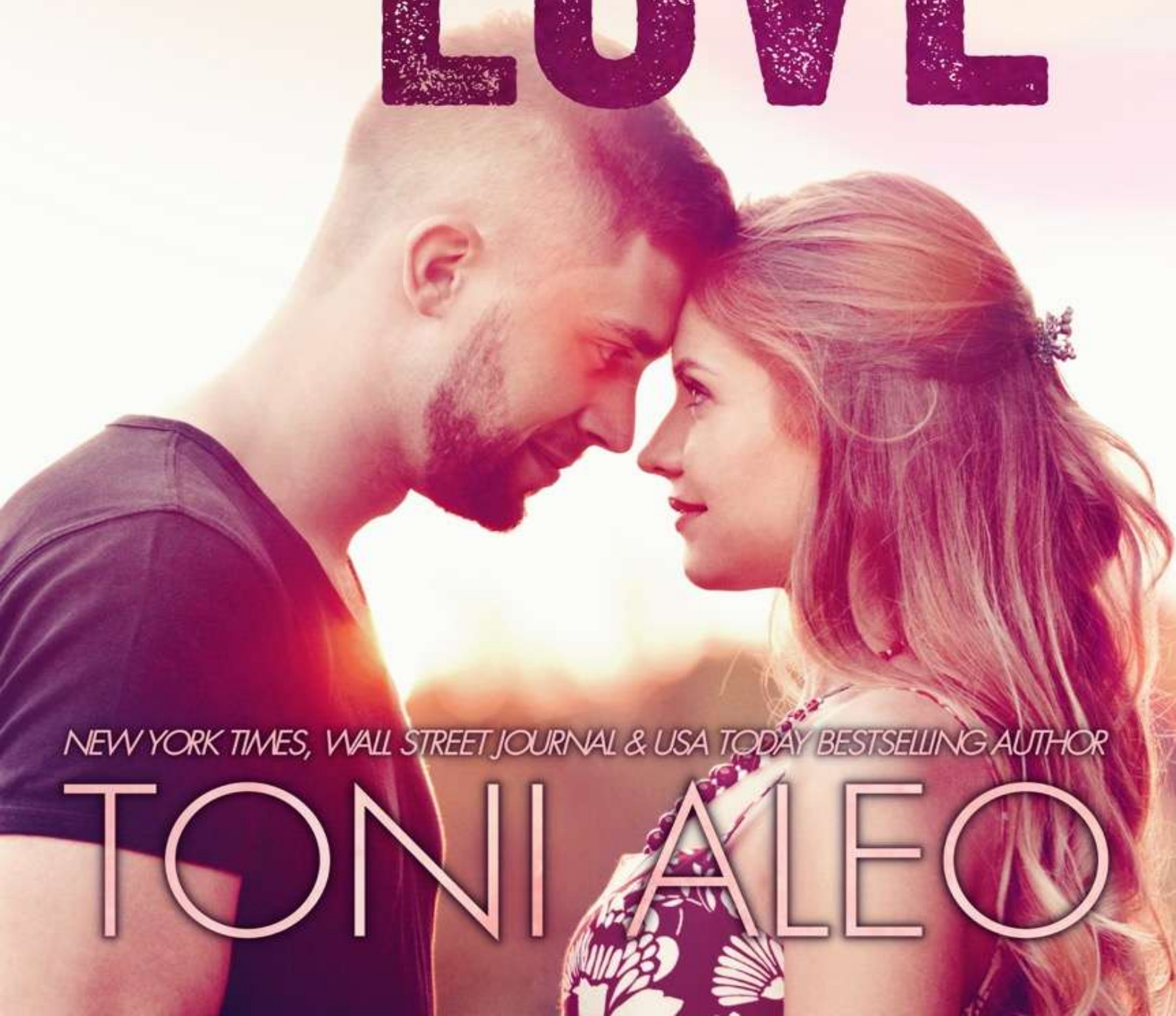


A BELLEVUE BULLIES NOVEL

CHOSEN

by **LOVE**



NEW YORK TIMES, WALL STREET JOURNAL & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TONI ALEO

Chosen by Love

BELLUEVE BULLIES

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Alyssa:

You are too much.

And you are perfect the way you are.

Prologue

BENSON AND CAMERON.

Cam and Benny.

No matter what name anyone uses, the two of them have a history.

A history that is unforgettable. One that, no matter how much time passes, binds them to each other. The outside world doesn't know what happened, but their friends say it's a messy history, and their parents are still upset about what transpired between the two. For them, no matter what, no matter who, they'll always be a part of each other's past. It wasn't easy sitting side by side in the clinic for the abortion Cameron chose to have, nor was it easy for them afterward. Cameron was convinced Benson would leave her to heal on her own, go live his life, but as he had from the moment she'd told him about the pregnancy, he stood by her side.

Or rather, lay by her side.

For a week, Benson didn't leave Cameron's room. He pushed off his trip home to stay with her until she was healed. Physically, that is. Emotionally, she was pretty sure it would take years for both of them to recover. He lay with her, he got her snacks, he watched trash TV that he hated, but most of all, he was that silent pillar of strength for her to lean on. He didn't question her; she didn't question him. They stayed in her room, and they existed together, in comfortable unity.

Nobody could ever understand their fears, their sadness, their what-ifs. The *maybe we shouldn't have*. The *maybe we*

should have gone through with the pregnancy. But they both knew doing that wasn't what they wanted. They were young, babies themselves, only eighteen, and both with huge goals that didn't include being parents yet. It wasn't the thought of being tied to each other—they both cared for each other, maybe even liked each other more than they thought, so that wouldn't be an issue. It was the fact that neither was ready for a child. Not that those words were ever uttered after it was done. Cameron and Benson sat, ate, and watched TV. As friends, who were lovers at one time, and now were connected over a choice that would always be a part of them.

When they parted after that week, Benson left a kiss on Cameron's lips that still lingered there even after all the time apart. Some would say she was a bitch for cutting him off when he left for home, but what no one would ever understand was that every time his name popped up on her phone, it hurt her. It made her yearn for him, made her remember the pain from the choice she'd made. The guilt would suffocate her because why would he want anything to do with her after everything that had happened? He was so supportive, so kind, and after a few texts, the shame of not answering him kept her from doing so.

She was embarrassed, while all Benson wanted was to talk to her. To hear her voice, to make sure she was okay. Unfortunately, he wasn't given that opportunity, and he never understood why. Instead of demanding it when he saw Cameron on campus, he gave her space. He watched her from afar, but never, not even a bit, could he shake his feelings for her.

Days turned into weeks with no contact whatsoever that whole summer and even into the start of their sophomore year. Benson figured that was how his life would be. Cameron wasn't meant to be in it.

That thought never felt right, though. And when Benson walked into media day for the Bellevue Bullies hockey team to find the Bellevue gymnastics team in attendance, he couldn't stop himself from being hopeful. It caught him off guard to see all the sparkling leotards and gorgeous girls, but only one

stood out for him. It had been seven months since he'd seen her and, as before, her beauty was unmatched.

Her blondish-brown hair hung to her waist, longer than before. Stunning waves of silky strands that he could still remember running his fingers through. Her brown eyes were bright, and they sparkled just like the teal leotard that hugged every single inch of her body. Her legs were strong, cut, and defined, and under the sleeves of her leotard, he knew her arms were the same. Unlike her teammates, she didn't have six-pack abs, not that it mattered to him, but he knew it was because she liked food as much as he did.

Fuck, he missed eating with her.

When her eyes met his, everything faded away, and he swallowed hard around the lump that had formed in his throat. He missed her. A lot. Cameron's eyes were knowing and even full of apprehension as they held each other's gaze. She'd known he would be here for media day. The teams were to take photos together for the publicity run for "the Beauty and the Bull," the promotion teams were working on together. But nothing could have prepared her for his stormy gaze.

Benson was thick in all the right places and massive. Wide shoulders, trim waist, and strong legs that made him the fastest on the ice. His teal-and-black jersey brought out the gray of his eyes. His hair was shaved close on the sides, but at the top, dark, curly hair fell into his eyes. A dusting of hair along his jaw made him look more dangerous than ever. He'd had a baby face when they'd first met, but now, he looked like a man. She wondered if he thought the same of her, that she had matured and grown, but words weren't formed as they held each other in a heated gaze. God, he left her breathless, just as he had before everything had happened. Back when it was just them, enjoying each other and hanging out. She thought he'd be mad or even ignore her, but his eyes were kind, calming.

As they always had been.

She missed him.

Neither said anything, though. They just watched each other.

When their names were called, Cameron noted a bit of surprise on his face. He must not have known of the press run of just the two of them. Since they both had huge social media followings, they would be the faces of the Bellevue hockey and gymnastics programs. The idea for the Beauty and the Bull promotion had actually been Cameron's. She'd even suggested that Benson be her Bull—not that she'd admit that to anyone, especially not him. Though she hadn't spoken to him in months, she couldn't deny how good they looked together. While he was dark, she was light, and the contrast was stunning.

He licked his lips as she stepped up beside him, their eyes still locked. "Hey there," he finally muttered, and the deep tenor of his voice had her insides clenching in all the right ways.

Cam tried to sound confident. "Hey."

Then neither said anything else. Benson took direction well, listening to the photographer and posing with his arms crossed as Cameron stood beside him, mirroring his stance. Heat radiated off him in waves, and she assumed that her body was doing the same. A tether stretched between them, one that urged her to touch him, to meet his gaze, but she fought against it, keeping enough distance between the two of them to protect the safety of her heart.

But then the photographer asked for her to lean on him. She looked up at Benson to find his eyes waiting for hers. A slow grin moved over his lips as he held out his hand. Cameron took it, and Benson leaned his head down, kissing her knuckles ever so softly. Cameron's breath caught audibly as his warm lips pressed into her fingers. Gone were his teammates and hers, and it was just the two of them, their eyes locked as his lips stayed on her skin.

But neither of them said anything.

Not a single word.

But Cameron didn't feel words were needed.

What else could be said, when she knew he didn't want her after everything that had happened. How could he? Being with her was a constant reminder of what had transpired, and she knew her pain was still raw.

But that didn't mean Cameron didn't enjoy his lips on her knuckles.

Or his eyes holding hers.

It didn't mean she didn't miss him desperately.

It just meant that things between them would never be the same.

CHAPTER

One

BENSON

Senior Year

My lungs are burning, but I ignore the pain as I haul ass down the ice with the puck moving back and forth on my stick. I hear Coach yelling something, but my eye is on the goal. While this is just practice, I always give one hundred percent. Before, it was to prove myself to our new coach, and it worked because he made me the captain my sophomore year. Choosing me even over seniors who had been there all four years. My talent spoke for itself, but because of that title, I can't be anything but the best for him and for my team. If I want into the NHL, I have to focus, I have to dig in, and I have to be the example for everyone else.

Because Jayden Sinclair will kick you off his team faster than his slap shot, and I'm pretty sure that sucker clocked in at 103 miles per hour the other day.

So yeah, no one fucks with him.

With this drill, I'm supposed to pass the puck to my winger, but I don't see ReVerti anywhere. I have open ice, a breakaway, really, and I am already loving the pure dread filling the face of my goalie, Odder. Poor bastard. He may be the son of a hockey goalie god, but he knows just as well as I do, I'm about to score on his ass. I fight back the grin, the

excitement, from trying one of my trick shots as I focus hard, and soon I'm holding my breath.

I slide the puck back between my legs, catching it behind me with my blade. I pass the puck to the left, as if I am trying to go to his left leg pad, and Odder moves to block it, as he should, and as I expected. But instead of shooting the puck, I snatch it out of midair with my blade and toss it into the open net I created when I pulled him left.

Goal.

Sick-ass fucking goal.

I am a hockey-scoring god.

Odder's head falls, he calls me a fucker, and I can't even contain the whoop of excitement that bursts out of me.

"Don't worry, buddy. I betcha your dad couldn't even have blocked that."

"Fuck you."

"You know that was sick," I call to him, and even he fights back his grin. ReVerti taps his glove to mine, but before anyone can agree about how sick that goal was, Coach Sinclair blows his whistle.

"Jeannot!"

Ahfuckbuddy.

I cringe as Coach Sinclair's voice rings out through the rink. Everyone goes silent as the gazes of my teammates snap to where I stand. They know I'm fucked. I know I'm fucked, but I couldn't help myself. I shuffle my blades against the ice in a nervous tic as I force myself to look to where he's standing in the middle of the ice. He does that to me. Makes me nervous, that is. No one else can instill pure fear in my soul the way Coach can. He has been riding my ass since day one, and I know it's to make me better, but man, he scares the hell out of me. You don't come to play for the Bellevue Bullies and suck. It's that simple. If you're trash, you're out, and he doesn't even bat an eye if that hurts your feelings.

Coach Sinclair played for the Nashville Assassins, was the captain, was one of the best, and he doesn't do losing. I feel like he has a chip on his shoulder from being medically retired from the NHL, even if, in doing so, he then came to Bellevue to make us a winning team. If you're not a winner like him, don't trip skating off the ice when he sends you away. In the three years I've played for him, we've made it to the finals every time. We haven't won yet, but it's gonna happen this year. I feel it in my bones.

If Coach doesn't kill me first.

Or make it so that I'm not drafted.

Both are huge possibilities.

On his own skates, a stick in one glove and his other on his hip, he glares at me. I smile widely at him and wave. "Yes, sir?"

"Come here." I feel everyone silently laughing at me as I skate toward him, my head hanging low. When I reach him, I meet his gaze as he asks, "What was the drill?"

"A drop pass to ReVerti, but—"

"The drill?" he cuts in, and I swallow hard.

"A drop pass to ReVerti, and then I was to go around the barn to the crease to tip in."

He nods. "So, you did understand the assignment?"

"I did."

"Then please explain to me why you did that trick shit that would never work unless you were on a pretty extensive breakaway, which doesn't happen in the college league because everyone is fighting to get into the NHL?"

I press my lips together. *Oh, I'm about to get it.* "Because I was on an extensive breakaway, and since it was practice, I knew I could make it, and I knew it would be sick." I shuffle my skates in good faith, but it doesn't help. Coach's glare only deepens. I feel like I'm the only one who can make Coach turn the color of a tomato.

“It was pretty sick,” he agrees, and then he leans in. He blows his whistle and then yells, “But it wasn’t the fucking drill, eh, buddy!”

Being that Coach is from Nashville and grew up here, I know he is mocking my accent. “No, sir. It wasn’t.”

“Was a camera on you? I know you show out for your TikTok, but last time I checked, I said no cameras during practice.”

“No cameras, sir.”

“Then what the hell? How does it look when my captain doesn’t do the drill?”

Shuffle, shuffle. “Like I don’t deserve the C.”

“Exactly,” he says slowly. “Which also means?”

“I’ll be doing laps until I either puke or you’re ready to leave?”

He simply nods. “Very good because you’d hate for me to take the C, eh?”

“I do happen to like it very much where it is.”

He pokes at my captain’s C patch then. It doesn’t hurt, but it doesn’t have to; his point is clear. “Okay then, be my captain, set the example, lead your team, or I’ll give you a P for your jersey. Which stands for...?”

“Puck bucket carrier,” I say grudgingly, and he pats my chest.

“I’m glad you know how to listen to some things I say.” I have to force myself not to jump when he blows the whistle again. He calls out, “Again, and if Jeannot can’t do the right play, everyone will be doing laps.”

Even without the warning looks I get from my teammates, I wouldn’t dare do what I’m not supposed to do. Though, I get back on a breakaway and I know I could probably make another trick shot, but I refrain.

Barely.

With my laps, I am the last one to the locker room. I am panting and feel like I am going to puke when Odder slaps my shoulder. “Face it. Those laps were worth it. That shot was sick.”

I laugh as I fall back into my locker, fighting for air. McGrady sits beside me, nodding. “Hell yeah, it was.”

I nod as I shake off my gloves and hand them to Penelope Odder, our locker room manager. “It was a good shot,” she tells me as she takes my gloves and gives me a sweet smile.

“Thanks, Penny.” I lean into my locker, exhaling. I’ve gotten to know Penelope and her brother, Phillippe, a lot over the years, not only on the ice but through family events with my billet family, the Adlers. I’m not sure I’m supposed to still call them that, though, because I don’t live with them anymore. I live with my best friend and their son, Quinn. But truthfully, Shea and Elli Adler are more my parents than my own.

I haven’t had a relationship with my parents since the summer after my freshman year. I miss them and wish I could call them, but thankfully, Shea and Elli have taken me in. They love me, feed me, come to my games, and no matter what, I know they have my back. Something I didn’t always have, which was a big reason for leaving home for America. I wanted stability, I wanted a home, and the Adlers have given that to me. A home for the last six years and a best friend for life.

As if thinking of him conjured him, I hear my phone sound with his text message tone. I reach for my phone to see what he wants.

Quinn: When are you coming home?

Me: I’m about to take a shower and then heading that way.

Quinn: Bet. I need to talk to you.

Uneasiness eats me alive.

Me: Quinn, I have a touch of anxiety. Tell me what I did.

Quinn: LOL, it isn’t even about you, jackass. It’s about me.

Me: Are you dying?

Quinn: Not today.

Me: Are you kicking me out?

Quinn: Again, not today.

Me: Did you make me food?

Quinn: Once more, not today because I'm not Mom.

Me: But I'm hungry

Quinn: You're always hungry. Get me a Mexican pizza from Taco Bell on your way.

I send him a thumbs-up emoji as I throw my phone into my pullover pocket and start to undo my skates. I watch a pair of bare feet move by me before the person they're attached to sits beside me, and inwardly, I groan.

“Ooh, my dad doesn't like you.”

Fucking Dawson Sinclair.

Coach's kid.

My nemesis.

And my little hockey brother.

I dislike him greatly.

I don't even look up. “Hey, Dawson. Go find your creek, loser.”

Everyone chortles as Dawson laughs in a fake-obnoxious way. This kid gets under my skin, and I don't know what it is about him. I've been dealing with him since my sophomore year, and I can't stand him. He is cocky, full of himself, and thinks he's the best on the team. He reminds me so much of myself, but the thing is, I *am* the best on the team.

“Come on, Captain. You think I haven't heard that before? Get new material.”

Hell, I didn't know what *Dawson's Creek* was before I met him. Not that I tell him that. “Go clean your creek, or get dumped by a girl named Katie.”

Dawson snorts. “Loser, you can’t even insult my name right. It was Joey.”

“Whatever, go play with your buddy Pacey.” I flip him the bird. “Oh wait, he sleeps with your girl in your creek.”

“You’re such a loser,” Dawson scoffs.

“Fine. When you’re done cleaning your creek and crying over your girl who slept with your best friend, holler at me, and maybe I can help you get off that bench you ride so hard.” Everyone laughs more, giving Dawson a hard time, taunting him. I would feel bad, but I don’t. I hang up my skates, wiggling my toes against the carpet. Dawson shoots daggers at me, and I just grin. I may fuck with him for being Dawson from the creek, but it chaps his ass that his daddy has him on the bench. “What was your TOI? Five minutes last game?”

Dawson mirrors his dad’s tomato-colored face, and I take great pride in the fact that I can piss them both off so greatly. Especially when I know Coach isn’t his dad on the ice; he’s his coach. He’s told Dawson over and over again, if he wants to play, he has to work for it. Problem is, the kid doesn’t know if he wants to play football or hockey. For some of us, there aren’t two options. But if it were me, I’d choose hockey.

Hockey is life.

“Don’t poke the bull if you aren’t ready for the horns,” I tease as I pull off my jersey and then my girdle. “Let me know when you’re ready to start working for it, eh?”

That shuts Dawson right up as I finish taking everything off. As I head into the shower with a towel around my waist, I find Penny is leaning against the locker room door. She’s pulling her long strawberry-blond hair up into a high ponytail as her crystal-blue eyes meet mine. “You don’t have to be so hard on him.”

I flash her a wide grin. Penny is a gorgeous girl, tall like her Swedish daddy but curvy like her mom. I know she has a thing for me, but she wants a relationship. I’m not doing relationships. I might hook up here and there, but I can’t bring myself to take the leap with her—or, really, anyone. I want to

say I don't know why, but I do know why. I just don't like admitting it. "Kid gets on my nerves."

She laughs. "If I remember correctly, you were an annoying kid at one point."

"I still am," I say with a wink as I head into the showers, and I'm followed by her laughter. It's nice laughter. Carefree, fun. A laughter I could enjoy.

If I didn't want to hear someone else's laugh instead.

CHAPTER

Two

CAMERON

My leg bounces as I check the insights of my latest post on TikTok. The video is of me getting ready for my morning practice, and I made sure to mention and tag the products I used during the day. Thankfully, it already has over sixty thousand likes and thousands of comments. I make a mental note to do another practice video at the end of the week, and then I check my insights for my commissions on the products I mentioned in last week's outfit haul. Everything is going great; I'm making money, and my final gymnastics season is upon me.

Some would say I'm living the life.

I'm not *some*.

I am stressed beyond the max by this upcoming media push for our gymnastics team. Since I am a senior, the captain of the team, and it's my last year, I want to go out with a bang. Not only that, but also my grade in my last marketing class depends on it. It's a yearlong class, so it's vital for my graduation.

I have been running the social media accounts for the Bullies gymnastics team since my freshman year, once I realized being a dentist was not my passion. Being an influencer is great; I make good money and don't have to depend on my mom and dad. Plus, since I'm not sure if I want to travel before I get a job, I can support myself fully wherever

I go. The only downside to the influencer life is the creeps and haters, who come out all the time, and that is exhausting in itself.

I could go for a week in bed, watching trash TV and eating snacks.

When I hear the dressing room door shut, I turn off my phone and tuck it between my thighs as my best friend, Callie, comes out. The beauty of her in her wedding dress is so overwhelming that I forget every ounce of the stress that is weighing me down. The bodice of the dress is made of lace with butterflies embroidered throughout it. The bodies of the butterflies are made of crystals. The neckline is a halter since Callie has been a bit self-conscious about her breasts since she had to get a replacement set put in after she fell into the bars last year and popped her left implant. Her sister and I tried to talk her into waiting until after the season for her replacement set, but she said she didn't feel like a woman without them and she didn't want to push Evan's and her wedding back.

Since she's my best friend, I support whatever she wants. I could never fathom the emotional toll of having your breasts removed as a teenager as a preventive measure, and in my eyes, Callie is a fucking queen. But I get it. She's also waited years to marry Evan, so I understand.

The neckline of the bodice is studded with billions of crystals, and the back of her dress is open, showing off her totally ripped and toned back. The skirt is an off-white silk fabric that clings to the curves of her hips and then flows out, with a slit up to the top of her thigh. Stunning. Callie is just perfectly stunning.

“Oh, Cal. I love it.”

She steps onto the podium and whooshes out her skirt as she bites her lip. It turns white from the pressure of her teeth as she looks herself over. This is her fourth fitting for this dress. Aviva, her sister, found it in South Carolina and had it shipped to her, and we've been coming to get it altered and make sure it's what Callie wants. Somedays, I feel like she doesn't like it.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” I prompt as I meet her eyes in the mirror.

Callie exhales. “I feel like the slit is too much now.”

I try not to laugh. “Okay. Why? I think you look incredible. I love this silhouette. The bodice fits perfectly, and the way it lays on your hips is flawless. The back is gorgeous. I mean, I know we have like six months until the wedding, but I think the dress is perfect.” She doesn’t say anything, just watches herself as she moves back and forth. “If this is the dress you want,” I add that just to remind her she can go a different direction.

“I’m pretty sure someone would lose their mind at me after I had this thing altered four times.”

“I’ll protect you,” I say with a wink, and she grins. “Is this not the dress you want to marry Evan in?”

She drags her eyes down her body as she exhales once more. “It is, but I can hear Nico in my head.”

Oh, I love her brother-in-law/dad, but man, with his autism, he can get in her head. He doesn’t have a filter at all, and also, I think he still feels Callie is a little girl, the one he helped with math. He’s so protective, but Evan is just dreamy.

“Let him go. He’s gonna be very supportive and loving that day, or I’ll kill him. Or Aviva will.”

She laughs at that. “But what if Evan doesn’t like it?”

“Callie, come on,” I say with an eye roll. “He just wants you to be Mrs. Evan Adler. All this other crap doesn’t matter, does it?”

Her eyes sparkle at that. “It doesn’t. We’ve waited years for this.”

“Exactly.”

She holds my gaze in the mirror, still unsure.

“Do you feel gorgeous in the dress?”

She slowly nods. “I do.”

“Then you’re golden, Cal. It’s a done deal.”

A grin moves over her lips before she turns, wrapping her arms around my neck tightly. I hug her back just as tight, thankful to have her as my best friend.

With my laptop open, I take a bite of my salad while Callie sits across from me, doing the same. She has a paper that is due this afternoon, and I’m working on my presentation for my meeting with Coach and the social media team. Callie and I do this a lot. Even though she lives with Evan in their own little townhouse, thankfully, I’m still welcome whenever I want. I, unfortunately, still live in the Bullies’ gymnastics house, mostly to save money, but it’s getting to be too stressful. My influencer status is getting too big for campus living. I need to find myself a little townhouse like this, off campus, but I also want to travel, and I don’t want to be tied to a lease. I wish I could make up my mind about what I want to do. I’ve already been offered a position with Bellevue’s social media team, but I’m unsure if I want to stay in Tennessee. I can go anywhere, do anything, so it’s hard to make such a big decision. Yeah, my parents are here, my friends, and everything I know, but sometimes I feel that there is more out there. That I should want more, yet I have no clue.

Which isn’t good when I’m about to be a real adult.

Not that I’m a fake one, but, like, I can go both ways. On the one hand, I’m still an immature little girl, and on the other, I’m a put-together woman boss. I toe the line beautifully. Much like I do on beam.

As I go over my notes and make notations, mentally, I remind myself to remember details, which is a bad idea since I can’t remember anything. So, I make more notes, filling Post-it notes and sticking them to my computer. When I open my final project file, which has been flagged by my professor, I groan inwardly when I see a note from her.

I need something different from the gymnastics team's social media. It is apparent that you are talented in marketing a gymnastics team—or any team, for that matter. Give me something else. Give me more. I want to see you think outside the box. I know you have it in you, Ms. White.

Fanfuckingtastic.

I let my head fall to the kitchen table, bouncing off the bowl of salad and getting hit in the face with a cucumber and a tomato.

Callie snickers as I squeeze my eyes shut, plucking the tomato off my face and putting it in my mouth. “My brain hurts,” I complain around my chewing. “Dr. Willard didn’t approve my final project outline.”

Callie’s grin falls away. “What? Why? I don’t even know why you have to do a final project. You are the poster child for the marketing department.”

She isn’t wrong. “She says she wants something more, that she knows I can market teams, but she wants me to think outside the box. I did my fall paper on my influencer stuff, so I can’t do my spring final on that.”

She thinks that through, biting her lip. Then her eyes light up. “Maybe market an event? A charity event?”

I make a face. “I did that last year, and now that she said what she did, I think I need something better.”

“Oh yeah,” she agrees, looking just as defeated as I feel.

I bring my lip in between my teeth, furrowing my brow. I let my head fall back when my brain aches from moving so quickly.

If this is what it feels like to be an adult, don’t sign me up.

CHAPTER

Three

CAMERON

I still have no idea what I am doing for my final project as I head back to the Bellevue sports compound.

I went through every possible idea I had in my head on the drive over, and nothing is clicking. Nothing feels good enough, and now that I know Dr. Willard wants me to think outside the box, I know I have to rise to that. She's right; I can market ice to a polar bear, but how can I use my skills to do something more? Events, I've done. Marketing for teams, easy, done. Marketing myself, easy peasy. But what can I do to prove I am the best in my class? What is out of the box?

I have no clue whatsoever.

I sit down as my coach and the senior media team gather in the meeting spot in our training facility. The Bullies gymnastics team shares the facility with the hockey, volleyball, and basketball teams. The meeting rooms are always full, with team meetings or the student athletes doing their homework. It's a little loud today, but once the door shuts, it's not as bad.

As I look across the table at my coworkers, I smile in a friendly manner. I've worked with Nati, Amber, Levi, and West regularly. While my focus is more on the gymnastics team, I do help with ideas and different strategies for everything on the Bellevue campus. Amber is an incredible photographer with an eye like a hawk. She can see things no

one else does and always gets the best shots. West is a Photoshop genius. I swear he can turn a turd into a flower. Our senior videographer is Levi, and sometimes I think he doesn't even need to waste his time in school anymore. He's fantastic with the camera and always gets the best shots of me at meets and in practice. No matter if it's with a phone or a camera, he kills it either way. Nati is the project manager, the person who keeps everyone in line and helps execute ideas. The team is badass, and our social media accounts for the school have taken off. We've raised attendance at sporting events, we've attracted a lot of kids to the school, and most of all, we have a blast doing it.

After everyone says hello, we get started. I'm the first to speak. "Confirmation emails with Coach Sinclair have been reviewed, and the team will be ready for the Beauty and the Bull media day on Sunday."

"Great. Since it's your senior year, you'll go out as our Beauty, and thankfully, Benson Jeannot has agreed to be our senior Bull," Nati informs us.

Benson Jeannot.

Benny.

Benson fucking Jeannot.

Oh, butterflies be still.

I don't react outwardly to his name, but inwardly, the butterflies I asked to be still aren't listening, nor do I feel they care to listen. Which is dumb. I haven't spoken to him but maybe three times over the last couple years. When we have a shoot, it's to the point and we get it done, even if heat explodes through me when our hands touch and I'm breathless the whole time.

It's silly; the ship of Benson and Cameron has sunk. It was hit by a hell of a cannonball, and there is no coming back from that. Yet I still think of him. I still feel his lips on mine. His hand in mine. His heart's steady beat as I lay in his arms. I can still remember every single interaction between us, and they still feel just as real as if they were yesterday.

“Good since it’s been that way for the last three years,” Levi laughs, and he’s not wrong. “We’ll need him to share on his accounts too. His social media is almost as popular as Cameron’s.”

I didn’t know that. I grab Levi’s phone since he has Benson’s account up. I’m impressed by his content, and even more impressed that he is only a few hundred thousand followers from my total. His feed is full of hockey stunts and him playing guitar. He also has a YouTube channel with his best friend, Quinn, where they do covers of songs. He’s blowing up, which is great. It’ll further our campaign even more. “He has shared every year. I’m sure this one will be no different. But we can confirm through email,” I say offhandedly.

“I’m not worried about views,” Nati tells us as she turns her computer. “Each year we do the Beauty and the Bull campaign, our reach, our views, and our donations skyrocket. People love you two together.”

“I mean, they aren’t hard to look at,” Amber supplies. “He’s a freaking dreamboat.”

Coach scoffs at that. “He knows it too.”

West agrees. “But they complement each other. Like, Cameron is so light, while he’s so dark. It’s like yin and yang, and people like looking at them.”

While I am fully aware they are speaking of me as if I’m not in the room, I’m completely overwhelmed by the insights into our campaigns. I’ve seen these numbers before, even recorded them for the analysts, but they are insane. I click through the data, and no other campaign for gymnastics or hockey has done as well as the Beauty and the Bull. That is so weird to me.

I mean, don’t get me wrong, Benson is a good-looking dude. Dark hair, curly on top and shaved up the sides. Dark, gorgeous gray eyes with full, lush lips. Long lashes and a body that should be illegal. He’s made of muscle. Thick tree-trunk legs, wide door-busting shoulders. He’s a stud.

And I'm not bad, but even I don't get views like this on a video of just me.

"I wonder why this campaign does so well," I find myself saying out loud. Everyone looks over at me, confused by my question. "Don't get me wrong, it's a great campaign. I'm proud of it. But these views and the number of comments... wow."

Nati gives me a dry look. "Do you not read the reports?"

I nod eagerly. "I do, but seeing the numbers like this is a lot to take in. I mean, each photo of us has over a million comments and that's only grown since the first one."

Levi clicks on his phone and then shows me the insights for one of the videos of Benson and me. It's from sophomore year, when Benson took my hand in his, kissing my knuckles as I grinned up at him, swooning because I am a fool. It's a gorgeous video, we're gorgeous, but I know it was all for show. He was just showing off. He loves attention. It had nothing to do with me. "Cameron, people love you two together."

Amber holds up her phone. "Especially since no one believes you aren't together. If you read the comments, everyone says you're hiding your relationship."

I scoff at that, and I don't miss the look from my coach. He knows Benson's and my history. "We are not involved."

"We know that, but it's almost like that need to see two people who look good together be together," Amber says, though it doesn't make sense to me. "It's like with *Dancing with the Stars*. When a couple has incredible chemistry, everyone wants them to date. Your chemistry is electric."

"It's a soundless video. How can anyone make any assumptions from that?" I challenge and she laughs.

"You don't need sound. It's the way you two look at each other. Everyone loves love."

Coach holds his hand up at that. "Except me. I hate love."

I snort. “Says a newly divorced guy.” Then I glance back to Amber. “But we aren’t in love—or together.”

Coach shrugs. “Doesn’t matter. Amber is right. It’s like when the stars of a movie hook up. It’s free press for the movie because of the gossip, it’s entertaining, it gives people what they want—or what they think they want in their relationships.”

I think that over and then say dryly, “But we are obviously not dating. We don’t talk or even hang. There is no basis for this belief.”

Nati shrugs. “Doesn’t matter. People ship you two together, and as Amber said, they believe you two are secretly dating.”

I look back down at the numbers as Amber says, “Just think if they were dating, like, for real. Our numbers would be insane.”

As I look around, everyone is nodding but Coach. He knows why we aren’t dating. He knows why we don’t talk. Our past is too much. But...these numbers aren’t something to ignore. I meet Amber’s carefree gaze. “No way.”

Levi scoffs. “For real, they would be.”

“Yeah, look at that football player and the pop star. No one even confirmed that they’re dating. She just showed up to a game, and his jersey sales went through the roof. Like Coach said, it’s the possibility of love. Everyone wants love,” she says with a dreamy look on her face. “Except you, Coach.”

He nods his thanks as West says, “I hear ya, Coach. Screw love. And while this is fun, I’ve got a class to get to. Can we move on?”

And so, we do, except me. I keep looking over the numbers from the Beauty and the Bull campaign. The comments that Benson and I “need to be together” or “have to be dating” make up at least seventy percent of what people said. It’s absolutely insane.

And just like that, it clicks.

I have the idea for my final project.

CHAPTER

Four

BENSON

What I thought was an email from my professor was instead one from the media team about this weekend's photo shoot. The Beauty and the Bull. I'm the Bull. And the Beauty... ahfuckbuddy.

We are confirming that you will be able to share, tag, and promote this campaign. While it's not a requirement, and we know you are busy, we do want our programs, our school, and this campaign to be successful, and that can't happen without all of us doing our part.

Also, would you have an upcoming date available for a sit-down with me?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,

Cameron White

I actually stop walking when I see her name along the bottom. I check the email again, then the name at the bottom, and it's not registering for me. Did Cameron really email me? Is she asking me out? Am I hallucinating? I close the distance between the door to our apartment and me before throwing it open.

"Quinn!" I holler through our apartment. I kick the door shut as I toe out of my sneakers.

Quinn comes out of his bedroom in his sweatpants, no shirt, and sweaty, just as the door closes. “Hey.”

“Jackass, did you work out without me?”

He rolls his eyes. “How do you know I wasn’t in the bed with someone?”

I snort. “Because Emery isn’t in town.” But then I pause. “Wait, is she?”

“You’re the fucking jackass,” he mutters as he comes toward me. “And yes, I was working out. You were taking too long.”

“Jackass,” I mutter as I walk toward him. “Read this.”

We meet in the middle of the living room, and I hand him my phone. He takes it, his interest piqued as I try to prepare myself for the letdown. Because surely Cameron White, the Beauty to my Bull, didn’t just ask me out. We haven’t spoken but like five times in the last three years. She gives me a wide berth. I’ll see her at a party, and before I can even get a second look, she’s out the door. On campus, she is nowhere to be seen, and I swear she’s doing an online class right now just so she doesn’t have to be in the same classroom as me. I don’t know what I did, but she makes sure she doesn’t see me and only interacts with me once a year.

Quinn holds my phone in his hand as he looks over at me. “What? You always share stuff for the school.”

“No, not that. Cameron sent me that.”

He isn’t impressed. “Yes, she is a senior marketer.”

“She asked me out.”

His brows touch. “That’s reaching. She asked if you could sit down. It’s probably to strategize.”

“Sure, but anyone could have done that. She asked me.”

“Benny, come on. She broke your heart.”

I shoot him a blank look. “Emery. Elanie. Brooks,” is all I say. He doesn’t flinch or even look affected. I shouldn’t need

to say more, but just for shits and giggles, I add, “The fact that I know her middle name says a lot.”

While I am well aware I got my heart broken by Cameron, we never promised each other anything. We never committed to each other or planned a future. We were hooking up. We got pregnant, we terminated the pregnancy, and she ghosted me. Cut-and-dried.

But Emery Brooks? She demolished Quinn’s heart; they were in a relationship. They love—loved? Not really sure—each other, and she walked away. She didn’t want what he wants. Yet, he is still holding out hope for her to come to her senses and be with him.

In my opinion, it won’t happen, and that may make me an asshole, but I’ve seen the aftermath of Quinn and Emery. I’ve seen him cry. And that kind of shit, you don’t forget. My homie Quinn believes wholeheartedly that they are fated to be together. It’s cute—and totally dumb as fuck.

So, if I want to be a little excited at the possibility of a sit-down with Cameron, Quinn has nothing to say about it.

“We aren’t talking about me, are we?” he tries, and I shoot him a sidelong glance. “Just saying, don’t get your hopes up. Things are messy between you two.”

“Could say the same about you and Emery,” I throw back at him, and he shrugs. “You two are more a crime scene than messy.”

Without looking at me, he says, “Not anymore.”

I stare at the side of his face before pointing to the wall and the table that have nothing on them except photos of him and Emery together. “Until the shrine to Emery comes down, I don’t believe a word you say.” He moves his eyes to where I am looking. “I still think you should get a voodoo doll to go along with all the photos.”

He scoffs at that, but the humor doesn’t reach his eyes. “I’m not taking it down.”

“Didn’t think so.”

“But I’m pretty sure when she finds out I’m getting married, she’ll never speak to me again.”

My jaw actually drops. My eyes widen. My heart stops dead in my chest. I blink twice, and then finally, words form. “The hell you say?”

He meets my gaze. “I asked Ava to marry me.”

“Ava? Who the fuck is Ava?” I truly don’t know whom he is speaking of, but then I hold up my hand. “Your friend from residency?”

He nods. “Yeah.”

I just gawk at him. “I thought you were just friends.”

“We are, but then we decided to see where things could go.”

“Could go?” I squeak. “You’ve hooked up with her.”

“I’m a gentleman,” he tries, fighting back the grin.

I snort. “Shut the hell up. You’ve told me all the places Emery has given you head.”

“That was different. Ava is different.”

“She’s different?”

“Yes, and here we are.”

“Here we are?” I ask, still not comprehending what the hell he is saying.

“Stop repeating what I say,” he scolds, but I don’t get it.

“Quinn, you’ve been waiting for Emery for years now. I don’t get it.”

“It’s time to move on,” he says slowly, not meeting my gaze. Something isn’t vibing here. Something is off.

“Quinn, bro.” He still doesn’t meet my gaze. “*Bro*,” I repeat, stressing the word, and finally, he looks up. Sadness swirls in his blue depths, and that confuses me even more. “What the hell?”

“I can’t keep waiting.”

“I’ve said that for years, but you don’t marry the next girl you meet.”

Dryly, he insists, “I’ve known her for a while.”

“And I’ve never met her. That’s not right, and you know it. What is Mom going to say?”

“I don’t know,” he admits, taking in a deep breath. “But I don’t care. I’m the only one not married—”

“Because you’re not even an adult yet.”

We both laugh at that. “Posey and Owen were married at my age.”

“Because they found their people. This chick isn’t your person.” I pause, swallowing hard. “As much as I hate to say it, Em is more your person than this chick.”

“She doesn’t want what I want.”

“Which is why you’re waiting.”

“I can’t wait forever.”

“I’ve said that from the jump, but I didn’t expect you to marry someone out of the blue.” He looks away, tucking his hands into his pockets. “Do you even love her? ’Cause I get the vibe you don’t.”

Quinn shrugs. “I gotta do something.”

I stare at the side of his face, his blue eyes troubling me. “So, you don’t?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does. Your siblings all love their spouses, which is why they married them.”

“It’s more than just love. It’s convenience.”

“Convenience? Fuck, man, you don’t have to do this.”

“But I am.”

As I gaze at him, I realize something. “Are you doing this to force Emery to make a move?”

Quinn looks up, meeting my gaze. “Not at all. I don’t even plan on telling her.”

“Your mom will.”

He shrugs. “It doesn’t matter. I’m getting married.”

With that, he walks back to his room, shutting the door and leaving me to dwell on his proclamation of marriage to someone he doesn’t even love. His family is gonna flip. Emery is going to murder everyone. And all I can do is watch it go down.

When Quinn makes up his mind, he doesn’t teeter. He’s pretty headstrong, which is another reason I am struggling with what he just admitted. I don’t know; it doesn’t seem right. I don’t know what this Ava has on him, maybe he knocked her up... But that doesn’t seem right either. It’s all very impulsive and unlike him, which only furthers my point that Emery truly fucked him up.

I should get a voodoo doll myself and poke needles through her eyes. Or I may not need to once she gets a whiff of Quinn’s engagement.

Ahfuckbuddy, I may need to hide him.

CHAPTER

Five

BENSON

Any time I bring up Quinn's engagement, he shuts me down or changes the subject. It's odd and unlike him. He's usually open with me, but with this, he's not. I even asked to meet Ava, and he claimed he'd make it happen. Sooner rather than later. I don't know that I believe him, and I can't help but wonder what our family will say. Hell, what Emery's going to say. Because I know for a fact that she's gonna find out, and she's not going to handle it well. I have a bad feeling, but Quinn isn't trying to hear me. As much as I feel Emery is on everyone's shit list, they all still love her. Know that Quinn loves her and truly hope they'll end up together. I've heard Elli, Quinn's mom, say she thinks they just need to grow up a bit. Need time. But I don't think anyone expected for Quinn to marry someone else.

Ah, even thinking it makes me cringe.

As I press my hip into the foam roller, I move myself over it for the stretch I need. While it hurts so damn good, I don't even feel it. I'm fully engrossed in my phone that's set up in front of me as I scroll through TikTok. Well, Cameron's TikTok. I should be ashamed, but I'm not. I do this more than I ought to, but I can't help it. She's so fucking gorgeous, and her content is fun. She is a great influencer, and it's easy to tell she enjoys it. The last three years have been beautifully kind to her, and I find myself checking my mail every few minutes for her response.

It's been a day since I got the email from her, and I'm chomping at the bit, trying to figure out what she wants. Of course, I've gone through every scenario. I go from thinking she wants to get closure on our decision from freshman year to what Quinn said—to discuss the campaign, to possibly wanting to collaborate. Then I go completely off the rails, thinking she misses me and wants to try again. I am well aware the latter makes me a hopeless romantic, but I can't help it.

I miss her.

Our relationship wasn't serious. Or at least, that was how it started. We were mainly thrown together because her best friend is Callie Merryweather, who is Quinn's brother Evan's fiancée. We started spending a lot of time together because wherever Callie was, Cameron was. She would come to the Adler house, we'd all go out for lunch, and we even had some classes together. I'm not surprised we hooked up; she was a damn good time, and the attraction between us was real. It was easy and it felt right.

I can still remember every single moment of the night we moved from friends to lovers.

When everything changed.

A random Tuesday night, freshman year.

"I shouldn't kick Callie's ass, right?"

I laugh as I meet Cameron's gaze. Her lids are heavy. We've been drinking, but no matter the amount of alcohol I drink, my awareness of Cameron is bar none. I don't know when I started to have feelings for her, but they've come fast and hard. I find myself looking at her lips a lot. Obsessed with the Cupid's bow of her top lip and the fullness of her bottom. The tiny gap between her two front teeth. The way her long hair falls along her shoulders, ending right at her breasts that I know for a fact would fit perfectly in my mouth.

Ahfuckme, she's got me simping hard for her.

"Nope, they're all obsessed with each other," I say, trying to ease the fact that her best friend told her not to come back to their room for a while. That she and Evan need alone time. We hadn't even realized that Callie and Evan had left the party, so when Cameron got that text, she was not only surprised, but annoyed. "Ah, let them be," I suggest, waving her off.

I lean my hip on the counter where she sits, and she rolls her eyes. Our bodies are so close, and the heat that rolls off her has desire swirling in my gut. I wonder if she feels the same heat I do, but I don't dare ask. Or make a move. Though I want to, I'm scared she'll reject me.

"Fine, but I hope you know I'm staying with you until I'm allowed to go back."

"That's fine," I say roughly, looking away so she doesn't see how that excites me. How all this time together has made me ache for her.

She grazes my arm with her hand and grins up at me. "Thanks, guy."

Before I can tell her it's a pleasure, ReVerti leans on the counter. "Hey, you two wanna play kiss cards?"

At the mention of kiss cards, everyone starts to gather before Cameron or I can even agree. "Heck yeah," Cameron exclaims, crossing her legs as Odder comes up, sucking a card to his lips.

Soon, the card is being passed through the kitchen, laughter and catcalls filling the room as guys pass to guys, to girls, from girls to girls, and everything in between. It's hard to watch everyone else when Cameron continually laughs in such a beautiful, carefree way. It's almost childlike, full of such excitement. But when ReVerti has the card, his green eyes gleam as he leans toward Cameron. She giggles, leaning forward to get the card with her mouth, but like the jackass he is, he drops the card and grins widely at her.

Before I can even process what I am doing, I take her jaw in my hand and guide her face away from his. Her eyes widen, her breath catches, but she doesn't stop me as I bring her lips to mine. The room loses their minds. ReVerti cusses at me, but I don't care. I couldn't if I wanted to. I watch as her eyes drift shut, and soon mine do the same as I fall deeply into the kiss. Her lips are better than I could ever have imagined. Soft, but firm, and she tastes like absolute heaven. She brings her hands up, cupping my cheeks as I snake my other hand around her waist, sliding her along the counter against me. I run my tongue over her lips, ignoring the room, ignoring everything, and when she opens her sweet mouth for me, I dive in.

Ahfuckbuddy.

Her tongue moves with mine, the kiss deepens, and everything fades away. Nothing else matters but her lips on mine. My fingers bite into her hip as she threads her fingers through my hair, pulling me even closer. When she hooks her legs around mine, I wish the counter to hell for blocking my body from the chance to encase myself between her sweet thighs.

“Jesus, get a fucking room, Jeannot!”

With that, her lips curve, and I find myself returning the grin against her sweet lips. We part only enough so we both can draw in deep breaths as our foreheads meet. I open my eyes first, and when hers flutter open, her brown eyes are burning with such desire, I feel like a starving man. I want to lose myself in her lips, her body, everything, just as long as I get to be with her. She looks up at me, her eyes so dark.

“I think you cheated.”

“I don't care,” I say, my lips moving against hers. “I won't watch another guy kiss you.”

“Is that right?” she asks, her eyes all-consuming. “Why is that?”

“Because if you want to be kissed, I'll fucking kiss you, Cam.”

Her tongue comes out, sliding along her bottom lip, gently touching mine and setting my whole being on fire. She strokes her thumbs along my cheekbones, her eyes locked on mine. "Benny."

"Cam."

Her lips curve. "I want to be kissed."

"It's an honor."

Even now, after knowing how it all played out, I don't regret a damn thing. If anything, I wish I could feel her lips once more. Sometimes I wonder if I came on too strong, if I rushed things, if I wasn't completely up front with how I felt. Maybe if I had told her I had feelings for her, she wouldn't have ghosted me. If I hadn't just jumped right in and made it about the physical rather than the emotional, then things could have been different. I can't change the past, but if she gave me the chance, I would make our future something for the ages.

I switch to my other hip just as my phone dings with an email. I almost fall off the foam roller trying to open my app, and my potential pain is worth it when I see an email from her.

Hey,

I appreciate you answering me back. Can we meet this afternoon at the sports complex? One of the meeting rooms? Around four? I hope to hear from you.

Thanks.

Cameron

My body vibrates with excitement as I write her back that I'll be there. When I hit send, though, I pause. I am way too excited for something that may not even be what I think it is. I can't get my hopes up. I can't allow her to hurt me once more. She didn't do it on purpose, neither of us promised anything, but there is something about Cameron White that awakens every single fiber of my being, and I need to be careful.

Before I end up like Quinn.

CHAPTER

Six

CAMERON

I smack my face into my pillow mat as chalk flies around me with each strike of my face. Callie is on her knees at the chalk bucket, chalking up her grips as she listens to me groan.

“I made a bad choice,” I mutter against the mat, inhaling chalk. I turn my head to the side, coughing as she meets my gaze. “Tell me I’m insane.”

She shrugs, a little grin playing on her lips. “I’ve always loved you two together. He’s a good dude.”

I know this. “That’s not the issue.”

She just grins, her eyes playful, and I know she knows the issue, but neither of us will voice it. “Anything I say,” she tells me as she gets up to take her turn on bars, “you’ll get annoyed by. So I’m gonna sit back and watch this go down.”

I glare at her as she jumps for the low bar, skipping up and starting her routine as if swinging on a wooden rod is child’s play. I guess, for us, it is. I roll onto my back, blowing a piece of hair out of my face. As I stare up at the rafters, I tighten my own grips since I’m supposed to go after Callie, but I’m not ready yet. This is by far my worst practice in years. My stomach is a mess, and my heart won’t stop racing. I am well aware that I am currently doing gymnastics, but the constant knocking of my heart against my ribs has nothing to do with that activity.

It has everything to do with the fact that I’m meeting Benson after practice.

I was going to wait until after Sunday, but I want photos of us for socials, and I feel like I may have to talk him into what I want. I've gone over my speech a thousand times since he agreed to meet me. I've written bullet points, I've made pros and cons, but I am not confident at all. It doesn't matter how much this could help our social media accounts or that Dr. Willard emailed me so full of excitement when I sent her the potential outline of my project—I just don't know that he'll want to help me.

Why would he?

He doesn't owe me a damn thing. I ghosted him. I avoid him. What am I even doing?

"I'm an idiot," I say once Callie lands her dismount. She high-fives Coach since she stuck her dismount and then turns to look at me. "He has absolutely no reason to agree to anything I ask."

Callie scoffs, but before she can say anything, Coach says, "Is this the woes of Cameron's love life or gymnastics practice?" We all snicker at that as I line up to take my turn. "Instead of worrying about boys, worry about your toe hang and how you keep arching out of it, huh?"

He gives me a look, and I smile. "I've slayed that skill today."

Coach's eyes narrow. "Slayed? You poked it, barely, with a toothpick. Straight legs, pointed toes, White."

I chuckle to myself as I clap my hands together, the chalk flying. Before I can go, though, Callie comes up next to the bars to watch. Our eyes meet, and she says, "Just like I know you're going to land this skill, I know he's gonna agree."

"So, I shouldn't try to miss the skill to make myself feel better in case he does the opposite of what you say?" I ask, my heart unable to slow down at all.

I feel like I've downed six Red Bulls, but I swear my heart freezes with the ice-cold look Coach sends me.

"You miss this skill on purpose, you won't have a spot in the lineup for our first meet."

“Jeez,” I mutter, making sure my grips are on tightly. “I was just kidding.”

I wasn't, but he doesn't need to know that.

And just to prove my statement more, I slay the skill. But that doesn't give me the confidence I need to face Benson.

I'm late.

Which isn't that much of surprise for anyone who knows me. I'm pretty sure when they discovered the time blindness disorder, my photo was added beside the definition. I thought I had enough time to shower and straighten my hair since I wanted to look presentable and enticing to Benson, but maybe I should have left my hair to dry. Or maybe not put on a full face of makeup. Or change my outfit six times.

Not that any of that matters as I run into the meeting rooms of the sports complex like I'm running toward a vault. We were going to meet at a coffee shop, per his suggestion, but I decided it'd be better to be alone, so no one hears us or bothers us. After I pass by three meeting rooms, I finally find him on his phone, sitting casually, his long legs out in front of him. His ankles are crossed, each cord of muscle in his legs on display. He is focused on his phone, so I draw a deep breath as I take him in.

Damn, he's stunning.

His dark curls, which are usually wild and unruly, are wet and combed to the side, giving him some extra length on one side of his head. Dark hair dusts along his jaw, accentuating his chiseled cheekbones and masculine jawline. His thick, rosy lips are pursed as he stares at his phone so intently, I almost don't want to bother him. But I know I have to. As my breathing goes back to normal, I start for the door while I move my eyes along his body. His Bullies pullover hugs his shoulders, and even with the extra fabric, it's hard to ignore the pure strength it covers. He's wearing a pair of black shorts,

his legs thick and coarse with hair. His black Nike socks are high on his calves with bright teal Crocs on his feet.

As I walk into the room, he cuts his eyes up to me, taking me in through those dark lashes. I swallow hard as heat rushes through me. And my heart...I don't know if it'll ever beat right. We say nothing for a long minute as we stare at each other.

He sets his phone between his thighs, not breaking eye contact as he leans back in the chair. Not only does the chair protest his weight, but the movement he makes fills the room with his cologne. Sandalwood and rosemary. I know that scent because I went shopping with him to get it one time. My body burns, my cheeks flushing when I remember running my nose along his neck, taking in his scent as he brought me to the edge with his fingers between my thighs.

Oh, I know for a fact that I'm making a bad choice. Such a bad one.

Heat swirls in Benson's eyes as he drinks me in, leaving me utterly breathless. I don't understand it; we haven't had any communication, but my body yearns for him. His tongue then shoots out, wetting his lips, and I jerkily reach for the chair, sitting down as far from him as I can. I exhale, letting my breath out with a whoosh before I urge myself to say, "Thanks for meeting with me."

"Absolutely," he says, his voice deep and husky. "Have to say, I'm intrigued about the reasoning since you said you'd rather we speak in private."

I swallow, ignoring the fluttering in my chest. "I'm sure you are," I mutter as I open my notebook. A few Post-its fall out, and I stick them back onto the front. When I look up, he's watching me, a small smile pulling at only one side of his gorgeous face, and everything seizes inside me.

How in the fiery depths of hell am I supposed to get through this?

Or even move forward with my plan?

"So, what's this about?" he asks coyly.

I clear my throat, tearing my gaze from his. “As you know, we have been doing the Beauty and the Bull campaign for three years now.” I look up, and he nods, confirming he is listening, though his face is stoic. Like he’s bored already. “Yeah, okay. So, I don’t know if you’ve seen the insights,” I say, sliding the printouts to him. He doesn’t reach for them or even acknowledge the file. God, he makes me nervous. “Yeah, so our campaign is highly popular. Actually, anything that has us in it does very well for the school.”

He shrugs, tapping his fingers to the paper. “I’m not surprised.”

Okay. I swallow around the lump in my throat. I don’t know what I was expecting—for him to fall all over himself at the chance to meet with me? Why would he? I blew him off. He is Benson Jeannot; he’ll more than likely go top ten in the draft this summer. The Nashville Assassins are fighting to sign him, but I doubt they’ll get him. He is one of the best players in the history of Bellevue and so damn handsome, it hurts. This is probably the stupidest thing I’ve ever thought of.

But I’m not one to back down from a challenge.

“Nor am I,” I say, matching his energy. “Any campaign that features you or me does well for our respective team, but when we’re together, those have the highest engagement of the school. Last year, we had almost two million comments on a video of us interacting for the Beauty and the Bull.”

He nods slowly. “Again, I’m not surprised. Hottest gymnast, hottest hockey player—what do you expect?”

His confidence is intoxicating, and my heart has no intention of slowing down in my chest. I feel as if spiders are crawling down my back, and my stomach is in knots as I nod, wishing like hell I had even an ounce of his confidence. “We complement each other well, the dark to the light, according to our media team,” I say, moving my fingers along the cool surface of the table. “And everyone thinks we’re secretly dating.”

He scoffs. “How? You don’t speak to me. Or even acknowledge me.”

Well, that burns. “I wouldn’t go that far—”

“What is this about?” he says, cutting me off. “Like I said, you don’t speak to me or acknowledge me, and then I get an email out of nowhere. What is it you want, Cameron?”

The lump grows in my throat, threatening to suffocate me. Warmth fills my cheeks, guilt eating away at me because at one point we were friends, and in no way should a friend treat him the way I did. I feel as if I should apologize, but I don’t think that’s what he wants. He wants to know what I want. Which is fair.

I lick my lips, and when I look up to meet his gaze, I swear his eyes are on my lips. His eyes move to mine so quickly, I almost think I imagined it. “Fair enough,” I mutter, clearing my throat to buy myself time. “My project for my final marketing class was denied because my professor feels I can market to anyone, and that’s nothing new. She wants something bigger, something out of the box. When I saw our numbers, an idea came to me.” His brows draw together, and I know he is getting frustrated. I need to spit it out. “I’m not sure if you’re seeing someone—”

“I’m not. Though, I don’t know what that has to do with anything. You’re rambling, by the way. Get to the point.”

The giddiness that comes from knowing he isn’t seeing anyone is downright ridiculous, but nonetheless, I feel it deeply. I wet my lips once more. “I’m nervous,” I admit, and his brows come in.

“Why?”

“Because you don’t owe me a damn thing, and I’m about to ask you for something that you should say no to.”

His brows furrow more. “What’s that?”

Well, no need to beat around the bush, I guess. With our gazes locked, I swear I don’t even breathe as I say, “I want my final project to be about us.”

More confusion moves across his features. “Us?”

I nod. “I want everyone to think we’re dating.”

I'm met with silence as his eyes burn into mine, and I wait for the laughter, the "fuck no." But to my surprise, he cocks his head to the side, and he asks, "You want people to think we're dating?"

"Yes."

"For a marketing project?"

"Yes."

His eyes search mine, and then he asks, "And what do I gain from this?"

Relief floods me since I assumed he'd tell me to fuck off, but he didn't. Excitement follows the relief as I open my file to show him exactly what he's about to gain.

CHAPTER

Seven

BENSON

While I'm caught off guard by what Cameron is asking, it's a battle not to say yes so quickly. I want to. Desperately. But I know I have to refrain. I can't let her know how much I want this, because I don't think she wants the same thing. She never has. She always kept me at arm's length, but sometimes she gave in to her desires. It didn't happen much, but I could see it in her eyes when she wanted more than just sex from me.

But fuck if the look of relief on her face doesn't do something to my heart. Her eyes are the deepest brown, her lips curved at the sides as her cheeks dust with color. She stands, and I take in her short shorts that show off those fantastic, toned legs and round ass. I love that ass. Not only is it two perfect globes, but she has ripples along the bottom where her thighs meet, and I can still remember how it felt to run my tongue along them. To feel her thighs tremble under my mouth and fingers.

Ahfuckbuddy, keep it in check, I beg myself.

She walks over to me, opening a file and placing it beside me. I have to tuck my hands beneath my thighs to keep from touching her as she leans in and explains each sheet. I learned a lot from her about insights and data when we were dating, if that's what you want to call our relationship. It was more a situationship if anything, but she didn't catch feelings the way I did. I try to focus on what she is explaining and all the numbers she has to back it.

“I looked into your accounts, and I have a ballpark of how much you make, but I know I can help you triple it.” Money. So, she is offering money to date her. I chew the inside of my cheek as she continues. “I have more than nine companies that will work with us as a couple to promote their products. Once we get you to where I am, I know I can get you sponsorship with a lot of the athletic companies. And I’ve already drafted emails to Bauer and CCM.”

Anyone else would be highly impressed by her, but that’s normal for me. I don’t expect anything less from Cameron White. I’ve always been impressed by her. She’s a marketing genius, which is why I’m surprised she’s doing this. The school knows how successful she is—why would she even need to supply a final project? She doesn’t need them; they need her. Or at least, that’s what Callie said at the last family dinner.

I feel Cameron’s eyes cut to mine, but when I look up, she moves her eyes back to the file. I don’t look away, though. I take in the slope of her jaw, the purse of her lips, and the way she pushes her tongue into the small gap between her teeth. She swallows hard, and I can feel the heat coming off her in beautiful waves. She pulls out the chair from beside me and sits, leaning on her legs as her eyes meet mine. “I have a whole outline of different things we’ll do together. Of all our videos we’ll make. It’ll involve you going to my meets and me to your games.”

“Okay,” I say, the first thing I’ve said since she began talking. I don’t think she realizes I love going to her meets. I don’t think she ever sees me, but I do go.

“I’ll need six months for this. I believe that will give me an adequate amount of data for my final project. It’s a two-semester class.”

“Six months,” I say slowly. “Just so we’re on the same page, you want to date me for show, but we won’t be dating for real.”

“Right.” I look at her, really look at her, and she mutters, “I know this is a lot to ask, and as I said, you have no reason to

say yes.”

She’s right; I don’t. But why wouldn’t I? Yet I do have a question that is burning deep inside my chest. “I don’t understand why you chose me for this.”

“Because we have history. We’re friends, so this should be easy.”

“We’re friends?” I ask with a laugh. “Since when?”

She swallows, her whole body going taut as she holds my gaze. “I know it may not seem that way with the distance I’ve put between us, but I’ve never stopped caring for you.”

“Then why the distance?” I find myself asking. Her eyes search mine, and I know I could be pushing her away. “I know what happened was a lot—”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she cuts me off, looking down at her hands. “The guilt eats me alive over how I treated you, but I couldn’t process it and I didn’t know how to tell you that.”

I watch as she squirms in her seat. I don’t like seeing her like this. Hell, I don’t like feeling what she is feeling. It was really hard, what we went through, but I thought it would bring us together. I didn’t think she’d push me away, but I also understand. It’s hard to be constantly reminded of a choice neither of us was ready to make. Like Quinn and Emery, maybe we needed time to heal.

Maybe this is our second chance, but she’s disguising it as a fake-dating situation. Just knowing she chose me for this fills me with such hope. But I gotta keep my wits about me. I can’t just fall.

No matter how easy it would be.

“I know this won’t fix how I handled things, but I wouldn’t ask anyone else but you.”

I scoff. “Because my insights are good?”

She gives me a dry look. “That’s part of it, but because I trust you.”

My heart warms, and man, I want to drop to my knees for this girl.

To keep myself from doing so, I take the file from her and start reading through it. As she said, she outlined outings and video ideas for our social media. She came up with a posting calendar for our accounts. She's prepared scripts and even prompts for us. I know this is to be a fake relationship, but it all feels so planned. I don't like it.

"Since we're both busy with sports, it'll be easy to just do our thing until it's time for a game or a meet or a video. On the outside, we'll be in a relationship, but on the inside, we'll be focused on our own lives."

If she thinks I won't care about what she's doing when I'm not seeing her, she's got another think coming. I don't say that, though. Everything is here, but she's missing something.

"So, what are the rules?" I ask since I don't see them.

She licks her lips. "What do you mean?"

That surprises me. I figured she'd have included that since she's included everything else. "How far are you willing to go to make this look real?"

Her brows crash together as her eyes burn into mine. "I don't understand."

I want to laugh at her. "Do you think us showing up to games and making videos is really going to convince people we're together?"

"I'm sure if we say we are, they'll believe it since they already assume something is going on."

"They may assume, but until they see me with my arms around you, and my mouth on yours, that's all they'll do—assume." Her cheeks darken with color as her lips part. I see her thighs clench, her hands wringing together so tightly, her knuckles turn white. "People need to see us together around campus, there needs to be PDA, it needs to be believable."

She swallows thickly. "I don't really go on campus."

"What?"

“People bother me.”

My blood boils within seconds. “Who?”

“People,” she says offhandedly.

“Who? Give me names.”

Her face scrunches up as she meets my gaze. “Why?”

“So I can fuck them up,” I say simply, my gaze burning into hers as her eyes widen. “If we’re dating, no one will bother you.”

She flashes me a look, but I see her lips wanting to curve. “We won’t be truly dating.”

“I don’t give a shit,” I say. “No one will bother you. Who is it?”

Her eyes stare into mine. “I don’t know, Benson. I have creeps galore, and they feel I owe them my attention since I’m all over social media.”

“Not anymore,” I say as a promise. “No one will bother you, Cameron.” She doesn’t look at me, but I watch as she chews on the inside of her cheek. “Is that why you aren’t in my classes anymore?”

She nods. “I do everything I can online.”

I nod slowly. “I’ll walk you to your classes.”

“Benson,” she says on an exhale. “That’s unneeded.”

“Let me decide if that is unneeded,” I announce as I shut the file, leaning back in the chair, crossing my ankles. I look her over, and while I know she has done her research and set up a nice proposal for me, I know she hasn’t thought everything through. “Since you chose me for this, you’re not involved with anyone?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not.”

I knew that, but I still wanted confirmation. “And we aren’t to see anyone else but each other for the next six months.”

“Right.”

“Okay, not to sound like a fuckboy, but I have needs.”

She scoffs. “Needs?”

“Yeah, six months is a long time, and as you said, we aren’t to see anyone else. So, what am I supposed to do?”

Her eyes darken, and it may be in my head, but I think she’s jealous. “You have great hands, according to the NHL.”

My lips quirk as I nod. “I absolutely do, but—”

She holds up her hands.

Hands I want to touch me.

With a firm look, she says, “This is a future conversation. We don’t even know if this will work.”

“Oh, it’ll work,” I promise. “I’ll make it believable.”

The look on her face takes my breath away. It’s somewhere between fear and excitement. She looks down at her hands. “How do you know?”

“Because I do,” I say softly, licking my lips. I pull my phone out from between my legs and click the app for my BullieBoards. It’s like Twitter for students at the school. I hit the button to make a post and then get to work.

@CameronWhite1

I’m shooting my shot. Come to the home opener Friday, and I’ll score a goal for you.

Hopeful, #61

When her phone sounds, she reaches into her hoodie pocket, and her lips curve once she reads my message. “This wasn’t in the script.”

I shrug. “I’m not scriptable, Cameron.”

Her breath catches. “So, you’re going to do this with me?”

“I am.”

Soon, both our phones are sounding with people responding to my post. Within seconds, hundreds of comments are under my post for her, just like I assumed would happen. The BullieBoards are the best for getting everyone's attention.

When she looks up at me, my stomach swirls with desire. Oh, how I want her. How I want this. But I want more than what the terms she laid out give me.

I want all of her. I just have to make her realize that.

“Thank—”

“But,” I say, cutting her off. “I hope you're ready for this to be believable.”

“I am,” she says, way too quickly and without an ounce of confidence.

I should feel bad for how that excites me, but I don't.

Because Cameron White has no clue what she just got herself into.

CHAPTER

Eight

CAMERON

@BensonJeannot61

One goal? That's all? For me to come to your game, I'm gonna need a hat trick.

I know my worth.

Skeptically, Cameron

@CameronWhite1

Are you skeptical 'cause you think I can't score you a hat trick? Let me just say, even without the pleasure of knowing you'll be cheering me on, I can score with my eyes closed. And I am well aware of your worth, pretty lady, which is why I'd offer more than a hat trick. Just ask.

No longer hopeful, but yours, #61

@BensonJeannot61

I have seen you play, and it's a sight to behold. As long as you know my worth, Benson Jeannot, I may be able to make an appearance. I'll need to get some Bullies gear, I guess. Since all I have is gymnastics gear.

Pleasantly excited, Cameron

@CameronWhite1

While I enjoy, immensely, seeing you in your gymnastics gear, MY jersey will be waiting for you, in your seat. Front row, seat 61.

Yours, #61

@BensonJeannot61

Your jersey? What if I want to wear another number?

Just saying, Cameron

@CameronWhite1

That's not happening. Only my sweater, with my number, will cover that sweet body of yours.

Yours, #61

@BensonJeannot61

Possessive, much?

Once more, skeptical, Cameron

@CameronWhite1

When you feel how great it is to wear my sweater with my number, you'll see why I say that. As for being possessive, is it being possessive when I know who I want to wear my number and who I want to score for? Some would think this exchange is romantic.

Stop being skeptical, read my words, believe them, yours,
#61

@BensonJeannot61

And some would throw red flags at this exchange.
Some may be swooning.
I guess we'll see Friday. Which I will.
Deciding, Cameron

@CameronWhite1

I'll see you Friday, Cameron White.
Yours, #61

I press my tongue into the back of my teeth and resist wiggling like a little schoolgirl. While his words are fuel to the fire of my heart, I know he is laying it on thick. Especially when the first post from him had over a thousand comments urging me to go, and some that said if I won't, they will. Guys and girls. While I knew from the jump that Benson would be the best for this project, I truly didn't expect it to soar the way it already is.

I'm super excited, though I need to remind myself this is all for show.

It's not real.

I have needs.

Jesus. I can't even fathom that right now.

I sit in front of the mirror, my ring light set up from where I filmed myself getting ready to go to Benson's game. I'm tying my shoes while Callie sits on my bed on her phone.

"That was some exchange."

I grin up at her. "I knew he'd be great for this. He's so over the top."

She flashes me a look. "He is."

"I've already gained followers, and so has he. It's only been two days, and things are going well."

"Have you seen him since y'all met up?"

I shake my head as I stand, fixing my jeans at my ankles. “No, we’ve only talked through the boards.”

“Oh, so this wasn’t scripted.”

“Nope,” I say, leaning into my mirror to fix my lip gloss.

“I thought you wrote everything out.”

“I did, but he told me he is unscriptable, so I followed his lead.” I feel her gaze on me, so I side-eye her. “What?”

She shrugs. “This was off the cuff?”

“Yeah.”

Callie’s eyes widen as she shakes her head. “Oh, my love, you’re in trouble.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, that was too easy. It flowed too well.”

I shrug. “It’s easy for us. We’re friends.”

“Cameron, come on. I’ve seen a lot of movies and read a lot of books where the people who are fake dating fall in love, and I feel like you’re forgetting that.”

I scoff. “Please, we have too much history. We’re doing this to help each other. It worked out great. Neither of us is dating anyone, and since we’re both focused on our sports and school, we don’t have to worry about that part of a relationship, ya know? We can just exist in our own worlds until it’s time to exist together, and since it’s easy, this will go beautifully.”

She blinks. “Do you know how dumb you sound right now?”

I laugh. “You’re just a hopeless romantic who is totally in love. This is business—he knows that.”

“Does he?”

“Yes, Callie!”

“Do you?”

“Callie, what the hell?”

She doesn't seem convinced. "The history is the reason why I think this may get out of hand. You can act like you aren't attracted to him, but I know you are, and I know you still care for him."

"Of course I do," I say simply. "But this being more than it is...? That's ridiculous. It won't happen. I'm surprised he even said yes."

"Are you?"

I bring in my brows, pressing my tongue to my teeth. "Yes."

"You know I can tell when you're lying to me—and yourself, for that matter."

I roll my eyes. "It really is exactly what I proposed, a way to make my final project the best it can be."

"So, you have ground rules?"

"He asked the same thing. I don't get that. I feel I've been thorough. We date in front of people, that's it."

She laughs at me, like, fully laughs with her hands on her belly as she falls back onto my bed. "So, you expect him to be your boyfriend but not reap the benefits?"

I make a face. "Sex isn't everything."

"No, but it's fun, and when you fight, it's a great way to make up."

"Why would we be fighting? We have nothing to fight about."

Her eyes narrow. "Cameron, this is gonna get real messy."

"It's not." I reach for a Post-it and make a note to discuss this with Benson. While I don't want to involve sex in this project, maybe I can buy him a pocket pussy or something. "I plan to go over it with him."

"Why did you write 'pocket pussy'?"

"I'll buy him one."

She gives me a dry look. "He wants the real thing."

“Well, that isn’t happening.”

The last time I slept with him...

I swallow past the lump in my throat. “I doubt he wants to sleep with me anyway.”

“And I doubt he likes playing hockey too,” she deadpans.

I throw my fluffy slipper at her, and she laughs as she rolls onto her stomach. “That’s not even on my radar right now. Right now, it’s establishing us and seeing what happens from there.”

Her laugh dies off, and I meet her caring gaze. I have loved this girl since the moment I met her. She is the kindest, most loving, and supportive person I know. We’ve been joined at the hip since freshman year, and I adore her. Soul mates aren’t always of the opposite sex; sometimes you find a soul mate who is meant to be your sister. Callie is that for me. I love her. We’re two halves of one heart. My sister.

“Enjoy this, Cameron,” she urges, her eyes burning into mine. “Enjoy him.”

“Callie,” I warn, but she shakes her head.

“You haven’t dated or been with anyone since him. You are so focused on school, on gymnastics—maybe this is your chance to just enjoy being with someone.”

I shrug. “It’s all for show.”

“But why not enjoy it?”

I look away, picking at invisible lint. “I mean, I will enjoy myself. He’s a cool dude.”

“Yeah, but maybe don’t script it, and let things happen.”

I roll my eyes. “Nothing is going to happen. Like I said, it’s a business transaction. I’m helping him, he’s helping me.”

She blows out a breath, shaking her head as I reach for my purse. “I want you to remember this moment, Cameron White. And in six months when you’re wildly in love with him, I’m gonna ask, ‘What happened to this being a business transaction?’”

I laugh. “I am *wildly* confident that won’t happen,” I say, mocking her choice of words. “I’m gonna ask him to meet up with me after the photo shoot, so we can discuss these ground rules. I wanted to get through this weekend first, see the reaction.”

She shakes her phone at me. “You knew the reaction would be this.”

“I did, but still, I have to make sure he knows what he is getting into.”

“Do you know what you’re getting into?”

I grin. “Yes, an A+ on my project.”

I make my declaration with all the confidence in the world, but as we leave for the game, Callie’s words haunt me. I ignore them, though, ignore the racing of my heart, and focus on how to sell that I’m interested in Benson once I get to the arena. It won’t be hard to watch him intently on the ice—I love seeing him play—but I have to remember to record him and act as if he is the only one on the ice.

I doubt I’ll be acting.

CHAPTER

Nine

BENSON

I hadn't expected Quinn to invite me to lunch last minute, but I was down without a thought. He's my homie, but what I sure as hell didn't expect when I walked into our favorite Italian spot was to find him sitting beside his...fuck, his fiancée.

Ava Mettison is a very beautiful girl. She has extremely straight blond hair that is cut in a bob. Her eyes are a bright hazel, more green than brown. They slant a bit, especially with the cat eye makeup she has drawn on. Her lips are thin, and her nose is long and hooked at the end, while the shape of her face reminds me of a heart. She is very skinny too, model-skinny, and makes me think of one of those perfect Instagram girls. Not like Cameron, though; Cameron will video herself waking up with snot on her nose and with a Snickers hanging out of her mouth.

I may have screenshotted that photo just because it makes me smile, but Ava... I don't think Ava does anything but exist in perfection.

She is everything Emery Brooks is not, and *ahfuckme*, it doesn't feel right.

Don't get me wrong. I don't like the way Emery treated my boy, but at least she was honest from the top. He just loved her more than she loved him, I guess. Or maybe she was scared. I don't know. But man, I don't like Ava and Quinn together. It doesn't even sound right.

For me, it's always been Quinn and Emery. Em and Q.

One thing is for sure, I wouldn't be bored out of my mind if Emery were here. That's not fair, though. I should give Ava a chance. My boy is marrying her. I have to try for him.

Clearing my throat, I ask, "So, Ava, are you from Nashville?"

Quinn doesn't look up from his lasagna, but Ava's gaze does meet mine. "Yes."

I wait and...nothing. She looks back to her chicken salad, and yeah, this is gonna be hard for me. Quinn looks at her and then me before saying, "She grew up in Brentwood, and actually, her grandparents were songwriters for some pretty huge country superstars, and her parents sing at their church. Her dad is a preacher, and her mom is the choir director."

I blink and wait for Ava to elaborate, but she doesn't. Man, this is a blast. "That's super cool."

"Yeah, Benson grew up on a llama farm in Canada and is now living that city life," Quinn says with a grin. "He's the best dude I know."

Yeah, I gotta try for this guy. My homie.

Ava looks up at me through her lashes. "I could tell you were from Canada. Your accent is a bit thick."

"Yeah, you can take the boy out of Canada, but I can't leave the accent. At least I left the llamas, eh?" I joke, and Quinn laughs, his laughter booming, but Ava is stone. I meet Quinn's gaze, and he just shrugs before shaking his head to let me know *she's not a talker*.

I mean, what the hell did he do? Find Emery's exact opposite? I know he's my guy, but what the fuck is happening here? I never thought I'd say this, but I miss Emery's crazy, homicidal ass. This is not how I wanted my pregame meal to go. We sit in silence, only the sounds of the restaurant filling the air with what should be our conversation.

I can't help but watch them. They sit a good six feet from each other, which I know isn't that weird, but I can't help but

remember how he was with Emery. She always sat right next to him. Even when they were on the outs, she was close. Or at least, it seemed that way. Quinn couldn't keep his hands to himself when it came to Emery, but right now, his hands don't even seem to itch for Ava.

Hell, I'm not even near Cameron, and my palms are itching for her.

"Are you coming tonight?" I find myself asking, and Quinn looks up. "To the home opener?"

Thinking of the opener has me thinking of the exchange Cameron and I have been having for the last couple days. We haven't spoken outside of the BullieBoards, and I hate that, but I'm trying to be patient with this. While I want to follow her lead since this is her "project," I also know I won't be able to stick to what she wants. She wants this to be only on paper, wants it to be completely emotionless since that's what she does. Or at least, that's how she portrays herself.

Back when I had her in my arms on a regular basis, I could feel her emotions, her heart in her kisses, her eyes, in the way her hands slid across my body. She might not have wanted to feel things for me, but she did, and lord knows I felt a lot. I followed her lead last time, but maybe this time around, I shouldn't.

But, well, this is supposed to be fake. She has a script and events planned.

The course of our six-month relationship is written out.

I hate it.

"Yeah, I'll be up there with Mom and Dad," he says around the bite he just took. I watch as Ava glances at him for a moment and then back at her food.

"Nice," I say. "Ava, you're welcome to come."

They both shake their heads. "I'm leaving town," she tells me, as Quinn says, "She's going out of town."

Convenient since coming would mean meeting Mom and Dad Adler, which obviously isn't happening yet. I'm pretty

sure Mom would call this what it is real fast: weird as fuck. Quinn looks over to me, “How did that meeting with Cameron go?”

“Good. We’re dating.”

His jaw goes slack. “No shit?”

“Yup,” I say, lowering my voice with a shit-eating grin on my face. “She’s doing a project on how a relationship can affect a person’s image, and she chose me. I’m the football player to her pop star.”

He gives me a sideways look. “Y’all both realize neither of you is anywhere near as cool or popular as they are?”

I snort. “Sure, but we’re a big deal around campus.” His eyes taunt me, and I grin. “Don’t be jealous that you aren’t all that and a bag of chips on Vandy’s campus.”

He laughs at that, and when Ava side-eyes him, I want to throw my bread at her. Yeah, Quinn’s laugh is loud, but that’s no reason to side-eye him. Hell, she better get used to it. She’s marrying this hyena-laughing idiot. As his laughter subsides, he asks, “You think this is a good idea with y’all’s history?”

I shrug. “She trusts me, and let’s be honest, I’m the hottest guy on campus.”

Ava looks up then, and her expression tells me she doesn’t find me attractive, which is cool. I’m not trying to get her attention. Quinn laughs at that. “You’re so full of yourself.” I shrug, and he shakes his head. “But I mean, on paper, yeah, you two could pull this off. What do you gain from this?”

A chance for her to choose me.

“Money.”

He gives me a dry look. “You don’t need money.”

I explain all the logistics she has planned, and he doesn’t seem impressed. I don’t even think Ava is listening. “She does know you’re beyond successful right now and don’t need her help? She may have more followers and more deals, but you’re sitting mighty pretty.”

“Apparently, she doesn’t, but I’m not going to correct her.”

He gives me a knowing look. “You’re wanting this to turn into a real thing.”

Well, look at him hitting the nail on the head. Since there is no reason to confirm or deny that, I am going to promptly ignore his accuracy. “So, when is the wedding?”

Quinn laughs at me as Ava looks from him to me. “Sometime in June.”

June? Jesus. Okay. “Wow, quick.”

“We wanted to do it sooner, but with, um, er, who’s getting married?” she asks him, and I make a face. She doesn’t even know his brother’s name?

“Evan,” Quinn supplies, and I gawk at him. “What?”

I look at Ava then. “You don’t know his siblings’ names?”

Her eyes darken. “There are a lot of them,” she says, like that’s an excuse.

I blink. “Um, no. Shelli, Posey, Evan, and Owen. It’s pretty simple.”

“For you, because you’ve been around us forever,” Quinn says, trying to laugh it off, but this is not okay. I can tell I’ve pissed her off because she drags her gaze from mine back to her food.

Quinn gives me a pointed look, and I mouth, “*What the fuck?*”

“*Just let it be.*”

Well, this is going great. When my phone sounds, I glance down to see it’s a message from Coach.

Ahfuckbuddy.

Coach: Jeannot.

That’s all, just my last name.

Kill me now.

Coach: Call me.

I clear my throat. “Excuse me, it’s my coach. Sorry.”

Quinn waves me off, and I fully expect him and Ava to converse, but that would involve her actually uttering words to him.

I don’t like her.

Ignoring my distaste, I dial Coach’s number. “Are you trying to kill me? I swear, just the mention of your name makes my blood pressure go up.”

I pause. “I would never do such a thing, and I apologize for your blood pressure. Can I get you some Cheerios? I hear that helps.”

Quinn snorts as Coach seethes. “These next 182 days can’t go fast enough, Jeannot.”

So, 182 days, huh? That’s how long I have to convince Cameron I’m the one for her.

I shouldn’t feel giddy, when I’m pretty sure my coach is about to rip me a new one.

“I should have known when tickets for tonight sold out that you had something to do with it,” he says dryly. “Now, I’m on the BullieBoards, watching you flirt and show out like the pain in my ass you are.”

“But the game sold out. That’s a good thing.”

“But not for us, for you and your romance with Cameron White. Who the hell is that? And God please, don’t tell me it’s the gymnast because I don’t want to deal with her coach. He’s super possessive over his gymnasts.”

When I don’t say anything, he yells my name, so I explain, “Coach, you told me not to say she was the gymnast, and since I’m worried about your blood pressure, I’m trying to do what you ask.”

I’m met with silence for a moment. “You’re going to put me in an early grave. Not my own damn kid. You, Benson Jeannot.” I press my lips together not to joke around, not to piss him off more. “I should bench your ass.”

“For flirting?” I ask incredulously.

“For being a pain in my ass. You need to be focusing on grades and upping your game, not girls.”

“She’s a woman.”

“Jeannot!”

“Sorry.”

“You will not make a spectacle of my sport.”

“So, don’t score a hat trick?”

“No, Benson, score a fucking hat trick because I like goals. But don’t be throwing pucks or blowing kisses or flirting at the rink. Leave that shit off my ice, you hear me?”

I press my lips together. I fully planned on doing all that. Shit.

“Yes, sir.”

When the phone goes dead, I let out a laugh as Quinn looks over at me. “You know Jayden will kill you dead.”

I laugh harder. I always forget that he grew up with Coach since Jayden Sinclair used to play with the Nashville Assassins, which is where Quinn’s dad played and is the team his mom owns. “I know. I’ll need to stop and grab him some Cheerios on the way to the rink.”

“You’re a tyrant.”

I nod with no shame whatsoever. “I am.”

I notice that Ava is on her phone, in no way showing us a lick of attention. Quinn pushes his seat back. “Excuse me. I need to piss.”

“Classy, Quinn,” she mutters, and he doesn’t react. What the hell? If Emery said that, he would have licked her or something so unclassy, we all would have laughed. When my boy is almost to the bathroom, I find myself watching Ava as she clicks through her phone. She must feel my gaze because she looks up. Her brows come in, and she presses her lips together for a moment before asking, “Yes?”

I nod. “Just thinking. Trying to figure this out.”

“This?”

“What is going on between you and my brother?”

Her eyes narrow. “You two are hardly brothers.”

“Maybe not by blood, but by bond, we are.” She has nothing to say to that, and I know if she says something to Quinn, he’s gonna chew my ass. But I can’t hold back. I have to know. “Has he told you about Emery?”

“I am well aware of Emery.”

“You are?”

“Yes, but that has nothing to do with what Quinn and I have decided.”

“Decided?” Huh?

Her lips press into a straight line and way too casually for my liking, she says, “I mean how in love we are.”

I scrunch up my face, and I know I shouldn’t say this, but I need her to know. “I have it on good authority that he still loves her.”

“He does,” she says simply. “But that is none of your business—or even your place to say that to me. What happens between Quinn and me is between us. You’re his friend. I am his soon-to-be wife. Don’t forget that.”

Now I press my lips together and find that I’m glaring at her. “Is that a threat?”

“Doesn’t need to be.” Her eyes bore into mine. “If anything, it’s a reminder. Let us be, and out of respect for Quinn, don’t bring up Emery around me again. He is better off without her.”

She may be right, but I don’t like it at all. Maybe it isn’t my place to comment on, but something doesn’t feel right here.

But I have bigger things to worry about than my brother and his fucked-up love life. Cameron will be at my home

opener, and I play my best hockey when she is around. That should be what I'm worried about—not Ava, Emery, and Quinn.

But what I'm really worried about is how I'm gonna flirt without really flirting so that my ass doesn't get benched.

CHAPTER

Ten

CAMERON

As always, the Bullies' ice rink is packed. Students are already gathering to try to get in, the suites are full, and most of the seats are taken. Friday nights, now that football is over, are for the hockey boys, and everyone knows this is the place to be. Callie keeps her arm tightly hooked through mine, and I wish Evan were here. No one really talks to me when he is around. He's a big dude, and I like that buffer, but he had a conference for mental health advocates. Callie was going to go with him but decided to come with me. Thankfully.

As I walk through the rink to find my seat, I feel eyes on me, and they aren't shy about the fact that they're watching me. Not that I expect anything else. Soon, the catcalls are in abundance.

"Cameron, I'm better than that dude. Wear my shirt."

"Baby girl, I'm the one you want."

"If he can't give you what you want, holler at me."

"Cameron, don't waste your time on that dude. Come home with me."

Callie groans beside me, her arm tightening in mine. "It's so annoying the way people are acting."

I nod in agreement, but even I can't be bothered by the catcalls. The air is electric with excitement for the home opener, but the excitement that flows through me is beyond

compare. Benson was right; this is going to work. As I smile and wave, but also ignore the creepers, I have a hard time controlling the giddiness that spreads through my chest, because on seat 61 is a black-and-teal jersey with the number 61 on it and Jeannot printed above the number.

I swallow, trying to fight back my grin and ignoring Callie's gaze. But when I see the bouquet of black roses, I have no control over my lips as they curve into a huge grin. I love black roses; they're my favorite, and I can't believe he remembered that. I reach for them, and I'm aware Callie is watching me, a knowing grin on her own lips as I discover a teal Post-it that is stuck to the teal paper around the roses.

Enjoy the game. Yours, #61.

I'm unsure if it's the *Yours* or the black roses that has me fighting for my next breath, but one thing is for sure—Benson was absolutely right when he said he was unscriptable.

Fuck me.

This is a business transaction.

He's showing out like I knew he would.

I gotta keep reminding myself of that. I gotta keep that wall up.

Before it crumbles and exposes my feeble heart.

Callie clears her throat, but I ignore her as I reach for the jersey, setting the roses down to put it on. It's huge, going to mid thigh and hanging off me like a robe, but I don't care. I love it. I take my phone out of my back pocket and hand it to Callie. "Take some photos, please?"

"Sure," she agrees as she takes it, trying to meet my gaze. "So, we're ignoring the smitten little look on your face, right?"

I reach for the flowers, ignoring her prying gaze. "Take a few, please."

I'm met with laughter as I pose in different ways, smelling the roses, leaning against the glass, making a heart, and then pointing to the back of the jersey as I look over my shoulder. When I'm done, I sit down just as she does, handing me back

my phone. I take it, and together, we look over the photos. I'm pleased with all of it.

"You're so beautiful, Cameron," Callie says, leaning into me and pressing her chin into my shoulder. "He was right. You look great in his jersey."

I have to fight the grin that wants to appear. I clear my throat as I post the photo with a caption on the BullieBoards real fast.

@BensonJeannot61

You're right. I do look good in your jersey.

Fingers crossed for that hat trick.

Good luck, Cameron

"Cute," Callie comments, and to my surprise, Benson responds.

"Shouldn't he be getting ready?" I ask more to myself than to her as I click on his reply.

@CameronWhite1

Honestly, I may have been confident in the fact that I knew you'd look good in my jersey, but nothing could have prepared me for that photo.

I don't need luck when you're here.

Yours, #61

"Lordy me, he's laying it on thick, isn't he?" Callie says, shaking her head, and I giggle, much to my surprise.

"He's a showboat."

"Sure," she says, but she doesn't seem to believe her own response. I do, though. Benson is, and has always been, over

the top. Before I can elaborate on what I feel is the truth, the rink loses its freaking mind when the jumbotron shows the guys starting to come out of the locker room for warm-ups. My heart speeds up in my chest as I watch the guys hit the ice.

I don't have to wait long before Benson's massive body is in view. I would like to say I forgot how much I enjoy seeing him on the ice, but I'd be lying. There is no forgetting this. There is no ignoring how great the teal of his home jersey brings out the gray of his eyes. Or how the skates he wears have him towering over everyone, and how the pads on his shoulders make him appear more like a bull than a regular hockey player.

I watch as the blade of his stick meets a puck, and he carries it toward the goal. When he shoots, the puck goes right in since there is no goalie, and as he rounds the goal, he looks over his shoulder. His eyes meet mine. Even through the thick plastic of the cage covering his face, his eyes are dark and burning toward me. He doesn't have a smile on his face, though, but a smirk—a satisfied one that has my insides clenching in all the dirtiest ways. He moves on the ice with ease, his body flowing like water as he plays with the puck. He bounces it on his blade before shooting, and each time the puck goes in, his eyes find mine.

Business. Transaction.

I love hockey. I've always been a fan, but watching Benson play is a whole other experience. It's so easy for him, and as an athlete myself, I appreciate how at home he is on the ice. How obvious it is that he loves the sport and how thoroughly he enjoys playing. When I realize I'm forgetting to record him, I rush to pull out my phone and start to shoot video of him. As he skates around the goal from where he just shot, he skates toward where I sit. Our eyes lock, and when he winks, my stomach does flips more extensive than the double back I do on floor.

Within seconds, I'm knocked back in time.

Keeping my hands off Benson is becoming a real issue.

It's so easy to touch him, though, and I desire him so much. His body feels so good under my palms, and the way my thighs squeeze his trim hips is almost as exciting as the feel of his lips on my neck. I thread my fingers up the back of his neck, curling his hair between them as he kisses and nibbles on my neck. When he trails his teeth along my jaw, I moan loudly as I squeeze his hips with my thighs. His fingers dance along the small of my back as his lips meet mine once more for a lusty kiss that has my toes curling against the grass of the quad. I'm sure anyone who sees us only sees tangled limbs, and I, for one, don't give a shit who's watching. I want him. Badly.

When he pulls back, his nose sliding along mine, our eyes meet, and I smile at him. I didn't even realize his alarm was sounding because my heart was pounding so loudly in my ear. "I gotta go," he mutters against my lips. "I don't want to, though."

I clasp my fingers behind his neck. "I don't either."

He kisses my top lip. "Come by Sunday, when I get back?"

I kiss his top lip back and nod. "Okay."

He takes me under my arms and lifts me with ease so I can stand. Not letting go of his hands, I pull him up until we're toe-to-toe with each other. He wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me to him as I press my hands into his chest. I look up at him and realize I'm gonna miss him while he's on his road trip. I want to tell him that, but that sentiment seems a little out of line for what we are.

Friends. Who hook up. A lot.

He captures my jaw, rubbing it between his forefinger and thumb before drawing my lips up for a long, deep kiss. I fall into his body as he wraps his arm around me tighter, and every inch of his body burns into me. When he pulls back, our eyes lock, and he swallows as I draw in a deep breath.

We've been doing this song and dance for a little over four months, and I wonder if we're going to make it official. Neither of us brings it up, becoming exclusive, but I blame that on both of us being busy with school and sports. I wouldn't

mind, though; I may give off the vibe that I want nothing to do with a relationship, but that's to protect my heart. I tend to fall hard for guys, and then I'm left in their dust. Add in the fact that gymnastics means more than dick, and I don't chance getting involved with anyone. Because of how busy I am. Not because I don't dig him. I do. A lot. It's just, we both are going in different directions this summer. He's going back home; I'm going to be traveling to different gymnastics gyms to help Coach. It's all a bit complicated.

I tuck my hands into his back pockets, and he grins down at me before wrapping his arms around me for a tight hug. He buries his face in my neck, kissing me before he squeezes me tightly. He really does give the best hugs imaginable.

"Good luck this weekend," he says softly against my neck.

"You too," I say back, kissing his jaw. He brings his mouth to mine one last time, and then we slowly part. He hands me my bag and then my water bottle before giving me one last look.

"Text me."

"Or you can text me," I throw back at him, and something moves between us.

"I plan to."

A grin pulls at my lips as one does the same at his. He turns to leave, and then, impulsively, I ask, "Are you seeing anyone else?"

He looks over his shoulder at me, that grin unstoppable. With a wink that has my stomach clenching in all the right ways, he says, "Nope, only you."

"Only me?"

"Only. You."

"What about when you head back home?"

He shrugs. "Our phones work, right?"

"Yeah."

“So, we’ll stay in touch, see if we’re vibing when we come back next fall?” He turns then, snaking his arm around my waist and pulling me to him once more for a passionate kiss that has my toes curling again and my heart soaring. “No matter what, I’m enjoying this too much to forget you.”

Two weeks later, I found out I was pregnant.

And things changed.

Completely.

CHAPTER

Eleven

BENSON

I am well aware that I've already seen a picture of Cameron in my jersey, and it was awesome. Really, it was. But seeing my jersey on her, through the glass in the arena I love playing in, brings about a whole different onslaught of emotions. So much so that I actually trip over air when I round the corner of the goal since I'm trying to watch her.

I'm just glad Coach isn't out here, because if he were, he'd have words for me.

Of course she's gorgeous. That's a given. Her blondish-brown hair is down, curled to perfection, and her makeup is all bright and vibrant. She has teal glitter along her eyes, and her lips are devastating with a gloss that makes them shine. The jersey comes to midhigh, and the sleeves cover her hands, while her eyes watch me. My jersey hangs on her body in a way that makes me wish we weren't in an ice rink and were back at my place instead. That jersey has me wishing she weren't wearing the black leggings with teal socks and high-top Nikes.

Fuck me, my jersey belongs on her body.

So much so, it's a goddamned distraction for sure.

I skate to center ice and shuffle my skates as everyone skates around me. I don't pay anyone any attention; my eyes are on Cameron. She is laughing with Callie, and I wonder what Callie thinks of all this—if Cameron told her the whole

truth, or if she told her that we really are dating. I guess I shouldn't have just told Quinn, maybe should have asked how we were navigating that, but I don't actually care. Because I refuse to accept this six-month expiration date. No, if I'm lucky, there won't be one.

Hell, fuck luck—I'm going to make that a reality. I just have to be patient, show her what she could have with me and, if I could grow some balls, be honest about how I've always felt. A fluttery feeling tickles my belly as I continue to be engrossed in how she laughs. I love it. But when a guy leans over Callie to Cameron, the shuffling of my skates stops. I purse my lips, and red-hot jealousy burns through my veins.

Where the hell is that coming from?

Cameron is a beautiful girl. A real stunner. I've seen the comments on her social media, but she never replies back. I mean, she could be DM'ing them, but I don't see that. One thing is for sure, I've never witnessed another guy hit on her. Even more, I've never seen her grin at one like that. In front of me. In my arena. While she's wearing my jersey.

Without much thought, I tap my stick to the ice, and as I expected, Bradley, one of our forwards, sends the puck right on my blade. I pull my stick back, and I let the puck sail. Not toward the goal, but to where this dude is engrossed in the girl who is wearing my jersey.

When the puck hits the glass, it surprises everyone, and they all jump. Callie actually drops her phone, and Cameron's eyes whip to mine. So does the gaze of the jackass who is talking to her. His eyes widen when I yank on my own jersey and then point to her. He looks at her, and I do the same to see Cameron gawking at me. She says something, and he holds his palms up to her, then me. When she looks back at me, I feel a little pathetic. But then those brown eyes burn into mine, and gone is that feeling. I start to shuffle my skates once more, and I watch as her tongue comes out to wet her sweet, thick lips. When Callie whispers something in her ear, they laugh, and my chest clenches. I wish I could hear her laughing.

Since I can't, I rip my gaze from her and find that everyone is watching her. Some even take pictures, and that really gets my heart pumping. What the hell do they need a picture of her for? I get it—she's on social media, people feel entitled to her—but she's here for me, not them.

Man, seeing that shit chaps my ass. This is probably what she meant when she said she doesn't go to class. These are the creepers. My heart wants me to get off the ice and protect her. Guard her from them and use their phones as pucks, but I know I can't do that.

Coach will probably kill me since he did not appreciate the Cheerios I brought in. He actually tossed them in the trash and told me to kiss his ass, claiming it's his blood pressure not his cholesterol that I was causing a problem with. I feel I add flavor to his life, but I don't think he sees it that way.

Unfortunate, really.

A puck gets passed to me, and I shoot toward Odder. He bats it away, his eyes challenging, and soon, I'm peppering him with pucks from every angle. He watches me as I go to each open puck I find on the ice and shoot them in different ways. It's our thing, and I enjoy it, but it makes it even better when I get a few past him. Each time I glance back at Cameron, she's watching me with those twinkling brown eyes. It's hard to pull my gaze from hers, but I'm in the middle of a huge battle with Odder. Phillippe was supposed to be drafted last year, but he chose to finish school first. His parents are dead set on him having an education to fall back on, which makes sense after his dad got hurt and couldn't do anything outside of the sport. I remember Shea telling me it took a long time for him to enjoy working in the sport instead of playing. So, I get how they wouldn't want that for their son.

Odder is talented beyond belief, so he'll get drafted with no issue.

When the horn sounds for warm-ups to be over, I shoot one more time, and Odder catches it in his glove with ease before dumping it out and skating toward me. "I don't know if you'll get a hat trick tonight, buddy. Your shot is soft."

I feign hurt. “Wow, went for the jugular, eh?”

Odder snorts. “You weren’t even trying. Too busy watching Ms. White.”

I look back, finding Cam’s eyes on me. I turn, skating backward as I grin. “She sure is gorgeous to look at.”

“She’s out of your league. You know that, right?” he taunts, and now I snort.

“Please, no one is out of my league,” I announce, and then I wink at her, enjoying the blush that moves across her cheeks. Fuck, she’s gorgeous. “Eh, you may be right. She might be, but she *is* in my jersey and not yours.”

He smacks me with his glove. “I’m not the one having to get a date by going on the BullieBoards.”

He’s got me there. I laugh to ease my ego since that isn’t how I usually do things. I don’t have to. Girls flock to me. But for Cameron, I’ll post anywhere to get her in that teal-and-black sweater with my number on the back. “Do you see how good she looks? I can swallow my pride for that.”

He tucks his helmet under his arm, shaking out his blond locks as his ice-blue gaze drops to mine. He’s a giant off the ice, but on the ice, he’s a giant’s giant. “True, but didn’t y’all already date? I thought Penny told me that.”

I nod. “We fooled around our freshman year but never committed.”

Odder nods. “But I thought you don’t date someone more than once.”

I don’t. “She’s different.”

“Is she?”

“Yeah, she dumped me.”

He laughs at that. “But you put yourself out there again?”

I suck in a breath. I did. And once more, she has the opportunity to dump me again. But we’re older now. Some may say wiser. Just don’t ask Coach; I’m sure he wouldn’t agree. While this is all for show, according to her, she also

knows I'm unscriptable. Though, I know for a fact she isn't ready to admit that.

So, game on, Cameron White.

"She's different, my gentle giant, and I can't go into the draft without having a second chance with her."

"Man, fuck that. Girls are stressful," Odder laughs.

"You just haven't met the right one to stress for," I tell him, and he scoffs at that.

"Sure, but now that she's here, are you going to her home opener?"

"Hell yeah, I am."

"And since you got her in your shirt, what will you wear for her?"

I grin widely. "Anything she wants."

"A leotard?"

"If that's what she wants."

Odder laughs, shaking his head, and he mutters something about me being an idiot as I let him go ahead of me into the gate. I look back at Cameron and hold up my three last fingers, which is a feat with my gloves on. She mirrors what I am doing, tucking her thumb and forefinger together as her eyes sparkle. She looks so damn confident, so beautiful, and I can't wait to give her what she wants.

A hat trick.

And then...everything she could ever imagine.

CHAPTER

Twelve

CAMERON

“What in the world was that about?”

Callie looks over at me from where she’s devouring a pretzel with cheese. “What?”

“Benson,” I whisper out of the side of my mouth, so no one hears me. It’s loud, but I don’t want people catching wind that I’m speaking ill of my...Benson. “Hitting the glass with the puck and all when that guy was talking to us.”

The look on my best friend’s face makes me feel like an idiot. “So. Fucking. Messy. Girl, did you hit your head on the beam again?”

I gawk at her. “What? What are you talking about?”

Her annoyed gaze burns into mine. “Let me tell you something about men, because apparently you’ve dated boys. But a man, when they are with someone, gets jealous.”

“Jealous! Hardly.” I laugh, shaking my head.

“Cameron, guys don’t shoot pucks at thick glass and shoot daggers with their eyes unless they’re jealous,” she tells me, holding my gaze. “Go on YouTube, search for Shea Adler and Elli Fisher, and watch.”

“What do Evan’s parents have to do with this?”

“Shea Adler was riddled with jealousy when Elli showed up to his game with her coworker, and he broke the glass—

like, smashed it. With a puck, no remorse, no nothing. Jealous. As. Fuck.”

I blink. “Callie, they’re married and have thirty kids now,” I exaggerate, and she laughs. “Benson and I are in an arrangement,” I whisper out of the side of my mouth again.

“You can whisper, you can yell, you can form your lips whatever which way, but this arrangement is about to get super messy. You didn’t think this through, Cameron. At all.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“You just jumped in. You picked the first guy you thought of for this, and while I love Benson, I don’t know if he was the right choice with how things went down with you two. You didn’t think how this could play out. All you saw was the endgame, but my sweet, beautiful bestie, in every game, there are phases.” She holds her hand out to the ice. “Take hockey, for example. There are three periods—”

“I know how a hockey game is played, Callie, but I don’t know why the hell that matters!”

“Cameron,” she stresses, leaning in before licking the cheese off the side of her mouth. “In each period, there are twenty minutes of play. You two are in the first period of this. It’s the cute, flirty part, where you play with the idea of this being an ‘arrangement’—”

“It is—”

She waves me off. “In the second period, feelings will form—on your side because that dude has always had a thing for you.”

“Sex,” I say dryly. “He had lust for me.”

“And feelings. But anyway, things will get messy, you’ll act a fool and be like, ‘Oh my God, why is he making this more than it is?!’”

“I don’t like you,” I mutter, but that doesn’t deter her.

“The third period, he will pull you back in, and you two will fall madly for each other. And you’ll be like, ‘Well, that

wasn't scripted.' And he's going to go, 'Yeah, I'm not scriptable, baby.'"

"Are you done?" I ask dryly, looking at my nails so I don't have to look at her.

"And then the endgame, the Cup winner, him proposing at my wedding."

"You're insane," I say, rolling my eyes. "This is all an arrangement, and it's going beautifully."

"It is, and it's going to be successful and mind-blowing, and you're going to look at me and say, 'You were right, Callie. How could I ever doubt you? I actually did this subconsciously because I hate how things ended between us, and this was my way of getting a second chance without calling it a second chance.'"

I gawk at her. "If this conversation were a beam, I'd push you off."

She laughs at that, and even my lips twitch a bit. "I'm calling it now. Because for real, Cam, this is all too easy, too right, and it's been only a few days. I mean, look at the way he looks at you," she says, and I can't deny that. His dark eyes were possessive, and this warm flutter comes to life in my gut, but it doesn't mean anything. Of course lust is present. We know what happens when we get in bed together and how great our bodies work together, but that's not going to happen.

This is an arrangement.

A business transaction.

That's it.

"Because he wants in my pants."

"Of course he does. He's been there, he liked it. You said ___"

"I know what I said!" I say before she can say it. But even I can't deny the fact that he was the best I ever had. "It won't happen. That will make this messy."

I feel her gaze on me, and when I chance a glance, I regret it instantly. She holds up her palm, fighting back her laughter. “You mean to tell me that you, Cameron White, who hasn’t slept with anyone in years, is going to resist sleeping with that hunk of a man? You do know you have to kiss him, touch him in public? That’s not gonna wake up the girl between your thighs?”

“Just because you’re constantly thirsty doesn’t mean the rest of us are.”

Her eyes darken as her lips curve. “Because when your thirst can only be quenched by one man, it’s easy to ignore everyone else.”

Her words make my spine tingle. Oh, sleeping with Benson was one hell of an experience. I swear, he worshipped me. Cared more about me coming than himself. I had never been with anyone like that, and fuck, it scared me. Which is the main reason it can never happen, or next thing you know, I’m following Callie’s game analysis to a tee.

“Benson isn’t the drink I need.”

She guffaws at that in a very annoying and overzealous way. “I bet you...” She thinks for a moment. “You’ll sleep with him within three months.” I scoff and she grins. “If you do, then you have to wear the blue dress I picked out.”

I give her a dark look. “Callie, that dress is hideous! I look like a tormented Little Miss Muffet!”

She grins. “I love it, and I’ll get you a tuffet. But if you last, then you can wear that little smexy number you want.”

I glare, but then I take a deep breath. “You’ll be buying me my smexy number too.”

She pats my thigh. “No, my love. I’ll be buying your dress for your tuffet, Miss Muffet.”

“I dislike you greatly,” I mumble, and her laughter is unstoppable.

Realistically, I have nothing to worry about. I have this planned out perfectly. Benson and I will meet on Monday to

go over everything, and it'll be easy peasy. A few events, a couple games, maybe a coffee here and there, that's it. We won't have to talk about anything, we won't need to be around each other, we'll just exist together for people to see. Now, if I do have to kiss him, that's fine, easy. I'll act like I'm kissing... Okay, I may need to rethink the kissing thing because there would be no imagining anyone but the man whose lips are under mine. Because Benson, Jesus help me, can bring me to my knees with a kiss.

By the grace of God, I was sitting when he kissed me the first time, so I didn't fall over. But each time our lips found each other, it was really hard to stop. Like, really hard. His lips are just so inviting, so soft and lush. The feel of his palm along my jaw, or how his nose would slide along my neck. How when he let his beard grow a bit, it tickled my neck and jaw. Those eyes. How dark and deep they'd burn into mine.

I know I'm in an ice rink, but fuck, I'm burning up.

"Thinking about sleeping with him?" Callie pokes, and I don't even bother giving her my gaze.

"Keep it up, and you won't have a maid of honor."

"You're right," she quips. "I'll have a matron of honor who looks like Miss Muffet."

Thankfully, before I can cause bodily harm to my sister in all ways but blood, the damn game starts.

And Benson, well, he scores in the first fifty-two seconds.

Yes, it was a soft goal—he barely shot it in—but the goalie must not have been ready. And hey, a goal is a goal, no matter what. We all shoot out of our seats, screaming as Benson tucks his stick between his legs and acts as if he's riding it around the goal. He even circles his glove as if he's trying to lasso someone in.

With the look he gives me, I feel it may be me.

Shit.

CHAPTER

Thirteen

CAMERON

Benson not only scored three goals; he scored four. The last one being an empty netter when the other team pulled their goalie to try not to be shut out by our barreling Bulls. With Benson's empty net goal, the final nail was added to their coffin, and the Bullies won the home opener. Not that I'm surprised. Our team is stacked with talent, not that I watched anyone but Benson. I've always enjoyed watching him play. He's eager, he's quick, and you can just tell he loves every single part of the game. I love to watch an athlete who loves their sport. It makes me love the sport more, not that it's hard to enjoy hockey. It's fast-paced, it's hard-hitting, and something is always happening. I love it. It just adds to my love of the sport that Benson looks fantastic doing it. He truly floats on the ice, and his hands are unbelievable.

On and off the ice.

Not that I'm thinking of his hands.

Or how damn good he looked on the ice.

@BensonJeannot61

Great game. Thanks for the hat trick—and the jersey.

I had a blast. Cameron

I click my pen against the vase holding the flowers he left for me. I admire them, a hint of a grin on my face as I gaze at the velvety black petals. Callie is right. Last night was too easy. It was second nature to cheer him on and to wink when he winked at me after each goal. I felt everyone watching us, I felt the excitement, and I swear, when he scored, the crowd was over the top.

But I was louder.

Before the game was over, I was tagged in video after video of me cheering and how Benson's eyes always found me. Everyone ate it up, just as he said they would. The way he sent me a knowing look when he skated off the ice after the game left me breathless.

And knocked me completely off-kilter.

The data may have spoken for itself, and I wholeheartedly believe that people would want more of us as a pair, but I didn't prepare myself for this. I guess I was pretty sure Benson would say no. I think, subconsciously, I wanted him to say no. I knew he would show off. I mean, the dude scores, and he rides his stick like it's a bull. He throws himself into the boards. He chirps at everyone and doesn't hold back at all. He plays the part of a flirting dude perfectly. I'm unsure which he loved more—scoring, or grinning at me. He knew he was right, and he knew he was giving me all I wanted.

Which has me in my feelings.

My impulsive choice of a boyfriend guy was a great one, but damn it if Callie's words don't haunt me. It would be too easy to fall back into what we were, but I don't want that. At the end, I was ready for more...and then the pregnancy happened. I had to get away, I had to heal from everything, and I just don't see him wanting anything but sex from me. I don't even think he does relationships. At least, he never said he did.

For the love of God, what am I doing?

This is an arrangement.

That's it.

I can't give any thought to an alternative. There is no way in hell he is doing this because he wants a relationship with me. Our history is too messy, and it's easy because we're friends.

Friends who haven't talked in three years and now are "dating."

Yeah, I didn't think this through at all. After last night, with his jersey laid along the back of my chair, I feel like I'm the puck, ready to be shot. And Benson... Well, he's known for scoring. I don't know what this feeling means. Is it a warning? Will we become what Callie has projected?

That can't be right, though. If he wanted me, why did I have to come to him? No, it has to be the money and the fact that he is a good guy. He wouldn't turn down helping me, not after everything that happened. Just as I'd never turn down helping him. We don't have to talk to know the other would help. It's an unspoken promise.

I have to remember that.

I move my pen over the flowers as I gaze up at my pin board. Instead of on the wrapper around flowers he had waiting for me, I stuck his note on the board with the rest of my Post-its. While I have a lot already stuck to the board, they are all yellow since that color always attracts my eyes. Benson's note is blue, so it stands out.

While I've tried to keep notes on my phone, seeing them on the board when I wake up really helps me to remember what I need to remember. I have an endless supply of Post-its, and my room bears the brunt of that. The notes go with the chaos of my room, and while I should be embarrassed, no one comes in here. Not even Callie.

Being a senior, I have my own room in the Bullies' gymnastics house. It's nice, especially since the only person I'd want to share with is Callie, but she lives with her hunky soon-to-be husband. I do share a bathroom with Shantae Miller, but we hardly speak. She keeps to herself, and I do the same. While she was there for me when I went to the clinic freshman year, I don't think she can truly get past her

judgment over my choice. That's fine; I owe her nothing. It was my choice and one I've come to terms with. I will forever be grateful for her, though, how she stood beside me, holding an umbrella so the protestors couldn't get to me. Even if she wanted to protest with them, she stood beside me. For that, she'll always have a place in my heart.

I'm torn from my thoughts of that day when my phone sounds with a text from Callie. I reach for the phone and notice the message is a photo of her sparkly green dress and Evan's dark suit.

Shit, should I have asked Benson to walk me down?

Everyone will have a date, but I've been walking the carpet single since freshman year. Well, I take that back. I walked with Callie our freshman year. Damn it. I was so caught up in our exchange on the BullieBoards, I didn't think about the Teal Walk, or even if he'd come tonight. He threw me off course by inviting me last night. We weren't supposed to start this thing until Monday, but here we are. I shouldn't want to ask him, but wouldn't people wonder why he isn't walking me down when I was there for him last night? I haven't even asked him to come to my home opener. I went to his. Shouldn't he come to mine?

This is why I wanted to wait until Monday!

Plus, could I truly handle him in a suit? Game days, that man always took my breath away with how delectable he would look, entering the rink in a tailored suit that hugged him in all the right places. He didn't wear Crocs. Nope, he wore these sleek shoes that carried him like he was born to run a boardroom. Or a throne.

Oh, I hate Callie.

'Cause now all I can think of is me riding him in that stupid Miss Muffet outfit while he wears a suit on a throne.

A frustrated groan leaves my lips as I go to contact him, but my phone rings, and my mom's face comes over the screen.

“Hey, Mom,” I say, praying my pupils aren’t dilated and my face isn’t red because it’s a full-on movie in my head with him pounding into me as layers of dress bounce around us. My ass slamming into his thighs, his cock so deep inside me that I feel it in my chest.

Oh God, help me.

I should be focusing on my mom, but I’m trying to figure out if I should email Benson or go to the BullieBoards again.

To be honest, I probably need to take a cold shower.

“Baby, you okay? You’re flushed.”

“Fine,” I mutter, trying not to look at the camera. “I might need to call you—”

Her excited voice cuts me off. “Are you ready for tonight? Your last Teal Walk.”

Well, that reminder threw some cold water on me. I have been so caught up in everything else, I forgot this would be my last Teal Walk. That’s sad. I tap my pen to the vase of flowers as my heart rate slows. “Kinda sad, but excited. I gotta finish up some work, and then I think the dress trunk will be here for us to pick out teal-carpet outfits.”

“What do you think you’ll pick?” Mom asks, but my mind is still reeling. Not of me riding Benson, but of how it would feel to hold his arm during this last walk of mine. It’d feel better to ride him—less sad and more exciting—but none of that can happen. I don’t want to be sad, though. I want to be proud. I worked my ass off to get to this last season, and I just don’t want to be sad anymore. “Baby doll? Are you okay? Are you sad?”

“I’m sorry. No. Well...yes, but I don’t want to be. My brain is going nuts.” I wave her off. “I’ll see you tonight, right?”

“Yes. Are you okay? Do you need to talk about whatever has your brain going nuts?”

Um. That’s a big *hell* no and only furthers my realization that I didn’t think through this Benson and me situation at all.

My parents know who Benson is, and I'm not sure they're gonna handle us "dating" just dandy. Fuck me, I might need to call this off.

Or I could be honest. Why is it so easy for me to flirt and be flirted with, but the layers of what our being together means mess with me. I don't want to think about any of this. I don't even want to deal with it. I just want to enjoy my life. I want to see how this project turns out. I want to graduate and then leave Tennessee. For good, maybe?

Thoughtlessly, I blurt out, "I need to be honest."

What is wrong with me?

"Honest?" she asks, her brows coming in. "That sounds very loaded."

"You could say that," I say softly, and I don't know if I can tell her. Why should I? I mean, it's all for show, but I know she watches my social media, and I don't want her to be blindsided when she sees us together. I think it would hurt more that way. But am I truly going through with this? I can't deny the insights, though. Everyone is talking about it, and I know my project is going to be one that will be used as an example for future marketing students. Jesus, I feel like my brain is a herd of squirrels, and I can't even grasp one of the damn vermin.

And if I'm honest with myself, I want to see this through. I want to know what happens.

Now that Benson's attention is on me again, I don't know if I'm ready to let that go.

"Just spit it out, baby doll. Lord, you're making me nervous."

I swallow just as a notification comes across the top of my screen. It's from the BullieBoards.

@CameronWhite1

It was an honor.

Seat 61 is yours for the season. Yours, #61

All kinds of butterflies go crazy in my gut, and my heart speeds up as I watch comment after comment follow his post. This is going to work. Whoever said money doesn't buy happiness didn't have plans not to work for a year and to travel instead. Or have a coffee addiction or a Post-it-notes-buying problem, because what Benson and I have going on is going to bring in a load of cash. This is going to be the greatest project of my college career, and I can't turn my back on that.

CHAPTER

Fourteen

CAMERON

Even though I know my mom may get mad, I tell her my plan, and like a coward, I don't look at her as I do it. I know that's pathetic and I know that I am an adult, but I want her to support me. I want her to believe in me, and I know she's still upset with my choice from freshman year. She couldn't have kids after me, and I know she wanted Benson's and my child, but I couldn't do that. I wouldn't do it. Because of everything that happened, our relationship hasn't been the same. Though, even when I was growing up, I knew she kept me at arm's length. Given that I was the product of her teenage rape by her pastor and then her being forced to have me, I think she has always resented me.

Which is why my stepdad made us go to therapy after my abortion. Sometimes, I can't help but feel like her interactions with me now are all for show. Like, my stepdad is there watching to make sure, but really, she hates me. Or I'm being dramatic, as she always claims.

"The insights are insane, and that was before I even went to his game last night. He gained so many followers, and I did too, across all our platforms. With my going to the game last night, our socials are buzzing. I have over three million likes on my video of him from last night."

"Social media isn't everything," she interjects, and I mean, she's right. But for my generation, it is.

“I am aware, but I had to think outside of the box. I wanted to do something I know no one has done because no one has the status Benson and I have.”

Even though it's been three years, when I look up at her, I still feel like that scared little girl who lay on the bathroom floor and told her I was pregnant. I meet her gaze, and as I suspected, she doesn't look pleased. “Why him, though?”

“Mom, he's the most successful influencer on campus. He's going into the NHL draft top ten, and since we have history with the Beauty and the Bull campaign, it only made sense for it to be him.”

Her eyes narrow. “He knocked you up. I don't know how you can even look at him after all that.”

I make a face. “*We* got pregnant, Mom. It takes two to tango, and in all reality, it may be more on me since I was the one who was on antibiotics.”

“It doesn't matter. He didn't stop you from getting the abortion.”

“Because he didn't want a baby,” I say, glaring at her. “Neither of us did. But he was ready to marry me, support me, because he knew my life would be the one to change, not his.”

“I don't—”

“Mom, he was amazing, so supportive, and I ghosted him. So, really, why he's even speaking to me is beyond me.”

“Because he probably wants back in your pants.”

I glare. “Mom, please. He isn't like that.” Though, I do leave out his “I have needs” comment because, really, don't we all? I know I told Callie I don't, but I have been vividly imagining riding Benson for longer than I care to admit. I'm throbbing between my legs even though my mom is reprimanding me for choosing the boy I'm riding in my head, so yeah, I'm a total idiot.

“All boys are.”

“Not him. He's a good dude and wants to help me with this, and I'm helping him. I've already heard back from all the

companies I've contacted. This is going to go great, and there are no feelings between us. We're friends."

"Cameron, you can't be friends with someone you dated and got knocked up by."

"That's not true. While we have a loaded history, we do care for each other as friends."

She shakes her head, not convinced. "I feel certain you could have hired another influencer."

I shrug. "But I trust Benson. He won't rat me out, and he'll do right by me."

"I don't like it," she says softly, shaking her head. "It brings up very bad memories."

She isn't wrong, but I don't verbally agree with her. Maybe at the beginning, it was hard to look at Benson and not think of our choice, but now, three years later, that's no longer the case. I don't think of the pain, but rather how supportive and kind he was. And how much of an asshole I was. I think that's why I'm working so hard to get him so many deals. I want to make sure he gets the most out of this, and I know I can catapult his career once he hits the ice with his professional team. He's already going to go top ten, but wouldn't it be awesome if he could go with millions in his pocket?

"Hm, I don't know, Cameron. Just be careful."

"I'm good, Mom. We're friends, that's it."

"I find that hard to believe," she says with a rueful look. "While it was sexual before, this is just a partnership. What if it turns out to be more and then you get pregnant again?"

I roll my eyes. "This is strictly business."

"Sure," she says, rolling her eyes. "I give it a month before you fall between the sheets with him and I get another call."

Do I have a flashing sign above my head that reads "HORNY"?

I thought I was keeping my red-hot thoughts to myself, but I must not be by the way everyone thinks I'm going to fall into

bed with him. That's the last thing that'll happen. I can take care of myself faster than any dude, and while, yes, I'd rather have him between my legs, I'm not dumb. Sex leads to feelings, and feelings are the last thing I need when he isn't looking for anything more than money.

"Mom, stop."

"Maybe you'll keep the next one," she mutters, and I glare, my heart seizing in my chest at the blatant slap in the face.

"You're being toxic. What was the point of all that therapy we went to if you're going to say sly shit like that?" I snap, and I notice she looks to the side. Probably to my stepdad.

"You're right. I apologize."

"Thank you," I say, holding her gaze. "Trust me, okay?"

She doesn't comment on that. Instead, she says, "I love you. See you tonight."

"Love you."

I hang up, and my screen goes back to Benson's post on the BullieBoards. Of course, my mom's words fuck with me, and I want to ignore him, but I can't. I trust myself, I trust him, and I know this is going to work.

And it will without either of us getting hurt.

Or me looking like Miss fucking Muffet at Evan and Callie's wedding, all alone, because Benson would have all the money he wanted and free ass.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

BENSON

I move my fingers along the guitar, playing the melody to Noah Kahan's "Your Needs, My Needs" as Quinn sings. I don't look at the camera. Instead, I look at my friend, who sings with his eyes closed and his heart open. He comes from a musical family. His mom and sister were on Broadway, his dad taught not only me to play guitar, but the whole family. Most of them even play piano. On holidays, there is a playlist that is emailed with everyone's part for each song. The Adlers love to sing just as much as they love hockey.

And while Elli and Shelli sing like angels, as does Evan, I love Quinn's voice the most. It's very gravelly, almost like he belongs in the hills of Virginia with a banjo and a piece of grass between his teeth. It's soothing, nice, and I think that's why we have such a successful following for our cover songs. Not only do we do all the songs acoustically, but Quinn's voice is pure gold. While he is a legit genius and has a full ride to Vanderbilt to become a sports surgeon, this little side gig has helped a lot of people.

We split half of the earnings from this account between the two of us, and we give the other half to whatever charity we want to help. I grew up poor, never living beyond my means, so having the money I do is already a shock. I want to help people who need help since that's how I was able to play hockey when I was younger. Through charity and donation. Sponsorship families. The Adlers. I'm a true believer that you

can't go to the grave with money, so why not give it to those who need it?

Usually, it's the Nashville Assassins Foundation since Shelli does great work to help so many, but last month, we donated to the student services organization on the Bellevue campus. They help college kids who can't afford food, clothes, or other necessities. This month, we're donating to the Autism Center of Bellevue where Callie works on campus. Unlike with other influencers who do videos on what donations they make, no one knows we do this because it's for no one but us. It's not for us to impress people; it's to help, and we enjoy doing it.

I look down at my guitar, watching my fingers move and the ring light shine off the smooth wood below the strings. I love this song, love the artist who sings it, but listening to Quinn is like listening to his soul cry for Emery. No, I didn't get the name wrong. No one can tell me anything different. This dude doesn't sing for anyone but her. I am damn sure even Ava knows that.

That chick.

What the hell.

We finish the song, and our eyes meet. His mouth is hidden behind his mic, but I know he's grinning by the way his blue eyes shine. The dude smiles with his eyes first. His face is very expressive, much like Cameron's. Before I can fall into all the ways her eyes lit up, her lips curved, and how fucking good she looked in my jersey last night, I say, "Sick, man."

He nods, grinning as he gets up, shutting off the camera and then picking it up to take to the computer to start editing the video. Some may edit all their footage at once, but that's not how Quinn does things. He makes sure the video is perfectly edited, and then he confirms the audio sounds right before he posts. It takes longer, but I trust his process.

"Last night was over the top," he calls to me, and I laugh as I gently set my guitar in its case before spreading out on the couch. "Mom and Dad were laughing at you."

I know. Shea made a point to tell me I'm going to have to shoot harder to be on his level.

Unable to stop the grin, I say, "But did you see? I have over six thousand new followers today."

He nods. "Yeah, I saw. I never doubted Cameron. She's a badass influencer. The video she made of you was really good, fun."

I may have saved it. "Yup, she's doing what she said." He sends me a knowing look. "What?"

"So, you're gonna keep acting like you need her help until...?"

"Until I know she wants me."

"And you don't think she does?"

"I assume, but she's hard to read."

He looks back at his computer. "Just don't put yourself out there first. She'll break you again."

"Words from someone who knows?"

"Yup, and I wish you'd leave it be. You're wasting your time."

I stare at him until he looks back at me. "If this were you and Emery, what would you do?"

He presses his lips together. "I'm getting married."

"Sure, but I got it on good faith, Ava would be left at the altar and Emery would be in your arms."

He doesn't even dignify me with a response—rude, really—as he looks back at the computer again. I roll my eyes because he knows I'm right. I open my phone to check my emails because while we were singing, I noticed my phone was going off like crazy. I have emails from some major hockey equipment companies for influencing work, and I reply to them that I'd love to meet up with them. I'll need to thank Cameron when I see her.

Whenever that will be.

I didn't see her after the game as I assumed I would. Though, I think that was me being hopeful she'd wait around for me. I looked for her, but it wasn't scripted for us to see each other. Honestly, nothing from last night was, but I had to show her that this could work. This is my in. The *in* I've been waiting for.

She has been avoiding me for three years, but now that she's come to me to fake date—which is laughable—she's about to see what it's like to date Benson Jeannot. And if, for some crazy reason, she has forgotten what it's like to have me between her legs, I will eagerly remind her.

Until she never forgets.

I lick my lips at just the thought of her perfect hips in my hands. I love her hips. Like, in an unhealthy way. When I watch her do gymnastics, it's not her ass I watch, it's the way her hips move. There is always more movement to her hips than probably needed, but fuck if I don't want to gobble her up. Start behind her knee, nibble right up one thigh, lick the curve of her ass, and then take a bite out of her hip before I do it to the other side. I wonder if she still wears that almond butter lotion. I love how it made sliding my nose along her skin so smooth. And the smell? Ahfuckbuddy, it was to die for.

I shift awkwardly, trying to give myself some space while making sure Quinn doesn't see my full-ass hard-on. Man, Cameron does it for me. Badly. I go to Instagram to look at her content. She did a photo dump of her in my jersey with the caption, *Eyes on #61*. I smirk to myself as my cock throbs. Oh, what I'd give to see that girl in my bedroom with just my sweater on. My number moving across that ass and my name along her back. Fuck, I gotta go give myself some relief.

I hop up quickly, and Quinn shoots me a look. "Where you going?"

"Self-care," I throw over my shoulder.

"If this is how it's gonna be while you fake date Cameron, get your own bottle of lotion!" he yells at me, and I laugh as I stop at my door.

“I don’t use yours since you keep using it all for your nightly self-care while thinking of Emery.”

His eyes narrow. “You mean Ava?”

“If it were for Ava, you wouldn’t need it since you’d be fucking her.”

“Fuck you,” he calls to me, and I grin.

“I said what I said, brother. Now, excuse me.” I close the door, go into our adjoining bathroom, and grab his lotion. I’ll get my own next time I’m out. Just as I close the bathroom door, my phone sounds with a notification from the BullieBoards. I know this because I set it as the goal horn. I open it to see Cameron has posted a status, tagging me. We really need to take this to DMs, or hell, she needs to text me.

@BensonJeannot61

Do you have a suit? I need a date tonight for the Teal Walk.

Fingers crossed you aren’t scoring hat tricks for someone else. Cameron

Well, damn. So now she’s going off script? I fucking love it.

@CameronWhite1

I’m only scoring for you, beauty.

I do have a suit. Which do you prefer? Black or gray?

Your date, #61

@BensonJeannot61

Black. Meet you in the complex at 4?

Thankful. Cameron

@CameronWhite1

I'll be there, and can I ask what color you're wearing?

Yours, #61

@BesonJeannot61

You pick: pink, white, or lilac?

Indecisive on the dress, not the date. Cameron

@CameronWhite1

Pink to match your lips, but really, you'd look great in anything. Maybe you'll give me your new number so we can stop communicating for the world to see?

I want you all to myself, #61

@BensonJeannot61

All to yourself? Hmm.

Maybe.

See you soon. Cameron

Ahfuckme, she's got me in knots. Not sure if the maybe is to confirm the number exchange since she changed hers after freshman year, but it's cool; I'll get it from her. First, I gotta get rid of the throbbing in my cock. Since I do have the best hands, according to the NHL and anyone else who asks, I take hold of my cock, and my thoughts drift to Cameron, her body, her eyes, her laugh, and above all, that mouth. I'm wound so fucking tightly that I come in moments, but as my come sprays onto the towel I'd laid down, I'm not satisfied. My hand isn't her, and lord knows it doesn't feed the desire that burns inside me.

No, only Cameron can do that.

But I can't dwell. No, I gotta get ready for my date with my *girlfriend*.

CHAPTER

Sixteen

CAMERON

I make poor life choices.

I do. I'm not even going to lie or try to make an excuse. I can't blame it on having ADHD because I've been diagnosed since I was eight, and I can't continually blame my poorly thought-through choices on my diagnosis. I am what I am, and I never learn. Or maybe I forget? I don't know, but for real, though, I thought inviting Benson fucking Jeannot to walk me down the teal carpet was a good idea?

News flash, it is not.

I know this the moment I see his white Tesla pull up and the door opens, only his long, thick leg emerging to give him stability as he grabs what he needs. Just that leg, with a bright pink sock peeking out the hem of his pant leg, that's all I need to know I am fucked to the max. I squeeze my thighs together so tightly to try to prevent my pussy from pounding when he holds the top of his car to heave himself in all his glory to a standing position.

The leg was one thing, but his whole body, clad in his black suit, is out of this world.

His suit is tight at his shoulders and thighs, the fabric straining against his biceps as he buttons one button on his jacket before pulling it down with ease. He wears a pink dress shirt with no tie and the first few buttons open, showing off one hell of a tattoo I didn't know he had but now want to

know everything about. A silver chain hangs around his neck, and I have to force myself not to think of the time that I took hold of it and yanked him to me for a lusty kiss. He was so deep inside me, squeezing my hips in his hands, and when we parted, my name fell from his lips in a way I'll never forget.

It was like a prayer.

Once more, I have to squeeze my thighs, pressing my hand into my stomach as I continue to study him. Even though I know I shouldn't, I can't not think in everything about him. The way he locks his car before sliding his key into his pocket. How he looks around, taking in his surroundings before tucking his hands in his pockets. The way his hair is combed over and his face is free of stubble. He shaved. For this. Of course he did. He has to look good for the cameras. He runs his large hand over his mouth, and then he looks up at the building, a slow grin moving over those devastating lips.

He knows I'm watching him.

Shit.

Bad choices, all bad choices.

Within seconds, I nervously fool with the ends of my hair, making sure it falls over my shoulder just the way I want. With his gaze intent on me, or so I assume, I feel like my dress is getting tighter. It's already tight since it's a size too small, but I loved it. The one-shoulder long-sleeved hot-pink mirror-cut sequined number is to die for. I wanted something that screamed hot, and this dress did it. It ends right below my ass, showing off my thighs, and with high black stiletto heels, I know my calves look good. My makeup is light, mostly because I don't want to redo my makeup to compete, and while my hair is down now, it'll be nothing to throw it up for the meet.

When I was ready, I knew I looked good. I was confident. But now, as Benson pulls open the door to the complex, I find myself hoping he thinks so.

God, what is wrong with me?

Benson's eyes move over me as he pulls his wallet from his back pocket, showing his student ID to security. His eyes don't leave me either as the guard verifies he's supposed to be here before he lets him through. I'm breathless. My stomach is so clenched, I feel like I might break as Benson prowls toward me, looking every bit like he wants to eat me whole. That shouldn't please me. I shouldn't be turned on by that, but like I've decided many times over today, I'm a total idiot. A glutton for punishment. Hell, I may have hit my head so many times on the beam that I'm not even able to make decent decisions.

Some would have stopped far before he does, but Benson comes toe-to-toe with me, stealing my breath from my lungs. In my heels, I'm at his chin instead of his chest, and our eyes lock as he reaches out, snaking his arm around and pulling me to him. I don't stop him. I press my hands into his chest as his other arm comes around me, pulling me even closer into a hug that not only curls my toes but has my gut doing double backflips. His nose moves into my hair, and he squeezes me tightly as I hold my breath, because if I don't, I'll get drunk off his scent. He inhales deeply, taking me in with no bashfulness at all.

Everything goes hot. I hadn't realized how badly I craved his touch until now. How safe his arms make me feel, how every bit of the tension that was coursing through me dissipates in seconds. My body trembles as I clench my thighs, begging myself not to fall back into images of his face between them. A flush breaks out all over me as his lips move to the shell of my ear. He runs his nose along my lobe and then whispers my name.

Just my name.

"Cameron White." I swallow past the lump in my throat, every single inch of my body trembling like I'm about to try a new skill that could end with me falling to my death. Answering isn't possible, but thankfully, he doesn't need me to. With his lips right at my ear, he whispers, "It is wholly unfair how gorgeous you are."

He squeezes me again, and my eyes drift shut as my pussy tightens. I urge her to behave, to keep her wits about herself, but I don't think she's listening. I can feel her salivating for him, and I know that's dangerous. I know for a fact that can't happen.

Because if I fall into bed with him, I'll fall madly for him.

Distance. We need distance. I pull back as far as he'll let me, his arm still wrapped around my waist as he digs his fingers into my hip. I look up at him, his dark pupils dilated and stormy as they bear down on me. "I could say the same about you. You pulled out all the stops, huh? We look good."

Something flashes in his eyes. "We do." I put my hand on his as he says, "Thanks for inviting me."

"Thank you for being so willing. I'm sure you have better things to do."

His eyes darken. "I'm where I want to be."

He licks his lips then, and once more, my pussy purrs for him. We stand there, staring at each other, and I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. But then his eyes fall to my lips, and everything catches on fire.

I clear my throat, and as confidently as I can, I say, "I got you a ticket for the meet, if you want to come."

He nods. "I was coming anyway, but I don't need the ticket. I used my season ticket choice for the gymnastics team."

"Really?" I ask, surprised. "Not football?"

"You don't play football," he says, and my heart about stops dead. Our eyes are locked, my chest tightens, and I don't know what to say to that. How to react.

"Hey! You made it!"

While I'd rather kiss Benson, I could truly kiss Callie for the distraction. I drag my gaze from his to my best friend, who is truly the most gorgeous girl I've ever laid eyes on. In a sparkly green dress that hugs her body in all the right ways, she already has her meet hair up, and her makeup is more dark

than soft, which is surprising. She doesn't usually wear makeup for meets, but with this being our last Teal Walk, I get her wanting to show off. Beside her, Evan is the proud fiancé in a beautiful dark suit that complements her perfectly. His blue eyes are blazing, and his grin is unstoppable, only for her, as he holds her close.

“Why wouldn't I?” Benson asks, and even though he's holding me, he leans in, kissing Callie's cheek before he and Evan do a handshake. His other arm never leaves my waist, and while my body loves it, I know that's not good. It's easy for him, but for me, it does things to my heart that shouldn't be happening. “I'd be a numbnut for not escorting this beauty to her last first meet.”

And I'm a numbnut for inviting him.

“She is stunning,” Callie gushes, but I see that knowing look in her eyes. Oh, she makes me stabby. “They're lining up. Y'all ready?”

We agree, and even though I turn to walk, his hand doesn't leave my hip. He holds me with such possession that my heart is galloping in my chest. “I'm glad you had fun last night.”

Ignoring the pounding of my heart, I look up at him. “It was a blast. I think your celly celebration was my favorite.”

He grins, his eyes dancing. “I thought you'd love that.”

I press my tongue into the gap of my teeth. “Though, the shooting the puck at us was a bit over the top.”

I notice a tic in his jaw. “Was it now?”

I give him a look. “Yes, you're selling this perfectly. You don't have to act like you're possessive of me.”

He cocks his head as we line up with everyone. “Is that right?”

All the girls turn when we come to a stop, and they look back at us. I notice that Miley and Shantae have looks on their faces that are a mixture of intrigue and confusion. But my other teammates are just grinning, excited for me. While

everyone else goes through boyfriends left and right, I don't do that.

"Looking good, Cammy," Elise calls back to me, her arm tightly wrapped around her swimmer boyfriend.

I send her a grin as I laugh. I feel Benson's gaze on me, and when I look up, his eyes are darker than normal. "Yeah, I mean, it was a nice touch but unneeded."

"I'm pretty sure I said I'd decide what is needed and what isn't," he says, his voice so low and rough, I feel it along my skin. "I don't want some guy talking to my girlfriend."

My girlfriend.

I bite into my bottom lip at his declaration. "I'm just saying, don't go out of your way."

He nods slowly. "I'll keep that in mind."

"I don't want you to feel like you have to go all out. Everyone is already eating up our content. I know I'll ace the project."

I can tell he's fighting back a grin. "I don't doubt that at all." His fingers bite into my hip then, pulling me in closer. He splays his hand across my hip, and he begins to move his thumb in a circle across my hip bone. It's maddening, and my body starts to tingle from the simple stroke of his thumb. When his lips come to my ear once more, I can't breathe as he whispers, "But like I said, I have needs. And while you may assume those are purely sexual, it's not all about sex for me, Cameron." My eyes drift shut as his lips caress my ear. "For me, it's to let everyone fucking know that you are mine for the next six months, the way you asked for me to be yours. If that means I slam a puck against a sheet of glass to educate some jackass, I will. If that means I hold you so close that we are basically one, I will. If that means bringing such beautiful color to your gorgeous face with my words, I will." My hands begin to shake, as do my thighs. "I'll do whatever I want to get you what you want."

To ace the project, I remind myself. To get him all the money imaginable.

Breathlessly, I say, “I would have gotten you the sponsorships without how awesome this is going.”

He stills beside me. “Thank you for that, by the way.”

“Like I said, we’re in this to help each other,” I say, but I’m not sure I believe my own words. “It’s only been a few days, but it’s going great.”

He doesn’t say anything in agreement, though, and I refuse to look up at him. I feel like if I do, I won’t stop looking at him. He continues to move his thumb along my hip, and my blood simmers in my veins as I remind myself this is all for show. Even I can’t ignore the way everyone keeps looking back, grinning and gossiping. Just the way I wanted. It’s insane to think that people care this much about two people being together. I guess that’s the world we live in, though. Social media rules all. But the obsession with celebrities has always been a thing. In no way am I saying we’re celebrities, but people care what we do. To me, that’s dumb since we’re just two normal people, but I bet celebrities feel that way too.

Though, thinking of that is impossible when Benson’s thumb just won’t quit. I almost want to place my hand over his to stop, but I can’t. I physically can’t. I crave his touch, the way his thumb moves, how I feel his heart pounding into my shoulder. I move slightly, my ass grazing his thigh, and his thumb presses deeper into my hip, causing my breath to catch. Someone is talking about how we’ll walk, but I can’t pay them any mind. I’m lost in the way his thumb is gliding along my hip, and the pressure he inflicts before rubbing it away is pure madness.

“You smell really good,” he says softly in my ear, and I can’t keep my eyes from closing as I lean into him. My mouth goes dry while my mind reels with how badly I wish his thumb would move between my legs. How I know I’d come so hard and quickly that nothing else would matter in the world. It wouldn’t matter that this is for show; it wouldn’t matter that he is only helping me and I’m helping him. All that would matter would be my release.

Oh, how I want it.

From him.

I arch into his thumb without thought, and I feel him tense behind me. “What are you doing?”

I don’t fucking know. “Nothing.”

“Are you nervous?”

“Yup, nerves.”

He brings me in tightly. “I got you.”

I got you.

Fuck. Me.

My body trembles as his words replay in my mind. Soon, in my head, his words merge with the image of his thumb moving along my slick lips, finding my sensitive bud, and bringing me to the edge. He wouldn’t even need to try; I’d cry his name in seconds. I know I would, and sweet Jesus, why am I thinking this? What am I doing?

Fuck me, I make bad choices.

CHAPTER

Seventeen

BENSON

I think saying Cameron is beautiful is pointless by now.

It doesn't need to be said.

It's just my reality, and the urge to fall to my knees for her is getting harder to resist by the moment. Her scent, *ahfuckme*, it's a lot. The dress, yeah, I'm at a loss for words. I don't know what she's nervous about, but if she doesn't stop moving her ass along my thigh like that, she and I are going to be finding the closest dark space. So I can show her how I don't give a single fuck about the money, the deals, or anything other than drowning myself between her thighs.

As Cameron arches into my hand, I find myself forgetting the anger that was burning inside me moments before. I don't like how she insists that I'm doing this for the money. I thought she knew me better than that, but it has been three years. She does know I come from nothing, but she also knows that the Adlers are good to me. I may not have as many followers or endorsements as she does, but I make good money. I guess I could tell her that. Though, the thought of her pulling back has me hesitating. What if she shuts down? What if she doesn't want to do this anymore if she assumes I'd get nothing out of it? Yeah, I'm gonna have to navigate this carefully. As much as I don't want to, I may have to reel in my desire for her and show her who I really am.

That I could be completely and utterly hers.

I should probably just tell her my intentions, but I don't think she's ready to know yet. Plus, she stopped talking to me when things got deep—yes, I am aware that there was an unplanned pregnancy involved, and we've both grown from that—but I'm still scared. I'm not trying to go down that road again. I don't know why, but I don't think she does well with emotions. I feel as if she might have some issues from her past, not that we've ever discussed them. We were too busy touching and taking each other to ecstasy. Not that I am complaining—I enjoyed myself over and over again.

I've thought of those moments often over the last couple years, yearned to touch her, hold her like this because, for me, holding her is as easy as holding my stick. She fits perfectly against me. Her hips are made for my hands to hold, and fuck if I'm not getting drunk off the way her scent is consuming me.

Cameron moves restlessly against me again, and I feel her breath catch. I feel her heart hammering in her chest as her breathing becomes erratic. I bring in my brows, confused. What is wrong with her? I get that she is nervous, but she's nonstop jittery. Shaking, even. Almost as if she can't control her body. I lean forward, looking at her profile to find her lips parted, her eyes closed, and her face full of a beautiful flush.

I know that look.

I could never forget that look.

Instantly, I wish I had taken care of myself more than once as she blows her breath out in a whoosh and her body trembles against mine.

Surely... No way.

She draws a deep breath as the heat creeps down her neck, her skin shining just as her dress is. My body tingles as I breathe out, "Cameron?"

"Yes?"

"You good?"

"Yup." The word comes out strangled.

A slow grin takes over my lips because I'm pretty sure she just came. I don't know how, don't know why, but I'm fucking jealous I didn't do it for her.

Or did I?

Well, this is a new development.

I lick my lips before they curve in a wider grin, my heart pounding just as hard as hers. My cock aches in my pants as the line moves up. I let her move without me as my eyes trail down her back, to her ass, to her thighs. As she walks, I focus my gaze between her legs and notice they're coated with slickness. Just like I expected. Oh, how my cock begs to slide between them. Somehow, I resist. Barely. Thankful we're in the back of the line, I step in front of her to block anyone from seeing. She looks up at me, her eyes dilated, and her beautiful face still flushed.

She brings her brows in. "What are you doing?"

"Not to sound like a creep, but your thighs are wet," I whisper. "If I noticed, someone else will. And there is a lot of moisture."

More heat creeps up her neck to her face as her perfect lips form an O. "Sweat," she all but blurts out. "I'm hot."

God, she's adorable. My eyes challenge hers. "While that's not a lie, you are extremely hot...that isn't sweat, Cam."

Her cheeks burn with color, and breathing doesn't seem to be working for her. Her voice breaks, and she looks straight through my chest as she mutters, "I peed."

I hold back my laughter. "Instead of just owning up to what it is, you're going to tell me it's pee?"

She doesn't move. I don't even know if she's breathing as I take her hand in mine, pulling her around the corner, much to her dismay. "It's not that noticeable!"

I scoff. "Cam, your thighs are more reflective than your dress now. If I noticed, anyone can." I make sure we're alone before I pull my handkerchief from my pocket and crouch down to her. I tap her ankles for her to open them, and when

she hesitates, I look up at her and smirk. “I’m trying to clean your pee, Cameron.”

Her eyes darken, and I can see I pissed her off. “I just want you to know, I could do it myself if I weren’t in this dress.”

“I would expect nothing less,” I taunt, my eyes gazing up at hers.

“It’s a tight dress.”

“Yes, and very short.” Her eyes dance with mine. “Open for me, beauty.”

Her lips press together so hard, they whiten. “And also,” she huffs as she reluctantly does as I ask. “Don’t think you caused it. I’m just nervous, and I come when I’m nervous.”

I don’t even comment on that as I run the handkerchief along her inner thighs, the parts that are showing. I don’t dare go higher, because if I do, I don’t know if I’ll stop. When she jerks, I glance up at her, and her face flushes deeper. With a pointed look, she bites out, “Stop looking at me.”

That won’t ever happen. I want to run my tongue along her thighs, but that may scare the shit out of her, so I settle for the handkerchief. The scent of her blows all my senses to smithereens, and my hand shakes as I wipe away all the evidence of her *nerves*. “Hell, if I came when I was nervous, I would welcome all the nerves,” I joke, trying to lighten the mood.

“You’re not funny.”

I fight back my grin as I stand, and when she holds out her hand, I look at it before tucking the handkerchief into my front pocket. “I think I am.”

“Give me that.”

“No, it’s mine.”

“But that’s my...stuff on there.”

The low, deep rumble of my chest surprises me as I lean forward, our eyes locking. “You mean your juices all over my handkerchief? Yeah, I know, they’re mine now.”

Her eyes widen, her lips parting as she gazes up at me. “That’s disgusting.”

“I beg to differ,” I throw back at her, holding out my hand. “Ready?”

“Please don’t tell anyone.”

Fuck, I want to kiss her. My eyes search hers as I lean in. “You know good and well what happens between us stays between us.”

She swallows. “Still, I don’t need it getting out that you were cleaning...stuff off my thighs.”

“No one will know you pissed yourself, Cam.” She hesitates for only a moment before placing her hand in mine. “Your secrets are safe with me.”

I squeeze her hand with mine as she says, “Thank you.”

“My honor.”

Her breath catches as I guide her back around the corner and into the line. I move her in front of me and take her hips in mine before bringing her back into my chest, her sweet ass nestling right against me in all the right ways. I clench her hips in my hands, and by her quick intake of breath, I know she feels the rock-hard bulge in my pants. I move my lips to her ear, and ever so softly, I whisper, “But just so we’re on the same page, you caused this.”

She goes rigid in my arms, and all I can do is chuckle against her ear.

Her name is called, and thankfully, I remember how to walk, despite the pure lust swirling around us. We walk together, my hand on her hip as cameras go off and students cheer her—or I guess, us—on. Soon, it’s time for her to stand alone, so I move to the side, stunned and in awe of her. The lights of the cameras beam off her dress. And those eyes of hers...well, they sparkle way brighter than I’ve ever seen. Her lips purse, glossed to the nines, as her cheeks still reflect the aftereffects of her release.

I guess those nerves did her well.

I take out my phone, videoing her from every angle, and when she sees what I'm doing, her grin grows. I stand when she couples up with the other seniors, Callie included, and the cameras shoot off like mad.

I turn the camera to myself, and with a grin, I say, "Tell me she isn't the most gorgeous girl ever."

Beside me, Evan chuckles. "Well, this has escalated quickly."

I glance at him as I turn off the camera. "I'm not complaining."

"I'm just glad you don't have to pine over her. Now I need Emery to come to her senses and put my poor brother out of his misery."

I realize two things in that moment—he thinks Cameron and I are for real, which means Callie may not know, and he doesn't know that Quinn is getting married. I press my lips together so I don't tell him the truth. Evan is just as much a brother to me as Quinn is, and I love the dude. I don't want to lie to him, but I also don't know what the hell Cameron has told people. I swallow, nodding. "Same, dude. Same."

We share a grin before the girls break apart and go back to their dates. Cameron hasn't really looked me in the eye since our intimate moment around the corner, but thankfully, her eyes meet mine now, that sneaky little grin on her face. I wrap my arm around her, pulling her to my chest, and without thinking, I graze my lips along her temple before inhaling her deeply.

I feel her tense against me, but then just as she starts to lean into me, someone yells, "Cameron, Benson!" That grabs our attention, and we find one of the student bloggers with a microphone in her hand. "Tell us, did you give him your number?"

Cameron laughs as her hand comes to rest on my ribs, and I know she feels my heart pounding. "I did." I give her a look, and she shoots me a promising grin. "Or I will, once this is over."

I chuckle. “Good to know, eh?”

Cameron grins as the girl squeals. I think her name is Brandy. I’ve seen her around campus. She’s done a lot of reporting for the lifestyle section of the Bullies newsletter. “So I can confirm, you two are together?”

Without hesitation, I reply, “You sure can.”

I feel Cameron’s gaze move to my profile, but I don’t meet her gaze. I don’t know why, but I don’t want to know what’s swirling in those depths. I don’t want her to correct me, or even act like we aren’t.

Because we are.

She just isn’t aware of that yet.

CHAPTER

Eighteen

BENSON

Like Cameron did for me, I make an edit of the Teal Walk video as I wait for the paint on my chest to dry. Cameron used a trending song for my edit, but I have had one song in mind since the moment I watched her walk down the teal carpet. “Shape of You” by Ed Sheeran. Though, I don’t use the original. I use a version of me playing it on my guitar, and man, it’s hot. When I rewatch the video with the song as she walks and grins like she belongs nowhere else but on display for everyone to drink in, I’m grinning from ear to ear. No matter how crazy it drives me to know people look at her, even I can appreciate how gorgeous she is.

Also, how perfectly “Shape of You” fits what I made.

Because I’m obsessed with the shape of Cameron.

I look around as I tuck my phone into the back pocket of my athletic pants. I changed once we were done with the carpet since I missed my Crocs. Plus, my slacks were a bit tight on my hips, and I don’t want anyone noticing how much I enjoy watching Cameron do gymnastics. Man, I’m stoked for this. I think the last competition she knew I was at was right before she told me she was pregnant. I’ve been coming to the meets for years, but it thrills me to know she knows I’m here and that I’ll be cheering her on.

Maybe she’ll want to go to dinner tonight?

Beside me, Evan is getting his chest painted by one of the other senior's boyfriends, and before I can comment how badass his paint job is, a voice sounds beside me, "No leotard, I see?"

I meet Phillippe Odder's gaze, and I laugh as we do our handshake. "Nope, she asked for a suit."

"I know. I saw. Everyone saw. It's all so gooey, I'm glad you said something about getting her number because I don't want to witness it anymore," he says, though his eyes are playful.

I snort at that. "No one said you have to read it."

"I get a notification when someone from the team posts. I have to read in case it's something I need to know. I didn't need to know she was wearing pink," he says dryly, and I grin.

Then I notice his sister Penelope is beside me. "Hey, Pen."

She smiles over at me, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "Hey, Benson. Excuse me, I'm gonna go sit with my teammates."

Without another look, Penelope walks away, and Odder rolls his eyes. "She's butthurt you two are together."

Ahfuckbuddy, I worried that would happen.

"Damn, just throw your sister under the bus, eh?" I defect to hide my discomfort. I don't want to hurt Penny. I care for her as a friend, and she's a good girl. Just not the girl for me.

Odder laughs. "I haven't got time for her bitching. She didn't even want to come. So, I'm like, don't. And yet, she comes. She's a pain in my ass."

"Still, don't do her like that." I give him a narrow look. "She wouldn't do that to you."

He scoffs. "Because who in the hell am I trying to date right now? Between hockey, grades, my parents, and her bitching ass, I'm swamped."

I cup his shoulder. "Eh, be nice."

He shrugs, and we share a look as Evan calls my name. "Benson, come on over here. We're gonna take a photo."

I do as I'm asked, gathering with the other senior boyfriends for a photo of us with the girls' names on our chests. Together with Odder, we head to the stands since the girls are about to come out. As I make my way to the stands, though, I notice two things. Dawson fucking Sinclair, and then a woman who I swear is an older version of Cameron. That has to be her mom. I'm well aware that she's an only child, so she can't be a sibling. Add in the fact that she is glaring at me like I belong in a puck bucket rather than at a gymnastics meet, and I know I'm right about who she is. Her eyes narrow, her brows so close, every wrinkle in her forehead dares me to look away. Her bright blond hair is in an intricate updo, and she's dripping in Louis Vuitton. The shades on her head are LV, her bag, her shoes, hell, she even has earrings. I don't look away, though. I have no reason to. I have nothing to be scared of or even ashamed of.

But fuck, if her eyes aren't scrutinizing me.

I place my hand on Evan's bicep, stopping him as everyone else continues to the stands. I turn so Cameron's mom can't see my mouth and ask Evan, "That's Cameron's mom, eh?"

I watch Evan's eyes move to where I jerk my head before he nods. "Yup. Don't like her. She's kinda a stuck-up bitch. The dad is cool, though."

I nod. "Should I introduce myself?"

He cringes. "Without Cameron as the buffer?"

"Do I need a buffer?"

"With that lady, yeah."

"Eh, I'm good," I decide, and he scoffs.

"Your death wish."

That stops me in my tracks. "Really?"

"Really. I wouldn't speak to her unless she speaks to you."

I press my lips together in deep thought as we go toward where some of my teammates are waiting for us. I unfortunately find myself beside Dawson, and he gives me a

once-over that annoys me to no end. “You already landed her. Do you really have to rub it in everyone’s faces?”

I shoot him a sideways look. “The hell are you talking about, Creek Boy?”

“Cameron. You landed her. Not surprised, you get everything you want, but you don’t have to rub it in everyone’s faces.”

I scoff. “Aw, were you hoping to trade Joey in for Cameron?” I laugh along with everyone else. “Not sorry, buddy. Stick to your creek.”

He rolls his eyes, and I laugh. “What did you do, pay her?”

My laughter dies off as I look over at him. “Excuse me?”

His eyes meet mine, challenging. Little fucker. “No one has landed her. She doesn’t talk to anyone and blatantly ignores everyone. But she answers you? Doesn’t make sense.”

Well, that’s an interesting bit of information. I look at Evan, but he shakes his head. “Don’t ask me.”

“Is it true?”

“Listen, she’s Callie’s best friend. I only care about Callie’s love life ’cause it’s mine.”

Why am I jealous of that? “Have you hung out with her and any guys?”

He chews on his lip, thinking. “Not at all.”

Interesting, indeed. I glance back at Dawson. “Have you met me? I’m awesome. She knows what she’s getting with me. The best.”

Evan snorts at that. “Not that you’re unsure of yourself or anything.”

I would laugh, but I don’t like the way Dawson is forming his lips to speak to me. “Doesn’t make any sense. I’ve been hitting on her since I got here.”

I don’t like that at all. “Why would she settle for a creek when she can have the whole damn ocean?”

Odder snorts from in front of me. “You’re fucking dumb.”

I fight back my grin as Dawson rolls his eyes. “She’ll drop you in no time. I’m not worried.”

“You shouldn’t be worried about me and Cam at all,” I throw back at him, his hazel gaze burning into mine. “Worry about your ice time.”

Before he can pop off like I know he wants to, the arena goes dark, and the crowd loses its damn mind. The girls are introduced, and when Cameron’s name is called, I whistle loudly for her before hollering her name. I can feel people looking, but the only person I want to look at me is her. Cameron waves to the crowd as she runs down the line, smacking hands with her teammates before lining up with them. When she stops shoulder-to-shoulder with Callie, her eyes find mine. I point to my chest and wiggle my pectorals for good measure, just so I know she sees. Her lips curve up in a big way as she shakes her head, and soon I’m smiling so wide, it hurts.

Ahfuckbuddy, I love to make her smile.

Warm-ups go quickly, and the meet starts off with a bang. After the first event, vault, we’re in the lead over Alabama. Cameron doesn’t vault, because, according to Evan, she’s got a back injury or something along those lines. Even so, her bars are stellar, and while I feel she was a perfect ten, apparently I don’t know shit about gymnastics. Not that it matters because the Bullies stay in the lead. When it’s time for beam, a tremble runs through my body since the beam is right in front of us, and that teal-and-black leotard she wears is riding high on those delectable hips. I watch as she doesn’t stop moving. She bounces, she plays in chalk, and she shakes her limbs out. She cheers but doesn’t really watch, just keeps moving. It’s obvious she’s nervous, and any other time, I’d joke about her coming, but her anxiety is giving me anxiety. She’s so tense, I want to reach out and knead her back for her. Kiss that scowl off her beautiful face. Help her. Guarantee her she’s got this.

When it’s Cameron’s turn, her coach talks to her for longer than anyone else. His eyes burn into hers, and her fists clench

and unclench. I find that my own heart is pounding so hard in my chest when the coach shakes her shoulders lovingly, and then she steps to the beam.

When Cameron looks up, our eyes meet.

I may be making this up in my head, but I see something move in her gaze. My lips quirk at the side, and I give her a small chin nod, hoping she knows I know she's got this. She doesn't smile, but I swear I can see some of the tension leave her body. She takes a deep breath, and my smile grows.

"Let's go, Cam! You're a ten, baby!" I yell, and her grin grows as more tension leaves her shoulders.

She looks to the judges, throws her hands up, and soon, I'm sitting on the edge of my seat. Each move she makes is quick and sharp. Aggressive, but graceful. She moves like she's not on a small piece of wood with nothing but a mat underneath her. Fuck, her confidence is invigorating. Each flip thing she does, she doesn't wobble on the landing, and when she does one hell of a twist thing, sticking the fucking landing, I come out of my seat, screaming her name.

"Infuckingcredible! That's my girl!"

She throws her hands up, grins at the judges, and then grins at me as the girls all wrap her tightly in their arms before flicking their hands open and closed to signal a perfect ten. For me, it's a given, but apparently one of the judges didn't like something because she got a 9.9.

"Man, who do I need to fight?" I bite out, and Evan laughs at that.

"Hey now, you can't fight here. It's assault, not five minutes in a box."

"That's unfair," Odder says, and I nod in agreement.

Even with the bullshit score, pride still sparks deep in my soul.

Because that's my girl.

But fuck, how that feeling leaves me only an hour later. I know the moment Callie's eyes meet mine after the meet that

I'm not going to like what comes from her kind little mouth.

“Should I ask if she's coming out?” I find myself asking, wanting to control however this is about to play out.

Before Callie answers, though, I know there is no controlling anything when it comes to Cameron. Shit, I said I was unscriptable. Truth is, neither of us is. With tortured hesitation, Callie doesn't look at me while she's wrapped up in Evan's arms, but finally, she says, “She told me to tell you she'd see you tomorrow at the campaign. That she has plans with her parents, but thank you for coming.”

Oh, how the irritation eats me alive. I feel it course through my body, burning the tips of my ears. “She tell you to give me her number?” When she only shakes her head, I stare at her until she finally meets my gaze. “Will you give it to me?”

Her eyes burn into mine. “Can I ask her first?”

We hold each other's gaze. “Do you know?”

“Know what?” Evan asks, and Callie doesn't hesitate on that question.

“About their arrangement,” she says softly, and oh, how that chaps my ass.

Arrangement. The fuck?

“Arrangement? What's that about?”

Callie pats his chest to shut him up, I guess. “I'll tell you later.”

Then her eyes move to mine, and I lean in, despite the flash of warning in Evan's eyes. “It's not a fucking arrangement for me.”

Callie's hand smooths over Evan's chest. “I think the only person who believes it is, is her.”

At least we can agree on that.

“Let me know.”

She nods as I turn to leave before I lose my fucking marbles. “Will do. But, Benson...” I stop at her words. “Be

patient. It's not a sprint, but a marathon with that one."

"A marathon, eh?"

"Yeah."

"Good thing I'm built for a marathon just like her."

With that, I turn to leave, my heart on my sleeve. I don't give a shit who sees.

CHAPTER

Nineteen

CAMERON

Nope, nope, nope. Absolutely nope.

Space. I need fucking space. No matter how much I wanted to go out and take a photo with Benson and my name on his muscle-ridden chest, I need space. Especially after beam. What in the hell was that? Beam is my nemesis; we aren't friends. We never have been. I have great form and beautiful artistry, but that damn beam loves to throw me off. I don't know why, but staying on it has been my downfall all week, and I've been nervous. I didn't want to fall in front of Benson. Bars, I've got on lock. Floor, I can do in my sleep. And listen, vault is making a return, I just have to get past this injury in my back that likes to take me out when I vault. Once I get over that, though, I'll be right back on it, slaying it. But beam...beam has never been kind.

But today was different. One look. One little nod. A small curve of his lips as those dark orbs hidden behind long, luscious lashes locked me in place before he said—no, not said—screamed one bit of encouragement.

Just one.

Let's go, Cam! You're a ten, baby!

I didn't even get a ten today, but I feel like one. All because of that look, those lips, those words of encouragement. Because of him. Because of Benson. And that freaks me out beyond belief. I mean, I came from him stroking

my hip. My *hip*. Not my pussy or even when he kindly wiped up the mess I made. Nope, I came from him strictly stroking my damn hip. And what was that? Him cleaning me like that? Like it was no big deal that I had come on my thighs, or that I lied, saying it was sweat and pee. I mean, fuck me.

Then he had the audacity to rub his hard length on me and blame it on me? Well, duh. Who wouldn't be hard when you're wiping come off a girl's thighs? It had nothing to do with me; it was a physical reaction. Purely male. But like the idiot I am, I wanted to be the reason. I wanted him to touch me. I wanted to feel each one of his digits play with me. Hell, if my dress hadn't been so tight, I would have loved to drop to my knees and relieve him of that hard bulge.

What am I even thinking?

I gotta pull back. I gotta put some space between us because something is bound to happen beyond our arrangement, and that can't be. Shit, we haven't even set ground rules for anything, and everything is already out of control. These last two days alone have me in knots. I wasn't prepared for any of this, and I don't know what to do, how to progress without either falling face first into his lap or falling head over heels in love with him.

Bad choices. Such bad life choices.

Since I don't trust myself to see him, once we're done with the meet, I haul ass out of the compound to my mom's car, where my parents are waiting for me.

Which I regret the moment my ass hits the expensive leather.

"He strolled around with your name written on his bare chest. How beyond tacky."

I roll my eyes as I throw my bag on the seat, bringing my legs up underneath me, and I let out a long breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

I dig in my bag for my phone as my stepdad says, "You did wonderful, Cameron. Great meet."

I smile at him in the mirror. He's aged, but he's still so handsome, the best guy a girl could have as a dad. I swear, he's the only reason I still talk to my mom. "Thanks. I'll get vault, don't worry."

"I'm not worried at all, Cammy."

We share a grin as my mom seethes. "Well, I'd hope so. After everything you've gone through to be an all-around gymnast, it's pathetic you aren't competing as one."

Oh, how I love when my mom is being toxic.

"Gymnastics isn't easy, my love," Dad tells her, and then he looks back at me. "She's all in fits about that guy walking around with your name on his chest."

He gives me a roll of his eyes in dramatic fashion, and I grin. "I couldn't tell."

We share another grin. "So, it's serious?"

I shake my head. "We're friends, but we're dating for a project I'm doing. Did Mom not tell you?"

"No, because it's stupid," she mutters, and I give her a dry look. He turns in his seat, giving me a curious look, and I know he wants to know. So, I explain it all.

He listens intently, like he always does, and nods in agreement. "You know, I remember back in my day, when Ross and Rachel from *Friends* finally hooked up, everyone was in a fit because they wanted the actors to be together in real life."

I nod. "Exactly. It's the football player/pop star thing, or even better, when *A Star is Born* came out, those actors. They had everyone believing they had something going on, and all it did was push that movie to the top. Everyone craved seeing them together."

He agrees, a wide grin on his face. "Absolutely. And the data is proving your point?"

"Oh yes," I say excitedly. "Any interaction we have fuels followers to our socials. Everyone wants us together, and apparently it's been like that since freshman year. Since the

first Beauty and the Bull campaign. Just this afternoon, I got an email from a company that wants us to pose in matching hoodies and offered nine hundred bucks a post—for each of us. I mean, our accounts are growing by the minute.”

“That’s awesome, honey, and good for you. I’m glad he’s helping you.”

I smile. “Yeah, he’s a good dude.”

“Who needs to put shirt on. The meet is over. Why is he still running around like that?” she says, pointing to where Benson is walking toward his car, still beautifully shirtless. My breath catches at the way his abs contract with each step he takes. His face is illuminated by his phone, and I can see the furrow in his brow. He’s pissed. Probably at me.

As he pulls open the door to his Tesla, my stepdad whistles. “I thought you said this was for money on his end.”

“It is.”

“A kid who’s driving a Tesla doesn’t need money, Cameron,” my mom snaps, and I scoff.

“For one, who doesn’t want money? And two, he got that from his billet family. They bought all the kids Teslas.”

“Well, hell. Where was my billet family when I was that age? And what is a billet family?” Mom asks, and I laugh at that.

“It’s a family that sponsors a hockey player from another country. It’s the Adlers. Elli Adler, who owns the Nashville Assassins?”

“Oh, so they got Tesla money,” Dad murmurs.

“We have Tesla money,” Mom reminds him, and he shrugs.

“True, but I don’t have to spend it because my daughter makes more than I do on the internet.”

“This is true,” I agree.

I lean down in the back seat a bit so I know Benson can’t see me as Dad asks, “Where is he from?”

“Canada.”

“Figures. Canada.”

“What? What do you have against Canada?”

“I don’t like them because I don’t like him, and I never will,” Mom announces, and I roll my eyes. Hell, even Dad does.

“You don’t even know him,” I remind her, but she isn’t hearing me.

“He doesn’t deserve you.”

“No one does,” Dad adds. “Don’t forget that. But I know you’re a smart girl. You’ll do what needs to be done.”

“Until she—”

“Please don’t,” he says, cutting her off, and I have truly always loved this man. “For the love of God, leave the past in the past. Stop beating a dead horse.”

His eyes meet mine and I thank him with a small smile. He winks and my heart soars. He’s always been good to me, good to my mom, even when she doesn’t deserve it. He looks past her trauma, her hard life, and just loves her. And me. They don’t make men like him anymore. The kind that looks past what haunts you and tries to ease your fears, but Charles White is just that.

The saving grace in my life when it comes to my mom.

As they start to bicker, the way they always do, I ignore them both as I pick up my phone, seeing a text from Callie.

Callie: He’s asking for your number.

I press my lips together.

Me: I’ll give it to him tomorrow.

Callie: He was super bummed you didn’t come out. It was a good photo op, according to him.

It was, but unlike him, my emotions are raw.

Me: I can’t right now.

Callie: Can't what? Thank him in person for coming? Give him your number so you and he can talk? I don't get it.

Me: I don't either. Just let it be. I'll talk to him tomorrow.

Callie: Cam, come on.

Me: I don't owe him anything. This is just an arrangement, remember?

Callie: Let me tell you something. Denial isn't just a river in Egypt, Cameron. You're delusional, and before you lose a chance with a good guy, get your head out of your ass.

I shut my phone off, throwing it in my bag as I cover my face with my hands. The darkness makes me feel safe as I close my eyes, exhaling. I wish I could appreciate how he calmed me, how I loved having him at my meet, but I can't. I can't tell him that, expect something I don't deserve. I don't want to hear what she has to say because I'm not delusional, and in this situation, the only denial is that damn river.

I'm keeping my heart locked down.

Safe.

CHAPTER

Twenty

CAMERON

I didn't sleep at all last night.

Because I came up with a plan.

One I am confident will work and will help me control all these weird desires, feelings, and whatever else is coursing through me. I feel as if I don't know myself, honestly. I've been fine, great even, the last three years. Just doing me, kicking ass at school and gymnastics, and making great content. I haven't needed or desired anyone; I've been just fine.

It has to stay that way.

If I weren't an impulsive idiot, I would have done what my mom said and selected someone else for this little project, but since I chose otherwise, it's cool. Benson is the best for this. I know he is. Not only is he smart, gorgeous, and talented, he knows how to make quality content. I don't have to teach him, which is a blessing. I rewatched his "Shape of You" video of me three times, reposted it on all my socials, and people are eating it up.

We look great together. Better than great, if I'm honest, but that doesn't matter. I have this whole thing completely under control. Each interaction, each meeting, all our social media posts, everything. It's all planned to a tee. We won't need to talk outside of coordinating when we post. I've got this. He can focus on hockey and school, and I can do the same, just

with gymnastics. Everything is going to be fine. No feelings, no desires, no coming will be involved. I'm confident.

Until Benson enters the compound corridor where our photo shoot is being held.

Why does he have to be so...striking? He walks in, looking bigger than ever in his pads and Bullies jersey. His hair is styled to the side, and he has the most delectable five-o'clock shadow going on. His eyes are dark yet bright, if that makes sense. His lips look fuller today, or maybe I just think they are so I can stare at them to figure out why. Damn it, where the hell did my confidence go?

I have a freaking plan!

Benson's eyes search the room until they find me. Within seconds, heat is coursing through my body like wildfire. I feel wholly naked at that moment, which is insane since I've lived my life in a leotard. Yeah, my legs are out and my ass fights to stay in its assigned spot, but it's nothing to me. That all changes the moment his heated gaze lands on me. He makes his way through the room, not even saying excuse me as he closes the distance between us. Unlike yesterday, he doesn't come toe-to-toe with me, though, nor does he wrap his arms around me.

And I don't admit how much that saddens me. How much I yearn for his touch.

Plan, Cameron! Arrangement! This is a fucking arrangement!

I swallow as I fix a smile on my face. "Hey!"

He moves his eyes along my face, and I feel his gaze like it's a trail of fire. From my chin to my lips to my nose and finally to my eyes. "Hey there, Houdini."

"Houdini?"

"Yeah, you pulled a magic trick, disappearing after the meet. I was hoping to take you out for dinner to celebrate how great you did."

My heart trips over itself in my chest. “My bad,” I say offhandedly. “I had plans with my parents, but you’re too kind. Though, I could have done better.”

“Spoken like a true athlete. Never satisfied.”

I shrug. “I didn’t compete on vault.”

“When I asked Evan about it, he said you have a twinge in your back. Can’t do something that hurts. Only makes it worse.”

I don’t know why it pleases me that he asked. “Yeah, I’m on the mend.”

“Great, I can’t wait to see you compete in all four events. You looked great out there,” he tells me, his eyes intent on mine. “As you do now.”

“Thanks,” I say breathlessly, though I do still try to draw in a deep breath. “I loved how you painted on your chest.”

He nods, a small smile pulling at his lips. “Would have been a great photo op for us.”

“It would have. Sorry I missed it. Though, you’ve gotten a lot of interaction on the photo of just you.”

“Eh, I think it’d be higher interaction if we were together.”

It should be illegal the way he says together. He makes it sound so dirty, so welcoming. I swallow at that, my chest aching from my pounding heart. I pull my gaze from his as I lift my phone, and with an unsteady voice, I say, “I finished our plan for this.” I gesture between us, and I watch as his eyes follow my hands before meeting my gaze once more.

“Are we sitting down to talk about it?”

“Um, we can. But I’m sending it to you now, and then we can just go off it,” I say, leaning back a bit to give us some space. I unlock my phone and send him my notes. “I want to get some B-roll footage today since we’re dressed up and all. Just little stuff, nothing too crazy—hand-holding, kisses on the cheek, and things like that. Once products come in, we’ll do videos for those.”

He nods. "I'd like to sit down and talk."

I wave him off, trying to breathe without taking in his invigorating scent. It's hard, and I know I look stupid breathing through my mouth, but a girl's gotta do what she's gotta do. I turn to set my phone on the counter. "Absolutely. No problem. I'll look at my schedule."

His arm comes around me, and a surprised yelp leaves my lips as he pulls me into his hard chest. I can feel the heat of his body pulsating into mine. He positions his face beside mine, and then I notice his phone. I smile brightly, and he does too as he snaps a photo. Then he presses his nose into my cheek, still grinning and looking every bit too fucking good. He inhales, and my eyes drift shut from the sensation. When his nose blazes its way to my ear, my breath catches. "Going to kiss you now, eh?"

"What?!" I squeak.

He chuckles against my ear. "Relax, Cam. I'm gonna kiss your *cheek*. As directed."

Everything stops. The chattering, the laughing, hell, even my breathing, as he waits for me to stop him. I don't, I can't, as he slowly drags his lips along my cheek, leaving pure lava along my skin. I force my eyes to stay open, the fake grin on my face as he presses a smacking kiss to my cheek. I did plan this, but I didn't expect the heat to gather so abruptly in my gut. When he nibbles along my jaw, I don't have to act like I'm laughing. My giggles come out naturally, before he kisses the spot right below my ear, causing my breath to catch and my heart to take a tumble in my chest.

He pulls back, looking down at me. "That's some good B-roll."

Finding my voice, I agree, "Yeah, please send it to me."

"I'll need your number for that."

"Yes. Yes, you would," I decide, and then we exchange numbers. My hands shake as I plug his number into my phone. It gives me a giddy feeling that I know is super dangerous. When I finish, I set the phone down once more and cross my

arms over my chest. He's still very close to me, his scent and heat making it real hard to form coherent thoughts. I bring my fingers together to keep them from shaking, and I'm met with a low rumble from his chest.

“Nervous?”

I giggle—for what reason, I don't know. “Yeah, a bit.”

He reaches for my chin, tipping it up to see me. “I left my handkerchief by my bed, but I can go get a towel if need be.”

Oh sweet lord, my face burns within seconds. “Not cute.”

He chuckles loudly. “You're right,” he says, sweeping his thumb along my chin. “But you sure are.” He leans in, his lips so close I could devour them if I weren't holding back. “Especially after you're...*nervous*.”

I smack his hand away, really needing him not to touch me before I start climbing him like a tree. “No one is around. Stop flirting.”

He shakes his head. “I don't care who's around and who's not.”

Oh, his words warm me everywhere. “To sell this, people have to be around. Don't waste your good stuff on just me.”

His lids fall a bit. “I'm not wasting a damn thing, my beauty. I am making sure you know you've got my attention.”

I forcefully make myself ignore his hollow words. They're all for show. They have to be. I roll my eyes to keep from swooning. “Such an attention whore.”

“Attention whore?” he laughs, and then his laughter dies off as his eyes meet mine. Showing all his teeth, he gives me the most devastating, almost feral grin I've ever seen in my life. Thinking isn't even possible at this point, and the heat that's been gathering in my belly promptly explodes as he leans toward me once more. Unable to move, I just gaze into his eyes. “For you and only you.”

Oh, come the hell on!

By the grace of God, I don't have to respond because our names are called. I fully expect him to walk away to give me a second, but that would mean that my carefully thought-out plan would go accordingly. Oh, I forgot that Benson is unscriptable. No kidding.

He holds out the crook of his arm and looks down at me expectantly. I feel everyone watching, and I know I have no choice but to take it, so I do. Heat radiates up my arm, I feel pinpricks everywhere, and I genuinely don't understand what I'm doing. While my heart goes insane screaming for him, my brain reminds me this is all for show. As we walk toward the photo spot, I'm unsure if my brain and heart will ever get on the same page—or if I'll actually survive these next six months. All I can think about is how much I enjoy the way he looks at me.

And how stupid I feel, wishing this were real.

CHAPTER

Twenty-One

BENSON

Me: Hey, great post. I look really good when you film me, don't I? Thanks for coming last night. Was hoping to see you after the game. You guys are away this weekend? Can we get together tomorrow? Coffee? No one will bother you.

It takes my Houdini two hours to answer me back.

Two. Fucking. Miserable. Hours.

Cameron: Hey, thanks! I thought the lightning edit was badass, and yeah, you're a great subject.

Cameron: Yeah, we are away.

Cameron: Um, probably not tomorrow, maybe next week.

My molars grind as I pace my apartment. Quinn is acting as if he isn't watching and laughing at me, but I know he is. He thinks it's rather hilarious that Cameron is only talking to me when I text her, and that she is direct and to the point. That she hasn't met up with me at either of the two games I had this week. She comes wearing my jersey, looking every bit my doting girlfriend, but she isn't doing any of the doting. Quinn has made it known that the fact that she isn't falling all over me pleases him to no end.

Mainly because I am going crazy.

I don't know what is going on. I thought we had rekindled the fire with the last two interactions, but I could tell she was being standoffish at the Beauty and the Bull shoot at first.

Once I kissed her cheek, though, she relaxed, and we fell into the dance that is easy for us. We hold hands, she hugs me, she leans into me, and I can't stop touching her. I had her on my back as we laughed, running through the compound for B-roll that Callie shot for us. It was us being us, and ahfuckme, I loved it.

But now, she'd thrown up a fucking wall, and she's hiding behind it.

I'm over it.

Especially when the first shots of the Beauty and the Bull campaign dropped this morning. It was just Cameron and me, her looking spectacular in a flashy pose, her hip cocked to the side while I stood beside her, side-eyeing her with a smug grin on my face. The caption was **the Beauty and the Bull. Buy one ticket, get the other free.** Everyone was buzzing in the comments. Even Momma Adler commented she might need to buy a ticket just to see the gymnastics team. It was sweet, but it didn't ease my annoyance over Cameron's behavior.

I just want to talk to her.

And not this flirtation thing we're doing—or what she assumes I'm doing for show. I want to sit down and truly talk, figure out if I'm imagining all these things that are making me believe she's actually into me. I know I'm into her, and I thought she was right there with me, but between the damn arrangement bullshit, and her saying I'm not flirting for real, I'm not so sure. I don't like feeling like this.

Above all, I fucking miss her.

God, I'm a dumbass.

I groan loudly, and my so-called best friend chuckles from where he sits at the bar, on his computer. I glare over at him, wanting to fight. “When are you telling Mom and Dad about Ava?”

He scoffs. “When I want to.”

“Okay, and if you're so set on marrying her, why doesn't she ever come over here?”

“Don’t worry about me, buddy, and don’t start a fight with me because you’re pissy your girlfriend won’t be your girlfriend,” he throws at me, not even sparing me a glance.

“At least everyone on the internet thinks she is,” I toss back at him, but even I know how stupid I sound.

“Because that totally means you’re winning at life,” he taunts, shaking his head. “You know, if you were smart, you’d employ her best friend, who is our brother’s fiancée.”

I side-eye him. “What do you mean?”

He shrugs. “If this were me, I’d call Callie, have her set up a party, and invite Cameron over. Boom, bam, she’s there because she won’t turn down Callie, and you can do whatever you need to so you aren’t moping around the apartment, driving me crazy.”

I think that through. “I don’t want her getting mad at Callie, though.”

“How badly do you want some time with her?”

Pretty fucking badly, but that doesn’t feel right.

I look back down at my phone, our text thread still up.

Me: How about tonight? I can cook for you.

Cameron: Sorry, have a paper due.

Me: Breakfast?

Cameron: Early practice.

I press my lips together, and I swear each of her quick responses—or better yet, excuses—makes me want to toss my phone against the wall. I squeeze my phone tightly, wanting to physically break it in half, but instead, I try to take a cleansing breath.

It doesn’t work.

Violently, I text back.

Me: Are you avoiding me?

Cameron: Not at all. Just busy.

Me: Okay, can you make time for your boyfriend?

Cameron: Don't be silly. That is the great part of this. We don't have to do that kind of stuff.

“But I fucking want to!” I scream at my phone.

“For her to know that, you gotta type it,” Quinn quips, and I close my eyes to keep from tossing my phone at him.

“She’s frustrating. Why doesn’t she want to hang out?”

“Did you tell her you want to hang?”

“Yes!”

“You said, Cameron, I want to see you because I want to, and so we can talk about only you and me, together, as one.”

I blink. I don’t appreciate how he is making me feel. “I mean, if you want to send Emery that, I’m all for it.”

“Eat shit.”

I groan loudly as I set my phone down, staring at it, willing her to realize I want to see her. I could text what Quinn said, but she’ll more than likely say no through text. No. I gotta get her in front of me. Talk to her face-to-face to get what I want.

“Am I wasting my time?” I ask, glancing over at Quinn.

He blows out a long-winded sigh before looking over at me. I fully expect him to say yes, but to my surprise, he says, “If she makes you happy and she’s who you want, then no.”

“Really?”

Quinn looks back at his computer. “Benson, you’ve always had a thing for her. You’ve always gone with how she wanted things. She wanted it to be just sex, so you put aside your feelings and made it sexual. Maybe change it. Maybe steer this the way you want for once. If she doesn’t go for it, then you have your answer.”

I hold his profile in my gaze as I process his words. I have let her decide how this has gone, but mainly because I’m scared of the rejection. I just took what she gave me, but that’s not fair to me. I deserve more because I can be more for her.

“This goes back to the way you were raised,” Quinn adds as he clicks around on his laptop before looking back at me. “Not to knock your parents, but they only loved you when you were working on the farm. Or when you played for Canada. They pulled back whenever the talk of you coming to the US came up. When you wanted more than that small town and those damn llamas, they didn’t want to have anything to do with you. So, you just settled for what they wanted, until it was too much. So, really, are you done with her shit and ready to get what you want?”

I swallow past the lump that’s formed and is suffocating me to the point my eyes burn. I look down and inhale sharply through my nose. “I see that psych class is going well.”

He chuckles. “It is, until I start psychoanalyzing myself and find that I should have known years ago that Emery would never want what I wanted.”

His words are like knives, but not for my flesh, his. “I think she will,” I say quietly. “Just like Mom said, you two have to grow.”

He shrugs. “Doesn’t matter anymore.”

Eh, that’s hard to believe, but I don’t want to talk about Emery. Though, it would keep him from analyzing me. I tap my fingertips to the counter as I think of my next move. I could go to their away meet, but then that would piss Coach off because I’ll miss practice Saturday. We have a game Friday too, so that won’t work. I could just go over to her dorm, but I don’t want her to feel trapped or awkward.

“Just call Callie. She’ll help.” Quinn looks at me and gives me a small smile. “Stop overthinking it.”

I exhale once more and then pick up my phone.

I stare at it for a long time until Quinn lets out an aggravated sigh. “You’re killing me, smalls.” I look up as he brings his phone to his ear. “Hey, Cal. I need a favor.”

And while I feel a bit stupid for not pulling the trigger, I’m truly thankful that Quinn is my brother.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

CAMERON

“As we expected, the campaign blew up,” Nati reveals, not looking up from her computer. I sit across from her in her office in the marketing department. She’s a TA for a few classes, which is why she has an office. I’ve been offered the TA position for years, even as an undergrad, but when I’m not studying, I’m doing gymnastics. And when I’m not doing either of those, I’m creating content, which I’m running low on of Benson and me. I need to fix that, but that would involve seeing him without a piece of glass between us.

Not happening. Not yet, at least. I need some more time.

“What we didn’t expect was sixty-two thousand new likes on the school account, thirty-six thousand on the hockey, and fifty-four thousand on the gymnastics. Tagging all three accounts, along with yours and Benson’s was a fantastic idea, Cameron. I think we’ll do that for all future posts for everyone.”

If I weren’t avoiding Benson, I’d text him that the gymnastics team is doing better than the hockey.

I smile proudly. “I’m stoked for the results. They are banging.”

She mirrors my grin. “In my opinion, it has a lot to do with the raw chemistry between you two,” she says, looking back down at her computer. “We had over six thousand fire emojis posted on the photo of you and him. You two aren’t even

touching—just him side-eyeing you with that little smirk on his face—and I mean, it really is fire. I knew you two would hook up eventually.”

I have to hold back my laughter. Or maybe a sob? I am fucked in the head. “Yeah, can’t deny that we look great together.”

“No one can. I mean, there are the haters. But fuck ’em, you know?”

The haters being the people who want to date us, and then we have the lovers who want to join us. “For sure. Like you said, though, we blew my last Beauty and Bull campaign out of the water.”

“Sure the hell did,” she agrees, grinning. “So next, I want to do posts of you doing his sport, and him doing yours. I already sent the email, and we’ll start shooting next week since it’s a bye week for both teams.”

I blink. Okay, this is okay. I can use that time with him to get more B-roll footage since I can’t tell her I don’t want to be around him. Everyone will be there, so it’s not like he can trap me to talk. Because I can’t handle talking to him, not yet. Especially when all I’ve done for the last week is think of him, miss him, and wish like hell I could lean into his chest, with his thumb stroking along my hip. Oh, how it’s torture to watch him on ice and not be able to touch him. Each time he texts me, I have to remind myself he only wants more footage. He posts more than I do, and I know he must be running low if I am. He probably needs more guidelines for the social media calendar I sent him. Or he’s lonely and has needs, and he figures since I’m his girlfriend, I owe him that.

God, I hate my brain. If there is a potential scenario for what he might want, I’ve thought it. But in a totally negative way. I have convinced myself that I’m not worthy of him. I don’t get that. I am a strong, confident, badass woman. Damn it, I roar! Yet I feel so unworthy of him, and it doesn’t make a lick of sense.

The abortion freshman year was the best choice for us. Just seeing where we are now, both successful and thriving, we

couldn't have done that with a child. Not that children are bad, but we weren't ready. We had dreams to achieve, and we're doing that. Not only would it be unfair to us, but it would definitely be to a child.

I know what it's like to be a regret to a mother.

I should be living it up. I should fall back into bed with him, enjoy my fucking self, because why not? Why can't I have what I want? I have been so focused on my grades, making sure my GPA is perfection, and setting myself up to have a future that I earned. I won't have to live like my mom did, struggling and looking for a man to love and support me. No, I can do it my fucking self. I have worked my ass off in the gym, overcoming injury and mental blocks so I can do what I love. I have earned the choice to have Benson, but I'm terrified.

Because I could fall... Oh, I could fall. Hard.

Which is why I haven't dated anyone for years. When I walked away from Benson, I think a part of my heart stayed behind. I'm unsure if I left it there or if I misplaced it, but I have had no desire for anyone since him.

It was so easy for him, though. He moved on, has been living a great life, and now... Now, I'm a dumbass. I shouldn't have asked him to do this. I should have just picked up some rando from my comments section. Though, I know my project wouldn't be as successful as it is now.

No, its success is because of Benson. Because of us. Together.

I clear the emotion away from my throat when I notice that Nati is staring at me, waiting for a response. "Sounds great. I'll see if I can get him in a leo," I jeer, and she grins.

"Now that will bring in the numbers," she laughs, and I can't help but agree.

Benson in a leotard?

Lord, we'd need to put that NSWF image up for sale.

We'd make millions.

Hell, I'd be one to contribute.

I snicker to myself as I walk out the back of the marketing building, where my car is parked. I have it worked out with school security and the dean to be able to park in the back of buildings, so I'm unbothered. I drive toward the gymnastics house, and when I round the building to enter through the back, I notice Callie's car parked at the curb in front of the house. A grin moves across my lips at the anticipation of seeing my best friend. I see her every day, but I love her and miss her all the time. Once I park, I gather my things and head in, greeting the girls who are in the kitchen, but not seeing Callie.

"Is Callie here?" I ask, and Miley nods as she slides a scoop full of scrambled eggs onto her plate.

"Yeah, she's upstairs."

Ugh, she's in my room. I mutter a thanks before I hightail it upstairs. And when I throw the door open, I see what I suspect.

Callie cleaning.

"You're a raccoon, Cameron! Why in the hell do you have sixteen bottles of washed-out almond milk containers?"

I groan loudly. "Callie, don't clean! I need those. I am saving them for the STEM center. I just haven't made it over there!"

She grudgingly pulls each one out of her big black trash bag that I assume she brought with her. "This is why I was hesitant to move in with Evan. While I enjoy having sex without having to make sure you're not coming home, leaving you here alone means you live in filth!"

I shoot her a look. "It's not filth, it's controlled chaos."

She mirrors my look. "Filthy chaos! When was the last time you did laundry?"

I shrug. "I don't know. The washer is on the fritz downstairs, and I don't want to go to the laundromat."

She doesn't push me further since she knows people tend to bother me when I go places. "While I love that you're an influencer, I hate how much it affects your life. Get an apartment, Cameron. Please. Or come move in with me and Evan."

I scoff at that. "No way in hell am I moving in with you. I have five more months of school, and then I'm out of here."

"Which only furthers my point of moving out of here and staying with us. Or hell, go stay with the Adlers. They have a pool house. Fully furnished."

I give her a look. "While they are kind and I adore them, I don't know them well enough to live in their pool house. That's weird."

"It's not, when you can't go anywhere on campus without getting harassed or bothered, and you can't get a lease because you're leaving, apparently. Come on, Cameron. This is crazy." She gestures her hands around me. "Do you just buy clothes to replace the ones you haven't washed?"

I sure the hell do, but I'm not telling her that. I shrug. "I'm fine, Callie. I promise."

She doesn't believe me, and I guess I could clean more, but I'm just so busy. When I clean, I think, and when I think, Benson floods my mind. "Gather your clothes. We'll go to my place and do laundry."

"Callie," I groan, and she sets me with a look.

"Either that, or we stay here and I clean."

I start to gather my clothes and ignore her as she walks around, throwing away trash and other crap I have lying around. I really am a raccoon. In my defense, it's easier to stay holed up in my room than to leave with the risk of running into people. Here, I can be in my sweatpants, my hair uncombed, and living my best life. Out in the real world, I have to look put together.

And most days, I'm just not.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Three

CAMERON

When we get to Callie and Evan's place, we find that Evan isn't there.

"Well, fuck me," Callie groans as she throws her car into park. "I wonder where he is."

"Not here to help me bring all this crap in," I announce as I throw the door open. "It's cool. We've got it."

She's on her phone, though, texting him as I get out to start gathering my bags of laundry. Finally, she gets out and starts helping me. "He said only to grab what we want to start now, and he'll get the rest. He's at the store."

"God, I love that guy," I decide as I drag two baskets toward the front door. She comes beside me, two bags in her hands before she gets the keys out to unlock the door. Together, we go in, and I head toward the laundry room that's in an alcove in their bedroom. Callie is a clean freak, so unlike in my room, nothing is out of place here. If I had a washer and dryer in my room, all my clothes would be around it, on the floor, or still in the washer. Not Callie, though. Her space is pristine.

I stuff everything into the washer and grab the scooper from the glass jar of detergent. "I'll replace everything I use."

Callie is sitting on the bed, on her phone, before she waves me off. "I'm not worried about it." She's too good to me. As I

start the washer, she calls, “Hey, you like shrimp, right?”

I give her a look. “Yes? Why?”

“Evan is cooking tonight and wanted to make sure you liked it.”

“Damn, I get help with my laundry and fed? I may not leave.”

She grins up at me. “We have a spare room.”

I shake my head. “I have lived with you while dating Evan, Callie. You two are disgustingly in love.”

She snorts. “True, but we could tone it down.”

“Yeah, right.” I look back over my shoulder at her. “In what universe?”

Her cheeks flush. “I do love him so.” She says it as if no one knows that. Anyone who meets them knows it’s true. “And living with your mom is still a no-go?”

I almost laugh. “I’d rather have you call me a raccoon daily than live with her.” I give her a pointed look. “She’s insufferable right now. She saw Benson with my name on his chest, and she is still pissed.”

Callie drops her hands to her lap. “Seriously? It was cute. All the guys did it.”

“I know, but she doesn’t want me near him.”

“That’s dumb. He went above and beyond after what happened.”

“She doesn’t see it that way. She sees him as the guy who knocked me up and let me get the abortion.”

She rolls her eyes. “*Let you*. That’s ridiculous and so unfair. Benson is more than that.”

I couldn’t agree more, but thinking about it has my heart swelling in my chest. If I were one to acknowledge what I’m feeling, her words would also make me miss him. I swallow past the lump in my throat and close the washer. “So yeah, living with her will never happen.”

“I still vote Adlers’ pool house. They’d let you.”

I shake my head. “No way, and don’t you ask them. Or Evan, for that matter. All of you are always trying to scheme against me.”

She laughs at that as the front door opens, and Evan’s voice bellows through the house. “Why in the hell is there so much laundry?”

We share a grin. “My best friend is a raccoon.”

Evan comes into the room, dragging bags, before he stops to give Callie a smacking kiss on the lips. “At least she’s a cute raccoon,” he throws at me, and I flash him a wide smile.

“Aw shucks, Evan. Always the charmer.”

He grins as he brings the bags over to me. “Let me go get the rest, Camcoon.”

Our laughter follows him out, and together, we go to help. After bringing in the rest of my laundry and the groceries, I make a face. “Why did you get so much?”

Evan comes out of the room and looks over at me. “I invited friends over for dinner and game night since you’re here.”

I freeze, my skin suddenly crawling with awareness. “Friends? Who’s friends?” I look over at Callie, but she’s not looking at me. “Callie?”

Still not looking at me, she basically becomes one with the refrigerator. “Um, Quinn and his new girlfriend, who we haven’t met but I don’t know how I feel about it.”

Evan nods, leaning on the counter. “Yeah, I hear she’d odd. But I guess we should be happy he’s moving on.”

“Oh, so just the two of them?” I ask, practically praying that’s all. I can be the fifth wheel. That’s fine. If I have to choose a team to be on for the games, I’ll be with Callie and Evan. Easy peasy. But I don’t have to look at either of them to know that I won’t be on their team.

Evan looks from Callie to me, and I don't think he even tries to hide his grin. "Oh, and your boyfriend."

My stomach drops. "Benson is coming?" I ask as calmly as I can.

Callie leans into me. "Yeah, figured it'd be fun."

I meet her gaze. "Maybe if I hadn't been avoiding him."

"You're avoiding your boyfriend?" Evan asks, and Callie gives him a look. He holds his palms up. "I'm just asking."

I can't pay him any mind. I'm staring Callie down. "Was this all a scheme? To get me to be around him?"

Callie's eyes drag from Evan to mine. "No and yes."

"Huh?"

"So, this has been planned. But I truly did bring you over in my car so you couldn't just leave after you do your laundry."

"Callie!" I exclaim, gawking at her. "What part of I'm avoiding him don't you understand?"

"All of it!" she yells at me. "It's dumb, Cameron. Stop."

"You don't freaking get it. I—" My words cut off when I feel Evan watching us intently.

He looks between us. "What?"

"Can you excuse us?"

"It's my house," he tries. "She's my fiancée." We both just look at him, and he rolls his eyes. "Whatever."

When he goes into their room, shutting the door behind him, I look back at my best friend. "I can't. Like, seriously. I got off from him rubbing my hip."

She grins. "Just think that would happen if you let him rub you the right way."

I would implode.

"Callie, for real, for real," I stress. "In only two days, I was feeling things that I shouldn't be. It's dangerous. I have to put

space between us.”

“Why?” she asks, visibly confused, and jeez, she’s infuriating.

I can’t even form my thoughts into words. How do I tell my best friend that I don’t think he’d ever love me back? In her eyes, I’m perfection, as she is in mine, and I know what she’ll say. She’ll reassure me because she loves me, but it can’t be true.

Her eyes burn into mine to the point I have to look away. “Cameron,” she says softly, wrapping her arms around me, squishing my arms to my sides. “What is the deal?”

“It’s an arrangement.”

She presses her chin to my shoulder. “You know, he told me it wasn’t.”

“What?” I ask, turning my head to look at her. Our noses almost touch as I search her eyes. “He said what?”

“That it wasn’t an arrangement for him.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you should ask him.”

The thought of doing that scares me to the bone. “He said that?”

“He did.”

I press my lips together, our gazes locked. “He probably ___”

“Ask him,” she stresses. “Get out of your fucking head and ask him.”

I swallow thickly. “I don’t know that I can.”

“Cam,” she breathes, her eyes urging mine. “You can do anything.”

My heart swells at her truth, or maybe it’s the love that shines in her eyes. I feel the emotion choking me. “I don’t want to wear the Miss Muffet dress.”

Her face bursts into a bright smile. “But Cameron, we both know you probably will be.”

I press my lips together. “I don’t want to get hurt.”

“Then don’t. You trusted your gut on who to ask to be your boyfriend for your project. Maybe trust it once you talk to him.”

Her words strike a chord in me as our gazes don’t falter. “There is too much history,” I whisper, and she shrugs.

“And quiet possibility a future.”

Oh, my heart snags at that. Before I can even try to come up with a response, Evan’s voice carries to us. “Should I be worried that you’re trying to steal my fiancée, Camcoon?”

At that, we dissolve into laughter as I lean my forehead to hers. With a knowing grin, Callie says, “No, baby. She’s too messy and lacks a certain appendage between her legs for me.”

Despite that, I kiss her nose and then wrap my arms around her. She squeezes me hard, and against her ear, I say, “I love you.”

She hugs me tighter. “I love you, and no matter what, I’ll be here, Cam.”

While I know she set up this plot, and I should be truly upset with her, I can’t. Because her words are true, and I know she always has my back. I just hope she’s ready to put me back together if I allow myself to be shattered by Benson’s rejection.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Four

BENSON

Quinn offered to drive me over to Evan and Callie's, but there was no way in hell I was riding in the car with Ava. The moment she walked into the apartment, she had this puckered look on her face that did nothing for my nerves. I had no desire to be around her and needed time to myself before I saw Cameron.

I don't know why I am so anxious, or even why I've checked how I look in the mirror over nine times. I know for a fact that Cameron likes the way I look. We've slept together before, and the only thing that's changed is I'm a little thicker.

Shit, what if she thinks I'm fat?

Damn it.

I bring down the car visor to look myself over once more. I haven't shaved, so my stubble is a little out of control, and my curls are too, but I like the way I look. I'm giving off bedroom vibes, which surely will make her think of waking up next to me. Or force her to run the other way, like she already is. I shut off the car before I turn around to go back to my place to shave and fix my hair.

"Please let this go well," I mutter to myself.

I get out of the car just as Quinn and Ava are walking up the sidewalk. Quinn is dressed down, in a pair of jeans and a hoodie, but Ava is dressed like we're going to the opera rather

than her future brother-in-law's house. She wears a black bodysuit that has long sleeves, with a huge fuzzy brown jacket. Doesn't seem sensible to me since I know she's gonna have to pee, but it's none of my business. I'm just thankful that Quinn made this happen. That he's here for me, not that I'd ever doubt he would be.

"Ready?"

I nod to him as we fall into step together. "Yup, I'm hungry. How about you, Ava?"

The look she gives me doesn't make me think she eats. "Isn't... I'm sorry, which brother's house are we going to?"

I don't know why it bothers me so much that she doesn't know. "Evan's. Owen lives in South Carolina."

"That's right. With Callie?"

Quinn looks back at her. "No, that's Evan's fiancée. Angie is Owen's wife."

"Yes. Good thing I don't have siblings, so you don't have to track, huh?"

I know Quinn is ignoring my displeased look as we climb the stairs. He mutters something as he throws the door open and calls out, "Lucy, I'm home."

"Who's Lucy?" Ava asks, and I give her a look.

"From *I Love Lucy*?" She just looks at me expectantly, and I sigh. "Google it." I move past her just as Evan comes to me for our handshake. I kiss Callie's cheek, laughing at the glare I receive from Evan. "Bro, I've been kissing her cheek for like four years. It hasn't escalated, much to my dismay." I flirt with a wink, and Callie smacks my arm, laughing.

"Listen, I saw her and Cameron about to make out. I'm on edge."

Now Callie smacks Evan as my brows go to my hairline. Quinn stops mid-step. "Wait, what?"

"You didn't get video evidence?" I ask incredulously, and Evan glares at us both.

“We weren’t even close enough for tongue.”

While the vision of Cameron and Callie kissing is mighty hot, nothing compares to Cameron’s whimsical voice. When her laughter meets me, I look up to see her coming from the bedroom, a grin on her face. Slowly, almost painfully slowly, her eyes move to meet mine, and my heart catches in my chest. The only time I’ve ever seen Cameron not done up is right after our abortion. She isn’t always made up like Ava is, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen her outside of her dorm in sweats. She leans into the door, heat creeping up her face under my gaze. I prevent myself from moving, even though I want to grab her and smother her in a hug.

And then kiss that top lip of hers.

She moves off the door, going to Quinn. “Hey, you. Haven’t seen you in weeks!”

Quinn gives her a little side hug. “Yeah, you good?”

Okay, so I get why Evan tenses like he’s squeezing his butt cheeks when I hug Callie. I don’t like anyone touching Cameron. “Great. Heard you got yourself a new girlfriend.”

He gives a little nod and looks at Ava. “Yeah, so let’s get this done. Ava, this is everyone.” He moves his hand toward them. “My brother Evan, his fiancée, Callie, and her best friend, Cameron.”

Ava only nods, a tight smile on her lips. Doesn’t say a damn thing. And why aren’t they touching each other?

I just don’t get it.

Everyone gives a collective “Hey,” and as I assumed, even they look confused. I want to yell, “Yeah, welcome to my world.” But just like I’m refraining from gathering Cameron in my arms, I don’t allow myself to yell that. I might come off as rude, and Ava doesn’t like me as it is. After Quinn set this up for me, I get the impression he wouldn’t like that. I’m just glad I’m not the only one who feels like this seems off.

Much to my surprise, Ava points to Cameron. “Isn’t that Benson’s girlfriend too?”

All eyes whip to Cameron, and I grin at the flush that fills her beautiful face. I love when she wears her hair down; her eyes are stunning with the way it frames her face.

“Sure is,” I say, and the flush on her face deepens in color.

An awkward silence fills the room as my eyes stay locked with Cameron’s, until Evan claps his hands. “So, I can’t wait to see how this night plays out. Who’s ready for some dinner?”

“Me,” Quinn and Callie say, but I don’t move until Cameron looks away, as Quinn leads Ava into the kitchen behind Callie and Evan. Then I’m walking toward Cameron. I can’t stop myself.

When she looks up, her eyes widen as I stop before her. “Hey there, Houdini.”

Her lips quirk at the side. “I have not disappeared. You’ve been texting me all week.”

“Yeah, I have been texting you. And you’ve been deflecting, making excuses, and basically being a huge pain in my ass.”

That makes her grin appear, her eyes dancing with mine. “I think that’s your issue because I’ve just been doing my thing.”

I step closer, leaning in, and just like I want, she backs into the wall. “Maybe. But still, it’s a bit rude.”

I move even closer to her as she presses her palms to the wall, her chin tipping back to see me. “Is it now?”

“Yes. Why did you make me employ my best friend to get you in my presence?”

Her eyes widen. “So, this was your doing?”

I shrug. “Yeah, I wanted to see you.”

“For what?”

“What the hell do you mean, for what?”

“Why did you want to see me? Remember, that’s the great ___”

“Let me stop you there,” I say, pressing my palm to the spot beside her head, leaning in. “I don’t want to hear that bullshit.”

Her breathing stops, her eyes widening even more as she gazes up at me. Her cheeks flush with heat, and fuck me, I want to touch her everywhere. I want to drown myself in her brown eyes. Get lost in her touch. Become fucking one with her. I watch as her eyes travel down my face, stopping at my mouth before snapping back to my eyes.

I lean in closer, my nose almost touching hers. “Do me a favor, eh?”

“What?” she squeaks.

“Breathe.” Her mouth parts as she draws in a deep breath. “Better, yeah?”

Her eyes narrow, that defiant little tip of her chin leaving me with no room in my jeans. I should have worn sweats too. “I am just fine, thank you.”

“Eh, are ya, though?”

“I am. You have no effect on me,” she lies, and I’m sure she knows I know that. Or at least, that’s what her blush tells me.

Fuck, I want to kiss her.

I grin. “Ah yes, that’s right. It was nerves I was cleaning off your thighs,” I say under my breath, and boy, do her eyes flash with heat.

“We aren’t speaking of that. It had been a long time for me. I don’t let people touch me.”

“And why is that?”

She swallows. “I don’t trust anyone.”

“But you trust me?”

Her eyes flash once more. “I do.”

I nod slowly, pleased by that.

“How could I not, with everything we went through?” My grin falters a bit, but then pride swells in my chest. “We’re friends—”

“Stop.” Her brows knit at my demand, but those beautiful pink lips press together. “I don’t want to hear that bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit.”

“It is,” I tell her simply. “There is only one reason I’ve been trying to see you.”

I wait as she breathes in deeply then lets it out in a hard whoosh. “Which is?”

“Because I wanted to.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Five

CAMERON

Benson could tell me to breathe a million times, but there is absolutely no way breathing is an option after that statement of his.

For the love of everything holy, he is deliciously unpredictable.

A bemused smile sits on his lips as he gazes down at me. My heart feels as if it's getting knocked around like a puck, and my mind is whirling with every negative thought I can come up with.

He doesn't mean it.

He just wants some ass.

He just wants more money.

He's bored, and I'm here.

He has needs.

But none of my thoughts line up with his proclamation.

Because I wanted to.

Well, maybe the *needs* bit. And maybe I'm being hopeful, but I feel his words are more than that. Or maybe I want them to mean more because of how much I desire him. Or is it more than desire? I care for him. Deeply. But does he really want me more than sex?

Why do I make life harder than it needs to be?

For some reason, God is looking out for me because Evan calls out, “Hey, y’all making out or coming to eat?”

Benson’s gaze burns into mine as a feral grin pulls at his tantalizing lips. “Unfortunately, no making out is being done, so we’ll come eat,” he calls back, his eyes devastatingly hooded. For me, he whispers, “Unless you want to make out.”

God, yes.

Instead, I shake my head, and his knowing eyes dance. “Good thing you’re wearing sweatpants, eh?”

Oh, he is devious. “Eat ass, okay?”

“Are you offering?”

I smack him, and his grin falters as he stands back, eyeing me. “Stop. You don’t have to do this when—” He walks away, shaking his head, not even allowing me to finish. “Rude.”

Though, I’m glad he walks away. I rather hate stating what I believe, when I want the opposite. I know he is doing this for show. He has to be. Or else, he means what he says, and what the hell am I supposed to do with that? I tried so hard to script this out for us, make it easy, but I’m finding neither of us is using a script. I’m pretty sure he trashed his, and I probably lost mine. Which isn’t surprising with my ADHD.

I push off the wall and see that Callie is watching me with a knowing grin. When she starts to hump the air, I roll my eyes. “Grow up.”

Her laughter taunts me as I head toward her room when I hear the buzzer for the dryer ring. I close the door behind me, needing a moment to breathe as I take care of my clothes. I take my time switching everything over just to have a chance to compose myself. I have no clue what I’m doing. I don’t get how I’m even entertaining the idea of putting myself out there. I haven’t put myself out there like that since the last time he and I were together. Now I want to? It doesn’t make sense. What is so different about Benson?

Everything.

Absolutely everything.

I shake my head as I start the dryer and then walk back out to the kitchen to make my plate. I feel his gaze on me as I move to each pot, taking what I want, before heading to the table. Of course, there is only one seat left, and it's beside Benson. I inhale deeply as I sit, and I notice everyone has started eating except him.

I glance over at him, a thankful smile on my face. "You didn't have to wait for me." He doesn't say anything. Instead, he reaches for his fork and starts to eat. I look over at Callie, and she's grinning around the bite she just took. "You could have waited."

She snorts. "I didn't know how long it was going to take for you to get your shit together before you came out."

I flash her a dark look as Benson chuckles beside me. Soon, the conversation is flowing just as fast as the wine that Quinn had brought. Not that I expected anything less; we're comfortable together. We laugh, we joke—but Ava, she just sits there. She has not said a word, nor has she eaten anything. I swallow my bite before I ask, "Are you not hungry, Ava? It's really good. Evan is a wonderful cook."

Evan's lips curve. "It's my new passion, helps the mental health."

Callie leans into him, the proud fiancée, as we all wait for Ava to answer. She looks at me, and I almost wonder if she didn't hear me. With a bit of sharpness in her voice, she says, "I'm not hungry."

"Oh, okay," I draw out as I lock eyes with Callie.

She shakes her head, and Quinn adds, "She's not much of an eater."

No one comments or even acknowledges him, because something is off here. An awkwardness falls over the table, and my knee starts to bounce. I don't do awkward. Leaning on the table, I ask, "How long have you two been dating?"

Ava doesn't even look up from her phone. "A couple months," Quinn answers. "We've known each other for a few

years now. We met the first day of our residency.”

I move my gaze to Ava, thinking maybe she'll add something to that, but she doesn't. Nothing. Not even a glance at me. I clear my throat, but nothing. I look at Benson, and he shakes his head.

Under his breath, he says, “You're wasting your time.”

I ignore him. Quinn is a great guy. Surely she's redeemable. “You must be shy, Ava. You don't talk much, do you?” I say, smiling at her.

Ava's eyes cut to mine. “I don't have anything to say.”

I blink, and I can't stop myself from saying, “Sure, but if you're dating someone who is important to us—Quinn's brother, his fiancée, his best friend, and his friend—you'd want to get to know us. We're important to each other.”

“Best friend's girlfriend,” Benson corrects, and I move my gaze to his. “You said Quinn's friend, but since Callie gets to be Evan's fiancée, use the right title for yourself.”

My lips twitch. “I was his friend before I was dating you.”

“Eh, no, you were mine before his.”

I blink, and Callie chokes on her water. “God, this is awesome,” she murmurs, but I ignore her, my eyes locked with Benson's.

“You're being possessive.”

He nods. “And?”

“Are you done?” I ask, and he shakes his head.

“Not even close.” His eyes move to mine. “But I can relax if you'd like.”

“Can you?”

His eyes darken, those lashes taunting me. “I can try.”

I flash Callie a look that asks what in the hell is going on. My best friend...well, she just laughs, and I know she's loving every bit of my discomfort. Probably as much as Benson is. I look back at him. “Are you messing with me?”

“Not at all.”

I blink while Callie’s laughter grows. Even Quinn is trying to hold back his laughter, a stupid little smirk on his round face. Ignoring the peanut gallery, I look at Ava expectantly.

Her eyes narrow as she looks at me. “I know when I don’t vibe with people. While I may vibe with Quinn, I don’t with the rest of you.”

My brows knit tightly. “You don’t even know us.”

When Benson’s hand comes to rest on my thigh, I take in a sharp breath as I cut my eyes to his. He squeezes my thigh, and then he shakes his head. “Let it be, eh? As long as Quinn is happy, we’re happy.”

I don’t like that. We are awesome—she should want to get to know us. “But you’ll have to be around us.”

She shrugs. “For now.”

Quinn looks up then, giving her a look. “Come on, be nice.”

“I’m being pleasant.”

I scoff at that. “You’re being a stuck-up bitch.”

Well, that wasn’t the right thing to say.

Benson’s hand squeezes my thigh as Callie stares at me with wide eyes. Quinn looks over at me, surprise in his blue eyes as I hold up my palms. “I just mean that you aren’t even trying to know us, and we want to know you.”

Ava is unaffected by my words, I can tell. She doesn’t give a fuck about any of us. I don’t even think she cares about Quinn. “Why would I try when I have no desire to know any of you? Yeah, these are his brothers, but they’re tolerating me, no matter what, for Quinn’s sake. The fiancée will do whatever Evan wants since she’s obsessed with pleasing him. And you, from what I hear, you’re not even around, too busy hoeing out your big ass on your social media to worry about anyone but yourself.”

The silence that falls around us is thicker than my ass that I apparently hoe out with.

It's so fucking awkward, all I can do is laugh. I feel Benson's gaze cut to mine, and boy, is it full of fire. I go to tell her exactly how much I make with my ass, but Benson's voice commands her attention. "I'll give you the fact that Evan and I will do what Quinn wants because we love him, and that's what you do for someone you love. Though I don't know that you understand anything about loving or caring for anyone, because if you did, you'd learn names at least." He jerks his head to Callie. "Her name is Callie. Again, love can make you a bit obsessed, but that's nothing to fault her for or even assume that she'd like you because of it. She has a mind of her own." I watch as Callie beams at Benson, but when I look back at Ava, her eyes are dark. "Now, as for Cameron, it's none of your fucking business what the hell she does on social media. But I can tell you right now, you'd be lucky to be on the receiving end of her friendship."

I nod at that. "But don't worry. I have no intention of trying anymore."

Ava scoffs. "Thank God."

What the hell? I look at Quinn, but he's moving his shrimp around on his plate, visibly uncomfortable. Without thinking, I say, "Quinn." He looks up, and such sadness swirls in his blue eyes. "Blink twice if she's blackmailing you."

Ava rolls her eyes and pushes back from the table. "Evan, where is the bathroom?"

He hooks his thumb to the side. "Over there."

As she walks away, Quinn leans back in his chair, looking at all of us. "Don't."

"Don't?" Evan asks incredulously. "What the hell?"

But Quinn doesn't hear it. "Just let it be."

He gets up then, going into the kitchen, and I look at Evan and Callie. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

Before they can reassure me they aren't upset, Benson says, "Don't apologize for being you, Cameron."

I whip my gaze to his, my heart in my throat as his eyes burn into mine. As someone with ADHD, I've always heard the opposite. Be quiet, be good, don't do that, calm down, but never *don't apologize for being you*. His words stun me. He gets up, squeezing my shoulder before heading into the kitchen with Evan. My gaze slides to where Callie is watching me with a knowing look on her face. She knows what people used to say about me, especially our freshman year when I wasn't as mature as I am now. When I tried so hard for everyone to like me.

A little smirk moves across her lips as she leans on her hand. "I think I'll get you a really big bow for your hair to go with the dress. Lots of frills."

"Go be best friends with Ava," I shoot at her, and her laughter is unstoppable.

And so is my grin.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Six

CAMERON

After cleaning up, everyone gathers back at the table. I don't know why we are going to play games with this chick, or even why she stays. If it were me, I'd be out of here in a heartbeat, yet we bring out Trivial Pursuit, much to my dismay. I tend to get bored with board games, but after my outburst during dinner, I am determined to try. It is obvious after a few rounds that Ava isn't playing, but Quinn doesn't need anyone on his team in a trivia game. Evan and Callie work great together and argue as much as they get the questions right, which I find hilarious.

With our arrangement, though, it means I'm on Benson's team, an instant teammate. I'm disgusted with how much that excites me. Like on the ice, he's wicked smart and strategic. I'm so into the game, the last thing I am is bored, and damn, how I love it. We're winning by a landslide when the dryer buzzes.

I go to get up, but Benson's hand capturing mine stops me. "What are you doing?"

"I gotta switch my clothes over."

Quinn stands. "Great, let's take a break. I need to piss."

Ava exhales and then stands. "I'm gonna go make a call."

No one acknowledges her, but as I head to switch my clothes over, I notice that Benson is walking with me. "What

are you doing?”

“Coming with you.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to.”

I knit my brows. I don't know what it is about him saying *want*, but it hits me in the gut. Like, straight in it. Annihilates it.

Somehow, I get out, “I can manage.”

“Sure, but some alone time with my girlfriend sounds nice.”

I roll my eyes. “You're being a lot right now.”

“You think so?” A teasing grin pulls at his lips, and I'm convinced he's out to ruin me.

“I know so,” I throw back at him as I enter the room.

When I hear the door click closed, my heart kicks up in my chest. Awareness prickles through my body like tiny spiders running along my skin. My stomach clenches, and oh, the desire gathers between my legs at the thought that a bed is right there. Yeah, my clothes are all over it, but it's not like I have any intention of folding my clothes anyway.

Lord, Cameron, you are a raccoon.

A shaky breath leaves my lips when I reach for the dryer. As I start to unload it, I glance over my shoulder to find Benson leaning on the dresser, his arms crossed over his wide chest as he watches me. His eyes are so dark and trained on nothing but me. Instantly, I'm self-conscious, and I feel like I forget how to put clothes in a laundry basket. Everything falls out, and when I glance over at him once more, I can see heat in his eyes. It makes me want to run my tongue along the stubble on his jaw. I squeeze my thighs together as his voice caresses my spine. “Nice panties.”

I look down at what he's staring at to see my teal thong. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” he says, leaning his hips forward and stretching his back. The motion accentuates his long legs, his thick thighs, and he must be smuggling a footlong sub in there, because *goddamn*. I whip my gaze away, shaking my head. When I see my hands tremble, I know I need a distraction. “So, is Ava always a cunt?”

A look as if he has eaten something sour fills his features as he chuckles. “Yup, she’s been like that since I met her. I think Quinn’s trying to piss Emery off, so he’s with Ava.”

I nod. “Makes sense. She is the exact opposite of Emery.”

“Absolutely. Makes me miss that psycho.”

I can’t stop my grin. I haven’t seen Emery in years, but the first time I met her, she explained to me how to kill someone without leaving a single trace of evidence. I was absolutely terrified. “I guess. I’m sure Quinn will have words with me about calling her a bitch.”

“He better not.”

I furrow my brows. “Huh?”

“If he does, he’ll deal with me.”

My lungs burn for air, but it’s hard to draw any air into them. I ignore my shaking hands as I move my clothes from the washer. Nothing is said, but I feel him watching me. When I go for my last pieces of laundry, he asks, “Why are you doing laundry here?”

“Callie made me. Pretty sure it was part of y’all’s scheme.”

He grins without a lick of bashfulness. No shame whatsoever. Jackass. “Why is there so much?”

“Are you judging me?”

“Not at all. Do you plan on folding everything?” I give him a look, and he grins. “I’ll take that as a no. But for real, why do you have so much?”

I shrug. “The house’s washer is messed up, and I don’t go on campus.”

“I don’t like that,” he says, annoyance visible in the press of his lips. “You should be able to go wherever you want.”

“It’s more me than anyone else. I don’t want to be bothered.”

“I get that.” I load the washer again, and he says, “I can go with you to the laundromat on campus if you want, or you can come to my place.”

I give him a little grin. “You don’t have to go out of your way.”

“But I want to.”

There is that fucking word again. Why does it affect me so? “Thanks, but I should be good for at least two months.”

“Good thing you got me after that, eh?”

My heart does a little tumble. I try to gather my wits about me. “Is there a reason you followed me in here, Benson?”

“Yeah.”

I put in the detergent and look over at him. “And that is?”

“We need to talk, Cameron.”

My heart jumps into my throat. “Then talk.”

“I’m trying,” he admits, pushing off the dresser and stalking toward me. My breath catches audibly, and that wicked smirk on his lips only grows wider. He’s so big, so commanding, that all I can do is press my back into the washer as he angles his leg between mine. Benson’s eyes are so dark, I swear no gray is showing as he traps me between his body and the washer. He brings his arms to rest against the machine, his chest almost pressing into mine as our eyes lock.

“Trying?” I squeak. “Looks as if you’re not trying to talk at all, but rather distracting me from my laundry.”

His eyes hood as his lips part, a rumble of a chuckle leaving him and making me utterly breathless. “Only fair when you distract me just by existing.” My skin feels too tight, and everything south of my head is wholly aware of him.

“What are you doing, Benson?” I whisper as I dig my fingers into the washer’s hard surface.

“Admiring your lips. I was too far away,” he says, dropping his eyes to said lips. “As I suspected, it doesn’t matter how far or close I am, I desperately want to kiss them.”

I press my tongue to the back of my teeth, trying not to rise up onto my toes and take his mouth with mine. I gotta put space between us, but there is no way I can move him. He’s too big, and God, I crave him. I know he would move if I asked, but I don’t want him to move. Words. I need words.

Last-ditch effort. Come on, don’t fall, Cameron.

I hold his gaze, my breathing erratic as I whisper, “No one is around. Why would you want to kiss me?”

The lips I want to suffocate myself with curl up in the most devastating smirk. “Because I fucking want to.”

And without another response from me, his lips take mine.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven

CAMERON

Benson's lips feel like coming home.

They are soft, warm, and everything I have spent years trying to forget. He slides his tongue along my lips, and I open greedily for him. God, I want to feel him everywhere, and Benson delivers. His mouth consumes mine. He kisses me like a starving man, like he's never kissed me before, but that's not true. He has, plenty, but my God if this doesn't feel like our first kiss.

My stomach clenches, my heart slams into my ribs, and I feel as if my skin might shatter from how tight it is, but I don't give a shit. Thinking isn't even an option at this point. No, all I can do is feel every inch of his mouth move along mine in an assault I have yearned for. He is the last guy I kissed, and now I know why that is.

He ruined me for everyone.

Neither of us touches the other, probably because we know we'll never stop. No, it's just our lips in a tangled dance of lust. He strokes his tongue along the roof of my mouth, and I moan ever so loudly. I should be embarrassed, but when he grins against my mouth, all I want is more. I go to move into him, but then I stop.

What am I doing?

Ground rules. I need fucking ground rules.

He knows I've hesitated, and when I pull back, he's already glaring. "I'm pretty sure I don't want to hear what you're gonna say next."

Probably not, but that doesn't stop me. "What are you doing?"

His eyes flash with frustration. "I was kissing the fuck out of you, but then you stopped, probably thinking too much, which really does nothing for my ego."

"Why, though? This is supposed to be an arrangement, and if we are going to bring sex to the table, we need to discuss it first."

When he takes my jaw in his hand, I gasp, my eyes widening as his nose comes closer to mine, his eyes molten. His grip is so tight it stings, but I know he isn't doing it to hurt me. "Focus, my beauty—"

"I really don't think you're giving me an option to do otherwise."

His jaw ticks. "Cameron, this is not a fucking arrangement."

"But it is. We—"

"Stop," he demands, running his thumb along my lip. "It's not. If I had the script you wrote out, I'd tear it up for dramatic effect and tell you none of that matters."

"I don't get it. I thought we had an understanding. Why are you changing it up without discussion?"

"Because I fucking want you."

"For sex? I don't know if I'm ready for that. And if you need it so bad, I can order you a pocket pussy."

His brow knits. "What is wrong with you?" he asks, letting go of my face and taking a step back. "I get that's how we started, but even then, I wanted more."

"*What?*" I roar. "We slept together for four months, and you wanted more? Why didn't you tell me?"

“Because you didn’t even tell me your fucking last name, Cam!” he yells back, and I feel like I’m tingling everywhere. He liked me and wanted more than sex? Why didn’t he tell me? “I had to get it from Callie, but then everything happened, and you ran.”

“I ran because I couldn’t handle what happened!”

“Same!” he yells back, and he looks away, running his hand through his hair. His shoulders are so tight, but I know my chest is tighter. I look down, trying to get my feelings under control, but seeing him so raw hurts me. I didn’t want to hurt him. “I know it was a lot. And I knew we needed space, so I gave it to you.”

I swallow past the emotions trying to choke me. “I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories with this. I trusted you and thought you’d be good to fake date and get the grade I want.”

“Sure, but the moment you asked me to do this. I saw it as the opportunity to get what I wanted.”

“What you wanted?”

He sighs. “You’re not listening to me.”

I look up. “What do you mean?”

Benson’s eyes burn into mine, and my heart is beating so fucking fast and hard, I feel my vision vibrating. “Nothing about our past, no matter how messy, carries bad memories for me. None of it.” I press my lips together as he takes a step toward me, his eyes never leaving mine. “I watched a girl take her fate into her own hands and choose the future she wanted. I sat beside you, floored by your strength. I would have done anything you wanted. If you’d wanted to get married and raise that baby, I would have because I was in awe of you, Cameron. Fuck, I still am.” My lips tremble as my eyes start to water. “I stepped back because I knew you were hurting. Ahfuckbaby, I was too, not because of what we did, but because it caused you pain. Everyone looked down on you, everyone blamed you, and I hated it. I had to step away just as much as you did.”

“It was all too much,” I admit, swallowing thickly. “Sometimes, it still is.”

“I know,” he agrees, taking a step toward me. “But your choice didn’t make me think of you any differently. If anything, it only made me want you more.” I cut my eyes to his as my heart thuds in my chest. I watch him come toe-to-toe with me, his eyes studying me as I see him bring his hand up to cup my jaw. “There hasn’t been a day in these last three years when I haven’t thought of you,” he whispers, moving his thumb along the curve of my chin. “How I missed you. That’s why I agreed with no hesitation. It was the second chance I’ve been waiting for.”

His words send shivers down my spine as my heart thuds for this man standing before me. “I chose you because I didn’t want to do this with anyone else.”

Benson nods, his eyes hooded as he looks down at me. “And you don’t know what that does to me, honestly.”

I feel like it’s the same for me, but I don’t say that. I just hold his gaze, pulling in deep breaths so I don’t pass out. Neither of us says a word as he angles his body closer to mine, making it real hard not to touch him. He takes my hand in his, threading our fingers before bringing my hand to his lips. He places a small kiss on the back of my hand and then another to my wrist before his eyes meet mine. With so much emotion in his voice, he says, “I have a new...I’m not using arrangement because you’ve made me hate that word.”

I can’t help but grin at him. “The word did nothing to you.”

“No, but your intent with it did,” he tells me, moving even closer to me. “You intended to keep me at arm’s length, but I’m not playing that game with you.”

“No?”

“Fuck no,” he promises, my gaze trapped by his as he tightens his fingers around mine. “I want another chance at us.” Oh, how that thrills me, but it also scares the ever-loving

shit out of me. “I can see your thoughts in your eyes, Cam. Tell me what you’re thinking?”

His request for my thoughts has my heart clenching in my chest. I don’t know what I’m thinking or what I’m feeling or even what I want. “I didn’t even think you still liked me like this.”

His lips perk at the sides. “How could I ever stop?”

“I thought it was all for show.”

“For you, yeah, but only for you.”

I lean into his hand, so pleased by his response but knowing I’ve gotta keep my wits about me. Benson gathers me in his arms, bringing his hand up to the back of my neck, where he tangles his fingers in my hair. I’m breathless as I gaze up at him, wanting so desperately to kiss him but not doing so for the simple fact that I’m scared.

He squeezes my scalp as his eyes bore into me. “Talk to me.”

“It’d be so easy to fall back into what we were, and I don’t want that.”

“Neither do I,” he agrees, leaning down so that his nose slides along mine. “So, here are my *arrangement* terms.” My lips curve at how he says the word with such vengeance. “Date me for real and use the insights for your project.”

“But not the script?”

“Fuck the script, Cameron.”

I grin. “But we were supposed to break up at the end of the six months and announce it, see what that does—”

He shakes his head, cutting off my words. “Yeah, that’s not happening.”

“It was in the script I gave you.”

“I didn’t read that shit,” he admits, and I laugh. I watch as his eyes drift shut, and the smallest of smiles comes across his thick lips. He leans in, so close to where his lips almost touch mine. “Give me a second chance, Cam. A real chance.”

It's difficult for me to believe this is happening. After everything that went down, he still wants a chance with me? It almost doesn't seem real, but I can feel his lips and smell the wine on his breath. I can feel the heat of his body. I swallow hard as my insides yearn for him, yet my brain is telling me I'm not good enough. But even that thought doesn't make sense. My brain is really mean sometimes. Like, damn, whose side is it on? One look at Benson and I know he's on my side... yet I'm tearing myself down when this man has his arms around me and is asking for one thing.

The same thing I want.

Still, needing to be sure, I ask, "Shouldn't I be the one asking for the second chance?"

CHAPTER

Twenty-Eight

BENSON

I've achieved everything I've ever worked for.

When I was slinging llama shit, I was also slinging pucks. Even when I was up until midnight doing homework, I had my stick in my hand, one-handedly playing with a puck. I used my ice time to my advantage, up and on the ice before everyone else. I knew I had to keep my grades up if I wanted to get into a D1 school, so I used to listen to my lessons while I skated. While I was working on the farm, I used my stick to do much of the work. Guiding llamas, cleaning the pens, and I used to practice tip-ins with snacks for the animals.

I worked hard to get noticed, and I was rewarded.

When I wanted to leave home for America, I put in all the paperwork. I walked to the local library to use the internet and fax machine to send my forms of intent. When I was chosen for the billet program, I sat for hours with my coach to find the family I wanted. I mean, no one was as awesome as the Adlers. Elli and Shea had come to Canada to watch me play. Had dinner with my family, promised they'd take good care of me and love me as their own. Not that my parents cared. But even knowing I was going to pick the Adlers, I still took the time to make sure I was going to the best.

When I left home, everyone thought I was going so I could draft right out of high school, but that wasn't the reason. I left to get out of a toxic environment and find my way into a

loving one. I learned what it was to be supportive, to be loved, and I think that made me a better player.

When I broke my wrist senior year of high school, I remember being crushed, thinking my career was over. But Shea looked me in the eye and reminded me that the comeback is always greater than the setback. My dad would have told me to quit, my mom would have had me in the pens with the llamas, but not Shea. He taught me to play left-handed, and even though I struggled, he never gave up on me. Now, because of that work, because of the man I claim as my father, I can shoot both ways, and no one ever knows what they're getting from me. It makes me lethal.

I've focused hard on school, on my skills and play, and yeah, I've had fun. Girls are easy to get with when you are a top athlete, and they've come to me without any work at all. I can just stand there, and girls appear, wanting me. It takes no effort whatsoever on my part, really never has—except when it comes to Cameron. She didn't fall at my feet. She didn't hit on me. She was a friend. I kissed her first without even knowing if she wanted to start something. She never wanted anything from me, when all I wanted was to give her every single part of me. There has always been something about her that has drawn me to her, a hidden tether between the two of us, and ahfuckbuddy, there is no amount of work that I wouldn't put in to keep her.

She wants it, she needs it, she asks for it...it's hers.

I'm hers.

“Shouldn't I be the one asking for the second chance?”

Cameron's brown eyes are a darker shade now, rather than the warm chocolate they usually are. Her lips are parted just a touch, the little gap between her teeth covered by her tongue. Her hair falls along my hand, and everything inside me burns for this girl. “So, ask,” I practically beg, and I almost don't recognize my own voice. It's so rough, like ice under a blade. Something flashes in her eyes, and she looks down. “Eh, don't get shy now, Beauty. Eyes on me.”

Her breath catches before she drags her eyes back up. Heat burns in those eyes, and my chest tightens. “You should say no.”

“When it comes to you, the word no never crosses my mind.”

Her eyes widen in a stunning way. Her lashes are almost touching her brows as her lips slowly turn up. A challenge flares in those eyes as she asks sweetly, “Will you fold my laundry?”

Without hesitation, only a smile, I say, “Yes.”

Her eyes twinkle. “Will you watch *Dance Moms* with me?”

Oh, she’s a pain. “Yes.”

“Can I—” she thinks for a second, her grin is unstoppable “—borrow your car?”

“Yes.”

That sneaky grin almost does me in. “Can I wear my own jersey with my own number?”

I lick my lips, and while I want to prove my point, I can’t. “Absolutely not. You wear my number and my number only, my beauty.”

Her eyes are bright as she leans into me, her nose smushing into mine. I cuddle her closer, pulling her from her feet, but she doesn’t have any fear in her eyes. She trusts me. She runs her fingers along my stubble. “Will you be patient with me?”

“Yes.”

“Cause with school, gym, and content creating, I’m busy.”

“But I know you’ll make time for me.” I gather her closer. “Just as I’ll make time for you.” She doesn’t say anything to that or even acknowledge my words. She moves her fingers along my stubble, and I can see the emotion in her eyes, swirling deep. I hate when she does this, when she overthinks. Unable to handle it, I say, “Cam, eyes on me. Talk to me.” Her

eyes cut to mine as she bites her bottom lip. Her lip squishes through the gap in her teeth as her eyes lock mine in place. When she releases her lip, I lean in, running my tongue along it, soothing the red spot, mostly for me. Because I want to taste her. I'm rewarded with a soft sigh, and I demand, "Just say it."

What, I have no clue, but I see she needs to say something.

"I've already hurt you, Benson," she says so softly, I almost don't hear her over the rumbling of the dryer. "It's my biggest regret, and I don't want to cause you any more pain. Ever."

Ahfuckme, this girl has my heart. "Then don't."

The tension in her body vanishes automatically. "That easy, huh?"

"For us, it could be," I say, knowing deep in my soul that it could be.

As easy as breathing.

"Your confidence blows me away."

Unable to resist any longer, I move in, my lips right over hers. "You blow me away."

I watch as her eyes slowly drift shut. "Benny?" she asks in a low, breathless way that has every inch of me hard.

"Yes, Cammy?"

Her lips curve. "Will you kiss me?"

My heart revs up, feeling as if I'm doing laps upon laps for Coach. "Oh, my beauty, you know the answer to that."

Before either of us can make a sound or a comment, my lips take hers. My fingers bite into her neck and her hip as I devour her mouth. Needing every single taste her lips have to offer. She tastes of the rosé she was drinking, but also just her sweetness. I have been thinking of her lips, her kisses, every single time I had the pleasure of seeing her over the last three years. These last couple weeks, when I'd kiss her cheek, it was with the hopes she'd turn and meet my mouth. Now, though, I don't have to hope.

I've got her exactly where I want her.

When the buzzer sounds for the dryer, we both jump with surprise, and then her giggles break our kiss. I lean my forehead into hers as I open my eyes to find hers still closed. "Benny."

"Yes?"

"You said you'd help me with my clothes, and I need to do them so Callie doesn't yell at me and call me a raccoon."

I try to hold back my laughter, but it's not possible. When her eyes meet mine, her joy lights up her face, and everything in me prays it's as easy as I said it was.

That she won't destroy me.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Nine

BENSON

“So, why are you doing laundry here? Couldn’t you have gone to your mom’s?”

The look on Cameron’s face tells me that’s the last thing she wanted to do. Her brows knit tight, her lips twist into a grimace, and the way her eyes cut to mine is not in a playful manner. I sit cross-legged across from her, folding endless numbers of leotards. She has to have a hundred. I’m honestly proud of myself that I’m not trying to hump her handling these little scraps of fabric, knowing they’ve touched her in all the ways I’ve yearned to. The feel of the material leaves me squirming to make room in my pants. She hangs one of her shirts as she says, “I’d rather throw everything out and buy all new than go over there.”

“Really? I thought you two were close?”

She shakes her head but doesn’t look at me. “Did I tell you that she was forced to have me?”

“I don’t think so,” I say, and already, I’m pissed. How could anyone be forced to do anything when it comes to Cameron? It’s a damn gift to be in her presence. Jesus, I sound like a whipped fool, and this relationship is, what? Twelve minutes old? Thankfully, her words draw me from my thoughts. “Yeah, she got knocked up with me when she was seventeen by her pastor, who was like forty or something. Her family forced her to have me because it was *God’s will*.”

I nod slowly. “Well, that’s fucking disgusting.”

“Agreed.”

“And explains why she was a pain in the ass when it came to your choice.”

Her lips quirk at the side as she glances over at me, but then she looks right back down at what she is hanging. “I love that you said that.”

“What?”

“That it was my choice,” she says softly, her voice almost a whisper. “You never forced me or pushed me in any other direction. You went with what I wanted.”

I meet her gaze. “Because it’s your body, Cam. I may have added something to it, but at the end of the day, like I said back then, nothing would change for me. Everything would have changed for you.”

She nods. “I know I thanked you back then, but truly, I couldn’t have gotten through most of that without you.”

We share a small smile. “I wanted what you wanted.”

I always have, since apparently I allowed her not to speak to me for all this time, but look how that patience paid off.

Cameron looks away then as she exhales, and her shoulders fall. “Since then, though, life has been pretty shitty with my mom. I could blame it on the abortion, but it was more than that. My being here at Bellevue brings out the worst in her.”

“How so?”

“I’m a gymnast, and she sacrificed a lot for me growing up to do this sport.”

“I get that, but shouldn’t she be proud?”

“Sure, and she is to an extent, but gymnastics can be a very toxic sport. It’s a team sport yet also an individual one, and everyone is against everyone. It brings out the worst in people more than the best, and I’ve felt like my mom was never proud of me unless I was winning.”

I nod as our gazes lock. “My parents only cared when I was slinging llama shit.”

Her lips quirk. “I’m glad you play hockey. You’re so damn good at it.” I smile a thanks as she goes on. “But she always compared me to everyone else, and she blamed the fact that I was slower to catch on to skills or learn new choreography on my ADHD, and that was annoying.” She swallows, and I know she has more to say, so I just listen. “Compulsory gymnastics was not it for me. But when I got to optionals, I was finally able to shine. Enjoy gymnastics just for me. Ya know? I think I fell in love with it again and started ignoring my mom.”

“For good reason.”

“Yeah. And I tried so hard, to the point of exhaustion, since she was asking my stepdad to shell out so much money.” My heart hurts for the little girl who went through that. “I feel like she’s always resented me. Not only was she forced to have me, but I was defective. I ruined her life in some sense, I guess.”

“I don’t accept that.”

“What?” she asks with a grin. “Why not?”

“You aren’t defective, and you only add to people’s lives, Cameron. I mean, look how happy your content on social media makes people. If you didn’t have all the ideas going through your head, you couldn’t do that. Look how everyone loves you on the team and looks up to you. You are able to see things others don’t, and I think that’s awesome.” Her lips curve as a flush fills her face, leaving me wanting to touch her. “And I mean this with all the disrespect in the world, but your mom is a bitch.”

She snorts at that. “That she is. Sorry for unloading my mommy issues on you.”

I start on the next pile as I scoff. “It’s cool. I’ve got parent issues too. I know they’d still demand I come home and take over the farm. Too bad for them, hockey is what I want.”

“As it should be. You were born to be on the ice.”

Ahfuckbuddy, the pride that fills me at hearing her say that rattles my soul. “But I learned a long time ago, why be in a toxic situation when I could be loved? The right way.”

She smiles. “The Adlers are pretty amazing.”

I couldn’t agree more. “But your stepdad is good to you, right? I feel like I remember you liking him.”

“Oh, I love him. He evens everything out and can reel in my mom’s bitchiness pretty quickly, but her words still get to me.” She rolls her eyes. “Ugh, I don’t want to talk about them. How are your parents?”

I give her a sad smile. “We don’t talk anymore.”

“Really?” she asks, visibly surprised. “I know they were shitty about you coming to the States, but I thought y’all still talked?”

“We did for a bit there, but then I told them about us, and they said America had changed me. Ruined me. That no son of theirs would kill a child.”

Her eyes widen. “Wow. That’s a bold statement.”

“Yeah,” I say with a soulless laugh. “But it is what it is. Elli and Shea were supportive and agreed it was your choice, not mine.”

I notice then that she’s stopped hanging her shirts. “You claim I’m the only one who dealt with the backlash, but you did too. I never wanted to cause a rift between you and your family.”

“The rift was there way before that, Cammy.”

Her eyes flash with sadness. “I’m truly so—”

“Don’t, Cam. You don’t need to. I supported you completely,” I tell her. “I don’t regret anything.”

“You don’t?”

“About the abortion? No,” I admit. “Now, about you cutting me off. Yeah, I hated that. But I get it, eh?”

Her eyes scrutinize mine. “You weren’t mad?”

“I was pissed,” I tell her with a laugh. “But I think if we had forced it, it would have ended really badly, and I wouldn’t be sitting here, folding your clothes, and wishing like fuck I had you in my lap, kissing you and reacquainting myself with all the ways to make you squirm.”

A flush fills her cheeks before she throws a bundle of socks at me. “Behave.”

I bat them away as I scoff. “Behave? That’s not possible when you’re looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” she challenges, that little tip of her chin making me hard in all the right ways.

“Like you want to sit in my lap and allow me to make you squirm.” I gesture around me, and with a teasing, bold grin, I say, “We have plenty of towels if you want to do just that.”

Her face breaks into a wide grin before she throws another sock bundle at me, and I bat it away, much to her delight. Her giggles fill the room, and my face hurts from smiling so widely. I take my phone from my pocket and snap a photo of her because, while I enjoy when she’s all done up, her dressed down, sitting in a pile of her clothes while she laughs, is what really gets my heart pumping. When she looks up at me, heat moves through me like a spark through a powder keg. My heart seizes in my chest, and in a throaty way, I somehow get out, “Come here.”

Her eyes darken. “If I do that, we’ll forget the clothes.”

“They’re already forgotten,” I tell her, and then I tip my chin up. “Come here, Cam.”

She licks her lips as she pushes the clothes from her lap, and fuck me dumb, the girl goes to her hands and knees, crawling to me. Her eyes never leave mine, that perfect ass in the air as she comes to me just as I asked. I reach out, cupping her hips as her mouth meets mine. My eyes fall shut, and my heart slams into my chest as our lips press together with such need. Just as I’m about to pull her into my lap in the hopes we’ll use every single towel in here, rewash them, dry them, and do it all over again, the door flies open.

We break apart, but I don't stop watching her as she covers her mouth, her face dark red, as Evan yells, "Benson! Er, fuck, sorry."

But he doesn't leave as Cameron falls back to her haunches, and I gawk at him in disbelief.

"Fucking cockblock," I mutter, and Cameron snorts. "I mean, ya already interrupted. What do you want?"

He throws his hand back toward the living room. "Did you know he's marrying that chick?"

Well. Shit. Cameron's eyes widen. "Who? Quinn?"

"Yeah," I say answering both their questions, and Evan's eyes widen.

"What the hell! She doesn't even like us!"

"According to her, she doesn't have to like us, only Quinn," I supply, and Evan's eyes widen.

Beside me, Cameron says, "Does he even like her?"

"I don't think so," Callie says, leaning on the doorframe. "Oh good, you're folding everything. It was killing me knowing that wasn't done."

Cameron ignores her best friend's comment and looks at Evan. "Did they leave?"

"Yeah, he made me promise not to say anything, told me, and then left like it was no big deal." Evan's eyes cut to mine. "What the fuck is going on?"

I shrug. "Dude, I have no clue. She came out of nowhere. They've known each other in school, but he never said he liked her. Then all of a sudden, they're engaged. It's fucking weird."

"Do you think he is doing it to mess with Emery?" Callie asks, coming to sit on the bed.

As she starts to fold, I say, "I said so, but he claims it's not. That he has to get over Emery."

“Sure, it’s been three years, but don’t marry someone who is not even kinda into you,” Evan says, his eyes wide. “Mom is gonna be pissed. And listen, I’m not sure Emery won’t kill Quinn for this.”

Cameron snorts at that, and even I grin as she says, “I thought the same thing earlier, but now that I know they’re engaged, I know for a fact that she’s gonna hide his body once she’s done.”

“I think he’s still in love with Emery, and he went for her exact opposite,” Callie adds as she grabs another basket. Man, she’s fast. “And yeah, should someone tell him to hire security? We could go in on it, give it to him as a wedding gift.”

Cameron laughs, and I would too if Evan didn’t look so stricken. Holding his gaze, I say, “I said the same thing to him, but he insists it’s not that. That he doesn’t want to wait anymore for someone who doesn’t want him.”

I feel Cameron’s gaze on me, and when I look over at her, she gives me a small smile. “That’s super unfortunate.”

I shrug, holding her gaze. “Some people don’t realize how important it is to wait for the one they truly want.”

It’s Callie’s snickering that breaks our locked gazes. “I should go ahead and put in the order for the Miss Muffet dress.”

Cameron’s eyes narrow. “Don’t you dare.”

“What?” I ask, but Evan is over it.

He groans loudly. “Can we not make this about you two? My brother is marrying the spawn of Satan, and someone needs to tell my mom or even Emery. I bet if Emery gets wind of it, she’ll put a stop to it.”

I’m sure Evan isn’t wrong, but I ignore him. “What’s this about Miss Muffet?”

Cameron glares at Callie. “Nothing at all.”

“Ha, whatever,” she chortles. “I made a bet with you girlie-friend, and I know I’m gonna win.”

“What’s the bet?” I ask, watching Cameron’s profile as her face fills with color. Even the tips of her ears are dark red. God, she’s stunning.

And damn, I want to know all about this Miss Muffet dress.

“None of your business,” she throws at me before cutting Callie a look. “Don’t you dare.”

Callie’s eyes dance with mischief as Evan throws up his arms. “Hello! People! Quinn is getting married to that awful person, and someone needs to stop it!”

We all ignore him as I lean in, pressing my lips to the shell of Cameron’s ear. “Tell me.”

“No,” she says, moving away, but I catch her around her waist, dragging her back to me and into my lap. Callie laughs as Cameron’s sweet ass settles in my lap. I wrap my arms around her waist, holding her to my chest as I nuzzle her neck.

I kiss her there, then below her ear, before whispering, “Tell me.”

“Absolutely not,” she barely gets out.

Evan groans once more before leaving the room in a fit, while Callie tries not to laugh. I kiss Cameron again, then run my tongue along her ear. Her heart speeds up as my cock throbs in my pants. “Tell me.”

“Nope,” she says, swallowing hard. “It doesn’t matter, because I have self-control.”

Her words are for Callie, and her best friend only grins. “Sure, self-control of a fly in a trash yard.” Callie teases, her eyes falling on us. “So, I guess we’ve moved from fake dating to real dating?”

It’s not me who doesn’t hesitate this time.

Leaning back into me, Cameron looks up at me, her cheeks full of flush and those damn eyes only for me. “Yeah, he’s no longer an arrangement. I think.”

I cup her face. “Don’t think, just know.”

Her lips curve, and I lean down, pressing my lips to hers. Callie squeals happily, but all my attention is on the girl who is currently deepening our kiss. My hand comes up to cup her cheek, stroking it with my thumb as I fall into her kiss. Into her.

Ahfuckme, with each pull of her lips, each stroke of our tongues, I know for a fact, this girl is the goal I've been practicing for.

Quinn's Chapter One

My hands vibrate along the steering wheel as annoyance eats me alive. Beside me, Ava sits all prim and proper, texting someone, not that I fucking care. I had high hopes for this night at Evan's. I couldn't get away with Benson not knowing about Ava, which is why I introduced him to Ava first. I know he's not a fan, but I knew he'd be supportive. With Evan, though, he's the level-headed one of all my family. He tries to see the good in everyone, and I really thought that this would go well. That Evan could go back to my parents and tell them how great Ava is.

But that backfired right in my face. Badly.

My heart is in my throat as I chance a glance at my fiancée. Ava is stunning. Super-skinny, long, straight blond hair, and the brightest blue eyes. Her nose is pointed, her lips full of filler that I've paid for, and she's just perfectly put together. She comes from old money, the kind that has made her stuck-up because no one has ever told her no. She's everything I don't want, yet someone I have hitched myself to.

"That didn't go well," I say since I know she won't say a word. "I thought you said you'd try."

She doesn't spare me a look. "Those people are not my people."

"They're my family."

"True, but you aren't like them, Quinn. You are smart, gorgeous, and sophisticated." My jaw ticks at that since I know my family is great. Loving, kind, welcoming. She wasn't good to them; she was rude, but I couldn't trust myself

to correct her behavior. “I mean, Evan was okay enough, I guess, but I think it’s because he comes from money like you do. You can tell the rest of them didn’t grow up like we did.”

“Not everything is about money, Ava. And honestly, I’m pretty sure Cameron has more than both of us combined,” I say, and I know this is only going to cause more issues for me, defending Cameron. But I have to.

“When you whore out your body, the money is tainted.”

I press my lips together. “But the money spends the same.”

“True, but it doesn’t make you classy.” She scoffs before chuckling. “I can’t believe she called me a bitch. How disgusting is that?”

I ignore that comment. “I thought you’d like Callie.”

“As you said, she’d actually have to care about someone other than your brother, which I get since he’s her meal ticket.”

I grind my molars, shaking my head. “It’s not like that. She loves him for him. She helped him heal.”

She waves me off, her perfectly manicured nails glittering in the lights of my car. “I’m sure she’s fine. But honestly, I don’t care about any of them.” That really grinds my gears. “I bet they loved Emery, didn’t they?” she asks with venom in her voice.

Everyone did. Especially me. “Yeah.”

“Of course, they did. Trash loving trash.”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I warn, my heart thudding in my chest. “I told you not to talk about her.”

I feel her gaze on me. “And I told you to stay off her socials, but you’re still on them, and no photos have been taken down in your apartment.”

My jaw hurts, I’m clenching it so badly. “I told you. I’m not taking any of that down, not that it matters since you don’t plan on moving in.”

“Still, having those up doesn’t help sell our upcoming nuptials.”

I want to say fuck our nuptials, but I don’t. “I don’t care. I told you. When it comes to Emery, I don’t budge.”

“I don’t get it. She did you dirty. She blew you off, and I’m here helping you—”

I scoff at that. “How are you helping me? This is about you, not me.” I feel her gaze burning into me. “I looked like a jackass in front of my family. You treated the person my brother loves like shit—”

“Oh please. That girl is hardly worth his time. He does realize he can do better than a butt model on TikTok.”

I give her a warning look. “Cameron posts gymnastics stuff.”

“With her ass hanging out. That’s what brings in the money.”

I run my hand down my face. “Are you jealous?”

She scoffs. “Of what? A huge ass? I can buy that.”

“You’re being a real pain in *my* ass, Ava. You make it hard for me because I want to tell you to act right, but I know you and know you’ll pop off. If we start arguing, I’ll say something I shouldn’t.”

“You’re making this deeper than it is.”

“We’re supposed to be friends, Ava. Close friends. But if you don’t get it together and start behaving properly around my family, I don’t know if I can do this.”

“And what? Run back to your beloved Emery, who is just waiting for you with open arms?” She throws that at me even though we both know Emery isn’t waiting for me at all.

“I told you not to mention her name.”

“She doesn’t deserve you.”

“We aren’t together. I’m marrying you.”

She laughs. “And you think I don’t know you’d rather not? You love her more than yourself, and she doesn’t deserve that.”

“Let it be. You’re pissing me off. I do care for you, Ava. Even when you are acting like a stuck-up bitch.”

“Oh Quinn, it’s not an act.”

“I’m well aware.”

She exhales. “I don’t want to fight with you.”

“And I don’t want to take you around my family and have you treat them like shit. Don’t do it again.”

Ava doesn’t answer me right away, but then she says, “Fine, I can deal for a bit longer. Once we’re married, I doubt I’ll have to be around them ever again.”

“We’ll see them at holidays.”

“No, we’ll go to my parents’ house.”

I inhale sharply as I shake my head. “That’s not what we agreed to.”

“But you like my family.”

“Because everyone is drunk and doesn’t talk to me,” I throw over to her, and she laughs.

“I know, it’s great. So let’s do the easy thing, okay?” She pats my hand, and I hate when she does that. “I’m sorry it didn’t work with your family today. I’ll do better for your mom and dad.”

“Will you?” I ask, unable to look at her.

“I will for you.”

“Thanks.”

She pats my hand again, and I wave her hand off. “Don’t be like that.”

“Don’t belittle me.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not trying to do that at all.”

“Whatever,” I snap. Honestly, I just don’t have it in me to fight with her. I’m exhausted. Between school, her, and missing Emery with every fiber of my soul, I’m just tired. I didn’t expect to find myself engaged to Ava, but I can’t blame it only on my exhaustion.

I can blame it on tequila, though.

“It’s only for a year, Quinn,” Ava says. “Why would we go out of our way to be liked by each other’s families when this will be over sooner rather than later?”

She’s not wrong, but I don’t say that. Or even acknowledge it. Instead, I swallow and remind myself of that fact.

This is only for a year.

CHAPTER

Thirty

BENSON

After a few weeks of my always having been the first one to text Cameron, my body burns with excitement when I see her name waiting for me on my screen.

Cameron: Did you see the insights on our newest videos?

Cameron: Everyone is way more impressed by your backflip than my ability to shoot a goal. On skates.

Cameron: I'm sure it has nothing to do with the fact that you're wearing a leotard.

Cameron: I should have taken your advice and worn just your jersey on the ice, huh?

It cracks me up the way she texts. It reminds me of the way she talks, each thought individual and in its own text bubble. Since we made the content of a hockey player doing gymnastics and a gymnast playing hockey, I haven't seen her physically. The way I really fucking want to. Since I've had away games and she had an away meet, we've only been able to text and FaceTime. It sucks not being able to see her in person, but I don't have to see her to know our relationship has progressed.

We're truly together.

While my grin threatens to split my face, the thought of her in only my jersey, nothing underneath, on some skates, has

my cock aching for her. It's a welcome sensation as I write her back.

Me: Told ya. But this way, I don't have to cuss out any jackasses for ogling you.

Cameron: So, you're saying I should get in the comments and cuss out the girls who are asking why you didn't forgo the shorts?

I chuckle at that, putting guards on my skates before hanging them up. I pick up my phone to answer her back, and man, I'm sore. I just had a grueling practice since we lost our last game and Coach is truly in his feelings. For good reason. We took stupid penalties, and no one wanted to protect the barn. I'm not a fucking defenseman, yet I took a nasty puck to my thigh, blocking a shot to help Odder. We deserved the practice, and hopefully my teammates will wake up.

Cameron knows I'm at practice and probably doesn't expect me to text her back so quickly, but I don't like making her wait.

Because I don't want to wait to write her back.

Me: Would you like to stake your claim on me?

Cameron: The claim is made, and anyone who doesn't know that isn't my problem.

Cameron: All I gotta make sure of is that you know.

Cameron: Do you know I have staked my claim on you, Benson Jeannot?

My stomach clenches before I pull off my practice jersey and throw it to the floor. As I unsnap my chest gear, I write her back.

Me: I am proud to be claimed, my beauty.

Cameron: Like I said, we both know, and that's all that matters.

I couldn't agree more.

Before I can tell her that, Coach's voice roars through the locker room. Everyone jumps—hell, even I do—as he calls

out, “Jeannot, come here.”

Ahfuckbuddy.

I stand on shaking legs, and I’m thankful for the coolness under my feet since my soles are burning up from skating so hard. “Yes, sir,” I call as I text Cameron.

Me: Since this is true, maybe you’ll tell me what your little bet with Callie is?

Cameron: As I’ve said the last six hundred times you’ve asked, nope.

Me: Fine, I’ll ask again at dinner.

Cameron: Oh, how I can’t wait to say no once more.

I chuckle deeply as I put my phone down, ready to get her alone. It’s the first time neither of us has anything going on, and we’re going out. Just us.

On our first date.

I’m so excited, it’s sickening.

I grin to myself as I slip my feet into my slides and head toward the office, even though my legs are jelly. I turn the corner, and right before I enter, I notice that Dawson is sitting in front of his dad’s desk. Ahfuckme, what’s he doing here? I push the door open and poke my head in. “You needed me, Coach?”

Coach Sinclair nods. “You know I do. I called for you.”

“I was being polite.”

He doesn’t even look at me. “Being polite would be your ass in the seat, Jeannot.”

Yay. I go in and notice that Dawson isn’t snickering. Oh, he’s in deep shit too. That’s awesome. I sit down beside him and lean on my legs. “Sorry, I hadn’t hit the showers yet.”

“Can’t when your nose is pressed to your phone twenty-four seven.”

“Aw, come on, Coach. You know how it is when you’ve got yourself a new hot girlfriend who keeps texting you.”

His eyes cut to mine. “My hot girl didn’t want anything to do with me, beat my ass on the ice over and over again, so I married her.”

“As one does,” I admit with a grin. “Mrs. Sinclair is a lucky lady.”

Around a cough, Dawson murmurs, “Kiss-ass.”

I chuckle at that as Coach looks between us. “Listen, I’m gonna be straight with ya, okay?”

I nod slowly while trying to figure out what the hell I did. I’ve been on my best behavior, I think. “Did you need more Cheerios?”

But then I do shit like that, and I wonder why I’m in my coach’s office.

His blazing green gaze cuts to mine, and I give him a wide smile. “Just asking. I care greatly about your health.”

“Anyway,” he says sharply. “I want to move Dawson to your line since ReVerti is out for the year.”

That was a lot of information in one sentence, and while Dawson coming to my line makes me want to puke, I am focused on the latter part of that statement.

I blink. “Sorry, what about ReVerti?”

He looks up at me. “ReVerti is out.”

I literally was just on the ice with him, and he was fine. “What happened?”

“Drugs,” is all he says, as if that’s a good enough answer for me.

“Taking or selling?”

“Both,” he says, holding my gaze. “And I hope that stays between us. Though, I’m sure it’ll get around. Maybe if you’d get off your phone and stop texting your girlfriend, you’d be more aware of what’s going on.”

I would flash a smirk at the mention of Cameron, but I’m kinda floored about ReVerti... And shit, Dawson is coming up

to my line. I guess he's been working to get his ice time up and he's an okay shot, but I can't stand the little dickhead. I run my hands down my face, inwardly groaning as I ask, "And we have to move Sinclair up?"

Through my fingers, I can see Coach fighting back a grin. "Yup, and he's your responsibility."

"Ew, why?" I ask, dropping my hands. "We don't like each other."

"Sure the hell don't," Dawson adds, much to Coach's dismay.

"More of a reason to mentor him, shape him into a player who can replace you."

I grin at that. "Sir, I'm not replaceable."

Coach's blank look almost makes me laugh. "I want him ready to be moved up without fail by next game. You've got five days."

I sling a thumb toward Dawson. "Five days to get him as good as me? I'll need years, sir."

"I said to play on your line. He has the skill. You two just need to find the chemistry, knowing where the other is, and trusting each other."

"I mean this with all the respect, sir, but I don't like him," I say, and Dawson scoffs. "And I don't trust him."

"Feeling is mutual."

"He was mad my girlfriend chose me."

"I was not," Dawson snaps. "I was annoyed you locked her down."

"See? I can't work with a jealous, bumbling buffoon."

Dawson scoffs. "And I can't work with a know-it-all kiss-ass who thinks everyone should bow down to him."

I grin over at him. "Get on your knees where you belong."

"Okay, that's enough!" Coach yells, and we snap our lips shut. "You are teammates. Surely there is something you can

find that you both like. Other than hockey.”

“He thinks my girl is hot.” I cut Dawson a look. “He’s not wrong, but she’s mine, so he can’t bond with me over her.”

Coach blinks. “Get your asses out of my office.”

I laugh at that, but bonding with Dawson isn’t anything to joke about. How in the hell am I supposed to get this kid ready when I can’t stand him? “Come on, Dawson, let’s go check the creek for our chemistry.”

When Coach cackles, my grin grows. “I told Bay people would tease him about that damn show. She didn’t care. She loved the name.”

“Yeah, thanks for fighting for me, Dad,” Dawson mutters as he follows me out of the office. Once in the hall, he falls into step with me. “So, what are we doing?”

I look over at him. “We’ll practice. Together. Go gear up.”

“Now? We just got done,” he says, and I swear the color is draining from his face.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Do you not like to work?” He mumbles something, and I watch as he walks in front of me. To his back, I say, “Don’t worry, we can cuddle and watch your namesake if you like.”

Over his shoulder, Dawson snarks, “Will Cameron be sandwiched between us?”

I have half a mind to check the kid into the wall, but I don’t. Somehow. When we enter the locker room, it’s buzzing with word of ReVerti. Apparently, he was hopped up on Molly at practice and was selling that, along with a date rape drug. Fucking awesome. Bastard. When I get to my phone, there is a message from Cameron.

Cameron: Aced my money marketing exam.

Cameron: Thanks for your notes.

Camron: I can’t wait to see you.

Cameron: Am I meeting you at the rink, or are you picking me up?

My heart swells when the last text is a bunch of hearts, kissing emojis, gymnasts doing cartwheels, and hockey sticks.

Me: That's my girl. I'm so proud of you. I am stoked and ready to get you in my arms after 148 hours of missing the feel of your lips. I've got another hour here, but I can grab you after. I've got my clothes here, so I can come straight to you.

Cameron: Did you Google how many hours it was?

Me: I did.

Cameron: I just Googled to make sure you were right.

Me: 'Cause you're a pain in my ass. You couldn't just be like, Wow, how romantic.

Cameron: No, 'cause I wanted to know if you were right.

I laugh as I reach for my jersey.

Cameron: I thought you were done like twenty minutes ago?

Me: I gotta hit the ice with one of my teammates who is being moved up to my line. I can't let him make me suck.

Cameron: I don't feel it's possible for you to suck.

Cameron: Okay, did you want me to come there?

Cameron: I'm bored. And maybe I can sneak a kiss real fast.

My eyes drift shut as I exhale heavily. I'm about to blow off Dawson and go get my girl.

Me: Wait like forty minutes. I don't want you waiting and being cold.

Cameron: Okay, see you soon!

Me: Not soon enough.

And that's the damn truth, but it's all good. I'll deal with Dawson, and then I'll get my hands on my girl.

My reward to myself for a job well done.

Because I will do a good job, no matter how much I want to send Dawson down the fucking creek.

CHAPTER

Thirty-One

CAMERON

Benson may have been worried I would be cold in the rink, but his jersey keeps me warm pretty well. I pull my hat down lower on my head as I walk into the rink that I heard sounds of skates coming from. Instantly, my gaze falls on Benson. I don't know why I'm always so surprised by how massive he is on his skates. Maybe it's because I'm so much shorter than he is, or maybe because he moves as if he isn't a towering 6'6" of muscle. I don't know, but damn if I don't love watching him play.

He floats across the ice, and I notice that his teammate mirrors his strides on the other side. They move around the goal and head back down, skating hard together, stride for stride. It's mesmerizing to watch, and when they come to a stop, Benson isn't even winded. But the other guy, he lies on the ice, sucking in deep breaths, and looking extremely pathetic.

"Please tell me we're done," he begs, but Benson pays him no mind, coming to where I'm standing by one of the doors as he throws up his cage. He hits his glove on the release lever and pushes the door open. His eyes are bright, his smile wide as he takes off his glove before reaching for his sweater on my body and pulling me to him. Our lips meet, and I melt into him the moment my hands touch his burning chest. He smells to high heaven, but I couldn't care even a bit. I have missed these lips.

As he pulls back, I notice his hair is curled against his forehead, drenched in sweat, and I love how red his nose is. He's so cute. He slaps his helmet down and winks. "Hey."

"Hey," I practically purr as he reaches for the door.

"I'm not gonna lie, Cam. I want more of that mouth."

I grin. "Then hurry up."

"Don't gotta tell me twice. Sinclair! Get the hell up! I got a hot date to get to!"

I laugh as the door shuts, and he flashes me a wide grin. God, that grin causes the most delectable shivers to run down my back. I can't even blame it on the cold. Nope, it's all him. Benson skates to where Sinclair is lying, circling him and yelling at him to get up. I lean on the door and watch as they run drills. Benson is commanding and lethal, and while Sinclair may act like he hates every second of what Benson is doing to him, I can see the awe in his eyes. Hell, I probably match him.

Because I sure as hell am in awe of him.

I guess kissing him was like flipping a switch for me. It turned on, and now I can't get enough. Unlike when we started this, when I would think about him or wanted to tell him something, I'd refrained from contacting him. Now, though, I text him just for the fluttery feeling I get when his text bubble comes up. It's silly, I know, but I regret how I handled this. How I tore myself down and didn't allow myself to do what I wanted.

Enjoy him.

'Cause good lord, there are a lot of things to enjoy about Benson Jeannot.

This last week without him has been hell. Our schedules never lined up to see each other, but that didn't drag me down as much as I thought it would. We were always in contact, and we even watched TV together over FaceTime when I was heading back from a meet in Florida. It was his idea. He even Cash Apped me money for a snack at the gas station since he

refuses for me to use my own money. It was sweet. Cute. God, I'm falling for him. Just like I knew I would.

I watch as he tortures Sinclair, and I don't miss how much Benson enjoys doing that. Hell, I'm enjoying it too. Benson is so much fun to watch. Not only when he's doing his own thing, but when he's mentoring. The thing for me is that he doesn't just demand things from Sinclair; he does them with him. He goes just as hard as he asks Sinclair to, and I admire that. It inspires me to be better when I'm coaching the younger girls on my team. I work hard, but I sure do let them carry a lot of mats so I don't have to. I should be doing the same. I should be setting the example like Benson does.

Benson leans on the goal, and he is jerking his glove toward the spot in front as Sinclair listens intently, his eyes never leaving Benson's. A small grin pulls at my lips, loving how authoritative Benson is. He demands greatness. It's fucking hot. I lick my lips as I watch him, totally turned on, but like a bucket of cold water, the thought of wearing that stupid dress puts me back in my place. Though, as I watch him skate toward me, I wonder if it wouldn't be worth wearing that damn dress just to be taken by Benson.

I know for a fact that his head looks great smushed between my thighs.

That core memory leaves me breathless as I watch him rub his gloved hand all over Dawson's face, much to the other guy's dismay. Dawson hits him in the shin with his stick, but Benson just laughs as he heads toward me, that striking smile making his eyes shine ever so beautifully. When he comes to the door, I lean into it and he leans against it as we stare at each other. My breath warms the glass, and laughing, I write, "Hi."

His eyes dance with mine as he blows his own breath on the cool surface, before drawing a heart and then pointing to me. I pull out my phone and take a photo as he grins at me. When he opens the door, he suggests, "Post that."

I shake my head. "No, that's for me and me only."

The grin that takes over his face is so breathtaking. I take his stick since he's trying to move his gloves into the crook of his arm, but the stick is in the way. He smiles a thanks before slamming the door shut. He puts his arm around my shoulder, kissing my temple, which is a feat with how much bigger than me he is. He's a full foot and a half taller than me on skates, I'm sure. But I don't care. I love looking up at him when he's all sweaty and sexy. With a wink, he says, "I can send you some more photos of me, only for you."

I snort. "I'm all set. If I want the goods, I'm sure you'd show me."

He pauses mid-stride, and I look up at him, confused. "Listen, I need a little warning if you want that now. I gotta untie, unhook, and pull everything off to give you the goods, Cam."

I try not to laugh, I try to be offended, but I can't. I snort as I laugh loudly at his stricken look. "Stand down, Benson. I don't need it now."

He takes me back into his arms, and his heat is welcome. "Okay, good. I can take some while I shower. They can be in exchange for you telling me what the bet is," he tries, and I laugh.

"Not happening."

"But I've got really good photos," he insists, but I'm already shaking my head. "I've got a great shot of me with my stick." I smack him in the arm, and our laughter mingles as he holds me tighter. "What? I was talking about my hockey stick, you dirty girl, you!"

My stomach hurts from laughing as I stop in front of the tunnel that leads to the locker room. He takes his stick back, and then I grab hold of him by his chest guard under his jersey and pull him down to me. "Hurry up. I'm ready to be wined and dined."

He kisses my nose. "And then sixty-nined?"

I press my lips together as the heat fills my cheeks. "Who's dirty now?"

Benson presses his lips to the side of my mouth, and without moving, he whispers, “Ahhbaby, all my thoughts of you have been nothing but the dirty kind.” He kisses me, and I lean in, wanting it so badly, I can’t even begin to understand my desires. And for a split second, I think I may be able to work that Miss Muffet dress. When he pulls back, way too quickly in my opinion, he kisses my nose. “I’ll be right out. Wait for me.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

As soon as the words leave my lips, I have to wonder if the promise in my words was only for right now—or for the long haul.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Two

CAMERON

I don't think Benson liked that I took off his jersey once we got in his car.

He didn't have to say a word for me to notice his disappointment. He wears it in his tense jaw and how his hand swallows mine. Almost as if he needs to touch me since I'm not wearing his number.

His behavior is a huge turn-on.

Slow your roll before you're the Miss Muffet of the bride.

In my defense, though, it's uncommonly warm in the middle of winter, and I started sweating as soon as we left the rink. But that's Tennessee for you. One day, you're freezing your titties off, and the next, you've got intense boob sweat. It's crazy and reminds me a lot of myself. I never know how I want to feel either. I also think the weather here is another reason I want to leave. Maybe go somewhere that actually has real seasons, unlike this bipolar state.

I move my thumb along his as our hands rest in his lap. He sits casually, holding the wheel with one hand and his other firmly holding mine. He's wearing a Bullies Hockey sweatshirt and some black athletic pants with his trusty teal Crocs. We actually match; I'm wearing my Bullies gymnastics hoodie with black leggings, but instead of Crocs, I have on my Bullies slides. I can't get on the Croc train like he is. I think my feet are big enough without extra plastic.

I watch his profile, loving how he's let his beard grow a little longer, giving him that devastatingly rugged look I enjoy so much. He has a Bullies cap on, hiding his wet hair, and I watch as he chews on his bottom lip. He looks almost nervous.

“What’s wrong?”

He glances over at me for a split second before looking back at the road. “Nothing, why?”

“You’re chewing your lip.”

His lips quirk at the side. “I guess I’m nervous.”

“Really?” I laugh.

“Yeah. It’s our first real date.” His voice is small, which is mind-blowing to me since he isn’t small. And yes, no amount of time could ever make me forget that nothing on this man is small. “I want to impress you.”

I lean over, pressing my chin into his shoulder. “Just being with you is more than impressive.”

He leans his head into mine, and my eyes drift shut as I inhale his fresh cologne, lost in how scrumptious he smells. Without thinking, I run my tongue along his jaw, and he tenses under the sweep of my tongue. What am I doing? I press my lips together as he inhales deeply. “Cam.”

My face burns. “Yes?”

“Did you just lick me?”

I want to laugh. I want to snort loudly, but I hold it in. “I think I did.”

“You did,” he tells me as he stops at a light. He looks over at me, his lips curving. “Want to share why?”

“Cause you smell, look, and taste scrumptious,” I admit, and he shows me the widest smile. “Is that weird?”

He shakes his head, taking his hand off the wheel and cupping my jaw. “No, my beauty, not weird at all. You can lick me anywhere you like.”

He leans in, pressing his lips to mine in what I'm sure was supposed to be a sweet kiss, but it gets hot in seconds. I run my tongue along his bottom lip, and he opens his mouth for me without hesitation. Our tongues move together, his dominating mine as desire throbs between my legs. God, I want him. When someone honks behind us, he pulls back, laughing while I fill my lungs with air. He drives off, and I sit back in my seat, my hand still in his.

“Where are we going?” I ask, trying to get it out of my mind that I want to climb into his lap and lick him all over.

“I was going to take you out to dinner, but then I decided I didn't want to share you with anyone.”

My lips quirk. “So, we're going to be alone?”

“Totally alone,” he says as he turns into a local pizza spot and pulls up to the window. As he rolls down his window, he looks over at me. “Still like jalapeños and ham?”

He remembers my pizza order? Miss Muffet be damned, I'm swooning for this dude. “Yeah, with a Cherry—”

“Coke, I know,” he finishes for me, grinning before ordering just that and a large cheese bread too. “Did you want a salad?”

I shake my head. “No. Maybe some wings?”

“Ah yeah, right?” he agrees, ordering that too, and I love how his Canadian accent comes out when he gets excited. They say it'll be about twenty minutes and have us park in a waiting spot. Once he puts the car in park, he looks over at me just as I look at him. He reaches out, cupping my jaw. “You're so beautiful, Cam.”

My heart skips as my lips curve. I lean toward him, and he meets me halfway, his thumb stroking my jaw. His eyes burn into mine, and I watch as he uses one of his hands to turn his ball cap backward. I don't know what it is about this man moving the bill of his hat to the back, but I'm left squeezing my thighs with desire for him. But before I can admire how gorgeous he looks, his curls falling out of the gap in the opening of the cap, our lips meet. Just as before, the kiss

escalates quickly, our tongues tangling together as I grab hold of his sweatshirt, holding myself as close as I can get to him without ending up in his lap. His lips are so soft but demanding as he inhales me.

That's the only way I can describe it; it feels like I'm being consumed by him.

And there is no stopping him.

Even if I wanted to.

Not that I do.

When we break for breath, our noses slide together as we try to breathe. I open my eyes to find his darker than ever, his eyes hooded as he continues to stroke my jaw with his thumb. "I don't want to stop kissing you."

I inhale deeply. "Then don't."

My lips curve before he takes them once more, and there is nothing sweet about this kiss. No, it's all tongues and teeth. My fingers curl tightly in his sweatshirt as he drags one of his hands down my neck, over my shoulders, and to my ribs. His grip on me is hard, possessive, and the sensation has me dizzy. He drags his teeth along my bottom lip, and I moan loudly, at which his hand tightens on my ribs. He moves his mouth down my jaw, giving me slow kisses and small bites before he buries his face in my neck.

My eyes drift shut as my hand goes up into his hair, knocking his cap off. My breath comes out in spurts as he drags his tongue along my neck, running his nose along my earlobe before he takes a deep breath. "Ahfuck, Cam," he murmurs against my burning skin. "I've missed every single inch of you."

I arch my back, my chest pressing into his just as his teeth capture my lobe, biting softly and drawing a loud moan from my lips. My whole body is shaking with want. I haven't been touched like this in years, and I knew I was in trouble the moment he set his eyes on me. Because Benson knows exactly how I love to be touched. "Keep up with those noises, Cam,

and I'm going to pull you into my lap and really have you screaming."

"I don't see any issue with that," I murmur, stretching my neck for him as he drags his tongue along my chin.

He nips at my chin before taking my lips once more. I lean into the kiss, needing everything he is giving me. God, he tastes so amazing. He feels so strong under my hands. Fuck, he makes me feel so fucking good. I want more. I slide my hand down his shirt and then under the fabric, finding his abs taut and hot. I gasp against his mouth, and with the opportunity, he slides his tongue along the roof of my mouth. I move my hand down over the waistband of his pants and find him thick and long. So hard.

His breath catches against my lips, and I can't help but smile. "Mmm. I love how you feel," I murmur against his mouth, licking his top lip. "Can I touch you?"

He chuckles against my lips, but it sounds more like he's choking. "My beauty, you don't have to ask."

Our eyes meet, and I pause. I want him badly, so fucking badly, but I don't want to fall into what we were. Just sex. He brings his hand up, cupping my face. His eyes search mine. "I lost you to your brain," he teases, kissing me again. "Tell me what you're thinking. Let me in, eh?"

My heart trips in my chest. This man knows me, all of me, and he brings such calmness to my soul. "I don't want to get hurt, and I sure as hell don't want to hurt you."

"That's not gonna happen."

"I also don't want to fall back into just the physical, ya know?"

He nods. "This is more than sex, Cam. It was before, and it is now. The huge difference now is we both know that, and we're communicating. Just as long as we keep talking, we've got this."

I swallow thickly. "And what happens when we graduate?"

His eyes don't leave mine. I feel as if I can see his soul, and it's glowing. Just for me. Peace falls over me, and honestly, even though I asked, I don't care what will happen as long as we're together. I may be jumping to conclusions, but his eyes make me believe he's on the same wavelength as me. Feeling exactly what I'm thinking. "I should go top five, and my agent thinks I'll end up in Chicago."

Chicago. They have seasons, really good food, and great gymnastics. I could coach while I work. Hm. *Whoa. Jesus. Okay. Relax, Cameron.*

"Chicago is nice."

He shrugs, his hand still holding me tightly. "It's not Nashville, but Elli said she's gonna try to get me back once my contract is up."

"So, you want to come back to Nashville?"

"I want to play for the Assassins. My family is here." He moves his other hand into mine, bringing it to his lips and away from his throbbing cock. He kisses my wrist. "What are your plans after graduation?"

He brushes his lips along my knuckles, distracting me as I try to hold his gaze. "I just wanted to leave Nashville."

He kisses my knuckles. "I'd love for you to come with me."

While I fully expected him to say that, the words hit me square in the chest. Our eyes stay locked in a heated embrace as my heart slams into my ribs. I know he feels it, but it doesn't scare him or even make him want to remove his hand. He holds me, the truth clear in his eyes.

But before either of us can say another thing, a knock comes to the window. Benson doesn't move for a few seconds before he kisses my knuckles, and then he lets me go to get our food. I'm breathless as I tuck my hands between my thighs and sit there, awestruck. He's right. We know this is different—hell, it was different back then—but things just couldn't work. It wasn't either of our faults. It just happened. But this is our second chance.

A chance I've been waiting for.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Three

BENSON

Well, I just threw my cards out there.

With her hand in mine, I drive toward Bells Bend Park, and my heart is knocking against my ribs as if it's trying to get out of my chest. As if it wants her to know the truth—that I'm all in for her. Without a response from her to my comment, though, I don't think I can tell her how I feel. How this life of mine is nothing if I don't have her many texts, her grins, and her kisses in it. How I want nothing more than to drop to my knees in front of her to worship her forever. How my love for her has never faltered. My heart is hers. But I can't say that.

Not when I don't know if her heart is mine.

Which completely contradicts what I said about us communicating.

It's frustrating because I'm a confident dude. But with her, fear is a real thing.

But then I'm reminded of what Dawson said, that she hasn't dated anyone in the last three years. "I heard something about you."

I feel her gaze on my profile. "Probably a lie, but please end my misery about the current gossip and tell me."

I grin. "I was told that you haven't dated anyone in three years."

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as she shifts in her seat. She can't go far with the pizza boxes in her lap, but I can tell she's uncomfortable. "I haven't."

"Why not?"

"Didn't want to."

"You mean to tell me no one has caught your eye at all? 'Cause I know for a fact that you catch the attention of everyone."

In my periphery, I see her lips curve. "Maybe so, but no one was worth my time."

My heart thumps at that. "You make time for me."

"Because you're worth it." My grin widens as I take the back way into the park, where I know no one ever goes. There is no light back here, but with the full moon, it's not as pitch black as it usually is. "But you've dated?"

I back my car into a spot. "I haven't dated seriously, but I've hooked up."

"You do have needs."

I snort at that, and I almost tell her that no one has ever made me come the way she can, but I hold that back. "Not sure you know this, but the girl I wanted wouldn't speak to me."

I catch her watching me as I throw the car into park. "She may have hit her head on the beam a time too many."

"Probably," I agree, and she laughs as I take the boxes from her. "Can you grab the blanket from the back?"

She nods as she grabs it, and I get out, walking around to open her door. She takes my hand, and I pull her out. I wait as she lays out the blanket and then sits down. I join her, setting the boxes and bags in front of us. Before I open the box, though, I take her by her knees and pull her into my lap. She laughs as her legs wrap around my waist and her ass settles hard on my thighs. Right where I want her.

"I told you I wanted you in my lap."

“This could make it hard to eat.”

I shake my head. “I’ve spent years not touching you, Cameron. And you, my beauty, are a busy girl. So, when we’re together, I’m not wasting a single second without my hands on you.”

Her cheeks fill with color, and I lean in, pressing my lips to her nose. Her eyes drift shut, and I hug her close to me. She wraps her arms around my neck and then takes my lips with hers. My eyes fall shut as I lean into the kiss, loving how thick her lips are, how soft and inviting they are. She opens her mouth for me, and I dive in, needing to deepen this kiss. Needing to devour her.

Her fingers bite into the back of my neck, and I tighten my arms around her as our kisses become more frantic. It’s as if we’re making up for all the time we didn’t kiss, and I’m not complaining one bit. She strokes her hands over my shoulders, sending shivers down my spine. Her fingers dance along the hem of my shirt, and when she pulls back, she lifts my shirt up and off. The cool air cuts into my skin, but I’m so hot for her, nothing can stop this now.

I reach for her shirt, and when I pull it up, I see she’s not wearing a bra. Hunger burns in my chest as I cup her small breasts, her gorgeous pink nipples hard and crying for me to taste them. I take one nipple between my teeth before I draw her whole breast in my mouth. She arches back, crying out, and everything inside me burns for this girl. I shift my mouth to her other breast, sucking it and tasting her heated skin under my tongue.

“Benny,” she gasps, threading her fingers into my hair as I swirl my tongue along her hard nipples. My name as a moan on her sweet lips has me harder than ever and throbbing so deeply for her. She digs her fingers into my shoulders, and I suck harder, loving how her body is singing for me. I drag my mouth between her breasts, kissing her between them before reaching underneath her arms and lifting her to her feet. She looks down at me, desire swirling in those brown depths as I cup the back of her knee, taking off her shoe while never looking away from her eyes. Her hair falls in her face, her lips

are swollen, her face flushed as she drags in deep breaths, letting them out in a rush. I grab her other ankle, pulling off her other shoe and setting it beside the one I already removed.

Her eyes dance with mine as I pull down her leggings, along with her panties, revealing her glistening pussy for me. I don't even have to touch her to know she's wet. I can see it, and fuck, I'm salivating for her. My hands shake as I take hold of her legs, bringing her to me and burying my face in between her sweet thighs. I suck in an inhale, making myself mad with her scent. She takes hold of my hair, crying out as I run my nose along her pussy, her desire covering my nose and causing my control to slip.

"Cam, ahmylove," I whisper against her lips as she arches into me, her fingers clutching my hair as her thighs quiver. "I want to rub my face in your wetness and hope it soaks into my pores, so I always have you deep within me."

"I'm yours," she whispers, arching into me. "Please."

"Oh, my beauty, you don't have to beg."

Without another word, I slide my tongue along her lips, savoring how fucking good she tastes. I curl my tongue between her lips, finding her clit, and I caress my tongue over the thick bundle of nerves. She jerks against me, her cries from her soul as I swirl the tip of my tongue along her clit. Her body starts to shake, her grip on my hair so fucking tight, I love it. I love the pain it causes, and I want more. Holding her hip in my hand to keep her from moving, I slide my other hand between her legs as I continue the assault on her pretty pussy. I slip one finger into her, and fuck, she's tight. Her cries are loud, my name falling from her lips in gasps as she arches into me, giving me all the access to her.

Just how I want her.

I slide another finger inside her, and she squeezes them tightly as she cries out, bowing back into my mouth. She's tight as fuck. I should go slow, take my time, but I have no control when it comes to her. I pump my fingers in and out of her quickly as I continue to swirl my tongue along her clit,

until she breaks against my mouth. Her cries are so loud, it
pleases me to know someone could hear her.

Hear her coming only for me.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Four

CAMERON

I should be embarrassed by how quickly Benson brought me to a quivering mess, but I'm not.

He knows exactly how to work me, how to bring me to the edge and push me right on over. It's mind-blowing, and I hate myself that I allowed us to be apart. Again, my brain is a fucking asshole because I need this man. I brace myself against his shoulders and watch as he slowly slides his fingers from within me and brings them to his mouth. Breathlessly, I watch as he sucks his fingers dry, his eyes burning into mine. His pupils are so wide, his eyes are almost black as he gazes up at me. "I love how you taste."

Pretty sure I just came again.

I draw in a deep breath as his eyes never leave mine while he pushes his pants down, his cock springing free. He's thick, hard, and his cock is dripping with need for me. There are many things I forget daily. My meds, my computer, phone, keys, hell, my ass if it weren't attached—but Benson's cock? I couldn't forget each ridge, the thickness, or especially how long he is, even if I demanded it.

His cock is seared into my brain, and you'd think with that monster of a cock, my brain would be nicer to me.

I drop to my knees, his legs between my thighs, as I take hold of him by the base. I run my wet pussy along his thighs, squeezing him before I drop down to run my tongue over the

head of his cock. I lick his desire for me as he hisses strangled breaths, making me wetter by the second. He threads his fingers into my hair, squeezing tightly as I take him to the back of my throat, needing desperately to taste him. He fills my mouth completely, to the point my eyes water as I draw his cock from my lips with a popping noise, my pussy clenching for him.

When I go to take him in again, he stops me, tilting my head back so our eyes meet. “As much as I want to fill your mouth, I need to be inside you.”

My pussy throbs for him as I sit back on his legs, and he grabs a condom out of his wallet from his discarded pants. I take the condom, opening it and sheathing him since I just want to touch him. I love the feel of his cock, how velvety it is, and how thick it feels in my hand. Once the condom is in place, he takes me by my waist, rolling us over away from the food, but into the cold grass. We both hiss out in surprise, but then he’s pushing into me, and gone is everything but his cock filling me. He stretches me to the point of tears, but I welcome the pain as tears leak down my cheeks, a hoarse cry leaving my lips.

“Am I hurting you?”

“Yes, but it’s okay. Please don’t stop,” I hiss out, my chest tight as I squeeze his hips with my thighs. “Please. God, please.”

It’s as if that’s all he needed, that confirmation, before he cradles my hips in his hands and tips them up so that he goes deeper. I wrap my fingers around his wrist at my hips as he thrusts into me so deep, I feel it in my chest. He slides out to the tip and then slams back into me, leaving me utterly lost in pleasure. He takes his time at first, savoring the feel of me as my name falls from his sweet lips.

“I’ve missed this,” I breathe out, my body shaking under his grip.

“I’ve missed you,” he gasps, his eyes closing as his jaw goes taut.

I can feel his cock throbbing and his hands shaking as he begins to move faster, each thrust so deep, so filling, such utter perfection. He holds me in place as he hammers into me, my thighs slapping against his, and I feel myself tightening up, ready for a release. He feels it too. Slowing down, he holds my hip with one hand and then slides his thumb to my clit, pressing into it and tilting my world off its axis. I brace myself on his biceps, crying out as his cock throbs inside me. He swirls his thumb in circles in time with each thrust, and soon, I am coming so hard, I'm screaming his name.

He follows seconds later, his body jerking into mine with a roar so guttural, I find myself in awe of him. His hips twitch as he holds me tightly, his orgasm rocking him to the core, just as mine did to me. I reach up, cupping his firm jaw as I take in his stunning face. His lips are pressed tightly together, almost white, and his eyes are squeezed shut.

He's spectacular.

I bring him down to me, our lips meeting as our hearts pound together. He rolls to the side of me and brings me in close as our lips continue to play with small, sweet kisses as our breathing slows. Benson strokes his hand over my jaw as he rubs his nose with mine, and my eyes drift shut as tremors run throughout my body.

"I missed you too," I whisper, and his lips pause at the side of my mouth. "I need you to know that."

"So, we aren't getting dressed?"

I open my eyes to meet his, and I feel like he wanted to say something else. I don't press, though. I only nod and say, "I can eat naked."

He grins. "Same." He kisses the side of my mouth, then my bottom lip before whispering, "Don't move. Let me clean up."

I nod, my body spent, as he pulls out of me and then away from me. The cold hits me within seconds, and I realize what I just did.

Secured my role as Miss Muffet in Callie's wedding.

But wait, Didn't she say I would fall into his bed? I haven't; I fell into the grass. And I sure as hell didn't sleep at all during any of this. So, really, I'm in the clear.

Who am I kidding? I don't even care anymore. I only care about how Benson makes me feel. Thankfully, he isn't gone long before he's gathering me in his arms and sitting me in his lap, before kissing my jaw. Our eyes meet, and I smile. "I lost the bet with Callie."

He laughs. "I knew it had to do with sleeping with me."

I laugh too. "I have to wear this awful frilly dress for her wedding now."

Benson just grins. "It's okay. I'll rip it off you afterward and make you forget that you ever wore it."

I giggle at that, hot all over for that outcome. "I hadn't considered that, but even before I told you, I didn't care that I lost."

"Why would you?" he asks, opening the pizza box. "We are incredible together. Hell, if it makes you feel better, I'll wear a matching dress."

I snicker as he hands me a piece of pizza, and then he takes my other hand. Our fingers thread together almost instantly, and it just feels so right. It's as if our hands are two very old puzzle pieces that, no matter the time or space, fit perfectly together. "I'd love to see you in a dress. You look great in a leo."

Benson's face breaks into a wide grin. "I'd wear it for you."

"Such a good, supportive boyfriend," I say with a wink, and he nods.

"You know good and well that I am."

"I do," I agree as I take a long drink of my Cherry Coke. "Though, I'm pretty sure the bet was for me falling into your bed, which I didn't."

"You can spin it any way you want, but I'm pretty sure Callie won."

I nod. “She did. Though, I think I’m the one who truly won.”

He licks his lip, leaning into me. “After that? Beauty, we both won.”

My laughter is breathless as I take a bite of my pizza. Around the bite, I say, “That reminds me, we have some B-roll footage to shoot this week.”

He nods. “Okay. Are you coming to my game?”

“Of course. We have a home meet this week.”

“I know. I’m going—much to your mother’s dismay, I’m sure.”

My stomach clenches. “I should probably introduce you to them.”

“That doesn’t sound confident at all.”

“It’s not,” I admit. “My mom will be a bitch.”

He shrugs. “Duly noted.”

I kiss his jaw. “My dad will be nice.”

He meets my gaze. “Beauty, I don’t give a shit about anyone but you.” Everything warms inside me. “Which reminds me, are you busy Sunday?”

I shake my head. “Not that I’m aware of.”

“Would you go to the Adlers’ with me for dinner? Apparently, Quinn is bringing Ava, and they’re announcing their engagement.”

I snort. “That’s gonna be a shitshow.”

“Oh yeah, I can’t wait.”

I laugh as I shake my head. “I’d love to come.”

He gives me a small smile. “Awesome.”

We share a heated look but refrain from attacking each other. At least, until we’re done with our food. As he takes my body to the edge of oblivion over and over again, I can’t ignore how much I crave this intimacy with him. The

normalcy of how easy it is between us hits me deep in my chest. I knew from the beginning that if I allowed myself to be with him the way I wanted, I'd fall for him. As I watch him bury his face between my thighs again, I know for a fact that's happening.

I just hope Benson is falling for me too.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Five

BENSON

I have spent more time with fucking Dawson than I have Cameron this week, and I am very unhappy about it. I'd rather be tangled in her limbs than deal with Dawson's fucking mouth. I swear he tries me, he pushes me, and I can't stand the idiot.

I gawk at him as he watches me with a disinterested look. "You have been passing a puck since you were born, right?"

Dawson shrugs. "That pass was on point."

"Whose point? The boards? On my stick, Sinclair, or I can't fucking score. Go by the damn net!" I holler, and while he's a pain, he does listen. He's improving, but it's like pulling teeth to get it out of him. It's as if he has a chip on his shoulder or something, which makes no damn sense to me. His parents are great and he's talented, so why he doesn't want this is beyond me. When he is lined up with me, I pass the puck, hard, and to his stick with ease. "You shouldn't have to look at me to pass. You know where I am, get it to me."

He does as I ask, and I nod in approval. We go back and forth for what seems like hours before he's begging for water. I roll my eyes as I go to the bench for my water bottle, and he comes up beside me. "You gotta trust me," I tell him after swallowing a mouthful of water. "Put the puck on my blade, I'll score. Believe me, I'll make sure you score too, but you have to trust me."

“It’s hard when I don’t like you.”

“You don’t have to like me, bruh. We’re teammates. This is for the team, not each other.” He swallows as he thinks that over while he takes his helmet off. I watch as he shakes out his hair, squirting his face with water, and something clicks for me. “I get the feeling you don’t want this.”

His gaze snaps to mine, water dripping down his nose. “What does that mean?”

“Exactly what I said. You’re a badass football player. If you don’t want to play hockey, you don’t have to.”

“My dad is the coach,” he admits, his voice a little softer than before. “And I do love hockey.”

“What are your plans after graduation?”

“I want to go into the draft. Not sure which one, though.”

“What do you love more?”

“I don’t know.”

I exhale heavily. “I need you to figure that out, because when I leave this team, there are no other underclassmen on the team who I trust to carry on the legacy that is the Bullies.” His eyes cut to mine. “You’re talented, and you could be a good leader. You’ve just got to know what you want.”

“And you always knew this was what you wanted?”

I nod. “Always. I love everything about this sport. I love how it makes me feel. I love the sounds. The feel of my stick in my hand. The sensation of scoring and having the crowd lose their fucking minds. I love this sport. Do you?”

I watch as he visibly mulls that over, and I get bored waiting. I tap the ice and then point to the net. “Go left circle, and I’ll pass you some one-timers.”

He only nods as he skates away, and I don’t think I’m gonna make it with this kid. I take another swig of my water, and I swear, I get this feeling I’m being watched. When I look over my shoulder, I find out why. Cameron is leaning on the bench by the door the scorekeeper uses to get out of the box

and onto solid ground. She waves, and I usher her forward. “Hey there,” I call to her as she comes through the door.

“Hey,” she says, walking toward me as I push up my cage so I can give her a kiss. She leans into the kiss, making it real hard to stop. Especially when she slides her hands up the back of my neck and into the sweaty spot where my hair is probably curling all kinds of ways. We’ve seen each other this week, but not as much as I want to. She wasn’t kidding when she said she was busy. The girl is always doing something. But now, I’m along for the ride. We’re in constant contact, just the way I like it. And I feel selfish, but I want more.

I want all of her.

I pull back, kissing her top lip and then her nose.

“I thought I was picking you up?”

“I got bored,” she says with a sigh. “I’ve been getting my work done quickly so I can make sure I have time to do things with you. And now, when you’re busy, I’m bored.”

I grin, kissing her nose again. “I’m almost done.”

“I see you haven’t killed him yet.”

“Barely,” I confess as I flash her a wink. I take in her high ponytail and the cute oversized, fuzzy white sweater dress with lace at the hem that comes to her knees, almost skimming the top of her high brown boots. She has a large brown scarf around her neck, but it’s the gloss on her lips that has my desire running rampant in my body. “You look real good, my beauty.”

Her lips curve. “And you’re sweaty as hell.”

I grin down at her as I start to back away from her. “You love it,” I accuse, and her face fills with a flush.

“I do, but more so when you’re naked,” she says with a flirty wink. My stomach clenches as I shake my head. I haven’t had this girl since our date, and not even the four times we went at it that night were enough to quench my need for her. I’d take her right now. I know she doesn’t have a bra on; I can see her hard nipples poking the fabric of her sweater.

“Behave, you.”

“What? I didn’t say anything naughty, did I?” Her eyes go hooded as she licks those sweet lips, being exactly what she claims she isn’t.

My naughty girl.

I exhale a shaky breath. “I can’t with you.”

She smirks. “Oh Benny, I know for a fact that isn’t true. You can with me, very efficiently.”

Before I can respond or even laugh, out of the corner of my eye, I see a puck coming full force toward us. Actually, for Cameron. I hear her scream just as I throw my blade up, stopping the puck in midair and turning my wrist to redirect it down to the ice. I whip my gaze to Cameron, my heart in my throat. “Are you okay?” I ask, out of breath, closing the distance between us.

She draws in a deep breath, blinking before meeting my gaze. “You saved my life.”

I chuckle softly. “Maybe not your life, but for sure your teeth or your nose.”

“How in the hell did you do that?” she asks, blinking rapidly as I hear the crunch of ice and Dawson coming up beside me.

“Oh my God, are you okay? I’m so sorry. I got the puck with the tip of my blade. I’m sorry.”

I wouldn’t have believed him if I hadn’t spent the last week with the kid. When he isn’t paying attention, he makes foolish mistakes. His eyes are wide, full of guilt, as he asks Cameron over and over again if she’s okay. Then he looks at me. “Dude, that was sick.”

I grin. “Yeah, but how about don’t do that ever again, or I’ll shove a puck down your throat?”

He nods quickly. “Yeah, my bad. I shouldn’t have been shooting anyway.”

He shouldn't have, but all that is enough to annoy me and decide we're done. "It's fine. Hit the showers. I'll meet you in the morning."

Dawson looks back at Cameron. "I'm really sorry."

"It's okay. Thankfully, I have a boyfriend with quick hands."

I lick my lips to keep from strutting like a llama with the biggest dick. Dawson nods, apologizing once more before heading into the tunnel, grabbing his water and extra sticks.

Once we're alone, I ask, "You sure you're okay?"

She nods. "I promise. Thank you for protecting me."

I don't know what to say to that because doesn't she realize it's my job to protect her? Not only her heart but her body? I hold her gaze, and then slowly, I look away. "It's as easy as breathing to protect you, my beauty."

Her lips curve before she takes me by my jersey, pulling me to her with ease. I throw my gloves down as her lips meet mine, and my stick rattles on the ice before I wrap my arms around her. I kiss her with every single ounce of myself, and I wish this board weren't between us as I dig my fingers into the small of her back. I lift her slightly off her feet, and the smile she rewards me with against my lips makes it real hard to breathe.

When we part, she traces my jaw, then my lips with her fingers. "So, I packed a bag."

I raise a brow. "Yeah?"

"Yes, but I forgot it."

A deep chuckle tickles my chest. "We can stop by and grab it."

"Good, because I thought I'd stay the night with you."

I lean in, kissing the side of her mouth. "I think you're the smartest girl I've ever met."

"Forgetful, though."

I kiss her again. “It’s okay. When you forget, I’ll remind you, or I’ll fix it. No worries.”

Her eyes dance with mine, and I know her ADHD fucks with her confidence. I now know it’s because of her mom, but for me, it’s not a big deal. Her lips curve against my lips, and I close my eyes in pure satisfaction.

Every perfection and every flaw...I love every single thing about this girl.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Six

BENSON

“Why couldn’t I go up with you?”

Cameron’s eyes cut to mine, accusation in her gaze. “Because you and I both know that instead of grabbing my bag off the bed, you would have knocked the bag away and laid me out on that bed.”

I shrug. “Facts.” She giggles as we head toward the Adlers’ house. “But in my defense, I did just set your bag in my room.”

We had to stop at my place so I could change into something better than Crocs. Elli isn’t a fan of my shoes, and I worry one of these days she may not feed me if I show up to family dinner in them. While I showered and dressed, Cameron worked on some posts for the B-roll footage we’ve been working on. “Because I knew better. If I had followed you into your room, we wouldn’t be heading to dinner.”

“Hundred percent facts,” I agree, and her laughter is contagious as she taps quickly on her phone. Which I dislike because her hand isn’t in mine. “Though, I think you didn’t want me in your room because I bet you haven’t put away your laundry from the first time I kissed you.”

Her cheeks flush, and I can’t help but laugh at how she tries to hide her smile. “I will not dignify that comment with a response, my fine sir.”

“Ah, but my lady, you can admit I’m right.”

“Never,” she proclaims as she continues to type quickly on her phone.

“What are you working on now?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not. I’m texting Coach. My vault has been trash all week, and I’m making sure the gym will be open tomorrow morning. Can you drop me off when you go in with Dawson?”

“Absolutely. What time?”

“I have a meeting at ten, so I’ll want to be there by seven to get some work in and shower before my meeting.”

“I’m not meeting Dawson until nine, so that’s totally fine.”

She waves me off quickly. “No, it’s fine. I’ll get an Uber.”

“The fuck you will,” I insist, meeting her surprised gaze. “My girl doesn’t take an Uber.”

“I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“I want to, Cam.”

Her eyes dance with mine as she exhales. “Thank you.” I give her a wink as I turn onto the Adlers’ road. As I pull up, Quinn is getting out of the car with Ava, and my gaze meets Cameron’s when she looks over at me. “Does Ava know that Quinn has a shrine to Emery?”

I nod. “She does. He told her willingly, because she hasn’t been to the house since I’ve lived there.”

She brings in her brows. “I think she’s blackmailing him.”

“For what? He’s loaded, and not just from his parents but his grandparents on his mother’s side. He’s a trust-fund kid. What in the hell can she be blackmailing him with?”

“I don’t know,” she admits, meeting my gaze after I park. “It’s just odd, don’t you think? I really don’t think he likes her. I’ve never seen him just sit there and not have something to say before.”

“You aren’t wrong.”

“Like, I remember one time... Shit, I forgot Emery’s sister’s name.”

I smile. “Stella.”

She claps her hands excitedly. “Stella!” I chuckle as she continues, “Stella was giving Emery shit over stealing her clothes, and she called Emery a bitch or something. And Quinn came unglued, telling Stella she couldn’t talk to Emery like that, and fuck it, he’d buy Emery all the clothes Stella has. It was intense and oh-so swoony.”

I furrow my brows. “You think Quinn is swoony?”

She smacks me playfully. “No! What he did was swoony. But he doesn’t talk around Ava. It’s almost like he lost himself when he took her on.”

We both look up as Quinn passes by, waving, while Ava walks beside him. They don’t hold hands, and he isn’t even touching her. “It’s fucking weird.”

“I’m telling you, I think she’s blackmailing him,” Cameron says, and I almost agree. But about what? Ava has nothing on him. Quinn isn’t the kind of guy that could be blackmailed. He’s smart, he’s rich, and he’s a damn good dude.

“I don’t know, but I agree it’s weird.”

“It is,” she confirms as I shut off the car and get out.

When I go around to let her out, she’s reapplying her lip gloss before taking my hand and allowing me to help her out. I bring her into my arms, wrapping her up tightly against me, my forehead dropping to hers. “Wanna know what’s not weird?”

“What?” she asks breathlessly as I slide my hands down her back, cupping her sweet ass in my palms with ease. I love when she’s in a dress.

She gasps against my lips as I say, “How badly I want you.”

Heat fills her light eyes. “Oh good. I thought I was being weird, craving you so damn badly that I want to say the hell with food and take you to the nearest quiet spot.”

I scoff. “Baby, I’d take you right here. I don’t need a quiet spot.”

“But then how could I fill the air in that spot by screaming your name?” Heat explodes inside me. She goes to her tippy-toes, nipping at my bottom lip. “I’d want you to hear me clearly.”

Seeing straight isn’t happening in this moment as I get lost in her eyes. “Listen, Cameron Dianne White.” And just how I wanted, her breath catches at her full name. “We could be in the middle of a crowded room as I suffocate myself between your sexy thighs, and no amount of noise could ever drown out how beautiful my name is off your sweet lips.”

She leans into me, her stomach pressing into my throbbing cock. “Mm, Benson,” she moans softly. My cock jerks in response in my pants. “Benson, mmm... Benny, kiss—”

She doesn’t even get the full sentence out before I’m pressing my lips to hers. I wrap an arm around her, lifting her up, and she wraps her legs around my waist. With one hand braced on the top of the car, I use my other to trace my fingertip along her bare skin, trailing my fingers along the inside of her thigh and then to the burning-hot wetness soaking the panties that cover what I want. “I could slide my fingers into you right now,” I whisper against her lips, licking her bottom one. “Fill you, stretch you, and get you ready for my cock.”

She arches into me, her eyes the darkest, most gorgeous chocolate brown I’ve ever seen. “Benny, you don’t have to do much. I’m always ready for your cock.”

Fuck me sideways. Now I’m gasping as I take her lips once more. I put my foot on the rocker panel for her ass to rest against my knee, and I slide her panties to the side. She hisses a breath against my lips, and with ease, I slip my thumb inside her wet center. Her sweet pussy clenches around me as her breathy moan fills my mouth. I groan roughly against her, wanting to drown my face in her. I grip the top of the car as I draw out my thumb and then slowly push it back in, her legs trembling against mine.

“What if someone is watching?” she hisses, her breath hot and erratic against mine.

“There is no one but you, Cam.” I lick along her bottom lip, totally lost in the desire in her eyes. “We should have made a detour to a bed,” I decide as I draw my thumb in and out of her with slow precision that has her shaking against me.

“Yup, I’ll agree with that.”

“I’m going to make you come right here,” I murmur against her lips. “I want you wet and throbbing for me all of dinner.”

“Oh God...” She moans against my mouth.

“Hey!” I freeze at the sound of Shea’s voice. “We live in a neighborhood of older people, and no one has enough Viagra to keep up with the show you two are giving everyone.”

Cameron’s hand slams against her mouth as she laughs, and I close my eyes, my face burning with color. I look over my shoulder. “Hey, Dad.”

“Hey there, son. Want to disentangle yourself from your girlfriend and come on in?”

Actually, no. But I nod. “I can. My bad.”

My chosen dad just grins. “Hey, I get it. Even with my bad hip, I’m always lifting Elli up everywhere.”

Cameron snorts loudly, and I groan at the image my dad just gave me of him with my mom. “Thanks for that visual.”

“No problem. Come on, I’m hungry.”

As he disappears into the house, I remove my thumb and lower my giggling forever girl to her feet. But that laughter falls silent when I bring my thumb into my mouth, sucking it dry of her need. Her eyes widen, her breath catching as she shakes her head. “You bewitch me, Benson Lars Jeannot.”

I nip at her bottom lip. “As you do me, my beauty.”

Our eyes lock as I cup her jaw, and the little sneaky grin on her face has me burning everywhere. “You think it’s funny to

get me hard as a steel pipe and then have me go inside for dinner with my family?”

She pats my chest, no remorse whatsoever on her flushed face. “Benson, you keep me wet. Welcome to my world. We have T-shirts, snacks, and even beer koozies.”

My laughter sputters out of me as she moves out from in front of me. I don't let her get far. I grab her wrist, my eyes burning into hers as I turn her to me. “No matter the perks, if that's supposed to be payback for how I make you feel, it's not.”

“I never intended for it to be payback. It's the truth.” She leans in, kissing my jaw. “And just so you know, I'm ready when you are.”

She starts to pull me with her, and I groan loudly as I follow. Her laughter runs down my spine, and while I love hearing her scream my name, her laughter is right up there on my list. I love my family, and I want to watch the shitshow that is Quinn and Ava, but even now, I'd rather be thumb-deep in Cameron.

My name on her lips.

Where it truly belongs.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Seven

CAMERON

As soon as I walk into the Adler household, the heat between my legs is extinguished with one look from Callie. In a beige dress that hugs her curves, she is leaning against the couch by the door, her phone to her ear. “Yes, I need to schedule a dress fitting for my maid of honor. Yes, Cameron White. No, we’re gonna switch it to my original pick. Yeah, I know she hated it, but she lost a bet.”

My eyes narrow, but Benson can’t control his laughter. I go to smack him, but he catches my wrist, pulling me into his arms and capturing my lips with ease. I can taste myself on his lips, and the taste has me completely forgetting that Callie is on the phone. His lips remind me that, no matter the number of bets I lose, I’m ultimately winning if he’s involved.

When we part, he winks at me before taking my hand in his, threading our fingers. “Come on. I gotta introduce you to the fam.”

“I know them,” I remind him, but his eyes are full of excitement.

“Yeah, as Cameron, Callie’s best friend. But not as Cameron, my girlfriend.”

My heart swells in my chest as he guides me into the kitchen. Quinn is leaning on the counter, trying to hold in his laughter. “Oh, you were able to detach from her to come inside?”

I giggle as Benson flips him the bird before Elli Adler turns to look at us. Her auburn hair is curled along her shoulders, her green eyes shining like emeralds. There are life lines around her eyes and mouth, but no matter her age, Elli Adler is a stunning masterpiece of grace and beauty. She wears an Assassins tee with some jeans, looking every bit like she belongs barefoot in a kitchen with grandbabies on her hips.

I know for a fact that, no matter the space—a kitchen or a boardroom or even a rink—Elli can command it. But right now, she is totally in love with her grandbabies. With one on each hip, she grins widely at us. On the left is Posey’s son, Zac, looking every bit like his daddy and so chunky! On her right is Shelli’s son, Fitz, and all I see is Aiden Brooks. Unlike Zac, he isn’t chunky with rolls, but I can tell he likes the breast milk. I can’t get over how damn cute these kids are.

“Mom, I’d like to introduce you to my girlfriend, Cameron,” Benson says, and Elli beams at me.

“Oh, what a blessing,” she gushes. “I always had hope you two would reconnect.”

My heart swells as Benson winks at me. “Thank you for having me.”

“Oh, my love, you’re always welcome!”

Her excitement and love are contagious and leave me so full of happiness. Benson lets me go to walk over to the boys, and my heart stops swelling, going still in my chest.

“Hey, Fitzzy and Zaccy,” Benson coos, tickling the boys. They squeal and giggle happily, and an ache forms in my chest. A deep one. It takes my breath away as he blows raspberries on their cheeks. He makes faces at them to make them smile, and they laugh so hard, the whole room joins in.

Benson would be a great dad.

With that thought, the room fades away as I go to war with myself. I took this from him. My choice to abort the pregnancy took away his chance to be a dad. He would have been a great dad; I knew that before I even saw him with the boys. Though,

he didn't want to have a child either. We weren't ready. But the evidence is right here. He loves kids.

How could he truly ever love me when I took that gift from him?

But he agreed. He supported me.

What if he did that because he's a good dude?

But he said it was the best choice.

I swallow past the lump that's forming in my throat as my stomach goes sour. I hear Benson say my name, but I'm lost in my thoughts until he squeezes my hand. I blink a few times, looking up at him as his eyes search mine. "I lost you, eh?" he says softly, and his eyes never leave mine. "What's wrong?"

I feel everyone's gazes on me, and I shake my head quickly, unable to put into words what is firing off like mad in my head. "Nothing. Just overwhelmed by how darn cute these two are!" I play off, but Benson knows I'm lying. I feel his eyes on me, but I ignore it, meeting Elli's gaze.

He wraps his arms around me, and Elli beams at me. "Cameron, it's so good to see you on my Benny's arm."

Benson wraps his arm tighter around my waist. "She looks pretty damn great here, eh?"

"Way better than legs wrapped around your waist in front of our neighbors," Shea throws from the doorway, and everyone laughs but me. "Pretty sure we'll be getting complaints."

They're all laughing, but I can't. I gotta reel in these feelings, these thoughts. I gotta get control. I gotta protect myself, because he can't love me. He can't. Why would he? I need to run. I gotta get out of here.

I frantically look for Callie, but then, out of nowhere, Benson's lips move against the shell of my ear. "Cameron."

Just my name.

"Breathe."

I draw in a deep breath, and he kisses the top of my ear. “Again.”

I do as he asks, before against my ear, he says, “Get out of your head.”

I turn my head, our cheeks meeting before I tip my head back to look up at him. His eyes are no longer filled with excitement but uneasiness. Our eyes lock, and my heart aches in my chest as his eyes search mine. “I’m sorr—”

“Nope,” he says roughly, shaking his head. “Don’t apologize. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I can’t. Not here,” I whisper, and I can see the struggle in his eyes.

He leans his lips against my ear once more. “Okay, I’ll try to be patient. But you have to promise me, when your brain starts ganging up on you and you start spiraling, you squeeze my hand three times.”

My brows knit. “Three times?”

“Yeah, it’s a calming technique,” he tells me, and I chance a glance around the kitchen. No one is watching us. They’re all talking and joking. Like they usually do. Well, except for Ava. She’s just sitting there like a bump on a log, looking bored and out of place. I almost want to focus on that drama to get out of my own, but that’s not fair. I can’t deflect; I can’t ignore what is going on inside me. Benson and I are doing adult things. Like communicating.

Benson threads his fingers with mine, and he squeezes my hand three times. My eyes slowly drift shut, and I lean into him, welcoming the warmth of his body, welcoming his support. His actions have my eyes clouding, but I hold in the tears. I won’t cry here, not in front of all these people, people who love him. They’ve always loved him, he’s always been theirs, but for me, everything has changed.

And it’s beyond overwhelming.

“Okay, dinner is ready!” Elli announces, and Benson places a kiss to my ear.

“I got you,” he whispers, his voice rough and full of emotion.

“I know,” I reply as he pulls back to look down at me. I do. I know that just as much as I know I can’t run from him. No matter how badly I feel I need to, I can’t. I’m his. He gives me a small smile, and I smile back with no hesitation.

Without much warning, Callie wraps her arm with mine and beams up at Benson. “I’m not sure if I should thank you for helping me win the bet, but I don’t think you appreciate losing.”

Benson winks. “Callie, you know good and well I never lose.”

Evan scoffs. “I used to beat him all the time at sock hockey.”

Quinn nods. “Yeah, he’s trash without a stick.”

Benson grins at his brothers. “Good thing I’m always carrying a stick, eh?”

My face flushes as Callie snickers beside me. Elli smacks him playfully as Shea laughs loudly, dancing in the kitchen with his grandsons as they hold on for dear life. I would too. That’s a long way to the floor if he dropped them. Not that I think he would. He’s Shea Adler. Walking hockey god and the best grandpa ever, according to the mug that sits on the counter.

“You okay?”

I look over to my best friend and lie. “I’m fine. Just tired.”

“Probably from all the bet-losing you’ve done.”

I snort. “Shut up, and stop gloating. It’s not cute.”

“Oh, I’m not gloating. I’m just excited to call you my Miss Muffet.”

“I dislike you greatly.”

“Eh, you’re still going to be my maid of honor, so it’s cool,” she says as we walk together into the massive dining room. The table is full of fried chicken, mashed potatoes,

green beans, gravy, mac and cheese, and biscuits that glisten with butter. I am a huge fan of Elli's cooking, but even the excitement of filling myself to the brim doesn't ease my fear or my thoughts. As I sit down, it's almost as if I can only hear white noise while I watch Aiden Brooks kiss his wife, Shelli, as she buckles their son into a high chair. Boon Hoenes sits with Zac in his lap while Posey puts a bib on him. Evan sits beside Callie, handing her a glass of lemonade before he gives her a chaste kiss on her temple. Quinn sits beside Ava, filling his plate, while she just looks around, visibly uncomfortable.

Shea pulls out Elli's seat at the head of the table before capturing her jaw in his hand. "Dinner looks incredible, sweetheart."

Her eyes are full of such all-consuming love as she brings his palm to her lips. "Thank you. Would you like me to make you a plate?"

"No, I'll make yours," he tells her, and my heart explodes in my chest.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Benson sit down, and then he sets a plate in front of me. All my favorites, which is one of everything plus two biscuits, sit on my plate. I look over at him in awe, my throat closing with emotion as he reaches for his fork. "Do you want a beer or lemonade?"

"Lemonade." He slides the cup to me, keeping the beer as I lean into him, my hand squeezing his thigh. "Thank you."

He kisses my temple with such ease, it makes my heart ache. "Of course. Eat, my love."

Breathless, I sit straighter and do just that. As I shovel food into my mouth, I try not to fall back into my thoughts, but it's hard when I feel one thing and my brain tells me something totally different. I have nineteen different scenarios going off in my head. Ranging from Benson's actions being real, to him doing it for show, to him doing it for the sex. It's so frustrating, and I wish I could know the truth.

I have to ask.

I have to communicate.

But fuck if that doesn't scare me to the core.
Because his rejection could ruin me.

Quinn Chapter Two

I feel sick to my stomach.

Sweat is dripping down my back, and every single nerve is firing off.

This doesn't feel right.

Being here with my family, Ava sitting beside me, not eating anything my mom has cooked, it just feels so wrong. As I inhale mashed potatoes, I can't help but think of Emery. How, if there is food, she's eating it with no cares about who is watching, who is judging, or even who is talking. That girl is eating, and I miss her. I miss her so much it hurts, and no matter how hard I try to act as if I care for Ava, I don't.

It doesn't work, but I made a promise.

"So, Quinn," Shelli says, and our eyes meet while I feel Ava tense up beside me. Just as anxious as I have been about his dinner, I know she is too—if not more anxious than I am. She told me she doesn't want to fight with me, she wants this to be easy, but how can it be easy when my heart belongs to someone else? "How long have y'all been together?"

I swallow my bite as I answer. "A couple months, but we've known each other since residency."

I watch as everyone nods, and Shelli asks, "Are you doing sports medicine too, Ava?"

Ava shakes her head. "No, I'm doing emergency medicine."

"Nice," Dad says, cutting me an impressed grin, but I can't return it. "That's long hours, though, isn't it?"

“Yes.”

Dad waits for more, but when he realizes she’s not going to say anything, Shelli asks, “Are you from here?”

“I am,” Ava answers, and once more, she doesn’t elaborate. I sigh deeply before shooting her a look. Her eyes narrow as she shrugs. “I’m truly sorry. I’m a bit shy.”

I’m glad no one is looking at Benson, Cameron, Callie, or Evan, because I’m pretty sure one of them is two seconds from telling my parents the opposite. I swallow hard as I look at my parents and explain that she grew up here, that her parents are songwriters, and that they are nice people. I don’t know why I am making myself explain when she should be doing that, but I just want this to go well. I want my family to accept this because I’m doing it. There is no way out. I promised myself to Ava for a year of marriage.

And I’m a man of my word.

I told Emery I would love her for the rest of my life, and even with years of silence, nothing has changed. We may have both become true adults, but my heart still yearns for hers. My hands shake to touch her, and my lips cry out for hers. I look over the table where Benson sits so close to Cameron, she may as well be in his lap. They share heated looks, small grins, and just look so fucking in love, I’m burning with jealousy. I want what he was given, a second chance with the love of my life.

Because like Benson has with Cameron, I would grab hold of Emery and not let go.

I’d fall for the person she is now because our souls match.

Because she’s mine and I am hers.

Fuck, love hurts. But with Emery, it’s the only thing I know.

Yet I’m marrying someone else.

I clear my throat and push back from the table. “Excuse me.”

I don’t have to spare a glance at Ava to know she’s not sparing one for me. She’s too busy on her phone.

As I walk around the table toward the bathroom, Mom takes hold of my hand. “You okay, my love?”

I lean in, kissing her cheek. “Yeah, Momma. I’m fine.”

She smiles up at me, patting my cheek. “You’re lying.”

I grin. “Maybe.”

A sad smile replaces her genuine one as she whispers, “Does she not eat?”

I shrug. “Not heavy food like this.”

She makes a face. “Heavy? I don’t think it’s heavy.”

Cameron looks over at us, biscuit on her lips. “If this is heavy, call me heavy. I’ll be completely okay with that.”

I watch as Ava looks at Cameron. “I prefer salads.”

Mom starts to stand, but I stop her. “I can make you a salad. Tear up some of this chicken and put it on top.”

Posey nods. “And then add mashed potatoes.”

“And mac,” Cameron supplies.

“And a lot of biscuits and gravy,” Callie adds, and all the women nod in agreement.

Well, everyone but Ava.

I squeeze Mom’s hand as Ava insists she’s fine, and I head to the bathroom. When I shut the door, I lean my forehead against it as I draw in a deep breath, filling my lungs to capacity. I let it out in a rush as I turn and slide down the door to sit on my ass. I pull my phone out of my pocket and go to Emery’s TikTok. I bring up my knees, leaning my forehead on my arm as I scroll through her videos. Not much has changed. She’s still gorgeous as ever. Thick in all the right ways, a round face, long, dark lashes, curly dark hair, and lips that I want to consume. She posts a lot of videos of her working with law enforcement and of her doing silly dances. Though her laughter is not audible, I don’t need it to remember how fucking great it sounded when she let it loose.

I click off her TikTok and go to her Instagram to look at all the photos she posts of her apartment, her job, and things she does in California. She has friends, lots of them, not that I'm surprised. She's moving on, she's living her life, just as I am, but my heart is in California. With her. I don't feel like I'm truly living, only going through the daily motions of what I'm supposed to do.

It leaves me exhausted.

When I see that she has a story up, which is unlike her, I click it. My stomach drops, for my heart is sitting in some guy's lap. The blond guy has his arm around my girl, his lips on her jaw as she laughs, looking every bit the vixen she is. She hasn't posted pictures of guys or even her with one, but I knew it was bound to happen. I close my eyes, letting my phone fall into my lap as I rub my eyes roughly. I lean back and exhale as I shake my head.

I always knew she'd move on. Emery is smart, brilliant, beautiful, and loves so damn hard, I can still feel it.

I just wish it were me holding her.

Kissing her jaw.

Loving her.

Instead, I'm marrying someone else.

Someone who isn't her.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Eight

BENSON

Just like I know there is something wrong with Cameron, I know Quinn isn't okay.

And it stresses me out to no end to know both my people aren't good, because I'm great. I'm sitting beside the most beautiful girl in the world, fully loved by everyone in this room—minus Ava—and I'm happy. For the first time in years, I can say I am truly happy. Yet knowing that Cameron is dealing with some delusions she's conjured up, while Quinn is marrying some chick he isn't even in love with, I feel guilty for being happy.

Cameron's hand sits in mine, and I squeeze it three times. I told her it was a calming technique, but I didn't tell the whole truth. I saw on TikTok that you squeeze your person's hand three times to silently tell them you love them. Three little words. Three little squeezes, just for her. My love. She looks over at me, and I smile as I reach up, wiping her lip free of biscuit. Her lips curve, and I'm thankful she has color back in her cheeks. She froze up on me, a stricken look on her face when we were in the kitchen, and I don't know why.

But I will.

"I'm gonna go check on Quinn," I tell her, and she nods as I start to get up.

"Why?" Ava asks before I am fully out of my chair.

I look over at her, and before I can even tell her to go kick rocks, Cameron says, “Because when you love someone, and they’ve been pooping for a while, you need to make sure they don’t need more toilet paper.”

Quinn’s laughter fills the room, and I lower back into my seat as I grin. “Thanks, Cam. But I had to make a call. No pooping. Yet.”

“Right?” Aiden agrees, leaning back and rubbing his belly. “Elli, I think I’m stuffed.”

Mom beams. “I know for a fact you have room for apple pie.”

I was full a second ago. Not now. “I have all the room.”

“Me too,” Cameron agrees, and when I look at her, she’s grinning. Her eyes are bright, leaving me breathless.

Before I can kiss that smile off her face, Quinn is reaching for his beer. “If I can have everyone’s attention.”

Oh shit. He’s doing this now?

Cameron glances at me just as I glance at her, before looking back at the train wreck that is Ava and Quinn. He clears his throat and leans on the back of Ava’s chair. “Mom, before you bring out that apple pie, I have an announcement.”

“You failed school?” Shelli asks.

“It’s all been a lie? You’re not a genius?” Posey suggests.

“You realized I’m the hotter brother?” I ask, and Evan snorts. “I mean, everyone knows it.”

“He’s always known that,” Evan says. “I think he’s finally going to do something about that wart on his ass.”

Everyone starts to laugh as Quinn rolls his eyes, laughing himself. Ava doesn’t seem to think anything we say is funny, which is annoying. We’re hilarious.

“I think if Owen were here, he would have decided you were announcing your retirement as the favorite kid,” Evan adds, and that has everyone laughing, even Quinn.

“I love you guys, truly,” Quinn says around his laughter, and I lean back in my chair, my gaze moving to Elli because she’s going to be the one to freak out. She loves Emery and loves the whole Brooks family. Hell, Aiden is Emery’s big brother, and he’s married to Shelli. This isn’t going to go over well, and I just pray it’s enough to get Quinn to come to his senses. “But—”

Before he can finish, though, Shea’s phone rings. He issues an apology, getting his phone out and then making a face before declining the call. “Sorry, it’s Dad. I’ll call him back. Continue.”

But before Quinn can, the phone rings again, and that’s not good. Alarm rings in my ears as dread fills my gut, and I cut my gaze back to Shea. Before he can decline it again, Elli stands up, fear taking over her features. “Answer that.”

All eyes are on Shea as he answers. “Hey, Dad—” When he cuts off, panic fills his face. I find myself unable to breathe as I watch his lips press to a thin line before he stands. He leaves the room, and Elli follows closely behind him. When we hear the door shut, everyone is looking around at one another. Usually, we’d joke and try to figure out what the parents are talking about, but this doesn’t seem like a laughing matter. Something is truly wrong.

When Shelli clears her throat, we all look at her. “What’s your announcement, Quinny?”

“I wanted to wait for Mom—”

“Distract us, please,” Posey says, her eyes cutting to the hall and then back to him. “You can tell them later.”

Quinn’s eyes dart to mine, and I shrug. “Up to you.”

“Well, if he knows, I want to know,” Shelli demands, and Posey looks over at their baby brother.

“Exactly. Spill the beans,” she insists, and Quinn looks to his sisters since we all know on this side of the table.

Without confirming with Ava, he clears his throat. “Um, so, ugh, Ava and I are engaged.”

“No, you’re not,” Shelli laughs. Beside her, Posey spurts with laughter, but neither Boon nor Aiden is laughing. “I don’t even think you like her.”

Yeah, Shelli doesn’t have a filter. Beside me, Cameron snickers and Callie nods.

Between her chuckles, Posey adds, “And she’s not Emery.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious,” Quinn says somberly.

“I don’t know why you all are laughing. We’re engaged,” Ava snaps, and I press my lips together, looking down on my plate. She’s about to find out quickly who Posey and Shelli Adler are. They can change their last names, but they can’t change that fiery Adler blood.

“Excuse me?” Posey exclaims, and Shelli whips her head in Ava’s direction.

“They laugh because we’ve seen him with Emery,” Callie says, much to my surprise. “When you see a person so in love with someone move on to a girl he doesn’t even want to touch, it’s hard for us to believe.”

“I mean, look at his parents,” Cameron says, lifting her hand toward the hall. “That is what true love is. I don’t know what y’all got going on, but if I find out you’re blackmailing him, no threat in this world will live up to what I’ll do to you.”

Callie crosses her arms over her chest. “Yup.”

Posey nods. “Hell yeah.”

“I’ll strap my baby, the one who’s asleep in the other room and whom you don’t know about because you don’t know anything about us, to my chest and bring snacks to support my girls,” Shelli adds, and the silence that falls over the table is so tense, I feel like breathing isn’t an option.

“Don’t you ever utter that sentence to Mom,” Posey threatens, her gaze locking on the baby of the family. “Not until you get your shit together, kid. This isn’t funny.”

“If you’re trying to get over Emery, bruh, this isn’t how,” Aiden offers. “I love my sister, but she wouldn’t want this.”

“It’s not about Emery,” Quinn tries, but that’s hard for any of us to believe.

“He doesn’t even love her anymore,” Ava adds. “He loves me.”

I know I’m an asshole for laughing, but I can’t help it.

Quinn cuts a death look my way, and I snap my mouth shut. Before I can utter an actual apology or even a roundabout one, Elli comes into the room without Shea. I don’t have to look hard to see the tears flowing down her cheeks, and my stomach drops. No, this can’t be happening.

Instantly, I stand, as does Evan, while Elli clears her throat. “Grandma had a stroke, and it’s not good.”

As questions are fired at Elli, I stay with my hand in Cameron’s, wishing like hell that all the questions were directed at Quinn about his upcoming nuptials. Not about the health of the grandma I never knew I needed. I swallow thickly just as Cameron’s hand squeezes mine three times. I look over at her, and I have to remind myself she doesn’t know the truth of that motion, but I can’t help the way my heart swells.

Without hesitation, I whisper, “I got you.”

She shakes her head with a soft smile. “No, I got you.”

I’ve been told that many times, by family, friends, and teammates, and I’ve always questioned if they meant it.

But hearing those words from my forever?

I don’t question a thing.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Nine

CAMERON

I can tell that no one wanted to leave when Elli asked for everyone to do just that. They all wanted to stay, support their parents—hell, I wanted to do the same—but Elli and Shea needed to pack to head to Boston to be with Shea’s parents. I think everyone was so worried that they all forgot about Ava and Quinn. I feel as if even Quinn didn’t care anymore; he only cared about his grandma. He had offered to fly with them, but Elli said they needed to go first to see what was truly going on. The fear in the house was palpable as I helped with the dishes, but no one spoke as we made sure the house was clean for Elli and Shea. I wanted to do more, but Elli ushered us out with a promise to call as soon as she knew something. Before today, I had only met Shea’s parents once, at Owen’s wedding, and they were so kind, so loving. Grandma Adler seemed to be in great health, and I’m floored by the fact she had a stroke.

Though, I’m more floored by the fact that my brain actually shut off so I could focus on Benson.

I hold his hand as we head back to his apartment. He hasn’t said anything, and I don’t know what to say to make it better. All I know is that my brain can go fuck itself because I’m not letting it deter me from being there for him. It’s apparent how much he cares, how much he loves them, and I wish I could take away the fear and pain in his heart, to relieve him of those emotions.

I've always been a firm believer that blood isn't thicker than water. The one person I trust more than my mother is Callie, and I know Benson feels the same for the Adlers. Hell, I'm surprised he hasn't asked for them to adopt him and then take their name. That's how apparent it is that he is theirs. As a son and a sibling, Benson is an Adler. He fits in, and just like the rest of the family, he is beside himself with worry.

I run my thumb along his knuckles as I study his profile. His jaw is so tense, and I can tell he's thinking a million different things. Unable to handle it, I say, "I'm sure she'll be okay."

He nods slowly. "She has to be. This world is better with her in it."

"Absolutely."

"Have you met them?"

"I did, at Owen's wedding."

"That's right," he says before clearing his throat. "You were there, hiding in the back."

My lips quirk at the side. "Not hiding, just keeping a low profile."

"Nope. Hiding from me."

He might be right, and what he doesn't know is that I actually left before the first course was served. Mostly because seeing him still wrecked me. Not that he doesn't wreck me now, but in a good way. I bring his knuckles to my lips. "Are you okay?"

He shakes his head. "Nope. Scared out of my mind."

My heart aches as I kiss his knuckles again. "Anything I can do?"

"Being with me is all I need, Cam."

I smile against his knuckles, but I know it doesn't reach my eyes. We ride in silence, and when we pull up to his apartment, he gets out without a word. I wait, as I know he would want me to, and he comes around to open my door. He

holds out his hand and I take it, before he pulls me into his arms, burying his face in my neck. “Thank you for being here.”

Emotion clogs my throat. “Of course. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

He kisses my neck and then threads our fingers together before guiding me into the apartment building. Neither of us says a thing as we ride the elevator up or even when we enter the apartment. After locking the door, he kicks off his shoes and throws his keys in the bowl by the door. I expect him to turn on the lights, but he doesn’t. Instead, he takes my hand and brings it to his lips. He kisses my fingers and then my wrist as he pulls me along with him. His tongue slides along my wrist, and heat flourishes deep within. I reach to take him by his shirt, yanking him to me for our lips to crash together. Our kiss is all tongues, desperate, wanting to get lost in each other to forget the outside world. He cups my ass, lifting me with ease, and I wrap my legs around his waist without thought.

Then we’re moving.

As I eat at his mouth, I hear the bedroom door shut. Moments later, he gently lays me down on his bed. I hear a *thunk*, and I grin against his lips. “My bag was meant to hit the floor tonight.”

“Facts,” he mutters against my lips before pressing his head into mine. “I want to lose myself in you.”

His eyes flutter open, and I cup his face in my hands. His eyes are basically black and swirling with lust, but also a bit of fear. My heart catches as I rub my thumb along his bottom lip. I want to care for him. I want to be lost with him. “Let me please you,” I whisper against his lips.

His breath catches as he glides his nose along mine. I press my palm into his shoulder and push him, though I know he’ll roll us until I’m on top. I straddle his hips as I reach for the hem of my dress and pull it off, leaving me in only a thong, a scarf, and my boots. His hooded eyes take me in as his lips part, and he squeezes my hips with his fingers.

“Fucking stunning.”

A little grin pulls at my lips as I unwrap the scarf, throwing it to the side. “If I wasn’t wanting to feel your hands on me, I’d tie you to the bed with my scarf.”

His eyes dance with mine. “Just know, you tie me up, I get to tie you up.”

I lick my lips. “Oh Benny, you know better than to tempt me with a damn good time.”

His eyes darken as he brings his hands up to cup my breasts. I arch into his palms, his thumbs tweaking my nipples and eliciting a deep, guttural moan from my chest. He sits up, and I fall back on his thighs as he brings my whole boob into his mouth, his tongue lapping at my nipple. I reach for his shirt and pull it up, disrupting him, but he doesn’t complain. I throw his shirt to the side as he pulls at my thong, tearing the fabric as if it’s made of paper. He tosses the torn fabric off the bed and then takes my ass in his hands. With a cheek in each palm, he spreads them, the pain so fucking delicious, I cry out as I arch against his chest.

“You keep up with all these noises, I won’t make it,” he murmurs against the heated skin between my breasts.

“Buckle up, Benny, ’cause it’s gonna be you squealing in a few,” I tell him as I reach between us, undoing his pants. I’m answered with a grunt of satisfaction before I help him shimmy out of his pants as he lies back. He angles one arm behind his head as he uses the other to hold my thigh over his hip. His cock springs up, all thick and taut, leaving my mouth watering at the sight. I take ahold of him at the base, and my eyes lock with his. God, he is beautiful. Just lying there for me to devour.

Not breaking eye contact, I tighten my grip and run my hand up the length of him, his breath coming out in a long hiss. I lean down, my lashes almost touching my cheeks, before I lick the slit of his cock just to taste his desire. He groans loudly, his hand squeezing my hip before I run my tongue along the length of him. I hold him tightly, licking from the base to the tip and then back down.

“Fuck,” he groans. “Your mouth is so damn good. *Fuck,*” he drawls when I take him to the back of my throat without warning. I gag, but I welcome the tears that gather in my eyes as I continue to take him to the hilt and pull him back out. I drag my teeth along him, and when his nails bite into my hip, I have to focus on his cock to keep from grinning. But then I feel his hand wrapping around my thigh, and he pulls me up his body so that my ass crashes onto his chest. I let out a yelp of surprise, one hand landing on his abs as my other holds his cock.

“What—” But then his hands are at my hips, lifting me until my pussy is positioned on his mouth. I cry out, and my thighs squeeze his face when he delves his tongue deep inside me. My head drops, as do my eyelids, while a shiver runs down my spine.

“Cam, you’re so warm against my lips,” he murmurs against my center. “And you taste like fucking heaven.”

He sucks my pussy into his mouth, and unlike how I’d planned, I’m the one squealing. I shake against him, completely engrossed in how he is licking and sucking me with such determination. Instinctively, I start to rock against his mouth as I lean down, taking him back into my mouth. I suck the head of his cock hard, licking and trying to focus, but fuck me, his tongue is dangerous. He moans loudly against my pussy, arching into my mouth, going to the back of my throat, and I cry out, choking on his cock.

His nails bite into my hips, and soon it feels like a game between us. Who is going to come first? Who is going to give in to the ecstasy we both so deeply need? I force myself to ignore how good his tongue feels swirling around my clit, and I suck him deeply with the need to feel him explode in my mouth.

But apparently, he has the same idea, and my body is his. He sucks my clit into his mouth before flicking the tip of his tongue against me, causing me to brace myself against him as my body trembles. Sweat gathers at the nape of my neck, running down my back as I rock against his mouth and continue to take him into my mouth. His tongue is relentless,

and as he said, he always wins. I close my eyes tightly, unable to breathe as I shatter without warning.

The sound that leaves me is so loud, even I'm surprised as an orgasm bursts from deep within. I rock against his mouth, digging my fingers into his abs, squeezing his cock with my other hand. He kisses my center, licks up my lips before kissing my entrance and then thrusting his tongue inside me. I grit my teeth, drawing in deep breaths at the pure ecstasy he brings me.

“Come on, love. I want to be inside you.”

My pussy clenches around his tongue. I somehow remember I can move and crawl down his body, trailing my tongue along his abs, his hips before I run it down the length of him. He slaps my ass, and the sound pleases me more than I can even describe. I straddle his hips and take his cock in my hand once more. I move it along my slit and then along my clit, my head falling back from the sensation.

He hisses. “God, you're so hot.”

My lips curve as I guide him inside me. We both groan at the indescribable high of his cock entering me, stretching me, filling me to the hilt. I place my hands on his chest, my fingers clutching his sweat-slicked skin, but when I go to move, he stops me.

“Condom,” he bites out, and I cry out in distress.

No wonder it feels so damn good.

He throbs inside me as I clench around him, my breath coming out so hard, my chest hurts. “I don't want to move.”

“Oh love, I don't want you to either. You feel so fucking good, and I want to live with my cock buried inside your beautiful pussy, but we need a condom.”

I want to convince him we don't, but he's right. He wraps an arm around me, without breaking our incredible connection, and scoots to the edge of the bed. He pulls open the drawer, and I grab the first condom I see. “I'm glad you are thinking clearly.”

“I’m not thinking of anything but how good you feel around me.” Breathless, I go to lift off him, but he stops me. “Just another second. I love being in you like this.” My hands shake as he cups my jaw, his lips coming to mine. “I can’t wait until I can fill you every day, every night, with my come. Watch it drip from your perfect pussy because I’ve filled you to the brim.” He nips at my bottom lip. “Those will be some of my best days.”

I want those days. I want that moment. I want him. I swallow hard and start to gyrate my hips, drawing him in and out of me. His eyes widen in surprise, and his lips part as his eyes burn into mine. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you a taste of those days,” I murmur against his lips, my ass resting on his thighs. “Just a taste before I put this condom on.”

CHAPTER

Forty

BENSON

It doesn't make sense for her pussy to feel this fucking good around my cock.

I squeeze her ass, guiding her up and down my cock, nothing between us, my brain going to mush. Sweat gathers all over, and I'm so hot I feel as if I might burn up. I know this isn't wise, especially since I knocked her up before while using a condom and birth control, but something in her eyes has me unable to stop. It's just a taste.

A fucking unbelievable, mind-blowing taste.

One that is going to have me exploding inside her.

As I watch her eyes fall shut, her head tilting up, I know I'm in trouble. I gotta take control. I lift her hips, removing myself from her, and I sit her on my thighs, much to her dismay, as I take the condom from her fingers. "You're a menace to me, ya know that?"

Her sneaky grin is intoxicating as she shrugs. "I don't think that's a complaint."

Once I'm sheathed, I grin up at her. "No complaint, just facts."

She climbs up me, straddling me before taking ahold of me. Once more, she moves the head of my cock along her clit, and I grip the sheets, lost for her. "I really like when you do that."

Her lips tip up at the sides before she guides me inside her, and filling her is better than any goal I've ever scored. She slides her hands up my chest as she braces herself, lifting that perfect ass up and down on my throbbing cock. Soon, I'm meeting each thrust, lost in her moans, lost in the way her body pins mine to the bed, and loving every second. I hold her hips, thrusting up, and she slams down, the room filling with the sounds of our bodies slapping against each other and our moans.

God, she makes me wild.

Suddenly, her hands drift up my chest and press into my neck. Her eyes widen as she realizes my air flow is cut off. She steadies herself, and with worry in her eyes, she says, "My bad. Don't stop."

"I wasn't going to," I tell her, slamming up into her. "But I think I like that."

Her eyes dance with mine. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Maybe you should choke me a bit and call me your good boy?"

I thrust into her, but she doesn't react. She only looks at me, and I can tell she's trying not to laugh. It's too much, though, and soon, she is a giggling mess. Her laughter has her pussy squeezing me and leaving me fighting to hold on to my restraint. "Are you serious?" she asks around her laughter.

"Not with you laughing at me!" I insist, and then I roll her over, pinning her to the bed. "Maybe I'll choke you." I slide my hand up her chest, my hands coming to her throat. "Call you my good girl."

She licks her lips as I thrust into her, causing her eyes to fall shut. "Call me whatever you want as long as you keep fucking me."

"Mmm," I murmur against her jaw as I thrust into her again before removing myself completely and repeating the motion. I take her jaw, squeezing it as I whisper against her lips, "Mine."

Her pussy squeezes me like a vise grip as she moans against my mouth. I move my hand over her beautiful face, and my thumb bites into one side of her throat. I press into her, each thrust harder than the last. Her center squeezes me tightly as she arches up, her perfect nipples begging me to taste them. I lean down, doing just that, and within seconds, I'm rewarded with a curt cry before she explodes around my cock. The pulsating, the wetness, the heat, it's all entirely too much, and I fall over the edge, face first.

My release has me roaring into her neck where my thumb was as I jerk into her, filling the condom when I wish I were filling her. In due time. It'll happen, and when it does, she's gonna have a hard time keeping me off her. Not that I think she'll mind. I hold myself up, careful not to crush her as she wraps her legs around my waist, the cool leather of her boots pulling a hiss from my lips. I kiss her neck, then her jaw, before falling to the side of her. She turns to her side with me, kissing along my temple, my cheek, the corner of my mouth before pressing a kiss to my nose.

As I watch her, I can't help but think she is the most gorgeous girl I've ever met. And she's all mine. I run my fingers up her spine, the dips and grooves blowing my mind as I take her in. Her swollen lips, the tear trails over her cheeks, and the flush that covers every single inch of her body. She opens her eyes to find me watching her, and the most satisfied grin fills her face.

"There's my *good boy*," she coos, and...ick.

"Yup, I don't like that."

Her laughter fills the room, and I grin before pressing my lips to hers. Our kiss deepens as I hold her close, our hearts beating together. When we part, only for air, I cup her face, running my thumb along her jaw. As I gaze into her eyes, my love for her is overwhelming. I want to scream it at her, but I'm sure that wouldn't be romantic. Probably a bit aggressive, but that's how I feel—aggressively in love with her. I want to tell her. I wonder if she'd say it back. I feel she is in love with me, but I've wanted her to love me for so long, I'm not sure if I'm imagining her intentions.

I feel her squeeze my cock, and my breath catches as our eyes meet. Her lips tip up as she tightens her leg around my hip, tangling it with my leg as I fall out of her. “I’ll go clean up,” I whisper against her lips, but she stops me when I start to move away.

“Wait,” she says, her fingers dancing along my jaw. “Did you mean what you said?”

My brows knit. “Which part? I talk a lot when I’m with you. I think your ADHD rubs off on me because my thoughts fire off like mad, and I come up with all kinds of ways to fuck you in my head.”

Her lips curve up into the most gorgeous grin. “It must, because when I’m with you, my thoughts don’t come to me. I feel the calmness I’ve only ever felt when I’m with you like this.”

Oh, that hits me hard. “Really?”

She nods. “Yeah, I’ve never experienced anything like it until you. Even before, my brain always just shut off, and all I did was feel.”

I kiss her nose. “Then screw squeezing my hand, Cam. Just let me between those thighs.”

Her laughter comes quick, and I love how she shakes in my arms, her giggles such a stunning sound. As her eyes lock with mine, her laughs die off as my heart thumps in my chest. “I mean, that is a good idea.”

“I thought so,” I agree, kissing the side of her mouth. “But what part were you asking about?”

“The part about filling me and watching your come drip out of me.”

As they did before, the thought and the image I made up in my head leave me breathless, and my cock stirs back to life. “Hell yeah, I did.” Her eyes search mine, and I can see her thoughts swirling behind her bright eyes. “Talk to me, Cam.”

“It can wait,” she insists, but I shake my head. “Really, I’m tired.”

“Cameron.” She inhales sharply and then lets it out with a whoosh. She looks down at my lips, so I reach for her chin, tipping it back so I can see those eyes of hers. “My love, look at me.”

Her lips press into a straight line, and I can see the war in her brown depths. She opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out, so she shuts it, her eyes burning deeply into mine. I reach up, running my thumb along her jaw. “Cameron.”

“I’m trying—”

“I love you.”

I’m surprised I said that as calmly as I did. Cameron must not realize how hard that was for me, because pure shock fills her features. Her jaw goes slack, hanging open as her eyes stay locked with mine. A flush fills her cheeks as her eyes widen, but no words leave her lips. Silence stretches between us, and each second she doesn’t say it back fucks with my ego. She licks her lips, and in the smallest of voices, she asks, “Are you sure?”

I bring in my brows. “Damn sure. Why do you ask?”

She sits up then, and I do the same so that we’re facing each other. “I saw you with the boys today. You were meant to be a dad, Benson. I took that from you.”

You’ve got to be kidding me. I let my head fall back and groan loudly as she continues to talk. “I saw you with them, and then you say you want to fill me with come, which means getting me pregnant, but I took a child—”

“For fuck’s sake, Cam. Please, eh?” I ask, bringing my gaze to hers. “You didn’t take anything from me. Not a damn thing but your heart. I don’t think of what we did as a loss or even a mistake. Baby, we made a choice not to bring a kid into the world when we both knew we weren’t ready. I’ve told you before, I admire you for your choice. For being so fucking strong. But please, baby—please listen to me.”

“But how can you love someone who did that to you?”

“We did it together!” I yell, losing my patience. I breathe in deeply, unsure how to make her see the truth. “We made

that baby, you chose not to have it, and I agreed. I went with you, did what you wanted because, guess what, I love you, and you were absolutely correct in your choice.” Her eyes widen before she looks away, breathing in through her nose and then letting it out. “You’ve got to let this go because, Cam—” I reach for her chin, tipping it back to meet my heated gaze “—I loved you through all that, and I love you now.”

“I’m a mess. Like, a walking train wreck,” she whispers, almost as if she’s trying to talk me out of loving her.

I smile. “Call me your conductor because there is no way I’m derailing what we have. I’m in this for the long haul, my beauty.”

“But—”

“No but, Cameron. I don’t know how you can look at me and not see that I’m totally in love with you.” She swallows as she presses her lips tightly together, but thankfully, her eyes don’t leave mine. “Do you not want me to love you?”

Her eyes widen, and I instantly regret that question.

Why did I ask that?

CHAPTER

Forty-One

CAMERON

His question rocks me to my core.

Do you not want me to love you?

It's a loaded question, but nothing touches the three words that left his lips with no hesitation. Not once, not even twice, but many times. And each time, it's directed just to me. He loves me. Benson loves me. Even back then, he did, and all I can do is gawk at him. I almost say that I'm not worthy of his love, but his eyes convince me otherwise. As if I am worthy, as if he does love me.

"Of course I do," I say in a small, pathetic voice as I thread my fingers with his.

"Then what is the issue?"

"Me. I'm the fucking issue," I say, my voice getting louder as I bring my gaze back to his. "I will sit here and convince myself you regret our choice, that you blame me, and that you could never love me."

His eyes burn into mine before he lets go of my hands and takes my face between his palms. He stares deep into my eyes, bringing me to him until our noses press together. "Then let me be there to reassure you."

"What?"

"It's pretty simple, Cam. If you start to try to convince yourself of those things, come to me, tell me, so I can remind

you of the truth. Look at me, look into my eyes, and see how much I fucking adore you. How much I admire your strength, your resilience, your talent. Everything about you makes me so unbelievably happy, I swear things can't get better. No one else makes me feel the way you do. Only you, my love. Trust me, believe me, and let me remind you at every turn, eh?"

Tears gather in my eyes, and when they fall, they roll over his knuckles. But his hold doesn't falter. He holds me, stroking his thumbs along my cheeks, catching my tears, and rubbing them into my skin. He leaves me breathless and scares the living hell out of me. "I don't want to disappoint you. I'm messy. I really didn't put away those clothes we washed a couple weeks ago."

He laughs like I'm not a hot mess. "I'll put them away."

"You can't clean up my mess."

"I can," he retorts, his eyes holding mine. "Just as you held me together at dinner, I'll hold you together."

"I meant literally. You can't clean my mess."

"Yes, I can, because I want to."

Ugh, that word.

"God, you're impossible!" I say, my eyes itching with tears. He is so damn swoony, and he makes it real hard to breathe. "Benson, I'm forgetful, and I'm pretty sure my brain hates me."

"Are you going to forget me?"

My heart almost stops in my chest. "Never."

"Exactly. And when I'm so deep inside you that you do forget my name and you need something to scream, just say 'mine.'"

My pussy purrs to life for this man. "Benson—"

"Cameron, what you see as flaws are my favorite things about you. All those little things that do my heart in. Let your brain hate you, Cameron, because I love you."

My lip starts to wobble, and I know he wants me to say it back. “I don’t want you to regret anything and wish—”

“Cameron, there is nothing to regret, and my only wish is for you to choose me.”

“Choose you?”

“Yeah, it’s all I’ve ever wanted. To choose me with just as much conviction as you made that choice for us. I want you to choose me for us.”

That cracks my heart wide open. “Benson, the moment I wanted to do this project, I chose you. I had no one else in mind. Only you. Hell, I should have chosen someone else, because I knew from the jump that I was going to fall madly in love with you.”

Silence stretches between us as his eyes search mine. “Say it,” he whispers against my lips. “Tell me, my heart.”

His heart. Jesus Christ. My own heart is slamming in my chest, and my whole body breaks out in gooseflesh as I get lost in the dark gray that swirls in his eyes. My lungs feel as if they aren’t getting enough air, and everything just feels tight, but I know the truth. Hell, he knows the truth. “I choose you, Benson, because I love you.”

His shoulders sag in relief as he exhales. “I love you—”

I take his lips with mine before he can finish, because I need to kiss him. I need to show him how much I love him. I wrap my arms around his neck as his go around my back, bringing me into his lap. He drags his lips from my mouth to my chin to my jaw. Trailing kisses, nipping with his teeth, and ultimately driving me crazy.

“This isn’t going to be slow. I need you,” he mutters against my neck before laying me back on the bed. He removes my arms from around his neck, ignoring my complaints as he pulls the condom off and gets a new one. “It’s going to be hard, fast.”

“Promise?” I ask, and when his eyes meet mine, I smile.

“Menace. A total menace to my heart,” he murmurs, rolling on a new condom and then pressing a knee to the bed. His eyes are hooded as he prowls across the bed to me and settles between my thighs. He takes my hips, tilting them up as I go to wrap my legs around his waist. He stops me, though, taking one leg and throwing it over his shoulder before entering me without warning. He slides into me like he belongs, and hell, he does. He fills me to the hilt, and I cry out, arching my back and closing my eyes in ecstasy. His cock hits me in the most perfect way, but then he pulls out almost completely, and with a rough voice, he says, “Watch me fuck you, Cameron. See how fucking much I love you.”

My eyes open then, meeting his heated ones, and my whole body feels as if it catches on fire. He holds my hip in one hand, and he holds my ass with his other as he slides into me deeply. He slides out slowly but then slams back in, the motion mind-altering as he continues over and over. A deep moan leaves my chest as I watch him fuck me with such love in his eyes. With each thrust, his eyes darken even more. Each time he pulls out, he drops his eyes to between my legs, and I swear I see a feral grin move across that beautiful mouth.

Soon, control is gone, the planned movements are forgotten, and he disappears in and out of me with such vengeance, I don't know where he begins and I end.

All I know is that I love him.

And as we come, together, our names falling from the other's lips, I know I love him so much, I can't fathom ever loving anyone but him.

The next morning, I wake up alone.

And deliciously sore.

But dread fills me within seconds.

I kick off the blanket and scramble out of bed, reaching for the teal shirt Benson wore to dinner the night before. As I head

out of his room, I make sure the buttons are buttoned before I look up to find Benson setting two full plates of breakfast beside two cups of coffee. He isn't crying, and he doesn't look stricken.

Grandma must be okay.

“Good morning, beauty.” I let out a breath as my lips turn up. “I was about to come wake you up.”

I walk toward him, checking the clock to see I have well over an hour to get ready and head to the gym. I wrap my arms around him, as he does the same, kissing my temple. “Any word?”

He shakes his head, his nose moving along my hair. “Not yet.”

“Where is Quinn?”

“He just went to bed. He stayed at Mom's house to care for the dogs once they left.”

“Oh. Is he okay?”

“He's as good as he can be with no news.”

I swallow nervously. “No news is good news?”

“I hope so,” he says, kissing me again. “Come on, let's eat. You need calories to run full force at a stationary object.”

I laugh as he takes me by my hips, lifting me to the counter. “There are barstools.”

“But maybe when I'm done eating breakfast, I'll have me a little dessert?”

I giggle as he comes in close, stabbing some eggs and feeding them to me. His eyes are so playful and sweet, I feel like my jaw might break from grinning so hard.

“Have you checked your phone?”

I shake my head before taking a sip of my coffee. “No, why?”

“I posted something.”

My lips curve as he slides my phone to me across the island. I smile a thanks as I open my lock screen to see I've been tagged in a video on TikTok. I feel Benson move closer to me, his chin resting on my shoulder as I click the notification so it takes me to the video. The video starts with Benson sitting on the floor beside the bed, my arm hanging off the bed beside him but not touching him, as he plays the guitar. My bare back is visible as I breathe deeply in my sleep. Unaware of the man below me. He did wear me out pretty damn good.

“When did you shoot this?”

“Last night,” he answers just as I recognize the song. “Until I Found You” by Stephen Sanchez. But instead of the name the artist uses, Benson sings mine. His voice is so refreshing, like wind through the trees, and it hits me straight in the feels. I cover my mouth as I watch him sing such beautiful words only for me. When he snakes his arm around my waist, I lean back into him, speechless as I replay the video. He laughs as he kisses my jaw, and I lean into the kiss.

Against my cheek, he whispers, “I couldn't sleep while I watched you drool all over my pillow,” he teases, and I cry out in distress.

“I don't drool.”

“I had to change shirts, Cameron.” I burn with embarrassment, but he just laughs. “As I watched you, that song just kept playing in my head, so I knew I had to sing it to you. Right there and right then.” He covers my hand with his own over the phone. “If I'm not around to remind you, Cam, just watch this and know that I love you.”

My heart soars in my chest. If my ribs weren't holding it in place, I'm pretty sure it would have escaped and landed in a bloody heap on the floor in front of him. This man is a walking dream. Why did I waste so much time fighting what we have? Oh, that's right. Because I'm a walking hot mess.

Whom he loves—completely.

I turn, pressing my lips to his. I kiss his top lip and then his bottom before whispering against his lips, “I love you.”

With his lips moving against mine, his words are a promise. “I love you more, Cam.”

CHAPTER

Forty-Two

BENSON

I thought getting Cameron locked down would be the hardest thing to do when it came to her, but that doesn't even compare to the pain of watching her fail.

It physically hurts me to watch her fall over and over again.

But the pride that swells within me when she pushes herself up and stands after falling face first into the mat is something I've never experienced in my life.

I think I'm falling in love with her all over again.

I stare at her profile as her brows knit, and she angles her shoulders back. Her face is full of color, and sweat gathers along her hairline and drips down her back. When she does her little skip thing that gives her more momentum to go into her run, I squeeze my asshole tight. I don't know why, but fuck if this sport doesn't give me crazy anxiety. Cameron does her cartwheel and hits the vault, then hits the floor. It all happens so fast that I don't even understand why she isn't landing on her feet. She gets the height, but her feet aren't making it to the mat before her face does.

"You know this is mental," her coach tells her as he stands with his arms crossed over his wide chest. "You're choosing not to land."

Well, I don't like that at all. Fucking fucker. I stand to mirror his stance as I watch Cameron listen. "You gotta lift your chest and find your landing. I know this is a tough vault, but you wanted tough for your senior year. Here it is—take it by the horns and stand it, White. Or you're not vaulting this week."

I especially don't like how he says her last name like a curse.

I don't like this guy.

Cameron presses her lips together as she nods and starts walking toward me. She doesn't make it far before he yells at her, "I'm not gonna stand here and watch you eat this mat! I don't know what else to say to help you. This is all on you."

She swallows hard, and I'm ready to fight the dude. Her eyes meet mine, and she shakes her head. "Don't you dare."

"What?" I ask innocently.

"You look like you're about to beat his ass."

I shrug. "He's got one more time before I do."

"Stop," she demands as she walks to where her water bottle sits beside me. "It's already a shitshow with me not landing. I don't need you making it worse by being all protective and shit."

I just look at her. "What's wrong?"

She stares down at me. "I'm not fucking landing."

"Why?"

Her eyes about bulge out of her head. "How the hell am I supposed to know?" she yells incredulously. "It's a blind fucking landing, but I can land it. I've done it before."

"You know what I think?"

She exhales harshly, cutting her eyes to mine. "What?"

"That you can do it."

Her shoulders fall. "I know I can, but I'm not doing something right, and I can't figure it out."

“Talk to me,” I tell her, holding her gaze. “Break down what you’re doing.”

She presses her lips together before she sighs deeply. “So, my run is good, I’m getting the momentum I need, I’m doing my Yurchenko with ease. I’ve got that, no issues. I know I’m hitting the boards right, and even when I block off the vault, I’m already...” Her voice trails off, and she looks over her shoulder. “Hey, am I twisting too early?” she yells to her coach.

He looks up and shrugs. “I don’t think so. Do it again.”

She looks back at me, and I grin. “Do you, baby.”

Her lips curve as she goes to the line. I watch the determination on her face, and I’m in awe. She does her hop thingy and hauls ass to the vault. She hits the table and has so much power, she doesn’t hit the middle of the mat with her face, but the edge instead. Progress, I feel. “You’re twisting way too early,” her coach says, “You’re not letting your toes go up all the way before you twist. You’ve got to be patient. Again.”

Cameron nods and then jogs back to the line again. Once more, I watch as she runs, hits the vault, and when she stands it up, I come off the bleachers as if she just stuck her landing at a meet. “Let’s go! Yes, baby! Ten, ten, ten, ten,” I chant like her teammates do, opening and closing my hands. Her coach looks annoyed with me, but Cameron’s grin is unstoppable as she looks over her shoulder at me.

He gives her a high five and then nods. “We’re stopping on a landing, even if you did take eight steps when you could have stuck it.”

So, he wants to fight me, eh?

Cameron doesn’t seem to mind him as she beams once her eyes lock with mine. She jogs toward me, and I meet her halfway, wrapping my arms around her and lifting her off the floor while our lips touch. She squeezes my face as we kiss, and my heart thumps with pride. When I pull back, I beam up at her. “That’s my girl.”

She wiggles happily in my arms. “I love you.”

I feel like my ribs crack from how big my heart swells for this girl. “I love you.”

We kiss again before I put her down on her feet. “Do you want me to drive you back to your place?”

She shakes her head as she grabs her things. “No, it’s fine. It’s a five-minute walk, and you’ve got to meet Dawson.”

I groan loudly. “Yay.”

She smacks my chest. “He looks up to you.”

“He makes me crazy.”

She snickers as she throws her backpack on. She checks her phone and then looks at me. “You haven’t heard anything, have you?”

“Not yet. I texted Mom, but nothing. Shelli hasn’t heard anything either.”

She sighs deeply. “No news is good news,” she tells herself before kissing the side of my mouth. “I’ll meet you after your game?”

I nod. “Yeah, or I can come over after I’m done with Dawson.”

Cameron’s lips twitch. “I need to clean my room before I let you in.”

“Or I’ll just come over for lunch,” I say, wrapping my arms around her. “And you’ll be my meal.”

She giggles in a way that leaves me hot for her in seconds. “Let me see if I can get it somewhat presentable. Text me before you come over...for your meal.”

I lick my lips. “Or I can take you into the locker room for a midmorning snack.”

She leans into me, stroking her thumbs along my cheekbones. “Or you’ll go meet with Dawson, I’ll go shower, I have a meeting with my professor, and then I may clean.”

“Mmm,” I murmur against her lips, holding her close. I kiss her, and her lips part for me. I swipe my tongue along hers as I tighten my arms around her, loving how good she feels in my embrace. I pull back for a breath and then kiss her nose. “Text me.”

“I will,” she says, kissing my cheek, then my chin. “Love you.”

God, those words bring me to my knees. “Love you, baby.”

She gives me a sweet little wave, and I watch as she walks away due to the simple fact that I’m addicted to those hips of hers. I love how they sway, and I want nothing more than to grip her tightly by them and pull her to my chest. God, she’s stunning. Once I’m able to tear my gaze off her, I turn to find Cameron’s jackass of a coach standing only a few feet from me.

“If looks could kill, I’d be dead.”

I shrug as I match his stance, crossing my arms over my chest. I’m much larger than he is, but I have to remember he is her coach. I don’t want to mess with her spot on the team. “I don’t like the way you talked to her.”

Amusement twitches at his lips. “She’s my gymnast.”

“And my future wife.” His eyes flash with surprise but for only a second. “She may be your gymnast for a couple more months, but she’s mine forever.”

“That’s a bold statement.”

“I’m a confident dude,” I tell him.

He chuckles. “I could make it so you couldn’t come into my gym.”

“That’s fine,” I say simply, walking by him. “Because she’ll come home to me, tell me what happened, and I’ll plan accordingly.”

I feel his gaze on me. “Is that a threat?”

I scoff. “I don’t have time for threats. I make promises.”

His eyes darken and narrow as I walk toward the exit. I don't have time to deal with him. My point was made. She's only his for a little while longer, and after, if he makes her cry even once, I'm going to drag his ass. I head to the hockey part of the complex and go into the locker room. I dress quickly, and when I hit the ice with my two sticks, I find that Dawson is already there, practicing his blind passes. I lean on the boards, watching him, and once more, pride fills me. He's doing a good job, and I'm proud.

Not that I'm telling him that.

I stand my stick behind the bench and then open the boards to head onto the ice. Dawson looks up at the sound of my skates crunching against the ice and pauses, leaning on his stick. "Hey."

"Hey there," I call to him as I come to a stop.

"How's Cameron?"

"She's good," I tell him.

"I heard about Grandma Adler. How's she doing?"

"I don't know yet. I haven't heard."

"That sucks."

"It does," I say with a sigh. "So, yeah, I need a distraction. Ready to work?"

He nods. "Yeah, but I wanted to tell you... I decided that I want the NHL draft."

That surprises me. He's a damn good football player, and he hardly has to try to be great. Hockey, he'll have to work. Hard. "Nice. You must be really ready to work, eh?"

"Yeah," he confirms, meeting my gaze. "I want to be the player you see in me."

Well, damn. I guess I don't hate the kid that much. But still, my goal is to make him puke today.

"I have no doubt you'll do just that." His proud grin leaves me a bit breathless, but I hide it well. "Let's do some suicide drills, eh?"

To my surprise, Dawson doesn't complain. But he does puke, which makes me feel like I won all around this morning.

CHAPTER

Forty-Three

CAMERON

I get a weird vibe the moment I walk into the gymnastics house.

My teammates are giggling, grinning at me, and I feel like they are talking about me. I eye everyone very suspiciously before heading up the stairs to my room. When I hit the top stair, Shantae is coming out of her room.

Our gazes meet for a moment, and her brown eyes glimmer brightly. “It’s nice to see you happy.”

Her statement surprises the hell out of me, stunning me to silence as she moves past me and down the stairs in a hurry. I blink because...what just happened? That was weird. I shake my head and take out my key to unlock my door. When I push it open, though, I’m shocked in the doorway. Not only can I see my floor, but my room is full of black roses. Every clean surface has a vase of the black beauties, and soon, I’m out of breath. I look at my closet, and everything is hung up. There is no trash, no clutter, and if my key hadn’t worked, I’d almost think this wasn’t my room.

I step inside to see a note on my bed.

Camcoon,

I cleaned, as you can tell. Last night, I was called to come over to do this for you so that the only clutter you have is just

the thoughts in your head. Per your boyfriend's request. Let's try to keep it this way, okay?

Love you,

Callie

PS: See if you can find his Post-it notes.

I turn, looking up at my bulletin board, and soon my eyes find each teal Post-it note.

I love your mess.

I love your forgetfulness.

I love your wildness.

I love your determination.

I love your resilience.

I love your talent.

I love your laugh.

I love your lips.

I love the shape of you.

I love you. All of you.

And all the little things about you that drive me out of my mind.

As if the words weren't sweet enough, they form a heart around all my other Post-its. My breath catches as I reread the words, my heart jumping into my throat. My lip starts to tremble as I sit back in my chair, unable to look away from each of his notes. Each one, a promise. Each one, his truth. He loves me, and God, do I love him. Tingles run through my body as I think back to how he cheered me on this morning. How he reassured me last night. How him being him is everything I've ever wanted and more.

Mine. Benson is mine.

Emotion scratches at my throat, but then my alarm goes off, signaling my meeting with my professor. I push aside my swooning heart and grab my computer, opening it and logging on to my Zoom app to meet with Dr. Willard. While I wait, I send Benson a quick text, and as I look around my super-clean room, tranquility floats through me. He always knows what I need, especially when I don't realize it.

I whip my head to the computer when Dr. Willard appears on the screen. I smile brightly as we go over the latest paper I turned in. I had also turned in a revision to my outline, which I assume is the reason for this meeting.

“Ms. White, you're my star student, and I know you will go on to be the most sought-after marketer. If I were lucky enough, I'd put you on my staff. But I know you're meant for bigger things.”

I beam proudly. “Thank you, Dr. Willard.”

“You're welcome. Having said that, though, I was surprised to see the revision. What happened to ending things with Mr. Jeannot for the data?”

That's not happening.

Benson's words cloud my thoughts. I swallow nervously. “I fell in love with him.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh. Well, that would definitely change things.”

“Drastically,” I agree. “Even if it was just for show, I refuse to put us through that when it's unnecessary.”

“I agree, and from the insights, it's safe to assume people enjoy you two together.”

“I know I do,” I say with a laugh. “I hope this doesn't affect my grade.”

She thinks that over. “I can't make that promise until your final paper is turned in. Though, maybe this project wasn't to see how the start and end of a relationship can affect an influencer's media, but rather, what happens when two people fall in love with all of social media watching?”

I know she's giving me a suggestion for my final paper, and I appreciate it. She doesn't want me to fail, and I'm learning that, just like Benson, I'm a fucking winner. Pride burns within me as a grin spreads across my mouth. I want not only to make myself proud, but I want to make Benson proud. While I'm super confident today, tomorrow will be different, I'm sure. But today, I'm feeling good, and I know it has to do with everything Benson is teaching me. To breathe, to believe in myself, to declutter my life, and gosh, to love.

It's incredible how easy it is to love Benson.

We finish our meeting, and then I log off to work on my final paper. I'm starting on it extremely early, but my premise is fresh in my brain. I can add insights and data pages closer to the due date. With all the thoughts and points bursting to life in my head, I want to get them down. Minutes turn to hours, and when my phone buzzes on my desk, I realize I've typed nineteen pages.

My grin is unstoppable until I see who is calling. With my phone on vibrate, it didn't sound with my mom's ringtone. Damn it. Before she hangs up, I answer, "Hey."

"So, I'm on TikTok, and I see you've reposted something. Much to my surprise, it's that guy, with you naked in his bed."

I press my lips together. "I wasn't naked. I had shorts and a cami on."

Total lie. I was naked as the day I was born with beard burns on my thighs.

"You look naked, and it's really trashy that he posted that."

"I thought it was romantic. Did you listen to him sing?"

"Is that what we're calling that?"

"Don't be like that," I insist, blowing out a breath. "It was sweet. Benson is wonderful."

She lets out a frustrated sigh. "Cameron, why are you always making such bad decisions? What are you going to do? Wait for him to knock you up again and, when he doesn't want it a second time but you do, be stuck as a single mom?"

I close my eyes. Her words mean nothing when Benson's are streaming into my head. I imagine Benson's lips at my ear, telling me to breathe, before he kisses my lobe. I count to ten, and with each number, I imagine him pressing his lips to my skin. When I open my eyes, I let my shoulders fall. "Mom, for the sake of our relationship, I will not be discussing my choice from freshman year any longer. It is not up for discussion from this moment on. It is Benson's and my past, and we are looking forward to our future."

She scoffs. "*Our* future. Do you have a concussion?"

I want to scream. I want to cuss. I want to tell her never to speak to me again, but I want to give her a chance to see that she is pushing me away. I know she has her own trauma, but it's not my job to help her heal from that. I'm too busy trying to heal my own self from the trauma she left me with. Each day is a struggle, and I know she hurts, but I can't allow my mother to inflict that on me.

Not when I have a future I deserve within reach.

"I love him," I tell my mother. "I love him more than I can ever explain to you, and I need you to respect that. For the two of us to have a relationship, I need you to let that go because the choice we made was ours and ours alone."

"It was the wrong choice—"

"According to you. But for me, for Benson, it was right. I have beaten myself up for years over what happened. I ghosted him, wouldn't speak to him because of the guilt, and I wasted years without the love of my life."

"Cameron, he can't love—"

"He can, he does, and at the end of the day, I choose Benson. Only Benson."

"Cameron Dianne!"

"I said what I said," I say simply, feeling way more confident than I expected. "I'd love for you to give him a chance, to get to know him."

"I have no intention—"

I hear her muffle a curse, and then she yells at my dad before his voice fills the line. “I’d love to get dinner with y’all. When do you two have time?”

Tears gather in my eyes, and even though I try to hold them back, they splash down my cheeks. “I love you, Dad.”

His voice softens. “Oh Cameron, I love you.”

I wipe my face and tell him I’ll get back to him on a time and date since Benson and I are so busy, along with everything going on with his grandparents. “Sounds good to me. I’m proud of you,” he tells me, and I can hear my mom complaining. “And no matter what, Cameron, I’m your father.”

“I know. I love you.”

He tells me the same, and then I hang up. My lips tremble as a small sob breaks from me. I don’t think my mom will come around, not with her trauma. I wish I hadn’t called her when I had that positive test in my hand. I wish I would have done everything myself, but I wasn’t the woman then that I am now. These last three years may have been tough, but they shaped me into a woman who is worthy of Benson’s love. Who wants to love him in every way possible. I swallow past a sob and run my hands down my face, wiping away the tears and snot. As much as I want to have a relationship with my mom, I know I’ll be okay without her. I have a chosen family.

I have Benson.

When a knock comes to my door, I furrow my brows, but I assume it’s Callie, coming to make sure I haven’t trashed my room yet. I smile to myself as I go to the door, but when I throw it open, it’s not Callie.

It’s Benson. With tears rolling down his face.

My heart stops dead in my chest as I instinctively reach for him, bringing him to me. He wraps his arms around me as he buries his face in my neck. I hold him close, squeezing him as a sob racks his massive body. He doesn’t have to tell me what’s wrong. I know, and my heart shatters for him. For the

Adlers. I try to hold him closer, but my arms aren't long enough, and I whisper, "Benny, I'm sorry."

"It's even worse," he mutters against my neck, taking in a deep breath. I run my thumb along his neck as he slowly pulls back, looking down at me. I reach up, rising onto my tiptoes to wipe his face free of his pain. "She passed last night, but it was late, so they wanted to wait until today to tell us. When Grandpa didn't come out of his room after eight, when he's usually up at five, Shea went in to find that he had passed too."

My breath catches as I cover my mouth. "No."

He nods, closing his eyes. "They think he had a heart attack in the middle of the night."

My heart aches for the passing of two incredible people, but my heart breaks for the pain the people I love are left with.

Then again, isn't grief the gift of life?

Because it stands as a constant reminder of how much you loved a person.

CHAPTER

Forty~Four

BENSON

I lean on the counter in the middle of the kitchen of Grandma and Grandpa's home. Shea and his twin, Grace, grew up in this house. Shea brought Elli here to get to know his parents. They found out Grace's husband had cancer here. All the grandkids spent many holidays here, and the home is full of different mementos of the love they had for their grandkids. From photos to art to a growth chart on the wall that marked the height of all the kids.

Grandma had a stroke here, and Grandpa died in his sleep here.

This place is a home full of love, and by all the crying, that is more than apparent.

I need a moment. I need to breathe, but even from where I stand, that's hard. Not when Cameron is buzzing around like a little bee, going to everyone as if they're a flower she needs to tend. She has cleaned, she has cooked, and she has loved. She's a sight to behold, and she's all mine.

With two mugs in her hand, Cameron walks toward Shea and Elli to give them each a cup of the coffee she made. She leans on the chair, pressing her hand to Shea's shoulder as he stares off into the dark depths of his grief. When he looks up at her, he actually smiles, and Cameron grins back. I push off the counter to get a closer look just as Elli reaches for Shea's hand.

“Honey, you remember that damn fish?”

I lean into the doorframe leading to the room that holds my whole family. Owen and his wife, Angie, sit on the couch with Shelli’s and Posey’s boys. Shelli and Aiden are looking through photo albums with Posey, Callie, Evan, and Boon. Quinn is sitting on the other side of Elli, tucked into her side. He’s not handling everything well, his heart broken since he spent a lot of time up here with his grandparents. Even here, he was the favorite.

But at Elli’s comment about a fish, everyone looks up to where a huge striped bass is mounted over the massive fireplace. I look from the fish to Shea as he says, “God, you hate that thing.”

Elli laughs as Owen asks, “Didn’t you catch that, Mom? I think Grandpa told me that.”

She nods proudly. “Yeah, Grandpa took me out on the boat to bond with me when Daddy brought me home for the first time,” she laughs, but tears start to roll down her face. She sighs deeply. “The whole time I was fishing, I couldn’t stop thinking of Shea. I was fighting with myself over if I was actually falling in love with him.” I watch as Shea looks at his wife, love shining in his eyes, but also so much pain. “So, when I decided I was totally in love with him, I thought the pain in my chest was from that realization—and it probably was—along with that damn fish rattling my pole and hitting me square in the chest.”

The room erupts with laughter as Shea threads his fingers with Elli’s. “I loved you from the moment I met you. No fish was needed to help me realize it,” he says with a wink, and her lips curve in a grin only for him.

“Just like your mom and dad. Mark told me once he looked at your mom and knew she was it for him.”

Shea nods just as Owen says, “You guys have set the standard for how to be in a relationship, Dad. And now I know it came from Grandma and Grandpa.”

Shea swallows thickly as his eyes lock with Elli's. "Your mom makes it pretty easy for me."

My eyes itch with tears as I look toward Cameron to find her watching me. I hold out my hand, and she takes it before I curl her into my arms, kissing her cheek. She makes it easy, way too damn easy. She didn't even think twice; she just packed and got on the plane. I tried to talk her out of coming since she has a meet this weekend, but there was no deterring her. Callie missed it too, though their coach was very supportive. They both haven't missed a meet since being on the team, and really, what's one meet?

Especially when they want to be there for Evan and me.

Against her ear, I whisper, "I'm so thankful you're here."

She leans into my cheek before tipping her head back to meet my gaze. "I wouldn't be anywhere else."

"You could be at your meet."

She shakes her head. "I'm where I want to be."

"You worked hard to compete that vault."

Cameron's lips press to my chin before her eyes meet mine once more. "And I wouldn't want to stick it without you there to see."

My soul sings for this girl. I kiss her, and her fingers dance along my jaw. I press my nose into hers, and she whispers, "I love you."

I swear, each time she says it makes me feel like it's the first time. Against her lips, I say, "I love you, my love."

Her eyes flutter open to meet mine, and love flows between us.

"I think my favorite memory of Grandma is from my wedding," Posey says, drawing all the attention to her. "She told me the key to a successful marriage is giving a lot of head."

Stunned silence fills the room, and then Boon nods, heat visible in his eyes for his wife. "Wisest woman I've ever

known.”

With that, we’re all laughing so hard, we’re crying. I wipe my eyes as I look up at the ceiling, sending a silent prayer to the heavens above to protect the two people who have taught us to love the way we do. When a melody starts to play, I look over to the piano where Evan sits, running his fingers along the keys. Quinn gets up and goes over, playing too until the song registers in my head.

Tears burn my eyes, and I whisper roughly in Cameron’s ear, “Jenna and Mark danced to this at Owen’s wedding.”

Her breath catches as Shea stands, bringing Elli with him before embracing her and swaying to the melody of “Can’t Take My Eyes off You.” When Shelli starts to sing like the angel she is, I nuzzle my nose in Cameron’s neck. I close my eyes when Evan and Quinn join Shelli’s hypnotic voice. Cameron turns in my hold, wrapping her arms around my neck, and we sway as my family sings for two people who left us way too early. I slide my hands down her back, cupping her hips in my hands to bring her in closer. She tips her head back, her eyes locking with mine as I sing the words to her.

Falling ever so much more in love with her.

She didn’t have to be here. She didn’t have to miss her meet or push back classes, but she did it without hesitation. For me. Her mouth parts as she gazes into my eyes, her own lips forming the words just for me. I cup her jaw in my hand before bringing her back close to me, our foreheads pressing together. Our heated gazes don’t falter, and I can feel her heart slamming into her chest. I know mine matches hers, and ahfuckbuddy, I love her.

“Be mine forever,” I say, not as a question, but as a promise.

Without hesitation, she says, “Done.”

I feel like I’m flying as I drop my lips to hers, but before I’m able to deepen the kiss, the music cuts off abruptly. I look up to find out why.

Emery Brooks stands in the doorway.

Her eyes solely on Quinn.

Oh. Fuck.

CHAPTER

Forty-Five

BENSON

I feel like I'm watching an outtake of *The Notebook*.

And no, I'm not ashamed I've seen that movie.

Emery breathes in deeply, tears streaming down her face as her eyes stay locked with Quinn's. He slowly stands, and I can't accurately read the expression on his face. He's somewhere between shocked and fucking wrecked. Thank God Ava didn't come—which I have feelings about, but Quinn told me to let it go, so I did.

But that doesn't mean my dislike for her hasn't grown. It has. A lot.

A shocked silence fills the room, the tension so thick, it's suffocating. I look between them just as Cameron does—hell, the whole room does. I have to force myself to breathe because I'm getting light-headed watching them.

“Hey there, Emery!” Owen says, breaking the tension, not that I'm surprised.

Owen is a dork.

Emery swallows. “Hey, Owen. Hey, everyone,” she says with a shyness I've never seen in her before. Finally, she tears her gaze from Quinn's to look over at Shea and Elli. She goes to Shea, and he envelops her in a hug that is both familiar and sweet.

Cameron looks at me in confusion.

I clear my throat free of emotion and say, “Emery stayed here a lot growing up.” Leaning in, I whisper, “She and Quinn hooked up here.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh my.”

“Yeah.”

Next, Shelli hugs her, kissing her cheeks and wiping her tears away. “It’s so good to see you, my darling girl. How are you?”

“Be better if I hadn’t gotten the call that two of the most astonishing people in the world had passed. I just talked to Grandma last week. What happened? Mom didn’t know.” Her voice is so horse, so raw, it kills me.

“Grandma had a stroke and fell into a coma. They couldn’t get her back, and we’re pretty sure Grandpa died from a broken heart.”

Hearing Elli say that really does me in. I feel Cameron tense beside me, and I close my eyes, leaning into her. She holds me like I don’t outweigh her or tower over her. She is the strength I need when none is in sight.

“I’m so incredibly sorry for your loss—for all of y’all’s loss,” Emery says, and everyone murmurs some kind of thanks. When I open my eyes, I see that Emery is making her way around Shea and Elli, her eyes on Quinn. I look at Quinn to find his jaw slack and his eyes wide. He steps out from behind the piano, just as Emery reaches him. All eyes are locked on them, with no intention of giving them privacy. We’ve all been waiting for this, and I wonder if anyone is going to bring up Ava.

Looking at the two of them, I sure hope not.

Emery makes the first move, wrapping her arms around Quinn’s neck, and my dude falls into her. His tears come quick, his arms tightening around her like she is a life preserver and he’s drowning. He buries his face in her wild, curly hair, and when her lips graze his temple, I have to look away. I take a deep breath and then look at Cameron. “Wanna get out of here?”

She nods, and I thread her fingers with mine. I guide her toward the back door, and in the mud room, we put on coats and snow boots since Boston is in dead-ass winter. We head into the freezing cold and crunch through the snow until we get to the snowmobiles. I get on, and she climbs up behind me, wrapping her arms around me. I'm surprised she hasn't asked where we're going, but then, I don't think she cares. She wants to be with me. I start the vehicle, and we take off into the woods of the Adler property. We could have walked but it's cold, and I want to be alone with Cameron.

I need to be alone with her.

When we come to the pond house, I park beside it and then get off before helping her down.

"Where are we?" she finally asks, and her teeth rattle. I chuckle at her red nose, her purple lips, and her wide eyes.

"And you want all four seasons?"

She laughs. "Yeah, I don't know about that now. Don't get drafted by Boston, 'k?"

I scoff. Though, knowing she plans to come has me grinning for the first time since I found out Jenna and Mark had passed. As I guide her toward the pond house, I tell her, "This is where we went pond fishing, and we skate on that pond when it's good and frozen."

I open the door with the key from behind the broken board by the door and push it open into darkness. It's cold as fuck in here, so I hurry to the wood-burning stove and throw on some logs. I light it as Cameron sits on one of the fluffy, oversized chairs, bundling up in her jacket and mittens. The chair was for Grandma when she'd come out here while Grandpa fished. On the table beside the chair is a stack of romance books. She loved the *Outlander* series and told everyone she was just waiting to fall through some stones to meet her Jamie. "*Pray God he looks like your granddaddy.*"

That Halloween, Grandpa dressed up as Jamie Fraser just for Grandma.

With a lump the size of a puck in my throat, I somehow get out, “It’ll warm up soon.”

I walk to her, lifting her out of the chair and then sitting down before bringing her into my lap. She turns so her butt is beside me, but her legs are over my lap, her arms around my ribs as I hold her tightly against me to ward off the cold. We don’t say anything at first, just listen to the crackle of the fire, and for the first time since arriving in Boston, I finally feel at ease. I lean my head into hers, kissing her temple as I brush my fingers over her hip.

“Have you talked to your mom?”

We had gone to lunch with her dad before we flew out. He was pleasant, but I could tell Cameron was struggling with the fact that her mom didn’t show. “Somewhat. She was mad I came up here instead of doing the meet. Said I was choosing a man over my sport.”

I sigh deeply, aggravated. “I don’t get why she doesn’t like me.”

“It’s not you. It can’t be. I really do feel she’s just jealous I found happiness.”

I cuddle her closer. “I told you to go to the meet.”

She shakes her head. “And as I told her, I did choose you over my sport, and I regret nothing.”

I kiss her temple, and she leans into me, threading our fingers together. “Thank you.” She gives me a look, but then she squeezes my hand three times, and my breath catches. “Do you know what that means?”

“What?” she asks, her brows pulling in and knitting tightly together.

“Squeezing my hand.”

“It means something?”

I nod with a sneaky grin, and then I squeeze her hand once. “I.” A second time. “Love.” And on the third time, I say, “You.”

Her eyes widen as her lips part, pink tinting her cheeks. “So you had me saying I love you before I even spoke the words? You play dirty, Jeannot.”

I chuckle as I nuzzle her neck. “I did it so even if I didn’t say the words, you’d feel them.”

She trails her lips along my ear. “I love you.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, cuddling closer to her, moving my lips along her neck, getting drunk on her scent. “I love you.”

CHAPTER

Forty-Six

BENSON

We stay wrapped up in each other in the pond house in the middle of the forest for a long while. Neither of us needs to fill the silence that surrounds us. We exist together, just the way I love to. When the room is nice and warm, I sit up as she takes off her jacket and mittens.

“Emery showing up was unexpected.”

“Unexpected is putting it mildly,” I say as she leans back to look at me. “I don’t know how that’s going to play out.”

“I’m just glad Ava isn’t here.”

“Same.”

“Though, why didn’t she come?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Quinn told me to leave it be.”

“It’s all so weird,” she muses, shaking her head. “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere but where you are during all this.” I cup her neck, rubbing my thumb along her throat. “Which is why Emery showed up. She knows Quinn needs her.”

I don’t know why that has my throat working past everything I’m feeling, but it does. “I do need you, Cam. Always, not just for this.”

“I know,” she says simply, moving her hand over mine before she leans her nose into mine. “Just as I need you.”

I kiss her, and as tends to happen, our kiss deepens. I take slow nips of her lips, running my tongue along hers, and it wasn't my intention to kiss her until I'm unable to breathe or totally lost in my lust, but that's how it always is with Cameron. There is no stopping, no thinking, just feeling. Feeling all of her and everything she gives me.

She pulls back, heat in her eyes as they meet mine. I thread my fingers into her hair, bringing her lips back to mine, wanting desperately to lose myself in her lips. I feel her fingers moving along the front of my jacket, undoing it before she trails her lips from my lips and along my chin. I open my eyes when she pulls back, pushing my jacket off my shoulders, while her eyes don't leave mine. My mouth goes dry at her heated gaze, and she throws my jacket to the floor and starts to unbutton my shirt.

"You're beautiful," I remind her, and I love the little smirk that turns her lips up.

She finishes unbuttoning my shirt, and then her eyes land on the spot where my tattoo sits on my chest. "Every time I have you naked, I never look at your tattoo, and this is the perfect moment."

My breath catches, and all my words are lost. I wasn't prepared to tell her about my tattoo. I thought she would have asked about it a long time ago, but we never focused on the ink—rather, on making the other come.

As you do.

She traces her fingers along the petals of a large black rose, her eyes intent on each line. I watch her, and when the significance of the date on one of the petals registers, her eyes widen. Her gaze cuts to mine, and I swallow nervously.

"Is that the date we kissed? At the house party?"

My lips kick up at the side. "Yeah."

"It was the day before Callie's birthday." Her eyes widen even more. "Is this tattoo for me?"

I hold her gaze. "You know that answer."

I watch as her eyes move from mine to the tattoo and back.
“Why?”

It feels almost as if the tattoo will come alive and tell her the truth. “Because every time I look in the mirror, I want the day I fell in love to play in my head.”

“Benson,” she says hoarsely, her eyes filling with tears.
“Why didn’t you show me or tell me?”

“I don’t know. For so long, it’s just been a part of me. I felt like, if you wanted to know, you’d ask.”

Her eyes dance with mine, and then she leans in, our lips crashing together. Together, we remove our clothes, laughing when the cold bites into us, but both of us are so lost in lust for the other, the cold is not even a concern. Thankfully, my wallet is in my pocket, and I grab a condom before she guides my pulsating cock inside her tight, hot wetness. We both groan at the utter perfection of our connection as she slides down my cock with ease. When her ass hits my thighs and I’m filling her to the hilt, I press my forehead into her chest, her name falling from my lips. Her heart pounds against my face as she kisses the top of my head, threading her fingers through the back of my hair. She then lifts herself, and I cup her ass, squeezing her sweet globes with a fierceness.

I move her up and down my cock, her head falling back as her moans fill the pond house in the most stunning way. I trail my tongue along her breasts, her clavicle, and her neck as the rhythm we create has every inch of me burning just for her. I feel she’s almost there, her pussy squeezing my cock in all the right ways. Each thrust gets harder as I stretch her with the intent of making her completely mine. When she jerks, her back arching as she cries my name, I’m right there with her, a guttural roar leaving my lips as I explode inside her. She sits, her ass twitching against my thighs as I embrace her, my breathing erratic and my heart so full, just for her.

My love.

I look up at her as my body vibrates with my orgasm. Her neck is red, her chest flushed, along with her face. Her thick lips are parted, her eyes squeezed shut as tears slide down the

sides of her cheeks. I reach up, cupping her cheek so I can guide her to look at me. She doesn't open her eyes as I wipe her tears, and then I kiss her top lip. Against her lips, I ask, "Why the tears, my beauty?"

Her eyes slowly open, full of tears and absolute love. "I love you."

My lips quirk at the side. "That does nothing for my ego that you're crying because you love me."

She grins, cupping my face. "They're happy tears," she whispers against my mouth. "Because I'm deliriously happy with you."

My grip on her cheek tightens as her words hit me deep in my soul. I lean in, our eyes locked as our noses press together, our lips only inches from each other. "Cameron."

"Benson."

"I hope our love story is like Grandma and Grandpa Adler's. I want to live this incredible life with you and never live a moment without you."

Her breath catches, and so quietly, I almost can't hear her, she whispers, "I want that too."

I feel something click into place inside me when our lips meet, almost as if we're sealing our promise with a kiss.

A promise that will never be broken.

Quinn's Chapter Three

I'm setting myself up for heartbreak.

I know I am.

But space isn't a thing when it comes to Emery Brooks.

There isn't a memory I have of being in my grandparents' home in which Emery and I didn't share this love seat. We would play video games, do homework, talk about her business plan and inventions, talk about how I was going to make sure all my patients played hockey again, or just be together. We kissed for the first time in this spot. It escalated to us on the floor, but this couch is special to us. And as we've always done, I find myself beside her, her thigh touching mine, her shoulder against mine, while some movie plays.

I'm not paying attention. How can I? Between the grief threatening to suffocate me and the overwhelming love I have for this girl, I can't focus on shit. Damn it, she smells divine. Like bergamot and apple blossoms and her. Emery. I look over at her, fighting the urge to bury my face in her neck to drown in her scent.

I mean, hell, she's absolutely exquisite. Her wild curls are up in a high, thick bun with sweet tendrils falling all around her temples. Her gray eyes that are bloodshot from crying are framed by thick, dark lashes, while her lips are swollen from where I assume she is biting the inside of her lip. A nervous habit she has. She's put on a bit of weight, and I love how round her face is. My hands itch to cup her cheeks, feel the weight and heat of them.

I miss her. I love her. I want her.

Badly.

She looks over at me, and her breath catches. We don't say anything, just stare at each other, until she reaches out, tucking my hair behind my ear. "You need a haircut."

She smiles, and my lips curve slightly as her fingers brush my temple. "I don't know. I might grow it out."

"Don't. I love it all clean-cut, like you belong in a boardroom instead of an OR." I look away, taking a deep breath. "How is school going?"

I hate how painful this is. I feel like it's amplified by the grief flowing through me. "Good, really good. How's work?"

"Work," she says offhandedly as I glance back up at her. Deep sadness swirls in her gray eyes, leaving me breathless. "It's weird being here when they aren't."

"Yeah."

"It doesn't feel real."

I have to shake my head because it feels unreal that she's beside me, her body touching mine and intoxicating me with her perfume. My heart acts as a kick drum against my ribs when I look up to meet her gaze. "Did your family come?"

She nods. "Yeah. They're at the hotel."

"Why did you come here?"

Her brows knit as her eyes search mine. "I wanted to. I just talked to Grandma last week. You know I loved them, Quinn."

I shake my head. "I don't question that, but you could have seen us tomorrow."

"I didn't want to. I wanted to see you tonight."

"Is that why you looked right at me?"

"I always look for you first," she says simply and with a shrug, as if her statement is as normal as breathing.

"But you can't text or call other than my birthday and holidays?" I throw back, my eyes burning into hers.

Her lips press together as she turns, her knees knocking into mine. “Are we really going to fight?”

“I don’t want to fight.”

“Then what are you doing?” she asks, her eyes searching mine. “I came here to be with everyone because I loved this family and your grandparents as mine. Yeah, I gravitated to you from the jump because I miss you, Quinn. I’m not sorry for that, but I refuse to fight when we’re both sad. I want to just be with you. Grieve with you.”

I have to look away to hide the tears that are burning in my eyes. “So, you didn’t come for me?”

I don’t know why I’m asking that. It doesn’t matter if she did; I’m engaged. Something I need to tell her before she finds out from someone else. Like Aiden—or her mom, if Aiden tells her.

In a small voice, basically a whisper, she admits, “Maybe I did.”

I almost crack my neck, whipping up to look at her. “You did?”

“Selfishly, I wanted you to myself before you’re with everyone tomorrow.”

I blink. “So, you came to hook up?”

Her gray eyes turn to steel, and then they narrow. “Don’t be a jackass, Quinnifer. That’s not what I meant. We have history here—”

“Fuck, Emery, of course we have history. We’ve known each other since we were in diapers. There isn’t a memory I have that doesn’t include you. So, how did you want me to yourself, if not naked?”

I want to say I prepared myself for her to slap me, but I didn’t. Her hand cracks across my face with a vengeance. I cover the cheek she just slapped with my hand as she glares at me. “That’s not fair.”

“What’s not fair is that you haven’t had any contact with me, but then you presume we’ll fall into the way things were.”

“We always have,” she says with a shrug. “Nothing has changed.”

I scoff, shaking my head. “Everything has changed, Emery.”

“I mean, sure—”

“I’m getting married.”

Just as it did when I heard my grandparents had passed, my world stops. Emery’s eyes darken to storm clouds as her eyes narrow even further. Her brows shoot up in shock, but she recovers quickly. Only I would see the pain in her eyes. Because I know this girl better than I know myself. She looks down at her left hand and then back to me. “I don’t have a ring, nor did you ask me.”

Now I’m the one narrowing my gaze on her. “Says the person who posts photos of herself in a guy’s lap with his lips on her cheek?”

Every emotion—rage, fear, and amusement—moves across Emery’s face. “That’s my friend Johnny who prefers women with something hanging between their legs. He was very disappointed I didn’t have a dick.”

Any other time, I’d laugh and want the story, but not this time. “Fine,” I say casually. “I wanted you to hear it from me. I’m getting married this summer.”

Her lips curve but then press together, before laughter sputters out of her. She gets up, and I do the same, confused. I fully expected her to hit me again. “Okay, Quinn.”

She looks up at me, her eyes dark and devilish. “What does that mean?”

Emery scoffs, shaking her head. “Nothing. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes. First, you think I only want to see you to sleep with you,” she tells me, reaching for the door. “And then, you tell me you’re getting married. If you’re trying to make me jealous, it’s not cute.”

“I’m not trying to be cute,” I stress, but she isn’t listening. “I’m serious.”

Emery sighs as she walks out the door, and it hurts to see her walk away. I want to stop her, take it all back, and beg her to stay. But when she looks over her shoulder, her eyes burn into mine, and my request dies on my lips. Her narrow-eyed gaze has me gasping for my next breath. Usually when she looks at me like that, it’s before she devours me, but I know that’s not the case now. With a slow, knowing smirk, she says, “We’ll see.”

I furrow my brow. “We’ll see?”

Her lips curve at the side, those gray eyes wicked as they hold mine. “Yup. We will see.”

CHAPTER

Forty-Seven

BENSON

I am well aware that a funeral is not the place to discuss my brother's girl drama, but I don't think any of us can stop ourselves. In our defense, though, we've already done a lot of crying, our hearts hurt, and our heads hurt from being pillars of strength for Shea and his sister in front of everyone who came to support the Adlers. If I have to tell one more person that "We're gonna be okay," I may scream. I think we all feel that way. We're tired, so when Posey pulls up in a huge SUV and calls us all in for a sibling drive, I've never been more thankful for the peace my siblings bring me. Even if it means that Cameron has to ride back to the house with Callie and Angie. She'll be fine. She likes them a lot.

"*We'll see?*" Posey asks. "What did Emery mean, *we'll see?*"

"I don't know. After I told her about Ava, she looked at me like she wasn't sure if she wanted to kill me or fuck me, and she said 'We'll see.'"

Owen scoffs, smacking Quinn's shoulder. "Like, we'll see when she's over your bloody body with a knife?"

"Or maybe we'll see when she skins Ava and wears her face?" Evan suggests. "Could you imagine? Her in the wedding dress, ready to say I do, and then Ava's face slides off? Emery laughing all evil-like."

Shelli makes as face as me, and the twins chuckle at the gruesome image. Quinn gives us an annoyed glare. “Thank you. That’s terrifying.”

Evan gives him a look. “I mean, you did spare your future wife’s life and tell Emery you don’t like her at all, right?”

Quinn shakes his head. “She never asked, never gave me a chance.”

I hiss out a breath, genuinely worried for my brother. “You should have screamed at Emery, ‘But I don’t love her! I only love you! Please don’t kill me.’”

Quinn’s look is exasperated as he rolls his eyes. “She’s not going to murder anyone. I hope.”

“Hold tight to that hope,” Posey mutters, shaking her head. “I mean, should we hire security?”

Evan leans toward the front. “Callie said we should give it to him as his wedding gift.”

“I got a hundred for that,” Owen says, reaching for his wallet. “Or you want me to Venmo you, Posey?”

“Why am I collecting money?”

“Because you’re the mom of the group,” I say simply, and Shelli looks back at me.

“Hi, I’m the oldest.”

I make a face. “Eh, in my head, it goes Posey, Evan, Me, Owen, you, and then Quinn. He’s super immature, so you’ll always be above him.”

“Wait. How are you between me and my twin? We came out together, and you didn’t even come out of our mom!” Owen razzes, mussing my hair.

I laugh. “You’re right. I came from her heart, so really, I should be before Evan.”

Evan scoffs. “Please, we all know Mom loves me the most.”

“Not before Quinn,” Posey throws back at him.

Everyone laughs, but I notice Shelli holds my gaze. “You know I draw up the contracts. And word is you’ll be looking for one, come draft time.”

I grin back at her. “I’m going top ten, sister, and you can’t lock me in.”

She flips me the bird as Posey throws up one of her hands. “Okay, put your dicks up, children,” she calls to us, and then she looks in the mirror at Quinn. “I think we should let Quinn get his ass killed since we all know he doesn’t need to marry this girl. And since he is the favorite, we can all gain from this.”

“I don’t know. Emery might want a cut,” Owen muses, and Quinn looks at all of us.

“Y’all are my family, and this is how we solve my issue? By just letting her off me?”

We all think that through, and then we all basically agree. Quinn shakes his head, utterly confused, as Shelli turns to pat his leg. “Wanna know what Aiden and I think?”

“Wait. I didn’t know we were letting spouse’s opinions in!” Posey complains. “Boon is convinced she’s going to show up to the wedding and be in the back, screaming ‘I object!’ and then she kills everyone and captures Quinn for herself.”

I snort. “That’s a good one, and totally believable.”

“Angie thinks Quinn is going to call off the wedding and go to California to beg Emery to marry him.”

I nod. “Real good one. Quinn, are you taking notes?”

Quinn glares as Shelli says, “Aiden thinks she’s gonna move home and fight for you. That you won’t marry Ava and, like Boon thinks, you’ll marry Emery instead.”

“I mean, that could be a winner,” I say.

“Callie thinks Quinn should go into hiding.”

I give Evan a look. “Why does your spouse suck?” I can’t even get all the words out before laughing, but Evan still

punches me square in the arm. I notice Quinn cradling his face as he shakes his head.

“All of you are idiots.”

“What are Cameron’s thoughts?”

I scoff. “Please, my baby wasn’t thinking a lick of anyone but me.”

“Gag,” Shelli taunts. “I hope you didn’t hook up in our grandparents’ house.”

I give her a knowing look. “I caught you bent over the fireplace by Aiden six Christmases ago in that house.”

“She was riding him last Fourth of July,” Posey adds, and Shelli gives her a look of pure betrayal.

Owen scoffs. “I caught them last night in the bathroom.”

That has the whole car razzing and laughing as we pull into our grandparents’ driveway. A peaceful silence falls over the car as we look up at the house that holds so many memories. There are cars everywhere since immediate family was invited back here for the scattering of the ashes. Cameron is going to give a speech, which is confusing to me since she’s only met them once, but when Shea asked if anyone wanted to do it, she was the only one who volunteered.

She thinks nothing through, and I love it.

“Are you going to marry Cameron, Benny?” Shelli asks, though all our gazes are on the house.

“Yeah, I am.”

“Good,” Posey announces. “I’ve always liked her a lot.”

Owen nods as he leans in beside me again. “It’s good you’re not dumb like the golden child here.”

I chuckle as the girls smile back at us, and Quinn glares at his brother.

“I love you guys,” I say, and all of us look at one another.

Unlike in the Hallmark movies, Shelli says, “Mom should have stopped after Evan.”

“She couldn’t. I was holding on to his ankle on the way out!” Owen hollers after her, though I doubt she is listening.

“I wish I were an only child,” Posey sighs, throwing the door open.

“Hell, we all know I’m Mom’s favorite,” Evan reminds everyone.

“Have Mom. Dad likes me more than the lot of you,” Owen says, patting my back before jumping ahead of Quinn and me to follow Evan out. I look out to see them gathering their girls, and there between Angie and Callie is mine.

My beauty.

My lips move into a slow grin. I can see the anxiety rolling off her in waves. I don’t know why she thought she wanted to do this speech, but I know it’s going to be great. Because she’s great. She’s everything.

Quinn looks over at me, and I meet his troubled gaze. “What do you think Emery’s plan is?”

He shrugs, looking down at the invisible lint on his pants. “I know her, more so than anyone, and I honestly don’t know. Her face told me she wanted to kill everyone in her way, but her eyes, they were sure I wasn’t going to get married.” He looks up at me. “But I have to.”

I bring my brows in tightly. “Why?”

He only shakes his head. “Because as much as I believe Emery loves me, I know she won’t be with me the way I want her to be. She just doesn’t want me with anyone else.”

“We’ll see,” I say then, and his eyes cut to mine. “I think you’re about to find yourself in quite a pickle.”

He laughs. “I’m always in a pickle when it comes to Emery.”

“True.”

“Not everyone gets a true second chance.”

I look up, meeting Cameron’s gaze as she watches me, confused as to why I’m not getting out of the car. I swallow

hard and look at Quinn. “You know why I think you’ll end up with Emery?” His expectant gaze meets mine. “Because she came to be with you, to support you, to love you, just as Cameron did for me. She had a meet this weekend, she had a paper due, but she has been here, for all of us.”

I can see the pain fill his features. “Not everyone gets a happy ending, Ben.”

I shake my head at that. “We do,” I insist. “We Adlers. We do, because we don’t give up on who we love.”

Confusion shines in my brother’s eyes. “I’m marrying someone else.”

“We’ll see,” I say, feeling the words even more than I did before. I have no clue what Emery is going to do, but I know it’ll be something.

And Quinn will have no chance.

When our gazes meet, Quinn says, “I love you, brother.”

My grief-stricken heart soars. “I love you.”

CHAPTER

Forty-Eight

CAMERON

The pond house sits only feet away from where they are scattering Mark's and Jenna's ashes. Benson and I spent hours in there the night before, just losing ourselves in each other, and it's really hard to focus on such a sad event with the constant reminder of the things we did in that shed. I wish I could go in there with him and hide, because once more, I've made a bad choice.

I met Mark and Jenna one time. Once, yet here I am, about to give a speech about them. How? Fuck if I know. I don't know a damn thing about them except how much they loved each other and their kids, grandkids, and great-grandkids. The latter was already said over and over again at the funeral, so what in the hell am I supposed to say to the fifty people who are gathering around the pond?

I'm such an idiot.

Shea and Grace, his twin, are on their knees as Shea drills a small hole in the ice for them to pour Grandpa's and Grandma's ashes in. Apparently, this pond doesn't just hold memories for Benson and me; it's where the senior Adlers came daily. It was their spot—that we defiled and made our own yesterday. I'm not sure how I feel about that, but I need to let it go. I'm already stressing as it is.

Benson wraps his arms around me as I watch Shea, while Grace sobs. My soul hurts for them. For everyone. Losing both

parents without hours of each other isn't fair, but man, it's kind of sweet. I close my eyes as Benson moves his lips along my lobe. "Cameron, my love."

I lean into his mouth. "Yes?"

"Breathe," he reminds me, and I inhale. "Let it out slowly. I've got you."

My body melts into his as my heart sings for this man whom I know has me. He kisses my ear and then the spot below it. "I love you," he whispers, and my shoulders sag in relief. I don't know why they do that, because I know he loves me, but hearing him say it fills me with peace.

I turn my head, moving my lips close to his. "I love you."

"You ready?"

"Nope," I admit, laughing. "I have no clue what I'm doing."

He gives me a look of confidence, one that makes me feel like he knows I've got this, even though I don't think I do. "Giving a final word about two people who loved harder than anyone could ever fathom. A love for the ages."

My breath catches as our eyes meet. "I'm gonna use that."

I give him a quick kiss and then head toward where Shea and Grace stand with Elli between them, holding their hands. All three of them give me a strained smile, and I hug each of them, making sure not to slip on the ice or fall into the hole that Shea has made. Honestly, I'm surprised I don't do either as I look out around me. Along with Shea's kids, their spouses, and his grandkids, Grace's kids are here with their spouses and children. It's a huge crew, and instantly, my anxiety grows with each set of eyes I see on me.

I swallow before taking a deep breath. I find myself looking toward the two silver urns Grace and Shea hold, and my insides turn to mush. Tears gather in my eyes as I look for Benson. He's watching me from right where I left him, and when his lips curve just for me, a calmness washes over me.

I clear my throat free of emotion as my gaze doesn't leave his. "I met Mark and Jenna at Owen's wedding almost a year ago, and while I didn't get to know them well, I didn't have to know they were devoted to each other." I watch as Shea's hand tightens on Elli's, and nerves eat me alive. I don't want to let them down. I don't want to ruin this. I want to honor his parents the way they need to be honored, but maybe I wasn't the right one for this.

Breathe.

I've got you.

Benson's words fire into my head, building a wall against my self-doubt. I take a deep breath, filling my lungs before letting the air out in a long whoosh. "I grew up with a single mom who wanted desperately to be in love. She didn't find my stepdad until I was much older, and even then, I didn't really know what love was until I saw Evan loving Callie." I look out toward where my best friend is leaned into her fiancé.

"I had a front-row seat to their love, and then I met his family, and it was like a movie I wanted to watch on repeat. So, when I met Jenna and Mark, I felt like I knew their love story before I had the opportunity to witness it."

I turn my eyes to Shea. "I knew it because of your love story with Elli. I've known you guys for years, and how you love her made me want exactly what you two have. It's beautiful. But what's more beautiful is that you two passed it on to your children." I meet Grace's watery gaze as she squeezes the urn of one of her parents in her hands.

"Each of your kids has found someone they want to love the way they learned from you guys, and they'll teach that to their kids. I mean, that's a love for the ages. It's inspiring, and I'm proud to know you guys, to have the chance to witness so many different love stories that not even the best storyteller in the world could write."

A tear runs down my cheek, and I quickly wipe it away as I look down at the hole in the ice that is about to receive Jenna's and Mark's ashes. As one, they'll enter the water, just as they entered the next life. Together.

Just as I want to be with Benson.

I look up, meeting his loving gaze, and I smile widely for him. “I am currently writing my last paper for my major, and I know this might be a lot to ask, but can I read the final page that I wrote last night?”

Shea and Grace nod, and I swallow as I pull my phone from my jacket pocket, opening the document. I scroll to the paragraph I want and sigh deeply. “Social media is a highlight reel of all the great things in your life. Even when people post sad things, or moments in which their emotions are raw, it’s still what they chose to post. As I type this, I’m lying in the arms of a man I never thought would be in my highlight reel. I thought he couldn’t love me because of our history, but that history has nothing on the future we’re ready to build together.” I look up to see Benson’s intense gaze is only on me.

“It hasn’t been easy throwing out my own issues, my own trauma, and letting myself fall for someone who was only supposed to be for social media. But like parallel lines, he matches my energy and levels me out. He loves me despite how deeply I drag myself down, and he fights for what he wants. Which is me.” His eyes dance with mine, and I wipe away another tear.

“As he strokes his thumb across my hip, I know he’s in pain from losing his grandparents, and all I want is to make it better for him. I want to take all his pain and hold it for him because I don’t want him to hurt. But most of all, I want to give him the kind of love he saw in his grandparents. They built a strong life together, made a set of twins who went on to have their own kids with a partner that completed them just as Benson does for me. His grandparents left this world together, and that is the ultimate ending to an epic love story. What better way to honor that love than to love someone just as Mark and Jenna loved each other.”

I smile to myself, looking back at my phone. “While a part of me wants to skip to the end of Benson and me, going out together just as his grandparents did, I can’t wait for the middle part. The ups and downs. The laughing. The fighting.

All the things I'll post and all the things I won't. The hockey games with his number on my back, the broken hockey sticks, and his cocky grin when he scores just for me. Just as Mark and Jenna did, I am ready to have my own Adler love story and continue their impeccable example by loving Benson on and off social media." I press my lips together, making myself stop before I move on into the data part of my paper.

When I look up at Shea and Grace, their tears are flowing, but they also have smiles on their pain-filled faces. "We all can learn a lot from how Mark loved Jenna, and how she loved him. Thankfully, through you two, I'll always have that reminder. So, know that while they're gone, they'll never be forgotten. For each 'I love you' that leaves our lips, we honor the legacy they created for us."

I sigh deeply, and everyone starts to clap. Benson cheers louder than needed, but that's just him, and I can't hold back the grin that spreads my swollen lips. Shea leans in, kissing my cheek. "I couldn't have chosen a better person for my son."

My heart swells. "I could say the same, that Benson choosing y'all as his family was the best thing that could have ever happened to me."

"We love you, honey," Elli says, kissing my cheek.

"I don't know you, but that was beautiful. Thank you," Grace tells me, hugging me tightly, and I laugh in her arms. Once we part, I start toward Benson to find he's already across the ice, holding out his hand for me. I take it eagerly as his lips curve up just for me.

"Was it too much?" I ask quietly as he guides me carefully off the ice.

"It was perfect. You're perfect."

Our eyes lock when our feet crunch in the snow. Benson pulls me into his arms, his chest to my back, and gone are my feelings of oversharing. I honored Mark and Jenna by speaking of the love they inspired in all of us, and I should be proud. I am proud. Benson kisses my temple, and together, we

watch Shea and Grace sprinkle their parents into the pond at their spot.

A tear trails down my cheek, and I lean my head into Benson's chest. Our hearts pound in time together while Shea leans into Elli, his body shaking with sobs. Elli wraps her arms around his neck, holding him close to her chest before kissing the top of his head. My heart lurches at the sight. As tragic as it is, it's also beautiful. What a life Jenna and Mark had to leave such pain behind. They'll be truly missed.

Once the ashes are free, everyone silently starts for the house, though Benson doesn't let me go or follow behind everyone.

"Cameron," he says roughly in my ear, and I lean into him even more.

"Benson?" I ask as he turns me in his arms, and our gazes meet. "How are you holding up?"

"Better when you're looking at me like this."

"Like what?"

Lust swirls deep in his dark gaze, and my breath catches at how stunningly handsome he is. And he's all mine. A grin pulls at one side of his mouth as he tells me, "Like you're absolutely in love with me."

"Makes sense." I reach up, running my thumb along his bottom lip. "Since I am."

He cups my jaw with both his hands before leaning in, pressing his forehead to mine. I tuck my hands under my chin as his eyes bore into mine. "You know I'm yours."

My breathing stops. "I do."

"And you're mine?" His words form a question I never thought he'd ask. Benson has never questioned if I was his. I think we both know by now that we belong to each other.

"You know I am," I say, mirroring his earlier words. "I have been for longer than I want to admit."

Benson's eyes fall shut as he presses his forehead into mine. "I want everything you said." His words are so thick with emotion, and when his eyes meet mine once more, I'm breathless at the sight of his unadulterated love for me. "I know you said you wanna skip everything and get to where we die together, our ashes scattered in the same space, and go into the next life together. But Cameron, my heart wants the middle part too."

His eyes burn into mine and I feel like tiny sparkles are dancing along my spine. "I want to wake up and see your face every morning, knowing that my day will be great just because you smiled at me. I want you to hold my hand as we wait for my name to be called at the draft. I want to move in to our first apartment and argue about what color we'll paint the walls—and don't worry, I'll hire a maid." I laugh around the lump in my throat, my eyes burning with tears. "I want to see your eyes blaze for me when I ask you to marry me. I want to catch your tears when I declare my love for you. I want to hold you as we wait for a stick to tell us we're pregnant with a baby we're ready to have, and then cry together when we hear the heartbeat of our child." My lips start to twitch as tears gather in my eyes. "I want to reassure you, Cameron. I want to remind you how much I love you every chance I get. My beauty, I want to make every moment of your life worthy of being posted as your highlight reel."

I forget how to breathe. I don't know how I'm even forming thoughts at this point, but my God, I love him—with my whole being. My tears stream down my cheeks as I move my hands to his jaw, and when I notice the tears in his eyes, my heart explodes in my chest. He reaches up, catching my tears, and everything fades away. The cold, the sounds of the woods, everything but the love that burns inside me for this man who has become such a pillar in my life. Such a need.

"Do you know what it does to me when you say, 'I want'?"

Benson's eyes flash with excitement, his lips curving. "I don't. Tell me."

"It makes me fall deeper in love with you because I can't do anything but give you what you want." His eyes close as

tears leak from them, rolling down his pink cheeks. “Benson, you’re not just my second chance, you’re my home, my calm, my heart, and my safe place. I love you, and I’m yours. Always.”

“Always,” he whispers against my lips. “I am yours.” He glides his thumbs along my face, brushing away my tears. “Cameron.”

“Yes?”

“I want to kiss you.”

My lips curve against his. We’re practically kissing already, but I don’t point that out. Instead, I whisper, “Then kiss me, Benson.”

He does, and with that kiss, our future is sealed.

Epilogue

BENSON

The last few months have been a whirlwind.

Cameron scored a perfect ten on vault on senior night, and I lost my voice I was screaming so loudly for her. When the Bullies brought home the championship cup, Cameron cried and screamed louder than every fan in the rink. Her final project earned her an A like we knew it would, and our social media still buzzes for content from us. We are pushing brands like crazy, we do Amazon hauls, hockey hauls, and now that we're moving in to a new apartment, we've basically furnished the place with products from different companies. Because of all of our sponsorships, we've donated so much money to different charities around Nashville and the surrounding counties. While I love money, I love helping people more, and I really love falling deeper in love with Cameron each day.

After graduation, we toured all of Scotland and Ireland for a solid month before we had to come back for the draft. As expected, I went third and ended up on the Blackhawks. Elli is convinced she'll get me back, and as much as it hurts to be away from them, my home is wherever Cameron is. Thankfully, that place is beside me. Our move to Chicago has gone smoothly, and in the first week, Cameron found a gymnastics gym not only to coach at but also that asked her to run their marketing.

Not to sound biased, but my girl already has attendance at the gym up by eighteen percent.

She's a damn marketing genius.

I miss her.

God, I miss her.

This past weekend was Callie's bachelorette party, so Cameron went back home for that, leaving me alone. And I complained, much to her amusement. Even though we're always in contact, I miss her.

It's the first time we've been apart since I finally got her to realize we weren't an "arrangement." Ahfuckme, I still hate that fucking word. It's rather laughable now, given how insanely happy we are. How great we are. How aggressively in love we are. Though, we always have been, even when she didn't want us to be.

I crack my neck as I shuffle my skates on the ice while taking in lungfuls of air. Even though I got to where I wanted to be, the NHL, I know my work isn't done. I have games to help the Hawks win. And since I'm a winner, I gotta make sure I'm in tip-top shape. Better than I was in college, better than I've ever been. I line up my shot and slam my blade to the puck before it goes sailing through the air, hitting the back of the net. Over and over, I shoot, tightening up my wriester and working on my slap shot.

It isn't until I'm skating to the bench for a drink that I notice someone is watching me.

My gaze locks with a stunning pair of melted-chocolate eyes, and my grin comes without hesitation.

Cameron leans on the boards, her hair in wild waves along her shoulders, while her glossed-up mouth is tipped up in a smitten little smile just for me. But it's what she's wearing that has me in knots. My Bullies jersey covers her gorgeous body, and instantly, I'm knocked back to the first time I saw her in my number.

Even then, I knew she would always be mine.

I pick up speed as I cross the ice, and when I reach her, I lean in to press my lips to hers. She wraps her arms around my neck, holding tightly as our kiss deepens. I drop my gloves and throw my stick to the side as I wrap my arms around her waist, bringing her as close as I can with a board between us.

Parting, we're both breathless as our gazes lock. "Eh, my love, I've missed you."

Her eyes brighten for me. "I've missed you."

I kiss her nose as our foreheads meet. "I swear, your arms around my neck are my favorite thing ever."

She laughs softly. "I thought you liked my hips."

I groan against her lips before grasping said hips. "You're right. I think everything about you is my favorite."

"I doubt you'll feel that way when I tell you I forgot my charger at Callie's and my makeup bag."

I grin, kissing her top lip. "Nothing could change the way I feel. All that's replaceable. You, on the other hand, yeah, nothing can change how I feel about you, my beauty."

She kisses me again. "I love you."

"Ah, I love you."

Our lips meet once more as I gather the jersey she wears in my fingers, her hands cupping my neck. When we part, she runs her thumb along my bottom lip. When I notice tears welling in her eyes, my heart becomes a frozen puck in my chest. "Cam, what's wrong?"

A tear spills over as she meets my gaze. "I need to tell you something."

My brows knit, confused by her tears. When she takes a deep breath, I can feel her heart pounding in her chest. "Hey now, breathe," I say, gathering her in my arms. "I've got you. What's wrong?" She nuzzles her nose into my neck, and I chuckle slightly. "I know I'm about to sound super insecure, but did you find yourself in an arrangement with a guy when you were down on Broadway?"

She pulls her head back and gives me the driest look ever. I laugh, unable to contain my amusement. “I’m gonna act like you didn’t just say that. *Arrangement*,” she mutters, shaking her head.

“Good plan,” I agree, wiping away her tears. “Talk to me.”

She swallows nervously, her eyes never leaving mine. She licks her lips and then sighs. “I’m pregnant.”

Two words. Just two.

But unlike before, fear doesn’t slam into me. Not this time. This time, this second chance at having a future with Cameron has me fighting back my grin. “Pregnant, eh?”

Her lips quirk, her eyes burning into mine. “Yeah.”

“But we use condoms.”

She nods. “I stopped taking my birth control.”

My grin widens. “You did?”

“Yeah. I was breaking out really bad, and then I was going to go get an IUD, but then I kept forgetting to make the appointment. And then I realized I didn’t want to—” I cut off her rambling by taking her lips with mine. She melts into me, and my soul sings for this girl. For everything she blesses me with.

I pull back, cupping her face. There is no apprehension in her eyes; all I see is joy and love. “You didn’t want to?” I ask against her lips, just like I did back in freshman year, and she smiles.

She shakes her head. “No, I know I should have talked to you first, but I love what we have, and I want to have your child.”

My heart thuds in my chest. “Do you wanna get married?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Then we will.”

Her lips quiver, and I cuddle her in my arms. “In the nightstand at the house is your engagement ring that Shea gave

me to give to you. It was Jenna's moonstone ring that Mark gave her last Christmas. I had planned to ask you at Evan and Callie's wedding since, apparently, Callie told you that's how this would play out."

A laugh bubbles out of her. "She had it all right, except for there being a baby in my belly."

Emotions slam into me at that. I pull back and lift my jersey to place my hands on her flat stomach. A gasp leaves her lips at my cold hands, but she doesn't pull away or stop me. Our baby is in there. My mouth goes dry as a lump forms in my throat. I run my thumb along her flesh as her hands cover mine.

"Are you happy?" she asks then, and I look up to meet her unsure gaze.

My stomach clenches. "I had this whole proposal plan. I had all the words ready. My declaration of love that is only for you. I had planned on making you cry, but I'm the one fighting back tears, because happy doesn't even begin to describe what I'm feeling, Cameron." Her fingers thread with mine over her stomach. "I'm complete because of you."

Her jaw ticks as her tears come fast down her cheeks. "So am I."

I capture her cheeks in my hands, brushing aside those tears that fall in rivers. "Wanna get married today?"

Her eyes dance with mine. "Today?" she laughs, but it dies off when she sees I'm not laughing. "You're serious?"

"I am always serious when it comes to you," I tell her, dusting my lips along hers. "I *want* to marry you. Now."

Her breath catches, and then she starts to ramble. "What about Elli, Shea, everyone? My dad would—"

"Cammy."

Her eyes drop. "Benny?"

I kiss her nose as her eyes slowly meet mine. "Marry me."

Cameron's eyes brighten in a way that lets me know her answer before she even utters a word. She takes my hand in hers and then squeezes it three times. Everything inside me goes still as my gaze stays locked with hers. When I told her the truth of the hand-squeezing bit, it became something super special to us. Something we do when we need to reassure the other.

God, I want her to be my wife. Right now.

"Answer me," I practically beg.

"You know my answer."

"I do," I say, moving close enough for my lips to touch hers. "But say it."

Her eyes darken as her fingers squeeze mine.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

"It's yes. It's always yes when it comes to you."

Our lips curve up at the same time right before she pulls me in for a kiss so full of love, I feel it everywhere. As she gathers me close, I get lost in the kiss, in the feel of her.

In the arms of my wife and the mother of my children.

THE END.

Acknowledgments

When this book comes out, I'll officially be in my forties. It's wild, y'all. I don't feel forty, except when I try to bend down and my hip pops. LOL. One thing is for sure, I'm doing so much better mentally. I'm still sad, but I'm handling it a lot better. I still shut down, and I need breaks from social media, but I'm doing so much better than I was.

I feel like writing Cameron's ADHD helped me a lot. Benson reminds me so much of my own husband, who really does support all my craziness. I enjoyed the love between these two, the over-the-top way Benson loved Cameron. And then add in the Adler gang and QUINN??? Y'all, Emery???? She killed me with the "We'll see." And that chick kept telling me the wildest stuff, and I was sitting there like, um...chick, sit down. LOL. It's insane. I'm insane!! LOL. Thankfully, y'all still love me and support all this crazy!

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As always, thank *you*, the reader of this book, for always standing beside me, supporting me, and believing in me.

I am forever grateful for you.

Love,

Toni

Also by Toni Alco

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About Toni Aleo



WALL STREET JOURNAL, NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR TONI ALEO IS AN AUTHOR YOU CAN'T MISS!

make sure to Join my Mailing List: <https://www.subscribepage.com/tonialeonewsletter>

My name is Toni aleo and I'm a #PredHead, #sherio, #potterhead, and part of the #familybusiness!

I am also a wife to my amazing husband, mother of a WKU Hilltopper and a gymnast, and also a fur momma to Phoebe, Gaston el Papillon & Winston.

You can usually find me hollering for the whole Nashville Predators since I'll never give my heart to one player again. When I'm not in the gym getting swole, I'm usually writing, trying to make my dreams a reality or being a taxi for my kids. I'm obsessed with Harry Potter, Supernatural, Disney and anything that sparkles! I'm pretty sure I was Belle in a past life and if I could be on any show it would be supernatural so I can hunt with Sam and Dean.

Also, could I LOVE hockey anymore?

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