



NICOLE  
GUY'S  
DON'T  
WIN

MICALEA SMELTZER

**NICE GUYS DON'T WIN**

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## Epilogue

Also by Micalea Smeltzer

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## **BLURB**

### Nice Guys Don't Win

When I agreed to be his roommate, I had no way of knowing that Cole Anderson was one of my father's star players.

Having transferred to Aldridge University for my junior year, I wasn't familiar with anyone on campus.

If there's one rule I've always been supposed to follow it's don't date a basketball player.

Cole is different, though, and I don't want to stay away.

But when he finds out I'm the coach's daughter I might not have any say in the matter.

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**COLE**

I THINK I'm going to commit murder.

“What do you mean you can't live with me? I already signed the lease. I can't back out now. Fuck, man, I can only afford this place with you paying half the rent.”

Teddy, one of my good friends, scratches the back of his head giving me a sheepish smile. “Yeah, well, you see. My parents were going to be paying for it, not me, and I kinda fucked up and they're cutting me off. Apparently, they think I'll be less of a headache and pain in their ass if I have to live on campus. Something about not partying and fucking everything that moves. Like are they kidding, that's *worse* on campus, but when I tried to tell them that they thought I was just bullshitting them.”

I stand frozen, taking in his long-winded explanation. I don't care about his excuses, all that matters is I'm moving into my new place *today* and I can't afford it without him.

*What the fuck am I going to do?*

“Teddy.” His name comes out as a growl, and he must realize I'm *this* close to sucker punching him because he shuts up. For a second at least, then he's back to running his mouth. It's the only thing he's good at besides baseball.

“Look, man, I'm sorry. Believe me. I don't like dropping this on you now.”

And by now, he means when I'm unloading my shit from the back of my old pickup truck. The run-down black Chevy has seen better days—like back in the 80s. Teddy's Porsche 911 Turbo in a cobalt blue looks extremely out of

place beside it.

“Please tell me you have a goddamn plan in place and a replacement for your sorry ass.”

“Um...” He rubs the side of his head. “No.”

“You have to be fucking kidding me.”

“Shit, man. I said I was sorry. Look I’ll help you find a replacement. I doubt they’ll be half as charming, and definitely nowhere near as good looking but I’ll do what I can.” He messes with his shaggy brown hair, clearly nervous and probably still expecting me to punch him.

I should but hitting him would only make me feel better temporarily and that’s not my style anyway.

“I don’t need your help. You’ve already helped enough.”

And by helped, I mean he’s tossed me over a cliff and to the jagged rocks beneath.

I know, I fucking know I could go to my friend Mascen and he’d make sure my costs are covered, but he’s the sole reason I want out on my own so I’m not about to ask him for a fucking favor. Especially one I doubt I’ll ever be able to pay back.

Hefting a box from the back of my pickup, I carry it into the apartment. Teddy, my new Golden Retriever apparently, follows dutifully behind me still muttering about how sorry he is. He doesn’t even make himself useful and carry a box. Typical.

“You don’t understand, I’m walking a fine line with my parents. One more screw up and I’m done, they’re cutting me off for good—like no inheritance forever. If they’re demanding I stay in the dorms, that’s what I’m doing.”

I whip around on the stairs, nearly knocking him down them with the box. My bad—not really. He steadies himself with a hand on the railing.

“You’ve had to know about this for a while or you wouldn’t have a fucking dorm to go back to.”

“Well, actually, I was just going to keep it, that way Jude would basically have a single and it’d be a great on campus party space.” Jude, a junior and a year behind us, is the star wide receiver on the football team. “I swear I wasn’t trying to screw you over or anything. I was looking forward to it. Now that Mascen is pussy whipped it was going to be you and me. The two single bros living the best of their senior year. Throwing parties, getting shit-faced, and getting all the pussy we can. Aldridge is like an all you can eat buffet of



the finest girls around.” He throws his arms out and I nearly hurtle my box at him.

“First off, don’t talk about Rory that way. Secondly, if you thought for one minute, I was going to let you turn our apartment into some sort of sex club den thing you’re fucking wrong.” I start up the stairs again so I can put this box down.

Teddy, like our friend Mascen and most of the lucky people at Aldridge unlike myself, are rich. The kind of rich where they could buy their own island if they wanted. Some is new money, like Mascen’s family—his dad is a drummer in a world-famous band—some of it is seriously old money like Teddy’s family. I still don’t know exactly what it is his family does, but I do know he casually mentioned one time that his cousin is married to a prince of Greece. Still haven’t wrapped my head around that one.

Unlike them, if it wasn’t for my talent at basketball, there’s no way I would’ve ever been able to attend Aldridge University. But for some reason they saw something in a poor mixed kid from the middle of nowhere Michigan.

Reaching the apartment, I set the box down and unlock the door. Teddy pushes his way in before me. He has no idea that he’s tap-dancing across my last nerve.

The smell of fresh paint litters the air, stinging my nostrils when I step inside. Despite the chemical smell, I won’t complain. The apartment building is new, built to accommodate the growing amount of people in the area thanks to the university.

Setting the box on the kitchen counter, I turn to Teddy. “Since you’re here already and irritating the shit out of me with your babbling, make yourself useful and unload my truck.”

He laughs like I’m being funny. “Oh,” he sobers when I don’t laugh along, “you’re serious.”

“Yeah.”

He holds out his hands. “You see these hands? Do they look like they do manual labor? No. They’re good for baseball, weightlifting, and fingering pussy.”

“What pussy? The only action your hand gets is from jerking yourself off.”

He slaps a hand to his chest, gasping like a dramatic mother in a period drama when her daughters do some shit she’s not pleased with. Yeah, my

sisters have made me watch all that shit.

“You don’t have to cut me like that, Cole. I know you’re mad at me, but you know damn well I have no problem getting girls.”

“There’s shit in my truck waiting for those delicate hands of yours.”

“All right, all right.” He throws his hands up. “I’m going. But don’t think I’ve forgotten about my promise. I’ll find you a new roommate. A great one. The best ever. Better than even me, which is unimaginable, but I’ll make it happen.”

“You do that,” I call after him as he walks out.

I shake my head. It’s laughable to think that Teddy will actually manage to secure me a roommate. Nah, like always I’ll be on my own to dig myself out of a hole.

**ZOEY**

“WHAT DO YOU mean you don’t have me down for a dorm assignment?” I slam my hands on the counter, glaring at the secretary behind it. She’s older, graying hair down to her shoulders and a pair of lime green reading glasses perched on the end of her nose. I’m not in the habit of snapping at older ladies, my mom raised me to always speak respectably, but in this moment, I can’t keep my temper at bay.

Transferring to Aldridge University for junior and senior year wasn’t part of my plan. But when I caught my fiancé cheating on me with my best friend of all people, I knew I had to get the hell out of dodge, and lucky for me my dad is a coach at Aldridge. He pulled some strings and now here I am. It’s a tad awkward since I haven’t been that close with my dad since he and my mom divorced when I was thirteen, but desperate times call for desperate measures. His eagerness to help me get in did leave me feeling a tad bit guilty for not making more of an effort to be involved in his life, along with those of my half-siblings as well with his new wife.

“It shows you were late enrollment, and all the dorms were full.” Her tone is calm but pointed. “There’s nothing we can do.”

Panic surges inside me. “B-But no one told me. There was nothing in all of this,” I wave my massive stack of papers from the university, “telling me that I didn’t have a place to sleep. This has to be a joke.”

Behind me, the door to the front office opens and a guy’s voice barges in. “Hey, Mrs. Jostin I lost my student ID again, can you help a guy out? I promise it’ll never happen again.”

In front of me, the woman sighs heavily, her shoulders sagging. “Teddy

McCallister, you lose your student ID every three months. Classes haven't even started yet. How is it possible you lost it already?"

The guy speaks from behind me. "Ah, Mrs. Jostin don't be that way. I know I'm your favorite guy. I can't help it that I lose everything. It's a character flaw that most find endearing."

"Endearing my ass," she mutters under her breath, startled eyes darting up to mine to see if I heard. When she sees me trying not to laugh, she cracks a smile. "Teddy, let me finish up with this young lady and I'll see what I can do."

"Right on."

Sighing, she adjusts her glasses and shuffles the papers in front of her. "I'm truly sorry, dear, but the dorms are full and there's nothing I can do. There is plenty of off campus housing you can try. Rent is usually fairly reasonable."

Tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to cry. I gave myself three days to cry over Todd and our broken engagement and then swore I wouldn't cry again. Ever. I have a little bit of savings from odd jobs over the years, so I know I should be able to swing rent, but I wasn't planning on that. I guess I should be thankful my mom always insisted I be smart with money and save a reasonable amount of every paycheck.

"All right," I sigh in defeat. "Thank you."

I can always suck it up and stay with my dad and his family, but I really don't want to do that.

I turn around and come face to face with the guy. He's fairly tall, with floppy brown hair, light stubble on an angular face, and bright forest green eyes. He gives me a lopsided grin, not hiding the fact he's checking me out at all. I start to skirt around him, but he reaches for my arm. I give him a death glare and he immediately releases me.

"Hey." He holds his hands up in surrender. "Sorry, I just wanted to say I might be able to help you out with the whole housing situation."

I narrow my eyes on him. "I swear to God if you offer me your bed, I'll cut your dick off."

Mrs. Jostin laughs, quickly turning it into a cough.

"No, but that's a good idea too." I give him a menacing glare and he waves his hands for me to calm down. "I have a friend, yeah, he's a guy but he's kind of in a bind and needs a roommate. He's cool. You'd like him. I think. You seem like you might not like anyone." He rubs the back of his

head awkwardly. “But I mean, it would be mutually beneficial. He needs a roommate to help with rent and you need a place to stay.”

“This isn’t some gross bachelor pad is it?”

“Uh ... no. It’s a new apartment. It’s clean. He doesn’t smoke or drink much. He’s not much of a partier which kind of cramps my style but sounds like it would be good for you since you seem like the type to like the quiet.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” My glower deepens on the shaggy haired Louis Tomlinson lookalike except more jacked. It’s obvious he spends a lot of time in the gym and thinks his looks alone let him get away with anything. Typical. Todd was the same way. I should’ve known then to run far and fast.

“Nothing, I swear. Just that ... look ... I kind of had to back out of rooming with him last minute and now he’s stuck needing someone else to cover half the rent. He’s a good guy, I swear. At least come meet him and check out the place. I can take you as soon as I finish with the lovely Mrs. Jostin.”

I narrow my eyes on him. “Fine, but I’ll follow you in my car.”

“Whatever you want. I’ll meet you outside.”

I wait on the front steps of the main building on campus, toeing the end of my worn white Converse against the ground. I should probably stop, that’s why they’re so grubby to begin with, but it’s a nervous habit. I’m really good at appearing confident and in charge in certain situations, while on the inside I’m a freaking mess.

Five minutes later the large wooden doors creak open behind me and Teddy comes out, envelope in hand.

“Got your ID?”

“Mrs. Jostin always comes through for me. Don’t worry, I’ll send her some flowers to thank her for dealing with my shit.”

I arch a brow as I follow the long-legged guy to the parking lot. “You actually send her flowers?”

He stops dead in his tracks, causing a car to honk and speed around us. “Do you think so little of me? I’m a good guy. I even send my one-night-stands home with freshly baked cookies. I’m basically Betty Cocker.”

*Don’t laugh, Zoey. It’ll only encourage him.*

“Pretty sure it’s Crocker.”

“No, babe, I assure you I am all Cock ... er.”

“Don’t call me babe.”

“Sorry, I can’t help myself sometimes.” He grins, green eyes shining with mischief. “I’m over here.” He points to a shiny Porsche sports car. “Where are you?”

I sigh and unlock my Honda CRV across from his. “That’s me.”

“Sweet. Follow me for a good time.”

I stare at him the way a mom looks at her unruly child—you know, the look that says shut your trap with your idiotic remarks. My glare doesn’t seem to bother him a bit. He laughs and goes to his car.

When he looks back and sees I haven’t made a move to my car, he says, “You’ll get used to it.”

If this guy thinks I’ll be getting used to anything when it comes to him, he’s sorely mistaken. I doubt I’ll want to live wherever he’s taking me and who’s to say the guy living there will even agree.

More than likely I’m going to be stuck living with my dad and his new family. It’s the last thing I want, but you know what they say about desperate times.

Slipping into my car, I follow the blue Porsche off campus and about five minutes down the road where he pulls into an apartment complex. We pass by a building that lists things like *gym* and *pool* and circle around to one of the apartment buildings in the back.

Parking beside Teddy, I get out and look around in surprise. It looks nice. He did say it was new but I kind of thought he was fucking with me just to get me here and hopefully agree to stay.

“It’s on the third floor.”

I grumble a little at that, not liking the idea of carrying groceries up them every week. But you know, that’s a small sacrifice to make if it means I get my own place. Well, sort of my own place. I’d still have a roommate, which is true if I’d been given a dorm on campus like I was supposed to.

“Did you let him know we were coming?”

“Uh,” he looks at me over his shoulder as we climb the stairs, “no.”

I roll my eyes, holding onto the railing. We reach the third floor and turn to our right where he knocks on a door marked 308.

Waiting with crossed arms, it isn’t but maybe thirty seconds later when the door opens.

My jaw drops at the sight of the guy standing there. Sure, I swore off men after Todd, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have eyes, and this guy? He’s the sexiest man I’ve ever seen. Tall, way taller than my five-foot-seven frame.

His skin is a beautiful brown color, tattoos snaking up an entire arm from wrist to—well, I’m not sure where it ends since he’s wearing a shirt. His curly black hair is cropped close to his scalp. Eyes a unique shade of amber brown—honeyed—stare back at the guy at my side, his full and pouty lips turned down into a frown.

“What do you want?” He grumbles in a deep voice, glowering at my companion. “Come to deliver worse news?”

“Actually, I found you a roommate.” Teddy turns to me, sweeping his hands at me like I’m a prize on a game show. “Ta-da.” And then the goofball does jazz hands.

The guy’s eyes turn to me, elegant brows furrowed together wrinkling his forehead. “You?”

“Me.” I point to myself, pretending I’m not at all affected by the way those thick lashes flutter against his cheekbones. For months I’ve been mad at all men because of Todd, but apparently all it takes is one exceptionally good-looking guy to make me weak in my knees. “As long as this isn’t a total dump and you’re not a dick.” I straighten my spine, glad that despite my attraction to the stranger in front of me at least I still have my sassy mouth.

“Who are you?” he asks, looking confused, his gaze flickering between his friend and me. “Did you find her on the side of the road or something?”

My mouth pops open. “I’m not a prostitute!”

His eyes widen in horror and he puts his hands up in a placating gesture. “Fuck, that’s *not* what I meant. Just this fucker here bails on me last minute as my roommate, and even though he promised to find a replacement he doesn’t have a very good track record for keeping his word.”

“Hey!” Teddy protests.

The guy continues on like Teddy didn’t interject. “Forgive me for thinking maybe there’s a catch here.”

“No catch, I swear. I ran into her when I went to see Mrs. Jostin—”

“Did you lose your fucking ID already?” He pinches the bridge of his nose.

“No.” When Teddy finds both of us staring at him in disbelief he gives a sheepish smile. “Yes, okay, I did. But that’s not the point here. The point is, I ran into the lovely Zoey there. Care to fill in the rest?” He prompts me to speak.

I eye the guy still standing in the doorway. “I’m a transfer and apparently somehow there was a mix up and I never got a dorm assignment. Now

they're saying there aren't any free beds for me and I'm basically screwed."

His eyes turn sympathetic. "Can you cover half the rent?"

"Depends on what it is?"

"Eight-hundred for half."

I bite my lip, calculating in my head. It's high, but I can swing it. I'll have to cut corners in other areas if I like the place.

"Yeah, I could do that. Can I at least check it out first?"

He doesn't answer, merely steps aside and allows entry. Teddy follows me in, muttering to his friend, "See, I told you I'd help."

"Shut up," my possible new roommate grumbles.

The place is gorgeous, well worth the eight hundred I'd be spending a month. Everything is new, from the floors to fresh paint, and the stone countertops. The kitchen has a decent amount of counter space for an apartment. In the living area, there are French doors opening onto a decent sized balcony. It's sparsely furnished, but if this guy is so desperate for a roommate then I doubt he has the extra money to spend on things. Plus, he's a guy, so décor and comfort probably aren't high on his list.

I venture down the hall on my own, peeking into a bathroom that's surprisingly clean—no pee stains on the floor or toilet, which is a total win. I was always grumbling at Todd to either aim correctly or wipe his pee up. He never did either.

Peeking into the first room I find a bare mattress on the floor with a blanket tossed over it with a pillow that still has an indent from being slept on. Moving on, I open the final door in the hall to an empty bedroom. It's large, plenty of room for a bed, dresser, and desk.

I hate to admit it, but running into Teddy might be the best thing that could've happened to me. As long as his friend is okay with me living here.

Walking back out to the main living area, arms crossed over my chest, I stop in front of the two guys who cease conversation.

"Would you mind having a girl for a roommate?"

His brow curves upward. "I have four sisters. I'm used to girls. Will you mind having a guy for a roommate?"

I glance around quickly, trying to ignore Teddy's giddy puppy dog like expression.

"Nope, not at all."

"Welcome home then. I'm Cole." He holds out a hand for me to shake.

"Zoey."



“Oh, guys.” Teddy wraps an arm around each of us, pulling us into the most awkward group hug ever. “We’re going to be the best of friends.”

**COLE**

“MORE BOXES?” I open the door, incredulous by the number of boxes outside. Most with IKEA on the outside of them, but a few others from Target and Amazon.

“I’m sorry,” Zoey says sheepishly, appearing behind me. I didn’t even know she was anywhere near or I would’ve kept my mouth shut. It’s not my business what she orders. “They’re from my dad,” she explains, and I feel a smidge bad for assuming she had some extreme online buying addiction. “We don’t have the best relationship.” I can tell it pains her to admit this, not because she’s butthurt over a strained relationship but because it doesn’t take a genius to see that Zoey is tight-lipped about her life. In the three days since she moved in, I haven’t learned much about her except that her last name is Reynolds and she’s addicted to some real estate reality show on Netflix. “Anyway,” she nervously tucks a piece of curly brown hair behind her ear, “I guess he’s trying to make up for things by showering me with unnecessary furniture items that I have to figure out how to put together.” She winces. “Wow, that sounds ungrateful.”

“Nah, I get it.”

“You have a crappy parent too?”

I think of my mom and dad, two of my favorite people in the entire world. How they always made sure to make my sisters and I a priority and never let outsiders’ whispers about our family get us down. Not that it was always easy growing up biracial—especially with my mom black and my dad white. Interracial relationships are still frowned upon by a lot of people, but at least for me I noticed that white women with black men seemed to be far more

accepted than my parents were and that ... that fucking sucked, because I knew how in love they are. The kind of sickly-sweet love that most people never find. I'm not sure I'll even be lucky enough to have it.

"No, my parents are great." I start carrying her boxes inside. "But I've had friends who haven't had it as good, so I know how it is."

"Oh." She picks up a box herself, and dammit if my eyes don't stray to her pert round ass filling out a pair of pink cotton shorts.

Zoey's got long legs, honey brown skin, and the prettiest curls I've ever seen. Her dark brown eyes are kind, but there's a hint of something there that tells me she's been through some shit. She's beautiful, the kind of beautiful that steals your breath, but she's my roommate and I definitely shouldn't be checking her out. Especially since I swore off women after everything that happened last year.

I met Rory and really liked her, thought we had a connection, but it turned out it was my best friend Mascen who got her in the end. He and Rory grew up together, which I hadn't known, and apparently lost their way. Looking at them now, I know they're perfect together and Rory and I never stood a chance, but it doesn't mean it didn't hurt. I need to focus on basketball this year and figuring out what comes next.

Zoey and I make quick work of getting the boxes in and she sits down with a box cutter to get started on them.

"I can help you put stuff together," I offer.

She looks up, already shaking her head. "It's okay. I'll figure it out myself."

I bend down, joining her on the floor. "I have no doubt you can, but it'll go faster with the two of us."

Her lips thin and I know she's hesitant to accept my help, but after a moment she gives a tiny jerk of her head. I don't let her think twice about it.

After a few minutes of silence, she turns some music on her phone.

"Dan and Shay?" I ask in surprise.

She glances over at me, setting a white board meant to be a shelf in a bookcase aside. "Yeah, you have something against country?"

"Not at all." My lips twitch. I love country, but it's not something I really talk about, not when most of my friends and teammates are obsessed with rap or anything raunchy. If they found out I actually enjoy new country I'd never hear the end of it. "What do you want me to build first?"

Zoey pauses, a piece of carboard clasped in her hands. "You really don't

have to do this.”

“Zoey.” I’m not about to have this argument again. “If it makes you feel better you can help me put my bed together whenever I get one.”

She cracks a smile. “Deal. I guess we’ll start with the desk.”

She already has a bed and brand-new mattress. It seems like her dad is trying extra hard to make amends. But maybe he’d be better off actually talking to his daughter instead of dumping an insane amount of furniture into her lap.

Not that I’m complaining about our new flat-screen TV or the couch that is large enough to comfortably fit my six-foot-six frame. It’s way better than the secondhand one I’d been eyeing at a local thrift store.

An hour later, with the desk and chair put together, Zoey sits back, tucking her legs beneath her. She gathers her curls up, tying them with some sort of coiled elastic. “Are you sure you’re okay with me living here?” she asks, hesitancy on her face.

I snort, shaking my head as I pick up the directions for the bookcase. “Yeah, I’m fucking sure. You’re saving my ass. I figured I’d be kicked out the first month when I couldn’t make the rent on my own.”

“Sure, but I mean, you probably would’ve preferred one of your friends.” I eye her and she lowers her gaze, not wanting me to see the insecurity there. I can tell Zoey is the kind of girl who can hold her own, who doesn’t take bullshit from anyone, but that doesn’t mean she can’t be hurt, and I have a feeling she’s got her demons just like I have mine.

“You’re just fine. Honestly, better than a smelly ass dude.”

She cracks a smile. “I’ll add that to my resumé.” I flip through the instructions and she gives a laugh. “I thought all men tossed the directions and decided to wing it.”

I pause, stretching out my legs. “Not this guy. If you want something done right, you don’t half-ass it.”

Standing, she smooths her hands down the front of her shirt. I quickly divert my eyes, not wanting to be caught checking her out. I want Zoey to feel comfortable here, she doesn’t need me leering at her.

“I’m going to grab a drink. You want anything?”

“A root beer.”

She cracks a tiny, almost secretive smile and walks out of her bedroom. Returning less than a minute later, she holds out an IBC with the cap already removed. I don’t know what it is about root beer, but it’s always been my

favorite. I keep a stash on hand for not only drinking but making floats as well. Sure, I have to watch what I eat because I have to stay in shape but that doesn't mean I don't allow myself to indulge now and then.

Zoey sits back down, crossing her legs. She undoes the cap from a Fiji water and spins the cap around her fingers. "Thank you for doing this."

"It's not a problem."

"We haven't talked about much since I moved in, but do you think we should set some ground rules?"

"Like what?" I set my root beer down and start assembling the shelf.

"I don't know. Not stealing each other's shampoo or food or something." She picks at the carpet, not meeting my eyes.

"Well, for starters I don't think we have to worry about the shampoo thing." I rub my scalp. "Something tells me we use very different kinds." A flush warms her cheeks. "And food, I'm not the kind of guy who gets butthurt over that kind of thing, but I'll stay out of yours. Promise."

Her white teeth nibble on her full bottom lip and I know she's thinking deeply about something. Finally, she says, "What about visitors?"

"Like friends? Shit, I don't care if your friends come over."

"No." She fidgets some more, tugging on the top of her socks. "I mean, will you be having girls over?" Her gaze goes to the wall, refusing to meet my amused stare. "Like, I can't tell you *not* to, but maybe give me a heads up so I can wear headphones or leave for the library or—"

"You don't have to worry about me with girls."

"Are you gay?" She immediately slaps a hand over her mouth. "Sorry, that was wrong of me to ask."

"No, not gay, just ... swearing off women for the foreseeable future." She gives me a questioning look. "There was a girl I liked last year but turned out she liked my best friend more."

She flinches. "Harsh. Sounds familiar." And from the sympathetic look she gives me, I know she's been there, but she doesn't offer more than that.

"It's not like anyone cheated. Rory and I weren't together, but that shit hurts. It's my senior year. I want to focus on my grades and whatever it is that comes next." There's a knock out front and I arch a brow. "Are you expecting someone?"

She looks puzzled, shaking her head. "No." She stands and groans. "It better not be my dad. I'm not in the mood."

She marches out front and I stay where I'm at, wanting to get this

bookcase together and call it a day.

“Wow, look at you.” I glance up to find Teddy standing in the doorway to Zoey’s room, holding a bucket of KFC chicken and a drumstick in hand. He tears into the chicken leg like a savage. Around a mouthful, he says, “It’s only been a few days and she’s already got you wrapped around her finger.”

“Oh, shut up.” Zoey pushes past him, but not before she stands on her tiptoes and smacks the back of his head.

“Hey! What was that for?”

“For running your mouth. I didn’t *ask* him to do anything. He offered.”

Teddy’s green eyes narrow on me. “Shit, stop being so chivalrous and making me look bad.”

I snicker. “Don’t worry, Teddy. You make yourself look bad all on your own.”

Teddy tips his head back, sniffing haughtily on purpose. “Fine, no chicken for you or you.” He gives us each a look before turning with his bucket of fried meat and walking away. I don’t hear the door, but the TV does come on a second later, so I know he’s not going anywhere.

Zoey sits down on the end of her bed, resting her hands on her bare knees. “Your friend is weird.”

I snort. “That’s an understatement.”

“It’s good to have friends like that. Ones that really care.” There’s a lost look in her chocolate brown eyes, but I don’t ask her to elaborate. We’re barely acquaintances and it’s none of my business. Standing, she says, “I’m going to go ask Teddy if he’ll share his stick.”

I know she’s joking, and only talking about goddamn chicken, but something in my chest squeezes at the idea of her asking Teddy for anything. Before she can leave, I yell out, “Teddy, get your ass in here and bring the fucking chicken!”

Teddy shuffles down the hall, and I swear to God if he leaves shoe stains on the carpet, I’ll make him pay for them to get cleaned. “Oh, so now you want my chicken.”

“Zoey does.”

Teddy lets out an exaggerated sigh. “Fine, but I don’t share my chicken with just anyone. We’re bonded for life.”

“Uh, on second thought maybe I don’t want any.”

“Come on, you know you do.” He holds the bucket out in her direction. “Take one. Join the club. On Wednesday’s we wear pink.”

I roll my eyes. “Will you ever stop quoting *Mean Girls*?”

Zoey, presses her lips together, fighting laughter as her head bounces between the two of us.

“Um, no. Tina Fey is a literary genius who deserves our undying love and gratitude for such a masterpiece. Now take some chicken.” He shakes the bucket. “And remember, I’m not a regular mom. I’m a cool mom.”

**ZOEY**

IT WAS GUILT that made me agree to my dad's invitation to dinner tonight. Classes begin tomorrow and I'd much rather be in bed with a coloring book and markers trying to calm my nerves over starting my junior year at a different college. But when he asked if I'd be willing to come over for dinner, I felt like it'd be rude to say no.

That's how I've found myself parked outside on the street of a massive house—no, mansion—tapping my fingers nervously against my steering wheel while Taylor Swift hypes me up in the background.

The house is beautiful, with a circular driveway and beautiful stone front. The front door is one of the largest I've ever seen, with intricate ironwork around the glass.

It's definitely out of the budget for your typical college basketball coach—but my dad isn't typical. He spent nearly five years in the NBA before a career-ending injury took him out.

If I'm honest with myself, he's part of the reason I want to be a physical therapist. To help athletes and others who've been hurt and need help, and maybe prevent someone from walking away from their family like he did.

All because he didn't want to face the reality that he couldn't play anymore and apparently my mom and I weren't a good enough reason to move on.

They met when they were in high school, and dated through college, where my mom got pregnant with me their sophomore year and they decided to get married and make it work.

It's too bad 'making it work' was only temporary.



The worst part is the divorce came years after the injury, but he was never the same after it happened. It was like nothing meant the same if he didn't have the NBA anymore.

I inhale a deep breath, and shut my car off, Taylor's voice cutting off in the middle of *Shake it Off*.

Slipping from the car, I sling my purse over my shoulder and lock the car behind me. Though, in a neighborhood this nice—one where I had to enter through a gate—locking it is probably unnecessary. I doubt any of these rich pricks want anything to do with my ten-year-old Honda.

I trudge up the driveway, my arms wrapped around my body.

I don't know why, but the memory of my high school graduation floods my mind. I gave my dad the cold shoulder after the event. My heart pangs in remembrance of his warm smile, the pride in his eyes when he told me congratulations and opened his arms for a hug, and I just dodged him. Like he was nothing. Before then I'd spend the occasional holiday with him, not because he didn't want me to but because I loved my mom and felt like I had to be loyal to her, even though she never said or did anything to make me feel ill toward my father. That wasn't my mom. She was a good, kind soul. Better than me, better than anyone I've known. What he didn't know at my graduation, is the day before my mother confessed she'd been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. She told me to be optimistic, that she'd be fine, but I knew my mom better than anyone and always knew when she was lying.

She was dead a year later, gone almost to the day of when she was diagnosed.

Perhaps her loss is why I latched on so strongly to Todd, even when I knew he was all wrong for me.

Reaching the door, I take a deep, fortifying breath and smooth my hands down the front of my simple flowered dress. Cole had jokingly asked if I was going on a date when he saw me leaving. I reluctantly grumbled out that I was going to my dad's house for dinner.

I would've much rather met on neutral ground at a restaurant, but he was insistent that his wife, Allison, wanted to make me a home-cooked meal.

I know it's unfair to Allison that I don't like her. It's not like she's done anything to me. But I guess seeing her, and the kids they've had together, reminds me of what I should've had.

But now that I'm here in Tennessee and going to Aldridge, it's time I made more of an effort. At least when it comes to my younger half-siblings.

After stalling long enough, I raise my hand and push the doorbell. It rings through the house.

Allison hurries to the door, her blonde hair cut off at her shoulders. She smiles at me behind the door. Opening it, she lets me in. “Zoey, I’m so glad you could come.” She opens her arms to hug me. I’ve always denied her embraces in the past, but this time I accept it and there’s no missing the happiness in her bright blue eyes. It makes me feel like a bitch for things I’ve said and done in the past.

“Thanks for having me.” I release her. She’s dressed in a nice pair of jeans and wraparound top. I wish I would’ve worn jeans now, but it’s too late to change.

“Everyone’s this way.” She nods for me to follow her.

We enter a massive kitchen with state-of-the-art appliances, shiny granite countertops, and cabinets I’ve only ever seen in homes well over a million dollars—which I’m sure this place is.

“Dinner’s almost ready.” She gives my shoulder a squeeze as my dad stands up from the large table in the kitchen. I’m glad we won’t be eating in some fancy dining room. Even though the kitchen is luxurious it definitely feels more relaxed.

“Hey, Zo-bug.” My dad’s voice booms as he stands to his full six-foot-nine height. His hands are massive, the size of dinner plates. I remember when I was little, I was always putting things in his hands to compare the size.

“Hi, Dad.” Like with Allison, I make myself hug him. He squeezes me tight, holding on like he doesn’t want to let go, and I swear the guilt is going to smother me just like his massive arms. Craning my neck back to fully take him in, I ask, “How are you?”

You’d think with such a giant for a dad I would’ve been taller than my five-seven stature, but my mom was a barely five-foot Latina powerhouse, and I inherited a lot of her genes. It definitely wasn’t always easy growing up as an Afro-Latina, but I love my heritage, both sides, even if I’ve harbored anger toward my dad over the years.

You know, I guess I should be thankful he realized that my mom wasn’t the love of his life and didn’t stay in a loveless marriage, but as a teenager growing up without my dad in those vital year, not looking like the other kids, it was hard.

“I’m good, I’m good.” His eyes flit over me, taking in every detail like

he's trying to memorize me. "How are you? You've gotten all the furniture set up okay? I told you I'd come help."

"My roommate helped me."

"Good, good." Awkwardness sets in like usual. I've cut him down so many times over the years the poor man doesn't know what to say to me. "Want to say hi to the kids?"

I give a tiny nod, eyeing the small children at the table.

Gabriel is six, Isaac four, and then there's the baby, Rose, who isn't quite one yet. I remember the jealousy I felt when I found out my dad and Allison were having a girl. It was so dumb, I'm an adult and being jealous of a baby is preposterous, but all I could think about was how I was well and truly replaced. I'm not my dad's only little girl anymore.

I take small, measured steps to the table and find the boys scribbling in coloring books, well Isaac is scribbling, but Gabriel is doing a good job of staying in the lines.

"You guys like coloring?" I ask my brothers.

Gabriel looks up. "Yeah, do you? We have more coloring books if you want to color with us?"

Isaac looks up, only just realizing I'm there. "Zo-Zo!" He grins from ear to ear and slips out of his seat, barreling toward me and tackling me into a hug. My heart clenches at his obvious excitement over being there. "I missed you! You didn't come for Christmas!"

No, I was too busy spending it with Cheater-Cheater-Licking-Someone-Else's-Pussy-Eater Todd. But I did spend Thanksgiving with my dad's family last year. It was just as awkward as you'd expect but for some strange reason the boys seem to like me.

"I'm sorry," I say automatically, but I actually mean it when I take in his saddened expression.

"The boys ask about you a lot," my dad says with a smile that is both somehow happy and sad as he observes Isaac's chokehold on me.

"They do?" I don't mean to say it out loud, but the question slips out.

He jerks his head in a nod. "They love you."

Letting Isaac go, he smiles at me holding my face between his small hands. "I'll get you a coloring book. We have an Avengers one you can use."

"Whoa! Whoa!" Allison calls after him when he tries to flee the kitchen. "Zoey can color with you after we eat if she wants to stay, but dinner is ready so park your tush back in your seat."

Isaac goes back to the table, head hanging.

Walking over to Allison, I say, "Let me help you with that."

She gives a smile, appreciating that I'm trying. "Thanks."

Together we plate the chicken fettucine she made. It smells incredible and my stomach rumbles. She tries to hide her amusement at the sound.

"I might be a little hungry," I admit sheepishly.

She smiles. "That's what we want."

Sitting down at the table with Allison, my dad, the two boys, and babbling baby isn't as awkward or as horrible as I expected. It's been my own fault all these years that things weren't great. Now that I'm here, living nearby and going to school, I need to put in more effort.

"This is delicious, Allison," I say to the pretty blonde. She's only thirty-three, almost twelve years older than me, which if I'm honest with myself is another reason I resented her. Even though my dad was single for a few years after my parents' divorce, it still felt like a betrayal to my mother when he married Allison. Like he upgraded to a new, younger, shinier model. "I really appreciate you doing this."

"Of course, Zoey." She smiles at me. "You're our family."

Looking around at my dad, brothers, baby sister, and Allison, I return her smile.

We finish dinner and even have dessert—a homemade tiramisu that Allison prepared earlier. I help clean up and then stay to color with the boys for a little while, saying goodbye just before it's time for them to settle for bed.

I arrive back at the apartment and trudge up the steps. Despite actually enjoying my evening I'm exhausted from the stress and anxiety of it all.

Opening the door, I find Cole relaxing on the couch with a root beer in hand.

"How'd it go?" he asks as I lock up behind me.

"Pretty good." I decide that's a pretty basic answer, so I elaborate with, "Better than I thought it would. My brothers were happy to see me."

"Brothers? I didn't know you had siblings."

"Yeah, Gabriel and Isaac. They're young—six and four. There's a baby too, Rose, she's only nine months."

"Wow."

I give a small laugh, filching one of his root beers from the fridge. When I first opened the refrigerator and saw all the bottles lined up, for a split second

I thought I was dealing with an alcoholic college boy and what a nightmare it would be, but I had quite the laugh once I read the label and saw that it was root beer.

Cole gives me an amused smile when I sit down beside him, kicking my shoes off on the carpeted floor and tucking my feet under me and drink in hand. “Are we sharing drinks now?”

“I needed something stronger than water.”

He throws his head back and laughs, caramel brown eyes sparkling when they meet mine. “Sorry I only have root beer then.”

“It’s okay. We can go shopping for actual beer sometime this week.”

“We, huh?”

I roll my eyes. “At least if we grocery shop together, I won’t have to carry everything up the stairs by myself.”

He tsks. “Using me as a pack mule to carry your shit, Zoey? I see how it is. And here I thought you wanted to spend more time with me.”

For some reason my heart trips over itself. I better as hell not be developing a crush on my roommate. The last thing I need is to be lusting after a guy, even one as hot as Cole, after the disaster that was my last relationship.

“You wish, Anderson.” I bump his shoulder with mine, definitely not affected at all by how muscular his bicep feels against my arm.

He grins, eyes glimmering with amusement and holds his bottle out to mine. “Cheers, Zoey.”

“Cheers to what?”

“I don’t know. To school starting, to you surviving dinner with your family ... to ‘grocery’ shopping.”

My heart skips a beat again, something about the way he says ‘grocery shopping’ feels illicit. Like limbs touching between sheets, nails scraping against skin, tongues dueling.

Somehow, I find my voice and tap my bottle against his. “Cheers.”

I down a swallow, disappointed there’s not a twinge of alcohol, because right now I think I need it.

**COLE**

IT FEELS good to be back on campus. I stroll into the Aldridge Café where Teddy and I agreed to meet before classes start. I ate breakfast before I left the apartment, actually shared some eggs and bacon with Zoey, but I could go for some coffee.

Surprisingly, I'm not minding her company at all. It hasn't been a full week yet, so that could change, but so far she's way easier to deal with than I know Teddy would have been. Not that I don't like Teddy, obviously I do since we're friends, but he can be a lot to handle. Like a toddler that's had too much sugar.

I order a black coffee with one creamer and find Teddy at a table already with one of those frozen coffee drinks with whipped cream on top.

"Top of the morning to you, hey."

I furrow my brows as I pull out a chair and sink my body into it. "What kind of accent is that supposed to be?"

"No idea." He sips on his drink, making eyes at a girl a few tables over. "How's the new roomie working out?"

"Better than you."

He feigns injury. "I'm hurt."

"Mhmm, you look real torn up about it." I indicate the girl he's checking out with a nod of my head.

He grins, setting his drink down. "It's going to be real boring without me."

"Now that I can agree to. But Zoey's great."

"Nice to look at too. Great tits." I reach across the table and smack the

back of his head. “What was that for?”

“For talking about my roommate like that. Respect her.”

He puts his hands up, gesturing for me to calm down. “My bad, but even you have to admit they’re nice.” He gestures to his own chest like he’s holding a handful.

“Teddy,” I growl a warning.

“I forget you’re a nice guy,” he grumbles, stirring the whipped cream into his frozen coffee. “And with sisters too.”

“What’s that mean?”

He cracks a grin. “Just that you’re extra sensitive.”

“Don’t be an ass,” I warn him.

He looks over my shoulder and his smile grows bigger. “Yo, Mase! Come join us.”

Instantly, I stiffen and Teddy frowns when he notices giving me a sheepish look.

Mascen’s shadow falls upon the table. “Morning.” He lifts his coffee to his mouth, watching me over the rim. No doubt he’s trying to gauge my reaction to him.

“What class do you have first?” Teddy asks, filling the awkward silence.

Mascen rubs his jaw, facing Teddy, but his eyes move in my direction every few seconds. What does he expect? A surprise attack like I’m going to jump up and brawl in the middle of the coffee shop. Not likely.

“I’ve got a chem class.”

“Brainiac,” Teddy mutters under his breath. He’s not wrong. Mascen is a talented athlete, and could easily go pro with baseball, but he doesn’t want that. Instead, he’s pursuing sports medicine.

“What about you?”

“News writing and reporting.”

“Damn, you mean I’m going to be all alone in communications? Figures. Stupid majors separating us. I’m going to need another one of these if I’m going to survive.” He slips out of his chair, going to place an order, and Mascen takes his place.

“Teddy told me he bailed on rooming with you. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I regard him for a moment before I answer. “What good would that have done?”

I know what he’s going to say before he does, so I’m not surprised when he replies, “Because I can help you.”

“I’m sure Teddy also told you he solved my roommate problem. It’s all good, man.”

With a sigh, Mascen stands, adjusting his baseball cap before he picks up his cup. “For what it’s worth, I really am sorry. And you know me, dude, I don’t apologize for shit. And I’m not saying I’m sorry for loving Rory, just for hurting you.”

I wave my hands. “It’s water under the bridge.”

He arches a brow. “Is it?”

He doesn’t give me a chance to answer before walking out, lifting his hand in goodbye to Teddy.

Teddy struts back to the table, another frozen coffee in hand but I’m already standing and grabbing my backpack to sling across my shoulders.

“Don’t tell me you’re leaving already. That’s no fun.”

“Gotta get to class, dude.”

“Fine, pizza for dinner?”

“Dinner?”

He looks at me like I’m the dumb one. “First day of class celebration, duh.”

I shake my head over the fact that he actually used the word *duh* in a sentence. “No parties.”

“No, not a party. Promise. Just a few of the guys.”

“Don’t forget Zoey lives with me now. I can’t have you infringing, because it’s not only my space.”

“Only a few people, I promise.” When he winks I know I’m fucked.



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**ZOEY**

COLE GIVES me yet another apologetic look, mouthing, “I’m sorry.”

Our apartment is crowded with guys. Apparently, Teddy took it upon himself to have a “First Day Back Get Together” as he called it. So far, I’ve been introduced to guys named Murphy, Jude, Cree, Daire and one who introduced himself to me with, “Caesar, like the dressing, not the dead guy.” Both him and Teddy cackled over that one. There are a few others who’ve since joined, packing into our small apartment that I haven’t been introduced to yet.

“Give me one of those.” I tell Teddy, waving my fingers at one of the beers in his hand. Something called Three Floyds Zombie Dust. Never heard of it, but if I’m going to have to deal with this much testosterone, I’m going to need actual alcohol. Cole’s root beer and my water just aren’t going to cut it.

“Here you go pretty lady.”

“No flirting.” I glare at the pretty boy as I take the beer from him and grab the bottle opener, popping off the top.

“I bring you beer and food and this is how you treat me. Shame, Zoey.” He actually rubs his right index finger on top of his left.

“Boohoo.”

Not only do I help myself to his beer, but I pile a plate with two slices of pizza and some of the chicken wings he brought.

Squeezing past some of the guys in an effort to get to my room, I bump into one, spilling a little of my beer on his shirt. “Shit, I’m sorry, Murphy.” I cringe at the stain on his shirt.

He laughs. "It's fine. It's just a shirt, it'll dry. And it's Murray."

I cringe at having messed up his name. I could've sworn I heard him say Murphy earlier, but with a thick Australian accent it's apparent I misheard.

"Murray," I repeat. "I'll remember that."

Cole appears out of nowhere, fire in his eyes. "He's not bothering you is he?"

Murray snorts at the accusation. "Nah, man. She bumped into me by accident."

He turns that fiery caramel gaze to Murray. "Didn't ask you."

"Are you okay?" He addresses me again.

"It's just like he said. I'm on my way to my room to get out of your way so you guys can do whatever."

Cole's face instantly softens. I don't think he even realizes it, but he reaches down, holding my wrist. "Don't go to your room. Stay out here and get to know everybody. I told Teddy not to do this, but ... well, you already know how he is."

I crack a smile. "Are you sure?"

"Positive." Hand still on my wrist he pulls me away from Murray and back toward the kitchen where he'd taken up residence before. Lowering his mouth to my ear, he whispers, "These guys can get rowdy, but I promise they're all decent." I believe him too, because Cole's a good guy, that much is obvious to me, and I can't imagine him hanging out with anyone that's not okay. "You weren't here when I got home, so I haven't had a chance to ask you how your first day went?"

Pulling a piece of stringy cheese away from my mouth—*how attractive*, not that I'm trying to attract Cole or anyone—I finish chewing my bite of pizza before I answer. "It was good. Only got lost once. This campus is massive, but beautiful. I love the old buildings."

He grins, raising his root beer to his lips. "The buildings are one of my favorite things. Don't laugh at me, but it reminds me of a fairytale. You know, like old castles covered in ivy."

I smile at his comparison. "It totally is."

"Where did you go after classes? To your dad's?"

I shake my head. "No, I was job hunting. I have an okay amount of savings, but I'll go through it fast with rent and other necessities so I need to find something."

He rubs his jaw. "I might be able to help you with that." I hesitate,

because I hate taking favors from anyone, even if I don't owe them for it. I'm a go-getter and like to do things by myself. "I work at a mechanic shop and Joe, the owner, is in need of a receptionist. Taylor who used to do it had a baby and decided she wants to stay home now."

Answering phones and taking care of files wouldn't be so bad, but it would put me around Cole even more than we already are as roommates. Sure, he's a nice guy, but I don't want to spend so much time with him that we get sick of each other and things get awkward.

"I'll think about it." It's a non-answer, but it isn't a flat out no, either.

He grabs a slice of pizza, leaning against the kitchen counter. He's wearing a t-shirt and sweats that leave nothing to the imagination. Guys can't really be that oblivious to the sweatpants thing, can they? I mean we can see the entire outline of their penis, and from what I can see of Cole's ... the dude's packing.

Not that I was looking.

Absolutely not.

"There are plenty of other places if an auto shop isn't your kind of place."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I have no idea why I sound so defensive over it.

"Nothing bad. Just that, like this," he waves his hand around the room, "it's mostly guys."

"Oh, that doesn't bother me. I was a manager at a gym before I moved here."

"Why *did* you move here?"

My chest deflates at his question. "I don't want to talk about that."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to pry." He looks genuinely apologetic about it.

I exhale a breath. "It's a normal question, but I don't want to talk about it."

"Maybe one day you'll tell me." His eyes are warm with understanding.

"Maybe," I reply, but in my mind, I'm thinking *not likely*. I finish my plate of food and the beer. "I'm going to bed this time. Can you have them out of here by eleven?"

"Shit," he grins, "I'll get rid of them now." He wraps his hands around his mouth. "Get your shit and get out of my house! I'm going to bed!"

Teddy stands up from the couch. "Are you kicking me out too?"

"Yes, even you."

"B-But I'm your favorite."

“Out.”

“I brought you food and beer. I—”

“And you also ditched on being my roommate.” Cole grabs up the pizza boxes and shoves them in Teddy’s arms. “Thanks for dinner, dude, but it’s time for you to go.”

The other guys say their goodbyes and throw away the trash before heading out the door. Teddy ends up leaving a box of pizza behind saying if Cole and I want leftovers then we have it.

Even though the guys did an okay job cleaning up after themselves, a few cans and napkins were left behind. Neither of us say a word to each other, but Cole picks it all up while I wipe everything down.

Shutting off the lights in the living area, he gives me a tired half-smile. “Goodnight, Zoey.”

I open my mouth to say goodnight back, but for some reason I can’t get any words to form. He goes into his bedroom, the door clicking quietly closed behind him.

I take a moment to steady myself, trying to wrap my head around the insane effect he has on me. Taking a bottle of water from the fridge, I gulp down half of it, hoping it’ll help cool down my suddenly flaming hot skin.

Changing into my pajamas, I crawl into my bed trying not to think about the gorgeous man sleeping only a wall away.



“ARE you seriously eating leftover pizza for breakfast?”

Cole looks up from his plate and swivels the barstool around to face me. He’s shirtless, showing off his incredible abs and the ink on his left arm and across his chest. I bite down on my lip, so I don’t whimper, squeezing my thighs together. I’m blaming the pulsing in my vagina on the fact that it’s been nearly six-months since I got laid. It definitely doesn’t have anything at all to do with my gorgeous roommate.

Did I say gorgeous?

Average.

He’s mediocre at best.

Who the hell am I kidding? Cole Anderson is runway worthy. He has the kind of face that makes you stop and look and the personality to draw you in

and make you stay. It's taken me only a few days to learn that.

"Leftover pizza is the best kind of pizza," he argues. "Especially when it's cold."

I wrinkle my nose. "We'll have to agree to disagree on that one." I open the fridge, pulling out a jar of the overnight oats I made the other day.

"You're going to eat that mush when you could have this?" He holds up a half-eaten slice.

"Um, yes." I grab some blueberries and sprinkle them on top along with a little bit of granola.

"Suit yourself." He shrugs while I take a spoon from the drawer, hip checking it closed.

Sitting on the other stool, I swivel to face him. "So, Cole, you're a senior, right?"

He stifles a grin and finishes chewing before answering. "Yes."

"And what's your major?"

His eyes sparkle with humor. "Journalism."

"And what are you going to do with that?"

This time his head falls back with laughter. "What is this? A job interview?"

"Sorry," I wince. "I'm trying to get to know you better, but you're right, this does sound like an interview."

"What are *you* studying?"

"I plan on becoming a physical therapist. I'm getting my bachelor's in health sciences before I enroll in my DPT program."

"Wow. I'm impressed."

I bristle at that. "Do I not look smart enough?" The words fly out of my mouth before I can stop them. I know I shouldn't have said it, but it's an insecurity of mine. All my life I've been underestimated by people because I don't look a certain way.

He rears back like I've slapped him. "Fuck, no. That's not what I meant at all, Zoey. It's just ... that shit is hard, and I know I could never do it, so yeah, I'm impressed."

"It's a sore subject for me," I whisper, stirring my oats. "My ... ex," I settle on, instead of *ex-fiancé*, "was constantly telling me it would be too hard for a woman and require too much studying."

"Fuck him. Or her."

"Him," I laugh.

A moment of silence passes before he adds, "I'm sorry he acted like you were inadequate."

"Yeah, well," I shrug, licking my spoon clean, "I think it's just because he was lacking in inches, so he wanted to make me feel just as small."

Cole chokes on his pizza and starts coughing. I reach over, beating his back. "Damn, girl," he gasps when he's recovered slightly, "warn a guy before you make him laugh that hard." Recovering, he asks, "How small did he make you feel?"

I know he's being serious, but I can't stop myself when I answer with, "Micro-sized."

"Oh, Jesus." He starts laughing all over again and I smile. I like his laugh a lot. It reminds me of syrup or honey. Rich and thick. "You're something else, Zoey. You know that."

"So, I've been told." I shrug my shoulders and finish my oats, hopping up from the chair to clean my jar. Leaning against the counter facing him it's impossible not to miss the way his eyes dip to my chest, barely held in my tank top. I've always been a curvier girl and used to guys checking out my assets, but there's something almost innocent in the way Cole does it. As soon as he realizes he's ogling my tits, his eyes dart away and he clears his throat. "Do you really like cold pizza?" I ask him. "Or were you too lazy to make an actual breakfast?"

His eyes come back to mine and I can see him fighting not to look down. It's kind of admirable how much of a gentleman he wants to be. But boobs.

"I don't mind cooking. I truly love cold leftover pizza."

"That's..."

"That's what?" He prompts, finishing his second slice.

"Interesting. I guess I've always been fascinated by every person's little quirks. Those tiny details of our personality that set us apart from the rest. Lots of people have the favorite color blue, but not everyone eats cold pizza for breakfast."

His eyes crinkle with a smile. "What's a quirk of yours?"

I think for a moment. "I never wear matching socks. Not because I'm lazy and can't match them, but because it feels like this tiny secret rebellion of mine. Society likes to put us in boxes, and most people always wear matching socks, but not conforming to that makes me feel like I've taken back a tiny bit of control."

"That's..." He pauses, shaking his head. "Fascinating. I wasn't expecting

that explanation.”

I smile, walking around the counter to head back to my room. “I’m full of surprises.”

I feel his eyes trail after me. “Yes, you are.”

**COLE**

“HOW’S MY BOY?” I smile at my mom’s voice as I walk out of my media writing class, heading for the exit so I can swing by the student dining hall for some lunch. I’m starving.

“Just leaving class and going to grab a bite to eat.”

“You haven’t called me this week,” she accuses, laying on the guilt.

“I’m sorry, I’ve been busy with classes and going to the gym in my spare time. I can’t be out of shape when practice starts.”

“I know, I know,” she chides. “But I’m your mother. I worry.” She takes a breath and continues, “Anyway, how is it going with Teddy? If I need to scold that boy, you just let me know. He’s a good boy but sometimes he needs a swift kick in the caboose.”

I try not to laugh as I exit the building, throwing up a hand when I see Murray across the quad. He spots me and jogs over in my direction. “Dining hall?” I mouth and he nods, falling into step beside me. “I’m actually not living with Teddy, Mom.”

“What do you mean?” She interrupts me. “Where will you live? Where *are* you living? I knew that boy needed his ass whooped.”

“It’s okay, it all worked out. I’m still in the same place, just got a new roommate.”

“Who?” she asks.

I open my mouth, ready to answer honestly. I don’t usually lie to my momma, I grew up knowing better than to do that, but I know if I tell her I’m living with a woman she’ll jump to conclusions. “Guy named Zach,” I blurt. “New guy on the basketball team.”



There is no new guy named Zach, but what she doesn't know won't hurt her.

"Well, I hope he's a good roommate. You are remembering to clean up after yourself aren't you?"

"Yes, Mom. I always cleaned up at Mascen's. I'm not a heathen."

"Exactly, I raised you right." Pride echoes in her voice.

"All right, I gotta go. I'm at the dining hall."

"Okay but promise to call me more."

"I will. I love you."

"I love you too, sweet boy."

I hang up the phone, sliding the device into my pocket and look over to find Murray grinning at me as we enter the building.

"You're a total momma's boy, aren't you?" He can't hold back his laughter.

I shrug, not at all ashamed. "I have four sisters. I'm the only boy. I'm all of their favorite."

He shakes his head, amused.

We head in separate directions to grab our lunch and meet back up at a table in the back near the windows.

Unwrapping my turkey sandwich, I dig in.

"You didn't tell your mom about Zoey." There's an accusatory tone in Murray's voice.

I cringe. Realizing it sounds bad, but... "You don't know my mom. She would assume Zoey's some secret girlfriend I've had for years and she'd want to meet her and make it into a whole thing. I love my mom, but I don't have the time for her matchmaking dramatics."

Murray throws his head back with laughter. "That's hilarious. I take it she's tried, and failed, to set you up in the past?" He waits for my answer.

Unscrewing the cap from my water, I give a nod. "Yeah, a few times. And by a few, I mean more than five. Hell, maybe more than ten. I know she means well, but I'll find a girl when the time is right."

Murray gives me an understanding nod, knowing all about the shit that went down last year. He plays on the baseball team with Mascen, so it was kind of impossible for him not to know.

"There's going to be a bonfire tonight to celebrate surviving the first week. You going?"

I look at a piece of lettuce on the table that fell from my sandwich. "I

guess.”

“Come on, free beer and chicks galore. What’s to miss?” He spreads his arms wide. “You know Teddy is bound to end up drunk, naked, and running through the woods again.”

I bust out laughing at the memories of the past three years. “You’d think he’d learn, but he never does.”

“Every year,” he echoes my thoughts. “You know, that dude’s going to be a fucking legend when we graduate.”

“He’s one of a kind,” I agree.

“Aw, are you guys talking about me?” Teddy claps my shoulder and drops into the empty chair beside me.

“Speak of the devil and the devil shall appear,” I mumble out loud.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. I bet the devil was handsome as fuck. That’s the real reason he got cast out of Heaven. God was jealous.”

Murray shakes with laughter. “Whatever you have to tell yourself, man.”

“Are you coming to the bonfire tonight?” Teddy must not have gotten close enough in time to hear my answer.

“Yeah, I’ll be there.” I’ll ask Zoey if she wants to go with me. I get the impression she doesn’t go out a lot, but for some reason I want her there. I know if she won’t go it’ll bother me and I’ll be worrying about her alone in the apartment, which is dumb.

“Good, good. None of you fuckers slip me tequila again. That stuff’s the devil’s juice.”

“And that’s exactly why we’ll be giving you some,” Murray counters, Australian accent thick with humor. It’s comical to think of an Australian guy playing baseball at an American university, but he grew up in the states when his parents immigrated when he was in middle school. For some reason he fell in love with the sport and is pretty fucking good at it. “I mean, obviously it’s made for you since it’s, what did you call it? The devil’s juice? And you’re claiming you’re as handsome as him.”

“Fuck, I really dug my own hole there didn’t I?”

“Yup.”

“Yeah, man.” I give him a fake-sympathetic nod of the head.

“Fine, but this time for the love of Mariah Carey make sure I don’t rub my naked body on a tree. I got a splinter in my ass cheek last year.”

“Thank God it wasn’t your dick,” I blurt, physically shuddering the thought of such a thing. The *pain*.

“Mariah Carey?” Murray asks. “Why her?”

“No idea,” Teddy answers with a shrug. “It was the first thing that popped in my head.”

I look down at the table to hide my smile. That’s one of the things I love about Teddy, you never fucking know what’s going to come out of that dude’s mouth.

Finishing my lunch, I say goodbye to the guys and toss my trash before heading to my next class. When the day is over, I drive home, but Zoey’s car isn’t in the lot yet.

Heading up to the apartment I go ahead and shower and change. It’ll be hours before the bonfire’s going, but I’d rather get ready now and have a few hours to chill. Maybe even take a nap. Definitely living the dream.

Two hours have passed by the time the door opens and Zoey looks exhausted when she walks in.

“Ugh,” she groans, dropping her bag to the floor. “This sucks.”

“What sucks?” I ask from the couch.

Her dark chocolate eyes meet mine. “I went to two pharmacies, a grocery store, a Dollar General, and even a bank and *no one* is hiring.”

She walks to the fridge and steals one of my root beers. I hide my smile, pretending to rub my nose. I fucking love how she was the one who brought up using each other’s stuff but she’s constantly stealing my root beer. It’s kind of adorable, not that I’d tell her that. I feel like Zoey is the kind of girl who would bristle at being called adorable.

“I know a mechanic shop hiring,” I remind her.

Her eyes light up. “I forgot about that.” With a resigned sigh, she asks, “You think they’d hire me?”

“I don’t see why not. I can grab you an application, or just drop by. It’s Zero-2-Sixty Auto Shop.”

“Thank you. I appreciate the help.”

I jerk my head in a nod. “You might want to get changed.”

Her eyes narrow on mine. “Why?”

“Bonfire tonight. There’s always a party out in a field near the old football field to celebrate the start of the year.”

“There’s an *old* football field, implying there’s a *new* one?”

I laugh. “Yeah, they put a brand new arena in about fifteen years ago, so the old field is just sort of there.”

She takes a couple of sips of root beer, a frown marring her lips. “What if

I don't want to go? I'm not that great at socializing.”

“Somehow, I don't believe that. But you should come. It'll be fun.”

She toys her bottom lip with her teeth. “Fine,” she agrees. “Let me shower first.”

“Don't worry, you've got plenty of time.”

**ZOEY**

“YOU’RE RIDING WITH ME,” Cole says, walking over to his pickup.

“I can drive myself.”

He levels me with a look. “No reason we can’t go together, Roomie.”

I don’t feel like arguing with him, so I agree. I cross over to his truck, the door creaking and screaming when I open it and then close it behind me. His truck smells of cinnamon and I find the reason for it when he reaches down and grabs a pack of Trident cinnamon gum, popping a piece into his mouth.

“You like gum,” I remark, noting all the empty packs littering the floor.

He laughs, cranking the engine. “Yeah, I chew it mostly when I’m nervous. It distracts me.”

“Are you nervous now?”

“Nah, just want some gum.” He grins over at me, his teeth blindingly white in the darkness as he pulls out of the apartment complex. “You look nice.”

I look at my ripped jean shorts and my white ratty high-top Converse. I put on a white crop top and my favorite gold necklace. It was my mother’s, and she gave it to me on my sixteenth birthday. The flower charm with her birthstone in the center is one of my most cherished possessions. Ironically enough it was my dad who gave it to her on their one-year-dating-anniversary.

“I’m not dressed up.”

He shrugs, checking both ways before making a left turn at the stop sign. “Doesn’t mean you can’t look nice. Surely you know you’re beautiful, Zoey.”

My treacherous stomach dances with the flutters of a million butterflies. “You’re not allowed to say that.”

“Why not? I’m not hitting on you, just stating fact.”

A flush steals over my body, a fire building inside me. I need to douse it before it gets out of control. “Do you mind if I put the window down?”

“Nope.” He turns the radio up, *That’s My Kind of Night* by Luke Bryan playing. I roll the window down with the hand crank and lean out, letting my arms loose in the window. “What the fuck? Get back in here.”

He grabs onto the back of my shirt with one hand, trying to yank me backwards. He manages it easily since he’s a hell of a lot bigger and stronger than me.

I shove his hand off me. “Stop, I’m fine. I want to feel the air.”

“You’re crazy,” he grumbles.

“Ten seconds, that’s all I ask.”

He mutters reluctant agreement but holds onto my belt loop when I lean out this time.

I count down my seconds and settle back into the seat, leaving the window down. My curly hair swirls around my shoulders and I revel in the sting of the air on my cheeks.

After my mom died, I had my best friend drive me around while I leaned out the car window just like I did tonight. It was a reminder that was I alive, that I could still feel the air on my face and let it fill my lungs, while my mom couldn’t—it was my way of telling myself I had to keep going.

Little did I know a few short years later I’d be losing that friend too, but for very different reasons. It doesn’t make the loss any easier to bear.

“What are you thinking about?” Cole gives me a speculative glance.

I inhale that stinging crisp nightly air into my lungs. “Friendships,” I reply.

How they form. How they grow. How they fall apart.

I can tell he wants to ask more, but he doesn’t. He turns onto a backroad near the university, and soon we’re bumping over the land. Lanterns hang from some of the trees, lighting the way. Eventually we come to an open area where lots of cars are parked, and he pulls off at the first empty spot.

“Nobody better block me in again like last year.” I’m rolling up the window when he clears his throat. “Look, if you decide to go back home with someone tonight ... let me know. I...” He scratches the back of his head awkwardly. “I worry,” he finishes with.

I stare at him with an arched brow. “And what if you decide to do the same? Am I stranded here?”

He snorts, rolling his eyes. “I won’t be bringing anyone back.”

“Well, I won’t be going home with anyone. I’ve sworn off men.”

He cracks a grin. “What did my fellow man do to you?”

I press my lips together, weighing whether to be honest, lie, or flat out ignore him. Taking a steadying breath, I meet his eyes. “My ex cheated on me.” He lets out a low whistle. “With my best friend.”

“Damn.” His eyes fill with sympathy. “I don’t know exactly how you feel, but I liked this girl last year, a lot, but it turned out she used to know my best friend and there was a spark there for them.”

I smile in understanding. “We’re two sad saps aren’t we?”

He chuckles, pulling the key from the ignition. “No point in being sad when there’s free beer just around the corner.” He winks.

He opens his door and I do the same, meeting him in front of the truck.

Insects chirp from the nearby grasses along with the occasional hoot from an owl. There’s a path cut through the woods that we follow, music in the distance growing louder.

“You ever go to anything like this at your old school?”

“No, never.” Not that I didn’t go out, but if we had things like bonfires, I never knew about it.

We approach an open field and I’m astounded by the amount of people here. It’s hundreds of students, enough to get lost in. I’m glad I have Cole’s number, because I’m not about to get left behind here.

Cole checks his phone and motions for me to follow him to the right where we meet up with the group of guys that were at the apartment on Monday along with some girls that are either girlfriends or just hangers-on.

“My man.” Teddy approaches, doing that guy hand-grab-hug thing with Cole. “Let’s get you guys some drinks.”

We follow him over to an open cooler and he pulls out two of the beers he was drinking at the apartment and passes them over.

“Thanks,” I say, popping the top off on the side of the cooler.

I feel a little awkward standing there with Cole and his friends. They’ve known each other for years and I’m just his roommate. I sling back the beer, gulping down half.

Teddy watches with wide eyes and grins. “My kind of girl.”

“Find another,” Cole growls at him.

Teddy turns his smile to Cole. “Interesting.” Gaze flicking between the two of us he gives a shrug. “I’m going to find me a lady to dance with. Unless you wanna be my girl?”

“*Teddy.*”

Teddy winks at me. “Sorry, I think you’re claimed.”

“Claimed?” I look at Cole, unable to keep the snarl off my face.

He rubs his jaw, blowing out a breath. “He thinks I ... it doesn’t matter. I just don’t want him messing with you with unwanted advances ... unless you do want them.”

“I’m not interested in him.” I try to ignore the obvious relief on Cole’s face as he turns away, hoping I don’t see it. “He’s a goof and fun to have around, but not my type.”

He rubs his lips together, and I know there’s a question on the tip of his tongue. But he doesn’t voice anything. Instead, he slides his hands into his pocket and pulls out a fresh piece of gum. This time I think it *is* because he’s nervous.

I finish my beer and add it to the growing empty pile beside the cooler. Fluffing my hair, I shake out my arms and smile at my roommate. “I’m going to dance. Alone.”

His eyes follow me as I walk over to the actual fire where some people sit on the ground but quite a few are dancing. *Sail* by AWOLNATION plays, the beat vibrating along with the pulse of my blood flowing through my veins.

I danced from the time I was four through high school. Even though I love math and the sciences, and consider myself on the more studious side, dance has been my creative outlet, a passion. I know I’m good at it, and as I move my body, eyes closed, I know people are watching. When I dance I don’t care why they’re looking at me or what they’re thinking. I do it for me. Because it feels good to move my body, to exist in a moment. Dance is freeing, it’s the language of our bodies.

When I finally open my eyes, they connect immediately with caramel brown ones. He’s moved closer to the bonfire, beer bottle in hand while his jaw works angrily at the piece of gum he’s chewing.

I know I shouldn’t do it.

I’ve sworn off men.

He’s my roommate.

He’s hot as hell.

But I do it anyway.



I crook my finger. It's a challenge, a silent dare. The ball's in his court.

He shoves the bottle into the hand of one of his friends, slinking toward me like a panther. When he gets to me he wraps one big hand around my waist, the heat of his palm a brand against my skin. He begins to move to the song as well, and despite our massive height difference it works—we work, but I don't let my brain linger on that thought too long.

I don't know if he has any formal dance training, but he moves like someone who has at least some knowledge or basic understanding of rhythm. The fire crackles nearby, and I faintly taste ash on my tongue. His brows are drawn low as he watches me, our movements evenly matched as we anticipate each other's movements. People still watch, but this time they're not just watching me. It's us. Normally I would be scared to put on a show like this, I'm not this bold, but after everything with Todd some spontaneity won't kill me. In fact, I think it'll be good for me. It also helps that on this campus no one knows who I am. I like the anonymity of it. I can be anyone.

*He knows you,* my conscience whispers to me.

But not really, sure he knows who I am, but Cole doesn't know much of my past, of my hurts, the scars I bear. And tonight, I just want to be, to exist in this moment.

With both hands on my waist, he dips me backwards and my hair falls with me, the ends touching the grass. When he pulls me back up, we're closer than before. Chest to chest. Heartbeat to heartbeat—well, maybe not quite since he's such a giant. I crane my neck back as we sway, our hips moving in a sensual rhythm, and our eyes meet.

Lust.

Desire.

Sex.

It's there. In his gaze. Mine too. We can't go there, not just because we're living together, but because I need time. To heal. To stand on my own two feet. To grow.

I pull out of his arms. "No. I can't. I'm sorry." I bite my lip, truly remorseful. "I'm sorry," I repeat, taking a step back.

Another.

One more.

Until I'm disappearing into the shadows.

"*I'm sorry,*" I whisper again, but he's not listening.

No one is.

The words are for myself.

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**COLE**

ZOEY IS pretending nothing happened last night. That we didn't share something. And since she's acting that way, I'm following her lead.

We walk side by side in the grocery store, picking up some necessities, and on the way back home I promised I'd take her to my job and introduce her to Joe.

Zoey drops a bag of apples in the cart, followed by oranges, and grapes. Apparently, the girl likes her fruit. Next are bananas, some sweet potatoes, and bags of salad.

We decided it would be easier to shop together and split the costs since we like a lot of the same stuff. I don't let it show, but I'm highly amused by it after her whole not wanting to share speech.

"Do you like zucchini?" She picks up the phallic shaped vegetable.

"No."

She puts it in the cart. "You'll like it the way I make it."

I curse under my breath, scrubbing a hand over my face. I like *her* and that's the problem. My eyes watch her ass as she walks in front of me.

*Look away. Don't go there.*

We make it through the entire store and then she starts down the cookie aisle.

Turning to look at me over her shoulder, she lifts a finger in warning. "Don't say a thing."

"About what?"

"Root beer and cinnamon gum are your vices." She eyes the packs of IBC and gum in the cart. "This is mine." She pulls six packs of red velvet Oreos

off the shelf and places them in the cart with everything else. “Do you want any? Because I’m not sharing.”

I can’t help but laugh. “You’re not very good at sharing, are you?”

“I’m an only child.” She gives a shrug like that explains it all. “Well,” she frowns, “I guess technically I’m not, but I never grew up with siblings.” We head toward the checkout and her eyes light up at the floral section. “Plants!” She shrieks like a kid on Christmas. “Ooh, I have to get one.” I pull the cart to the side, letting people go around us as Zoey squeals over the various plants. “I’m getting this one,” she decrees.

“That’s a peace lily.”

She gives me a puzzled look. “Yes.”

“Aren’t those for funerals?”

“They’re for anything, Cole, and I want one. I like plants. I’m impressed you know what a peace lily is.”

“My mom worked at a flower shop.” She nods as she absorbs this information. “Do you want any more plants while you’re here?”

She eyes them and picks a white orchid. “This one. Don’t worry, I’ll pay for the plants separately.”

“I wasn’t worried about your plants, Zoey.”

Though, I suppose I should be since it’s not like I have a ton of spare money sitting around.

We checkout and load the groceries in the back of her car. I get in the passenger seat, my legs cramped even with the seat all the way back. At my height I’m used to squeezing my body in small spaces.

I give Zoey directions to the auto shop, which isn’t far and have her park in front of the building.

“You’re going in with me?” She eyes me when I unbuckle my seatbelt.

“Yeah. Thought I’d make the introduction since I’m the one vouching for you.”

She wrinkles her nose, displeased at my involvement but she’s going to have to deal. I unfold my body from the car and head to the door.

Zero-2-Sixty is a small auto shop in the middle of the old town outside of Aldridge. It’s definitely seen better days—the brown paneling in the front office reminds me of the seventies along with the puke green fabric covered chairs for customers to wait on.

Still, despite the appearance, the place is always busy.

“We’re booked,” Joe gruffs, eyes glued to the computer screen and

clicking madly at the mouse.

“It’s me, Joe.”

“Cole,” he cajoles in his booming voice, raspy from all the cigarettes he smokes despite always claiming to have quit. “You’re not working today.”

“Nope.” I shake my head, moving aside so he can see Zoey behind me. “I brought someone who’s interested in the front office position.”

“Ah,” he brightens. “Cole, my boy, I can always count on you to save the day.”

“Hi. I’m Zoey.” She holds out her hand for Joe to take.

“Are you Cole’s girlfriend?”

Her eyes drift to me at his question, her top teeth pressing into her bottom lip. “No, we’re roommates. I’m new to town and looking for a job. Cole suggested this.”

“Good, I’m glad. I hate doing this shit.” He waves his fingers at the computer screen. “And don’t get me started on the phones. All these Karen’s calling expecting me to have an opening right away all ‘cause they got a nail in their tire.” He sighs. “You okay with computers? Phones? Customer service?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re hired.”

Zoey’s brows draw together. “That’s it? That was hardly an interview. Don’t you want to do a background check or something?”

Joe fiddles with his mustache. “You killed someone?”

“No.”

“Robbed a bank?”

“No.”

“Then that’s good enough for me.” He scratches at his stubble. “I assume you’re at the university too?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ll work out a good schedule for you then. Anything will help me out. I’d rather be in the shop and much as I can. And don’t listen to anything this kid says,” he points a lazy finger at me, “I taught him everything he knows about cars.”

“You keep telling yourself that, Joe.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he dismisses me.

He takes Zoey’s phone number, promising to call her on Monday since the shop is closed on Sundays.

Back in her car, Zoey starts it up and after clearing her throat gives me a tiny smile. “Thank you for helping me with the job.”

“It’s not a problem.”

“You didn’t have to, though, so I want you to know I appreciate it.”

“It’s really not a big deal.” I don’t do well with praise, I never have—not even sure why.

She laughs. “Can you just say *you’re welcome*, Zoey, so we can move on?”

I crack a grin. “You’re welcome, Zoey.”

Back at the apartment, between the two of us we manage to carry up all the groceries in one trip. I set mine down, digging in my pocket for the key. Unlocking it, I let her inside first.

Zoey screams, dropping the bags in her hands. Something breaks, probably the jar of spaghetti sauce.

“Parkour!”

“What the fuck?” I turn on the light to find a half-asleep Teddy slicing his hands through the air like a ninja. “How the hell did you get in here?”

“I still have a key.” He rubs a hand over his face, blowing out a tired breath as he sits back on the couch. “Jude brought a bunch of girls back to the dorm after the bonfire and I can’t get caught up in that shit. If anyone posts a pic and my parents see me partying with a bunch of girls like that, I’m cut off. So, I left him and some of the other football players there, walked around campus for a while, and the next thing I knew it was morning and I hadn’t slept, but I was scared to go back to the dorm. I took an Uber here because I wasn’t sure if I was sober yet. I knocked but no one answered.”

“So, you let yourself in?”

“Exactly.” He throws out a hand, pleased I’ve caught on.

“Teddy, you don’t live here. You scared the shit out of Zoey *and* me. Say you’re sorry and help her clean up. And for the love of God put some fucking pants on.” Shaking my head, I mutter, “I can’t believe you showed up here, let yourself in, and proceeded to strip down to your boxers to sleep on the couch.”

“I wanted to be comfy,” he protests, wiggling his hips. “And sorry, Zoey. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

Zoey turns to me, shaking her head. Her lips are pursed. I can tell she’s pissed. “Your friend is insane.”

“I’m not insane,” he protests. “Just lonely. Won’t you love me, Zoey?”

She stares him down with a hard look. “No.”

“Dude.” I snap my fingers. “Clean up.” I point at the red sauce spreading all over the tiled entry. I’m grateful it didn’t get on the light-colored carpet.

“Right.” He sighs, getting up.

I bring the rest of the groceries in and then with the three of us, we make quick work of getting rid of the mess.

“Why didn’t you go to Mascen’s?” I ask him.

He wrinkles his nose. “You know Mascen ... why would I go there when I have a key here?”

I level him with a look. “Because you’re not supposed to have a key. You. Don’t. Live. Here.”

“Dude, don’t do me like that.” He puts his hands up in a begging motion, lower lip juttled out. He’s still knelt on the floor, so he looks absolutely comical, like a scorned lover begging for forgiveness. “I feel like an unwanted child in the middle of a divorce. Just love me.”

Zoey snorts. “More like you’re the world’s most annoying Golden Retriever.” She pets his head, ruffling his hair. “Who’s a good boy? I’ll get you a treat if you can do a trick.”

Teddy looks offended for one second before he perks up, intrigue lighting his eyes. “What kind of treat?”

“*One* red velvet Oreo.”

“Ew, red velvet? Pass. I was hoping it was a kiss.”

She pets him again. “Sorry, I don’t kiss dogs.”

“Zoey!” He calls after her as she walks down the hall to her room. “You can’t leave me like this, we’re meant to be, I know it.”

She gives him the finger over her shoulder, laughing as she closes the door.

“That’s one girl I’d let break my heart.” He grins at me as he stands.

“Don’t even go there,” I growl, eyes narrowed in warning. “She’s off limits.”

He dances away from me. “Ooh, you got the hots for her? You calling dibs on her?”

“I’m not calling anyone. She’s my roommate.”

His eyes grow serious and he stills. “Fuck, man. You like her.”

“No, I don’t.”

He grabs a water bottle from the fridge, twisting off the cap. “Who are you trying to convince? Me or yourself?”

I grab a piece of gum from my pocket, taking off the foil wrapper and putting it in my mouth. “You’re crazy.”

“That, I am. But I’m not stupid.” He taps the side of his head. “And you *like* her.”

“Shut up,” I grumble, taking the groceries out of the bag so I can put everything away.

Zoey reappears, having changed from her jeans into a pair of leggings and a loose shirt. Somehow, she still looks effortlessly gorgeous, her warm skin glowing, and her eyes bright with life. The gold necklace she never seems to take off glimmers at her neck.

Teddy smacks me in the stomach, and I turn to glare at him. “Tell me again that you’re not into her,” he mutters under his breath.

I don’t reply. There’s no point. I’m a liar and he’s right. We both know it. No need to confirm it.

Zoey grabs one of the boxes of Oreos and rips it open, snatching three cookies. “God, I love these. They’re not good for my ass, but I can’t seem to stop eating them.”

“Nothing’s wrong with your ass. Believe me.”

“*Teddy*.” I slap the back of his head. “Don’t say shit like that.”

“What? She has a nice ass. It’s a compliment. Did you guys get any orange juice?”

I blink at him in disbelief. “We’re talking about orange juice now?”

“Yeah, I want some. You get any?” He tries to peer at the groceries behind me.

“Sometimes I wonder how your brain works,” I mutter, passing him the bottle. He takes the top off and removes the seal, lifting it to his lips to drink straight from it. “Whoa, I don’t think so.” I swipe it back.

“Dude, are you the orange juice police?”

“I don’t want your backwash in it.”

“A little spit won’t kill you. Germs are good for you. Immunity and all that shit.”

I shake my head in disbelief, grabbing a glass and pouring some out. I hand the cup to him and recap the bottle. “There’s a difference between normal germs and yours.”

“I don’t have to take this abuse,” he scoffs, taking his glass with him over to the couch where he sits beside Zoey. “Protect me, Mom. Dad’s being mean.”



She giggles at his antics. “Aw, poor baby boy not allowed to drink from the carton. What a tragedy.”

“Truly. It’s a crime. Don’t tell Cole but you’re my new best friend.”

“I’m right here!” I toss my hands up. “I can hear you. Besides, since when have we been *best* friends?”

“Since Mascen ditched us for Rory. We were the three best friends anyone could have, but now we’re just two bros chillin’ in the hot tub five feet apart cuz we’re not gay.”

“Wow, you managed to get two references in there. That’s impressive.”

He bows from his seated position. “It’s a talent, I know. Hold your applause.”

Zoey laughs, and fuck if that sound doesn’t stir something inside me. I tamp it down, focusing back on the remaining groceries that need to be put away.

“So,” Teddy continues, I swear the guy could carry on a conversation with an inanimate object, “Mom, Dad, can we watch a movie? I vote for the classic two-thousand-and-two film *Ice Age*. It’s a cinematic masterpiece and Sid, oh dear sweet, confused Sid, is my spirit animal.”

“Should I give you a baby to take care of?”

“Fuck no, don’t even put that juju out there, dude.” He wipes his body off like he’s trying to rid himself of said juju. “I always wrap it before I tap it. I’m not ready for any Teddy Juniors running around.”

“We could give you a sack of flour to pretend with.”

“Does this mean you don’t want to watch *Ice Age*? *Isn’t there anyone who cares about Sid the sloth?*” He taps his chest, and adds, “Besides me, of course.”

I stare at him, my mouth half-open. “Is your brain full of useless information like that, that you just pull out when you feel like it?”

He points at me. “You say useless, I say useful. Tomato, potato.”

Zoey bursts into laughter, shaking her head. “Come on, honey, can we keep him? I’ve always wanted a dog.”

“Don’t entertain his insanity. We’ll never get rid of him.”

“Hey!” he protests.

I continue on, undeterred. “He’s like a stray cat, you feed it once and *it* adopts *you*.”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “Cat? More like a panther. Or a lion. Or a tiger. I’m no house cat.”

“No, you’re a puppy.” Zoey musses his hair again.

I throw my hands up. “Put the damn movie on.”

Like an eager five-year-old Teddy excitedly gets the movie going.

“You want anything?” I ask Zoey, pointing to the fridge.

“Nah, I’m good.”

Teddy settles on the couch beside her and I give him a warning glare, pointing my finger. “No funny business.”

He mock-gasps. “I’m a gentleman.”

Mhmm, sure he is.

“I can’t believe we’re watching this.”

“Shh,” Teddy hushes me.

Zoey giggles, her eyes glittering with happiness when they connect with mine. I let out a small laugh too.

Sure, there are plenty of other things we could be doing on a Saturday afternoon as college kids, but I guess this isn’t so bad.



## ZOEY

I WAKE up in the middle of the night, pain spasming in my abdomen.

*Oh no.*

“Oh no, oh no, oh no,” I chant turning the light on.

I knew my period was due to start in a few days, but I didn’t think it would start this soon. I went off birth control after Todd and I broke up. The one I was on never suited my body, but he was so adamant on not wearing a condom that I couldn’t risk going off of it to switch. My doctor suggested I give my body some time without it before I tried something else. I wasn’t keen on the idea since I’ve always had horrible periods, but I went along with it.

I’ve regretted it ever since.

I can feel the wetness in my pajama pants but it’s nothing compared to the pain that woke me.

Reaching over, I turn on my bedside light and toss back the covers to reveal the murder scene. It’s not the worst I’ve seen, but bad enough to let me know a blood clot probably burst.

The joy of being a woman.

I make a mental note to make an appointment at the student health center as soon as possible. Screw my old doctor, I’m not dealing with this shit any longer.

Easing from my bed, another cramp clenches my body and I bite down on my lip to stifle the whimper that’s desperate to escape.

I grab a clean pair of pajamas and the granny panties I save for Aunt Flo.

Okay, I wear them other times too but that’s because they’re so comfy.

I tiptoe into the hall, sweat on my brow from the painful cramps. Shutting the bathroom door as quietly as possible, I sit down on the toilet to deal with the blood bath. Reaching across to the bathroom cabinet, I reach for the bag that I keep my tampons and pads in.

I flail through it.

Nothing.

Zilch.

Nada.

I silently curse myself for not restocking. What the hell was I thinking?

The truth is I was focused on preparing for my move here and forgot to buy more.

I cringe, knowing what I'm going to have to do because there's no way I can drive to the store in pain like I am.

After cleaning myself up, I stuff some toilet paper in my underwear for the time being and treat my soiled clothes, tossing them in the washer. I don't start it. I'll have to add my sheets too.

Whimpering as another painful cramp hits I knock on Cole's door and ease it open.

"Huh?" His sleepy voice is gruff, deeper than normal. "Zoey?" He turns his light on, blinking from the brightness. "It's three in the morning. What's wrong?"

I scrub a hand over my face. I hate doing this—asking anyone for a favor. But desperate times call for desperate measures. "I need your help."

"Sure." Cole rolls out of his bed and I have to catch my breath at the site of him in only a pair of black boxer-briefs. He's so tall and muscular and *perfect*. It's annoying really, for anyone to have a face that gorgeous *and* the body to match. It's unfair to every other male on the planet.

*Now's not the time to stare at him, Zoey!*

Rubbing my eyes as he grabs a pair of sweatpants, slipping his long legs into them, I sigh and say really fast, "I need you to go get me pads and tampons. I'm out. Honestly, my intense craving for red velvet Oreos *should* have tipped me off that it was coming, but even if it had, I didn't realize I was out of everything I need and—"

I jolt at the feel of his warm hand on my elbow. He lowers himself so he can look me straight in the face. He has a shirt half-tugged on and he looks fully awake now. "Zoey, it's fine. Just tell me what you need and I'll get it."

"Really?"

My brain instantly goes to Todd who turned his nose up at anything female product related.

“Yeah.” He grabs his wallet and keys off his dresser. “Do you need any medicine?”

“Some Midol. Extra strength.”

“Okay, and what kind of pads and tampons do you want? I know you girls can be really specific about that kind of thing.”

I blink at him in awe. *Who is this man?* He’s too good to be true.

“Girlfriend?” I ask.

Somehow, he knows exactly what I mean despite my vague question.

“Four sisters, remember? I’m a pro at this despite being the youngest. They made sure I was well-versed in dealing with this very situation.”

Tears prick my eyes, because in this moment I’m just so freaking grateful. I wince when another bad cramp rips through me. Cole’s grip on my elbow tightens, his gaze sympathetic.

“I’ll text you what I want.” My body feels heated all over from the pain. “Let me get you some money.”

“Zoey,” he says in that deep, steady voice, “don’t worry about that right now. Just text me what you want, and I’ll get it. You’re hurting.”

“Thank you.” A tear falls.

Before I have the chance to swat it away, he captures it with his big thumb. “Don’t cry,” he practically begs.

“Hormones.”

It’s so much more than that. In the past five minutes this man who’s my roommate, and maybe slowly becoming my friend, and yeah that I’m attracted to, has shown me more kindness than Todd ever did in our relationship and I was too blind to see it. I hate that I stayed so long and got even more hurt in the end.

*“You’re just not enough for me, Zoey. You aren’t what I want.”*

I remember his words so clearly when I caught him in bed with Liza.

Liza with her pale blonde hair, her big blue eyes, and pert small boobs was the complete opposite of my darker complexion, black hair, and brown eyes. I’d always thought I was pretty enough, but in that moment his words brought back a long-ago buried fear that I was too different to truly be beautiful.

“Hey,” Cole whispers, rubbing his thumb over my cheek. “Where’d you go in that pretty head of yours?”

I smile faintly at the word pretty. “Thinking about people who aren’t worth my time. Thank you. You have no idea what this means to me.”

“It’s not a big deal. I’d do this for anyone.”

I know he means that too. It hasn’t taken me long to realize that Cole is a special, rare kind of guy.

The most amazing thing is I think he’s completely unaware of it.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

I feel cold when his hand falls from my cheek. The door closes behind him a few seconds later.

I waddle back to my room, uncomfortable thanks to the toilet paper stuffed in my underwear. Grabbing my phone, I text him what I want and get my comforter off the bed and one side of the fitted sheet before I feel wetness seeping down my leg. I look down, cursing at the line of red.

I hurry back to the bathroom, whimpering at the mess.

I do the best I can and start a bubble bath, grabbing a fresh set of pajamas from my room for the second time. It’s the only way I’ll truly feel clean. I send a text to Cole, letting him know that I’m getting in the bath and to hang the bag on the bathroom door, along with another long-winded thank you.

The bath helps immensely with the cramps and helps slow down my flow as well.

Slipping out of the bath, I dry myself off and wrap the towel around myself before I take the bag from the door.

Bless him.

Coming out of the bathroom, I pause at the entry to my bedroom in stunned silence. Cole looks up, giving me a half-smile. “I saw the...” He flicks his fingers at the bed. “Anyway, I started the laundry and I’m almost done putting these on.”

He’s putting clean sheets on for me.

I woke him up at three in the morning for tampons and he comes back and doesn’t crash like a normal person. No, he sees the state of my bed and finishes removing my sheets, adding it to the washer and starting it, and then proceeds to put clean sheets on.

*Hormones, get ahold of yourself. I’m not going to cry again.*

“Thank you. I can finish this.”

“Nah, I got it. Go take some medicine. I also got you a hot water bottle. It’s in the kitchen.”

“I don’t want this to go to your head or anything, but you’re really kind of

amazing.”

He gives me a small half-smile. I know he’s going to say it’s not a big deal again or something of the sort so I leave before he can. I take the Midol and fill the bottle. I didn’t even think about how much help one of these might be. But he did.

I wander back down the hall to my room, just as he’s finishing putting the pillows back on my mattress.

“Is there anything else I can do to help you?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue, to ask him to stay, because I hate being alone when I’m hurting, but I don’t. It’s not right to ask him of that, especially when we’re still getting to know each other and when I’m already fighting my attraction.

“I’m good, thank you.”

He walks around me to leave. “If you need me, just wake me up again. I don’t mind.”

I jerk my head in a nod.

Setting the hot water bottle on the bed, I grab a towel from the bathroom and lay it down. I’m praying the worst is over, but I’d rather mess up a towel than my bed all over again. Burrowing beneath the covers, I hold the heat against my stomach. The Midol starts to kick in, and I fall back to sleep easily.



“HOW ARE YOU FEELING?” Cole asks, when he ventures out of his bedroom in the morning. I got up earlier than normal, paranoid about bleeding through my clothes again. The few hours of extra sleep I did get were a big help.

“Better. Thanks to you.”

He waves off my praise, heading for the fridge. He pulls out the orange juice and pours it into a cup. “I’m going to make an omelet, you want one?”

I frown at the idea of eggs. “No thank you, but would you mind bringing me one of my Oreos?”

I’m currently laying on the couch, burrowed beneath a blanket and don’t want to leave my comfy spot if I don’t have to.

He grabs me two Oreos—smart man—and brings them over.

I nibble on one, not allowing myself to worry about how this is hardly a



suitable breakfast. Sometimes you have to say screw it and eat the dessert first.

There's a knock on the door and he arches a brow. "Are you expecting someone?"

I shake my head.

He crosses the room to the door and swings it open, revealing Teddy standing there with a Krispy Kreme box.

"Morning, Dad. Mom." Teddy smiles in my direction. "I come bearing gifts. The light was on." He lifts the box. "Hot and delicious glazed donuts. Except for the cake batter one—the yellow with sprinkles—that's mine, don't think about taking it."

"Why are you here?" Cole asks him as Teddy pushes his way inside, setting the box on the coffee table. He picks up my feet, blanket and all, and sits down, letting my legs rest back on his lap.

"My spidey senses were tingling and I knew you guys were missing me. Surprise! Here I am." He tosses his hands in the air.

Cole shakes his head, locking the door. "Trust me, we weren't missing you."

"Dad, don't hurt my feelings. They're fragile."

"Yeah, talk nice to our doggy."

Teddy grins at me. "I like belly rubs."

"Go somewhere else for those. But I will take a donut."

Teddy leans over and opens the box, passing me a glazed. Cole shakes his head, resigned to the fact that we just can't seem to get rid of Teddy, which is honestly comical since he was supposed to be his roommate. I'm not going to complain, though. I'm happy that didn't work out and I ended up with a nice place to say. Honestly, this is way better than living in a dorm and Cole's much easier to get along with than a girl can be.

"We should do something fun today."

"No," Cole and I say simultaneously.

He's chopping some peppers, preparing the ingredients for his omelet.

"Fun suckers," Teddy mutters, picking up his donut. It's just as bright and colorful as his personality. Glancing at me, he inquires, "Do you like baseball, Zoey?"

"No."

He gasps. "But I play baseball."

"This is good news then. You can be my favorite player."

“Damn straight.” He grins, holding up his fist.

I reluctantly pull my arm from beneath the blanket and bump my hand against his.

“You better be cheering me on in the stands in the spring.”

“Keep dreaming.”

“Leave Zoey alone,” Cole grumbles from the kitchen. I can’t help but notice the way his back muscles flex, even in his cotton shirt.

“Zoey loves me.”

“Did she say that?” Cole retorts.

“Well, no, but—”

“Why aren’t you with Jude?”

Teddy pretends to gag. “He went for a run. Asked me to go, but no way in hell am I doing that. Learned my lesson with Mascen. Running’s the devil.”

“Who’s this Mascen you guys are always talking about? Am I ever going to get to meet him?”

“He was at the bonfire. Sorry we didn’t introduce you.” Teddy gives me a sheepish smile. “It seemed like you two had a good time, though.” He winks, reminding me of Joey from *Friends*. Honestly, they even have similar personalities.

I was kind of surprised he didn’t bring up the bonfire yesterday, but maybe he was still hungover enough to not remember.

“It was fun,” Cole replies in a monotone, sliding his breakfast onto a plate. He grabs a fork and starts digging in on his way over, where he drops into the chair.

“I enjoyed it.”

Teddy grins, eyes darting between us. “Uh-huh. I might’ve been making out with one of the sorority girls—Jessica? Or maybe it was Savannah? No, it was definitely Kayla. Anyway, that doesn’t matter, what does is the fact that I saw you two.” He waggles his finger between us then smacks his hands together. “Fireworks. Boom. Pow. Chemistry.”

Cole’s eyes connect with mine for the briefest second before we both hastily break eye contact.

“You know, I once met a fortune teller at a fair and she told me I have the Eye for these kinds of things. I’m telling you now, you two...” Teddy gives a low whistle. “Something is there.”

Cole gives his friend an incredulous look. “You know that shit isn’t real. She was just fucking with you.”

“She was legit man, I’m telling you. Long flowing skirt, beads, all those dangly bracelets that clinked when she walked. The things she told me man ... she was the real deal, I know it.”

Cole stares down at his eggs, lips twitching.

“Fine, don’t believe me.” He takes a massive bite of his donut, eating almost half of it in the one bite. “But I know the truth.”

I look back at Cole, our eyes connecting for the briefest of seconds.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. Yeah, I think we know the truth too, but we’re both going to keep lying to ourselves and each other because it’s easier.



## COLE

I GRUNT, pushing the barbell up. Teddy spots me, counting out loud.

When my arms start to shake, he yells, “Are you fucking weak, man? Push it up! I know you’re better than this!”

Groaning, I crank out three more reps before I’m done. I’m dripping with sweat as I climb off the bench. I grab my towel, drying my face.

Teddy adjusts the weights and then it’s his turn. I stand over him to spot, looking around the gym. I see Mascen near the end with Murray.

I need to talk to him, I know. Selfishly, there’s a part of me that wants to put all the blame on him and make him do all the work, but that’s not how friendship goes, and if ours has any chance of survival it’s going to take both of us working at it.

Teddy finishes up and I tap him on the shoulder. “I’m going to go talk to Mascen.”

“Seriously?” His eyes widen, noticing him at the other side of the gym. “It’s about damn time. Get to it.” He slaps my ass with his towel. “I’m going to shower. A few of us are going to Harvey’s tonight. You in?”

I ponder it for a moment. “Maybe.”

“Cool, text me later if you decide to come.”

I give him a nod and count silently in my head to ten before I walk over to Mascen and Murray.

“Mind if we talk?”

Murray clears his throat. “Play nice,” he jokes, walking off with a grin.

I sigh, rubbing the back of my head. I should’ve thought about this more before I walked over, had some idea what I was going to say.

“I’ve been a dick to you, I know,” I blurt it out there, getting it off my chest.

Mascen’s brows rise. “You haven’t been a dick, man. Sure, you’ve been distant, but fuck, I don’t blame you.” He pushes his fingers through his sweat-damp hair. “You know I’m sorry, and I’m not the type to keep repeating myself so I’ve chosen to keep my distance and hoped ... I don’t know, that one day we could move on. I don’t want to lose you as my friend, but...”

“But Rory is more important,” I finish for him.

Maybe it’s because I’ve been living with Zoey for a month now, but I’m beginning to see how ridiculous I’ve been about this whole thing.

“Yeah, she is.” He gets a look in his eyes that’s impossible to mistake for anything except pure love. Who would’ve thought that out of all of us that Mascen would be the one to fall in love first?

I hold my hand out to him and he eyes it skeptically. “Let’s put this shit behind us.”

“You sure?” He looks skeptical, eyeing my hand like it’s a snake that might decide to strike at any second.

“Yeah.” I’m tired of holding onto a grudge that was dumb to begin with, dragging it out would be pointless and immature of me and I like to think I’m above such things.

He takes my hand. “All right, then.”

“Are you gonna be at Harvey’s tonight?”

“Yeah, we will be.” I know he means him and Rory.

“I’ll see you there, then. You’re buying my drinks.” I point a finger at him, daring him to say no. We both know he can afford it.

He laughs. “Sure thing, man.”

Tapping his shoulder, I walk away and head to the showers so I can get to the auto shop for a few hours this afternoon. Zoey’s supposed to be working too so it’ll be the perfect time to tell her I’m dragging her out with us. I know if it was left up to her, she’d stay in the apartment and study the majority of the time.

Thirty minutes later I walk into the back of the auto shop and pull on my coveralls.

“Cole,” Joe calls from beneath the hood of an old Buick.

I jog over to him. “What’s up, Boss?”

He wipes his blackened hands on an old rag. “Your girl is something else.

Best thing I ever did was hire her. Do you know she asked me if I'd be willing to buy an iPad, so I did, and she got it all set up to keep appointments straight with alerts sent straight to my phone as reminders, even if someone cancels. Technology is amazing. I guess I shouldn't have shit on it all these years."

I laugh. "Glad she's helping you out." She's been working at the shop for nearly three full weeks now, and all the guys love her—some a little too much, but Zoey is quick to put them in their place.

I don't comment on Joe referring to her as *my girl*, because frankly I want to ignore the way I felt at the mention.

Finished with the conversation, I clock in and check out what's on the whiteboard beside my name. That's always been Joe's idea of organization. I'm sure if Zoey has any say she'll be reorganizing the shop area soon enough.

Putting my head down, I get to work. Oil changes and tire rotations are pretty much the only thing I do unless one of the guys needs an extra hand. I'm okay with cars, but when it comes to more complicated stuff, I know I'd invariably fuck it up.

It's after six when I finish up and take off my coveralls.

Zoey is coming through the garage from the front, her purse slung over her shoulder. She straightened her hair today and the dark locks hang well past her breasts. She has a bit of makeup on, nothing outrageous, just eyeliner and mascara, and some kind of gloss on her lips. She's wearing jeans and a shirt with the shop's logo over her left breast.

I try not to let my thoughts go there, but I can't help it. She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen.

I reach out and gently grab her by the elbow as she walks past me.

"See you at home?" she asks me.

I jerk my head in a nod. "We're going to Harvey's after we change."

"Harvey's? Who's Harvey?"

"It's a bar."

Her lips thin. "I'm tired. I really don't want to go to a bar."

"It'll be fun. Just a few drinks, food, karaoke."

"I'm not singing." She points at me in warning.

"Don't worry, Teddy will do all the singing for us."

"Do you sing?" Her brow arches in inquiry as we walk out the back door. I toss my hand up at Joe just before we exit. He's always the first here and

last to leave.

“Not really.”

It’s a lie. I can sing pretty damn well, play guitar too.

Her eyes sparkle with a challenge as we stop beside her car. “How about this? I’ll only go tonight if you promise to sing one song.”

I frown, acting like this is the worst proposal ever. Shoving my hands in the pockets of my jeans, I ask, “Do I get to pick the song?”

She bites her lip, head swaying slightly side to side as she thinks. “Deal.”





## ZOEY

WHILE COLE'S SHOWERING, I touch up my makeup and change my clothes to go out. Ditching my jeans and work shirt, I opt for a yellow denim skirt and white tank top with a matching denim jacket. I haven't had much of an excuse to get dressed up lately, and even though the last thing I wanted to do was go to a bar, I'm going to make the most of it.

The bathroom door opens and it's my automatic reaction to turn toward the sound, just in time to see Cole crossing the hall to his bedroom in nothing but a gray towel.

Sweet baby Jesus.

The man is tall, lean, and ripped. Sure, I see him shirtless often living with him, but it's a sight I don't get sick of. I tell myself it's okay if I look as long as that's all I do. No more repeat performances like the night at the bonfire.

Cole catches me looking when he goes to close his door and winks.

A little shriek flies out of my throat at being caught and I hear his laughter through the door.

I cover my face with my hands, wanting to hide, which is pointless. He already witnessed me in the act.

Heart racing, I adjust my skirt, making sure all the necessary parts are covered and slip on my favorite white Converse.

Grabbing some cash from my wallet I stuff it in my pocket, so I don't have to worry with a purse. Cole's door creaks open and he steps out of his room in clean jeans and a fresh t-shirt.

"Ready to go?" He pulls a pack of gum from his pocket and takes a piece

out.

“Yeah. Ready to hear you sing.”

“Your ears might bleed,” he warns, following me out the door, and down the stairs to the parking lot.

“Hopefully you’re not *that* bad. If you are, I’ll pull you off the stage.”

His eyes sparkle with barely contained laughter. “I appreciate you looking out for me.”

“Oh, it wouldn’t be to save you from embarrassment. It’s to save myself.”

“Ah, I see.” He opens the passenger door of his truck for me to climb in.

Before he closes it, I say, “Okay, maybe there would be like five-percent of me doing it for you.”

“Mhmm,” he hums, dimples I haven’t noticed before popping out in his cheeks when he gives me a closed mouth smile.

Harvey’s, it turns out, is really close to campus and though from the outside it looks like it would be a dive bar, I’m guessing from the expensive cars lining the gravel lot that it’s far from it.

Cole parks his truck in one of the few open spaces. Picking up his phone, he types out a text to someone and waits.

“Teddy says they’re in the big booth in the back.”

“You know that means nothing to me.”

He chuckles. “Don’t worry I won’t let you get lost.” He winks and my body clenches. He really needs to stop doing that. I don’t need to be feeling anything for him. No tingles. No goosebumps. Zilch. Nada.

Slipping out of the truck, we walk side by side into Harvey’s. The place is packed, wall to wall with people standing, not to mention the crowded tables. Music blares from speakers, some kind of loud country remix. People are dancing, singing along, cheering, you name it. I notice a lot of the girls are wearing cowboy boots and I look down at my Converse. No way in hell would I get caught dead in cowboy boots. No thank you.

Cole’s hand slips into mine and I try to jerk it away, but he only holds on tighter. Lowering his head, he says into my ear, “Don’t wanna lose you in the crowd.”

Reluctantly, I jerk my head in agreement. I’ll just have to ignore how warm his hand is and how the large size swallows mine whole.

Cole pushes his way through everyone, and if anyone gets perturbed by him plowing through they quickly get over it when they see it’s him. I eye him carefully, realizing he must be kind of a big deal on campus if so many

people recognize him and bow out of the way. There are also dirty looks tossed my way by several girls when they notice him holding my hand. Alas, ladies, it's not what you think.

"Mom! Dad!" Teddy yells loud enough to be heard above the noise and the table comes into view. Cole was right, this booth is super-sized. I notice some of the guys I've gotten to know over the past month, like Murray, Cree, and even Jude. He's dropped by a few times with Teddy now and is a pretty cool guy, kind of serious, but *hot*.

A pit forms in my stomach over even thinking someone else is hot when my brain is hyper-fixated on Cole.

Even though I wasn't keen on coming, I'm here now and I want to have fun.

Teddy sits down, in the middle like he's the king and everyone else are his peasants.

I drop Cole's hand, realizing that we're still hanging onto each other. He gives me a curious look but says nothing. He slides into the booth, leaving the end spot for me. I appreciate the gesture of not being boxed in, especially since I don't know everyone.

"Hey," Cole says to a guy I haven't met before, "this is Zoey, my roommate. Zoey, my friend Mascen."

The guy has the most unique shade of gray eyes I've ever seen and a broody expression on his handsome face. His cheekbones are sharp, like the kind you see on models. He wears a backwards baseball cap, but wavy brown hair escapes from underneath. "Nice to meet you."

"Hi."

"This is Rory. Mascen's girlfriend." Cole indicates the girl beside Mascen. She has long glossy brown hair and a pair of thick, black-rimmed glasses perched on the end of her nose. "And her friends Li and Kenna. You've met everyone else."

I exchange pleasantries with the girls and settle back into the booth. Cole stretches his arm behind me. Not *on* me, it's on the booth, but I feel his presence surrounding me. A tiny shudder works its way through my body.

"Cold?" He leans in to ask me.

"No."

A waitress appears and we both place an order for drinks, and I ask for an appetizer of something called rattlesnake bites.

Everyone around me is making conversation, they include me from time

to time and I'm present enough to reply, but my treacherous body is homed in on Cole's arm and his leg that's now pressed against mine.

*It's because you haven't had sex in so long, my brain reasons. You'd feel this way over anyone.*

But a quick fuck isn't what I want or need. Sure, I love sex, but I'm not a one-night-stand kind of girl and I'm not looking for a relationship right now either.

"Mom!" Teddy calls out.

"Fido?" I reply sarcastically and he cackles.

"Dance with me?"

"Huh?" I can't hear him and can't read his lips.

He cups his hands around his mouth and yells, "Dance with me?"

Out of the corner of my eye I see Cole's hand clench into a fist where it's stretched behind me. Even his leg goes taut.

"Sure," I reply, slipping from the booth, heart racing from Cole's reaction.

Everyone shuffles around to let Teddy out. He claps Cole on the shoulder before he sits back down. Cole glowers as Teddy walks toward me where I wait. Our eyes connect and his nostrils flare.

His eyes speak a thousand words but five say everything.

*It's supposed to be me.*

I swallow thickly, now unsure about agreeing to dance with Teddy. I said yes more to get a breather from the proximity to Cole and not because I really wanted to dance with him. Teddy's my friend, that's it, but I can see that Cole is hurt by my agreement.

Teddy surprises me when he grabs me by the waist, sweeping me onto the dancefloor. He pulls me close enough to whisper in my ear, "Make him sweat."

My surprised eyes collide with his and he lets out a low chuckle. "Contrary to popular belief I have a genius level IQ. Yeah, shocking I know. Regardless, it doesn't take a genius to see that he likes you and that you—" he gives me a spin and when I collide back with his chest, he finishes with "—like him too."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't bullshit a bullshitter." I press my lips together. "Look, I'm not one to pry—"

"Then don't," I interject, the lump in my throat growing larger.

“But Cole’s my friend. He’s been hurt before. Don’t do the same. Dude’s a nice guy and doesn’t deserve it.”

I glance toward the table, surprised to find my roommate still watching us with an intense gaze.

“Nothing’s happening with us.”

“I believe you.” He spins me around the dancefloor. “But I can see you both want it.”

“It doesn’t mean we’re going to act on it.”

“Just be careful. Now,” he whispers in my ear, “let’s have some fun with him.”

The song is an upbeat tempo and I move my hips to the beat. Teddy has surprisingly good dance moves, but not as good as Cole was at the bonfire. I shouldn’t want a repeat performance of that night, but God I do. And as good as it felt dancing with him I can’t imagine how amazing sex would be. I don’t know how but I know with Cole it would be incredible.

The sad thing is sex with Todd was subpar, aching bad at times and unsatisfying. To think I was willing to settle for so little when it came to every aspect of my relationship with him. Honestly, the best thing that ever happened to me was catching him cheating on me. I know my mom would’ve never liked Todd, but Cole?

Dammit, I refuse to let my thoughts go there.

Teddy leans me back, skimming his soft lips over my throat, but it’s not the mouth I want. When he pulls me up Cole is *right there* over his shoulder. He grabs Teddy’s arm and pulls him away.

“*Enough*,” he growls, his caramel eyes flaming.

Teddy shoots a wink my way where Cole won’t see and throws his hands up. “We were just dancing, Dad. Jeesh.”

“And now you’re done.” Cole waves his hand in a shooing gesture.

Teddy cackles as he grabs another eager dance partner, not at all bothered by losing me. I know what he was doing. Bastard.

“If you wanna dance, sweetheart, you dance with me.” He’s smoldering at me and I don’t think he realizes it.

“Is that a threat?”

He pulls me to him by the belt loop on my skirt, his body moving easily to the beat of the song. I skim my hands up his firm chest, twining them around his neck. Lowering his head until we’re encased in a Cole and Zoey bubble, he murmurs, “It’s a goddamn promise.”

A shiver runs down my spine, my pussy clenching. I know if I look down my hard nipples will be showing through my thin top.

Several heartbeats pass, our bodies moving automatically to the music. The way his hips move with mine is erotic and delicious, but I can't go there.

Putting my hands on his firm chest, I push myself away. "I can't do this."

Head down, I shove my way through the crowded dance floor to the opposite side of the bar to where the glowing neon RESTROOMS sign is. I burst inside and have to wait a few minutes for a stall. I didn't even need to go to the bathroom, just needed a moment to catch my breath and definitely *not* think about that flash of hurt I saw in Cole's eyes a second before I ran.

I pee anyway, and wash my hands, checking my reflection to make sure my mascara hasn't smeared.

After one more deep breath, I exit the restroom and make my walk of shame back to the booth. But when I get there, there's no Cole. My body goes cold with fear.

*He didn't leave me here, did he?*

"Where's Cole?" I ask Teddy, shouting to be heard.

Teddy arches a brow and points behind me.

I turn, expecting Cole to be *right there*, but he's not. My eyes search the crowd, trying to ignore the hurt I feel over the idea of him dancing with another girl. I have no right to feel that way. Not when I keep pushing him away.

But he's not dancing anymore. My eyes freeze when I see him on the stage, pulling up a stool to the microphone and sitting down.

"Hey, guys. Hope you're having a fun evening. I thought I'd take a stab at this tonight. I made a deal with someone and the only way I could get her to come out was if I sang. Hopefully I don't make your ears bleed."

The crowd chuckles and Cole turns toward the person working the karaoke machine. I didn't realize it, but I've been holding my breath since he started to speak. I haven't bothered sitting down in the booth, instead I stand in front, hands at my chest as the opening notes of Dan + Shay's "Tequila".

Cole's voice is not at all what I expected. It still has that deep and husky quality he has when he talks, but it's smooth and buttery with a slight country twang I didn't expect at all. I'm not sure if it's because of the song choice or if his natural singing voice has that country edge to it. Regardless, his voice is beautiful. Couples on the dancefloor rock together to the song.

But as he's singing about tasting tequila and still seeing you, his eyes somehow find me in the crowd.

"Did you know Cole could sing?" One of the girls behind me at the table asks.

"Yeah," comes the voice I think belongs to Mascen.

I don't focus on them. I only have eyes for Cole.

*You said no falling in love this year*, I remind myself.

The devil on my shoulder whispers sweetly in my ear; *You didn't say anything about hookups*.

But logically I know I can't use my roommate for sex. That wouldn't end well. Inevitably one of us would end up hurt or things would be awkward after the deed. It's not worth it.

I sway to the song as Cole sings and when he finishes it a lone tear leaks out of my eye at the beauty of his performance.

Inhaling a shaky breath, I turn around to face the table of his friends. Teddy looks at me knowingly and grabs a shot, holding it out to me. "Drink up. You look like you need this."



"I'M NOT DRUNK," I protest as Cole leads me out of Harvey's. "It's going to take a lot more than two beers and a couple of shots to knock me down."

"Zoey," his tone is low with warning, "you asked the waiter if he has a fire crotch."

"Why's that a big deal?"

"Number one, it's not normal to ask strangers about their pubic hair. Number two, he had bright ass dyed red hair. Not a natural ginger."

"I was just curious," I grumble, his hold on my elbow tightening when I stumble on a piece of gravel.

"Hey!" A male voice calls out to him. "Yo, Anderson, I heard you're not going out for the draft this year. What's up with that?"

"Draft?" I mumble in my inebriated state. "Like the military draft?"

Cole looks from me with amusement to the approaching stranger. "Nah, man. I wanna finish senior year and get my degree. Gotta have a backup. After graduation I won't have to declare, I'll be automatically eligible."

"Cool, cool," the guy chants. "You're one of the best basketball players



I've ever seen. You and Andrew last year were unstoppable. Sad we lost him, but L.A. gained one hell of a player."

"Sure thing, man. I'd love to chat, but I need to get her home."

"Right, right." *Ugh why does he say words twice?* "Nice seeing you."

The stranger heads toward the bar.

I squint at Cole, his color washed out from the bright parking lot lights. "Did he say basketball?"

"Yeah?" He gives me a quizzical look. "You didn't know? Could've sworn I told you."

"You didn't." I bite out. "I'm gonna be sick." I pull away from him and throw up beside someone's bright red truck. Whoops.

Suddenly Cole's there, pulling my hair away from my face and rubbing my back. "Shhh. It's okay," he soothes, and I start to cry.

He plays basketball.

He's a basketball player.

Just like my dad was.

And if there's one vow I made with myself that I refuse to break, it's that I'll *never* date a basketball player. Even if I'm trying to mend my relationship with my dad, it's not an easy mindset to change. I've hated all basketball players on principle because of him. I know my dad didn't cheat on my mom, I'll give him credit there, but he left us. He left *me* and I won't be abandoned by another person in my life.

"I've got you," Cole says, still rubbing my back.

I retch again, but nothing comes up. I know I can't tell him that my sudden sickness has more to do with learning that he's a basketball player than anything I drank.

Straightening, I give him a strained smile. "I'm okay."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

He holds onto my arm again, so I don't fall in the gravel as we finish the walk back to his truck.

"Let me get you some napkins," he mumbles to himself, grabbing some from his glovebox and passing them to me.

I smile gratefully, wiping my mouth. "Can I have a piece of your gum too?"

"Sure." He leans into the cab and grabs a piece, passing it to me before he helps me into the truck.

Once in the vehicle, I lean my head against the cool glass of the window.  
“I told you not to have those tequila shots.”

I wave my hand at him in a *shut up* gesture. “Nobody likes a know it all.”

He chuckles, cranking the truck to life. The engine rumbles loudly and I hold my head, groaning loudly.

Cole starts the drive back to the apartment complex but before he gets there, he pulls off at a convenience store. “What are you doing?” I ask, a slight whine to my voice.

All I want to do is get home, strip out of my clothes and climb into bed.

“Just sit tight.”

The bright lights of the store flare into the truck and I cover my eyes.  
“Get Advil,” I beg.

He chuckles. “We’re around the corner from the apartment. There’s some there.”

“Don’t care. The sooner the better.”

He shakes his head, opening the truck door. “The next time I say you’ve had enough, just listen.”

I give him the finger and he laughs loudly, closing the door behind him as he heads into the Circle K. He throws his hand up at the cashier. I doubt he even knows the guy, but that’s just Cole. He’s kind.

*He’s also a basketball player.*

“Shut up,” I grumble aloud to my conscience.

Cole returns a few minutes later with a bag and a bottle of something. He passes it to me as soon as he gets in.

“I hate the taste of coconut water, but I swear by it when I’ve drank too much.” I wrinkle my nose at the bottle now that I know what it is. “Drink up, Buttercup.” He takes out a tiny bottle of Advil and shakes two of the red pills into my palm.

Spitting out my gum in one of the already soiled napkins, I down the pills, cringing at the tang of the coconut water. “Yuck.” Eyeing the bag with a curl of my lip, I ask, “What else you got in there?”

“Gum and Cheetos. Cheetos is my personal hangover food so I thought you might want some for tomorrow, which is dumb because of course you’d want something different than what I would—”

“Shh.” I press a finger to his lips, silencing him. “It’s sweet. Thank you.”

I don’t move my finger, so he murmurs, “You’re welcome,” around it.

He’s staring into my eyes, drowning me with the warm dark brown color.

I feel so much, things I can't handle, things I don't want to think about.

I break eye contact.

He clears his throat, throwing the truck into reverse. "Let's get you home."



## COLE

THE POLISHED MAPLE floors squeak underneath my shoes as I run down the court, ball bouncing in front of me. Practice doesn't start for a few more weeks, but my teammate Shawn, a sophomore, asked if I was willing to do some one-on-one work for him. He's a good guy, hard worker, and genuinely wants to play his best. He's willing to put in the work. Last year, he confessed to me that he has a son—a four-year-old—when he got his high school girlfriend pregnant. They're not together anymore, but he said it ended on good terms and he wants to do right by his kid. I admire that about him.

Shawn snags the ball from me and I laugh, chasing him back down the court.

This feels good, like the old times when I was small, and this was just a game. Now it's so much more, the pressure bearing down on my shoulders. But the love and passion are still there. It hasn't waned, even when doubt nags in the back of my mind.

"What are you two doing?" Coach's voice booms across the court from the door that leads down the hall to his office. "Practice hasn't even started yet."

Shawn halts with the ball, tucking it under his arm.

Lifting the edge of my shirt, I use it to wipe my damp brow. "Just having some fun, Coach."

He shakes his head, hands on his hips. "Well, since you're here I need a word with you, Anderson."

I jerk my head in a nod. "See you later," I say to Shawn, heading off the court after Coach.

Coach Reynolds. He's about the same height as me, with dark skin and buzzed hair. He can be a hard ass, he expects a lot out of us since he was in the NBA a few years himself, but he's always there for anyone on the team. He pushes us hard, but he's compassionate. Can't say the same for the coach I had in high school. He was a prick.

Coach opens his office door and lets me in first, coming in behind me. Sitting down in front of the desk, I smile at the pictures behind it of his wife and children. They recently had a baby girl. Shortly after she was born, they brought her to a practice to meet the guys on the team, and I'll admit while we're all a bunch of big tough guys, we go soft for a baby. We were passing her around, trying to see who could make her smile and laugh the most. There's another photo, one of him much younger holding a little girl on his shoulders as she dunks a ball into a net. I haven't noticed it before, but I'm really not in his office all that often.

He plops down into his chair, crossing his fingers together in front of him.

"I'm actually glad I caught you today. I was going to call you, but this is better. I know you're waiting until you graduate to enter the draft, which I totally respect. It's commendable. I know you could've gotten picked up easily last year with Andrew."

"Thank you, Coach. I appreciate that."

Andrew, a tall—fuck, we're all giants playing basketball—blond guy with hair to his shoulders did not look anything like your typical basketball player, more like he should be on the runway. Some opponents took to calling him Supermodel but the easygoing guy never let it get to him. But he's the most talented player I've ever shared a court with. Far ahead of me and I *know* I'm good. There are very few players with as much raw talent as he has. The fact Coach has me ranked with Andrew in his eyes means a whole fucking lot.

He dismisses my thanks with a wave of his fingers.

"Anyway, I was talking with one of my old friends. You might've heard of him. Jason Caswell." He waits, letting the name sink in.

"He used to play for Atlanta, right?"

"Yeah." He smiles, pleased that I know. "He's a scout for them now and he wants to meet you."

"Meet me?" My voice squeaks embarrassingly.

"Yes." He shuffles some papers on his desk. "He wants to meet for lunch when he's in town in December. I wanted to let you know so you have time

to prepare. Don't overthink it. It's just a casual getting to know you, feeling you out to see how you might fit with the team."

In other words, don't get my hopes up that anything will come from this.

"Thank you, Coach." I know he must've put a good word in for me.

He shakes his head. "Stop thanking me. You're talented and a hard worker. Own your accomplishments. You work hard for them."

It's on the tip of my tongue to thank him again, but I manage to bite back the words. "I appreciate this so much," I go with instead, which is basically the same thing.

Coach eyes me, suppressing a chuckle. "I'll call you with the details when I have them. Now get out of here, you smell."

I laugh. "See you next week then."

"Mhmm," he hums, but he's already no longer paying attention to me. Instead, he's looking at the photo I noticed, a sad and contemplative expression on his face.

Leaving his office, I head to the locker room and grab my stuff changing back into my jeans and cotton t-shirt with the school's mascot—a wolf—on it.

Shrugging my backpack over my shoulders, I stride out of the athletic building, heading for the café to grab a coffee before I go home. My steps feel light, buoyant from the excitement of my prospective meeting with Jason Caswell. It's a step in the right direction.

My phone rings and I smile before I even answer. "Mom, what's up?"

"You haven't called me in a week, Cole. *A week*. Is this how I raised you? I don't think so. Your sisters remember to call me. But not you. Not my baby boy. My one boy. Have you forgotten where you came from? The seventy-two hours of *back* labor I endured to push your ten-pound chunky ass out?"

Laughter bursts out of me. "Laying the guilt trip on thick, aren't we? I've been busy with classes, Ma."

"And you couldn't spare five minutes to call your mother?" she harrumphs. "I see how it is. I'll remember this."

"Ah, don't be like that." Even if she has a point. "I'm sorry. I'll be better."

"That's right, you will, or else I'll get myself on a plane and come down there."

Fuck, I know she will too. She did it freshman year when she was worried I wasn't adjusting to life away from home. Newsflash, I was fine and she's a

worrywart. But she's still my mom and I love her.

"Sorry," I say again. "I'll call you every day from now on."

"God, no. Not every day. I don't like my kids that much." She laughs on the other end like she's told the funniest joke ever. "Have you spoken to Jessa?" she asks, referring to my youngest sister. Before I can answer, she goes on, "Daniel proposed." I swear, I hear her swoon through the phone. "It was so romantic. He had your father and me hide, along with his parents, so we got to watch it and take pictures with them after. I cried so much. When are you going to find a girl to settle down with?"

I sigh, dropping onto a bench beneath the shade of a tree across from the café.

"I don't know, Mom." I rub the back of my head, my mind going unbidden to Zoey.

I know what I went through last year pining for a girl. I don't want the same thing to happen this year. Especially when time and again Zoey pushes me away the minute things get hot between us. The other night after Harvey's I went to sleep and dreamt of a different scenario than the one that happened. We kept dancing, and she didn't freak out on me, and when the moment was right I finally kissed her. She'd kiss me back like she was starved for me and we made out in the middle of the bar like two horny teenagers. When we got back home, I carried her to my bed—I had an actual bed in my dream, not just a mattress on the floor—and made love to her. I woke up right after with a raging hard on and jumped in the shower before she got up, taking care of business.

"Are you even listening to me?" My mom's voice snaps me back to reality.

"Sorry. Zoned out."

She grumbles some unintelligible under her breath. "You never call me and now you're ignoring me while on the phone with me? The disrespect. And from my favorite son, no less."

"I'm your only son."

"Doesn't matter." She inhales a breath that rattles through the phone. "You are at least coming home for Thanksgiving, aren't you?"

"Ma, that's practically two months from now."

"It's never too early to start planning and if you're not coming, I'm giving away your seat. And I'm never making you that French silk pie you love ever again."



“Are you blackmailing me?”

“I would never.”

I laugh, leaning against the back of the bench. “You know I’ll be there. When have I missed a Thanksgiving?”

“Never.”

“Exactly. Now don’t threaten me with French silk pie ever again. That’s just evil.”

She giggles. “All right, I’ll let you go. Your dad just pulled in the driveway.”

“Tell him hi for me and that I love him.”

“I will.”

She hangs up and I tuck my phone away, walking across to the coffee shop. I get in line and place my order. When it’s in my hand, I turn to leave but a waving hand catches my eye.

When I see it’s Rory I expect to feel something—hurt, sad, irritated, but I don’t feel anything and that says everything.

“Hey, how are you doing?” I walk over and pull out the chair across from her. “Where’s Mascen?”

“He’s in class.” She smiles, pushing her glasses up her nose. “I didn’t know you could sing. You were amazing the other night.”

“Thanks. I don’t usually perform for a crowd.”

“Really?” She sounds flabbergasted. “You were a natural up there. You didn’t look nervous at all.”

I shrug off her words. “I didn’t say I was scared to perform, just that I don’t usually, and that was way less people than those who watch in the seats at a basketball game.”

“You really have a beautiful voice. I was impressed.”

“Is that all you called me over for?” I arch a brow.

She laughs, crossing her arms over the table. “Am I that obvious? I just wanted to ask you for Zoey’s number. I ... I got the impression the other night that she doesn’t have a lot of friends here, and maybe she doesn’t want them, but I don’t know what I’d do without Li and Kenna so I thought maybe I’d invite her to a girls night this week? Do you think she’d like that?”

“I don’t know. But you can ask her. I’ll give you her number.”

“Cool.” She beams as I rattle off the digits. Suddenly, her demeanor changes. She grows nervous, slipping her glasses up her nose and fiddling with her hands. “Are you okay?”

I know what she's really asking. "I'm over you, Rory. We were never a couple and let's be real, we probably would've never gotten to that point. We ... we didn't have that spark you need to have to make it work. That's you and Mascen. If I'm being honest with you, what hurt the most was knowing Mascen wasn't truthful with me. He's my best friend, so that fucking sucked. But I'm over it. And I'm not sorry for moving out either, you two deserve to have your space."

She laughs, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "I'm glad, Cole. You're a nice guy."

"That's what everyone tells me," I sigh, picking up my coffee. At times it feels like being told you're a nice guy is a backhanded compliment. Like you're nice but a lot of times not good enough. "I'll see you around."

She smiles, pulling a textbook over to her side. "Thanks, Cole."

With a jerk of my head, I acknowledge her words and head out and to the parking lot. I'm done with classes for the day and I have to get to work.



## ZOEY

I LOCK the front door of the main office and turn off all the lights up front. Grabbing my bag, I sling it over my shoulder and head through the shop so I can leave.

“Hey,” Cole calls out to me, wiping his hands off on a rag. “I have to finish up helping Jay and then I’m headed home too. You want to get Chinese tonight?”

My stomach rumbles and I frown. “I’d love to, but I can’t. I said I’d have dinner with my dad and his family.”

“Ah,” he nods, “I hope that goes well.”

“Thanks.”

I’ve been trying to have dinner with my dad once a week, but last week he canceled when the boys and Allison came down with a bug. Things are slowly getting better with us, but it’s still a little strained and awkward. Years of distance are to blame for that. I put up so many walls when it came to my dad. I guess it’s taken getting older, to see things in a different light, that while I wanted to believe my dad didn’t love us, that he left us, he never actually left *me*. People fall out of love and that’s okay, but when I was young and being sat down and told that my dad was moving out and my parents were getting a divorce, my brain translated that to *dad doesn’t love me anymore*. But now I see how hard he tried to always see me, to talk to me, to be there, and I pushed him away time and again. *I did that. I caused my own heartbreak.*

The girl I was wanted him to hurt as much as I was and I caused us both so much heartbreak.

But now, I'm not sure how to fully mend that bridge.

I get in my car and sit there, gripping the steering wheel. Tears stream down my face. I know I need to start my car, pull away and go to their house so I'm not late, but I can't seem to move.

The back door of the garage opens and Cole's head pokes out, his brows furrowing when he sees me still here. Worry fills his eyes when he notices my tears, no doubt they're shining wetly on my cheeks thanks to the bright parking lot lights.

He steps outside, his long-legged stride carrying him quickly to the driver's side. He doesn't wait for me before opening the door, leaning down with one hand braced on the car.

"What happened?" His brows are drawn, eyes scanning the darkness like whatever, or whoever, has upset me is lurking there.

"Having a realization," I snuffle, wiping beneath my nose. I'm sure I look like a crazed mess, but Cole doesn't seem bothered.

"About what?"

"My dad," I croak.

He knows bits and pieces now, that my mom's gone and they got divorced when I was young and how we're trying to reconnect.

"What'd he do?" There's a protective tone to his voice, like he's ready to jump to my defense.

"Nothing." I wipe away tears but more replace them. "It's me." He waits for me to elaborate. "It's just ... he's tried. All these years now, I see how much he's tried to have a relationship with me, and I pushed him away over and over again. I guess I was subconsciously trying to hurt him for leaving us, but he never gave up on me. Even now, when I'm adult, and he shouldn't have to try so hard, he's still putting in the work."

Cole's eyes are full of understanding. "Sometimes we do things and later on we don't understand why we've done it. You were a kid, Zoey, and you were hurt by their divorce and that's okay. You're allowed to feel your emotions, but now that you've had this realization tell him that. Be honest. Try to ... rebuild, I guess."

"Thank you," I snuffle.

"Anytime." He pulls something out of his pocket and hands it to me. "It's clean, I promise. I haven't used it for anything yet and it's fresh out of the laundry."

I stare down at the rag he's given me, smiling at the gesture.

“I better get going.” I pass the rag back.

His fingers tap out a beat against the roof of my car. “I’ll see you later?”

“See you later.”

He steps back and closes my car door. Cranking the engine, I pull away from the auto shop. I’m going to show up at my dad’s house with mascara coating my cheeks no doubt, but it can’t be helped.

When I arrive, I park in the driveway and do my best to spruce up my appearance, hoping it won’t be obvious that I’ve been crying.

I can’t stall any longer, so I get out and go to the front door, ringing the bell.

My dad’s the one to answer the door this time. With a chuckle, he says, “Kiddo, I texted you the garage code weeks ago so you could use it when you come over. You don’t have to ring the doorbell like a stranger.” I don’t say anything, just dive into him. “Whoa.” He puts a hand on the back of my head to steady me.

Slowly, hesitantly, his arms wrap around me and he hugs me back.

Over his bent shoulder I see Allison walk out of the kitchen. She smiles when she sees us and immediately turns, heading back.

He holds me until I make the first move to let go. “What was that for?”

“I just ... needed to hug my dad.”

“Oh.” He rubs his jaw. “Okay. Cool.”

“Cool.” I smile back at him. I hope he doesn’t notice the new tears forming in my eyes.

“Dinner’s ready!” Allison calls.

I follow my dad into the kitchen and to the table where Allison is already setting the pot roast.

“As always, this looks amazing, Allison.”

“Thank you.” She clasps my wrist briefly before going to grab a side of mashed potatoes.

I pull out the chair beside Gabriel. “How are you doing, little bro?” I ruffle his curly hair and he immediately reaches up to smooth it back down.

“Good. I got an A on my spelling test.”

“Whoa! That’s awesome, buddy. Give me some knuckles.” I hold up my fist and he bumps it with us.

“Do I get some knuckles too?” Isaac asks from across from me.

“You didn’t get an A on your spelling test,” Gabriel gripes.

“But I drew a picture and it’s awesome. I’ll show you!” Isaac says the last

part to me and jumps out of his chair, running as fast as his little legs will carry him.

My dad laughs. “That boy is always on the move.”

Isaac dashes back into the room just as Allison starts putting food on the boys’ plates.

“See, Zoey,” Isaac hands me a piece of paper and I flip it over to see the drawing, “it’s our family.”

There’s my dad and Allison, Gabriel, Isaac, baby Rose and—

“Is that me?” I point to the tall girl with wild rainbow-colored hair.

“Yep!” he says proudly.

“And what’s this?” I point at what looks like another person floating above all of us.

“Oh, that’s your mommy. Daddy said your mommy was in heaven watching over you, but I think she’s watching over all of us because we’re your family.”

Gut punch right to the feels.

My dad comes up behind me, placing a glass of water beside my plate and squeezes my shoulder. I look up at him with a watery smile, and mouth, “Thank you.”

He smiles back and takes his seat.

After dinner is done, the boys drag me to their playroom and we play with their Hotwheels for a while, zipping the cars around and around in their tracks.

It’s surprisingly fun. I never thought I’d like spending time with them, but I actually do.

An hour or so later, Allison pokes her head in the door. “Boys, say goodnight to Zoey. It’s time to get you ready for bed.”

“Aw, man!”

“Do we have to?”

“Five more minutes, Mom!”

“Nope.” She shakes her head. “March those little booties up the stairs.”

“Goodnight, Zoey.” Gabriel gives me a high-five as he walks by.

“Night-night, Zoey. Sleep tight. Don’t let the bed bugs bite.” Isaac gives me a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Night, boys.”

I start gathering up their toys, and Allison says, “Don’t worry about that. I’ll get it later.”

“It’s not a big deal. I promise.” Pausing with a pile of cars in my hands, I turn to her. “I was thinking ... would it be okay if I took the boys to a movie one day?”

Her eyes widen with surprise, her lips parting. “Oh, of course. That would be wonderful. They’d ... they’d really love that.” She gets a little choked up. “They’re really excited about the new Spiderman movie coming out.”

“Perfect. I’ll check dates and let you know?”

She nods. “Sounds good.”

When I’ve finished cleaning up, I walk out of the room and down the hall, finding my dad sitting on the couch watching *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*.

“You watch this stuff?” I ask him, settling on the opposite end of the couch.

He chuckles. “It’s my guilty pleasure, but don’t tell anyone that. I’m invested in Kourtney and Scott.”

I shake my head. “My big, tough, former NBA player father has a love for the Kardashians. Who would’ve thunk it?”

“This stays between us, missy.” His eyes narrow. “Can’t let my players learn about this or they’ll think I’m weak.”

I giggle, but quickly sober when I realize Cole is one of his players. I’ve tried my hardest not to think about that fact since I found out in the parking lot of Harvey’s but it’s difficult to ignore. I doubt he knows my father is his coach, how could he? And I’m not about to tell him *or* tell my dad I’m living with one of his players.

Standing after a few minutes, I say, “I better head out.” It’s getting late and I have class tomorrow, so I do need to try to get some sleep.

“All right.” He stands too, opening his arms for a hug. “I was thinking, maybe we should have lunch on campus sometime next week? Or if you didn’t want to be seen with your old man in public we could eat in my office.”

I laugh. “I’m not embarrassed. We can meet somewhere on campus. Just text me.”

“Classes are going good for you, right?”

“Everything’s great.”

“You know, my offer still stands to knock that prick Todd out.”

I shake my head. “He isn’t worth it.”

A slow smile spreads on his face. “I’m glad you see that now. Just sorry it



took what happened.”

“Me too.”

I start for the door and he calls after me, “I love you, Zo.”

Turning around, I stumble awkwardly over my words. “Um ... yeah, me too.”

I’ve just gotten in my car when I get a text message.

**UNKNOWN NUMBER: Hey, Zoey. It’s Rory. We met at Harvey’s. I got your number from Cole. I hope that’s okay. I know this is random, but I wanted to see if you’d like to have a girl’s night with my friends and me. You met them too. Li and Kenna. We usually just order pizza and watch movies. Nothing too exciting.**

Her text surprises me since I didn’t really talk to the girls much at the bar. If I’m honest with myself, I think after what happened with Liza it’s made me wary of trusting other females. But it’s wrong of me to put all girls in the same box. Not every girl is Liza. And ... not every guy is Todd.

**Me: Sure. That sounds fun. What day are you thinking?**

**Rory: Does tomorrow night work? 6pm?**

Tomorrow is Thursday.

**Me: That should be fine.**

**Rory: Cool. We’ll see you then. I’ll send you their dorm information, so you have it.**

Tucking my phone away, I pull out of the driveway and head home.

Trudging up the stairs to the apartment I blow out a tired breath.

When I open the door, I nearly cry with the pure unfairness of it all over the sight of a shirtless Cole, wearing only a pair of low hanging sweatpants, standing in the kitchen.

“Are you making root beer floats?” I blurt out, locking the door behind me.

“Yeah,” he grins boyishly at me, scooping vanilla ice cream into a mug. “You want one?”

I smile back, something in my stomach spinning and dancing—and if I’m honest with myself it has nothing to do with the floats and everything to do with the maker. “Yes, absolutely.”

Cole pulls out another mug from the cabinet while I take my bag back to my room. Turning on the ceiling light, I pause when I notice something on my bed. I walk over and pick up a stuffed dog sitting next to a pack of red velvet Oreos. This has to be Cole’s doing.

*But why?*

“You were sad earlier, I wanted to cheer you up.” I jump at the sound of his voice, turning around to find him standing in the doorway with the two root beer floats. He strides in, handing one to me. “But I think I’m about to break your heart.”

“Why?” I ask hesitantly.

“There was only one pack of your favorite Oreos left and I asked about it...”

“Where are you going with this?”

“Turns out, they’re being discontinued.”

“What?” I shriek. “Not my favorite Oreos!”

“Yes, your favorite Oreos. I hope stuffed Teddy can help you through this difficult transition.”

“Teddy?”

He hands one of the floats to me and takes the stuffed dog, showing me the collar, he added around the neck with *Teddy* scrawled on it in his handwriting.

I bust out laughing, forgetting about my beloved cookies for the moment. “This is amazing.” I take my stuffed dog back from him, cuddling it. “Thank you.”

I can’t get over the thoughtfulness of my roommate. He knew I was hurting when I left work and he wanted to cheer me up, so he went out of his way to get my favorite Oreos and a cute stuffed dog that we can all laugh over. I can’t wait to introduce Teddy to, well, Teddy.

“Any time.” He puts the dog back on my bed and I follow him back to the living area, both of us sitting on the couch to enjoy our floats. “Did your dinner go okay?”

“Yeah, it was nice. I’m going to take my little brothers to the movies soon.”

Cole smiles over at me. “That’s nice of you.”

“They’re cool kids. I got a text from Rory.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she invited me to a girl’s night tomorrow.”

“Are you going?”

“I said I would.” I stare into the depths of the mug.

“Rory’s cool. So are Li and Kenna. You’ll like them.”

“She’s the same Rory you mentioned you were interested in last year,

isn't she?" It's not like Rory is a popular name, so I don't imagine there are many floating around on campus.

"She is, but there's nothing there now, and honestly there wasn't anything there last year like I thought." He gives a shrug, twisting his lips back and forth.

"There's someone out there for you."

He looks me over, a soft sigh echoing in his chest. "Yeah, for you too, Zoey."

Silence descends between us and I don't like it one bit.



AFTER WORK I head to the apartment for a quick shower and to change my clothes before I go back to campus to Kenna and Li's dorm. Rory, I found out, lives with her boyfriend Mascen.

I manage to get into the building behind someone else and ride the elevator up to the dorm.

Knocking on the door, I wait for barely ten seconds when it swings open revealing Rory.

"Hi, Zoey!" She beams, eyes shining with excitement behind her glasses. "Come on in."

"We're about to order the pizzas," the pretty girl with dark, nearly black hair, named Kenna says from the couch where she lays on her stomach, legs in the air. "What kind do you like?"

"Uh ... I can eat whatever."

"Just tell her what you like. She ends up ordering us all separate pizzas because Kenna is extra like that."

"No, I'm not!" She pouts, staring at her phone.

"You totally are," Li, the gorgeous Asian girl from the other night, enters the room from a side bedroom. "Hey, Zoey. It's nice to see you again."

"Hi." God, when did I become so fucking awkward?

"This is our new roommate Ophelia since Rory ditched us this year for her bad boy," Kenna adds, wiggling her fingers at a fourth girl I didn't notice.

"Hey." Rory tosses a pillow at Kenna.

The pillow bounces off her and onto the floor. "I can't blame you. I'd live with my boyfriend too if he looked like that. But alas, I'm as single as they

come.”

“You can sit down, Zoey. Make yourself comfortable,” Li tells me, passing by me to the little kitchenette. “Anyone want anything to drink?”

“Do you have root beer?” *Dammit Cole, stop rubbing off on me.*

Rory giggles. “Cole’s rubbing off on you isn’t he?”

I sigh, sitting on the couch by Kenna. “Apparently.”

Li passes me a can, it’s not the same brand as the glass bottle kind Cole gets so I have no idea if it’ll be as good, but I’m not going to complain.

Looking around the dorm, it’s pretty nice—nicer than the one I had at my old school, anyway.

There’s an open living space with enough room for a couch and chair, TV, and coffee table. There’s a small table with two chairs tucked into a back corner near the kitchenette. There are three separate bedrooms and one shared bath. The one I had was just a room shared with me and another girl. Definitely no kitchenette and we shared a bathroom with all the other girls on our entire floor.

Fun times.

“Pizza?” Kenna asks me again.

“Uh ... I like Hawaiian.”

“Ew.” Kenna wrinkles her nose. “Pineapple does not belong on pizza. Ham either.”

Ophelia laughs and leans over from the chair for a high-five. “Finally, another Hawaiian lover. I’ve been mocked for it my whole life.”

“It’s the only way to go,” I agree.

“Okay, order placed!” Kenna bounces up off the couch, spinning dramatically into the kitchen. “I got champagne!” She grabs a bottle from the fridge, fiddling with the cork. It explodes with a loud pop and I hope someone on the floor doesn’t come to investigate.

She pours the champagne into glasses and passes them around while Li brings up Netflix on the TV.

“What movie are you guys in the mood for?”

I take a sip of the champagne, trying to hide my distaste at the tang. I set the glass down on the coffee table and Ophelia giggles, her glass joining mine. I guess that makes two of us who aren’t on the champagne train.

“How about *Pride and Prejudice*?” Rory suggests.

“You always say that.” Kenna plops onto the couch beside me. “Not that Matthew Macfayden isn’t nice to look at, but you have to admit that movie is

kind of a bore.”

Rory gasps, her hand flying to her chest. “No, it’s not!”

“Ladies,” Li interrupts, “let’s focus. Last time it took us an entire hour to pick a movie. I think we should let Ophelia and Zoey pick since it’s their first time with us.”

“Good idea,” Kenna agrees.

“All right,” Rory pipes in. “It’s up to you guys then.”

Li hands me the remote and I pass it to Ophelia. “Whatever you pick will be fine.”

Ophelia’s eyes widen like a deer in headlights. “Don’t put all this pressure on me.”

“You’ll be fine,” I assure her.

She flicks through the options, settling on *What A Girl Wants*.

“Ooh I loved this movie when I was little.” Kenna claps her hands gleefully. “Don’t laugh, but I had the biggest crush on Colin Firth.”

“Me too,” Rory sighs dreamily.

Li gives them a funny look. “You guys are weird.”

The movie starts and we maybe get twenty minutes into it when the pizzas arrive, and Kenna runs downstairs to get them.

My phone vibrates in the pocket of my jeans and I pull it out, smiling when I see a text from Cole.

**Cole: How’s it going with the girls? Teddy showed up and won’t leave me alone.**

**Me: So far so good. Be nice to Teddy I like him.**

**Cole: You like him? Interesting.**

**Me: As a friend, nothing more. He’s funny and sweet.**

**Cole: I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone call Teddy sweet before.**

**Me: I kind of feel bad for him.**

**Cole: You do? Why?**

**Me: He seems lonely.**

**Cole: I’ll be nice.**

**Me: Good. Kenna’s back with the pizzas. I’ll see you later.**

I put my phone away, my stomach growling at the scent of the pies. I haven’t eaten since a very early lunch around eleven and it’s nearly seven now. She sets the boxes down on the coffee table and we figure out everyone’s, settling back to focus on the movie.

When it ends, I stand up and stretch. “This was fun, guys. Thanks for

inviting me.”

“Any time. We try to do this at least once a month.” Li smiles at me, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

“It was really nice to meet you,” Ophelia says with a slight blush. I’ve gotten the impression tonight that she’s fairly shy, but she’s putting in effort with her roommates and with Rory and me as well. I have a feeling I could be really good friends with her if I give her a chance. It’s just difficult after my falling out with Liza to trust again.

Saying my goodbyes, I take what’s left of my pizza home with me. When I get back to the apartment, I swing the door open and nearly drop to my knees at the shrill scream.

“You scared me!” Teddy accuses me. Cole looks ready to punch him in the face.

“Why are you screaming at me?” I grumble, shutting the door and locking up behind me.

“No more scary movies for you.” Cole changes the channel on whatever they were watching.

“Hey, I wanted to keep watching that.”

“Spoiler alert, more people die and you’ll scream every time it happens.”

“Don’t ruin my fun.” Teddy tries to wrestle the remote back.

Setting my pizza box in the refrigerator I stifle a yawn. “Have fun boys. I’m going to bed.”

“What? You just got here! You’re way more fun than this dude.” Teddy playfully pushes Cole’s shoulder.

“Sorry. I’m tired.”

“Party pooper.” Snapping his fingers, he says, “Cree, you remember him, right?” He doesn’t give me a chance to answer. “He’s having a party at his place this weekend after the first home game. I don’t really know why since the dude plays hockey not football, but hey, a party is a party. You guys want to go?”

“I don’t kn—” Cole starts.

I shrug. “Sure, why not?” I’m not a big party girl, but I need a break in the monotony.

Cole clears his throat. “Yeah, we’ll be there.”

“Bring your own beer.” Teddy crinkles his nose. “Or in your case root beer, I guess.”

I CAN'T BELIEVE I've agreed to go to a party with a bunch of jocks.

It's ironic, really, since I always swore to stay away from that type, *especially* basketball players because of my dad. But now here I am living with one and becoming friends with other guys in sports. Todd was the complete opposite. He was the tall skinny, nerd. Cute in his own right, but he wasn't showy. He wasn't a king on campus like I'm gathering these guys are. I thought he was safe. But he broke my heart.

*Did he really, though? My thought stops me in my tracks. You can't break something if it was never yours to begin with.*

And if I'm honest with myself, despite agreeing to marry him, Todd wasn't some great love and therefore he's not the great loss I've made him out to be either.

I glance over my shoulder, barely catching a glimpse of the two guys before I walk into my room.

I think I've been looking at things all wrong.





## COLE

WHENEVER SOMETHING'S on my mind, I find myself with a basketball standing on a court somewhere. When I'm there, ball in hand, dribbling up and down, it's like I can focus my thoughts better than any other way.

Lifting the ball, I toss it. It swishes through the net on the small court next to our apartment beside the playground.

I don't know what to do about my growing feelings for Zoey, so here I am.

I jog after the ball and grab it before it can roll into the bushes. Bouncing it up and down, I walk around the court. I've been out here for a while already, my body damp with sweat, but for once I'm not getting the answers I normally do.

I'm still confused, lost when it comes to my complicated feels for her. I like her. She's quickly become my friend, but I can't ignore that tug, the undercurrent for more. She's like a magnet, pulling me in.

"I wondered where you were. I saw your truck, but you weren't in the apartment."

Her voice rolls over me. My eyes roam over to her where she stands at the edge of the court. She's in the same ripped jeans and Aldridge University t-shirt she cut into a crop top that she wore to go with the girls and some of the guys to the football game. I lied and said Joe called me into work today so I wouldn't have to go. I needed time away from her, to figure out how I'm feeling, but it hasn't done me a whole lot of good like usual.

"I needed to be outside," I go with, instead of the honest truth of wondering how the hell I'm going to get her out of my system.

“Pass me the ball.” She walks forward hands held out. I bounce it to her, and she catches it with a tiny smile. She looks at the ball in her hands with wonder, like it’s both somehow familiar and mysterious. She walks over to where I stand, dribbles it three times, and shoots. “I still got it.” She does a little dance when it goes in.

*Fuck me.* Clearly, my time out here has done me no good, because I find myself wanting to take her by the waist and pull her against me, press my lips to hers. I wonder if they’re as soft as they look.

Snapping myself out of my thoughts I jog after the ball and toss it back to her. “Think you can do it twice in a row?”

“Is that a challenge?” She holds the ball against the side of her hip, brown eyes sparkling with humor.

“If you want it to be.”

“What do I win if I get it in?”

“I don’t know. What do you want?” I shove my hands in the pockets of my loose athletic shorts.

She thinks for a second, tapping a finger against her lips. “If I make the shot, you have to make me dinner. Whatever I want.”

I laugh. “That’s all you want?”

There’s a hesitation in her eyes, like there’s more, but she shakes her head. “That’s it.”

“And if you miss...” I rock back on my heels. “You have to tell me a secret.”

Her breath catches. “What kind of secret?”

I itch to step closer to her, to wrap a curl around my finger. But I don’t. Touching her is dangerous. I’m a moth to a flame when it comes to this girl.

“Something good.”

She bites her lip and nods. “Okay.” Inhaling a breath, she dribbles the ball and sets her eyes on the net.

She lifts the ball and tosses it, wrist following through the end. Her tongue sticks out as she watches it hit the rim and roll around and around. I’m holding my breath, waiting to see if it goes in or bounces out.

It slides through the net.

“Woohoo!” She cheers, arms in the air. She dances around me, rolling her arms. “You owe me dinner.”

I sigh heavily, like it’s an incredible hardship, but it’s really not. She could’ve asked for something much worse. “Name the meal and when.”

“I’ll let you know when I’ve made up my mind.” She scoops up the basketball, looking at it again with that same curious expression.

“Did you use to play?”

She bites her lip, eyes hesitantly meeting mine. “From the time I could walk through middle school. I ... I stopped after my parents divorced. It was sort of my thing with my dad and I didn’t want to do it after he left.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” She looks around the court. “I don’t know why we let ourselves give up on things we love because of people that hurt us. We’re only punishing ourselves. I let my dad do it to me and I’ve let my ex do the same.” She shakes her head, letting out a self-deprecating laugh. “Except that’s not true at all. They didn’t do it to me, I did it to myself.” She pushes air out of her lungs in a big breath, her lips forming an O.

“What are you going to do about it?” I tilt my head to the side, curious.

She stares at the orange ball like it holds all the answers to the world. “Forgive and forget.”

She gives me a small half smile and closes her eyes, a contemplative expression on her face like she’s making a wish. She throws the ball up and behind her. It sails through the air. Eyes popping open she gives me a look I feel all over, like maybe she’s *really* seeing me for the first time.

Walking off the court, she doesn’t turn to see if the ball makes it into the hoop, but I see.

Whatever she wished for, or whatever baggage she let go of, I hope it makes all the difference for her.



I KNOCK on Zoey’s half-open door, and it squeaks as it moves, swinging fully open.

“Hey, are you riding me?” I blanch, stuttering over my mistake. “Riding *with* me?”

Zoey turns away from the full-length mirror in the corner of her room, her lips quirked in amusement at my blunder. She’s changed into a pair of black skinny jeans with some sort of lacy black top. Her favorite worn white Converse are already on her feet.

“Yeah, I have no idea where this party is.”

I'm grateful she doesn't comment on what I said by accident, but I'll be cursing myself for it all night.

"I'm going to swing by the store and grab a few things to take with us."

"Ah, yes. BYOB." She grabs her phone, tucking it into her back pocket. "All right, I'm ready."

Yanking my keys out of my pocket, I jingle them, spinning them around my fingers. It's already dark outside. By the time we get to the party it should be fully raging. I've already gotten a slew of texts from Teddy asking where we are and one from Mascen asking if I'm coming.

I follow Zoey down the stairs to the parking lot. We pile into my truck and I crank the engine. Despite the year and outrageous number of miles, she runs like a dream. Joe's helped me keep it running smooth.

I stop off at the grocery store and Zoey hops out to go in too.

"What are you in search of?" I ask her, grabbing a cart.

"Oreos." Her lips pout. "I can't believe they're getting rid of red velvet. What a travesty."

"Truly, a crime," I go along with her. We hit the liquor aisle first and I get Teddy's favorite, Zombie Dust. One of his texts was pleading for me to bring more because Murray stole what he brought. "You want anything?" I motion to the endless amount of beer to choose from.

She shakes her head. "Nah. Are you getting any root beer?"

"But of course."

She grins. "I'll take some of that then."

"Staying sober?"

"I'm not a big drinker," she admits, walking beside me with her hands in her back pockets. "It usually gives me a headache and I regret my life choices, and I already had two at the game today, so I better not push it. That's all you're getting for you, though?" She nods at the Zombie Dust as I push the cart forward.

"Nah, that's for Teddy. Practice starts on Monday and I'm not risking getting shit-faced tonight and still feeling it then. Coach can be a hard-ass. It's like he can smell alcohol on you even if it's been a week, and then he pushes us harder, and I don't want to do death sprints on the first day."

"Death sprints?" She giggles as we turn onto the candy aisle. I grab several packs of my favorite gum as we pass.

"Well, I call them that because he makes us go until we collapse. He's a great coach, though. Couldn't ask for better."

She turns away from me, but not before I see a funny look flicker over her face.

“Ooh!” she cries, running down the aisle to the cookie section. She scans the shelves for red velvet, her face falling when she doesn’t find any. “It’s not here.” The distress is evident in her voice.

“Hold on, let me look.” I scan all the packs and she’s right. “Nope, no red velvet. Maybe you should give something else a try.”

“I don’t want to give something else a try,” she grumbles, shuffling her feet. With a sigh, she crosses her arms over her chest, staring at the Oreos like they hold all the answers in the universe. “Fine, I’ll get the carrot cake.” She grabs a pack and drops it into the cart, but I can tell she’s still not pleased about the idea.

I make a vow to myself to check out some other nearby stores and see if I can even get Teddy on it, so we get her as many packs of red velvet as we can.

We head to the checkout, once again passing the floral area, and Zoey’s eyes light up.

She clasps her hands beneath her chin and pouts her bottom lip. “Do you mind if I look at the plants?”

“Go for it.” I follow her, trying not to show my amusement as she scours the flowers and plants, searching for something she might want to take home.

She picks up a tiny succulent that looks like it’s seen better days and sets it in the cart, actually petting the plant on top. “Don’t worry, I’ll save you,” she whispers at the plant, and I chuckle. She shoots me a look. “I can’t leave him here to die.”

“Him, huh?”

“Shush.” She holds a finger up to her lips. “We can go now.” She wiggles her fingers for me to push the cart forward.

After checking out, I load everything into the truck and text Teddy that we’re on our way.

The house Cree shares with some of his friends is ten minutes from the store. When we get there, the street is packed with cars. It’s a good thing it’s mostly college kids around this neighborhood or the cops would’ve already been called.

People spill out onto the lawn, laughing, dancing, just generally having a good time. I’m suddenly cursing my decision not to drink tonight, because dealing with this shit sober isn’t fun.

I shoot Teddy a text, telling him to come get his beer and hop out of my truck grabbing the root beer. Teddy runs outside, his shirt missing and a flowered bucket hat on his head that God knows where he got it.

“Thank God. I’m going to kill Murray for downing all my good stuff. Such a fucker.” He reaches inside the truck and grabs the Zombie Dust, his eyes getting big and round. “My precious,” he says in a Gollum voice, and then runs back away. “Thank you,” he yells, behind himself before he disappears into the house.

Zoey shakes her head, laughing softly under her breath. “I swear he’s some sort of experiment that got loose and never recaptured. Like Stitch.”

“I think you have a point.” We head inside the house, the music blaring loud enough to rattle the windows. It’s hot too, thanks to all the closely packed bodies. I set the root beer down in the kitchen, sticking it in the fridge. “It’s not cold, but do you want any?” I ask Zoey over my shoulder.

“Might as well.” She holds her hand out and I grab one of the drinks, passing it to her. She swipes a bottle opener from the counter and pops the top, taking a long sip.

*And I’m staring.* I grab my own and straighten, hip checking the door closed.

“Ah, there he is! Wasn’t sure you were going to make it!” Cree comes over, holding out his hand. I take it and we give each other a half-hug. “When does your practice start, dude?”

“Monday.” Zoey passes me the bottle opener.

“Ah, so that’s why you’re not drinking the hard stuff tonight.” He eyes the drink in my hand. “Such a shame.”

“I’ll still have fun.” I shrug.

“So, you play hockey?” Zoey asks him. “Do all of you play some sort of sport?”

Cree smiles in amusement, shoving his long fingers through his dark hair. “I do. We tend to run in tight circles. Y’all have fun. I’ll catch up with you later.” He smacks me on the shoulder and moves by me into another room.

Zoey looks around, keeping herself tucked closely against my side. If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say she’s considering making an escape for it and snacking on Oreos in the truck.

Cheers arise from the area of the living room and it feels like the blood is draining from my body when I notice what song is playing.

“Oh no.”

“What?” Zoey startles at my tone.

I shove my beer into her hand. “It’s Teddy’s song. The last time this played at a party he took off all of his clothes and started swinging his dick like a windmill—sure he’d had a lot to drink, but it’s his hype song.”

She frowns, following me as I push past people in search of my friend. Someone turns the volume up and ‘Everywhere I Go’ by Hollywood Undead gets even louder.

There are people gathered around the coffee table in the living room, cheering and sure enough, there’s Teddy on top of it doing a strip tease as he screams out the lyrics.

Mascen enters the living room from a back door and we make eye contact, silently communicating that we have to end this before it escalates.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Just ... stay here,” I tell Zoey.

“Teddy!” I yell, but of course he can’t hear me. Mascen and I corner him from opposite ends.

“Off the table,” Mascen demands.

Teddy’s eyes are closed, and he’s absorbed in the song, fingers on the zipper of his jeans.

“Oh, hell no, we’re not doing this again.” I grab for him and his eyes pop open.

“Don’t kill my buzz, Cole.” He gyrates his hips.

“Get off the fucking table, Theodore!” Mascen bellows. “I fucking mean it! I’m not doing damage control if you turn into a campus wide meme again!”

Teddy dances around the table, trying to avoid us. He sing-songs, “Theodore’s not my name. Try again.”

“TEDDY!”

“Sure, let’s go with that!” He goes back to singing the lyrics and girls start tossing dollar bills at him when he wiggles his jeans lower. Dude’s not even wearing boxers.

The last thing I want is to manhandle his drunk ass, especially with the risk of injury, but if I don’t intervene, he’s going to end up streaking around the neighborhood in no time.

“I’ve got him,” I mouth to Mascen.

As fast as I can, so Teddy doesn’t see it coming, I grab him up in a fireman’s carry, so his weight won’t strain my body as much.

He screams like a little girl. I guess he closed his eyes again and didn't see me coming for him.

"Put me down, man!" He yanks and pulls at me. I grit my teeth and shove my way through the cheering crowd and girls still tossing money, phone numbers, and fuck I think those were panties that just smacked me in the head.

"I'll put you down in my truck, because I'm taking you home."

"I don't want to go home! I'm just getting started! Don't be a party pooper. That's no fun."

Mascen's on my heels and I stop by Zoey. "Can you grab my keys from my pocket?" I ask her.

Her eyes widen, but she jerks her head in a nod and does what I ask. I breathe carefully and evenly, trying not to think about how close her hand is to my dick. I can't go there with my thoughts, definitely not when it looks like I'm going to be babysitting a drunk Teddy tonight.

She secures my keys and then the three of us—well, four counting Teddy strapped across my back—make our way outside and down the block to my truck. Zoey runs ahead, opening the passenger door so I can put him inside.

As soon as I get him in the truck he's trying to get out, protesting about how he's fine.

I shove his chest back and strap him in. "Don't give me a song and dance about being fine. You don't even have a fucking shirt on." I slam the door closed and turn to face Mascen and Zoey. I blow out a pent-up breath, clasping my hands behind my head. "I'll take him back to our place," I say to Zoey. To Mascen, I add, "We know he can't be trusted on his own."

Freshman year, after another experience, we took him back to his dorm and left him, but he escaped and came right back to the party. The guy needs twenty-four-hour surveillance when he reaches a certain level of intoxication.

Behind me, he bangs on the window.

My patience thin, I yank the door open and get in his face. "Did you, or did you not, tell me that your parents are done with your shit? How do you think they'd like to find out about this stunt?"

His eyes grow to the size of saucers and he blanches. "Don't tell my mom. She's scary." He shudders.

I close the door again and exhale. "Zoey, stay if you want. I know we only just got here, but I've got to keep an eye on him."

She's still holding both bottles of root beer and the keys. She gives a



shrug. "It's okay. I don't really know anyone here anyway. Let's just go home."

"You sure, man?" Mascen finally speaks, shaking his head as he looks at Teddy through the glass. "You can take him to my place, and I'll deal with him."

"Nah, I got it."

Mascen can be kind of a dick and doesn't always say the right thing. Teddy ... there's something about him that I always feel the need to look out for.

He jerks his head in a nod. "All right, I gotta go find Rory."

He walks off and the truck door opens. I'm ready to shove Teddy back inside if he's making an escape for it, but instead he leans his torso out and croaks, "I'm gonna hurl."

Zoey cringes and I sigh as he vomits all over the asphalt.

"You're going to have to sit in the middle," I warn Zoey.

"If he pukes again, I'm tossing him out on the road." She wrinkles her nose.

I take the keys from her and nod at the drinks. "Just hold onto them. I don't exactly have cup holders."

"What if we get pulled over by the cops and they think it's beer?" She shrieks in horror.

"Good point," I cringe. Taking them from her I dump the root beer out and toss the glass bottles in some random person's recycling bin. "All set."

Opening the driver's side, I let her slide across the bench and settle beside Teddy.

I hop in and crank the engine, trying to ignore the fact that gears are between her legs and the proximity that will put us at.

"Look at us," Teddy giggles, "we're the three best friends anyone could ever have again. Who needs Mascen? Fuck that dude."

"You like Mascen," I remind him, pulling out.

"I did, until he fell in *love*," he draws out the word, "and now he's all about Rory and you're going to fall in love too. I see the way you look at Zoey." Beside me I don't miss the catch in her breath. "And then it'll just be me. The lone wolf. My parents don't care about me. You guys don't care about me. Everyone always leaves Teddy."

"Nobody is leaving you, bro. I'm taking you to my place."

"But you will. Eventually. Don't worry, I'm used to it." He slumps

against the door and starts snoring two seconds later.

Zoey looks at me with a sad smile. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I feel bad for him. He’s lonely.”

“Yeah,” I glance over at him, “he does seem that way. A little lost too.”

“It’s like behind all the things he says and his wild ways, he’s hurting.” Out of the corner of my eye I see her study Teddy like some strange new discovery she’s trying to puzzle out.

“There’s usually a lot more to people than what you see on the surface.”

We make it to the apartment, and I get Teddy awake enough that he can drag himself up the stairs.

Once inside he collapses on the couch, tossing an arm over his eyes.

“Do you want your shoes off?” Zoey asks him in a soft tone. He jerks his head in a nod.

She undoes his laces, removing his shoes gently and setting them by the front door.

I set the bag of Oreos and gum on the counter along with her plant.

“Want me to put the TV on for you?”

“No noise.”

Patting his arm, she says, “I’m going to put a trash can beside you in case you get sick.”

We exchange a glance, me silently thanking her for being kind and taking care of my friend.

Once the trash can is fixed beside him, she says, “Let us know if you need anything else.”

“A back rub.”

She laughs and pats him on the head. “Nice try.”

He lowers his arm, looking blearily from her to me. “Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Dad.”

“You fucker,” I chuckle. “Get some rest and drink up.” I pass him a bottle of water. “I’ll set some Advil on the table.”

“Best parents ever.”

He gulps down some water and by the time I return with medicine he’s snoring once again.

Starting back down the hall, I yank my shirt over my head, nearly colliding with Zoey when she walks out of the bathroom.

“Oh my God.” Her hands land on my chest, her skin cool against my heated body. “I’m so sorry.” She jerks away from me.

I want to tell her she can touch me any time she wants, but I'm not that forward. I'm just not that kind of guy. Maybe that's my downfall. But I refuse to change who I am.

"It's okay."

Her eyes are on my chest, taking in every muscle I've worked my ass off for. She seems to realize what's she's doing and hurriedly averts her gaze, darting into her bedroom.

I chuckle in amusement, but the damage is done. My cock is hard, and like every night, she's all I'm going to have on my mind.



## ZOEY

I GRIN at the giant A circled on my paper. I busted my butt on my essay for my anatomy professor. I'd heard he was a hard ass, but I was determined not to let this class drop my GPA and so far, I'm off to a pretty good start.

Doing a little happy dance as I exit the classroom, I cringe at my awkwardness and hope no one noticed. Swinging my backpack around I stuff the papers inside. I can't wipe the grin off my face. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I see a message.

**Dad: We still on for lunch today?**

**Me: I'm leaving class now. I'll meet you at the café.**

**Dad: Do you know what you want? I'll go ahead and order.**

I text him back what I want and I'm tucking my phone away when I hear my name being yelled across the quad. I look up and see Teddy waving at me as he jogs over.

"What's up?"

He throws an arm around my shoulders tugging me against his side. "I wanted to say sorry for the other night. Thanks for ... thanks for looking out for me."

I get the impression that Teddy rarely apologizes for his actions.

"You're welcome. Next time, don't try to strip tease at a party."

He grins, his arm dropping from around my neck. "Come on, Z, everyone wants a piece of me." He grabs his crotch.

Rolling my eyes, I push my hand against his arm. Of course, he doesn't even stumble. The guy is pure muscle.

"You're calling me Z now?" He falls into step beside me as I head toward

the café on the other end of campus.

“Sure, my new best friend needs a nickname.”

“Does that mean I have to come up with one for you?”

“Sex God will do.”

I roll my eyes as he laughs uproariously. A guy passes him and high-fives him.

*Men.*

“I don’t think so.”

“True, Cole might get jealous.” He grins at me. “Don’t think I don’t miss the little dancey-dance you two are doing.” He spins in front of me, hands up like he’s waltzing with someone. Back beside me, he shrugs. “Honestly, I think you two need to just do it already. It’s inevitable.”

“Nothing is inevitable,” I defend, lifting my chin in the air.

“Mhmm, keep telling yourself that, Z.” He hooks his fingers around his backpack straps. “Where you headed?”

“Lunch with my dad.”

“Oh, I didn’t know your parents lived around here.”

“Just my dad. My mom’s dead.”

He winces. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. But I do have to go.”

“All right, all right.” He grins, walking backwards down a loop in the cobblestone sidewalk that heads in the other direction. “I’ll see you later.”

I lift my hand in goodbye and take a deep breath, bracing myself for lunch with my dad.

Entering the café a few minutes later, I inhale the heavenly scent of coffee beans and baked goods. My dad stands, towering above everyone else, and waves me over to the table he secured in the back corner.

“Thanks for coming,” he says in his extra deep voice as he sits back down. “It’s nice to get to spend some time with just you. Even though I love having you to the house for dinner.”

I give him a small smile, and it’s not even forced.

“This is nice,” I agree, settling in front of the B.L.T. I had him order for me.

“The food just got delivered so perfect timing.”

“I’m starving.” My stomach rumbles in agreement to my words.

“How are your classes going?” he asks, staring down at his salmon meal. The café serves some fancy ass food, I guess to cater to the rich tastes of most

of the kids who attend.

“Good, I got an A on my anatomy essay.” I pull it out of my backpack and hand it over like a proud little kid.

“That’s amazing!” He grins, eyes scanning the opening lines of my paper. “Can I keep this?”

“Why?” I ask curiously.

“To put on the fridge beside Gabe and Isaac’s school stuff.”

It’s dumb. I’m twenty-one years old, and it’s a college essay of all things, but the fact he wants to display it on the refrigerator along with my brothers’ stuff feels good. It makes me feel wanted, like I belong. I’m not the outsider I wanted to make myself believe I was in his family.

“Y-You can keep it,” I stutter, trying to keep my emotions at bay.

“Thanks.” He sets it beside him on the table.

“Dad?” My voice is hesitant.

“Yeah?” He looks up from his plate.

“I love you.”

He rears back, startled by my words. It makes me sick to my stomach to admit it, but I haven’t told my dad I love him for years. I was punishing him. And myself. I deluded myself into believing he didn’t love me, or he would have stayed. It was a childish way of thinking. Just because my parents fell out of love, didn’t mean either of them stopped loving me. But I placed all the blame of the divorce on him and that was unfair.

He swallows thickly, looking down to hide the emotions in his eyes, but I see it.

“I love you, too.” He glances up at me. “You’re my little girl. You’ll always be my baby.”

I reach across the table, taking his hand. “I’m sorry.”

*For hurting you.*

*For hurting me.*

*For everything.*

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

“Yes, I do. I pushed you away. Over and over. I said mean, hurtful things to you. I was awful.”

He squeezes my hand back. “You were a child and you were hurting. It was understandable. You didn’t understand—”

I snort. “I was a brat.”

He chuckles, but tears shimmer in his eyes. “Your mom and I might’ve

fallen out of love, but I never, not for one second, stopped loving you. And frankly, a part of me will always love your mom, but when you're not *in* love with someone, it hurts to stay."

"I see that now."

It's taken years for me to gain that clarity, but I'm glad it didn't take a second longer. I don't want to miss out on a relationship with my dad, or even Allison, and definitely not my siblings. I know my mom, wherever she is, is proud of me.

"It's good to have you back, baby girl."

"I love you," I say again, because I can, because I haven't forbidden myself from those words anymore.

And my dad? He beams, like I've given him the greatest gift ever.



"YOU'RE A SAINT," Cole exhales in relief upon opening the door to the apartment and finding me in the kitchen making dinner.

"It's almost ready."

"I could kiss you right now." His eyes widen with realization of what he's said. "Not that I'm going to or anything." He walks over to me and tries to peek in the oven. "What are you making?"

"Roasted chicken and vegetables."

"I think I love you." Again, his eyes grow large. "I'm going to change before I get myself in trouble."

I laugh, brushing off his words. I know he didn't mean any of it, so I'm not reading into it.

The timer goes off and I pull the meal out, getting our plates ready. I'm not much of a cook, I've never really liked being in the kitchen, so Cole does most of the cooking and I usually clean up. But I figured he'd be tired after his morning and afternoon practices, not to mention the classes in between.

Cole comes down the hall, having changed into black sweatpants and an oversized Aldridge University sweatshirt. I quickly avert my gaze before I do something dumb.

Like drool.

*He's a basketball player. Stay far away.*

My vow feels moot at this point since my dad is the main reason I always



said I'd stay away from anyone who played the sport, and I've forgiven him. But it doesn't change the logistics of the fact that from whispers on campus Cole is headed straight for the NBA and pursuing a relationship with anyone with that kind of spotlight shined on them would be a disaster waiting to happen. The women who throw themselves at players, regardless of whether or not they're married is laughable.

And it's not like I'm looking for commitment from anyone. Not after Todd. I'm better off on my own for a while.

"Where'd you go?"

I jump at the feel of Cole tapping his finger against my forehead. "Sorry, zoned out." I shake myself free of my thoughts.

"Looked like it."

I force a smile and sit down with my plate. He grabs a root beer from the fridge and looks at me over his shoulder. "You want one?"

"Yeah." I jerk my head in a nod.

He grabs another and settles beside me on the other barstool. "This smells amazing."

"Thanks, I had some help from a *Food Network* recipe so I can't take all the credit."

"Doesn't matter." He clinks our glasses together.

We dig into our meal and we're almost done when there's a knock on the door. Before either of us can get up, the door swings open and Teddy is tucking keys back into his pocket.

Cole snaps his fingers, pointing at Teddy. "I'm going to need those keys back."

"No can do, man."

"Why are you even here?" He grumbles as Teddy stocks some of his favorite beer in the refrigerator.

"Jude said he was having a few friends over. A few turned into a full-fledged party. So, here I am." He spreads his arms wide. "Can't have mommy and daddy dearest catching wind of it and look I don't mind trouble, but it's going to be my choice."

Cole's chest rattles with a sigh. "You can sleep on the couch."

"Thanks, Dad." He tries to steal a piece of chicken from Cole's plate, but he swats him away with his fork.

"If you were hungry you should've brought some food with you."

Teddy mock-gasps, eyes drifting to me. "Mom, are you going to let him

talk to me like that?”

I finish chewing a bite of squash. I should've baked it longer, but there's nothing I can do about it now.

“I only made enough for two. One,” I point to myself, “two.” My finger swings to Cole.

Teddy sticks his tongue out. “Fine. I'm ordering pizza and I'm not sharing.”

“Do we look like we need you to share?” Cole indicates our almost empty plates.

Sticking his nose in the air, he huffs, “I don't have to take this abuse.”

Cole cocks his head to the side. “Need I remind you, you showed up uninvited?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever.” He grumbles, pulling out his phone to order his pizza. Walking out of the kitchen, he plops on the couch. “Don't mind me. I'll be over here *all by myself*.” He sings the last part.

Cole presses his lips together, trying to hide his laughter. “Do you think if we put him in a box and put a sign around his neck that he's free to a good home someone will take him off our hands?”

Before I can reply, Teddy retorts, “Hey! I heard that! And you'd miss me!”

I laugh, looking over at the pouting man-child on the couch. “Don't worry, I'd miss you if you were gone. I won't let him get rid of you.”

Teddy grins from ear to ear. “I knew I could count on you, Z.”

“Z?” Cole asks me with a raised brow.

Teddy answers. “We're besties now. And besties have nicknames. She's Z and I'm Sex God. Has a nice ring to it, like we're superheroes or something.”

“Sex God?” Cole swings his gaze to me, stifling laughter.

“I was going to call him my little Fuzzy Wuzzy Teddy Bear, but...” I trail off with a shrug. To Teddy I say, “I'm never calling you Sex God so come up with something else.”

He straightens, his eyes losing their joking quality. “Just call me T. I like that. T and Z. Yeah,” he nods to himself, “I like that.”

I don't know what it is about Teddy, but I want to hug him and tell him it's all right, that he's a good person, funny, kind, smart. I get the impression he hasn't heard that a lot in his life.

“T it is then,” I chime. “You want a nickname too?” I eye Cole, my lips

twitching with the threat of a smile.

He chuckles, shaking his head. “Cole is fine.”

Teddy snorts. “But he’d sure prefer you moaning it.”

My jaw drops and Cole’s eyes grow large. “Teddy,” he warns in a low growly sound.

“What?” he mutters. “We all know it’s true.” Cole and I exchange a look and I shiver from the sexually charged air between us. We both look away quickly, eyes diverted to the food we need to finish. “See, what did I tell you? The sexual tension is *spicy*.”



## COLE

“TELL ME AGAIN, why we’re at a *third* store looking for some kind of magical Oreos?”

“For Zoey,” I remind Teddy. “If you’re going to keep crashing on our couch several nights a week, at least make yourself useful and help me stock up on these. They’re her favorite and they’ve been discontinued.”

“Oh, so this is why you wanted me to go on my own and not tag-a-long. And here I thought you were just trying to get rid of me.”

“Why would I ever want to get rid of you? You’re a glimmering ray of sunshine on a cloudy day.”

“Damn straight.” He ignores my sarcasm, looking behind the neatly stacked rows in case there’s a pack of red velvet hiding there.

“Can’t you order Oreos on the computer? I’m sure eBay has some.”

“I’m not ordering Zoey cookies from eBay.” I let out a disgruntled breath when I come up empty handed again.

“Found one!”

“You did!” I jump up from my crouched position.

“False alarm, they’re just regular.”

I glower at my friend. “I’m going to kill you.”

“I really thought they were red velvet.” He returns them to the shelf. “Why are we wasting our time with this?” Before I can retort with yet again, that I’m doing this for Zoey, he adds, “We could just call places and see if it’s in stock.”

My jaw drops. How the hell did I not think of that? “Teddy, you’re a genius.”

“That’s what they tell me.” He shrugs his shoulders, shoving his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “Everyone underestimates me, but I do have a brain.” He leans against the shelf and pulls his phone out. “Let’s get back in the truck and I’ll start calling places.”

I grin at him. “I could kiss you right now.”

He wrinkles his nose. “You’re a good-looking guy and all but you’re not my type.”

I shove his shoulder as I walk by him, yanking my keys from my pocket. “Just get on the phone.”



“HEY.” Zoey smiles when I walk in the door, looking up from her laptop where she’s snuggled up on the couch beneath a blanket. Her hair is piled on her head in a messy bun and the zip up hoodie she’s wearing is falling off one shoulder. She shouldn’t look so delectable, but damn if I have to fight the urge to walk over and kiss her.

*She’s not yours, I remind myself.*

“Hi,” I say back, locking up behind me. “I got you some things.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widen at the bags in my hands. Her smile grows as she sets her laptop aside and stands. “What is it?”

I shove the bags into her hands, and she takes them to the kitchen, eyes widening when she sees all the packs of red velvet Oreos that Teddy and I spent the afternoon and evening tracking down.

“How did you find all these?” Her voice is whisper soft with surprise.

“Let’s just say a lot of driving was involved and Teddy was on the phone all day.”

“You didn’t need to do this.” Her voice catches, and her eyes glimmer with emotion. “But thank you. Thank you so much.”

“I know I didn’t have to. I wanted to.”

Walking away from all the cookies she shocks me when she wraps her arms around my middle, pressing the side of her face into my chest. My arms come up slowly, hugging her back.

“I can’t believe you did this.” She lets me go and starts unpacking her cookies, stacking the packs on top of each other. We were able to hunt down nearly twenty of them.

“I wanted you to have as many of your favorite cookies as possible.”

She appears deep in thought as she moves the stacks to our pantry cabinet.

I edge down the hallway and use the bathroom before changing out of my clothes. I have some homework I need to get started. The last thing I need to do is get behind on my studies. It can be hard to keep up with everything, school, my job, basketball, but somehow, I always manage to make it work.

Grabbing one of my textbooks and laptop I join Zoey back on the couch.

We work in companionable silence, but every so often I feel Zoey’s eyes drift to me, like she’s trying to figure out my motivation for hunting down her favorite Oreos.

The truth is, I would’ve done that for any of my friends for something they cared about, but would I have gone so far out of my way after the first few failed attempts?

I’m not so sure.

Zoey closes her laptop. “I’m going to make tacos for dinner. Is that cool?”

“That’s fine,” I mumble, pretending to be absorbed in my paper, when in reality my body is in tune to every movement of hers as she sets her computer on the coffee table and stands.

My chest tightens. I need to move past my feelings for her. I can’t do this again—pine for someone who clearly doesn’t want me. But knowing it and actually accomplishing it are two different things.

Desperate for fresh air, I shut my computer and grab my basketball from beside the door. I’m out in seconds, jogging down the stairs to the small court beside the building.

Digging in my pocket, I hope to find a piece of gum stuffed there. Luck is on my side when my hand closes around the foil wrapped rectangle. I take it out and pop the cinnamon gum in my mouth.

Dribbling the ball, I close my eyes, focusing on the feel of my fingertips grazing the surface and how in tune I am with it and my surroundings. Keeping my eyes squeezed shut, I shoot the ball, opening them in time to see it glide easily through the net.

Basketball is second nature to me, as easy as breathing. It’s been like that since the first time I stepped on a court. I’ve always felt like I belonged once I got a ball in my hands. I think of the smiles my parents and sisters have always worn when watching me play. I know I’ve been fortunate to not only

have a talent for something, but the support of my family as well. Not everyone is as lucky. Look at Zoey and what she's been through, a strained relationship with her dad and her mother passing. At least she's trying to mend things with him. I know that takes an incredible amount of courage when you've been hurt.

I don't realize how long I've been out there until Zoey emerges in the darkness; her arms wrapped tightly around her body. Her hair is down now, and she's slipped her feet into a pair of flip-flops she's taken to keeping by the door.

"Are you okay? Your tacos are getting cold."

I tuck the basketball against my side, scrubbing my other hand over my head. My curls are getting a little out of control and I'm in desperate need of shaping them up. If my mom saw me now she'd strap me to the kitchen chair and go to town.

"I'm fine. Just needed some air. That paper was getting to me."

It's a lie. It wasn't the paper at all, but the beautiful girl I'm forced to live with.

She's everything I want, and everything I can't have.

"Oh." She gives a small smile. "I'd offer to help but I don't think I can do you much good with the difference in our studies."

"No, I guess not." I give her a flicker of my own smile.

"Cole," she starts, her eyes drifting to the ground. She wiggles her toes, staring at them like they hold all the answers in the world. "Look, I like you, a lot. But ... I'm scared." Her dark eyes lift to mine. "I was screwed over in my past, and really hurt, and even though I realize now that he was never the guy for me that doesn't mean damage wasn't done. I'm just ... trying to figure out who I am."

I stare into her eyes, trying to convey a thousand unsaid things. "From where I'm standing, Zoey, you're pretty remarkable."





## ZOEY

“TELL ME AGAIN, how we got talked into this?” I yell through the crack in the bathroom door as I put the final touches on my makeup.

I hear Cole’s door open down the hall. “Because Teddy is a master manipulator when it comes to us.”

“True,” I sigh, swiping gloss on my full lips. “All he has to do is give those puppy dog eyes, and I’ll agree to just about anything.”

Stepping back, I take in my costume. I bought a green sequined mini-dress, strapped some wings to the back, and *ta-da* I’m Tinkerbell.

When Teddy first suggested all of us dressing up for Halloween night at Harvey’s I was steadfastly against it. I’ve never much enjoyed the holiday, even as a kid. I mean, knocking on strangers’ doors and asking for candy doesn’t exactly scream safe. And as I got older it seemed childish to parade around in costumes. But Teddy worked his voodoo magic and the next thing I knew I was saying sure, and Cole was too.

Opening the bathroom door fully, my jaw drops when I see Cole.

“What?” He pats his bare chest. “Is it awful?”

I swallow thickly, looking him up and down, from the gold sandals on his feet, to what is practically a white sheet wrapped around his waist. A golden laurel sits like a crown on his head and his body is sprinkled with a gold shimmering dust.

“Wha-who-what are you?”

He looks down at himself and back at me with an unsure smile. “Zeus. It was my sister’s idea. She’s good at this kind of stuff so I asked her what I should be, and she told me what to get.”

I needed to both thank and curse his sister.

He looked incredible, and I had to resist the urge to shove him into his bedroom and have my way with him.

“A-Are you going to get cold?”

*For the love of God, Zoey, stop stuttering and staring at his man nipples!*

“I’ll wear a jacket and take it off when we get there.” His eyes do a slow glide up and down my body. I feel that look *everywhere*. My attraction to him isn’t going away, if anything it’s getting stronger day by day. I don’t know how much longer I can resist him. “You look amazing, Zoey.”

“Thanks.” I tug on the hem of the mini-dress, wishing it was a tad-bit longer.

“You always look gorgeous,” he adds, clearing his throat. Adjusting his crown, he asks, “Are you ready?”

“Yeah. Let me grab my phone.”

While getting my phone from my room I also slip on a jacket to cover my bare arms. There’s not much I can do about my legs, but at least most of the evening will be spent in the warm bar.

Cole and I are silent on the drive over. When we pull into the packed lot, he grabs a piece of gum and starts chewing. “You want any?”

I shake my head. “I’m good.” We walk into the bar and I yell to be heard above the music and cacophony of voices, “Do you know what Teddy came as?”

I glance around, seeing a lot of guys dressed as Marvel superheroes, but Teddy likes to stand out in a crowd. I doubt he’d do something so basic.

“Sup,” says a guy dressed as Bucky Barnes.

“Keep moving.” Cole glowers, removing his jacket. I press a hand to my mouth so the poor guy can’t see me snicker. “No, Teddy didn’t say what he was, but I’m sure everyone’s at our usual table.”

I don’t protest when he reaches for my hand to guide me along, not only do I not want to get lost in the insane crowd that frequents Harvey’s but I selfishly like the feel of his hand wrapped around mine.

When we get to the table, he still doesn’t let my hand go, sliding into the same spot he was in the last time with me on the end. I take in everyone seated at the table, figuring out their costumes. Mascen is dressed as The Joker and Rory as Harley Quinn. Kenna is as a blue butterfly, complete with face makeup, and Li is Cruella De Vil.

But I don’t see Teddy.

I open my mouth to ask where he is when there's a rough shout of, "Avada Kedavra!"

My head jerks in that direction, my jaw dropping. "Oh. My. God."

Cole snickers beside me. "Teddy." He shakes his head, trying not to dissolve into full blown hysterics.

Teddy took his costume to the highest elevation he could. I don't know how he pulled it off, but a full makeup and prosthetics team had to be involved to pull off his perfect recreation of Lord Voldemort.

"Avada Kedavra!" He shouts again, pointing his wand and mimicking the way Ralph Fiennes did it in the movies. In his other hand he carries a tray filled with shot glasses.

"Is there a costume competition?" I ask Cole under my breath.

"Maybe. I don't know. But Teddy does everything over the top. You get used to it."

"If he ends up shit-faced back at our place, I'm not peeling that thing off his face." I shudder at the idea of removing whatever prosthetic is glued to his face to give him the snake like appearance.

"Nah, we'll let Jude deal with him." He nods at the guy on the other end of the table dressed as Cupid with several girls hanging off him. One is dressed as a sexy nun, which I can't help but roll my eyes at.

Teddy reaches the table and sets the tray down. He passes a shot to me and another to Cole.

"Mom and Dad go first."

Mascen chortles. "You call them Mom and Dad?"

"Sure, they're my college parents." Teddy passes out the rest of the shots. Picking up his own, he stands at the front of the table and lifts it high in the air. "To great friendships, memories made, and of course, finally, to that bitch ass Harry Potter. Cheers." He downs his shot just as a wide-eyed guy side steps our table, ironically dressed as Harry Potter. Teddy spots him and in his best Lord Voldemort impression says, "The boy who lived. Come to die."

Cole leans over to me, his lips brushing against my ear and sending a shiver racing down my spine. "He's having way too much fun with this."

"Jude," Teddy points his wand at the football player, who cocks his head, waiting for him to go on, "next round is on you, my friend."

Jude lifts his empty shot glass. "You got it. Excuse me, ladies." He extricates himself from his posse of girls.

Still standing in front of the table, Teddy adjusts his cloak, and grins,

wiggling his eyebrows when he slides his hands inside. “It has pockets.” And then he does a little spin like a girl who’s just discovered her dress has pockets.

“How much has he already had to drink?” Cole asks Mascen.

Mascen stares into his glass of beer. “Just a beer when he first got here and the one shot. Teddy never needs much alcohol to be ... well, Teddy.” He raises his glass toward Teddy’s figure where he’s shouting random spells at patrons. He takes a sip of his drink and eyes Cole. “What are you supposed to be anyway?”

“Zeus.” He plays with the laurel on his head. “You know, the Greek God.”

“And you must be Tinkerbell?” He arches a brow at me.

“Ding-ding-ding we have a winner.”

Jude reappears with more shots and Teddy grabs one, doing a little happy dance.

I’m so glad I didn’t come up with an excuse to not come tonight, because witnessing Teddy as Voldemort is worth it.

“Are you singing tonight?” I ask Cole, passing him a shot and taking one for myself.

He makes a face like something tastes sour, but he hasn’t even downed his shot yet. “Probably not.”

“Come on.” I nudge his shoulder. “You’re so talented.”

“Maybe if I get drunk enough,” he half-whispers, but gives me a tiny smile.

I take my shot, trying not to wince at the bitter bite of alcohol going down my throat. “Get me drunk enough and I might even sing with you.”

He turns his body toward me, his smile making his eyes twinkle. “Now that has me intrigued.”

“Don’t get your hopes up *too* much. It’ll take a decent amount to get me there.” I lift my empty glass and set it on the table.

“Well, if Teddy has anything to say about it that can be arranged.” He flicks his fingers toward his friend who’s dragging Murray, dressed as Iron Man, out from the booth with orders for more drinks.

After another shot, I slip out of the booth and head to the bathroom for a pee break. On my way back to the table I stop off at the bar and request two glasses of water. At the table, I pass one to Cole and he smiles gratefully. That smile does weird things to my stomach, like make it flip and jump

around like a horde of butterflies are taking flight.

“We need to stay hydrated if we have any chance of survival,” I hiss to Cole, just as Teddy’s next volunteer, Cree, shows up with drinks for the table.

Under his breath, he says, “I think Teddy’s trying to kill us all tonight.”

“Ah,” Teddy leans in, somehow having overheard with his supersonic hearing, “but what a fun death it will be.” He hands Cole and me each whatever concoction Cree bought, some sort of Halloween special if the fake eyeballs floating in the glass are any indication.

I shrug, eyeing the drink and take a sip. It’s not bad, there’s definitely berries mixed in with whatever alcohol has been used. It’s one of those drinks that tastes harmless but will get you shit-faced in no time.

“Are you hungry?” Cole asks, passing me a menu.

I didn’t realize it until he spoke, but I’m starving, and with the amount I’ve already drank I definitely need to get some food in my system to absorb it.

“Food. Yes. We should get that.” My words come out disjointed, not because I’m drunk but because staring at Cole renders my brain useless.

He chuckles. “Order what you want. It’s on me.”

“No.” I wrinkle my nose. “I can buy my own food.”

“I know you can, but I’m buying.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Mom. Dad,” Teddy interjects. “No fighting in front of the kids.” He spreads his arms wide to encompass the table where he’s finally taken a seat. It’s hard to take him seriously, considering he’s lacking a nose at the moment.

“Say that in parseltongue,” I challenge.

“Hiss-hiss, motherfuckers. No hiss-hiss fighting.”

I snort, slapping a hand over my face in hopes no one heard the horrid noise but from Cole’s amused look he definitely didn’t miss it.

Cheeks flushed, I hold up the menu to hide my face from everyone at the table.

When a waitress comes by, I order a cheeseburger called the Wild Cowboy Ride. I hate to admit it, but the name is what sold me on it. I’m easily amused.

My phone lights up on the table and I pick it up, grinning at the photo my dad sent me of the boys in their Halloween costumes. Gabriel is dressed as Buzz Lightyear and Isaac as a pirate.

**Dad: The boys had fun. They're already passed out from a chocolate coma. Wish you could've joined us. Hope you're having fun with your friends.**

**Me: They looked adorable.**

**Dad: They're really excited you're taking them to the movies this weekend.**

**Me: I'm excited too.**

"Are those your brothers?" I jump at the sound of Cole's voice, somehow having forgotten in the past minute that he was beside me.

"Yeah," I bring up the picture of them in their costumes, "aren't they cute?"

He smiles, eyes crinkling at the corners. "They're adorable."

I put my phone away and pick up my glass of water, taking a couple of sips to help cool me down from the sudden heat I feel rolling off the man beside me.

I smile gratefully at the waitress when she drops off our food. I stuff my face, so I don't have to look at him or talk to him and try to slow down the racing of my heart.

Why. Why does he have to affect me this way? My attraction to him isn't dimming, it's only growing. But I'm scared. To make that move. To ruin a good thing. To put myself out there at the risk of being hurt again.

Just because I realize Todd is a piece of shit now, doesn't mean the hurt at the time wasn't real.

Scarfig down the rest of my burger I then allow myself to be dragged onto the dancefloor by the girls.

Lately I haven't had the best luck dancing. It seems to lead to a dangerous temptation with Cole and me, but I figure dancing with them is safe enough.

Letting myself get lost in the music, I lose track of time, until my body's demand for me to quench my thirst is too much to take and I return to the table to gulp down some water. I feel Cole's eyes rake over my sweat dampened skin.

"Having fun out there?" He raises a glass of beer to his lips, his eyes darker than normal in the shadowed bar.

"Yeah. I like to dance. I took classes for years."

"Hmm," he hums, and I can tell he's filing back that tidbit of information.

Gulping down every drop of water from my glass, I wink at him.

Teddy appears from out of nowhere, grabbing my elbow. "Come on, Z.

They're about to announce the winners."

I guess there is a costume competition then.

I allow Teddy to drag me away toward the front of the stage where Cole sang weeks ago.

A guy, the owner perhaps, stands at the mic and calls out the top five costumes as voted by the patrons. Teddy beams proudly on the stage, but that smile falls when he's announced as second place.

"Second place," he scoffs to me when he returns, "what kind of blasphemy is this. Losing to a guy with little pom-pom things glued on his shirt, calling himself a gumball machine, when I'm wearing this." He motions to himself in his massive flowing black cloak and full makeup. "Avada Kedavra to all you idiots. You know nothing." He shoves the gift card he won into my hand. "Here, you take it. I don't want it."

Two hours later, despite joking we'd let Jude deal with Teddy, Cole and I find ourselves helping him into the apartment. After losing, he got a little carried away with the drinks and I didn't think it was smart to leave him in the care of his roommate.

Cole deposits Teddy's heavy form onto the couch and I sit down on the coffee table, taking a look at the prosthetics adhered to his face.

"Why are you staring at me like that? Do you think I'm beautiful?" He puckers his lips.

"Not a chance." I shove his face away, trying not to laugh.

"It's better you don't kiss me. Cole will get jealous and punch me in the face and I'm too beautiful to have my face messed up."

"Beautiful, huh?" I pick at the edge of the prosthetic where it's already peeling up on the side. "I'm not sure beautiful would be my choice word at the moment."

"Rude," he grumbles good naturedly.

Picking up the remote, I turn the TV on for background noise and holler for Cole to bring me my makeup remover from the bathroom when he's done.

"Thanks for helping me," Teddy says.

I pause, tilting my head to the side. "That's what friends are for."

He peers behind me at the TV screen. "*The Chronicles of Narnia*, huh?"

I glance over my shoulder since I hadn't been paying attention to what was on. "Looks like it."

"The one kid is named Edmund, right?"



“I think so. It’s been a long time since I’ve watched it.”

“Edmund,” he repeats with a humorless laugh and roll of his eyes, “what a stupid name. Sounds like something only a rich prick would name his son.”

I arch a brow. “Have you been personally victimized by an Edmund?”

He snorts, looking away. “Something like that.”

Cole comes out of the bathroom, holding a towel around his waist and passes me the makeup remover and some cotton pads. “I’m hopping in the shower. You got this?” He tosses a thumb at Teddy.

I laugh. “We’ll see, I guess.”

Cole walks down the hall and as soon as the door closes, Teddy smirks. “Will you two just fuck already and put us all out of our misery?”

My jaw drops. “Teddy!” I swat at him.

He laughs, dodging my hand. “It’s going to happen eventually. You might as well get it over with.”

I narrow my eyes. “I’m not helping you remove this junk from your face.”

“I take it back, Mom.”

“Mhmm.” I eye him doubtfully. I dampen a cotton pad with the makeup remover and rub it gently against his face where the prosthetic is peeling. I have no idea if this will actually work or not, but it’s worth a shot.

Teddy quiets as I work carefully to free him from all the various pieces glued to his face and then I remove the wig cap. He yawns, rubbing at his face and smearing the face paint on his actual skin.

“You’re going to need one hell of a shower,” I tell him. “Scrub a dub dub.”

He throws his head back and laughs as I pick up the various pieces that were once attached to him and toss them in the trash.

Cole reappears, now in his pajama pants. “Hey, you got it all off. Well ... most of it.”

“I’ll get the makeup off in the shower. Z, you mind if I hop in?”

“Go ahead.” I wash my hands at the kitchen sink, ignoring the heat from Cole’s body behind mine.

He eases around me and opens the fridge, grabbing a water. “I’m beat. I’m headed to bed.”

Drying my hands, I turn around to face him. “Goodnight.”

He lowers his head, and my heart skips a beat with the stupid hope that maybe he’s going to kiss me. It’s such a dumb, foolish desire. He’s not going

to kiss me, not after all the times I've pushed him away any time something gets close to happening between us.

“Night.”

I watch him walk away, the door to his room clicking closed behind him. I can't help but think about what Teddy said, and he does have a point. There's only so long we can keep avoiding our feelings. At some point it's all going to come spilling over.



## COLE

I'M DRIPPING in sweat by the time I step into the locker room after practice. Coach is drilling us hard for the upcoming season. Our first game is the beginning week of December, right after Thanksgiving break.

"Anderson!" Coach pokes his head into the locker room as I'm peeling my practice jersey off my body.

"Yeah?"

"Come see me after your shower."

"Ooh!" Some of the guys call out like I'm in trouble. I roll my eyes at their antics and grab my towel.

After I'm clean and changed I head down the hall to Coach's office. I knock on the door before I enter.

"Take a seat, Cole."

I slide the chair out and sit down. It's small for my large body but I make it work.

"What's up, Coach?"

"I heard from Jason and he's coming into town the week after our first home game. Are you still up for meeting with him?"

I sit forward, eyes wide. Hands on the knees of my jeans. "Absolutely."

"Excellent," he threads his fingers together on top of his desk, "I'll let him know you're still agreeable and give him your number if that's okay?"

"Yeah, yes, of course."

"Remember, this is just a casual lunch to get to know you. It doesn't mean anything."

Sitting back, I try to calm my nerves. "I know, sir."

But neither of us can deny what a great opportunity it is, even if it leads to nothing.

“I’ll pass your information along and he’ll be in touch.”

“Thank you.” I stand, shaking his hand when he offers it to me.

His face brightens, a smile I know isn’t meant for me thrown over my shoulder to whoever has approached the door. “Zoey.”

*Zoey?* My blood runs cold. Surely, he doesn’t mean *my Zoey*. There has to be plenty of Zoey’s on campus, and yet as I make a slow turn to the door I know, I just fucking know it’s going to be her.

She freezes in the doorway, her eyes darting from me to Coach.

“Hey, Dad.”

*Dad? Her fucking dad?*

I look over my shoulder at Coach Reynolds and back to her, horror spreading through my veins.

*Zoey. Zoey Reynolds. My roommate. My friend. The girl I’m falling for.*

*She’s my coach’s daughter.*

The world has never been so cruel to me. Am I cursed? Am I this unlucky when it comes to the girls I like? What the hell is happening?

I keep standing there, even though I should leave. Coach and I are done, there’s no reason for me to still be here, except my feet won’t move.

Zoey’s eyes don’t leave mine. It’s like her father, *my coach*, isn’t even in the room.

She’s known. She knows I play basketball, and she never said a word.

“We’re done here, Anderson,” Coach reminds me, trying to nudge me out of the room. “I’ll see you on Monday.”

“See you then, Coach,” I manage to grind out, pushing past Zoey, careful not to touch her.

I trudge back to the now empty locker room and slam my hands against the metal. I do it again, just because, letting out a groan of frustration.

My feelings and situation with Zoey were complicated enough.

Both of us have been avoiding the feelings, fears from our pasts holding us back, but now on top of that she’s my coach’s daughter, the embodiment of forbidden fruit. I didn’t even know Coach Reynolds had a kid our age.

Collapsing on the bench, I bury my face in my hands.

I’m royally fucked.

Grabbing my bag, I sling it over my shoulder and go to leave the locker room.

I fully plan on just leaving the building, letting my anger cool down before I see her next, but when I swing the door open, she's walking by and instinct takes over. I clasp her wrist and she lets out a tiny cry of surprise as I pull her into the locker room, pinning her against the wall.

"Cole," she squeaks out.

"You knew," I accuse. "You knew your dad was my coach and you didn't say a word." Her eyes drop to the floor. I place a gentle finger on her chin, raising her face back up, refusing to let her not face this. "Why?"

Her teeth grind. "Because we're complicated enough, Cole. I like you. You like me. But we're both protecting our hearts. You knowing about my dad ... that only gives you more arsenal to stay away from me."

"As if you're not carrying enough of your own," I bite back.

She wets her lips. "Things are difficult with my dad. Everything I've told you is true. And a part of me was protecting you from that. He's been your coach all these years. I'm sure you like him. He's good at what he does. I don't want my relationship with him to skew how you see him."

I lean in closer to her, helpless to stop myself. I inhale her scent, coconut and lime.

Brushing my lips over her ear, I growl out, "You're so fucking deep under my skin I'm never going to be able to get you out and you're worried about protecting my feelings when it comes to your *dad*?"

She shakes her head in the tiniest of nods, pulse pounding in her throat.

I don't know what makes me do it, temporary insanity maybe, but a dam breaks and I can no longer hold myself back. Hand on the back of her neck, I move in and she doesn't fight me. Her eyes flicker to my lips and I know then that she wants this as badly as I do.

This time, I don't hold myself back from what I've wanted since that night at the bonfire.

Our lips connect and it's like fireworks shoot down my spine. This girl has been driving me crazy for months and I've dreamed about what it would be like to touch her, kiss her, hold her. To have her be mine.

She gasps against my mouth and our tongues meet. It's a passionate kiss, not a timid first meeting of lips. Her pulse drums against my hand at her neck, her heart beating as out of control as mine. I wonder if she can feel it where her palm rests against my chest.

I push into her, spreading her legs with one of mine. She rolls her hips against my leg. I don't think she even realizes she's doing it. My hands skim

lightly down her sides and she shivers like the last leaf left before winter comes. Settling my hands on her hips I hoist her up and she wraps her legs around my waist. Her arms twine around my neck and I push her into the wall.

Kissing her feels like the closest I'll ever get to heaven. Her lips are pillow soft and she makes the tiniest sounds in the back of her throat.

My fingers dig into the skin of her waist, exposed from her shirt riding up between us.

Her hands move to my cheeks and she attacks my mouth like she wants this kiss as much, if not more, than I do.

I lose myself in the moment, in her. I allow myself to be selfish and take what I want.

A door in the hallway slams and we jump apart like we've been electrocuted. Her legs fall from my waist to the floor, and I keep a steady hold on her hips. Her eyes drop to the floor like she doesn't want to look at me, and I worry that it's shame over us finally succumbing to this thing between us.

"Zoey?" I prompt, pleading with her to say something or at least look at me so I know where we stand.

She doesn't say anything, her eyes staying glued firmly to the gray locker room tiles.

I sigh, stepping back. I don't even know how to interpret how I feel. We *both* wanted that kiss. I felt it in the way she kissed me back. It wasn't just me.

But now...

Her silence speaks volumes.

Hanging my head, I speak softly, "I'm sorry, we'll forget this ever happened."

Her head jerks up, lips parted like she wants to say something, but before she can—before I have to hear the rejection on her tongue—I swing the locker room door open, and I'm gone.





## ZOEY

COLE DIDN'T COME HOME last night.

He found out about my dad, gave me the best kiss of my life, and then he didn't come back to the apartment.

I know Cole. There's no way he kissed me and was out spending the night with some other girl. That's not his style. But it doesn't mean it hasn't worried me. When I texted him, asking if he was okay and that I was worried, all I got back was an *I'm fine* text.

I certainly didn't expect him to kiss me, especially not when he learned my dad is his coach. It took me by complete surprise. That kiss ... it was everything, and it reminded me of everything I would've been giving up if I hadn't caught Todd cheating on me.

I was complacent with him.

But Cole awakens a passion inside me I didn't know existed.

It's electric.

As much as I want to wait around the apartment and see if he shows up, I have to go pick up my brothers for our movie day.

I scribble a note for Cole, letting him know where I'm at. Sure, I could easily text, but after his basic two word reply last night I'd rather not.

Hopping in my car I do my best to ignore the empty space beside it where Cole's truck would normally be parked.

"Get your shit together," I mutter to myself, backing out and heading for my dad's neighborhood.

I've barely parked in the driveway when the front door opens, and two little boys come flying out.

Allison walks behind them, the baby on her hip.

Putting my window down she stops beside the car. “Thank you for doing this. They’re so excited. Your dad is grabbing Isaac’s car seat.”

“Mommy, I don’t need it!” He stomps his little foot.

“Yes, you do.” She ruffles his hair.

The garage door goes up and my dad comes out with the car seat and secures it in the back. Once the boys are loaded, I wave goodbye and we head over to the theater a few miles away.

“Do you like Spiderman, Zoey?” Gabriel asks from the back.

“Who doesn’t like Spiderman? He’s the best.”

I know nothing about Spiderman.

“Can we get popcorn?” Isaac pipes in.

“Ooh, and candy?” Gabriel adds.

I laugh, turning into the shopping center where the theater is. “We’ll get drinks and snacks. Don’t worry.”

I’ll probably end up spending a boat load of money before the day is over, but it’s worth it to make the boys happy.

I park the car and make each of them hold my hands as we walk up to the front to buy the tickets. After purchasing two buckets of popcorn and a small bag for myself—since they insisted on having the biggest and there was no possible way they could share because they’d eat it all, they promised—we stocked up on candies and sodas.

Somehow, I manage to wrangle the two kids and all our stuff into the theater and to our seats. Sure, we leave a trail of popcorn in our wake, but it could be worse.

I sit between the two boys so I can keep an eye on both of them easily.

The lights dim and the boys sit back in their seats, growing quiet with wide eyes. I watch them with an amused smile, snacking on my popcorn. As the movie starts, I do my best to pay attention and let go of my thoughts and worries about Cole. It’s difficult, but I manage for the most part.

When the end credits start both boys look at me with wide, round eyes.

“Can we watch it again?” Gabriel asks.

“Please, Zoey! It was so good!”

I laugh at the excited children. “Maybe another weekend. I need to get you guys home.”

“Aw, man.”

“But I want to spend more time with you.” Isaac’s bottom lip juts out in a

pout.

My heart tugs at his words. “That’s so sweet. I need to get back to my home and study, though. I’ll see you guys for dinner soon.”

*And by study I mean obsessively watch the door for Cole to return.*

“We can help you study!” He jumps up and down.

Gabriel grabs his little brother’s elbow. “No, we can’t, Issy. She’s like super smart. She’s in *college*.”

I hide a laugh behind my hand and unlock my car, letting them scramble into the back. After I’m sure they’re safely secured in their seats, I drop them off at their house with promises to see them soon, and then I race to the apartment.

It’s all in vain, because when I pull into our reserved spots his truck still isn’t there.

I tap my steering wheel, feeling treacherous tears sting my eyes. I don’t even know why I feel like crying. It’s not like Cole and I are anything other than friends, but I hate feeling like what we do have might be ruined over the fact that my dad is his coach. I know it puts him in a complicated situation and I should’ve said something as soon as I realized he played basketball, but ... he found out and he finally kissed me for the first time, so maybe it’s not as bad as I think it is?

Grabbing my purse from the passenger seat, I head up to the apartment, telling myself I’m not going to think about Cole for the rest of the day.

*Fat chance.*

Opening the door, a figure stirs on the couch.

“Ah!” I scream, throwing my purse as hard as I can at the body.

“Jesus Christ, woman! What do you have in here?”

Teddy’s voice jolts me back to reality.

“What the hell are you doing in my apartment, sitting on the couch, with the lights off?” I shriek, turning on the table lamp. I hadn’t noticed Teddy’s car in the parking lot, and it’s not like it’s hard to miss. Then again, all my thoughts were focused on Cole.

“Well, *someone*’s roommate has taken up permanent residence sulking in my dorm, so here I am.” He spreads his arms wide.

“You have got to stop coming in here and scaring the shit out of us. Why are you even sitting in the dark?”

“I was reading on my phone.”

I stare at him, blinking a few times. “Reading ... what?”

“Fanfiction.”

“Fanfiction?” I repeat, sitting down in the chair and eyeing the man on the couch. “What kind of fanfiction?”

He looks away. “The fan written kind,” he hedges.

“That was implied.”

He throws his hands up in the air. “Fine, okay! It’s Kylo Ren. Ben Solo deserved better.”

I press my lips together, because I don’t want him to think I’m laughing at him. I’m amused, and sort of impressed more than anything. Teddy isn’t at all who he comes off as and I think that’s why I like him so much.

When I don’t say anything, he continues, “I like the spicy ones. You know, the smut? Not gonna lie, who needs porn when you have words? Don’t get me wrong, though, I do like some good old-fashioned porn every now and then. Particularly—”

“Don’t finish that!” I throw up a hand. “I do not need to know about your porn preferences.”

“Are you sure?” He grins, messing with me.

“Positive.” Standing up, I wave a hand in his direction. “You get back to your fanfiction and I’m going to ... I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I’m going to find something.”

Before I can walk away, he asks, “What happened with you and Cole? At least I’m assuming it’s something to do with you. He wouldn’t say.”

My shoulders tense. I turn around, biting my lip nervously. Teddy and I have become friends, but he was Cole’s friend first, so I’m not sure if I should say anything or not. But with him sitting there giving me pleading puppy dog eyes I can’t help myself.

I walk back over and sit on the coffee table in front of him.

“He found out my dad is his coach.”

Teddy rears back. “What did you say?”

“My dad is—”

“Your dad is Coach Reynolds? Holy shit.” He runs his fingers through his hair. “No wonder he’s acting so strange.”

“That’s not all of it.”

“There’s more?” His eyes widen and he leans forward, ready to absorb the juicy gossip.

I rub my hands over my jeans, trying to wipe the dampness from my palms. “Um, so after he found out, he kind of...”

“Yes?” Teddy prompts, gesturing for me to go on.

“Pulled me into the locker room and we made out.”

Teddy jumps up from the couch, letting out a low whistle. He grins at me, snapping his fingers. “Ooh, this is good.”

“No, no. This is bad. As you can see, he’s not here.” I spread my arms wide, encompassing the otherwise empty apartment.

He sits back down, growing somber. “Look, Cole ... he’s the serious type. He cares deeply about people. His friends, family. He can be intense. And if I had to guess, right about now he’s probably scared of his feelings for you. He doesn’t want to get hurt or do the hurting. And yeah, your dad being his coach royally complicates things because Cole isn’t going to want to show any disrespect towards your dad by going after his daughter. But he wants you. It’s been obvious since pretty much the beginning. Give him time to sort through his thoughts. I don’t think he’s avoiding *you*. He’s probably trying to sort things out and he needs to do that on his own.”

“On his own,” I repeat. “In your dorm?”

Teddy shrugs. “It’s not like Jude’s gonna help him. The dude had three girls in his room this morning and obviously, I’m here. Need to read my Reylo smut in private, ya know?” He winks.

I eye him. “In private? Don’t tell me you jerk off to fanfic?”

He rolls his eyes and snorts. “No.” He sighs. “Okay, fine. *Sometimes*. But don’t act like you ladies haven’t ever rubbed one out to some word porn, too!” He wags a finger in my face. “Now,” he picks up his phone, “I’m ordering some food. I’m in the mood for some chicken nuggies. You hungry?”



## COLE

It's late Sunday night when I return to the apartment. I figured if I came in well after midnight it would ensure Zoey would be in bed and I might even be able to leave in the morning before she gets up.

Pathetic, I fucking know.

But two days after I last saw her, and I still don't have my thoughts together.

When it comes to her, my brain is a jumble of discombobulated thoughts.

Letting myself in, I close the door quietly behind me and turn the lock. When I start down the hall, I immediately know something isn't right. The bathroom door is cracked open, light pouring out from it, and the door to Zoey's room is wide open showing her ruffled mattress like she'd been tossing and turning before finally getting up.

"Zo?" I ask softly, hesitating in the hall. I don't want to surprise her if she's using the bathroom or something.

There's no response, so I push the door open the rest of the way and find her lying on the cold bathroom tiles in nothing but a t-shirt and her panties. She appears to be asleep, but her chest rises and falls with shaky breaths like she's in pain.

Crouching down beside her I press the back of my hand to her forehead like my mom always used to do with me when I was child. She feels warm, but not feverish. The hot water bottle I bought her is lying on the floor beside her like she once had it clutched to her abdomen.

"Zoey?" I shake her shoulder and her eyes fly open.

She moans in pain. "Go away."

“Let me help you,” I practically plead. I don’t like seeing anyone hurt, but definitely not this girl. I want to take away whatever it is.

“It hurts,” she whimpers, lower lip trembling.

“What hurts?”

“My stomach.” Her fingers flutter over her abdomen. “It’s not my period this time. I don’t know what it is.” Tears leak out of her eyes.

“What can I do?”

“I was going to sit in a bath, but I can’t move right now. I just can’t. Don’t make me.”

“I won’t,” I promise.

Her breaths are ragged, and she squeezes her eyes shut. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

She struggles to stand and rolls to all fours. I help her to the toilet, holding her hair out of the way of the sick. She clutches the toilet, whimpering.

“Must be food poisoning,” she grumbles.

“What did you eat?”

“Leftover chicken nuggets. Fucking Teddy.” She lays back down on the tile.

“Are you sure it’s food poisoning?”

“Don’t know what else it would be.” She closes her eyes, cringing in pain.

“I don’t think you’re in pain with food poisoning. Really sick, sure. But not pain.”

“Shut up,” she pleads. “My head is pounding. It feels like there’s an ice pick digging behind my eyes.”

“Do you want me to go?” I whisper.

Eyes still closed, she reaches out lightning fast and grabs ahold of my wrist. “Lay with me.”

I’m dumb and foolish, because I’m helpless to deny her plea.

I stretch my long body out beside her. She snuggles against me and I wrap my arm around her.

This isn’t exactly how I imagined it would go the first time I laid with Zoey, but I’m not about to leave her on the cold bathroom floor if she wants me here.

She squeezes my hand where it rests against her stomach. “Don’t leave me.”



Before I can stop myself, I kiss the crook of her neck. “Never.”

I must fall right to sleep, which is a miracle in the bright bathroom, but an hour or so later Zoey wakes me up whimpering in pain.

She sits up, pressing her fingers into her lower stomach.

I feel helpless as she leans her head against the bathroom cabinet, teeth digging into her bottom lip. Sweat dampens her brow and her body begins to shake.

“What can I do?”

“I don’t know. Something’s not right.” Her eyes grow even bigger than normal. “I’ve never felt anything like this.”

“I’m calling an ambulance.” I yank my phone out of the pocket of my jeans.

“No, no. That’s not necessary. I don’t need an ambulance.”

“Zoey,” I say her name sternly, “you said it yourself, something isn’t right.”

She doesn’t protest again when I call 911.

With the ambulance on the way, she begs, “Get me some pants, please. There’s a pair of sweats on the floor.” Her request is interrupted every few words with hissing breaths and winces as pain rocks through her.

I don’t want to leave her, but I do as she asks and bring her the sweatpants, helping her put them on.

“You’re so kind.” She snuffles, wiping at her face. “Perfect.”

“I’m far from perfect.”

Holding onto my arm, she stands up. “Help me get out of here and down to the parking lot. I’m not having them cart me out of here on a gurney.”

“Are you crazy?” I look at her like she’s lost her mind. “You’re hurting. The last thing you need is to walk all the way down there.”

Somehow, she manages to roll her eyes. “I still have my pride and dignity.”

“I’ll carry you out.”

“What? No!” She shrieks, trying to pull away from me.

“You’re not walking out of here. So, it’s either me or the gurney. Take your pick.”

She winces in pain, her fists clenched tightly at her sides. “Carry me,” she bites out.

I scoop her easily into my arms, carrying her through the apartment. I have to let her down to lock up, and of course Zoey being the stubborn

woman she is uses that to her advantage and tries to start down the stairs on her own like she's trying to prove to both of us that she's fine and can do it.

She's only made it down two when I get to her and she's already leaning against the railing, trying to get ahold of her breath.

"Needing help isn't weakness, Zo." I pick her up again.

"It feels like it." She leans her head against my chest. "I've always prided myself on needing no one. I guess that was my fatal flaw. No wonder Todd cheated on me."

"Your ex was an idiot," I grumble, wanting to deck the bastard for hurting her, for not realizing what an amazing woman she is.

"True. Don't get me wrong, he holds all the blame. I didn't make him cheat, but ... I could've been more open."

"Trust me, you don't need to change."

"I pushed my dad away." She cries, I don't know whether from the topic of conversation or the pain. "It was easier than admitting I was mad at him. I convinced myself he didn't love me, that he never did. I was wrong, though, Cole. My dad loves me a lot. So much. And I was such a bitch all these years. How do I fix it?"

We reach the sidewalk, but I don't put her down. I don't want to. I hear sirens in the distance growing closer.

"With time," I answer her, drowning in her warm chocolate eyes that glow from the nearby streetlight that illuminates the parking lot. "With words. With ... with love. I don't think this is a bridge that can't be rebuilt. Sure, it's shaky right now, and you're scared but it'll be worth it."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you who he was."

I press my forehead to hers. "I don't care."

"Y-You don't?" Her face contorts with hurt, and I wish I could take it all away and make her better. I fucking hate that there's nothing more I can do.

"I probably should, but I don't. I just can't believe you didn't want to tell me because you were afraid of changing how I view your dad."

"He's a lot of people's hero. At least in the world of basketball." She hisses out a breath at the pain. "He used to be mine too, until I hated him."

"He can be your hero again. If you want."

"You think so?"

"I know so." I kiss her cheek. "Don't harbor resentment or hatred at yourself for feeling like you hated him. You were young, hurt by your parents' divorce. It was natural to place blame. Forgive him, but more

importantly forgive yourself.”

She opens her mouth to respond, but the ambulance turns into the apartment complex and her eyes zero in on the flashing lights. Setting her down, I keep my arm firmly around her waist. When I feel her sway slightly, my eyes flash to hers with worry. She grips onto my shirt.

“A little light-headed,” she explains.

My worry deepens.

Waving to the ambulance they pull over in front of us and one of the guys hop out. He spouts out a bunch of questions that we both answer and then he’s joined by another paramedic. They help Zoey into the ambulance, settling her on the gurney and strapping a blood pressure cuff to her arm and stick one of those finger things on her that checks your pulse oximetry.

“Are you family?” One of the paramedics asks me when I try to climb in.

Zoey looks at me with pleading eyes. *Don’t leave me*, they beg.

“I’m her husband,” I lie.

Zoey doesn’t call me out on my bullshit and the guy nods, letting me on. Closing the doors, we head to the nearby hospital. I sit beside her, cradling her hand in mine.

“Do you have any idea what’s wrong?” I ask, wanting answers.

They don’t reply, busy listening to her heart and lungs and doing other checks that I have no idea what they are. They even get her started on IV fluids since she’s dehydrated.

At the hospital, they whisk her inside and into a curtained off area in the ER.

A nurse comes in, going over questions we’ve already answered.

“Why are you asking all this again? Isn’t it on a chart somewhere? Why aren’t you guys figuring out what’s wrong with her?”

“We’ll get there,” she says in a calm tone. “But I have to do this first. It’s protocol.”

I’m about to tell her to fuck her protocol but Zoey squeezes my hand and says, “It’s fine.”

She explains her pain to the nurse, when it started, how it feels and where it’s located.

“The doctor will be by shortly to check on you and order some tests. Okay, sweetie?”

Zoey jerks her head in a nod.

“Can we at least get a damp cloth?” I practically beg, wanting to do

something. If I can press it to her sweat damp forehead it'll make me feel better. I hate feeling like there's nothing I can do.

"Of course."

The nurse seems nice enough, but I hate that there's a lack of urgency. I mean, I know Zoey isn't dying, at least she doesn't appear to be, and this is an ER but when you see someone you know hurting you just want them to do something. Anything.

Zoey squeezes my hand as the nurse breezes past the curtain. "Sit down." She nods at the chair near her bed.

I do as she asks. "How bad is the pain?"

"Bad enough."

"What can I do?"

"Just you being here is enough."

"Zoey," I beg.

"Fine. Can you rub my stomach? If you apply some pressure, I think it'll help."

"I can do that. Show me where."

She takes my hand, placing it on her lower abdomen. "Right here."

The nurse comes back in with the damp cloth and I take it, muttering thank you before I apply it to Zoey's forehead.

"Thanks, Dr. Anderson." She cracks the tiniest of smiles, but it doesn't mask how badly she's hurting. I see it in her eyes.

"I can't believe you're joking right now."

"It helps me cope. If this is food poisoning, tell Teddy I'm murdering him with his damn chicken nuggets."

"I'll help you."

I'm not convinced this is food poisoning like she seems to think it is. I got it a few years ago after a disastrous buffet experience. Never again will I eat at one. I couldn't stop throwing up. But I was never in pain like she is.

Eventually a doctor comes in, going over the same fucking questions yet again, poking and prodding her, listening to her lungs, until finally he steps back and says he's ordering blood work and an ultrasound. Just like the nurse figured he would. They give Zoey something to help with the pain and she drifts off to sleep.

Stepping out of her room—well, curtained off corner of the ER—I round the hall and scroll through my phone contacts.

She might get pissed at me for this, but I can't in good conscience not let

her dad know she's in the ER.

The phone rings a couple of times before his groggy voice answers with a gruff, "What the fuck, Anderson? It's three in the morning."

"I know, sir, and I wouldn't be calling if it wasn't an emergency."

"What's wrong?" He sounds more alert now, worried even, and he doesn't even know this has to do with his daughter.

"It's Zoey."

"What about her?" Panic cuts through his voice and there's shuffling in the background, no doubt he's climbing out of bed.

"I got home and found her on the bathroom floor in pain. It wasn't getting better, so I called for an ambulance. She's sleeping right now, but they're going to do some tests and I thought you should know."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll be there as fast as I can."

He hangs up, and I realize then that he's so flustered he didn't even ask how I know Zoey or how I would've found her.

Back in Zoey's room, I sit down at her side. She's still sleeping, but I can't help myself when I take her hand, brushing my thumb gently back and forth over her knuckles.

I don't like seeing her in pain and knowing I'm helpless to take it away.

The curtain brushes back roughly, the noise startling Zoey awake. "What's going on?"

The phlebotomist pulls a cart in with her and smiles. "I'm here to take some blood."

"Ugh, great." Zoey rolls her eyes to me. "I hate needles."

I squeeze her hand. "Focus on me, then."

She holds my gaze as her blood is taken, wincing a little when the needle first goes in.

"All done," the lady announces. "You did good."

And then we're alone once more. "I called your dad," I admit, wanting to give her a heads up before he shows.

"What?" Her eyes threaten to bug out of her head. "Why would you do that?"

"Because you're in the hospital and he's your dad. He deserves to know."

I expect her to get mad, but she lets out a sigh and jerks her head in a nod. "You're right."

"How are you feeling now?" Before I can stop myself, I'm smoothing a curl away from her forehead. She relaxes into my touch. I don't think she

even realizes she does it.

“Better. Whatever they gave me really helped.”

“Good.”

“Thank you for coming with me.”

“I wasn’t going to let you go alone.”

She touches her fingers to my jaw, the barest hint of pressure. “Why are you so perfect?”

“I’m not perfect, Zoey. Not by a long shot.”

Her dark eyes focus on mine. “You are to me.”

We’re interrupted by transport arriving to take her for an ultrasound since there’s no room for the machine in the tiny area we’re sectioned off in.

“Sir, you’ll have to stay in the waiting room until she’s back.”

I jerk my head in a nod. “I’ll see you in a little bit.”

She gives me a thumb’s up as they wheel her away.

Sitting down in the waiting room, my leg bounces up and down with nerves. I’m glad whatever they gave her has helped with her pain and she’s no longer hurting, but I want to get answers on what’s going on.

Every time the doors from the parking lot to the ER open, I glance over in search of Coach Reynolds. About five minutes after I sat down, he enters, and I wave him over.

“What’s going on?” he asks, out of breath. He’s tossed on a pair of gym shorts and a zip up jacket. Two different sneakers adorn his feet.

“Not sure. I got back to the apartment and found her on the floor like I said. She threw up but she was really in a lot of pain in her abdomen. She seems to think it’s food poisoning, but I’m not convinced. That’s when I insisted on calling an ambulance.”

“Can I see her?”

I shake my head. “They took her for an ultrasound and sent me out here.”

Finally, a lightbulb must click in his head. “How the hell do you know my daughter, Anderson?”

I look up at him since he’s still standing in front of me, refusing to take a seat. “She’s my roommate.”

“Your roommate,” he parrots. “How did that happen?”

I run my fingers over my hair. “My friend Teddy was supposed to rent the apartment with me, but shit happened, and he couldn’t. Zoey was his replacement. I didn’t know she was your daughter.”

He gives a resigned sigh, finally sinking into the chair beside me. “I’m

not surprised. I don't know how much she's told you, but our relationship ... it's a work in progress."

"She loves you."

He lets out a gruff laugh. "It wasn't my daughter that called me here tonight, Anderson," he reminds me.

"She's getting there."

"She talks to you about me?"

"Yeah," I admit, not sure if I might be better off keeping my mouth shut, but I kind of want to give the poor man something. He looks saddened. Defeated. I don't have kids yet, don't plan on it for a while, but I can't imagine how I'd feel if I was in his position. "I didn't know it was you until Friday when she showed up at your office."

"Ah," he breathes.

The nurse who's been working with Zoey appears in the corner of the waiting room. "Mr. Anderson," she calls, "your wife is back from the imaging center. You can see her now."

Coach arches a brow, pressing his lips together not to laugh. "Your wife, huh?"

I smile sheepishly. "They weren't going to let me come, so I said I was her husband."

He claps me on the back. "Well, come on then, son."

I straighten at his words, taken by surprise. After telling the nurse his relation to Zoey, she gives him a sticker and permits him to go into the back.

I open the curtain and Zoey's eyes dance from me to her dad behind me.

"Hi," she says awkwardly to him.

"Hey."

"Have they said anything about the imaging?" I ask, trying to break the awkwardness.

"Not yet." She rolls her eyes.

"And the pain?"

"Manageable. I love these drugs."

Coach shakes his head and sits in the empty chair I was in earlier. "What happened, baby girl?" He reaches for her hand but drops his like he's afraid she might reject his touch.

"I'm not sure. I woke up covered in sweat and hurting so bad." She clutches her abdomen reflexively. "First, I tried the hot water bottle, but I wasn't getting any relief. I thought a bath might help so I crawled into the

bathroom, but then the cold tile felt so good that I just laid there. That's when Cole found me."

"You could've called me," he tells her. "I would've come."

She shrugs. "I wasn't even going to go to the hospital but this one was worried." She points in my direction.

"You were in obvious pain."

"I could take it."

"You shouldn't have to take pain like that. Especially when something could be wrong."

"Maybe you're just dramatic," she counters with a tiny smile.

Coach chuckles. "Well, I'm glad Cole insisted on getting you to the hospital since you've always been too stubborn for your own good."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," she chants. "Overprotective males. What are you going to do?" She shrugs her shoulders.

We have to wait an hour before her results come in. The doctor breezes in with his clipboard, introducing himself to her dad before he goes over the results.

"In the ultrasound we found an ovarian cyst and based on your symptoms we're assuming you had another and it burst."

"You're assuming?" I interrupt. "You're the doctor. Shouldn't you know?"

The man sighs like this is a question he gets a lot. "Once it bursts there's little evidence left behind, but I'm fairly certain that's what happened based on the fact there's another."

"Will the other one burst and hurt just as bad?" Zoey looks terrified by the very thought.

"There's always the possibility yes, but lots of times the body reabsorbs them, and you don't even notice."

"What's to be done?" Coach Reynolds asks. "Does she need to stay overnight?"

"I'll give you a script for a pain medicine to take over the next few days and you'll be good to go."

"That's it?" I scoff in disbelief.

The doctor's eyes slide to me. "Yes." Looking back at Zoey, he says, "I suggest making an appointment with your OBGYN and if this problem persists discuss treatment with them. This type of thing doesn't really merit a trip to the emergency room."



He steps out of the curtained off room before I can deck him in the face.

“What an asshole,” I growl, hands clenched at my sides. “Who says that? You were in pain, Zoey. I bet that dude couldn’t handle a fucking cyst bursting.” I swing the curtain open to go after the rude ass doctor, but Coach jumps up and grabs my arm, stopping me.

“He’s not worth it. Let it go.”

“I won’t let him talk down to her like she’s ridiculous for being here. I’m the one who insisted she come, and she needed to.”

“*She* is sitting right here.” We both turn to find Zoey pointing at herself. “I’m not going to let some dick head make me feel bad about myself. I bet he cries over a papercut.”

I laugh. “Damn straight.”

“Do you want to come home with me?” Coach asks. “Allison and I can look after you.”

Zoey’s eyes widen and she shakes her head. “No, Dad. Thank you, but no. I’d rather go home to my own bed. Besides, Cole will watch out for me.”

I grip the end of the bed. “I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

Coach’s eyes bounce back and forth from each of us. His lips twist in contemplation like he’s trying to puzzle something out, but I don’t know what.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

She reaches for his hand and he gladly gives it to her. “I’m fine, Daddy. Promise.”

Emotion flickers over his face at her calling him that. “Okay.” He turns to me. “You call me if anything else happens. Take care of her.”

“I will.”

He gives her a hug and sends me a look that says *thank you* before slipping out of the room.

It’s another hour before we get out of there, and I call an Uber to pick us up. They called her prescription into a local pharmacy, but they won’t be open for a couple more hours.

I get her into the apartment and back to her room. She climbs beneath her covers, pulling them up to her chin.

“I’m okay, Cole,” she murmurs sleepily. “Stop looking at me like I’m going to disappear.”

“I can’t help it. I’m worried.”

“I’m better, promise. The magic drugs they gave me are a-okay.” She

holds her hand up with her thumb and forefinger making the okay gesture.

“I’m going to try to get some sleep, but holler if you need me. Or text. Or —”

She grabs my wrist, brown eyes pleading with me. “Don’t leave. Sleep here. There’s room.”

I eye the empty side of her bed, my heart speeding up. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.” I eye the floor, wondering how badly a few hours of sleep on it will fuck up my back.

“*Please.*” She bites her lower lip. “I ... I don’t want to be alone.”

Just like in the bathroom when she asked me not to leave, I can see how much it takes for her to admit that. “Okay.” I jerk my head in a nod. “But I’m getting up early to go get your medicine.”

“Thank you.”

I yank my shirt off, but my leave my jeans on as I lay on the bed beside her.

“You can get under the covers,” she says, rolling toward me.

“I’m good like this.” I curve my arm behind my head.

“Whatever you say. It’s not like I’m going to maul you.”

In minutes, her breaths are even with sleep. Her body seems relaxed and I’m glad she’s going to be able to get some much-needed rest.

Right now, I’m wide awake, far too wired to fall asleep. I lie there, staring up at the ceiling and doing my best to ignore the presence of the slumbering woman beside me, the woman who has clawed her way under my skin without even trying.



I JERK awake a little after eight in the morning, light pouring in through a crack in Zoey’s blinds. She snores softly, her breaths tickling my neck since at some point in the past few hours she’s scooted her body against mine. The covers are kicked off her and her leg is draped over top of mine. Her right arm is curled over my shoulder and her head is buried in the crook of my neck.

I have no idea how I’m going to extract myself from her hold on me, but I need to get up and head to the store for her prescription and pick us up some breakfast.

It's Monday, but there's no way either of us are making it to class today.

Slowly, working a little at a time, I manage to remove her limbs from my body and slip from the bed. I scribble out a note, so she doesn't wake up and panic that I've left her.

In my room I change my clothes and grab my wallet and keys.

I shoot a text to Coach and let him know she's still sleeping but doing okay, since I figure the man has to still be worried. Immediately he texts back a thank you.

Cranking my truck up, I drive down the road to the strip mall and run into the CVS there. Afterwards, I swing by McDonald's and pick up breakfast biscuits and hash browns. Paranoid that she might not want either, I grab donuts from the nearby Krispy Kreme.

I hope Zoey won't mind the fact there's one missing from the box, but I couldn't resist the fresh glazed goodness.

When I get back to the apartment, I open the door, balancing the McDonald's and CVS bag on top of the donut box, and find her sitting on the couch wrapped in a blanket with her stuffed Teddy dog in her arms.

"Morning." She gives me a wane smile. "Please tell me those are the magic drugs."

"Yep, and food. You need something in your stomach."

"So bossy," she jokes.

I set everything down on the kitchen counter. "Are you okay with a sausage and egg biscuit?"

"Gimme." She does grabby hands.

I pass her a biscuit and hash brown then grab her some water from the fridge. "You need to hydrate."

"Again, *so bossy*." She giggles, then winces, grabbing her abdomen again. After a few deep breaths she forces a smile. "After I eat this will you let me have the drugs?"

"Absolutely." I hate seeing her in pain, but I know she needs to eat first. "I got donuts too if you want one. Even got an Oreo one for you to try. No idea if it'll be any good since you prefer the red velvet ones, but—"

"Cole?" She silences me. "Thank you ... for everything."

"You don't have to thank me."

She rolls her eyes. "Can you just accept my thanks and sit down to eat with me?"

I laugh, grabbing my breakfast and joining her on the couch. "You're

welcome.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard.” She bites into the biscuit. “Wow, this actually tastes amazing. I didn’t realize I was so hungry.”

“Aren’t you glad I’m forcing you to eat now?”

“Don’t be smug.” She looks at the time and then me. “Don’t you need to be going to class soon?”

I turn the TV on, flipping through the channels. “I’m staying here with you today.”

“Cole,” she breathes, her eyes softening, “please don’t miss class because of me.”

I take a massive bite of my sandwich, nearly eating half in one go, and ignore her plea. “What are you more in the mood for—a rerun of *Charmed* or *Law and Order*?”

“*Charmed*,” she answers, “but seriously, Cole. You already got me breakfast and my medicine. You looked after me all night. I’ll be fine. You can go.”

I turn my head to look at her. “Now who’s the one bossing. I’m staying here and that’s that. Coach already told me not to worry about practice and stay with you.”

She blanches. “You can’t miss practice too!”

“Can and will.”

“You’re unbelievable,” she grumbles.

“Unbelievably amazing,” I counter.

“All right, Teddy 2.0 simmer down.”

I glance at her, leveling her with a look. “I’m taking care of you and that’s that. I need to be here to make sure you’re okay for my peace of my mind. Even if all you do is nap today, I don’t care.”

She rubs her lips together and dips her chin. “Okay.”

She finishes her breakfast and then says she’s going to shower, rolling her eyes when I tell her to leave the door open in case she needs me.

“I’m not going to need your help.”

“What if you fall from a bout of pain?” I counter. “What if the pain meds kick in and you fall asleep standing up? What then?”

“Fine,” she agrees, knowing I won’t give in easily. “I’ll leave it open.”

“I promise I won’t peek.”

She groans, muttering something about *stubborn ass men* under her breath.

The shower starts up, and I stay seated on the couch keeping an ear out. Seeing her like that last night was scary. I know she thinks it wasn't a big deal but seeing someone writhing in pain on the bathroom floor isn't exactly fun.

My phone buzzes from between the couch cushions and I fish it out.

**Coach: How's she doing?**

**Me: You didn't ask her?**

**Coach: All she said was fine. I figured you'd give me more details.**

**Me: She ate some breakfast and took her medicine. Now she's showering. I have a feeling she'll want to go back to bed after.**

**Coach: Thank you for looking out for her. I'll stop by after practice tonight.**

**Me: Okay.**

I try not to cringe over the idea of my coach showing up at our apartment, but he's Zoey's dad and has every right to want to check on her. I glance around, resolving to clean up today. It's not that messy, both of us are fairly neat, but the kitchen counters need a wipe down and I could probably vacuum.

**Coach: I can't believe you live with my daughter.**

It's over text, so there's no real way of knowing his meaning but I think he's in disbelief more than anything else.

**Me: I know. What are the odds?**

Not only that I'd live with her but be falling for her too.

The shower screeches as it's cut off and Zoey calls out. "I'm getting out now and I'm perfectly fine! I told you!"

"Better safe than sorry," I call back.

I stay seated on the couch until she emerges changed in a pair of fresh sleep shorts and a tank top.

*Do not look at her boobs. Whatever you do, Cole. DON'T. LOOK.*

Swallowing thickly, I watch her scrunch her hair with a t-shirt. "I'm going to try to get some sleep. You should too."

I jerk my head in a nod. "I'll clean up out here first."

"There's not much to clean."

I open my mouth to tell her about her dad stopping by tonight but decide against it. More than likely she'd call or text him and convince him not to come and I'm sure for his own peace of mind he needs to see her.

"I know," I say instead, "I just like to stay ahead of it."

“Suit yourself.” She yawns. She turns to go down the hall but pauses.  
“You ... you can nap in my bed if you want.”

My fists clench on top of my legs. “I don’t think that’s a very good idea.”

Her dark eyes flit over my face and she sighs, looking away. “You’re probably right.”

Her feet pad down the hall and then her door clicks shut quietly behind her.

“Fuck,” I growl to myself, covering my face with my hands.

*What am I doing?*



## ZOEY

IT'S BEEN two weeks since my ER visit and being smothered with the pure overprotectiveness of Cole. I might've balked, but damn if I didn't actually enjoy it. I saw a gynecologist last week and was basically told it was normal and sent on my way. So much for doctors, huh? I'm going to have to make another appointment with a new doctor and hope I actually get some help.

But now Cole's gone for an extended weekend in Michigan with his family for Thanksgiving and I'm headed to my dad's house to spend the day with him, Allison, and my siblings.

Surprisingly, I'm not dreading it.

My relationship with my dad is a work in progress, but we're repairing it and I don't feel the need to flee every time I'm in his presence.

I check my appearance one last time—hair curly and wild, simple makeup, and a long-sleeve lavender sweater dress. I figure Allison is the type to want to dress up for the occasion, though no one told me any sort of dress code. But I'm sure my baggy sweatpants wouldn't have been appreciated. Not that Allison would have said anything even if I did show up in them. She's too nice for that. I'll give her credit, she might not be much older than me, but she's never fit the wicked stepmother role.

Swiping my keys and bag, I head out the door and to their house. My dad said to get there around three and that we'd eat at five.

Before I can back out of my parking spot, I get a text from Cole and smile when I see the selfie of him and what I assume is his mom. The dark-skinned woman is curled under his big arm, beaming not at the camera but her son. Her eyes slightly crinkled at the corners like she smiles and laughs a lot.



Before I can reply another photo comes through, this one of Cole on the couch with his four sisters. Two little girls sit in his lap. They must be twins and not older than two or three. And finally, a photo of him and his dad hits my phone. They're on the driveway playing basketball. The light-skinned man is taller than average, with graying hair and a beard. The look of pride in his eyes as he watches Cole about to make a shot warms my heart.

**Me: Your family is beautiful.**

He replies immediately. **Yours is too.**

A lump lodges in my throat and I vow to send him some pictures with my family today. For now, I take a selfie in my car and send it to him.

**Me: On my way to their house now.**

**Cole: You look gorgeous. But you always are.**

He's not even here and I can feel my cheeks heat with a blush. "What is he doing to me?" I say out loud. I stick my phone in the cupholder, choosing not to reply.

Arriving at my dad's house, I don't even have my car in park when two little boys come barreling out of the front door.

"Zoey!"

"It's Zoey! Daddy! Zo-Zo's here!"

I put the car in park and shut it off, hopping out in time to be tackled by my brothers.

"I missed you!" I smother them in kisses.

Their giggles are music to my ears and tears prick my eyes thinking about how much of their lives I've missed out on because I was so fucking stubborn. But no more. These are my siblings and I love them.

"Come on, Zoey." Isaac grabs my hand in his much smaller one. "Daddy got us a VR headset and it's so cool. You have to check it out. The zombies aren't that scary."

"Zombies?" I squeak.

"It's not that bad," Gabriel promises, taking my other hand. "Issy only peed a little bit when it scared him."

"Great."

Inside the house, Isaac screams out again, "Zoey's here!"

Allison's laughter bounces around the room as she comes into the foyer from the kitchen. "We heard you the first time, Issy." Smiling at me, she says, "They've been asking when you're getting here since they woke up."

"Really?" I look down at the two boys who still haven't let go of my

hands.

“Oh, yeah. They love you.”

I smile at her. “I love them, too.”

She beams at that. “Well, I’m sure they’ll keep you occupied until dinner’s ready.”

“Where’s Rose?” I ask, not hearing any babbling from the baby.

“She’s taking a nap. She’ll be awake soon enough and your dad had to run to the store. I didn’t have enough milk or butter. Can you believe that?” She hangs her head in shame.

“Come on, Zo.” Isaac squeezes my hand. “We want to show you the zombies.”

I let the boys take me to their playroom and reluctantly agree to battle the zombies.

They both burst out into laughter when a zombie scares me and I scream, falling to the ground.

“Dad!” Gabe giggles. “The zombie scared her so bad.”

I ease off the headset and find my dad standing in the open doorway of the room with a smile on his face, my heart tugging when I see the love in his eyes for me, for them. I shoved that love in his face for way too long. I remember a long-ago conversation, one we had when he told me he was dating Allison, and I screamed at him over and over again about how much I hated him.

I must have broken his heart.

It’s the way I felt at the time, I was a hurt teenager, but now I see things so incredibly different.

I guess that’s what they mean when they say hindsight is twenty-twenty.

“That’s because zombies are terrifying.” I smooth my hair down.

My dad chuckles. “I’m glad you’re here, Zo-Bug.”

Getting off the floor where I fell when I turned around to find a rotting green zombie face right beside me, I give him a hug. “Of course. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

His eyes warm and he hugs me back. “Are you guys good here? Rosie is awake so I’m going to grab her.”

I bite my lip. “Do you mind if I get her?”

His eyes widen. I never have anything to do with the baby. I’m not much a baby person, much preferring kids that can actually talk and tell me what they need versus an infant who just babbles.

“Um, yeah.” He jerks his head in a nod. “You can get her if you want. She’ll probably need her diaper changed, though.”

I crinkle my nose. Diapers. Ew.

“I can handle it.”

“And then you’ll play with us some more?” Isaac asks.

“Dinner’s almost ready.” Our dad ruffles his hair. “You can play more after if Zoey doesn’t have anywhere else to be.”

“I have plenty of time to play,” I assure my brothers, seeing my dad’s grin out of the corner of my eye. “I better get the baby.”

Excusing myself from the playroom, I head upstairs to the nursery, easing the door open quietly. The room is dark from blackout curtains and a sound machine plays rainfall. I turn a light on, drawing closer to the crib where the baby kicks her legs happily.

She coos when she sees me. “Hi, Rose.” I reach down, rubbing her tummy.

She gives me a funny look, her smile disappearing.

“I know you don’t see me a lot and I’m sorry about that. I’m your sister. Zoey. Or Zo. Whatever you want to call me is fine. I mean, it’s not like you can say any of that yet.”

She babbles as if she’s trying to say *I might not speak your language, but I speak mine*.

I think she even gives a gurgled, “Da,” but I’m not sure whether it’s random or intentional.

I’m truly clueless when it comes to babies.

Reaching down, I scoop her up and she gives a small cry but settles down as soon as she curls into me. Laying her down on the changing table I mutter to myself, “How do I do this?”

I don’t want to have to ask Allison or my dad for help. I’m almost twenty-one years old and should know how to change a diaper.

Having an *aha!* moment, I text Cole.

**Me: Do you know how to change a diaper?**

**Cole: Yes, why?**

**Me: I need to change Rose’s diaper and I don’t know how. There’s probably a YouTube tutorial for this, right?**

He doesn’t respond by text, instead my phone rings with a Facetime and I reluctantly answer it. “Hi,” I say, feeling pathetic for my lack of maternal instincts.

“Hey,” he chuckles, moving through his parents’ house and stepping outside. “You don’t need a tutorial. I can talk you through it.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“You know how to change a diaper?”

He laughs, sitting down on the porch steps, the cheery yellow front door behind him. “I have a shit-ton of nieces and nephews, I’ve changed my fair share of diapers growing up. Now, first off, I need to know what you’re dealing with. Is it a pee or poo?”

“Uh...” My eyes bug out, darting from his image on the screen to the squirming baby on the changing table. “I don’t know.”

“Time to figure it out then, Champ.”

I set my phone down where he can see me and lift the baby, smelling her butt. “It doesn’t stink.”

“It’s probably pee, but we could still get a surprise. Before you start undressing her get your fresh diaper and wipes out, and there’s probably some ointment there too for her bottom.”

There’s a basket on the table with everything in it, so within seconds I have the fresh diaper ready, a handful of wipes—probably more than I’ll ever need—and something called Desitin.

“Okay, got the arsenal ready.”

“You’re not going into war, Zoey.” His amusement is obvious.

“That’s what you think.”

“You’re going to have to take her pants off at some point and check out the damages. Stop stalling.”

“Fine,” I grumble, slipping her bottoms off.

“Now the diaper. You can do it.”

I cringe, afraid I’m going to be met with a messy surprise but it’s definitely just a very full pee diaper.

“Roll up the old diaper underneath her, wipe her down, and then slide the fresh diaper under her when she’s clean. Now, since she’s a girl you’re going to have to ... uh ... how do I say this ... get in the crevices.”

“The crevices?” I laugh.

He rubs his face. “Look, you’re getting off easy since it’s just a pee but it can get messy around there and you want her clean.”

“Right, right. Okay. I got this,” I chant to myself.

“Yes, you do,” he assures me, his voice calm.

After getting the new diaper under her backwards at first, I finally get it right and strapped on, putting her pants back in place.

“Thank you,” I tell Cole, my relief evident as I lift the baby into my arms. She claps her hands.

He grins back, standing up. “Anytime, Zo.”

“Enjoy your dinner.”

“You too. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye.”

I hang up, and then nearly jump out of my skin when my dad says from behind me, “You and my player, huh?”

“Jesus Christ, Dad! You’re like a ninja sneaking up on me like that. Were you there the whole time?”

He laughs. “Just the past few minutes. I have to say, it was quite amusing listening to him walk you through changing a diaper.”

“I’ve never done it before.” I pat the baby’s back, rocking her in my arms. “And Cole and I ... we’re nothing. I mean, we live together, but we’re not together-together.”

He looks amused more than anything else. “Who are you trying to convince? Me or yourself?”



TONIGHT, was one of the best Thanksgivings I’ve ever had, which makes me the tiniest bit guilty when I think of my mom. I know she’d be happy for me repairing my relationship with my dad and getting to know my siblings.

Taking my makeup off I hop in the shower and change into my pajamas, ready to crash for the night.

Burrowing beneath the covers, I groan when my phone starts ringing.

Reaching over to the nightstand, I grab it and pull it beneath the blankets with me.

I’m surprised to find it’s Cole Facetiming me again.

“Hey,” I say with surprise when his face appears on screen. Like me, he’s in bed and bless my eyes he’s shirtless, the tattoo on his chest there for my viewing pleasure. “When you said you’d talk to me later, I didn’t think you actually meant tonight.”

“Oh,” his face falls, “I can hang up.”

“No!” I cry out. Calming myself, I add, “I’m happy to hear from you. Did you have a good day with your family?”

“The best. It’s always nice to be with them, even if my sisters spend most of the day hazing me. It’s what I get for being the youngest and only boy.”

“I bet they’re a lot of fun.”

“I’m sure you’d love them. Then you could all gang up on me.”

“Thank you for helping me with the whole diaper thing today.” My cheeks heat. “I’m not good at baby stuff. I like kids but babies scare me.”

He chuckles. “It can be intimidating. I got used to it really quick with my older sisters having kids.”

“Are you in your childhood bedroom?” I question, noticing what looks like trophies in the background.

“Yeah, you want a tour?”

“Sure,” I answer, intrigued by the idea of seeing a peek into the boy and teen Cole was, especially since his bedroom here is lacking so much personality.

He groans as he rises from his bed and flips the camera, giving me the grand tour complete with photos of family and friends, a giant stuffed teddy bear in the corner that he explains he’s had since he was a newborn and his mom would never let him get rid of, and lots of basketball trophies.

“I like it,” I say when he sits back down on his bed. “The Big Bird yellow walls are a nice touch.”

“Ugh,” he groans, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I was six when I picked it out and my mom would never let me change it because of the work and cost of paint even though I swore I’d take care of all of it.”

“Bold choice for a six-year-old.” I prop my phone up on the opposite pillow and curl my hands beneath my head.

“What can I say? I knew what I liked and canary yellow was it.” He leans back against his wooden headboard, crooking an arm. “It looked like you had a good time with your family today.”

After I left, I sent Cole a medley of photos much like he sent me.

“It was nicer than I expected.”

“I can see how hard you’re trying, Zo.”

“Thanks.” I exhale a weighted breath. “When are you getting home?”

*God, I hope I don’t sound too eager for him to get back.*

“My flight is Saturday afternoon. How are you fairing without me?” He grins, like he knows I’m lonely without his presence. “And without Teddy, of

course?”

“What do you mean? He’s right here.” Something flashes in his eyes as I lift the covers, but leaves when I reveal the stuffed dog he got me. “See?”

“Right.” He clears his throat. “I’m glad stuffed Teddy is keeping you company.”

“And my Oreos.” I hold up the pack I stuffed under the pillow.

He chuckles, shaking his head. “You and your Oreos.”

“I love them.” With a mighty sigh at the horror, I add, “I’m going to have to find a new favorite soon. Such a shame. Red velvet was superior.”

“Apparently not superior enough for them to not retire it.”

I gasp. “You take that back.”

“Too late.”

We talk for a while longer before I start yawning uncontrollably and he tells me goodnight.

I sleep peacefully, dreaming of a life with Cole I haven’t dared to let myself even think about.





## COLE

“WHO’S THE GIRL?” My head whips around in the direction of my mom.

We’re sitting in the family room drinking homemade hot chocolate with mini marshmallows. It was always my favorite growing up and she makes it every time I’m home.

“What girl?” I play stupid.

“Don’t play stupid with me, son.”

I shouldn’t be surprised she catches right on. My mom has always known things she shouldn’t. She misses nothing.

“Mom, there’s no girl.” I drink my hot chocolate, ignoring her gaze boring into the side of my head.

“Really? Then who did you sneak out onto the front porch to talk to yesterday? Mind you, it was freezing cold, and you didn’t even put a coat on. Could get sick, but it’s not like you’d listen to me anyway, since naturally as your mother I know nothing. Like I definitely don’t know that you were talking to someone on the phone in your room last night.”

“Mom—”

“I hope one day you have children, and they think you’re dumb too and don’t tell you a thing even when you know. A parent always knows.” She taps her forehead.

“It’s complicated.”

“Is she married?”

“No,” I snort.

“A criminal?”

“No.”

“Does she hate waffles?”

“Waffles?”

“Just making sure you’re paying attention. I don’t see the problem here.”

My hot chocolate tastes sour all of a sudden and I set it on the table beside me, careful to put the mug on the coaster so I don’t get reprimanded.

“I don’t want to get into it.” She stares at me, daring me to think I can get away with telling her next to nothing. “She’s my roommate. She replaced Teddy after he bailed, remember?”

“I remember, you just conveniently lying about your roommate. Is Zach even a real person? I see how it is.”

“Mom.”

“Go on.” She wiggles her fingers for me to continue, but the look in her eyes tells me I’ll have hell to pay later for straight up lying to her about my roommate situation.

“Anyway, she’s dealing with things. She had a crappy ex and she transferred to Aldridge to reconnect with her dad, and he happens to be my basketball coach.”

“Ooh.” She sits up straighter, smiling. “This is juicy. Like those soap operas I love.”

“It’s complicated,” I repeat. “Not juicy.”

“If you like her and she likes you, then there’s really nothing complicated about it, just your own fears and worries. Sometimes you have to take a leap. See how things go. Like your father and I.”

“It was hard for you two, wasn’t it?”

“Love is always hard. But yes, ours was a little extra complicated. It was all worth it. It’s still worth it.” She gets a wistful expression. “I love your dad with all my heart. We have a beautiful family and grandbabies. I couldn’t ask for more. I want the same for you.”

“It’ll happen one day, Mom.”

She looks at me seriously. “Don’t let *the one* slip by because you’re waiting for *one day*. Things usually happen when we least expect it.”

“You’re getting wise in your old age.”

She gasps, tossing a pillow at me which I dodge easily. “Who are you calling old?”

“Well, there’s only two of us in the room and I’m definitely not the old one.”

She cackles, shaking her head. “I thought I raised you better than this.”

My eyes soften. “You raised me the best, Mom.”

“I sure hope so.” Sobering, she says, “I want you to be happy.”

“I am.”

“All I’m saying is, the last thing that should ever hold you back in life is fear.”

“I’m not afraid.”

Her eyes narrow and at first, I think she’s not going to say anything else, but then she adds, “Are you sure about that?”



## ZOEY

TEDDY and I descend into the stadium to our seats. Mascen and Rory are already there, and she smiles at me when I take the seat beside her, so we're sandwiched between the two guys.

"I love snacks." Teddy shoves popcorn in his mouth.

Rory leans around me. "Teddy, you just love food in general."

"This is true." He shrugs, picking up his Coke and slurping it down.

"When does the game start?"

I look at my phone. "We have another twenty minutes."

"Shit, all my snacks will be gone by then."

"Then you can go buy more."

"Excellent point." He tugs his hoodie up over his head.

"What are you doing?" I eye him suspiciously.

"Blocking out my haters." He nods his head to a gaggle of girls glaring in his direction.

"What did you do to them?"

"Probably turned them down." He munches on more popcorn. "I can't help it that my dick is picky. I won't fuck just anyone."

"Teddy," I sigh, shaking my head.

"What?" He blinks his green eyes innocently. "It's the truth. Not that I haven't had my man whoreish ways in the past, especially freshman year. Ah, freshman year." He gets a nostalgic look on his face. "Sophomore year too, I must admit. Okay, last year too." He holds one hand up since the other is gripping the bag of popcorn. "But this school year I haven't had sex at all. I have to be on my best behavior." He wrinkles his nose. "You know, so I

don't get cut off from my inheritance. Assholes," he mutters the last part under his breath. "I take that back, my mom's not that bad. A little superficial. It's my dad who's the real prick."

I blink at him, astounded. "Did you even take a breath through that entire speech?"

"Only a half one."

I turn to Mascen. "Where did you all find him?"

Without missing a beat, he says, "Found him like Tarzan. Raised in the jungle."

"Hey." Teddy tosses popcorn over my head, pelting Mascen in the face with it.

Mascen glares back at him with pursed lips but doesn't say a word as he picks the popcorn out of his hair.

"Sorry I'm late," says a soft feminine voice, and I look over to see Kenna.

Mascen and Rory scoot down another seat and Kenna takes the now empty spot beside me.

"Is Li coming?" Rory asks her.

Kenna shakes her head. "No, she's having a Keanu Reeves marathon tonight."

"Kenna, want some popcorn?" Teddy shoves the bag between us and offers it to her.

"No, thank you. I'm good."

"Are you sure?" He wiggles the bag, spilling some popcorn onto my lap. "It's delicious."

"I'm fine, promise."

"Okay, suit yourself." He yanks the bag back and stuffs his hand into it, spilling more onto the floor.

"Why are you so messy?" I grumble at him, picking pieces off my lap.

"I can't help it. I have to sprinkle a little of my presence everywhere. It's my way of saying *Teddy was here*."

"You're a menace."

"I'm a heartthrob, baby."

"Don't call me baby."

"You sleep with a stuffed dog named after me."

I narrow my eyes. "How do you know that?"

"I know everything." He taps the side of his head.

"I swear you have the apartment wired."

“Nah, I’m just damn intuitive.” He chews on a handful of popcorn. “So, have you and Cole boned yet?”

I spit out the orange flavored soda I bought. “Teddy!”

He cackles merrily. “Give me a heads up beforehand. I do not need to catch Mom and Dad having sex.”

“First off, Cole and I ... it’s not going to happen.” I swallow past the lump in my throat that’s shaped like the word *lie*. “Secondly, you have got to give us the key back.”

“Never. I need to escape when Jude invites his groupies over. Gotta be on my best behavior, remember?”

“What’s up with that?” I inquire. He keeps hinting that he’s in deep shit with his parents but never elaborates. “It has to be more than that video of you.”

From bits and pieces I’ve picked up, the school wide viral video of Teddy stripping at a party is sadly normal for him.

He sighs heavily, his eyes growing serious for a change. “I got drunk over the summer, stole a yacht—in my defense I thought it was my parents’ yacht.”

“Because that makes stealing a yacht justifiable.”

“Exactly! I thought I was borrowing it!” More popcorn ends up in his mouth. “Anyway, threw a party on it, the interior was completely trashed, and since I was wasted, I crashed it into the wharf. Cost over a million dollars in damages. My dad was not pleased to say the least. So, now, I have to be on my best behavior, or I’m cut off for good.”

“Sounds tragic,” I say sarcastically. It’s not like I grew up poor, but I definitely didn’t live a life where I could’ve stolen and crashed a yacht.

“It really truly is. I’m not taking all these business classes *not* to take it over.”

“Business, huh?” I’ve never talked to Teddy about what he’s studying. “What does your dad do?”

“Mostly just sit on his ass and bark orders at his minions.”

“That’s not what I—”

I’m interrupted by the start of the game and I forget all about Teddy’s woes as the guys come onto the court.

Immediately my eyes find Cole’s form and the sound of the announcers and stadium is lost to me as I watch him. He looks at ease out there, like he belongs. My dad says something to him, and he nods.

I grew up around basketball, and I've always been interested in the game as a whole. I mean, I even played for years.

But this is the first time when everything else has faded to the background and I've only been focused on one player.

My eyes follow Cole the entire game as he runs up and down the court. His body is a lithe machine. By the third quarter he's drenched in sweat, but not even breathing heavily. He's a sight to behold and if I wasn't falling for him before I definitely would be now.

He sinks the ball into the net and my heart stutters with the realization of how much I want him.

It's more than pure attraction.

It's who he is as a whole.

For the rest of the game, my mind is lost, and when the final buzzer goes off, I blindly jump and cheer with my friends.

"Do you think they're still selling popcorn?" Teddy asks as we walk up the stairs.

I eye him, arching a brow. "No."

"Darn." He wads up the empty bag and tosses it into the trash can when we get near one. Pulling out his phone, he says to the four of us, "Party at Cree's house? You guys in?"

Mascen defers to Rory and she wrinkles her nose. "Not tonight."

"Boo, you whore," he mocks. "Kenna?"

"Nah, I have some homework to catch up on."

Teddy clasps his hands beneath his chin, pouting at me. "You're my last hope, Zoey. Let's go."

I'm not really in the mood to party, but the team did win, and I imagine Cole will want to celebrate.

"Fine, I'm in."

"Yes!" He fist pumps the air and tosses his arm around my shoulder. "You guys are missing out," he says to the other three.

"There will be more parties." Mascen takes Rory's hand. "We're out."

"We need to do another girl's day soon." Kenna squeezes my arm and then she's following the other two.

Teddy and I walk together to the parking lot. I rode with him and it was my first time in his sleek sports car. I've never been a car girl, but this one is a literal dream. The dashboard looks like a spaceship, the leather is buttery soft, and the engine hums so softly that I didn't even think it was on at first.



Teddy sings along to his music on the drive over to Cree's place and I sit there, a mere spectator to the performance he's putting on. He parallel parks easily—something I'm envious of since I lack the skill and finesse to do it. We're heading into the party when I get a text from Cole.

"You go on in," I tell Teddy. "Don't do anything crazy."

He mock-gasps. "Me? I would never."

Shaking my head, I tighten my coat around me and read the message.

**Cole: Where are you?**

**Me: Party at Cree's.**

**Cole: Not with Teddy. Please.**

**Me: Uh...**

**Cole: Shit. I'll be there soon. Keep an eye on him.**

**Me: You played incredibly tonight. It was amazing to watch.**

I hope I don't sound too much like a fangirl stalker.

**Cole: Thanks. That means a lot coming from you.**

**Me: Let me know when you get here.**

**Cole: Will do.**

Shoving my phone in my pocket, I head into the house. Music is already pumping and somehow in the timespan I was outside Teddy has found a drink and is standing on the dining room table shouting at one of the guys.

"Put my girl Shania Twain on or so help me—"

*Man! I Feel Like A Woman* starts to play and Teddy cheers, singing along.

*Was he spiking his Coke at the game?* I know he wasn't. This is just Teddy.

"Get off that table!" I yell at him, earning more than a few looks from the partygoers.

"Mom!" he cries when he sees me, spreading his arms wide. "Get up here."

"No, you get down before I call your real mom."

He narrows his eyes. "You wouldn't dare. You don't even know my mom."

"I have my ways."

"Fine," he grumbles, jumping off the table. Beer sloshes out of his cup and he licks his fingers clean. He wraps an arm around my shoulders like he did when we left the game. "Let's get you a drink."

"I don't want a drink."

“It’s a party. Of course, you want a drink. And take that coat off. Who wears a coat inside a house?” I shrug off his arm and then my coat as we enter the kitchen. He takes my coat and I think he’s going to put it somewhere, but instead he tosses it at some guy, smacking him in the face with it. “Stick that in a closet, Jenkins.”

“Do you even know him?” I whisper-shout, so that he can hear but chances are slim anyone else will.

“I make it a habit to know everyone, Mom. I’m a social butterfly.”

I sigh heavily. What was I thinking agreeing to come to a party with Teddy? He’s exhausting just watching a movie with him, let alone in a situation like this.

“Let’s get you that drink now.”

Grabbing a red solo cup, he pours me some beer from the keg in the corner of the kitchen. Shoving it into my hands, he gives himself a refill to top off what he spilled out.

Taking my free hand, he tugs me back into the family room where the furniture is shoved out of the way to make space for dancing.

He doesn’t really ask me to dance, it sort of happens by accident. Nelly’s *Just a Dream* plays, and we sort of dance around each other, holding onto our drinks. I laugh, allowing myself to feel free for a bit and let loose. I’ve mostly been studying and focused on the upcoming finals, as well as work, so there’s been less time to decompress.

One song bleeds into another and then Teddy grips me by the waist, pulling me in. My drink falls from my hand, what’s left spilling onto the floor.

The room smells strongly of booze, marijuana, and a mix of overpowering perfume.

“I’ve been waiting for this,” he chuckles, looking over my head. To me, he says, “Sorry about this, Z.”

And then he kisses me.

I’m taken by surprise and don’t have a chance to react. He doesn’t try to force any tongue on me, but he really goes for the dramatics of making it seem like he is. Hands on my face. Wild movements like he can’t get enough of me.

As quick as the kiss started, it’s cut off.

Teddy’s body flies away from mine as he’s yanked backwards. A punch flies into the side of his face.

“What the hell, Teddy!” Cole thunders, inserting his body in front of mine, between me and his friend.

Teddy chuckles, eyes lit with amusement. He rubs his split lip, working his jaw back and forth. “Proving a point.”

“And what point is that?”

Teddy straightens his shoulders, starting back at the glowering Cole who’s quite a few inches taller than him. “That you want her.” His eyes flicker to me. “Sorry, Z. But I had to do something to get his head out of his ass.”

“You crossed a line.” Cole’s shoulders are tense in front of me.

People are staring, expecting a fight and I hate that they’re eager for the potential confrontation.

I curl my hand around Cole’s forearm, and he relaxes the tiniest bit. “Come on,” I tug on him, “let’s go.”

Cole points a warning finger in Teddy’s face. “Try that shit again and you’ll regret it.”

Teddy just smirks when Cole wraps an arm around me to steer me away.

“You can thank me later!” Teddy yells after us.

Cole freezes, his body tensing. “Let’s go,” I plead. He shakes his head and strides forward. “Wait, my coat.” I look behind me, not sure where it ended up.

“I’ll get you a new one.”

“Cole—” I gasp when my back is pressed up against the wall of the entryway, his body crowds around me. “Wha—”

My question is cut off when he kisses me. Like that day in the locker room, I’m taken completely by surprise, and this is nothing like that stunt Teddy pulled.

His tongue strokes mine, the smell of his cologne invading my senses. Cupping my cheek, he angles my head back, deepening the kiss. He tastes of his favorite cinnamon gum.

As quickly as it began, he stops. Dark eyes pierce mine. Stroking his thumb over my bottom lip he murmurs, “His lips couldn’t be the last ones to touch yours. I won’t allow it.”

“A-Allow it?” I stutter.

He shakes his head, lower to press his lips against my ear. “Not when you’re mine. I know it. You know it.”

An unspoken question reflects in his eyes.

A thousand thoughts and concerns war through my head, but I silence them all, blocking out the noise.

“Yes.”



COLE GRIPS the wheel with one hand, gaze forward, while his other hand sits on my jean-clad leg, his thumb rubbing in circles that get gradually closer to my center that pulses with a need only he can satisfy.

I'm aching with a desire that vibrates through my entire body.

I've never felt like this before. Even with Todd, sex was just ... something we did. It wasn't really a want or a need. I thought for a long time that maybe I just lacked much of a sex-drive, but I realize now the missing ingredient was true attraction.

Cole parks the truck and we're silent as we walk up the stairs, our hands clasped together.

He unlocks the door, closing it gently behind us. We keep staring at one another, like we're afraid to break the silence. I swear if he changes his mind, I'm going to have whatever is the female equivalent of blue balls. Blue clitoris, perhaps?

He looks delicious in a pair of dark blue jeans and fitted black Henley with a leather jacket over top. His brows are dipped low, brown eyes intense. His jaw is perfectly sculpted by the Greek Gods themselves and whatever is in his cologne is making my hormones go crazy.

It seems like he's not going to make the first move, probably gauging how much I actually want this. Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I reach for my Aldridge U sweatshirt and slip it off my head. It drops to the floor. Next, I toe off my white Converse. His eyes follow my fingers when I pop the button on my jeans, the zipper sliding down before I wiggle them off my hips. I teasingly sway my hips as I take off my shirt and it joins the rest of my clothes on the floor until I'm left in only my bra and panties. I can't even remember which ones I put on this morning and I hope to God they at least match, but I don't take my eyes off him to look.

“You're wearing too much.”

He arches a brow, wetting his lips with his tongue. “That so?”

“I mean, unless you don't want—”

He crosses the distance between us in a single breath, silencing me with a bruising kiss. “I want to.”

He removes his clothes in record time until he’s left in only a pair of boxer-briefs that hug his thighs and highlight his massive erection.

I choke back a gasp at the sheer size of it held back by its fabric prison.

“It’s so big,” I blurt.

Todd wasn’t my first, but he was my second, and all I can say is neither of the two guys I’ve slept with have been anywhere near Cole’s size.

He tosses his head back and laughs. “Fuck, you’re adorable.”

“Adorable?” I scoff, hands on my hips. “More like—”

Once again, he silences me with a kiss and I let out a tiny scream of surprise when he lifts me up, my legs winding around his waist. The sound quickly turns into a moan when I feel the press of his cock against my aching pussy. Glancing down between us, I see the mushroom-shaped tip poking out of his boxers.

“I want it.” Apparently, I’m just speaking every thought I have tonight.

“I want *you*,” he murmurs, suckling my neck. No doubt there will be a giant hickey there in the morning, but I can’t bring myself to care.

He carries me into my room. It’s dark except for the light from the moon pouring in through the open blinds. I roll my hips against his cock, seeking some sort of relief for the pulsing ache inside me, and he hisses out a breath.

“*Fuck.*”

“Yes, fuck. Me. Please.”

“You’re a greedy little thing, aren’t you?” He nips my lips, palming my ass in his massive hands.

Grinding my hips down upon him, I grip his chin in my hand. His dark eyes meet mine, hazy with lust. “I know what I want, and I want it now.”

He lays me on my bed, his big body coming down across mine. He kisses me languidly, like we have all the time in the world, when all I want is to feel the glide of his body above mine. My hand glides down his chest, palming his erection through the cotton fabric. Air hisses between his teeth.

His hand covers mine, pulling it away. Taking both my hands he pins them beside my head.

“What was that for?” I pout.

“Do you want this over before it even starts?”

I arch a brow. “Is it only going to happen once?”

He smothers my lips in a kiss. “Good point. Slow later?”

“Absolutely.” I raise up and snap my bra clasp in the back, letting it fall down my arms. His eyes take in my breasts hungrily. “Condom?”

“Shit, yeah.” My body feels cold with the loss of his as he dashes across the hallway, returning with several foils.

“Confident, are we?” I challenge when he tosses the strip of condoms down on the bed.

“There’s no going back after this for me, Zoey. If you’re not in, say it now.”

I stare at my gorgeous roommate. His big body towering at the end of my bed. His chest tattoo of angel wings, and the full sleeve that snakes down his muscular arm. His chiseled jaw is taut as he waits for my reply.

“I’m in.”

“Thank God,” he breathes in relief. I squeal when he grabs me by the hips, yanking off my panties. “You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for this.”

Before I can ask him to elaborate on what *this* is, he kneels between my parted thighs, licking my pussy like it’s a feast that’s been put before him.

Todd never wanted to go down on me, and frankly I didn’t mind it since I didn’t like the idea of a guy’s face *down there*, but the way Cole moves his tongue expertly in and around my folds has me realizing what I’ve been missing out on all this time.

Cole hums, the vibrations adding to my pleasure, and when his fingers join the mix I go off like a rocket. I cover my face, slightly embarrassed by how fast I came. It’s been so long and he’s just so ... so *him*.

Suddenly my hands are pried away from my face and I blink my eyes open to find Cole hovering above me. “Don’t do that. Don’t hide. Not from me.”

He grabs a condom from the bed and rips the foil open. I watch with rapt attention as he kicks off his boxer-briefs and rolls the condom down his cock.

His eyes hold mine as he grips the base of his cock and guides it to my pussy.

“Oh my God,” I moan as he stretches me.

He’s so big and I’m so full and—

“Stay with me, Zo. Eyes on me.” He lifts my left leg, putting it over his shoulder as he strokes into me, slow and steady at first.

“More,” I beg, raking my fingernails down his abs. “Harder. Please.”

“You feel so good.”

It's the last thing he says before he loses control, gripping my hips and pounding into me until I'm finding my second release.

He comes with a shout, emptying into the condom. His body collapses on top of mine and I wrap my arms around him, gently scratching my fingernails down his back.

"That was—" He starts.

"Everything," I finish for him.





## COLE

I WAKE UP SLOWLY, a little disoriented from the sex dream I had last night. I wish I could say it was the first time I've dreamt of Zoey that way, but it would be a lie.

Rubbing my eyes, I stifle a yawn and scrub my hands down my face. Looking around, I realize I'm not in my room, nor in my own bed.

"Oh, holy shit," I curse, coming fully awake when I look down and find Zoey nestled between my legs with my cock in her mouth.

Everything comes rushing back to me. I came fast and hard our first time, then made love to her slowly and gently the second time, drawing out both of our pleasure. After that, we took a break and renewed our energy with snacks before going at it again.

I have no idea what time it is now, but it doesn't matter.

She watches me through half-lidded eyes as she sucks on my cock like it's her very own lollipop. We didn't get around to that earlier, though she tried once. I just wanted to bring her pleasure and didn't want her to feel obligated to return the favor. But *fuck* I was missing out. Her mouth is magic.

I sit up slightly, reaching down to cup her breast. I play with her nipple and she moans around my cock. My hips jerk off the bed from the vibration of her mouth.

"You're going to be the death of me," I tell her in a garbled breath.

Her mouth releases my cock, saliva clinging to her lips that are swollen from how many times I kissed her last night.

"We can't have that now. I like you too much to kill you."

I rub my thumb over her wet bottom lip. "Me or my cock, sweetheart?"

She smiles. “Both.”

And then I nearly lose my mind when she takes my cock in her mouth again, stroking the base with her fist.

I grip her hair, the curls twining around my fingers. “Fuck, babe. I’m gonna come in that pretty mouth if you don’t stop.” This only spurs her on and she hums, taking more of me even when my cock grows thicker. She doesn’t stop as I come, swallowing every drop. She releases my dick and it’s still half-hard.

Wiping her thumb over her lips she gives me a self-satisfied smirk before climbing up the bed and cuddling her naked body against mine. I press my lips against her forehead.

“We need to try to get some sleep.”

“Mhmm,” she hums, eyes growing heavy.

Wrapping my arms around her, I tuck her head beneath my chin.

I’m not falling for this girl anymore, because I already have.



SMOOTH ARMS WIND around my waist, fingers dipping beneath the waistband of my boxers.

“What are you doing?” Her silky voice purrs behind me, her lips pressing to my shoulder blade as I focus on the eggs crackling in the frying pan.

“Scrambling eggs.”

She moves beside me, leaving an arm around my middle, those fingers rubbing tantalizingly against me. My cock hardens and I start counting backwards from one hundred.

“You could be scrambling mine.”

“Fuck,” I curse, turning the burner off.

She squeals when I grab her by the waist, lifting her onto the counter behind me. “That’s not nice.” I cage her in with my arms.

“You know what else isn’t nice?”

“What?” I kiss her full bottom lip.

“I woke up and you weren’t in bed.” She leans forward and kisses me.

I get lost in her lips for a moment before I come back to reality. “We need sustenance.”

“Food is for the weak,” she pouts.

I grin, kissing the end of her nose. “Well, we’re eating.”

“You’re no fun.”

I step away and go back to finish the eggs. “Why don’t you get the toast ready?” I point to the toaster. “The sooner we eat, the sooner we can do other things.”

“When you put it that way,” she sing-songs, hopping down from the counter.

It doesn’t take long to finish the eggs and plate them. We sit down in our usual seats, exchanging heated glances between every bite.

I could kill Teddy for what he did last night, kissing her in front of me, but I also know exactly why he did it. For this. So, I’d get my head out of my ass and make her mine.

We finish breakfast and clean up the dishes before I can’t take it a second longer and pick her up. She wraps her body around mine, holding on tight as we kiss. Carrying her down the hall, into the bathroom, I don’t even let go of her as I reach in and turn the shower on.

I step into the shower and tub combo and only put her down now because I need to get her naked. She lifts her arms, and I pull off the now soaked t-shirt she slipped on. Next go her panties, landing in a plop on the bottom of the bathtub. Shoving down my boxers, I reach for her. She moans at my hardness pressing insistently against her stomach.

She reaches between us, stroking my length.

I end up backing her against the tile wall, my body sheltering her from the pounding water. Water drips from my nose onto her face. Her big brown eyes look at me with intense wonder and lust. Lifting her up, I lower her onto my cock, hissing between my teeth when I feel her warm heat clasp around me.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I grind out, just holding her there.

“What?” She shudders above me, wiggling her hips which isn’t helping my problem at all.

“Condom,” I bite out.

She nibbles her bottom lip, watching me carefully. “I’ve been back on my birth control for a while now. It’s safe and I’m clean. If ... if you want to. But we can get a condom. It’s not a big—”

I silence her with a kiss and plunge fully inside her. She feels amazing. Everything about this girl was made for me.

I fuck her relentlessly and she takes it all. Meeting my thrusts with her hips. She wants me as badly as I want her, and if that isn’t the biggest turn on

I don't know what is.

"Say you're mine," I growl in her ear. "Say it."

"No."

She's so goddamn stubborn. "Say it," I demand, slowing my strokes.

"No."

"Why do you defy me?"

She smirks at me, a moan drawing out of her when I play with her clit. "Because I can." I take my fingers away and she mewls in protest. I fuck her harder, then slow again. "You're being mean."

"Say it. *Please.*"

Maybe it's the please that does it or maybe she just really wants to orgasm, but she leans her head back against the tile, eyes hooded. "I'm yours."

"Fuck yes you are." My grip on her hips tightens, and I worry I might bruise her, but I can't let go. Can't stop.

I kiss her, fucking her mouth with my tongue like I am her pussy with my cock.

She's invading all my senses until all I know is her.

I'm ruined.

No one will ever take her place.

She falls apart in my arms and I'm right behind her, filling her up with my come.

Her breaths are heavy, and I don't let her down, not wanting to leave her body yet.

"Is it supposed to be this good?"

I brush a damp curl off her forehead, pressing my lips to my favorite spot there. "I don't know, but with us it is."



I WAS reluctant to accept Teddy's invite to Harvey's when he texted me in the afternoon, but Zoey thought it would be fun, and I guess it gives us a break since we spent most of the day having sex.

On her bed.

On the couch.

The kitchen counter.

The hall floor because we couldn't make it to the bed again.

Taking Zoey's hand when she hops out of my truck, I kiss her knuckles. Even in the dark parking lot I don't miss the flush of color deepening her cheeks. Grabbing her by the back of the neck I pull her in for another kiss.

Her fingers curl into the fabric of shirt and she stands on her tiptoes. I pull us apart before we get carried away and I can add *Harvey's parking lot* to the list of places we've had sex.

Holding her hand, we walk to the entrance and I pull her against my side with the excuse of the crowded bar, but really I just want to hold her.

We make it to the usual table my friends frequent, and Teddy sits in the middle like the king with his harem. He lifts a bottle of his favorite beer.

"You're welcome."

"You asshole." I shake my head, but I'm grinning.

He's a dick, sure, but it worked.

I kiss the top of Zoey's head and she laughs lightly. We're glued together as we slide into the booth.

"You singing tonight?" Teddy hollers.

"Probably not."

Zoey grabs onto my arm, blinking up at me with those beautiful chocolate eyes. "Please?"

"Only if you sing with me."

She recoils. "I don't sing."

"Anyone can sing." I eye her, trying not to laugh at her visible discomfort.

"Yeah, but not everyone can sing well, and there lies the difference." She shudders.

I rub my nose against the crook of her neck, kissing the spot where her pulse races. "Please. Sing with me."

"Ugh. Fine. It's really annoying how you just have to give me that look, and I'll do whatever you say."

"What look is that?" I ask curiously, not sure what she's referring to.

"That one." She waves a hand at my face. "You're just so hot and sweet and earnest and your eyes go all soft and I'm putty in your hands."

I curl an arm around her waist, pulling her against me in the booth so our legs are pressed firmly together. "I would never want you to do something you really don't want to," I murmur against her ear and she shivers.

"I know. If I really didn't want to, I'd say so. It's nerves more than

anything else. I don't like being stared at by people, but I'll be with you."

"Exactly. Just focus on me." I kiss the shell of her ear.

I can't seem to stop kissing her. Touching her. Just being close to her. I need the reminder that this is real. We haven't exactly talked about it yet, what this means—if we're together or not—but the fact we're not acting as if nothing happened makes me feel good like this thing is going somewhere.

A tray of drinks is delivered, and I pass a shot to Zoey before I take one for myself.

The alcohol hits my system, mellowing out the hum that's been there since last night.

"So," Cree speaks up from the opposite end of the table, his floppy black hair falling into his eyes, "are you two like ... a thing now?" He points at us with a bottle.

I laugh at the irony that his question coincides with my thoughts over us not having this conversation yet. I look to Zoey and she smiles, shrugging.

"Yeah, I guess we are," she says to him.

Cree turns his attention to Teddy. "Is this why you smothered her with one last night? Trying to make the big guy jealous and do something about it?"

Teddy rolls his eyes, leaning back in the booth. "Someone had to get him to get his head out of his ass. You too, Zoey. Anybody could see the way you two looked at each other. Like just fuck already. And from the looks of you two, I'm guessing a lot of that went on last night."

I shake my head. "Shut up, Teddy."

"You know you love me. XOXO Gossip Girl."

I shake my head at his typical Teddy antics. "I'm gonna grab a root beer. You want one?"

Zoey nods eagerly. "Yes, please."

I slip from the booth and order two at the bar. The bartender gives me a funny look, but I don't give a shit. I don't want to get wasted tonight. Not when I want to take her home and continue where we left off.

Carrying the drinks back to the table I pass one to Zoey and sit back down. Cree's in the middle of telling an animated tale of his on the ice antics. Sitting beside Zoey, surrounded by our friends, I realize how much I love this. Having friends who are like family and a girl I lo—*care* about. I don't dare let myself even think the word lest it chase her away. Zoey's guarded, more than I am, and what we have is good. And I don't want that to scare her.

Her ex was a douche, but I'm not him. She can trust me.

About an hour later, holding Zoey's hand, we take the stage.

"What song are we singing?" Her hand tightens around mine, her palm slightly sweaty.

"I thought we could do the one I sang before."

"*Tequila?*"

"Yeah, it's a duet." I shrug.

She bites her lip and nods. "Okay." She closes her eyes and blows out a breath, like she's mentally preparing herself.

Once everything is set, we sit down side by side on the stools on top of the stage and start.

Zoey's voice is soft and crackly. Not horrible, but you can hear the hesitancy in it.

Her fingers tighten around the mic, but she keeps her eyes on me the whole time, ignoring the crowd, and I do the same.

I've never sang with anyone else before, but there's no one else I'd rather share the stage with. Basketball is my life, but music is my soul.

The song ends and she throws down the mic, diving into my arms.

I carry her off the stage and into the cheering crowd.

The actual music starts up again and I pull her onto the dancefloor. I've been wanting to dance with her again, but it never seemed to go right any time we did, but now it's different. Now I've had her. Now, I hope, I *think*, she's mine.

I spin her around and she shakes her hips to the song.

I could still kill Teddy for that stunt he pulled, but I know he's right, if he hadn't Zoey and I would still be tiptoeing around this thing.

Fear tends to hold us back from the greatest things imaginable and I know she's the real deal. She's the girl you don't let go of. The one you marry. The one who has your kids.

I just hope she sees me the same way.





## ZOEY

I'M STRIDING across campus when I hear my name being called repeatedly. I don't pay attention at first, assuming someone is calling after another Zoey. It's not a super common name, but it's not uncommon either.

But as the voice grows closer, louder, and more insistent I finally stop and look around.

When I see the girl trying to flag me down, I nearly throw down the textbook in my arms and haul ass out of there like I'd been trying to do.

The last thing I ever expected in a million years was to see my former best friend on the Aldridge U campus.

I blink and blink again, thinking maybe she'll disappear like a mirage, but nope she's still there.

With one hand I tug my beanie down over my ears, protecting myself from the cold and the incoming avalanche of emotions.

She stops in front of me, her blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. Her makeup is done flawlessly, and she's dressed like she's just stepped off a runway. She fits in on the posh campus far more than I do.

Now that she's in front of me she seems unsure. "Hi," she says awkwardly.

"Liza, what are you doing here?" The words tumble out of my mouth.

"I..." She looks around at the students milling by us. "I wanted to talk to you."

"You came here, all the way to my school, to talk to me?"

She bites her lips, eyes hesitant. "Yeah."

I exhale a breath, watching as it fogs the air. *Do I want to talk to her?* I

really don't, but she was my friend for years and if she came all the way here just to talk to me, I'm not sure I can turn her away.

"Okay. There's a coffee shop close by." There's a hesitancy in my voice, but something is telling me to do this. This conversation is long overdue.

"Are you sure?" she asks. "You don't have class? I can come back later or—"

I level her with a glare. "It's now or not at all."

I know if I give myself too much time to think I won't speak to her.

"Okay. Now then."

Neither of us say a word on the walk over. We place an order for coffee and then take a seat in the back where there are less people.

"So," she curls her fingers around her cup, "how have you been?"

"You came all this way to ask me how I am?" The snarkiness in my tone is obvious and I try not to cringe. I know I'm not in the wrong here. It's not like I slept with *her* fiancé, but I would like to be the bigger person. After all, I've moved on.

She winces. "No."

I take the lid off my coffee, letting it cool down. "I think it's better if we don't waste our time on the niceties."

She looks out the window as snow flurries start to descend from the gray sky. More than likely it won't even stick. Not yet at least.

Inhaling a breath, her eyes meet mine. There's a hesitancy there, a worry like she's afraid I might reach across the table and throttle her. I have news for her, I've moved on from her and Todd. I'm not angry. Not even hurt anymore. If anything, all I feel is indifference.

"I wanted to apologize to you. Face to face." She stares down at her cup. "I can't even begin to tell you how horrible I've felt—"

"Because I caught you."

"No," she shakes her head, "I felt bad as it was happening, but I couldn't stop it because ... I wanted it. You and Todd seemed like the perfect couple and I was jealous. I wanted that. Wanted *him*. And when he started to pay attention to me, flirt ... I went along with it. I liked the way it made me feel wanted. I didn't think about what I was giving up by being flattered over his flirting. I threw away our friendship. I realize that now and it's the biggest mistake I've ever made." She wipes tears from her eyes. "Anyway, I know you probably never wanted to see me again, but I wanted you to know that it's my biggest regret and I'll forever be sorry."

It takes me a moment to wrap my brain around everything she's said. "You were jealous? Why?" I don't know why I choose this to focus on.

She snorts like it's unbelievable that I don't understand. "You've always had your shit together, Zoey. You're smart, beautiful, going places, and then you were engaged. It's just felt like I was falling behind while you were propelling forward."

I rub my hands over my face. "I'd lost my mom, hated my dad for no good reason, and I was in a relationship that might've looked good on the outside but now I see how incredibly flawed it was. I'm not trying to dismiss your feelings, but Liza you had no reason to be jealous. Not everything is as shiny as it appears on the surface."

"I know." She wipes her eyes with a napkin. "Like I said, I see how dumb it was now. I don't know what happened to make me feel so vindictive. It made me feel powerful, having his attention on me when he was yours."

I frown. I know I should be mad, hurt even, but as I look at her all I feel is sorry for her.

"I think it's really sad you felt that way, Liza. You're all those things you think of me. And we both deserved better than Todd."

Her lips twitch. "He was a prick, wasn't he?"

"The worst."

"You never miss him?"

"Not at all." I smile, thinking of Cole.

As if my thoughts have conjured him, I see him walk into the shop. He must sense me staring at him, because our eyes connect, and he grins. He strides back to the table, oblivious to Liza and bends down, kissing me in front of everyone. I swear I hear a girl a table over gasp.

"Hey, beautiful. What are you doing here?"

I wave a hand toward Liza. "Catching up with an old friend. What about you?"

"I have a meeting with a scout for Atlanta."

"Really?" My eyes widen. "Cole, that's amazing! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Nerves," he admits with a shaky smile. Extending a hand to Liza, he says, "Hi, I'm Cole. Zoey's..." He looks to me, like he's seeking clarification before he blurts out, "boyfriend."

I press my lips together, trying to hide my smile, but it makes me happy to hear him say that.

The girl who swore off men, especially basketball players, fell for one.  
Oh, the irony.

I suppose fate knew better than me.

After the introductions are done, he gives me another kiss before ordering and sitting at a table to wait for the scout.

“He’s hot.” Liza looks over her shoulder at him.

“Don’t even think about it,” I joke, her jaw dropping.

“I-No-I-I wouldn’t.”

“I’m kidding.” I take a sip of my drink.

“Right.” Her cheeks are bright red. “Anyway, I guess I’ll let you go. I just wanted you to know that I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you.”

She exhales a weighted breath and starts crying again. “You have no idea how badly I needed to hear that.”

Reaching across the table, I take her hand and give it a small squeeze. “Don’t ever let another douchebag like Todd get in your way. You’re worth more than him.”

“Thank you.” She stands, cradling her coffee cup. “Good luck with everything, life, I guess.”

I laugh. “You too.”

I watch her leave and wait for her to disappear from my sight before I get up to go. A man has joined Cole, and as I walk out, I give him a sly thumbs up. His tense shoulders relax, and he gives me a tiny nod.

Pushing the door open, I step out into the cold so I can head to my parked car.

Once again, my name is called after me and I jerk to a stop looking around.

Teddy jogs over from a group of guys, most faces I recognize. Cree lifts his hand in a wave, and I wave back.

“What’s up, T?”

Teddy pushes his shaggy brown hair out of his eyes. “Cole’s birthday is the twelfth—” I jerk my head back at this news, since Cole hasn’t mentioned his birthday is a few days away. “—and I was thinking we could throw him a surprise party.”

“Oh.” I rub my lips together. “Um ... sure. What were you thinking?” I can’t believe he didn’t tell me about his birthday.

“Cree’s down to have it at his place. Cole’s not a big partier so we’ll try

to keep it small, but you know how it is once word gets out.”

“Right.”

“Any ideas on something he’d like?”

I think for a moment. “Root beer floats.”

“Ah, of course.” He grins. “Thanks for your help, Zoey. Cree and I will handle everything. Just get the birthday boy to his place by eight.”

“O-Okay,” I stutter, still taken by surprise that it’s Cole’s birthday in just a few days.

“See you later.” Teddy throws his arms around me in a hug I barely have time to return before he’s jogging back to join the guys.

I finally make it to my car and drive home. I’m not going to allow myself to obsess over why he might not have told me, but I sure as hell will be asking him as soon as I see him.



AN HOUR or so later I hear the door open, but I don’t move from where I’m lying in my bed, staring at the last sentence I wrote on my paper that’s due Friday. I haven’t written another word in the last twenty minutes. I’m brain dead.

Cole strolls down the hallway and walks into my bedroom. He moves my laptop off my bed to my desk and then lies on top of me, hugging me.

“Cole,” I giggle, shoving at his muscular shoulder, “you’re squishing me.”

“Needed to hold you,” he murmurs into my chest.

“How’d your meeting go?” I massage the back of his neck.

“Good. I think. There’s no really knowing.” He looks at me, hesitating, before he says, “You didn’t freak out when I called myself your boyfriend.”

My fingers still. “No. I didn’t.”

“Are you okay with that? With being my girlfriend?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Even if I get drafted somewhere like Atlanta?”

I shrug. “I’m not afraid of long distance and after I graduate in another year, I’ll be applying for a DPT program and I don’t have to do that here.” I trace the shape of his lips.

“You’re really okay with this?”

“Do you want me to run away screaming from us?”

“God no.”

“Good, because I don’t plan on going anywhere.” Being with Cole is the most natural thing in the world and I refuse to ruin it with unnecessary overthinking and obsessing. “Now,” I hold his chin, “why didn’t you tell me your birthday is in a few *days*?”

“It’s just a birthday.”

I shake my head. “It’s not just a birthday. It’s yours. I want to do something for you, get you something special.”

His hold on me tightens and he lays the side of his head on my chest. “All I want is you.”

I close my eyes. It’s not an *I love you*, it’s too soon for that, but it sounds pretty damn perfect.

“All I want is you, too.”

He places his hands on the bed, holding his weight above me. He kisses me and I sink further into the mattress, a moan rumbling in my throat from the pressure of his body above mine. I tug at his shirt, wanting it gone, and he sits up getting rid of the offending piece of clothing. With it out of the way I trace my fingers over his smooth warm skin as he kisses me.

“I want to make love to you,” he murmurs, into my neck before pressing his lips there.

I gasp at the feel of his erection pressing into my center. I wish I could dissolve my clothes so I could feel him all over right this second.

“Then do it.” I sound breathless as he peppers kisses over my collarbone and between my breasts. I changed into a tank top and shorts when I got to the apartment. We keep it nice and warm, and I hate wearing layers.

He chuckles, the sound vibrating against my skin. “Oh, I’m going to baby. Tonight. Tomorrow. *The rest of our lives.*”

I gulp at the teasing promise in his voice.

His fingers skate beneath my tank and he hisses when he finds me not wearing a bra. He cups my left breast, playing with the nipple.

“Cole,” I practically beg, writhing beneath him.

His brown eyes sparkle in the light of my room. “Beg,” he challenges. “Beg all you want but I’m taking this slow.”

I whimper when his hot wet mouth closes over my breast through the cotton fabric. My core pulses with its own heartbeat.

My breaths are shaky, and I squeeze my eyes shut as he gives my other

breast the same treatment.

My body wiggles beneath him and I can tell from his self-satisfied smirk that he loves knowing he's driving me insane.

He undresses me slowly, like I'm his very own present he's unwrapping.

He kisses every inch of my body, ignoring my pleas, and when he finally sinks into my body I nearly orgasm then and there. He rocks into me leisurely, like we have all the time in the world. I suppose we do. My nails rake down his chest to the base of his cock and he shudders, gritting his teeth.

"Zoey," he pants my name, our hips meeting stroke for stroke. "Fuck, yes, baby. That's it. Yes. You feel so good." He rubs my clit, and I was already so close that I go off, my body shaking. I bite my lip, trying to keep my noises quiet but Cole plucks my lip from between my teeth. "Let me hear you, baby."

He spreads my legs open wider, laying his body on top of mine. Our chests are plastered together, damp with perspiration. I wrap my arm around his back, holding us together as I rock my hips.

He speeds up his thrusts, unable to hold back a second longer, and comes, shuddering against me. His orgasm triggers another for me and we come down from our high together.

He smooths my hair back from my forehead. Our eyes locked.

He doesn't say those three words. He knows I'm not ready.

But I see them.

I feel them.





## COLE

“WHY ARE WE AT CREE’S?” I ask when Zoey parks her car outside of the darkened house. “I thought we were going to dinner?”

All I want to do for my birthday is take my girl out and then go home and make love to her until we’re both exhausted.

She reaches over, squeezing my thigh. “I told you, I left my coat here the last party they had. You know, the one you dragged me out of.” She smiles.

I never knew you could feel a smile, but I do hers. It lights up the darkest parts of me.

“Right,” I sigh, reaching for the door handle. “I’ll go with you.”

The house is dark, but Cree’s car and Murray’s—who also lives here—is in the driveway.

Zoey slips out of the car, tucking her keys into the pocket of her tightly fitted black jeans. She looks incredible in those and a lacy top with a leather jacket. Since she has that jacket, I have no idea why it’s pertinent that she gets her other coat tonight. I could easily pick it up tomorrow for her.

She doesn’t bother knocking on the door, instead reaching for the knob and swinging it open.

Before I can ask her how she knew it would be open, lights turn on, blinding me, and there are shouts of, “SURPRISE!”

Several people pop those confetti things and blue and white pieces of paper float through the air, landing on me, Zoey, and the floor.

Teddy stands in the center of our friends holding a sheet cake that says Happy Birthday Cole with the Avengers on it.

I’m definitely surprised, that’s for sure.

“Wow, thanks, guys.”

Zoey smiles up at me, her eyes questioning. It’s obvious she was worried about this plan, no doubt executed by Teddy. I jerk my head in a nod, letting her know it’s okay. Sure, I was looking forward to dinner just the two of us, but this is nice too. These friends of mine are practically like family and who knows where I’ll be celebrating my birthday next year.

Someone cranks up the music, drinks are brought out, and we dig into the cake. As the night wears on there are even root beer floats.

“Isn’t this great?” Teddy asks, dancing around Zoey and me with a Zombie Dust in his hand. The golden retriever energy radiating off of him is astronomical. When someone finally captures his attention, and he falls in love it’ll be something to see.

“You did a fabulous job.” Zoey moves her body languidly against mine and I bite back a groan. She’s turning me on and there’s nothing I can do about it, except maybe drag her out of here to the bathroom for a quickie but she deserves more than a quick bathroom fuck. “The streamers are great.” She waves her hand at the ceiling where blue and white streamers are taped across the entire length.

“Maybe I’ll go into party planning,” Teddy muses, shaking his hips to the Shakira song. “You know, if I don’t get my inheritance and I’m barred from the family business.”

“What is your family business?” I ask. He never says much about it.

“Mostly just being a lazy prick bastard and letting others do the hard work.”

I don’t think he’s talking about the business.

He moves away and Zoey wraps her arms around my neck, the two of us slow dancing like two middle school teenagers to the cover of *Time After Time* by Quietdrive.

“Are you sure this is okay?” She rubs her thumb back and forth against my neck.

“Best birthday ever.”

She beams and stands on her tiptoes. “Don’t worry, when we get home, I have something else planned for you.”

“And what’s that?” I arch a brow, my hands lowering from her waist to her ass.

“You. Me. A bubble bath. And chocolate syrup.”

“Chocolate syrup, huh?”

“Yes.” She smirks. “You’re going to lick it off me, and the bubble bath is for easy clean up.”

I lower my mouth to hers, kissing her deeply. One of our friends whistles. Teddy yells, “Ew, get a room Mom and Dad!”

“You’re perfect,” I whisper in her ear.

She shakes her head firmly. “No, I’m not. No one is. We all make mistakes and do and say things we wish we wouldn’t have. Perfection is a construct to force us to try to fit in, but I don’t want to fit someone else’s mold. I just want to be me. Imperfect, me.”

I press my forehead to hers. “I like imperfect you.”

“I like you, too.”

Across the room I catch Mascen pulling Rory onto his lap on the couch. She giggles, curling into his body and he whispers something that makes her blush.

I had no idea a year ago that Zoey would come crashing into my life.

And I wouldn’t change a fucking thing.



## ZOEY

THERE'S AN AWAY game this weekend, and I'm already dreading Cole being gone for it. I've fallen hard and fast for the basketball player.

We pull up outside of my dad's house in Cole's truck. I didn't tell my dad I was bringing him, just that I was bringing someone, but I don't want to keep my relationship with Cole a secret from him. It's not good for me as his daughter, nor Cole as his player.

And let's be real, my dad probably already suspects who it is. He's been dropping enough hints about thinking Cole and I have more going on than just roommates.

Cole reaches over and squeezes my knee after he parks the truck. "It's going to be fine. Breathe, Zoey."

I blow out a breath, forcing a smile. It's not that I think my dad will be mad about me dating one of his players, but our relationship is still being stitched back together and I don't want to make it even rockier than it is.

Cole gets out and I'm frozen in the passenger seat. He eases open the truck door, but it still squeals in protest.

"Zoey?" He prompts and I meet his gaze. "You and me. Together. We got this."

I nod, heart racing.

*Why am I so nervous?*

I wasn't this nervous when I told him about Todd.

*Because back then you didn't care what he thought,* my conscience reminds me.

Cole takes my hand, entwining our fingers, and we walk up to the door.

He looks down at me with a reassuring smile before he pushes the doorbell.

You'd think as the guy he'd be freaking out more. This is my dad after all. But he seems cool as a cucumber.

"I want to get it!"

"No! Let me get the door!"

The front door swings open revealing my two little brothers.

"Whoa." Isaac's head leans back. "You're so tall." He looks at Cole with an awestruck expression.

Gabriel smacks him on the arm. "That's Cole. We know him."

"We know him?"

"Yeah."

"But why is he here?"

Cole and I laugh, amused by the conversation being carried out in front of us.

"Because he's my boyfriend," I interrupt my bickering siblings.

In sync they both cross their arms over their small chests. "Boyfriend, huh?" Gabriel narrows his eyes.

I shake my head. Apparently even brothers this young are overprotective.

"Are you going to let us in or not?" I try to stifle my laugh.

"I guess." Isaac steps aside, opening the door wider. "I've got my eye on you."

Cole cocks his head to the side. "You don't remember playing basketball with me?"

"Of course, I do," Gabriel scoffs, rolling his eyes as he pushes the door closed. "But that doesn't mean you're worthy of my sister. She's a princess."

"Yeah," Isaac pipes in, "Zo-Zo is the best."

"Boys what's going on?" My dad comes around the corner from where I know his office is.

"Oooh," Isaac drawls, eyeing Cole. "You're in trouble now, Mister."

Both boys take off running, probably for their playroom.

"Hey, Dad." I take Cole's hand and we meet him at the end of the foyer. "I hope it's okay I brought Cole."

He arches a brow. "You brought my player." He pauses. "Your roommate. And?"

"And my boyfriend." I smile up at Cole. It feels good to say that. I know I need to open up to him about my ex, explain the situation, so he understands

that trusting him with my heart is a big deal.

My dad tries to hide his smile. “Can’t say I didn’t expect this after what I saw at the hospital.”

“Nothing was going on then,” I insist, and he throws up a hand.

“You don’t need to defend yourself. I’m not mad at you, Zoey. Or you either.” He looks at Cole. “All I’m saying is, that I’m not stupid. I’m your dad. I saw the way you two looked at each other. You might not have known it then. But I did.” He taps the side of his head. “I want you to be happy, Zo-Bug. It’s what I’ve always wanted.”

“Thank you, Dad.” I look down at the floor, trying to hide the tears flooding my eyes.

“Now,” he points a finger at Cole, “you break my daughter’s heart, and you’ll have hell to pay.”

Cole looks at me, and a rush of emotion hits me, stealing my breath with it. In that look I see it all. I see the two of us graduating. I see me walking down the aisle in a beautiful white dress. I see him holding our baby to his chest.

I never pictured that future before. I was so fucking blind.

*Complacent.*

Cole lights my world on fire. He terrifies me in the best way possible.

“You don’t have to worry about that, sir.”

My dad lets out a gruff noise. “Better not.”

“Dinner’s ready!” Allison calls out and the boys come barreling from the back of the house, running into the kitchen.

My dad shakes his head. “Those boys keep me on my toes like you did at that age.”

He reaches out, like he wants to hug me, but drops his arm. It breaks my heart a little because I put so much distance between us.

Cole, always in tune with my thoughts and feelings, grips my hand and gives it a squeeze.

The three of us join the others in the kitchen and Allison smiles. “Oh, I think maybe we’ve met before?” She squints, trying to place the man at my side.

Cole extends his hand to her. “I’m on the basketball team. I’m Cole.”

“Ah, yes, that makes sense. I hope you’re okay with meatloaf.”

“Anything is fine, ma’am.”

“Call me Allison.” She sets the loaf pan on the table and I grab the sides

placing them around the table.

Sitting down beside Cole with my dad at the head of the table, Allison beside the baby, and my two brothers I'm struck by how far I've come since that first dinner. I no longer feel like a stranger here.

Conversation is easy throughout dinner and when it's finished, I help Allison clean up before joining Cole in the playroom with my brothers. They're showing him the zombie virtual reality game and I bust out laughing when the large man screams like a little girl and drops to the floor.

He shoves off the headset, breathing heavy. "You two are evil. That was scary."

The little boys laugh and move on to their train track set.

Cole lifts his hand out to me. "Help me up?"

I give him my hand and he pulls me down on top of him. Both boys start laughing.

"Zoey fell!" Issy chortles.

"What are you doing?" I narrow my eyes on the man I'm lying on top of.

"Just wanted you close." He sneaks a kiss to my forehead.

"Ew, they're kissing," Isaac shrieks at Gabriel and then they both dissolve into a rendition of Cole and me kissing in a tree.

When they're done with their song neither of them can stop their uncontrollable giggles.

"You guys are the worst." I tickle Issy and he shrieks for me to show him mercy.

Cole and I play with the boys for a while before I slip from the room, whispering to him that I'm going to find my dad.

I wander down the hall, dragging my fingers against the wall. I walk slow, stalling.

The door to his office is closed when I approach, and I knock hesitantly.

"Yes?" He calls.

Wrapping my hand around the brushed nickel knob I twist it open.

His eyes fill with surprise when he looks up to find me in the doorway. He takes his reading glasses off, setting them on the desk. "Are you getting ready to leave?"

I shake my head and close the door behind me, taking a seat on the leather couch across from his desk. I gather my legs beneath me, looking around at the framed photos and plaques on the wall. I still when I see one of me as a little girl, by a pond that was near the house I grew up in.



His eyes find where mine are glued and he smiles. “Do you remember the summer you kept trying to catch a tadpole?”

“And you kept telling me it would die? That we can’t trap the things we love and admire, we have to leave them be and watch them grow?”

He chuckles, leaning back in his chair. “Yeah, that’s the one.”

“But when I finally caught one you didn’t make me put it back.” My voice grows soft, brows furrowed. “And then it died in the bowl. Why didn’t you have me put it back like you wanted me to?”

He rubs his jaw. “It was a lesson you needed to learn.”

“Is that what you’ve done all these years with me? Leave me alone and watch me grow?”

He inhales a breath, blowing it out in a heavy gust. “I couldn’t force you to forgive me, or even love me, Zoey. That was your battle to fight. Even these dinners, I couldn’t force you to come, but I wanted you to. I always wanted you. Your mom and I ... we were young when we got married. We loved each other, a part of me will always love her, but we weren’t meant to last forever. But just because we stopped working, doesn’t mean I ever stopped loving you.” He stares at me, willing the words to sink into my skull. “You’re my daughter. My pride and joy. I will never,” his voice cracks as he gets choked up and my own tears start to fall, “forget the day they placed you in my arms. You’ll understand it one day, when you have your own kids, but nothing else compares to holding that precious life that’s half of you. All you want for your child is the best, even if the best isn’t you.”

“Daddy,” my voice cracks. I wipe at my damp cheeks. “It was never you. I didn’t realize that at the time. I was so hurt by you leaving. You were my ... everything.” I shrug, more tears falling. “I felt like you didn’t love me. You weren’t only leaving Mom. You left me too.” He opens his mouth to respond but a hold up a hand for him to wait. “I know that isn’t true now. Believe me, I see things so differently now that I’m older, but when I was thirteen it felt like you didn’t love me anymore, so I punished you for it, and myself too.” Leaning forward on the couch, I continue, “I want you to know I’ve moved past all of that. I just want to ... start fresh. I want to be your daughter again.”

He stands, coming around the front of the couch and crouching in front of me. “Zoey, honey,” he takes my damp cheeks in his hands, “you never stopped being my daughter. You are and you always will be my daughter. There’s no beginning or end to it.”

I dive into his arms, hugging him tight. I sob into his shirt, dampening the

fabric. He only squeezes me harder.

“I love you, baby girl.”

“I know.” I inhale a shaky breath. “I know. I love you, too. Please forgive me.”

“Hey.” He pushes me away slightly. “There’s nothing for me to forgive. I mean it. We’re here now. That’s all that matters.” He pulls me in again and lets me cry it all out.

When I finally leave his office, a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

“Hey.” Cole’s voice startles me in the dark hallway. “Are you okay?”

I rub at my swollen eyes. “I am now.” He’s rocking Rosie in his arms and dammit if my ovaries don’t do a somersault at the visual of him with a baby in his muscular arms.

*Rein it in, I warn my ovaries. We don’t need any spawn yet, no matter how hot Cole would look as a dad.*

“Allison is putting the boys to bed and this little one wanted her bottle.”

I rub Rose’s hair that’s grown long enough to put in the tiniest pigtails I’ve ever seen. “I think she likes you.” She has her small hand on his chest and her eyes are glued to his face.

“What can I say? I’m irresistible.”

“That’s definitely it.”

We sit down in the family room and he smiles at Rose. “Did you talk with your dad?”

“Yes. It was much needed.” I motion to my face, forcing a smile. “I’m sure I look fabulous now, but sometimes you have to cry it out.”

“You’re always beautiful.”

The way he looks at me, I know he means it, but I also feel it. I could look my absolute worst and all that man would have to do is look at me like that and I’d think I was the most beautiful woman in the world.

Allison’s feet sound on the stairs and she rounds into the family room looking a tad frazzled. “I’m so sorry about that,” she blurts, scooping the baby from his arms. “Time got away from me and she was fussy and—”

“It’s not a problem, really.”

She smiles gratefully at him. “Are you guys heading out?”

I stand. “Yeah, we should get going. I’m tired.”

“It was good to see you as always, Zoey. The boys are begging to go to another movie with you. And Cole, please come back any time.”

I give Allison a hug and she stiffens in surprise before hugging me back

the best she can with Rose between us.

“I’d love to come again. If Zoey will have me.” Cole smiles in my direction.

“I haven’t gotten rid of you yet.” I roll my eyes playfully.

“Will you be spending Christmas with us?” Allison asks, taking me by surprise. “You’re welcome to spend the night here.”

“Oh.” My lips part with surprise. “I actually haven’t really thought about it. I’ve been so focused on finals, but yeah, of course I’ll be spending Christmas here.”

“Good and Cole if you don’t have plans with your family you’re welcome here too.”

“Thank you for the offer but I think my mom would whoop me if I missed Christmas.”

Allison laughs, rocking a sleepy Rose. “I understand. Drive safe you two.”

She heads for the stairs and Cole reaches for my hand. He looks down at our clasped palms for a moment, a reverent look on his face.

“What are you thinking?” Curiosity gets the best of me at his expression.

“Let’s go home.”

It doesn’t escape my notice that he avoids the question, but I reply with, “Okay,” anyway.

When we get back to the apartment I half-expect to find Teddy chilling on the couch but he’s not there.

“I’m tired.” I stifle a yawn, pressing a hand to my mouth.

“Me too.” He goes to the fridge and grabs two root beers and then a pack of my favorite Oreos. “Bed?”

“You’re speaking my language.” I waggle my brows.

Clasping the two bottles between his fingers on one hand, he holds the Oreos in the other and wraps that arm around my shoulders pulling me against his chest. Instead of saying anything he kisses me. It’s slow, sensual, and over too soon.

I mewl in protest and he chuckles as he releases me, walking down the hall to my room.

He flicks on the light and sets the drinks and cookies on the nightstand before taking off his clothes until he’s in nothing but his boxers. I do the same but change into a pair of sleep shorts and a loose tee.

We both climb into bed and I audibly sigh at how good it feels to be in

my bed. I'm not one of those people who can sleep anywhere. I like my bed and my bed only. Especially when Cole is in it.

He passes me a root beer and I twist the cap off. He does the same, placing the Oreos between us in the bed where I peel back the wrapper.

I bite into a cookie, savoring the taste since I know my days with my favorite are limited. The carrot cake ones were nasty and since Cole and Teddy stocked me up, I haven't bothered trying any other new flavors.

"I was engaged," I blurt it out there, no take backs.

Cole's head swings in my direction. "What?" A cookie is halfway to his mouth.

"My ex. We were engaged. Liza, the girl I was talking to in the coffee shop, she was my best friend. She's who I caught him with."

"Wow." His full lips part. "That's intense."

"I wanted you to know that, since I never mentioned the engagement before. It really tore me up at the time, but I know now that I wasn't losing some great love. I was comfortable with Todd, but there was no spark. The chemistry was lackluster." I take a sip of my root beer and reach for his hand, entwining our fingers together. "I want you to know that I don't carry that with me. I've let it go and I've moved on. You and I ... this is different."

His eyes soften. "Everything that happens to us, good and the bad, makes us who we are. I'm sorry you had to go through that heartbreak but I'm not sorry it brought you to me."

Setting the bottle on the nightstand, I scootch closer to Cole, laying my head on his chest. He rubs his fingers against my scalp and I nearly purr at the sensation.

"Does it bother you that my dad's your coach?" I whisper the worry that's been buried in the back of my mind since the day he turned around in my dad's office to find me standing there.

I thought for sure when he learned who I was that he'd run the other way, intimidated, but I should've known that Cole Anderson is anything but weak.

His fingers still. "At first, when I realized, I was pissed that you knew and didn't say a word. But no, I'm not bothered by the fact he's your dad. He's a good coach and a good man. I mean," his lips quirk, "he didn't chase me out of his house when I showed up with you tonight."

"True," I giggle, tracing my fingers over the dips in his abdominal muscles. "We had a nice chat. It was much needed. Something we should've done a long time ago, but I wasn't ready."

“What happened with your mom? You don’t really talk about her.” His fingers move from my scalp to my neck, massaging at the soreness there.

“She got cancer. It was awful watching her wither away. She deserved more but I guess life had other plans. She would’ve liked you.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.” I think fondly over memories of my mother. “She was my best friend.”

“I wish she was still here.”

“Me too,” my voice cracks.

He moves, lying me on the bed as he hovers above me. “Please, don’t cry.”

“They’re good tears, I promise. It’s nice to think about her.”

He traces his index finger around my lips. “Do you look like her?”

I jerk my head. “I don’t know how, but I took more after her than my dad.”

Cole wipes away my tears with his thumbs. “Let it out, baby.”

And I do, letting him wrap his arms around me I cry out all the tears I’ve held in for way too long. I’m saying goodbye to every negative thing I’ve allowed to hold me back over the years.

This thing with Cole. I know it’s big. A fresh start. A second chance.



## COLE

CRADLING Zoey's face in my hands I kiss her over and over. We're protected by the side of her car since she drove me over to where the team bus is picking us up for an away game. For the first time ever, I'm having trouble leaving. I want to stay with her, talk about random shit, kiss her, make love to her.

"You need to go," she murmurs against my lips.

"I know." I kiss her again.

"Preferably before my dad comes to see what we're doing."

I groan, letting her go. "You're right."

"Good luck tonight. You guys are going to kick ass."

"I wish you were going."

Something flickers in her eyes, but she darts them to the ground. "Me too."

I kiss her one last time and take a step back, so I'm not further tempted. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," she echoes, opening the driver's door.

"I'll call you tonight when I get back to the hotel."

"Okay ... if I don't answer I'm probably still at work."

I narrow my eyes. "We never work that late."

"Or in the shower. You know, because I need to be clean." She points toward the bus. "They're calling for you. You better go."

"Zoey—"

"Bye!" She closes the door.

*That was fucking weird.*

I watch her pull away, an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach but I can't focus on it, not when I have to leave.

Holding onto the straps of my backpack I climb aboard the bus, sitting down beside Shawn.

"Sup, man?" He pulls out his earphone.

"Nothing much. What about you?" I settle my backpack between my feet, already cursing the tiny amount of space between seats. They were not made for any person over six-foot, that's for sure.

"Nothing much. The kid's been sick so that's been rough, but nothing I can't handle."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's just a cold. He'll be up and running circles around me in no time. That boy has more energy than I've ever seen."

I chuckle, thinking of Zoey's brothers. "Most do."

At the thought of her brothers, I think once more about her strange behavior before leaving me. It doesn't make any sense. Zoey isn't the secretive type, and I trust her, but I can't deny the nagging feeling that something isn't right.

The bus pulls out of the parking lot of the gym and from the front Coach starts going over stats and figures of the team we're going up against. Harding University in Alabama is our biggest rival. We're ranked neck and neck in just about every category from sports to academics.

Everything Coach is saying is something we've already discussed, and my brain immediately tunes him out. It's early in the morning, barely after six, since we have a long bus ride ahead of us and I fight to keep my eyes open. Before I can doze off to sleep, I send a text to Teddy, asking him to check on Zoey today and make sure she's okay.

Coach finishes his spiel and turns around to face the front.

Beside me Shawn pops his earbud back in and leans against the window.

Closing my eyes, I visualize the game ahead and the victory I so desperately want to cinch.



I RUN up and down the court, laser focused on the game. Every worry I had this morning is empty from my head.



Jason Caswell is in the stands. Coach wasn't going to tell me, probably didn't want the pressure to get to me, but I saw him sitting there with his fingers pressed to his lips watching intently.

He could be here for any number of players. Doesn't have to be me. Hell, he could be scouting someone on the opposing team.

Shawn passes me the ball and I run like hell, shooting when I have the opportunity.

It sinks into the net and I give myself one millisecond to celebrate before we're back in. We're currently down by six points. It's not a lot, but in the fourth quarter we can't risk any mishaps.

My eyes follow my every movement, not missing a thing. It was hard for me to ignore Jason's presence at the start of the game, but now it's like no one and nothing else is here.

My teammate Reggie tosses me the ball and I take an elbow in the gut from Kessler Cooligan on the opposing team. The sneer he sends my way doesn't make me think it was an accident. I pass off the ball to another teammate and watch the ball sail into the net.

The clock is counting down and somehow, we manage to tie it up.

When the ball gets passed to me again, I know it's now or never.

*Five.*

Breathe.

*Four.*

Focus.

*Three.*

Aim.

*Two.*

Shoot.

*One.*

The arena erupts with a massive wave of boos and heckling since we're not on our home court, but it doesn't matter. We don't let it get to us. My teammates jump up and down, hugging me, smacking me on the arms, and celebrating the win we fought so hard for tonight.

I speak to reporters on the sidelines, answering questions when I can and evading ones asking about where I hope to play after I graduate.

"Ah, that doesn't really matter," I tell one reporter. "All I care about is the game. I'll be happy to play on any team that wants me."

I'm dripping with sweat as I walk off the court to the locker rooms. I'm

desperate for a shower, not only to wash up but to help uncoil the muscles that I didn't even realize tensed during the game.

Loading up on the bus back to the hotel, I refuse to let tiredness take hold. I want to call Zoey first. Whatever was going on this morning probably isn't important and she might've just seemed off because of the early hour.

The bus pulls up to the front and we get off, our feet sounding like a stampede in the narrow aisle.

I have a room to myself, and when I get there I let the door close behind me and latch it. Kicking off my sneakers, I change out of my clothes into a pair of sweats before diving onto the bed. I ring Zoey but it goes straight to voicemail.

*Maybe something really was off this morning.*

I ring again, and just like before I get her voicemail.

*What the hell.*

I shoot a text to Teddy.

**Me: Did you check on Zoey?**

**Teddy: Yeahhhh**

**Me: Is she okay?**

**Teddy: Totally fine.**

I narrow my eyes on my phone screen.

Before I can type out another text there's a knock on my room's door. I groan, irritated at the interruption, but it could be Coach or one of my teammates.

I get up and cross the room to the door, opening it without bothering to check the peephole.

My mouth drops when I find Zoey standing outside the door.

"Surprise!" She does these little jazz hand moves and then clasps her hands beneath her chin. "I hope this is a good surprise?"

I shake my head free of cobwebs. "Yes, yes. Of course. Amazing surprise." I grip her hips, pulling her in to me and kissing her. "How'd you get here?"

"Ah, for that I needed Teddy's help." She steps away and that's when I notice my friend loitering in the hall.

"I had to sweet talk my dad for access to the private jet."

"Are you joking?" Sometimes with Teddy I can't tell if he's being serious or not.

"Oh no," Zoey squeezes my arm, her eyes round like saucers, "it was a

real private jet. They asked me if I wanted caviar and everything. It was so cool.”

“I can’t believe you came all this way. Both of you.”

“We were supposed to be here in time for the game, but we hit a little snafu.”

“And what was that?” I curl my finger in her belt loop, tugging her closer.

Teddy removes his baseball cap, rubbing the back of his head. “Daddy Dearest decided to be a dick and change his mind so then I had to spend three hours convincing him to let us go.”

“Why does your dad hate you so much?” I ask him.

He frowns. “Because I won’t act the way he wants me to.” He scratches at his jaw. “But with him holding my inheritance over my head, I have to do *some* ass kissing.” I don’t tell him I’m sorry, even though I am. I know he doesn’t want pity. “Anyway, Mom and Dad, enjoy your night. I’m going to my room.”

“Night, Teddy! Thank you!” Zoey calls after him. He throws his hand up in a wave. Zoey pushes on my chest, forcing me into the room and the door closes behind us. “I know you won, but I didn’t get to see any of the game.”

“Well, we kicked ass. Pulled the game winning point in the last second.”

“And who made that score?” She drops her coat on the floor, yanking her shirt off right behind it.

“Me, of course.” I grin, watching her undress as her slender fingers go to the button on her jeans.

“I’m not surprised.” Her eyes narrow on me. “Are you not going to get naked?”

“I’m enjoying watching you too much.”

She shoves playfully at my chest and I chuckle, hooking my thumbs into the back of my shirt. I drop the garment onto the growing pile of her clothes. As soon as we’re both naked she plasters herself to me, stroking my hardened cock between us. I whistle through my teeth at the sensation of her hand wrapped around me.

“You’re so thick,” she purrs in my ear.

I have no idea what her idiot ex was thinking cheating on her. But his loss is my gain.

I cradle her face between my hands. “I still can’t believe you’re here.”

Her brown eyes warm. “Believe it.”

She drops to her knees and my head falls back when she takes me in her

sweet mouth.

“Fuck,” I curse, gathering her hair back from her face. She swirls her tongue around my tip before taking as much of me as she can. She worships my dick and I’m happy to let her. She’s a fucking pro at this.

Letting go of me, she pushes me toward the bed, and I sit down. She climbs on my lap and I moan when she sinks down on my cock but stops halfway. She’s soaking wet, and it pleases me that sucking me off gave her pleasure too.

She lifts off me and back down, taking a little more of me. She keeps up her ministrations until she’s fully seated on my cock. I grip her ass in my hands tight enough to bruise.

Looking into her eyes, I know I’ve been waiting so long to feel this way about a girl. I’ve fallen hard, and fast for her, but I wouldn’t take it back for anything. It’s on the tip of my tongue, those three little words, but I hold them back because I don’t want her to think I’m saying them only in the heat of the moment.

I rub her clit, wanting her to get off before I do.

Her eyes are hooded, lips parted. She’s the most gorgeous creature I’ve ever seen.

*And she’s mine.*

I come with a roar and the two of us collapse onto the bed, a tangle of sweat-dampened limbs. I kiss her forehead, stroking my fingers through her hair. She hums, snuggling against my side.

Surely life doesn’t get more perfect than this.



## ZOEY

IT'S BEEN a few days since the game and when I spontaneously decided to surprise Cole thanks to Teddy's help. I'm tired from studying, but winter break starts tomorrow. I'll be staying here and Cole will be going to Michigan. I'm set to join him over New Year's, which both excites and terrifies me. It'll be nice to meet his parents and sisters as well as all of his nieces and nephews. Though, he did warn me to expect his mom to start asking when the wedding is.

Cole and I pull up to the apartment. It's been dark for hours while we've been at work.

Tomorrow morning I'll drive him to the airport, and I don't want him to go, but I know I'll see him soon enough.

I didn't expect Cole and my heart certainly didn't think it was ready for him, but I guess life knows better than we do. I think deep down, even on that very first day when he opened the door and I stood beside Teddy, I knew he would change my life.

He shuts the truck off and turns to me. "Meet me on the basketball court."

"What? Why? It's cold!" Snow flurries swirls through the air, landing on the windshield. We're not due for more than two inches, but still, it's cold and the last thing I want to do is stand outside in it for one more minute even if I'm layered in a sweatshirt and coat.

"Because I said so."

I pout. "You should know by now that I'm not very good at doing what I'm told."

He chuckles, reaching for the door handle. "I guess not. But please?"

“Fine,” I grumble.

“I’ll be right back.” He runs up to the apartment while I walk to the basketball court, my breath fogging the air as I do.

I stuff my hands in the pockets of my coat, rocking back and forth on my heels.

I don’t have to wait long for Cole to come jogging back and I laugh when I see him with the two bottles of root beer, Oreos, and a basketball. If those three things don’t sum us up, I don’t know what does. He sets the bottles and cookies on the ground and then bounces the ball over to me.

“I thought we could play a game.”

“A game, huh?” I steal the ball from him and hold it to my chest. “What kind of game? One on one? It’s kinda late, you know?”

“I made this one up.”

“Hmm,” I hum. “And what does it entail?”

“For every shot you make you have to call out a letter to a word or sentence and then the other person has to try to guess what you’re trying to spell.”

“Fine. I’m in.”

I dribble the ball, spinning so he has my back. I think about my word and shoot for the net, but it doesn’t go in.

Cole jogs around me and swipes the ball before I can get to it and tosses the ball. It sails effortlessly into the net.

“I,” he declares.

“Give it.” I try to steal the ball from him.

“Nah, you gotta come and get it.” He flicks his wrist and I grumble when he makes a basket.

“L.”

I steal the ball and shoot but since he was trying to get it back from me my aim is wrong and I don’t make it.

“Cole,” I whine, “don’t do that.”

He laughs, clearly amused by my irritation. Another score. “O. Any ideas yet?”

“Nope, but this feels like a backwards game of hangman.”

I run after him, trying to get the ball, but he’s so much bigger than me he dodges my advances easily.

*Swish.*

“V.”

*“Cole.”*

Into the net.

“E. Have a guess yet?” He grins, brown eyes reflecting the lights in the parking lot.

I spell out the letters in my head.

*I.*

*L.*

*O.*

*V.*

*E.*

He knows the moment it clicks in my brain.

“You,” he murmurs.

The ball drops from his hands, the bounce echoing as he closes the distance between us.

His big hands swallow my face when he cups my cold cheeks. “I love you, Zoey.”

I close my eyes, reveling in the sound of him saying those words to me. “You love me?”

“Yeah, yeah I do, crazy girl.”

“I love you, too,” I whisper back, lower lip trembling with tears.

He smiles, eyes crinkling at the corners, and then he’s kissing me and behind my closed eyes I see it all again those glimpses of the future I saw in his eyes before.

A white dress.

Babies.

Laughter.

Happiness.

Him and I against the world.

If my heart was a net, he shot the ball straight into it and won the game winning score. He won me, my love, forever.



## **EPILOGUE**

COLE

### **Two Years Later.**

I'VE BEEN PLAYING for Atlanta for the past two years. I've found a new home and new team to love that feels like family. Sure, the stakes are a hell of a lot higher, but we look out for each other as much as we can. Life on the road is rough, but it's worth it knowing my girl is waiting for me at home in our downtown high-rise condo.

I couldn't ask for more when it comes to my life. I'm so incredibly blessed in ways I never knew were possible.

Dripping with sweat, exhausted, but desperate for a win, I throw the ball toward the net. I'm farther away from it than I'd like, but with seconds left it's either throw the ball myself and score or lose. There's no time left to pass to someone else.

Time stands still as the ball soars through the air down the court.

It feels like everyone in the arena is holding their breath.

My heart pounds in my chest and ears, silencing everything else.

When the ball sinks, my eyes widen and then I'm covered in my teammates.

Closing my eyes, I'm reminded of that away game years ago when Zoey surprised me.

Tonight, though, I'm the one surprising her. And when I get down on one knee and present her with a ring, I hope to God she says yes.

I soak in the chaos around me, and speak to reporters, before retiring to the locker room to shower and change.

“Good luck tonight,” Freddie LaMone, who’s become my closest friend on the team, says holding out his fist.

I bump it with mine. “Thanks.” I button my dress shirt.

“She’s going to say yes, dude,” Jackson, another player, chimes in.

“What’s going on?” Keeton walks over, opening his locker.

“Anderson’s proposing tonight,” Freddie tells him while I slip my feet into my shoes.

“Damn, it’s about time you wifed up that fine piece of ass.”

I freeze. “Don’t talk about Zoey like that.”

Keeton dances away from me. “I meant no offense. The girl is gorgeous.”

I glower at his retreating figure as he goes back to the showers. If there’s anyone on the team I struggle to get along with, it’s him. He knows how to push my buttons.

“Don’t listen to him. He’s a fucking idiot.” Jackson adjusts the cuffs of his sleeves.

“I don’t.”

By the time I leave and meet Zoey in the area reserved for friends and family to wait after the game, I’m a jittery mess, and of course she picks up on it right away.

“What’s wrong?” She wraps an arm around my middle. “Are you okay?”

“Just coming down from the high of a win.” I smile at her, once again marveling at what a lucky guy I am to have her.

“Are you sure that’s all?”

“Positive.”

Outside, we get in my new Chevrolet Silverado. I still have my ancient and always reliable one too, but an upgrade was necessary.

I’m quieter than normal on the drive back to our condo and I can tell from the way Zoey fiddles with her jersey—my number and name on the back—that she notices.

When we get inside, she runs to the bathroom which gives me the perfect opportunity to set everything up.

Fireplace image on the TV, root beers on the coffee table, and the red velvet Oreos I had made by a local bakery. Sure, they’re probably not exact, but it was the best I could do.

The bathroom door creaks open and my heart races.

This is it.

Her steps come closer, and I wait for her to reach me.

“What’s all this?” Her eyes grow big, taking everything in.

That’s when I drop to my knee, pulling the ring box from my pocket.

“Zoey, this has been the best two years of my life, and I want you to be my whole life. Will you marry me?”

Her hand hovers over her mouth, tears pooling in her eyes. “Yes. Yes. Obviously, yes!”

I slip the ring on her finger, one I had custom made because I wanted it to be perfect for her. Kissing her ring-clad finger, I look up into her eyes.

She gets to her knees in front of me, kissing me over and over again.

I get to love this girl for the rest of my life, and if that doesn’t make me the luckiest guy on the planet, I don’t know what does.

I used to think nice guys didn’t win, but I was wrong.

When I fell in love with Zoey, I won the greatest game of all.

**Want more Cole and Zoey?**

**Find out what happens when Zoey goes home with Cole over Spring Break.**

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I’ve heard the whispers on campus of what a player Teddy McCallister is. Most girls on campus are vying to be the one, but guys like him don’t settle down.

When he overhears that my tuition has been pulled and I’m going to basically be a college reject he makes me an offer I can’t refuse.

Be his fake girlfriend until graduation so he can get his inheritance.

It seems simple enough. I need the money and he needs someone to make

him look committed.

If one thing is certain, it's that I won't be falling for him. But no one warned me about what happens when my fake boyfriends starts to fall for me.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Micalea Smeltzer is a twenty-something author from Northern Virginia. She has three dogs, which is as crazy as it sounds. As a recent kidney transplant recipient she's dedicated to raising awareness around the effects of kidney disease, dialysis, and transplant as well as educating people on living donation. When she's not writing you can catch her with her nose buried in a book.

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