

THE LEAGUE

The Red Zone

MEG
READING



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*The
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Zone*

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To all the girlies who have ever had a man show you his high school highlight tape while trying to convince you that he could have gone pro if he hadn't blown out his knee senior year.

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AUTHORS NOTE

HI READER!

Thank you for considering The Red Zone as your next read.

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xo,
Meg

ONE

OCTOBER

I WASN'T one to call people profane names often... but what a fucking bitch.

Mae Garten was the epitome of evil encompassed in the body of a five-foot-ten bleach blonde, and my personal affliction since elementary school.

One would've thought that after two decades of knowing each other, we'd have worked through our animosity toward one another by now. Yet, at this point, I was convinced finding the edge of the universe would be an easier feat.

Why did we despise each other so much, you ask?

Great question. Not so simple answer.

See, in our case, there was no defining moment that changed it all. No playground throw down that marked a pivotal turning point for us, or a monstrous betrayal that demolished our chances of having a hearty friendship.

Instead, our aversion bloomed at a sluggish, long-drawn-out pace with a snide remark here and a displeased eye roll there. Until a time came where we couldn't be in the same room together, without slashing a multitude of obscene remarks back and forth at each other. That is, until an innocent bystander was forced to break us apart.

Sounds complicated, right? Well, that was Mae for you.

Now, in football, there were a few key components that made up an ideal center quarterback exchange—pressure, push, and pull. Cleverly coined as “The Three P’s”. Thankfully, the many years I'd had to dwell on Mae and I's mutual disdain gave me ample time to categorize our relationship—or lack thereof—into three pillars that I conveniently liked to call “The Three C’s”.

Competition. Conflict. Control.

It was a principal rule that at any given moment in time, no less than one of the aforementioned pillars was at play between the two of us. For example, until a few weeks ago, I hadn't seen Mae in nearly seven years. During that time, the element of competition still loomed within every Page Six article and Socialgram photo. Both of which acted as an implicit tally of our latest accolades and career achievements, despite us living nine hundred miles apart with no contact.

If it wasn't already clear, Mae was the last person I intended to seek out in my time of need. Yet, somehow, I caught myself standing in her backyard peering down at her skimpy blue bikini covered body asking—nay, begging—for a favor.

“Mae, sweetheart. Please,” I pleaded, contemplating how far into the afterlife she would mock me if I dropped to my knees with beggar hands.

A scoff escaped Mae's lips and a pained expression spread over her face as she pushed herself off the chaise lounge she'd been lying on and breezed past me. Shaking my head, I swept away a bead of sweat from my hairline with my tattooed forearm and watched as she marched toward her back door, attempting to rid herself of my presence.

Which was somewhat understandable given that mere moments ago, I all but demanded that I move into her pool house without giving any prior explanation.

Some might say inviting yourself to live in your sworn enemy's backyard was rock bottom. And if that was the case, I'd need a search party sent to the darkest depths of the Atlantic immediately.

In the meantime, we shouldn't overlook the fact that this moment right here was a prime example of “The Three C's” in action. You see, in this instance, Mae and I were exercising one of, if not the most, important pillars—control. Unfortunately for me, though, she was in possession of power this time around. Not only did she have the ability to escape inside at any second, but she also had the final say in whether she'd deny helping me, which could, in turn, leave me both emasculated and on the hunt for a house.

Neither of which were ideal.

“Sweetheart, I'm sure we can talk through this...”

“Eww.” Mae's entire body cringed as she swiveled on her heels to face me. “Do not ever call me ‘*sweetheart*’ again.”

“How about sugar tits instead?” I chided, slipping my gaze down to the

thin turquoise material covering her perky breasts. Although seeing the glower on her face as I inched my eyes back upward gave me an overwhelming inkling she wasn't charmed by my proposition.

Such a shame.

The thing about Mae, was that she'd grown immune to my taunts by the time we were teenagers. However, since our recent reconnection—no thanks to her sister, Scarlett—there was no mistaking her stiffened shock at my newest lineup of lewd remarks. For the better half of a decade, I'd been carefully brewing a new set of ready-to-use annoyances for when we inevitably crossed paths again. Nice to see my years of mental handiwork coming to good use. Best of all, there weren't any parents or teachers around these days to reprimand me when things got out of hand.

"If I ever catch you gawking at my tits again, I swear to god I'll wear a turtleneck and peacoat every second until I'm six feet under the ground."

"Good thing you're already on the fast track to hell, because lying is a sin." The corners of my mouth quirked upward into a playful grin as I called her bluff. Just as I suspected, she stood there with a stern-faced expression, stopped in her tracks without so much as a comeback stuck on her lips.

Granted, it wasn't difficult to conclude her claim as false, being that we were standing outside in one-hundred-and-five-degree Miami heat where she was quite literally frying herself by the pool in next to nothing a few minutes ago.

"Try me, Calhoun... I dare you."

Apparently, our time apart had made her rusty. Her quarreling tactics desperately needed refining if she wanted to come anywhere close to unnerving me.

Despite her insufficient sharpness, the tension that swarmed between us was as electric as ever. It was practically tangible. A profuse static humming that consumed the five feet of space separating us. And frankly, I'd be a stone-cold liar if I said I didn't get a bit of a high off of our deranged dynamic. As much as Mae's presence annoyed me, there was no denying that I found our little feuds to be quite entertaining.

I wouldn't continue taking part if they weren't.

"Seriously? You're still staring." Mae balled her hands into fists at her sides before making two giant strides forward until her chest was flush against mine. "You're shameless. You know that, right?"

With utmost honesty, I could confirm that I hadn't been gawking at her

like she was accusing me of. Then again, why on God's green earth would I need to steal a look when I could feel her nipples hardening against me instead? Someone entertain me and make her logic make sense.

Like I said, I knew the girl needed some work on those argumentative skills, but I never would've guessed she was this out of practice.

Raising a brow in silent question, I matched her steadfast stare while a wry smile tugged at the corner of my lips. After a beat, she fluttered her gaze down to our connection, and it was only then that I watched in amusement as a flurry of emotions rolled over her features.

Shock. Disgust. Uneasiness.

Just to name a few.

"I... I..." she stammered, fluttering her gray-blue eyes up to mine before dropping them down to our point of connection once again.

Mae was rarely one to waver in a fight, and while there wasn't a prize to be won here, I couldn't resist the hint of triumph that ignited in my chest knowing I'd rattled her a bit.

Man, some small victories sure tasted just as sweet as the big ones.

"You what?" I challenged, lifting a hand to brush away the strand of blonde hair that had fallen into her eyes. And no, I didn't suppress the amused grin that took over my face as she avoided eye contact by looking up at the crystal blue afternoon sky.

Accepting her downfall with an eye roll, Mae sagged away a fraction of an inch so we were no longer touching. Somehow, the minimal space between our bodies only seemed to intensify the rampant spark between us. The yearning desire blooming tenfold with each passing second.

"So, tell me... when can I move into the pool house?"

"Let me think..." Mae hummed, resting her palms on her hips and tapping her right foot against the hardscape before her face went flat. "Never. It's occupied. Indefinitely."

"Don't lie to me, March baby. I know Scarlett moved into Abel's place across the street a few weeks ago. I was at their housewarming party last Friday, remember?"

"Hmm, doesn't ring a bell." She brushed me off as if we hadn't had a spirited debate over whether lime crema and mango salsa could be used together on fish tacos simultaneously. The answer was, without a question, yes. Yet, she insisted on arguing over the subject while a handful of my teammates sat back, sipping on cold beers while watching the two of us argue

like we were some sort of hired entertainment.

“Mae, seriously,” I exhaled, running out of patience. My lease was ending in two days and I had more important things to spend the next forty-eight hours focused on, like preparing for the Matrix’s first preseason game that was coming up in a week.

“Why do you need a place to live in the first place? You’re a professional athlete, and unless you’re financially reckless—which would make sense now that I’m saying it out loud—you have to have at least a few million sitting in a bank account you could use to find somewhere, anywhere, else to live?”

“First off, I am not ‘*financially reckless*,’” I mocked her shrill voice in an exaggerated feminine tone. “Second, my contract with the Matrix was only for a season. They haven’t offered me an extension yet, and there’s still another month before the fifty-three-man roster is finalized. Even then, there’s always the possibility I could get released.”

She threw her head back and let a wicked laugh ripple past her lips. “Sounds like a personal problem if I’ve ever heard one. Maybe if you played better last season, you wouldn’t be in this predicament.”

“We were undefeated, won the League Bowl, and I broke four franchise records. Only a handful of players in League history have had a season as good as I did last year.”

“If you say so...” she stretched her arms up over her head, pretending to yawn. “But it doesn’t sound very impressive, if you ask me.”

I expelled a ragged sigh while poking my tongue into my cheek, trying to simmer down my growing desire to challenge her thought process. “Look, I’ll only be here until the Matrix decide to extend my contract, or I get signed with another team.” I paused, wiping another dot of sweat from my forehead. “Trust me when I say you’re the last person I wanted to ask. But it’s hard to find a place that will rent to me for an unknown period of time that also has enough security.”

Didn’t hurt that she lived ten minutes from our practice facility either.

“I can think of a few places for you... oh yeah, they’re called hotels, you imbecile.”

“Where anyone off the street could walk in and lurk outside my room?” I countered.

“Why are you acting like you’re not a six foot three, two-hundred-thirty-pound football player? Hell, even if you weren’t, you could always hire a

bodyguard.” She fired back effortlessly. “Besides, I don’t know if you’ve heard, but Abel’s house got toilet papered by a few heathens a while back, so this neighborhood isn’t exactly the safe haven you might think it is.”

I leveled my gaze at her with a blank face. “If I recall correctly, you and your girl posse are the ‘heathens’ that were found guilty of that offense, weren’t you?”

“Once again, I do not know what you’re referring to.” She deflected, darting her gaze to the pool house on her left.

Mae had always been a horrible liar. It was comical, really.

Like once, when she was in first grade—and I was in second—she went on a passionate rant trying to convince her dads that she hadn’t stolen a candy bar from the convenience store down the block from our neighborhood. Regardless of the evidence being smeared across her face and the brown and silver wrapper hanging halfway out of the back pocket of her shorts.

Man, some things never changed, did they?

“I assume you asked all of your friends first?” Mae arched a brow. “How disappointing that none of them wanted to help you.” She made a mock frown that ignited a warm blaze of heat beneath my skin.

As much as I wouldn’t mind her taut nipples being pressed against my chest a second time, I was ready to shut this conversation down. We could pick this little game back up and argue ourselves into continuous circles some other time if she wanted. “Come on. I know you’re bored, but I don’t have all day to waste here.”

Her lips flattened into a line as she paused for a beat to push out a heavy breath from her nostrils. “The best I can offer you is a room at Rita’s next door. She rents the house from me and I’m sure she’d let you stay in one of the guest rooms or something... but you’ll have to pay five times her rate as an inconvenience fee.”

“What’s the inconvenience?”

“You.”

“Clever,” I deadpanned. “But I already told you I want the pool house.”

“You’re not getting the pool house.”

“What are you going to use it for?”

Mae sucked in a breath as if I’d insulted her before stomping toward her back door once again. “I don’t have to give you a reason,” she called back over her shoulder as I trailed behind her. “It’s mine. If I want it to sit there and collect dust, then so be it! Hell, maybe I have plans to turn it into a sex

house. Who knows?”

I ignored her sex house comment for the sake of wanting to end this conversation, although I had to admit it piqued my curiosity.

“You won’t even know I’m here. I swear.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No!” she insisted, flailing her hands in frustration as she whipped around. “Seriously, has no one ever told you how insufferable you are?”

“You have... many times. Even though you never walk away from a fight.” Her jaw tensed at my words, but I made the conscious decision to prod further. “I’m beginning to think I’m not as ‘insufferable’ as you insist I am. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if you were getting turned on by this long-standing game of cat and mouse we play.”

“Oh, that is rich, Calhoun. Just freaking rich. I can’t *believe* how enormous your ego is! It’s alarming, truly.”

“You’re in luck, because I have another thing that’s alarmingly enormous too.” I shot her a wink, which—based on the dirty expression on her face—was not well received. “Be a good girl and I’ll let you have a look any time you want... all you have to do is ask.”

She flared her nostrils at me with a scowl, and crossed her arms over her chest, which inadvertently pushed her breasts upward. Nope, nope. I was not going to unravel her wrath by looking at them.

By the time I flicked that thought out of my head, Mae had already turned on her heels to flee from me yet again. Catching up in three steps, I wrapped a hand around her elbow to hold her back from escaping. “Mae... please.”

She reared her head back with an open mouth to observe my face, likely as astonished by my use of the word ‘please’ as I was. It wasn’t a term I was accustomed to, especially where she was involved. But seeing as this was the second time I’d used the word since stepping foot in her backyard, surely, she must’ve sensed my desperation.

“Get on your knees and I’ll consider it.”

I contemplated her offer for all of a millisecond before a slow smirk curled at the edge of my mouth. “All this time, I imagined I’d be the one saying those words to you instead.”

“That’s it. I’m done with you.” She hissed, reaching for the handle, tearing open the door so forcefully that a gust of crisp air blew against my cheeks. “Get off my property.”

“Does that mean you’ll think about it?”

“I hate you.”

“Likewise,” I replied drily, just before the door slammed shut behind her.

This might not have been the victory I was hoping for, but I had a tendency to play better in the second half of the game, anyway.

TWO

OCTOBER

A CLOUD of annoyance consumed my thoughts as I stalked across the street to Scarlett and Abel's place. The march over helped to blow off some of the steam I'd accumulated during my conversation with Mae. But the subtle reminder that I'd made no progress on my housing dilemma only brought it back up again.

Technically, Mae and Scarlett weren't blood related sisters, but as I saw it, they were as good of siblings as any. If it wasn't clear, Scar was undoubtedly my favorite.

She and I had stayed in contact over the years, texting and Videotiming when we had free time, but it was only once I got traded to the Matrix last season that our friendship really rekindled. We'd met up a few times for dinner over the past few months, usually whenever some old friends of ours from school were in town. Lately, she'd been inviting me around more often, though, no doubt hoping for Abel and I to form some sort of fraternal bond.

While I applauded her effort, that friendship wasn't going to happen.

Sure, Abel and I worked together about as well as a Quarterback and Tight End could during practices and games. Our League Bowl rings were proof of that. However, off the field, our personalities were completely incompatible. Hence why Scarlett's attempt at forcing our friendship wasn't going to work out the way she envisioned.

It wasn't that I didn't like the guy. He seemed like a fine enough dude. Had there not been a fundamental disconnect between our temperaments, we might've gotten along. But despite Scar's effort, some things simply couldn't be cured overnight.

My thighs burned as I trudged up the porch steps and twisted the knob

before darting through the front door without warning. “Scarlett!” I bellowed, ignoring Abel, who was lounging on the couch with a remote in hand.

“What the fuck are you doing in my house?”

“It’s not just your house anymore, dude. Pretty sure her name is on the deed, isn’t it?”

“Touché.” He nodded in acceptance, drawing his attention back to the television screen.

See? What’d I tell you about that fundamental disconnect?

“Scarlett!” I called out again, darting my eyes around the disarranged kitchen which was sprawled with vegetable covered pans and marinated chicken skewers ready for the grill.

“In here.” Her muffled voice sounded from the small pantry off the left of the cabinetry.

Winding my way past the large marble island, I paused in the doorway of the tiny room as the five-foot-four, pastel green sundress wearing brunette I was looking for came into view. All it took was one look at my clenched jaw and flared nostrils before her beaming grin was replaced with drawn together brows. “Rough day?”

“Don’t get me started.” My shoulders slumped, and I pushed out a breath before wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her in for a quick, welcoming hug.

“Hands off my girl.” Abel’s voice rumbled from the living room. I peered over my shoulder, only to see that he hadn’t taken his eyes off the baseball game on the television screen. How was that possible?

Scarlett rolled her eyes and poked her head out of the pantry to shout back to him, “Abel, come on! It’s a platonic side hug, and you know that.”

“Yeah, it’s platonic,” I echoed her statement like a small child.

“Like I give a fuck. Hands off, and they stay off. Got it?”

I knew he was protective of her, understandably so, but Scarlett had been like a sibling to me since before my actual sister, Hallie, was born. I loved Scar, but even as kids, there’d never been a time where I’d looked at her as anything other than family.

Sure, there was the time where I’d asked her on a date as a ploy to get her and Abel back together. But I thought we’d all moved past that by now. I mean, he was the one who asked me to do it, and he got his girl back, didn’t he?

“You got it, man.” I complied with Abel’s demand for my own sake. The

last thing I needed in life was a Page Six headline about me getting pummeled by a teammate. Especially since my contract was up in the air. “How did he notice that? He couldn’t even see us,” I whispered low enough that only Scarlett could understand.

“Maybe he’s omniscient or something?”

“I heard that,” Abel piped in from the living room.

Scarlett and I exchanged a knowing look while trying to will down the howls of laughter threatening to spill past our lips. Man, why was everything ten times funnier when you weren’t supposed to be laughing?

A beat passed as I calmed myself before biting out the one sentence I so vehemently despised saying aloud, “I need your help.” My throat burned with each syllable and my jaw clenched tightly.

“With what?”

“Mae.”

I wasn’t certain whether the smug smile plastered on her face was supportive or concerning. However, upon observing her tickled expression, I had a feeling she’d been waiting for me to say that since the dawn of time.

“Operation Red to the Red has begun,” she mumbled to herself.

“What does that mean?”

“Don’t worry. You’ll find out soon enough.”

THREE

MAE

FOR THE MOST PART, I was generally a happy person.

I woke up each morning with a little extra pep in my step that fueled me throughout the day, whereas most people needed an iced coffee the size of their head before they could even consider being a functioning member of society.

Not only was I a happy person, but I liked to believe that I was a nice person too. Okay... so maybe that one was a bit of a stretch. At the very least, I was a decent person.

But when it came to being in the presence of October Calhoun? Yeah, that's when my pleasant demeanor was shot to shit.

Primarily because I hated him—oh, so fucking hated him—and there wasn't a damn thing in the universe or beyond that could change that.

Was my reasoning for detesting him asinine? Potentially.

Did I care? Not even slightly.

At this point, after years of feeling nothing but fire fueled ill will at the mere mention of his name, altering my opinion of October would be a blatant waste of eighty percent of my life. And frankly, my time on this silly, insignificant planet was too freaking short to make amends with someone who wasn't worthy of having my unparalleled presence in their life.

The funny thing was, he had invariably decided for both of us that our feud of the past couple decades was “slow moving with no point of contention”—his words, not mine—but dimwitted, ignorant October couldn't have been more wrong.

Then again, he was a man... so I really shouldn't've been that surprised by him making conclusions on my behalf without so much as consulting me

first.

Moving along...

You see, there *was* a pivotal moment that demolished all possibilities of acquaintanceship between October and I. And it all started with... Molly fucking Goldberg.

I didn't have time to relive one of the most mortifying moments of my childhood right now, though. My life was being derailed six ways to Sunday, and there were more important things in life I could be pissed off about.

If we were getting into specifics, there was the grave reality that my company was one mishap away from collapsing to shambles. I could definitely be pissed about that.

Oh, and don't even get me started on October barging into my backyard unannounced and uninvited—what if I had been tanning naked, huh?—while all but *demanding* that he move into my pool house.

Who in their right mind had the confidence to be so unabashedly senseless?

Him. That's who.

Earlier this morning, when I woke to the sound of birds chirping harmoniously outside my window, I had an innate feeling that today was going to be a fantastic day. Then, much to my surprise, the last thing I ever expected to witness in this lifetime happened... my arch nemesis, standing in front of me, *nanoseconds* away from dropping to his knees to beg for my help.

It should've been enjoyable. Gratifying. Downright entertaining, even.

Yet somehow, my internal victory was trampled over the second I became cognizant of the fact that he was calling in a favor purely for his benefit, and his benefit only.

Of course, it would be just like him to ruin one of the most anticipated moments of my life by making it all about him. I was a fool for thinking otherwise.

The prevailing attribute I'd grown to loathe most about October was that he always—and I mean always—had a way of turning my proudest, most sought-after moments around onto himself. Like the one time in elementary school when I raised the most money for our school wide walkathon, yet because his mom bought popsicles for everyone afterward, he was the one who got treated like the savior of the damn world.

It was an abomination, truly.

“Scarlett!” I shouted while wandering through the front door of her new house, bypassing Abel on the couch. “You’ll never believe what that idiot...” Stopping in my tracks, my words dropped off as the six-foot-three tattooed beast of a human sitting at the kitchen island came into my line of sight. “Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me.”

It had been half an hour after I left him high and dry on the back patio. And I *finally* felt calm enough to walk across the street for Friday night dinner after replaying our encounter in my head half a dozen times. Which was Scarlett’s latest ploy to create “long lasting family traditions,” although I was certain her words were secretly code for “I need guinea pigs to try out my latest recipes before posting them on the blog.”

I knew it... Abel knew it. But we loved her too much to admit we saw right through her. Her cookbook was coming out in a few months and she wanted to keep her blog views up in the meantime. So, Abel and I plastered on cheerful faces, showed up to her silly little dinners every week, and gave “unscripted” reviews of whatever her newest dish was at the end of the meal.

My mistake, however, was in thinking that she wouldn’t invite October to join us. Of course—*of course*—I should’ve known he’d go running to my sister’s side the second our little dispute ended. Just like he always did.

Even at his ripe age of twenty-six, he was still vying for the coveted spot of teacher’s pet.

How childish.

“I take it I’m the talk point of the hour?” He swiveled his head so the smug grin I so desperately wished I could slap off his stupid face was on full display.

“You’re a pest,” I snarled, sliding onto the barstool seat furthest from him and averting my attention to my sister. “Scarlett, why is he here?”

“I invited him,” she said matter-of-factly, casually immersed in pouring a glass of wine, as if she hadn’t just blatantly offended me.

“You invited him?” I echoed, pretending like “he” wasn’t observing our conversation from three feet away. “If you didn’t want me to come, you could’ve just sent me a text. Now I have to order dinner for myself.” I flailed my hands, pulling my phone from the back pocket of my shorts and opening up a food delivery app.

“Jesus Christ, Mae...” Scar whispered harshly, like *I* was the one being unreasonable. Which I clearly was not. No debate necessary. “You’re not leaving, and neither is he. The four of us are going to sit outside at the table

and have a nice cordial dinner together. Got it?”

Scarlett bounced her gaze between October and me, though neither of us uttered a word in response. Rolling her eyes, she picked up the large serving tray and headed toward the back door with her famous lemon garlic marinated chicken skewers that smelled so good I could practically taste them.

“You need my help, Red?” Abel asked, coming up behind her to grab the food from her wobbly hands as she struggled to maneuver the door handle.

Before the door slammed behind him, Abel’s deep voice resounded through the kitchen. “Don’t kill each other inside our house.”

Great.

This was the second time in one afternoon that I’d been trapped into having an unbearable conversation with October. My blood warmed to the equivalent of molten lava, thinking back on our earlier interaction as I watched him slide off his barstool. I didn’t hide the disgust written on my face as I eyed him walking around the island, open a fresh bottle of white wine then pour himself a glass.

“First, you invite yourself to live at my house, and now, you’re here inviting yourself to my family dinner too. Am I right in assuming your audacity knows no bounds? Or has your infatuation with me become all-consuming?” I pressed, turning to face him with my arms crossed tightly over my pastel blue top.

“Lovely as always, March baby.”

“For the love of *God*, will you please stop calling me ‘March baby’,” I mocked his gravelly tone. “I don’t want to have a pet name like your little whores.”

“Ahh, so you’re telling me you don’t want to be one of my... ‘little whores’?”

I scoffed. Was everyone in the business of offending me tonight? If so, where the hell was my memo?

“I’d rather be trapped at the bottom of the ocean without an oxygen tank.”

“Why suffocate down there when you could suffocate on my cock instead?” The smug grin he sported as he leaned against the countertop behind him and brought the glass to his lips was infuriatingly arrogant. “Speaking of which... I’m getting offended that you haven’t found a new pet name for me yet. I take it ‘Toby’ is no longer enticing to you?”

Comical. This man was absolutely comical.

“Oh, really? Please tell me your ideas, because I’m dying to hear what you have in mind.”

“Well, ‘master and commander’ has a nice ring to it.”

“Fuck off.” I shot him a disapproving glare. That movie was almost as horrible as his request for a nickname.

“Do you always have to act like this?” October snarled. “You should really learn to take a joke at some point.”

“Maybe I could take a joke if yours weren’t so obnoxious.”

In the handful of weeks since October had dropped back into my life, I’d been trying to implement a new mantra—I am calm. I am cool. I am collected—in order to stifle my ever-growing rage whenever he was around.

Yet, no matter how many times I chanted the mantra in my head, every time he was within ten feet of me all logic in my brain shut off, and a new phrase took over instead—I am angry. I am agitated. I am annoyed.

I wasn’t proud of it, but at least I was self-aware enough to recognize my flaws. We all have to start somewhere, am I right?

“Come on, Mae... can’t we go one night without trying to bite each other’s heads off?”

I huffed, contemplating how much it would pain me, both mentally and physically, to do so. The answer, by the way, was a lot. Scratch that—more than a lot. Not to mention, I was more so unmoved being that this came at his request.

Two substantial favors in one day. Who the hell did October think he was?

“I know what you’re thinking...” he rasped, running a frustrated hand through his hair. “Don’t do this for me, do it for your sister. You know how much these kinds of things mean to her.”

Letting out a ragged breath, I reluctantly rolled the idea around in my brain.

God, did I hate it when he was right.

To make a long story short, my sister wasn’t actually my sister... confusing, I know.

See, my dads and Scarlett’s mom had been best friends all throughout college. When they mutually decided their impulsive glory days were over, they bought houses across the street from each other. Shortly after, my dads started the adoption process, and Scarlett’s mom picked sperm donor eleven thousand twenty-three from a donor database.

Our parents raised us together like siblings, though, and it never once felt like there was a divide between our families. And that was especially true after Scar's mom passed from cervical cancer two and a half years ago.

It hit all four of us hard, but for her it was exceptionally harrowing.

Scarlett used to spend hours in the kitchen committing every one of her mom's habits and techniques to memory. I almost forgot how effortlessly Miss Jill made everything seem back then.

What I missed most, though, was that no matter how big of a mess we made, she'd ignore it all and pull up a chair next to us to spend quality time with Scarlett and I while we devoured her latest recipe.

God, I missed her so much sometimes. And I knew that this—making dinner for people and spending time with them—was Scarlett's silent way of showing all of us she loved us, too.

Who was I to deny my sister that?

Sighing, I pressed my lips together into a thin line. "One night. That's it."

Almost as if on cue, the back door burst open and Scarlett shouted to us, "Food's ready!"

It was a humid August evening, and the sun was setting, leaving us a cotton candy colored sky to eat dinner under. The adorable twinkle lights Scarlett and I put up before last Friday's dinner were already lit, giving us a Socialgram worthy scene for the evening.

I'd barely made it two feet outside before Scarlett's hand wrapped loosely around my arm as she dragged me over to the side of the patio. "Mae, can I talk to you in private?" she questioned, waiting until October was out of earshot before speaking again. "What the hell has gotten into you?"

"He didn't tell you?" I raised my eyebrows at her. "He asked—no, demanded—that he move into the pool house."

She stared at me blankly. "...and what's so wrong with letting him?"

"Oh, my god... oh, my god. Of course, you're on his side!" I gasped, bunching my fists at my sides. This betrayal felt worse than someone draining my bank account for everything I was worth. "He tricked you into convincing me to let him move in, didn't he?"

"No, no, no. You know I am always on your side, but don't you think you've held onto this grudge with him for a little too long?"

"I am *not* holding onto a grudge."

"Okay... then tell me what he did that was so bad that you act like an enraged shrew every time he's around?"

I stared at her, dumbfounded and wordless. Partly because she'd just called me an "enraged shrew" ... how rude. But mostly because I was the one in our dynamic who called her out on her overly dramatic behavior.

If I remembered correctly, the two of us had a nearly identical conversation a few months ago when I challenged her to consider whether she was only seeing what she wanted to see when it came to Abel. Obviously, the answer was a resounding "yes". Neither of us would be standing in his backyard right now if I wasn't.

"I know there's a reason..." I tried to cut her off, but she wouldn't allow it. "Nope, don't even bother with your usual 'he's rude' or 'he's self-centered' bullshit. You and I both know those are just a big fat coverup for something else you won't admit," she whisper-yelled.

Releasing an exhale, I contemplated telling her the one sentence that spilled from Molly Goldberg's lips and what October did after, which turned my seven-year-old heart to stone. To this day, I'd never told another soul of the words I'd overheard after our second grade Valentine's Day party. But now, a couple weeks away from my twenty-fifth birthday, it seemed pathetic to admit that I'd been hung up over a few words and actions all this time.

Granted, October and I's demise started years before that moment. This one event just so happened to be the straw that broke the camel's back. Even if there hadn't been a defining moment in our not-so-friendship, I had no doubt we'd still be at sparring at each other's throats.

"Fine... don't tell me. All I'm saying is that a lot can be resolved with a hate fuck." Scarlett raised her brows while nudging me on the side with an elbow.

She'd said that a few times over the last few weeks, and every time I couldn't help but roll my eyes. It was my natural instinct. Not my fault, I couldn't help it.

"I would rather never cum again than have him give me an orgasm," I deadpanned.

Scarlett and I both drew our gaze across the backyard, giving October a once-over as he flaunted his newest forearm tattoo to Abel—who by the looks of it didn't give half a shit.

"On second thought... it might just be another thing for him to brag about." Scar concluded after a beat.

"My point exactly."

The two of us ambled over to the table, taking seats next to each other,

while the boys settled in across from us.

In the few weeks since Scarlett had started our new Friday night dinner tradition, there hadn't been a moment of awkwardness the entire night.

Which was especially surprising, considering Abel was still a bit skeptical of me. I might have iced him out shortly after he and my sister got together, but it had all been in good fun. I promise. Yet, as the four of us settled into our seats, filling our plates to the brim, silence hung heavy in the air.

"So, Abel..." After fifteen minutes of excruciating silence, I had to put a stop to it. I'd pushed my food around the plate with my fork long enough while trying to muster up the courage to ask for his help. "I, uh, heard your sister is going to be participating in that charity fashion show downtown later this month."

He hummed while shoveling an enormous bite of chicken into his mouth.

"Well... if she happens to mention that she's looking for models—like in passing or something—would you mind putting in a good word for me?"

I wasn't normally one to ask for favors, but seeing as Abel's half-sister, Aera Chase, was one of the biggest up-and-coming names in fashion, I had to put my foot in the door.

"Sure, I'll call her right after this."

My shoulders relaxed as a small sigh of ease washed over me.

"Struggling to keep the business afloat, March baby?"

"Stop talking before I make you regret it." Scarlett came to my aid, pointing at October with a butter knife. She dragged her gaze over to me and I shot her a sheepish smile and mouthed my thanks while silently hoping he didn't catch on.

Many moons ago, I had been one of—if not the most—successful high fashion models on the planet. And no, I wasn't saying that to be cocky. It was simply a fact.

That was until I called out my former employer on a scandal involving some of the nefarious antics he got up to while on the job, thus ending my career and shunning me from the industry entirely. It was only when I started my modeling agency—where models could work without having to worry about their employer taking advantage of them—that I began to reclaim my power.

Yet, two years later, Gordon Sandoval still had a way of making me feel defenseless when I least expected it. Hell, earlier this week he was sending me anonymous emails threatening to blackmail me.

With what? No idea.

Aside from being one of the few people on earth who had the power to unnerve me, there wasn't anything he had on me that could end my career. Trust me, I made sure of it.

While life might not have been going according to plan lately, with the business on the edge of failure and all, I was determined to forge ahead. I'd told Scarlett some of it—enough for her to know it was a sore subject—but she had no idea how much worse it had gotten.

The silence around the table had grown so tense it was palpable, yet none of us dared to speak a word as Scarlett broke out the dessert plates.

“So... how does everyone feel about the key lime pie?” She broke the painful silence after everyone had taken a bite, and I peeked over to see Abel's shoulders visibly relax. “I tweaked a recipe from a friend.”

Moments later, the three of us chimed in with our praises as we shoved back-to-back, heaping spoonfuls into our mouths.

When I finally peered up to sneak a glance at October, I was surprised when I found his attention was already locked in on my face. There was the faintest drop of sorrow in his eyes, almost like he knew his earlier comment had upset me.

That alone made me swallow back the tears that pricked the back of my throat. Not because I was grateful for his remorse, but because there was nothing I hated more than people taking pity on me.

Least of all, October Calhoun.

FOUR

OCTOBER

I TRIED CATCHING Mae's eyes from across the table, but she refused to look up from twirling her fork around her plate. No matter how hard she tried to shield her face behind her hair, camouflaging her misty eyes, there was no hiding the embarrassment rolling off of her.

As much as I enjoyed toying with the girl, I never wanted to be the reason behind her tears. Sure, we got snappy at each other sometimes, but it didn't give me the right to go around purposely hurting her feelings.

If the roles were reversed and some dude acted like that toward my sister, I'd fucking kill them. No question.

That being said, I was fully capable of apologizing when needed.

While Abel and Scarlett mumbled quietly to each other next to us, I cleared my throat loud enough for only Mae to notice. She didn't look up as I muttered across the table in a hushed tone, "I'm sorry for upsetting you."

Her glossy eyes jumped to meet mine, pinning me with a pointed stare. "I don't want your pity."

"This isn't that, and you know it."

She didn't relent her piercing gaze, but instead of letting her unsettle me, I leaned forward, placing both elbows on the table, matching her fixed look. I wasn't a big enough asshole to make her cry, but I sure as shit wouldn't let her poor attitude ruin everyone else's night.

Mine included.

Mae and Scarlett had some sort of weird sisterly telepathy thing going on since we were kids, and I was doubtful I could break through. It wasn't something I had with my sister, but maybe it was one of those girl things. You know, kind of like how they always travel in groups to the bathroom

together.

Might as well try my hand at mental magic, anyway.

You're acting like a brat.

Mae squinted at me from across the table, tightening the grip around her fork. My body temperature rose as I shot the same message to her once again. A few seconds passed, and I gave it one last shot, attempting to send my words down the telepathic line. Sure enough, Mae's eyes widened, and a scoff escaped her lips as the silverware in her hands clattered against the table. "You did *not* just call me a brat!"

In my peripherals, I could see Scarlett and Abel's heads whip toward us, but I didn't dare avert my eyes in their direction. Blood pounded in my ears, but I remained focused, keeping my concentration locked on the girl in front of me, who looked like she was going to explode out of her seat.

See, the thing was, I wasn't going to waver from Mae's little stare down. At this point, an unexpected tsunami washing over us was about the only incident that would cause me to falter. Even then, I'd probably try to fight through it as long as possible.

I might've been new to this telepathic communication ordeal, but I would've bet twenty bucks I heard Mae shoot a message through the line calling me a conniving piece of shit.

I lifted a brow in question.

"Yes, you heard that right." Her tone was scathing.

"You little—"

"Jesus Christ," Scarlett cut me off before I had the chance to elaborate further. "This dinner is officially over."

Huffing, Mae pushed back her chair, springing out of her seat as she picked up her plate. She brushed past Scar, storming into the house while the door slammed closed behind her. Now, Abel and I weren't typically ones to share solidarity off the field, but the wide-eyed look we exchanged was the closest we'd gotten to friendship.

Shaking my head side to side, I pushed off the table and leaned across to grab the cup and utensils Mae had left behind, and stacked them on my plate. I trailed behind Scarlett and Abel as we silently ambled into the house. Upon entering the kitchen, the three of us stood there sharing a concerned look as we observed Mae pounding down the remaining white wine straight from the bottle.

Classic Mae-like dramatics.

Ignoring her, I headed over to the expansive kitchen sink and rinsed off our dishes before placing them in the washer.

Scarlett, who was putting away leftovers in the fridge, called over her shoulder to me. “October, can you grab the kiwi buns from the pantry? I’m going to make something really quick for you guys to take home.”

Hard to say no to a second dessert.

Obliging to her request, I gave her a nod before waltzing into the small pantry and perusing through all the labels.

That’s not it... nope, not it either.

I scanned through the entire pantry three times before slumping my shoulders and calling out to Scar, “I don’t see anything labeled as ‘kiwi buns’.”

“Look in the back near the cereal boxes.”

I scanned the area, only to come up short once again. “I still can’t find them.”

“Men are useless... all of them,” Mae muttered, barging into the tiny space to take over browsing the shelves. Before I could move out of the way, she planted herself in front of me, dropping to her knees to pick up a few of the boxes on the bottom shelf.

“Is that—nope—those are Hawaiian rolls,” she mumbled to herself in a hushed tone.

As she continued to sift through the shelves, my ears perked up at the sound of the pantry door closing to my right... and it was immediately followed by the lock latching from the outside.

Damn it, Scarlett.

Had Lea been with us tonight, I wouldn’t have been slightly surprised by her pulling something like this. The girl was single-handedly responsible for getting Scarlett and Abel together in the first place, so I wouldn’t put it past her to try to work her magic to convince Mae and I to reconcile our issues.

But Scar? Not a chance.

If I was a betting man, she was the last person I would’ve put my money on to play matchmaker. How was she going to match people together when she had no idea Abel was plain as day in love with her before they started dating?

Mae twisted around, looking up at me with widened eyes as her mouth formed into the perfect O shape. Closing my eyelids, I ran both hands through my hair with a groan.

I did not have the energy to deal with this right now, but I guess I didn't really have a choice, did I?

Dropping my hands to my sides, I opened my eyes to see Mae still on her knees with her mouth open, gaze fixed on the door in shock. Ever so slowly, she raked her line of sight across the small space until our eyes met.

Well, seeing Mae on her knees with wide eyes and an open mouth wasn't exactly something I planned on seeing in this lifetime. Even more shocking was the fact that I wasn't mad about it. Not one fucking bit.

Alright, alright.

Nope.

My gaze flickered to the ceiling. I would not allow my dirty mind to get the best of me right now.

When I peered back down at her seconds later, she was still making the same face.

Alright, I lied.

Now I was definitely thinking about her plump pink lips wrapped around my cock. Another minute of her looking at me like that and I was going to start thinking she was on the same wavelength.

"Can you back up so I can get your boner out of my face?" she snarled.

"I do not have a..." I mumbled, looking down at my zipper.

You've got to be kidding me.

Reaching over her shoulder, I quickly grabbed a box of minute rice to cover myself despite the fact that she'd already gotten a front-row seat to my body's betrayal.

Last time I got an unexpected hard on was four years ago during a press conference, when a bombshell sports reporter questioned me about a series of false tabloids which alleged to me throwing weekly orgies with the team's cheerleaders. Needless to say, when I went to stand up after the interview was over, the photographers and reporters got a killer picture for their headline.

Could you blame a guy, though? Sitting around talking about orgies for ten minutes was hard enough—no pun intended—but tack on the gorgeous reporter interrogating me... asking me for intimate details about my sex life? I was fucked from the start.

The rumors grew tenfold overnight and it took months and thousands of dollars to scrub the internet of those images and videos. Seeing as they hadn't resurfaced in about eighteen months, I think it was safe to conclude it was water under the bridge at this point.

“Are you really going to finish that sentence?”

“I’d rather not,” I muttered lowly.

With a small laugh, Mae pushed up off her thighs and shot over to bang her fists against the door. “Scarlett, open the door right now!”

A few seconds of dead silence passed from the opposite side of the door before Mae began pounding again.

“Abel, did you hear something?” Scar’s muffled voice sounded through the cracks. The hint of amusement coating her voice was difficult to miss.

That sneaky little minx. Who would’ve thought little Scar girl had it in her?

Whirling around, Mae pressed her back against the door with closed eyes, sucking in a measured breath then holding it for a handful of beats before exhaling. When she opened her eyes, the glare she gave me was deadly.

What was that for? It’s not like I wanted to be locked in here anymore than she did.

“I take it they want us to talk...” I offered.

“It’s a wonder you weren’t valedictorian with deductive reasoning skills that good,” Mae said with a pinched expression.

I took a few steadying breaths of my own to gather my composure.

If we were going to make it out of here without ripping each other’s heads off, one of us was going to have to be the voice of reason. And seeing as she couldn’t look past her blind rage for something out of both of our control, that position was going to have to be bestowed upon me, whether I wanted it or not.

The thing about Mae, was that she never knew when to back down from a fight. Getting her to let down her defenses long enough to have a cordial conversation was the equivalent to getting a toddler to sit still at preschool all day.

Not an easy feat.

“This is all your fault,” she huffed, stepping closer to me with her arms crossed tightly against her chest.

“My fault?”

“What, you think I wanted this?” Mae flailed her arms out in front of her before crossing them back again. “I’d rather be summoned to the underworld than be locked in this closet with you.”

Nice to know we could agree on one thing.

“You know what I’m sick and tired of?”

“Dwelling on your miserable existence?”

“No. I’m sick and tired of the fact that every time we’re around each other, you act like a fucking fourth grader. You realize you’ll be twenty-five in less than a month, right?” If it were humanly possible for smoke to come out of my ears, this would’ve been the moment. “And believe it or not, most twenty-five-year-olds can fake it long enough have a pleasant conversation with someone they don’t like. At the very least, most can take a joke. So, if you could act like an adult for five *fucking* seconds, I’d like to have one productive conversation. That’s it...”

“Fine.”

“So, you don’t like me...”

“Congrats on stating the obvious, fuckface,” she deadpanned with fury filling eyes.

I roamed my gaze over her face. She could try to cover it up all she wanted, but there was a trace of lust flaring in her eyes that didn’t go unnoticed.

“So, you’re saying you want to fuck my face?” I chided, taking one step closer to her, so her back was pressed against the door again.

I was trying to be serious, but she set me up for a response that was too good to keep inside.

“You’re insufferable.”

“Established. Now, let’s get back to the point, so we can get out of here.”

“You want to move into the pool house.” That was a statement, not a question. A bit obvious, if you ask me, but nonetheless, it was nice to know she was paying attention.

“Precisely.”

“And I don’t want that.”

“What do you suggest I do, then?”

“You could stop breathing,” she replied flatly. “Then your new home would be a coffin, and I wouldn’t be subject to suffering through another ‘cordial’ conversation with you. It’s a win, win,” she muttered the last sentence with her fakest smile to date.

“What is wrong with you?”

“Many things.”

“I’m aware,” I countered, moving the box of rice from my crotch and placing it back on the shelf to my left. “Look, I know that what I’m asking isn’t an ideal scenario for you, but I swear it will only be for a few weeks

until I find out whether or not I'm getting traded."

"Is there anyone I can call to make that decision come sooner?"

"Sure, call up Madden Matthews and see if he'll strike a deal with you."

Madden was the youngest person to own two professional sports teams—the Matrix and the Boston Benders hockey team. Sure, Mae might've been a well-known public figure, but despite what she believed, she wasn't "call up one of the richest men alive" kind of famous.

Man, wouldn't I get a kick out of watching her attempt to badger his secretary for a meeting, though. That'd be better than a damn comedy special.

"Do it for Scarlett," I suggested. I knew she'd never do anything to upset her sister, and I wasn't above using it to get my way with this. "Do you know how happy it would make her, seeing us pretend to be friends with each other?"

She sighed; annoyance written all over her face. "You can't keep pulling the 'do it for Scarlett' card every time you want me to do something."

"It's quite effective, isn't it?" I inched closer to her as she scrunched her lips together in thought.

I maximized her moment of contemplation by taking a minute to observe her features. Button nose. High cheekbones. There was a reason she'd previously been one of the highest paid models in the world. Even when she was pissed off, she looked gorgeous.

Smart of her for choosing a career path that involved little to no talking too. Lawyers everywhere should be grateful she wasn't their counterpart in the courtroom. Or man, how about picturing her as a doctor... could you imagine Mae performing bedside manner?

A small laugh slipped past my lips at the mental image, to which Mae shot me a deadly glare.

"Fine," she sighed after another minute of grueling silence. "Just know that Scarlett is the only reason I'm doing this. I don't know why she insists on keeping you around as a friend, especially when she has Lea and I, but she does. Plus, she'd get pissed at me if I let you rot cold on the streets like I want to."

Can't say her vivid imagination of my suffering came as much of a surprise.

"Let's get a few things straight... I don't want to see you. I don't want to hear you. In fact, I don't even want to know you exist. And for the love of fuck, if I so much as see one of your obnoxious whores on my property, I will

have both of you arrested for trespassing.”

“Lucky for you, I don’t sleep around during the season.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“If that’s your way of telling me I’m hot enough to fuck, I’ll take it.”

“Ha. Ha,” Mae grumbled with a twisted face. “I’m being serious. I’m a light sleeper. If you play your music too loud... I’ll know. If you test your luck at sneaking someone into the pool house at two in the morning... I’ll know. If you attempt to park even the *slightest inch* over from your designated spot in the driveway... I’ll know,” she muttered through clenched teeth. “I am all-knowing and all-seeing.”

“Say it ain’t so,” I gasped in mock surprise.

“While you’re at it, you should really get a new cologne. The one you’re wearing smells like month old unwashed underwear.” She pulled a face like she’d just stuck her nose in a freshly used dog crap bag. “I don’t want your nasty odor infiltrating my pool house.”

“I find it interesting that you’re so familiar with what month-old unwashed underwear smells like,” I countered. “Please... tell me more. Don’t leave out any details.”

Was I being a wee bit childish? Admittedly so.

What’s that phrase people said, again? All is fair in love and war.

“You should really keep an eye open while you’re sleeping now that I know where you live and all.”

“I’m shaking in my boots.” The corners of my lips curled upward into a taunting grin. “Truly.”

Turning around, she pounded her fists against the wood door much like she had a few minutes earlier. “Scarlett Joanna Sawyer! You won. I’m letting him live with me. Now, let us out!” She smacked a defeated hand against the door. A moment later the door opened, and a smug Scarlett stared back at the two of us. “There’s no such thing as ‘kiwi buns’, is there?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny.” A coy smirk was plastered across Scar’s expression. Meanwhile, Abel lifted an apathetic shoulder before snaking a hand around her waist and pulling her close. Based on the soft pink plush that rose to her cheekbones as he whispered in her ear, I had a feeling it was something suggestive.

The two of them were so disgustingly in love. And I wasn’t sure whether the pulling sensation I felt in my gut was envy or just a general hatred for public displays of affection.

Mae and I shared an uncomfortable glance, silently agreeing that their shameless affection was our cue to dish out our goodbyes and a faux-friendly “thanks for inviting us” partings before seeing ourselves out the front door.

“Do you need me to walk you across the street?” I offered as we neared the end of the driveway. “I wouldn’t want those—what did you call them?—heathens grabbing hold of you. In case you haven’t heard, this neighborhood isn’t exactly the safe haven you think it is,” I chided, as a security patrol golf cart cruised by us and the two middle-aged night guards gave us a passing wave.

“Fuck off.” She raised both middle fingers for my viewing pleasure as she stormed toward her yard.

“Fun sparring with you as always, March baby,” I taunted, as I watched her stomp up her front porch steps. “I’m already looking forward to our next.”

“I still hate you,” she barked back, slamming her enormous wooden front door behind her so hard her summer wreath nearly fell off the hook.

With a pompous smile pulling at my lips as I grabbed my phone from my pocket to pull up a ride share app.

“Likewise,” I mumbled to no one but myself.

FIVE

MAE

I HAD SUCCESSFULLY SURVIVED twenty days of October living in my backyard without catching a murder charge. Which was a pleasant surprise, to say the least.

What I found to be even more surprising, was that our arrangement hadn't been *nearly* as agonizing as I'd envisioned it being.

So far, he'd been quiet. He routinely parked in his designated spot in the driveway. And to my knowledge, he hadn't snuck any of his usual bed warming League wife want-to-be's into the pool house.

In fact, aside from infrequent sightings of him out the window, I'd hardly seen him since dropping off the keys on move in day—let alone had a conversation with him.

Overall, the entire arrangement had been fairly ideal. Well, as ideal as having your childhood nemesis living in your backyard could be, that is.

Today, however, there was something deep inside my bones wanted the satisfaction of annoying October. I mean, it was my birthday after all and I was deserving of a little birthday treat, right?

There was one thing and one thing only on my agenda for the night: get belligerently drunk off of celebratory champagne. In doing so, I hoped to wipe any and all memories of the tatted jock who lived in my backyard, and his, albeit faint, presence in my day-to-day life. So, I needed to get my fix before the party.

Tonight, he would be cooped up in the pool house playing video games—or whatever the hell he did when he was home alone on a Friday night—while I'd be out drinking the night away with friends at my “surprise” twenty-fifth birthday party.

Although, it wasn't much of a surprise since Scarlett accidentally left a copy of the booking confirmation for the luxury yacht rental on the printer in my office. If she wanted to pull one over on me, she should've elicited the help of our best friend, Lea. The girl was as clever as the devil and twice as sneaky.

My sweet, yet oblivious sister was none the wiser I'd caught on to her plans, so I was going to have to put on the performance of the lifetime to convince her otherwise. In fact, I'd spent the better half of twenty minutes practicing my surprise gasp in the mirror this morning. But I was starting to think that the more I practiced, the less believable I became.

Oh well.

I had a few hours to kill before the girls arrived to get ready. And I was determined to have a *teeny tiny bit* of fun with October in the meantime.

If that was a crime... sue me.

I was already planning to spend a few hours by the pool this afternoon, when I heard October's car pull into the driveway and an idea came to mind. Like I said, normally, I'd avoid interacting with him at all costs, but today I had a plan up my sleeve, and as long as he played along, it would all go... swimmingly.

My flip-flops snapped against the hardwood stairs as I bounced down the steps in a bright blue two piece. Pulling the sunglasses off of my head, I slid them onto my face as I wended my way through the living area, dodging the circular coffee table in the middle of the room.

The mid-day Miami heat hit my cheeks as I opened and closed the back door, stepping into the backyard. Fanning my face with a hand, I ambled over to take a spot on one of the chaise loungers, leaning my head back against the headrest with closed eyes, soaking in the sun's rays as they warmed my skin.

In the distance, I heard the beeps of October locking his truck, which was soon followed by the sound of the white gate across the yard rattling open.

"You out here waiting for me?" He wore a conceited grin as he walked through the opening, letting the gate door slam shut behind him. "Must be my lucky day."

"Yes, actually. If you must know, I'm turning over a new leaf."

"Ahhh, tell me more. I'm dying to hear all about it," October chided as he crossed the backyard and took up shop right in front of me.

He was wearing a black t-shirt so soaked with sweat that it clung to his torso, accentuating the outline of his abs. The cotton around the armholes

stretched to accommodate his muscles, though I'd imagine most people's attention were drawn to his double sleeve tattoos instead. Even his tawny brown hair appeared disheveled and desperately needed a wash.

It must've been a tough practice, by the looks of it. Gosh, wouldn't a bath sound so... refreshing after that?

When I last saw October about seven-years ago, at his high school graduation party, he had less defined muscles and only had one small tattoo of a compass on his chest, just above his heart. Needless to say, a lot about him had changed physically in the near decade since then, and it was a bit unsettling how attractive he'd become in that time.

He really did look good. Older. Bigger. More mature. Handsome. Devastatingly handsome.

Although, I'd rather be sucked into a hell dimension for the rest of eternity before admitting any of that to his face.

"I take it the showers were broken at the gym today?" I quirked a brow at him.

"Why? Is this your way of inviting yourself to join me?" He tipped his head in the direction of the outdoor shower which sat between the pool house and the fence.

"Quite the contrary, Toby boy. So, tell me. How's the season treating you so far?"

"Back to using my old nickname, and asking me about football..." He narrowed his eyes at me. "What's gotten into you?"

"I told you... I'm turning over a new leaf," I said triumphantly. "You know, righting my wrongs. Making amends. Things the saints would rejoice over." I smiled, squaring my shoulders and sitting up a little straighter in my seat. "You never answered my question. How's football?"

"Fine. How's reviving your modeling career?"

Aaaand that was the tipping point of this conversation.

My former boss was willing to pay the tabloids *copious* amounts of money to come up with out-of-pocket headlines about my time in the industry. The hard and fast truth was that none of his bullshit lies were true. Yet, every time I've made a statement contradicting them, my words were "conveniently" misconstrued.

The man had it out for my career. My business. All because he couldn't handle the world getting wind of the fact that he stole from teenage models to pad his pockets.

Anyone with access to the internet had likely come across something to the tune of me being a “troublesome person to work with” or saw a statement from another model claiming that I “frequently got in arguments with peers”. Clearly, October was included in that crowd.

And much to my demise, he would stop at nothing to remind me of the bullshit lies being spread by Gordon and his minions.

“Enough about me...” I deflected with a fake-as-shit smile, wanting to avoid all talk of this topic. “Aren’t you going to wish me a happy birthday?”

“I thought we were done talking about you?”

I rolled my eyes, although he couldn’t see it through my sunglasses.

“Happy birthday, March,” he muttered after a beat, a coy smile pulling on his lips. “Did you get everything you wanted for your birthday?”

“The day is still young, but there is *one thing* I was hoping for...” I trailed off while pushing myself out of the lounge to stand on solid ground. “Maybe you could help me?”

“With what, exactly?”

“You see... there’s been something I’ve wanted to do for a while.”

“Mhmm. I know taking a seat in my lap has been on the list for a few years. Maybe next year will be the one where you finally get your wish.”

“Please,” I scoffed, crossing my arms over my chest to accentuate my cleavage. Taking a step closer to him, I watched as he trailed his eyes over me, uncertainty flickering in his face. A flirtatious smile curled at the corners of my mouth as I took *one more* step closer to him. Only this time, just as I suspected, he took one step backward... setting my plan into motion.

“No, I want something... better.”

“What could be better than—”

“Stop talking.” I pressed my pointer finger to his lips to shut him up.

“That’s always been your problem. You never let anyone else get any words out before you cut them off and divert the conversation to benefit yourself.”

“Quite a bold statement coming from you.” He peered down at me with a popped brow. I tried schooling the growing scowl on my face, but I knew he’d already caught on. “What? Are you going to try to convince me I’m wrong?”

A surge of heat trudged through my veins at his snide tone. I must’ve been out of my damn mind thinking we could spark up a chit-chat in passing without wanting to gouge each other’s eyeballs out.

“The only thing I’ll be convincing you of, is moving out of my pool house. You’re already three weeks in... seems you’re overstaying your welcome a bit, huh?”

The teeniest, tiniest knot he made with his eyebrows ignited a hum of triumph in my chest. Funny how quickly hatred can be turned into joy in a few seconds flat. Especially where he was involved.

Even decades later, pissing him off was still my favorite pastime. Nostalgic looking back on it now, but somewhat alarming knowing little has changed between us in over a decade.

“If you want me to leave, kick me out.”

Any other time, I would’ve jumped at the chance, but right now I needed him to take one *small* step backward so his heels were lined up with the edge of the pool. I couldn’t make it too obvious, though, or else he’d catch on.

Rocking on my heels, I gave him my best attempt at a genuine smile before taking a small step forward. “What would be the fun in that?”

As if he knew my inner thoughts, he shuffled backward just enough for me to execute what I’d set out to do. I could practically taste my victory at this point.

Sweet... it definitely tasted sweet.

When he peered down at me, I looked up at him with big fake doe eyes before briefly dropping my line of sight to his lips, then back up again.

“You’re acting weird.”

Looking back down at his mouth again, I lingered longer this time before lowering my voice, “I told you. There’s something I’ve been wanting—thinking about—for a while now.” I placed one hand lightly against his chest.

October raised an eyebrow, tilting his head downward so that his face was only millimeters from mine. “What are you doing, Mae?”

The small pocket of air between our lips grew more enticing by the second. It was almost as if there was an unwanted devil on my shoulder whispering twisted temptations into my ear that I had to fight away.

Just close the distance.

Haven’t you ever stopped to wonder what his lips might taste like?

Do it. Kiss him.

Leaning into the devilish taunts, I inched forward just enough that our lips brushed together as the next word spilled from my lips. “This.”

Knowing his stupid boy brain was caught in the wave of lust, I made my move before his football player reflexes could catch up. With a hand still on

his chest, I pushed against his pecs and watched in amusement as he stumbled back into the deep end of the pool—with enlarged eyes, arms winding in circles, and all.

With a thunderous splash, I was doubled over laughing while trying to catch my breath. I watched as October's head popped up above the surface followed by him spitting out a mouthful of water.

His eyes ignited with fury as he treaded in place. "You bitch."

"I might be *a* bitch, but I'm certainly not *your* bitch," I chided, a coy grin spreading from ear to ear. "Best birthday present a girl could ever ask for."

"My phone was in that that bag."

Oh? The one that was still on his shoulder when I pushed him in? Too bad, so fucking sad.

"You're rich. Buy a new one."

I could've sworn I heard him mumble something along the lines of, "God, I hate you.", under his breath.

"What was that?" I asked with a sarcastic smile.

"You know exactly what I said."

"In that case... likewise." I leveled my gaze at him. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be masturbating for the rest of the afternoon. So, if you need me... don't."

I was attempting to unnerve him during a moment of weakness, but instead of getting flustered by my bluntness like I expected him to, he chuckled as he flicked the water out of his hair, giving me an amused expression.

Ugh, his subtle delight was ruining my high.

With that, I turned on my heels and headed for the house without glancing back at him. I'd gotten exactly what I wanted here, and there was no point in enduring his presence any longer than needed.

"Think of me when you come," he yelled as I reached for the handle to the back door.

"I'd rather die first."

SIX

MAE

I COULDN'T FINISH.

Every time I got within a millisecond of having a mind-numbing orgasm roll through me, October's smug face would appear in the forefront of my brain. Sending a spat of aggravation coursing through my veins instead of the sweet, sweet neurochemical cocktail I so desperately craved.

This was just great. Not only had he infiltrated my property, but now he was sabotaging my "self-love" time too. It was appalling, really. Even the saints would consider something of this stature to be downright blasphemous.

Maybe pushing him in the pool earlier was too much enjoyment for my brain to handle in one day. Surely, that was it. But then again, ruining things for me was precisely on brand for him, even if he wasn't present to reap the benefits, so there could be darker forces at work here.

Peeling the covers off with a sigh, I slung my legs over the edge of the bed and let out a frustrated groan. I bent over to grab my shorts from the floor and shimmied them halfway on before pushing off the mattress to stand.

As I was tying the strings at my waist, my ears perked up at the sound of the front door creaking open in the distance. Followed by Lea and Scarlett's voices echoing off the walls in a sing-songy tone, announcing their arrival. "Birthday girl! Where are you?"

"I'm walking over to the beauty room." I shouted down the hall to them with a small laugh. Their enthusiasm made my birthday feel a teeny bit more special. With a smile, I listened as the door slammed behind them, followed by their heavy footsteps trudging up the steps.

Of course, right as I plopped down onto the chair in front of my vanity, both girls barged into the room with overstuffed make-up bags and balloons,

screaming and jumping as they smothered me in their arms, wishing me countless happy birthdays.

My heart swelled three sizes bigger than normal as they tangled their arms around me. Pulling away, Lea's brows perked up as she surveyed the scene outside the large floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the backyard. The natural light in this room was the reason it became the designated “beauty room”, after all—although, it was more like a giant closet with a make-up area than anything.

Outside the window, standing by the edge of the pool with a skimmer net in hand, a freshly showered and shirtless October was cleaning the algae out of the deep end.

A small smile tugged at my lips at the thought of him an hour ago drenched in water, clothes and all. Sure, I could've told the girls about it, but *some* things were better kept in my personal memory bank.

When October moved in, I made pool cleaning a last-minute mandatory stipulation on his rental agreement, since I was already so gracious for letting him live here. He wasn't thrilled about it, but in my defense, there was no sense in keeping my overpriced pool maintenance company when I had a live-in pool boy readily available at my leisure.

In my eyes, having him do the job wasn't a form of punishment. It was simply logic. Though, I'm sure he would vehemently disagree.

“It always surprises me that some of the guys on the team are still single.” Lea chimed in after an extended moment of gawking at his half naked body. A minute longer and I would've had to wipe up drool from her chin.

“Well, in his case, I could think of a few reasons people might go running for the hills...” I smarted off as a scornful laugh rippled past my lips. I stood side by side with Lea, observing him like a guinea pig in a pet store. But no matter which way I tilted my head; I couldn't understand her surprise.

Why was he still single?

Oh gosh, let me think.

I mean, there's his unpleasant demeanor. His cocky personality. Or maybe his disgustingly senseless comebacks. And those were just an appetizer of the nauseating qualities I could think of on the fly.

“Why?” I looked over at her. “Are you finally considering getting your hands dirty with one of the players?”

“At the risk of losing my job and enduring the wrath of my father?” She dipped her chin, giving me a dull look before drawing her gaze back out the

window once again. “I might be horny, but I’m not an idiot.”

I peeked back at Scarlett, and we shared a glance with each other, shrugging our shoulders. Lea’s dad was head coach for the Matrix and he had one rule for his players— “don’t date my daughter”.

I’d met Coach Sterling a few times now, and he wasn’t a scary guy by any means, but for some reason, he was the only person on planet earth who had the power to disrupt Lea’s take-no-bullshit demeanor.

With a sigh, she peeled herself away from the window and took a seat in the open chair on the left of my usual spot. “I mean, surely, he has no trouble picking up women. I passed him naked in the locker room by accident once, and I can confirm he is *very* well endowed.”

“Lea!” Scarlett and I exclaimed in unison, sharing a look before turning to her with slack jawed faces and appalled laughs.

“Double digits...” Scarlett whispered, tipping her head with a lifted eyebrow.

“Easily... and if not, damn close.”

What in the world?

How did this conversation even get here?

“If you guys want to continue to fawn over October’s dick, go do it in front of his face. I’m sure he’d love nothing more than to have a couple of girls praise his manhood,” I grumbled, sitting back down on the pink chair in front of the center vanity.

“Oh, come on! It was an honest question for... you know, research purposes.” Scarlett shot me a teasing wink before claiming the only other open seat in the room.

Can you believe she was the one who was always telling me *I* was the terrible liar of the group?

“Aww, Mae girl, we’re just having some fun.” Lea wrapped her arms around my shoulders and squeezed me into a hug so tight both of our faces scrunched together. “Are you ever going to tell me what the deal is between you guys? Why you hate each other so much?”

“Oh, I’ll tell you...” Scar piped up. “Since we were five—and October six—the two of them have had a silent competition to see who could irk the other person’s nerves the most.” Scarlett looked over at me for confirmation, to which I gave her an indifferent shrug. “Like one time when October beat her in the Pi Day contest, so Mae made it her life mission for the next year to memorize as many numbers of Pi so not only would she beat him the next

year, but also so she would break the school record for most numbers recited *knowing* he would be going to middle school the next year and wouldn't be able to challenge her title."

"Okay, first off, I won that contest fair and square. Second, I am still the proud Pine Crest Elementary School Pi Day Challenge record holder. Fifteen years strong. I even have a plaque to prove it."

"We know... it's hanging up in your office downstairs." Scar and Lea looked at each other and their smiles deepened into laughter. "Back to your original question," Scarlett started again. "The real kicker in their relationship happened when Mae and I were in second grade, though. At the time it seemed subtle, but looking back, Mae was a woman scorned from that Spring forward..."

"Hmmm." Lea raised her brows with a sarcastic smile. "Imagine that."

"Only... to this day, Mae has *never* told me the reason." Lea mock gasped at Scarlett's over exaggerated confession. "To think, my best friend, *my sister*, has kept a secret like this from me for two decades. The betrayal!" Scarlett sighed dramatically while lifting the back of her hand to her forehead like she was the lead in a period drama who just found out terrible news.

"Oh, cut the dramatics. There's hardly anything to tell."

"So, you're admitting there is *something* to tell?" Lea pried with narrowed eyes.

"If I say yes, then I would be incriminating myself, and if I say no... that would be a lie." I turned up my nose. "And frankly, I'd rather not accuse myself any further."

The thing about my revulsion toward October was that while it might've been slow and contentious to start, like Scarlett mentioned, there was a vital turning point that shifted my view of him from minor competitor to public enemy number one in a matter of minutes.

It all boiled down to the fact that Molly Goldberg was a big mouthed, two-faced bitch from hell. Always had been, and as far as I was concerned, always would be. Last I heard, she was working at a topless bar somewhere off I-95, but got into an argument with the owners and was told to never come back. Word around our hometown spread that she was unemployed and living in her parents' basement because no one would hire her.

Can't say I was surprised.

In case you haven't heard, karma's a bit of a bitch.

Back to the point...

Many, many moons ago on a planet far away, I had a teensy tiny schoolgirl crush on October Calhoun himself. Though in today's day and age, I'd never, under any circumstances, outright admit that.

It all started the first moment we met at his parents' Halloween party. His mom, Mrs. Tish, was one of those people who made the holiday their entire personality all year round. Granted, she might've been a little too obsessive, but who was I to judge?

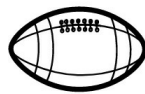
It had been a windy night in South central Florida and the chilly air smacked our faces as the five of us—Scarlett, her mom, me, and my dads—marched down the sidewalk toward the California ranch style home which sat on the corner of Pine Street.

Eerie tunes blared from the speakers and as soon as the door opened, a tall dark-haired woman with buttons stuck on her eyes like Coraline greeted us with the most enthusiastic welcome as she waved us into her home.

There were people in costumes of all kinds—princesses, doctors, monsters—but when I locked eyes with the boy across the room wearing football pads and a Rhett Fuller jersey that was three sizes too big for his body, the biggest crush I'd had in my five-year-old life washed over me, completely consuming my being.

I was too hardheaded to let it show, but it was there buried deep down under there.

However, Two Valentine's Day's, a humiliating moment, and a gut-wrenching sentence from Molly Goldberg later, the crush I'd had on October was dead on impact with no chance of revival.



The night was young and there was a pleasant breeze rolling off the water, which was a refreshing change from the late August heat. Scarlett and Lea had their arms looped between mine as they guided me down a dock toward the luxurious black and white yacht with the words "Dirty Beach" painted on the side in a decadent royal blue.

It took everything in me not to burst out laughing at the outrageous name.

I'd never admit it, but the white blindfold they gave me was a hundred percent sheer and I could see *everything* around us with crystal clear vision.

To make my act seem more believable, I'd purposely tripped while getting out of the car, and as far as I could tell, they totally bought it.

At this rate, I'd be able to add "seasoned improv actress" to my resume by sunrise.

Scarlett's voice grew louder with each step as she babbled on about the latest celebrity gossip, likely trying to mask the sound of friendly chatter from party goers resounding through the air as we approached the boat.

Our heels clattered against the wooden planks a few more feet before Lea and Scarlett tugged my elbows to signal for me to stop walking.

"Okay, we're here," Scar buzzed next to me. I could hear the smile on her lips as she spoke.

Slipping off the blindfold, my eyes grew wide and my expression brightened as I took in my surroundings. Best of all was seeing the pleased look on Scarlett's face from thinking she pulled one over on me.

God, I love her.

"Oh my god, you guys! I can't believe this," I exclaimed, trying to conceal my high-pitched tone as I pulled them both into a group hug. "You're telling me this isn't a cruise ship?"

"Ahhh, it's so great, isn't it?" Scar was practically jumping out of her skin as she whisked past us and led the way up the ramp to the entrance. The girl loved a good party, especially if it meant she got to help make the food.

"You're a horrible liar." Lea whispered in my ear as we took our sweet time strolling behind her.

"Do you think she noticed?"

I really thought I'd gotten away with my act, damn it. Then again, there wasn't much that went past Lea unnoticed.

"Doubtful. She's too excited about everyone trying her mini donuts to care. It's all she's talked about all week."

I couldn't help but let out a burst of laughter.

Sounded just like Scarlett.

"You won't tell her?"

"Never." She shot me a sly wink before locking her elbow with mine as we picked up our pace to catch up.

As we crossed over the threshold of the entrance and onto the gargantuan boat, a sea of people shouted, "Surprise!" in unison. A slow smile spread across my lips as people swarmed me with hugs and countless happy birthdays.

Before I could blink, I was sucked into conversation after conversation with people I hadn't seen in years. How Scarlett had tracked down all of these people was beyond me. Then again, I'm sure most people weren't foolish enough to turn down a yacht party with an open bar.

After nearly an hour, I managed to break free from one prolonged catch-up after another long enough to capture my breath. Leisurely working my way through the crowd toward the dessert bar where Scarlett and Lea were piling their tiny plastic plates with every flavor mini donut in sight.

My stomach rumbled in retaliation. I hadn't even had a bite to eat all night.

Almost as if the universe heard my inner thoughts, the corner of a silver tray slammed into the side of my shoulder as a server circulating hors d'oeuvres crashed into me. Quiche and caviar flew every which way, splattering across the maritime floorboards.

In a last-ditch effort to keep myself upright, I winded my arms back, twisting myself uncomfortably until a sharp, searing pain spread out from my ankle.

Shit.

With no time left to make a move, I accepted my defeat, which unfortunately meant falling backward into someone's lap. Thankfully, a firm hand caught my back, helping me stay vertical. This person's hand was the only thing that saved me from falling over their knee and cracking my head open on floorboard.

What a story that would've been.

As far as the eye could see, everyone had their gaze locked on me with widened eyes and a palm slapped over their mouth.

Dear God, this was mortifying.

Which was saying a lot coming from someone who'd spent the better half of the last decade being stared at by bystanders for a living.

The muscular hand from earlier dropped lower, wrapping around my hip to keep me from sliding forward and face planting onto the ground, thus embarrassing myself further.

"I'm so sorry—" I twisted my neck, flickering my gaze up only to find my knight in shining armor was none other than my worst fucking nightmare. "Who the hell invited you here?"

SEVEN

OCTOBER

SHOULD I have been surprised by Mae mindlessly miscalculating the fact that every partygoer had their focus zeroed in on the two of us as she blurted out her disapproval of my presence? Because I wasn't.

If her intention had been for everyone to keep their attention to her, she'd certainly achieved it.

"My apologies, ma'am. Are you hurt?" The scrawny teenaged-looking server mumbled with a slight tremble in his voice.

"I'm fine, thank you, though." Mae gave him a soft smile as he let out another stream of incessant apologies while scurrying to pick up food scraps from the floor and placing them back on the tray. "No, it was entirely my fault. I should've been paying closer attention to my surroundings," she insisted, repeating herself twice before the guy finally eased. Finally, he flashed her a timid smile before disappeared into the crowd of people with his head bowed.

At this point, a few eyes still lingered on the two of us. Though it was no surprise when the rumble of voices began to up again, signaling that people were returning to the pre-collision conversations they'd been taking part in.

Yet, somehow, Mae was still seated firmly in my lap. Not having said a word or moved a muscle.

I leaned forward to whisper against her ear, "I'm beginning to sense that these compromising encounters you keep getting us into are your way of coming onto me."

"Get over yourself."

"If I'm wrong, then I'd love an explanation as to why your ass is burrowed against my cock right now. And even more so, why you aren't

scrambling to get off my lap?”

Doing the opposite of what I expected, she stayed planted exactly where she was, not budging a millimeter as she locked her narrow-eyed gaze on mine. It took a beat for me to pick up on it, but there was something off in her eyes I couldn't get a read on.

Was she embarrassed about what had just happened with the server? Maybe she was pissed about the nauseating fish smell reeking from her dress? Whatever it was, she was concealing it well with a practiced neutral expression, masking her feelings to make them unnoticeable to everyone around her.

Too bad for her, because I was too intrigued to let it slide.

To my right, Fortune, the Matrix's wide receiver, was sitting with one leg loosely crossed over his knee. He had a drink held halfway to his lips as he observed Mae and I's stare down. In my peripherals, I could see him shaking his head, brushing off a grin before throwing back the final swig of his cocktail.

Mae peered over her shoulder, perking up as she gave him a warm smile. “Hi. I don't think we've been officially introduced. I'm Mae.”

“Fortune.” He extended a hand out and she twisted in my lap to accept his handshake. I had to tighten my grip on her hip to hold her in place so she didn't fall yet again.

She could thank me later, because if she'd fallen twice—almost three times if you counted her nearly falling backward out of my lap after her initial fall—people would've thought she was a drunk. Call me a cynic, but all it took was one snake to snap a picture and tip off the tabloids before some fabricated headline came out about her using tequila to cope with some forthcoming quarter life crisis.

How generous of me to save her from a PR nightmare.

“Thanks for coming to the party. Lea and Scar did such a great job with the surprise, didn't they?” She didn't give him a chance to respond before continuing on. Though there was a subtle longing that took over his face at the mention of Lea's name. It might've been faint, but it was definitely there. “Hey, do you mind giving us a minute? I need to talk to October about something kind of, um... personal. If you know what I mean.” Mae wiggled her brows.

“Sure thing.”

“See you, man.” We shared a parting nod before he walked off in the

bar's direction.

Mae whipped her head around, slapping me in the face with her hair. "What are you doing here?"

"Ahh, asking a question to evade mine from earlier?" I countered. "Nice try, but it's not going to work. Why aren't you moving?"

"You said it best yourself. Taking a seat on your lap has been on my birthday wish list for a while. Thought I'd finally take you up on the offer."

"While I'm glad you finally got your long-awaited wish, I wasn't offering. Now, I'd appreciate it if you moved." I tapped the side of her hip twice with my palm, signaling for her to get up.

"I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't? Stand up on your feet and start walking until you find someone that actually wants to have a conversation with you. It's simple, really."

"Seriously, who invited you here? This is a horrible way to treat someone on their birth—"

"Looks like I'll be helping you then." Using my hand that was holding her in place, I slid it down her side to scoop under her butt while my other hand slipped underneath the backs of her knees. She squirmed in my arms as I moved to stand.

"Wait, stop!" she whisper-yelled with her eyes bugging out. "Please."

I stopped, bunching my eyebrows together as I settled back down on the bench. "What's going on?"

Mae sighed, rolling her eyes. "Fine, I'll tell you. But you have to promise you won't make a big deal about it..."

"I've been warned about making deals with the devil."

"I would laugh, but unfortunately, I don't find you funny," she deadpanned.

"Will you just tell me what's wrong, so we can get on with the night."

She paused for a moment to examine my face, no doubt contemplating whether or not she could trust me. I didn't blame her, but then again, I wasn't going to wait here all night for her to cough up details on whatever the hell was going on.

"Any day now, March."

"Fine... *IthinkItwistedmyankle,*" she mumbled, her words spilling out so quickly I couldn't make out half of what she said.

"Louder."

“I think I... *twistedmyankle.*”

“You what?”

Releasing an elongated breath, she lifted a hand over the side of her mouth for privacy and leaned closer to whisper against the shell of my ear. “I think I twisted my ankle.”

The firm hand I had resting on her side gripped tighter as I pulled back a few inches to examine her expression. “You’re hurt?”

“Yes, but I said don’t make a big deal about it,” she scolded in a whisper, flicking my chest with the back of her hand.

To the outside eye, we probably looked like a couple flirting and murmuring sweet-nothings, ignoring the people in close proximity to us.

If only these people knew the full truth.

“How bad does it hurt?”

“I don’t know, maybe like a six and a half out of ten? It feels swollen and sort of tingly. I can’t explain it.”

“Stay here until it’s at least a four. Do you need ice?” I raised a palm to grab the attention of the server passing by.

“No, stop. I’ll be fine.” She swatted at my hand.

“Are you sure?”

“Sir, yes, sir,” she grumbled, rolling her eyes.

“I thought we agreed on you calling me ‘master and commander’, no?”

She shot me a murderous glare that I couldn’t help but chuckle at. As I laughed, Mae held back a smile of her own while still trying to maintain her lethal expression. Something inside me eased at the sight of her tiny smile.

“To answer your earlier question, Scarlett is the one who invited me.”

“Of course, she did...” she trailed off. As her eyes surveyed around the room, she relaxed her posture and slumped back lightly against my chest. “You know she thinks we should fuck.”

I coughed away from her face, choking on my saliva. “Excuse me?”

There were few things in life that shocked me these days, but hearing those words tumble out of Mae’s mouth as casually as chatting about the weather? Yup, that did me in.

“Scarlett... she thinks we should have a hate fuck or something. She says it’ll ‘resolve our tension’.” Mae used air quotes, still surveying the crowd. Again, talking as casually as if we were discussing what we ate for lunch.

What the fuck was going on?

A minute passed as I tried to wrap my head around what she’d just said,

when Mae decided she'd catch me off guard for a second time tonight.

"Maybe she's right." She sighed, sinking deeper against my pecs.

My lungs stopped working.

"Could you repeat that? I think I heard you say—"

She rotated her upper half toward mine and cut me off with a palm to the mouth. "You heard me correctly. I said, 'maybe she's right'."

She released her hand and I stared at her blankly, without a single thought behind my eyes. This couldn't be real, right? Certainly, this ship had gone off course and taken us to the Bermuda triangle or something?

In all the years I'd known Mae, we'd never once acted on the sexual chemistry between us. Even when we were hormone rampant teenagers and our spark became volcanic, neither of us made mention of it. Sure, we made salacious remarks at each other from time to time, but that had all been in the name of friendly competition... hadn't it?

Damn it, she was getting in my head. Making me overthink this whole thing so I'd fall victim to whatever joke she was trying to play on me.

It didn't help that my dick was aching—*aching*—at slightest the mention of sex.

When I first got drafted to The League and moved up to Nashville to play for the Knights, a couple of teammates introduced me to the idea of temporary celibacy as a means to increase athletic performance.

Some people believed it was bullshit, and maybe they were right about it being some weird placebo effect. However, in the six years I'd been playing professionally, the only time I had a below average season was when I got too intoxicated during bye week, and picked up a month-long fling from Broadway. She'd been fun, but it was my worst season to date. We didn't come anywhere close to making the playoffs that year.

In the three seasons since then, I'd abstained from sex from our first preseason game until the final post-season game. Once the season was over, though, I made up for everything I missed out on during my time away... and then some.

Hold up. What was wrong with me? Season celibacy or not, I wasn't going to give into some stupid "hate fuck" with Mae.

"You're joking, right?" I shook my head, running a hand through my hair.

"Nope." She made a pop sound at the end of the word. "Wow." She laughed. "Who would've guessed you'd look so perplexed by someone coming on to you? Oh, wait!" Mae drew in a breath. "Aww, women never

make a move on you, do they?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, for starters, you’re as white as a ghost.”

“Trust me...” I schooled my expression before dropping my gaze down to meet hers. “I can assure you that I have no problems when it comes to getting women.”

“Oh, so it’s me who you’re flustered by? What an honor.” Mae placed her hands over her heart in flattery.

“Even if I was interested, which I’m not, I don’t fuck during the season.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, pushing up her breasts to accentuate her cleavage. Man, I hated that I was so aware of every time she did that. With her eyelashes batting slowly and desire coating her voice, she said, “That’s fine, I’m willing to be patient.”

Alright, now I was certain this was a joke.

I squinted at her. “You’re playing me right now, aren’t you?”

“Like a fiddle.”

“And that weird boob adjustment thing you just did... that’s part of it, isn’t it?”

“Finally, you picked up on it!” She let out a deep laugh, placing a hand over her stomach as her head dropped back. “It’s a deflection tactic. Every time I do it you get in your head contemplating my reasoning behind why I’m doing what I’m doing, right?” I didn’t respond, but we both knew the answer. “You think you’re getting the upper hand when I cross my arms, assuming it’s because I’m angry or flustered. When in reality, I was always aware of what I was doing...” She inched her face close to mine as she spoke, so close that I could feel the warmth of her breath against my lips. “Every. Single. Time.”

“Even a few weeks ago when I asked to move in? You knew what you were doing when you did it?”

“I fiend innocence well, didn’t I?” Her nose crinkled as a coy smile pulled up the corners of her lips. “That was some of my best work, if I do say so myself.”

I was smart enough to know she was playing her game with me right now. The only problem was that my dick was too slow to catch on, so my pants tightened despite trying to continuously will down my arousal.

This no sex thing was hard enough as it is, but when temptation was quite literally sitting in your lap? Fucking excruciating.

“You’ve been hanging around Lea too much.” My voice was flat.

“What can I say? I learned from the best.”

“For the record, I enjoy the boob thing... Every. Single. Time.” A hint of a smirk pulled at the corner of my lips as I mocked her. “But now that I’m aware of it, it might work better if you just get naked next time.”

“I thought you said sex was off limits during the season?” She raised a brow at me.

I leveled my gaze with hers. “Who said I was interested in fucking you?”

Her eye roll was no surprise.

Scooping underneath her legs again, I gently lifted her from my lap and planted her in the seat next to me. Another second of her ass pressed against me, and I would’ve had a raging hard on that would’ve been impossible to conceal.

Shaking my head, I leaned down to untie my shoes so I could slip them off of my feet.

“What are you doing?”

“You can’t keep walking in those all night.” I looked down at her high heels. “So, we’re trading shoes.”

“As much enjoyment as I would get out of seeing you struggling to strut around with red bottoms on, these are special editions.” Mae slipped off her shiny black stilettos and held them up to show me, although I had no idea what I was looking for that made them so “special”. “Plus, it’s not like I haven’t spent years walking around in uncomfortable shoes for work. Another night of it won’t kill me.”

“You did that because it was your job. This is not your job. It’s your birthday party.” I pinched my lips together. “You’re not going to walk around in unnecessary pain for the next who-knows-how-many-hours if you don’t need to.” I leveled my gaze with hers, grabbing the shoes from her fingertips. “So, again... we’re trading.”

“What shoes are you going to wear?”

“None.”

“You can’t go—”

“Stop telling me what to do and take the damn shoes before I throw yours overboard.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Those are Louboutin’s. You can’t do that.”

“Argue with me again and you’ll find out exactly how much I don’t care about those unbearably overpriced hunks of leather you call shoes.”

“That might be the most offensive thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Sounds like I need to work harder, then,” I smirked, holding out my pair of size twelve dress shoes. “Put them on.”

She grumbled to herself, reluctantly taking the black loafers from my hand.

“Damn it, we should’ve had everyone sing happy birthday while you had everyone’s attention earlier.” Scarlett popped up out of nowhere with what appeared to be a green apple martini in one hand, while she silently grabbed Mae’s shoes from me with the other.

“If you need her to fall again, I can make that happen,” I offered.

The glare Mae shot me held the venom of someone who had just been granted the license to kill.

Joke not well received. Noted.

“You two seem like you’re getting along.” Scar waggled her brows while bouncing her gaze between the two of us.

“Don’t be fooled. I’m seething on the inside.” Mae looked up at me with a not-so-subtle glare. I watched as she secured my shoes onto her feet with one last knot and pushed off her knees to stand.

Instead of looking like a clown with oversized shoes, she somehow had a way of making them look like a new fashion trend. Man, I hated to admit how good she looked wearing my shoes... and there she was in my head again.

This girl was going to be the death of me, I swear.

EIGHT

OCTOBER

SHE THINKS WE SHOULD FUCK.

I was ashamed at how many times that sentence had slipped through my mind throughout the night. Thankfully, we were almost back to shore and I could hardly wait to get off this cramped boat long enough to clear my head. The constant stream of chatter buzzing through the air was giving me a headache.

Somehow, I got stuck in a painfully boring conversation with a couple of old teammates from high school who I hadn't seen in years. They reminisced about their glory days of being on varsity football together while exchanging well-rehearsed excuses about which injury prevented them from playing professionally.

It was always the same song and dance with these kinds of guys.

Maybe I was bitter about being stuck on this boat for too long without a place to escape—or maybe it was the fact that I'd been walking around barefoot for hours—but their excuses all seemed a little pathetic and repetitive. A hollow wish for the life they'd wanted to have, but deep down knew they never had the chance of obtaining.

Yet, I still stood there nodding tightly, silently forcing myself to remain in their presence while suppressing reminders that they never had scout visits, let alone a single offer to play college ball.

God, I needed to get out of here before I said something I'd later regret.

Carefully controlling my tone, I excused myself from the group, giving back pats and handshakes before stalking off to the bar area.

"Bar's closed, sorry." The black-haired bartender with a pointy nose called over her shoulder with a courteous smile.

Any other time, I would've leaned against the bar with a seductive smile while charming chatter spilled from my lips until she inadvertently made me a drink. Any other time, I would've left her a nice tip in the jar and scribbled my number onto a cocktail napkin. She'd text me something flirtatious from the back room behind the bar. And inevitably, we'd find some closet or an open bathroom stall to hook-up in. Then, once it was all said and done, I'd never see her again, and she'd have a juicy story to share with her friends over Sunday brunch.

But tonight, the haze clogging my brain wanted nothing to do with that. The reminder of my seasonal celibacy hit me like a wave, and my jaw clenched on instinct. The season hadn't even started yet, and I was already contemplating breaking my vow.

Shit. This was going to be a long six months.

The cute bartender bent at the hips to pick up a crate of wine bottles from the floor and hoisted it upward. She gave me a closed-mouth smile as she turned and pushed the door to the backroom open with the side of her hip.

Once the door swished shut, I surveyed the remaining bottles behind the bar, settling for the half empty bottle of whiskey. I pulled out my wallet from my back pocket and dished out all the cash I had before plucking the bottle off of the counter. A tip for her troubles in case she got in trouble with her boss for a bottle going missing.

Twisting off the cap, I chucked it in the trash, then headed down the quiet hallway to my left. A circular staircase at the furthest end caught my eye, and I paused in my tracks, turning my head to check my surroundings before trudging up the steps.

As I rounded the last spiral of the stairs, a cool breeze rolled off the water and brushed against my cheeks. I took a long swig from the rim of the bottle as I strolled to the opposite end of the rooftop deck to look out at the water. Sunset had passed a couple hours ago, so there wasn't much of a view, well, unless you enjoyed staring at seemingly never-ending blackness. Might not have been the most stunning, but it sure was peaceful.

Up here, the chatter from the party was drowned out by the sound of waves crashing against each other. It was serene. Calm. For the first time all night, the haze clouding my mind was beginning to fade away.

I continued staring over the ledge at the dark nothingness, collecting my thoughts for a moment, when the sound of one person's rich belly laugh carried through the air to my ears. My focus was instantly drawn to the

opposite side of the rooftop, which had a glass railing that overlooked the deck beneath it.

With the bottle of Jack pressed to my lips, and the warmth of its contents sliding down the back of my throat, I crossed the space in a few strides until the party goers below came into view.

There she was, doubled over in a fit of laughter with her hand over her heart, cutting up like the guy standing in front of her had just told the funniest joke in the damn world. Mae's long blonde hair no longer held the same bouncy curls as it did earlier in the evening. Instead, the ringlets framing her face had fallen into waves from the salt filled air.

I poked my tongue lightly into the corner of my cheek and expelled a long breath.

It pissed me off. *She* pissed me off.

Seeing her happy, giggling and smiling all night, made my blood pressure sky rocket.

What annoyed me most, though, was the tiny micro-aggressions she sported anytime we inadvertently made eye contact or the way she'd blatantly ignored me if we somehow got caught in the same group chatting.

A few minutes passed of me reigning in my emotions, before another long pull of amber colored liquid slid down my throat and the sound of footsteps making their way up the stairs caught my attention.

Mae stood at the top step running her fingers through her blonde waves, bunching the strands together at the top of her crown, then slipping the hair tie from her wrist and looping it around until her hair was secure. She jerked backward and drew in a breath at the sight of me across the rooftop. "Sorry, you scared me. I didn't think anyone was up here."

"Birthday girl not enjoying her party?" My words came out more slurred than I expected.

"No sex during the season, but drinking yourself silly is fine?" She bit back. "Makes sense."

"What are you doing up here, Mae?" I leaned against the railing, trying to school my voice enough that my simmered rage wouldn't show.

Was I drunk? Certainly getting there.

Were my words going to get ruthless and unrefined like they tended to when I was intoxicated?

"If I have to fake a smile while listening to another story about someone's kids' first play date or their painfully boring nine to five corporate job, I'm

going to internally combust.” Mae came and stood right next to me, resting her forearms on the railing.

I studied her face as she observed the crowd, then pressed my lips against the rim, taking a long pull before extending the bottle in her direction. “Jack?”

She shook her head side to side, giving me a soft, closed lip expression with her rejection.

Good. More for me.

“You know what annoys me?” I started, feeling the warmth from the liquor taking root in my bloodstream.

She rolled her eyes. “If you say me, I swear to—”

“Yes, you,” I cut her off before she continued on with some line about how it was ill mannered to insult someone on their birthday. Too bad for her, because I was too intoxicated to give a shit. “And the fact that you’ve walked around here all night with a grin from ear to ear while you chit-chatted with other people. But the minute, the *second*, you lay eyes on me, your smile falls.” I took the last pull of whiskey from the bottle before lowering it down to my side. “Why is that, huh?”

“Why do you care? I thought you didn’t like me.”

“That’s the least of my concerns right now. I want you to tell me what I did,” I prodded, peering down at her. “What did I do that’s so bad that you can’t even look at me when I’m around, hmm?”

One might consider this conversation to be exercising the pillar of “conflict” as far as “The Three C’s” were concerned. Maybe there was one too many shots of alcohol in my system, or maybe it was the decades of pent-up angst threatening to break free, but I was done wasting energy trying to justify our feud with some stupid ass framework.

Until now I’d been under the assumption Mae and I’s feud was juvenile with no real inciting incident, but after watching her tonight, my stance on that changed.

There was something I was missing. And I wanted answers.

“Where is this coming from?”

I repeated her idiotic question, blood boiling beneath my skin. “I think this conversation is long overdue. Twenty years overdue, in fact.”

“You’re an idiot, you know that?” Her voice was calm. Not a drop of poison coated her tone like usual. If anything, there was a hint of gloom that had taken its place. “Five seconds ago, I sat there telling you how fake all of

that was. Those smiles? Fake. The giggles? Rehearsed. But if that's what you want, then sure, I'll give it to you." She stuck out her hand and an easygoing smile transformed over her face. "Hi, October. How was your night? And the family... how are they? Oh, they're doing good? Great, great. So glad to *fucking* hear it." The sarcasm in her last sentence was thick.

"Hilarious."

As much as I hated to admit it, I saw her point, though.

Anyone looking up at us would've seen her smile, or comfortable posture, and assume we were making cordial conversation. Little did they know she hated me to her core. Although she might've had a point—fuck, I hated saying that—it still didn't answer my question. If she could fake it with everyone else, why wouldn't she do the same with me?

Something was missing. And I wouldn't rest until I got to the bottom of it.

"I'm considering a career in comedy."

"Stick to your day job."

She shrugged, mumbling something to herself I couldn't quite decipher.

"This thing between us is toxic, you know." My tone was sharp and my breathing grew heavier.

"You're telling me."

But did it have to be like this? Did it have to *stay* like this?

Maybe it was the alcohol talking, but what if there was some alternate universe out there where we didn't act like we despised each other? Where we had gotten along from the start. What would our lives look like now if that had been our reality instead?

"Then why don't you just tell me what I did so we can move past it." I followed behind her as she took a seat on one of the white couches at the opposite end of the deck. "I did something, didn't I? All this time I thought I didn't... but something inside me is telling me I'm wrong."

Mae's posture stiffened as she sat, looking up at me with her mouth open like she was going to speak, but the words she wanted to say wouldn't come out.

"Tell me I'm right."

A moment passed before she sighed, slumping back against the cushions with crossed arms. "You're right."

"I knew it." I took a step back, running my free hand through my hair. "I fucking knew it. What was it?"

“Nothing. Let’s stop talking about it.”

“Tell. Me.” I argued, flinging my arm holding the empty whiskey bottle recklessly at my side.

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

She hesitated, dropping her gaze to her hands as she twiddled her thumbs. A knot formed in my chest as I waited for her words to come. “Because I’ll cry.” Her lower lip trembled at the last word.

Fucking shit.

That knot? Yeah, it had dropped to the pit of my stomach.

Any ounce of alcohol that had been in my system felt like it had completely evaporated from my body. All that was left was to face the hollow, sobering reality I’d commanded her to give me.

“I hurt you that badly?” My voice broke and everything in me fought not to drop to my knees and cup my hands around her face. Any traces of anger and resentment from earlier had dissolved with the alcohol. What the fuck had I done? “Mae, please. I need to know.”

She nodded up and down with closed eyes before gulping. “Do you remember the time our classes got paired up to trade Valentine’s in elementary school? And we both got each other?”

“Yeah, I made you a giant Dum-Dum bouquet.” I reminisced on the memory I’d long since forgotten. “My mom and I spent the entire night before the party sorting through the jumbo-sized bag to pick out your favorite flavors.”

“What are you talking about?” Her tone was uncertain as she pursed her lips together.

“What are *you* talking about? Didn’t you notice there were only sour apple and cotton candy flavors?”

Mae ignored the question. “Wait, so, you’re telling me you spent an entire night sorting through suckers to pick out my favorite flavors...”

“That’s what I just said, right?”

“But...”

“But what?”

She sucked in a long, steady breath and expelled it from her lungs. “I’m just confused... because right after the Valentine’s party, we all went outside to play because it was like seventy-five degrees or something, remember?”

I nodded, recalling the vague memory. “I was pissed because Oscar had a cast on his leg and couldn’t go out, so he and Chester stayed inside. Mrs. Lowry wouldn’t let me stay with them.”

“Exactly.” She threw her hands in the air. “And while they were inside, one of them had accidentally pressed their elbow to the button for the outdoor intercom or something...”

I racked my brain trying to remember what was said between the two of them, but nothing came to mind. All I remembered was doing backflips on the monkey bars because I was an eight-year-old little shit head, and there weren’t any teachers monitoring the back of the playground to stop me.

“Everyone outside on the playground listened as Oscar said something about you giving me a ‘pity valentine,’” she raised her hands into air quotes. “Because, *‘Mae Garten is the meanest, ugliest girl in second-grade, and the only reason October got stuck with her was because he was the last person who got to choose’.*” Her face remained impassive. “Then, Chester followed up with some remark about how he’d wished you’d gotten Molly Goldberg instead since she was your crush.”

“Everyone on the playground heard him say that?” I raised a brow. If so, why hadn’t I remembered it?

The blank stare Mae gave me in response was answer enough.

Shit. What was even worse was that they hadn’t been lying about what they said. All of third grade, I had a massive crush on Molly Goldberg. That same year, Mae had a permanent bad attitude, a unibrow, and a choppy bob haircut.

It took her a while to grow into herself, but by the time middle school rolled around... her looks had changed drastically. Everyone else might as well have been invisible compared to her by that point. By the time she was a freshman, she’d gotten signed with a modeling agency and spent more time being whisked around the world than she did at school.

“All of this bullshit was because of something stupid someone said over a valentine?”

She sniffled, with a small laugh that made something buried deep in my chest clench tightly. “Don’t belittle me. I was seven years old and humiliated because my first crush called me ugly in front of half the school.”

“You don’t believe that’s still true, do you? Mae, you were one of the highest paid supermodels in the world. Didn’t you get named ‘most beautiful woman of the year’ once?”

“Twice.” She corrected me with an ornery smile. “And it wasn’t *just* them talking about valentines, though. That might’ve been the starting point of my hatred, but we both know there was more to this than just that. Not to mention, we’ve been at each other’s throats from the beginning. While I might’ve hated you a bit less without the humiliation factor, it wouldn’t have changed the fact that I still would’ve hated you regardless.”

I guess I couldn’t disagree with that.

“Why don’t I remember any of this? And why hasn’t Scarlett ever said anything about it?”

“You were playing on the back of the playground, so you probably didn’t hear it. And Scar was home sick with the flu that week, remember? You got it right after...” she trailed off.

Shit. I had forgotten about that too. Valentine’s fell on a Friday and I missed the entire week after because I was sick. “So, by the time we got back in school, everyone had already moved on to something else.” I finished the sentence for her.

She nodded with an eye roll. “Well, except for Molly Goldberg.”

“What’d she do?”

“You don’t remember?” The hurt in her voice made my chest ache.

Mae closed her eyes. Not speaking for a long time as she did what appeared to do a few box breaths. When she finally opened them, her eyes were glossy and the urge to cry was written all over her face.

I started to speak, unsure of what to even say, but she held out her hand to stop me.

“When we were heading back inside, you guys were walking a few feet in front of me with Jenna Colligan, talking and you were telling her all about how you wished you had her as a valentine instead of me then she turned to you both and said...”

She paused, looking up at the night sky as she gathered herself enough to finish. She wasn’t hyperventilating, but it was almost as if she wasn’t able to fill her lungs completely.

The heaviness in my chest felt unbearable. I dropped to my knees in front of her, putting the empty bottle on the ground, and placing my hands over hers. “Please, Mae. I need to know what she said.”

“She said, ‘*Mae’s birth parents didn’t want her, so it’s only right that nobody else does*’.”

Fuck.

Just fuck.

My head fell forward, and I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“And then you laughed—*laughed*.” She blinked, and one singular tear skated down her cheek. “I’ve had broken bones, and I’ve been called awful things by some of the most beautiful and powerful people in the world... but nothing, nothing, has hurt me as badly as hearing her say those words.”

“Hey, hey, hey. Please don’t cry.” I wiped a thumb underneath her eye to get rid of a tear that was threatening to break.

I hadn’t been the one to say those words, but if I hadn’t been an idiot telling Molly how much I wished I’d chosen her in the first place... *fuck*. It might’ve been an accident, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t inadvertently responsible for the worst, most heartbreaking pain of her life.

With two fingers under her chin, I tilted her face up so she could see the remorse in my eyes as I spoke my next words. “Mae... I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. If I had known, I never would have—”

She shook her head, tearing her eyes away from mine. “I know.”

I rose to my feet, taking a step back to feel the breeze against my face as I ran my hands down my cheeks. I didn’t know what to say, do, or think at the moment. Everything that came to mind felt wrong, and I didn’t want to screw things up more than I already had.

“Mae! Are you up there?” Scar’s voice traveled up the stairs from the deck below. “We’re about to enter the no wake zone, so we need to start saying goodbyes.”

“Just a minute.” She twisted her neck to call down to Scarlett before turning her attention back to me. “This changes nothing between us. You know that, right?”

“That’s not true,” I replied curtly. “You can continue making me the villain in your story all you want, but you’re done being the villain in mine.”

Mae sat there for a moment, eyeing me carefully before giving me a clipped nod. I watched as she rose from her seat, smoothing down her dress with her palms before giving me a small weak smile and turning away from me.

It was only after she disappeared down the steps that I sat in the seat she’d just gotten up from and hung my head into my hands.

Those answers I thought I needed? I wished I’d never gotten them.

NINE

MAE

TOSS. *Turn.*

Toss. Turn.

With a groan, I rolled from my left side onto my back.

For years, I had trouble falling asleep. Instead of counting sheep—or whatever other people did to get to sleep—I would lay in bed late at night, tucked under the warmth of the covers while my thoughts spiraled deeper and deeper into a never-ending abyss. Eventually, I'd wear myself out from overthinking, allowing exhaustion to take over and carry me through the night.

Even with the business struggling the past few months, it had been weeks since I'd had an episode like that. Lately, my sleep schedule has been like clockwork. Ten o'clock wind down, eleven o'clock get ready for bed, and without fail, I would be sound asleep by midnight with my limbs spread out like a starfish across the bed.

Tonight, however, there was no chance for sleep in sight.

It had been hours since we'd all gotten home from my birthday party. Hours since I'd crawled into bed. Hours spent reminiscing on my interactions with October from earlier in the day. I'd spoken to him more in the last fifteen hours than I had since he dropped back into my life a couple months ago, and the day's events left my brain in an endless tailspin as I tried to process our conversations.

You're not going to walk around in unnecessary pain for the next who-knows-how-many-hours if you don't need to.

Mae... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. If I had known, I never would have—

You can continue making me the villain in your story all you want, but

you're done being the villain in mine.

My mind was reeling and I couldn't make sense of anything as I replayed it all on a continuous loop. Did we hate each other? How were we supposed to act after I was a complete fool who trauma dumped all over him? Granted, he begged me to, but still. Most of all, I wondered whether there was some truth behind my joke when I said that Scarlett might be right about that hate fuck?

Nope. I couldn't do this any longer.

"I need to get out of here," I grumbled, massaging my temples. The cool air kissed my skin as I pushed off the covers and slipped out of bed. I fumbled through the darkness, smashing my big toe against the footrest in the process, before finally making it to the tall dresser on the opposite side of the room.

I turned the switch to the miniature lamp that sat on top and the soft yellow-gold light illuminated the small corner of the room. Opening the top drawer, I pulled out a periwinkle blue two-piece bikini and set the top next to the lamp while I stripped out of my oversized sleep shirt.

Wasn't one of my favorite swimsuits, but it wasn't like anyone was going to see it, anyway.

One foot went in the leg hole of the bottoms, followed by the other, then I snagged the top off the dresser and tied it securely as I ambled down the steps—blatantly ignoring my throbbing toe pain—and worked my way through the living room toward the back door.

I peered over at the clock on the stove—2:28 a.m.—before quietly cracking the back door open and slipping outside. Quietly shutting the door behind me, I twisted around toward the pool, but the large figure immersed in the middle of the water with its back pressed against the opposite edge made me jump back, covering my mouth with my palm.

"Jesus!" I gasped. "What are you doing out here?"

"Couldn't sleep. You?"

I paused for a second to calm myself before echoing him in an identical tone. "Couldn't sleep."

"Are you just going to stand there and look pretty?"

"Awww, you think I'm pretty," I joked, placing both hands over my heart like I couldn't bear the flattery.

"Never said you weren't."

It was a subtle jab to our earlier conversation back at the party. A part of

me despised myself for being so vulnerable with him. Knowing that if he wanted to, he could use it against me at any time.

I bit my bottom lip to refrain from making a snide remark. My intention for coming out here was to relax, and that wasn't going to change simply because he was here too.

In truth, I didn't care if he thought Molly was prettier than me. Then or now.

He seemed remorseful once the truth finally came to light.

And I think, deep down, I always knew he would be whenever my truth finally came to light. He might not have been the one directly responsible for the words that hurt me, but he understood the role he played in what happened, which was something.

The worst part was that it made it much harder to hate him knowing that he wasn't the monster that had been living inside my head all these years. That despite our animosity, he'd still dropped to his knees without a second thought to console me when I needed it.

For the first time he made me see that he was more human than monster. Would he ever see the same with me?

I'd had eighteen years to let go of the feelings that harbored in my heart for so long after overhearing Molly's comment. I was willing to extend forgiveness, but I wasn't ready to embrace him with arms wide open yet.

Squatting down, I took a seat on the edge of the pool opposite him, dipping my legs in the ice-cold water until they were submerged up to my knees. Leaning forward, I placed my palms on the stone coping and looked around the dark yard. The only source of light was the crystal blue haze illuminating from the pool.

"Sometimes I like to come out here late at night when the world is still and the only sounds are the bugs chirping and the pool circulating water."

"It's calming," he offered in response.

"Exactly."

"About tonight..."

"Save it," I cut him off, though there wasn't any malice in my tone like usual. "I'd rather not take *another* trip down memory lane."

He nodded, loosening the tension in his shoulders as he ran his passions over the top of the water.

What I'd said back on the boat earlier about our little heart to heart not changing anything between us was true. One apology couldn't erase the

twenty years of damage we'd administered to each other.

Yet, there was an uncertainty between the two of us that landed somewhere between hatred, lust, and acquaintanceship. These few minutes, sitting outside in silence, were the longest we'd gone without snapping at each other for as long as I could remember.

Which didn't help the fact that with each passing second the voice inside my head which was screaming '*What if Scarlett was right?*' got louder. And louder. And louder.

You know what... fuck it. The worst he could say was no, and frankly, I could use a little excitement in my life right now. Something to take my mind off of the chaos around me.

I mean, it's not like things were going to get better between us. So, the least we could do was relieve some of this tension by exchanging a few orgasms. Then, tomorrow, we could pretend like nothing happened and go back to regularly scheduled programming where we avoid each other at all costs.

"You know what? Why don't we call a temporary truce?" I pushed off my elbows and submerged myself into the water until it waded around the middle of my rib cage.

"A truce..." He whipped his head toward me, tilting it to the side.

"You know, an agreement between enemies to stop fight—"

"I know what a truce is."

"Oh really? Couldn't tell." I shot him a playful smile and he shook his head. "It would only be temporary. For a few weeks, until you moved out. Then we can go right back to loathing each other the second you're gone."

I couldn't make out his face well in the darkness, but I could've sworn he was sporting knotted brows. "Before I answer that, I've been meaning to ask..."

I took a few steps until I was in the middle of the pool. "Yeah?"

"Was there any truth in what you said earlier? About Scarlett's comment..."

"I wasn't lying about what she said. She's been saying we should fuck for months."

Until now, I'd always brushed it off. Assuming it was just some sort of trivial joke made at my expense for the sake of a laugh. I didn't mind it much, because we both knew how far off from reality I'd have to be to actually consider it.

Yet, here I was, arguably about to make one of the most unhinged decisions of my life. Weird thing was, I felt a sense of calm about it. If he sucked in bed, then I'd have more material to work with at our next battle. And if he was halfway decent, then at the very least, it would make for a fun night.

Truly, what was the worst that could happen? My lifelong enemy becoming an even bigger enemy? Please. I'd survive.

I looked over at October with an overly seductive expression and a fluttering sensation ignited in my stomach. Well, there was no turning back now.

He peered at me intently as I waded through the pool, moving close toward him. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?" My tone was smooth and sultry.

"Like you want to fuck me."

"What? I'm not—"

Innocence. He always fell for it. I was certain this time would be no exception.

"The only thing you're not... is a good liar." He lifted his arms off of the water and placed his elbows on the edge. His arms looked huge. It was like some weird kind of bicep porn, and his tattoos made it unnecessarily hotter. "You're not fooling anyone, Mae. I see how you look at me. It's the same way you've looked at me for weeks. The heat in your eyes when we're sparring together. The way you try to stop yourself from arguing with me, but end up giving in anyway. Just admit that you want me, Mae."

I stared at him. In part because I hadn't been looking at him in any kind of way prior to tonight, and I wasn't sure whether or not I should laugh at his grave miscalculation. The only reason I didn't call him on it was because once we started to argue, there wouldn't be an end until one of us was crowned as winner.

"And what would you do if I said you were right?" My heart raced with every step as I moved closer to him. "That I was curious to see if Scarlett was right? You know... give into the heat of the moment."

"Stop fucking around, Mae."

"Come on. What's the worst that could happen?" I blinked at him, slow and seductive.

He scoffed like he was pissed off, but I knew somewhere in his pea sized brain he was weighing his options. Considering whether or not he should give

into the temptation right in front of him.

“I don’t know... I could contract an incurable STI from you. Or—”

“Or let loose and have the most earth-shattering sex you’ve ever had in your entire life?” I cut him off.

“Doubtful.”

“Won’t know until you find out.”

He swallowed.

“Twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes, what?” He analyzed me, rubbing along his jaw.

“If I wanted to, I could have your mouth between my legs in twenty minutes.”

Probably less, but I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt because I’m sure he’d try to talk himself out of going all the way because of his weird celibacy vow. What kind of twenty-six-year-old professional athlete willingly stopped having sex for seven months out of the year? It was weird, right?

A low laugh rambled from his chest. “I’d love to see you try.”

I lifted my hands out of the pool, and flicked the water off of them as I reached for the bathing suit strings that were tied in a bow in the middle of my back. October ran a hand through his hair, not noticing as I squinted past him to check the clock on the outside of the pool house.

Go time.

Pulling the long end of one of the strings, I felt my bathing suit loosen around my torso. I took another step closer to October, leaving two feet of space between us, if that. It was always so easy to notice when he was stuck in his head, because he would stare blankly into the distance for a minute before raising a brow as he tried to find reason for the questions in his head.

Lucky for me, that gave me the perfect amount of time to untie the things around my neck, leaving my bright blue bikini top floating in the water.

When he finally came out of his trance, his mouth dropped open.

“What? You said it’d work better if I was naked next time.” I batted my eyelashes at him.

“I said it *might* work better,” he mumbled, raking his eyes over me boldly as he lied through his teeth.

“And is it?”

“No,” his tone was firm, but the way he was holding his breath was enough to figure out his bluff.

“Lying is still a sin, even if the person you’re lying to is yourself.”

“What are you doing, Mae?”

I whispered against his lips, “Something I’ll probably regret tomorrow.”

With one step backward, I turned, gliding through the water toward the stairs. Once I reached the top step, I paused, slipping my thumbs underneath the sides of my bikini bottoms, tugging them down to the ground and stepping out of them.

With my mouth twitched in amusement, I looked at October over my shoulder. “You coming, or what?”

TEN

OCTOBER

I'D MADE plenty of poor decisions in my life.

Getting arrested in high school after being caught underage drinking at a house party. That time sophomore year of college when I sported a botched mullet for far longer than I should have. And that ice cream cone tattoo on my upper thigh was pretty ugly, not going to lie. Frankly, there was a whole slew of other bad choices I could rattle off on command if needed.

This right here though—following Mae as she walked naked toward the outdoor shower—was easily the start of my worst decisions to date.

Instead of making the rational choice of drying off my swim shorts and walking the ten yards to the comfort of my bed, I hopped out of the pool, toweled off my hair and body, and walked directly behind Mae's perky ass as she waltzed over to the outdoor shower on the side of the pool house that sat between the brick and the fence.

I tried to stop my feet from trudging across the yard, but they must've gotten the wrong mental cue, because my pace only increased in an attempt to catch up with her.

The light from the pool carried over to the side of the yard, making it easy for Mae to see as she twisted the handle all the way to the left. Scorching water erupted from the shower head, gliding down Mae's back, over her ass, and down her thighs. The steam that rose around her only made the scene in front of me that much more pornographic.

What level of horny was it to be jealous of some fucking water droplets?

I shook my head, stifling a laugh as I casually leaned my left shoulder against the white brick a few feet away from her. Crossing my arms against my chest, I released an elongated breath.

What I wasn't prepared for, was Mae twisting on her heels to face me, giving me a full front view of her naked body. She closed her eyes, leaning her head back to rinse her hair and I had to fight to hold back a groan. The way her breasts were pushed out from the movement and her bare pussy on display... it was too much for my sex deprived brain to handle.

She ran both hands down her hair, but stopped once she reached her shoulders and began trailing them down her chest instead. Mae's eyes locked on mine as she massaged with her breasts.

It felt wrong to stare, but it would take the heavens opening from the clouds for me to even consider tearing my eyes away from her body right now.

Yet, even still, there was some part of my brain that was still trying to process our conversation from earlier. I was trying to give myself some grace, but it didn't make it any easier to sort through. I continued reminding myself that it happened when I was seven—a little over eighteen years ago. And as much as I wish I could take back my part in hurting her, those words still would've left Molly's lips, and Mae and I still would've ended up despising each other.

Pushing the thought out of my head, I refocused my attention on Mae. Only this time, one of her hands was trailing down her stomach toward her center. I held my breath as she dragged her fingertips lower, taunting and teasing her bare skin.

"Are you just going to stand there and watch?" Her voice was sultry with a hint of underlying playfulness. When I failed to respond she shrugged a shoulder. "Fine by me, I guess. I don't mind putting on a little show."

Mae had always been bold. Never had a problem saying exactly what was on her mind. But seeing her this outwardly taunting toward me wasn't something I could've calculated for. Even as teenagers we never crossed the line between friendship and hatred, which meant the jump from long-standing rivals to fuck buddies would be nearly impossible.

Seeing this side of her was entirely new to me, yet for some unknowing reason, I couldn't take my eyes off of her. I continued watching intently as she leaned back against the wall behind her, dodging the shower handles, but still keeping most of herself covered by the scorching water.

My body went still as she ran her hands down her stomach slowly before teasing her slit. She let out a few breathy whimpers before making a V with her fingers and spreading herself open to give me a full view of her little pink

pussy. Had I not already been leaning on the brick wall; I would've fallen straight on my ass.

I blinked slowly as lewd fantasies flooded my brain. The thought of throwing her over my shoulder, taking her into the pool house, and teasing her until she was in tears begging for me to let her finish. Or dropping right in front of her and making her come on my tongue so loudly that she woke the neighbors. A thousand more fantasies rotated through my mind at warp speed before I returned back to the wet dream that was playing out in front of me.

Mae's eyes stayed locked on mine as she dipped two fingers inside herself. A satisfied moan spilled from her lips and her eyes fluttered closed as her head lolled backward. Seeing the look of pure pleasure on her face was all I needed to cross the space that separated us in two steps until I was standing just outside where the water from the shower reached.

Sweet God, I could listen to her make those noises all day. Not only was it music to my fucking ears, but those tantalizing moans that continued spilling past her plump red lips were the reason my dick was aching right now. Which was saying a whole fucking lot considering no other woman had gotten me hard since I saw Mae for the first time in years a few weeks ago.

And yes, I tried multiple times with a handful of women and not a damn thing any of them did helped me get up. Do you have any idea how hard it is—no pun intended—to turn down a stunning hotel heiress who was visiting town for the week because your dick refused to cooperate?

Fucking agonizing. Now I couldn't step foot in on a Black Hotel Group property without risking the staff knowing about my dick problems.

"What are you doing?" My voice was thick with heat.

"Showing you how I like it."

Such a fucking tease.

For a while after I'd left for college I'd forgotten about Mae. Freshman year, I was too swept up with being the big shot starting quarterback who was able to have any girl I wanted—any time I wanted—and securing a championship ring to worry about what she was up to during her senior year.

It was only after she'd graduated and she and Scar temporarily moved to New York—Mae for modeling and Scar for culinary school—that I started keeping tabs on her again. Like I said, in high school she was gorgeous, blew everyone out of the park by a landslide, but it wasn't until I saw pictures of her standing next to some of the most stunning women in the world that I really allowed myself to appreciate her effortless beauty.

Sure, I'd kept an eye on her over the years through Socialgram. I knew that she quit modeling right before her twenty-third birthday and shortly after started her own company. And no matter how good she looked in a photo or tabloid, I never gave myself permission to let my mind wander—well, aside from coming up with snide comments to piss her off the next time we saw each other.

I continued to watch her for a while longer as she drew her fingers in and out in a slow, steady rhythm. Watching her like this was easily one of the most erotic things I'd witnessed to date. And that was saying a lot considering that aside from my seasonal celibacy and recent erectile dysfunction issue, I'd been a bit of a playboy. Wasn't proud of it. In fact, in recent months I hadn't found it enjoyable at all.

A sharp inhale from Mae pulled me from my thoughts.

"Aren't you going to join me?" she rasped.

"I'm not getting naked in your backyard."

"You're the one who said that if I wanted a look, all I had to do was ask." She dropped her eyes to my growing hard on. "Now I'm asking."

"I'm not—"

"If you're a liar, admit it."

"If you want to fuck me, just say that," I countered, although the only thing I could think about was what it feels like to have her red lips wrapped around my throbbing cock.

"I don't want to fuck you. I want *you* to fuck *me*." Her tone was sultry, and the confession rolled off her tongue with ease.

My eyes squeezed shut instinctively.

Inhale. I needed to inhale.

My lungs were devoid of oxygen. My brain was no longer receiving any signals.

I stood there blank brained and breathless for a long minute before blinking away my shock. Mae reached for my wrist and waited until I gave her a small nod. Her eyes flared with heat as she grabbed my hand and placed it against her neck. I took a step forward, letting the water consume me for a beat before leaning forward and dropping my mouth against the side of her throat.

With her hand still on mine, she lowered it from her neck, skimming it across her chest before guiding it low enough to cup her boob. I squeezed instinctively, and the utterly satisfied look on her face as I pulled my mouth

away from her neck was enough to send me reeling.

We stayed like that for a moment before she placed her hand over mine again, dragging it down her stomach toward her center. The prolonged anticipation was almost fucking unbearable.

“Are you sure you want this?”

Mae stared at me with a neutral expression, her chest rising and falling while the sound of water pouring around us filled the silence. She nodded, guiding my hand lower until it replaced the one she had on her clit.

Keeping her hand over mine, she guided my fingertips in slow circles, only allowing me to take over once she was so satisfied that her eyes couldn't stay open and her head was being held up by the wall behind her. I continued keeping the pace she had set as I dropped my mouth down to the hollow of her neck.

She hummed her approval and I pressed my throbbing erection against the side of her ass cheek. Looking up, her eyes shot open, almost like she was shocked she had this much of an effect on me. Mae reached her hand over to feel me over my swim shorts and my head began to spin.

“I can't say I'm surprised by you coming onto me like this... but why now?” I rasped against her neck.

Her words came out between moans as I curled my fingers upward, hitting that special spot that I knew would drive her wild. “I could... use something... to take the edge off... that's all.”

“I find it hard to believe that that's the only reason.”

“Don't.” She looked at me with her big, seductive saucer eyes before briefly dropping her gaze to my lips then dragging it back up again. “If it wasn't you, it would've been someone else.”

Fuck me. She was such a tease.

With a wry smile on my lips, I pulled out my two middle fingers and thrust them back inside her so hard it made her breath hitch. She followed that up with a taunting smile that made my fucking head spin.

Now, what I hadn't planned for was the surge of jealousy at her mentioning another person taking my place. For a quick moment, I tried convincing myself that it wasn't jealousy, that I was simply caught up in the moment of lust and hormones. That was until I felt her inner walls begin to clench around my fingers all while her breaths grew quick and shallow.

She was close. So close that I could feel her beginning to ripple around my fingers.

“I—”

“You what?” I challenged. “You want my mouth on your pussy, don’t you?”

She nodded and I let one more desperate moan slip past her lips before slipping my fingers out of her heat and turning to walk away. My hand was soaked, coated in her juices and all I could think about was how badly I wanted to taste her.

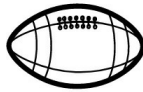
I couldn’t let this go that far, though.

Behind me, Mae let out a frustrated groan which made one corner of my mouth lift upward.

“What the fuck?”

“You said twenty minutes... it’s been twenty-one,” I called over my shoulder, not giving so much as a glance back. “Goodnight, March. You could use some rest. Might help... take that edge off.”

As I turned right toward the front door of the poorhouse, I heard her muttering a stream of choice expletives as she shut off the water.



The next morning, I woke up early to clean the pool before practice. Only this time, I fished out her light blue swimsuit top from the deep end, grabbed her bottoms from the deck, and placed them on the ivory finished rectangle dining set. That way whenever she woke up, and tried coming out here to enjoy sipping on her morning tea at the head of the table like usual, she’d be met with a piercing reminder of last night’s endeavors.

Man, what I would’ve paid to stick around and see the look on her face.

ELEVEN

MAE

“I HAVE A PROPOSITION FOR YOU.” I grabbed the remote from the coffee table and plopped down next to October, who was sprawled out on the fluffy white sofa with his eyes glued to the television screen above the small fireplace.

He didn’t bat an eyelash when I strolled into the pool house unannounced. Granted, the door had been unlocked, and sometimes, like now, I forgot Scarlett didn’t live in here anymore, and I wasn’t welcome to march right in with no reason. Old habits die hard, but if he wanted to give me shit over it, I’d classify it as Landlord privileges.

“Not interested in going down on you right now. Sorry to disappoint.”

“Could you be any more crass?” My face scrunched together as I turned to look at him.

“Really? You’re going to pretend like you weren’t milliseconds away from coming on my fingers last weekend?”

Why, yes. Yes, I was.

So much so, in fact, I made up some lame excuse as to why I couldn’t attend Scarlett’s Friday night dinner last weekend. What was so wrong about pretending?

It was simply a temporary moment of weakness that never should’ve seen the light of day. Or, more technically, the dark of night.

Don’t get me wrong, I enjoy reveling in a self-deprecating joke from time to time—keeps me humble. Like the time I accidentally fell face first on the runway at Milan Week of Fashion. Humiliating? Yes. But I was modest enough to laugh at the memes that circulated on Socialgram after.

Reliving the mortification of almost hooking up with October, though?

No, thank you.

I wouldn't even allow myself the indulgence of remembering how much I liked the feel of his hands as they explored my body or how the heat of his breath against my neck as he worked his fingers in and out of me sent goose bumps down my spine.

Nope. I would not allow it. More importantly, I could not allow it. Because if I did let one teeny *tiny* thought slip through my brain, then that would leave the door open for me to convince myself falling into bed with him would be a rational decision.

And frankly, I'd rather bathe in cow manure than wake-up in bed next to him after a hot and heavy night of giving into horny Mae's desires. October was already revolting enough, but add in morning breath to the mix and I would be left with no choice but to swear off the entire male species as a whole.

"Hmmm... I have no recollection of that."

In fact, I wished I could push the image of last weekend out of my brain completely. Making myself look like a vulnerable idiot in front of him twice in one night was mortifying in and of itself. Then add on him denying me an orgasm right as I was about to finish, and, well, I might as well wear a flashing sign over my head with 'village idiot' written in big bold letters.

Damn Scar for planting the seed in my brain that falling into bed with him was a good idea. I could hear her in my head now saying, "*A lot can be solved with a hate fuck. Just get it out of your system.*", in her convincing tone. Just like I'd heard her say more than a handful of times in the few weeks since October rudely dropped back into our lives.

What did I just say about not allowing myself to think about this? I needed saving from my own inner turmoil at this point.

"You don't seem to recall a lot of things," he said with a smug smile.

I shot him a snide look.

"Need my help jogging your memory?" October leaned over to me with his eyes closed and his lips puckered.

"Stop it! I did not come here to seduce you." I pushed against his chest and turned my head to dodge his lips. His roaring laugh boomed out through the room and I almost—*almost*—didn't hate the sound of it. Which was disgusting in and of itself. October continued laughing hysterically as I pulled back my shoulders and puffed out my chest. "I have a real proposition, and it's for a good cause."

“What? My dick isn’t a good cause?”

“Oh, so now you want your dick involved? After the stunt you pulled last Friday? I would purposely jump out of an airplane without a parachute before I’d consider letting you touch me again.”

He gave me a nonchalant shrug. Though the widening grin on his face was a dead giveaway he’d wanted to make some snarky remark about it already happening before. Instinctively, my lips pressed together into a thin line as a pinched expression consumed my face.

“What’s that look for? Still learning how to take a joke?”

“No. There’s just an offensive insult sitting on the tip of my tongue, and I’m trying *really* hard to be the bigger person right now.”

“If you play your cards right, you can have something big on the tip of your tongue in a minute flat... two tops.” I followed his eyes as he looked down at his sweatpants then shot me a patronizing wink. “Just ask nicely first.”

“October! Oh my god,” I groaned, flailing my hands in the air and slumping back into the couch cushions. Okay, so maybe it was a *little* funny, but I refused to let it show. “Be serious with me for one second. I promise I’ll let you go on telling enough vulgar jokes to fill your heart’s desire once I’m done.”

I took a deep, centering breath before looking at him with as serious of a face as I could muster. “I would like your help.”

Those words felt like acid on my tongue.

Sickening. Absolutely, positively sickening.

“Mae Garten...” He mock choked with a devilish smirk plastered on his lips. “Asking for my help? Oh, this better be good.”

“Preposterous, I know.” I rolled my eyes, refusing to give into his dramatics. “But really, I’m in need of another male model for the charity fashion show Abel’s sister is throwing in a few weeks. All of the proceeds from the event are going to rebuild the children’s oncology ward at Miami Memorial.”

“Is this your way of flirting with me? By telling me I’m good looking enough to be one of your models? If so, it’s working.”

Was it possible to witness someone’s ego growing right in front of you? If so, I had a front row seat. Sure, October wasn’t a sight for sore eyes by any means—which was disgusting to admit now that I thought about it—but would it kill him to be a little more humble?

“If that’s your idea of flirting it would make sense why you’re celibate half of the year.”

“It boosts athletic performance. There are studies on it.”

Yeah, there were studies on it—I blame my curious mind for looking it up after he brought it up the other night at my birthday party. And all of them seemed to come to the same conclusion... that sexual activity, or lack thereof, had no effect on athletic performance.

“Mhmmm,” I hummed. “If that’s what you need to tell yourself to sleep at night then so be it. Now, back to the point, this fashion show will be good press... and you could use some of that. You know, considering the extension you were hoping for hasn’t happened yet.”

I could feel the schooled rage simmering off of him as a taunting smile cracked at the corners of my lips. There was something about getting under his skin which sent a warm rush of satisfaction coursing through my veins. In truth, that little drug of a feeling probably made-up ninety percent of the reason that I continued entertaining October’s presence. Without it, there would be no point in subjecting myself to voluntary torture.

“Just admit that you think I’m hot.”

“Mildly attractive at best,” I replied in a clipped tone while averting my eyes on the football game on the television screen in front of us.

“Bump me up from mild to moderate and I’ll join your little fashion show.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Oh no, it looks like I have plans that da—”

“Fine,” I grumbled, crossing my arms across my chest.

I wasn’t keen on agreeing with him, but right now I needed to choose my battles. And since I had to finalize the model list to send to Aera by tomorrow, my options were just about as thin as the list of men I knew who’d be willing to participate.

“Say the words,” he prodded. “I want to hear them.”

“I, Mae Elizabeth Garten, find October Calhoun to be moderately attractive,” I mumbled begrudgingly.

We turned both of our attention to the screen where last night’s game between the Las Vegas Lions and the Arizona Avalanche was coming to an end. The Lions were winning by three, but the Avalanche came in with another touchdown in the final few seconds of the game to win it all. I wasn’t

well versed in football, but it seemed like quite the way to kick off The League's first game of the season.

"You could've thrown better in that charity game a while back. I saw where you missed that throw to Fortune."

Out of my peripherals I could see October twisting his head to look at me. "Watching my games, are you?"

"Again, with the vast ego." I clicked my tongue. "If you must know, I went with Scarlett to watch Abel... you just happened to be playing too."

"You're totally watching my games." He smirked. Granted, I didn't know for certain because I refused to take my eyes off the screen to confirm, but I could sense it. Any time October felt a modicum of joy it was like an alarm went off in my brain, which was immediately followed by a laundry list of things I should do to ruin it for him.

Only this time, I was too flustered by all of this strange friendly hatred thing going on between the two of us right now that I couldn't come up with anything worthy of saying out loud. Which was a damn shame, because I would've loved nothing more than to wipe the smug grin right off of his face.

"Leave me alone," I said with a huff.

"If you need a jersey, I've got one with your name written on it." He turned his attention back to the game. "Well, my name... if we're being technical."

"I'd rather sit through the entire game naked with every seat in the stadium filled than wear your jersey."

"Even better."

"Fuck off. I actually have a second proposition for you... I need you to drive me to the grocery store."

"You're twenty-five... drive yourself."

"I can't. I went to the eye doctor today and they tricked me into getting one of those glaucoma tests and now I can't operate a motorized vehicle until lunch time tomorrow."

Okay, so maybe that was a tiny white lie. I completely consented to it, filling out the form approving it and everything. But only because the white-haired lady with enormous, red cat-eye glasses was an exceptionally convincing sales woman. What could I say? She reminded me of my late grandmother. How on earth was I supposed to say no to her after that? Hopefully she was earning commissions, because she was missing her calling selling luxury timeshares if not.

“Not my problem. Have Scar take you.”

“Her and Abel went on a date to that Italian place they like.”

“Ahhh, is that the reason she canceled tonight’s dinner? Tell her to bring me back some tiramisu.”

“Even better idea.” I perked up. “Get this, you take me to the grocery store... and you can get tiramisu there instead.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“Aside from my pleasant demeanor and dazzling looks?” I turned to October, batting my eyelashes like an innocent angel sent from heaven above.

Too bad he wasn’t buying it.

That was one thing I hadn’t anticipated when October waltzed back into my life—him having far greater comebacks and tiny annoyances than he did when we were kids. I held in a laugh remembering all the times he used to sputter profusely until he eventually huffed and puffed away with his fists balled at his sides.

Weirdly enough, it was almost like he’d been holding this new set of snide remarks in an offshore arsenal waiting for the perfect time to use them. Frankly, I found that entire possibility a bit strange. Had he really spent the last seven years thinking up tasteless insults for the next time we saw each other again? How embarrassing for him. Especially since the only time I was ever reminded of his existence was whenever Scar brought him up in passing.

He could deny it all he wanted, but he was a boy obsessed if I’d ever seen it.

October let out an amused laugh, pulling me away from my thoughts. “If you’re trying to be convincing, you’re moving in the wrong direction, March baby.”

“Hmm, let me think about it...” I stared off into the distance like I was pondering really hard about it. “Well, since you were too afraid to show me your micropenis last weekend, that takes road head off the table.”

“I do not have a micropenis.” October rolled his eyes so hard it looked like he was having an exorcism.

A small smile cracked at the corners of my lips as I held back a burst of laughter that was threatening to break free. “Yet, I’ve found that most men who get defensive about small dick jokes... do in fact have small dicks. The ones who are well endowed usually just roll with it since they don’t have anything to hide.” The way he rubbed the back of his neck while avoiding eye contact with me created a newfound exhilaration in my chest. “Care to

defend yourself?”

“You’re not going to leave me alone until you get what you want, are you?” he grumbled.

“Not a chance.”

“Get in the truck. I’ll meet you there.”

With my chin lifted high and a big satisfied smile on my face, I leaned over and placed a slobbery kiss on his cheek. “Did you know that you’re my hero?”

October wiped it off begrudgingly and I couldn’t help but let out a laugh as I hopped up from the sofa and snatched his keys off the kitchen island.

I wasn’t entirely sure what the rest of the night had in store, but something deep, deep down inside was telling me that whatever it was, it *sure* would be fun.

TWELVE

MAE

“OCTOBER CALHOUN! IS THAT YOU?” A sweet voice called down from the opposite end of the candy aisle.

It was nine o'clock on a Friday night, and the entire store was seemingly desolate. Granted, most twenty-somethings would probably rather spend their time after a long week of work drinking away their sorrows while trying to forget about having to wake-up Monday morning and doing it all again. Then there were people like me, perusing each and every aisle as I filled my arms with three different types of chips and sour candy because I'd convinced myself that I wasn't going to need a cart when we walked in.

Surprisingly, October and I hadn't murdered each other on the short car ride over. Although, we did get into a little quarrel about what kind of music should be playing—he wanted house music, but I obviously protested. Never in my life had I listened to that god awful music at my leisure, and I sure as hell wasn't going to start today.

“Donna! Lovely to see you. How are the boys?” October ambled over to bear hug the strawberry-blonde-haired woman that was at least half his size. Something about her looked familiar, but I couldn't quite put my finger on where I'd seen her before.

“Oh, they're as ornery as ever. Little Tommy started playing in Tiny League this year and Cody has convinced everyone that he's the team's water boy. The coaches got him a polo with the team's logo on it and everything.” The two of them laughed in unison.

“No way. Some of the guys and I will have to drop by their practices sometime before the season ends.”

“Please do! Their friends would love it.”

I cleared my throat at the lull in the conversation, standing off to the side awkwardly.

“Forgive me, Donna. This is my friend April Showers.” The upturn of his lips pissed me off. He knew I hated it when he called me that. “April, this is Donna. Coach Kirby’s wife. He’s our offensive coordinator.”

“What an... ironic name.” The woman's eyebrows scrunched together.

Oh, it was just absolutely perplexing, wasn't it?

Donna made a motion to shake my hand while eyeing the mound of snacks I was shuffling around to free up a hand to extend to her. She pulled a face at my selection—dill pickle kettle chips, maple bacon Pringles, butter garlic ruffles paired with four types of sour gummies that were, let's face it, the same thing with different shapes and packaging. God, I wished I had never made my presence known. Blending into the background would've been less awkward than this.

Anyone know if it was possible to evaporate entirely?

Someone.

Anyone.

Please.

Oh, so the answer is, no? That's great. Really, really great.

“You're telling me,” I muttered with an artificial smile as I briefly took her outstretched hand into mine and gave it a small shake.

October opened his lips, likely to say another idiotic remark, but I cut him off with a kick to the shin as the woman turned to grab two packs of peach rings off the shelf. The counterfeit smile I was sporting didn't falter in the slightest, though the wince sound he made might've given me away.

When my dads adopted me, they had a difficult time coming up with a name that they both agreed on. Until one night when they were watching Barefoot Contessa and decided that a three-letter first name would pair well with our ironically matching last name, Garten. They settled on a variation of May since that's what month it was, and neither saw a problem with the fact that they had quite literally named me “May Garden” with a botched spelling.

Of course, October found a substantial amount of humor in making fun of me for it over the years. Making each knockoff name more absurd than the last.

April Showers. May Flowers. Sunflower Summers. Autumn Falls. Breezy Winters.

It was never ending.

Although, I'd take these weird dummy nicknames over his typical "March baby" any day.

"Anywho, lovely to see y'all, but I've got to get going now. Just had to stop in here and get Jason something to snack on this weekend. You know how he gets on game day... nervous as a nellie munching on whatever he can get his hands on."

"Coach does love peach rings." October leaned in and gave her a parting hug and she patted him on the back a couple times before they broke apart. "I'll talk to him about getting some of the guys together and coming to one of the boys' practices sometime."

"All right, honey. I'm so glad I got to see you. Remember to play safe on Sunday." Donna looked over her shoulder, and waved him off as she pushed her cart away.

For a split second, I contemplated what it would be like to be October's girlfriend— disgusting, I know. I'm ashamed that I even had that thought to begin with. Is this what it would be like though? Friday nights at the grocery store catching up with old friends instead of lavish dinners?

Ew.

Shaking my head, I pushed the deranged thought out of mind.

"I'll be right back. I need to get some paper towels and dishwasher detergent."

The sheer audacity of this man was astounding.

"How is it that I'm the one who begged to come to the store, but you're the one who has a full list of items you need to get."

"Keep up with your complaining and I'll make you walk home."

I groaned, rolling my eyes at him and giving him the finger despite my hands being full. "Get a cart while you're up there." I shouted to him before he left the aisle.

Rounding the corner to the freezer section, I perused the frozen pizza options for a while before deciding that ice cream, while not necessarily more nutritious, would be the better option as my main course.

A dark-haired lady in her late-forties to mid-fifties reached for the handle of the freezer door next to mine in unison with me. I gave her a friendly closed-mouth smile before transferring my attention on the vast ice cream selection in front of me.

Perusing through the pint-sized options, I silently debated back and forth between the options for a quick second before deciding to get both birthday

cake and chocolate brownie crunch. I placed them on top of the mound of snacks I'd already accumulated and let the door slam behind me.

"Sorry," I apologized to the woman, thinking the repulsed look on her face was from the loud noise of the door shutting. However, the disgusted once-over she was giving me told me that this had nothing to do with the freezer.

"You should really learn to put on some clothes." She turned up her nose, giving me a once-over with a disgusted look on her face.

Jealousy was a disease. And unfortunately for this woman, I wasn't immune. I'd spent countless hours from the ages of thirteen to twenty-three being picked apart, ridiculed, and called every horrible name under the sun. While also spending a majority of my time with some of the most beautiful people on the planet—by society's standards, of course.

Whatever this deeply insecure woman had to say to or about me wasn't even penetrating the thinnest layer of my mind. Especially considering the fact that I was wearing a boring workout top and athletic shorts. If she considered this to be scandalous, I'd hate for her to see the rest of my closet.

Normally, I would take the high road and choose to "kill them with kindness". Maybe it was because I had been around October too much lately... or maybe it was the way she could've just gone about her night without having to be a cunt to random strangers. Either way, I wasn't feeling like mustering up any kindness right now.

"Why?" I smirked. "Are you jealous?"

The woman scoffed. "I'd never be jealous of a skank like you."

Boo-fucking-hoo. My feelings were soooo hurt.

I internally rolled my eyes. Though, I wouldn't have been surprised if I had accidentally done it externally as well.

What was with people these days, anyhow? Was there a reason people felt the need to just say whatever bullshit came to their mind without filtering it through their brain first? At least when I was modeling, I was getting paid to listen to people's unrefined, unsolicited thoughts.

Long gone were the days where people plastered on a fake smile when they didn't like someone and gave them a condescending "bless your heart". Then proceeded to keep their mouths shut until they got home. Then, and only then, did they run through the entire scenario aloud while voicing all of the things they'd wished they said to your face.

Those were the good days—no matter which side of the equation you

were on. Gosh, I missed it. I know what you're thinking, "Mae, doesn't this logic apply to October, too?", and the answer to that is hell no—no explanation necessary.

The woman continued to stand in front of me with her arms crossed over her chest and a scowl on her face that accentuated her forehead wrinkles. I eyed who I assumed to be her husband who was coming down the aisle based on the fearful look in his eyes. I gave him a *long* head-to-toe stare down while licking my lips before returning my attention back to the woman who was trying to ruin my night. "Why? Worried I'll fuck your husband when he finally decides to divorce you?"

The man laughed under his breath as he placed a twelve pack of beer in the cart and came to stand next to her.

Unexpectedly, October came up behind me and placed one hand on my waist while he took my grocery items out of my hands. My annoyance from this situation must have drowned out the sound of the cart he had brought with him. "Hey, babe! You finally found someone to help fulfill that hotwife fantasy of yours?"

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and I peered up at him with knotted brows, he shot me a quick micro-expression urging me to play along. "Yeah, I did... what's your name, again?" I wrapped a hand around October's back and reached up with the opposite one to interlock my fingers with his hand that was hanging off my shoulder.

Poor lady's husband looked like a deer in headlights standing in front of us blinking rapidly like he could see his life flashing through his eyes. "Our hotel is just down the block. You're more than welcome to come back with us. As long as you're... okay with an audience."

The woman's face turned fire truck red and it took everything in me to keep my composure and not burst out laughing. "We're leaving... now." She stormed down the aisle leaving her full cart in the dust. "Larry. Now," she called back.

"I—I, uh..." he sputtered, not having moved a muscle.

"Maybe he'll be down for a spit roast. I know you've been wanting to try that for a while now." October's voice was far more seductive than it should've been.

I peered up at him with a taunting smile "Yeah, I have. What do you say? Is that something you'd be interested in?"

Glancing to my right, and the guy's eyes looked like they were going to

pop out of his head. Poor dude, probably hadn't gotten any action in ages by the looks of it.

"Larry!" His wife barked from the end of the aisle.

"Bye, Larry." October and I broke apart our hand hold to finger wave as he stared at us slack jawed while he walked backward down the aisle. "Call us when you get bored."

We watched with smug smiles until he rounded the corner out of sight.

October peered down at me longingly. "We make a good team."

I stared at him with a blank expression that slowly turned into my eyes narrowing and my mouth opening in surprise. "That's... just no. Now get your arm off of me." I shuffled out from under his touch and my entire body cringed in disgust.

Sure, it was nice to poke a little fun, but us being a "team"? Get out of here. In what universe did that seem logical?

"Yeah... I regretted saying it as the words were coming out."

"Do you think they're going to come back for the cart?"

"Not a chance." He laughed, grabbing the handle of our cart and following me to the register.

At checkout, I caught October staring at me out of the corner of my eye. He had a subtle smirk on his lips and not a single brain cell behind his eyes.

"Stop looking at me like you've seen me naked."

"I have seen you naked," he said matter-of-factly.

"The good shoppers of Publix don't need to know that, though," I scolded with a whisper.

October turned his attention to the long, black-haired, college-aged cashier who had an equal number of tattoos as him. "I've seen her naked."

The girl eyed me up and down slowly. "Can I see you naked too?"

This man. I swear. I can't be seen in public with him.

Do you see the kind of shit he gets me roped into?

"I admire the confidence, but absolutely not."

She shrugged off my rejection and continued scanning our groceries.

I turned to look at October with a scowl. "See, this is why I can't take you anywhere."

"Oh, you didn't tell me you were planning on us going out to more places together." His smirk only made my displeased expression more prominent.

"Geez, ask me out to dinner first, March. I'm not a piece of meat."

"Yeah, he's not a piece of meat." The cashier echoed loudly with a glare

as she scanned my Pringles. People in other checkout lanes all twisted their heads to look at us.

Jesus, someone remind me that the Friday night shoppers are a tough crowd next time.

Take the high road, Mae. Take the high road.

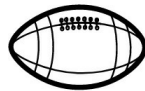
A light bulb flashed in my head, but I maintained composure as I eyed October staring at the cashier girl with a satisfied grin.

One little moment of weakness was all I needed to make my move.

“Oh, I know he’s not a piece of meat... he’s a cash cow, actually.” I smirked, perking up as I snatched the kettle chips she’d just scanned off the belt before the bag boy at the end could grab them. Cracking the bag open, I turned back over my shoulder with a little wave as I walked away. “Thanks for paying for me, Toby boy.” I winked over my shoulder as I headed toward the exit.

“You don’t have the—”

“Keys?” I finished for him, waving the keychain I’d snatched from his back pocket while he was reveling in the high of his “victory” of embarrassing me. “Better be nice or I’ll make you walk home.”



Back in the car, October and I sat in comfortable silence for the first half of the ride.

“We should get to know each other,” he said confidently without taking his eyes off the road.

“What is wrong with you?” I turned and gave him a blank stare from the passenger seat. What was up with him tonight? “Did you block out the part where we met when you were six or something?”

“No, March.” He rolled his eyes like I was the one asking the dumb question. “I mean, sure, I’ve *known* you for that long, but I feel like I don’t *know* you, you know?”

“That’s a lot of ‘knowing’.” My lips quirked as he snatched a handful of chips from the open bag in my lap and shoveled them into his mouth.

“You’re impossible,” he said after a minute. And I could’ve sworn—I’m talking, willing to place big money bets on it—that he had the tiniest twinge

of a smile on his lips as he spoke.

“What do you want to know?” I asked, but cut him off before he had the chance to respond. “Wait—I have an idea! Why don’t we... I don’t know, play a drinking game or something?”

“Or something?” He lifted a brow, looking over at me for the first time since we’d gotten into his truck.

The best part about being best friends with someone like Lea was that she’d taught me far more about seduction than I ever would’ve learned on my own. In her world, the art of seduction and having a cunning personality were the key to getting whatever she wanted. Most days, the tips and tricks I’d picked up from her went unused. But now that October was around, I couldn’t help but give some of them a try.

What October didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him. Right?

A wry smile turned up the corners of my lips as I lifted a shoulder. “Or something.”

THIRTEEN

OCTOBER

“YOU’RE DRUNK.”

“I’ve had one beer. I’m nowhere close to being drunk,” Mae scoffed, popping the top off her second amber colored bottle of the night. “If anyone’s drunk, it’s you.”

“I haven’t had any alcohol...”

“That’s beside the point.” She snarled.

This girl. I swear she could argue with a tree, and, somehow, she’d still come out the winner at the end of it.

After putting our groceries away, and changing into swim attire, we were both out by the pool, once again, for the second Friday night in a row. By the looks of it, we were on the path to having two weekly traditions together. Strange how that happens, huh? Going from seeing each other nearly every day as kids, to not seeing each other for years, and now here we were seeing each other on a routine basis again.

What was next? Spending Christmas together? On second thought, that probably didn’t seem too far off—especially if Scarlett had a say in it.

Hanging out with Mae was easier than hanging out with other girls, though. She wasn’t trying to be someone she wasn’t. Or trying to impress me. In fact, I go as far as saying that she was trying to be as unimpressive as possible. It was refreshing to say the least.

I couldn’t think of a time in recent years where women hadn’t wanted something out of me—money, sex, game tickets, to be seen with me on social media. Most of the time I didn’t care, but being with Mae made me realize how much I’d been used in the past. How fake people were whenever they were around me.

It was a shitty feeling. But a humble reminder to keep my circle small once this season was over instead of getting caught up with the superficial bullshit.

“Weren’t we supposed to play a drinking game?”

“Yeah, and you’re already losing.” She eyed the unopened beer in my hand before bringing her bottle to her lips and taking down half of it in two giant gulps.

“Someone didn’t tell me we were already playing.” I shot back.

All week, I hadn’t been able to get her out of my head. It probably wouldn’t have been nearly as bad had she not ditched out on family dinner last weekend. All that did was send an incessant stream of questions coursing through my mind.

Sure, we had fun last Friday, but I didn’t want her to be upset with me about leaving her to finish herself off. I also couldn’t deny that I’d thought of that exact scenario more than a few times in recent days.

The thought of her stomping back up to her room with her fists balled at her sides as she huffed up the stairs. Only to crawl into her bed and finish the job while thinking of my fingers taking the place of hers.

“Are you good over there?” There was a faint smirk on Mae’s face as she brought her bottle of beer to her lips and took a long pull. “Afraid you’ll get brainwashed if you come any closer?”

When I didn’t respond, she shrugged, heading for the pool steps instead. Tonight, she was wearing a barely-there bikini that was roughly two times smaller than the ones I’d previously seen her wearing. Her long, tan legs disappeared into the water until she was submerged to her waist.

For a moment, I contemplated following her in before deciding it would be best to take a seat on the edge, dipping my legs in instead.

“I’m not afraid of anything where you’re concerned.”

Mae came up and leaned her back against the wall of the pool next to my thighs. She took another long drag of beer before crossing her arms and staring off into the distance. After a few silent beats, she looked up at me with a small closed mouth smile.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

“It’s going to take a lot more than a penny before I let you in on my secrets, Calhoun.”

What I wouldn’t give to get inside her head for just a few minutes. I didn’t need long, just enough time to figure out why she was coming onto me

so strongly all of the sudden. She could claim it was Scarlett's nagging finally getting to her all she wanted, but we both knew there was something deeper. Something she wasn't telling me.

At the end of the day, I guess it really didn't matter. I didn't have the privilege to pry into her personal life. She was a big girl. I didn't need to monitor her every move. Whatever was going on with her, I'm sure she'd figure it out. And if I was going to be the collateral that helped her get there, so be it. Better that it be me than some strange dude with questionable intentions.

How she managed to trick me into this I had no idea, but my mind was already made up.

Mae and I were going to fuck.

One time.

No feelings.

No strings attached.

That was it.

"There's no game, is there?"

"Obviously, not." She let out a huffed laugh. "October, you know me about as well as anyone. And even though it makes me want to die on the inside, I'd go as far as saying you know me better than most people on the planet."

She looked up at me again only to be met with my confused expression.

Now that I thought about it, I guessed she was right. Aside from her more mature looks, and terrible argumentative skills, there wasn't all that much that had changed about her in recent years.

"You know my brain inside and out. In the span of a minute, you can make me feel a rainbow of emotions. You know exactly what makes me tick. You can read my facial expressions like you memorized them a thousand lifetimes ago. So, while you might not know my favorite color or how I take my coffee... you know me. Far better than I'd like to admit."

"Blue."

"What?"

"Your favorite color is blue. Light blue to be specific. And you don't drink coffee, you drink tea. Ginger tea twice in the morning and chamomile once at night. If neither of those are available then you'll settle for green."

She sucked in a breath. "How do you rememb—"

I cut her off. "And around the holidays you'll trade out the ginger tea for

peppermint instead.”

Mae looked at me slack jawed—half in disbelief, and half something I couldn’t entirely make out. She was right. I knew her like the back of my hand... and I thought about her a lot more than I should have—then and now.

It was time to stop denying myself the truth.

Setting my beer on the hardscape next to me, I pushed off the ledge and entered the water. I turned toward Mae and grabbed the mostly empty beer from her hands and placed it next to mine. Facing her, I placed one hand against the ledge on both sides of her.

She just stared at me with her big blue eyes, not moving a muscle as I inched closer to her face. I could feel my breaths go shallow as the pull toward her grew stronger. The draw between us had always been intense, but right now... it felt unbearable.

I skimmed my lips across hers. “You have no idea what you do to me.”

“Well...” She smirked, pulling back slightly. “I know that I make you angry...”

“Fantastic observation.”

Both of us grew more breathless by the second.

“And... I make you flustered...”

“Questionable.” The corner of my mouth lifted up.

She might have shocked me the other night by getting stark naked in front of me, but right now I was feeling the furthest thing from being on edge. In fact, speaking of edging, I had every intention of doing that to her again, and again, until she was in tears if that’s what she wanted.

She tipped her head down, peering up at me with those big doe eyes. “I make you turned on...”

“And then some.” I pressed my forehead to hers. “You’ve been eye fucking me since the day I moved in.”

“You must be mistaken, because I’ve hated your guts the entire time.”

“No, you haven’t. You just wished I was rearranging yours.” I challenged. “Which I find funny considering you claim that you don’t like me. Yet, somehow, you continue making excuses to be in my presence—pushing me in the pool, your birthday party, your late-night swim, coming to the pool house tonight. You’re up to four occurrences in the last week alone.” She didn’t say a word, so I continued. “If I were a betting man, I might even go as far as saying that you’re seeking me out. You’ll deny it, of course, but we both know it would be a lie.”

“I can assure you that I’m not interested.”

“In anything other than my dick, right?”

“Your dick is the only thing about you that I’m remotely interested in.”

Our lips grazed each other as we splayed back and forth.

Our eyes locked and everything about us went silent as I leaned forward.

At the last second, Mae dodged my kiss, ducking into the water under my arm and coming out the other side. Flipping onto her back as she swam away with a smirk. “This was fun. Sorry I can’t stay longer. Early morning tomorrow.”

“Is this your way of getting back to me for last weekend?”

“What happened last weekend? I don’t have any memory of it.”

Ahh, so she *was* trying to get back at me. That little minx.

“Not so fast.” I reached out and pulled her foot, dragging her through the water until she was close enough that I could wrap those long legs around me. “You’re not getting off that easy.”

“Sounds like something I should be saying to you instead.”

I had one hand underneath her ass, holding her in place, and the other on the back of her neck. She rolled her hips against my growing length and I had to fight the groan threatening to break free from my throat.

“One time,” I rasped, working my fingers through her hair.

She knotted her brows at me.

“We’re only doing this one time... that’s it. And just so we’re clear, I’m not the kind of guy who’s going to have tea waiting on your nightstand the morning after. And I’m certainly not going to be your shoulder to cry on when you have a bad day. So, if that’s what you’re in the market for, then you should follow in your sister’s footsteps and find a guy like Abel to take care of you instead.” I took her silence as an invitation to finish my statement. “Because I don’t plan on playing nice.”

“I’d be disappointed if you were. And just so we’re clear...” she started. “I’m not the kind of girl who’s going to be the sideline cheerleader at your games. Or the one who tends to every ache and pain after a bad practice. This is just sex. Nothing more.”

Music to my fucking ears.

The last thing I wanted was her getting her feelings caught up in this.

“You’re certain you don’t like me?” I asked one final time, trying to figure out if there was a hidden bluff she was concealing.

Her gaze heated. “Who said I have to like you to fuck you?”

I pulled her in closer and our breaths grew faster and more audible as her eyes locked on my lips. My mind raced, spiraling through all the reasons I shouldn't be doing this with her, of all people. If there were a pro con list to be made the cons would far outweigh the pros, but there was a part of me that wanted to give into the heat that soared between us when we argued. Figure out if our attraction to each other transferred over to the bedroom or if it was just a figment of my imagination.

I shouldn't be doing this, but fuck, I really want to.

"Fuck it."

Closing the gap between us, I crashed my lips to hers and she slipped her tongue into my mouth. My grip on her ass got tighter as she rolled her hips against me again. With our mouths fused together, I walked us over to the edge of the pool until her back was pressed against the concrete. It was only then that I got the strength to pull back from her mouth. Staring into each other's eyes, we panted, our chests rising and falling in unison as a physical depiction of our desire.

"I hate you," she moaned breathlessly against my lips.

"Likewise." I grabbed her waist and lifted her up out of the pool and onto the ledge. "Now pull your swimsuit over to the side and spread your legs so I can taste your pussy."

Mae broke apart her knees and before she had the chance to make some snide joke, my mouth was on her center. Mae sucked in a breath, tensing for a moment, but by the time I had circled her clit with my tongue twice, her muscles had eased completely.

It took everything in me not to let out a smirk and make some crass comment after seeing how effortlessly she melted at my touch. Never in my life did I think I would see Mae like this, but I was enjoying the sweet taste of her pussy too much to ruin things this early on.

She leaned back against her hands and I held her in place with my hands gripping firmly on her outer thighs. I continued lapping circles while her moans grew louder and more frantic as she lifted a hand from the concrete and slid it through my hair, tugging gently as her desire grew more intense.

Fuck me. She was better than I could've ever imagined.

I backed away from her—unhappily, I might add—and jumped out of the pool. Careful not to completely drench her with water on the way out and unleashing her wrath.

"What are you—"

Bending down, I wrapped my arms around her waist helping her up until she was standing, then grabbed the back of her thighs and hoisted her over my shoulder. Mae might've been okay being the naked neighbor, but there wasn't a chance in hell that I'd let one of our neighbors get a free show of all the ways I was about to make her come for me.

"October!" She squealed, thrashing her legs around as I took the fastest route to the pool house. "I'm soaking wet!"

A smirk curled at the corner of my lips while I turned the handle to the front door with one hand while holding Mae firmly by her thigh with the other. "I know you are."

She wiggled her legs trying to break free from my grip which essentially turned into her ass wiggling in my face. With my newly freed hand, I smacked her ass gently and the desperate moan she let free made my dick twitch. Although, it was immediately followed by a feminine squeal filling the entryway alongside a spat of her giggles.

Such a brat.

Not caring that we were still drenched from the pool, I walked us through the entryway and down the small hall, making a left into the bedroom. I made another left, carrying her into the bathroom and setting her on the countertop where I quickly toweled us both off. Future October could deal with the puddles all over the floor later because right now that was the least of my goddamn worries.

The only thing on my mind right now was imagining how good Mae was going to look in a few minutes when she was begging for my mercy.

Once we were dried off, she tugged me in by my shorts, tilting her chin up as our lips locked together. I slipped my fingers through her hair and pulled gently so she was peering up at me. "I thought you didn't fuck during the pre-season?" Her chest rose and fell, and desire flashed through her eyes with each passing second.

"I was willing to make a one-time exception. Besides, the official season starts Sunday and that's when it really matters."

"What did I do to deserve such an honor?" She gasped. "Is this, like, the equivalent to taking your virginity?"

With a laugh, I wrapped her legs around my waist, carried her into the bedroom and tossed her on the bed. Placing both hands on the mattress on either side of her head, I bent down so our faces were only a few inches apart letting the hunger build for a few more seconds.

The equivalent to taking my virginity?

This girl had no idea what was coming for her... literally.

FOURTEEN

MAE

“I WAS under the impression that you didn’t want to be one of my... ‘*little whores*’, was it?” October’s lips brushed against mine, and the only response I could manage was a raspy moan spilling from my lips as my back bowed up from the mattress. “Aren’t you, though... my little whore? Just for the night.”

I should have been embarrassed at how much it turned me on hearing him call me that. The way those three words had the power to send a shiver down my spine while simultaneously turning my blood to lava was concerning.

With his lips still skimming against mine, he slipped one hand underneath my swimsuit bottoms. My breath hitched, but I made it a point to maintain eye contact with him despite the nerves that were pooling in my stomach. I’d never felt insecure when it came to sex before, but there was something about doing this with October that made me anxious in the best way.

Like years of anticipation had been leading up to this climaxing moment—no pun intended. Yet, there was still a *tiny* part of me that questioned whether or not I was insane for sleeping with the man I’d despised for nearly half my life.

I wasn’t crazy, was I?

The doubt crept through my mind for only a moment before I was hit with the reminder that this was a one-time event. I wasn’t going to allow myself to feel guilty for giving into the attraction between October and I. Or for letting myself have one irresponsible night of fun that I so desperately needed right now. Then, tomorrow, when we woke up, we’d go back to our lives as usual—snide remarks, avoidances, and all.

Simple as that.

I shifted my hips forward wanting to feel the heel of his palm against my

clit while he lined up two fingers with my entrance. My head pulled back against his pillows as he drove his fingers inside as deep as they'd go. October dropped down, placing his lips on my exposed neck and sucking hard making my breath catch as thrills ran up and down my body.

Fuck.

My eyes slammed shut and my inner walls clenched around him eliciting a warm, tingly feeling that spread all the way down my thighs and didn't stop until it reached my toes. Meanwhile, his hot breath against my skin as he drug his lips along the side of my neck made my head spin. It was a full body experience.

Impulsively, I placed my hands on his hips and tried to tug him onto the bed so that I could get on top, but he didn't budge. Somewhere in my mind drunken haze I must've forgotten that he had five inches and a hundred pounds on me.

Honest mistake, really.

His mouth brushed against the shell of my ear and the hum from his breath against my skin made me light up with excitement. "Not a chance, March. Out there I might let you get the upper hand, but in this bedroom, I'm in charge."

"Okay, but what if we leave the bedroom? If we go back out to the pool can I—"

I could sense the smug smile on his lips as he nipped my earlobe with his teeth and thrust his fingers into me again, harder this time. It didn't take long before he placed a handful of searing kisses down my neck and chest before pulling the triangles of my swimsuit top to the side and dropping his mouth to my nipple. He swirled his tongue around the peak while toying the other with his pointer finger.

I writhed beneath him, hot and wild. My only thought, though? How wrong it felt doing this in Scarlett's old room. Sort of like I was defiling a sacred space, or like she had secret surveillance footage of what was happening in here or something. I mean, it's nothing she hadn't seen before, but still. It just felt... weird.

Of all the nights we'd spent having sleepovers in this bed, not one of them could've prepared me for this present scenario becoming reality.

"You're thinking about how this used to be Scarlett's room now, aren't you?"

"How did you—"

“Like you said... I know you.” His cocky smile was one of the hottest things I’d seen to date, yet it was completely revolting all the same. However, my arousal decided to betray me and the cocky son of a bitch could feel it too. “Just relax.” The seductive stare he gave me while he whispered between my breasts made my skin irrupt with goose bumps.

October continued to work his fingers in and out of me at a steady pace and the pressure from his palm on my clit sent me into sensory overdrive. I slammed my eyes shut, soaking in the waves of bliss as my orgasm began to build at the base of my spine. But as I should’ve guessed, his rhythm slowed and my impending orgasm started to unravel right before me.

He slipped his fingers out of me for just a second to peel off my bikini bottoms while I untied my top and flung it across the room. I shot him a scowl and he let out a huffed laugh as he kissed down the center of my stomach.

“If you edge me one more time I’ll die.” My words came out commanding.

“So, you’re saying I should do it one more time... for good measure?”

I shot him a scowl, but his only response was a sly wink.

My breathy moans grew louder and my thighs began to shake as he slid his hand between my legs and entered me with two fingers again, circling his thumb over my clit this time. I tried to hold off my orgasm, hoping to bask in the pleasure filled high for a little while longer—which was only slightly ironic considering what I’d just told October.

“If you keep moaning like that, I’m going to start thinking you don’t actually hate me.”

“Your arrogance is...” I tried to finish the sentence, but he curled his fingers inside me, placing pressure on my g-spot and any thoughts I had were lost.

“Massive.” He finished my thought for me. “So I’ve heard.”

I clipped my mouth shut as he slid down, kissing along my inner thighs eliciting a round of crazed moans from my lips. After a few seconds, he stopped moving completely and part of me wondered if I was dreaming up this entire scenario and it was finally time to wake-up.

“Why’d you stop?” I lifted a brow in question.

“Whenever you stop making your little noises... I stop.”

“Do you really need your ego stroked that badly?” I scoffed.

“I need more than just my ego stroked, March baby.” The wry smirk that

seemed to be permanently smeared on his face was intoxicating to say the least. “But you can help me with the other half after you come for me.”

After placing a few small kisses against my slit, he began flicking his tongue against my clit in fast movements. I could hardly breathe as he brought me right to the edge of ecstasy. All it took was a few fast flicks of his tongue against my clit before my back arched and the force of my orgasm rolled through me at lightning speed. My vision was clouded by little white fireworks as my thighs clenched around his head.

By the time I slumped back against the pillows to see his face, there was already a beaming smile on his lips like he’d won the freaking League Bowl or something. I tried to tell myself it was because he’s been sex deprived for at least a few weeks now, if not longer. Though, I had a tiny feeling it had more to do with the fact that he’d just seen me in my most vulnerable state, shattering against his tongue as he sent me to another planet.

“Stop smiling. It’s a turn off.”

With a grin still on his face, October shifted up toward my face and bent down to press his mouth against mine. He parted his lips and I slipped my tongue into his mouth to deepen our kiss.

This felt like some sort of wet dream that I never thought would happen. Five-year-old me would be thrilled that I was kissing my then crush, but sixteen-year-old me? She’d pull a disgusted face at me and list off all the reasons I was making the worst decision of my life.

Twenty-five-year-old me, though? She wasn’t sure what to feel.

Part of me was in shock that this was even happening. I mean, October and I hooking up? If someone would’ve told me that two months ago, I would’ve laughed right in their face. Meanwhile, there was another part of me that was too caught up in the thrill of it all to care.

Our tongues danced together for a long while as I caught my breath. My legs felt like noodles and my head was still spinning. As our kisses grew more frantic, I reached down to his swim shorts and briefly ran my hand over his length before untying the small tie and pulling them down his thick thighs. His dick sprung out from his pants and I had to fight a gasp as I glanced down.

“Lea was right.” I muttered under my breath.

“What’d you say?”

“Stop asking questions and grab a condom.” I shoved him off to the side where he flung his legs off the edge of the bed and pulled off his shorts the

rest of the way.

I swallowed the knot in my throat, trying to act casual.

Don't get me wrong, I wasn't a prude by any means, but I hadn't been with someone of that—Caliber? Horsepower? Magnitude?—before. Needless to say, October was not most guys and I wasn't sure whether I should be excited about it or completely terrified.

“You good over there?” he asked, rolling on the condom he pulled out from the nightstand.

I hummed my answer, though I'm sure my widened eyes and my lips which were crushed into a thin line were a dead giveaway to how I was really feeling.

He leaned over to kiss me again, moving so his body was on top of mine. His warmth and the firmness of his muscles as he brushed the hair out of my head and cupped my face was comforting and tantalizing all at the same time.

“Are you sure you want this?” His tone was gravelly as kissing me softly. I nodded with a small smile. “Say the word and we'll stop.”

I stared up at him with my best doe eyes, not saying anything for a beat. “Just so we're clear, this changes nothing and I still hate you...” I muttered, and he kissed me hard before pulling back. “So much.”

October settled between my hips as his mouth recaptured mine, more demanding this time. He broke apart our lips with heavy breathing and a smug smile that made my insides melt. “Likewise. Now take this cock that you wanted so badly.”

With that, he drove his entire length into me on the first thrust and I gasped. Heat flushed my cheeks and I gripped his back tighter as he entered me again slowly, only this time my nails dug deeper into his skin as he gave me more of his length than the first time.

“If it's too big for you we can stop now.” He paused, looking serious as he spoke.

I took a few deep breaths, adjusting to his size. So, maybe, *just maybe*, Lea was right about him being well endowed. More than that, really, it was somewhat baffling that he just walked around with that monster between his legs all hours of the day.

After a few seconds, my muscles relaxed and I regained my composure. “The biggest thing in this room is your ego.”

With a wry smile, October pulled out of me, leaving just the tip, then slammed into me so hard I saw stars behind my eyes. Instinctively, I dug my

nails into his back once again which only seemed to make his thrusts more primal.

“I thought it was my arrogance?”

“Shut up and fuck me.”

October worked his hips driving into me hard and I drew him in closer as I dug my nails into his back. It was hard not to wiggle underneath his touch with his body overpowering mine. Eventually we found our rhythm, and I switched my grip and began caressing the back of his neck, twisting his head slightly so that his ear aligned with my mouth.

Poor guy was only going to get this opportunity once in his life, so it only seemed right to drive him crazy by moaning directly in his ear. This way, he could think back on exactly how good he was making me feel, only to be hit with the jarring recollection that he'd never be able to do it again.

Oh, if only there was a mirror above the bed so I could see the smirk on my face right now as his large body engulfed mine.

“Enjoying my cock, aren't you?”

“Don't flatter yourself. It's the only part of you that's slightly tolerable.”

He pulled out, teasing my clit with the tip for a moment before giving me all of him in one deep thrust that made my heart stop. “You consider this tolerable?”

That must be his signature move in the bedroom—making some cocky remark about how big he is and then reminding me of it when I made a snide comment in response. Kind of hilarious how vain he was if you stopped to think about it. Just another thing to add to my little black book of things to make fun of him for later.

If I could've managed words, I probably would've made some snarky remark back to him about how much of an arrogant jerk he was. But I was too overcome with a flame of emotions to even attempt trying.

“You look so pretty taking all of me like that.”

“Is that all you got?” I challenged, hoping this shove would be just enough to send me over the edge. “Fuck me harder.”

If there was one thing he did well in the bedroom, it was following through with orders, because he was driving into me so hard, I could practically feel my blood coursing through my veins right before I was hit with a soul shattering explosion that took over my entire body. October kept going as I rippled around him, but I didn't think I could handle another one. Not with how powerfully the last one had hit me.

“I—”

“Take it.” Flames awakened in his eyes before he dropped down to capture my lips and whispered against them. “Pretty little sluts like you deserve it.”

There went those words again, sending a shiver down my spine, making me surrender to him completely as another orgasm slammed into me like a million glowing stars. His release quickly followed with a groan and he thrust into me a few more times as we caught our breath.

He was still inside me as we both stared at each other wide eyed and panting.

That really just happened, didn't it?

Worst part was, it wasn't bad. Nowhere close, in fact. Hell, I'd even go as far as saying it was a good time... okay, fine, better than good.

October rolled onto his back next to me and we both stared at the ceiling, catching our breath for a long while. The silence that passed between us wasn't awkward—or maybe it was. I was too relaxed, my bones felt like they'd turned to liquid. I could've been melting into the mattress and I probably wouldn't have noticed. Even the initial shock of what we'd just done had completely disappeared.

Sure, it felt dirty... wrong, even. But lying next to him right now? All I could think about was how much I craved having his lips searing against my skin again while his hands moved downward, skimming the sides of my body all the way down to my thighs.

I mean, if we were only going to have one night of fun... might as well make the best of it, right?

I twisted my head to look at him, but he already had his eyes on me, though I couldn't quite get a read on what he was thinking.

“Want to go again?” I panted.

Before I had the chance to form another thought, his lips were locked on mine as his hand slid down my stomach and underneath the covers.

FIFTEEN

MAE

“DO you always take up the entire bed like that?” A horse version of October’s unsolicited voice filled my headspace.

What kind of nightmare was this?

“Get out of my dream,” I grumbled with my face squished against my pillow.

“This isn’t your dream.”

I made a weak attempt to pry my eyelids open, but they refused to budge as the siren song of sleep frantically attempted to pull me back in for a *few* more minutes of blissful rest. Maybe if I tried to focus on something else hard enough his voice would go away.

“Get out of my room then, October.”

“This isn’t your room either, March baby.”

My eyes shot open. The light green walls were a dead giveaway I wasn’t in my bedroom. *Shit*. More importantly, that meant I was in the pool house. *Double shit*. And if I was in the pool house that meant... I slept with October.

And no, I don’t mean the horizontal shuffle kind of slept with... I mean *slept with*, slept with. Naked under the sheets, nasty morning breath, post-slumber bed head, and all.

Oh my god.

He didn’t seem at all phased by my being here, but maybe he was just as good as hiding his emotions as I was. I rubbed my eyes with the back of my hands before glancing at him again—hoping that maybe, somehow, someday my vision was still blurry from waking up and the giant figure next to me was some kind of giant stuffed animal instead.

Sadly, for me, that wasn’t the case.

“Unfortunate to see you’re still breathing,” I rasped, pulling the covers up to my neck and snuggling into them further. There was no point in scrambling away since he already knew I was here, so I might as well make myself comfortable.

“Were you planning to strangle me in my sleep?”

“I considered it.”

“Nice to know I’ve been pardoned.” He wore a smug smile as he lifted a coffee mug to his mouth and took a long sip.

“For now,” I mumbled sleepily, turning on my side to face away from him.

“You’re acting shy for someone who was cuddled up against my back with her hands wrapped around my waist and legs intertwined with mine all night.”

Twisting my head over my shoulder, I shot him a scowl. “I didn’t—”

“Oh, you most certainly did.” A small laugh expelled from his lips as he placed his coffee on the nightstand and slipped out from under the sheets.

Peeking over the covers, I watched tentatively as he threw on a pair of navy-blue sweatpants with the Matrix logo on the upper right thigh. I surveyed the tattoos on his upper body that I hadn’t paid attention to before—an assortment of crows across his pecs and the comedy and tragedy masks on the left side of his torso. A small part of me was afraid that if I kept staring I might out myself for gawking at him by drooling on the top sheet.

“You going to wipe up the drool on your bottom lip, or should I?”

My eyes rolled instinctively. “Oh, suck my dick, balls included.”

“Let me grab a pen if you’re going to start listing off all the things you plan on doing to me later.”

“There won’t be a later. This was a one-time thing, remember?” I pinched my brows together and gave him a nasty look before shrugging it off. “Nice to know you enjoyed it enough to want a second round though.”

“If you say so.” October lifted a shoulder. “But based off the way you were screaming my name last night; I’d place good money on you crawling back to my bed in no time.”

“Doubtful,” I scoffed. “You might’ve been a decent lay, but I can assure you it was nothing to write home about.”

He crossed over to my side of the bed, placing his hands on the mattress on both sides of me. “Then tell me why I have this overwhelming feeling that less than two weeks from today, you’ll be pounding at my door, begging to

jump back into this bed so you can ride my cock again.”

“Maybe you should tell me why I have a theory that less than two weeks from today, *you’ll* be the one begging *me* to jump back into bed with you.”

“Let’s bet on it, then.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, feeling a rush of heat crawl up my neck. “A hundred bucks.”

“Come on, that’s chump change to people like us, March baby. Scared you’ll lose if we up the stakes?”

Squinting, he leaned in as if to challenge me. I maintained eye contact while pushing away the fluttery feeling that was forming in my stomach

“Fine, a thousand.”

“Fifty thousand and you’ve got a deal.” His gaze dropped to my lips as he spoke.

Was this man out of his fucking mind? Betting some peoples entire yearly salary on whether or not we’d fuck again? This was insane.

But why did I kind of like it?

“Ten thousand. Final offer.”

Dragging his gaze back up to my eyes, he smirked and my heart dropped to my stomach. “Great doing business with you.”

“I don’t like you,” I grumbled as he turned away from me, revealing the bright red scratch marks on his back from last night.

It took everything in me not to gasp.

“Like? We’ve taken a step up from hatred, haven’t we?” October walked over to the dresser across from the bed and picked out a light gray shirt from the top drawer and threw it over his head. “In that case... likewise.” He grabbed his bag from the ground—no doubt heading out for morning practice—but paused in the doorway before leaving to peer over his shoulder with a smug grin. “Twenty years.”

I squished my eyebrows together.

“That’s how long it took to get you to admit you don’t hate me.” The corners of his lips twitched. “Twenty more and you might actually admit you like me.”

My eyes grew wide for only a second before I schooled my expression. I might’ve given him a nonresponse in return, but my lack of a reply said a lot more than any words could have.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Looking forward to seeing how they play out.” He shot me a wink

before ambling out into the hallway and I listened as he let the front door of the pool house slam behind him as he left.

I laid there in disbelief for an extended moment, trying to gather my thoughts. My brain was simultaneously rushing with flashbacks from last night while also being completely and utterly blank.

With a sigh, I glanced around Scarlett's old room, taking in the minor changes October had made since moving in until I peered over to the nightstand closest to me. Sitting there, on a beige marble coaster, was a steaming hot cup of ginger tea waiting for me.

What the hell had I just gotten myself into?

SIXTEEN

MAE

THERE WERE two things I knew with complete and utter certainty.

One, I wasn't going to throw away ten thousand dollars at the drop of a hat. And two, had ten grand not been on the line, I without a doubt would've crawled back between the sheets with October Calhoun.

Now listen, I had *some* self-control, but by no means did I have a lot. Vibrators existed for a reason, which was tremendously helpful. However, had this been the early nineteenth century, I would've been fucked. Literally.

For the last eight and a half days, I'd avoided October at all costs. Well, aside from a few glances at Friday night dinner and the occasional peak out the window while he skimmed the pool in the mornings.

Two nights ago, both of us ate in silence while Scarlett and Lea talked about their latest work endeavors. Seeing as I'd been avoiding work like the plague lately, I didn't have much to chime in with, anyway.

Oh, yeah. Business is great. Five seconds from going broke, but great. Really, really great.

Inherently, I knew I needed to get my shit together. To buck up and battle through the storm. Regardless of the outcome of the business, I would live comfortably for the rest of my life, thanks to my financial advisors. The houses were paid off, retirement accounts maxed, my investments had a consistent and healthy cash flow. Not to mention, there were brands constantly banging down my door offering me obscene amounts of money to wear their clothes or post about them on Socialgram.

I had everything I needed and more. There was something about running my own business that fueled a fire within me, though. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was doing something for myself. Not because someone was

instructing me on how I needed to look or walk or pose.

This business was mine.

My only regret was not being as well versed in business as I should've been from the beginning. I'd made a few—okay, a lot more than a few—bad decisions out of ignorance. Couple that with the fact that I should've asked for help sooner, and there was really no one to blame but myself.

I'd heard the phrase once that nearly half of small businesses fail within their first five years. I guess I was naive in believing I wouldn't be one of them. Now, like a coward, I was trying to salvage my business at the eleventh hour to keep my models employed—the one's I had left at least.

You know what? Enough thinking about this. I had places to be and I was still on the hunt for a shirt to wear to tonight's Thursday night football game. The Matrix were playing the Atlanta Assassins and Lea scored Scarlett and I some sideline passes to watch Abel play.

Bursting out the backdoor, I marched over to the pool house, not even considering knocking before turning the handle and letting myself right in. My heels clanked against the hardwood floors as I made the left turn into Scarlett's room—scratch that, October's room.

Speak of the devil. There he stood shirtless with unzipped black suit pants and his boxer briefs showing out of the opening.

"Oh, sorry... I didn't think you'd be here."

"The door was unlocked?"

"Scarlett always left the door unlocked."

Not to mention the part where I own this pool house and therefore, by obvious deductive reasoning, would be in possession of a key. Meaning that, even if it wasn't locked, I could've got in with ease.

"You're naked." He lifted a brow at me.

"You're one to talk." I side eyed him, flinging open the closet doors. "Have you seen a lilac purple corset looking top lying around anywhere? I've checked my closet, Lea's, and Scar's and I can't find it anywhere."

The thing about committing to challenges was that I was going to win. Come hell or high water. This was especially true whenever October was involved.

As much as I'd grown fond of watching him out the window every morning as he cleaned the pool—shirtless, might I add—before running off to the Matrix's morning practice, I was starting to feel like one of those middle-aged sex deprived mothers in those soap opera style television shows

who spent their free time gawking over the pool boy.

It was appalling behavior on my part, really.

I should've been ashamed of myself.

“Wear this instead.” He tossed me the navy-blue jersey which had been laying on the edge of his bed.

I stuck out my hands to grab it, holding it out in front of me and watching it unfold to reveal a large, white number sixteen printed on the front, and, yup—you guessed it—his last name written across the back.

“This is your jersey.” I turned the garment around so he could see what I was seeing.

“Congrats on... wait, what are you making that face for? Is wearing my jersey such a bad thing?” His jaw was clenched tight, and I stood there with the jersey in my hands staring at it in disbelief. “Stop making that face and just put it on. You can't wear purple anyway. That's Atlanta's color, and they'll kick you off the sidelines before the game starts.”

“How many other girls have worn this?” The words slipped out of my mouth before I had the chance to filter them.

“It's brand new... I wouldn't give you a jersey someone else has worn. You deserve better than that.”

I was at a loss for words.

I didn't like him. I might not have hated him anymore, but I still didn't like him. And wearing a jersey with his name on it felt like a very “girlfriend” thing to do. I mean, I wasn't very well versed in the world of sports, but this was totally the kind of thing that was reserved for girlfriends, right?

“Are you going to put it on yourself or do you need me to help you?” There was a snarky kick in his comment.

With my eyes squinted, I shoved my arms through the holes and pulled the two sizes too big jersey over my head. I turned to look in the floor length mirror in the corner, which had been there since I bought the place, taking in my newest outfit.

Not exactly what I had planned—like, ever in this lifetime—but it wasn't awful. I looked good in navy blue, and sixteen was a good number, wasn't it? It also helped that I couldn't see October's last name unless I turned around to look at it. That had to count for something, right?

I turned around, twisting my head over my shoulder to get a glimpse of the back of the jersey. Looking up, I caught October's eyes in the mirror and the corner of his lips turned up into a small smile.

Did he... like this? Nope. Impossible. Hell would have to freeze over, pigs would have to fly, and we'd *both* have to get struck by lightning all at the same time before that could happen.

Im-fucking-possible.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" I narrowed my eyes at him.

"You're gorgeous, Mae. More gorgeous than my thoughts from the last seven years led me to believe." He ran a thumb over his bottom lip, slowly as he looked me up and down. "Like it or not, I'll never apologize for admiring how beautiful you are."

"Wait... you thought about me... while we were apart?"

"Often."

Huh.

"You're acting strange today..." I muttered with a puzzled expression before shaking my head and twisting on my heels to walk out the door. Halfway into the hallway, I stopped dead in my tracks.

"You know what, now that I'm here..." I turned to face him, watching as he threw on a white undershirt which somehow, someway made him look ten times sexier than when he was half naked. "Why are you still living here, anyway? The season started—what?—two weeks ago which means the roster was finalized at least a week before that, if not more..."

"Is this your way of kicking me out?" He lifted a brow in question.

"No. I don't really care if you stay or not. I'm pretty indiffer—" I suppressed the gasp spilling past my lips by slapping a hand to my mouth. "You're such a shithead. You tricked me!"

"Looks like I'll be sticking around after all." He winked.

There was a burning fire flaring underneath my skin, and I had to fight not to ball my fists at my sides. I should've known his sudden niceness was too good to be true. It didn't bother me too much that he was here, but it's not like the guy couldn't afford to go somewhere else.

"You just want to stay somewhere close to the practice facility."

"Would you like a reward for getting that right?"

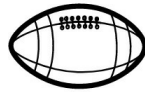
God, that smug smirk of his irritated the shit out of me sometimes. I gave him a blank look and threw up a middle finger for good measure before turning to head out the door again.

Would you like a reward for getting that right? Fucking asshole.

"I want to hear you cheering for me at the game, March baby," he called out from the bedroom as I made my way down the hall.

“I would rather have my vocal cords burst into flames.” I mumbled, mostly to myself.

God, I hoped Scarlett wasn’t going to make a big deal about my outfit.



“Woohoo! Let’s go football,” I shouted, eyeing the delicious display of big, athletic men warming up on the field. My words of encouragement earned me a few head turns from the training staff and a laugh from the photographer who was standing a few feet from Scarlett and I.

“You don’t know a single thing about football, do you?” She peered up at me with a lifted brow.

“Not one thing.”

“Me either.”

We bumped nacho trays in solidarity, before taking our final bites and tossing them in the trash can behind us.

So far, I was liking football. I’d always wanted to pick a sport to be a fan of, and based on the array of gorgeous men stretching in front of us right now, this was the kind of sport I could see myself adopting for the long haul.

Watching tall, athletic men run around—or whatever it was they did—every Sunday? Sign me up.

Music blared through the speakers and people started filing into their seats in the stadium around us. I could see why people liked coming to these kinds of things. The excitement was buzzing throughout the building and the game hadn’t even started yet.

Players began filing into the locker room, and Abel and October sauntered over toward the sideline together. They could complain all they wanted claiming they could never be friends, but the two of them were ever so slowly becoming friends.

By the end of the season, they’d be hanging out at least once a month outside of Friday night dinners—which, if you knew Abel, was about the closest thing he got to best friendship. I’d be willing to bet a couple thousand dollars on it, easy.

Abel picked up his pace as they got closer to us and Scarlett jumped into his outstretched arms, locking their lips together in a passionate kiss like they

were the only two people around. They were disgustingly cute together. It made me sick.

October, who was trailing behind Abel, finally caught up and gave the two of them a side-eyed once-over as they kissed again... and again... and again. When our eyes met, he shot me a lifted brow that I reciprocated with a shrugged shoulder.

Scarlett and Abel broke apart to look over at us, and at that exact moment October grabbed me by the waist with one hand and a handful of my ass with the other as he pulled me closer to him.

“What are you—”

Within a second he was giving me a big, slobbery kiss on the cheek. Exaggerated kissing noises and all.

How revolting.

“Eww, get away from me.” I pushed October away playfully to which he flung his head back in an amused chuckle, although his hands stayed firmly planted on my body.

After his fit of laughter died down, he tugged me in closer, bending down to whisper in my ear. “Funny you say that, considering you were begging me to bury myself inside you a few nights ago.”

My breath hitched, but I tried to conceal it with a cough.

October drug his attention over to the two love-birds. “That’s what the two of you look like, by the way.”

Scarlett narrowed her eyes at me, shooting me a pleased smile. I rolled my eyes and shoved October away, flicking my fingertips to shoo him toward the locker room.

“Thanks for the good luck kiss, March baby.”

“I hope you break every bone in your body,” I muttered with disgust coating my voice.

“Ma’am.” A muscular security guard called over from a few feet away in a firm voice. “Threatening the players is a removable offense. Do it again, and you’ll be escorted out off the sidelines.”

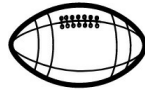
I had to fight not to roll my eyes as my shoulders slumped forward. How did things like this always happen to me? At least this wasn’t as embarrassing as the one time I accidentally robbed a bank, which was an *honest* mistake. Don’t let anyone convince you otherwise.

“Sorry, officer,” I mumbled under my breath.

October looked back over his shoulder before disappearing underneath

the tunnel and shot me a sly wink which made my heart skip a beat.

Fortune was walking next to October, and I watched as he snuck a glance back at Lea too. I could've sworn I saw a *little* twinge of a smile on his lips. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I had a strange feeling there was *something* going on between those two that she wasn't telling us about.



Back at home, I stared at myself in the floor length mirror in the beauty room, taking in the weirdness of seeing me wearing a jersey with October's number on it one last time before changing into a sleep shirt.

Right then, an idea sparked in my mind and I instantly pulled out my phone and snapped a picture before uploading it to Socialgram without a caption. What could I say? Sometimes it was fun leaving the people wondering. Scrambling to find the hidden subtext in the silence even if there was nothing there in the first place.

Within a minute, there were at least one hundred comments speculating dating rumors between the two of us. I couldn't help my burst of laughter as I scrolled through some of them.

@sunshinegirl0927: OH. MY. GOD. ARE YOU DATING OCTOBER CALHOUN?!?!

@sugardaddydan: Unfollow. I thought you were single. I can't believe you'd lead on your loyal followers like this. #whore

*@scarlettsawyer: *curious eye emoji**

@knights_football98: The Matrix suck. Go Knights!

@fansofmaegarten: They're not dating. The two of them have been friends since they were kids.

@gwendolynmarie6323: @fansofmaegarten not true. Someone posted

a picture at her birthday party a few weeks ago and she was sitting on his lap in the background.

With a smug smile plastered on my lips, I thumbed out a response to the last comment.

@maegarten: @gwendolynmarie6323 I was consoling him because he couldn't handle the attention being on someone other than himself for a night.

I set my phone down against the comforter, but almost as soon as I did it buzzed with a new notification.

@octobercalhoun has reposted your photo to his story.

Half a second later, a ping came through on my phone from none other than the devil himself and I threw my head back in laughter as I read his text.

Oh, naive October Calhoun.

I've got you right where I want you.

SEVENTEEN

OCTOBER

OCTOBER:

If you wanted my attention that badly, all you had to do was ask.

MAE

Is this some kind of booty call?

Depends whether or not it's working.

A FEW MINUTES passed without a response. As embarrassing as it was to admit, I checked my phone every thirty seconds to see if she'd responded. Who would've guessed I'd be this hung up on her of all people?

The only thing I'd thought about in days was how much I wanted her to be laying in my bed again. Listening to her desperate moans as I buried myself inside her until she was shattering around my cock. And those lips. Man, I'd never get tired of kissing those lips. There was no way I'd survive on only the memory of having her once.

When I made that bet last weekend, I didn't suspect *I* would be the one contemplating whether or not it was worth losing. In my heart of hearts, I knew I should just forget about it and wait another couple days for this bet to be squashed. Stay locked away in the pool house until the end of the week, then flirt my way into having her come back to the pool house with me after Friday night dinner.

Setting my phone down on the kitchen island, I headed over to the couch,

flopping down onto the cushions then staring up at the ceiling with a groan wondering how I had gotten myself into this situation in the first place. The last thing I wanted was to end this casual hook-up situation going on between Mae and I, especially since it was the friendliest we'd been with each other in... well, ever.

I had this fear, though, that if we kept doing this, someone's feelings were going to get caught up in it—and even worse, they'd be mine.

My phone pinged from across the room and I hopped off the couch to grab it without a second thought.

MAE

It's 11 p.m. and I'm already in bed.

OCTOBER

I'll make it worth your while.

Ehh, not sure I feel like giving away \$10,000.

It took all of three seconds to decide I was going to throw this bet. And two of those seconds were spent mentally kicking myself in the balls for making the damn thing in the first place.

Fucking idiot.

Oh well. There was no sense in dwelling on it any longer seeing as my accountant would ream me out for it at our next meeting, anyway. Maybe then I'd let myself be pissed about it, but right now I was too consumed by the thought of licking Mae's pussy to give a shit.

OCTOBER

Fuck it.

I'll take the loss.

MAE

I'll take my payment in the form of Jimmy Choo's.

I'll give you anything you want on one condition...

Yeah?

Jersey stays on.

Aye, Aye, Captain.

After a quick shower and changing into a fresh pair of sweatpants, I sat against the headboard scrolling on my phone for the better half of twenty minutes before I heard the front door creak open. Another five, and I would've marched into Mae's house and carried her to my bed, slapping her ass along the way in the hopes that she'd let one of those charming giggles slip past her lips like last time.

"What took you so long?" I tried to mask the annoyance in my voice as Mae appeared in the doorway, but I was certain a hint of it had slipped through the cracks despite my best effort.

Especially after I got a glimpse of how fucking sexy she looked wearing my jersey. She'd ditched the jeans she'd worn to the game and instead wore my jersey like a mini dress, hitting her bare upper thigh. No shoes. No makeup. Knowing Mae, I had a solid feeling she'd kept the same theme when it came to her underwear, as well.

Man, this girl had no idea how much control she had over me.

"Didn't want you to think I was jumping at the chance to ride your cock again," she said matter-of-factly while taking a seat on the end of the bed opposite of me. "Because I refuse to be single handedly responsible for your ego becoming more inflated than it already is."

A huffed laugh slipped through my lips as the corners curled upward. About time she started working on those quarreling skills. A guy could only hope she'd bring that same energy into the bedroom too.

"If I recall correctly, you were the one who needed time to adjust to my size." I raked my eyes over her long, tanned legs hanging off the edge of the bed. "Not sure there's anything that can inflate a man's self-esteem more than that."

"And if I recall correctly, I was just pretending so you didn't cry from an ego hit... you're welcome for that, by the way." She patted my shin with an ornery scrunched nose smile before flopping back against the comforter.

"Funny how you're suddenly able to recall things when my dick is the

topic of conversation.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

I slid off the bed and moved to stand in front of her, breaking apart her knees with my thigh as I bent over, placing two hands on either side of the mattress next to her head. Mae had her eyes locked on my lips for a brief moment before flickering them up to meet mine with a cocky grin.

I don’t think it was possible to get tired of that shit-eating grin of hers. Might’ve even been part of the reason I enjoyed sparring with her so much. Seeing those pretty pink lips turn up just for me. She could find fault with my arrogance until she was blue in the face, but her conceit was as close of a match to mine as any.

“I think you’ve already done that enough for me, March.” I bent down, brushing my lips over hers as I slipped a hand underneath her jersey to cup her breast. “So, we’re really doing this?”

“As long as you accept your loss of the bet.”

I looked down to find my earlier suspicion had been correct. Her bare pussy was on display from where the jersey had been shifted up by my arm.

A smirk played on my lips as I lifted a brow at her. “Not much of a loss, is it?”

Mae let out a delicious laugh as I dropped down, lifting the jersey up over her boobs so I could quickly suck each of her nipples into my mouth before planting open mouth kisses down the center of her stomach. Her back arched against the bed as I got closer to her slit.

“You’re evil,” she groaned as I backed away from her.

I was too caught up in the thought of going down on her that I’d almost forgotten about the toy I’d picked up for us earlier this week. Maybe I’d been a bit too confident in Mae giving up the bet. Or hell, maybe I inherently knew that I’d throw it and was too dense to realize it. Either way, I had a newly purchased wand with her name on it, and every intention of making her come with it as many times as possible until the thing was dead.

I sat back onto the bed, leaning against the headboard with my legs open as I gently pulled her toward me so her back was pressed against my chest. “Spread your legs.”

Mae broke apart her knees exposing herself fully. It turned me on that she wasn’t shy in the bedroom. Or worried about the way she looked while I made her feel good. She just allowed me to take control, and worship her the way I wanted to.

Wrapping my hand around her neck, I turned her face toward mine, then pressed my lips against hers into a long, deep kiss. A slow, wicked smile came over her mouth as our lips were fused together, which was my sign to reach over into the nightstand and grab the box out of it.

“What’s that?” Her brows pinched together as I unboxed the light blue vibrator I’d picked up on my way home from practice the other night. I had a few ideas in mind on how I wanted to use it on her, and if I was going to be out ten grand by breaking this bet then I’d like to get as many orgasms out of her to get my money’s worth.

A small smile pulled at the corner of her lips as she watched me unbox it. “You know you usually have to charge them first, right?”

“I already did, smart ass.” I wrapped my hand around her throat and kissed the mocking smile off her face. “The box was just for looks.”

“Oh, so you’re trying to impress me?”

“Why would I try to impress you?” I bluffed.

“Just seems like you’re trying a *little* hard for someone who’s just a booty call.”

“First of all, you are not *just* a booty call.” I kissed the side of her neck. “Second, I’m not trying hard.”

“You totally are.” She looked cute trying to conceal her “knowing” smile. “Our bet wasn’t supposed to end for another few days. Yet, you already had this purchased, charged, and ready for use.” She grabbed the wand from my hand and waved it around. “Which means, this was pre-planned... and that means you already knew you were going to lose.”

“Oh, so we’re just going to pretend like that picture you posted wasn’t your way of trying to come onto me?”

“That wasn’t for you. It was for Larry from the grocery store.”

We both stared at each other for a beat as the smiles grew on our lips until we both burst out into laughter. It was strange how easy two people could go from bickering any chance they got to laughing with each other like old friends.

Having Mae around was easy. The last few weekends with her felt unhurried and relaxed. Two things I never could’ve expected when it came to spending time with her. As crazy as it sounded, I wouldn’t mind if she wanted to keep coming around.

“Doesn’t matter who you posted it for. Either way, my name is the one you’ll be screaming all night long.”

“What’s this for, anyway?” Mae grabbed the device from my hands.

“You’re going to give me something.”

She arched a brow at me. “And that is?”

I couldn’t fight the coy grin that tugged at the corner of my lips.
“Control.”

With a smile that matched mine she placed the toy on her center, turning it on and playing with the settings until she found one she liked. She sucked in a breath and I took that as my cue to take over.

The buzzing sound filled the space around us, and it didn’t take long before her chest started to rise and fall at a shallower place. With my free hand, I lifted up her shirt again and toyed with her taut nipples until she was moaning in my ear begging for me to let her come.

“Please,” Mae begged, wriggling beneath me as her thighs began to tremble.

With my hand back around her throat, I pressed my fingertips deeper into the sides. “You can come for me now.”

“Oh, oh God,” she moaned as an orgasm slammed into her. Mae shook on top of me as she rode the waves of ecstasy before another followed a handful of seconds later. She sunk deeper against my chest while trying to wiggle her ass against my aching dick.

She could taunt me all she wanted, but I had every intention of making her come over and over again until she was so content, her body felt like a puddle.

I drug my tongue up her neck, sucking her earlobe between my lips and breathing heavily in her ear. Her breaths grew sharp, which was a warning sign that another orgasm was coming any second.

Almost as if on cue, she screamed out my name as I pinched her nipple hard.

“One more, baby.” I kissed along her jawline, urging her to keep going.

I could do this all night, but after nearly half an hour of this, I could tell she was starting to get tired. Each orgasm hitting her stronger than the one before.

“It’s too much.”

“You can take more,” I rasped into her ear, eliciting a small shiver as goose bumps started to prickle her arms. “I’ll tell you when you’ve had enough.”

With that, I turned up the vibrator to the next level, making her moan as

she lulled her head back against my shoulder. I placed a kiss against her now exposed neck, licking and sucking just enough that it would drive her crazy, but wouldn't leave a mark.

I never would've guessed how much it would get me off by getting her off, but there was something about focusing on her pleasure, on her enjoying this, that made my brain go silent. Paired with the look on her face as she melted under my touch, it was a far better dopamine kick than receiving could ever give me.

Mae's thighs started to clench together as another orgasm budded on the horizon. I could always tell when she was close because her breaths would get short while her stomach started flexing, almost as if she was trying to hold it in.

Dragging my tongue up the side of her neck, I breathed heavily against her ear as I drove her over the edge into oblivion. Her body shook and she gripped my forearm tight as she moaned my name.

A proud smile took over my face as I roamed my eyes over her.

Such a fucking good girl. I knew she could take more.

"How does it feel being such a good girl for me?" I whispered, kissing the side of her cheek.

She turned her head to face me and a satisfied smile transformed her face as she hummed some sort of cute mindless nonsense. This time, she was the one to lean in and kiss me and it made my brain spin.

I kept the vibrator on her clit, but turned down the setting as she rode out the waves of her orgasm and drifted into a blissful post-orgasm state.

She looked so fucking beautiful submitting to my mercy like this.

I wanted her to stay here, in my bed, all night. Hell, every night would work just as well for me.

The vibrator cut off right then and she let out a heavy sigh. Such a good girl going all the way to the end for me. I didn't think she had it in her.

"I want to keep going," she mumbled, her head resting against my shoulder and her eyes still closed.

"Beg for it. I want to hear you use your words."

"Please."

"Please, what?"

"Fuck me. Please fuck me," she begged with those big doe eyes that made my dick throb.

"I thought it was too much?"

“I can take it,” she whimpered. “I promise.”

I worked my fingers into her hair, and pulled her in to lock my lips against hers, briefly dipping my tongue into her mouth. “Such a pretty little slut desperate for my cock.”

Mae smiled at my words which only elicited one of my own. She loved it when I called her dirty names, only further proving my point that she’d been getting off on our little arguments all along.

I fucking knew it.

Shifting out from under her, she wiggled herself into a comfortable position teasing her wet pussy while I ripped off my sweatpants and grabbed a condom from the nightstand and rolled it onto my length.

I barely had the thing on before she was pulling me on top of her, grabbing my shaft and guiding it into her tight heat with ease. The sounds of her soaking wet pussy as I worked my way in and out of her drove me fucking wild.

She pulled my head down, intertwining my lips with hers before thrusting her tongue into my mouth to explore. Never in my life had I met anyone with as luscious lips as hers. I could get lost in them for hours, days, even.

“You like that, don’t you?” I pulled back with a smirk, angling upward so I was thrusting directly against her g-spot.

“Yes,” she moaned breathlessly, brushing her mouth against mine.

A wicked grin pulled at the corner of my lips. “Of course you do.”

This is going to be quick. There was no way I was going to be able to hold on for long. Not to mention the fact that Mae had already had nearly half a dozen orgasms, and if I had any say in it, she’d be having at least one more.

My jersey was still bunched on top of her chest and I motioned for her to lift her arm so I could slip it off. I wanted her completely naked as she writhed underneath me, so I could watch as her tits bounced as I pounded into her little cunt.

“Your pussy feels so good.”

She tightened herself around me and I almost lost it right then, but I did my best to hold on a little bit longer so she could get another orgasm out of this. I wanted to see her mouth open into a perfect oval shape.

“So come in it.”

Fuck me.

I couldn't have held back even if I wanted to. All it took was one more thrust into her tight little cunt and I was seeing stars as I filled the condom.

Mae sucked in a sharp breath, following right behind me as she moaned my name in my ear.

Collapsing on top of her, she let out a senseless giggle that made my chest clench as she roamed her finger tips over my back.

“You okay?” I tilted my head up.

“Mhmm,” she hummed with a pleased smile.

Remember when I said this girl was going to be the death of me? Well, I had a feeling seeing her like this was enough to put me six feet under.

EIGHTEEN

MAE

I THINK I might've accidentally transcended to heaven.

And if not, I was definitely somewhere on the outskirts.

At this point, there was no telling where my thoughts started and ended. My entire body felt limp as I sighed against the bed in pleasant exhaustion. It was safe to say my brain followed suit, feeling like a mindless glob of mush with nothing inside. I don't think it was humanly possible to have a productive thought no matter how hard I tried.

This all probably sounded a lot more exhausting than it actually was, because it felt like heaven and euphoria and everything wonderful all mixed together. There was no telling when the last time I'd felt this soothed was. Actually, on second thought, I wasn't sure I'd ever felt so content and relaxed in my entire life.

Hmm, I wondered if October would be down to do this *one* more time for good measure? Only next time, instead of being in the pool house, we could do it on my California King with thousand thread count sheets and the endless cloud of fluffy pillows. Oh, how I missed my pillows right now. Why did all men sleep with so few pillows? It should be a crime.

October walked back into the room, scooping me off the bed in one motion and carrying me toward the en suite bathroom. At least I thought. I couldn't quite tell if I was half asleep or just in a weird blissed out state—either way, I wasn't complaining.

As we got closer, I heard water trickling out of the bathtub faucet and I could smell Scarlett's old vanilla cupcake bubble bath he must've put in there. A few moments later, he set me on the toilet seat, but I kept my eyes closed, trying to focus all of my energy on staying upright.

“You need to pee, baby.”

“Impossible. That requires focus... and energy.”

His hand caressed my cheek and I instinctively leaned into it. Letting the moment of peace pass between us as he delicately stroked his thumb over my cheek. “I know you can do it.”

I wasn't sure whether I sat there for hours or milliseconds, but eventually, I did my business—I mean, at least I think I did? Who knows. Not me.

“Do you need my—”

“I got it.” I swatted October's hand away, wadding some toilet paper off the roll and finishing the job.

I managed to open my eyes just enough to see him bending down in front of me before wiping a warm rag over my face. After wiping my left cheek, he gave it a quick kiss before doing the same on the other side.

“You're so beautiful,” October whispered against my lips before pressing them against mine.

I hummed my appreciation as I kissed him back.

“Alright, let's get you up.”

October scooped me up and carried me over to the warm bath, and much to my surprise he stuck his feet in first, holding me firm against his chest as he lowered us both into the tub.

“Come here.” He placed his hands gently on the sides of my upper arms and helped me lean back against his chest once again.

“No, I can't.”

“We're done for the night, baby. Let me clean you up.”

The gentleness in his voice nearly made tears well in my eyes. In all the years of my life, October was the least likely person that I could've expected to be stroking foamy soap over my skin and washing it away when I was too tired to do it myself.

There was something about it that made a fathomless longing unfold in my chest ache. The way that he was lathering my hair with shampoo, taking his time like there was nothing in the world that he'd rather be doing. I let him massage his fingertips through my scalp in circular motions and I swear the feeling from it was almost the equivalent of having an orgasm. Although, there wasn't a single ounce of sexual intent in the way he washed my skin or rinsed my hair. This outwardly ultra-masculine man had a soothing, tender side of him I don't think I'd ever noticed before—quite frankly, never knew existed.

“You did such a good job for me tonight.” His voice was low as he whispered against my ear.

“Happy to oblige.” I stuck out a thumbs up before lulling my head back against his shoulder.

A deep laughter rumbled from his chest that brought a smile to my lips.

I liked this.

I liked us. Together.

“I’m serious. Every time I thought you were too tired to continue, you’d surprise me by taking another one... and another one,” he praised, kissing along my jawline and my stomach filled with butterflies. I could listen to him talk like this all night.

“Keep going,” I taunted.

“And the way you kept going, taking me so well, even when you thought you couldn’t handle any more.” His breath against my ear sent chills skating down my skin. “I’m so proud of you.”

I was too drained to confirm, but I think one of the tears that had welled in my eyes slipped down my cheek.

Never in my life would I have guessed that October would be this attentive after sex—especially with me. Maybe it was heartless of me to assume he was going to be the kind of guy who got his and left, but I was pleasantly surprised to find that I was wrong.

Completely wrong.

October rinsed the conditioner out of my hair just as the water was starting to get cold. He got out first, drying off and throwing on the sweatpants that were on the counter before patting my body dry and wrapping the towel around me to carry me into the bedroom. He set me on top of the comforter on my side of the bed, but I made a jump up, abandoning my towel, heading straight for the door before he even had time to step away.

“Where are you going?” He tugged at my elbow, urging me to sit back down.

“My clothes are in the main house.”

“So, you’re just going to walk out there naked for anyone to see?”

“Why not? If they’ve been paying attention, they’ve already seen more than enough of me.” I hinted toward our endeavors from the last few weekends.

Plus, sometimes it was fun to just be careless and free. My next-door neighbor, Rita, was in her late eighties and she’s mentioned to me on more

than one occasion that her bed time is six o'clock sharp. The house on the other side of me had been for sale for a few months now with no offers, so unless there were squatters that I didn't know about, it wasn't like anyone had caught on.

"Not a chance. Stay there. You're wearing one of my t-shirts."

October walked over to the closet and pulled out an old maroon shirt with his college football team logo printed on the front.

"I have a confession," I said as he slipped that shirt over my head and pulled my arms through the holes.

"You can tell me anything, March." There was that low, gentle voice of his again. He really had to stop doing that because every time he did it made my insides melt.

"I... kind of like wearing your clothes. Not to be rude, but I think they look better on me than they do on you."

"In that case, I have a confession too..."

I hummed, urging him to keep going, but cut him off before he had the chance to speak. "Are you finally going to admit that you have a crush on me?"

"Not yet." My eyes might've been half open at this point, but I could hear the smile in his tone. "But I am willing to agree that you look good wearing my t-shirt."

"I have another confession," I added. Maybe it was stupid of me to blurt out my feelings like this, but, at this point in life, I just didn't care anymore. I was tired of harboring old resentment toward him. "I don't hate you... anymore, at least."

October stood there in silence, but I decided to keep going.

"Maybe I even like you. Not all the time, but sometimes."

"I can work with sometimes."

"Any other confessions?"

"Yeah, one time in tenth grade, I broke in through your bedroom window, and snuck a bag of weed into the back pocket of a pair of your dirty jeans, so you'd get grounded."

Much to my surprise, his big, bellowing laugh filled the room. "You're the reason I got grounded for three weeks? To this day, I've never seen my mom as pissed as she was when she found that in my laundry basket. I missed prom because of that."

"Are you mad at me?" I shrunk into myself.

At the time, I didn't feel an ounce of remorse for what I'd done. Especially after he'd drawn a slew of penises on my brand-new car with permanent marker a few months earlier. Granted, my dads found it significantly funnier than I did, but they didn't hold me back from moving forward with my little revenge plan either.

Now that October was being so nice to me, though, I felt like spilling all the pent-up secrets I'd been keeping for years. The guilt was starting to weigh on me more than I thought it would.

October cupped my face into his hands and whispered. "I'm not sure I ever really was."

He bent down and kissed me softly, pulling away then going back in for another. There was something about that second kiss that felt different from the rest. Like there was some alternate meaning behind it my too tired brain couldn't wrap my head around.

This time I was the one to pull away from his lips, slipping beneath the sheets and flopping back onto the pillows. I made a mental note to remind him to step up his pillow game if this was going to be a regular occurrence, because not only were there only three pillows on the whole bed, but all of them were completely flat.

Why did every man have flat pillows?

Such strange, strange creatures.

October left the room for a few minutes, and by the time he came back the temptation of sleep was threatening to take me under. Keeping my eyelids open for longer than a couple seconds was a small feat. As long as he didn't kick me out of his bed come morning, I'd be sleeping in until noon.

"Eat this for me." He held out a PB&J in front of my face.

"I'm too tired. You eat it."

"Two bites. That's it."

I grabbed the sandwich and took one normal sized bite of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich, chewing slowly. It was so delicious—grape jelly, my favorite. Arguably the best meal I'd had in days—then again, that could've just been the exhaustion talking.

"One more. Make it a big one."

"That's what she said," I joked, which won me a burst of laughter as I took another giant bite before sticking my hand out for October to take it and finish the rest.

"Good girl. Now, take a few sips so we can go to sleep." He traded the

sandwich for a glass of water and I fought a groan as I took two giant gulps and slumped back under the sheets.

I listened as October peeled back the covers on his side of the bed and shuffled his way under the sheets. Butterflies erupted in my stomach as he wrapped his arm around my waist and tugged me against his chest.

Another night, I would've over thought it. Maybe even pushed him away and made some snide remark about him letting his feelings get involved. Tonight, though, I didn't mind. Not one bit.

He placed a few kisses below my ear and my skin erupted in goosebumps as he whispered in a low voice. "You we're right, you know."

"About what?" I mumbled, dozing in and out of consciousness.

"This really has become your sex house."

"Stop talking and go to sleep."

October reached up and turned my face toward his to give me a quick goodnight kiss before wrapping his arm around my waist once again.

Something deep, deep down told me that if I let my walls down enough that I could get used to this.

NINETEEN

MAE

I FOUND it *quite* funny that October thought he was the one who seduced me last night. When in fact, I was the one who set the stone in motion far before the thought of us hooking up ever crossed his mind. Not only that, but I got him to lose the bet without so much as lifting a finger. I planned on playing the long game, tormenting him with provocative pictures for the few days leading up to the end of our bet.

But all it took was one photo—not even my best work— before he was begging at my feet.

This was also the reason that I didn't have an ounce of surprise when I woke up to drink my morning tea by the pool, and October himself was already sitting at the outdoor dining table. I paused in the doorway, taking in the scene in front of me with cautious eyes as I spotted a breakfast plate filled with eggs, bacon, and waffles in front of my usual seat.

Not to sound cocky, but I didn't think our hook-up last night was bad enough that he'd consider poisoning me, but then again, you can never be too sure.

"I thought you said you wouldn't be sleeping over again?"

"And I didn't think my legs would be too weak to walk," I grumbled, and October let free a small smirk at my confession of pleasure. "My bones feel like goo."

"You realize that's a compliment of the highest order, right?"

"One you're ruining with your arrogance."

There was a twinge at the corner of his mouth that sent my pulse racing. He had no idea—no earthly idea—how much of an effect the tiny expression he made had on me.

“Are you going to keep standing there or what?” He didn’t look up from his plate as he shoveled a giant bite of waffle into his mouth.

“What is this?”

“Breakfast. It’s a new concept where you eat foods that give you nutrients and they help fuel you as you go on about your day. Profound concept, really.”

I narrowed my eyes at him as he scarfed down another bite. “Don’t be smug. I’m allergic to assholes before 9 a.m.”

“Yeah, I don’t blame you. Most people aren’t into anal this early in the morning.”

I swear this man got his rocks off on annoying the absolute shit out of me. Although, I had to admit the joke was *kind of* funny. As I took my seat at the table next to him, I was instantly drawn back to thoughts of him taking care of me last night.

I never... I guess I just never expected to feel anything toward him that wasn’t hatred or lust. So, you could imagine my surprise when I woke up in the pool house a few minutes ago and my heart sank to my stomach when I realized he wasn’t there.

Even now, sitting a few feet apart, I wanted to crawl into his lap and bury myself under his skin. It was all just a whirlwind of emotions, really.

The two of us ate in comfortable silence, and I devoured my breakfast faster than him though he had a head start. In hindsight, I regretted not finishing off that PB&J when I had the chance.

“I have to go back to the stadium because I left my ear pods in the locker room last night. Want to ride along? I can give you a tour of the place if you want.”

“This isn’t like... a date, is it?”

“Not even close. Why? Were you wishing it was?”

His smirk made me wish I’d kept my mouth shut.

I did a mental run through of all the things I need to do today—laundry, have a call with my financial advisor, tell the vendors I’d been working with that the business would be shutting down at the end of the year.

Yeah... it turned out that after a call with my accountant last week, I learned that my agency was doing *significantly* worse than expected, and there was no room for revival.

You know what? On second thought, maybe going to the stadium with October wasn’t the worst idea. At least it would help me clear my mind for a

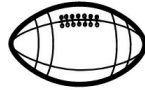
little while.

There was a little part of me that knew deep down that the reason I wanted October and I to hook-up in the first place—and continue hooking up—was so that I could free my mind, even if it was just for a few minutes here and there.

This impending shut down had been weighing on me hard, then mix in the added tension of having him around and... wait, why do I feel the need to justify myself?

I wasn't going to explain myself for having sex with anyone or any reason—former enemy, need for relaxation, or otherwise.

My eyes opened wide and I swallowed, realizing what I'd just said in my mind... *former enemy.*



The ride across town was filled with chatter as October and I reminisced on some of the stupid things we used to do as kids. Neither of us could hardly finish a story without the other person piping up with another one.

I brought up the memory of this one time that we argued at a back-to-school bash until we were blue in the face. Our parents were so mad at us, we both got grounded for two weeks. Which was a long time for an eight-year-old. I wasn't even allowed to see Scarlett outside of school. How cruel was that?

Crazy how much time can change things, huh?

One day you're a scrawny little third grader with a smart mouth, and the next you're twenty-five and the crush you abandoned almost two decades ago has suddenly started blooming again. Only this time, you're not quite sure it'll go away again.

I peered over at October, noticing his hand resting on the center console, and there was a tiny voice in my head that urged me to reach over and intertwine my fingers with his.

Just go for it.

What's the worst that could happen?

Do it. Grab his hand.

Just as I was about to go for it, he made a sharp right into the parking lot.

I wasn't sure whether I should be grateful for the universe's intervention or upset at the missed opportunity.

We both quickly hopped out of the car, and weaved our way through the parking lot. I was trailing behind October a little bit as I tried to gather my thoughts, until he paused with his hand outstretched, waiting for me to catch up.

He locked her fingers together, and a swarm of butterflies took flight in my stomach. We walked around the entire facility hand-in-hand as he showed me around the locker room and the area where the post-game press conferences were held that I'd seen on T.V. before. It wasn't until we walked through the tunnel to the field that we broke apart from each other and I felt an emptiness in the place where his palm had been.

We walked toward the fifty-yard line, and it was impossible not to stare up at all of the seats, imagining each of them being filled with screaming fans, who were there to cheer you on. He took a seat on one side of the white line and I sat on the other, so we were shoulder to shoulder.

“What’s going on with you, Mae? Not that I’m complaining, but something about you seems off lately.” There was a genuine concern in his voice that made my stomach sink.

I could do this. I could tell him the truth. Couldn't I?

Maybe we were just casual fuck buddies or maybe we were more than that. Somehow, somehow it was starting to feel like there was more to this than just sex. Even more than that, I was starting to see October as more of a friend than a long-standing feud partner.

With a sigh, I contemplated telling him the truth, deciding to go for it at the last second. “My business is failing. Well, technically already failed. I’ll probably have to shut it down by the end of the year.”

“That’s why you wanted to...” His words trailed off, alluding to our unlabeled dynamic.

Not daring to look up, I gave him a weak smile and a clipped nod.

Glancing over, I caught a glimpse of his frown. “Does Scar know?”

“Vaguely, but not really.” I dropped my gaze down to look at my feet and clicked my shoes together a few times as I tried to tame the endless stream of thoughts blazed through my brain.

Silence passed between us for a long while, but neither of us seemed to mind.

“Why haven’t you said anything to anyone?” he asked after a beat.

“Because it’s...”

“Embarrassing?” He finished my sentence for me. I kept my head down, feeling the shame and guilt heating my cheeks.

October wrapped a hand around my waist and tugged me into his side, stroking my hair as I rested my head on his chest. Tears welled in my eyes, threatening to break free at any second.

“It just hurts, you know? I worked so hard... so hard.” My voice broke. “Do you know how many sleepless nights I’ve had? How many events I’ve missed over the past two years? All for this to crumble right before my eyes?”

Reaching over, he placed two fingers under my chin and tilted my head up so we were locking eyes. For a long while we stayed like that, saying absolutely nothing. The intimacy of it, though, made it feel as though we were saying everything we’d never said to each other out loud.

One singular tear slipped down my cheek, he broke our silence with a whisper as he wiped it away with his thumb. “You should be proud of yourself. Most people would’ve been too scared to start in the first place.”

I gave him a small nod. Anything more and I would’ve been a blubbling mess for the rest of the afternoon.

“You should tell her, though. She’ll be happy that you came to her.” The softness in his voice was a punch to the gut.

Just a few months ago, I walked into the pool house to borrow Scarlett’s computer and accidentally stumbled across an email about her cookbook deal. I played it off like a joke, but there was a small piece of my heart that stung knowing she was too nervous to share about it with *me*, of all people.

One of the happiest moments of her life, and she was too anxious to tell anyone? Now I was walking into this unknown phase and I felt too embarrassed to tell her about it? I couldn’t go back in time and change the ways of the past, but I did have the power to make the conscious choice to let Scarlett in instead of trying to forge through on my own.

“You’re right...” I sniffled.

“I wish I was hearing those words under different circumstances.”

A small, huffed laugh broke past my lips and I could feel the smile on his as he placed a gentle kiss on my forehead.

“Now that that’s settled, are we ever going to finish talking about your birthday party?”

“What else is there to say?” Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath before

exhaling. “We were kids. And yes, my feelings might’ve been hurt at the time, but the fact of the matter is that I grew up with two parents who loved me better than most kids could dream of. Then there was Scarlett and Miss Jill, who were this unwavering addition to our family that never for a second made me feel like I wasn’t one of them.” I gave October a weak smile as I gathered the rest of my thoughts. “So what if you didn’t want to be my valentine? And so what if Molly Goldberg was just projecting her insecurities about feeling unlovable? Her words—and your laughs—might’ve hurt at the time, but they didn’t erase the fact that what was said simply wasn’t true.”

“I’m sorry.” His voice was small and strained as he placed his elbows on his knees and hung his head in his hands. “I wish I could... I never should’ve...”

I wrapped my hand around his waist and squeezed him tight. There was nothing I hated more than seeing the pain on his face. “I forgive you... I forgave you. A long time ago, I think. Seeing you again mustered up those old feelings at first, but they’re gone now.”

His head hung low. “Do you ever wonder... I don’t know, what things would’ve been like if we didn’t hate each other all these years?”

“I’d probably still have a crush on you like I did when I was five.” I threw my head back with a laugh, looking over to see a flurry of emotion pass over his face.

Before I could question it further, he hopped up to his feet and held out his palms to help me up. “We should probably get out of here before security comes and makes us leave. You want to watch a movie when we get home?”

“Maybe later... I think I’m going to go talk to Scar for a while. We’ve got a few things to catch up on.”

We walked to the car in comfortable silence. Meanwhile, the entire ride home, his hand was locked in mine while my head rested on his shoulder. For the first time in a long time, I felt the peace that I’d been longing for.

TWENTY

MAE

“DOES ANYONE HAVE A SAFETY PIN?” Aera shouted, sewing up an inevitable eleventh-hour tear on a model’s outfit.

The hair and make-up room at the event center was bustling with commotion as models were slipping into their outfits while hairdressers and make-up artists did touch ups. Days like this made me miss this world, the nerves and excitement all wrapped into one giant knot in the pit of your stomach.

It was the most intoxicating non-drug induced experience, every time, without fail.

I glanced around the room with a content, hopeful smile until my gaze caught on October in the corner. Much to my surprise, the grin on my face only got bigger. He was laughing with the stylist who was fastening cuff links to his sleeves while he buttoned up his suit.

This thing between us was all happening fast, and to be honest, it terrified me a bit. In recent weeks, we’d hooked-up a handful of times, and somehow, my feelings for him were already this involved. It always baffled me when couples in movies got together after a few weeks of being together and they just *knew*.

Something deep in my gut was telling me that the knowing feeling in my chest was right.

Even weirder than that, I couldn’t remember the last time I was genuinely mad at him. The night of my birthday party? Everything after that was all a blur and I wasn’t entirely sure where my dislike for him ended or began these days—if it even existed at all.

A smile pulled at the corners of my lips as I watched him for a little while

longer. He twisted his head, catching my eyes and the grin he shot me gave me the boost of confidence I needed to power through the rest of the night.

Aera came up behind me, pulling me from my thoughts as she mumbled something about how she wished she had brought her seamstress with her because this was equally as stressful as a normal fashion show would be.

We both giggled, trying to swallow our laughter so we didn't draw attention to ourselves.

Abel's sister was great. I like her a lot more than I expected to—I mean you never know how people will be in this industry. Especially someone who's amassed as much success as Aera has in the last few years. Not to mention, it was cute getting to witness her and Scarlett getting along and finding their dynamic with each other.

My heart clenched in my chest. Aera would hopefully, eventually become Scarlett's sister-in-law, which meant she would become a part of my family too. I looked over at her with a half-smile. Watching your family build another family was one of the most bittersweet parts about being an adult, and I couldn't be happier for Scarlett than I was right now.

I cleared my throat. "Want to go check out the crowd?"

Her eyes perked up and she nodded, leading us over to the portion of the back of the stage that was still hidden by the thick, maroon curtain. She pulled back a corner just enough so we could catch a glimpse of the attendees who were starting to settle into the event hall.

"Look at all these people." Aera took in a breath. I peered over to my left and caught her smiling to herself as we scanned the crowd. A proud smile pulled at my lips as I surveyed people shuffling into their seats and snapping photos for Socialgram.

Miami might not have been a fashion capital by any means, but the city got enough celebrity traffic that made pulling off events like this worthwhile.

"Wait! Is that Gordon Sandoval? I've been dying to meet him!" she exclaimed.

My heart sank as I glanced over and the short gray-haired man came into view.

No. No. No.

This could not be happening.

Gordon Sandoval was single-handedly responsible for the downfall of my modeling career. He spread lies about me so people wouldn't pry further about the accusations I'd publicly made about him during a press run a few

years back.

You see, our good friend Gordon had a habit of exploiting young models by outright stealing a percentage of their paychecks—and assumedly using that money to fund some of his scummy addictions. For the most part, he covered his tracks well. Then there was the part where most girls who were just starting out in their careers weren't stupid enough to call him out on his bullshit, so he got away with significantly more than he should have.

I knew how much I was supposed to get paid, and I could only assume it was comparable to other girls on the same level as me. There was no debating that people were greedy, but the thousands—hundreds of thousands—of dollars he'd stolen over the years, on top of his *very* healthy salary, couldn't have possibly been used for the greater good.

Yet, when I pressed the media to look into it, I was the one who was made to look like an idiot for calling out a powerful man. *My* career was the one that ended overnight. *My* business was the one that failed because *I* got blacklisted from the industry.

A breath was stuck in my throat.

I needed to get out of here.

Now.

Before Aera noticed the blood rushing from my face, I quickly excused myself and sprinted past the dressing area where everyone was getting ready. The baby blue ruffles on my dress flowed through the air as I picked up my pace searching for a quiet spot away from the swarms of people.

Wasn't there a closet around here somewhere? I could've sworn I saw a janitor's closet.

Where is it? Where is it?

A small sigh of relief came when I spotted the white door, followed by another when the handle turned easily and the door opened without a hitch.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

I wasn't exactly sly about slipping inside. I didn't care if anyone noticed, as long as I could get a moment alone to catch my breath and gather my thoughts, I'd be just fine. Right?

A sudden wave of dizziness began to cloud my vision as I flipped on the light and locked the door behind me before dropping to my knees with my head in my hands. My heart pounded forcefully as it resounded in my ears, drowning out the incessant clatter that lay behind the small door.

Of all the places this man could have showed up to unnerve me why

—*why*— did it have to be here, at a charity event, for Christ’s sake.

Evil. The man was pure evil.

Thump thump. Thump thump.

My pulse boomed in my ears. I tried expelling a breath, but just as quickly another seemed to get caught in my lungs.

Fine. I was completely fine.

Inhale.

Nothing was wrong.

Inhale.

Not a single thing.

Inhale.

I tried to suck in a deep breath for four counts. Close my eyes, hold it, and then exhale for four counts while repeating my internal mantra.

I am calm. I am cool. I am collected.

I am calm. I am cool. I am collected.

Continuing to repeat the phrase in my head, I placed a hand against the wall to steady myself as my breathing became increasingly more sporadic. My chest grew tight, then tighter, until I was gasping for air despite trying to maintain deep, slow breaths.

Okay, five things I can see... my sparkly shoes, the tile floor, various sized boxes poorly stacked on top of each other, the light switch by the door, and the circular light on the ceiling. Four things I can touch... the blue ruffles on my dress, my diamond earrings, the wall, and the door handle. Three things I could hear... people chatting outside, someone’s cell phone going off in the distance, and pop music from the sound system blaring through the speakers from the main event space. Two things I can smell... cleaning supplies and hairspray. One thing I can taste... the green tea I had a few minutes ago.

Taking in a few more deep breaths, I finally felt like I could breathe again.

The last time I had a panic attack was a few months ago in the grocery store parking lot. Anxiety was weird like that. Sometimes it flared up at the most random, inopportune times.

Inherently, I knew the stress of the business struggling was taking a toll on me both mentally and physically. These days, unless I slept over at October’s place, I had trouble sleeping. Eating took far more effort than it usually did.

When I gave into Scarlett's idea and approached October about this whole fuck buddy situation, I knew deep down that I just needed something—anything—to help take my mind off of my life imploding around me for a little while. I never intended for it to be anything more than a one-time fling, but now, I craved the simplicity and relief I felt whenever he was around.

It was almost like I allowed myself to let my walls down, giving him access to the ugly, damaged parts of me because he was never going to love me anyway. As fucked up as it might be, it was comforting knowing I could be the truest version of myself around him because in the grand scheme, it didn't really matter.

Tears welled in my eyes, threatening to break free any second.

How did I let this happen?

Why was I stupid enough to think this was a good idea?

My first industry appearance in nearly two years. Of course—*of course*—Gordon would come here if not for any other reason than to dispirit me.

Throw me off my game.

Hit me with one final blow before blacklisting me forever.

As hard as I tried to keep my tears at bay, warm droplets began sliding down my cheeks. How had I been so naïve?

My chest shook as I pushed out a ragged breath.

Fine. I was completely fine.

Inhale.

Nothing was wrong.

Inhale.

Not a single thing.

Inhale.

My breath caught in my throat when two knocks struck against the door. "March, is that you in there?"

At the sound of his voice, my world went still and without a second thought, I dropped my head into my hands, letting the guttural sob that was stuck inside escape from my throat.

TWENTY-ONE

OCTOBER

“GO AWAY.” Mae’s muffled voice sounded from the other side of the door. Deliberately ignoring her, I rattled the doorknob.

“Are you crying?” I wriggled the doorknob once again, but it wouldn’t budge. *Fuck*. What kind of utility closet locked from the inside, anyhow? “Open the door.”

“I’m not crying.” I heard a faint snuffle through her broken words. Man, she was a horrible liar. Wiggling the thing again, I let out a stream of expletives when it still didn’t move.

“Yes, you are. Now open the door for me.”

“No. You’ll just make fun of me.”

Her words were like a sucker punch straight to the heart.

That’s what she thought? Instead of assuming that I’d want to help her through whatever was going on, I’d barge in there and make some sort of joke to hurt her even more?

Fuck.

Until this point, there weren’t many things I’d regretted about Mae and I’s previously deranged relationship. Now, I’m not going to sit here and pretend like I’ve been a damn saint—there were more than a handful of things I’d said over the years that I wished I could take back—but at this moment, I wanted nothing more than to reverse it all. Go back to the beginning and start over with her on a clean slate.

Do I think it would’ve completely prevented us from despising each other? Not a chance.

However, I knew that starting over clean wasn’t possible. Which meant I had to do everything in my power to show her that we were done with these

insulting remarks toward each other.

We could joke. Fuck, we could even argue until we were blue in the face. But there was too much at stake to risk losing her—the possibility of us—to continue on with our hostile jabs.

“Fuck.” I cursed under my breath, taking a step back to run my hands through my hair as I sized-up the door, contemplating my chances of breaking it down without injuring myself.

I felt like a failure.

Like I’d let her down once again, and it tore at my heartstrings. Not only that, but it unleashed an overwhelming desire to prove her wrong—to show her that I could be the exact opposite of how she thought I’d act in this moment. Not because I wanted to win some intangible achievement I’d created in my head, but because I wanted her to see that I wasn’t the bad guy anymore.

I’d spend the rest of my days reversing her perception of me if that’s what it took.

“Open the damn door, Mae, or I’ll break it down myself.”

The lock on the door sounded, but nothing could’ve prepared me for what I found when I whipped it open.

The most stunning girl in the world with her face in her palms. My fucking heart couldn’t take seeing her like this.

“Come here.” Before I had time to think, the door to the small room slammed behind me, drowning out the outside noise as I dropped to the floor and gathered her into my arms, pulling her snugly against my chest.

To my surprise, she wrapped her arms tightly around me so firmly that it almost knocked me over. A long while passed as she sobbed against my chest while I stroked her hair. I could feel the wetness from her tears soaking through my suit, but I couldn’t have cared less. I’d walk out onto that runway naked if it helped her feel better.

As she sobbed, in my arms, I felt helpless.

Like nothing I could’ve said or done would have been enough.

“Baby, tell me what’s wrong? Talk to me.”

“He’s—he’s here...” she managed through shaky breaths, tightening her grip on the back of my shirt. “And I feel like I can’t breathe.”

I tipped her head up to look at me. “I need you to breathe with me, okay?”

She gave me a weak nod, pulling in a breath at the same time I inhaled,

and pushing one out of her nose when I exhaled. We did that for a few rounds, until she was noticeably relaxing. Her shoulders were no longer tense and her breath had returned to a normal pace.

“Who’s ‘he’?” Irritability dripped in my words. I couldn’t take it any longer. My blood turned to a boil as the thought of an ex of hers being here flickered through my mind.

Hell, it didn’t even have to be an ex. A crazed fan? Some fucking weirdo from her Socialgram direct messages who refused to leave her alone?

Either way, I didn’t give a fuck who ‘he’ was because ‘he’ was going to be on the receiving end of my wrath two seconds after his name spilled out of her mouth.

Anyone who was asshole enough to make a woman hide in a closet with tears streaming down her cheeks in fear would quickly become public enemy number one in my book.

“Gordon Sandoval.” Her voice broke halfway through croaking out his name. “He—he’s sitting on the front row in a paisley suit.”

“I’m going to kill him.” I broke apart from her body to stand, and pushed off the ground, headed straight toward the door.

“No, no...” She tugged firmly against the hem on the back of my pants. “Please don’t leave me.”

The blatant fear in her eyes sent a new ripple of anger toward this guy coursing through my veins. But the fresh tears that spilled down her cheeks were what kept me locked in place.

How was I supposed to say no to her?

“I’m right here, baby,” I whispered, pulling her firmly to my chest once again.

“I can’t go out there until he’s gone.”

“I’ll handle it.”

I pulled my phone from my back pocket and quickly thumbed out a group text to Abel and Scarlett.

OCTOBER

Gordon Sandoval. Front row. Paisley Suit. Abel, can you take care of him for me?

SCARLETT

Holy shit. Holy shit!

Where's Mae?

I've got her.

A couple minutes passed without a sound, until I heard the muffled sound of gas on the opposite side of the door. Immediately followed by a thunderous thwack of a fist connecting with a jaw. In the years I'd been playing competitive sports, I'd grown to know that sound well.

A few seconds later my phone buzzed.

ABEL

Consider it fucking resolved.

A pent-up breath expelled from my lungs as I rubbed the back of Mae's hair. "He's gone."

The sigh that expelled from her lungs was so substantial it took her a handful of deep breaths to regulate her breathing again.

Abel might not have been my favorite dude in the world, but him helping me out right there— more importantly, running to Mae's aid without hesitation—made me rethink my preconceived notions about him.

"Why are you being so nice? I thought you didn't like me."

"You've said that before, and I'm going to give you the same answer I gave you a few weeks ago... that's the least of my concerns right now." Her face softened as she gave me a weak smile before placing her head on my chest and melting into me with a sigh. "Now, are you going to tell me who Gordon Sandoval is, or am I going to have to go get answers out of him myself?"

"He used to be my boss," she started, her voice barely above a whisper. Before she continued, she sucked in a measured breath and pushed it out, almost like she needed to gather strength in order to finish. "Until I found out he and some of the photographers were stealing money from some of the underaged girls he represented and using the money to fund some kind of

child exploitation scheme.”

“Were you ever...”

“Did he steal from me? Yes. But I was an adult by the time I realized it. Thankfully, I never got caught up in any of the other dirty antics he involved himself in. I was careful. Made sure he had nothing on me from when I was underage, before I spoke out. I don’t know... I just couldn’t sit around and stay silent.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” I smarted-off. “Putting that spirited attitude to good use.”

That line won me a faint laugh, and a small smile that sounded like music to my damn ears.

“Yeah, I thought so too. But when I went to the press about it, he found a way to exile me from the industry, and suddenly all of the brands and companies that I had been working with for years had found loopholes to nullify our contracts.”

“So, you came up with your own company in retaliation...” The pieces were all starting to fall together.

“Something like that.” She nodded sheepishly. “Except for the part where Gordon has been trying to blackmail me and continues to drag my name through the mud, hoping I’ll dissolve the company.”

“Damn it, Mae...” I released a breath, poking my tongue into the side of my cheek. This guy was beyond lucky Abel knocked him out with one clean hit, because I wouldn’t have been as pleasant. “Why didn’t you let me have my way with him?”

“You don’t have to do that you know... stick up for me, or whatever.”

“You should know me well enough by now to know that I don’t do anything unless I want to do it.”

She gave me a weak smile before resting her head against my pecs again. “You’d really do that for me?”

“There’s not a whole lot I wouldn’t do for you,” I muttered in a low voice.

We stayed like that for a few minutes, her head on my chest while I stroked her hair.

With a big sigh from her, she hopped up to her feet, and I followed suit. We stood face to face as I wiped the black smudge marks out from under her eyes with my thumbs, before her face in my hands. As much as I wouldn’t mind staying locked in this closet with her all night, she had a show to put on

and money to raise.

Mae drew back her shoulders and puffed out her chest. “I can do this,” she said matter-of-factly.

“I’ll be around if you need me.”

This time, she was the one who reached for my hips, drawing me in closer as she leaned in. Her lips crashed against mine sending passion and desire inching through my veins.

The handle of the door rattled behind me and Scarlett’s voice piped up as the door whipped open. “Mae, are you in there? They need you—”

I broke apart from Mae’s lips and the two of us turned our faces to see a wide-eyed Scarlett staring back at us. Ever so slowly, her smile broadened in approval.

She grabbed Mae’s wrist and tugged her out of the closet, whispering loudly as the door began to close behind them. “We’re so going to talk about that later.”

Just before the door slammed shut, and I was left alone in the closet by myself, Mae turned over her shoulder mouthing a “thank you” with a hint of a smile.

Standing in the tiny room alone, I realized I knew two things:

Life changes fast.

I was a goner.

TWENTY-TWO

OCTOBER

RAIN POUNDED against the roof of the pool house.

I hadn't looked at a clock in hours, but my guess was that it was somewhere between midnight and two in the morning. There was no telling how long I'd spent lying in bed after the fashion show, replaying the image of seeing Mae so anxious and defeated in that closet.

Every time the thought popped into my head the only thing I could think of was how deeply I wished I was the one who took Abel's place. What I wouldn't give to lay out the fucker who was responsible for making Mae fall apart like that.

Any man whose presence made a woman burst into tears while shaking in fear? Scum of the fucking earth.

As angry as I was about the whole situation, the part that hurt the most, was watching silently as Mae breezed through the rest of the night without so much as a slip up in her demeanor. Smiling and shaking hands with attendee's and donors like she hadn't been sobbing in my arms two hours earlier.

I couldn't help but wonder how many times she'd done that before. Enough to make it look effortless, and that thought alone ripped my heart right down the middle.

Setting up I threw my legs over the side of the bed, gripping firmly at the sheets as I replayed the night's events once again. Nope, I couldn't do this. I needed to get up and find something to distract me long enough that I could push this entire night out from the forefront of my brain. Otherwise, I'd drive myself mad until sunrise.

The rain began thumping harder against the roof as I stood up off the bed,

around the same time a faint knock sounded on the front door.

Recently, Mae and I had gotten into a comfortable nightly routine. At approximately ten o'clock while I was winding down for bed, I'd unlock the front door. Then, without fail, around eleven I'd hear the pool house door creak open, immediately followed by Mae's footsteps as she tiptoed down the hall. In my half-woken state, I'd peel back the covers and she'd crawl into bed.

I looked forward to it every night.

She did this thing where she'd start the night at the opposite edge of the bed, laying there stiff as a board, careful not to move a muscle. Yet, at some point throughout the night, she'd shuffle her way over to my side of the bed and curl up against my back, spooning me until I was forced to get up for practice.

After tonight's event, I assumed she'd want to sleep in her own bed for once. Take some time to decompress alone. Although, the thought of sleeping alone in this bed without her for the first time in weeks was half the reason I was still awake right now, despite having one of the biggest games of the season less than thirty-six hours from now.

There was a feeling in my gut telling me I should've banged down her door the second she got home until she let me in. Scooped her up into my arms and held her all night. But I didn't want to overstep. My feelings for her were becoming clearer with each encounter we had, and I could only hope that hers were following suit.

I undid the lock, opening the front door with knotted brows, but they quickly softened as Mae came into view. She stood there, drenched head to toe in the t-shirt I'd given her the other night. But it was the tears welled in her eyes and the torment written across her face as she hugged herself tightly that did it for me.

Neither of us said a word.

The silence that passed between us said more than any words ever could. The way her chest rose and fell frantically as rain droplets continued to drizzle onto her. Standing here like this, allowing me to be the person she ran to when she needed someone most.

My Mae.

Without a second thought, I pulled her across the threshold, scooping a hand underneath her ass to hoist her up. My hand gripped tightly around her neck as I stood there lost in her lips for a long moment. Her kiss was slow yet

ravishing as I walked us toward the bedroom.

She didn't want to talk. And I wasn't going to make her.

When she felt up for it, she could start from the beginning and give me all the details she wasn't able to give me in the short time we had in the closet earlier. Right now though, my job was to make her feel good—make her forget.

Our tongues danced together as I placed her back against the bed. She locked her legs around my hips, pulling me closer to her. My shirt pooled around her waist and I pressed my hard on against her already wet panties.

It was such a turn on knowing how badly she wanted me.

Our kiss deepened and I worked my length over her clit until she was whimpering against my lips. Desperate for me to take things further, but instead, I slowed down. Dragging out the moment, her pleasure, as long as I could.

“Aren't you going to undress me?” She looked up at me with those blue-gray eyes that made my chest ache, despite her being right in front of me.

“Stop talking and let me kiss you for a while.” I fused our lips together again, this time slowing the roll of my hips. Tonight, I wanted to take my sweet time with her. Letting our tongues brush together until we were both so turned on we couldn't take it any longer. “Just lie back and let me take care of you.”

Lately, I'd been thinking about her a lot more than I liked to admit. More often than not, it wasn't in a sexual context either. Occasionally, I'd let my mind drift. Thinking about the morning after our first night together when she tried to deny cuddling with me. Or the morning after we ditched the bet, enjoying a nice breakfast together with no arguments.

I held back a small laugh at all the recent reminders I got of her snoring. She'd swear up and down she didn't do it—maybe even going as far as getting one of those sleep recording apps to prove she didn't—but there was no hiding the truth.

My favorite though, was the night I made her come so hard so many times in a row that her mind turned into a puddle. One would've thought that'd be the part that stuck out in my mind most. But it wasn't. Not by a landslide. Every time, without fail, my mind reverted back to scooping up her limp, replete body into my arms and carrying her to the bathtub.

The way she slumped against my chest, resting her head on my shoulder as I lathered her skin with soap and rinsed it off. Then drying her off and

putting her in one of my t-shirts. There wasn't a single complaint out of my mouth when she'd peeled back the covers on the bed and curled up on the left side, ready to stay the night as if she'd done it a thousand times before and would do it a thousand times again.

"Please," she begged, pulling me from the recesses of my brain and back into the present moment.

At her request, I broke apart from her lips, although I could've stayed there for another half hour without so much as a complaint. I began placing searing kisses, across her jawline and down the sides of her neck, lifting her legs up and pinning them together by her ankles as I dropped down to my knees to lick her sweet pussy.

One flat tongued lick from her entrance to her clit, and she was already soaking wet for me. Fuck, I could do this all night, getting drunk off her juices until she was too overstimulated to keep going. Still holding her legs up by the ankles, I flicked my tongue against her clit until the room was filled with her cries of pleasure. It was only once her thighs started to quiver that I stuck two fingers deep inside her, to push out her orgasm as it came closer to its peak.

Mae's head shot up and she placed a hand on my shoulder, stopping me from continuing as her walls started to tighten around my fingers. "No, please. I want it with you inside me."

My pretty girl wanted to come on my cock.

How could I deny her that gratification?

"Spread your legs and play with your pussy for me."

I peeled off my sweatpants, unleashing my hard cock while she peeled off her t-shirt. Reaching over to the nightstand to grab a condom, I glanced over at Mae, who shook her head while toying with her clit. "I don't want anything between us right now."

This girl.

Settling between her legs, I drove my length into her, making her take all of me at once as I sealed our mouths together. A delicious gasp breezed past her lips as I filled her to the hilt.

That sound.

It unfurled something deep, something primal inside me that I couldn't put words to. Whatever it was, I craved it.

Dropping down, I burrowed against her neck, licking and sucking at the sensitive skin I knew would elicit more of those heavenly noises from her.

I worked my hips, finding the usual hard, steady rhythm that I knew she liked. That was until she gripped the side to my waist, urging me to go slower.

“Can you...” Mae’s words trailed off.

“Do you want me to be gentle, baby?”

She nodded, giving me a shy smile that was unlike anything I had ever seen from her. This girl showing me her soft side? I loved it.

“Okay, then let’s be gentle.”

I slowed down my pace, and instead of going hard and fast, I went deep and slow. Filling her completely with every stroke as needy moans broke free from her throat, echoing off the walls around us. Mae ran her nails up and down my neck as she pulled me in, pressing her lips to mine.

If I didn’t have a job, I’d stay in this bed and kiss her forever. Spending days, weeks, committing every inch of her mouth to memory. Picking up on all of her little antics, like how she’d bite my bottom lip to throw me off guard, so she could take dominance.

The two of us inched closer to our orgasms together, and as we got close, I thrust deep into her one more time. Switching to small movements of my tip rubbing against her g-spot while my pelvis brushed against her clit.

Mae gripped the back of my neck harder, deepening our kiss as the tension between us exploded, and our bodies shook together at the same time as we both came to a climax.

Fuck.

I didn’t know a feeling like that was humanly possible.

We continued to kiss while I stayed inside her, and the only thought in my brain was that there was something different about this time. There was something different about us—about me.

That wasn’t just sex.

Whatever it was, a thousand times of it would never be enough.

TWENTY-THREE

MAE

“WHERE IS SHE?”

Abel nudged his head over to the couch where Scar was curled up into a ball with blankets piled on top of her. Without hesitating, I walked over to the couch and plopped directly on top of her.

The second October pulled through the neighborhood gate after going to a nice breakfast together, my phone buzzed with a call from Scarlett, but it was Abel’s voice on the other end of the line asking me to come over as soon as I could. Something about Scarlett missing her period and thinking she saw a faint line on a pregnancy test, although she took a few more to be safe and they all came back negative.

“How are you holding up?”

“Fine.” Scarlett sniffled. “I just—I don’t know—I got scared.”

“How many tests did you take?”

“Three...” she answered, but the lie was written all over her face. I narrowed my eyes, trying to get her to squeeze out the truth. “Jesus Christ, so maybe it was five. And my period started not even half an hour later. Can you believe that?”

We both let out small laughs.

“I love him...” There was a softness in her voice that tugged at my heart strings. “And he’d be such a great dad. But I’m not ready to have a kid yet. I mean we’ve only been together for a few months.”

“I know.”

“Are you and October... you know?”

“Yeah, we’re being safe.”

I was on birth control, but I wasn’t known to be the most responsible with

taking it. More often than not, I'd skip a day here and there then take two the next day to make up for it. The last two years my sexual encounters had been few and far between, so it didn't occur to me that I needed to be more diligent about taking birth control now that I was having sex with someone regularly.

Wait... fuck.

When was the last time I'd taken my birth control?

A silent panic ensued in my brain, but I tried my best to conceal it. It had been two weeks since we hadn't used a condom after the fashion show, but my period just started yesterday morning. And we'd used condoms every time since that night. So, we were safe for now, right?

"Why haven't you answered any of Richard's calls, by the way?" Scarlett quirked a brow, temporarily pulling me from my downward spiral.

If I would've continued trying to connect the dots about when I'd last taken my birth control, there was no doubt in my mind that I would've jumped straight off this couch and stormed out of their house toward the pool house with a ball of nerves in my stomach.

"How'd you know about that?" I pulled back with a puzzled expression.

"He called me to ask why you weren't answering his calls... or his emails... or his texts."

Fucking Richard.

I knew sharing the same accountant with my sister would come back to bite me one day. Wasn't there such a thing as accountant-client privilege or did that cease to exist without my knowledge?

"What are you going to do with all your free time now? You used to work such long hours, it must be weird not having anything to do anymore."

Well, these days, spending time with October has taken up a lot of my time. Every night, I slept over at his house, and every morning we hung out together until he left for practice.

I sighed. "I was thinking about going back to college maybe... finishing the last few credits for my degree. Hopefully while I'm there it'll give me some ideas for what I want to do in the future. Or maybe Lea could help me get a job with the Matrix to help with their social media marketing or something."

She sucked in a breath and a satisfied grin lifted her cheeks, making her eyes squint together. "I like that idea... the team's socials are really awful. They could use a rebrand."

"Right?"

“Now, are you finally going to tell me that I was right about you and October?”

“Your ego needs stroking just as badly as his.” I rolled my eyes playfully. “But fine... you were right. Hate fucks have proven to be very beneficial.”

“It’s more than just a hate fuck, though, isn’t it? You like him, don’t you?”

More than I wanted to admit out loud.

I couldn’t sleep without him. Every breakfast and morning tea, I wanted him to be the person sitting at the table next to me. I wasn’t even shy about it anymore. I’d wake up extra early just to eat with him before he ran off to practice, only to crawl right back into bed, snuggling against his pillows the second he left.

Hell, I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d slept in my own bed, let alone gone up to my closet to change into something that wasn’t one of his oversized t-shirts and a pair of his boxers.

Even more than that, I can’t remember the last time I felt an ounce of anger towards him. We still squabbled back and forth with each other, but it was all playful and in good fun—resulting in steaming hot sex, more often than not.

“You like him?” she asked with a hint of hopefulness in her tone.

I gave her a small nod.

“Does that mean you can finally tell me what he did that made you hate him so much?”

With a sigh, I told her the same story that I’d told him. Only this time there weren’t tears in my eyes or the pangs of resentment in my heart. The story was what it was, and we both knew it wasn’t true, which was all that mattered.

Her face softened as I finished and she broke her hands out of the blanket mound and squeezed around my neck so hard I almost saw stars.

October was right—ugh, even now, the words still pained me to admit out loud. Sometimes a little reminder that it’s okay to let people in was all that was needed to make you realize that you weren’t alone with your feelings. That you didn’t have to go through big, monumental life changes—both the good and the shitty—without the most important people in your life by your side.

Scarlett and I stayed on the couch, cuddled up watching movies for a few hours while we let her whirlwind of emotions from the morning settle down.

The entire time, a war raged inside my mind as I contemplated what I should say to October.

I should tell him we have to wear condoms every time.

No, maybe we should just end it while things are good. Before our feelings get caught up in this. Before the potential for another life gets caught up in this. But did I really want that? For all of this to be over for good?

I let out a rugged sigh, looking over to realize that Scarlett was sound asleep. Abel walked into the living room right around the time I stood up from the couch and placed a quick kiss on Scar's cheek before tucking the blankets in a little tighter at her sides.

"Doesn't Scar look so cute when she's sleeping?" I whispered, coming over to stand side by side with him as we both watched her chest rise and fall.

Abel gave me a clipped nod, twisting his head and looking at her longingly. Almost like he missed her even though she was right in front of him.

There was a pulling sensation in my gut.

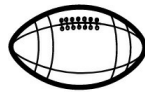
I wanted that. What the two of them had. Someone who would look at me the way that he looked at her and wouldn't hesitate to call a friend on my behalf when I needed some girl time to decompress.

Was it possible that October could be that person for me?

"Thanks for calling me. You know... she's lucky to have you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." I forced a smile, rubbing a friendly hand on his upper arm before heading for the front door.



A bundle of nerves twisted in my stomach as I walked through the pool house door and into the kitchen where October was peeling an orange, and planting myself in front of him.

"I think that... we should—I don't know—maybe stop sleeping together?" My words came out a bit more uneasy than I'd rehearsed on the way over here.

Concern washed over his face and he dropped the orange onto the counter before walking over and placing his hands on my hips. "What's wrong?"

Maybe it was the whirlwind of emotions from the last few hours altering my cognitive ability, but I was almost certain there was a hint of hurt in his eyes.

“Look, I’m sorry. It wasn’t like I planned for Scarlett to have a pregnancy scare. Or that it would completely terrify me, because my life is in shambles right now, and the last thing I need is a child added to the mix.” I paused to suck in a breath between my frantic rambling. “Plus, you wouldn’t want to have a kid with me, anyway, would you? That would just be—”

“Hey, hey, hey.” His hand wrapped around my waist and I instantly felt a sense of calmness wash over me. He held me, not pushing for more of an explanation while I caught my breath. “What was all that for? If you don’t feel comfortable sleeping together anymore then I have no problems with that. I just want to make sure you’re alright.”

I tucked my chin into my chest bashfully. “Wait... so you’re not upset?”

“Why would I be upset?”

“I don’t know... I just thought...”

“Stop thinking.” There was a pull at the corner of his lips that made me huff out a laugh. “If you want to stop this, just tell me. I’m not going to pry you for answers or make you feel bad about it. I’d never do that.”

I didn’t want to stop this.

Was I terrified? Undoubtedly.

The thought of potentially having a child with someone who I was still mending a broken relationship with was scary. There was already so much change happening in my life and another tiny human added to the mix would send me into a spiral.

I wanted to keep seeing October.

Not only was the sex great, but I had this feeling that there was something there. Something deeper than either of us could see. The spark Scarlett had been hinting at all along.

I sighed. “I don’t want to stop seeing each other... but I think we need to be more careful. Wearing condoms and me being more diligent about taking my birth control.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” October kissed the tip of my nose. “And for the record, one day, down the road...” He gave me a soft smile. “You’re going to be a great mom. I’m sure of it.”

Was it wrong to feel a bundle of excitement in my chest at the possibility of him—far, far down the line—being the father? Or was I getting too ahead

of myself?

“You want to stay and hang out?” he asked.

“I don’t really feel like having sex tonight, though.”

“I like to believe we’re capable of hanging out with each other without having to fuck.”

“I don’t know...” I trailed off.

“Just stay.”

“Fine, as long as I get to pick the movie.”

TWENTY-FOUR

OCTOBER

TO PUT IT PLAINLY, I was fucked.

Some part of me wondered if I was a goner at six-years-old when Mae came barreling down the street with a handful of worms asking me if I wanted to have lunch with her.

But this—Mae waking up in my bed, yet again—solidified it.

No, we didn't fuck. We didn't even cuddle. Not once did she even snuggle up against my back in the middle of the night like usual.

There was something about that last point that struck a chord with me. I hated how she could be in the same bed, two feet away from me and I still felt like she wasn't close enough. Was it even fucking possible to miss someone who was in the same room as you?

Look, at the end of the day, I was fine if she didn't want to have sex anymore. Or if she wanted to wear a condom every time. Or wanted me to feed her birth control like a baby bird—alright, maybe that one was a stretch, but you get the point.

We could do whatever she wanted as long as it meant she didn't go back to hating me. Shipping me off to an unknown island, and putting me in a box that I had no way of opening.

I couldn't fucking do it. Not again.

Seven years without her was enough. I wasn't going to let it all go to shit, letting another seven go by without her, all because I was too scared of sorting out my feelings—confessing them—and her not reciprocating.

I'd dealt with her despising me once already, but I wasn't sure how I'd manage if it happened another time. But something inside me was telling me that I need to take the risk.

Just do it.

Tell her how you feel.

Slipping out of bed, I threw on a sweatshirt as I headed out the front door and marched across the street. Bursting through the front door of Scarlett and Abel's house without knocking. Scar stood in the kitchen with a cookie scoop in hand, placing little balls of batter onto a pan.

"I like her."

"You what?" She perked up like I'd just told her the best news she'd ever heard.

"I like her. I like Mae."

"Finally!" Scarlett lifted her hands in the air like the fans at games when we scored a touchdown, although she flung some of the cookie dough from her scoop onto the cabinet behind her. "Operation Red to the Red is going *exactly* according to schedule."

"You keep saying that, but you've never told me what 'operation red to the red' actually is?"

"It's my game plan to get you and Mae to realize that you're perfect for each other," she said matter-of-factly.

"You've really got to stop barging into my fucking house unannounced." Abel's voice boomed through the house as he rounded the corner into the kitchen.

"Jesus Christ, can't you see this is an emergency of utmost importance?" Scarlett gasped. I tried to bite back a laugh as Abel looked like a dog with his tail tucked between his legs. "Good, now get over here and help us strategize."

"Wait... if you like her then what do we need to strategies about?" Scarlett lifted a brow at me.

"Things were going great, but your pregnancy scare spooked her a bit. Now I'm afraid that *she's* afraid to step out of this unlabeled fuck buddies situation and into something more... committed."

"Why are you saying that like it's Red's fault Mae doesn't like you back?" Abel butted in.

"I'm not, dude... if it's anyone's fault for freaking her out, it's yours. *You* caused the pregnancy scare, because *you* couldn't pull out."

Scarlett threw her head back and laughed. Meanwhile, Abel sighed at her side. "What's that look for? We both know he's not wrong."

"And, to be clear, I don't know if she likes me back yet because I haven't

told her—don't know how to tell her without petrifying." I set the record straight, before turning my attention over to Scarlett. "I wanted Scar's opinion on how to go about it, but now I'm curious about 'Operation Red' or whatever it is you call it."

"Operation Red to the Red is my master plan to help you get to the red zone with Mae." Scarlett squared her shoulders with a well-pleased grin. "I've been learning about football and Abel told me once that the chances of scoring are higher in the red zone, it's just the matter of getting there..."

Scarlett looked to Abel for confirmation and he nodded in response.

"Keep going..."

"Yeah, what else did you tell me... something about how the offensive strategy changes when the plays are finite." Scarlett perked up. "Isn't that right?"

Abel puffed out his chest with a pleased smile like a proud as fuck boyfriend. A twinge of jealousy came over me. Not because he was proud of Scar, but because for the first time in my life, I wanted to be the boyfriend who got to wear the beaming grin when his girlfriend did or said something amazing.

"Well, your plays are finite because she doesn't want to be fuck buddies anymore. Therefore..."

"I have to change my strategy to get her back in the red zone so I can win her over."

"Touchdown!" Scarlett raised a fist in the air.

"That's what the whole 'operation' is?"

"Fantastic, isn't it?"

"Alright, so what's your plan to help me get to change my strategy then?"

"Haven't thought that far ahead yet..." Her words trailed off at the end until a wry smile began transforming over her lips. "You know what, on second thought, I think you need to just tell her straight up. No grand gestures or crazy shenanigans. Admit that you're done playing games, and just... see what happens."

She made it sound like the easiest thing in the world.

"What if she doesn't like me back?" I questioned.

Scarlett was looking at me like she knew something that I didn't and I wasn't sure whether or not I should let it plant a seed of hopefulness in my mind. "What if she does?" She lifted a brow, keeping that smug smile plastered on her lips.

“I know you said you like her, but are you in love with her?”

“No... maybe... I don't know.” I opened my mouth to explain further, but nothing I could've said out loud would have sufficed. “I guess, sometimes, I'm still trying to wrap my head around the whole not hating her anymore part.”

“What's that saying? ‘There's a thin line between love and hate’.”

“That's the problem... I can't figure out if I've hated her since we were kids, or if it's just been a backwards form of love this whole time.”

Scarlett smiled. “I think we both know the answer to that.”

TWENTY-FIVE

MAE

“HAS ANYONE SEEN LEA?” I shouted loudly, standing on top of the coffee table with a crisp beer in one hand while Scarlett temporarily cut the music that was blaring through Lea’s surround sound system.

Lea lived a few blocks over from us, in a four-bedroom, forty-five hundred square foot house. Which was currently filled to the brim with jocks, D list celebrities, and the like as we celebrated the Matrix’s landslide win over the Jacksonville Jackrabbits and the upcoming bye week.

“This is her party.” Some knuckle headed looking jock piped in from across the living room. At least the three equally boneheaded looking dudes standing next to him had half a braincell based on the “you’re dumb as fuck” expressions they shot at him.

“Thank you, captain obvious, but that doesn’t answer my question. Has anyone seen her in the last—I don’t know—hour or so?”

The awkward silence and shared glances between friend groups gave me my answer. I took one more look around the room, seeing if anyone would budge. Kind of like how teachers in middle school did when no one volunteered to answer their questions. Their tactic almost always never resulted in a response, but at least it gave the kids who were shy the chance to muster up the courage to raise their hand if they wanted to.

Unfortunately for me, most of these people didn’t have a shy bone in their body, so I just looked like an idiot standing up there giving everyone an aggressive stare down.

“As you were.” I waved my freehand before reaching for some random tall man’s shoulder to steady me as I stepped off the coffee table. Blaring party music began filling the room again, and everyone returned to their

mindless chatter like they hadn't missed a beat.

I walked over to Scarlett who was leaning against one of the walls with a red solo cup in her hand. "I can't believe no one's seen her."

"Maybe she's handling a work emergency or something?"

Scarlett shrugged, peering around the room until she spotted Abel, who was talking to one of the defensive ends.

"Go." I winked at her, noticing she was contemplating whether or not she should leave me to hang out with him. "I'll see you later."

I rounded the corner to my left, heading for the kitchen, hoping I could find something—anything—to soak up some of the cheap beer I'd been sipping on for the last hour. I spotted some of the pinwheels that Scar had left on the counter, but before I could make a beeline for them, the doorway was blocked by a six-foot-something shaggy haired dude in an ugly brown graphic tee.

"Hi, Bobby." I smiled at him, trying to squeeze past him, but he placed his hands on both sides of the doorframe to stop me.

"How's my girl?"

"I'm not your girl. Now if you'll excuse me—"

He blocked me in once again, shuffling to the right so I couldn't get past him. There was a simmering warmth starting to sizzle through my veins, but I tried not to let it show through.

"You could be." He waggled his eyebrows at me, placing a hand on my waist.

Disgusting.

Sure, Bobby was a decent looking guy—tall, curly blonde hair, knew how to dress himself without his moms help—but that was really all he had going for him.

You know how some people have a good personality and it makes them ten times hotter than they actually are? Well, unfortunately for our boy Bobby, he was the opposite. His creepy lurking and unusual demeanor made him lose hotness points, which was a shame, because he had good potential.

The weirdest part about the guy was that he wasn't really friends with anyone in our friend group, yet he continued to show up at parties. People tolerated his presence because he wasn't an outright jackass, but no one was jumping for him to join their conversation either.

"Not interested, thank you," I said with a chipper smile, patting him on the chest before ducking under his armpit and breezing past him.

“I’ll see you around then?” He called out to me as I walked away from him.

“Not a chance,” I responded under my breath, not sparing a look back at him.

“That guy bothering you?” October came out of nowhere, shooting Bobby a lethal glare as I shoved pinwheels in my mouth back-to-back. Barely taking any time to breathe between bites.

“Not at the moment,” I mumbled with my mouth full.

I gasped as my favorite song boomed over the speakers, singing along to the tune, trying to push past October so I could steal back Scarlett from Abel and dance with her. But he just dragged me back into his arms instead.

His back flushed against the wall and he pulled me tight against him. I could feel his hardened bulge pressed against my stomach. A wave of heat flooded straight to my center, but I did my best not to think about what I was feeling.

I was here to party with my friends. Not to be seduced by October. That was for later.

“You sound like a horrible town troubadour.” He worked a hand into my hair, pulling my face toward his to sear my lips with a tantalizing kiss.

“How many troubadours do you know exactly?”

“Enough.” He kissed me hard.

“Mmhmm, I’ll take your word for it.”

Our lips found each other again, and he slowly forced my mouth open, gliding our tongues against each other. I wasn’t generally one for public displays of affection, but right now, I couldn’t have cared less.

If people wanted to watch as he skimmed his hands over my body, pulling me close to him with that dominating grip that drove me crazy, so be it. Oh? They want to watch as he explores my mouth with his tongue, instead? Then let them watch.

“Come home with me,” he rasped, both of us panting as he pulled back. He nudged his hips forward, grinding his length against my stomach, and it was *almost* enough to tempt me. But the night was still young. I had people to dance with, songs to sing, and copious amounts of beer to drink.

“But I was just starting to have fun.” I glanced over at Bobby who was eyeing us like a hawk.

“I don’t like this... you, talking with him.” His jaw clenched. “I don’t like it one fucking bit. The guy’s a creep.”

“Wait... are you jealous?”

October stared at me blankly with a fire ignited behind his eyes and his jaw clenched tightly. He pulled me in closer with the hand he had on the small of my back before sliding it down to grab a healthy handful of my ass.

“Oh, my god. You *are* jealous.” There was a hint of amusement in my voice that I couldn’t hide no matter how hard I tried.

“Extremely,” he bit out, grabbing my hand, trying to lead me down the long, dark hallway to our right. “Let’s go.”

“I can’t do that. I’m hanging out with Bobby.” My feet stayed planted in place.

“Like fuck you are.”

He was so jealous. And God, it was so fucking hot.

A cheeky smile transformed my face. “You’re hot when you’re jealous.”

“I didn’t like seeing that guy’s hand on you. He was toying around with you like some kind of fuck toy. Not only was it disgusting, but I’m not exactly the biggest fan of other people trying to flirt with you either.”

His claims were bit dramatic considering the guy had his hand on my hip for all of two seconds before I left him in the dust, but I wasn’t in the mood to argue.

“Are you that I’m yours?”

“What if I was?” His gaze was locked on my lips.

“I’d think you were drunk.”

“People have always said that drunk words are sober thoughts.”

“They also say that there’s a thin line between love and hate.” I added. “How true do you think that one is?”

October’s lips turned up into a seductive smile as he poked his tongue into his cheek.

People threw around that saying all the time, and typically, I wasn’t one who based my thought processes off of mainstream sayings, but then again, I guess I never realized how much truth was in that expression until I experienced it first-hand.

What people failed to give direction on, though, was what a person was supposed to do when the lines became so blurred, they couldn’t discern between the two emotions anymore?

Was I in love with October? I didn’t think so. Not yet, at least.

Was I headed in that direction faster than I could comprehend, though? Undeniably.

“You should stop drinking,” he scolded, although I’d lost the drink in my hand somewhere along the way. Maybe back by the pinwheels? Oh, well. It wasn’t like I was going to go back for it.

“I can assure you that I’m perfectly safe and nowhere close to being drunk, but thank you for your concern, though.” I tipped up my chin, giving him a smug smile before turning to walk away. “See you in the morning?” I called over my shoulder, not caring enough to perk up my ears enough to hear whatever nonsense he was mumbling to himself.

We both knew I’d be falling asleep in his bed tonight, but what was the crime in toying with him just a *teeny tiny* bit? After all these years of provoking him, I couldn’t let him think that he was finally getting the upper hand.

TWENTY-SIX

OCTOBER

MY EYES HAD BEEN ANCHORED on Mae since the moment I stepped foot into the party, but even more so now after seeing Bobby talking to her. I didn't know the guy personally, but from what little I'd heard of him, none of it had been positive.

I made it halfway into the living room, scanning the crowd with each step before I found Mae dancing with some of her friends with a red solo cup in hand, nearly spilling it every time she rocked her hips side to side to the beat.

Her eyes caught mine from across the room for a brief second as she backed her ass up against her friend to grind on her. Mae maintained eye contact with me, letting out a loud laugh at something her friend whispered in her ear. What was that girl's name, again? Claudia? Carissa? Didn't know, didn't care.

Mae had me right where she wanted me, and we both knew it.

"Hey," Abel came up next to me. "Have you seen Fortune anywhere? He said he'd be here, but I haven't seen him all night."

"Not tonight, man. Sorry."

According to Mae's announcement earlier in the night Lea was missing from the party... now Fortune... that couldn't be a coincidence, right?

Abel mumbled something about him and Scar taking off, but to call him if we needed anything.

We.

Mae and I.

He talked as if we were already a couple and it made me feel like I was on top of the world. Speaking of which, I flickered my gaze back to where Mae had been dancing with—Candace? Cynthia?—whatever her name was,

but the two of them were gone.

A slight panic ignited in my chest as I surveyed the crowd. Moving deeper into the room, I was stopped right in my tracks at the sound of that wicked laugh that I knew well. Which only begged the question—who the hell was she talking to and why did she sound pissed off?

Perking up my ears, I heard Bobby's voice coming from the corner behind me. "Why don't you want to hang out with me?"

"Why do I get the sense that you feel entitled to an answer?" I made out Mae's voice over the sound of the music blaring through the speakers. Turning around solidified my prior suspicions were correct.

There she was, being cornered by Bobby, while he gripped tightly at her waist. Mae ducked away from him, but he reached for her again.

He was... touching her. Again.

I tried to simmer the rage that was brewing beneath my skin, but with every second that I watched the two of them interact my jaw clenched harder and my nostrils flared.

"Because I am."

Something between a scoff and a laugh broke free from Mae's lips. Anger continued to unfurl in my stomach at the sight of another man's hands on her body. This Bobby dude had no *fucking* idea what kind of beast he'd just unleashed.

Unfortunately for him, I had a whole team of football players here to back me up at a moment's notice if needed. However, I had this innate feeling that I'd be able to handle this guy on my own *just fine*.

My pulse raced as I stalked up to the two of them, nudging my shoulder between their bodies, but the fucker decided to keep his hand planted on her hip anyway.

"Dude, she said no." I made no attempt to restrain the anger dripping in my tone.

"What are you... her boyfriend or something?"

"N—"

I cut Mae off. "Something like that." She looked at me with a puzzled expression, but quickly stifled it and turned to him nodding in agreement. "Now get your hands off of her before I break yours."

He had five seconds to take his hand off her hip before any pretenses of composure I had were stripped away completely. I invaded his personal space, moving forward until we were chest to fucking chest.

Five... Four... Three...

Leveling his gaze with mine, he inched forward with squared shoulders.

“I suggest you back the fuck up.”

“Or what?”

Two... One...

“Can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Reaching over, I grabbed the guy’s wrist and peeled it off of her. Poor Bobby made the grave mistake of wrapping his hand around mine, but instead of tucking his thumb, he left it sticking out.

He was making this too fucking easy.

With my other hand, I grabbed his thumb and forced it back until there was a snap, immediately followed by him dropping to his knees with his face scrunched together in pain. In his moment of weakness, he made another mistake—poking out his pinky finger.

Two for one special, anyone?

“Touch. Her. Again...” I pulled back his pinky until a wail escaped his throat. “And I’ll break your arm next time. Do you understand?”

The guy winced in pain, but it sounded like there were angels singing to my ears.

Turning to Mae my words came out through rugged breaths. “You okay?”

“Oh, my god. I’m so wet right now,” she blurted out in response.

Had I not been blinded by rage from this stupid fucker who was wailing on the ground, I probably would’ve buckled over into a fit of laughter.

“Let’s go, you’re coming with me.”

“Wait, where are we—” I grasped her hand, urging her to trail behind me as I fiddled through the crowd, leading us down a long hallway before making a sharp left into the small powder room that, according to Lea, never got used. It was tucked away from the rest of the house, so the likelihood of someone barging in on us was slim.

I shuffled Mae through the doorway, following behind her with my hands wrapped around her waist. The moment the door slammed behind me one of my tattooed hands wrapped around her neck as I turned her to face me, trading places so she was walking backward.

“I’m done fucking around and I’m done picking stupid fights with you.” My tone was gravelly, but her eyes lit up as her back flushed against the door, and I reached over with my right hand to lock it. “You’re mine. Do you understand that?”

I leaned in, sealing my words with a kiss.

“I can’t stop thinking about you. I never stop thinking about you. Even when we lived a thousand miles apart and I hadn’t seen you in seven years, you consumed my thoughts more than I’d like to admit. Don’t you get that?”

Mae gulped.

“For a long time, I hated that I wanted you. I hated that you drove me fucking crazy, taking up space in my head at all hours of the day. I hated that when you joked about not sleeping in my bed tonight, the first thought I had was how awful my day would be tomorrow because I wouldn’t get to wake up next to you.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because as much as I wanted to hate you, I’m not sure I ever really did... and I certainly don’t now,” she kissed me this time, hot and demanding. “I’m done playing games with you.”

“Really? Tic-tac-toe... hangman. You don’t want to play those together anymore?”

I rolled my eyes, crashing my lips to hers before she had the chance to add on another foolish comment.

Breaking our kiss, I pulled back to see the blazing fire ignited in Mae’s eyes. “We’re going to have arguments. They’re normal, healthy even.” I pressed my lips against her once again, firmer this time. “But if I’m going to argue with anyone, it’s going to be you. So, when I say you’re mine, I mean it. Mine and no one else’s.”

“Okay,” she said breathlessly.

“Looks like that temporary truce wasn’t all that temporary after all, was it?”

She shifted her hips forward against my hard on that was beginning to ache more with each passing second.

“And if another guy bothers you like that, tell me. I can’t guarantee it’ll be just his hand next time.”

“Did you really break his hand for me?”

“I’d do anything for you. Now get on your knees for me.”

Mae rustled with my zipper as she gracefully dropped to her knees. Her eager eyes flickered up to mine as she pulled my jeans and boxers down in one move, low enough for my cock to spring free in front of her face.

With a pleased smile, she wrapped both hands around the base of my shaft, spitting on it so it was easier to glide them up and down. I lifted her

chin with my index finger and bent down to give her a long, closed mouth kiss before she returned her attention back to her hands, breaking apart her lips as she wrapped them around my length.

Starting slow, she sucked on the tip as she ran her tongue on the underside of my dick, but as she grew more confident, she began to take more of me into her mouth. Meanwhile, both of her hands still worked together in alternating twisting motions.

She was doing such a good job trying to take as much of me as she could, but I knew she could handle more. As she started to slow down, I began moving my hips forward, thrusting into her mouth.

Mae's eyes lit up as she opened her mouth wider, giving into the moment with total surrender. She moved her hands, gripping firmly on the side of my thighs to hold herself in place as my movements became more hurried.

“Get up. I want to fuck you in front of the mirror, baby.”

Hopping up to her feet, she lifted her short blue dress up and dropped her panties to the floor, meanwhile I pulled out a condom from my pocket and rolled it on. Mae placed one hand against the counter to hold herself up while the other circled her clit as I entered her tight, wet heat. That first thrust into her pussy was fucking divine, both of us closing our eyes as we moaned together.

I worked my cock in and out of her fast and hard, the thrill of the party bustling on the opposite side of the door only made it hotter. Knowing that at any second someone could wander down the hall and hear the sounds of her wet little pussy clenching around my dick.

“You're mine,” I rasped against the shell of her ear, picking up the pace.

Mae whimpered, nodding her head up and down.

“I want to hear you say it.”

Our eyes locked in the mirror as I thrust into her one final time before we both came together and she drained every last ounce of cum out of me.

“I'm yours.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

OCTOBER

“I’m sure the two of you are aware of the reason I called you into my office...” Lea paced the small space behind her glass desk with her arms crossed tightly in front of her. She had yet to make eye contact with either of us which was concerning to say the least.

Abel and I twisted our heads to look at each other, both of us sporting squished brows and subtle frowns. I shrugged my shoulders in response to our seemingly mutual confusion whereas Abel shook his head slightly before staring down at the ground like a sad puppy.

“Seriously,” Lea barked, raising her voice like my mother did when I was a teenager. “Neither of you have *any* idea why you’ve been called to my office?”

A painfully long moment of silence passed between the three of us.

“You’re surprising us with raises?” I offered hopefully.

At long last, Lea paused her steps and whirled around to face us and her piercing green eyes darted over to me. The tense smile she gave us as she clasped the edge of her desk so tightly her knuckles went white was more terrifying than I expected it to be.

The only thing I knew for certain at this moment was that whatever we were in here for wasn’t positive.

I’d heard about Lea’s wrath before by some of the teammates who frequented her office because of the dumb shit they publicly got themselves into. Most of them were rookies who thought they were invincible after getting their sign on bonus or that first game check. Don’t let that fool you though, there were still a few seasoned vets who acted like dumbasses to stay relevant.

“Raises? You think that the two of you are first in line for *raises* after the stunts you’ve pulled recently?” She flailed her arms at her sides before returning them to their crossed stance. “You... punching a world rebounded fashion icon at a charity event for a pediatric oncology facility... really?”

“In my defense...”

“Save it.” She closed her eyes firmly and held up a hand to stop Abel. “This is not a courtroom. You’re not getting time for a rebuttal. But I am curious to know how you were planning to talk your way out of punching someone at a freaking charity event.”

Shit, me too.

Sure, he was coming to the aid of someone who was practically his sister-in-law, but somehow, I don’t think that would’ve sufficed as a reasonable answer from Lea’s standpoint. Granted, I saw an article about that Gordon guy getting arrested for child exploitation a couple of days after the event. I could confidently say that I didn’t feel an ounce of sympathy for the fucker for what he did to Mae, but the news of his arrest really solidified it.

My muscles went rigid and jaw tightened as I let out a heavy sigh at the reminder of how his presence had turned Mae into this... shell of her usual self. She did nothing—nothing—to deserve that. She was a fucking kid while she was working for him for Christ’s sake. He thought he could just take thousands of dollars from her pockets and use that dirty money to fund his nasty porn addiction.

Fucking disgusting.

Abel shot me a confused look and I shook my head in response, trying to will down the rage that was simmering beneath my skin. Now was not the time to get riled up, especially with whatever bullshit Lea was about to lay into me for.

“And you... breaking a man’s hand? What were you thinking?”

There it was. Almost like she read my mind.

“I told him not to touch Mae and he kept trying to get handsy with her... can you blame me?”

“No, I don’t blame you, but did you really have to take it that far?”

“If it helps, I told him I was going to do it beforehand.”

Lea pinned me with a stare so intense it made my stomach drop. “So, with that logic, robbing a bank is okay as long as you tell the clerks you’re going to do it first?”

I—

The silence on my end was more telling than I'd like to admit.

See, Lea had this way of making you think that you got the upper hand for a few seconds—just long enough to build up your confidence—before coming in with an opposing viewpoint that sucker punched you in the gut. Mae might've picked up on a few of Lea's tricks and tactics in the recent years since they'd become friends, but she'd never quite mastered this technique, and for that I was grateful. Otherwise, she'd be too damn smart for my own good.

"Exactly what I thought." A pleased smirk played on her lips for a brief moment before she schooled her expression. "The two of you are going to go on a public apology tour." Her voice was stern as she continued. "Abel, I've set up an interview for you with Jameson on Monday morning. I'll email you the questions he'll be asking and the answers that you need to respond with. And for the love of God, try not to use the word 'fuck' in every other sentence."

"What if I—"

"What part of no rebuttals did you misunderstand? I thought you were smarter than that," she barked. Abel slumped back into his chair with his chin tucked against his chest mumbling the curse he was just forbidden from saying under his breath.

I will say one thing about Lea, though, it was damn fun to watch the woman have so much power she could bring a man double her size to his knees in a few sentences. The girl was a menace and she wasn't afraid to use it to her advantage when necessary.

"And you, October... you'll be paying any medical bills for that guys injury."

Seemed easy enough.

"*And* you'll be issuing a personal apology to him, along with season tickets that will be paid for out of your next game check."

Ouch.

Looks like I spoke too soon.

"Any questions?"

"Why—"

She cut Abel off. "Good. So, I'll see you both tomorrow at Friday night dinner, yeah?" Her tone reverted back to its usual calm, feminine sound.

Her entire demeanor changed and the typical happy-go-lucky Lea who walked around the practice facility and came over to the house to hang out

with Mae on occasion came out of nowhere.

“You just scared us within an inch of our life and now you’re asking us about Friday night dinner?” My brows knitted together.

“Yeah, pretty much.” She shrugged nonchalantly while giving me a pinched expression like *I* was the one who was asking the irrational question.

“Red and I are looking forward to it,” Abel said as he got up from his seat.

“Want me to bring anything?”

Abel shook her head, because we all knew Scarlett would undoubtedly make some crazy five-course meal, plus appetizers for everyone to graze on beforehand.

Saying his goodbyes, Abel headed out the door and down the hall, meanwhile Lea was shuffling me out of my chair and through the doorway like a drill sergeant. Without looking to see who was behind us, she called out my teammates name. “Fortune! My office, please.”

I twisted over my shoulder to see him and a few other teammates walking past Coach’s office down the hall. I bared my teeth at him in warning and his eyes widened before he slowed his pace, briefly pausing to talk to another player who was passing by.

“I saw that,” she grumbled in a snarky tone.

“You ever going to ask him out, or what?”

The guy was an attractive looking dude—six-foot-four, jet black hair and a chiseled jawline. My opinion didn’t matter much, but the two of them would make a good-looking couple.

“You ever going to admit to yourself that you’re in love with Mae?” She glanced up at me with a popped brow, but I tried to keep my face as impassive as possible.

Touché, Miss Sterling.

There wasn’t a chance in the world I was going to confess my feelings for Mae to another person before she heard them from my mouth herself. Now that we were officially together, I’d been contemplating how to go about it for days. Was I supposed to ask her out on a date, or would that be too formal? Telling her mid-sex probably wasn’t the brightest idea either. The more I thought about it, the more I got in my head, trying to talk myself out of doing anything.

Maybe if I stopped stressing over it the right time would come naturally. Exactly how it was supposed to.

“Back to your original question... even if I wanted to go on a date with him—which I don’t.” Lea looked up, pinning me with a stern look. “You know I couldn’t.”

“Oh yeah, how could I forget that Daddy’s little princess is forbidden from dating the players.” An amused laugh spilled past my lips at the reminder. “The real question though, is whether or not Coach is trying to keep you away from the players or the players away from you?”

Lea in her own right was terrifying—in a demented, yet maternal way—but Coach Sterling? Sure, the guy could be stern when he needed to be, but everyone knew he was secretly a softie. Somehow the man was the only person on earth who unnerved her.

His intentions made sense—hell, I wouldn’t trust half these players with my daughter if I was their coach either. And maybe I was overreaching here, but I had a feeling she wasn’t willing to risk ruining the “picture perfect daughter” persona that her father clearly had of her.

Maybe I was right. Maybe I was wrong.

Either way, I had a feeling if she and Fortune got locked in a room together for more than five minutes they’d come out with disheveled hair and swollen lips.

“Unless you want to find out the hard way by being on the tail end of a rumor that you tried asking me out, I suggest you run along to the showers like a good boy.” She pinched my cheeks with a wicked smile that made my stomach drop. “See you tomorrow.” She perked up with an ornery smile before calling Fortune’s name again and urging him into her office.

The girl was some kind of shape shifter, I swear.

TWENTY-EIGHT

OCTOBER

“WHO ALLOWED you to come into my house?” Mae stood in her kitchen, drinking a glass of water with a scrunched face as she eyed me up and down.

“The unlocked door.” Her face softened to an amused smile at my remark and I followed up with one to match hers. “Nice dress.”

She stared at me blankly for a second, setting the glass onto the granite countertop, before turning on her heels and walking past me down the hall.

“What... where are you going?”

Was I not supposed to say that or something? I thought telling someone their outfit looked nice was a compliment, no?

“I’m changing. Stay right there.”

She had to be messing with me.

I caught up to her in two steps, grabbing her by the elbow. “Don’t even think about it.”

The only way she was getting out of that dress tonight would be if it was my hands taking it off of her, but with the way her boobs looked in the damn thing, she could keep it on for all I cared.

Whirling her around to face me, I wrapped my hands around her waist, tugging her against the front of my body. My hands glided over her figure instinctively before I slid them both down to her ass, squeezing tight.

“If you don’t stop...” she moaned as I dropped down to kiss the side of her neck. “We’re going to be late for dinner.”

Friday night dinner was the least of my worries right now. In fact, skipping dinner and making a three-course meal out of her sounded way better than the chicken parmesan Scarlett was making tonight.

Mae tightened her fingertips around my biceps as I continued sucking on

the hollow part of her throat. “Are you ever going to let me in here, or are you going to keep sneaking out to the pool house and crawling into my bed every night?”

Not that I was complaining, we could stay in the pool house as long as she wanted. But it seemed like a damn shame to let such a nice house go to waste. Especially considering all of the rooms in here that we could have fun in—her office, the kitchen, right here in this hallway.

Mae wrapped a hand around the back of my neck, brushing the sensitive skin with her nails before pulling me in for a long, tantalizing kiss. “Might I remind you that you were supposed to move out like three months ago... wait, I forgot to ask, did your contract ever get extended?”

“I signed for another five years... I’m looking for a roommate, you know anyone?” I taunted.

“I’m sure we can ask around.” I smacked her ass so hard she yelped. “Fine... I’ll think about it, but only because my bed has better pillows.”

“Don’t worry, we can transform it into that sex house you were wanting,” I joked, nipping at her earlobe. “We’ll get a sex swing or something to really solidify it.”

She shook her head with a laugh. “Let’s go. I’m starving.”

“Me too,” I replied, but we both knew I wasn’t talking about food.

Ten minutes later, we were all seated around the dinner table at Scarlett and Abel’s place, drinking and laughing together as we started on some appetizers.

“Have you guys decided to stop living in the pool house, yet?” Lea asked.

I looked over at Mae with a laugh, knowing we’d just been talking about the same subject a few minutes prior. Lea was a fucking mind-reader, I swear.

“She’s coming around to the idea of it. She hasn’t even cashed any of my checks, though. So, I might need to pay up in other ways... if you know what I mean.”

Mae’s body tensed as the hand I had on her thigh slowly began to inch under the hem of her dress. I wasn’t going to make any exhibitionist style moves, but there was no harm in giving her a little glimpse of what she could expect after dinner.

“I don’t know what you’re referring to.” She turned up her chin, and I kissed the side of her jaw as she gripped my hand under the table, stopping me from teasing her further.

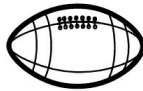
“Sure, you don’t.”

Scarlett looked over at Mae with a smile stretched on her face from ear to ear like she knew something that I didn’t. Mae mouthed something to her about them getting lost to which Scar gave a little hop of her shoulders.

Mae twisted her head, and I caught her lips, intertwining them with mine.

“You guys are disgusting.” Lea shook her head side to side, eyeing Mae and I as she brought a newly poured glass of red wine to her lips and gulping the entire thing down in one go.

“I second Lea’s statement.” Scarlett side-eyed us with a smile and Abel tipped his head in agreement.



“Do I sense some double dates in y’all’s future?” Jamison, a well-known sports reporter, held out his recorder as Abel, Scarlett, Mae and I all walked into the stadium’s player entrance together the following Sunday afternoon.

“In his dreams,” Mae called back.

I turned over my shoulder and shot a wink at him. “She’s not wrong.”

Scarlett and Abel continued on ahead of us. Meanwhile, Mae smacked my shoulder playfully out of reflex, but all I did was let free a bellowing laugh as I slung my arm over her shoulder and tugged her closer to my side. Kissing her forehead, I guided us to the player and family entrance where Lea was already waiting at the end of the hall with her hip popped and arms crossed.

“Calhoun! Let’s go. You’re already late.”

“Sorry, Lea! It’s all my fault. I was having an outfit crisis,” Mae said.

“In case no one’s told you... it’s nice seeing the two of you finally getting along.” She gave us a genuine smile. Man, it was nice seeing our people happy for us.

“You know what that means, right?” I shot a look at her. “You’re next.”

Lea rolled her eyes. “Come on before my dad finds you. You’re supposed to be setting an example for these rookies, quarterback.”

Mae squeezed around my waist tightly, stopping me in my tracks for a long hug. She did this every home game, holding me in this hallway as long as she could, like she wasn’t ready to let me go. As much as I enjoyed

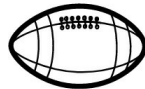
playing football, there was nothing like meeting up with her after the game, bickering playfully about what songs to listen to as we rode home together.

I just loved spending time with her, being in her presence.

“Play safe?” she whispered.

I nodded, dipping my head down for a good-luck kiss. “See you after the game?”

“I’ll be here.”



There were nine seconds left on the clock.

The fans were in an uproar around the stadium.

Both teams were tied, and we had the ball at the five-yard line.

One more touchdown and this game would be ours.

Then, I could go back home with Mae and we could have our own special kind of celebration.

I called out the final play, looking around the group for everyone’s understanding nods.

“Let’s win this, boys. On three.... one... two... three...” We broke the huddle, everyone shuffling into position, ready to drive this victory home.

The ball snapped, and a defensive tackle came out of nowhere, stopping our red zone drive as he knocked into me with the force of a thousand suns at the exact moment the ball released from my hands.

I could feel myself being propelled backward toward the ground. What I knew to be milliseconds felt like an eternity as I watched my life flash before my eyes in slow motion.

When my body finally hit the ground, her face was the last thing on my mind before everything went black.

My Mae.

TWENTY-NINE

MAE

BEEP. *Pause.*

BEEP. Pause.

BEEP. Pause.

My heart clenched as I stood in the doorway listening to the perpetual sounds the heart rate monitor made. October laid there in the hospital bed with his eyes closed, random wires hooked up all over his body. The bedside table didn't have any get-well-soon cards or flowers yet, which, for some reason, made tears flood to my eyes.

On a normal day, he was a six-foot-three, two-hundred-thirty-pound tattooed God of the human. Right now, though, laying in this bed under the low light he looked so... small. Fragile. Helpless.

Seeing him like this felt like my heart was being cracked in two while taking a sucker punch to the gut. Even more so than watching him get hauled onto a stretcher and carted off of the field mid-game.

I wanted to run to him, curl up into his arms, and never let go.

But something inside my brain wouldn't allow me to move. Instead, I stood there, half way between his room and the hallway, shell shocked with my feet planted in place. Afraid that if I made one wrong move as I inched closer to him, that he would shatter into a thousand pieces.

There was no way of knowing how long I stood there like that.

Hours. Days. Seconds.

My knees felt like Jell-O.

Regardless of how long it was, it felt like time had stopped and I was the only person in the building. My heart beat frantically in my chest as I counted for four breaths, then held it, then exhaled.

It was only once a doctor placed a hand on my shoulder and asked if I was all right that I was pulled out of my trance. I gave her a small smile to mask the fact that I was hardly able to stand up right. Any moment, I felt like I could've collapsed to the floor and curled up into a ball on the cold, hard ground. All while nurses and other hospital staff buzzed around me.

“Are you family?”

“Yes,” I lied without hesitation.

At that moment, there was no one else who was more of his family than me. His parents and sister had long since moved to Massachusetts, and it would still be another two hours before they could catch a flight down here. So, if it meant lying to this doctor that I was his family then sue me.

“Sister?”

“Uh... yes?” My voice jumped an octave and the blonde-haired doctor gave me an uncertain look before brushing it off.

“Well, he's in stable condition, but he suffered a mild head and neck injury. He was really lucky... had he been hit differently; it could've been a lot worse. We're planning to keep him overnight for observation, but he should have a full recovery as long as he takes it easy for a while.” She gave me a reassuring smile. “Some of the team's staff just left, and it looks like he's resting now, but you can go in there and wait for him if you'd like.”

I gave her a quick nod, mumbling my thanks as she rounded the corner toward the nurses station. With every ounce of strength I could muster, I took one step forward into the room, and then another until I was standing over him at his bedside.

I squatted down next to the bed, slipping my hand into his and running my thumb over the back of his. He stirred in the bed uncomfortably for a minute before his eyes started to budge open.

He had been here for a while now and it tore me to shreds knowing that he didn't have a friendly face with him. Scarlett and I tried to leave the stadium as quickly as we could after we saw him getting carted off the field, but since it was the final few seconds of the game, traffic leaving the stadium was a nightmare.

What was typically a twenty-minute drive, turned into two and a half hours as we sat in bumper-to-bumper traffic while our minds raced with worst case scenarios. Once we arrived at the hospital, they made us wait for over an hour until all of the Matrix staff had left before letting one of us come back here.

Scarlett and I tried pleading with the administrative ladies, but they didn't budge, telling us that they had to follow the proper protocol that was set in place for instances like this since there would soon be a swarm of reporters filling the lobby waiting to find out details of his injury, so they could be first to break the news.

Scarlett tried texting Abel—who ended up scoring a touchdown to win the game—to see if he had any updates from the athletic trainers, but despite his efforts he wasn't able to find out anything more than what little we already knew. Staying in the waiting area for an hour before hearing anything was torture.

How was it possible that sixty minutes could feel like sixty hours and six seconds all the same?

“Hey, baby.” October's voice was low and delicate. “You came.”

“Of course.”

“I've been waiting for you.”

I tried to keep a strong front, holding back the tears in my eyes as I roamed my gaze over his face to see if it would give me any indication as to whether or not he was in pain. The lump in the back of my throat only seemed to grow tenfold, begging—praying—to be let free.

“I, um, got you a gift.”

“Dum-Dum's?” He flattened his hand, signaling for me to let him have it.

“Yeah, I found some in the gift shop downstairs, but they called me back right after so I didn't have time to pick out your favorite flavors though, sorry.”

After forty-five minutes, I couldn't take it any longer. I had to get up and do something to distract me from the endless spiral of worst-case scenarios swirling in my head. The gift shop was small, mostly filled with stuffed animals and balloons with get well messages and “it's a girl” announcements written across them in big bold letters.

I spent all of five minutes perusing around the tiny space attempting to find something for October when he woke up, but nothing seemed fitting. Until I got to the very back corner that had an assortment of candy bars and gummies. Then, there on the bottom shelf, was one lone back of Dum-Dum suckers that just felt... right.

Symbolic, even. As we closed off one chapter and jumped into a new one.

The moment I saw him go down on the field, my heart felt like it was being ripped from my chest, and it was right then that I knew that I was in

love with him. The hatred that I'd once harbored in my heart for him had dissipated.

To the outside eye, I'm sure it was obvious. Hell, I think Scarlett knew long before I did. The only person left to tell was him.

A weak smile tugged at the corners of his lips that made my heart crack then stitch it back together all the same. "Come here," he whispered.

"Are you sure?" I shuffled closer to the edge of the stiff looking bed, but still kept a foot of distance for good measure. "I don't want to hurt you."

"The only thing that will hurt is my feelings if you don't come here. Don't you know it's rude to kick a man while he's down?"

I sighed.

Yup, same old October.

He scooted over to make space and I slipped into the stiff bed next to him, curling up against his side. I made it all of a minute before a handful of hot tears flooded to my eyes, pouring down my cheeks faster than I could wipe them away.

"Hey... what're those for?" He lifted a finger under my chin and tipped my face up towards his. The sorrow that was laced in his stare only made my tears fall harder. "I'm fine, baby. I promise."

"I'm sorry," I sucked in a breath, and then another. "I was just so..."

"Scared?"

My frown deepened and I gave him a weak nod. "Don't ever do anything like that ever again. It was terrifying." I laughed, but my words were coated in truth. "Can't you switch to kicker or something? I feel like their chances of getting hurt are much less."

"I'm pretty sure it's because we broke my seasonal celibacy."

"You can't believe that's real."

"It is," he said, so sure of himself. "I knew I shouldn't have given into your taunts."

Unfortunately for him, he was really going to have to get out of that mindset, because there was no way we were going to abstain from sex for seven months every year for the foreseeable future.

We could try all he wanted, but the guy couldn't be in the same room as me at a party or event without sneaking over to whisper all the dirty things he wanted to do to me once we got home.

Doubtful he would make it seven months.

"I told the doctor I was your sister." I laughed, pitifully, placing my

forehead against his.

“It’s going to be really awkward when you kiss me then, isn’t it?”

Pressing my mouth against his, a calm, secure feeling washed over me knowing he was going to be okay.

“I love you.” He pulled back, whispering against my lips.

“That’s a horrible decision on your part, really,” I countered, pulling back with a playful smile.

October leaned in, kissing me gently before pulling back and giving me a weak smile that tugged at the corner of his lips. “Just say likewise.”

“Likewise.”

EPILOGUE

Two years later

Mae

“YOU’RE TELLING me that you got pregnant on my wedding night and I didn’t?” Scarlett’s mouth fell open as she grabbed the positive pregnancy test from my hand with widened eyes.

“Don’t give me that look... you were already six weeks pregnant on your wedding night. It’s not my fault you didn’t know!”

“Fair point.” She nodded in agreement, still staring at the test while blinking rapidly.

I peered over her shoulder to get another look at the dark lined plus sign on the blue and white stick, eyeing it with disbelief. When Scar and I finally drew our gazes up to each other after a beat, our faces softened and small smiles tugged at the corner of our lips, almost like we were mirroring each other’s expressions.

“You’re having a baby.” Scarlett’s lower lip started to tremble. “I’m so happy for you.”

“We’re having babies.”

“And they get to grow up together.” She bit her lip to control a sob, and I wasn’t far behind her.

At this point, my eyes were completely clouded with tears. “All of our kids are going to get to grow up together—Lea’s included—just like we did.” With one blink, warm droplets began rushing down my cheek. I tried to brush

them away with the back of my hand, but they fell faster than I could manage. “Oh, God. Is this what the entire pregnancy is going to be like? Am I just going to be a crying, blubbering mess for the next eight months?”

We both laughed to hold back the tears that stung the back of our throats. As kids, we dreamed of raising our children the same way our parents had raised us, and now that was going to become our reality.

God, how did we get so lucky?

Shit. Why are these pregnancy hormones making me so emotional?

“Were you guys trying?”

“I mean... we were definitely practicing.” We both threw our heads back with a laugh. I mean, sure, October and I might’ve gotten a little risky on their wedding weekend after I left my birth control at home. Growing up Scarlett’s mom always told us, “one time matters,” but I never realized the full weight of that saying until now.

My legs started to feel weak. What was October going to think about this?

“Now that you’re pregnant with his kid, I have a confession.”

“Oh, God. Should I sit down? Let me sit down.” I dropped back onto the closed toilet seat lid.

“Remember your surprise birthday party a few years ago?”

“How could I forget? It’s not every day you get mounds of hors d’oeuvres dropped on you.”

Not only that, but that was the night that changed everything for October and I. It was the first time we had allowed ourselves to be vulnerable with one another—in more ways than one, if you know what I mean. So much changed that night, and looking back, I couldn’t be more grateful for it.

“Yeah, sooo, about that... I *might* have paid that server to bump into you knowing that you’d fall backward into October’s lap.”

“What?” I gasped. “You were the one responsible for my twisted ankle? How’s that possible? That server looked so remorseful!”

“I know. Who would’ve guessed that I’d ask the one out of work actor, of all people? And in my defense, I didn’t think you’d twist your ankle. I just thought you would fall into his lap and chat or something.”

“Or something?” I repeated, like she hadn’t been the one pushing for the two of us to become friends with benefits all along. “I can’t believe you—”

“Before you finish that sentence, I should probably tell you I’m also the one who tipped off October about Bobby being weird with you at Lea’s

party.”

“I can’t be mad about that one.” I lifted a shoulder in a small shrug. “Any other confessions you’d like to startle me with?”

“Well, since you asked...”

“I was joking...” I trailed off, raising both brows. “But now you’re telling me there’s more?”

“Yup,” Scarlett said, straightening her posture and drawing back her shoulders. “Remember when we were all in New York in February after winning The League Bowl?”

I nodded.

“Yeah, that horse-drawn carriage wasn’t for you and October to ride off in after the engagement.”

“Excuse me, what?” My mouth dropped open.

Scar doubled over in laughter. “You were both so blinded with happiness that you didn’t notice when Lea paid the driver to go along with it and pretend like you guys were the couple he was picking up.”

“Oh, my god.” Heat flooded to my cheeks. “What happened to the other couple?”

“No idea.” Scar hunched her shoulders upward. “Lea said she took care of it. Whatever that means.”

“Jesus, were you responsible for his neck injury when we first got together, too?”

“No, that was the other guy’s fault. But if I had known...” She raised her brows at the idea.

“Scarlett!”

“What? I’m just kidding.” Scarlett laughed. “When are you going to tell October?”

“I mean... right now, I guess?” I shuffled to my feet, pushing my hair out of my face. “I’ve never done this. Am I supposed to wait or something?”

“I don’t know... Abel was standing over me the entire time, practically jumping out of his skin waiting for the results. Meanwhile, it was the most nerve-racking five minutes of my fucking life.”

Scar and Abel eloped at their beach house in Malibu a few weeks ago, less than twenty-four hours after getting engaged. What she didn’t plan for was finding out that she was pregnant a week later during their last-minute honeymoon trip to Fiji.

Apparently, she was sick the entire time, thinking she got food poisoning

until Abel bought a test from the resort's convenience shop and convinced her to take it. Little did she know, she was about to find out her "food poisoning" was actually my soon-to-be nephew instead.

Now, here we were a few weeks later trying to pinpoint when I had gotten pregnant based on my last period. We backtracked, remembering I had been out of town for two weeks prior to our trip to Malibu, and October had left immediately after to spend a week in Boston helping move his sister, Hallie, out of her sophomore dorm and into a townhouse right off the Warren University campus.

Which meant her wedding was the only viable option.

Turning to face the mirror, I ruffled my hands through my hair and wiped underneath my eyes before turning to Scarlett with a weak—but happy—smile. "Alright, how do I look?"

"Like you just walked out of a funeral."

"Good enough."

We opened the door to her bathroom, and walked down the hallway before stalking down the steps toward the living room where the boys were watching the Boston Benders in the playoffs.

They'd both verbally deny it, but Abel and October had become best friends over the past two years. They watched sports together all the time. Frequently went outside to drink beers with Fortune and grill things while the three of us girls stayed inside and chit-chatted about everything and nothing.

The six of us had a sweet little life and I wouldn't trade it for anything. Oh, did I mention that Lea moved into the house next door a couple months ago?

Behind our backs, Scarlet slipped the positive test into my hand, giving me a knowing smile before we walked into the living room.

"October, uh, can I talk to you... in private?" I jerked my head toward the kitchen.

He got up from the couch with his brows crinkled together, and Scar swooped into his spot, curling up against Abel's side. He peered down at her with a smile as he reached over to place a hand on her tiny baby bump.

My heart did somersaults at the sight of the two of them, and I nearly wept right there in the middle of the living room out of pure happiness.

Damn pregnancy hormones.

Was it really going to be like this twenty-four-seven? Because if so, I was going to need a constant supply of facial tissues within reach at all times.

Blinking back my tears, I caught up with October, who was making his way around the kitchen island. Once we were out of earshot of Scarlett and Abel, I stood in front of him with both hands behind my back and eased out a breath.

October placed both hands on my waist, gripping firmly as he squinted down at me with concern flashing in his eyes.

“I have something to tell you...”

“Let me guess,” He looked off behind me like he was thinking for a moment before he snuck a hand around my back with a mischievous smile and snatched the test from my hands. “You’re pregnant.”

“What?” I whispered, mostly to myself. “How’d you know?”

“I am all-knowing and all-seeing.” He winked, mocking the phrase I had used on him many moons ago.

I flicked the back of my hand against his chest playfully. “Wait, really? How’d you know?”

“I didn’t know for sure, but I had a hunch. You’ve been sleeping in until noon all week and it feels like you’ve been going pee every five minutes lately...”

“Why did you say that? Now I have to pee.” I crossed my legs, and we both laughed under our breath as he pulled me into a big bear hug.

“We’re really having a baby?” he said in a soft voice, pulling back to look down at the test while blinking rapidly

I looked up at him with tears welling in my eyes and nodded while he smoothed my hair out of my face and kissed my forehead.

“I think it’s going to be a little girl.”

“Really? I was hoping it’d be a boy, so he could play sports with Emerson and Rowan.”

“No, she’s a girl. I know it.”

“If you say so.” I rolled my eyes with a little laugh. “But do we really have to stick to the month for names thing?”

“Of course.” He squared his shoulder. “It’s only right.”

A few weeks after we got engaged, October confessed that he’d been thinking about our future kids’ names for a while. Then, he went on a twenty minute long tangent about how we had to name our kid, or future kids, after a month like our names were.

“Are you still in favor of August for a boy, and June for a girl?”

“Yeah, we’ll call her Junie for short.”

“That doesn’t make sense, Junie has more letters than...” I argued, crossing my arms, but he cut me off with a long kiss.

He pulled back to whisper against my lips. “Just go with it.” He rubbed his right hand over my stomach, and I had to fight back another spat of tears that threatened to break.

Thankfully, the throat tightening sob that wanted to escape dissipated as soon as the front door opened and Lea’s rust-colored hair brightened the entryway.

“Rowan just went down for his afternoon nap, and I need nutritional support before I go pump again.” Exhaustion was written all over her face as she plopped down on the couch. Then again, having a five-week-old would do that to you.

“I have some chicken stir-fry in the fridge,” Scar perked up. “I’ll go heat it up while Mae shares her news with the crowd.”

Lea looked over at me with a tired but self-approving smile as October and I walked back into the living room to join everyone. “You finally figured out that you’re pregnant?”

“How did everyone know but me?” I gasped.

“I might’ve been sleeping standing up when you came over last week, but I still noticed you getting up to pee every five minutes.”

“That’s exactly what I said!” October chimed in.

Okay, now I really had to pee.

“Are the two of you going to get married now that you’re having a kid?”

Truth is, we weren’t really in a rush for the whole marriage thing. Maybe next summer, once football season is over, we’d go somewhere warm, like my parents’ place in The Keys, and make a weekend out of it.

“Ehh, we’re thinking about trying this engagement thing out for five years... maybe ten.” I lifted a shoulder.

“I was thinking more like fifteen.” October followed up, looking down at me with a silly grin while putting an arm around my shoulder. My heart still hammered against my chest every time he gave me that look. “Twenty, tops.”

Averting my gaze back to the middle of the room, the three of them stared back at us with neutral expressions.

“They’ll be married by the time the baby comes. Who wants to bet on it?” Lea proposed. The suggestion brought a smirk to her lips.

“I’ll put a hundred on them not making it past the end of summer.” Scarlett held out her hand for Abel’s wallet, and he shook his head with a

small chuckle as he reached into his back pocket before handing it to her. “She won’t want to look pregnant in her wedding photos.”

“Why didn’t I think of that?” Lea rolled her eyes while flailing her hands up in the air.

“Mom brain,” Scarlett offered, to which they both nodded in silent agreement.

“What the hell, you guys? I didn’t know we were still making bets about each other.” My eyes grew openly amused, and we all erupted with laughter.

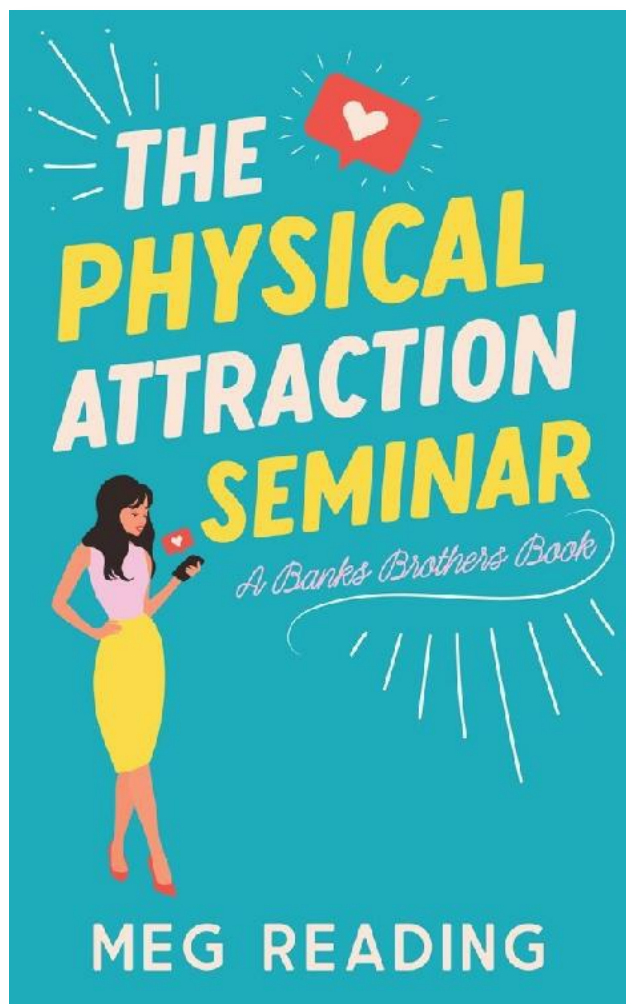
Call me sentimental, but an easy smile played at the corners of my mouth as I looked around the room at everyone, acting all friendly, smiling, and bantering with each other in a relaxed manner. My heart clenched at the sight, and I could already feel my eyes growing misty again.

Three years ago, if someone would’ve come up to me on the street and told me that my life would’ve looked like this, I would never have believed them. In fact, I probably would’ve laughed in their face and told them they were insane.

Yet, here we were, defying the odds together. It was the life Scarlett and I had dreamed of as kids, and having Lea here only made it that much sweeter. Plus, I’m pretty certain my five-year-old self would be proud of myself for snagging my crush too, even if I went about things a little bit backward.

I rested my head against October’s shoulder and he placed a gentle kiss on my forehead. “I love you,” I whispered softly.

“Likewise.”



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THE FANTASY LEAGUE PREVIEW

Chapter One

Scarlett

I'D BEEN CAUGHT RED-HANDED.

The pool house door creaked open and closed in the distance, and heels clanked against the hardwood floor, making their way toward where I was standing in the kitchen.

Click-clack.

Click-clack.

"*Have you ever been so in love you couldn't breathe?*" the male narrator's voice boomed from my computer speakers.

"Scarlett, I swear to fucking God! If you're listening to those cheesy romance novels again, I'm going to throw you *and* your computer into the pool," Mae called down the hall to me. The sound of her heels quickening their pace drowned out the sound of the latest audiobook I was listening to.

No, no, no. Not again.

There was absolutely no way that I was going to be able to set down the pan in my hands, take off my oven mitts, *and* dive for my computer before she made it to me.

Shit.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Mae turn the corner and charge her way

past me, swiping my laptop off the island and dramatically slamming it shut. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” Her lips pressed together in a tight line and her eyebrows raised an inch on her forehead. I didn’t tell her that though. If I had, I had no doubt she would’ve booked an emergency Botox appointment with her dermatologist. “You’re already on what, your fourth book boyfriend this month?”

She said that like it was a bad thing.

And... it was the fifth, but who was counting?

I didn’t know there was a problem with having *too many* book boyfriends. So what if I coped with my lack of a love life by living vicariously through fictional characters?

There were worse crimes.

“Put it down!” I shouted, setting down the pan in my hands onto a trivet before attempting to grab my laptop, which was now raised over Mae’s head, with oven-mitt-covered hands. I refused to let the fact that she stood well over six feet in her red-bottom stilettos stop me.

“Fine.” I ignored her eye roll as she reluctantly handed over my beloved laptop. Walking over to the opposite side of the kitchen, she opened the utensil drawer and pulled out two forks. “Scarlett, babe. I say this with love, but we need to get you laid.” The disappointed look she threw my way while she plopped down onto the barstool directly across from me didn’t go unnoticed.

Over the last twenty-four years, I’d mastered the art of deciphering Mae’s microexpressions. The look she was giving me right now might’ve fazed those who didn’t know her well, but I’d gotten this look precisely once a day for... well, twenty-four years.

That had given me plenty of time to master the nasty habit of purposely zoning out of the conversation when she gave me that look which annoyed her even more. Much like I was doing now.

Mae and I had been sisters since diapers. And while we *technically* had different parents, they purposely raised us together like we were siblings, so it was really just a matter of semantics.

My mom and Mae’s dads had been roommates in college their freshman year. Throughout the years, they’d grown to be inseparable. So, as good friends do, they made a pact that they would continue to do life together no matter where life took them.

And they did just that.

After Desmond and James got married and my mom got settled into her career, they bought two houses right across the street from each other in a quiet neighborhood in Sarasota.

A year later, when Mom was considering getting a sperm donor and starting a family, Mae's dads decided they would begin the adoption process. Just over a year and a half later, Mae and I lay side by side in our cribs, attempting to squirm our way out of our matching swaddles.

To the outside eye, our family might not have been conventional, but our lives were filled with unwavering love from three parents who would have moved heaven and earth for us.

And that was all either of us could've ever asked for.

But two years ago, our family was rocked when Mom passed from cancer and Mae's dads decided that they were retiring to the Keys. The four of us video called and visited as often as our schedules allowed, but an overwhelming sense of loss lingered among us now that Mom wasn't around.

Although our family looked different now, Mae and I had stuck to the promise that we made as kids, to keep up the tradition that our parents had and to never stray too far from one another in life.

We went from school night sleepovers to college roommates. And even as we grew into grown adults with bills and careers, we still held tightly to the vow we made as children. Mae had stuck by my side as Mom's cancer peeled her away from me and she helped pick up the pieces when I thought that all was lost.

While we *might* have been forced into friendship by our parents—okay, fine, we were definitely forced—I knew that Mae and I were meant to find each other. Call it soul mates if you want, but despite all of our differences, there was no one in the world that would stand by my side the way she had.

The only thing that made her somewhat unbearable was the fact that she was a five-ten blonde supermodel. Seriously? *Come on*. Would it have killed Mom to have picked a better-looking sperm donor? Sure, sperm donor eleven thousand twenty-three did a pretty decent job if I said so myself, but I *definitely* wasn't supermodel material by any means.

Nine times out of ten, whenever we told people we were sisters, we were immediately met with tilted heads and squinted eyes.

Assholes. All of them.

"Hello, earth to Scarlett?" Mae waved a hand in front of my zoned-out expression.

“Cut it out.” I swatted her hand away from me.

So maybe I was guilty of having a book boyfriend or twenty, but I refused to be shamed for them. “I am getting laid. Mentally laid... by fictional men,” I said smugly, waggling my brows at her. “And none of my book boyfriends have failed me yet, if you know what I mean.”

“Gross!” Mae squealed loudly, scrunching her face as she stuck her fork right into the center of the cake that I’d just pulled out of the oven. She shoveled a large bite into her mouth, not giving it the chance to cool down first. “I do *not* need to know the details of the mental orgasms you’ve received from fictional men. It sounds unsanitary.” Her whole body cringed as she scooped out another giant bite of cake onto her fork and shoveled it into her mouth, barely finished with her first bite.

“Don’t knock it until you try it.” I shot her an overexaggerated wink. “Plus, you know I’ve never been good at dating anyway.” I sighed, twisting the small emerald ring on my middle finger round and round.

Mom had found the ring in a small pawnshop on one of her work trips years ago and brought it back as a gift for my birthday. These days, when I wore it, it felt like a piece of her was there to comfort me when I needed it. “I wouldn’t know where to begin if I tried.”

Growing up, I’d never been the kind of girl who got asked out in high school—or college, for that matter. I had my first real relationship just out of college, if you could even call it that.

We were together for a little less than a year, but it was a long-distance relationship and I could count on one hand the number of times that we saw each other in person.

Since that “relationship” ended almost two years ago, I’d been *a bit* skeptical of dating. Most people who are nearly a quarter of a century old have an elaborate dating history. I, on the other hand, felt so inexperienced in the realm of dating that the rare dates that I did go on were practically over before they started.

“I know, Scar.” Mae’s voice was more tender than usual as her fork made another dive into the red velvet cake.

“You know...” Mae smirked, perking up from her chair and pointing the cake-filled fork toward me. “You could always ask out Mr. Tight End.” She waggled her eyebrows.

Abel Abbott, the best tight end in the league, lived across the street from Mae and me. And to my dismay, he also happened to be my boss. I didn’t

exactly hate the guy, but in the eight months that I'd worked for him, we'd maybe said a hundred words to each other... and that was pushing it.

We had met through a mutual friend of ours, Lea. And I knew it was probably too good to be true when I found out he was looking for a chef *and* lived right across the street from us, but I was desperate for a job and took it anyway.

Turned out I was right... it was too good to be true.

Because Abel Abbott was the biggest asshole I'd ever met.

My only saving grace was that I only worked for him part time and our paths didn't cross often. If I had to work for him full time the last few months, I would have quit by week four.

Over the past few months, Abel and I had mastered the art of avoiding each other at all costs on the rare chance we were in the house at the same time. I couldn't thank God enough that his mornings were spent doing team workouts while I prepped his meals for the day.

"You could offer me a million dollars *and* a slice of pizza, and I still wouldn't go on a date with the guy," I grumbled, shoveling a large bite of cake into my mouth.

"Come on, Scarlett! He's gorgeous. Have you seen his thighs? They're huge!" She made a motion with her hands to show me the size like I hadn't seen them every day for nearly a year. Not to mention the guy is six foot five and two hundred and sixty pounds. I'd venture to say everything about him was huge. "You can't possibly tell me that you don't want a slice of him."

Was it possible to roll your eyes so hard that they fell out of their sockets?

"First of all, he's my boss," I started, holding up my pointer finger. Although there weren't enough fingers and toes in the world to count the reasons I would never date Abel. "Second, he hates my cooking. And third, he hates me. I can assure you that I don't want a '*slice of him.*'" My fingers formed mocking air quotes.

Mae walked across the counter and stood in front of me, placing her hands on my shoulders with a softened expression. "Scarlett, he doesn't hate you or your cooking. If he did, he would have fired you by now."

"Then explain the first two weeks I worked for him, huh?" My eyebrows rose an inch higher as I slumped my shoulders.

The first few days that I worked for Abel were a nightmare to end all nightmares. On my first day, he took one bite of the breakfast that I made for him before running off to "practice." Unbeknownst to him, I saw Coach

Sterling, our friend Lea's dad, driving down the street two hours later. He stopped to chat and told me that the Matrix never practiced on Tuesdays.

I wouldn't have thought much of it had I not found his breakfast sitting on the top of the trash the next morning while I was peeling vegetables. If that was a one-time event it would have been understandable, but I found his breakfast in the garbage for the next two weeks straight.

The food sat there in the trash can, mocking me.

Every. Single. Morning.

The real kicker came on day ten when the idiot kicked me out of his house right as I was in the middle of prepping his salmon for lunch later that day.

A lanky Korean girl, maybe a year younger than Mae and I, stood on his doorstep with two giant suitcases.

When he saw her standing on the porch as he peered through the window, he whispered that I needed to sneak out the side door as quickly as possible and come back in a week.

What a freaking asshole.

Mae said she recognized the girl from the modeling network. Apparently, she was a fashion designer from Los Angeles who'd been in town because her fall line was being featured at Miami Week of Fashion.

But that still didn't explain why Abel frantically shooed me out of his house like some dirty little secret. The guy hadn't dated in years according to my internet research, so why did he feel the need to hide his chef from some girl he was hooking up with for the week?

"He didn't want his side chick seeing his hot chef; can you blame the guy?" She jokingly smacked my butt as she passed me on her way to the living room. Plopping her long legs on the coffee table, she settled into the fluffy white sofa. I let out a small laugh as I sat next to her on the couch.

"Doubtful. Can we change the subject, please?" I begged, laying my head lightly on her shoulder.

"Sure... are you going to tell me why you've been stress baking all day?" she said gently as she placed her head on top of mine.

My heart fell into the pit of my stomach. I was hoping she hadn't noticed. But then again, it was hard to miss the two loaves of banana bread and three pizzas sitting on the counter.

Fresh out of culinary school, I started a food blog that had gained a steady following over the years. I started posting new recipes every week as a way

to keep a digital cookbook. Now nearly a million people viewed my recipes every month.

When an agent reached out to me a few months ago to see if I had interest in turning my blog posts into a cookbook, I jumped at the idea. The only problem was that I *might* have kept it a secret from Mae.

I didn't know if a book deal would actually come of it and I didn't want to get my hopes up by telling her.

"So, a cookbook deal, huh?"

My head shot straight up, forgetting hers was right on top of mine. Both of our heads bang together, followed by searing pain. *Jesus Christ*. I cupped my forehead in my hands, attempting to ease some of the stinging underneath my skin.

"How did you know?" I shouted, shocked at her admission.

How could she have known that I got a cookbook deal? I haven't told a single soul. Not even Dads knew yet.

"Scarlett, you can't hide anything from me." She cocked a brow at me as if I shouldn't have been shocked by her profession of omniscience. "And when I asked to borrow your computer yesterday... I *might* have looked through the emails between you and your editor."

"You snoop!" A laugh jumped out of me. Of course, she was going through my emails. "So, you're not mad I didn't tell you?" I questioned a bit uneasily as I leaned back against the couch cushions.

"Are you kidding me, Scar? I'm so proud of you!" she exclaimed. "I'm just disappointed you didn't share this big life event with me. We're supposed to do these things together, you know?" Her voice grew tender as she opened her arms to embrace me.

"I knew you would be happy for me... but I didn't want to get my hopes up until it was set in stone. Even now, it still doesn't seem real."

"Yeah, I'm sure it doesn't. I saw the number of zeros on that contract." She said that like she wasn't one of the highest-paid models in the world. Although, I did appreciate her attempt to make me feel special. "You could put a down payment on a house if you wanted!"

Yeah, a one-bedroom shack in the worst part of town.

Mae made more money in two days than I made in two years. So, she was more than a *little* out of touch.

When Mom was sick, Mae was kind enough to cover her medical bills, but paying for the funeral and the business costs for starting my blog wiped

me clean, and until recently I'd spent every spare dollar I made paying off my crippling six-figure culinary school debt.

Last summer, Mae decided to buy a house in the neighborhood where most of Miami's elite lived. Hence why our neighbor was the best tight end in the league. I knew that I could *never* afford to live in this neighborhood, even now with no debt and a fairly decent income for a twenty-four-year-old; it would take me seven hundred years to afford a house in this neck of the woods.

Trust me, I did the math.

Growing up, we had always dreamed of having houses next to each other and raising our kids together, the same way our parents raised us. But now, that dream was looking less and less like it would become a reality. Unless I wanted to live in Mae's backyard forever.

Granted, the pool house was more of a mother-in-law suite than a room used to hold beach floats and cleaning solutions. It had a bedroom and bathroom with an expansive living room and kitchen area with modern appliances.

Aside from the stupid bird that sang outside my window at six sharp every morning, it was the perfect space for just one person.

Mae and I had never lived apart from each other, let alone spent more than a week away from each other at a time. And the idea of that changing in the next few years utterly terrified me.

I was happy that Mae was able to buy such a beautiful house, but I hated knowing that our dreams meant more to me than they did to her.

"We'll see." I rolled my eyes and sagged my body into the couch cushions.

"Hey. You could always convince Mr. Tight End to fall in love with you and then move in with him," she said with an arched brow.

If only it was that simple.

CONTENT NOTES

Hi reader!

Thank you for considering *The Red Zone* as your next read.

In an effort to protect your mental and emotional well-being, it should be noted that *The Red Zone* contains mentions of anxiety, a detailed on page panic attack, implied feelings of being unwanted (from adoption), and detailed medical talk.

It is recommended to refrain from reading if any of these could be potential to be triggering for you.

xo,
Meg

MORE FROM MEG

The League

Scarlett & Abel - [The Fantasy League](#)

Mae & October - [The Red Zone](#)

Lea & Fortune - [The Silent Count](#) (August 2023)

Banks Brothers

Lyla & Barrett - [The Physical Attraction Seminar](#) (March 2023)

Camila & Harrison - Secrets Safe With Me (Spring 2023)

Aspen & Reid - Back to Square One (Summer 2023)

Standalones

Aera & Elliot - [Christmas in Comets Valley](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the readers who changed my life with book one. I love you. So so much more than I can even put into words. Your messages, comments, reviews have fueled my creative fire and I can't thank you enough. There's no way to describe how special it is to see people love my books and characters as much as I do.

Damn it, you guys. We're only a handful of sentences in and I've already got tears welling in my eyes, ugh. Love you forever and then some.

My newfound author friends who did countless sprints with me and (virtually) held my hand the entire way. My love for you overflows. Can't wait to do all the books together until the end of time.

Lucy, who created the most perfect depiction of these characters for the cover. I'm obsessed with everything you do. There aren't enough thank you's in the world.

My bestie, Nat, who doesn't understand why I can't dedicate every book to her (lol). Thanks for listening to all my rants and never letting me give up even on the hard days.

To my other bestie, Jenn, for sending me pictures of sexy shirtless men every couple hundred words to motivate me to keep writing... love you for that. Thank you for telling me to keep going even when it was tough.

To my imposter syndrome—disrespectfully, you're a bitch. And I'm proud of myself for not letting you win.

Lastly, to my first book babies, Scarlett and Abel. Without them this book, this series, me being a full-time AUTHOR (still doesn't feel real to say) would not exist. They say you never forget your first, and I'm so grateful that they were the start of the endless world that is to come.

Okay, that's all.

Going to find some tissues now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Meg Reading is a contemporary romance author whose family knew she was destined to become a writer long before she did. Although, her imaginary friends and the stack of fictional stories she wrote about her middle school crushes made it kind of obvious. However, Meg was too engulfed in reading books to notice her calling, and it took her another decade to finally put down the books and start writing her own instead.

She is a self-proclaimed homebody who has two cats named Gomez and Fester. When she's not reading, writing, or procrastinating, you can find her incessantly re-watching Gilmore Girls and surviving off of copious amounts of hazelnut coffee.

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