



WHEN LIFE THROWS
YOU A CURVEBALL,
ONLY LOVE CAN KNOCK
IT OUT OF THE PARK.

IMPERFECT PLAYER

L.M. REID

Imperfect Player

L.M. Reid



Scarlet Lantern Publishing

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About L.M. Reid

Also By L.M. Reid

Chapter 1

Everly

The room is buzzing with activity, and I'm standing in the doorway taking it all in. Appraising it. Dissecting it. Scrutinizing every single detail to make sure everything is going perfectly.

People are mingling. More importantly, the right people are mingling. Players and executives. Tripp and executives. Everyone establishing connections, building rapport.

Check.

People are smiling. Laughing. Having a good time. Subjective as that might be, from what I can see?

Check.

The food?

I grab an hors d'oeuvre off a passing tray and emit a soft moan the moment I bite into it.

Check.

Definitely check.

The drinks?

Servers holding trays of champagne maneuver flawlessly through the room. The bar is full, and the bartenders are busy.

Check.

“Everything is going great.”

The unexpected voice at my side startles me, and my hand flies to my chest. Linnie. My boss’s wife and my co-collaborator on this event.

“You know how important this party is to Tripp,” I tell her.

Not that she needs the reminder. More than anyone, she knows what this party means to Tripp.

Everything.

Logical or not, he believes that this little soiree is the sole reason for why Advantage Player is so successful, and in turn, why he is so successful. He’s held it every year since he started the company five years ago.

It’s where he signed his first deal, landing then-client Peter Hampton an outstanding deal with PowerPunch, the top selling hydration drink in the United States. Tripp swears it was all because PowerPunch executive, William Moore, got to see Peter for who he really was, not just the athlete persona that was all over television and social media.

Who am I to argue that?

“I know how important it is to you too. That’s why I’m telling you that everything is amazing.” She nods her head in

the direction where Tripp is standing, chatting away with a couple players and some execs from the top brands in the business. He's laughing and having a great time. "Looks happy to me."

Linnie's right. He does, and she would know better than anyone. The fact that Tripp is smiling, and schmoozing, should settle my nerves—but it doesn't.

Advantage Player is my life. I eat, sleep, and breathe this place. Making sure tonight is perfect? That Tripp is happy? That's top priority right now.

That, and I'll do just about anything to keep my mind off my breakup with Kai.

Christ, even thinking his names causes the anger to rise in me. The anger I focus on rather than the heartache. It's been months since he walked out, telling me he was on to bigger and better things. It was only last night, though, that I realized he meant bigger and better breasts, considering the woman he was splashed all over Instaspace with.

When Tripp glances in our direction, his smile is automatic. It makes me forget about Kai for a moment and smile back at him. With energetic hands, he waves us over.

Linnie loops her arm through mine. "Show time."

"Show time," I repeat as I square my shoulders and begin to walk with her, arm in arm.

The moment we reach the group, Tripp pulls Linnie against him and presses a kiss to her cheek, the epitome of a proud,

love-drunk husband. For a moment, a fleeting one, I feel a twinge of jealousy over what they have. It's what I thought I had found with Kai. Right up until he made damn sure I knew I hadn't.

"I'd like you to meet my wife, Linnie," Tripp tells everyone in the group, as if the sappy smile on his face wasn't enough to let them know.

Her smile appears genuine as she shakes hands with a bunch of men she doesn't know or care about. Sports. Athletes. Schmoozing. That's Tripp's world, not Linnie's. Linnie is a teacher. She loves children. Loves teaching them even more. I guess it's true what they say—opposites really do attract.

"And this," Tripp's voice rises, "is Everly. She's the best agent I have. Probably the best in the business. She and Linnie put this event together."

A tall gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair stretches his hand out to me, his eyes raking over me as he does. I immediately curse my curves. The blue dress I selected—stunning but professional—falls to my knees. The material is tight enough to show off my curves, but not enough to make a man pant. At least, I didn't think it was. I'm always careful when it comes to my attire, trying to still be true to myself while at the same time not putting myself out there as a sexual being.

I take his hand and shake it, trying to ignore the way he rubs his thumb over the back of my hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Everly. The event is..." His eyes drop to my breasts. "Impeccable."

“Thank you so much.”

I tug my hand back, but Mister Salt-and-Pepper doesn't seem to care. He holds it a little tighter, his eyes turning a little darker. My smile falters.

Tripp and Linnie are otherwise preoccupied with players and businesspersons, too busy to notice the extra-long, leering look the man is giving me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see movement. Movement in my direction.

Then I'm wet.

Soaked, actually.

Mister Salt-and-Pepper releases my hand and jumps back, trying to avoid any splash of the liquid that's now covering the front of my dress.

My eyes meet those of the man whose drink is currently all over me.

“Oops,” he says, a cocky smile on his handsome face.

I would read him the riot act if those brown eyes of his didn't have me stunned silent. Who am I kidding? Every piece of him has me stunned silent.

I've heard of him, seen him on television. Hell, I know everything there is to know about him—not that he allows much to be known. None of it compares to being up close and personal with him. Those eyes. That smile. The combination of the two? Lethal.

Ethan Ambrose. Pitcher for the Remington Railcats.

Party boy. Troublemaker. Tripp, and Advantage's, top client even though the man has yet to do a single endorsement, or much of anything, really. Besides being the best pitcher in the league, that is.

Yeah, I should be pissed. Or say something. After all, the man just spilled his drink on me, and all he has to say in return is oops?

Instead, I stand here staring at him, trying to remain calm and professional.

Tripp runs over with napkins which Ethan promptly takes from him before I can reach them myself.

"Here, let me help you," he says, pressing the napkins to my stomach, my chest—my breasts.

Utterly stunned by the events transpiring, I allow his hands to linger on my breasts a little longer than they should before snapping out of my fog and swatting his hand away.

"It's okay, I've got it," I say, taking the napkins from him.

"I'm not trying to cop a feel, I swear," he tells me, though the wicked smile on his lips says otherwise. Still, I believe his words more than his smile. There's something deceiving about his smile—something missing. Beautiful as it is, it doesn't quite make its way to his eyes. For me, the eyes are where you find the truth. In his, all I see is heat and heart.

Yep, it's always in the eyes.

“It’s fine, really. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to clean up.”

I brush past Linnie and the group of men and head to the nearest restroom.

Standing before the mirror, I try to blot out the dampness. Luckily, whatever he was drinking was clear, so it doesn’t appear to be staining, but the fabric is still soaked.

Behind me, a figure appears in the mirror. I jump, startled by his presence.

“What the hell are you doing in here?” I ask, astounded, as I turn to face him.

Only Ethan Ambrose would think he has *carte blanche* to walk into any room he wishes, including the women’s restroom, without repercussion. I would argue it, but let’s face it, very few women would complain. Including me.

He holds up a rag. “Club soda. It’ll help.” He takes a step toward me. “May I?”

Unable to speak, I nod my response, gaze fixed on his hand as it attempts to clean up the mess.

He chuckles. “Might be better off if we just stick you under one of the hand driers. This is only making you wetter.”

Holy hell, he has no idea just how true his words are.

I clear my throat before I speak. “It’s okay. I’m not worried about it.”

“I’m Ethan,” he tells me, as if he, of all people, needs introduction.

“Everly. Everly Mann.”

“*The* Everly Mann?”

“The? You’ve heard of me?”

“Not a player in the world who hasn’t. Beautiful, smart—the go-to agent.”

“Glad to hear my reputation precedes me.”

“That it does.” He pauses for a moment, eyes searching mine—for what, I’m not sure. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just a little ... wet. Like I said, it’s—”

“Not that. The guy. The one that was ... being insistent.”

The tension eases from my body as I stare at him. This was no accident. This was a ... save?

“You saw that?”

“Him not letting go of your hand? Yeah. The way he was looking at you?” His fists clench at his sides. “Saw that too.”

“I’m fine, thank you. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal. You shouldn’t have to deal with that shit. I’ll talk to Tripp.”

“You will do no such thing. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“I’m sure you are, but—”

“No buts. I am. The last thing I need is some knight in shining armor trying to save me by making me die of embarrassment.”

I brush past him to leave, but his hand grabs my arm.

“Wait, please. I’m sorry. I’m just trying to help.”

The sincerity in his voice weakens my resolve. My adamant behavior is indicative of me always feeling like I have to try to survive in a man’s world. I have to be tougher. Stronger. More willing to put up with shit that others wouldn’t or don’t have to.

“I know. Thank you.”

Apology accepted. He still doesn’t release my arm. “Let me make it up to you.”

I’m not sure what it is that he’s trying to make up for. The spill? The butting into something that doesn’t concern him? The ... sexy look in his eyes?

“Not necessary.”

“It is to me. Please?”

Why in the hell is he being so insistent?

“And how exactly do you intend on making it up to me?”

His eyes sparkle as his lips curve into a smile. “Dance with me?”

Dance with him? Is he serious?

My answer should be an immediate no. He’s a client. Yet here I am feeling like a schoolgirl that just got asked to dance by the star quarterback. In a way, I guess that’s exactly what I am. I’m an agent, a nobody. And he’s ... Well, he’s a star all

right. A highly sought after, sexy-as-hell pitcher for the top team in the league.

Ethan walks to the bathroom door and opens it for me, sweeping his arm out before him, giving a slight bow as he does. He's not taking no for an answer. In fact, I'm pretty sure no isn't a word he's ever even heard before.

In silent acceptance, I walk past him. The moment I do, his hand is on the small of my back, leading me to the dance floor.

We face each other, eyes locking. His arms are outstretched, inviting me in. I take a step toward him. His hands reach for my waist and pull me against him until my body is firmly planted against his hard, strong, solid one. His hold is possessive, secure, as though he's protecting me in some way. I like it. I like it more than I should.

When he speaks, the deep timbre of his voice settles in my belly.

“So, Everly Mann, are you enjoying the party?”

Christ, he sounds sexy even asking the simplest of questions.

The truthful answer is, I am—now. I know full well how that will sound though, and while I might be dancing with the man, I have no intention of flirting with him. He's a client. Work. Off limits.

“Yes and no. Honestly, it's been stressful more than anything.”

“Stressful? Why?”

“I planned the event. The happiness of everyone in the room is resting on my shoulders.”

“Wow, that’s quite a load to bear.”

“I want things to go well for Tripp. Tonight’s important to him.”

Ethan looks around the room. “Pretty sure you can stop worrying. Everyone seems to be having a great time.”

His smile illuminates his face, displaying every gorgeous feature on it. The deep dimples on his cheeks, the chiseled jaw line hidden beneath the five o’clock shadow he’s sporting. His eyes are filled with amusement and mischief.

“Besides, I’m pretty sure that the happiness of everyone in the room is more dependent on how strong the drinks are rather than if you picked the right centerpiece. Which you totally did, by the way.”

“Thank you,” I say with a laugh. “And I suppose you have a point.”

There’s something in how he says it that allows my body to finally relax. Ethan can feel it too. He holds me a little tighter, our bodies pressed together. This time when he smiles at me, the smile makes its way to his eyes and entrances me. Who knew brown could sparkle? I am lost not only in the sparkly pools of chocolate but also the comfort of his embrace. It’s like a warm coat, making me feel safe and secure, allowing my worries to slip away without even thinking about it.

Ethan is nothing like I expected. He's funny and charming. The player, the bad boy, all the things I've heard about him are nonexistent in this moment.

When the song ends, neither of us lets go. Even as the new song begins, something with a quick tempo, we stay standing in the middle of the dance floor, arms around each other, neither of us wanting this moment to end. I'm completely content being lost in the moment, the feeling—him.

Only the things I'm feeling, I shouldn't. Not just because of his reputation or the fact that I swore off dating athletes after Kai, but because on top of all that, he's also a client. Maybe not mine, no. But he's still a client of Advantage Player, and that's more than enough to make him off limits.

So then why is it so hard to walk away?

Why doesn't he seem to want me to go any more than I want to leave?

Walk away, Everly. Just walk away.

Taking a step back, I smile at him. "Thank you for the dance, but I need to get back to work."

He nods his head in acceptance.

"Hey, Everly," Ethan calls after me. I halt in my spot, but I don't turn to face him. "Thanks for the dance. It was ... real."

It was ... real.

Ethan's words continue to replay in my head as I make my way through the party, chatting up a few clients and some

potential sponsorship deals for them. I can't help but agree with him. It was real. In fact, it's the most real thing I've experienced in, well, a long time.

Even more than the real, unconditional love I was supposed to have shared with Kai.

Or maybe that's it. Maybe it's just hitting home a little more because of the breakup, my anger, the pain. Maybe it only felt real because it's the first moment of real enjoyment I've had in weeks.

"We meet again."

Even though tonight is the first time I've ever heard his voice, I recognize it instantly. As does my body and the way it viscerally reacts to the sound of it.

"Small world," I say as I turn to face him.

Why is he here? Does he feel it too? This draw. A connection. Something so intangible, but undeniable at the same time.

Ethan turns to the bartender. "One whiskey and a water."

He hands me a glass of whiskey and takes the water for himself, raising it in the air.

"Hold on," I say, holding my hand in the air to silence him. "You mean to tell me you spilled water on me?"

A sly smirk graces his lips. It's all the response I need to know that I am, in fact, right.

"Oh my God. So, the club soda?"

He shrugs.

I gasp, unsure what to feel right now. Violated? I should, but I don't. Turned on? I shouldn't, but I do.

"Ethan." I say his name as though it's a scolding.

"What can I say, one touch wasn't enough."

My mouth falls open to speak, but I have no words. No words for what he did, or him in general.

Pointing my finger in his direction, I say, "I can't believe you did that."

Can't I though? After all, this is Ethan Ambrose. A man who does what he wants and gets what he wants.

Not to mention that smile. Those dimples. Fucking hell.

"For the record, I'm not trying to get in your pants," he tells me, unprompted. "Or, in this case, under your dress."

His words are a definite ouch to my ego, though I swallow down the bitter taste that they cause and smile at him.

"Good to know. I don't date clients." I stutter out the sentence, his words affecting me more than they should.

"It's not you. It's me."

"Full of cliché lines, aren't you?"

He chuckles. "It's not a line. It's the truth. Trust me, sunshine, you deserve better than me."

"Sunshine, huh?"

He shrugs.

“A little ray of sunshine in an otherwise dark existence.” He nods to the glass of whiskey in my hand. “Drink up.”

I debate the drink in my hand. I need to keep a clear head, especially around him, despite the fact that apparently he’s not trying to get under my dress.

The challenge in his eyes has me throwing caution into the wind.

I’m about to bring the glass to my lips when he stops me.

He clinks his glass against mine. “To Everly, the smartest, most gorgeous woman I’ve ever met.”

“All that after knowing me for, what, a whole five minutes?”

“Six, but who’s counting.”

His eyes are steadfast on mine as he watches me take a slow sip of the amber liquid, the alcohol burning my throat as it goes down.

I shake my head as the liquid warms my belly.

“How the hell do people drink this?”

He shrugs. “Personally, I like the taste, but you? You should drink it for the effect. Chug it.”

“You want me to chug whiskey?”

The bartender sets down a couple more glasses.

“It’ll be a lot more fun if you do.”

I pick up one of the glasses and raise it, his voice chanting a quiet encouragement.

“Chug it, chug it, chug it.”

“Here goes nothing.” I pinch my nose and down the drink, surprised at how much easier, and quicker, it goes down.

By the time I finish glass number three, I’ve forgotten all about my breakup and my responsibilities for the party. I’m drunk and lost in a sea of chocolate pools and dimples that are so big they could swallow me whole. And I like it. I like the way being around him feels. There’s an ease to it. Something I’ve never experienced before. Not with any other man. Certainly not with Kai.

As we stand there, silently taking each other in, the music changes. The tempo is quicker, modern. The real party has begun. Several of the players make their way to the dance floor.

“Join me?”

What the hell. I’ve already spent the better part of the evening with him. What could one more dance do?

Hesitantly, I wrap my arm around his, and together we walk to the dance floor.

Ethan pulls me close, my body pressed against his as he moves to the music.

There is a whole group around us, most of the players from the Remington Railcats, including my very own client, Maddox—who is currently shooting daggers at Ethan, but I’m having too much fun to care why.

Instead, I smile up at Ethan.

“What?” he asks.

“You’re way more fun than I thought you would be.”

He tosses his head back in laughter. “Is that so?”

I nod. “I figured you were all talk, no dance.”

“No dance, huh?”

Another nod.

“I’ll show you just how fun I can be.”

The undertone of his voice, the insinuation of his words, leaves my body humming as we continue to move around the dance floor. This time, his body grinds against mine as he moves.

I’ve lost track of time and my ability to think clearly. When the music ends and the lights raise, I pout.

“Looks like you threw one hell of a party, sunshine. Even you enjoyed it.”

Thanks to him—words I think, but don’t speak.

With his hand on the small of my back, Ethan escorts me out of the venue. “Do you need a ride?”

I nod my head in the direction of the large black bus that several members of Advantage Player are entering.

“Party bus, I’m good. Thank you.”

He leans in and presses his lips to my cheek.

“Goodbye, Everly.”

“Goodbye, Ethan.”

The words sound so final when I wish they were anything
but.

Chapter 2

Ethan

Everly Mann was quite the unexpected surprise the other night. I'd dreaded going to that party, but I'd been forced to by my coach. The man was holding onto her a little longer than he should have been, and way longer than I liked.

I'd noticed her the moment I entered the venue. Long legs, blond hair, curves in all the right places—curves that she tried to hide with the beautiful, but still professional, dress. She doesn't have the kind of curves you can hide though. She has the kind that clothing clings to sinfully. Damn, but if I wasn't ready to sin.

“Hey, Ambrose, who was the hottie you were hanging all over the other night?” Fox asks as I make my way to my locker, the towel slung low on my hips.

Elias Fox, catcher for the Remington Railcats. My catcher. Also, the only guy on the team not afraid of giving me shit.

“None of your damn business,” I tell him, my mind wandering to the hottie he's talking about. Everly.

While yes, every part of me wanted her upon first sight, that's not why I'd approached her. It's not the reason that I spilled my drink on her. All I'd wanted was to rescue a poor unsuspecting woman from the clutches of John Killion, owner of the Remington Red Wings hockey team and a real dick bag. The guy is notorious for hitting on women half his age, making promises with no intention to keep them. I can only imagine what he'd had in mind for Everly. Everly who is so sweet, so sexy, so damn amazing without even knowing it.

There were a million things I could have done to step between them. None seemed half as tempting as what I'd done, spilling my drink on her. Or as I like to look at it, making her wet. And isn't that the damn goal now? Making the woman wet.

I wasn't supposed to be attracted to her. Worse, I wasn't supposed to like her. But I am and I do, and now? I'm fucked.

I don't do things like this. I don't have feelings or want women for anything more than sex. But I did last night, and I still do now. With Everly.

Maddox Prescott, first baseman, appears out of nowhere. It's as though the mention of his agent's name has somehow summoned him here.

"She's off limits," he tells me.

The stern look on his face meets the amused one on mine. Call it a battle of wills, call it stupidity, but I take his bait and I up the ante.

“Little late for that,” I tell him.

The insinuation is enough to have him charging at me, eyes filled with fury, muscles tensing.

“She’s a good person, Ambrose. Don’t fuck with her,” he orders me.

“Relax, asshole. I was just kidding. Nothing happened.”

Nothing will happen.

Entranced with her as I was—her beauty, her laugh, every goddamn piece of her—I did manage to learn one thing during our short time together. The woman is too damn good for the likes of me.

Not that it stops me from thinking about her or wanting her. I’ve certainly spent more than enough time cursing myself for not having acted on it while simultaneously applauding myself for my restraint.

“It better not,” he says, stopping dead in his tracks, hands falling to his sides. “The last thing she needs is another asshole in her life.”

“You referring to yourself or someone else?”

I ask the question out of curiosity, only slightly enjoying the fact that I’m able to get in a small dig at Maddox.

I like the guy and all, don’t get me wrong. Problem is, he knows too much, knows me too much—my past, my history, my issues. He was there front and center when my life took a nosedive. He was also the one that helped me get it back. My

life, baseball, all of it. Him and Coach, that is. They were the ones that picked me up off the floor, covered up the shit I did, and got me the help I needed. As much as I hate to admit it, if not for them, I honestly don't know where I'd be.

Less deserving of Everly and her kind eyes and gorgeous body, that's for sure. Not that I'm exactly deserving of her now. Sure, I might be sober, but my head is still fucked up and the demons are always in me, threatening to reemerge. She doesn't deserve that. No one does.

"I'm referring to her ex."

Her ex, huh?

"Who's her ex?"

Maddox looks at me and shakes his head. "Do you ever pay attention to anyone but yourself?"

I shrug. "Not really."

There's a smug smile on his face, despite the fact he just called the guy an asshole. "Kai."

"Kai?" I ask, confused. "As in Kai Iona?"

Please say no. Please say no.

"The one and only."

Fucking hell. Not that I ever thought I actually stood a chance with her, but goddamn, no doubt I don't now.

Kai Iona is the god of the soccer world. He's highly respected, a complete gentleman. He works with countless

charities. He comes from a good family, strong values. A
momma's boy, if you will.

No way in hell does a woman like her go from a guy like
him to one like, well, me. Unlike Kai, I come from a broken
home, asshole parents, and the foster care system, and I am not
a poster boy for anything. The only thing I have going for me
is my charity work, but that's something I keep on the down-
low. It's not something I advertise. Not the way Kai does, at
least.

“What happened?”

There has to be more to the story. I mean, did they just grow
apart? Who breaks up with a woman like her? Based on the
way Maddox referred to him as an asshole, I'm inferring that
he was the one that did the dumping.

Looks like Mr. Perfect does have a fault after all—he's a real
fucking idiot.

“Not my place to tell.”

Either that means that he doesn't know, or he really has
Everly's back. Either way, I'm okay with it. I shouldn't be this
curious anyway. Can't be. There's no point.

Nothing is going to happen between me and Everly Mann.

Nothing.

Nada.

Zilch.

The visual of her in that blue dress is still vivid in my mind.

She was fucking stunning in it, despite the fact that it wasn't very revealing. It left plenty to the imagination, and fuck if my imagination didn't go into overdrive.

I've spent more time than I care to admit over the past several days thinking and fantasizing about a woman who is off limits. Jerking off to the visual of her too.

It's not just her beauty, those amazing tits, or how her ass felt as it ground against me while we danced. It's her. The way she laughed, her smile, the almost shy look she got every time my eyes scraped over her body.

More than anything it's the way she made me feel.

There was a connection. Something that I can't quite put my finger on and sure as fuck couldn't explain if I tried. But it was there, and it was real.

Thanks for the dance, Everly. It was real.

The most real fucking thing I've felt in my life.

That right there is the problem. She's not just some woman that I can fuck to sate a need and then run. No, Everly is so much more than that. She is the whole damn package. The kind you keep around, dote on. Love.

Things that I'm not capable of. Things she deserves.

I nod in acceptance of his answer. What else can I do?

“Well, no worries. Your agent is safe from big, bad Ethan Ambrose. I promise.”

The look on his face says he doesn't believe me, and quite frankly, I'm not buying it either.

I can tell myself to stay away. I can do whatever I can to avoid her. I can do all the things, make all the promises. But deep down, I can't help but feel like I'm going to be breaking every one of those fucking rules.

Why?

Because Everly Mann is worth everything.

If only I had anything worth a damn to offer her.

Chapter 3

Everly

“So? How was the party?” Chelle asks, as we sit in the Mexican restaurant down the street from my house.

It’s Margarita Wednesday.

That’s what Chelle and I like to call the days that we meet at La Caretta and drink margaritas while consuming way too many tortilla chips dipped in our favorite queso.

It’s a weekly ritual where we spill our guts about our lives, something we started when she first moved back to Remington. I swear, without it, one, if not both of us, would lose our minds.

“Everything went great. Tripp was pleased.”

“Tripp is pleased with everything you do,” she says with a shake of her head. “I honestly don’t know why you worry so much. The man literally went out of his way to steal you from another company and offered you a salary he couldn’t afford to pay you.”

That right there is exactly why. I never want to do anything to let him down.

When Tripp decided to bring me over to Advantage, he offered me an insane salary, one that he couldn't afford when he was just starting out. I appreciated the sentiment, the value that he was putting on me as an employee. We were never going to get Advantage up and running if he was paying me what he offered. He knew it. I knew it. When I accepted the position, I did it under one condition: he pay me the salary I had written down on a slip of paper. He wasn't allowed to see it until he agreed, which eventually, he begrudgingly did.

He blew out a breath when he saw the meager salary I was requesting. Just enough to cover the bills.

He argued. I argued back.

I didn't care about the money. I cared about the job. About proving myself. I could either work for a firm, struggling to make my way through the ranks, fighting men for the clients I know I should have, or? Or I could work for a man who respects me. Thinks highly of me. Wants me and only me to help him build his business.

“He wouldn't have hired you if he didn't think you were talented. He sure as hell wouldn't trust you with his high-profile clients.”

“It's not that.”

Not completely, at least.

“I know. It's Kai.”

She rolls her eyes, beyond familiar with the constant barrage of insults Kai used to sling my way. How I'm not good enough. How I'll never succeed.

Kai is the last thing that I want to think about right now. Especially as I'm still riding high off the other night. The evening I spent with Ethan. The way he made me laugh. Made me feel.

“That aside, I really just don't want to let Tripp down. He gave me the most amazing opportunity, pushing me further along in my career than I would have ever hoped to be anywhere else at this point.”

She takes a sip of the mango margarita before her. “I get it, but let's be honest here. Advantage wouldn't be as successful as it is if it weren't for you. You both benefited, and you should both reap the rewards. So quit worrying and start enjoying.”

Worrying is just a part of who I am. If I'm not worried about work, I'm worried about my parents. If not them, Chelle. It's a compulsion—the need to worry, the need to take care of those that I love. Chelle, however, considers it more of an addiction—a sickness of sorts. One that she desperately tries to get me to overcome. Valiant effort on her part, but I'm a hopeless case.

“You know the one thing that you never worry about?” she asks.

“Me.”

“Ding-ding.”

It’s a never-ending conversation between us—how I need to quit worrying about everyone else and start taking care of me.

So I decide to make her proud.

“The party wasn’t all worry and work,” I tell her. “I drank. I danced. I let loose.”

“I call bullshit.”

Reaching for a tortilla chip, I grab one and toss it at her.

“I did. It was fun.”

Chelle lifts the heavy, yet nearly empty, margarita glass in a cheers. “About damn time.”

“I was going to bring your dress tonight, but I took it to the cleaners.”

“Did you spill something on it during a twirl?”

“Ha, ha. No. I didn’t spill anything. Someone else spilled their drink on me.”

“Was it a man?” Her eyes grow wide with intrigue.

After my breakup with Kai, I decided to take a sabbatical from love and romance. Hell, from men in general. She’s been pushing me to have fun, to live life. To carpe the dick, if you will.

Something that I just don’t think I have in me.

“It was. In fact, it was ... ” I pause, bracing myself for the reaction I know is coming. “Ethan Ambrose.”

Chelle is a huge baseball fan. An even bigger Ethan Ambrose fan. So when she squeals loud enough to catch the attention of everyone in the restaurant, I'm not surprised. In fact, I'd actually been looking forward to it.

“Ethan Ambrose spilled a drink on you? And you're just telling me this now?” She begins to fan herself. “That man is goals. All the fucking goals. Did you talk to him? Jesus, Ev, could your life be any more amazing? The man is gorgeous. Beyond gorgeous. Not to mention how insanely talented he is.”

Even though I work with several of the top athletes in the country, even dated a famous soccer player, Chelle somehow always seems surprised when I meet someone new. Though this time, it is her favorite player, so I will give her that.

“That he is,” I agree, deciding to leave out the part about how amazing his hands feel or how his eyes sparkle. “And yes, we talked. In fact ... ”

“In fact ... what?”

Chelle is on the edge of her seat, elbows on the table, eyes imploring me to dish.

“He's a really good dancer too.”

She falls back against her seat, arm resting on her forehead.

“You danced with him? Hands on him, danced?”

I smile. I nod. I don't say a word.

“I hate you, you know that?” She throws her hands up in frustration. “I swear I picked the wrong career.”

Chelle is Director of Public Relations for an up-and-coming makeup company. She’s amazing at what she does and most certainly didn’t pick the wrong career.

“You did not make the wrong career choice,” I assure her. “I made the wrong choice on who I should have brought as my date to these events.”

As though it’s dawned on her for the first time in our years of friendship, she stares at me, a stricken look on her face.

“Oh my God. How dare you? How dare you take him and not me?”

“Because I’m a terrible friend. My deepest apologies.”

“Yeah, well, for that, you’re buying dinner tonight.” She flags down the waiter. “I’ll take another.”

With fresh margaritas in front of us, Chelle finally convinces me to tell her all about Ethan and the events of the night.

The memories are still so fresh, it’s hard not to gush and sound like a giddy schoolgirl. Hell, I feel like one.

“You should have taken the ride from him,” she says. “I bet he can give good rides.”

With two margaritas under my belt, I begin to giggle. “The offer was to ride in his limo, not on his dick.”

“Pshh ... I’m sure he would have offered that up too. This is Ethan fucking Ambrose we’re talking about. It’s kind of his

thing.”

“Okay, well, let’s not forget, he flat out told me that he wasn’t interested.”

“I call bullshit.”

“You already called it earlier.”

“There’s nothing that says you can only call it once.” She waves her finger at me. “Especially not when your best friend is full of it.”

“You’re cut off,” I tease her, though we’ve both consumed way more margaritas and tacos than we normally would.

“There is no way Ethan Ambrose is turning down sex. Especially not with a goddess like you.”

I roll my eyes at her compliment.

“He didn’t. He turned down everything with me.”

“Except a ride home. And a dance. And a drink. And laughter and fun and a million other things.”

“He wasn’t interested, Chelle. Besides, I’m happy with the way things went. Meeting Ethan reminded me of how good things can be with someone. Our conversation was easy and fun, not a struggle like it was with Kai. Ethan’s attention was solely on me, not his phone or any of the dozens of women in the place.”

“Not every man is an asshole like Kai. And not every man has to be your forever. Nothing says you can’t just have a little fun with someone and then move on.”

My head says that I can't. My heart too.

I've never been that girl. I don't want to be.

Though, if I were, Ethan is exactly who I would want to be that girl for.

"We are not talking about Kai. You're going to kill my buzz."

"You could tell me more about Ethan."

"Or you could tell me what's going on with you."

"Oh, you know, the usual. Work. Hookup. Work."

"Hookup, huh? Who is he?"

She shrugs. "He's no Ethan Ambrose, that's for sure, but damn did he have rhythm."

Her head falls back as she lets out a moan that causes me to laugh. In fact, we're both laughing so hard that I barely hear my phone.

When the reminder sounds, Chelle reaches for it.

"Who is it?" I ask.

"Unknown number."

She hands the phone over. Sliding my finger over the screen, I unlock the phone and peer at the message.

Unknown: It was a pleasure meeting you.

"What does it say?" Chelle asks.

"That it was a pleasure meeting me."

Chelle smiles, clapping her hands together giddily. “It’s Ethan.”

I shake my head. “No. I never gave him my number. Besides ...”

Chelle sits there waiting for me to finish my thought, but I can’t, because aside from Ethan, I can’t think of a single new person I’ve met recently. Especially not anyone I gave my number to.

“Only one way to find out.”

I shake my head. “I’m not going to respond.”

“What? Are you crazy?” she shouts in my ear.

“Yeah, and deaf now too,” I say, pushing her away. “What am I supposed to say?”

Chelle grabs the phone from me and sends a message before I can get it back.

Me: I would say the same, but I don’t know who this is.

“Cute,” I tell her as I read the message that appears to have come from me.

Unknown: You wound me, Everly.

With no one else in mind, I send back a name with a question mark.

Me: Ethan?

Ethan: Whew. At least I’m not that easy to forget.

Impossible is more like it.

As soon as I have confirmation that it's him, my heart begins to beat faster.

Ethan: What are you up to?

“Nothing. You are doing nothing. Tell him.”

I look over at Chelle and laugh. “No way. I'm way too drunk and—”

“Even better.”

Ethan: You still there?

Me: Yeah, sorry. At dinner with my BFF.

Ethan: Sounds like a blast.

Me: It is.

Me: How did you get this number?

Ethan: I have my ways.

Me: I bet you do.

Ethan: Does it bother you that I did?

Me: No.

It doesn't bother me, per se. It just confuses me and excites me when it shouldn't.

Me: Just not sure why you want it.

Ethan: You're not an easy woman to forget, Everly. In fact, you're all I've been thinking about.

My eyes widen, unsure whether I am reading into the words too much or not. Because if I didn't know better, I would say

he's flirting.

Me: Is that so?

Ethan: It is. Have you been thinking about me?

“What the hell am I supposed to say to that?” I ask Chelle.

“Tell him the truth. Fuck yes, you've been thinking about him and all the things he can do to you.”

“That might be a little too much truth,” I say with a giggle.

Me: Maybe.

Maybe. What the hell kind of answer is that? I couldn't have given him more? Been a little more definitive?

I wait for a response, hoping to high hell that I didn't just screw up whatever this is.

Ethan: Obviously I need to work on my game.

Me: I thought you said I deserved better than you.

I hit send and instantly regret my text, the recital of words that he said to me. In my head it sounded cute and flirty. Looking down at the words now, I look like a bitch.

Ethan: It's true. But...

Me: But?

Ethan: You're not an easy woman to forget.

My smile grows larger as my stomach fills with butterflies.

Not an easy woman to forget?

Quite the compliment for a woman whose boyfriend did just that—forgot all about her and landed dick-first into someone else.

Ethan: Enjoy your evening with your friend.

I can't help but wish I had lied, told him I was at home watching television or something. Anything to keep the conversation going and feel like he's nearby.

It's a nice feeling. Nice to feel wanted, desired—hell, even liked.

By the end with Kai, I wasn't even sure he had ever liked me, let alone loved me. It all felt a little disingenuous. Phony. We were just a lie. I'd been nothing more than a placeholder until he found what, or in this case who, he really wanted.

“What in the hell just happened?”

I ask the question to no one in particular. The fact that Chelle answers so quickly, though, doesn't surprise me.

“That,” she replies, “is a man on the hook.”

She does a giddy little dance in her chair as I try to wrap my head around the fact that Ethan Ambrose just texted me.

And worse, how I can't do anything about it.

Chapter 4

Ethan

Texting Everly last night wasn't the smartest move I've ever made. After I told myself that she was off limits, I should have left well enough alone.

Instead, I'd headed over to Advantage Player. Partially in hopes of running into Everly, but as my backup plan, obtaining whatever information about her that I could. Including her phone number.

Everly hadn't been there, which meant that I settled for acquiring her phone number. But why? What would I use it for? To call her? Unlikely. Text? Seemed a little stalkerish.

Okay, the whole me trying to hunt her down thing *was* a little stalkerish. A little.

Tripp's assistant was an easy target. Young. Star struck. Beyond willing to help.

I made up a quick story on the fly about a business conversation that Everly and I never finished at the party the other night. The vast importance of the conversation. How

angry Tripp would be if Everly and I didn't finish what we started.

Truth be told, Tripp would have probably been much happier if Everly and I never started what we had. He sure as hell wouldn't give a damn if we finished it or not.

I do though.

I care.

More than I want to. More than is rational.

Either way, I'd walked out the door with Everly's personal cell number added to my phone. Her work cell and office number too. Just. In. Case.

Sitting on the balcony now, my eyes on the dark, cloud filled sky above me, I can't help but be reminded of the dark cloud that looms over me.

The feeling of worthlessness. The inability to love or accept love. The fucking devastated mess my parents left me in when they walked out on me twenty-two years ago. Parents that left their son because he wasn't worth giving up their lives for. He wasn't worth the shit they had to go through in order to take care of him.

It was too hard. Too much.

And he wasn't worth it.

I don't remember a whole lot about that time—after all I had only been eight years old. I do remember those words though.

Vividly. I remember how they made me feel. The shame. The anger. The sadness.

I remember my dad leaving first. He ruffled my hair then walked out the door. The ruffling confused me. It was a stark contrast to the words he had just uttered to my mother. How he didn't want to be a father. How he was tired of it all. How I wasn't worth it. The ruffling made no sense. Still doesn't.

Regardless of the words or the ruffling of my then-shaggy hair, he left. Gone. Never looked back.

I remember thinking that at least I had my mom. At least I wasn't alone. I'd be good. The best little boy anyone had ever seen.

And I was. Or at least I'd tried to be.

Tried and failed.

It was less than two weeks later that my mom left too.

Her excuse was just as lame as his. She couldn't do it on her own. This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

I felt her on that one.

Neither parent wanting you. Not being good enough, no matter how hard you try. Being abandoned.

Yeah, that's not how it was supposed to be either.

Once they were gone, then came the foster families. Families. Plural. One after another. None keeping me longer than a few months. None willing to adopt me.

It's been a long time since I thought about this shit, rehashing the feelings that my parents left me with and the fucked-up head that I'm still working on. Living with might be a better description, because as soon as my ass was out of that rehab facility, I quit working on it.

I quit drinking too, but that I didn't pick up again. The fucked-up head shit? That never really went away.

Here it is rearing its ugly head. Why?

That's simple: because for the first time in my life, there's a who. A person that I'm interested in beyond throwing a baseball at or sticking my cock in. A person who makes me feel things I've never felt before. Things that I want to feel again. Need to feel again.

My ray of sunshine.

Everly Mann pulled some sort of voodoo magic on me the other night. Enough that my incessant thoughts about her resulted in me texting her last night.

Lucky for me, I'd stopped while I was ahead.

Looking at the screen now, I groan.

Me: Come over. I want to see you. I want you. I want to know what you taste like on my tongue, feel your lips wrapped around my cock. I want to know how you sound when I slip my cock inside you.

Every single word is true. Every single one inappropriate to send to a woman like Everly. Especially considering she's currently employed at the agency I've signed with.

Thank fuck I didn't send it.

The thing is, I like Everly. The party that I had dreaded going to turned into one of the best nights I'd had in a long time. All because of her. I like her and I want to spend time with her, but I also know better. I know she deserves better. I know that I won't be able to resist her.

One night with a woman without sex is one thing, albeit a very rare thing for me. More than that? A fucking joke. Hell, more than one night with anyone, really. I'm not much for relationships, platonic or otherwise. Hell, I'm not much for people. The only things that have been in my life on an extended regular basis are my teammates and the mutt currently licking my face.

"Ugh, Baker, stop," I say with a laugh as I swat him away.

His insistence tells me that his bowl is empty, which means I need to get my ass out of bed and feed him.

"All right, all right," I say, sitting up in the bed.

I pick up my phone again and delete the text that I can't send. Won't send.

Yes, my fingers did the talking last night when they texted her. Apparently they wanted more than just a hello or they wouldn't have written the words that they did, the ones inviting her over. And yes, I'm talking about me, not actually my fingers. It's me. I'm the one that wants more. More of her skin. More of her closeness. More of ... her.

Every damn piece, when all I ever wanted before was a warm body to bury myself in.

As if on cue, the damn cell rings in my hand, startling me, making me grateful I hit delete just moments earlier.

The number is unknown.

Even though I wouldn't normally answer an unknown number, a small part of me can't help but hope that it's Everly. Hadn't I already put all her numbers in my phone though? Still, that sliver of hope that maybe I messed up a number and this is actually her is enough to get me to pick up.

"Hello?" I say into the phone.

Silence.

"Hello?" I say again.

Nothing.

I disconnect the call and ruffle Baker's head before getting out of bed to feed him. While I tell myself that it must have been a wrong number or one of those irritating bot calls, I can't help but get an uneasy feeling from it.

That uneasy feeling doesn't go away as I take Baker for his morning walk, or when I arrive at practice.

In fact, the call has left me so out of sorts that when Maddox smacks my back, I jump.

"Jesus, what's gotten into you today?" he asks with a chuckle.

“I think I may have scorned the wrong woman,” I say, a smirk on my face.

“All the women you ‘date’ are ‘wrong,’ so yeah, probably. Something happen?”

“No. Just a weird call this morning. Unknown number, that sort of thing. Typical crazy behavior.”

Maddox points his finger at me. “One day you’re going to learn.”

“Like you did?” I toss back at him.

His eyes narrow as he glares at me. He knows exactly what I’m referring to. Based on the look on his face, it’s too soon for the joke.

“I retract my statement.”

“Damn right you do.”

“Field, now!” the coach yells from the doorway that leads to the field.

As I head toward the door, his hand presses to my chest to stop me from walking through. He doesn’t speak, just takes me in, in what I assume is a fatherly fashion. Eyes imploring, studying, worrying. He’s making sure I’m okay.

I offer him an easy smile. Smiles, something that has come a little quicker ever since I met Everly. Not that I’ll ever admit that to Maddox. Or Everly, for that matter.

“I’m good, Coach. Really.”

I throw him a quick wink before I jog toward the mound.

Fox is already squared up behind home plate.

I take a deep breath, the smell of the grass and dirt mixed with the fresh air settling over me.

It smells like home. The only real home I've ever known.

Baseball saved me as a kid. And again a couple years ago.

I take another breath, sucking in every piece of serenity the scent brings me, then I wind up and pitch.

“Fuck, man,” Fox calls out. “That shit hurt even with the glove on.”

It's going to save me today.

“Get used to it. It's only going to get worse.”

Another wind up. Another pitch.

Damn, that feels good.

Chapter 5

Everly

“**T**wice in one week? How lucky can we be?”

The sound of Jessa’s voice fills the air. She’s Tripp’s assistant—mine too, if I need her. But her main job here is to greet all the clients as they walk in, which is exactly why she’s young and beautiful and ... perky.

All the clients love her. And she most definitely loves all of them.

The exaggerated yet authentic excitement in her voice tells me that it’s someone big.

I check Tripp’s calendar to see who it might be. Only one meeting. Scheduled for twenty minutes from now.

Ethan Ambrose.

The name on the screen causes my breath to hitch, and my skin to tingle with excitement.

Ethan is here. So close that I can practically smell his aftershave.

“Tripp is on a call right now, Mr. Ambrose,” Jessa tells him.
“He should be done shortly.”

I know that Tripp hates making clients wait, even if it is because they’re the ones that are early.

So for that reason—and that reason only—I make my way into the lobby of Advantage Player.

“Mr. Ambrose,” I say from my doorway.

“Ms. Mann. What a pleasure to see you again,” he says, taking a step toward my office. Toward me.

His smile is soft, sweet, and it makes me smile instantly too. Not that I wasn’t already giddy on the inside just from knowing he was here.

Jessa’s eyes are on us, and the last thing I want is to give the perception that Ethan and I are anything but business. It’s hard enough being a woman in a man’s world. I don’t need to add fuel to the fire.

“May I get you some coffee?” I ask him.

“That’s my job,” Jessa protests from behind him.

“Tripp asked me to entertain Mr. Ambrose until he’s free,” I lie.

I’m not sure why I feel the need to explain myself to her, let alone lie, but what’s done is done.

“So?” I ask.

“I’d love some.”

I nod in the direction of my office before entering. Ethan follows, closing the door behind him.

There's something about the sound of the door shutting that causes my body to tense.

I stand at the coffee machine, preparing to brew him a cup.

"I didn't really want any coffee," he tells me. "I just wanted away from ... her."

I turn toward him, smiling. "Not a Jessa fan?"

That would be a first.

"She looks at me like I'm a piece of meat."

"I would assume you would be used to that by now."

Ethan chuckles. "Not quite so up close and personal."

I gesture for him to take a seat in the chair that's situated at the front of my desk. He does, and as I make my way around the desk, he pats the seat next to him.

"I won't bite," he tells me.

Something in the look in his eyes tells me that if I asked him to, he most definitely would.

Gingerly, I take the seat next to him.

"Your text the other day was unexpected," I say. "How exactly did you get my number?"

There's that look again. His smile a mixture of sex appeal and mischief.

His eyes glance toward the doorway, then back to me.

Jessa.

“I should have known.”

“In her defense, I did tell her that we had very serious business to handle. A conversation that Tripp would be very angry if we didn’t finish.”

“Is that so?” I say, chuckling at just how convincing he is.

If I didn’t know better, I might actually believe him myself.

“It’s so. Very. Important.”

“Funny, I can’t seem to recall what we need to discuss.”

Ethan shakes his head, keeping true to character and his lie.
“Business.”

“What kind of business?”

The kind where you splay me out on your bed and have your way with me? It’s the first thought that runs through my head, the thing I want most. The thing I most definitely cannot have.

“You. Me. Dinner.”

Dinner?

My eyes widen at the words. Is this him asking me on a date? If it is, how do I gently decline without completely pushing him away? Because I have to decline. I can’t have dinner with Ethan. Not even for business. He’s not my client. Everyone knows that. The talk, the rumors. No. Absolutely not.

“I ... can’t. I appreciate the offer, but—”

“But what? You can’t have dinner with a friend?”

“Friend? Is that what we are now? One meeting, a couple texts, and you just assume that we’re friends?”

“I’m not assuming anything.”

“Oh, so you’re certain we’re friends.”

“Beyond certain.” He leans in close, elbows resting on his knees. “You liked spending time with me as much as I did with you.”

“That was business.”

“The way you were grinding against me, that was business too?”

Instantly, heat flows to my cheeks.

“You’re cute when you blush,” he tells me.

“Friends don’t call each other cute,” I inform him.

“Your friends sound like jerks then.”

“You tell Maddox how cute he is?”

“He’s not my type. Fox, on the other hand? I tell him twice a day.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Seriously though, I like hanging out with you. I’m not looking for anything more than your friendship—I promise.”

His words don’t quite match the look on his face, the desire I see flicker in his eyes as I cross and uncross my legs.

“Ethan, I—”

“Ethan, my guy.” Tripp walks into the office. “I’m so sorry to keep you waiting.”

“I didn’t mind the wait at all,” Ethan tells Tripp, his eyes on me.

“Thank you, Everly. You know how much I hate to keep my clients waiting.”

“Glad I could be of some entertainment,” I say, shoving out of the chair and rounding my desk. I’m grateful for the reprieve, the break in the moment where I struggled to figure out how to explain to Ethan why I don’t think us having dinner is a good idea.

“Shall we?” Tripp says to Ethan, gesturing toward the door.

Ethan’s still looking at me though. Intently. He raises his eyebrows, waiting for an answer.

There’s something in the way he’s looking at me that makes me feel unable to say no.

I nod my head, accepting my fate and my inability to say no to the man, while full well knowing that could be bad for me. Very. Very. Bad for me.

“It was nice seeing you, Everly,” Ethan says before following Tripp out the door.

Collapsing into my chair, I immediately reach for my phone and dial Chelle. She answers on the first ring.

“Well hey there, best friend,” Chelle says.

“Hey.”

“Everything all right?”

“Yeah, I just ... Something strange happened.”

“Tell me more.”

Quickly, I delve into the details of Ethan’s arrival at Advantage, our quick conversation, and the dinner invitation that followed.

“You’re doing what?!” Chelle screams into the phone.

“I’m having dinner with Ethan.”

I repeat the words for her, knowing she needs the confirmation, and for myself so I can try to wrap my head around it.

“Dinner with Ethan fucking Ambrose. You lucky bitch.”

“It’s just dinner.”

We’re just friends.

“What time should I meet you at your place?” Chelle asks.

“For what?”

“To help you get ready.”

“I don’t need help getting ready. This isn’t a big deal. It’s not like it’s a date or anything.”

She ignores me and just continues on.

“We just did a photo shoot at work. There are a ton of amazing outfits.”

“It isn’t necessary,” I assure her, though I don’t think she believes me.

“So where is dinner anyway?”

“I don’t actually know.”

In fact, maybe I’m blowing all this out of proportion. Maybe he’ll change his mind and I’m freaking out for nothing.

As if somehow he could read my thoughts, a text comes through from Ethan.

Ethan: Rigors. 7pm. Don’t be late.

“We’re meeting at Rigors at seven,” I tell her. “Meeting. See? It’s not a date.”

“I’ll see you at five then.”

The phone disconnects before I can argue.

At 5 o’clock sharp, Chelle strolls into my apartment with an armful of clothes.

“What’s all this?” I ask as she drops them on my bed, plopping herself down next to them.

“I told you. Outfits. From a photo shoot at work?”

“Again, I don’t think all this trouble is necessary.”

Still, the clothes are designer and gorgeous, so my hand immediately grabs a piece. A simple black jumpsuit with rhinestone spaghetti straps. It’s beautiful. Elegant. Simple.

Chelle immediately yanks it from my hand and discards it.

“Hey,” I scold her.

“Way too hard to get off.”

“I’m not going to be taking anything off.”

Chelle rolls her eyes.

“Just in case,” she says as she hands me a green dress.

It’s casual. Nothing too fancy. Not too short, but still well above my knee to show off my legs.

I hold it up to me as I look in the mirror.

“Are you sure it doesn’t say I’m trying?”

Chelle throws her arms in the air. “I’m still trying to figure out why you’re not trying.”

Stripping off my shorts and tank, I pull the dress over my head.

Cute. Fun. Flirty. Not overtly sexy in any way.

“I like it,” I tell her.

“Perfect,” she says, clapping her hands together. “And it can easily be lifted for easy access. Just. In. Case.”

We match some jewelry and touch up my hair until I’m a perfect ensemble.

Glimpsing the clock on my nightstand, I curse.

“Shit, I have to go or I’m going to be late.”

Chelle swats my ass. “Go get him.”

Chapter 6

Everly

Even though I know this isn't a date, I can't help but feel slightly on edge. It's the closest I've come to one since Kai ended things with me a few months ago. It was abrupt, out of the blue, but not completely unexpected.

Kai's soccer career had taken off and begun taking him all over the world. Proud as I was of him, that sudden fame left me in the dust. We were on different paths. We grew apart. It was no one's fault.

It wasn't until we broke up that I realized just how bad we were together, how unhappy I had been. Meeting Ethan only solidified it more.

Spending time with Ethan felt right. Good. Yes, it was only one night, but in that one night with Ethan things were easier, more comfortable, more enjoyable than they ever had been with Kai. I couldn't help but wonder that if that goodness and happiness was possible with a man I barely knew, then maybe it was possible to find that with someone else. That maybe Kai and I were never a really good fit after all.

I deserve a man who compliments me, not controls me. I deserve someone to find happiness with, not to try to make happy.

When I walk into Rigor's, the upscale steakhouse Ethan suggested, all thoughts of Kai leave my mind because there sitting in the middle of the restaurant is Ethan.

He's decked out in a gray polo that hugs tightly to the muscles in his arms and clings just right to the ones on his torso.

My stomach flip-flops at the sight of him.

When he sees me, he rises to his feet, a heart-stopping smile on his face.

"May I help you?" the maître d' asks.

"I think I see him right there," I tell him, nodding in Ethan's direction.

The man smiles. "Right this way."

"Hi," I say softly when I arrive at the table.

"Hey there, sunshine." Ethan takes a step toward me and presses a kiss to my cheek. "You look gorgeous."

"Thank you," I say, unable to meet his eyes.

He pulls out the chair for me and I happily sit.

Ethan takes a seat next to me, not across like he had been before.

"I'm glad you came," he says, as though he'd been unsure I would.

“I’m glad you asked.”

“Are you sure about that?” He takes a sip of his water. “You didn’t look all that glad when I asked.”

“It’s not you, it’s me.”

“Now who’s using cliché lines?”

The humor in his voice was apparent as he referenced our conversation from our first night together.

“I’m sorry if I seemed disinterested, it’s just ... I worry. A lot,” I admit.

“About?”

“Everything? But in this instance, I worry what people will think when they see us together. I worry that rumors are going to fly, and my reputation is going to turn to shit. I worry that—”

Ethan holds up a hand. “Holy shit, you really do worry too much.”

“Told you.”

“Your reputation is impeccable,” Ethan says in a reassuring tone. “No one would think less of you for going out and having fun.”

“No, but if the person I’m out with is a client ... ”

“I’m not a client. Not yours, at least. No harm, no foul.”

“You’re still a client of Advantage Player and—”

“And yet, you have zero say in my career, how I run it, or what I do. That’s Tripp’s job. I’m happy to clarify that to

anyone who insinuates otherwise.”

While it doesn't work wonders, his words do put me at ease.

“So, what's good here?” I ask.

I'm here, so there's no use in hemming and hawing over my worries and fears. We might as well enjoy our night.

“I don't have a clue. It's the first time I've been here. I don't do much dining out.”

He doesn't do much dining out, yet here he is with me.

“Then what made you pick this place?”

“A lot of the guys have been here, said they had great food. I do love a good steak.”

“Me too,” I agree as I glance over the menu. “The filet sounds amazing.”

“That's my favorite too.”

When the waiter comes back, he brings a bottle of wine and sets it next to the table. He fills my glass, then fills Ethan's with water.

“I hope you don't mind,” Ethan says, gesturing to the wine glass. “You looked like a wine drinker to me.”

“Oh, really? What about me screams wine drinker? My distaste for whiskey?”

“Admit it. You liked the whiskey. Or at least how it made you feel.”

“Maybe,” I say, refusing to admit anything to him because it almost feels like defeat. “But yes, I love wine. Thank you.”

“So, how do you like working with Prescott?”

“Maddox? He’s great. Easy to work with. Very agreeable.”

“Is that some sort of dig?”

“Maybe.”

“I’m not unagreeable. Disagreeable? Whatever, I’m not a pain in the ass. I’m ... selective.”

“Selective, huh? I’ve seen some of your dates. It doesn’t look like you’re all that selective to me.”

He chokes on his sip of water as he laughs at my comment.

“Those ‘dates’ are just sex. But the things in my life, things I actually care about? That’s where I become a picky son of a bitch.”

“Such as?”

“The team I play for. The endorsements I refuse because they’re all bullshit. The people I spend my time with.”

“Like me?”

“Just like you.” He pauses for a moment. “I feel like I need to set something straight. Set some ... parameters.”

“Parameters?”

“I like spending time with you, Everly.”

Ethan’s words are unexpected and welcome. The fact that there is a ‘but’ coming is undoubtedly obvious.

“I like spending time with you too.”

“The thing is, when I said that you deserve better than me, I meant it.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, I like you, Everly. I like talking to you. I like spending time with you. But that’s it. That’s all this can be.”

“What you’re saying is ... you want to be friends?”

“Yeah. Friends.”

“We’re in agreement then.”

“Really?”

I nod. “Really. Besides, I’m kind of burned out on dating athletes.”

“What’s wrong with athletes?”

“Aside from the fact that you’re all just a bunch of players?”

“Not all of us.”

I angle my head to the side, eyebrows raised.

“Okay, I am—was. But that’s not true of everyone. Not my catcher, Fox. He’s one happily married guy.”

“A rarity.”

“Okay, who is he?”

“Who’s who?”

“The athlete that broke your heart.”

My voice is soft as I respond. “Kai Iona.”

Ethan just nods.

Embarrassment rises in me. I can only imagine what Ethan must think of me. Clearly, he's familiar with Kai, which means he's familiar with the name he's made for himself since our breakup a short while ago. Most notably, his association with Milani Lee, a famous model.

Ethan sits back in his seat, the look on his face unreadable.

"I'm sorry things ended," he says after a moment.

"I'm not. Not anymore, at least. We didn't belong together."

"Does anyone really?"

"Not a relationship guy?"

"Not in the slightest."

"You don't think that there's someone out there for you?"

"No. But I'm guessing you do."

"I do. I'm not saying that finding that person is easy, or immediate. You have to kiss a few frogs along the way, but yeah. I think there's someone out there."

The waiter returns to our table to take our orders.

"To start, we'll take another bottle of wine for the table. I'll have the filet, medium, with a baked potato. Everly?"

"I'll have the same."

The waiter takes our order, nods, and heads back toward the kitchen.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?" I ask teasingly.

“Maybe.”

I ignore the flirtatious way he says it as well as the mixed signal it gives me. We’re just friends. I deserve better.

“So, uh, how about those endorsements?”

“You mean the athlete’s foot cream one that Tripp’s currently trying to sell me on?”

“Definitely not the most glamorous deal, but lucrative for sure.”

“I don’t care about the money.”

“You don’t care about money. Or relationships. What do you care about?”

“Baseball.”

The word is like a trigger, reminding me of when Kai said that soccer came first. That I could come second, be the woman behind the man, or we were done.

Ethan watches me, staring into my eyes as though he can see right through me. Straight into my mind, my heart. My innermost thoughts are bared to him. As much as I should be uncomfortable under his gaze, I find myself anything but. I like it. I like that for some reason he seems to know me, understand me even, without really knowing me at all.

“Don’t let him do that to you,” he tells me. “You’re amazing, Everly. The whole damn package. Don’t let anyone, especially him, tell you otherwise.”

I give him a weak smile. “Thank you.”

The waiter returns with our food, setting our plates down in front of us.

Ethan picks up his fork and begins to dig in, a silence settling over us as we eat. I don't feel inclined to talk, and frankly at this point, after his comments, I'm not even sure what I would say.

As I eat, my mind wonders about the man across from me. How he just inadvertently fell into my life. While he seems to know so much about me—my job, my boyfriend, my recent breakup—I realize just how little I know about him. In fact, outside of knowing that he plays for the Railcats and that Tripp is his agent, I know nothing.

“What about you?” I ask.

“What about me?”

“I don't know. Anything. You're not exactly an open book.”

“I'm not?”

“You're rarely in the news, you won't take a single endorsement. No social media.”

A cocky grin spreads across his handsome face. “You spying on me?”

“It's my job to know these things.”

“Except I'm not your client.”

“Maybe not, but you're a client at the firm I work for. Still part of my job.”

“You keep telling yourself that.” He shakes his head as though he can’t believe what he’s about to say. “Let’s see ... I have a dog.”

“Really? I pictured you as more of a cat guy.”

Ethan drops his fork onto his plate. “Take it back.”

I’m startled by his response. “What?”

“I am not a cat guy. I refuse to be thought of as a cat guy. Those things are ... ”

“Cute? Cuddly?”

“Evil. They’re fucking evil and I will not be associated with one.”

My hand covers my mouth to hide my laughter.

Ethan smiles broadly. “You have a great laugh.”

I can feel the heat rising to my cheeks. “Thank you.”

I resist the urge to compliment his smile, gorgeous as it is. Just enough teeth, full of mischief, sexy as hell. Instead, I begin to eat again.

“What kind of dog?”

“German shepherd.”

“Tough dog.”

“Smart dog. Only dog that could put up with my shit.”

“What’s his name?”

“Why do you assume it’s a he?”

“You don’t seem like the kind of guy that would let a female spend the night, let alone live with him.”

Ethan laughs again. It’s a great laugh. One that reverberates through my body and penetrates my soul.

“Would you care for some dessert?” the waiter asks when we’ve finished eating.

Ethan sweeps his tongue over his lips suggestively. “Chocolate cake. Two forks.”

“Why are you ordering me dessert?”

“Us. I ordered *us* dessert. Can’t blame a guy for wanting to prolong his time with a gorgeous woman.”

“Maybe not, but you can fault him for ordering the wrong dessert.” I turn to the waiter. “I’ll have the cheesecake.”

“Cheesecake?” He sneers at my selection.

“What do you have against cheesecake?”

“Nothing. Come on, though. Who seriously picks cheesecake over chocolate cake?”

“Clearly, I did.”

“You’re lucky I like you, or I might have just gotten up and walked away.”

Dinner finished, Ethan rises from his seat and steps behind me, pulling out my chair for me.

“I had a great time tonight,” he says.

“I did too,” I agree.

Not that I thought that I wouldn't enjoy his company; I already had at the Advantage event last week. But when he rests his hand on the small of my back as we exit the restaurant, I question just how much I enjoy his company. My skin itches with desire, my body begins to hum.

If the reaction I'm having to this gentle, friendly touch is any indication, I may be starting to like him way too much.

Outside in the fresh air of the night, I'm able to breathe and shrug off the feeling his touch has imprinted on me.

I pull out my phone to order an Uber.

"Put it away," Ethan directs me. "There's already a car headed here."

"You keep making these incorrect assumptions. First the cheesecake, then me wanting to be friends with you, and now a ride?"

He tosses me a look, one that says there isn't a woman on this planet that wouldn't get in a car with him if he asked. And he's right. His smile alone is enough to draw you in. Add in the rest of him? He's damn near irresistible.

We stand, arm to arm, as we wait for the Uber to arrive.

"It was very sweet of you to invite me to dinner."

"Sweet, huh? I guarantee my last few dates would disagree with me being sweet."

"Good thing this isn't a date then, or maybe I would disagree too."

A car pulls to a stop in front of us. It sure as hell isn't an Uber.

“What's this?”

“Car service.” He opens the door for me. “Get in.”

I slide into the seat, and he closes the door behind me. A moment later he's sitting next to me.

Silence falls over us. I'm wondering where this car is going to take us and what I should do about the mixed signals he's been sending all night.

We've barely driven two blocks when the car rolls to a stop in front of a tall building.

“I would invite you inside,” he says, “but I have an early day tomorrow.”

“Me too.”

“Goodnight, Everly.”

“Goodnight, Ethan.”

Ethan pats the driver on the shoulder. “Take her wherever she needs to go.”

Chapter 7

Ethan

Inviting Everly to dinner was a bad idea.

When I talk to her, though, it's like talking to an old friend. At least what I assume that would be like if I actually had any friends. Not that I really want them. Everly's a different story though. There's something about being with her. I trust her, despite barely knowing her. I like her, even though I shouldn't.

Everything about being with her is enjoyable—easy, even. We ate. We laughed. That was my favorite part. Christ, I can't remember the last time I laughed like that.

It's the very reason why as I leave practice, I send a text to her.

No doubt about it. I'm addicted. To her. To the way she makes me feel. Fuck me if I don't even care that we've friend-zoned the whole situation. Sex would great. Outstanding, I'm sure. Her presence is enough though.

I just hope I don't do something stupid to fuck it up.

Me: We have a problem.

It's barely been two days since my dinner with Everly, and yet here I am needing more. Another fix of ... her.

Everly: We do?

The response comes quicker than I expect. My smile, even faster. What in the hell is it about this woman that turns me inside out and upside down?

Me: Yep.

Everly: Care to clue me in?

Me: I can't stop thinking about you...

Those irritating dots appear on my screen telling me she's either typing her response or just staring at the screen at what I said.

The line isn't untrue. I can't stop thinking about her. Maybe this is my backward way of telling her that, but I sent it with the intention of making a joke out of it.

Me: And why you ordered cheesecake the other night instead of chocolate cake. Who does that?

Three laughing face emojis appear on the screen.

Dessert. The fight of the century.

I'd ordered us chocolate cake. She told me I ordered wrong and requested cheesecake instead. The battle ensued. We argued relentlessly throughout dessert about which was better and why. The entire time I was wondering if she would taste

better than the chocolate cake that I was biting into. I decided she would. Sweet, utterly delectable.

I'd adjusted in my seat countless times that night.

Turned on as I was by her, it was more than that. More than just a sexual desire that I was feeling for her. I liked her. I liked being around her.

That's where the problem lies. I'm stuck in this middle ground I'm not used to being in. Either I fuck women, or I don't. That's it. There's no in between. With Everly, though, that's all there is. This murky gray area that I don't know how to navigate.

Still, here we are days later, texting and chatting as I leave practice. Because as I said in my text—I can't stop thinking about her.

Me: What are you up to tonight?

Spending more time with her is bad. Wrong.

Everly: Girls' night.

I groan at the thought of her and her friends out there drinking and dancing. Men's hands on her, trying to get in her pants.

Me: Sounds like fun.

Everly: Oh, it will be. Just me, Chelle, and a gallon of ice cream.

Relief washes over me. An at-home girls' night. No prospect of men touching her. Sounds good to me.

Me: Never pictured you to be so... wild.

Everly: You haven't seen anything yet.

Me: Can't wait.

Me: Enjoy your night. And if you happen to text me pics, I wouldn't be angry.

“Hey, Thurston,” I say as I enter my building.

There's a tight smile on his face. A look I haven't seen in two years. Not since I let my world implode.

“Mr. Ambrose,” Thurston says.

“Everything okay?” I ask him.

“Okay, yes. I just ... ”

There's something he wants to say but can't or doesn't want to. I'm not sure which.

“Spit it out, Thurston,” I tell him.

I've lived here for five years. The man is one of the few people I trust. So why in the hell does he look so nervous around me now?

“I don't want to alarm you, sir.”

As if that statement isn't alarming in and of itself.

“What is it?”

Thurston blows out a breath. “Someone came in today, asking questions.”

“Questions about what?”

“You.”

“Probably just another reporter, Thurston. Someone trying to get—”

“I don’t think so, sir,” he says. Worry fills his voice.

The hang-up call from the other day pops into my head.

It’s just a coincidence, I tell myself.

“I’m sure it’s fine. You didn’t tell them anything, right?”

“Of course not.”

“Then we’re good. No worries, man.”

“There was just something different about this man. Something almost ... familiar.”

Thurston is an exceptional doorman and an even better man. Still, some days, I think the job might be getting to him.

“It’s fine. If anything else happens, just let me know. For now, nothing to worry about.”

As much as I try to ease Thurston’s nerves, my own get rattled. The call. Now the visitor. Both unknown.

The part that I think stuns me the most is that the person who came here was a man. A woman, out for revenge? Makes sense. A man? Aside from the press, I can’t imagine who he might be.

Then I laugh.

Fucking hell. Here I am getting all worked up because some guy came to my building? Some guy whose wife I probably

inadvertently fucked? I don't check wedding bands. There isn't one on my hand, and that's all that matters to me.

Now it all kind of makes sense.

Baker looks at me like I've lost my mind as I laugh to myself.

As I rub his head, I think of Everly's assumption. *I pictured you as more of a cat guy.*

I chuckle again.

My phone pings. I pick it up and smile when I see Everly's name on the screen.

When I open the text, a photo of Everly fills the screen.

It's a selfie. Not a dirty pic, or even remotely naughty. It's just her smiling, looking happy and relaxed. Sexy as hell too even though I know she's not trying to be. She can't help it. She's gorgeous. The kind of woman that sets your body on fire and makes your dick stand at attention with nothing more than a look.

Me: Fucking gorgeous.

Everly: Glad you like it.

Me: Having fun?

Everly: Loads.

Another picture comes through. This time it's a shot of an empty container of ice cream and what I assume is a serial killer on the screen.

Me: I should be there to protect you.

Everly: Aren't you sweet.

Me: No.

Everly: I don't think you give yourself enough credit.

Me: You give me too much.

Everly: What are you doing?

Me: You don't want to know.

Everly: Who is she? 😊

You. She's you. It's been you every night since we met. Sparkling blue eyes. Beautiful smile. Tits that I can still vividly recall what they feel like pressed against me.

Me: If that's what I were doing, I wouldn't be texting you. Unless...

Everly: Ugh. No.

Me: Can't blame a guy for trying.

Considering we are just friends, she actually could. Fear rises in me that my stupid joke may have just caused me to fuck up something that actually matters to me.

I'm not used to things outside of baseball mattering. Certainly not people mattering. Everly's different though. I just wish I knew what the fuck I was doing. I wish I wasn't so fucked up that maybe, just maybe ...

I shake my head before I even finish the thought.

What in the hell is it with this woman and her ability to get me to want things, need things, that I've never wanted or

needed before. Namely, her.

Me: Thanks for the pics. Enjoy your night.

Everly: You too.

Chapter 8

Everly

There's a hum in the office.

This time I don't even have to glance up to know who it is.

Glancing up from my desk, I see Ethan. He's leaning his hip against Jessa's desk and smiling at her. Flirting with her?

My heart begins to race. A jealousy that I don't want to experience rises inside me. As does my body from my chair as my feet begin to move to the lobby without my permission. It's as though I'm on autopilot.

"Hey there," I say, stepping up to Jessa's desk.

Ethan turns to me, a broad smile on his face.

"Hey there, sunshine," he says.

The sight of him takes my breath away. He's in a suit, just like the night I met him. He's not wearing a tie though, and the top two buttons of his shirt are undone.

"I didn't realize you had a meeting with Tripp."

“Just a quick one. I need to be at the airport in a couple hours.” Silence falls over us. Ethan clears his throat. “Do you have a minute?”

“Me? Oh, yeah. Sure.”

I gesture toward my office, only he doesn't move. “Ladies first.”

“And they say chivalry is dead.” I enter my office and head straight for the window. “Everything okay?”

In the reflection I can see him perch himself on the edge of my desk.

“Just dandy.”

“Then what are we doing here?” I ask as I turn to face him.

“I'm not sure,” he says with a chuckle. “I guess I just wanted a couple minutes with you before I left.”

I'm blushing. I don't need to see it to know it. I can feel the heat on my cheeks.

“You're cute when you blush,” he tells me.

He rises from his spot on my desk and closes the distance between us.

“Thank you,” I reply, my voice soft and unsure.

Him and these damn mixed signals. Me and my stupid desires.

Being friends with Ethan is turning me into a mess.

“I just wanted to warn you that Kai was in town. I wasn’t sure if you knew, but a couple of the guys ran into him yesterday.”

I think back to the missed call from Maddox that I hadn’t yet returned.

“Noted. Thank you.”

“If you need a place to hide out or whatever, you can stay at my place.”

“That’s a very generous offer to make to someone you barely know.”

“Are you saying you’re untrustworthy?” He chuckles.
“That’s what I thought. I just ... ”

“I get it. I appreciate the thought, but it’s not that serious. Really.”

“I’m only a phone call away if you need anything.”

“Back at ya.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He opens his mouth as though there’s something he wants to say but closes it just as quickly.

“I’ll see you soon.”

Ethan tosses a wink in my direction that has my insides melting into a puddle.

“Good luck, Ethan.”

“Pretty sure I used it all up when I met you. Lucky for me, when it comes to baseball, I don’t need luck.”

Five minutes with Ethan Ambrose. That’s all it takes to turn my world upside down and make my heart do flip-flops.

Not wanting to run into him again, I make my way down the street to my favorite deli.

The chiming of the door causes my head to tilt up. I watch as Tripp walks in, his face red, his eyes tired.

He takes a seat at the table with me and rests his head in his hands.

“Uh-oh, what happened?”

“Another endorsement, another decline.” He throws his hands up in the air. “I don’t know what the hell is wrong with this guy. He could be raking in the dough, and yet here he is throwing away every damn opportunity I propose to him.”

“He said he doesn’t care about the money.”

“Everyone cares about money,” Tripp scoffs.

I shake my head. “I don’t think he does.”

“Then how in the hell am I supposed to get him to do anything?”

“Maybe he doesn’t have to. I mean, you get paid either way, right? What does it matter what he does?”

“Because my job is to make him look good. Turn him into a role model.”

“You’ve done a hell of a job cleaning up his image the past two years.”

“Thanks.”

“Okay, so if money isn’t a driving force for Ethan, what is?”

“Women.”

“Okay, so maybe we get him to do something where he’s surrounded by women?”

“He’s always surrounded by women.”

“True.” I pause, tapping my finger against my chin. “You said he donates a lot of his money, right?”

“So? You want me to have him give away more?”

“No, but I think I might have an idea.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense,” Tripp says, the worry finally draining from his face.

“A friend of mine works for an athletic apparel company. They’re coming out with a new line directed at kids.”

“Okay? What’s so different about it than the things I’ve tried to sell him on?”

“The company is extremely philanthropic. Twenty-five percent of every dollar they earn goes to a different children’s organization each month.”

Tripp still looks clueless.

“Ethan loves working with kids’ charities. It’s the single thing in his file that’s consistent. Give him what he loves, and

he'll work his ass off for it.”

“At this point, I'm willing to try anything.”

As soon as I get back to the office, I head for my phone. There's a Post-It note on my desk that catches my eye. I snatch it before Tripp can see it, just in case.

First time I've ever had someone to miss on one of these trips.

See you soon.

- *Ethan*

My heart swells. He's going to miss me. Me, of all people. There's a whole world out there for him to miss, but it's just little old me. My heart also breaks at the fact that the poor man has no one else in his life to miss. No family? No friends?

I know he said he wasn't a fan of relationships, but I had assumed it meant romantic relationships. Not all of them.

Under Tripp's gaze, I push the thoughts out of my head and grab my phone to call Yolanda. I set my cell on the desk, putting her on speaker so that Tripp can hear the details as well.

“Active Apparel is launching their Active All-Stars kids' brand in the next few months. They're looking for a spokesperson who can command a crowd. Someone who will draw attention to the brand and to the various kids' charities,” Yolanda says.

“Then I really think that Ethan is your man,” I tell her.

“You all have certainly done a great job of cleaning up his act over the past couple of years. Is that sustainable? I mean, we are marketing to kids. I don’t need him and a million women splashed all over the pages of magazines and newspapers.”

“Not an issue,” I assure her. “Ethan is a great guy. He loves helping kids. He’ll do right by the company.”

“Okay. Well, talk to him, see what he thinks, and get back to me. In the meantime, I’ll send over all the deets.”

“Thanks, Yolanda,” I say before hanging up.

No sooner do I disconnect the call than Tripp is reaching for his phone.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Calling Ethan.”

“Oh no. Absolutely not.”

“Excuse me?”

This is the perfect deal for Ethan-it’s almost as though it was tailor made for him. I can picture it now, him being the spokesperson, raising money left and right for various kids’ charities everywhere. I also know that Ethan doesn’t want to be an in-your-face kind of guy. He doesn’t see himself as a role model. Doesn’t want to be one, despite the fact that I know he can be.

If Tripp shoves this at Ethan now? He’ll turn him down. No, I need to get him to see the impact he’ll have. The lives he’ll

affect. Then we might just stand a chance in hell of sealing this deal.

“What? Why?”

“First, because he’s getting on a plane to Chicago for a big series.”

Tripp releases the phone. “And second?”

“Because accosting him with another endorsement isn’t going to work. You need to feed this to him slowly. Trickle the idea in. Mention the kids. Then the company.”

“Everly ... ”

“I know, it sounds silly, but it’ll work. I’m sure.”

“You better be right about this.”

“And if I’m not? What other ideas do you have?”

“You got me there.”

Chapter 9

Ethan

First one to board the plane, I take my favorite seat next to the window.

Head back, eyes closed, I let my mind wander to the only place it seems to want to go anymore.

Everly.

I had hoped to run into her today. Hoped she would be in the office and not out meeting a client or some shit. I wanted to see her before I left. Needed to.

Thank God she was.

I've known the damn woman for two weeks, and yet ... I like her. I miss her. Even now. It's been a whole fifty minutes since I left her, and I am already wondering what she's doing. If she found the note I left her.

When I grabbed the Post-It off her desk, I had intended to write nothing more than see you soon. Maybe a cheesy smiley face or something. It was as if something took me over when I put the pen to the paper. Sure, the thought had run through my head, but I sure as fuck hadn't intended to tell her that.

In all my time playing baseball, all the road trips we've done, never once did I give a fuck about leaving home. Hell, it was a vacation in my mind. Nice hotel. Fresh crop of women. As I packed my bag today though, there was an ache in my chest. Then a thought of Everly. Then the realization that I was going to miss her.

That was a real fucking jolt for me.

A jolt that apparently my hand decided I needed to tell her even though I shouldn't have.

The moment I left Advantage, I regretted it. Not because it wasn't true or even that I cared that she knew I would miss her, but rather the fact that I don't want to send her mixed signals. I don't want to confuse her, make her read into something that isn't there.

Isn't it, though?

My head argues with my heart. A disagreement so foreign to me that all I want to do is figure out a way to get rid of it. The only thing I've come up with thus far is omitting Everly from my life.

Fat chance of that.

Only two weeks and still I know that I don't want to let her go. Not now. Maybe not ever.

I feel the seat next to me shift. I peek open an eye and see Fox sitting next to me.

The complete opposite of me, Fox hates these trips, hates being away from his wife. Especially now.

"You okay?" I ask.

I keep my eyes closed because I don't really want this to turn into a full-blown conversation, but I know he's struggling this trip. His wife is pregnant. Damn near due. The idea of being away, being unable to get to her in time? It's killing him.

While I might be a bit of a heartless bastard at times, I like Fox. He's a good guy, and I feel for him. So I open the conversation while silently praying he keeps it short.

"I will be. As long as I don't get a call saying she's going into labor."

"You won't. You'll be there."

Fox chuckles.

"What?"

"Look at you being all supportive and shit. This woman must be doing a real number on you."

"What woman?" Slade, the second baseman, asks.

"There is no woman," I say, scowling at Fox. Here I am trying to be nice to the fucker, and he announces to the entire plane of assholes there's a woman in my life. Fuck me.

"She's just a friend. Right, Ambrose?" Maddox chimes in.

I can practically feel the fury in his words.

Opening my eyes, I sigh.

"I love that all you fuckers are so invested in my love life, but there is no woman. Never has been, never will be."

"Heard you were hooking up with Maddox's agent," Slade continues.

"Better not be," Maddox grumbles.

Fox laughs next to me, but I'm not sure if he's laughing at me and my proclamation or the grumbling coming from

Maddox.

“You heard wrong,” I tell Slade. “Everly is way too smart to fall for my shit.”

Even without seeing him, I can feel the fury radiating off Maddox.

“Easy, Prescott. I won’t hurt your precious agent. We’re just friends.”

He kicks the back of my seat. “What happened to leaving her alone?”

I tried, man. Believe me, I tried. It’s just not that easy. Not with a woman like her.

My screen lights up, and from his seat next to me, Fox can see the photo of Everly, the incoming text from her.

He laughs. Then laughs harder when he sees the stupid smile on my face. The one I try to hide but can’t. Thankfully, he keeps his mouth shut.

Everly: Thanks for the note. Good luck with the series. Go kick some ass tomorrow.

Me: Wheels up. I’ll text you later.

“I bet you will,” Fox says.

“Fuck off,” I tell him.

“Will what?” Maddox chimes in.

“Fuck the first woman we see at dinner tonight,” Fox says.

It's my usual MO. Find a hot woman, hook up, pitch my ass off the next day.

The flight feels long, so long that I feel like I should be in a different damn country, not just a few states away. The teasing, the ridicule, the questions and comments. It's all too much and so fucking draining that when we finally get to the hotel, I immediately head for my room.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Slade shouts after me as I make my way to the elevators.

“You pussies and all your gossip wore me out. I'm going to my room, ordering some room service, and going to bed.”

I can hear them talking shit and laughing as I step inside the elevator. I lift up my middle finger and hold it in position until the elevator door closes. Then I go to my room and do exactly what I said I was going to. I call room service and order my favorite pregame meal—a bacon cheeseburger, sweet potato fries, and a large Dr Pepper.

When the food arrives, I make myself comfortable on the bed with my burger in one hand and the remote in the other. I flip through the channels looking for something on our series with the Cobras. I manage to catch the tail end of a report with the sportscaster wishing both teams luck with the series.

The word luck strikes a chord with me, reminding me of the text from Everly. That one thought is all it takes for me to reach for my phone and text her.

Me: Hey, sunshine.

Everly: Hey there. How was the flight?

Me: Boring. What are you up to?

Everly: Work. Checking out a new company.

Me: For Maddox?

Everly: I'm not sure yet. It's not really his thing. It's kid clothing.

Me: Not really anyone's thing – except for kids.

Everly: I know. I just love this company though. They do so much great work with various charities. 25% of all proceeds go to a new charity each month.

Me: Sounds great.

Everly: Right? Problem is, they're a small startup company. They have the potential to be huge, but they need a big name to give them the traction.

Me: Why do I feel like I'm being suckered into something?

Everly: You're not my client. I can't sucker you into anything.

Me: That's where you're wrong. You're probably the only one that can.

Everly: Does that mean you'll do it?

Me: Only if you say please.

Everly: Please, Ethan. Pretty please with sugar on top?

Me: Fuck! I love it when you beg. Fine. I'm in. Tell Tripp he owes you.

Everly: I will.

Our text conversation continues on for quite a while longer, with me having to resist the urge to send her something dirty every five minutes.

At some point I drift off to sleep, phone in my hand open to her text. When I wake up in the morning, seeing her name puts a smile on my face. Only thing better would be if she were here.

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I shake my head.

Where in the fuck did that come from?

I've never woken up next to a woman, not even when I was drunk off my ass. I always had my wits about me when it came to that shit. So why, when I've never wanted to be with a woman, do I suddenly keep thinking about these things in relation to Everly?

"Because you're a selfish prick, that's why," I say to myself.

The pounding on my door is followed by shouts.

"Wake up, pretty boy, time to roll."

Fuck.

I had been so busy texting Everly that I never set my alarm.

Rushing out of bed, I brush my teeth and throw on some clothes in a hurry.

“What took you so long?” Fox asks as he and Maddox stand outside my door.

“Overslept. Late night.”

“Thought you were going to bed?” Fox pries.

“I was. I did. I got caught up in a movie.”

No one buys my shit, least of all Maddox.

“Oh, come on. Don’t be mad, Prescott. It was just a few dirty texts,” I yell after him, trying to rub salt in the wound.

“Do you want to get your ass kicked?” Fox says with a laugh.

“I’d like to see him try,” I say.



Head down, feet firmly planted on the ground, I make my way to the mound for what I hope is the last time today.

Three strikes and they’re out.

I kick the dirt. Center myself.

My head snaps up to face the batter. My eyes drift over to Fox.

My mind only on two things: the strike zone and Everly.

The ball leaves my hand and sails through the air.

Strike one.

Eyes on Fox. Mind on the strike zone and Everly, I pitch again.

Strike two.

The batter is pissed. Thomas, I think his name is.

Well, Thomas, you're about to be downright furious.

Eyes on Fox. Mind on the strike zone and Everly, I pitch again.

Strike three.

Looks like Everly is more than just my little ray of sunshine. Seems she's my goddamn lucky charm, too.

Chapter 10

Everly

“**Y**ou’re my lucky charm.”

That’s the first message I saw when I woke up this morning. My smile was automatic. As it is every time I so much as think about Ethan. And it’s remained steadfast on my face all day.

Yes, like a fool, I’ve been walking around with this giddy smile all day because Ethan Ambrose called me his lucky charm.

Even the constant reminder to myself that we’re just friends, nothing more, isn’t helping.

As I sit at the bar with Chelle chatting about our week, game two in the series begins. The moment I hear the National Anthem, my eyes are glued to the big-screen TV.

“I’ve never seen you so invested in a game before.”

I’ve never felt so invested before. I’ve never cared beyond the stats, the player, the fact that they’re doing what they’re supposed to be doing. Wins and losses—they happen.

Not for Ethan, though. Not now. I want to be his lucky charm. I want him to text me and tell me that the win was because he has me.

I want him to have me.

“You’re falling for him, aren’t you?”

“What? Who?”

Chelle cocks her head to the side. “Really? Ethan.”

“No. I’m watching because my client—”

“This has nothing to do with Maddox and you know it.”

“I just want them to do well. Both of them. Because they’re my friends. Nothing more.”

“I don’t know who you’re trying to fool, sister, but it better not be me. I know better. I know you. And you are crushing hard on Ethan Ambrose.”

“He’s just a friend.”

“Who’s just a friend?”

My body tenses at the sound of the all too familiar voice. The warning Ethan gave me earlier pops into my head.

Kai’s in town.

I didn’t really care that he was back in town. There was no inclination to see him or even think of him. He’s the past.

“Who’s just a friend?”

He repeats the question as I just stare at him. The knowledge of Kai being in town had apparently done little to prepare me

for the sight of him.

He looks good, I'll give him that. Cocksure smile, green eyes, and impeccably dressed. He's far less casual of a man than Ethan is, choosing slacks over jeans and button-up shirts over t-shirts. What I once thought made him more refined is now something I realize is nothing more than a show.

Ethan looks better in his t-shirts and jeans than Kai could ever hope to in a tux. Ethan's attractiveness is real, while Kai's is strived for. And damn but it doesn't make all the difference.

"None of your business," I tell him, turning my attention back to the game.

"Come on, honey, don't be like that."

The sound of his voice triggers emotions that I kept at bay when we broke up. The way he calls me 'honey' makes my skin crawl.

"Don't call me that. While we're at it, how about you just not talk to me period."

My voice rises with my anger as I speak.

"Lower your voice," he tells me.

"No."

I am so over this. Over him.

"Everly."

I know the warning tone in his voice, and where it used to strike a fear in me, now I find amusement. Does he really

think he can still control me? Still tell me what to do and how to behave? God, how had I been so stupid for so long.

I glance back at the television screen. Ethan is on the mound.

I might be his lucky charm, but Ethan has managed to instill more confidence in me than I ever had before. A confidence that is going to give me the strength to finally tell Kai exactly what I think of him.

“Actually,” I begin, “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Oh yeah?”

The smug smile on his face makes my skin crawl and my stomach churn.

“Yeah, that way I can finally tell you how I really feel.”

His fingers run down my arm and then back up again.

“How do you feel, honey?”

“Grateful. So damn grateful that we’re over and I’m rid of you.” I slap his hand away. “You are a controlling, manipulative prick, and I honestly don’t know why I ever wasted my time on you.”

“Wasted your time on me?” He scoffs. “You’re lucky I—”

“Dumped me? Yeah, I am. I’ve never been happier than I am now—without you.”

The stunned look on his face is more than enough to satisfy me. In all the years we were together, never would I have spoken to him like that.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have a game to watch.”

Kai grabs my arm.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Assault charges would look terrible on your record,” Chelle tells him. “One button and the cops are on their way.”

Kai releases me.

“You’re not worth it. Never were.”

“Back at ya ... honey.”

Kai walks away, and the weight of our breakup and the fact that I let him walk all over me for years is finally lifted off my chest.

I sigh.

“That was amazing,” Chelle tells me.

Sure, there were probably a dozen more things that I could have probably said, but the fact that I said anything at all was huge.

“It felt amazing,” I admit. I turn to see Ethan’s face on the screen again, his stats next to him.

I’m amazing. And thanks to him, I finally see that.

The bottom of the eighth turns into the top of the ninth and Ethan takes the mound.

Three strikes. That’s all he needs to put game two of the series behind them.

“Come on,” I plead as I watch the ball leave his hand with grace and precision.

“Oh yeah, not falling at all.”

I throw a death glare in her direction before returning my attention to the screen just in time to see the ball sail into the catcher’s mitt.

Two strikes down. One to go.

The camera zooms in on Ethan, his face resolute, focused. When he blows out a breath, my eyes fall to his lips.

“Here’s the wind up,” the announcer says. “And the pitch.”

“Strike three,” the other announcer shouts. “That’s two in the three-game series for the Railcats.”

As the announcement is made, I jump out of my seat and cheer.

Chelle watches every move I make, a satisfied look on her face. Based on my reaction, she’s deduced that she’s right. That I’m falling for Ethan Ambrose.

There’s a chance that she just may be right.

More than a chance, actually.

The sports announcer makes his way onto the field where the Railcats are cheering. He shoves a microphone directly in Ethan’s face.

“Ethan, your pitching in this series has looked better than it has all season. What’s new? What’s changed?”

Ethan looks directly at the camera, dimples in full effect as he smiles. “I have a lucky charm.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in luck?”

“I didn’t—until now.”

Maddox’s arm wraps around Ethan’s neck in a sort of embrace. He pulls Ethan away and they continue to celebrate.

“There you have it,” the sportscaster says. “Ethan Ambrose and his lucky charm.”

Chelle bumps her shoulder into me. “Looks like the feeling is mutual too.”

As I crawl into bed, I keep thinking about the change in dynamics between me and Ethan. The warnings that he’s given me that I deserve better than him. The fact that being with a man like him could blow my career out of the water.

So much is up in the air when it comes to him. So much that I don’t know how to interpret or understand. Chelle’s right, though. I like Ethan. Way more than I want to.

Just as I’m about to set my phone on the nightstand, a text from Ethan comes through.

Ethan: Did you see the game?

Me: I did. It was amazing. YOU were amazing.

Ethan: I couldn’t have done it without you.

Me: Whatever.

I type the word, both wanting to blow off what he’s saying and also looking for confirmation that he actually does mean it.

Ethan: It’s true, sunshine. Having you in my life makes everything better.

Me: I feel the same.

The same and so much more.

Chapter 11

Ethan

What a high.

We dominated this series. *I* dominated this series.

And I owe it all to Everly.

That's why the minute I got off the plane, I made a beeline for a florist.

Now, here I am, standing at her door with a massive bouquet of flowers in my hand. Nervous, I run my hand through my hair.

I'm not even sure what I'm doing here or why I rushed right over.

What I do know is that I've spent more time thinking about her this past week than I should have. I know that the flowers in my hand weren't easy to pick because I wanted to make sure to get her just the right ones.

I know I should turn around and leave. It's what's best for her—not me. She ... she is what's best for me. I'm just

terrified that I'm going to destroy her.

I send a text to Fox asking a question that's beyond fucking embarrassing: friends can give friends flowers, right? His response? Yes. Only now I'm thinking he was fucking with me to try and push me into something I'm not capable of.

Fuck it.

I knock on the door and wait.

And wait.

The words "I'm coming" echo through the door before it flies open.

There, standing before me in nothing but a towel, is Everly.

Fucking hell, is there anything the woman wears that doesn't make my dick hard?

As if it matters. I jerked off to a fully dressed selfie of her more times than I care to admit this week.

"Hey there," she says, smiling.

I'm smiling too. I'm happy to see her and I'm even happier to see her barely dressed.

"Hi, sunshine." I look her up and down. "You always answer the door in a towel?"

"Only on Mondays." Her eyes fall to the flowers. "Are those for me?"

I nod. "They are. A little thank you."

She takes the flowers from me and brings them to her nose. She turns around and begins making her way into the apartment. “Come in.”

I linger in the doorway for a moment, watching her pull a vase from a cabinet in the kitchen, as I contemplate whether or not I should go in. The temptation of being alone with her may be too much considering I’m barely hanging on by a thread.

I told her friends. I owe her friends.

I can’t fuck this up with sex.

“I’m not sure what I did to earn these but thank you. They’re beautiful.”

You’re beautiful.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, and I literally have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from saying them.

“I didn’t think I would see you today. Not after the long day of travel.”

“I wanted to thank you in person for being my lucky charm.”

She tosses me a look over her shoulder. “You could have done that tomorrow. Not that you have anything to thank me for. I didn’t do anything.”

“You’ve done more than you know.”

She offers me a bottle of water, which I happily take thanks to the sight of her making my mouth go dry.

“Quick question. Are you planning on putting some clothes on? I only have so much restraint.”

She looks down at herself and her cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink.

“Oh my God.” Her arms wrap around her and holds the towel tighter. She thinks that she’s hiding her body when in fact all she’s really doing is putting those perky tits of hers on display for me. “I was so surprised to see you that I completely forgot.”

She takes off through the apartment and down the short hallway.

I follow her, slowly, waiting outside the closed door.

“You have a nice place,” I tell her.

“Thanks. I’ve thought about upgrading, but I like it here. It’s home.”

The door opens and her outfit is much better. A loose t-shirt. A pair of leggings. Her covered up is definitely an improvement. For my hormones at least. My cock is cursing me. He was much preferring the other view.

Even dressed, I can’t help but to find her attractive—want her, even. I like the casual look on her. Okay, I like every look she has, but I think I actually like this one the most. Relaxed. Relaxed looks good on her. Her being this relaxed with me? Women never do that. They always try too hard. Hair done. Makeup on.

Everly has neither. No makeup. Hair in a messy bun and a cute shirt with the words coffee and sunshine splattered across the front of it.

“It suits you.”

“The apartment or the outfit?” she replies with a laugh.

“Both.”

I follow her into the living room where she offers me a seat on the couch with her. She curls up onto one side, and I settle in on the other.

“You were amazing this series. The whole team was, but your pitching was on point every game.”

“Is this a work thing or are you that big of a baseball fan?”

“Growing up, my dad used to take me to games all the time. He loved baseball. And since he spent most of his time working and supporting me and my mom, he didn’t have a lot of friends to hang out with.”

“Must have been some great bonding time for the two of you.”

“Yes and no.”

“Why do you say that?”

She waves her hand in the space between us. “You don’t want to hear about that. Let’s talk about—”

“Yes, I do. What is it?”

Everly looks down at her hands. I resist the urge to touch her, to lift her chin and make her look at me and see that I really do care. That I really do want to know.

Touching is off limits so instead I just tell her.

“I want to know, Everly. I want to know everything about you.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t that what friends do? Share things?”

“I’m not going to lie, I’m a little afraid of what you might share with me.”

“I said I want you to share. Not the other way around.” I wink at her. “So ... talk.”

“I’m a twin,” she tells me.

My overactive imagination goes into overdrive picturing two of her and me in a bed. *Reign it in, Ambrose. That’s not what this is.*

“My brother, he, uh, he died a couple hours after we were born.”

“Oh, shit. I’m ... I’m sorry. That must have been really hard on your family.”

“Despite what you hear about twins, we didn’t have some sort of bond in the womb. I don’t remember him. Probably wouldn’t have if my dad didn’t constantly remind me about it—about him, I mean. He never got over the fact that he lost his son.”

“That’s not your fault. He shouldn’t be guilted you because you survived and ... ”

“Ean,” she supplies.

“And Ean didn’t.”

“Maybe not, but it’s what happened. So I did everything I could to try to be the best of both—son and daughter. Not that it mattered. It was never good enough.”

You’re not worth it.

“That’s fucking bullshit. You’re good enough, and you shouldn’t have to fucking prove it. Not to anyone, especially not your parents.”

While all of this seems to be nothing more than a mild irritation to her, something for her to strive for, it pisses me the hell off. I know that feeling. I know what it’s like to not be good enough. She, of all people, doesn’t deserve that.

“Ethan? You okay? You went somewhere there.”

Her hand is resting on my arm in a manner that can only be construed as comforting.

I shake the thoughts out of my head. Anger at her father. At my own. Frustration at men who have no idea what unconditional love is and how to give it to their children.

“I hate that you went through that. Are going through that. It’s no way to live.”

I know.

She settles back into her seat.

“What’s worse is that I found myself a man just like him. Someone that I could never measure up to.”

“Kai?”

She nods.

“I ran into him.”

“Damn it, I knew I should have—”

She shakes her head.

“No. I’m glad I did.” Her gaze drops to her hands. “When he dumped me, I let him say the most horrible things to me, let him make it sound like I was a terrible girlfriend. When in actuality, he was the terrible one. Now, thanks to you, I was finally able to tell him how I felt.”

“Thanks to me? What did I do?”

“You build me up when he would tear me down. You make me feel special and important ...”

“You are.”

“You gave me the confidence to stand up for myself.”

“I don’t know if or how I did that, but I’m glad.”

Looks like Mr. Perfect isn’t so perfect after all. In fact, it sounds like he’s a downright dick bag. I’m not sure why that makes me happy. Maybe because it makes me feel like I have a fighting chance—for what, I still don’t know. This right here is all we should ever be.

So why the fuck can’t I stay away?

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“What was your childhood like? Your parents.”

In this moment, her eyes penetrating my soul, I want to tell her the truth. I want to unburden my secret—that my parents left me. I want to tell her that my father is trying to get back into my life for some godforsaken reason.

“They died when I was eight.”

Her hand flies to her mouth. “Oh my God, Ethan, I am so sorry. Here I am complaining about my dad being a little controlling and—”

“Don’t. It’s fine. I barely remember them. What your dad did —”

“We’re talking about you.”

“I don’t like talking about me.”

“I’ve gathered as much.”

“Then why don’t we change the subject entirely.”

“Okay, so what do you want to talk about?”

“Baseball. Lucky charms. You, not the cereal.”

Her head falls back, and the most beautiful laughter fills the room.

This. I could get used to this.

We order pizza, keep talking. We spend the whole evening doing things that I’ve never done with a woman—just hanging out.

No sex.

In fact, there wasn't anything sexual at all about our evening.
Very strange concept for a man like me.

Everything with Everly is.

It's late when I leave.

She walks me to the door. I step through and turn around to give her one final goodbye. With her head tilted to the side and a soft, relaxed smile on her lips, I can't resist the urge to touch her anymore.

I lean in, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“Good night, sunshine.”

Chapter 12

Everly

“**F**irst he shows up at your house and now he invited you to a baseball game?”

The more Chelle talks, the faster I run on the treadmill to avoid further conversation with her. She’s making a mountain out of a molehill. Ethan showing up at my house the other night was no big deal. Nothing happened. Not even close.

We talked, we laughed. Just like friends do. Just like Chelle and I do.

The invitation to the baseball game ...

Well, that’s because for some reason Ethan has deemed me his lucky charm. Something about us texting while he was away being the reason for why he played so well and, therefore, the reason they won.

Besides, we’re friends. Friends invite people places. Even Maddox has offered me tickets to games before. Not that I’ve ever accepted them. Information Chelle does not need to know

because she will only read into things further. Things that aren't possible for so many reasons. His and mine.

Since the other night, Ethan and I have been texting. A lot. So the phone call today really didn't surprise me. Neither did the invitation.

Best seats in the house, he told me. Nothing but the best for his lucky charm.

If I tell Chelle these things, she'll just read into it. See things that aren't there. We're friends. We're happy. Nothing wrong with that.

“Do you want to go with me or not?”

“Are you sure you don't want to be alone? Just in case?” she asks, a wicked smile on her face.

“Yes or no?”

“Of course I'll go. No way am I turning down good tickets to a Railcats game. Or the opportunity to get up close and personal with Ethan Ambrose.”

My face stays forward but my eyes glimpse in her direction. Just how personal does she think she's going to get with Ethan?

I can't let her know that the idea of her flirting with him bothers me. She'll never let me live it down. Not to mention she'll do everything in her power to push the two of us together.

Rather than come across as a jealous girlfriend, I put the spotlight back on her.

“What about what’s his name?” I ask her, recalling her telling me that her latest one-night stand turned into a two-night stand. Then a three-night stand. And now they’re basically dating, though she won’t admit to it.

“Oh, Joe? Yeah, he’s great, but we’re talking Ethan Ambrose. Unlike you, there is no way in hell I would pass up a chance with him.”

I don’t have a chance. If I did, he would have made a move the other night when we sat in my apartment until the early morning hours. All we did was talk though. No flirting. No trying anything. He was a perfect gentleman.

“I’m not passing anything up. There was nothing offered up.”

Open mouth, insert foot.

“Exactly, because we both know that if he tried, there is no way you would be able to resist.”

I hop off the treadmill, doused in sweat. Chelle, on the other hand, is cool as a cucumber.

“You do know the speed goes past two and a half, right?” I tease her.

“You may want to stay super healthy and toned, but I’m just looking to burn enough calories to indulge in a few Hershey’s kisses each night.”

“You’re a mess.” I toss my towel at her.

“No, you’re a mess.” She waves her hand in front of her face. “A stinky, sweaty mess.”

I move closer to her. “You know how much I love you, right?”

“Don’t,” she warns me.

“Come on, give me a hug. I’m your best friend. You wouldn’t deny me that, would you?”

Finally, Chelle begins to run—straight into the locker room of our gym.



After our workout, we each headed home to get ready for the game. My closet has plenty of Railcats gear, but nothing specific to Ethan. Since he invited me, I feel like I needed to wear his jersey.

“That’s what you’re wearing?” Chelle scolds when she gets into my car and sees the plain tank top that I paired with some jean shorts.

“I didn’t have an Ambrose jersey,” I tell her.

“Ah. And you’ve got to support your man.”

“My friend. And yes, I do.” I turn the car onto the highway, the quickest route to the stadium, which is on the outskirts of town.

Our first stop is the stadium store.

There's something about seeing his name splattered all over the place that makes me feel proud. Other players' names are everywhere too, including my very own client Maddox Prescott. Knowing what I now know about Ethan, how he lost his parents at such a young age, how much he's had to overcome, it makes all this seem so much more.

More important. More special. More amazing.

Just like the man himself.

It's something that he doesn't see in himself, and I'm not quite sure why. I had assumed it had something to do with a troubled past, doesn't it always? Losing your parents is a horrific thing, though I'm not sure how it equates to the lack of self-love he seems to have for himself.

Except when it comes to baseball.

There's a wide variety of shirts with his name, number, or both on them, including the jersey I'm currently eyeing. His last name is emblazoned on the back. I run my fingers over the letters before I pick it up.

"It looks too small," I tell Chelle as I hold it up against my body.

"Or not small enough," she says, nodding to a woman who's barely wearing anything except his name.

"Even if I were interested in him, how am I supposed to compete with that?" I ask her.

Sure, it's a telltale sign that I am in fact interested, at least a little. I'd have to be crazy not to be. Any woman would. Still, I don't fit the Ethan Ambrose groupie bill. Hell, I don't want to.

"You can't," she says, matter of fact.

"Thanks?"

"There's no competition. You're gorgeous and smart. You've got a great head on your shoulders and an eye for the game that he loves. You live in his world and understand more than you realize about it. You can't compete with that because she doesn't even remotely compare to you."

"But her tits," I groan, glancing down at my very normal, on-the-small-side boobs.

"Tits are a dime a dozen. And if you really wanted them, you could buy them. She did."

The woman must overhear our conversation because she turns toward us.

There's a satisfied smirk on her face when she speaks. "These are real."

"Real what? Silicone?" Chelle antagonizes.

"Ask Ethan, he knows."

"I'm sure he does. Along with hers, and hers, oh, and probably hers too." Chelle points at random women as she speaks.

"You're not his type."

"I don't want to be his type," I tell her.

I want to be the one he wants. I want to be his more.

“But I do want to get to my seat. The one that Ethan gave me tickets for.”

I toss the last part in just for fun before stalking over to the counter and buying the jersey.

The section we’re seated in is reserved, so we have to show our tickets before they let us in.

“Ms. Mann, how wonderful to see you. Right this way,” the guard says, extending his hand. He guides us to our seats, right to the side of home plate. Perfect view of the pitcher’s mound. Close enough to reach out and touch the players if I wanted to.

The Railcats are already on the field warming up. Off to the side, I can see Ethan in the pitcher’s area. He’s rotating his right arm, swinging it around before holding it in front of him.

“Jesus, he’s amazing,” Chelle says. “Look at that ass.”

It’s a nice ass, no doubt about that. The baseball pants that hug the muscle only make it more prominent.

We sit in our seats watching for a few uninterrupted moments.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Mann,” a man says.

It’s not the same man from earlier. This is someone new.

“Um ... Hi.”

“Is there anything that I can get you to eat? Drink?”

“Oh, uh ... ”

I've been so preoccupied with thoughts of Ethan and that irritating woman in the shop that I haven't given food much thought.

"If there's something you would like that we don't have, just let us know and we'll make sure it's available to you."

"Oh, no, you don't have to go to all that trouble."

"It's no trouble, ma'am."

"Two beers and two hot dogs," Chelle tells the man, who happily nods and walks away, returning no more than a few moments later with our items.

I reach into my wallet and pull out some money.

"Oh, no, ma'am, everything is taken care of. Whatever you like, just let us know. It's on the house."

"By the house, do you mean Ethan?"

The man chuckles. "Yes, ma'am. Mr. Ambrose gave me explicit instructions to make sure that all your needs are met."

"I bet he did."

Warm-ups end and the team begins to walk off the field. Ethan sees me and smiles. Rather than heading for the dugout, he heads straight for me.

Chapter 13

Ethan

My first glance into the stands, the seats I got for Everly were empty.

This time?

Everly's sitting there, another woman who I assume is her friend Chelle next to her. They're talking to Dwight. He's the head of concessions. I asked him to take care of them for me. No expense too high.

Top of the line, top shelf, royal treatment—all for her.

But that's not what I'm focusing on. It's her. The jersey she's wearing. The one with my name on it.

The sight of her, in my jersey, does things to me that I don't expect. It furthers the things that I've been trying to discount for the past week and makes shit ... real. Like her. Like us.

For a man who never thinks in the plural, who prefers to be on his own because, let's face it, it's what's safe, I sure have been thinking a lot about there being an us. In just a few short weeks, this woman has brought things out of me, made me do

things, made me be a person that I don't recognize, but one that I like, nonetheless. One that I want to be.

"Yo, Ambrose," Fox calls out to me.

I turn back to face him as a ball comes whizzing by my head.

"Get your eyes off your girlfriend and back into the game," he tells me.

I turn toward him and send the ball sailing in his direction.

"Watch out or I'll shove my size fourteen up your sorry ass."

Fox chuckles as he catches the pitch I just threw him. "Didn't hear you deny she was your girlfriend."

He's right. I didn't.

I look back at the unexpected woman that fell into my life. So beautiful. So kind. So much more than I ever expected or believed I deserved. Deserve. Because honestly, do I? Sure, I've cleaned up my act some. The drinking, mostly. That was just for self-preservation, not even because I wanted to.

Yes, I'm a better man for it. But am I good enough for her?

I think about the things she's told me about her relationship with Kai. Tidbits that she let slip. I sure as fuck would never treat her like he did.

Turning around again, my eyes land on her. Everly. She looks amazing in the too-short black shorts and tight black jersey with my name on it.

Christ, does she look good.

“Ambrose!” Fox shouts my name again. This time I’m so lost in Everly’s silky thighs I’m not ready when I turn back and get hit square in the chest with the ball.

“Fuck!” I yell out the word as I rub my chest. “Maybe you should be pitching instead.”

“Maybe I should,” he agrees.

Practice time is over. It’s time to focus on the game at hand. The winning season. Yet when I should be walking to the dugout, my feet carry me over to where Everly sits.

“My lucky charm,” I say, my hand gripping the fence in front of me. “Nice jersey.”

“As the lucky charm, I have to represent.”

“You’re doing a damn good job of it. The seats okay?”

“They’re amazing. You didn’t have to go to all this trouble.”

Trouble? This was nothing.

“You must be Chelle,” I say, finally acknowledging the beautiful brunette standing next to Everly.

“I am, and I’m also your biggest fan. Great season.”

Her tone isn’t flirtatious. She isn’t saying it to try and get in my pants the way most women do. She’s sweet and genuine, and hearing that I’m her favorite makes me smile. Even more than I already am.

“I have to head into the dugout, but sky’s the limit, ladies. Your wish is Dwight’s command.”

I throw them a wink before jogging back to the dugout.

With Everly here, I'm ready to play. Even better that she's wearing my jersey.

When we were on the road last week, I would stand on the mound, eyes on the plate, mind on Everly.

Today? Things are a little different.

This time while I'm on the mound, I can see her. I lock eyes with her. Even from this distance, the things I can see and feel in them ...

Fuck.

I wind up.

There goes the pitch.

"Strike one," the umpire calls out.

She smiles. I smile back. Fuck, I never smile on the mound. Focused, tough, no-nonsense. That's what I am when I'm playing.

Fucking Everly, she changes everything.

Strike two.

The batter thwacks his bat against the ground. I'm not sure if he's more irritated that he's got two strikes against me or that I'm smiling about it.

Strike three.

Fox throws the ball back at me with a shake of his head.

Eyes still on Everly every moment I can, I strike out two more batters. Perfect inning.

Sure, I get distracted here and there. But fuck if this isn't the best game I've ever pitched.

Goddamn lucky charm.

It's not until the seventh inning stretch that I have a moment to actually stop and check in with her. I've noticed the butler service, her smile, everything that's been happening out in the stands when normally I don't even see them. To me the crowd, the stands, it's nothing but a blur. My mind is on the ball, the strike—the win.

I reach her, my right hand gripping my mitt, the other holding onto the chain link fence.

“Having fun?”

“Me? Are you? You're phenomenal out there.”

“Told you that you were my lucky charm.”

“Maybe we should test the theory. Maybe I should go and ...”

“No.”

My voice is so insanelly insistent that she begins to laugh.

“I didn't take you for the superstitious type.”

“I didn't take you for a good luck charm, but here we are. Promise me you won't go.”

“I'm not going anywhere.”

“I'll see you after the game. One of the security guards will come get you and bring you back.”

“Back where?”

I don't answer her, just continue back to the dugout to finish the game.

The eighth inning goes just as smoothly as the last seven. The ninth too.

What a game. What a day.

Final score: nine to nothing.

Fuck, what a rush!

I'm feeling high as a fucking kite, and if I'm honest with myself, it's not just because of the win. It's because of Everly.

I don't really think that she's a good luck charm per se, but her presence certainly does have an effect on me.

When I walk toward the locker room, Everly is already standing there with her friend at her side. Everly, a woman who lives in a world of pro athletes, looks nervous, while the woman next to her seems to just be soaking it all in. By “it” I mean the plethora of men parading past her.

I don't even hesitate as I make my way over to them, my arms reaching for Everly, lifting her until her body is pressed against mine and squeezing the hell out of her.

“That game was ... amazing.”

I love the excitement in her voice. The feel of her against me.

“You're amazing,” I tell her, letting the thoughts in my head slip out when normally I can control them. The high of the

fucking win has me all over the goddamn place. As does the woman in my arms.

I offer her friend a smile and a greeting.

“Great game,” she tells me, being my biggest fan and all.

“Give me twenty. I am going to hit the showers and then we’re going to get out of here.”

“Where are we going?” Everly asks.

“You’ll see.”

I set her down and press a kiss to her cheek before heading into the locker room.

The glare I earn from Maddox is worth it.

“I thought ... ”

“That I was going to leave her alone, blah blah blah,” I say as I pull my shirt over my head and drop it to the ground. “You sound like a broken record.”

“So help me God, if you so much as lay a hand on her—”

“You’ll what? Kill me? That would fuck up your season, so we both know that’s not going to happen.” I turn toward him and for the first time look him in the eyes. “I’m not going to hurt her, man. I like her. We’re friends. She’s ... I promise.”

I don’t owe him shit. Not an explanation. Not a reason. Certainly not a promise.

“I will tell you this, though,” I say. “Don’t let her catch you pulling this shit. She’ll end you.”

“I’m just trying to protect her.”

“That’s the thing, man. She doesn’t need you to protect her. Not unless she asks for it.”

I walk past him toward the showers. There are two beautiful women outside this locker room that I don’t want to keep waiting.

Showered and dressed, I exit the locker room.

“Where’s Chelle?” I ask when I see her standing there alone.

“Something came up.” Her eyes refuse to meet mine as she speaks.

“Guess it’s just the two of us then.”

“Two of us for what exactly?”

“After home games, the team always hits up Bases Loaded. They shut down the place for us and we eat, drink, and laugh in peace.”

“And you want me to come with?”

“A lot of the guys bring their girlfriends and wives.”

“I’m not either of those.”

“Rub in my lonely single life, why don’t you?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m sure you’re real lonely.”

“Terribly,” I tell her, smiling so she doesn’t see the truth—how truly alone I really am. “Friends can come too.”

Not that I have many of those either. Nor have I ever brought anyone with me. Bringing Everly is going to create a shit

storm, but I don't care. For the first time in a long time, I feel good. Happy, even. As much as I hate to admit it, it has everything to do with her.

Not waiting for her answer, I fling my arm around her shoulders and lead her out the back entrance of the stadium. "You'll have fun, I promise."

It's been a long time since I've gone to one of these. Not since I quit drinking. Normally after a game, I head home, ice down, and rewatch the game to see where I fucked up and how I can improve. So when we walk in the door, the shit immediately begins.

"Bout time you pulled your head out of your ass, Ambrose," Slade teases.

Looks like Everly's in for a treat. The guys seem to be in rare form tonight, hooting, hollering, and making total jackasses out of themselves. And me.

Maddox is standing on top of a fucking table. Even in the midst of a celebration from high up on the pedestal he put himself, Maddox sends me a warning look.

His eyes moving to Everly, he jumps from the table and heads over to her.

"Hey, babe," Maddox says. He greets Everly then presses a kiss to her cheek. "What are you doing hanging around this guy?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but we're friends."

"Friends, huh?" Fox chimes in.

Fuck. Here we go.

“Didn’t think Ambrose knew how to be friends with a woman.” Fox chuckles.

“Let alone anyone,” Slade says.

I’m used to the ridicule. Especially from the three of them. Everly isn’t though. While the last thing I want or need is her fighting my battles for me, fuck if I don’t like the way it feels to have her on my side, having my back.

“Well maybe he can teach you how to be one because he does a damn good job.”

“Yeah, well, just watch out. Those pitchers like to use their hands,” Maddox says as he stares at me.

“Good to know,” Everly says, giving me a wink.

Pissed for all sorts of reasons that I still don’t understand, Maddox storms off. He might be willing to give me shit, but not Everly.

“What can I get you to drink?” I ask her.

“I’ll have what you’re having.”

“Just water for me tonight,” I tell her.

Her head tilts to the side. “I figured after a win like tonight you’d want to celebrate.”

When I was younger, I was never much of a drinker. It wasn’t until my demons caught up with me, the nightmares of my childhood, that I began to drink. So no, I don’t drink to celebrate. I drink to rid my mind of the demons.

These are all things that she should probably know, be warned about if she's going to associate with me in any way. Things I'm too afraid to tell her out of fear that she'll run the opposite way. As she should. So I deflect. What I don't do is lie.

“Yeah, well, when I'm around you I have to keep my wits about me.”

Nothing truer than that. Fuck, one drop of alcohol after all these years might have me burying my head between her thighs.

“Just wine,” she says with a smile.

We stand off to the side, observing the room around us. This season has everyone going out of their minds. What is normally a nice, relaxed night is turning into a bit of a wild party. The idiots around us—my teammates—are acting like just that. Idiots.

“Oh my God, what is he doing?” Everly claps her hand over her mouth as Doug, the third baseman, attempts a headstand.

“Probably giving himself a broken neck,” I say, wincing as I watch him.

Once upon a time, I enjoyed this. Watching the guys act like fools. Occasionally acting like one myself. I've been so focused on the straight and narrow that I forgot to have a little fun too.

Everly's at my side laughing, her hand covering her mouth.

“I apologize for their behavior,” I tell her. “They were obviously born in barns.”

I nod toward her empty glass. “Another drink?”

She shakes her head. “No, thanks. I should be going.”

I don’t want her to go. I’m not ready for this night of fun and laughter with her to end.

“You’re looking pretty tense. You should stay and relax.”

I plaster a smile on my face. It spreads across my cheeks from ear to ear. It’s laced with mischief and just a twinge of innocence for good measure. It always works. Women can’t resist it.

My hands reach for her waist, pulling her close. I don’t speak, just look at her. It’s enough.

Usually.

Her smile mirrors mine, yet she won’t budge. “I have to go. I’m sorry.”

“Fine, we’ll go.”

“You don’t have to leave.”

My eyebrows dart up. “You came with me; you’re leaving with me.”

She opens her mouth to protest—some independent women shit, I’m sure.

“No arguments.”

I give a quick round of goodbyes to the guys, then with my hand on her lower back, I escort her out of the bar. The entire way, I can feel Maddox's gaze on me.

We make our way to my car, and I open the passenger door for her.

She giggles. I think it's more because of the wine than the gesture because I did open the door for her when we left the stadium. I'm sure of it. Regardless, she's laughing and I'm happy, so who fucking cares.

"Who knew you were such a gentleman?"

"Who said I wasn't?" I ask.

"No one, I guess. Just the whole athlete, player persona. I thought you would be different."

"Believe me, I'm different."

"And trouble."

"That too. Just not in the way you think."

As the car rolls down the street, I have to resist the urge to reach out and touch her. Hell, I would even settle for just holding her hand.

I should be taking her home, but instead I drive the car to my place, because if I'm honest, I'm not ready for tonight to end.

"Where are we?" she asks.

There's a confused look on her face as she looks outside the window, then back to me.

“My place.” My tongue darts out to wet my lips. “Come on, are you really ready for tonight to end? I know I’m not.”

“No, but ... ”

“Then come inside. I’m a gentleman, remember?”

“One hour,” she tells me, her finger pointed in my direction. “One hour and you get me a car home.”

“I’ll do you one better. I’ll drive you.”

With my hand on the small of her back, I lead Everly to the private elevator.

“Oh, your own elevator. Fancy.”

She giggles as she teases me.

When the elevator door dings and we arrive on my floor, Everly’s eyes widen. She seems to be entranced with the view before her.

Have to admit, so am I. I just don’t think we’re looking at the same things. She’s staring out at the skyline. The dark sky filled with stars. The tall, bright buildings.

“Wow.” The word comes out more like a breathless sound and sends an ache straight to my balls.

I’m in full agreement with her, but it’s not the skyline that’s impressing me. It’s the beautiful woman standing before it.

“This is amazing.”

“Yeah, it is.”

In fact, I'm certain it's the most beautiful view I've ever seen. The light silhouetting her body against the window. Every curve coming into focus. Taunting me. Tempting me.

I remind myself what an asshole I am. How much I don't deserve her. But no plea, no reason overshadows how much I like her, want her.

I come up behind her, my hands resting on her waist. Her body relaxes, melting into mine, her head falling back and resting on my chest.

"Today was a great day," she tells me.

"Yeah, it was."

My eyes drift closed as I hold onto her tighter. I'm tired of feeling like this. Tired of sad. Tired of depriving myself of things. Tired of not feeling good enough.

"You okay?" she asks.

"Always am when I'm with you."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

She turns in my arms, looking up at me with these emotional blue eyes. Fucked. I'm fucked.

"I don't deserve you," I tell her.

"I disagree."

Of course she does.

I need to speak, to say something to deter her from what I see in her eyes. The emotion that matches my own. Something way beyond desire or sexual tension.

It's there and it's real and I can't avoid it anymore.

My hands move to the sides of her face, my lips press to hers. When she accepts my kiss, deepens it, all bets are off.

Chapter 14

Everly

Holy hell, the man can kiss.

My eyes remain closed even after Ethan pulls back. I can feel the weight of his stare on me, but I'm not ready to leave this kiss. I can still feel it, his lips on mine, and I just want to revel in it for a moment more.

One single, solitary kiss just changed my entire life.

It was heart-stopping and all consuming. It was the kiss of all kisses.

“What am I going to do with you?” Ethan asks, his voice soft and filled with an emotion that I don't expect.

There's a list on the tip of my tongue of things that he can do to me, things that I want him to do. I'm speechless though, unable to vocalize anything, much less that.

Ethan takes my hand and leads me to the couch. We sit, my head resting on his shoulder as he traces circles on my arm.

I'm not sure what's happening, but the dynamic between us has definitely shifted.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a bone. A squeaky toy. I recall him telling me he had a dog.

"Where's Baker?" I ask. "I was hoping to meet him."

Ethan chuckles. "Sent him out of town. Didn't want you falling for him and forgetting about me."

I give him a quick jab to the ribs.

"He's at the groomer's. I just kept him there overnight since I had a game."

"Is he as charming as you?"

"More." Ethan laughs. "He's a total chick magnet."

Silence falls over us.

"Everly ... "

"Ethan ... "

"You go first," he tells me.

"No, you."

We both laugh.

"I was just going to say that that kiss ... " He takes my chin and tilts it up to face him. "It meant something to me. I need you to know that."

"It meant something to me too."

"I wasn't lying when I said that you deserve better, and I should probably be a better man and walk away, but I can't. I

can't walk away from you. I like you. I need you. I—”

I reach up and press my lips to his, soft and quick. He exhales, slowly relaxing.

“I'll be the judge of what I deserve and what I want.”

Ethan nods.

“I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think it's time I get you home.”

“I can't believe it either.”

“You called me a gentleman. If I have you here much longer, that's going to go right out the window.”

“What if I don't mind?”

He grabs his phone and keys, and we take the fancy, private elevator down to the underground garage.

This time he leads me to a blue sports car. I don't know much about cars, but I know it's fast—and expensive. Much like the sedan we drove in earlier was.

“Nice car,” I tell him.

“What can I say, I like fast cars and fast ... cars.”

“You were going to say women.”

“No, I wasn't.”

“Yes, you were.”

Feeling daring after our kiss, I lean in and whisper to him, “Show me what you've got.”

He emits a low growl before putting the car in drive.

“The things I want to show you, Everly.”

My hand squeezes his leg. “Soon.”

We both need to be sure, and right now, we’re both on edge. Both uncertain whether we want to follow these feelings we’re having that we didn’t anticipate.

He walks me to my door, hands shoved in his pockets.

“I would invite you in, but I really do need to get some sleep.”

“I just wanted to make sure you got home safe.”

“Thanks to you.”

“Goodnight, sunshine.”

My hand reaches up and touches his cheek, my lips soft against his.

“Goodnight, Ethan.”

I enter my apartment, close the door behind me, and sink against it.

He’s the last thing I expected. Now he’s the only thing I want.

Chapter 15

Ethan

Today has been amazing. The game. Everly. That kiss.
Fucking hell, that kiss was better than anything I could have envisioned. And I fucking envisioned that shit a lot.

I sit at the kitchen counter, a water next to me and my mail in front of me.

One envelope in particular stands out.

It's handwritten. No address, just my name on the front.

How in the fuck did this get in here? The question rolls around in my mind as I slide my finger beneath the seal and open it.

Inside is a single sheet of paper. The note is handwritten. Big, sloppy block letters fill the page. Sentences are uneven on the unlined paper.

Very masculine. Nothing curvy or fancy about them like a woman's handwriting might be. Like I'm sure Everly's is.

Though she floods my mind for a moment, all thoughts of her cease the moment I read the letter.

Ethan,

I know this is going to be hard to believe, but I'm your father. I have been trying to get ahold of you for years. Please, contact me.

Abbott.Rick@hotmail.gen

111-555-9999

Dad

The moment I read the word "Dad," I drop the paper like it's on fire. My eyes never leave it as it flows down landing on the counter.

My heart begins to beat fiercely in my chest, my breathing turning into quick, almost panting breaths.

No. No fucking way.

The man who left me when I was eight years old, abandoned me, told me I wasn't worth it, is reaching out to me? Wants to talk to me?

No, this has to be a fucking joke. Or some bullshit scam to try and get money from me.

But how?

No one knows my past. No one knows that I was abandoned as a kid, left on a doorstep because neither of my parents loved me, neither thought I was worth a damn. Even Coach and Maddox don't know. They think my parents are dead because

that's what I told them. It's what I've told anyone who ever asked. It was easier than admitting they didn't want me.

No one wanted me.

I spent years wishing they would come back for me, love me, be the parents I needed. The parents they were supposed to be. Every single one of those wishes went ungranted, until at some point I stopped wishing. For them. For a home. For family. For love.

I am my only family. I am all I have. I am all I have ever had.

Memories from the night my dad left penetrate my mind in rapid flashes. The words he said to my mother clear as day. The things she said back clouded by the sobs that escaped her. It was their argument, but I was the one that lost.

I lost my mom and my dad. I lost my ability to trust—to love.

Neither of them wanted me.

I wasn't worth it.

Anger and pain that I thought I had buried long ago returns. Pissed, I grab the sheet of paper and crumple it before making my way to the garbage can to throw it away.

I may not be worth it, but neither the fuck is he.

Trying to contact me for years? Bullshit. I'm not that hard to get to. I talk to the fans. I go to events. If he wanted to, he could have gotten to me one way or another.

Without even thinking, I walk away from the garbage can and begin to pace the room.

For two years, I haven't had a drink. Haven't wanted one. Now? It's all I want. All I can think about.

Running my hands through my hair, I try to talk myself out of it. I don't need that drink. He's not worth it. Not my sobriety. Not my career.

"Fuck!" I scream out, the memories cycling through in rapid succession.

Fuck if I don't need one right now.

Grabbing my wallet, I make my way out of my condo and straight to the lobby.

"Going somewhere, Mr. Ethan?"

I turn to the man who's questioning me. The smile on his face fades when he sees me.

Thurstan. My doorman for the past five years. He's seen it all. Knows it all. Probably better than I do. He was sober for it. I wasn't.

"Just have to run a quick errand."

"Are you sure you want to do that?" He raises an eyebrow.

How the fuck does he know? And why in the hell does he care? This is my life. My problem.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

There's a liquor store two buildings down. I haven't stepped foot in here in ages.

“Mr. Ambrose, long time no see.”

“Hey, man. Can I get your—”

“Top shelf whiskey?” He laughs. “You think I could forget? You were my best customer.”

Yeah, I bet I was. Best customer. Biggest alcoholic.

He grabs a bottle from behind him, places it in a paper bag, and sets it on the counter. Grabbing some cash, I toss it on the counter. It more than covers the bottle and hopefully his silence.

“Hope to see you again soon, Mr. Ambrose.”

“One time stop, but thanks.”

Just this once. Just to dull the memories—my parents, the group home, the foster families that didn’t want me anymore than my parents did.

I just need to get the thoughts out of my head, and I’ll be fine. A drink and a good night’s sleep. That’s all I need.

When I walk back into my building, Thurston does nothing more than offer me a small, sad smile. Fuck him. He has no room to judge. He doesn’t know what my life has been like.

I grab a glass out of the cabinet and fill it to the brim.

I just need tonight. Need to get this fucking letter and the memories that it dredged up out of my head. Then I’m done. I won’t drink again.

I make the promise to myself.

I raise the glass to my lips.

My phone dings.

Everly's face appears on my screen.

I set the glass down and pick up my phone. I read the message from her.

Everly: Today was perfect. That kiss was perfect.

And I'm so utterly imperfect it's not even funny.

The reminder of the amazing day we had, the kiss we shared. The thought that for the first time in my life I was going to go for something more, for her. All of it became overshadowed by this stupid fucking letter. A letter from a man that doesn't matter.

Everly matters.

I look at the glass. Still full. Not a sip missing. I pick it up, but this time I take it to the sink and drain it. I toss the bottle in the garbage can.

I call Everly.

“Hi.”

“What are you doing?”

Even I can hear the emotion in my voice as I speak. I'm sure she hears it too, but she doesn't acknowledge it.

“Lying in bed.”

I groan.

“That's quite the visual.”

Focus on her. Forget the alcohol.

“Don’t ask for a picture.”

“I already have one, remember?”

“You kept that?”

“Of course I did. In fact, I look at it. A lot.”

I can practically see the flush of her cheeks.

“What is happening here?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I admit willfully. It’s the truth, and honestly not something I can decide on right now. Especially not right now.

“Me either, but, uh ... I like it.”

Me too. So fucking much.

Hell, just the sound of her voice has calmed the rapid beating of my heart. The panic that rose in me nearly gone. The anger, not so much. That I’m used to though. That I live with every day. It’s what drives me. Pushes me to be better. In hopes that they see. They see what they gave up on, what they walked away from.

“I’m a mess, sunshine.”

“None of us are perfect.”

“I’m more than just a little imperfect. I’m disaster level.”

“Doesn’t scare me a bit.”

It should. It scares the fuck out of me.

“Can we just agree on something?” she asks.

“What’s that?”

“That there’s something here. Something more than friendship?”

“I will willingly admit to that, yes.”

“Maybe we just see what happens.”

“Is that what you really want?”

“I’ve heeded your warnings and Maddox’s and even my own. But yes, I’m sure that’s what I want.”

“Can I see you tomorrow?”

“You can see me anytime you want.”

“You have no idea what you’ve just opened yourself up to with that statement.”

“Oh, I do.”

Silence fills the phone, but it’s nice. Comforting even. Just knowing that she’s on the other end of the line is enough.

“Goodnight, Ethan.”

“Night, sunshine.”

With Everly in the forefront of my mind, I make my way to my laptop. If I want to make a go of this with her, which God knows I fucking do, then I need to do right by her. I need to forget this fucking letter, I need to stay sober.

For her.

For us.

Fucking hell when did I even decide I wanted an us?

I chuckle. I don't think I did. Not consciously at least. With Everly though, I just don't think there was ever any other choice.

I pull up my email and type in the email address that the asshole claiming to be my father left me. I write up a quick message.

I don't give a fuck if you're my dad or not. Leave me alone.

I click the send button. There. Done. Over.

Time to move on. Time to be with Everly.

Chapter 16

Ethan

Fox has spent the better part of practice talking about Everly. It's a welcome topic compared to the one that's been rolling around in my head all day.

"You guys look good together."

"You seem a lot happier since you met her."

Then the big question came.

"What's going on between you two anyway?"

Good question. One that I'm trying to figure out.

First, that kiss. Then the way her voice soothed the ache in my chest last night.

Feelings.

Complicated fucking feelings. Something that had always been so easy to avoid before is nearly impossible when it comes to Everly.

Love and romance aren't my thing. Unconditional love is not something I believe in. Yet isn't that what a relationship is

supposed to be? Two people who love each other no matter what. Good, bad, and everything in between?

“I don’t know,” I admit to him.

The admission makes me feel like a pussy. Talking to Fox doesn’t though. He’s a good dude. Seems like he’s trying to be a friend. While I’m not ready, nor will I ever be, to divulge my deepest, darkest secrets to him, I don’t mind bouncing my ideas regarding Everly off him.

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Do you like her or not?”

“It’s not that simple.”

Why does he make it sound so easy when it’s anything but? My feelings for her are complicated as hell. Mix that in with the fact that I don’t know what to do with feelings period—none outside of anger or horniness, at least.

“Actually, it is. Do you like her?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts, man. You like her. The first step is admitting you have a problem.”

Despite the AA program reminder, I chuckle. Admitting that I have feelings for Everly is definitely a problem.

“Then what?”

“Then you decide what you want to do about them.”

“That’s the problem,” I tell him. “I don’t know what to do about it. Or her. I’m a mess, man. A fucked-up mess.”

Something she shouldn't be a part of.”

“She already is. Was the moment that you two met. Even more now. So why fight it? Why keep pushing away something—someone—that makes you happy?”

“To protect her.”

“From you?” Fox laughs. “You're not as devious or detrimental as you think. In fact, you're a pretty good guy. Shit, I can't believe I just said that.”

“Real funny, asshole.”

“I mean it, man.”

“My past, though.”

“We all have pasts. Even Everly. And that's exactly where they should stay—in the past.”

I wish that were true. I wish to hell that shit would disappear and never rear its ugly head again. It did though. And my first instinct was to run to a bottle.

She stopped you, man. She made you put down the glass, all without having to do a thing.

“She's amazing.”

He states the fact as if I don't already know. As if any normal person wouldn't be able to see that just by looking at her. They wouldn't even know the half of it. Hell, I didn't when I first laid eyes on her. I still say it was the touch. That one single, solitary dab of a napkin against her skin did me in.

“I know. I don't deserve her.”

“Damn right you don’t,” Maddox chimes in. He’s standing off to the side, arms folded across his chest.

“I’m not in the mood,” I tell him.

I’m actually in a great mood. Fucking fantastic after kissing Everly the other day. What I don’t want is for Maddox to ruin it.

“I don’t know how many times I have to say it.”

“Why don’t you just save your breath and both of our time, and not say it.”

“Because you keep talking to Everly, pretending to be her friend.”

“I’m not pretending shit!” I shout. “I care about her, okay? I like her.”

“Yeah, and what are you going to do about it besides break her heart?”

“Back off,” Fox says, pressing a hand to Maddox’s chest.

“You know I’m right,” Maddox argues with Fox.

“Even if I did agree with you, which I don’t, it’s not your place,” Fox informs him.

“I’ve heard your warnings, and I don’t care.” I laugh. “I don’t fucking care because Everly is worth it. She’s worth your wrath, this damn game, all of it. She feels it too, and fuck if I’m not going to take a shot at happiness because of you.”

I pat Fox on the back. “Thanks, man. I appreciate the talk.”

“You got it.”

Jogging off the field, I immediately grab my phone and dial Everly's number.

"This is Everly."

"You sound sexy when you're being professional."

I can practically see her cheeks flush, the visual an automatic turn on for me.

"Um ... "

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Oh, uh ... nothing. Why?"

"Meet me at my place in an hour. I'll text you the address."

Before she can argue or make an excuse, I disconnect the call.

My smile grows.

My entire life I've avoided relationships, friendships—love. Done everything in my power to keep it away because I didn't believe in it, believe in people.

The moment I met Everly all that shit went right out the window.

It wasn't something that I could fight or even control. She was inevitable. We are inevitable.

I have every intention of showing her exactly that tonight.

Chapter 17

Everly

When the door swings open, I smile broadly. Only it's not Ethan on the other side. A very young, very gorgeous woman opens the door. She can't be more than twenty.

My heart sinks as I try to remind myself that Ethan and I are just friends. He can spend time with whoever he likes, he doesn't owe me anything. While that may be true, the sight of a beautiful woman in his home still hurts. It's a reminder of the type of woman he goes for. One much younger, much tighter, than me.

I just don't know why he would invite me here if he was already ... occupied. Maybe to prove a point? Solidify our "friendship" since we've come close to blurring some lines?

The woman just stands there, smiling at me.

"Is ... Is Ethan here?" I ask.

I manage the words, holding back my tears as I speak.

"Everly? Is that you?"

I hear Ethan's voice from inside. A moment later he appears in the doorway, fully dressed. "You're early."

"Sorry about that. I, uh ... I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Interrupt? What are you—? Oh."

"Yeah, oh."

He shakes his head softly at me before wrapping strong arms around my waist and pulling me against him. The gesture is so unexpected that I half tumble into him because my feet had been so rooted to the floor.

"That's Veronica," he tells me, as if I give two shits what her name is. We're friends, I get it. His hookups? None of my business. But Christ, does he have to shove them into my face?

"She's Fox's sister," he continues. "She's trying to start up a cleaning business so I told him I would hire her. Everyone on the team hired her."

"I bet they did."

Young, gorgeous, and scantily clad. What more could a successful baseball player ask for in a housekeeper?

Another shake of his head just before his lips brush against my neck unexpectedly.

"Are you jealous?"

"No."

"Mmhmm."

"I'm not. It's none of my business who you ... you know."

He pulls back and looks me directly in the eyes. When I look into his, honestly, I see a shit storm. Emotion swirls around: pain, fear, happiness. It's all in there, battling, rioting, each one trying to come out on top.

This man is so much more than he gives himself credit for. So much more than I ever did either. A player. Arrogant. An asshole. Those had been my assumptions about Ethan Ambrose prior to actually meeting him. Yet I'm not sure that if someone else would have met him that night that he wouldn't have been those things to them.

Because there's something here that I don't quite understand, and based on the look in his eyes, neither does he. It's here nonetheless though, and neither of us seem to want to let it go. An immediate connection. Comfort. Friendship. More?

What that more is, I don't exactly know. How do we proceed from here? I haven't a fucking clue.

The only thing I do know is that Ethan's wrong. I don't deserve better than him. I don't want better than him, if that's even possible. I just want him in my life, in whatever capacity that means.

So I suck it up, offer a playful smile.

“You. I only want to you know ... you.”

I chalk the statement up to him teasing me about our kiss the other night. He's giving me a hard time. Even though that's what I tell myself, try to convince myself, I can't help but feel a little giddy on the inside.

The dampness between my thighs that his words cause aren't an issue. But the beat that my heart just skipped? That's a problem. That's something I need to reign in and hide away if I want to have this man in my life. Because let's face it, if I've learned anything in dealing with men on a daily basis, it's to take what they say at face value. While I may associate the emotion I feel toward him with the sex he just said he wanted to have with me, he doesn't. He wants sex. End of story.

Even though I know that, my heart still relishes the possibility of his words.

He smiles at me, looking happier than I have seen him since ... well, ever. There's a subtle shake of his head as he steps back.

"Let me grab my keys and we're out of here."

"Where exactly are we going?"

"The batting cages."

"Huh?"

Ethan laces his fingers with mine and pulls me into the elevator.

"Come on, let me show you what I've got."

"I thought pitchers didn't bat."

"They don't, usually. But I have a damn good swing. I want to keep it that way."

"A little overconfident, aren't you?"

"Never."

When he said batting cages, I assumed he meant at the stadium or the practice field. Nope. Here we are at a family fun center, hands filled with quarters.

“This isn’t exactly what I envisioned,” I tell him.

Not that I’m not loving every moment of it. The sound of the arcade games in the background, the chain-link fenced cages, the miniature golf course off to the side.

“I know. It’s so much better, right?”

His smile is broad and the most genuine that I’ve ever seen it. He looks like a kid in a candy store.

“It’s like being a kid again.”

Something flashes across his face that I can’t quite comprehend. I’m not sure if it’s a sadness or anger, and it’s gone just as quickly as it appears.

“I do it for the kids,” he tells me. “They love getting the chance to watch some major league guy practice just like they do.”

He’s not wrong. We’ve only been here five minutes, just enough time to park and get all these quarters for the batting cage, and yet quite the crowd has gathered around us already.

Kids with their jaws practically hitting the ground, parents with their phones out.

For a moment, I worry. About what this might look like. About what it might mean for my career. Then I look at Ethan, standing there in all his glory, and for some reason I just don’t

give a damn anymore. I love the way he's looking at me, love the way he makes me feel. Not just when we're together, but when we're apart too.

Isn't that what really matters? Not what the rumor mill says or what people think. I'm damn good at my job, and my work should speak for itself. My clients should speak for themselves. And Ethan, he isn't my client.

"Well then, give them what they want."

Ethan shakes his head. "Ladies first."

"We came here for you to bat, not me."

"True," he says, making his way around me. His fingers run along my stomach as he moves behind me. He rests his chin on my shoulder, his lips near my ear. I hiss at the feel of him against me like this. I can hear a soft chuckle before he speaks. "I would hate to be the one having all the fun."

"All these people are watching."

I'm not sure if I say the words out of the nervousness rising in me about batting or because people might see us in a less than professional or friendly stance.

He shrugs. "So?"

So? That's his response? So?

"What has gotten into you today?" I ask him, both liking this switch and fearing it because clearly he's up to something.

Something besides just torturing me by making me bat in front of a large group of people when I can't even recall the

last time I swung a bat.

He takes a step back, crosses his arms over his chest, and just smirks at me.

“Fine,” I grumble, turning toward the batting cage.

When I don’t move, Ethan presses his hands to my back giving me a slight shove into the cage. He sets the helmet on my head and swats my ass as he walks away.

“Ethan.”

My scolding earns me a chuckle and I’m not sure why. There are people watching, kids, cameras. And here he is swatting my ass and acting like ... like ... Like what, Everly? Like you’re friends? Like you’re being silly and having fun?

All the while, I’m reading more into the whole day, his words. I’m making a mountain out of a molehill, just like Chelle did. Only I’m living this, and overanalyzing or not, there’s something different about today. About him. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but I know I’m right. I know it’s there.

“Go get ‘em, sunshine,” he says as he closes the cage door.

He stands there, smile on his face, hands holding onto the chain link fence that separates us.

Get them. Yeah. Okay.

Standing in the batter’s box, I wait for the ball to eject from the machine. As it comes sailing toward me, I swing. Way too early.

Behind me, I can hear Ethan's laughter.

Asshole.

Another ball comes. Another swing and a miss. This time, I'm too late.

My timing is all off.

"Come on, sunshine. You've got this."

Another ball. Another miss.

I resist the urge to hit the bat on the ground out of frustration. Instead, I breathe. I try to focus. I ... freeze.

Ethan's stepped into the batting cage with me. His hands are currently on my hips.

"Here, let me help you."

He squares me up on the plate before wrapping his arms around me and guiding the bat into position. He steps back and appraises his handywork before making a few more adjustments to my arms, then legs, until they are in a perfect batting stance.

"Just remember, keep your elbow up and follow through," he tells me.

I raise my elbows. The position feels awkward.

"On the count of three, swing. One. Two. Three. Now!"

At his command, I swing.

Thwack.

The bat connects with the ball in the most glorious sound I've ever heard.

"I did it!" I squeal, jumping up and down, making sure to stay in the batter's box as I do. The last thing I need is to get hit with a ball.

"Yes, you did." Ethan smiles proudly, picking me up and twirling me around.

The crowd cheers too. The crowd that I had forgotten about the moment I felt Ethan's body against mine. The one I should have been more aware of for that reason.

Ethan takes the bat from me. "Let me show you how a pro does it."

"Oh, please. If you were so good at batting, they would have kept you at first base, not made you a pitcher."

He swings and hits the ball with a precision and force that I hadn't anticipated. He's good. Damn good.

"Guess you did do your homework."

"It's my job."

He swings again. Another hit.

Watching him in there, eyes narrowed, muscles taut, bottom lip tucked between his teeth. It's such a turn on. Sexy as hell. So much so that I suddenly feel the need to petition the league to allow pitchers to bat. A lot.

He makes a few more hits before stepping out of the batting cage. If I thought the crowd cheered for me, it's nothing

compared to what they're doing for him.

He smiles and waves at the fans, but his eyes are on me. His hand grabs my waist and pulls me against him.

“This your job too?”

His lips slant over mine. My reaction is instantaneous as I slide my hands up his back and fall into the kiss. Into him.

I'm falling and I never want to stop.

“Everyone,” I breathe out.

“Don't care,” he says.

“But ... ”

“I want this, Everly. I want ... ” he hesitates for a moment, his lips forming a smile against mine. “I want us.”

I break the kiss, my hands pressing to his chest. The feeling of him beneath my palms momentarily fogs my mind, but I shake it away long enough to ask if he's serious.

He doesn't speak, just nods, his eyes clouded with emotion. His lips quirk into a half-unsure smile as he waits to see if I'm pushing him away or just confirming the truth in the bomb he just dropped on me in front of a large group of people.

“Can we get out of here?” I ask.

Partially because we clearly need to talk. But mostly because that kiss, mixed with those words, lit a match, one that's about to send everything up in flames.

Only when we turn back to the crowd to say goodbye, to leave, do Ethan's shoulders sag.

“I, uh ... ”

“Go. Do your thing.”

“Thank you,” he says softly before heading over to the group of kids holding their baseballs and sheets of paper.

The slight detour doesn't dim the match we lit, it only intensifies it. Watching him interact with the kids causes my heart to swell. It's a turn on in and of itself. The way he talks to them, ruffles their hair. Even the way he rises to full height and scans the crowd to make sure he didn't miss a single one of the twenty plus kids that had gathered.

And when he's satisfied, he reaches for my hand, laces his fingers with mine, and bids them farewell.

Chapter 18

Everly

When we reach his car, Ethan presses me against it. His thigh is between my parted ones, his hands framing my face.

“Tell me this is real. Tell me we’re really doing this.”

Before I can answer, he kisses me.

“It’s real,” I murmur when he breaks the kiss and rests his forehead on mine.

He emits a sigh of relief that makes me giggle slightly.

“Not funny, sunshine. Do you have any idea how long I’ve wanted this? Dreamed of this? Jerked off to this?”

The last part throws me for a loop, but only causes my body to burn hotter. He wanted me so bad that he thought of me while he masturbated? Not porn? Not some hot, young baseball groupie? Me?

Fuck if that’s not the highest of compliments coming from a man like him.

A man that is nothing but heart and heat.

“Can we go now?”

I breathe out the words, my voice, much like my body, filled with desire.

“Your wish is my command.”

As we drive, to his place or mine, I’m not really sure, his hand rests on my thigh. It doesn’t slide up; his fingers don’t graze my soaked panties. Nothing. He just holds onto me as though to make sure I’m not going anywhere and that this whole thing is real. I feel much the same way, needing some sort of connection to tell me this is real, he’s real.

He parks the car in the garage, and I half expect him to haul me out of my seat and pull me into his lap. Instead he rounds the car, opens my door, and extends his hand for me to take.

He takes me through a private entrance, an elevator that from the few glances around that I’ve taken doesn’t have a camera in it.

Every step we take I wonder when it’s going to happen. When Ethan’s restraint will snap. I worry too that maybe he’s changed his mind and that he’s taking me to his place to break the news to me.

Our silence becomes deafening in the elevator and even more so once we’re inside his condo.

It’s clean, that’s for sure. Good job, Veronica.

“Ethan?”

His name is a question because I'm not sure what to ask or how to ask it.

"Follow me," he says, leading the way.

The moment we step into his bedroom, everything changes.

He stalks toward me like an animal to its prey, pressing me against the wall, his body pinning me there. Strong hands capture my wrists and hold them tightly above my head as he kisses the breath out of me.

Our lips meld together, parting enough to allow him access.

The silence we've lived in the past thirty minutes or so is replaced with the sounds of our mutual moans as our kiss deepens, our hands search, our desire swells.

I arch into him, pressing my body further against his, begging for more. More kissing. More of him.

"Are you sure about this?" he asks from under dark, hooded eyes.

Am I sure? Can he not feel my pebbled nipples against his chest? The heat of my body that's caused by him? The desperation for him as I grind my hips against him best I can from the position he has me in?

If only I could touch him, I could show him just how sure I am. Under his control, I can only offer him the words, "I'm sure. God, am I sure."

No sooner do the words fall from my lips than cool, calm, collected Ethan, my friend Ethan, is gone. Standing before me

now is a sexually charged man.

Effortlessly, he sweeps me off my feet, tosses me over his shoulder, and carries me to the bed. Standing at the edge of the bed, he drops me. I begin to giggle until I see the look on his face, the one where he's staring at me like he's a starved man and I'm about to be his first meal.

I lie before him, sprawled out, wishing to high hell that I had worn a skirt instead of these shorts.

Ethan pulls his shirt over his head and discards it on the floor. He appraises me, eyes raking over every inch of my body as he runs his finger over his lips.

“I'm going to show you how you should be treated, Everly. I'm going to worship you. Fuck you. Make you scream my name.”

Oh, Christ.

“Is that what you want, sunshine?”

His fingers dance at the waistline of his jeans, toying with the button, waiting for my consent.

“Yes.”

Naked, a picture of perfection, except for one scar along the right side of his torso. Whatever happened, it looks like it was painful.

Tonight isn't a night about pain, so I don't ask the question that burns my lips.

My eyes fall to his dick. The massive appendage that I had assumed would be impressive, but never would have dreamed to be this.

The corners of his lips quirks up into a wicked smile when he catches me staring.

All I can think is that this is actually going to happen. He's going to fuck me. He's going to make me lose control and then probably do it again. I can see it in his smile. His eyes. In the erect appendage that's staring me in the face.

"I'll be gentle," he promises.

"Don't be."

He emits a low growl before reaching for me. Hands, rough against my hips, tear at the denim shorts, yanking them from my body. The tiny, lace thong the only thing left between him, me, and sex.

"Do you have any idea how fucking sexy you are?"

He kneels on the bed, the mattress beneath me dipping as his body moves over mine, his hands sliding up my sides, pushing the jersey with them until it slides over my head and off my arms. He pins me there, arms above my head with just one of his strong hands as the other moves lower to toy with the pink lace on my bra, fingers brushing over my pebbled nipple.

His body hovers over mine, lips so damn close I can taste them. Feeling completely powerless, I suck my bottom lip in between my teeth.

“Fuck,” he growls as he watches me for a moment before searing me with the kiss of all kisses.

The kiss doesn't stop at my lips, but trails across my body, down my neck, my breast, until he reaches my core and the soaked silk that barely covers it.

He puckers his lips – and blows. The heat of his breath mixed with my wet skin sends a shiver through me. I can feel him smile against me, before moving the lace to the side.

His hot, wet tongue laps over my core, swirling around my clit.

The hands his descent had forced him to release fist the sheets at my sides.

The feel of his tongue against me is amazing, but it's not enough. I want to protest, but I don't. His words, *I'm going to worship you*, run through my mind.

So I let him do that. I let him savor away, enjoying every lick, every suck, every nip. Each leaves my nerve endings on the verge of explosion. I'm so sensitive, so stimulated that I can't do much of anything except enjoy the moment and buck my hips up to beg for more.

He presses a finger inside of me, giving me the more I need.

“Yes,” I cry out at the feeling of his finger moving in and out of me.

It's what I had been begging for, but it still isn't enough. As though he can read my mind, he pulls the one finger out and replaces it with two.

The bedding curls under my fingers as I grip it tightly, eyes rolling back in my head. A toe-curling, body-burning, soul-completing orgasm hits me.

My body spasms, my core tightens, and his name, oh God, his name is screamed out in the most utter pleasure I've ever experienced. The best orgasm I've ever experienced. Given to me by a man who looks all too pleased with himself for doing it.

He's kneeling between my parted, weak thighs, the remnants of my soaked core still on his face. Then the bed shifts, and he's gone.

I want to ask what he's doing, where he's going, demand that he come back, but I'm still coming down from my high and unable to utter a word let alone speak a full sentence.

He returns, condom in his hand. "Almost forgot."

Thankfully he hadn't because I had. Swept up in the moment, in the whirlwind this night turned into, a condom hadn't even dawned on me.

I watch as he rolls it over his hard cock, excitement rising in me knowing that I did that—caused that. Little old me. Everly Mann.

He settles himself between my thighs, his cock teasing my entrance, but his eyes are steadfast on mine.

"Last chance, sunshine."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure."

Sure, but not ready. Not for the way he sinks into me. Slowly. Gently. The way he thinks I deserve. Not for the look in his eyes as he does. The intensity in them, the emotion.

Inch by inch he moves in deeper, groaning as he does.

“Fuck, you feel so good.”

I remain silent, my gaze transfixed on his face. The stormy look in his eyes, the way his jaw hangs open in satisfaction.

When he pulls out, I feel the loss immediately. Of him, of the feelings—physical and emotional—that he’s stirring up inside me.

Then, without warning, he thrusts back in. This time less gentle and quicker. I whimper, loving the sting of it, in awe of how quickly my body is willing to adjust to him. It’s as though we fit, as though our bodies are meant to be together.

Out and in, quicker and harder. He repeats the process over and over until I’m teetering on the edge. Until I can’t do anything except grab his ass and press him to me. I need him in me, deep in me. No more in and out, just deeper thrusts.

He obliges, grinding against me, cursing my name under his breath. One hand holds my hip, the other is pressed against the mattress next to my head. I turn, my lips pressing against the inner part of his wrist.

“Oh fuck,” he cries out.

The weight of his body covers me, his lips find mine as he bucks into me with a reckless abandon that feels so fucking good that I orgasm again. And just when I think I’m spent, that

I can't take anymore, his body stills, his own orgasm hitting him in short, jerky movements that my body can't get enough of. I tighten, I explode. I fall. I fall so damn hard.

Chapter 19

Ethan

Rolling over in bed, I smile at the woman lying next to me. A woman who took up residence in my mind the moment I laid eyes on her and hasn't left since. I don't want her to either. That's the crazy, fucked-up part.

Last night, being with her felt like fucking heaven.

It's more than that though. More than just the amazing sex we had. More than a few laughs. With Everly, it's so much more.

No sooner had we finished, I excused myself and bolted for the bathroom. Hands gripping the counter, I stared at myself in the mirror, trying to get all the shit racing through my head under control. At least enough to be the man that she needs me to be, not the imperfect player that I am.

When I stepped back into the bedroom, Everly was still there. She was sitting on the bed, back against the headboard, legs crossed at the ankles. She was wearing my shirt. The shirt I wore when we went to the batting cages.

I apologized for my behavior. She offered me a gentle smile and shrugged. Said it was no big deal, that everyone needs to catch their breath once in a while.

Fucking Everly.

Sweet, sexy, understanding.

It wasn't until I met her that I truly gave a damn about anyone but myself—and maybe Baker. But her? I want to take care of her. I want to be everything to her. I want things that I'm still not quite sure I believe in or understand. Yet here they are. All the emotions keep stirring inside me front, center, and undeniable.

Despite all that, last night was a new beginning for us. At least, it was supposed to be. I had prepared this whole speech in my head. It was more of a plea, I suppose. Me, begging her to try this thing with me. To be patient with me as I fumble through it.

I never got to tell her anything that I wanted to because my cock took over, and then the emotions, and all I could do was fall asleep with her in my arms.

Now, I lie here waiting for her to get up so I can tell her all the shit that I need to before I chicken out.

I'm patient for a whole thirty seconds before I reach out and touch her, my fingers dancing over the soft skin on her stomach, then up her arm. I scoot closer, my arm draping over her, my head tucked into the curve of her neck.

She stirs, but she doesn't wake.

I roll onto my back, deciding to let her sleep, when I hear her giggle.

“Are you messing with me?” I ask, propping myself up on my elbow.

“Yep.”

I want to kiss the smile off her lips, but fuck if I don't need to get this shit off my chest first. It's too important. She's too important.

I smile, biting back my laughter at the thought that pops into my head. One that I can't quite believe or understand. Me, Ethan Ambrose, warding off sex to have an emotional conversation with a woman.

Who the fuck am I?

Gathering my courage, I take a deep breath in then say, “We need to talk.”

Her body tenses, shifting in the bed as she pulls the covers tighter around her.

“About?”

“Last night.”

“Nothing to talk about. It was just sex. It was—”

“That's not true and you know it.”

“It's not a big deal. We can just forget it ever happened.”

“I can't do that. I don't want to do that. I want that memory ingrained in my brain until the day I die. I want to close my eyes and remember what you felt like, how you tasted.”

Her eyes widen at my less-than-elegant words. I hadn't meant to say those things, not like that, at least.

“I'm not trying to walk away. I'm trying to ... ”

How in the hell did this go so off the rails?

Because you don't know what the fuck you're doing, idiot. And there's a good chance you shouldn't be doing it to begin with.

“I don't know what this is between us, and I sure as fuck don't understand it. I don't date, didn't date, never wanted to. Until you. I know I'm not handling this right. That I'm probably making things worse. It's just ... I have no clue what I'm doing. All I know, all I can give you, is me. I hate to say it, but that comes with a whole lot of shit that you shouldn't have to deal with. I like you, Everly. I like being with you in ways that I've never been with anyone before. I like talking. I like holding you. God, do I love fucking you. But it's more than that, so much more. You're important to me, too important to lose. So, if me fumbling my way through whatever this is will ruin our friendship, then—”

She presses a finger to my lips. Tears trickle down her cheeks.

“I want that too. And I don't care what we have to fumble our way through. I'm here for it.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Her lips brush against mine, soft and sweet.

The kiss causes my balls to tighten. She trails soft kisses down my torso. Her lips wrap around my cock.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Who the hell knew that soft and tender could be so fucking good?

My head falls back onto the pillow as she works her mouth around me. Soft. Slow. Gentle. A kiss to the tip of my cock, followed by her tongue darting out to taste the precum waiting there for her. Nails softly scrape along my balls before she cups them in her hand.

“Fucking hell, sunshine.”

Her smile. I can feel it against the velvety skin of my cock just before she sinks down on me, taking every fucking inch. The feel of the back of her throat has me emitting the loudest fucking groan.

She slides her lips and tongue over my cock in such a torturously slow manner that I think I might literally die if she doesn't speed up. I'm loving every fucking second of it.

Her lips release me with a pop. Her eyes meet mine with a wicked gleam.

What in the fuck is she up to? What could she ...

The thought evaporates as she does just what I was wondering about.

Her hand wraps around the base of my shaft. She begins to pump me, slow at first then faster as her mouth crashes over

me again. Quick, deep.

“Oh, fuck.”

Unable to resist the urge, I fist my hand in her hair, my hips bucking up, forcing her just a little deeper. It’s hard, carnal. The sound of her gagging and moaning has me on the fucking verge. As much as I would love to finish in that gorgeous mouth of hers, see my cum drip from between her lips, I instead pull her off.

“Ride me,” I tell her.

It’s the one position I hadn’t had her in last night. There were so many things I wanted to do that I needed the control. I needed her how I wanted her.

My eyes are glued to her as I roll the condom over me. She reaches for the hem of the shirt she’s been wearing, pulling it over her head and tossing it behind her. Once I’m sheathed, I slide my fingers between her already-parted thighs. So wet. So ready.

“You are so fucking sexy,” I tell her.

Even though she’s before me, completely naked, body getting situated over mine—more specifically, my cock—she blushes. Her cheeks become this rosy pink. Her smile shy. My hands hold her hips, and she stills, as though waiting for or maybe expecting me to take over.

“Oh no, sunshine. This is all you. I’m just holding on for dear life.”

Just as she had done when she took me in her mouth, she slowly takes me into her tight pussy.

Breathe, Ambrose. Breathe, I tell myself, hoping not to fucking come the moment I'm fully inside her. Because that's what she's doing to me. She's unearthing me. And I don't want her to stop.

She sinks down on me until I'm completely bottomed out in her. Her eyes meet mine, her hands massaging her tits.

Fuck. Yes. Jesus.

Goddamn perfection.

Perfectly imperfect, that's what we are.

As she grinds against me, my hands running all over her body, I'm done.

Not physically. Not orgasmically.

Emotionally.

She has me by the balls. Literally. Figuratively. I'm hers. Body and fucking soul.

"Just like this," I tell her, before she does something stupid like trying to quicken the pace to please me. She has no idea the immense pleasure I'm feeling. Balls, cock, heart.

Every goddamn piece of me is in a state of immense happiness, and I'm not ready to let it go. Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

So, we do this. We rock together. Slowly. Sensually. Hands exploring. Kissing. nipping. Her body upright at first, then

splayed over mine, her hands on either side of my face. Tits dangling in my face.

Sex. Pleasure. Promises.

It's all here. It's all exactly what I fucking need.

Her. Us.

"I need you, Everly," I admit, my voice clouded with emotion.

Her hand tenderly touches my cheek, a soft kiss to my lips.

"I need you too."

Then another kiss.

And another.

They become less soft, more demanding. As does the way her pussy controls my cock. The tightening. The pulling. The increased pace.

"Oh, God, Ethan." Her voice is strained.

Yes's and curses fall from both of us. Our bodies taking over, searching for the release that we both need. The solidification of the unspoken promises we made with eyes and bodies connected.

My hand behind her neck, I pull her down to me. I force her to meet my eyes.

"Look at me, Everly. Let me see you. Let me see what I do to you."

Let me see how much you love me. Because that's what it is that I'm seeing in her eyes, isn't it? Not infatuation. Not desire. Love.

For once, I just want to be loved.

As our eyes lock, as her orgasm hits her, I know I'm right. I see it. I feel it. I fucking explode because of it.

When she collapses on me, I hold her tightly, face buried in her hair.

A word I can't yet utter is on my lips. A word that's so foreign to me, but I know is true. Has been since that first night.

I don't speak it though, because before I do, I need to absorb it. Accept it.

"You're all I need, sunshine. You're everything to me."

Chapter 20

Ethan

It's been no more than two hours since I dropped Everly off at her place.

Since then, my phone has been a barrage of text messages from Fox, Maddox, some of the other guys. Every text was about the same thing—Everly.

I don't know what I was thinking when I kissed her in public like that. Fuck that, I know exactly what I had been thinking. That I wanted her. More that I wanted her to be mine. And now everyone knows it.

Fine by me.

I ignore the shit they're giving me, even the threats I'm getting from Maddox, and instead reach out to Everly.

Me: Looks like we created a media shit storm.

Everly: Tripp is loving it.

Me: Yeah? I thought you said he would be pissed.

I throw her a little flack about the worry I know she carries about mixing business with pleasure.

Everly: Any press is good press, right?

Me: As long as it's a picture of me, with my lips on yours, I'm not complaining.

In fact, I would give just about anything to kiss her again.

Two hours. Two fucking hours and I'm already missing her. Not that it should surprise me. I mean, I missed the hell out of her when I left for our out-of-town series last week, and that was before last night. Before I knew what it felt like to be inside of her. To own her. To have her own me in ways that I didn't think were possible.

I have a game tonight. One that I wish she could be at, but apparently she has other plans. A concert.

Pink, I think she said.

I don't know her music. It's not my thing. Not pop music, not music in general. All I like music for is the ability for it to drown out the thoughts in my head or pump me up for a game or workout session.

Not true for Everly. Apparently music is life, and Pink is her soundtrack.

I like learning about her. The secrets she divulges. The little idiosyncrasies that she admits to.

It does leave me with a pang of guilt though. My lack of sharing. The secrets that I harbor, that I fear for her to find out

rather than relish in telling her. The dark spots. The demons. Things that I don't want to think about when I'm with the one person that manages to keep them at bay.

The moment I step into the locker room, all eyes are on me.

"Get it over with," I say.

Fuck if I'm not smiling like a giddy motherfucker. The razzing only lasts a few minutes before Coach calls it quits and we're back on track. All except for Maddox.

"If looks could kill," Fox says. He shudders.

"I don't get what his deal with her is anyway. She's not interested in him. I don't think he's interested in her. Why the hell does he care so much?"

"Beats me," Fox says with a shrug. "But from the looks of it, you're about to find out."

Turning my head, I see Maddox standing next to me. "What?"

"You said you were going to stay away from her."

"It's not that simple."

In fact, it's complicated as fuck. I wanted to stay away from her. I didn't want this.

"No? Then explain it to me."

"I don't have to explain shit to you. What happens between Everly and me is none of your business."

"He has a point," Fox says. "Just because she's your agent doesn't mean you get to dictate who she dates."

“Don’t you get it? He isn’t dating her. He’s using her.”

Shit like that normally wouldn’t bother me. I’d let the accusations, founded or unfounded, roll off my back and move on. I don’t like that he thinks I would do that to Everly though, or that she would be dumb enough to fall for shit like that.

“What Everly and I have is real. I’m not using her. I care about her.”

There isn’t an ounce of hesitation in my voice as I speak the words.

“You better.”

Coach walks up behind us, and based on the look on his face, he’s ready to give me some shit too.

“Never thought I would see the day,” he says with a chuckle.

“You and me both.”

“She must be special.”

“She is.”

“This isn’t going to affect your business with Advantage, right?”

“Nope. Her boss is completely on board.”

In fact, it sounds like he’s loving it.

Coach nods, pleased with my answer. “That’s what I want to hear. Now, get your asses onto the field.”

With one last warning glare, Maddox heads to the field.

“Listen, man, I just ... Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. Just quit being so hard on yourself. Whatever you’ve been through, whatever you think makes you fucked up, it doesn’t mean you don’t deserve happiness. If anything, maybe it means you deserve it more.”

“I already took your advice,” I tell him. “I don’t need your cheerleader shit anymore. Makes you sound like a pussy.”

“Still an asshole,” Fox says with a chuckle.

“Always,” I tell him.

“Come on, let’s get the win.”

We got the win all right, but it was a much bigger struggle than it should have been. The team we were playing is one of the worst teams in the league, and yet we barely got by with the win.

Pretty sure at some point one of the guys shouted to me to get my head out of her pussy and back in the game.

Fair observation, but fuck if he knows just how goddamn good it is.

“You coming out with us tonight?” Fox asks.

The invitations that had stopped for a long time have begun rolling in again ever since the night I took Everly out with the team.

“Nah, not tonight,” I tell him. Though there is a small part of me that wants to go. Be a part of the team. Feel the comradery.

My body is fucking exhausted though. My mind even more so.

So I decline, head home, and take Baker for a walk that's longer than usual because I'm just in that good of a damn mood. From Everly. From the game. So much shit in my head that I don't know what to feel first. And fuck me, but I actually want to feel it. The happiness, the excitement. The love.

It's around ten when I make it back to my building, Baker in tow, exhausted from the walk.

When I step inside the building, Thurston eyes me.

"What's up?" I ask him.

He nods his head in the direction of a man sitting on the bench.

"Who's that?"

"You tell me, sir. He said that ... He said he's your father and he needs to speak to you."

The calls. The letter. Now this?

Clearly, the man, whoever he is, isn't getting the point.

"I wasn't sure, and the resemblance ... " Thurston says. "I didn't call the authorities ... yet."

"Don't. I've got this," I tell him.

Making my way over to the man sitting on the bench, eyes closed, hat low on his head, I kick his leg.

He jolts.

"Ethan."

He says my name enthusiastically, a smile on his face.

Fuck. Thurston wasn't kidding about the resemblance. It's like looking in a goddamn mirror.

"What do you want?"

I bark out the question. My voice is filled with all the anger that I've been holding in all these years.

"Look at you," he says, as though he's almost in awe of me.

"Money? Is that what you're looking for? How much? What will it take for you to go away?"

The man shakes his head. *My father* shakes his head.

"I don't want your money."

"Then what?"

"Can we sit? Talk?"

"Absolutely fucking not."

"I know I don't deserve your time."

"Damn right you don't. I'm not worth it, remember?"

His eyes soften, his head hangs. "I was a kid. A stupid—"

"No. *I* was a kid. A kid whose parents didn't want him. Told him that he wasn't worth it."

He nods, acknowledging the truth in my words.

"You're right. This isn't about me though."

I'm not sure why I bother, but I ask the question that he leaves before me. "Then what is it about?"

He extends a photo to me.

“Your brother. Ben.”

I take the photo and stare at it. The boy in it could have been me twenty years ago.

“My ... what?”

“Your brother, Ethan.”

I shake my head. “I don’t have a brother,” I tell him. “I don’t have parents. Or a family. You made goddamn sure of that. So you can take your words, your picture, your bullshit, and fucking leave.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I understand perfectly. I just don’t care.”

They never gave a damn about me. Why the fuck should I give a shit about some kid I don’t even know?

Picture in hand, I storm away. Even with the rage in my head, I can hear him calling after me.

“Get him out of here,” I tell Thurston. “Call the police. Call whoever you have to. Just get him the fuck out of here.”

My head is fucking spinning. My heart is pounding in my chest. Everything I shoved down while I stood in front of a man that was a reflection of myself rises in me as the elevator doors close behind me.

I rest against the wall, trying to get my breathing in check, my mind straight.

The doors open, and I drop Baker’s leash and rush into my condo, straight to the kitchen and the still nearly full bottle of

whiskey in the garbage can.

I pull the bottle out of the trash. Not bothering to reach for a glass, I put the bottle to my lips and drink.

The burn is welcome, needed.

It tastes good and feels even better.

Another drink.

Warm. Comfort. Familiarity.

One more long pull from the bottle before I finally set it down, before I collapse onto the ground.

For the first time in over twenty years, I was just face to face with my father. A man who deemed me unworthy-of him, of his time, of his love. A man who up and left his son without so much as a glance back. A man who just told me he's here for his son and wasn't referring to me but rather to my brother.

Baker plops down next to me, his head in my lap.

My hand reaches behind me, grabbing the bottle I left on the counter above my head.

The memories of my childhood flood my mind, the few that remain prior to my parents abandoning me mixed with the plethora of the ones that occurred after they left. Good foster homes that didn't want to keep me. Bad ones that abused me. Both ultimately leaving me homeless, parentless, unloved.

I run my hand through my hair, then scrub it over my face. I scream a curse into the empty room.

Empty.

Alone.

That's what I am, right?

It's what I've always been?

Everly.

The memory of her, this morning, curled in my bed.

I'm not alone.

Not anymore, right?

I set the bottle onto the floor and clumsily rise to my feet, the whiskey hitting harder than I remember it doing before. Two years. Two years without a drop of alcohol. My tolerance is low. My patience thin.

Me: Where are you?

Everly: Heading home. Thank you for the limo by the way, it wasn't necessary.

Me: Is Chelle with you?

Everly: Just dropped her off. Is everything okay?

Me: Make a detour. Come here. I want you. Naked. Bent over my lap.

Everly: Bent over your lap – for what?

Me: To punish you.

Everly: Punish me?

Me: Tell the driver to bring you here.

She texts again. Again, asking questions I don't want to answer. Things like what I'm punishing her for – nothing. If everything is okay – fuck no it isn't.

Instead of answering her, I set the phone down and pick up the bottle of whiskey at my side and wait.

Chapter 21

Everly

Filled with trepidation, I knock on Ethan's door.

The concert with Chelle tonight had been amazing. The limo Ethan conjured up for us last minute was beyond thoughtful. The texts I got from him moments ago ... not the same man I left earlier today.

They were demanding. Needy. They screamed that something was wrong.

Immediately, I pulled up the stats from the game today. Not his best game, but not close to his worst, either. On top of that, they won.

So if it's not the game, then what changed since I saw him?

The door opens. Ethan stands before me, eyes dark and heavy. His hands grip my hips, hard, and pull me into the condo.

Lips crash over mine, hard and intense. The taste of whiskey on his breath is strong enough that I could very well get drunk off this kiss alone.

“Have you been drinking?” I ask as his lips move to my neck.

In all the time I’ve known Ethan, I’ve never seen him touch a drop of alcohol. I hadn’t thought much of it. Maybe it’s a during season thing, like many athletes I know. Maybe it’s just not his thing.

Now, tasting the whiskey, feeling the pain radiating off him, I start to wonder if maybe this is his demon. One of the ones that he warned me about.

“So what if I have?” he says, nipping at the skin near my collarbone.

“I’m just surprised is all. You don’t really seem like a drinker,” I say.

Ethan chuckles. It’s unlike any other laugh I’ve heard from him. It’s dark, brooding, sarcastic.

“You don’t know me as well as you think you do, sunshine,” he says.

“I want to. Tell me,” I say as I pull back to look him in his eyes.

I want him to see that I’m here—not just for the amazing sex we have, but for him. All of him. Even the pained part that while he is trying his damndest to hide, I can clearly see through.

“Is that what you came here for? To talk?”

I came here because his texts were fun and flirty and turning me on in ways that I can't even comprehend.

The minute he opened the door, I became less turned on and more worried.

“No, but that was before ... ”

“Nothing's changed,” he tells me.

“Yes, it has. Something's wrong.”

“Everything's fine, sunshine. The only thing that's bothering me is you being a naughty girl who needs to be punished.”

As much as I want to push, to ask questions, I'm afraid to out of fear that I'll push too far and ruin whatever this is between us. The idea of losing him terrifies me.

So I bite my tongue and I give in to what I know he needs—sex, me, a way to forget.

When I don't respond, he continues.

“Is. That. What. You. Want.” He punctuates each word as he says them.

Unable to formulate the words, I nod.

He emits a low growl and begins to circle around me, appraising me. When he meets my eyes again, he smiles.

“Strip.”

“Strip?” I mutter out the question.

Ethan sits on the couch, his arms stretched out to either side of him.

“Yes, strip. As in take your clothes off in a seductive manner.”

He sits there, waiting.

I’ve never stripped before. The lack of music is making the whole ordeal even harder.

I slowly peel my shirt over my head and let it fall to the ground, exposing the bra beneath. It’s a sheer material. Railcats red. It sits beneath my breasts, hoisting them up, exposing my already hardened nipples.

The hiss he emits only serves as encouragement. My movements might be anything but sexy, but he’s enjoying the show and that’s what matters.

My hands tremble as they reach for the button of my jeans.

With my pants unfastened, I slide the material down my thighs before stepping out of them exposing the stringy, crotchless material that’s supposed to be panties.

Standing before him like this, I feel exposed and insecure. It’s one thing for him to see me like this. It’s a whole other to be on display for him.

My arms move to cover my body.

“No. I want to see you.”

I drop my arms, body and soul exposed to him.

“Jesus Christ,” he says before licking his lips and emitting a low growl. “Get over here.”

One foot in front of the other, I move forward until I'm standing directly in front of him. His right arm falls from the back of the couch, his hand moving to his thigh and patting it.

"Bend over," he says, his voice hoarse.

"What?"

"Bend. Over. My. Lap."

Taking a deep breath, I do as he says. Lying over his lap, my ass in his face, I don't breathe. Not until I feel his hand on me, running over my skin. His hand lifts, returning to my skin with a slight tap. I heave a sigh of relief when I feel the gentleness of his touch.

He slides his hand over the swell of my ass, rubbing it in a circular motion before palming it and giving it a firm squeeze. Again, his hand leaves my body. This time returning with a smack. Goodbye gentleness, hello hard slap of his firm hand against my bare skin.

Taking my lip between my teeth, I try to bite back the pain it elicits, but I can't. An inaudible sound still escapes me. I wait for him to say something, forbid me from making a sound, but it doesn't come. Just another smack. Flesh against flesh.

This time, I cry out.

"Fuck, that's sexy."

I can feel him harden beneath me, his dick pressing against my side.

His hand connects to the same spot, harder this time. Where I expect him to silence me, it seems he wants to hear me. He wants to know what he does to me, how he makes me feel.

Smack.

The sound echoes in my ears, the heat pools between my thighs, the sting in my right ass cheek hurts so good.

“Fuck, you’re a bad girl,” he tells me. Before I can protest, his hand fists my hair and lifts my head. “Suck me, Everly. Take my cock in your mouth and taste what you do to me.”

The bulge in his pants presses forward, begging me to free it. My hands work the button, then the zipper, Ethan bucking his hips up to give me an assist.

The moment he’s free, my tongue darts out and flicks his already hard head.

“Don’t tease me, Everly.”

I ignore his direction, doing nothing except flicking my tongue over him—almost, but not even close to taking him in my mouth.

His free hand wraps around his cock, the other still wrapped around my hair, pressing my head down until my lips have no choice but to part around him.

“Take it, baby. Taste me. Fuck me with your pretty little mouth.”

Crass. Dirty. Hot as hell.

My pussy clenches from the words he speaks, the sound of his voice.

Opening my mouth wide, I don't move. I just hover over the head of his cock until he makes me take him. The pressure from his hand pushes down, the rising of his hips pressing further into my throat.

There's something about Ethan Ambrose that's addictive. Or maybe it's just the culmination of everything. The sound of his voice, the look of sadness in his eyes, the rock-solid physique. Every piece of him is a unique, untapped treasure, and I can't get enough.

Unwilling to play games anymore, my head drops and rises, his cock sliding in and out of my mouth. It's unlike any other time I've done this before. What always felt like a job, a requirement, now feels like pleasure. The blowjob is turning me on. It's the way he feels, the sounds of pleasure he's making. There is something so pure and carnal about all of it. I want to do this. I want to fuck him with my mouth and be his good little girl. To hell with punishment, I want to obey every command he gives me.

When he tugs my hair, easing me off him, I don't pout even though I want to. I don't want to stop. I want to please him. I want the taste of his cum in my mouth.

I sit back on my heels as he rises to his feet.

"Don't move." The command rolls off his tongue with ease, and I remain in position like a statue.

When he returns, there's a smile on his face. "Good girl."

He extends his hand to me, and I take it. He helps me to my feet and nods over to the windows.

"What?"

"Go to the window and place your hands flat against them."

"The window?"

Silence followed by a nod.

I follow his direction and walk toward the windows, pressing my hands against it. Ethan is behind me, the heat of his body overwhelming my senses. My eyes watch through the reflection as he undresses. The jeans he had been wearing are kicked to the side. The tattered black t-shirt is pulled over his head and tossed away. His right thigh moves between my legs, parting them until he's satisfied.

Strong hands dig into my hips, pulling me back to him, my hands remaining on the glass.

I'm bent over, my ass up, my head hung. I'm on display for the world to see me.

For the world to see what he does to me.

"Are you wet for me, Everly?" he asks, the tear of the foil packet sounding in the background.

"Yes," I pant out.

"Tell me. Tell me how wet you are. Tell me what you want me to do about it." The head of his cock slides against the slickness of my slit up to my ass. "Tell me."

“I’m soaked.”

“And what do you want me to do about it?”

“F ... fuck me,” I say softly.

“Sorry, I couldn’t hear you.”

“Fuck me already, Ethan. Please.”

Without any warning, he fills me. Hard. Fast. Deep.

He penetrates me—body and soul.

Every touch, every feeling, is solidified in this moment. Whatever this is between Ethan and me, it’s so much more than sex. It’s deeper than friendship. It’s whole and complete. It’s us.

He rocks in and out of me. Every movement hard and punishing, claiming my body. Claiming me.

My cries fill the room. His curses and pleas too.

“Talk to me, baby. Tell me.”

Tell him? I’m not sure I can do that. I’ve never been much of a talker. A moaner, sure. Unintelligible sounds are more my thing. But to speak? I don’t know how, nor how it’s even possible when I can barely think coherently at the moment. I close my eyes, listen to my heart.

“Oh, God, Ethan. You feel so good.”

“More, baby. Tell me what you need, how you need it.”

I’ve never vocalized my desires before. I’m not even sure I know how. What if it’s not what he wants? What if I fuck this

up?

He pulls out of me, and I stand here, waiting for the feeling of pleasure again, but it doesn't come.

“Tell me, Everly. Tell me how you want it. Tell me what I need to do to make you come.”

“Slow. Deep.”

I feel him at my entrance, the head of his cock teasing me, only deep enough to make me beg for more.

“Push in, Ethan, please.”

“Where do you want my hands? Want me to spank you? Rub your clit? Play with those pretty pink nipples?”

“Yes. My nipples. Play with my nipples.”

His hand leaves my hip and reaches forward. He kneads my breast, twisting my nipple between his fingers as he does. Inch by inch he slides into me. So excruciatingly slowly.

“More. Faster.”

He picks up the pace ever so slightly. It's as though he's trying to drive me insane.

His fingers pinch my nipple, and the jolt causes me to back my ass against him.

“Fuck yeah,” he growls.

I do it again. And again. I set the pace, my body backing against his as his fingers torture my nipples.

My breaths come out in pants. My body tenses, my pussy tightens. I claw at the glass as my orgasm hits me, wave after wave.

“Holy fuck,” Ethan cries out.

Even through the condom, I can feel the warmth of his cum fill me.

His head falls to my back as he feathers kisses along my spine.

“Time to hit the showers,” he says as he pulls out of me.

Scooping me in his arms, he carries me to the bathroom and sets me on the counter so he can turn on the water.

Hand extended to me, he says, “Join me?”

As if I could ever say no to him.

Chapter 22

Ethan

The room smells of vanilla. Like her.

I roll over, my arm draping over Everly, and I smile.

Yesterday's events are as fresh in my mind as the scent of vanilla in the room. Every glorious moment.

Having her here is helping to keep the bad moments at bay. My father being here. Him telling me I have a brother. The drinking.

As much as I hate that she saw me like that, I needed her more. The alcohol wasn't enough; it wasn't doing the trick. Everly did, though. Fuck did she ever.

The things we did, the way I spoke to her. Dirty sex is great, and while I'd want to get us there at some point, last night may have been a little soon. Enough so that I know in my heart I would never have done or said those things to her had I not been drinking.

The recollection of how much she enjoyed it though does put a smile on my face.

“Want to talk about it?” she asks.

“I didn’t know you were awake,” I admit, pressing a kiss to her shoulder.

“I was just enjoying being here with you. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s more than okay.”

“So? Do you?”

“Do I what?”

Avoidance is key when it comes to my past—my drinking.

“Do you want to talk about whatever you were trying to drink away?”

“Why do you assume that I was trying to drink something away?” I ask.

I ask the question as if her suggestion is absurd when it’s actually spot on. The fact that she can see through me, read me, is fucking terrifying. Something I’m not ready for.

“The man who opened the door last night was not the same man that kissed me at the batting cages.”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, sunshine, but that was very much me.”

“I’m not talking about the sex. The sex was hot and amazing, but the look in your eyes during it? That wasn’t you.” She rolls over in the bed, her hand reaching up and touching my cheek. “Talk to me, Ethan.”

The lie I told her about my parents is still fresh in my mind. I want to be honest, but I’m scared. Fucking terrified that she

won't like the real me. The imperfections and flaws that come with me.

“Just a bad day. It's nothing. Really.”

I get out of bed and slide into my boxers needing to put space between us.

“That wasn't nothing. You were drinking when you don't drink. You were void of emotion when ... ”

“When what?”

She sighs, and when I look back at her I can see the worry lines etched on her face.

“When normally I can take one look at you and see how you feel about me. I won't push, but ... nothing you can tell me is going to make me think less of you. I'm just worried about you. I want to be there for you if you need me.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. She's worried about me. No one has ever worried about me before.

“I'm okay, I swear.” Or at least I will be. For her sake. “Have to admit, it's kind of nice knowing someone is worried about me. I've never had that before.”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise, sunshine. Now, is this how we want to spend the last couple hours before I head to Denver? Because I think there is definitely something better we could be doing with our time.”

“Such as?”

I step out of my boxers and climb on top of her.

“Such as me, buried inside of you.”

Chapter 23

Ethan

The wheels are up on the plane to Denver.

It's a four-game series this go round which means I'll be spending more time away from Everly. It sucks, but it does mean less of an opportunity to run into someone else. Someone I don't want to deal with or think about.

My eyes are closed, my ear buds in, as I try to process the last twenty-four hours.

As much as I hate the man and what he did to me, and the shitstorm the memories create in my head, I can't help but focus on Ben. My brother.

Brother.

A sibling?

Fuck me.

Admittedly, it hurts. The idea that while he walked away from me, abandoned me, he went along and had another kid.

One that he kept. One that he deemed worthy enough to love and raise.

The question of what I did to make them not want me returns. The few quick sips of whiskey I took before I boarded the plane are lessening the effect the thoughts have on me.

Maddox plops down in the seat next to me.

“You were late today,” he says.

“Astute observation.”

“You’re never late. Not since ... ”

I turn toward him, my eyes tired, hardened. “Since what? Just spit it out.”

“Not since you were drinking last.”

“I’m not drinking now. I was just late. Having a gorgeous woman in your bed will do that.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“What? You haven’t heard the news? Everly and I are a thing.”

A thing I don’t deserve. Especially not after last night. The way I took her, used her.

“Goddamn it,” Maddox shouts. “You promised you would stay away from her. You promised—”

“Get the fuck over it,” I tell him. I’m tired of explaining myself to him. Making promises that don’t need to be made to him because he is nothing more than Everly’s client. While I

appreciate his protective nature over her, I don't appreciate that he thinks he can dictate any aspect of her life.

From what she's told me, men like her father and Kai, they've already done that to her, and I won't stand for anyone else doing it.

"She's—"

"A good person? Don't you think I know that? Fuck, man, whatever it is that you think about me, I assure you, I won't ever let it touch her. For her, I'll be goddamn perfect or whatever the fuck I have to be. She's worth it. She and I together—it's worth it."

"If you hurt her, I will end you."

"If I hurt her, I will end myself," I tell him, his threat not scaring me in the slightest.

Hurting her in any way would destroy me. She's all I have. The only good thing in my life.

"And the drinking?"

I groan.

"Don't bullshit me. I can smell it on you."

"One slip up," I lie.

A lie that I'm pretty sure that he can see right through.

"I'm going to be keeping my eye on you," he informs me.

"Kinky," I reply.

“You’re a real asshole, you know that?” He shakes his head. “Make fun of me all you want. I just want what’s best for this team.”

“And you think I don’t?” I ask, offended by his insinuation.

“I did. Until today.”

I close my eyes, ending the conversation. Or at least my portion of it. He can rant and rave all he wants, but I don’t have to listen to it. Don’t have to respond either.

Eventually, he vacates the seat and goes back to his own.

Fuck him. Fuck his accusations and insinuations.

I know what I’m doing. It was one night. One fucking mistake.

When we get to the hotel, Maddox doesn’t leave my side. We’re both on the thirty-fifth floor. His room is directly next to mine.

I slip my key in the door and laugh.

“Did you get us adjoining rooms too? Planning on sneaking in during the night and spooning with me?”

“If that’s what it takes.” His voice is calm and even, but he makes his point.

“Relax. I’m not going anywhere,” I tell him. “Just me, a facetime with Everly, and sweet orgasmic bliss.”

Maddox steps into his room and slams the door behind him.

“You two are a fucking mess,” Slade says as he walks past me to the room on the other side of mine.

Don't I know it.

Tucked away in my room, I dial up room service immediately, placing my usual order.

I've talked myself out of the drink that I desperately want to help rid me of these thoughts in my head and instead focus on the texts from Everly.

Have a good flight.

Be safe.

I miss you already.

The feeling is fucking mutual on that one. Christ, how I wish she was here. Most of the time, guys don't bring their wives or girlfriends on the road with them. The trips tend to go by quickly, mostly practice and games followed by food and sleep. Sure, some of the guys, myself included, like to troll for women. A one-night stand. A hookup. The "out of town" girlfriend, if you will. The one you only visit when you stop in the city where they're located.

I used to have a few of those. Regulars. Easy fucks that knew their place and purpose.

Now, I wish I was more like Fox. A fucking ridiculous thought since the guy is married, and Everly and I are far as hell from that kind of step. It's been, what? Three days.

I don't hate the idea of seeing her every day though. And I sure as hell don't hate the sexy little pic that she just sent me.

Me: Are you trying to fucking kill me?

As I wait for her reply, I check my email. The message I had from Tripp tells me that the contract with the kids' clothing company is set and just needs my electronic signature.

I shake my head, knowing that this was all Everly. The woman knows how to work me, that's for sure. At least she uses her powers for good and not evil.

Can't say the same for myself.

Before I can even open the email containing the contract, another email catches my eye. From him.

I don't know what in the hell possesses me to open it, but I do.

His words are simple: "Ethan, please. I need your help."

I chuckle at the thought.

He needs my help? That's rich. Where was he when I needed his help? When I was just a scared kid that didn't know where he was going to end up or if anyone would ever take care of him again? He was off building a life that didn't include me, that's where.

So fuck him and his request for help. No chance in hell am I going to ever do anything for him.

I toss my phone to the side and instead pick up the one next to my bed.

The same girl answers the call that did before.

"Can I add something to that order?"

Her reply is once again, yes.

“A bottle of whiskey and, uh, keep it on the down-low.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

The attendant delivers the food to my room on a rolling cart. Burger. Fries. Booze.

I tip him heavily, asking him to keep the bottle of Jack just between us.

“Sure, man, whatever you say,” he says, taking the two-hundred dollars I offer him.

After taking a sip, I sigh. I wait for the pain to subside. The thoughts too.

I don't touch the burger or the fries. I don't give a damn about the Dr. Pepper sitting next to them.

There are only two things in the world that I need. Whiskey and ... Everly.

Feeling much better than I did thirty minutes ago, I grab my cell.

My last text earned me a winking emoji. Nothing more.

Let's see what she has to say about this, I think to myself as my fingers work feverishly on the keyboard of my phone.

Me: That picture was sexy as hell.

Everly: Glad you like it.

Me: Like it?

I close my eyes allowing the visual of her in the photo she sent to take over my imagination as my hand wraps around my cock.

The longer I look, the harder I stroke.

Me: I fucking love it.

Everly: Awe. What are you up to?

Me: Honestly?

Everly: Preferably, yes.

Me: Jerking off.

Everly: OH. MY. GOD.

Me: You're not here and you sent me this picture. What's a guy to do?

Everly: Lie to me. Text me when you're done.

Me: Or.

Everly: Or what?

Me: You could... help.

Everly: Help? How?

Me: Send me another pic? Talk dirty to me? I'm not picky.

No, not picky at all. Just horny. For her. And she isn't here.

Everly: Ethan!

Me: Come on, please, sunshine. Tell me what you would do to me if you were here.

Everly: No.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I focus. I imagine. I play pretend with the few things my eyes know and my hands remember, and I focus on all of it. All of her.

The sound of a text coming through causes my eyes to fly open.

Everly: I would take you in my mouth. Suck your cock until my cheeks are hollowed out and you're hitting the back of my throat.

Me: Jesus. Fucking. Christ. Yes.

Everly: I would touch my pussy while your cock was buried deep in my throat.

Me: So good, baby.

My hand pumps feverishly as I re-read the words that she sent me.

Me: Don't stop, I'm so close. Is your pussy wet?

Everly: Yes.

Me: Touch yourself. Slide your fingers inside.

Me: Are you doing it?

Everly: Yes.

Me: Tell me.

Everly: I'm fingering myself, sliding them in and out at the same time your cock slides between my lips. Faster, harder. Oh God, I need to come.

Me: Do it. Come for me, Everly.

The words are enough to have me grunting out my own orgasm, cum running down my hand.

Me: Thanks, baby. That was just what I needed.

Everly: Are you sure you're okay?

Drunk and drained, emotionally and physically, I set my phone down and close my eyes. Dick still hanging out, I fall asleep in the bed.



“Wake up, asshole,” Maddox’s voice booms through the door.

“What the fuck is your problem?” I shout back, stuffing my dick back into my pants before opening the door.

“We need to get moving,” he says. His eyes scan over me, searching for a sign that I’m drunk or hungover.

A sign besides the fact that I overslept. Again.

He shakes his head, analysis of my current state already complete.

“Don’t go judging. I was just up late, having phone sex with Everly,” I taunt him as I slide into a pair of shorts.

I can shower and do the shit I need to when we get to the stadium. At least if I go in like this, I won’t be late, and hopefully Coach Rick won’t be none the wiser.

The minute we get to the stadium, I hit the showers. I try to wash away the smell of whiskey and exhaustion, but I'm not that successful. Enough to not call too much attention to myself. Not from anyone but Maddox, at least. As promised, he's keeping an eye on me. Too close of an eye if you ask me. The guy is practically up my ass even as the game is about to begin.

"Back the fuck off already," I tell him.

"Just making sure my pitcher can actually pitch," he says.

"You worry about your base. I'll worry about mine."

I'm on the mound. Sweating. It's hotter in Denver than I remember. Either that or the alcohol is finally working its way out of my system.

Just like I have been doing, I focus. Everly, home plate, pitch.

The ball makes contact with the bat and sails into left field.

Fuck.

Next batter, same thing. Only his hit makes it all the way into the stands. Home fucking run.

Shit.

Maddox is glaring at me, mouthing the words "World Series" as if I don't know the significance of what we're trying to do here.

What I fail to do here.

The score is ten to two.

Railcats lose.

Chapter 24

Everly

I'm on the edge of my seat as I listen to the play by play of the Railcats game while I work. I'm busy putting together some details for the photo shoot with Active All-Stars.

Tripp placed the project in my care when Linnie got the call that her mother's condition has worsened.

Despite my own workload, I'm happy to help. Tripp is more than my boss. He and Linnie are friends. So when he said that he needed some time away, that he needed me to cover things, I took the reins and shooed him out of my office.

The batter walks to first base, a satisfied smirk on his face.

It's been like this all game. The last two games too.

There's something off about Ethan. I knew it when he texted me the other night, the plea for sexual gratification. Had he been playful, I wouldn't have thought anything of it. Just another step in our relationship. A look into what away games will be like.

He wasn't playful though. He was short and demanding. He was the man that opened the door after the Pink concert.

He was drunk.

I'm the queen of worst-case scenarios, so my head automatically goes to that. Ethan's an alcoholic. The drinking is his problem. The demon.

None of which I can confirm considering I only know with certainty of one actual instance of him drinking.

Still, I know something is wrong. Each and every time I ask, inquire, try to be there for him, he shuts down. Disappears. Ghosts me until the next day.

The game ends. Railcats lose.

Again.

I send a text to Ethan. One that if the past few days are any indication, he'll ignore. At least for several hours.

Worried as I am, I have work to keep me busy. Including the walkthrough with Yolanda for the photo shoot that's scheduled to take place a few days from now, once Ethan's back in town.

"You have no idea how excited I am about this," Yolanda says when I meet her at the location of the shoot.

We're sitting across from each other, coffee in hand.

"Ethan was a genius idea," she tells me.

I smile, genuine as I can, considering I'm starting to think that maybe he isn't the best candidate at the moment. Maybe this is too much pressure for him.

Is that what has him drinking?

“Everly?”

“Hmm?” I ask.

“When does Ethan get back?”

“Oh, uh, day after tomorrow. They have one more game, then they fly home.”

“Great. So the shoot on Thursday won’t interfere with anything.”

“No, it’s their off day,” I say absently.

“Are you okay?” Yolanda asks.

“I am, sorry. Just a bit distracted.”

“I would be distracted too if I was dating Ethan Ambrose.”

She raises an eyebrow in my direction, a sly smile on her face.

“It’s not why I suggested him, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I don’t care why you suggested him. He’s a perfect fit, so all is right in the world.”

God, I hope she’s right.

“So, tell me about it,” she continues.

“Tell you about what?” I ask.

“You. Ethan. What’s he like—personally, not professionally.”

Broken. Scared.

“He’s amazing. A real gentleman. Sweet. Sexy, obviously.”

She fans herself as though my vague description is enough to send her right over the edge and straight into orgasmic bliss.

Thanks to the detour of questions regarding Ethan the man, not the player, the walkthrough takes longer than I expect.

Exhaustion takes over the minute I step into my apartment. As does the grumble of my stomach.

Kicking off my shoes, I make my way to the kitchen and pour myself a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch then curl up in my bed. As I eat, I read through the texts from Ethan. The ones I hadn’t expected.

They said he missed me. Asked where I was. Why wasn’t I answering him. Questions filled with worry. A pang of guilt settles in the pit of my stomach for not responding. For making him worry.

How was I supposed to know that he would be concerned rather than assume that I was busy at work?

I text him back immediately, apologizing for not responding sooner.

Ethan: Just glad you’re okay.

Me: How are you?

Ethan: I’m Ethan Ambrose. I’m perfect.

Me: My apologies. How could I forget?

Ethan: Apology accepted. What are you up to?

Me: Lying in bed reading your texts.

A wide-eyed emoji comes through, and I realize how massively I put my foot in my mouth. The way the words read I can only imagine where his mind would go.

Me: Not like that.

Not that I don't think about him like that in bed. How can I not? The man has taken residence in my head—and my dreams, sexual and otherwise.

Ethan: It's okay, sunshine. You can think about me in bed all you want.

Me: Oh, really? LOL.

Ethan: Yep. You can touch yourself too.

Me: Didn't we do this last night?

My phone rings in my hand and startles me.

It's Ethan.

“Hey,” I say into the receiver.

“Hey, sunshine.” His voice is even, unaffected, but I swear I hear a slur of his s's when he speaks.

“Sorry for not getting back to you sooner,” I tell him.

“Don't deflect.”

“Deflect what?”

“What we're about to do.”

“What's that?”

“Well, since we already sexted, I thought we could try phone sex. You still in bed?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you wearing?”

“Very unsexy pajamas,” I say with an uneasy giggle.

He’s gearing for phone sex. Something I’ve never done before, and I’m not quite sure I’m capable of. Texts are one thing, but this?

“On you, I bet they’re still sexy. Do me a favor ... take your top off.”

“Just my top?”

“Just your top.”

Setting down my bowl of cereal on my nightstand, I do as he asks. Not that he would know if I didn’t, but still.

“Okay? Now what?”

“Show me.”

“Show you?”

“Send me a photo. Just your tits. Just as proof.”

“Ethan ... ”

“Please, sunshine? Do it for me.”

I try a few different angles before finding one that doesn’t look horrible. I snap the photo, sans face, and send it to him.

“Good girl.”

The words thrill me. Make me want to follow every direction he gives to be just that—his good girl.

“Fuck, you’re sexy,” he groans into the phone. The s in sexy sounds slurred again.

Before I can think too much into it, Ethan continues by telling me to put him on speaker phone and then to touch my breasts.

I do as instructed, the sound of his voice enough to cause the slickness occurring between my thighs.

“Roll your nipples between your fingers,” he instructs.

Doing as he says, a small moan escapes me.

“Louder, baby, let me hear you.”

I pinch harder, twist a little. The moan this time louder, the sensation I’m feeling more intense. The slickness between my thighs now a fucking puddle of pleasure.

“That’s it, baby. Are you wet?”

“Soaked,” I tell him.

“Good. Now slide one of your hands into your shorts but don’t touch yourself.” Silence fills the air. My hand slides beneath the fabric of my shorts. “Did you do it?”

“Yes.”

Tell me I’m good. Tell me I did good.

“Good girl.”

I moan.

“You like that, sunshine? You like when I tell you you’re a good girl?”

“Yes,” I murmur. “May I touch myself now?”

“Say please.”

“Please, Ethan. Please let me touch myself.”

“Oh, fuck,” the words are strangled and filled with tension as he says them. “Do it. Touch your clit. Imagine it’s me touching you. Imagine my fingers are pressing down on it, rubbing it. My mouth would cover your nipple, sucking on it.”

One hand beneath my shorts, the other stimulating my nipple, my mind visualizing Ethan being the one doing it all to me.

The naughtiness, the feeling, the praise—all of it has me on edge. I just need him to speak again. To tell me to come, to fall, to do whatever he wants me to.

“Does that feel good, baby?”

“Yes. So good.”

“Faster, baby. Move your fingers faster for me. I want to hear you come. I want to...”

That’s it, that’s all I need to finally get my release: his approval. With his words falling over me, I work my fingers feverishly, my body jolting, my moans filling the room.

I tumble down a path that I never want to end.

“Holy fuck, that was hot,” Ethan says.

As I lie here, trying to come down from the explosive roller coaster I was just on, I turn the tables.

“Are you hard?”

“Hard? I’m fucking rock solid after hearing that.”

“Are you ... ”

“Am I what, sunshine? Say it.”

“Are you touching yourself?”

“Not yet. Should I?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me, sunshine. Tell me what I should do.”

If I weren’t so sexually satisfied, I would be nervous as hell. But the pleasure still washing over me gives me the courage to say the words that I know he wants to hear.

“Grab your cock.”

He groans. “Done.”

“Slowly move your hand up ... ”

“Then?”

I can hear the impatience in his voice. He’s following my orders. Doing as I asked even though I know damn well he wants this to move faster.

“Rub your precum over the head of your cock.”

Another groan.

“Make sure your hand is tight around your cock and move it down and up, slowly. Build the anticipation.”

“Listening to you come over the phone built up plenty of anticipation.”

“Even more than the feeling of my mouth covering you, licking every drop off the head of your cock?”

“Your mouth, huh?”

“Yeah. I want to taste you, Ethan. I want your cock to fill my mouth.”

“Can I pick up the pace here?”

“Mmhmm. I will too. I’ll take you deeper and faster. Swirl my tongue around you.”

“Oh fuck.”

“You like that, baby? You like when I suck your cock? You want to come in my mouth?”

“Oh ... fuck ... ”

Ethan emits curses and groans as the pleasure takes him over.

“Fuck, sunshine. That was amazing.”

“I’ve never done that before.”

“And?”

“And I’m not sure if it helped or made me want you more.”

Ethan chuckles. “You can have me all you want tomorrow. Right now, I need to clean up this mess you made.”

“Night, Ethan.”

“Night, sunshine.”

My soggy bowl of cereal sits next to my bed as I slide down under the covers, clutch my phone to my chest, and think about all the inappropriate things we just did.

Chapter 25

Ethan

It's been a shit week.
First the losses.

Then the flight delay.

Now as I take the final few steps to my building, the week gets even worse.

He's here. Again.

“What the fuck is it going to take to get rid of you?”

It's not until I say the words that I notice the little boy at his side.

I'm that much more fucking grateful that I had a drink at the airport before I left.

Not because of my dad but rather because of the little boy staring me in the face. The port in his shoulder is visible through his t-shirt. The exhausted look in his eyes is hard to miss, as is the smile on his face when he realizes who he's looking at.

“This is Ben,” my dad tells me. “My son.”

My eyes fall to Ben, the boy from the photo, then back up to my dad. He nods his head to confirm what he said is the truth. That the resemblance I can see for myself isn't just a trick of my eyes.

Ben's smile stretches from ear to ear as he says, “You're Ethan Ambrose. I'm you're biggest fan.”

Fan. Not brother like my dad indicated to me. His son. Ben. The son he loved enough to keep, to raise.

While Ben might be looking at me with these big eyes filled with awe and admiration, he isn't looking at me like I'm his brother. Or half-brother. Or however in the hell that shit works. Which means that he doesn't know about me anymore than I knew about him. Until recently.

My heart can't take looking at the kid, but I can't handle hurting him either. He's not a part of this. It isn't his fault that I wasn't good enough, that my parents didn't want me.

“I am,” I reply, eyes darting between my dad and the little boy.

His smile only grows as he begins to spew a million questions at me. What's it like to be a baseball player? Why did I become a pitcher? Do I think he'll be able to play one day?

“If you work hard enough,” I tell him.

If he survives whatever cancer he has, I think to myself.

“Can you give your dad and me a second?”

Ben nods enthusiastically and walks down the street a few steps. When he’s far enough, I give him a thumbs up.

“What are you doing here? Why did you bring him?”

“I thought that maybe if you met Ben, you would ... ”

“I would what?”

“Understand.”

“Understand what, exactly?”

“Why I’m doing this. Why I came back after all this time even though I know I shouldn’t have. You’ve built yourself an amazing life, Ethan. I had no intention of ever tainting that for you in any way, but ... ”

“Then don’t. Go.”

“He’s sick, Ethan. He needs a bone marrow donor.”

“And what, you thought bringing him here would guilt me into getting tested?”

“Your mother and I thought—”

I hold up my hand. “Woah. Wait a minute. You and ... You’re still with her?”

He nods.

“And he’s your son? Both of yours?”

Another nod.

Holy fuck. This has to be a joke. A sick fucking prank. They had a replacement kid? One that was, what, better than me?

Smarter? More well behaved?

What made them think that round two would be any better?

“Mr. Ambrose?” Ben’s soft voice fills the momentarily silent air.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think you could sign a piece of paper for me? I don’t have my ball. I didn’t think I would be meeting you today.”

“I, uh ... ”

“Please? My dad takes me to every single home game. He has since I was a baby.”

My eyes fly up and meet my father’s.

“Like I said, I never wanted to interfere.”

I take the pen and scrap paper from Ben and scribble my name on it.

“I have to go,” I say.

“What about a picture?” Ben asks.

“Some other time,” I tell him.

“Okay. I understand.”

That makes one of us. I don’t understand a fucking thing that just happened. I don’t want to. I want to go back twenty minutes when the only thing on my mind was Everly.

Somehow I manage to make my way to the elevator without losing my composure.

The minute that I'm in the safety of my home, that composure evaporates. Tears flow freely down my face. Anger rises in my core. I'm not sure whether to be pissed or hurt or, fuck, I don't know, happy? All these years, my dad has been coming to my games? He brought Ben? Turned Ben into my biggest fan? All without saying a word to him about who I am. Or even asking for money.

Fuck.

I think back to the little boy, his dark shaggy hair that he kept swatting away from his eyes. Eyes that were the same color as mine. Fucking hell, I have a brother. If that's not enough for me to chew on, I have a brother that clearly has cancer. That needs me to donate my marrow.

Slowly, I make my way into my condo. I head straight for the whiskey. I don't bother with a glass. One drink, two, hell, even four isn't going to handle this. I'm not sure what will.

I drink, swig after swig, reveling in the burn of the alcohol. I wait a moment for it to hit me, but the calming sensation doesn't come. I take another drink, my hand running through my hair, pacing the room. All I can picture, all I can see, is the little boy, my brother. The excitement in his eyes when he saw me, the way he proudly wore his Railcats shirt. His big, innocent smile to go with his big eyes and floppy hair.

It's why he reached out. The urgency. He's not doing this for me or because he gives a damn about me. He's doing it for his son, his real son. The one he stuck around for.

Even though I hate the man that very well may be my father, this little boy is innocent.

No. It's still not my problem.

None of this is my problem.

Everly's smiling face appears on my screen. A reminder that I'm supposed to be meeting her, supposed to be on for a photo shoot that I don't know I could handle if I fucking tried right now.

I send the call to voicemail.

It rings again.

And again.

It keeps ringing, she keeps calling, until I finally decide to turn the damn thing off and drown my sorrows the exact way that I want to.

Chapter 26

Everly

Ethan hasn't answered his phone all day.
In fact, at some point, he shut it off to avoid me completely.

The photo shoot with Yolanda and Active All-Stars is in a few hours, and honestly, I'm not sure if he's going to show.

With no other choice, I make my way over to Ethan's building.

There's a regal-looking gentleman at the front door. Thurston, if I recall correctly. I've seen him before but know him more because of how much Ethan speaks of him as well as the regard with which he speaks.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Mann," the gentleman says.

"Everly, please."

"I've heard much about you, Ms. Everly."

"Likewise."

"Mr. Ambrose is quite fond of you."

“I’m quite fond of him as well. Except when he isn’t answering my calls. Any idea where he might be?”

“He’s home. Come with me, I’ll let you up.”

I eye him curiously, certain that there should be some protocol in place, that he wouldn’t let just anyone up to Ethan’s place. Has Ethan given permission for me to be let up whenever I like? Or is there something that Thurston isn’t telling me?

“Are you sure this is okay?” I ask him as he enters the code for the elevator.

Thurston looks thoughtful for a moment before he speaks. “I’m not sure about much when it comes to Mr. Ambrose, but I do know that he needs you. And for that, I’m willing to take the risk. Are you?”

I want to ask what risk he’s referring to. What is it that Ethan needs me for? What’s hurting him?

Does it even matter?

The question is, is Ethan worth putting everything on the line for? The answer is simple: yes.

Ethan Ambrose is more than he realizes and everything to me.

“I am,” I tell him.

He nods with a pleased smile on his face and allows me access to the elevator.

“Thank you.”

He gives another slight nod before the elevator door closes.

When I reach Ethan's floor, I notice that the door to his condo is open. Thurston must have made him aware that I was here, and he left the door open for me to just come in.

I step inside the condo, looking a far cry from the last time I was here. In the middle of it all—Ethan.

“Ethan? What happened?”

His eyes glance in my direction before closing again. He groans.

“Goddamn Thurston.”

“I'm guessing he let me in because he was worried about you. With reason, it seems.”

“I don't need his worry. Or yours. Now go away.”

Instead of listening to him, I move closer, though I do tread lightly. He's drunk. The empty bottle of whiskey next to him is a clear indicator.

My eyes scan the room, looking for a clue as to what might be bothering him. The first thing I noticed is a whole bunch of papers scattered around him. Documents, photos. A picture of a little boy.

“Who's this?” I ask, picking up the photo as I do.

He opens his eyes, snatches the photo from me, and tosses it back onto the floor.

“None of your business.”

“Ethan ... ”

“Unless you’re here to suck my cock, then leave.”

“That’s not going to make it better. Neither is this,” I say picking up the empty bottle.

“Neither are you. You can’t fix me, Everly. I don’t want you to.”

“You don’t need to be fixed.”

“Just go so I can find someone who will give me what I need.”

“Go right ahead. Anyone I can dial for you?”

His eyes shoot up at mine. Black circles engulf them.

“How do you know I don’t already have someone here?”

“I don’t. You’re right.” I look him dead in the eyes. “And yet I’m still here. Because I care about you, Ethan. Because I want to be here—with you, for you.”

“You’re pathetic.”

His words are like a knife to my heart. They cut deep, making a scar that I’m not quite sure will ever heal.

“Why don’t you quit treating me like shit and try telling me what’s going on so I can help?”

“I don’t need help.”

“You need something.”

He rises to his feet. “You’re right, I do. I need you to fucking leave.”

“I can tell. You’re working really hard to get rid of me.”

“And yet you’re still here, so maybe it’s not hard enough. Maybe I need to tell you the truth. How I lied to you. How I’m not who you think I am.”

“Go ahead. I’ll listen, but it won’t change how I feel.”

What truth? Who exactly does he think he is? What on earth is he hiding, and is that what’s causing him all this turmoil?

“You were a mistake. We were a mistake.”

“You don’t mean that. You don’t—”

“Believe me, I mean every fucking word.”

The last thing I want to do is cry, to let him see me cry, but the tears are uncontrollable. They fall regardless of how hard I try to keep them in. “I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you believe. I want you gone. Out of my condo. Out of my life.”

My body begins to tremble with sadness and anger. So much anger at the way he’s acting.

“This isn’t about me. Or us. This is about something else. About you, your past. Whatever it is, Ethan, just talk to me. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Get out!” he yells as loud as he can. The sound reverberates through my ears and rattles me to the core.

Why am I trying so hard, when clearly, he doesn’t want me to?

Because you’re doing it again, Everly. Trying to prove yourself. Prove that you can be what he needs. Prove that he’s

wrong and really does want you here.

That's not how this works, not how it's supposed to be.

"You know what, fine, forget it. You win. Just remember, the only reason I'm walking out that door is because you are making me. You are pushing me away. If it were up to me? I would be sitting on that couch with you trying to figure all this out."

"It isn't up to you."

"Clearly." I make my way to the door. I pause and turn back to him. I'm here because I care, but I'm also here for work. With Tripp out of town, this is my job. He's my job. "Don't worry. I'll cover for you with the athletic company."

"I'll be fine for your little photo shoot tomorrow."

"It's today, Ethan. It's in an hour. And you aren't fine enough to do a damn thing."

"No. I ... Fuck."

"Call me when you're ready to quit pushing me away," I say before walking through the door and slamming it behind me.

Like a fool, I wait a moment, hoping he'll follow, that he'll try to stop me.

When he doesn't, I break down. My body slides down the wall to the floor and I sob. I stay there, just like that, until there are no more tears to cry. Then I straighten myself up and walk out of the building, refusing to make eye contact with Thurston but keeping my head high.

I have to be calm. I have to collect myself.

Not only is this personal. Not only did he break my heart. This is business. Right now, I need to take care of business. Make the call, Everly. Just make it because there is no fixing this.

“Hey, girl,” Yolanda’s perky voice says when she answers the phone.

“Hi.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Yeah, I don’t have great news,” I tell her.

“He bailed.”

“No. No, not at all. He’s sick.” It’s not the God’s honest truth, but it’s not a lie either. Ethan is sick, it’s just not the stomach bug that I’m going to tell her he has. “I just left him, and he looks like death. I had to force him not to come.”

The entire time that I speak and make up excuses for him, I hope to hell that she’s buying it, that she doesn’t see through my lie.

“It must have been something he ate on the plane or at the airport. I don’t know. But it hit him hard and fast and ... ”

My own stomach churns at the lie I’m telling.

“He promises he’ll make it up to you and that he’ll cover the cost for today, so no worries there.”

“Be straight with me, Everly. Is he bailing on the company? We’re small, I get it, but—”

“No. He isn’t. He wouldn’t do that. I promise.”

She blows out a sigh of relief.

“I will call you tomorrow with a reschedule date.”

“Tomorrow,” she says, before disconnecting the call.

Hopefully, he’ll sober up by then.

Chapter 27

Ethan

I'm sitting in Coach's office, head hung, listening to him shout at me. I have no choice but to take it. If I want to play, I have to do this. I have to suffer the consequences of my actions.

If he only knew how warranted they were.

He's going on and on about how shitty I've been playing, how I can't miss practices, how I'm letting the whole team down.

I'm sober now. Slightly hungover, but not physically looking any worse for the wear, thanks in part to the thirty-minute shower and the thirty-two ounces of coffee I drank before coming here.

Late.

I was late for practice.

Something that earned me a knowing glare from Maddox when I walked in and the current reaming that I'm getting from the coach now.

He stands in front of me, looking me straight in the eyes.

“Swear to me, Ethan. Swear to me that’s all this is. That I don’t need to worry. That you don’t need my help.” His hand rests on my shoulder, and there’s an emotion in his eyes that I don’t expect to see. Not for me. “Swear to me you’re okay.”

“I’m okay, Coach. I just overslept. That’s it.”

He closes his eyes, opens them, and nods.

He’s not buying it. He’s making himself accept it, but he’s not buying it.

“I’ll let it go for now but know this. Any more fuckups? You’re going to land yourself on the restricted list. And I’m not going to be able to help you with that.”

“No more fuckups, Coach, I promise.”

I make the promise with every intention of keeping it but knowing there’s a better chance that I won’t.

The drinking isn’t even the real reason that I’m late. It’s the memories. The texts from her that came both before and after I drove her away.

I just hope to God that it wasn’t for good.

I need to get out of here. I need to get to her, make it up to her.

“All right, get out of here. Good practice today. I expect nothing less than this every day.”

“You got it.”

I bolt from the chair and out of the stadium, making my way directly to her place.

Just my luck, Chelle opens the door.

As if getting talked to by my coach and having Everly hate me wasn't bad enough, I can only imagine what the best friend has to say. Her very vocal best friend.

"I was wondering when you were going to show up," she says, hands on her hips, a no-nonsense look on her face.

Gigantic bouquet in my hands, I say, "I'm here, and I'm ready to grovel."

"You're going to need to do more than that," she tells me. A fact that I'm already more than well aware of.

I can see Everly on the couch, knees hugged to her chest.

Fuck.

Standing silent in her doorway, I allow Chelle to just glare at me and take the delay she gives me as time to think about what I'm going to say. How I'm going to make it better. If I can make it better.

Because I may have flown over here right after practice, but fuck if I know what I'm going to do or say to her to fix this. Or if I even can fix this.

I sure as fuck don't deserve her forgiveness—not that I remember a whole hell of a lot from last night, including what I said to her. The most I've been getting are little flashes, words, hurtful words. All culminating in me telling her to

leave. Followed by her telling me she's leaving because I told her to, not because she wants to.

Chelle ducks back into the apartment, gathers her purse, and presses a kiss to the top of Everly's head.

"Make it right," she says, poking me in the chest, "or I will make you pay."

She has no idea how much I'm paying for this already.

After she leaves, I close the door and slowly make my way over to the couch.

"Hey, sunshine."

My greeting is met with silence.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," I tell her.

"Well, you did. And you did a damn good job of it."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Oh, isn't that nice," she says, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"I'm trying here," I tell her, my voice getting frustrated at how difficult she's making this for me. Not that I don't deserve it, I do. I apologized, though. What else am I supposed to do?

"So much for not walking away. From the sound of it, you're a million miles gone."

Everly rises to her feet.

"I'm standing right here, Ethan," she says, arms outstretched at her sides. "I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere. But

I'm also not going to accept some pathetic attempt at an apology. One that, frankly, I'm not even sure if you mean."

"This isn't easy for me," I tell her.

"It isn't exactly easy for me either."

If I have any hope of holding onto her, I need to be honest. I have to do the one thing I never do—open up.

"I lied to you," I tell her. "My parents ... They're not dead."

There's a look of surprise on her face, but there's no judgment in her eyes.

I run my hand through my hair.

"You need to understand, I ... I've never told anyone this before. Never talked about it. Not with someone who isn't a professional, at least."

She doesn't speak, just returns to her seat on the couch and sits there silently, allowing me to do this at my own pace.

"My dad left when I was eight. Told my mom that I wasn't worth giving up his freedom for. I was too hard to handle. Too much work. I wasn't what he expected, and he didn't want any part of it. So, he left." A strangled chuckle emits from my tongue-tied mouth. "What's worse is, my mom thought the same thing. A couple weeks after my dad left, she bolted too. Left me at some group home, knocked on the door, then ran."

Everly's hand flies to her mouth. "Oh, Ethan."

"I don't want your pity. That's not why I'm telling you this. I'm telling you because I want you to see how much you

matter to me. How far I'm willing to go to make this right, to keep you, when I'm terrified as hell that you're going to leave too. Because I fucked up. Because I'm a goddamn head case."

"You're not perfect, no one is. Just because you're not perfect doesn't mean you don't deserve to be loved. Just because you're struggling, doesn't mean you don't deserve happiness." She rises to her feet, walks toward me, and takes my face in her hands. "I'm not going anywhere, Ethan. I'm here as long as you want me."

The relief I feel in her words is mixed with guilt, because I know I don't deserve her or her forgiveness. The realization hits that maybe my parents had the right idea leaving me.

"Is this what happened? What started the drinking?"

I let out a deep breath. "Can we sit?"

She nods, then leads us to the couch.

"He showed up."

"Who did?"

"My dad. Out of the blue. He contacts me, shows up at my building ... " I shake my head, unable to grasp everything that's transpired. "As if that shit isn't bad enough, I find out that he and my mom reconnected, had another kid. One that they decided to keep."

Everly remains silent as I bare my soul to her. In a way, it's freeing, but fuck if it doesn't terrify me. What if she sees what they saw? What if she leaves? Here I am doing everything I

can, putting it all on the line, and for what? For her to walk away.

No, asshole. You're doing it to keep her. You're giving her what she needs.

“I, uh ... I had a problem a couple years back. The press chalked it up to me being a player who liked to party too much, but it was more than that. I didn't drink for fun, I drank to forget the shit that happened to me as a kid, to cope with the shit in my head that I couldn't conceptualize.”

“And now?”

“I slipped. I saw him and ... I did the only thing I could think of. Then there was you. And you ... You're more important than the alcohol. I need you. Not it. One time. One fuck up. I swear.”

She nods.

I'm not sure it's with a resolve that everything is okay—we're okay—or because she just doesn't give a shit anymore.

“I can handle screwups and slips off the wagon, but what I won't allow is for you to screw up my career, or yours for that matter. You really put me in a bad spot yesterday. You missed the photo shoot, Ethan. I had to lie for you.”

“I know, I'm sorry. Fuck. I ... I'll fix it. I'll fix us.”

I should go. I should leave her here to move on with her life. But like a selfish prick, I can't walk away. I won't let her go. Instead, I'll do whatever I have to in order to be worthy of her.

“I’m going to make it up to you.”

She opens her mouth to speak, but I slant mine over hers and silence her with a kiss. A kiss that is so fucking perfect it makes me forget all the shit in my life.

Forget baseball. Forget alcohol. All I need is Everly and her sweet fucking kisses.

“But that means I need to go. I have a few things to take care of. You’re free tonight, right?”

Everly doesn’t speak.

“Please. Please give me this chance to make things right.”

“I’m free.”

“I’ll pick you up,” I tell her, pressing a kiss to her lips one last time. “I’ll text you later with a time.”

“What are you up to?”

“You’ll see.”

One more kiss because I just can’t resist, then I’m out the door.

Chapter 28

Ethan

The minute I leave Everly's place, I call Fox. He's kind of been my go-to when it comes to Everly since I'm beyond fucking clueless. After bouncing some ideas off Fox, I settle on taking her back to where it all began, turning the night we met into how it should have gone than a how it did go. I rented out the ballroom where the Advantage event was held. Only this time, it's going to be just us. Tonight, we're going to do it right.

All the plans I made nearly go out the window the moment she opens the door. She's wearing Railcat red, only it isn't a jersey, it's a sexy, short-as-sin dress. My first thought is to press her up against the door and move the dress the inch, maybe two, that I would need to hike it up to slide into that sweet pussy of hers.

"Damn, sunshine. You look amazing."

She does a little twirl for me.

“I wasn’t sure what we’re doing, so I hope I’m not overdressed.”

“Anytime you wear clothes you’re overdressed as far as I’m concerned, but for tonight ... you look perfect.”

“You clean up pretty nice yourself,” she says, giving my tie a slight tug.

“Oh, that?” I raise an eyebrow. “It comes with a purpose.”

“I bet it does.” Her eyes glance down at the flowers. “More?”

The sight of her looking like a sinful angel had me forgetting all about the damn flowers. The ones I wanted to specifically hand-deliver because they reminded me of her.

I extend the flowers to her and suck in a breath.

“Something wrong?”

I shake my head. “Just the opposite, actually. Everything is perfect. Better than it’s been my whole life. All because of you.”

Her eyes well with tears.

“I’m really grateful you gave me a chance.”

She giggles. “I didn’t have a choice. You sucked me in the moment I met you.”

“Funny you say that.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see.”

Everly looks over my shoulder, her eyes widening when she notices the limo behind me.

“What the ... Where ... Ethan, this is too much.”

“Obviously, Tripp didn’t share my financial documents with you,” I say as I shut the door behind her. “This is nothing.”

“I don’t need all this. I just need you.”

“You’ll have plenty of me tonight. I promise.”

I rest my hand on the small of her back and lead her to the limo. She emits a soft sigh.

“Something wrong?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “God, no. I just love when you do that.”

“Do what?” I ask, unsure of exactly what it is I’ve done, and needing to know so I keep on doing it.

“Rest your hand on my back. Escort me. It makes me feel ... ”

“Horny?”

She slaps me playfully. “Special.”

“You are special, Everly. Hell, you’re the only good thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is true.” My hand touches her cheek. “It’s why as much as all of this scares me, I’m willing to do it. I can’t lose you. I ... ”

She smiles as I stand here, unable to let the word I want to say fall from my lips. The one I feel so deep inside.

She kisses me softly.

“Me too.”

Once we’re inside the limo, I hand her a glass of champagne, but don’t pour one for myself. I’m on my best behavior. In order to remain so, I won’t drink—or sit close to her. In fact, I’m clear on the opposite side of the limo from where she is.

“Is there a reason you’re sitting all the way over there?” she asks.

“Yeah, because if I don’t, I won’t be able to control myself.” I shake my head. “Could that dress get any shorter?”

“What? Don’t you like it?”

She shifts in her seat, her legs parting as she does. Just long enough to give me a glimpse.

“You’re evil.”

“I know. Now, tell me where we’re going?”

“Not a chance in hell.”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to play hard ball.”

“Oh, come on, baby, mine are already blue just from looking at you. Don’t make it worse.”

When the limo comes to a stop, Everly peers out the window, then looks back at me.

“What are we doing here?”

“I’ll show you,” I say as I slide out the door and extend my hand to help her out.

As we step into the ballroom, she gasps, her hand flying to her mouth.

“Oh, Ethan.”

“It’s not a hundred-percent authentic, but if I’m being honest, I was little busy checking out my new friend and didn’t really pay attention to the decorations.”

“This is so sweet.”

“I need you to know that this is where it all began. We were more than friends from the minute I spilled that water on you.”

“I felt it too.” She twirls around the dance floor, arms out at her sides. “This is amazing. Thank you.”

Taking her hand, I bring it to my lips and press them to her palm. “Anything for you.”

The server appears, smiling, with a plate of appetizers in hand. He sets them on the table before pulling out a chair for Everly. I move my chair next to hers, my hand resting on her bare thigh as I sit.

“I thought you had to keep your distance.”

“I did in the limo. Now, you’re all mine.”

“Oh really? Even with the waiter watching creepily from the doorway? Is it just me or does he look like Lurch from the Adam’s family?”

“Damn you. Now I’m not going to be able to unsee that.”

“Sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re right. I’m not.”

“This really is amazing,” Everly says as she relaxes back in her chair, full from our meal.

“Does that mean you don’t have room for dessert?”

“Depends on what it is.”

The waiter brings the covered metal tray.

“It’s your favorite,” I tell her as I lift the lid, showcasing a very large piece of chocolate cake.

She huffs. Then laughs.

“There better be cheesecake somewhere around here.”

With impeccable timing, Lurch appears with another tray just for her.

“Trust me, sunshine, that is one thing I will never forget. It was almost a deal breaker. Lucky for you, your blow jobs are impeccable.”

She slaps my arm before offering up a piece of her cheesecake. I take the bite, uncertain how I’ll feel about it. I’ve never tried it before, something about it not appealing to my taste buds. Once again, though, Everly breaks through the barrier.

My hate for cheesecake wasn’t unlike my hate for relationships. Both items it took Everly to open my eyes to.

Smooth, creamy—delicious.

“Fuck, that’s good.”

“Told ya.”

“Share with me?”

“Oh no. You can’t have your cake and eat mine, too.”

I raise an eyebrow in her direction as the innuendo in what she’s just said hits her.

“That you can have. Just not my cheesecake.”

Adamant about not sharing, she rises to her feet, taking the plate with her, and sits at the bar.

“You can run, but you can’t hide.”

“Stay away.”

She slides off the chair as I stalk toward her.

“Back.”

“Yeah right. You’re mine.”

Her laughter rings through the room as she takes off running, heels clacking on the floor, cheesecake plate in hand.

I sprint off after her, one hand grabbing the plate, the other wrapping around her waist.

“Gotcha.”

“Always.”

She spins around in my arms, her now free hands grabbing my face, and kisses me.

To hell with dessert. There's nothing sweeter than this.

Chapter 29

Everly

The night Ethan planned for us at the event venue from the Advantage party had been amazing. It was a date, a real date. A perfect date.

Cheesecake included.

It was a magical night filled with love and affection and promises.

Promises that, only a few days later, are already broken.

Earlier today, Ethan stumbled into the studio where the shoot for Active All-Stars was taking place. He was already ten minutes late, which Yolanda would have been quick to forgive if, when he did show, he hadn't been drunk. This time, there was no covering for him.

Not with Yolanda.

Not with Tripp.

Linnie's mother had been released from the hospital and was at home resting, so Tripp took the time to come back home

and do some work before heading back next week.

When Tripp saw Ethan, his jaw dropped.

The cool and collected man that would stroll into the Advantage Player offices was long gone and replaced with a man who had dark circles around his eyes and reeked of whiskey.

Before I could even say anything, Tripp shoved Ethan out the door and told him not to come back. He made a threat, one about telling his coach and his career being over. Pieces of the puzzle that is Ethan Ambrose suddenly became clearer.

As if having to divulge the details of my relationship with Ethan to Tripp wasn't bad enough, having to explain that I lied to him, and Yolanda, about the last shoot nearly broke me.

Tripp is less than pleased with me, but even more so with Ethan. I can't blame him there. I'm pretty pissed at him myself.

Based on the sympathetic look on my face when I step into the lobby of Ethan's building, Thurston knows it too.

"Is Ethan here?" I ask Thurston.

"He is, ma'am. In quite a mood too."

I would hope so, after what he just pulled.

"I'm aware."

Thurston nods. "Go on up."

"Thanks, Thurston."

When I walk into Ethan's condo, Baker immediately runs to greet me.

"Traitor!" Ethan yells out from the couch. I'm not sure if he's referring to Baker or me.

"You look ... worse," I tell him as I make my way further inside.

He doesn't respond, so I continue.

"What the hell were you thinking showing up drunk to the shoot?"

"I was thinking that if I didn't show you'd be pissed."

"I'm still pissed."

"Your problem, not mine."

His behavior is infuriating. As much as I want to be understanding and get to the bottom of what is bothering him, my emotions get the best of me.

"How dare you."

He laughs. "How dare I what?"

"Fuck up my career," I tell him. "If you don't want to be with me, don't give a damn about me, that's fine. Take your bullshit lines and use them on someone else. But do not mess with my career."

"I wasn't trying to do anything to you!" he shouts. "This isn't about you."

"Then what is it about, because you're sure as hell taking it out on me."

He rises to his feet and staggers toward the kitchen. “Just get out.”

That would be the easy route, wouldn't it? Walking away like he expects me to. Giving into him like he wants. Allowing him to continue on when I know that deep down, he's better than this.

“No,” I say as I follow him into the kitchen.

He yanks open a cabinet door and pulls a bottle from it, then slams said bottle on the counter.

“Get out!”

This time he shouts the words.

“Is that what you really want, Ethan? Because if I walk out that door, I'm not coming back.”

“Just like the rest of them.”

“Don't you dare compare me to your parents. They left because they are bad people, selfish people. I'm here, Ethan. And I'm not going anywhere. You're the one pushing me away. Throwing away what we have.”

“We don't *have* anything.”

“You seem pretty pissed about me leaving for us to not have anything.”

“I'm not pissed. You leaving is inevitable.”

“No, it's not. Not everyone leaves. I. Don't. Leave.”

“You would if you knew the truth.”

“What truth is that, Ethan? That you have a drinking problem? Newsflash, I know, and I’m still here. Still fighting. For you. For us.”

“You shouldn’t be.”

“You fight for things that matter. You fight for things you love.”

“I’m not worth it. I’m not loveable.”

“Whoever told you that is a liar.”

Ethan drinks, straight from the bottle.

Seeing him like this tears me apart. I can only imagine what feeling like this does to him. How whatever it is that happened in his past pushes him to do things I know he doesn’t want to do. Like drink. Or push me away.

The unworthy feeling that’s engrained in him. The pain from the hurtful words and actions. His inner child is suffering, his adult self is drinking to try to soothe the ache.

“You don’t understand.”

“Then make me understand. Tell me, Ethan.”

He stalks toward me. The look in his eyes, filled with pain and fury, causes me to back up. I’m pressed against the wall, his hands resting on either side of my face.

“You want to understand? Fine. Understand this. I’m not the guy for you. I tried. I failed. It’s who I am, what I am. I’m not worth your time. I’m not worth anyone’s time.”

“Want to know what I think?” I don’t give him an opportunity to answer. I don’t care if he wants to know or not, he’s going to hear what I have to say. “I think you’re an amazing man who was dealt a shit hand.”

“I am not amazing.”

“Give me one valid reason why.”

“Because I’m letting my little brother die.” The words drain him, making him stumble back and rest against the wall. “I’m letting a kid die because ... because I hate him for being the one that they loved.”

The little boy in the picture—his brother.

“Oh, Ethan.”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t pity me.”

“It’s not pity.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s empathy.”

“Whatever it is, take it and get out.”

He shoves off the wall, walking away from me. The breath I hadn’t even realized I had been holding releases.

Straightening my back, I square my shoulders and stand taller.

“What the fuck is it going to take for you to go away?” he shouts.

I smile at him. My answer is simple. “You, sober, telling me to go.” I round the island and stand before him. “Otherwise, I’m not leaving. Not now. Not ever.”

“Huge mistake.”

“It’s my mistake to make.”

“You deserve better than me.”

“I deserve better than you in this moment, maybe. But not better than you. You’re a good man, Ethan.”

“Sure as fuck don’t feel like one.”

Leaving the bottle behind, Ethan makes his way back to the living room. He settles on the couch, his usual spot.

“You just going to stand there all day?”

I breathe a sigh of relief before joining him on the couch.

“Why are you doing this?” he asks me.

“Doing what?”

“Putting up with me. Dealing with my shit.”

“Because I care about you.”

“You shouldn’t. I’m a fucking mess. Look at what I did to you today. Look at what I’m doing to some poor, sick kid. One who apparently worships me.”

“Rightfully so. Just like you have every right to be pissed—at your parents, at the situation they put you in.”

“Not him, though.”

“No, not him. He didn’t do anything.”

“I should. I should help him.”

“You should do what’s right for you.”

He shakes his head with a little chuckle. “No one wants that.”

“I do.”

“I’m scared of losing you. I’m scared of being alone again.”

I wish that there was some way for me to assure him, to tell him how much he matters to me and how little all of this affects those feelings.

The emotions taking over in combination with the alcohol has his eyes fluttering shut as he tries to mutter what’s on his mind. Bits and pieces spill through. How he loves me. How he tried. That he’s sorry. Proclamations that I don’t need because I already know.

Chapter 30

Ethan

The first thing I see is Everly. She's curled up in bed beside me.

My head is pounding, my body aching.

I have no clue what day it is, or why she's here.

Did we go out last night? That can't be right. I wouldn't drink in front of her. I wouldn't let her see me like that again.

I sit up with a jolt as the memories start to trickle in.

My dad.

Ben.

The photo shoot.

Showing up drunk.

Our fight.

I did let her see me like that.

Getting out of bed, I head straight for the bathroom. I reach for the over-the-counter pain killers and take a handful.

“Ethan? Are you okay?”

I can see her standing behind me in the doorway.

“I’m fine. I just need a minute.”

I need a minute to not want to scream at her to get out, to not want to push her away.

Why in the fuck is she still here?

Everly backs away from the doorway. With her out of sight, I feel like I can breathe again.

She knows the truth about me and how I cope with the demons in my head and for some unknown reason she’s still here. That terrifies me more than anything.

My hands grip the edge of the sink as I take a deep breath in then exhale. I repeat the motion a few more times as I try to figure out how in the fuck to handle this. Even more, how to get rid of her.

“Ethan? Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” I reply as I emerge from the bathroom.

“Do you want to talk about last night?” she asks.

Is that a fucking joke? Do I want to talk about it? Fuck no, I don’t. I want to forget it ever happened. I want to return to the moment where she had no clue what a disaster I am.

“No.”

“Ethan, I think you need help.”

“You think? What gave it away?”

“Don’t be a jerk.”

“Don’t pry. Just let it be.”

“I can’t. I can’t just sit by and—”

“Then don’t.” I extend my arm, hand pointed at the door.
“There’s the fucking door, use it.”

Internally, there’s a battle between my head that wants her to leave and my heart that needs her to stay. What a roller coaster of emotions.

“I got why you tried to push me away last night, but why are you doing it now? Don’t you see—”

“All I see is you, not leaving.”

“You need help, Ethan.”

“I’m beyond help, Everly.”

“That’s not true.”

“Either you accept me the way I am or get the fuck out. It’s your choice.”

“Is this a test? Hmm? Are you trying to see if I’m like the rest of them? Because I’m not. I’m not leaving. I won’t stop caring. I will stand by you every step of the way.”

Willing to put it to the test, I go to the kitchen and pull open a cabinet. Bottles of whiskey line the shelf.

“You don’t need those bottles.”

“What I do is none of your business. You’re going to stand by me no matter what, right?”

“Yeah, I will.”

“Then what do you want, Everly? Why are you trying to stop me?” I’m shouting at her. Emotions run through me that I can’t control because I don’t have the one thing that keeps them in check—a drink. Alcohol.

“I want to be your bottle. I want to be what you run to instead of this.” She holds up the bottle in the air, then smashes it on the ground. “Be with me, Ethan. Not with it.”

“You’ve lost your fucking mind.”

“Maybe. But I found my heart. With you.”

I shake my head, deny what she’s saying. No. I don’t belong in anyone’s heart. I’m a fuck up. A mess. A mistake. I am not that guy. I am not her guy.

“Yeah, well, then you’re even more fucked up than me.”

She steps over the puddle of whiskey on the floor, making sure to avoid the shards of glass, and heads straight to me. We’re toe to toe, our faces only inches from each other.

She doesn’t speak, not with words at least. Her eyes, though, they say it all. The emotion I thought she had been lacking, I just hadn’t taken the time to notice. It’s there, in her eyes. Understanding, love.

Her hand gently touches my cheek. Her lips brush against mine.

“I know, Ethan. I know, and I’m still here. I’m not going anywhere.”

I want to stumble back, but her presence grounds me. She knows. But what? How much? I couldn't have possibly told her all of it ... could I?

“Use me. Not the alcohol. Take what you need from me. Let me dull the ache. Use pleasure to erase the pain.”

This time, when she kisses me, it's hard. The kind of kiss that that goes right to your balls.

Without hesitation, I take what she's giving. I pick her up, legs wrapping around my waist as I press her against the nearest wall. I don't have time or patience left.

Her hands reach between us, freeing me of the confines of my denim jeans. Thankfully, the shorts she's wearing are loose enough to slide them to the side before slipping inside her.

She cries out, nails digging into my skin. It's going to leave a mark. Maybe even bleed. I want that. I want more of the pain, the pleasure, the goddamn solace that this moment is bringing me.

Rough and raw.

Bare.

Just the two of us.

If feels wrong, using her like this, taking this thing between us and turning it into something to make the pain of the withdrawals subside.

I'm blinded by the physical, the feeling. My mind is lost. Unable to comprehend whether she's even climaxed when my

own takes hold of me.

Her legs loosen, sliding down my body until her feet hit the ground. I look between us. My cum dripping down her inner thigh.

Fuck.

I stuff myself back into my pants. Zip up.

Then, I bolt.

Chapter 31

Everly

“**W**hat is going on with you?” Chelle asks.

I snap out of my fog only to realize that I’ve been staring at a wall, rather than engaging in conversation with her.

It’s Margarita Wednesday, and a margarita is the last thing I want.

I want Ethan. I want things to go back to normal.

Ever since the photo shoot, he’s been avoiding me. I’m not sure if he’s in a drunken stupor or trying to recover.

He fucked me and ran. Literally ran right out of his own house and away from me.

Not because he wanted to. I know he didn’t. I know that no matter what he’s going through there is one thing that isn’t in question—how he feels about me. In fact, if anything, it’s those emotions that manage to at least calm some of the storm that’s brewing inside him.

So I keep reaching out, letting him know that I'm there.

As much as I want to be there for him, I need to take care of my own life too. Especially since he doesn't seem to want to get help.

I may not know much about addiction, but I do know that until the person wants to help themselves, there isn't a whole lot you can do. I was willing to let things go back to normal even though I'm not exactly sure it's the right thing to do.

"Earth to Everly.

"Sorry," I tell Chelle. "What did you say?"

Chelle shakes her head. "As much as I appreciate the interest, something is clearly going on with you. Spill."

"It's Ethan."

"Trouble in paradise?"

"Sort of. I've learned some things about Ethan."

"What kind of things?"

"Things about his past. Things about now. He's drinking. A lot."

Something tells me this isn't the first issue he's had with it. Before, he didn't have anyone. Now, he has me. If only I knew what to do to help him.

"Like needs AA a lot?"

"Like needs a full-blown rehab program a lot."

"What are you going to do?"

Initially, I wanted to run out and get him help, but I opted to get information first.

“I’ve been gathering information, trying to figure out the best course of action.”

“I feel like there’s a but coming on.”

“But the general consensus seems to be if he doesn’t want to get help, any help I try to get him won’t work. Basically, he has to want to stop. First step is admitting you have a problem and all that.”

“I’m so sorry, honey. How are you?”

I shrug, unsure how I’m feeling or even what I’m thinking.

“What’s worse is ... since all this happened, I haven’t heard from him. He won’t answer my calls. He’s basically ghosted me.”

“Maybe he’s embarrassed?”

“He doesn’t feel like he’s good enough. He doesn’t think he deserves me.”

“Does he?”

My defenses go up against the one person that they shouldn’t. “Just because he’s an alcoholic—”

“No. Not because of that. Because you said you learned things and I don’t know what those things are. I don’t know if this guy who’s ghosting you when all you want to do is love him is actually worth it.”

“He is. I promise. And it’s not like he did anything bad, he just ... His childhood was hard and recently it’s kind of come rearing its ugly head.”

“Hence the drinking?”

I nod.

“Poor guy.”

“I just wish I knew how to make him understand that what his parents did to him isn’t his fault. Maybe then he could move past the drinking and the pushing people away.”

Maybe then he could love me. Really love me.

“I did find a couple programs that I think would be good for him. He can afford anything he needs. It’s just the getting him there that’s going to be the hard part.”

When I hear my phone in my purse, my heart begins to race.

I reach in and answer it, not even bothering to look at the screen.

“Hello?”

“Hey, sunshine.”

Relief washes over me at the sound of his voice. His seemingly sober voice.

“Hey. You okay?”

“I think we both know the answer to that.”

“Did something happen?” I ask, excusing myself from the table and stepping outside the Mexican restaurant. “With your

dad? Ben?"

"I haven't been tested, if that's what you're asking."

"I'm just trying to figure out what's going on. Why you're calling now when you've refused to speak to me for the past week."

I can hear him curse beneath his breath. "The things I said, the things I did ... Fuck, Everly I am so damn sorry."

"It's okay. I'm okay. I'm just worried about you."

"I won't fuck up the shoot tomorrow. I promise."

The athletic company shoot. A job I had completely spaced on because I am so busy being worried about him.

"I don't care about that. I care about you. Can I come over? Please?"

"I don't want you to see me like this."

"I've already seen you like this. I don't care. It doesn't change how I feel."

"It should."

"It doesn't."

"Can I come see you?"

"Not tonight. I just ... I needed to hear your voice."

Chapter 32

Ethan

Tom Petty was right when he said waiting was the hardest part.

I feel like a damn rat in a cage as I sit here, waiting for the results of the test that I put off for way too long.

The minute the photo shoot ended, I pressed a kiss to Everly's cheek and headed straight for the hospital.

I'll admit, it was a struggle. In order to take the test, to make it to the photo shoot, and make Everly proud, I needed to be sober. Being sober was a lot fucking harder than I remember.

Still, I managed. I made it through the shoot, even did a pretty damn good job with it based on the compliments that Yolanda was tossing my way. Then I made it to the hospital. A quick swab was all it took. Thirty seconds of my life. That's it. Now I sit here, waiting for what feels like an eternity.

Everly: Where did you disappear to?

Me: Had an errand.

Everly: Oh, okay. Great job today by the way.

Granted it's only in text, but the feeling is still palpable. She's nervous, worried about me. She's a fucking mess, and I'm the one making her this way.

Me: All the credit goes to you.

Everly: I don't look nearly as good on camera as you do.

Me: Better.

Everly: Awe.

Me: Why don't I make all this up to you? Come for dinner tonight?

Everly: Really? Are you sure?

Me: Positive. I want to cook for you. 8 good?

Everly: Sounds great.

Me: See you then.

I'm about to set the phone down when it begins to ring in my hand. The number is unfamiliar. No contact associated with it. The hospital. It has to be.

"Hello?"

"Hello. May I please speak with Ethan Ambrose?"

"This is he."

"This is Lenore from Remington General Hospital. I'm calling with your results."

"And? What are they?"

“I’m sorry, sir, but you’re not a match.”

“Fuck!” I shout as I disconnect the call.

Frustrated, I throw the phone across the room. To my surprise it doesn’t break, just lands hard with a thud.

All of this for nothing. Absolutely fucking nothing.

I grab the bottle, not even bothering with a glass. Why? I know what’s going to happen, how much I’m going to need to drink to erase this most recent nightmare from my fucking mind.

A mind that’s simultaneously trying to convince me to call Everly. To be with her. To let her be with me—to make things better.

She makes everything better.

Call her, Ambrose. Quit being an asshole and call her.

The bottle in my hand pulls harder though. The pain in my chest tells me even Everly isn’t strong enough to soothe the ache.

The bottle wins. The bottle always wins.

Incessant knocking on my door startles me awake. Baker is at my side, nudging my hand. My shouted demands to go away go unanswered, the pounding continuing. Louder. Harder.

“What?” I shout as I pull open the door.

Everly’s face stares back at me.

Scrubbing my hand over my face, I try to wipe away the sleep—and the drunkenness—before she can see it.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, trying to not sound pissed even though I am.

The last thing I want, or need, is for her to see me like this.

I’ve fucked up. I’ve been drunk. But this? I don’t think I’ve ever been this low. This bad. I have to admit, it even scares me.

“You invited me,” she says, holding up her phone and showing me the text I sent.

A text that was sent before I knew I wasn’t a match. The text I sent when I thought that I was doing the right thing and saving an innocent kid’s life. Instead, I just gave him his death sentence.

“Now’s not a good time.”

“Why’s that? Because you’ve been drinking? I know, remember?”

“I just don’t want you here,” I lie.

She doesn’t believe me, doesn’t buy it.

“What is it? What happened this time?”

This time. Another reminder that this isn’t the first time I’ve fucked up. Been nothing more than a loser, a drunk, a worthless piece of shit.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“It might help.”

I run my hand through my hair. “Nothing can help.”

“That’s not true. I can help. We can do it together.”

“No. We can’t. Christ, Everly, why are you even here? You shouldn’t be.”

Yet, she is. She stands here, strong and determined, eyes filled with love.

“I’m here because I want to be. Because I care about you. Because despite what your parents did to you, that’s not how love and relationships work. It’s not how I work.”

“I’m sorry, sunshine. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Her hands frame my face. “The only thing that hurts me is seeing you in so much pain.”

Where everyone else left, Everly stays. Where most people would give up, she fights harder.

The problem is, I don’t know if I’m worth the fight. My parents sure as shit didn’t think so. Why would Everly? When is enough going to be enough for her? When will she finally see the truth that’s staring her right in the face?

My parents saw it before it was even true. They knew. One day, Everly will too.

“It’s better for both of us if you just walk away.”

“That’s not going to happen. I’m not walking away. I love you, Ethan.”

I refute her statement, my head shaking. “I don’t deserve your love.”

“Well, you have it regardless. So let me in.”

She doesn't just mean my house. She means inside me. Into the dark places that I don't even want to go. Yet there she is, willing to go there with me. Hold my hand through it.

Guilt rises inside of me.

Opening the door further, she steps inside. She places her purse on the table next to the door and scratches Baker's head.

“Want me to take him for a walk?”

“No.”

“Want me to make dinner?”

“No. Everly, stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Trying to fix me. Trying to fix something that's irreparable.”

“I'm not. I just ... ”

“Want to pretend everything is normal when it isn't?”

She nods her head.

“I just want to be here for you, but honestly, I don't know how.”

“You're already doing it.”

I press a kiss to her forehead.

Even though I know she should go, I can't find it in me to push her away. I need her. I love her.

“I said I’d cook for you,” I tell her, making my way to the kitchen.

My hands yank both doors of the oversize refrigerator open.

“Okay, let’s see what we’ve got to work with.”

Nothing. There is nothing to work with because the thing is practically empty.

“We can order pizza,” she suggests.

I shake my head. “I said I was going to cook for you.”

It might be a challenge to do considering the slim pickings in the fridge, but for Everly, I’ll do it. I’ll even succeed.

As I pull ingredients from the fridge, Everly hops up onto the island counter and watches me work. Our conversation is light, comical even, despite the fact that I owe her plenty of explanations—starting with why I forgot our plans.

She doesn’t ask though, and I use that as a copout to not have to explain myself to her. Don’t ask, don’t tell. Her lack of questioning is my escape from having to tell her about the demons that trouble me on the regular. The very demons that don’t seem to exist when she’s around.

It’s why I won’t let her go, won’t walk away from her when I know it’s the right thing to do. I need her.

“When you opened the fridge, I really thought we were going to have to order something,” she says, taking the plate I extend to her.

“Probably should have.”

She looks down at the food—bacon grilled cheese and homemade french fries. “Are you kidding me? This looks amazing.”

We settle onto the stools at the island, my eyes fixed on her as she takes her first bite. I hold back the groan I desperately want to make when I hear her moan in pleasure.

“So good,” she murmurs before taking another bite.

“Glad you like it.”

Seeing her satisfaction, I begin to dig into my own food.

Silence falls over us as we eat, but it’s far from quiet. I swear I can hear my heart pounding in my ears.

“Next time I’ll whip up something better.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think that’s possible. It was everything I wanted—and more.”

“I’m sorry. About dinner, about forgetting, about ... me.”

“Don’t be. Just ... don’t push me away.”

“I don’t want to. I just don’t know how to be a we, Everly. I don’t know how to rely on someone.”

“It’s not that hard,” she says. “You just take what’s in your head and your heart and share it with me.”

“That’s it, huh?”

“That’s it.”

With my head hung, I speak the words that broke me earlier today. “I’m not a match.”

“I didn’t realize you had gotten tested.”

“I did. Today. For ... for you. So I can be the kind of man that you deserve. And I’m not even a fucking match.”

Her hand touches my cheek and I lean into it.

“It’s not your fault you’re not a match, baby. You can’t change your DNA.”

“Christ, you have no idea how much I wish I could.” I sigh. “I’m trying here, sunshine, but fuck if I can get it out of my head that I don’t deserve you. That you don’t need to be here fighting my demons for me.”

“Not for you—with you. I’ve seen the demons, Ethan, and still there is no place else I would rather be.”

Chapter 33

Ethan

My head rises from the pillow.
Everly's gone. She had a meeting or something.
Wished me luck on my game.

Fox: Hey, man, where are you?

Slade: Dude, you're late. Coach is pissed.

Maddox: Where the fuck are you?

Coach: You're done.

The messages came in hours ago.

Earlier today when I was supposed to be at the game, but I wasn't.

Fuck.

Fuck it.

Fuck me.

Everly: I love you, Ethan. It's going to be okay.

I wish to hell I could believe her.

Chapter 34

Ethan

With my head down and my eyes on the ground, I walk into Coach's office. I already know what's coming; I'm just trying to brace myself for actually hearing the words.

I'm finished. My career is over.

I know it. I'm just not sure I can bear to hear it.

"Sit down, Ethan," Coach says the moment I step through the door.

With my gaze on the floor, I see multiple sets of shoes. The old ratty pair of sneakers, those belong to Coach. The high end, expense loafers, those belong to Tripp. The heels? Those ... those are Everly's.

"What is this, some sort of intervention?" I ask.

My head raises, my eyes scanning the room. There was one more set of shoes that I missed. More expensive loafers. These belong to the team owner, Jamal Hurt.

Fuck.

“We’re past the intervention stage,” Coach tells me.

“Let me guess, we’ve entered the lost cause stage?” I interject.

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” Everly says, her sunshine personality shining through.

Positive thoughts lead to positive results. If only that were true.

“It does though, doesn’t it, Coach? I did it again. Fucked up, in more ways than one.”

Coach shakes his head. “Why didn’t you just come to me?”

I shrug. “Easier said than done.”

“What is it this time?” he asks.

Everly looks at me with an encouraging smile and eyes filled with love and understanding. Christ, if she couldn’t save me, nothing can fix the broken in me.

Coach presses on, reiterating his question. “What is it? What happened?”

“Does it matter?” I ask.

His hand clamps down on my shoulder. “It matters to me.”

“To all of us,” Tripp says.

Mr. Hurt stands there, arms folded over his chest. He nods.

“Family shit.”

Coach continues to look at me. The tidbit I gave him, it’s not enough. Not to save my ass from this one.

“My dad popped back into my life, okay? I’m having a hard time and ... and I fucked up. I’ll fix it.”

“Damn right you will,” Coach says.

“I’ll start AA again. I’ll—”

“You need more than AA,” Mr. Hurt says. “You need help, son. Real help.”

Everly’s hand grabs mine. “And I’ll be there every step of the way.”

I look directly at Mr. Hurt. “Am I done? Am I finished with the Railcats?”

Am I finished with baseball, period, is probably the more accurate question.

Mr. Hurt exhales loudly. “For this season, yes. You’re done. If you pay the fines, you get the help, I’ll see what I can do about next season.”

“Next season? What about this season? The World Series is weeks away,” I argue.

Grateful as I am for a chance at a future, the realization that I’m not going to the World Series with my team is unbearable.

“I’ll do whatever you want, just let me finish the season. Please.”

“Your health is more important,” Coach tells me.

“Yeah? Tell the guys that,” I say. “They need me. They—”

“They want you to get better. So do I.”

I turn toward the voice behind me. Maddox.

“You’ll lose without me,” I tell him.

“Maybe. Maybe not. What I’m certain of, though, is that if you don’t get some fucking help, you’re going to die, and that isn’t going to get you there either. Do this, Ethan. Do what they say and get your ass back here next year so we can all do this together.”

I yank my hand free of Everly’s.

“Fuck you. Fuck all of you. I don’t need this shit. I don’t need any of you.”

Pissed, scared, hurt, I storm out of the room and head to the first bar I can find. I mean, I’ve already lost everything that matters, what’s the point in hiding it now?



I’m lying face down on the couch. My breath is hot and smells of whiskey as it blows right back into my face.

Flashes of what landed me here go through my mind. My dad. The drinking. The intervention. The bar. Maddox. Slamming door.

A voice shouting out my name.

“Ethan!”

The voice is loud. It echoes through my head as it says my name on repeat. Hands grab me, jostling my body.

My first thought: make it stop. Make whatever, whoever, this is go away.

My hand releases the bottle, arm swinging back as I try to rid myself of whoever this is. Even in my current state—near dead, from what I can tell—I’m still strong. Enough to hit whatever it is that was jostling me.

Whatever I hit was soft and warm.

There is only one thing in the world that feels like that would bother with my sorry ass.

Everly.

Fuck.

I hit her.

“Shit,” Everly curses under her breath.

My elbow hit her in the eye as I moved my arm.

“Everly? Fuck. I’m ... ”

Bile rises in my throat. I’m not sure if it’s from the alcohol or the fact that I just hit the woman I love—intentional or not.

I shove off the couch. Unable to stand, I immediately drop to the ground and crawl my way to the bathroom, gagging.

My head hangs over the toilet as the remnants—from last night or this morning, it’s hard to tell—projectile into the bowl.

A soft hand. A gentle touch.

Everly.

She's next to me on the floor, her hand rubbing my back.

I don't deserve her or her kindness. I certainly don't deserve to have her here sitting next to me.

"Why are you here?" I ask between vomit sessions.

I'm not just referring to the bathroom, at my side while I vomit. I mean with me, period.

"Shh."

"You shouldn't be. I don't deserve you."

"Maybe not."

I'm grateful she doesn't refute my statement. There is nothing in the world that could convince me that I deserve love, let alone the love of someone as good as Everly.

"I deserve you, though. I deserve the happiness you bring me."

Finally done, at least for the moment, I sit back and wipe my mouth.

"This is happiness?"

"No. Not this minute. But the ones in between. Those are. The nights when we laugh on the phone. Or you rest your head in my lap. The moments you kiss me, hold me, treasure me. Those are pure joy."

"For me too," I tell her.

I'm not sure if she'll believe me or not considering my current state. Or maybe it helps her believe it more. That

during those moments, the more frequent they became, I didn't drink. Not when I was with her, at least.

I didn't need to. I had her. My other addiction. My drug.

My love.

I close my eyes, flashes of me with Everly stampeding my mind. I want that. I want her. I want the happiness that being with her brings. Not like this though. Not when I'm a fucking train wreck.

"You should go. You shouldn't be here."

"I'm not leaving you."

"I need help, Everly. More help than you can give me."

She's the only person on the planet I would admit that to. The only person that I would get that help for. I want to do it because I want her. I want to be worthy of her. I want to be the man she deserves. Not the mess that she fell in love with.

"We'll get it for you. I've found some great facilities."

Of course she had. Standing by my side was one thing. Waiting until I fell over the edge to help me back up ... that is Everly. It's who she is. What she does. It's why I love her so much.

It's why I need to do this—alone.

Only I know she'll never let me. Not unless I push her past her limits. If only the fuck I knew what they were.

Chapter 35

Everly

Sirens are blaring as I hold onto Ethan for dear life.

Bottles scattered around the room; I couldn't even begin to guess how much he drank beyond the obvious too much.

All I know is that when I showed up hours ago, he stopped. He quit drinking and instead held onto me. He cried, told me what a mess he was. We promised to work through it— together.

Only now, I can't seem to wake him.

"Wake up, Ethan," I plead with him, my voice loud in his ear.

Nothing.

There's a pulse. A heartbeat. He's breathing. He's alive.

My heart aches as it questions, *but for how long?*

"Damn it, Ethan, wake up."

I hold him, shaking him, begging him to stay with me.

This isn't the end. It's only the beginning.

He was going to get help. We picked out a place. A nice place. He wanted it.

Rock bottom, E. He has to hit rock bottom.

Hadn't he already, though? Why this?

"Paramedics," a voice beyond the door shouts.

"Come in, it's open."

I don't even recall shutting the door. The sight of Ethan's lifeless body on the floor instantly instilled fear in me. My hand instinctively grabbed for my phone and dialed 9-1-1. Then I ran to him, knelt at his side, and begged him to wake up.

Paramedics rush in, followed by police.

"Ma'am, we're going to need you to move," one of the men says.

I do, but not far. What if he wakes up? What if he doesn't see me? Would he fear that I too had left him like all the others? Like his parents?

No. I need to stay close. I need him to know that I'm there—through thick and thin, good and bad.

The paramedics do what they can, hoisting him onto the stretcher.

"I'm coming with him," I tell them.

"Ma'am ... "

“He doesn’t have any family. I’m his agent. I’m all he has.”

And I won’t walk away from him. Not for anything.

The paramedics finally give in, knowing I won’t relent.

The ambulance ride is a blur. Me, sitting next to Ethan, squeezing his hand, praying for him to wake up. Minutes pass, maybe more. I feel his fingers move but think I must be manifesting it. There’s no way. He needs his stomach pumped. He needs ...

“Everly.”

The faint sound of his voice makes my heart swell.

“Yeah, it’s me, Ethan. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’m sorry,” he says softly.

“It’s all going to be okay.”

This. This is rock bottom. It has to be. It’s only up from here on out.

The minute we get to the hospital, they drag him away from me, rolling him through the halls into one of the emergency stalls.

My hands tremble as I text Tripp, then Chelle.

I pace the waiting room for what seems like forever. The hustle and bustle around me feels surreal.

Chelle’s the first to burst through the doors.

“Oh, honey,” she exclaims, taking me in her arms.

I accept her embrace, my head buried in her shoulder as I sob.

“What is it? What happened?”

“I ... I don't know. He was on the floor. Unconscious, but breathing.” I glance at the double doors they wheeled him through what feels like an eternity ago. “It's been so long. They haven't said anything.”

“Everly.” Tripp's voice fills the room. I turn, giving him a weak smile.

This is my fault. He's here because of me. Because I didn't get him the help he needed sooner.

Tripp gives me a reassuring hug. “It's going to be okay. After I kill him, it's going to be okay.”

If only Ethan could see this now. The people here to support him. Me. Trip. Thurston. Chelle. Fox. Slade. Maddox.

“Maddox, what are you doing here?” I ask.

“I was with Tripp when he got the text. Dude's a pain in my ass, but he's still my brother,” he says.

So many more people than he realized.

You're not alone, Ethan. You never were.

Chapter 36

Ethan

I'm alive.

I'm alive and lying in a hospital bed wishing I wasn't.

Not because I'm sober, or even because of the shit childhood that I blame the drinking on. It's because I can't handle what I just put Everly through. Sweet, sinfully sexy Everly who sits beside me, holding my hand, reiterating the 'plan.'

"This is the rehab facility."

"You'll spend thirty days there."

Lying here in the hospital bed, all I can hear is Everly's voice making plans, going over what needs to be done.

"Enough."

Everly's mouth snaps shut.

She's been a goddamn saint through this and doesn't deserve my wrath.

I have to do something though. I have to get her to walk away when I know damn well she doesn't want to, and

honestly, I don't want her to either.

What I want and what she needs are two very different things.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "I just need a little quiet."

What I actually need is space. From her. From her 'plans.'

How do I tell her that though when she's trying so hard? Too hard, for that matter. She wants me fixed more than I do. She wants me to be the man she needs. The only problem is, I don't think I can be him. Especially not now.

"Yeah, of course."

She plasters on a fake smile as she tries to hide the tears I see welling in her eyes.

"Why don't you take a break? Go get something to eat."

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

The question may sound playful, but it comes from someplace deeper. I can hear it. Feel it.

"I'm just tired. With the transfer to the rehab facility tomorrow ... I just want to get some rest."

"Yeah, sorry. You need rest. I'm going to go."

She reaches for her bag on the floor, her movements quick and jerky as she tries to rush. She knows. She can feel it.

Fuck.

I reach for her hand and manage to capture it just before she bolts.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

With a brave face on, she nods, acting like everything is okay when we both know that it isn’t.



Everly hadn’t been joking when she said she found some great rehab facilities. Hell, I’m pretty sure she had found every single one. Including the one we’re sitting in.

Every tick of the clock, every moment that passes, I want to run. I want to leave and head for the bottle because I’ll be damned if it isn’t the easier way.

This? Withdrawals? Coming to terms with the shit I’ve done? The shit that’s been done to me?

Fuck.

It’s everything I’ve avoided my whole life. It’s why I’m here in the first place. An impossible feat.

Still at my side, Everly sits silently as I sign the papers.

It’s official.

I, of sound mind and body, just signed myself into rehab.

I want to be here, even if I’m terrified of it.

One of the parameters of the program is no visitors for the first two weeks. Perfect. I want to do this alone. I don’t want Everly to see me like ... whatever I’m going to be like. While

I'm not sure exactly what's going to go down, I know that what she's seen so far hasn't been my worst.

This will be.

"I'll be back, just as soon as they'll let me," she promises.

It's a promise that, for her sake, I hope she doesn't keep.

I don't say anything. I just nod.

"It's going to be okay. You've got this."

Another nod.

She presses her lips against mine in a tender kiss filled with love and promise. I don't kiss her back.

A weak smile from her. Another nod from me.

Then, she's gone.

The day has already been long as fuck, and I can feel the alcohol continuing to wear off.

Everything is so foggy as I walk down the hall, guided by two men in scrubs.

Withdrawal is a killer. It's fucking with my head, my body.

We enter the room, with a hospital-looking bed in the center of it and a small dresser off to the side. It's nothing much, but it's more than I deserve. Hell, even at my best I never really cared about money or belongings, probably because I've always had more than I needed.

I rest on the bed, trying to get the spinning to stop. The doctor, the men in scrubs, they just stand there, talking about

me like I'm not even here.

That's when I see her. Everly.

She walks into the room, eyes on me, a sweet smile on her face.

"I thought you left," I say.

The bald guy in the scrubs shoves her, pushing her toward the door.

"Leave her alone," I shout.

His hands grab her arms, holding her as she fights against him.

"Let her go," I demand.

His sick laughter fills the air as she struggles against him, fighting him as he holds her against him.

My feet hit the floor and I run toward them. "I said, let her go."

My hand grabs his shirt as I shove him up against the wall. My forearm against his neck, I cock my other hand back and swing.

"Don't ever touch her again."

"Who, Ethan? Who is he touching?" Dr. Monroe asks as he steps between us.

The other orderly or whatever the fuck he is grabs my hand before I can swing again.

"Everly. Are you okay?" She doesn't respond. "Everly?"

I glance back, but she's nowhere to be found. I blink my eyes, still, she's not there.

The doctor moves closer. "Everly isn't here, Ethan. She left. Do you remember that?"

She left. I remember. Before I walked down to the room. My room.

My eyes dart around as I take in my surroundings.

"She's not here, Ethan. She never was."

I release the man, confused.

"It's a hallucination," the doctor says. "A side effect."

"It felt so real," I tell him, sinking to the floor, head in my hands.

"They do. But don't worry, they'll pass."

They'll pass.

I'm sure they will. Until then, I'll feel like I'm losing my fucking mind. And maybe I am.

Chapter 37

Everly

It's been two long, excruciating weeks since Ethan first entered the rehab facility.

Today is the first day that I'll be able to have contact with him.

I'm excited and nervous and unsure what kind of mood he'll be in. Will he still be fighting the demons? Will the past two weeks have helped him and brought him back to the man that I met?

Will he hate me for helping get him here? Resent me for wanting to help?

So many thoughts run through my head as I wait for the woman behind the desk to allow me entrance.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but you aren't able to visit Mr. Ambrose today," she tells me.

I was so proud of Ethan when he entered the program under his own name as opposed to the alias that both Tripp and his coach had suggested.

Brave as it was, I'm fairly certain he did it more as a punishment for himself rather than the exemplary example he set.

Yes, his entrance to rehab, his addiction, his inability to play in the World Series that he helped get the Railcats to is splashed all over the news. And you damn well better believe I've made certain that every story was spun in the most promising light.

Ethan doesn't deserve punishment, least of all for getting the help that he needs.

That's something to be proud of.

I'm certain he wouldn't see it that way.

What I'm not certain of is why the woman is refusing to let me see Ethan when I damn well know that he's allowed to have visitors today.

"What do you mean I can't visit him? You said yourself that he's allowed to have visitors."

"Yes, but ... " She clears her throat. "You're not on the list."

"What do you mean I'm not on the list?" I ask. "I am the list."

I'm all he has. Clearly, there's been a mistake.

"I want to speak with Dr. Monroe."

She doesn't move, she doesn't speak, she just stands her ground.

Well, honey, so do I.

“Now,” I demand.

With a roll of her eyes, she calls Dr. Monroe. “He’ll be right with you.”

A few moments later, Dr. Monroe appears from behind a doorway. The exact one that I should be headed through to see Ethan.

“Good morning, Ms. Mann,” Dr. Monroe greets me.

I’m in no mood for pleasantries at this point. “Why can’t I see Ethan?”

“He asked not to see you.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Mann, but he doesn’t want to see you.”

“What about my letters? Have you given them to him?”

Surely if he’s read them, he’d know that I’m not going anywhere. He’d know that I love him—broken pieces and all. He’d want to see me.

“No.”

“What do you mean no?”

“My first priority is his recovery. I’ll let him know about them if and when I feel he can handle it.”

“Tell him I’m here. Please. Just ... just let him know that I’m here. I don’t want to mess up his recovery. That’s the last thing I want. I only want to see that he’s okay.”

The doctor doesn't look thrilled with my suggestion, but he nods and heads back toward the area where the patient rooms are.

Minutes pass as I impatiently pace around the lobby area waiting for Dr. Monroe to return.

When he does, he gestures for me to follow him back.

As I walk past him and through the open door, I want to say "ha." I want to tell him that it was just a mistake. An oversight.

When I step into Ethan's room, he's standing at the window, his back to me.

I can see the muscles on his back tense when he realizes I'm here.

"Hey," I say, softly.

"As you can see, I'm fine. Satisfied?"

I ignore the bite in his tone and continue. "I've missed you. How are—"

"I'm fine. That's what you wanted to know, right? Well, here I am, I'm fine. Now ... go."

"I'm not going anywhere."

He needs to know—to understand—that just because he's an alcoholic, it doesn't mean I'm abandoning him. Not after what we went through to get here.

"I don't want you here."

“Face me and say that,” I tell him, knowing damn well he’s not looking out the window for the scenery. He’s doing it because he doesn’t believe in the words he’s saying. He doesn’t want me to go. He needs me as much as I need him.

Slowly, I make my way to him, my hand touching his shoulder. “I’m not—”

Ethan whips around. “God damnit, Everly, I said, leave. I don’t want you here.”

“You don’t mean that.” Despite my words, tears sting my eyes at the anguish his harshness brings me.

“Oh, I mean it, all right. I tried to be nice. Gave you what you wanted. But now you need to get the fuck out.”

“Ethan.”

His hands grip my arms, and he forces me to walk backward toward the door. “What is it going to take to get through to you? I don’t want you. You were a drunken mistake. Nothing more. The fog has lifted, and I’m done.”

Refuting his words, I shake my head. “You weren’t drinking when we met.”

“You sure about that?”

“I know what you’re doing, and it isn’t going to work.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you think you know. I’m here to get myself in position to play ball again next year. That’s it. End of story. You didn’t fix me. This isn’t some grand love story.”

“I know you love me.”

“You know the words I said to get what I fucking wanted. That’s it.”

“Asshole.”

The word files out of my mouth despite the fact that I don’t mean it, that I know there is no truth behind it. This is nothing more than him pushing me away. I just wish I knew why. To protect me? To protect him?

“Exactly.” He folds his arms as he stares me down. His words say he doesn’t care, his eyes say the opposite.

“Fine. You can have it your way. For now.”

“For now?”

I nod. “I know you’re going through hell. I know you’re trying to push me away. And for now, I’ll let you. I’ll step back. By no means does that mean I am giving up on you.”

“I’m not yours to give up on.”

“Really? Because the way I see it, you’ve been mine since the moment you ran into me. You’ve been mine since you wouldn’t—couldn’t—walk away. If you want to think this is any different, that you can just end things with me, you’re wrong. I know you, Ethan. I know that you can’t live without me, just like I can’t live without you. So yeah, for now, I’m going to give you space. Let you heal. But I will never, ever, give up on you.”

Even though he's the one pushing me away, the one that supposedly doesn't care, he watches every step that I take toward the door. Grabbing the handle, I yank it open. "Good luck, Ethan."

Chapter 38

Ethan

Everly steps through the door, and it slams with a thud behind her.

She's gone.

Just like I wanted her to be. Like I told her to be.

“Fuck!” I scream into the empty room.

Despite the fact that I told her to leave—that I wanted her to leave—a part of me is angry at her for actually doing it. For walking out on me. For walking away. For being just like everyone else.

Even if it's my own fault. Even if I pushed her.

It's stupid.

Illogical.

It's as fucked up as I am.

Just another reason she's better off without me.

Yet when I hear the door open again, a small piece of me hopes that it's her. Not to end things, but rather to embrace her, hold her. One. Last. Time.

It's not Everly that enters the room.

It's Dr. Monroe.

Right now, I'm not sure whether or not to be grateful for it.

"Is everything okay?" he asks.

"No."

"Want to talk about it?"

I hate that fucking question.

"No."

"Well, it's time for our session, we could—"

I shake my head. "I said no."

"Ethan. Therapy is a huge part of your recovery."

"I know that!" I shout. "Just ... just not today."

He takes a seat on the edge of the bed.

"I'm not in the mood," I tell him, the words coming out as more of a growl.

"That's when we need therapy the most."

The fact that I'm not ready to talk about it is only part of the problem. The other part is that I already know what he's going to tell me.

Pushing Everly away is wrong. Trying to do this alone is wrong.

Basically he's going to tell me I'm fucking wrong about everything, and after seeing that hurt look in Everly's eyes, my emotions are running too fucking high right now without me having a place to hide.

"The problem is, Everly's gone."

"I thought that's what you wanted."

It's not the first time this idea has rambled through my head, though it is the last. Decision made. For her benefit, not mine.

"No, I didn't want this. I want her." Pacing around the room, I run my hands through my hair. "I'm trying to do right by her."

"What about you?"

"This isn't about me."

"I disagree. All of this is about you. It's about your addiction. Your recovery. Your fear of being left."

"It's about her. Her happiness. Her living her life to its fullest. It's about giving her what she needs."

"And what if what she needs ... is you?"

"No one needs me."

"I think she would disagree with that."

"It doesn't matter. This isn't something that I can ask her to do."

“What isn’t?”

“The endless recovery. I’ve already failed once.”

“You didn’t quite have the motivation then that you do now.”

“I had my career. My—”

“You didn’t have Everly, though. She’s your motivation. She’s the light. The one illuminating the path to the other side. The better side.”

Fucking asshole throwing my words back in my face.

“I won’t use her like that.”

“It’s not using her, Ethan. This is what people who love each other do. They support each other. Stand by each other.”

“What in the hell did she do to deserve standing by a fucking loser like me, huh? She’s not the reason I drink. Why should she have to bear the brunt of all this shit?”

“Because she loves you. We don’t choose who we love. We just ... love them.”

“We can also move on from them. That’s what I’m giving her—the ability to move on.”

“You think it’s going to be that easy?”

“I’m not exactly a fucking prize here, so yeah, I do.”

“You don’t think so, but what does Everly think?”

“She thinks she loves me. She thinks love will heal everything. Newsflash—it won’t. I have to fix this. Me and

only me. And I will not have her waiting around to see if I succeed.”

Or worse, if I crash and burn.

Again.

“And what will not having her around do to you? To your recovery?”

“No, don’t do that. Don’t put that on her. My recovery is mine and mine alone.”

“No one should have to go through things alone.”

“I always have. I can handle it.”

“Can you? Or do you think that maybe that’s why you didn’t succeed the last time?”

“Because I was alone? No. This is all because of my asshole parents. Before, it was what they did to me and now ... ”

I think of Ben. The cancer. The fact that he was my replacement. A better model. Ethan 2.0.

“That’s why this happened. They’re why this happened.”

“You honestly don’t believe that has anything to do with being alone? Feeling unworthy? Unlovable?”

Slamming my fist on the dresser, I shout at Dr. Monroe. “I am all those things! Everly isn’t going to change that.”

“You’re right. She won’t. What she will do, what I want to do, is get to you finally see that those things aren’t true.” Dr. Monroe rises to his feet. “Ethan, you are so much more than

you realize. So much more than your past, your addiction.
You're a good man. A generous man."

I scoff at his very inaccurate description.

"Give me a few more weeks and I'll have you seeing what I see," he says very confidently.

"You want to make a bet on that?"

"You have enough vices already, don't you think?"

He raises an eyebrow at me.

Touché, Doc. Tou-fucking-che.

Chapter 39

Ethan

Two months later...

Therapy.
The key to my recovery.

A place where they want me to spill my guts and blame my mom for my issues. In this case, the blame is legit. I've got mommy issues. Daddy issues, too.

In fact, I have more damn issues than I can count.

The first question Dr. Monroe—Brad—ever asked me was, “What’s the last thing you remember before you woke up in the hospital?”

My answer should have been waking up on my couch in vomit. Or the look on Everly’s face.

The fact that it wasn’t had a pen-tapping-against-the-chin moment for Brad.

Rad Brad.

Bad Brad.

I fucking hate Brad.

I'm also simultaneously grateful to him. While the guy has made me talk about more shit, deal with more shit, learn to live with more shit than any other therapist I've had, saying it's been easy would be a lie. I've yelled at him, shut him out. Fuck, I don't even know how many sessions we had where I didn't even speak. We just sat there, staring at each other.

Yet here we are today. My last session.

The countless hours Brad and I have spent together are coming to a close.

I'm not cured. Far from it. But the daily sessions, those aren't necessary anymore. The demons I fought, the ones that I've learned will always be there, I've also learned how to control them, not let them consume me.

There's still a long road ahead of me. One that I'll be on for the rest of my life. This addiction, this disease, there is no cure for it.

Still, today marks the day.

Sixty days sober.

Leaning forward, I rest my elbows on my knees and wait for the last question that Brad's going to ask me.

I'm not one hundred percent sure what it is going to be, but I'm certain it will be something along the lines of how I'm doing, how do I feel about the things we've talked about over the last month.

Brad smiles at me. “You’ve done well, Ethan.”

I nod at his compliment. I didn’t have a choice. I had to do well if I wanted my life back. The bonus is that I actually do feel better. My head feels clearer. My pain lessened.

Brad opens his mouth to speak again. Here it is. Final question.

Drumroll, please.

“So, what are you going to do about Everly?”

I sit back on the couch, his question hitting me like a ton of bricks.

We don’t talk about Everly.

We did in the beginning. I spilled my pussy guts to him about her and how I feel about her. About all the reasons that I should stay away from her. Then it became too hard. I missed her too much.

As much as I may need to sort through shit when it comes to her, she isn’t the problem. She’s not the reason I drink, not why I’m here.

I am. My family is.

Those are the demons that I live with. The ones I need help conquering.

I told him as much. I told him there would be no talk of Everly. A request that, until today, he adhered to.

So the fact that he’s bringing her up now is quite the fucking blow.

Everly, my ray of sunshine. My everything. She's the one thing through this all that has helped me even keep remotely afloat. At least until I was so bad off that even she couldn't help me.

“What the fuck kind of question is that?” I ask him, stunned.

“A valid one. Your therapy is over. You're sixty days sober. You're on the road to recovery. Don't you think that it's time you finally reach out to her?”

No. No, I don't, Brad.

“I'm never going to be recovered, remember? I'm going to be in a constant state of recovering—you said it yourself. Everly doesn't deserve to have to deal with that. She deserves better.”

“Better than what?”

“Better than me.”

“What's so wrong with you?”

“Oh, I don't know, Doc. How about the fact that I'm a fucking alcoholic.”

“And?”

“What do you mean, and? Isn't that enough?”

“There are lots of people in the world that have issues with addiction. Do they not deserve love?”

“I'm not talking about them. I'm talking about me.”

“So then they do deserve love? Maybe even happiness?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“This isn’t about me. It’s about her. I’m trying to protect her.” I’m off the couch now, pacing around the room. Today was supposed to be easy. The final piece of the puzzle. A celebration. Instead, he hits me with this whammy.

“From what?”

“The things I did. The way I treated her. The ... the possibility of it happening again.”

Work in progress.

That’s what I’ll always be.

Everly deserves someone that’s complete.

“What does she think about that?”

“It doesn’t matter what she thinks.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“No. I pushed her away and never looked back.”

That’s a lie. I look back every day. I think about her every day. The good times, the laughs, the moments when I was the happiest I had ever been in my life. All of it centers around her. I promised myself back then that I would stay away from her. Do what’s best for her.

Brad walks over to his desk. He pulls out a stack of envelopes and extends them to me.

“What the fuck are these?”

“Letters. Sixty letters, to be exact. All from Everly. She wrote you one each day. Asked me to hold onto them. Give them to you when I thought you were ready.”

“I’m still not ready.”

“You’re more ready than you know. You love her, Ethan.”

Well, thank you, captain fucking obvious.

“I know that.”

“She loves you.”

“I know that too.”

Brad shakes his head and laughs.

“What?” I ask.

“You play on a professional sports team. You know how to rely on others in that capacity. You know that alone, you couldn’t win that game, no matter how good you think you are. Yet you can’t seem to accept the fact that life is the same way. It’s okay for you to want a teammate. It’s okay for you to want that person to be Everly. There are wins and losses in everyone’s life, but that doesn’t mean anyone should have to go it alone. It takes a team, a village, a lover, whatever it is that you want, to make it to the other side. That’s for all of us, Ethan. Not just you. You just refuse to accept that.”

“For her. I refuse to accept it for her.”

He nods toward the envelopes in my hand. “Maybe if you read those letters, you’ll see.”

“See what?”

“That it’s okay to need someone. That someone just might need you.”

The stupid timer Brad sets each day on his phone goes off. He extends his hand to me. I place mine in his and shake it.

“I, uh ... I don’t think I could have done this without you,” I tell him.

“And I don’t think you can continue on without her.” He shrugs. “I’m proud of you, Ethan. The progress you’ve made. The things you’ve overcome. I’m always here if you need me.”

“I appreciate it, Doc.”

Letters in hand, I leave his office for the final time.

It’s time to start my road to recovery.

On my own.

My first stop: my parents’ house.

Chapter 40

Ethan

I stand on the front porch of the very modest home. It's much larger than the apartment I recall living in as a kid. Better maintained too.

It's nothing fancy, but it looks like a good home. A family home. One that I would have loved to grow up in.

Those are the thoughts that I have to quit dwelling on though. Regardless of what my childhood was, my present is fucking amazing. No one, least of all them, can take away what I've built, who I've become.

I'm Ethan fucking Ambrose, and I'll be damned if I allow myself to ever forget that again.

After dozens of sessions with Dr. Monroe, I've learned that they are the problem, not me. I didn't do anything to push them away or make them leave me. They were the ones that couldn't handle it.

And Ben?

Ben is just as innocent in all this as I am.

For the first time in my life, though, I feel like I have family. I have Ben. And while I can't be his donor, I sure as fuck can be his brother.

I slide my sweaty palms against the denim on my legs. Who knew that facing a ten-year-old could be so tough? They're unjaded, accepting. This should be a piece of cake, and yet it takes every ounce of strength that I have to raise my hand and knock on the door.

"Ethan," my dad says when he opens the door. The look on his face tells me that he's surprised to see me. I'm sure he is after the therapy session that I forced him and my mom to endure a few weeks back.

I needed to tell them. I needed to get off my chest what they did and how it affected me. While they were both very apologetic, they weren't filled with regret. For whatever reason, they still believed they did the right thing. So I blasted them. Told them to go to hell, that I don't want them in my life anyway, and that frankly, I was better off without them. Had it not been for their shitty parentage and their abandonment, I wouldn't be where I am.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not going to thank them for being assholes, but I sure as fuck am not going to let it affect me anymore either.

For all the issues I have, I still made something out of myself. Something better than I ever could have been if they had stayed. That's what I need to focus on. Me. My life. Ben.

Even though they didn't come right out and say it, I know that if not for Ben, they never would have reached out.

Ben doesn't need to know the truth. Not the whole of it, anyway. The kid is enduring enough between the cancer, the treatments. So I spun a version of the truth that I think will be palatable for him, because what he does need is his brother. A brother that will most definitely have his back at all costs.

"I'm here to see Ben," I tell him.

"Don't do this," my dad pleads with me.

There's fear in his eyes. Worry that I'm going to tell Ben the truth, destroy their happy family.

"I won't tell him anything that he doesn't need to know, but he deserves to know he has a brother. He needs all the support he can get."

My father nods in agreement. They may not give a shit about me, but at least they love Ben. Or pretend to.

"Mr. Ambrose?" Ben says as he slowly makes his way to the door.

The new treatment he's on seems to be helping. The one I am footing the bill for. I may not have been a match, I may have fallen apart, but fuck if I was going to let anything happen to him.

"Call me Ethan," I tell him as I crouch down to his level. Looking at him now, the similarities between us are undeniable. The eyes. The way the corner of his mouth crooks up ever so slightly, just like mine.

“What are you doing here ... Ethan?”

He hesitates as he says my name, as though calling me by it is somehow a sign of disrespect. Or maybe the opposite. Maybe to him it's a sign that he's cool. Connected to me in some way. Kid has no idea.

“I was hoping I could talk to you about something,” I tell Ben.

His eyes widen as he nods his head.

“May I come in?”

My eyes leave Ben and look up at my dad. My mom is now standing behind him, her hand covering her mouth.

I'm about to blow this kid's world apart, but I'm hoping it's for the better.

“Show me your room?” I suggest to him.

He nods his head happily and takes my hand, tugging me along behind him.

“This is my room,” he says. “It's not much, but ... ”

“It's great,” I tell him. The pictures of me on the wall cause my heart to constrict. “You're a real fan of mine, huh?”

“The biggest. Are you here from the Make a Wish foundation?”

“What? No. I'm here ... ” I blow out a breath. “I'm here because I have something really important to tell you.”

“What is it?”

I sit down on the small twin bed and pat the space next to me. Ben sits, looking up at me with these big brown eyes.

“I, uh, I know this is going to be hard to believe, but I promise you it’s true.”

I checked. Three times, actually. But it’s true. We’re brothers.

“I’m ... I’m ... ”

“You’re what? Please tell me you’re not going to a different team.”

“No, nothing like that. I’m your brother, Ben.”

Ben’s laughter fills the air. “Did my dad put you up to this?”

“It’s true, man.” I hand him the picture from my pocket. The one of his dad holding me as a little kid. “That’s me. That’s your dad.”

“I don’t understand.”

He doesn’t need to know the sordid details. I wish I didn’t have to tell him any of it. But I knew he would I ask—hell, I would have asked too. So I have my story, and I’m sticking to it. For him.

“Your mom and dad had me when they were really young, and they couldn’t take care of me, so they gave me up for adoption. It wasn’t until you got sick that they came looking for me.”

I glance up at the doorway, our parents standing there. The fearful look in their eyes dissipates when they hear the word

adoption rather than the truth. Abandonment.

I look back to Ben, who just keeps looking between me and our parents, shocked, in denial.

“It’s true,” my dad says. “Ethan is your brother.”

“And you knew? All this time?” Ben says, tears welling in his eyes.

“No,” I tell him. “They didn’t know. Not for sure.”

“How?”

I nod toward the picture he’s still holding. “I look a little different now, don’t ya think?”

I offer him a smile, a touch on his arm, a gentle squeeze.

“You being sick, that’s what made them come looking for me. They wanted to help you. They ... they love you, Ben.”

As I say it, I expect the words to sting, but they don’t. Fucking Brad and his therapy; it actually helped.

“I just wanted you to know the truth. I wanted to be the one to tell you. I want to ... I want to be your brother. If you’ll have me.”

Ben looks at me, then our parents, then back to me.

“This is for reals?”

“Thousand percent,” I tell him.

His little body jumps into my unsuspecting arms and hugs me.

“This is the coolest. I have a brother. And he’s Ethan Ambrose.” Ben pulls back. “Can I tell all my friends?”

I chuckle. “You can tell whoever you want.”

Sure, that means that my past might come out, and I might have a lot of explaining to do, but fuck if I care. Especially not now, seeing the look on his face.

Ben rises from the bed and begins to pace the room, his hands on his head.

“You have to meet Timmy, he’s the best. He loves you almost as much as I do. And Tristan. He’s not going to believe this.” He pauses, turns to me. “Can I invite them over now?”

“I, uh, I kind of had a really long day today. Could we maybe just hang out for a while—the two of us?”

“Can we get ice cream?”

“We can get whatever you want, as long as it’s okay with your parents,” I say.

“Our parents,” he corrects me.

I just nod, because there are a million things that he doesn’t understand, but that phrase will never be an accurate one.

His parents concede, clearly grateful that I didn’t blow their secret out of the water, and allow me to take Ben to the local ice cream store where we don’t need to call Timmy or Tristan because they are already there. As are several other kids from Ben’s school. All of whom look like they’ve been sucker punched the minute Ben and I step inside.

When Ben tells them I'm his brother?

Poor little Timmy faints.

The nice part is that Ben does all the talking. I just get to sit back and watch as he tells them all the things we are going to do together. His excitement is boundless.

And when I finally drop him off at home, the hug he gives me is probably the single best thing I have ever experienced in my life.

The words "I love you" fall so easily from his lips, and I wonder how he could love me when he didn't even really know me. Then I realize that the feeling is mutual.

Love doesn't have a time stamp on it.

It just ... is.

When I make it back to my place, I settle onto the couch with Baker at my side, the stack of letters that Brad said are from Everly sitting on the coffee table before me.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do with these?" I ask Baker. The dog. I'm talking to the goddamn dog. Worse, the look on his face is answer enough. Even he thinks I'm being a pussy about this.

"Don't judge me," I say, earning me a head tilt from Baker.

Luckily, letter one is simple enough. She hopes I'm doing well. She's thinking about me. She misses me.

If only she knew how much I fucking miss her.

The only good thing that has ever happened to me.

Some of the letters are funny. Some break my goddamn heart. Most are just telling me about her day, her life, as though she is trying to make sure I knew that I am still a part of her. That we are still us.

The more recent letters are tougher to read. They talk about me, us, my addiction. How scared she is. How much she misses me. How I'm worth it.

It's the last one, though, that tears me apart.

Ethan,

I can't believe it's been sixty days since I've seen you, let alone spoken to you. We weren't together long, but even in that short time I grew to depend on you. On your presence in my life.

You always told me that I deserve better than you. So, I tried. I tried to find better.

His name is Nate. He's a doctor. He's sweet and handsome. Funny, too.

What he isn't, though, is you.

One date is all it took to know that, regardless of what you're trying to convince me of, there is no one better than you. Not for me. Not now. Not ever.

If we can't be together for your sake, I can live with that.

What I can't live with is you doing it for my sake. Because what I need is you.

I don't give a damn about the demons. Never have, never will. I'll be at your side and slay them with you.

I love you, Ethan. That will never change.

Love,

Everly

I set the letter down and run my hand through my hair.

Everly. Everly. Everly.

What in the hell am I going to do with you?

Chapter 41

Everly

“**Y**ou swear you gave them to him?” I ask Dr. Monroe, Brad, Ethan’s therapist.

“I swear,” he tells me.

It’s the first straight answer I’ve ever gotten from the man.

Obviously, he could never give me any details on Ethan’s therapy sessions, nor would I ever want to invade his privacy like that. All I ever asked, ever wanted to know, was if Ethan was okay.

That, and if he gave him the letters I would hand-deliver daily.

Until today, his answer had been a resounding no. That meant that up until now, either Ethan wasn’t ready for them, or he had flat out refused to accept them.

According to Dr. Monroe, he gave Ethan the letters last week. All sixty of them.

A whole week he's had them in his possession, and still I haven't heard from him.

Not a thank you. Not an I miss you.

Crickets.

"That doesn't sound good."

Glancing up, I find Tripp standing in my doorway.

"Sorry. It's fine. Just ... "

"Ethan?"

I nod.

"That's actually why I'm here. I have a meeting with him in an hour. I wasn't sure if you wanted to be around or not."

I offer Tripp a soft smile. "Thanks for the warning."

He nods.

"Is him being a client here going to be an issue for you?"

Yes.

"No."

I just don't quite know why he's a client still. Is it still a condition of him being a Railcat, which I'm not even sure he still is?

Tripp has kept quiet about anything going on with Ethan. In fact, this is the first time that he's even mentioned him to me.

Without even realizing it, I begin packing up my things.

"Clearly."

There's a gentle smile on Tripp's face. I stop mid-shove of my notebook into my bag.

"It won't be. Things are just raw right now. I appreciate the heads up, really. And I promise, this is the only time I'll—"

"Everly, you don't have to explain it to me. I get it. And I don't give a damn if you ever look at the guy again."

That's the problem. I do. I want to see him. I want to hold him. I want him.

I understood him pushing me away during his recovery, that was understandable. He needed the time to process everything he'd been through. He wanted to recover, in peace, without having to worry about me or anyone else. He needed to do it alone.

All that, while I hate it, I can accept.

This? Now? Him refusing to reach out when I've been doing nothing but proving I'm still here for him every single day, with every single letter?

That is a little harder to swallow.

"It'll be fine. Things will go back to normal before you know it," I assure him.

What is normal anymore, though? For the last six months, my life has been consumed by Ethan Ambrose. Good. Bad. Everything in between. It's all him. Us.

God, do I miss the us.

The laughter. The support. The understanding without having to speak.

While Ethan was busy recovering, I was too.

Things were said, damaging words that, while I know they came from a dark place, not the man that I love, still hurt. I knew that if I wanted to be a part of his life, I too had to heal, to learn. Al-Anon meetings became a regular for me. I met men and women like me. People who have gone through much worse for much longer and still managed to come out the other side.

I learned about the constant battle. The struggle that Ethan will have to go through and some of the best ways to support him through it.

If I want to.

Live and let live.

I have to live my own life, be my own person, and hope he wants to come along for the ride. Hope that I'm enough to break through the desire of drinking.

I have that hope. Hope for him. For me. For us.

I have a belief that we're strong enough, because even when things were bad, there was still a whole hell of a lot of good too.

As I make my way down the street, I catch a glimpse of Ethan walking toward the Advantage building.

I duck behind a building so he won't see me.

I watch him stroll down the street. There's no hat to hide his identity. If anything, he's walking taller, prouder. He looks healthy. Handsome as hell too. But even at his worst, he was gorgeous.

It's the healthy part that captivates me. It's not the taut muscles, or the trim yet muscular build that I'm referring to. It's the look in his eyes. A look much brighter, much happier. It's the lack of dark circles under his eyes. A true indication of just how much he was hurting, not sleeping—drinking.

Healthy and happy.

And he wants no part of me.

I sigh. A single tear slides down my cheek as I accept the fact that what we have ... it's over. That maybe in order for him to heal, it has to be.

And I have to be okay with that.

I have to live for me.

Chapter 42

Ethan

“**T**here he is,” Tripp says as I walk into his office.

No sooner do the elevator doors open on the floor that houses Advantage Player than my eyes gravitate directly to Everly’s office. Her very dark, very empty office.

In all honesty, I’m not ready to talk to her. I’m not sure what I want to say.

Hell, I’m not even a hundred-percent sure where I want to go from here with her.

My instinct has me wanting to stay away—for her sake.

My head knows that if she knew that, she would hate me for it. It’s her life. Her decision.

My heart, that tricky son of a bitch, wants every fucking piece of her regardless of the fact that we may damn well implode.

“You don’t have to sound so happy to see me,” I tell him. “I’ve made your life a living hell these last few months.”

Tripp smiles. “True. But come on, we both know that even bad press is good press.”

“That’s why I’m here. I, uh ... I want to take the bad shit and make something out of it.”

I may not know what to do about Everly, but between the therapy and the sobriety, I sure know what the fuck I want to do in life. The stamp I want to leave on it.

“I’m all ears,” Tripp says, motioning for me to sit.

I take the seat opposite his desk.

“First I need to know—”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“I’m not discussing Everly with you.”

“I just want know how she is.”

“Then call her. Visit her. Do whatever you want, just don’t ask me about her.”

Fair enough.

It’s also the same reaction that I got from Maddox.

“Okay. Well, let’s get down to business then.”

Tripp is silent, doing nothing more than nodding his head as I speak about the causes I want to support rather than the endorsements I want to do. The things that I want to bring awareness to. He’s not saying no, he’s listening, so at least there’s that.

The ideas I'm offering up aren't exactly money -generating, but I don't want them to be. I have money. What I don't have is purpose. These things, they give me purpose, a reason to stay sober. That, and Everly and Ben.

I know, I have to do it for myself. I have to want it for me. But hell, isn't it always easier if you have a reason behind it? Something to drive you? Before it used to be my anger, my need to get back at my parents and prove to them that I don't need them.

Now?

Now I need to prove that I'm worthy of Everly and Ben. I want to help the millions who struggle with addiction, just like me. I want to help kids that suffer, just like Ben.

So yeah, it's for me, to help me be the man I know I can be. Yeah, that should be incentive enough. But when you add in the two of them, it makes the reward of it all that much sweeter.

"So?" I ask Tripp.

His face is unreadable. I'm not sure if he's proud, or happy, or pissed.

"I support whatever you want to do," he says.

"But you don't agree with it."

"It doesn't matter what I agree with. It matters ... "

"It matters to me. Come on, Tripp. Honestly, what do you think?"

“I think you’re not going to make me a fucking dime, but I’m goddamn proud to be your agent.”

“I’ll up your salary.”

Tripp shakes his head. “Damn right you will. But seriously, I love it. I’ll get to work on all of it ASAP.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it.”

We hammer out a few details, a literal few because I have no fucking clue what getting all this shit up and running is going to entail.

Before I leave the office, Tripp stops me.

“I almost forgot,” he says.

He hands me an envelope.

The last time someone handed me an envelope, they basically put my heart in my hands. The typed print on the front of this one says this is different though.

“It’s an invitation,” Tripp explains. “The athletic company still wants you at the face of it. They would like you to speak at their event next week. I didn’t want to pressure you but ... ”

“I’ll do it.”

Chapter 43

Ethan

I've spent the past week trying to figure out what to do about Everly, her letters, us.

The overwhelming thought in my head is still, despite all the therapy, that I don't deserve her—never will. And she doesn't deserve to have to deal with this never-ending uphill battle that I'm on. Who wants that? Who wants the worry of wondering if I'm going to slip up again? If this time maybe I'll actually drink myself to death?

Not that I have any intention to. Fuck, I don't even want a drink. Not now, not since I got my head right about my childhood, my parents. Then again, I thought the same thing two years ago.

God only knows what could set me off next time.

Why put her through that?

The answer: because she loves me. Because the bad doesn't scare her. Because for some reason, we can't seem to live without each other.

The pain she admitted to in her letters, the missing me, is one hundred percent reciprocated.

So I thought about it. Made some pretty pricey calls to Dr. Monroe.

Who am I to argue with the woman?

If she's willing, I am too. I'll do everything in my damn power to be the man she deserves.

The problem is that I've been too much of a chicken shit to call her. Fuck, even to text her. I don't know what to say or how to have the conversation that I know we need to have. Hell, I don't even want to have it, if I'm honest. I would much prefer for things to just go back to the way they were.

Why can't it? At least for a little while. After all we've been through, why can't we just have one night?

Like tonight.

The Bright Star Gala is tonight. The event that I'm not only the face of but also the surprise speaker at.

Maybe it will work, or maybe she'll slam the door in my face. It's worth a shot though.

Now, as I stand here in front of her door, I regret not calling first. Not texting to let her know I was stopping by. Because as I stand here, I realize ... what in the fuck am I going to do if she already has a date?

That's why, when the door opens, my smile is hesitant. Excited as I am to lay eyes on her for the first time in months,

I'm terrified.

“What are you doing here?” Maddox asks when he sees me on the opposite side of the open door.

He folds his arms across his chest and stands there as though he's Everly's personal bodyguard. For my sake, I hope that's all he fucking is. The memory of his protectiveness over her, the way he tried to keep me away ... It's got my mind racing and wondering, what if? What if they're together? What if she realizes that a guy like Maddox is way better for her than some asshole like me?

She'd be right. No doubt. But ... fuck.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

I don't want to, but if he wants to put my mind at ease, that would be fucking great.

“None of your business.”

He's right, it's not, but fuck if I'm not curious as hell.

“I'm not looking to fight. I just want to see Everly.”

“She's busy.”

“Just get her,” I tell him.

“No. Not after what you put her through.”

I hate that he obviously knows what I put her through, how she feels. I hate that she opened up to him when I want it to be me that she does those things with. I sigh, resigning myself to the fact that she tried. I was the one that kept her away, and I

sure as fuck deserve the gut punch of her having moved on because of how I treated her.

“Maddox, who is it?” Everly’s voice calls from the background.

“No one,” Maddox replies.

Over his shoulder, I can see Everly appear.

“Ethan?”

“Hey, sunshine.”

She looks gorgeous standing there in the red wrap dress. It’s shorter than I would have pictured her wearing to an event like this. Hell, any event, considering she’s all about being professional.

“What are you doing here?”

“Leaving,” Maddox says, blocking the doorway.

“Move, Maddox,” Everly orders him.

With an under-his-breath curse, Maddox steps out of the way.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I say, the words falling out before I can stop them. Not that I should stop them—they’re the truth. It’s just not how I wanted this conversation to start.

“Thank you,” she says with a small smile on her face. “What are you doing here?”

“I know it’s a little last minute, but I was hoping you would be my date tonight.”

“Your date?”

I nod.

“Two months I don’t hear from you, and now you show up on my doorstep and ask me on a date. Expect me to be your date.”

“I don’t expect anything from you. It’s just a question. One that you’re welcome to say no to.”

One she probably should say no to. Words that I think but don’t speak, because let’s face it, she would argue them.

She steps closer.

“Do you have any idea how much I want to say to you? How much we need to talk about?”

“I do. I just thought that it might be easier to delve into if we got back on the right track first.”

“The right track?”

“I thought that maybe it might be easier to just ease back into things. Talk a bit, have a few laughs, before we do the heavy hitting.”

“That’s what you want? To do the heavy hitting?”

“No, not really,” I say with a sheepish grin. “You’re worth swinging for though.”

“And you’re just so sure of yourself that you came over here expecting me to just be your date?”

“No. Not at all. I expected you to slam the door in my face. Tell me to go to hell. I deserve it. What I am sure of though is

us. Of this connection we have. And that means that no matter how many times you slam the door in my face, I won't give up. I'll just keep trying."

"Fine. Let's go," she says, grabbing her purse and walking past me to the elevator.

"You're kidding me, right?" Maddox shouts after her.

"Lock up when you leave," she tells him.

The limo in front of her building doesn't take her by surprise this time. In fact, she stands, waiting for me to open the door for her.

"My lady," I say, doing just that.

"Thank you," she says, sliding into the limo.

I round the vehicle and slide in the other side. Maximum restraint in full effect, I keep my distance from her.

Something tells me that we're going to be okay, but she isn't going to make it easy for me. Rightfully so.

"How are you?" she asks as the limo pulls away from the curb. Her eyes are on the window and the buildings passing by.

"Better."

It's a simple answer. Truthful, too. I'm better, but I'm not fixed. I'm better, but I'm not great.

"You look good," she says, still refusing to look at me.

"Nothing compared to you."

“Don’t flirt. I’m not ready for flirting.”

“Noted.”

“I’m not trying to—”

“I get it. You don’t have to explain.”

“I don’t think you do.” She turns to me, tears welling in her eyes. Fuck, I hate the sight of that. “I don’t care that you pushed me away. I don’t care that you needed time and space. I don’t care that I’ve had to sit here wondering and worrying and missing you for the past sixty days.”

“Then what is it?”

“You. I’m trying to protect you. Because all I want is to jump into your arms and pick up right where we left off. But I don’t think that’s what you need. Or maybe it is. I don’t know. I think that’s the hardest part.”

“What is?”

“Not knowing. Not knowing what you need or how you need me to be.”

“I just need you to be you. Nothing more. Nothing less. I shouldn’t have bombarded you like this. Not tonight. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. And you’re not bombarding me. I want to be here with you. I just ... There’s so much to say.”

“You have no idea.”

“Maybe you’re right though.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

She lets out a small laugh. “Maybe we do need to just ... be.”

“No one else I would rather have by my side—ever.”

“Can I hug you?”

It’s my turn to laugh.

“Sunshine, you can do whatever you want to me.”

No sooner do the words leave my mouth than she’s across the limo, arms wrapped around me. I can feel the tears trickling down her face and landing on my shirt. I hold her tightly, my forehead resting on her shoulder as I inhale the sweet scent of her.

God, I missed this. Her. The comfort and ease of just being with her.

She pulls back and looks me dead in the eye. “Nobody leaves. Ever. Understood?”

“Understood.”

We ride the rest of the way to the Bright Star Gala just like this. Wrapped in each other’s arms, tear-stained faces, her body pressed against mine.

No place else I would rather be.

When the limo comes to a stop, Everly takes a moment to touch up her makeup and compose herself.

Good thing too, because the moment the door opens, the flashes of lights from the cameras are blinding.

I do my best to shield her from them, but there's no hope. It is what it is, and she doesn't seem to mind.

The moment her arm loops through mine, the barrage of questions begins.

Who is she? What are we? Where have I been?

I hold up my hand to silence the group. "I promise you'll all get your story, just not tonight. Tonight is about the kids, not me. So please, let's focus on what we're here for, not who is here."

Then just to give them a little something—okay, it's for me too—I press my lips to Everly's cheek before leading her into the event space.

"You certainly know how to make an entrance," she says.

"Didn't have anything to do with me. It's all the beautiful woman on my arm."

She smiles. "We're going to be okay."

"I hope so, because two months without you was too damn long."

"Ethan, Everly," Tripp's voice fills the lobby as he makes his way over to us, his wife at his side. "You two are making headlines already."

Linnie rolls her eyes. "How about you just say hi and wish them well and quit looking at them as a promo?"

"Force of habit," Tripp says.

"Everly stays out of the spotlight," I tell him.

“Everly will do whatever she wants,” Everly informs me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, agreeing, because let’s face it, when it comes to her, I have no other choice.

Tripp puts his arm around my shoulder. “Let’s head to our table.”

Chapter 44

Everly

There's so much to talk about. So much to figure out.
Right now, none of it matters.

All that matters is Ethan. Me. Us.

All that matters is our love.

The connection we share is still there. It's why, despite the way he popped back into my life no more than an hour ago, we can be here just like this, smiling and happy. Because we're stronger together.

Still, when we step out of the limo and get accosted by the media, I'm more than impressed with the calm and collected way Ethan handles things. Especially the questions about his sobriety.

He doesn't answer them. He focuses on the event at hand. The charity, his involvement, the kids. That's what's important.

Before I can compliment him, Tripp is on his way over with a beaming smile on his face. I know that look. I know what he's seeing. Press. A narrative. Opportunity.

"You handled that well," I tell Ethan when I finally have him back at my side.

"So did you."

"Pretty sure I'm going to be squinting or cross eyed in the photos."

"And still, you'll be the most beautiful woman here."

Together we walk into the ballroom, Tripp and Linnie behind us. All eyes are on us. I can see the scrutiny. The questions. All of which fall dead on their lips as Ethan seems to transform into someone else and begins shaking hands like a politician, greeting people and introducing me. He's working the room with perfection.

"You're really good at this," I tell him when we reach our table.

"What can I say, you found the way to my heart—helping kids."

Kids like him.

Maddox is at the table already with Chelle. There's a scowl on his face and a smile on hers.

I didn't take Ethan's time away lightly.

Just like he had to, I came to terms with his addiction and what it would mean for me and us. The possibility of relapses.

The possibility of pain and hurt from the ramifications of those relapses. I talked to Chelle at length about it. I made pro and con lists. I studied addiction and recovery at length.

I made an informed decision.

One that, in all honesty, my heart had already made for me.

Whatever I have to go through with Ethan, it's worth it. He's worth it. We're worth it.

While I'm not being naive about the constant struggle this will be for him, or for us for that matter, but I do know that he's worth it. I know the heart of him. The broken pieces he never wanted anyone to see. I know the way he makes my heart feel whole when no one else ever has.

The fact that he's standing here next to me ... I hope to hell that means he knows it now too.

The tension between Maddox and Ethan is palpable. Okay, mostly directed at Ethan by way of Maddox.

Ethan pulls out my chair and I take a seat, both of us ignoring the looks from Maddox. Dinner is about to begin, but first come the speeches. Just like Ethan told the reporters, this is what tonight is about. This is what matters.

Yolanda makes an introduction.

The head of the children's foundation speaks.

Then the announcement comes.

Ethan Ambrose will be taking the mic.

My heart races in my chest. Is he ready for this? Is the world ready for this?

“Did you know about this?” I whisper to him before he rises to his feet.

“I asked for it.”

As though he needs it for luck, he presses a soft kiss to my cheek. “I love you, sunshine.”

Tears well in my eyes, and I haven’t even heard what the man has to say yet.

Ethan heads to the front of the room, the audience clapping as he makes his way to the stage.

“Thank you, everyone. You have no idea how happy I am to be here. For several reasons. Like so many kids out there, I was put up for adoption by my parents. Unfortunately, things didn’t go quite the way anyone would have liked, and I spent more than my fair share of time bouncing from foster home to foster home until I finally aged out of the system. Being a kid with a fair shot at life is hard enough. Any additional struggles can destroy a child’s future. That’s what I love so much about Bright Star and what they stand for. They want to help kids overcome those hardships, learn to cope with the disappointments that life brings. They want to make the world a better place by starting where it counts—with children. They are our future, and it’s up to us to do right by them.”

A round of applause fills the room.

“Many of you may have noticed that I kind of dropped off the face of the earth recently. Unlike the kids that Bright Star helps, I didn’t have that guidance. Instead, I had a bottle of whiskey and a hell of a woman at my side. My drinking almost ruined my life. All because I didn’t have the tools I needed to learn how to cope, or the guidance to tell me it’s okay to not be okay. So yeah, this endeavor is personal and close to my heart. I am one of those kids, and my goal is for none of them to have to end up in the position that I did. Thank you for coming tonight and taking part in this amazing event and even more amazing organization. Please enjoy your night, and don’t forget to open those pocketbooks.”

The entire room rises to their feet as they clap. I’m not sure if they’re clapping for Bright Star, Ethan’s speech, or Ethan himself, but all three deserve a round of applause as far as I’m concerned.

Ethan walks up to me with a soft smile on his face and his heart on his sleeve. His right hand rests against my cheek as he stares me directly in the eyes.

“You are more of an addiction than any alcohol or any drug. You, Everly, are ... everything. You’re the sunshine to my clouds. You’re the beauty to my beast. You’re the perfect to my mess. You are what gets me through every day. You are why I’m still standing here. I wanted to be better—for us.”

“You are the most perfectly imperfect man I’ve ever met.”

Chapter 45

Ethan

“We should probably talk first,” I say between kisses as Everly and I stumble our way into my condo.

“Talk later. Make-up sex now.”

“I’m a bad influence on you,” I say as she sheds my suit coat off me.

“The worst,” she agrees, her hands undoing my belt.

“Everly,” I groan, knowing damn well that there is a lot of shit that we need to talk about, figure out, deal with before we should be doing this.

“Nobody leaves, Ethan. So whatever has to be said, it can wait. Neither of us are going anywhere.”

It’s a valid point.

Even if it weren’t, the moment her hand touches my dick, I’m done for.

Two months without sex. It was rough. Two months without her, though, was a lot fucking harder.

I'm like a starving man finally getting his fix, and it's better than any damn thing in the world.

After all that I've put her through, I'll be damned if I deny her anything. Especially not when it's something I want more than my next breath.

My hands frame her face as I deepen the kiss. She moans softly as our tongues dance together.

"I need you. Now."

She murmurs the words between frenzied kisses.

"You?" I tease. "Do you have any fucking idea how deprived I am? How I—"

Her fingers run over my cock.

"I think I have an idea," she says.

As much as I want this, my mind can't seem to keep other thoughts from running through my head.

"I'm so sorry, sunshine," I say as her lips press to my neck.

My arms wrap around her body and feel every inch of her that I've been missing these past few months.

"I fucked up. I should never have pushed you away. I ... "

She presses one last kiss to my neck before pulling back and looking me in the eyes.

"Prove it."

"I will. Every day. I—"

“Now, Ethan. Prove it to me now. I don’t need the words. Show me.”

Taking her hand in mine, I lead her to my bedroom.

She’s the only woman that’s ever been in that bed, in my home, in my life for anything besides sex. Hell, the only damn person.

There’s no finesse. Nothing sexy. It’s just us.

I pull the zipper down her dress, my eyes watching intently as it falls to the ground in a pool at her feet.

She’s not wearing a bra. No panties.

Bare.

Naked.

Mine.

“You’re going to be the death of me, sunshine,” I murmur into her hair, my body pressed against hers.

“You’re not going anywhere,” she tells me. “Not until I’ve had my fill.”

I chuckle. “Oh, and when will that be?”

“Never, Ethan. I could never be done with you.”

Words I wanted to hear—needed to more than I realized.

“Back at you, beautiful.”

I press my lips to her shoulder.

“Lie down. Get comfortable. You’re in for a very long night.”

She does as I ask, and fuck if my heart doesn't stop beating at the sight of her lying there before me. It's more than her body or the way that her blonde hair fans around her head—yes, she looks like a fucking angel sent from heaven, but it's more. It's the way in this moment she bares her heart. Her soul. She proves to me that this is real, and even more that I'm forgiven.

That look in her eyes as I shed my clothing is filled with love and happiness.

Completeness.

I smile as I take her in. I smile because she's mine. Because no one else can have her. I smile because, fuck, I can't do anything else when I look at her.

I may have been dealt a shit hand as a kid, but fuck if I wasn't given the world the moment that Everly stepped into my life.

I crawl onto the bed, my body covering hers. Our eyes meet, and they hold the gaze we share.

“Marry me, Everly. You're already my everything, be my wife.”

The words fall from my lips without thought, and I'm not even stunned or bothered by the fact that they do. I mean them. I want it. I want us. No amount of time is going to change that. Nothing that we go through will either.

This connection, our bond, it's forever, whether we want it or not.

“Are you ... Are you serious?”

My lips claim hers, then pull back just as quickly.

“I’m serious. Like, let’s fly to Vegas tomorrow and do it kind of serious.”

“Let’s do it.”

Let’s do it.

Even if we crash, when we crash, we may burn, but those flames will never go away. The wreckage will be removed, and we’ll still be standing on the other side.

My fingers dip between her already-parted thighs, the ones my hips are nestled between. When I find her wet, I smile. Hand on my cock, I line myself up at her entrance and press into her.

The motion is slow, so excruciatingly slow that I’m actually starting to regret my decision to worship her tonight. Am I going to be able to do this? How the fuck am I not going to cum the moment that I bottom out in her.

I’ve been deprived of this, of her, for too long. Way too fucking long.

As I slowly begin to move, I feather her with kisses and soft touches. I whisper promises and I love you’s.

I keep the apologies I want to utter to myself and save them for a different time. For every day for the rest of my life.

I commit her sounds to memory, the way we feel together.

I groan as her nails dig into my biceps as she begs for more.

It's the more that we both love. The spanking, the rough, the hard. The undeniable desire we have to please each other, our bodies always wanting more. Craving it until we explode.

Not tonight.

Tonight, I can't give her what I know she wants, what I want too. Tonight I give us what we need. Slow, emotional, soul-baring sex that feels so good and so right that it makes you want to charge for that release. A form of foreplay, if you will, before the good part.

With Everly, though, all of it is the good part, and I have all night to show her that.

So despite the nails that dig deeper, the plea in her eyes, I keep the slow and steady pace. I make love to her because I do, in fact, love her. More than anything or anyone.

"You're it for me, baby. This is it for me."

My mouth covers her breast, her nipple.

"Ethan!"

My name is a cry of pleasure, her walls tightening around me as she cries out, "Yes!"

The sounds, the feel, the fucking pure unadulterated heaven that is her orgasm milks mine right out of me.

My hips buck, faster and harder than I had allowed them to all night.

"Oh, fuck," Everly says, arching into me and taking what I'm giving her—what she's doing to me.

As my orgasm hits, so does another for her. The room is filled with moans and curses as we ride this pleasure induced haze out—together.

Together.

I smile.

That's what we'll always be.

It's what we've always been.

Chapter 46

Everly

My eyes flutter open. The sun is peeking through the curtains, and Ethan is next to me, arm under his head, sleeping peacefully. More peaceful than I have ever seen him before.

I would like to think it's because of me, because we're together again, but I know it's more than that. It's the fact that he's rid himself of his demons. The alcohol too.

"I said and did a lot of shit things."

His voice is soft and sleep filled.

"It doesn't matter," I tell him.

"It does. I hurt you. At the least you deserve an apology, but really, I owe you an explanation."

"You were drunk. You—"

"I was trying to hurt you. I was trying to push you away." He rises, adjusting himself so he's on his side, head resting on his

hand. “You’re too damn stubborn though. No matter what I did, you wouldn’t go.”

“You thought everyone was going to leave. I wasn’t going to be one of those people.”

“I know. That’s why I had to push harder and harder. I knew there had to be a breaking point. Fuck if you would break though.”

“I never left. I may have walked out of the building, but my head and my heart were always with you.”

“As were mine.” He lies on his back. He smiles. “The second night I was there, I started to hallucinate from the withdrawals.”

“That must have been awful.”

“Actually, looking back, it’s kind of amusing. But then? Yeah. I kept seeing you. And someone was trying to keep you from me. Hurting you in the process. Yes, I know now that was me and my fucked-up head trying to process it, but the orderly that was helping me was a great punching bag instead.”

“What?”

“I, uh, I may have attacked him because I thought he was hurting you.”

“Oh, my God. Ethan.”

“He’s fine. Really. We talked. I just ... The point is, the idea of you being hurt is the most terrifying feeling in the world to

me. Knowing that I'm the one that hurt you?"

Ethan shakes his head.

"I was hurt. But I healed too. The moment you showed up at my door."

"Yeah? Are you sure you weren't wishing it was Dr. Nate?"

"You read that, huh?"

"I read all of them. Repeatedly."

"Nothing happened. It was one—"

"You don't owe me an explanation."

"Maybe not, but I want to. Nothing happened. Not so much as a kiss. We went to dinner, but ... You've ruined me, you know."

"Ruined you?"

"Yep, ruined me for all other men. Not a single one of them can compare to you."

Ethan puffs out his chest. "Damn straight."

I slap his bare chest playfully. "That being said ... "

"I don't like how that sounds."

"Last night was very emotional, and I ... "

"You what, sunshine?"

"I won't hold you to anything you said. Or ... asked."

"Are you referring to my poorly timed proposal?"

"It wasn't poorly timed, it was perfect."

“It wasn’t, but it was heartfelt. I mean it, Everly. I want to marry you.”

“I want that too.”

Knowing the proposal was real is more than enough. The when of it doesn’t matter. We have our whole lives to take that step, but the one that we need to take today involves heavy hitting and hearts on our sleeves.

That’s exactly what we do as we lie in bed, fingers intertwined. We talk. We say the things we’re afraid to, ask the questions we don’t want to.

He tells me about the rehab program, the therapy sessions, the long road to recovery. He reminds me more times than I can count how his recovery is never-ending, how he’ll never be cured.

All of which I already know and accept. Things that I reassure him of.

He tells me about Ben. The smile on the little boy’s face when he found out his brother is a famous baseball player. His favorite player, nonetheless.

We lie there talking and hashing things out for what seems like forever. The one constant in it all: us. Neither of us wants to let go. Neither of us wants to stop fighting.

We are together.

It’s not going to be easy and it’s not going to be perfect.

We can be perfectly imperfect—together.

Epilogue

Ethan

A year later...

The locker room is abuzz. Champagne is being sprayed around, the guys are hooting and hollering.

Winning the World Series once is a dream come true.

There are no fucking words.

“You coming out with us tonight, man?” Levi Woods, third baseman, asks. It was his homerun in the sixth inning that put us ahead, and my amazing pitching that kept us there.

“Nah, not tonight.”

Tonight I have plans. Big plans.

I exit the locker room and give a handful of interviews before making my escape.

Everly’s waiting just outside the stadium.

Her smile makes today’s win all that much better.

I scoop her up in my arms, hers immediately wrapping around my neck.

“Congratulations, baby,” she says before pressing a kiss to my lips.

“I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“You could have, but it wouldn’t have been as much fun.”

She’s right about that. Having her by my side has made everything better. From the recovery to the season to the endorsement with Active All-Stars. Something I still don’t know how in the hell she got me into, but I’m grateful as shit.

I set her down on the ground and look at the people behind her. My dad, and more importantly, Ben.

It’s been a year, but honestly, I still have no use for my parents. Not for my father who keeps trying, or my mother who tries to distance herself.

I’m okay with it. With not having them in my life. Hell, it’s been like that for years. Decades. What I wouldn’t accept was not having Ben in my life.

That’s why I partnered with Be the Match. To help gather donors for Ben and other kids like him. That single endorsement brought in more donors than they ever thought possible. The people banding behind me and Ben were astounding.

But they did, despite the fact that I ended up in a rehab facility. Maybe because of it. I’m not sure.

What mattered most was the fact that we found a donor for Ben. That the donor came through, and Ben is on the road to recovery.

And he's standing right here.

"That was so cool," he tells me, before rattling off every single one of his favorite plays at top speed.

He's right. It is pretty fucking cool.

Even cooler that he and Everly are here with me.

My dad offers me a "great game," which I happily accept, just like I would from any fan. Even he can't ruin my mood today.

"Thanks for bringing Ben," I tell him.

"He was thrilled you asked."

"You ready, man?" I ask, giving his shoulder a squeeze.

"Ready for what?"

"Our celebration. Can't win the World Series without a huge celebration."

"I can go?" He turns to look at his dad, our dad, to see if it's okay. He nods, giving Ben the answer he was looking for.

"You can go," he tells him.

Ben runs into my arms. "Let's celebrate."

I look at my dad. "I'll bring him home tomorrow. Around noon?"

"See you then. Oh, and Ethan?"

“Yeah?”

“For what it’s worth? I’m proud of you,” he tells me.

His words may not hold a lot of value with me, but there’s definitely a small piece of me that likes hearing it. Knowing that the man who thought I wasn’t worth anything sees just how damn good I am. How good I turned out in spite of them.

Ben, Everly, and I head back to my place.

I planned an awesome night—at least, I think it’s an awesome night. Hopefully, Ben does too.

Everly was in on it; her job was very important.

If we win, she calls Thurston and everything gets put into place. If we lose? She needed to order pizza and ice cream with lots of cookie dough and peanut butter cups in it. Then win or lose, she better have something Railcat red on beneath that jersey.

Seeing my name emblazoned on the back of it still makes me smile like a fool after all this time.

Some of the guys are joining us. Fox and his family. Slade—if he doesn’t find a woman on the way to my place, at least. And Maddox.

Who the fuck knew, out of all these guys, that Maddox would end up being my best friend? I think in part it’s because of Everly, so he can make sure that I don’t hurt her. I’m grateful for that. But he doesn’t have to worry. I’ll never hurt her again. Not for anything in the world.

“You okay?” Everly asks, covering my hand with hers as we drive back to our house.

That’s right. Our house.

The condo held too many memories—bad ones, deplorable ones.

After rehab, after making things right with Everly, I decided we needed a fresh start. That we should put some roots down.

So I did.

We did.

We found a house just outside the city. It’s tucked away in a wooded area, secluded. Great for skinny dipping in the inground pool we had installed.

It’s still close enough for practice and games and Everly’s job, but it’s far enough out that we don’t feel like we’re stuck in the city. Instead, we feel like we’re home.

“I’m Ethan Ambrose, I’m perfect,” I tell her, a shit-eating grin on my face.

“How could I forget?”

She laughs, and my heart swells at the sound of it. Call me a pussy, call me whatever you want, but fuck if that isn’t the best sound in the world. Okay, second best. The best is when she moans out my name during sex.

I glance over at her, suddenly regretting asking my little brother to spend the night tonight.

After the year he's had, we've had, he deserves this as much as I do.

The drive home takes a little longer than it should so I can give everyone time to get there.

When we pull in the drive, I'm pleased with how everything came together.

Lights, balloons, music.

Ben's eyes widen as he steps into the backyard.

"Wow," he says, standing there gawking and taking it all in.

When he notices some of the people, my teammates, he begins to stammer. "That's ... And that's ... "

"It is," I tell him. "They're our friends."

"Friend might be too strong of a word," Maddox says, walking up next to us.

I shake my head and his hand at the same time.

"Maddox, this is Ben. Ben, this is—"

"Maddox Prescott. You're my favorite player," Ben tells him.

"Wait. I thought I was your favorite?" I ask, only slightly devastated by Ben's revelation.

Next to me, Everly laughs. Maddox too.

"Let's see what your brother has around this place for me to sign for you."

Maddox gives me a wink and walks away with Ben.

I turn to Everly, who still looks amused by Ben's comment.

"It's not funny," I tell her.

"It's a little funny," she says, putting her fingers an inch apart before bursting out laughing.

"I just can't win," I say.

"Awe, poor baby." Everly wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me close. "You're my favorite."

"Well, yeah, but that's because I give you multiple orgasms. I'm talking about being the best baseball player here."

She rolls her eyes. "You'll be his favorite again as soon as the others aren't around."

"I better be."

"Come on, let's mingle," she says, referring to the party that's in full effect.

"Nah."

"Nah? This was your idea."

"There's booze and women and music. The party is great, everyone will have a blast. They don't need me here."

"What if we need you?"

"That's kind of what I was hoping for."

My lips slant over hers. In fact, it's the whole reason I texted Maddox and asked him to entertain Ben for me for a little while. Just long enough to get a real celebration with Everly in.

As we kiss, I maneuver her backward until we reach the pool house. Just as I'm about to step us inside, I pause.

“Did you say we?”

Everly nods.

“As in you and ... ”

She lowers her hand to her stomach.

Fuck.

A million emotions swarm me. Each one hitting harder than the one before.

“A baby?”

“Our baby.”

Our baby. I'm going to be a dad.

“Are you okay with that?” she asks me.

If someone had asked me that question a year ago, I would have laughed in their faces. A wife and kid? No fucking way I would be okay with that.

Each day with Everly makes me want those things more and more.

“I'm more than okay with it. I'm Ethan Ambrose, and you, Everly Ambrose, are the best thing that ever fucking happened to me.”

About L.M. Reid

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L.M. Reid is a reader, writer, and lover of all things romance.

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