

A muscular man with short brown hair and a light complexion is the central focus. He is shirtless, showing his well-defined chest and abdominal muscles. He is wearing dark-colored athletic shorts with a white waistband and a white drawstring. He is standing on a green field, likely a football pitch, with a large stadium in the background. The stadium's roof is visible, and the scene is illuminated by bright, cool-toned lights, creating a dramatic atmosphere. In the top right corner, there is a logo for 'SUNDAY LIGHTS' featuring a yellow football with black laces and the text 'SUNDAY' above it and 'LIGHTS' below it.

SUNDAY
LIGHTS

one question FOR THE
QUARTERBACK

ELLEN BROOKS

One Question for the Quarterback

Ellen Brooks

Editor: Brynn Paulin

Cover: CH James

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Welcome to **Ravish Ridge**, where sexy, small town heroes fall fast and work hard to satisfy the sassy women who capture their heart in an instant.

If you love blindsided men, women who know what they want, and steamy, small town romances, the **It Only Takes ONE** series is perfect for you. There is no cheating and no cliffhangers, just a sweet and steamy HEA for every couple.

One Shot with the Soldier

One Oath by the Officer

One Hassle for the Handyman
One Challenge for the Cowboy
One Favor from the Firefighter
One Question for the Quarterback

One Question for the Quarterback

A relentless quarterback who only commits on the field.

A well-respected reporter who's always been just one of the guys.

Will he go on the record and lay his heart on the line or will their chemistry only fuel the rumor mill in her small town?

Kate

Sure, I know who Asher Monroe is. Anyone who's even remotely interested in football has watched the golden boy go from college star to MVP.

So when I find out he's going to be in town as a groomsman in his sister's wedding, I pitch a profile feature to my editor who gives me the green light and wishes me luck.

But I don't need it. I'm a professional there to do a job not fall for this jock's easy charm, incredible physique, and wicked tongue.

Asher

Get in and get out. That's the game plan for my forty-eight hour visit to the middle of nowhere, Montana, for my sister's wedding.

Except from the moment I land in the mountains, nothing goes according to the play call.

Especially the interview with a local reporter who turns out to be a fascinating tomboy. A whip smart athlete in her own right who doesn't see how irresistible she is.

I've never been one to give up and I'm not about to start now. It might seem like she's on a rival team, but I'm determined to play hard and win her heart.

Will the headline reveal a touchdown or a false start in this steamy small town instalove sports romance?

Return to Ravish Ridge and get ready for a scorching season! Join these hardened, sexy footballers as they risk it all off the field, chasing victory... and love. The bright Sunday Night Lights illuminate their path, but the winning touch has these fiery hearts racing.

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Also By Ellen Brooks

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Kate

LEONARD'S OLD WALL CLOCK ticks as loud as a bass drum. Its face is worn and tarnished, but it keeps the time as it has every day for the past two years, marking one second after another, clicking past one hour after another, crawling through one day after another.

The steady beat isn't comforting. It's an annoying dreadful reminder I'm still here writing game-changing articles, such as what the Scouts learned about fire safety during their trip to the firehouse last week. Or, how the library is busy planning another community boardgame night after the smashing success of the first one last month.

Don't get me wrong. I love Ravish Ridge and the people here, but I'm ready to throw my running shoe at that damn clock. The form letter rejection sitting in my email inbox weeks after I received it still makes me want to break something. Or yank on a pair of boxing gloves and go toe-to-toe with Asher Monroe's publicist.

My pitch for an interview was thoughtful and well researched. The questions I proposed for Asher Monroe were detailed and comprehensive. The profile was my chance for a byline on something that might catch the eye of a sports editor at a paper with national distribution or maybe even, the attention of someone at ESPN online. I mean, how often does a Super Bowl MVP come to Ravish Ridge? Spoiler: never.

Did my email outlining my fresh take on the star even make it to his publicist? I bet it was denied by some eager intern with a brand-spanking-new degree in public relations sitting at an ergonomic desk in an open-concept office in LA because my outlet was listed as *The Ravish Ridge Times*, circulation two thousand seventeen (on a good day).

My watch buzzes, and it takes a full ten seconds to realize why. Apparently, I haven't moved in twenty minutes. I guess tapping one's foot furiously during a serious brooding session doesn't count.

I break the number two pencil in my hand in half and jump to my feet. It's go time. This profile could be my big break, and I'm not about to let some entry-level PR nobody stand in my way. It's as if the game was called before the ball was even tipped, before the clock started. And there's no way that's fair.

Asher Monroe is coming to town for his sister's wedding in two days, and I need that interview. I'll have to do what any journalist worth their salt would. Go directly to the source.

"Hey, Leonard," I say, knocking on the doorframe of my editor's closet, er, office. "If I could convince Asher Monroe

to give me permission to do the profile, you'd still run it, right?"

"Kate..." Leonard sighs, pulling down his wire-framed readers. "The publicist denied your request. Isn't it enough that you have the green light to cover the wedding? Exclusive access, remember? Reporters across the country would kill to be in your position, right about now."

"Exactly!" I exclaim, skirting the stack of newspapers on the floor to step inside the dark, musty room. "We've been granted exclusive access, which means I'll have plenty of opportunities during the wedding events to talk to Asher, one of the *groomsmen*. If he gives me permission, we can run the profile alongside the wedding coverage. Think about it, Leonard, a two-for-one deal."

"Look, I know a fancy-pants wedding isn't your speed, but it's news. The biggest story in Ravish Ridge all year."

I open my mouth to protest, but he holds up a hand. "I get that you're a go-getter, Kate. And I've known since the day I hired you that you're going places, but—"

"But don't you see? This is my chance to break out."

He rubs his wrinkled temples and leans back in his rickety wooden chair, regarding me closely. "And you think you can actually convince him? You realize Asher Monroe's a famous athlete, right? In town for a family celebration."

I dismiss his concern with a wave. "Athletes always have their sport and their image at the top of their mind, no matter the

distractions.”

“Just because you lettered in however many sports you played at Ravish Ridge High and were the captain of the women’s golf team in college doesn’t mean you know what Asher Monroe is thinking.”

I’m so surprised Leonard remembered I was the captain of my college golf team that I’m slow to open my mouth and protest, but he’s quick to add, “Even if Coach Dawson is your dad and football runs in your blood.”

I place both hands flat on his paper-strewn desk. “I’ve done my homework, and I’ll prove it to him. I can quote Asher’s career stats inside and out, going back to his freshman year in high school. I know every charity he’s ever supported and every brand he’s represented. Plus, I could frame the profile as a chance to show some goodwill for his sister’s new hometown.”

Leonard shakes his head, and a thrill runs through me. I know exactly what his look means and what he’s going to say next. “You’re not going to give up, are you, Kate?”

And by now, he knows my usual response. “Do winners ever quit?”

He heaves a sigh and lumbers to his feet, glancing out the second-story window that overlooks Main Street. “He’s supposed to be quite a charmer. At least, that’s what Martha said the ladies in her sewing circle were gossiping about last week.”

Martha is Leonard's wife of over forty years. She was the lunch lady at my elementary school for so long they named the cafeteria after her when she retired.

"You have nothing to worry about, sir," I assure him, rocking back on my neon-pink running shoes. Sure, I can admit Asher Monroe is an attractive man. And rich. And, by all accounts, has a wicked tongue. But I've been a tomboy all my life. Guys—especially jocks—see me as one of them. Not girlfriend material. And yeah, I wasn't in the running for homecoming queen, but team captains always picked me first in gym class. "I'm a professional journalist, not some fangirl who's going to swoon over the sight of a pro football MVP in person."

"Fine," Leonard relents, sinking back into his chair. "If you can get Asher Monroe's permission, you can write the profile. But it'd better not interfere with your coverage of the wedding, understood?"

"Understood." I give him a two-finger salute, then spin back before I bounce out the door. "Thanks, Leonard!"

Asher

IN AND OUT IN forty-eight hours. That's the game plan. After all, I've got OTAs first thing Monday morning back in California, and I'm not going to stay at the top of my game by skipping a single second of voluntary organized team activities. I mean, come on; I haven't missed a day of summer workouts in the past seven years.

But as the SUV driver whisks me from the airport to the golf course, I can admit Ravish Ridge has at least two things going for it. First, it's not LA. And second, the view. But even snow-capped mountain peaks, vibrant green pine trees, and meadows bursting with wildflowers wouldn't be enough to keep me in this sleepy little town any longer than I need to be for my sister's wedding. No matter how much I like it.

Savannah insisted I'd love this place. She called it charming, quaint even. I couldn't believe she was leaving Hollywood to move to a town with only one stoplight, but as soon as I met Robbie, her fiancé, the Deputy Police Chief born and raised in Ravish Ridge, it made complete sense. He's perfect for her.

Even if they did fall in love faster than I can throw a forty-yard touchdown pass.

Speaking of Robbie, my soon-to-be brother-in-law shoots me a warm smile as I step into the pro shop. “Hey, Asher! Glad you could make it.”

I clasp his hand in a firm handshake. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Unless it was a game weekend. Then we’d most certainly be having a different conversation.

He eyes the football in my hand. “Can’t travel without one?”

I toss it to him. “It’s for Aaron. Signed and everything.”

Robbie turns over the ball to find the signature from his son’s favorite player, a wide receiver on a rival team, and lets out a low whistle. “Aaron’s bummed he’s sitting out this round, but he’ll *love* this. Thanks.”

“Anytime. And, by the way, congrats on this weekend.”

Robbie’s smile broadens. “Thanks, man. And thanks for being here. I know how much it means to Savannah.”

We head out to the range under a warm summer sun, and Robbie introduces me to the two other groomsmen, Ace, a former Army sniper, and Thad, a local handyman. Both have known Robbie his entire life and seem like guys I’d be friends with if I’d grown up in this small town.

Before long, we’re warmed up, and although golf isn’t my game, I’m feeling good about my practice swings. We’ve

settled into teams of two for a friendly round of best ball with the prize being a round of beer. I glance over at Thad, my partner for the day. “Play a lot?”

He shakes his head. “Never.”

I run a hand through my hair and temper my expectations. Or at least try to, but it’s hard. Competition runs in my blood.

“Ready to go?” Ace asks, dropping his club back into his bag.

Robbie checks the time and then glances back toward the clubhouse. “This morning, Savannah reminded me the *Times* has exclusive access to all the wedding events, and that means today, too. Kate’ll be joining us on the course today.”

Press? I should have known.

Thad slings his golf bag over his shoulder. “She’s not playing, is she?”

He seems worried she’ll join our round, but I’m not sure why.

“No,” Robbie assures him. “Just tagging along. There she is now.”

I spin to find a tall, athletic blonde with a long ponytail swishing across her back.

“Kate, you made it,” Robbie calls as the other guys wave hello and appear completely unfazed by this beauty.

She flashes the four of us a wide, perfect smile. Between that and her mile-long, tanned, toned legs, I can’t help but stare. This afternoon just got a lot more interesting.

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world.” She tosses a golf ball up in the air and catches it. “It’s rare I get to tag along on a round and call it work.”

Work? Right, she’s press. It’s best to remember that. Robbie nods in my direction. “Speaking of work, this is Asher Monroe, Savannah’s brother, not that you don’t already know that, of course. Asher, this is Kate Dawson, a reporter with the Ravish Ridge Times.”

“And a killer golfer who could kick all of our asses,” Thad interrupts with a wry smile.

“Too bad she’s not playing then,” I say, extending a hand. “And just Asher, please. It’s nice to meet you.”

She slips her hand in mine, and her eyebrow quirks up. “Just Asher? Well then, you should be glad I’m not playing. You’d need more than that seven handicap to have a chance.”

I let out a hearty laugh. Her eyes are as bright blue as the sky. And she’s bold and brash and fearless and somehow knows my golf handicap. I love it. “Is that so?”

She lifts a shoulder, a smile playing on her lips, before she turns her attention to Robbie. “Let me guess, best ball and the stakes are a round of beer.”

He ducks his head, acknowledging she’s spot on. “We’re running late. Let’s get started.”



I DON'T KNOW QUITE how I manage it, but somehow, Kate ends up as the passenger in my cart while Robbie and Ace ride together, and Thad and a photographer bring up the rear.

"I have to warn you," I say when the heat of her gaze lingers on me as we take off down the cart path. "I don't go easy on my opponents...or reporters."

"I'm aware," she says, her eyes twinkling. "Good thing neither do I."

"And you're going to be around all weekend?" I ask, the idea sending a thrill through me as if I just connected with a receiver under full coverage in the red zone.

"At all of the official events."

"Right, exclusive coverage," I murmur. This woman might be a hometown beauty, but she's still here on official business and anything's fair game.

Half an hour later, Thad and I lose the fourth hole, thanks to a putt that misses by inches. I'm scowling as I shove my putter back in my bag and then peel out, replaying the shot in my mind. Kate is thrown back against the seat of the golfcart and grabs on to the sidebar. Automatically, my arm shoots out to pin her in place while I let up on the gas.

"You okay?" I ask, yanking back my arm as soon as I realize my palm is splayed flat across her breast.

She swallows and shoots me a side eye, still gripping the bar. "Do you often need to restrain the passengers in your motor

vehicles?”

I meet her eyes. “Only when I’d kill myself if a single hair on their head was hurt.”

She studies me for a beat. “You’re still in the lead, you know. Ahead in the round.”

“No one likes to be down.”

“There’s a lot of golf left to play.”

“It’s easier to defend an advantage than pull off a comeback,” I say as we skirt a water hazard.

“You realize this is best ball, right? A fun round with the guys before the rehearsal dinner.”

“So you’re saying it’s not the fourth quarter of a big game?”

She laughs, and the sound is sincere and bubbly. I turn to catch her smile, and she murmurs, “Not even close.”

Over the next few holes, we fall into an easy conversation about the weather, the course, and the other guys, all of whom she’s known her whole life. Safe subjects, almost as if she’s choosing to avoid anything personal. Kate doesn’t have a notepad and hasn’t jotted down a single thing. Either she’s got a fantastic memory, or I’m completely boring and not worth taking up word count in her article.

After the tenth, which Thad and I take by the skin of our teeth, she’s champing at the bit to give me a few pointers when I climb back into the driver’s seat. I relent. “Have any tips?”

“Try shifting your weight a bit more onto your back foot during the backswing. Think about the connection between your upper and lower body. Combining the two can add more power to your shots. Then work on your follow-through. Let your club finish high, and your control will improve.”

“Is that all?”

“I got more if you want it.”

It’s my turn to chuckle. “Think you could best me head-to-head at a hole?”

She scoffs. “No doubt.”

She might be right, but I can’t help it. “You’re on.”

She shakes her head as if I’ve lost my mind. “You realize you’re going to lose, right?”

“There’s no way I’m going to lose,” I insist, ignoring the thread of doubt that snakes through my gut. Believing in yourself is half the battle in any sport.

She doesn’t meet my eyes, but her expression tells me she’s hatching a plan. “What are we playing for then, if you’re so sure?”

“What do you want?”

“An interview.”

That was fast. “An interview?”

She spins to face me, bending one knee and shifting on the seat until she’s turned ninety degrees in my direction. I’m

distracted by her golden thigh until she says, “So I can write a profile on you in addition to the wedding coverage.”

I don't admit I would have granted an interview—or anything, really—if only she'd asked. It's much more fun this way.

Kate

THE BENCHES ALONG BOTH sides of the long, worn wooden table in the dining room of the Big House at Noah and Grace's ranch are bursting. Especially the one holding a pro football player whose thighs are as thick as logs. I know I told Leonard I wasn't some fangirl who'd swoon over a pro football MVP in person, but I kind of did. I couldn't help it.

Asher is tall and chiseled. Even resting, his power ripples just beneath the surface. He's fit in a way only an athlete who cross-trains hard could be. Plus, one look in his grass-green eyes and I had to force myself to pull it together. I've never felt such instant attraction to a man, and I've been around plenty of fit guys here in Ravish Ridge.

Laughter bounces off the walls as everyone talks over everyone else and the wine flows freely. It's hard to keep my professional distance when, for the third time in ten minutes, I'm called upon as an impartial party to settle a friendly dispute.

“No, Thad, I don’t think Reid still owes you for that time you challenged him to the pie throwing contest at the county fair and lost. It was your fault you got distracted by that girl in the daisy dukes.”

With a laugh, I dodge the linen napkin Thad hurls my way as an uproar over my ruling erupts with everyone voicing their opinion at once. Just like always.

Except for Asher. He’s friendly enough, sharing smiles, and laughing good-naturedly with everyone in the wedding party and their guests, but I can’t shake the sense he’s feeling out of place. He doesn’t know everyone around the table, doesn’t have the history we all share, the relationships constructed over years growing up together.

Everyone knows who the quarterback is, of course, and they’re friendly because he’s Savannah’s brother, but Asher hasn’t been brought into the fold, hasn’t been welcomed in town over the past year by falling in love with a local, like Savannah and Grace have. I wonder if that’s why he’s quiet, observing everything and everyone. Including me.

Yeah, I noticed, although I’m pretending I haven’t.

The other day, after Leonard gave me the green light, I prepped a series of questions for the interview. The interview which, thanks to my birdie on the 18th hole this afternoon, is scheduled for tomorrow morning. But now that I’ve met Asher and spent a few hours in his company, I’m finding I’m curious about topics that aren’t on my list and that I definitely can’t ask. Like why he’s never had a girlfriend, what his abs feel

like when you run your fingertips across them, and has he ever kissed a girl late at night under a wide Montana sky?

A spoon rings against a wineglass and snaps my attention back to the party. Robbie and Savannah share a kiss and radiate happiness. Their eyes are locked on each other as if no one else exists in the room. This is what I'm here for, the wedding celebration of an A-list actress to our town's Deputy Chief of Police. Capturing the details is my top priority, and I'd best remember that.

I concentrate on the bride and groom, jotting down notes for my article, but am sucked into wondering what it would be like to have someone look at me the way Robbie looks at Savannah. What would it feel like to experience the unconditional love of a man rather than the *you're a great friend* line I've heard before? I push those thoughts aside. My career—and especially this exclusive wedding coverage—comes first.

“Are you sure I can't get you a glass of wine, Kate?” Grace asks, sidling up to me on my stool in the corner of the room and tipping a bottle of red in my direction.

“No, thanks,” I reply. “I'm here for work, remember?”

“Oh, I remember, all right,” she says, taking a sip from her glass. “I just thought that, with the way a *certain someone* can't keep his eyes off you, tonight might turn into... I don't know, more?”

It takes every ounce of willpower I have not to look in Asher's direction. “Tonight certainly isn't going to turn into anything.”

Grace is a gorgeous, stylish woman from California, who surely had experience dating before she met Noah. She's not a tomboy from a small town with a makeup collection that consists of Chapstick and an old tube of clear mascara.

She leans in and lowers her voice. "Don't be so sure about that. He's staying in one of the cabins, you know."

I am most certainly sure about that, but I just smile and slip off my stool, my running shoes touching the hardwood floor as I set down my pen and notepad. "I think I need a breath of fresh air."

"I would too if I'd been on the receiving end of that scorching gaze for five minutes, let alone two hours."



TEN MINUTES LATER, THE warm evening summer breeze has helped. I'm composed and ready to head back inside when the front door swings open. Asher steps out onto the porch with Aaron, his soon-to-be nephew, on his heels, tossing a football up and catching it.

"There you are," Asher says, his eyes landing on me. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I say, waving off his concern. "I just needed some fresh air."

"So did we, didn't we, Aaron?"

“Catch is better than a party any day,” Robbie’s son says, taking off a few yards across the thick grass before turning and throwing the ball to Asher. “Wanna play, Katester?”

Asher catches the ball. “Nice throw, little man.”

For a second I think he missed the nickname but no, before he throws the ball, Asher glances over at me. It’s well past dusk, but the house is lit up brighter than a lighthouse on a rocky coast, so I can see the arch of his eyebrow as if it was ten o’clock in the morning. “Katester?”

“Yeah, it’s—” Aaron starts, but I cut him off.

“It’s just a nickname from my dad,” I explain. “And yes, of course, I want to play.”

Asher throws me the ball, and I, in turn, throw it to Aaron.

“Nice arm you have there,” Asher calls, and I take a few more steps back, away from the man whose words...and look just shot to an unexplored place low in my belly.

We throw the ball back and forth for a few minutes. Asher’s form is near perfect as his powerful arm propels the ball through the air with precision. Our laughter fills the night, mingling with the distant sound of music cranked up inside the Big House.

After just a few more minutes, Noah escapes the festivities. I’m not surprised. The cowboy wasn’t thrilled the wedding’s being held on the ranch to begin with, and now that everyone’s here, he probably can’t wait for them to be gone.

“Want to check on the stables with me?” Noah calls to Aaron, who agrees in a heartbeat.

Which leaves Asher and me alone under the endless blanket of stars.

“Beautiful night, isn’t it?” he asks, tucking the football under his arm.

“It is.” I’m no astronomer, but the twinkling night sky has always been a sight that gets me. It’s a wide open world I dream of exploring some day.

Neither of us say anything, but somehow, we walk side-by-side toward the empty paddock, the tall rail fence a peaceful place to lean against on a warm summer night. The moonlight casts a soft glow on Asher’s sculpted features when I sneak a look out of the corner of my eye.

“You really can see all the stars out here,” he marvels, gazing upward. “It’s nothing like LA.”

“Perks of living in a small town.” I smile, but rather than agree or give me a hard time, Asher’s lips press together and his head drops as his shoulders raise.

“Can I ask you a question?” I whisper, not even sure what I want to ask right now but determined to unearth what he’s thinking.

He shoots me a side eye with that delicious eyebrow lifted again. “The interview’s tomorrow morning.”

“This one is off the record.”

He doesn't answer right away but seems to consider my request. "How about a deal?"

"A deal?"

"Yeah," he says, shifting to face me. "For every question you ask me, I get to ask you one."

What? Why? Who's interviewing who here? I hesitate for a moment, my mind whirling in all sorts of directions when I consider what he might have in mind. A negotiation is in order. "Two for one."

"What?"

"Two questions from me gets you one question. That's fair."

"How on earth is that fair?"

"Because I'm the reporter. I need information to produce an article. You're asking out of—" *Why is he asking?* "Sheer curiosity," I finish with a wave of my hand.

He kicks back against the fence as if he doesn't have a care in the world. "My need to know is just as great as yours, believe me."

My breath hitches. "Two for one. That's my final offer."

He shakes his head. "You should be an agent, not a reporter. I bet you could have negotiated double what I got in my last contract."

I know exactly how many millions his last five-year deal was but ignore his attempt at distraction. "Is that a yes?"

A slow, sexy smile fills his face. "It is a yes, Katester."

I clear my throat and ignore the nickname, focusing instead on the way he looked inside, at the table. “Are you enjoying the rehearsal dinner?”

He stills and studies me for a moment. “Is this on the record?”

“You tell me.”

“On the record.”

“Okay.”

“I’m enjoying it a lot more now.”

Not what I was expecting. For once, I have no comeback, no idea how to respond to that. And I ask questions for a living.

Fortunately, he relents and breaks the silence. “Look, I’m thrilled to be standing up for Robbie at the wedding, and I couldn’t be happier for him and Savannah. Really. But,” he continues, tilting his head toward the Big House. “I’ve given my life to football and—don’t get me wrong—I wouldn’t trade the success I’ve had for the world, but sometimes...” He trails off and runs a giant hand through his thick, sandy-blond hair.

“Sometimes what?” I prompt, desperate to know where he’s going with this.

He holds my gaze steady. “Sometimes, I wonder if I’m putting other parts of my life on hold for so long that when I’m finally ready, it’s going to be too late.”

“Oh.” I breathe the word, or more accurately, it escapes from my lips. It was barely audible, and I’m sure he didn’t hear it, but his gaze drops to my mouth.

“Are you going to ask me another question?” Asher asks, pulling me from my wayward train of thought, his voice low.

“Yeah.”

“What?”

This time, I know exactly what I want to ask. “I know we planned on ten a.m. for the interview tomorrow, but any chance I can pick you up at seven-thirty instead?”

“*That’s* your question?”

“Yup.”

“Are you going to tell me why?”

“Is that *your* question?”

“No.”

“Then no.”

“Fine. I’ll be ready bright and early.”

“Good.” I’ve got just the thing that’ll make him feel right at home. “Now, what was your question?”

He spins to lean against the railing with his back, his thick arms crossed against that broad chest. “How in the world are you still single?”

My eyebrows shoot to my hairline, and before I can help it, I blurt out a little too quickly, “How do you know I am?”

The slow turn of his head in my direction is almost as bad as the question. “Are you saying you’re not?”

“No.”

He relents, looking a little sheepish. “Robbie told me, but only because I asked. But seriously, how?”

Asher Monroe was asking about my relationship status? Why? But the question is quickly consumed by a flush of embarrassment that sweeps up my chest. I hope the red streaks on my neck aren’t visible in the light.

“I...” I start, debating how to answer. I can’t come up with anything but the truth, and even if I tried to lie, I’m sure he’d see right through me.

“I’ve always been athletic and grew up playing sports. The guys I know see me—have always seen me—as one of them. You saw it today on the course and in there,” I say, with a wave back at the Big House. “Plus, when you have a dad who knows all the boys in town you were ever interested in, it... It makes things difficult.”

“I have a lot of thoughts,” he says, pushing off the railing. “But have you ever—”

“Hey,” I say, cutting him off with a hand on his arm. The warmth of his skin under my fingertips sends a jolt of electricity through me, but I focus on the conversation at hand. “You asked your question, and I answered it. Two for one. That was our deal, remember?”

He stares down at my hand. “Oh, I remember. I just don’t like it.”

Asher

THE WOODEN SWING ON the front porch at the Big House creaks under my weight as I ease onto the smooth, worn planks. It's still a few minutes before Kate is scheduled to arrive, but I was up with the sun and headed down here from the cabins up on the meadow near where the ceremony will be tonight.

Maybe, it's the fresh country air or the blonde beauty who'd starred in my dreams, but I'm eager to spend the morning with Kate, even if Noah ruined her surprise in the kitchen a few minutes ago before he headed out to the barn.

I stretch my legs and gaze out over the wide open range toward the mountains in the distance as an SUV rumbles up the long road, kicking up dust. Sure enough, it pulls up in the circle drive and Kate is at the wheel. I jump to my feet as she hops out, her neon-pink running shoes hitting the ground as I make my way toward her.

"Morning," she says, with a broad smile that hits me like a sack square in the chest. I thought the silvery moonlight last

night highlighted her features, but now, in the soft morning glow, her natural beauty comes alive. No makeup and her hair is once again pulled back in a ponytail. Kate is real in a way so many of the women I've met aren't. No pretense, no façade, just raw authenticity. She's like a breath of fresh air, and I'm regretting that my flight back to LA is before noon tomorrow.

"Good morning," I reply.

"Ready to go?"

"I'm always ready."

She laughs and spins back toward her SUV, calling over her shoulder, "I should have figured a guy like you would have a comeback like that."

I buckle up, and Kate leans toward me to reach between our seats for something in the backseat. Her chest is inches from my face. The swell of her breast through her white athletic tank top isn't generous, but it's shapely, and my fingers itch to run along the curve. She slides back into her seat and hands me two foil-wrapped parcels that smell delicious.

"Breakfast," she explains with a lift of her shoulder. "You're going to need your energy."

To keep up with her? I don't doubt it. Turns out there are two homemade breakfast sandwiches for me, along with a thermos of coffee to share. My stomach growls and I eagerly tear into one sandwich as she starts up the engine and pulls out.

With three bites, I'm almost done with the first one. "I'm not sure two of these will be enough." I turn over the foil,

searching for a sticker or the name of the place where she picked them up, but there's nothing. "Did you make these?"

"Yes," she says, with a pleased smile. "But don't be too impressed. They're about all I can make."

"I need to have you tell the team chef your secret."

She pauses and then. "Of course. Happy to."

Although her tone is even, my comment struck a chord. The wrong chord. The atmosphere in the car sinks as we turn onto the highway toward town, but my spirits are bolstered. There's a reason she didn't like the mention of my team chef, and the odds aren't bad it's because she enjoys my company as much as I love hers.

I take a swig of the strong black coffee and feel the need to come clean. "Before you ask if I'm curious where we're headed, I should tell you Noah clued me in this morning."

Her lips curve into a wry smile, but she doesn't seem too upset I know. "What did he say?"

I wipe my hands on a napkin and crumple up the foil from the first sandwich. "He said there's only one place folks know to find you on Saturday mornings in the summer."

She makes a face as if conceding the truth of the statement, but asks, "And where's that?"

"At the park."

"And what am I doing at the park?"

“Coordinating flag football games for the youth sports league.”

She shoots a glance in my direction. “So you’re up for it?”

Football? She’s joking, right? “Of course.”

“I’m going to put you to work, just so you know.” She nods toward the back of her SUV, which is packed full of cones and flags and bags of youth footballs.

I grin. “Sounds like the perfect way to spend the morning together.”

She freezes, and her bottom lip tucks between her teeth. “Before the official interview, you mean.”

“Right, of course.” The reminder she’s a reporter hits me like the first touch of an ice bath after a game. But I didn’t get to where I am today by letting setbacks halt my progress toward a goal. I just have to adjust my strategy.

Another mile or so down the road, Kate shifts in her seat and checks the mirrors even though the open road toward town is deserted. “So what else did Noah tell you about me?” she asks, playing off the question as if she’s just making conversation. As if she isn’t curious as hell. “Other than my location on Saturday mornings?”

I take another swig of coffee. “That you played Division I golf at Montana State and were an All-American.”

Her nose wrinkles as she scrunches her face. “Maybe, I should have mentioned that before our friendly wager yesterday.”

I shake my head. “I don’t mind being an underdog. The worse my odds are, the harder I work.”

“So you’ve shown, time and time again.”

I don’t want to talk football right now. I want to talk about Kate. “He filled me in on your dad, too. Apparently, a local institution.”

She scoffs. “Coaching the high school football team in a small town for thirty years’ll do it.”

“And did you grow up on the sidelines?”

She nods. “I told you, one of the guys, remember?”

Oh, I remember. “Noah mentioned your dad will be at the park this morning. And that Coach Dawson is tough.”

Kate chuckles, shaking her head. “Noah realizes who you are, right?”

“He does.” *And he realizes I’m into you.*

“A professional quarterback with your stats can handle Coach Dawson,” she assures me.

“Oh, I’m not worried about my game.”

We turn into the park, and a quizzical expression fills her face as she glances over at me. “What are you worried about, then?”

“How your dad will treat the guy interested in his daughter.”

Kate

THE BELL ON THE counter dings, indicating an order is up from the kitchen. Ridgeview Diner smells like bacon and fresh-baked huckleberry pie and is louder than I'd like, but it's the best place I could think of to conduct the interview. The ranch is surely busy with last-minute wedding preparations, and Asher's cabin or my place were both out of the question, for obvious reasons.

I'd considered the library, but Asher's no doubt hungry, and among the tall, quiet bookshelves, he'd probably feel like a bull in a China shop. So, after the games wrapped up at the park, I steered us here and told Sloane, my best friend and the owner, we'd wait for the back corner booth. Her gaze had swung over to Asher, but thankfully, she'd made no comment, only nodded and moved on to seating the next party. I'll have to catch her up to speed later.

Hopefully, getting Asher well-fed will put him at ease, so he'll let his guard down for the interview. Not that he seems to have any trouble telling me what he thinks.

After last night's conversation by the paddock and this morning's exchange in the car, I'm unsure what to make out of the events of the last twenty-four hours, other than complete confusion. How could this handsome, competent man be interested in me? Surely, he's delusional. That's the only explanation.

Maybe, he's looking for a good time while he's in town, but why me? I'm never the one who catches anyone's eye, let alone a pro quarterback who's also kind and thoughtful and made friends with my dad.

But if he made an offer...

I dismiss the appealing idea before it has a chance to take root and make me crave his touch more than I already do. I'm sure sleeping with Asher might be—no, scratch that—would be amazing. It would also wreck me because I can already sense my heart slipping into his care.

"You don't mind if I record, do you?" I ask once we're seated and Sloane's taken our order, dragging my mind from the gutter. I pull out my phone to access the voice memo app I use for interviews.

Asher barely fits between the table and the red vinyl bench across from me, but he shifts in his seat and cocks an eyebrow at me. "As long as our deal is still on."

"Of course," I say, pretending his questions don't affect me in the least. "But remember, we don't have long until you're supposed to be back and ready for pictures and I need to get to

work covering the pre-ceremony activities. It's important I get enough content for an in-depth profile now."

He shoots me a saucy smile that hints at the trouble I'm staring down. "Don't worry. I'm good under pressure."

"Yes, well," I start, gripping my pen as I glance over the questions in my spiral notebook. I need to stick to them even if I'm curious about things I could never print in black and white.

At the fields this morning, after the initial surprise from the players—and my dad—that *the* Asher Monroe was there to help, he fit right in, running warm-ups for the kids and then calling plays on the sidelines with my dad. Asher was in his element and clearly having a blast. The weather was perfect, and it was nice to see his easy smile knowing how much the game means to him.

Of course, my view wasn't too shabby while I watched him and the muscles of his broad, well-built body move. Especially when his strength was on full display after the game when he gave in to the kids' pleading and threw a dozen forty yard passes downfield to a horde of receivers who scrambled to catch them.

I appreciate his physique because I know how hard he must work to stay in such good shape. But when he glanced in my direction every few minutes, it felt as if I were caught red-handed. As if Asher could read my mind while I admired his body and considered what else it's capable of. As if he saw the

fantasies playing in my mind that had me squirming and squeezing my thighs together.

Damn, is it hot in here or what?

“Okay, then,” I start, clearing my throat and putting on my best neutral journalist’s face. “Tell me, Asher. Most people would rate that division playoff game, with last second Hail Mary to come from behind and win in OT against the Scorpions, as one of the greatest moments in football history. In your mind, what’s a moment that stands out to you from your football career and why?”

He leans back and blows out a long breath. “That’s a good question. And that was a tough win against the Scorpions, but there is another moment I think about much more often than that one.”

“Tell me about it.”

His voice is low as he starts, looking off as if he can see it in his mind. “It was the opening Sunday night game of the season three years ago. My grandfather was my biggest fan, but he was in hospice, and there wasn’t much time left. I didn’t want to leave his side, but like he always did, he encouraged me to go out there and give it my all. I waited until the very last minute to head to the stadium. Once I got there, nothing was out of the ordinary. I didn’t even have a second to spare a thought for him because—”

“The Tornados returned the opening kick for a touchdown, and your team was down from the start.”

He nods. “We were still down late in the second quarter, but just after the two-minute warning in the first half, I got sacked. I was flat on my back, the wind knocked out of me as hard as it’s ever been, and as I lay there, I knew—I felt it in my bones—that he was gone, but also, without a doubt, that he was watching over me and always would.”

“Was it true? Your premonition?”

Asher sighs. “At halftime, I called Savannah, and she confirmed it. He’d passed only a few minutes earlier. Just about that moment in the game.”

“Is that the day you decided to start the Arthur Monroe Scholarship?” The endowment provided sports equipment and funds to pay high caliber coaches to serve in underprivileged schools across the country.

Another nod. “It was.”

“Thank you for sharing,” I say sincerely. Asher could have answered my question in a thousand different ways. He didn’t have to pour out his soul to me, a small-town reporter in an old-fashioned diner, hours before his sister’s wedding, but he did, and I appreciate it.

Just then, Sloane returns with our orders. The solemn atmosphere releases as she plunks down two turkey clubs and fries for Asher and a BLT and fruit salad for me. “Anything else I can get you?”

“I think we’re good,” I reply, eyeing Asher, who nods in agreement, already popping a fry into his mouth.

“My turn,” he says, squeezing entirely too much ketchup onto his plate. “Tell me, Kate Dawson, why are you so intent on getting this interview? On writing this article?”

I hesitate for a moment and busy myself unfolding my napkin in my lap before landing on the honest truth. “I’m just like you. I want to be the best and hope this profile will draw some attention to my writing beyond Ravish Ridge. Maybe, help me break into sports reporting for a national publication. You’re my chance, you know? I mean, pro athletes don’t exactly swing by Ravish Ridge every day.”

Asher feigns a wounded expression, thumping a hand over his heart. “So any pro athlete who showed up in Ravish Ridge would have been good enough for you?”

I look up, ready to defend myself, but before I can, he drops the act, turning dead serious. “Not that I think any man, especially me, is good enough for you.”

My cheeks heat. *As if.* This man’s a professional quarterback worth millions, and I’m...a small town reporter, who was fortunate to play in college and dreams of something more. I take a sip of water and try to make a joke out of his ridiculous statement.

“It’s a good thing it was you, though. And that you’re exceptionally complex, with enough sides to give me a few angles to choose from for the piece.”

He chuckles, shaking his head, and picks up the second half of his sandwich. “I think you need to spend more time with me.”

I don't disagree. "Why's that?"

"I'm anything but complex, Kate. I'm a simple man. I've always known what I wanted and have done everything in my power to pursue the goal to no end. That's it. Nothing special."

"So perseverance is your superpower?"

He holds my gaze. "And having the end game clearly in mind."

I swallow and stab another piece of strawberry. Something tells me he's not talking about football anymore and the endgame isn't another Super Bowl ring.

Fortunately, or maybe not, Asher's phone buzzes. He wipes his hands on his napkin and picks it up.

"Robbie's texting," he says, a wide smile filling his face. A tremor of unease runs through me at that look. "Seems he knows I'm here having lunch with you."

I'm unsurprised. Pictures of the two of us in this booth probably spread like wildfire the second we sat down.

"And," he adds with a chuckle. "He's wondering when I'm going to finish my date and show up for pictures."

Asher

PLAYING FOOTBALL FOR A living, you'd think I'd wear shoulder pads and a helmet a lot more often than a tux, but you'd be surprised. Between charity galas and sponsor events, I've been custom fit more times than I can count. Plus Savannah, the Hollywood star, always asked me to be her plus one whenever she didn't have a date for red-carpet premieres or awards ceremonies.

Not that I've had to do that in a while. Once the true story of how a small-town deputy captured her heart became public, Robbie's become almost more famous than she is. Not that Savannah minds. She's head-over-heels for him and Aaron, and I have no doubt her marriage to Robbie is built to last.

I adjust my vest and button my black jacket in the mirror as the banter from Robbie and the other groomsmen filters in from down the hallway. They're waiting on me, but I take a second to adjust my cufflinks as I think about how right Savannah was. There is something special about Ravish Ridge and the people here.

But I'm still glad to know Kate is open to relocating. She's still technically working tonight, covering the wedding, but at lunch, I negotiated a dance at the reception. This afternoon, I also read every article of hers I could get my hands on. She's good, and I'm even more determined that once the celebration ends, nothing will stand in my way of pursuing her.

I press a hand to my stomach at the unusual sensation I haven't felt in years. It's a churning that isn't pre-game jitters. It's something entirely different. It's Kate. She's the one for me, and tonight, I'm going to confess how hard I've fallen for her and do my damndest to convince her to give me a chance.

"Looking sharp, Asher!" Robbie says, clapping me on the back when I join the gathering in the living room.

"Saw the pictures of you and Kate at lunch, my friend," Thad says, lifting his glass in my direction.

Ace nods and takes another sip of what looks like straight whiskey. "Ravish Ridge women are hard to resist."

From what I hear, each of these guys, along with Noah, is in a loving, committed relationship after whirlwind romances. I'm green with envy, and it's not a feeling I have a high tolerance for. The faster I can officially join their ranks the better.

"And to think," Thad adds, "Just yesterday, Kate out-drove you on the golf course by what? A good twenty yards?"

"She's got skills," I admit, accepting the glass a server offers. Kate might have beaten me on the eighteenth hole, but it's her

intelligence, her drive, and her passion that won me over. And that fresh, sexy smile. She's unlike any woman I've ever met.

"So you like her?" Robbie asks, eyeing me closely.

I take a sip of the smooth whiskey. "Shouldn't you be more concerned about your wedding than my love life right now?"

"You know your sister," he says with a grin. "If I don't get the scoop, there'll be hell to pay."

He's right about that. Savannah will, no doubt, want every last detail. She's been encouraging me to date for a long time now.

"You can tell your *wife* I don't like Kate Dawson."

"No?" he says, surprised.

"I love her."

He rubs a hand across his smooth jaw and gives me a knowing smile. "Oh, I'll be sure to tell her that, and you'd better watch out when I do because she'll be on you like a hungry grizzly on a salmon."

I laugh and roll my eyes. "Only in Montana."

"Time to move, gentlemen." An assistant in all black, wearing a headset, points to the SUV waiting out front. We pile in, drinks in hand, and take the short drive from the Big House up to the picturesque meadow for the ceremony.

The SUV circles around back, past the enormous white tent where the reception will be. On the way, we pass the rows of white chairs and the intricate wooden archway adorned with hundreds of wildflowers. Busses are unloading guests, and the

rows are filling up, but Kate is nowhere to be seen. She must be with Savannah and the bridesmaids. I wonder if she's facing the same inquisition I did about our lunch today, and if so, what her response is.

"Robbie," I say, clapping him on the back as we exit the vehicle out of the sight of the guests. "Welcome to the family. I couldn't be more thrilled for you and Savannah."

"Thanks, Asher," he replies, his eyes shining. "It means a lot."

It's not too long before the music changes, and it's our cue to make our way to the arch at the end of the long aisle. Robbie follows the officiant, then Ace, as the best man, follows. I'm next and behind me is Thad. Once we're in place, I scan the crowd for any sign of Kate.

At first, I don't recognize the bombshell standing off to one side of the rows of white chairs dressed in a long navy gown, her blonde hair cascading in waves over her shoulders. It's only when she meets my gaze and offers a small, knowing smile I realize it's Kate.

Fuck. She. Is. Gorgeous.

In and out. That was the game plan for this wedding weekend in Ravish Ridge. Within the first few hours, it was challenged. Then, my strategy was revised. And now, it's completely shot to hell.

But I don't mind. I'm the lucky bastard to meet this girl and see her for who she is. And tonight, when the festivities are in

full swing, I'll do everything in my power to make sure Kate knows just how much she means to me.

“Get ready, Kate Dawson,” I think, my heart pounding as if I've just run ten-by-ten sprints. “Tonight's the night I show you just how perfect we can be together.”

Kate

THIS ISN'T A DATE. I'm here by myself, *working* at this wedding, the likes of which our sleepy small town has never seen before. And may never see again. The enormous white tent, the lavish table scape, the exquisite foods, and the guests dressed to the nines celebrating in style could be over-the-top, but it's not.

Despite the grandeur, the elegant reception feels intimate. The atmosphere is warm and inviting, cozy even, for an event this size. Every detail is infused with personal touches that reflect Robbie and Savannah's story, and it's truly a celebration of love and joy.

I'm trying my best to capture the lightning in a bottle and take note of the laughter and clinking glasses. Trying to capture with words the look the bride and groom share as they begin their first dance. And even trying to nail the description of the flickering candlelight and how it casts a soft glow in the summer night.

These are the specifics readers will swoon over, but every time I glance up from my notepad, I can't help but meet Asher's eyes. He's mingling and celebrating, but he's also zeroed in on me like a receiver he's determined to connect with.

I knew I was in trouble the moment Asher walked out with the other groomsmen in his well-cut tux. His tall, broad frame and that no-nonsense look were enough to unfurl a curl of desire in my low belly. But when he searched me out in the crowd and recognition dawned, his face transformed from surprise to disbelief to downright desire, and it was hot enough to melt the snow-capped peaks of the ridge in the middle of winter. Or set me on fire.

And now, it seems he's just biding his time, building up the anticipation, before he makes his move. A move I'm more and more tempted to take him up on as the evening progresses, even if it means I can't publish the profile. My mind says no, but my body screams yes, and I consider that maybe a compromise would be I could ask him to introduce me to another player to interview.

But that's a decision for later. Right now, I'm still at work, and instead, I focus on stopping a few guests for quotes I could use to describe their take on the wedding celebration. As I'm asking a follow-up question, the eyes of the tall, dark-haired woman I'm speaking with shift to over my shoulder and rise. A warmth at my back confirms Asher's there, only inches behind me.

“Would you mind if I steal this lovely lady for a dance?” he asks the woman in a low tone. The butterflies in my stomach go wild, and I grip my phone, open to the recording app I’m holding out.

“Of course,” she says, turning back to her own date, who’s also eyeing Asher with a combination of admiration and awe.

I set down my phone and notebook at my table and take Asher’s outstretched hand. He leads me onto the dance floor, and as the music shifts to a slower tempo, he pulls me close.

I finally look up and meet his gaze, although the instant I do, I’m lost, drowning in those deep grass-green eyes reflecting the shimmering twinkle lights. I never thought I’d be on the receiving end of a look like this, but it feels...so good.

“Enjoying the evening?” I ask, trying to maintain a professional distance despite the fact his broad chest, as hard as a brick wall, is pressing against my breasts, causing my nipples to peak. And his scent, a heady mix of sandalwood and whiskey, is so appealing I draw a deep breath and grip his shoulders. But the smooth, luxurious fabric of his tux under my fingers only adds to my sensory overload.

“I am now,” he murmurs, his voice low and delicious. “You, Kate Dawson, by far, are the most captivating woman in this room.”

Surely, he can’t mean that. Not only is his sister, an A-list actress—and the bride, no less—is here, but plenty of her Hollywood friends, who eclipse me by a mile, are milling about, enjoying the festivities. But before I can protest, he

continues. “Don’t you dare try to deny it or try to convince me again that you’re just one of the guys. From the minute I saw you, I saw nothing but a gorgeous, irresistible woman, and now, tonight, you’re...breathtaking.”

My heart pounds, the beat echoing in my ears as I try to breathe. I try to comprehend what he’s saying because it goes against everything I’ve ever believed about myself. I’m never the beautiful one. I’m the athletic one, the tomboy. The list goes on, but I’m never the one who gets the guy.

“Asher, I... I don’t know what to say,” I stammer, my thoughts a whirlwind of confusion.

“Say you’ll be mine,” he whispers, his warm breath gliding over the skin of my bare shoulder. “Say you feel this, too, this unmistakable connection between us.”

I do. I can’t deny it any more than I can deny the sun rises in the east. “I do.”

“Let me show you how I feel, how much I want you.”

This is it. The offer I knew was coming. One night with this pro athlete. It will crush me tomorrow, break my heart in two, but tonight, at this moment, I don’t care. I want Asher Monroe with every fiber of my being. And I want the pleasure his body promises.

“Alright,” I say, lifting my chin. “Let’s go.”

“Now?” he asks, glancing around, a muscle in his jaw clenching.

“Yes, now.”

A. because I can't wait, and B. because his cabin is only yards away, and I won't be tempted to spend the entire night in his arms and lose my heart to this strong, confident, charming man more than I already have.

Without another word, he grips my hand and practically hauls me off the dance floor. I pull up short and slide my hand from his.

"What is it?" he asks, wrinkles crisscrossing his brow. "If you're having second thoughts—"

"No... I'm not. I just don't want to be seen leaving with you," I whisper hiss, trying to be inconspicuous. "There are too many prying eyes here who would notice. I should follow you in a few—"

"Kate," he says, stepping close enough to silence me. Then, before I know it—before I can stop him—Asher leans down and kisses me. And not a quick peck. Not by a mile. It's a fiery kiss that stakes his claim and pulls no punches. The press of his lips is full of anticipation and longing. It's not rushed but feels somehow urgent, as if he has all the time in the world to savor every bit of me but can't wait to do just that.

His tongue traces a leisurely path across my lips that declares his intentions beyond this moment without a word. I can't help but let out a soft moan and open for him. He responds with a low growl I feel through the silk of my dress. One large, calloused hand slides down my back and pulls me flush against him. The other sweeps up to cradle the back of my head.

It's a long minute before he releases me, drawing back only enough for me to meet his eyes, smoldering with need. My breath comes in quick gasps while I try to regain my senses. My skin is on fire, and I'm blushing furiously, but Asher's lips curve up into a sexy smile, and he leans in close to whisper in my ear. "That'll give them something to talk about. Like how I. Am. Yours."

Kate

ASHER TAKES MY HAND once more, and I can do nothing more than focus on putting one foot in front of the other. I hold on tight and stare at his broad back, trying to pretend I'm still just an outsider reporting on the event. That I'm not following a very tall, very recognizable athlete outside and trying not to think about what guests might murmur to each other and will certainly talk about tomorrow.

Once we're out of the tent, into the dark, starry night, I stop short and reach down to pull off my heels before they sink into the rich earth. Asher sees what I'm doing, and instead of stopping, he scoops me up as if I'm as light as a feather. I wrap my arms around his neck as his powerful arms encase me like a protective shield. I've never felt as safe and secure as I do held tight against him.

"That's better," he murmurs as he stalks toward one of the recently renovated cabins.

He takes the porch stairs two at a time and kicks the door closed behind us, his loafers clicking across the hardwood

floor as he heads directly to the bedroom. He sets me down, my dress sliding against him and up my thighs before my feet hit the ground.

“Kate,” Asher murmurs, his lips meeting mine once more. Our kiss deepens again as if the taste before, the preview in the tent was just enough to whet our appetite.

Now, free to give in to my desire to touch him, I’m desperate to run my hands over his broad shoulders, to roam under his jacket. I push it off until it drops to the floor, so I can caress the muscles beneath. Asher’s grip on me tightens, and he walks me backward until my back is pressed flat against the wall.

He towers over me. The pressure of his thick chest pinning me in place is hotter than I ever would have imagined. I’m so small against him, and maybe, it’s the dress and the makeup, or maybe, it’s the way this man makes me feel so beautiful, but I writhe against him, my fingers twisting in his hair as my pussy throbs.

He wrenches away from my mouth just far enough to reach down and grip the bottom of my dress before lifting it up over my head in one fell swoop. I stand before him in nothing but a lacy bra and panties and make no move to cover myself. It’s not as if there’s much to hide. I might be fit, but my chest is as flat as a pancake, and I barely have what anyone would call curves. Still, his eyes rake over me as if he’s committing every inch of my body to memory.

“You are perfect.” He reaches out with one hand to trace a single finger slowly down from my collarbone, between my breasts, and further south to the edge of my panties. My breath hitches.

His finger dips under the fabric and brushes against my wet clit. I gasp and cling to his biceps as a hum of approval sounds from his chest. His other hand moves around to cup my ass as he pulls me flush against him, his huge, rock-hard cock straining against his pants, pressing into the soft curve of my belly.

Asher kisses me again, a quick peck this time, before stepping away and leading me to the bed.

“Lie down,” he says, and I comply. But rather than join me, he bends over to trail feather-light kisses from my neck down to between my legs. Before I can even untuck his shirt, he slips off my panties and spreads my legs, taking a deep breath as he kisses his way across my inner thigh. His tongue flicks over my already swollen clit, making it convulse and my legs quake.

His tongue circles faster and harder, lapping at me with tantalizing pressure that’s soon unbearable. I’m lost to the pleasure as his lips and mouth and tongue work their magic, and the intensity builds until I can’t take it anymore. My back arches off the bed as I come hard, crying his name, my eyes screwed shut.

When I finally open my them, Asher is gazing down at me, swiping a hand across his glistening mouth to reveal a satisfied

smile. He reaches out and laces our fingers together.

“Do you want me, Kate?” he asks, his voice tight, as if he’s barely holding his desire in check.

I nod, unable to get out any words past the lump in my throat. I want all of him, heart, body, and soul, but all I can do is whisper, “Yes.” The single word is barely audible, even to myself.

He strips naked while I watch, admiring every sculpted muscle and every toned plane, and although I just came, I can barely contain my desire to have him inside me. My gaze drops lower, to his huge and impressive erection.

Asher must sense my apprehension, because he lifts my chin with a single finger. “Don’t worry,” he says, pressing a gentle kiss against my forehead. “I promise to go easy.”

And he does, kissing and nibbling each of my nipples as he lines up between my legs. He sinks slowly into me while I cling to him and gasp, adjusting my position to accommodate his size. Once inside, he fills me, stretching me, and it feels so good, but it’s not enough. I want more, all of him. I rock my hips and urge him deeper, all the way to the hilt.

After a minute, he starts to move, slowly, inside and out, but I’m desperate to feel him pounding into me.

“Please, Asher, more,” I moan, and he complies, driving hard as I wrap my legs around his waist and meet him thrust for thrust. The pleasure is overwhelming, each movement more intense than the last until I can’t hold back anymore and come,

clenching around him, my fingernails digging into his shoulders. After a few more strokes, he jerks and groans, burying his face in my neck.

His pounding heartbeat pulses against my skin, and I hug him to me, my grip desperate as I think about my own beating heart and how much it will ache tomorrow. The article...my career doesn't seem nearly as important now, but that's a worry for another day. For now, I sear this moment in my mind so I can revisit it in the future when I'm searching for a man who makes me feel as half as worthy as Asher does.

Asher

I'M NEVER THE FIRST one off the team bus, but this morning is different. I'm down the steps of the mini bus hired to transport guests from the cabins to the inn in town before it even comes to a complete stop. A celebratory after-wedding brunch is scheduled to start at any minute, but it's not the event that has me scanning the inn's wraparound front patio.

I'm looking for Kate. But, just like last night, when I surveyed the tent at the end of the evening, looking for her long blonde hair and navy dress, she's nowhere in sight. She slipped away without so much as a goodbye less than twelve hours ago, and the frustration bubbling inside me is quickly morphing to downright desperation.

"Hey, big brother," Savannah calls out, sipping a mimosa with an amused smile on her face as she waves hello to some other guests. "Looking for me?"

"You know I'm not," I grumble, taking the stairs up to the wraparound porch and planting an obligatory kiss on her cheek

while I keep my eyes peeled for any sign of the reporter who's doing everything she can to avoid my company.

"Kate's not here," Savannah says, watching my reaction as my gaze snaps to hers. "Yet," she adds with a mischievous grin.

"But she's coming though, right?"

"You tell me," Savannah whispers, her tone dripping with innuendo.

I could kill her right about now.

"*Savannah*," I growl in warning, but she just laughs and lifts a shoulder.

"You're the one who missed the garter toss last night. And the cake cutting."

"I caught the tail end of the cake cutting," I say through clenched teeth.

She chuckles, and her eyes are dancing when she leans in.

"Well, maybe, that's it. Maybe, if you'd taken your time, you'd know where Kate is right about now."

I pivot away from her and grip the wooden railing. It's well built, but I could rip it right off the porch, and I'm damn well tempted to right about now.

"I'm just joking," she says, waving her glass in the air. "I certainly don't want to hear the details of your *tryst*. Just know that I couldn't be happier. Kate is a darling, and if you've—oh, Kate, it's so lovely to see you this morning." Savannah motions with her hand for the reporter to join us.

I spin, and my heart skips a beat. Then another. Kate is at the top of the front steps in a ponytail and those neon-pink tennis shoes, looking as fresh and natural and beautiful as ever. The morning sunlight filtering through the trees casts a halo around her, and for a moment, I'm captivated by the sight. Until I notice she's staring straight at me with a determined look that reminds me of her face before she teed off on the eighteenth.

I'm as nauseous as if I've just wrapped up two-a-days in the heat of a summer afternoon with the relentless sun beating down on me. And my mouth is dry.

"Savannah," she says, reaching out to my sister with both hands and smiling broadly for her. "Congratulations. Last night was pure perfection, and I couldn't be happier for you and Robbie."

"Thank you!" Savannah exclaims. "And thank you for covering the event. But more importantly, this morning," she adds, swiveling to bring Kate and me face-to-face for the first time since I kissed Kate one last time under the wide Montana sky before we returned to the reception. "As a reporter, I think it's your journalistic duty to ask my brother a very important question."

I shoot my sister a puzzled look, and Kate's expression is just as confused. "What question?" she asks, glancing between us.

"If I were you, I'd be curious to know why Asher showed up here this morning, bright and early, but didn't bother to bring his suitcase like the rest of the out-of-towners who are leaving to head to the airport after brunch." A mischievous grin tugs at

the corners of her mouth, and I wonder how she ever pulled off any of her roles in the movies, because she certainly isn't playing it cool right now.

Before I can say anything, Savannah makes a hasty exit, leaving me alone with Kate, who shifts her weight from foot to foot until she finally lifts her eyes to mine. "Actually, Asher, I do have a question for you, but not that one."

I take a step toward her, but she moves the same distance back and looks off, over the lush green grass, toward a towering sycamore.

"Anything," I reply, curling my fingers into fists to keep from reaching out to her.

She lifts her chin. "I was wondering if you could introduce me to one of your teammates."

The way she said it, as if she were asking me to pass the iced tea, throws me for a loop as I process her request.

"One of my teammates?" I blurt out, shaking my head. "What? Why?"

She looks at me as if I've lost my mind and lowers her voice to a hushed whisper. "I can't publish a story about you now, not when I've slept with you."

Oh. I didn't think of that. I didn't consider how a relationship with Kate or even a one-night-stand might impact her work, her career. "Did you realize that before you said yes last night?"

She straightens her shoulders. "Of course."

“Then why did you?”

“By then, it didn’t matter.”

What?

“Why not?” That’s what I really want to know. Why did Kate sleep with me? She’s not the type to do it for bragging rights, and I know her well enough to know she’s not a one-night-stand kind of woman. I hold my breath, waiting to see if she’ll admit she has feelings for me—even if they aren’t half as strong as the certainty deep in my bones. It would be a start. And that’s all I’m searching for right now.

“Because...” she starts, before pausing as if she’s considering whether to give me the truth. She does. The set of her chin and the steel in her tone give away her honesty. “Because by that point, I was long past being an impartial journalist when it comes to you.”

“Oh.” Relief mixed with elation surges through me as if I’ve been waiting on the sidelines, forced to release control of a game to a kicker in the last seconds and praying he comes up with the winning field goal. I want to sweep her up into my arms, but I settle for taking a step closer and reaching for her hand. She doesn’t pull it away.

“I’m glad to help, although I don’t think you need it. From all of your pieces I’ve read, it’s clear you’re a competent writer who knows how to weave a story and make a point.”

“You’ve read my articles?”

“As many as I could find,” I confess. Her lips part as if she’s unsure what to make of that, but I continue, desperate to get to the point. “You’re more than capable of going after anything you want, and I have no doubt you’ll achieve your goal of a national byline, but if you want me to introduce you to one of my teammates, I’m happy to, tomorrow.”

Her jaw drops. “Tomorrow?”

“In LA.”

“I can’t go to LA tomorrow!”

“Tuesday, then?”

“Asher,” she says, stumbling backward. “I’m not going anywhere, and you have OTAs starting tomorrow. And I know for a fact you’ve never missed a single one in seven years.”

I rub my stubble-covered chin and smile. “Studying up on me again, were you?”

“Don’t distract me!”

I hold up both hands. “Just trying to even the playing field.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“From the moment I laid eyes on you, Kate Dawson, I knew I was a goner. You’ve captured my heart faster than the seconds on a game clock tick away in the final minute of a game. You —”

She shakes her head as if what I’m saying isn’t the honest truth. “No, Asher, you’re...” she trails off and waves a hand

around as if to encompass me, “*You*, and I’m just a small-town reporter who knows it was just one night.”

“But it wasn’t, not for me. That’s what I’m trying to tell you, and I’m sorry if I’m not as good with words as you are, but I’m not leaving here unless you’re coming with me. If that means I’m staying for a few more days and skipping OTAs until I can convince you how much I love you, then I’ll do it.”

“You...you love me?”

“Yes,” I confirm, holding her gaze. “And I’m not going anywhere until I do everything in my power to convince you.”

She studies me for a moment but then looks away, biting her lip. I’m not surprised she’s hesitant to believe me, given how quickly everything has unfolded between us.

“Hey,” I say softly, pulling her to me. “I know it’s hard to trust what’s happening, but I promise you, Kate, I’ve never been more certain about anything in my life.”

Her hands slip around my waist, and her soft scent fills the air. “It’s not hard to trust what’s happening because I’ve felt it, too. From the moment we met, there’s been something special here between us, hasn’t there?”

I press a kiss to her forehead. “There sure is.”

“Can I ask you one question?”

“You can ask as many questions as you like.”

She draws back enough to look up at me, and there’s a mischievous look in her eyes. “So last night then, it wasn’t

just...a onetime thing?"

I rock my hips against her. "It was a first-of-many-times thing."

"I like the sound of that," she admits, with a small, sexy smile that speaks directly to my cock.

Epilogue | Kate | Fourteen Months Later

THE STADIUM ERUPTS AS I jump from the black town car the second it pulls up to the sidewalk then sprint toward the entrance closest to the section where my seat is. My heart pounds as I whip out my friends-and-family pass and pray I make it in time. It's late in the fourth quarter, and Asher's team was down by three a minute ago, but they just got the ball on the fifty-yard line.

If only the NFC West game I was covering earlier today in Phoenix hadn't gone into OT. Then I wouldn't be rushing through security and thanking my lucky stars every eye is riveted to the field, and the concourse is deserted. The roar of the crowd at this prime-time televised, Sunday night game hits me like a tidal wave, and it must mean Asher's team advanced because this is his home turf.

I glance at the jumbotron, but the score hasn't changed. The offense is lining up on the thirty-two-yard line as I hurtle down the stairs and slip into my seat in the section reserved for players' and coaches' families near the sideline. I find Asher

on the field, tall even among his teammates. Although I've seen him play a dozen times, my heart still skips a beat.

"Kate! You made it!" Carrie, the wife of one of Asher's teammates, exclaims, her eyes lighting up as she glances over.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," I pant, giving her a quick one-armed hug.

"Asher could really use some good luck right about now," she replies, wringing her hands together as we both turn back to the game.

On the field, Asher surveys the opposition with steely determination. The clock ticks down, and the tension in the air is palpable.

"Can you believe this crowd?" I shout over the cheers of seventy-thousand loyal fans. The way everyone is on their feet, you'd think this was the Super Bowl instead of the featured Sunday night game of the week. The atmosphere is electric, and although I'm not completely impartial, I have spent the past year covering pro football for ESPN.com and have visited every stadium in the league. Nothing compares to the twelfth man here in LA, especially tonight.

"No way we want to lose our undefeated record to our rivals in front of the whole country," Carrie says loud enough, so I can hear her.

Asher shouts orders to his teammates, and I can't help but admire the way he commands the field. The confidence in his

stride, that intense focus in his eyes, it's no wonder he's been so successful in his career.

"Come on, Asher," I whisper, my heart nearly beating out of my chest as the offense lines up for what could be the game-winning play. With a quick snap, he drops back and surveys the field. Grunts and thuds echo as the linemen collide, blocking and tackling. Asher's protected in the pocket and drops back but remains unflappable.

I hold my breath as Asher takes a long second to read the defense before launching the ball into the air, the leather spiraling beneath the stadium lights. It's a beautiful throw, arcing high above the field, and the crowd seems to hold its collective breath as the receiver springs up to snag it, his fingers closing around the pigskin just as the defender slams into him.

The sound of the hit echoes through the stadium like a gunshot, but the ball is tucked tight against his chest. He hits the ground hard, tumbling end over end, but holds on, and the roar of the fans is deafening when the referee signals a touchdown.

"*Yes!*" I exclaim, jumping up and down. "That's how it's done!"

"Amazing play!" Carrie shouts, high-fiving me enthusiastically. "Asher really pulled through!"

As the crowd continues to go wild around us, my phone buzzes in my back pocket. No doubt, it's my dad. Sure enough, I pull it out to find a text complimenting the play call

and Asher's execution. It thrills Coach Dawson to no end to have a future son-in-law to talk shop with, but my dad assured me a few months ago, just after Asher proposed, that he admires Asher's character so much more than his athletic ability, which is what made me fall in love with Asher to begin with.

The final whistle blows, drawing my attention back to the field. Asher's teammates swarm around him in celebration of their hard-earned victory. One of the team's PR reps in a branded polo weaves through the throng and pulls Asher aside, leading him to a reporter set up for a post-game, on-camera interview. But just as he gets close, he makes a motion for them to hold on a minute and glances up at the stands in my direction.

Asher finds me in the crowd, and a slow, warm smile spreads across his face. He turns and says something to the interviewer, and I can't help but chuckle at the look of surprise that flashes across her face as Asher stalls during the live TV interview to jog over to me, helmet in hand.

"Hey," he says with a grin, out of breath but with a sparkle in his eyes. "Glad you could make it."

I bend over the railing and hold out a hand. "Just caught the end, but it was the best part."

"We came through," he says as if it were a given. "Work was good?"

I can't believe he's thinking to ask about my job in a moment like this, although I should be used to it by now. Asher always

makes sure I know my work is just as important as his.

“It was, although I’ve still got to file my story.”

“I won’t keep you then,” he says with a wink as he lifts on his tiptoes to kiss me. He’s grimy and sweaty and perfect.

“Alright, you two lovebirds,” Carrie calls out, laughing. “Save it for the honeymoon!”

Asher chuckles, pressing one last lingering kiss to my lips before turning back to the PR rep, who’s been waiting patiently nearby. As he answers the interviewer’s questions with his signature grin, I can’t help but thank my lucky stars to have found a man who loves me as fiercely and unconditionally as Asher does.



DEAR READER, THANK YOU so much for reading **One Question for the Quarterback!** I hope you enjoyed Kate & Asher’s story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

If you missed the rest of the **It Only Takes ONE series** starting with Baylee & Ace in **One Shot with the Soldier** (A Heart of a Wounded Hero series story) be sure to catch up now!

xoxo ~ Ellen

One Shot with the Soldier

Baylee

I've been underestimated before and didn't like it one bit. So when a gruff hottie with piercing eyes scoffs when I list my name as Sharpshooter at a kids' laser tag birthday party, I can't help but smile and offer him a friendly wager. Even after I'm warned he's a veteran. A former Army sniper, to be exact.

Too bad when I demolish him I have to run and don't have time for the rematch he insists upon.

Two days later, when he shows up at the retirement home where I work, I have a feeling he will not take no for an answer this time. And I'm right.

But I don't mind playing along because this well-built vet is wounded and giving me exactly what I want. A chance to sneak past his defenses and prove he deserves my love and to be recognized for the hero he is.

Ace

When my Army days ended in the blink of an eye I swore I'd never shoot again. But I'd do anything for my godson, even if I have to fight the darkness closing in just before the round of laser tag at his birthday party.

Until a curvy ray of sunshine rushes in and throws down a challenge I can't refuse. She's gorgeous, fearless, and young enough I shouldn't look twice, but I can't resist. Especially when her warm smile slips under my armor and breaks down every wall I've built.

The sense I've met my match lands like a grenade in the pit of my stomach. The last time I had this feeling, I was on a gurney in the back of a Black Hawk medevac within an hour. But, I've learned my lesson. I've got a plan.

Only problem is... she blows it to pieces.

One Shot with the Soldier is part of the Heart of a Wounded Hero Series, as well as an interconnected standalone in the It Only Takes ONE Series.

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About the Author



Ellen Brooks believes in love at first sight, eating cake for breakfast, and staying up way too late.

She's a classically trained pastry chef who now spends her days whipping up sexy and satisfying modern day love

stories.

When she's not dreaming up her next characters, or plotting a happily ever after, you'll find her absorbed in a book, relaxing into shavasana, or downing a caffè americano. Oh, and belting out the lyrics to Hamilton.

Ellen lives in the desert southwest where she still *occasionally bakes a batch of cookies for her real-life hero and two girls.

*code for not often enough, if you ask them

Ellen loves to connect with readers everywhere.

