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Mrs Kristal

Perfect
ROOMMATE

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Chapter 1

Millie

Target Field, Minneapolis, One Week Earlier—

I approach the large glass front of our family box at Target Field and look down at the field. Scattered confetti are still flying around the stadium, and loud music is blaring from the speakers. The Lincoln Tigers players keep lifting the college championship trophy to pose for pictures with their families and friends.

Last year, we won the bid to host the college finals. At that time, I never dreamed that my friends would be down there celebrating. I already knew I was going to Lincoln, and I knew the Tigers were a good team. But I never imagined that four of those guys would become my friends. Much less that the quarterback, Denver Jones', girlfriend would become my best friend. For the first time in my life, I feel like I've found that in Sienna.

And what did I tell my best friend when she asked if I would accompany her and Denver to the finals? I have to study. I'm the only one who could come up with something so stupid, but I had no choice. No one in Lincoln knows who I really am. Of course, I had to enroll in college using my real name and other information, but it hardly reveals that I come from one of the richest families in the country.

My great-grandparents made their money in the gold rush until the 1980s when my grandfather decided to invest his money and bought the Minnesota Warriors. We also own stock in publicly traded companies that have nothing to do with football franchises. These are the New York-based McDonald's companies.

My family is filthy rich, and that's the problem. Because of that, I could never make real friends. I could never tell if they were interested in me or my money. I spent my school years in an elite school for girls. Most of the students came from

millionaire families and were used to a certain standard. My family's wealth made me stand out from them.

As a result, many of the girls wanted to be friends with me because they wanted to become more than their name and bank balance. They only liked me as long as I paid for everything. After a while, I started to feel very lonely. That's why I asked my parents not to send me to Harvard or Stanford or Yale, as it is usually expected for a daughter of my status, but to send me to Lincoln instead. But that wasn't enough. Instead of moving into the fancy townhouse in the most expensive building in Lincoln that they had bought for me, I applied for a place in the dormitory behind their backs.

Now, I live with my terribly moody roommate Amanda in a forty-nine-square-foot apartment with a mini-bathroom instead of a three hundred and twenty-eight-square-foot apartment with a roof terrace. It would be impossible to explain to anyone that I'm a normal student living in an apartment like that. Sienna has always been looked at with envy because she lives with Denver. Her room costs almost twice as much as mine. Maybe it's not fair that I took an affordable room from a student, but my family donates enough money.

I'm not ashamed of where I'm from, and I love my parents and sister more than anything, but I needed normalcy in college. I wanted to be ordinary. I had that at Lincoln. I made great friends and was warmly accepted into a wonderful group that also loves and lives my favorite hobby – American football. When it comes to sport, I would have made a better boy. If I could, I'd play football, too, but in college I'd rather work towards one day taking over the Minnesota Warriors.

Days like today make me wonder if it's all really worth it. If I'm being ridiculous and should adopt my grandmother's motto, as she used to say:

*'Millie, people like you for who you are
inside, and those who just want your money
don't deserve you.'*

In all these years, I've never been able to believe her because I've always gotten taken advantage of. I don't trust

Sienna, Joy and Phoenix not to suddenly want to profit from my wealth. I'm not sure about the guys either, because their ultimate goal is to get into the NFL. One day, I'm going to own an NFL club, and maybe they will think that if they're nice to me, they're more likely to get picked. Which is complete bullshit because we can't control the draft.

I shake off the negative thoughts. None of it helps. I have to find a solution to my dilemma.

My gaze lingers on Darren, and I grin foolishly to myself. I've had a crush on him since day one. The semester was only a few hours old; I was new and had no idea where to go. So, I was standing against a wall near the cafeteria, checking the building map on my iPhone, when Darren and his friends walked through the door. I didn't know at the time that they were the three poster boys for the football team. I didn't find that out until the next day.

To this day, I have successfully convinced myself that he gave me a quick smile. But I doubt that was the case. Since I joined the group because of Sienna, I feel like Darren doesn't have much time for me. He talks to me in passing, but he doesn't show any real interest.

This morning, Denver, Jake and him looked like college gods, and honestly? They are. They definitely are, and they know it. While Sienna has tamed her god, I still worship mine like a little schoolgirl. And that's how I feel. My experience with the opposite sex is very limited. And Darren sleeps with anyone who is willing. I don't think there has been a party in the last few months where he hasn't picked up a girl. Joy, Sienna and Phoenix think I should come to my senses and forget about him. I deserve better, but damn it, all I want is him.

Every now and then I think about letting Joy help me change my style and step out of my comfort zone to get his attention. But at the same time, I wonder why I should do that. I don't want to bend over backwards for a guy who thinks a relationship is toxic. So, I guess I'll just pine for Darren from

afar for at least another year, until he gets drafted and leaves college.

When you go to an all-girls school and you're an outsider, it's not easy to gain any sexual experience. Now I'm nineteen years old and in love with the biggest player in college.

"Hey." My sister Maya comes up next to me and grins. "Do you want to be down there with them?"

We get along really well, we always have. Even though Maya is six years older than me. She lives in New York with her fiancé, Preston, and works for the football franchise there. She doesn't have much to do with football, she prefers to take care of the business end of the club.

"They're my friends," I say. "Of course, I want to be with them."

"Then why don't you just tell them?"

I don't know how many times we've discussed this. In fact, we have this discussion every time we talk on the phone. Keeping quiet about her heritage was never an option for Maya, but she has been much more open and self-aware since childhood. Our mother's matchmaking efforts to find a young man within our circle also worked much better for Maya. She and Preston have been together for almost ten years. I, on the other hand, am a failed debutante, too shy even for the boring boys. "Eventually they'll find out that you..."

"We don't have to go over that again, do we?" I give her an annoyed look and she sighs.

"No," she replies, taking me in her arms. "Which one of the cute boys is your Darren?"

"He's not my Darren," I reply, the heat rising in my body. "Stop saying that."

Maya grins at me knowingly and now I sigh. I should never have told her that I was interested in him. But it was one of those nights when I was so frustrated. Darren had taken another cheerleader home, and my friends had looked at me with pity. At home, I called my big sister and asked her if a guy like Darren could ever notice me. Now, every time we

talk, she asks about him and if there is anything going on between us. I always deny it. My sister doesn't understand that there will never be anything between us.

"The one with the fifteen on his jersey next to Sienna."

"Hot." Maya whistles appreciatively through her teeth as Preston comes up behind her and wraps his arm around her waist.

"I hope you mean me."

"Sorry," my sister giggles, turning to her fiancé and giving him a kiss on the lips. "I mean Millie's guy."

"He's not my guy," I hiss. My face must have turned the color of an overripe tomato. There is no way I am having this conversation with my sister's fiancé. I'm embarrassed. "Can we please talk about something else?"

"Like what?" Preston asks with a grin, and Maya is more than happy to oblige. "That's your type? he wants to know. "I would have guessed the blonde guy next to him."

Preston points at Denver and I have to laugh out loud.

"God, no." I shake my head. Sure, Denver's hot too, but he's not my type. Besides, he's my best friend's boyfriend. And he's not Darren. Unfortunately, you can't see his many tattoos under his football uniform, which only adds to his insane sexiness. "Plus, he's my best friend's boyfriend."

"Who doesn't know who you are either," Maya accuses me and I nod. I have to at least tell my friend...

But Sienna will tell Denver, and if he knows, soon Darren, Jake and Tyler will know. And eventually the whole football team. After lying to them for over half a year, I don't know how to tell them.

"Why don't you tell them?" Preston asks, as if revealing my identity after six months is the easiest thing in the world. "If they're your friends..."

The ringing of my iPhone interrupts Preston's attempt to appeal to my conscience. I pull it out of my pocket and block out Preston and Maya.

As expected, Joy and Sienna have sent photos and messages to the group.

**Joy: You're missing out, Millie Mouse!*

I laugh softly. Sadly, I am missing out on being with them tonight. But I am there. Luckily, Maya and I didn't have to stand next to our grandfather at the awards ceremony to present the trophy. My lie would have been exposed. Sienna also sends a message.

**Sienna: This is unbelievable, honey!!!*

A picture of her and Joy. Next is one of Denver and Sienna posing with the trophy. Another of Tyler and Joy, and one of Darren, Denver, Tyler and Jake with the trophy. Dumb as I am, I naturally zoom in on Darren's body and face and look at him. I run my fingers over the screen and sigh. How I'd love to be on the field with him ... and have him hold me in his arms like Denver does with Sienna.

But that's just wishful thinking. Darren and I will never be more than friends. If we even are friends. Sometimes I'm not even sure he notices me during our group chats and greetings.

Phoenix has been in Bristol for a week as part of her Work & Travel in Europe program. Hopefully after that she will know what she wants to do with her life and her studies.

**Phoenix: It's 6 a.m. in Bristol ... congratulations!!! Miss you guys!!!*

**Millie: You'll have to tell me all about it next week!*

I have to figure out how to tell them the truth ... even if I could just disappear again in Lincoln. Because no one there

would think of questioning who I am and where I come from. I am one of thousands of students. One of many, just like I always wanted to be. Millie McDonald – the hardworking student and mousy one – and not Millie McDonald – the heiress of the Minnesota Warriors.

Chapter 2

Darren

Lincoln, one week later

A week after winning the college championship, I still feel the effects of the party marathon in my bones. We partied all night in Minneapolis and when we got back home, we went to the stadium. The fans greeted us, and we celebrated again with them. Then we had an audience with the mayor of Lincoln and a dinner. We were treated like heroes. As if we had won a war, not a championship. I wonder what it must be like to win the Superbowl. The hype must be even greater. Winning the college championship is the biggest title of my career and I'm very proud to be a part of this team. Next year, we have a chance to defend the title before Tyler, Jake, Denver and I become eligible for the draft in April.

It's now time for a few weeks without football, but the stress of school will be even greater. The heroes of Minneapolis have exams coming up, too, and I'm not looking forward to having to retake any of them. I'm a good student, there's no question about that, but for me, sports always come first. The only reason I'm studying business is because I couldn't get a scholarship with just football.

If my parents had had their way, I would have quit playing after high school and gone to Houston to study business and agriculture and eventually take over their huge cattle ranch. But I had many conversations with my high school coach. He told me that I would regret it if I stopped playing. That I should find some middle ground that would make my parents and me happy. With economics as a major and playing football on a scholarship, we found it.

I've been at Lincoln for three years now and I don't regret choosing this school. We have a great team that has accomplished a lot and I have made great friends with my teammates. Especially with Denver, Tyler and Jake, I think we will still be friends after college. No matter where we end up after the draft.

Denver would probably prefer to stay in Chicago because it's his hometown and he has Sienna now. Having a girlfriend

is a bonding thing, not only in terms of fooling around, but also in terms of making decisions for the future. Sienna would go anywhere with Denver, I know that, but I still think it's easier to make a decision like that without a partner. No one tells me when I can go where or until what time I can stay at a party. If I let someone dictate that to me, I won't have any say in where we live later. Although no one can influence the draft.

Denver, in particular, has a good chance of being a first-round pick and ending up on a lousy team. This is what happens to most really good quarterbacks. As a defensive end, you're more likely to be taken by a top team in the second or third round. On the other hand, I wouldn't make nearly as much there as Denver would on a lousy team. We always try to tell ourselves we're doing it for the sport, but that's bullshit. It's not lost on anyone on the team that Denver has some sponsorships that we can only dream about. I don't begrudge my friend because, unlike me, he doesn't come from a rich family and really needs the money. The Audi I drive was given to me by my grandfather and the apartment I live in is paid for by my parents. The flip side of that is that Denver's whole family, except for Phoenix, was in Minneapolis. So were Tyler's and Jake's relatives. My family didn't even call to congratulate me.

Speak of the devil...

"Hi Mom," I say, bracing myself for another lecture about my failure to comment on Dana's wedding. My big sister is getting married in two weeks to her crappy fiancé, Willmore. I can't stand the guy, and I don't think he's going to make Dana really happy either. Unfortunately, no one but me seems to see that. Willmore is a total jerk and cheats on Dana all the time. I've been on the verge of punching him in the face so many times because she keeps calling me in tears. But every time Dana assures me that he is sorry. In my opinion, he's not sorry. He just keeps managing to calm my sister. However, he is not very suitable for her financially or emotionally. But Dana loves him. And while she's getting ready for her dream wedding, this dumbass is running around Austin sleeping with everyone.

I also like to have a lot of sex, no question, but I am single and have the right to do so. When I am in a committed relationship and in love with a woman, I am faithful to her. This has only happened once in my life, but it didn't last. Lisa and I broke up before college. She has since happily moved on with my childhood best friend, Jacob. At first, I was shocked that they were a couple, but I quickly realized that beyond the shock, it didn't affect me at all. I have my life in Lincoln, and they have theirs in Austin.

"Hi Darren," my mom says, "How are you?"

"Good, and you guys?"

"We're good, too," she replies monotonously, and I sigh. Talking to her is so exhausting. Her voice always has the same boring tone. I wonder if she is even capable of showing any emotion when she talks to me. I know I disappoint my parents. I am not the son they wanted. But I am still their child. While my father at least tries to reach out to me and build a better relationship with me, my mother is stone cold. After all, Dana does everything she asks. Even though the life my mother wants for her, and especially her marriage to Willmore, will break my sister. But Dana has to figure that out for herself.

"When are you coming?" she asks. I lean my head against the headrest and turn on my blinker so I can park in front of the bar where I have to meet with the guys.

"Next week, Mom," I reply. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Fine," she replies, "and who are you bringing?"

"I'm coming alone," I hiss and turn off the engine. "It's Dana's wedding, which is bad enough because no one but me seems to realize that Willmore isn't treating her well and..."

"That's enough," she cuts me off. I take a deep breath. "You're not a football star back home, Darren. You have responsibilities here, and one of them is to come to your sister's wedding with a date. We're letting you get away with this football nonsense and paying way more than we should.

For once, please pull yourself together and come to this wedding.

“I never said I wouldn’t come.” I ignore the rest of her rant. “But you can’t expect me to come to my sister’s wedding with a girl whose mother wants to see me at her daughter’s side. How would that look? I think it’s embarrassing.”

Especially since I don’t even feel like flirting with these girls because they’re all extremely boring.

“Duties, Darren, duties,” she reminds me, and I roll my eyes in annoyance. “In my opinion, Catherine Howard would be a good choice. Her father is one of our larger suppliers and...”

Just the thought of Catherine makes my stomach turn. She looks all right, but I wouldn’t dream of taking her to my sister’s wedding. She’s yawningly boring and that’s the last thing I need that day. If I was going to take a date, I’d at least have to like her and get along with her.

“I have a girlfriend,” I suddenly hear myself say. “She’s going with me.”

What the hell am I saying? I don’t have a girlfriend and I’m not going to be able to pull one out of my hat before next week, am I? Shit, damn it.

“You have a girlfriend?” Her voice is tentative and noticeably softer than usual. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“It’s still new,” I babble, continuing to roll with it. “We ... she and I got together just after Christmas.”

“And you weren’t planning on telling us?” she questions in her usual sharp tone. “Nor were you planning on taking her to Dana’s wedding?”

“Mom,” I grumble. “What was I supposed to say? We’ve only been together three weeks. Of course, I wasn’t planning on...”

Oh God, this web of lies is never going to last.

“Darren, bring her.”

What choice did I have but to come up with this stupid story? And that leaves me with a whole new problem: Who in the world am I going to bring? I can't take a cheerleader or one of my conquests to meet my mother. If I were smart, I'd spend the day with Catherine getting drunk. Instead, I have to come up with a fake girlfriend to endure the circus that is this wedding. Great, really great. A wedding that shouldn't take place, with a girlfriend who doesn't exist. This can only happen to me.

"I'll ask her," I mumble vaguely. Surprisingly, Mom hasn't noticed that I haven't even called my supposed girlfriend by name. "I've got to go, Mom. Ciao."

Without waiting for her answer, I hang up.

Exasperated, I throw my head back and close my eyes. Shit, shit, shit. I should have just kept my mouth shut and complied with her demands like I've been doing for years.

Angry with myself, I grab my wallet, cell phone and car keys and stomp towards the bar.

Denver and Jake are already sitting at our regular table in an alcove, while Tyler is standing at the bar. My buddies raise their hands to signal that they've seen me.

"Hey." Arriving at the table, I join them and sit down in one of the empty chairs. "Hey Darren," Tyler says, setting the drinks down in front of us.

"Hi," I reply, regretting that I drove here and can't have a beer. Although, after talking to my mom, I'd need something stronger. Maybe a whiskey or two ... or three.

"You look stressed." Jake cuts to the chase. "Are you okay?"

I rub my face and shake my head.

"My mom called me about my sister's wedding," I tell him, sipping my Coke. "She wanted to know if I had a date, again. I've been putting it off for weeks."

"Why is that?" Tyler asks, and I exhale loudly. You can tell that my friends don't come from one of America's more

affluent backgrounds and don't understand this kind of obligation. They go to their relatives' weddings with or without a date, and no one minds. With us, it's all about seeing and being seen.

"That is the way it is in our family," I explain. There's no point in explaining etiquette in detail. They'll forget it in five minutes. And to be honest? I envy them. "My parents expect it of me, and because I haven't said anything about it yet, my mom has been checking out her friends' daughters."

"And you don't like them?" Denver asks, laughing and I roll my eyes.

"No way." I clench my left hand into a fist. "Nothing and no one is going to make me show up at my sister's wedding with some boring Southern girl who has her hopes up on top of it."

The three of them look at each other and grin.

"I'm not going to have sex with any of them. Never have," I make it clear. "I'm not tired of life. Besides, they don't use contraception, the condom breaks, and I end up having to get married."

"So, what are you going to do?" prods Jake. "Apart from the fact that having a child is no reason to get married. Your mom's not going to give up, is she?"

"I told her I have a girlfriend," I whisper, looking back and forth between my buddies. Tyler and Jake's jaws almost drop and Denver chokes on his beer. He coughs violently and doesn't stop until Jake slaps him twice on the back.

"But you don't have a girlfriend." Denver gets to the point. "Do you?"

"No." I want to roll my eyes again. "And you know I don't want one. It's too exhausting for me."

Denver is the one rolling his eyes now – as he always does when I say that.

"So, what are you going to do?" Jake asks again, unnecessarily. "You can't ask one of your fuck buddies or one of the cheerleaders for help."

Denver and Tyler nod in agreement before my best friend chimes in.

“The pickings are slim, to say the least, since you’ve already banged them all.”

I’m seething inside. I want them to stop telling me things I already know and start telling me things that will help me. Like how I can get a girlfriend right now. Because I’m really in deep shit.

“You’re not helping,” I accuse them. “Do you have a sensible suggestion?”

“Let’s think about it.” Denver taps his chin with his index finger, playfully thoughtful. “Basically, you need someone you’ve never slept with, who can appease your mother and look passable at the same time, and who you might even like. After all, you have to pretend to be a couple. You know...”

“To sum it up, it’s a needle in a haystack,” I conclude. “The only girls in college I haven’t slept with that I like, and trust are Sienna, Phoenix, Joy and Millie. And I think the first two are out for obvious reasons. I can’t take Joy either. My mom would freak out if my girlfriend had blue hair.”

Not to mention that Joy and I don’t have the best relationship anyway. On the other hand, it would be fun to see my mom’s face when she meets Joy for the first time. Besides, I’ve often heard that she’s a grenade in bed. Actually, Joy would be ideal, but she’s the exact opposite of what my mom wants.

“I guess it’s obvious you’re not asking Sienna,” Denver hisses.

He’s jealous of any guy who looks at his sweetheart for a second too long. He once punched Tyler in the face for kissing Sienna at a party when he first arrived in Lincoln. They weren’t even dating at the time. “And I am not letting my little sister anywhere near your dick.”

I want to reply that he lets her get close to Jake’s dick, which he has put in Phoenix many times, but I keep my mouth shut. Denver can’t or won’t admit to what’s obviously going

on between his best friend and his little sister. Besides, Phoenix won't be traveling back from Europe anytime soon, so she's not an option anyway.

"Then ask Millie," Tyler says, giving me a questioning look. "She's perfect."

I raise my eyebrows, craving a beer even more. Millie is the most boring person on earth. Seriously. She's always so ... so quiet and shy. I can't stand that in a woman. I bet my ass she's not only a virgin but has also never been kissed. Just like she's always walking around in her stuffy blouses and stretched jeans. She doesn't have a bad figure either. Just before Christmas we all went to a spa in Chicago. She couldn't hide behind her clothes and had a surprisingly good figure. And a really hot ass. Her breasts are too small for my taste, but they suit her. And she looks a hundred times better in contacts than she does in glasses.

Tyler is probably right. Basically, she fits the stereotype of a dream daughter-in-law. More than that, I've often noticed how polite and well-mannered she is. Sienna is too, but Millie reminds me a lot of Dana. She must come from a family like mine. There's no way I'm going to a wedding with someone who lacks etiquette.

"I don't know," Denver says. "I don't think she's suitable."

"Why not?" Jake asks. "Tyler's right. Darren likes Millie, well ... he knows her and trusts that she won't embarrass him. Besides, she'll do his mother's bidding and help him out."

"I agree with him," Tyler says, nodding in agreement. "You should ask her."

"Denver?" I look at him urgently. "Do you have any objections? We're all friends and the girls will kill me if I mess up."

"What are you going to screw up?" interjects Jake. "Even you won't pick the lock on her pussy."

Tyler laughs out loud, and I roll my eyes in annoyance. I don't want to unlock Millie's pussy. I'm not interested in her. Can't they see I have a much bigger problem?

“Don’t worry,” I growl. “I’m not interested in her.”

The bottom line is that I need to take someone to Dana’s wedding, and Millie seems like the best option.

“I’ll ask her.” With that I commit myself.

“Well, with all your good intentions, don’t forget to kiss and touch her when she’s playing your girlfriend,” Denver says, winking at me. “Have some fun.”

I don’t answer him, preferring to think about how to make this all palatable to Millie. Because wooing her and having sex is not an option.

Chapter 3

Millie

I lie on my bed and look over at my roommate, Amanda. When I got my room, I was convinced we could be friends. After all, I hardly had any friends when I was younger. I had this ridiculous idea that my roommate was going to be my best friend. Like in those teen movies I used to watch. In the end, it was clear that it was my luck to get the mean bitch who never forgets to mention how boring she thinks I am and how much she wants me to move out. Sometimes I wonder if Amanda would be as mean to me if she knew I was a billionaire. She'd probably be crawling so far up my ass I wouldn't be able to breathe.

Amanda and her even dumber friend Hayden are college bitches. I don't even want to know who they haven't had sex with. Especially the guys on the football team they regularly hit on.

I don't even want to think about what happened when Sienna and Denver officially started dating. Amanda asked me for days if it was true and what Denver saw in Sienna. Even though she didn't say it, she obviously thinks she is a much better fit for him. She has no doubt that Denver loves Sienna and wants to be with her.

"Are you studying?" Amanda asks and I look up from my MacBook.

"No," I reply. "Are you?"

"Oh, no!" She laughs, tossing her black hair back. "I'm looking at spring break deals."

Why did I think for a second that Amanda was actually studying? How stupid of me. I wonder how she got to third semester. I've never seen her study seriously. Maybe she is gifted and can memorize everything she reads. I can't believe it, but sometimes miracles do happen. I turn my eyes back to my MacBook and annoyedly click through the evening gowns Maya has sent to me. She's been invited to a ball with Preston,

and, of course, she wants to look perfect. Even though my sister always does.

There's a knock at the door and Amanda jumps out of bed. She's wearing skimpy hot pants so tight her butt is practically hanging out of them, and a crop top with no bra, so her nipples stick out at the slightest gust of wind. And I feel undressed with my plain top and padded bra and skin-tight leggings in which I would never venture out the door...

Amanda tosses her black hair back again and pulls her top further down, exposing her breasts.

"Darren," she sighs, and I jerk my head up. "What are you doing here?"

Amanda leans against the door and licks her lips lasciviously. Typical. I look past her and can't stop my heart from racing. Darren's eyes are on Amanda, which doesn't surprise me. And of course, she immediately offers herself to him. She would love to wrap her arms around his neck, pull him onto her bed and fuck him. In front of me. I'm sure it.

"Hi," he says after taking a good look at her breasts. "I'm here to see Millie."

"Millie?" Amanda asks in surprise, turning to me.

"Me?" I close my MacBook and look at him, no less astonished.

Hesitantly, I rise from my bed and cross my arms over my chest. Unlike Amanda, I'm not comfortable with him seeing me like this. Nervous and confused, I walk over to him and nudge Amanda aside. She doesn't like it at all. I guess she was sure Darren wanted to be with her. I don't know if they've ever slept together, and frankly, I don't want to know. He's been with so many girls—one more or less doesn't matter anymore. But the fact that she, of all people, could have slept with him still offends me. I'm not ugly and I don't understand why he doesn't take notice of me. Just because, unlike most girls in college, I wear clothes on my body and don't throw myself at him?

Well, maybe it's because I'm not confident enough.

“You want to talk to Millie?” Amanda asks, walking back to her bed and sitting down. I want to roll my eyes, but out of politeness I don’t. Darren isn’t as polite and does just that, which makes me grin.

“That’s what I said.” Darren doesn’t seem to like Amanda’s attitude. “In private.”

“In private...” Amanda looks back and forth between us and gets up from her bed. She pulls on a sweater and sweatpants and looks at us with a furrowed brow. “Maybe you’ll still be here when I get back.”

I don’t expect him to stay that long, but I’m relieved when she closes the door behind her and we’re alone. But this feeling lasts only a few seconds. Because now I’m faced with the next problem: I’ve never been alone with Darren before. Whenever we’ve met, one of the others has always been there. Being alone with him and having to talk to him makes me nervous. I bite my lip and look at him. Darren looks back at me and once again I can’t believe how hot he is. The sleeves of his black hoodie are rolled up, revealing his tattooed arms. He’s had his hair cut a few days ago and his grin makes my knees weaken. I can see why Amanda went for the jugular. If I were more experienced and not so shy, I might have dared. But I’m not even capable of looking even a tiny bit sexy in front of Darren. I still stand with my arms crossed so he doesn’t get a glimpse of my breasts.

“Would you like to sit down?” I ask, pointing to my desk chair. He nods and pulls it towards him as I sink back onto my bed. Legs crossed; I look at him. “What ... what would you like to talk about?”

Darren rests his forearms on his thighs and looks nervous. He keeps licking his lips with his tongue. What would I give to feel those lips on mine just once in my life? He’s apparently a great kisser.

“My sister is getting married in two weeks,” he begins. I already knew that from Sienna. She told me that Darren doesn’t want to go because he doesn’t have a good relationship with his family. I can’t relate to that at all, because I have a

very good and close relationship with both my sister and my parents. “And I have to bring a plus one.”

It takes a moment for the words to sink in. His sister is getting married, and he has to take a plus one – so far so good, but what does that have to do with me...?

I hesitate and tear my eyes away. Darren couldn't have had the stupid idea to take me with him, could he? I can't believe it. Yes, we're friends, but surely, he can ask Joy or all the willing girls on campus who would be only too happy to accompany him. On the other hand, ... could I imagine someone else going with him? Especially Joy? Yes, she's my friend and she knows I'm in love with him, but I'm still not sure if something wouldn't happen between them.

What am I thinking?

Joy thinks that Darren is stupid. She never tires of saying it. She would never get involved with him.

“Are you listening to me?” Darren looks at me, laughing, and I jump.

“Sorry,” I mumble awkwardly. “What did you say?”

“I asked you if you would consider coming with me.”

“Why me?” I answer bravely, knitting my eyebrows together. “Sorry, but you're certainly not short of volunteers.”

Darren's lips curl into an arrogant smirk that makes me roll my eyes. Why am I telling him something he already knows?

“No,” he says and pulls his desk chair closer to me. So close that his knees almost touch mine. I look down between us and back up at his face. He's still grinning. “I need someone I can trust, and more importantly, someone who will behave.”

I didn't expect this explanation. As far as trust goes, I can understand him, but someone who behaves? That doesn't make sense. If he tells the girls what to do, they'll behave.

Darren finally wipes the smug grin off his face and sighs.

“My mother is difficult,” he admits, scratching his neck. “Is that enough of an answer for you?”

“So that’s why you want me to go with you...” I answer. Darren’s lips curl into a grin. He thinks he’s convinced me. That can’t be right. “Of course not. Who has perfect parents?”

“How can I put this?” he mumbles, rubbing his hands together nervously. It’s the first time I’ve seen him so withdrawn and quiet. It’s not like Darren. He is always confident and cocky. “My parents, especially my mom, don’t approve of my life choices. They don’t like me playing football or studying so far away from home. Although they continue to support me financially, it’s probably more so that they don’t have to embarrass themselves in front of their friends for neglecting me. If my mother had her way, I would be wearing fancy suits and taking over our business one day. I would also date one of her fabulously empty-headed friends’ daughters and marry her as soon as I joined the company. But I don’t want to do that. Besides, Dana’s wedding is going to be a huge social event. I need a plus one for that. She has to be friendly, but she can’t let on how weird my family is.”

I nod, adding a small but subtle detail.

“And an escort who’s never been to bed with you, right?” I don’t know where I’m getting these defiant retorts from. Sienna, Phoenix and Joy would be proud of me. He is actually managing to bring out the Millie that I try so hard to suppress in Lincoln. My shy nature isn’t always an act, but I often take a step back because I believe a reserved girl will never be connected to the heiress of the Minnesota Warriors.

“That too,” he admits reluctantly. “But I haven’t gone to bed with every college student, Millie. FYI.”

“Denver and Jake wouldn’t like it either,” I reply, winking at him. Darren’s laugh gives me goosebumps. It’s good to see him in such a good mood again, and to be able to have a completely uninhibited conversation with him. I had not expected it. I’m surprised that I can utter a clear sentence in his presence. Apart from my cheeky questions.

“Point taken,” he says, getting serious again. “I can’t take Joy with me. Her blue hair and big mouth alone would drive my mother crazy. And ... and if you want something in return,

I'll get it for you. Maybe a handbag you've always wanted but can't afford. That's what you women like, right?"

Now I am the one who has to laugh. Even if unintentionally. He is offering material goods to the daughter of a billionaire. This amuses me.

I take a deep breath and look into his eyes. I've learned more about him in the last few minutes than in the last six months. It surprises me that he comes from such a conservative family.

"I take it your mother is a fan of those silly debutante balls?"

"Yes," he groans and leans back. "But how do you know about them?"

"I went to one once," I answer honestly and take a deep breath. I can tell him a little about myself. "I went to a private school and that was part of it. Terribly boring and stuffy." I think back to that evening with horror. It was a disaster from beginning to end.

"I ... didn't know that." Darren's surprise is written all over his face. He stands up and leans towards me. "That ... that means you know your way around these ... these circles."

"Yes," I answer, not following up on his statement. Darren doesn't seem to want to ask either because he nods again.

"So, you'll come?" he wants to know hopefully, pressing his lips together.

To be honest, I don't know what to say. I am flattered that he would ask me and trust me. After all, the choice of willing escorts is frighteningly large. Besides, I have to study for my exams. How will I do that if I fly to Texas with him for a week?

"I have to study," I talk myself out of it. "I have exams and..."

"You can study there." Darren debunks my strongest argument and smiles at me. "We have a rehearsal dinner with the family two days before the wedding and the wedding itself.

We don't need to stay longer than that. Four days is enough. The sooner we get back, the better."

"Darren." I roll my eyes. "This is your family."

"Yeah, barely." He leans forward and puts his hands on top of mine. His face is so close to mine that I can see every speck in his eyes. He looks at me pleadingly. When he looks at me like that, I can't help but agree to this crazy idea. Darren thinks it's all so easy, but it's not. We have to get used to each other. I have to find out exactly what his family is like.

There must be a reason why I, of all people, am going. I also have to remember that I'm in love with him and he has no interest in me. At most, a superficial friendship.

"I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't really important." He's good at nipping all my arguments in the bud with one look.

"I know," I relent. "Can I think about it?"

"How long?" he wants to know, and I shrug.

"Until tomorrow?"

"But why?" he nudges. "You should know if you want to come or not."

Sighing, I pull away from him and stand up. I'm afraid that if I get to know him better during this time, I'll lose my heart even more to him. From a distance, my crush is okay. So are the less than X-rated dreams and thoughts. But the moment I agree, we'll be more.

"Do we have to pretend to be a couple?" I ask, holding my breath.

"What do you mean?" The chair creaks and Darren moves to stand behind me.

"You know what I mean," I reply, annoyed. He must have thought about it. "Do I have to pretend to be your girlfriend, Darren?"

"Yes," he says, and I immediately tense up.

Images of us kissing, holding hands, and sleeping in the same bed pop into my head. After all, he would do that with his

girlfriend. I don't know if I can do that. I've kissed one boy in my life, and it was ... awful. Darren has laid more girls than I own shoes – and I have a separate room in my apartment for them. What would I have to do to have a chance with him if I went along with this charade?

Can you die of a broken heart? Hopefully not.

“Millie,” he mumbles from right behind me. Suddenly, his hands are on my upper arms, and he spins me around to face him. I lift my head to meet his eyes and swallow. He's so damn attractive. “Would that be a problem for you?”

“Would it be a problem for you?” I ask him the same question. For me, making out with him would be the fulfillment of all my dreams. I'm sure it would be different for him.

“No,” he answers honestly, smiling at me. “Otherwise, I wouldn't have asked you.”

“Hmm,” I murmur, smiling at him. “I'll do it.”

What's the worst that can happen? Maybe it's a chance for us to get to know each other better and for him to finally see me for who I am. For who I am, and nothing more than the shy little mouse that's part of his group.

“Really?” he asks, looking at me in amazement. I can't help but laugh.

“Yes, really,” I reply, still laughing, as he picks me up and lifts me in the air. I wrap my arms around his neck and snuggle into him. My body is pressed against his and I can feel his hard muscles. Darren stops, but instead of putting me down, he looks at me. Nervously, I return his gaze and as his mouth comes closer and closer to mine, I hold my breath. My heart is beating in my throat and I'm afraid it's going to jump out of my chest at any moment.

“Can I kiss you?” he whispers.

Chapter 4

Millie

I look into Darren's eyes as he continues to press me against his muscular body. He scrutinizes me as much as I scrutinize him as his hands run over my hips and he lowers me down. Kissing Darren is one of my most daring fantasies, which, of course, will never come true. But now the question is out in the open and my stomach flutters in anticipation.

"Yes," I breathe and reach out to him. Even in high heels, he's considerably taller. Darren's lips curve into a smile. He takes his right hand from my hip and places it on my cheek. Gently, he runs his fingertips over it until he slides his thumb over my lower lip and pulls it down. His fingertip is rough, just as I always imagined it would be. A glance at his lips tells me that they don't have a single imperfection. They are almost perfect, framed by his dark beard.

I gasp in surprise as he separates my lips with his thumb and slides it into my mouth. What's happening? I thought he was just going to press his lips chastely against mine and give me a soft kiss. Instead, he slides his thumb into my mouth. I close my lips and let my tongue slide over his fingertip. I don't know if this is right or what he wants. After all, I've never done anything like this before. My heart races in my chest as Darren slides his finger deeper into my mouth and presses my body against his. Hard muscles greet me and something between his legs presses against my stomach that definitely wasn't that big before.

"Fuck, Millie," he moans and pulls his thumb out of my mouth. I look longingly into his eyes again and wet my lips with my tongue. That was definitely the hottest thing I've ever experienced.

Darren takes one last look at my lips before he leans in and covers my mouth with his. I wrap my arms around his neck again and snuggle against his toned body. His hands move to my hips, and he pulls me even closer. Gently he moves his lips over mine. I adapt to his rhythm and let him take the lead.

Nothing else makes sense. I want this kiss so badly; I don't want to do anything wrong. Ever since I first saw Darren, I've been imagining kissing him, and now it's finally happening. The kiss is tender. I've seen him be very brash and wild with other girls. But this is neither.

His hand touches my butt, and he grabs me to pull me closer. I gasp in shock. My mouth inevitably opens, and Darren pushes his tongue into my mouth. Once again, I surrender to him. What started as a cautious kiss turns into a wild make out session with him getting the upper hand.

"Touch me." Still reluctant, I let my hands slide down his broad chest to his stomach. Startled, I claw into the fabric of his hoodie as he gently bites my lower lip. Darren pulls his mouth away from mine and looks up at me, smiling.

This is all more than I expected. But my experience is so limited that I can't judge if he likes it or not. Judging by his look and his hands still on my butt, he seems to like it.

Encouraged, I reach up to him again and press my lips to his. He immediately greets me with a passionate kiss. My hands wander over his chest and stomach to the waistband of his hoodie, where I linger.

"Do whatever you want," he whispers into the kiss. "I don't bite."

I chuckle because he's obviously already bitten my lip once today. I slide my fingers under his hoodie and the shirt he's wearing underneath. As expected, steel-hard muscles greet me, and I sigh with pleasure. His body is everything my dreams have promised. Fuck, he is so incredibly hot, and I start to caress him.

Darren's hands find their way under my top and I jump. He draws small circles under my breasts. Now my nervousness increases again. Superficial groping and making out is one thing, but feeling hands under my clothes is something else entirely.

My emotions are all over the place. I'm closer to Darren than I ever thought I could be, and I'm seriously considering

throwing my principles out the window and going for it.

“Millie,” Darren whispers against my lips, playing with the clasp of my bra, “can I?” He pulls his hands out from under my top and reaches for the hem of my shirt. I press my lips together and hesitate for a moment. I’m going to give Darren my virginity. A thousand thoughts go through my mind. About how I was saving myself for the right guy and how an opportunity like this will probably never present itself again to us. I’ll have to do it sometime. Whether it’s today with Darren or in six months with another guy, somehow it doesn’t matter. I want Darren.

“Yes,” I say before I can change my mind and raise my arms. He pulls the top over my head and throws it to the ground. Standing in front of him in just my classic black bra, I feel incredibly insecure. I also own some nice lace sets, but I never expected to need to be wearing one of them today. Darren’s eyes wander down my body and linger on my breasts. I bite my lip nervously. My breasts are rather small, a decent B cup. Mother Nature could have given me a little more. I’ve never wanted them as much as I do now. Because Darren lingers on them longer than expected. I want to say something when he pulls me to him and kisses my neck. He runs his lips gently over my thin skin and his right hand opens the clasp of my bra. Goosebumps cover my body as I help him remove the last piece of clothing covering my torso. Darren’s eyes shoot up and meet mine. Our eyes meet for a moment. Darren smiles and leans down to my breasts. He spreads soft kisses over my heated skin, and I moan as his mouth cups my nipple for the first time.

Holy shit, that feel good!

Sienna and Joy have often talked about how much they love having their nipples teased. I can only agree. With a smacking sound, Darren releases the first one and devotes himself to the second. He repeats it in turn. He sucks and plays with my nipples with his tongue until both are hard and tight. My breath comes in jerks, and I watch his every move. His kisses make their way to my belly button, where he sinks his tongue into the waistband of my leggings. His big hands cradle my

breasts completely. I know they are too small, but Darren doesn't seem to mind.

“Take your pants off and get on the bed.”

His command and the sudden movement in his body as he stands up bring me back to the here and now. Uncertain, I let my eyes wander over his still clothed body. He responds by pulling me closer to him. My breasts are pressed against the cool fabric of his t-shirt and as he kisses me, my excited nipples rub painfully against the fabric.

“Please,” he adds, stroking my butt.

I pull away and take a step back. Brave and encouraged by his look, I reach for the hem of my leggings and pull them down. I breathe a sigh of relief because I'm wearing panties that match my bra. I'm sure Darren has never had to deal with such boring underwear. I step out of my socks and kick them both aside. Then I sit down on my bed, still wearing only my panties, and look up at him. From this perspective, he looks much more imposing and bigger. There is also the considerable bulge that almost makes his jeans burst. Darren walks towards me and leans over me. He puts his hands on either side of my head and presses his lips to mine. This time I don't think twice and immediately welcome his tongue. Groaning, he leans over me and presses his hard cock against my center.

“I want you,” he whispers, kissing my neck. “Tell me you want me too.”

“I want you too,” I answer hastily.

He closes his hand around my left breast and takes my nipple between his index finger and thumb to stimulate it. He plays with the other one with his tongue until I moan again. Meanwhile, I'm lying on the bed with my legs spread, eager to see what else he has in store for me. Darren does not seem to be the type of guy who only cares about his own pleasure. He's putting too much effort into it so far.

He kisses my belly again and lets his tongue slide into my belly button. My breathing accelerates and I have to laugh

softly. His fingertips caress my heated skin. “Ticklish?” he wants to know, looking up at me.

“Maybe,” I answer cheekily, impressed with myself. I expected to blush with embarrassment. He gives me a knowing smile and suddenly kisses the inside of my thighs. As he does so, he slides between my legs, which are spread apart by his broad shoulders. In this position, he has a perfect view of my center, which is still covered by my panties.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispers, and my body starts to tingle.

“Darren,” I moan loudly. His middle finger runs through my cleft. “Oh, God.”

“Darren will do for now,” he replies cockily, and I want to squeeze my thighs together, but he gently pushes them apart again. “Please stay like that.”

He pulls away from me and pulls his hoodie over his head in one smooth motion. I stare at his naked torso, trying to remember every inch of his skin. He has two swallows tattooed above his left breast and a huge lion’s head on his right, its mouth wide open. Only his dark nipple is not tattooed. His upper arms are also covered in tattoos, but I can’t make them out from this distance. Darren leans over me so I can see the individual black hairs on his chest. I reach out and run my fingertips over them. The look he gives me is magical and very intimate. We stare into each other’s eyes for a few seconds before I reach up and place my lips on his. Darren kisses me back and turns his attention to the throbbing spot between my legs.

He gently separates my labia with his finger. Never in my life has anyone touched me there. Darren is the first and that makes me incredibly nervous. I should have lost my virginity at one of the parties. I panic that I’m going to disappoint him or that he’s going to ask me to do things I don’t want to.

“You’re so hot,” he whispers, planting a kiss on my hip before licking the tip of his tongue along the hem of my panties. “May I?”

Darren points at them and looks at me. So far, he's asked if it's okay with me—except for my bra. But I'm sure he wouldn't do anything I didn't want. He is definitely more considerate than I thought he would be. I nod and smile at him.

Darren pulls my panties off my thighs and throws them on the floor next to us. He doesn't allow me to close my legs to protect my center from his gaze but slides between them. I am completely exposed in front of the hottest guy I know. I swallow hard as he stares at my shaved pubis for a few minutes without doing anything. Deep down I expect him to get up and leave. He hasn't even taken off his pants.

Darren presses his mouth to my sex before I can think about whether he's staying or not. Fuck, that's good. His tongue runs through my labia and touches my clit. I arch my back with a moan. I squirm under him. He puts his hands on my hips to push me into the mattress. I claw my fingers into the blanket beneath me and thrust my pelvis towards him. Whatever he's doing with his tongue, I don't want him to stop. This is the most incredible thing I have ever experienced. Why did I wait so long?

Even though... Joy always says you have to kiss a lot of frogs to get the prince to lick you.

“Darren,” I moan as he wraps his lips around my clit again and sucks on it. “Oh yeah...”

Suddenly I hear rustling. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him throwing his car keys, iPhone and wallet on the floor next to the bed. He continues to tease me with his tongue, but when I feel his finger at my entrance, I tense up. He hasn't penetrated me with his tongue, and I've never been experimental enough to insert my own finger—except when changing tampons. Never even thought of sex toys.

Darren slides his middle finger inside me. Luckily, I'm so wet by now that it slides easily into me. He enters me with gentle thrusts while his tongue continues to tease my clit. I can't take it for long and climax with a loud moan. I fall back onto the mattress and feel him pull away from me.

My first orgasm was so good. Now I definitely know what my friends mean when they say that a good tongue and a talented finger can work wonders.

The rustling of a belt buckle brings me back to the here and now. Darren has straightened up and is standing at full height in front of me. He opens his jeans and pulls them down with his boxer shorts. He doesn't take his eyes off me for a second. I swallow when I see his erection. His finger is tiny in comparison. Even though I don't have anything to compare it to, I'm sure Darren is well hung. The panic returns immediately. This is my first time! I have no idea how his penis is going to fit inside me. Darren takes off his socks and bends down to his wallet. He takes out a dark blue package with the typical round circle. Now it's time to get serious.

Darren is going to take my virginity.

“Slide back until your head is at the headboard.”

I nod and climb up. Darren opens the package as he joins me on the bed. He tosses it away and expertly rolls the condom over his hard cock. I don't want to know how many times he's done it. It seems routine.

Darren grabs the back of my knees and pulls me close. He leans over me and gently presses his lips to mine. I kiss him back and wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him even closer. Darren reaches for his cock and expertly slides it through my cleft a few times. I moan into his mouth and bury my face in the crook of his neck. He positions his penis at my entrance and wraps my left leg around his waist to open me up even more.

As he pushes into me, I press my mouth against his heated skin. My nails claw into his upper arms to relieve the pressure in my center. It hurts more with every inch that Darren pushes into me. I feel like the air is being sucked out of my lungs and all I can feel is the pain between my legs. Maya said it wouldn't hurt if he did it right and Sienna and Joy said only the first few inches would hurt. But it doesn't. My body is on fire. It hurts like hell and makes me want to scream. Darren gasps softly.

“Darren, please ...,” I breathe. “It hurts.”

“I’m sorry.” He looks at me and caresses my cheeks. “But you’re so tight.”

I know I am too tight for him. He should just stop, but he doesn’t. Instead, he pushes his cock deeper into me. Whimpering I cling to Darren. “You’re almost there,” he whispers, kissing my temple. At first, the loving gesture is comforting, but it still doesn’t mask the pain.

“It hurts,” I gasp. “Please, I...”

“It’ll be over in a moment,” he replies, pulling away from me. Darren raises his head to look at me. Humiliated, I lay beneath him, his cock inside me, robbing me of breath. “I’m sorry,” he mumbles, pressing his mouth tightly over mine.

I don’t know what he means, but then he thrusts forward. My scream is muffled by his mouth and my fingernails dig into his shoulders, looking for support. My body rears up, but Darren’s body prevents me from moving.

“Breathe, Millie,” he stops me. “In and out ... yeah, that’s it.”

I feel him tense up under my fingers. Sweat trickles down our bodies, mixing as we cling to each other.

To my surprise, the pain actually subsides, and I exhale in relief. Darren turns my face towards him and looks at me lovingly. I return his gaze and he intertwines our fingers above my head. Then he starts to move inside me.

At first there is a tingling sensation, but soon it is replaced by the same overwhelming feeling that his tongue and finger had caused.

Chapter 5

Darren

Millie's steady breathing tells me she is asleep. Her head is on my shoulder and her right arm is across my stomach. I stare up at the ceiling and close my eyes for a moment. As much as I want to, I can't write off the last few hours as a mistake. Even though everything inside me is screaming that I went too far this time. Millie was still a virgin. I felt that clearly and yet I went through with it. When I penetrated her, I thought she was just tight as hell and had very little experience. Her kisses had already proven that to me. While I usually have to deal with girls who know what they want or are willing to adapt to my wishes, there was no sign of that with Millie.

Yes, I enjoyed kissing her. Honestly, it had been a long time since I had been kissed so tenderly. Even though it was awkward at first. Then one thing led to another, and we made love. Eventually we were past the point where we could have stopped. She would have felt the pain of penetration with any other man. Well ... maybe I'm telling myself that just to make myself feel better. Because right now I feel like the biggest asshole in the world. I'm sure Millie enjoyed being kissed, touched and licked by me. She's old enough to decide for herself if she wants to have sex.

I look down and see her beautiful face. Her thin but perfectly curved lips and the cute freckles on her nose. I never noticed how beautiful she really was. I always just reduced her to her nerdy ways and boring clothes. But today, in her leggings and top, she was insanely sexy.

But no matter how I spin it: I made a big mistake. I should have stopped. She gave me her virginity. The first time is special, and you remember it for the rest of your life. Millie wasted it on me. She certainly won't want to go out with me again under the circumstances. She is not one of those girls for whom sex is just sex. I don't think of her that way. Millie got involved with me because she likes me and because she trusts me. Maybe she's even in love with me, and that really turns

my stomach. I hate it when girls fall in love with me because they get awfully annoying and clingy. Millie will be the same.

I push her arm off my stomach and put my free hand under her head to put it on the pillow. She mumbles something but doesn't wake up. I don't want to run into Amanda. If that happens, Millie and I might as well start a rally at the stadium. Her roommate will tell everyone that I was in Millie's bed – naked.

Quietly, I get out of her bed, slip into my clothes, pocket my iPhone, car keys and wallet, and leave the room with my shoes in hand. I take one last look at Millie. She has her back to me and continues to sleep peacefully. Sighing, I close my eyes and quietly pull the door into the lock behind me.

I really messed up, I think as I leave her dorm and walk to my Audi. Once there, I pull out my iPhone and open the chat group with Denver, Jake and Tyler. But then stop. Denver will tell Sienna and Jake will tell Phoenix if he is in contact with her. They will castrate me. Especially Sienna. And honestly, I wouldn't blame them. I've behaved terribly. I close the chat and open the private chat with Tyler.

**Darren: Where are you?*

I place the iPhone in the center console and start the engine.

Tyler has become my best friend over the past few weeks. Maybe it's because Jake and Denver are such a tight unit. Sure, we've all been friends since the first day of practice in college, but you can tell they have a deep friendship unlike any other. They've known each other since they were kids. Jake has always been there for Denver, especially when his father was killed in the war a few years ago. I wonder if their friendship will still be as close when Denver finds out that Jake is sleeping with Phoenix. The thought of it actually makes me smile, even though I feel terrible.

Tyler, on the other hand, is new to college and became the fourth guy in our group – after Denver realized that Tyler

didn't want anything from Sienna and that their kiss was nothing more than an insignificant one. Over time, Tyler and I have found more and more things in common – even outside of football – and occasionally hang out together. I hope I'm right about him. His answer appears on the on-board computer.

**Tyler: At home, why?*

I reach for my iPhone, unlock it, and open the chat. I don't normally do that. Getting distracted in traffic is never good, but in this particular case, it has to be done.

**Darren: Be there in twenty minutes.*

**Tyler: Okay! Why is that?*

**Darren: Fucked up...*

**Tyler:???*

I don't answer him, put the iPhone back in the center console and step on the gas.

Exactly twenty minutes later, I park my Audi in front of Tyler's apartment building. He lives in a townhouse near campus with two other guys. I don't know their names. According to Tyler, they're out most of the time anyway. I hope that's the case today, too, because I can do without an audience. The more I think about it, the bigger my problem becomes. Because now I'm not only sure that I shouldn't have slept with Millie, but that I shouldn't have run away. You don't do that. Actually, I don't usually care. In fact, I normally leave

as soon as I've pulled out of the woman and disposed of the condom. But Millie – fuck! She's special and doesn't deserve to end up with an asshole like me. I turn off the engine and grab my wallet, iPhone and keys before getting out and slamming the door behind me. My Audi locks with the push of a button and I walk to the front door and ring the bell. I enter as soon as I hear the buzzing sound. In the foyer, I kick off my shoes and jog up the small stairs. Tyler has already opened the front door for me. I step inside and stand in the cozy living room that the guys use as their main room. The apartment also has a small kitchen, two bathrooms and a separate room for each of them.

“Hi,” Tyler greets me with two beers in his hand and sets them on the coffee table.

Tyler has a lot more mass and is a few inches taller. His frame would make him a better defensive player than me. “I went ahead and got us some beer, just in case. It's non-alcoholic.”

“Thank you.” I sit on the couch and grab a bottle. “I need it.”

Tyler takes a sip of his beer and looks at me, his eyebrows knitted together. “What's going on? You're fucked up.”

“I fucked up, that's what I said,” I insist.

“Darren,” Tyler says. “You wouldn't say that if it wasn't important.”

I take another sip of my beer and nod. He's right. Tyler's known me long enough to know I'm guilty of something.

“I went to see Millie,” I tell him, putting the beer down in front of me so I don't spill it on myself. “I wanted to ask her to go with me to Dana's wedding.”

“And I suppose you did?”

I nod. “And then things got totally out of hand,” I confess to him quietly.

I press my lips together and bury my face in my hands, so I don't have to look at Tyler. Not a good idea. Suddenly, images

of Millie's naked body appear in my mind's eye: the way she's naked in front of me, clawing her nails into my shoulders. Fuck, this is not good. This is not good at all.

"How does something like that get out of hand?" asks Tyler, and now I look at him again.

"She agreed," I answer and he's wide-eyed. I guess he wasn't expecting that. "And ... and it all happened so fast."

Okay, that's total bullshit. It didn't happen that fast. Not fast at all. We took our time, or rather I gave Millie time to be sure about each of her decisions.

"What happened so fast?" asks Tyler. "Don't blow everything out of proportion."

"We kissed," I confess. "And ... and one thing led to another. You know what ... what I mean."

Carefully, I look at Tyler and see the shock in his eyes. Of course, I shocked my best friend with this confession. But I am still overwhelmed by the events of the last few hours.

"Yeah," Tyler replies. "But not with Millie. What were you thinking?"

"I..."

"Nothing," he interrupts me harshly, shaking his head. "You weren't thinking. Where do you want to go from here?"

"How would I know," I snap at him, annoyed. "Sorry."

"Seriously, Darren ... we ... we were just talking yesterday about how inexperienced she is and ... and how you've never had any interest in her, and that's exactly why she was the perfect choice. And then you fucked her."

"You think I forgot about that?" I blurt out, reaching for the beer again.

"Apparently, before you fucked her."

"Could you stop saying fucked," I ask him. "It wasn't like that." I look at Tyler angrily, even though he's saying exactly what I need to hear right now. What I did was irresponsible,

and not just because I still need Millie's help. She will never be able to undo her first time, and she wasted it on an idiot.

"I didn't plan this," I try to explain myself again. I guess it's called damage control or something. "We kissed and ... and things took on a life of their own."

Tyler takes a deep breath and reaches for his beer. I do the same and we're silent for a moment until he speaks again.

"Were you gentle with her?" he wants to know and my head jerks around to face him. Stunned, I look at him. He doesn't pull a face. "Come on, Darren. We both know you're not into missionary sex. And she was a virgin, right?"

"Yes and yes," I answer, taking a deep breath. "Hell, of course, I was gentle with her. What do you think I am? I'm not as big an asshole as I often seem. I know when to be ... gentle." I sound like the biggest jerk under the sun. It was important to me that she was enjoying it. I would never do anything she didn't want to do. After I was inside her, she wanted me out. I felt it clearly, but damn it... I couldn't have spared her that pain.

"I'm sorry," Tyler says sincerely. "How was it?"

Sure enough, the bastard is now grinning suggestively and wiggling his eyebrows.

"It was..." For a moment I think about what to say, but words fail me. Nothing can describe what happened between Millie and me. "Good."

"Good?"

"Yes, good," I repeat. "It was just like you said ... no big deal. Except I made her come first with my tongue."

Just the thought of her exploding during her first fucking orgasm makes me hard. "Have you been with a virgin?"

"Yes," Tyler answers, suddenly seeming distant and thoughtful. "But it was years ago."

"Did you like her?" I continue and he nods.

“Yes, very much,” Tyler answers quietly. Apparently, I’m getting to know a new side of him as well. Mostly we brag to each other about our conquests. We’ve never had such a deep and emotional conversation before, but it feels really good. “I hurt her pretty badly.”

“Yeah, me too, Millie,” I join in, taking a deep breath. “She asked me to pull out, but I knew I was ... fuck... I sound like the biggest asshole ever. But in that moment, I was ... it wouldn’t change anything, you know?”

“Yeah,” Tyler agrees. “You had to get past that moment.”

“Hmm,” I murmur, taking a deep breath. “You weren’t referring to the physical when you said you hurt her, were you?”

“No,” he says, setting his bottle down noisily on the table, making me jump slightly. “What’s your plan with Millie? You need a plus one for your sister’s wedding. After taking her virginity, I’m sure she won’t be willing to go out with you.”

“I’m afraid so,” I mutter. “Still, I’ll ask her again and hope she’ll come. I like her, I mean that, and I... I trust her.”

“I know,” Tyler answers with a smile and pats me on the shoulder. “Just get back to her soon. Women hold grudges if you run off afterwards.”

“You’re speaking from experience, aren’t you?” I speculate. “I mean ... you ... you’re still talking about the same person?”

Tyler nods and reaches for his beer again.

“Do I know her?” I ask, hoping my buddy will be as open with me as I was with him. It seems to be bothering him.

“Her name is Jolene,” Tyler whispers. “And yes, you know her.”

My mind races. I don’t know a Jolene. At least no one with that name comes to mind. I immediately run through his acquaintances of the last few months, but ... nothing.

“Or rather, you know her as Joy.”

My mind races and I cry. Tyler and Joy? I don't think so. Joy has been sleeping around for as long as I've known her.

"Joy? Our Joy? I mean ... when and where and how ... and ... and how do you know her?"

"We went to high school together," he tells me. "Our fathers are doctors. My dad in the military and Joy's at the local hospital where soldiers were treated when their injuries were too severe."

"I don't believe it." I expected many things, but certainly not that Joy and Tyler knew each other. Especially this well. "How come you never said anything?"

"Jolene... I mean, Joy doesn't want me to," he answers with a shrug. "Besides, she avoids me. We talk normally, but I can tell she's just doing it for the group dynamic."

"What happened between you two?" I ask.

"It was my last summer in Kentucky before we moved to Ohio." Tyler looks dejected as he tells me about his past. "Joy and I were together almost every day. I liked her, a lot, and that's why I didn't tell her we were moving. I couldn't, and then ... and then the last night came."

I don't say a word and continue to listen to him.

"We slept together and she ... she was a virgin," Tyler whispers, running a hand through his hair. "She was in pain, but ... she ... she really wanted to go through with it. It was great, good ... whatever you want to call it. The next morning, I left. Without a word, without a goodbye. We met again here at the college."

This story leaves me speechless. Joy, of all people. I never expected it.

"You hadn't seen each other in all those years?" I ask and Tyler shakes his head.

"No," he replies. "We hadn't seen each other in five years. I didn't recognize her at first either, but what ... what I'm really trying to tell you with this story is that if you don't go back,

you're going to break Millie's heart. She doesn't deserve that any more than Joy did."

Tyler looks at me intensely. I agree with him. She doesn't deserve it, but I can't go back.

"I can't go back." I bury my face in my palms, scrubbing it in frustration. "Her roommate Amanda will show up, if she hasn't already, and you know what a blabbermouth she is."

"Fuck," he says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "I didn't think of that. Text or call her."

I know I should at least call or text Millie, but I can't bring myself to pick up my iPhone and dial her number...

Chapter 6

Millie

A few days have passed since my first time with Darren. I wasn't particularly surprised that he wasn't lying next to me when I woke up. But that didn't mean it hurt any less. It would have been nice if Darren had still been holding me and telling me that he enjoyed it as much as I did. But he was gone, and maybe that was just as well. For him, I'm just another number on a long list of conquests. God only knows how long it is. I mean nothing to him, at least not enough to keep him with me after sex. The only thing that matters to Darren is his own self-interest. And as much as I want to, I can't regret it. Darren was sweet to me. From his kisses to his polite way of constantly checking to see that I was okay, to the way his fingers and tongue played with my most intimate parts. I never thought he would bring me to orgasm so quickly. It was great and somehow; I feel filled with new courage.

Finally, I can join in when my friends talk about the most beautiful thing in the world. Although I am still a little embarrassed by the rather coarse language used by Joy and Phoenix. Thinking the F-word and saying it are two different things. For the first few moments after Darren's penis entered me, I thought he was going to tear me apart. But Sienna and Joy told me it hurt them too.

I enter the restaurant where I am meeting Sienna and Joy for lunch. While Sienna looks unassuming with her blonde hair and natural makeup, Joy is a force of nature. Her black hair with dark blue streaks, perfect black eyeliner and red lips makes her a 'femme fatale'. Her Asian roots give her a very special glow.

"Hey," I begin, greeting Joy with a hug. "How are you doing?"

Next, I hug Sienna before joining them.

"Good, and you?" Sienna replies, handing me a card. "You're late."

“Sorry,” I reply gruffly, taking off my jacket. “I had books to return.”

It’s a lie, and the more I lie to her, the sleazier I feel. I picked up a dress I ordered from a boutique in Chicago a few weeks ago. My grandfather is turning seventy-five and he wants to celebrate in style. I can’t be without the right dress for the occasion. Even though I own hundreds of custom-made gowns, some of which I have only worn once. On the way back, I got stuck in traffic and had to take the dress and Porsche back to my apartment. Once there, I changed to catch the bus. On days like this, my double life is way too stressful, and I would have loved to come in my designer clothes and Chanel bag. By car, I would have been on time, but how would I explain to my girlfriends that I drive a Porsche Panamera and have a five-thousand-dollar bag slung over my shoulder?

“You’re too busy,” Joy nags, shaking her head. “You’re not going to fail an exam.”

I shrug and stick my nose into the menu. Of course, I’ll pass my exams, but that’s not what I care about. I want to run a football club one day, not get a mediocre office job with a mediocre degree. The fact that I’m inheriting the club instead of earning it through hard work will make my debut even more difficult. Because let’s face it ... when I take my first seat in the executive suite of the Minneapolis Warriors after earning my master’s degree, I’m going to need more than just my name to convince the men on the board. Because I don’t think they’d give me the same respect they gave my grandfather without good grades. They wouldn’t say it to my face, but there are already whispers behind closed doors that I’m a little girl who has no idea of what’s going on. Probably even my good grades won’t earn me respect at a table full of middle-aged men who think the world is their oyster.

“I’ll have a salad,” Sienna decides, closing the menu. “You guys?”

“Me too,” I decide, not wanting to look at the menu anymore.

“How about a burger?” Joy raises her eyebrows. “Or doesn’t Denver like them?”

Sienna rolls her eyes and I grin. Denver would never tell her what to eat. I’m sure he doesn’t care. But I can’t eat a huge meal when I’m supposed to accompany Darren to his sister’s wedding in two weeks. I sigh at the thought of him. I have no idea if he still wants me to go with him. Sex has changed everything between us. I don’t have to be a genius to see that. Darren will treat me differently if he contacts me at all. Then we will really have to talk. If I’m going to play his girlfriend, I need to know a lot more about his family, don’t I? Starting with simple things like their first names.

“Darren asked me to go with him to his sister’s wedding,” I drop the bomb. My friends immediately stop and stare at me. Their banter about healthy food and boys has faded into the background. “His mom wants him to bring a date and he asked me to go with him.”

Nervously, I look back and forth between Sienna and Joy. At first, they are silent – both of them.

“Wow,” Sienna blurts out. “That’s ... a surprise.”

The shock of the situation is written all over their faces.

“I said yes.” Their eyes widen again, and I bite my lip. I understand by the way they are looking at me that saying yes was a mistake. God, of course, it was a mistake!

We slept together the first chance we got. I have no idea how things are going to be remotely casual between us in Texas after that.

“Do you think it was a mistake? You’re giving me that look,” I ask cautiously.

“We ... well... I think ... we think...” Sienna stammers, looking desperately at Joy, who sighs softly.

“You think it’s a mistake,” I finish. If Joy can’t speak, I can only assume it was a mistake.

“Millie,” she says, squeezing my hand. “Don’t get mad at me, but do you think it’s a good idea to go to the family home

of the guy you've had a crush on for months and play the happy couple? Darren's not going to return your feelings."

"Joy," Sienna hisses, looking at her angrily. "Stop it."

"Why?" she wants to know. "Do you really think Darren will swear eternal love to her after this, like Denver did to you? That's ridiculous. We're talking about Darren Andrews."

"Yeah, maybe. But you're still hurting her," Sienna says and puts her hand on mine. Gently, she strokes the back of my hand with her thumb. "She doesn't mean it."

"But she does mean it," I snort. I've known Joy long enough. Most of the time she's right. My crush on Darren is ridiculous, and if he knew, he'd tell the guys about me. If he hasn't already, after having the worst sex of his life with me. Tears well up in my eyes and I sob quietly. I'm such a rare stupid idiot. Darren needs me to get along with his mother. Any means will do. Even my virginity.

"Millie Mouse," Joy whispers, scooting closer to give me a soft hug. "Don't cry. I didn't mean it."

"But you're right," I sob, wiping away my tears. "He doesn't return my feelings, and I... I'm so stupid."

"You're not," Sienna says. "Remember how I embarrassed myself in front of Denver? I even kissed Tyler..."

"I slept with him," I blurt out. "After he asked me."

Sienna and Joy are silent for a moment. They look at each other but remain silent. If I were them, I wouldn't know how to make the situation better. I lost my virginity to the biggest player on campus. This is as bad as it gets.

"Did he make you... I mean, did Darren make you...?" Joy takes a deep breath. "Did the jerk pressure you?"

"No," I gasp, shaking my head. "He didn't, really. He kept asking if I was okay and if I liked it."

"Then he should have kept his hands off you," Joy fumes about Darren. "I want to punch him in the face."

“It wasn’t like that,” I continue to defend Darren. Yes, it was shitty of him to leave, but he didn’t force me to do anything. “I told him I was going to his sister’s wedding and he ... he picked me up and ... and spun me around because he was so excited. Then he stopped and looked at me and ... and asked if he could kiss me.”

“And you said yes?” Sienna asks quietly, handing me a napkin to wipe away my tears. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Joy send the waitress away. God, this is so embarrassing. We’re talking about this in a restaurant near campus, of all places.

“Yes,” I reply. “I agreed, and we ... we kissed and ... and touched.”

“And then you continued?” asks Sienna.

“Yes,” I answer again. “Darren licked me ... he licked me and...”

I start to blush at having to say it so openly. I’ve never talked about sex before and I’m not very good at listening when others do.

“He went down on you the first time.” Joy whistles through her teeth. “Respect.”

“Why?” I ask, irritated. “Wasn’t it like that for you?”

They both burst into laughter that I don’t understand.

“For me, the first time was with Denver,” Sienna explains, smiling at me. “So no, it’s not normal that during the first time a guy will make you come with his mouth.”

“I didn’t have an orgasm either,” Joy agrees. “I mean ... did you?”

They both look at me and my cheeks glow at the thought of how I squirmed under Darren’s tongue. How he opened my thighs to get better access.

“Hmm,” I grin, biting my tongue. “I had one.”

“I’m really jealous,” Joy says and actually manages to make me laugh. “And then you had sex?”

“Yes,” I answer. “It was... I don’t know ... it ... was ... it hurt.”

I look back and forth between them, closing my eyes for a few seconds to put those awful moments out of my mind.

“It usually does the first time,” Joy counters. “It hurt me too. I thought at the time that there was no way it was going to be fun. It felt like he was tearing me apart.”

“Yeah, exactly,” I say. “And he wasn’t even completely inside me at that point.”

“Darren’s well endowed, isn’t he?” Sienna asks, and Joy snorts, making her roll her eyes. “I’m allowed to ask, aren’t I?”

“Why?” sneers Joy, clicking her tongue. “Afraid your quarterback doesn’t have the biggest dick in the locker room?”

“Joy,” Sienna shrieks, blushing. “We’re not talking about Denver’s dick.”

“But Darren’s?” I ask, raising my eyebrows. “I... I think he’s well endowed. I have no comparison.”

“From what you have heard...” Joy speaks again without thinking, but why not? Darren had already slept with every other girl on campus. Surely there were a few who talked about it. Her eyes meet mine and she backtracks. “I’m sorry, Millie. Do you regret it?”

“No,” I say honestly. “I don’t regret it. It was wonderful after ... well ... after he was finally fully in. He was careful and ... and considerate. You’ll have to take my word for it.”

“We do,” Sienna assures me with a smile. “And if you don’t regret it, that’s great.”

I nod hesitantly and look at my friends gratefully. It was good to talk to them about it. I actually feel better now. I still don’t know if or when Darren will get back to me, but I’m not as embarrassed anymore that it happened.

“Thanks for listening to me and not thinking I’m a stupid idiot,” I reply. “It means a lot to me.”

“You don’t have to thank me.” Joy grins. “That’s what we’re here for, and now that you’re no longer Millie the Virgin, you can finally join in on the good conversations.”

I roll my eyes at the nickname, but grin anyway.

“Speak of the devil,” Sienna says suddenly and Joy and I turn our heads towards the entrance.

Denver, Tyler and Darren enter the restaurant. My pulse races and I check all the possible escape routes. Heat shoots up my cheeks and I bet everyone within a meter can see how embarrassed I am by this situation. I don’t want to face him.

“Did you invite him?” I ask Sienna accusingly. She throws up her hands defensively. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“Hello, beautiful lady.” Denver walks purposefully towards Sienna and plants a movie-worthy kiss on his girlfriend’s lips, making me sigh inwardly. Just the thought of Darren greeting me like that makes me hot. Possessive, Denver’s hand is on the back of Sienna’s neck, yet he kisses her so affectionately it makes me dizzy.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Tyler grumbles. “What do you want to drink?”

“A water for me,” I say, looking at Darren who joins us. Tyler turns and goes to the bar. Darren and Denver pull up the nearest table so we can sit together. Darren of all people sits down next to me.

“Hi,” he greets me, looking completely relaxed. “How are you doing?”

I look at Sienna and Denver to see if they are listening, but they are so busy with each other that they don’t even notice us.

“Fine, and you?” I lie, smiling faintly.

The fact that I’m not as good as I’d like to think should be obvious even to him.

“Me too.” He doesn’t notice and I look away. “Please look at me, Millie.”

I turn my head and look straight into his eyes. He doesn't look as relaxed now as he did when we first greeted each other. More downcast and perplexed.

"I'd like to drive you home later." It's supposed to be a request. But I've known Darren long enough to know it's a suggestion. "We need to talk."

For me, there's nothing to talk about. He doesn't have to tell me to my face that our sex was the worst mistake of his life. That will be followed by a phrase like 'Let's just forget about it.' But damn it, I can't. It was my first time. How can I ever forget it?

"Okay," I answer hesitantly.

Relief washes over me as Tyler and Joy return and put the drinks down. I reach for my water and ignore Darren's presence as best I can while Denver and Sienna fill us in on their plans to move. It's not that easy. Every time Darren moves, his thigh touches mine, and when he laughs, my stomach tingles wickedly. His presence is hard to bear. The obvious rejection when he walked away after sex is just too deep. I want to scream. This is all going to end in disaster.

Chapter 7

Millie

We leave the restaurant together and I keep looking at Darren. He takes a few steps in front of me and pulls his car keys out of his jacket pocket. I don't feel comfortable going with him. But I am not the kind of person who cancels a date just like that. But if I were that kind of person, I wouldn't be in this shitty situation right now. A conversation to clear things up is the last thing I want. In fact, I don't want to see Darren at all for the next few months. Until grass has grown over the whole thing, or better yet, a whole jungle. If I'm lucky, he'll never say a word about us sleeping together. I'm not one of the cool students. The fact that he slept with me tarnishes his image of being the perfect player. More than that, he probably found the sex so outrageously bad that he wants to forget it. My only real contribution was a kiss.

"I'm going that way," Tyler says, pointing in the opposite direction of Darren. Joy, Sienna and Denver stop.

"Okay," Darren replies, slapping first Tyler and then Denver. "See you," he says, hugging Joy and Sienna goodbye. "Are you coming?" he wants to know, turning to me and suddenly the eyes of our friends are on me.

I don't know where to look, I feel so uncomfortable. My face must be the color of an overripe tomato when Darren raises his eyebrows in invitation. Denver looks down in embarrassment and tries to hide his grin. Tyler, on the other hand, gives his best friend a disapproving look, causing Darren's eyebrows to lower. I'm surprised, but I'm not complaining.

"Drive carefully," Joy warns him. "And behave yourself."

"Joy," I call, quickly walking past Darren to his Audi. "Come on."

He laughs and follows me to the car, unlocking it with the central locking. I reach for the passenger door handle, but Darren beats me to it and opens the door for me.

“In you go,” he says with a smile, but I don’t reciprocate and get into the passenger seat without comment. “Then don’t,” he grumbles, slamming the door behind me before walking past the hood to the driver’s side.

I don’t understand Darren. I’ll go with him to his family’s if he still wants to. We don’t have to talk. And he better not push one of those awkward ‘let’s stay friends’ conversations on me.

Darren closes the driver’s door behind him with a bang and starts the engine. I keep looking at him, but I don’t dare speak. He wanted to talk to me. Now it’s his turn to start the conversation. Darren is silent and stares at the road.

“Why did you say you wanted to talk if you don’t?” I blurt out. He flinches, as if I’ve caught him doing something wrong.

“When did you become so brash?” he launches into a counter question that makes me roll my eyes.

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I’m not changing the subject.” My gaze rests on him. His chest rises and falls unnaturally fast. “I’m surprised at how bitchy you can be.”

“Maybe it’s because I’ve never been treated like crap before,” I hiss, regretting it as soon as I say it. I don’t want him to know how much it hurt me that he left. It makes me vulnerable.

“I wanted to come back,” he admits, licking his lips nervously. Fortunately, he doesn’t look at me. My face is probably the color of a tomato again. “But then I remembered where you live, and I didn’t want to run into Amanda.”

I remain silent and look out the window. While we were making love, I didn’t think about Amanda for a second – afterwards, of course, I did. She could have entered the room at any time while we were... I don’t even want to think about it anymore.

But it makes sense. Amanda would have interrogated me down to the last detail. It would have been a feeding frenzy for her. My God, I don’t even want to think about what would have happened if she had found Darren in my bed – naked!

“Why didn’t you say goodbye?” I want to know, licking my lips.

“You were asleep.”

“Darren,” I hiss, surprised at how firm my voice sounds. “Why don’t you stop making excuses? I know it was just sex for you. Let’s just get to your real problem.”

If I’d known how exhausting conversations with him would be, I’d have preferred to keep ogling him from a distance.

“My...” He pauses and looks at me as he stops at the light. “What do you mean?”

“Your sister’s wedding,” I say with a raised eyebrow. “You want to know if I’m going. Why else are you making all this fuss?”

“I need to know if you’re going because I’m running out of time. That’s right.” He switches on his indicator and turns onto the highway. “But that doesn’t mean I slept with you to make your decision easier.”

“Oh, no?” I hiss.

“No,” he growls. “I’m not that stupid, and I wouldn’t blow the only chance I have of appeasing my mother by sleeping with you. So, the answer is no. I didn’t do it to make your decision easier.”

I take a deep breath and look away from Darren.

“You left anyway and didn’t get back to me until today,” I accuse him. “Days later you expect me to get in your car and we ... yeah, what are we doing anyway? Talk?”

“If you don’t want to come to my sister’s wedding, that’s fine with me and I understand,” he says, not addressing my accusation. “But just say so.”

“Do you want me to come?”

“You think...” Darren gasps. “Of course, I want you to come. We’re friends, right?”

There it is. The famous line no one wants to hear from their crush. Darren doesn’t know that I’m in love with him, but he’s

smart enough to know that I'm not one of those girls for whom sex is a recreational activity. So, he must know that for me it was more than just a desire for his body. And that body is really, really beautiful. Just thinking about his muscles, his tanned skin and his tattoos make my heart beat faster.

"Millie?" Darren digs in. "We're friends, right?"

"Sure," I lie. "Friends."

Smiling, he looks over at me and seems more cheerful even as my heart breaks. It was a stupid idea to go with him and an even stupider idea to sleep with him. Did I really think Darren would fall in love with me after sex? How many girls thought that and probably still think that, weeks and months after they slept with him?

"Great," he replies. "Then I guess I should tell you the most important facts about my family, right?"

"Sure," I whisper.

I don't care about the facts about his family. He must realize that his behavior hurt me, right? Unless he's such a smug asshole that he only cares about accomplishing his goal.

If I wanted to, I could just buy everything his family owns and make Darren suffer. But that's not who I am. And he didn't force me to sleep with him or play his girlfriend.

"Do I need to take notes or is it okay like this?"

"I guess like this," he says, giving me that typical Darren smile I fell in love with so many months ago. "My mother's name is Diana and my father's name is Daniel," Darren continues. "My sister's name is Dana and..."

"Your names all start with D?" I interrupt.

"Don't ask." He waves it off and looks at me for a second. "Dana's fiancé's name is Willmore. My family made its money raising cattle in the nineteenth century and still does. We also own a lot of real estate and resorts all over Texas. Dana works for my parents in the family business and Willmore..."

Darren takes a deep breath and his entire body tenses up. His future brother-in-law doesn't seem to be a subject he likes to talk about. That's a shame, because I have a great relationship with Preston. Carefully, I reach out to touch his forearm resting on the center console. Darren flinches slightly but doesn't pull his arm away. He doesn't ask me to remove my hand either.

"His family, like ours, is old money aristocracy in Austin. We've known them for generations. Willmore is a pissant of the highest order, but Dana loves him."

"You don't like him," I say matter-of-factly, and Darren shakes his head. He bites his lip and clenches his teeth. To calm him down, I run my hand up his arm and down again. Once more he's surprised by my gesture and I'm afraid I've finally gone too far, but instead Darren intertwines our fingers and squeezes my hand. My heart stops for a moment. Even though the conversation is going in a less than positive direction, the butterflies in my stomach explode.

"He cheats on Dana," Darren says hoarsely. "Over and over again, and you know what the worst part is?" I shake my head. "Dana knows. She knows how shitty he treats her, my parents know, and all they care about is that our families will merge and become more powerful because of the marriage."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I say sincerely, now squeezing his hand in turn to offer comfort. "When I think of Preston cheating on Maya ... that would be terrible. After all, they're getting married this summer."

"Dana loves him and she won't listen to me," he mumbles. "It's just so hard watching my sister destroy herself and my parents do nothing."

"Is that why you don't want to go to the wedding?" I conclude and Darren nods.

"And also, because I want nothing to do with this circus," he grumbles. "It's always about who has what. Everyone is so superficial and fake..."

“Tell me about it,” I mutter, realizing for the first time that we have something in common. I’m also fed up with the social norms of my background. That’s why I broke away. Fortunately, my relationship with my family hasn’t suffered as much as Darren’s.

“But ... as hard as this is for you: Dana’s going to wake up eventually, and when she does, she’s going to need you.”

“I know,” he says. “I wish she would in the next few days. And before she says yes. There’s a lot of money at stake, too.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen,” I say honestly, and Darren looks at me briefly. Our fingers are still intertwined as he draws little circles on the back of my hand. Every place he touches tingles. “We should make the most of the celebration.”

“I can’t believe you still want to come.” He smiles. “And that’s after I told you nothing good about my family.”

“Well.” I shrug and grin at him. “A couple of Texas ranchers won’t scare me off that easily.”

Darren laughs out loud and looks over at me. He parks his car at the side of the road. Time flies.

“What did you call them?” he asks with a grin. “Cattle ranchers from Texas? And I picked you because of your impeccable manners.”

Darren wiggles his eyebrows and I roll my eyes.

“Don’t worry,” I reassure him. “I won’t say it in front of them.”

“You can say it when I give you the signal. Then we’ll get out of there before my mom has a chance to react.”

I shake my head with a grin.

“What should I pack?” I ask seriously again. “At least a ball gown for the wedding, right?”

“Yes,” Darren says. “Tell me the color, please. I’ll get a matching tie for my suit.”

“I’ll do that,” I say. He certainly won’t get the exact shade. “And another dress for another night?”

“Yes, maybe another fancy dress for the family dinner two days before the wedding. Otherwise, something comfortable. We can see Austin and spend as little time as possible with my mother.”

It’s amazing how much he wants to avoid his mother. To be honest, it pains me. Because I love my mom and miss her.

“Okay,” I say. “And the flights?”

“They’re booked,” Darren answers with a smile. “I’ll pick you up the day after tomorrow. Hope you like business class.”

I can tell he’s trying to impress me and nod hastily. Now I have to slip back into the role of the poor scholarship student from Minnesota. Business class is ridiculous. When I fly, it’s on one of our private jets, but I can’t tell Darren that.

“I’ve never flown business class,” I answer honestly. In fact, I’ve never seen the inside of a commercial airliner. “That sounds great.”

God, I hope my enthusiasm doesn’t sound as pathetic as it feels.

“Perfect,” he says, leaning towards me. Immediately my heart starts beating faster and I stare at his lips. I wonder if he’s going to kiss me again. Like he did in my room a few days ago? But then he plants a shy, friendly kiss on my cheek and pulls away. I force myself to smile and release my hand from his.

“Will you get back to me when you have all the other information?” I ask gruffly, trying not to think about the kiss on my cheek, and open the passenger side door. I need to get out of the car.

“Yes,” he confirms, smiling at me. “Thanks for doing this. I really owe you one.”

This time I don’t answer and get out of the car. I need to get some distance between us and somehow get our friendship back to where it was before sex, before kissing, before holding hands in his car. Otherwise, my heart is not the only thing that will be broken on this trip.

Chapter 8

Millie

Darren's Audi pulls up slowly and I can't help but smile. Deep down I know it's not a good idea to accompany him to his family home. Especially for my heart, which is in love with him. The sex only strengthened it. But I didn't want to back out after saying yes to him. So here I am, going with him to the airport in Chicago. My little black suitcase and bag will have to do for the next few days. My biggest problem is that I only own winter clothes and five tops that an average American woman my age would wear. My summer and spring wardrobe as well as my formal dresses scream of money. But since I didn't have the time or inclination to go shopping for a new wardrobe, I packed for the trip in my apartment in the city. If Darren were to ask me about the fact that most of my clothes are Gucci, Prada and Balenciaga, I could tell him that I come from very good stock. I wouldn't have a choice. For the pre-wedding family dinner, I decided to wear the floor-length red dress I had originally planned for my grandfather's birthday party. In Minneapolis, no one will know I've worn it before. Besides, my family doesn't know about this little trip down south. For the wedding, I chose a light blue dress with an embroidered top and a flared skirt. It's more of a dress. I bought Darren the matching tie and handkerchief for his jacket.

Darren stops the Audi and gets out a few seconds later. "Hey," he greets me, and I smile.

"Hey," I say and walk over to him with my luggage. "I would have come and got it upstairs," he says, pointing at my suitcase.

"I'm not a weakling," I defend myself, letting him put the suitcase and my bag in the trunk.

"I never said you were," he counters, winking at me. "Get in the car."

I nod, open the passenger door, and get in. Once I'm comfortable and buckled in, he gets in as well. Darren fastens his seat belt and starts the engine.

"Our flight leaves in four hours," he tells me. "It's only an hour to the airport. We have plenty of time."

"Okay," I reply, giving him a smile. I know that for a commercial flight, you're supposed to be at the airport at least two hours before takeoff. A private jet flight is different. It flies when you are ready, not the other way around. You also don't have to stand in line and squeeze into rows of seats that are way too narrow with people you've never met before in your life. Hopefully, the business class Darren mentioned will be as comfortable as first class, which is supposed to be the closest thing to a private jet, depending on its size.

"How long is the flight?" I ask, looking over at him.

"Just over two hours," Darren says. "Have you flown a lot?"

"Yes. My sister lives in New York and my family lives in Minneapolis. Plus, Maya studied in Madrid. I visited her there, too."

I don't mind being honest with Darren and telling him a little about my real life. I leave out the fact that I've also been to the Seychelles, the Maldives, the Bahamas, Peru and Paris. Not to mention the many cities in the USA I have visited. Darren would get suspicious if I listed them all. Still, it feels good to be able to open up to someone without worrying about repercussions.

Fortunately, our family is very private and the last time I had to pose for official photos was a long time ago. Besides, McDonald is a common name in the United States.

"You seem to have been all over," Darren replies appreciatively. "I've been to New York and London."

"I'd love to go to London sometime," I gush about the city on the Thames. "I hear it's great."

Maya went to London for a weekend when she was studying in Madrid. My sister has also been to Rome, Milan, Berlin and Paris.

“It is,” Darren confirms my assumption. “Dana and I went there for a weekend. We got along better then.” He smiles weakly at me. It’s obvious how much it hurts him that his relationship with his sister has suffered so much over the past few years. I wonder if it’s because of her fiancé. I’m really curious about the guy.

“Maybe things will get better,” I say, encouraging him. “You can’t give up hope.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he replies. “Where else would you like to go?”

I recognize this question as a clue, a signal that the conversation about his sister is over.

“I want to go to Australia someday,” I say. “I hear it is incredible, and maybe New Zealand. What about you?”

“Australia sounds great,” he says. “But I don’t think my plans for the next few years will allow for such a long trip. I hear Hawaii is great, too.”

“I’ve heard that too.” I grin, realizing that I haven’t been there yet. “Before I forget, I got you handkerchiefs that match my clothes. They’re made of the same fabric, so they fit perfectly.”

“Wow.” He gives me an astonished look. “Thank you.”

“And so, I don’t have to show you what I’m going to wear,” I follow mysteriously, and Darren’s head whips around. His eyes are wide open, and his mouth is slightly agape. I can’t help but laugh. “You look horrified.”

“I am horrified,” he replies in disbelief. “You’re not going to tell me what you’re going to wear?”

“Two dresses,” I reply. “One for the dinner and one for the wedding. Why do you want to know more?”

“Good question,” he mutters. “Then I’ll just have to be surprised.”

Grinning, I look at him.

The Chicago airport departure lounge is huge, and I'm tempted to grab Darren's hand, so I don't get lost. Usually I'm picked up at home, taken to the jet and off I go. I've never experienced anything like this. Moments like this make me realize how different my life is from most people's. I have so many privileges that I am overwhelmed by many things that seem simple at first glance. Darren holds our tickets in one hand and his luggage in the other.

"We need to go to counter 50," he says, pointing in a direction where countless people have gone before us. I nod and quickly follow him. A huge line has formed in front of the counter. I groan in frustration.

"Don't worry," Darren says, looking at me over his shoulder. "We don't have to wait in line here."

He points to a line of no more than five people.

"Thank God," I sigh and follow him. The longer we wait in line, the more used to the bustling airport building I become. It is very hectic. All around us are people of all ages and from all walks of life. Many families are traveling with their children and have mountains of luggage.

"Can you give me your ID and luggage?" Darren asks. "I'll check in for us."

"Sure," I reply, smiling and hand them to him. Our fingers touch, something I was lucky enough to avoid the first time I handed over my luggage, and we look at each other for a moment. Darren's gaze pierces me and I swallow. He looks hot as hell, looking at me so insistently. I pull my hand away from him as if I've been burned. "Please."

"Thank you," he mumbles and walks to the next free counter. I look after him and sigh. For now, everything seems to be relaxed between us, but so far, we've been able to keep our distance. It won't work with his parents, because Darren will introduce me not only as his companion, but also as his girlfriend. I push these thoughts aside because they'll drive me crazy if I don't. Instead, I reach into my purse for my iPhone

to tell Sienna, Joy, and Phoenix that we're at the airport and on our way to Texas. My friends still think this is a huge mistake. They don't think I should do him this favor. But I'm not like that, and deep down I'm getting more and more curious about the guy behind the player facade.

"Ms. McDonald?" I flinch violently and jerk my head up. "What are you doing here?"

"Mr. Broderick?" I gasp and stare wide-eyed at the young airport employee. "Hello."

He's in charge of private jets and always greets me when I fly home. He can't know that I'm traveling with Darren today and that we're flying to see his family. He looks at me curiously.

"Is everything okay, Ms. McDonald?" he prods. "I didn't know you were flying today. Your father didn't send the jet either."

"I..." I stammer, looking at Darren standing at the counter. "I'm traveling with my boyfriend."

Oops. That came out of my mouth without even thinking about it for a second. I'm traveling with my boyfriend? Fuck. I should have known I'd be recognized here.

Mr. Broderick is only a few years older than me, which is why I've always gotten along with him. I don't know his exact age, but I would guess he's in his mid-twenties. We get along very well, and he is always polite and courteous when I travel. Sometimes he even jokes with me if we have to wait a while. Today, however, I am cursing him. I want him to leave before Darren sees us.

"With your boyfriend?" he asks, interested and I point at Darren. "If you wish, I can arrange a smaller, more luxurious charter plane, Ms. McDonald?"

"No," I say quickly as Darren turns to face us and his eyes meet mine. Surprise is reflected in his eyes, and I press my lips together. "There's no need, really. We ... we have good tickets."

“But Ms. McDonald.” Mr. Broderick sounds almost indignant. “Of course, I accept your desire to travel in far less comfort today, but please give me your flight number so I can at least provide you with all the amenities upon arrival.”

Darren approaches us and I desperately look back and forth between them.

“Listen.” I have to get rid of him. “My boyfriend ... he ... doesn’t know I’m a McDonald. He thinks I’m just a normal girl who’s ... flying business class for the first time.”

“Business class,” he gasps, as if I told him we were flying economy. I can understand. Compared to a private jet, even business class is a nightmare. “Ms. McDonald, please.”

“Is there a problem?” Darren’s voice is sharp, and when he puts his arm around me and pulls me close, I think I’m going to melt. The gesture is so telling that it makes my heart beat faster and the butterflies in my stomach come to life. I thought his terrible kiss on the cheek had killed the critters. Darren looks contemptuously at Mr. Broderick. I’m uncomfortable with this because Mr. Broderick is always very nice to me.

“No,” I reassure him. “It’s all right. He was just trying to be helpful because I was standing here on my own.”

“Yes,” Mr. Broderick confirms my white lie and nods to Darren. “I hope you have a good trip. Is there anything else I can do?”

“No, thank you,” Darren barks formally and pulls me closer. “We have to go.”

Darren pulls me behind him and away from Mr. Broderick. On the one hand, I’m grateful to him because it means I won’t be embarrassed if I say the wrong thing. On the other hand, his behavior towards the friendly airport employee makes me uncomfortable.

“He’s just hitting on you,” Darren exclaims on the way to security. “Unbelievable.”

“He was trying to help me,” I defend myself. Darren still hasn’t taken his arm off my shoulders. In fact, I have the feeling he’s pulled me even closer to him. ‘He was nice.’

“He would have loved to ask you for your number, wouldn’t he?”

“You’re being silly,” I reply, rolling my eyes. Mr. Broderick has had far better opportunities to ask me for my number. It doesn’t even occur to Darren that he might have a girlfriend.

“Whatever you say,” he grumbles, pushing me in front of him through the security checkpoint. I follow the instructions of the staff, which I’ve never had to endure before. While Darren routinely takes off his clothes and puts them in the boxes, I line up awkwardly. But the woman at the checkpoint is very patient with me and friendly.

“Your first flight?” She slides the box with my things through the scanner. “Don’t be afraid.”

“Thank you,” I say with a smile on my face as she hands the box to me. Darren is already done and stands a few steps away from me. I put everything back in my bag, pull on my jacket and join him.

“Shall we grab a coffee before we board?” he asks, pointing to the Starbucks in the duty-free area.

“Sure,” I reply, smiling at him.

This time he doesn’t put his arm around me but walks ahead. I follow him, suppressing the disappointment that is building up inside of me. I have to stop reading so much into these little gestures. Otherwise, I’ll ruin everything. Darren is not in love with me, and he will not fall in love with me. No matter how much I want him to.

We get some coffee and sit down at a small table. I put my bag down and take out my iPhone. Darren has his in his hand as well and is no longer paying attention to me. Grinning, I take a picture and send it to my friends.

**Millie: Coffee will hopefully calm him down.*

**Joy: I have a bad feeling...*

**Sienna: What happened?*

**Millie: He harassed some poor airport worker who was trying to help me.*

“Did you take my picture, you little minx?” I jump as I notice him leaning slightly towards me.

“No.” Chuckling, I put my iPhone down on the table. Darren grins at me.

“If you want a picture of me, just ask. I’m very photogenic.” He leans back gallantly in his chair and winks at me.

“I don’t doubt it,” I say more to myself. Heat shoots up my cheeks as I realize he heard me. Darren grins at me amusedly and stands up. He sits down on the chair right next to me and holds up his iPhone.

“Say cheese!”

“Cheese.”

I lean over to him. Our shoulders touch. Butterflies fly wildly as Darren presses the shutter and takes our first picture together.

Chapter 9

Darren

I keep looking over at Millie, who is sitting in the chair next to me, looking at her MacBook. Even though we have a two-hour flight to Austin, she wanted to study. I let her and put my AirPods in my ears to listen to music. My original plan was to unwind and prepare for the upcoming meeting with my parents – especially my mom – but I can't get Millie out of my mind. It's been like this since we slept together two weeks ago. I can't stop thinking about her. Her body and the sounds she made as we made love. Every time I do, my dick gets hard.

I have no idea how that night would have ended if we were in my bedroom. We would have been totally undisturbed. The fact is, I can't get her out of my mind, and that's never happened to me before. Especially with an inexperienced mouse like Millie. She was completely clueless, but she's still so damn sexy that I almost freaked out earlier when the young employee was talking to her. Millie may not have realized it, but it was immediately obvious to me that he was flirting with her. I have to admit that her behavior earlier was suspicious. Having been to Europe and South America, she was clearly out of place at the airport. When the stewardess showed us to our seats – super-comfortable luxury chairs – she seemed almost offended that I was putting her through such discomfort. The more time I spend with her, the stranger she seems. I used to think she was just a boring, dull mouse who had nothing interesting to offer. That she only became part of our group because of Sienna.

In the meantime, I have revised this thought several times. Millie surprises me, though not always in a positive way, and sometimes I'm inclined to point out her strange behavior. But most of the time I am pleasantly surprised by her nature. She is the perfect choice for a fake girlfriend to present to my mother. On the one hand, she's shy and polite enough not to step on anyone's toes. On the other hand, she is bold enough to stand up to her in the right situations. At least I hope so.

I look at Millie. She is sinking deeper and deeper into her seat, staring at her MacBook. To work on the laptop, she wears her glasses, which, to be honest, I've never liked on her. Apparently, she only needs them for studying and screen work – thankfully. It's hard to imagine her wearing them every day. It makes her look even more boring. And Millie is not dull at all.

I don't know what I see in her. The sex was good, but nothing I haven't had before. I fucked her in the missionary position exactly once. Basically, boring and nothing I strive for in sex, but it was ... nice.

Time and time again we share these moments, looks and touches which make more than just my cock react. In addition, the fact that I was her first and also the first to give her an orgasm turns me on a lot. I enjoy being around her and look forward to spending the next few days with her in Austin.

My thoughts sound as mushy as the crap Denver spews when he talks about Sienna.

At the same time, what Millie and I share and what Denver and Sienna have don't even begin to compare. Right?

My buddy and Sienna are an item. Millie and I aren't even friends with benefits. God, how I'd love to fuck her again and teach her new positions. Maybe she'd ride me while I wrapped my hands around her slender hips, her small breasts bobbing up and down with each thrust. Annoyed, I close my eyes and push the thought of sex with Millie out of my mind. It won't work. She probably won't have sex with me in Austin. We agreed to be friends, and friends don't sleep together. No matter how much I'd like to repeat that and what I have in mind for her.

I finally shift my thoughts from Millie to my sister. Dana has to tell me that she is one hundred percent sure about this wedding. She's going to be miserable with that idiot by her side. Willmore is no good to her. I don't understand why he cheats on her all the time. I understand even less why Dana lets him. If I thought Millie and I were a couple and I cheated

on her even once ... she would send me packing in seconds. And rightly so.

My iPhone shows a message from my buddy Jacob. Smiling, I open it.

**Jacob: Hey, do you want to get together tonight for a beer and some pool? Lisa's coming too.*

I don't like hanging out with my ex-girlfriend – even though our relationship was years ago, and I have absolutely no feelings for her anymore – but I want to see Jacob. And I can't leave Millie alone with my parents. Hopefully, she'll get along with Lisa and it'll be a nice evening.

**Darren: With pleasure! Shall we go out for dinner? I will bring someone too.*

**Jacob: Who? Do you have a girlfriend?*

He's too curious. I understand Jacob. I have never introduced a girlfriend in the past few years. Now he is even more surprised. I decide to tell Jacob the truth about Millie and me.

**Darren: No, not like you think. We are friends and she is accompanying me to Dana's wedding.*

**Jacob: I am curious. See you tonight.*

I give him a thumbs up and pull out one of my AirPods to turn to Millie. I have to let her know that we're going out with my childhood friend whose girlfriend is my ex-girlfriend.

Lisa is the exact opposite of Millie. Maybe not in character, but in appearance. Lisa is a blonde with big breasts and now rather protruding waistline, while Millie looks like a dowdy brunette. I tap her lightly. She jerks and pulls the Air Pod out of her ear. ‘Yeah?’ she asks, and I smile at her.

“My buddy Jacob asked me if we wanted to meet him and his girlfriend Lisa tonight.”

“Do you?” she asks the counter question and I nod. “Then let’s do it.”

For a moment I think about telling her that Lisa is my ex-girlfriend. But I decide to keep it to myself. I don’t want to make her nervous. Maybe I don’t want to get myself in trouble either.

“Great,” I answer and give her a smile. “Can you ride?”

For a tiny moment her head seems to wobble, and I have to stifle a laugh.

“On a horse?” Millie asks, and now I can’t hold back my laughter either.

“You can ride me too...” I offer, and she jerks up and lightly slaps my arm.

“Darren,” she hisses, blushing. “Stop it.”

“Sorry,” I reply, still laughing. “But yes, on a horse. We have big meadows all around our property. If you want, we can go for a ride.”

“It’s been a long time,” Millie says thoughtfully. “I think I can still manage a walk and a light canter.”

“Then we’ll go for a ride in the morning, after breakfast.”

“That wouldn’t have anything to do with your plans to spend as little time as possible with your mother, would it?” She looks at me questioningly and I purse my lips. It’s scary how well she’s already figured me out, but she doesn’t make fun of it, instead she sounds genuinely interested. It’s a quality I really appreciate in her. Millie has never failed to take something that bothers me seriously or make fun of it. Anyone else would either laugh at me for being so afraid to confront

my mother or confirm that everything is as bad as I say it is. Millie looks for compromises to make it better for all of us.

“As you wish.” Millie shrugs her shoulders. “So yeah ... let’s go for a ride.”

I nod and smile at her. She puts her Air Pod back in her ear and turns to her MacBook.

The long path to my parents’ estate is lined on both sides with ash trees, which I often counted as a child, only to lose count and give up in frustration. A few yards away is the magnificent nineteenth-century mansion with its imposing double staircase. I haven’t been here in almost a year, and with good reason. It was never a loving home for Dana and me. It was always cold and unemotional. My mother was more concerned with impeccable parenting than having fun and enjoying the finer things in life. My father is different, but he mostly bows to my mother’s wishes. Dana handled social conformity better than I did.

If I have children, they won’t grow up in a white block of stone, but in a nice home with a garden and plenty of room for everything that makes them happy. Of course, by then I hope to have bought a house with more than enough room.

I look at Millie and again she surprises me. She is not amazed at our property, as most of my companions have been in the past. Rather, she seems to take stock and smiles at me.

“The big white house is my childhood home,” I explain, and she nods. “That’s where we’ll be staying for the next few days. It has two wings, and I have arranged for us to be in the guest wing.”

Millie nods again and I point out the window to the large stables where the cattle are kept. I explain that this is where we house our company’s main source of income, and she laughs at my referring to the animals as a source of income. Next to it is our horse barn, which houses ten of the most valuable horses in the southern United States. My own horse, Hurricane, is

barely worth a penny according to my mother, but I love him. My grandfather gave him to me for my tenth birthday. Beyond the stables are two large guesthouses and the resort that one of our tenants runs for us.

“Impressive,” Millie says. “Especially all in one place.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, turning a corner to park right outside the front door behind my father.

“As far as I know, business and personal facilities are kept strictly separate,” she replies, and I frown, but Millie doesn’t seem to elaborate. When I get a chance, maybe I should find out what her parents do for a living. She’s definitely not as poor as she pretends to be. That’s clear to me now. She’s not impressed enough by the luxury I’ve been treating her to since this morning.

I put the car in park and turn off the engine. Nervousness rises in me. I don’t want to be here and everything, really everything, in me resists the coming days in the company of my family. It’s sad and not right. This is my home. The place where I grew up, and yet I can’t wait to get back on the plane to Chicago.

“Ready?” I ask, turning to Millie, who nods. I do the same and we get out of the car.

Suddenly, the front door bursts open and my sister rushes out. Dana is wearing a light blue blouse tied at the collar with a thin black bow. She is also wearing tight jeans and black pumps. Her black hair falls in soft waves over her shoulders.

“Darren,” she exclaims happily, and I run up to her, beaming. Overjoyed, I hug Dana who, despite her high heels, is still quite a bit shorter than me. Only now do I realize how much I have missed her these past few months.

“Hey,” I murmur as I pick her up. “It’s good to see you.”

“I feel the same way,” she replies, giving me a hug before pulling away and looking past me to Millie. She’s standing by the car, watching us with interest. Smiling, I turn and walk over to her. Without thinking, I put my arm around her and pull her close.

“Let me introduce you,” I say, pointing at my fake girlfriend, “my sister Dana. Dana, this is Millie, my girlfriend.”

I don't like lying to Dana, and I don't think it's fair to her, but I can't tell her the truth and pretend Millie is my girlfriend in front of Mom. Besides, the risk of her telling Willmore the truth is too great. So, I have to tell Dana the story that Millie is my girlfriend, too. When I get the chance, I will talk to her and set the record straight.

“Hi,” Millie says and shakes Dana's hand. “Thanks for inviting me.”

Surprised, my sister blinks and laughs. “You don't have to thank me. Seeing as how you put that grin on Darren's face, you're always welcome.”

I stare at my sister, who gives me a victorious look, then at Millie, whose cheeks are slightly flushed. Wow, Dana managed to baffle me and embarrass Millie in less than five sentences. She's even better than I remembered.

“Yes,” Millie replies cheerfully, looking up at me. “It's always fun to see what makes him happy.”

I have no idea what Millie is trying to imply, but the ice between Dana and her is instantly broken. My sister doesn't hesitate for a second, grabbing Millie's hand and pulling her towards the house. “You must be exhausted from the flight and drive here. Let's get some coffee.”

Millie looks over her shoulder at me. I just nod and tell her to go. Meanwhile, I go to help one of the housekeepers with the luggage and figure out which room we're going to sleep in. Millie follows Dana into the house, and I go to the trunk and open it.

“Darren.” I look up and see my grandfather walking towards me. He has parked his car behind mine and is grinning at me.

“Grandpa,” I say in surprise and pull him into a warm hug. “How are you?”

My grandpa is the only person in this crappy place besides Dana who supports me and my plans to become a professional athlete. He's always been more of a father to me than my own, which is why I have a much better relationship with him. That will never change. Although my dad is now trying to make up for the mistakes of the past few years by paying a lot of money for me to go to Lincoln and showing an interest in football, I don't know how genuine it is. I'm a grown man now and I don't look to him for attention anymore. I just don't care.

"I'm fine," Grandpa says, and I grin at him. He's turning eighty this year and he's still going strong. Since my grandmother died unexpectedly of cancer fifteen years ago, he's been traveling the world and staying away from the estate because he and my mom don't have a good relationship. "So, how's my college champ?"

He was the only one who called me after I won the championship. It was the next day, but he's an old man. He thought I wanted to celebrate with the guys that night instead of receiving his congratulations.

"I'm fine too" I say. "You should have been in Minneapolis."

"Next time, kid," he promises, slapping me on the back. "Have you seen Dana?"

"Yes," I say, lifting first my suitcase and then Millie's out of the trunk. "She's all excited. Well, she almost always is, but this time it's extreme."

"She really wants to marry that good-for-nothing," he grumbles, and I nod.

Grandpa is as opposed to Dana and Willmore getting married as I am. But she's going to marry him whether we like it or not. Grandpa would at least have the option of disinheriting Dana if she said yes. But he can't bring himself to do that. Neither would I. There must be another way to get rid of the idiot. Grandpa nods, too, and looks at the luggage.

"Two suitcases?" he wants to know and looks at me with raised eyebrows.

“Yes,” I counter. “The second one is my...”

“Darren.” My mother’s voice makes me jump and my whole body tenses up. “You’re finally here. Where’s your girlfriend?”

Chapter 10

Millie

Dana is very nice, but insanely hyper. You can hear her excitement about her wedding in every sentence. And it's still three days away. I don't even want to know what she'll be like on the day of the ceremony.

Dana is also very polite and funny. I can tell that she is going out of her way to make me feel comfortable in her presence. Me too, but I'm nervous about her parents. And about Willmore. Darren doesn't leave a good impression on the three of them. How am I supposed to face the people who make him so angry and vulnerable?

"Dana, baby." The raspy voice makes me jump and I look up. A young man is coming towards us. I estimate him to be in his late twenties, maybe early thirties. Like Dana, he has dark hair that is pulled back. He is wearing jeans and a white shirt with a polo player patch. His face is clean-shaven, and, unlike Darren, he doesn't seem to think much of ink on his skin. His future brother-in-law is the complete opposite. I stand and clasp my hands in front of me. Dana stands as well and walks over to her fiancé. She puts her arms around his neck and kisses him. Willmore grabs her hips and pulls her against him. His hands slide to her bottom, and he pinches it, making Dana giggle. I look away in disbelief. How embarrassing.

"Let me introduce you." Dana's voice snaps me out of my thoughts, and I look up. "This is Millie, Darren's girlfriend. Millie, this is my fiancé, Willmore."

Dana's face lights up, and if Darren hadn't told me those outrageous things about Willmore, I would never have believed that he was cheating on her. The two of them seem very happy.

"Hello," I say and walk over to Willmore. He gently pushes Dana away from him and surprises me by pulling me into his arms. I stumble against his chest, not expecting such an attack. Embarrassed, I look up at him, my hands on his chest.

Willmore doesn't seem to mind. On the contrary. He unabashedly lets his hands slide down my hips to my bottom. My entire body tenses and I don't know what to do. It's terribly uncomfortable the way he's touching me. It's even worse that he's doing it in front of his fiancée. Hopefully, Darren will be here soon. Willmore wouldn't dare do it in front of him. I'm sure he wouldn't. But there's no way I'm going to slap his sister's fiancé. Especially when I'm here to celebrate her wedding. Willmore, on the other hand, doesn't even think about letting go and moves closer.

"It's so nice to meet you," he whispers to me. "I didn't think a guy like Darren would have such a cute girlfriend."

I squeeze out a 'hello' and gently but firmly push him away from me. Not too hard, so he doesn't get in trouble or have to explain himself in front of Dana, but hard enough that he finally backs away. What a pig! I'm Dana's brother's girlfriend – or so he thinks – and he has nothing better to do than grab my ass? 'Nice to meet you.'

Willmore grins and winks at me before walking past me to Dana. I want to leave the room, but I can't. For one thing, I don't know my way around and for another, I can't tell Darren what Willmore did. He'd beat him up.

"Dana, Millie," I hear Darren call out the next moment and exhale in relief. Not a second later, he appears in the doorway of the huge living room, followed by his mother and another man. His mother is the older version of Dana. Her dark hair is tied in a tight knot at the back of her head, and her makeup is striking and bold. Not at all warm like my mom's. She wears a dark blue high-necked dress that reaches to her knees and black pumps. She's an imposing presence, I'll give her that. The man next to her reminds me of my grandfather, with his white shirt, dark jeans, and chubby frame. Except he has a lot more hair on his head.

"Hey," Darren says, ignoring Willmore and walking over to me. "You okay?"

I nod and lean into him. I don't know if he expected it or if he's okay with it, but I don't want to be at Willmore's mercy

again. Darren wraps his arm around my waist and plants a kiss on my forehead. That calms me down and makes me smile.

“And you must be Millie,” his mother speaks up and comes over to us. “The girl who turned my son’s head.”

Inside I laugh out loud. I would love to be the girl who turned her son’s head, but it will never happen. Darren is never going to fall in love with me. I fell in love with him before I even knew him. Even his wild life on campus hasn’t put me off. The more time I spend with him, the deeper my feelings for him become. I’m a hopeless case when it comes to Darren Andrews.

“It wasn’t easy, but it worked out,” I answer cheekily, looking up at Darren who raises his eyebrows. Dana laughs softly and his mother seems impressed. At least she doesn’t give me a disapproving look. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Andrews.”

I hold out my hand, but she just nods. How awkward. She turns to Dana instead.

“We have a lot to discuss,” she says, having lost interest in me. I am far from offended, just confused. The least she could have done was to shake my hand. Just out of courtesy. “Hello, Willmore.”

He kisses his future mother-in-law on the cheek and smiles at her. Wow, maybe these two should get married and not ruin Dana’s life. Okay, my sarcastic thoughts are probably out of line. But Willmore seems to be just as much of a creep as Darren said he was. After all, he grabbed my ass in front of Dana. I wish she could see for herself and send him packing before the wedding.

“Millie.” Darren’s voice snaps me out of my stupor, and I look at him. “There’s someone else I want you to meet.”

I nod and turn to the man who must be Darren’s grandfather.

“This is my grandpa, Daniel Andrews Sr. Grandpa, this is Millie.”

“Hello,” he greets me warmly and shakes my hand. “My grandson has excellent taste in women.”

Flattered by his compliment, I give him my best smile and snuggle up to Darren.

“Thank you,” I whisper. With Willmore I would have found that statement disgusting, but his grandfather seems to mean it sincerely. I think he’s just happy that his grandson is happy.

“Did you ever doubt my taste in women, Grandpa?” asks Darren, wiggling his eyebrows.

How I’d like to roll my eyes.

“Never,” his grandfather replies, squeezing Darren’s arm. “Sorry, but business calls. See you later.”

We smile at him, and he leaves the living room. Now we’re alone with Willmore, who gives us a disgusted look. What an asshole. Everything in me wants to show him what an influential family I come from and whose ass he just grabbed. I wonder what he would say if I wiped out his family’s business with one phone call to Minneapolis. He would deserve it. How can you have such a disgusting character and get a woman like Dana? I don’t get it.

“You have good taste,” he lets slip, and Darren’s body tenses. He takes a threatening step towards Willmore, pushing me behind him. Willmore seems unimpressed. He grins cockily at Darren and looks at me. I meet his gaze. “Nice to meet you, Millie.”

He turns and leaves the living room.

“That motherfucker.” Darren’s chest still rises and falls with tension. “I shouldn’t have left you alone.”

“Nothing happened,” I assure him. He turns to me with a jerk. He stares at me angrily. His jaw clenches and I could swear he wants to ram his hand into the wall behind him to relieve the pressure.

“Nothing happened?” he grumbles at me. “He undressed you with his eyes. Can’t you tell?”

Of course I noticed, and he did a lot worse, but I can’t tell him. Darren would freak out if Willmore’s looks upset him that much.

“Darren,” I say, putting my hands on his chest, “please calm down. This isn’t going to help.”

He looks at me and nods reluctantly.

“Let’s go upstairs,” he says. “I’ll show you to our room and we’ll get ready for dinner with Jacob and Lisa.”

Without waiting for me to answer, he takes my hand and pulls me behind him. We don’t get very far, though, because his mother stops us in the hallway. “Where are you going?” Mrs. Andrews wants to know. “Dana and I were having coffee. Please join us in the living room.”

“Mom.” Darren’s voice is monotone. “We’ve had a long trip and would like to freshen up.”

She hesitates a moment and nods.

Without answering, Darren pulls me up the imposing staircase in the foyer, leaving me a little time to look around the house. Except for a few photos in the living room, I don’t notice much in the way of personal touches. The house is as cold as its owner.

Upstairs we turn right and then immediately left to reach our hallway. I doubt I will ever find my way around this house. Too many rooms and hallways. It’s very twisty and you can definitely tell the house is old. Our mansion in Minneapolis is also large, no question. But it was built in the eighties of the last century. Not the eighties of the nineteenth century.

“Here we are,” Darren announces a few minutes later and opens the door.

I follow him inside and look around. The room is painted a light beige and is dominated by a huge bed. It’s black, the bedding is gray. There are bedside tables on either side and a small, light wooden bench at the foot of the bed. Surprised, I notice that our luggage is already there.

“Do you like it?” Darren wants to know and sits down on the bed.

“Yes,” I say, smiling at him. “It’s nice.”

Ignoring Darren, I walk to the floor-to-ceiling windows and look out over the Andrews' imposing property. I recognize the guesthouses Darren told me about on the drive in, as well as some cattle grazing in the pasture. It's the first time I've been on a real Southern farm.

"Pretty big, huh?" I didn't realize he'd gotten up from the bed and was standing right behind me. I feel his breath on my neck and his fingers on my hip. My heart beats faster and I press my lips together to keep from making an indecent sound. Darren's hands aren't idle, running up and down my sides until he slides them under my sweater. We're dressed way too warmly for the Austin weather. Goose bumps spread across my skin as he draws little circles on my stomach.

My breathing accelerates and without being able to control it, I lean against his chest. I feel his hardness against my lower back. He can't ... can he? Shit, what are we doing here?

"Since you're not objecting," he says into the silence. "I assume you like it."

My mind goes blank. Does he mean the view or his fingertips stroking my stomach?

Suddenly he spins me around so I'm standing right in front of him. Something flashes in his eyes that gives me pleasant goosebumps. He gave me a similar look the first time he kissed me. I don't know what's right and what's wrong anymore. Darren and I are friends, I don't want to ruin that.

With a heavy heart, I push him away and walk past him to put some distance between us. I turn to face him again. His gaze rests on me. Neither of us says anything, although we can both feel the tension.

"When are we meeting Jacob and Lisa?" I deliberately steer the conversation in another direction to break the tension.

"At seven," he replies tight-lipped. "I'm... I'm going to my grandfather's. Make yourself at home."

I nod, and before I can say anything, he's gone.

I watch him go, eyes wide, and then stagger back to the bed where my bag is lying. I pull my iPhone out of my jeans and

dial Sienna's number. I desperately need my best friend's advice.

"Hello," her cheerful voice sounds. "Did you get there okay?"

"Hmm," I reply, falling backwards onto the bed. The ceiling is decorated with stucco work, which looks insanely pretty and gives the room a classic feel.

"Millie?" she asks and I sigh, "What's wrong?"

"It's not going to work," I snort. This whole thing was a spur-of-the-moment idea, and we didn't think it through. Not me and certainly not Darren. "It's not going to work, Sienna. I... I can't ... not with him. We have to sleep in the same bed and..."

"Take a deep breath," she tells me, admonishing and reassuring in equal measure. "You'll get through this. Just see where it takes you. Darren likes you too, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, but..." I sigh and sit up again. "We almost kissed again a few minutes ago, but I pushed him away. And ... and because the situation was weird after that, I wanted to distract him and ... and asked him when we were meeting his friend tonight. As a result, he left."

"Oh, Millie," she whispers, "I guess he had other ideas."

"That's not the worst of it," I continue, closing my eyes. "His sister's fiancé ... he ... he's disgusting."

"What do you mean?" she asks, alarmed, and I open my eyes to look at the door. I don't want anyone to hear this.

"He hugged me when we said hello ... and grabbed my butt."

"What?" Sienna's voice is unnaturally loud, and I have to hold the iPhone away from my ear for a moment.

"I mean, he ... he grabbed my ass – his future brother-in-law's girlfriend. What am I supposed to do? Darren didn't miss his look. I can't tell him about it. Avoiding Willmore isn't an option either. We're here for his wedding."

“You have to tell Darren.”

“Are you crazy?” I exclaim, pausing as the door creaks and opens moments later.

Darren enters the bedroom and raises his eyebrows questioningly.

“Hold on a second,” I say to Sienna, turning to him. “I’m on the phone with Sienna.”

“My dad’s here,” he says curtly. “Come on.”

I nod and get off the bed.

“I have to go. We’ll talk later.”

“Okay,” Sienna replies. “Have fun anyway.”

After I hang up, I silently follow Darren downstairs to meet his father.

Chapter 11

Darren

Ever since I tried to kiss Millie at the window and she turned me down, things have been tense between us. Admittedly, I was offended that she didn't want to kiss me. It was clear to me that she wanted to as much as I did. Then there was the stressful situation with my family. I shouldn't have gone along with Mom's demands. Then I wouldn't have slept with Millie, and I wouldn't be so upset. Millie would still be of no interest to me, and I could make a nice life for myself in college. Instead, she is stuck in my head. No matter what Millie does, I think it's cute.

Cute ... that's a disaster.

I don't use words like that. Horny or hot, yes, but not cute. Small animals are cute!

I look at her, annoyed. She stares silently out of the window as we make our way to meet Jacob and Lisa. If it wasn't so late, I would have canceled on my buddy. Now I have to bite the bullet and enjoy the evening. I can only hope that Lisa doesn't mention that we used to be a couple. I don't think that would go over too well with Millie. On the other hand, she was the one who turned me down today. Maybe she's not even interested in my past.

I haven't thought it through. Besides, I can't let her out of my sight at home as long as Willmore is there. The way he looked at her when she was standing next to me was disgusting...

I tighten my grip on the wheel and try to put Willmore out of my mind. That guy really is the best fuel for my already bad mood.

"Darren?" Millie suddenly asks into the silence. "What did you tell Jacob?"

"What do you mean?" I want to know and lick my lips.

"Did you also tell him that I'm your girlfriend or..."

“No,” I reassure her, “I told him exactly the way it is. I think that’s better.”

“Me too,” Millie replies quietly, staring out the window again. “It’ll be more relaxed if we don’t have to worry about touching each other all the time.”

What is she trying to say? Does she not like it when I touch her? I didn’t really get that impression. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have tried to seduce her in our bedroom. I have the hots for Millie, I can’t deny it. When she cuddled up to me in the living room, my jeans got incredibly tight. I want her. Her, of all people, whom I didn’t give a shit about two weeks ago. This is all Denver’s, Jake’s and Tyler’s fault. I never should have asked those three if they had any idea who I could bring as a girlfriend. At twenty-two years old, it’s time to face my mother and tell her once and for all that I’m not who she thinks I am. I quickly dismiss the idea. If I fight with my mother right before Dana’s wedding, I’ll break my sister’s heart. That will have to wait.

“Or we could pretend in front of Jacob and Lisa... It’ll be good practice for tomorrow night,” I suggest, trying to draw her out. “Don’t get me wrong, but we need to be more ... affectionate.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Millie looking over at me. Her lips are pressed tightly together, and her upper body rises and falls in an uneven rhythm. She doesn’t seem pleased with my suggestion, even though she knew she’d have to play my girlfriend. That is the main part of our deal.

“And in a minute, you’re going to suggest that we need to practice kissing,” she replies pointedly, and I grin. I wouldn’t mind that either, but there’s real annoyance in her answer. Millie isn’t finding this as easy as she pretended at first. Maybe she’s only now realizing what she’s gotten herself into. But it’s too late to back out. I’ve already introduced her to my family.

“Actually, yes.”

“Dream on.” She laughs and shakes her head. “You can forget it.”

“And how are we supposed to look authentic?” I grumble.
“Can you tell me?”

“I don’t know,” she snaps at me. Her eyes are wide and I’m afraid she’s going to cry. What in the world has gotten into her to make her fly off the handle like that? It’s obvious that we have to kiss. It has to look real. Besides, I’m a good kisser. So, she doesn’t have to worry about that.

“I don’t know anything anymore, okay? I wanted to help you, that’s why I agreed to this nonsense. But now... I don’t know if I can and ... and the boyfriend ... your sister’s fiancé. He’s horrible.”

All at once I tune out the rest of her desperate confession. I don’t suspect anything good, because she wouldn’t have freaked out like that if she did. Something must have happened, and I swear to God I’m going to make Willmore pay for it. It’s bad enough that I have to put up with that dumbass touching my sister. Of course, he would never hurt her, and I even think he loves her in his own way, but he is not averse to other women. Not even my girlfriend, it seems. My fake girlfriend, to be exact.

“What did he do?” I growl, clenching my right hand into a fist. “If he touched you...”

“He didn’t,” Millie reassures me immediately, taking a deep breath. “Forget what I said and...”

“No way,” I snap at her. “What did that dumbass do?”

Fortunately, the restaurant’s parking lot appears in front of us. I park my car a short distance away and turn off the engine. I quickly unbuckle my seat belt and look at Millie. The parking lot is well lit, so I can see every emotion on her face. She regrets what she said. Son of a bitch. I could swear that’s why she was on the phone with Sienna. To get advice from her best friend.

“Is that why you talked to Sienna?” I ask carefully, raising my eyebrows.

“No.”

“Millie,” I sigh, gently taking her chin between my forefinger and thumb to force her to look me in the eye. Her look is defiant, and even though it’s wrong, it turns me on to see her like this. Her lips magically attract me, and I remember her sucking my thumb. These thoughts are completely out of place now. Picturing Willmore’s ugly face again brings me back to the subject at hand.

“What did he do?” I ask quietly.

In the same breath, I let go of Millie. There’s no point in holding her and trying to squeeze a confession out of her. Besides, I have to concentrate on Willmore, so I don’t fuck Millie in the car. She makes me lose all restraint. I’m not a teenager running around horny all the time anymore. Normally I can control myself. But in Millie’s presence ... no way.

“What does it matter?” she asks, shaking her head. “Nothing happened.”

“Tell me what he did right now or I swear we’ll go to his house and I’ll beat the shit out of him.”

Millie rolls her eyes.

“That’s exactly why I didn’t tell you, she scolds me. “You’re going off on a tangent and forgetting the big picture.”

She’s not wrong. I nod and place my hand on her cheek. Gently, I run my thumb over her chin, where I just touched it roughly. Millie relaxes under my touch but doesn’t say anything.

“Millie.” I try again. “Please.”

Then she gives in.

“He came up to me after Dana introduced me,” she answers quietly. “He was impetuous and pulled me close. It wasn’t anything wild, but...”

“He’s going to get hurt.”

“No.” Now it’s Millie who puts her hand on my cheek. Her skin is soft and comfortingly warm. I like the way she touches me. “It won’t do any good. It won’t change him, and it won’t help anyone if he walks down the aisle with a broken nose.”

“It helps me,” I reply, annoyed. “I’d like to break his nose.”

“Oh, Darren,” she sighs, pulling away from me. Millie unbuckles her seat belt and opens the passenger door. “We should go to the restaurant.”

Millie gets out of the car, and I do the same. I lock the SUV and join her, walking together to the front door.

“Good evening,” an employee greets us at the entrance. He stands behind a wooden desk with an iPad on it. “Do you have a reservation?”

“Porter,” I reply, and he nods. “Have a nice evening.”

“Thank you,” Millie and I say in unison as we enter the restaurant.

Jacob and Lisa are sitting at a table in the back. It’s been almost a year since I’ve seen my childhood best friend and my ex-girlfriend.

“There they are,” I say to Millie, pointing. When Jacob sees us, he raises his hand briefly.

When we reach their table, they stand up. I shake Jacob’s hand and kiss Lisa on the cheek.

“Hey, guys,” I say exuberantly. “Glad this worked out. Meet...” Grinning, I point to my companion. “This is Millie. Millie, this is Jacob and Lisa.”

“Hi,” Millie says with a smile and holds out her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” Jacob replies as Lisa looks at her. Millie doesn’t seem to notice because her gaze remains on my buddy. I wonder if she likes Jacob. What am I thinking? Even if she did, he’s off-limits to her because he has a girlfriend. Jacob would be pretty stupid to flirt with Millie.

“Shall we sit down?” I ask her. Millie nods and sits down in the left chair – the one across from Jacob. I do the same and soon a waiter comes over and hands us our menus.

“And you are going to Lincoln together?” Jacob starts the conversation after we order our drinks.

“Yes,” Millie answers. “Well, almost. I’m a freshman studying business and Darren is a senior. We met through mutual friends.”

“Friends?” asks Lisa. “What kind of friends?”

I roll my eyes inwardly. I don’t like her playfully interested undertones.

“Darren’s buddy Denver and my best friend Sienna are an item,” Millie answers cheerfully. She smiles and looks at me.

“Oh yeah. And there was never anything going on between him and that Sienna girl?”

Millie’s eyes almost pop out of her head, and I give Jacob an angry look. I want him to stop her. Lisa is still ruining everyone’s evening with her comments.

Apart from the fact that I don’t give a damn about Sienna, she can’t compare this to us. She and Jacob got together long after we broke up. Besides, she broke up with me and isn’t the poor dumped girl.

“No?” Millie asks, much to my annoyance. “Why would you ask that?”

“Oh man.” Lisa laughs and gives me a quick look. “He didn’t tell you?”

What the fuck? It’s over and she’s happy with Jacob. Jacob looks at his girlfriend just as annoyed. It’s none of Millie’s business and she has no business involving her.

“Didn’t tell me what?” asks Millie, looking at me. “Darren?”

I purse my lips and snort contemptuously. Lisa can be a bitch, but I’ve never seen her like this. It looks like she’s out to cause trouble between Millie and me. Since things have already been so bumpy between us today, she succeeds.

“Nothing,” I mumble, keeping an eye out for the waiter to take my order. Why are they never around when you need them? “Did you choose what you would like to eat?”

“What’s wrong with you?” Millie asks, placing her hand on my forearm. With this gesture, which makes me cringe, she forces me to look at her. “What does Lisa mean?”

“Excuse me,” I call to the waiter, who rushes over. “We’d like to order our food.”

I look around. Jacob complies with my silent request and orders a rump steak. I do the same and turn to Millie.

“What would you like to eat?” I ask with a smile, but she doesn’t answer. Lisa has done a great job. I want these days to be as stress-free as possible. That’s not too much to ask. Then I can go back to my life in Lincoln. Without my mother, without Willmore, and without Millie.

Okay. One hundred percent without Millie will be difficult because we still have the same circle of friends. But at least I can avoid her there until I get my hormones back under control.

“I’ll have a chicken salad with yogurt dressing,” Millie says, handing the waiter the menu. “Thank you.”

Lisa chooses a salad, too, and the waiter leaves.

“I’m glad to see that Dana is giving you...”

“Don’t change the subject,” Millie interrupts curtly, “What does she mean? Did you do anything with Sienna?”

The blood drains from my face and I take a moment to collect myself. Is she still upset? Of course I didn’t do anything with Sienna, because I like living. Denver would have drawn and quartered me. He was about to lose it with Tyler. And they weren’t even dating at the time. Jake and I had a hard time breaking them up.

“No,” I exclaim, immediately clenching my fist in front of my mouth to muffle my voice. I need to calm down. “Of course not. I didn’t do anything with Sienna.”

“Then what did she mean?”

Annoyed, I groan and give in to her questioning.

“Lisa is my ex-girlfriend. Happy?”

All color drains from Millie's face and she pulls away without comment. I give her a look, hoping she'll come around in the next few minutes, but she doesn't. She remains sitting next to me, silent and as white as a sheet. Lisa, too, seems to have finally realized that she made a mistake, because she looks at me guiltily.

"And you're going to Dana's wedding with Darren?" she asks, turning to Millie. "Have you met her yet?"

"Yes," Millie answers monosyllabically.

"When?" Lisa doesn't give up easily.

"This afternoon." She smiles. "Dana's great and very excited." Millie's face lights up when she talks about my sister. Her words make my heart skip a beat. It makes me so happy that she likes Dana so much.

"How long have you two been together?" Millie changes the subject, looking back and forth between Lisa and Jacob.

"Four years," Lisa answers, looking lovingly at Jacob. "But we're not getting married yet."

"Are you sure?" I tease, and Lisa laughs. So does Jacob.

Suddenly the mood at the table is boisterous again.

I don't want to get married before I'm thirty, if at all. You have to test what will last forever. At the moment I have the best, or rather the worst example in my family.

"Would you like to get married someday?" Lisa asks Millie and I look at her with interest. Uneasiness spreads through me at the thought of another man marrying her. I push the thought away as quickly as it came. It doesn't matter who Millie marries, does it? I'm being silly.

"Of course," Millie replies, her eyes shining. "But there's still time, and first I have to find Mr. Right."

"What a poetic answer." Lisa grins and winks at me. "Sometimes you have to kiss a frog to find your prince."

She takes Jacob's hand in hers.

“Yes,” Millie says, looking amused. The corners of her mouth turn up. “You find frogs easier...”.

Chapter 12

Millie

Although I didn't know how to feel about Lisa in the first few minutes, I liked her more and more as the evening went on. I also had a good conversation with Jacob. Now we stand together in the parking lot and say goodbye.

"See you at the wedding," I say, hugging Lisa and then Jacob.

"It's going to be great," Lisa answers happily and kisses Darren on both cheeks. He didn't add much to our conversation after I more or less ignored him. He should have told me that Lisa was his ex-girlfriend. It was a horrible moment for me. With her long blonde hair, big breasts and sexy curves, Lisa clearly fits his booty type. I don't know what she looked like then, but she's more his type than I'll ever be. I don't like that. I don't like it at all. Darren just tried to kiss me a few hours ago and now this?

After he says goodbye to Jacob, we walk in silence to the car and get in. It seems as if the last few days, when we really got along, never happened. The longer I'm in Texas, the worse I feel. What was I expecting from this trip? That Darren would fall in love with me? That's ridiculous. It's never going to happen. We'll go back to our lives in Lincoln next week and we'll pass each other by just like we did before this trip.

Darren is a frog, perhaps even a toad – not a prince!

Definitely not my prince.

Darren pulls the car out of the parking lot and steers it silently onto the road. I look out the window and watch the city lights go by. The quiet country road finally leads to the Andrews' farm. It's kind of scary in the dark. I wouldn't want to be out here alone.

"I liked it better in the light," I say, because I can't stand the silence between us anymore.

“Scared?” asks Darren, looking over at me with a grin. “I’ll protect you.”

He winks at me, which makes me giggle. I take him at his word.

“Are there any wild animals here?” I ask seriously.

“Who knows,” he says, amused, and we stop in front of the house. The outside lights are still on and Darren parks the car behind his parents.

Up until now I’ve pushed the idea of us sleeping in the same bed far away. Now I can’t, because it’s getting close to bedtime. I’ve never slept in the same bed with a man. Until Darren and I had sex, no one had ever been in my bed. Okay. My sister and I slept in the same bed when we were kids, and Sienna did too during her big fight with Denver a few months ago. But other than that...

Nervously, I enter the house and climb the stairs to the second floor with him. The silence between us is more than awkward.

“After you,” Darren says, letting me pass into the room. I put my bag down and put my iPhone on the nightstand next to the bed.

“Do you want to use the bathroom first?” Darren asks immediately and goes over to his suitcase.

“I don’t mind,” I answer, feeling my self-confidence start to leave me. The last few hours have been going so well. I was hardly self-conscious around him. Now my familiar nervousness in Darren’s presence catches up with me again. My heart is pounding in my throat. What will happen in the next few minutes? How will the first night go? Will Darren try to kiss me again? Question after question rushes through my mind like a freight train. Nervously, I step from one foot to the other. “Whatever you want.”

“Go ahead,” he mumbles with a sweeping wave of his hand. “I still want to shower.”

“Okay,” I mumble, also walking over to my suitcase to grab my pajamas and then disappearing into the bathroom.

I take my time. Twenty minutes later, I have no more reasons to stay in here and avoid Darren.

With one last look in the mirror, I straighten my shoulders and take a deep breath. I have nothing to fear. Darren needs me. One wrong word and his tower of lies will collapse like a house of cards. My reflection in the mirror tells me pretty quickly that I would never do that. No matter how he behaves in the next few days. Far be it from me to cause Darren problems. I can see how much he is suffering. First because of his bad relationship with his mother and second because of his sister's upcoming wedding. To stab him in the back now would be wrong. I can't bring myself to do that.

When we get back to Lincoln, everything will be business as usual. Darren will pretend I don't exist and I'll pine for him from afar.

With this realization, I walk out of the bathroom and stop abruptly. Darren is naked. He has his back to me, so I can only see that and his tight ass. But fuck – it's too much! He is so unbelievably hot that everything in me contracts. My nipples get hard and I'm glad I left my bra on. I usually sleep without it. It's uncomfortable. But next to Darren in bed I will feel much more comfortable.

Ignoring me, he slips into his boxers and turns over. I feel like a deer caught in the headlights, but I can't help it. I didn't expect him to be naked.

"I showered in my old bedroom," he says, smiling at me. "You were taking too long for me."

"Okay," I reply, walking over to the bed. I quickly pull back the covers and then the blanket before slipping underneath.

Darren watches me and then comes over to me with his iPhone in his hand.

"Can I ask you something?" he wants to know and sits down next to me on the edge of the bed. Unsure, I look at him and nod, my heart pounding. I'm not sure if I want to hear what he wants to ask me. When he announces it like that, there's a good chance it will be embarrassing for me.

“Yes,” I say in a strained voice. “You can.”

My fingers play nervously with the hem of the blanket.

“Okay,” he says.

Darren uses his iPhone to turn off the overhead light and turns on the small lamp above the bed.

The room is bathed in a romantic light, and when I turn to face him, my heart stops for a moment, then starts to beat twice as fast. Darren looks at me and licks his lips nervously.

“Was our kiss your first?”

I am so surprised by these words that I flinch. My stomach turns and I press my lips together in embarrassment.

“What?” I stammer, making sure I heard him right.

“When we ... kissed,” he repeats. “Was that your first kiss?”

Darren thought it sucked. No, he thought it was so awful that he thinks it was my first kiss. Shame rises in me and I want to flee from the bed, but he holds me by my upper arms. Darren catches my eye and, for the second time today, places his index finger and thumb under my chin, forcing me to look at him.

“Millie,” Darren whispers. “Look at me.”

I give in and look into his eyes. He doesn't look like he's trying to make fun of me.

“So?” he asks again. “Was that your first kiss?”

“No,” I answer. “My second.”

I must be out of my mind to confide in him. Darren has kissed hundreds if not thousands of girls and I tell him he was my second kiss? I hope he doesn't ask me about anything else that happened between us. Because he was my first and I'm sure he noticed.

He swallowed and looked away.

“You've kissed at least one frog?” he asks, actually making me laugh. I never would have guessed that's what he was getting at and that Lisa had hurt his ego that much.

“You could say that.”

Darren laughs softly. “Just one?” he prods.

“A frog and a player,” I reply with a grin, and his lips curl into a smile as well.

Darren leans closer to me. I feel his hot breath on my face. His Adam’s apple twitches as he closes his eyes and places his lips on mine. I gasp. Darren immediately takes advantage and plunges his tongue into my mouth. I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him closer. He is only too happy to accept this invitation and slides his body over mine.

His hands start exploring and I moan softly as he takes my breasts in his hands and gently kneads them.

Our kisses become more and more passionate, and it isn’t long before my pajamas find their way to the floor. Darren lets his burning eyes slide down. I swallow and put my hand on his cheek. He lifts his head and there is a genuine smile on his lips that makes my heart explode. If I wasn’t already head over heels in love with him, I would be right now.

He pulls away and I slide back into the pillows. Then he reaches into the top drawer of the nightstand and pulls out some condoms. My chest rises and falls wildly. Once again, he’s several steps ahead of me. While I’m still clinging to our kiss and the loss of my clothes, he’s much further ahead. Darren throws the condoms on the bed next to us and grabs the first package.

“Wait.” I lean on my elbows and search his eyes. “Do you want to have sex with me?”

“Yes?” Equal parts question and affirmation, he looks at me.

“Isn’t that ... obvious?”

To match his words, he waves the condom in my face. I roll my eyes and slap his hand away. He lowers it and puts the condom on the mattress next to us.

“Yeah ... that’s ... that’s not what I meant.”

He makes me nervous as hell.

“What do you mean?”

“I... I... I don't want to be alone again,” I confess. “You ... you shouldn't leave again. I... I can't go through that again...”

“I understand,” he interrupts me, planting a soft kiss on my lips. “I don't want to go. All right?”

The typical Darren grin graces his lips and he picks up the condom again.

“All right.”

Confirming my words, I put my hand on his neck and pull him towards me. Darren smiles and kisses me.

“Take off your underwear,” he instructs me in a raspy voice and a pleasant shiver runs down my spine.

Without taking my eyes off him to see his reaction to my body, I straighten up. Now we are kneeling in front of each other. I run my hands down my back and unhook my bra before sliding it off my shoulders. He grins as the fabric sinks, exposing my breasts. My nipples have hardened into hard buds and can't wait to get his attention. I toss the bra to the side of the bed and look at him. Darren leans over and circles my right nipple with his mouth. A moan escapes me. My hand tightens in his hair as he gently bites down.

“Now your panties,” he murmurs, fixing his eyes on the sensitive spot between my legs.

I lie on my back and straighten my legs. Darren slides back on the bed to give me more room. The panties find their way to the floor as well, leaving me naked in front of him.

Surprisingly, I'm not the least bit embarrassed. In fact, his look and the lustful gleam in his eyes confirm that I'm just fine the way I am.

“Now you,” I begin, pointing at his shorts. Darren grins and gets off the bed to take them off. His stiff cock sticks out in front of his lower stomach, and I bite my lip. He slides his hand over it so casually that for a second, I'm tempted to look away in shame. He unwraps one of the condoms and puts it on.

Without saying anything, he pulls me close to his thighs and slides between my wide-open legs.

“Do you think...” he mumbles and lies on top of me. His penis presses against my entrance. I close my eyes, expecting the pain this time. “Can you do it without more foreplay?”

I open my eyes and shrug. I don’t think it will hurt like it did the first time. That’s what everyone I’ve talked to has said. I’m thinking feverishly about what I want when I remember Joy once said she prefers to do it in the riding position because she can control when she lowers her pelvis.

“Can we try another position?” I ask hesitantly. Once again, my heart is pounding because I don’t know how Darren will react. I’ve already noticed that he likes to have the upper hand in bed. And I know this from my own experience. His sex life is not something we talk about on campus.

Darren pauses and nods. He looks surprised, but then grins broadly.

“Of course,” he agrees, pulling away from me. “Which one?”

Heat rises in my cheeks. Dirty talk isn’t my thing, although this isn’t even dirty talk. God, I curse myself for waiting so long and not having a clue now. I’m not ready to be so open about what I want out of sex.

“I heard once that it’s easier for the woman in the riding position ... so... I... I can lower my pelvis ... when ... when I’m ready.”

My head must resemble a tomato after the words leave my mouth, but Darren says nothing in response. Without a word, he lies down on his back and reaches for my hand.

“Come here,” he asks me gently. “Swing your leg over me so you’re sitting on me.”

I do as he asks and sit on his thighs under his cock. Darren’s hands move down the back of my thighs to my bottom, which he grips tightly.

“Lift your pelvis,” he moans and my pubic bone brushes against his erection. “Take my cock in your hand and insert it.”

His voice is hoarse and he’s audibly aroused. I have to admit that I find this position hot as hell and I like it much better already. Having him under me with that smoldering look on his face really gets me going. Darren’s abs are tight. His six-pack is clearly visible. His hands dig into my hips.

I take another deep breath and gather all my courage as I grab his cock. Darren closes his eyes as I guide him between my thighs and place his penis at my entrance.

“Fuck,” he gasps. “Lower yourself slowly.”

“Okay.” I put my free hand on his stomach. The ridges of his six-pack press against my palms and I throw my head back, whimpering.

God, this is good! Having control over when and how far he penetrates me is fantastic.

“Millie,” Darren moans and his pelvis starts to move. He pushes into me from beneath. “Move.”

I moan as he thrusts again and curl my fingers into his chest. It doesn’t take long for us to find a rhythm together, my pelvis thrusting against his again and again in circular motions. Darren’s grip on my hips tightens and he picks up the pace. The friction makes me moan louder and louder.

Darren straightens up and his lips bounce passionately on mine as his hands rest on my ass.

He takes the lead in this position as well.

“Sorry baby,” he moans. “I need to go deeper.”

At first, I’m surprised and scream as he turns us over and I’m under him. I look at him with big eyes and he grins. He leans over and plants a soft kiss on my lips.

“Are you okay?” His left thumb strokes my cheek.

“I’ve never been better,” I reply. “And it doesn’t hurt.”

Darren drapes my right leg over his shoulder and wraps my left around his waist, penetrating me even deeper. Groaning, I

bury my fingers in the sheets.

It doesn't take long before I think I see stars. This time it is longer. The best part is that it doesn't hurt at all. Despite the lack of foreplay.

"Come, Millie," he urges me, his left thumb circling my clit.
"Come for me."

My body rears up, my muscles contract around him, as our lips meet, and we climax together.

Chapter 13

Millie

Darren looks across the breakfast table at me and grins, as if we have some dirty secret that his mother mustn't know about. I have to admit that we do. I return his look and grin as well. Last night was amazing and I don't think I'll be able to sleep with him again anytime soon. This morning in the shower, it burned a little between my legs. After we used up all the condoms and I came for the third, fourth and almost fifth time, I guess it's no wonder. It was a sex marathon. The kind of nights I've only read about in books on my e-reader. I didn't think it was possible for something like that to happen to me. Sienna and Joy are going to freak out when they hear about this.

"What are you doing today, Millie?" Darren's mom's curious voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

"We're going for a ride," I answer with a smile.

"And what kind of ride," Darren interjects, winking at me. I want to kick him in the shins under the table, but I'm afraid of hitting his mother. He should stop saying things like that in front of others. I'm glad I was able to talk to him about sex in private. That would have been unthinkable a few weeks ago.

"Riding?" Mrs. Andrews doesn't sound thrilled. "There's a dinner tonight and the wedding the day after tomorrow. What if you get hurt?"

"Mom." Darren rolls his eyes. "Millie's an exceptionally good rider."

I think his comments are about last night. I know Darren well enough to know that he is replaying the images right now. Of me riding him, my fingers clawing into his chest, and him coming inside me with a moan. I push the memories away and turn to his mother.

"I'd like to see your property, Mrs. Andrews." Friendly, I smile at her. "Darren raved about it."

“Did he?” She raises her eyebrows skeptically.

“Of course.” The bright singsong in my voice hurts my own ears. But Mrs. Andrews looks at me, beaming. “I want to know everything there is to know.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” she exclaims, and for the first time since I’ve arrived, I feel like she’s giving me an honest smile. “Are you interested in football, Millie?”

The question catches me off guard. After all, Darren said she hates it. Maybe that’s the point. She hopes I hate it, too, and that she can keep her son from fulfilling his big dream. Unfortunately, she got the wrong daughter-in-law in me. The wrong fake daughter-in-law, I mean.

“Yes, very much so,” I say honestly. “I like to watch. Especially when Darren plays.”

I give him an amorous smile that is not fake. It is not a lie. I love watching him play. He proved last season why he’s an NFL prospect. Even though it will be another year, I would love to introduce him to my grandpa and invite him to a tryout. I think we need to add some depth to our defense. Darren would be perfect for that.

“Oh yeah?” Mrs. Andrews raises her perfectly plucked black eyebrows. She’s intrigued. “Well, that surprises me. I would have thought you’d be interested in far more ... civilized sports.”

Interesting. So, she finds me uncivilized. This statement says it all about how she feels about her son’s future. I take a deep breath and look at Darren, whose expression continues to harden. I don’t want to come off as the heir to the Minneapolis Warriors, but I can’t let it go either. I love football. It’s my life, and I can’t wait to run the club. I won’t own it 100 percent because my grandfather will have a say until he dies, but the primary responsibility will be in my hands. The board of directors and our advisors will support me. As CEO, I’ll own fifty-one percent of the Warriors and always have the final say.

“I’m from Minneapolis,” I explain with a smile. “Football is a ... a religion there, and well... I grew up with it. My parents

used to take me to the stadium when I was really little. The atmosphere is unbelievable every time. I suppose you've never been to a game?"

"No." Her expression is hard. "It's brutal and takes forever."

"Not even for Darren?" I ask and she shakes her head.

"No."

God, this woman is colder than a snowman.

"That's too bad," I answer honestly. It's hard for me to keep a smile on my face. She's horrible to Darren. He doesn't deserve it. "Because he's very good and he has a great career ahead of him in the NFL. I think he's ... he's going to be the best defensive end ever."

Darren looks up and goes wide-eyed. Of course, he doesn't know how well I know and can evaluate his talent. He's much further along and more mature in his game than Denver, Tyler and Jake. To him, it sounds like his girlfriend is standing up for him, and I'm okay with that. At least for now.

"It's nice of you to defend Darren, but you don't have to," his mother says coolly, giving her son a look that makes me cringe. I'm beginning to wonder if she loves Darren at all. "He's not going to make any money playing football and..."

"Mom, don't do that," Darren interrupts, noisily putting his silverware down next to his plate. "Can't you just be happy that I'm good at it? I'm not even asking you to watch my games. I just want you to respect them."

"It's ridiculous."

"Oh, is it?" His eyebrows rise and he looks at her challengingly. "So ridiculous that it will make me richer than you will ever be. That's what you want, isn't it? Prestige and power. Football can give me both one day."

"And if not?" she shoots back. "Then you have nothing, and with this ridiculous attitude our family..."

"We're leaving!" Darren stands up so quickly that his chair tilts backwards and falls to the floor with a clatter. "Come on."

I look at his mother, her upper body rising and falling with tension. She opens her mouth to say something, but finally lets it go. Maybe it's for the best. The situation would only get more heated.

"Excuse us," I whisper, following Darren out of the dining room. He doesn't say a word as he storms through the front hall of the house and steps out into the yard.

"Darren," I call after him, because by now I have to run to keep up with him. "Wait!"

Sure enough, he stops and turns around so I can catch up. He stands there, hands on his hips. His chest rises and falls with effort.

"I'm sorry," I gasp, putting a hand to my chest to normalize my breathing.

"What are you sorry for?" he wants to know, taking a step towards me. He grabs my hands and pulls me towards him. Smiling, I look up at him as he twists my arms behind my back and intertwines our hands. "It was very nice of you to defend me and my dreams."

"I wasn't defending you," I reply. "I know talent when I see it, and you have it. More than Denver and the others."

My heart is humming in my chest. It's a part of the real Millie that I'm revealing to him. But Darren doesn't notice. He raises his eyebrows and the corners of his mouth turn up slightly. He doesn't believe me. And since I can't tell him why he should, I'm satisfied with his reaction.

At least I've cheered him up a bit.

"Let's get the horses," he suggests, now completely relaxed. "The sooner we get out of here, the better."

"Okay," I reply, and we start walking hand in hand. "But trust me, you're going to make the NFL."

I can't help but emphasize that.

"Oh, Millie." He looks over at me. "You can just tell me you want a kiss. You don't have to suck up."

“I’m not sucking up,” I reply indignantly, stopping. “I don’t have to. And besides – who said I want to kiss you?”

Darren laughs and places his hand on my cheek. Goosebumps cover my body as he runs his thumb over it. Then he leans down and gives me a soft kiss. I kiss him back and lean into him.

“Let’s go,” Darren flutters almost too happily after we part, pulling me behind him.

We stop the horses at a lake that is also part of the Andrews’ property. Darren grins at me and points to the small wooden dock that juts out into the water. “I used to come here to think and get away from my mom,” he says with a slight smile. “For our guests, the lake is not very interesting. Here we will have peace and quiet.”

He gracefully dismounts his stallion, Hurricane, and ties the horse to a nearby tree. Hurricane stands five feet, eight inches. As Darren rode him casually, I had to work hard not to stare the whole time. My mare, Lady, is considerably smaller.

“Let me help you down.” Darren stands at my feet, his arms outstretched. I swing out of the saddle as sexily as I can. He grabs my waist and gently sets me down.

“Thank you,” I whisper and snuggle up against him. His hands brush over my hips and memories of last night come flooding back.

“You’re welcome,” Darren replies, his lips brushing my ear. “Anytime.”

He releases me and ties my mare to the tree as well. He grabs my hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world and pulls me with him to the small footbridge. We cross it and sit down at the end.

“Take off your shoes and socks,” he says, taking off his own. “The water is cold, but not icy.”

I nod and take off my sneakers, setting them beside me on the dock. I pull off my socks.

“Oh my God,” I yell. “This water is cold as shit.”

I immediately pull my feet back.

“Oh, come on.” Darren waves me off. “It’s comfortable.”

Laughing, I shake my head and look across the lake. The water is calm, a few ducks swim by now and then, but no one bothers us.

“Darren?” I ask and look over at him. He looks back at me. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Did you plan all this?” I try to find the right words. “When you asked me to come here with you, I mean. Did you plan that we would ... we would do what we did?”

I’ve had this question on my mind for a while, albeit subconsciously. Sleeping with someone once is one thing. Twice and more is another. Losing my virginity to Darren, especially in a situation like this, is something I never planned on. I wanted to give it to someone who was in love with me. And Darren is definitely not that. At least I thought so until now, because a lot has changed between us since we’ve been here.

“Do you want to know if I planned to sleep with you?” he asks, and I shrug.

“I got the impression that at some point we ... well ... forgot about that night.” I take a deep breath, my hands gripping the edge of the dock for support. “It was my first time ... that’s no secret, and it ... it hurt. I wanted you to stop and...”

“Hey...” He touches my shoulder gently. But I don’t dare look at him. “I know that.”

“Then why didn’t you?” Now I lift my head and look at him intently. The reproach in my voice is unmistakable. “Do you have any idea how ... how painful it was? Suddenly there was something inside me whose diameter ... it didn’t fit, Darren.”

“And then?” He takes a deep breath and clenches his jaw. “You were a virgin, I could tell. It didn’t matter if it was me ... or some other guy. You would have been in pain.”

“Hmm.”

“Millie,” he whispers, taking my hand. “I didn’t hurt you on purpose, and it didn’t turn me on to see you like that. I realized there was nothing you could have done to prevent the pain.”

“That’s not fair,” I say. “You always get to have all the fun.”

“Oh, come on.” He nudges my shoulder. “It’s not my fault. No guy can control the pain, but we ... we don’t want to hurt you. You have to believe that.”

“I do.” I snuggle up to him. A lot has changed between us in the last few days. I have to deal with it all and know where I stand with him. Every day I fall more in love with him. “I... I don’t really know what to make of it.”

“Neither do I,” he says honestly, licking his lips nervously.

My heart contracts. What does he mean? Everything happened so fast between us, after months of longing for him from afar. And now we’re sitting here talking about us. I shouldn’t have started this conversation. I will only be disappointed because I’m sure he doesn’t feel the same way about me.

“Okay,” I mutter, folding my hands in my lap. “Fine.”

“You think it’s fine?” Darren asks and I look at him. “I mean, you ... you really think it’s okay that you and I have no idea where we’re at?”

“No,” I say. “I don’t know anything. I didn’t even know if you knew who I was until two weeks ago, and now ... we’re having sex.”

“I knew who you were,” he defends. “Why would you think that?”

“Oh, please.” I can’t help the sour look on my face. “You never talked to me or noticed me. It always seemed to me that you accepted that I was part of the group because of Sienna, but otherwise you didn’t have any interest in me.”

“I’d be lying if I said I had my eye on you from the beginning.”

I lower my eyes and press my lips together. Of course he didn’t. Why would he? Of all the girls around him, I’m by far the most boring. That’s why Darren finally asked me out. Because he wouldn’t have any problems with me if it didn’t work out. He was sure that I would keep my mouth shut. He was sure that I was nothing more than the scared little mouse I play in Lincoln.

“I always felt you were uncomfortable around me,” he confesses. Surprised, I look at him. I’ve never felt uncomfortable around him. More like awkward. “You’ve never been very talkative or tried to contribute whenever we’ve met. I just don’t like that,” he continues. “You’re very different here, Millie. Much more open, funnier, and kind of ... sassy. I like this Millie more than the one I knew when we hung out socially.”

“Yeah?” My heart races as I lift my head to look at him. Darren smiles and meets my eyes.

“Of course.” He shakes his head in disbelief. “Why are you so different in Lincoln? I don’t get it. You have a great sense of humor. You’ve proven that to me many times since we’ve been here. You’re also smart. To my mother, talking to Lisa...”

“I need time to warm up to people,” I apologize.

“With me, you...” He calculates in his head how long we’ve known each other. “Six months wasn’t enough?”

“This is something else.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” I answer, annoyed, and he laughs.

“It’s pretty sexy when you’re bitchy like that.”

“You ... you think that’s sexy?” I look at him in surprise. “I thought it would put you off.”

He grins and leans in. Our lips almost touch.

“I find some things about you sexy,” he admits. My insides tingle. “I find it sexy that you defend me so passionately in front of my mother. I find it sexy the way you push up your glasses when you’re working on your laptop.” I laugh softly. “I think it’s sexy that you’re so passionate about sex and so shy at the same time. I think it’s sexy that you finally stopped wearing those hideous nun costumes.”

“They’re not costumes. They’re jeans and blouses.”

“I say right – nun costumes,” he repeats, grinning mischievously. “I find it especially sexy the way you talk to me when you can’t keep up your facade. Which has actually been going on for the last twenty-four hours. And to be honest, it makes me want to embarrass you even more. I find a lot of things about you sexy, but you don’t seem to.”

His confession pulls the rug out from under me. I’ve never thought of myself that way, and it never occurred to me that another person – especially Darren – could see me that way.

“Sexy” has never been the word used to describe me in the past. Shyly, and not sexy at all, I look at him. “More like prim, boring, staid, and well ... not in a way that would pique your interest.”

Wait ... did I just indirectly tell him how long I’ve been in love with him? I must be completely insane.

“Our first time was ... it was just a mistake on my part and it shouldn’t have happened,” he says, and when I want to protest he puts a finger to my lips. “That doesn’t mean I regret it and I’ve never thought about it again. I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind since. I don’t know why, because it’s never happened to me before. We ... we don’t even fit together and yet ... yet I feel like you’re the only one who understands me.”

“Darren,” I whisper and kiss his finger. “Are you trying to tell me in your twisted way that you like me?”

“Probably.” He laughs to cover the now embarrassing situation he is in. Darren certainly hasn’t told his conquests how he feels about them very often. Besides Lisa, I don’t

know anyone he's been serious about. That's why I know how sincere he is when he says these words. "Are you going to tell me why you are the way you are?"

I smile and nod. He pulls away from me and I'm afraid he's going to put a healthy distance between us again, but he doesn't. Darren pulls me onto his lap and wraps his arms around me. Smiling, I cuddle up to him and enjoy his closeness.

"As you may have noticed, my parents have a lot of money." Slowly I feel my way to the big truth. A lot of money is ridiculous. My family is one of the richest in the United States. I could buy everything here and still have enough money to do it again. If Darren's mother knew who I really was and what I could offer her for her beef, she would be kissing my feet. And that's exactly why I don't want her to know. It would be like high school. She would reduce me to my money. "In high school it was always hard because a lot of girls wanted to be my friends because I was richer than them. They hoped it would get them into cool events and trips. Since I went to an all-girls school, it was even harder. It was all about who owned what, how cool you were, and what clique you belonged to. Sienna, Joy and Phoenix were the first real friends I made. And I don't know if that would have happened if I hadn't acted the way I did.

Darren says nothing, just nods. He pulls me closer and kisses my forehead.

"I'm sure they'd like the Millie I've gotten to know over the past few days," he says. "No, I know they would. You don't have to pretend. And if they don't like you anymore ... they're just stupid."

I can't help but laugh and look up at him. Darren leans down and closes his mouth over mine.

"And yes, you're right," he admits to me and to himself. "I'm trying to tell you in some twisted way that I like you."

Chapter 14

Darren

The conversation at the lake was a few hours ago now. The fact that I told Millie in my twisted way that I liked her still feels strange. Mostly because it's the truth and I never expected to say it. Of course, I chose her to get things over with as best I could.

And now this: I like Millie.

She's blown me away in the days we've been getting to know each other – and I can't stop thinking about her. She's good for me, and the way she defended me to my mom was great. But Millie is not the person she pretends to be in Lincoln. I'm sure of that now. Something is going on, but I don't know what it is. That she has money, or rather her parents, became clear to me as soon as I saw the contents of her suitcase. Tons of designer clothes I couldn't even afford. Gucci, Prada, Chanel – everything. Even her crappy pajamas are Agent Provocateur. A very expensive lingerie brand, as I know from my sister. The term 'good family' is an understatement for Millie.

Why won't she tell me the truth about her background? She probably hasn't gotten to the point where she trusts me completely. I will change that.

I close the last buttons on my shirt and reach for the red pocket square she gave me for tonight. Smiling, I turn it over in my hand. She must have had it made, because the fabric is identical to that of her dress. I saw her earlier out of the corner of my eye. Then she disappeared into the bathroom wearing the fiery-red dress.

"Millie," I call, reaching for my bow tie. "Hurry up."

She's been in the bathroom for ages. But she doesn't have to be. She's beautiful. I keep noticing that. Why I never noticed her in all those months, I can't explain.

Or maybe I can?

I'm a superficial idiot. I never make the effort to get to know a girl. Most of them just spread their legs without any small talk. Sure, Millie did that too, but she's different. I can't get enough of our Millie Mouse, as Joy always calls her.

In fact, except for a few harmless kisses for my family, I had no intention of touching her. But things got out of hand. From our first kiss, she was unlike any girl I've ever known. It reminded me of my time with Lisa, only better. The sex with Millie gets more and more intense as she opens up to me more and more. And damn – she's dynamite when she lets herself go.

“Here I am.” The bathroom door bursts open and I lift my head. “What do you think?”

Millie spins around once. I close my eyes and open them to make sure it's really her.

“Who are you and what did you do to Millie?”

She laughs brightly and winks at me.

“Surprised?” she wants to know, and I nod.

“More than that,” I confess to her, “Shit ... you look incredible.”

“Incredible shit?” She laughs again and puts on her bracelet. “I thought the dress might be a little ... sexy?”

Did I ever mention that she's a real minx when she comes out of her shell?

Millie looks amazing. If I tell anyone that this sexy woman and the Millie we see in Lincoln are one and the same, they'll laugh at me. Holy crap, she looks so hot.

The bright red dress she's wearing has a subtle cleavage that gives a hint of her breasts. It is held in place by two thin gold chains on either side. But what catches my attention even more is the waist-high slit on her left leg. Her brown hair is straightened and falls over her shoulders. The makeup is much more dramatic than I am used to.

“You ... you look beautiful,” I say, walking up to her. “Wow.”

“So, you like it?” she asks shyly, smiling at me.

“Yes,” I croak, pulling her hand towards me. “I like it a lot. And you should never say that you’re not sexy again. Because this is more than sexy.”

“You look sexy too,” she replies, fingering the hem of my lapel. Her cheeks take on a slight blush that doesn’t quite match the hot dress she’s wearing. I want to grab her and take her to the bed behind us. “I’ll get my shoes on and then we can go.”

“All right,” I say and let her go. Millie walks past me and I gasp in shock when I see her back. The fucking dress is cut all the way down to her tailbone.

My cock gets hard and I adjust it in the tight suit pants. It’s already a hot number from the front, but now I’m at the end of my rope. There is no way she is wearing a bra underneath, not even a strapless one or those cups that are glued to her breasts. And what the hell about panties? I take another look at the slit, which doesn’t seem high enough to hide panties. Plus, the dress is skin tight.

“Darren?” Millie’s laughing voice reaches me. “Are you daydreaming?”

“Indeed.” I grab her and hold her close, placing my hand on her bare back. She looks up at me, her eyes wide open.

“Are you wearing anything underneath?”

“Like ... like what?”

“You heard me.” I slide my right hand down her hip to the slit.

“What are you doing?” Millie exclaims, grabbing my wrist as I try to reach under her dress. “Darren. Stop it.”

“I just wanted to make sure you were wearing panties underneath,” I reply nonchalantly.

“Of course, I’m wearing panties. Skin-colored and tight as hell.”

“Mine are tight as hell too,” I murmur and kiss her. “You look so hot and ... and that neckline. I’m not going to survive this.”

“Of course you’re going to survive this,” she replies, batting her eyelashes. “You just have to pull yourself together.”

Her lips slide across mine and she presses against my body. I don’t know if she’s doing it on purpose. Often, I can’t read her actions in the context of sexual innuendo. But knowing Millie, she has no idea that I would love to get her on her stomach on the bed and fuck her hard from behind. But I can’t do that now because of time constraints, and I won’t be able to in the future. She is not ready yet.

“We have to go,” I order and push her off me. “Good thing you’re wearing panties.”

“Why wouldn’t I wear panties?” she asks, annoyed. “It’s disgusting and cheap.”

“Uh, yeah, how stupid of me,” I reply flippantly. Her eyes narrow. “But I don’t suppose you’re wearing a bra.”

“No, but nipple pads, for your peace of mind.” She rolls her eyes. “Kiss me, you Neanderthal.”

“I can’t say no,” I reply, putting my mouth on hers.

When she pulls away and grabs her iPhone and clutch off the bed, I pull my iPhone out of my back pocket and wave at her.

“Come here,” I say.

“What are you doing?” Without giving her an answer, I push her in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirror in the corner of our bedroom. I wrap my free arm around her waist and pull her to my side. Millie is standing sideways next to me, her leg with the slit sexily positioned in the foreground. She puts her left hand on my chest. Grinning, I take a picture of us.

“You have to send it to me,” she says, and I nod.

First, I send it to my chat group with Tyler, Jake and Denver.

**Darren: My date tonight!*

Plus, lots of flame emojis.

**Tyler: Is that Millie?*

**Jake: Dude?! What did you do to her?*

**Denver: Sienna's eyes fell out.*

**Tyler: Not just Sienna! She is stunning!*

I laugh at first, but when I read Tyler's message, a lump forms in my throat. The need to make him understand that she is mine is superhuman. Millie looks at me and raises her eyebrows.

"Why are you laughing?" she asks curiously.

"The boys love your outfit," I tell her with a wink.

"What did you do?" she cries, grabbing my iPhone to look at the picture. "Oh my God, Darren. This makes me uncomfortable."

"Are you crazy?" Uncomprehending, I take the device back. "You look great and I think you should know that."

"Please ask next time." She tries to sound stern but doesn't succeed at all.

Grinning, I pull her close and kiss her, "Of course I'll send you the picture."

"That's not what I meant," she replies with a soft sigh. "I look so ... so different in it."

“And that’s bad?” I ask, tilting my head slightly. Millie shrugs. “Shall we take another picture? Without your legs?”

Millie likes her body. In fact, I’m pretty sure she’s very happy with it. Now she just needs to learn that it’s sexy.

“Yes,” Millie agrees and I smile at her. She snuggles up to me again and I hold up the iPhone. Then I press the shutter. The picture is beautiful, even more beautiful than the one in front of the mirror, because we’re both laughing heartily and seem infinitely happy.

Oddly enough, that’s exactly what I am – happy!

“I like it,” she voices my thoughts. “We look happy.”

“You’re awake,” I say when I return to the bedroom the next morning.

After dinner and the party that followed, we fell into bed exhausted. My dream of ripping the red dress off Millie’s body and having sex with her came to nothing. But instead, the beautiful dress is lying on the chair in the corner, and the scene is playing out in my mind.

“Hmm,” she sighs, stretching out under the covers. “Have you had a shower yet?”

“Yeah,” I say, walking over to our bed. Millie’s gaze travels over my body and I gladly let her gaze wash over me. I like that she’s becoming more and more open. There is hardly a trace of the young woman who was so shy at the beginning. If someone had told me a few weeks ago that this was the real Millie, I wouldn’t have believed it.

With the towel wrapped around my hips, I stop in front of her and prop myself up on the mattress. I lean down to Millie and kiss her gently. She puts her hand on my cheek and kisses me back. “Come back to bed,” she mumbles, “I’m still too tired to get up.”

I pull away and drop my towel. As expected, she averts her eyes. I can't help but laugh and lean over her again. Millie's eyes are on my cock, she can't deny it.

"Don't be shy," I whisper. "You've seen it in all its glory before."

"Shut up and get in the..."

That's as far as Millie gets when the door is pushed open and I immediately sit up to see who's interrupting my morning sex. Dana is standing in the doorway staring at us.

"Oh my God," she cries, "I'm... I'm... I'm sorry."

I don't need to be a fortune teller to know what thought is running through her mind. I stand, still naked, leaning over my girl, ready to kiss her. One look at Dana's face nips all my desire for Millie in the bud. My sister is white as a sheet, crying and shaking all over.

"Dana," Millie cries, jumping out of bed. "What happened?"

I stagger back, covering myself. My sister really doesn't need to see my dick right now. I quickly run to my suitcase, pull out a pair of boxers, and pull them on.

Meanwhile, Millie has taken Dana in her arms and pushed her onto the small sofa in our bedroom. I sit down on the table in front of her.

"I... I don't want to bother you, but I..."

"You're not bothering us," I assure her, reaching for her hand. "What happened?"

Unfortunately, I can guess what has happened. Willmore must have done something to finally open my sister's eyes. Luckily, just in time. I would actually be grateful to the dumbass if she wasn't so devastated. Because tomorrow she would have said yes to him. It was supposed to be the best day of her life.

"I'll get you some water," Millie says as she stands up.

I nod gratefully. Whatever Dana is going to say, I need her to stay calm.

“Dana,” I whisper as I sit down next to her, “what happened?”

“Yesterday ... yesterday everything was fine,” she sobs. “Dinner was nice and ... and I really thought it was over, but...”

Dana sobs louder and her crying intensifies as Millie returns from the bathroom with a glass of water and sits down on the table in front of my sister. “Here,” she says, “drink this.”

“Thanks.” Dana takes the glass. “I... I didn’t want to bother you, but I... I didn’t know where else to go.”

“You’re not bothering us,” I say immediately. “It’s all right.”

“I saw your naked adult body bent over a woman – your girlfriend,” Dana hisses. “Please don’t tell me I wasn’t bothering you.”

“Well,” I shrug. “Five minutes later would have been...”

“Shut up. Nobody cares,” Millie hisses. “What happened, Dana?”

Dana smiles briefly and looks at her.

“I... I don’t know if ... if Darren told you, but Willmore cheated on me before.”

I want to laugh contemptuously, but Dana doesn’t deserve it. She’s in bad enough shape, and after this brief teaser of what happened in the past, my whole body tenses.

“I left shortly after you yesterday because I had a few more appointments today. The final fitting for the dress, hair and makeup have to be checked. I can’t let anything go wrong. Willmore wanted to stay and I let him.” Dana shakes her head and cries again. “I woke up and he wasn’t in bed. At first, I thought he was already up or in the bathroom. But he wasn’t there, so I went to the dining room and asked for him. No one saw him there either. After that... I started to get worried. His brother didn’t know where he was either.”

I exchange a look with Millie that says nothing good. Her lips are pressed into a thin line and she looks at Dana sympathetically.

“I... I went to one of the guesthouses to talk to ... to Emma.”

I swallow hard, knowing Dana’s best friend from childhood. They had been inseparable. Even though I can guess what’s coming next, I don’t want to hear it. Emma and Willmore, it can’t be true. He couldn’t have slept with her best friend, and even worse—Emma slept with him. If I imagined Millie fucking Tyler, I’d freak out.

“I went in and ... and wondered about the clothes in the living room, but ... but I didn’t think about it again. Emma likes to have fun.” Dana laughs bitterly and I press my lips together. I know only too well that Emma likes to have fun. I’ve had sex with her many times. And Willmore, that dirty pig, apparently did too. “And then ... then he was lying there ... with ... with her. My fiancé, my ... my future husband and ... and my best friend.” Dana cries harder again, making only a half-hearted attempt to wipe away her tears.

“Oh, Dana,” Millie murmurs, taking her in her arms. “I’m so sorry.”

“I... I was so blind and ... stupid,” she rants. “I told Emma everything about ... about us and ... and what wasn’t going well in our relationship and she ... she’s sleeping with him.”

I clench my hands and stand up. I can’t hear this, let alone see it. Not only is Dana devastated. It happened the day before her damned wedding. Of course I wanted to stop the wedding. I didn’t care how, but not this way. Not the day before and with her best friend.

“What happened after that?” I ask and Dana and Millie look up at me.

“Willmore came to me and ... tried to push him away from me,” Dana sobs. “I slapped him and he ... he slapped ... he slapped me too, and ... and said that I’d better get it sooner than later, that it was normal for ... for a man.”

Without uttering a sound, I storm out of the room to beat the shit out of Willmore. What the hell does he think he's doing?

"Darren," Millie yells, but I ignore her, "that's not going to help."

Of course, it wouldn't help if I punched him in the face, but I couldn't just let it go. Not only has he humiliated my sister for years, but now he's beating her because of his mistakes. This has clearly gone too far. He's going to get it back with every punch I'm about to give him.

I run down the hall and down the stairs, where I meet my dad halfway down.

"Where is he?" I bark, staring at him. Grandpa appears behind him and looks at me critically.

"Why do you look like that?" my father wants to know instead. "And who are you looking for?"

"Willmore," I answer. "Where's the pig?"

"Darren, no." Dana is standing by the stairs with Millie. "Stop it!"

My sister is all messed up and my girlfriend ... for God's sake, what am I thinking? Millie is not my girlfriend and I'm sick of this whole charade of the last few days and weeks. It was all a big mistake. The wedding, the trip, things between Millie and me. But I'll deal with that later.

"So," I call. "Where's Willmore?"

"He's waiting for you in the dining room," my father replies irritably, and I briefly consider punching him, too. Doesn't he realize what's going on or doesn't he want to because he's afraid of the consequences?

Without another word, I storm past them and head for the dining room.

Chapter 15

Millie

Darren can no longer be calmed down. Dana and I try to keep up with him, maybe to prevent the coming disaster.

But it is already too late. Darren has grabbed Willmore, who in his white jeans and polo shirt looks like he's about to go out for a round of golf. Mrs. Andrews screams as her son grabs her future son-in-law and slams him against the table. Dishes clatter to the floor and food flies everywhere.

Dana screams from behind me. Her father and grandfather have followed.

"You son of a bitch," Darren yells, punching Willmore in the face. "I'm going to kill you."

Two more punches follow. There are several cracks, but Darren doesn't stop. Not even when his mother yells at him. Surely none of this can be happening. Blood spurts from Willmore's nose. Darren hesitates under his mother's vehement demands. Willmore takes advantage and strikes. Darren backs away. Willmore jumps up, punches Darren several times and then punches him in the nose. Now he is bleeding too.

"Stop it," Dana yells, pushing past me to get between them. Darren stops immediately. "Please stop."

Tears stream into her eyes, but her brother's rage is unrelenting.

"And why should I?" Aggressively, Darren wipes away the blood. "Was today the first time, or has that bastard hit you more than once?"

"The first time," Dana says, taking Darren's fists in her hands. "Please stop."

"Stop it," Willmore coughs, wiping away the blood. "It won't change anything."

“Shut up,” Darren snarls. “I’ve put up with this way too long. I should rip your dick off.”

I understand his anger and desperation. But this is getting us nowhere. He’s not only making his sister miserable, he’s also making himself miserable. Willmore’s nose is crooked, and his left eye is swollen.

“What’s all this about?” Mrs. Andrews asks, suddenly. I’m beginning to get angry with her. Surely, she can see that the situation has escalated. “Can’t you behave yourself for once, Darren?”

“What the...” Darren shakes his head and pulls his hands away from his sister. “Tell her.”

He looks at Dana. She takes a deep breath and looks at her mother.

“Willmore cheated on me,” she tells her through tears. “With Emma. And he hit me after I confronted him.”

“With...” Mrs. Andrews says nothing more as the realization hits her. She turns white as a sheet. Surely, she can’t have been blind to the way Willmore was behaving all these years. “Get out of my house! I’ve always stood by you, but this is too much!”

Willmore blinks. Up to now he has never had a problem with his future mother-in-law. This dismissal must be affecting him. I’m glad she’s standing by her children. Especially for Darren, after the rebuke she gave him a few minutes ago.

Suddenly, Darren’s grandfather is standing next to Willmore and grabs his upper arm.

“You heard my daughter-in-law. Get out of our house right now and stay away from Dana,” he threatens. “Or your nose will be the least of your problems.”

Willmore gasps in indignation. But then he turns and hurries away.

I push past Dana to Darren and touch his arm. He’s still in his boxers and I’m in my pajamas. We could be naked in bed. Instead, he’s beating up his future brother-in-law.

“We should go,” I whisper. “I’ll fix you up.”

Darren doesn’t say a word as I grab his hand and wordlessly pull him behind me. We walk past his grandfather and his father, who is still speechless. So is his mother. I don’t know if it’s right to take him out of there and leave Dana alone, but there’s nothing more he can do for his sister.

We walk silently up the stairs to our room. Once there, I push Darren onto the bed and go into the bathroom. I turn on the water and hold a washcloth under it. Then I come back to him with it and a towel in my hand.

Darren is sitting on the bed looking at his iPhone.

“Hey,” I say and he looks at me. “Want me to fix you up?”

“If it’s a hot roll in the hay, I’d like that better.” He grins and pulls me astride his lap. I set the towel down beside us and dab the blood from his nose and lip. Darren lets me do it without comment.

“You can fly back tonight,” he says suddenly and at first, I think I’ve misheard him.

“Why?” I want to know and step back to look at him. “We’re leaving the day after tomorrow anyway.”

“I’m not coming,” he says, pressing his lips together.

“What do you mean, you’re not coming?” I ask, dabbing at the cuts with the towel. Darren grabs my hand to stop me.

“I’m staying here,” he says firmly. “Dana needs me. Her whole life has collapsed around her and...”

“Then I’ll stay too,” I offer. “I don’t want to leave you.”

“No,” he says firmly, and my heart slips into my stomach. The coldness in his voice makes me freeze. “You have to write your exams and ... and I have to do this by myself.”

I don’t know what to say and get up from his lap. His rejection hits me hard. For me, we are past the point of shutting each other out when things are bad. I don’t understand him. Was I just imagining what’s been going on between us

these past few days? It can't be. I may be inexperienced in many things, but I'm not an idiot.

"My first exam is only next week," I remind him. "I can stay Darren."

"I said no," he replies harshly, standing up to put some distance between us. I look at him without understanding.

"And what are you going to do here? Your sister is devastated and I'm sure she wants to be left alone."

"And who's going to handle the guests for the wedding, clean Willmore's shit out of our house, help Dana move out of the house they share? My mother? She'll be busy restoring my sister's social standing as soon as her maternal instincts die out, and nothing else."

"Fine, but what about your grandfather and your father?" I look at Darren questioningly. "I don't want to leave you alone. It's not that I want to get involved in your family business. You need someone when ... when all this is happening."

"I'm brave, baby." Darren pulls me close. I wrap my arms around him desperately, hoping he won't send me away. Even though it's ridiculous. He's made it clear that he doesn't need me here anymore. I was just a means to an end for a wedding that won't happen.

This realization breaks my heart, but an end with grief is probably better than grief without an end.

Dana must feel the same way.

"I... I should pack," I mutter in resignation and pull away from him. I turn around so he doesn't see that I'm on the verge of tears. I don't want to leave him, but he leaves me no choice. Without looking at Darren, I go to the bathroom to get dressed and have a moment to myself. All the wonderful things we've experienced together, the conversations we've had. Surely, he won't throw that all away, because he's completely beside himself right now.

"Shall I book you a flight?" he calls from the room, but I don't answer. Hot tears roll down my cheeks. I had imagined everything going so wonderfully, and now it's a big disaster.

“I’ll book you a flight and ... and I can drive you to the airport.”

My sadness gives way to hot anger within seconds. I turn around and yank the door open. Darren is still standing in the middle of the room, iPhone in hand, waiting for my answer.

“Is that all you have to say?” I hiss. “You want to book me a flight?”

“I just thought you...”

“Stop thinking,” I yell. “Why are you doing this? I mean, I... I could be wrong, but I don’t think so. Not even an hour ago you wanted to sleep with me and now you’re kicking me out the door?”

“It’s not like that.”

“What is it like? It’s obvious it was all for show, wasn’t it?”

Darren chokes up and shakes his head. But I don’t want to argue with him. Let him book me a flight and I’ll get out of here.

“It wasn’t a show, but what are you still doing here?”

I ignore him, go to my suitcase and start packing. Darren says nothing else and watches me for a while until he starts to move.

Suddenly he grabs my hand and pulls me towards him.

“It wasn’t a show,” he assures me, trying to meet my gaze, but I avoid it. “I just have a lot of things to take care of right now and ... and that takes time.”

“You don’t think I understand,” I ask. “I do Darren. What I don’t understand is that after the last few days and everything that’s happened between us ... what am I talking about? You used me just like everyone else before me.”

“I didn’t...” He purses his lips and looks seriously offended. “How could you think that?”

“How could you kick me out?” I snap at him in anger.

He remains silent and I turn away. I pack my things while he gets dressed and books a late afternoon flight to Chicago. I'll have to ask Sienna to pick me up. I don't like it, but I don't see any other way to get back to Lincoln.

"Your flight leaves at five," Darren says matter-of-factly. "I can take you there and..."

"I don't want you to take me," I hiss and close my suitcase. "Your chauffeur can do that."

"But..."

"But nothing," I interrupt him. "I'm saying goodbye to your family."

Ignoring Darren, I walk out the door with my purse in my hand and head downstairs to the living room. The excitement seems to have died down.

Darren's parents and Dana look surprised when I appear with my bag, followed by Darren with my suitcase.

"Millie." Dana jumps up and comes over to me. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going home," I say. "And I wanted to say goodbye and thank you for your hospitality."

"You're not leaving because of this morning, are you?" Dana wants to know worriedly and looks at her brother.

"No," I say reassuringly. "It was nice to meet you."

She still seems overwhelmed but pulls me into her arms. "It was nice to meet you too." Her grip tightens. "I hope Darren sees what he has in you and fights for you."

Surprised, I look at her, but she just winks at me and lets go. I hope the same, but right now I'm so disappointed in him that I never want to see him again. He used me and now that he doesn't need me anymore, he's sending me away. I didn't expect him to be so callous that he would take my virginity and pretend to have feelings for me. Not even from Darren.

"It's a shame you're leaving so soon, Millie," Mrs. Andrews says, "I hope to see you soon."

“Yes,” I murmur. I don’t know how else to respond. Mr. Andrews gives me a polite, distant goodbye, too. This family is not my world. So, I turn and walk out of the house, ignoring Darren.

My taxi is waiting and Darren follows me to give the driver the money and my suitcase.

“Have a good trip,” he says again and I turn to him. “I’ll call you when I get back to Lincoln.”

I don’t say anything because I don’t know what Darren wants to hear. He doesn’t have to call me and the fact that his family is behind him belies his words. As if that wasn’t enough to break my heart, he takes a step towards me. Darren leans in to kiss me. I turn away at the last second and hear someone catch their breath.

“Don’t,” I whisper. “Don’t humiliate me any further by keeping up this charade.”

I turn for good and get into the cab. The door slams shut behind me and the driver gets in as well.

“Start driving,” I tell him. He nods and starts the engine.

I look back out the window at Darren. His lips are pressed together and his hands are in his pockets.

Tears run down my face and I wonder what on earth I have done to deserve this.

Chapter 16

Darren

Two weeks later

I enter the barn to get Hurricane out of his stall and take him for a ride, as I have been doing almost every day for the past two weeks. Since Dana and Willmore's wedding fell through, I've been spending a lot of time at the ranch. Mostly to get away from all the family drama. Sighing, I walk over to Hurricane and stroke the white patch on his forehead. He whinnies softly and nudges my hand. I never thought it would be possible to stay in Texas for two weeks straight. Let alone live under the same roof as my family—including my mother—and still feel at home. First and foremost, Grandpa and I took care of everything so that Dana was free to leave Willmore and cancel the wedding. Even my mother had the good sense to pitch in instead of wallowing in self-pity. Willmore briefly threatened to press charges against me until Grandpa explained that if he did, he'd want the money he'd put into his company at the beginning of his relationship with Dana, back. As a result, the dumbass never contacted me again. Dana is recovering well and even laughs at the occasional joke.

My dad is trying to understand me better. He talks to me and asks me questions about my life in Lincoln which would have been unthinkable before. Last night I was throwing some balls in the backyard. He came over and joined me. Without saying anything, without questioning me, without trying to make me understand that there is no future in any of this.

I feel comfortable in Texas, but I still miss home, especially Millie.

I pull open the door to Hurricane's stall and lead him out by his halter to tie him up a few feet away and get him ready for the ride.

Looking back, I don't even know why I sent Millie home. The look on her face as I went to kiss her one last time by the car almost tore my heart out. I didn't reject her because she meant nothing to me, but because I didn't know how to deal with her still being here. My family is so weird, so broken and

twisted in its own way – as Millie would say – that I didn't want her to have to deal with them. We barely knew each other, we just had really good sex. That's not how I imagine getting serious with a girl. Yes, I'm an asshole and I've slept with more girls than I know what to do with in the past, but with Millie – I wanted to do it right for once. But then I did it all wrong. The first few days, she ignored my calls. Left my messages unanswered. Now they are not being delivered and my calls are not going through. She must have blocked me.

Maybe I should admit to myself that I have suffered a major loss with Millie, from which I am only slowly recovering.

The stirrups clank as they touch the loops on the saddle and I tighten them on Hurricane's belly.

"You ready, boy?" He lifts his head and I lead him out of the stall and into the yard as Dana comes up on Lady from the opposite stall.

"Hey," she says after I swing onto Hurricane's back. "Mind if I ride with you?"

"No," I reply, waiting for her to catch up. "Not at all."

"Great," Dana replies. "Are we going to the lake?"

"Sure."

I spur Hurricane on and Dana does the same. At a leisurely pace, we ride side by side in silence.

"Thanks Darren," she says suddenly, and I look over at her.

"For what?" I want to know. "There's nothing to thank me for."

"I couldn't have made it through the last two weeks without you," she admits. "I might have even considered forgiving him and..."

"Dana," I exclaim indignantly, shaking my head. "Are you crazy? That bastard never deserved you. Why didn't you leave him a long time ago?"

“I don’t know,” she mumbles, shrugging her shoulders. Dana seems understandably sad about the end of their relationship, but also relieved that she didn’t marry him. “We were together for so long, and I... I wasn’t sure I wanted to throw that away. He had good qualities, too.”

“He cheated on you constantly, in the end even with your best friend,” I growl and look at her. “On top of that, he slapped you for his actions. You don’t deserve that, Dana. No one does.”

“I know that,” she replies emphatically. “I admitted that, too. Better late than never.”

“That’s true.” I smile sincerely at her. Better late than never, I should get my ass over to Lincoln and talk to Millie.

Dana and I reach the lake and dismount. We tie the horses to a tree. Just like Millie and I did two weeks ago, we walk down the wooden footbridge and sit down at the end. Immediately my brain is flooded with memories of that afternoon. After confessing that we liked each other, I trampled on that confession less than twenty-four hours later.

I drop down onto the dock and pull my legs up to my body, resting my forearms on my knees. Dana sits down next to me.

“Do you miss her?” my sister wants to know and I nod hesitantly. “Why did you send her away?”

“I don’t know,” I say, running a hand through my hair, “after I taught Willmore ... well, a lesson...”

“You broke his nose.” My sister tries to sound stern, but finally has to grin broadly.

“All right,” I admit. “After that, Millie and I went upstairs. Something went off in my head. I... I didn’t know how to face her without the ... the deal and ... and what to do with my feelings for her.”

“The deal?” Dana raises her eyebrows with a grin. “I knew something was wrong the moment I saw her.”

I can’t help but laugh and nod. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“It was too amusing to see you falling for a girl who didn’t fit your stereotype.”

“Thanks. And I didn’t ... fall for her.”

“Oh, please!” Dana laughs hard. For the first time in two weeks, she laughs heartily. To my sorrow, yes, but she’s laughing nonetheless, and that means an incredible amount to me. “The way you looked at her and how possessive you were with her... You wouldn’t have done that if it was just a deal. Who is she really, Darren?”

Dana looks at me and brushes a strand of hair from her face. I shrug my shoulders.

“I don’t know,” I say honestly. “It’s true that Millie is best friends with Denver’s girlfriend, Sienna, and also that we have mutual friends at Lincoln and that’s how we know each other. But I doubt she is who she says she is.”

“What do you mean?” my sister asks, raising her eyebrows.

“Before I got to know her better because of your wedding, I thought that...”

“Okay, okay.” Dana holds up her hand and laughs. “Start from the beginning, and then we’ll talk about who she is and who she isn’t.”

“All right.” I sigh and grin at her. “Millie started business school at Lincoln last fall. She met Sienna in a class they took together and they became friends. That’s how she got into our group. At Lincoln, she’s always very shy, reserved, and kind of ... boring. The one thing that always impressed me was that she’s a total football pro. But then, most fans are. She was the perfect choice to keep Mother happy. Besides, I needed someone I could trust. She wasn’t my first choice, but ... who cares? Phoenix is in Europe.”

“You have a very strange way of finding true love,” Dana remarks with a grin.

I roll my eyes.

“I went to see her and wanted to ask her if she ... if she and I, if she would help me...” I continue. “Millie agreed and

suddenly we were so close and ... and she ... she wasn't wearing the boring clothes she usually wears; she was really sexy."

I remember her standing in front of me in her black top and leggings. It was nothing special, but unlike her other outfits, it was really pretty.

"I kissed her ... and we made love."

"Really?" Dana asks incredulously, rolling her eyes. "It escalated that quickly?"

"Obviously," I reply, suppressing the comment about Millie being a virgin. Dana would draw and quarter me if she knew. "After that, everything between us took on a life of its own."

"It's called love at first sight," my sister continues, and now it's my turn to roll my eyes. Love at first sight, what nonsense! It would have been love at first sight if I had fallen in love with her the first time I saw her. But I didn't. Until I needed her help. She was always there, but so far away. When I allowed myself to get to know her, I thought she was great. Oh shit, it can't be true.

"Darren," Dana says, looking at me lovingly. "There's nothing wrong with you falling in love with her even if she's not what you thought. You know what I mean?"

"I guess I do," I mumble, looking out at the lake. "I always thought I liked my life in Lincoln, and I still do, but Millie, she ... she understood our world and me in a strange way. I don't know much about her. She barely talks about her family and her past before college, but I know we're more alike than we first thought. She ... she didn't want to leave."

I whisper the last part because I feel uncomfortable about kicking her out.

"I know," Dana says sympathetically. "Why did you send her away?"

"I didn't want to burden her with my problems."

"Darren." My sister moans. "If I was a guy, I'd headbutt you, but since I'm not, I won't." I laugh softly as she gives me

a dirty look. “You don’t burden them with your problems because your problems are theirs too. I can’t believe I have to explain relationship 101 to you when you’re twenty-two. It was natural for Millie to stand by you, just like she did when things were good. And you, you fool, you put her in a cab and sent her away.”

“I know it was wrong,” I grumble. “And she’s been ignoring me ever since. Are you satisfied?”

“She’s got more guts than I first thought.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, annoyed.

“It means she knows exactly what she wants and who she is,” Dana says. “Millie is anything but a shy little girl looking up to the big football star.”

“I like it when she...”

“Darren,” Dana hisses, slapping my arm. “Don’t even say it. Your sex life ... let’s not talk about it.”

Now I can’t help but laugh. There was nothing sexual in my thoughts. I just think it’s cute when Millie looks up at me. She always has that sparkle in her eyes and the corners of her mouth lift in an honest smile.

“I wasn’t thinking about sex until you mentioned it,” I mumble. “Thanks, too.”

Because it reminds me that I haven’t had sex in two weeks and I really need to get laid. I’m really, really ready to have sex. Sex with Millie, but as long as she’s ignoring me, I can forget about it.

“And now you’re thinking about sex?” My sister is having the time of her life. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re not sorry, Dana.” I grin and wink at her. “Do you think about it?”

“Not since...” She stops herself and shakes her head. “Back to Millie and you. What are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know,” I confess. “As long as I’m here, I feel like I can’t do anything.”

“You’re scared.” Dana claps her hands. Slowly but surely, her glee at my failure is starting to annoy me.

“So what?” I wave her off. “She’s done with me.”

“And you just give up?” Dana prods. “Did you give up when you wanted your scholarship or a starting spot on the team? Did you give up because Mom and Dad had other plans for you?”

“That was different.”

“Why, Darren?” Dana wants to know, looking at me with wide eyes. “Because you might fail this time?”

“Yes.” I hate to admit that I’m plagued by serious fears of failure this time. But I can’t deny it. I’m afraid Millie will reject me again. I hurt her, I realize now, and I have no idea how to apologize. I’m not good at it. And when I think of Denver’s pathetic attempts to wrap Sienna around his finger, I feel my head spin.

“You won’t,” Dana says, smiling at me. “When you explain to Millie why you did what you did and why you are the way you are, she’ll understand. I’m sure she will.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Didn’t you think she was more like you than you thought before?”

“Yes, but...” I shake my head. “I don’t know if that’s really the case. I’m sure that who she is in Lincoln is not her true self. But I have no idea what her true nature is.”

Dana nods and pulls her iPhone out of her jeans. I look at her questioningly, but she says nothing, typing instead.

“The first time I saw Millie, she looked familiar,” my sister says, and my eyes widen. “At first I didn’t know where from, and I asked Willmore, but he couldn’t remember either. Anyway, I kept thinking and then it hit me. She looks like a former classmate of mine.”

Confused, I look at my sister. She went to Harvard. Probably every other girl there looks like Millie if she dresses right. Millie is not a middle-class American girl, as evidenced

by her demeanor, her eloquence, and her wardrobe. The clothes in her suitcase are more than any normal girl could afford. Not even Dana and I have such expensive clothes. The red dress, which still gives me a hard-on just thinking about it, was made by an up-and-coming young designer from Chicago. Absolutely nothing a middle-class girl could afford. During our conversation by the lake, she gave me a little peek behind the facade, but didn't reveal enough of herself for me to draw any conclusions.

“Look,” Dana says, holding up her cell phone. “Right here to my left is Maya McDonald.”

I pick up the phone and look at the dark-haired beauty next to my sister. Sure enough, I see some resemblance to Millie. The eyes, the nose, the hair. But it could just be a coincidence.

“So?” I ask, handing it back to her. “I mean, yes, they look alike, but what are you trying to tell me?”

“Jesus, Darren,” Dana says. “And you play football? Really?”

“What does this have to do with football?” I ask, confused. “Would you please do me a favor and enlighten me?”

“Maya McDonald has been running the McDonald's franchise that includes the Minneapolis Warriors for the past year,” my sister explains, and I straighten up. The team from the north of the United States is one of the best in the NFL and is highly coveted by rookies. The best players in each year's draft don't have much of a chance of joining them because they are always drafted pretty far down the order. “The club is still run by her grandfather, Roger McDonald.”

Dana shows me a picture of the old man I know and respect. What he has built over the past decades is unparalleled. The whole family is involved in the business, working in various positions. Roger has been running the club with strict discipline for almost forty years – at least that's what we hear internally. His son Harold will take over soon.

“So what?” I push. “Get to the point, Dana.”

“I knew Maya had a younger sister who, according to Harvard rumors, will succeed her grandfather in a few years. I guess her father is being passed over,” Dana reports, holding her iPhone out to me. “Millie McDonald. Congratulations, Brother, the lady of your heart is a future owner of an NFL club.

I take the iPhone from Dana and stare at the screen in front of me. At the image that seems so surreal and strange that I can hardly believe it. There she is, my Millie, standing on Taget Field with her grandfather. The picture is less than three weeks old. It must have been taken around the time of the college finals. At the time, Millie said she had to study and couldn't be there. In truth, she wasn't there because she's going to own the place one day. Holy crap!

Millie is going to own a football club!

It explains her enthusiasm for the sport I love so much, her precision when discussing a game with us that would make some coaches blanch, and last but not least, her prophecy about my future. She knows exactly what she's talking about because she's going to inherit all of this one day.

But even worse, I fell in love with one of the richest girls in the USA.

Chapter 17

Millie

Two days later, Lincoln, Illinois

For the umpteenth time, I close Darren's chat and throw the iPhone on my bed. He's back in Lincoln and he wants to talk. It's been two weeks. A month has passed since he sent me home. When he was in Texas, I was better able to avoid a confrontation. Knowing he's back in the same town makes me uncomfortable. I miss him. Besides, today is Joy's birthday and we will inevitably run into each other. Damn it. I don't want to miss him because he won't miss me. For two weeks now, Darren has been bugging me, so that I don't tell anyone what's going on at his house and what his family is like. I especially don't understand his mother. She's not a mother in my eyes, she's a woman who stands her ground and will never allow her family to be dishonored. No matter if her children suffer or not.

In recent days, I have been tempted to respond to his messages and agree to a meeting. I'd like to know how Dana is doing and if she's gotten over the breakup with Willmore. But I don't have the heart to ask Darren. If I give him my little finger, he'll probably take my whole hand.

To this day, I can only vaguely explain what made him send me away. I suspect that he himself did not know what was right and what was wrong. On the other hand, I can understand him. He was overwhelmed by the situation, and then there I was, needing explanations for his behavior. Our being together for a while, and having phenomenal sex, was wrong.

At least for me. I want all of him or nothing.

To hell with Darren Andrews.

I didn't tell Sienna or Joy the circumstances of my departure. I just let them know that I left after the wedding fell through because the family had a lot to sort out and I had to study. Fortunately, they didn't question it and realized that I didn't want to talk about it. Since then, I have been trying to cut Darren out of my life. It only partially works.

I passed all my exams even though I didn't study for them. I couldn't stop thinking about Darren. The idiot drives me crazy. He doesn't deserve that I think about him all the time.

I leave the small bathroom in my dorm, which only annoys me, and go to my closet. Luckily, Amanda is with her family in Alabama. If she were here, I wouldn't get a moment's peace. She would keep asking me about Darren and our time together in Texas. She is the last person I want to talk to about it. I might as well shout it out in the campus cafeteria.

The trip to Texas also taught me that I need to start being myself again and stop playing this shy girl that got me into this whole mess. That's not who I am and Darren is right when he says I don't need to hide. I made my friends because they like who I am. Not everything was an act. The deeper our connection became, the more I revealed about myself. I may never be able to be as open with other people as Sienna. If she hadn't approached me when we were in class together, we wouldn't have become friends. Likewise, I'll probably never be able to talk about the cruder things in life as bluntly as Joy or make my point to Darren as clearly as Phoenix did to Jake. But I don't want to be the dull mouse anymore.

It's time to show my friends who I really am. If they're anything like the girls in high school, I guess I'm out of luck. I will also have to tell Darren the truth at some point if we ever speak again. I like that he called me sexy. It made me feel good. I've never gotten such a nice compliment from a guy before. Especially one as hot as him. Before I tell Sienna and Joy the truth, I want to wait until tonight to be one hundred percent sure. Or maybe I'm just stalling because I'm afraid of how they'll react.

The knock on the door jolts me out of my thoughts and I raise my eyebrows. I don't have an appointment with anyone. Maybe it's for Amanda. As soon as my friends know, I'll move into my apartment and get rid of that stupid woman once and for all.

I quickly pull on my shirt and open the door. My heart starts pounding and I want to slam the door. Of all people, Darren is standing in front of me.

“Hi,” he says, smiling at me. “Since you avoided my calls and my messages went unanswered for two weeks. I thought I’d stop by.”

I open my mouth and close it again, unable to respond to his audacity. Instead, I look at Darren. His beard is longer than when I left. He’s wearing a black hoodie with the Lincoln Tigers logo, jeans and a winter jacket. It’s still damn cold in Illinois.

“I don’t have time,” I reply, avoiding his gaze. “I’ll see you at Joy’s later.”

I start to close the door, but he blocks it with his foot.

“Please let’s talk,” he whispers. “I want to explain myself.”

“And I don’t want to hear your explanation,” I counter confidently. “I understand that you don’t want me in your life now that you don’t need me anymore. But...”

“It’s not like that at all,” he interrupts, looking past me into the room. “Are you alone?”

“Yes,” I say. “But I’m still not letting you in.”

“I’ll be happy to explain it to you in the hallway, and everyone will understand,” he replies, a victorious grin on his lips. I clench my hands. He can’t be serious. “Is that what you want? I’m going to talk about our sex life in detail.”

I narrow my eyes to slits and take a deep breath. The asshole. Of course I don’t want that.

“All right,” I finally give in and take a step back. “Come on in.”

“Thanks,” Darren whispers and walks past me into the room. His aftershave wafts around my nose and I try not to let the memories flood back.

I just need to think about something else. Something ... not about Darren.

Of course, it doesn’t work.

After closing the door behind me, I turn around and cross my arms over my chest.

“What do you want to explain?” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

“When did you become so angry?” He smiles, but immediately shakes his head when I don’t respond to his joke. “Sorry.”

“I’m furious, Darren,” I counter, throwing my hands in the air in exasperation. “This has nothing to do with being angry. You asked me to go with you to your family’s house. You went to bed with me and told me you liked me. Why in the world did you send me home and push me away when you needed me the most? You told me to be the Millie I really am, and I was. I guess you don’t like that either. What the hell do you want from me?”

He looks at me, lips pressed tightly together, and just as I’m about to say something else, he grabs me. He pulls me against him with a tug. I gasp in shock as his left arm wraps around my waist like a vise. His right hand slides down my neck.

“You,” he mumbles, licking his lips. “I want you, and that scared the hell out of me. I’ve... I’ve never... I mean...” He stops and closes his eyes. “I’ve fallen in love with you.”

I jerk, startled, because I can’t believe what he’s saying. The corners of Darren’s mouth twitch slightly. I search for the lie and the mischief in his eyes, but I can’t find it.

He’s telling the truth.

“What is it?” he wants to know and his hand moves from my neck to my cheek. He caresses it gently with his thumb. “Don’t you believe me?”

“Yes, I do,” I answer hastily. “I mean, I’m... I’m surprised.”

“Why?” He smiles. “Didn’t you expect me to tell you the truth?”

“That, too.” I take a deep breath and look into his eyes. “First of all, I’m surprised that you have feelings for me, too.”

“Understandable. I didn’t exactly show my best side.”

“No,” I say, leaning towards him. “And just so you know, I’ve fallen in love with you too. The more I got to know the real Darren, the stronger my feelings became.”

“You were in love with me before?” he wants to know, sounding surprised. I roll my eyes demonstratively. This guy is so oblivious when it comes to feelings.

“Honestly, Darren,” I say. “Why else would I have let you take my virginity and talk me into such a crazy idea? I... I thought maybe if you got to know me, you’d like me.”

“Oh, baby.” He cups my face in his hands and kisses me softly. “I’m so sorry for being so stupid for so long.”

“You weren’t stupid,” I assure him, letting my fingers dance across his temple. “You were ignorant.”

“Ignorance is no defense for stupidity,” he says, and I can’t help but laugh.

“And now that you’re knowledgeable and smart...” Chuckling, I tilt my head slightly. “Just kiss me again.”

“A very good idea,” he agrees, pressing his lips to mine. Longingly, I surrender to the kiss and snuggle up against him. Darren’s grip on my body tightens. His hands wrap around my waist and I nestle against him. Damn, I’ve missed this so much. I’ve missed him. The kiss becomes more passionate as I open my lips a little to welcome his tongue. Darren’s hands run down my body to my butt and he lifts me up. He carries me to the bed and sits on it with me on his lap.

We pull apart and I look at him. He looks back at me then kisses me again.

“How’s Dana?” I ask and he grins.

“We’re making up and you want to talk about my sister?” he asks. “Mood killer.”

“Sorry,” I mutter. “I know you don’t want to talk about her. I just thought that...”

“No, no. Don’t worry,” Darren shakes his head. “She’s fine. She’s taking it relatively well. She said to say hello to you and that she’d be happy to see you again.”

“I’d like that too,” I reply in a good mood. But for now, I’m happy to have Darren with me and not have to avoid him the whole evening.

“Shit,” I exclaim and his eyes widen. “The party.”

“What are you talking about?” he asks, irritated. I want to get up, but Darren’s grip on my hip tightens and he pulls me back down onto his lap. So hard that I can feel his hardness beneath me. His cock presses against the fabric of his jeans, wanting to be released into the open.

“Joy’s party,” I explain. “We ... so we ... what are we doing?”

Darren furrows his eyebrows, not seeming to understand what I mean. But it’s obvious. The question is whether we’re together or not. Usually, you are if you’re both in love with each other, right? I bite my lip and look at him with big eyes because he still hasn’t said anything.

“What do you want to do?” he answers with a smile.

“I definitely want to go.”

“Then what?” he asks. “Millie, I know what you want, and I want it too, but I need to hear it from you.”

“Why?” I grumble.

He laughs and plants a kiss on my lips. I really have to get used to this. These kisses, which we can exchange at any time now, are new to me, but no less beautiful.

“Because it’s important,” he says. “You have to talk to me, tell me what you want. And then we’ll do some really fantastic things.” Towards the end, his voice takes on a noticeably rougher tone, and his lips brush down my neck to my earlobe, which he bites gently. It’s clear to me that he hasn’t been concerned about the party for a while.

“Darren,” I scold him. “Stay on topic.”

“I want you, baby,” he whispers, pulling my shirt off. “I’ve been thinking of nothing but your sexy fucking body for the last two weeks and before you start thinking about it now, no!”

“What do you mean?” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

“I’m not here because the sex is amazing, but because you are.”

Grinning, I look at him and place my lips on his. I wrap my arms around his neck and rub my crotch over his cock. Darren moans into the kiss and unbuckles my bra so I can slide it off my shoulders. He looks at me and runs his hands down my side to my breasts. Darren's hands cup them because they are so damn small. He seems to like it though, and when he leans down and takes my nipples in his mouth, I don't mind anymore.

Chapter 18

Millie

“Where are you going?” Darren pulls me to him as I try to get out of bed. “Stay here.”

“I want to get ready for the party.” I turn around in his arms and look at him, smiling. We’re both naked and lying in my small bed, which isn’t even big enough for Darren alone. He pulls me onto him and runs his fingers down my bare back.

“How about we stay here?” he suggests, kissing my shoulder. “We’ve just settled in nicely.”

“Settled in?” I shake my head at his choice of words and he presses his pelvis against mine. “Darren, no.”

I put my hands on his shoulders to move away from him. When my upper body lifts slightly, he takes full advantage and covers my breasts with kisses.

“I bet Sienna and Denver are having sex too,” he continues unabashedly and I roll my eyes. “The best is always saved for last.”

“Too bad we have to be at the meeting point in an hour. We’ve already wasted too much time.”

“Fine,” he growls and lets me go. “Will you sleep at my place tonight?”

I look at him in surprise and nod. It’s nice that he wants me to stay with him and that we can be as close as we were in Texas. Besides, I’m sure Darren’s bed is a lot bigger. I realize that I’ve never been in his room in Lincoln. We’ve only had sex in my bed.

“I’ve never been to your place,” I say, running my fingers over his chest, “what can I expect there?”

“A much bigger bed.” He grins and steals a kiss. Darren slaps my ass, making me moan. “Come on, we need to get ready. The sooner we get to Joy’s, the sooner we can go home.”

I laugh and get out of bed. Darren turns on his side and shamelessly watches me slip into my underwear. To my surprise I don't even feel uncomfortable. Almost nothing makes me uncomfortable with him, but I'm afraid he's going to put me in some awkward positions later in the evening. I wonder how much the guys know. I swallow and bite my lip. The first time we slept together, and even when we had sex in Texas, it wasn't official between us. Maybe he looked at me like he had all his conquests before. Bile rises in my mouth at the thought of him talking about having sex with me in front of the guys.

"Millie?" Darren is standing right in front of me. "Is everything okay? Your look got so ... so glum and panicked. Are you sore?"

His hand caresses my butt and I shake my head.

"No," I say honestly, kissing his chest, "I was just thinking about the guys."

"Okay." He stretches out the word and raises his eyebrows. "And what were you thinking?"

"Did you tell them?" I ask, looking at him urgently.

"Tell them what?"

"About us... I mean, did you tell Denver, Jake and Tyler about us?"

"Not about what you think," he explains. "I talked to them about whom to take to Texas. After we slept together the first time, I was confused because I realized that it went way beyond "having fun". I talked to Tyler."

"Oh," is all I say, "and ... and what did he say?"

"Not much," Darren replies. "What was he supposed to say? He was pissed that I left."

"I was too," I agree with Tyler. "And if you do it again, you can go to hell."

"I know." He grins and kisses me softly. "Did you tell the girls?"

“Yes,” I say. “They gave me a look... I think. Then it just poured out of me. Are you angry?”

“No.” Darren looks at me sincerely. “Are you angry?”

“No,” I answer with a smile. “I was just afraid that you would make fun of my inexperience. I’ve heard you talk about your conquests often enough and...”

“I think I need to set the record straight.” Gently, Darren lifts my chin with his index finger and looks at me urgently. “You are not one of my conquests, you never were. You are my friend. And we don’t talk about sex with our girlfriends. Well, okay, no one except Denver has. But he doesn’t talk about what he does in bed with Sienna, at least not like he used to. Sometimes he nods in agreement when we throw something out in the room. I have to be honest with you. But we ... we don’t ask him about Sienna’s preferences. I wouldn’t want to. It’s none of Denver’s, Tyler’s or Jake’s business what we do in bed.”

“Thank you,” I say with relief. “Joy and Sienna were impressed with you.”

“How am I supposed to take that?” Darren raises his eyebrows. “What did you tell them?”

“Are you worried?” I tease him. He pokes me in the side. “I told them I came because you went down on me and ... and it wasn’t the first time. That impressed them and ... pleased them. And I kept telling them how wonderful it was.”

“Even though you were in so much pain?” There’s regret in his eyes, and I nod.

“I guess that was part of it.” I shrug. “It was great after that. I promise.”

To highlight my words, I plant a kiss on his lips. I keep the fact that Sienna asked how big his dick was to myself.

Darren suddenly laughs, which I don’t understand. I would have expected him to be angry.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” he teases me and steals another kiss.

“No, why?”

“You manage to turn me on so much with a shy and obviously embarrassing statement that I’d like to get you back into bed and...”

“That’s really normal, isn’t it?” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

“What?”

“Well ... that when you’re first together you only think about one thing.”

“Of course it’s normal,” Darren says almost horrified and kisses me passionately. “But six months and a year from now, you’ll still be thinking about that one thing. Sex with me is heaven, baby.”

I don’t care if he thinks sex with him is divine. All I care about is that he still wants to be with me six months and a year from now.

Endless discussion later, Darren parks his Audi in front of Joy’s dorm and we get out. Sienna, Denver, Tyler and Jake are waiting for us. We all miss Phoenix a lot, especially on nights like this. She is part of our group and you can feel something is missing. Darren circles the car and approaches me. Unsure what to do, I stop.

He looks at me questioningly and raises his eyebrows.

“Are you okay?” he wants to know and I nod. “Or don’t you want them to know we’re together? It’s okay, Millie.”

“No, that’s not it,” I assure him. “I want them to know. I’m just not sure how they’re going to take it.”

“Why is that?” Darren frowns. I sigh because I have to explain it to him. But it’s obvious.

“They’re our friends and ... and maybe they think it’s weird that we’re a couple. It might hurt the group dynamic.

“The group dynamic?” he asks incredulously. “Why would it hurt the group dynamic? Sienna and Denver aren’t hurting the group dynamic.”

“No, but what if we want to do something without them that they also want to do?”

I quickly realize that I am desperately looking for reasons to avoid being cross-examined by our friends.

“Millie.” Darren’s voice is sharp and makes me jump. “If you don’t want to make this official, that’s fine with me. We don’t have to rush it. Don’t make excuses.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” he says. “Let’s go see them. Like we’re friends.”

I smile at him, grateful that he is giving me the choice. Darren smiles back at me, locks the car and starts to move. Together we walk over to our friends. I greet Sienna first with a hug, then Tyler, Denver and Jake. Darren does the same.

“Here’s the card.” Denver hands it to me. “We’re still giving fifteen dollars each.”

It’s blue, like Joy’s hair these days, and it says ‘Happy Birthday’ in squiggly letters. Tyler offers me his back to sign. For a few seconds, I look at the names on the card and get stuck on ‘Sienna + Denver. If I had the courage to be honest with our friends, it would be ‘Millie + Darren’ instead of just our names. After signing, I hand the pen to Darren. And what does the idiot do? He writes ‘+ Darren’ after my name. Jake and Denver grin while Sienna winks at me. “Here’s the thirty dollars from us.”

Without comment Denver takes the money.

“What are you doing?” I ask indignantly, but Darren just laughs as Tyler stands up again.

“Oh, come on,” he says suddenly. “We’re not idiots and saw right away that there was more going on.”

I’m ashamed of how stupid I’ve been.

“We’re happy for you.” My best friend chimes in and I mumble a half-hearted “Thank you.”

Darren wraps his arms around me from behind and plants a kiss on my cheek. I immediately snuggle up against him. “These are our friends,” he reminds me.

“I know,” I mumble. “Sorry, guys.”

The three of them say nothing more and Darren lets go of me because I really don’t want to make it public in front of the rest of the party crowd.

After entering the big room in the basement of the dorm, we run into Joy and congratulate her. Sienna hands her our gift. Joy takes a quick look at the card and looks at me in surprise. Her eyebrows go up as if she has to silently ask what it means. I bite my lip as Darren winks at her and she immediately understands.

“Are we going to get some beer?” Denver turns to the guys. “I’m dying of thirst.”

“Here,” Darren says, handing me his car keys. “It’s safer with you.”

When they’re gone, I’m turned around and Sienna looks at me with big eyes.

“We want to know everything,” she says, and Joy nods hastily. “Every dirty detail.”

“So ... so ... there’s not that much to tell ... we ... we made up and we’re together.”

Suddenly the two of them pull me into a group hug.

“We’re so happy for you,” Joy exclaims, and Sienna agrees. “He’s so sweet to you. I wouldn’t have thought that about Darren.”

I nod and agree with Joy. If you didn’t know Darren, you wouldn’t believe what’s behind the campus playboy facade. I’m not just talking about his family, but the way he treats me and the way we talk. Darren is very kind to me.

“Thank you,” I reply. “And yeah ... he’s even more awesome than I told you.”

“You had a crush on him to begin with,” Joy blurts out, and Sienna nudges her. “What? It’s true.”

Joy laughs and says goodbye to us, leaving us to mingle with her other guests. Sienna and I go into the kitchen to get drinks.

“Did you have sex?” she asks suddenly and I look at her with wide eyes. Oh my God. Is it that obvious that we had sex? I must be red as a tomato again, which makes my best friend giggle. “I’ll take that reaction as a yes.”

“You know I’m not good at this.”

“Having sex?” she asks, and I roll my eyes. “I get it, I get it. Was it good?”

“Very,” I answer much more confidently now, and she winks at me.

We get drinks and mingle with the party crowd. I don’t take my eyes off Darren. I keep looking at him. His roommate Ethan is standing with him, along with a few other football players. Among them Denver, Tyler and Jake. Sienna and I talk to Hannah, who is also a business major. The exams went well for all of us. We didn’t feel like we totally messed up with any of them.

I sip my Coke and see Tiffany approaching Darren. I know he’s had sex with her in the past. As he has with so many other girls. It’s not easy for me to ignore that, and tonight I’ll be put to the test. Darren has told me that he is in love with me, but I don’t trust Tiffany.

I’m jealous.

Tiffany approaches him, grabs his forearm and strokes it with her artificial nails. Darren has pulled up the sleeves of his sweater. She touches his tattooed skin directly.

“That bitch,” I growl. “Tell her to keep her hands to herself.”

Sienna grins at me and clicks her tongue.

“I hate to break it to you, but you have to mark your territory. At first, I thought it would pass and the guys would figure it out, but they don’t. Tiffany & Co. doesn’t care if they say no.”

“I don’t want to get involved,” I say, annoyed. “I don’t want Darren to think I don’t trust him on our first night.”

“Millie, this has nothing to do with trust,” Sienna says. “Darren is your boyfriend, and you need to make that clear to Tiffany. And you also need to make it clear to Darren that his single life is over. It’s okay to be jealous. Anything else would be weird.”

“You think?” She raises her eyebrows and I sigh. “Okay, okay, I’ll go.”

Sienna and I walk over to them. It’s nothing out of the ordinary and Tiffany sees no reason to let go of Darren either. Denver grins at Sienna and pulls his girlfriend into his arms, which Brittany – Tiffany’s best friend – notices with a sniff. Sienna is right to say that we should trust the boys but still stake our territory.

“We haven’t seen each other in a while,” Tiffany sings, leaning against Darren. Her plump breasts, barely fitting into her top, press against his arm. I’m seething inside. Darren doesn’t look at her and continues his conversation with Jake. He pretends that Tiffany isn’t glued to him. I’m really well mannered, but at this moment my fuse is so damn short that I grab her arm and pull her around.

At first, she’s completely stunned, but she catches herself faster than I’d like.

“Hey,” Tiffany yells, giving me an angry look. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Darren turns around as well, and suddenly all the guests’ attention is on us. Shit, what have I done? Nervously, I look at Sienna who nods encouragingly.

“Get your hands off Darren.”

Tiffany looks at me and then at Brittany who laughs out loud. Tiffany joins in and pushes me. I take a step back. What

the hell is wrong with her? She needs to stop. I didn't do anything except ask her to keep her hands off my boyfriend.

"And who says so?" Arrogantly, as if it's clear that I'm a nobody, she raises her eyebrows. "You? Who are you?"

Tiffany crosses her arms in front of her breasts, pushing them even higher.

"It doesn't matter to you who I am," I answer calmly. "Keep your hands off my boyfriend."

"Your..." The color drains from Tiffany's face and she looks at Brittany to confirm my statement. She shrugs her shoulders. "You're his girlfriend?"

And as if her caustically arrogant tone wasn't enough, she points her manicured nail at Darren.

"I am," I reply just as venomously, taking another step towards her. "I'm Darren's girlfriend, and you're going to stay away from him from now on, or..."

"Or what?" she interrupts, standing in front of me. "Darren would never go to bed with a frigid little virgin like you."

"According to your statement, it's even less likely that I'm lying, isn't it?"

"Or you're hallucinating," she says, looking around the room. "Guys, she's gone crazy."

I roll my eyes and look at Darren. He's standing silently between us, watching the spectacle. So is half the party crowd now.

"If you think I'm crazy, fine. It doesn't change the fact that I'm his girlfriend."

"I've never seen him pay any attention to you," she throws at me. "Or am I wrong?"

"What do you want him to do?" I counter. "Hold my hand while he goes off to have a nice evening with his buddies, or better yet, send a memo to every cheerleader that his dick is off-limits to you all?"

Sienna gasps as some football players whistle until a look from Darren stops her. I could have left out that part about his dick.

Tiffany's attitude annoys me so much. She's not the center of the universe – especially not Darren's. She acts like she's his girlfriend and struts around campus like a queen. I get so annoyed with this player's wife attitude because of the fame the guys get. How many times did my grandfather have to ask our new recruits to walk because their girlfriends were acting like the goddesses of Taggart Field?

“Again, very slowly so you can take notes,” I say, taking another step towards Tiffany, “constantly holding my hand, kissing me, telling everyone how great our relationship is... Darren doesn't need that and neither do I. We're together because we want to be, not because we want something out of it.”

If Tiffany and everyone here knew who I was, every one of the players would be all over me. At least that's what I tell myself. I'm just so upset. I don't know where I got the courage to stand up to Tiffany. It's not like me at all. In fact, I'm afraid of these confrontations. That's why I've always made myself small and invisible. But this situation was the straw that broke the camel's back.

“Oh yeah?” Tiffany looks at me contemptuously again. “Darren will be sick of you soon anyway, because you have nothing to offer him.” To underline her words, she pushes her breasts forward, which are, of course, much bigger than mine. In my jeans, plain shirt and boots I can't compete with her party outfit. The dress is definitely too revealing. “Like you're ever going to live the life of a player's wife. Did someone slip something into your drink because you're talking big all of a sudden?”

Tiffany manages to make me so angry that I'm ready to tell her that I'm the heiress to an NFL club and come from a family of billionaires. But I didn't build this life to lose it in the first fight over Darren. But I also trust Tiffany not to believe me and continue to make me sound crazy. It does sound crazy now that I think about it. The chance of a student

becoming a billionaire at a college like Lincoln is highly unlikely.

“I don’t want to live the life of a player’s wife,” I counter. “Because, unlike you, I care about Darren’s character, not his reputation and status as a player. Because if he tears his ACL tomorrow, you wouldn’t care about him anymore.”

Darren pushes past Tiffany and grabs my arm. Immediately the whispering around us gets louder. Oh God, now I’m embarrassed again.

“I’m going to finish this really hot show of yours.” He grins and puts his hands on my butt, making the whispering even louder. “You’re so hot, baby. Jealousy suits you.”

“You’re impossible,” I hiss. “And you ... you enjoyed it.”

“Of course I enjoyed my girlfriend almost getting into a fight because she’s so jealous,” he continues, amused. “I just want you and what you said... I know you don’t want me because of my name or my status on this campus.”

Smiling, I look at him and wrap my arms around his neck.

“Guess I made it official, didn’t I?”

“Not one hundred percent. I’m about to,” he replies, placing his lips passionately on mine.

Chapter 19

Millie

One month later

I get out of bed and get dressed. Darren is sleeping on his stomach. His left arm is under the pillow, his right arm next to his toned body. Smiling, I look at him and lean in to plant a kiss between his shoulder blades. It's been a month since Joy's party, and I still can't believe I got into it with Tiffany. A few weeks ago, I would never have dared. But when I saw her shamelessly hitting on my boyfriend, something inside of me snapped. I couldn't stand by and watch. No girl can, because it's just the pits. I still don't think she's really going to keep her hands off him, but she's been warned. After Darren's cinematic kiss, she didn't dare go near him again, at least not that night.

And in other ways, being a football player's girlfriend seems to have elevated me to a new social standing at college. I'm suddenly being greeted by people who never noticed me before. It has the same effect as my net worth. I hate it. I realize I've got to come clean. It's time to put my cards on the table. Who I am, what I do, and most importantly, where I come from. I can't keep it from Darren any longer.

My iPhone rings and I grab it.

"Hey, Grandpa." I answer the call in a good mood. "How are you?"

"Hello my darling," he greets me and I can't help but grin. "I'm fine and you?"

"Me too, thank you."

"I have some great news for you."

"Oh yeah?" I look over at Darren, who is still fast asleep. "What is it?"

"This year's draft is just around the corner. While we've already made our selections, I want to start looking around for next year."

My stomach rumbles uncomfortably and I turn to Darren.

“I thought that’s what our scouts do at Combine.” I take a deep breath. “Besides, it’s too early to start looking for next year, Grandpa.”

I have to talk him out of it. There’s no way he can come here with his whole entourage. Especially not to see the players for next year. My boyfriend is one of them. Besides, I’m in Darren’s room and he could wake up at any moment.

“It’s never too early to look into the future,” he announces. “I made a list of players I liked at the college finals earlier this year.”

I swallow and run my fingers through my hair. Next year Denver, Jake, Tyler, and, of course, Darren are going to the draft. I can’t imagine my grandfather wanting to see my boyfriend. It would be kind of weird, but it would also make me proud if Darren is as good as I think he is.

“Who do you have on your list?” I ask. My heart is in my mouth.

“Denver Jones, the quarterback, and Darren Andrews, a defensive end. Do you know them?”

Even though I don’t like the fact that my grandpa wants to see Darren play, I can’t help but grin. I’m so happy for him. The Minneapolis Warriors are a really good team. We’ve won a couple of Super Bowls, but unfortunately, we haven’t been to the Finals in the last few years. That’s why my grandfather wants to bring in reinforcements. You can’t always trade. That’s why it’s smarter to draft young talent for the long term. Darren would be a perfect fit for our defense.

“Yes, I know them both.” I feign surprise and sit on the edge of the bed. “Why do you ask?”

“Perfect,” my grandfather says suddenly. He sounds a little too enthusiastic. “Then you can accompany me to the meeting. What do you think? It’ll make me seem friendlier.”

“You’re always friendly,” I reply, trying to figure out how to get out of this mess. I don’t want to go with him and reveal to all my friends and the rest of the team that I’m the fucking heir to a football franchise. I can’t do it. It would destroy

everything I've built up over the past few months. It could also ruin my relationship. I don't know how Darren will react when he finds out I'm a McDonald. Especially since I've been hiding it from him.

"I don't have time," I lie. "I have appointments."

"Your mom said you had a semester off," he says in surprise. I groan in frustration, which makes Darren stir. "Please, Millie."

"I don't know..." I stammer, "I've never made an official appearance alongside you and ... and the players are my friends."

"You are one of them, they know you and trust you and then they will trust me," he explains his plan. "I want to have the best players on my ... on our team, and if Denver Jones and Darren Andrews are that, then I need them. You're a McDonald."

"I know that," I say, turning to Darren, who slowly opens his eyes. "I have to go."

"Are you coming, Millie?"

"I ... yes... I'm coming," I agree, wanting to hang up before my boyfriend fully wakes up.

"Glad to hear it, sweetheart. See you next week."

"Bye," I mumble and hang up. I lower my iPhone and run my fingers through my hair. This can't be happening. As soon as the players hear that my grandpa is coming, they're going to go crazy. Especially Darren and Denver.

I open a chat with Sienna and Joy. I need to tell my friends and ask for their advice.

**Millie: Do you have time?*

I send the message and get up from the bed. Darren is awake and looks at me sleepily as I put on my jacket and grab

my bag. He sits up, exposing his muscular torso. Grinning, I look at him as my iPhone vibrates.

**Joy: When?*

**Sienna: Sure!*

**Millie: Now!*

I send them the address of my apartment in the city. If I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it. I want them to know everything. That way I have less to explain and more to show them. It's time they finally know who I am.

**Millie: Come to this address. I'll wait for you there.*

"Do you have to go?" asks Darren sleepily. I nod and lean over him. He puts his hand on my cheek and pulls me into a kiss. "Will I see you later?"

"Sure." I giggle and kiss him again. "I'm meeting Joy and Sienna."

"Have fun."

"Thanks." I kiss him one last time before finally pulling away and leaving his room.

I stand outside the entrance to the most luxurious apartment complex in Lincoln, waiting for Sienna and Joy. Nervously, I step from one foot to the other. The doorman looks at me curiously. I can't blame him. After all, I usually walk right into the apartment building. It won't be long before he comes to

talk to me. After all, I've been standing here for over ten minutes.

"Millie." Joy's voice snaps me out of my thoughts and I look up. "Sorry we're late."

"Hi," I greet them, hugging first Joy and then Sienna. "It's nice of you to make time for me."

They both nod and look up at the front of the building behind me. I bite my lip and clasp my hands together.

"I didn't call you here for nothing..." I open the conversation. "I want to tell you something and ... and show you something. That's why we're here."

Hesitantly I point to the building behind me. The doorman looks at me and I nod.

"Come on."

"In there?" Joy asks surprised, pointing to the doorman who is already opening the door for us. "This is the most expensive apartment building in Lincoln. Only the super rich live here."

I think to myself, "No kidding," but I would never say it out loud.

"Good afternoon, Ms. McDonald." The doorman gives me a friendly nod. Joy and Sienna's eyes widen.

"Hello," I say and tell my friends to follow me. They look around the luxurious foyer. "This is marble," Sienna marvels. "Wow."

"Hmm," I murmur, smiling. "We have to take the elevator. Come on."

They follow me like two chicks following their mother, squealing as I take my key card from my pocket and hold it up to the elevator's card reader. The doors open and we step inside. Sienna and Joy are still looking around in amazement.

"Okay," Joy says after a long pause. "What are we doing here, Millie Mouse? Did you get a student job working in this place?"

"No," I say. "It's a little ... different."

“Different?” asks Sienna. “What do you mean, different?”

“You’ll see in a minute.” I punch in the combination that takes the elevator directly to my apartment and lean back against the wall. I close my eyes and let the last seconds of my life as one of them pass by. Everything inside me tells me I’m doing the right thing. But I am terribly afraid of their reaction. I don’t want to lose them under any circumstances. It’s the first time in my life that I have real friends. My God, I even have a boyfriend. An insanely hot and awesome boyfriend. I don’t want to lose any of them because I have more money than I can ever spend.

The elevator doors open with a ping and I walk past Sienna and Joy into the apartment.

“Coming?” I ask. “This way.”

Slowly, my friends start to move and they follow me into the huge living room. I set my purse down on the dining room table and look at them. They are still stunned and let their eyes wander around the room. I can’t believe I’m supposed to live here all by myself. It’s way too big for me, and there’s enough room for us to start a small community. If I had had the courage to tell them months ago, that would have been an option. Now I want to live here with Darren. That is, if he doesn’t leave me before we get the chance. I am very afraid to tell him because he has confided so much in me. I’m ashamed that I don’t have the same confidence in him.

“Great place,” Sienna breaks the silence. “Whose is it?”

“Mine.”

There’s a muffled thud as they both drop their purses. Their mouths are wide open.

“Y-yours?” stutters Joy. “You own an apartment in the most expensive building in Lincoln? Are you kidding?”

I sigh and shake my head.

“No,” I say. “I’m not kidding. My parents bought me the apartment when I moved here, but I applied for the dorm room.”

“But why?” Sienna asks, looking around. “The apartment is insane. Denver and I also had the option of getting an apartment in this building. Not the penthouse, of course, but still totally unaffordable despite the generous sponsorship money he gets. What do your parents do? I mean ... what ... who are you?”

I purse my lips and take a deep breath. Joy looks at me equally confused and I clasp my hands together. The question of all questions has been asked and now I have to answer it. There are no more excuses. I’ve let them both into my real life and now I have to see how they deal with it.

“Can we sit down?” I ask, pointing to the large couch in the middle of the room. “Then I’ll explain.”

They exchange a quick glance. I can see their skepticism, but they finally nod and follow me. Sienna and Joy sit down on the couch and I sink into the chair across from them.

I start with the part that is most important to me. “My name is really Millie McDonald, I didn’t lie about that.” I take a deep breath. “It’s also not a lie that I have a sister named Maya and that I’m from Minneapolis. It’s also true that I’m shy. I don’t like to talk about certain things ... as openly as you do.”

Joy’s lips curl into a knowing smile.

“I’m also as polite and well-mannered as you’ve come to know me. The most important thing for me was not to run into anyone at Lincoln and to study under the radar if possible. That worked well for the first few weeks, until we got to know each other better and Darren made me the center of attention.”

They nod but say nothing.

“My family is rich, very rich,” I say the words that can change everything. “We’re billionaires.”

Sienna and Joy sit up and gasp. I can only pray this doesn’t backfire.

“You know the Minneapolis Warriors, right?” I ask cautiously, even though I know the answer.

“Of course,” Sienna says. “Their stadium is where the college finals were, right?”

“Which you didn’t go to because you wanted to study,” Joy reproaches me, as she’s been only too happy to do these past few weeks.

“I went,” I confess. Again, their eyes widened. “I watched the whole game and cheered. But I was in our family box...”

I deliberately let the sentence hang in the air to give them time to process this information.

“You were ... in your ...,” Sienna stammers. “Family box? I’m lost, sorry.”

She throws up her hands in exasperation. Joy nods in agreement.

“My family owns the Minneapolis Warriors,” I drop the bombshell. “I’m the heir to one of the biggest NFL franchises in the country, and I’m listed in my grandfather’s will as the rightful successor. In a few years, I’ll be running the club with majority ownership.”

There is an awful silence between us. My heart is pounding in my throat and my stomach feels like there’s a rock in it. My friends remain silent as they continue to shoot uncertain glances at each other.

“I need alcohol,” Joy says, and Sienna nods. “You’re a fucking McDonald? I mean ... a McDonald like that? Your family is one of the richest in the country. You ... you have private jets, yachts, mansions and you ... you put up with ... a disgusting dorm room and Amanda?”

I chuckle at how perfectly she sums it up, but then I just nod. She’s telling the miserable truth. I have it all and I want none of it to have friends and a good college life.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “I’m sorry for keeping you in the dark for so long. I really am. But I didn’t trust you enough at first, and then I was embarrassed.”

“Why would you be embarrassed?” asks Sienna uncomprehendingly. “Of this?” She gestures to the large

kitchen and the roof deck.

“Of course I’m embarrassed, Sienna,” I say, running a hand through my hair. “You have to watch every penny you spend, you depend on your scholarships. You get in trouble if the dorm room costs a hundred dollars more than you agreed to with your parents. And I’m applying for one of those rooms to leave all this behind.”

“That’s really shallow,” Joy comments dryly, and Sienna jabs her elbow into her stomach. “Ouch. Sorry.”

“For always being so insensitive,” she hisses.

“At least I’m telling the truth,” Joy defends herself against Sienna’s accusation.

“Why did you do this?” my best friend asks. “You didn’t trust us at first, so why now?”

I take a deep breath and clench my hands.

“I never had any real friends,” I confess, feeling my cheeks heat up. “My parents sent me to one of the best private schools in Minnesota, which was also an all-girls school. My sister did well there, but I didn’t. Of all the rich girls, I was always the richest. You know, at those schools it’s all about what kind of money daddy has, and how long his yacht is, and whether he goes to Aspen or the Hamptons on vacation. I had the biggest, the best, the most expensive of everything. That attracted a lot of girls with the wrong intentions.

“Oh, Millie,” Sienna whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

“They only wanted to be my friends because they wanted to party on my yacht or fly to Paris on my private jet. I promised myself in college I wouldn’t let that happen again. I... I don’t expect you to understand, and I don’t expect you to forgive me. I lied to you and I deceived you. I pretended to have problems that I will never have. But I... I just wanted to have real friends for once in my life and a normal college life.”

Tears run down my cheeks and I wipe them away. It feels good to get it all out.

“To sum it up for me,” Joy says and I look at her. “You’re rich, no, you’re loaded, you’re about to own an NFL club, and you did all this to be our friend. I mean, you ... you cared more about being friends with Sienna, Phoenix and me than you did about having all this luxury?”

“I slept here once in a while when Amanda got too much for me to handle,” I confess and they snort. “Yes, I did. When I realized that you were really my friends, because you liked me and ... and invited me to come over again and again and included me in your group and I got to know the guys ... then I was afraid that I would lose you. All of you.”

“Darren doesn’t know.” Sienna’s statement makes me cry again.

“No.” I shake my head. “I couldn’t tell him. He wouldn’t react well. Not after he’s already asked me why I was so different around him in Texas. He’ll be angry because he trusted me with everything about himself and I...”

“Hey,” Sienna says grabbing my hands. “Darren might be mad, yeah. But he’ll understand if you explain it to him the way you explained it to us.”

“You ... you still want to be my friends?” I ask, looking at them in surprise.

“Sure, we do,” Sienna says and Joy nods.

“Listen, Millie Mouse,” she says, winking at me. “We’re your friends. We’re all friends and ... and everyone makes mistakes or disappoints someone sometimes.” She looks at Sienna, who smiles at her and nods. I wonder what passed between them, but I don’t question it. Instead, I continue to listen to her. “But we’re friends, and we believe you when you say you did this so you wouldn’t be taken advantage of. I, and I’m sure I speak for Sienna and Phoenix, who doesn’t even know about this yet, think it’s incredibly unfortunate that you had such stupid idiots around you in high school.”

“That’s true,” Sienna agrees. “We are your friends. And Darren will understand, too.”

I stand up and hug them both.

“You guys are the best.” I sniffle and wipe away my tears. “I want to show you something else.”

They look at me curiously and I gesture for them to follow me, grinning. Together we walk up the stairs through the long hallway and I push open a door.

“Welcome to paradise”. I walk into one of my two dressing rooms. “This is my bag and shoe room. I have another one next door for clothes.”

The incredulous looks of Sienna and Joy make me laugh out loud as they rush over to my designer items, barely daring to touch them.

“What size shoe do you wear?” Joy asks.

“Thirty-seven.”

“I’m a thirty-nine,” she says, kicking off her sneakers. “I’ll squeeze in.”

In a good mood, I watch her actually squeeze her feet into a pair of Louboutin “So Kate” size 37 and know I’ve done the right thing.

Chapter 20

Darren

Moaning, I bury myself in Millie and put her right leg on my shoulder to thrust deeper into her. I push my pelvis forward and feel how deep my cock penetrates her still tight pussy. She feels great. I enjoy the pleading sounds that demand that I make her come. So far, I've held back with Millie, never letting her feel what I sometimes need during sex. Especially when I need to release pressure. And I have an extreme amount of it today!

I'm so damn mad at my girlfriend that I should punish her with sex deprivation.

I didn't think anything of it when she left this morning, even though I overheard parts of her phone conversation. Unfortunately, not enough to be sure that she was talking to her grandfather. Millie still hasn't told me who he is, and so far, I haven't bothered to ask her. I am beginning to wonder what she is waiting for. At the beginning of our relationship, I thought she needed time to build more trust. Trust that I have long since earned.

After Millie left, Coach Flanders called me into his office. I started thinking I had done something wrong and drove to the practice facility with a bad feeling.

To my surprise, Denver was there as well.

In his office, Coach Flanders told us that a scout from Minneapolis had called him less than an hour earlier. Mr. McDonald himself, as well as some members of his scouting team, were coming to practice next week to watch Denver and I play. We were very excited and immediately questioned the coach, but unfortunately, he couldn't tell us anything specific. He just said he was very proud of us for getting this attention a full year before our actual draft.

While I thought about it, Denver kept babbling about his glorious future. I didn't know what to make of it and wondered if my girlfriend had a hand in it. On the one hand, I

wouldn't put it past Millie to send her grandfather to Lincoln to watch me play, but on the other hand, it would be perfect if they drafted me next year. I could move to Minneapolis, and she could finish her degree there. But do I really want my girlfriend to be my boss one day? I have no idea where Millie and I are going, and every day she keeps me in the dark about her background, my doubts about our relationship grow. She doesn't seem to trust me.

My orgasm builds. I thrust into her one last time and come. Since Millie is not one of the campus sluts, I rub her clit a few times to make her come as well. Her pussy tightens around me and it feels amazing. Moaning, I collapse on top of her and need a moment before I can move again.

Millie's fingers run over my shoulders.

Normally I would kiss her and take her in my arms after pulling out, but this time I hold back and stand up. I pull off the condom and toss it knotted in the trash can under the desk. Soon I'll have to find my own place so that I'm not constantly in danger of Ethan being home. It would be nice if Millie and I had our own place. She doesn't want to live with Amanda anymore and is always with me. But after everything that happened today, I don't know where to go from here.

"Darren." Her soft voice makes me jump. "What's wrong with you?"

Obviously, she's noticed that something's wrong. I've never been so cold after sex before.

I turn to her and reach for my boxers, which are on the floor. I haven't yet told her that Coach Flanders told us about her grandfather's visit. How does Millie see the future? I'm going to be a famous football player – that's my dream – and she's going to be the heiress of a football club. We ... it's all going to blow up in our faces. And Madame has nothing better to do than meet her friends for lunch, or whatever it was she was doing with Sienna and Joy.

"Darren." Her voice is more urgent. Millie has gotten out of bed and is slipping into her underwear. "What's wrong with you? What was that about?"

“We had sex.”

“We didn’t have sex,” she hisses, “You made me...”

As you might expect, she doesn’t say it, and for the first time I don’t think it’s cute. It pisses me off. It’s all a farce, isn’t it? What else about her is real? What can I believe and when is she playing with me? I don’t recognize my own girlfriend anymore.

“I fucked you. Is that what you wanted to say?” I answer annoyed. “At least now you know how I like it.”

What am I talking about? She doesn’t need to know. Besides, I like sex with Millie the way it is.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asks again. “Why are you being like this? Why do you want to hurt me with words like that?”

“Why are you lying to me?” I yell back at her, my carotid artery throbbing dangerously. I’m so upset. Her startled look tells me she really doesn’t suspect anything. She looks confused. “There you go, looking innocent, huh?”

“What do you mean I’m lying to you?”

“Stop it,” I yell. “I know who you are and I know your grandfather is coming to watch Denver and me next week.”

Millie makes a startled noise and staggers backwards, banging her calves against the bed frame. I stop and put my hands on my hips. She looks at me, and the longer we look at each other, the glassier her eyes get.

“I’m sorry,” she finally manages. “I didn’t mean to.”

At least she knows what I mean. That’s something.

“Then why did you do it?” I ask a little calmer. “Why didn’t you tell me the truth?”

“Because I didn’t tell anyone,” she answers, “not you, not the girls ... not anyone.”

Surprised, I snap out of it. She’s really kept it to herself all these months. I can’t believe it. She and Sienna are best friends.

“Not even Sienna?” I ask a little calmer and Millie shakes her head. Tears break out of the corners of her eyes and she sobs quietly.

“No,” she answers, “I didn’t tell anyone because I didn’t trust anyone at first. And then ... then I couldn’t tell you because I’d kept it a secret for so long.”

“Do you include me in ‘you’?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks,” I growl, pulling on a sweater and jeans. “Were you ever going to tell me?”

Millie looks at me, stunned. I grab my iPhone, keys, and wallet.

“What are you going to do?” she wants to know in a panic, looking back and forth between the things in my hand and my face.

“I need space to think.”

“What?”

“Do I need to be more explicit?” I hiss. “I want to get away from you.”

“You can’t do that,” she cries. “At least let me explain why I did it.”

“What do you want to explain?” I ask, grabbing my jacket. “You didn’t tell me the most important thing there is to know about you. Namely, your background, your family, and everything that forms the foundation of our relationship. Whereas I told you everything about myself.”

Millie takes a deep breath and walks over to take my hand. Angrily, I pull it away and distance myself from her.

“You think I did this to trick you?” she asks incredulously. “You know I’m not like that.”

“What do I know about you, Millie?” Anger seethes in every fiber of my body. “Is that even your name?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Millie shakes her head just as angrily. “Of course, it’s my name. Why didn’t you confront me about it, Darren?”

“Don’t give me that.” I don’t want her trying to pass the buck. It was her job to tell me the truth. “You kept it from me. Not the other way around.”

“But knowing and not saying is okay?” she asks. “Interesting. How did you know?”

“What was I supposed to say, huh?” I hiss, skipping over her second question. “Hey baby, is it really true that you own an NFL club and you’re fucking richer than the president?”

“What would have changed if you knew?”

“Everything!” I exclaim angrily. “It would have changed everything. Is your grandfather even coming to see me because I’m good, or did you ask him to...?”

“Don’t say it.” Millie raises her hand and walks towards me. “Don’t say I asked my grandfather to see you. In fact, it’s the opposite: I tried to keep him from coming.”

I raise my eyebrows and look at her. Is she trying to tell me that she stopped him because she didn’t think I was good enough? I have to laugh. This is ridiculous. My nineteen-year-old friend thinks she knows more about football than her grandfather, who has been running the club for forty years. You can’t make this stuff up.

“You don’t think I’m good enough to play?”

“Don’t twist my words, Darren,” she says, shaking her head. “If you don’t want an explanation and need distance, I understand. But I... I know what I’m doing when it comes to football. There’s no reason to keep my grandfather away from you. Of course I worry about being your boss one day. But I see talent, whether you believe me or not, and I want the best players on my team for years to come. And you are one of them. It makes me proud that my grandfather, with all his experience, sees it that way and wants to see you play. Very much so, but I tried to stop him from coming because I was afraid it would get out of hand.”

“You were afraid that I would find out the truth,” I cut to the chase. “Screw your grandfather and his trip.”

“Yes, I was afraid,” she admits. “I was scared, because I was already in way too deep. I didn’t know how to tell you or the girls. I... I was so afraid of losing you that I couldn’t tell you.”

“Don’t you think you made it worse?” I ask, shaking my head.

“I know I made it worse, but you ... you have to consider what it was all about for me. Separating my life in Lincoln and ... and Minneapolis so rigidly wasn’t easy. Revealing it to you ... it took a lot for me to overcome. And yes, I admit that I put it off for a long time, hoping that somehow I’d get out of it smoothly.”

“Smooth.” I laugh dryly. “Were you even a virgin, or was that part of your perfect performance too? The sweet, shy girl from Minnesota... It had to be the whole package, huh?”

Millie breaks down, tears streaming down her cheeks. Fuck. Now I’ve finally lost it, but the words just flowed out of my mouth. I can’t stop myself. I’m so angry at her that my mind has completely shut down.

“How can you say something like that?” she sobs, wiping away her tears roughly. “Do you have any idea how much it hurt when...” She shakes her head, because once again she can’t say it. It’s not an act. I can tell.

“Millie,” I say, reaching for her hand to apologize, but she slaps it away. I’m so sorry for hurting her like that. All I wanted to do was give her a piece of my mind. But my words went too far. Once again. “I didn’t mean it.”

“Neither did I” she says calmly. “It was my first time, Darren. Everything we’ve done together these past few weeks has been my first time. While you can’t even remember yours, I guess. I’ve opened up to you and I’ve been more and more honest with you, except for the thing about my background.”

“Sorry,” I mumble, biting my lip. “I didn’t mean to hold that against you. I know it was your first time.”

“All of a sudden?” she hisses, “So I’m not a hardened bitch anymore?”

“I never said you were.”

“But you were thinking it.”

“You don’t either.” I don’t let her insinuate that I think she’s a bitch. “I wouldn’t think that in a million years. You ... you’re everything to me.”

“Leave me alone, Darren,” she hisses as she walks past me. “I had this tiny hope that you would listen to me and understand. Aren’t you the one who pretends to everyone that you come from a really great family where everything is perfect? Life is not perfect and we make mistakes. I’ve always listened to you, supported you, and stood by you. Now it’s your turn. But you have nothing better to do than to question everything we have. Because I made a fucking mistake.”

And before I can say anything else, she’s gone.

Chapter 21

Millie

“He’s such a jerk,” I grumble, pushing past Sienna to enter her apartment. “Hey Denver.”

“Hi,” he says, looking at me with wide eyes. “Darren?”

“Yes, Darren, obviously,” I snapped at my best friend’s boyfriend. “Who else?”

After our fight yesterday, he ignored my calls all day. I’ve texted him a dozen times and left him voicemails, but he hasn’t responded. It looks like Darren is paying me back for what I did to him. I guess I should be sorry that it turned out this way, but I’m not. He completely overreacted and said hurtful things. Our sex life and everything we shared have nothing to do with my background. My feelings for him have nothing to do with where I come from. Love has no bank accounts and that is okay. We are so different and yet so similar that we just had to find each other.

I understand that Darren is angry and feels blindsided by me, but it’s not what he thinks. I didn’t lie to him because I didn’t trust him, I lied because I was in too deep at that point. I also didn’t plan for my grandfather to come to this stupid practice next week. How naive are Denver and Darren to think that this means anything? My grandpa thinks they’re interesting, that’s all. If they hit the wall in their senior college season, they’re off his list. Darren may know the drill on the field, but I know the drill off the field because I learned it from a young age. Maybe I am a business bitch after all, thinking that way about my boyfriend and Denver.

“What happened?” asks Sienna asks after I take off my jacket and slam my purse – a Hermès Birkin, now that I have nothing to hide – on the couch. Denver gives me an incredulous look.

“He knew,” I blurt out. “The whole time, and you think he called me on it? Of course not.”

I have no idea if Denver knows what I'm talking about, but it doesn't matter now.

"He ... he knew?" my best friend asks. I nod and rub my temples. I don't know how he found out. My family keeps Maya and me out of the press as much as possible. There was a photo taken before the college finals, but he wouldn't have found it without being suspicious. "How?"

"I don't know," I say. "He didn't tell me, and it doesn't matter. He freaked out and ... and he accused me of something else."

I look at Denver. I don't want to go into detail in front of him. My best friend's boyfriend is observant enough to get up to leave. He kisses Sienna goodbye and leaves.

"Sit down," she says, pointing to the couch.

"Thanks," I mumble and sit down. "Darren was so weird yesterday when I went to see him after our meeting. I thought he was having a bad day and then ... then we had sex." I pause and shake my head. "It was awful ... he ... he was so rough."

"Did he hurt you?" asks Sienna, alarmed, her eyes widening.

"God, no!" I exclaim. "He would never do that. He just made it a little ... well ... harder. You know."

"I guess so," she says curtly, nodding.

"After that, he got up, took the condom off, and got dressed. He never does that either. He always takes me in his arms afterwards and we cuddle. Maybe I'm too sensitive and..."

"Bullshit," Sienna interrupts, squeezing my hand. "It's normal. We do it too. Then what happened?"

"After he threw the condom in the trash and got up, I asked him what was wrong. I don't know him like that... I said that ... the sex was different this time ... and he made it ... well, I couldn't say it. You know I'm not good at that. That made him even angrier."

"Angry?"

“Yeah,” I sigh. “Darren talked about it and said that at least now I knew how he liked it. He was just so ... like that. He’s never like that with me. He knows I don’t like it and ... whatever.” I wipe away my tears and shake my head. “I told him not to say things like that. It hurt my feelings. Then he started to accuse me of lying to him. He threw everything at me. That my grandfather is coming next week and ... and asked me if I had arranged it. We had a terrible fight. He’s pissed because I didn’t tell him and I understand that. But Darren accused me of faking everything.”

“Excuse me?” asks Sienna indignantly. “I guess he caught too many balls without a helmet. He can’t be serious. You love him.”

“Between the lines, he accused me of being a calculating bitch and ... and not even a virgin when we first went to bed. I don’t know why that accusation weighs so heavily on me. Maybe because I’ve always wanted to save myself for the right guy. Someone who would want me for me and not for the money. Until yesterday, I was sure that Darren was that guy.”

“Oh, Millie,” she whispers, taking me in her arms.

“He apologized for the comment about my virginity, but otherwise it was a complete disaster,” I sob. “It went exactly as I feared it would.”

Sienna sighs and takes me in her arms. Soothingly, she strokes my back and I cling to my best friend, crying. I’m still angry at Darren, but also desperate. Where do I go from here? I’m not just in love with him anymore. I love him. I want to be with him and build a future with him. But right now, it looks like we’re not going to be able to do that.

“Have you tried reaching out to him?” Sienna asks quietly and I nod.

“He is ignoring me,” I mutter. “I guess I’ll have to wait until he tries to contact me.”

“He’ll be fine,” she says, squeezing my hand encouragingly. “Darren is quick to anger. You should know that after his mistake in Texas. He’ll calm down and forgive you.”

“I don’t know.” Uncertain, I look at her. “He thinks I don’t believe in him and talked my grandfather into coming because I don’t think he’s good enough.”

“He’s upset,” Sienna says reassuringly. “Remember when Denver thought I had a crush on Tyler? He was so angry and ignored me for days. Sometimes these guys need a little time to think, and Darren is getting it. You’ve got him by the balls, as Joy would say. He’s fallen in love with you.”

“I hope so.” I look at Sienna and take the tissues she hands me. I make a half-hearted effort to dry my tears. “Thanks for being here for me.”

“That’s what girlfriends are for,” she says, pointing to my purse. “And for this. Is that an authentic Birkin bag?”

Sienna stands and reaches for my purse.

“One of many,” I admit, biting my lip. “Do you like it?”

“Did you just say one of many?” Her eyes go wide and she gasps.

“Sienna,” I sigh. “Look... I grew up in luxury that is beyond what you can imagine. Denver will probably sign a million-dollar contract next year, but that’s still a pittance compared to my inheritance. I think these bags are beautiful, and so are my designer shoes. But they mean nothing to me... I... I don’t have them to show off. I don’t care about the price. This may sound crazy to you, but that bag is worth as much to me as a twenty-dollar bag is to you.”

“Maybe Darren doesn’t know how to handle it either,” she says suddenly, putting down the bag. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking over the last few hours, and Joy and I have been talking again.”

I hold my breath and my heart starts to beat faster. I knew they would talk and think about it. It’s not every day you find out that your best friend is loaded.

“We’re still very surprised and have to process it first. You throw a twenty-thousand-dollar bag on my furniture like it’s a twenty dollar one – like you said yourself... You don’t care. But we do. No offense, but we are overwhelmed by all this

wealth and ... and luxury. I don't want to alarm you, but it's a lot. Especially for Darren. Until recently, you were just an ordinary girl, supposedly from an average family in Minnesota, and then it turns out that your family is one of the richest in the country. On top of that, you have something that the boys love. I mean, they love us, but they live for this sport."

"Not just them," I say and Sienna laughs. "So, you think Darren is overwhelmed and ... and scared of what's going to happen?"

"I don't know, but it's very possible," she concludes, hugging me. "Give him time."

"Did you tell Denver?" I ask, changing the subject since he overheard part of our conversation.

"No," Sienna says. "That's not up to me."

"Okay." I nod. "If he asks you, you can tell him. The cat's out of the bag anyway. I'll go home and ... and maybe Darren will answer me eventually."

Sienna nods and plants a kiss on my cheek.

"If you need anything, let me know."

"I will," I reply, reaching for my bag. "See you."

Sienna hugs me again and I leave the apartment.

I sit on the bed in my dorm room and wait for a message from Darren. I'd rather be in my apartment because I don't want to see Amanda. She's back and has been harassing me for days. But Darren has no idea that I have an apartment. When my iPhone rings, I frantically grab it. I hope it's Darren.

Wrong. It's my sister.

I answer the call. "Hey, how are you?"

“Hey,” she answers cheerfully, bringing a smile to my face. “I’m good, and you?”

“Not so good.” I don’t want to tell her the truth. But what would be the point of lying to her? Maya can tell right away when I’m upset. “Darren and I had a fight.”

“Why?” she wants to know immediately.

“He knows who we are and ... and he totally freaked out,” I tell her. “We had a huge fight and I ended up leaving. He insinuated that I was lying to him and ... and I didn’t want Grandpa to see him. It totally ... sucked.”

“I’m sorry about that.” Her voice sounds sincere. “But I also have to say that I told you so.”

“I know,” I admit reluctantly. “Sienna and Joy took it well and I thought Darren would too. Instead, it escalated and now he’s ignoring me.”

“Don’t you think he’ll calm down?”

“Not for a while,” I mean. “He’s got a pretty big ego, and I bruised it.” I can’t help laughing. Maya joins in. “Why are you calling?” I ask.

“I’m coming to Lincoln with Grandpa next week,” she squeals excitedly into the receiver. “I am so excited to see you, your friends, and, of course, your sweetheart.”

“My...” I shake my head in amusement at her choice of words. “Sweetheart?”

“I’m not allowed to call him hot or horny,” Maya says sourly. “Preston doesn’t find it funny. My God, but he’s a sweetheart. I’ve checked out all his social media.”

“Maya,” I squeal, unable to believe she would be so brazen about Darren. “You’re engaged.”

“And I love Preston to death,” she replies seriously. “Besides, Darren is what? Twenty?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Well, in that case...”

“Seriously, Maya.” I take a firmer tone. “I don’t know if he’ll have calmed down by then.”

“He’ll roar like a lion now, and then he’ll be a cuddly tiger again.”

“You’re crazy,” I say with a grin. “I have to wait for him to come to his senses. That’s all I can do and I want to give him the time.”

“You’ll be fine,” Maya says, cheerfully. “I’ll see you next week.”

I smile.

“I’m glad you’re coming,” I say honestly. “And you’re going to like Sienna and Joy. They’re great and Darren ... he’s great, really great.”

“I can’t wait.” My sister giggles into the phone. “See you next week.”

I say goodbye and hang up.

Sighing, I lean my head against the wall and close my eyes. There’s a knock at the door. I jump off the bed and rush to the door.

I yank it open and my heart skips a beat.

“Hi,” Darren says, licking his lips. He looks nervous, his hands shoved in his jeans pockets. “Do you have time?”

“Of course,” I say and invite him in. Darren accepts gratefully and I close the door behind him. Before I turn to him, I take a deep breath to prepare myself for the conversation to come. I love him and I don’t want to lose him because I made a mistake. He’s the best thing that’s happened to me besides my girlfriends. If Darren breaks up with me, I will go through the worst crisis of my life. Compared to that, the incidents with the girls at my former high school are a joke. Darren will manage to break not only my heart, but also me.

“Millie,” he says softly. I feel him come closer and when his hands touch my waist, I jump. “Remember when we talked about the frogs and the princes?”

I can't help but laugh and nod.

"I don't want to be the frog again for a girl who ... who means so much to me," he says quietly, and I tense up. "Lisa left me because I lived for football, and I... I'm about to do the same. You live for this sport, too, and that... I have to get that through my head. What I said yesterday and ... how I acted towards you was beneath me. You didn't deserve it. You were right. I don't want anyone to know how broken my relationship is with my parents. Especially my mother. And you ... you covered it up to protect me. Please give me a chance to be your prince."

Tears run down my cheeks and I turn to him.

"I love you," I blurt out and Darren looks at me with big eyes. This wasn't the kind of situation I wanted to be in when I told him I loved him for the first time. "You're right. I was scared. Remember I told you about my problems in high school?"

Darren nods and pulls me closer.

"That's when it all started. Now you know how rich I really am. We're not talking about a little vacation in our country house or cool parties. We're talking about yachts and mansions and ... private jets, and I... I wanted to go to college without anyone knowing about it. That's why I didn't tell you," I finally explain. "I don't know if you would have looked at me differently or treated me differently if you had known who I was. And I don't need an answer to that, Darren. All I want is for you to forgive me and give me another chance."

"I'd probably give you a hundred more chances," he says, brushing back a strand of my hair. He closes the last few inches and kisses me gently. "I love you, too."

Overjoyed, I return the kiss and snuggle up against him.

"I still have one question," I say after we pull apart.

"What is it?" Darren raises his eyebrows. "I thought everything was settled."

"How did you know who I was? All public photos are super old. There was a photo taken at the college finals beforehand,

but you wouldn't have looked for it without knowing something."

"From Dana."

"Dana?" Now I'm lost. "How does Dana know me?"

"She doesn't know you," he replies. "She knows your sister. She and Maya went to Harvard together. You looked familiar to her. Then she did some research because she knew Maya had a little sister."

"Oh, wow." I'm amazed.

"Hmm." He smiles and kisses me lightly. "I was really surprised. I was prepared for anything, but I wasn't expecting you to be a McDonald."

"And do you think..." I lick my lips. "Do you think that's bad?"

"No." Darren takes my face in his hands and looks into my eyes. "I love you, baby. Whether you have billions ... okay, this sounds really crazy ... in your bank account or not."

"I love you too."

Chapter 22

Darren

One week later

“Baby,” I run my hand down Millie’s back. “Get up.”

“Go away,” she groans and slaps me, eliciting a laugh. I crawl back into bed with her and pull her close. As you’d expect, she snuggles up to me and presses her sweet butt against my cock.

Since we’ve been talking, our relationship has become more intimate. We’ve talked about our childhoods, our sisters, and our passion for football.

The day before yesterday, we started moving things from her dorm room to her apartment. Now that everyone knows, she doesn’t want to live with Amanda another day and has terminated the lease immediately for a small penalty. She was so dominant in the office that I had sex with her in the car afterwards. When Millie lets the ‘boss’ loose in a little black dress and four-inch heels, you simply have to have her. Later we made love in her dorm room one last time. After all, that’s where it all started.

Millie lives in her apartment now and I am almost always with her. It’s nice to have some privacy here that we don’t have in my shared apartment. Moving in together has not yet been discussed. I don’t want to force her into it.

Today is the big day. Her grandfather and her sister are coming to Lincoln to watch me play. Practice is tomorrow and I’ve been getting worked up for days. I try not to show it in front of Millie. It makes me nervous as hell that not only is this my first real tryout, but it’s my girlfriend’s family. Why can’t she just say that her background was a joke and that she’s the shy girl from Minnesota?

Like me, Millie has a very good relationship with her grandfather, which is why he named her as his successor in his will. Millie won’t take over for at least three years. By then I’ll

have found an NFL club and hopefully established myself. We try not to think about it, but it's hard to avoid.

"Are you thinking about it right now?" she asks quietly, drawing little circles on the back of my hand.

"Thinking about what?" I want to know.

"The future." Millie turns in my arms and looks at me. "Your future will be decided next year, and I'll be entering mine in a few years. What if you..."

"Hey," I whisper, kissing her gently. "Then that's it."

"But I don't want us to ... grow apart because of it," she tells me over and over about her fears. It's not the first time in the last few days that the subject of the future has come up. "I intend to accept my inheritance. Wherever you go won't change that. I can go with you at first, but eventually I'll have to go back to Minneapolis."

"Millie," I say more firmly now, pulling her closer. "We're talking about the future. It's going to be three, four, five years from now. Stop worrying about it."

"I can't help it," she replies. "Football, this club, has always been everything to me, and I... I knew I would never put anything or anyone before it. But that has changed."

"No." I push her off me so she's on her back and I lean over her. Millie's eyes are wide open. Her hands rest on my upper arms as I brace myself on either side of her face. "You are a McDonald, and you are going to take over the club. You were born to run it one day, and I don't want you to forget your life's dream and everything you're working for here because you're in love with a guy you might have to compete against."

"I'd rather you do that than play for us." Millie lowers her eyes. "Imagine if you were to screw up and get called into my office. How ... how would that go?"

My lips curl into a dirty grin. *I have a very specific idea of how it would go. Her desk would play a big role in it.*

"Hmm." I plant scattered kisses on her neck. "I'm going to listen to you, agree with you, promise to do better, and fuck

you on your desk. It'll be great, you'll see."

"Darren." Her voice is shrill. Millie slaps my chest with her hand, "Can't you be serious for once?"

Groaning, I hang my head.

"We can't control the future, baby." I pull her closer. "But we love each other, and we can make it work."

"You really think we can make it work, don't you?" she wants to know, still perplexed.

"Of course, I do." I nod firmly. "Now stop worrying your pretty little head about it and spread your legs."

Millie blushes as I squeeze between her legs and lower my body onto hers. She's become incredibly open these past few weeks. Communication in bed is getting better and better. Millie still doesn't talk dirty, but she tells me what she wants. I love her shy nature, which I've fallen in love with, as well as the tough businesswoman inside.

"I don't want you to blush every time I tell you I want to fuck you."

"Darren," she exclaims and I laugh hard as I reach between our bodies and slide my shaft between her labia.

"So wet already."

"Stop it."

"Oh, no," I murmur, pushing my pelvis forward slightly. Her labia part and I feel her tense. "You like it when I talk to you like this."

We kiss tenderly.

"Let's try something new," I suggest, looking into her eyes.

Along with her fear of anything new, there's always this irrepressible desire to try. If you had to pin the phrase 'Still waters run deep' on one person, it would be Millie.

"Like what?" she whispers as I straighten up and kneel down.

"A new position," I say, licking my lips. "Do you trust me?"

“Of course,” she says promptly. I take her hand and help her out of bed. Millie is puzzled as I pull her to the bedroom’s large picture window overlooking the rooftops of the city. It is a rainy day. The fog hangs between the houses. So, I’m not worried about anyone seeing us. Besides, the windows are mirrored – something I discovered yesterday.

“Brace yourself against the glass with the palms of your hands,” I instruct her.

“Against the...” Her eyes go wide and she looks at me, gasping for air. Her complexion turns another shade redder. Grinning, I put my hand on the back of her neck and pull her towards me. Since Millie is quite a bit smaller, I have to force her to stand on her toes so that her mouth can reach mine. My lips find hers and I kiss her greedily. My free hand runs down her back to her bare bottom. Before I dig my fingers into her sweet ass, I slap it, making her gasp for the kiss. Damn, this is even hotter than I thought.

The last few weeks we’ve been doing it a lot in the riding position, because it’s good for spontaneous sex in the car. Millie always needs some time to get used to a position and find out if she likes it. Riding is one of her favorite positions because she feels in control. She doesn’t notice that I usually control her pelvis.

“Turn around,” I ask, pulling away from her, “put your hands on the window and push back.”

She does what I say. Shit, it’s incredibly hot. Her face is reflected in the glass and her spine is slightly bent.

“People can see us!” Millie turns her head to look at me.

“No,” I murmur, kissing the hollow between her shoulder blades. “They can’t. The windows are mirrored and the fog is too thick.”

My hands slide down her sides to her hips. Goosebumps cover her body and she shivers slightly. With my right hand, I spread her legs a little wider. Millie moans as I play with her clit and slide two fingers inside her.

“Oh, Darren,” she moans, collapsing forward. Fuck, this is so hot.

Millie pushes her back forward and offers me her ass like this. I’d like to give her another slap, but I think it’s too early for that. She needs to enjoy this position first. It’s the first time she has to trust me completely because she can’t see or touch me.

I lean over her, one hand on her hip and the other with two fingers deep inside her.

“I love you,” I say, kissing her shoulder blades. My girlfriend begins to tremble. “This excites you, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe.”

I laugh softly and slide my fingers inside her a few more times.

“It excites me, baby.” She has to know how incredible this is for me. “You look so fucking hot. Completely at my mercy.”

“Darren,” she whispers, “do you always have to talk like that.”

I laugh and start trailing kisses down her back to her ass. Grinning, I gently bite her left buttock, making her cry out.

Then I pull my fingers out. Millie moans in frustration and I replace my fingers with my tongue. I let it slide through her wet cleft and poke at her clit. Her pelvis rocks back and forth, causing me to grip her hips tighter to hold her in place.

“Stay like that,” I demand, pulling away to grab a condom from the nightstand drawer. Millie’s on the pill now, but we don’t want to take any chances. The last thing we want is to get pregnant. We haven’t been together long enough. I want kids, and I’m sure she does too, but there’s still time. I tear open the package and put the rubber on. Millie looks over her shoulder at me and her body is covered in goosebumps. I grab her hips again and position my cock at her entrance. We moan in sync as I spread her wetness along my length. She unintentionally wiggles her ass. The gesture makes me even hotter.

“Hold still.” She pauses and moans loudly as I sink into her with one thrust. Her tight pussy welcomes me and I have to stop myself from taking her hard and deep.

The gentle lovemaking has not disappeared from our relationship. At first it was difficult for me to get used to it for Millie’s sake. But I realized that it was more important for me to be with her and make love to her than to chase one conquest after another. She has changed me and the way I think about sex. Still, I don’t want to give up having sex like this or a quickie in the car.

I begin to move inside her, thrusting in a steady rhythm. Millie moans and her pelvis moves in unison with my thrusts. Our first time in this position doesn’t last long as it turns me on way too much.

I bend over and clasp my hands with hers on the glass. That way I’m even deeper inside her and can kiss her when she turns her head.

It doesn’t take long before we both come.

I park Millie’s Porsche in the private lot at the Chicago airport and turn off the engine. I love driving her car. Smiling, I look over at her. Then I lean over and steal a kiss. After our session in front of the window, we went back to bed and made love again. But eventually we had to shower, get dressed and head out.

“Are you excited?” I ask. She grins broadly and nods.

“Very,” she replies, running her fingers down my cheek. “And you?”

“Me too.” We separate and get out of the car. Millie reaches for her purse in the back seat – a designer piece my mother would kill for – and takes my hand. The first time she showed me her purse and shoe room, I was in awe. My girlfriend has everything a woman could ever dream of. You can tell she is

visibly comfortable in her skin and likes to show who she really is. And that includes spending huge amounts of money on ridiculous things if she wants to.

“Now what?” From a distance I see the jerk of an airport employee coming towards us, the one who hit on her the last time we were here. He’s all smiles. “What does he want now?”

“Ms. McDonald,” he greets her, nodding at me. “Mr. Andrews. Your grandfather’s plane will be arriving in five minutes. Follow me.”

“Hello, Mr. Broderick,” Millie says, holding out her hand to him. “How nice to see you again.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Ms. McDonald,” he replies, winking at her. “And in the right place at the airport today.”

Millie laughs and he gestures for us to follow. I can’t understand a word he’s saying and would like to ram the guy into the ground. Does he still not understand that she is my girlfriend?

“How do you know that dumbass?” I hiss so low he can’t hear. Millie gives me a dirty look.

“He’s not a dumbass,” she says, rolling her eyes. “He handles the private jet clients.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Darren.” Millie stops, making me stop too, and looks up at me. There’s a smirk on her lips. “You’re not jealous, are you?”

“Of course not,” I blurt out. It’s not noticeable at all.

“All right then.” My friend giggles and kisses me gently. “Because I only want you.”

Millie looks at me lovingly, turns and walks off after this Broderick. I follow her and take her hand. I don’t trust this guy, and if he’s known her as long as she says, maybe he’s learned things about Millie that I don’t know. Things that make her happy that I can’t offer her right now.

I shake my head. Slowly but surely, I must be going crazy. I’m jealous of an airport employee.

“This way, Ms. McDonald,” he says, and we follow him to the tarmac, where a private jet has just landed. “They should be disembarking in a moment.”

“Thank you,” Millie says, turning to me. She puts her arms around me and grins at me. I smile back and kiss her gently. I don’t take my eyes off the guy who is also looking at us. “I’m so excited.”

I push her away slightly so we can turn around. Airport employees walk up to the private jet and the door opens. Millie gets more and more excited in my arms and I have to laugh as I rest my chin on her head.

“There she is,” Millie exclaims as her sister steps off the private jet and down the stairs. Maya has her brown hair pulled back in a ponytail and is wearing a coat and jeans with high-heeled boots. “I’m so glad she’s here,” she says.

“Follow me.” Mr. Broderick gestures for us to follow, and Millie immediately starts walking. I follow her at a brisk pace. The next moment, her grandfather steps off the private jet and my heart skips a beat. How many times have I imagined meeting the owner of an NFL team, shaking his hand and talking to him? And now that man is my girlfriend’s grandfather.

“Maya, Grandpa!” exclaims Millie. She waves excitedly. Her sister returns the gesture just as excitedly and walks towards us. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“We’re excited too.”

I stay behind Millie and watch the sisters. They don’t look as much alike as Dana thinks. On the contrary. Maya is a little taller than Millie and her hair and eyes are darker.

“Hi Grandpa.” Millie hugs him and he smiles at her.

“Hi, honey,” he says affectionately. “It’s good to be here. The team won’t be here until tomorrow morning.”

His eyes land on me and he raises his eyebrows.

“I didn’t know you were bringing my player.”

I grin to myself and Maya presses her lips together.

“No,” Millie says, turning to me. She grabs my hand and pulls me towards her. “Darren’s my boyfriend, Grandpa.”

Mr. McDonald looks at me confused and clearly at a loss for words. I understand him quite well. He probably didn’t expect this. He probably doesn’t think it’s a good thing. I’m a college player and I want to be on an NFL team next year. Maybe he doesn’t trust me and thinks I’m taking advantage of Millie. A lump forms in my stomach.

“Hello, Mr. McDonald.” I gather my courage and shake his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

I hope I don’t come across to this imposing man as the little pile of misery I am inside.

“And you’re my little Millie’s boyfriend?” He looks me up and down. He refrains from greeting me – which is fine. I nod hesitantly.

“Yes, sir.” I’m uncomfortable with this interrogation. Maya is still grinning and seems amused. “Yes ... for a while.”

“Oh, good,” he replies monotonously. “Because I want to make sure you’re not taking advantage of Millie because you want to be on my team.”

Speechless, I stand there as Millie turns bright red.

“Grandpa, please,” my girlfriend cries, “how could you think that’s why Darren is with me? He’s only known I’m your granddaughter for a week.”

“Oh, yeah?” Mr. McDonald looks at me and laughs. I don’t share his humor. “I’m just kidding, kid. I can see you make her happy.”

And I can tell he’s just saying that to calm Millie down and not ruin her day. Mr. McDonald doesn’t trust me. I can see it in his face. I feel a new uneasiness that I usually only feel when I have to deal with my mother. I can’t do anything right by her either.

“And she makes me happy,” I reply in a firm voice, and put my arm around Millie.

“I hope you’ll still say that after I kick your ass about your performance tomorrow morning,” he counters with a straight face.

With that, he kisses his granddaughter on the cheek, walks past her and wordlessly gets into the waiting limousine. Maya follows after a brief exchange with Millie. I turn to my girlfriend and look at her in horror. Rarely have I felt so exposed as I do right now.

“It went pretty well, didn’t it?” Mille claps her hands enthusiastically. “He still wants to see you play.”

Chapter 23

Millie

I get out of the limo and look at my sister who is doing the same. Today is rehearsal and I still don't know if my grandpa was testing Darren with his ridiculous comments yesterday. I could tell that Darren was uncomfortable. We canceled dinner last night. He went to bed early and I left him alone.

The temperatures have risen in the last few days and I can now wear a wool coat. Under it, is a tight dress, black tights and high heels. My sister is dressed similarly.

"Grandpa," I greet him warmly and immediately make a serious face. "Don't you like Darren?" I say with a smile.

After the disaster at the airport, I didn't sleep a wink last night. Darren has been nervous about practice all week. It's understandable. Not only is he meeting the owner of one of the biggest franchises in the NFL, but he's also meeting two of the most important people in my life. My grandfather's demeanor made him even more uneasy.

"I don't trust him." My grandfather, unmoved by what this statement does to me, puts on his sunglasses.

"Why?" I want to know, hurt.

"He's like I was in college," he replies. "A player. You're too good for him."

Has he been on the phone with Joy? I roll my eyes in annoyance.

Maya laughs and I give her an icy look. She shuts up immediately and takes a few steps away from us.

"That's not true," I explain.

"Isn't it?" The tone in his voice is clear. "He wants to be a professional football player and you, my darling, are the perfect ticket to his big dream."

I get angry because he is not giving Darren a chance. Besides, I thought my grandfather would always support me. I

love Darren and he loves me. He fell in love with me before he knew who I was and what opportunities I could give him. Although it's complete nonsense because we can't influence the draft.

"And you know how the draft works," I counter. "If Darren's as good as you said he was last week, we don't have a shot at him anyway. He'll end up in Florida or New York. What's the point?"

My grandfather turns to me and takes off his sunglasses before fixing me with his gaze.

"His sister went to Harvard with Maya," he says with a sigh, "he knew exactly who you were."

"That was very different, Grandpa." Annoyed, I roll my eyes. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Darren walking with Denver and a few other players to the practice field, where Coach Flanders is waiting. He holds his helmet loosely in his hand and jokes with Denver. He seems light-hearted and I hope he stays that way. I look back at my grandfather and he raises his eyebrows.

"Didn't he tell you?" he asks, giving me a questioning look.

"Yes, he did," I answer, jutting out my chin. "And I believe him that it was a coincidence. Dana, Darren's sister, remembered Maya and saw the resemblance between us."

"And why didn't he tell you?" Grandpa continues.

What's the point? If he doesn't like Darren, he might as well drop the whole charade.

"How should I know?" I hiss, clenching my hands into fists. "We haven't talked about it and ... and you don't know Darren. Stop judging him."

"That's true. But I don't want him to hurt you."

"Why are you here?" I ask now, holding his arm. "Are you seriously interested in him, or do you want to see me hit my head because I love a football player? You always had to know this could happen. He is my age and will still be my age in a few years."

He doesn't know how much this conversation hurts me. I might have expected this from my parents, but not from him. I always thought he wanted me to be happy. No matter who the chosen one is by my side. Apparently, that doesn't count when it comes to his life's work.

"I'm worried, Millie," he stammers. "Why not a normal student like Preston?"

By this time, Maya is out of earshot with some of the scouting team. She wouldn't approve of what our grandfather is saying either.

"Because I love Darren," I reply. "And nobody's going to change that. Maybe I'll fall on my ... on my face. Then that's the way it is, Grandpa. I'm an adult and I need to experience things. Besides, how do you know Preston means well by Maya ... maybe he's just waiting for an opportune moment to..."

"Don't be ridiculous," he scolds me. "Preston is a good guy and you know it."

"Of course I do," I admit ruefully. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want Darren to hurt you," he says, and I can feel his sincerity in those words. "You're really blossoming here. You're happy and I don't want him to ruin it."

"He won't," I promise him, taking a step towards him to speak in a lower volume. "And I'll ask you again, are you really interested in him as a player?"

"Yes." He nods and looks at Darren, who is already warming up. "I am. But if we're going to go over there and talk, I expect you to be my deputy, not his girlfriend. Especially if he acts like a jerk."

"Of course," I say. "You can count on me. Besides, Darren won't do that. He's not crazy."

"Good." Grandpa takes me in his arms and kisses my cheek. "He's afraid of me, isn't he?"

"He is..." I admit, and we catch up with Maya and the rest of the team.

Coach Flanders comes over and shakes my grandfather's hand. So far, he hasn't seen or recognized me.

"Good afternoon, Mr. McDonald," he says exuberantly. "I'm so glad you're here. Denver Jones and Darren Andrews are numbers ten and fifteen."

"Thank you," my grandfather replies. "I'm expecting a lot."

The coach nods and shakes hands with Maya. Then his eyes linger on me.

"What are you doing here?" He doesn't even seem to know my name. "I didn't order the college paper, and as you can see, none of the other players' girlfriends are here."

Who does Coach Flanders think he is? He coaches a college team that is admittedly very successful, but nothing more. Besides, I wouldn't be standing next to the owner of an NFL club and his granddaughter, along with an entourage of security and scouting personnel, if I had snuck onto the property.

"Yeah, I can see that," I tell him with a grin. "Millie McDonald. I own the Minneapolis Warriors. You've already said hello to my grandfather and sister."

The coach's face goes slack and stunned, he looks at my grandfather and sister, who grin at him smugly. Maya thinks as little of men in this business as he does of women. We're going to shake up the NFL in a few years. Female owners are still a rarity and young women ... that will be a novelty when it becomes official.

"Then ... then maybe we should start practicing," he stutters, and I nod.

Coach Flanders walks back and gathers the guys around him. Darren lifts his head and smiles at me, and I smile back. I'm a professional, but I can't help but smile at him.

For the next half hour, Coach has them run all kinds of plays to show us the players' strengths. He focuses on Darren and Denver because my grandfather came to see them both.

Darren finally told me when we made up that he found out about my true parentage through his sister, but that doesn't explain why Dana didn't tell me – or Darren himself. It would have been easy for him to ask me. I would have told him the truth.

In retrospect, it's a wonder I wasn't caught earlier. There were nearly a hundred guests at the rehearsal dinner; there would have been twice as many at the wedding. The risk of someone from Austin's high society recognizing me was enormous. My infatuated brain had completely ignored it.

"I want him to go in more." My grandfather pulls me out of my thoughts and points to Denver. "He stays in the pocket too long. His receivers can't cover him."

I agree as Denver throws a pass. It still works in college, but in the NFL, he would be mercilessly ripped to the ground.

"He does that all the time," I answer honestly, though it's hard for me to say. "He thinks too much. You can literally see him thinking about where he's going to throw the pass. Good defenders read him in a second."

"I don't like that!" Grandpa is stern, telling his scouts to cut Denver. I purse my lips, tempted to beg him to give Denver another chance. But I know how business works, and Denver blew his chance.

"What do you think of Darren?" I ask, looking at him. My heart starts beating faster and I start rocking back and forth nervously. He has to like him. He just has to.

"What do you think of him?" He raises his eyebrows. "And I want an honest answer."

"He's fast and his running routes are perfect," I discuss Darren's strengths. "He needs more bulk for the NFL. At least twenty pounds."

As his girlfriend, I don't like that at all. It will make him look like one of those brawny macho men. Disgusting.

"I think so too." His approval makes my heart swell with pride. "What else do you think?"

“I think that...” I take a deep breath. “I still think he’s going to be the best defensive end ever. He just lacks the bulk to bring down the big NFL offenses. He won’t have any problems with the quarterbacks.”

His head turns and he looks at me thoughtfully. At first, I can’t read his reaction, but then he smiles.

“I think so, too,” he agrees. “He’s got a great career ahead of him. First-round pick at least. He’s going to put that Jones guy in his pocket and eat him for breakfast when they play each other someday. And I have no idea how we’re going to get him.

I wasn’t expecting that kind of agreement and remained silent. Only the broad grin on my face shows my grandfather how pleased I am with his reaction.

“Well ... one way to get Darren would be to go to the wall this season and get the first pick.”

He looks at me in horror and I roll my eyes.

“I’m kidding,” I reassure him. “Don’t we have any trade possibilities for a first-round pick?”

“Let me see what I can do,” he counters. “Who’s that with the number seventeen?”

“That’s Tyler Connor,” I say and Grandpa nods. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m wondering why I didn’t notice him before.” Grandpa looks genuinely surprised. “I like the way he runs. He’s good.”

“That’s right. Tyler came from Ohio last fall.”

“He’s hot,” Maya says, and I roll my eyes. Grandpa turns away and talks to his scout master.

“You’re engaged,” I tell my sister.

“And you’re a killjoy,” she counters cheerfully. I laugh and shrug.

We finish watching the practice, and I can sense in every fiber of his body how much Darren wants to win over my grandfather. Both athletically and as a person. Athletically, he

already has him in the bag, but as a person... I really hope Grandpa gives him the chance he deserves.

Coach Flanders finishes practice and comes over to us, beaming with pride. Grandpa is standing next to us again.

“How did you like it?” he asks proudly, just looking at my grandfather. He doesn’t seriously believe that his coaching performance has anything to do with Darren and Tyler playing the way they do.

I speak up. “All right, we’d like to talk to Darren and Tyler.”

Coach Flanders puffs out his cheeks, his chest rising and falling frantically. He’s angry that I talked back to him earlier. He doesn’t want to talk to me and looks at my grandfather, the only person he respects.

“Tyler?” He looks surprised. “You came for Denver, didn’t you ... and Darren?”

“We changed our minds,” I explain, smiling sweetly at him. “Or do you have a problem with us not being interested in Denver anymore?”

“No,” he grumbles. “Do you want to talk to them now or in the box? We’ve prepared a little supper.”

I want to answer that we want to talk to them now, but Maya decides that we’ll go to the box. Grandpa nods and agrees.

We’ve been waiting for Tyler and Darren for half an hour. I’m incredibly nervous because this is the first time, I’ll be interacting with him in my role as the NFL heiress. Darren and I have talked a lot about what the future holds. The draft is unpredictable, but we could trade up in the order with other teams if we really want him. Since he’s a defensive end and not a quarterback, the odds are pretty good that he won’t be one of the first five picks in the first round. However, his

senior season in college will tell us what his chances are. One nasty injury and it's all over.

"Don't look so nervous," Maya says. "He loves you and knows this is your job."

"I know," I say quietly. "Did you tell Grandpa you went to college with Darren's sister?"

"Yeah," Maya says with a shrug. "I looked him up on Instagram and found Dana. I was surprised, but she's really nice."

"Hmm."

"What's up?"

"Nothing really," I reply. "Darren told me pretty late that he knew about Dana ... and today is just getting to me."

"Don't worry about it," my sister reassures me and takes me in her arms. "The guy's in love with you. He's a football player, not an actor. He's not fooling you."

"You're right," I agree.

Loud voices from the hallway interrupt our conversation and Coach Flanders, a supervisor from the boys' management team, and Darren and Tyler enter the box. They both look confused.

When Darren sees me, he smiles and I smile back.

He and Tyler are wearing Lincoln Tigers sweatpants and hoodies. Darren's hair is still wet and I can't help but grin. He looks hot.

"Mr. McDonald." Coach Flanders speaks. "Ms. McDonald and Ms. McDonald."

Wow. So, he is learning. Listen and marvel. Still, his overbearing manner annoys me. Hopefully, I'll have as little to do with him as possible in the coming months.

It feels good to be myself and in my element. Telling my friends and Darren the truth was the best decision I ever made.

“Hi,” I say, smiling at Tyler and Darren. “We really enjoyed your play.”

I have a hard time assuming my role because Tyler and Darren seem skeptical. A look at my grandfather signals me to continue.

“We know the draft isn’t until next year for you,” I continue. “But we want you to know that we will be watching you next season. If you continue to improve, we intend to draft you.”

Tyler looks surprised and can’t believe what I’m saying. Darren smiles cautiously. This is as new to him as it is to me.

“Why don’t you join us, we’ll talk some more,” my grandfather says now.

The two of them sit down at the table. I follow Maya and stay behind Darren. Carefully I put my hand on his shoulder and he turns around.

“Hey,” I say quietly, and he grins.

“Hey. Will you sit next to me?”

“Sure,” I answer, sinking into the chair. He immediately puts his hand on my leg and I put mine on his. “You were great.”

“So great that you want to draft me, Ms. McDonald?”

“I don’t know yet,” I say honestly, squeezing his hand. “We’ll see in a year.”

“I know,” Darren says, looking at our hands. “You’re really hot playing boss, by the way.”

His voice is low and I don’t think the others heard him. Still, heat rises in my cheeks. He just grins and squeezes my leg lightly. Then he turns to my grandfather. He engages Darren in a conversation about his training and gives him advice on how to improve in the coming months.

“I don’t think Millie would be thrilled if you put on twenty pounds,” Maya teases.

“For what he wants, he’ll have to,” I reply, leaning against Darren.

My sister laughs and turns to Coach Flanders, who asks her a few questions.

“I’m telling you,” Darren reinforces his words. “You’re hot when you play boss.”

A wave of heat runs through my body. Because I know exactly what’s going on in his head. Happy to have the best guy ever by my side and to be able to live my dream without having to hide, I lean into Darren.

“Millie?” I look at my grandfather. “He’s a good guy.”

Smiling, I lean into Darren and nod in satisfaction.

Epilogue

Darren

Chicago Airport, six months later

I nod to the friendly stewardess in Millie's private jet and follow my girlfriend into the opulent interior. This is the third time I've been on the McDonald family jet. The first time, we flew to Minneapolis for her grandfather's birthday. That's where I met Millie's parents, Roger McDonald Jr. and Jennifer. They were very kind and welcomed me into their family. Maya's husband Preston is also a great guy. Their wedding last week was beautiful.

We went to visit my parents for Easter. My relationship with my mother has eased because of Millie. She adores my girlfriend and still thinks it's a joke that Millie is going to inherit an NFL franchise. Dana moved to Australia to live with our uncle after he stayed with us to learn more about ranching and she needed to get some distance. I'm glad my sister is going her own way and not the way my parents wanted her to go.

While I grew up with a few luxuries, what Millie has to offer is pure insanity. In fact, it scares me to see how carelessly she throws money around. On the other hand, I know that her family probably makes more money in an hour than mine does in a year.

The interior of the jet has a seating area. The beige chairs and beige couch across from them match perfectly with the white walls and white carpet.

"We could have taken a commercial flight," I say, and she laughs.

"As long as I live, I will never set foot on a commercial flight again." She purses her lips. "If that's what you want, fine, but I can't stand it."

"Sometimes I want the old Millie back." I sigh and pull her closer. "I love you, but we don't need all this."

"I need it." She pushes me away. "Now stop complaining and start enjoying it. Ms. Bellingham, we'd like a bottle of water as soon as we reach cruising altitude."

Millie sits down in one of the chairs and I sit across from her. She grins at me, looking absolutely happy and exuberant. The new semester starts next week and we want to spend the last days together before the stress of everyday life starts again. I could have lived with locking ourselves in our apartment for a week and never getting out of bed, but my girlfriend has other plans.

“Remember when we talked about Hawaii?” she asks, taking my hands in hers. I return the gesture and nod.

“And you survived the subsequent flight on a commercial airliner.”

“And you survived your jealous attack on Mr. Broderick,” she shoots back immediately, winking at me. “He disappeared today when he saw you.”

“The guy has a crush on you.”

Millie rolls her eyes and I lean across the table and kiss her.

“Even after all these months, you still don’t know how sexy you are,” I whisper. “Why?”

We’ve been together almost half a year, and Millie is still shy when I compliment her or tell her how hot she makes me during sex.

“It’s just the way I am,” she explains. “And a few years from now, I still won’t be used to it. Besides, you’re the first guy to tell me that outright.”

“Yeah, because the others were all idiots.”

“You were one too,” she accuses and I groan.

“Okay, okay,” I relent and pull away. “I was stupid too.”

“I love you, Darren.” The sparkle in her eyes makes my heart skip a beat.

“I love you too, baby.”

The stewardess tells us to fasten our seat belts and the jet begins to move. It doesn’t take long before we’re airborne. Millie wraps a lock of her dark hair around her finger and looks down at her iPhone.

“Baby?” I ask, unfastening my seat belt.

“Huh?”

“Let’s go to the bedroom.”

She looks at me and immediately blushes. Of course she does. The corners of my mouth turn up. I stand up and offer her my hand. Hesitantly, she takes it and lets me pull her to her feet.

“What are you doing?” She looks at the closed door that separates us from the stewardess and the pilot.

“Oh,” I say, pulling her to me. I kiss her passionately and pick her up. Millie wraps her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist. “I want you to join the Mile High Club. This is our third flight on the jet and we haven’t christened it yet.”

She swallows and her eyes go wide. As always, she’s skeptical when we’re trying something new sexually, but also excited and eager for what’s to come.

Grinning, I carry her into the adjoining bedroom.

I thank the chauffeur and give him a good tip. Then I follow Millie into the imposing villa with private beach near Honolulu. My girlfriend has spared no expense or effort with our accommodations. A nice hotel near the beach with a comfortable bed would have been fine. But Millie insisted on a house of her own. Like I said, I’m still getting used to life at her side.

Smiling, I pull her close and kiss her gently.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” she asks, her eyes sparkling. “I just had to take the house for us.”

I frown. The term ‘take’ can mean anything and nothing with Millie. Last week we went shopping and I told her I thought a suit was nice, but I didn’t like some of the details.

The beast in my arms questioned me and had a suit made to my specifications.

“Define ... take?” I ask carefully.

“Take as in ... uh ... buy?”

She grins broadly. I widen my eyes and gasp. Surely, she can't buy us a luxury villa in Hawaii!

“You ... you bought this huge house for us...?” I stammer, swallowing. “Who's going to pay for it? Okay, stupid question ... you paid for it.”

In the future, it's definitely not going to be me who brings home the bacon. My girlfriend has very different ideas and potential.

“Yeah,” she says with a shrug. “I had to buy it. This will be our place, Darren. We can always come here and be alone. Just the two of us.”

She's excited and her eyes sparkle. Millie snuggles closer to me, planting scattered kisses on my chin. I pull away and run my hands through her hair. Her head is tilted so I can look into her eyes.

“You have to stop doing this,” I tell her. “You can't keep buying everything just because I like it. I don't want it and I don't need it.”

“You're mad,” she says matter-of-factly, and I roll my eyes.

“No. But you can't just buy a mansion or a new car. That's what we need to talk about, Millie. Yes, it's your money, and I'm not going to forbid it, but if it's for both of us, we have to talk about it.”

“Sorry,” she says, “I'm just going to have to get used to us deciding something like this together. I'm used to buying things when it suits me. Even if it's a seven-million-dollar mansion.”

“How much did the house cost?” I gasp. “Are you crazy?”

“I'm a businesswoman,” she says proudly, planting a kiss on my lips. “We already have people interested in renting it. I'll

have the money back in no time. Don't get your knickers in a twist, Darren."

She waves it off and walks away, hips swaying.

God, I love this woman.

"You." I grab her and throw her over my shoulder. Millie screams and I smack my hand down on her hot ass. "You're amazing."

Millie laughs as I carry her upstairs to the master bedroom and lay her on the big bed.

The sun has set, but it's still gloriously warm as I climb into the Jacuzzi on the patio.

"Oh, God," I moan as I lay back. "This is so good."

I sit down in front of one of the massage jets and close my eyes. The water bubbles around me and I feel completely relaxed.

"Can I keep you company?" I open my eyes and see my girlfriend walking towards me in a skimpy red bikini. I love it when she wears red. It reminds me of the sinful dress she wore to my sister's wedding. The dress I was never allowed to take off her. "I love it when you wear red."

"Why?" Millie places two water bottles on the designated rack and joins me in the water. I grab her hands and pull her astride my lap. The water washes around her small, firm breasts and I lick my lips.

"It reminds me of the dress in Austin," I say.

"I was ready for a long time," she says, "but I stood in front of the bathroom mirror for almost ten minutes, afraid to come out."

"Why is that?"

Her hands run down my bare chest and she wraps them around my neck. “I felt so ... so naked. I had rarely worn clothes like that, and ... and in front of you. I was insecure.”

“You looked stunning,” I assure her, kissing her, “you always do.”

“Always?” she wants to know, raising her eyebrows. “I can remember times...”

“Now,” I admit.

“Better.” Millie giggles and takes possession of my mouth. I love it when she takes the initiative. My hands run down her back and catch on the strings of her bikini top. All I have to do is untie the knot and I can pull the top off her body. That’s exactly what I do. First the knot on her back, then the one around her neck. The top falls into the water in front of us and I carelessly push it aside. Then I cradle her breasts and squeeze them.

“Darren,” Millie moans, lets her head fall back so I can stroke her throat. “That’s good.”

“Tell me something else,” I beg, pulling away from her. She looks at me, pulling back a little so I can see her breasts better.

“What do you want to know?”

“When did you fall in love with me?” The question comes out of my mouth spontaneously. I remember her yelling at me. That she would never have agreed to the rash idea of visiting my family if she didn’t have feelings for me.

The old familiar blush creeps over Millie and I raise my eyebrows. This is getting exciting.

“Honestly,” she mumbles, “from the beginning.”

“What beginning?”

“The beginning of my studies...” Millie laughs and shakes her head. “It was my second or third day, and I was looking for a room. I was standing in the main hall of the main building and you guys walked in the door. Denver, Jake and you. There was a buzz around me and ... and I looked up. That’s when I saw you for the first time and... I had a crush.”

“But...” I falter. “Our deal was months later.”

“Yeah.” Millie shakes her head. “I was secretly in love with you. All that time. Everyone knew, I think, but you never paid any attention to me.”

Her voice is stronger than I expected. I pull her closer. I don’t know what to say. Because it’s true: I never paid any attention to her.

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?” My fingertips dance down her bare back and her nipples stand up.

“Seriously?” She raises her eyebrows in amusement. “I should have told you I was in love with you?”

“Maybe not so ... outrageously, but you could have talked to me more.”

“I couldn’t,” she objects.

“Why?” I ask, kissing her neck. “I’m sure we could have found a way to communicate.”

I don’t have to lift my head to know she’s rolling her eyes.

“Every time you tried to talk to me, there was a big blank in my head...” She moans softly. “You were there and ... and in my head I had the perfect sentence. Unfortunately, it also took me at least five minutes to decide to finally talk to you ... well ... five minutes was five minutes too long. You were always so ... cool and ... and confident. It reinforced my belief that you would never be interested.”

“You know how that sounds to me?” I grin and tilt my head. “Like those shows where everyone’s afraid to go near their crush...”

“Sienna, Phoenix and Joy tried to talk me into forgetting about you, but I wanted you. I was sure of it from the beginning. And then came your offer and that night...”

I hold her close and kiss her. We don’t have to talk about it anymore. To be honest, I don’t understand Millie. We were in a group, and if she had been just a little bit like she is now, of course, I would have paid more attention to her. I’m not trying to excuse my stupidity. Surely, I would have seen her true

character if I had just tried a little harder and overlooked her bad taste in clothes. Since then, she has completely abandoned them. Each of her outfits now are incredibly beautiful.

“And you?” she asks, “When did you fall in love with me?”

I knew she’d ask me the same question in return.

“Sometime between our first time and my conversation with Dana,” I say, hugging her tighter. “I don’t really know.”

“That’s a very ... long time.”

“But it’s true,” I say, stroking her hips. “At first I didn’t want to believe it, and ... the more time we spent together and the more you opened up to me, the more I realized I felt something for you beyond friendship. The realization really hit me when Dana asked me if I missed you.”

“Did you miss me?”

“Like hell,” I confess, kissing her, “I love you.”

“I love you too.” My heart beats faster, as it always does when she says it to me.

With smooth movements, I remove the unnecessary fabric from our bodies and lift her onto my cock. Millie moans and gyrates her hips on mine.

“Darren,” she moans as we find a rhythm together.

“Yes?” I whisper as I look into her eyes.

“I’m glad I only had to kiss one frog. Because I think very few girls are lucky enough to find their prince the first time.”

About the Author

Of course, it was sports – specifically ball games – that led Mrs. Kristal to writing. She started writing stories in 2012, and her first attempts at writing about soccer evolved over the years into real stories and eventually books...

Mrs. Kristal then switched continents and began writing about American football. In 2021, she published her first book about college romance and football. Mrs. Kristal draws inspiration from everyday situations, memories of experiences, and conversations with friends and family.

In addition to sports, her books are always about love and friendship. What she loves most about writing is being able to immerse herself in other worlds, taking her characters on a long journey, with a happy ending at the end. When Mrs. Kristal is not writing, she spends time with her friends and family and travels the world. One of her greatest wishes is to see the countries, cities, and stadiums she writes about at least once in her life.

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