home moping, and not tell me what's going on. Not to mention, I had to find out *alone* that our coach was the man you drooled over yesterday. I will literally sit here all night until you talk. I've got plenty of time," she continues, leaning back and propping her hands behind her head, like she has all the time in the world.

"Fine, but I'm giving you the short version," I reply with a deep sigh. "I don't have the energy to live it all over again. To make a long story short, I had a flat tire, called a random guy from class to change it, and Coach Moore

ripped me a new one because I was late. Basically, he called me ungrateful, disrespectful, entitled, and the list goes on. He also made sure to let me know that he *definitely* saw me checking him out at the café. So yeah, my day has been complete shit.”

“Oh my God. Wait, what did he say about the café?” Maisie asks, sitting up with a wide-eyed look on her face.

“*We both know you're not shy when it comes to staring,*” I mock, repeating his words while covering my beet-red face in embarrassment.

“You’re kidding, he did not say that!” Maisie replies with arched brows. “I wonder why he gave you such a hard time. He seemed fine before you showed up,” she adds with a puzzled expression.

“Yeah, well, for some unknown reason, he hates me. Lucky for him, the feeling is mutual,” I snark. *If only I didn't think he was the hottest man alive.* “Anyways, I’m gonna try to go to bed. He’s making me run before practice tomorrow as punishment for being late.” I stand from the couch to head towards my room.

“Wait, have you eaten dinner?” Maisie shouts from the living room.

“I stopped and got something on my way home,” I lie. I’m too tired to eat, and my body is already starting to ache. I’m both mentally and physically spent.

“Night, Maisie,” I call out before closing my door and falling face first into bed.

The next day seems to pass by in a haze. I’ve been fighting sleep, making it difficult to pay attention in class. As tired as I was, I slept like shit last night. I’m on my third coffee of the day, and I feel like the previous two did nothing to up my energy levels. I decided against taking a nap after class, in fear of not waking up in time for practice. I just hope the copious amounts of caffeine I’ve consumed gets me through today's workout before I crash and burn.

Per Coach Moore’s request, I arrive an hour early to the athletic facility. I knew today's workout was going to be killer, so I decided to wear a black sports bra paired with matching shorts, the CCU Athletics logo stitched on

them. All athletes are given activewear, embroidered with the official university emblem to wear during practice or when traveling to away games. My sports bra even has the logo pasted on the back in the middle of the racerback design.

Lacing up my running shoes, I think about how grateful I am that the track is indoors not outside in the stifling Florida heat. I've been feeling lightheaded all day, running on little to no sleep. I'm sure my lack of food is also to blame for my fatigue. I usually love to run in the heat and get a good sweat going, but today, I feel like I would pass out if I tried. Thankful for the air conditioning, I get to my feet and make my way to the track.

"Two hours; you can make it through two hours," I whisper, giving myself a pep talk.

"Look who decided to show up on time today," a familiar voice sounds from a distance. I immediately recognize its owner, the most infuriating man on the planet. I despise the way his husky voice sends heat waves surging through my body.

"Yep, on time and hoping you'll let me run my hour in peace," I reply. I have no energy to deal with his bullshit today.

"Put this on," he commands in a stern tone.

I feel a light-weight material hit my back before it falls to the ground. I turn to see what he's referring to and spot a gray t-shirt lying on the track. I slowly lift my eyes from the shirt to where he stands, no more than six feet away. His amber eyes roam the length of my body, stopping on my chest for longer than I know he intended. He immediately shifts his gaze back to my face, and I notice he looks just as exhausted as me. His thick black hair is disheveled, and small bags have formed under his eyes that weren't there yesterday. He's wearing black joggers that highlight his long legs, paired with a CCU shirt.

"Excuse me?" I argue. "Are you seriously asking me to put a shirt on? I'm wearing a sports bra that covers more than a swimsuit. It's entirely appropriate and not to mention, designed for working out."

"It doesn't follow CCU Athletics dress guidelines. Put it on, Phoebe," he replies, flexing his jaw as if he's grinding his teeth.

"Oh really?" I scoff. "Can you give me a copy of these guidelines? I've seen plenty of men walking around here half-naked." Done with his misogynistic ass, I go for the jugular. "You know what? I think *you* may be the one with a bit of a staring problem, *Coach*. Afraid you can't keep your

eyes off my exquisite...”

“Phoebe! That’s enough.” He raises his voice, cutting me off before I can finish my sentence. “Put the damn shirt on. End of discussion.”

I wish I had the motivation to fight back, but I just don’t have the energy today. I want nothing more than to get this over with and go home. Arguing with him will only further hurt my cause. He’s my coach, and at the end of the day, I have to listen to him. I cast a furious glance his way and swipe the shirt off the floor. Slipping it on, I turn my back and begin my run.

An hour later, I look down at my Apple Watch to see I’ve run six miles. Legs shaking, I notice my t-shirt is drenched in sweat. I try to steady my breathing, but my lungs feel like an inferno. Too drained to move, I sit down on the track and fold my legs against my chest. Resting my head and arms on my knees, my chest rapidly moves up and down with exhaustion. *Breathe in, breathe out.* I just need five minutes to catch my breath.

“Hey, practice starts in a few. You good?”

Chest heaving, I look up to see a girl with ebony eyes and curly, chestnut hair pulled back into a ponytail. She’s wearing a CCU practice uniform, so she must be one of my teammates. Smiling at me sympathetically, she extends out a hand.

“Thanks,” I manage to say, still out of breath. I take her hand as she helps pull me to my feet.

“No problem. I’m Sasha,” she says with a soft smile. “Maisie told me all about you. I have a few classes with her, and I’m sure you know she loves to talk,” she laughs before a serious expression crosses her face. “What happened to you yesterday was out of your control. Coach shouldn’t have punished you like this.”

“Well, I did call him an asshole and basically told him to go to hell,” I reply with a smirk, still in shock that I spoke to my coach that way. It isn’t like me, but I just couldn’t stand his egotistical attitude. “So, I guess some of my punishment *is* warranted, but I don’t know what his problem is. It’s clear that he has it out for me already.”

“Something’s definitely bothering him. He’s been blatantly glaring at you since I got here half an hour ago. I honestly can’t tell if he’s pissed off or enamored with you,” she jokes with a lighthearted smile.

He’s been watching me this entire time? I swear, if he didn’t hate me so much, I would think he’s attracted to me. I’ve started to notice that every time we lock eyes, his seem to betray him. He tries so hard to keep his gaze fixed

on my face, but he can't help the way they quickly drink in my body every time I'm near. When he grabbed my arm in the weight room, his eyes snapped up at me in utter shock, like he had never touched a player before. It's as if he has no control when it comes to me.

"Anyways, will you be able to make it through practice today?" Sasha asks, breaking my trance. "I don't mean to be rude, but you look beat."

"I am," I agree honestly. "But I'm not about to let him win. I'll be fine."

"Alright ladies, huddle up," Coach Moore calls from the door leading outside the facility.

Why is he standing by the door? Once the team is circled up, he continues. "Nice of everyone to arrive on time today," he quips, casting a devious glance my way.

"Today's workout will be focused on recovery. Yesterday, we went heavy on the weights. I'm sure all of you are dealing with muscle soreness and fatigue to some extent. A light jog is a great way to get your blood pumping and relieve body aches. For today's run, you will follow the paved trail outside the athletic facility. It makes a loop around campus for exactly five miles. This is an independent run, not a race. Go at your own pace but do not walk or stop. If I see anyone attempting to do either, you will start from the beginning. As Division I college athletes, a five-mile jog should be a piece of cake. Once you've done your stretches, you can get started. You're free to go after you finish your run. Remember to hydrate and take care of yourself before and after each workout."

I'm going to die, I think to myself. I just ran six miles and now he expects me to run another five in the heat? That's almost a half marathon, for Christ's sake. Determined to not let him break me, I convince myself to block out the pain. Before I know it, my feet are shuffling on the pavement beneath me.

Mile four is when my body starts to defeat my mind. Suddenly, my feet seem to move in slow motion, my surroundings spinning out of control, and stars appear in my vision before my world fades to black.

FIVE

PHOEBE

Nauseous and confused, I wake up surrounded by a group of people – or, at least, I think they’re people. They’re blurry as my eyes strain to adjust. I remember telling myself to keep moving through the quicksand, forcing one foot in front of the other until my body would no longer cooperate with my mind.

Once my vision begins to clear, I notice I’m in a bright treatment room. I’m lying on cold padding that sort of mimics a massage table. My feet are propped up, elevated by a foam wedge, and a cold compress rests against my forehead.

“Hi, Phoebe. My name is Jonathan; I’m a certified athletic trainer. Can you hear me?” I narrow my eyes and slowly tilt my head towards the voice.

I see three people towering above me: two athletic trainers, and a very distraught Coach Moore. My eyes immediately collide with his, noticing how his brows are knitted together in an emotion that looks suspiciously like pain. His onyx hair is standing straight up from running his hands through it, something I’ve already noticed is a habit of his when he’s frustrated. His tough exterior has finally cracked, leaving him looking completely shattered.

“Phoebe? You’re probably confused right now, but I need to know if you can hear and see me,” Jonathan presses.

“Yes to both,” I croak, trying to use as few words as possible.

“Do you know where you’re at?”

I try to nod. “At the athletic facility.”

“Good. What’s the last thing you remember?” While Jonathan assesses my mental state, a female trainer hands me a large glass of water.

“Thank you,” I rasp, taking the glass from her and sitting up before

responding to Jonathan. “Running. The last thing I remember is running.”

“Her memory is good, and she seems to be in stable condition,” he notes to his colleague. Shifting his attention back to me, he continues his questioning. “Do you-”

“Jesus Christ, give her a minute to breathe,” Coach Moore fires off at Jonathan.

Clearly irritated, Jonathan gives Coach a glare before ignoring him and turning his head back towards me. “I need you to drink that entire glass of water. We should be able to release you once you're hydrated,” he says with a soft smile as he hands me a rectangular package. “Here, try to eat this granola bar. It will help to stabilize your blood sugar. Do you remember the last time you ate?”

“Um, I think I had a banana before class this morning,” I answer honestly.

Immediately, Coach Moore snaps his head to me, looking completely pissed.

“I see... I’m almost certain the lack of calories paired with the stress of starting a new semester is what caused you to faint. You also have to make sure you’re getting enough sleep. With the amount of training you’ll be putting your body through, taking care of yourself is key,” he adds, shifting his gaze back to Coach Moore, who’s pacing back and forth like a caged animal.

“I’m going to give you some space to recover. I’ll just be in the next room over.” Jonathan motions to the hall behind him as he speaks, clearly sensing the tension in the room. Once Jonathan leaves, Coach wastes no time telling me exactly how he feels.

“You what?” Coach says through clenched teeth, looking shocked. “Are you kidding me? You just attempted to run for two straight hours with nothing to fuel your body but a goddamn banana? *My God*, no wonder you passed out. What the hell were you thinking?” he scolds.

“I was thinking that I was exhausted, running on little to no sleep, and food was the absolute last thing on my mind. You just ran me to the point of passing out, and you’re still going to stand here and chastise me? Please, just go.” At this point, I really want him to leave me the fuck alone.

“No, you did this to yourself. You have to eat, Phoebe. I may be a hardass, but I would never put one of my athletes at risk. *Ever*. You should have told me you hadn't eaten today. Never pull a stunt like this again,” he

says sternly.

“I should have told you?” I raise my brows and scoff. “After how you treated me yesterday, confiding in you would have been my *last resort*,” I retort, staring at him like he’s the bane of my existence. I can tell that my comment hit right by his silence and the wounded expression on his face.

“I’ll see myself out,” I snark after chugging the rest of my water and jumping down from the treatment table. As my feet hit the cold tile, it takes me a second to find my balance. My body sways to one side before I feel a strong, muscular arm wrap around my waist.

“You’re not driving yourself home. I’m giving you a ride,” he commands.

His arm is still tightly wrapped around my middle, steadying me. *I’m speechless*. I don’t know if it’s because he said he’s driving me home or because my body is pressed up against his. If it wasn’t for our clothing, we would be skin to skin with how close we are. I can feel his body heat radiating through the thin material of our t-shirts. *God, he smells so good*. Like a perfect mixture of citrus and cedar.

As if he can hear what I’m thinking, he clears his throat and nods his head towards the exit.

“I refuse to go anywhere with you,” I seethe. “What about my car? Maisie can give me a ride if it’s that big of a deal.”

“I have your keys. Maisie will give you a ride to practice tomorrow; I already sent her home. You’ll survive one day without your Benz,” he mocks.

“Oh, screw you,” I respond. “Where’s my phone? I’m calling Maisie or Colin to come pick me up.”

“Colin? Who’s *Colin*?” he immediately asks without hesitation. Wait, I know that look – I refuse, flat out *refuse*, to believe it’s jealousy.

“None of your damn business. Give me my phone before I...”

“Goddammit, Phoebe!” he cuts me off, quickly slipping his other arm beneath my knees and picking me up, cradling me in his arms. “You’re coming with me, whether you like it or not. If you want to act like a child, then I’ll treat you like one,” he adds as he carries me towards the parking lot.

Who does he think he is? I can’t believe my *coach* is manhandling me right now. In what world does he think this is okay?

“What the *hell* are you doing? Put me down! People are going to think you’re a damn creep,” I shout, slapping at his chest.

“You just passed out cold on the pavement. Everyone in this building saw me rush you inside, so I have an excuse,” he replies. “You’re making this

harder than it needs to be. I'm just giving you a ride home, for Christ's sake."

Rush me in? Did he carry me while I was unconscious?

He stops us in front of a black Jeep Wrangler, opens the passenger door, and deposits me roughly into the front seat. He reaches across and buckles my seatbelt, securing me in place.

"Here's your phone," he says, tossing it in my lap once he's made his way around to the driver's seat.

"How do you know where I live?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"I'm your coach. I have access to every player's contact information in case of an emergency."

Just as I'm about to respond with a snarky comment, my phone rings. I see the name "Mom" flash across the screen and honestly, I'd rather talk to her than sit in silence with *him*. Before I have a chance to say hello, my mom is jabbering away as soon as I pick up the call.

"Phoebe, darling! I'm at a work event and only have a few minutes. How are you doing? Have you started class yet?" I love how she's already rushing me off the call, even though *she's* the one who called *me*.

"I'm doing fine," I lie. "Classes started a couple days ago. I think 'Rhetorical Studies' is going to be my favorite class this semester," I add, trying to start a conversation with her.

"And how's softball?" she asks, completely ignoring my comment about class.

"It's good. Maisie, one of my teammates is..."

She interrupts me before I can get anything else out. "I'm so sorry, but I'm going to have to run. One last thing, how's your diet? The freshman fifteen is very real, Phoebe. You have to watch what you eat."

Coach Moore's head snaps to me, as if he can hear the conversation through the phone. He looks furious, like he wants to throw my phone through the window. I'm sure he can hear everything with how loud my mom's speaking. She's practically yelling against the background noise of whatever gala she's attending tonight.

"It's under control," I reply, sounding defeated. I have nothing else to say to her.

"Good to hear. Your father is waiting, but it was nice to speak with you. Have a good evening," she says before ending the call.

I just stare out the window for a few minutes, not saying a word, before Coach finally breaks the silence.

“Who the hell was that?” he asks in a hushed voice, as if he needed a few minutes to collect himself before speaking.

“It was my lovely mother. Don’t act like you didn’t hear every word she said,” I snap.

“Well, you can tell your *mother* that I’m taking you to get a greasy burger and fries right now. Hell, I’ll even throw in a soda if you want.” He gives me a sympathetic look, trying to lighten the mood. His expression softens when he makes eye contact with me.

“Wait, what?” I ask in confusion.

“I’m taking you to get food, Phoebe. You need calories, and a lot of them. You have to eat, particularly with how much you’ll be training.” He takes a deep breath before saying something I never would have imagined coming from his mouth.

“It killed me seeing you like that today.”

Did he really just say that? I was almost positive he rejoiced in witnessing me succumb to his torture.

“Don’t worry, there’s a drive-thru. I know you would rather starve than have dinner with me,” he adds. Of course, he had to ruin the first nice thing he said by following it up with a sarcastic comment.

Twenty minutes later, we pull up to my apartment building, the inside of his Jeep smelling like a grease bomb. The drive here was mostly silent. I think Coach could sense that I’m not in the mood for small talk or banter. I grab the to-go bag with my burger and fries in one hand and open the passenger door with the other. I slide out of my seat and attempt to shut the passenger door with my hip. Before it completely closes, I turn to him as a question works its way to the tip of my tongue.

“Why?” I ask him, halting my movement. *Curiosity killed the cat, Phoebe...*

“Why what?” he responds, his eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

“This.” I gesture to my food and his Jeep. “Why didn’t you just let Maisie drive me home?”

He looks at me with a sympathetic glance. It’s almost like a little bit of that ice man façade melts as he answers. “Because I needed to make sure you were okay. I don’t think I could sleep tonight not knowing if you ate. Please, Phoebe. Promise me you’ll eat and get some rest once you’re inside.”

“I promise,” I reply, my words barely a whisper. *Who is this man and what did he do with my asshole of a coach?* “Thank you,” I add before

shutting the door.

“Phoebe, wait,” he calls out, rolling down the passenger window. “Don’t forget your Coke,” he adds with a soft smile, handing me my drink through the window.

His fingers lightly brush against mine as he passes me the styrofoam cup, his touch sending a wave of heat straight to my core. *Does he feel it too?* Terrified of what I’m starting to feel, I pull away and turn in the direction of my apartment without saying a word.

Hours later, I lay in bed, reading a few chapters from a smutty romance novel I picked up at the local bookstore. After I ate my meal and took a warm shower, I curled up in bed, feeling like I might actually get a good night’s sleep. Once my eyelids grow heavy, I shut my book and set it on the nightstand. Just as I reach over to turn out the bedside lamp, my phone dings with a text from an unknown number. *Who would be messaging me at this hour?* I tap on the notification and read the text.

Unknown: How are you feeling?

My jaw drops; I’m certain I know who the text is from. In all reality, though, it could be anyone who saw me faint today.

Me: I’m sorry, I don’t have this number saved. Who is this?

Unknown: Knox

Knox? Before I have a chance to think, bubbles appear, indicating ‘Knox’ is typing back rapidly.

Unknown: Coach Moore, sorry. Habit.

Oh shit. Coach just accidentally told me his first name. I’m totally saving his contact in my phone as Knox just to piss him off.

Knox Moore. Dammit, why is even his name hot?

Me: So, we’re on a first name basis now? Can I start calling you obKNOXious when you piss me off?

Knox: Very original. Never heard that one before.

He adds an eye roll emoji at the end of the text. I’m trying to think of a

clever response when another message comes through.

Knox: How was your food? Best burger in town, in my opinion.

Me: It was divine. I was thinking, you can't make me run tomorrow after forcing a burger down my throat lol

Knox: Wasn't planning on it.

Bubbles appear immediately after his last text, letting me know he's still typing.

Knox: Phoebe... I don't know why I didn't say this earlier, but I have to apologize for how I reacted yesterday. I realize it wasn't your fault you were late. Even after how I treated you, you showed up today and worked your ass off. You pushed yourself harder than anyone I've ever coached. I hate that I'm the reason you drove yourself past the point of exhaustion. I'm starting to realize that you're just as stubborn as I am.

Me: Seems like you've met your match, Knox.

I immediately hope he gets that I'm joking.

Knox: Well, you win this round. I don't ever want to see you like I did today, lying on the ground, unconscious. Never again, Phoebe. You have to communicate with me. If you aren't feeling well, tell me. If you need a break, tell me. Okay?

Me: Yes sir!

I make a joke, trying to lighten the mood.

Knox: Sir? Don't say that to me in person.

Me: Why?

Knox: Just don't. I'm not sure I'd be able to control my reaction if you did.

What does that mean? Before I can analyze it any further, my phone pings with another text.

Knox: See you at practice tomorrow. It'll be a light day. Text me if you need anything. Goodnight, Phoebe.

Me: Night, Knox

I hope he's okay with me using his first name when it's just us. It feels intimate in a way I can't explain. Feeling bold, I decide to add a smiley face emoji at the end of my goodnight text.

Your move, Knoxy.

SIX
KNOX

Phoebe. She's all I've been able to think about since I saw her in the café. Her sandy blonde hair, electric blue eyes, and sun kissed skin flashes through my mind several times a day. Seeing her up close and personal for the first time in the weight room punched the air right out of my lungs. I've only seen her smile a handful of times, but when she does, I can't help but notice the small dimple in her right cheek. *Fuck, that dimple.*

She's an addicting concoction of cute, sexy, and dangerously beautiful. When she tried to walk around me and I caught her arm, I think I blacked out for a second. I just needed to touch her. Never in my ten years of coaching have I ever grabbed a player like that. When I wrapped my hand around her forearm, it wasn't out of anger. To her, it may have seemed that way, but it wasn't. It was out of pure *need* - the desire to be closer to her. The most fucked up thing about it, though? I think she craved the forbidden touch as much as I did. She let me keep my hand on her for at least a minute before pulling away. I could feel goosebumps pebbling across her skin the longer I held on, the heat in her gaze matching mine. I knew in that moment, that I had to push her away and keep her at arm's length. One touch and I was already addicted.

When she walked into the gym today wearing that goddamn sports bra, I almost lost it. With one glance at her full chest, I could see the shape of her nipples pointing through the thin fabric. There was no way in *hell* I would have made it through an hour of her running in that thing. Number one, my eyes can't seem to control themselves when it comes to her body, and number two, I don't want anyone else eye fucking her but me. I've always been a possessive guy, but with her, it's on an entirely different level. Why,

though? She's not mine and can *never* be. There would be no happy ending for us.

My attraction to her is so much more than physical. Everything about her makes me weak. Her quick wit, determination, sarcasm, and stubbornness; they all drive me crazy. Most of all, it turns me on how she fights back, how she refuses to put up with my shit.

My goal was to make her hate me, not make her black out on the pavement. *What the hell is wrong with me?* It made me nauseous to see her sprawled out, unconscious, knowing I was the reason she made herself physically ill.

I'm done playing games with her. I'm just going to keep my distance and only speak to her when it relates to softball. No more trying to get under her skin for the hell of it. We're walking a thin line that can't be crossed.

After dropping Phoebe off at her apartment, I step into my shower and turn the water up to the highest heat. I swear, my dick has been aching for relief since I creped on her Instagram the other night. *Fuck, that bikini picture...* Just the thought of it has my length thickening, my balls growing heavy. *I just need a release*, I think to myself. Just this once, I'll allow myself to think of her, then never again.

"Just this once," I repeat out loud. *I sound like a damn addict.*

Steam bellows around me as hot water scorches my back. Steadying myself, I place one hand on the glass wall, wrapping the other around my erection. Just the thought of her already has me hard as a rock.

I dip my head, closing my eyes as I slowly slide my hand up and down my length. *I just need to get her out of my system.* Granting myself permission, I imagine it's her dainty hand wrapped around my dick, stroking me from root to tip. I envision it's *her* hand working me in a slow but firm motion. She swipes her thumb over the tip of my swollen head, smearing the pre cum leaking out of the sensitive slit.

"Oh, fuck," I groan, the thought making my dick twitch in my hand.

She continues to stroke me, pulling her hand away right as my body begins to shudder with pleasure. I picture her slowly sinking to her knees and taking my thick tip into her mouth. She pays special attention to my swollen head before licking down my shaft. Her ocean eyes never leave mine as she sucks me down to the back of her throat. She moans around my cock as I fist my hand in her golden hair.

"Come for me, Knox. I want to taste you," she says in between licks, and

I fucking explode.

“*Fuckkkk*, Phoebe...” I moan her name as ropes of cum spurt against the shower wall, dripping down my hand and forearm.

“Holy shit,” I say to myself, releasing my grip on my softening dick. My other hand still braced on the shower wall, I take in a few deep breaths and try to steady my breathing. I’ve never come that hard in my entire life. *I’m so fucked.*

Hours later, I’m pacing back and forth in my bedroom. Not only did I jerk off to Phoebe in the shower, but I impulsively texted her to check in and say goodnight. *What the hell am I doing?*

It’s like I’m a teenager again. My brain seems to run on impulse in any situation involving her. Even after ending our conversation, I keep thinking about her playful texts and emojis. *Was she trying to flirt with me?*

She’s eighteen, and I’m her thirty-one-year-old coach. *Jesus Christ, I have to stop.* I should be the adult, yet I’m the one fueling the fire. Maybe I need to talk to someone. The fact that I’m keeping this bottled up just makes it seem worse.

“Fuck it,” I utter. After mindlessly pacing for another five minutes, I dial the one person I trust with my life.

“Hey *brother*, don’t you know it’s like one in the morning?” my sister, Willow, answers with a sleepy groan.

“Yeah, sorry. I was kind of hoping you were up. I can call back tomorrow,” I respond with a sheepish smile. Willow’s always been a night owl, but I forget that her new job requires her to wake up bright and early.

I wait as she clears the sleep from her throat. “No, you’re fine. What’s up? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s okay.” I stay silent for a second before continuing. “Remember that time when we were kids, and you accidentally stole that horrible pink bracelet from the convenient store? You acted like you just robbed a bank,” I laugh. “You had the bracelet on your arm when we got home, forgetting to take it off at the store. You sobbed and made me promise to never tell Mom and Dad. You even made me say that I bought it for you so

you could wear it around,” I smile, remembering my twelve-year-old ass lying to our parents about a two-dollar bracelet.

With Willow four years younger than me, it’s safe to say I’ve told more than a few white lies for her. She sure as hell has done the same for me.

“Oh my God, I haven’t thought about that in years,” she replies. I can practically hear the smile in her voice. “Do you know I’ve never told Mom and Dad? They would probably laugh their asses off that we’ve kept it a secret for this long.”

“You better not have told Mom and Dad,” I joke. “We made a pact to never tell each other’s secrets. Even if you stole a thousand more pink bracelets, it would go to the grave with me. You made me pinky promise, remember?” I laugh at the thought.

“How could I forget?” she chuckles, before returning to a more serious tone. “It’s fun going down memory lane and all, but why are bringing this up? Are you drunk, Knox?”

I sigh. No more stalling. “I wish being shitfaced was the reason I’m calling you, but no. I need to get something off my chest. You were the only person I trusted to call. I feel like I’m going crazy.”

“Okay....” she replies, clearly confused.

Absolute. Silence.

“Knox, you’re scaring me. What’s going on?” she rushes out, sounding worried. “Oh my God, are you sick?”

Willow is basically having a conversation with herself at this point. “Knox, what the fuck? Just spit it out already—”

“I’m attracted to one of my athletes,” I blurt out, cutting her off. “Like one of the players I coach. I think about her in a way a coach should *never* think about a player. *Ever*. I can’t even believe these words are coming out of my mouth. You probably think I’m a pervert or some shit.”

“Oh, thank God,” she utters with a sigh of relief. *This is not the response I was expecting.* “I thought you were going to tell me you were dying or that someone else died. Jesus, Knox. Next time you’re planning to tell me you have a crush, use a better delivery method.”

My eyes go wide as my jaw drops. “A crush? Willow, she’s a fucking teenager. I’m her coach. The worst part is, I think the attraction is mutual.”

“She’s eighteen, right?” Willow asks. “I mean, I get that you’re her coach, but why are you acting like it’s the end of the world? Two adults are attracted to each other, big whoop.”

“Willow, she just graduated high school. She’s only eighteen. I can guarantee you that a man in his thirties is not what she’s looking for, or what she needs.”

“Who the hell are you to decide what she wants? God, being a woman in today's society is shit,” Willow quips.

“Willow... that’s not what I’m saying. Do you not see where I’m coming from? I could lose my career over something like this. She could lose everything she’s worked for. It’s not right and you know it,” I sigh, running a hand through my hair.

“Has anything happened between you two?”

“No,” I quickly reply. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to avoid. When we’re in the same room, it’s like we can sense each other. The more I’m around her, the harder it is to deny the attraction. I’m supposed to be her coach for the next four years; what the hell do I do?” I ask, clearly defeated.

I practically hear her shrug through the phone. “I don’t know, dude. I’ve never seen you so worked up over a girl before.” *Thanks, Willow. That helps a lot.*

“Willow...” I groan in frustration.

“Just be her coach,” she replies. “Simple as that. You have no other option. What are you gonna do? Resign because you have a crush? You’ll get over it. Just don’t allow yourself to be alone with her. Treat her like you would any other player.”

She’s right. It is as simple as that. So why does it seem impossible?

“You’re right. I’m making this into something it doesn't need to be. I can’t put myself in inappropriate situations with her anymore. I’m her coach, she’s my athlete, end of story.”

“Problem solved,” Willow says with a yawn. “Anyways, I’m always here if you need to chat.”

“I know, Lo,” I reply, my lips turning up in a soft smile. “Go back to sleep. Call me this week so we can catch up.”

After we say goodnight, I spend another sleepless night staring at the ceiling fan. There’s one last thing I need to do in the morning, and then she’ll be nothing but another one of my athletes.

At least, that’s what I tell myself until I see Phoebe sitting on the beach the next morning, looking like a sun-kissed angel with a book in her hand, the sunrise cascading golden light across her skin. I had to stop and check on her, to make sure she was okay.

Why can't I just stay away?

SEVEN

PHOEBE

This is exactly what I needed after the drama of yesterday. I'm sitting on the beach, watching the sunrise, and reading a smutty romance novel. What more could a girl ask for?

After texting Knox last night, I crashed and slept like the dead. With a full belly and exhausted body, I slept harder than I have in years. I don't think I moved an inch all night. I woke up early this morning, feeling well rested and wanting to get out of the apartment.

I thought about waking Maisie up to watch the sunrise with me, but I quickly decided against it. She's already threatened me with my life if ever I attempt to wake her up before her alarm. Maisie is the furthest thing from a morning person, needing a gallon of coffee to bring her back to life. I have to admit, the peace and quiet is nice. It's just me, the sea breeze, and the soft sound of waves rolling in.

"What are you doing out here this early? I'm surprised you're up before sunrise." A deep chuckle startles me, causing me to throw my book up in the air in shock.

It lands in the sand, revealing the explicit cover to my unexpected guest. There's a naked man plastered on the front, rippling abs and all. I scramble to my knees and gather the book in my arms, flipping it over to hide the cover.

"Studying for anatomy class?" He smirks, taunting me. I roll my eyes, grabbing a handful of sand and tossing it at him.

It's just my luck to run into Knox, *again*, at six in the morning while reading a dirty ass sex scene. I wasn't expecting to see anyone I knew; I'm only wearing a pair of leggings and an old, baggy sweatshirt, my hair tossed up in a messy bun, with absolutely no makeup on. Actually, I'm pretty sure

my mascara from yesterday is smeared around my eyes. I probably look like a feral animal right now. *Jesus Christ, take me now.*

Of course, Knox is absolutely gorgeous, even at six in the morning. *Figures.* He's wearing running shorts that end right above his knees, showing off his tanned, toned legs. His shirt has the sleeves cut off, revealing his chiseled biceps and the sides of his lean torso. His raven hair is damp from sweat, making him look like he just got out of the shower. He's the spitting image of the men I read about in my romance books; too perfect to be real. I decide to use humor to play off my embarrassment, and maybe make *him* blush a little.

"Want to borrow it after I finish? It has some delicious sex scenes in it. Maybe you could learn a thing or two?" I say with a smirk.

"I see you're back to your normal self this morning." He winces and clears his throat, choosing to ignore my snarky comment. "What are you doing out here this early?"

I sigh. I guess I have to actually answer that one. "I love watching the sun rise, especially over the ocean. I woke up early this morning and couldn't go back to sleep. So, here I am. What about you?"

He shrugs. "I run this route almost every morning; it's the best view in Coral Cove. I've seen a lot of sunrises in my lifetime, but nothing quite beats this. Can't ask for a better running view."

His comment makes me smile. I love that he appreciates the ocean, which is quite literally my favorite place in the entire world. I swear, I was a mermaid in my past life.

"Mind if I sit?" Knox asks, motioning his hand toward the sand. He doesn't wait for my reply before plopping down next to me.

We sit in silence for what feels like minutes, staring out at the vast sea. My heart thumps in my chest when I feel Knox turn his head to gaze at me. When he finally speaks, I swear, my heart skips a beat.

"You okay?" he asks in a soft tone. I'm still staring at the horizon, but I can feel his full attention on me.

"I'm fine," I reply quietly, fidgeting with the sleeves of my sweatshirt.

"You really worried me yesterday, Phoebe. I know you were trying to be tough, but..."

I interrupt him before he can get too far. "Can we not talk about me right now? We've already had this discussion. I know I need to fuel my body before workouts and make sure I'm getting enough sleep. The past couple of

days were complete hell for me. I just want to move past it,” I respond, running my palms back and forth through the soft sand.

“Okay,” he says gently, his eyes tracking the movement of my hands. It’s almost as if he wants to reach out and touch me.

“Can I ask you something?” I blurt out.

His brows furrow at my sudden question, and his answer comes out as nervous. “Uh... yeah, sure. What’s up?”

“How did you get the coaching job? Coach Cook was one of the top collegiate coaches. Not that you don’t deserve it, but you’re young and probably don’t have many years of coaching under your belt,” I ask, turning my head to watch his entire face as he replies. His brows are knitted together, making me wonder if my question offended or confused him.

“I think we all assumed someone in their fifties would come in with twenty plus years of experience. You’re just so...” I pause, trying to think of the right words without telling him I think he’s hot as fuck.

“So incredibly young and handsome?” he asks with a sudden wide smile plastered across his face.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I respond, rolling my eyes. “But seriously, how did you land the job?”

“Well, believe it or not, even at thirty-one years young, I’ve been coaching for about ten years. So, I’m not completely clueless, thank you very much,” he snarks back at me, playfully bumping his shoulder into mine. The brief contact makes my skin heat beneath the cotton of my sweatshirt. “To answer your question, I’ve known Dan, or um...Coach Cook, my entire life. He’s like a second father.”

“Oh... Was your dad not present?” I question. I cringe inwardly, immediately regretting asking him something so personal. *Get it together, Phoebe.*

“No, he just had to work a lot when my sister and I were growing up, and Dan was always there when my dad couldn't be.” Knox’s gaze turns towards the ocean and his lips turn up in a soft smile, as if he’s replaying memories in his mind. “Dan’s my godfather. He’s always been there, teaching me how to play baseball, showing up to my games, helping to guide me through my coaching career. He’s just an all-around good man. He deserves all the praise he gets,” he adds, emotion evident in his voice.

“Wow, Dan Cook is your godfather. How cool is that?” I reply, nodding my head in amazement. Who would have thought? “So, he recommended you

for the position?”

Knox nods and shrugs at the same time. “Yup. Don’t ask me why, because I can’t tell you. It baffles me that he trusted me to lead this team. I’m honored to be here, but sometimes, I feel like I haven’t earned it,” he replies, picking at a few seashells buried in the sand.

“Why did he decide to retire?” I ask, choosing to leave my heavier questions unasked. “Everyone was shocked when the news broke. It was just so sudden.”

“I don’t know,” he responds, exhaling a deep breath as he shakes his head. “I shouldn’t even be telling you this, but I’m worried that something is seriously wrong, that he might be sick or something. His job was everything to him. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“I’m sure everything’s okay. He’s probably so proud of you,” I whisper, placing a hand on his shoulder in comfort. *His skin is so warm.* His eyes seem to flare with desire from just my skin touching his.

“Thanks,” he rasps. He seems almost taken aback by my touch, but he doesn’t pull away. “I don’t know what I would do without Dan.”

“Why let yourself think the worst? Maybe he really was burnt out and ready to retire. You’ll worry yourself sick if you let your thoughts spiral,” I whisper, although I know he heard me. I lightly brush the pad of my thumb across his skin, telling myself I’m only touching him to be helpful. *Sure, Phoebe, sure.*

My eyes trail from his shoulder to his neck, watching his hammering pulse thumping in his neck uncontrollably. His gaze flickers from my hand to my eyes, before returning to the shoreline.

“Yeah, well... I tend to do that a lot. Overthinking is kind of my thing,” he scoffs. “That’s why I like to start my day with a run. It helps clear my head.”

“Anxiety’s a bitch, huh?” I quip, trying to lighten the mood.

“We may not agree on much, but I can sure as *hell* agree with you on that,” he laughs.

His laugh. It’s deep and all encompassing, and I swear to God, my stomach clenches at the sound. A pearly white smile stretches across his face and small lines form in the corner of his eyes. Everything about this man is so frustratingly perfect. My heart stops when he catches me staring and holds my gaze, not looking away.

A few beats of silence pass as we study each other, unabashedly staring.

It's like we've connected on a different level. In this moment, he's not my coach and I'm not his athlete. We're just two imperfect people confiding in one another. For the first time, I think we both feel a connection beyond physical attraction.

"Well, I better get going." Knox stands and breaks our intense stare, brushing grains of sand from his shorts. "I'll see you at practice. If you need to sit out today, I understand. Just take care of yourself, Phoebe."

"You're the one I should be worried about," I smirk. "You're too old to be out here running miles in the sand. You could break a hip," I joke. He clicks his tongue and nods his head, the corner of his mouth turning up in a smile.

"Actually, never mind. You *will* be at practice today, and I'm making you pay for that comment," he retorts, playfully kicking sand my way.

"Hey! You're getting sand all over me," I laugh, dusting away the dirt from my leggings.

"Serves you right," he says with a wink. *My God, that wink.* "See ya, Phoebe."

All I can manage is a wave as he runs off, giving me a mouthwatering view of his sculpted backside, leaving me completely breathless.

I'm so, totally, irrevocably screwed.

EIGHT

PHOEBE

“You look cute. Where are you headed so early?” Maisie asks as I walk out of my room, shutting the door behind me.

She’s sitting cross legged on the couch with a warm cup of coffee nestled in her hands. Gilmore Girls is playing on the TV, which she claims is the best show of all time. When I told her I’d never seen it, she made me promise we would binge it together.

After my unexpected run in with Knox, I rushed home to shower and get ready for breakfast. The only downside of being an avid beach goer is finding sand in every crevice of your body. I immediately feel the need to shower as soon as I get home, even if I didn't get in the water.

“Colin asked if I wanted to grab breakfast with him before class. I couldn’t say no, especially after what he did for me,” I answer, referring to how he changed my tire in the Florida heat. Smoothing my hands down my sundress, my eyes quickly sweep down my body, taking in my outfit.

I chose a thigh-length, yellow sundress that accentuates my tan skin, paired with white converse. Strands of blonde hair wisp around my face, escaping from my loose braid. *I love this outfit.* I honestly wasn't trying to dress up for Colin; this dress is just so comfortable.

“Ooooo, Colin,” Maisie croons. “It’s only the first week of classes, and you already have a date. Teach me your ways,” she jokes.

“Trust me, after the week I’ve had, I’m the *last* person you should take advice from,” I chuckle. Maisie’s playful demeanor shifts at my comment, her brows pinching together in concern.

“You scared the shit out of me yesterday, Pheeb,” she says, suddenly serious, a frown marring her features. “I hope you know that I tried to stay

with you. I told Coach I would drive you home, but he insisted that the team leave. I think he was worried about you waking up to a swarm of people, which is understandable, but I hated leaving you like that. Then last night, you came home and went straight to your room. I knew you were exhausted and probably didn't want to talk. I just... I'm sorry, Phoebe," Maisie adds.

Of course, Maisie would try to apologize when she didn't do anything wrong.

"Awe, Maisie, that's really kind of you to say, but you have nothing to apologize for," I reply with a soft smile. "I'm sorry I scared you. I was just stressed out and forgot to eat. My body was exhausted, and I knew I needed to stop, but I didn't want to let him win. I was careless and stupid. If anyone's to blame, it's me."

"Yeah, well, don't *ever* do that shit again. He's not worth it," Maisie replies, pointing a stern finger at me. "Coach made me promise, as your roommate, to make sure you're taking care of yourself. He never left your side; he even rushed your ass inside, carrying you like precious china," she quips. "I honestly think he felt like shit for pushing you to that point," she adds. "Anyways, how was the ride home with him?"

I shrug, not willing to divulge every detail to my roommate, as harmless as she may be. "It wasn't bad. He took me to get food before he dropped me off. He was *very* persistent that I eat," I scoff. "But he was really nice to me. It's probably just because he felt bad." I decide to leave out the part where he texted me at midnight. Not that Maisie would care, but I feel like it's our little secret; a special moment between me and Knox.

"Maybe he'll decide to get off your ass now. Dude really ran you to the point of passing out because you were late to practice," she sneers, shaking her head. "Hopefully, this is the end of an era."

"The era of the asshole," I reply in a posh British accent, causing Maisie to throw back her head in laughter.

"Anyhoo, I better scurry off to tea with my dear Colin. Cheerio." I keep up the charade; I'll take every bit of comedic relief I can get in this conversation.

"I'm so done with you," Maisie manages to comment between giggles. "Get out of here. I can't deal with you anymore."

I throw her a playful wink and head for the door.

Thirty minutes later, Colin and I sit across from each other at Sunset Café. I didn't want to go into detail on why I needed a ride, so I just said my car's at the shop.

Colin's handsome as ever, in a casual gray button down and tan shorts. His bronzed hair is styled perfectly, and his pearly whites seem to glisten every time he smiles. *He really is beautiful.* After the waiter delivers our coffee, Colin orders a bacon and egg breakfast burrito, and I decide on a bowl of maple oatmeal.

"Enjoy! Let me know if you need anything else," the waiter says with an overly cheery smile after placing our breakfast on the table.

"Smells delicious," Colin hums before taking a bite of his burrito. "How's yours?"

"It's perfect. Not too sweet; exactly how I like it," I reply, wiping the corner of my mouth with my napkin. "Thanks for asking me to breakfast, and thank you again for your help the other day. I honestly don't know what I would've done without you."

"I was happy to help. I would hope my friends would do the same for me," he says with a gentle smile. "So, was your coach okay with you being late?"

"No, not at all," I scoff, crossing my arms. "I would rather not talk about it, if that's okay with you. It kind of consumed my entire week. I'm just ready to move on from it at this point," I exhale.

"Absolutely." he taps his finger on his chin as he thinks. "When's your birthday? I feel like that's the first thing you should know about a friend."

"Wow, things are getting personal real fast," I quip with a laugh, arching my brows. "It's October 2nd; Libra season, baby," I say with a wink.

He smiles wide. "Hey, Libras are compatible with Geminis. Did I mention I'm a Gemini?" he responds, waggling his eyebrows.

"Someone *really* needs to teach you how to flirt," I chuckle, rolling my eyes.

"Hey, I convinced you to come to breakfast with me. Seems like I'm doing just fine," he smirks, taking another bite of his burrito. "So, your birthday's almost a month away. How old will you be?" he continues.

I decide to go along with this line of questioning; anything to get away from our previous topic. “Nineteen.”

“You got any plans for the big one-nine?” he asks.

“Nope. I’ll probably just hang out with my roommate, order pizza, and binge a Netflix show. Wild night, huh?” I laugh.

“*Hell* no, you are *not* spending your first birthday as a college student in your damn apartment. Tell your roommate we’re going out,” he states definitively, setting down his fork and knife with decisive clang.

Right as I’m about to respond, my spine prickles with awareness, and I turn in my seat just as Knox walks through the door. In all the ways that Colin is handsome, Knox is *fucking lethal*. He’s wearing a pair of dark washed jeans matched with a charcoal gray Henley that hugs his chest and arms in all the right places. His hair looks ruffled, like he’s been rapidly running his hands through it. *Shit, I’m staring again*. His golden eyes quickly sweep the café before they lock on mine, widening just a bit when they see me. He holds our heated gaze for only a second before quickly averting his eyes to the coffee bar. I guess this is his usual coffee spot.

“Phoebe?” Colin asks in a worried tone. “I’m just kidding. If you want to have a night in for your birthday...”

“No, Colin. It’s not that,” I interrupt. “A night out actually sounds like a blast. There’s just someone I need to talk to. Give me a minute,” I say as I stand and push in my chair, making my way towards Knox.

“Are you following me now?” I joke as I approach him.

Before he sees my face, I notice his back muscles go taut at the sound of my voice. Knox slowly turns my way, and I feel my cheeks flush crimson as we make eye contact. No matter how hard I try to hide my attraction, my body will always betray me.

“I was about to ask you the same thing,” he replies with a smirk. “Glad to see you’re actually eating today.” He nods his head towards the table where Colin still sits. I don’t miss the look in his eyes when his glance lands on Colin – almost like he’s jealous. I scoff internally at the ridiculous notion that Knox Moore would be jealous over *me*.

“What’s with your obsession with me eating?” I scoff, refocusing my attention on our conversation.

“I just want you to take care of yourself, that’s all,” he replies quickly – a little *too* quickly. His eyes roam my body, but I pretend I don’t notice. Not wanting Colin to get suspicious, I decide to get on with what I want to ask.

I shake, internally tsking at his audacity. “Anyways, I forgot to ask you this morning, but can you give me my keys back? I’m clearly fine to drive.”

His body seems to go still at the mention of my keys. *Why?*

“Your keys are in my office at the athletic facility. I’ll give them to you after practice,” he responds, flexing his jaw, almost like he’s gritting his teeth. *He looks so uncomfortable.*

“I don’t understand why you felt the need to keep them in the first place. I need my car to get around. I hate having to ask people for rides,” I throw back at him, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Looks like you’re having no problem getting around. Just ask your boyfriend to drive you.” He jabs his finger in Colin’s direction, practically spitting the words. *What is his problem?*

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I argue. “But you know what, that’s a great idea. I’m sure Colin would have no problem taking me to practice. I enjoy spending time with him anyways.” It’s a lie, but I have no problem with a little white lie if it raises his heckles further.

Well, it’s not a complete lie. I do like being around Colin, but I don’t think I can reciprocate his obvious feelings. Colin is undoubtedly a standup guy, but I can already sense he’d be too clingy in a relationship. I don’t see my friendship with Colin going any further, but Knox doesn’t need to know that. Two can play this game. I have this gut feeling Knox is attracted to me, and the way he’s acting about Colin just further confirms my theory.

“As long as you’re not late, I don’t care who drives you,” he replies tensely, refusing to look at me. I know he’s not telling the truth because he can’t look me in the eyes. If he does, I know his heated expression will give him away. Lowering my voice to a whisper, I finally stop beating around the bush. I take a small step towards him and tell him how I really feel.

“Why are you being a jerk? I thought we were past this, Knox. You were so kind last night, and this morning...”

“*Coach.* It’s Coach Moore,” he interrupts roughly, not giving me a chance to finish my sentence. “You do *not* have the right to call me by my first name just because I took care of you last night. I’m your coach; that’s my job when one of my players is ill or injured. I needed to make sure you were okay. Clearly, you are. Move on.” He says it all through clenched teeth, like it physically pains him.

What the hell is wrong with this dude? Did he completely forget about our conversation this morning? I don’t understand how a person can be so hot

and cold.

“Oh, really?” I scoff. “So, it was your job to sweep me into your arms, buy me food, and *then* text me goodnight?” I know my comment is going to get under his skin, but I don’t care, not at this point.

“Phoebe, this is neither the time nor the place. You need to go back to your table and enjoy breakfast with your *friend*. I’m your coach, you’re my player, end of story. I was there for you last night when I needed to be. I would’ve done the same for anyone else. So please, just let it go,” he asserts, his tone commanding. It’s almost like he’s trying to convince *himself*.

I snort my laugh. “Is this how you treat everyone you extend your hand to? If so, I’ll remind myself to *never* accept help from you again. See you at practice, *Coach*,” I sneer, before stalking back to the table. I feel his heated glance following me as I take my seat.

Thankfully, Colin’s back is to the coffee bar. I’m sure he got a glance of who I was talking to, but he couldn’t have watched for too long without it being obvious. Plus, he seems to be *really* into his breakfast burrito. Before I give Colin a chance to question me, I ask him a question I know will make his day. *God, I’m a terrible person.*

“Hey, can you give me a ride to practice? My car will be ready this afternoon, but not in time.” Maisie already offered to give me a ride, but I’m not missing this golden opportunity to piss off Knox.

“Yeah, of course. Anytime,” Colin says with a beaming smile, probably forgetting anything but his excitement at being in a small space with me again.

Later that afternoon, Colin pulls up outside the athletic facility with me in the passenger seat. He parks his truck in front of the glass doors at the entrance of the building. Anyone standing inside would be able to see us clear as day.

“Got everything?” Colin asks as I hop out of the passenger seat, slinging my gym bag over my shoulder.

“Yup! Thanks again, Colin. You’re the best,” I say with a *friendly* smile.

“Anytime. Breakfast again soon?” he asks, a hopeful look on his face.

“Sure, just text me,” I respond nonchalantly, waving and turning my

shoulders towards the building.

“Will do! See ya later, Phee.” *Phee?* That’s new. God, I hope I’m not giving Colin the wrong idea. I’m just trying to be his friend. Although, I’ll admit, asking him to give me a ride today was probably a bad idea.

As I’m walking into the entrance, I smile slightly to myself. *My little plan has worked.* I see a dark shadow walking beside me, and I realize Knox must have arrived at the same time. He’s dressed in all black, wearing joggers paired with a dri-fit shirt that cuffs around his forearms deliciously. I’ve never seen him dressed in all black before and *damn*, does it look good. He’s sporting a scowl, causing his brows to pinch together. He looks like he just finished a workout as sweat drips from his temples down to his tan neck. *Jesus Christ, this man.* Before I can open the door, he steps in front of me and pulls it open.

“After you, *Phee,*” he quips, almost mockingly using my nickname coined by Colin.

“What a gentleman,” I fake smile back at him, heading straight towards the locker room.

As promised, Knox took it easy on the team today. Practice consisted of just stretching and light agility training. I’m eager to get out on the field next week and start working on drills. I know my fielding abilities will be on par, but my focus on batting has been lacking. Maybe I should go to the batting cages and do some tee work before we hit the field. We have a few scrimmage games next month, and I want to make sure I’m prepared.

“Here you go. Drive safe,” calls a deep voice from a few feet away. Thankfully, I spin around fast enough to catch the keys Knox tosses at me.

I’m not sure what shifted after our conversation at the beach, but he’s been standoffish ever since. He’s barely spoken to me since practice started and won’t make eye contact for more than a second. Even now, his eyes are fixed straight ahead, avoiding me.

“Yes, sir,” I reply, knowing the comment will unnerve him.

And oh, did it. I see his jaw clench as the words leave my mouth. I think back to when we texted, how he asked me to never call him ‘sir’ in person. Could I have just walked away without blurting out a snarky comment? Sure. But if he wants to act like he can’t stand to look at me, I’ll make damn sure my presence is known.

When I realize he isn’t going to give me the time of day, I turn on my heels and make my way towards the parking lot. I know he’ll glance at me

once my back is turned, which is why It takes everything in me to not to toss up the middle finger behind me.

I stop in my tracks as I approach my car. *What the... no, he didn't.* My heart skips a beat when I realize what he did. My mouth hangs open in shock as I stare at the brand-new tire on my Mercedes. *A tire replacing my spare. A tire I didn't have replaced.* Is that why he was acting so weird when I asked about my keys earlier?

Oh my God, he spent his free time getting my tire changed. What would possess him to do that for me? Not to mention, a new tire is *not* cheap.

I'm beginning to learn Knox's love language is acts of service. Yes, he's cold and broody at times, but what he did shows what kind of person he is. The big question mark that is Knox Moore is finally starting to make sense. The truth hits me in the stomach, knocking the wind out of me. *Knox is attracted to me in a way he shouldn't be, and he's doing a terrible job at hiding it.* Suddenly, I feel like shit for being such a brat to him today.

Too ashamed of my behavior to thank him, I hop into my car and decide to send him a text. I can smell his woodsy scent filling the interior, making me wish he was next to me. *He drove my Benz.* Just the thought of him driving my car, his big hands wrapped around the steering wheel, has heat pooling in my core.

Me: Thank you for the tire. You didn't have to do that. It really means a lot.

After I hit send, I get the urge to type out another message. Even though this push and pull between us has only been going on for a few days, I feel tired. *Exhausted.* I feel something for him, and I know he feels it too. I could ruin everything by sending this text, but I'm sick of avoiding the elephant in the room. Either I address it now, or we walk on eggshells for the next four years. My thumb shakes in anticipation as I hit send on the most honest text I've ever sent.

Me: I'm sorry for being difficult today. Well, really since the day I met you. If we're being honest, though, you haven't been the most welcoming to me, either. I can't seem to control my emotions when it comes to you. I'm not going to spell it out, because you know what I'm trying to say. I feel like there's a rope between us that keeps getting thinner each day. I just wanted to say thank you. Not only did

you look out for me yesterday, but you also probably spent your entire morning at the tire shop. I'm not bluffing when I say it's the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. I don't hate you, Knox. What I feel for you is far from hate.

My anxiety is through the roof the entire drive home. Sweaty hands gripping the wheel, I can't help thinking through a million different ways he might respond. *If he even responds.* Will he understand what I'm trying to say? *That I feel things for him I shouldn't.* What if he feels the same? It's not like anything could ever happen. He's my coach. This is his job, his livelihood. I'm toying with his livelihood by sending him messages like that. My chest tightens as I let my intrusive thoughts take over.

Oh my God, what did I do? I sent that text without thinking through the repercussions, the consequences, though that seems to be how my brain operates when it comes to Knox. I spend the rest of the afternoon waiting for his response, but it never comes.

I wake up the next morning to see that Knox read my text, but he *chose* to not reply. I can't help but feel a tinge of pain in my chest, knowing that I made a complete fool of myself.

NINE

PHOEBE

“Come on, get up,” Maisie commands, towering above me as I lay on the couch.

Aside from class and practice, I’ve done nothing but lounge around and feel sorry for myself all day. It’s been almost twenty-four hours since I texted Knox, and he still hasn’t acknowledged it. He didn’t even glance my way one time at practice today. In all honesty, I didn’t go out of my way to look at him either. I was too afraid of what I might see in his face; would he be angry, appalled, or disgusted by my message?

I really have no valid reason to be upset, but I can’t help it. I feel a pit in my stomach when I think of how vulnerable I was in that text. I can’t help but feel pissed at him for leaving me on read. In reality, though, what did I expect him to say? That he also felt the instant connection? That every nerve in his body comes to life when we’re together? Of course not. He’s my coach. He could single handedly ruin his career by sending a text like that. Maybe I’m just pissed at myself for sending it in the first place.

“Phoebe, get off the damn couch,” Maisie says, fire in her tone this time as she extends her hand to me.

“Nooo,” I groan, pulling the decorative pillow from beneath my head and covering my face.

“When Coach said to rest, I’m pretty sure he didn’t mean becoming a couch potato and eating an entire box of Cheez-Itz. You’re gonna regret the hell out of that at practice tomorrow.”

“Stop judging me,” I huff as she pulls the pillow from my face and tosses it to the floor.

“What’s going on with you? I can barely get you to watch an episode of

Gilmore Girls with me, yet here you are, acting like you're married to that couch. Rory and Lorelai would be so disappointed," she scoffs.

"I'm just tired," I sulk, giving her my best pouting face.

"Well, it's probably because you're relying on a box of processed food to give you energy. You're getting your ass off this couch and eating a real meal. Come on, up you go," she says with labored breaths as she grabs my hands and pulls me to my feet.

As soon as I stand, lost Cheez-Itz fall from my baggy t-shirt and sprinkle onto the floor, a few hitting my toes on the way down.

"You've gotta be kidding me," Maisie chuckles with a wide smirk as her eyes track the little orange crackers. When she brings her gaze back to me, we stare at each other for a few seconds before bursting out in loud peals of laughter.

"Okay, maybe it's a good thing you're forcing me to get up against my will," I admit, wiping the remaining crumbs from my shirt.

"Ya think? Go get dressed. You aren't going anywhere wearing your leftovers," she replies, spinning me towards my room.

Twenty minutes later, I'm in the passenger seat of Maisie's car as she drives to Sammie's, a small sandwich shop in Coral Cove. When I was in grade school, my teacher asked us to share a fun fact about ourselves. Mine was that I loved sandwiches. I internally cringe every time I think about how I blurted that out without hesitation, but it still rings true. I *love* a good sandwich.

"I thought practice went well today. Thank God Coach decided to take it easy on us," Maisie says, her eyes focused on the road.

"Yeah, it's always a nice surprise to have a light day," I nod in agreement.

"So... What's going on with you? Usually, you can barely sit still for ten minutes, but you've been moping around all day," Maisie asks, her eyes flickering to mine for a beat before landing back on the road.

"I just think my body needed a day to recover. These college workouts are no joke," I lie.

I'm completely capable of handling our workouts, but how am I supposed to tell her I'm upset because our coach didn't respond to my impulsive text? How am I supposed to tell her I feel things for him that I shouldn't? Even worse... how would I tell her I have the slightest suspicion he feels it too?

She sighs as if she's in deep thought. "I just feel like you're keeping

something from me. Something's bothering you."

Damn, she's good. She seems to already know me so well. I mean, we *are* roommates and spend hours together at practice. All that set aside, Maisie is quickly becoming one of my closest friends.

"I'm good, Maisie," I reply with a soft smile. "I just think I need time to adjust. Classes, homework, Division I level workouts, living on my own... it's just all so new to me."

She nods in agreement, buying my little white lie. "Yeah, I get it. It's taken a toll on me too. Just promise me that if something were wrong, you would feel comfortable telling me. I hope you know you can come to me with anything. You're my friend and I would never judge you. You know that, right?"

"I know," I reply in a hushed voice that's barely a whisper. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her about Knox, but I just can't bring myself to do it. It doesn't matter anyways; nothing would ever happen between us.

I didn't have many close girlfriends growing up, so it's nice to finally have a friend I just click with. I've never had a friend that looks out for me like Maisie does.

I just can't help but feel like I'm making a mistake by not telling her what's really bothering me. I know that if Maisie were in my situation, she would tell me. Maybe that's where we differ; Maisie trusts with abandon, whereas I'm used to keeping things to myself. As an only child with self-absorbed parents, I've learned to carry things on my own. As much as I want to share, I'm just not ready. It has nothing to do with her, and everything to do with me. I have a feeling she knows I'm hiding something; I just hope to God she never finds out what.

TEN
KNOX

One month. That's how long it's been since Phoebe's subtle confession.

"I can't seem to control my emotions when it comes to you. I'm not going to spell it out, because you know what I'm trying to say."

I fought the urge to text her back for days. I could tell my lack of response bothered her, dwindling the embers burning between us. Still, the flame is there. I can feel it simmering every time we're in the same room.

She's avoided speaking to me at all costs, unless I directly ask her a question at practice. Her iridescent eyes only meet mine for milliseconds at a time. Gone are the days of watching her cheeks flush with heat when I caught her staring at me like no one was watching. When I ask her to do something at practice, she does it. I've tried to get a rise out of her a few times, but she doesn't linger or argue. She just nods her head and walks away. God, what I would give to have her roll her ocean-blue eyes at me again, or blurt out a sarcastic comment.

This is what I wanted, right? For us to strictly have a player and coach relationship? Well, we've retreated to that, and I don't feel any better about our situation. I still want her every damn day. I still think about what it would feel like to kiss her full lips and caress her smooth skin. It's been a month, and my desire for her is stronger now than it was before.

Not only has she made it a point to avoid me, but she also seems to just be going through the motions at practice. We started working on fielding and batting a few weeks ago, and it's evident her drive isn't here. Don't get me wrong, Phoebe is a fantastic ball player. She rarely makes errors and is extremely smart on the field, but she looks completely miserable. Playing collegiate softball at a university like CCU should be a dream for any athlete,

but for her, it just looks like a chore. I wish I knew what motivated her to keep playing, because it sure as hell isn't her own happiness. *Is it a money issue?* Maybe she really needs her athletic scholarship. Then again, the girl drives a Mercedes with leather seats, decked out with all the bells and whistles.

I've only been able to catch glimpses of her smile the few times her *friend* Colin has dropped her off for practice. She usually waves goodbye and gives him a soft smile, highlighting the dimple in her right cheek.

Colin. The dude pisses me the hell off. He's such a pretty boy. I can tell he doesn't do it for Phoebe. He thinks he has a chance, but she's too nice to tell him he doesn't. Has she kissed him? *I hate that I even care.* I can't help it; the thought of his lips on hers enrages me.

"Hey, Knox! You need anything else before the big game?" Hugh hollers out from across the field, distracting me from my thoughts.

Hugh is in his seventies and has been helping to maintain the fields since he retired. He never misses a game. Everybody loves Hugh. He likes to help drag the infield before games, which helps to smooth out the dirt and makes the field look clean.

"Nope! Field looks great. No one does it better than you, Hugh," I say, tipping my ball cap and waving as he heads towards his truck.

"Kick some ass tonight!" he calls out before driving off.

The fans will be arriving for our first preseason game in a couple of hours. It's basically a scrimmage; it doesn't count towards our season record. Even though it's not technically a real game, my nerves and excitement are through the roof. Tonight, I'll get to see how the team truly interacts in a game setting. In my opinion, the purpose of preseason is to scope out what we need to work on for the games that do count.

I remember Coach Cook mentioning that CCU Softball always has the biggest fan turnout, even during preseason. The team has been working their asses off for the past month to prepare for today. Regardless of the numbers on the scoreboard, I'll still be proud of them. I sure as hell hope we win, but ultimately, today is a learning opportunity, a chance to work out the kinks and grow as a team.

I check the field one last time before locking up. It looks clean, crisp, and ready for a ball game. I need to quickly run home, shower, and change before the team starts arriving for warm up.

"Well, here goes nothing," I utter to myself, sending up a silent prayer for

the team.

We're in the top of the seventh inning, bases loaded with two outs. The sky has faded to black, lights beaming down on the field like spotlights. We're up by one run, which means getting this last out is crucial if we want to win. Maisie is on the mound tonight, pitching a great game. My stomach turns as she winds up to throw her next pitch. If she walks this batter or they get a base hit, this game could be over for us. The stands are packed with quiet fans, silent in anticipation.

"Blue, timeout!" I call out to the umpire, making a 'T' with my hands. "Everyone in!" I yell out to the team.

Once the team is huddled around me at the pitcher's mound, I lower my voice and give them a last-minute pep talk. "Y'all played a hell of a game tonight. Don't lose your momentum now. Infield, let nothing get past you. Outfield, back up your infield and hustle - get to any balls that make it to the grass."

I turn to Maisie, who has pitched her heart out. "Maisie, you've been in the zone tonight. Nothing changes now; just keep throwing like you have been and trust your team will back you up." Maisie nods her head, wiping dirt off her face with her jersey.

"Alright, let's finish this," I say, clapping my hands together.

A few of the girls shout out "let's go" and "we got this" as they disperse back to their positions. Minutes later, Maisie throws a beautiful curveball that the batter gets a hold of and crushes to right-center field.

"I got it, I got it, I got it!" I hear Phoebe yell from center field, letting right field know she fully intends to make the play.

She's sprinting faster than I've ever seen her run, completely locked in on the task at hand. For a split second, I'm worried she's not going to make it, but then she jumps and dives for the ball, catching it right before it hits the ground.

The crowd behind me roars and the team jumps up and down, running full speed towards Phoebe. Before she can pull herself up from the grass, the team surrounds her in a dog pile, chanting her name. *Holy shit*. Phoebe single

handedly just saved this game for us. If she hadn't made that catch, the other team would have easily scored two runs, putting them ahead.

After the post-game handshakes with the other team, Phoebe walks towards the dugout with her head down.

"Hey, kid. What a game! That catch was unbelievable," I grin, giving her a congratulatory pat on the back.

Phoebe stops in her tracks. Her eyes widen, and she really looks at me for the first time in weeks. A sea of emotions swirl across her face, more than I've ever seen from her before. Her surprisingly melancholy gaze is full of ache, wrath, and sorrow. Her eyes seem hollow, like the life has been sucked out of her. After the game she just played, she should be ecstatic. I know she's probably still pissed at me, but something else is clearly bothering her.

"Don't call me that, and please, don't touch me," she says in a cold tone, brushing my hand from where it rests on her shoulder. *Shit, I didn't realize I was still touching her.* Her eyes dart from my hand to my face, her expression a warning before she turns her head and walks away, like I don't even exist to her.

An hour later, I'm the only one left on the field. Most of the girls stayed to take photos with their friends and family before leaving to enjoy the rest of the weekend. Today was an exciting day for the team. It was their first game wearing the official CCU uniform and playing as Division I athletes. Seeing their beaming smiles as they celebrated with their loved ones after the game made me remember why I love coaching.

After shutting off the lights, I make my way to the side gate to lock up. As I get closer to the gate, I swear I hear a light snuffle from inside the dugout. Squinting my eyes, I try to get a better view, but I can barely see in the darkness. The half-moon is my only source of light, painting the field in shadows. Completely forgetting about locking up, I walk towards the dugout to investigate the muffled sounds. The last thing I want to do is lock somebody in. I mean, they could definitely get out, but they would have to get their ass over the fence first.

As soon as I step foot in the dugout, I see the source of the noise sitting in

the corner. *Phoebe*. My heart cracks in two as I take her in.

She's hanging her head with her arms wrapped around her middle, almost like she's attempting to comfort herself. I can see dried tears staining her cheeks, the moonlight highlighting her sorrowful expression. *She looks so fucking sad*. Strands of her blonde hair have escaped from her ponytail, falling like a curtain around her delicate face. Her uniform is filthy, covered in dirt and grass stains from her dive. *How can someone look so beautiful and broken at the same time?* I clear my throat, letting her know she's not alone. Startled, she jolts her head up to look at me.

"Phoebe, what are you still doing here? I was just about to lock up. Is everything okay?" I ask, slowly taking a seat next to her on the metal bench.

"I'm fine. I was just waiting for my ride," she replies, wiping her damp cheeks with her jersey.

I snort. That's a lie, but I let her think I believe her. "Your ride is over an hour late. Do you need me to call someone? Actually, let me drive you. It's late, and I'm not leaving you alone in the dark."

"My parents were supposed to be here," she says flatly, turning her face to look at me. Her piercing eyes have transformed into a shade of deep blue, and her bottom lip trembles as she tries to fight fresh tears from falling. "Maisie asked me if I needed a ride when they didn't show, and I told her no. I was hoping they were running late or would call with an excuse, but I think they just forgot. Maybe something more important came up." She takes a deep breath to steady her shaky breaths.

I want to fucking strangle her parents.

"It's their loss that they weren't here tonight. You made one of the best plays I've ever seen. Don't let them take that away from you," I whisper.

She shrugs her shoulders and stares straight ahead, not responding to my comment. After a moment of sitting in silence, I realize she doesn't have any plans to move from her corner of the dugout. Does she really expect me to just leave her here? *Hell no, not happening*.

"Alright, let's go," I exhale. "I'm taking you home." I stand, extending my hand to help her up. Instead of taking my hand, she just shakes her head.

"No, I'll call Colin. Just give me a minute," she replies, reaching to pull her phone from her gym bag.

I sigh at her stubbornness. "Phoebe, please don't be difficult. Let me give you a ride home. I'm driving past campus anyways. Plus, it's a Friday night, are you really going to ask him to drop his plans?"

I'm sure that fucker would be more than happy to give Phoebe a ride, but I'm not about to let that happen. *You have no right to be so possessive, Knox. What's your problem?*

"Are you coming with me or am I going to have to call the cops to report a trespasser?" I joke.

She looks up at me again and sneers in my direction. "It depends; are you going to be an ass to me tomorrow for giving me a ride?"

"No, I promise," I reply, feeling guilty for the way I've treated her. "Come on," I add, holding out my hand. "Let me take you home."

"Okay," she responds, her voice barely coming out a whisper.

Color me shocked. When she finally places her hand in mine, it takes all my willpower to not pull her into my chest and wrap her in my arms. It fucking kills me to see her this way. She deserves so much more than her sorry excuse for parents.

After I lock up the field, we sit in silence as I drive Phoebe to her apartment. She's sitting in the passenger seat, picking at the skin around her nails, unable to steady her hands. I try to think of something, anything, that will cheer her up, when I remember what I learned from creeping on her Instagram. Grabbing my phone off the dashboard, I open up Spotify and type "Taylor Swift" into the search bar. I hit shuffle on the first playlist that pops up, and a song called "Wildest Dreams" filters through the speakers. *Oh God, this sounds like a love song.*

"Didn't really peg you for a Swiftie," Phoebe finally comments, earning me a small smile from the passenger seat.

"Why, because I'm old?" I joke. "There are many things you don't know about me, Phoebe," I smirk.

Instead of continuing our banter, Phoebe turns her head, looking out the window and fidgeting with her hands. *Dammit, I just want to touch her.* She looks so sad and anxious, and I can't fucking take it anymore.

Slowly, I move my hand over the center console and slide it beneath the hand resting in her lap. As soon as our skin makes contact, her head snaps up to meet my eyes in shock. Without thinking, I curl my fingers around her small ones, and wrap her hand in mine. I look down at our linked hands and notice goosebumps covering her arms. Every time we touch, it's like a current of electricity ignites down my spine, and it's nice to know she feels it too.

Her hand feels too good in mine. I never want to stop touching her.

Holding hands is such a simple gesture, but it's never felt like this with anyone else. Unable to stop myself, I gently brush my thumb back and forth against her skin. Her breathing has slowed, and she seems a million times calmer than she did a few minutes ago. I know this is wrong, but right now, I would do anything to make her feel better. In this moment, she's all that matters.

We hold hands the rest of the drive to her apartment, my thumb caressing her hand the entire time. The heat radiating off her, the feel of her soft palm against mine; it's all causing me to wonder what other parts of her skin would feel like. Thank God it's dark outside, because I can't physically hide my arousal, what her touch does to my body.

I pull up to a dimly lit parking spot outside her complex, in case she feels weird about me dropping her off a second time. I expected her to let go of my hand and start gathering her things once we parked, but instead, she continues holding my hand, staring out the window in a blank stare. Silence fills my Jeep as I turn down the radio, trying to get her attention. I have no idea what she's thinking, but I'm tired of guessing. I ask her what I've been wanting to know for weeks.

"Phoebe... why do you do it?" I ask. She takes a deep breath before responding, fully understanding my question.

"My parents," she says, turning her gaze to fully face me, keeping her grip on my hand. "I do it for my parents. I started playing when I was young and immediately fell in love with everything about softball. The smell of morning dew on the grass before an early game, the feeling of making a game-changing play, the comradery of a team. Not only was I obsessed, but I was good. As I got older, my skills ramped up and people started to notice me. Once my parents realized that I wasn't going to be a lawyer, they decided to use my athletic talent to climb the social ladder. That's when I started falling out of love with the sport, when it became about them. The pressure I felt to get into this program took all the joy out of playing. CCU was all my parents could talk about for years; they never thought to ask me if I wanted this. So, there's your answer. If it looks like I'm not happy, it's because I'm not, and I haven't been for a while."

I've coached dozens of athletes with parents like hers, parents who make the sport about themselves instead of their children. Unfortunately, this parenting style only burns kids out from a game they once loved. I wince at her statement; it makes me sad to see something she used to love become

something she can no longer stand.

“Why do you keep playing? You’re eighteen. If you’re miserable, you can quit. Trust me, college will fly by. Why waste it on something that no longer brings you joy?” I ask honestly. An unhappy player can turn into a bad player extremely quickly. *Sure, that’s why you’re asking.*

“Because I need an education. How would I afford CCU without my scholarship or my parents? I told them I was contemplating quitting once, and they threatened to take away my car, my phone, basically anything they pay for. If I can’t make them look good, they want nothing to do with me.” She says it with a sardonic smile that only makes me angry with her parents.

“Isn't it ironic that they couldn't even show up tonight?” Phoebe adds, letting out a sarcastic laugh. “They probably had some happy hour come up that was more important than their daughter's first game,” she scoffs.

“Phoebe...” I say, searching for the right words to say. I haven’t let go of her hand, and all I can think to do is tighten my grip.

“Do you know the last time I spoke to my parents was when my mom called to ask about my diet? Aside from that, they sent me a text about the game tonight. A fucking text. Then, to top it all off, they don’t even show up.” She sulks, pulling her hand from mine to wipe at a lone tear rolling down her cheek.

Before another falls, I reach across the console and slide my hand into her hair, gripping her beautiful face in my palm. Swiping away another hot tear with my thumb, I reach over and gently brush my lips across her skin, kissing away her salty tears.

Fuck, what did I just do? I just wanted to take away her pain. I can’t stand to see her cry.

As I pull my lips from her cheeks, I find her big blue eyes staring at me intently. Her face is less than an inch away from mine, and I can feel her soft exhales brush against my skin. Her eyes roam down to my lips, before traveling back up to hold my gaze, telling me exactly what she wants.

“Phoebe...” I rasp, tightening my grip in her hair, unable to say anything but her name.

“Knox...” she whispers back.

“Phoebe, please tell me to stop. You have to tell me to stop,” I beg, my throat thick with emotion, knowing exactly where this is headed. I don’t have the strength to pull away.

She takes a deep inhale at my words. “There's nothing more that I want

right now,” she pleads.

“Tell me. What do you want, Phoebe?” I ask, my question coming out as a whisper.

“You, I want *you*.”

I lose all control.

I slam my mouth to hers, bringing my free hand to her face so I’m cradling her cheeks in my palms. I can’t help the deep groan that escapes me when she parts her lips and allows my tongue entrance into her hot mouth. The second our tongues collide, my already hard dick twitches painfully in my pants. *She tastes so damn good.*

Phoebe whimpers as she wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me in, bringing us chest to chest. I can feel her heart beating frantically in her chest, and damn, the noises coming from her are the hottest sounds I’ve ever heard in my entire life. *Kissing has never felt this good before.* I’ve fantasized about what this moment would be like, never imagining it would actually happen. It’s better than I could’ve ever imagined.

When we finally part for air, I can’t resist running my lips down her jaw and latching onto her soft neck.

“Knox, oh my God,” she moans as I suck and nip at her neck. “Please, don’t stop.” It’s a breathy moan, one that goes straight to my cock. *Godammit.*

As I lather her neck in wet kisses, she glides her fingers down my chest and underneath my shirt, slowly running her hands up my bare abs. I groan as her hand travels to my pecs, brushing a finger over a nipple.

“Fuck, Phoebe. I need your mouth,” I groan again, before tangling my hands in her hair and sealing her mouth to mine.

As we devour each other, Phoebe attempts to slowly work her way over the console and into my lap, when a phone rings. I internally curse, knowing this is the end of our impromptu make-out session. To my surprise, though, Phoebe shuts that thought down.

“Mmmm, just ignore it,” she utters between kisses, and that’s exactly what we do. I suck on Phoebe’s tongue before paying attention to her bottom lip, sucking and biting it between my teeth.

“Knox, that feels so good,” she whimpers, placing one of her legs between mine, trying to position herself on top of me. Fuck, if she sits on my dick, I’m going to blow like a teenager. This could get embarrassing real fast. Before I have a chance to move her off me, her phone rings again.

“You should get that; it could be serious,” I breathe out, suctioning my mouth to her neck again. It’s probably going to leave a hickey, but I don’t fucking care. I hope her best friend *Colin* sees it.

She groans in frustration at my suggestion, sliding off me to check her phone. Her lips are red and swollen, her cheeks flushed with heat. Knowing I’m the one who did that her makes me fucking *feral*.

“Umm, hey Maisie,” she answers, clearly flustered. “Yeah, sorry. Colin gave me a ride. I’ll be right in.”

Oh shit. Maisie’s calling. What if she saw my Jeep in the parking lot? I mean, I tried to park in a discreet area, but we sure as hell aren’t hidden. What if Maisie knows Colin isn’t with Phoebe?

Shit. *What the hell are we doing?* I just made out with one of my athletes while she’s in a vulnerable state over her family. I blatantly took advantage of her. What is wrong with me? My dick suddenly starts to soften as I realize what I did. *I feel sick.*

“Knox, did you hear me? We have a few more minutes if you want to...”

“No,” I say harshly, cutting her off. “This was a mistake. I’m sorry, Phoebe. I took advantage of you. This is wrong; it should have never happened.” Frustrated beyond belief, I run my hands through my hair.

She furrows her brows and scrunches her nose in what I’m assuming is confusion. “What are you talking about? I told you I wanted it. Please don’t...”

“Phoebe, I’m not arguing with you. You’re clearly emotional, and we got carried away. This can never happen again.”

“Oh really?” she scoffs. “You’re really going to blame this on my emotions? Like we both haven’t wanted to jump each other from minute we...”

“Goddammit, Phoebe! Get out of my car. You need to leave,” I say through clenched teeth, losing my temper. Why does she always have to be so difficult?

She stares at me for a few seconds, fire in her eyes, before swiping her gym bag from the floor.

“Thanks for the ride,” she drops in a flat tone, opening the door and hopping out of my Jeep. “Oh, and make sure to take care of your dick tonight. It was hard as a rock against my leg a few minutes ago. Or was that just my *emotions*?” she adds before slamming the door and stalking away.

“Fuck!” I yell, beating my hands against the steering wheel. *What did I*

just do?

ELEVEN

PHOEBE

“I can't believe this is happening,” I mutter as he peppers heated kisses onto my lips, across my cheeks, down to my neck. My body is covered in chills, and I'm only capable of speaking in a whisper. Euphoric is the only word that comes close to describing what I'm feeling as he worships my body with his mouth. We both know this is wrong. This taste of forbidden fruit could end in colossal damage for both of us, but it's a risk I'm willing to take. As selfish as it sounds, I'm doing this one thing for me, for us, because I know he craves this just as much as I do.

Time seems to stop as he starts sucking on my neck, speaking words of praise in between kisses.

“Phoebe... God, you taste so good.”

I know his rough kisses will leave a mark, but I don't care. Right now, nothing matters but this moment between us. The tension has been building for months, and we finally allowed ourselves to give in tonight. I'm sure as hell not going to stop now that I have him.

“I want to taste you.” He stops kissing me to look me straight in the eyes. His gaze holds an unspoken question we both already know the answer to.

“Yes, please.” I look at him with confidence as I give him the green light to explore my body in the most intimate way. I want this. No, I need this more than life. If he stops now, I might literally die.

“Phoebe, I need you to be sure. This will change everything. We can't come back from this.” Clearly, he's fighting an internal battle, one we both know isn't worth fighting. We've tried fighting it, but we lose every time.

“Do you want this?” I ask, turning the question back onto him, quirked an eyebrow as I wait for his answer.

He doesn't hesitate. "I've wanted you from the moment I saw you. It's taking everything in me not to completely devour you right now."

I've verbally given him my answer, but sometimes, actions speak louder than words. I grab his hand and slowly glide it down my smooth skin. Our hands move in unison over my chest, down my stomach, to the edge of my lace underwear. I want him to know that I want this just as much as he does. I need him to know how much I crave his touch. We look each other in the eyes as I slowly move our joined hands beneath my lacy thong. The feeling of his hand against my bare skin is breathtaking.

I'm soaking wet, and in a matter of seconds, he'll know exactly how much his touch affects me, how much I want him. When our hands finally meet my slit, I slide his hand in between my folds. He looks at me with wide eyes, and I feel his dick twitch against my stomach the moment he realizes I'm dripping for him.

"Fuck, Phoebe. Tell me to stop. You have to tell me to stop. You are so fucking perfect, it hurts." His pupils have dilated, and he's looking at me with so much raw hunger, it makes my pussy clench in anticipation.

"The only thing I want you to do is stop overthinking. God, please don't stop touching me." As soon as the plea leaves my mouth, he finally stops fighting and lets go.

"Jesus, Phoebe. You're going to be the death of me. I can't stay away from you," he says as he rips my panties off, literally tearing them from my body. The lace snaps as it breaks, but my skin is so feverish with want, I barely feel it.

He plants hurried kisses down my stomach and positions himself between my legs. He dips his head, inches away from kissing me in a place no other man has ever explored with their mouth. The anticipation is out of this world as I wait for him to absolutely end me.

I jolt from my sleep and sit up against my headboard. I'm covered in sweat, my heart beating out of my chest, and I feel like the wind has been knocked out of me. I reach between my legs, feeling slick evidence of the very real effects my dream had on me.

"Shit!" I curse as I stare at the ceiling, contemplating what my dream means. The reality hits me like a freight train. I'm sexually attracted to my coach: my much older, self-righteous, broody, sexy as hell, college softball coach. This can't be happening.

I'm crushing hard on my coach, and his kiss did nothing but ignite the fire

that's been burning between us for weeks.

That kiss. Running the pads of my fingers along my lips, I can still feel his hungry mouth against mine. The feeling of his tongue dueling with mine was the hottest thing I've ever experienced in my life. I've never kissed a man who took control like he did, knotting his fingers in my hair and sucking fervently on my neck. Luckily, I have full coverage foundation to hide the fresh hickey he left there. When I looked in the mirror last night, staring back at me was the image of a woman I'd never seen before. My hair had come loose from my ponytail, falling in luscious, golden waves around my face. My breasts were straining against my sports bra, my nipples peaked. My cheeks were flushed, my lips swollen from Knox's nibbling and sucking. *I looked beautiful.*

Knox can act like our kiss didn't affect him as much as it did me, but I call bullshit. There was no hiding his groans of pleasure or the way his body mindlessly rocked into mine. Every time we broke our kiss for air, he would bring his mouth onto another part of my body, as if he couldn't get enough of me. When I finally crawled over into his lap, I audibly gasped when I felt his erection hard against my thigh - he definitely isn't lacking in size.

God, just thinking about that kiss has my core throbbing with need. I went to bed aroused, in desperate need of an orgasm. I knew if I got myself off, it would be to thoughts of him. I decided to fight the temptation, but clearly, it didn't work. My attraction to Knox is plainly unavoidable, even taunting me in my dreams. I need a release before I get out of bed, or today is going to be hell.

Taking a deep breath, I spread my legs and inch my hand down the valley of my stomach, slipping it underneath my sleep shorts and panties. I can feel my hard nipples straining against the cotton of my tank top. Once I reach my bare clit, I start to rub in a circular motion, instantly causing my hips to buck. I can't help the small whimper that escapes me as an image of the most infuriating, beautiful man fills my mind. His raven black hair that I love so much is tousled from running his hands through it. I imagine what his toned body would look like naked, masculine and hard in all the right places. I wonder what it would feel like to mark every inch of his tanned skin with my lips. I think about how good his lips felt on my neck. *My God, his mouth.*

"Fuck," I breathe out, feeling the pleasure taking me higher as touch myself.

If Knox were the one touching me, I might be embarrassed about how

wet I am. *Would he be turned on by that?* Not caring about how I'll feel after, I let my mind fixate on him, fantasizing he's the one touching me. I imagine it's his big hands caressing me, his thumb rubbing over my clit as he slips his long fingers inside of me.

"Oh my God..." I cry out, the thought of him inside me causing me to climax on the spot.

My orgasm ripples through my body like a shock wave, causing me to throw my head back as my insides spasm in pleasure. That was the most intense thing I've ever felt. And all I did was *think* about him as I touched myself. If I ever had the real thing, I'm afraid it would be the end of me. *I would never recover.*

My classes flew by today. Honestly, time is flying by in general. I can't believe I've been at CCU for over a month. My nineteenth birthday is next week, and Colin has planned an entire night out for us. Apparently, there's a nightclub called Island Fever where admission is eighteen and up. Colin knows the bartender and is convinced that he can sneak us a few drinks. Maisie and I are planning to go shopping this weekend for our outfits. I want to wear something edgy and daring. I want to feel the way I did when I looked at myself in the mirror last night. I don't care about looking good for Colin or anyone else; I just want to feel confident and sexy. *The way Knox makes me feel*, I think to myself.

Though Knox has never voiced his attraction to me, he makes me feel things without words. His heated gaze makes me feel like I'm the only person in the room. His lingering touches tell me he never wants to take his hands off me. The bitter look in his eyes when I mention Colin gives me the impression he can't stand the idea of me with another man. His hard length against my body shows me he craves me in all the ways I crave him.

I'm not letting him off the hook this time. I'm not some naive little girl; I didn't dream up what happened between us last night. If he wants to deny it, fine, but I'm sure as hell not going to let him forget.

I arrive an hour before practice begins, hoping Knox will be in his office. I haven't been able to stop thinking about our make-out session in his Jeep.

It's not fair he gets to shut me out and pretend like it never happened. I refuse to show up to practice and act like we didn't share the most earth-shattering kiss I've ever experienced. I'm not some unhinged teenager who randomly hooks up with men to mask my emotions. *Screw that.* He's not going to paint a false picture of last night, when we both know the feeling was mutual. This hurricane has been brewing for over a month, and last night, the waves crashed onto shore. The floodgates have opened, every feeling we've been suppressing rising to the surface.

Knock, knock, knock. My fist taps on his office door.

"Come in," Knox calls out, no idea who's on the other side. Just hearing his deep voice has the hairs on my arms standing up, goosebumps skittering across my skin.

"Hi," I say softly, lightly shutting the door behind me.

I look around his office, observing it for the first time. It's rather spacious, with his desk near the back of the room. A framed photo of him and Coach Cook sits on his desk, front and center. It's clearly from his baseball days because he's wearing a uniform. Coach Cook's arm is resting around his shoulder, beaming smiles stretching across their faces. The wall to the right has a window for natural light, bookshelves on either side filled with trophies, photos, and memorabilia. It's a typical coach's office, in all its sport-laden glory.

"Phoebe, open my door," he commands when he realizes I've closed it.

"No," I stand my ground. "We need to talk. Either we do it now, in private, or we do this at practice. Your choice."

"We have nothing to talk about," he replies through clenched teeth.

I take a deep breath, bracing myself for the onslaught of words I'm about to unleash on him. "If I didn't know who you were beneath this cold exterior, I might believe you, but I know you better than that. You may not want to talk, but your actions have done enough speaking for you. You care about me, Knox. As much as you hate to admit it, you do. Kicking me out of your car last night like I was nothing was complete bullshit. I refuse to let you manipulate me into thinking our kiss was one sided. You want to shut me out? Fine, but you're going to acknowledge that what happened last night was inevitable with or without my *emotional baggage*. Put aside your pride and admit it." I'm seething at this point, staring him straight in the eyes.

"Keep your voice down," he spits out in a hushed tone.

I scoff. Typical. "Or what? You'll throw me over your shoulder and carry

me out? Actually never mind; we both might enjoy that a little too much,” I quip.

That’s when the floodgates burst. He slams his hands down on his desk, shoving himself out of his seat. “What the hell is wrong with you? Do you realize you’re standing in *my* office? My place of work. This is not appropriate, and you know it.”

“Appropriate?” I snort out a disbelieving laugh. “That didn't seem to matter last night when your tongue was down my throat.”

He doesn't reply to my comment. He just takes a deep breath, folds his arms across his chest, and hangs his head. I can tell he’s using all the strength he has, trying not to lose his shit. I can see the fire building inside him, ready to ignite at any second. Determined to break his silence, I push him even further.

“Tell me, Knox - did you have to use your hand to get yourself off after our kiss?” I see his jaw clench at my question. “Because I certainly did,” I continue taunting him. “I had to finish what *you* decided to start. You want to know the worst part? It was your name on my lips while I was dripping all over my hand.”

Before I can blink, he fists his hands in his hair before swiping a heaping pile of paper off his desk in frustration.

“Lock my door,” he grits, barely audible.

“What?” I reply in shock.

“Lock my door or get out. You have two seconds to decide.”

Chest heaving, I quickly turn around and lock the door with a click. When I circle back to him, I don’t have the chance to blink again before he’s on me. His muscular arms wrap beneath my thighs, lifting me up and carrying me to the back of his office at lightning speed. My back hits a hard surface before I realize he’s slammed me against the wall. I haven’t changed into my practice clothes yet, and my sundress rides up my thighs, revealing my toned legs. The only barrier between us is the lace fabric of my panties and his thin sweatpants. In one swift move of his hips, I feel his hard cock brush against my slit, an audible gasp falling from my lips.

“Is this what you wanted, Phoebe?” he asks, thrusting his hips into me again. The feeling of him sliding against my throbbing slit is heart stopping. “For me to fuck you against my office wall? To put our futures in jeopardy? Because that’s what you're doing.” His face is so close that his nose brushes mine with each word.

I have no words. I can't do anything but throw my head back against the wall with a soft moan, exposing the column of my throat as he continues rubbing against me.

"I asked you a question. *You* storm into my office demanding answers, and now you suddenly forget how to speak. Answer me," he demands, picking up speed with each thrust of his hips.

"Oh God, Knox..." I moan. "I don't know, just please... don't stop." I don't know anything right now, not even my name.

"What is it about you?" he rasps before wrapping his fingers in my hair and slamming his mouth to mine.

We groan in unison as our lips and tongues collide for the second time. I wrap my arms around his neck, digging my fingernails into his shoulders, my grip sure to leave a mark. I start to roll my hips, meeting the rhythm of his thrusts. Never in my life would I have imagined that dry humping would feel this good. *I think I'm in heaven.*

Knox moves his hot mouth from my lips to my neck, sucking in all the places he knows will drive me crazy.

"You like that? My mouth marking you?" He asks me in a possessive tone, as if he already knows the answer.

"Knox," I whimper.

"God, Phoebe. You are so addicting. Why can't I stop?" he asks between wet kisses, slowly making his way down to my breasts. Taking me by surprise, he sucks my hard nipple into his mouth, still covered by the soft fabric of my dress.

I squirm beneath him at the feeling, my moans growing louder with each tug of his lips. "Knox. Please..."

"Please what? Tell me what you want and it's yours," he rasps, biting down on my nipple before sucking it into his mouth again.

"I need to... ahh," I moan as his dick rubs me from a deeper angle, causing me to lose my train of thought.

"Tell me, Bee," he whispers, softly pressing his lips back to mine. He called me a new nickname, one only he knows. *Oh, holy hotness.*

"I need to come. Please, Knox. I might die if I don't," I breathe out, not joking at all.

"Fuck, Phoebe. Lift up your dress, or you're going to have a mess all over it any second now," he replies, indicating he's losing control too.

I lift up the hem of my dress in one hand, completely baring my stomach

and thighs to him. I move my other hand into his hair and hold on for dear life as I try to make this feeling last as long as possible. *I want to stay here forever.*

“Look at you, Phoebe. So damn perfect,” he groans, thrusting harder against me.

I look down between our bodies and see the most erotic view of my entire life. Knox’s swollen tip has slipped out of the waistband of his sweatpants from our grinding. Pre-cum leaks out of his slit, and the sight makes me lose all sense of reality. I’ve never actually found a dick attractive before, just a means to an end, but his is a fucking work of art.

“I can’t. Knox, I’m so close,” I moan, clutching on to him as my orgasm takes over my entire body.

“I know. I’ve got you, Bee,” he whispers, softly kissing my jaw as I ride out the waves of pleasure *he* brought me. Knox cradles my face in his hands, breathing rapidly, and pushing our foreheads together as I feel hot liquid coat my stomach.

“Phoebe...” he groans. “Look at what you do to me. I tilt my chin down, silently answering the question I came here for. Before I can respond, a loud knock sounds against his office door.

“Knox! You in there? We need to discuss the rotation today before practice,” a deep voice calls out through the locked door. It sounds like his assistant coach.

“Shit!” Knox curses under his breath. “There’s a storage closet over there. I need you to get in and not make a sound until I tell you, okay?” he says, planting a kiss on my forehead and lightly setting me on my feet, pointing towards a small door in his office.

“Got it,” I whisper back, walking towards the closet, quickly opening the door, and shutting myself in. Thankfully, I find an athletic towel folded in the closet and wipe away his sticky release from my stomach. *I can’t believe that just happened.* My body is still shaking from the aftershocks of my orgasm.

I hear nothing but silence as Knox takes a second to gather himself and unlock the door, picking up the scattered papers from the floor and sliding into the chair behind his desk. It’s clear he’s using his desk as a barrier to hide his arousal.

“Sorry, I was on a confidential call. Come in,” he calls out. I try to listen in on their conversation, but all I hear are muffled sounds discussing what drills we’re running at practice today.

I'm in the closet for what seems like forever before Knox opens the door. The heat in the room has suddenly been replaced by a frigid cold, and we stare at each other in silence before Knox retreats back into his shell.

"This is exactly why we can't do this, Phoebe," he says, defeat evident in his voice. "We have no control. Do you realize if my door was unlocked how bad this could have been?"

"But it wasn't. We made sure it was locked," I reply.

"That's not the fucking point," he says in frustration, running his hand through his hair. "The point is we could have easily been caught rutting against the wall like a couple of wild animals. Hell, someone could have heard us."

"Knox, we can figure out a way-"

He interrupts me before I can finish. "Are you delusional? There's no way this would ever work. You came here for an answer, and you got it. I am so dangerously attracted to you, Phoebe. I'm ashamed I let things get this far. That's why I'm putting a stop to it now. This was *strike one* for us. We can't afford another one," he says in a low but serious tone.

Unlike the times he's pushed me away before, this time, he looks shattered. I came here to break him and that's exactly what I did. I got the answer I wanted and more, but somehow, I just feel worse. He's been trying to do the right thing for so long, and I just seduced him into coming all over my stomach. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

"I understand. I'll see you at practice," I whisper, nodding my head. I don't have it in me to argue with a broken man, one who's tried so hard to care for me without crossing the line.

"Thank you for everything, Knox," I add, before closing the door behind me.

TWELVE

PHOEBE

Gasping for air, my head breaks the surface of the salt water as I keep myself afloat in the strong tide. It's been five days since Knox dry humped me against the wall, melting me to a million pieces. He felt absolutely amazing, our most intimate parts grinding together. It also felt like a bittersweet goodbye, as if we both knew what our bodies needed in that moment before we ended this dangerous game.

I feel like the universe loves to fuck with me. Knox is the first person to make me feel like this. He makes me feel admired, wanted, sexy, and confident. When I'm around him, all my problems seem to dissipate, as if we're the only two people in the universe. When our eyes meet, butterflies dance in my stomach and flames ignite throughout my body. He makes me feel all these powerful things, but I can never have him. The man who's brought endless color into my life is my coach. We're the definition of right person, wrong time. *Why is life so cruel?*

I take a deep breath before ducking my head beneath the water and diving under the current as another wave crashes in. Today is Saturday and I don't have class, so I decided to watch the sunrise and take a morning swim. The sun is peeking over the horizon, painting gold hues across the water. The combination of the two is breathtaking.

Maisie and I are going shopping this afternoon to find outfits for Island Fever tonight. My actual birthday isn't until tomorrow, but since it falls on a Sunday, we're celebrating early. I love Maisie to death, but just a few hours with her can be overstimulating to say the least. I needed some time alone this morning before we "fuck shit up:" Maisie's words from last night as we laid in her bed, eating Oreos and planning for today.

The ocean has always been my happy place. I love the feel of the sand beneath my toes and the salt water on my skin. When I'm floating on the surface, staring up at the sky, it feels like I'm transported to another universe. It reminds me I'm just a tiny spec in comparison to the vastness of the world. Being surrounded by the ocean makes my problems seem smaller. It's the definition of bliss.

"Miss! Can you hear me? You need to swim back in. You're too far out!" I hear a deep voice yelling. Floating on my back, I position myself upright and squint to see where the voice is coming from. I feel something hard thud against my back, scaring the shit out of me. My fight or flight instincts kick in, and I spin my body around, swinging at whatever was behind me. It's when my fist connects with the orange and white warning buoy that I realize I let myself float too far from shore.

"Shit!" I curse at the pain radiating down my hand, throbbing from the hard surface it just connected with.

"You okay? I'm swimming out to get you!" a young man wearing a *Beach Patrol* shirt calls out.

"No! I'm fine. I can swim; I just drifted out too far," I shout back, kicking and paddling towards the shore. The beach patrol dude watches me like a hawk my entire swim back.

"I told you I could swim," I exhale, emerging from the water. My chest heaves as I try to catch my breath, my lungs feeling like they're on fire. I remind myself to *never* swim out that far again.

"Are you asking for a death sentence? There's barely anyone out here this early. One rip current and you'd be a goner." His eyes quickly assess my bikini-clad body, landing on the bruises forming across my knuckles. I'm going to have a great time explaining *that* to everyone.

"You need anything for that?" he asks, pointing to my red knuckles.

"No, I'm fine," I reply, ready to leave and end this conversation. *Why is he acting like I almost died or something?*

"What you did was careless. You don't want to know how many people die from rip currents each year. Once you get pulled into one, it's almost impossible for us to get to you in time. Be smarter next time," he chastises me, shaking his head. "Anyways, have a good day."

"Aye, aye, captain," I snark before saluting him and walking off. *Why am I such a bitch?* I feel his eyes glued to my ass as I strut away.

“*Oh. My. God.* That’s the one,” Maisie gasps as I twirl from side to side, taking in all my angles. “You look hot as hell. You’re getting that dress. I’m not giving you an option.” She fans her hand in front of her face to emphasize her vote.

We’ve been in Coral Boutique playing dress up for the past two hours. It’s a beautiful shop, with blush-pink walls and elegant, gold fixtures. The fitting room is decorated with a crystal chandelier and a spacious, round couch for guests to lounge on.

Maisie found her outfit almost immediately - a pair of high waisted, black leather pants and a black lace top that makes her boobs look amazing. She found a pair of red heels, adding a pop of color to the ensemble. Her outfit screams “Maisie”- she’s going to look incredible.

I, on the other hand, have not had the same luck. Everything I’ve tried on has been cute, but *cute* is not the look I’m going for.

Smiling at myself in the mirror, I think I’ve finally found the sexy look I’ve been searching for. It’s a silk black dress, the short skirt barely hitting the tops of my thighs. It has a small slit in the right leg, almost reaching my panty line. Thin straps connect at the back, right above my ass, exposing almost all my back.

“I thought these would go perfect with your dress,” the boutique’s stylist interrupts, handing me a pair of black, strappy heels.

“Thank you,” I reply with a smile, slipping on the heels and taking in the full outfit in the mirror. *Holy shit.* I don’t even recognize myself. I’ve never worn anything this daring or bold before. I blink at myself in shock, loving the confident woman staring back at me.

“I’ll get it,” I decide, my eyes never leaving my reflection. “The shoes too. I’ll take it all.”

“Hell yes!” Maisie yelps, clapping her hands together in excitement. “One correction though: *you* will not be buying anything. It’s your birthday, Pheeb. You can just charge it to my account.” Maisie smiles, extending her plastic card out to the stylist.

“Maisie, are you kidding me?” I exclaim, my brows arched in surprise as the stylist leaves to swipe her card. “This is way too expensive.”

“You can just buy me a hot outfit on my birthday, and we’ll call it even,” she replies with a wink. “I’m not changing my mind, you might as well just accept it.”

I sigh; I know she’s not going to let me talk her out of this. “Thank you so much, Mais. You’re seriously the best,” I reply, wrapping my arms around her neck and giving her a tight hug.

“You’re going to look unbelievable. It will be worth every dime watching Colin lose his mind,” she laughs.

I give her a pointed look, holding her out at arm’s length. “Maisie, I already told you; I’m not into Colin. He’s a great friend, but nothing more.”

She snorts as she downs the last sip of her champagne. “Are you going to tell *him* that? He looks at you like you hung the moon. Plus, why the hell are you so against it? Colin is hot as hell and follows you around like a lost puppy.”

When we arrived at the boutique, the stylist greeted us with a tray of champagne flutes, not even asking to check our ID’s. Before I could reply, Maisie grabbed a glass off the tray and took a swig. So, I guess you could say we’ve done a little pregaming already.

“Exactly. I don’t want a stage five clinger. It would be too easy with Colin,” I reply with an eye roll. I’ve already told her this five times over, but once more doesn’t hurt.

“Do you hear yourself right now?” she scoffs. “Isn’t easy what we all want? God, I wish I had guys falling at my feet. I would eat that shit up.”

Who I want is a man I can never have, one who has consumed my thoughts since the first day I saw him. A man who gave me the most intense orgasm of my life against his office wall.

“Just promise me you’ll let yourself have fun tonight,” she adds, grabbing my hand and giving it a squeeze. “You haven’t seemed like yourself lately. It’s your birthday; forget about the stress of class, softball, whatever else you have on your mind. Don’t think about tomorrow. Just have fun and let loose. Tonight is all about you, Pheeb.”

“I promise,” I respond, smiling and squeezing her hand back. *At least, I’ll try.*

THIRTEEN
KNOX

“Dude, you wanna hear some crazy shit?” my friend, Slater, asks from across the table, taking a swig of his beer.

We’ve been at Bay Area Dive, a local sports bar, for the past couple of hours. This late at night, most of the patrons are shit-faced men placing bets on Sunday’s football games. Televisions surround the bar, showing highlights of the weekend’s sporting events. Pool tables line the back of the bar, clouded with rings of smoke and glass from broken beer bottles. A fight broke out earlier, resulting in one of the guys busting a bottle over the other guy’s head. After security pulled them away from each other, they were both escorted out, yelling expletives at each other the entire time. Needless to say, this wouldn’t be the best place to take your significant other for a romantic night out, but damn, if it isn’t entertaining.

“Try me,” I respond. “My life has been a shit show, so I’m sure whatever you’re about to say won’t surprise me.” *If he only knew I blew my load all over my athlete the other day.*

“I don’t know, man. I had a crazy ass morning. Almost had to rescue a chick out at the buoys at sunrise.”

Slater is employed by Coral Cove Beach Patrol, where he’s responsible for enforcing safety rules and looking out for beach goers. People underestimate how hard their job is - they have to be in exceptional shape, in case they have to swim out to save someone. Slater was telling me about the insane fitness test he had to pass to get his certification, giving me some good ideas for strength and conditioning workouts.

Slater and I have been going out for beers on weekends since we met at the gym a few weeks ago. He’s a total beach bum that can’t go a day without

dipping his toes in the ocean. His hair is permanently bleached by the sun, and his wardrobe consists solely of t-shirts and board shorts.

“I could barely see her,” he continues. “At first, I thought it was a dead body floating out to sea. Freaked me the hell out, man.” He shakes his head.

“Is she okay? I’ve heard rip currents are bad this time of year. Hopefully, it was an accident that she was so far out,” I reply.

“I was thinking the same thing until she started swimming back like nothing was wrong. It was like she had no idea she was the only one in the ocean, drifting away by the second,” he replies, moving his hand like a wave. “Dude, you should have seen the fucking waves this morning. I’m still in shock she made it back to shore without my help. Hell, maybe I should ask her to apply to the patrol team,” he laughs.

“Damn, that’s crazy,” I say, shaking my head in disbelief.

“Yeah, she seemed fine other than her hand. She was too far out for me to see what happened, but I think she smacked it pretty hard on the buoy. It was already starting to swell by the time she made it back in. Honestly, though, I was kind of glad her hand distracted me. You should have seen the body on this girl. *Holy shit, Knox*. She had on this little bikini that made her ass look so damn good,” he swoons, chewing on his bottom lip.

“Maybe you should have asked for her number,” I quip, arching a brow and taking another swig of my beer.

“She thinks I’m a joke,” he laughs. “She saluted me like a fucking captain before walking off, her perky ass bouncing as she strutted away. I wouldn’t stand a chance, bro.”

“She saluted you? That’s fucking hilarious,” I reply, my chest heaving with laughter.

“Not only did she salute me, but she called me ‘Captain’ while she did it,” he scoffs, shaking his head.

“God, I would have paid to see that,” I mock.

“Last call!” the bartender shouts, letting us know the bar is getting ready to close. Damn, I can’t believe it’s already past midnight.

“That’s my cue to go,” I exhale. I’d only had two beers across three hours, so I was more than fine to drive home.

“Yeah, me too. I’ve gotta be up early for the morning shift,” Slater agrees, sliding out of the wooden chair.

“Maybe you’ll run into your dream girl again,” I joke, giving him a playful slap on the back.

“Yeah, yeah. See you later, man.” Slater smiles and waves goodbye as he walks towards his car.

I’m halfway to my Jeep when my phone starts buzzing in my pocket. “Who the hell is calling this late?” I mutter to myself.

My breath hitches when I see Phoebe’s name glowing across the screen. *What? Why would she be calling me?*

We haven't spoken a word to each other since our *moment* in my office. *God*, the image of Phoebe grinding her hips against me until she fell apart in my arms has been in the forefront of mind since she walked out of my office. *It was hands down the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.* When she lifted her dress and I got my first look at her toned stomach and gorgeous thighs, I almost came in my pants. Then, when I looked down and saw the tip of my dick brushing against her pink, lace panties, *I fucking lost it. God, I’ll never be able to forget that image.* The sound of her moaning my name as she came is a melody that will forever live rent free in my head.

Thank God we were interrupted, because I was one second away from ripping off her panties and *really* touching her. I could tell by her heavy breathing and needy moans that she wanted me to touch her too. I shouldn't answer her call, but what if she’s in trouble?

“Phoebe?” I answer, straining to hear over the loud music in the background.

“Knoxyyy! Omg, I can’t believe you actually answered,” Phoebe slurs. *What the fuck?*

I furrow my brows. “Are you prank calling me? What’s going on?”

“Have you ever had a star fucker shot before? It’s *soooo* yummy, tastes like candy!” She’s yelling over the music, her words slightly running together.

“I know what a star fucker is. I’m actually of the legal drinking age, unlike you,” I respond. *How many has she had?* Crown Royal, Schnapps, and Red Bull are a dangerous combination.

“There you go again, pointing out *age*,” she mocks. I can practically see her rolling her eyes. “I think it’s kinda hot that you’re older. Don’t you know that age-gap relationships are *sooo* in right now? You could be the next Leonard Dicaprio,” she giggles and hiccups at the same time.

Leonard? *Oh God, she’s drunk.* “Are you drunk, Phoebe?” I ask in a stern tone.

“Ooooo, I like it when you say my name like that. So demanding, *Coach*

Moore,” she hums.

“Where are you?” I ask, deciding against telling her I’m coming to get her drunk ass. *What the hell?* She’s not even twenty-one.

“Ummm.... I think it’s called Love Island?”

Isn’t *Love Island* a TV show? *My God, how much has she had to drink?* I do a quick search on my phone for bars in Coral Cove. A club called Island Fever is one of the first that pops up, and I immediately know that’s where she’s at. *What if some dirt bag tries to leave with her?* The thought makes me see red.

“Phoebe, I need you to stay on the phone with me,” I tell her, hoping she’ll stay put until I get there.

“Oh shit! Maisie ordered us another round of star fuckers. Got to go, byeeeeee!” I hear a loud squeal before the call disconnects.

“Goddammit!” I curse, stomping my foot on the gas pedal.

I arrive at Island Fever in less than five minutes, thanks to my speeding. After I flash my ID to the bouncer, I walk through the front door into the dark club, the walls illuminated by flashing neon lights. The bar lines all four walls, the dance floor right in the center. It’s lit up by LED lights, making it the focal point of the room. It’s almost two in the morning, but the party looks like it’s just getting started. Almost everyone is on the dance floor, grinding together and raising their glasses as they sing along to the music.

My eyes immediately scan the crowd for Phoebe, pushing through flocks of sweaty people in my quest to find her. Right when I’m about to move my search from the dance floor to the bar, I see *her*.

Phoebe’s standing near the back, running her hands through her luscious blonde hair as she grinds her ass up against Colin. He’s holding on to her hips, pulling her as close to his dick as possible. *I can’t fucking see straight.*

Her body is slick with sweat, her hair falling in seductive waves down her shoulders. Her lips turn up in a seductive smile as she closes her eyes and leans her head back against Colin’s shoulder, exposing the gorgeous line of her neck. She’s dancing under a scarlet spotlight, the color matching her red lipstick. *She’s so excruciatingly sexy.* The thought of those crimson lips wrapped around my cock sends a shudder through my entire body.

She’s the most beautiful human I’ve ever seen. She’s wearing a tight black dress that hugs her body like a glove. Her toned legs, arms, and back are on full display. *Fuck me,* her dress is basically just a strip of fabric leaving little to the imagination. Her body is a damn masterpiece. A body

Colin has his hands all over.

“Get your hands off her,” I command through clenched teeth in Colin’s ear. Phoebe’s eyes immediately widen as she notices me standing behind Colin.

“Woah, man,” Colin spins around, holding his hands up in defense. “We’re just having a good time.”

“Yeah, I can tell you’re having a great time. She’s drunk off her ass and you know it. Are you twenty-one? Cause I sure as hell know Phoebe’s not,” I add, flexing my jaw.

He stutters at me before looking at her. “Shit... isn’t he your coach?” he whispers to Phoebe, as if I can’t hear every word he’s saying.

“Yes, I am,” I respond. “And I’m responsible for the well-being of my players. You need to get your ass home before I turn you all in for underage drinking,” I threaten.

“Yes sir,” he answers in a shaky tone. “Come on, Phoebe,” he says as he reaches for her hand.

“She’s not going anywhere with you,” I stop him, stepping between them. “Leave,” I command, staring him dead in the face.

“What about...”

“I’ll make sure she gets home. Leave, *now*.” He glances at Phoebe one last time before turning and stumbling off the dance floor.

“That was aggressive, but hot,” Phoebe shrugs and laughs as she moves to wrap her arms around my neck.

“Where’s Maisie?” I ask, moving to the side and ignoring her drunk flirting.

“She met this football player. I think they went back to our place to do the dirty, if ya know what I mean,” she says, winking and arching her brows.

I shake my head. *Maisie is definitely running extra laps on Monday.* “Come on, we’re getting out of here,” I reply, wrapping my hand around her sweaty arm and leading her off the dance floor.

“Sooo demanding. Can you carry me like my own personal knight in shining armor?” she asks when we finally make it out to the parking lot and over to my car.

“Get in,” I demand, opening the passenger door for her. Her knees slightly wobble as she grips the door handle. *Okay, so she’s drunker than I thought.*

“On second thought,” I say, gripping her hips and lifting her up. “Let me

help you in before you break an ankle.”

“*Such* a gentleman,” she hums, patting the top of my head as I buckle her seatbelt. I can’t help the smile that breaks across my face as she pets my head like a damn dog. She’s an affectionate drunk.

“What are you hungry for?” I ask, once we’re finally on the road.

“Do you want me to answer that truthfully?” she replies, bursting out into laughter. She has the drunk giggles, laughing and snorting at the same time.

“You think you’re hilarious, don’t you?” I respond, trying my damndest not to laugh. “You have one minute to decide what you want or I’m picking. I don’t have any groceries at my house.”

“Your house? Are you taking me to your humble abode?” she asks in a posh accent. *Oh, here we go.*

“I’m sure as hell not taking you to your apartment right now. God knows who Maisie brought back there.” I refuse to be exposed to *that* clusterfuck.

“Damn, I would have gotten drunk a lot sooner if I knew that’s all it took to get me into your bed,” she responds with arched brows. The mention of her in my bed causes my dick to thicken in my jeans. *She’s going to hate herself tomorrow for flirting with me like this.*

“I will *not* be getting in any bed with you. I’ll be sleeping on the couch. I’m giving you a safe place to sleep, that’s it. I’m taking you straight home in the morning, once I know you’re alive and well.”

“Boo, you whore,” she replies and flips me off.

Fuck, trying not to laugh at her is getting harder by the second. “Okay, so McDonalds it is,” I exhale, making the decision for her. There aren’t many options this late at night.

“Nooo!” she groans. “Taco Bell! I want a cheesy gordita crunch and some of those cinnamon balls. I’ll take any balls I can get at this point,” she adds pointedly, cracking herself up.

“I hate to break it to you, but cinnamon balls are all you’re gonna get, little lady,” I snort, taking a left to Taco Bell.

Thirty minutes later, we’re pulling into the driveway of my townhome, Phoebe seductively moaning as she scarfed down her food. I know she was moaning because of the taste, but I can’t hide the way my body reacts. Tucking my hard cock under the waistband of my boxers, I hop out of my Jeep and walk to the passenger door to help her out.

“You know why they call it Taco Hell?,” she draws out. “Because there’s gonna be hell to pay after.” She laughs at her own joke, wrapping her arm

around my neck as I carry her into the house.

“Let’s hope it’s not a *shitty* night,” I joke. Phoebe throws her back laughing so hard, she can barely catch her breath.

I need to get her upstairs, and I sure as hell don’t trust her to walk up the narrow steps by herself like this. I also don’t mind the feel of her body pressed against mine, my arms cradling her smooth legs. Her hair is brushing up against my cheek, smelling of coconut and vanilla. *God, she smells so good.*

“Wow, this is fancy. Do I get a grand tour, like MTV cribs?” she chuckles as I carry her into my home. Though I’m pissed at her for getting this fucked up, I love hearing her laugh. *It’s my new favorite sound.*

“No, you don’t get a tour. We shouldn’t even be in this predicament,” I reply, carrying her upstairs to my room. “I’m taking you straight to bed, then driving you home first thing in the morning. My only goal for tonight is to make sure you don’t get taken advantage of by some douchebag or choke on your own vomit.”

“*To bed or to sleep?*” she replies in what sounds like a Scottish accent.

“Huh?” I respond.

“Oh, come on! Jamie Fraser, duuuuh. Have you never watched *Outlander?*”

“No, and I have no desire to watch it now,” I reply, setting her on her feet when we’re finally inside my room.

“I can’t believe I’m standing in Knox Moore’s room,” she says in amazement, as if I’m not standing right next to her. She slowly turns her head, taking a minute to observe my room. It’s the definition of minimalistic, with gray walls, a dark wood dresser, and my king size bed in the center. All sexual innuendos aside, my bed is my favorite feature. It’s like sleeping on a massive cloud - the headboard matches my black down comforter, paired with gray cotton sheets.

“I’m going to run downstairs and get you some water and ibuprofen. Do you need anything else?” I ask.

“A birthday kiss?” she responds with a smirk before puckering her full lips.

Shit, is it her birthday?

“Very funny, Phoebe,” I scoff. “I didn’t realize it was your birthday. Other than getting drunk off your ass, did you have a good day?” *Why am I asking her if she had a good birthday? I shouldn’t care.*

“Technically, my birthday isn’t until Sunday, but yes, tonight’s been fun. I know one thing that could make it better,” she says, arching her eyebrows.

Damn, this girl is horny when she’s drunk. I briefly let the fantasy of her as my girlfriend play through my mind. I imagine taking Phoebe out to a nice restaurant, wine and dining her, followed by rounds of dirty sex. My already aroused dick immediately twitches at the thought. *Dammit*, my little fantasy is turning me on way more than it should. Distracting me from my thoughts, my eyes go wide as they land on her right hand, red and bruised around the knuckles. *What the fuck?* Did she have to fight someone off?

“Phoebe, what happened to your hand?” I ask in a serious tone.

“Oh, this?” She looks down at her hand before hiding it behind her back. “It’s nothing.”

“Did someone try to touch you?” I snarl, feeling my blood pressure rising by the second.

“No, I’m fine,” she replies, looking around the room to avoid eye contact. *Something happened.*

“I swear to God, I’m going to kill that motherfucker,” I curse, clenching my fists at my sides. “I’ve always known he was a piece of shit.”

“Who?” she asks, her brows pinching together in question.

“Colin! Who else? I saw the way he had his hands all over you tonight. You’ve never been into him, but he just won’t give up. The asshole couldn’t read a stop sign if it was right in front of him.” I’m seething, practically foaming at the mouth.

“What? You’re way off base! Colin would never. I hit my hand on a buoy this morning. I was swimming and accidentally bumped into it,” she replies, holding her hand out for me to see.

I wonder why her story sounds so familiar when suddenly, it clicks. She’s the girl Slater told me about at the bar, the girl with a hot body he couldn’t stop gushing about. *Motherfucker.* I don’t know if I’m more pissed at her for being so careless, or at him for talking about her like that. I want to call him up right now and tell him she’s mine, even though it would be a lie.

“Are you insane? You swam all the way out to the buoys? They’re there for a reason, Phoebe. The water is extremely dangerous that far out! You’re lucky you didn’t drown or get caught in a riptide. Jesus Christ!” I respond, running my hands through my hair. I want to punch a wall, I’m so angry.

“*Blah, blah, blah,*” she mocks, making talking motions with her hands. “I’ve already been scolded by the blonde-haired loser,” she adds, rolling her

eyes.

“That blonde-haired loser is actually my friend. He told me an unbelievable story tonight, both of us in shock over who would be so *stupid* to swim that far out on their own. I guess I should have known it was you.” I don’t care if my comment sounds harsh; I’m fucking pissed she would put her life at risk like that.

“Ouch, that hurt,” she says mockingly, clutching her chest. “What else do you got? Don’t hold back, *Knoxy*.”

“Okay, we’re done with this conversation.” I exhale as I run my hands through my hair. “There’s no point in talking to you when you think everything is a damn joke. I’m going downstairs, I’ll be back in a minute,” I add before slamming the door and stomping downstairs.

Less than five minutes later, I’m walking back upstairs with a large glass of iced water in one hand, ibuprofen tablets in the other. I have a box of saltine crackers wedged between my arm in case she needs food to settle her stomach.

When I walk into the room, I almost drop everything as I take in the view before me. Phoebe’s laying on top of the covers in the center of my bed, clutching a pillow under her head. She’s laying on her stomach and her dress has ridden up, revealing a tiny black thong resting between her plump ass cheeks. *Holy mother of hell, this woman*. She’s laying in my bed, looking like a goddamn dream. It’s taking all my self-restraint to not curl up next to her and wrap her small body in my arms.

I walk around to the side of the bed where her head is turned and notice her eyes are closed. Her back rises in sync with her steady breathing. She must have passed out when I was downstairs. God, she’s even breathtaking when she’s sleeping. Her long eyelashes are fluttering, and I hope that if she’s dreaming, it’s of something happy.

I reach into my closet, grabbing an old quilt to cover her. I would tuck her in beneath the sheets, but I don’t want to wake her. I let out a sigh of relief once her body is shielded by the quilt, thankful I no longer have the option to stare at her delicious, heart-shaped ass.

My plan was to sleep downstairs on the couch, but I don’t want to be far from her if she wakes up or gets sick. Making a new plan, I grab an extra sheet out of the closet, swipe a pillow off the bed, and make myself a pallet on the carpet beside the bed.

I’ll be lucky if I get an hour of sleep tonight. The floor feels like stone

beneath me, and I toss and turn as I try to find a comfortable position. Finally, I settle with laying on my back, my hands resting on my chest as Phoebe's soft breathing lulls me to sleep.

FOURTEEN

PHOEBE

“Ughhh,” I groan, rolling over on my side to see what time it is. The digital clock on the nightstand reads five a.m. I can tell by the moonlight shining through the window that it’s still dark outside. I know exactly where I am, in Knox’s bedroom. I may have taken one too many shots last night, but I wasn’t blackout drunk. The last thing I remember is falling face first onto Knox’s heavenly bed and passing the hell out.

“Fuck,” I rasp, clenching my arms around my aching stomach. I feel like I’m going to be sick. Scratch that, I *know* I’m going to be sick. I absolutely *hate* throwing up with a passion. When I’m on the verge of puking, I know it’s serious. I can only count on one hand the number of times I’ve thrown up; I avoid that shit at all costs.

The only times I’ve ever experienced panic attacks in my life is when I’m about to heave my guts up. It’s nothing short of a traumatic event for me.

“Oh God,” I whimper as a sharp pain rumbles through my stomach.

I wish Knox was here. He must have slept on the couch or in a guest bedroom. I wish he was here holding me, but I understand why he would be hesitant about sleeping next to one of his drunk athletes. I just hate getting sick alone. As pathetic as it sounds, I feel like I’m going to die when I throw up. Because of my fear, I need someone with me when I get like this, someone to calm me down and tell me I’m not dying, that it’s normal to vomit when you’re sick to your stomach.

When another wave of nausea rolls through me, I shoot straight up, still wearing my silk dress from last night. I see a door slightly cracked across the room, leading to another small room with tile flooring. Praying to God it’s Knox’s bathroom, I jump out of bed, hoping I can make it across the room

before I vomit all over his spotless carpet.

“Woah! What the hell? Who’s there?” a deep voice frantically shouts, sounding startled.

It’s then I realize my feet landed on Knox’s hard-as-steel abs instead of the floor. He’s staring up at me, wide-eyed and confused, clearly coming out of a deep sleep. *Did he sleep on the floor to be next to me?* My brows pinch together as I think through why Knox is on the floor with nothing but a pillow and thin sheet.

Oh my God. He slept on the floor less than a foot away from me. On the cold, hard floor, just to be by my side.

“Knox, I’m so sorry! I didn’t see you. I... Oh God, Knox,” I breathe out, losing my train of thought as another surge of nausea takes over my body. I feel beads of sweat breaking out across my skin as I wrap my arms around my stomach. Without looking in a mirror, I know that my face is scrunched together in pain.

“Phoebe,” Knox says, immediately rising to his feet and cradling my sweaty face in his palms. His eyes dart back and forth between mine, searching for an answer. “What is it? Are you okay?”

All I can manage to do is shake my head. I can feel the bile rising to my throat as anxiety starts to take over my senses.

“Talk to me, Bee. You have to tell me what’s wrong. Are you sick? What hurts?” He’s talking a mile a minute, worry etched into every beautiful line of his face. *How in the hell is my mind still focused on his beauty when I literally feel like I’m dying a slow death?*

“Phoebe, you’re scaring the shit out of me! What do you need? Who do I need to call?” he asks in a hurried tone. He looks so scared. No one has ever looked at me with this much concern on their face. Concern for me. I muster all the strength I have to respond.

“I’m sick. I need to throw up, but I’m scared,” I whimper, my words almost coming out as a cry. “Knox, fuck... it hurts,” I croak, burying my face into his warm neck and wrapping my shaking arms around his torso.

“What are you afraid of, Bee?” he whispers in my ear, gently rubbing circles into my back with his big hands.

“Throwing up. I hate it,” I breathe out against his neck, letting a lone tear slide down my cheek.

“I’ve got you. I would never let anything happen to you,” he soothes, pressing a gentle kiss to the top of my head. He wraps his arms under my

legs, circling them around his waist and carrying me to the bathroom. I'm clinging to him like a koala, like he's my lifeline. He kicks a plush rug in front of the toilet and softly sets me down on my knees, my body facing the bowl. In less than a second, he's kneeling behind me, his body pressed to mine. He drapes his strong arms around my middle, holding me to him. *Is he really going to hold me like this while I puke my guts out?*

"Knox, you don't have to do this," I say, embarrassed. "You can stand outside the door if you want."

"Do you want me here?" he asks, his voice a soft brush against my ear.

"I don't want to be alone," I whisper, answering truthfully.

"Then I'm not going anywhere," he immediately responds. My heart clenches at his words. "Give me your wrist," he says, removing his arm from my waist to reach for my hand.

"What..." I say, before realizing what he's doing.

He slowly slides my black hair tie off my wrist to tie my hair back in a ponytail. *Holy shit, this man is everything.* After securing my hair, he wraps me in his arms again before speaking.

"Okay, now it's time to let it out. You're going to feel a million times better once you do."

"Knox, I can't. It's like a mental block. I know I need to, but my mind won't let me. Throwing up terrifies me." Before I can get another word out, an audible groan of pain leaves my body. "Fuckkk," I curse. "Knox, I don't know what to do. Please help me," I cry, finally letting the tears flow like a waterfall. The panic has officially set in.

"You're going to hate me... but think about all the shots you took last night. Think about taking one right now, the alcohol burning down your throat."

"Stop! Oh my God, I'm going to vomit," I shout, starting to hyperventilate.

"That's the point, baby," he says, rubbing my back with one hand and holding me to him with the other.

Did he just call me...

"Oh my God, I'm going to die. This is the end. I'm dying," I cry, as shivers take over my sweat drenched body.

"You're not dying, Bee. You just need to throw up. This is a natural reaction your body is having to the alcohol. You're anxious, which is causing your symptoms to intensify. This is all going to pass. Once you get it out,

you'll feel better, I promise. I'm right here. I'll be with you the entire time," he soothes, continuing to hold and caress me.

"Ughhh," I groan and hiccup at the same time. I fold my arms over the toilet seat, my chest heaving from my soft cries.

"Let's talk about that shot again," he continues. "Star fucker, huh? A mixture of so many delicious things. Crown Royal, Schnapps, Red Bull..."

I fucking lose it at the mention of Crown Royal. I don't even have a second to process what's happening before I'm puking my entire soul out into the toilet. I swear to God, I don't stop throwing up for what feels like five minutes.

"That's it, Bee. I've got you," Knox says in a comforting tone, keeping me calm as noises that sound like an exorcism leave my body. *This is so embarrassing.*

"Knox... I can't believe I'm in your bathroom, throwing my guts up. I'm so sor-" I don't finish my sentence before I gag and continue puking, my body shaking with each heave. There's basically nothing left in my stomach; I'm literally throwing up bile at this point.

"Never apologize to me, baby. I would much rather you be here with me than anywhere else," he replies, placing a kiss to the back of my head.

This man is kissing me as I'm vomiting like a damn feral animal. If I wasn't catching feels before, I sure as hell am now. He's never been this affectionate with me before. It's like seeing me sick broke down a wall he's been keeping up.

I spend a few minutes just taking deep breaths as Knox continues to rub circles into my back. I'm already starting to feel a thousand times better, thanks to him. He was right, getting that toxic shit out of my system is already making a world of difference.

"You okay?" he whispers into my ear once my breathing steadies.

"I think so," I reply. "Thank you." I keep my head down between my legs, too ashamed to make eye contact.

"Phoebe, look at me."

"No. I'm so embarrassed, Knox. I can't believe that just happened," I reply in a tiny whisper. He grabs my face gently in both his hands, forcing me to turn my head and look up at him.

"You have *nothing* to be embarrassed about," he replies, his eyes flickering back and forth between mine. "I'm sure this isn't news to you, but I think you're absolutely perfect, Phoebe. So please, don't ever be

embarrassed around me. *Ever.*”

If my mouth wasn't coated in vomit, I would grab his face and kiss the shit out of him right now. I don't care if he would want me to or not; I need his lips on mine after that confession. I can't seem to get a word out as I stare at him in shock.

“What can I get you?” he clears his throat, breaking the trance between us. “Water? Food? Just let me know what you need.”

“Um, a toothbrush and mouthwash would be a good start,” I answer honestly, letting out a small laugh.

“I think I have an extra toothbrush in the cabinet, let me check,” he notes, making sure I'm steady before he stands and opens the cabinet door. “Bingo.” He holds up the toothbrush in victory.

He's so damn cute.

After he takes the toothbrush out of the plastic package, he tosses the container in the trash and reaches for my hand.

“Here, let me help you up,” he says, wrapping an arm around my waist as I stand.

Once I'm standing, we're chest to chest, the heat of his body radiating against mine. We just stare at each other for a moment before he finally clears his throat and leads me toward the sink.

He stays behind me the entire time I'm brushing my teeth, watching my every move in the mirror, like he's afraid I might fall over. I've never brushed my teeth for so long in my entire life. I'm surprised my gums are still intact. There's nothing worse than the taste of lingering vomit. Once I finish brushing my teeth, I gargle with mouthwash for what feels like five minutes. After I spit out the remainder of the minty liquid, my eyes meet his in the mirror.

An undeniable heat rushes through my body as our gazes meet. He's so unbelievably sexy. He's wearing a pair of gray sweatpants, paired with a white t-shirt. His golden eyes are burning into mine, his raven hair disheveled, pointing in every direction but straight. I love seeing him look so casual. It feels like I'm getting a glimpse of a hidden part of him that only the people closest to him get to see.

“Can I use your shower? I ask, breaking the silence. “I feel gross.”

“Of course,” he replies, clearing his throat and taking a small step back.

Did my comment affect him? Averting my eyes to his body, I see his hands move to rest in front of his groin. *I guess his dick likes the thought of*

me naked in his shower.

“Let me grab you a towel. The shower is slippery as hell, so please be careful. I’ve been meaning to get a shower mat. Believe it or not, I almost ate shit a couple of times in there.”

His comment makes me laugh. The thought of a naked Knox tumbling in the shower, his bare ass flying around as he slips and slides, cracks me up.

“Oh, you think that’s funny, huh?” he replies with a smirk as he hands me a towel from the rack. “Turn the knob to the left for hot water and the right for cold. I’ll be right outside the door if you need anything.”

“I may need some clothes, although I could just slip my dress back on. You’ll probably be taking me home soon anyways,” I answer with a soft smile.

“No, I want you to be comfortable. I’ll get you something of mine to wear. I’m not taking you home until you’ve slept this off. My place is a hell of a lot more comfortable and quieter than yours. God knows who Maisie took home last night.”

I shake my head. “Knox, I’m not drunk anymore. It’s been hours, and I literally just threw up everything in my system. I’m honestly fine to go home.”

“You’re still going to be hungover as hell. What if you start throwing up again? I don’t want you to be alone, Phoebe.”

I don’t have the energy to argue with him, but mostly, I don’t want to go home. I want to be with him. I never get to just be alone with Knox, see this side of him, and I don’t want it to end.

“Okay,” I whisper. “Well, I guess I’ll just...” I trail off, motioning towards the shower.

“Right. I’ll be in my room. Just shout if you need me,” he responds awkwardly, abruptly, softly closing the door behind him.

When I move to take a few steps to the shower, I suddenly feel lightheaded and dizzy. *Shit, I probably need to eat something.* My panic combined with vomiting is making my limbs feel weak. I reach for the towel rack hanging on the wall to steady myself, when I accidentally swipe a can of what looks like shaving cream off the bathroom shelf. As soon as it crashes to the floor, sounding more dramatic than it should, Knox comes barging into the bathroom.

“Phoebe, are you okay?” he asks, looking concerned.

“I’m fine. I’m just a little lightheaded from getting sick. Why is your

shaving cream not in the shower?” I laugh, trying to direct his thoughts elsewhere.

“I do have one in the shower. That one’s an extra can. Can you stop trying to distract me? You almost just fell. You realize the floor is tile, right? One bad slip, and you could crack your head open.”

“You’re dramatic,” I quip, rolling my eyes and crossing my arms over my chest.

“You need to eat something first. Let’s go get you some food.”

“No, Knox,” I stand my ground. “I want to shower first. I have dried sweat all over my body and puke splattered on my chest. I feel absolutely disgusting. I’m not doing anything without showering first. I could almost throw up again from just smelling myself.”

He stares off into space, gripping his bottom lip between his teeth, thinking long and hard before responding.

“Fine, but I’m getting in with you,” he blurts out. “Don’t fight me on this, Phoebe. We both saw what happened before when you were lightheaded and didn’t eat. I’m not about to have you passing out in my shower and busting your head open. I’m not sure how I would explain to an ambulance that my nineteen-year-old athlete is naked in my shower. So, I’m getting in too. Non-negotiable, or you can shower when you get home.” I want to argue, but his expression is dead serious.

“It’s not like we both haven’t come all over each other,” he continues. It’s like he’s trying to convince himself that since we’ve already crossed a line, this will be okay.

“Fine, but if I’m getting naked, so are you,” I respond.

“Naked? Don’t you have on a bra and panties? It’ll be like you have on a swimsuit. I’ll keep my boxers on.”

I scrunch my eyebrows and look at him like he’s crazy. “I don’t have a bra on. This dress didn’t exactly lend itself to one.”

“Seriously, Phoebe?” he replies, biting his finger between his teeth.

“And I’m taking my panties off, are you kidding me? It’s a thong. it’s been between my sweaty ass cheeks all night,” I add, placing a hand on my hip.

“I know what a thong is, Phoebe. You don’t need to spell it out for me,” he quickly replies, running his hands through his hair.

A surge of excitement rushes through me at the thought of us being naked together. I know it’s wrong, but I want this more than my next breath. Even

though he's fighting it, I know he does too.

"Help me take my dress off?" I ask, lifting my arms up above my head.

"Turn around," he rasps, clearly affected by the thought of seeing me naked. Once my back is to him, I feel the heat of his body less than an inch away from mine.

"Why did you ask me to turn around?" I whisper, not that I expect him to answer.

"Because undressing you from behind is already going to wreck me. You're so fucking beautiful, Bee," his voice like gravel as he slowly lifts my dress over my hips.

I give a small smile at the nickname, even though he can't see it. "I like it when you call me that, Bee. No one has ever called me that before."

"Good; it's just for me," he replies, his voice hardening, as if he's suddenly jealous at non-existent competition.

I can't hide the goosebumps that cover my body as his fingers brush against my skin while he takes his time lifting my dress inch by inch. When he finally raises the dress over my head, leaving me in just my thong, he sucks in a deep breath.

"Phoebe, please tell me you can remove your thong. I might not make it up off the floor if I try to do it," his husky voice sounds behind me.

Smiling at his comment, I decide to show him some mercy. Stepping out of my dress pooled at my feet, I hook my thumbs into the strings of my thong and slowly slide it down my legs, fully exposing my backside as I bend to move it over my knees and feet.

"Phoebe, I need a minute," he croaks, his voice barely audible. "Get in the shower and turn the water on. I'll be right behind you."

Knowing he's trying to process the idea of getting in the shower with one of his athletes, I nod my head and give him the time he needs. Once I step in the shower, I'm encased by glass walls and black tile. When I turn the knob to the left, hot water starts to spray down my body from the rain shower head.

I have just enough time to let the water soak through my hair before I hear the shower door click open behind me. My body ignites with anticipation and excitement, knowing that Knox is naked and aroused, standing less than a few feet away from me.

Not wanting to push him, I keep my back turned and reach for the soap bottle. *God, I want to turn around and look at him.* I want to see what he looks like with nothing on to hide him from me. I want to watch the water

cascade down his sculpted body. I wonder if his dick is thick and hard, just for me.

“Let me,” he rasps, stepping closer and taking the soap bottle from my hands. He pours a decent amount of soap in his hand before placing the bottle back on the shower ledge.

I lose all sense of sanity when I feel his large hands start to rub soapy circles into my shoulders, neck, down the length of my back. *How can a simple touch feel so erotic?* I swear, I could come from just the feeling of his rough hands against my skin.

His hands stay focused on my back for a while, before he gets more comfortable and starts to explore other parts of my body. When his hand reaches out around and starts to caress my stomach, I arch into him, letting him know how much I crave his touch. The way he’s touching me is more than just washing me. It’s sensual and intimate, like he’s taking his time memorizing every inch of my body.

Leaning into him, I roll my head back against his shoulder, exposing my neck and chest to his wandering hands. My nipples have hardened to little points, and I know he can see how full my breasts are from this angle. He groans as his chest hits my back, placing us skin to skin for the first time. His hands move from my stomach to my hips, roaming back and forth, teasing the area above my core. He grunts, unable to hold back any longer, and grips my hips, pulling my ass flush against his hard cock. *Fuck, he’s so big.* His length settles between my cheeks, feeling thick and long against me. I moan when he rolls his hips, the friction driving me crazy.

“Do you feel what you do to me, Phoebe? You drive me fucking crazy. How can I be in the comfort of my own home, alone and naked with you, and not have you? I don’t have that kind of self-control. This is killing me,” he groans in a whisper, lowering his head to place an open-mouth kiss to my neck.

I need him to touch me. *To really touch me.* I want his hands on my breasts, tugging on my nipples, rubbing my clit, slipping inside me. I need him everywhere. I need him like I need my next breath.

“Knox, I need you. Please... I need you to touch me,” I plead, rocking my ass against his straining erection.

“Where do you want me to touch you?” he murmurs, skimming his hands up my body to cup my breasts, cradling them in his large hands. “Do you want me to touch you here?” He massages my sensitive breasts before rolling

my nipples between his fingers.

“Knox...” I moan, pushing my hips harder against him. We’re so close now, his dick is nestled into the crevice of my ass, rubbing up and down in continuous motion. We can’t control our bodies; they run on autopilot when we’re together.

“Do you like me playing with your perfect tits? Could you come just like this?” he growls as he nips the crook of my neck.

This man is going to be the death of me. I’m addicted to every dirty word.

“Knox, oh God,” I cry out, my eyes rolling to the back of my head. “Please touch me. I can’t take it,” I beg.

“Where do you want me? Tell me exactly where you want my hands, Bee,” he answers my plea, sucking on my neck between each word.

“My... my... ,” I stutter, trying to find the right word. I’m not exactly experienced with dirty talk. What am I going to say? Vagina? *That’s sounds fucking weird.*

“Your what, baby?” he prods, calling me baby yet again. I’ve always thought the term of endearment sounded cheesy when other couples used it, but it’s perfect coming from his mouth.

“Knox... please just...”

“No. I’m a grown ass man, Phoebe, not a vanilla, missionary, immature frat boy like *Colin*,” he says, disgust dripping from his voice at the mention of Colin’s name. “If you want me to touch you, you’re going to have to tell me where.”

He pinches my nipples harder and bites down on my neck, causing me to keel under his touch. I don’t even care about how I sound anymore – I just need his hands on me. *Now.*

“My pussy, my clit, inside me... anywhere between my legs. I’m begging you,” I moan, continuing to rock my ass against his erection.

“Come here,” he growls, grabbing my face and turning my head to slam his lips to mine.

We moan in unison as our tongues tangle together. I will never get over the taste of him. *Ever.* I reach out, sliding my hand up into his wet hair, trying to bring our mouths as close as possible. I want to devour this man. He moves his hands to my ass, kneading my cheeks as he sucks on my tongue before pulling my swollen lip between his teeth. *My God, this man can kiss.*

“You’re so fucking addicting, Phoebe. I’ll never get enough,” he rasps, kissing a trail down my neck.

After we spend a few minutes lost in each other's mouths, he slowly snakes his hand down to settle right above my core.

“Are you sure?” he asks, not breaking eye contact with me.

Unable to wait a second longer, I grab his hand and glide it directly into my wet heat. We both groan when his fingers connect with my bare pussy for the first time. I feel his dick twitch against my ass as he slides two fingers up and down my slit, now slick with my arousal.

“Fuck, Phoebe. You’re dripping for me,” he hums, moving his fingers higher to circle my clit.

“Knox, that feels amazing,” I moan, reaching my arm behind me to hold on to his neck for support, to keep my legs from buckling.

“My name from your lips is the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard,” he whispers in my ear, rubbing me harder and faster.

“More, please!” I cry. “I need more.”

Before I register what he’s doing, I feel two long fingers slip into my pussy, teasing me with slow thrusts.

“Oh my God! Knox,” I whimper when he curls his fingers, hitting my g-spot with perfect precision, like he already knew exactly where I needed him.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he groans, cupping my swollen breast with his free hand.

The feeling of him inside me is unreal. Even though it’s just his fingers, it’s beyond euphoric. I need to touch him. I’m on the verge of coming, and I want him to be there with me.

Reaching behind me, my hand lightly brushes against his rock-hard shaft before I clasp my fingers around it and stroke.

“Phoebe,” Knox rasps, his breathing picking up in my ear. “I need to see you,” he moans, removing his fingers from inside me as I whimper at the loss.

He quickly spins me around before lifting me and pinning me to the shower wall. Our mouths immediately find each other, frantically sucking and nibbling on each other's lips. We’re in the same position from his office, my legs wrapped around his waist. The only difference is this time, there’s no barrier between us. With one small push, he could easily slip inside me.

“My God, Phoebe. You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” he hums, pulling his mouth away from mine. His eyes roam down my breasts, my stomach, and down to where his dick is nestled between my wet lips.

I look down between us, finally getting a good look at his cock. The base

of his shaft is long and hard, grinding harder against my center with each thrust. On each upstroke, his thick head hits my clit, drawing moans and whimpers out of me every time his tip brushes against my sensitive bud. Precum is leaking out of his swollen tip, and dammit, I need to know what he tastes like.

“Knox, I need more. I need you inside me,” I grit out, gripping onto his shoulders and bringing him as close to me as possible.

“I want that too, baby. I want it so bad, but we can’t. Once I know what it feels like to be inside you, I’ll never be able to stop,” he replies in a painful tone, nibbling on my swollen lips.

“I never want you to stop,” I whimper.

“Ride me. Ride me like I’m inside of you,” he commands, positioning himself so I can easily slide around his cock. “Slide your pussy up and down my dick. I want to watch you come undone in my arms.” He lowers his head, sucking my nipple into his mouth.

“Knox!” I cry out at the sensation, already so close.

“God, Phoebe. I need you to get there. I want us to come together. I can’t hold on much longer,” he groans as he thrusts his aching cock through my slick folds.

As much as I want this feeling to last forever, I want to lose myself in him even more. Finally giving into the overwhelming pleasure, I let go.

“Fuck, I’m... Oh my God, it’s too much,” I cry in pleasure as my legs tighten around his waist, my body shaking with the most powerful orgasm I’ve ever experienced.

“That’s it, Bee. Let go. Give it all to me,” he groans, tightening his grip on my hips as white-hot ropes of cum coat my stomach. “Baby, you’re so fucking perfect,” he moans through his release, continuing to thrust against me until he has nothing left to give.

After we’ve come down from our high, both completely spent, Knox presses his forehead to mine and places a soft kiss to my lips. We stand there for what feels like minutes, staring into each other’s eyes as he holds me, so many unspoken words hanging between us. What happened was more than just mutual orgasms, and we both know it. It was as close to a religious experience than I’ve ever had. His body was worshiping mine like it was his only possibility of survival.

“Let me clean you up,” he whispers, carefully setting me on my feet and pouring more soap into his hands. He takes his time washing me again before

moving his hands across his own body, cleaning off the mess we made together. Once we're both clean, he grips my face and stares directly into my eyes.

"Phoebe, that was... I can't explain it. I'm sorry if I took advantage of you. I can't seem to control myself when I'm with you. I think about you every second of the day, and I finally broke. I would be lying if I said I regretted it. This is so wrong, but I can't stay away. I want you too much," he whispers.

"I want you, too. Every day, Knox. You didn't take advantage of me. Do you know how many times I've touched myself imagining it was you? How many times I've..."

"Phoebe, stop," he mutters with a pained look. "You have no idea what your words do to me." Letting go of my face, he steps from the shower and grabs a towel for each of us. I notice he's focusing hard on keeping his eyes directed away from me as I dry off. Once we're both dry, he hands me an oversized t-shirt and a pair of plaid pajama pants.

"I hope this is okay," he says, handing me the clothes and giving me a soft smile.

"It's perfect." I return his smile and gather the clothes from him.

"I'll give you some space," he mutters before retreating back into his room.

Why do I feel like he's pulling away again?

Fully dressed, I see him sitting on the edge of the bed as I emerge from the bathroom, resting his head in his hands. He's wearing his sweatpants again, minus the shirt. His tanned pecs and chiseled abs are on full display, looking like a Greek god come to life. *God, he looks so sexy.* As I take in his body, I notice a small tattoo resting beneath his right pec, just above his abs. Taking a closer look, I realize it's coordinates. I wonder what location is so special to him he would permanently ink it onto his skin.

Deciding to ask him about it later, I sit down next to him, placing my hand on his warm shoulder. "Knox..." I say softly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm more than okay, Phoebe. I'm just trying to process what just happened," he responds, his face a swirl of emotions I'm not sure I know how to decipher.

"Do you regret it?" I ask, my chest tightening as I wait for his response.

"No. Never," he responds without hesitation.

Another minute of silence passes between us, and I can tell he doesn't

feel like having this conversation right now. He's conflicted, as any sane person in his situation would be.

"Will you hold me?" I whisper, breaking the silence. "I don't want you sleeping on the floor. I want you next to me."

He doesn't say anything. Instead, he pulls me back until I'm lying next to him, pulling my back to his front. It's almost seven in the morning, but we both need to get a few hours of sleep. I can feel the heat of him radiating through the thin fabric of my t-shirt as he wraps me in his arms like it's the last time he'll ever hold me.

"Get some sleep. Happy Birthday, Bee," he murmurs, placing a soft kiss to my neck and nestling his face in my damp hair.

"Thank you, Knox. For everything," I whisper, linking our fingers together before I drift to sleep in his arms.

FIFTEEN
KNOX

I woke up this morning with Phoebe in my arms, with our limbs tangled together and our fingers intertwined. As much as I love being intimate with her, I think this takes the cake. Her golden hair is fanned out across the pillow, her chest rising and falling with steady breaths. Every time I try to pull away from her, she unconsciously tugs me closer or scoots back into me, like our bodies are magnets. I'm used to having morning wood, but today, I'm harder than granite. If she wakes up for even a second, she'll feel my erection straining against her ass. I can't control it. Having her in my bed, wearing my clothes; it's all too much. It's everything I could ever want but can never have.

Today is her birthday, and I don't want to think about how we could never work. I know what we did was wrong. The second I stepped into the shower and saw the steam billowing around her naked body, I knew I wasn't going to be able to hold back. I had to touch her. I had to feel her soft curves in my hands. It took every ounce of restraint I had to not slip inside her and fuck her against the shower wall.

I should be driving her home right now, but selfishly, I just need a few more hours with her. I should be absolutely disgusted with myself for crossing the line with her, on multiple occasions at this point. My mind knows this has to end, but my body doesn't seem to give a shit about the consequences.

I'm still pissed at her for getting completely shit faced last night, but I also have to remember what it's like to be in college. I'm just glad I got to her before Colin took her home. Hell, I should have just taken her home. Instead, I took her back to my place, made her come, and slept with her

cradled in my arms. *What the hell am I doing?* I know whatever is happening between us needs to stop, but not today. This is her special day, and I want her to know how amazing she is. I know little about her parents, but from what I do know, I have a feeling she didn't have the most memorable birthdays growing up.

"Happy Birthday, beautiful," I softly whisper, kissing the top of her head before quietly slipping out of bed.

Half an hour later, I crack open the door to my bedroom with one hand, holding a bouquet of a dozen fresh roses and a box of donuts in the other. Thankfully, she's still sound asleep. She looks so beautiful in my bed - her delicate hands are tucked beneath her head and her legs are curled up against her chest. *God, I would give anything to wake up to her every day.* I walk around to the bedside table, placing the roses and donuts next to her.

I wish I could let her sleep all day, but I have a staff meeting in an hour that I can't be late to. I want to have time to kiss her and show her how special she is, hopefully with my hands and mouth. Not only do I have a meeting, but I need to drive her back to her apartment beforehand, so I'm really pushing it on time.

Crawling into bed, I position myself above her, holding myself up by my arms to avoid putting any weight on her sleepy body. I plant featherlight kisses to her soft skin starting with her forehead, across her cheeks, and finally down to her jaw. When I reach her neck, I hear a sleepy moan as her hand reaches up and lightly grips the back of my head, running her fingers through my hair.

"Mmmm, I could get used to this," she rasps. Her morning voice is so damn cute.

"Give me your lips. I've been staring at them all morning, and I can't wait any longer," I reply in a rushed whisper, cradling her cheeks between my palms.

"But my morning breath..."

"I don't give a shit," I interrupt, nibbling at her lips before she opens up, giving me access to her hot mouth. We groan as our tongues tangle, slipping and sliding against each other in the most intimate dance. I could kiss her all day and never get tired of it.

After a few minutes, she pulls back with a puzzled look on her face. "Am I dreaming or does something smell amazing?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say, my lips turning up in a smile as I nod towards the

bedside table. Her eyes follow my glance, widening in surprise when she sees the flowers and donuts.

“Knox...” she softly whispers my name, staring up at me like I hung the moon.

“Happy Birthday, baby,” I say, dipping down to place another kiss on her swollen lips.

Why am I calling her ‘baby’ like she’s my girlfriend? I’m a horrible fucking person, calling her pet names and giving her false hope. It just seems to come naturally - everything feels that way with her. It’s just easy, except that it’s not. I’m her coach and she’s a teenager. Pushing away my doubt, I decide to let it go for now, because this morning is about her.

“I hope you like roses,” I add, tucking a loose strand of golden hair behind her ear. “The flower shop had so many options. I’m sure I looked like an idiot pacing back and forth trying to decide what you would like,” I laugh.

“I love them. They’re beautiful,” she smiles, placing intimate kisses down my neck between each word. My dick twitches in my sweatpants when she spends extra time on my Adam’s apple, sucking and licking her way up to my jaw.

“And the donuts.” I clear my throat, trying to keep my shit together as she continues to lather me in kisses. “The only options they had were glazed and pink icing with sprinkles, so I got both. I hope that’s okay.”

“Pink donuts with sprinkles are my favorite,” she responds with a smile, bringing out her dimple. Holding my face in her hands, she softly brushes her thumbs across my cheeks and presses her forehead to mine, our noses nuzzling together as we breathe in each other's air.

“Knox, this is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. I know that sounds pathetic, but I’m used to my parents just putting extra money in my bank account and calling it a day. Thank you, thank you so much,” she says quietly, her eyes glossing over with emotion.

“You deserve the world, Phoebe.” I kiss away a lone tear that slipped down her cheek. Those words feel like a lie coming out of my mouth, because I can’t be the one to give her that. I can’t be the one to show her how special she is every day. Since we can’t have that, I plan to cherish this moment with her while I can.

“Do you want one?” I ask, nodding my head towards the donuts. “I don’t normally eat in bed, but for you, I’ll make an exception,” I say with a wink, trying to lighten the mood.

“I actually have an appetite for something else right now,” she taunts, rolling her hips against my already hard length.

“Such a dirty girl,” I groan, grabbing her hips and grinding my dick against her core, showing her how bad I need her.

“Knox,” she moans. “I want you inside me, I need to feel you. Please.”

“Mmmm, I think I would like that too much. Actually, I know I would. This morning is all about you. I have something else in mind, something I think you’ll like very much,” I smirk, licking a trail from her neck to her earlobe, sucking it into my mouth.

I grab the hem of the t-shirt she’s wearing, lifting it over her head gently to expose her full breasts to my gaze. A groan escapes me as I dip my head to suck one of her already-hard nipples into my mouth.

She moans at the touch, arching her back so her chest moves against mine. “What did you have in mind?” she asks breathlessly. Pulling off her nipple with a pop, I stare up at her with heated eyes.

“I want to taste you. I want to feel your legs tighten around my head as I make you come on my tongue,” I groan as I roll her nipples between my fingers.

“Ummm,” she coughs. “I... um.” Suddenly, she looks nervous, like I said the wrong thing.

“We can do something else. I mean, if you’re not into that.” The words rush from my mouth like a waterfall. I’ve been dying to taste her - I hope my disappointment doesn't show through my expression.

“No, no. It’s not that... It’s just... No one has ever done that to me before, eaten me out,” she responds with flushed cheeks.

“Wait... are you a virgin?” I ask, moving up to look her in the eyes.

Oh my God. Have I been messing around with a virgin? Am I the first man to make her come? Her thirty-one-year-old coach. *I’m going to rot in hell.*

“No, Knox,” she responds, rolling her eyes. “I’ve had very vanilla sex with no foreplay. I mean, he fingered me once or twice but that was it. We were never comfortable enough to go down on each other,” she winces, her expression shy.

My eyes flicker with jealousy at the thought of another man’s hands on her, inside of her.

“Wait, so are you telling me I’ll be the first to go down on you? You’ve never sucked another man’s dick?” My cock twitches at the thought of me

being her first for both. The possessive side of me wants all the firsts I can get. The image of another man with his tongue between her legs makes me see red.

“Yes,” she nods quietly, almost like she’s ashamed. “What if I taste bad? What if...”

I put my finger against her lips to quiet her. “Phoebe, stop. You’re going to be perfect. I’m already salivating at the thought of being the first man to taste you.”

For a moment, she just stares at me, but before I can roll off her and grab us some donuts, she lifts her hips, sliding the plaid pajama pants down her legs. She’s now fully naked beneath me, the heat from her body igniting a fire deep in my stomach.

“I want you, Knox, in any way I can have you,” she says, reaching up to kiss me. “I trust you,” she whispers, nodding her head to let me know she wants this. My heart clenches at the thought of her trusting me with something so intimate for the first time.

I slam my mouth to hers, kissing her with all the passion I can muster before I make my way down her body. When my mouth roams down and latches onto her nipple, she roughly grips my shoulders.

“I only have one request before you do, though,” she says with a seductive smile. “I want you naked too. I want to feel your skin against mine.” *Fuck, I want that too.*

“Anything for the birthday girl,” I reply with a wink as I pull my shirt over my head.

Her hands immediately go to my chest, running her fingers down the contours of my abs. She traces my tattoo with her thumb before reaching up and placing a featherlight kiss to it. I quickly tug off my sweatpants and boxers, and my hard dick springs free, bobbing against my stomach. For what feels like minutes, we both stare in silence and bask in each other's nakedness.

“Knox, you’re so beautiful,” she gasps, reaching for my straining cock. I pull back, because I know if she touches me, I won’t be able to stop her.

“No, baby. This is about you, remember? I want to make you feel good. You got your request; I’m naked. Now, relax and let me wish you a happy birthday,” I smirk, slowly planting open mouthed kisses down to her belly button.

I take my time nipping and sucking every inch of her smooth skin until

I'm staring directly at her bare pussy. Holy shit, she's fucking perfect, pink and glistening just for me. I immediately reach out, brushing my thumb over her swollen clit.

"Knox!" she cries out, her hips bucking each time I run my thumb through her soaking folds, paying special attention to her clit. "Please, I need your mouth on me."

"Are you sure about this, Bee?" I ask, giving her one last chance to back out.

"Knox Moore. If you ask me that one more time...Yes. Now put your damn mouth on me already," she demands. Shit, she doesn't have to ask me twice.

I run my nose up her slit before giving her clit a soft lick. I flick her sensitive bud with my tongue a few times before sucking it into my mouth. *She tastes so fucking sweet.* I think I died and went to heaven. Her hands tangle in my hair as I continue licking and sucking on her, reveling in the way she grinds into me.

"You taste so fucking good," I groan, praising her between licks.

"Knox... Holy shit. That feels amazing," she moans, throwing her head back into the pillows and fisting my hair tighter in her hands.

"You ready for more, baby?" I ask, pulling my mouth away and massaging her clit with my thumb. She nods her head and whimpers, giving me her answer.

I place wet kisses down her slit until I reach her entrance, already absolutely dripping for me. I spend a few minutes rubbing her clit with my thumb while licking and sucking her folds at the same time. I need to stop being greedy and cut to the chase, because by the way she's moaning and rolling her hips, I can tell she's close. Finally, I lick down to her entrance and spear her wet pussy with my tongue, licking inside her as far as I can reach. We groan in unison as I flick my tongue back and forth inside her, massaging the walls of her pussy.

I must have hit a good spot, because she practically screams, her breathing frantic. "Fuck, don't stop. Knox, that feels so good. Knox..." she moans, chanting my name like a prayer.

I can't take it anymore. The combination of my tongue inside her and her screaming my name has me harder than steel. I reach between legs with my free hand and start to stroke my aching cock.

Removing my thumb from her clit, I replace my tongue with two fingers

as I suck on her clit at the same time. I'm so close, I'm going to blow all over my sheets any moment.

"Get there, baby. Come for me," I groan, stroking myself. When I curl my fingers, hitting her g-spot and flicking her clit with my tongue, she loses all control.

"Knox! Fuck, fuck, fuck. It feels so good," she cries, almost pulling my hair out with how tight she's gripping me to her.

She's mesmerizing to watch when she comes. Her head is thrown back, exposing her beautiful neck. Her back is arched, putting her perfect, round tits on full display for me. Her legs are shaking as her pussy pulses around my fingers, pulling me in further. One look at her coming undone because of me is all it takes for my balls to tighten and my orgasm to ripple through me.

"Phoebe, my God. You're mine. *Mine*," I growl against her clit as my cum shoots out onto my sheets and across her legs. I have no right to claim her as mine, but I do anyway. In a perfect world where she's not my athlete and I'm not her coach, she would be mine. *Every. Damn. Day.* I would wake her up like this every day. I could never get enough of this woman.

"Yours," she whimpers as she rides out the last of her orgasm.

After we both catch our breath, Phoebe reaches down, cupping my face in her hands and pulling me to her. Our mouths collide, moving like the world is ending and we're the last two people on the planet.

"That's the best birthday gift anyone has ever given me," she exhales, trying to catch her breath. "Your turn." She moves her hand to grip my softening dick. Her face morphs into something like confusion when she notices my lack of a hard on. Wanting to assure her it's not because I don't want her, I grab her hand and run her fingers through my cum coating her legs.

"I've had my turn," I say in a husky voice, bringing her finger to her mouth so she can taste me in return. She whimpers as she sucks her finger into her mouth, tasting my release for the first time. "Watching you come undone on my tongue was the hottest thing I've ever seen. I almost came without touching myself."

Realization hits her eyes as she drags her finger from her mouth with a pop. "How about we eat breakfast and do it again? But this time, I want to have my mouth on you."

Jesus Christ. She's going to be the death of me.

"Trust me, there's nothing more I want than to lay in bed naked with you

all day, but I have a staff meeting in thirty minutes. We should have left like five minutes ago,” I reply with a soft wince.

“A meeting? On a Sunday?”

“Yeah, they’re only once a month and today was the only day that worked for each of the coaches. I really have to get going. I’ll drop you off at your apartment on my way,” I answer, kissing her forehead as I slide off the bed.

Knowing we don’t have time to shower, I grab a wet towel from the bathroom to clean us with. Cleaning my cum off of Phoebe while she lays naked in my bed is so fucking satisfying, I almost say fuck it and skip the meeting. *Almost*. After we’re both clean, I retreat to the bathroom to brush my teeth and run some water through my messy hair. When I walk back into my room, Phoebe’s wearing her black dress from last night and staring at her roses with a somber look on her face.

“Everything okay?” I ask, pulling on my joggers and throwing my sweatshirt over my head.

“Yeah, it’s just... I won’t be able to take the roses with me. What am I going to tell Maisie when I walk into our apartment with a beautiful vase filled with fresh flowers?” She winces, almost seeming sad she can’t take them home.

Shit, I didn’t even think about that.

This morning with her felt so domestic, like we’ve been doing this for years. I feel so comfortable around her; I often forget that I’m her coach and that I could lose my career over having a sexual relationship with one of my athletes. We’ve already crossed so many lines. It’s why I refuse to have sex with her because once I do, I’ll be claiming her as mine. There will be no going back after that, and at this pace, that’s exactly where we’re headed. It’s getting harder and harder to not go all the way every time we’re alone, especially when she’s begging me to fuck her. *I have to stop this.*

“You’re right... you can just leave them here,” I reply with an awkward smile. “What’s your plan when Maisie asks where you’ve been?”

“I’ll just tell her I stayed with Colin. She left the club before me, so she won’t know any different,” she replies with a shrug.

I sigh, my nerves starting to fray. “Phoebe, CCU’s a small world. What if she already knows you weren’t with him?”

“She doesn’t. Maisie and Colin don’t run in the same circles. The only time they see each other is because of me. How could she argue with me

about where I was anyways? We were all drunk off our asses last night.”

“Oh, I know. I don’t need a reminder,” I snark, shaking my head. “Colin looked like he was ready to lift your dress up and fuck you in the middle of the dance floor. You’re not even twenty-one, for Christ’s sake. What were you thinking, Phoebe?”

“Wait, are you scolding me because I was drunk or because Colin had his hands all over me?” Her eyes widen and I can tell she’s putting two-and-two together.

“Both,” I admit, looking down at my phone that just vibrated in my hand. Tapping on the notification, I open a text from my assistant coach asking me if I can get to the meeting a little early. He wants to talk through our agenda items before the meeting gets started.

“Shit. We gotta go, Phoebe. You ready?” I ask, grabbing the box of donuts off the bedside table. We can eat them in the car on the drive to her apartment.

“Wait, Knox...” she hesitates. “What was this?”

“What do you mean?” I reply.

“This.” She gestures her hands between us. “Everything that just happened. Do we just go back to you being my coach again? We haven’t really had a chance to discuss anything.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I hate that I’m in a rush this morning,” I reply, running my hands through my hair as I take a deep breath. “Honestly Phoebe, I don’t know what we are. I just know it’s complicated. We obviously don’t have the time to figure it out right now, but we can talk about it later,” I lie.

There’s nothing to talk about. There can be no us. We can’t keep sneaking around and lying to people. Sooner or later, someone is going to catch us. I need to end this before that happens, before we both get hurt. Getting caught together would be serious, life changing for both of us, and not in a good way. Deep down, I think we both know this can’t go on. I just don’t have the heart to tell her on her birthday.

“You promise? We’ll talk later? I feel like you’re always so hot and cold with me, Knox. You can’t keep pulling me in just to push me away. It’s starting to take its toll. I’m starting to have feelings for you that won’t just go away because you snapped your fingers. I just need to know you’re not going to shut me out tomorrow,” she replies, her brows etched together in worry.

“We’ll talk,” I whisper, setting the donut box on the bed and cupping her beautiful face in my hands. “I promise, Bee.” I lean down and kiss her like

it's the last time I'll ever taste her lips. That's because I'm planning for it to be.

I'm a terrible person. She deserves so much better.

SIXTEEN

PHOEBE

Best. Birthday. Ever. I feel like I'm on top of the world. I don't know what I was thinking when I dialed Knox's number last night, but I'm so thankful I did. My lips are still tingling from his rough kisses, my body humming on a natural high. What happened between Knox and I felt so sacred, like so much more than just "fooling around." He took his time with me, praising every inch of my body.

While I'm on cloud nine, I would be lying if I said a small part of me wasn't worried about him pushing me away again. At least I have the comfort of knowing he promised we would talk. Knox may have his flaws, but he seems loyal. After he gets out of his meeting, he'll reach out, and we'll talk. *He promised.*

I'm grinning from ear to ear when I finally walk into my apartment. After turning the lock, my back hits the door and I stare off into space, replaying everything that happened in the past twelve hours. Thankfully, Maisie must still be asleep, or she would totally catch on to my swooning. I can't hide the love-stricken expression written all over my face.

Love? Pull yourself together, Phoebe.

Pulling myself out of my trance, I take a quick shower and change into a pair of sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt. I tie my hair up in a messy bun and take a couple ibuprofen to help with my headache. Relieved to finally be out of my black dress and no longer reeking of alcohol and puke, I walk into the kitchen and make myself a glass of iced coffee. Taking a seat at the dining table, I ball my knees up to my chest and take my first sip of the day. Grabbing my phone off the table, I decide to send Knox a quick text. I know he won't see it right away, but he'll read it later. I already miss him so much,

and it hasn't even been an hour.

Me: Thank you again for everything. Already missing you. Let me know when you have time to talk later. I hope your meeting goes well. Can't wait to see you again. - Bee :)

I smile to myself, ending the text with my new nickname and a smiley face. For hours, I can't focus on anything but his response.

A response that never comes.

SEVENTEEN

PHOEBE

“Oh, that is stunning!” my mom hums from across the table.

We’re seated at a table with my teammate, Sasha, and her family. Sasha’s parents just moved into a new, multi-million-dollar home, and her mom is currently showing mine pictures of their kitchen. I take a sip of water and discreetly roll my eyes at my mother’s superficial comments.

The only reason my parents showed up to CCU’s family weekend is because there’s a social event tonight. The athletic department hosts a banquet every year, and it’s considered extremely exclusive. They may not show up to my games, but they sure as hell won’t miss an opportunity to mingle with the powerful and wealthy.

The dinner is being held in a conference room at Island Grand, the nicest hotel in Coral Cove. It has its own private beach access, giving guests the luxury of walking from their hotel room right on to the white sands of Florida. The room is dimly lit by candles and chandeliers, cascading everything in a golden glow. Everyone is dressed to the nines, including me. This may not be how I wanted to spend my Saturday night, but I do love to dress up every once and a while.

I chose a floor length, metallic gold dress that glitters when the candlelight hits it just right. My whole back is exposed, the dress held up by thin straps. The front dips in a narrow V between my breasts, showing just enough cleavage. I’m wearing my sexiest pair of black heels that peak through a tapered slit, revealing a sliver of my smooth legs. My hair tumbles in big curls down my back, accentuated with a bold, red lip and more blush than usual. I feel like a princess. It’s all earned me a few heated glances tonight, but not from the right person.

I knew I was going to see a certain man tonight, and I would be lying if I said I didn't put extra effort into my appearance for him. I planned to bring him to his knees, make him beg like a dog. I want to walk the fuck away, leave him alone on the floor, desperate and broken. I want to make a fool out of him like he did to me. I want him to know what it feels like to be let down by the one person who makes you feel.

Two weeks. It's been two weeks since Knox woke me up with flowers and donuts, wishing me a happy birthday with his tongue. Two weeks since he dropped me off at my apartment and hasn't spoken a single word to me since. He doesn't even speak to me at practice anymore; he just has the assistant coaches work with me. I've tried texting and calling. Hell, I've even showed up to his office a few times but he's never there. He's been getting to practice right on time, as if to avoid the chance of seeing me.

He completely ghosted me. At first, I felt like my heart had been ripped out of my chest, but now, I'm just fucking pissed. The short amount of time we spent in his room felt like a major turning point for us. Even though we didn't sleep together, we still crossed that line of intimacy. I'm ashamed to think about how many times I've masturbated to the image of his head between my legs or his hard body grinding against mine.

My mind keeps flashing back to how he called me baby, the soft kisses he pressed to every inch of my skin, the way he held me tight to his chest as we slept. I can't stop thinking of how he cradled my face in his hands, the worry in his expression when I told him I was sick, the look in eyes when I woke him and he instinctively knew something was wrong. He looked so helpless, like his soul wouldn't survive in a world without mine.

I keep thinking about his rough hands roaming across my body, touching every inch of me in the most affectionate way. I hate that I was starting to fall for a man who has the ability to abandon me like I'm nothing. I hate that I'm still falling for him, despite how he's treating me. They say that hate and love are the two strongest emotions, and it's just my luck that I'm experiencing both at the same time.

Speaking of the devil, Knox is walking towards our table now. He's been making his rounds, formally introducing himself to the team's friends and families. He's glanced at our table a few times but refuses to make eye contact with me. My blood boils when I notice I'm not the only one casting glances his way. It's no secret half the team thinks Coach Moore is hot as fuck, but seeing it with my own eyes makes me seethe. If they only knew he

had his head buried between my legs a couple weeks ago, calling my name as he came all over my body.

God, he looks so good tonight. He's wearing a black suit with a white dress shirt, the first few buttons undone, revealing slivers of his tanned chest. His black hair is styled to perfection, looking less like a coach and more like he just walked out of a mafia movie. I pinch my thigh to bring myself back down to reality. I shouldn't be thinking about ripping that suit off him and licking every inch of his body. I should be thinking about what a self-righteous asshole he is.

"Good evening, everyone," he greets as he approaches us. "I'm Coach Moore. I'm so glad you all could make it tonight." Knox says it all with a smile, shaking hands with the parents before taking a seat across from me. He's made eye contact with everyone but me.

"Coach Moore, how nice to finally meet you! I'm Ann, Phoebe's mother. This is my husband, Charles," my mom gushes with a fake smile as she turns her head towards my dad.

"Yes, we're delighted to be here for our daughter. What a beautiful night this is turning out to be," my dad adds.

"We're delighted to be here for our daughter." Bullshit.

My dad hasn't asked me about college once, instead going on and on with Sasha's dad about the real estate market. My parents aren't even staying the night in Coral Cove; they're taking a red eye flight home right after the banquet. Them showing up this weekend has absolutely nothing to do with me. Tonight is one hundred percent a networking opportunity.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourselves," Knox replies with clearly false interest, smiling and nodding his head before turning to greet Sasha's parents. After everyone is acquainted, my parents begin to show their true colors.

"Coach Moore, tell us, how has our Phoebe been doing? We don't hear from her much. Sometimes, we wonder if she forgets who we are," my mom scoffs, putting on her best fake laugh. I hope Knox can see right through that bullshit.

"Yeah, Coach," I chime in. "I'd love to hear your thoughts on my performance. It's been a while since I've gotten any feedback," I quip, burning a hole through him with my gaze. I'm determined to make him look at me. I'm not giving him the option to avoid me any longer.

"She's doing great," Knox notes, quickly turning his gaze towards me in acknowledgment. He only looks at me for a split second, but I see an emotion

that looks like pain flash across his face when his eyes meet mine, like it physically hurt to look at me.

Do I really repulse him that much?

“Phoebe, darling. Don’t be rude. He has a team to coach. Everything is not always about you,” my mom interjects.

“I understand, Mom, but he’s still my coach and it would be nice to have some guidance. It’s very rare to get one on one time with him to ask these types of questions. He’s a very busy man,” I say pointedly, throwing him a devious glance.

His gaze snaps back to me quickly, roaming down the front of my dress before resting back onto my face. His stare is filled with a scorching heat that wasn't there a few minutes ago.

“You’ll have to excuse our daughter; she’s always been very outspoken, sometimes to a fault,” my dad grits out, throwing me a glare that screams shut your mouth before we take all your money away.

“No, it’s fine. I admire that about Phoebe. She’s a hard worker and takes every opportunity she can to improve her skills. Sometimes, being outspoken is the best way to achieve what you want,” Knox pipes in, surprising me to the point where my head rears back. Thankfully, I catch myself before anyone notices.

“Yes, well, she certainly has a smart mouth on her. We hoped she would go to law school. At least she could put her argumentative nature to use in that profession,” my dad jabs, talking about me like I’m not even at the table.

“Excuse me?” I ask in a not-so-surprised tone. I’m done letting them talk about me like I’m not right here. I’m so fucking done.

My mother turns to me like she suddenly remembered my presence. “It’s not too late to change your major, honey. You’re only a freshman. Dad and I have been discussing it and-”

“No,” I deadpan, stopping my mom mid-sentence. “We are not having this conversation.”

“Why not, sweetie? Your coach would probably agree with us. You’re a very bright young lady and your dad is right. You certainly do love to argue. You can still play softball and prepare for law school at the same time. We just want you to make something of yourself, Phoebe.” She smiles sweetly, and it makes my stomach churn.

“Make something of myself?” I scoff, arching my brows in disbelief. I expected some type of incredible bullshit tonight, but this is too much, even

for them. “So, if I don’t become a lawyer or a doctor, then I guess I’m just a complete failure in your eyes?”

“Ann, stop beating around the bush,” my dad cuts in, taking over the conversation. “Phoebe, what are you going to do with a communications degree? Do you want to work for a crusty marketing firm, go door to door selling cheap products, or run around planning events for important people? That’s the career you’re headed towards with a worthless degree like communications. What in the hell does that even mean? Communications.” He scoffs like it’s the stupidest thing he’s ever heard as he shakes his head. “It’s time to get your head on straight and start thinking about your future. You won’t live off our money forever. We’re not a trust fund, Phoebe.”

At this point, I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I feel like I’ve just been punched in the gut. My parents just said all of this in front of my teammate, her parents, and my coach. Angry tears start to swell in my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. Not here, not in front of everyone. No, if he wants to dish it out, he’ll take it, too.

“You really want to have this conversation here, Dad? Fine, let’s have it. You have no idea all the career paths possible with my degree. You have no idea how my classes are going. You have no idea what I want to do with my life, because you don’t ask. You want to act like I’m the selfish one? You and Mom literally only think about yourselves. You couldn’t give two shits about my life and what I want for myself. It’s always been about portraying the perfect daughter to your stuck-up friends. I hate to break it to you, but I have no interest in living such a shallow life,” I fume, my chest heaving as I try to steady my breathing. I’m not done, but I restrain myself, clenching my fists, digging my nails into my palms.

My dad looks at me in shock, almost with disgust, his face turning tomato red as he responds with clear disdain. “Watch your mouth, young lady. Your blatant disrespect will not be tolerated. You’re ruining a fine night with your entitled attitude. You seem to have a knack of ruining good things.”

“Do not speak to her that way,” Knox suddenly interrupts through clenched teeth, shooting a lethal gaze at my dad. I immediately notice the muscles in his jaw clenching in anger.

“Somebody needs to put that child in her place and as her father, it’s my responsibility,” my dad retaliates, returning Knox’s furious glare, aghast that my coach would chastise him.

“Mr. Rhodes,” Knox sneers back in a tone that makes the hair on my

arms stand. “This is not the time or place. I will not sit here and listen to you-”

“Knox, stop. I can handle it,” I grit out, cutting him off. I’m so fucking over his hero act, swooping in to save me each time I’m in distress and then shutting me out like I’m a burden.

“Phoebe, you will stop this attention seeking act right this minute. We will continue this conversation at a more appropriate time,” my mom furiously comments, clutching her hand around her pearls in fake shock.

Silence fills our group as I slowly lift my head and glance around the table. Sasha and her parents look like deer in headlights, shocked at how quickly this conversation took a turn. Knox is staring right at me, his expression a mixture of wrath, concern, and pity. My parents are practically fuming that I didn't play along with their charade. I’m surprised steam isn't billowing out of their ears. Then, there’s me: absolutely mortified and embarrassed. My bottom lip starts to tremble, and I know I won’t be able to hold back my tears much longer.

I need to get the hell out of here.

“Actually, I’ll just excuse myself. Problem solved. Have a safe flight home,” I say, my voice shaking as I stand and throw my napkin onto the table. My eyes briefly meet Knox’s as I turn to leave. His gaze is filled with pain, but most of all, fury, like he wants to fucking murder someone. Tearing my gaze away, I push my chair in and walk away. As soon as my back is to the table, I feel the tears start to fall.

EIGHTEEN
KNOX

“Sasha, weren’t there a few teammates you wanted us to meet? I suppose now would be a good time. We’ll give you all some space.” Sasha’s mom awkwardly smiles and nods in farewell. Sasha and her family excuse themselves from the table, leaving just me and Phoebe’s parents sitting here in awkward silence.

I’m glad they’re leaving, because I can’t bite my tongue any longer. What I’m about to say might raise suspicions about my relationship with Phoebe, but I don’t give a shit. I’ve always been protective over her, and what her parents just did is so fucked up.

“You should both be ashamed of yourselves right now. How you treat your daughter is horrible. If that’s how you speak to her publicly, I can’t imagine how you speak to her in private,” I scowl, my eyes darting back and forth between them. I’m so fucking pissed that I’m shaking.

“Pardon me? You have no idea what that child has put us through. You barely know our daughter and have no right to tell us how we should parent. She’s an entitled brat who does whatever she pleases. You will not sit here and lecture us on a matter you have no knowledge of,” Ann snaps back, her voice dripping in entitlement.

I just laugh. “See, that’s where you’re wrong. I do know your daughter. Actually, I promise you, I know her a hell of a lot better than you. Phoebe is one of the most amazing people I’ve ever met. She’s caring, determined, independent, passionate, and deserves the world. Do you have any idea why she’s on this team? Have you even asked her if she’s enjoying her time as a college athlete? Maybe she wants to study abroad. Maybe she wants to join a sorority. You wouldn’t have a damn clue because you don’t care about what

she wants,” I say through clenched teeth.

“Don’t you dare call her selfish again. She is hands down the most selfless person I know. She does everything for your approval, yet you do nothing but belittle her. You can’t even show up for her fucking games. What a sorry excuse for parents,” I add, shaking my head.

“Who do you think you are?” Charles huffs after a moment of stunned silence. “I’ll have you know that I’m well acquainted with every board member of this university. I’m sure they would love to hear how their new softball coach is talking to parents, tossing out curse words left and right. I have never met someone as unprofessional as you.” He’s red again, possibly redder than he was speaking with Phoebe.

I. See. Red. “First, I know exactly who I’m talking to - one of the most self-righteous, narcissistic people on the goddamn planet. Second, go ahead and tell the board, Charles. *I. Don’t. Give. A. Fuck.* My godfather, Coach Dan Cook, would be happy to give them a call on my behalf,” I reply with a devious grin.

“I see... so that’s how you got this job. It really is all about who you know, isn’t it?” Charles asks, as if he’s trying to bait me into a deeper argument.

“Oh no, I’m not falling for your games. It may work on Phoebe because you’re her parents, but not me. I see right through both of you. If there’s anyone who cares about namesakes, it’s you two. That’s the reason you’re here tonight, right? To sip expensive liquor and use your daughter to maintain your image? Do either of you know what Phoebe enjoys doing in her free time? Do you know that she loves reading and watching the sunrise? Do you know what music she likes or who her best friend is? What about her birthday a few weeks ago? Did you even pick up the phone? I’m sure you didn’t. You’re both fucking worthless,” I seethe.

Shit, I just gave too much away. I couldn’t help myself, and I don’t regret a single word.

“I’m curious, *Knox*,” Ann elongates my name, remembering that Phoebe let it slip earlier. “How do *you* know our daughter so well?”

Shit, shit, shit.

Thankfully, there’s a useful lie right on the tip of my tongue. “I’m her coach. I’m with her every day for long periods of time. We do team building exercises. On top of that, it’s my job to know what’s going on in her life. If a player is distracted by their personal life or having a bad day, I could very

easily be putting them in harm's way sending them out on the field. You know what's ironic, though? I've only been in Phoebe's life for a few short months and already know more about her than her own parents. That says a lot about your character, so stop questioning mine."

Charles and Ann stare at me in shock, completely speechless. I hold their stare for what feels like minutes, not backing down.

"Ann, we're leaving," Charles barks, finally breaking the silence. He straightens his tie and stands from the table.

"Well, this was a lovely conversation," Ann bites in my direction. "You sure do know how to charm your guests." A hideous fake smile stretches across her face. Charles clenches his jaw before tugging on Ann's hand and stalking out of the room. I give them a little wave as they go.

After they leave, my mind doesn't take a second to process the conversation because it goes straight to Phoebe. *I need to find her*. Luckily, I've already made my rounds, so I don't have any more introductions to make. It's getting late and the alcohol is flowing, the guests oblivious to what's going on around them. I should be staying until the event ends, holding doors and wishing everyone a goodnight, but finding Phoebe is all I can think about right now.

I've been a fucking mess these past two weeks. I've tried to push her away and act like what happened between us was just a fling, but I can't fool myself, and I can't deny it any longer. She deserves someone to reciprocate the love she gives so freely, and I'll be damned if it's anyone but me.

There've been so many moments I've wanted to call Phoebe and apologize for pushing her away. I couldn't even bring myself to wash my sheets after she left, because they still smelled like her. Everything reminds me of Phoebe. I've been running every morning to clear my head, and I stop each time to watch the sunrise. Each day, I hope like hell I'll run into her, just for an excuse to hear her voice. After two weeks of feeling numb and just going through the motions, I finally decided this morning that I need to talk to her. I just didn't plan on it happening tonight. If life without Phoebe is this hollow, I can't stand to live another day without her.

She needs to know how I feel about her. I've finally come to terms with the notion that I would risk it all for a chance to be with her. I would risk my career, everything I've worked for, to have a chance to be the man who makes her happy. Our relationship wouldn't be easy, but we could figure it out together. Phoebe voiced this on numerous occasions, and each time, I've

shut it down. At the end of the day, we're both adults, and my job is just a job. There are plenty of other coaching jobs available. No career is worth giving up someone who means the world to you, someone you love. *Fuck, do I love her?* I'm not sure, but whatever this is, it's the strongest emotion I've ever felt.

I've put her through absolute hell. I'm no better than her parents at this point. I have to find her and try to make her understand how sorry I am. She may never forgive me, but I need to explain myself at the very least. I don't ever want her to feel like she's the reason I've been ignoring her. I'm just so fucking conflicted. My reasoning for abandoning her after her birthday is because of *my* inner turmoil, not because my feelings have changed or lessened, which I'm sure is what she's thinking.

If she only knew my feelings for her keep me going each day. The highlight of my days is hearing her laugh or catching quick glimpses of her golden hair and magnetic smile. God, she's such an incredible person. *My person.* I just pray I didn't push her away for the last time. My first thought is to call her. I tap her contact in my phone and immediately get her voicemail. I try calling her a few more times, only to get the same voice message each try.

"Fuck," I curse. *Should I ask Maisie where Phoebe is?* No, that would be too obvious.

Running my hands through my hair in frustration, my eyes roam around the room and lock on to the view beyond the massive glass windows. Moonlight shimmers across the ocean, like a spotlight that will lead me straight to her. I'm assuming her parents drove her here, meaning she either took an Uber back to her apartment or she went to be near the ocean, letting each wave soothe her pain.

Pushing through the double doors, I follow the bamboo walkway to the hotel beach. As soon as my feet hit sand, I swivel my head, frantically searching for her. No one is out here, not a single soul. Knowing Phoebe wouldn't want to be found, I decide to explore further down the beach, hoping like hell she's out here. Right as I'm about to abandon my search, I spot a small body off in the distance, curled up in a ball against the sand.

Squinting my eyes to get a better view, the moonlight hits her just right, and I spy strands of her golden hair flowing across her dress, the material glittering in the sand. *My beautiful, broken girl.*

My first thought is to run to her, but I'm worried I'll startle her. The last thing I need is for her to run away before I have a chance to explain; I

wouldn't be surprised if she did. I've been a complete dick to her.

As I approach Phoebe, I slowly kneel behind her. Luckily, the sand muted the sound of my footsteps, making her oblivious to the fact that I'm less than a foot away from her back. I immediately notice her shoulders shaking from her soft cries. I want so badly to reach out and hold her; I hate knowing I'm part of the reason she's so broken. *I hate myself for how I've treated her.*

"Phoebe..." I whisper it like a prayer, and she doesn't even flinch when her name leaves my lips. Assuming she can't hear me over the waves, I softly place my hand on her bare shoulder.

"Bee, it's me, Knox," I call a little louder, giving her shoulder a light brush. As soon as she feels my touch, her body jerks and she bolts up to sit in front of me. Her eyes widen in fear as she tries to register who just crept up on her in the black of night.

"Jesus Christ, Knox! What the hell? You scared the shit out of me!" she shouts, jumping to her feet and putting a few feet of distance between us.

My still-outstretched arm drops as I whisper-shout in her direction. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to make sure you were okay." I inch toward her, not wanting to scare her away like a spooked animal.

"What do you want, Knox?" she asks dryly.

"I just want to talk."

"That ship sailed weeks ago. Leave me alone," she bites out, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"I'm sorry, Phoebe. I'm so fucking sorry, for everything," I confess, reaching for her as I sit in the sand. I need to close the space between us. I need to touch her.

"Do *not* touch me," Phoebe says through clenched teeth, taking another step back. "Please just do me a favor and leave. You're the last person I want to see right now."

I know what she's doing – she's in pain and pushing me away. I've done the same thing to her every day of the past few weeks, and I'm not letting her sink into that feeling now. "I'm not leaving you, Phoebe. I'm done leaving you. I've been a fucking mess these past two weeks without you. I've barely been able to sleep, eat, work, or even be a functional human. I'm so exhausted, Bee. I'm tired of trying to deny what I feel for you."

She sneers down at me, peering down like she wishes I'd disappear. "What exactly do you feel for me, Knox? *Pity*? Because the only time you give in to your so-called 'feelings' is when you're trying to save me from my

shitty life. We both know you wouldn't be here right now if it weren't for what happened with my parents. You feel bad for me, so you're here to play the hero, once again. I'm not fucking falling for your bullshit again, Knox. I honestly don't want to hear it, so please just go," she pleads. Her blonde hair flows angrily in the wind and streaks of dried tears stain her cheeks.

I shake my head, desperately wanting her to understand. "No, I pity your parents, not you. I pity them for missing out on a relationship with their daughter, who happens to be the most mesmerizing person on the planet. I wanted so badly to knock that smug smile off your dad's face for how he was speaking to you, but that's not why I'm out here, Phoebe. I've been trying to plan out when and how I could talk to you about us. I wasn't planning on it being tonight, but I'm so damn miserable without you, Bee. Your birthday was the last day I felt an ounce of happiness. Waking up next to you felt like a fever dream," I admit, letting my heart split open onto the sand for her.

"God, Phoebe... I would give anything to wake up to you every day. You said we could find a way to work this out and I'm so sorry it took me so long, but I want to try. You're so fucking important to me, and you don't deserve what I put you through. You've consumed me since the moment I first met you. Even when we aren't together, you consume me. *Every. Damn. Second.*"

Phoebe looks at me in disbelief at my confession, and her expression seems to soften before hardening again.

"How dare you," she spits through clenched teeth. "How fucking dare you push me away again, treat me like a dirty little secret, abandon me for weeks, then try to pull me back into your hold. It's a cycle with you, Knox. You promised me... you fucking promised me you wouldn't do this again. *You've been a mess?*" She snorts a laugh before continuing. "Have you considered what I've gone through? After waking me up on my birthday with a bouquet of roses, worshipping every inch of my body with your mouth, claiming me as yours, holding me in your arms like I was your lifeline... you fucking ghosted me. Do you know how that feels, Knox? It made me feel dirty, embarrassed, worthless. *You*, you made me feel that way. Not my parents, you. So, spare me your bullshit." She finishes with a shaky breath, and I can practically hear the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"What did you expect, Phoebe?" I respond, raising my voice. I don't mean to yell, but I need her to understand why I've been so hot and cold.

"I don't know... at least send a fucking text!" she yells back, tossing her arms in the air. "You must be delusional. How could you not know how

much you mean to me, Knox. You knew exactly what you were doing when you kissed me goodbye - you were preparing to leave. You let me believe there was a chance. You gave me hope and then ripped it away like I was nothing to you.” Her teeth are clenched now, and it only enrages me further. I’m standing now, not able to stay still.

“Put yourself in my shoes for one goddamn minute! I’m your coach and you’re nineteen! Everything I’ve worked for is now in jeopardy. Hell, if it was only myself I was worried about, I would have thrown all caution to the wind weeks ago, but I have to think about how this could affect you, Phoebe. I lay in bed at night and think about how our relationship could affect your athletic career. You may not want to be on the team, but you’ve worked your ass off to be here. If you decide to let that go, I want it to be your decision, not because of me,” I reply, pacing back and forth in the sand.

“You have no idea how much time I spend contemplating the ‘what ifs’,” I add when she doesn’t speak. “Could you lose your athletic scholarship if we were found out? What will Maisie think? Would another college even consider hiring me? Hell, I don’t know because I never imagined I would be in this situation! I’m thirty-one with a career I’ve spent years building, and I’m sneaking around with my teenage athlete. Jesus Christ, do you understand how that sounds?” I exhale, fisting my hair in my hands.

“You have to level with me, Bee. If you weren’t one of my athletes, I could’ve easily gotten over our age difference. You would have been mine months ago. Our circumstances are a hell of a lot more complicated than that, though. I’ve been dealing with this internal war for months, and I’m so fucking tired, Phoebe. I just want to be with you without worrying about the consequences. I just want *you*,” I rasp, my voice cracking with my confession.

Feeling absolutely defeated, I drop to my knees in the sand again and bury my face in my palms. This entire situation is so fucked, and I honestly don’t know what to do at this point. All I know is that I want Phoebe more than anything.

“Knox...” Phoebe whispers, kneeling in front of me.

“Knox, please look at me,” she pleads, pulling my hands from my face gently. Her thumb swipes away a lone tear that escaped from my tired eyes. I can’t remember the last time I let someone see me cry. When I meet her ocean blue eyes, I see unshed tears waiting to fall, months of want and need finally bubbling to the surface.

“Phoebe, you deserve so much,” I whisper, my voice hoarse. “You deserve so much more than your piece of shit parents. You deserve more than a life you don’t want to live. You deserve a hell of a lot more than me, but I’m too fucking selfish to let anyone else have you. You’re my sunrise over the ocean, Bee. Please tell me I haven’t lost you,” I croak, my voice barely audible over the crashing of the waves.

She finally lets her tears fall at my confession and crashes her mouth to mine.

We groan as our mouths collide, our lips and tongues frantically trying to make up for lost time. Phoebe whimpers as I part her lips with my tongue, kissing her deeper than ever before. This isn’t just a kiss; no, it’s the uniting of two souls. I cradle her face in my hands, trying to pull her as close as possible. I feel the mixture of our tears sliding down my fingers, reminding me that we’re so much more than a fling. *She’s everything.*

When we finally break for air, Phoebe utters the words I’ve been praying to hear.

“I’m yours, Knox. I always have been,” she whispers, her icy blue eyes darting back and forth between mine. “I get it, I do,” she adds. “I hate the way you’ve handled it, and I would be lying if I said I wasn’t still pissed, but I understand. If you need time to process things, you have to communicate with me. Shutting me out is not the answer. I can’t go through that again.”

I sit back in the sand, dragging her on to my lap and wrapping her legs around my waist. I take her face in my hands and stare directly into her eyes.

“Phoebe... you have no right to believe what I’m about to say but let me make you one final promise. A promise I will *never* break. I’m sure we will go through a million highs and a million lows, but I will never leave you again. Never again, baby. I can’t promise you I won’t hurt you or fuck up sometimes, but I won’t leave. I won’t put either of us through that again,” I promise.

“What about your job, Knox? What are we going to do? We can’t hide for four years,” she replies, her eyes searching mine.

I nuzzle her neck as I talk, not wanting to stop touching her to think. “I haven’t thought that far ahead, but I’ll figure it out. I can’t leave the team without a coach, but after the spring, I’ll apply to other coaching jobs in the area. We’ll have to keep our relationship discreet and be extra careful until then. I don’t have all the answers right now; I just know I’m not giving you up. No job is worth losing you.” I press a soft kiss to her lips.

Phoebe looks like she's about to breakdown all over again, but this time, it's with emotion I recognize mirrored back in myself. "You would just give up your coaching job at CCU for me? Knox, I couldn't let you do that..."

"Phoebe, I would give up the major leagues if it meant I could be with you," I interrupt, trying to explain just how much she means to me. "We have the rest of the season to figure this out, Bee. Right now, I need you more than my next breath. Come here, baby," I rasp, gripping the back of her head and pulling her mouth back to mine.

I lose track of time as we kiss like we're starved for each other. She grips my shoulders, shoving my back onto the sand and covering my body with hers. She trails hungry kisses down my neck before sealing her mouth to my lips again.

"Knox... I need you," she moans, staring down at me with a heated gaze. "Kissing and touching you isn't enough anymore. I want all of you. *Please,*" she practically whimpers, grinding her core against my throbbing erection.

"I've wanted to rip that dress off you the moment I saw you tonight. You look so gorgeous, Phoebe," I reply, arching up to kiss her neck. I'm practically lightheaded at the thought. "It would be my honor to lick every inch of your body and fuck you until you're screaming my name. *This* is mine," I growl, gripping her ass and grinding my hard cock into her center.

"Fuck, Knox..." she moans, ripping at my shirt, the first two buttons flying off in her hurry to get me naked. *Ugh. I can't believe I'm about to stop her.*

"We can't do this here, baby," I say, sitting up and taking her eager hands in mine. "As much as I want to fuck you right here on this beach, I want to take my time. I don't want to have to rush or be quiet. I want you completely naked in my bed, moaning my name as you come apart around my cock. Let's go back to my place," I pant, placing a soft kiss to her swollen lips.

"Can we teleport there? God, I need you now..." Phoebe whimpers, shifting her hips eagerly again.

"Baby, you need to stop grinding on my dick before this night ends way too soon," I groan, drawing a laugh from her.

"I'm serious," I laugh, nibbling on her bottom lip. "Let's go home. I'm going to grab my Jeep - wait ten minutes, then meet me outside the hotel gates. I'll send you a text as soon as I'm parked. I'll be waiting for you; text me if you get caught up or have trouble finding me," I add, diving in for one more kiss before standing and dragging her up with me.

“I’ll meet you there,” she replies with a seductive grin. As soon as I turn my back to walk away, she grabs the back of my shirt, spinning me around and crushing her mouth back to mine. She greedily sucks on my tongue, pulling a deep groan from my chest.

“Sorry, your ass looks so good in those slacks. I couldn’t resist.” She pulls away breathlessly, giving my ass a hard slap before turning me back towards the hotel.

“I’ll remember that.” I wink at her over my shoulder. I speed walk to my Jeep, ready to be alone with my girl and finally give in to temptation.

NINETEEN

PHOEBE

It's impossible to keep my hands off Knox as he drives us back to his house. Leaning across the console of his Jeep, my lips trail hungry kisses along his cheek and neck. My hands roam beneath his shirt, skimming across the ripples of his abs. His confession keeps playing on repeat in my mind, spurring me onwards.

"You're so fucking important to me, and you don't deserve what I put you through. I want you to know that you've consumed me since the moment I met you. Even when we aren't together, you consume me. Every. Damn. Second."

"You're my sunrise over the ocean, Bee."

"I'm sure we will go through a million highs and a million lows, but I will never leave you again. Never again, baby."

I could be naive for allowing Knox back into my life, but something about this just feels different. When he fell to his knees with tears streaming down his face, I knew a switch flipped inside him. I wanted to fight harder but I'm so fucking tired. It's like there's a magnetic force between us and nothing can keep us apart, no matter how hard we try. To hell with the consequences.

Once we scramble through the front door, Knox is on me in an instant.

"You have no idea how happy I am *finally* to have you all to myself," he groans. My back is flush against the wood as he pins me to the door.

Cupping my face in one of his large hands, he seals his mouth to mine and wraps the other arm around my middle, pulling me into him. My hips start to grind in perfect rhythm with his, almost moving on their own. Needing to feel his skin, I fumble with the buttons on his dress shirt before finally ripping it open. I hear little clicks on the hardwood floor as the

remaining buttons fly across the room; I quickly slide the soft cotton down his arms and let it fall to the floor. Pulling my mouth away from his, I trail my eyes down his chest.

“You’re so beautiful...” I whisper as I lazily run my hands up and down his body. I trace his tattoo with the pad of my pointer finger before skimming my hands down to the fly of his slacks.

“Can I?” I peek up at him through hooded lashes while unbuttoning his slacks, not pulling them down just yet. Like he’s given me so many times before, I want to give him the choice. This will change everything between us, and I need him to want this as much as I do.

“You just ripped my shirt off and *now* you feel the need to ask?” he chuckles. “Of course, Bee.” He cups my face, brushing his thumbs across my temples. “If you don’t start undressing me now, I can’t be held accountable for my actions,” he rasps, pushing his forehead against mine.

My breathing has basically stopped at this point. Reaching up, I wrap my arms around his neck, kissing him like my life depends on it. Our teeth and tongues collide in the most frantic yet beautiful way. I can’t hide the moans that escape every time his tongue brushes against mine or when he sucks my bottom lip into his hot mouth. His hands fall to my ass, kneading it in his palms as his mouth latches onto my neck, sucking and licking the spot he knows drives me wild.

Feeling for his zipper, I slide it down and push his pants to the floor, leaving him in nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs. My eyes immediately land on the huge bulge in his boxers, practically begging to be set free. Cupping my hand around his erection, I give it a few soft strokes before gliding my palm down and caressing his cotton-clad balls.

“Fuck, Phoebe,” he groans, rocking his hips into my palm.

Needing more, I slip my fingers into the waistband of his boxers and pull them down in one, quick swoop. I suck in a deep breath as my eyes slide down the entirety of Knox’s naked body. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to seeing him like this, like a god. His pupils are blown wide, almost swallowing his golden eyes whole. His raven hair is disheveled from my hands running through it. His tan chest is gleaming with sweat and his mouth-watering dick bobs against his belly button as pre-cum leaks from the swollen tip.

“It’s my turn to taste you,” I smile with hooded eyes as I drop down to my knees and take the base of his shaft in my hand. I’ve never done this

before, but judging by the heated gaze in Knox's eyes, I could touch him anywhere and he would be happy.

"Phoebe, this isn't going to last long if you... Fuck," he rasps as I drag my tongue from the base of his dick to the tip. I lick the precum leaking from his slit, moaning at the taste of him. His hands immediately latch on to my head, his fingers tangling in my hair. Once I seal my lips around his tip and start to suck, his hips begin to roll back and forth of their own accord. His dick inches further into my mouth with each thrust of his hips.

"My God, Bee... Your mouth... So good, baby," he groans, throwing his head back.

Feeling more confident, I hollow my cheeks, taking him to the back of my throat and rolling his heavy balls in my hand.

"Fuck, that feels too good," he moans, louder this time, pulling out of my mouth and hurriedly lifting me to my feet. He turns me around so my front is facing the door and pulls on the zipper of my dress, tugging it down inch by inch, a slow tease that's driving me crazy.

"Don't get me wrong, baby - I'll definitely be coming inside you tonight, just not in your mouth," he says possessively, licking a trail from the back of my neck to my ear.

I feel my dress fall to the floor as I throw my head back against his shoulder, leaving me in nothing but a pair of lace panties. Luckily, my dress had extra padding, so I didn't need to wear a bra.

"As hot as it is to know you weren't wearing a bra underneath that dress, I'm a little disappointed I didn't get to take one off you," he growls, reaching around to cup my breasts in his hands. "I've been fantasizing about undressing you all night. At least I still get to remove these." He hooks his fingers into my panties, sliding them down my legs.

As soon as the thin strip of lace hits the floor, he spins me around and pulls our naked bodies flush together. Grabbing my ass, he grinds his hard cock against my bare pussy, causing the most delicious friction to spark between us.

"I need more," I moan, gripping his neck and tugging his mouth to mine.

He sucks my bottom lip between his teeth as I feel two thick fingers slip inside me. His thumb massages my clit as he thrusts his fingers in and out of my wetness.

"Oh my God... Knox..." I have a death grip on his shoulders, practically riding his hand.

“You’re so fucking wet for me, baby,” he praises, adding a third finger and curling them to hit that euphoric spot inside of me.

“Knox...” I cry out his name. “I need *you*. Please, Knox,” I whimper.

“You’re killing me, Phoebe,” he groans, removing his fingers from inside me. He sucks them into his mouth, and I moan at the sight.

“I’ve been dying to feel your tight little pussy squeezing my cock. Let’s go upstairs,” he says as he lifts me, wrapping my legs around his waist. “I don’t have any condoms down here and I want you on my bed.”

We kiss like it’s going out of style as he carries me up to his room, setting me on my feet and shutting the door behind us. A moment of silence passes as we stare at each other while Knox holds me in his arms, looking at me like he can’t believe this is happening.

Me too, baby, me too.

“Phoebe,” Knox rasps, clearing his throat and cupping my face in his hands. “I need you to understand this will change everything. I can’t stay away from you, and once I know what it feels like to be inside you, I’ll *never* be able to let you go. I won’t just be fucking you; I’ll be claiming you as mine.” A jealous glint fills his eyes before he continues. “I’ve always been a jealous man, Phoebe, but with you, it’s on an entirely different level. Once we do this, you’re mine. *Mine*. Not Colin’s or anyone else’s.”

“It’s hilarious to me that you allow Colin to get you so worked up,” I chuckle, patting him on the chest.

“How is that funny?” he asks, pinching his brows together.

I scrunch my nose as I laugh lightly again. “Because Colin doesn’t hold a candle to you, Knox. How could you not know that I’ve been yours since the day we locked eyes in the café? I had no idea a stare could make me feel so many emotions, *until you*.”

Knox doesn’t say anything. He just stares down at me with hungry eyes before dipping his head to kiss me.

“Wait,” I rush out, stopping him in his tracks. “Promise me one thing.”

“Anything,” he rasps, his hands clutching at my hips.

“Promise me that as much as I’m yours, you’re mine,” I whisper, my eyes searching his for an answer.

“That’s the easiest promise I’ll ever make,” he says, his lips hovering over mine. “You’ve ruined me for all other women, Phoebe. You’ve completely turned my world upside down in the best way possible. I’m yours every day for the rest of my life and even after that. Now, get on my bed and

let me show you how much I'm yours," he growls, walking me back until my ass hits the edge of the mattress.

Knox crawls over me, inching me back until my head rests on a pillow propped up against the headboard. He's hovering over me, resting his weight on his muscular arms and roaming his eyes down my naked body.

"My God, Phoebe, you're so fucking perfect," he groans, chewing on his lip. "I'll try my best to be gentle and make it good for you, but I can't make any promises. I've waited so damn long for this and once I'm inside you... fuck, I don't know how much control I'll have.

"Be gentle?" I scoff, arching my brows. "When have you ever been gentle with me? I want all of you, Knox. Don't you dare hold back." I feel his dick twitch against my stomach at my words.

"You asked for it, baby," he smirks as he plants an intimate kiss to my lips. He leans over to open the bedside table, pulling out a square package and ripping it open with his teeth. *Well fuck, if that isn't the sexiest thing I've ever seen.* His eyes never leave mine as he slowly rolls the condom down his length.

He grabs his cock at the base, rubbing it up and down my wet slit. Every time his thick head hits my entrance, he traces it back up my wetness until his tip brushes against my clit. He's killing me with his slow teasing; I *need* him inside of me.

"Knox..." I moan. "Stop." *Moan.* "Teasing." *Moan.* "Me."

"Fuck... this is the hottest thing I've ever seen. My dick sliding through your pussy... you're so wet for me, baby," he rasps as he looks down between us.

I moan again at his words, rolling my head back and arching my back. He's going to make me come and he's not even inside me yet.

"Phoebe, look at me," he demands, gripping the back of my head and positioning his tip at my entrance. "I want you to look at me while I fuck you," he growls and pushes his swollen tip inside me. We both moan at the feeling of being connected for the first time, staring at each other in complete awe.

"Phoebe," his voice cracks. "Can you take more? You're so fucking tight. I'm trying to go slow, but you feel so good." His face is contorted with the effort it takes to hold back.

I refuse to wait another moment. I grip his waist and pull him flush against my hips until he's fully seated inside me. At first, I feel a shock of

pain that lasts for a split second, but then, I just need him to move. I feel so full in the best way possible, completely consumed by all things Knox. This man is quickly becoming everything I never knew I needed. If what we're doing is a mistake, then he's the best mistake I ever made. I wouldn't give up this feeling for the world.

"Bee... you fit me like a glove," he groans, his head falling to rest against my neck. "I need to move. Tell me if it hurts or if I need to slow down, okay, baby?"

"Knox, just move," I plead, pulling his beautiful face to mine. Our tongues fight for dominance as I tangle my hands in his hair. He wraps his arms under my thighs, spreading me out, deepening his angle to hit my g-spot with every deep thrust. His eyes roll to the back of his head and a deep groan escapes him as he starts to pick up his pace. His hard body hits my clit with each stroke, lightning bolts of pleasure searing through me every time.

"Oh my God... Knox..." I moan, completely breathless. He dips his head, nibbling my hard nipples with his teeth as he thrusts inside of me harder. He takes turns between biting and sucking them into his mouth, teasing me in the most tantalizing way.

"I'm already so close," I moan as my body shudders with pleasure.

"That's it, baby. Come all over my cock. Squeeze me," Knox moans, louder this time. "After, I want you to ride me. I want you bent over my bed. I want you in my shower. I want to claim you on every fucking surface of this house," he growls, sinking into me harder with each thrust.

"Knox!" I cry out, feeling my core begin to tighten.

"I know, baby," he replies. His eyes are glazed over with heat as he watches his length slide in and out of my pussy. "You." *Thrust*. "Feel." *Thrust*. "So." *Thrust*. "Fucking." *Thrust*. "Good. You were made for me, baby." When he reaches down and rolls my swollen clit between the rough pads of his fingers, I lose all sense of space and time.

"Knox!" I cry out his name, clutching on to his shoulders for dear life. I'm sure he'll have nail marks imprinted into his skin. The most intense orgasm I've ever experienced ripples through my body, causing all my muscles to contract. I have zero control over the shockwaves surging through my body as my toes curl and my back arches off the bed.

"Oh fuck, Phoebe. You're milking my cock so well," Knox groans, gripping my hips so hard, I'm sure it'll leave a bruise. "Fucking hell," he groans, throwing his head back. I feel his dick twitch inside me as warmth

fills the condom. Watching Knox come apart because of me is the sexiest view of my life.

As we both come down from our orgasms, he leans down and captures my lips with his, kissing me tenderly. He's still slowly thrusting inside me as his body twitches from the aftershocks. We're both panting and sweating, completely enamored with one another.

Knox presses his forehead to mine and grips my face in his hands. He closes his eyes as he tries to catch his breath. He's still seated inside me, not wanting to break the bond between us. When he opens his golden eyes, I look up and run my hands through his beautiful raven hair. *I want this forever.* I've never been in love before, but I can only imagine this is what it feels like. *If what I'm feeling is love, then I love this man with every fiber of my being.*

"Knox... You mean so much to me," I whisper. Maybe we're not about to say 'I love you' yet, but I have to say *something*.

"So do you, baby. So do you." He softly brushes his lips against mine. "I'm so sorry for everything I put you through, Phoebe. I promise I'll do my best to make it up to you."

"I just want to live in the present with you. I don't want to waste another second," I reply, brushing my thumbs across his flushed cheeks.

"Deal," he whispers, sealing his mouth back to mine. He parts my lips, telling me everything I need to know with a swipe of his tongue. *He feels everything I feel for him, but he doesn't know how to voice it yet.* Knox slowly pulls out of me, and I moan at the loss.

"Wanna take a shower with me? I'm pretty sure I have sand in my ass crack from the beach," he laughs. "Maybe you can help me wash it out?" He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

"You're such a shit," I laugh. "I will gladly take a shower with you, but I'm pretty sure you can handle cleaning your own ass, Knox." He throws his head back in laughter at my comment.

"What if I promise to fuck you in the shower as a reward?" he smirks, biting my bottom lip between his teeth.

"I figured you were planning to do that anyways," I reply, reaching down to grab his cock, already hardening again at the thought.

"Mmm... I plan to fuck you more times tonight than you can count, Bee," he growls, standing from the bed and taking me with him. He wraps my legs around his waist and leads us to the shower.

TWENTY

PHOEBE

Knox is a man of his word. We curled up in bed together completely naked after shower sex and made out until we were writhing against each other, in need of another orgasm. Knox flipped me over on my stomach and took me from behind, taking me deeper than I thought possible. Even after having sex for the third time in one night, we still couldn't get enough of each other. After cleaning up again, we fell asleep entangled in one another.

I woke up this morning with Knox's warm chest pressed to my back with a smile on my face. Our legs were tangled together and our fingers intertwined, not leaving an inch of space between us. I smiled as I felt him trail kisses across my shoulder blades. In a matter of seconds, his dick began to harden behind me with each brush of his lips. That's how we ended up here, with Knox's back against the headboard and me on top of him, riding him like we didn't already fuck three times last night.

"God, Phoebe, yes, just like that," Knox groans, holding on to my hips as I slide up and down his length.

"Knox..." I moan, gripping onto the headboard to slam myself down harder.

"You take me so well, baby," he rasps, staring at me with lust in his beautiful golden eyes.

"Fuck... Knox, I'm about to..."

"Come for me, Bee. I want to feel you squeeze my cock," he growls, leaning forward to bite my nipple.

God, his mouth. I swear, it will be my undoing.

"Knox! Yes," I moan, throwing my head back, exposing the column of my throat. He immediately latches onto the soft skin of my neck, sucking and

licking my favorite spot.

“That’s it, baby, let go,” he commands as I feel his dick twitch inside me, telling me he’s losing control, too. “My God, Phoebe... I can’t wait for when I can feel you without a condom. So wet and tight for me...” He wraps his arms around my middle, burying his face in my chest.

Within seconds, I feel his body tense as warmth fills the condom. We’re clinging to each for dear life, panting and sweating as we come down from our releases. After we catch our breath, Knox carefully lifts me off him and removes the full condom from his softening length. He tosses the latex in a trash bin next to his bed and rolls over to face me.

“I’m never letting you leave my bed,” he says as he wraps his arms around me and pulls me down beside him.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” I quip, playfully nibbling on his earlobe.

We spend the next few minutes in silence, holding and caressing each other's bodies. I roam my hand up and down his chest and abs, tracing the lines of the tattoo right above his rib cage.

“What does it mean?” I whisper, trailing my finger back and forth across the ink. I’d been meaning to ask for weeks before we were... distracted.

“Hmmm?” he responds.

“Your tattoo. Where do the coordinates lead?”

“Uh... It’s kind of cheesy,” he nervously laughs as heat flushes to his cheeks. I prop myself up on one arm, giving him my full attention.

“If it means so much that you would permanently attach it to your body, then I want to know all about it. Please, tell me,” I push, leaning in and placing a soft kiss to his cheek.

He sighs, running his hand down his face before answering me. “The coordinates lead to a baseball field in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. It’s where the Little League World Series is held almost every year. My team made it to the series when I was 12, and Dan Cook was our coach.” He smiles at the memory, and it lights up my heart.

“Wow, that’s so cool. Did your team win?”

“Yeah, we did,” he grins. “It was an experience I’ll never forget. There were television cameras everywhere, reporters fighting to take turns to interview us... It was honestly so badass. It felt like I had made it to the major leagues,” he chuckles.

“That’s so cute,” I reply as the biggest smile stretches across my face.

“My parents finally convinced me to give my medal to them so they could frame it with the team photo. It’s still hanging in their house. They brag about it to this day.” He laughs and shakes his head at the idea.

“I love that. Your parents seem amazing.”

He nods profusely. “They’re the absolute best. Seeing their faces the day we won is something I’ll never forget. It was pure joy and happiness. They knew how hard I worked and how bad I wanted it. They were just so fucking happy they got to watch my dream become reality,” he says with a soft smile. “So, that’s why I got the tattoo the day I turned eighteen. I wanted to be reminded of that day every time I looked in the mirror. I want to be reminded of the people who would sacrifice anything for me,” he rasps, emotion evident in his voice.

“Knox, how could you ever be embarrassed about that? That’s such a beautiful story. Not to mention, you won the Little League World Series. How badass is that?” I exclaim with a wide smile.

“Yeah, yeah. You’re just trying to butter me up,” he smirks, pulling me down for a kiss.

“I am not,” I laugh, playfully shoving at his chest. “It seems like baseball was always a huge part of your life. Did you have a chance to play after college?”

“Yeah, I had the opportunity to play for a few minor league organizations, but I had more of a passion for coaching. I got to volunteer at baseball camps, and my love for coaching just grew from there.”

His comment quickly brings me back to reality. Coaching is his dream, yet he’s in bed naked with one of his athletes. My heart sinks in my chest as I think about what I could be taking away from him.

“Phoebe, what is it?” he asks, noticing my silence.

I avert my eyes from his face, not brave enough to look at him. “Knox... you’ve worked so far to get where you are today. I can’t help but feel selfish. I want you so much that I didn’t even stop to think about the consequences of what our relationship could do to your career.”

He covers my cheek with his palm, lifting my face to look at him. “Bee, I took this job because Coach Cook asked me to. CCU wasn’t even on my radar. There are hundreds of coaching jobs out there. It’s not about coaching the best teams for me. Hell, I’d much rather coach a team of underdogs that needs someone to believe in them. We both deserve to be happy, Phoebe. I promise you, you make me a million times happier than coaching at CCU

ever could.” I bring my hands to his as his thumbs brush my cheeks.

“What are we going to do? What’s our plan, Knox?” I whisper.

“Well, I’ll be at CCU until the end of the school year, that’s a given. In the meantime, I’m going to start looking for other coaching jobs. CCU is a great school, and I would never want you to move colleges just for me. So, my plan is to hopefully find something in the area, *close to you*.” He punctuates his words with a kiss on the tip of my nose.

“Knox, I couldn't ask you to do tha-”

“You’re not asking me to do anything, Phoebe,” he interjects. “I’m choosing this decision. It’s not the end of the world, baby. It would just be a new job. People adjust to new jobs every day. It’ll all work out.”

“What about Coach Cook? What will he think?”

He takes a deep breath at my question. “I could never lie to him. Eventually, I’ll have to tell him about you. I’m sure he’ll be disappointed at first, but he’ll understand. As long as I’m happy and doing what I love, he’ll come around. Trust me, I made some stupid fucking decisions as a teenager and Dan didn’t disown me,” he laughs. “When he sees how happy you make me, he’ll welcome you with open arms.”

“I hope so. I know how much his approval means to you,” I reply, sincerity and *fear* lacing my voice.

“Well, he did recruit you, so I guess I can just put the blame on him if he gets pissed,” he replies, arching his brows.

“That is true,” I laugh.

“While we’re on the topic of my family... what are you doing next weekend?” he asks in a whisper, almost like he rushed the words out.

I raise an eyebrow at him, knowing what he’s asking me. “Umm... I don’t think I have anything planned. Why?”

“My parents are flying to NYC to visit my sister, and I’m planning to fly out Friday evening to spend the weekend with them. I haven’t booked my flight yet, but I know I’ll be flying home Sunday. Since it’s just a weekend trip, you wouldn't miss any class. Come with me, Bee.”

“Come with you? Knox, I thought we were planning to hide our relationship until the end of the school year. If your parents come to a game, they’re going to know you’re my coach. Are you crazy?” I ask in shock.

The shock really sets in, though, when he looks at me with a pained expression on his face. “Don’t hate me... but my sister already knows. We tell each other everything in my family. We’re super close, and I don’t want

to hide you away from them until May. I think it'll actually make things easier if they know," he says, placing a kiss to my forehead.

"Your sister knows about us?" I ask in a small voice, pinching my brows together in confusion.

"I told her about my feelings for you months ago. I was going crazy and needed to talk to someone I trusted. She handled it like it was no big deal," he scoffs.

"Well, that's good to know," I say sarcastically. "What about my plane ticket? How am I going to explain to my parents that I need money to fly to NYC? Actually, scratch that... I'm not asking them for a dime." I shudder at the thought. "Anyways, I don't have the money for a plane ticket right now."

"Phoebe, I'm the one asking you to come with me. I'm buying the tickets. Plus, I have tons of airline points that are going to expire soon. If it makes you feel better, I'm sure the tickets will be close to nothing once I apply my points," he says decisively, hopeful.

I worry my lip between my teeth. "Are you sure about this? I'd love to meet your parents, but it's a huge step. I just don't want you to make a decision you'll regret."

"Phoebe, look at me," he says, staring directly into my eyes. "I promised you that I would never leave again, and I meant it. Please, come with me," he pleads. "I'm one hundred percent sure. I want my family to meet the most important person in my life. Come with me, baby."

I take a few deep breaths, thinking it through. "Okay" I whisper, nodding my head. "I'll come with you."

A huge smile stretches across Knox's face as he pulls me closer, kissing me with everything he has. "I'll book our flights today," he says after kissing me breathless. "I can't wait for you to meet my family, Bee."

I chuckle nervously at the happiness on his face. "I'm not gonna lie, I'm a little nervous, but I'm also really excited to meet them," I reply with a soft smile.

"Don't be nervous. They're going to love you, baby," he assures me.

My phone pings with a message on the bedside table, interrupting our conversation. I reach for my phone and unlock it, checking to see who messaged me.

Maisie: Where did you run off to last night? I went to wake you up for breakfast, but you weren't there.

Maisie: Phoebe, if you don't reply in the next thirty seconds, I'm sending out a search party for your ass. Get your shit together, bitch.

I laugh at her messages, she's so dramatic.

Me: Sorry, I went over to Colin's to watch a movie last night and ended up crashing. I'll be home in twenty! We still on for breakfast?

I feel so bad for lying to her. I really need to find a better excuse than Colin. Even though they hang in different groups, there's still a small chance they could catch me in my lies. *Would Maisie understand if I just told her the truth?*

Maisie: Hell yes, we are! Did you give Colin that WAP last night?

Me: You're disgusting. Lol I'll see you soon.

"Sorry, that was Maisie. I forgot we're having breakfast this morning. Can you drop me off at my apartment? I kind of need to hurry. I think she's waiting on me," I ask with a wince. I'd much rather stay here.

"Yeah, of course," Knox replies. "Did she ask where you were?"

"Yeah, I told her I was with Colin," I nod.

He sighs at my flimsy excuse, and I see bits of jealousy raging in his eyes. "Phoebe... We need to come up with a better excuse than that. At some point, she's going to find out you weren't with Colin."

"I know, I agree. I just don't really have time to map out a plan right now. She's going to get even more suspicious if I don't get home in the next twenty minutes," I reply, sitting up and swinging my legs over the side of the bed.

"Bee..." Knox stands, cupping my face in his hands and placing his forehead to mine. "I need one more minute with you before we go back to the real world. I'm going to be working overtime this week to prepare for NYC, so I'll probably only see you at practice." He takes a deep breath and an even larger sigh. "Fuck, it's going to be hell waiting to be alone with you until next weekend."

"It will all be worth it, though," I whisper, rising up on my tiptoes to press my mouth to his. A deep groan vibrates through Knox's chest as my tongue brushes against his. We stand there for what feels like hours, devouring each other's mouths, not wanting to let go.

One more week. Just one more week until we can be together again.

TWENTY-ONE
KNOX

God, I've missed her. I've seen Phoebe at practice every day, but I haven't been able to touch her, hold her, or feel her soft lips against mine. I'm like a kid who's been eagerly anticipating Christmas morning. It's been difficult to stay focused on work; I've been so excited to be with her this weekend. I'm so thankful it's finally here.

Phoebe looks so damn cute as she walks towards my Jeep. Her blonde hair is falling in waves down her back, flowing in the wind as she rolls her suitcase my way. She's dressed for the fall in NYC in an oversized beige sweater, leggings, and black boots. An excited smile stretches across her face, getting wider with each step towards me. She's carrying a puffy winter coat in her arms that looks half as big as her. She must see me chuckle, because she sticks her tongue out and arches her brows. I smirk and blow her a kiss through the window in response.

Instead of pulling into the apartment parking lot, I decided to park behind the building. It's not like we can be discreet about putting her luggage in my car in broad daylight. We're already taking so many risks by doing this, but I don't give a damn. I've been so antsy for Phoebe to meet my family, I've barely slept. I told my parents I'm bringing her with me, but they have no idea she's one of my athletes. I'm sure they'll immediately notice that she's younger than me, but that won't phase them. I mean, my mom *is* ten years younger than my dad. I plan to tell my parents about how Phoebe and I met this weekend, but I just wanted it to be the right time. I already reminded my sister a million times to stay quiet until I've had a chance to speak with them.

My sister's having a hard time keeping it to herself because she's so ecstatic to meet Phoebe. I called Willow last week and told her about our

relationship. She's now the only person who knows we finally decided to stop fighting our feelings and give this relationship a chance. Once I bought our plane tickets and reality set in, I was overwhelmed with excitement that Phoebe agreed to come. If I thought I was excited, though, I've got nothing on Willow. She practically screamed through the phone when I told her.

"Oh my God, Knoxy! I'm so fucking happy for you!" I could hear the smile in her voice. "You sound so chipper, like you're finally smiling again. I'm just glad you came to your senses. I *cannot* wait to meet her!"

She squealed in my ear the whole time.

"Hey, you," Phoebe calls with a smile as she rolls her suitcase over to me.

"Hey," I reply, not wanting to give too much away in case someone's nearby.

I hop out of the driver's seat and swiftly grab her luggage. After securing her suitcase in the back, I open the passenger door with a wink as she steps up into my Jeep. Once I make it back around to the driver's seat, I shut my door and look around to make sure no one's watching. Once I'm confident the coast is clear, I'm on her in an instant. I know it would be smart to wait until we land in New York, but I can't hold back any longer. I can't go another second without touching her.

"Hi, baby," I smile, reaching across the center console and cradling her face in my hands.

"Hi," she beams, brushing her nose against mine.

"Come here," I whisper against her lips, pulling her mouth to mine.

We swallow each other's groans the second our tongues collide, and I tangle my hands in her silky hair, tugging her as close to me as possible. *She tastes so goddamn good.* I tilt her head, allowing me deeper access to her mouth. When she moans and sucks on my tongue, my dick twitches in my jeans.

"Mmmm," I groan, reluctantly tearing my mouth away from hers. "If you keep kissing me like that, we'll definitely miss our flight." I place a gentle kiss to her forehead and shift the gear into drive.

"I missed you," she says, linking her fingers with mine.

"I missed you too, Bee," I reply, giving her hand a tight squeeze.

"So, what's the plan for today?" she asks with more enthusiasm than I've seen from her in a while.

"Thankfully, I was able to book a direct flight, so we'll land around seven p.m. Once we arrive, we'll need to quickly swing by our hotel. We'll be

cutting it close on time, but we'll meet my family for dinner after we drop off our luggage."

"Our hotel? Are your parents staying in the same one?" she asks, her brows pinched in thought.

Probably doesn't want them to hear her screaming my name.

"No, they'll be staying with my sister," I reply. "She has a small apartment with one spare bedroom. I didn't want us to have to camp out in the living room, so I booked a hotel a few blocks away. Plus, it gave me a damn good excuse to be alone with you," I add with a devious smile.

"Oh, a hotel room all to ourselves? I can't wait," she hums while arching her brows. I toss her knowing wink in response.

"So, if we don't land until seven, we'll be meeting your family for dinner pretty late," she semi-asks.

"Yeah, our flight leaves early on Sunday, so we only have tonight and tomorrow with them. I figured we should try to make every minute count," I respond.

"Of course," she agrees with a smile. "I'm so excited to see the city at night. I have an entire Pinterest board dedicated to this trip." She's beaming, like this is the best day of her life.

"Have you ever been to New York? I didn't even think to ask," I reply, turning towards the airport.

She shakes her head. "Nope, never been. My parents have taken countless trips, but they never took me along. Go figure," she scoffs.

"Well, I'm honored to watch you experience New York for the first time," I reply, bringing our linked hands to my lips and kissing the back of her smooth skin. Her cheeks turn a shade of crimson when I gently suck one of her fingers into my mouth.

Okay, yeah. I can't do that again. My dick likes it too much, and he needs to keep his shit together until we get to our hotel room.

"So..." I say, quickly changing the subject and clearing the huskiness from my voice. "Where does Maisie think you're going with a suitcase half your size?"

"Um..." she stammers, letting out a deep exhale. "Okay, so you're not going to love my response, but hear me out..."

"What did you tell her, Phoebe?" I say stern but hushed tone, tearing my eyes from the road to take in her expression. She doesn't look so confident in what she's about to tell me. *Shit, that can't be a good sign.*

“Colin is gone for the weekend visiting his family, so it was the perfect excuse. I told her I went home with him and that we’ll be back on Sunday. She totally bought it,” she rushes out.

Jesus Christ.

“Phoebe, I thought we talked about this. Using Colin as an excuse is going to bite us in the ass. What happens when Maisie runs into him and asks how the weekend went?” I interrogate her, pulling my hand from hers. “Did you at least ask Colin to cover for you in case she does? Hell, Maisie probably thinks you’re dating him. God, I hate everything about this situation.” I’m not okay with this. I’m frustrated and jealous, not a good combination. In all reality, it would be a good thing if Maisie thought Phoebe and Colin were dating - it would take the attention off me. Still, I can’t stomach the thought of people thinking she’s with Colin. I can’t stomach the thought of anyone thinking she’s with *anyone* but me.

“First, calm the hell down. Second, Colin isn’t getting back until late on Sunday, so they won’t run into each other, and third, Maisie knows I’m not interested in Colin. She just thinks we’re having a good time together,” she says defensively, almost like she’s angry.

“Having a good time together. That makes me feel a lot better,” I snicker.

“Knox, can we not do this today? I’ve been looking forward to this all week. You have to agree, using Colin as an excuse was the best option, especially since he’s out of town. We can talk about different back up plans moving forward, but with such short notice, this was the option that made the most sense. We only have a couple of days together, and I don’t want to spend them worrying about Maisie or Colin, or, God forbid, *fighting*.” She shudders at the thought.

Fuck, she’s right.

“Okay,” I reply in a hushed tone, reaching for her hand again. “I’m sorry, Bee. I just can’t fucking stand that guy. Even his name pisses me off. I wish you could see the way he looks at you. It makes me see red.” I tighten my grip on the steering wheel.

“Well, unfortunately for him, the man who has me in an absolute chokehold is sitting right next to me,” she replies as she leans across the console and places a kiss to my jaw.

Four and a half hours later, we're waiting for our Uber at JFK. The sun has already set, and hundreds of car lights gleam across the damp pavement. The chilly, late-October wind whispers across our cheeks, a sensation completely different from the warm, Florida heat. Phoebe looks like an angel with her golden hair flowing in the wind, her cheeks rosy from the cold, and a beautiful smile etched across her face from the excitement of a new city.

Our first time at the airport together was an experience I never anticipated having. If someone told me six months ago that I'd be flying to New York with my nineteen-year-old athlete, I would have told them they were crazy. If someone told me I'd be fucking her, I probably would have kicked their ass. *Yet, here I am.*

I wanted so badly to wrap my arms around her, hold her hand, kiss her whenever I wanted, but we kept our distance. Anyone from Coral Cove could have been watching, even if we didn't recognize them. Once the flight attendants dimmed the cabin lights, we gave in to our need for each other while we were shaded by darkness. We skipped the complementary drinks and snacks handed out mid-flight, too busy making out and just being totally fucking obsessed with each other. As soon as the cabin lights came back on, we begrudgingly put the wall right back up until we left the airport. Now that we're in the city, I don't give a fuck who's watching. *She's all mine here.*

"Oh! I think that's our Uber. Just let me check the license plate," Phoebe exclaims excitedly, squinting her eyes as she checks the app. "Yup, that's him. You ready, babe?" she asks, focusing her gaze toward our luggage resting on the curb.

Does she realize what she just said?

"Babe?" I ask with arched brows.

"Oh," she blushes. "Sorry, it just slipped out," she adds, nervously tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"What are you apologizing for? I love it. Say it again," I command.

"No," she laughs and playfully rolls her eyes at me. "Come on, *Knox.*" She turns to wave and smile at our Uber driver. A big smile is plastered across my face as I stand on the curb with my arms crossed against my chest.

"Nope, not until you say it," I reply with a smirk.

“Oh my God, you’re such a kid,” she scoffs. “Come on, *babe.*”

Fuck, I love the way that sounds.

“Yes, my lady,” I reply, rolling our luggage towards the trunk and placing a wet, sloppy kiss to her flushed cheek.

Of course, our driver is in a Toyota Corolla, and I barely fit in the backseat. My legs are squished against the passenger seat, my knees against my chest. Phoebe is clearly loving the view as she tries not to die of laughter beside me.

“So, I guess no sexy time in the back seat?” she whispers before throwing her head back in laughter.

“You’re a little shit, you know that?” I snark back, the corner of my lip turning up in a smile.

“It’s okay, you can make it up to me later in the Jeep. I’ve never had car sex before,” she adds, the side of her lips tipping up in a smirk.

“Phoebe Rhodes,” I exhale. “Don’t talk dirty right now. The last thing I need is a hard-on while I’m fighting for my life back here. I feel like I’m in a fucking yoga class right now,” I quip, darting my gaze to my knees.

“I like my men flexible,” she hums, biting her full lip between her teeth.

“Phoebe Rhodes, you have no idea what you’re doing. Just wait until I have you alone tonight,” I whisper in her ear so the driver can’t hear.

“Is that a threat?” she whispers back, lifting an eyebrow.

“It’s a fucking promise.” I kiss right behind her ear as heat surges through me at the thought.

Traffic in NYC is a bitch. Almost an hour later, we finally pull up to our hotel. I internally curse and remind myself to look up how long it takes by train for the return trip. *I can’t go through that shit again.* After I maneuver out of the back seat, I walk to Phoebe’s door and hold my hand out to her. Her eyes widen in what I assume is amazement, her gaze tracking the flocks of people whipping by as she steps up onto the damp pavement. The first time I came to New York, I remember feeling overwhelmed, amazed, nervous, and intrigued all at the same time. The hustle and bustle of the city is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced.

“*Oh. My. God,*” Phoebe gasps, slowly pulling her hand from mine to spin around and take in the full view of the striking city. “This is... holy shit. I feel like I’m in an episode of *Gossip Girl*. Blair? Serena? I made it,” she calls out with a laugh.

“Another one of your juicy soap operas?” I joke.

“Only the best! I'm so making you watch episode one with me tonight. You're gonna be hooked,” she laughs conspiratorially.

I made sure to book a hotel right in the heart of Manhattan. Cars, taxis, and buses fill the dark streets, a fluorescent glow reflecting across the shiny asphalt. The city is alive with sounds of horns, tires, music, chatter, and laughter bustling through the streets. Phoebe's eyes look almost silver as she gazes up at an LED billboard advertising various Broadway shows. The neon colors cascade through her blonde hair, encasing her in a vivid ring of light. *Damn, she makes New York look good.*

“I wish you could see how beautiful you look right now,” I whisper in her ear as I step up behind her, wrapping her in my arms.

“All thanks to you,” she whispers back. “Thank you for asking me to come, Knox. I'm so glad I'm here with you.”

“Thank *you* for saying yes,” I respond as I place a kiss to her chilled cheek. “Being here with you is the only thing I could think about all week.”

“Aayyyy, get outta the middle of the walkway! Damn tourists...” an angry passerby yells, bumping into my shoulder as he shakes his head.

“What an asshole,” Phoebe scoffs, quickly flashing her middle finger in the man's direction as he storms away.

“Maybe we should wear ‘I Love NY’ shirts just to rub it in that we're tourists? What do you think?” I mutter, drawing a laugh from Phoebe.

“Let's go, Bee,” I say, placing a hand to the small of her back. “We're meeting my family in half an hour. After we drop off our luggage, we'll walk to the restaurant. It's only a few blocks away.”

Once we checked in, we made our way up to the 15th floor. I was hoping the elevator would be vacant so I could get my hands on Phoebe in places not appropriate for a crowd, but unfortunately, we had quite the audience. A frustrated mother was bouncing her screaming baby in her arms while an elderly couple furiously complained about not having a room on the first floor.

“That's what we have to look forward to one day,” I whispered in Phoebe's ear, pulling a soft chuckle from her.

“Which one? The baby or the bickering when we're old?” she replied.

“Hopefully, both,” I whispered back before the doors opened to our floor.

A small green light beeps on our door as I swipe our room card. I roll our luggage to the side, only to turn to see Phoebe admiring the floor-to-ceiling glass windows. Her mouth hangs open in amazement as she takes in the

spectacular view. The spacious room is illuminated by millions of twinkling lights stretching across the city. Resting in the center of the space is a king-sized bed positioned right in front of the flat screen TV hanging on the wall. A shiny mini bar stocked with coffee, bottled water, and alcohol sits in the corner of the room.

“Knox... you didn't...” she says in shock.

“Pretty amazing view, huh?” I respond, stepping towards her.

“This is... This is too much. I can't even begin to imagine how much this room costs,” she replies in amazement, shaking her head.

“Phoebe, you have to remember that I'm an adult and have a good paying job,” I chuckle. “I'm no Jeff Bezos, but I can afford a nice hotel room.”

“Nice? Knox, this isn't just *nice*. This is nothing short of luxury. I come from money, and I've never stayed in a room like this. It's just... Wow...,” she trails off, moving her gaze to the skyline once more.

“One day,” I reply, grabbing her waist and spinning her around to face me, “You can take me on a trip like this with your fancy marketing job. Until then, I want to spoil the shit out of you.”

Phoebe's eyes glisten as she stares at me in awe, like I'm the first person to ever do anything just for her.

In the blink of an eye, she pushes me onto the bed, climbing to straddle me and crushing her mouth to mine. The second our lips collide, my dick begins to thicken in my jeans. I twist my hands in her hair as we get lost in each other. Her tongue tangles with mine as she starts grinding her hips against my straining erection. My cock jerks as she sucks my tongue into her mouth and rubs her palm against my length. *Fuck, why did I agree to dinner again?* I could die happy, just like this.

“Phoebe, baby, as much as I want to, we don't have time,” I exhale, painfully pulling my mouth from hers.

“How much time do we have?” she breathes out.

I look at my watch. “Maybe fifteen minutes?”

“How long does it take to walk to the restaurant?” she asks, staring down at me with heated eyes.

“About seven minutes.”

“Then I have enough time to do this.” She slides off the bed and sinks to her knees in front of me. Before I have a chance to process what she's doing, Phoebe unzips my jeans and pulls my hard cock free from my boxers.

“I'll make this short and sweet,” she says before licking a line from the

base of my shaft to the tip.

“Holy fuck...” I groan, sitting up and placing a hand behind me to steady myself. I curl my other hand in her hair as she bobs her head up and down on my cock. Gripping the back of her head, I guide her mouth down my length, moving her exactly where I want her.

“That’s it, baby. So fucking deep,” I growl.

She whimpers around my cock as she strokes me with her hot mouth, causing my balls to grow heavy with each brush of her tongue against my slick skin.

“You have the most perfect dick,” she hums, sticking out her tongue to lick the precum leaking from my slit. *My god, it’s so fucking hot when she talks dirty.*

“It’s all yours, baby,” I groan.

Phoebe takes her time tonguing and tasting my slit. She uses her free hand to cradle my balls, rolling them against her soft hand.

“God... Let me fuck your face,” I rasp, guiding her mouth back down my length. She just hums in response as she sucks my dick like a damn lollipop.

“Baby... I’m about to come,” I groan. “If you don’t stop, I’m going to come in your mouth.”

As soon as the words leave my lips, she grabs my hips and tugs me closer, taking me all the way to the back of her throat. She wraps her small hand around the base of my cock to stroke it as she increases her suction. The sensation of her sucking and stroking me at the same time causes me to see fucking stars. My balls tighten and thick ropes of cum fill her mouth.

“Holy shit...,” I let out a breathy moan as she swallows my cum as it shoots down her throat. Once I recover from the best blow job of my life, I pull Phoebe to her feet and bring her mouth to mine. I fight back a moan as I taste my own release when our tongues brush together.

“Phoebe... that was so fucking hot,” I say breathlessly.

“Mmm, I can’t wait until I can do that again,” she replies, licking the remainder of my release from her lips.

“Fuck,” I groan, biting my bottom lip. “The faster we get to dinner, the faster we can get back to this bed. I hope you’re okay with not getting much sleep this weekend,” I pant, palming her ass and giving it a firm squeeze.

TWENTY-TWO

PHOEBE

“Phoebe? Oh my goodness! It’s so nice to meet you!” a beautiful woman I’m assuming is Knox’s mom stands from the table in the middle of the pizzeria, pulling me into a warm hug. Knox told me dinner would be casual, so I chose to stay dressed in my oversized sweater, leggings, and ankle boots. I love how Knox’s family seems so casual and down to Earth. Going to dinner with my family is like getting ready for the Met Gala. “You’re even more beautiful than Knox described,” she beams, pulling back to look at me. I feel my cheeks blush from her compliment. She’s absolutely stunning, with golden-brown eyes and hazelnut hair flowing past her shoulders.

“Ava, honey, you’re stealing the show,” a handsome older man jokes, stepping beside her to greet us.

Without a doubt, I know he’s Knox’s father. He looks like an older version of Knox - tall and lean, jet black hair with streaks of gray running through it. The only difference is his deep blue eyes and the soft age lines etched into his tan skin. It’s completely surreal to have Knox’s parents standing in front of me, the two people who created my favorite person in the world.

“Hi, Phoebe, I’m Luke.” Knox’s father smiles and shakes my hand. “Clearly, you’ve met my wife, Ava.” He playfully bumps her shoulder with his and plants a sweet kiss on her cheek.

“We’ve been looking forward to meeting the girl who has our son in a trance,” he smirks, darting his eyes to Knox.

“Nice to see you too, *Dad*,” Knox scoffs, wrapping his arm around Luke’s shoulder and bringing him in for a hug.

“Hey, Mom,” Knox adds, turning to Ava and enveloping her in a warm

embrace. “You look beautiful, as always.” *We love a man who’s good to his mom.*

“Hi bud,” she replies, closing her eyes as she squeezes Knox in a bear hug, soaking in the moment. “I hope this place isn’t too casual. Willow says they have the best pizza in NYC.”

Top Slice Pizzeria is actually super cute. The floor is plastered with black and white checkered tile, the walls decorated with old New York street signs, license plates, and customer photos. The mouthwatering smell of fresh dough, mozzarella, and tomato sauce surrounds me, and the big glass windows expose the busy streets of the city to the diners inside.

“This is great,” Knox replies. “Besides, Phoebe and I are pretty worn out from traveling. Something lowkey is perfect.” He pinches his brows together and darts his eyes around the restaurant. “Speaking of Willow, where is she?”

“*Holy. Shit.* Is that my big bro? Finally in New York!” a young woman excitedly yelps as she comes darting out from underneath a neon ‘Restroom’ sign. She’s sprinting towards Knox at full speed with her arms wide open, alerting every patron in the restaurant to her plan.

“Willow, honey, language! We’re in a family restaurant,” Ava scolds quietly.

“Oh, mom,” Willow rolls her eyes. “You’re in New York, you might as well get used to it.” She wraps her arms around Knox’s neck and squeezes the life out of him.

“Breathe... I need to... breathe, Willow,” Knox attempts through strained breaths. He gasps for a dramatic breath when she finally lets go. “Are you excited to see me or secretly trying to kill me?” he jokes, giving Willow a lighthearted shove. “Seriously, I missed you, Lo.”

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little jealous watching their family reunion. *Okay, I’m a lot jealous.* In the span of a few minutes, Knox’s family has made me feel more welcomed than my parents ever have. I can’t help but feel a tinge of sadness that I’ll never have this with my family.

“It’s about damn time you came to visit,” she smirks at Knox before turning her gaze to me. The most welcoming smile stretches across her face.

Willow is strikingly beautiful. She’s the polar opposite of Knox, all sunshine and free spirited. Still, their charming features and lively facial expressions undoubtedly give away that they’re siblings. Her silky black hair flows in waves down her back, and her ocean-blue eyes are so distinct, they’re almost hypnotic. She’s a little taller than me, with flawless olive skin.

Willow could easily be mistaken for a runway model.

“You must be Phoebe!” she beams, extending her hand to me before quickly pulling it back.

“Fuck it, I’m hugging you,” she decides, bringing me in for a hug.

“Hi,” I reply with a soft smile after we pull away. “It’s so nice to meet everyone. You’re all so welcoming.” I shift my eyes to each of them. Ava stares back, her eyes gleaming with happiness as a smile takes over her face. *She looks so happy to see her son happy.* This is what I want one day. I want my children to feel this type of unconditional love.

“Now that we’ve all caused a scene in the middle of the restaurant, let’s order, shall we?” Knox jokes and clears his throat. His cheeks are flushed with embarrassment – he’s so damn cute. Eighty percent of the time, I get Coach Moore, so it’s rare I get to see Knox’s soft side. I love it so much.

After ordering two large pizzas, Knox fills everyone in on how our travels went, including the details of our luxurious hotel.

“Phoebe, tell us a little bit more about you! What keeps you busy in Coral Cove?” Ava asks between bites of garlic bread. I’m not sure how much Knox is comfortable with me sharing, so I decide to keep it simple.

“Getting my degree is really my focus right now. I’m studying at CCU,” I reply with a soft smile.

“That’s great. Getting a good education is very important. What year are you in?” Luke asks, causing a lump to grow in my throat. Knox and I lock eyes for a split second before returning back to the appetizer.

Willow sees the hesitation in my face and quickly diverts the conversation. “What are you studying? That’s what *really* matters, right?” she cuts in, tossing me a discreet wink. *I love her already.*

“Marketing and Communications,” I smile back. “My dream is to work in public relations or start my own marketing firm one day. It’s the crux of success for pretty much every business.”

“No shit!” Willow replies, clearly stunned. “I work for a major marketing firm here in New York! It’s the entire reason I moved here. I would love to show you around the office this weekend, if you’re free.”

“Oh my gosh! I would love that! Just let me know when you’re free, and I’m there,” I accept without hesitation.

“How about in the morning?” Willow asks, before pinching her brows together, deep in thought. “Shit! I can only take one guest into the building at a time, though. Security and all...” She rolls her eyes.

“That’s okay, Lo,” Knox chimes in. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen Mom and Dad. We can grab breakfast while you show Phoebe around the office.” He gives my hand a squeeze under the table.

“Thank you,” I whisper, squeezing his hand back. Knox places a soft kiss to my temple. It feels so foreign, yet amazing to have the freedom to be affectionate in public.

“Yay!” Willow squeals. “I can’t wait! Do you drink coffee?”

“Drink coffee?” I laugh. “I’m pretty sure coffee is the sole reason I’m alive.”

“I feel you girl! How does one survive without it?” she chuckles. “We can stop by my favorite coffee shop on the way.”

“That sounds perfect.” I can’t hide the wide grin stretching across my face. I just met these people, but I already feel so comfortable. As weird as it sounds, they feel like family.

A few minutes later, the waiter arrives with our pizzas, placing the pies in the middle of the table. It’s been hours since Knox and I last ate, causing my stomach to growl at the mouthwatering sight.

“Have you ever had New York pizza before?” Willow asks.

“Nope, this is my first time in New York.”

“Girl, you are in for a treat.” She tears off a slice of pizza, and my eyes track the cheese stringing across the table to her plate as I follow her lead.

“*Oh. My. God.* I think I’ve died and gone to heaven,” I practically moan with a full bite of piping hot pizza in my mouth.

“You think that now, but just wait until have you alone later,” Knox leans close and soft whispers in my ear, close enough for only me to hear. Heat immediately rushes to my core and I squirm.

“Soooo good, right?” Willow hums.

“The best I’ve ever had,” I admit, already reaching for a second slice.

“So, Phoebe,” Ava starts, pausing to swallow and dab her face with a napkin. “Knox never told me how you two met. I’m dying to hear the story!”

Knox and I toss each other a knowing glance, before he intertwines his fingers with mine and takes the lead. “We met on the beach. Phoebe was out watching the sunrise, and I was on my morning run,” Knox lies. *Well, I guess it’s not a complete lie.* That did happen, it’s not just now how we met.

“She looked like a sun-kissed angel, sitting there with the morning rays shining through her hair. It would have been a cardinal sin not to stop and talk to her,” he continues with a smirk, causing me to blush.

“Well damn, who knew my brother was such a romantic,” Willow comments, opening her mouth and making a throw up motion with her finger.

“He gets it from his dad, Lo,” Luke adds, placing a sweet kiss to Ava’s cheek.

It’s so funny to see them joking and bickering. It’s all delivered in such a casual, loving way. Not one moment has felt awkward or tense. I can’t remember the last dinner I had with my parents where the conversation didn’t feel forced or dry. Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever had an easy conversation with them. *I would give all the money in the world to have this.*

After every slice of pizza is gone, Luke insisted on paying for everyone’s meal.

“Dad, you don’t have to do that,” Knox says, placing his hand over Luke’s wallet.

“Are you kidding? I’m buying dinner for my kids, and that includes you, Phoebe.” Luke flashes me a smile while handing his card to the waiter. My heart clenches at the thought that I’m already part of this family.

“Thanks, Dad,” Knox nods, appreciatively patting his dad on the back. “At least let me take everyone out for gelato.”

“You got a deal, son,” Luke responds, extending his hand to Knox’s.

My mind instantly fills with the fantasy of having my own family with Knox one day. I imagine Knox being best friends with our son, just like he is with his dad. I imagine him being protective over our little girl, just like he is with me. I can see him teaching them how to play sports and always being their biggest supporter, whether they choose to play baseball, join the theater, or become an artist. He would teach them the importance of hard work and commitment in everything they do. He would love them with all that he has, because that’s who Knox is.

It’s then I realize I see a life with this man. What I’m feeling for Knox is way beyond lust or a crush.

I’m falling in love with Knox Moore.

TWENTY-THREE

KNOX

I haven't been able to keep my hands off Phoebe all night. Having the freedom to hold her hand in public, kiss her whenever I want, and stare at her for longer than half a second is something I haven't had the sweet liberty of doing back home. Seeing her interact so effortlessly with my family is everything to me. Before dinner, I knew Phoebe was extremely nervous about meeting everyone, so I wasn't sure how comfortable she was going to be tonight. To my surprise, Phoebe was smiling from ear to ear and chatting away, so relaxed and just... herself. She fits right in with the chaos that is the Moore family.

As soon as we made it to the hotel for the night, we didn't hold back. We kissed the entire elevator ride up to our floor, and making multiple stops in the hallway to back each other into the wall. Completely lost in one another, out in the open where anyone could have seen us.

Honestly, I could care less who's watching or what they think. I fucking need her like I need air right now. It's been a week since we've had sex, and I'm dying to be inside her again.

"Clothes off," I command as the hotel door slams behind me. The next few seconds are a whirlwind of flying clothes, tongues, and teeth until we're completely naked. I walk Phoebe towards the bed until the backs of her knees hit the mattress.

"On the bed, baby," I rasp, crawling on top of her as she lays back onto the soft comforter. Rising up on my knees, I take in the length of her body. Her chest is heaving with heavy breaths, and her perfect nipples are hardened to little points. My eyes trail from her toned stomach to her bare pussy and down her smooth legs. My breath hitches when I drag my gaze back to her

face. She's perfect. Her blonde waves are fanned out across the pillow, her cheeks flushed pink with heat, the pupils of her icy-blue eyes dilated in anticipation, her lips swollen from my kiss.

"You're so goddamn beautiful," I exhale, swallowing the lump in my throat. It's almost too much how perfect she looks lying beneath me. How is she mine?

Feeling the need to praise every inch of her, I trail open-mouthed kisses down her stomach until I reach her core. The second my tongue brushes against her swollen clit, she fists her hand in my hair and rolls her hips against my face.

"That's it, baby. Fuck my face," I practically growl between licks.

"Knox... I need you," she moans, causing my dick to twitch in response. I rock my hips against the bed, needing some type of friction. I'm painfully hard right now.

"Not until you come on my tongue," I reply, rubbing her clit in a circle with the pads of my rough fingers. She whimpers when I start slowly licking through her wet folds while I massage her clit at the same time. She tastes so damn good. I can't get enough.

Dipping my tongue, I spear it into her entrance, fervently licking inside her. I rotate between soft, sensual licks and hard, fast strokes. The taste of her is enough to make me come on the spot.

"Knox... Holy shit. Don't stop," she whimpers. A deep groan vibrates from my chest when I feel her starting to tighten and clench around my tongue. She's getting close. Replacing my tongue with two fingers, I start to pump them in and out of her.

"You're so fucking tight," I grit out, watching in amazement as my fingers disappear into her soaked pussy. When I pull them out, they're glistening from her juices. She moans as she watches me bring my fingers to my mouth and suck down every last drop.

If I'm not inside of her in the next minute, I'm going to blow my load all over the damn comforter. Knowing exactly what to do to get her there, I go back to fucking her with my fingers and suck her sensitive clit into my mouth at the same time. Her hips rock faster, and her core squeezes my fingers like a vice.

"Yes," she moans. "Fuck, Knox! I'm coming," she whimpers.

"So fucking sweet. Such a good girl," I groan, continuing to lap at her as she drenches my face.

Her body trembles as I savor every drop of her taste, sucking and licking everything she has to give. The only sounds are her soft moans and my tongue making love to her. After taking my time to lick her clean, I crawl up over her and place the head of my straining cock to her wet entrance.

“I can’t wait another second,” I growl, before rocking my hips forward and sliding home in one thrust. God, she feels so good. I’m fully seated inside her, my heavy balls resting against her ass.

We both gasp at the feeling of being connected in the most intimate way. Phoebe frantically reaches for my neck and pulls me to her, sealing her mouth to mine. I reach beneath her, grabbing her ass in an attempt to pull her closer. I suck on her tongue as I thrust my hips in and out of her wet heat. Nothing has ever felt this good. *Ever.*

“Fuck, you feel too good, baby,” I groan, trying to process why this time feels so drastically different.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. I quickly realize why I can feel every inch of her, why she feels so warm and wet. It’s because I’m completely bare, no barrier of protection between us. I’m fucking her bare right now, and it’s going to kill me to have to stop.

“Phoebe...” I rasp, pinching my brows together.

“No, don’t stop,” she whines, noticing I stopped moving.

“Baby, I need to grab a condom. I’m not going to last much longer.” Her heated eyes quickly shoot to mine once she registers what I’m trying to say.

“I’m on the pill, and I just had my yearly exam. I’m clean,” she whispers.

“So am I,” I quickly respond, my eyes flickering between hers.

“Then don’t you dare stop,” she orders, gripping onto my shoulders and vigorously moving her hips, forcing me to move inside her.

Not breaking eye contact with her, I take my time slowly moving inside her wet heat. This girl is my everything. What we’re doing is so much more than sex. We’re giving our bodies to each other in the most raw, intimate way. Unspoken words fall between our locked gazes, words of admiration, affection, desire, need, commitment and love. We haven’t said it yet, but I know without a doubt we both feel it. It’s not even a question for me. I’m undeniably in love with Phoebe Rhodes. For the first time in my life, I’m making love to someone rather than just fucking for pleasure. I’m using my body to tell her everything my words can’t.

I keep my thrusts slow and steady, wanting this to last as long as possible. All the times we’ve had sex before, it was fast, frantic, hurried. We were

absolutely starving for each other and couldn't slow down if we tried. This time, I want her to know how much she means to me with every stroke. I want her to know how fucking special she is. I want her to forget anything else and understand that in this moment, she's my everything. My sunrise over the ocean.

"Phoebe... you mean so much to me," I rasp, cradling her perfect face between my palms. My balls grow heavy as I start to lose control of my thrusts.

"So do you," she whispers, taking my face in her hands. We're mirroring each other, both of us on the brink of release.

Dipping my head, I crash my mouth to hers and swallow her moans, sucking on her tongue and hitting her deeper with each drive of my hips. Wrapping my arms beneath her thighs, I place her legs over my shoulders and push into her with hungry strokes. Holy hell, I can feel every fucking inch of her at this angle.

"Fuck, harder!" she groans, throwing her head back against the pillow. "I'm there, Knox. I'm right there," she whimpers.

"Look at me, baby," I gasp, tilting her head to face me. "Look at what you do to me. Holy hell... Fuck, Phoebe. I'm going to fill you up. Fuck," I groan, my hips frantically chasing my release.

"Knox! Oh my God, I'm coming..."

When her pussy starts spasming and squeezing around my cock, I groan as my own release rocks through me. My dick twitches as hot cum surges out of me in thick ropes. The feeling of coming inside of her, watching my cum drip out of her entrance, it's all fucking unreal. I pray we never have to use a godforsaken condom again. This is so unbelievably hot.

"Phoebe... this is mine. You are mine," I exhale, placing my sweaty forehead to hers as we try to catch our breath.

"Yours," she whispers back, trailing soft kisses across my brow.

Rain sprinkles the pavement on my walk to the breakfast bistro I'm meeting my parents at. Willow stopped by bright and early, practically jumping in excitement to spend the morning with Phoebe. When Willow asked to take

Phoebe on a tour of her office, I knew that would give me the perfect opportunity to speak with my parents about our relationship. I'm not necessarily worried about them getting upset or uncomfortable, but just in case they do, I don't want Phoebe in the middle of it. After a couple more rounds last night, Phoebe and I laid in bed talking. Thankfully, she understood why I wanted to have this conversation with them alone. I know she's going to be anxious all morning waiting to hear how breakfast went, so I'm glad she's with Willow to help take her mind off it.

I immediately spot my parents sitting next to a window at a small booth that's big enough for just the three of us. I quickly scan the cozy bistro with hardwood floors, couches, and nooks for reading. Looking outside, I see specks of rain littering the big glass windows.

"Morning," I say with a smile, sliding into the booth across from my parents.

"Oh, Knox! Do you not have an umbrella?" Mom asks, concern etched into her face. I run my hands through my damp hair, trying to shake out the raindrops.

"Nah. I'm good, Mom. I can't handle a little bit of rain," I chuckle. "I see you already ordered my favorite." I spy the steaming Americano sitting in front of me.

"With an extra shot of espresso," my dad chimes in, knowing I love the extra kick of caffeine.

"Even better," I reply, lifting my cup to take a sip. I'm going to need it for this conversation.

"It was so lovely meeting Phoebe last night," Mom beams. "Dad and I have just been talking about how perfect you two are together. She is absolutely darling, Knox."

"Thanks, Mom. I'm pretty fond of her too," I reply with a wink.

"She's brave enough to want to spend the morning with Willow. I guess that will be the true test," Dad chuckles.

"Phoebe has no clue what she got herself into," I reply with a laugh as I shake my head. "Anyways, are y'all having anything to eat or just coffee?"

"Oh, you know us," Mom exhales. "We woke up hours ago and ate a couple of croissants we picked up yesterday. No matter how hard we try, we just can't seem to sleep in... Anyways, I think we'll just have coffee. We're just so happy to be spending the morning with you. We've missed you, bud."

Thank God they're not hungry, because I'm definitely not in the mood for

food right now. My stomach is in knots over having this conversation. I just need to get it out.

“I’ve missed you guys, too. It was perfect how everyone’s schedules lined up this weekend,” I nod.

“So, what’s been going on with you, son? How’s coaching been?” Dad asks, sparking up a conversation.

“It’s going well. We’re undefeated in the pre-season so far. The team works hard and has a lot of potential.”

“Well, they do have a pretty damn good coach,” Dad grins, taking a sip of his coffee. “How are you liking the team? Skill is important, but team morale is where it all starts.”

Oh, I like the team. Actually, I really like one of my athletes. I really fucking liked making her come last night.

“Knox?” Dad asks, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Um,” I cough. “Yeah, they’re great. All the girls seem to get along just fine, aside from the occasional college drama.”

“That’s wonderful, bud,” Mom chimes in. “Has Phoebe been able to make it out to any games?”

I almost spit my coffee out at my mom's question. Here goes nothing.

“Um, she...” I choke, trying to relieve the lump in my throat.

“You okay? Hold on, let me ask for a glass of water,” Mom continues and holds a hand up for our waiter.

“No, no, I’m fine. I uh... I’ve been wanting to talk with you guys about something.” Both of their gazes instantly snap to me, taking in my nervous expression.

“What is it, son?” Dad finally asks after we sit in silence for what feels like hours.

I exhale, hanging my head and resting it in my palms.

“Knox, are you okay? What’s wrong? Are you sick?” Mom asks hurriedly, her brows etched together in concern.

“No, it’s not that. I’m perfectly healthy. It’s... it’s about me and Phoebe,” I reply, slowly lifting eyes to meet theirs.

“Oh my...” Mom gasps and slaps her hand over her mouth. “Is she pregnant? Are you going to be a father?” Her eyes start to glass over with tears.

“Are you serious, Mom? No,” I reply without hesitation, running my hands through my hair.

“Knox, I’m your mother. I know you. You run your hands through your hair when something’s wrong. What is going on? You’re worrying me...”

I can’t hold it in any longer. Just say it.

“She’s one of my athletes,” I blurt out, cutting her off mid-sentence. Shocked silence quickly fills the table at my confession.

“Wait...say that again,” Dad responds in disbelief, a confused expression across his face.

“She’s one of the athletes I coach,” I reply in what sounds like a whisper.

“Like a previous athlete?” Dad asks, narrowing his eyes.

“No, she’s on the CCU softball team. I’m her coach,” I clarify, nervously fidgeting with the unused silverware.

“Holy shit...” Dad exhales. “I was not expecting that. I knew she was young, but damn...” He trails off like he’s at a loss for words. “Knox, are you aware of the potential repercussions?”

“Yes, trust me,” I exhale. “We fought it for months. I pushed her away until I couldn’t anymore. I never intended for this to happen, ever. I never understood instant attraction until her. You have to believe me when I tell you that we’ve been fighting this for months. I know it’s wrong. I know I’m putting my career in jeopardy. I don’t need a lecture about that. I’ve already beat myself up enough. I’ve had countless sleepless nights worrying about everything that could go wrong, but I’ve also come to the conclusion I would rather risk my career than lose her. I’m falling in love with her.” My declaration comes out rushed, with the last sentences barely a whisper. It’s the first time I’ve said it out loud.

“Oh, Knox,” my mom replies, grabbing a napkin from the table to dab at her eyes.

“I’ve been so worried you would look at me differently, like I’m some creep for falling for one of my athletes. Fuck, just saying it out loud sounds creepy. That’s why I wanted you to meet her before we had this conversation. It’s so easy to forget she’s nineteen and I’m thirty-one. She’s wise beyond her years, caring, down to earth, and so easy to talk to. She just gets me. I’ve never felt so connected to another person.” I hang my head, not wanting to make eye contact and see the shame I know must be in their eyes.

“Of course we don’t look at you differently, Knox,” Mom replies, resting her hands over mine. “I’ve always said, the heart wants what it wants. You do remember Dad and I are ten years apart, right?”

“Yeah, well, we’ve got y’all beat by a couple years,” I scoff.

“Son... I can’t lie and say this isn’t a shock, because it is,” Dad deeply exhales. “But I’m not upset with you. How can I be when I’ve never seen you happier? You look at her like she’s the center of your universe. I could never be mad about my son finding his person.” He gives me a soft smile that I’m instantly thankful for.

“Thanks, Dad,” I whisper, lifting my head up. I see concern in their eyes, but also love and understanding.

“Do you have a plan? I don’t want to burst your bubble, but this can’t go on until she graduates. Someone is bound to find out,” Dad asks, his concern evident.

I nod. “Yeah. I’m going to start applying to coaching jobs in the area. Despite our situation, CCU is a great school. I would never want to take that away from Phoebe. Plus, I only took this job for Dan. I couldn’t say no when he offered.”

“Have you told him?” Dad questions.

I shake my head, the thought making my stomach clench. “No. I will eventually, but not yet. It was hard enough mustering the courage to tell you. I have to say, it feels good to finally get it off my chest.”

“You need to prepare yourself for his response. I have a feeling he won’t take it well at first. He’ll come around, though,” Dad continues.

“I know he will,” I reply, nodding my head.

“Does Willow know?” Mom asks.

“Yeah, she does. I told her about how I felt about Phoebe months ago, before anything got serious between us.”

“Months ago? Knox!” Mom replies in shock. “It hurts to know you felt you couldn’t come to me with this too. When have I ever not supported you?”

“I called Willow in the hopes she’d convince me to stay away. I would have called you, but we all know you’re a hopeless romantic,” I laugh. “You probably weren’t the best person for that conversation.”

“He has a point, honey,” my dad chuckles.

My mother looks at me pointedly, before dropping what I consider to be an uncomfortable truth bomb. “Have you told her you love her yet?”

She purses her lips and crosses her arms when I shake my head. “Knox Moore. You need to tell her how you feel while you can. She clearly makes you happier than ever, and she fits right in with the family. I can tell she loves you by the way she looks at you.”

“Oh. Can you now, Cupid?” I laugh. “I’m glad you’ve confessed our love

for us, Mom. It's greatly appreciated," I joke.

"But you do, right? Love her?" she prods.

"Yeah, I do. So much," I reply without hesitation.

"Then what are you waiting for? Tell her!" she practically yells, causing my dad to roll his eyes and wrap his arm around her shoulder, giving her a soft kiss on the forehead.

"You have a good heart, honey," he laughs.

"I don't understand why you're laughing," she responds with a scoff and a smile.

TWENTY-FOUR
PHOEBE

New York was an absolute dream. I wish we were there for longer than just a few days, but I'm thankful for the short time we did have. I spent half the day with Willow yesterday, stopping by her favorite coffee shop, touring her office, and getting lunch at a sushi bar after. Aside from her being Knox's sister, I could totally see myself being best friends with her. She's just so fun, easy going, and enjoyable to be around. I love her eccentric and colorful view on life.

Later that day, Knox filled me in on how the conversation went with his parents. I could instantly tell that his mood seemed ten times lighter, like a weight had been lifted off his chest. I wanted to give Knox the space to speak with his parents alone, but I also just had this gut feeling they would handle it well. Just from the short time I spent with Knox's family, I could tell they were the furthest thing from judgmental people.

After Willow and I had lunch, we met up with Knox and his parents. We spent the remainder of the day strolling through Times Square, Central Park, and touring the Empire State Building. Being in New York for only two days made me realize how much we didn't get to see or do while we were there. The options are literally endless. In bed last night, Knox promised we would come back one day, just him and I. Just the thought of having such a magical city all to ourselves made butterflies flutter in my stomach.

Everyone decided on a quick breakfast together before we had to part ways. No one had brought up Knox being my coach until breakfast this morning. I kept waiting for someone to address it because it felt like a subject we were still carefully skating around. Thankfully, Luke finally addressed the elephant in the room with his humor and quick wit.

“So, you gonna take it easy on Phoebe at practice tomorrow?” Luke asked Knox in between bites of his croissant. Silence took over the table before we all burst out in laughter. It felt like the last wall finally came down, filling the awkward spaces with love, laughter, acceptance, and family. *For the first time in forever, I felt like I was part of a family.*

“You ready, baby?” Knox asks, distracting me from my thoughts as we pull up to the side of my apartment building.

“No,” I groan, pushing out my bottom lip in a pout.

Knox leans over, dipping his head and sucking my bottom lip into his mouth before parting my lips with his tongue. He kisses me quick, but I’m still breathless.

“This weekend was amazing,” he whispers, pressing his forehead to mine.

“It really was. Thank you again for asking me to come,” I reply, nuzzling my nose against his. We sit there in silence, enjoying the closeness before we have to go back to reality, before I go back to acting like he’s nothing but my coach. *Like he’s not everything to me.*

“What are your plans for next weekend? Isn’t it fall break?” he asks as he brushes his thumbs across my temples.

Fall Break at CCU is usually the first week of November. Classes are canceled on Friday, meaning we have a 3-day weekend.

“Well, I’m definitely *not* going home to hang out with my parents,” I scoff. “Maisie’s going home to visit her family, so I’ll probably just enjoy the peace and quiet. What about you?”

“The owner of my townhome is having new flooring put in next weekend, so I don’t know. I was maybe going to get a hotel or something,” he shrugs.

“Stay with me,” I blurt out.

“In your apartment? I don’t think that’s a good idea, Phoebe,” he quickly replies, shaking his head.

“Why? Maisie won’t be there and almost everyone goes home for break. Campus is going to be a ghost town. I’ll sneak you in early in the morning while everyone’s asleep. We can do delivery orders, or I can go out for food or grocery runs if we need anything. Don’t waste money on a hotel, just stay with me. Please,” I beg, clasping my hands together and doing my best attempt at puppy dog eyes.

“Phoebe...” He deeply exhales, running his hands through his hair.

“Please, *babe*,” I add, using the term of endearment I know he loves. His eyes dart back and forth between mine in thought before he finally responds.

“Okay,” he whispers, flashing me the most beautiful smile.

“Yes!” I beam as I lean across the console, throwing my arms around his neck in a tight hug. “Only five days, then. Five days until I have you all to myself again.” I pull back to stare into his golden eyes.

“Just five more days, Bee,” he says with a soft smile, placing one last kiss to my lips.

Minutes later, I’m dragging my suitcase up two flights of stairs until I’m standing outside my apartment door. Turning the key in the lock, the door creaks open as I roll my suitcase inside, huffing and puffing the entire time.

“God, that was bitch,” I mutter to myself, forcefully shutting the door and blowing strands of hair out of my face.

My steps come to a screeching halt when I turn towards my room and see Maisie sitting at the dining table, staring down at her clasped hands. She hasn’t spoken a word or even looked at me, which is so unlike her. *Something’s seriously wrong.*

“Maisie? Are you okay?” I ask worriedly, slowly walking towards her.

Before I make it, she lifts her eyes to meet mine. My heart drops when I see so many emotions etched across her face, ones I’ve never seen from her before. It’s a mixture of anger, betrayal, and confusion all tied into one terrifying stare.

“How was your weekend with Colin?” she finally speaks, flat and dry.

“It was fun. Thanks for asking,” I reply with a soft smile.

“You’re such a fucking liar,” she scoffs.

“Excuse me?” I say in shock, my heart beating a mile a minute. *Fuck.*

“You know, I had a feeling you were banging our coach by the way you both eye fuck each other at practice. You’re not very discreet, by the way,” she says, narrowing her eyes to little slits. “When I ran into Colin at Sunset Café this morning and asked where you were, his answer further confirmed my theory.”

“Maisie... Please, let me explain,” I frantically respond, my whole body shaking.

“You really should have done your research before you used Colin to lie to me. Did you know he had a date this morning? That’s why he came back early today. He said he’s barely spoken to you since we went to Island Fever. That means you’ve been straight up lying to me for weeks,” she spits out, her breathing getting faster.

I feel all the color draining from my face. “Maisie... What did you say to

Colin?”

“Are you asking if I told him you lied and said you were with him all weekend?” she replies with a smug smile, arching her brows and resting her chin on her hand.

“You know that’s what I’m asking,” I quickly reply. I’m not in the mood for trivia right now.

“No, I didn't, but only because Colin is a good guy and the way you’ve been using him is fucking shitty. For all he knows, you were busy this morning, and I couldn't get a hold of you,” she exhales, crossing her arms over her chest.

I sigh a breath of relief at her response. *Thank God she didn't say anything to Colin.* I can’t imagine how that would make him feel.

“I was walking back from the gym a few minutes ago when I saw *Coach Moore* helping you gather your luggage from the back of his Jeep. That’s when I knew with one hundred percent certainly that you’re fucking our coach,” she deadpans in a controlled tone that’s so still, it’s almost alarming.

“Maisie, there’s so much you don’t know. I know how it looks, but please, just let me explain,” I plead as my eyes start to well with unshed tears.

“Phoebe, I don’t think you get it,” she scoffs. “I could honestly care less who you decide to fuck. If you would have told me this weeks ago, I would have laughed, cried, freaked out, and swooned with you as you shared all the dirty details. What pisses me off is that you’ve been lying to me this entire time. You made me look like a damn fool, covering for your ass and asking Colin where and how you are every time I see him. You’ve been so fucking distant for the past month. I’ve barely seen you. Now, I know why.” She shakes her head.

“This isn’t just about me, and you know it,” I reply, letting a lone tear slide down my cheek. “This is about Knox and his privacy too. You’re one of his athletes, Maisie. How can you not understand why I would hide this from you?”

“*You* have the nerve to inform me I’m one of his athletes?” She arches her brows and laughs darkly. “Rain check - so are you, Phoebe. Not only are you his athlete, but you’re also fucking him in your free time. So no, I don’t understand why you couldn't have told me. The only thing that makes sense in my mind is that you just don’t trust me.”

“It all happened so fast,” I rush out. “After my birthday weekend, I promised myself it would never happen again. Then the night of the athletic

banquet, everything changed.”

“Your birthday weekend? So that’s who you disappeared with that night. You were with him. Did you also lie and say you were with Colin when you were late to breakfast last weekend?”

“Yes,” I exhale, my voice coming out shaky and weak.

“You’re unbelievable,” she scoffs, shaking her head in disbelief. “How can you lie to someone you call a friend so easily? Not just once, but over and over again.”

“Maisie, please...” I plead, walking towards her to take a seat at the table. Before I have a chance to sit down, she’s standing up and backing away.

“I have nothing else to say to you,” she whispers as her eyes begin to glass over.

“Maisie...” I follow her as she turns to walk away.

“No. Do *not* take another step,” she warns, spinning on her heels to face me. “At this point, we’re just roommates. I can’t be friends with someone I don’t trust,” she rasps, clearly trying hard to hold back her tears.

“I understand...” I whisper. A whisper is all I can manage right now.

What am I supposed to say to make this better? She has every right to feel betrayed. I’ve lied to her multiple times, lied to her while I’ve been having sex with our coach. *Admitting it to myself makes it sound so much worse.* The walls feel like they’re closing in around me. My chest feels like it’s being weighed down by bricks, making it hard to breathe.

“Can you just answer me one thing? Please answer me honestly, Maisie. This could affect Knox’s livelihood,” I ask through shaky breaths.

“That’s rich. *You* asking *me* to be honest,” she cuts me off in a clipped tone. “I already know what you’re going to ask, and the answer is no. I’m not going to snitch, because I’m not a vindictive person. I don’t find satisfaction in hurting people I care about. So don’t worry, your *secret* is safe with me.” She turns her shoulders to walk away but halts her steps before quickly spinning back around to face me, her brows etched together in pain.

“You know what hurts the most? The fact you would even think to ask me that question. That you think I’m the type of person who would go and expose such a damaging, life changing secret. I’m starting to think you never knew me at all, Phoebe,” she croaks, finally allowing a tear to escape from her emerald eyes.

“Maisie, I’m so sorry,” I reply as uncontrollable tears start to stream down my face.

In just a few short months, Maisie became my person. My best friend.
Now I'm losing her.

“Me too,” she whispers, walking to her room and shutting the door behind her. *Shutting me out.*

TWENTY-FIVE
PHOEBE

The bright field lights bounce off my shiny helmet as I stand in the batter's box and prepare for the next pitch. I'm down in the count with two strikes and one ball. Whatever I do, I cannot strike out. Bases are loaded, and we're down by one run in the last inning. Being the home team, we have the last chance to bat. All I need to do is get a decent hit and bring in two runs. Once again, the fate of the game literally lies in my hands.

This is our last preseason game, and if we win, we'll be undefeated. We don't have many fans in the stands tonight, being that it's a Wednesday and everyone's preparing to leave for fall break. As much as I love hearing the cheer of the crowd, there's something special about the silence: the sound of cleats scraping against the dirt, the crunch of sunflower seeds, hands rattling against the dugout, and teammates talking amongst each other.

I take a deep breath as I shuffle my feet in the dirt and angle myself towards the pitcher. We're facing one of the best pitchers in our conference, hence the reason why I just swung and missed twice. She has one of the best curveballs I've ever seen.

"Phoebe!" Knox's deep voice calls out from third base, immediately grabbing my attention. Once my eyes lock with his, he gives me a soft smile and nods his head. It's his way of comforting me, telling me that he knows I can do this.

"You got this, Bee," he mouths, only for me to see. He flashes me a quick wink before clapping his hands together and turning his gaze back to the pitcher.

It's moments like this that make me fall even harder for him. Knox knows confidence isn't my strongest attribute, and he's always finding ways to

remind me I'm enough. Gone are the days of seeking out my parents' approval in the stands, or anyone else's for that matter. I've learned I don't need another person's praise to be proud of what I've accomplished. Even if I were to strike out, Knox would never allow me to walk off the field hanging my head. He would go out of his way to remind me of a great play I made or an achievement I should be proud of. Knox may be a hardass, but he knows the difference between uplifting his athletes and making them feel worthless. As sick and twisted as it may sound, I couldn't be more thankful to have the opportunity to be coached by him.

"You gonna get ready for the pitch or just eye fuck your coach?" the catcher says with a smirk on her face.

Shit. Am I being that obvious?

"Thanks for the reminder," I quip, rolling my eyes at her comment and adjusting my gaze back to the pitcher's mound.

"A reminder of what?" she scoffs.

"That we're about to kick y'all's ass," I reply with a devious smirk.

Not even a second later, the pitcher is winding up and throwing a wicked curveball my way. Of course, she would throw another curveball. She thought she could get me a third time, but she doesn't know that I'm in the top of the lineup because I'm one of the most observant batters on the team. It's her mistake to give me a third chance to hit the same pitch I just saw twice before. As soon as I connect, I hear a crack of the bat and send a line drive straight to right field.

"That a girl!" Knox shouts, pumping a fist into the air.

I shoot him a swift wink as I round first base and make my way to second. My eyes dart to the outfield when I notice the right fielder missed the catch, allowing two of my teammates to make it to home plate.

"Ball Game! CCU Wins," the umpire yells, letting us know we've won the game, securing an undefeated preseason.

Before I have a chance to blink, Knox is running towards me and wrapping me in a strong hug. My helmet flies off from the combination of running like my life depends on it and Knox's forceful hug. God, it feels so good to be wrapped in his arms.

Before the team can make it to me, Knox tangles his hands in my sweaty hair and pulls my head to his broad chest. I can hear the heavy beats of his heart thumping through his thin, cotton t-shirt.

"I'm so fucking proud of you, baby. That was amazing," he whispers in

my ear, sending shivers down my spine as he massages the back of my head with his strong fingers.

Before I have a chance to respond or even make eye contact with him, the team is surrounding me, bringing Knox and I to the ground in a dog pile. Once we hit the dirt, I'm laying beneath Knox as the team engulfs us in hoots and hollers.

"Thank you," I whisper in his ear, placing a soft kiss to his cheek that's turned away from the team. I know it's risky, but I just need to feel his skin on my lips.

"We'll celebrate this weekend," he replies in a tone so low and gravely, even I could barely hear him. Thank God I wore my thickest sports bra, because I can feel my nipples hardening under him.

After we get to our feet and shake hands with the opposing team, I head towards the dugout to gather my equipment. Before I step inside, I come face to face with Maisie. She already has her bag slung over her shoulder - it's clear she's trying to get off the field as soon as possible.

"Good game," she clips in a dry tone without making eye contact. Her shoulder bumps against mine as she walks past me to quickly exit the field.

"What was that about?" Knox asks, a confused expression etched across his beautiful face.

"I'm sure it's nothing," I lie. "She probably just had a bad day."

"Hmm." He places his hands on his hips and pinches his brows together in thought. "Something's wrong. Maisie's normally the most chipper out of all of you. Take her out for dinner or something, okay?"

"Okay," I nod and whisper.

I suddenly feel sick to my stomach for lying to the two people I care most about in this world.

TWENTY-SIX

PHOEBE

The past five days have been hell. I feel like it's been an eternity since New York as I watch the hours pass by painfully slowly. The only thing I'm looking forward to is getting to spend time with Knox today.

Other than at practice and the game, we've barely seen or spoken to each other aside from a few texts due to work and school being so hectic. To make matters worse, Maisie's been treating me like I don't exist. She hasn't muttered a word to me since the game. When I'm in the apartment, she's either gone or holed up in her room.

After she exposed my lies and shut her door in my face, I went to my room and curled up in a ball on my bed. I passed out wearing my clothes from the airport as my steady tears lulled me to sleep. Losing Maisie is the first time I've ever felt true loss. I've obviously never had a close relationship with my parents, and thankfully, I haven't had to experience losing a close friend or family member.

Despite Maisie's outburst, she really is a good friend who would do just about anything for the people in her circle. I think that's why she felt so burned and betrayed. She felt like I questioned her trust as a friend. When you're a loyal person to your core, someone you love questioning your trust is a shot to the gut. I wish she could see that was never my intention. If it were any other man, I would have told her in a heartbeat. The fact that it's Knox, our coach, makes the situation so much more complicated. Telling Maisie needed to be a decision I discussed with Knox first. I needed to make sure he was aware that another person on the team knew about us. How blindsided would he have been if he knew I told Maisie behind his back? My education or position on the team could be on the line, but his entire fucking

career could be over if our relationship is exposed. I wish Maisie could understand that's the reason I didn't tell her.

I've been struggling, trying to decide if I should tell Knox. Actually, I *know* I should tell him, but I'm so scared of losing him again. Knox has shut me out so many times before, and I can't help but fear that he would try to push me away again. *God, I hate this entire situation.* I hate having to sneak around and lie to the people I care about. It hurts so much to lose Maisie's friendship, and I don't think I could bear losing Knox too.

As much as I hate to admit it, I feel like Maisie finding out was a step in the wrong direction for Knox and me. It made me realize that we're going about our days like everything is fine when it's not. We're walking on a tightrope that could snap beneath us any second. What is our plan if someone on the CCU athletic board finds out? We haven't talked about a backup plan or what our mutual stories would be. Every time I ask Knox if we can discuss our plan, he says it's something we'll work out with time. Well, time isn't in our favor, and May is going to be here before we know it. I don't know if Knox has started applying for jobs or what his plan is, because he hasn't talked to me about it. I don't want to risk hurting or losing people close to me if Knox isn't serious about making this work. After my fallout with Maisie, I made the decision to bring it up to Knox this weekend. I'm not giving him the option to avoid it anymore. We have to figure this out or we're going to do nothing but hurt ourselves and everyone in our path.

"Mmm, I've missed this," Knox groans as I straddle him on my couch, completely naked and trying to catch our breaths from our earth-shattering orgasms. His dick is still hard inside me, causing the most delicious friction. I roll my hips as I feel his release leaking from my entrance and dripping down my thighs. *I can't get enough of this man.* We haven't used a condom since New York, and I'm convinced I'll never get used to the feeling of him coming inside of me. It's like he's claiming me, marking me as his each time.

"Me too," I rasp, my voice gravelly from screaming. I dip my head down to kiss him, pulling his bottom lip between my teeth.

Knox got to my apartment early this morning with an iced hazelnut truffle

latte in hand, my favorite coffee order from Sunset Café. After we drank our coffee together, we attempted to watch a movie, which was interrupted by Knox's hands fervently stroking my stomach, chest, legs, pretty much anywhere he could reach. I'm definitely not complaining, because his seductive strokes turned into the hottest couch sex of my life.

Right before we were interrupted by sex, Knox placed a delivery order for pizza, because my stomach had been growling since he arrived. I've barely had an appetite, since I've been so stressed over everything that happened with Maisie. I wish I was someone who could eat when I'm stressed or anxious, but that's never been me. Food is the last thing I can think about when my stomach is knotted with nerves.

We groan in unison as I slowly pull myself off Knox's softening cock. His heated eyes track the separation between us, already looking like he's ready for round two. Before I have a chance to stand, Knox pulls me against his hard chest and wraps us in a blanket that was hanging over the back of the couch, cocooning us in warmth.

"Can we just stay naked all weekend?" he whispers, trailing soft kisses down my neck.

"It depends," I reply with a laugh.

"On what?"

"On if we're able to have a serious conversation without clothes on," I respond, arching a brow.

"We're having a conversation now, aren't we?" he asks, brushing his fingers up and down the length of my naked back.

"I said a *serious* conversation," I clarify. "The one I've been asking you to have for weeks. Knox, we have to talk about our plan. I want to keep acting like our relationship is perfectly normal just as much as you do, but May is going to be here in the blink of an eye. We haven't even discussed what we would say if someone found out before then. I'm just starting to get worried, and..."

"I know..." He cuts me off with a kiss. "I promise, we'll talk about it this weekend."

I roll my eyes at his diversion. "The weekend is here, Knox. Why don't we start now?"

"The pizza's going to be delivered any minute now," he halts.

"And? We can start the conversation now and continue it after the pizza's delivered. This is exactly my point, Knox. You're always trying to put it off,"

I groan with frustration.

“Fuck... I know, Phoebe,” he responds, running his hands through his hair. “I’ve just been enjoying getting to be with you and not having to think about the damn consequences for once. It was so exhausting fighting this for months, and I’m just not ready to go back to reality.” He lets out a sharp exhale at the idea.

“Well, I hate to break it to you, but there are *lots* of consequences to what we’re doing. Reality is going to bite us in the ass if we don’t start figuring shit out,” I snap. *Great, a fight.*

“You think I don’t know that? Trust me, I’ve been over the consequences a million times in my head.”

“You’re not acting like you do. I’ve tried to have this conversation with you so many times,” I snap back.

“Phoebe, I’m trying my best, okay? I’m finally getting comfortable with the idea of dating my athlete. This is a position I never in a million years thought I’d be in. I’m so fucking happy I met you, but it’s going to take me time to adjust, Bee. Please try to understand that.” He runs his hands through his hair and he sighs, waiting for my response.

“I know. I’m just saying, we have to talk about it. We can’t keep putting it off.”

“I know, baby,” he exhales, pushing a fallen strand of hair behind my ear. “How about this. Let’s eat, take a shower, and then we’ll do nothing but talk. I promise nothing physical until we’ve had a conversation.”

“Then we better get to talking because I’m not waiting until tonight to have you inside of me again,” I smirk, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“Such a dirty girl,” he growls, palming my ass cheeks with his rough hands.

Knock, knock, knock.

I snap my head towards the front door as three firm thuds sound through the living room. I stumble off Knox’s naked body, pulling on my discarded sweatpants from the floor and his extra-large t-shirt.

“Shit, pizza’s here. Put these on,” I rush out, tossing Knox his boxers.

“Worried someone might like what they see?” he smirks.

“Knox, just put them on.” I roll my eyes at him before swiftly making my way towards the front door.

Maisie’s out of town and I’m definitely not expecting anyone, so I don’t even think to check the peephole before I turn the knob and swing the door

wide. I just assume it's our delivery.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

No, no, no, no.

What is he doing here?

Oh my God. Please no.

Two dark blue eyes I know all too well are staring back at me. His 6'2 frame goes rigid as he surveys my apartment and sees Knox standing in my living room in nothing but boxers. His dark blonde hair is shorter than the last time I saw him, making him look a little younger. I notice his hand clenched tight around a vase of fresh flowers.

Standing on the other side of the door staring back at me is my Uncle Corbin.

"Uh... Did I interrupt something?" he asks, darting his eyes back and forth between Knox and I.

Knox is frozen in place, having no idea who Corbin is. However, we do look alike, with our blonde hair and blue eyes, so I'm sure Knox is slowly catching on to the family resemblance.

"I... I wasn't expecting you. What are you doing here, Corbin?" I ask in a shocked tone. I'm sure my question comes off as rude, but who just shows up at someone's doorstep unannounced?

"When your parents told me you weren't coming home for break, I figured I'd surprise you. I thought it would be fun for you to show me around Coral Cove. It's been months since I've seen my only niece."

"Corbin... it's a six-hour drive. You drove all the way here to surprise me?" I whisper. I'm in complete shock this is happening right now.

"Yeah, I thought it would be good for you to see family, especially after I heard how the athletic banquet went..." he trails off. "I'm so sorry, Pheebs. Next year, I'm coming to Family Weekend instead of your parents. I hope you know I told your dad exactly how I felt about what they did."

"Oh... Uh... It's nice that you're here, but can I at least show my guest out?" I reply, stepping to the side to cover the crack of the door with my body. *I just need to get Knox out of here.*

"Is that your boyfriend or something?" he asks, looking over my shoulder. "Why doesn't he hang out with us today? I'd love to meet him." He nods his head towards Knox.

"He's busy today. He was just getting ready to leave," I lie.

"Wait..." Corbin says as he narrows his eyes, inching the door open with

his muscular arm. “How do I know you?” he asks, confusion etched across his face as he stares at Knox.

Knox looks like a deer in headlights. I can see his pulse hammering in his neck.

“You... I swear to God you look exactly like someone I saw in an article this morning,” Corbin adds, his brows etched together in thought. He quickly pulls his phone from his pocket and opens up his browser history. I can see him loading the CCU Athletics news page.

“Corbin, can we do this later?” I ask, trying to reach for his phone. He quickly jerks his arm away and clicks on the headlining article. I don’t need to read the title to know what it says, because I read it this morning.

CCU Softball Wins Fourth and Final Preseason Game: Interview with Coach Moore Discussing the Team’s Undefeated Record

As soon as the article loads, an image of Knox, front and center, floods the screen.

“What the hell is this?” Corbin demands as he slowly faces his phone towards me.

“Corbin, please... let me explain,” I reply, my voice coming out as a whisper.

“Are you her *fucking coach?*” he asks through clenched teeth, shooting daggers at Knox.

“Um...” Knox replies, staring down at his boxers. “Can you let me get dressed first before we have this conversation?”

“You sick motherfucker,” Corbin seethes, stalking towards Knox and pointing a finger in his face. “She’s fucking nineteen! You’re standing here in nothing but your underwear in my niece’s apartment who, let me remind you, is a teenager! I’m going to fucking end you,” he grits out, balling his fists at his sides.

“It’s not what you think, man...” Knox calmly replies, lifting a hand to put some space between them. In the blink of an eye, Corbin grabs Knox’s arm, fisting his hand around Knox’s wrist. Knox flexes his jaw as his eyes track Corbin’s hand. I’ve seen this look in Knox’s eyes before, and it’s clear he’s started to get fucking pissed.

“Corbin, stop!” I yell, trying to get between the two of them.

Before I have a chance to process what’s happening, I hear a crack and see Corbin’s fist connect with Knox’s face. Blood immediately starts to trickle down from Knox’s nose, and I notice his chest heaving with heavy

breaths, like he's trying so hard to keep his shit together.

Fuck this. I will not have Knox and Corbin duking it out in my apartment. I place my hands on Corbin's chest and use all my strength to shove him away, my efforts only creating a few feet of space between him and Knox.

"Phoebe... If he touches me again, I *will* defend myself," Knox warns in a hushed, but lethal tone.

"Corbin, step away. Knox will leave, and you and I can talk about this. You need to calm the hell down," I say through shaky breaths, holding out my arm in front of his chest as he tries to stalk towards Knox again.

I don't think Corbin hears a word I'm saying. I see nothing but pure rage in his eyes. His pupils are fully dilated, and his chest is heaving with uncontrollable breaths. Corbin's hand shoots to my forearm, gripping me tightly before forcefully shoving me away. I don't even think he registers what he did, because his eyes are laser focused on Knox.

Knox's eyes immediately dart to where I'm holding my arm. His gaze turns deadly when he notices a red mark forming on my forearm. He slowly turns his head, staring at Corbin with nothing short of rage. If I was Corbin, I would be shitting myself from his stare alone. I've seen Knox pissed before, but right now, he looks murderous. *He's done holding himself back.*

"Knox, don't!" I scream as Knox reaches for the collar of Corbin's shirt, fisting the material in his hands.

"Don't you *ever* fucking lay a hand on her again," he seethes through clenched teeth, tightening his grip on Corbin's shirt before shoving him back with all his strength. Corbin goes flying into the flat screen TV, and I hear a loud crash as hundreds of little shards of glass go flying everywhere.

"Oh my God!" I scream in panic as hot tears stream down my face. My eyes fall to Corbin laying on the floor as blood drips down his arms from the glass penetrating his skin. Thankfully, it's not an excessive amount, but it's still alarming to see. My first thought is absolute shock. My second thought is how painful it's going to be for him to remove the small pieces littering his arms.

"What the fuck, Knox? Jesus Christ, Corbin's my uncle!" I yell, stepping to kneel beside Corbin. I can barely see through the uncontrollable tears filling my vision. *I have no clue how we could ever come back from this.*

"I don't give shit who he is! He laid his hands on you," he replies without hesitation, motioning his hand toward my already bruising arm.

"You need to leave," I reply through clenched teeth.

“I’m not leaving, Phoebe,” Knox replies, shaking his head.

“Knox, don’t make this difficult,” I grit out. “You need to give us some space.”

“Don’t bother,” Corbin chimes in, standing up and wiping little shards of glass from his clothes. “I’m leaving.” He straightens his back and walks toward the front door.

“Corbin, what do you mean you’re leaving? Look at you. You’re bleeding!” I respond in a panic, trailing behind him all the way to the door.

“It’s just a few cuts, Phoebe. I’ll survive,” he replies quietly, turning his broad shoulders to face me. His eyes are glassy and red-rimmed, like he’s trying so hard to hold back his own tears. I instantly see the regret in his eyes over what just happened.

“Please stay,” I whisper as hot, wet tears stream down my cheeks.

“What are you doing, Phoebe?” he scoffs, shaking his head. “You have your whole life ahead of you. I know you don’t understand this right now, but you’re just a kid. Do you even realize how fucked up this is?” he asks as he creaks open the door, the sun highlighting the concern etched into every line of his face.

“We didn’t plan for this to happen, Corbin. You have to believe me,” I reply, my voice barely audible.

“You were right. I should have called before I just showed up. You two enjoy the rest of your weekend.” He flashes me a disappointed look and slams the door behind him, leaving me absolutely broken.

I stand still as a statue for minutes, just staring at the door before I hear another knock coming from the door. This one is much softer than the knocks when Corbin first arrived. Still - I have a small sliver of hope that it’s him. That he’s calmed down, maybe changed his mind and wants to talk.

When I open the door, my heart drops as I realize it’s just our pizza being delivered. The young man wearing a Domino’s hat takes in the scene before him. His eyes widen and his mouth hangs open at the chaos he just walked into. The television is barely attached to the wall, small shards of glass scattered across everything. Knox is still frozen in the living room with blood dripping from his nose. I can only imagine what this looks like to a stranger as I stand here with bloodshot eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

“Is... is everything okay, miss?” he asks, flickering his eyes back and forth between me and Knox.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” I quickly reply, wiping my tears with the back of my

hand and grabbing cash from the counter for a tip.

“Are you sure?” he whispers quietly, only for me to hear.

“Thank you for your concern, but yes. Have a good day,” I reply, before grabbing the box and shutting the door in his face. I know he’s just concerned and trying to be nice, but I have nothing else to give right now. I’m completely exhausted and embarrassed over what just happened. A few seconds pass before I feel Knox’s body heat behind me.

“Phoebe...” he whispers.

“Don’t,” I reply, refusing to face him.

“Phoebe, I’m so sorry. When he touched you like that, I saw red. I fucking lost it,” Knox croaks, breaking our silence.

I keep my body angled towards the door, not wanting to face the cold, hard truth of our reality.

“Phoebe, talk to me,” he rasps.

“Knox...” I hesitantly turn my shoulders to look him in the eyes. He’s fully clothed now, wearing the jeans and hoodie he was dressed in when he arrived. He must have slipped them on when my back was turned.

“What the hell are we doing?” I whisper. “How did we ever think this could work?”

“Bee. Don’t do this,” he practically cries, shaking his head and gently cupping my face in his hands. “Don’t you dare push me away.” His eyes gloss over with emotion.

“Knox...I’m beginning to think you were right to push *me* away. You were doing the right thing. I’m sorry I fought you so hard,” I hiccup as my breath catches in my throat.

He shakes his head. “Phoebe, you’re wrong. Pushing you away was the worst thing I ever did. I was fucking miserable without you.”

“I’ve already lost Maisie, and now I’ve lost Corbin, my only family member who gives a shit about me,” I whisper, feeling a tear slide down my face.

“What are you talking about?” he asks, his eyes searching mine for an answer.

“Maisie knows, Knox,” I exhale. “She saw me getting out of your Jeep last weekend. She knows everything. I’ve been sick over not telling you, because I’m so afraid to lose you again. I’m starting to realize that we’re fighting a battle we never had a chance at winning,” I basically sob, hanging my head.

“Has she told anyone?” he quickly asks.

“No. She said she wouldn't, and I believe her. Regardless, people are going to find out. Look at what happened today,” I scoff. “We can't keep doing this, Knox,” I breathe out, my voice cracking with each word.

“We said we're going to figure this out, Phoebe. Not even thirty minutes ago, we were talking about coming up with a plan. I spent hours this week submitting applications for coaching jobs. I'm so fucking serious about making this work. If I get offered a job before May, I'll take it without hesitation. Please, Bee, don't do this. Don't let this ruin everything,” Knox pleads.

“What if you don't find another job, Knox? What happens then? What if your only option is a job hours away, and we have to do long distance for four years? What if we're found out before you leave CCU? It would make headlines, and your coaching career would be over, done for. The more I think about, the more fucked up this entire situation is. As much as we don't want to admit it, I think we both know this has to end,” I whisper.

“Goddammit, Phoebe. Please don't do this,” Knox says in panic, frantically running his hands through his hair. “I'm going to find another coaching job. We'll play it off like we started dating after I left CCU. It's all going to work out. I'm begging you, please don't push me away,” he adds, shaking his head.

“I don't think I have a choice,” I sob. “Look at us; look at what our relationship has done.” I shift my eyes to the living room that looks like a crime scene.

“Phoebe, don't...”

“Knox, this ends now. I'm sorry, but it's over,” I rasp, barely able to see Knox's beautiful face through the tears welling in my eyes.

“Why are you doing this?” His voice breaks as he brushes his thumbs back and forth across my damp cheeks.

“Remember that day we were almost caught in your office? That was strike one for us, you even said it yourself. Maisie finding out was strike two, and today was strike three. You know as well as I do that it's over after three strikes. If you try to fight it, you risk being thrown out. That's a risk we can no longer take. We're ruled out, Knox. This can't go on any longer,” I choke out, softly running my hands through his raven hair for the last time.

“Phoebe... I... I lov-”

I immediately stop him, knowing exactly what he's going to say and that

I'll give in if I let him say it.

"Knox, don't. You're making this harder than it has to be. Please respect what I want and *leave*," I painfully say, putting extra emphasis on the last word.

"Is that really what you want, Bee?" he asks, his voice laced with emotion.

Fuck, I'm about to break. I'm about to give in. I can't let it happen. I have to be strong.

"Yes, and I'm not going to ask you again. Please, just get the fuck out," I command, trying everything in my power to make him leave before I give in and wrap him in my arms. *This is by far the hardest thing I've ever had to do.*

He sucks in a deep breath and nods his head before placing a goodbye kiss to my forehead and pulling away.

"Goodbye, Phoebe," he whispers as he walks for the door. I don't miss the pained expression on his face or the tears staining his cheeks when he stops to look at me over his shoulder one last time.

TWENTY-SEVEN

PHOEBE

My back thumps against the door the second Knox leaves, and I'm sliding down it until my ass hits the tile floor. I bury my face in my hands and ugly cry for the first time in years. I feel like I've lost everything; my best friend, my closest family member, and the love of my life. I have no one to call, no one to confide in - *I feel so fucking alone*. It's not like I can call up a friend from high school and talk to them. They wouldn't understand. *No one would understand.*

My heart is beating a mile a minute, and I feel like the room is spinning in a haze around me. I've only had a few serious panic attacks in my life, and I know for certain I'm on the verge of one right now. In my experience, one of the scariest feelings in the world is being alone when you feel like you have no control over your own body. *I can't be alone right now.*

Picking myself up from the cold, hard floor, I stand and stumble toward the kitchen island. Grabbing my phone with shaky hands, I decide to dial the first person who comes to mind. Despite what I did to her, she's always been a fierce and loyal friend. I just pray to God she picks up.

Ring, ring, ring.

Thump. Thump. Thump. All I can hear is the beating of my frantic heart and the persistent rings sounding through the phone.

"Hello?" a soft voice answers.

"M-Maisie.." I croak, her name coming out broken between my cries.

"Phoebe?" she replies, clearly confused.

"Maisie," I rasp, only able to manage one word at a time through my panic.

"What's going on? Are you okay?" she asks, sounding panicked herself.

“N-no, I’m not okay,” I whimper, so fucking relieved she picked up. Just hearing a familiar voice is helping to calm me down.

“Where are you? What happened?”

“Our apartment. Maisie, it was awful,” I cry.

“Phoebe, what happened?” she pushes.

“K-Knox... My uncle, Oh my God... There was yelling and blood. Maisie, I don’t know what to do,” I reply, not even sure if she can understand me through my broken cries.

“What do you mean there was blood? Are you okay?” Her voice is rushed now, insistent on me answering her.

“Blood and broken glass... I’ve lost everyone, Maisie. I have no one,” I add, walking to the couch. I don’t trust my unsteady limbs to support me right now. I curl up on the couch, tucking the phone beneath my ear.

“Pheebs, are you okay? Are you hurt?” she asks again.

“N-no, I’m not hurt,” I manage to respond.

“Listen to me, you haven't lost everyone. You have me, Phoebe. You have me. Stay at the apartment, I’ll be there soon. The drive is only a couple of hours away my house.”

“Y-you, you don’t have to...” I trail off, my teeth chattering from the anxiety surging through my body.

“Yes, I do. You’re my friend, Phoebe. This is what friends do. I know you would do the same for me. I’m sorry about what I said when I was angry. I’m going to pack my bags and get right in my car. I’ll call you once I’m on the road and we can talk on my drive. I’ll call you in about 15 minutes, okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper. “Thank you.”

“Phoebe, wake up. It’s me, Maisie. Pheebs?” I hear my name on repeat as someone lightly shakes my shoulders.

Slowly opening my eyes, I squint and take in my surroundings. Maisie is kneeling in front of me, her face scrunched together in concern. When my eyes drift over her shoulder, I take in our living room that looks like a tornado barreled through it. Little pieces of glass are littered across the floor

and small droplets of dried blood speckle the area below the television. Our flat screen is hanging off the wall by a few wires, dangling halfway between the mount and the floor, which I'm sure is a major fire hazard. I rub my aching head with my hand and pull myself up into a sitting position. I must have fallen asleep after Maisie and I hung up. The combination of crying my eyes out and anxiety must have depleted me to the point of exhaustion.

"Thank God you're okay." Maisie lets out a deep exhale. "I tried calling you like a million times once I got in my car. You scared the shit out of me. You were so out of it when you called, I could barely make out what you were saying. I had no idea what could've happened. My mind spiraled the entire drive here." She plops down on the couch beside me and rubs my arms in a comforting gesture.

"I'm sorry. I don't even remember falling asleep," I sniffle.

"Phoebe, what the hell happened in here?" Maisie asks, trailing her gaze around the living room.

I spend the next hour telling Maisie everything, and I mean *everything*. I started from the day Knox took me home after practice and didn't leave out a single detail. We shared a few tears when I told her about the traumatic event between Knox and Corbin. She reached across the couch and held me as cries rocked my body for the hundredth time today. My face feels swollen and puffy from all the crying. This is definitely not how I imagined this weekend going.

"I already miss him so much, Maisie, and it's only been a few hours. I feel like I was in fight or flight mode, and my only option was to break things off. I didn't know what to do. I just panicked," I confess.

Now that I've had time to gather my thoughts, the regret is starting to creep in for pushing Knox away so suddenly. I did what I've always been so fearful of him doing. I abandoned him.

"Anyone in your shoes would have panicked. Are you having second thoughts about ending things?" she asks.

"How could I not?" I quickly reply. "Maisie, I love him. I know that sounds crazy, but I'm so undeniably in love with him. Trust me, I wish I could just shut it off - but I can't. He's everything to me. I've had boyfriends, but no one has ever made me feel an ounce of what Knox does. Things are just *different* with him."

"Then you need to talk to him," she responds without pause. "He's going to understand, Phoebe. God, I wish I could record the way he looks at you at

practice so you could see what's so blatantly obvious. He tries to hide it, but he can't. He's in love with you, Phoebe. I promise you he feels the same way."

"Why did you never say anything to me before if you knew?" I ask.

"Because I didn't want to accept the fact that you were lying to me. I wanted to believe it wasn't true," she says with a sad twist of her lips.

Her expression makes me want to burst into tears again. "Maisie, I really am so sorry."

"Phoebe, the things I said to you, the way I spoke to you was not okay. I didn't think before reacting and said so many things I regret. I was upset and angry with you for lying to me, but I had no right to treat my best friend like shit. I've been sick over it all week and was planning to talk with you when I got back. I was planning to tell you that I understand why you felt the need to hide this from me. It still hurts, but I get it. I have no fucking idea what I would have done if I was in your position. I just feel bad you've been going through this alone. I want you to know that you can *always* come to me, Pheebs. Always." She wraps me in a huge hug, and I can tell she's close to crying too.

"I know, and I feel terrible that I didn't. I don't know what I would do without you, Maisie. I really don't," I reply, my lips turning up in a soft smile.

"I know, I'm basically the best," she laughs while dramatically flipping her hair over her shoulder. "So, are you going to talk to Knox?"

I shrug. "I know in my heart that I want him but look at what our relationship has done to the people around us. I lied to you for weeks, trashed my relationship with my uncle. I don't know, I just feel like we've done more harm than good."

"Corbin loves you, Phoebe. Why do you think he reacted the way he did? He never should have laid a hand on you, but he's clearly protective over his family. I mean, you *are* his only niece. He just cares about you and needs to cool off. Just give it some time, and I promise he'll come around. The people that really care always do."

"Yeah... only one can hope," I reply, unconvinced. "Can you promise me one thing?"

"Depends on what it is," she laughs and bumps me with her shoulder. "Duh, Pheebs. What is it?"

"Promise me that even if I'm not on the team anymore, we'll stay

friends.”

Her eyebrows furrow at my words. “Phoebe, you’re not going to get kicked off the team. You know I would never say anything, and I don’t see your uncle sabotaging you like that.”

“No, that’s not why I’m saying this. I’m thinking about quitting, Mais,” I admit. “I’m not happy playing anymore. I’ve been living my life for my parents for years and if my relationship with Knox has taught me anything, it’s that it feels so damn good to *live*. I feel like I’ve just been going through the motions for years until Knox showed me what it’s like to feel alive. Regardless of what happens with him, I want to start living for *me*. Not anyone else.”

A sympathetic smile stretches across Maisie’s face, and a barely noticeable tear slides down her cheek.

“I’m so fucking proud of you, Pheeb. There’s a difference between living and being alive. I’m glad you’re choosing you,” she smiles. “Of course, we’ll stay friends. Get out of here with that bullshit,” she scoffs and rolls her eyes, her sass causing both of us to laugh softly.

“Can you promise me one thing in return?” she asks.

“Anything,” I reply.

“If Knox really makes you happy, don’t give him up. Things are going to be messy and hard, but if you really love each other, you’ll figure it out.”

“I promise,” I whisper, wrapping my arms around Maisie’s neck and hugging the shit out of her.

TWENTY-EIGHT
PHOEBE

It's only been three days since Knox left my apartment, but it feels like it's been a lifetime. My stomach has been in knots, my brain on overdrive since Corbin showed up at my apartment. I've been having a hard time keeping down solid food, only snacking on yogurt or a smoothie when my hunger becomes unbearable. I've drifted in and out of sleep the past couple nights, waking up from nightmares of losing Knox more than once. I don't need to look in the mirror to know that I look like hell.

I've been so close to texting him or dialing his number multiple times, but something keeps stopping me. I'm such a structured person, and I just feel like there are so many loose ends to tie up. Knox and I never got the chance to talk about what our plans would be, what the future would look like for us.

Then, there's Corbin. He sent me a text to let me know he made it home, but I haven't heard from him since. I'm so gutted about how things ended with both Corbin and Knox. Seeing the two people I love the most attack each other in my living room is something I wish I could block out of my brain forever. Even if Knox and I could repair our relationship, would *they* ever be able to overcome what happened?

Maisie has been nothing short of amazing, a true lifesaver. After we talked for hours, she helped me clean the living room and drank an entire bottle of wine with me. It felt so refreshing to be able to really tell someone the details of my relationship with Knox. After we had one too many glasses of wine, Maisie proceeded to ask me about the size of Knox's cock. She also asked me if I call him Coach Moore in bed, and that's when I told her it was time to call it a night. Maisie doesn't have a filter, but that's one of the many things I love about her. I have no idea how I got so lucky to have her as a

friend.

Coral Cove had a cold front come through this morning, so it feels like fall outside for a change. I'm wearing a white, cropped sweater that shows a sliver of my stomach, and black, high waisted jeans paired with ankle boots. My blonde hair is loose, flowing in soft waves down my back. Summer has always been my favorite season, but there's something about the crisp autumn air paired with a warm cup of coffee that brings me so much joy.

Getting to wear fall clothes, even if just for a day, brings a much-needed smile to my face as I walk to the library on campus. As I make my way across the courtyard, I spot a tall, handsome guy with a full head of golden-brown hair. When he lifts his head from his phone, his blue eyes quickly find mine.

Colin.

A huge, white toothed smile stretches across his face as he enthusiastically waves and walks my way.

"Hey, Phee! How was your break?" he asks in a chipper tone, wrapping his bulky arms around me and encasing me in a hug.

This guy is too nice for his own good.

"It was... eventful, to say the least," I scoff. "What about you? How was yours?" I ask, quickly changing the subject.

"It was fun! I got to spend time with my old man. He just got a new fishing boat, so he took me out on it over the weekend. It's pretty badass," he smiles.

"Wow, that's awesome. Well, I'm glad you had a nice weekend," I reply with a soft smile.

"Yeah, so, how have you been, Phoebe? We haven't really talked much since your birthday. We were all pretty fucked up that night," he laughs. "You've been so quiet in class, and you barely text me anymore."

I've just had a lot going on," I reply, stumbling over my words. "Colin, there's actually something I've been wanting to say to you." I tuck a fallen strand of hair behind my ear.

"Are you finally going to admit your love for me?" he jokes, arching his brows.

"You wish," I reply, giving him a playful shove.

"What's up, Phee? I'm all ears," he continues in a more serious voice.

I take a deep breath. *Here goes nothing.* "I just wanted to say that I'm sorry if you ever felt like I led you on. You really are a great friend, and I

enjoy hanging out with you. You're the life of the party and always know how to make me laugh," I chuckle. "Unfortunately, I think I'm just attracted to broody assholes. You are the farthest thing from that."

"Awe, Phoebe. Are you calling me a softy? That's not really a compliment," he laughs.

"No, I didn't mean it like that," I try to correct myself. *Except, I kind of did mean it like that.*

"Nah, I'm just messing with you," he chuckles. "I appreciate your concern, but I never felt that way. I'm a big believer that everything happens for a reason. Plus, I started dating a girl on the volleyball team a few weeks ago. Her name's Lily." He's practically beaming from just the mention of her name.

Everything happens for a reason. I've heard the saying so many times, but it's almost like hearing it from Colin is a sign. A sign to allow myself to be more carefree, to let go of needing to plan out every aspect of my life. A sign to not give up on the people who make your world come alive with vibrant colors.

"Looks like someone's been bitten by the love bug," I hum, nudging his shoulder.

"What can I say? I'm a sucker for love," he chuckles. "She came and visited me during break, got to meet my family and everything."

"I'm so happy for you, Colin. Truly," I respond, smiling from ear to ear. He deserves all the happiness in the world.

"Thanks, Phoebe," he smiles softly.

"Well, I gotta run to the library," I exhale, "but it was nice catching up. Maybe me, you, Lily, and Maisie can all get dinner one evening?"

"Lily and I would love that," he quickly replies.

"Great, I'll text you so we can plan it. I'll see you around, Colin." I wave goodbye and flash him a soft smile before turning and making my way to the library.

I'm almost done printing my papers at the library when my phone vibrates with a text. I grab it off the wooden table and gasp when I see the name

lighting up my screen.

Uncle Corbin.

Completely forgetting about my papers, I take a seat in the nearest chair and unlock my phone. My heart rate soars when I see a mile long text filling the entire screen.

Corbin: Phoebe, I know texting is probably not the appropriate way to go about this, but I want to make sure I don't miss a word of what I need to say. I'm also too embarrassed to have a real conversation right now, especially after how I acted. That may make me a coward, but it's the truth. I've never been a physical person, and I'm ashamed of how I presented myself. I want you to know that I don't think he's a bad guy, and he definitely didn't deserve to be attacked like that. I need you to understand that I've always felt like a father figure to you. I've always felt like I had a responsibility to look out for you, fill a role that your parents never did. I know we don't talk about it much, but I'm so sorry for the shitty hand you've been dealt for parents. Your dad would kill me if he knew I was telling you this, but I've had countless conversations with him, letting him know what a piece of shit he is for not realizing how wonderful his daughter is. I've never mentioned any of this to you, because I was always trying to keep the peace. I've been holding on to a thread of hope that your parents would wake up and realize how lucky they are. With that said, I wanted to step in and be the father you never had. I wanted you to know that you have a family member who loves and cares about you. I wanted you to know that someone is immensely proud of you. When I realized who Knox was, all I saw was that he was a much older man and your coach. You're still a teenager, Phoebe. But I failed to realize that you're also an adult now and can make your own decisions. What I didn't fail to realize was the way he looked at you. I need you to know that I don't fault him for what he did, because in his mind, he was protecting you. You and I know both know I would never intentionally hurt you, but he didn't know that. Protecting you is something I should have done, but instead, I had tunnel vision and did something I will always regret. Always. You may not believe me, but I admire him for what he did. I may not understand your relationship, but it's not my place. As someone who cares about you, it's my

responsibility to support you, make sure you surround yourself with people who value you and treat you right. If he's doing that, then that's all that matters to me. I hope one day you can forgive me. The same goes for Knox. You don't have to respond to this right away. You don't have to call me. I just wanted you to know that I'm sorry. Feel free to reach out whenever you're ready. You know I'm always just a phone call away. I love you, Pheeb.

I can barely read his text when I get to the end because my vision is flooded with tears. A few days ago, I felt so broken and lost, like I had destroyed relationships with the people closest to me. I had absolutely no hope. Colin and Maisie's words immediately echo through my mind.

"Everything happens for a reason."

"Just give it some time, and I promise he will come around. The people who really care always do."

"The people who care always do."

I'm slowly but surely learning that the people who want to be present in your life will put in the effort. That doesn't mean there won't be bumps or roadblocks along the way; it just means that the people you love are worth fighting for. You learn through the hard times who will stick by your side and who will abandon your ship when the waters get rough. Nothing good in life comes easy, and I'm learning that lesson the hard way. Relationships require work. You can't just give up on those you love when shit gets hard. Life is hard, but the beauty is that *you* get to choose who you want by your side for the ride.

Oh God. Knox. What the fuck have I done?

Abandoning my papers on the printer, I rush through the library doors and run across the courtyard, bumping into crowds of annoyed students.

"What the hell? Watch where you're going," a girl I accidentally hit yells out.

"Oh, you'll live," I yell back, continuing to swerve in and out of the flocks of students mingling in the courtyard. Honestly, I couldn't care less who I piss off right now. I just need to get to my car. I need to tell my person that he means everything to me. I need to get to *him*.

TWENTY-NINE

KNOX

My mental state has been shifting between misery, depression, and anger. I now know how Phoebe felt when I pushed her away time and time again.

Update: it's fucking hell.

I'm angry at myself for ever putting her through this. I'm dying to reach out to her, but I know I need to give her time.

"I'm not going to ask you again. Please just get the fuck out."

I'll never forget the expression on her face when she uttered those words through clenched teeth. She looked so hopeless. Her eyes were bloodshot from crying, and her bottom lip was quivering as she tried to keep it together until I left. I can't imagine how scared and confused she felt in that moment.

Fuck, I feel like such a dick for what I did to Corbin, but I blacked out when he shoved her. The red mark on her arm made me lose my fucking mind. I know he was trying to get her out of the way to get to me. It's clear he loves Phoebe and never intended to hurt her, but my protectiveness kicked in and all bets were off. He can swing at me all he wants, but touching Phoebe like that is off limits. *That was my breaking point.*

I have no idea how I'm going to face Phoebe at practice this week. I know I need to apologize for what happened, but I don't know how to do it without reaching for her or telling her how much I miss her. I can never go back to just being her coach. That ship sailed the second she let me inside her body. I've considered putting in my resignation multiple times over the past few days. I've even rehearsed how I would deliver the news to the athletic director. I just can't see how I can go on seeing Phoebe every day for the next four years. Who knows, maybe it's the torture I deserve for falling in love with one of my athletes.

I've gotten a few calls back inquiring about interviews for coaching jobs I applied to in the area. My plan was to tell Phoebe the good news over dinner, before Corbin showed up and the entire day went to shit. Scratch that, my entire world crumbled.

One of the employers was a representative from Coral Cove Community College. A vast majority of the students who attend the community college are students who didn't get into CCU. The athletes playing ball at a junior level college could only dream to play at a university like CCU one day. It would be beyond rewarding to help turn their dreams into a reality. As much as I enjoy coaching at CCU, many of the students are entitled or had their admission handed to them through money or connections. I want to find a job where I feel fulfilled every day. I want to make a real difference.

Thankfully, Dan's in town today and asked if I wanted to catch up. I don't just plan to confide in him about my coaching dilemma, but also my relationship with Phoebe. I'm fully prepared for him to be pissed and a little disappointed, but I'm also in dire need of his advice.

Dan should be arriving any minute now. I offered to take him out to lunch, but he insisted we meet at my house. I have a gut feeling he has something serious he wants to discuss with me. Maybe he just doesn't want to deal with being bombarded at a restaurant. Coach Cook is basically a celebrity here.

My doorbell rings, pulling me from my thoughts. Looking through the peephole, I see Dan standing on the other side of the door as a big smile stretches across my face. *Damn, it's so good to see him.*

"Well, shit! How is it possible that you get taller every time I see you, even in your thirties? You look great, son," Dan greets right as I open the door, pulling me in for a hug and giving me a firm pat on the back.

I wish I could say the same, but he looks significantly different from the last time I saw him, and not in a good way. Dark circles sit beneath his eyes, his cheeks have sunken in dramatically, and his silver hair has thinned, almost to the point of balding. I'm so used to seeing him with a full smile and a few extra pounds. It's alarming how different he looks.

"Dan, I can't even begin to tell you how good it is to see you! Come in," I add, motioning my hand inside and closing the door behind him. "Do you want anything to drink? I have water and coffee. I can make a pot of tea if you'd like."

"Nah, I'm good. Thank you, though. I really just want to get off my feet.

I'm feeling extra tired these days," he replies, sounding out of breath.

"Where do you want to sit? We can talk at the dining table or the couch. Your choice, old man," I lightheartedly joke.

"The couch is good. Old men like me need the extra padding," he grunts with a chuckle.

"Ah, you know I'm just messing with you. You're far from old. I can only hope to have the energy you do when I'm your age," I add, taking a seat on the couch beside him.

"Well, I definitely haven't felt like myself lately. I'm sure you noticed I'm not looking as handsome as I usually do," he laughs.

"You're really talking yourself up today, Dan," I say as my eyes crinkle with laughter.

"Don't they say humor's the best medicine?" he chuckles, before his face straightens into a more serious expression.

"How have you been?" I ask after a beat of silence, slightly afraid to hear his answer.

"You know I've never been one to beat around the bush, so I'm going to come right out and say it. I have cancer, Knox. Stage 3, lung cancer. I found out over the summer, and that's why I retired so quickly. I've always had the pride of a lion, and I've struggled with sharing the news. I just don't want anyone feeling sorry for me. Your dad is the only person, aside from my wife, who's known since I got the diagnosis. The chemo and radiation is starting to change my appearance, so I can't really keep it a secret anymore. Anyways, I don't want you getting upset or feeling sorry for me. I just wanted you to know," he exhales.

Cancer. Dan has cancer. My childhood hero has cancer. My heart stops beating as a lump forms in my throat.

"Dan..." His name is all I can get out. I'm at a complete loss for words.

"It's okay, son. You don't have to give me some sentimental speech. I have cancer, and it's been a battle every day since I found out. There's really not much else to say, other than I'm going to fight like hell to beat this," he huffs.

I feel like I can finally take a breath at the mention of him beating it. "So, you have a chance?" I choke out, my voice coming out shaky.

"Yes. Luckily, I was never a smoker, which increases my chances of recovery," he replies offhandedly.

"What do you need from me, Dan? How can I help? I'll do anything, just

let me know.” Dan hates when people offer to help him, because he likes to do everything on his own. He’s always been that way. I just don't know what else to say. I would do just about anything not to lose him.

“I don’t need you to do anything, Knox,” he sighs. “This is why I haven't wanted to tell people. I don’t want to be treated differently. I have a great group of doctors and nurses who are doing everything they can. I just want to be treated like regular old Dan, like nothing has changed.”

“Okay,” I croak out a whisper while nodding my head.

“Your dad knows I’m speaking with you today, and I’ve asked him to keep you updated on my progress. Aside from that, I don’t want to talk about cancer anymore. I hear the word way too damn much as it is. I want you to still call me to talk about baseball, coaching, girls...hell, just anything other than cancer,” he scoffs.

All I can do is nod my head and take a deep breath. Dan has never seen me cry, and I have a feeling he won’t want to see it now. I have to be strong. I need to keep it together.

“Knox, I’m going to be okay,” he whispers, placing his calloused hand on my shoulder.

“I’m going to hold you to it, old man,” I manage to reply, my lips turning up in a watery smile.

“You better,” he replies with a smirk. “Anyways, enough of this nonsense. What’s been going on with you?”

“God, I don’t even know where to start. Are you sure you want to hear about the shit show that’s been my life lately?” I reply, running my hands through my hair.

“Do you think I drove all the way here just to talk about me? Of course, I want to hear all about your life. I have a meeting with an old colleague in an hour, so you better get to talking, because I want to know everything,” he pushes.

“Well, since we aren't beating around the bush, I’m applying to different coaching jobs in the area. I’m planning on leaving CCU, Dan.” I hang my head, too ashamed to look him in the eye. CCU means everything to him.

“What’s got you wanting to move jobs? I mean, there’s nothing wrong with seeing what’s out there. You’re young and can move around. Hell, I took at least five coaching jobs before I landed at CCU.” He laughs, a true belly laugh that I’m grateful to hear.

He’s already taking this better than I thought.

“Are you not enjoying the job?” he adds, pinching his brows together.

“No, it’s not that. The team is great. It’s just...” I trail off, trying to find the right words.

“It’s just what? Spit it out, son.”

“It’s an athlete...” I exhale. “One of the girls I coach at CCU. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined having feelings for one of my athletes, but it all happened so fast. I wish I could say I regret it, but I don’t. I don’t regret a single second with her. That’s why I need to leave, because I can’t stay away from her, Dan. She means too much to me.” I nervously fidget with the couch cushion.

“It’s the blonde center fielder, isn’t it?” he asks casually.

“What?” I practically yelp, my head snapping up in shock from his response. “How do you know that?”

“I’ve been coaching longer than you’ve been alive, Knox. Do you think I never felt attracted to an athlete in my younger years? I never acted on it, but I sure as hell felt it. Whether they’ll admit it or not, I think every coach has at some point in their career,” he says with a shrug.

“But how did you know it was her?”

“I streamed the last couple of games while I was in treatment. I saw the way she kept looking at you from center field, and the way you left your hand on her shoulder a second too long when she would walk into the dugout. I saw the look in your eyes when she would make a good play. You didn’t just look proud, but head over heels in love with her. I know you too well, Knox. I would have been blind to not have seen it,” he admits.

Holy shit, have we been that obvious?

“Jesus Christ,” I laugh with mirth, “I’ve been sweating bullets over sharing this with you, and you’ve known for weeks,” I reply, shaking my head in disbelief.

He shrugs his shoulders. “Well, I didn’t know for sure, but I had my suspicions.”

“Damn. I really can’t get anything past you, can I?” I laugh again.

“Nope,” he chuckles. “So, tell me about her.”

Dan quietly listens as I fill him in on the past few months with Phoebe. I tell him everything, from her showing up late to practice, to our trip to New York, and finally, the disaster in her apartment. I was worried about him being pissed, yet he’s sitting here soaking up every detail.

“Well, I’ll be damned. That was her uncle?” he asks, his brows arched in

shock.

“Do you want some popcorn, Dan? This isn't a soap opera. It's real life, you know,” I reply with a lighthearted laugh.

“I know, I know, but damn, this is something out of a movie. So, what happened next?” he asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I didn't know you were such a drama queen, Dan,” I scoff. “You're living your best life right now.”

“You would be too after being cooped up in a hospital for months. Now tell me, dammit. What happened after the uncle left?”

I proceed to tell him about how Phoebe basically begged me to leave. I left out the part where she told me to get the fuck out. I wanted to hold on to at least a little of my pride.

“Hold on...you just left?” He scrunches his face together in disappointment.

I give him a confused face. “What was I supposed to do?”

“I don't know, talk some sense into her. Tell her you love her. Hell, anything but leave,” he huffs, shaking his head.

“I did. She knew I was about to say it. I tried to tell her I loved her, but she stopped me,” I respond.

“Well then you should've tried harder, Knox. I didn't raise my godson to be a damn quitter,” he scolds.

“What about CCU? What about my career? There are so many unknowns. She has a point, Dan. How are we going to make this work?”

Dan, my idol, rolls his eyes at me. “Knox, you're acting like changing jobs is the end of the world. Like I said, I had multiple coaching jobs before I found my fit at CCU. It sounds like you're trying to stick it out for me, and I would never want that. I want *you* to be happy. CCU will have no problem finding another coach. It sounds like you already have a few interviews, so take 'em.”

“Dan, I'm not gonna lie, I'm a little shocked by your response,” I say in disbelief. “I knew you would eventually come around, but I for sure thought you were going to be disappointed. This is definitely *not* how I thought this conversation would go.”

“Listen, Knox. If cancer has taught me anything at all, it's that life is short. Every chance you don't take is a missed opportunity. Six months ago, before my diagnosis, I may have been disappointed, but when you have the opportunity to live like you're dying, you stop taking things for granted. You

stop sweating the small stuff. You're good at what you do. You'll find another job, Knox. You can't find another Phoebe." The last sentence is a shot to the heart.

"You can't find another Phoebe." He's damn right about that.

Before I have a chance to respond, Dan's phone starts ringing.

"Hello," he answers, holding his phone up to his ear. "Calm your britches, I've been catching up with Knox... Yeah, yeah... Okay, I'll be there soon," he says before ending the call.

"Damn, that son of a bitch is impatient," he mumbles to himself. "Knox, I'm sorry to do this but I gotta get going. Gotta make my rounds while I'm in Coral Cove, if you know what I mean," he grunts out as he stands from the couch.

"No, I get it. You're practically royalty here in town, Coach," I laugh.

Dan and I spend the new few minutes saying goodbye before he slings his arm around me in a hug and heads for the door.

"Dan," I call out before he closes the door behind him. "You take care of yourself, and don't hesitate to call me if you need anything."

"I don't need any- Actually..." He trails off. "There's one thing I need you to do."

"What's that?" I ask, nodding my head.

"Go get the girl, Knox," he says with a wink before turning and shutting the door, leaving me speechless.

THIRTY
KNOX

I've been pacing back and forth since Dan left half an hour ago, trying to plan out what I'm going to say to Phoebe. I'm not sure how I'm going to get her back, but I'm not going to give up without a fight. I refuse to let her walk out of my life without so much as a conversation. I made her a promise I wouldn't leave again, and she needs to know I wasn't bluffing. *I need her to know I'm so ridiculously in love with her.*

While I was frantically pacing barefoot across my hardwood floors, I called Coral Cove Community College and confirmed an interview for next week. If we're going to attempt to make this work, I have to get serious about finding another job. No more "we'll talk about it later" or "we have until May." Phoebe was right; time isn't in our favor. Things aren't going to magically fall into place. I have to show her how bad I want this.

"Every chance you don't take is a missed opportunity. When you have the opportunity to live like you're dying, you stop taking things for granted."

Dan's words echo through my mind on repeat. They made me realize I've been holding back because of the "what ifs", because I've always been terrified of change. My career used to mean everything to me, but that was before I met Phoebe. Now, what terrifies me the most is looking back years from now and living with the regret of giving up the love of my life.

My head turns towards the window when I hear light sprinkles hitting the glass. The rain is just starting to come down as the palm trees softly sway in the autumn breeze. It's been a while since we've had rain or even cool weather for that matter. I usually enjoy the change of seasons, but the cold only reminds me of my time in New York in Phoebe. It's crazy how that trip feels like it was ages ago. So much has happened since then.

Thinking about our trip has my mind replaying all our most memorable moments. I think about how I was instantly drawn to her when we first locked eyes in Sunset Café. I had never been able to feel another person's stare before her. I think about the godawful day when I ran Phoebe past her breaking point, the way her small body felt in my arms as I carried her out to my Jeep. I think about the way she barged into my office and called me out on my shit after our first kiss. *God, that was single handedly one of the hottest moments of my life.*

I think about how beautiful she looked when I woke up next to her for the first time in my bed. I think about the first time we slept together, how she felt like coming home. I think about how my family instantly fell in love with her. I have a string of texts from Willow raving about how Phoebe's her new best friend. I pull up the texts every so often to re-read them because they make me so damn happy. I finally found my missing piece, and I'm not letting her go.

I'm done waiting. I promised Phoebe I would never give up, and I fucking meant it.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I tap on Phoebe's contact and pace back and forth while I wait, listening to the repetitive rings. I get her voicemail the first time and instantly try calling again. When I get it a second time, I chuck my phone across the room and run my hands through my hair.

"Fuck it," I mutter under my breath as I walk towards the front door and swipe my keys from the wall. *I'm going to her.* Every second I let pass is one I risk losing her for good. My heart drops to my toes when I sling my door open and see a white Mercedes screeching to a halt in my driveway. Never in my wildest dreams would I have expected to see her here.

A rain-drenched Phoebe jumps out of the driver's seat and onto the damp pavement, her chest moving with heavy breaths like she's been in a rush. Rain slides down her smooth skin, disappearing into the white sweater she's wearing. Strands of her golden hair are plastered across her cheeks and neck, making me want to brush them away just to give me an excuse to touch her. Her long eyelashes are damp from the rain, shading her icy-blue eyes. She looks thinner than when I saw her a few days ago and small bags are cradling her eyes. *Has she been eating or sleeping?* I sure as hell haven't.

She still looks achingly beautiful. She always looks so beautiful to me. My heart's practically beating out of my chest at just the sight of her.

"Phoebe." I manage a whisper as I take her in. I still can't believe she's

standing outside my house.

“Knox,” she says my name through labored breaths as the rain really starts to pour down.

Raindrops cascade into my foyer from the open door. *I’m in such a state of shock.* I’ve been standing here like a statue while she’s drenched. Stepping out into the downpour, I close the door behind me and stride towards her. The logical thing to do would be to ask her to come inside, but my brain isn’t operating properly right now. I don’t care that it’s a tsunami outside, all I see is her. I just need my girl.

“Bee, I was just trying to call you,” I rasp as my eyes trail down her body. We’re standing in the middle of my driveway, only a few feet separating us.

“I’m sorry. I honestly don’t even know where my phone is. I came straight to you,” she replies, blinking away water from her lashes. A few seconds pass before she continues.

“Knox...” She trails off, chewing on her full lip. “We need to talk.”

“I know... Phoebe, I’m so s-”

“Please,” she says, cutting me off mid-sentence. “Let me start.” I slowly nod my head at her request.

“First, since you *are* my coach, I need to inform you that I’m quitting the team, effective today. I didn’t know if I would need to turn in my training gear or not, so I went ahead and brought everything with me,” she adds, handing me a plastic bag with her training clothes.

“Phoebe...you don’t have to do this,” I reply in shock, grabbing the damp bag and setting it on the pavement.

“Yes, I do,” she says confidently.

“Why? Because of me? Don’t tell me you’re quitting because of me. I’ll never forgive myself if you do. You’ve dedicated so many years of your life to this sport, Phoebe. It would kill me to know I’m the reason you gave it up. I’m planning to leave CCU as soon as another job opens up, and then you’ll never have to share the field with me again. I actually have an interview scheduled for next week,” I blurt out, running my hands through my drenched hair.

“No, I’m doing this for me,” she clarifies. “You know I’ve been miserable for months. You’ve seen it on the field every day. I finally had to admit that I don’t love playing anymore. It just feels like a chore. I promised myself that I wouldn’t let them take anything else away from me. I would start living for *me*. You know as well as I do that being a college athlete is a

full-time job. Maybe it's selfish, but I want to have time to travel, join organizations on campus, get a real job for the first time in my life, and find hobbies I enjoy. I'm just so tired of living my life for people who don't give a shit about me. So, I've made my decision." She exhales deeply, taking a moment to steady herself. "I'm not changing my mind. I won't be at practice this week."

"What about your scholarship? Are you going to be able to stay at CCU?" I ask in shock.

"I'll get a part-time job and take out a loan like most students do. Thankfully, I've kept my grades up." She nods like she's thought all this out at length.

"Phoebe, you know I'll support you if this is what you really want. I just have to ask one more time: are you sure about this? You're doing this for you and not anybody else?" I ask, my eyes darting back and forth between hers.

"One hundred percent," she replies firmly.

"Okay," I breathe out. "Okay. Do you want to tell the team, or do you want me to announce it?"

"I've already told Maisie and a few of the girls I'm close with. You can announce it to the rest of the team at practice this week," she replies.

I nod and slip my hands in my pockets.

"Phoebe, I've been wanting to talk to you about last weekend. Let's go inside," I say, taking a step towards her.

"Wait, I'm not done yet," she says, holding up her hand and stopping me. "I need to say what I should have said weeks ago," she continues, sucking in a deep breath before she absolutely wrecks me.

"I love you, Knox. I'm so in love with you, and these past few days have been fucking unbearable. It's taken me a while, but I'm learning that certain people come into your life for a reason. I felt like I was living in a world of gray until I met you. You showed me what it feels like to be alive. *You* showed me what it feels like to be loved. You showed me how to love with every fiber of my being. I know our relationship will have some uphill battles, but if we're climbing them together, I know it'll be okay. You're my person, Knox. I never want to go back to living in a world where there's no you." She takes a heavy breath and pauses, waiting for my answer as tears slide down her cheeks, clear even in the rain.

"I don't care how complicated this is, I just want you," she adds breathlessly.

“Phoebe,” I rasp out a whisper, finally closing the gap between us and tangling my fingers in her sopping hair, slamming her mouth to mine.

Our damp cheeks slide against each other as our tongues collide, finding home again. The pattering of rain has been drowned out by the intimate sounds of our kisses and needy moans. A low groan vibrates deep in my chest every time Phoebe laps her tongue against mine. When we finally pull apart for air, I cradle her face in my palms and walk her back until she’s resting against her car, my body caging her in.

“You have no idea how good it feels to hear you say those words,” I exhale. “I was so scared I lost you for real this time. I hope you know I was coming to fight for you. I was never going to give up on you, Bee. I finally know what it feels like to be pushed away, and I’m so fucking sorry I ever did that to you, baby.”

“I can’t lose you, Knox,” she says seriously in response. “Not again.”

“You won’t, baby,” I reply, tilting her head to stare directly into her eyes.

“What about your job? Now that I’m no longer on the team, do you think you’ll stay?”

“No,” I immediately respond. “I want to stay around Coral Cove so I can be close to you, but I want CCU to be your thing. I want you to make friends, get involved on campus, study abroad, but only if it’s for a few weeks max,” I clarify, causing Phoebe to chuckle. “I seriously might die if I have to go a full semester without you.”

“I want you to have the time of your life in college without having to hear gossip about you dating the softball coach. Once everyone knows, the news will spread like wildfire if I’m still coaching here. I don’t want that for you, Phoebe. Plus, after I secure a new job, I refuse to hide that you’re my girlfriend. I plan to kiss the shit out of you wherever I want,” I say with a smirk. Her cute little dimple pops out as she smiles at my comment.

“Did you just call me your girlfriend?” she asks, arching a brow.

“Hell yeah, I did,” I growl, lowering my hand and giving her ass a playful slap.

“I like the sound of that,” she hums, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“I need to get you out of these clothes, so I can show my *girlfriend* how much I love her,” I reply, biting her bottom lip between my teeth.

“What?” she asks, wide eyed. *Did she think I wouldn’t say it back?*

“I love you, Phoebe, so damn much. There aren’t enough words in the universe to explain how much I love you. So let me show you,” I reply,

wrapping my arms around her middle before gently lifting her and carrying her inside. Her hands immediately find my hair, delicately sliding her fingers through my soaked locks as we walk through my front door.

Once we're inside, I press her back against the foyer wall and slowly peel her sweater over her head, exposing her lace bra. Her perfect tits are rising in sync with her deep breaths, almost spilling out of the cups. Her nipples have hardened to little points, completely visible through the thin material. *God, she's perfect.*

"I love you," she gasps as I yank down her bra and suck her hard nipple into my mouth.

Phoebe grabs the hem of my shirt and starts inching it up my torso. The next thirty seconds consist of us ripping each other's clothes off until there's nothing left between us but skin. Wrapping her legs around my waist, I pick her up and carry her a few feet to the kitchen table. There's no way in hell we're making it to my bedroom. I need to be inside of her, *now*. We devour each other as I lower her feet to the floor and spin her so her back is facing me.

"Put your hands on the table, baby. I want you to feel every inch of me," I groan, running my hard cock through her wetness before positioning my swollen tip at her entrance. Phoebe's bent over the table looking like a goddamn dream. *I can't believe she's mine.* Her arousal is dripping down her thighs, making me want to sink to my knees and lick her clean. Her pussy is glistening, all pink and swollen - so fucking ready for me.

"Knox, please, fuck me," she pleads, making my dick twitch in my hand.

"Holy fuck, Phoebe," I groan as I push all the way in. Her pussy is so tight, squeezing me like a vice. My hands latch on to her hips, my grip tightening with each thrust in and out of her wetness. My heavy balls slap against her clit with every stroke, the sensation causing me to lose my damn mind.

"Fuck, baby... You feel so good. Your pussy was made for me," I growl, wrapping my hand around her throat and pulling her flush against my chest, deepening the angle. Her moans become louder and more frantic with every stroke of my cock against that sensitive spot deep inside her.

"Oh God! Knox! Right there," she whimpers, tilting her head back onto my shoulder.

Fuck, I'm about to come.

I quickly pull out of her, and we both gasp at the sudden loss. Gripping

her hips and spinning her towards me, I latch onto her neck, sucking and kissing every inch of her soft skin.

“Knox...” she moans, reaching down and wrapping her hand around my cock, giving a few hard strokes.

“Fuck, baby. Stop doing that or this is going to be over too soon,” I groan. Lifting her up to sit on the table, I spread her legs apart with my knees. She looks so fucking sexy splayed out for me.

“I want to watch my girlfriend come all over my cock,” I growl, pulling at her hips and pushing into her with one hard thrust.

“Knox!” she screams, arching her back and digging her nails into the wooden table. *God, she looks like a dream.*

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Bee. I love you so much,” I groan, my thrusts turning frantic. There’s a time for slow, sensual sex, and now is definitely *not* one of those times.

“I love you,” she whimpers, sitting up to wrap her arms around my neck, gripping onto my shoulders for dear life.

Keeping one of my hands on her hip, I trail the other down her toned stomach and brush my thumb across her swollen clit. Sliding my thumb down to coat it in her wetness, I bring it back up to massage the sensitive bud in a circular motion. I groan when I feel her pussy tighten around my dick, telling me that she’s almost there.

“Knox, yes, don’t stop,” she moans in my ear.

“Come for me, baby. Squeeze my cock and make me come with you,” I growl, knowing how much it turns her when we come together. My balls tighten as my release rockets through me at the feel of her wet heat fluttering around my cock. There’s no better feeling in the world.

“Baby... Fuck...” I rasp as I continue to pump my hips, feeling hot ropes of cum filling her up.

When I see my release dripping out of her, I pull out and slide my head through our combined release coating her skin. After I’ve sheathed myself in both our releases, I slide back in and thrust a few more times. *Mine.* We watch as my glistening length slowly slides in and out of her wet heat. It’s the most erotic, yet intimate, sight I’ve ever seen.

“Phoebe,” I whisper. I pull her limp body to my chest, wrapping my arms around her waist. She tangles her hands in my damp hair and presses her forehead to mine.

Silence fills the air as we try to catch our breath and come down from the

most mind-shattering sex of our lives. Our skin is slick from sweat, rain, and the mixture of our releases. That was... I can't even explain it. I couldn't tell where my body began and hers ended. We were just *one*.

"My girl. *My sunrise over the ocean*," I whisper as my eyes dart between hers. I tuck a strand of her beautiful golden hair behind her ear to get a better view of her perfect face.

"Every time I see the sunrise, I think of you," I admit. "You're such a light in my life, Phoebe. I hope you know that," I say, brushing my thumbs across her cheeks.

"I love you, Knox," Phoebe whispers, trailing soft kisses from the corner of my mouth to my cheek. Her blue eyes find mine when she pulls back to look at me. The lust that was in her eyes a few minutes ago has been replaced by love. *Immeasurable love*.

"I love you. More than anything, Bee," I reply, tangling my hands in her hair and sealing my mouth to hers.

EPILOGUE

Phoebe
One year later

So much has changed in the past year, in the best way possible. It has hands down been the best year of my life. Since quitting the softball team, I've joined a sorority and landed a part-time job at the CCU Communications Department. I work around twenty-five hours a week, leaving me plenty of time to focus on school, be present in my sorority, and spend time with Knox when he's not coaching.

Knox started as the head coach for the Coral Cove Community College baseball team a few months ago, and it's everything he ever wanted. When he interviewed, he was presented with the opportunity to coach the baseball team rather than the softball team. The athletic director felt his experience as a college baseball player would be valuable to the team. The baseball program has been on a five-year losing streak, so Knox is determined to help turn things around this year. Since CCCC is only a two-year college, he gets to work with athletes hoping to play Division I ball by their junior year. He has so many goals he wants to help the team achieve, making his job tiresome but so fulfilling.

"Where's my girl?" I hear Knox call from across the room.

"She's right here," Maisie scoffs. "Can you not spend one second away from her?" Maisie laughs and shakes her head.

"Be nice, Maisie," I joke, giving her shoulder a light shove.

"Where'd you go, babe?" Knox says, walking up and looping his arm around my waist. He's looking dashing handsome in a white button-down

shirt paired with black slacks. “Dan’s about to head out and wants to say goodbye.”

“Oh okay, one sec,” I reply. “I’ll be right back, Maisie.” I smooth my hands down my yellow satin dress and flash her a soft smile.

We’re surrounded by Knox’s closest friends and family for his housewarming party. When Maisie found out there was going to be free alcohol, she totally invited herself. Since I have at least two and half years left at CCU, Knox decided it would be best to buy a house in Coral Cove instead of renting. I still live in an on-campus apartment, but I spend most of my nights at Knox’s place.

“Damn, you kids look great together,” Dan says, giving Knox a firm pat on the back.

“You’re not looking so bad yourself, old man,” Knox replies with a deep chuckle.

Dan has been in remission for close to three months now, looking more and more like himself each day. I’ll never forget the relief that washed over Knox’s face when we found out that Dan beat his cancer. He told Knox he was going to fight like hell, and that’s exactly what he did. We tried to throw Dan a milestone party to celebrate his remission, but he refused. He said that chapter of his life was closed, and he was ready to move on. Honestly, I don’t blame him. There were a few times we were worried he wouldn’t make it.

We spend the next few minutes chatting with Dan before he grabs his coat to leave.

“Well, I better get going. I’ve got a long drive ahead of me,” Dan exhales. “The place looks great. I’m proud of you, son,” Dan beams.

“Thanks, Coach,” Knox replies with a wink, patting Dan on the back in farewell. After we see Dan out, we walk back into the living room, where almost everyone is sipping on cocktails and mingling.

“Hey Knox, serious question,” Slater says, coming out of nowhere and standing between us.

Slater is an interesting guy, to say the least. He’s fun to be around, but he’s wild as hell. Now that I really know him, I find it ironic he got after me at the beach that day. When I found out he was Knox’s friend, I couldn’t help but feel a little embarrassed about that morning on the beach.

“What’s up?” Knox asks, nodding his head.

“Who the *hell* is that?” he asks, darting his eyes towards Willow. She always looks stunning, but tonight, she looks like a high fashion model. Her

black hair falls in luscious waves down her back, red lipstick on her lips, and she's wearing a black dress that hugs every inch of her body.

"That is my baby sister," Knox warns. "She's off limits. Don't even think about it, Slate."

"I had a feeling she might be, but hear me out..." Slater pushes.

"The answer is no, Slater. Never. Not gonna happen," Knox growls, ending the conversation on the spot.

"Damn, it was worth a try," Slater exhales. "On the upside, I don't work tomorrow, which means I plan on getting absolutely shit faced tonight." He raises his empty glass in the air and heads back towards the mini bar.

"Remind me why I'm friends with him again?" Knox jokes, shaking his head and laughing as he grabs my waist and pulls my back into his chest. "Can I steal you away for a minute?" Knox whispers in my ear.

"I mean, it's your house. You can do whatever you want," I say, arching a brow.

"C'mon," he replies, linking his fingers with mine and leading the way to his bedroom.

Once he closes the door, my eyes dart towards the bed.

"Did our sex marathon this morning not hold you over until tonight?" I laugh.

"I could never get enough of you," he hums, wrapping his strong arms around my waist and pulling me to him. "But that's not why I brought you in here. I wanted to wait until we were alone tonight, but... I thought it would be fun to celebrate the new house together while everyone is here."

"Isn't that what we're doing?" I ask, *very* confused.

"Well, technically we're here to celebrate *my* housewarming, but I want it to be for us," he adds, his eyes flickering between mine.

"Are you asking me to..." I trail off with a wide-eyed expression.

"Move in with me, baby," he says with a smile, pulling me closer to him. "You're already here almost every night, and I know it's taxing for you to constantly go back and forth between two places. I don't want to just have lazy mornings in bed with you on the weekends, I want it every day. I want to go to sleep and wake up with you next to me in our bed, every day. *Every. Single. Day.*" he says slowly, placing lingering kisses to my lips between each word.

My first instinct is to say yes, but my only hesitation is Maisie. I love being her roommate, but if I'm being honest with myself, I never see her at

our apartment anyways. Our schedules are completely different now that I'm not on the team. Even though we're roommates, we have to plan time to hang out with each other.

"*Just move him in with him, already.*" Maisie's words echo through my head, ones she utters daily. I'd miss being her roomie, but we'd still be living in the same town and would make it a priority to see each other.

"Plus, we'll have a couple spare rooms for when guests come to visit," Knox adds in a convincing tone. "Didn't Corbin say he was planning on making the trip soon?"

Thankfully, everything that happened with Corbin resolved with time. It didn't happen overnight, but he's slowly coming around to the idea of Knox and me together. I don't know if he'll ever fully be comfortable with our relationship, but at least he's trying. He's visited Coral Cove a few times, always taking enough time to spend the day with Knox and me before heading home. We visited Corbin over the summer in my hometown, which I think was a huge turning point for all of us.

Corbin hosted dinner at his house - he and Knox spent hours watching baseball and shooting the shit. He invited my parents to join us for dinner, but shocker, they didn't show. After I told them about Knox and quitting the team, they kind of disappeared. They check in from time to time, but other than that, I don't really hear from them. I'm oddly okay with that, though. I've stopped allowing people to have power over my emotions who have zero interest in having a real relationship.

"Earth to Phoebe," Knox says, waving his hand in front of my face. "Either I've left you speechless or you *really* don't want to move in with me."

"Sorry," I say with a laugh. "I was just thinking."

"About?" Knox asks, arching his brows.

"About how much I would love to move in with you," I respond as a huge smile breaks out across Knox's face.

"Are you serious?" He beams, lifting me and wrapping my legs around his waist. *Signature Knox*, I think to myself and smile.

"Really," I reply with a smile. "I only have one rule though." I wave my finger in front of his face.

"Should I be scared to hear your one rule?" He laughs. "What is it, babe?"

"I'm your girlfriend, not your athlete," I demand. "No waking me up at

six in the morning and running me to death, okay?” I chuckle, raising my brows.

“Fine,” he grumbles, trailing his lips along my jaw. “But can I wake you up at six in the morning for something else?” he asks, brushing his thumb across my satin-clad nipple.

“Now that I’m okay with that,” I hum, raking my fingers through his onyx hair.

“Let’s go back out there and thank our guests for coming so I can get my girl alone and christen our new home,” he says in a deep, seductive tone.

“Sounds like a plan,” I practically moan as he lightly sucks on my neck.

When he finally pulls away, he cradles my face between his palms and darts his golden eyes between mine. “It was all worth it, Bee,” he says, emotion clear on his face. “I love you so much, baby.”

“I love you, Knox. More than the prettiest sunrise,” I whisper back, leaning down to kiss his beautiful lips once more before we go back to *our* housewarming party.

THE END

“I once believed love would be black and white, but it’s golden.”

- Taylor Swift, *Daylight*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As an avid romance reader, books have always been a constant in Morgan's life. She picked up the *Twilight* series in grade school and never looked back. Getting lost in stories and escaping reality is what brings her joy. As a little girl, Morgan was constantly creating fictional characters in her mind. She would imagine where they lived, how they fell in love, and their happy ending. Little did she know that years later, she would be writing a book of her own. Morgan's writing style strongly reflects her reading preferences: spicy, angsty, emotional romance. She loves books that break your heart into a million pieces, put it back together, and wrap it up in a pretty bow at the end.

Morgan currently resides in Texas with her husband and their two dogs. She has her bachelor's degree in communication along with a master's degree in business administration. Iced coffee, traveling, fresh chocolate chip cookies, and the beach are just some of her favorite things. When she's not writing, she can be found reading, talking books with her friends, scouting out new coffee shops, and planning her next travel destination.

CONNECT ONLINE

Authormorganpaige.com

Instagram: @morganpaigeauthor