



HE *always*
GETS WHAT HE WANTS

Always, Axel

ROSE CROFT
BOYS ON THE HILL

Always, Axel

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BOYS ON THE HILL

ALWAYS AXEL

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Being the most talented football
player came with benefits.

Fame

Popularity

Adoration of all

Women flocked to him

People wanted to be like him

So why would he have any interest
in an innocent, book nerd like me?

I owed him a favor.

“Be my girl,” he said.

“Let’s have fun,” he said.

And when the fun was over,
we would go our separate ways.

Harmless, right?

But what if it wasn’t?

Because I realized...

Axel did nothing in half measures

And whatever he wanted,
he would do everything in
his power to have it.

I just didn’t realize

he would break me in the process.



This is book four in the Boys in the Hill Series.



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Thank you Patricia for everything



Gravitation cannot be held
responsible for people
falling in love

-Albert Einstein

Chapter ONE

Nataliya Pradhan

—Age 19

You want to know how to get on someone’s shit list? Show up at the wrong place at the wrong time. Well, technically, I was at the right place because I was doing my job. The part-time job I had at Hillside’s main library on campus.

The sprawling, grayish building was goth-like, with its pointed arches and ginormous stained-glass windows that stuck out like a sore thumb amongst the more modern buildings on this central Texas campus nestled between vast hills of limestone and live oak trees. Actually, Anderson Library was a historical landmark, which had been in existence for over one hundred years. It was the first building ever constructed at Hillside University.

What was I doing? Brain babbling about meaningless facts again. I did this when I was in an awkward position and tried to make myself feel not so awkward. Because I was standing in this very library, in the American History aisle, catching a show I certainly didn’t buy a ticket for when I went in search of a book. Unfortunately, I was watching a couple a few feet away, making their own history.

A beautiful, leggy brunette was standing in a plaid miniskirt, unbuttoning her shirt until she parted it wide—

braless. Her more-than-generous breasts were on display to the tall, muscular guy who had his back to me, leaning against the bookcase. The very spot where I needed to be to get the stupid memoir my manager had asked for.

Then the girl slipped off her panties, kicking them aside in her heels, before she threw her arms around his neck and wrapped her legs around his waist. “Just admit it. You missed this,” she breathed seductively as she started gyrating against him.

Realization slapped me in the face. They were going to fuck in the library, right in front of the Alexander Hamilton section. The section where my manager had asked me to retrieve a rare book because one of Hillside’s most respected and tenured professors had requested it. The book was buried behind the hip of this brick wall of a guy, who was still leaning casually against the bookshelf, unmoving, as pink heels dug into his ass, and brunette Barbie with the perfect boobs continued sliding up and down his body like he was a stripper pole.

Her hands slid down his wide back, tightening his already fitted T-shirt, accentuating the bulk of muscle underneath. With his build, he must be some sort of athlete. Probably one of the football players on campus.

“God, I’ve missed you,” she moaned, leaning in to kiss him, but he turned his head to the side. When he did that, I could see the profile of her face. Her eyes opened and quickly narrowed as she was now glaring at me over his shoulder. “What the hell are you looking at? Get the fuck out of here, you freak!”

My heart seemed to stop, and I tried to gather my wits and force my feet to step back and get away. Then, the brick wall of a man twisted his head over his shoulder to look, too. And, oh, boy, was I off the mark. Yes, he was an athlete at Hillside. I just didn’t know before that he was *the* athlete. One of the most well-known athletes on campus. The big football star here at Hillside. Not only was his play on the field

acknowledged, but so were his extracurricular activities. Even I, whose social life was nearing less than zero, had heard about what a player he was.

Axel Thomas. National champion. Future NFL baller. Rumor had it he was going to forego his senior year at Hillside next season, but he'd changed his mind a few months ago. Rumor also had it that he'd left a trail of broken hearts the size of the Hillside campus. I'd also heard that he'd had a liaison with one of his professors last year, a married professor who taught British Lit and who was one of the most widely known professors on campus because everyone signed up for her class. But after the so-called affair, she didn't return to Hillside this year.

There were other things about him that seemed to be spread around as fact, and everyone seemed to know about it. In a nutshell, every move he made seemed to be common knowledge among the masses in this college town. He was that popular. He was also in one of my classes, Genetics, but he probably didn't know it.

However, his deep brown eyes were still locked on me, mesmerizing as they were, and I forgot the reason why I needed to step away and not voyeurize these people. *Jeez, I truly must be a freak.* His full lips curved up a smidge, bearing a small flash of glossy white teeth, and I could almost see why a professor might throw away her ethics, risk her job, and have an affair. Then I remembered where I was and who he was, and then brunette Barbie clarified any other reservations I might've had. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Go away!"

Finally sinking in, I stumbled backward and took off, hooking a right to the main desk. Before I went far, I pulled up short, nearly crashing into my manager.

"What took you so long?"

"Sorry," I mumbled, feeling like I'd just finished a grueling workout.

“What’s this?” His bushy gray brows furrowed into a V under his horn-rimmed glasses at my empty hands. “Do you not understand how to find a book?”

Mr. Wilson was a crusty old man who’d almost worked in this library as long as it had been around. He took his work seriously and always came across as grumpy and condescending.

“Yes. I know where it—”

He cut me off, whisking by me with a grumble in his voice. “If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.”

Then he turned down that aisle. *Oh, no.* Like someone who couldn’t turn away from an accident, I followed him.

“Hey!” His gruff words were jarring amidst the near silence surrounding us. “What in the hell is going on in my library?” He hobble-stomped toward them while brunette Barbie dropped to her feet, hastily fumbling with the buttons on her shirt.

Tugging on the hem of her blouse, she managed to throw a dark glance my way, and if looks could kill, I’d be dead. “Don’t worry, we’re leaving.”

“You’re damn right, you are. I should file a complaint with campus police for public lewdness,” Mr. Wilson said, pulling out his cell phone.

Axel, who was casually leaning against the bookcase, watching this as though mildly amused and definitely not worried about his threat, shoved off the bookcase with his hands in his pockets. “Now, I don’t think we need to do all that. It was just a misunderstanding, that’s all.”

Recognition settled over the old man’s face. “Oh, Mr. Thomas. I didn’t know it was you.” Even Mr. Wilson, who was a stickler for rules and proper conduct, backed down when he realized who graced his library. Seriously?

Axel shrugged carelessly, walking over to Mr. Wilson. “No harm, no foul.” He reached out and shook my manager’s hand.

“We gonna win another championship next season, son?”

“Gonna do my best to make it happen, sir.” Axel peered down at me, and mischief flashed in his eyes before he drew his attention back to the old man. “I’ll make sure to have some platinum seat tickets for you to all the home games.”

“That would be great.”

“Not a problem. We love our Hillside supporters.” Axel gazed down at me with a smirk on his face. “I can hook you up with some tickets, too.”

“That won’t be necessary. I don’t take bribes.”

His eyes widened slightly in surprise before he smiled widely. “Bribes. That’s cute.”

“Miss Pradhan, why don’t you find the book I asked for instead of badgering our patrons? Or do I need to hold your hand and show you where it is?”

Patron my ass. If it had been anyone else besides this six-foot-two-inch athlete in front of me, they would’ve been tossed out of here. Regardless, I said between clenched teeth, “Of course.” Stepping around them, I went to the shelf and plucked the stupid memoir from the shelf.

Passing by me, Axel winked smugly, while his girlfriend continued to peer down at me like I was a bug she wanted to lance with her stiletto heel.

I averted my gaze and walked over to Mr. Wilson and handed him the book. So much for another boring day at the library.

The next day, I made it to my Genetics class and parked in a seat in the front row. I set down my things and cautiously glanced over my shoulder to the back section of the auditorium to see if Axel was there. However, I didn’t see him.

Of course, he wasn't. There were still five minutes before class began, and he usually showed up late.

Scrolling through my notes on my laptop, I absently clicked the top of my gel pen. Why did I feel a sense of anxiousness? Shaking my head, I shifted in my seat, wishing, for once, Dr. Longley would start class on time.

"Hey, man, can you scoot down a seat?" I heard a familiar male voice say in the row behind me.

Without thinking, I glanced over my shoulder to find Axel sitting in the seat directly behind me. He had that infuriating grin on his face as if expecting me to notice him and gave me a two-finger salute.

I quickly faced the front, fighting the racing of my pulse. Luckily, our professor began his lecture. I tried not to read too much into why he chose the seat behind me since he normally sat in the back row. Besides seeing him say a few words to students who were fans of the team before and after class, Axel never participated in class discussions. But today, he seemed more than eager to answer questions, even asking Dr. Longley questions for clarification on genetic code sequencing.

I rolled my eyes and twirled my pen in my hand, checking my phone for the time. Only a few more minutes. I sighed in relief. As soon as class ended, I quickly shoved my things into my backpack and rushed out of the auditorium.

The next time I had that class, I arrived a few minutes early like always. Pulling up a PDF of an article for class, I aimlessly scanned over it when I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. This time, I didn't turn around to look, but I knew he was there. Although class had begun, my mind was preoccupied.

Why did my pulse speed up when he took the seat behind me? Why would I even think he was deliberately trying to get my attention? Maybe I was just overreacting.

Stupid imagination. What could I say? I loved to lose myself in a book and escape. It wasn't unusual for me to get caught up in the fictitious world of my favorite romance books, so maybe I was reading too much into this whole scenario. *I really needed to get a life.*

As I absently stared at our professor, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Glancing behind me, I jerked in surprise at seeing Axel's perfectly symmetrical face so close to mine. I could smell the cinnamon scent from the gum he was chewing. The insolent tug of his full lips showcased a flash of white teeth and two dimples that were perfect indentations. The dark scruff of shadow grazed his jaw. I could see how people could fall under his spell.

"Better pay attention because I certainly am." His words were low, thrumming against my skin in a tempting warning.

Before I could respond, I heard, "What is your opinion, front and center?" Dr. Longley posed a question. Turning as if in a daze, it dawned on me that our professor had his attention on me, tapping his toe impatiently. He never called us by our name—there were over two hundred students in this class. But he normally called out the location of where we were seated, and after several classes, we were used to it. *Front and center, left side, outer aisle, third row to the right.* He was a pompous professor, yet we, the ones who cared about our GPAs, eagerly accepted his assholeishness and answered his questions with extra zeal.

However, right now, I had no zeal. I sat frozen, trying to rack my brain over what he asked, hoping I didn't screw up my chances. Honestly, I couldn't remember the last fifteen minutes of his lecture. My mind had drifted once again.

"I can answer that, Dr. Longley," Axel said from behind me.

Blinking my eyes rapidly, not believing what was happening, I completely took back what I said about our professor knowing none of our names because he did know *his*. "Yes, go ahead, Mr. Thomas."

At the urging of our professor, he went on a five-minute explanation on chromosomal mutations, while I stewed in stunned silence, feeling like an idiot because I could've very easily answered if I'd paid attention to the question. I couldn't help but turn around and scowl at him, while he gave me an innocent look with an unapologetic shrug.

When class wrapped up, I started packing my things and felt another tap on my shoulder. This time, I ignored him, but I could feel him ghosting over my shoulder, regardless. "It's okay. You'll get it next time." With that, he gave me a consoling pat on the back, and by the time I did turn around, he was walking up the aisle, out of the auditorium.

Chapter TWO

Axel Thomas

—Age 21

Nobody said life would be easy. Who was I kidding? For me, life was pretty sweet. It was the end of the spring semester and my junior year at Hillside, and our football team was the reigning national champs. In most circles, I was considered one of the top prospects for the NFL and could've declared for the draft this year, foregoing my senior year at Hillside.

However, my best friends, Roman, Nick, and Dmitri, decided that we weren't leaving Hillside after our junior year for the draft. Like me, they were all pegged to forego their last season of college eligibility and enter the draft, but one night, several months ago, *said* best friends got together and changed their minds, dragging me into this decision with them. Honestly, it wasn't that difficult of a decision. We all wanted a shot at a back-to-back title. And I'd made a promise to my mother long ago that I would graduate from college. If only she could see me now...

"Axel, what's up, my man?" Joel, one of my fraternity brothers called out and loped over to me. I'd just finished my last class of the day and was going to grab something to eat before I hit the gym.

"Hey."

“You going to the Pike formal this weekend? We got a party bus. It’s going to be lit.”

“Yeah. I’ll be there.” The formal was going to be held in Austin at the Four Seasons. It was a big event for the fraternity. Being the vice president, Joel got off on this fraternity shit. Did I have fun in the fraternity? Sure did. Nick and I had both pledged early on because we liked the social activities, and it looked good on our résumés. Not that I needed a résumé. However, we didn’t live or die by the Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity. Football was our first love. And I damn sure didn’t get into the bullshit hierarchy that people like Joel and the even douchier frat president, Justin, did. Yet, it did have its perks, not gonna lie.

“That’s great. Can’t wait, man.” He leaned in and did the hand slap-shake before he walked off, pausing as someone caught his eye. “There’s my girl,” he said, pointing both index fingers out like a cheesy game show host or something, while a petite blonde approached him with a pageant smile and folded into his arms. Melanie was her name, I think.

And right behind her was Jeanette. Tall, leggy, brunette—all the perfect assets by many people’s standards. She was wearing a cropped top and a pleated skirt that barely reached her upper thighs. She was a beautiful girl, and believe me, she knew it. She was also beginning to drive me fucking crazy. Not in a crazy good way.

“Hey,” Jeanette said, pushing up on her toes with lips puckered for a kiss. Was she serious? I didn’t do that shit, and she knew it. I leaned away, staring down at her in warning, and she paused before finally backing down on her damn heels. “You haven’t called,” she said, tapping me on the chest.

The statement hung between us for several seconds. “Didn’t know I needed to,” I said in a bored tone, looking away, hoping she’d get the message. My momma raised me to have manners, so I couldn’t be a straight-up dick to her.

Within five minutes of meeting her at a party several weeks ago, she told me she wanted a good fuck, and I told her

it would be, but that's *all* it would be. She flipped her model-worthy hair, pursed her plump lips, and agreed. We were on the same page. Or so I thought.

After hooking up a few times, she started to get clingy. Texting me all the time. Unexpectedly showing up at places where I was. Like now. We didn't have any classes together, yet here she was.

Just like when I was at the library looking for a book for my political science class, and she was there. With stars in her eyes and a potential cash cow on her mind, she ended up cornering me in an aisle. It wasn't like I couldn't stop her. I was about to until she started stripping off her shirt and then gripped my shoulders, climbing up my body like I was a tree.

Maybe she had some expectations about me... that I was a piece of meat, and sex was all I thought about. Forgive me if I was being cynical, but I'd stepped to this dance before. And that pissed me off. I wasn't here to amuse her. I wasn't here to fuck her whenever she sought me out. Honestly, I'd lost interest.

However, when she had me backed against the books in the library, I caught the girl in the baggy clothes with her thick black hair pulled up in a messy bun and glasses, staring at us as if she were watching some brutal mating show between animals on the *National Geographic* channel. Her mouth formed an O. She'd drawn my attention, and I didn't understand why. Maybe I'd become so depraved, so bored, that a messy-haired book nerd who stared at me like I was Satan incarnated was drawing my interest.

The next day, I realized she was in my class. How could I have missed her? There was something about her that intrigued me. We were already nearing the end of the semester when I noticed her sitting in the front row of the auditorium like one of those zealous students who were trying to make an impression in class. I always sat in the back, since I usually showed up at the last minute, not trying to make small talk

with strangers or draw attention to myself. I got enough of that on a daily basis.

Yet she'd drawn *my* attention, and I decided to take the seat behind her. Make my presence known.

Not trying to brag, but people recognized me. Even moving to the front of the class, I knew I'd bring more attention to myself. Which in this case, I hoped I did. I wanted her attention. However, she barely gave me a glance. So, I started incorporating myself into the class discussions, answering questions that our professor asked, and being an eager beaver like the rest of the overachievers in the front of the class. Deliberately trying to get her to notice me. However, it wasn't working.

Today, I took it a step further and touched her shoulder, forcing her to notice me. But she looked at me like I was some kind of deviant.

"Of course, you didn't have to call me, but it'd be nice if you did." Jeanette's voice jolted me out of my thoughts like a knee to the balls.

"What's up?" I glanced at her with impatience, still hoping she would take a hint.

"I can't wait for the formal..." I knew a fucking lob when I saw one, and she was lobbing me the ball, hoping I'd volley back with the correct response. Too bad I didn't play tennis.

"You should see my dress," she added, scrolling through her cell, probably to find a picture of it.

She held up her phone, but I didn't care because I saw the sassy little book nerd walking down the sidewalk a few feet from me.

I stared, drawn to her, not quite understanding why.

Maybe I was amused.

Maybe I just needed a distraction because I was bored.

Whatever the reason, I kept my eyes zeroed in on her.

I didn't even know her name.

She had earbuds in her ears. Her fluffy, black-haired bun bounced with each step she took, and the backpack she sported was filled to capacity. She wore an oversize *Dragon Ball Z* sweatshirt and baggie jeans, which seemed to swallow her since she was a petite girl, from what I could tell. This girl probably spent all her time in the library studying, keeping to herself.

Studying and school were probably her life.

"Axel?" I heard my name again, and Jeanette thrust her phone directly into my face. "Do you like it?"

"Yeah. Sure," I responded automatically, barely glancing at the picture of her dress because I couldn't keep my attention off the girl who sat front row center in our Genetics class.

"Oh, my god." Jeanette's voice was annoying as fuck when she screeched. "Isn't that the girl who was watching us like a creeper a few days ago?"

I didn't answer, just kept watching her as she trudged down the sidewalk.

"I could've kicked her ass for almost getting us thrown out of the library. How immature is that? I ought to confront her now so she'll know she fucked with the wrong person."

She started off after her, and I reached out, gripped her bicep and yanked her back. "Don't even fucking think about it." I realized my words came out sharper than I'd intended, releasing her arm before she got the wrong idea.

Regardless, she cooled her heels before she adjusted the strap of her purse, trying to regather some chill, because maybe she realized she was acting irrationally. And irrational wasn't a look she wanted to present.

"Wait." Jeanette had a thoughtful look on her face. "Why do you care?"

"I don't." I didn't care what Jeanette thought. "Don't blame her for getting caught. It was your crazy idea to stalk

me down in the library.”

“In fairness, it was her fault for being there.” She shifted and toyed with the ends of her hair as if she didn’t hear what I said. “Anyway, I wanted to show you my dress so you’d know what color suit to wear for the formal.”

I peered down at her in distaste. “Not gonna happen.”

“What’s not going to happen?”

“This. The formal. Us. Find someone else.”

“Wait. You can’t be serious.”

“Very.” Glancing at the dark-haired book nerd from class, I started to walk off, but Jeanette clutched my arm. I narrowed my eyes down at her hand, clearly showing my disapproval.

“Don’t tell me you’re actually interested in her,” she said in disbelief.

Shrugging out of her hold, I warned, “Stay away from her.” I walked away, not caring, nor answering, leaving her staring at me like she was blindsided. I knew Jeanette; I knew her thought process. She couldn’t believe that I would ever choose a girl over her who she thought was beneath her. She was self-absorbed in that way. Fuck her. Let her work that out in her head. Maybe that’s why she kept pursuing me, not taking *no* for an answer. She simply couldn’t believe I would have no interest in her.

Should’ve known to stay away from her. What we did had well run its course days ago, fuck... weeks ago. Hearing her voice still giving me grief, I put in my earbuds, cranked up the volume on my cell, and set off across campus. Regardless if we went together or not, Jeanette would be at the formal since she was a Delta Zeta and most of her sorority sisters would be there. Maybe she would take a hint and leave me the fuck alone if she knew I took someone else as my date.

Did it really matter who I asked? Perhaps asking the book nerd to be my date wasn’t such a bad idea. I just needed a date

for the formal, and it literally could be anyone else on campus. It wasn't like I was looking for a relationship.

The more the idea marinated; the better it sounded. At least I'd have zero expectations on having to put on a performance because she seemed like the type who'd faint dead away if she ever saw a dick. Which was fine with me because I wasn't looking to fuck her. I just needed someone on my arm. Not someone to Hoover my dick and then expect a goddamn ring on her finger.



If anyone could mix the look of surprise with an eye roll, the sweatshirt-wearing, dark-haired book nerd did as I parked my ass in the chair right beside her at our following class.

“What?” I smiled mildly, looking around me. “Is this seat taken?”

She lifted a shoulder in indifference. I heard the rustle of paper as our pompous professor dug through his worn satchel and pulled out a stack of papers. He always seemed disheveled and disorganized and was an asshole to talk to. He really needed to work on his social skills. Not to mention, it would take another five minutes before class would actually begin.

Turning to watch as she perused her MacBook, I tapped my finger on the desk. “My name’s Axel, and you are...?” I waited while she typed on her laptop as if she didn’t hear me, but I’m fairly certain she did.

After a few ticks, she still hadn’t responded, and I leaned closer to her, seeing her twitch in response but committed to ignoring me. “Hey. What’s your name?”

“Not interested,” she mumbled, keeping her eyes on the screen.

She was a little presumptuous. I held in a chuckle. “Whoa. Hold up. Are you implying that I’m hitting on you?”

She kept typing like she was transcribing some important shit. What the fuck was she typing? Class hadn't even started. I reached over and caught her hand, stopping her. She yanked it away and scowled at me. "I don't know why you chose to sit beside me today, but I'm not in the mood to play whatever game you're trying to play with me."

"I don't play games, little girl."

Chapter THREE

Natalie

Little girl? “Excuse me?” I glanced up from my laptop. Why was Axel Thomas sitting next to me? Was this a prank at my expense? Was someone low-key pointing their cell in our direction, recording this interaction? Last class, he’d distracted me to the point I looked like an idiot when the professor called on me. What did he have planned today?

I peered around cautiously but didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

“You gonna tell me your name? Or do I have to call you *not interested* or *little girl?*”

“If this is about the incident in the library...”

“What incident are you talking about?” he asked innocently, his eyes giving nothing away.

Either he was lying or he didn’t care. “Never mind.” I turned my attention to my laptop and acted as if I could concentrate. However, I could feel his gaze on me, making the room heat up.

Then, my laptop was slammed close as his large hand splayed across it. “Hey! What are you doing?”

“Getting your attention.” His voice was as casual as the small smile he sported. “Your name? I can do this all day.”

“It’s Natalie. Now, can you leave me alone and stop with this...”

“With what?”

“Game or whatever.”

He leaned his head to the side and narrowed his eyes slightly, but he still had his lips quirked in a semi-smile. “That’s twice you’ve implied that, but I can assure you the only game I play is on the field. And I’m quite good at that one. So, I’m kind of lost right now at what you mean.”

I rolled my eyes, opening my mouth to reply, but was cut off when our professor started talking. “Today we’re going to delve into gene therapy...”

Axel turned his attention to Dr. Longley, where it seemed to stay. As our instructor droned on, I noticed he was taking notes just as furiously as me. One time, his head popped up, and he caught me watching him. He only lifted the side of his mouth before turning his attention back to the lecture. I did, too, but I could feel the heat in the flush of my cheeks. For a torturous hour, we sat side by side. He didn’t make a move to tease me again.

I was puzzled—distracted was a better word for it—and I couldn’t focus on the lecture, although I took notes. Dr. Longley could’ve been talking about how Frankenstein was the ideal specimen, for all I knew. Axel shifted in his seat, and his elbow inadvertently bumped mine. He whispered a quick “sorry” while I felt goose bumps travel up my skin. He was a big guy, which left little space between us—the epitome of a well-toned, defined machine.

I inwardly cringed at my description of him. Jeez, this was surreal.

When our professor finally wrapped up his spiel on genetics, the auditorium rumbled with the murmur of students and the clap of closing books and laptops. Following suit, I gathered my things, shifting out of my seat with the intention of making my exit. I had another class to get to. I wouldn’t

think about the weird convo or not-so-much convo that took place between us.

I made it past the auditorium doors, already resetting my brain to move on, and then a deep voice that was too close called out, “Wait.” Then a hand was on my elbow.

Shocked, I stopped, but not by choice, because he held me still. I rolled my lips and stilled my beating heart. I wasn’t brave or confrontational by nature. However, this guy was rubbing me the wrong way. I felt like I was an unwanted punch line to an inside joke.

I forced up all my courage. “What now?”

“Ease up. I don’t bite. Just wondering if you’re hungry.”

“No,” I answered sharply. Too sharply.

“You look a little hangry. Maybe we should go grab a bite to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I didn’t say hungry; I said *hangry*. You know what that means, right? Haven’t you heard of the acronym HALT? You’re either hungry, angry, lonely, or tired.”

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes again. “Are you a psychologist?”

He laughed without remorse. “Yeah, I guess you could say I’m well-versed in all the psychological bullshit.”

I averted my gaze. “I’m not any of those.”

“You sure about that? When I said I was well-versed, I wasn’t kidding. I know this shit like the back of my hand.”

Before I could answer, his grip was firm on my arm, but not hard enough that it hurt. His touch was actually soft. I glanced down at his long, tanned fingers briefly and pulled away. “I’m not hungry.” My stomach took it as a cue to voice itself.

“Your stomach tells a different story.” *Damn it.* He heard my stomach growl, since I hadn’t eaten anything this morning. “Let me buy you something to eat.”

“I have another class. Sorry.”

“Which I bet you could skip because I’m certain you’ve never missed a class in your life unless you were deathly ill or something.” He followed beside me. What he said was true. I’d never missed a class.

“You’re being very presumptuous,” I said as I ascended the steps of Andrews Hall for my final class of the day. I paused at the top step. “Are you going to follow me to class?”

“I might. Are you seriously ditching me for your class?”

“Yes.”

“Aww, that’s kind of rude.”

“I can tell you’re heartbroken,” I deadpanned before I passed through the building entrance. “I really have to go.”

He shrugged a shoulder and shoved a hand in his pocket. “All right, then. Run along to your class, Natalie. I’ll get a lunch out of you, eventually.”

“Probably not,” I quipped. “But thanks anyway.”

“We shall see, won’t we?”

I made it to my advanced chemistry class with a minute to spare. Shelling out my laptop from my overstuffed backpack, I forced the strange conversation with Axel from my mind. He must’ve been having a slow day to follow me to class and try to convince me to go have lunch.

However, after class, I drew up short when I saw him standing in the hallway, leaning against the wall, waiting. “You’re still here?”

“Told you I’d get that lunch date.” He pushed off the wall and fell in step with me.

Before I could protest, he was leading me out of Andrews Hall in the direction of the student center, where all the fast-food kiosks were. “I’m really not—”

“You really are,” he cut in. “Stop raining on my parade,” he teased. “Let me be the gentleman and offer a beautiful lady lunch, okay? If for nothing else, do it to humor me.”

I sighed but relented only because I was hungry and was going to grab something to eat anyway.

He took me to a very popular burger joint nestled in the heart of the student center. “They have the best burgers in town.” He smiled smugly, flashing two perfect dimples.

“I don’t eat beef.”

“Oh.” Holding the door open, he paused as his smile fell. “Do you eat chicken? The chicken sandwich is good. They have vegetarian options, too. Or I can take you somewhere else.” He continued to stand in the doorway, blocking the people behind us

“No, it’s fine,” I said quickly, aware of the crowd around us waiting to enter. Finally, he stepped aside to allow me to pass ahead of him. I looked at the huge menu board hanging behind the counter. There were a lot of options, and I ate other meats, just not beef. Wait. I was actually agreeing to have lunch with him.

How did I let him lead me this far? I normally didn’t do this. I’d never had the attention of one of the hottest people on campus before. I’d never had the attention of anyone like this before. *It’s just lunch, Natalie.*

I ordered a chicken sandwich, and he ordered a burger. I opened my backpack to pull out my debit card, ready to pay for my half, but he closed his hand over mine, causing me to jump from the contact. I was nervous and jittery, but he only shook his head. “I’ve got this.” He was already paying before I could argue.

He grabbed our drinks and led me through the crowd. The place was wall-to-wall packed with students, and as far as I

could tell, there was no available seating. I followed him to the back of the place to a corner booth that was already occupied by two large guys wearing Falcons Football T-shirts. “Sup, Axel?” one of them said.

He nudged his chin in acknowledgment. “Hey, man, I need this table.”

“Sure, you can sit with us.”

“Nah, you misunderstood. This is *my* table, so you two are gonna have to bounce.”

His table? I glanced at him in disbelief. One of the guys was halfway between taking a bite of his burger and eying him with uncertainty. Axel didn’t waver as he waited impatiently, tapping his high-top Jordans. Soon, both guys dropped their burgers onto their trays and got up without a word.

With a pleasant smile on his face, Axel directed me to sit in the newly vacated booth and slid into the spot across from me. I guess I still wore a look of surprise, and he shrugged without a care. “It’s my table.” As if his three simple words made all the sense in the world. Then, I noticed a picture of him holding a trophy in a Falcons jersey, with his signature hanging on the wall between us. I guess it *was* his table.

I folded my hands and stared at my drink. “Do you always get what you want?”

Taking his straw with the corner of his mouth, he slowly lapped it with his tongue before his sensuous lips closed over the straw as he took a pull. The look he gave me clearly said, *What do you think?*

Great. No lack of self-confidence.

Someone approached our table with our food. As we ate in silence, my curiosity couldn’t take it anymore. “What am I doing here?”

He raised his head. “Having lunch. You were hungry. What did you think we were doing?”

I raised my shoulders and took another bite of my sandwich. "I have no idea."

He thumbed the lid of his drink, keeping his gaze on me. "You're very reserved, aren't you?"

If by reserved he meant inhibited, then, in most cases I was. "Not always. Only when I don't know someone."

He nodded slowly. "Then we need to change that. Tell me something about you. What are you majoring in?"

"Sports medicine."

"Oh? Are you on the training staff?"

"No, but I submitted an application for an internship in the fall."

"I'll put in a good word for you." He winked. "I have connections on the football team."

He really went there. As if I'd forgotten he'd offered me top-tier seats to the football games the other day. *As if* I hadn't noticed his autographed football photo hanging on the wall beside us. "Thanks, but that really isn't necessary."

"Suit yourself, but you should always take advantage of connections when you can." He scraped his knuckles against the side of his cup.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"You do that." Then he added, "Why don't you eat beef?"

"I'm Hindu. The cow is sacred in our religion."

He eyed me thoughtfully. "Forgive me for not knowing. I would've taken you somewhere else."

"Why? I like my chicken sandwich." I gave a small smile. While many people in the Hindu religion were vegetarians, my family wasn't.

"So," he said, leaning back against the booth, splaying his arm across the top of the back. "Are you seeing someone?"

"That's a little personal."

“Only if you’re trying to hide something. Are you? Are you a little shady, Natalie?” he teased, tilting his head to the side, and the hand drifting over the back of his seat slowly curled into a fist.

“No.”

“No, you’re not shady, or no, you’re not seeing someone?”

My eyes narrowed, somewhat puzzled that we were having this conversation. “No, to both. Why?”

“You’re a little skeptical, too, aren’t you?”

“I think anyone who gets asked to lunch out of the blue would be skeptical.”

“Now, why wouldn’t I just want to take you to lunch because I find you fascinating?”

“Because you know nothing about me.”

“Well, that’s why we’re getting to know each other.” He grinned, flashing those killer dimples. “Don’t you want to know something about me?”

I wiped my hands on my napkin. “Let me guess. You play football.”

“Wow. Good guess.” There was amusement laced in his voice. “Are you psychic or something?”

I shook my head, fighting a smile. “What’s your major?”

“Biology.”

My eyes widened, and he must’ve picked up on it. “Let me guess,” he said in a tone mocking mine from minutes ago. “You don’t think athletes are smart?”

“I didn’t say that. I just assumed you were here on a football scholarship, and *that* was your main focus.”

“Football is my main focus, but I also plan on getting my degree. In fact, I’m on pace to graduate with honors.”

Perhaps I shouldn't have assumed he was only a big-time athlete using college as a pit stop before he went to the pros. His look confirmed my thoughts. "Sorry, I made an assumption."

He scraped his chin with his thumb as he watched me. "No need to apologize." Then he added, "I have a 4.0 GPA, by the way, in case you were wondering."

His gaze was heady, and I could understand how anyone could get sucked under by the weight of his charm. And he was smart. That was definitely a plus in my book. I took one last draw from my straw. "I should probably go."

"Hey. There's a Pike formal this weekend in Austin at the Four Seasons, and I was wondering if you wanted to go?"

"Me? Go with you?" He was asking me on a date? I stared at him in confusion.

He made a show of looking around us in an overblown way, then checked under the table. "Don't see anyone else around, so..." He again leaned back and tilted his head as he displayed a lazy smile. "Yeah. You go with me."

"I can't." The words were automatic. I'd never been on a date in my life, much less ever been alone with a guy.

"Why not?" Axel's phone hummed on the table, and he tapped it once.

"Because I don't know you—"

He cut in easily. "We've been over this already. That's why we're having lunch." His phone vibrated against the table again, and he clicked it off, not missing a beat.

I shook my head. "I've never..."

Been on a date. The words trailed off as his phone buzzed for the third time, and he frowned, typing out a quick message. I saw him cut his eyes to the side quickly in annoyance, and I glanced over to see brunette Barbie from the library, sitting in a booth across the restaurant with an equally stunning blonde girl beside her.

I turned away before I caught the wrath of her glare, but the food in my stomach suddenly felt as heavy as a rock. Even if I'd had some foolish notion of going on a date with Axel, this was more confirmation that I'd be crazy to consider it. I didn't know what his motives were, nor did I care.

Why would he ask me on a date when he had girls like her at his beck and call? I could only argue brain fog from lack of food as being the reason I allowed him to take me to lunch in the first place. Did I not remember the rumors? Did I not remember what I witnessed in the library? I was an idiot.

Gathering my things, I said, "I have to go. Thank you for lunch."

"Come on, you can't leave me hanging like this without giving me a definitive answer."

Didn't I give him one? I tilted my head. Had no one ever told him no before? Looking at the confidence that exuded around him like a blatant aura, probably not. "I already told you I can't go."

"And I think your excuse is as flimsy as that napkin." He nodded down at the napkin by my hand.

"I'm sorry." I glanced down at my feet. "Even if I wanted to go, I couldn't because I have to work at the library this weekend."

"Now, you're flat-out lying to me. Who would've thought an innocent, studious girl like you would tell a lie?" His expression was laced with humor.

"No, I'm not." I totally was, and I was a terrible liar.

"Yes, you are. You didn't even look me in the eye when you said it. Definitely a shady move."

I sighed wryly. "I really need to go."

"Wait." He leaned over the table and laid his hand on my wrist, and his smugness seemed to drop a few decibels. "Come to the formal with me."

I stared down at his long, strong fingers touching my skin as warmth spread up my arm, causing goose bumps to form. Raising my eyes to his, I almost faltered at seeing a softness that would melt anyone's resolve and erase any reasons why you would ever have reservations.

“Axel, I didn't know you were having lunch here. You're usually training at this time.” A blast of Gucci perfume clouded my nose as I glanced at the brunette from the library, who looked like she'd just stepped out of a photo shoot. She crooked her head my way, staring down her nose at me with her lips upturned unnaturally, maliciously. “You look very familiar.”

We both knew what she was implying. Was she going to call me out again? Call me a freak? I stared at her, measuring my words and thinking of what I would say, especially if she were his girlfriend. If so, this scenario looked bad.

“What do you want, Jeanette?” Axel asked in a bored tone. However, his fingers tightened around mine, subtly tugging me down until my butt hit the booth. He didn't release me, as if he sensed I was about to spring up and bolt like a rabbit. Which I was seriously thinking about.

“Oh, I wanted to say hi and meet your friend.”

He gazed at me with a heart-melting smile. “This is Natalie, my date for the formal this weekend.”

My jaw dropped, and I gave him an accusing look, which he rewarded me with a squeeze to the wrist in warning.

Jeanette's eyes narrowed into two slits. She slapped her hand down on the table, almost hitting my hand, and glared at me as if she were going to rip into me.

“Whatever you're about to say, Jeanette, I would think about it very carefully.” His tone was casual but laced in steel, like the calm before a storm.

Eventually, she pursed her lips like she'd swallowed something distasteful before giving me another death glare.

“Have fun with your *date*.” She flipped her hair, scrunching her nose before she strutted away.

“Why did you do that?” I asked in disbelief, yanking my hand away.

“What?”

“I already told you I couldn’t go.”

“It’s called manifestation.”

“No, it’s not.” I shook my head. “I think arrogance is the correct word.”

He shrugged without care. “You say arrogance; I call it being self-assertive.”

Our gazes held in a silent stand-off before I looked away.

“You know, you’re bruising my ego by turning me down.” There was nothing in his expression that showed his ego had taken a hit.

“I doubt it.” Holding my tray in one hand, I rose, slinging my backpack over my shoulder. “My earlier statement stands, but thanks again for lunch.” I started to turn, but he clasped my arm, drawing me to a halt and almost causing me to dump the remnants in my tray on the floor.

“At least tell me you’ll consider it.”

At this point, did it matter what I said? It’s not like he could actually force me to go. “Okay. I’ll consider it,” I lied.

Chapter FOUR

Natalie

“No. No. Nooooo!” I covered my mouth with my hands, staring numbly through the windshield at the car in front of me. “This can’t be happening. This isn’t real. It’s just a bad dream, and I’ll wake up in my bed...”

“Natalie.”

“I’ll just count backward from ten and take several deep breaths, and everything will be fine.”

“Natalie...”

“I’m just going to put the car in reverse, and we can go home. Maybe we can stop by the all-night café by our dorm and grab some key lime pie.”

“Natalie! You’re freaking me out!” Lizzie squealed from beside me, shaking my arm. I slowly turned to her as a weird calmness overtook me. Why was my roomie looking at me like there was something wrong? She gripped both of my shoulders. “Oh, my god. You’re suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. I should call 911.”

“Seriously, Lizzie? I’m okay.”

She peered through the windshield, and my gaze followed hers, landing on the car in front of us—the parked BMW

convertible that was crushed against my car. Realization began to settle in at what I'd done. Oh, my god, I hit a parked car.

"I should have stayed home tonight," I groaned. "Why did you convince me to go out?"

"Because we've been on this campus all year and never do anything but study and work. We're in college, for goodness' sake. We should be having fun, too."

I liked my life. It was safe and predictable. Wasn't it? After the weird lunch I'd had with Axel yesterday and seeing how Jeanette looked at me like it was completely inconceivable that Axel would actually be interested in me, maybe there was a part of me that did want to venture out and live a little. Of course, I never would've gone out without my bestie, Lizzie Goldman, convincing me to go. Well, she was a dramatic arts major and was very persuasive when she set her mind to it.

However, accidentally throwing the car into drive instead of reverse was not on my agenda tonight. "Ohhhhh, god. My mom and dad will kill me if they find out." My parents had given me this car when I turned eighteen, and I'd already had two wrecks in the past six months—in my defense, one wasn't my fault—but my dad had complained about how the insurance premiums shot up after each one.

If they found out I'd hit a parked car, they would take away my car and forbid me to drive again. Not to mention if they knew where it happened... at the Sky Lounge, a twenty-one and over club. Lizzie had hooked us up with fake IDs. I'd never ever been to a party, much less a club. I was a goner.

"Come on, Nat. Maybe it's not that bad." Lizzie opened the passenger door, and I followed suit, squinting my eyes in fear as I crept forward. My optimism nosedived when I heard her say, "Oh, no. It's bad." She gnawed at her bottom lip. Both of our cars were smashed together like a front-end sandwich, and the debris from the headlights was sprinkled all over the pavement like confetti.

I dropped my head and rubbed my eyes. “I can’t believe this. What am I going to do? I’m screwed. I’m so screwed.” I fought the tears threatening to fall. “I can’t tell my parents about this. They’ll jerk me out of school. They’ll keep me locked up in my room, and I’ll never...”

“What the fuck happened?” a deep, familiar voice growled from behind me.

My head popped up, and confusion settled over me. What was he doing here? I watched warily as Axel slowly prowled closer. He pulled up beside me with a hand at his chin, and his eyes zeroed in on the damage in front of us. He seemed far more concerned than an innocent bystander.

“Please tell me this isn’t your car,” I croaked, somehow knowing it was.

He exhaled sharply and stepped closer, slowly scanning the damage to his sleek BMW and the bashed in hood of my practical Toyota sedan. Broken plastic crunched under his shoes. He stood frozen for a few seconds before he asked quietly, “Are you going to tell me what happened?” He smoothed a hand over the bashed front end of his car before he casually turned back to me, waiting for an explanation.

Hoping for a miracle, holding out hope that this was only a bad dream, I gazed at my friend, who watched silently like a deer caught in headlights. So much for my lifeline helping me out. Time to face the music. I licked my lips. “It was an accident.”

“No shit,” he rasped. “You hit a parked car directly in front of you. How the hell did you manage that?”

I was so distraught; I ignored his sarcasm. “We were leaving the club, and I thought I’d put the car in reverse... I’m not used to driving in these heels, and my foot slipped... and I guess I put the car in drive...” I was babbling like an idiot, but it was the truth. “I’m sorry. I promise it was an accident.”

“Hold up. Hold up.” By now, he was facing me with a hand in the air, halting my words. He took a minute to study

me from the top of my head, to my strapless minidress, and down to the high heels I wore. “You were here tonight?”

Oh, god. Was he going to use this against me? What if he found out I was underage? My heart was racing, and he kept staring at me like I was some weird specimen. Maybe he was going to call the police and keep me here to file a report. “Were you?” he stressed.

I smoothed a hand over my forehead. “Yes.”

He took a few steps closer and tilted his head. His expression was impartial, and his voice was calm. “I didn’t know you were someone to frequent a club.”

“I’m not—not really. This was my first time.” Why were we discussing this? Shouldn’t he be shouting at me for wrecking his expensive sports car?

“Your first time...” His voice was gravelly as he continued to study me.

“My first time to go to a club, and I was leaving. Then this happened.” I held out my hand in hopelessness, like I was about to lose the battle of holding in my tears. I rubbed at the corner of my eye, certain I smeared the damn eyeliner I had on. “I’m so sorry.” I choked the words out, hating how I sounded so pathetic.

“Mm-hmm,” he murmured in thought. “It was an accident, right?” He lifted a shoulder as if it wasn’t a big deal and spoke in that calm cadence he always seemed to have. “Just give me your insurance information—”

“No!”

His brows drew in, probably thinking I was crazy and desperate, which I was. “You don’t have insurance?”

“Yes. I do.” I licked my lips nervously. “I do have insurance.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

My shoulders slumped. “I don’t want my parents to find out.”

He stood silently for several moments, and my anxiety rose with each passing second. I felt a tear dipping down my cheek, and I turned away before he could see. Gah, why was I so emotional? Because I was about to lose my car and my college life at Hillside. I was being slightly dramatic, but it seemed like a real possibility.

“Why? It was an accident.”

“Because...” I shook my head. “They wouldn’t understand,” I breathed out. “I’m done here if they find out.”
Why did I tell him that?

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t file another claim on my parents’ insurance,” I groaned. “I’ve already had two wrecks in the past year, and my father warned me if I had another one, he would take away my car. Can we handle this without filing a claim?”

“Hmmm,” he said quietly, tapping his index finger on his chin. “Seems like you’re in a predicament, aren’t you?”

He sounded sympathetic, but something else flashed through his expression. Something not so sympathetic.

“I’ll pay for the damages, somehow,” I said, but I knew it would be impossible to come up with the amount of money to cover the damages. I’d definitely need another side hustle—or two or three or four or five—in addition to my part-time job at the library. I could donate blood. And write research papers for students. What was the going rate for that? It would take me several months, years even, but if I worked hard enough, it could happen.

“No.” He crossed his arms and glanced down at the ground. “Then, I guess it was my fault.”

“What?”

“I hit your car.”

“But you didn’t—”

“It was my fault, okay?” he cut in.

“I don’t under—”

“Understand?” He raised his eyebrows and took a step closer. “I think you do understand. I accidentally threw the car in drive and ran into your parked car. What’s there to understand? I’ll handle it.”

I eyed him like I was waiting for him to say he was joking and that this was all just a bad dream. “Are you serious?”

He nodded solemnly. “Very.”

“Okay.” I swallowed slowly. “Somehow, I’ll pay you back.”

“I don’t want or need your money.”

“What is it you want?”

His smile spread slowly, and two dimples materialized. “Now, that’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it?” His words hung in the air between us before he leaned in and said, “I still need that date for the Pike formal.”

He would take care of this situation if I went to the formal? This all seemed wrong, and my pulse raced with apprehension. There had to be another way.

“On second thought.” I pursed my lips, knowing most people would’ve taken the deal he was offering. “I’ll give you my insurance information.”

His brows rose, clearly incredulous. “You’d rather risk losing your car than attend a formal with me at a five-star hotel?”

I nodded solemnly. “It’s my fault. It’s the right thing to do.”

“The right thing to do. Of course, a good girl like you would never consider compromising her morals.” He studied

my face before peering down at my body. “How old are you?”

A chill ran down my spine. “Why?”

“You have to be twenty-one to get into the Sky Lounge.”

My heart stopped. “I’m of age.” My words came out stilted.

“Of age? Come on, now. Don’t disappoint me by telling a lie. Gotta keep those morals in check, don’t you?” He moved in closer as he watched me.

I held his stare before dropping my eyes and saying quietly, “I’m nineteen.”

Silence passed. “Nineteen. It seems like you’re not quite of age to be here.” He leaned into my cheek, and my breath caught in my throat. He ran his nose down my skin and hovered over my lips. “I smell alcohol.”

“I had one drink,” I said unsteadily.

He paused, lingering over my mouth, but he drew his head back with a faint smile. “You’re underage. You were drinking. You hit my parked car.”

My heart pounded in my chest, knowing I was screwed. He held all the cards. “Are you trying to blackmail me?”

“No. Blackmail sounds a bit harsh, don’t you think? I was only stating the facts.”

I exhaled slowly, rubbing a finger over my brow. “What do you want?”

“You know what I want.”

I glanced over at Lizzie who was watching this exchange in quiet interest. “Fine,” I sighed. “I’ll go. I’ll go to the formal with you.”

I didn’t know if I’d made a deal with the devil, but at the moment, it seemed like a better deal than the alternative. I’d rather suffer through this date than ever disappoint my parents.

Chapter FIVE

Natalie

The next day, I made it to class—barely. I’d almost overslept since I didn’t get home until four in the morning. Then I couldn’t sleep because I was still overwrought from the events that had passed. Axel said he’d handle taking care of the cars, so I put my trust in his hands and gave him my car keys because I really had no other choice. He even set Lizzie and me up with an Uber to take us home.

I slid into my seat, mulling over my other dilemma—attending this formal with Axel. He said we would be staying overnight at the Four Seasons in Austin. I needed an evening gown, but I didn’t have one, and the event was tomorrow.

“Good morning.” Axel had a cat-that-ate-the-canary smile on his face as he took the seat next to me. He studied me, apparently taking in my baggy hoodie and sweatpants that I’d haphazardly pulled out of the closet this morning without thought. My thick hair was in a messy bun. I looked like a hot mess. From the look on his face, I’m certain he was thinking the same thing.

He leaned in and whispered, “Rough night?”

“You know it was,” I said lowly and opened my laptop, pulling up my notes. As usual, our professor was still piddling around, filtering through papers in his satchel.

“Sorry to hear that. Maybe you’ll have a better day today.”

“I doubt it.”

“Don’t be such a pessimist. You have me, so your luck is already changing.”

I glanced up at him with brows drawn together while he innocently stared ahead, watching our professor and clicking a pen in his hand.

After class, I gathered my things while Axel stood in front of me, waiting. He tipped his head toward the exit. “Come on.”

“Where?”

“To make your day better.”

We walked across campus to a parking lot. He led me up to a black BMW convertible. This wasn’t the car I ran into last night. That one was blue. I eyed him in surprise. “That’s not your car.”

He side-eyed me. “Very perceptive. It’s a rental. My car’s in the shop. By the way, so is yours.” He clicked the remote.

“It is?”

“Yep. Had it delivered this morning.”

“How?” Usually, it took days, weeks even, before I could get my car repaired in the past.

“You’re such an inquisitive little thing, aren’t you?” He held the passenger door open for me. “I have my ways.”

I dropped down in the seat in a daze.

We pulled out of the parking lot, and soon we were in the middle of the town, where there was a ritzy shopping center with boutique stores. He parked in front of a store with the name *Danielle’s Closet* scrolled in fancy script and was at my door before I could open it. “What are we doing?”

“Shopping for a dress.”

I opened my mouth to protest. But he tapped his index finger under my chin, closing it. “I won’t take no for an answer.” Apparently, I was getting a clearer picture of this very fact.

I checked the time on my phone, seeing it was well before ten in the morning when boutiques normally opened. “It’s not open yet.”

“Yes, it is. I know the owner.”

Of course, he did. Must be another one of his many fans. As if he only had to snap his fingers to get his way, the door of the boutique opened, and a stately, attractive woman dressed in a designer dress stood at the door, smiling. “Axel, it’s so nice to see you.”

“Mrs. Jones, you’re looking as lovely as ever.” He walked over and placed a kiss on her cheek. Apparently, even older women fell under his spell. Did he sleep with her, too?

“Thank you, and you know you can call me Danielle. I already pulled some dresses for you.”

“Great. This is Natalie,” he said, and I waved awkwardly, still amazed at all he had accomplished this morning without my knowledge. I guess I could see how people were easily sucked into the world of Axel Thomas. Self-assertive indeed. “And Danielle is my coach’s wife.” He winked at me as if he knew I was wondering how they knew each other.

“Come along, dear. I have a dressing room set up for you.” She led me to the back of the store, to a small room with gorgeous dresses draped on hangers.

“I’ll take it from here,” Axel said, lingering by the room. Was he going to come in here and help me change? And why was I here, looking at dresses? I knew they would be too expensive.

I glanced down at the tag on the pale pink silk dress beside me. One thousand dollars? I couldn’t afford this. I drew my brows together. “I can’t afford to pay for this.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

Wordlessly, I flipped through the tags on the other dresses that were just as expensive, if not more. “Are you gonna try them on or not?” he asked.

I shook my head and finally came to my senses. “I can’t.” Nothing about this felt right, and I was fooling myself to believe it was.

“Why not?”

“Honestly, I don’t know what we’re doing here.”

“Is it not obvious? I thought you were a smart girl— magna cum laude material and all that. I’m finding you an appropriate dress for the formal.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. Neither one of us knows or likes each other that much, so you can stop with the fairy godmother act.”

He raised his brows, and an impersonal smile spread across his lips. “Fine by me, if that’s what you want. You’re here because you owe me a favor. This is part of your debt. Now pick out a damn dress before I do it myself.”

I tilted my head in disbelief. Any stranger would’ve seen a pleasant man who appeared to be an amicable person. However, something seemed unnerving as I studied his mesmerizing dark eyes. There was a hardness as if an invisible shield was drawn and nothing could affect him.

It was weird that I thought this, but I couldn’t help but shake the nagging feeling that something was off. Who was I kidding? This whole situation was off. I hit his car, and he was making me go to a formal with him because I was too scared to face the music with my parents. In a sense, he was doing me a favor. So, I closed my mouth and complied, yanking a hanger off the hook and slamming the curtain closed in his face.

My teeth clenched as his raspy snickers scraped my nerves like fingers on a chalkboard. I yanked my hoodie over

my head and slipped off my sweats. I left on the pale blue T-shirt that read, *I'm hardcore now!* in block letters, with the usually sunny character Bubbles from *The Powerpuff Girls*, who was angry and scowling with her teeth gritted. My shirt also had a giant coffee stain on it, but I was in too much of a hurry this morning to sort out whether I'd picked out a clean shirt or not. At least it didn't smell repugnant. Small victories.

I unzipped the pink chiffon dress and slid it over my head, adjusting the thin straps over my shoulder. It was a beautiful dress. More beautiful than any dress I've ever owned, not including my saris. I hated to sound cliché as the words flowed in my head, but I did begrudgingly feel very princess-like in it, despite the pale blue shirt I wore underneath and Bubble's eyes glaring at me like I was failing her in some way. *Don't judge me, Bubbles. You don't know the shit I'm dealing with right now.*

I heard the wisp of fabric move behind me as a large hand curled around the curtain, pushing it aside. "You dressed?" Axel asked.

Despite being fully clothed, I gripped the curtain, trying to keep it closed. "Wait!"

"Stop stalling. Let me see."

My silence apparently spurred him to slip inside and yank the curtain closed behind him. Oh, my god. The confines of the space were small, and he was a muscular giant compared to me. The air grew thick as I glanced at him through the mirror hesitantly.

His eyes met mine in the mirror. Unreadable. "Turn around." He motioned with his finger.

My cheeks felt hot, and I turned around cautiously, careful not to accidentally touch him in any way.

"I already told you I don't fucking bite," he murmured under his breath.

"I've never done this before," I whispered lamely, staring at his brick wall of a chest.

“You’ve never done what before? Tried on clothing in a dressing room?”

I shook my head, despite knowing he was making a joke. “I’ve never tried on a dress this expensive or had a guy buy a dress for me. I’ve...” Why did word vomit decide to surge up my throat at this moment? I shook my head before I said anything else. “This is too much.”

“Let me worry about that.” Studying my face, he lightly touched the diamond stud piercing in my nose. “I like this.”

“Thanks.” My cheeks warmed. Seriously? It was just a small compliment.

He reached behind me and pulled out the hair tie, which was holding my messy bun together. My hair spilled down over my shoulders and lower back. I felt my heart speed up.

“Now.” He spread his fingers through my hair, arranging it until he seemed satisfied. “Leave your hair down.” Then he smirked as he trailed his finger down my arm and tugged on the short sleeve of my tee. “I like this dress on you. Wear it for the formal. But next time, lose the shirt, *Hardcore*.”

Chapter SIX

Natalie

“You look gorgeous, Nat.” Lizzie set the curling wand down on the counter and gave my hair a final toss.

“Thank you.” I ran my hands over my dress, smoothing out the wrinkles. I tried to keep from wobbling in the silver high heels I was wearing, courtesy of Axel. They weren’t cheap either. “I hope I don’t fall on my ass and ruin this dress. It was super expensive.”

“Yes. Everything from Danielle’s is.”

I stopped smoothing the soft material of my dress. “How did you know I bought it there?” She never asked me where the dress came from. In fact, I found it odd that she didn’t question me about it at all, considering she knew I didn’t have a fancy dress of my own.

“Ummm.” She looked away, and before she said more, a knock sounded at the door. “That must be Axel.” She rushed out and left me in the bathroom. I exhaled slowly and grabbed my makeup bag, double-checking that I had my necessary toiletries and contact case and solution, hoping I could manage with contacts tonight since they sometimes irritated my eyes. Normally, I wore glasses.

When I stepped into the room, their backs were to me, and I heard, “You really went all out for her dress.” Lizzie’s

voice. Wait. Lizzie did know?

“Thanks for giving me her dress size.”

She was in on this, too? “Excuse me? You were in on this?”

Both of them turned and looked at me. Lizzie looked like a child who’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Faint pink spots marred her porcelain skin as she wrung her hands in front of her.

“For convenience purposes,” he said. Axel swiped a thumb over his jaw and leisurely studied me. “Not bad.” He stepped toward me. “You ready, Hardcore?” He nodded over my shoulder. “Is that your suitcase?”

I was convinced Axel’s way of answering questions was to do a rapid-fire change of subject and annoy me in the process. Regardless, I nodded.

He moved past me and grabbed my carry-on. Lizzie shrugged helplessly and mouthed, “*Sorry.*”

Soon, a hand was at my back, nudging me forward.

“Have fun,” my friend said lamely.

“Oh, we will.” Axel winked at her and led me out the door.

“What was that about?” I asked as we passed through the doors of Agnes Hall.

“What was what about?” he countered as he strode beside me.

“You coerced my best friend into helping you find a dress for me?”

“Coerced? That’s a bold statement.” He smiled wryly. “So far you’ve accused me of bribery, blackmail, and coercion. Do I look like a member of the mob or something?”

My lips twitched, and I looked away. He nudged me on the arm. “I don’t have to coerce someone to do anything.”

Then his eyes swept down my dress. “Most of the time, I don’t, anyway.”

“Are you always this blasé?”

“Uh-oh, pulling out the big words, aren’t you? Blasé?” He glanced at me as if offended before veering off to the trunk of his car. “That’s a lazy word to describe me.” He popped the trunk and slung my suitcase inside. “I’m actually impressed by a lot of things.”

“Like what?”

He scraped his teeth over his bottom lip. “You look pretty damn impressive in that dress, Hardcore. Nothing blasé about it, that’s for damn sure.”

My face heated as my head warned me against his bullshit. He closed the trunk and walked over to open my door like a perfect gentleman. When I stepped in, he bent down behind me, and his nose grazed the back of my neck. My breath caught, and he said, “You smell good, too.”

“Thanks?” I squeaked out as my butt hit the car seat. “I guess you’re impressed by good hygiene.”

He left me hanging with one of his mysterious smiles and closed the door.

We pulled off campus and turned into a neighborhood with rows of fraternity and sorority houses. “I thought we were headed to Austin?”

“We are.” He parked the car in front of a three-story Greek revival house surrounded by a group of people dressed in formal wear and lounging in front of a sleek black party bus in the driveway. “We’re taking a party bus.”

Gathering our things, he led me over to the bus. Once Axel was spotted, it seemed he became the center of attention, and everyone flocked to him. I felt myself tense up, but he kept a firm hand at my back as he greeted people with ease.

“Who’s this?” a tall, willowy blonde who looked like a cover model called out, staring at me as if I were some

undiscovered specimen. “She doesn’t look like your type.” Her eyes shot to Axel, who was shoving our bags into the luggage compartments. Did he do her wrong? She sure as hell looked like it. “New blood?” Her words were snarky and felt like I was part of an inside joke I wasn’t in on.

Axel stood up and shook his head before glancing down at me. “Let’s get on the bus.”

He held out his hand, and I slipped mine into his, pushing the snarky, beautiful girl’s comment aside. *I don’t know these people. I couldn’t care less what they thought of me. It is only one night, and I can do this.*

We found a spot inside the bus, and more people joined us. There was a bottle of champagne on ice beside us, with flutes, and Axel seized them and poured me a glass.

“Maybe I shouldn’t,” I said cautiously as he held it out in front of me.

“Why?”

“I feel like I need to keep my wits about me.”

“Lose your wits, and I’ll keep a watch out.” He nudged his chin. “Relax a little for once.”

“Easy for you to say,” I said under my breath wishing for once I could act as relaxed as he always seemed. He sat with his legs spread, and he draped a muscled arm, straining under the fabric of his charcoal grey tailored suit, over the back of the seat. He looked every bit a sophisticated gentleman who was very much in his element.

More couples were filing onto the bus and stopped to fist-bump him or say a few words as if he were the king being greeted by his people. I’m certain if he had a signet ring, they would drop to their knees and kiss it. I watched in silence and took a sip of the champagne, licking my lips. *Damn, this is good.*

I glanced over and saw him watching me intently.

“What?”

He ran a finger over his bottom lip, then shifted his attention to something behind me. “Where the fuck is Jensen?” some guy with chestnut brown hair and an air of privilege snapped as he whisked by us.

Axel’s demeanor remained relaxed. “He’ll be here, Justin. Calm your tits.”

“He better be here within the next five minutes or we’re leaving his ass.”

“Yeah, right.” Axel chuckled, but there was no humor in his eyes. “You itching to get your ass kicked by him again?”

“Whatever, man.” Justin shook his head and led the blonde standing beside him—the one who’d made the ‘new blood’ comment to me—to the front of the bus.

A few minutes later, it seemed the bus was filled. Drinks were passed around, and the murmur of conversations was all around us. Axel looked up from his phone as I saw another couple climb on, both looking flushed. “You got here just in time. We were about to leave without you,” he said.

The large guy, who looked like a Viking, flashed a smile at Axel and led his date to sit down beside us. He looked familiar, as well. Seeing his build, I was certain he played on the football team. “You know you wouldn’t have taken off without me.”

Axel reached behind us and grabbed the bottle of Dom and another glass before handing it to the gorgeous redhead. “Kenz, you want some champagne?”

“I would love some. Thanks.” Axel poured her a glass and introduced us as he refilled my glass.

“And this loser”—Axel pointed a beer bottle at the Viking—“is Nicholas.”

“Nick will suffice.” He jerked the bottle out of Axel’s hand.

“Glad to see you finally graced us with your presence, Jensen. Thanks for holding up the party, as usual,” Justin

called out sarcastically.

Nick smirked, pulling Kenzie close. “What’s wrong, Davis? You sound like a whiny ex-girlfriend.”

“Nah. As president of the fraternity, who has a responsibility for all the expenses, I’m just concerned because we’re paying for this bus by the hour, and we spent a good thirty minutes with everyone loaded on here, waiting for your ass.”

“You wanna dock me for being late or something?” Nick pulled out his wallet. “What do I owe you?”

It was very evident, despite the teasing banter, there was tension between those two. Justin was scowling as he raked his eyes over Kenzie, who acted as if she was oblivious and stared at her drink in her lap. Then Nick leaned in and devoured her mouth. Soon, people were howling and catcalling as they went at it—everyone except Justin, who seemed very pissed.

Axel slapped Nick on the shoulder, keeping a wary eye on Justin. What was going on?

The bus was in motion, and everyone moved on to something else, settling into conversations again. Throughout the ride, I found out Nick and Axel were both members of the Pike fraternity and were close friends who shared a house with two other friends who happened to be teammates, as well. Kenzie was very nice, and you could tell she and Nick were very much into each other. They were sickeningly sweet to one another, and I was kind of jealous, wondering what it would be like to be in a relationship. A real relationship.

After checking in at the Four Seasons, we filed into the elevator. We all stepped off together on the ninth floor. Nick and Kenzie’s room was on the same floor as ours but on the east end of the building. “Meet you down at the lobby in thirty,” Nick said, striding off with Kenzie stuck to his side, as if he was on an urgent mission.

“I won’t hold my breath, man. I know y’all are about to go make a baby.”

I raised my eyes in surprise at Axel, while Nick held his middle finger in the air without looking back.

“It was a joke, Hardcore.” Axel slid the keycard into the door and pushed it open, waiting for me to pass by. “Damn, you really don’t get out much, do you?”

Self-conscious that I was alone with this man, who was basically the poster boy for every person who had a pulse and a sexual fantasy, I stepped into the room. I needed to remain calm, but I couldn’t when I saw the king-sized bed with a fluffy white comforter and thousands of pillows.

“What’s wrong?” he asked and dropped down on the edge of the bed.

“There’s only one bed.”

“Uh-huh.” He glanced down at it. “One giant bed.”

“I thought we would have doubles.”

“We aren’t at summer camp, Nat.” He scratched his chin absently.

“I know.” I spread my fingers over the plush comforter, trying to cover my nervousness, worried he would have certain expectations. “It’s fine.”

“Hey.” I felt his hand close over my shoulder. “You’re anxious. Talk to me.”

I drew my hand away from the bed and crossed my arms over my stomach. “I’ve never been on a date before. I’ve never been with anyone before... intimately.”

“Oh.” I could feel his eyes on my face, but I refused to look. “Never? As in never ever?”

“Never ever.”

“So, you’re a virgin.” He sounded like he garbled marbles while getting the words out.

I hung my head in embarrassment as several quiet seconds passed by.

“I see.” He slid his index finger under my jaw, lifting my chin and coaxing me to meet his gaze. “You have nothing to worry about. I didn’t ask you to this formal to sleep with you.”

I was both relieved and puzzled. “Why *did* you ask me?” Frankly, anyone would’ve jumped at the chance to go out with Axel. The reason he blackmailed me into going and was spending a large chunk of money on my car and other expenses on me didn’t add up.

“Maybe I just wanted to go and have fun.” He shrugged. “And not have to worry about fulfilling someone’s false expectations or leading them on.”

What did that mean? “You don’t think I have any expectations? You don’t worry about leading me on?”

This time he smiled, and it seemed genuine. “Nope. You would’ve never agreed to this if I hadn’t twisted your arm, remember? And I don’t take advantage of virgins. Not my thing. So, you really have nothing to worry about. Think of this as a business transaction without sex being involved. We both get something out of this without the pressure of having to be emotionally available.”

“Oh.” Why did my stomach feel like I swallowed a boulder?

“Anyway, if it makes you feel better, I’ll put pillows between us. Make a barrier.”

“No. That’s not necessary. I can handle this... sleepover.”

“Sleepover,” he repeated and ducked his head. I could hear him stifle a laugh, which caused my cheeks to burn because it seemed like my mouth was a never-ending faucet for idiocy. Despite that, he continued. “After dinner, we can put on our pj’s, make popcorn, and tell scary stories.” He jumped up. “Actually, maybe I should call the front desk and see if they can send two sleeping bags up here.”

I rolled my eyes.

He clutched the comforter in his hand, peering down in deep thought. “This would make a great tent, you know. Wait, I have a flashlight around here somewhere.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket and clicked on it as a light flashed across the room. “*And God said, ‘Let there be light.’*”

I started to snicker and crossed my arms. “Stop. You know what I meant. This is all new to me.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “I was trying to make you laugh because I could tell you were starting to freak out.”

“I was not.”

“You were.”

“Not everyone can be as chill as you, Axel.”

He laced his fingers together and stretched them out in front of him, cracking his knuckles. “Yeah, you’re right,” he teased. There was something in his tone... I don’t know. It was strange how he seemed so personable yet distant, if that made any sense.

Chapter SEVEN

Natalie

Dinner was nice, which could only be expected from a five-star hotel, right? A five-course meal was on the menu, which included the choice of prime rib or sea bass—which I opted for—and perfect wine pairings. I wouldn't know what a good bottle of wine was, even if it hit me in the face, but Axel certainly acted like he was some kind of connoisseur.

He and I had barely spoken since we sat down to dinner. Not that he was being rude. He was just that guy who everyone seemed to gravitate around. Apparently, he loved the attention. As we ate, Kenzie and I talked about school while Nick and Axel carried on a conversation about football.

As soon as our dinner plates were cleared by the staff, Kenzie stood up and glanced at Nick. “I have to go to the restroom.”

After a while, Kenzie hadn't returned, and Nick dropped his napkin, starting off out of the dining room. Axel cursed under his breath, tossing his napkin aside, too. “I'll be back.” He took off after Nick, while I sat puzzled.

I thumbed my glass in thought. “I guess it's just you and me, wine.” Did I actually talk to my wine glass? I chuckled and touched my warm cheek. I felt really good right now. Shrugging, I took another sip.

“Hi.” Oh, no. Brunette Barbie—Jeanette, I think was her name—with shampoo commercial-worthy hair dropped down into Axel’s vacant seat. Of course, she was on the party bus, sitting with the group at the front of the bus with Justin. “Natalie, right?”

“Yes,” I said cautiously.

“What a lovely dress. I’d be careful around food and drink because these rental places have a strict policy about returning the clothing in perfect condition.”

What the hell did that mean? Her words were polite, but I would have had to be an idiot not to miss that it was a slight at me. She smiled demurely and continued. “Anyway, I noticed you were sitting by yourself and looked lonely. Would you like to come sit at our table?” She nodded over at the table across from us. I caught the group of friends over there, watching us and trying to keep a straight face. I inwardly cringed. Did Jeanette actually believe I would hang out with her? And I wasn’t lonely, dammit; I could entertain myself.

“No. I’m fine right here. My date went to the restroom,” I lied, because I didn’t know where the hell Axel and Nick went. As far as I knew, they were like the wolf pack in *Twilight*, sharing gazes and telepathically talking most of the evening. Damn, I wish I’d had Edward’s power of reading minds.

“Oh, yeah? Are you sure?” she asked with a concerned face. “The thing with Axel is...” She smiled demurely and shook her head. “Never mind.”

“What about him?” I knew I shouldn’t care and should ignore whatever she was about to say because she put off major mean-girl vibes despite her being somewhat friendly at the moment.

“Umm.” Her brows drew together as if this bit of information she was about to share was difficult to deliver. “So, he really did bring you as his date?”

“Yes. Why?” My eyes narrowed, and my cheeks felt hotter, and I knew it wasn’t solely because of the wine.

“You just don’t seem like his type.” She frowned, and I could feel myself tense. “No offense,” she added quickly.

I knew I wasn’t his type. In fact, I heard the same comment from her blonde friend earlier. But it still hurt to hear it.

“I didn’t mean it the way it came out. But since it was brought up, I think you should know something.” She laid a dainty, jeweled hand on my shoulder as if she were my dear friend and needed to confide in me, even though I never asked for this convo in the first place. I wasn’t fishing for information. “Axel is only with you tonight because he wanted to make me jealous and needed to bring a plus one to the formal.”

My body tensed, and I fought to remain calm. Why would I be surprised that he would have eyes for Miss Pantene and her perfect self? I already knew they had a history together.

Obviously, she took my silence as encouragement to continue explaining this situation, which wasn’t too difficult to understand. I sure as hell didn’t need a *Mean Girl’s Guide to Enlightenment* to explain this. “We broke up, and he was upset.” She lifted her lips wryly. “However, I know he still wants me back because he brought...” She scanned over me like I was leftover scraps from Thanksgiving dinner. “You. And please don’t take this as offense...” How many times was she going to tell me not to take offense as she passive-aggressively offended me? “You seem like a nice person.” My heart sank like an anchor.

Asking me on a date was just a stupid revenge plot to get back at Jeanette. Damn. That kind of hurt. Her words stung, even though I knew Axel and I had an agreement. A server came by and asked if I would like to try a chocolate martini to go along with the chocolate lava cake they were serving. *Yes, and yes.*

Now, back to Axel. I didn't delude myself into thinking this date was anything more than an agreement. Instead, I forced a smile. "You have nothing to worry about. I have no interest in Axel. In fact, he had to bri—"

"Natalie." I felt a large hand clamp down on my shoulder. I peered up, seeing Axel's unreadable face. "Did they already serve dessert?"

"Not yet, but I'm so glad I got to have a little chat with your... friend here." I clasped my hands together and sighed. "She's *so* interesting." I watched as Jeanette kept her eyes locked on him. She was apparently oblivious to my sarcasm. She was oblivious to anything but him at the moment.

He finally seemed to notice her. "Jeanette."

She batted her eyelashes and watched him in adoration. "You look so handsome tonight. Is that Tom Ford? Didn't I help you pick out this suit?"

He shook his head and glanced off to the side as if he was annoyed or disinterested. Either way, he didn't seem heartbroken, but maybe that was part of his front. "You're in my seat," was all he said.

She took her time standing up and leaned into him like she wanted to tell him something private. He backed up, holding his hands up beside his head and ignoring her as he looked off into the distance.

"I miss you," she said with a pout, and I almost thought she'd stomp her dainty, heeled foot.

"Go back to your table."

"Can we talk?"

He shook his head slowly. "I don't do scenes," he said curtly. "And you're trying to make one. Don't embarrass yourself."

She stared at him as if he'd slapped her or something, but I guess it worked to get her away from him. "Fine. This isn't

over.” Finally, she strutted off like a petulant child while he dropped down into his seat, not giving her another glance.

The wait staff came over with my chocolate martini and plates of chocolate lava cake for everyone seated at our table. “Oh, wow. What a beautiful presentation.” I eyed the martini glass coated in a chocolate glaze and the beautiful dessert, which was a pile of chocolate cake in the form of a volcano, drizzled in dark chocolate syrup. Axel was sitting beside me, arranging his napkin on his lap. It finally registered that Nick and Kenzie hadn’t returned. Maybe they went back to their room.

I lifted my chilled drink with both hands and brought it to my lips.

“What is that?” Axel asked, peering at the drink skeptically.

“Just a dessert drink. A chocolate martini.” I took a sip and licked my lips over the rich chocolate sweetness. It tasted glorious. Anything to get the bitter taste of Jeanette’s conversation out of my mouth.

“Pace yourself, Hardcore.”

“It tastes like a liquid dessert. It’s fine.”

“It also has vodka, and you’ve already had champagne and wine.”

“So?”

“So, you aren’t used to drinking like this.”

How intuitive he was. Although, I had to begrudgingly admit that he was right. *Am I that much of a homebody who never does anything fun? Yes, you are.* That’s why Lizzie had tried to get me out of my shell, and then I crashed into his car, starting this whole mess. *Stop thinking*, I told myself. I needed this buzz to kill the self-worthlessness I was feeling.

“Did Nick and Kenzie go back to their room to make a baby?” I took another sip and stifled a giggle. Wow. Those words just came out of my mouth. As I set my glass on the

table, I realized some of my drink spilled over on my hand, so I brought it to my mouth and licked it off.

When I glanced at Axel, I caught him staring at me. There was no casual smile on his lips. He ran his tongue over his teeth, keeping his eyes on my mouth. I finally dropped my hand. He cleared his throat and leaned in. I had a crazy notion he was going to kiss me, but he only grabbed my martini and took a leisurely sip, licking his upper lip. “They were tired and went back to the room.”

“Oh. That’s nice,” I breathed out, realizing I was staring at his sensuous lips. Warmth rolled over my skin and pooled between my thighs. He was gorgeous and sex personified. *Get it together, Natalie. This is not even a real date.* Finally, I glanced down at the lava cake that was beckoning me, and I cut into my cake, taking a big bite. “Oh, my god, this is so good,” I moaned.

“Damn,” Axel groaned under his breath and picked up his fork. He shoved a piece into his mouth, looking down at his plate.

“Jeanette seems so nice.” I grabbed my glass and took another sip.

Bringing the fork to his mouth again, he swallowed the piece of cake, giving me a look that said he knew I didn’t mean it. “No, she’s not. Did she say something hateful to you?”

“I’m not certain. She was polite, so... is it actually hateful when you preface something by saying ‘no offense’?” I was being cheeky and didn’t care.

His mouth turned down. “What did she say to you?”

“Nothing I didn’t already know.” I winked at him and took another bite of my dessert. The alcohol was making me bold. Speaking of which, I needed another sip.

However, his hand clamped down on mine and brought it back down on the table, looking pointedly at the drink. “You’re gonna regret that in the morning.”

“I already regret this whole evening.”

Chapter EIGHT

Natalie

The next morning, I woke up and felt groggy with a dull headache. I reached over to the nightstand and grabbed my phone. It was nine in the morning. Glancing behind me, I saw the extra pillows piled up, providing a barrier in the center of the bed and a vacant spot with the sheets indented, indicating someone had slept there. Last night came back to me. Axel. The five-course dinner. The champagne, the wine, and the chocolate martini. Jeanette and her bitchy reveal.

The rest of the events were fuzzy, but I must have put myself to bed and had the wherewithal to take out my contacts because my eyes weren't irritated. Exhaling, I sat up and saw my glasses by my phone. Slipping them on, I noticed two aspirin, a glass of water, and a sticky note on the nightstand written in a bold script that read, *Take these for your hangover; Hardcore.*

Consuming them, I slid out of bed, needing to pee, but I assumed Axel was in the bathroom since he clearly wasn't in this room. Regardless, I walked over to the door, but it was ajar and dark. Where was he? Did he decide he'd served his time as my date last night and left me to rekindle his relationship with Jeanette?

I knew there weren't any expectations, but I had at least hoped we'd finish this farce after I'd safely arrived back on

campus. I didn't want to have to rejoin the party bus back to Hillside this afternoon by myself. That could be awkward. *Would* be awkward. Hell, I'd take an Uber before I'd ride back on that bus by myself—before I'd allow Jeanette to rub it in my face.

After peeing and brushing my teeth, I took a shower. I wrapped a towel around my body and stepped out of the bathroom to pick out my clothes. I was contemplating when to request a ride on my app and leaned over my suitcase to grab some underwear.

“Natalie.” His deep voice shook me to my core. I jumped up, and the towel slipped through my grip. I caught it awkwardly as it draped over my lower abdomen. Oh, my god. I tried to wrangle the towel up my body but caught a glimpse of Axel, shirtless and in athletic shorts, sitting in one of the chairs at the table by the window.

He had earbuds in and was watching me with his legs manspread and his phone in hand. I'd never seen a shirtless man in person. Especially not one who was built like a Greek god. *Wait. Did he have his nipple pierced?*

Then it hit me as water dripped from the ends of my hair, down my bare skin, over my boobs—my exposed boobs. I dumbly glanced down at the sagging towel hanging around my waist.

Time stopped as I stood frozen. Axel's eyes were blank as he flashed his eyes over me. “Are you going to put on some clothes, Hardcore, or are you going to just stand there and stare at me?” he said with disinterest and settled his attention back on his phone.

I rapidly drew the towel around my breasts and found a shirt and a pair of shorts. Practically sprinting to the bathroom, I slammed the door and leaned against it, blinking away the tears that were threatening to fall. Could I experience any more embarrassment? I didn't want him to see me naked, but did he really find me so repulsive?

After dressing and giving myself time to calm down, I opened the door and saw him still seated across the room.

“You’re still here,” I said, acting as if nothing had happened.

“Were you expecting me not to be?” His eyes still carried that blankness as they roved over my now-covered breasts.

I wanted to crawl into a sinkhole. “I thought maybe you left already.”

“Left the hotel? No.”

“Oh.”

“I wouldn’t leave you here. Do you think I’m that much of an asshole?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Well, the formal’s over...”

“You in a hurry to get rid of me?” His mouth twisted wryly.

I paused too long, which caused him to shake his head. “Don’t worry. We only have a few more hours together. I need to shower, and we’ll meet Nick and Kenzie for breakfast.” He stood up and whisked by me to the bathroom.

Axel and I barely spoke on the trip back to campus. I felt like I was someone who’d overstayed my welcome, and he, too, was ready for this farce of a date to end. I was still battling a dull headache from a hangover, so I closed my eyes and drifted to sleep. He nudged me awake when the bus pulled up in front of the Pike house.

As I opened my eyes, I straightened my glasses to see Jeanette walking past us to the exit. However, she paused, glancing between Axel and me, and said, “Looks like the newness of the date already wore off. Such a pity.” She leaned over close to Axel. “Whenever you’re tired of pouting, you know where to find me.” She patted his shoulder and stomped off.

I caught him out of the corner of my eye, and he seemed to be staring off at her with a tight line drawn at his lips. “Let’s go,” he said quietly.

When he parked his car in front of my dorm, he glanced at me briefly, staring down at my hands twisting in my lap before he opened his door and stalked around to the trunk of the car. I drew the door open and tracked around to the trunk as he closed it. “I can take in my things.” I reached out for the carry-on and bag, but he lifted them up and shook his head.

“I don’t want you trudging up three flights of stairs with this. I can do it.”

Was it guilt he felt for what happened, or did he think it was something perfunctory he should do? I kept silent as we trekked up the three flights of stairs. Standing by the door, I was ready to take my stuff inside and forget this weekend, but I was polite. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He set my things down. “Your car should be ready in a few days. I’ll have them deliver it to your dorm when it’s ready.”

I’d almost forgotten how this all came about, but he’d done me a solid, and I’d always be grateful. Even if I was a revenge date for him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He crossed his arms, glancing down at me with that adorable smirk and those dimples that seemed to be his trademark. The public mask was back in place. Finally, he leaned in and said, “I’ll see you around.” His lips brushed my ear, and I froze, watching as he backed away and strolled off down the hall. “Don’t be a stranger,” he called out casually over his shoulder.

We’d exchanged phone numbers the other night of the accident, but it was only for practical purposes. It wasn’t like we were going to keep in contact. What would be the purpose?

Sighing, I entered my room and put all my things away. Lizzie was working at the Velvet Bean coffee shop and

wouldn't be home for a couple of hours. The room was too quiet, and I wanted to talk to my best friend.

My phone buzzed, and my heart fluttered, hoping it was Axel; however, it was only my mom. I wasn't ready to talk to her. I didn't tell my parents I was going to spend the night at a hotel in Austin for the night with one of the biggest football players on campus.

As if my mom would know who he was. She wouldn't. The only football my family watched was the international sport that the world watched, but Americans called soccer. Besides, if she knew I was alone in a hotel room with a guy, she would've completely lost her mind. Even when mutual guy friends came to my house in a strictly platonic or academic way, it was normally in a study group setting. And my parents made certain we stayed in the kitchen or living room, where we were well monitored.

I let it go to voicemail. Immediately after, I received two consecutive texts.

Mom: Kanchu, it's Sunita.

Mom: You need to come home. Your father passed out.

Oh, my god. Oh, my god! My sister-in-law was texting me on my mother's phone, telling me my dad passed out. I quickly gathered my purse, calling back my mom's phone as I stepped out of my room. After two rings, Sunita picked up. "Kanchu."

"What happened to my father?" I demanded, set on driving to my parent's house. Then I remembered I didn't have a car.

"I don't know." My sister-in-law was crying. "He passed out on the floor."

"Is he okay now?" Pausing, I put her on speakerphone and found my app to get a ride. My parents lived about an hour away in San Antonio. I didn't care about the fare; I needed to see my dad. I needed to know he was okay. My

breathing rose as I started to panic. I clicked on the nearest car that was five minutes away.

“I don’t... I don’t know.” There was chaos and noise in the background, and I heard my mother screaming. “He’s not breathing.”

“Then do CPR on him!” I yelled.

“Your brother is.” She gasped as I heard more chaos in the background. Tears started to fall down my cheeks. “The EMT is here. I have to go.” And the line went dead. I felt like I couldn’t breathe and prayed for the health of my father. Standing out in the parking lot of my dorm, I saw a four-door sedan pull up. Numbly, I got in, keeping the chants going in my head for my father to be okay.

My dad is fine. Everything will be fine.

He had to be.

Chapter NINE

Axel

—Three Months Later

“It’s a new season. We’re coming in like national champions. And guess what?” Coach Jones barked out the question as he stood in front of our team on the field as we began our two-a-day practices in August, marking the beginning of our senior year. “We’re going to end this year like national champions again!” All our teammates roared in agreement. Coach pumped his fist in the air. “Now, let’s get out there and show the world that Hillside is not a team to fuck with!”

Amidst the cheers, we broke out of our team huddle and ran onto the field to commence with our drills, rearing to begin practice. After running drills for over an hour, I felt my calf start to cramp. I tried to work through it, but it was tight and burning like a bitch. As soon as the play was over, Coach Davis, our running back coach, approached me with a frown. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just a little cramp.”

“A little cramp? Go over to the sideline. Get treatment. You don’t need to injure yourself at the first practice of the season.” Coach shook his head. “And don’t try to come back on the field today. I hope it’s just a cramp and not a calf strain.” Coach knew I was his cash cow at running back and

didn't want to lose me to injury. *Join the club*, I thought, yanking at my chin strap. Lifting my helmet off my head, I walked off the field as two trainers sidled up to me. One with a water bottle, spraying it into my mouth, and another at my side, ready to throw my arm over his shoulder to help me get around.

"I can walk. It's just a cramp." I was frustrated, and it was already hot as fuck this morning in early August, so it wasn't unusual to experience cramps. Besides, I'd probably been hitting it too hard in the gym lately because I was so fucking driven to make this season my bitch and make my name known to potential pro teams.

When I got to the sideline, the water bottle trainer walked off, and the other one had me sit on the ground while he called over another person to help out. The trainer who stayed at my side grabbed my shoe, lifting my leg as he flexed my foot. "Massage his calf while I stretch him out," I heard him tell someone.

I tossed my helmet aside and lay back on the grass, and then I saw... her. She had on a red Falcons T-shirt and khaki shorts, looking like every other trainer on the field. Except she didn't look like every other trainer on the field. Her thick, black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she was wearing her glasses and no makeup. She also looked down at me like she would rather be anywhere else but here. Her brows furrowed under the rim of her glasses, and her tan skin glistened under the brutal Texas sun.

"Well, what are you waiting for? You signed up for this job and knew there were at least fifty other students who would kill for this internship. If you can't handle this, then I can call up someone else who wouldn't blow this opportunity," the trainer holding my foot said to her.

"Sorry," she said and placed her hands on my calf. You could tell she wanted no part of this. Or any part of me. She made it very clear when I dropped her off after the formal a few months ago, and she went radio silent. Hell, she could've

at least sent me a thank-you reply for having her car fixed and delivered in better condition than it was before she crashed into my car.

However, the way the trainer spoke to her rubbed me the wrong way. Who the fuck did he think he was? “Leave us.” Natalie dropped her hands from my calf like a hot potato. I rolled my lips in frustration. “Not you,” I said quickly and pointed to the trainer who was pushing my foot forward, nudging him away. “You. Go.”

“But I’m the head trainer.” He glanced at me as if I were crazy. “It’s my job to make sure you get proper treatment.”

“I will get proper treatment.” I glanced at Natalie, whose cheeks were now flushed. “She can take care of me.”

“But she’s just an intern.”

“Do you think I’d risk myself? My health? My body? I call the shots here.” I glared at him in annoyance. I knew I sounded like a douche, but dammit, I wanted to talk to her and find out why she’d ghosted me. He still stood there like he didn’t believe me, which pissed me off. “Leave us before I lose my shit.”

With his lips flattened together, he turned to Natalie with disapproval dripping from his eyes. “Is this how you got the internship? Using your *connections*?”

She physically cringed and dropped my leg. “No. I would never.”

“Whatever. Be a little more creative.” He stalked off, and Natalie was about to trail after him, apparently set on pleading her case. But I sat up and grabbed her wrist, keeping her near me. I’d deal with that asshole later.

She tried to yank her arm away, but I didn’t budge. “Let me go,” she gritted out as she scowled at me.

“You’re here to take care of me. That’s your job.”

“I didn’t sign up to be humiliated.”

“I didn’t sign up to humiliate you, so I don’t see the fucking problem.”

“Did you hear him? I’m going to lose this internship.” Panicking, she tried to tug her hand away again and sighed in exasperation when I didn’t relent. “Why are you doing this?”

Why the fuck was I doing this? She was obviously trying to do her job, and here I was, messing shit up for her. However, I wasn’t beneath giving her grief. “You’re here to tend to the players. That’s what you did sign up for, right?” I lifted my leg and brought her hand to my calf. “Do your job. Heads will roll if Coach finds out I wasn’t served proper treatment.”

“Wow. I’ve been insulted by two jerks today when all I wanted to do was try to help people. Now, I’ll probably lose this internship, and at this point, it doesn’t really matter.”

I could feel her releasing my leg, and again, I gripped her wrist. “Massage my calf, Hardcore.” I could see her eyes narrow, and she looked like she was about to kill me. Then she must’ve realized I was high up on the food chain because she unwillingly started digging her small hands into the back of my calf. Hard. To the point it fucking hurt. “If this is how you do your job, then I wouldn’t be surprised if you do lose this internship.”

“Do you find this funny?”

“No. Not at all, at the moment. You’re digging into my skin, and it hurts like a bitch.” She seemed to ease up somewhat, but it was still uncomfortable. “What I find fucking funny is how I texted you after the formal and never heard from you again. You could’ve at least said thank-you for delivering your car back to its original state. Actually, better than that because I had the shop replace your tires and rims and had your windows tinted. That was an extra two thousand dollars, by the way, that I gladly ate because I wanted to help you.”

The pressure of her hands eased up even more. Her eyes were focused on my leg. “Thank you,” she said quietly. “I’ll never be able to repay you.”

“I told you. I don’t want your money.”

She kept her eyes downcast, focusing on her hands.

“I want to know why you never returned my texts,” I said quietly.

Her head shot up and sad confusion settled over her face. “I lost my phone.”

That sounded like some kind of bullshit excuse I would’ve given a stage-five clinger who wouldn’t stop DM’ing, texting, or even showing up at my front door, which had happened a time or two. But her saying that to me? “Okay, Natalie, couldn’t you think of a better excuse than that? I didn’t know you were that much of a liar.”

“It’s the truth,” she rushed out, seeming frustrated. No. Actually, she seemed visibly upset, like she might cry at any moment. I wanted to press her, but something told me to let it go.

“I’m sorry. I can’t—” She dropped my leg and ran off toward the field house. I watched her disappear in bewilderment. *What the actual fuck?*

Chapter TEN

Natalie

It'd been three months since my father died. He had a massive heart attack and was already pronounced dead by the time I made it to my parents' house. I would never forget the flashing lights of the EMT vehicle in my parents' driveway and how our neighbors were crowding the front yard when I stepped out of the Uber.

I'd rushed into the house to see my mother wailing in agony over my father's lifeless body. My older brother and my sister-in-law were at her side. I dropped to my knees and broke down. My heart had been shattered. My father had always been larger than life. He'd taught me so many of my firsts. How to ride a bike. How to ice skate. Anything I wanted to learn, he'd always been eager to help me with. He said I was his shining star. He was our rock. And now he was gone.

Everything after moved in a blur. First, I realized I'd lost my phone, which I probably left in that Uber, but didn't realize it until days later. And it was a rude awakening because whoever stole it hacked into my banking account and went on a shopping spree. So I decided to get a new number when I bought a new phone. However, some of my contact information was lost during the transaction. It was a nightmare.

Fortunately, my professors had given me an extension, and I was able to finish my spring semester classes online. Obviously, I lost my position at the library, but I didn't lose any sleep over it. Lizzie was kind enough to deliver my car back to my parents' house and stay with me for a few days because I was falling apart.

We were a Nepalese family living in central Texas and had Father's burial service with our Hindu priest. His body was cremated, and my mother booked arrangements for us to fly to Kathmandu to spread his ashes on the Bagmati River. We spent the rest of the summer in Nepal, visiting with family. My mother owned her own beauty salon, and my father owned a dry-cleaning business. Luckily, he had trusted people who could continue to run the business. And, always a planner, he had a life insurance policy that would assure our family was financially stable in the event of his death.

I considered taking the fall semester off from Hillside. However, my mother was having none of that. "You are going back to school."

"I will. I just need more time. I'm not ready."

"No. You need to go back to school. Back to Hillside. It's what your father would want you to do." She ran her hand through my hair. "You are my strong child. I know how difficult this is. I know how much it hurts. But your father will always be with us. Always. If he were physically here right now, he would tell you the same thing. He would never want you to wallow in pity over his death."

"I'm not wallowing in pity. I just miss him so much." I'd never had to deal with grief in my own personal life, and although we believed in reincarnation, it was still difficult to process why my father's life was cut short.

"I know you do." Her eyes glistened with unshed tears as she pulled me into a hug. "I miss him, too. But that is just his physical aspect. His soul still exists. And we must take comfort in that and celebrate."

When we'd come home from Kathmandu, I'd received an email saying that I'd been accepted for an internship as a trainer for the Falcons football team. My classes were already set for the fall since I'd preregistered in the spring before finals.

Now, it was my junior year, and I was back at Hillside. Back in the same dorm that I shared with Lizzie last year. When I entered the room, she was sitting on the edge of her bed with her nose stuck in a thick manuscript. She was trying out for the lead role in a new play on campus.

Her head popped up when I closed the door, and she called out, "Nat! How was your first day as a sports trainer?"

Earlier events on the field came flashing back, and I shrugged. "I don't know. Uneventful." It was only day one of my internship, and I felt like I was thrown under the bus. I was certain I was about to lose this position if Josh, the person who was my mentor and also one of the lead trainers, was already accusing me of sleeping with the players to get this position in the first place.

And Axel certainly didn't help matters. I knew it was inevitable I would see him on the field among the hundred other football players, but I didn't expect to be singled out and have to actually tend to him. Talk to him. Touch him.

Then I broke down on the field and ran off.

I took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry. Do you want to talk about it?" Lizzie asked.

"Nothing to talk about." Changing the subject, I pointed to her stack of papers and set my backpack down. "How's it going with the script?"

"Oh." Her face lit up. "I think it's going well." She'd told me about a new play the theater department was producing, which was a modern remake of *The Breakfast Club*. Lizzie wanted to audition for the part of Claire Standish, the spoiled rich girl who was misunderstood. "Do you mind helping me go over some lines?"

“Sure.” I moved to sit beside her and scanned over my lines. Lizzie was driven when it came to acting, and I’d seen her performances on campus. She’d never won the lead role in a production at Hillside, and I knew how important this was to her to get this part. Not to mention, she was a very good actress, and her time was going to come, considering all the hard work she put in.

After going over the scene several times, she peered at me with self-doubt lingering in her eyes. “What do you think? Am I too over-the-top?”

“Are you kidding? I think you own this role.” Lizzie and I had seen *The Breakfast Club* several times since we loved old, angsty movies. It was one of our favorites.

In many ways, she was like the character in the movie... the only child of a wealthy family. She’d told me how her parents spoiled her with all of the material things she could ever wish for. However, they never gave her the one thing she really wanted. Their love and their time.

Lizzie had grown up with a nanny, while her mother and father gallivanted around the world. Her father was a famous musician in a rock band, and her mother was a costume designer who fell in love with him on the road, and they were inseparable ever since. Their careers seemed to take precedence over having a normal family. By the time Lizzie was twelve, she was sent to boarding school, where she attended until she was eighteen.

Although she never really lamented over her upbringing, it wasn’t too difficult to draw conclusions. Don’t get me wrong, she was a sweet person and a loyal friend, and for the most part, seemed very happy. However, there were moments when I could see a sadness she was hiding with a smile. The loneliness. In fact, she’d ended up spending Thanksgiving and Christmas with my family last year, since her parents were out of the country.

“Do you think I’ll get the role?”

I reached out and grabbed her hand, giving it a tight squeeze. “I have no doubt you will.”

“Thanks, Nat,” she said with a smile. “How are you doing? You know, *really* doing?” Lizzie had been a rock for me when my father died. She’d been there for the funeral, and she flew to Kathmandu and stayed with me for a few weeks, as well. Even when she wasn’t there, she’d called almost daily throughout the summer to make sure I was doing okay.

“I’m doing better. It’s hard, but I’m just trying to take it day by day.” It still hurt like hell, but if I kept telling myself I was fine, eventually, I’d believe it—right?

She leaned in and gave me a hug. “I’m always here for you if you need to talk.”

“I know, and I’m here for you, too.” I blinked, keeping the tears at bay. It was comforting to know that I had a good friend who had my back. When we pulled apart, both teary-eyed, I swiped at my eyes. “Okay, enough of this sappiness. Let’s discuss the most serious problem. What do we want to eat for dinner?”



The next day, I rushed to practice, wondering whether I still had a spot on the team as an athletic trainer. I knew I was running late, but my mom had called me, which caused me to panic, making my heart stop, terrified something dreadful had happened again. My mind always seemed to go into panic mode when she called unexpectedly. Luckily, she just needed to talk to me. My brother and my sister-in-law had flown to New York to visit her parents in Queens, so my mom wanted to hear my voice and know I was okay.

Mom was by herself and lonely. No matter how hard she tried to keep a brave front, I knew she was still having trouble dealing with this situation. We all were. She and my father had known each other most of their lives. They’d been married for twenty-five years and did everything together. Although my

mom was the more vocal, outspoken one, it was my father who was the silent leader, whose words of wisdom always guided us. Mom would never admit it, but she had been very codependent on my dad. Regardless, I would risk being late to help my mother get through a difficult time.

When I clicked off my cell, I warily searched around the facility, looking for Josh, since he was the one I had to report to. Finally, I spotted him talking to one of the defensive players on the team.

Walking over to him, I waited patiently until he finished his conversation. He was tall and lanky, with fuzzy red hair. He also had beady eyes and never smiled. After the other guy walked off, he glanced down his nose at me. “You’re late.”

“I’m sorry. I had a family emergency.”

He scowled at me. “Don’t let it happen again.”

“I won’t.”

“Make sure it doesn’t,” he said and added, “I also need to remind you about your professionalism on the field.”

“My professionalism?”

“Yes. I don’t care what you do on your own time, but as a trainer, we have a code of ethics. You would know this if you read the agreement you had to sign to take this internship.”

“I did read it.” My teeth clenched, pissed over what he was implying. Or about to imply.

“Then you know flirting with players is highly unprofessional, as well as being alone with a player—”

“I wasn’t flirting, and I know another person must be present to give treatment.”

“You were alone with a player yesterday.”

“I was not. We were on the field. In plain view of everyone. That wasn’t my choice, by the way. You walked off, leaving me with him.”

“Make sure it doesn’t happen again,” he warned. “Or you can kiss this opportunity goodbye.” He strode away while I stared daggers at his back. *I can do this. I can do this*, I mentally chanted.

“What did he say to you?” I jumped, hearing Axel’s deep voice behind me.

“Nothing.” I glanced up at him and froze. He stood tense, with eyes narrowed and jaw clenched. He looked... furious.

“What did he say to you?” he said slowly, peering off in the distance like a lion set on his prey before he attacked. Goose bumps pricked my arms, even though it was hot outside. I’d never seen Axel worked up over anything.

“Nothing that concerns you, so please don’t cause any more waves.” I sighed in exasperation.

“I haven’t caused any waves yet, but if he’s threatening you, you better believe he’s gonna run into a fucking tsunami.”

“Axel, this isn’t a joke, okay?”

He finally glanced down at me. The intensity of his gaze gave me pause. “Oh, Natalie, I’m not joking right now. I assure you.”

“I need this internship. Please don’t ruin this for me.”

I expected him to make some smart-ass quip about how I was here to serve him like he did yesterday. However, his next words took me by surprise. “You won’t lose this internship. I promise. But if he makes you uncomfortable again, nothing will stop me from confronting him.”

However, when I showed up at the field the next day, it was apparent that Axel had lied. He was standing beside Josh on the side of the practice field, and as I drew closer, my stomach dropped in dread. Josh had a greenish bruise under his eye. “Natalie,” he said tightly.

Axel wrapped his hand around Josh’s shoulder as though they were buddies. “My friend has something he wants to say to you. Don’t you, Joshy boy?”

Josh gazed at me sullenly. He looked like he would rather be anywhere but here. "I'm sorry for being rude to you."

"And?" Axel piped up pleasantly, leaning in closer to him.

Sighing, Josh clasped his hands together; his thumb dug into his palm. "It won't happen again."

I shot Axel a withering look that he ignored as he turned to Josh. "That's right. Because if it does." Axel's pleasant demeanor dropped in a heartbeat. "I will make sure you never have a job in this field again. You feel me?"

Josh nodded in fear.

Axel's smile reappeared as he slapped him hard on the back. "Good. Now, run along, Josh."

When we were standing alone, I narrowed my eyes. "How could you do that?"

"He needed to be set straight."

"I told you nothing happened. You promised."

"Did I?" he asked innocently. "I promised that you wouldn't lose this internship. And you won't."

I swiped a hand over my head. "Please stay out of my business, and let me do my job in peace."

He raised his hands as if he were an angel who'd never punch someone in the face and make threats. "Only looking out for you, Hardcore. That's all."

"I can take care of myself."

"All right, then. If you say so." His tone indicated he didn't believe me, and I shook my head and stomped off before any more unnecessary drama could unfold.

Chapter ELEVEN

Natalie

We were a month into the fall semester, and Hillside was playing an away game in Houston on a Saturday night. The Falcons were ahead by two touchdowns, with less than a minute on the clock.

There had been no more issues with Josh. I kept my head down and did my work, giving him no reason to complain.

I tried to steer clear of Axel, and luckily, there hadn't been any more injuries or issues with him, either. Like me, he was focused on his own business, which was rushing for over one hundred yards a game and punishing defensive lines that loaded up the box, thinking they could stop him. He was a machine, and now I knew why he was a god at Hillside. Axel Thomas was not only leading the conference in rushing yards. He was leading the nation.

I checked my Apple watch; it was almost eleven o'clock. I yawned, dreading the three-hour bus ride home. After all was said and done, we probably wouldn't get back on campus until after three in the morning. Luckily, tomorrow was Sunday, but I had a lot of homework for my classes, and that's how I'd be spending my day off.

Thirty seconds left on the clock, and our defense was on the field, still wreaking havoc on the opposition. I felt the hairs

on the back of my neck stick up as a shadow fell over me. Axel was standing beside me with his helmet off, his hands gripping the collar of his jersey. “How’s it going, Hardcore?”

“Good. And you?”

He chuckled. “Can’t complain. Two touchdowns and over 200 yards rushing.” He smirked. “Not bad for a day’s work, huh?”

He was so cocky, but he backed it up on the field. What he did tonight was insane. And I had to unwittingly admit to myself, I didn’t find it all that unappealing. As long as he wasn’t trying to suck me into any sideline drama with Josh. “Fishing for compliments? I never would’ve thought Axel Thomas would stoop so low.”

“I wasn’t fishing for compliments. Just confirming that you knew my stats.”

“I’m very aware of your stats, yes.” I kept my eyes on the field.

“All right, then.” The time on the clock ran out, and teammates started congratulating each other on the field, slapping hands, bumping fists, and bro hugging. Taking it as his cue to join them, Axel began walking backward toward the field as he kept his eyes on me. “You ever gonna give me your new number?”

“I thought you didn’t believe me about losing my phone.”

He flashed his teeth. “I realized you wouldn’t have ghosted me. You’re not like that.” He spread his arms wide. “I realized the texts I sent you were marked undelivered.”

Whenever I thought about the night I lost my phone, it brought back haunting memories of flashing lights, my mother wailing in pain, and the peaceful expression of my father as he lay lifelessly on our living room floor. It still hurt to think about it.

“Hey, you okay there? You spaced out on me.” Axel eyed me with concern.

“Yeah.” I forced a half-hearted smile. “Just tired.”

Tilting his head, he ran his knuckles under his chin. “It is past your bedtime, isn’t it?”

“Yo, Axel!” Players started gathering around him, giving him props. He winked at me before turning his attention to his boys, while I tried to still my galloping heart.

Another month passed, and Hillside was playing a home game against one of our divisional rivals, the Panthers. They, too, were undefeated, and this afternoon’s game was to claim first place in the conference, as well as to keep hopes alive of going to another national championship, since college teams had to have a perfect or near-perfect season to be considered one of the final four teams for a chance. It was about an hour and a half before game time, and I, along with another trainer, was in one of the many treatment rooms available, helping tape ankles and giving massages, even acupuncture if needed, basically doing whatever was needed to prep players to get ready.

I finished helping one of our offensive linemen tape his ankles and started to follow him out of the room, but then Axel showed up, peering down at me before nodding at one of the vacant tables as if expecting me to follow. Begrudgingly, I did, since it was my job, and he wasn’t any different from any other athlete on the team. He had on a Falcons T-shirt and athletic shorts and sat down on the edge of the table with his phone in his hand, looking at it as if I wasn’t there.

Since the last time he’d asked for my number, several weeks ago, we’d never really had a chance to talk again. I’d sometimes spot him, and he’d smile at me or wink on the field. However, Axel smiled at everyone. That was simply his demeanor. Sometimes, when I was working with another player, he’d walk by and say something to his teammate to the effect of, “*Watch yourself with her, or I’ll have to kick your ass.*” His delivery was always light, in a teasing way, so I really couldn’t get a feel for whether he was being serious or not.

However, as he sat before me, I was nervous. His nearness always made my stomach flutter. I cleared my throat, and he glanced up at me. “What do you need?” My voice sounded an octave higher than normal.

The side of his mouth curled up. “Mmhmmm,” he drawled slowly. “Still waiting on that number.”

“Why?”

“Calm down, Nat. I’m not asking for a booty call. Did it ever occur to you, being a trainer, that I might need treatment outside of practice? That’s what Dave does for me.”

It wasn’t unusual for athletes to have specific trainers they worked with. And I knew lately one of the trainers named Dave was the one who always seemed to hover around Axel, so why wasn’t he the one prepping him for the game? “Then why don’t you call Dave? Where is he, by the way?”

“His wife went into labor this morning, and he’s on paternity leave for the next month and a half.”

“Oh. I didn’t know.”

“Yeah. They had a nine-pound baby boy. I just received the text.” He showed me the picture of Dave and his wife holding their baby.

“Oh, he’s adorable.” He looked like a little angel. When I finally looked up, Axel was staring at me strangely, and his nostrils flared slightly.

He turned away and scooted back on the table. “My hamstrings are tight. I need you to massage them.” He rolled over on his stomach and stretched out, resting his chin on his crossed forearms.

“Maybe I should get someone else.” It wasn’t unusual to massage athletes, so why was I nervous about this? It was part of my job, but...

“No. I want you to do it.”

I stood there for several moments, staring dumbly at him. I'd watched him from afar many times during practice and admired his body. Who wouldn't? He was gorgeous. Lately, he'd also unwantedly crept into my fantasies, but I would never admit it to anyone. But touching him like this?

He peered over his shoulder with brows raised in impatience. "You want to hurry up? I don't have all day."

"Fine."

"Chop chop, Hardcore," he said and rested his chin on his forearms, staring at the wall in front of him.

Closing my eyes, I inhaled calmly. I could do this. *Just do this and get it over with.* I tentatively touched him and felt his muscle twitch. His skin was warm, but his muscles were tight. I ran my hand up the back of his thigh and heard him hiss.

"Does it hurt?" I paused.

"No," he responded gruffly.

"Just relax, okay? I'll try to work out some of this tightness, and then we need to make sure you stretch it out thoroughly before the game." I moved my hand up his leg, kneading the muscle.

He only grunted in reply as I continued to work on his left leg. Then I proceeded to do the same with his right leg. He was quiet, only giving a few barely audible groans, while I kneaded until I felt his muscle loosening up. When I finished, I tapped his leg. "There you go. You want me to tape you up?"

"No."

"I don't mind."

"Natalie, just go," his voice was terse, and he was staring at the ground beneath him, still lying on his stomach.

Was he angry? Did I do a poor job? I was confused. One minute, he was teasing, acting like we were friends, and the next, he seemed annoyed by me.

Without saying anything else, I backed away and stepped out of the room.

Thirty minutes later, guys were on the field, doing pregame warm-ups. I watched as Axel sat across the field, stretching. His face was set in stone. He was always focused before the games or he wouldn't be dominating like he had been every game, but today, he looked like he wanted to do someone bodily harm.

"Hey, Natalie." Tank Williams, one of our defensive ends, passed by.

"Tank. You ready?"

"Of course, I'm ready." He flexed his arms in a Superman pose. "That O-line can't stop me."

"That's right, and I expect three sacks from you."

"I'll have at least five. Probably more." He held out his fist to me. "Bet on it."

"I'm going to hold you to it." I bumped his fist with mine.

"For you, I'd do anything."

"Tank, if you touch her again, I'll break your goddamn neck." Axel materialized out of the blue, clenching his fists and glowering at his teammate.

My jaw dropped, but Tank just laughed, thinking Axel was playing. "'Sup, man, you ready to get it tonight?"

Axel looked like he was about to attack him. "Did you not hear what I said?" he asked, deathly calm. "Get the fuck away from her. Now."

"Hey, man. What's your problem?" Tank seemed completely puzzled because Axel never threatened teammates. He was the motivator on the team. The happy-go-lucky guy who didn't give a shit about anything but winning and showing up everyone on the field.

“Come closer, Tank, and I’ll give you an explicit demonstration.” He took on a crazed smile while his eyes shone like a feral animal.

“Bro.” Tank laughed nervously, as though he were afraid or unsure of his teammate and what he would do. He was pushing 6’5” and stocky, built like a tank, hence the name. Axel wasn’t quite as tall, but he was pure compact muscle and looked threatening and imposing. Apparently, even to the tough defensive lineman who ate quarterbacks for breakfast because he raised his hands in a gesture of peace. “You’re crazy, man. Why don’t you save your aggression for the game?”

“I’ll bring it like I always do. But you better stay the fuck away from her.” Axel slapped his chest hard with his fist. “You feel me?”

Tank waved his hand at him in acknowledgment, and I stood there in awe of how those two didn’t go at it with the way Axel was threatening our star defensive lineman.

Although he was trying not to engage Axel in an altercation, Tank turned my way and gave me a kind smile before he walked off. Axel took another step closer, and I could see how his broad chest constricted and expanded under his jersey. I also caught the brunt of his intense glare directed at me.

I was tired of his hot-and-cold behavior today. I didn’t know why he felt the need to be in my business and then push me away for no reason. He didn’t have that right.

“What’s your problem?” I asked, with my hands on my hips.

“*My* problem?” He closed in on me to where there was barely an inch between us. “My problem is that you are out here, in my space, in my domain, trying to fucking distract me.”

“Excuse me?” I sputtered. What did that even mean? He was the one who kept approaching me, engaging me for some

insane reason, when all I wanted was to work in sports medicine and not screw up this opportunity. This internship was one of the few things that had kept me sane these last few months.

“You know exactly what you’re doing. Out here stirring up trouble with the players.”

Was he actually serious? “Do you hear how ridiculous you sound?”

“It’s not ridiculous if it’s the truth.” He lifted his hand to my face like he wanted to touch me but stopped himself, curling his fingers into a fist. “Just be warned, Hardcore. Stick to your job and stop inciting the players, or someone will get seriously injured to the point that no amount of ‘physical therapy’ will help them.”

He didn’t smirk or leave a comment with a smile. Axel had made a threat. A serious threat to me. Throwing up my hands in frustration, I stepped back, not wanting to engage in this conversation. “Fine. Whatever. *You* do *your* job on the field and let me do mine. And stay out of my business.” I turned and stomped away before I drew any attention to myself because Axel damn sure didn’t care about being in the spotlight, as I’d witnessed game after game this season. He was a star, and everywhere he went, people followed. He didn’t seem too bothered about who heard us arguing. However, I didn’t think anyone was around, but you never knew.

I’d only gone a few yards before I heard footsteps padding behind me. Glancing over my shoulder, Axel was trotting up to me with a football cradled in his arm and determination oozing from his demeanor. He bent down to me. “As long as you’re on the same field as me, I will be in your business.”

Chapter TWELVE

Axel

“You ready?” Nick slapped me on my shoulder pads as he scanned the field.

“Yeah.” I glanced over and saw Natalie talking to one of our offensive linemen and checking his ankle. My hand involuntarily clenched at my side. Goddammit. I needed to get a grip. She was a trainer and doing her job, just like the twenty other Hillside staff on the field, but the more I was around her, the more anyone getting her attention pissed me off.

Forget about the part where I had a raging hard-on after she worked out my hamstrings. I nearly lost it on the massage table and fought myself from yanking her underneath me to work out my aching cock. That was a little concerning. More than a little concerning.

“You sure? Why are you bothering that poor girl?” Nick nodded in her direction.

“I’m not.”

Nick laughed. “You forget who you’re talking to? I know you, man. You like to mess with people. And she looks like she’s had about enough of you.”

“Fuck off, Nick. I’m not fucking with her.” He always had to point out stupid shit that didn’t pertain to him.

“Didn’t you take the hint when you took her as your date to the formal last spring? She’s not interested.”

I gritted my teeth. “I’m not interested in her, either. She’s not even on the table. Never was. She’s a virgin nerd who’s not even in the same league as me. As us.” I regretted the words as soon as they came out of my mouth. I wanted to shut Nick up. “These assholes on the team would chew her up and spit her out if she fell for their bullshit.” The thought of one of our teammates trying to get in her pants made me want to annihilate everyone on the field.

He side-eyed me with his brows mildly raised. “If you say so.” He pointed to the south entrance of the field, where our players were starting to pass through to the locker room. “We better join the team.” He tilted his head at me again.

“I’m good, Nick. Worry about your game.”

He smirked before he trotted off. I took one last look at Natalie, who was jogging behind some of the players and staff, as well. Her brows furrowed as she caught me watching. I spun and took off toward the entrance, vowing to shove this shit out of sight and out of mind.



“And the MVP game ball goes to... this cagey motherfucker, who rushed for four touchdowns and 150 yards.” Nick held a giant oval blob of crinkled foil that he’d shaped into a football above his head, while the crowd of people cheered around us. We were hosting an after-game party at our house, as usual. He brought the foil football down, holding it out like he was handing it off, and I ran to it with one arm over the other, ready to receive it.

“*Speech. Speech. Speech,*” someone shouted, and everyone fell in, pumping their fists in the air.

“Don’t encourage this joker because he already has a big fucking head,” Dmitri called out beside me, with his perpetual

resting bitch face. “Besides, he’ll never shut up.”

I lifted my lips and nudged Nick. “Somebody’s salty tonight, huh? I wonder why.”

Nick shook his head. “About as salty as you were before the game.”

“I wasn’t salty. I was focused on kicking some Panther ass tonight.”

“Whatever you say.” Nick’s girl, Kenzie, was approaching, and my buddy’s constant teasing was over because he only had eyes for his girl. Pussy-whipped at its finest. But he wasn’t the only one in the house like that. “Stay out of trouble tonight,” Nick added and waved me off as he slung an arm around his girl.

Like I would find trouble. Out of all of us living here, I was clearly the only one with any sense and kept my side of the street clean at all times. *Trouble*, I inwardly scoffed.

Roman was already MIA with his girl, Theo.

And Dmitri was staring down at his phone, texting with a little side grin. The fucker was probably making plans to see Sorina on the down-low. He thought nobody knew what the hell he was doing, but shit wasn’t too hard to figure out, considering he basically brawled with anyone who got near her.

But Dmitri wanted us to believe he was acting in a protective brother capacity—watching over his father’s ward. It was quite entertaining. Soon, D raised his head from his phone and walked off, ignoring the crowd around him, who was giving him props. Dmitri was about as sociable as a stripper pole. Shiny, with zero personality, but always had girls crawling all over him.

“Say hello to your ward for me,” I called out, which he returned with a middle finger. Man, all my roommates were fucking duds now.

“Yo, MVP, you ready to take me on in Madden?” Trey Lomas, our other running back, was at my side with a red cup in his hand. He was a sophomore and too overconfident for his own good, but he had swagger. I’d give him that. He was clearly in line to take my place after I graduated this year. He wasn’t a threat to me, and I actually liked the guy. I’d pay it forward. Make sure Hillside stayed in the spotlight.

I also couldn’t resist a challenge. “You think you’re ready for the big leagues, young’un?”

He grinned and pulled out a wad of hundreds. “I got a thousand here that says I’ll kick your ass.”

I chuckled and downed my drink. “Careful who you’re talking to, Lomas. You better be able to back that shit up if you’re going to disrespect your elders.”

“You know I’ve got mad respect for you, Thomas, but I’ve played a game or two of Madden in my life, so I’ll take my chances.”

“All right, then. Don’t go crying to your mama when it’s all said and done, and I take your broke ass to the cleaners.”

Trey’s lips twitched, but there was something hard in his eyes. “Are we playing or what?”

I walked over to the sofa crowded with other players and fan girls. Snapping my fingers, I said, “Move.” And like Moses with the Red Sea, the people parted, leaving generous space on the couch. It was good to be the king.

After playing one half against Trey, I was winning by two touchdowns. He was good, but he was delusional if he thought he could beat me. Nick and I could become professional gamers and make bank on this game if we weren’t headed for the NFL.

It was the second half of our game, and Trey’s team had the ball. “I thought you said you were good at this game,” I taunted as usual when I played this game. Any game, for that matter.

“It’s not over yet. Just wait and see.” His QB threw a slant pass to one of his receivers and got a first down. “There we go,” he said coolly. Then added out of the blue, “Hey, do you have Natalie’s number?”

And just like that, my chill evaporated. “Why?”

“She’s good, man. She did me a solid in the locker room after the game, and I forgot to get her number.”

My hands clenched the controller, and my gaze grew blurry with rage. *What kind of solid was he talking about?* “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Before I knew it, his team had scored a touchdown, and people around us were cheering. At this point, I didn’t give a fuck about the game. I was trying to keep myself from flying at him and choking his ass out for mentioning *her*.

“You know who Natalie is, right? The trainer on our team,” he said, obviously thinking I wasn’t following this conversation. On-screen, my player fumbled the damn ball, and his team recovered. “Yes!” he shouted.

I sat fuming, trying to keep myself in check while he said, “She helped me work out the soreness in my calves and said she had some exercises that would help me.”

Jesus Christ, Axel, get yourself together. I couldn’t lose my shit every time someone mentioned her name. I was gonna lose my mind, and I didn’t understand why I cared so much. I didn’t have any interest in her in that way, so why should I bother with what anyone else thought? “I don’t have her number,” I growled out, sounding like a fucking loser.

Yeah, she still hadn’t given me her damn number. Fuck, I’d thought about contacting her on social media, but all of her accounts were set to private, and I wasn’t that damn desperate to send a fucking friend request, no matter how badly I wanted it. People came to me. Not the other way around.

I was so in my head that Lomas’s team scored another touchdown. “Looks like this game is a tale of two halves, huh?” Trey looked as content as a greedy cat. If I were even

half as emotional as my roommates, this fucker would be in a hospital on life support.

“Just shut up and play. And find another damn trainer.” My team had the ball with a minute left on the screen. I was ready for this game to be over.

“I don’t want another trainer. I want her. She’s kind of fucking hot, too.” I misplayed the ball, and his defense intercepted and went down to score. Game over. I checked myself before I threw the remote through the eighty-inch flat-screen in front of me. I swear to God... if he said one more fucking thing about her...

“Looks like you got schooled.” Trey reached out and grasped the pile of cash on the console in front of us. I flattened my lips and gripped the edge of my seat. I hated to fucking lose. I hated hearing this joker talk about Natalie. However, I wouldn’t lose control. I never did, and I wouldn’t now. I’d been trained to keep my emotions in check and channel my anger into something productive. Like winning.

Someone patted my shoulder, and a shot glass was pressed into my hand. I glanced up to see Jeanette in my face. She had a fake pout on her overly cushioned lips. “I’m so sad you lost,” she drawled. “So, I thought you might need this.”

This was a recipe for disaster. But I wasn’t going to let it bother me anymore. Fuck it. I downed it. “Get me another,” I ordered, shoving her off as she giggled in glee. Let her have her stupid moment. I still had business to take care of.

Trey was pocketing his money. I held out my hand, stopping him before he walked away. “You don’t really think you can initiate a challenge before giving me a chance to redeem myself, do you? That’s not how this works. Best two out of three.”

He paused, looking a little unsure, before he shrugged carelessly. “Sure.” He sat back down. “Double or nothing?”

I pffted. “That’s child’s play. Five grand.”

“Five grand?”

“Did I stutter? When you come up here acting like you’re the big dog, you better be able to keep up with the pack.” I knew I was being an asshole, but I couldn’t let it go. Everything I did was premeditated and planned out, but not tonight. Tonight, I was freestyling, going on instinct. Soon, Jeanette was back with another shot, settling beside me.

“You already lost.”

“Did I? You fucking cheated.” I knew my reasoning was faulty. I was the one who got distracted.

“How did I cheat?”

I shook my head, ignoring the question because any rebuttal I had would sound stupid. “Here’s the deal. We’ll play two more games. If you win just one of those, you win the money. If you win both, then I’ll double your money.”

He raised his brows. “You serious, man?”

“Do I look like a liar?” Fuck. I was a player and a liar, but this fucker wouldn’t win another game.

Trey spread his hand out in front of us. “Let’s do this.”

I smiled like a wolf. “All right, then.”

Chapter THIRTEEN

Natalie

“How did I let you talk me into this?” I scowled at Lizzie.
“Remember the last time you coaxed me to go out?”

“Yeah, but you needed to get out and have fun. Don’t you remember telling me how you wanted to live a little this semester?” My friend flipped her black silk hair over her shoulder and shifted the bodice of her top, plumping up her boobs.

“I guess,” I admitted sheepishly.

“Besides, I drove this time and parked far away from any cars.”

I shook my head, trying to keep a straight face. Lizzie didn’t give me too much grief about the night I wrecked my car, but she had her moments.

She had on a dress with a corset and looked somewhat Snow White-ish, but the skirt only fell to the top of her knee. Instead of princess slippers, she wore red Chucks. Lizzie looked adorably theatrical, as usual.

I looked like I was ready to go to bed. Which I was when I got home after the football game earlier and slipped on my black leggings and a *Powerpuff Girls* shirt with Buttercup on it that read, *Don’t call me princess*. I topped it off with my authentic Hello Kitty black sweatshirt I’d bought when Mom

and I stayed a few nights in Tokyo this past summer when we were traveling back from Nepal.

Tonight, I'd only wanted to have ice cream and go to bed, but Lizzie guilted me into coming to this stupid Falcons after-game party. I was already dressed in comfy clothes, and she dragged me out before I had a chance to say no.

We walked up to the front of the house, and the music was blaring. The people here looked like they could all audition on a reality hook-up TV show for beautiful people. "This better be worth it," I grumbled. "Remind me why we're here?" This was so not Lizzie's scene either.

"One of the football players invited me. I forget his position, but he's a big guy. Anyway, he's a theater arts major and plays a side character in our production. His name is Jake something..."

"Jake Williams," I said, because I knew everyone's name on the team. "He's an offensive lineman." *So, this was why we were here.*

"Yeah. Him." She clasped my shoulder, not interested in the position he played, and led me through the open door of the modern home. "Put your game face on, honey. We're going to have fun tonight."

We passed through where there was a crowd of people settled inside, dancing and living it up. Everyone had red cups in hand. It was loud and crazy in here. Lizzie was looking at her phone, sending off a text. After a few seconds, her head shot up. "He's coming to meet us."

Oh, joy. I wondered if Axel was here, since I'd already noticed a lot of the players lingering around. I saw Tank hanging out in a corner, and he smiled widely, pointing at me. I waved at him across the room.

Soon, Jake was bowling through the crowd, with his eyes set on my friend. "Hey." He was huge, pushing over three hundred pounds, and that alone would make him intimidating. But with his blond hair that curled around his temples and big

blue eyes, almost doll-like, he looked almost sweet. He was always polite and soft-spoken on the field around me.

“Hi, Jake.” Lizzie had on her perfect smile.

“Lizzie.” He mirrored the same smile. Then his eyes cut to me. “Hey, Natalie.”

I nodded in acknowledgment.

He led us to the kitchen and quickly handed us red Solo cups of who knew what.

“You’ll like it,” was all he said and winked at Lizzie.

“Yeah,” my friend said, smiling brightly. We hung out around the kitchen and had a few drinks. Lizzie and Jake were huddled together, talking about their class. After a while, we followed Jake through a hallway and down a staircase to another room. People were packed in here like sardines, and music blared as people gyrated, nut to butt, around us. Like catching a wave, Lizzie and I started bouncing around to the music. I closed my eyes and let myself get lost in the beat.

Suddenly, a loud roar pierced the room, and I glanced in the direction of a ginormous flat-screen casting a video game. I realized who was the center of attention—of course, it would be him. Axel stood with his arms spread wide and head thrown back, soaking in the adulation of the group around him cheering. Not a surprise.

Somehow, I ended up pressed into a crowd, standing behind him. Axel peered down at the dark-haired guy beside him, who was slumped on the sofa. “Game over. Never bring a knife to a gunfight, Trey,” he said with a cocky grin, holding out his hand.

Trey reached into his pocket, pulling out his wallet, but Axel shook his head. “This was a free lesson. Next time, don’t try to play a player, son.”

“Are you serious, man? You won. Let me at least give you back your money.”

He shook his head. “Nah.” Then I saw the brunette Barbie, Jeanette, press up against him. My fingers dug into the plastic of my cup. Axel kept his focus on Trey. “Just stay the fuck away from Natalie. You got it? She’s different. She’s not fuckable material.” The next thing I knew, Axel stepped off, with Jeanette clinging to him as they passed through the crowd to the bar set up in the back of the room.

What the hell? My body tensed as people oohed around me. I ducked my head as humiliation set in. Not to mention, anger. I was usually invisible, but most of the team knew who I was. With shaky hands, I pulled my hoodie over my head, hoping to sink into the landscape of the crowd. After a few seconds, I realized everyone had moved on to bigger and better things as music pumped through the room, and bodies bounced around.

Where was Lizzie? I glanced around, hoping to find her nearby, but she and Jake were nowhere to be seen. Oh, my god, did my friend leave me here to hook up with Jake? I started moving through the throng of people, still reeling over what Axel said.

“Drink up!” Axel’s voice carried across the room, and I saw him and his other teammates, Trey Lomas included, taking shots and slamming their glasses down on the bar counter in the corner of the room. Jeanette was still clinging to him like a koala. Axel poured another round as more people started gathering around. My eyes narrowed, and I wanted to inflict bodily harm on both him and her. He scanned the crowd, and his eyes landed on me. He threw back his drink while he insolently stared at me.

It seemed the world gravitated to him, and why wouldn’t it? He was already a certified star, and his professional career hadn’t even begun. He had over 300,000 followers on social media and was already fielding endorsements. Sadly, I’d checked. It was okay for him to throw out stupid comments like that while he continued to live his fab, privileged life. I hated him at this moment.

Pushing through the crowd, I ran up the stairs, just wanting to get out of there. I didn't stop until I made it out the front door. Swiping at my face, I scurried across the driveway in between a few of the parked cars. Why did he have to be a jerk? Why did I come here?

I leaned against a car and took a few calming breaths. Eventually, I pulled out my cell and scrolled through my pictures until I came across one of my dad blowing out the candles on his birthday cake. That was the last picture I had of him before he died.

"I miss you, Dad." I sighed.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

I jumped, startled to see Axel stalking over to me. I pocketed my cell and pushed off the car. "Leaving."

"Who invited you here?" His words were condescending, and I was at my limit of his asshole attitude toward me this evening. And he had the audacity to question why I was here?

"None of your damn business. Who invited *you* here?"

"No one." He inched closer until the tips of his shoes touched mine. "It's my fucking house, and I am the damn party."

His house? Axel lived here, in this huge, modern mansion that most college students couldn't even afford?

"I didn't give you the invite."

He crowded me in, but I stood my ground, holding my chin up. "Don't worry. If I'd known you lived here, I would've never agreed to come."

"I highly doubt that," he whispered, but there was no humor in his words.

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I know who the fuck I am." His chest bumped mine, backing me against the car. "At least I did know," he whispered. His eyes were hooded as he stared down at me.

“You think it’s funny trying to humiliate me?”

“Come again?”

“You really think I’m going to fall for your bullshit? I was there. I heard what you said to Trey.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I heard you when I was downstairs. I heard what you said to him.”

His eyes widened a millimeter, but other than that, he didn’t react. “I wasn’t trying to humiliate you. I was only speaking the truth.”

“That I’m not fuckable material?” I hissed between my teeth.

“Exactly.”

My breath caught in my throat, and I reacted out of anger. I threw my hand up and slapped him. Then I stared in shock at what I’d done. I wasn’t a violent person. I’d never even fought with my brother when we were kids. I shook my head in disbelief and tried to sidestep around him, but he didn’t budge. In fact, he pressed against me, keeping me sandwiched between his muscled body and the car. “Let me go, Axel.”

“What if I don’t want to, Hardcore?” He tilted his head and rubbed his cheek with his palm where I’d hit him. “Maybe I enjoy getting a reaction from you. That’s something mildly disturbing to ponder, huh?”

His comment was puzzling, and it bothered me that I could never get a read on him. It pissed me off how I allowed myself to get pissed off. “I didn’t mean to slap you,” I said, trying to regain some semblance of composure. “But you had no right to say what you did about me to Trey.”

“I didn’t?” he asked softly. “Is that why you were here? Hoping to hook up with him?”

“If I were, it has nothing to do with you. Just like it’s none of my business how many girls you bang, nor do I care.”

“Girls I bang?” he asked in a semi-amused voice.

“Axel, why don’t you go back inside and join your adoring fans?”

“Why don’t you answer my question? Were you here to see Trey?”

“No.”

“Good. Because you aren’t on the menu for him.”

“On the menu? I don’t even understand what you’re talking about.” I studied his face, but he gave nothing away except a slight tic in his jaw.

“Of course, you don’t.” He reached out and tugged the edge of my hoodie off my head. “My little, naïve Natalie.” His fingers trailed down my hair to the ends that fell over my chest. Then I felt his touch ghosting over the side of my boob before gripping my waist. His thumb was almost touching the underside of my breast. My nipples tightened against my bra, and my breath hitched.

“Such an alluring package you keep well-hidden under oversized clothing.” I could feel something hard pressing against my stomach. “But I know what you’re hiding beneath the layers.”

I didn’t know what he was doing. He certainly seemed disinterested when he’d seen me step out of the shower that day in the hotel. Almost as if I weren’t even in the room—nonexistent. His hands tightened around my waist, and my breath hitched. “I should... leave.”

“You should.” His grip eased, but this time his thumbs skimmed under my breast, and my skin tingled in awareness. “You shouldn’t have been here in the first place.” His voice was laced with anger, and he dropped his hands.

I made a move to squeeze around him, and this time, he took a step back, letting me pass.

“Run along, Hardcore,” he rasped as he backed away. He gave me a flippant smile before he casually strolled around the

cars and disappeared into the garage.

I gazed numbly into space, while I felt my heart pounding in my chest. Running a hand through my hair, I pulled my cell out of my pocket and texted Lizzie.

Me: Could you take me home?

Lizzie: Yes. Where r u?

Me: I'm outside, out front.

Lizzie: Give me a few minutes.

Fifteen minutes later, Lizzie approached. "Hey. I'm sorry it took so long, but Jake needed me to talk him through the direction he wanted to take his character." Of course, my friend would come to a party to rehearse.

"No worries. I can get a ride if you want to stay." I didn't want Lizzie to be annoyed because I was having a shitty time. That wasn't fair to her.

"Are you kidding? I'm not going to leave you by yourself." She yawned. "I was getting tired anyway since I pulled an all-nighter last night, finishing a paper for my Literature and Film class."

I nodded in silence and followed her down the street to her car. "Do you think I'm unfuckable?"

"What?" She pulled up short. "Why would you say that?"

I shrugged. "I don't know." I almost regretted saying the next words because it made me sound like I had low self-esteem, but I really didn't. I knew I was inexperienced and never had a boyfriend. I also knew I'd always put my schoolwork first over having a social life. I'd been okay with that.

I wasn't desperate for a boyfriend, but ever since I'd met Axel, I looked at things differently. It made me want things I hadn't really thought about before. His words were hurtful and confusing, and now I wished I'd kept my mouth shut.

"Did someone say something to you at the party?" Lizzie's eyes narrowed and started walking back to the house

as if she were going to confront someone. She could be so dramatic. “Who was it?” she demanded.

“No, no. It was nothing.” I jogged up behind her, stopping her. “Nobody said anything, okay? I was just wondering if people see me as plain and uninteresting.”

“Are you kidding, Nat? You are an amazing person. And if someone thinks that, then they aren’t worth your time anyway. Sounds like they need to work on themselves.”

I hugged her. “Thanks, Liz.”

“You’re welcome. If I ever hear anyone say anything like that about you, then they will die a slow death. I have connections, you know.”

I giggled in her arms because there was never a dull moment with her. This girl, who’d freak out if she saw a cockroach, was acting like she had mafia connections and would do bodily harm to my enemies. I loved this girl.

Chapter FOURTEEN

Axel

“Axel. Axel!” Loud pounding blared in my head, rousing me from sleep. “Axel, open the door!” Nick yelled, banging on the door again. *Fuck!* My head throbbed, and my mouth felt like I’d swallowed a bag of cotton balls. I glanced around me to confirm I was in my own bed, in my room, and alone. Thank God.

“Go away, Nick!” I groaned, rolling onto my stomach and ducking my head under the pillow. What the hell did he want? It was Sunday morning and our only off day when we didn’t have classes, practice, or team meetings.

“He won’t answer,” I heard him say.

“Pick the lock.” That was Dmitri. Did that dumbass think I was stupid? As much as I’d fucked with them, there was no way I’d ever give them the opportunity to go through my room.

“I tried, but he also has a dead bolt on his door.” Nick. He should’ve known better.

“What’s the holdup?” Now Roman was in the mix.

“He won’t wake up, and the door’s dead-bolted,” Nick said.

“Goddammit, Axel. Get your ass out of bed, now!” Roman pounded on the door. “We have twenty minutes to be at the golf course.” Golf course? Shit. I forgot we were invited to play at a charity event today. Coach would be there, along with other celebrity athletes and golfers. “If you don’t open this door,” he warned, and I rolled out of bed, fighting off nausea. Stumbling through my room, I mimicked his voice because I knew his next words: “I’ll kick your ass.”

I opened the door and scratched my stomach. “Sup?”

Roman looked like he was about to pop a vessel in his temple. Nick shook his head, probably thinking I looked like shit, while Dmitri peered down his nose, expressionless. “Get ready,” Roman snapped. “You have five minutes.” He glanced at Nick. “You take him because I don’t want this fucker to puke in my car.”

“Come on, Roman. I thought you cared,” I called out, seriously fighting off the urge to vomit. “It’s not my fault, *Dad*, that you stocked the house with unlimited tequila.”

“Grow up, Axel,” Roman said before he stalked off.

Nick bent over, and his shoulders shook. Even Dmitri’s lips twitched. Normally, I would’ve joined in, but I closed my door on them, searching for much-needed aspirin and a quick shower before I *did* yak all over the hallway. Normally, I didn’t take it to the limit on alcohol. Yeah, I’d occasionally smoked a little weed in the past and drank socially. But, for some reason, I was in a bad way last night, and I went balls out on partying, and now my body hated me.

Fifteen minutes later, I was riding shotgun in Nick’s truck. “Dmitri, you didn’t want to ride with Roman? You know his pussy ass is so needy now.” I donned my Oakleys and wore my ball cap to block out the obnoxious sun. I’d already downed three bottles of water with Liquid IV.

“Hard pass. I’d rather take my chances seeing you puke than hear Roman bitch. Actually, it would make my day to see you puke.”

“Am I here to amuse you?”

“No. You’re here to piss me off, but you in a weakened state makes me strangely content.”

“Bro, that’s harsh and mildly weird the way you phrased it, but whatever.” I glanced at Nick, about to ask about Sorina, knowing it would get under D’s skin, but Nick frowned and shook his head. *Not the time*, his look said. I let it go and sank back into the seat. I wasn’t even in the mood to talk shit today. Instead, I closed my eyes and reveled in the scent of vanilla that still lingered in my nostrils. Her scent. My favorite flavor.

“Not my problem you can’t handle your liquor, pussy,” Dmitri said. Ah, there it was, but again, I wasn’t feeling inclined to have a diss battle. Talking shit to D was easy pickings.

“L. O. L,” I said flatly, so over this.

“We’re here.” Nick stated the obvious, trying to shut us both up, I’m sure. Didn’t blame him. This convo was fruitless and annoying as fuck. Roman was standing on the sidewalk with his golf clubs, waiting with a personal dark thundercloud over his head.

“You gonna be okay, Axe?” Nick eyed me with concern after Dmitri exited the truck. I knew he always had my back, and I appreciated it. He could dish out anything like the rest of us, but he also turned into a school counselor on an afternoon school special at the drop of the hat. Deep down, Nicky had a heart of gold.

“I’m good.” I twisted the bill of my hat around to the back of my head, getting into show mode because I was Axel fucking Thomas, and the world was mine—hungover or not. We all grabbed our clubs out of the back of Nick’s truck and made our way to grumpy-ass Roman.

“About time you got here.”

“Calm your tits.” I slapped him on the shoulder. “We were giving you time to put together our itinerary. Did you schedule bathroom breaks, too?”

Roman's jaw ticked, ignoring me, and he walked over to the entrance of the country club where we were supposed to sign in. Coach was there, waiting. "About damn time you showed up, boys." He thrust out a list that had all the pairings. There were sixty people playing in this event today. I was paired with Dmitri. Oh, joy. And we were playing against Roman and Dallas Lobos's quarterback, Marco Cruz.

Everyone had set times when they would tee off. Before I followed my friends outside, Coach pulled me aside. "You okay, Axel? You look a little green beneath the gills."

"I'm great, Coach. I think I had a touch of food poisoning last night, but I'm fine now." Then it hit me that I could get some info from him. "I do have a small issue."

"What is it, son?" Coach's thick brows drew together as he threw a hand on my shoulder.

"I need the phone number of one of our trainers since Dave went on paternity leave. I meant to ask but never got around to it. Would you be able to get it for me?"

"Of course, whatever you need."

And just like that, I had her number. Did I feel somewhat shitty about the means I used to get it? No, not really. The perks of being a star athlete. Shrug. Whistling, I strolled outside to the back end of the club to see clusters of golfers practicing their swings.

"You better have your shit together today. I'm not trying to make a fool of myself out here." Dmitri teed off on a ball at the range as we waited for our scheduled tee time.

"I'm good, man." How many more fucking times did I have to tell everyone I came in contact with today that I was fine? Dmitri didn't give a shit about my well-being. Okay, maybe he did a little bit, but he was more concerned about making an impression when playing against NFL QB, Marco Cruz. Dmitri was gunning to make an impression today. That wasn't hard to see. Didn't blame him. However, we weren't

being judged on our golf game to make it to the pros. But it always helped to network.

He nodded. “Good. Then let’s kick some ass today.”

“We will.” I gave him a fist bump.

When we finally teed off, I actually ended up driving my ball farther down the course than anyone in our group. “Good shot, Axe,” D said as we took off, walking down the greens to our next shot.

“Told you I was good to play.”

He nodded in confirmation, as if we were on the football field together and knew we had each other’s backs during the game. “Let’s do this.”

At hole five, we were three under par while Roman and Marco were two strokes behind us. Dmitri and Roman were fucking fangirling Marco like crazy. Marco was a three-time Super Bowl champion, in addition to receiving every damn award possible in football. He was a legend who would eventually be inducted into the Hall of Fame.

They were still chatting it up as we made our way to the next hole. I took it as my chance to test out the waters and pulled out my phone, typing out a text.

Me: What’s up, Hardcore?

Dot. Dot. Dot.

Natalie: Who is this?

I grinned. She knew who it was. She answered quickly enough.

Me: Your favorite running back.

The dots showed up, then disappeared. Then popped up again and disappeared again. Finally, a message came through.

Natalie: Trey?

My blood started to rumble, and I stared off into the distance in frustration. But I unwillingly had some admiration for her sass.

Me: You know who it is.

Natalie: What do you want?

“It’s your shot, Axel. Quit playing with your phone,” Dmitri grumbled behind me, peering over my shoulder.

“Bro, get out of my personal space.” I clicked off my cell before he could see anything. Taking my time, I stepped over to my golf bag and deliberately contemplated which club to use.

“I’m going to personally kick your ass if you don’t hurry up,” Roman piped up like a bitch with his arms crossed at his chest. “I have zero patience for this shit. You’re throwing off my rhythm.”

“Maybe that was my plan.” I raised an eyebrow, taking even longer to decide when I already knew which club to use. I just liked to piss him off. Not my problem he had the patience of a toddler.

Marco watched us with mild amusement. “I’d go with the five iron.”

I already was. “Thanks.” I lined up in my stance, did a practice swing, and then hit it. The ball landed on the putting green, one foot from the hole.

“Damn. Great shot.” Marco nodded in appreciation.

While the other guys took their shots, I fired off another text.

Me: My hamstrings are tight. Could we meet later today to do a treatment?

Natalie: Are you joking???

Me: No. I don’t joke about taking care of my body.

Natalie: Find someone else.

Me: I don’t want anyone else.

Natalie: Too bad. I can’t. I’m busy.

Me: Too busy for me?

Everyone had taken their shot and was walking toward the putting green. Shaking my head, I followed. My ball was

closest to the hole, so I had to wait on the others to take their shot. Dmitri and Roman were talking shop with Marco about offensive schemes and passing routes.

Natalie: Too busy for anything that includes you.

Me: Don't let your personal feelings about me cloud your professionalism.

Natalie: Don't make it about you, narcissist.

I laughed.

Me: Narcissist? Seems like you've thought about me a lot if you're already giving me a label.

Natalie: You just proved my point.

Me: What? That you've thought about me a lot?

The dots moved again and then went away before another text finally popped up.

Natalie: No!!! That you're a narcissist.

Me: Okay. I'll let you get back to doing whatever you were doing. Keep thinking about me.

Natalie: Please don't contact me again.

“Yes!” Dmitri pumped his arm in the air before bending over to take his golf ball out of the hole. I put my phone away and pulled out my putter, fist-bumping him as I passed by. “Why are you grinning like an idiot?” he asked.

“Life is good, man.” For some reason, I felt a thousand times better than I did a few hours ago. She may not have wanted to, but she responded to my texts.



Several days had passed, and Natalie was being elusive as ever. Anytime I asked her if we could meet, she shut it down or made an excuse. At practice, she was never alone, so I didn't have a chance to talk to her. She wanted nothing to do with me, apparently. Which didn't bode well for either of us because I didn't do well with not getting what I wanted.

It was Saturday morning, and we had a game later this afternoon. It was the final game of the season, and we had to

win. Stepping out of my bedroom, I heard chatter off in the distance. As I drew closer, I heard Nick say, “Don’t expect me to call you Daddy Dmitri.”

“Well, what are you gonna do about it?” Roman asked. “Are you finally going to admit there’s something going on with your ward?”

I walked into the kitchen to see everyone standing around, watching Dmitri like he was a time bomb about to set off. Well, not everyone. Theo and Kenzie, yes. Nick and Roman both had smug looks on their faces. Dmitri was texting something on his phone, grinning like a son of a bitch.

“Did I miss something?” I leaned a hip against the kitchen counter, waiting for an explanation.

“Sorina’s pregnant,” Roman said.

“Pregnant? But I swear I used protection,” I deadpanned, and cue Dmitri losing his shit... I wanted someone to lose their shit today, considering I was fucking frustrated, as well.

“Axel...”

“I know.” I raised my hands. “You’re going to kill me.” I added, “You can try.”

“I will, one day soon.” He stalked over to me. With the mood I was in, I was close to welcoming the challenge, regardless of whether I should give Dmitri a hard time. But it was so damn easy.

I wasn’t afraid of Dmitri. Hell, we’d gone at it before in practice. But that was part of our DNA. At one point, he thought I had an interest in Sorina, but I never did. Anyone could see she and Dmitri already had a thing for each other. “Come on, D, I’m fucking with you.” I reached out to give him a dap. He just stood and glared at me, fuming.

“Wrong time to make jokes,” Roman said shaking his head.

Nick walked by and nudged my shoulder. “Have some tact.”

“I do. Come on, man. We all knew you and Sorina were sneaking around, fucking on the down-low. Anyone with any sense could tell.”

Nick wrapped an arm around me, dragging me with him. “We got a game to get ready for. Right?” I allowed him to take me away because he was right. If we won, we were a shoo-in for the top seed in the playoffs for the national championship. When we were standing in the hall by our rooms, Nick went into counselor mode. “Give D a break. He just found out he’s gonna be a father.”

“Yeah. That stoic motherfucker as a dad? God help us all.”



That night, we won. We didn’t just win; we annihilated our opponent. “Helluva game today, guys,” Coach said when we were in the locker room. “But we’re not done. Remember that. Stay humble. Stay hungry... and *all hail the mighty Falcons!*” The locker room erupted in cheers, and water spewed everywhere from shaken water bottles.

By the time I’d talked to reporters, showered, and dressed, most of the team had already filed out of the locker room. Closing my locker and gathering my bag, I nodded at Jake, who passed by. “Good game tonight, Thomas.”

“Thanks.”

“See you at practice Monday,” he called out over his shoulder.

“Yeah.”

I checked my phone, returning a text from my dad, who was waiting outside in the parking lot for me. However, I paused when I heard Jake’s voice in the distance. “Yo, Joe, some of the guys on the team are headed over to Duffy’s with Natalie...” The locker room door closed behind them, leaving me in silence.

I clenched my fist, and my pulse kicked up at hearing her name. That didn't sit well with me. At all.

I stalked out of the locker room and went down the hall and saw two of the female trainers coming out of one of the staff's changing rooms. I'd seen Natalie exit this room several times after games. "Is Natalie in there by chance?"

One of the girls smiled and nodded. So, I fired off a text to my dad, letting him know I'd be late, and leaned against the wall, waiting. Rationale flew out the window when I heard her name, but I tried to justify it. *Maybe I needed a little confirmation from her. Or maybe I wanted to dissuade her from going altogether.*

Chapter FIFTEEN

Natalie

I gave my thick head of hair a shake and smoothed out the wrinkles in my casual floral-print dress that came down to my knees. It was only one of the few dresses I owned. I'd almost declined to go out tonight because I was tired. I also needed to study for finals this weekend. However, Lizzie convinced me to go and was going to meet me there.

Grabbing my backpack, I opened the door and froze. Axel was leaning against the wall in front of me. He took his time observing me as he moved closer. "You're dressed up tonight." His words held a strange undertone. "You going somewhere?"

I licked my lips, finding my words. "Out to dinner with friends."

"Friends, huh?" He glanced to the side before returning his gaze to me. "Who?"

"It's really none of your business, now is it?"

"You think so?" he asked casually before he was in my space and gripped my hips.

"Let me go."

"Not yet. You and I are going to have a little talk."

He stepped forward with his hands clenched around my waist, pushing us back into the dressing room. “What do you think you’re doing?” I panicked, glancing behind me, wondering if anyone was still around, but saw no one. I was usually the last person to leave.

“Finding a spot to talk,” he said and locked the door behind him.

I slipped out of his grasp and crossed my arms over my chest. “Axel, this isn’t funny.”

“I’m not playing around.” Ignoring me, he lifted me up and carried me over to a dressing area with a vanity. My butt hit the marble of the countertop while he took a step closer, standing between my legs.

“Now. Tell me who you’re going to dinner with,” he said with condescending patience, as if he were a parent who was speaking to a four-year-old.

How did he know where I was? Why was he asking me this? It dawned on me that he must’ve heard from someone. My eyes narrowed. “Why were you waiting outside the door? You already know who, don’t you?”

“I heard your name mentioned.” He ducked his chin.

“This is ridiculous. I’m going with a large group of friends, including my roommate Lizzie.”

“I told you how I felt about you hanging around my teammates.”

“And I told you it’s none of your business what I do.”

“Well, I’m making it my fucking business.”

I cocked my head, studying him like he was unhinged.

“Why are you avoiding me, Hardcore?”

“I’m not.”

He shook his head in disappointment. “I expected more from you. I didn’t think you were a coward. You could at least

tell me the truth.”

“What? Me? A coward?” I glanced down at his large hands that were now at my side, caging me in. “The truth is, I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I told you. I needed you to help me with my training, but you barely give me the time of day. Yet, you’re more than happy to go out to dinner with Jake, Joe, and who the fuck ever else on the team.”

I glared at him. “You have a lot of nerve saying that.” The words I didn’t want to say finally came out, since he wanted the truth. “First, you take me to the spring formal as a ruse last year, and then you announced to everyone at a party the other night that I was unfuckable.” I felt ridiculous with a side of embarrassment at pointing it out to him. “And now this?”

His brows drew together. “Who told you that shit about the formal?” It took a few seconds as if he were going through the files in his brain. “Jeanette said something to you that night, didn’t she?” He shook his head.

“Did you two have a good laugh at my expense?”

“No, and I damn sure didn’t tell her that.”

“Maybe you didn’t tell her, but it seemed like a convincing story.”

“She was pissed because I didn’t take her, and I never would have.” He tilted his head and laid a hand on my thigh. I tensed under his touch. “I also recall you got something out of it, too, and I never lied to you about my intentions.” Bending closer, he lifted my chin so my eyes were level with his. “Did I?”

“No,” I said finally. What he said was true, and he’d done me a solid with my car. We had an agreement. However, his actions this semester had done nothing but confuse me. “But you announced at a party that I was not fuckable material. At *your* party.” I clarified. “Why would you say that?”

“Because it’s true. I’m just looking out for you so that you’re not taken advantage of by people who would.”

His answer was very cavalier-like, but it rubbed me the wrong way. He thought he could out me and threaten people to stay away because he thought I was too naïve to make choices for myself when it came to guys talking to me? While he went about his business as usual? “Why?”

“Why?” He held my gaze and forced my legs wider apart.

I tried to control my breathing. “Wh—Why make it your business to look out for me? Do you think I’m too dumb to make decisions for myself?”

“No. I know that what guys like my teammates want and what you want are two completely different things.”

“Based on what? You have no idea what I want.”

“Yes, I do.” He trailed his finger down the outside of my thigh. “You’re not someone who wants to hook up with a player who would pressure you into giving up your virginity when you weren’t ready.” His mouth was at my ear; his lips skimmed my skin. “I know that much.”

I swallowed slowly. “Is this based on your own past experiences?”

I could feel him shake his head against my cheek, and now both hands were at my hips again. “No. I’ve never had any interest in fucking a virgin. I told you that.” The way he said it was like he’d rather swallow poison. Yet my heart sped up at his nearness, his spicy male scent, and the overwhelming presence of his sculpted body in front of me.

“Then what are we doing now?”

“I don’t know, Hardcore.” His nose dipped to my shoulder, and his fingers pressed into my skin. “I don’t know what it is about you, but the thought of anyone getting near you or having the chance to take your virginity makes me want to commit murder.”

I sucked in my breath. “Axel?”

He trailed his nose over my shoulder and up my neck. “Tell me, Natalie... have you ever had an orgasm?”

My skin flamed at his question, although a steady heat was building between my legs, too. “That’s...” *None of your business* was what I wanted to say, but I couldn’t form the words.

“Answer me.” He yanked me against him, and something hard was pressed against the thin barrier of my panties. I might’ve been naïve and inexperienced, but I wasn’t stupid. It was his erection. His thick, hard erection.

“No,” I eeked out as he moved against me. I was nervous, but the heat between my legs started to build into a heavy throb. I bit my lip to stifle the moan stuck in my throat.

“Fuck,” he groaned and pulsed against me harder. His thumbs had now moved to the crease between my pelvis and thighs. Pulling back and glancing down between us, he whispered to himself, “How have you not...” His words trailed off as his hands skimmed down to the hem of my dress.

“What are you doing?” My words sounded slurred amidst the heady beat of my pulse, as if I were in a dreamlike state. Yet, I was also apprehensive.

He closed his eyes briefly and slid his thumbs under the material of my dress. “I want to see you come.”

“You want to see me come?” I repeated dumbly. My pulse kicked up a notch.

“Yes.” His calloused thumbs scraped against my thighs, sending electric currents straight to my core.

“Now?” I gasped.

He nodded slowly, with a sultry curve of his mouth. “Now.”

“I can’t. I don’t—” I stammered, and my head warned me to push off the vanity and leave, but Axel was like a brick wall and wouldn’t budge.

However, he must've realized my apprehension. "Hey. It's okay." He caressed my cheek like I was a skittish kitten. "You're nervous, and that's understandable." His other hand slid down my arm, soothing away my fears. "Let me help you relax." Clutching my palm between his fingers, he said softly, "Just trust me with this."

Despite my reservations, I acquiesced. "Okay."

"That's my girl." He squeezed my hand before dropping it to rest on my thigh. "Remember to relax." His thumb lightly trailed up my inner thigh. "Can you do that for me?"

Feeling as though I was in some kind of trance, I nodded. I felt his other hand slide down to my hip.

"Good. I want you to pretend that I'm touching you, and I want you to take your hands and run them over your tits."

I watched him with uncertainty, but I tentatively drew my hands up over my stomach and skimmed them under my breasts, pausing.

"Go on."

At his soft encouragement, I slowly ran my hands up my breasts and over my nipples. I felt them harden underneath the material.

"That's it." His eyes darkened. "Keep rubbing them. Get those nipples nice and hard for me and squeeze your tits together."

Timidly, I did, and delicious warmth spread down my body as pleasure built between my thighs.

"Again," he rasped.

This time I was more confident and deliberate in my movements, and I licked my bottom lip.

"You like that, don't you?"

"Mm-hmm."

“Fuck. I do, too. You look so fucking hot right now. I wish I could taste your tits. I wish I could feel how full and ripe they are. I would suck your nipples so hard. Feast on them. Pinch them for me, baby.”

I did and gasped, imagining Axel’s teeth grazing my skin and devouring me. My nipples were puckered and visible, even under my bra and dress. And he watched me with so much intensity that I wanted to feed off it and let go of my inhibitions. I felt empowered. A new level of freedom that I’d never experienced. Never dreamt of experiencing. *Maybe I wasn’t just a shy and boring book nerd. Maybe he did find me sexy.*

His hands traveled up my inner thighs, sending shivers over my skin. “You take orders so well, Natalie. You’re such a good girl.”

I arched my back, pressing my tits into my hands, dropping my head to my shoulder. My pleasure was building, and I wanted more. Needed more. I needed to fulfill the ache throbbing in my pussy.

“You want to come, don’t you?” His voice was rough and gravelly, and he spread my thighs wider.

“Yes,” I moaned.

“Okay. Now, take your hand and touch your pussy.”

I paused. *I shouldn’t do this.* But I was so stimulated I didn’t want to stop.

“Don’t be shy, Natalie. No one will know but us. Only for me. Show me how fucking perfect you look when you touch your pussy for me. Stick your hand in your panties and rub your fingers over your clit.”

My hand trembled slightly as I slid it down to the hem of my dress that was bunched up over my upper thighs. Our shortened breaths cut through the silence of the room. I tugged the material up to my pelvis.

“Go on.” He clasped my thighs so tight, as if he were restraining himself. His eyes were zeroed in on my plain white panties.

I delved my fingers under the waistband, skimming my clit, and bit my bottom lip. I felt my cheeks flush as Axel rumbled, “Christ, Natalie.” His eyes were hooded. “Keep touching yourself.”

I slowly moved my fingers up and down over my clit and felt myself getting slicker. I knew I’d be embarrassed later, but right now, I didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was chasing this elusive high that made my body strum with uncontrollable need.

“How does it feel?” he asked coarsely, and his hand drew over the tent in his pants, gripping his erection.

“So good,” I choked out, because the sensations were building into something indescribable. Lust filled the air, and I was burning with need.

He bent down, moving closer until his face was mere inches from my hand. “Slide your finger inside your pussy.” His breaths were heavy, falling over my hand through the material.

I pushed a finger inside, amazed at how slick I was.

“Jesus Christ,” he rasped. “You are so fucking wet, aren’t you?”

I nodded jerkily.

“Now push your finger in and out, slowly.”

I did, and a current of pleasure started to build, and I felt somewhat naughty doing this in front of him. I thumbed my nub, increasing the sensations. Pressure was building, and the more I moved my hand, the higher it climbed.

“Damn, I can see how wet you are. I can only imagine how your pussy would feel strangling my thick cock.”

“Oh, god,” I breathed shamelessly, imagining how it would be, too. I pushed harder, deeper, and my breaths turned into little moans.

“You’re about to come.” His nose grazed the back of my hand. “I can smell it.”

“Uh-huh,” I moaned, consumed as I soared higher and higher. I felt his hand slide under my dress and travel up my stomach to my breast. I pumped my pelvis against my hand, knowing I was about to burst into a million pieces. My thighs tightened painfully as I climaxed, clenching around my finger.

A low rumble vibrated from his chest, and his thumb dipped under my bra and swirled over my nipple, heightening the sensations as I floated back down to Earth. I slumped forward, feeling weightless, still panting as if I’d run a marathon. I could feel strands of my hair stuck to my temple.

His thumb drifted over my nipple before his hand fell away. He adjusted his still-rock-hard erection. “Fuck. That was beautiful.”

I dropped my hand and braced myself on the counter, trying to regain my bearings. I felt sated and had the wild urge to cuddle him, but I stopped myself. Axel had an unreadable expression on his face.

Reality sank in about what I’d done, and I straightened my dress.

“You’re not going to dinner with them,” he warned softly.

“Says who?”

“Says me.” Before I knew what was happening, he reached under my dress and tugged my panties off me.

“What are you doing? Give those back.” I tried to snag them from him, but he yanked them out of my reach, rising to his full height.

“Nope. I’m keeping these.” He gazed at me with a smug look and brought them to his nose, inhaling deeply.

I could feel my skin burn in frustration and shock. “I can’t go anywhere tonight without my underwear.”

“Then I guess you’d better go home.”

“Give them back. Now.” I lunged at him, and he raised my panties higher above his head, completely out of reach. I struggled to reach for them again, but couldn’t.

He snaked an arm around me, holding me against him. I felt his erection poking my stomach. “Hardcore, you’re fucking turning me on. I would suggest you stop fighting me before something happens tonight that you aren’t ready for.”

My mouth fell open, and I stepped away from him. “You’re unbelievable.”

He dangled my panties and shrugged with no remorse. “And you’re too fucking adorable to resist. So be a good girl and go home. Because if I find out you went to Duffy’s, I may have to show up with these.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“You really don’t think I would? You want to test out that theory and see if you’re right?”

I involuntarily shivered, seeing the triumph in his gaze. He knew I wouldn’t. Then he frowned. “Oh, you’re cold. We can’t have that.” He shrugged off his jacket and slipped it over my shoulders. “There. Much better.” I wanted to claw the smugness off his face, and it appeared that he knew my thoughts.

“Anyway...” He shoved the panties into his pocket and winked. “Goodnight, Hardcore. Sweet dreams.” With that, he walked away, leaving me at a loss for words, silently fuming at his back.

Chapter SIXTEEN

Natalie

Two weeks later, it was Christmas Day, and I was spending the holidays at home. “*Kanchu*, get the dishes out of the china cabinet and set the table.” My mom was busy taking out a shrimp casserole from the oven, while my sister-in-law, who was three months pregnant, stirred the pot of boiling potatoes on the stove to make *alu ko achar*, a Nepalese potato salad. My brother was carving the turkey Mom had baked earlier.

Our family had always joined in the American tradition of cooking a turkey and all the other typical sides you would have with it, aside from the *achar*. My mother was excited to have company and had invited all her friends over, whom she’d known for over twenty years since moving to Texas. I was happy she was getting back to some sense of normalcy.

The tables were set—the one in the dining room and the one in the kitchen, as well as setting up two card tables in the living room. When my mother entertained, she meant business. It was the same when we celebrated *Dashain*, actually even bigger, with more people, since it was the biggest and most important holiday in Nepal.

The doorbell sounded. “I got it,” I called out. When I opened the door, I saw *Rajina*, my mother’s best friend from Nepal, and her husband, *Raaj*, who’d moved here not long after my parents. We greeted each other as they slipped off

their shoes at the door. “Hey, Natalie.” Kiran, their son, passed through the door behind them, balancing gifts in one hand. He gave me a side hug and toed off his shoes.

“How’s life treating you at Hillside?” he asked.

“Never better. Of course, it’s not as prestigious as Duke, but...” I shrugged playfully.

Kiran and I were good friends and had gone to the same school together from elementary to high school. There had always been a healthy competition between the two of us academically that was initiated by our families, but it never affected our friendship. He’d ended up valedictorian while I was salutatorian.

He was attending Duke University for medical school, while I was at Hillside, pursuing a degree in sports medicine.

Later, we were all seated for dinner. Both Kiran and I had fielded questions from friends and family about college and our future plans. He was firm about what his future held because he wanted to pursue a career in neurology. He already had the next several years of his life mapped out.

While I knew I wanted to be in the field of sports medicine, I wasn’t completely certain in what capacity. I was planning on going to graduate school in the future but hadn’t decided whether I would stay at Hillside or apply to another university.

I heard my phone buzz, and I pulled it down in my lap to see a text.

Axel: Merry Christmas.

I hadn’t heard from him since that night after the game when I was lying in bed in my dorm room after bowing out of going to dinner, thanks to *him*. He’d had the audacity to send a text with two words as if he knew I would follow his instructions.

Good girl.

I'd never responded. In fact, I should've ignored this text. However, for the last few weeks, every time my cell signaled, I'd grabbed my phone with a little more zeal, secretly hoping it was him. Then I'd chastise myself and tell myself I was only bored because classes were finished for the semester, and I'd been home and had too much time on my hands.

I knew the football team had been required to stay on campus and practice, as well as essential training staff, and was only allowed to go home for a few days for Christmas. I'd been allowed to go home earlier for the holidays. However, in two days, we'd all meet back on campus to take buses to the airport and fly out to Arizona, where the semifinals would take place. If they won in Arizona, then we'd fly to Miami to contend for the National Championship.

Sighing inwardly, I eyed my phone. I shouldn't respond.

But I decided that I didn't want to be rude, so I did something stupid and texted him back.

Me: Merry Christmas.

Axel: What are you doing?

Me: Having dinner with my family and friends. You?

"*Kanchu*, did you hear what I said?" My mother rolled her eyes before turning to Rajina. "These children and their phones."

"I know. They do not know how to sit at a dinner table and socialize without pausing to check out the latest TikTok video."

I set my cell face down on the table after being called out. "I'm sorry."

Glancing at Kiran across from me, I made a face, and his lips twitched. Our mothers loved to commandeer the conversation and were always quick to tell us how much more difficult life was when they were our age.

However, I would gladly suffer through the stories because tonight, my mother was glowing as she continued to chat it up with everyone at the table. Seeing her smile warmed

my heart. I could hear my phone vibrate again, but I ignored it, trying to be polite and stay present in the conversations at the table. Kiran and I talked about the classes we'd just finished this past semester and discussed the ones we would be taking in the spring.

"Kiran is working at Duke University Hospital," my mom reiterated, as if I didn't know this already. We all did. She clasped her hands together and sighed, smiling at her friend. "You should be so happy. You've raised a future doctor."

"Raaj and I are very proud of him," Rajina said, beaming and looking at her husband.

"You know how we've always hinted around at the two of them eventually marrying?"

"Mom," I warned, embarrassed.

"What?" She raised her eyes innocently. "What did I say that was so wrong? It is true, isn't it?"

Rajina nodded her head in agreement. "You two are at the age where it's time to consider your future. Think about settling down."

"You're actually implying that we should get married?" I asked incredulously and glanced at Kiran, who seemed about as enthusiastic about the notion as I did.

"Well, not anytime soon, but maybe you should court each other and see if you would make a good match," my mother suggested. "You're both getting older and working toward your careers."

"We are hardly around each other. He's in another state."

"So? It's not unusual today to court by video chat. I want you to marry a good Nepalese boy, and there's nothing wrong with a long-distance relationship right now. You will have a lifetime to spend time together."

I glanced over at Kiran, who looked like he wanted to sink under the table. He was just as uncomfortable as I was. "Mom," I began, "could we please have this conversation

another time?” I glanced around the table at all our other guests, hoping she’d take a hint.

She threw up her hands and eyed me innocently. “I’m only asking you to think about it.” Yeah, right. My mother had this idea in her head for a while, probably forever. He was the ideal candidate in her eyes.

A few minutes later, I excused myself and grabbed my phone. Passing through the living room, I slipped out the front door to get some air. Clicking on my screen, I saw the text Axel had left almost an hour ago.

Axel: About to have dinner. How’s the family?

He was being polite since he knew nothing about my family. I hadn’t shared with him that my father had passed away. I hadn’t shared it with anyone but Lizzie. In fact, Axel and I hadn’t really shared anything personal except for the fact that he knew I was a virgin who didn’t eat beef. Oh, and he’d watched me give myself an orgasm. And I liked it.

And I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I couldn’t stop thinking about *him*. I dropped down in one of the Adirondack chairs on the front patio. I probably shouldn’t respond to him, but I felt a sense of recklessness and a feeling of being boxed in after what my mother had said earlier. My fingers swept over the face of my cell.

I heard the front door open and deleted the message I was texting. “Natalie?” Kiran said from behind me as he closed the front door.

Setting my phone aside, I teased, “Hey. Were you as freaked out as I was?” Rajina was just as pushy as my mom, so I’m sure he’d heard it all before, as well.

He smiled wryly. “Yeah. You know our families have been hinting at this for the last few years.”

“I know, but I never took it seriously. However, tonight they seemed very persistent.” I peered up at him. “I know you’re one of my good friends, but marriage...”

“Trust me. I’m not ready for that either.” He slid down into the other chair beside me. “I’m seeing someone.”

“You are?” I relaxed in relief, knowing for certain he felt the same as I did.

He nodded. “We’ve been dating for a year.”

“You haven’t told your parents?”

He shook his head. “No. She doesn’t have the right ‘pedigree’ in their eyes.” He raised his fingers in air quotes. “She comes from a poor family and goes to a community college near Duke.”

“Is it serious?” I knew my experience was limited when it came to relationships, but I would think if you’ve been seeing someone for a year, it was kind of serious.

“I don’t know.” He tugged at his collar. “Maybe. She keeps hinting at us moving in together.”

“And what do you want?”

“I’m considering it.” He didn’t seem as happy as he should. I knew Kiran was like me. We wanted to please our parents. And with being the prodigal child came big expectations that we wouldn’t let them down. Moving in with someone out of wedlock would probably throw our parents into a disappointed tailspin. I covered his hand with mine understanding his dilemma. “Well, I wish you the best in whatever you decide.”

“Thanks. What about you? Are you seeing anyone?”

I thought about Axel, and what we did. What I did. The intensity in his gaze as I touched myself, like he wanted to devour me...

“You are, aren’t you?” Kiran’s words interrupted my thoughts. “You’re touching your cheeks.”

“No,” I denied. “It’s just unusually humid tonight.”

He laughed. “Good one, Nat. But seriously, you’re in college. You should be having fun, going out on dates.”

“I am having fun.” I nudged him as an exclamation point. “I’m not an old maid.” *Liar*, I chided. I wasn’t having an awful time, but I wasn’t exactly living it up either.

“Good. The college years are the best years of your life. And don’t worry about what our parents said earlier. You know our mothers... their bark is bigger than their bite. They can’t help but meddle in our futures. They’ve always been like that.”

“I know,” I said, but there was an equal dose of doubt in my mind, too. My mom could be very persistent when she wanted something. Her perspective had changed since my father had passed. Mine had, too.

“Besides,” he added, “life is too short to let others dictate how to live it.” He reached out and touched my shoulder. “Just seize the opportunities when they arise. Live with no regrets.”

Live without regrets. Could I do that? I’d been trained to always do the right thing. Be a good girl. My life wasn’t a hardship by any means, but I’d always been raised to follow a plan. Almost as if I had tunnel vision. I’d always focused on that tunnel, but now I could see me veering off that path. It wasn’t so much a variance, just an exploration. Regardless of my musings, I glanced up at my childhood friend. “All right.” I smiled. “You, too.”

The door opened behind us, and my mom seemed very pleased with herself. “It’s time to open presents. Come on, you two.”

It was after midnight when everyone finally went home. Mom and I were sitting on the couch, having tea as we thumbed through the one hundred pictures my mom had taken on her cell of everyone opening their presents.

When she saw the picture of Kiran and me in front of the Christmas tree, she said, “You know, I was serious earlier about you and Kiran. You two have always been so close.”

Here we go. “Mom, I’m very involved in my life at school, and Kiran is, too.” I would never out Kiran about his

relationship, but I didn't want her to keep pushing this because it was starting to get very awkward now.

"I think you should start considering the idea. You will finish your bachelor's soon, and you could transfer to Duke to pursue your master's, then you and Kiran would not have to deal with a long-distance relationship. Problem solved."

Arguing with my mom was like going twelve rounds in a heavyweight fight. She could go on and on until you collapsed in the ring. "Mom, I'm tired. I'm going to bed." I kissed her cheek.

She stood up with me. "Just think about what I said. It's what your father wished for you, as well." She dropped her head as she twisted her hands. "He wanted the best for you."

"I know." I fought the tears burning to fall. I missed him so much. If only I had more time with him. I thought about Kiran's words... *Live with no regrets*. "I'll think about it," I lied, knowing that was the last thing I wanted to do, but I couldn't flat-out say no to her.

When I went to bed, I couldn't sleep. Turning to the side, I grabbed my phone off my nightstand and opened the text from Axel earlier.

With my thumbs hovering over the screen, I typed out a message.

I miss my dad. I wish he were here. Shaking my head, I deleted the message and typed out another message.

Me: My family is great. Did you go home for the holidays?

A few minutes later a text came through.

Axel: Yup. We had dinner and exchanged gifts.

Me: We did too.

Axel: Hope Santa was good to you.

I smiled.

Me: He was.

Axel: Of course he was because you would never be on the naughty list.

Me: Ha Ha.

Axel: Goodnight, good girl. ;-)

Me: Goodnight.

I sighed, setting my phone aside. Curling my hand under the pillow, I closed my eyes and thought of happy memories of past family gatherings with my dad.

Two weeks later, I was in Miami with the team. The Falcons easily won their semifinal game last week in Arizona. Now it was on to the championship. We were all set up in our hotel, and I was rooming with Andrea, another girl who was also interning on the training staff. We had a full schedule of being with the team on the practice field all week while they prepared for the game.

The football players had an even busier schedule, which included long practices and staying afterward to sign autographs and speak to the media. Each night, there was some event for our team, as well as the opposing team, leading up to the game. Another press opportunity to promote the national championship game. Trust me, the universities were getting paid well for this event, and these teams were their cash cows, especially the stars.

In addition to all of that, it was ridiculous how many stars came out to watch the practices. Anyone from actors, famous athletes in any major sport, musicians, popular, influential people, and people from all over the world seemed to be centered at this event, as if it were the World Cup or the Super Bowl. Miami was already a massive international city, and this game seemed to bring out everyone from all over the world.

And who was at the center of all this activity? Hillside's running back, Axel Thomas. As soon as Coach blew the whistle to end practice, media members had mics and phones shoved in Axel's face, looking for the perfect sound bites. That didn't include the scheduled times he was supposed to address the media at the podium on a daily basis.

And then there were the girls... They were everywhere, and they all looked like models, actresses, and influencers.

They flocked to Axel like bees to honey. Wanting his autograph, wanting his time, one even had the audacity to unbutton her shirt so he could sign the swell of her boob. Luckily, a Hillside public relations person was there to shuttle her aside.

It was madness, and Axel seemed to take everything in stride, keeping that million-dollar smile in place. He said the right words, and he teased and spoke easily with the media. He charmed and enraptured the audience. If anyone could handle the grandest stage in the collegiate world, it was him.

He was larger than life and so far out of my league that it was almost farfetched to think that what'd happened in the training room weeks ago actually happened. We hadn't spoken much, only in the capacity of how all staff and football players interacted on the field.

Gathering up towels from the practice bench, I walked around the large crowd surrounding him to make my way to the locker room.

"Natalie. Wait up." I glanced over my shoulder to see Trey coming up behind me.

"Hey. How's your ankle?" I asked. Trey had been battling an ankle sprain for most of the season.

"It's holding up." He smiled and reached out to take the heap of towels out of my hand. "Let me get those for you."

"You don't have to do that."

"I don't mind." He bumped his shoulder with mine. "It's the least I can do, considering all you do for the team."

"Thanks." I remembered the words Axel said that night about him and shook it off. Surely, he didn't mean it. Or didn't actually care. With that thought, I looked over at the massive huddle surrounding Axel, watching as he spoke to one of the reporters from ESPN. Somehow, he turned and caught my gaze. Then his eyes narrowed as he looked at Trey standing beside me. Without missing a beat, he turned back to the reporter and continued answering questions.

I drew my gaze away from him and asked Trey, “How do you like Miami?”

“I love it. I grew up here. You can’t beat the weather. Of course, you have to watch out for tropical storms and hurricanes, but other than that, it’s great.”

We passed through the corridor of the stadium, heading toward the locker room. “I’ve never been to Miami.”

“If I had the time, I would take you to some of my favorite places around here that aren’t the usual tourist spots.” He winked at me. “Maybe someday.”

“Maybe.” I lifted my lips, knowing he was full of shit.

He passed by a hamper with towels and clothing in disarray and dumped the towels inside. “Anyway. I gotta get ready to speak at one of those lovely after-practice press junkets. I’ll see you around.”

Before he turned around, there was a flash of a white shirt and a body taking Trey to the ground. The next thing I knew, Axel had Trey in a chokehold. “The fuck did I tell you, Lomas?”

Trey’s face was turning red, but he had a smile on his face, not seeming the least bit concerned. “I was helping her, man. Calm the fuck down.”

“Axel, stop,” I warned, but he didn’t relent.

“I told you to stay the fuck away from her.”

“We weren’t doing anything,” he gasped, while Axel pressed his forearm into his neck.

“Goddammit, Axel.” Roman was there with Nick at his side, both grappling at Axel’s shoulders, and they finally managed to rip him away from Trey.

Running his hand over his neck, Trey gingerly sat up, breathing heavily. “Your boy needs help.”

Axel struggled to get out of their hold. “I’m about to help myself by beating the shit out of you.”

“Go on, Trey.” Nick nodded solemnly toward the locker room. Trey raised his hands in resignation but had a faint smirk on his face, despite what happened, and eyed me before he went to the locker room.

“I’ll kill him. I swear I will,” Axel fumed, still trying to break out of their hold.

“Get it together, man,” Roman gritted out.

After a few more moments of struggle, Axel seemed to relent.

“Come on, Axe. Let’s take a walk and cool off,” Nick said calmly. “We have media all around us, and we don’t want to be part of the circus. Not like that. No distractions, remember?”

Axel ran his tongue over his teeth and eventually nodded slowly as he watched me like a predator and backed away, letting Nick guide him. I watched them as they disappeared down the corridor.

“What the hell happened?” Roman asked me, with brows drawn together. “Was Lomas bothering you?”

“No.” I was still shocked by what happened, and Roman intimidated me. He wasn’t personable at all, and he always looked semi-pissed off when he was at practice or in a game. In fact, he’d never said a word to me the whole season.

“You sure?” he pressed.

“I swear.”

“Huh.” Roman scratched his chin as if he were miffed. “That doesn’t add up. Axel never loses his shit. That’s not his personality. He usually drives people crazy, but he never goes ham on someone.” Roman seemed to be having a conversation with himself.

“Maybe he’s having a bad day?” I offered.

Roman shrugged, and a partial smile began to materialize. “Maybe he is, but that fucker never has a bad

day.”

Chapter SEVENTEEN

Axel

“What happened?” Nick asked as we walked down an empty corridor.

“Nothing. That joker was trying to piss me off.” I couldn’t tell Nick that I’d lost my control and bailed out of an interview to chase that fucker Lomas down and choke his ass out. That shit was certifiable wasn’t it?

“What’d he do? Threaten you or something? It takes a lot to get under your skin.”

Dammit. He knew me better than anyone, and anything I said would sound stupid. I exhaled. “A lapse in judgment. But I’m straight, man. Like you said, I shouldn’t let distractions get to me.”

He had an enigmatic look on his face. “Okay, buddy. If we walk back to the locker room, you’re not going to start more shit, are you?”

Nick and his negotiator voice acting like I was a loose cannon... Now *that* was funny. Too damn funny. Him thinking he needed to talk me off a ledge? Fuck that. “Nope. It’s in the rearview.” I couldn’t think about her. I couldn’t dwell on Trey moving in on her. If I did, I’d do something else destructive.

Something detrimental to myself and the team. I had too much at stake to fuck up my prospects or let my team down.

And a rumble in the locker room would definitely leak to the press. “I had to let off some steam, but you know me. I’ve already hit the reset button.”

He peered at me before nodding. “Okay. Just keep your shit together, man.”

“It’s on lock.”

The rest of the week was the same: practice, talk to the media, five-star dinners, and media attention. This was my realm. This was where I needed to stay. Stay in my lane. In my weak moments, I’d almost clicked on my cell and texted her. Then I stopped myself.

I’d also stopped myself from taking the elevator down two flights to march to her room after dinner tonight—since I knew where she was staying. Good thing, too. Nothing good would come from that, though my dick disagreed. Thank God my brain had some say-so because my cock was voicing his opinion on a daily basis. More so than ever before. He wanted to plow that virgin pussy like nothing else. *Christ, what was wrong with me?*

As I lay in bed, the night before our national championship game, I tried to visualize the game and the plays our offense would call. I imagined myself taking the handoff and breaking through the line before I took off down the field for an eighty-yard run. Going over plays in my head had always been something I did before the game. It was like second nature. I always believed if you visualized your goals, they were more likely to materialize in real time. Manifest it.

However, my thoughts were drifting from what I knew I needed to be thinking about. All I could see was Natalie moaning as she touched herself. How her cheeks flushed and her eyes closed as she focused on her pleasure. How her delicate pink tongue peaked out over her lips when she was on the brink of an orgasm. How she came so hard, leaving a wet spot on her panties. Dammit. My desire to find out how her pussy would taste and feel overruled any other rational

thoughts, and I mentally kicked myself for not taking what I wanted and tasting her when I had the chance.

My cock was as hard as steel, and my balls hurt with the need for her. Jesus, I wasn't a green-ass teen who'd never wet his dick. Yet lately, you wouldn't know it. I wanted her... I wanted her like I'd never wanted anything else in the world, including the championship. And that thought was disturbing, alarming. I needed to stay focused on the prize. This was the very reason I never opened myself up to anyone. I didn't need the distractions. I knew better.

"Fuck." I gripped my dick in a choke hold, willing myself to deny the pleasure I really wanted to succumb to. I wasn't that weak. I'd trained myself to kill any indulgences that might sidetrack me. Setting personal goals and meeting them had always been ingrained in my head. Not allowing anyone or anything to get in my way of reaching them. I'd been conditioned to never let irrational feelings get in the way of my plans and future.

But now, I was one step away from tearing down her door and taking what I wanted. *Mine. Mine. Mine.* The words roared in my head like a never-ending, loud mantra.

"Fuck!" I punched the pillow beside me. I clutched my phone and swiped the screen. My thumbs itched to call her—FaceTime her and command that she strip and let me see her ripe tits and juicy pussy. I wanted her to touch herself again and cry out my name like it was gospel and bow and beg before me like I was her savior. I wanted those full lips open and ready to receive my cock like it was the bread of life. *Mine.* The word blared in my head again. Pre-cum dripped from my dick, making my boxer briefs stick to the tip.

What the hell was wrong with me? I was reckless going after Trey at practice earlier. That definitely would've made headlines if anyone outside of our camp had gotten wind of it. I was even more reckless when I watched her finger herself in the training room at our final home game over a month ago. Jesus, I could've been caught. That alone would've caused a

buzz because messing around with anyone on the training staff, in the team's facility, was enough to cause a scandal. I could've been kicked off the team for misconduct, or she could've lost her internship. And that was the very reason I knew I needed to avoid her. However, if she was within my vicinity, it was getting more difficult to stay away.

My fingers burned on the cell, knowing her number was one click away.

My body burned with unhinged desire for her.

My cock throbbed with unresolved lust for her.

I was weak for the virgin nerd who barely knew what passion was.

“Shit!” I threw my phone across the room, hearing the thud as it crashed against the wall. I was better than this. Never had I lost my head or pursued a girl for her affection, and I wouldn't start now. Sleep would be hard to come by tonight, but by God, I would control these foolish urges before they got the best of me. Chalk it up to me not having sex in a long, long time. That's why I was struggling.



“It is my pleasure to crown the Hillside Falcons as your 2023 National Champions!” Our coach was presented with the trophy as Roman, Nick, Dmitri, and I, along with the rest of the team, surrounded him on the makeshift podium that was set up on the field.

A mic was thrust in Coach Jones's face. “We worked hard for this. I couldn't have asked for a better group of guys who worked their asses off and did whatever it took for the team, starting with these amazing players whose leadership has contributed in a large way to where we are today.” Coach turned to us, holding the trophy out in front of him to share. “I've never in my life had an opportunity to coach a better group of players. Boys, this is for you!” The crowd roared, and

confetti fell around us as fireworks erupted in the sky, high above the stadium.

My friends and I laid a hand on the trophy, holding it high above us. “We did it!” Nick crowed beside me. “Aren’t you glad you decided to stay another year?”

“Yeah, I guess it was an okay decision.” I smiled wide as I gazed around at the expanse of field that was now filled with Falcons’ fans, family, team, and staff. When I’d been coerced into that decision to forego the draft almost a year ago, I wasn’t so sure, but now, hoisting a trophy and being a two-time national champion and the MVP of the game made it all worth it. If anything, I think my stock had risen, and I was certain to be one of the top-ten prospects in the NFL draft. “I’m ready to celebrate.”

“I bet you are, player,” Dmitri cut in with a smug look. He was a little less uptight lately since he and Sorina were an item and inseparable. Now, all he could talk about was baby stuff and wouldn’t shut up about the damn sonogram they’d had of the baby. I mean, I was happy for him and all, but thinking of Dmitri as a father was mind-blowing. I seemed to be the only guy in the house who still had his balls intact.

“Too bad your player days are over,” I said and looked over to my left to see Natalie talking to one of the younger coaches on our team. He was a grad student, couldn’t remember his name, but I didn’t like how his eyes scanned over her chest as he spoke.

“I don’t miss it. What Sorina and I have is so much better than going to meaningless parties and hooking up with groupies.”

Half-assed paying attention to D, I watched how Natalie’s teeth glistened against her full lips as she laughed at something that tool bag was saying. Then she adjusted her glasses and froze when she caught my gaze. She looked apprehensive. She should.

“Thanks for the unsolicited advice, D. Maybe you should write a book on relationships.” I forced my attention away from her so I didn’t jump off the podium and surf through the crowd and injure a staff member. Christ, I needed to blow off steam in a productive way.

“Nah. I’m too busy for that, but if you ever need my advice, come find me.” He slapped my back and stepped off the podium to encircle a waiting Sorina in his arms. Roman and Nick were both off with their girls, as well. I shook my head and saw more team members come up and give me props. Let them enjoy being shackled prematurely; I was going to bask in the glory.

“Hey, man, we’re gonna hit the town tonight. You want to join us?” Jake approached me, slapping me on the back. “It’s gonna be lit.”

Right now, I felt like the world was mine, and I needed to reach out and take every opportunity. “Yeah, I’ll be there.” Most of all, I needed to stop worrying about what *she* was doing right now or at any other time of the day.

Chapter EIGHTEEN

Natalie

“Oh, my god, it’s so loud,” I moaned and stuck my head under the pillow. It was three in the morning, and apparently, Jake was entertaining friends, since his room was next to mine. I’d heard him invite Tank and others out after the game. I guess they were having an after-party in the room.

“I know, but what can we do? We can’t call and complain,” Andrea, my roomie on the trip, said from across the room. I guess the noise had woken her up, too. The whole floor was taken up with the Falcons football team and staff, as well as other floors in the hotel. So, if anyone made a complaint, they would be considered a traitor. No one on the team would turn them in tonight. They were national champions.

“You’re right.” I was tired, and we had to be at the airport by seven-thirty in the morning to catch a flight back to Austin. Suddenly, the music next door seemed to pulsate through my bones, and I heard more shouting and laughter. One of the voices sounded distinctly like Axel’s. Would he be there? Of course, he would be in the middle of the party.

As usual, he was the star of the show. Literally, Mr. MVP of the game. Although I was inwardly happy for him earlier after the game, I sighed in frustration and yanked the comforter over my head. I could separate the football player

from the man. “I’m going to try to get some sleep.” I didn’t know if I was trying to convince Andrea or myself more. After lying there for thirty more minutes, I heard a thump against the wall and female giggling. Then a louder thud caused me to startle.

Gritting my teeth, I grabbed my cell. Furious and sleep deprived, I clicked on Axel’s number and sent him a message not caring that I might be wrong in assuming he was there. I knew. I instinctively knew, and right now I was too pissed to care.

Me: Can you please keep it down? I’m in the room next door and can hear you.

After a few minutes, I rolled onto my stomach and propped myself up on my forearms, waiting. Then frowned. What if he wasn’t next door, and I’d texted him out of the blue?

Finally, my screen lit up.

Axel: Oh, you do remember my number.

Really? I shook my head and texted him back.

Me: Can you tone it down?

I watched as the text turned from delivered to read, and a text bubble popped up.

Axel: What will you do for me in return?

I read it twice and frowned before my fingers started moving.

Me: What does that mean?

I stared at the screen, worrying my bottom lip as the dots moved.

Axel: Come over here and find out.

I inwardly huffed. I was not going to go over there. Certainly, he could do the right thing.

Me: Just keep it down. Please.

I waited for his response, but after ten minutes, he hadn’t texted back. Exhaling sharply, I set my phone aside and forced

my eyes closed. Twenty minutes later, the bass vibrated so hard I thought I was going to bounce over to the edge of the bed and crash to the floor. If anything, the party only grew louder. There was a steady bump against the wall, like a headboard hitting the wall, mixing with the tempo of the base... thud, thud, thud, and a girl moaning.

Enough was enough. I shoved the blankets aside, grabbed my keycard, and stomped over to the room next door, intent on stopping this before I chickened out.

Rapping on the door, I threw an arm over my chest, realizing I was braless under my yellow, ribbed tank. I also had on flannel pajama pants with an assortment of emojis on them. Maybe I should've thought this through.

The door opened, and Jake stood there with a drunken grin, and red splotches fanned his pale, freckled cheeks. "Natalie! You come to join in the fun? Come on in." He opened the door wide, stepping aside. I saw rapid movement on the bed with naked legs entwined and pink polish on a set of delicate feet. That was all I could see as the wall blocked that side of the room from where I was standing.

I was about to protest and say what I came to say, but Jake pulled me into the room and closed the door. Anxiousness swirled through me, knowing if that were Axel on that bed with someone, I might get physically ill. Scratch that, I knew I would.

However, when I turned and looked across the room, he was sitting on the couch over by the balcony with legs spread wide and a drink in his hand. Alone. His eyes were already on me.

He seemed relaxed with one arm thrown casually over the back of the sofa, and brown eyes dropping to Jake's hand on my arm. "Get your hand off of her, Jake." His voice cut through the noise with authority. Jake dropped his hand from my bicep like I was a hot potato. I stared at him briefly, wondering why he would listen like a trained dog. I wondered

why Axel had such a problem with me being around his teammates.

“Come here, Hardcore.” Axel dropped his hand off the couch and signaled with his finger, pointing at the empty space of the couch between his open thighs.

Staying frozen in place, I knew I stood out like a sore thumb. I didn't want to cross through the room and see a couple having sex on the bed while a party continued. In fact, there were other couples mugging down off to the side of Axel. Obviously, no one else in the room cared. But I wasn't in that same mindset. I shook my head slowly, throwing a cautious glance toward the bed, tightening my arms across my chest, very self-conscious about the party and my state of dress.

He seemed to catch on to my reservations. Shaking his head with a small smile, he rose and snagged a bottle of champagne, then stalked slowly toward me. “You made it.”

We both knew me coming over here willingly was a joke. “You gave me no choice, did you?”

“Didn't I?” He smiled wider, and his adorable dimples made an appearance. He glanced at Jake, who was still standing by, and waved him off with the flick of his fingers, as if he were one of his lackeys. “Go away, Jake, and if I ever see your hand on her again, I'll fuck you up and ruin your future NFL career before it even gets started.”

Jake blanched as if Axel could and would do it. “Sorry. I was just being friendly and welcoming.” It was ridiculous how a 350-pound offensive lineman acted like a child who'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar around Axel. Was he really that powerful?

I gave him an apologetic smile, and Axel stepped into my line of vision, blocking out the view past him. “Now, what brings you here?”

Drolly, I watched, fighting how my heart raced. “You know why I'm here. It's three in the morning, and this party is

so loud that I can't sleep."

"I'm sorry. Do you want me to tuck you in and stay with you until you fall asleep? I think I know how to help you release that tension."

I knew he did, and he wouldn't be reading me a bedtime story with a glass of warm milk. "It's not tension," I countered, trying to focus on the reason I was here to begin with.

"It's not? Are you sure?"

Sometimes he could be exasperating on so many levels. "It's not tension, and you know it."

"Then what is it you want?"

"I wanted you to tone down the party because if anyone has authority and gets what he wants, it's you, and you could shut this down if you wanted to." He could probably commit murder and convince his team members to help him hide the body. Not trying to compare Axel to a murderer, but he did have a magnetic pull over his team. They'd do anything for him.

"I could do it in a heartbeat," he agreed. "But like I asked earlier..." His voice lowered an octave. "What will you do for me?"

"Axel..." I sighed in frustration. "We have to be up in a few hours. Please."

He stared down at me and set the bottle of Dom down on a side table beside us. "Damn, I like it when you say please." Pulling out his phone, he clicked a few times, cutting off the music.

There were shouts, groans, and "What the fucks?" thrown out before Axel twisted his head, pocketing his phone and facing the puzzled faces. "Party's over. We have an early morning." Glancing around the room, he added as an afterthought, "I don't want to have to call Coach. He would be pissed."

Surprised but not surprised, I wasn't going to question how he was the one who seemed to be in charge of the music or how it seemed to grow louder when I'd texted him earlier. He'd clearly manipulated me into coming over here. He was certainly in charge of this after-party. But now, he was shutting it down because I said 'please.'

Axel grabbed the champagne bottle. "Come on, Hardcore." He nodded to the door. "You wanted peace and quiet, then that's what you shall receive."

I fought an internal eye roll. "Where are we going?"

"I'm gonna walk you to your room like a gentleman." With his other hand at my lower back, he reached out and hooked the handle with his other, opening the door for me. I passed through before him and took the three or four steps to my room.

Unlocking the door, I glanced over my shoulder. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He smiled but didn't budge as I felt the heat of his presence at my back.

"Well, goodnight," I said awkwardly, stepping inside the room, and as I turned to close the door, I realized he was trailing behind me. "What—?"

He slid an arm around my waist and pulled me into the bathroom, closing the door behind us. "Are you crazy?" I whispered in the pitch-blackness, anxious my roommate would hear us and see us together. More anxious that this brick wall of every girl's dreams had his thick arm around me and had locked the bathroom door.

"Shh. Relax," he said softly, slowly sliding his arm off me. Suddenly, soft light flooded the bathroom. "I wanted to share one celebration drink with you. That's all. Think of it as your repayment for having me shut down the party."

I watched him skeptically, and he held out the bottle. "Come on, now. It would make my night if you would share this moment with me."

Sighing, I reached out and took it. “Just one drink.”

“Just one drink,” he echoed. “It will help you fall asleep.”

I took a sip. “I hope I can fall asleep, no thanks to you,” I mumbled. “I’ll probably fall asleep an hour before the flight, and then I won’t wake up in time and miss it anyway.”

He laughed and tweaked my nose. “Nah, I’ll make sure you wake up in time.”

“You’re one to talk. You’ve been partying all evening.”

“I’ll wake up in time,” he said casually and tucked a loose strand of my hair behind my ear. “And I got your back, Hardcore. I’ll make sure you make that flight, too.”

“Thanks.” I took another sip and felt myself starting to relax around him. “Congratulations,” I said quietly. I’d seen all of his games this season, and he’d truly played his best game tonight.

“Thank you.”

“You were amazing tonight, Mr. MVP.”

His mouth turned up before he tipped the bottle to his lips, taking a swig. “I hoped I impressed you.”

I pffted and took the bottle. He was so full of shit. “Please. You have so many fans I bet you can’t even keep count.”

“I do, don’t I?” He had that easy grin on his face and pulled the bottle out of my hand, setting it aside. Leaning into me, his smile eased, almost turning into a frown. “But lately, your opinion of me is the only one that seems to matter. Why is that?”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

“Yeah,” he said softly as his arms caged me in. “It’s a bad thing for me.”

“Why?”

He ducked his chin so I couldn't see his face. “I don't like to lose control of situations.”

“Lose control? How?”

He kept his head down, not letting me see his expression. “Fuck. I'm just talking nonsense, and I need to let you go to sleep, don't I?”

“You do,” I answered. Though now, I was wide awake, and his words had me in constant bafflement.

“All right, then. Goodnight, Natalie.” *He called me Natalie, not Hardcore.* Then, with a mesmerizing smile, he walked away.

Chapter NINETEEN

Natalie

The upside: I received a wake-up call from the hotel, and I was on time to pack for my flight.

The downside: When I was at the airport, I checked out my Instagram feed, and my heart twisted. Axel had a smug grin and eyes at half-mast, leaning against the wall of an elevator in the clothes he'd had on hours ago when he left my room. But what made my heart twist was that a girl was clinging to his arm. Not just any girl. It was Jeanette. She had posted it with the caption: *After-hours party with my bae*. Followed by stupid heart emojis and sappy hashtags.

I checked the time of the post, and it was posted two hours ago. After he'd shared a drink with me and told me how my opinion of him mattered the most. Was I naïve for actually thinking what he said was true? Most likely, yes. He was a hot commodity and had a reputation as a player. It wasn't like we were together, so why did it bother me so much?

I didn't see him at the airport when our bus arrived. As I stood in line to board, I still hadn't seen him. I told myself to let it go. My seat was on the last row of the plane, and I situated my carry-on and sat down, putting in my earbuds so I could listen to music and block out the world.

When it looked like everyone had boarded, and the plane was scheduled to depart, I saw him pass through the front of the plane with a large-billed hat and sunglasses. He looked solemn, his mouth in a tight line, and took off his backpack before sitting in one of the outer seats near the front of the plane. He'd barely made it because literally five minutes later, we were taxiing down the runway.

However, I was now certain the plane wouldn't have left without him. Or even better, some wealthy alumni or sports figure would have gladly given him free rein of their own private jet if he needed it.

Why was I even thinking about him? What did it matter, anyway? His college football career was done, and so was my internship. We had nothing to bind us together. It was a clichéd story as old as time. The popular guy who had everything going for him and the nerdy girl. Stupid, overactive imagination on my part. I closed my eyes and shut down my brain as much-needed sleep eventually came.



A few hours after landing:

Axel: I didn't see you on the plane. Did you make it home okay?

Me: Yeah.

Disappointment set in after seeing the picture. Apparently, I was very upset. Not to mention, he didn't even see me when the team landed and departed the plane.

Axel: How about we grab something to eat later today?

I would die before I let him know I was upset or give him my time.

Me: Can't. I'm not on campus.

I was, but I was going back home to stay with my mom. After seeing him in that picture, it gave me a reality check I knew I needed to face. I'd already heard all the rumors about him and how he was a player and larger than life. Why I'd

even thought Axel would want to spend time with me was a head scratcher. I should've enacted my spidey senses, but I was too caught up in the notion that he was interested in me.

Axel: How about tomorrow?

Me: I'll be out of the country for the next week until school starts.

I wasn't, but I almost wished I was. I planned on staying home in San Antonio for a week before the second semester began.



Live with no regrets.

Learn how to swim.

Go out on a date.

Experience my first kiss.

Lose my V-card.

I bit the end of my pen, thinking about the goals I wanted to accomplish. Staring out my dorm window, Axel's arresting face popped into my head as I thought about experiencing these things with him. Then I inwardly chided myself for thinking about it. What was I? A teen writing out foolish fantasies in a notebook? I was bored and writing down a checklist was second nature.

The jolt of a door unlocking caused me to startle, and I dropped my pen. "New semester, new start, and it's like all my good energy is finally manifesting itself into the universe." Lizzie threw her hands up in the air, dancing around like she was part of some awkward pagan dance or a cult revival as she passed behind me to her side of the room.

"You got the part."

"I got it!" she squealed. We'd been back on campus for a few days, and today was the first day of the spring semester. Lizzie had found out she'd won the role of Ophelia in *Hamlet*.

Her performance in *The Breakfast Club* last semester had been a big success, and now she was seeing the fruits of her labor.

“Yay!” I jumped over and threw my arms around her. I was so happy for her. “Just remember the little people on your way to the top.”

“I’ll always remember.” She slapped my arm and gave me a goofy grin. “I’m still the same ole boring Lizzie.”

“Girl, please. You’re a star and soon to be a supernova.”

“Okay. Maybe just a little star.” She grinned cheekily before shaking her head. Plopping down on the edge of her bed, she asked, “How were your classes today?”

“Good, I guess.” I was taking a full load. “Nothing out of the norm or as amazing as getting the lead in a popular play.”

Rap, rap, rap echoed off the door, and I glanced at Lizzie. “Were you expecting company?”

“No. You?”

“No.”

Three more impatient raps blared out. “Okay!” I called out and went to the door, yanking it open. My breath caught in my throat when I gawked in shock as Axel leaned into the open space between us with one of his muscular arms over my head on the doorjamb. His broad chest was level with my eyes, and when I allowed my gaze to travel up, my body tensed with the way he was staring down at me.

“What—” I swallowed, catching myself and trying to level my voice. “What are you doing here?”

“I was in the neighborhood,” he said evenly.

“Why?”

He peered over my shoulder. “Are you going to invite me in?”

“Why?” I knew I sounded repetitive.

He scoffed and rubbed his hand over his forehead. “You always have to make things difficult, don’t you?” Something behind me caught his attention, and his eyes lit up as he became the persona that most of Hillside was familiar with. “Is she always this skeptical about friends?” I knew he was talking to Lizzie, and something like jealousy strummed through my veins, although the analytical side of me knew I was being ridiculous.

“No. Just cautious,” my friend answered behind me.

“I see that. On any other day, I’d think that’s a great trait.” He glanced down at me. “Are you gonna let me in?”

“Why are you here?”

He rubbed his lips together. “Damn, Hardcore, you really do make me work for it.”

I didn’t understand what he meant, but I stood my ground and waited for an explanation, which he didn’t provide.

“You gonna be polite and let me in?”

Frustrated with his evasiveness, I stepped back and allowed him access to come in. “Please, come in,” I mumbled. “What do you want, Axel?”

“You have my jacket, remember?”

“Oh,” I said, embarrassed. But I did remember. I remembered too much and still had dreams about what happened before he gave me his jacket that night. I turned before he could see any signs that I might’ve been reminiscing. Did he still have my panties? I glanced away. “I’ll get it.”

I rushed to my closet and found it and had to fight the urge to sniff it with the overwhelming scent of sandalwood, cinnamon, and pure male permeating through the material. Axel’s scent was ingrained in my brain because I’d inhaled it several times to know. It wasn’t disturbing at all. Nope, not at all.

Regardless, I curled my fingers over the soft leather. I looked over and saw him standing by my desk, glancing down at my notebook. I frowned. “Here you go.” I held out his jacket with one hand while flipping my notebook shut with the other. Did he see what I wrote?

He raised an eyebrow, and after a few seconds, took his jacket. “Can you walk me out?”

“Why?” I shot a look at Lizzie, who was now sitting on her bed, thumbing through a textbook, which I knew she wasn’t interested in because she barely stayed on one page long enough to read anything.

He gripped the back of his neck, peering at me, appearing half-annoyed, but that couldn’t be. Nothing bothered him. “Can you for once say yes?”

Not waiting for an answer, he circled an arm around me as if we were the closest of friends, moving us toward the door as his weight carried me with him. “I need a word with you in private.” He sounded so polite when he said it, but he had me out in the hall before I could protest.

“What do you want?”

He slowly ran his hand over his mouth as though covering his amusement. “I could give an obvious answer, but that would be too fucking basic.”

Apparently, I was basic and clueless because I felt like he had an inside joke I wasn’t privy to. “Then clue me in,” I finally answered.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Too busy for me?”

I’d heard this before. His comment rubbed me the wrong way because it only fed into the persona he seemed to thrive on. “Too busy for you? It seems like your life is busy enough as is. You’re surrounded by plenty of people who give you

plenty of their time.” Axel had everyone’s attention, and I couldn’t get the image of him with Jeanette out of my head.

“Life is good,” he admitted. “But I’m not completely satisfied. Not by a long shot.”

He wasn’t satisfied? I didn’t want to touch that one. “Maybe you should read a self-help book or try meditation.”

“Maybe you should tell me why you’re avoiding me.”

“How can I be avoiding you? I’m talking to you right now.”

He pinched his nose and sighed. “You always have to be difficult.” He dropped his hand and peered down at me. “I’d like to take you out to dinner.”

My pulse erratically sped up, but I couldn’t allow myself to get sucked into his vortex. I’d heard this one before. “Thank you, but no.”

“Why not? I don’t just ask out anyone.”

“Am I supposed to feel special?” I quipped. “Maybe you should ask out your bae, Jeanette.” The words fell out of my mouth before I could stop them. I covered my mouth with my hands. *Why the hell did that slip out?*

He tilted his head. “You saw the picture she posted?” he asked calmly and shifted his stance.

I nodded.

He rubbed the back of his head with a frown. “Nothing happened that night.”

I shrugged, not exactly believing what he said, although my heart fluttered unwillingly. But I could be cavalier, too. “Okay. Not my business, and you’re free to do whatever you want to do.”

“Don’t be like that. Don’t act like you don’t care,” he said quietly. “I swear nothing happened. I was drunk and going up to my room to bed, and she was staying in the same hotel because her dad is a prominent Falcons booster, and she

happened to run into me going into the elevator. She said she wanted a picture and took it. It was no different from the hundreds of pictures I'd already taken with other fans that night."

She wasn't one of the hundreds of other fans; she was someone he'd had been with. It still bothered me, but I wouldn't point it out. "You don't need to explain yourself."

"You sure about that?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. However, I can't go out with you."

He crossed his arms and dipped his chin, staring at me hard as if he were trying to persuade me to change my mind for several awkward moments until he finally spoke. "All right, then, Hardcore." There was a touch of aggravation in his voice, though his delivery was pleasant enough. He took a step back. "One day, you'll say yes." He took another step back, putting two fingers to his temple in salute. "See you around." With that, he turned and strolled off.

Chapter TWENTY

Axel

I waited for her outside her dorm room the next morning. No, I wasn't stalking. I just wanted to walk her to her first class. I kind of had connections to find out her schedule. Okay, maybe I bribed someone on campus, but I needed to talk to her, and Hardcore could be stubborn.

I should've known she'd see that stupid picture Jeanette took and posted on fucking social media. I wished she hadn't taken it, but by that point, I was too tired to care. She happened to be in the elevator when I was going up to my room. She took a fucking picture. I should've known she'd post some stupid caption, making it look like it was more than it was, but I let it go. Lesson learned.

After we exited the elevator, she followed me to my room and tried to convince me to rekindle our fuckship, which I quickly declined. Even drunk, I knew better. As far as I was concerned, I never wanted to be in the same vicinity as Jeanette ever again.

Then, I overslept and realized my phone was dead because I'd forgotten to charge it before I passed out. And damn near missed my flight.

Shaking my head, I knew Natalie was obviously pissed about it. But I would wear her down and get a date out of her.

The word no was foreign to me.

I saw the front doors open, and she passed through in baggy sweats and her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. After taking a few steps down the stairs, she spotted me, sporting a look of disbelief.

“Good morning,” I said, pushing off the ledge to fall in step with her as she made it to the bottom stair.

“Are you lost?”

“Nah, I was waiting for you.”

“You were?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I thought I’d walk you to class.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself.” And began to speed walk down the sidewalk trying to leave me in the dust apparently. But that wouldn’t do.

I couldn’t help but find it amusing as I caught up to her easily. “What classes are you taking this semester?”

She peered up at me in annoyance like I was chopped liver. “Are we doing small talk today? Because I’m really not in the mood.”

“I don’t have to make small talk.” I raised my hands. “Fine with me. We can walk in silence. I don’t mind.”

She did her little scrunchy, disapproval face and took what I said literally. We walked the rest of the way in silence and entered Stephen’s Hall. When we ended up at her classroom, she paused, asking sarcastically, “Are you going to follow me into class and sit in on the lecture, as well?”

“No, not unless you want me to. I do take excellent notes.”

“No, thank you.”

“Okay. Enjoy your day.” I smiled and waved at her before I strolled down the hall to my class.

The next morning, I arrived outside her dorm earlier than before. Knowing her, I assumed she would be prepared and leave at a different time. And she didn't prove me wrong. She just glanced at me in annoyance and took off down the sidewalk.

I caught up to her. "You're not a morning person, are you?"

"No. I love mornings. I just don't love chatting with people who are trying to manipulate me."

"Manipulate you?" I asked in surprise. "I just want to get to know you and take you out to eat. Not fucking brainwash you."

She shook her head and flattened her lips and kept walking.

Little did she know, the more she ignored me, the more I would persist. Or maybe she did know and was playing a game, too. It seemed like she was. "That's okay. I can be patient."

Silence.

"It's actually a skill of mine."

Silence.

"And persistent. I'm very persistent."

Silence.

"Most people can't resist me."

She looked up at me, raising an eyebrow. "I'm sure. Like I said before maybe you should go find your after-hours girl again. She's obviously enamored."

I cocked my head. I should've known she didn't believe me about the night in Miami. "I told you nothing happened that night with Jeanette, but I find your jealousy adorable."

She gritted her teeth. "I am *not* jealous."

We arrived at her class, and I thumbed her chin. “It’s okay to admit it.” She jerked away and stormed into the auditorium. “Enjoy your day,” I called out with a smile. I realized my signature smile that I always had ready at the drop of a hat was genuine this time.

The next morning was dark, cloudy, and cold. It was January, and you never knew what the temperature would be in central Texas. It could be hot one day and cold the next.

The door opened, and Natalie stared straight ahead as she took the stairs, not even glancing my way. She turned and made her way down the sidewalk. I caught up to her peering down at her. “You’re going to flat-out ignore me today? That’s rude.”

“Why can’t you leave me alone?” Her voice was a thin thread about to break.

I could’ve been a dick and made a snide comment, but I didn’t. I paused studying her noticing something was off. “What’s wrong?”

She waved a hand in the air and kept walking.

I reached out and stopped her.

She threw her arms around her waist, caving in. “I’m sorry.” Her voice sounded shaky. “I’m just...” The words trailed off, and she rolled her lips together.

“Hey. Talk to me?”

“It’s nothing.” She averted her gaze.

I pulled her off to the side, away from the students walking behind us, and several feet away until we were alone. “Tell me what’s wrong, Natalie.”

She dipped her head and swiped a finger under her eye. “It’s my dad’s birthday today.” She exhaled and said in a quiet voice, “He would have been fifty years old.”

Would have been. I tipped her chin up staring into her misty eyes. “I’m so sorry, Natalie. Do you want to talk about

it?”

Her mouth quivered fighting the urge to tell me. But in the end, she relented. “He died of a heart attack... that night after you dropped me off from the formal.” She sniffled and forced a laugh, while I hid my surprise. “I had to take an Uber home because I didn’t have my car. And then somehow, between leaving the campus and arriving at my parents’ house, I lost my phone.” Her voice rose higher with tears. “He was already pronounced dead by the time I made it home.”

“Fuck.” Seeing her tears affected me more than I wanted to admit. I pulled her close and held her, letting her cry. I remembered that day at practice when she said she’d lost her phone, and I’d given her shit about it. I mentally berated myself for being a jerk.

Eventually, her tears subsided, and she pulled away, swiping her face. “I’m fine, really.” Patting her cheeks, she said, “I have to go. I’m going to be late for class.”

She turned, and I clutched her hand. “You don’t have to go. Maybe you shouldn’t go. Let me take you to get a cup of coffee.”

“No. I have to go. I have a test in a few days, and I can’t miss this class.”

“Natalie, I can get the notes for you. Fuck, I’ll talk to your professor if I have to. Just let me take you for a cup of coffee and take your mind off this for a few hours.”

“No.” She shook out of my hold. “I’m fine. I’m already running late.” She took off in a run down the sidewalk, while I stood there in bewilderment. She was distraught but wouldn’t skip class. She wouldn’t let me take her for a cup of coffee. I slammed my hand against the tree in frustration ignoring the sharp pain that shot up my arm. Why was she so stubborn?

Chapter TWENTY ONE

Natalie

“You didn’t have to pay for my coffee, but thank you.” I sat down in the opposite booth of Mark Burns, my lab partner in my Advanced Human Anatomy class. We’d just finished a study session, and Mark suggested we go to the Velvet Bean for a cup of coffee.

“You’re welcome. It’s the least I could do since you carried the heavy load of our work today.”

I didn’t want to brag, but this class was right up my alley. For Mark, not so much, but he was driven and didn’t want to blow up his grades by failing this class. He was worried about losing the contents of his stomach when he heard we would use human cadavers. Regardless, he needed this class, so he was motivated and assured me he wouldn’t be a dead weight, no pun intended. However, I did low-key question if this field was in his best interest.

“Why molecular biology?” That was Mark’s major, and I was curious why he chose it.

“I want to be a pathologist. I’ve always wanted to help create vaccines and treatments that could save someone’s life.”

“Very noble.”

“And you? Why sports medicine?”

I shrugged. “I want to help people, too.” I heard a commotion behind us as a new group of people passed through the door.

“Hey, aren’t those the guys on the football team?” Mark directed his head in their direction. “They won the national championship.”

I turned and saw Axel, Nick, Dmitri, and Roman with three girls—one was Kenzie, but I didn’t know the other two. I’d seen them in passing and assumed they were girlfriends of Roman and Dmitri.

“Yeah, they are,” I said, thinking about how Axel had been at the steps outside my dormitory to take me to class every morning this week. How yesterday he’d allowed me to cry in his arms over my father. “I interned as a trainer for the football team this past season.”

Axel was speaking to Nick as they stood in line for their order, but he shifted his attention around the packed coffee shop and happened to scan my table. He paused as his eyes bounced between Mark and me. His mouth moved as he obviously kept up the conversation, but I saw something in his demeanor that reminded me of how he appeared before a game. A glint of determination. The predator before he conquered his prey. Suddenly, his mouth quirked into a half smile, and he slightly nodded his chin at me.

“Do you think you could introduce me to them?” Mark’s voice punctured my thoughts.

Seriously? He was apparently star-struck and wanted me to introduce them. Actually, it wasn’t so surprising he asked, considering people were already approaching them with hats, napkins, and anything they had on hand for them to sign. People also pulled out phones and took pictures with them. It seemed so invasive and somewhat disrespectful, but this wasn’t the first time it’d happened. I was acclimated to how fans treated them after games.

Watching the guys try to be accommodating to crazed fans pulled at my heartstrings. Just watching them interact, it wasn't difficult to tell Nick and Axel were clearly the ones who were more personable. I'd seen it so many times before, hanging around the team this past season, and tonight was no different. They seemed more at ease with this situation, maintaining pleasant smiles on their faces and interacting with the growing group around them. Dmitri and Roman acted more reserved and were soon moving around the crowd, walking off to plant down at the eight-top, where the rest of their group was already sitting and waiting.

"Come on, Natalie. Could you introduce me to them?" Mark persisted, and it kind of rubbed me the wrong way. I wanted to tell him no, but before I could, Axel was coming our way.

"Looks like you'll have your chance," I said under my breath, feeling a mixture of uneasiness, yet my heart sped up.

Axel parked himself in front of our booth, glancing casually between us as if he were sizing up his competition, but that couldn't be true. "Hey," I said over-brightly acting as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

He crossed his arms over his chest, dropping his chin. "You seem to be doing better today."

Before I could answer, I heard, "I'm Mark." He shot out his hand like he was trying too hard, while Axel glanced down at him dismissively before setting his sights on me. His look was both annoying and endearing. Yet something else was there I couldn't place. Something dark.

"I'm a big fan of yours, man. Could I get a picture with you?" Mark's voice sounded like it was coming from miles away, for all I knew or cared.

Axel kept his intimidating gaze on me. "Sure," he said softly, studying me as if he knew more about me than anyone else. "You want your girl in the picture, too, because she would definitely brighten up the landscape."

Dammit, stupid cheeks. I sat mesmerized by his eyes and words like a plant craving sunlight. Then it occurred to me how he was fishing around to see if this was something more than a casual cup of coffee. I ducked my head and pulled a strand of my hair behind my ear, not wanting to say anything one way or another. Mark and I had no interest in each other that way, but there was a vengeful, petty part of me that wanted Axel to think it was something more. Let him stew over it.

But that notion was short-lived. “Oh, no, just me. We’re not dating or anything,” Mark said as an afterthought, putting the kibosh on any ideas of that, too caught up in his “seeing a star” moment, and slid out of the booth with his phone.

Axel was still looking at me, and his front teeth clipped his bottom lip. “That’s too bad. She’s the real star among us all.” My breath caught in my throat. He didn’t break his stare, even when Mark was standing beside him awkwardly with his phone in the air in front of them like a teenage girl who was allowed backstage to take a photo with Harry Styles.

The only time Axel’s attention broke from me was to smile quickly, as if he were trained to take stupid selfies with desperate fans. My lab partner took two pictures and turned to fist-bump Axel, who left him hanging because his focus was back on me.

“Thanks, man. Really appreciate it,” Mark said regardless as he slid back into his seat, checking his phone and clicking around as if he were already posting it on his social media accounts.

Axel didn’t respond; his attention was solely on me. I lifted my cup, struggling to calm my nerves to take a sip of my coffee. “So you do like coffee,” I heard him murmur softly. He watched me as if he was trying to work something out in his head.

What it could possibly be, I didn’t know. “Yeah,” I responded lamely.

“I see.” He rapped his knuckles against the table. “See you around, Hardcore,” he said before strolling back to his table of friends.

Fighting the urge to stare at him, I drew my attention back to Mark, who was still clicking on his phone, and his face lit up. “Dude, my phone is already blowing up.”

“Great,” I replied with zero interest, ready to leave already. I didn’t care about Mark and his popularity status on social media. All I could think about was what was going on in Axel’s head as he casually walked away.

The remaining time I spent with Mark was quiet and somewhat uncomfortable, peppered with lame small talk as we finished our coffee. I only glanced over twice in Axel’s direction, though I tried not to, and each time, he was staring me down.

Gathering my backpack, I stood and threw the strap over my shoulder. “I have to leave, but thanks for the coffee.”

“No prob. I’ll see you in class.” Mark waved quickly and went back to searching his phone.

As I was leaving, my head unwillingly turned in Axel’s direction, and I wished I hadn’t. He was leaning back in a chair with his arm slung over the back and his legs spread wide. His eyes were on me. Embarrassed again, I turned away and left. *Stop acting like a fangirl around him.*

Walking through the parking lot, my cell rang. I pulled it out of my backpack as I opened my car door. With brows drawn together, I answered. “Mom? Is everything okay?”

“Yes. I was calling to check up on you. How are your classes?”

“Good, so far.” I sank into the driver’s seat and set my backpack in the passenger seat, sighing in relief that there wasn’t another emergency. “How are you?”

I’d just been home with her before the second semester began, and each time I left her now, I was concerned and felt

guilty. We were both suffering from our loss but had silently moved on. *Just move on and deal.* That's how we handled our pain.

I sat and listened as she talked about my brother and sister-in-law's sonogram today. The upcoming birth of their baby was a bright spot in our life. Life was funny, in a way. After suffering the end of one life, we were preparing to celebrate the birth of another.

Starting the engine, I continued to listen as the call shifted to the car's speaker. "I'm so happy for them. I can't wait until the baby is born."

"Me either." Then she went on another five-minute tangent about the baby and future plans.

I slid my hands over the steering wheel at ten and two, just like I'd been taught to do when I got my permit. I looked in the mirror and put my car in reverse to see the camera. All clear.

There was a lull for a second before my mother said, "I want you to think about what I said about Kiran."

My foot eased down on the gas, ready to back out, and I shook my head in frustration. *She wasn't going to let this go.* "Okay. I will."

"I'm serious. I want you to give this a chance."

"Okay, Mom. I have to go." I clicked off the call and pushed the gas pedal harder than I should've, and... *Crunch!* I was jerked against the seatbelt that tightened across my chest. My head snapped back into the seat, and I stared ahead of me in shock. My adrenaline kicked in, and I felt like I was experiencing something surreal.

Then denial kicked in.

Because it was hard to grasp how I'd hit a car—*again.*

"No. No. No!" I gripped the steering wheel in a choke hold. Why? Why was this happening? Sighing in resignation, I

dropped my head on the top of the steering wheel. I couldn't believe I did this again. What the hell was wrong with me?

After a few deep, slow breaths, I opened my eyes, and the blinding lights reflected in my rearview mirror pierced my vision. I knew I needed to step out and talk to the driver. Apologize. Exchange insurance information. Oh, my god, why did I struggle with backing out of parking spaces?

Before my hands slid off the wheel, there were three soft raps on my window. I looked up and saw Axel standing before me. *Why was he here?*

Staring at him for several seconds in shock, I finally cut the engine. Axel motioned for me to get out. Like a zombie, I opened the door and stepped out of the car.

"Are you okay?" he asked with concern as he raked his eyes over me.

"Yeah. Why are you here?" Where was the other driver? I was out of sorts and not thinking straight. "Did you witness the accident?"

"Natalie..."

"How did I not see it?"

"Natalie."

"I swear it was clear behind me."

"Natalie," he began slowly, as if I had trouble understanding. "You hit my car." He ran his hand down my arm, still looking me over as if checking for injuries. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I hit your car." My jaw dropped in disbelief as I stared off into the distance. "Again?" How could I do that? What were the odds of this happening? Was this a cruel joke?

"Are you hurt?" he pressed.

I blinked my eyes slowly and steadied my voice. "No. I'm fine."

“Are you sure?” He lightly cupped my head, running his hand down the back of my neck and over my arms, gently feeling for injuries.

How could this have happened again? Why was he being so kind and always making sure I was okay? Was he not angry? Taking a deep breath, I nodded.

“Good.” When I saw the expression on his face, it was one of pure relief.

Reality set in, and I fought back tears of frustration. “I’m—I’m so sorry. I’ll give you my insurance information.” Steadying my nerves, I turned to reach into the car and grab my backpack, but he stopped me.

“No.”

“No?” I peered over my shoulder at him in confusion.

“We can settle this without getting the insurance companies involved.” He tapped his temple. “Without your mother finding out.”

My throat tightened, but I fought to keep my composure. I exhaled, unsteadily shaking my head. “I don’t... I don’t want to disappoint my mom after all she has been through.”

“I don’t want that either. That’s why I want to offer you a solution,” he said.

“What kind of solution?” I asked but already knew the answer.

“I’ll take care of the damages. I’ll cover it.”

“No.”

“Yes,” he interjected calmly. “You can’t afford another wreck on your insurance record because the premiums would skyrocket. Am I right?”

Staring at my feet, I had to blink several times to keep myself from crying. I thought back to how my father was always concerned about my driving. At the time, it’d pissed me off. But I knew he’d only been worried and wanted me to

be responsible. At the end of the day, I knew Dad would never drop me from his auto insurance. How I wished he were alive now. How I'd gladly take the stern talk he would give me if he were still alive. How I missed my dad. So much. So much it hurt.

“Hey,” Axel said gently. His hand crept over my shoulder. “Don't cry. I want to help you, okay?”

I wasn't crying, dammit. “It isn't necessary.” I glanced off to the side, trying to hide the rogue tears beginning to slide down my cheek.

“What do you mean?” he asked incredulously, almost in frustration.

I studied him in question, and he added, “It is necessary. You're standing here, trying to keep it together.” He reached out and cupped my chin, turning me to face him. “I can fix this.”

“You can?” I felt like I was melting under his gaze and needed his reassurance as a lifeline. I knew he could fix this. I knew Axel Thomas had the power to right the earth if it ever fell off its axis. He had the charisma and power in the palm of his hand whenever he so chose to use it. It was both a harrowing and an exhilarating thing to experience.

Of course, he could fix it.

He'd done it before.

“Of course, I can. You know I can,” he whispered lowly, confirming my thoughts. “You know I can make this all go away.” He swiped his thumb across my cheek, catching the stray tear that had fallen. “Do you want me to make it go away?”

I did. I wanted this to go away. I didn't want to add any more stress to my mother or cause her to worry. I didn't want to disappoint her. “Yeah,” I said softly, borderline shameful to rely on him again. “Make it go away.”

He peered down at me almost in surprise, but only swallowed calmly. “Okay. I will. But you have to do something for me.”

I tensed slightly as he slid his hand from my face and brought his thumb to hover over his bottom lip.

“What do you want?” I watched him as he slowly dragged his thumb over his tongue as if... he were savoring the taste of my tear. In fact, he took his time, and his eyes closed briefly for several seconds. Then he leisurely dropped his hand.

And I shook myself out of my daze, realizing there was a catch to this.

Just like before.

I pursed my lips. “What do you want?” I repeated firmly.

“You know what I want.” He reached out again and swiped my other cheek. “I want to take you out on a date.”

My heart skipped a beat. “A date?”

“Yeah. Lunch, dinner, coffee... whatever you prefer.”

“Just one date?”

He shook his head with a wry twist of his lips. “You don’t have to act like it’s a sacrifice. I’ve been trying to ask you out.”

“Why?”

“Ahh, your favorite word again.” He ran a hand under his chin. “Why can’t it be as simple as I want to hang out with you?”

“Just hang out?”

“Yep.”

Contemplating his words, I smoothed a hand over my forehead. Why did it seem like I was being manipulated on some level? But I was at fault again, although I still couldn’t believe I didn’t see his car.

“So, what do you say? Are you gonna agree to this?”

A car honked, and I jumped, realizing there was a line of cars starting to grow behind Axel’s BMW.

I couldn’t believe it, but I could feel myself opting to say yes. *Live with no regrets*. The words reverberated in my head. Someone shouted angrily off in the distance about the hold-up in the parking lot. Axel didn’t seem to care too much because he kept staring down at me, waiting.

“Come on, man. Move your car. I’ve got to be at the library for a study group,” some guy called out from his car. Axel peered behind him casually and held out his hand as if to say, *give me a minute*.

Giving me his attention again, he pressed, “Do we have a deal?”

Finally, I nodded, wanting to remove myself from the chaos that was happening around us in the parking lot. However, could I remove myself from the chaos of him?

Chapter TWENTY TWO

Natalie

“Hey, thanks for helping me out.” Tank tapped his finger on the *Intro to Genetics* book between us on the table that I’d used last year. “I couldn’t find this book anywhere.”

“No problem. It’s not like I was ever going to use it again, and I definitely wouldn’t get much money back for it anyway.” The resale value of textbooks was basically nothing, which was crazy considering how much money the campus bookstores sold them for, to begin with.

I was at the main library on campus, where Axel was meeting me to take me out to lunch. I’d run into Tank this morning and told him I had the book he was looking for. Hence the reason he was here.

“I owe you one.” He smiled brightly. “Just name your price, and it’s yours.”

“You owe her what?” Like a crack of thunder, Axel growled behind us. I looked up to see him glaring at Tank.

He raised his eyes mildly at Axel, like he was someone not quite right in the head, but said nothing.

“You owe her what?” Axel demanded again, taking a step closer, posing like he was ready to strike out at his teammate.

Tank's forehead wrinkled in puzzlement. "Bruh, you serious? You need to check yourself."

"Check myself?" he asked in disbelief. "Do you not remember what I told you about her?"

Tank chuckled, shaking his head and throwing his hands out. "I'm not even going to answer this."

"Oh, yeah?" Axel took a menacing step forward with his chest bowed. "Well, let me remind you. I told you to stay the fuck away from her."

"Stop." I scrambled out of my chair and pushed myself between them, laying my palms on Axel's chest, trying to ease him back, but he didn't budge. "It's nothing. Tank needed a book for class, and I gave him mine. That's all."

His eyes dropped from Tank down to my hands, which were firmly pressed against his rock-hard pecs. "That's all?" he asked softly, with an edginess laced in his voice.

"That's all."

"What the hell's wrong with you, man? We're in a damn library, and I have a girlfriend. You know this." Tank's normally soft voice rose about ten decibels.

I wanted to know the answer to that, too, and I could feel Axel's muscles tense under my palms. "Yeah? Then go fucking find her and stop hitting on *my* girlfriend." *My girlfriend*. He eventually eased back a step, but it was obvious he was still pissed.

"Wait a minute. What did you say? Did I just hear you correctly? You two?" Tank's voice rose incredulously, higher than before, if that was even possible. "You and Natalie are together?" I peered behind me, and he looked like someone had just been told the impossible was possible.

"You calling me a liar?" Axel crowded in again, and I panicked, trying to keep him contained. What was with him? We hadn't even gone out on our date.

Glancing behind me, I saw Tank relax, and a small smile materialized. “No. I’m just shocked, man.” *You and me both.*

“Why?” Axel asked.

I guess Tank thought it wise not to voice his opinion, but eventually, he said something. “Congratulations.” He reached over my shoulder, holding out a fist. “It’s about damn time. I’m happy for you. Happy for you both.”

Oh, my god. This was too much.

Axel begrudgingly fist-bumped him. “Thanks, man.”

“Maybe we should go on a double date sometime. Check out the new steakhouse that opened over by the stadium.”

“That sounds really nice, but my baby doesn’t eat beef.” As he spoke, his arms wrapped around me, pulling me against his chest. I stood stiffly, glancing up at him in surprise. He cupped the back of my head as he peered down at me with... fondness? “Besides,” he added. “I’m not to the point where I’m willing to share her with the rest of the world. I want her all to myself.” All to himself? Maybe Axel had a promising career in acting, as well.

“All right, man. I get it,” I heard Tank say behind me. “Anyway, I’ll catch you around.”

Axel nodded in acknowledgment. “Later.”

“Thanks again for the book,” Tank directed at me sincerely before he walked away.

When a few moments passed, I tried to pull away, but he didn’t release me. “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“The whole acting like a jealous boyfriend.”

“I was jealous,” he said easily. “Do you think I’d stand by and allow anyone to hit on you?”

“Well, no.” What was I saying? I had no idea. He was already Jedi mind tricking me and making me question myself.

“I don’t know. We haven’t even gone on our date.”

“You don’t know,” he mused with an enigmatic look, still holding me firm. “We need to rectify that, don’t we?”

Before I could question what he meant, he led me forward, with his arm tight around my waist, toward the rows and rows of bookshelves in front of us. In the opposite direction of the library entrance.

“What are we doing?”

“Rectifying the situation,” was all he said before I was lifted in his arms and backed up against a wall of books on the shelves behind me.

“Axel,” I warned, glancing around with apprehension.

“Shh, Natalie, be quiet or we’ll get in trouble. You don’t want to get thrown out of the library, do you? A good little rule follower like yourself would never want to tarnish that reputation, right?”

“No,” I squeaked and realized my legs were dangling around his knees.

He gripped my thighs; the heat of his hands burned through my jeans as he drew my legs around his hips.

“Axel?” I whispered, somewhat nervously. Was this what he wanted all along? Is this what he expected on a date? Was he going to take my virginity? In the library?

“Relax, I’m not going to ravish you in the library.”

“You’re not?”

He leaned his forehead against mine with a reassuring smile. “No.”

“Then what are we doing?”

He pressed deeper between my legs, and I bit my bottom lip at the contact. He stared at me intently with so much hunger it almost frightened me. “I want to give you your second orgasm, your third, your fourth, and every orgasm

after. I want to see how soaked I can make you until you have a wet spot on your jeans between your legs from what I do. Then I'm going to fantasize about your tight, drenched virgin pussy and how much I want to mark it with my cum."

"Oh, my god," I exhaled unsteadily.

"That's right, Hardcore. You better pray right now to every deity you know that I can control myself and not do what I want, *what I've been dreaming about for several goddamn months*, and ruin this sweet cunt for any other man you might ever encounter in your lifetime after me."

He thrust against me, and I moaned as my thighs clenched around his waist. He thrust again, and another sound fell from my lips.

"Damn, baby, you keep making those sweet noises, and we will get caught."

"I can't he—" *Help it*, I wanted to say, but he pulsed into me, and I nuzzled into his chest to keep my sounds muffled.

"I know, beautiful girl." His voice was gravelly, and one of his hands drifted up my shirt and closed over my breast, squeezing in desperation. I arched my back, relishing his touch. "Goddamn, it drives me insane how responsive you are to me."

He kept moving and moving and moving against me as the pressure between my legs kept growing and growing like a balloon that expanded at breakneck speed, bound to exceed capacity and burst into pieces. Nothing mattered right now. I didn't care that we were in a public library. I didn't care how I was drenching my panties—because I was. I didn't fucking care that Axel might remind me of that fact in the aftermath. I just didn't care. The only thing that mattered was chasing the high I'd experienced with him before.

My thighs tightened so hard, to the point I felt like my muscles were twitching without control.

"You're about to come, aren't you?" His words made me shiver as his tongue traced around the shell of my ear.

“Mm-hmmm.” My voice sounded loud to me, but I knew it was stifled by the broadness of his chest. In fact, I could feel my teeth gnashing into the fabric of his shirt, doing all I could to not scream out in the middle of the library and out us both.

“Fuck, Natalie.” He squeezed my boob harder and pushed so hard against me, my back scraped up against the bookshelf. “Come for me,” he commanded.

And I did. I squeezed my thighs around him in a death grip and cried into his shirt, convulsing as if I’d been shocked by a Taser and suffering the aftereffects like I had no control of my movements.

He coaxed me through it while my eyes stayed sealed shut, afraid to look at him. When my tremors subsided, I felt the ridiculous wetness in my panties and the overwhelming hardness of his cock still nestled against me. I clung to his shoulders, keeping my head down.

“You okay?” he asked softly.

I exhaled slowly, trying to keep my voice level. “I’m okay.”

“Good, because I need to get us out of here before I do something I said I wouldn’t do.”

“What does that mean?” I glanced up at him.

“Damn, girl. You really are that innocent, aren’t you?” He smoothed my damp tendrils off my face, giving me a tender look. “You truly are too fucking adorable for your own good.” He smiled wryly, as if he were sharing an inside joke with himself. “Now, let’s go grab something to eat.”



“Thank you for taking care of my car again.” I dipped a loaded french fry into ranch dressing. Axel coaxed me into going to Duffy’s because he said they had the best loaded fries with jalapeños. I didn’t know if it was true or not, because I had nothing to compare it to, considering I’d never tried loaded

fries before, but they were very good. Actually, better than good. Delicious.

“You’re welcome.” He dragged a cheddar and chive french fry through the ranch dip. “However, it’s going to take a few weeks before the car is ready, since they have to custom order a new bumper.” He took a bite and chewed, deep in thought. “I can hook you up with a rental if you’d like.”

“No, I don’t need one, and rentals can be expensive. I can’t afford it.”

“Who says you’d have to pay for it?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I can’t take another thing from you.”

“Why not? You could go out on another date with me.”

“You realize how seedy that sounds, right?”

“Why? I’m not demanding sex for favors.”

Rolling my eyes, I raked another fry through the dressing, as well, and brought it to my mouth. “You’re trouble. Big trouble, you know that?” I wasn’t going to delve below surface level with him about how much trouble he could potentially be. I was well aware. I didn’t need to have an in-depth conversation about it.

“Me? Trouble? I’m basically a Boy Scout.” He held up three fingers together with another arresting smile he knew all too well no one could resist. “Scout’s honor. No pun intended.”

“Trouble,” I murmured.

He leaned forward, folding his hands together. “I want to propose another deal. An addendum to the current one.”

I tilted my head. “What kind of deal?”

“Don’t get all defensive again, Hardcore. Just hear me out.” He seemed amused. “And I don’t think I’m asking too much, all things considered.” Translation: *I’m covering the damages to your car. Again.*

“Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“Here’s the deal. I like hanging out with you, and obviously, I want another date.”

“Another date?” I eyed him skeptically. We weren’t even finished with our current date. I thought about what he’d said to me in the library, about how he wanted to give me multiple orgasms and take my virginity.

“Yeah, I like you, and I think you like hanging out with me, too, and would enjoy it even more if you’d relax and allow yourself to live a little. You didn’t seem to have a problem in the library.”

Embarrassing heat flushed up my neck. I did enjoy it, but right now, I didn’t want to think about it.

“Anyway, I propose a little experiment. Call it a project if you want.”

“Are you the project?”

He chuckled, dropping his head before laying his eyes on me. “We both are.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“I want you to be my girl.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Be your girl?”

“Yeah. For now.”

Then my heart dropped slightly, which was ridiculous. *For now?* “For how long?”

He took a sip of his water before answering. “Do we need a time limit? I suppose it’s over when we’re not having fun anymore. Like a typical couple.”

“I don’t know what typical couples do because I’ve never dated anyone, remember?” I reminded him, then added as an afterthought, “Except for being your fake date for the formal last spring.” I crossed my arms over my chest.

“Well, I’ve never dated anyone either.” He shifted in his seat, mimicking me, closing his muscular arms over his chest. “So, we can navigate this together. It shouldn’t be that hard.”

I forced a laugh. “Please. Hearing all the rumors of how girls lost their minds over you—”

He held up a hand, eyeing me seriously. “I wasn’t dating them. I was fucking them.” At my gasp, he clarified, “It was mutual.”

“But what about Jeanette?”

He shook his head, giving me a droll look as if I was supposed to know. “I told you. Nothing happened between us that night. In fact, I haven’t touched her since that day you saw in the library, which was not my idea, by the way. We only saw each other a few times, and the only thing between us was fuc—”

I held out a hand. “Okay! I get it.” I didn’t need to hear about it. But I realized Jeanette lied to me about Axel at the formal. Axel didn’t care about her. Did it matter? My heart thumped a little harder.

However, the rumors about him were apparently true. One of the biggest players on campus. Great. Great start to our project. “So, will you still be…” I swallowed slowly, kicking myself for even asking this question. “Hooking up with people during this project?”

“No. Why would I do that?” Axel said, as if offended. Then he gazed down at me and caressed my cheek. “I’m not going to cheat on you. That would make me a shitty boyfriend if I did that, now wouldn’t it?”

His messed-up logic somehow made sense. That was about the only thing that did, because this sounded like a disaster waiting to happen.

Allowing myself to hang out with Axel as his exclusive girlfriend could be too much for me. I mean, I was already more attracted to him than I should be. He was charming, intelligent, hot—obviously—and entertaining to talk to when

he wasn't being an arrogant smart-ass. "Yeah, I guess it would."

"So, what do you say? Are you gonna agree to this?"

"What exactly does being your girlfriend entail?" I asked again because he never clarified. My thoughts drifted back to what we did in the library earlier.

The noise of the restaurant buzzed around us, but Axel placed his elbows on the table leaning in. "Whatever you want it to be."

"I don't know if this is a good idea."

"Why?" His eyes seemed somewhat serious. "I'm a good guy. I know this is all new to both of us, but I will treat you right. I can promise you that."

A short-term promise. I nodded and thought about how he'd never had a girlfriend. I picked up another fry. "Why haven't you ever had a girlfriend?"

He watched me, but I could see the wheels spinning in his brain, his expression never changing. The more I was around him, the more I realized Axel Thomas only showed you what he wanted you to see. He could be charming, playful, focused, and angry when you got on his bad side. He was a dichotomy of personalities, but everything was hidden under a smirk or a back-handed smile. For most of our encounters, I felt like I was a novice playing in the big leagues with him.

I didn't want to get on his bad side, I realized. However, I didn't want to get sucked under either. So, I was determined to stay in the neutral zone with him. No matter how easy it was to fall for his charm. Or how fulfilling it was to climax when he hadn't even removed my clothes. So, yeah, I needed to tread carefully and keep my head above water.

But I also needed to know more about him. "Why?" I pressed.

He shrugged noncommittally. "The right opportunity never presented itself." He reached for another fry and held it

out to me. “Here, take it, beautiful.”

I scoffed. “I’m not stupid. I know what you’re doing.”

“What am I doing?”

“Avoiding the question.” I took the fry from him and snapped it in half between my teeth. “Now, answer it.”

He chuckled under his breath. “Hardcore, hard ass,” he mumbled and focused his attention on the half-eaten basket of fries as if it were the most fascinating thing he’d seen lately.

“I’m waiting,” I responded, undeterred.

He casually lifted his eyes to me and folded his hands on the table. “You’re trying to make something out of nothing.”

I mentally took note of his casual way of avoidance. “Stop stalling,” I said quietly.

“It’s not a complicated answer.”

“Then tell me. Humor me.”

Keeping his eyes on me for several seconds, he finally relented. “Okay. Honestly? I just never saw an opportunity where it was worth it. At least, not in the long run.” He grabbed another fry and chewed, never breaking our stare. “What else do you want to know? My blood type? My social security number?”

“Nope. I’m good.” I paused. “But on second thought, maybe I should know your blood type in the event you need a blood transfusion.”

“It’s A positive. Anything else?”

I shook my head.

“All right, then.” He reclined casually in the booth across from me. “Why haven’t you ever dated?”

“The opportunity never presented itself.” I wrapped my lips around the straw of my water and sipped.

“Seriously? Who the hell wouldn’t want to date you?” I wanted to roll my eyes at the incredulity in his tone. Was he

trying to boost my ego?

“I didn’t exactly say no one had ever asked me out.” I thought about how there were a few guys in high school who had asked me out on dates; however, my parents were not having any of that, and I was too much of a good girl to go against them. Maybe I never thought they were worth the effort, either. Maybe I could sympathize with what Axel said. Instead, I took the easy way out. “My parents wouldn’t let me date or have boyfriends in high school.”

“For real?” Axel eyed me skeptically before grabbing another fry.

“They were strict.”

“Actually, I don’t blame them. I would’ve probably kept your fine ass locked up in the house, too. Saved you all for myself.” He flashed his perfectly straight white teeth as he chewed.

“That’s somewhat disturbing.”

“Nah, someone needed to keep you out of trouble.”

And this time, I did roll my eyes. “Like I said. You’re the one who’s trouble.”

He grinned. “It’s okay. You’re such a good girl that a little trouble in your life is not gonna hurt you. It could only give you character.”

Chapter TWENTY THREE

Axel

“Damn, you’re such a show-off,” Nick teased after watching me squat 500 pounds. We were in the weight room, working out and preparing for the NFL combine in a few weeks.

“Just a typical Tuesday for me.” I grabbed a towel and wiped off my face.

“Spot me on the bench.” He strolled over to one of the weight benches and dropped down while I hovered behind him.

“You got something you want to tell us?” Roman called out across the room and leaned over, depositing the kettlebell he’d been using back on its shelf.

“You mean besides him announcing he’s a douche?” Dmitri piped in, sitting on another bench nearby, looking at his phone.

“Did you come here to work out or text your girlfriend like a desperate pussy?” I called back. I swear that fucker couldn’t be apart from Sorina for more than an hour as of late.

“Shut up,” Dmitri grumbled in a monotone voice, never looking up from his cell.

Roman peered over D's shoulder with brows raised.
"You're looking at baby furniture?"

"Yeah. If you haven't noticed, we're going to have a baby soon, and we need to be prepared."

"It's five months away."

"Never can prepare soon enough," he said, still scrolling through his phone.

Roman shrugged and straightened with his hands on his hips, directing his gaze at me. "Theo said she saw you leaving Duffy's yesterday with a girl."

"Is she keeping tabs on me?" I checked on Nick, who was speed-pressing 250 pounds like a champ. I drew my attention back to Roman. "Maybe you're the one who should be concerned."

He smiled, but it wasn't friendly. "Don't piss me off by deflecting with your bullshit, Axel."

"Deflect?" Lately, Roman felt like it was his right to know everything going on among us. Basically, he was like an annoying parent. "Am I not allowed to have lunch with a friend?" I asked innocently, "Are you jealous I didn't ask you?"

"You don't ever take anyone to lunch. Sounds kind of like you were on a date."

I laughed. This joker. "And?"

"Axe... you spotting me or trying to let me die?" Nick wheezed beneath me, struggling with the bar at his neck, and his face was strained and red. *Oh, shit!* I quickly reached down and helped him bring the bar up, setting it on the rack.

"So, was it a date?" Roman persisted. "Because you don't date, do you?"

This was pointless, but I'd humor him. "Nah. I don't date."

“I didn’t think so.” He looked like he was about to roll his eyes. Why in the hell were we having this conversation?

Nick sat up and swiped his face, breathing heavily for several moments and gathering himself. “Fuck it. Let’s grab something to eat. I’m hungry.”

I cracked a grin. Nick was already failing with his commitment to intermittent fasting. I knew it wouldn’t last. I patted him on the shoulder. “There’s always tomorrow, little buddy.” I motioned with my finger. “Let’s go, then.” I started off, with Nick and the guys trailing behind me.

We ended up going to one of the sandwich delis on campus. As usual, it was packed with students. There were also a lot of our team members there. Everyone needed to get their sandwich on today, apparently.

Halfway through our meal, I noticed Natalie sitting across the restaurant with her friend, Lizzie. A few minutes later, two guys were hovering over their table, one of them Jake and the other one, that fucker Trey. What part of the message to stay away from her was he not understanding? And Jake, too, for that matter.

More importantly, why the fuck did I care so much? Why did I feel like burying every guy who got near her? Including my friends. It was the same way yesterday when I saw Tank talking to her. I’d never felt an inkling of jealousy in my life. Never had a girlfriend, so I never had to worry about this nonsense. Never cared enough to think about it. In fact, I’d never felt jealousy over anything.

Never in football either, because I was too busy making my mark instead of worrying about someone else’s glory. Never. It seemed like a waste of time and energy. You made your own luck. If you were jealous of something, then that was on you. You were worried about the wrong thing. You weren’t focused on the big picture.

It was never my intention to drag her down a vacant aisle in the library and dry hump her until she came either. I swear

my intention was taking her to lunch and being on my best behavior. But as soon as I got near her, my fucking brain apparently shut down.

All this rationalizing didn't mean shit because my blood was boiling, and my hands clenched, imagining how satisfying it would be if I strangled the life out of Trey.

"You're crushing that sandwich," Nick intervened in my thoughts. "And I mean that in the literal sense."

I glanced down, seeing my bread mangled and mayonnaise oozing all over my hand. Fuck! Dropping it, I licked my palm as I continued to keep my eyes focused on her table and saw Trey say something, causing both girls to laugh. If my asshole friends weren't here, ready to bust my balls, I'd already be at her table. Fuck crushing sandwiches; I'd be crushing windpipes.

"This is a new color for you," Roman said with eyebrows raised before glancing over his shoulder at Natalie's table.

"What the hell does that mean?" I already sensed the punchline.

"Jealousy." His lips twitched as if he were a damn comedian, which was a joke in itself. "It's your new color," he added.

Then Dmitri's resting bitch face perked up as he lifted his mouth into a semblance of a smile and slammed his hand on the table. That was an overreaction if I'd ever seen one. "About time this joker lost his chill over something."

Wiping my hands with a napkin, I forced a grin. "That's cute. You're projecting your irrational feelings on me."

"Hey, if the shoe fits," Dmitri added.

"Whatever that means," I mumbled flippantly and glanced *her* way, noticing how she was beaming up at Lomas again. My right shoe dug into the floor as I was about to set off toward her table. My fucking shoe fit just fine, and I was about to put it in Lomas's stupid ass.

Roman nudged Dmitri. “Look at him. He’s about to lose his shit in three, two—”

“Lay off him, man,” Nick interjected before finishing off the last bite of his sub.

“Ah, look at Nicky defending his buddy,” Roman pointed out.

“Shocker,” Dmitri deadpanned.

“At least someone around here does.” I fist-bumped Nick and stood up, about to make a beeline for her table because my patience had run out.

“Where are you going? Gonna talk to your non-date?” Roman asked.

Regardless of what my friends thought, I was going to shut this down once and for all. “Not my date. My project.” Finally, I saw my two teammates walk away from her table. The tightness in my chest started to ease. “Our project. We’re working on a project this semester,” I added and stalked off, hearing laughter behind me as I’m certain Roman and Dmitri got a kick out of that, but I didn’t care at the moment. They could take it however they chose. They could also go fuck themselves, for all I cared.

When I reached her table, she was gathering her trash. I swooped in and took it from her. Giving a quick greeting to Lizzie, I helped Natalie stand. “Come on.”

“Axel?”

I didn’t give her time to stall. I wanted to get out of here and take her with me. “You’re coming with me.” Turning to her friend. “See you later, Lizzie.” I caught Lizzie’s shocked face before I tugged Natalie along with me.

I only stopped to dump her trash into the restaurant trash bin, and once outside, she glanced up at me. “Where are we going?”

“To my house, and don’t ask why.”

She contemplated asking, regardless; she did, but then she closed her mouth and followed me. Well, she really didn't have much of a choice because I was tugging her with me. Hell, I was one step away from throwing her over my shoulder and carrying her to my car because her little legs were having a hard time keeping up. That sounded a little creepy, didn't it? I knew I was being irrational, but I couldn't seem to help it.

"What if I had another class this afternoon?"

"You don't." I opened the passenger door for her. "I know you're done with classes today."

Her eyes widened. "How?"

"Don't worry about it. I have my ways." It didn't suck being a high-profile person on campus. Nor did it suck having someone who worked as an academic advisor on campus who could easily be swayed to give me Natalie's schedule. Was it unethical? Probably. Did I care? Not one damn bit.

She sat quietly while I closed the door. I guess there was something to be said about the element of surprise.

When I slid behind the wheel, she sat clutching her backpack to her chest. "I have a lot of homework."

"That's fine. You can work on it when we get to my place."

"How do you know I have everything I need to do it?"

"Because you're a planner." I glanced down at her backpack. "Knowing you, you were probably headed to the library to do some work." I could see it on her face that she was, although I asked anyway. "Am I right?"

"Maybe."

I reached out and tapped the tiny diamond stud of her nose ring. "My little nerd."

She scoffed, but her tanned cheeks flushed with more color, and damn, it was so cute when she did that. *Where the*

hell did that come from? I cleared my throat and started the car.

“Me? A nerd?” she fired back. “Aren’t you the one who told me you have a 4.0 GPA?”

“Yes, ma’am, but I don’t spend all my time in the library.”

“Obviously.” She rolled her eyes.

“I’ve always been a planner,” I answered easily. Everything I did was premeditated and well thought out. From sports to academics—even down to the way I could get under people’s skin. I’d always prepared for A, B, C, and D. That was just how my brain operated... except for when it came to her. But I damn sure wasn’t going to tell her that. Because how this all went down was the most impulsive thing I’d ever done in my life.

Chapter TWENTY FOUR

Natalie

Axel whisked me through his house, down the hallway, and into his room as if he were late for an appointment. Closing the door behind him, he set my backpack down on the edge of the king-sized bed centered in the middle of the room. “Make yourself comfortable. You can sit at my desk and do your work if you’d like.”

Stunned at how I’d ended up here, I glanced over at the modern desk that was clutter-free, with a few books neatly stacked on the side. Next to the desk was a tall bookshelf with several books lined up and color-coordinated, along with picture frames and trophies. His bed was made, and there were two modern end tables, one on each side of the bed. A large flat-screen hung on the wall across from the bed with a wide dresser beneath that balanced out the room. A few pictures of modern art lined the wall. His room was neat and organized.

He walked over to a door and paused, throwing a thumb behind him. “I’m going to take a shower. I worked out earlier.”

I watched him with uncertainty.

He did his side-mouth lift. “Just make yourself comfortable, okay?” He turned and passed through the door, which I assumed was the bathroom, and closed the door.

Comfortable? How could I be comfortable when I knew he was stripping off his clothes a few feet away? I heard the shower, and my thoughts started spinning in my head. My imagination was running wild with images of his big, muscular body naked. Rivulets of water running down his smooth, tan skin. Lathering up his hands and stroking his large... I bit my lip with just the thought. I'd never seen a guy naked in person. Well, except for the cadaver that we were using this semester in my anatomy class... but that was different. Not something to fantasize about. I mean, some people could have a cadaver kink, but... I shuddered.

Think of something else besides the hot guy in the shower a few feet away.

But I couldn't.

I thought about how prominent his erection was when he pulsed against me. He had to be big, considering I'd felt his girth, but I hadn't seen it. I wondered how it would look. Would it be long and thick? I already suspected it would be. Would it hurt if we had sex? Was he going to try and take my virginity? He said he wanted to ruin me, but was he just talking dirty to turn me on?

Were they just meaningless words that he threw out whenever he was around a girl? Was that part of his game? How many girls had he said those exact words to? Was this the next step with us? Him taking my virginity? Is that why he brought me to his bedroom? Was today the day? Is that what he expected? Was I ready?

Whatever you want it to be.

Shouldn't we establish some guidelines? I wasn't certain, but it seemed like we might. I was so deep in thought that I didn't realize the shower had stopped. However, I did hear the door open, and Axel entered the room... with only a towel wrapped around his waist.

"Hey," he said casually and tilted his head. "You're still standing in the same spot I left you."

It took me a second to find my voice because I was staring at him standing half-naked only a few steps away. The bulging of his pecs, the glint of his nipple ring, and the definition of his six-pack abs. The way his belly button popped out like an adorable button, and then the hint of shadow below it that led below his towel.

Seeing his upper body without a hint of clothing was like looking at a beautiful moving canvas with muscles, six-pack abs, and... My mind wouldn't quit.

“You okay, Hardcore?”

“Y-yes, I'm fine.” I needed to get my act together, so I looked away and stared at the closed blinds from the window by his desk.

“What's wrong?” His voice startled me because it seemed too close. And dammit, it was because now he was standing right in front of me. Too afraid to gaze at him head-on, I kept my head down and saw his bare feet that were long and beautifully shaped, like he could be a foot model or something. His feet? Jeez, even his feet were beautiful and perfect. What was wrong with me? I didn't have a foot fetish, but damn, he had some gorgeous feet. I'd seen enough athletes' feet in my lifetime to know the difference between ugly and beautiful male feet.

“Hey.” I felt his fingers at my chin. I scanned over his legs, the towel with the noticeable lump underneath, up and over his defined chest, and up to his eyes that were now smoldering at me. “What's wrong?”

You. You and all of this going on in front of me. “It's a little hard to talk to you when you're standing here... you know... in a towel.”

He tilted his head. “Does it really bother you?”

“Yeah. Do you think I've ever been in a bedroom with a guy like this?” I added sheepishly, “Except that night we shared a hotel room.” And he never paraded around in a towel in front of me.

His eyes narrowed slightly, as if perturbed by the thought. "I hope to hell you haven't."

"You already know the answer to that." He was being ridiculous. "Maybe we should talk about, our..." I whisked a hand between us. "Our project."

"Okay." He placed his hands on his hips, and my eyes were drawn to how the towel hung low on his waist and how it was knotted well below his lower abs.

"Could you put on some clothes first?" I wasn't going to be able to concentrate with him like this.

"If you insist." He had a smug look before he moved over to his dresser and snagged some clothing out of his drawer. With his back turned, he slipped his underwear on under the towel and tossed it aside. Although he was dressed in boxer briefs, I thought I might die from seeing his well-defined ass snug in black material. His butt was like two perfect globes, high and tight, that fed into two muscular tree trunks of thighs, which I knew felt glorious. I'd massaged them. However, seeing him in boxer briefs was like seeing a statue of Atlas posing with the world on his shoulders.

He turned around and raised a T-shirt over his head, and my eyes dropped to the prominent bulge in his briefs.

Oh, my god. There was no question about how big he was.

"You over there praying again?" Axel raised a brow before he leaned over and casually pulled some basketball shorts over his thick thighs.

Did I say my thoughts out loud? I flattened my fingers over my lips as if I could push the words back into my mouth.

"Cat got your tongue?"

I shook my head and cleared my throat, determined to move on. "Can we discuss some rules or boundaries?"

"You're already talking about parameters and boundaries, and we haven't even been together that long." He walked past

me and dropped down into the black leather chair in front of his desk.

“I just want to know what we’re doing.”

“All right, then.” Axel pulled out a neon green pad of sticky notes and a black Sharpie. “Let’s establish some rules.” He peered up at me. “What are your deal-breakers?”

“Deal-breakers?”

“Yeah. What is it you won’t tolerate?” He flipped the lid off the Sharpie, ready to write what I said on a Post-it note.

“Cheating?”

“I already told you that was a deal-breaker.” He wrote down *No cheating* on a sticky. “I’m going to hold you to this, too.” He gave me a serious look before peeling off the sticky and slapping it down on his desk.

“Whatever.” I rolled my eyes. “As if I would.”

“You think I don’t know what my teammates are thinking about when they’re around you? Especially that motherfucker Lomas. If he had a chance, he’d be swooping in and taking what’s mine.” He looked down at his hand that was fisted on the edge of the desk. “I should’ve choked that fucker out when I had the chance back in Miami.”

My eyes shot up. “He was only being friendly.”

“No, he wasn’t. He was trying to tap that ass, but I’ll kill him before that happens. I’ll tell you that right now.” He ran his hand through his inky hair. “What else?”

I crossed my arms over my stomach, shifting my stance. “Honesty?”

“Yeah.” He scribbled it down on another sticky note. “I think we need to always have honesty between each other. And I can’t tolerate games.”

“Me either.” This almost seemed ludicrous, considering the obvious, but here we were. I watched as he scribbled

Honesty on another note and peeled it off, slapping it down beneath the other note.

“What else?”

“Do we need to establish how many days a week we see each other or have a date night?”

He frowned. “Are you trying to put a limit on how many days a week I can see you?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I assumed couples set up a day for date night.”

“We can have a date night, but I’m not down with limiting how many days of the week we see each other. If we want to spend time with each other, we will. Even if it’s every day of the fucking week. Do you have a problem with that?”

My eyes widened, considering he didn’t seem like the type who was clingy. I couldn’t get a read on him. On this. “No. I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so?”

He seemed annoyed, and I didn’t understand why. “Do you want to spend that much time together? With me?”

“Why not? You’re my girl.”

For now, I reminded myself. Regardless, I agreed. “Okay. No limits on date nights.”

“Good,” he answered gruffly and wrote in angry, all cap letters: *NO LIMITS*.

A few seconds passed as I thought about how to phrase what I wanted to ask. “What about—?” The words got stuck in my throat because I knew I’d sound stupid.

“Sex?” Axel supplied, knowing exactly what I was wondering.

I strummed the ends of my hair over my shoulder. “Um, yeah. Sex.”

He scratched the dark stubble on his chin. “Sex encompasses a lot of different things. You’re a virgin, so I plan on showing you everything. Teaching you everything.” His voice sounded gravelly again, causing my stomach to flutter. He smiled wryly. “I said I’d never do this, and yet here we are.”

I don't fuck virgins. He was breaking his rules for me.

“When you say everything...” I began slowly, licking my lip anxiously, whether out of being afraid of the unknown or the thrill of anticipation. “Does that start now?”

“Is that what you think? That I’m gonna give you a crash course? Nah, that’s not how it’s going to happen. You’re not ready to learn everything right now.”

“I thought you might’ve brought me here for a reason.”

“So eager to learn, aren’t we?” he deadpanned. “I thought you said you had classwork to do.”

“I do, but I also didn’t know you were going to kidnap me and take me to your house.”

“I didn’t plan on that either.” His brows furrowed. “But since you’re here, I guess...” He steepled his hands over his mouth, peering up at me in thought. I caught that brief glimpse of hunger in his eyes before he stood up abruptly. “You need to sit down and do your homework.”

My brows drew together. “And what will you do?”

“I have work to do, too. Even though I’m not a library rat like you, I do have to work hard for that 4.0 GPA, you know.” He stepped over to his backpack and rifled through it, pulling out a laptop and a book. Then he plopped down on his bed and went to work, while I watched for several moments, stunned. Realizing he was dead serious, I unwittingly pulled out my laptop.

After staring at my computer for what seemed like forever, I couldn’t focus on the work. I kept sneaking glances at him, wondering how he could be so nonchalant after what

he'd said about how he was going to teach me everything about sex. How I'd seen the flash of fire in his eye. How he made my stomach do somersaults. And just as I anticipated something happening, he'd shut it down, concentrating on something that he obviously thought was far more fascinating than me.

"What's wrong, Hardcore?" He never looked up as his voice pierced my thoughts.

I shifted my eyes to my screen. "Nothing."

"You've been sitting there for almost an hour, staring at your screen." He shifted into a seated position. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

"When will my car be ready?" That wasn't really the top of all my concerns, since I knew Axel had made good on his word before.

"Should be a week or two. You know I'll take care of it, and I hooked you up with a rental." He'd given me a rental car, even though I'd told him I didn't need it.

"I know," I said, and my eyes scanned down his body as he shifted on the bed to stretch out his legs.

"Something else on your mind?"

Yes. I contemplated saying something but decided against it. "No." I started to gather my things. "I should probably go. Don't worry, I'll just text my friend Lizzie to come get me." I picked up my phone.

"Wait." I sensed his presence before I saw him, and his hand covered mine with the cell. "What's going on?"

"I really need to go."

Ignoring me, he took the phone out of my hand and set it down on his desk. "Come on. Talk to me. I know something's on your mind."

I sighed in frustration. "I don't understand you sometimes."

“I don’t understand you—”

“You come on to me in the library, and you give me an ___”

“Orgasm,” he said without hesitation. “Your second, by the way.”

I nodded unsteadily. “Okay. And you say all the things you’re going to do. Then you bring me here and say you’re going to ‘teach me’ things, and...” I paused because I sounded like an idiot, but the words had already fallen out of my mouth.

“And?” he persisted. I glanced down and saw how his hands were gripped around my biceps. Desperate. Strong. Warm.

“Then you act like you aren’t interested. You want honesty? You don’t like games? Well, lately, whenever I’m around you, it seems you say things, promise things, and act like you want me, and then you shut down and act like you’re not turned on by me at all.” There. I’d said it. I couldn’t believe I did it. But if he wanted honesty...

“You don’t think I want you?” he asked incredulously.

“I don’t know what you want.”

“Natalie.” He shook his head as if all of this was ludicrous. “I want you. I want you so much I’m fucking afraid of what I might do because you’re an innocent virgin. And my rational side tells me to take it slow, but there’s another part of me that relishes the idea of taking everything from you. So, I’m trying to practice patience and not scare the shit out of you. Okay? Do you understand me?”

Heat was emanating from him, so much that his touch seared my skin. I peered up at him. “What if I’m not afraid? What if I want you to show me?”

“Do you know what you’re saying?”

“Yes. You won’t do anything I’m not ready for. I trust you.”

“You trust me?” He slid one hand up my arm, and his finger trailed over my collarbone.

“You wanted honesty, right? Yes, I trust you not to intentionally hurt me. And don’t honesty and trust go hand in hand?”

He paused for a second. “Yes.” His finger dipped lower to the collar of my shirt, slightly dragging the material down to the valley between my breasts. “I suppose they do.” Again, he stopped himself, removing his finger before both hands were at my waist. “That’s what you want. You want me to give you a lesson?”

I clamped my lips together and nodded my head.

He gripped the hem of my T-shirt and slowly dragged it up, higher and higher, until he pulled it over my head. I kept my eyes on his and tried to calm my nerves as I felt my nipples harden under my plain white cotton bra. I heard the whisk of fabric as my T-shirt hit the floor. He ran his warm hands up my back and easily unhooked my bra, and my breaths shortened as the straps slid down my arms. I forced myself to hold still and not cover myself.

Finally, his eyes dipped down, and he stared at my breasts, which were feeling heavier with each passing moment. “Do you know how many times I fantasized about these after seeing you in that hotel room?” Axel rasped as he palmed the underside of my boobs, pushing them up and together.

My pulse thrummed. *Tha-dump. Tha-dump. Tha-dump.*
“No.”

“Too many times to count.” He traced my areolas with his thumb as he continued to stare in fascination.

“The way you turned away when you saw me naked in the hotel...” I swallowed a moan, dwelling on the sensations he was wreaking on me. “I thought you weren’t interested.”

Around and around his thumbs went, teasing me. “No. The complete opposite, unfortunately. I was too damn

interested.” He squeezed them gently and traced over my hardened tips. “I’ve never been much of a tit man. However, when I saw yours, I couldn’t get them out of my mind. Teasing me, taunting me. Imagining every possible fantasy. How well they’d fit in my hands.” He continued teasing my nipples, and I felt wetness pool between my thighs. “How sweet they would taste.” Then he bent down and took one of my nipples between his full lips, licking, sucking, devouring like a starved man who was feasting at a banquet.

“Axel,” I moaned and clutched his head. My fingers dug into his thick, black hair that was silky to my touch.

“You like that?” He tongued my nipple and bit down gently.

“Mm-hmm.” I gasped, holding him in a death grip. If he kept this up, I was going to come.

“You know what else I fantasized about?” His tongue lapped a trail over my skin, into my cleavage, and up the slope of my other breast.

“What?” The word popped out like a puff of air.

“How perfect they would be squeezed around my cock.” He dove to my other nipple and sucked mercilessly.

“Oh, god.”

“You wanna come? Is that why you’re so edgy?”

His words barely registered because he took my other nipple into his mouth and sucked hard, causing a sensation that zipped down to my core. My thighs squeezed together.

“Look at you,” he whispered, tracing a pattern around my pebbled nipple. “You need to come, don’t you? I bet if I reached down between your legs...” His hand slid down my stomach and cupped my pussy over my jeans. “Fuck. You’re drenched for me, aren’t you?”

Words couldn’t form. I couldn’t put a coherent thought together. I just wanted to feel and ride this wave of pleasure.

His hand clenched around my core, and I tugged on his hair in desperation.

“Please,” I whined as I felt the pressure between my legs tighten.

He ground his palm over the panel of my jeans causing friction and drew my nipple between his teeth sucking hard.

I spasmed uncontrollably as I climaxed.

With nipple between his teeth, he stared at me as my head fell to the side, and I rode out my orgasm. As I started coming down from my post-coital bliss, I realized my hands were cradling his head. He tugged one last time before releasing the nipple from his mouth. “Third time,” he reminded me softly, giving my pussy a gentle squeeze before pulling away.

Realization hit me that I just came again. From him basically giving my breasts attention. He must think I’m some kind of freak. How embarrassing. “Oh.” I clasped my hands over my mouth. “I’m sorry. There must be something wrong with me.”

He slowly ran his tongue over his bottom lip with a predatory smile. “Nah, baby, there’s nothing wrong with you.”

“There isn’t?”

“Hell no. You’re so responsive to me that I’m about to bust a nut in my shorts as we speak.”

“Oh.” I glanced down and caught his pronounced erection tenting his shorts.

“You’re killing me, Nat,” he groaned.

I tentatively reached down, and my hand hovered over his erection. “What do I do?”

“Fuck, you’re going to be the death of me with your innocence.” Then he covered my hand with his, stopping me from moving closer. “You really want me to show you?”

He seemed uncertain, so I nodded in reassurance.

Watching me intently, he reached behind him, yanking his shirt over his head and tossing it aside. I watched in awe as he took my hand and pressed it against his rock-hard cock. I felt how thick it was, and it twitched as I moved my hand over it. Up and down, he moved my hand with his, and I felt the hardness and ridges outlined through the material of his shorts. His breathing grew heavier; his grip on my hand tightened. “Take it out,” he coaxed lowly.

I slid my hand up to the waistband of his shorts and dipped my fingers in and parted the band of his boxer briefs. The back of my fingers scraped against the soft hairs on his pelvis, and then I touched the smooth skin of his tip. Feeling bolder and more curious, I dug lower, and my palm grazed his bulbous head, and he hissed softly. I felt moisture on my skin, and I rubbed it around the smooth tip in fascination.

As I explored tentatively, his hand caught mine again. “I need you to wrap your fingers around my dick.”

“Oh.” I curled my fingers around the girth of his erection. It was so thick that my fingers didn’t even touch.

“Tighter.” He gently squeezed my fingers around him.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” My words sounded foreign as I marveled at the realization that I had my hand wrapped around his cock.

“You’re not hurting me in the sense you think,” he rasped. “Now, stroke my cock, Hardcore.”

At his command, I moved my hand up and down, keeping my grip tight. His skin was velvety soft, and when I reached his head, more moisture pooled, and I smeared it around the tip. “You’re wet, too,” I said.

“Very,” he growled, and he yanked his shorts and underwear down, and I saw—yes, saw—exactly what he was packing. His cock was long and thick, and his dusky skin twitched beneath my fingers. “Keep moving your hand.”

I slid it down to the base and back up to the head of his tip. Then again and again until I started to hit a steady rhythm.

His forehead dropped down, touching mine, and his breathing grew more labored with each pass.

“Like this?” I sounded breathy, too.

“Fuck yeah,” he groaned. “Just like that.”

As I kept a steady tempo, it seemed he grew harder and bigger in my hand. With each stroke, I could feel the friction of the hairs on his pelvis as his dick twitched closer to his stomach. “Cup my balls with your other hand.” He sounded as if he were in pain, and I tentatively reached down with my other hand and caressed the soft skin of his balls that were heavy in my palm. He clenched my other hand and yanked my hand up and down in a faster motion.

A low growl rumbled deep in his throat, and his hips rolled into me, powerful, demanding, a hungry beast that was barely restrained. I could feel his need, the insatiable craving as more of his wetness trailed down his cock, making my hand slicker as I continued to pump up and down, desperate to drive him to the brink as he did me.

“Fuck. I’m about to come,” he growled out a warning, squeezing my hand in a death grip. Suddenly, his dick jerked furiously in my palm. He grunted as thick ropes of milky fluid landed on his stomach. He continued to pulse several more times with his damp forehead pressed against mine. When I glanced at him, his eyes were closed, and he exhaled heavily as if he’d just finished a strenuous workout.

After a few silent moments, he opened his eyes and peered down between us. His hand still holding mine, clenching his base. His cock wasn’t as hard but still impressive. Chuckling softly, he released my hand and said, “Damn, I made a mess, didn’t I?”

Now that the high of my orgasm had subsided, I felt my body heat in awkwardness as I realized I was standing there semi-naked and had just jerked him off. I dropped my hand. Axel didn’t seem too bothered, and he bent down and

collected his shirt, and started wiping my hand before he wiped himself. "Help yourself to the bathroom."

Wrapping my arm over my breasts, I picked up my discarded clothes. "Thanks," I said awkwardly. He seemed like he was going to say more, but I made my way to his bathroom to clean up. As I dressed and washed my hands, I realized something after now receiving my third orgasm from him. We hadn't even kissed.

Chapter

TWENTY FIVE

Natalie

“So, what exactly was that yesterday?” Lizzie asked, looking up from her script as I sat down on my bed across from hers in our dorm room. I’d just come back from my last class of the day.

“What do you mean?”

“Girl, please. Don’t insult my intelligence. You and Axel.”

“Oh, that.” I schooled my features and stared down at my blunt nails, studying the ones that were chipped and thinned on the edges. I had shitty nails. I probably should take more vitamin B. “We’re working on a project.”

She snorted. “Must be some project if he had to basically apprehend you at a sandwich shop and whisk you away like a kidnapper.”

I shrugged. “What can I say? He takes his college work very seriously.”

My phone buzzed.

Axel: Dinner and a movie tonight?

Me: Is this our date night for the week?

Axel: If you want to call it a date night, be my guest. I already told you there were no limits on how many dates we have.

I bit back a smile and started typing.

Me: Okay. I guess I can pencil you in tonight.

Axel: That's right. You better keep that calendar open for me.

Me: Such a demanding boyfriend.

Axel: I'm not demanding. I asked first, didn't I? I'll pick you up at 7:00.

I gave his text a thumbs-up.

“Another discussion about your project?”

“Yeah. He wants to get together tonight and go over it.”

She rolled her eyes. “You are the worst liar in the world, Nat.”

“Me? Never. Do you actually believe someone like Axel Thomas would have an interest in someone like me as his girlfriend?” I asked the question in jest, since I had to remind myself this relationship wasn't exactly genuine.

“Yes. I do. He did before.”

I scoffed. “You know that date to the formal last spring was a sham, and you know why I had to agree.”

She tilted her head and studied me for several seconds as if she were filing through information and putting it together. “Was it really? Because it seemed kind of real. And the way he looked at you yesterday...”

“Like what?”

“Like you were his. Definitely, like you were his.”



“I thought this place would be somewhere you like.” Axel had picked an Indian restaurant, the only one in town. It was actually sweet of him, and the food was good.

However, I raised an eyebrow, putting him on the spot. “Why? Because you assume I am from India?”

“No. I like this place, and I thought you would, too.”

“Good choice,” I said sincerely. “I do.”

“Where are you from, Natalie?”

I batted my eyelashes. “Why do you ask? I’m just a Texas girl.” I grew up in a family deeply rooted in Nepalese culture, but we were also Americanized.

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m Nepali. My parents are from Kathmandu, Nepal.”

“Oh,” Axel mused. “The home of Mount Everest.”

I smirked. “Somebody paid attention in geography class.”

“I had to. I knew it would come in handy one day.”

“It’s a beautiful country. I would definitely recommend visiting if you ever have the chance.” I picked up the menu and scanned it casually. “But I was born and raised in San Antonio.”

“Do you visit Nepal often?”

“Yeah. To see family.”

“Your family still lives there?”

“Well, not my immediate family. However, my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins still live there.”

He took a sip of his water. “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“I have an older brother who’s married and about to have his first child.”

“Really?” His eyes lit up with interest. “Did your parents allow him to date?”

“If you’re implying whether my parents had double standards with us growing up, no. Besides, my brother was too much of an introvert and only interested in his studies.” I glanced down, toying with my napkin. “Do you have any siblings?”

“Nope. I’m an only child.”

“I bet you were spoiled,” I teased.

“Of course, I was,” he said lightly. “What about you? The youngest. I bet you were spoiled. I bet you were Daddy’s little girl.”

My body tensed. It still hurt when I thought about my dad.

Axel shook his head realizing what he’d said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Like divine intervention, the server came and placed an appetizer on our table between us. Some pakora and samosas.

“I love these,” I said changing the topic and forked some of both before spooning some cilantro chutney on my appetizer plate. I looked up at him and saw he was studying me with concern. I focused on the food on my plate. “You should try this. It’s so good.”

He picked up his fork and put some on his plate, deciding on the mango chutney.

“So, tell me something about you,” I said.

“I was born in Washington, DC.” He took a bite of the samosa and nodded in appreciation. “My dad played professional football for Washington, and my mom was a child psychologist and started her own practice. We lived there for several years until Dad was traded to Dallas when I was in middle school. He retired from the NFL a year later, and my parents decided to stay in Dallas.”

“Did you always want to play football?”

“Yes.” He picked up a piece of the pakora and brought it to his mouth. “I’ve played since I was in elementary school.”

“Was it your decision?”

“Are you asking whether or not my dad assumed I would follow in his footsteps? I wanted to play. Yeah, he was a legend, but he never forced me to play. I loved the game. I

made that decision on my own. Besides..." I could see his cocky persona emanating from the side lift of his lips. "I'm damn good at it, as you can see."

"Passable," I deadpanned.

"Ouch." He winced playfully. "You know how to hurt a guy, don't you?"

I rolled my eyes. "You seem so well-insulated that I don't think anyone could hurt you."

"Oh, yeah?" His voice was light, but I noticed he'd lost his smile. "Maybe I'm just very good at covering it up." As soon as the words came out, his moment of vulnerability was gone. "Years of practice." He winked in a way that made you wonder if he was serious or not.

As I chewed, I wondered what was truly under the polished veneer Axel allowed everyone to see.

"You look like you're in deep thought, Hardcore. What's on your mind?"

"Was it true that a British Lit professor lost her job because you slept with her?"

He paused mid-bite. "Whoa. Do you believe everything you hear?"

"So, it's not true?"

"No. I wouldn't fuck around with a married person. I didn't even know her. Some asshole who was on the team at the time was fucking her down behind his girlfriend's back. He was too much of a pussy to admit it." He shrugged. "So, rumors started flying around that it was me."

"That's shitty."

"Very shitty," he agreed. "But it's in the past and old news."

I swallowed my food. "Can I ask you another question?"

He nodded. "Go for it."

“How many girls have you been with?”

He pointed his fork at me with a smug look. “We’re gonna stay on this subject, aren’t we?”

“How many?” I persisted, squelching the small voice in the back of my head that was telling me it was none of my business and I was foolish to ask, because I knew I wouldn’t like the answer.

He leaned forward on his arms, presenting me with his personable persona that I was beginning to think was completely impersonal. Like it was his way of evading questions he didn’t want to answer. As if he could flash a smile and it would swipe away any questions that would delve beneath the surface of Axel Thomas. “A gentleman never tells.” His words only confirmed what I’d already suspected.

I leaned over the table, too. “You said honesty was important.”

He rolled his lips together and nodded once. “You’re right.” Then he looked up at the ceiling as if he were in deep thought, trying to remember how many there were. He started counting off quietly as he thought, and I could tell it was going to be a longer list than I’d thought. Now, I wished I’d never asked.

“Never mind.” I shook my head.

“Yeah. It’s probably better that we don’t talk about this,” he agreed. “Especially while we’re having a date night.”

“You’re probably right,” I replied flippantly and glanced away, feeling like an idiot. “I’m sorry for asking. It’s really none of my business.”

“Don’t apologize, Natalie.” He wiped his hands with his napkin. “I like that about you.”

“What?”

“I like how you speak your mind.”

“You do?”

He looked down at his crossed arms on the table. “I do. You don’t try to bullshit me or play games. I like that.”

“Is that what you’re accustomed to? People playing games with you?”

He popped a shoulder. “It comes with the territory. That’s not to say I was completely innocent.”

I rubbed my palms against my napkin, knowing I should stop asking questions, but I couldn’t stop. “When did you lose your virginity?”

“At fourteen.”

“Were you nervous?”

He chuckled. “No.” He paused thoughtfully. “Okay. Maybe a little, but I was more trigger-happy than anything. You know, hormones and shit.”

“Was she a virgin?”

“No. I already told you. I don’t fuck virgins.”

“Not yet.”

His mouth quirked in a lazy smile. “Not yet.”

There were more questions I wanted to ask, but our server came back and asked if we wanted anything else.

Axel raised his eyes at me, and I shook my head. “No. Just the check, please,” he said before he leaned in. “You’re making me break my rules, Hardcore. You know that?”

My skin tingled under his gaze, aware that rules weren’t the only things that would be broken.

Afterward, we went to the movie theater down the road from the restaurant that wasn’t far from campus. We’d agreed on a mystery/horror film, since we’d both agreed those were our favorite genres. Axel bought a bucket of popcorn and some drinks, and we found the theatre showing our movie.

It was a weeknight, and there were only a few people sprinkled around.

“Do you have a preference on where to sit?” he asked.

“No.”

“Good.” He led me up the stairs until we reached the back row, which was completely empty, with no people in the few rows in front of us. We walked down the row until we were in the middle and sat down.

The movie was about a dysfunctional family from New Orleans who moved into a Greek revival home that was over two hundred years old, which had been deserted for years because the last family who’d lived there had all been mysteriously murdered.

Axel had the popcorn in his lap and held it out to me each time I moved my hand in his direction. Occasionally, I would glance his way and catch him watching me with a little smile, dimples and all, as he’d throw a fist of popcorn into his mouth.

At one point, I jumped in my seat because a dead body was found. Then I felt Axel’s fingers thread through mine and his mouth at my ear. “I got you.” He squeezed my fingers tight as if reassuring me.

“I know,” I whispered back, and I strangely believed him. I felt safe with him, despite suspecting he’d been a major player who could potentially break my heart if I let him. In fairness, what he’d done in his past was none of my business, and I wasn’t his conscience either.

Minutes passed, and his hand stroked my palm, then I felt him shift beside me, and his other hand fell on my knee. Soon, his fingers traced a pattern up and down my inner thigh. Each pass went higher and higher, creeping up my upper thigh, closer to the apex between my legs.

His fingers drifted back down my leg slowly. This time, he ran them up, dipping over my upper thigh until his middle finger dragged against my core. “Axel,” I gasped, looking around nervously. “We can’t.” I didn’t know exactly what his plan was or how far he was going to go. “We’re in a public place.”

“Relax. No one is around us.” His lips were at my ear. I felt the pressure of his hand as it drifted over the panel of my jeans and over my clit. My thighs clenched at his touch. His other hand was still holding mine, and he gently rubbed circles over my palm.

Then I felt his thumb working the button of my jeans. I brought my hand down on his, about to push it away, but he enclosed my fingers. “Let me do this.” He nuzzled my cheek. “Let me make you feel good. I need to touch you.”

My hand eased away, and he continued; the waistband loosened as he pulled the zipper down. Warmth consumed me when his large hand slipped under the hem of my shirt and splayed over my lower abdomen, and then his fingers delved under the elastic of my panties. His middle finger strummed over my clit, and my breath caught in my throat.

“Spread your legs,” he coaxed, as he continued to strum my clit slowly. I parted them slightly. His finger traveled lower, pausing at my entrance. “Wider.” His mouth traveled down my neck, and goose bumps trailed over my skin. I spread my legs apart.

His finger dipped lower, circling my entrance and dispersing my wetness around. “Fuck. You’re so wet. So damn wet. I can’t wait to taste you.”

My head fell to the side as I continued to stare ahead at the movie; I couldn’t tell you what was happening at the moment. He slowly inserted his finger inside, and I clutched his hand tighter.

“Shit. Does that hurt? I’m barely inside.”

“No.” It felt... different but good.

“Okay.” He pushed in a little deeper and hissed. “You are so tight and so drenched. I’m losing my fucking mind.”

“Oh, my god,” I whispered unsteadily, and he thrust his finger in up to his knuckle and pressed his palm against my clit. I’d never experienced such sensations in my life. Never been touched like this. He moved his finger out and then in

again. I squirmed against his hand, craving more of his touch with each pass.

“Does it feel good?” His tongue lapped against my pulse, then he nipped my skin.

“Yes,” I choked out.

“Do you think you can take more?”

“I don’t kn—*Ohhhh*.” He thrust another finger inside, filling me to the brink.

“Natalie,” he groaned against my skin. “You are squeezing my fingers like a fucking vise. I can’t even imagine how fucking good it will feel when you take my thick cock.”

A low moan erupted from my throat, and I clenched my thighs. Wanting more. Craving more. He pumped his fingers deep inside. “I’m so full.”

“Baby, you are making me burn for you,” He growled and pulsed his fingers faster inside me, heightening the tension that would certainly set me off soon. My chest tightened, and the movie was only a blurred kaleidoscope of images in front of me. The only thing I was concerned about was the pleasure that was building in my core. Like a puppet being pulled by strings, I moved my hips shamelessly against his hand, desperate to climax.

“I need to...” I realized I was moaning, and I covered my mouth with the back of my free hand.

“What do you need?” Axel nibbled against my neck.

“I need to come.”

“You do?” he murmured innocently, and I could sense the smile in his voice. He knew exactly what he was doing to me.

“Uh-huh.” I bucked into his hand.

“Don’t worry, Hardcore, I’ll take care of you.” He curled his fingers inside me as his thumb circled my clit, and I burst into a million pieces. My thighs quivered, and I convulsed, riding out my wave of pleasure. I cried out into my hand, and

Axel bit into my neck and sucked hard, as if he were trying to inhale my orgasm, too.

Floating. I was floating like a leaf that was leisurely taking its time falling to the ground. My body felt as relaxed as a noodle. The movie in front of me started to come back in focus, and it was like someone had unmuted the volume. I felt his fingers withdraw, and his tongue was now licking the spot on my neck where he bit me. “Good girl,” he crooned against my skin.

His words of praise sent warmth through my skin. I should’ve worried about someone hearing or catching us, knowing what we did. I knew I was probably loud, even though I’d muffled my voice. However, I felt a sense of joy at hearing his praise. Finally, I turned and looked at him to see him bringing his fingers to his mouth as he sucked them, watching me intently. Taking his time, he looked as if he were savoring the moment. “Mmm.” The sound rumbled in his throat.

Finally, he released his fingers with a pop. “I knew you’d taste like fucking heaven.” He brought my hand that he was still holding up to his lips and kissed it before releasing it. “Fourth orgasm. Now, let’s put you back together.” He smirked before he zipped up my pants and fastened the button. For the rest of the movie, he leaned close with his arm around me. Yet he still hadn’t kissed me.

Chapter TWENTY SIX

Axel

“Where have you been?” Nick was in the kitchen, hovering over the stove. All the other lights were off in the house since it was almost one in the morning, and I lived with a bunch of lame married couples now, it seemed.

After the movie, I dropped off Natalie at her dorm room like a gentleman. Despite my blue balls. Despite wanting to fuck her like an animal. All I wanted to do was go to my room and ease this pressure, the constant hard-on I’d had all evening. I felt like a preteen who jerked off in my bedroom twenty-four seven.

“I was working on my project.” I stepped past him and grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge.

Nick laughed as he flipped a grilled ham and cheese sandwich in the sauté pan. “Project,” he mocked, knowing full damn well what I was about, apparently, and held out his hand. “Let me smell your fingers.”

“Fuck you. You dirty bastard.” I moved over to the counter and leaned against it, tipping my bottle toward the stove. “Late-night snack? How’s the fasting going?”

Nick smirked, shaking his head. “It’s my cheat day, bro.”

“I think you said the same thing yesterday.”

With a spatula in hand, he dumped his sandwich onto a paper plate and turned off the burner. Glancing over his shoulder, he said, “Maybe I’ll come clean with cheat days when you stop confusing going after a girl with a class project.” He grabbed the sandwich and took a bite, smiling as he chewed.

I took a sip of my water. “Touché,” I acknowledged quietly. I’d razed him enough, as well as all my friends, in the past, so it was only fair. “Anyway, I’m going to bed.”

“Yeah. Me, too,” Nick said with a mouth full of food. “Just be careful. Don’t step into something you can’t step out of.”

“I’m good, man.”

“Okay.” Nick had a serious look on his face. “I’ve heard this song before.”

I was already in the living room when I heard him. I waved him off. “It’s all good.”

I knew Nick was being nosy and concerned, and I knew I gave him clear warning when he pursued Kenzie. He was paying it back, but at the end of the day, I knew Nick had my best interests at heart. “Is it, though?” Nick fired back, and I was already walking to my room.

“Yeah. We’re just having fun.”

Actually, I knew what I was stepping into, but damned if I could stop it. I’d already broken most of the rules I’d set up for myself. Rules I’d made years ago. I was a driven person about football and school. My father had taught me how to be successful in football, but my mother had instilled in me how to be successful in life. She’d always been the more skeptical of the two. The one who’d given me the mental game plan to navigate my teenage years. She was always one to give me advice and be in my head about my choices.

“Don’t fall for the first girl who says I love you,” she said.

“Why?” my dumbass, twelve-year-old self asked.

“Because you’re too young to know what love is, and you’re destined for something greater. Just be careful of people’s motives.”

When I broke through in Pop Warner football, people looked at me differently because I was a star at an early age. When I started playing football in middle school, our games were more packed with fans than at the high school games. Now, here I was in seventh grade and owning our district in football. High school coaches were already hanging out at the stadium, scouting me.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you’re a commodity. You play a popular sport, and you are successful. People are either going to fawn over you or try to undercut you.” She wrapped her arm around me. “I just want you to protect yourself.” Yeah. My mom could analyze any person in the world. And she did. Even my dad sometimes felt uneasy with the way she could read people. But she went on. “It comes with the territory of being the son of an NFL player. People will say anything to be your friend. Girls will do anything to be with you. You better be careful, son. I know you’re growing up and have typical urges that hormonal boys do.”

My mom just made shit uncomfortable as I looked at her like she was crazy, but she went on. “Don’t look so surprised. I’m well aware of what you do. You think I don’t notice how your sheets have stains or how your damn socks are stiff when I do laundry? Don’t take me for a fool.”

It did surprise me that she knew what I did. Even weirder that she mentioned it to me. However, ever since then, my mom was skeptical. Maybe that was the time I finally started heeding her advice. It was in her nature to analyze people. Hell, she’d analyzed me throughout my childhood. Sometimes it was mentally exhausting to try to outthink her or out-chess her.

My mom was pretty much spot on about her observations about people. Again, that was kind of her job. She took *read the room* to the next level.

But with girls, I'd never read anything further than what it was. Pure, unadulterated sex. *Hormones in overdrive* was what my mother used to say at awkward moments when one of the cheerleaders on the team was giving me too much attention. Or when other girls were waiting for me beside my parents as if they were close friends. My mom was already on the up and up and wasn't fooled by any of their bullshit. Any of my bullshit. She always came at the angle that I needed to keep focused on my life, my studies, and my football career, and never, ever let someone derail that shit. I'm paraphrasing, of course.

She was big on showing and talking about teenage pregnancy and how it could wreck your life. Mom was big on the whole, *I would rather you abstain from sex, but I'm a realist, and if you are going to have sex, you better use a condom*. She was the one who supplied me with a box of condoms before I even had the chance to have sex. However, she knew. She'd already told me that much. She was right. Especially now. *Don't let irrational feelings get in the way. Don't lose your head*. I could still hear her words.

My mom could bust my balls, but looking back, I knew she was trying to protect me. She was the voice of reason in my head, in my life, until one night when I was sixteen changed our family dynamics forever. From then on, I became more guarded than ever.

Which brought me to Natalie. The very innocent, feisty Natalie. *What the fuck was I doing with her?* The question circled around in my head as I kicked off my Jordans before I sat down on the edge of my bed and undressed. My dick was still pipeline hard, and I was going to punish my hand like a depraved perv. My balls were aching. After two hours of petting and teasing, I didn't blame them. However, I would not take out my aggression on her. She wasn't ready for that. She wasn't ready for the way I fucked.

I'd never been impulsive in my life until her. I knew the stakes. I fucked. Boy, did I ever fuck. I'd never had to worry about my baser needs. They'd been taken care of in spades. I wasn't trying to brag. I wasn't one to talk shit about it. That wasn't me. I had needs; the girls I was with had needs. We both had the same goal. A mutual agreement that led to a fleeting paradise, which was comforting at the time, but give it ten minutes, and you felt a little bit numb and a hell of a lot empty.

Damn, I needed to shut off my brain as I contemplated my life. Normally, I didn't dwell on it, nor did I sound so depressing. Or even reflect on past transgressions. I wasn't *that* guy. I truly lived my life without regrets. If I dug deep, I would call myself fairly cerebral. I mean, I did maintain stellar grades throughout high school and college. Dean's list since I stepped on campus. But I'd actually felt like shit tonight when she'd asked me about how many women I'd slept with.

What was it about her? Why was I going balls out for her? I never planned on being where I was with her. I never thought I would sink so low to force her hand like I did. I saw a weakness and pounced on it like a mountain lion who saw an elk. All I knew was I wanted her. I wanted her more than I'd ever wanted anything in my life. And the gladiator in me wanted to conquer her. The rules went out the window where she was concerned.

That's why I had to be the good guy and take her home safe and sound tonight.

Groaning, I fell back onto my pillow and shoved off my boxer briefs before gripping my raging cock, thinking of her tight cunt and how she drenched my fingers. Yes, I only had one finger inside her, and Jesus, it was like a clamp around my skin. But when I had two inside her... it was like an electric current went straight to my cock. I jerked my shaft hard, thinking about how I'd have to work my dick inside that small hole. I stroked harder, imagining the slickness of her pussy walls sliding over my cock. The thought of popping her cherry

and seeing her blood on my cock made my balls draw up tight, anxious for release.

And I savored the little moans she made when she was close to coming apart. When I fucked her, she would cry out my name and soak my dick with her orgasm. “Fuck.” My balls tightened, and I was about to come. After a couple of tugs, I groaned as my cum shot out over my stomach, warm and hot. Yanking relentlessly, my hips rolled into my hand, over and over, until I had nothing left to give.

With my breaths expended and my body easing into a relaxed state, I huffed out the last of my climax. The fading beat of my pulse in my ears was all I dwelled on as I stared up at the ceiling, searching for answers... searching for a reprieve. I was fucking shadow fantasies that led to nothing.

I exhaled heavily and realized... I missed her. I wanted her here with me and wished I could hold her in my arms. *This was all part of the fun, right?*

Chapter TWENTY SEVEN

Natalie

What are you doing this afternoon? I was in class, reading the text from Axel. There were only five minutes left, and Human Anatomy was my last class of the day.

Me: Going to the library to study.

Axel: You can study at my place. I'll come get you. Be there in five.

Me: I'm not home. I'm still in class.

Axel: I know.

Clicking off my phone, I heard our professor closing his lecture and dismissing the class. The next thing I knew, I heard people making more of a commotion than the usual low chatter when class was over. When I'd gathered my things, I saw Axel standing in the aisle, surrounded by a group of students. He smiled and glanced over at me before moving through the crowd toward me.

"I didn't know Axel was in this class." Mark was standing by me, looking as though he were contemplating snapping another picture.

"He's not."

"Huh," he said, shrugging his shoulder. "Anyway, are we still on for meeting up tomorrow?"

“Yeah.” We had an exam on Friday, and I’d already told him we could meet together and study.

He patted me on the shoulder. “Great. I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon. Oh, hey, man, what’s up?”

Mark held his fist out to Axel, who stood, glaring at him. He must’ve gotten a clue and withdrew his hand with his mouth drawing down. “You having a bad day or something?”

Axel’s nostrils flared, and I tensed up, thinking it would possibly get worse the longer Mark stood here. “Not yet, but it could end badly for you if you ever think about making a move on my girlfriend.” Axel’s mouth curled into a sneer.

Mark held out his hands and glanced around in confusion. “Girlfriend? What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play me with that bullshit. I see your angle.” Axel edged next to me and threw an arm around my waist, pulling me to his side. “Natalie’s mine, got it? So keep your distance.”

“Axel,” I warned softly, worried since he drew enough attention to himself by being a star on campus. The last thing he needed was to attract a larger crowd with an altercation.

Mark backed away cautiously. “We’re lab partners. That’s all.”

“It better stay that way,” Axel said.

Mark gave a short nod before turning and bumping into someone as he sped-walked out of the auditorium.

After a few seconds, I glanced up to see he was still scowling. “What was that?”

“Switch lab partners,” was all he said, as if his word was final. As if our professor would allow it when we were practically mid-semester into this class. Was he actually serious?

“What? No. I can’t.”

“I don’t like it.”

“You can’t go around jumping to conclusions like that. He’s harmless.”

“Yeah? As long as he stays away, he won’t be harmed.”

I put my hand on my hip. “What are you doing here, Axel?”

“I told you I’d pick you up.”

“Wait. I didn’t tell you what class I was in.” I’d never told him my class schedule. Well, he knew about my early class, but he didn’t know where this class was held.

“Sure, you did. You told me you were in class.” Before I could answer, he was leading me out of the auditorium, giving a curt nod of his chin to the several people who recognized him and called out his name.

Passing through the main entrance, he asked, “Do you have all your things? Everything you need to study?” he added.

“Yes.”

“Good.” He laid a hand on my hip and guided me across the parking lot to his car.

We took off out of the parking lot in the opposite direction of his home. “Where are we going?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be much of a surprise, now, would it?”

He still didn’t explain how he knew where I was. “How did you know where to find me today?”

He turned to me, dipping his head slightly, but I couldn’t see his eyes behind the Oakleys he was wearing. “I have my ways.”

“Seriously. I think you’re stalking me.”

“You think?” He pulled into a vacant parking spot right in front of Danielle’s Closet. Leaning over the console, he drew

close, inches from my face, as he tugged his sunglasses down his nose.

I caught my bottom lip with my teeth. His eyes darkened as he watched. “Yeah. I think you are,” I said softly.

He inched in closer, and my breath caught. Was he going to kiss me? “Someone needs to keep an eye on you, Hardcore. May as well be me.” He pushed his shades back in place and tapped the tip of my nose. “Come on. Let’s get you dolled up.”

Puzzled, I followed him out of the car. “Dolled up?” I trailed behind him as he opened the door, waiting for me to pass.

“I want to buy you some new clothing.”

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” I had on my boyfriend jeans, a T-shirt, and my favorite sweatshirt. My standard clothing.

“Nothing.” He slung his arm over my shoulder. “I just want to do something nice for you.”

“But it’s not necessary.”

He curled me around until I was facing him. “It’s not necessary, but it’s something I want to do for you.” He trailed his finger up the column of my neck. “Let me spoil you a little, okay?”

His sunglasses were pushed up on top of his head, and his eyes held a sincerity that made my heart gallop. How could I resist him?

“Okay.”

His idea of spoiling me was more than buying an item or two. It was extravagant, borderline obscene how many items of clothing he coaxed me into trying on. More fitted clothing than I was used to wearing—skimpy tank tops with spaghetti straps, short, flirty skirts that left my legs bare, and fitted, girly dresses that weren’t so girly, sexier than I was used to. I wasn’t exactly ashamed of my body, but I never wore clothing that revealed too much skin.

Whenever I questioned him, he shook his head. “Baby, you have a fine-ass body. You should show it off more.”

I tilted my head, about to make a rebuttal, and he raised his hands. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not trying to objectify you or make you feel uncomfortable. I’m only asking you to try them on.”

“You’re not trying to objectify me?” I already felt warmed by his compliments on my body, but I couldn’t help but tease him.

“I wouldn’t do that to you.” His words were as smooth as silk. “I like you for who you are.” He reached out and touched my jaw. “But I also have this overwhelming urge to buy things for you, too.”

What the hell, I thought. To be honest, I did like the clothing we’d picked out, and maybe I did want to feel sexy around him.

After we combed through every item in the boutique, I went back to the dressing room to try them on. I pulled on a thin-strapped black tank and denim shorts, cuffed at the hem. The tank was cropped and fitted and exposed my stomach, while the shorts were so snug against my hips that I had to suck in to zip them up. The hem was at my upper thigh, almost to the crease where my thigh and pussy hit. I wanted to embrace what I saw in the mirror, but my hips were a little too wide, and my stomach wasn’t as flat as a rock, by any means. Frustrated, I tried to smooth out the bumps and curves, hoping I could miraculously make it happen.

Through the mirror, I saw the curtain yanked to the side, and Axel walked in casually, like he had the right to be there. I self-consciously threw my arms over my stomach.

Keeping still, I watched as he snapped the drapes closed and crowded me in, observing me. “Damn,” he whispered and trailed his hands down my arms. Fingers crept over my hands as he gently began tugging. “Don’t hide from me.”

“I’m not. I’m not used to exposing this much of my body.” I glanced down at his hands holding mine as I fought to keep myself covered. “And you have to have the perfect figure to wear this outfit.”

He dropped his head to my shoulder, and his chin touched my skin. Peering at me through the mirror, he said, “I know.”

Confused and anxious, I fought my insecurities. “Then you know I probably shouldn’t wear this.”

“Mmm,” he said softly as he stared at me in the mirror. “The only reason you shouldn’t wear this is because I might serve time in prison.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ll kill any man who comes near you.” He nuzzled my neck. “You’re fucking perfect, Natalie.”

“Really?” I hated how I sounded so needy for confirmation, but I didn’t care.

“Really.” His hands slipped over my hips, and he squeezed my ass. “Your body is insane. This ass was made for me, and I can’t wait to claim it.”

“Axel?” I didn’t know what to say. We hadn’t even had sex, and he was talking about claiming my ass. My cheeks burned, yet heat seared my core. I drew my thighs together.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to claim it today. You’re not ready for that.” His hands snaked over my pelvis, pulling me against his hard body. “But I think you’re ready for something else.”

Soon, I felt my shorts loosen around my waist as he was now tugging down the zipper. He was undressing me. Gathering my thoughts, I reached down and clamped his fingers. “We can’t,” I said.

I watched him through the mirror as he smiled into my shoulder. He whispered against my skin, “No limits, Hardcore.” Then he lifted me up, twisting me in the air rapidly until I was facing him, backed against the mirror. I started to

protest, but he gripped my hands in one of his and raised them above my head, containing them against the mirror. The cropped tank rose higher, and the hem was brushing against the underside of my boobs.

“Axel?”

“Shh.” He nuzzled my cheek. “You don’t want us to get caught, do you?” He trailed his nose down my neck while his other hand slid the shorts down the curve of my hips. I watched as the denim draped around my feet. Seconds later, his fingers ghosted over the soft cotton covering my clit. “Now, are you gonna be a good girl and stay quiet for me?”

His thumb curled over the waistband of my panties. I was anxious because I anticipated what he would do and was a little afraid of getting caught. “Are you?” he pressed, and his thumb dragged down the hem of my panties. “Are you gonna let me take care of this beautiful pussy?”

His thumb played with my clit, and I lost all the words I wanted to say. All I could manage was a slight nod.

“That’s my girl,” he cooed and kissed one of my nipples that peaked under my top while he kept his hand on my clit, massaging gingerly.

He slithered down to my stomach, his mouth burning a trail down my pelvis, inciting a direct reaction from my core.

Through my haze, I glanced at the curtain of the dressing room, expecting someone to pop in and kick us out for being inappropriate. Did I actually care at the moment?

“I’m hungry,” Axel rasped, and his mouth grazed my clit in a teasing manner. On instinct, I dropped my hands around his head, cradling him. My protective instincts kicked in. Why did I feel that way with him?

I ran my fingers through his thick hair, holding him in place. “Maybe we should stop,” I gasped.

His tongue ran over my pussy, and he paused. “Nah. When a man’s hungry, he’s gotta eat.” Lapping around my

opening, he groaned. “Christ. You taste so damn good. You can’t even imagine.”

I moaned and clenched him tighter, pulsing against his mouth. He took his time teasing me before he thrust his tongue inside and sucked on my clit. “It feels so good.”

My heart raced as I was overloaded with sensations. He was hitting all the right feels. Then he pulled back and lapped at his lips slowly as a low sound hummed in his throat.

“Why did you stop?” I gripped his head tighter, trying to bring him back, but he didn’t budge.

“Savoring my meal.” Smirking up at me before his eyes leveled on my pussy again, he said, “You still afraid we’ll get caught?”

Was I worried before? That seemed like eons ago, but now I was thrumming with the need to climax, which outweighed my common sense. And he knew it, too. “No.”

“No?” He raised an eyebrow and blew on my pussy before he leaned in and began nibbling my nub with his teeth, which drew another moan, and my legs felt like they might give out. “Should I stop?” He murmured the words but ruthlessly jabbed his tongue inside me again, causing me to nearly sink to the floor, but his hands were at my hips, securing me firmly in place.

I was getting close, and I held him in a death grip. “If you stop, I might go to prison,” I panted, thrusting myself shamelessly against his mouth. “Because I will kill you.”

Tonguing me like a man possessed, he plunged two fingers inside me. “That’s my hardcore girl. You know I’ll take care of you.”

His words floated around me, but I was too far gone to respond in any sensible way. Instead, my body shook as the most intense orgasm overtook me, and I called out his name as I shamelessly rode his face and fingers.

Axel continued to lick and finger me, watching me as I fell apart. Literally, I would've fallen if he wasn't holding me up. He lingered inside me as his tongue moved in a lapping motion, and soon, he withdrew his fingers, taking his time to lick them clean. "You know, Natalie, this pussy is mine."

With my body relaxed, I watched as he brought his hands to my folds, spreading me open. My mouth dropped open, but words didn't come out.

"Say it." He peered up at me with eyes darkened in lust and lips curved in a devious smile.

"It's yours," I said softly.

"Damn right, it is." He kept his eyes on me as he leaned in and flattening his tongue against my pussy one final time. Then, he kissed my clit before he released me and stood up. He leaned forward, and our noses almost touched. His eyes were on my mouth, staring as if he were contemplating kissing me. My heart was still pounding from my intense orgasm and how he could strip all of my inhibitions. Make me want to give him anything. Make me think this was actually real.

Closing my eyes, I braced for the moment he stole a little more of me, anticipating his kiss. Wanting to feel his lips on mine. However, that didn't happen. Instead, his cheek slid against mine, and he said, "I should probably let you get back to trying on clothing because if I don't step out of here right now, I'm going to take your virginity against this mirror."

My breath hitched as I backed into said mirror, and Axel traced a finger down my jaw. He looked like he wanted to say more, but he backed away, leaving me alone in the dressing room. After a few shaky breaths, I unsteadily leaned over and managed to slide my panties back on.

Chapter TWENTY EIGHT

Natalie

Axel was back on campus after spending the last weekend at the NFL combine. According to all the media sources, he'd made quite an impression, which was not surprising. He always seemed to be part of the discussion on sports networks about the top football prospects, and his showing at the combine only fueled the fire of his popularity.

It also seemed that, lately, he was very busy with everything that was involved with being a hot prospect in football. He had agents vying for his attention and companies wanting him to be the spokesperson for their campaigns—anything from fast food commercials to athletic wear. Not to mention, he was constantly asked for interviews.

His time was spread thin. I was also busy with classes and focusing on my work and checking in on my mom. Spring break was only a few weeks away, and she wanted me to come home and spend the week with her.

I headed to the library to study for one of my mid-terms. The weather was warm, and I was wearing a cap-sleeved fitted top that bared my stomach and a short, flouncy skirt—one of the outfits Axel bought for me. I should've felt guilty for all the clothing he bought, but deep down, I did like them and wanted to dress more girly and not like I just rolled out of bed

and threw on some baggy clothing. Besides, I was feeling more confident in my own skin. And yes, I loved how Axel liked it, too. So, maybe I did want to impress him.

When I found my favorite spot in the library to study, I cracked open a book and saw movement out of the corner of my eye as Axel slid into the seat beside me.

“Are you tracking me down?”

“Like GPS. It’s my duty.” He roved his eyes down my fitted top to my beige short skirt and whistled low. “You look good. Too good.” A couple of the guys from the team who’d been on the practice squad passed by and both smiled and waved at me. Then they gave a shout-out to Axel, who barely smiled—scowled, actually—saying nothing as he threw his arm around my shoulder in a clear show of possession. He stared them down until they were out of sight.

Hiding a smile, I ducked my head.

“What?” he asked, massaging my shoulder gently.

“Nothing.”

“Maybe I created a monster.” He dragged his eyes down my body again.

“How?”

He ran his teeth over his bottom lip. “I don’t like how every guy is looking at you like they want to devour you.”

“I think you’re being ridiculous.”

“No, I’m not. I’m being realistic.”

“For someone who’s never had a girlfriend, you seem awfully possessive and caveman-ish.”

“Oh, yeah? I guess that’s why I never had a girlfriend. I didn’t need the damn distraction.”

Of course, he didn’t. Turning away, I focused on my book. “Anyway, I really need to study.”

He flipped my book closed. “Later.” Nuzzling my neck, he said, “I really need to spend time with you.”

“Axel,” I began, but my stupid heart fluttered, regardless. I’d missed him.

“No. No more studying. Besides, you know what they say about all work and no play...”

I smiled and pushed at his chest, putting a little distance between us. “It makes you more successful?”

His mouth quirked as he closed the space between us. “Maybe. But how boring would that be?” He swept his eyes down my body slowly. “And you’re definitely not boring. Come on, just relax, and go with the flow.”

“That’s easy for you to say. I can’t blow off studying and expect to maintain my GPA.”

“I doubt spending a few hours having fun equals you tanking your grades.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then bring your books. You’ll have plenty of time to study.” The way he spoke made me highly doubt it. However, he was already packing my books for me. It was hard to deny him, and to be honest, I really didn’t want to, anyway. I could use a few hours to unwind from my work.

Before I knew it, he was leading me out of the library, carrying my backpack. “Where are we going?”

“My place.” He had an arm securely around me and was thumbing around on his phone. Leading me to his car, he let me into the passenger seat. He placed my backpack on the floorboard between my legs.

When he slid into the driver’s side, I said, “Do you always get your way?”

He dipped his chin, peering at me with a smug look. “What do you think?”

“You can’t answer my question with a question.”

Shaking his head, he sported a wry smile before he turned to me. “Okay, Hardcore. How is this for an answer? Yes, I do. Always. When I want something, I take it.”

I glanced down at the backpack between my legs. “Oh.” Unease started to swirl in my stomach. Swallowing slowly, I twisted my hands in my lap.

“Hey,” he said, softly touching a stray curl hanging over my shoulder. “I didn’t mean that in the way it came out. I would never take something from you that you didn’t want to give, Natalie.”

“I know.”

“I’m serious. I just want to spend time with you and have some fun. Can we do that?”

Axel may have pushed my boundaries in some ways, but it was never something I didn’t want. Wasn’t I living out the list I wrote at the beginning of the semester? Besides, what was wrong with having a little fun? I was fooling myself if I said I didn’t want to spend time with him, too. “I’d like that.”

When he pulled into his driveway, he got out of the car and walked around to my side before opening my door. Retrieving my backpack, he took my hand and gently led me out like a gentleman.

Passing through the living room, Nick was sitting on the large L-shaped sofa with Kenzie by his side. They both glanced at us with eyes slightly raised in curiosity.

“Hey, Natalie. Fancy seeing you here.” Nick’s mouth rose in humor as he slid a sly look at Axel.

“Yeah, we’re working on a project together.”

“Must be a big project, huh?” Nick still had a teasing glint in his eye. “You’ve been working on it for quite a while, haven’t you?”

Puzzled, I glanced at Axel, who appeared aggravated, but he answered, “It’ll probably take us the semester to finish.”

My heart dropped at hearing him give a definitive end date to our so-called project.

Kenzie smiled at me. “How’s school going?”

“Great.” I forced a smile.

Nick curled his arm around Kenzie. “I should work on my project, too,” he teased. “But it will probably take forever and a lifetime to complete it.” He leaned in and kissed her. “I hope she’s in it for the long haul.”

“Baby, you know I am. I will stand by your side and take on any project with you.” She melted against him, and I felt both envious and embarrassed at witnessing them kiss intimately.

“Oh, brother,” Axel murmured and laid his hand on my lower back.

Thud. Thud. Thud. I jumped to see Roman standing outside on the back patio, banging on the sliding patio door with a dark look. He slid it open and stuck his head in. “It’s about time you got here.” He leveled a scowl at Axel, then turned his grumpy gaze on Nick. “I just bought sixty pounds of crawfish. You wanna help me with this, or am I supposed to be the one who always preps and cooks?”

“Come on. Let’s go help Roman before he gets his panties in a wad.” Nick rose from the couch, taking Kenzie with him.

I peered up at Axel as he guided me behind him. “Crawfish?”

“Yeah, we’re having a crawfish boil.”

“I’ve never had crawfish.”

“What? How could a Texas girl not have had crawfish?” He bent down and murmured against my ear. “Another first I’ll get to experience with you. Trust me, you’ll love crawfish.”

The guys carried in a ginormous cooler and set it down on the patio next to a large steel pot settled on a propane burner. Nick flipped the cooler open. “Look at these babies.” The cooler was full of live crawfish still moving around.

“That’s quite a lot,” I said, staring down in surprise.

“It’s really not, and we invited over a few friends.” Nick closed the lid.

“We did?” Axel drew his arm around me as if he needed to offer protection.

“Just a few guys from the team. Why do you care? You’re usually the one inviting people over all the time,” Roman said as he and Dmitri were securing what looked like a tarp made out of trash bags over a long, rectangular tabletop.

“It seems his priorities have changed, haven’t they?” Nick added with a sly grin.

A willowy blonde stepped out on the patio, dressed in black shorts and a Duffy’s T-shirt. Following her was a petite girl with raven hair who was obviously pregnant. I’d recognized them both, having seen them with the guys in passing but had never been formally introduced. They both looked at Axel and me with interest.

“Hi. I’m Sorina. Why don’t I know you?” She gave me a smile before shooting Axel a reproachful glance, as if he’d been keeping a secret from her.

“I’m Natalie, and I’m not sure I was supposed to be known.”

“It’s Axel’s project, *zaychik*,” Dmitri supplied as if he were being helpful. Was everyone in on this? Now, I was the one who shot Axel a reproachful glance, as well.

“Project?” she asked, laying a hand on her stomach. “What are you working on?”

I tried to pull away from Axel, but his hold was like an iron clamp. Forcing a smile, I said, “I’m contemplating how to make the perfect exit.”

“Oh, no. You must stay and enjoy the crawfish,” Blondie said. “I’m Theo, by the way.”

“Of course, she’s staying. We still have a lot of work to do.” Axel’s face lit up pleasantly. He was so manipulative and full of shit. Why did it make my heart pump faster, regardless?

“Natalie,” Kenzie piped up, taking my hand, “why don’t we go grab something to drink?”

“Yes. Let’s.” Axel nodded toward the door, keeping me by his side.

“Seriously?” Kenzie eyed him as if he were crazy.

“She’s not going anywhere without me.” Everyone’s eyes shot to him, and he shrugged unapologetically. What was with him?

Finally, Axel must’ve realized he was being overbearing and relented. “Don’t stay gone long.”

“They’re just going to the kitchen, Axel. Ease the fuck up. Damn, I thought I was bad,” Roman said before grabbing Theo from behind and kissing her on the neck. “I missed you.”

“You saw me this morning before I went to work. It’s only been a few hours.”

“A few hours too long.” He cupped her chin, dragging her mouth to his.

Later, we were all gathered outside, watching the crawfish boil. Nick and Roman seemed to be in charge of cooking. The girls were drinking mango seltzers, except for Sorina, while the guys were drinking beers, except for Dmitri, who had a vodka martini garnished with olives in a martini glass.

A few people filed in through the gate, some of the guys I recognized from the team. Axel and I were sitting on a lounge. He had his hand on my back, tracing a lazy pattern, while I chatted with Sorina. She was seven months pregnant, and she and Dmitri were having a boy.

Dmitri brought her a glass of lemonade. In fact, he'd been hovering around her all day, waiting on her hand and foot. I even saw him smile at her, and I'd never seen Dmitri show any kind of emotion whenever we'd been out on the field, whether it was during practice or a game. Wow. It was funny seeing how all these tough football players softened around their girlfriends.

"Hi, Axel." The voice was familiar, and I looked up to see Jeanette standing before us with sunlight framing her face like a bad aura, and her model-worthy figure was in a micro mini and crop top.

Axel's arm slithered around mine as if he thought I might slip away. "Jeanette," he said flatly.

I thought she would walk away, but she stood there for several more moments, and I didn't miss the slight frown she gave me before Joe, the backup quarterback, walked up beside her, talking to Axel about the NFL combine. Axel was still clutching me against his hip as he spoke, while Jeanette's eyes narrowed as she focused on his hand. An involuntary chill coursed down my spine despite the warm spring day.

Axel stopped talking and leaned into me, wrapping his free hand around my arm. "Are you cold? I can get my jacket." He stroked my arm as if trying to warm me up.

I watched as Jeanette turned on her heel and stalked away, with Joe trailing behind her in confusion. I exhaled as if I'd been holding my breath. "I felt a chill, but I'm fine now."

After we ate crawfish, corn on the cob, potatoes, and sausage, the guys decided to play a game of cornhole. Nick and Axel were taking on Roman and Dmitri.

"Let's go sit in the chairs over by the game," Kenzie suggested, pointing to a set of lawn chairs on the other side of the pool. As I followed the girls around the pool, I felt my stomach starting to cramp. A familiar cramp. Ugh. This was a bad time to start my period.

“I’ll meet you there. I just have to run to the bathroom.” I started to make my way to the house to find my purse but was cut off when Jeanette suddenly blocked my path. “It’s Natalie, right? I almost didn’t recognize you because you look so different.” She scanned over my clothing distastefully.

I wasn’t going to engage, and I needed to get my purse and run to the bathroom. “Whatever. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

She stood her ground. “I really don’t get it. I don’t get what he sees in you.”

Unease settled over me. “That’s something you’ll have to ask him.” I tried to push around her, but she clasped my arm, digging her fake nails into my skin. “Let go of me.”

“You think you’re someone special? You think Axel really cares for you?” She sneered at me. “Guess what? He doesn’t.”

“You know what? Why would you waste your time on someone who has no interest in you?” I yanked on my arm, but she didn’t let go.

“Oh, my god. Who do you think you are?”

“Let go of me, Jeanette,” I warned lowly and tried to shove her off.

She pushed me back, and I stumbled until I lost my footing, and all I felt was air. My arms flailed helplessly, knowing that my worst nightmare was coming to fruition. I felt the sharp smack on my back as I hit the water.

Terror consumed me, and I kicked my feet wildly and flapped my arms, trying to keep my head above water. But soon, the water was heavy and dragging me down. My scream was garbled as water filled my mouth, and my head submerged.

Don’t panic.

Don’t panic.

Don't panic.

My mind kept chanting the words. However, my body wasn't listening, and I kept sinking deeper and deeper into the abyss until darkness consumed me.

Why? Why didn't I ever learn how to swim? Why wasn't anyone coming to save me? Did no one care that a person was drowning in a pool? My lungs were burning, and I wouldn't be able to hold my breath much longer. I struggled to kick my legs, but the water felt like a dead weight holding me down.

I was going to die.

I was going to die a virgin.

I was going to die without ever experiencing my first kiss.

I sunk to the bottom and white dots flashed before my eyes. I knew I couldn't hold my breath any longer.

Whoosh went the water above me, and a large figure shot toward me like a bullet. An arm wrapped around my body, and then I was propelled up through the water, higher and higher until we broke the surface.

I gasped for air, desperately coughing as if I were choking. Loud noises echoed around me.

"Natalie!" Axel sounded panicked, keeping my head above water as he propelled us to the side of the pool. He hefted us both over the edge until I was cradled in his lap.

I gasped, trying to catch my breath as I began to shiver.

"Jesus Christ. What happened?" he said hoarsely and frantically ran his hands over my face, gripping my hair in desperation.

I coughed several more times before I could get the words out.

"Can you breathe?" His eyes are filled with panic as he searched my face.

I fight through another bout of coughs and placed a hand over my chest. “Yes. I can breathe.”

Theo hurried over with a towel in her hand. Axel draped it around me, enfolding me in his arms. I peered up at him. “I can’t swim.”

“I know you can’t swim. It was on your list.” He closed his eyes and exhaled unsteadily. In fact, he seemed to be a little shaky, too. “We should probably go to the hospital.”

“No. I’m fine.” I started to pull myself out of his lap, but he held me against him.

“You could have water in your lungs. Let me take you to the hospital.”

I shook my head. “I don’t need to go to the hospital. I swear.” I began to pull myself up to stand, and he got to his feet, holding me as though afraid I couldn’t stand on my own. “I’m okay,” I reassured him, although he looked like he didn’t believe me.

“How did you end up in the pool?” He stroked my hair. I saw Jeanette staring at me with no remorse. She probably would’ve been fine with me drowning, although I’m certain she had no idea I couldn’t swim. What a crazy bitch.

But I guess having a near-death experience made me feel a little crazy, too. I smiled maliciously at her, saying matter-of-factly, “Jeanette pushed me.”

Axel’s face morphed into granite, and his body tensed like a cobra ready to strike. “She’s gonna wish she’d never met me. I’ll destroy her life.”

“No.” I held out my hand, stopping him. “She’s going to wish she never fucked with me.” Feeling an adrenaline rush of survival, I trudged over to her as she crossed her arms and glared. Not caring anymore, I drew my fist back and struck her across the face, and she stumbled back in shock. I hit her again, and she fell to the ground on her ass.

“Get away from me, you psycho!” she screeched with eyes wide, trying to scoot away from me. With my foot, I shoved the bottom of my wedge against her chest, knocking her supine on the ground.

“I’ll press charges for assault,” she cried out, glancing around to see if anyone was going to back her. However, no one came to her defense.

“Assault?” I forced a laugh keeping my foot on her chest. “That’s what we’re calling it? You pushed me in the pool.”

“You’re such a bitch.” She grabbed my ankle intent on pulling me down.

“I wouldn’t if I were you, Jeanette,” Axel warned deathly calm, wrapping his arms securely around me from behind as I kicked out of her grip. “Touch or threaten Natalie again and see what happens. Let me give you a hint... it won’t be pleasant.”

“Axel. I’m sorry. It was an accident. I didn’t know she couldn’t swim.” Her already poofy bottom lip had doubled in size, and blood trailed down her chin.

“There are witnesses here who would say otherwise.” Axel pointed to his friends, who were standing by us in support.

She opened her mouth to speak, and Axel snarled, “Say one more goddamn word, and I swear I’ll make your life a living hell.” He sneered at Joe. “Get her the fuck out of here. I don’t *ever* want to see her fucking face again.”

Joe walked out with his tail between his legs, taking the campus bitch with him. Axel lifted me up and had one arm under my knees and another around my back as he carried me bridal style across the lawn. He ignored everyone around him as if he were on a mission.

“I can walk.”

His face softened when glanced down at me. “I don’t care. I need to hold you right now, so let me have my caveman

moment.” He bent down and his mouth grazed my temple, and he tightened his arms around me. “Besides, anyone can see through your wet clothes, and that’s not working for me.”

I ducked my head into his chest, reveling in his strength and warmth. When we entered his room, he closed the door and locked it. Leaning against the door, he dropped his head back, staring at the ceiling before he exhaled a long breath. “Fuck, Natalie. You scared the shit out of me. Don’t ever do that again.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose. I was pushed into the pool.”

“I know. I could murder that bitch.”

I touched his face and teased, “Let’s not joke about death right now.”

“I’m not joking.”

His arms were trembling beneath me, and his face tight with anguish. “Axel?”

Chapter TWENTY NINE

Axel

I could've lost her tonight. I could've fucking lost her. This whole experiment was supposed to be fun, right? If so, why did I feel like someone had bludgeoned my chest with a baseball bat? Seeing her almost die was torture. I was fucking shaken over what had happened.

“Axel?”

I couldn't find my words.

“I'm here. I'm all right. And I should thank you for saving me,” she rasped, her voice husky as she leaned up and ran her lips over my cheek, lingering for several hazy moments.

I froze against her, fighting how her touch affected me. She'd never initiated any kind of kiss. Neither had I. Even a kiss on the cheek was too personal for me. Far too personal, borderline dangerous, and I knew it could potentially ruin me, changing the landscape of whatever I told myself we were. I steadied my voice. “I don't need your gratitude, Hardcore. It should've never happened to begin with.”

She paused as her lips lingered on my skin before she withdrew. “You can put me down now. I'm fine.”

“This is not fucking fine,” I growled, drawing her close to me again. “None of this is fine.” Before I could think, before I could stop myself and consider what I was doing, I cupped her cheek, knowing I was going to break my own resolve. Because I wanted this. God, I wanted this. Without a fucking regret, I slammed my lips on hers and did what I’d wanted to do for too damn long... I ravished that mouth.

She tasted like the promise of heaven. A first drink of water after a grueling workout in hundred-degree weather. That first drop tasted so good, you’d do anything to have another taste. Beg for it. Kill for it.

She moaned against my lips, and I coaxed her mouth open, wanting to taste all of her. And when she did... fuck. I dove in like a desperate son of a bitch who’d dreamt about tasting her... in every way. Except now it was reality. However, I was doing everything backward with her because I’d already kissed her pussy, and now I was devouring her mouth. Either way, I was a winner.

Her hands curled around my neck, pulling me closer. She swirled her tongue around mine, driving me mad, and gnashed her teeth against mine in her desperation. It was wild; it was unsophisticated. She had no guile, no stakes in trying to fuck with me. Yet it was the hottest kiss I’d ever experienced. “You wanted to know what it’s like, didn’t you? How is this for your first kiss?” Yeah, I went there because I’d seen that on her bucket list, too.

“Not bad,” she gasped. “But I’m still mad that you snooped.”

“I didn’t snoop. It was laid out in front of me to see.” I cupped one of her tits in my hand, and she curled into me like a damn kitten. “You wanted me to see it.”

“Careful, your arrogance is showing again.”

I smiled before I plunged into her mouth again and lowered her to her feet. I sucked on her bottom lip, nipping it softly. She sighed against me and gripped my head, drawing us

closer as she kissed me back. Holding her face between my hands, I deepened the kiss, relishing her taste. I didn't think I'd ever get enough of her. Which I knew would ultimately be a problem. It was a big problem. I knew it was, but I'd take my chances.

“Damn, you taste so good.”

“You taste good, too.” She smiled against my mouth and followed my lead, tugging on my bottom lip with her teeth. I loved her playfulness and feistiness. She was quickly sinking into me, and it wasn't only physically.

“Did I make the cut?” I teased, running my lips over the corner of her mouth. “As your best kisser?” I trailed my mouth over her cheek, addicted to the taste of her skin, wanting to kiss every part of her face like a depraved man who'd been denied food for weeks.

“I think so,” she said unsteadily. “But you're my only kisser.”

“Damn right, I am.” I kissed her forehead, moving down to one brow and then the other. Not stopping, I kissed her eyelashes and finally traced a path down the center of her nose, kissing the diamond stud at the tip of her nostril. I wanted to touch and taste every inch of her body. Have the pleasure of experiencing all of her firsts.

She accused me of being caveman-ish. Yeah, I was. The caveman in me wanted to flex my possessive chest, carry her away, lock her up with me, and spend twenty-four hours making her scream my name in ecstasy until she lost her voice.

However, I held back because I didn't want to just take from her. How the hell I went from swearing her off because she was a virgin to this, I'd never know. In fact, I'd deliberately tried not to rush her into sex. Besides her insisting on doing me a solid the last time we were in my room, I hadn't attempted to persuade her to return the favor. Unfortunately, I was about to have a goddamn torn ligament in my wrist and a

chaffed dick from all the blue ball nights and hand jobs I'd given myself. But, god, I wanted her; I wanted her so badly that it was painful. No lie.

Drawing my lips to hers, I kissed her like she was my last meal. I ran my hands over her breasts, squeezing them together under her fitted blouse that was held together by buttons and laced at the top. I tugged on the bow centered between her cleavage, unlaced it, and trailed my mouth down her neck, inhaling that intoxicating scent of vanilla. On impulse, I licked at her skin, desperate to inhale her skin again, her taste, and drew my teeth into her skin, sucking both hard and gently. I couldn't help it. I wanted to consume her. She arched into me as her nails dragged down my back.

Releasing her skin, knowing it was going to leave a mark, I kissed her delicate skin that I marred, making her mine. I wanted more. I needed to taste more. Drawing my fingers over her buttons, I started to unbutton them one by one, slowly, regardless of the beast in me wanting to rip her shirt apart. When I released the final button, I spread her top apart, admiring how her full tits strained against her plain white bra.

I paused, trying to relish this moment like a fine wine you didn't want to drink too quickly. You wanted to swish it in your mouth and savor it. Patience. A word I knew well, but right now, it seemed fucking foreign to me. "Do you realize how beautiful you are?" I nuzzled the exposed skin of her breasts. I knew she was self-conscious about her body, but to me, she was flawless. Absolutely flawless. Perfect for me.

She didn't answer with words, just reached up and ran her thumb over my bottom lip. Her eyes were heavy-lidded, sultry. A fatal cocktail of innocence and seductress that I wanted to indulge in, to drown in regardless of the warnings, knowing it would probably be harmful to my health. I lapped her thumb with my tongue before taking it into my mouth and sucking on it as I would her clit.

Then I dropped down to my knees, eager to taste her pussy again. "Now let me feast on that beautiful cunt."

Her eyes widened as though she'd realized she forgot something important. "Wait. You can't." She reached down, trying to stop me from peeling her wet skirt from her thighs, but she wasn't quick enough to stop me.

Chapter THIRTY

Natalie

I'd been so caught up in the pool incident and losing myself in Axel's kiss, until he dropped down to eat my pussy. But I couldn't deter him in time before he'd realize why he couldn't as he drew up my short skirt. Glancing down, I was mortified because there were a few faint spots of blood peppering my once-pristine white panties.

"You're bleeding." His voice was rough as he gazed in some kind of weird fascination. His grip on my thighs tightened while his fingers dug into my skin. A wave of heat spread over my skin in shame the longer he stared. I stood frozen, at a loss for words, as painful seconds passed. Swallowing slowly, he raised his eyes, flashing unabashed lust. Much like a predator who'd trapped his prey and was about to go in for the kill.

He nosed closer to my pussy, and my mouth parted in surprise when I realized his intention. I pushed at his shoulders. "Axel, don't."

Not budging, his brows drew in as if he didn't understand my words. "Why not?"

My cheeks burned. Was he really going to make me say it? "Because I started my period."

“So? You think a little blood’s gonna stop me?” he asked without remorse and leaned in, kissing my pussy through the material. “You’re wrong.” He nibbled on my clit, and despite my reservations, a hum of pleasure started to build. His tongue lapped over me relentlessly, wearing down my defenses and sensibility.

Sliding his fingers to my pelvis, he edged under the elastic of my panties and pulled them down. I should’ve protested, but I didn’t have the will, and he wouldn’t have been deterred anyway.

He took his time licking and sucking on my nub, and I bucked into his mouth. I ran my nails down the back of his neck and heard mumbled, broken sounds, realizing they were mine.

“You like that?” he murmured against my pussy, and I could almost feel the smirk on his lips. “I sure as fuck do.”

However, I didn’t care as long as he didn’t stop. I needed to feel him everywhere. I needed this.

Gripping my thighs, he tugged my legs wider and delved into my pussy like a man possessed. “You taste better than any fucking thing in the world.”

“So good. So good,” I panted, thrusting my pelvis into his face, wanting more.

He delved deeper, set on a mission, and my thighs tightened. I gripped his broad shoulders so I wouldn’t fall over. “Yes. Like that.” Fire burned so hot that I was about to turn to ash. And with a deep thrust of his tongue, I moaned like someone in pain and released, riding out my orgasm. He held my hips and lapped at my pussy until I came down.

After several moments, his mouth trailed up my clit slowly. One hand was soon at my side, tugging on the zipper of my skirt and pulling it down my legs, coaxing me out of it.

When he raised his eyes, desire flashed so intensely, I knew tonight he wouldn’t be content with only giving me pleasure. His calloused fingers traced a path up my lower back

as he continued working his way up, dropping kisses over my lower abdomen.

“So beautiful. So fucking beautiful.” His words were both silky and demanding, sending delightful goose bumps down my skin. He unhooked my bra and tugged it down my arms until it dropped between us on the floor.

Rising up, he towered over me with one hand on my back and his other hand cupping my breast. Staring down, he thumbed my nipple before taking it into his mouth, and he walked me backward until the backs of my thighs hit the edge of the bed. He raised his head. “Get on the bed.”

“Maybe I should go clean up.” A sense of trepidation ran through me.

“No.” He reached down, grabbed the hem of his shirt, and pulled it over his head. Once again, I lost my ability to think when he displayed tanned skin, that sexy nipple piercing, and insanely defined abs. Not to mention a perfectly cut V that was like a glaring arrow pointing down to the main attraction below the waistband of his shorts.

He shook out his damp shirt and draped it over the bed like a towel. “Get on the bed, Natalie,” he said again.

I crawled onto the bed and twisted around until I was on my back, reclined on top of his shirt, trying to calm the jitter of nerves.

He climbed over me, caging my head between his forearms as he nosed into my neck. “You want to know something?” His words brushed my skin in a whisper.

Swallowing slowly, I nodded faintly.

“I’ve never wanted anything in my life as much as I want you.”

My heart sped up, and my pulse pounded relentlessly. I licked my lips and couldn’t help but ask, “Really?”

“Mm-hmm.” He continued tracing a delectable pattern down my neck and over my collarbone. “Ever since I saw you

standing there wide-eyed in the library.”

I didn't know if he was telling the truth because he seemed like he already had that easy-going, polished quality where he could say the right words to make anyone melt into putty. That was a while back. *When I want something, I take it.* “You don't have to lie to impress me.”

He took my jaw between his fingers, holding my gaze. “I wouldn't lie to you about that. It's not like I didn't have plenty of opportunities, but at the end of the day, why would I settle for anything less when all I really wanted... was you?”

Chapter THIRTY ONE

Natalie

All I really wanted was you. His words seeped through my veins like an intoxicating drug that set off my endorphins. He smoothed the damp hair off my cheek. “I want you so much it scares me.”

“Why does it scare you?” I roved over his face, trying to get a read on him.

He ducked his head and drew his hand over my breast. “Because I’m going to do something I swore I’d never do. But I can’t seem to stop it from happening. I want to fuck you.”

He was going to take my virginity tonight.

His hand strummed down my stomach and lower until he was stroking my clit. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me.” The words were reactionary because I had no idea whether it was true or not.

“I will.” He brought his lips down, kissing me like I was a cherished possession. “It’s going to hurt because you’re a virgin and so small,” he warned gently and continued spreading soft kisses in reassurance.

“Oh.”

“But I’ll try to lessen the pain.”

“I know you will,” I whispered against his mouth. “I trust you.”

“Fuck, Natalie. Fuck.” He drove his tongue into my mouth in desperation. Then his fingers traveled over my clit until he was parting my folds. He pushed two fingers inside me, causing me to gasp in surprise. It was a tight fit, and although he’d done it before, it still took time to adjust. However, when he added a third finger, I squirmed in caution as he slid in back and forth, stretching me. “God, you’re so tight.” His words passed down my throat as he continued to kiss me like the world was about to end.

Feeling bold, I curled my thumbs into the waistband of his athletic shorts, tugging them down over his ass. He wore black briefs underneath. Withdrawing his fingers from me, he artlessly yanked his briefs down, joining his shorts that were already drooped at his knees. Gripping his cock, he leveled it over my clit, stroking his bare tip up and down over the sensitive skin. I bit my lip as liquid heat pooled at my core.

“So many nights, I’d fantasized about this moment,” he rasped, dragging the head of his cock lower until he circled it around my entrance.

Focusing on the wide tip glistening with pre-cum, I watched with a mixture of fascination and apprehension. “Shouldn’t you wear a condom?”

“I will. I just wanted to feel you first.” He pressed his dick between my folds and rocked carefully into me—not deep, just enough pressure to feel really good. He sucked in a breath. “Damn, this feels like heaven. I’ve never done this before...”

Never done this before? He pulled out, then gently nudged the head of his cock back inside my entrance. Dropping his head down, he took one of my nipples into his mouth, and I got lost in the sensations. It did feel good, and I could feel myself moving with him, wanting to take more. My body felt ready to take in a little more of him.

“Baby, you’re so... *damn wet.*” His words sounded ragged as he gave my other nipple his undivided attention. “Soaking my dick.” We were still rocking against each other. Soon, I started to feel more pressure inside my walls, much fuller as heat emanated between us. My nails curled into his shoulders. He lifted his head and slid a hand under my back. “Am I hurting you?”

“No. Not really.” I cradled his face and tentatively kissed him as if he now needed my reassurance. It was still new to me, this dynamic, but he soon took over, aggressively claiming my mouth.

“Natalie,” he groaned out my name. He pulsed the crown of his cock into me again, butting against my barrier, and his pelvis grazed my clit.

My eyes drew to his, and I locked my thighs around his waist. I braced myself for the pain. “Relax, sweetheart.” His voice was unsteady.

I knew tensing up would make it worse, so I tried to focus on remaining calm. Axel eased a hand up the side of my neck, stroking in a soothing manner, giving me a sense of security as he withdrew from me. I caught the flicker of remorse in his eyes before he bent down and brushed his lips against my forehead. “Forgive me for what I’m about to do,” he said softly.

Before his words registered, he drove into me. A piercing pain sliced through me as he broke through my barrier, and I cried out, arching off the bed and digging my nails into his skin.

It hurt, and I struggled against him, but he encased me in his arms and claimed my mouth. “I’m sorry, baby, but it was the only way.”

I couldn’t work my voice, only aware of the throbbing discomfort between my thighs. Aware of every twitch of his ginormous cock buried deep inside of me. So deep he could possibly lance my intestines.

“The worst is over. I promise.” He traced his hand up and down my back, holding me close as he stayed still, allowing me time to adjust.

“It’s okay,” I reassured him. My words came out in pants, and I threw my hands around his neck, touching my forehead to his. He fingered my cheek and showered kisses over my face with care, unmoving, although I could feel his cock throbbing inside my oversensitive pussy. Yet, he was being thoughtful and considerate, waiting until I was ready.

Feeling cherished and relishing our intimate moment, I leaned up and licked a trail over his neck, sucking on his skin like he’d done mine earlier, tasting the faint hints of his cologne and salty taste of sweat, focusing on his pleasure.

He exhaled a long breath and began to withdraw slowly before pushing back inside me. Tensing slightly, I was mildly surprised that the stark pain from before had waned, although it was still a very tight fit. But I allowed myself to follow his movements, letting him lead me in the way he desired.

He started out slowly, taking leisurely strokes in and out of me, and threaded his fingers in mine, spreading our hands out wide above my head. His chest expanded and contracted as his breathing sounded labored. His body was tense, as if he were holding himself back.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked.

“No.”

“You sure?”

I nodded shyly. “You don’t have to hold back.”

He paused mid-thrust, staring at me in surprise.

I unthread my hands from his and reached up to stroke his jawline. “I can take more.”

“Fuck.” He cupped my face and ravished my mouth before driving himself into me like he was on a mission.

Soon, pleasure began to bloom with each thrust, and I opened my thighs wider. I heard the sound of skin slapping skin as I lifted my hips higher, trying to match his moves. The harder he drove, the more I started to fall apart. I never would've thought this could happen, considering the pain earlier, but my insides were churning with the need to find release.

Axel reached down and fingered my clit, enhancing my sensation. Higher and higher I flew as he fucked me relentlessly. Everything around me faded, and my blood curled in my veins. Nothing mattered but chasing this high. Thrashing against him, I cried out his name as I rose higher and higher. He grunted as he fucked me harder. "Let it out. Come for me." And I moaned as I climaxed.

"Jesus, Natalie." His voice was a ragged whisper floating above me as I rode out my climax. Axel tensed against me as his movements became jerky and sharp. He groaned deep in his throat, with his mouth twisted as if in pain, and pulsed deep inside of me. He buried his head in my neck, and I felt my insides coated with liquid heat, each thrust making it even more apparent. More and more warmth filled me before he stilled and relaxed on top of me.

Seconds passed as we panted like running a marathon.

Wetness trickled out of me and down my butt as I lay there in semi-contentment.

"Did I hurt you? Are you okay?" Axel asked with concern nuzzling my cheek.

"Yeah." I frowned.

But...

I shouldn't feel so much wetness seeping out.

Realization dawned.

He came.

Inside of me.

Without a condom.

“Axel?” I said his name in question, hoping I’d just imagined this.

“Mm-hmm?” He trailed his mouth down my throat leisurely.

“Did you... did you wear a condom?”

There was a slight pause as his lips skimmed my skin.
“No.”

“No?” My stomach dropped like I’d swallowed a lead anvil.

“I’m clean. I promise. And you’re a virgin.” He curled his lips in satisfaction before he devoured my lips. “Or were.”

“Well,”—I closed my eyes, chiding myself for my irresponsibility and getting swept away in a moment—“I’m not on any kind of birth control.” I sighed heavily.

I expected him to scowl or look at me like he was pissed. Instead, he rolled over on his side, and I felt some kind of sorrow at missing his weight, missing the heaviness of him between my legs. *Instead*, he drew the back of his fingers over my cheek, watching me with... tenderness and understanding?
“You’re not?”

“No. I never had a need for it in the past.” The more I spoke, the more I felt like an idiot. How could I have not prepared myself regardless of whether I was having sex or not? It wasn’t like this moment wasn’t ever going to happen between us, considering the build-up. I was completely irresponsible, plain and simple.

“It’s okay. You’re on your period,” he said, like this situation wasn’t that big of a deal for him.

“I know, but we should be more careful next time.” The words sounded more like a question, even to my ears. Then I wondered if this was a normal occurrence for him.

“I have always been careful. I’ve never put myself in a questionable situation. I’ve never fucked anyone without a condom. Safe sex has been drilled into my head since I was a preteen.”

“But you didn’t wear one with me.” I knew I sounded ridiculous, stating the obvious, and I should’ve had the wherewithal to know we were taking a risk.

“I didn’t wear one with you,” he said slowly. “I’m sorry. I got caught up in the moment.”

“I did, too.” I rolled onto my side to face him. “I didn’t mean to be irresponsible. All my life I’ve made sensible decisions and stayed focused on school and going to grad school when I graduated from Hillside. Having an accidental pregnancy was not part of my plan.”

“Oh, yeah? We’re talking about accidental pregnancies right now? You think being irresponsible was part of my plan?” he asked lightly, with eyebrows raised. If anything bothered Axel, it was near impossible to decipher. However, it wasn’t difficult to know what his words implied, especially when you knew the context of his situation. *I’m about to sign a multi-million-dollar contract with an NFL team in a few months. Who wouldn’t try to take advantage of me?* I had a fleeting thought that he’d wonder if I were some kind of gold digger or something, considering how I’d heard some of the players on the team talk in passing about girls trying to trap them.

“Hey. Next time, we’ll be more responsible. Okay?” He leaned in and kissed me in reassurance. “Everything will be fine,” he whispered against my lips, curling his muscular arms around me and holding me like I was his most cherished possession. And I relaxed against him, believing him.

I woke up disoriented in the dark with a heavy weight over my chest and realized Axel’s arm was holding me down. “Hello, Sleeping Beauty,” he said beside me. Letting my eyes adjust, I caught the small smile through the faint light of moonlight passing through the blinds.

“What time is it?”

“Almost midnight. Are you scared you’ll turn into a pumpkin?”

Glancing around me, it dawned on me that I was naked under the sheets. And I’d started my period. Wild panic coursed down my spine, hoping I didn’t stain his sheets. I struggled to get up like the room was on fire. “I need my purse. I need to go—”

“Easy, Natalie.” He kept his arm snug around me. “I took care of everything.”

“Everything?” Confusion muddled my brain. I rubbed my thighs together and felt a tenderness at my core from him breaking my barrier. And something else. Did he? No, he couldn’t have.

“Yes.” He leaned over me, kissing my lips as his hand trailed down my pussy, and his fingers parted my thighs. Something light tickled my inner thigh like a small paintbrush. It took me a moment to confirm what it was.

“You inserted my...?” I couldn’t finish my thought because I would’ve never thought he would do something like that. Who would? And although it was strange, warmth flooded my veins from my head to my toes. Who would’ve thought Axel could be so tender and caring?

“Yeah. I told you I’d take care of you.”

“How did you know...” My cheeks flushed because this was embarrassing. “What to do?”

“I got your purse.” His shoulder lifted as if wasn’t a big deal. “It wasn’t difficult to figure out.” He ran his hand over my stomach, massaging gently. “I have a heating pad and ice packs if you’re feeling discomfort, you know, for your cramps.”

Oh, my gosh. My ovaries were about to explode. I never would’ve discussed my period with anyone. My mother and I

barely talked about it besides her giving me the basics of what to do, and that in itself was very vague.

However, Axel had shown me tonight that it wasn't something dirty or something to be ashamed of. Life wasn't put on pause because of something females had to deal with. "That's so sweet, but I'm okay."

"You sure?"

"Yeah." He kept rubbing my stomach, and I closed my eyes, sighing in contentment.

"How come you don't know how to swim?"

My eyes shot open. The events from earlier passed through my mind. I could've drowned, and Axel saved me. I should know how to swim. I was probably the only person here tonight who didn't. I pressed my lips together.

"Natalie." He cupped my chin, bringing my gaze to his. "Don't be embarrassed. You've never shied away from telling me the truth before. I think we're beyond embarrassment by now." *Yes, we were.*

I couldn't explain it. Scratch that. There wasn't a definitive moment where you could say, "*Oh, that's why you never learned.*" But I didn't have a traumatic past where someone could pinpoint or make sense of why I didn't know how to swim. We just never went swimming in our family. In fact, we went to the beach, but it was strictly to see the scenery.

I measured my words before I spoke. "It's... I know it's, like, one of those things that everyone should know how to do. Like learning CPR. I should've taken lessons long ago, but I never learned how." How many times would I feel embarrassed tonight?

"Don't be ashamed," he said. "It's never too late to learn."

"Honestly, I never wanted to swim. Never thought it was something I would ever do anyway. My family wasn't big on

swimming. However, my perspective... changed recently.” I heard the shake in my voice as my father’s kind, dark eyes passed through my mind.

“Because of your dad?” His thumb caressed my jaw. His voice was comforting, like a familiar blanket.

“Yeah.” Tears leaked out of the corner of my eyes.

“Talk to me,” he urged.

“Swimming wasn’t something that we ever did. My father wanted to. He wanted us both to learn how to swim.” No one in our family knew how to swim, but Dad told me that one day, we’d learn. However, we never had that chance. “He said we would learn. He said we’d take lessons together. But that never happened. I took for granted the time we had left together.”

“Baby, don’t blame yourself,” he said, with a voice full of emotion.

The tears continued to pour as if I were going through a cleansing. I burrowed my head in his chest while he enveloped me like a warm blanket. And all the feelings I kept well hidden fell out of me as I sobbed into his chest, using him as a buffer to absorb my pain. Although I knew this wasn’t a true relationship, his comfort and the safety I felt right now seemed very real. Everything seemed so real.

Chapter THIRTY TWO

Axel

Damn. I realized I hated seeing her suffer. I would gladly take her pain away if I could.

I felt a connection with her and could sympathize with her loss. It was difficult to talk about the death of a loved one.

Trust me, I knew. I kept my feelings buried inside, trying to keep a brave front to everyone. I was sixteen years old when my mother died. It was devastating. It was unexpected. And it nearly killed my father. It made me question ever falling in love when I saw how my father shut down and almost self-destructed. He said he lost his better half and didn't know if he could move on. I didn't know if he'd move on at the time either. Eventually, he did, and I did, too.

But right now, my concern was with my beautiful girl bawling against my chest, and I'd be there for her. "Let it out, Nat. I know you need an outlet," I urged gently. If she was anything like I thought she was, anything like me, she didn't let her emotions show too much, or at all. I rubbed my hand up and down her back and leaned down with my lips kissing the top of her head. "You can always come to me if you need a shoulder to cry on." Every sob muffled against my chest made me ache a little more.

After the sobs wracking her body began to subside, her cries downsized to broken whimpers. Fuck. I felt like that sixteen-year-old kid, hearing about my mom's car accident...

"I'm so sorry," she sniffled deeply. "I'm making a mess." That wasn't the only thing she'd made a mess of, I feared, but I shook off that notion. She leaned back, sniffing loud again, pointing at her nose. "I just need a—"

"I'll get it." I loped to the bathroom and snagged a box of tissues. When I came back, she was curled up in the bed. Her dark eyes were red-rimmed and puffy, but she was still breathtaking in her vulnerability.

She smiled sadly as she took the box. "God, I know I must look awful." She blew into the tissue.

"Nah, you look adorable."

"Yeah, right," she mumbled against the Kleenex in her hand as she wiped her nose. "When you said you wanted to have fun this afternoon, I'm sure this wasn't the fun you were speaking of."

No. It wasn't. Not gonna lie, I'd been stressed lately with all the stuff going on in my life. Not complaining. Going to the combine and impressing scouts was great. Fan-fucking-tastic, actually. A blessing. But the craziness around this whole scene could sometimes be very overwhelming. *Could be? It was.* The national championship was crazy, but now I was out of college football. Making it to the NFL was different.

The media was at your heels twenty-four seven, capturing your every move. The agents were sniffing around, trying to hook in their next prospect. People, who you had no idea who they were, approached you, throwing around new and upcoming products they wanted you to endorse. And the women... The women were there, looking at you with dollar signs in their eyes. I had to stay focused and not get caught up in believing in the hype. But at the end of the day, I somewhat felt like a commodity. And I was. Business was business.

Luckily, I'd grown up with parents who'd kept me grounded and who were always my support system. God rest my mother's soul. She set the foundation for me, as well as Dad. Since my father had already been there and done that, it helped that he'd been at my side, giving me valuable advice about navigating my career.

Regardless of the support system and being cautioned about the NFL biz, it could still be overwhelming and suck you under into a false sense of security. Honestly, I didn't know shit about these people who acted like we were close friends. Too clingy, promising me everything under the sun, just because I had potential. I had, for lack of a better word, hype. Having hype was like a double-edged sword.

"Always remember who your true friends are and who will go to battle for you in the trenches." My dad always said this to me as a reminder not to fall for fool's gold. So, yeah, maybe I came back here, hoping to find some familiar territory. To find Natalie and mess around to take my mind off things. To have some fun.

However, now, I just wanted to be here for her.

I could've made a teasing comment. Did the lighthearted bullshit I did with most people, but I didn't. I just wanted to be real. Sitting down on the bed, I gazed down at her. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be than here with you."

Her head shot up in surprise as she swiped at her eyes. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She clutched the tissue in her hand. "It still hurts."

"I know." I nodded, thinking about my own personal pain. "It hurts like hell. I've been there."

Her mouth parted as if she were surprised. "You lost someone?"

"Yeah. I lost someone." I didn't share this shit with anyone—see the similarities?—but I answered, "My mom."

“Oh, my god. I’m so sorry.”

Keeping my voice level, I said, “It was a car accident. She was passing through a green light and was sideswiped by a truck. It ran a red light, going over sixty miles per hour. Killed her on impact.”

“Axel.” She clenched my shoulders gently.

I stared off into the darkness. “I was sixteen, a sophomore in high school, when the school counselor came to my geometry class that afternoon and pulled me out of class.” Remembering that day like it was yesterday, my heart nearly stopped when I saw my uncle Morris standing in the main office with a somber look, and I knew something was very wrong. “I didn’t believe it at first, you know? How could you believe something like that would happen to your mom?”

“You can’t. You should’ve never had to experience that,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry, Axel.”

“I’m all right. It took me a long time, but I’m all right now. But it was hard back then. It took a lot of time to heal.” I glanced at her hand on my shoulder and covered mine with hers. “I know how it is.” Squeezing her hand, I bent down and kissed her temple. “I’m here for you, if you ever need to talk. I promise.”

Natalie gazed up at me with a tired smile, eyelids puffy and heavy. “Why, Axel Thomas, you truly are a player with a heart of gold, aren’t you?”

I grinned, lifting an index finger to my lips. “Shh, don’t tell anyone.”

Chapter THIRTY THREE

Natalie

“What are we doing today?” A week later, we were back at his house. The house was deserted and quiet.

“Having fun,” he said as he whisked me into his room. I wondered where his other roommates were. It was a big-ass house that could room at least twelve people. But we were alone for the moment, it seemed.

Axel walked over to his dresser and pulled out a floral, turquoise two-piece bikini. “Let me take you to the pool.”

I eyed him skeptically. Where did that come from?
“Why?”

“That word again,” he said tenderly, shaking his head as we shared a brief moment before he went on. “I want to teach you how to swim.”

“Where did you get... that?” I pointed at the material.

“Always so skeptical. You may be more of a skeptic than me.” He stepped closer, with the clothing held tightly in his hand. “I bought it for you when we went shopping.”

My adrenaline started to trigger a fight-or-flight mode. “I don’t know if I’m ready.” Yeah, I wrote it down as a goal to

learn how to swim, but it was harder to do this in real time when someone was actually going to hold you accountable.

“I won’t let anything hurt you, Natalie. Surely, you know that by now.” He said all the right things to me, and I honestly knew he would never deliberately hurt me. So, why was I scared? I hesitated, thinking of a million ways to justify my fears, but there was never a direct answer to the way I felt. I couldn’t explain it.

Axel reached in and folded me in his arms. “I would never, ever allow you to be in danger. You know you can trust me.”

“I know.”

Somehow, he talked me into putting on the skimpy swimsuit and led me outside to the pool. He held my hand tightly. His sense of calm and confidence radiated around him and passed through me, giving me *we can do this* vibes. “If it makes you feel any better, I was a lifeguard during the summer of my junior year in high school. I’m a certified swimmer.”

“That’s good to know.” I really didn’t doubt him; I already trusted him. I did. Yet I was still trying to get over my own anxiety. He held my arm and led me down the steps, so slowly, allowing me to get used to standing in one foot of water. He waited patiently until I was ready to bring my foot down to the next step in the pool. When he stepped with me, he stood beside me, stone still, a clear show of letting me lead. Our legs were almost knee-deep in water. With his hand at the crook of my elbow, I felt comfort, knowing Axel would have my back.

Shoving my fears aside, I stepped down lower, past the final step, until I reached the bottom. It wasn’t too deep. My shoulders were still above water, so I knew I could handle this. “I want you to get used to being in the water,” Axel said from beside me. Warmth flowed through my skin with his touch, despite the coolness of the water.

Never leaving my side, we stood in the shallow end. Axel joked with me, stupid antics that would keep my mind off my worries about drowning. The longer I stood in the pool, the more a sense of tranquility settled over me. *I could do this.*

“See, it’s not so bad.” He moved in front of me, dipping low as his lips touched the water, and he playfully began blowing bubbles from his mouth like a child did when he discovered he could make noises with water. It was endearing to watch him letting go, not concerned about how he looked. He drew his head up. “You should try it. It’s fucking fun.”

Standing there unsure, I watched, mesmerized, as he bent down again, skimming the water with his lips and watching me with his boyish charm, blowing more bubbles, as if he knew I was enchanted. He paused, with his chin above water. “Come on, Hardcore,” he coaxed. “You can’t tell me you never wanted to make bubbles in the water.”

Finally, I relented. “Okay. Maybe I did when I was a child.” Perhaps when I took a bath, I played in the water like that, but it was so long ago. Bending my knees, I dipped down until my mouth was level with the water’s edge, keeping my eyes on Axel. Something passed between us, or maybe I was dreaming it. I inhaled a deep breath before I blew it out into the water, watching as bubbles formed around my face.

I stood up, swiping my hair off my face. “You were right. That was fun.”

“Good.” He stared at me, unwavering. “That was your first lesson. Not being afraid of the water.” Trudging through the water, he reached me, lifting me up into his arms. My legs instinctively clamped around his hips, while his hands clutched my ass, tugging me against his body.

“You still doing okay?” he asked, swaying us side to side.

“Yeah.”

“Good. I’m proud of you for taking a risk and facing your fear.”

“Thanks.” I rocked with him as water lapped against our skin. It felt like we were dancing to our own silent song.

He dipped his head, staring between us, how we were connected together. “Damn. This is a good look.”

“What?” I thought he was talking about me in my swimsuit, and I was here for the compliment.

“You. In my arms. Like this.”

I smiled. “I thought you might compliment me on the swimsuit.”

“What?” he mimicked me, flashing a dimple. “Are you fishing for compliments?”

“No,” I denied when we both knew it was a lie. This was the most skin I’d ever shown in public, even though it was only the two of us.

“No?” he mocked cheekily as he kept his eyes leveled between us. “Then let me break this down for you so you’ll understand. God broke the mold after he made you, angel, because he knew he couldn’t ever recreate perfection again. You are definitely one of a kind.”

My breath hitched as I kept his gaze. Sometimes, his words took my breath away. He walked us backward until his back was butted against the pool wall.

“Hey. Are you nervous? I’ve got you. I wouldn’t take you anywhere in this pool where you couldn’t touch the bottom with your feet.”

Realistically, I knew it. Already, I was feeling comfortable in the water with him. I trusted him to keep me from harm. He wasn’t callous or irresponsible. I wouldn’t be left here, struggling to keep my head above water, since he knew my dilemma.

However, my heart was thumping heavily in my chest. I knew emotionally I was already flailing my arms, struggling to stay afloat and keep my head above water.

“No. I’m not nervous.”

“You sure? I just gave you a compliment, and you’re glancing around the water like it’s about to attack you.”

This time, it wasn’t the water that frightened me. I pasted a smile on my face. “No. I’m fine. This is a lot for me to take in. It’s the first time I’ve been in the water like this—well, except for being pushed in.”

“Aw, damn.” He cupped the back of my head. “Yeah.” He pulled me close, kissing my forehead with tenderness. “That should’ve never happened. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to prevent it.”

I linked my hands around his neck and nuzzled his cheek. “You have nothing to apologize for. You saved my life.”

His lips found mine and he kissed me long and leisurely. When we pulled apart, he said, “I think it’s time for our next lesson. You ready?”

I peered at him curiously. “I think so.”

“Good, Hardcore, because I’m gonna need your trust right now.” Before I knew what to say, he carried me several steps across the pool until our heads were barely above water. Water sloshed between us as I held on tightly to his muscular arms, contemplating crawling up over his head to stay higher above water, fighting a panic attack that was stirring in my chest.

Regardless, I eyed him with fear and uncertainty. “What do you need?” I was anxious, although he was keeping me secure and above water.

“I need to eat that beautiful, ripe pussy.”

“Here?”

“Yes. Here.”

Apprehension filtered through my mind, and I shook my head. “No. We can’t.”

“Yes, we can. Trust me.” He gripped my waist securely, and he bent his head down, scanning the water with his mouth as he watched me intently.

“I promise you’ll enjoy it.” His thumb grazed my belly button. “Now, I want you to start counting.”

“Excuse me?” *Counting?*

“Focus on counting how many seconds it takes me to make you come.” He pulled his lips out of the water and crooked a grin. “It shouldn’t take too long, considering how responsive you are to me.”

His cockiness got to me. “You are way too presumptuous.”

Holding that impish glint in his eyes, he said, “No. I don’t think it will happen. I *know* it will happen. Now, start at one Mississippi.”

I stared at him in disbelief.

“Say it.”

“One Mississippi,” I said cautiously, and he submerged himself under water.

“Two Mississippi.” His mouth skimmed over my stomach.

“Three Mississippi.” I felt the strings at my hips fall aside, and my bikini floated away from my skin.

“Four Mississippi,” I called out nervously, glancing around. I felt his fingers clamp around my waist, holding me secure, and then...

“Five Mississ—” Warmth enveloped my clit, and his teeth nibbled on my nub. “Fuck,” I breathed, and my head dropped to the side. I lost track of counting and reactively reached under the water, trying to clutch him. His head, his shoulders... any part of his body.

He lapped my pussy, and I moaned. Then his tongue was thrusting up my entrance, as well as his fingers. I forgot where

I was and helplessly gave into the pleasure he was extracting from me.

Weightless, I felt like a feather floating on water as he drove his fingers inside me. My thighs tightened around his broad shoulders as I bucked against his mouth. “*Axel. Oh, please. Please.*” My voice reverberated in the sunny sky, but I didn’t care.

He curled his fingers and bit my nub simultaneously, and I screamed as I set off, and stars burst behind my eyes. Warmth flooded through my veins, and my pulse drummed in my ears as I rode out my climax. I could’ve drowned for all I cared, yet I would have a satisfied smile on my face.

When I descended from my cloud, I realized Axel had resurfaced. His mouth captured mine, and he kissed me with possessiveness. “Twenty seconds,” he whispered against my lips.

For a moment, I was not following him, but then it dawned on me what he meant. “You’re making that up,” I denied, since I’d lost count.

“I counted in my head since I knew you’d stop counting.” He clamped me tighter against him and propelled us toward the steps of the pool. “Actually, it was eighteen seconds, but I rounded up.”

I should’ve been embarrassed by how easy it was, but I felt so relaxed, it didn’t matter.

He set me down on the top step and stared down between us. Water lapped over my thighs, and it dawned on me that I was without my bikini bottoms. Biting my lip, I peered up at him. “My bikini.”

“I’ll get it later.” He snaked a hand behind my back and loosened the strings of my top, tossing it aside. “But for now...” His words trailed off, and he seized a foam noodle floating beside us and placed it behind my head.

“Axel. I’m naked.” I glanced around apprehensively.

“Very naked.” His eyes darkened as he pushed me back gently until my head rested on the noodle. Since I was on the top step, the water barely covered my bare stomach. My breasts were exposed, and my nipples drew up as a gentle breeze passed by.

“Anyone could see us.” I watched as he climbed over me. His chest flexed as he clamped onto the edge of the pool. His nipple ring glinted in the sunlight, winking at me in a tease.

“No one is here.” With his free hand, he shoved down his swim trunks and gripped his hard cock at the base. Sliding his fisted hand up his shaft, the veins bulged in his forearm when he twisted his grip, squeezing the thick crown. Wetness glistened at the tip, and he ran his thumb over it leisurely.

He stared down at my breasts and drew his tongue over his bottom lip. “Goddamn, Natalie.” He released his cock and traced my nipple with his thumb, spreading his pre-cum over my skin. “I want to fuck these tits.”

“You do?”

Clamping his knees at my waist, he bent down and traced a path over the slope of my boob with his mouth, and clutched the other in his hand. “I do.” He nipped my skin lightly, making a trail to my nipple. “Desperately,” he rasped.

Raising his eyes to me, I caught my breath—seeing the hunger and raw craving reflected in his unabashed gaze. In that moment, I would’ve let him do anything he wanted. “Okay.”

“Christ,” he groaned, devouring my nipple like he’d lost all of his restraint. When he came up for air, he scooted up my body until the head of his cock was nestled in my cleavage. He grabbed my hands and placed them around my breasts. “Squeeze them together.”

I did, and he grunted in approval as more pre-cum pooled over his crown and dripped down onto my skin. “You’re gonna be the death of me.” He sounded as if he were in pain and thrust his cock up and down between my breasts.

I watched in fixation as he worked himself back and forth, and a slow heat pooled between my thighs. It was humbling to see how he was losing control. Words tumbled out of his mouth as he moved.

“God this is so hot,” he crooned.

“You’re such a good girl, letting me fuck these tits.”

“I’m gonna paint you with my cum.”

“Fuck, Natalie.” He gritted his teeth. “You don’t realize how amazing this feels.”

He pressed harder, faster, and his rhythm grew erratic. “I’m about to come.” He closed his eyes, and his face twisted in ecstasy. With a final thrust, a stream of cum shot out over my boobs. He started jerking again, and another spurt of semen splayed over my collarbone.

Breathing heavily, he ran his index finger through the milky texture, spreading it around my left breast, over my heart. It felt like he was tracing letters. *Wait. Did he just trace his name over my heart?* “Mine,” he growled like a caveman. Lifting his finger, he pushed it over my bottom lip. “Taste my cum. Taste what you do to me.”

I closed my mouth over his finger and tasted the salty, thick texture. Swirling my lips and sucking, I peered up at him.

“Look at you. Taking my cum like the good girl you are.”

I released his finger with a pop and smirked. “Only for you.”

“You better fucking believe it’s only for me.” He scowled before yanking me into his arms and slamming his lips onto mine. “Now, let me take you inside so I can fuck you properly.”

He cleaned me up, wrapped me in a towel, and carried me upstairs, whispering promises of giving me several orgasms.

When we were in his room, he tossed me on the bed pulling me to the edge. Flipping me over, he positioned me on my hands and knees. He yanked his cock out of his shorts and notched it against my pussy.

“Axel, you need to wear a condom.”

He grumbled about it, but stepped over to his nightstand and pulled out a foil wrapper. Once he sheathed himself, he paused. “Are you still tender?” He circled a finger around my entrance gently.

“No,” I gasped.

“Good.” His finger was replaced with his cock as he thrust into me. “You’ve ruined me, Natalie, and now I’m going to ruin you.” Which he did. Several times like he promised.

Chapter THIRTY FOUR

Natalie

“I’m going to miss you, Hardcore.” Axel and I were leaving one of the small cafés at the student center. It was Thursday afternoon, and tomorrow would be the last day of classes before the Hillside campus would be closed for spring break.

“I doubt it. You’re going to be in Los Angeles, rubbing elbows with the beautiful people.” He was leaving tomorrow to go to California to meet with potential agents as well as meet with companies to discuss possible endorsement opportunities.

“It’s only business, and I’ll be there with my dad.” He rubbed his forehead as if he were tired. This whole week, he’d been taking phone calls and responding to what seemed like millions of texts. The draft was one month away, and although Axel acted like nothing bothered him, I thought he was beginning to feel the pressure of potential stardom and all it would entail.

“Yeah, you’re going to be wined and dined at the finest restaurants and staying in a five-star hotel. I know how this works,” I teased, bumping his shoulder.

“You sound like you’re jealous.”

“Jealous of a star who will have everyone fawning all over him? Pfft.”

He threw his arm over my shoulder. “You could come with me and act like my bodyguard and keep all those fawning girls away from me.” His words were light, but I sensed there was something serious laced in the delivery.

“And miss all the fun of staying home with my mom for the week? No, thanks.”

“How’s she doing, by the way?”

“She’s doing better. She keeps herself busy with work at the salon and fussing over my sister-in-law’s pregnancy.”

“That’s good.” We walked down the main sidewalk on campus. “So, you’re going to be an aunt? Are you excited?”

“Yeah. I can’t wait, and I’m ecstatic for them.”

“How did they meet?” He raised his eyes in curiosity.

“Um, my brother was about to graduate college, and my parents wanted him to get married. So, through friends, my parents spoke to my sister-in-law’s parents, and decided they would be a good match to marry, and then set them up to meet.”

“You’re serious? Just like that, they agreed they liked each other and got married? Like an arranged marriage?”

“Well, yes. I mean, they had a choice if they didn’t like each other, but they suited each other well and are very happy, so it all worked out.”

“And what about you? Is that what you will do, too?”

I thought about Kiran and how our families had been hinting at us making a good match. “Probably. It’s not uncommon in our culture to have an arranged marriage, but it’s not as archaic as you are probably thinking it is.”

“I’m not saying it is.” His eyes narrowed slightly as he glanced down at me. “But...” he said slowly. “Does that mean your mom already has someone in mind for you?”

I paused before I answered lightly, “Yes.” I rolled my eyes as if it was a joke. “She likes to play matchmaker.”

“And?” He pulled up short with his hand on my arm in a death grip, forcing me to face him. “What will you do?”

“Axel. I haven’t given it much thought because I’m not looking to get married right now. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were jealous.” This time, we weren’t talking about keeping up appearances in front of people. I didn’t think he was teasing, either. Our project had a timeline, and soon, he would go on with his life, and I’d go on with mine. As long as I told myself that, it would make things easier when our project was over.

He seemed to remember that, too, and he shook his head. “I just don’t want you to settle or have regrets.”

My heart deflated because there was a part of me that wanted him to be jealous and tell me that the only person I was marrying was *him*. A foolish notion, but I shouldn’t be surprised, and at least he was being semi-honest. Pasting a smile on my face, I said, “Don’t worry about it. I won’t. And I’m trying to live my life without regrets right now, with your help, remember?” I didn’t know how I kept myself together when I added, “Why are you so concerned? We’re just having fun, right?”

He rolled his mouth into a flat line, otherwise giving nothing else away in his expression. “Yeah. We’re just having fun.”



My week at home was passing me by. My days had been filled with shopping, helping my mom out at the salon, and studying for my classes. Sitting on the living room floor with my books spread out, the doorbell chimed. It was late afternoon, and my mother was still at work.

Reaching the door, my face lit up when. “Kiran. I didn’t know you were home.”

“Got in last night. Can I come in?” He mustered a wry smile but appeared tired with dark shadows under his eyes.

“Sure.”

He walked over to the sofa in the living room and dropped down, folding his hands over his knees, staring down at his hands with his shoulders slumped.

“Is something bothering you?” What was he doing home? I knew he had a grueling schedule and normally didn’t come home until the end of the semester. “Did something happen?” His silence and demeanor were beginning to freak me out. If anything, Kiran had always been upbeat, and rarely had I ever seen him down about anything. However, today, he looked defeated.

“I came home for the weekend to clear my head. And to discuss us.”

“What about us?”

He twisted his lips wryly. “I told my mom I’d consider you and I... getting married.”

“You did? B-but I thought you had a girlfriend?”

He shook his head. “We broke up.” His voice was flat, much like his expression.

“Why?”

“Because she pressured me into making a more serious commitment.”

“And you don’t want that?”

“I realized what I want doesn’t really matter.” He ran his hand over his forehead. “You know as well as I do that our families want us to get married. If I’d chosen her, then they would’ve been disappointed in me. You know it, Nat. We come from different worlds.”

I did know. My thoughts turned to Axel. I'd only heard from him a few times this week. A few texts here and there, checking in. Maybe the "having fun" stage between us was already coming to an end for him. Who was I kidding? He was in Southern California, having the time of his life. On the precipice of becoming a global star. Did I actually believe he was sitting in his luxury suite in a high-class hotel thinking about me?

"You know this is what makes sense."

In the end, Kiran and I had known each other forever, and on paper, we would make a great match. It would please our families. He was going to be a doctor, for Christ's sake, and my mother would be ecstatic. It only made sense.

Words escaped me, but I nodded imperceptibly.

"Hey. Think about it at least, okay? And we can decide how we want to proceed," Kiran said.

Standing still, feeling numb, all I could muster was another small nod. I guess in the end, it was always inevitable.



Sunday afternoon, I was back on campus, in my dorm room, alone. Lizzie wouldn't be back until later this evening. I checked my phone as if willing Axel to text me to let me know he was back. He'd texted me hours ago to let me know he was at LAX and about to board his flight. He should've been back by now. Honestly, I didn't know what that meant. Did he miss me? Did he want to see me?

Sadly, I sighed. I thought maybe the time away from him would make it easier for me to focus and put things in perspective when I wasn't in my Axel fog. But it didn't. I missed him. My fingers clicked on his name under my texts, and I contemplated sending him a message, asking if he was back on campus. As I started thumbing out a message, I

stopped. I didn't want to appear too clingy, and that's what it'd look like if I did.

Thump. Thump. Thud! I startled, dropped my phone, and stared at the door. Sliding off the bed, I opened the door, and my heart pounded against my breastbone. Axel stood before me in a fitted white tee and black tapered track pants with red high-tops. I peered up at him and couldn't read his expression because he was wearing sunglasses and a red ball cap. However, he perused me slowly before he stepped forward, nudging me back into the room with his chest.

"Axel?" My brows drew together in puzzlement, and my heart continued to pound.

His face was expressionless, not even a smile. He said nothing, moving us back another step, and I thought I might trip over my feet. Then he grabbed me by the hips, jerking me into his arms. "I fucking missed you, Hardcore," was all he said before his lips claimed mine.

I wrapped my hands around his neck, pressing myself closer to him, indulging in his taste, and kissing him as if we'd never see each other again, knowing that, in reality, our time was limited. In a few months, our lives would be very different. Shoving aside my inner voice, I just couldn't think about that right now.

"Did you miss me?" he asked gruffly as his mouth traced a path to my ear. His hand at my lower back was sinking into the band of my yoga pants and panties, yanking them down over my ass. Then he shoved a finger inside of me.

"Yes," I gasped, arching into him, bumping my head into the bill of his cap, knocking it off. "So much."

"You have a funny way of showing it." He turned us, hurling us around until my back was against the wall. He tugged the material down my thighs until they were stretched and stuck at my knees.

"I didn't want to bother you. You had bigger and better things to worry about." I dropped a leg from his waist,

allowing him to shove my pants and panties off me. Hiking my leg over his hip, he pressed me into the wall and pressed two fingers inside me, moving roughly. I gasped, desperate for his touch.

“Oh, yeah? You would think that, wouldn’t you?” Sarcasm laced his words, and I couldn’t get a read on his emotions because his eyes were shuttered by his polarized sunglasses. I reached up and took them between my thumb and fingers, pulling them off. He kept his unwavering gaze on me. His deep brown eyes were dark, without a tinge of humor. Or even his usual confidence. There was a vulnerability that he rarely showed, if ever.

“I signed with one of the top agents in the game. I was offered over five million dollars to endorse my own line of tennis shoes. And two million from another company wanting me to endorse their new sports drink. Not to mention, the other offers I turned down.” His lips twisted wryly. “The rest of my time, I spent on video calls from coaches and personnel from NFL teams, asking me every question under the sun, reviewing game film to analyze and break down my skills, and testing my football IQ. I had to stay laser focused and be on my A-game because every move I make is critical to be successful.”

He sounded almost angry as he curled his hand around my throat, firm but not in a threatening way. His eyes pierced me with his intensity as he tilted his head slightly. “However, despite knowing this, *despite knowing* I was blessed and should be grateful for these opportunities, and despite the fact I was living the dream others would kill for, all I could think about was you, and how much I missed you.”

“Really?”

He nodded solemnly. “That’s kind of fucked-up. Isn’t it?”

“Wh—?” Before the question escaped my mouth, he drove his fingers inside me again, stealing my breath.

“Talk time is over.” He drew us close, thrusting his fingers inside me again, and my insides were tingling with the need to orgasm. I tightened my thighs around his hips, bracing myself. Then he withdrew his fingers, and my mouth fell open, wondering why he stopped, only to soon feel the thickness of his cock answering the question, spreading me wide with his girth.

I only thought he stole my breath; now he was stealing all my common sense. Because I wanted him inside me now.

He thrust inside me to the hilt. “Condom,” I panted as I felt myself clench around him as if my pussy was fine with the current predicament.

He started to withdraw as his forehead crinkled and his eyes closed, but he kept the tip lodged inside. “I don’t have one,” he growled and drove himself deep inside my womb, and I curled my fingers over his shoulders. At the same time, my eyes widened. Whether in surprise or in pleasure, I didn’t know. Probably both. Definitely both.

He eased his shaft out slowly as we both watched. “I won’t come inside you.”

“You promise?” I exhaled sharply, my body trembling as he continued to move in and out of me. Euphoria seared my nerve ends, and my desire built with each thrust, frying my brain cells, as well, apparently.

“I’ll pull out,” he said in an unsteady voice. I ran my hand down his chest, feeling his firm muscles tighten and flex as he pressed his pelvis against mine. With each pass, he went deeper, and I moaned, bunching the fabric of his shirt in my hands. I guess that answer was good enough, and we were both not too concerned about making a foolish decision.

His cock was throbbing inside me, and he hissed through clenched teeth. “This feels too amazing to be fucking real.” With that, he drove into me relentlessly, powerfully, and my insides quivered as my orgasm overtook me, and my vision blurred, rendering me speechless. I thought I would rip his T-

shirt as I clutched it like it was a lifeline. Axel was still pumping inside of me as my climax subsided.

Then he ducked his head between us and pulled out of me, jerking his dick as his semen shot out over my upper thigh. My legs hung limply around his hips as he still held me, our breaths mixing together as though we'd run a marathon.

I cupped his face and trailed small kisses over his mouth and down his cheek. I was feeling cuddly and emotional. "I truly did miss you." I didn't want to think about what I'd discussed with Kiran. Or mention it to Axel. It really had no impact on our little project. Technically, I hadn't agreed to anything yet.

Later, we were lying on my bed fully clothed, watching a movie on Netflix. Axel was propped against my pillows behind me, and I was splayed between his legs with my laptop on my lap. It was a meet-cute movie, and I'm sure it wasn't his first choice to watch, but he let me choose.

Wrapping both arms securely around my stomach, he leaned his chin on the space between my neck and shoulder. "This is nice."

"Watching a rom-com movie?"

"Wasn't my choice, but if you like it, I guess I can compromise."

"How thoughtful of you," I teased.

"It is, isn't it?" He smiled against my cheek and added, "It's nice to hang out like this."

"Ah, so you're a cuddler."

"Didn't know I was. Never done this before."

I ducked my head. "You're such a liar."

"Me? Never." He exhaled softly. "I wouldn't lie to you about this." His words were laced with something more than teasing.

I craned my neck to face him. “Careful, Mr. Thomas. We need to check the fine print and make sure cuddling is one of the rules under *just having fun*.”

“I’m certain it is. If not, I’ll rework the contract for you.”

“And for you, too.”

“Hell yeah. I’m learning a lot about negotiating and getting what I want out of a deal. You got a sticky note? I’ll write it down right now.”

Pausing the movie and setting my laptop aside, I grabbed the Post-its from my desk and a pink Sharpie and handed them to him.

He lifted his lips as if he were sharing an inside joke as he scribbled a note. When he finished, he handed it to me.

To my hardcore girl,

Cuddling is required.

♥ Always, Axel ♥

Butterflies erupted in my stomach, but I kept it casual. “Now, you’re signing your sticky notes? Must be a habit from signing all those autographs.”

“Nah. I’d only use that signature line for you.” His eyes were smoldering when he reached for me and pulled me into his lap. “Now, let’s get back to cuddling.”

Chapter THIRTY FIVE

Natalie

“Discuss the theory of why segmentation occurs in the small intestines,” Jayla, a classmate, said peering around the group at our table. We were at the library, studying for an upcoming quiz in our anatomy class.

“Wait, I know this.” Mark scanned over his notes. “It pertains to localized contractions of the circular muscle...”

Yawning, I lifted my phone that I had on silent and checked the time. Oh, no. It was nine o’clock in the evening. I was supposed to meet Axel at my dormitory thirty minutes ago, and we were going to order food and watch a movie.

There was also a text from him.

You’re late.

He’d sent it twenty minutes ago. We’d been here for three hours, and I totally blanked on time.

I clicked out a quick message.

Sorry. I lost track of time. I’m on my way.

Gathering my things, I shoved them into my backpack.

“Where are you going?” Mark asked in annoyance.
“We’re not finished with our discussion questions.”

I frowned at him but heard a deep, familiar voice. “Finish your own damn questions for once. She’s done studying for the night.”

My eyebrows raised to my hairline as I watched Axel standing at the end of our table, scowling at Mark like a grumpy king. Mark opened his mouth and closed it as he obviously thought better of saying anything to Axel. Jayla, as well as the other members of our study group, kept suspiciously quiet and stared at their laptops and books.

Throughout this semester, I realized Mark was kind of a leech when it came to studying for tests, and I guess Axel was catching on to this, as well. I mean, I appreciated his concern; however, I wasn’t exactly thrilled by his high-handedness in front of my peers.

“What he meant to say is that we had plans earlier, and I lost track of time.” I pasted a smile on my face. “I’ll see you all in class tomorrow.”

I walked over to Axel and nodded my chin for him to follow. He turned falling into step with me and slung an arm over my shoulder. “You putting words into my mouth?”

“Of course not.”

I started to turn toward the stairs that led to the exit, but Axel pulled me to the right. I cocked my head as he tugged us down an empty row of books. “Axel,” I said with caution.

“You love the library so much, don’t you?” He cupped my face and kissed me hard, and I clung to his broad shoulders. He spun me around and flattened my hands against the books above my head. “Maybe we should christen it. For real this time.”

“What do you think you’re doing?” I frowned at him over my shoulder.

“I’m going to fuck you. What did you think we were doing?” His body leaned into mine, and I could feel his erection poking my ass.

“We are not going to fuck in the library.” I pushed against him, but he didn’t budge.

“Come on, Hardcore, be a good girl like I know you can be.”

“Axel. Someone could see us.” His hand slid up my thigh and under my skirt. His thumb coasted over my slit, and I swallowed a moan.

“Then, I guess you better keep your voice down, unless you want your study group to hear us. On second thought...” He plunged his finger inside of my pussy, and my nails scraped the spines of the books as I tried to find purchase to balance myself. “I don’t really give a shit if they do.” Withdrawing his finger, he yanked my panties down my legs and lifted each one of my ankles. “I’m keeping these, too. Just in case I need to have another chat with Mark.”

I shook my head and protested weakly, “You wouldn’t dare.”

He slapped my thighs apart and pressed his hand at my back, bending me over. “I’ve realized there’s very little I won’t do when it comes to you, Natalie. I’m surprised you haven’t caught on to that yet.” He fingered my entrance, spreading my wetness around, and then nudged his thick cock inside me. “Fuck,” he hissed. “I’ll never get enough of this.” He withdrew and thrust into me until he was deep inside.

I gasped, and he wrapped his hand around my ponytail tugging my head to the side. His lips grazed my neck. “Your skin tastes so sweet, and this fucking pussy is so perfect. You can’t even imagine how honored I am that you allowed me to be your first.” His cock slid out, and he slammed into me again.

Any rational thought or inhibitions dissolved, leaving me with this craving. Axel’s cock throbbed inside of me, and all I could think was that I wanted more. “More,” I moaned.

“You want more, baby?” he whispered against my skin and thrust into me again.

“Yes,” I mewled. My voice seemed to echo around me, and he released my hair to slide his palm over my mouth.

Then he pumped harder, picking up his pace, fucking me until my legs trembled and tension built in my core. I could hear the sounds of skin slapping skin mixed with my wetness.

Axel yanked me against his chest and kept his palm over my mouth while his other hand cupped my breast. He pulsed into me again, hitting me at a different angle, and I moaned against his hand. Deeper and harder, he pushed. Again and again. I clawed at the books on the shelf, thrashing against him. My pussy ached with pleasure, and I burst as I came.

“God, you’re so hot when you come,” Axel groaned as he pounded into me. I knew he was close, and I shook my head and cried into his hand, “Pull out. Pull out.” But the words were muffled.

He tugged my face to him and slammed his lips on mine, consuming me, taking my breath away. Grunting into my mouth, he drove deep inside of me and then jerked slowly in and out as he filled me with his release.

When he’d finished, he tugged on my bottom lip with his teeth before releasing it. “It only gets better with you.”

“You didn’t pull out,” I said softly, feeling a sense of worry.

Axel didn’t seem too concerned. “You probably should get on birth control.”

“I have an appointment the day after tomorrow, but that doesn’t help right now.”

He smoothed the hair off my face. “If it will ease your nerves, we can get the morning-after pill.”

I nodded. “It’s late. The pharmacy is closed.”

“I’ll buy it in the morning and bring it by. Okay?” His eyes were filled with concern.

“Okay.”

He kissed my temple and set me on my feet as he stuffed his cock back into his track pants. I waited for him to give me my underwear back, thinking he was only kidding this time because there was no way that he would think Mark would be any threat to him. However, he pocketed them in his pants.

I scoffed in disbelief, holding my hand out. “Give me my panties.”

He sported a charming smile with dimples. “No. I told you I was holding on to these.”

“I can’t walk out of here like this in a skirt. If it catches a gust of wind, I’ll flash everyone.”

“We’re just walking to my car, not spending an evening out on the town.”

“Axel, your... *stuff* is leaking down my thigh.”

“My cum,” he clarified, staring hard at my skirt as if he could see through the material. “And don’t tell me that.”

“Why?” I crossed one foot in front of the other, squeezing my thighs together.

“Because I want to fuck you again,” he groaned and took my hand. “Let’s get out of here so we can eat, and I can fuck and cuddle with you again.”

When we left the book aisle, we passed by the area where my classmates were still at work. Some heads turned, seeing us, and I ducked my head in embarrassment while Axel smiled as if enjoying it. The guy had no shame, no shame at all.

The next morning, Axel went out to grab me breakfast tacos and brought me the morning after pill. “What a combination,” I said wryly before taking out the pill and swallowing it.

Chapter THIRTY SIX

Axel

“You’re really gonna go for it on fourth and eight on your team’s thirty yard line?” April had rolled around, and I was teaching Natalie how to play Madden on the Xbox. She was getting better the more we played, but still. I wasn’t trying to decimate her team, but she played recklessly and had no interest in hearing my suggestions. Of course, she didn’t. Didn’t I already know she was obstinate?

Much like me.

“Yes.” She stuck out her chin in challenge.

“All right, then.” I smiled smugly. The play started, and I rushed her quarterback, sacking him before he could get the play off.

“Ugh! I hate this game.” She slapped the arm of the couch beside her.

“Damn, Hardcore. You have a temper.”

“I do not.”

“You do.” I leaned in, staring at her full lips that were tempting me like forbidden fruit. “I told you not to go for it on fourth down. You should’ve punted. You know that.”

“Punting is boring.” Her eyes flicked down to my mouth briefly before she drew back and shrugged a shoulder in indifference.

“But you are not.” And I realized I’d rather play with her than play this stupid game right now. Tossing the controller aside, I climbed over her and pushed her back on the couch, knocking her remote aside.

“Hey. I thought we were playing.”

“We are. I like this game more.” I clasped her wrists above her head. Hovering my mouth over hers, I said lightly, “You’re better at this game, too.”

“I am?” She smiled.

“You know you are. And you’re better at following instructions when we do this.” I drew her bottom lip beneath my teeth and released it. On reflex, she bit me back, doing the same. Little brat. “See how well you follow my lead?”

She huffed. “I’m not a dog that follows commands.”

“No, you’re definitely not.” I dove into her lips, kissing her like she was my last meal.

“Damn, what kind of project is this?” Roman was standing above us with his eyebrows raised and his arms crossed over his chest. Natalie was struggling beneath me in panic, trying to sit up, but I tightened my hold and glared at Roman.

“Don’t see any studying going on. Looks more like a lesson about the birds and the bees.” Fucking Nick stepped up behind him, giving his shitty two cents.

“Go away.” I scowled at both of them.

“What’s this?” Dmitri’s voice droned as his grumpy ass popped into the picture, stepping over to the couch. “You better not be fucking on this sofa. I just vacuumed and conditioned it.”

I was trying to ignore this joker with his ridiculousness. Ever since he found out he was going to be a father, he'd been borderline OCD about keeping the house spotless. We all wanted a clean house, but that fucker was close to being a stalker, chasing you around with a mop and vacuum in hand. Besides, I knew for a fact that he and Sorina had gotten their fuck on... on this very sofa. If I could kill all my friends with a look, and I was trying—believe me, I was—then they would've been annihilated.

“How you doing, Natalie?” Nick asked politely with a stupid smirk on his face as he leaned over the couch.

“Fine,” she croaked and ended up giving *me* a death glare, which, in turn, made me want to lash out at my friends, whom I'd already mentally thought about destroying in the first place. My thoughts were interrupted when Natalie bucked against me, trying to rise up again. I finally relented, not wanting to let her flail around and accidentally knee me in the balls. Taking a random knee to the nuts sucked, by the way. I bent over briefly, trying to get my shit together, taking a few deep, calming breaths. Why did I live with the assholes? The house seemed too damned crowded as of late.

She sat up and clutched her hands on her knees, looking at the flat-screen in front of us, making me doubly pissed that my roommates had fucked up my game to fuck her. Not to mention, they were just flat-out pissing me off. “Get out,” I said quietly, throwing another warning glance at my friends, who gave zero fucks and looked like they were about to laugh and let the real hazing begin. These idiots and their payback. The space in our house was growing smaller by the minute. Forget minutes... seconds... milliseconds.

Then Sorina waddled in at seven months pregnant, petite and thin, but looked like she'd swallowed a basketball. She, too, zeroed in on Natalie and walked over to stand in front of her. “Hi, Natalie.”

Natalie forced a smile, not missing a beat. “Hi. How are you feeling?”

Sorina placed her hands on her back, bending back slightly. “I feel like a balloon, and my feet are swelling. Other than that, I feel great.”

“Why don’t you sit down?” Dmitri suggested, moving to her side to guide her to the couch. “I’ll massage your feet.”

I rolled my eyes like a chick, and Natalie stood up. “I should probably go.”

“Come on. Don’t leave on our account,” Nick said. “Don’t you want to stay for the party?”

“Yes. Please stay,” Sorina added.

Party? “What party?” I tilted my head at Nick. In the not-so-distant past, we threw parties like it was confetti. Just give us a reason to be festive. But lately, we were all into our own shit.

“Just a small gathering with friends to celebrate. It might be our last blowout party at this house before we graduate.” Nick raised his chin at me. Dude was getting too damn sentimental lately.

“How did I not know about this?”

“You’ve been too busy, man,” Nick said.

He wasn’t wrong. I was so disconnected from whatever the fuck was happening at Hillside right now and what was happening in my life. All I thought about was her, all the time. She consumed me. That wasn’t good. I nodded back. “Yeah, we’ll hang out,” I answered for both of us. Natalie had that fucking deer-in-headlights look, but she could adjust. After all, we were just having fun, weren’t we?

A few hours later, the party was in full swing. At least a hundred people were in our house. Anyone from the football team, fraternities and sororities, and others were crowding our house as if we’d never missed a beat. It’d been a few months since we hosted a balls-out party. I used to live for this.

I made sure Natalie was at my side. She was uncomfortable; I could sense it. However, she looked hot as

fuck in her outfit, which looked like a dress but had shorts, and I knew I needed to stay by her side because I'd shank any motherfucker who approached her.

"Axel." I looked behind me, and Trey Lomas was coming our way—the last person I wanted around her. His eyes were zeroed in on my girl, and I pulled her against me.

"Lomas," I acknowledged him curtly.

"Natalie. How you doing, girl?" he said and looked at me as if in challenge.

"Great." She nodded her head with a small smile; however, she seemed to tense up.

"What do you want, Trey?" We used to be cool, but shit could go south quickly.

"It's all good, man. I was just saying hi." Trey bobbed his head, and his eyes were half-lidded and red. He looked fucked-up. High as fuck. He stared down at her body. "You're looking really good, Nat."

I took a step closer. "Do you have a death wish?"

"Maybe I do." Trey's eyes were glassy, devoid of emotion, although he grinned like a lunatic. "You gonna do something about it?"

"Axel." Natalie maneuvered in front of me with her hands on my chest. "Not here," she pleaded.

I glanced down, trying to get a grip, but it was hard because nothing was normal when it came to her, but I guess I could lie. Spreading my hands wide, I said, "We're just having a discussion."

Smiling down at her, I noticed how she didn't completely believe me. She could see through my mask.

Chapter THIRTY SEVEN

Natalie

I never knew how to take his smile, but I knew it didn't reach his eyes. Axel could be the coolest person in the room, but he would never show you what he was really feeling. I thought maybe I'd be a better judge of what he was thinking the more time we spent together. Maybe I was wrong.

"Can I not give your girl a compliment?" I heard Trey goad behind me. I didn't know what he was doing, but it seemed like he deliberately wanted a fight tonight. He seemed messed up, but Axel didn't have to engage in this.

"Don't." One word was all I could conjure.

Axel heard my voice but said nothing, taking a step around me while I gripped his arm. However, he ignored me and went straight for Trey.

"No."

As the word fell out of my mouth, he punched him. Trey stumbled backward, chuckling. But before he could get his balance, Axel was throwing another punch, clearly intent on kicking his ass.

"Axel, don't!" I screamed as he slammed his fist into Trey's face. Then Trey fought back, punching him in the chin and shoving him off.

“Fucker. She is *mine!*” Axel growled as he threw his fist again. My heart was lodged in my throat.

Trey struck back and punched him across the cheek.

He wasn't fazed, although his head snapped back. “That all you got, motherfucker?” he called out with a wolfish smile. *They were going to kill each other.*

“Stop! Stop!” I yelled, trying to stop him before he attacked again. He paused with nostrils flared as he stared down at me like a well-trained machine, ready for the command to strike.

My hands were pressed against his chest, and he peered down at my hands in question. I shook my head. “Let it go.”

Axel processed it for several seconds and frowned, but he took a step back, still pissed.

“Ah, that's too bad. We were just getting started.” Trey swiped his forearm over his bloody nose and spat on the ground. “Guess you've had enough.”

Axel tilted his head with a growl and dove at his fellow teammate with arms flailing as he pounded his fists into his face relentlessly.

“*Axel!*” I screamed, tugging on his arm in desperation, but he was too strong, beyond listening to reason. He was so muscular and taut, and I couldn't make him move with my measly force, whether I wanted to or not. He slammed his fist into Trey's face again. And again. Tugging at his arm to no avail, Nick popped up, as well as Dmitri, and they both crowded around him.

“Axel, you need to calm the fuck down.” Dmitri was in his face.

“Move D.”

“You're acting irrationally,” Dmitri said emotionlessly as he finally was able to pull Axel off Trey with Nick's help, despite Axel wanting to continue the ass-kicking. Trey pushed himself into a sitting position, not showing any signs of fear,

although his face was already bloody and bruising, with cuts marring his face as if he'd been in a car wreck.

“Trey, I don't know what crawled up your ass tonight, but it's probably time you left.” Nick glanced over at him seriously while keeping one arm on Axel.

“Gladly.” Trey smirked, staggering to his feet as he tugged his hoodie over his head. “See you around, bro.” He passed by me and brushed my shoulder.

Axel panted heavily and struggled to break free of his friends, but they held him back.

Chapter THIRTY EIGHT

Axel

“What the hell happened?” Nick asked quietly when we were standing alone.

“Nothing. Trey was being disrespectful to Natalie.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “In what way?”

He fucking looked at her like she was his next meal.

“Doesn’t matter. She doesn’t need to deal with that. Lomas is a piece of shit.”

“Oh, so you’re her protector now? I guess that’s part of the project, too, huh?”

“Nick, now is not the time.” I didn’t need to hear his self-righteous bullshit right now.

He ducked his head, shaking it slowly as he stepped back. More people were filing into our backyard as the party grew.

“Just be careful, man. We’re a few weeks away from the NFL draft, and you don’t need to do anything stupid.”

“I’m solid.” I sounded like a damn broken record. But I wasn’t good. Far from it. When I glanced around, my blood started to simmer. Natalie was off by the gate, handing Trey a napkin for his face, her brows furrowed in concern. Of course, she’d render aid to someone who was hurt. I clenched my fists.

I started off in their direction, but Nick cut me off, blocking me from moving forward. “Get out of my way.”

“No.” He didn’t budge. “You need to calm down.”

“I am calm.” I tried to push around him, but he held his ground. Fucking Nick and his big-ass body.

“No, you’re not. You’re jealous, Axel.”

Ignoring his stupid comment, I saw Trey’s face soften as he talked to my girl. *My girl*. “This doesn’t concern you.” I shoved at Nick, but he stood his ground.

“Jesus, look around you. People are watching us.” A small crowd of people were gazing at us in curiosity, some with phones in hand, ready to catch some golden footage. “You want to start some more shit and then have it posted all over social media? You want to bring negative attention to yourself and potentially lose your stock in the draft?”

I closed my eyes, trying to settle the fury searing in my chest. A rational man would know he was right. If I were rational, I would agree. I was projected to be the fourth pick in the draft. If shit was posted about me fighting, teams could lose interest because they didn’t want the headache of dealing with someone labeled as a “problem” to the team and locker room.

“Get him out of here,” I hissed, and my hands opened and clenched again as Trey looked up at me with a smirk on his fat, bloody lip. “Now, before I kill him.”

“Okay,” Nick said slowly, like I was a ticking time bomb that needed to be diffused. He glanced behind me and nudged his chin. Dmitri and Roman materialized, passing by us and heading for the gate like the damn clean-up crew. They approached Trey and exchanged a few words, and Trey started laughing, shaking his head, but followed them out the gate.

“I don’t need you to hold my hand, Nick.”

“Just giving you a little more time to cool off.”

Dammit. I wasn't an idiot. Yet, why was I acting like one? I didn't do this. I was losing focus on everything in my life that mattered. Especially when I was about to see all my dreams come to fruition. Yet, here I was, brawling in the backyard because I was jealous.

"I'm calm."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "You swear?"

"What the fuck? Are you gonna make us pinky promise this shit out? I told you, I'm good."

"All right." Nick backed away before giving me one more cautious glance. "I get it. I get you. You talked me out of making some stupid decisions that would've ruined my life. So, I'm here for you, man. Just be careful, okay?"

Rolling my tongue over my teeth, I nodded. Glancing over by the fence, I saw Natalie still there, leaning against it with a troubled look marring her expression. She gazed at me warily, as if I were deranged.

I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all.

Walking over to her, I fought to hold in my anger and my thoughts of her betrayal that she had sold me out in a way when she'd sidled up to Trey and worried over his stupid wounds. Why? Why feel sympathy for that asshole? Why didn't she feel sympathy for me?

But more than that, I wanted her loyalty. I wanted her to think of me and only me, whether I was right or wrong in my justification. It seeped through my veins like an uncontrollable fever and stoked the ebbing flames of jealousy that I'd tried to contain.

I caged her in like a trapped rabbit as she stared up at me with apprehension. My cheek burned from the shitty punch Trey threw, and I knew it would leave a bruise. "My face hurts. Are you gonna take care of my wounds, too?"

"Why, Axel? Why did you do that?"

“Why not?” I cracked a smirk, even though it hurt, and not only in the physical sense. “You would take up for him over me?”

“I wasn’t taking up for him,” she answered quietly, and her hands were at her temples, rubbing them as if trying to erase what’d happened.

Harsh laughter bubbled out of my mouth. “Whatever, Hardcore. I was defending your honor. Shouldn’t I get bonus points for that?”

“No, you weren’t. You were pissing a circle around me, marking your territory.”

“And? What’s wrong with that? You’re mine, Natalie.”

“Am I?” Her voice sounded shaky. “For how long?”

How long? Didn’t she know? Didn’t she remember our deal? “You know the deal. Until one of us isn’t having fun anymore.” *Are you not having fun?* I almost asked her the question directly, but maybe I didn’t want to know the answer. Having fun was a vague, over-encompassing idea.

Maybe I needed to take her away from here and make her admit how much fun she could have with me. And remember how I was the one who gave her real pleasure. Gave her *her firsts*. How I was the one who could make her dreams come true. How I fucking protected her against assholes like the guy she was concerned about.

Unable to stop myself, I grabbed her and pulled her along with me, leading her out the gate to the driveway. “What are you doing?” She clutched my wrist with her tiny hand.

“Taking you on a joy ride.” I led her to my car and coaxed her into the passenger seat.

When I revved the engine, she sat quietly, staring at her folded hands between her thighs. “What’s really eating at you, Natalie?”

“Nothing.”

“Ah, come on. Don’t be like that.” I kept up my front of not letting anything affect me, but dammit, I wanted her to give me something. Tell me how she was fucking feeling.

“Do you like me?” she asked in a small voice and kept her eyes trained on her hands in her lap.

I stared ahead into the night, studying the lines of the median on the road that were flashing in rapid motion. *Did I like her?* I liked her too damn much. “Of course, I like you. Do you think I’d spend time with you if I didn’t? Where is this coming from? I thought we were on the same page.”

She stared out the window. “Yeah. We are on the same page.” Her voice sounded less than enthusiastic.

We passed through the main part of town, and I saw my gas light flash on the panel. Low fuel. I pulled into a convenience store by one of the gas pumps to refuel. Leaning on the car, I watched as the occasional car passed down the two-lane road. Sighing, I rubbed my forehead, cursing myself again. Still tense from the debacle earlier, I willed myself to get a handle on my emotions, wondering for the millionth time why I was so consumed with her.

I heard the car door close behind me, and Natalie peered at me over the hood. “I need to use the restroom.” She directed her thumb toward the store.

I nodded and watched her until she made it safely across the parking lot before entering the store. Maybe I should’ve told her to wait until I could follow her in. Goddammit. What was wrong with me? I sounded like an obsessed stalker. I ran a hand over my face and topped off the gas.

Settling back in the car, I leaned my head back. *Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.* Looking around, I saw a phone lodged between the console and the passenger seat, recognizing the silver case as Natalie’s cell. It must’ve fallen out of the pocket of her romper. Picking it up, a picture of some guy named Kiran flashed on the screen, trying to FaceTime her. Who the fuck

was he? I had a mad urge to answer it, but common sense finally prevailed.

I laid the phone on the console, but moments later, a text message popped up.

Kiran: Just giving you a heads-up. My mom spoke to your mother about us agreeing to marriage, and she was surprised. I thought you'd spoken to her about this. Call me back.

Married?

I stared dumbly at her phone for several seconds.

Natalie was actually getting married? I scanned over the text again, trying to make sense of it. But I couldn't. Not now. Not ever. This was a joke. It had to be.

White noise blared in my ears, and hard plastic dug into my palm as I held her cell in a death grip. The urge to crush it was strong. I couldn't put a coherent thought together, and I felt a piercing pain in my chest. The air was heavy, too heavy to inhale, suffocating me. I methodically set her phone back on the console.

Her phone chimed again, and I refused to look at it because I would destroy the damn thing. My pulse thrummed, and I clenched the steering wheel, fighting the wave of fury that flowed through my veins. Natalie was getting married? She fucking mentioned how her mother liked to play matchmaker, but she told me she wasn't interested in marriage. The thought seemed inconceivable. How the fuck could she not tell me she was getting married? Didn't we agree on no cheating while we were having fun? She was so concerned about what I did, but she was actually the one I needed to worry about. The one who acted so innocent yet held secrets.

My hands shook, and I was about to reconsider destroying the fucking cell that wouldn't stop ringing. The buzzing only added more gasoline to the fire. She was concerned about my behavior earlier? She hadn't seen anything yet.

I saw her walking back to the car like an innocent little princess. *She played you.* The words blared in my head. She was like a witch and put some kind of spell on me. She'd pulled me in with her naïveté, her intelligence, and her fucking sultry beauty without even trying. She'd blindsided me. That was the only way I could've fallen for her. *Fallen for her?*

Chapter THIRTY NINE

Natalie

When I opened the car door, Axel was staring straight ahead with a grim look on his face; his eyes were blank and expressionless. *Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.* I saw the cell humming on the console and realized it was mine. I didn't notice how it'd fallen out of my pocket. Sliding into the seat, I picked it up and saw my mom's face flash across the screen. I silenced it. I'd call her later.

As soon as I closed my door, Axel threw the car into drive and sped out of the parking lot. Night had closed in, and we were driving farther away from Hillside. The next town was thirty miles away. "Where are we going?"

Several seconds ticked by as the humming of tires on asphalt and the low strum of bass from the radio floated in the air between us. Without giving me a glance, his fist tightened on the wheel. "I told you we were taking a joyride."

I checked my cell again and saw the notifications. There were missed calls from Kiran, as well as a text message from him. When I read it, my heart sped up to the point I thought I might have a heart attack. No wonder my mom was calling me. *Oh, my god. Oh, my god.* The reality was setting in, and I couldn't deal with it. I didn't want this. I didn't want any of this. I closed my eyes, fighting back tears of frustration.

“Bad news?” Axel’s voice sounded distant, and he slowed and hooked a left on a deserted county road.

“No.” I leaned back and pinched the bridge of my nose.

After another mile, he pulled off on a dirt trail and drove a few feet before putting the car into park and killing the headlights. We were out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by pastures and trees.

Axel shifted in his seat with one arm slung casually over the steering wheel as he finally glanced at me. His face was a cool mask of indifference. “So, tell me, Natalie... do you like me?”

I didn’t know what Axel was doing, and he was apparently still worked up over Trey. “You know I do,” I said cautiously.

“How much?”

My cell rang again in my lap, but before I could do anything, he’d snatched it out of my hands and tossed it in the back seat. “No distractions.”

Startled, I sat frozen, trying to gauge his mood.

“Answer me,” he rasped.

“You already know the answer.”

“Do I?” He tilted his head, and his lips curled up. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m feeling a little insecure. I think you need to give me a demonstration.”

“If this is about what happened earlier with Trey...”

“I don’t want to talk about what happened earlier. I want you to show me how much you like me.” He seemed casual, relaxed, but there was something different in the tone of his words.

“How?”

“If I have to tell you how, then you must not care for me that much.” He eased his seat back, giving himself more space.

“But being the considerate person I am, I’m gonna give you a hint.” He lounged back in his seat and tapped his thigh. “Come here.”

Something seemed off, yet I still wanted to please him. Wanted to ease the underlying tension that radiated between us. With reservation, I slowly climbed over the console and landed in his lap, settling my knees around his thighs. With my hands on his chest, I paused, waiting for his lead. Waiting for him to kiss me, touch me, anything.

“Take off your clothes,” he said finally and sat, as if unfazed. As if I were the entertainment that he’d paid money to see perform.

We were in a car in the middle of nowhere, and he wanted me to strip? “But—”

“Take. It. Off.”

Fighting my nerves, I began fumbling with the buttons on my bodice and slipped the cap sleeves down my arms until the fabric fell to my waist. Reaching behind me, I unhooked my bra and slid it off, too. Peering up at him with uncertainty, I rubbed my palms over my thighs.

“All the way.”

His words may have been bossy and curt, and he may have acted indifferent, but I could feel his hard-on beneath me. *He wasn't that indifferent, was he?* Wetness pooled at my core, and I scrambled onto his lap awkwardly, tugging my romper down my legs until I was finally free of it.

I reached for my thong, but he stopped me. “Leave this on.”

His eyes scanned my body, and he ran his tongue over his bottom lip. His eyes seemed to cover every inch of my body as though he were trying to memorize it. He looked away and cursed under his breath before reaching out and clasping the back of my neck, yanking me close until my mouth was on his.

He devoured my lips relentlessly. Licking, sucking, nipping, and biting. I relished every moment. I dug my fingers into his thick hair as his mouth trailed down my neck, where he bit and sucked on my skin. I gasped, relishing the pleasure mixed with pain.

Axel pulled back, and his hand tightened securely on my neck. “What are you willing to do to prove how much you care for me, Natalie?”

I eyed him with reservation, but I also wanted his affection. His attention. I wanted him to want me as much as I wanted him. “Anything.” The word reverberated between us and hung in the air.

He held my head close to his and roved his eyes over my face like he didn’t know how to take me. Take what I said. “All right, then,” he said slowly and yanked me down; my head fell at his chest as his hand threaded my hair.

“Axel?”

“Shh,” he said and gripped the back of my neck, dragging me down to the floorboard. I was crouched between his thighs, and he casually reached into his athletic shorts and pulled out his cock. It was hard and thick, bobbing in front of my mouth. “You gonna take me in your mouth, Hardcore?” His fingers caressed my neck as he guided me to the head of his tip, butting his thick mushroom head against my lips. “Come on, now.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“It’s not difficult. Open those pretty lips and let me fuck this mouth.” I parted my lips to say something, but before I could, he pushed the tip into my mouth. He was thick and smooth, with a faint taste of saltiness. Warmth spread through my stomach, pooling between my legs.

I ran my tongue down the underside of his cock and looked up at him. “Fuck,” he groaned, relaxing against the seat. He drew his hand through my hair and guided my head down, forcing me to take more of him while simultaneously

rolling his pelvis until his dick hit the back of my throat. I gagged and tried to pull back, but he held me there for a second before pulling himself back slightly.

Then he pushed in again, but not as deep, and began to set the pace with his grip firm on my head, moving me the way he wanted me. Up and down, slow and fast, occasionally hitting the back of my throat and pressing deep until tears formed in my eyes, and I'd gag against his cock. "Such a beautiful, innocent girl, aren't you? But underneath, such a dutiful whore for me, Natalie."

His words were dirty, and I felt myself shamefully throbbing with need. "You suck my cock so well. And this sweet little mouth... Fuck... you can't even imagine how good it feels. I can't even fit all of my dick inside."

He pulled my head back until only his tip lingered at my lips. "Look at me," he demanded, and I raised my lashes. He pushed me down, and this time, he plunged so deep I couldn't breathe, and tears streamed down the side of my face. My hands curled into his thighs, trying to find reprieve. A low growl erupted in his chest, and he withdrew, yanking me up until I was straddled on his lap again. Reaching behind my ass with his other hand, his fingers found my entrance, spreading me wide.

"You drive me fucking insane." His words were sharp, and he drove me down on his dick, filling me to the hilt.

"Condom." The breath rushed out of me.

"You're on the pill now." He leaned in and latched his mouth onto my nipple, sucking as he lifted my hips and yanked me down on him, going so deep I felt him in my stomach.

"It's only been a few days." My words were shaky as I started to move against him, feeling feverish, on fire. Desire strummed through me like never before. I'd just gotten on the pill a few days ago. However, we should probably take extra precautions.

“No fucking barriers,” he growled as he fucked me mercilessly. I gripped his shoulders, digging my nails through his shirt. All coherent thought flew out the window. My thighs clamped around his, and I propelled my body up and down, trying to keep up with his pace. Fueling the flames that were consuming me. I knew it wouldn’t take long before I combusted.

Axel’s mouth trailed over the slope of my breast, nipping and marking my skin like an animal. Then I felt a finger pressing into my back entrance, filling me with a tight pressure that was foreign but not quite painful. “Axel?” I panted, hanging on by a thread, yet nervous about him exploring the one part of my body no one had touched before.

He lifted his head; his eyes were half-lidded and filled with lust, yet something else was there that was unreadable. “Are you my girl?”

Thrusting deep inside me, he pressed his finger into my tight hole. “Yes,” I moaned unashamedly. I was there. Almost there.

“Good.” He leaned into my ear. “Remember this. Always remember the guy who broke you and ruined you for...” Thrust. “Any.” Thrust. “Other.” Thrust. “Man.” He thrust so deep into me I’d feel it for weeks. His harsh words singed my ear as his teeth sank into my lobe painfully. However, it didn’t matter. Despite the pain and his sharp, caustic words, my orgasm shattered me, and I sobbed out his name as I came all over his cock.

In jerky motions, Axel slammed into me deeply before he grunted, and his hot semen flooded inside me, pulsing over and over until he spent all his release.

When my breathing subsided, a heavy silence fell between us. His hands dropped to his thighs, and he studied my face briefly with no smile, no sign of contentment or softness after what we’d shared like he usually did. No light teasing or kisses or aftercare. Instead, he turned his head, staring out at the obscure nothingness through the window.

“Get up,” he whispered finally, flatly, as he fixated on the blankness of the night.

Confusion flooded my brain, and unwanted panic flowed through my veins. “What’s—”

“Get the fuck off my lap.” His Adam’s apple bobbed, but his words were dismissive. He still wouldn’t look at me.

I paused, fighting the sinking of my heart. “What’s wrong?”

He swiped a hand over his mouth. “Get up. Now!”

Dropping my head in humiliation, I looked for my clothing, but they were draped at his feet on the floorboard. I couldn’t reach them in the position I was in, and it seemed as though Axel was about to lose his composure and toss me out of the car, leaving me in the middle of nowhere.

Making the crawl of shame, I climbed over the console, feeling wetness sliding down my inner thigh, his cum. I didn’t have anything to wipe it off, but I pushed the thought aside and settled into the passenger seat, awkwardly holding one arm over my chest and the other covering my lap. Feeling vulnerable, I didn’t miss the irony of how I was naked and Axel was still clothed. In some way, it seemed he was stripping me of my armor, be it physically or emotionally.

He shook his head, exhaling as if it took unwanted effort before leaning down and picking up my clothes, dropping them in my lap without a word. He started the engine and jerked the car into reverse as gravel shot out around us like pellets, and I gripped the dashboard, trying to keep myself composed before he sped off into the night like a bat out of hell.

Chapter FORTY

Natalie

The ride was quiet by the time Axel pulled up to the front of my dorm. I was now dressed and glanced over at him as a sense of dread settled in my stomach, making me feel nauseous, but I couldn't take the dead silence anymore. "What's wrong?"

He leaned his arm on the steering wheel and rubbed his forehead. "Goodnight, Natalie." He wasn't going to kiss me or take me up to my room like all the other times before. What did I do? How did he change personalities so quickly?

"Are you angry with me?"

"Why would I be angry with you?"

"If it's about Trey... I was trying to deescalate the situation—"

"It's not about fucking Trey!" I jumped as each word reverberated inside the car. He rolled his mouth together and kept his eyes straight ahead. Running a hand down his shirt, he smoothed it out. "Go up to your room."

"Talk to me, Axel. What's wrong? Something's bothering you."

"Look, I'm going to be busy for the next several weeks, and then I'm flying out to Vegas for the draft." He sounded so

impersonal, as if I didn't already know the draft was coming up. We'd spoken about it. Not to mention, I'd helped him pick out the outfit he wanted to wear to the event.

He'd asked me to go to Las Vegas with him at the end of the month, but I couldn't since I'd already scheduled my cadaveric dissection exam for class that day and couldn't reschedule. He threatened my life if I wasn't available to take his call when he did find out which team drafted him. I'd promised I would.

But now he was acting like I was a stranger, an inconvenience.

"I already know this."

"Then you need to know I won't be available."

I clutched my hands together, digging my nails into my palms. It was as though I was sitting beside a completely different person. "What is it you're trying to say?"

"The semester's almost over, and my commitments are about to change."

The writing was on the wall. Staring at his stiff profile, I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Why don't you tell me what you really mean?" My eyes burned with unshed tears, and I tried to control the waver in my voice before I lost it. "You could at least tell me the truth. At least be honest with me and look at me when you speak."

"Honesty." His lips curled wryly as he faced me. His eyes were dark, without a hint of feeling. "It's a little late for honesty, don't you think?"

My pulse thrummed in my ears, and I felt a sense of trepidation. *Honesty. No cheating. Are you my girl?*

He leaned over the console and retrieved my phone from the back seat, dropping it into my lap. "You're quite popular tonight because your phone has been blowing up all evening."

My hands shook as I held my phone, and realization set in. My cell was on the console earlier. He must've retrieved it

and placed it there. Did he see the text from Kiran? He must have. Otherwise, how could his demeanor have changed so quickly? It was the only rational answer. He was hurt. He thought I deceived him. “I can explain.” I held back on giving Kiran a definitive answer because nothing felt right about it, and he would never make my heart race like Axel did. Regardless of whether my relationship with Axel was real or not. Kiran and I would only be doing it to please our families.

“Explain what?” he asked mildly.

“You saw the text from Kiran?”

He nodded once. “I saw it.”

“It was a misunderstanding. I haven’t decided anything.” I pinched the bridge of my nose blinking away the burn of tears. “We’ve been trying to deflect the pressure coming from our parents.”

“It doesn’t matter.” He swirled his finger between us. “This was only temporary, right? We both knew this project would eventually run its course.”

I shook my head in silent denial, and Axel’s cruel, devastating face blurred before my eyes. “No. I’m sorry.” I reached over to touch him. Desperate for him to understand. It was only a big misunderstanding. “I should have told you, but I swear I haven’t agreed to anything. I won’t agree to it. I don’t...” My voice caught as I blinked slowly. “I lov—” Words started to fall out that I never thought I would say.

“Natalie,” he cut me off, catching my hand before I could touch his cheek. “You’re causing a scene,” he said slowly, shaking his head. His throat bobbed, and his jaw clenched. “I don’t do scenes.”

I froze as if he’d slapped me. *I don’t do scenes*. The same words he’d said to Jeanette at the formal, and my hand slipped through his fingers, landing on the console in shock.

Shuddering, I fought to hold in my tears and reached for the handle of the door, too afraid to say anything more because I’d already sounded weak and pathetic, and he’d just

demonstrated that I was no one any more special than any other girl he'd fucked. In the end, he'd drawn me into his world with ease and discarded me just as easily. I was fooling myself to think it would last, and the only person I could blame was myself. I was a complete fool.

I gave him one last look, hoping this was some kind of prank, but the desolation surrounding me confirmed it wasn't.

"So, this is it?"

"This is it."

"Wow, okay." I sighed shakily. "The worst mistake I ever made in my life was hitting your car." If only I'd been paying attention, none of this would've happened. If only I'd stuck to my books and my boring, predictable life.

He smiled cruelly. "Don't be so hard on yourself. The second time actually wasn't your fault."

I paused, and a chill ran down my spine. "What do you mean, *it wasn't my fault*?"

"I mean," he said slowly, "I hit your car."

"You." Words escaped me, and I had to collect my thoughts. "*You* hit my car? You made me believe it was my fault? You did this for what? What reason?"

He shrugged without remorse. "I told you I'd get you to say yes to me, eventually."

All of this because I refused to go on a date with him?
"So, this was all a game? A challenge?"

He remained silent, but his look said it all. Of course, it was a game to him because whatever Axel wanted, he got.

"You manipulated me."

"You had a choice, Natalie. I didn't force you at gunpoint to go out with me. Besides, you got something out of it, too, and we had fun, didn't we? At least while it lasted."

My hand trembled, and anger seeped through my veins at his callous words. “That’s all it was? Fun?” He’d degraded me earlier and asked me if I was his girl, as if I meant more than a short fling. But it really was just a stupid, fun project to him.

“Yeah. That’s all it was. I thought we agreed that’s all it would be.”

“I guess we did,” I said numbly. “But I thought it was turning into...”

“Something different? You thought you would be the one to change me?” His words were casual, as if girls admitting this to him happened on a daily basis. Unfortunately, it probably had. “Sorry, Hardcore. You weren’t the first to try, but if it’s any consolation, I’ll always think of you fondly.”

Seething rage bubbled to the surface, breaking my last string of sanity. Before I knew what I was doing, I felt the pain in my palm as a loud thwack echoed between us. “You are an *asshole!*” I quickly turned and yanked on the door handle, stepping out of the car.

“Go on, Natalie. Go back to your family where you belong. Go marry your boy Kiran like the dutiful girl you are.”

I gripped the doorframe and squared my shoulders as I faced him, forcing a contrived smile, though I knew my face was a tearstained mess. “At least Kiran is ten times—scratch that, one hundred times the man you’ll ever be.” I slammed the door like I was slamming the chapter closed on this blip of bad judgment in my life and didn’t look back. Despite how my legs trembled beneath me. Despite how I was one second away from completely falling apart.

Reaching the entrance of my dorm, I realized I didn’t have my badge to get into the building or my room. I’d left my purse at Axel’s place, and my phone was the only thing I had with me. *That’s just great.* I dropped down on the top step and texted Lizzie, who was luckily upstairs, to come get me. Without any choice, I texted Axel that I left my purse at his

house, to which he responded he'd have it delivered in the morning.

Delivered. As if he couldn't be bothered with seeing me again. I drew my legs up to my knees, dropped my head, and silently cried.

Chapter FORTY ONE

Natalie

“And for the fourth pick in the 2023 NFL draft, New Orleans selects Axel Thomas, running back, Hillside University.”

The crowd in Las Vegas attending the draft erupted into cheers.

Coverage zoomed in on Axel, who was sitting in a suite with his father and all his roommates, their girlfriends, and their families. He stood up and hugged his father and then Nick, Roman, and Dmitri, as well as others who were packed into the suite with him. Amidst all the congratulatory hugs, someone handed him a ball cap that he donned with New Orleans’s logo, smiling wide for the camera and posing cockily.

The camera cut to the crowd as rabid fans in New Orleans jerseys and paraphernalia bounced around, pointing their index finger at the camera in a *number one* gesture.

It was a bittersweet moment because although it physically hurt to see him, even on a live stream from thousands of miles away, he deserved this moment. In that sense, I guess I could be happy for him. Only for that reason alone.

Now would've been the time he would've called me, wanting to share this moment together. At least, I thought that would've happened. However, I had to remind myself he was obviously over me, and I was delusional to think it was anything otherwise.

His life would go on, and so would mine.

After crying for several hours the night Axel ended our project, I called my mother back and told her I would consider giving Kiran a chance. I still wasn't quite ready to accept we would be engaged or eventually married. It was something I couldn't quite wrap my head around. Nor anything either of us wanted.

My cell chimed. Speak of the devil. My mother was calling me again.

"Mom."

"*Kanchu*, how was school today?" my mother still asked me, as if I were a child in elementary school. "How was your test?"

"Great. I dissected a dead body and rocked it. You should've seen it. The way I used the scalpel today was on point, no pun intended."

"Oh, don't make jokes involving the dead."

"I wasn't. I think I did really well."

"Good. Then I won't keep you long because I know you are probably studying."

"Of course," I lied. However, I knew I needed to. I glanced at the screen of my laptop and watched as highlights of Axel's best games at Hillside were meshed together, showcasing his talent. My heart hurt to watch it, bringing back more unwanted memories. I cleared my throat, turning away from the screen. "What did you want?"

"I want to have a gathering with Kiran's family the weekend you come home. It's Rajina's birthday."

A gathering. Of course, she did. “Sure. Sounds great.” I feigned an excitement I wasn’t feeling at all. “I told you I needed more time to think about Kiran and I. I don’t know if I can promise anything more.” This whole situation made my stomach hurt.

“I understand. I am not putting pressure on you. I only want to have a celebration for my best friend. We always celebrate birthdays together.”

“I know, Mom.” I sighed.

“Great. It’s all set.” Of course, it was because my mother made plans first before confirming if everyone was on board. We were just naturally always available. “Okay, darling, I will let you go. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Dropping my head, I sighed. My phone buzzed again with a notification. My heart jumped, thinking maybe *he* would call or text. However, it was just an Instagram notification of Axel’s latest post. Clicking on it, I saw a picture of him as a skinny young boy with thick dark hair in a football jersey, standing between his father and a stunning woman who must’ve been his mother. The caption read: *I did it, Mom.*

My eyes watered; he missed his mother. My stupid heart softened for him. *Get over it.* I tossed my phone aside. I had to move on from this. From him. I could do it. As time went on, certainly, it would become easier.

Chapter FORTY TWO

Axel

“Here’s to good health and great friends.” Roman raised his glass. “To the future.”

“Here! Here!” Nick said, with his arm around Kenzie. Glasses clinked in the center of the table. We were all having dinner at one of the restaurants at the Aria hotel, where we were staying for the night. It was after eleven at night, and all my friends had been drafted in the first round to different professional teams.

We’d worked hard, and this was the ultimate goal. We’d all made it to the pros. Nick was drafted by Kansas City, while Roman was going to Arizona. And Dmitri’s wish had come true. He was going to Dallas to play with Marco Cruz.

Scanning the large, round eight-top, my friends were smiling and celebrating with their girlfriends—soon-to-be wives, eventually. Hell, Dmitri was going to have a family soon. They were all happy. Content. They had someone to share their achievements with. They weren’t alone.

Fuck. I was still high off the adrenaline tonight and needed someone to celebrate with. Unwillingly, my thoughts went back to Natalie. It’d been three weeks, and I had to remind myself not to think about her. She was in my head too

much. She was making me lose focus on what I needed to do. She was fucking getting married.

I was angry and a jerk to her, but damn, she'd been talking about marriage to another guy while she was going out with me? That hurt. It fucking hurt, and I wasn't a pussy. Maybe I needed to find some entertainment tonight. We were in Vegas, for Christ's sake.

I glanced down at my phone, which had continually blown up all evening with congratulatory texts. However, the one person I wanted to hear from never sent a message. I wasn't surprised. I figured she was done with me when she slapped me and called me an asshole. I was an asshole, but she was even crueler by admitting that her future husband was a better man for her. Should I be surprised? It was probably the truth.

I felt a sharp jab in my arm. I narrowed my eyes. "The fuck was that for, Nick?"

"You gonna keep moping like a bitch all evening?"

"I'm not moping."

"You've either been sulking like a baby for the past few weeks or drinking like a closet alcoholic."

"I have not. You're so overdramatic."

"You fucking destroyed your room."

When we broke it off that night, I sped home, intent on getting fucked up. So, I passed through the throng of people still partying at our house, ignoring them all as if I had tunnel vision. I went straight to the kitchen, snagged an unopened bottle of tequila, and headed to my room. After locking the door, I sat down on the bed and proceeded to polish off most of the bottle until I blacked out.

The next morning, it looked like my room had been ransacked. Clothes, books, and trophies were strewn all over the floor. Dresser drawers were tumbled over, and a glass lamp lay in pieces on the floor. My desk was broken in half and

missing a leg. Everything, with the exception of my flat-screen and bed, was damaged beyond repair.

That morning, Nick pulled me aside and told me to get my shit together and then helped me clean up the mess. Since then, I'd only drunk myself into a stupor a handful of times. But I didn't destroy any more shit, although I'd itched to do it.

"I haven't destroyed anything since."

"Thank the good Lord for small favors. I'm getting a little tired of having to make sure you stay on the straight and narrow," he said.

"If I needed a life coach, I would ask."

"Suit yourself, little buddy." He forked a piece of black forest cake and turned to feed it to Kenzie.

I rolled my eyes at their sickeningly sweet display and glanced down at my untouched cake that I had no one to share with.

"You know, you could call her."

I raised a brow at Nick, acting as though I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Come on, Axe. Don't act like you don't care about her."

Thumbing the stem of my glass, I frowned in contemplation. "I don't think she wants to talk to me."

"Oh? Is it that bad?" he asked.

"Probably," I said under my breath, thinking about some of the shit I said because I was trying to hold myself together. Because it felt like I'd taken a hammer to the chest.

"Maybe if you reached out to her, you could work through this."

"I doubt it."

He leaned in, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Sometimes it doesn't hurt to set your pride aside and apologize."

"Why do you think I need to apologize?"

“Because I know you, man. I know how you operate. You’ve never been serious about anyone. But with her, you looked like you would fight the world for her. Hell, you acted crazy jealous over anyone who approached her. Even before your so-called project began. And you’re scared; I get it. You like to be in control of your emotions. So, you cut ties with her because you felt like you were losing your sense of self.”

Was Nick also a relationship expert now? He was kind of spot on, and I didn’t know what to make of it. But he didn’t know the piece about her getting married—or potentially getting married. It was probably for the best if I left her alone and let her live her life. “There’s nothing to work out. It was just a fun project while it lasted.”

Nick swiped a hand over his face, snorting in disbelief. “Whatever. Stay in denial and see where that gets you.” He straightened his tie, smiling smugly. “As for me, I’m going to take my girl back to my room and celebrate. All night long.”

I shook my head, shoving my envy aside. What the fuck did Nick know anyway?

Later that night, I found myself walking through the hotel’s casino with a few of the guys I’d met at the draft. They talked me into hitting a club with them. *Why the hell not?*

We bypassed the club’s waiting line, and the bouncer let us in like we were celebrities. He even congratulated me on getting drafted. We were immediately led to the roped-off VIP section, with drinks in our hands and beautiful girls approaching our table like bees to honey.

This was what I needed. I sat back in the velvet wraparound booth with a gorgeous blonde on my left and a hot brunette on my right. Both had their phones out, taking selfies with me and chatting about shit I had zero interest in. The longer I sat, the more I wondered what the hell I was doing here. But I stubbornly shoved my conscience aside. I slammed back my drink and ordered another one.

I stared down at my drink, ignoring the girls beside me. “Axel.” I looked up to see a blonde, curvaceous woman standing in front of me in a skintight black dress. She wasn’t just a random at the club. She was my new boss. Actually, she was the daughter of the owner of my new team.

“Hey...” I squinted my eyes, trying to remember her name.

“It’s Diana.” She smiled wide.

“Yes,” I snapped my fingers in recognition. “Sorry, it’s been a long night.”

“I totally understand. Draft night can be crazy. Just wait until you arrive in New Orleans and see the hundreds more people you’ll meet from our organization.”

“Yeah. I can’t wait.” I took a long drink and smoothed out my dress shirt.

“Can I sit down?” She glanced at the two women occupying the spots beside me with a flash of annoyance.

“Sure.” I wasn’t an idiot. I had to toe the company line and be polite. I turned to the two ladies sitting beside me and politely told them to take a hike. They both sulked but finally complied. This night was beginning to grate on my nerves.

Diana dropped down beside me, scooting so close her thigh was touching mine. I ran a hand over my tie and polished off my drink.

“I’ll get us another round.” She hailed a server and ordered us tequila shots and more drinks. A few minutes later, she was passing me a shot glass and making a toast. “Here’s to our future MVP and Super Bowl champion.”

Several shots later, Diana had her hand on my upper thigh and leaned into my ear. “It’s so loud in here.” Her mouth grazed my ear lobe. “Do you want to get out of here?”

My mind was numb, and my body felt relaxed. I shrugged, not really caring whether we stayed or left. “Sure.”

After closing out the tab, she linked her hand over my arm as we passed through the packed crowd dancing around us. Flashing lights flickered from cell phones lighting up the semi dark club with each step we took. “You’re a very popular guy. The crowd loves you,” Diana teased. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d be jealous.”

I smirked over the bullshit line and followed her out of the club. When we made it to the elevator, she shook her head and led me to a private one. “I have the presidential suite. You’ll love the view.”

I followed her and gave myself a pep talk.

This is what you wanted.

No ties.

Have fun.

I’m in control.

As the elevator climbed higher and higher, I realized the excitement I used to feel wasn’t there. My dick was soft. It hadn’t even twitched all evening. Diana was a beautiful woman. Yet, I felt nothing. *You’re just drunk and tired.*

But I knew it was more than that. Much more. If Natalie were in this elevator with me, I would’ve already attacked her and had her backed against the wall. Fuck, I’d tried not to think about her all night. However, even in my blitzed state, standing alone with an attractive woman, all I could think about was her.

Maybe Nick was right.

I hated to admit it.

Despite reaching my goal to the top, I felt miserable.

And fucking it out of my system was off the table because *she* owned me.

Goddamn it. Why didn’t I just tattoo Natalie’s name on my dick and call it a day?

When we entered Diana's suite, she tossed her purse aside and wrapped her arms around my neck, leaning up on her toes. I averted my head and pulled her hands from around my neck. "I'm sorry. I can't do this."

She peered up at me as if she didn't believe me.

"I have a girlfriend."

She blinked slowly. "And?"

Apparently, it wasn't a deal breaker for her, but I was going to lose it if I had to stand here a second longer. "I love her, and she's the only person I want."

After all that inner chatter I had about finding some entertainment to take my mind off her, I knew I was lying to myself. This wasn't me anymore. I'd experienced something better, and I didn't want to have meaningless one-night stands. It was like putting on an old pair of shoes that I'd outgrown.

When I made it back to my room, I dropped down onto the edge of the bed. Flipping on the television, I stared at the highlights of the draft. Glancing around the room, the loneliness set in. I missed Natalie. I missed her so much that I felt like I had a hole in my chest where my heart used to be.

What I'd give to have her here with me now. I'd give anything to hold her in my arms and make love to her all night long. Then wake her up and fuck her until she couldn't get out of bed. And the cuddling. I'd cuddle with her and watch a cheesy rom-com with her. Fuck, I'd do anything she wanted.

I grabbed my cell, intent on texting her; but it was after one o'clock in the morning here in Vegas, which made it three o'clock in Texas. Shaking my head, I tossed my phone aside. I'd call her in the morning before I took a flight to New Orleans to meet with the team and sign my contract.

Chapter FORTY THREE

Natalie

It was Saturday night, and I was in the same sweats and T-shirt I'd worn since Thursday evening when I saw Axel being live-streamed on draft night. I thought I was doing okay until I saw him on the screen, and it sent me into a tailspin. Swiping at my sensitive nose with a tissue, I couldn't take my eyes off my computer screen.

"Natalie? No. No. No." Lizzie burst into the room, probably acknowledging the train wreck I was, and rushed over to my bed. "You're seriously not going to do this." She reached for my laptop, and I pulled it out of her reach. They were showing a mini-documentary on Axel and his training footage leading up to the NFL draft.

"But I have to see this. He trained really hard to make it to the pros."

"I can't leave you alone for thirty minutes before you're doing something detrimental to your life." Lizzie had made it her duty to watch over me. Especially when she'd seen that Axel texted me yesterday. Then called me three times. Each time, she had been there to snatch my phone away and remind me that he'd dismissed me like a subpar dinner.

"It's not detrimental. It's a well-done sports piece."

Lizzie's almond-shaped eyes narrowed as she shook her head. "You have to stop this. You need to take a shower and get out of this room."

I knew she was right. My hair was ratty, and I'd managed to spill coffee down the front of my T-shirt yesterday, which I didn't bother changing. I didn't have the energy. "I will later."

My phone chimed, and my heart surged at seeing it was Axel.

Axel: I'm sorry. I was an asshole. Please talk to me. I miss you.

My heart tingled and I clicked in the text box.

Me: I mi—

Before I could finish the text, Lizzie yanked the phone out of my hand. I glanced up at her and scowled. "That was a bit dramatic, don't you think?"

"No. You need a reality check. And do you think anything is too dramatic for me?" Lizzie tilted her head and put a hand on her hip.

"Good point," I conceded.

"You've been moping around for three weeks, and now he wants to talk to you? Don't do this, Natalie."

"He was upset because he thought I was getting married."

"But you tried to explain to him it was a misunderstanding, and he treated you like trash."

"He was hurt," I said in his defense.

"Was he?" She shook her head in disappointment. "He sounds like a manipulative, toxic person. I mean, seriously, he hit your car and made you believe it was your fault. And I saw what he did to Trey Lomas's face that night of the party. He's lucky Trey didn't press charges."

Wait. What? I peered at Lizzie in question. "How did you know what happened to Trey?"

"Um, I kind of ran into him that night." Lizzie's cheeks tinted pink. This sounded very strange since she wasn't at the

party. And where would she have seen him?

“But you weren’t there when it happened. Trey kind of provoked him.”

“You don’t know what Trey’s dealing with.” She clamped her mouth shut as if she’d said too much. “Anyway.” She swiped her hand in the air, changing the subject. “That’s neither here nor there.”

I folded my hands together. “Axel’s not a bad person.”

Still holding my phone as if she didn’t trust me, Lizzie shrugged her shoulder and pointed to my laptop. “Why don’t you do a search of Axel Thomas and see exactly how much he missed you in Vegas on draft night?”

Dread settled over me, yet my curiosity got the better of me as I minimized the documentary and clicked on the search engine. *Curiosity killed the cat*. The words played in my head as I did a search and saw the damning images I knew would break my heart. Would? I could hear the crack as if I were standing on thin ice over a lake, and it spread and spread until I gripped my chest. There were several pictures of him with two girls climbing all over him at a club. Then there was another picture of him leaving the club with another woman. The pieces of my broken heart were bleeding out, and I closed my laptop and rubbed my face in defeat.

“Now, will you believe me when I say Axel is toxic for you?”

Fighting back another round of tears, I nodded.

And decided, for real this time, I needed to move on with my life.

But it still hurt like hell.

It also pissed me off, and I did something rash and called my mom. When she answered, I said the words she’d been waiting to hear. “I’ll do it. I’ll marry Kiran.”

Chapter FORTY FOUR

Axel

She wouldn't answer my texts or calls. I'd been to her dorm, and she wouldn't answer the door. I even waited for her to come out of her dorm room, but I never saw her. I was losing my mind.

I'd taken the last final of my college career and was hitting the gym to blow off some steam. Starting off with some leg presses, I went hard, pushing myself to the limit and basking in the pain. Hoping muscle aches would replace the ache in my heart. God, I needed to punch myself in the face for sounding pathetic.

I saw someone in my peripheral vision. Dmitri was standing beside me, curling a fifty-pound dumbbell. "Did you get lost?" I gritted my teeth at rep twenty-five. Five-hundred pounds started to weigh on you, literally. "The vanity mirror is over there." I managed to point behind him.

"I don't need a mirror. I know how good I look." He easily curled the weight up and down.

"Okay. That obviously went over your head."

"No, it didn't. I need to talk to you." That was Dmitri. Dry, direct, and to the point.

"About?"

“Your shitty disposition and how you need to change it. STAT.”

Feeling the burn in my muscles, I dropped my legs and swiped at my brow. “Hold up. What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I could take—okay, tolerate—advice from guidance counselor Nick, but this robotic motherfucker, who had zero personality, was accusing me of having a shitty disposition?

“It means... whatever you need to do to make things right with Natalie, you need to do it because I can’t take your depressing shit anymore.”

I did a double-take. “Excuse me?” Okay, I probably was depressed, but having to take advice from Dmitri just flat-out pissed me off.

“Yes. And the worst part of it all is that I have to hear it from Sorina, who’s worried about your pussy-ass because you’re ghosting her on playing video games and staying huddled in your room in a fetal position. And when she’s not happy, I’m not happy.”

“It’s bad enough that I have to hear this from Nick, but you, too?” I sat up and clutched my hands between my knees. Exhaling in frustration, I tugged on the ends of my hair. “I’ve tried, but she won’t see me, man.”

He set the dumbbell down and stretched out his arm. “Try harder.”

“How?” I couldn’t believe I was asking for advice from this guy. I guess I was desperate. “Besides, she’s getting married.”

“Bullshit.”

“Yeah. Arranged marriage.”

“Then what the hell are you waiting for? Go back to her dorm room and get her. Kidnap her if you have to.”

I was on board with his idea, but... “I don’t know if kidnapping a girl would work in this day and age. In a democratic society.”

Dmitri shrugged and eyed me with a straight face. “You don’t know that for certain until you try. But I do know she’s not in love with whoever she’s been told to marry. She’s crazy about you.”

“How do you know?”

“I know these things. Don’t question me. Now, go and make this shit right before I have to resort to desperate measures. I’ll bring Roman into this drama, and you know how that will go.”

Fuck, he was right, but I wasn’t letting this go. I was gonna take his advice and kidnap her ass if I had to. “Not necessary. I was trying to figure out a way to resolve this. And you’re right. She’s mine.” Standing up, I held out a hand to him as we bro-hugged. “You are naming the child after me, right?”

His eyes narrowed into slits, and he only responded with a snarl.

“All right, then, keep thinking about it.”

He growled louder behind me as I left the room, thinking about my next move. Dmitri was right. I needed to be more persuasive.

The next morning, I coaxed someone to let me into the main doors of her dormitory, hoping to have the element of surprise on my side. Loping up three flights of stairs, I thought of all the words I’d say. Now that time had passed, and I’d dissected our last conversation to death, I knew she wasn’t trying to marry someone else because she loved him. She couldn’t... because she loved me. She had to. And I was going to get it through her stubborn head and make her admit it.

Actually, I should probably apologize first, since she wouldn’t speak to me. Then I’d tell her that I love her, too. Because I did. I’d never admitted that to anyone. I’d shied away from ever putting myself in a position to fall in love. But with her, I just wanted to put myself in a position to have a chance to be with her. To love her.

Stepping up to her door, I knocked sharply and waited, shifting on my feet in impatience. I heard movement inside, so someone was there. Knocking harder this time, I called out, “Natalie, open the door!”

Still nothing. I ran my hand through my hair. Fuck. She was going to make this difficult.

Again, I pounded on the door like a maniac. “The least you could do is talk to me! I’m not leaving until you do!”

The door swung open, but it was Lizzie who stood behind the door, firing icicles at me with her eyes. How had things changed so quickly? I thought Lizzie and I were on solid ground. “What do you want?” she hissed between her teeth.

“Where is she?”

“None of your damn business.” She tried to shut the door.

“Oh, yeah?” I flattened my hand on the door and used enough force to push it open as she stumbled back in surprise. I gripped her arm, making sure she didn’t fall because I wasn’t a complete asshole, regardless of what Natalie thought of me.

Lizzie yanked her arm away. “You are a piece of work, aren’t you?”

I didn’t come here to trade barbs. I glanced around the room. “Natalie!”

“She’s not here.” Lizzie flounced, slapping a hand on her hip. “I don’t know what you’re trying to do, but you’ve done enough.”

“I’m trying to win her back.”

“Oh, that’s just rich.” She laughed. Pointing at me, she added, “You had me, you know. I thought you truly had an interest in her. I thought you really cared. However, I realized you were just a spoiled boy who’d never been told ‘no’ in his life and manipulated people until he got his way. Seriously? Blackmailing her into going out with you and then ending it the way you did?”

I stared at her in silence.

“You hurt her,” she emphasized.

“I know.”

“Oh, really?” She laughed bitterly. “Do you know she moped in this room for weeks, not going anywhere at all except to take her exams? She was devastated.”

“I was, too.”

She sighed, rubbing her eyes, clearly not believing me. “Just leave her alone, Axel. You don’t care who you hurt, do you?” She lowered her voice in disgust. “She saw the pictures of you in Vegas at the club, living it up. You weren’t that devastated. Newsflash: You’re not good for her.”

My jaw ticked. “Do you always believe what you hear or see? Nothing fucking happened.” I should’ve gone straight to my room that night and skipped the goddamn club, but I wasn’t going to stand here and listen to this. “Where is she?”

“She went home to stay with her mom, okay? And don’t expect me to give you her address.”

“I don’t need it.” I turned and started out the door, but Lizzie rushed in front of me, pressing her small hands against my chest as if she could stop me. I slowed because I could’ve easily bowled her over if I wanted, but again, I was a gentleman.

“Don’t go after her.”

Ignoring her warning, I easily lifted her and set her aside before continuing to walk out the door.

“Don’t you dare hurt her—again.” Her words hit hard.

I stopped and turned around. “I won’t. Never again.”

Chapter FORTY FIVE

Natalie

I dressed in a sari at my mother's request because it was Rajina's birthday, and Mom loved to entertain. All the women wore saris to most celebrations. Sometimes we didn't, but more often than not, we did. It was a small party, Mom assured me. However, there were at least fifty Nepalese people that would be at our house in a few hours. Not unusual when there was a celebration. Everyone knew everyone, and we stuck together like glue, just needing a reason to throw a party.

All morning, I helped my mother decorate the house, trying to keep my mind occupied. Because any downtime I had, I would dwell on Axel, and it was like I was going through a mourning period.

I blamed him.

I blamed myself.

No matter how many times I told myself to move on, I couldn't.

I'd told myself a million times over the past week that I'd made the right decision—the practical decision that would please everyone. Everyone except Kiran and me. My heart weighed heavily, and my nerves were constantly on edge. I didn't have the desire to eat because I'd been fighting off

nausea for the past few days since I'd been home. And when I did force myself to eat, I had to fight myself to keep it down.

Get yourself together, Nat.

As I was putting the finishing touches on the decorations, the doorbell chimed. "I got it," I yelled, assuming it was some of my mom's friends or neighbors who were arriving early. When I flung open the door, I froze.

"Hello, Hardcore." Axel stood before me in a gray fitted Henley tee and black tapered pants, with unlaced Nike high-tops. He looked so handsome, and I hated myself for gawking at him like he was a tall glass of water in a desert. I'd missed him like a sickness. However, it finally dawned on me that he was actually standing before me at my house. How did he know where I lived?

Schooling my face, I stared at him. "What are you doing here?"

"You've been ghosting me." His expression was solemn, and he looked tired, as if he'd lost sleep. Then I reminded myself he was an asshole, and I wouldn't succumb to his manipulative behavior anymore.

Regardless, I met his gaze and asked sarcastically, "I wonder why? For the record, I made a resolution to stay away from insensitive jerks."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I guess I deserve that."

"You definitely do. No guessing about it."

"Thanks for the affirmation," he deadpanned. He stared me down, taking his time before saying, "I need to talk to you."

My heart buzzed in my chest. I could hear my mother and sister-in-law arguing in Nepali in the kitchen over the food. Soon, one of them would come in here and wonder who was at the door. "Now is not a good time."

"I'm not leaving," he said simply, and I knew Axel wasn't one who was easily dissuaded when he wanted

something.

I gripped the edge of the door. “Stand there if you want. I don’t care.” I tried to close the door, but he flattened a hand against the panel, stopping me.

“Axel, leave now before I cause a scene. I have nothing to say to you.”

“Just hear me out. I didn’t come to cause trouble.” He gazed at me solemnly, dropping his hand from the door. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I was an asshole. And I miss you. I miss us.”

I wanted to believe him. My heart ached, screaming for me to listen to him and give him a chance. However, my pride held me back, and I couldn’t forget the words he’d said to me that night in his car, the way he treated me. I couldn’t forget the images I’d seen of him living it up in Vegas. Living up to his image. “I can’t do this with you.”

“Don’t do this, Natalie. You don’t love him, and you know it.”

“It’s too late.” My eyes started to burn with the threat of unshed tears. *I would not cry in front of him.* “Goodbye, Axel.” Catching him off-guard, I slammed the door. My heart thumped erratically, and I placed my hand over my chest sucking in air. Streaks of wetness trailed down my cheeks, and my stomach churned.

“*Kanchu*, who was at the door?” My mother’s voice pierced through the air from the kitchen.

I swiped at my face and called out, “No one we know. Just a solicitor.”

Damn you, Axel.

Damn you for making me cry again.

Hiking up my skirt, I ran to my room before anyone saw me crying. I went straight to my bathroom to grab a tissue and held up an empty box. I must’ve gone through that box last

night when I had another pity spell. Sighing, I tossed it into the trash and opened my cabinet to retrieve another box.

However, I paused when I saw a box of tampons. My mind raced. When was the last time I started my period? It was after spring break, but that had been well over a month ago. I did a mental calculation as panic began to settle in. Oh, my god, that was at least six weeks ago.

I rushed over to my phone that I'd left on the nightstand to charge. Unhooking the cord, I saw a text from Lizzie that she'd sent two hours ago.

Axel came by the dorm looking for you. And I think he's coming to your house. I swear I didn't give him your address. Sorry.

Too late, I thought wryly.

I found her name and called her.

She answered on the first ring, rushing out, "Nat, I'm sorry. He forced me to tell him where you were."

"I know. I saw him." I sniffled and went back to the bathroom and grabbed the box of tissue. "And I told him to leave."

"Are you okay?"

My mind was all over the place, and I didn't know where to begin. "No. I'm not okay, Lizzie." I blew my nose.

"Oh, I'm sorry, babe. Did he say something to upset you?"

"He said he was sorry and that he missed me."

"Huh, I'm surprised he left that easily. He practically barreled into our room this morning, looking for you. And he wouldn't leave until I told him where you were."

"Well, he tried, but I caught him by surprise and slammed the door in his face." I peeked out my blinds, worried he might be standing out front, still waiting. However, I didn't see him.

I kept thinking about my missed period, and how lately I'd been dealing with nausea. I thought it was because I was

still upset over Axel and this engagement. Goosebumps settled over my skin. What if I was pregnant? I'd have to tell him. I'd have to tell Kiran. Rubbing my forehead, I said, "I may have a bigger problem." I paused, clenching my cell tighter. "I haven't had my period this month."

"Oh. Well, maybe you're just late. You started birth control recently, so it could've messed up your cycle."

"It's been six weeks," I said quietly, glancing up at the ceiling. "And I've been experiencing nausea for the past few days, but I thought it was just nerves... and a broken heart."

"Ohhh."

"What do I do?" I whined.

"Listen to me, Nat. You have to go get a pregnancy test. It could be a false alarm. You've been dealing with a lot lately. So just take a deep breath before you panic, okay?"

I swiped my nose with the tissue and inhaled slowly. "Okay." I could do this. "I'll go now, and I'll call you when I get back."

"You better. And whatever happens, I'm always here for you."

"I know, bestie."

I hung up and picked up my purse, stuffing my cell inside. I splashed water on my face and took several deep, calming breaths before I left my room. Walking into the kitchen, I listened as my mother was on the phone. "Oh, thank you for letting me know. I'll be there in fifteen minutes to pick it up." She nodded. "Okay. Thank you. Bye."

She clicked off the phone and eyed my purse. "Where are you going?"

"I need to grab some things from the grocery store." I hoped she didn't detect the anxiety in my voice.

"Oh, perfect. Could you pick up Rajina's cake while you're there? The bakery called to say it was ready. I've

already paid for it.”

“Sure.” At least I had a legit reason to go to the store.

Walking out to my car, I glanced around, still expecting to see a black BMW parked on the street, but I didn’t. I only saw an older couple walking their dog down the sidewalk and some kids riding their bikes.

When I returned from the store, I passed the cake off to my sister-in-law, who fawned over it, and then I fled to my room. Closing my door and locking it, I sat down on my bed and pulled out one of the boxes of pregnancy tests I bought.

I called Lizzie who answered on the first ring. “Did you get it?”

“Yes.” I put her on speaker and ripped into the box. “I’m opening it right now.” My hands shook. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m fairly certain you just pee on a stick and wait a few minutes to see the results. I don’t think it’s rocket science.”

“I’m already stressed enough as it is, Lizzie.” I frowned and pulled out a stick and the instructions.

“I know. I’m sorry. I wish I could be there for you.”

“Do not apologize. You can’t miss your final stage performance this afternoon.” Lizzie was performing in the final show of *Hamlet* and had received rave reviews.

I scanned over the instructions. “Okay. I think I can do this.”

I heard the door handle rattle. “Why is this door locked?” my mother called out, knocking on the door. “What are you doing in there?” I groaned under my breath. My mother was always in my business.

“Mom, I’m getting ready!”

“Open the door.” The door handle rattled. “I need you to wipe down the table and patio furniture outside. I told you to do this over an hour ago.”

“Okay. I will. Give me a minute.”

“Young lady, if you don’t open this door right now...”

“Oh, my god. Liz, I’ll call you back.” I clicked off the cell and shoved the stick back into the box. My mom was still banging on the door. I grabbed a shirt that was lying on the edge of my bed and draped it over the pregnancy test kit.

“I’m coming!” I ran to the door and opened it.

“Come on. Stop dallying around. We only have a few minutes before our guests start to arrive.” She pulled me out of the room with her, and I rolled my eyes. I would have to find time to do this later. Until then, I needed to remain calm.

Soon, most of the guests were here, and the party had commenced. Kiran was sitting between our mothers at the picnic table, listening to them with feigned interest.

He wore a dress shirt and tie with slacks, looking very handsome and debonair, like an international playboy. He already dressed the part of a successful doctor. Hence the reason my mother was so proud. *Marry someone who is driven and successful, Kanchu.* And if he was Nepali and from the Newari region, where both our families originated, even better. He had everything going for him, in my mother’s eyes.

Kiran glanced at me and smiled sadly. He could hide things from his mother, but I knew this was not something he wanted to do. We were both walking into this with heavy hearts and reservations. But we’d play our parts to the hilt. For now.

The suspense was killing me, and every time I thought I could slip off to my room, someone engaged me in a conversation. I was talking to one of my mom’s clients about school, and I glanced up and saw Axel walking around the corner of the house through the backyard toward me.

Chapter FORTY SIX

Natalie

My chest seized. “Um excuse me, Mrs. Wetzel.” I turned away from the sweet, elderly lady and stalked over to Axel, leading him over to the side of the house, away from the party.

“Are you crazy? What are you doing here?” I hissed.

“I told you. I need to talk to you.”

“Do you not see that we’re in the middle of a party?” I pointed in the direction of friends and family gathered around the patio. “And you weren’t invited.”

He scanned down my body slowly. “You look beautiful, Hardcore.”

I shook my head. “Don’t do this.”

“Do what?” he asked innocently. “I’ve tried talking to you several times, and you won’t give me the time of day. What am I supposed to do?”

“That’s right,” I snapped. “I don’t want to talk to you. Most people would take the hint, not crash a party they weren’t invited to. By the way, how did you know where my family lived?” I’d never given him my address, yet he was here.

“I know someone in the academics department who has access to student information.”

My mouth fell slack. “That’s... I don’t even know what to say.” Someone gave out my personal information because he’d asked for it? It was somewhat disturbing, but in a weird way, it was kind of hot, too. However, he’d also crashed into my car on purpose to coerce me into going out with him because he didn’t like being turned down. So it wasn’t really surprising. I sighed in exasperation. “It doesn’t matter. But you need to leave.”

He stepped closer; his gaze was unwavering. “Please forgive me, Natalie. I’ve missed you. So fucking much.”

I took a step back, folding my arms around my chest. “You can’t show up here and say things like that.”

“It’s true.” He reached out and tried to cup my cheek, but I turned away, avoiding his touch. “Please, give me another chance,” he said roughly.

I felt the makeshift shield I put around my heart begin to crack, and I almost forgot we weren’t alone. And I also almost forgot how he’d lived it up in Vegas. “Don’t lie to me. You’re a player, and I saw the pictures of you with not just one woman, but several women in Vegas. Do you think I’m stupid?”

“Nothing happened that night. I swear to you. Fuck.” He ran his hand through his hair. “I was miserable. I missed you so goddamn much that I was losing my mind. And it pissed me off that I couldn’t get you out of my mind. And yes, I had an opportunity, but at the end of the day, I couldn’t do it. I had no desire to do it because all I ever think about is you.” His beautiful brown eyes, which usually glinted with potential mischief, were traced with red lines. He also had faint circles under his eyes. Distraught. “I need you.”

Gazing into his eyes, I could almost fall under his spell again. Then I remembered all the things he said that night in

his car. I realized where we were, and I knew people would start to talk soon enough.

“You can’t waltz back into my life after what you did to me that night. After what you said...”

He clutched my arms tightly. “I didn’t mean it.”

“You hurt me.”

He glanced down at his feet before peering up at me again, and pain flashed through his eyes. “I was angry and hurt. You were talking about marriage with another man. How the fuck was I supposed to take it?”

Axel was still standing too close to not draw attention. He was still gripping my arms with familiarity.

“*Kanchu*, who is this?” My mom was walking up to us with her eyes narrowed and head cocked to the side.

I took a step back, and Axel dropped his hands. “This is my friend, Axel Thomas. He goes to Hillside, and we had a class together. He plays football and was just drafted to play in the NFL in the fall.” My mother stared at me blankly, since she had zero interest in sports. “He also graduated with a degree in biology,” I added.

“Dean’s list with distinction and summa cum laude,” Axel clarified.

I held my arm out to my mom. “Axel. This is my mom, Alina Pradhan.”

Axel smiled widely before he held out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Pradhan.”

“Likewise. Why are you here?”

He gave me an imperceptible smirk, and I knew what he was thinking... *The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.*

“Your daughter obviously forgot to tell you.” He studied me again, and his eyes held a devious glint that made me nervous. “We’re *close* friends, and she invited me over to attend this... function.”

My mother nodded and gestured with her hands. “Well then. Please join us. We are about to start serving food.”

“Yes, ma’am. I will,” he said like the perfect Boy Scout, and I was surprised at his audacity. Who was I kidding? This was Axel. He could make the biggest skeptic his number-one fan with the crook of his smile and a few nice words.

Mom shuffled off to rejoin our guests, and we followed at a distance.

“That was shady,” I said lowly, not wanting to cause a scene at my mother’s party.

“You already know the means I’ll take to have you be my girl.” His tone was light but unapologetic.

My stomach clenched uncomfortably as I saw Kiran making his way over with his hands in his pants pockets and a curious expression. “What is Axel Thomas doing here?” he asked in disbelief.

“How do you know who he is?” I felt Axel tense up beside me, and I hoped he’d behave.

“Are you kidding? Two-time national champion. First-round draft pick. Of course, I’ve heard of him.” He reached out a hand. “I’m Kiran and a big fan.”

“Kiran.” The word sounded like a curse on his lips, and I clenched Axel on the arm, not giving him a chance to either shake his hand or punch his face. Kiran was the last person who deserved any ill will.

His muscles flexed under my hands, and I knew he was restraining himself from taking out his anger on Kiran.

“Let’s grab something to eat,” I said and tugged on his arm. Surprisingly, he allowed me to lead him away from a potentially unprovoked fight. Maybe he was trying to make an effort to be respectful, but I could still feel the tension emanating from his body. He bent his head to mine. “Can we talk in private?”

I noticed others were peering at us, and I dropped his arm, forcing a pleasant smile. “Not now.”

When I led him inside, there were platters of food set up in the kitchen—goat curry, chicken curry, fish curry, and achar. My mom took over, as usual, and began making a plate of food for him before directing Axel to a seat at the table in the dining room. I made my plate as Kiran did, too. We had two seats at the table next to Rajina, who was seated at the head of the table with Raaj on her other side.

“This is the best birthday,” Rajina said. “To have my family and dear friend host this celebration...” She turned her attention to Kiran and me with joy written all over her face. “And soon, we will have a wedding.”

Clang. The sound of silverware on a ceramic plate was hard to ignore, and I gazed at Axel briefly who sat with fists clenched beside his dish. *Please don't do this,* I begged silently.

Swallowing thickly, I tried to keep the bile from rising in my throat. “We aren't getting married anytime soon.” I laughed nervously, as if that would ease the tension no one knew about except Axel and me. I couldn't even think about the elephant in the room—that I might be pregnant. I was in denial and couldn't go there right now.

“True.” She tilted her head, and her eyes tapered in suspicion. “But your engagement party is coming up in two weeks, and time will fly faster than you think. The wedding will be here before you know it.”

“You're having an engagement party in two weeks?” Axel asked, his voice sounding garbled as if he'd swallowed razor blades. His jaw ticked, and I was worried he was about to cause a scene.

“Yes, there is so much to plan for. You have no idea,” my mother chimed in and rambled off a list of all the things she needed to do to prepare. Her voice blurred into nothingness as

I watched Axel's knuckles whiten by the side of his plate. A wave of nausea threatened to surge, and I swallowed thickly.

"Mrs. Pradhan." Axel's voice was still strained, and his eyes were stormy. He looked like he was about to lose his composure. "May I use your bathroom?"

"Of course, it's down the hall and the second door on your left."

"Thank you." He deposited his napkin by his plate and stalked off.

"*Kanchu*," my mom said as I finally dragged my eyes away from Axel's back. She signaled to my untouched plate. "Eat. You haven't touched your food."

Nodding to Mom as if on autopilot, I pushed the food around on my plate, and my stomach quivered. I couldn't eat, so I played with my food like a little kid.

The chatter around me sounded like background noise as I felt my pulse thud dully in my head. Several moments later, Axel hadn't returned to his seat, and I was anxious. So much so that I knew it wouldn't pass. I set my fork aside slowly. "Excuse me."

Standing up, I measured my steps as I walked calmly down the hall, passing by the bathroom that was unoccupied. I looked in regardless, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. Where the hell was he? Moving on, I stopped at my bedroom door, which was half ajar, and pushed it open, gasping as I saw Axel sitting on my bed, holding a white stick in his hand. He raised his head and leveled me with a concerned gaze. "Is there something I should know?"

I sprinted to the bathroom and locked the door, barely making it to the toilet before I vomited.

Chapter FORTY SEVEN

Natalie

After my stomach stopped heaving, I swiped the back of my hand over my mouth and rose slowly to brush my teeth, despite the light-headedness consuming me.

“Natalie! Open the door,” Axel’s voice boomed, startling me out of my inner thoughts.

Righting myself, I unlocked it, tugged on the handle, and sank against the door, dropping my head.

“You okay?” he asked softly and touched my shoulder.

“I’m fine,” I lied. Everything was chaotic, and Axel was here in the middle of it. Nothing in my life had been neat and orderly since I’d met him.

“You’re not okay. You look like you’re about to pass out.” He picked me up and carried me to my bed.

My pulse raced, and warmth unwillingly filled my chest. His familiar scent flooded my senses. Then I remembered how my mother would have a conniption if she caught us together like this. “Axel.” I struggled to sit up. “You can’t be in here. My mom will kill you if she catches you in my room.”

He tightened his arm around me, keeping me from getting off the bed. “Let me worry about that. I’m only concerned

about you.”

“I’m not your project anymore.”

“You will always be my project.” I felt the bed sink behind me, and he began stroking my hair in a soothing manner.

I closed my eyes and exhaled unsteadily. He was making it difficult for me to push him away. I wanted to believe him. I wanted to relax in his arms and let all my problems slip away. Yet, my stomach lurched, bringing me back to my harsh reality. “I’m going to be sick again.” I shoved him away and sprinted to the bathroom.

Hugging the commode as I dry heaved, I felt his presence behind me as his hands were at my hair, holding it back. When my stomach settled, I panicked and said, “You need to leave. This is so embarrassing.”

“No,” was all he said before he helped me to my feet and grabbed a washcloth folded on the counter. “You’re not getting rid of me.” He turned on the faucet, letting it run a few seconds before wetting the cloth. “Were you gonna tell me about this?”

“I didn’t even know or think about it until a few hours ago.”

“Have you already taken a test?” he asked calmly as if this was an everyday occurrence.

Shaking my head, I stared at the running water. “I’m scared,” I said in a small voice.

“Don’t be.” He leaned over and swiped the washcloth over my forehead, down my cheeks, and across my mouth gently. He was being so sweet, so caring, and tears sprang up in my eyes. “Whatever happens, we’ll deal with it, okay?”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath and nodded. He dropped the cloth and pulled me into his arms. “I’m so sorry, Natalie. Please give me another chance, I promise I will never hurt you again.”

My throat felt tight, and I was already an emotional mess. However, when I peered up at him, I felt all my hurt and anger melt away. “Do you promise?”

“I swear on my fucking life.” His voice sounded ravaged. Then, he pulled me into his arms and kissed me. My tear-filled eyes widened in surprise before I curled into him, relishing his mouth like a heady drug.

When our lips pulled apart with a pop, I smiled nervously swiping under my eyes. “I guess this is the moment of truth, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

He thumbed my hair behind my ear and walked out of the bathroom briefly, returning with the white stick.

Taking it from his hand, I inhaled and exhaled. “Okay.”

“Okay,” he said and ran his thumb over my bottom lip before his hand fell away. I thought he would step out, but he stood waiting.

“Do you mind?” I asked, nudging my chin at the door.

“Yes, I do mind. I’m not leaving you alone.” He stood with his face set in determination. This was so embarrassing, doing this in front of him, but he insisted on it.

When I finished my business, I placed the stick on the counter, and we waited. He sat on the edge of the tub and pulled me between his legs, lacing his large hands over my lower abdomen. “It’s going to be all right.”

“How do you know?”

“Because fate brought us together when you crashed into my car.” He smiled into my neck. “And I sealed it when I crashed into yours.”

This crazy, infuriating man. I shook my head. “You have a way with words.”

“I do, don’t I?”

Finally, enough time had passed, and I glanced over at the stick, and my legs nearly gave out. It was a plus sign. Shit just got real. “Maybe we should take another one.”

Axel kissed me softly and appeared far too calm and content. “If it will put your mind at ease, we can.”

That was an understatement. I thought I was going to have a full-on panic attack. He pulled another box out of the bag, opened it, and handed me a stick from another brand.

We waited again, but I knew what the result would be before I saw the two pink stripes appear as clear as day. I was pregnant with Axel’s child.

“This is your fault,” I said, staring at him reproachfully.

His expression was something of pure satisfaction, definitely not remorse. Saying nothing, he cupped my chin and brought his lips down on mine hard, with total possession. “What can I say?” he rasped against my mouth. “I’m lovesick, and the only cure for me is you nursing this fucking disease that I can’t shake. So, you gotta help me. And for that, I lay the blame on you.”

My heart soared at his words as our kiss deepened.

“This is crazy,” I moaned.

“It is.” He lifted me up, carrying me into the bedroom. “But ask me if I care.”

“Please, don’t lie to me about your feelings out of a sense of duty.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he growled, pulling back. “Normally, words come so easily. I can wax poetic about anything. I’ve been known to be a bullshitter. I suspect you probably figured that out about me, too. Never did I have to work this hard for something, nor have I felt the need to impress someone. But I did for you. I did some underhanded shit I’d never thought I would do because I wanted to impress you so badly, Natalie. And I thought of all the words I’d say to you when I got here. However, all I can think to say is... I love

you. I love you so fucking much that I can't imagine my life anymore without you in it. By my side."

"Axel?" Tears of joy pooled at the corners of my eyes. "Don't play with my heart. Please, don't play with my heart."

He cupped my cheeks, pulling me toward him as his gaze was unwavering. "I will guard your heart with my life. Bet on that."

All my reservations faded away, and I said the words that had been locked deep down in my heart. "I love you, Axel Thomas."

He leaned in and kissed me softly, as if I were his most cherished possession. "One more thing, in case you don't believe me," he whispered. "The only person who you're destined to marry is me, so get that through your head."

"Only you," I murmured against his lips.

"Mine." His mouth delved deeper into mine in desperation. "You were always mine, Hardcore."

He started to tug at the cloth tucked in and pinned at my waist as his lips devoured mine.

"Wait," I said breathlessly. "We can't do this here."

"Sure, we can. Now, how do I take this off?"

When Axel was determined, there was no way to deter him, and I reached down, undoing the safety pin, and he flipped the material over my shoulder, leaving my cropped blouse exposed. He stared down at my bare stomach in fascination and cupped it protectively. "You're going to be a beautiful mother."

"Why, Axel Thomas..." I guess *thank you* would've been appropriate, but I was still adjusting to the situation.

He walked us over to the bed. "And you'll be my wife." He kissed me as he pulled up my cropped blouse. "I'm glad I put a baby in you." I opened my mouth to make a retort, but it

died on my lips when I caught movement out of the corner of my eye.

“*Kanchu!*” my mother screeched, with her hands over her mouth, standing by the door. Could this day be more dramatic? Kiran stood behind her, shrugging apologetically.

Axel set me on my feet, straightened my top, and I scrambled to adjust the material over my shoulder again. “Mom—”

“What? What is happening?” Her voice was shaky, and she glared at both of us. “I come in here to check on you, and I hear... and I see you...” She pressed her fingers to her forehead as if she couldn’t ever fathom this. “I can’t...”

My heart dropped at seeing Mom’s confusion and disappointment. I took a step toward her. “Mom, please let me explain.”

“What is there to explain? How could you do this? How could you? You’ve been sleeping with that boy, and now you are pregnant? *Pregnant?*” Her voice rose to incredible decibels when she was shocked or angry. “You were betrothed to Kiran, and you go behind our backs and do this? *How could you?*”

“Please, let me explain.”

She shook her head, repeating the word “Why” over and over.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen.” Tears burned the backs of my eyes because it hurt to disappoint my mother. “Axel and I fell for each other. It just happened.”

“You’ve been doing god knows what with him and all you can say is it just happened?”

“Mom, please listen.”

“I do not even know you anymore.”

“You do know me. I’m the same person. I’m your daughter.”

She looked pained and reached out and touched my cheek. “All I ever wanted was the best for you.”

“I know you do. I never wanted to disappoint you. Please know that, Mom.”

Axel came up behind me and placed his hands on my shoulder. “I love your daughter, Mrs. Pradhan. I promise I will always love, cherish, and support her in every way.”

“Why did you keep this from me?” she asked in an accusing voice pointing at my stomach.

“I didn’t know. I just found out. I swear. I promise I would’ve told you.”

She peered up at Axel with skepticism before sighing. “How will you manage to support her? How do I know you’re not some deadbeat guy trying to take advantage of her?” This was the kicker. Remember when I said my mother was clueless about professional sports? She *really* was clueless about professional sports, and the salaries athletes made.

If you weren’t a doctor, engineer, or the CEO of a company, then you weren’t going to impress her. Not that I needed a man to support me, but Axel could easily take care of me financially if she’d just listen.

“He has the means to support her,” Kiran said with a slight tilt to his lips. For the first time in a while, I saw a teasing glint in his eyes that had been missing.

“How do you know?” Mom turned her attention to him. She studied Kiran for a second before adding, “How can you stand here and allow this?”

He eyed me with admiration before turning to my mom. “Because we don’t love each other. We only agreed to this to please our families. Because you pressured us.” He spread his hands out wide. “Natalie and I will always be close, but she is clearly in love with someone else... and I am, too.”

My mother furrowed her brows. “Why weren’t you two honest with us to begin with?”

“Because I didn’t want to disappoint you, Mom. I knew you were still dealing with Father’s death, and I wanted to please you. Make you happy. Kiran and I were trying to be respectful of you and Rajina’s wishes.”

“You could’ve told me. You’ve always shared everything with me.” She had a sad smile on her face, and a lone tear leaked down the corner of her eye. “You’ve never kept secrets from me.”

“I wasn’t keeping secrets. I was just having fun at the time” I glanced back at Axel. “I never thought I’d fall in love, but I did.”

“You still could’ve told me about your relationship with Axel.” Mom narrowed her eyes at him. “Do you think I would approve of someone who was sneaking around with my daughter?”

“No, ma’am,” Axel said smoothly. “I completely see your point. I get your concern, and I’m sorry we didn’t tell you.” He was making it sound like we were both in on this decision not to tell my mother. It all started out shady, with him coercing me into going out with him... to have fun. How quickly things changed. “From this day forward, I will be transparent with my intentions.”

My mother looked like she was in a crazy skit that she didn’t understand or know how to react to. However, she surprised me by saying, “Please, be good to her.”

“I will.”

“And you will have to marry her.”

I wanted to protest because it sounded like she was trying to trap him in some way. However, Axel smiled brightly. “I would marry her tomorrow if she would let me.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulder. “I would do anything for her.”

“Is this what you want?” She smoothed my hair much like she did when I was a little girl.

I nodded, catching her hand and clutching it in mine.
“Yes. This is what I want.”

“Oh, my baby is grown up now.” Her eyes glistened with tears she’d never shed. “I just want you to be happy.” She pulled me against her in a hug, and I could feel her tremble.

“I will be.” Time stood still as we held each other. Mom finally pulled back and righted her face, pasting on a bright smile and bringing her hands together. “I guess we will have a Nepali wedding, after all.”

Later, I watched as Axel bedazzled my mom by bringing her a cup of hot tea and insisting on cleaning up the kitchen. Kiran was still here, opting to stay and hang out longer, even though his parents had decided to go home earlier. He had broken the news to his mother that our engagement wasn’t happening. She didn’t seem thrilled.

However, Kiran seemed to have a fan crush on Axel and decided to stay. I set my teacup down and motioned to Kiran to step outside. He stood up and followed.

I rubbed my arm absently staring at the light post on the street corner. “Thank you for having my back today.”

“No problem,” he said.

“How did your mom take it?”

“Not good.”

I turned to him. “Did you tell her about your girlfriend?”

“Yes. She’s still processing this.” His mouth twisted wryly, and he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“She’ll come around.” I patted him on his arm. “If my mom could deal with all my baggage, I’m sure your mom can handle your situation.”

We had a good laugh, and then he sobered. “I’m sorry, Nat. I’m sorry that I put us in this position.”

“Don’t be. We only wanted to make our families happy.” I leaned in and hugged him. “Don’t ever settle for less than

you deserve.”

Epilogue

ONE

Axel

—*Two Weeks Later*

“Where the hell have you been?” Dmitri asked with a perpetual scowl as I waltzed into the hospital room after Sorina gave birth to their child.

“Working on my project.” I grinned widely because Natalie and I were back on, and all was right in the world. So much so that I could tease again, to the point where it would piss D off. “Now, where’s my son?”

He only scowled darkly, as usual, and I made my way to Sorina, who held their son, Luca, in her arms. He was so tiny, and I stared in amazement. That would be Natalie and me in the near future.

It’d only been a few weeks since we reconciled, but we’d kept things close to the vest. She was attending a few classes at Hillside through the first summer session, then she was transferring to Tulane in the fall to finish out her bachelor’s and be with me in New Orleans.

My phone buzzed, and I glanced down to see Natalie’s text.

I’m done with classes today.

Me: *Good. I’m still at the hospital. Why don’t you come up here?*

Natalie: *Are you sure?*

Me: Yes. Get over here. I miss you.

Natalie: You're so impatient.

Me: Damn right, I am. I miss you every second of the day that you're not by my side. It's room 212.

Natalie: Okay. I'll be there soon. ☺

I smiled at my phone, feeling a sense of contentment that I hadn't felt in a long time.

"Why are you smiling?" Nick nudged me with his shoulder.

"It's a good day. D and Sorina have a beautiful, healthy child."

"Yeah." Nick nodded. "So, how are you, man? You seem like you've got a little pep in your step lately." He had a smug look. "Is your project back on?"

"Yeah, Nick. It's back on."

"Good. I'm happy for you, man." He smacked me on the back. "It's about time you got your shit handed to you."

I shifted my feet and smiled. "Yep, I fell pretty hard for this one." I sobered and told him the news. "She's pregnant."

"Are you serious? Is there something in the water?" His lips twitched, but he eyed me with some uncertainty. "She's pregnant."

"Who's pregnant?" Dmitri butted in, cradling Luca close to his chest, waiting as he glanced from Nick to me.

Nick said nothing as he watched me. He wasn't spilling my secret. Not that I was trying to hide it. I just hadn't told anyone, yet. "Natalie," I answered.

"You impregnated your project?"

"Are you sure you're not a robot?"

Ignoring my comment, Dmitri glanced down at his son. "So, what's next?"

"What the fuck do you think is next? She's mine, man. We're going to live our own happily ever after. I can tell you

that much.”

“Good.” Dmitri sounded like he’d orchestrated all of this and was happy with the result. As happy as he could possibly express, anyway. “Glad she got on board with the program, and you didn’t have to resort to kidnapping.”

Roman stepped up, glancing among us all. “Kidnapping?” He spread his hands out in question.

“Natalie’s pregnant,” Dmitri said, bouncing his son in his arms.

“She is?” Roman raised his eyes at me in shock. “Damn, how did I miss that? Did you and D have a running bet on who could get someone knocked up first?”

“Shut up, Roman.”

He crossed his arms, studying me like he wasn’t sure whether I was in a good headspace. “For real, man, how are you dealing?”

I grinned like a crocodile. “Never been happier.”

As if she could hear us talking about her, Natalie peeked her head through the door. She had on her glasses and wore a Sailor Moon T-shirt and denim shorts. As usual, she looked freaking irresistible. She held my gaze and smiled shyly.

“Natalie.” Kenzie pushed around us as she had her arms open wide, giving her a hug.

After a few seconds, the girls were over by Sorina’s side, and Dmitri laid Luca in my arms. “Guess you need to start practicing.”

I cradled Luca secure and cupped his tiny head. “I guess I do.”

Everyone in the room impatiently waited to have a turn holding the baby. But when I saw Natalie cradling Luca in her arms, I nearly lost my shit because I couldn’t stop obsessing about her with our child.

I stepped up to her and slid my arm around her shoulder. “I can’t stop watching you and thinking about you holding our child.”

“Oh, yeah?” She gazed up at me.

“Yeah. You’re so damn breathtaking.”

She swayed back and forth with Luca in her arms. I curled my hand over hers that was holding Luca’s. I whispered into her ear, “I need to be alone with you.”

She nodded with a secretive smile and walked over to Sorina, saying a few words before she laid Luca back in her arms.

After saying our goodbyes, I led her out of the hospital to my car.

Peering up at me in puzzlement, she said, “I have my car here, you know.”

“Sure do.” I opened the door to the back seat. “Get in.”

“But—?”

“I can’t wait.” Not waiting for an answer, I scooped her up and slid us into the seat, closing the door behind us.

“Axel, we can’t.” She tried to scoot off my lap.

“Can’t isn’t in my vocabulary. Don’t you know me by now?” I slid my hands to her waist.

“People will see. It’s broad daylight, and we’re in a hospital parking lot.”

I undid her shorts and maneuvered them down her legs. “Who cares? My windows are tinted dark. No one will know.”

“But—” she protested, and I yanked her panties aside, thrusting two fingers inside her. “Ohhhh,” she moaned.

“Your pussy is soaking wet, little liar. You need this, too. Such a needy little cunt that is so hungry for my cock.”

She bit her lip and nodded. I pumped my fingers rapidly until she was a sopping mess. She was panting and gyrating

over my hand like a stripper, and my dick was so hard it was painful. I could feel pre-cum leaking on my underwear, making the material stick to the head of my cock.

“You gonna come on my hand, Natalie?”

“Mm-hmm,” she mewled and clawed the seats in front of her.

I curled my fingers and thumbed her clit, sending her off to the stars as she clenched my fingers in a choke hold.

When she came down, I pulled out my dick. “Now I’m going to feed that needy cunt my cock.” I thrust inside her, filling her to the hilt.

“Oh, god.”

I wrapped her hair around my hand and tugged her head back, sucking on the column of her throat as I pumped into her. “Look at you. Taking my cock so well.” She reached behind me and speared her fingers into my hair, holding my head. “You want more?”

“Please.”

My prim and proper girl liked it dirty. And when she said please... Fuck, my balls drew up tighter. “That one word will be the death of me.” I bent her forward and fucked her harder, fingering her clit.

“Oh, yes!” she crooned and bucked against me.

Skin slapping skin and the smell of pure, primal sex permeated the car. My dick throbbed with the need to release, but I would fuck another orgasm out of her before that happened. “Such a tight pussy that’s gripping my cock in a vise. You’re carrying my child, and I’m still going to mark you with my cum. You want that, don’t you, baby?”

“Yes.”

Higher and higher she soared, and she was so damn wet; moisture was dripping down her inner thigh onto my lap. It was so fucking hot I was going to blow my load any minute. I

withdrew my dick and slammed back inside her snug entrance, and she screamed out my name. She clenched and convulsed, coming all over my swollen cock.

I felt the tension build to a crescendo as my cum pulsed up my cock until I released, spilling inside her as I jerked uncontrollably, filling her with my seed. “Take it. Take it all,” I groaned, grinding my dick as deep as it would go.

Still connected, I fell back in the seat, holding her in my arms. “You make me crazy.” I nuzzled her cheek until my lips found hers.

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No. As long you’re mine, I can deal with it.”

“That’s good.” She smirked against my mouth. “Because I’m not letting you go.”

“You can bet on that. I knew the moment I laid eyes on you I wasn’t letting you go.”

Later, I followed Natalie back to her dorm so she could pack a bag and stay with me. As we walked up the steps to the main entrance, we saw Lizzie passing through the door. When she saw us, she paused in surprise. “Hey. What are you doing here?” She sounded as though we caught her off guard.

“I live here. Duh,” Natalie teased.

“Well...” She glanced behind us quickly. “I gotta run.”

“Wait.” Natalie reached out, stopping her. “Is everything okay?”

When Natalie and I reconciled, Lizzie was one of the first people who knew, and she’d been supportive, so I didn’t think she was still holding a grudge over what happened. Yet, she was acting strange right now. But she did seem a little high-strung anyway and kept glancing behind us. “I’m fine. I have to meet a study group, and I’m running late.” She rushed by us, waving. “See you later.”

Natalie and I looked at each other and shrugged.

“Axel motherfucking Thomas.” I heard a deep voice behind me and turned to see Trey Lomas standing at the bottom of the steps with his arms folded, wearing a slight grin. I hadn’t seen him since the run-in at my house. Remembering how shitty that night ended, I wasn’t looking for a repeat. I was a family man now. And, I got the girl.

“Trey.” I nodded curtly. What the fuck was he doing over in this neck of the woods? Most of the football players who lived on campus were housed in campus apartments over by the stadium. Trey was going to be a junior next year. “What are you doing over here?”

It was then I noticed how Trey was staring hard at Lizzie, who was speed-walking down the sidewalk. “Meeting some classmates for a study group. Gotta keep up that GPA, man.” He smirked, but his eyes kept straying back to Lizzie, who I saw glance behind her shoulder at him. I tilted my head. *Interesting.*

Trey drew his attention back to me. “Anyway, congrats on getting drafted by New Orleans. You deserve it, man. Best running back in the nation. We’re gonna miss you.”

“Thanks.” I tapped my chest. “Rep Hillside well next year.”

“I will.” He smiled and waved at Natalie. “You got yourself a great girl.”

I stared down at her in tenderness, seeing her tan cheeks flushed. “Damn right, I do. She’s gonna be my wife and the mother of my child.”

“No shit?” Trey’s face lit up. “Congratulations.” I nudged my chin in acknowledgment.

“Anyway.” Trey lifted his textbook, backing away. “I better hit the books.” He turned and strode away as though on a mission. I was fairly certain what that mission might be.

I pulled my girl to my side, kissing the top of her head. “Let’s go get your things and get you fed.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re going to need all of your energy tonight.”

Epilogue

TWO

Natalie

—*One Year Later*

“What are you doing? I know I taught you better than this,” my mom tsked, taking the mangled circular wrapper out of my hand. “What kind of Nepali wife will you be if you can’t make mo mo?” Mo mo was a Nepali version of steamed dumplings.

“It doesn’t matter how it looks; it still tastes amazing.” I could never fold a dumpling where it looked like picture-worthy food porn, but Axel loved my mo mo, and that was good enough for me.

“Like this?” Theo’s slight country lilt came through as she held out the perfectly wrapped dumpling.

“Yes. That’s perfect.” Mom pointed to a greased metal pan.

“This looks so good,” Kenzie said and set her wrapped dumpling on the pan, as well.

Theo, Kenzie, and Sorina were here in New Orleans for the weekend. This was the first time I’d seen them in person since my wedding last summer. Well, actually two weddings. We had a Hindu wedding in San Antonio, which was planned quickly since my mother and I agreed to have it before I was too far along in my pregnancy. And then we had a small destination wedding in Cabo San Lucas.

We'd planned this reunion several months ago, and the guys were out playing golf with Axel's dad, who was also visiting. Luckily, we had a huge house with several bedrooms.

Axel had finished his first NFL season and led the league in rushing yards. Although his team made the playoffs, they lost in the division championships. But Axel was encouraged because it was a young team, and they'd been more successful than any of the sport's experts and analysts had predicted this year.

I'd transferred to Tulane to finish my bachelor's degree and completed the fall semester but took off the spring semester since I gave birth in January. I probably wouldn't return until next fall or maybe even just take online classes because I wanted to spend all my time with my family.

"Waaaahhhh!" I heard the wail of my daughter on the baby monitor. *Nap time was over*, I thought to myself. Alexa Taliya Thomas was making it well known that she was awake. Not a surprise. Our baby girl was four months old and was already establishing her presence.

I quickly rinsed my hands in the sink. "I'll be right back."

Rushing to her room, I leaned over the crib and pulled her into my arms. "It's okay," I crooned, kissing her soft cheek and relishing the sweet baby smell. I was still in awe that I was a mother and had created such a beautiful child. With my amazing husband's help, of course. She had tufts of inky black hair and wide brown eyes. "It's okay, Lexi," I whispered again, cradling her against my chest.

I carried her back to the kitchen, smiling when I saw Kenzie and Theo oohing and aahing over her. My mother bustled over with her arms out. "Come here, Lexi, darling." Any chance my mother had to hold her, she would. I was happy to oblige her because nothing mattered more to her than family.

Sorina came into the kitchen with her son, Luca, in her arms, and more female cooing commenced. She smoothed

down his wild black hair as his dark eyes glanced around at us. He grinned big and started flailing his arms at the attention.

Kenzie stretched out her arms. “Can I hold him?”

“Of course.” Sorina passed him off to Kenzie, who cuddled him close.

“She’ll be next,” I teased.

“Yeah, she will.” Sorina nodded in agreement. “She’s been talking about how she and Nick are ready to start trying for a baby.”

“I can hear you talking, you know. And yes, we are trying.” Kenzie smiled at Luca as she spoke to us.

I glanced over at Lexi, who was making what looked like a smile, or a grimace, as my mother sang and bounced her up and down.

Finishing up preparing the mo mo and dipping sauce, we were ready to start steaming the dumplings. I prepared the steamer, setting the heat. Then I heard the sputter and gasp of my daughter. She was about to start crying, even though my mother was doing everything she could to keep her calm. I knew she was probably hungry, since it’d been several hours since her last feeding.

I moved over to my mom, taking Lexi. “I’ll go feed her.”

Lexi’s face was twisted as though she was building up to a bawl, and I sped to my bedroom and dropped down into one of the designer leather club seats by our bay window and took out my breast that she latched on to without haste. “You were starving, weren’t you?” I murmured.

I caressed her head and smiled, thinking about how quickly life could change. Sometimes your best-laid plans didn’t pan out the way you always envisioned them. A year ago, I never would’ve thought I would be crazy in love, married, and a mother to boot. Especially to Axel. It wasn’t my original plan. At least, it wasn’t my plan for it to happen so

quickly. But I couldn't be happier, and I wouldn't change a thing.

I heard more voices in the other room, and one of them sounded distinctly like Axel's. I guess the boys were back from golf.

Barely a moment passed when the bedroom door opened and Axel passed through. His face lit up when he spotted us. "There are my girls."

"How was golf?"

"It was good." He stared down at us tenderly and rubbed Lexi's back. "But I missed you."

Yes. We were that couple now, the ones who missed each other if we were apart for more than a few hours. "You're so whipped," I teased and rolled my eyes in jest.

"Damn right, I am." He leaned down and kissed me on the lips. "And I won't apologize for it."

Lexi gulped and sighed, and we both gazed down at her. Her eyes fluttered slowly before they closed, and she started to doze off.

"Did I ever thank you for our beautiful daughter?"

"Yes. Every day."

"Good. You always deserve to hear it." He reached down and lifted a sleeping Lexi into his arms. "She's in a food coma now." He grinned and kissed her forehead.

"She was hungry."

Axel cradled her against his chest and peered down at my exposed breast. Biting his lip, he extended his finger and swiped at a stray drop of milk beaded on my nipple. "Daddy's hungry, too." He lapped at his index finger.

My insides quivered with need, but we had a house full of guests, not to mention our parents were here. "We have guests."

“And?” He raised a brow, not seeming to be too concerned.

I readjusted my bra and shirt. “Behave, Axel.”

“I will,” he said lightly. “For now.” Wagging his eyebrows, he patted Lexi on the back, holding her over his shoulder as he turned toward the door. “I’ll be back in five minutes, Natalie. Be ready for me,” he called out over his shoulder.

I bit my lip hiding a smile and stripped off my clothes as I entered our spacious closet. Pulling one of his jerseys from the rack, I drew the shirt over my head, smoothing it down. It hung to mid thigh fitting me like a t-shirt dress.

Humming, I adjusted the ponytail on top of my head and made my way over to our bed. Adjusting my glasses, I dropped down on the edge of the bed. I hiked up the hem of the shirt, spread my legs wide, and leaned back on my elbows. Waiting for him.



Axel

When I popped back in our bedroom, I saw her. She was sitting on the edge of our California king-sized bed with her black hair in a ponytail, her studious glasses perched on her nose, and a sultry smile on her lips. But that wasn’t all. Oh no. The little minx had on my jersey that was hiked up to her waist, and her legs spread wide showing me her beautiful pink pussy that glistened under the afternoon sunlight peaking through the blinds.

A hazy wave of lust clouded my vision, and my dick strained against my zipper. I groaned and licked my bottom lip. “Damn, baby. You know how to incite a man to lose his mind.” I stalked over to the bed. “You put on my jersey.” She was playing dirty, and I loved it. “You do know how much I

fucking love seeing you wear my jersey, don't you?" She knew I turned into an animal when I saw her in my number. The last time she wore one of my jerseys, I damn near ripped it completely apart trying to take it off and fuck her. But today, we were definitely going to leave it on.

"Yes, I do." She casually ran her index finger up the inside of her thigh stopping right at her bikini line.

"You're playing with fire."

"Maybe I want to get burned." She scraped her teeth over her plump bottom lip and, fuck, my dick twitched painfully needing to fill her with my cum. However, I knelt before her spreading her legs wider studying her cunt. "Fucking soaked, aren't you?" I pressed two fingers inside her and thrust deep.

"Yes," she moaned.

"Fuck, baby." I leaned in and kissed her as if we'd been apart for years. I pumped my fingers rapidly a few times and curled them until I found her G-spot.

She panted against my mouth and lifted her hips; I could tell she was burning with the need to come. "I'm almost there."

I smiled against her lips. "Patience, sweetheart." I withdrew my fingers and heard her huff in surprise.

"Stop teasing me." She pouted, and I wanted to bite that sexy bottom lip.

Instead, I smirked and drew my fingers to my mouth tasting her sweet arousal. I stood up and cupped her chin wanting to give her reassurance. "Don't worry. You know I'll take care of you. Now turn around and get on your hands and knees."

She leaned back on her hands and slowly rolled over pushing up on her hands and knees like the dutiful wife who needed to get fucked. She glanced over her shoulder at me with anticipation. Fuck she was tempting and my mouth curled up in approval. "Fucking perfect." I moved in closer and

pulled the jersey over her hips exposing that plump ass. She was curvy in all the right places. “So perfect.”

I dug my fingers into her ass cheeks and spread her wide giving me better access to her forbidden puckered hole. I needed to fuck this plush ass. But first, I ducked down and flattened my tongue over the entrance of her pussy teasing her until she was squirming with pleasure. When I had her panting and worked up, I leisurely licked a trail up her ass until my tongue circled her tight hole.

“Axel,” she gasped with slight apprehension. “What are you doing?”

“Just relax, Natalie.” I squeezed her ass gently and continued to stimulate and tongue her hole. I saw her back dip slightly as she tried to relax. What I was about to do took trust, and I knew my girl trusted me to take care of her.

Soon, she pressed into me, and I gripped my cock stroking myself through the material. “Fuck, I can’t wait anymore.” My voice sounded rough, and I took a step back trying to gather my control.

“Stay just like that,” I ordered as I rounded our bed and went to the nightstand to grab some lube.

Circling back, I resumed my spot behind her keeping my eyes on hers that were wide with question. “What is that?”

“Lube.” I twisted off the cap holding it over her ass and squeezed. She sucked in a breath as the liquid trailed down the valley between her ass cheeks.

“Lube?”

“Mhmm,” I trailed my finger over her delicate skin. “It’s time I claimed this beautiful ass.” I watched in fascination as her skin trembled beneath my touch. I started to work my finger into her hole.

“Bu—” She began but clenched when I pushed my finger inside her ass. I’d dabbled with fingering her ass, but she’d

never taken my thick cock. So I needed to work up to it. “Oh God,” she moaned as I added another finger inside her ass.

“Fuck. Look at you. Taking my fingers like a good girl.” I pumped my fingers slowly moving them in and out, trying to get her acclimated to me. “Are you gonna let me fuck this ass, baby?”

“I don’t—” She panted. “Know.” Pant. “If I.” Pant. “Can. It-it’s a lot.” Her head was thrown back, and she clenched against my fingers. Damn this was intense. I undid my belt and unbuttoned my shorts, yanking down the zipper. I withdrew my fingers only to thrust them inside her again. And I continued moving them in and out until she began to relax and adjust to the pressure.

“You’re starting to relax,” I said softly pulling my cock out of my briefs with my free hand, and gripped the base of my erection stroking slowly. After a few more pulses into her ass, I pulled out my fingers.

Stroking up my erection, I grabbed the lube and squeezed more over her ass and some over my dick rubbing myself until I was slick and ready. I butted the head of my cock against her hole. “Relax.”

“I don’t know if this will work. You’re too big.” She sounded panicky and tried to scoot away.

I hooked an arm around her stomach holding her against me and caressed her lower back with my other hand as though trying to soothe a frightened mare. I pressed my mouth to her ear. “You can take me. I promise. Just trust me okay, my love.” After a few moments of massaging, I felt her body unwind beneath me.

I pressed the head of my cock inside her tight entrance. She inhaled sharply but stayed still, giving me the benefit of the doubt, allowing me take another first from her. God, she was ideal for me. “Easy,” I said softly as I wedged inside and filled her with another inch. And, Christ, I had to keep myself from pounding into her and shooting my cum inside her ass.

She was quiet, but I could see the tension she tried to hide as she kept her mouth clenched in a tight line. “Does it hurt?” I paused trying to allow her to adjust to me.

“A little,” she said on a strained exhale.

“I’ll make it feel good for you.” I drove in slow and steady holding her in place. I gritted my teeth because holy fuck, her ass was squeezing my dick so tight. “Fuck, baby, I’ve never felt anything like this before.” I needed to do some mind fuck shit to my brain so I wouldn’t end up being a two-pump chump because her ass felt amazing.

I ran a hand down her lower abdomen until I reached her pelvis. “Tell me how you feel.” I needed to know. I needed to keep this connection between us. I never wanted to just take from her without giving her something, too.

“I think...” She sucked in a breath when my fingers splayed over her clit. “I think I can take it.”

I sighed in relief as my cock throbbed inside her ass. “That’s my good girl.” I gripped her ponytail and pulled her head back until her mouth was in reach. “I knew you could take me.” I ran my mouth over her lips. “I love you my beautiful queen.”

“I love you, too.”

I withdrew my cock slowly fighting the sensitivity of my dick being held like a fucking clamp. “Good.” I gritted my teeth against her mouth. “Because I’m about to ruin this ass.”

I drove myself inside her to a hilt and pressed two fingers inside her pussy. She bucked against me. “Yes,” she gasped.

“Goddamn, I can’t describe how amazing this feels.” I withdrew again and shoved my cock deep inside her again. Trying to keep some of my wits about me and continue to fuck her pussy with my fingers.

I pumped in and out in a slow motion, working her in. Then, I started fucking her ass in a controlled rhythm, while I

finger fucked her. She was so wet that it was dripping down my fingers.

“*Axel*,” she moaned. “I need to come.”

“Fuck yeah, you will.” I kept filling her holes with my fingers and cock, knowing she was so close to bursting into pieces. I could feel my balls draw up, but I was determined to hold off until my baby came all over my fingers. “Beg me,” I grunted. “If you want to come.”

She threw her head back, and her eyes were closed beneath her glasses. She looked like a sexy librarian starring in a porno. “Please. Oh please, daddy, make me come.”

Holy hell. Did she just fucking call me daddy? My dick felt like it grew three times in size, and I had to grit my teeth to keep myself from coming before she did. I thrust my fingers rapidly inside her cunt.

“Yes. Oh my god. Yes!” she screamed, and then she came all over my fingers like a damn river. Squirted all over me.

I let her ride out her orgasm until she was spent. I withdrew and dug both my hands into her ass cheeks and started rutting into that ass like a man possessed. Sweat trickled down my temple, and I stared at my last name on the back of my shirt she wore. “My name is covering your back, and I’m about to coat you with my cum. If you didn’t know it by now...you are inevitably, undeniably mine.”

I thrust in deep one final time, and quickly withdrew in time to shoot ropes of cum over her ass and lower back. I jerked myself again and again while I kept pulsing all over her, marking every part of her I could.

Then, I pulled her against me not caring about the mess between us and kissed her gently like she was the most precious thing in the world. And she was. “Let me take care of you now.” I held out my hand, and she took it because at the end of the day, she was my beautiful partner in life, and the mother of my child. We were a team.

“You always take care of me.”

“And I always will. Just like you take care of me.”



Natalie

Later, we sat around the dining table, everyone with full bellies, and shared anecdotal stories of anything from our childhoods to our college days.

Axel’s father stood up and stretched, stating he was going to bed since he had an early flight back to Dallas and had to be at the airport at five in the morning. Axel rose up, and they hugged. His father was pushing fifty and was the definition of a silver fox with his salt-and-pepper hair. He was striking and looked like an older version of Axel. They were almost identical in height and build. His father still worked out daily and was in excellent shape.

Standing up with Lexi in my arms, I gave him a hug. “It was so good to see you.”

He swiped at Lexi’s tuft of hair. “I had a great time. You better come visit me soon,” he warned in a teasing voice.

“We will,” I promised.

My mom made her way to the kitchen to start cleaning up, but Axel followed her, stopping her before she made it very far. “I’ve got this,” he said. Soon, Nick and Roman were up and in the kitchen helping. Seemed like old times when they lived in Hillside.

Roman glanced around. “Where the hell’s Dmitri?”

“He’s changing Luca’s diaper,” Sorina called out as she retook her seat at the table. “You want to go help him? It was a big one, especially since Luca’s been eating solid food.”

Roman scrunched his nose. “No thanks.”

Everyone laughed.

Axel slapped him on the back. “It’s not so bad. I change diapers all the time.”

“I still can’t get over seeing you and Dmitri changing diapers.” Roman bent over, setting a plate in the dishwasher.

“One day it will happen to you, man.”

“Now, I’d pay money to see Roman change a diaper,” Nick said and nudged his chin at Axel. “Should we make a wager on it?”

“You know I’m game.”

Roman ignored them both.

Soon after, Dmitri was back holding a freshly bathed Luca in his arms. “That was a bad one,” he said gravely. “Like an explosion went off in his diaper.”

Cue another chuckle from us all.

“Aww, darling, I’m sorry.” Sorina held out her arms to take Luca, who sported a lopsided smile. “But you did brag about how our son could eat anything, and you know what goes in... must come out.”

“Anyway,” my mom interjected. “I think I am going to go to bed.”

Soon, everyone dispersed to their rooms for the night. Axel was putting Lexi to bed and whispered in my ear to be ready and waiting for him to “tuck” me in.

I cleaned my face, put on the sexy pink lace bra and panties Axel had bought me the other day, and slipped into the bed. Smiling, I thought about what a wonderful weekend it had been, seeing friends and family. It made me realize how fortunate we were. We’d already made a pact to get together at least once a year, maybe more if we could swing it and everyone’s schedules worked out.

Ten minutes later, I was still waiting. Fifteen minutes later, I started to worry. Thirty minutes later, I sighed and slipped out of the bed. Lexi normally fell asleep quickly.

Shrugging on a robe, I hurried out of our room and down the hall.

Stopping at Lexi's door, I heard the low rumble of Axel's voice. "You wanna hear a story?"

Lexi cooed, and I peered through the half-open door, seeing her bouncing excitedly in his arms. She was wide awake.

"All right, then. Once upon a time, there was a..." Axel paused. "Let's just say there was a cynical man who portrayed himself as happy-go-lucky and had everything in the world going for him. Fame, girls, uber-intelligent... basically living the dream." I bit back a laugh and glanced up at the ceiling.

"He literally had anything his heart desired. However," he sobered, "he felt empty and bored. After a few years, he thought he had a hole in his heart."

Lexi ducked her head as her eyes started to close, and Axel tucked her under his chin. "I know. It was truly pathetic, but it's true." I shook my head, but my heart melted.

"Then he met this innocent princess. She didn't wear tulle or have a tiara. She wore oversized sweatshirts, baggy jeans, and glasses. She had these voyeur tendencies, too, but that's neither here nor there. All I knew was when I saw her standing in that library, with thick black hair and cheeks flushed in embarrassment, I thought she was the most beautiful girl in the world."

He rocked in the chair and cupped Lexi's head as he stared down at her. "I thought it would be easy. I thought I could crook my finger and she would jump at the chance to be with me. But it wasn't easy at all."

At this point, he leaned down and kissed her forehead. "I realized I would do anything to have her. And when she hit my car, I saw an opportunity." He smiled, staring off into space. "Then I had to sweeten the deal, to ensure she would eventually be mine. She just didn't know it yet."

He exhaled and continued rocking. “She kept pushing me away, and the more evasive she was, the more I couldn’t stop myself.” He paused and glanced down at Lexi. “Sidenote: I swear to God, if anyone like me comes after you like that, I’ll beat his ass.” He had a scowl on his face.

By this time, Lexi was fast asleep. Axel kept steadily rocking his chair, and his facial expression softened. “However, I would’ve done anything to have this perfect woman in my life. And I did. I staged a car crash and made her think it was her fault because I knew I needed to have her in my life.” He dropped his head. “I’m not proud of that shit, but I couldn’t bear to see her with anyone else. I couldn’t imagine living without her.”

I pushed through the door. His head raised, and his lips lifted in a smile, as if he were so confident in himself, he didn’t care what I’d heard. “You have me,” I whispered, walking toward him like I was a moth to a flame. I couldn’t turn away if I tried.

His eyes were steady and showed all the love he had for me. “I know, baby.”

I reached in and grabbed a sleeping Lexi. “She’s fast asleep.”

“I know that, too.”

Kissing her tenderly, I placed her in her crib. Axel crowded in behind me, and I peered up at him. “I love you.”

“I love you more, Hardcore, and now I’m gonna prove it in every single way.”

And he did.

THE END



Stay tuned for Trey and Lizzie’s story. TBR: [Forever Trey](#).

If you would like to read more about Marco Cruz, the NFL QB who played golf with the guys, you can check him out in [Jugador](#). It's free in Kindle Unlimited.



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Besos/XOXO,

Rose





About
THE
AUTHOR

Rose Croft is a wannabe poet and a writer in her own mind. She's a wife and mom to a beautiful daughter and lives her own happily ever after. For updates on her books or if you just want to visit and chat about anything and everything, visit her at:

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