

Holden Moore
can have any girl
he wants...
*except the
coach's
daughter*

QUARTERBACK
SNEAK

k a n d i s t e i n e r

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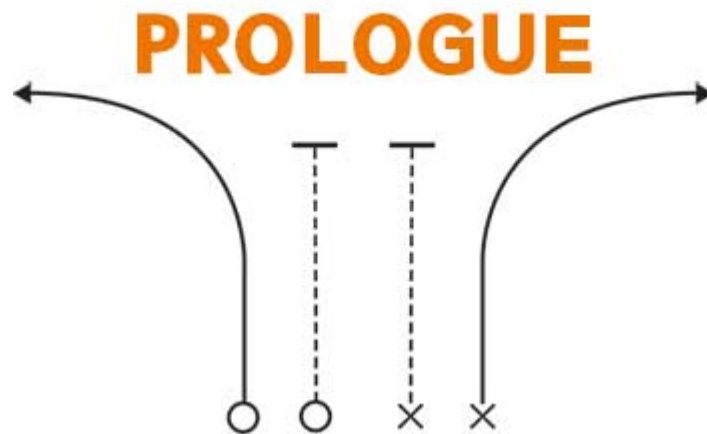
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To the ones who have been strangled by the dark hand of grief,
who have found the strength to stand
even with its heavy boot on your chest,

to those who continue to live
even when it feels impossible...

this one's for you.



Holden

The North Boston University locker room was completely silent on the first day of spring training.

My teammates sat in front of their lockers or leaned against training equipment, eyes on the floor as we waited. The silence roared like the hum of an airplane engine, vibrating through every chest in the building.

I wanted to take charge, to pump my team up, to have some grand speech that would soothe all their worry. I longed for sage advice like the kind my uncles gave me in times of stress, for the right words to make everyone breathe easier.

But the truth was, I was worried, too.

Despite how I'd somehow managed to redirect my team's energy after our bowl game loss, I knew as much as everyone else in this room how much a new coach would change things.

A new coach meant new drills, new ways of doing things, new plays and tactics and — possibly — new starters.

That was what scared everyone in this room the most.

And even if we did all get to keep our spots, we were in unfamiliar territory now. Nothing would be the same this season.

All eyes snapped to the doorway that led into the hall when Coach Dawson, our defensive end coordinator, swung through it. On his heels was our special teams coach, our offensive coordinator, and our trainer staff.

And then, at the very end of the line, Coach Carson Lee.

Coach Lee shared a few similarities with our last coach. He was brutal in his training camps when he worked down south, he had a zero-tolerance attitude when it came to any of his players stepping out of line, and he expected greatness.

But he was different from Coach Sanders in many ways, too.

For starters, he was twenty years his senior, which somehow made me respect him even more just because he'd been coaching ball before I was even born. He also had a bit more of a radical approach, one that got him headlines for doing things like making his team run half the length of the Florida Panhandle one weekend after a loss to a team they were expected to beat easily.

We all stood when he entered, like soldiers coming to attention for their sergeant.

He swept into the room with purpose, his salt and pepper gray hair styled in a neat wave and parted to the side. He was tall, at least as tall as our tight end and number one pain in my ass — Kyle Robbins — and built like a train. There were rumors that he ran a lot of drills alongside his players, as if to show them that if a fifty-something-year-old could do it, it was embarrassing if they couldn't.

One look at him told me the rumors were likely true.

He was tan, evidence of working hard in the sun day in and day out, and his dark eyes held no kindness as they swept over the room. He bent toward the man to his right, talking in a hushed voice to our new assistant coach whom he'd brought with him. I watched the two of them conversing as they moved toward the center of the locker room.

That was, until she walked in.

I almost thought it was Riley Novo, our kicker, at first — because she and our Public Relations Coordinator, Giana Jones, were the only girls we ever really saw in the locker room. But the girl who swung through the door behind Coach was no one I'd ever seen before.

Her long, leather-brown hair flowed over her shoulders like chocolate waves — and that was the only thing soft about her. Every inch of her face was etched into severe precision, her jaw set, bow-shaped lips flattened into a tight line. In a red crop tank top and black track pants, I could tell she was fit, her toned, golden stomach peeking through the gap between the two. She was slight, narrow hips and lean arms, which made her ample bust stand out even more.

In every possible way, she was a complete knockout.

But it wasn't her body that held me captive.

It wasn't her hair, or the graceful line of her neck, or the arrogant indifference with which she strode into the room.

It was her eyes.

Warm, endlessly deep brown, framed by thick lashes that swept across her cheeks with every blink.

And haunted.

Just like mine.

“At ease, gentlemen,” Coach Lee said with a smirk that looked almost unnatural, like he hardly smiled at all. He held out his hands and signaled for us to sit once he was in the center of the room. “And lady,” he added with a pointed look at Riley.

The rest of the coaches lined the wall behind him, giving him our full attention.

“I know I've already met a few of you during my tours here, but I'm excited to finally get real time with each and every one of you. I won't pretend like I'm blind to how uncomfortable and uneasy this all must be for you. I'm not just a new player, I'm a new coach — and I know how that can shake things up more than anything else.”

I swallowed.

“But I want you to know, I’m not here to change everything. Obviously, a lot of what you have going here has been working. It’s an honor to be walking onto this team.” He paused, hanging his hands on his hips. “It’ll be even more of an honor to give you the last push to the finish line, to be there when they crown us champs at the end of the season.”

That made several players exchange looks of determination and delight, that fire that I’d stoked at the end of last season just one good poke away from roaring again. We’d played in bowl games the last two seasons, pulling NBU back from an embarrassing ten years of lackluster performance. But while we’d won two years ago, we’d lost our most recent one — costing us our shot at the Championship Title.

And this was my last year to get there, to win it all, to seal my spot as a first-round draft pick into the NFL.

“It’s the first day of spring training,” Coach said. “And I don’t want to use this precious time babbling on about myself. We’ll get to know each other as the season progresses. For now, I want to introduce you to Coach Hoover,” he said, gesturing for the man who’d walked in next to him to come up. “Hoover is my right-hand man and will probably become your favorite person in the world because if anyone can talk me out of making a team run laps, it’s him.”

Coach Hoover smirked as Coach Lee clapped him on the back.

“And this,” he said, waving a hand behind him. “Is my daughter — Julep.”

A knot formed in my throat, too thick to swallow past as all eyes shot to the dark-haired, dark-eyed girl.

Hesitantly, she stepped up to his side, though she didn’t smile or show any ounce of emotion other than a slight raise of two fingers from where she’d folded her arms across her chest.

“Julep is rounding out her junior year, and for some reason, loves me enough to transfer from our last university and finish out her degree here. She’s majoring in sports

medicine, and she'll be interning under the training staff on the team."

My heart rate spiked at the thought of her being around all the time, at the mere inference that she might be the one to stretch or massage me before a game.

Coach paused, something more severe washing over his expression as his jaw hardened, eyes narrowing.

"And let me be extremely clear," he said, scanning the room. "If any of you even so much as thinks about flirting with Julep, let alone having the balls to ask her on a date, you will have me to answer to. She's not here for you to ogle over. She's here to work — just like you. I imagine since you have Riley Novo as a teammate, I don't need to lecture any further than this about respecting females in the athletic industry."

Riley smiled a little at that, obviously impressed, and Julep rolled her eyes like she hated that this was a conversation that even needed to happen at all.

All the while, I was burning from the inside out.

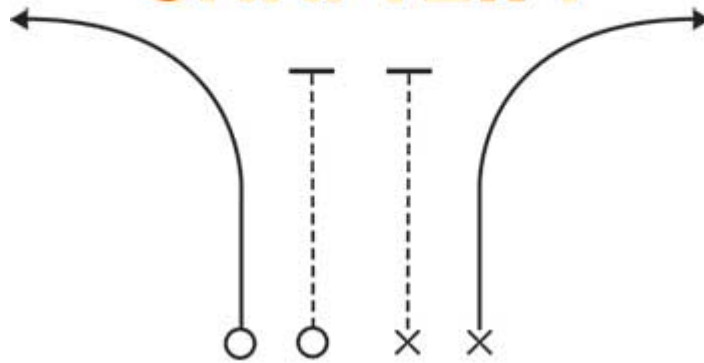
Because all my life, football had been my one and only focus. It was all I cared about. It was my reason for waking up in the morning, and the only thought that consumed me when I laid my head down at night. It was my lifeline, my muse, the center of my attention.

But in one fatal moment, that focus shifted.

Julep Lee was the coach's daughter. She was completely off limits.

And yet, I knew right then and there that I had to have her.

CHAPTER 1



Five months later...

Julep

“I am not helping you put a stripper pole in the middle of your living room.”

My dad folded his arms sternly across his chest, caterpillar eyebrows furrowed the way they always were when he was yelling at one of his players.

“Help me or don’t help me, it’s going up,” I told him, fitting the chrome extension to the pole before tightening the screws.

“There’s a giant window that faces the street.”

I just shrugged, indifferent. “Then I guess the neighbors will get a free show.”

Dad scowled more, and I wish I still had the human emotion of joy left inside me so I could smile and put him at ease. Instead, I put the pole aside long enough to climb to my feet and wrap him in a hug — massive arms across his chest and all.

“I’ll get curtains, okay?”

He didn’t seem convinced.

“Remember why I love it,” I told him — *begged* him.

The inhale he dragged through his nose was enough to cause a draft in the room, but he softened with the exhale, uncrossing his arms and hugging me in return. He pressed a quick kiss to my forehead before pulling back.

“I know,” he said. “Doesn’t mean I want to see it.”

“Fair enough,” I conceded. Then, I hung my hands on my hips, chewing the inside of my cheek. “Thank you, Dad. For letting me do this.”

He nodded, then made his way to the kitchen to continue unpacking a box that did *not* include a chrome apparatus I would be clinging to while half naked.

I decided to wait to put the pole up until later, settling on a box labeled *bedroom*, instead. It was a miracle my father was trusting me enough to live on my own — well, with a roommate, but without *him*. It was the first time in my new adult life that he’d granted the permission to do so, and I had a feeling it was because he felt guilty moving me in the middle of my junior year of college last spring when he took the job as head coach of the North Boston University football team.

Not that I cared.

It wasn’t like I left a group of friends behind — like I had any friends *at all*. I’d given up on trying to establish anything close to a relationship, friendly or otherwise, since the night I lost my sister.

As if the universe heard my thoughts, I opened the box on the floor to find a picture of Abby looking back at me.

What was left of my heart stuttered at the sight, at the neon blue eyes, the wide smile, the way she hugged my waist like I was her best friend while I stood there looking annoyed with life — like always.

But I didn’t cry, didn’t pick up the picture and run a hand over the glass, didn’t do anything other than set it aside and continue unpacking the personal items beneath it.

The front door burst open, and I glanced up at the frazzled girl who stumbled through the entryway, arms loaded with shopping bags.

She paused at the sight of me, her dark sunglasses sliding down her nose a bit. She arched a brow over them, taking in the length of me as I did the same to her.

I knew without asking who she was — Mary Silver, my new roommate.

We'd found each other through an app that reminded me of a dating app, except it matched you with potential roommates in the Boston area, instead. We'd both "swiped right" on each other, and after a couple nights of conversing, decided we could tolerate each other enough to live together. That was maybe what I'd liked most about her — she wasn't bubbly and annoying, she wasn't trying to be my best friend, she wasn't expecting anything other than for me to pay my bills on time.

I felt the same.

My first impression of her in person was that she was gorgeous. That much I ascertained within seconds.

Her long blonde hair was styled in waves over her shoulders, her makeup immaculate, blush-painted lips and cat-lined eyes that made me wonder if she did it professionally. She wore a forest green dress covered in delicate flowers, her lush hips and thick thighs straining the fabric and calling attention to her curves I was already envious of. She paired that dress with a leather jacket it was far too hot to be wearing and black combat boots, and I noted the tattoos visible on her legs, her sternum, the piercings through the septum of her nose, and lining both her ears.

A subtle tilt of her chin was her first greeting. "Hey."

"Hey," I said back.

Dad paused where he was unpacking in the kitchen, and though he looked pleasant enough on the outside, I knew as his daughter what he was thinking as he eyeballed my new roommate.

Mary's eyes drifted to the half-built pole in the middle of the floor.

“You dance?”

I shrugged. “Tricks and combos mostly, but I dance sometimes, too.”

She nodded, bottom lip poking out like she was impressed and maybe a little surprised. “Cool. Just don't break anything. I want to get our deposit back.”

With that, she slid past me and Dad both, on her way down the back hallway toward the stairs that led to our rooms. She glanced into the kitchen as she passed. “Sup, Pops.”

I actually felt the corners of my mouth tilt up at that, at how my dad's eyebrow slid into his hairline with the greeting.

Once Mary climbed the stairs and shut her bedroom door, Dad looked at me.

“She seems nice,” I said.

He blinked but refrained from saying anything else and went back to unpacking.

Bending, I heaved the box I'd been sifting through into my arms and carried it up the stairs, too — to my own bedroom. The house Mary and I were renting together was ancient, the wood floors creaking with every step and the plumbing a delicate situation I was sure would give us trouble more than once. I was pretty sure we'd be haunted at night by a ghost from the Revolution era. But I loved the natural light that streamed through the large bay window in my room, loved the idea of filling my space with plants and all my favorite yard sale finds.

I finally had a space of my own.

I couldn't blame my father for worrying about me. I had given him every right to after the way I'd completely lost control of my life when Abby died. Between the partying, the alcohol, the drugs, and the numbness with which I gave myself to any boy who wanted me... I had turned into someone no one recognized, most of all me.

I would have done anything to feel something, even though it never worked.

My mother gave up on me. I didn't hate her for it, mostly because I was too busy hating myself. But it surprised me, the ease with which she seemed to dismiss me after the third or fourth time I showed up at their house in the middle of the night and puked on the lawn. I was lucky that my actions didn't end my parents' marriage. But somehow, they managed to hold on to each other even when I tested every last nerve they had.

But while Dad and I had moved here for his new job, she'd stayed back home in Alabama.

She claimed it was because she loved our house too much to leave it, that the church wouldn't be able to go on without her, that the yoga studios wouldn't be the same in New England.

I knew it was because she was happy for the chance to get away from me.

Dad, on the other hand, had never lost hope. He'd never lost faith in me. And somehow, that was worse.

I'd never forget the night my father broke down in tears at my feet, begging me to get straight, to go to college, to find a will to live again.

"I can't lose you, too."

Those words would haunt me for the rest of my life.

And so here I was, a sports medicine major who only drank a glass or two of wine a week, trying to do whatever it was that would make him happy. Because there wasn't a shot in hell that *I'd* ever find that state of being again.

The least I could do with my miserable life was make his a little less hard to bear.

Rock music started blasting from Mary's room as I got to unpacking, pulling out a hollow golden Buddha statue I'd picked up at an estate sale a few years ago and setting it on the floor next to my bedside table. Piece by piece, I filled my new

bedroom with the vases and paintings and stained mirrors and tchotchkes and whatever else I'd thrifted over the years. The space became more and more eclectic as I did so, and each new addition made me feel a little less dead inside.

I liked surrounding myself with other peoples' stories, liked the thought of having a piece of them in my own life — as if strangers could feel a little less lonely with just a simple connection like an old, chipped teacup.

Eventually, I came back to the picture of me and Abby, and I carefully sat it on my desk before my eyes caught on someone in the yard of the house across the street.

The house itself looked as decrepit as the one we were living in, the paint peeling and roof in desperate need of new shingles. The porch was littered with beer cans and bottles, and there was a massive kid passed out on the porch swing with one leg hanging off it holding him steady.

But that wasn't what held my attention.

From downstairs, I could only see the front of the house, as well as the old half-rotted fence that surrounded the side yard and wrapped around the back. But up here in my room, I could see over the fence completely.

And it was the boy in the back yard I couldn't look away from.

I'll admit, *boy* seemed like the wrong term to describe him. He was shirtless, his thick, ebbing muscles gleaming in the sunlight as he ripped weeds from a bed of flowers. Sweat ran along his chiseled back as he did, and when he sat back on his heels to wipe his forehead with the back of his forearm, I frowned.

Holden Moore.

I recognized him instantly. It was impossible for anyone not to know who the NBU quarterback was. And given that I'd studied under our athletic trainers over summer training and watched them work on his shoulder, wrap his ankle before every practice, and torture him with a combination of ice baths

and deep tissue work each week — I'd have known his body anywhere.

I'd also have known that head of hair, thick and a dark, sandy blond that reminded me of the beach. And though his head was down, focus on the garden, I knew the dimples that framed his smile, the one that had popped on his left cheek the first time he laid eyes on me during spring training.

Maybe I was shocked to see him like that, tending carefully to a bed of flowers instead of launching a football down the field. Maybe I was fascinated to see him doing anything *other* than football — which had seemed to be the only thing he cared about since the moment I first met him. Or maybe there was a small part of me that *wasn't* completely dead, a part of me still capable of feeling a touch of heat at the sight of a shirtless, muscled man sweating in the New England sun.

He stood, gloved hand wrapped around the neck of a black trash bag full of weeds as he dragged himself back toward the house. He set the bag aside and grabbed a water bottle, drinking for only a moment before he dumped the rest overhead, the water mixing with the sweat already lining his arms and abdomen.

Then, he froze, frowning as if he sensed something.

And his green eyes shot to me.

I could have hidden. I could have jumped back or pretended to focus on the photograph I'd just unpacked. I could have shied away and acted like I hadn't been watching him. But instead, I stood my ground, holding his gaze as he squinted up at me.

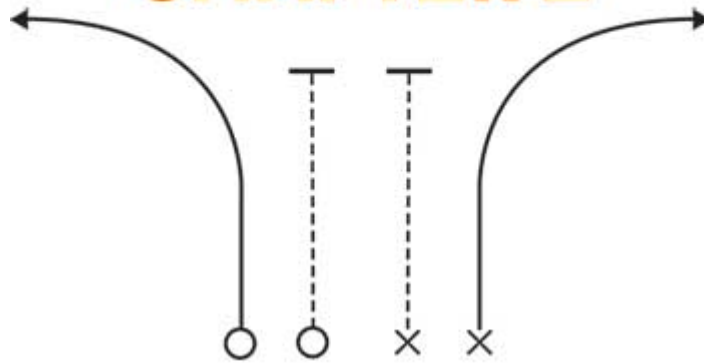
When he realized who I was, his eyebrows ticked up a notch — just barely enough that I noticed.

For a moment, he just stood there, staring at me as I stared at him. But then, hesitantly, he lifted his hand in greeting.

I blinked.

And then I drew the curtains shut and got back to work.

CHAPTER 2



Holden

“Red thirty-two, red thirty-two. Set, hit!”

Marshawn Walker was a beast of a block poised in front of me before he snapped the ball, tossing it back through his legs and into my hands. Then, he immediately shoved against the defensive player doing his best to get through and sack me.

I was grateful for players like Walker and the two men next to him, just a few who kept me safe and allowed me the chance to scan the field for my receiver.

Everything slowed — time, noise, my heart rate in my ears — as I searched for the play. Our tight end, Kyle Robbins, was covered, unable to shake our safety, Clay Johnson, as he juiced with every step. I found Braden Lock next, a transfer who had been key in our winning streak last year. He was just out of reach of the defender chasing him, and when he cut toward the middle of the field, his eyes jetting to me as his hands splayed open for the catch, I launched the ball.

It sailed over where our men were scrapping in the middle, and Lock caught it easily, running another ten yards before he was wrapped up in a tackle and brought down.

I clapped my hands, smiling at the victory.

Until Coach Lee blew his whistle, and one look at the scowl on his face told me he wasn't happy.

“Moore!”

“Yes, sir,” I answered, already jogging over to line up at attention. The rest of the team followed my lead.

“Did you read your install packet?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And did you retain any of that information, or did it just empty out the other side of your big head?”

I gritted my teeth against the insult, knowing well enough from working with other coaches who had a similar training style that it wasn't a question he wanted me to answer. I'd forgotten what it was like to work with a coach like him. Coach Sanders had been softer in his approach — firm, but trusting in me and my leadership abilities.

Coach Lee had watched me ever since spring training like I was an in-law camping in his basement who he couldn't wait to be rid of.

“I called a slant,” he said.

This time, he arched a brow, which told me he wanted a response.

“Defense shuffled, sir, and the new formation made the slant impossible. I called out the coverage and—”

“Impossible?” Coach Lee cut me off, stepping right up into my chest. I kept my gaze fixed on the players running a drill down the field behind him as he peered up at me. “Is that what you're going to say when you pull that shit in a game and cost us a first down?”

I frowned. “Sir, Lock caught—”

“I don't give a flying horse's ass what Lock did, he wasn't supposed to have action in that play at all.”

“Coach, with all due respect, we got the first. We got the first and more.”

Coach Lee shook his head, watching me like he was slowly figuring me out.

Like he didn't like what he saw when he did.

"I understand you've been operating as a leader on this team for years, Moore, and I like that. It's important." He got even closer, his coffee breath finding my nose as he continued. "But you're the Captain, and I'm the General. You report to me. You obey *my* orders. Understood?"

I swallowed down my annoyance, my longing for Coach Sanders and the way he ran things. Maybe I'd just gotten too comfortable. Maybe I was spoiled with a coach who I also felt like was a friend.

Or maybe Coach Lee was just a class A sonofabitch.

"Yes, sir," I answered.

"Good." Coach Lee nodded, stepping back with his eyes on his clipboard. "Burpees. All of you."

There was a stifled, collective groan before someone yelled out, "How many?"

"You stop when I say stop," was all Coach answered, and then he was in conversation with our Defensive End Coordinator.

My jaw tightened as I yanked off my helmet and dropped down for my first burpee, not giving in to the temptation to look at the other players who I knew were watching my every move. They waited for me to give them the look that I was annoyed, that I thought Coach Lee was being harsher than necessary and calling bullshit punishment drills just to be a dick.

But I kept my gaze either on the turf where I dropped or across the field when I jumped, getting my reps in without a hint of emotion. I had to set the tone, and the last thing our team needed was any rift between us and our new coach. He was just trying to assert dominance, to garner the respect he felt he needed to run the team.

It wouldn't be like this for long.

That's what I told myself each time my hands hit the ground, even as my chest burned and my legs ached and Coach Lee looked on like he forgot we were doing burpees at all. But eventually, all the pain numbed, my head cleared, and I fell into a rhythm.

Jump at the top, hands up, hands down, jump back, pushup, hop feet back to hands, right back into the explosion up to my feet and repeat. Over and over, I ran the drill, gaze distant and out of focus.

Until Julep Lee came into view.

Her long, sleek, brown hair was up in a high ponytail, swinging slightly side to side as she followed on the heels of the athletic trainer in front of her. She held fast to her clipboard, making notes as a silent study until the trainer would point to a player and Julep would take over. I watched in-between burpees as she gently maneuvered the knee of one of our rookies, firing off questions that I could recite since I'd been asked them a multitude of times over my career.

Does this hurt? How about this? Scale of one to ten, what's the pain level? What kind of pain do you feel, sharp, dull, pins and needles? Can you bend it, straighten it, apply pressure?

My eyes kept her as my new focus each time I popped back up, and I strained to find any emotion in those endlessly dark brown eyes. But she was the picture of poised indifference.

Or perhaps she was numb, too.

I'd done my best to avoid her since the first day she walked through the locker room doors in spring training. She was the coach's daughter, and therefore off limits in every conceivable way. As if I didn't already know that, Coach had been sure to remind us every chance he had — if he caught someone watching her for too long or overheard a joke in the showers.

It wasn't difficult to follow his orders — at least, not for me. Football outweighed everything in my life. So, when I came to my senses and realized even flirting with the thought

of being friends with her could put my career in danger, I'd boxed up any fantasy I'd had about the dark-haired, dark-eyed girl and shelved them high enough that I couldn't reach for them in moments of weaknesses.

And seeing her every day in tight athleisure with sweat beading at the small of her back proved I would face *many* of those moments.

So I stayed focused, stayed centered, and reminded myself of the one and only goal that mattered to me: going pro at the end of this season.

But now, I not only had to fight to keep my eyes off Julep at the stadium, but at home, too.

Because she was *also* my new neighbor.

Coach Lee blowing his whistle brought me back to the present in a whoosh, and only when I stopped moving did I register how much pain my body was in, how hard I was breathing, how badly my chest ached with the strain I'd put on it. The rest of the boys collapsed onto the field, and I just barely stayed upright with my hands braced on my knees.

The rest of the team circled up around us, gathering from where they'd been running their own version of hellish drills. They didn't seem envious as they joined us around Coach, and Riley hung an arm off Clay's shoulders as Zeke came up on my opposite side.

"Aren't we all having fun?" Riley teased, and Clay managed to flick her off before he nearly vomited.

The three of them felt like family to me. Riley and Zeke, both special teams, were a couple and had been ever since their freshman season — which was my first season as quarterback, thanks to the shoulder injury that had redshirted me.

I'd been worried about Riley when she first showed up. I wondered just like the rest of the team if having a girl on the team was more of a PR stunt than anything else. But she proved to all of us why she was here — because she's talented.

She earned my respect in that first season, and even more last year when she stepped up as a leader I could count on.

As for Zeke, he'd been a top special teams recruit, thanks to the fact that he was hell on wheels and came up with monster returns every time the ball sailed down the field and into his hands. I knew many of our touchdowns were thanks to the positioning he secured for us in that first play.

Clay was the best safety in the nation — period. He was a gargantuan thing with the heart of a puppy dog, and I was convinced there wasn't a quarterback in this country who was safe from him picking their throw and embarrassing them with a touchdown in the opposite direction. He was one of my closest friends, second only to Leo Hernandez, our star running back and one of my roommates at what the team affectionately called the Snake Pit.

As if I'd conjured him, Leo jogged up to the other side of Zeke, and he arched a brow at where Clay and I were still doubled over in pain.

“Gotta love Fall Camp,” he murmured.

“Alright,” Coach said, calling all our attention to where he stood in the center of the group. “Hit the showers and get some food in you. We start film at one o'clock sharp,” he added, checking the time on his watch. “And leave all phones in the locker room.”

Kyle Robbins audibly groaned at that, and the rest of us smirked and exchanged looks. He was used to getting away with a lot of shit when Coach Sanders was here, and he'd grown a following on social media for giving behind-the-scenes looks at our day to day as a team. But Coach Lee had put a stop to that.

And maybe that was the one call he'd made since his arrival that assured me he had the team's best interest at heart.



My post-practice routine was brutal.

It had been ever since my shoulder injury — the one that had made me sit out my freshman year of college. Once I was cleared to play again, I took my duty to keep that shoulder in shape and away from any further injury very seriously.

Ice baths, deep tissue work, physical therapy — it was all part of my training. And because of that, the training staff at NBU knew me well.

“How’s it feeling today, Moore?” JB asked when I perched up on the table, fresh from my ice bath.

“Like a million bucks.”

He smirked at the same answer I gave him every time — regardless of whether my shoulder was throbbing or not. JB had taken my rehab as his own personal challenge when I came to North Boston University, and because of how much time we spent with him torturing me through physical therapy and deep tissue work, we’d become good friends.

As good of friends as I could be with the person who had the power to bench me at any moment, anyway.

“Still taking your NSAIDs?”

I nodded. “Every day.”

It was my least favorite part of my morning routine, taking anti-inflammatory medication, but I knew it was non-negotiable during the season. I wanted to avoid corticosteroid injections for as long as I could, and so far, I’d succeeded.

“Well, if you’re not in too much pain today, we’re going to hold off on dry needling or deep tissue and just focus on strength.” He paused, looking at something on his clipboard before he called over his shoulder, “Julep, why don’t you take the lead on this one?”

The training supply closet was open, and out swung Julep at the call of her name, those dark eyes locking on me only briefly before she addressed JB.

“Injury?”

“Rotator cuff. Two years post arthroscopy. Advanced stage rehab,” he told her, handing her the clipboard in my hand that somehow made me feel like he’d just shown her a naked picture of me.

Her eyes scanned the pages as she flipped through them, taking in all the notes JB had made on me over the years. Once, her gaze flicked to mine, and it trailed slowly down the length of my biceps, my abdomen, before sliding back to the pages.

I swore I saw a faint blush on her cheeks.

“Just work through the plyometric and I’ll monitor in-between other players,” JB said. Without another word, he left us, moving his attention to a defensive lineman who just walked through the door.

Julep looked at me, and again, her gaze slipped low for a brief moment before she cleared her throat and swept her hand across the ground in front of her as if it were a red carpet. “Well, what are you waiting for, an invitation? Let’s go.”

My eyebrow shot up at the tone, but I just smirked and hopped off the table, following her lead over to the training area.

“Let’s start with some eccentric stretching,” she said, eyes on her clipboard before she pointed at the ground by the weight bench. “Go ahead and kneel and I’ll grab a dumbbell.”

I shamelessly watched her walk toward the weights as I took a knee, noting even through the leggings she wore how toned her hamstrings and ass were. That was an ass that told me *she* trained, too.

When she returned, she handed me a ten-pound dumbbell.

“I want you to think about keeping your chest lifted, elbow balanced on that knee as you rotate your shoulder open and closed,” she said, demonstrating with her own arm. “Move nice and slow.”

I bit back the urge to tell her I’d done these exercises so much I could perform them in my sleep — mostly because this was the first time she’d ever talked to me, and if she thought

she was bossing me around and showing me something new, I'd let her think it.

“New England in the fall must be a lot different from where you lived down south, huh?”

No response.

“Alabama, right?”

When she didn't reply, I kept on.

“I grew up in the south, too. Florida. Moved here with my uncles when I was a kid.” I smiled, despite the mixed emotions that went with that move. “I miss the beach, but I don't miss that heat.”

A flat-lipped blink of acknowledgement was all I got from Julep.

I probably should have shut up then. If it were any other trainer, I likely would have.

But I couldn't stop myself.

“How's it been so far?” I asked after a moment. “With the training staff, I mean.”

“Fine,” she clipped. “Alright, let's move on to pendulum swings.”

I stood, balancing my left hand on a table for stability before I began swinging my right arm side to side. “Do you feel like you're learning a lot?”

“Loads.”

“What made you want to go into sports medicine?”

She sighed, clipboard hitting her thigh before she leveled me with a stern look. “This isn't an interview, Moore. It's rehab. Focus.”

I smirked. “Could be both, if we tried our hand at multi-tasking.”

Julep ignored me, walking me through the next set of exercises while I watched her curiously and tried to see under the hard exterior she wore so easily. There was nothing even

close to a smile on her dusty-colored lips, just sharp concentration on every move I made and the checklist in front of her.

JB came over to check on us, making a few remarks before he was gone again. When he left, I tried poking the bear once more.

“You and your dad must be close, huh?”

Julep stilled, pausing only a second before she pointed at the medicine ball on the ground. I knew without her saying another word that she wanted me to do chest passes against the wall.

“Something like that,” was all she responded with as I launched into the first set.

“Got any tips?”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Your old man seems to have it out for me,” I answered.

I thought I saw the corner of her lips lift, and it was stupid how much encouragement that slight movement gave me.

“He doesn’t like anyone who questions his authority.”

“So, I should just bend over and take whatever he wants to give me, eh?”

“Your words, not mine,” she remarked, and for the first time since I’d met her, her eyes danced with a bit of amusement.

I smiled, which seemed to pull her back to the moment, because with a clearing of her throat, her eyes were on the clipboard again.

“I saw you gardening,” she said after a moment.

“And I saw you,” I replied. “Stalking me.”

The most unattractive snort of a laugh left her then, and she accented that noise with a roll of her eyes before she gave me the signal to stop with the medicine ball. I hung it between my forearm and hip, arching a brow at her.

“Don’t act like you weren’t.”

“I was unpacking and happened to look out my window,” she countered. “Not my fault you were shirtless playing in the dirt.”

“I was pulling weeds,” I corrected. “Sorry if my abs were distracting.”

Another roll of those beautiful eyes.

“Should I wear a shirt from now on?”

“Do whatever you want,” she said, and then she checked the time on her watch and pointed to the ball for me to start again.

“I don’t know if anyone’s told you about the Snake Pit,” I said as I tossed the ball. “But we’re kind of an open house. If you ever need a night out or anything.”

Julep gave me a look that told me I was a fool for even suggesting.

I shrugged. “Everyone needs to cut loose sometimes.”

“Did you not heed my dad’s warning?”

Her question struck any humor in our conversation down like a lightning strike, and I caught the medicine ball before turning to face her.

“I’m off limits.”

“I’m just talking to you. I’m not allowed to talk to you?”

“You’re flirting with me. There’s a difference.”

“Someone’s full of themselves.”

Her little mouth popped open, brows furrowing as she took a step into my space. That one step narrowed all my attention to her slight frame, her bust, her lips as she pursed them and folded her arms over her chest.

“It’s never going to happen, QB.”

“Hey, I’m just as off limits as you are,” I quipped back, testing that delicate space between us. “So maybe you should

take a step back and avoid looking out your window if me being shirtless is a temptation.”

As if she just realized how close she was to me, her gaze dropped to my bare chest.

I flexed my pec, and she scoffed, taking a giant step backward.

“You really think you’re something, don’t you?”

I shrugged. “Quarterback syndrome. Seems like you might have some of that in you, too.”

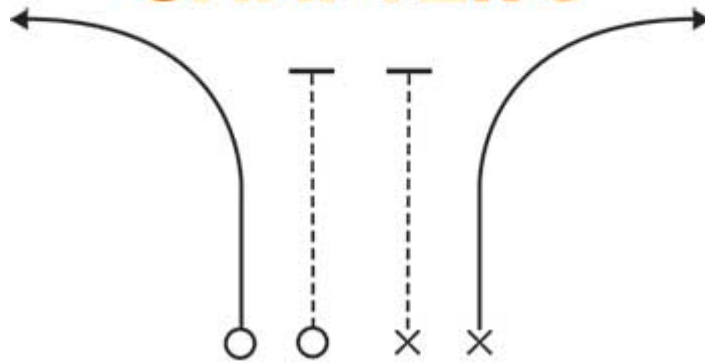
“Trust me — you and I are nothing alike.”

“Oh, I have a feeling you might be wrong about that, Julep Lee.”

Her full name shot out of me in an attempt to be cute, or maybe in an attempt to rile her up even more now that I knew how fun it was to ruffle her feathers. But instead, it was like a bucket of ice water on a fire, dousing her flame and sobering her expression.

“You’re free to go,” she said without emotion, and then she turned on her heels and left me standing there wondering who the hell I’d just stepped out of the ring with.

CHAPTER 3



Julep

The muscles along my rib cage ached as I stretched around the pole, hanging by one leg as I fought to reach back for the opposite foot. I spun slow and seductively to the melodic voice of H.E.R., inhaling deep and exhaling the same as I tried to match my movements to the beat.

Holding the inverted shape for a count of eight, I carefully released my foot, reaching up between my thighs for the chrome apparatus only to pull my chest up and re-center. I arched, letting my hair flow behind me, reveling in the full-body and mind escape only this could afford me.

It was shortly after Abby's death that I attended my first pole class. I'd signed up mostly because I thought it matched my rebellious attitude at the time. It was one more way I could disappoint my family, one more way I could act out and be the screw up they all assumed I was.

But what I found inside that pole studio ended up being my saving grace.

It was a community of women empowering themselves, taking back what had been taken from them and re-inventing their souls from the inside out. These women were young, and they were old. They were all shapes, sizes, and colors. They were every corner of the feminine energy.

They were survivors.

It was the most supportive environment I'd ever been in, and more than that — it was the most physically and mentally challenging endeavor I'd ever taken on in my life.

When I was flowing, I couldn't think about anything other than my breath, my points of contact with the pole, or my next move. There was no space in my brain for thinking about my sister, about the men who took her life and remained free, about my family's demise once she was gone.

About how it was all my fault.

I knew nothing would change — not for the rest of my life. I would always be haunted by that one party, by that one seemingly innocent bit of peer pressure to con my sister into doing drugs with me. It was supposed to be a fun night, one we would laugh about as we grew older, one we'd tell our kids about when they teased us about not being any fun.

Back in our day...

Instead, it was the night she took her last breath.

And so, pole became more than just a way to exercise for me.

It became the only way to survive.

My breath sawed in and out of my chest once my bare feet touched the wood floor again, and I held onto the pole, heaving and standing still as my dizziness slowly began to fade. Once I felt okay, I strode over to the coffee table that I'd shoved out of the way and under our front bay window, snagging my water bottle off the top of it.

I chugged the cool liquid, mopping my forehead with a towel as I considered what trick sequence I wanted to try next. I was so deep in thought I almost didn't notice the pair of green eyes watching me.

I felt them before I saw them.

It was a chemical buzz, humming right under the surface of my skin as I stood there in what was left of the fading sunlight coming through the window. I snapped out of the daze

I so easily slipped into with pole, still breathing heavily as my gaze found Holden Moore.

He stood rooted in place on the sidewalk in front of the stairs that led up to his house, one large, stuffed paper bag in each arm. His lips were slightly parted, and even from across the street, I noted how his Adam's apple bobbed hard in his throat as his eyes trailed the length of me.

In order to stick to the pole the way I needed to, I couldn't wear much clothing. And so, I stood there in a black sports bra and black thong to match, and I didn't bother to cover myself as those green irises carefully made their way back up to connect to mine.

Fire licked along my navel the longer he stared, the longer I held that gaze — just like it had in the training room the other day. There was something so unwaveringly cocky about how he stood, how he carried himself, how he pushed my buttons like he knew where every single one of them hid.

Something about him changed when he talked to me, it seemed. With everyone else on the team, he was calm, constant, severe — a leader, through and through. But with me, it was as if he saw a fleck of something covered by dirt, and he couldn't help but scratch and scratch in the mission to uncover it.

It annoyed the ever-loving shit out of me that I was intrigued by that fact.

It annoyed me even more that I loved having his eyes on me.

“Ugh, what a creep.”

I jumped a little in surprise as Mary sidled up next to me, crossing her arms with distaste written in every feature as she shook her head and frowned at Holden.

“We need to invest in blackout curtains.”

I smirked, turning back to find Holden still staring. His gaze seemed stuck to me until it flicked to where Mary was beside me, and he chuckled, adjusting the bags in his arms and turning for the house. When I looked back at my roommate, it

was just in time to see her tuck away the two middle fingers she was flipping him.

I nudged her. “Subtle.”

“I don’t care. He’s being a creep. They’re *all* creeps — that entire football team.”

I arched a brow. “You know I’m a part of that team, too, right? And my dad.”

Mary waved me off. “That’s different. I’m talking about the players. Emphasis on the word *player*. The whole lot of them thinks they run this campus and that every girl should just fall at their feet. They’re assholes,” she added. “The number one asshole being Leo Hernandez.”

I frowned. “Leo? He’s been sweet to me. A little flirtatious, maybe, but harmless.”

“Trust me. There’s nothing harmless about that stupid boy.”

Her face hardened, then her eyes flicked to mine, and when she saw me waiting with a lifted brow for further explanation, she sucked her teeth and swept her long blonde hair over one shoulder.

“Anyway. Want to smoke a joint and order a pizza, or are you going to strip for our neighbors all night?”

I winked. “Just trying to keep the block interesting. Pizza sounds good.”

“No joint?”

Mary was already pulling out her stash, the aroma of the flower hitting me as she unpacked it from what looked like a makeup bag.

I swallowed, heart ticking up a notch at the sight, at the fact that it was close enough I could make out the resin sticking to the light green and orange bud.

But a flash of my father’s face twisted in grief hit me next, and I blinked, knocking away all temptation with that one simple gesture.

“Just pizza for me.”



The following week, my father announced the depth chart for the team, and everyone was in a tizzy.

Although football wasn't my life the way it was his, I knew as his daughter that college football chart day was big, not just at our campus, but every campus around the nation. Reporters would offer full coverage of the charts for each university, and thus would begin the predictions for which match ups would prove the best ones of the season.

Of course, this *particular* day held more weight than ever — because he was the new coach.

And he'd shaken things up.

I didn't have to look to know there were surprises, that players used to starting found themselves slated in the number two or even three spots. There was a raucous energy among the team as we all filed into the cafeteria after practice, and when I filled my tray and turned to find a seat, it felt like every set of eyes was lasered in on me.

“Hey, why don't you sit with us today?”

I blinked at the soft, sweet voice, and found myself looking down to find Giana Jones to my left. She held a tray of her own, her curly hair framing her smile like a halo as she beamed up at me.

“I'm Giana,” she said when I didn't answer. “I know we haven't had much time together yet, but I'm the Public Relations Assistant Coordinator. I'll probably be hounding you for an interview soon,” she added with a laugh. “So, let me at least sit with you at lunch first.”

I tried my best to smile back, nodding toward the room in a silent answer for her to lead the way. If I was being honest, I'd planned on taking my tray back to the training room and eating next to the ice baths.

But again, I felt the weight of my father's expectation, the pressure of the hope he held onto that this move would be good for me. He wanted nothing more than for me to find friends, to find purpose, to be okay.

I'd rather fake that I could do those things than admit to him that I never could.

I followed Giana through the crowd, ignoring the stares from players as I did. I couldn't tell if they were angry with me, like I had an influence over my father's decision, or if they were intrigued by me.

I knew *that* game well — the one where they took bets on who could get the coach's daughter in their bed before anyone else.

But this wasn't my first rodeo. If any of them actually thought they stood a chance, they'd end up disappointed in the end.

Giana slid into a seat at a table in the middle of the room, patting the one next to her for me to take. It was right across from Riley Novo, the only female on the team. She beamed just as brightly as Giana when she noted me.

"Hey, Julep. How's it going?"

"Peachy," I answered flatly.

Riley and Giana shared a look as if they were having a silent conversation.

"Don't worry about all this," Riley said, waving her hand at the tables around us. "*Some* of the team is bent up over their poor performance at camp that was reflected in the chart today."

She said that last part louder, which earned her some disgruntled murmurs from her teammates. But she just smiled, cutting into her chicken and popping a piece in her mouth.

Giana snickered.

"How's it going so far?" Riley asked next. "Anyone I need to set straight?"

The tension in my shoulders eased a bit as I unwrapped my silverware. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“That’s what we figured,” Giana interjected. “We saw it the first day you walked in during spring training. You’re used to this circus just as much as we are.”

“What made you get into training anyway?” Riley asked between bites. “Are you an athlete, too?”

“Does pole dancing count?”

Riley coughed a little as Giana’s eyes doubled, and I waited for it — the judgment, the instant awkwardness that I was met with most of the time when I let that little fun fact slip.

“Um, *hell yeah*, it counts!” Giana said, surprising me with a light smack across my bicep. “I want to learn! I mean, I’ll probably fall on my face trying but hey, I’m game.”

I smiled — at least, as close to it as my lips could get nowadays.

“I need to build my upper body strength,” she added.

“Lifting books to your face every night doesn’t count?” Riley quipped.

Giana stuck her tongue out.

“I bet you’re stronger than you give yourself credit for,” I said.

“She is,” a deep voice interjected, and then Clay Johnson swept in and kissed Giana’s blushing cheek before taking the seat on the other side of her.

“You don’t even know what you’re encouraging,” she shot back.

“Enlighten me.”

“Julep is a pole dancer, and she’s going to teach me.”

One of Clay’s dark brows shot up, and he assessed me with an appreciative smile. “This sounds like a great deal for all parties involved.”

I snorted. “It’s not as sexy as you think — especially in the beginning. A lot of bruises.”

“I didn’t see any bruises.”

I went stiff at the familiar voice, keeping my eyes on my food as a large, warm body filled the seat next to me.

“Then again, not the best view from across the street. Maybe you should invite me inside next time.”

I turned to find Holden wearing that stupid smirk he loved to don so much, the dimple in his left cheek defined.

“Or maybe I should invest in blackout curtains and a security team, stalker,” I replied sweetly.

“Who stalked who first?”

I rolled my eyes, just as Riley knocked on the table between us. “Um, can we get a little context here?”

“Julep lives across the street from The Pit,” Holden explained.

“No way!” Giana gushed, squeezing my forearm. “You have to come out after the first game. Win or lose, The Pit is always the place to be.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Sounds like it.”

That earned me a laugh from Riley. “Aside from the fact that it looks *and* smells like a bachelor pad, it actually is pretty fun.”

“Hey! Not *every* part is like a bachelor pad,” Holden defended.

“Yeah, yeah, we all love and appreciate your pretty garden,” someone said as they rounded the table, grinding a knuckle into Holden’s head as they passed. Leo Hernandez plopped down in the seat on one side of Riley with a grin just as Zeke Collins took the one on the other side of her.

And suddenly, I felt surrounded.

“You *should* come over sometime though,” Leo added once he was seated. “And bring that roommate of yours.”

“You mean the one who hates you?”

Leo smirked, shrugging. “They all *say* they hate me, but words are cheap.”

He winked at me, and I let out an incredulous breath of a laugh before picking at the broccoli on my plate.

Zeke threw his arm around Riley, whispering something into her neck that made her blush and made *me* feel uncomfortable for having witnessed it.

“Disgusting, isn’t it?” Holden said in a low voice, nodding toward where Zeke and Riley were huddled together. “Although, I’d take this over the shit show they were their freshman season.”

“Isn’t it weird,” I asked. “Two teammates dating?”

He shrugged, shoveling a huge mound of rice into his mouth. Once he swallowed, he said, “Not really any of my business. As long as they do their job on the field, I don’t care what’s going on off it.”

“So very captain of you.”

Holden winked, and I fought the urge to give him another roll of my eyes.

“What about you?” I asked, waving the end of my fork toward the back corner table. “Which one of the cheerleaders is yours?”

“Oh no,” Leo interjected, standing up enough to clap Holden hard on the shoulder. “Cap doesn’t date.”

“Wilson is his one true love,” Clay added.

I gave them both a look of disbelief. “Uh-huh. Sure.”

“They tell no lies,” Riley said. “QB1 doesn’t have time for a girlfriend.”

“He makes time for the important part of a relationship, though,” Zeke added with a wink.

I caught Holden just in time to see him giving Zeke a warning glare, and Riley smacked Zeke across the chest.

“Ah — so that’s the move, huh? Pull a cheerleader into your bed, make her think she has a chance, only to break her heart?”

Holden angled himself toward me, one elbow on the table as he leaned in and invaded my space. His scent overpowered anything else, a combination of his spicy body wash and the musk still hanging on from practice.

“Is this your not-so-subtle way of asking if I have a girlfriend, Julep Lee? Because I can save you the detective work and tell you that I don’t.”

I scoffed. “Like I care.”

“Seems like you might.”

“*Seems* like they might need to order new helmets to fit your big head.”

Leo coughed to cover his laugh, nudging Riley who was having that silent conversation with Giana across the table again.

Holden ignored all of it, only leaning in even more, his breath warm on my lips. “Some of us are going out tonight to celebrate chart before the real work of the season starts. You should come.”

“Since when are *you* going out?” Leo asked with a scoff.

“Since now,” Holden answered without looking away from me. I didn’t think it was possible for him to lean in any closer without it being a kiss, but he managed, and I resisted the urge to back down. “That is, if Julep joins us.”

My next inhale came harder than the one before it, burning in a way I was unfamiliar with as those sea green eyes danced.

“You keep forgetting who I am,” I said, hoping my voice was louder to him than it was over the roaring in my ears.

“I know exactly who you are.”

That made me scoff. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“So, let’s change that.”

He shot the words back at me so quickly that the table went quiet, everyone pretending to eat when I knew damned well they were all tuned in to what I would say back.

I narrowed my eyes, rolling my lips together before I pressed just a fraction of an inch into the slight space that still existed between us. I opened my mouth, ready to fire back even though I didn't have anything locked and loaded.

But before I could, a deep voice rumbled through the room.

“Moore.”

It was like a rubber band snapping, how my father's voice made every player sit at attention. They straightened their backs, aligned their shoulders, and kept their eyes on their food.

Everyone except for Holden, who jumped back from me like I was on fire before standing like a fucking soldier.

“Sir,” he answered.

Dad ambled over to the table slowly, a tray of food in his hands as his eyes surveyed the scene. He looked at the table of players, at Giana, at me, and lastly, at Holden — at where he was in *proximity* to me.

There was no verbal response, just a head tilt from my father toward the door. He walked out without checking to see if Holden followed — which he did, without so much as a look behind at me or anyone else.

When they were gone, Leo let out a fizz of a laugh that set the rest of the table at ease.

“Poor Cap,” Zeke said, shaking his head. “Can't catch a break this season.”

Embarrassment heated my neck as eyes slowly drifted to me, and I cleared my throat, forcing the best smile I could before I grabbed my tray and stood.

“I better get back,” was all I quietly offered before I was jetting toward the trash cans to dump my barely touched lunch.

Giana and Riley chased me down, stopping me before I could leave.

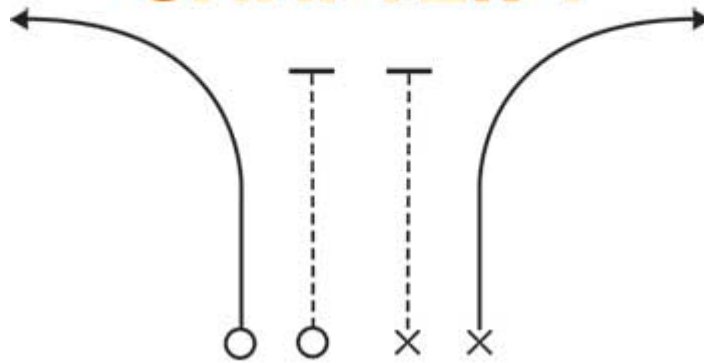
“You really should come out tonight,” Giana said. “We could use another girl in the troupe with all this...” She waved a hand. “*Masculine* energy floating around.”

I glanced behind them at where the players watched me, then to the door my father had led Holden out of, and my chest tightened.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “I... I can’t tonight.”

And then before either of them could argue, I bolted.

CHAPTER 4



Holden

“You actually *said* that?”

My uncle Kevin tried not to laugh as he asked, sharing a glance with his husband who was sautéing mushrooms with one hand and sipping red wine with the other. It was a look that said *can you believe he’s talking to us about a girl instead of football?*

“I’m as surprised as you are,” I admitted, shifting Joanne in my arms.

My cousin was tiny — just eleven pounds and three months old — and she slept cradled against my chest. I could have put her in her crib or bouncer, but I liked having her there, liked having someone so soft and sweet and innocent to look down at as I confessed my unfortunate stupidity.

“I cannot understand what’s going on with me, honestly,” I said, exasperated. “When I’m away from her, I’m my normal, logical self. I recognize that there is no point in even entertaining the thought of her. But when I’m around her...” I made a face, struggling for words. “It’s like she scrambles my freaking brain. All I want to do is get a rise out of her, get her to do anything other than float by me like an emotionless ghost.”

“A ghost?”

I nodded. “I can’t explain it. She just seems... haunted.”

My uncles glanced at each other before pretending like they hadn’t, as if I didn’t already see.

“Did she end up coming out with you?” Uncle Nathan asked before carefully adding the thin-sliced steak to the pan. It sizzled when he did, the steam that hit my nose making my mouth water instantly. Uncle Nathan was a phenomenal cook — which was exactly why my Uncle Kevin had married him.

Because he’d be living off Easy Mac, otherwise.

“Of course not,” I answered. “And thank God she’s smarter than I am and didn’t, because it would have only brought on more trouble.”

“I think it would have brought on *fun*,” Uncle Kevin said, smirking.

“That’s because trouble and fun are synonymous in your book,” I pointed out.

He shrugged, as if it should be that way for everyone.

“Can you grab the asparagus out of the oven and start plating?” Nathan asked him, and my uncle hopped up from his barstool, smiling at his daughter as he passed by where I sat. He reached out and ran a hand over her soft baby hairs.

My Uncle Kevin was just eighteen years older than me. My dad, his older brother, was only twenty-one when I was born. Now that I was twenty-one myself, it was impossible for me to wrap my head around that fact. I couldn’t imagine having a serious girlfriend right now, let alone a child to raise.

But my father had been different from me in that way.

Where football was everything to me, my mom had been everything to him.

They were high school sweethearts, and Dad used to tell me all the time how all he’d wanted was to marry her and have a family. He wanted it so much so that he couldn’t even wait

until after college to get started. They were married their junior year, and by the time they graduated, I was born.

My sister came two years later, and they had what they'd always wanted. They had a house with a yard, two kids — one boy and one girl — and each other.

The All-American Family.

For years, it really did seem like we were living the dream. I was too young to appreciate it, to understand that not every kid had two adoring parents who actively participated in their lives. I didn't know how lucky I was that my father spent every evening after work with me and my sister, playing with us in the yard or helping us with our homework.

On the weekends, he and Mom never made plans with their adult friends. It was all about us as a family. If we weren't taking a road trip or camping or going out on the boat, we were hanging around the house, watching movies on rainy days or spending the sunny ones in the pool.

My sister and I both had our own special connection with Dad.

My favorite weekends were the ones he spent working football drills with me in the park down the street while Mom and my sister, Hannah, painted their toes or read books together under one of the big oak trees.

Hannah's favorite weekends, though, were the ones when Dad took her out sailing.

While sailing never grabbed me the way my father hoped, Hannah's eyes lit up the first time she was carried onto that boat as a baby. As she grew older, she also grew thirstier for the knowledge that every good sailor needed to survive. She didn't just want to help Dad by learning how to tie the right knots — she wanted to be his first mate.

And eventually, she was.

Every weekend, Dad would spend one day with me — usually doing something football-related — and he'd spend the other day on the water with Hannah.

Mom would join us, of course, but as we got older, it became clearer and clearer that she preferred the low-key days around the house to the adventure-seeking on the water. And so, sailing became Dad and Hannah's special time together, and Mom and I had our time while they were gone.

Everything in my life was perfect. Perfect parents, perfect sister, perfect grades at school, and perfect opportunity to play football for life. I was good, even when I was young, and as I inched closer to playing in high school, I could feel it in my bones.

I was *destined* to play pro ball.

I didn't realize it then, how fortunate I was to have all that comfort and energy to focus on football because I had the best support system in the world.

Not until my entire life crashed down around me when I was thirteen.

It was a normal summer Sunday morning the day it happened, our kitchen loud and chaotic as Mom whipped up breakfast while also simultaneously packing a lunch for all three of us. I had football camp, and Dad and Hannah were headed out on the water.

They didn't usually sail much in the summer, because in Florida — where we lived at the time — it stormed almost every day. But the forecast was clear and the water was calm and there was a perfect ten-to-twelve knots of wind blowing through the bay, so they decided to make the most of it.

"Sunscreen," Mom had warned Hannah as she scrambled up the eggs in the pan. "And bring your SPF shirt, too."

Hannah hadn't even whined or complained. She was so excited to have a morning on the water that she hopped off her barstool where she was drinking her orange juice and sprinted upstairs to get her shirt.

Dad had chuckled, wrapping his arms around my mother from the back and kissing her neck. I'd smirked and looked away, out the window to where the clouds were breaking and

the sun was streaking a ray of light over our back yard. I couldn't wait to get outside and play football.

Mom made sure we were all fed and had plenty of snacks and drinks to take with us before we all spilled onto the driveway. Dad and Hannah went in the truck, Mom and I took the SUV. I gave my sister a wet willy on my way to the car and she screamed and swatted at me all while Mom and Dad shook their heads before kissing each other goodbye.

That was our last perfect moment.

Because that morning, Dad and Hannah went out on the boat.

And they never came back.

"I think you should ask her out on a proper date," Nathan said, his words snapping me back to the present.

"Retweet," Uncle Kevin said from where he was plating dinner. He looked even more like my father from this angle, his profile showcasing the sharp edge of his jaw, the thickness of his brows.

"That's because you're both sappy romantics who don't think about consequences before acting," I pointed out.

Neither of them argued.

"What's the worst that could happen by asking her out?" Uncle Kevin probed.

"Other than her saying no, which at this point she definitely would?" I shrugged. "Oh, you know — Coach sitting me on the bench my last season, or worse, kicking me off the team altogether."

"He couldn't do that," Nathan tried.

"Oh, but he could," I argued back. "And he would. He's made that abundantly clear." I sighed, shifting Joanne in my arms as she curled into my chest. "No matter how I spin it, Julep Lee is off limits. Besides, I don't have time to date anyone."

"Here we go," Nathan murmured.

“I don’t even know why I brought this up to you two,” I said, shaking my head. “I should have known I couldn’t mention a girl without you trying to plan my future wedding with her.”

“I was picturing more of an *elopement*, actually,” Uncle Kevin said, sweeping his hands over the air in front of him like they were making a screen. “Italy. Or Greece!”

“Oh, I love a destination wedding,” Nathan chimed in.

I chuckled, standing as steadily and quietly as I could before maneuvering Joanne into the bouncer. “Sorry to crush your dreams. You’ll have to settle for football being my true love.”

“For now,” Nathan said, and he winked at my uncle Kevin as if they knew all the secrets in the world that I had yet to unveil.

But I knew no matter how optimistic my uncles were, this was one love match no one could make — not even them.

It didn’t matter that my dead heart sparked at the sight of Julep Lee, or that I found it impossible to stay away from her, no matter how much I knew I should.

In the end, it would never be us.

So, I’d settle for the annoying quarterback who could get under her skin.

And maybe, with time, a friend.



The first couple weeks of the fall semester blew past like a fresh New England breeze.

As it did every season, my life became a tornado of football practice, weight training, film and meetings peppered in-between a full schedule of classes, nights of unending homework, and checking in on my teammates to make sure they were all on track. A sacred piece of me fired up in the

fall, coming to life beneath the pressure to perform not just as an athlete, but as a student and a leader on the team, as well.

I didn't have time to think about anything other than football, and that was just the way I liked it.

My favorite of it all?

The games.

We won our first two, the home opener against one of our rivals and our first away game against Buffalo University. After our embarrassing Bowl loss to end last season, the wins set us up with the momentum I'd prayed for all off-season, the entire team buzzing with the notion that *maybe* we could get to the championship this year, after all.

For me, there was no maybe.

There was only the undeniable fact that we *would* make it to that game.

And we'd win it, too.

I was a red-shirt freshman, which meant that technically, I *could* stay another year and play next season for NBU if I wanted to. But after my last two seasons, I had the attention of scouts and general managers across the National Football League, and I knew if we performed the same way this year, if we won championship?

I could graduate, shift my focus, and go into the draft at the end of the season.

And I could go pro in the first round.

Nothing lit me up like that possibility. Nothing made my head clearer. Nothing wiped away any and all distractions like having my dream within reach.

It was barbarically hot the Monday practice after our win against SHU, fall teasing us by bringing in cooler nights without bothering to do the same for our afternoons. I knew in the blink of an eye we'd be playing in the freezing cold rain or sleet or even snow. But today, sweat dripped into my eyes as I huddled with the regular offensive squad to call our play.

“Okay, regulars. Blue lizard wing right, forty-six, full cross, on two. Ready?”

“Break,” they all chanted with me, and then we were jogging to our places on the line.

The heat was dizzying as the sun moved out from behind the clouds, and I scanned the defensive line up, the play I’d just called like a movie on the screen in my mind that I ran back over and over again, making sure there was nothing in the way the defense was lining up that would cause enough issue for me to change.

I felt confident with the call, so I called out the cues again to each side of the line before I bent and waited for the snap.

“Set... hut!”

All noise, all motion on the line fell into the background of my mind as the ball hit my hands.

I stood, ignoring the grunting and digging of cleats into the field right there in front of me as I pulled back into the pocket and searched for my receiver. It was the perfect play call, and Kyle Robbins easily found an opening before I set the ball sailing through the air.

I only had time to watch him catch it before I was taken to the ground, not in a sack but in the aftermath of an offensive lineman being brought down by two defensive players.

It should have been an easy fall.

It should have been nothing more than an uncomfortable pressure of weight as those players toppled on top of me.

It was a hit I’d taken more times than I could count, something I’d hopped up from unfazed each and every time.

But this time, my right hand shot out for the ground to break my fall, and instead, it got twisted up in the legs of one of the defensive players going down with us. I knew before we hit the ground that it was bad — the angle of my arm, the added weight throwing me rapidly toward the field. But I couldn’t do a damn thing about any of it.

All I could do was brace.

Snap.

I felt the rip through the front of my shoulder, adrenaline pumping in the next breath enough to make me question if I'd felt it at all.

You're fine. You're fine.

Panic zipped through me for only a moment before the players were off me, and for a split moment, I thought I really was okay.

Dominic Bartello reached down to help me up.

But when I lifted my right hand, pain shot through me like a lightning bolt.

I grimaced, gritting through my teeth as I fell back on the turf and covered my right shoulder with my left hand as if applying pressure to it could make it stop radiating agony through my entire body.

The pain ebbed quickly enough.

It was the panic that stayed.

I knew that particular ache as well as I knew every playbook I'd ever been handed. I knew when I tried again to raise my arm and heard a *pop*, *click* right before the pain intensified what had happened.

I glanced up at the players hovering over me, at their pale faces as it sank in for them, too.

Then, the training team was sprinting across the field.

They were professionals. They did their best to keep their faces schooled as they reached me, two of them bending down to my level and immediately reaching for me. One was JB, who held my gaze to try to comfort me as he moved my arm in different directions while firing off those questions I was so familiar with.

Does this hurt? How about this? Scale of one to ten, what's the pain level? What kind of pain do you feel, sharp, dull, pins and needles? Can you bend your arm, straighten it, lift it, apply pressure?

Each question was drowned out more and more by my rapidly beating heart, by the blood pounding in my ears. Coach Lee was standing over me, too, with his arms crossed and a frown etched into his brows.

I knew by just one glance at him that while he was concerned for me, his primary worry right now was who would fill my spot.

I ignored the way my gut bottomed out at that, at how the show would go on without me. It had to. And just like I had my freshman year, I felt defective. Worthless. I was no longer the nucleus of the team.

I was a liability.

All in the blink of an eye.

My vision blurred as the moments ticked on, as JB moved me through the sequence of testing the pain. I wanted to lie. I wanted to fake that I was fine and ignore that familiar pinch of pain every time it spiked through me. But my face gave me away before the lie could find my lips, each grimace worse than the last.

Through the chaos, I saw Julep.

She was standing just behind the trainers, behind her father, her face expressionless as she listened to them run through the drill. I knew they were trying not to concern me, but I heard the panic in the trainers' voices the more they worked through the questions, saw the looks JB exchanged with Coach that said more than anything else could.

But Julep was as steady as a steel bridge in a storm.

When her eyes flicked to mine, I held that serene gaze, willing it to calm me, too.

But it was no use.

My heart rioted, fear of the truth prickling my skin like a thousand needles.

I was hurt.

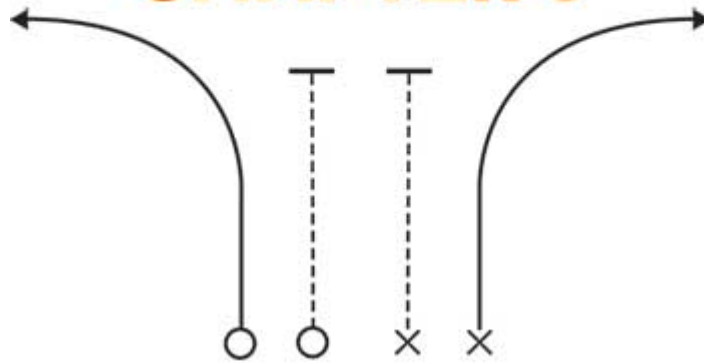
I was injured.

I wasn't just shaking this one off.

"You'll be okay, kid," Coach tried to assure me once the trainers helped me to my feet, and he carefully squeezed my good shoulder before giving the trainers a knowing nod.

My entire future flashed before my eyes as JB and the rest of the crew silently led me off the field, Julep quietly rounding out the back of the group.

CHAPTER 5



Julep

You could have heard a pin drop in the hospital room where all the NBU coaching and training staff were, but all I heard was the distinct sound of a dream dying.

I silently took notes as JB and the rest of the trainers discussed Holden's diagnosis after X-rays and an MRI. Holden sat on the exam table, eyes unfocused. Even though we were all discussing quietly, I knew he could hear us.

The good news was that nothing was broken.

The bad news was that he had torn his rotator cuff again.

Fortunately, it was just a partial tear — tiny, really, and far milder than the one he'd suffered as a freshman. That one had been enough to warrant surgery, whereas this was something we could handle without it. He was lucky it had been in a different part of his muscle, too, because if he had torn it in the same place he'd had surgery, we'd be having a different discussion right now.

JB was already walking us through the rehab plan, discussing best practices with the staff and my father listening in and interjecting his own thoughts. Of course, *his* first question was when we thought Holden would play again.

And I knew by watching his bouncing knee that that would be Holden's first question, too.

It wasn't an easy one to answer. He had pretty good movement, and already the pain had subsided. But we all knew it would resurface, especially at night, and that if he got out on the field and tried to launch a ball through the air, he'd do even more damage.

He had a road of rehab ahead of him, but we were all optimistic he'd play again.

And though I didn't say it, I hoped it would be this season.

My gaze kept slipping over to Holden as the staff discussed his future. He somehow kept his shoulders back and his chin raised, even with his arm in a sling, even as the devastation of what had happened danced in his eyes. It was like he still felt that weight of being captain, of being a leader, of knowing the team would be looking to him as their cue on how to react to this news.

I wondered if he was already making a plan, already thinking of who would take his place, how he could help that teammate transition, how he could somehow still be a part of the win.

He'd left me alone the past couple of weeks, his sole focus on the team. And it was in that time of him not being an annoying fly buzzing around my face that I felt my perception of him change, even if just marginally.

I saw what the team had told me about him — his severity, his patience, his complete and total concentration on every play. He wasn't just tuned in when he was leading the offense down the field, either. He was a part of every defensive play, too — talking to players in-between whistles to make sure they had their heads on straight, huddling with my father or the other offensive players with an iPad between them, even bringing players water to make sure they were staying hydrated.

It was then that I realized I'd seen the rare version of him first: relaxed, flirty, almost a bit... *goofy*, even.

When the season started, I saw the real him.

And now, watching the muscles of his jaw pop beneath the skin as he awaited his sentencing, I wondered what version of him this news would bring.

“Julep,” JB said, snapping my eyes to him. “You’ve been the one closest to his rehab lately. What’s your recommendation?”

I sipped a bit of oxygen before holding my head high and answering, “I think we need to start from the beginning. Maximal protection. He needs to be in that sling and limit movement as much as possible. We can introduce isometric strengthening and range of motion to start, with tissue work and cold compression, obviously. Maybe some electric stimulation,” I added, thinking. “He’s already on his NSAIDs, but we’ll need a steroid injection. And hopefully, we can move into moderate protection within two weeks, and get him back on the field by October.”

Dad lifted his brows. “You really think he could be back that quickly?”

“With how minor the tear is, how strong those muscles he’s already developed around his rotator cuff are, and how familiar he already is with this type of rehab?” I nodded. “Absolutely.”

JB smiled, sharing an appreciative glance with me before he chimed in. “That is the exact logic behind my thoughts, although I wouldn’t be surprised if we need until November.”

“He’s QB1,” I said, glancing behind JB at where Holden was watching us. “He’s going to do everything in his power to get back on that field with his team.”

Holden’s nose flared, his eyes flicking between mine before he looked away, staring straight ahead at some anatomy poster on the wall in front of him.

“JB,” my father said, bringing my attention back to our inner circle. “Do you think Julep is ready to lead this injury rehabilitation on her own?”

“Yes.” He didn’t even hesitate.

Dad nodded. “Good. Then, it’s settled.” He looked at me then. “You deliver the news to your player, give him a run-down of the plan, and then get him home. Make sure he has what he needs to follow your recommended recovery instructions.”

I drew in a shallow breath before a full inhale found me, and JB reached out his hand for me to shake it before he left with the rest of the staff. Coach stopped by to say something to Holden, who only nodded with a grim look before my dad squeezed his shoulder and left, too.

Then, it was just us.

I cleared my throat. “Well, it looks like—”

“I heard,” he clipped, hopping off the examination table. “Let’s just get out of here so we can get started.”



Holden was quiet as I drove us off the hospital grounds and across Boston toward the suburb where our houses were. His eyes were focused outside the rolled-down passenger window, jaw set, those trademark dimples nowhere to be found.

I’d already run through the list of things I wanted to make sure he had at home to get his recovery started — cold compresses, anti-inflammatories, the right pillow to help elevate his arm and keep him from rolling onto his shoulder at night. Of course, he had all of that and more, and fortunately he lived with three other teammates who could help him with the tasks he wouldn’t be able to do for a while.

Like comb that messy head of hair.

It was strange, seeing him all broody and silent. I’d been content to let him mope when we’d first left the hospital, but now, I found myself drumming my thumbs on the steering wheel and sneaking glances at him, wondering how I could cheer him up a little.

Which also made no sense.

For reasons unbeknownst to me, I saw a bit of my sister in him in that moment. I remembered how she never faltered in her optimism, in her blind hope that everything would turn out okay. I'd only seen her sad a handful of times in my life, and each one, I'd done everything in my power to bring her usual smile back because it felt like the world had tilted off its axis anytime she wasn't wearing it.

I'd heard it from plenty of players and staff alike around the locker room, how Holden Moore was sharp, focused, and serious. And on the field, I saw it for myself.

But off the field? I'd only witnessed him being an insufferably jolly idiot intent on getting under my skin.

I would never admit it to him or anyone else, but I wished for that version of him now.

Maybe it was because I'd been assigned to him. Maybe I felt a bit of ownership over his recovery, over his emotions, too.

Or maybe I was just tired of sitting in a silent car with a mopey quarterback.

"You have a lot of friends."

I inwardly cringed at the stupid statement, but it was the first thing that had come to mind.

Holden subtly shifted his chin toward me but kept his eyes on the buildings as we passed them. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

I considered. "Not bad. Just... interesting. At least, to me."

"You don't have a lot of friends?"

"I'm not sure I have even one."

Holden turned to look at me then, and it was me who kept my eyes on the road this time. I thought he was going to press, ask me why or suggest that he was sure I had at least *one* friend.

Instead, he watched me for a pause before looking out the window again.

“It’s going to be okay, you know,” I offered after a moment.

No response.

“I know you probably can’t imagine your life without football, but you won’t be off the field long. And the team will still need you.” I paused, leaning over a bit before adding. “Cap.”

I was aiming for a smile, but Holden only swallowed and let out a long, slow exhale like that breath was the only thing keeping him from breaking down.

I chewed the inside of my cheek. *This was not going well.*

Then, I shifted in my seat, holding the steering wheel with my opposite hand. “Ah, it’s not football that has you so upset, is it?”

Holden frowned, turning to look at me.

I held up my right hand and wiggled my fingers. “It’s that you won’t have use of your hand for a while. Your...” I let my eyes trail down to rest between his thighs before arching a brow and meeting his gaze again. “*Good* hand.”

He frowned at first, confused, but when I waggled my brows, his shot into his hairline before a bark of a laugh left his chest.

“Are you making a joke about me masturbating?”

I shrugged, noncommittal as I turned back toward the road. “Just saying. I can understand that disappointment.”

Something of a breath of a laugh left him then, and he shook his head, angling himself toward me. “Wow, so all I had to do to get you to talk to me was get injured, huh?”

“Or maybe all you had to do was stop stalking me,” I argued. “It’s been nice to be in the training room without you pestering me. And to practice pole without you gawking from your driveway.”

“I’ve been busy with school and ball,” he said, and his smile dropped with that last part. But then he added, “And be

honest — you *loved* having the audience.”

I snorted. “You would think that.”

“Just saying. You still haven’t installed those curtains.”

“Ah, so you *are* still stalking me.”

Holden just smirked, and then his phone was ringing. He glanced at the screen before angling himself toward the window again and answering.

Two deep, worried voices filled the car then.

“What the hell happened?!”

“Are you still at the hospital?”

“He’s clearly in the car, Kevin.”

“Well, I wasn’t looking at the background, Nate! And I’m a little too concerned to be accurate right now.”

“What was the diagnosis?”

“Don’t say *diagnosis*. You make it sound so serious!”

This went on for a solid minute, each one talking over the other as they peppered Holden with questions about what had happened and whether or not he was alright. I glanced at the screen, finding two middle-aged men with concerned expressions. One was tall, broad-shouldered, with salt-and-pepper hair that gave off major hot dad vibes.

The other was a bit leaner, with dark hair and green eyes that looked just like Holden’s. He had the same sharp jaw, too, and the hollowed-out cheekbones that could have given him a career in modeling.

“I’m okay,” Holden finally said when the men took a breath. “Minor tear. They’ve already got a rehab plan outlined for me.”

The men released a synchronized breath of relief. “Oh, thank God. We were worried sick. Do you need to stay here for a while?” one of them asked.

“We can make up the guest room,” the other offered.

But Holden waved them off. “I’ll be good at the Pit.”

I snickered when they both wrinkled their noses, and one said, “Ugh, that is such a disgusting name for a place of residence.”

“Who’s that driving you?” the other one asked.

Holden glanced over his shoulder at me. “Julep Lee. She’s a new part of the training staff.”

The men went so silent that I glanced over, and when I did, I found them with gaping mouths and wide eyes as they elbowed each other and gave Holden some sort of look that I imagined he was supposed to interpret.

“Don’t,” he warned them quietly before angling the phone so they couldn’t see me anymore, and I couldn’t see them.

“Thanks for taking care of our boy, Julep!” one of them yelled.

“You’re welcome to dinner *anytime*,” the other added.

I smiled, though my brows bent in a mixture of curiosity and confusion as Holden’s jaw tightened and he gave the screen another warning glare.

“I’ll call later when I’m settled in,” he said, and then he cut the call without another word.

I rolled my lips together. “They seem nice.”

“My uncles,” he answered, shaking his head. “Like two mother hens.”

“They care about you.”

“I guess there are worse things,” Holden surmised as we pulled up to his house.

I smiled, considering how much he looked like his uncle. I’d thought it was his dad.

Immediately, I wondered why it wasn’t his parents who had called.

It wasn’t my business to ask, though, so I parked in the driveway across the street from my own, and before he could reach for it, I unclicked Holden’s seatbelt for him.

“Limited motion,” I reminded him, and I thought I saw him roll his eyes as I hopped out of the car and rounded it to open his door for him.

“Wow, how chivalrous,” he commented, swinging his long legs out. He unfolded his massive body from my tiny car, getting out slowly.

I gave him a patronizing smile.

But then, once he was standing, he stepped into me, making that curve of my lips slide off my face like oil.

With how much larger he was than me, that one step should have made me feel small, should have made me feel intimidated.

Instead, it was electrifying.

And his next words were soft, smooth, and sultry, like he’d pin me up against this car right now if he wasn’t injured.

“What else are you going to help me with, Julep Lee?”

I ignored how my heart hammered in my chest as he looked down on me, his eyes sweeping over my chest before they met mine again. Then, I tilted my chin up, defiant.

“Maybe... if you’re lucky?” I rasped, lifting my hand. Holden’s gaze was on mine until I extended my pointer finger and tapped it right in the center of his chest.

He seemed enraptured by that finger, his throat tight as it held his focus. I dragged my nail down the center of his chest, keeping my eyes on that nail until I hit the top of his abs. They tightened at the touch, and I smirked, letting my gaze slowly wander back up as I lowered my voice to almost a whisper.

“I’ll help you with your deodorant so you don’t smell like such a moldy foot.”

I said the words sweetly, crinkling my eyes with an exaggerated smile before I stepped back and gestured for him to lead the way inside.

Holden looked like he wanted to pop off with some smart remark of his own, tongue in cheek and eyes watching me like

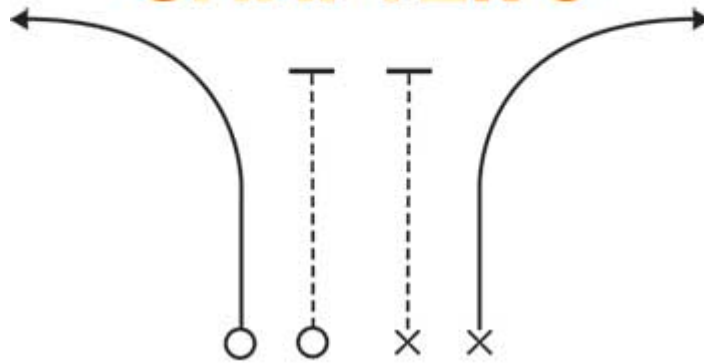
he appreciated the challenge I didn't even realize I'd raised.

But if he did have something else to say, he resisted — just as much as he resisted the urge to grab his gym bag off my shoulder when I retrieved it from the back seat.

It killed him already, not being able to take care of himself. I hoped as much as he did that he'd only have a week or so of this before we could introduce movement and get him on the road to recovery.

For all our sakes.

CHAPTER 6



Holden

I knew Julep walking me inside was a mistake.

I knew before I opened the door, leading with my left hand while the other lay suspended in a sling around my neck. I knew before my three roommates paused their video game, mouths wide like that of a trout before they hopped up and rushed over to help Julep with my bag.

I knew, and yet I still had to watch it happen.

I had no choice.

“Hey, sweetheart, let me get that,” Leo said, attempting to take my bag from Julep with a wink. I couldn’t help but smirk to myself when Julep pinned him with a glare and shrugged away from him, adjusting my bag even higher on her shoulder.

“Welcome to the Pit,” Kyle added, tossing his arm around her shoulder. “To what do we owe this... pleasure?”

His eyes trailed down the length of her while I gritted my jaw and tried not to boil over. I had absolutely zero right to feel any sort of possession over that girl.

And yet...

“Are you both fucking stupid?” Braden interjected, and he gave my roommates murderous glares before his eyes softened

on me. “What’s the verdict, Cap?”

I swallowed, glancing down at my arm in the sling. “Cuff tear.”

That same silence that had burned my ears in the hospital fell over us then, all eyes floating to my already-swelling shoulder.

“He’ll be fine,” Julep said when no one responded. “And back before the season is over.”

Kyle grinned from where he *still* had his stupid fucking arm around her. “With you at his bedside? I have no doubt.” He leaned in a little closer then. “And my room is just down the hall, if you ever want to check on me, too.”

My jaw ached with how hard I clenched it, but I didn’t have time to tell him to fuck off before Julep leaned away from him and pointed her finger into his chest, her smile wide and dazzling. “Hey, aren’t you the one Riley Novo embarrassed in a game of five hundred before making you shave her name into your head?”

Kyle’s face fell flat, and he removed his arm from around her as Leo and Braden laughed so hard they both doubled over.

“I like her,” Leo stated, thumb pointed at Julep.

“Oh, joy. My whole life has been made,” she said, deadpan.

I knew without him saying it that that made Leo like her even more.

I climbed the stairs to my bedroom, Julep on my heels and the guys blessedly returning to the couch to continue the game they’d paused. Every now and then, I glanced over my shoulder and watched her take in our home with an amused, yet simultaneously confused expression on her face.

The Snake Pit was an eclectic house, filled with memories and relics of many North Boston University players past. It was first purchased in 1982, gifted by the quarterback’s dad to him and three of his friends on the team. What they thought

would just be their place to crash and party at in their tenure at the school turned into a house full of history, passed on from generation to generation. Who got to live in the Pit was usually voted on by the entire team, and it was almost always the quarterback and three of the team's top partiers.

Because balance, of course.

They needed someone to hold up the house, make sure it stayed in good shape, and made sure the team stayed on track — both on the field and off it. But they *also* wanted players who knew how to have a good time to keep the legend of the house alive and well. It was one of the top places off campus for parties, especially during football season.

And my current roommates made sure that reputation didn't die with them.

Julep smiled a little as we walked down the hall to my room, her eyes wandering over the old photos and odd knick-knacks, like a lawn flamingo that had been turned into a beer bong, and a beheaded torso of a half-woman, half-fish creature that was rumored to have given the team of 1999 good luck.

They won the championship that year, so on superstition alone, that statue would remain at the Pit forever.

I nudged the door to my bedroom open, and unlike every other bedroom in this house, mine was actually clean. I made my bed every morning, usually had a candle burning to keep the bachelor smell from invading my space, and always kept my belongings tidy. Just one glance at Julep told me all of that surprised her.

“It smells like teakwood in here,” she commented as she set my duffle bag on the foot of my bed.

“Just covering the moldy foot stench.”

She actually smiled a little then, folding her arms over her chest as she started walking the edges of my room and looking around.

I pretended to unpack my bag, all while watching her as she ambled along my desk, my walls, pausing when she saw something that piqued her interest. I noted how she hovered

over my copy of *Atomic Habits*, how her eyes lingered on the photo of me, Hannah, and our parents on the boat. Thankfully, she didn't ask about them — just kept right on perusing until she hit my stack of CDs.

She picked one up, chuckling before holding the cover of Jay-Z's *The Blueprint* toward me. "You know you can listen to music on your phone now, right? In better quality."

I shrugged. "I like to take my Discman on my morning runs."

She looked like she was trying not to laugh as she picked up the ancient white and gold relic that still miraculously worked. She marveled at the corded headphones before unclipping the lock and looking inside.

"Green Day," she commented. "Nice." She paused, shaking her head as she shut the cover again. "You really run with this?"

"Every morning."

"Why?"

I stilled, the truth to that question making my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth. It had been Hannah's, and I'd teased her for listening to it even back then because we both had iPods. But she'd insisted that CDs were better, that there was something *cool* about them. She thought everything about the 90s and early 2000s was cool, even though she wasn't even born until 2003.

When she and Dad had disappeared, I'd snuck into her room every night, slipping her earbuds into my ears and playing the same CD she'd left in that Discman over and over.

Crazysexycool by TLC.

It took me years to be able to change it.

"I guess I'd worry less if that broke than if my phone did," I lied. "Plus, it feels kind of nostalgic."

Julep smiled as if she appreciated that answer before she moved on to looking at all the posters hanging on my wall — the largest one of Tom Brady.

“So, you run every morning, huh?”

“I do. Part of my routine.”

That made her quirk a brow and turn to face me. “You have a *routine*?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“At twenty-one?” She snorted. “No.” Then, she moved over to my window, the one that overlooked the garden. “Is this part of your morning routine?” she asked, nodding toward it.

“Yes.”

She shook her head, leaning a hip against the bottom window frame as she faced me. “It’s kind of strange, you know. That you’re a college quarterback and you like to garden.”

“And you’re a college athletic trainer who likes to pole dance.”

The corner of her mouth sparked up but died quickly.

And suddenly, as if all the sources of free-flowing air in the house had been plugged, the air grew thick and heavy. It was like we both realized at the same time that we were standing just a few feet away from each other in my bedroom.

Alone.

I’d been so focused on football since the season started that I’d almost forgotten how striking she was, how her long, brown hair flowed over her shoulders, her thick lashes framing those endlessly dark eyes. I’d almost forgotten those lean, tan legs and the narrow angle of her waist. I let myself take her in, let my gaze wander the length of her before slowly climbing back up.

She didn’t shy away. She didn’t cover herself or adjust her stance or make any sort of comment — though we both knew I was raking my eyes over every inch of her. She stayed perfectly still and calm until I found her gaze again, and then she tilted her chin a little higher, and the only thing that gave her away was the slight bob of her throat.

“I’ll let you get settled,” she finally said, her voice softer than before. She pushed off from where she’d been leaning against the frame and made her way toward the door. “Limited movement,” she reminded me, spinning to pin me with an aggressive finger point.

“Wait.”

She halted mid-turn, something... *new* in her eyes as she paused for me.

I hooked a thumb over my shoulder toward the en-suite bathroom. “Aren’t you going to help me shower?”

Julep blinked, and then scoffed, rolling her eyes and turning for the door again. “You’re lucky I don’t *drown* you in the shower.”

I gave her a toothy smile then, even though she’d already turned and couldn’t see it. But before she got all the way out the door, I called, “Thank you.”

She paused again, her back still to me as she hovered in the doorway.

“For having faith in me back there.”

Her back tensed, and then her shoulders deflated, and she angled her chin down and back toward me, her eyes flashing over her shoulders before her gaze was on the floor again.

“I don’t have faith in anything,” she said.

And then she left.



Julep

Two days later, I woke up at the ass crack of dawn from a nightmare.

It was a nightmare I was familiar with, one that made no sense but somehow always filled me with terror no matter how many times I had it. I could never even remember it when I woke. All I could grasp was that I was in a dark house with no walls or windows, that I was cold and scared, and that I had the distinct feeling that I'd slipped off the face of the Earth and was lost somewhere in-between where I was previously and where I was supposed to be now.

After the panic subsided, the sweating kicked in, and just like it had countless nights since Abby died, my brain started in on playing its favorite game of attacking me and keeping me awake with endless questions that had no answers.

It was still dark as I flopped back and forth on my bed, trying and failing to fall back asleep before I finally ripped the covers off and angrily stormed into my bathroom. I looked like hell, dark circles under my already dark eyes, skin pale and dull. I splashed some water on my face before hanging my hands off the edge of the bathroom counter and staring at my reflection.

But I didn't look long.

Because the longer I stared, the more likely it was that I'd see her.

Abby may have been younger than me, but we had often been mistaken for twins. We had the same long, thick, shiny, dark hair, the same lean frame, the same button nose and full lips. Our biggest differentiator was that her eyes were neon blue and mine were shit brown — and I used to tell her that all the time, how jealous I was of her eyes.

I wondered if she'd be proud of me.

I'd only been in Boston for five months, since Dad moved us here for spring training, but it'd been the best five months I'd had since she'd died. I'd had a few drinks, sure, but I hadn't smoked, hadn't sniffed or snorted or popped anything other than Advil. I was focused at school, and on my work at the stadium — so much so that even Dad trusted me enough to let me live on my own.

He now trusted me enough to let me lead rehab for his quarterback.

I hoped this was the first real step in me changing for the better, in me turning my life around. Then again, the little shred of hope I held was pitiful because I knew who I was at the root of everything.

A monster.

And the only reason I was here, doing everything that I was doing, was because my father didn't deserve to have his heart broken any more than it already had been.

I checked the time on my phone when I ambled back into my room, groaning at the ungodly hour. The sun hadn't even started peaking over the horizon yet. But I knew sleep wasn't happening, so I quietly changed into shorts and a sports bra and slipped in my headphones before making my way downstairs.

It was dark in the living room, save for the soft bit of blue streaming in from dawn through the window. I left the lights off as I stretched and got warm, and then I slowly slid the coffee table out of the way as quietly as I could.

Once it was in the corner, I wrapped my hand around the pole.

That first touch of cool chrome was like a bucket of ice water dousing the flame of guilt and panic and pain I'd woken up with. It soothed me immediately, and I took my first deep breath of the morning, walking around the pole before I lifted my inside arm high and did a dip, flying backward into a goddess spin.

That was my last bit of true consciousness for the next hour.

After that, I slipped out of my mind and into my body, letting it move in whatever way it wanted to with the cool, dark living room as its stage.

Sweat beaded on my neck, sliding down the crevices of my chest and along my abdomen the more I moved. My breath became shallow and ragged, and yet I kept on, finishing one

trick sequence only to start another. Tricks turned into flows which slowly turned into dance, and before I knew it, I was slinking on the floor, exploring movement with my arms and legs and torso.

I didn't come up for air or consciousness until my body demanded hydration, and I padded barefoot over to the kitchen long enough to fill a cup up with water, drain it, and fill it again. I ambled over to the window then, sipping from my glass as I watched the sun's warm rays spread across our lawn and the one across from it.

The longer I stood there, the more my breaths evened out, and I let my mind wander to Holden.

He had been moody the past couple of days — though, rightfully so. I knew without probing too much that he likely wasn't sleeping well with his injury, and the fact that he was in the stage where all he could do was rest had to be driving him mad. He wanted to skip this part. He wanted to get to the day when he could start *doing* something about it, start working toward recovery and, ultimately, his return to the team.

So far, he'd only been able to sit on the sidelines in the shade and watch his team practice. And he did. He watched every *second* of practice, showing up early like he usually did and always being the last to leave, too. Then, he came to us in the training room, and we checked in on him.

There was nothing for *us* to do yet, either.

Right now, he just needed to rest.

I was staring up at what little of his window I could see from this angle, wondering if he was sleeping in or trying to make up some *new* morning routine since most of his usual one was off-limits. But then, I saw movement through the old, rotted, wooden gate that led to their side back yard.

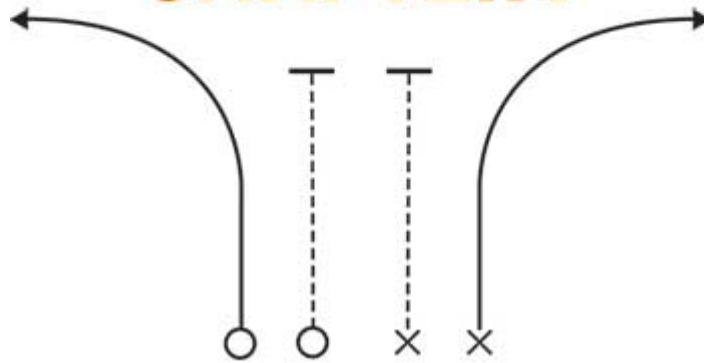
I could only see through the slats of it — though they were wide from poor installation or passage of time or both — but I saw enough to know it was him piddling back there in the garden.

Mostly, because I'd put money on no one else in that house even being *awake* at this hour, let alone working in the back yard.

I gritted my teeth, slamming my cup down on the coffee table.

And then I whipped open our front door.

CHAPTER 7



Holden

“What the hell, Holden?!”

I paused where I was bent over my cucumber trellis, a knife in my left hand while I held a ripe cucumber in my right.

“Drop the vegetable,” Julep ordered as she stormed up behind me, and before I even had the chance to, she leaned down and ripped the knife out of my hand before tearing the cucumber out of the opposite.

“Whoa, relax,” I said, standing before she knocked me backward.

“What part of *limited movement* do you not comprehend?” she asked, slicing the cucumber stem before she started using it as a weapon to threaten me with.

There was more emotion rolling off that woman in those few seconds than I’d seen in the entire time I’d known her. She was radiant in her fiery, raging glory — an absolute vision of messy hair and tired eyes as she worried over my injury.

I smirked, holding my left hand up in surrender. “I was using my healthy arm,” I noted, wiggling my fingers.

“I literally pried this behemoth out of your injured hand,” she pointed out.

“Technically, it’s not my hand that’s injured. And nothing about this was triggering pain in my shoulder.”

“You’re impossible. Why didn’t you ask one of your roommates to do this?”

I snorted at that, hooking a thumb over my shoulder. “These guys? They would never.”

Julep glared at me, using the cucumber to point at the old white bench behind where I stood. “Sit down, shut up, and tell me what to do.”

I frowned, trying to decipher the meaning in that juxtaposition. But then she pointed at the bench again and, out of fear she might beat me over the head with that cucumber, I sat.

That’s when I realized what she was wearing.

The black shorts she wore reminded me of the kind the girls’ volleyball team sported, Spandex in nature and hugging every slight curve of her ass. They were heartbreakingly short, the tight band at the top stretching across her lean abdomen and wrapping over her hip bones. The sliver of her stomach that usually showed in the crops she wore was completely exposed now, along with the rest of her navel, all the way up to the band of the tiny sports bra that matched her shorts. It was simple, black and without any sort of logo or pattern, but it was cut in a deep V that accented the ample swells of her breasts.

My eyes hooked there, something primal stirring in my gut before I blinked and tore my gaze away.

I was met with a bored blink. “Are you done ogling me now?”

“Probably not.”

“You act like you’ve never seen a girl in a bikini before.”

“I haven’t seen *you* in a bikini.”

She rolled her eyes, then dropped to her knees right where I had been in front of the terrace. “What were you doing here, anyway?”

“Just harvesting the ones that are ready.”

“How can you tell?”

“If they look big enough to eat,” I said simply. “And if any of them are too big or have yellow at the bottom, they’re probably overripe. You can toss those to the side.”

Julep assessed the pile of overripe cucumbers I had lying beside the basket of ripe ones, and with a curt nod, she clipped the stem of one that was ready to eat and dropped it into the basket.

I didn’t hate the view of watching her harvest, not when her ass stretched against those shorts, her cleavage coming into view each time she moved her arm to cut a new vegetable. I sat back on the bench, stretching my left arm over the back of it.

“Do you always bolt into your neighbors’ yard in your underwear?”

“It’s a sports bra and shorts,” she said flatly. “And I was poling.”

“This early?” I nodded, impressed. “Seems like I’m not the only one with a morning routine.”

She scoffed. “As if. I just couldn’t sleep.”

Something about the way she said that made me pause, made me watch her more closely. When I looked past the lean lines of her body that was entirely too distracting to focus on much else, I could see the bags under her eyes, the fatigue weighing down her shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She shrugged. “It’s fine. I’m used to it.”

Our drive home from the hospital popped into my mind, and I chewed the inside of my bottom lip a moment before asking, “Why don’t you have any friends?”

“Because I hurt my friends,” she said — matter-of-factly and as if there was no refuting that statement. “And because I don’t trust anyone.”

“Not even me?”

She snorted. “*Especially* not you.”

“What did I do?”

Julep leveled me with a look. “Other than disobey my father’s direct orders?”

Her words sobered me the way a cold shower after a night out would. It was easy to forget sometimes, how I couldn’t have her — especially with her dressed like that, looking at me like that, and actually fucking talking to me. Since my injury, it almost seemed like she cared about me... even though all previous signs pointed in the opposite direction of that notion.

I wished for some smart-ass remark but found myself silenced by the reminder of who she was, who her father was, and all the reasons I needed to stop giving in to my instincts that drove me toward her.

And so, we fell quiet, and I watched her finish off the rest of the cucumbers before she sat back on her heels and looked up at me.

“Anything else?”

I nodded to a couple holes I’d dug back around our fence. “Well, I was halfway into planting my peonies back there when this happened,” I said, lifting my right elbow a bit.

She gave me a warning glare when I did, as if even that movement would trigger my injury.

“But it’s okay. I can wait until next fall.”

“Why not plant them in the spring?”

I frowned. “Everyone knows peonies do better when they’re planted in the fall.”

“And by *everyone* you mean no one, right?”

“Well, anyone who knows anything about gardening,” I amended.

“It doesn’t make sense to plant them now. Everything will freeze in the winter.”

“Yes, but it’s not about this season. It’s about *next* season.”

Julep blinked at me. “You’re so weird.”

I just grinned.

I expected her to let it go, but instead, she waved for me to follow her over to my half-finished project. After she pulled on my gloves, I walked her through what was left, adding a bit of compost to the soil along with some bonemeal and then setting the roots so that the eyes of the peonies faced upward. I made sure she didn’t plant too deep, and once everything looked good, I instructed her to backfill the hole before we both gently used our feet to tamp down the soil.

“Jeez, you ran over here barefoot?”

“Did you just say *jeez*?” she shot back, ignoring my assessment.

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Like I said, I was poling.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t run over here in heels, then.”

“I wish I had so I could take them off and gouge your eyes out with them, perv.”

I smirked. “You love my eyes on you.”

She paused where she was tenderly working the soil, eyes on her feet before they slowly crept up to mine. For a moment, she let me hold that weighted gaze, and I soaked up every second of it until she broke eye contact and stepped back, peeling my gardening gloves off each hand.

“What got you into pole?” I asked.

“My future dreams of being a stripper, of course.”

I honestly thought she was serious, and I nodded appreciatively. “That’s cool. Seems like a really difficult career. I feel like you need to have thick skin to do it, put up with the asshole clients and the club owners stealing your wages.”

Julep blinked at me. “You idiot, I was joking.”

“How am I supposed to know?! You have the same expression for everything.”

That earned me the tiniest smile, and she hooked a hand on her hip. “I’m actually kind of impressed with how you reacted to that. Most people don’t have any respect for dancers.”

“Oh, I have *all* the respect for dancers.”

Julep gave me a look. “Don’t ruin it.” When I zipped my lips closed, she shrugged, glancing back at her house across the street like she could see her pole from there. “It’s a long, stupid story. Let’s just say I was drowning, and pole was the life raft that kept my head above the waves.”

“Is it still like that now?”

Her eyes were dark when she faced me again, but in lieu of answering, she shook her head and nodded toward the flowers we’d just planted. “What got *you* into *this*? I don’t know a single *grown* man who gardens, let alone one in college.”

Without hesitation, I answered, “My sister.”

I didn’t know why it came out so easily, especially when her asking about my CDs just two days prior had made me clam up. Maybe there was something about that morning, about her helping me that set me at ease.

“Well, not *just* my sister,” I amended, grabbing the back of my neck. “It was a family thing. My mom was the one who was good at it. She had the greenest thumb,” I said, smiling at the memory of Mom always being covered in dirt, stains on the knees of her overall jeans and grime under her nails. She used to wear this red bandana in her hair to hold it out of her face, and on Hannah’s eighth birthday, Mom got her one just like it. “But she taught me and Hannah what she could. Even Dad helped out, taking on the weeds and such.”

There was something hollow in Julep’s gaze when she said, “Sounds like you’re the All-American family.”

“We were.”

Julep arched a brow, and my mouth suddenly felt dry. I wondered if there was a possibility she actually didn’t know

my story, given that it was one every sports channel loved to cover — especially as I approached the draft. If anything, she had to have heard it from the training staff, from her father.

But the longer she stared at me, confused, the more I doubted that she knew a single thing. And suddenly, it felt like I'd been stripped bare in front of her, like I was standing completely naked under her scrutinizing gaze while she waited for me to tell her about my biggest scar.

I swallowed. "Sorry, I... I just assumed you knew."

"Knew what?" She frowned, folding her arms over her chest.

There was never an easy way to tell this story. In fact, I felt as if I'd almost become... *cold* with it. Detached. "My dad and sister disappeared when I was thirteen," I explained. "And my mom took her life a year later."

For a moment, shock colored Julep's face, her eyes widening as her mouth parted just the slightest bit. But it happened quickly, almost so quick I wondered if I'd seen it at all before something else washed over her.

It wasn't pity, which I was used to, or sorrow or anger, or that look I saw in some girls' eyes when they thought, "*Ah, this is it. He's let me in. This is my way to his heart.*"

No, it was... soft, subdued, and a distinct kind of sad.

Understanding.

It was the look of someone who truly understood.

"Disappeared?"

I nodded. "We had a little sailboat, and my sister... she loved to sail with Dad. They took it out one day when the forecast was clear, but..."

I shrugged, not having to finish the sentence. Julep was smart enough to figure it out.

"Your uncles," she said, skipping over the traditional *I'm sorry* I was so used to hearing after revealing the truth about my past. "They took you in, didn't they?"

I nodded. “The summer before I started high school. They moved me from Florida up here with them.”

“I thought he was your dad before you told me,” she said.

I smiled. “They look a lot alike.”

Julep bit her bottom lip, looking down at where she held my gardening gloves in her hands. Those haunted eyes that mirrored mine flashed with a ghost of her own.

“What?” I asked.

She shook her head, swallowing, and still she clamped her teeth down on that bottom lip like if she let go of it, she’d tell me what was wrong.

Like it would be the end of the world if she did.

“You know loss, too, don’t you?” I asked — softly, carefully.

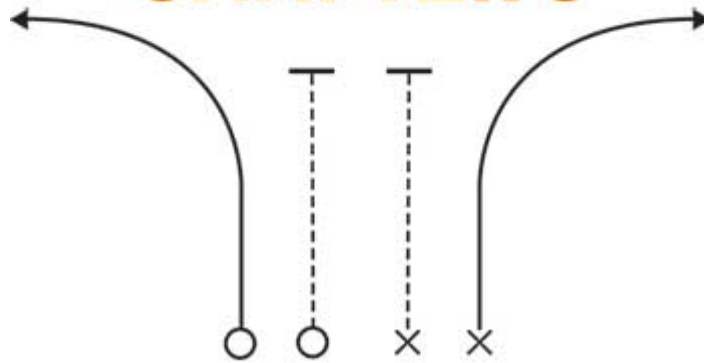
But not careful enough.

Julep sucked in a shallow breath like she was drowning in a memory and my question had pulled her up for her first breath. She shoved my gardening gloves into my chest.

“I have to go,” she said, words tumbling out in a rush, and then she turned and darted across the back yard.

She was through the gate before I could say another word.

CHAPTER 8



Holden

We had a home game the Saturday after my injury.

We lost.

Not for our lack of trying, because the team was phenomenal on the field. Offense converted when they could, defense held our opponents from too many points. My backup, Blake Russo, had been kicking his ass to learn the new playbook this season just as much as I had. He had been ready to go the last two seasons just in case something like this happened, and I appreciated that he took it seriously when the time came.

They all did good.

It just wasn't good *enough*.

Even though we only lost by seven, a loss was a loss, and we all felt the weight of it as we moved into the next week. Fortunately, it was the week I could actually start working on rehab, on getting my shoulder back to normal.

I hadn't been as optimistic as Julep had been when I first got injured. Memories of my major tear and the surgery that went along with it wouldn't let me be. But as we worked through the first bit of rehab, the stretching and isometric strengthening — I was surprised at how good I felt.

“Because you listened to me and actually rested,” she had said after our first day when I noted my surprise.

It was about the *only* thing she’d said to me since that morning in my garden.

I thought we were breaking ground, thought maybe I’d defrosted the ice queen — even if only marginally. But after that morning, she had retreated into herself. She wasn’t cold with me the way she had been in the beginning, but she also wasn’t smiling or trying to make conversation the way she had been in the car on the way home from the hospital.

Still, rehab forced her to be around me, and I’d never admit how much I looked forward to those hours in the training room. It didn’t matter the torture she was putting me through, how the smallest movement and exercises made me feel like my shoulder was burning off.

Because at the base of it all, she still had that look in her eyes.

Understanding.

And it felt like I’d built the first pillar of a bridge between us.

At least, until that pillar was knocked down by the hand of a reality check one evening after practice.

I’d sat out, again, watching from the sidelines as we prepared to head on the road and face off against the Rhode Island Trojans. But even from the sidelines, I called out what I saw, coached Russo in-between plays, and instructed my offensive line how to help him gain a little more time in the pocket so he could make his throws. He wasn’t quite as quick as I was, and it took him longer to find the player he wanted, to decide, to wind up and make the pass.

Every second counted.

By the time we made it back to the locker room, I was exhausted and just as sweaty as if I’d been on the field with the rest of the team. I carefully removed my jersey, trying not to anger my shoulder that was still tender even if I was gaining better movement with it.

The locker room was alive with the chatter it usually had, primarily because Kyle had decided we were having a party at the Pit tonight. A big part of me wanted to nip that plan right in the bud, but the other part of me knew the team needed this — a way to blow off steam after our loss, to have a little fun before we took on the Trojans. So, I let it ride, committing to the fact that I'd just have to suck it up for a night.

I had my eyes on where I was taking off my cleats when the buzz died down, and I looked up just in time to see Julep duck into her dad's office. She rattled off something to him, and he nodded and checked his watch before saying something back. Then, with a simple nod, she rounded out of his office — and she didn't look at a single player gawking at her as she walked the few short steps that took her back out of the locker room.

Someone let out a wolf whistle, and then the room broke out into a mixture of laughter and talking again.

“Swear to God, I have never seen a finer ass on any woman,” Kyle said, biting his knuckles and doing a little spin.

“Yeah, well I hope you've made peace with the fact that *looking* at it is all you'll ever do,” Zeke popped back.

“Pshh, just what a pussy-whipped simp would say.” Kyle waved him off. “Just because you're soft from only having one girl in your bed for two seasons now doesn't mean the rest of us are.”

Riley gave Kyle a fake smile before flipping him off and heading toward the showers, clearly done with the conversation.

“You don't stand a chance,” Clay told Kyle, wiping his forehead with a towel before hanging it over his shoulder.

Kyle crossed his arms on a devilish smirk. “Is that a challenge?”

“No,” I cut in, blood pulsing in my neck. “It's a reminder that she's a member of our training staff and the daughter of our head coach — who made it pretty clear that she was off limits the first time he walked into this locker room.”

Every head spun toward me, and Kyle's eyebrow shot up before he let out a high-pitched laugh. "Oh, that's rich coming from *you*, Cap."

I blinked, looking back down at where I was untying my other cleat. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure. That's why you had her practically naked in our back yard last week, right?"

Those disrespectful words aimed toward Julep were an incendiary device on my already-frayed emotions.

My teeth nearly shattered from how hard I gritted them when I stood, and in a flash, I had Kyle pinned by the neck against the lockers. He just laughed harder as I pressed into his space.

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about," I spat. "And if you know what's good for you, you'll shut your fucking mouth."

"Careful," he said with a wink. "Don't want to hurt your precious arm there."

I pressed my left forearm even more into his neck, hating the challenge I saw in his eyes before Clay carefully peeled me off him, and Zeke stepped in, too, pulling Kyle in the opposite direction.

"Alright," Leo said, exchanging looks with Clay and Zeke before snapping his towel between me and Kyle. "That's enough machismo for today. Neither of you stand a chance of fucking the coach's daughter, so let's just drop it, hey?"

"Speak for him," Kyle said, nodding toward me. His eyes flicked toward Coach's office to make sure the door was still closed before he shrugged the guys off and pinned me with a glare. "You may have had her playing in the dirt with you in her bra and underwear, Cap, but it'll be my bed she lands in. I promise you that."

I surged toward him, ready to plow his fucking teeth in — shoulder be damned. But Zeke and Clay both caught me and shoved me back, which only made Kyle laugh like he'd already won. He winked at me before dropping his shorts and

sauntering toward the shower, letting his dick swing the whole way.

“Get off me,” I growled, shoving my friends away before I kicked my cleats toward my locker and reached in for my shirt, tugging it on a bit too quickly. My shoulder stung, but I ignored it.

Leo squeezed my healthy shoulder, he and the other two hovering behind me as I tried to school my breaths.

“Coach’s daughter,” he said, so low only the four of us could hear it.

“I know,” I bit back.

“Then fucking act like it,” Zeke added, and I turned to face him, to face all three of them, ready to fight like an animal backed into a corner.

But when I met their gazes, I saw nothing but the concern of my brothers, my friends who loved me like family.

They could see right through me, my walls nothing but glass to them.

I let out a long breath, my head falling back against the locker before I shook it. “Yeah, no. I’m fine. Just... tired.”

It was a sorry excuse, one I knew didn’t fool any of them as they exchanged looks. But they nodded, and Leo squeezed my shoulder once more before releasing me.

“We’ll blow off some steam tonight,” he assured me. “Pong. You’re on my team.”

I nodded, though I knew no amount of beer could make me not act like an absolute psycho when I heard someone talk that way about Julep — especially a scumbag like Kyle Robbins. He was the worst of the worst, the kind of guy you hated as a human but depended on as a player. He was the best tight end in our division, which meant we were lucky to have him. But he was also a disrespectful misogynist who cared more about how much money he could make from a shoe deal than whether our team won the championship or not.

I didn't want him so much as looking at Julep, let alone thinking about touching her.

The problem was that I had no *right* to feel that way, or act that way.

I was losing my damn mind over a girl I should have been staying far, far away from.

“Hit the shower,” Clay said to me, and he gave me a look that said he'd be talking to me later, that he saw right through the bullshit.

They all did.

Which meant I had better get my act together before Coach Lee started to notice, too.



Julep

God, if you really exist, please strike me with a lightning bolt at this very moment and end it all.

The thought was only *half* a joke as I pushed pasta around on my plate listening to my father tell Mary stories about me as a kid. Of course, Mary leaned into every word, smiling and laughing and egging him on with questions in-between throwing me winks across the table.

Traitor.

I *was* happy she was winning him over — first with inviting him to dinner, then with *cooking* said dinner, and now by laughing at his stupid jokes and acting like she was interested in his boring football talk. When he'd first seen her on move-in day, piercings and tattoos and leather-clad, I knew he'd been worried. So, this dinner, her softening his suspicion — it was a good thing.

I just wished it wasn't at my expense.

And I wished my father wasn't pretending we had some glorious relationship when the truth was that we barely knew each other at all.

"Wait," Mary said, chuckling as she wiped her mouth with her napkin before folding it in her lap again. "You're telling me that Julep, the Julep sitting at this table with us, used to tie bows in her hair?"

"Every day," Dad said, beaming. "She'd match it to whatever she wore that day, and she had a special one for game day. Bright blue and orange like her uniform."

"I still can't believe you were a cheerleader," Mary said, snickering.

"Trust me, it wasn't by choice," I grumbled.

"You loved it," Dad teased.

"No, *Abby* loved it," I corrected, meeting his eyes. "I just did it for the boys."

Dad's mouth thinned into a flat line, and an awkward silence fell over the table as he reached for his wine and took a sip.

My gaze stayed fixed on him, as if this time might be different from every other time I brought her up. I wanted so desperately for him to admit it. To say, "*Ah, that's right. It was Abby who loved cheerleading, wasn't it? Didn't she used to cheer the birthday song to you every year?*" And I could laugh and say, "*She sure did, even when we were teenagers.*"

Then, we'd both laugh — even if that laughter was underlined with sorrow. But we could remember her, share the memory of her, and keep her alive in even that small way.

Instead, he stayed silent, and I grew more resentful.

Mary gave me a look like *what the hell was that?*

I only looked down at my plate, counting down the minutes for this dinner to be over.

To anyone on the outside of this dinner, it would seem I was being a brat. And I guess in many ways, I was. But I felt

that lingering gaze from my father all the time. It wasn't as bad as Mom's, who barely wanted to see me at *all* anymore, but I still felt it.

It was the sadness, the worry, the fear of what my life was, and even more so of what it would become.

In truth, I could admit that I was an ungrateful little snot when it came to how much he put up with where I was concerned. I'd put him through enough, too much really, and yet he still tried. He still wanted to see me succeed.

Sometimes, I wished he'd just leave me to dig my holes and bury myself alive in them.

"Speaking of boys," Dad said after a minute, and all the lightness that was in his voice before disappeared. "Are the players leaving you alone?"

"Oh, my God, Dad," I said, huffing as I sat back and shoved my plate away from me.

"I see the way they look at you," he said. "And I know better than most how football players can be."

"No one is bothering me."

"Leo Hernandez?"

"No," I said in a bored tone, though I didn't miss how Mary's lip curled at his name.

"Zeke Collins? Clay Johnson?"

"They both have girlfriends. You *know* their girlfriends."

Dad made a face like he wasn't sure that mattered. "Kyle Robbins?"

"Who?" I made a face, waving my hand in the air to illustrate how little I cared.

Dad picked up his fork, stacking some pasta and broccoli. "What about Holden Moore?"

I sighed, shoving back from the table and standing. "Trust me, Dad — everyone has heeded your warning and they're all

staying away from me. Now, if this interrogation is done, may I be excused?"

"You've barely touched your dinner," Mary commented with a pout.

"Yeah, well, I'm not hungry," I said to no one in particular.

I didn't dare look at my father, not when I knew the disappointment I'd see waiting for me if I did. I knew the look well, the one that said he wished it was his other daughter who survived instead of me.

"I'm sorry," I said softly to Mary. "Dinner was great. I really appreciate it. I'm just... tired."

She nodded like she understood, giving me a look that said we could talk later.

She'd be disappointed to find that I didn't want to talk to *anyone*.

I forced myself to smile at my father, because no matter how irritated I was, I knew how precious life was, how quickly it could go. "I really am just tired," I reiterated, because I knew the way he was looking at me, he didn't believe the lie I'd fed Mary.

Thankfully, he still held enough compassion for me that he nodded like he did. He stood, opening his arms, and I slipped into them for a brief hug.

"Love you, Dad. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Love you, too. Your mom wanted me to tell you hello, by the way. She's going to call later this week. Things have just been crazy with planning the church banquet. You know how into all that she gets."

I rolled my eyes at the lie, because pretending I was indifferent hurt less than admitting how much that lie really hurt. Mom had no intention of calling me. She hadn't since we left.

"Okay," I said.

When he released me, I drained the last bit of the wine in my glass before retreating up the stairs and to my room.

I wanted to slam my door, to throw a tantrum like I was allowed to when I was a pre-teen. Instead, I closed it with a quiet *snick* that seemed to echo through the empty room before flopping face-first onto my bed and letting out a strangled scream into my pillow.

For a while, I just laid there, listening to the muffled voices downstairs until I heard the distinct sound of the front door opening and closing. Mary knocked on my door a moment later, her voice soft as she told me he was gone.

I didn't respond.

"You okay, roomie?" she asked after a moment.

When I didn't reply, I heard a long sigh leave her.

"I'm going to eat an edible and watch old episodes of *Schitt's Creek*. Invitation is open."

Then, she was gone.

I eventually rolled onto my back, watching as the last bit of sunlight faded from my room. I thought of Abby, of my parents, of what things might have been like if Abby were still here.

If I hadn't...

I couldn't even finish the thought before emotion gripped me by the throat, and I closed my eyes, willing myself to just go numb. Eventually, I snuck back downstairs and quietly topped off my wine glass. I didn't care that I'd already had two. I wanted another.

I took it back up to my room and drank it too quickly before I flopped back on my bed. The minutes ticked by with me staring at the ceiling, and just about the time I convinced myself I should shower and go to bed, I heard it.

Music.

It was muffled, but the base beat thick through the house, rattling my bed frame a bit. I frowned, leaning up on my

elbows before I rolled off my bed and padded over to my window.

Holden's lawn was covered with people.

The front door was wide open, students ambling in and out of it with plastic cups in their hands. Music blasted, couples made out on the porch, and a group of guys dragged a large folding table into the back yard, careful not to step on any flowers, fruits, or vegetables.

I chewed my lip, watching, and then for reasons unbeknownst to me, I bolted out of my room and shoved into Mary's without knocking.

"Hey!" she scolded, holding up the shirt she'd just taken off to cover her knockers.

But I didn't turn around, didn't leave, didn't do anything for fear that one second of hesitation would make me change my mind.

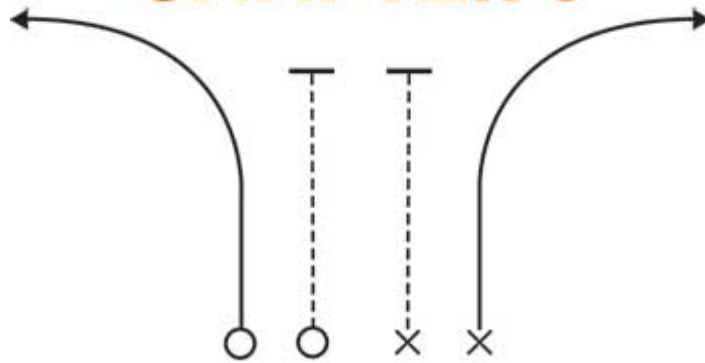
"Are you tired?"

She was still frowning at me, like I was a crazy person on the verge of a breakdown. "Not really?" she answered, almost more of a question than a certainty.

I nodded, folding my arms before I glanced down the hall at my room, and then back at my roommate.

"How do you feel about making an appearance at the Pit?"

CHAPTER 9



Holden

I was three sheets to the wind when she walked in.

It was a combination of things that afforded me the opportunity to actually get drunk. One was that my room was right upstairs, though that had never encouraged me before tonight. Two was that I didn't have to practice tomorrow, because I *couldn't* practice, because I couldn't play at all. And three was because I'd been riled up since my altercation with Kyle in the locker room earlier that afternoon.

Because of the infuriating, off limits, fucking irresistible girl who just waltzed into our party.

I pretended I was fully engaged in the game of beer pong I was playing with Leo, Clay, and Zeke — Leo as my partner, and Clay drinking for two since Zeke was sober by choice. My body was angled toward the table, shoulders square as I took my shot with the ping-pong ball, missed the cup, and then took a small sip from the one in my hand like I was unbothered.

But out of my periphery, I watched Julep's every move.

I watched her thread an arm through the girl's she was with, whom I recognized as her roommate only from the small glances I'd caught of her across the street. Roommate seemed annoyed to be here, a bored expression on her face as she

almost angrily chewed gum and let Julep guide her through the thickening crowd.

Julep, on the other hand, looked... different.

She was almost smiling as they weaved in and out of pods of students, and her eyes caught on the different areas they passed — a flip cup game in the dining room, body shots in the kitchen, dancing in the middle of the living room where we'd shoved the couches out of the way. I didn't miss how she swallowed thickly at the sight of a couple kids lining up something to snort — not football players, because their asses would be off the team in a flash. She brushed past them, though, she and her roommate making their way to the keg.

“Defense, man!” Leo barked at me, smacking my bicep as the ball Zeke threw fell into one of our cups. Apparently, it had been spinning around the lip for a while and I'd missed my chance to finger it out.

I shrugged, then took a long drink to pay for the mistake.

I wondered why she was here, sneaking glances at her as she filled a cup for her and her roommate before they began making the rounds again. Judging by the look in her eyes, she was a little buzzed, too.

I didn't know why that put me on edge.

Maybe it was because, added to how she looked, I knew I wasn't the only one watching her.

Julep Lee had knocked me on my ass the first time I saw her, and she had been wearing pretty modest athleisure. But tonight, she wore impossibly tight, black leather pants that hugged her hips and ass and every lean line of her legs all the way down to the small heels on her feet. I'd never been so fucking turned on by a sliver of ankle before, but the skin that peeked out between the pump and the hem of her pants drew my eye, holding me there and making me wonder what that delicate ankle bone would feel like wrapped in my hand as I guided it up to my shoulder and laid her back on my bed.

She wore a dark green crop top, too — one that looked almost vintage with the sheer, olive lace covering the dark

fabric beneath it. The heels she wore were unique and far from what I'd ever have pictured her wearing.

Then again, I hadn't seen her wearing anything outside of the athletic wear she wore at the stadium and the tiny shorts and bra she wore when poling.

Everything about her was different, even her hair that was usually straight or pulled into a ponytail was curled, flowing down her back and over her shoulders and just begging to be wrapped up in my fist.

“Bro.”

I turned back to Leo, who blinked at me.

“What?”

“They just double bounced us and fucking won, that's what.”

I looked at the evidence on the table, two little white pong balls in our last two cups.

“Damn,” I said, running a hand back through my hair. “Well, good game, guys. I'm going to go re-up.” I lifted my cup in the air toward Zeke and Clay, who watched me just as suspiciously as Leo did.

But when I turned for the keg just as Julep and her roommate headed the same way, Leo clapped a hand on my shoulder, halting me.

“Ah, *now* I know why you were distracted.”

I feigned indifference. “Just tired.”

“Tired my ass. Come on, Cap — I need a refill, too.”

He grinned devilishly as he took the lead, and I turned over my shoulder at Clay and Zeke who were just smiling and shaking their heads at me like I was a lost cause.

Leo and I were almost to the kitchen when Giana and Riley tugged Julep and her roommate to the side, wrapping them both in hugs before launching into chatter. I drained the last of the liquid in my cup as we approached them.

“I’m so happy you came!” Giana said, squeezing Julep’s elbow. “And you, too...” She waited, arching a brow at Julep’s roommate.

“Mary,” the girl said, still wearing that bored expression, though she somehow managed to sound nice despite it. Her eyes were a little glazed, lazy, like she was a touch high.

“Mary,” Giana repeated. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Giana, this is Riley.”

Before I could stop him, Leo squeezed in between Mary and Julep, throwing his arm around each of them. “And I’m Leo. Now that we all know each other, what do you say we take this little ménage...” He counted each one of them on a finger. “*Cinq* up to my room?”

Giana and Riley just smiled and rolled their eyes because they were used to my best friend’s sense of humor. But Mary shrugged him off, nose wrinkling as if he stank. “I’d rather peel off my own toenails.”

“And I’d rather you take me somewhere private and let me see all those tattoos,” Leo said, ignoring her very obvious dismissal of him as his eyes raked over her exposed skin.

She shook her head at him, disbelief and disgust mixing on her face. “You really are clueless, aren’t you?”

“Desperately. I need someone to teach me everything about the world.” He released where his arm was around Julep and turned his full attention on Mary. “You in the market to be my new mommy?”

Mary scoffed, turned on her heels, and Leo wagged his brows at all of us before chasing after her.

“Poor girl,” Giana remarked, but she smiled anyway.

I took the break in the conversation as an opportunity, along with the marginal space between a couple of my teammates and the backside of Julep. The keg lay just beyond them, and before I could talk myself out of it, I pushed through.

It was a tight squeeze, and the front of me brushed along the back of her, the distinct scent of raspberries and sage hitting my nostrils as I did. I tilted my head down, lips and nose just inches from the back of her neck.

“Excuse me,” I muttered, though I slowed my pace, savoring the touch as I brought a hand to her hip as I passed.

Julep stiffened, keeping her jaw angled toward the girls.

But her eyes slipped back, over her shoulder, and found me.

My fingers blazed where they touched her skin, every inch of me lighting up as I wedged myself between her and my teammates. It happened in a matter of seconds, but those seconds lingered like years, like decades of a fire burning in my chest. I held my breath, noted that she held hers, too.

And then, just as quickly, I was through, and I released her, not so much as looking back over my shoulder once the contact was broken.

I headed straight for the keg like it hadn't meant a thing, like I'd barely noticed.

My heart thundered the entire way.



I realized I should have sobered up as the night went on, but I found myself drinking more and more because it felt like the only thing I could do as I watched Julep from across the party.

She fit in seamlessly, letting Giana and Riley tout her through the crowd, introducing her to people. They even conned her and Mary into a game of quarters, which I only half-watched as I gave Blake Russo a pep talk in the kitchen.

“I’m too slow,” he said again, even after my insistence that he was faster than he thought. “I just... I clam up. Even when I *know* what the move is.”

“So, tell me why,” I said, nudging my fist to his chest. “Why don’t you follow through with your gut instinct?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.”

His mouth pulled to the side. “I guess... I guess because I’m scared. I’m afraid I’ll pull the trigger too soon and not see something, get intercepted or read the play wrong.”

“And so what if you do?”

He gave me a perplexed look.

“So *what* if you get picked off? Or sacked? Or if you throw it far past your target? You know what happens then?”

Blake blinked as if to say *yeah, you idiot, we lose the game.*

I leaned in closer. “That play ends, and the next one starts.” I shook my head. “Every player makes mistakes. Every *quarterback* overthrows and underthrows and gets taken to the ground more than a few times. We all throw picks. We all fuck up. It’s part of the game. The key is not letting that shit get in your head or stop you from making the play you know needs to be made. Trust your instinct, so that you can untap the potential you have instead of playing it safe in what’s certain. And newsflash — even when you *think* something is certain, it never is.” I clapped his shoulder. “Trust me, once you let go, once you make a mistake and then realize it’s not the end of the world?” I shrugged. “That’s when the real magic is unlocked.”

Blake nodded, like he was finally understanding. “I think I see what you’re saying.”

“Humor me next game and go with the first thing your gut tells you. I’ll run every lap Coach gives you for any mistakes that happen.”

He snorted. “Now that’s a deal I’ll take.”

I smiled, squeezing his shoulder before I took a drink and subtly turned to see if Julep was still playing quarters.

But she wasn't.

I scanned the crowd idly, noting that Giana and Riley were with their boyfriends now on the dance floor, and I caught the tail-end of Mary's blonde hair as she exited out the front door.

Then, I found Julep.

Squeezed between the arm of the couch and a smirking, wasted Kyle Robbins.

It was dark in the corner where they were, the couch shoved back against the wall to make room for the dance floor. Everything in my body reacted to that sight — fist tightening around the cup in my hands to the point of nearly crushing it, heart galloping so loud in my ears I barely heard the music, blood boiling and jaw clenching so hard I had an instant headache.

I didn't allow myself the time to even formulate a plan before I was pushing through the crowd toward her.

I watched them through the gaps in the people as I shoved my way past, and when Kyle bent toward her, hand finding her thigh as he spoke something along her neck that made her laugh in a way I didn't know was possible — a way I'd never seen her laugh before — I nearly passed out from red invading my vision.

And I didn't care that I didn't have a right to be pissed.

I didn't care that I shouldn't have been watching her, that I should have let it go.

I didn't care that I didn't know what the hell to say or do.

I just walked right up to them, towering over where they sat, breathing like a fucking dragon.

I startled them both, Kyle stopping mid-laugh and glaring up at me as if to say, *I'm busy here, fuck off.*

But my eyes were on Julep.

Her smile slowly waned, those dark irises growing even wider as she took me in. She was buzzed, maybe even drunk, which would explain the carefree way she'd just been

laughing. But now, those glossy eyes were trained on me, and they slid the full length of my body before slowly crawling back up, a cat-like smirk painting her lips when she found my gaze once more.

“Hello, QB1,” she purred.

That one little greeting set my whole body blazing.

“Hello, Polerina,” I said back, and somehow, the corner of my mouth tilted despite how I was two seconds away from Hulk-smashing my teammate. In fact, I somehow embodied cocky indifference, one hand sliding into the pocket of my athletic shorts while the other held onto my cup.

I thought maybe Julep could sense it, the way her smile crept up even more.

“Having fun?” I asked, as if Kyle wasn’t there at all.

“Yes, we were,” he interrupted, trying to block my view of Julep. “So, if you could just—”

“I’m pretty bored, actually,” Julep cut in, something of a challenge in her eyes. “I thought you said parties at the Pit couldn’t be beat.”

I ignored the drop of Kyle’s jaw at her comment, though my smile was smug when I said, “Maybe you just haven’t had the right company.”

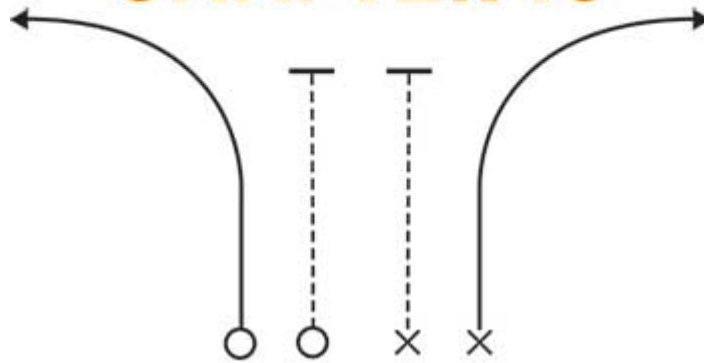
“Or maybe this party blows,” she countered.

“Maybe,” I conceded. I looked out back at the garden, at the folding table that had been abandoned out there with cups littered all over it. No one else was out there, so I looked back at Julep before nodding my head toward the door. “Want a change of scenery?”

She didn’t take her eyes off mine as she peeled Kyle’s hand off her thigh. “Desperately.”

And then she stood and led the way, and I winked at a furious Kyle over my shoulder before following her out.

CHAPTER 10



Julep

“You’re drunk.”

The corner of Holden’s mouth lifted at the accusation, and he simply shrugged, drinking from his cup — which was in bad shape, like it had been partially crushed.

It wasn’t right, how tantalizing he looked in the warm glow of the Edison lights strung above us in the garden. We were the only ones out back, and I took advantage of my lowered inhibitions, letting my eyes rake over him. His hair was mussed, curling over the edges of the backward baseball cap he wore. I’d never seen him in a hat before that night, and I felt like a fucking high schooler for how I wanted to take it off him and put it on my own head, to see his smirk when I did.

Idiot, I chastised myself, but it didn’t stop me.

It didn’t stop me from noting how unfair it was to every other man in the world that he could look that good in black athletic shorts and a heather gray NBU pullover that zipped down to his chest, showing a white t-shirt underneath it. He’d shoved the sleeves up past his elbows, showcasing his ridiculous forearms that only a quarterback could have.

I wanted to hate it. I wanted to hate *him*.

But I liked how cocky he looked standing there with one hand in his pocket, how he had marched over to where I'd been with Kyle and not thought twice before stealing me away.

“And are you?” he asked, arching a brow.

“A little buzzed,” I admitted.

Maybe that's why I'm in such a “check out Holden Moore” mood...

I sighed then, folding my arms over my chest as I took a seat on the same white bench he'd sat on while I tended his flowers the week before. “I might have used red wine as a crutch to get through dinner with my dad.”

“That bad, huh?”

Holden sat next to me, and though there was plenty of space on that bench, the outside of his thigh pressed against mine.

“You know my dad,” I said.

“Not like you do.”

“No,” I agreed.

“Is he hard on you?”

“Not any harder than he should be.”

Holden frowned, not understanding, but I didn't want to talk about my father any longer. “I really am surprised to see you drinking.”

It was his turn to sigh. “Yeah, well, I wouldn't usually. But since I'm not playing...” He cracked his neck. “It's just been a day. I try my best to be okay with this,” he said, lifting the elbow of his injured arm just a fraction. “But...”

“But you're human,” I finished for him. “And you're upset.”

His mouth twitched, and he nodded.

A moment of silence passed between us, the music thumping loud from inside as a couple tumbled out through the back sliding door. They glanced at us for only a second

before the guy threw his arm around the girl and led her around the dark side of the house.

“I kind of like seeing you a little disgruntled and sad.”

Holden puffed a laugh. “Gee, thanks.”

“I mean it. You’re always so... *happy*,” I said, wrinkling my nose. “So calm and steady and sure.”

“You know, you *almost* had as much disdain in your voice when you said that as when you commented on how many friends I have.”

I smiled a bit. “I don’t know... I guess I just don’t get it.”

“Don’t get what?”

I swallowed. “How you can be so happy after what you told me last week... what happened to your family.”

Holden stiffened, the grip around his cup making it creak in his hands. That seemed to snap him out of wherever his mind was trying to take him, and he sniffed, draining the last of his beer before setting the cup under the bench.

“Well, the alternative is to stop living my life,” he said simply, turning to face me with those wide, endless green eyes. “And I owe it to them and to myself not to do that.”

The words were quiet, raspy around the edges as they floated over the space between us. And still, they hit me like a stampede of horses, each one trampling me even more into the hard ground.

Abby’s smile flashed in my mind, her head tilted back on a laugh. And I swore I heard the sound of it, heard the sing-song lullaby of it that everyone around her found so endearing.

I was lost in that thought when Holden nudged my knee with his. He must have noticed, must have seen it in my own eyes where those words had taken me.

I didn’t like that he could see it, what I so easily hid from others.

His brows bent together, and he leaned toward me just marginally, mouth opening like he was ready to ask me where

I'd gone.

But I tore my gaze away, nodding toward the cucumbers. "Looks like you've got a few more ready to harvest."

Holden watched the side of my face a moment, like he was trying to will me back to the moment he'd lost. But eventually, he followed my gaze, and out of my peripheral I saw him smile a little.

"Is that you giving me permission to garden?"

I rolled my eyes.

"These will probably be the last ones," he commented, eyes trailing over the trellis. "It's a good thing I have football in the fall and winter, because there's not much to be done back here once the weather turns."

Something washed over him then, and I realized it the moment it touched his eyes — it was worry, fear.

That he wouldn't have football this year, either.

"You should share with your neighbors, you know," I said. "It's the friendly thing to do."

"You want some cucumbers?"

"Tomatoes, too."

He nodded, then smirked like a little kid before he said, "I'll pick out the biggest cucumber for you. One that's nice and thick, long..."

I rolled my eyes so hard my eyelids fluttered as I turned away from him, shaking my head.

"What?" he asked on a laugh he couldn't contain.

"Do you ever get tired of making jokes like a twelve-year-old boy?"

"No, because it's the only way I get a rise out of you."

"You could try normal conversation."

"You usually shut me down when I do."

I turned to face him fully, shoulders back and chin tilted up. “Try me,” I said. “Tell me something real.”

“Something real?”

I nodded.

Holden’s eyes flicked between mine, his tongue swiping out to wet his bottom lip just marginally before he turned toward me just as earnestly. “Okay,” he said, and then he leaned in close, jaw set. “I haven’t been able to take my eyes off you since the moment you walked through that door tonight.”

My breath hitched.

I felt it, stuck somewhere between an inhale and an exhale, and yet I couldn’t reach for either one.

Holden didn’t waver, didn’t back down. His eyes continued searching mine, and I saw the challenge in them, the dare for me not to run. And part of me wanted to lean in. Part of me wanted to meet that challenge.

But the instinct was too strong.

I finally found an exhale, tilting it into a laugh as I broke eye contact and stood. “God, you’re so patronizing.”

I took a step toward the house, but before I could take another, Holden stood, his calloused hand slipping into the crook of my elbow and spinning me to face him. We were so close my chest met his, and I kept my gaze on the zipper of his pullover for fear of looking up, fear of meeting his gaze I felt burning down at me.

“Stop trying to laugh me off,” he said, voice reverberating through my ribcage. “And look at me when I tell you how enamoring you are.”

“That’s not a word.”

“It is now,” he argued. “And it was made for you.”

I swallowed as his knuckles found my chin and lifted it, causing my gaze to meet his. As if that touch didn’t burn already, his fingers uncurled, palm cupping my cheek. He

followed the movement of his fingers as they drew a line along my jaw, traced the outline of my lips, and finally swept gently underneath my eye, as if he was trying to erase the tiredness he saw there.

His Adam's apple bobbed hard in his throat, the muscle of his jaw flexing like he was restraining himself.

I closed my eyes.

Looking at him that closely was too much. But it was even worse once my sight was gone because every other sense kicked into overdrive. I heard the labored inhale he carefully drew, felt where I leaned into his palm even though I should have torn away.

My eyes popped open.

"You can't have me," I reminded him, though my voice was shallow, weak.

"Says who?"

"My father."

His eyes fell to my lips, his next breath warming them.

"As long as it's not you saying it, I don't care."

Holden tilted my chin even more, angling his mouth for mine. And I sucked in my last haggard breath, closing my eyes again, surrendering.

For the split second before good sense found me.

Because I knew regardless of what his words said, it wasn't true. He did care. He *had* to care.

Or he'd be off the team.

And just two weeks of that had nearly killed him already.

I could almost taste him, his lips brushing mine when I said, "Then I'm saying it, too."

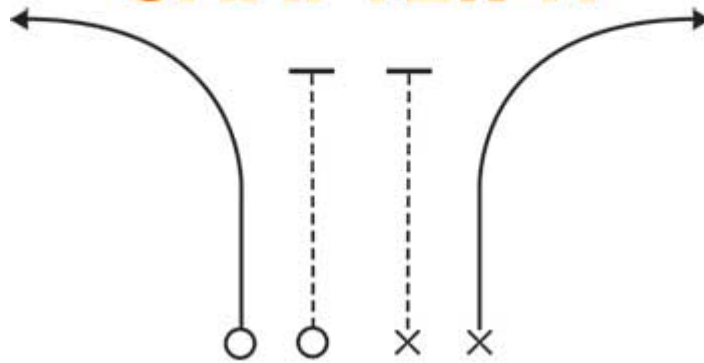
I pressed a hand into his chest, and Holden paused, his lips still hovering so close to mine that just a fraction of an inch would give us both the reprieve we longed for. But we were drunk. We were being reckless.

There wasn't a world that existed where Holden Moore could have me, and I could have him in return.

"Goodnight, Cap," I breathed.

And he released me.

CHAPTER 11



Holden

Blake Russo must have really taken the advice I'd given him to heart because that Saturday he led our team in a win against the Vikings.

And the following week at home, he did it again.

It was invigorating — for him and the team and the coaching staff, too. All the odds had been stacked against us, but the backup quarterback had shown grit, and the team had pulled together, and we had won.

It should have been invigorating for me, too. It was what I'd wanted.

And yet, I felt the all-too-familiar sting of being useless.

And even worse — the team had been fine without me.

I never spoke those selfish, whiny, child-like thoughts out loud, not when we were on the road and not when we were back at the stadium, either. But they were there, deeply rooted in my chest and the seeded fear I'd always had of being defective, of not being needed.

I woke with night sweats, panic zipping through my spine like lightning at the realization that this could be it for me, it could all be over. I saw the draft slipping out of my fingers no

matter how I tried to tighten my grip, saw scouts turning their gaze to other prospects with me on the bench.

Inside, I was treading water in a sea of doubt and fear.

But on the outside, I was the same Holden Moore — level-headed and sure, calm, encouraging.

I had to be.

And it was being captain that kept me going, that gave me the life raft to stop myself from drowning.

The wins lit a fire in me, just like they did the rest of the team. Whereas they worked harder on the practice field, readying themselves for our next home game that weekend, I pushed myself to the edge every day in rehab. The steroid shot had me feeling good, along with the exercises we'd been doing and the anti-inflammatories. I'd rested, and then I'd stretched, and then I'd introduced movement, and then I'd strengthened that movement. We were already introducing the passing motion, and it felt good.

I felt good.

Now, I was anxious to get back on the field.

I knew better than to push, than to ask Julep or JB or any of the other training staff to put me in before they recommended it. I was almost afraid to ask, like if I pushed too soon, it'd raise their warning flags and they'd hold me back even longer.

So, I showed them I was ready through physical therapy, through ignoring any little grimace of pain I might have felt and proving I could perform despite it. No, I wasn't in perfect condition yet, but that would come with time. With practice.

With being back out there with my team.

If I was in the NFL, I'd already have been on the starting line-up. When money was involved, everything was different. But as it was now, the university was responsible for my well-being and health, and as much as I hated it, I was a liability.

They weren't going to rush it.

The Thursday before our home game, I stretched out on the table after a grueling session of PT with Julep, sweat sluicing over my skin as I did. My chest heaved for a while as I lay there, as she carefully stretched my shoulder while it was warm.

She'd been all business since the party at the Pit more than two weeks ago.

I didn't push her, not that night when every inhibition I had told me not to let her go, not to release her without kissing her first, when everything inside me yearned to claim her and show that I *could* have her — *would* have her.

And certainly not once I woke the next morning, sober enough to realize that she had been right.

Thank *fuck* she'd been the smart one, the strong one, to realize that line we toed was one we could never pass over. I understood that fact just as much as she did, but that night, with my judgment impaired...

I hadn't cared.

I'd been willing to risk it all.

It had been hard for her to meet my eyes that next day in training, but once she did, it was as if nothing had happened at all. I cracked a joke, and she shot a one-liner back at me. And that was it.

Business as usual.

It'd been that way ever since.

"You've really progressed," she said as she maneuvered my elbow and wrist this way and that, testing my shoulder's limits. "Your recovery is going better than even I speculated."

Hope ballooned in my chest, but I didn't dare ask what that meant, and Julep dropped it just as quickly as she'd brought it up, instructing me to roll over onto my stomach for deep tissue work.

We were both quiet as she massaged my neck and shoulder, my upper back, all the little muscles and tendons that needed to be worked out. Those quiet minutes lulled me into a

stupor, my heavy heart and mind begging me to sink into oblivion. I was so exhausted from training, from the mental and physical aspect of it all, that I succumbed, a long exhale bringing me the last bit of relaxation I needed to release.

In my half-dream state, Julep's hands felt even warmer, firmer where they squeezed and rubbed. I inhaled deep, soaking in each touch, groaning a little when she dug her thumb into a sore spot that brought on as much pain as it did pleasure.

I knew without being able to see her that she was grinning. The little sadist loved bringing me pain.

It made me wonder if she'd dig those nails into my flesh if I ever had the chance to lay her back, if she'd bite my lip enough to draw blood if I dared to steal a kiss.

I'd wanted to so badly that night in the garden.

It had made me dizzy, made me *sick* when she'd told me to stop, when she'd said goodnight and pulled away just enough for me to let her go. I'd been intoxicated by her, drawn into her web and willing to lay my entire life on the line for just one taste.

That desire hadn't ebbed, not even as my intelligence took over and reminded me all the reasons nothing between us could ever happen. It didn't stop me from storming up to my shower that night, running it hot, and stroking myself to the thought of taking her. It didn't stop me from daydreaming every time I'd seen her since. It didn't stop me from fantasizing about how she would respond if I broke loose of the constraints I'd tied myself up with and said fuck it all, pushing her against the nearest wall and hiking her thigh up, skating my fingers between her legs...

"Roll over," she commanded, and I did so as those words drifted to me through a fog only a massage could bring on.

I kept my eyes closed, sighing contently as I rolled onto my back and waited for her to start working on the front part of my shoulder.

Instead, a soft laugh floated into the shell of my ear.

I creaked one eye open and then the next, Julep framed in a halo from the fluorescent light above her. She wore an amused smile, and through my exhausted, sated massage haze, she almost looked like an angel.

“What’s so funny?” I mused with a smirk of my own.

“Oh, nothing,” she said, folding one arm over her chest and balancing the elbow of the opposite on top of it. She rested her chin on her knuckles, rolling her lips together before she released them with a pop. She pointed at my crotch at the same time. “Just saying hello to my new friend, that’s all.”

I frowned, following the direction of her finger.

And then cursed.

I had a raging fucking hard-on, my cock at full attention, straining against my shorts.

I sat up, adjusting myself as Julep laughed and laughed. My cheeks flamed with embarrassment, but the longer I watched her laughing, the longer I heard that rare, fucking perfect sound coming from her, the less I cared.

I smiled, too, and leaned back on my hands, shaking my head. “It amuses you, does it?”

“Oh, very much so,” she managed between her laughs. She was holding her side now, tears flooding her eyes.

“Who’s the twelve-year-old now?” I teased.

She just howled more.

I couldn’t help but watch her, and even though she was laughing at my expense, I felt some sort of pride in getting that sound out of her at all. I waited until she calmed, and she rested one hand on the edge of the table, the other still holding her side as her eyes found mine.

Silence fell over us like a warm blanket, shielding us from the outside world. Her face evened out as her breath shallowed, and I held her weighted gaze as long as I could before she shook me free and stood straight again.

“Well, I have a boner killer,” she announced, and she actually had the decency to look a little apologetic as she wiped a tear from her eye. “Holden... you’re going to be out again this game.”

All joy left me with those words.

I flopped back on the table, sighing. “Perfect.”

Julep didn’t try to comfort me, didn’t try to assure me everything would be okay and I’d be out there soon. I appreciated that, that she didn’t lie, didn’t make any promises she couldn’t keep. She was calling the shots as she saw them in that moment, not a future one.

Right now, I couldn’t play.

It was as simple and awful as that.

After a moment, she leaned against the edge of the table, half-seated, as she said, “We’re making progress. Your strength has improved ten-fold.”

Both true.

Neither enough to soothe the burning in my chest.

I nodded, sitting up again. “Well, I guess I can look forward to another game of me showing up bright and early like always, except instead of having purpose, I just look like a lost puppy now.”

Julep offered a sympathetic smile. “Why do you show up early if you don’t need to?”

I shrugged. “Because I always have.”

She nodded, considering, and then said, “What if we changed it up a bit, did something before the game to take your mind off things?”

Surprise made me sit up more. “You want to hang out with me, Polerina?”

“Never mind,” she said instantly, lips flat.

“No, no,” I said, reaching for her as she stood up and started to walk away. I didn’t touch her though, just ran a hand

back through my hair. “It’s just... it’s an early game,” I reminded her. “Kick off is at noon. I may not need to get here early, but what could we possibly do before official team report time at ten?”

Something in her eyes told me she regretted making the suggestion, but still, her lips curled into a smile. “I have an idea.”



Julep

“A yard sale?”

Holden made a face, blinking at the hand-written sign with balloons that had an arrow pointing down a narrow street before he turned to look at me. I just smiled and hit the blinker, heading toward our first stop.

“Maybe a few, if you’re lucky,” I corrected, and I reached between my seat and console, fishing out a small stack of papers that I handed to him.

“You actually mapped out a plan,” he mused, cocking an eyebrow as he filtered through the pages. I had red circles with numbered ratings in all the suburbs surrounding the city.

“Oh, you’ve got to. Every bargain hunter knows that. You scope out the best neighborhoods first, early — before anyone else gets there. And of course, you want to try to avoid driving back and forth across town, get the best routes. But then again, it’s worth the gas and the time to hit the most coveted spots first.”

If I hadn’t been watching the road, I would have been smiling at Holden’s expression, his jaw a bit unhinged as he listened to me.

“Who *are* you?” he asked.

I just laughed.

Leaves rained down overhead as we drove a beautiful street of brick houses with lush, expansive yards. It was one of those perfect fall days, the sky gray and cloudy, breeze rushing in a cool front that would likely wash away the last bit of summer that had been trying to hold on to New England. Growing up down south, I never had much of a fall, so I marveled at the trees changing colors, and felt a true sense of joy for the first time in ages all because I could wear jeans and a sweater without sweating my ass off.

“It’s a perfect day for football,” Holden mused, looking out the window like he, too, was appreciating the sudden rush of fall.

“No football talk this morning.”

He arched a brow at me. “It’s game day.”

“Who cares? You’re not playing.”

His face sagged, and I inwardly cursed at my social inability to recognize when something like that was inappropriate to say, when it might hurt.

“What I mean is that today, we’re going to shift focus from what we can’t control to what we can,” I amended, and even I was impressed at how adult that sounded. Holden seemed surprised by the statement, too, judging by the way his expression softened.

“Which is, by your definition, hitting all the best yard and garage sales in Boston before nine AM?”

“Precisely.”

We pulled up to a nice house, modest in size but with a kept lawn and a literal white picket fence. The *really* nice houses never *had* yard sales. They were rich enough that they usually just donated their lot or had someone who worked for them take care of it. Estate sales were the *real* jackpots, huge mansions with antiques galore. But I hadn’t found any for today, so yard sales would have to do.

I parked along the curb, and a forest green minivan pulled in right behind me. An elderly woman hopped out of the driver seat like it was on fire, giving me a look over her glasses that said she would trip me with her walker if I dared to get in her way.

I nodded my head in a sign of respect, which made her lift her chin a bit before she made her way up the small driveway toward the sale.

“I didn’t realize how brutal these things got,” Holden murmured, his brow reaching for his hairline as he joined me on the driver side of the car.

“Oh, you have no idea.”

He followed me up the drive to the sale, which hadn’t even been touched yet. It was just past seven in the morning, and the owners of the house were still setting up, but they greeted us and the older woman with wide smiles.

“Good morning,” the female owner said. She looked to be in her fifties, with brown skin and black hair that showed a touch of gray at the roots, and oversized, wire-rimmed glasses that gave her a warm, studious vibe. She dropped a box of toys on one of the folding tables. “No price tags, just make an offer if you see something you like. I’m Geraldine, and this is my husband, Howard,” she said.

Her husband didn’t look as pleased to be up this early moving boxes, but he managed a smile and lifted one of his large hands at us in greeting before he got back to moving an old dresser out of the garage and into the driveway.

We thanked them, along with the older woman who was already perusing the first table, before I led Holden to start on the opposite side.

“There’s so much stuff,” he commented.

“Which just makes the treasure hunt that much more exciting.”

He picked up a strange figurine that looked like something between a long neck dinosaur and a Pegasus, eyeballing it

every which way before shaking his head and setting it back down.

We ambled slowly along the tables and racks, and after a while, I felt like Holden was watching me more than any of the items for sale. I peeked at him over my shoulder as I picked up what looked like an oddly shaped, dusty piece of metal at first, but on closer inspection I discovered was a Baroque hand mirror. I ran a thumb over the dust, revealing beautiful rose details on the back. The mirror itself was in good shape, too — just needed a little cleaning.

“Jackpot,” I muttered under my breath.

“What is—”

I turned away from Holden before he could finish his question, holding the mirror up to Geraldine. “Five bucks?”

She barely looked up from where she was setting up a full china set. “Deal,” she said with a smile.

I smiled, too, opening the reusable bag I had with me and carefully dropping the mirror inside it before I readjusted the straps on my shoulder.

Holden chuckled, following me as I continued scanning the table. “I take it you’re a pro at this.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said. “But I’ve been doing it my whole life.”

“What do you do with all this... *stuff*?” he asked, picking up an old tool that was far too rusted to be on sale.

“What do you mean, *what do I do with it*?” I asked on a laugh. “I use it. I hang the art on my walls, polish the vases and fill them with flowers, line my cabinets with old glassware and dishes, stuff my closet full of gently used clothes.” I shrugged. “There’s already so much *stuff* in the world. Why buy something new when you can have something with memories attached to it, something with history? Every single thing you see here has a story.” I picked up an old, worn, heavily read edition of *The Feminine Mystique*. “It has character.”

I held up the book, then, turning to Geraldine.

“How much for the book?” I asked.

She shrugged, unsure. “Two bucks?”

I nodded, signaling it was a fair price before I dropped it in the bag.

Holden smiled. “This explains what you wore to the party at the Pit that night.”

“What do you mean?”

“The vintage-looking top, the bizarre heels, the leather pants that looked like something my mom would have worn in the 80s.”

I folded my arms over my chest, leaning a hip against the table. “You really were watching me all night, weren’t you, Cap?”

His eyes caught mine, but before they could dig their claws in and hold me captive, I turned and headed for the next table over.

“You said you’ve been doing this your whole life,” he mused as he followed me. “Who got you into it?”

I smiled — and not the fake or forced kind of smile, but the genuine kind that bloomed from the memory in my mind. “Grandma. My dad’s mom. She used to take me and Abby *every* Saturday in the summer. We’d stay with her for a few weeks while Dad did football camps, and she’d drag us out of bed groaning and complaining before the sun was even up. But we always gave in because we knew she’d buy us something.” I chuckled. “*And* she always made us coffee on Saturdays, which made us feel like adults. It was mostly milk and sugar, but still.”

Holden mirrored my smile. “Who’s Abby?”

Ice water washed over me, *through* me, and I paused where my hand hovered over a delicate teacup. Even my heart seemed to hesitate, taking a long breath before it began beating again, a little more unsteady than before.

“My sister,” I finally breathed. Then, I lifted my eyes to find Holden. “She died the summer before my senior year of high school. She was sixteen.”

Holden looked as if I’d reared back and slapped him, as if he was both shocked and in pain from my admission.

“I didn’t know,” he finally said.

I shrugged. “Not many people do.”

I continued walking, and though my heart was still unsteady, I found my next breath a little easier.

Holden fell quiet, spending some time sifting through old CDs. He plucked a few from the stack and offered Geraldine two dollars each, which she agreed to. I opened my bag for him to drop them in, smirking a little when I noticed the old Aaron Lewis album.

“So, yard sales are to you what gardening is to me,” he mused, pausing at an old casserole dish.

I frowned, confused.

“It’s a way to keep her with you,” he said when I didn’t reply. “A way to live a little piece of her life in your own.”

He looked at me then, and tears pricked the corners of my eyes unbidden when he did. Because I’d never been so nailed down like that, never had someone look at me with the same kind of pain and horror mirrored in their gaze.

I’d never been seen.

It was like he’d lifted up the rock I’d been hiding under, blinding me with sunlight as he peered down at me with a magnifying glass.

And he didn’t run at the sight of what he found.

But then again, he didn’t know the whole story.

“Oh, that would be a *lovely* piece for a couple,” Geraldine said as she brushed past us with an arm full of blankets. She tilted a chin up at the orange, yellow, and white casserole dish Holden still touched. “It was my grandmother’s. She and

grandpa were married for sixty-two years. I'd keep it if we didn't already have so many."

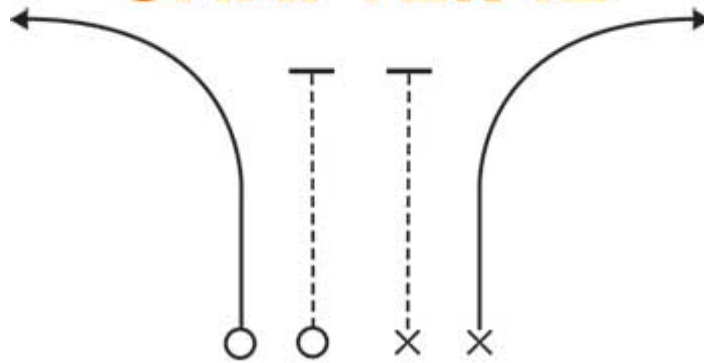
Holden pulled his hand back. "Oh, we're not—"

"Ten bucks?" I interrupted.

Geraldine looked at Holden, then at me, a knowing grin spreading on her weathered face as she winked at me.

"Deal."

CHAPTER 12



Holden

“Whose house?!”

“Our house!”

“Whose house?!”

“Our house!”

Clay was a beast as he stalked around the locker room, grabbing players by their face masks as he chanted. The energy in the room rose each time he did, every reply shouted louder and louder. Leo bounced on his toes, murmuring to himself as he smacked his helmet and hyped himself up. Riley was silent, her eyes a little dazed where she stared off into space, and Zeke stood beside her, nodding like he was listening to music, like the beat was thumping through his veins.

I watched from where I sat on the bench in front of my locker, elbows on my knees and hands clasped in the middle. Blake Russo glanced at me, the nerves evident in his eyes when he did. I gave him a simple nod, a look that told him he could do this.

I shoved down the part of me that wished he'd fail, that longed for the day when I'd rip back the title of QB1.

We needed this win. We needed *every* win we could get to earn our place at the championship game.

As if he was reading my mind, Coach Lee caught my gaze from where he was huddled with Coach Hoover in the corner, the two of them muttering to each other behind the barrier of their clipboards. He paused the conversation, giving me a look that told me he wanted to see me step up, get the team pumped, get them ready.

Injured or not, I was still captain.

I had the responsibility even if I didn't have the reward.

Blowing out a breath, I stood, making my way to the center of the room before I closed the lid of a cooler and climbed on top of it. I didn't have to whistle or cheer or clap my hands to get anyone's attention. One by one, my teammates turned toward me, quieting as they did.

"This is a big one," I started, and I felt the truth of that bearing down on my chest like an anvil. "The Lions are tough. They're going to test you, *all* of you. They have a team full of players just like you, who want the same thing as you want."

I locked eyes with a few players, who swallowed, nodding.

"Which means you have to prove you want it more."

"*Whose house?!*" Clay yelled from the back.

"*Our house!*" the team chanted back.

"Our house," I echoed, slamming my fist into my chest. "Our field. Our fans. Our *win*." I scanned the room, locking eyes with each player. "I don't want you to think about the championship game, or a bowl game, or any other game other than the one right here, right now. Focus — that's what will get this win. One play at a time. Be smart," I told them, tapping the side of my temple. "Be patient. Be *confident*. They may push, but we push back harder."

There was a roar of agreement, and then I nodded at Clay, hopping down to let him take over in leading the team in a chant. I threw one arm around Blake and the other around

Riley as we all bounced as a team, the energy in the room swelling to the point of combusting.

My heart felt the same where it beat against the bones of my rib cage.

Something was off, even as I encouraged my teammates and followed them out onto the field like I had every game since I'd been injured, I didn't feel the same. I was only half here, which was a feeling I wasn't used to. On game days, my focus was always solely on football.

But today, Julep swam in the back of my mind.

As the team ran through the tunnel and out onto the field, I jogged behind.

And I caught her gaze as I passed.

Those dark eyes didn't leave mine, and time seemed to hesitate, my breath long and slow, legs delayed as if I were running underwater. She held my stare even as I passed her, and I watched her as I did, turning back over my shoulder until I had no choice but to face forward again.

When I did, I nearly slammed into Coach Lee.

His hands shot out to stop me before I could, careful to avoid my shoulder, and then he paused there with me in his grip. He looked behind me at his daughter, then turned that glare down to me.

He didn't have to say a word for me to know what he was thinking.



We won.

We won, and I tried to be happy.

We won, and I tried to remind myself it was a good thing.

But my pride was bruised and beaten, angry and tired of being ignored — and it wasn't going to let me skate by any

longer without it going noticed.

I was a recluse the Sunday after the game, hiding in my bedroom with the door locked. Leo tried to get me to go out. Kyle tried to get me to play video games. Clay and Zeke both tried to get me to fifth wheel with them, Giana, and Riley to the Topsfield Fair. And my uncles tried to get me to join them for dinner, to help choose my baby cousin's first Halloween outfit.

I ignored them all.

The truth was I was almost embarrassed by the petulant frustration that rolled off me like steam, and I knew if I let even one member of the team get a whiff of it, it could start problems. I didn't want any rumors going around that I wasn't supportive of Blake, of the team as a whole, that I was a sore loser — or in this case, a sore, injured winner.

I took the day to rest, to read and listen to music and try to recenter myself.

I was still the captain, and I needed to remind myself of that.

Just like I needed to remind myself to stop getting so caught up with Julep.

She'd been a distraction for me during the game. I couldn't stop thinking about the yard sale, about what she'd revealed to me. To know she'd suffered the same loss as I had, that she understood not just grief but that *particular* brand of it...

It shifted something inside me, something I knew would never move back.

It was nearly impossible not to reach for her on that chilly morning, to not hold her and tell her I got it. It was like a lightbulb going off, an *aha!* moment.

That ghost I'd seen in her eyes since the first time I met her, I knew what it was now.

It was the same as mine.

As if wanting her physically hadn't driven me mad enough, as if pushing her buttons didn't rev me up, as if that

bickering with her and making her roll her eyes didn't light some dead part of me back to life — now, I felt a connection to her I'd never felt to anyone in my entire life.

And I had to cut it out of me like a bullet.

Coach saw what I thought I hid so well. He didn't have to say it for me to know, especially with how he watched me the entire game, how he ensured I didn't get too close to Julep.

Which was why, on Monday morning when I showed up for PT, I wasn't the least bit surprised to find JB waiting for me instead of her.

“I hear we're making good progress,” he said, patting the table for me to hop up. I did, trying not to be as grumpy as I had been all weekend, while he stretched my shoulder. “Julep seems to think you could start practicing this week.”

I couldn't even find a glimmer of hope inside me.

“The shot help?”

I nodded.

“Any pain while you're sleeping, or showering, any regular activity setting it off?”

I shook my head.

JB grew quiet, watching me as he maneuvered my arm this way and that, assessing. “We're moving you forward in the recovery process, that's why I'll be taking over.”

The corner of my mouth lifted, and I gave him a look.

The one he offered in return told me he knew that was bullshit just as much as I did.

After physical therapy, I sat out for another practice. JB wanted to look over my chart before he made any other decisions. The team was on a high from the win, everyone smiling and laughing and joking around.

“You good, Cap?” Leo asked me on a water break.

I nodded from where I was studying the playbook. “Never been better.”

He frowned, opening his mouth to say something, but before he got the chance, Coach Lee came up behind him and clapped him on the back, signaling it was time for him to get back to work.

When Leo was gone, Coach stood next to where I was on the bench, his arms crossed and eyes on the field where offense was running drills.

“I spoke with JB,” he said. “He’s cleared you to come back to practice tomorrow.”

My chest sparked with the first sign of life since the game Saturday.

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

“It’s just practice,” he clarified. “No promise on the game this weekend.”

“I understand, sir.”

He turned then. “I hope you do, Moore. I hope you understand *very* clearly what your role is on this team, both as quarterback and as captain.”

I tried to hide the bob of my throat as I lifted my gaze from the playbook to meet his.

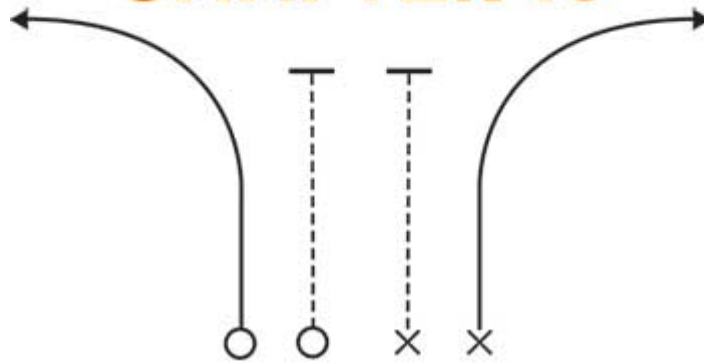
“You’re a leader,” he reminded me. “Everyone on this team looks to you as their first point of direction for how to behave.”

My mouth was dry as I nodded in understanding.

Coach Lee bent then, his face right in front of mine as he said, “Julep is a good girl. She’s worked her ass off to climb out of the pits of hell.” He shoved his finger so hard into my chest I knew it’d bruise. “Keep your head in the game, and your hands off my daughter.”

Then he stood, blew the whistle, and called the end of practice.

CHAPTER 13



Julep

“Where are you going with those?” Mary asked, waving her Twizzler at me before she took a bite of it. Her brow arched. “And what exactly *are* those?”

I felt like I’d been caught red-handed trying to steal alcohol out of my parents’ stash.

I looked down at the platter in my hands. “Banana nut muffins.”

“And you’re taking them where?”

I gave her a guilty look. “To our neighbors across the street.”

“To the Pit, you mean,” Mary said flatly, and she shook her head on a sigh as she bit off another piece of Twizzler. “You’re being stupid, my friend, but I’ll let you do it if you really want to.”

“What? I’m just being a nice neighbor,” I said. “I like to bake sometimes. You and I certainly won’t eat all these.”

It was only *half* a lie. I really did enjoy baking, when the mood struck me — and, truth be told, it *hadn’t* struck me in years. Which was a big reason why I’d been so giddy when it

had, why I hadn't second-guessed it or let myself overanalyze the *why* behind the feeling.

I'd come home from school, worked on an online quiz that was due before midnight, and as soon as I'd finished, I'd been struck with that nostalgic feeling I used to get when I was in high school, the one that urged me to pull out every ingredient in the fridge and pantry and see what I could bake up.

It was Mom I got this from.

When she was really happy, Mom would do one of two things: one, blast Celine Dion as loud as she could and clean the whole house, or two, blast Celine Dion as loud as she could and bake up a storm.

I was in middle school when I started wanting to learn, and Mom was happy to teach me. I had vivid memories of her explaining how precarious baking was, how just a smidge too much of this or too little of that could alter the entire recipe. It felt like a hobby and a challenge all in one, and eventually, I became even more engrossed than Mom.

Abby always *loved* when I got in this mood.

She'd close whatever book she was reading and hop up all excited, following me around in the kitchen and begging to help. We'd end up making a complete mess most of the time, flour and sugar everywhere.

That was exactly the feeling I got this afternoon, that bubbly, warm excitement.

Except this time, I didn't have Abby.

I also didn't have Mom, or her stocked kitchen, so I'd run to the store to get what I needed before blasting Summer Walker and singing along as I whipped up muffins with a delectable crumble topping.

And I was only taking them across the street because it was dangerous to have them all here with only me and Mary to eat them.

Mary blinked at me. "You're so far gone you can't even see the red flags waving, can you?"

I rolled my eyes. “Calm down. It’s not that serious.”

“You like him.”

I swallowed but lifted my chin in defiance. “I find him tolerable at best.”

That made her snort, and she turned, flopping down on the couch before she reached for her PlayStation controller. “Look, just be careful. Not only do I find all of those football players to be cocky, selfish assholes, but your dad is their coach.” She gave me a pointed look as she put on her headset. “And I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t be thrilled with knowing you were banging one of his players.”

“I won’t be banging anyone.”

She smiled. “Uh-huh.”

“I’m just being friendly.”

Mary ignored me, already talking to one of her friends on her headset as *Final Fantasy VII Remake* loaded on the TV screen.

I stood there a moment debating if I should keep defending myself before I decided it was pointless, and then I pushed outside into the cool evening air before I could talk myself out of it.

The *real* reason behind the muffins was that Holden had been cleared to return to practice today. I’d had a hand in it, meeting with JB and my father early this morning and updating them on where we were in his rehab. I felt confident he could start practicing, even if he had to take it easy for a few days. He wasn’t experiencing any pain or limitations in physical therapy, and his shoulder was strong, mobile.

What surprised me most was that Dad trusted me.

He believed me, seemingly impressed with my answers to his questions. Before the meeting was over, Dad assigned JB to take over and move Holden into the next phase.

And I was proud.

I was *proud* — God, when was the last time I'd felt that? I couldn't remember a time outside of unlocking a new trick in pole. The studio or my living room with that chrome lover were about the only times I felt good.

Until recently.

Something about working with Holden had given me purpose, had given me *confidence*.

Him being released back to practice felt like something worth celebrating — for both of us.

And so, I carried the platter of muffins with my chin held high, knocking on the front door of the Pit on what sounded like a particularly quiet evening for them.

Leo opened the door, and I was thankful it wasn't Kyle — who had been pretty relentless in his advances since that night of the party.

“Julep,” he said with a surprised smile, opening the door for me to step in. “What's up?”

“I made muffins,” I said stupidly, holding up the tray. “Thought there might be some hungry football players here who could help me eat them.”

“Oh, you have come to the right place, *cariño*,” he said, taking the tray out of my hands.

I followed him into the kitchen where he sat them down on the counter, and I looked around, a bit impressed with how clean the place was considering how I'd seen it at the party last time I'd been inside.

Leo groaned when he unwrapped the cloth I'd put over the muffins, and he picked one up, peeling the wrapper off the bottom and shoving half of it in his mouth. “*Homahgod*,” he said, moaning. “They're still warm.”

I chuckled, crossing my arms as I looked around. I hated the way I not-so-subtly looked for Holden, wondering why he hadn't come down when he heard me.

But there wasn't a chance in hell I'd ask where he was.

“It doesn’t often look like this,” Leo said around another bite of muffin, nodding to where I was looking. “This clean, I mean. Cap has been in a mood since he got home from his last class. He scrubbed these counters like Coach Lee himself was going to come and inspect them after.”

I smirked at the joke, biting back the niggling question in my mind.

Where is he now?

“He’s upstairs in his room,” Leo said, like he could read my mind, and the smirk he wore mirrored the knowing one Mary had given me when I left the house. “If you want to take him a muffin, see if it’ll get him out of his grumpy mood.”

“Grumpy?” I frowned. “He was cleared to practice today. I figured he’d be ecstatic.”

Leo shrugged. “Must have something else going on. But hey, nothing these won’t fix,” he said, holding out one of the muffins. He nodded toward the stairs, and though I narrowed my gaze at the suspicious grin he was giving me, he only pushed the muffin toward me more.

I carefully took it from him, still giving him a look as I conceded.

Leo smiled a little too proudly as he all but skipped back into the living room, and he flopped down onto the couch just like Mary had, putting on his headset and tuning back into the game I’d interrupted. I idly wondered if he and Mary played any of the same games but didn’t muse on it too much before I was climbing the stairs up to the dark hallway of rooms.

Holden’s was on the end, the one that overlooked the side of the garden. I knocked softly but got no response.

“Holden?” I asked, testing the knob. I pushed it open just a crack, peering in to make sure I wasn’t going to storm in on him naked or anything. Music played from a small Bluetooth speaker, something melancholy and beautiful that I didn’t recognize. When I didn’t see anything, I pushed the door open a little wider. “You in here?”

It was humid in his room, warm and wet with the intoxicating smell of a man's body wash. I heard his bare feet on the floor first, and then Holden rounded the corner out of his en-suite bathroom.

In nothing but a navy-blue towel that was wrapped low around his waist.

I swallowed, standing there in the doorway with a fucking muffin in my hand as my eyes raked over him. I didn't have a choice, couldn't have stopped them even if I tried. It was like an irresistible magnet, the way the water dripped from his hair, sluicing over his swollen pectoral muscles, his defined abs, trickling all the way down to where a deep V disappeared under the towel at its apex. With only his bedroom lamp on, he seemed to glow like a Roman god, and I marveled at his chiseled body, at what years and years of being an athlete had sculpted him into.

He was cleaning one ear with a Q-tip, watching me as I watched him, and when I met his gaze, it wasn't warm or flirty or even the least bit playful. I waited for him to call me out for my blatant scan of him, to make some smart-ass comment, but instead, he turned back toward the bathroom.

"What's up?" he asked over his shoulder, disappearing behind the wall.

I frowned at the unusual coldness but stepped tentatively more into his room. "I, uh... I baked muffins," I said.

Like an idiot.

"A lot of them," I added. "So, I brought some to share."

Holden padded out of the bathroom again, one hand running a small towel over his head as his eyes fell to the muffin in my hand. I offered it to him, and he glanced up at me before taking the muffin, turning it over in his hand, and setting it on his desk.

"Thanks," he said, and then he drooped the towel he'd been drying his hair with over one shoulder and opened up his top dresser drawer. He pulled out a t-shirt and basketball shorts, dropping them to his bed. His hands found the top of

his towel, the muscles in his back flexing with that light sheen of water on them as he did.

He glanced over his shoulder at me, and I flushed, turning to give him some privacy.

I heard him drop the towel to the floor once my back was to him.

I swallowed.

“I thought we should celebrate,” I said, picking at dirt under one of my nails to give myself something to focus on other than the fact that Holden was naked behind me. I heard the distinct sound of him shrugging on his shorts and then his t-shirt as I continued. “You getting cleared for practice, I mean.”

Holden brushed past me, dressed now, and hung his towels in the steamy bathroom as I followed and leaned a hip against the door frame.

“It’s just practice,” he said, indifferent and far too moody for my taste.

“Yeah, but it’s one step closer to playing again,” I pointed out.

He shrugged. “We’ll see.”

He walked past me, squeezing as close as he could to the opposite side of the door frame where I leaned, almost like he was afraid of touching me.

I blinked, face screwed up in confusion and maybe a bit of annoyance as I turned just in time to watch him sink into his desk chair. He pulled out a textbook from his bag and splayed it open like I wasn’t even there.

I noticed the CDs he’d grabbed at the yard sale laying on the corner of his desk, and I smiled a little, picking one of them up and turning it to read the song list on the back.

“Have you listened to any of these yet?”

“Nope.”

He answered without looking up, the word a pop on his lips.

I ignored his shortness, persisting. “Still running to Green Day?” I probed, reaching for his Discman, but before I could pry it open, he snagged it out of my hands and shoved it in his top desk drawer, slamming it shut.

“Can you stop touching things?”

“Can *you* stop being such a grumpy jerk?” I shot back, crossing my arms. “You haven’t even looked at me since I walked in this room.”

He shook his head, pretending to focus on the words in his textbook even though I knew he couldn’t read a damn thing with me there.

I sighed, wondering if this was residual upset from the win on Saturday. It was a good thing that we won, of course, but I knew even though he’d never admit it out loud, it bothered Holden a little bit, too.

Because they won *without* him.

I watched him for a moment before I said, “It’s just a couple games. They still need you. And now that you’re cleared to practice, you’ll be back out there before you know it. You’ll be—”

“Save the pep talk for someone who gives a shit,” he interrupted, flipping a page so haphazardly he nearly tore it.

My head reared back as if he’d slapped me. “What is your *problem?*”

“*You!*”

The word rolled off of him like a bellowing roar of thunder, loud and menacing, his chest heaving as he slammed the textbook shut and glared up at me.

I didn’t know what to do, what to say, so I just stared back.

“You,” he said, his voice still rough and ragged as he splayed his hands on the desktop and used it to stand, to push into my space. “You’re my problem. You, and your hot and

cold bullshit, your blatant annoyance with me followed quickly by trying to make me laugh, make me feel better. You and your *leave me alone* attitude one minute and your *let's play* attitude followed right after.”

My breath caught in my throat as he stepped even more into me, his chest touching mine, the fresh scent of him hitting my nose.

“You,” he said on a shaky breath that touched my lips. “And the way you’ve scrambled my fucking brain.”

He lifted his chin, just a notch, so that he was staring at me down the bridge of his nose. Every cell in my body vibrated under that stare. I noted how the muscle in his jaw ticked, how his throat was tight on his next swallow before he blew out a breath and shoved away from me.

Holden stormed to the other side of the room, his hands raking back through his hair before he left them clasped on top of his head, his back to me, eyes on the garden outside the window.

For a moment, I was shocked still and silent.

And then, I scoffed.

“Oh, fuck *you*, Holden,” I spat, shaking my head. “Don’t act like I played some game with you that you didn’t willingly participate in, too.”

He laughed, turning to face me before his hands hit his legs with a slap. “What do you want from me? Hmm?”

I sobered, swallowing. “A friend,” I said weakly.

“A friend,” he echoed on another bitter laugh. “Right. Okay. Then we’ll be friends. You can leave now.”

I shook my head. “I came over here to celebrate, to be fucking *nice* and bring you a goddamn muffin. You’ve been moved from me to JB. This is a *good* sign, Holden.”

“You think me getting switched to him means I’ll be playing soon?” he asked incredulously, and then he stepped toward me, face leveling out. “I was put with JB again because your father doesn’t want me anywhere near *you*.”

My jaw was set as I argued, “No, it’s because at this point, you need a more experienced trainer to step in and—”

“God, will you just...” Holden fisted his hands, shaking them as frustration colored his face red. “*Shut up?!?*”

I all but growled as I crossed the space between us and pressed my chest to his, nearly knocking his chin with my own. “Make me.”

He stared down at me, his eyes flicking between mine, chest heaving with rage. He grabbed my arms like he was going to throw me off him, like he was going to shove me to the side and storm past me right out of the room.

But instead, he gripped them tight enough to bruise, like he *wanted* to leave a mark.

And he kissed me.

His mouth hit mine with brutal pressure, hands sliding roughly up my arms to grip my face, instead. And he pinned me there, holding me to him as he inhaled that kiss in a mix of want and fury.

I pushed back.

Pressing up onto my toes, I met his demand, opening my mouth and gripping his hair in my hands as I tugged back just a little, just enough for me to suck his bottom lip between my teeth and bite.

Holden groaned, and my entire body erupted in chills as his hands groped blindly down my back for my ass. He cupped me to him, and I scraped my nails down his back with the same infuriating need.

One breath, and I was lifted, my legs hiked up and wrapping around his waist as he palmed my ass and held me to him. Another, and I was dropped onto his bed, the covers *whooshing* up around me with the pressure of my weight hitting the mattress. I didn’t have time for a third breath before Holden was on top of me, his knee between my thighs, backing me up into his pillows with punishing, desperate kisses.

His tongue snaked against mine, and I held the hair at the nape of his neck, held him to me, demanding more. I ignored every distant warning sign blaring in the back of my mind, ignored every ounce of good sense I had that told me this couldn't happen, that *we* couldn't happen.

I wanted him.

I wanted him so badly I'd let him devour every bit of everything that I was. I'd let him banish me from existence, to wipe me off the face of the planet if it meant I got to succumb to this moment right now.

Holden ran his hands back through my hair and tightened his fingers into fists, making me arch, my chin tilting up and mouth popping free of his own. He licked and sucked along the skin of my jaw, my neck, across my collarbone as I writhed beneath the touch. I couldn't move, not with him holding my hair so tightly, and it only made every caress that much more intense as he crawled his way back up, gently biting my chin before he claimed my mouth once more.

One hand released my hair, moving to my hip and squeezing me hard before he roughly pushed his palm up under the hem of my shirt. I wasn't wearing a bra, and my nipples ached with need as Holden's fingers splayed up my rib cage. He stopped short, just the tip of his thumb brushing the bottom of my breast as his thigh pressed against me, stimulating that sensitive bundle of nerves with the seam of my jeans.

I moaned into his mouth in a desperate plea for more.

It was the sound that shattered the illusion.

Holden stilled, panting, his grip going lax and lips still touching mine though he was no longer kissing me. He held me pinned there for only a second longer before he threw himself back, off me, all the way to the other side of the bed.

He ran his hands back through his hair, balancing his elbows on his bent knees as he drew them toward his chest. He looked like a mad man, like someone on the verge of an absolute fucking breakdown.

Reality crashed down on me next.

I knew without him saying one single word that I should go, that we'd made a mistake, that we'd gone too far.

You can't have me, I'd told him in the garden that night at the party.

And yet, here I was, breaking the very rule I'd taken every chance I had to remind him of.

"You need to leave," he managed, voice rough and uneven. "Now. Go. *Go*, Julep."

Swallowing, I shuffled off the bed, smoothing my hands over my hair and shirt as I ripped his door open and flew out of it without looking back.

I ran down the stairs, out the door, across his yard and the street, and then my own yard before tumbling in through the front door. I locked it behind me as if he'd follow, ignored Mary's puzzled gaze as I whizzed past her and blew upstairs to my room, shutting the door before I slammed my back against it and slid down to the floor.

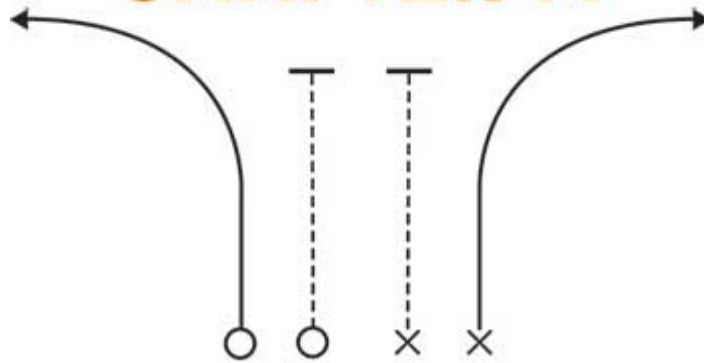
I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't believe what we'd just done.

I couldn't wrap my head around how it had happened at all.

And yet, I knew already that I would risk *anything* to do it again.

CHAPTER 14



Holden

“Someone’s distracted.”

I blinked, shaking off my thoughts and coming back to the present moment. My uncles gave each other knowing looks, Nathan readying the pumpkin seeds to bake while Kevin carved an elaborate design into the orange fruit the seeds had been scooped from. My cousin watched from where I had her seated in my lap, pumpkin goop all over her hands that she’d take a taste of from time to time.

“Sorry,” I muttered. “Just thinking about the game.”

It was a lie, one I knew they saw right through.

I hadn’t thought of anything, or anyone, but Julep since the night I kissed her.

Ever since, I’d been wound tight, my gut in a perpetual state of unease. It was a mixture of guilt and fear swirling with longing and desire. I’d stared right into her father’s eyes as he told me to keep my hands off her, and yet in that moment, it was impossible.

I couldn’t kiss her.

And yet, I couldn’t *not* kiss her.

If she hadn't moaned, if that sweet, intoxicating sound hadn't jerked me back to reality, I would have taken her. I would have shredded that vintage top she wore and peeled her jeans off leg by leg. I would have hiked her ankles onto my shoulders and buried myself so deep inside her I left a permanent piece of me behind.

But sense had found me, and I'd somehow managed the miracle of stopping.

Judging by the way Julep ran, I knew she was glad I did.

We hadn't talked since, not even a friendly greeting when we passed each other at the stadium. I kept my head down when I saw her, and she did the same when I was in the room.

But I felt her buzzing presence like neon under my skin.

"Are you playing?"

I blinked, again coming back to the messy kitchen. "What?"

"In the game," Uncle Kevin mused with a smirk. "Is that why you're thinking about it? Are you playing?"

I swallowed. "Not this time. But soon, I hope."

"Practice went well this week?" Nathan asked, sliding the cookie sheet lined with pumpkin seeds into the oven.

"It did. No pain, full range of motion, good execution. They took it easy on me defense wise — no tackles," I said. "But I feel good."

"And Coach?"

My stomach bottomed out, like his piercing eyes were watching me even in that room.

"He's wary," I admitted. "But I think he wants me back out there, too."

"He'd be dumb not to," Uncle Kevin said. "He doesn't want to be remembered as the coach who kept the future Tom Brady benched his senior year."

The corner of my mouth ticked up, the closest I'd been to smiling in a week.

Our game tomorrow was against the South Hartford University Bulldogs, and their fans were the worst in our division. They were loud, rude, and ruthless — and they always got into our heads. Since it was an away game for us, I knew it'd be even more intense than when that motley crew traveled the two hours over to our stadium.

And I was gutted I wouldn't be able to play, to make them shut their fucking mouths with every touchdown pass I threw.

“Soon,” Coach Lee had promised me in the locker room at the end of practice today. He'd called it early, wanting us all to get a good night's rest before we got on the bus tomorrow. It was a late game, prime time, and everything inside me folded when he told me I wouldn't be the one leading the team under those big lights.

“Can I say something mushy without you punching me?” Uncle Kevin asked as he slid the paring knife along the outside of a moon he'd carved into the pumpkin, giving it depth.

“No promises.”

He chuckled, eyes flashing up to me before he focused on the pumpkin again. “Your dad would be really proud of you, for how you've handled all this.”

I froze, heart skipping a beat before it picked up pace in my chest.

“It's not easy, to be injured and have to support your team as a leader all the while working through your own complex emotions with not playing. It's a testament to your maturity, Holden, and he would have been proud.” Uncle Kev swallowed, his eyes meeting mine. “*I'm proud.*”

My throat was tight as I nodded, unable to speak.

Joanne reached a pumpkin-covered hand up to my cheek, smearing the orange goop over my skin with a gurgling little laugh.

It broke the tension of the moment, and my uncles chuckled as I wiped my finger over the mess and tapped her nose with it.

It was only a few minutes, but it was the longest I'd gone without thinking of Julep.

Later that night when I got back to the Pit, I was thankful to find it empty. We always had an early practice on the Friday before a game so we could rest up, but I knew since bus time wasn't until two tomorrow afternoon, a lot of the team was probably out, taking advantage of the rare time when we had an early night *and* a late report.

The Pit was almost eerie when it was empty, too quiet for comfort. But I savored it as a blessing, climbing the stairs to my bedroom to shower and change before I made my way back downstairs.

I was too wired to sleep, too distracted to try to study, so I flopped down on the couch and scrolled Netflix, trying to find something that would occupy my mind. I scrolled for about thirty minutes before I huffed and picked the first action movie I saw, hoping some guns and gore would be the cure.

As time passed, I slumped more and more into the couch, increasingly annoyed with how little the movie did to ease my suffering. I kept picking up my phone and pulling up Julep's number, only to stare at our last few texts from weeks ago, write out a text, delete it, and close my phone again.

It was almost eleven when I decided I might as well just go upstairs and lie in the dark until I fell asleep. I stood, cracking my back with a twist left and right. Turning off the TV first, I went through the house and made sure doors were locked and windows were closed, knowing when the other guys came back drunk, they wouldn't think to do it.

I reached up for the blinds of the large bay window that faced the street, the one that would be a perfect reading nook if we weren't fucking animals. As it was, the beat-up cushion usually housed our dirty gym bags and cleats, an easy place to drop things when we came in the front door.

Before I could pull the blinds down, my eyes caught on the house across the street.

On Julep.

The only light on in the house was the living room one, and it was soft, warm, like the gentle glow of a lamp. I didn't see Mary's car in the driveway, so it didn't surprise me when Julep came into view of the window a moment later, her hands hanging on her hips as she stared up at the pole in the middle of their living room like she was about to battle it.

With the lights out in our house, it made her even more clear, the dim silhouette of her body so crisp I could note the sheen of sweat lining her abdomen. I couldn't make out the colors of any of the clothing she wore, only that there wasn't much of it — just a high-rise thong that hugged the curve of her hips and a simple bra. It didn't even look like a sports bra, but rather one she'd been wearing all day, as if she'd just walked in the door and stripped out of her clothes to immediately reach for the pole.

Look away, you perverted bastard.

I willed myself to close the blinds like I'd planned to, begged myself to leave her alone, to give her privacy, to remember that this was just fucking torture considering that I'd never touch her again.

But the masochistic part of me kept me rooted in place, heart thumping hard as I watched her launch herself onto the chrome.

It was mesmerizing, how easy she made it look as she pulled herself parallel to the pole before flipping upside down, her legs splaying out in a straddle. She held that shape for a moment before hooking one of her legs, and then her hands were free, and her silhouette hung from the pole in a blur of long legs and flowing hair.

She was wearing heels this time.

I marked the outline of them, how they lengthened her already-lean legs. I immediately thought of her that night at

the party, how she'd worn heels then, how that tiny sliver of ankle had made me mad with the need to touch her.

I felt that tripled now.

I was in a trance as she flowed, and when she came back down to the floor, landing smoothly on her knees, she arched, rolling her body against the pole before whipping her hair. That sight nearly unraveled me. I thought I'd shred into nothing watching her on her knees, imagining what it would be like to be in place of the pole, to see her looking up at me with her legs spread wide.

I blinked, reaching up for the blinds again.

Close them. Shut this down now.

But I couldn't.

And that's when her head popped up, and she looked right at me.

I didn't think she could see me at first, with all the lights in our house being out. Sure, the streetlights were on, but was it enough for her to see me standing here?

I held my breath, standing completely still as she stared directly at the window where I stood.

Julep walked over to her own bay window, leaning close enough to the glass that I could see the faint outline of her face. She stood there for a long moment, staring, but made no other sign that she saw me.

I waited for her to wave, or flip me off, but after a moment, she reached down to the coffee table beside her and grabbed a glass of water, nearly draining it. I saw her gaze go up to the top of the window next, and I wondered if she was about to draw her own blinds, to do what I didn't have the strength to do.

But she hesitated, her chest still heaving from the exertion of her last flow.

Her eyes slowly trailed to my window again.

And then, her hands came to the front of her bra, meeting at the small piece of cloth in the middle of her breasts.

No, not cloth.

A clasp.

One she unfastened while I watched.

My next breath halted at the base of my throat, as if even *it* was afraid one little movement would scare her off. But fear was the last thing reflected in what I could see of Julep's face as she slowly opened her bra, sliding a strap off her left shoulder and then her right. She let the fabric dangle from one finger before it dropped to the floor, and then she leaned forward, pressing her hands against the ledge of the window and using the streetlight to give me a perfect view of her breasts.

I bit back a curse as my cock twitched to life, growing achingly hard as she ran a hand up her rib cage to cup herself. She framed her nipple, rolling it between her fingertips, and then leaned down a bit more so I could see her face.

Her wicked smile.

She watched me for a long moment, or maybe she let me watch *her*. And then, she wiggled her fingers in a teasing wave and reached up for the blinds, pulling them down in one fell swoop that snuffed out the entrancing view of her.

I was still cemented in place when my phone pinged from the couch.

I ambled over, adjusting my cock in my sweatpants as I lifted the device and found Julep's name on the screen.

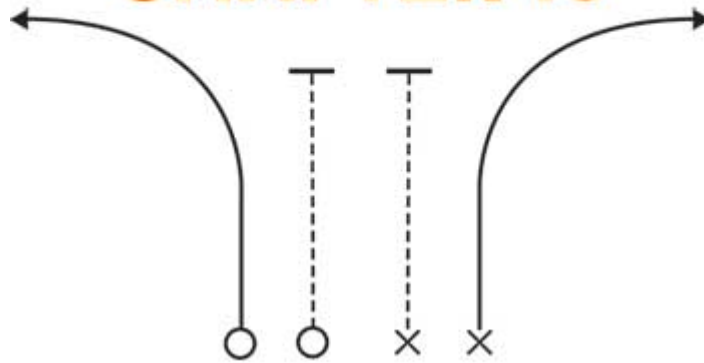
Goodnight, Cap.

I shook my head, biting my lower lip.

And one thought played on repeat in my mind for the rest of the night.

I'm in trouble.

CHAPTER 15



Julep

I was already seated in the second row of the bus with JB, the two of us going over each player and what they'd need for today's game, when Holden showed up.

"Clay's ankle has still been bothering him, so we'll need to tape it up good and do some mobility checks on it before he warms up," JB continued through the list, but his voice faded.

Everything faded as I watched Holden out the window.

His hair was damp and darker than usual, laying in haphazard waves that he nonchalantly ran his hand through as he approached the bus. He shrugged his bag off his shoulder and handed it to one of the staff who was loading up the equipment, and then he immediately put his over-the-ear, noise-canceling headphones on.

He wore the team's colors, a brick red hoodie and matching sweats with NBU's golden logo stretched across his chest. There was something stupidly appetizing about him in those sweats, in the way they hugged his hips and thighs and... a certain *other* region, too. It wasn't fair that he looked that fucking hot in joggers and a hoodie, but it wasn't just that he was an athlete boarding a bus to a game with that cocky swagger only college athletes had.

It was that he looked cozy, comfortable, like he would crook that smile at any second, showing you his dimple and pulling you under one arm before he kissed your forehead.

Just as that thought hit me, Holden's eyes snapped to where I watched him through the window.

I tore my gaze away, trying to catch up with JB's conversation as my cheeks flushed and my heart raced. *What the hell is wrong with me?* I idly wondered, but I swatted that thought away like a gnat, too.

"...for Holden. And then—"

"Sorry, what was that?" I asked JB, blinking back to our conversation.

JB arched a brow with a smile. "I said, we should line up a pre-game deep tissue for Holden. Do you disagree?"

I paused like I was considering, like I really had to think about it. "No, I think it's a good call. He may not be playing, but he'll be tense from the sidelines. It definitely couldn't hurt."

"My thoughts exactly. I'll put Tanner on that while you and I handle the active players."

I tried not to slump with my disappointment that it wouldn't be *me* giving that massage. "Perfect."

Then, Holden boarded our bus, climbing the steps slowly with his headphones still in place.

It took every effort to keep my eyes on the clipboard where JB pointed as he went over the rest of the team's notes, especially when I caught scent of Holden, that familiar spice of his body wash striking my nose and zapping me back to the night we kissed.

His joggers brushed my shoulder as he passed.

And I *swore* I felt his hand through the pocket squeezing my arm — just a little, just enough to make me tilt my chin down over my shoulder and glance back at him.

But he kept on walking, all the way to the back, and when he plopped down in a seat, he looked out the window — not at me.

I swallowed, wondering if I'd misread last night, if he was upset with what I'd done. He'd been the one to break our kiss last week, and we both knew it couldn't happen again.

And yet...

I had no explanation for my behavior last night other than the fact that he'd driven me to the brink of insanity with just one fucking kiss. I'd seen him standing in his window.

Watching me.

And that power had tipped me over the edge of rationality.

Chills had raked over me when I unclasped my bra, when I saw his breath hitch even through the soft glow of the streetlight that cast him in an eerie shadow. I didn't even know how much he could see, but I knew he didn't look away.

Still, he hadn't responded to my text after I'd pulled the blinds shut, and I had no idea how he felt about what happened between us — the kiss, or anything since.

I looked for any sign that he was as consumed with thoughts about me like I was about him. I longed to know he felt the same torturous burn that I did, that sense that we couldn't do anything more without risking a full-on fire.

But the overpowering instinct to light a match, anyway.

When we made it to the South Hartford Stadium, I stood beside JB as we watched the team file off the buses, letting each of them know when and where we wanted to see them. I held my breath when Holden trailed down the steps, when he moved toward us with power and focus rolling off him in plumes.

Every player looked to him for their energy cue, some of them stopping mid-laugh while horsing around once he stepped off the bus. They fell in line behind him, channeling his calm essence, and he nodded to some of them while clapping others on the back. It was fascinating to watch, the

way just one touch or glance from him could change a player's entire demeanor, could wipe the stress off their face and give them the space to take a deep breath.

Even injured, Holden was captain, the team's leader, their king.

He didn't look at me once.



By some miracle, we pulled out the win.

It was a miracle not because the game was particularly brutal — which it was — or that the score was close the entire game — which it *also* was — but because South Hartford's fans made every second of play time absolutely miserable.

They were loud, vulgar, and a level of rude I didn't know existed. I'd been shocked by how deafening they'd been when we ran through the tunnel, booing and slinging out harassing threats. They didn't chant the usual *NBU sucks!*, either — they were personal. They targeted Riley as a girl, called out Kyle for his social media stunts, and even preyed on Clay for the terrible things he'd gone through with his family last semester.

Holden had to physically hold him back with a hard hand on his shoulder when they started making jokes about his mom.

They were relentless, screaming so loud when our offense was on the line that Blake could barely be heard calling out the plays. Holden was steady through it all, though, watching on the sidelines with his arms folded hard over his chest. He pulled each player aside at one point or another during the game, holding them by the helmet as he told them what they needed to hear.

And somehow, by some strike of luck, we'd managed to hold them, to keep the score close.

In the end, a last-second field goal had sealed the win.

I could still see it as I showered in my hotel room, the way Clay and Zeke had carted Riley up onto their shoulders and paraded her around the field as the fans were silent for the first time all game. It was the most beautiful sight, that sweet vendetta.

I could also still see the concern in my father's eyes when we'd checked into the hotel, the team rowdy and ready to celebrate. He'd watched me from his peripheral the entire time he stood at the lobby desk, and when he handed me my key, he held onto it a touch longer than necessary.

"I'm proud of you," he said.

I swallowed, holding the key with my eyes on the ground below it. "Why?"

"Because you've really turned a corner, Julep. I can see it in everything that you do. Tonight, on the sidelines, working with the players... I haven't seen you that focused, that passionate about anything since..."

He cleared his throat, and I looked down, hoping he wouldn't finish that sentence. He didn't need to.

"I just... I don't want you to throw this away," he said softer, finally releasing the key.

I almost laughed. "I'm going to bed, Dad," I told him, finally meeting his eyes. "I'm tired."

Dad nodded, though concern still etched his brow. "Good. Me, too."

It wasn't a lie. The exhaustion I felt was bone deep as I cut the hot water of the shower and stepped out, wrapping myself in a towel. I combed out my wet hair and slathered my face with night cream. Giana and Riley were my roommates tonight — which was fitting, since we were the only females traveling with the team. Apparently, Riley was used to rooming by herself as the only female player, and Giana was typically assigned a room with her boss, Charlotte.

But tonight, it was the three of us, and I was looking forward to eating pizza and passing the fuck *out*.

All those dreams were dashed when I emerged from the bathroom to find Giana hair-spraying her curls while Riley finished off her makeup.

They both looked at me at the same time, exchanged a look, and before they could even say a word, I knew what was about to happen.

“We’re going out, aren’t we?” I asked on a sigh.

They just smiled in answer, and without argument, I flipped open my suitcase and pulled out the one dress I’d packed just in case this happened.

As tired as I was, part of me was excited to go out with the team. I hadn’t had the chance, other than the one party at the Pit, and that had been a different vibe. That was a high-stress, *let’s blow off steam* kind of night.

This was a celebratory one.

My dad’s warning flashed briefly in my mind as I applied a little bit of makeup, but I quieted it, knowing that I felt in full control of myself tonight.

Plus, we were in a new city, and with everything that had been tangling up my thoughts lately, I had a feeling even with the weight of a long day bearing down on me, I wouldn’t find sleep easy.

And maybe, *maybe*, a small part of me wanted to see Holden.



“You look like you’re about to crawl out of your own skin,” Riley said in the Uber on the way to the bar.

I blinked, turning from where I’d been watching the city lights blur past. “I kind of feel like I already have,” I admitted.

Giana frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean... I’m not feeling like myself lately.”

“In what way?” Riley probed.

I considered, trying to figure out how to explain it without sounding like a crazy person. “I just... I’ve been feeling... *weird* lately.”

“Like sad?” Giana asked.

“No.”

“Angry, disheveled?” Riley chimed in.

“No... the opposite, actually. I’m *used* to feeling depressed. But this... I don’t know.” I picked at my thumbnail. “I feel kind of... excited? But also, a little freaked out. Anxious, maybe?”

Giana grinned then, leaning into my shoulder. “Ah, football season does that to all of us.”

I forced a smile. “Yeah. Football.”

Riley arched a brow, her gaze zeroing in on me like she saw something Giana didn’t. But she didn’t have time to ask because our car pulled up, and Zeke ripped open the back door before hauling Riley out on his shoulder like a sack of flour.

“Put me down, you Neanderthal!”

He just laughed and carried her inside the bar as Clay did the same to Giana, although she didn’t protest, just grabbed for the back of her skirt to make sure she wasn’t flashing anyone her ass. Clay seemed to read her mind because he covered it with one of his gargantuan hands, which made Giana smile and kiss his forehead as he carried her inside.

“You want a ride like that, too?”

I froze at the sound of his voice, but managed to turn slow and calm, like I wasn’t affected at all. “Do *you* want a knee to the groin?”

Holden chuckled, his eyes a bit glossed as he tucked his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He still wore his NBU hoodie, but something about those jeans had me even more dizzy than the joggers had this morning.

He watched me for a moment, rolling his lips together like he wanted to say something else. Instead, he gestured with one hand toward the bar, and I led the way.

Loud house music thumped through the walls even before Holden jogged around in front of me to open the door. I was tempted to roll my eyes at the move, but it would have been a betrayal to the soft spot inside me that actually found it sweet.

We were carded at the entrance, and once we were inside, I couldn't help but smile at the sight of the team that had completely taken over the place. It was just a dive bar close to the South Hartford University campus, but it was covered in our colors, from the pool tables and dart boards in the back to the throbbing dance floor.

“Julep!”

I turned to find Giana waving me over to a table near the dance floor where she, Riley, Zeke, and Clay all were. Leo was there, too, along with a cheerleader I recognized but didn't know personally.

I felt Holden following behind me, felt the humming buzz of his nearness just as loud as the music vibrating through my bones. When we made it to the table, though, he moved to the other side, socking Leo on the arm as Clay handed him a beer.

I tore my gaze away from him, focusing on Giana who had just slid me a pink, fruity-looking shot. I didn't even know if *shot* was the right word, considering it was a big enough glass to be a cocktail.

I groaned. “Oh, God.”

“It's just one,” she said sweetly.

Riley gave me a look that said *don't believe her*.

I stared at the shot warily. I knew I'd be fine with just one, maybe a drink or two after. But I also knew I had to cut it off after that. Otherwise, my light, happy buzz would go south, tipping me over the line that thinly separated that kind of drunk and the kind that had me making bad decisions.

The kind I'd made for too long after Abby died, that had nearly driven my father to his breaking point.

Not that Mom had been particularly thrilled, either, but she'd long since given up on me. When I acted out, when I ended up in the back of a police car in front of their house or vomiting in their guest bathroom or doing the walk of shame from a guy's house whose name I couldn't even recall — she didn't get upset the way Dad did. She'd just let out a spurt of a laugh, shake her head, and go back to drinking her chardonnay like she was better than me.

She blamed me for Abby, and I couldn't even hold it against her.

Because I blamed me, too.

"To the team," Giana said, holding up her shot. "And to the championship title that's yours for the taking."

"I'll drink to that," Zeke said, tilting his cup of water toward us.

We all threw back a drink or shot, depending on what we had in hand, and then Clay pulled Giana into him and said, "*Ours*. You're a part of this team, too, you know."

She smiled on a blush, and I looked away a little uncomfortable when they started kissing.

"I want to dance," Riley said, but instead of pulling Zeke out onto the floor, she hooked my elbow.

I was tugged away before I had the option to decline.

The dance floor was packed, and Riley dragged me through the crowd right up to the front of the DJ. The music was so loud this close to the speakers that I felt it like a heartbeat.

Giana joined us, and together we made a tight little circle. Riley danced without a care in the world, winding her hips and rolling her body to the beat. Giana seemed a bit shy at first, but she closed her eyes, and then slowly, she began to move, too.

I wished I had my pole. I wished I had something strong and sturdy to hold onto, to hold me steady. I *loved* dancing

when I had that chrome partner, but without it? I felt uneasy, like a new baby giraffe figuring out its impossibly long legs.

The neon lights flashed across our faces, fog machine sending a cloud cascading over us in time with the deep bass. It was so dark that with those elements combined, I couldn't see much other than the DJ above us and the girls where they danced right in front of me.

And I knew that meant that, likely, no one else could see me, either.

I let out a long exhale at that, and then I ran my hands up my sides, over my head, and held them there as my body began to move. I took cues from the beat, which was tapering down from a high-energy house song to one that was smoother, slower, the beat heavier somehow.

I felt it in my soul as I moved, and I surrendered, letting myself be taken by the music.

I didn't notice when Riley was pulled into Zeke, or when Giana was peeled off the floor by Clay.

But I did notice the precise moment Holden came up behind me.

He didn't touch me, didn't put a hand on my hip or pull me flush against him. He just stood there, right behind me, one inch of distance between us.

He was putting the power in my hands.

It felt like a challenge, like a dare, and that one shot had me feeling just brave enough to take it.

I was still rolling my hips as I took a tiny step back, and it was just enough to connect us, for my ass to meet the zipper of his jeans. My head went light at the touch, my next breath shallow as I waited to see what he'd do next. It was just a small touch, one he could easily pull away from.

But he leaned in, instead.

No, he *swooped* in, like that one point of connection had been the permission he was desperately seeking.

One hand found my waist while the other swept my hair off my neck, and he cradled his chin there, his breath warming my skin as he lined his hips up with mine. I arched my back, leaning my head against his chest and closing my eyes as I let the music take control.

The dress I wore was a gun-metal, metallic gray. It was spaghetti strapped and lined with lace. I'd found it at a thrift store over the summer, and it was far too thin to be wearing on a cool fall night like this one. But I'd suffered the cold outside because I knew it'd be hot in here.

Holden must have been warm, too, because he'd shed his sweater, and he wore a button-up now that had the sleeves shoved up to his elbows. I crawled my fingertips over one of his forearms, digging my nails into the flesh *just* enough to bite.

He hissed a groan, the sound like the birth of an addiction as it reverberated over my neck and met the shell of my ear. Holden angled his head down, the tip of his nose in my hair as he rasped, "I saw you dancing last night."

I arched my back, grabbing his hands and moving them a little lower, to my hips. His fingers bunched the fabric there, feeling how thin it was, how little separated us.

I feigned innocence. "Did you now?"

"You know I did," he challenged, his voice low in my ear as we moved together. Another blast of the fog machine covered us, and I felt his fingers bunch the fabric of my dress a bit more. "And you know I loved it, too."

I reveled in the admission, in hearing him say it, in knowing he'd seen me and hadn't been able to look away.

"Was it the heels you loved most?"

"No," he answered immediately, and he held me tighter to him, letting me feel the hardening length of him against my backside as he lowered his lips closer to my ear. "What I loved most was seeing you down on your knees."

Chills fell like a waterfall over me, from the point where his breath warmed my skin all the way down to my toes. He

smirked against the skin behind my ear as his fingers followed the chills, running down the length of my arm, up over my rib cage until he found my hip again. I knew from his vantage point, from how thin my dress was that he could see my nipples hard and aching against the fabric.

I couldn't hide how he affected me, not even in the dark.

I licked my lips. "Well, too bad for you, I don't get on my knees for anyone other than my pole."

I rolled my ass hard up the length of him before dropping it back down, and he let out a throaty laugh.

"We'll see about that."

Another blast of the fog machine covered us, and I knew I couldn't blame that fruity pink shot — no matter how big it was — for what I did next. I grabbed one of his hands, sliding it up my waist, over my ribs to rest just below my breast. I let him feel the bottom swell of it, let him understand that only the thin, shiny fabric of this dress kept me covered.

Holden nipped at my earlobe, making my eyelids flutter shut. "Someone needs to punish you for being such a tease."

"You wish," I shot back.

Without warning, the hand he had on my hip shot lower, splaying my thigh before he ran it up, up, up. I gasped when he slid that hand so confidently between my legs, my entire body quivering as he shoved my lace thong to the side and ran the length of his middle and forefinger along my center. It happened so quickly, only as long as his heavy exhale into my ear, but the searing magnitude of it lingered as he withdrew and lifted his fingers to rest in front of me.

I shivered at the loss, at the fact that it had happened at all, my breath ragged as Holden rubbed his fingers together before spreading them apart, evidence of how wet I was shining on his skin under the brief flash of neon lights.

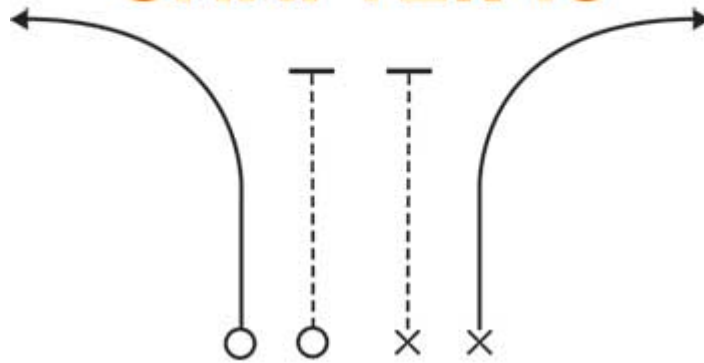
He smiled against the back of my neck, pressing a soft, feather-like kiss there before he whispered, "Apparently, *you* wish."

My eyelids fluttered, knees weakening, and then all at once, Holden broke contact from me. He released my hips, his chest breaking from where it was against my back and letting a cold rush of air sweep in. I didn't realize why he'd done it until we were swarmed by more members of the team, and slowly, without another word, Holden made his way off the dance floor.

I just stood there, frozen in place.

Burning from the inside out.

CHAPTER 16



Holden

I couldn't sleep.

Of *course*, I couldn't sleep.

Not a single part of me was surprised, not after the intense game against South Hartford, the one we pulled out only by a last-minute field goal. Not after going out until almost three in the morning with the team to celebrate.

And certainly not after having Julep pressed against me, her ass grinding against my cock as I slid my fingers between her legs and found proof of how much she wanted me, too.

When we'd made it back to the hotel, my roommates had passed out immediately. Leo was so drunk I had to carry him inside and throw his ass on our bed, and he sprawled out like a starfish. I'd somehow managed to make room for myself after I brushed my teeth, but then I'd only laid there wide awake for an hour, replaying every second and dissecting every word uttered between me and Julep.

It was just after four in the morning when I gave up on sleeping and changed into my Under Armour compression shorts — which was the closest thing I had to swim trunks — and headed to the indoor pool.

It was just late enough, or rather *early* enough in the morning, that it was open. I was the only one there, which was no surprise to me, and I tore off my t-shirt and hung it along with a towel over the back of one of the lounge chairs. Then, I dove in, and started swimming laps.

The first few did nothing to tame my mind. The water was warm, the pool heated, and I almost wished it was freezing so as to shock the anxiety right out of me.

Eventually, my breathing intensified, the muscles of my arms and legs and core firing to life. I was careful with my shoulder, making sure not to do anything that triggered it, but I was happily surprised to find it so unbothered.

I was ready to play.

I knew it, *Coach* knew it.

And yet still, he held me back.

For a brief moment, it was those thoughts that plagued me, and I swam a few laps mulling over how long it would be before I'd be back on the field. But eventually, my thoughts drifted back to Julep.

I didn't know what we were doing. I didn't know what had possessed me to follow her out onto that dance floor, to test the distance between us so carefully before jumping in so carelessly. We'd been surrounded by the team. Anyone could have seen, could have found just enough evidence to rat me out to Coach. Not that I thought any of them *would*, but it was still a dangerous game to play.

And yet, I couldn't leave her alone.

No matter the risk involved, no matter how I tried to pretend like she didn't exist — I craved her. Not in the way you crave a cigarette or a beer, either, but in the way you crave a tall glass of ice water after a grueling workout.

I didn't just want to touch her.

I *needed* to.

And therefore, I couldn't hold myself back.

I kicked off the wall hard on my next lap, grinding my teeth. Because the fact of the matter was that I *had* to hold myself back. I *had* to figure out a way to snuff this aching desire for her before it chewed me up and spit me out on the other side of my shattered dream.

Football was everything to me. It always had been.

I couldn't throw that all away.

I tried to cement that into my thick skull as I swam, and finally, my arms and legs burned enough that I stopped and came up for air.

I was in the deep end, and I hung my arms over the edge of the pool, chest heaving with every breath I struggled to take. My heart was racing, body on fire with the intensity of the workout. But I felt *good* — sated in the way only a brutal cardio session could warrant.

“Impressive.”

I startled, whipping around at the unexpected voice that nearly made me jump out of my fucking skin.

And there she was, Julep Lee, sitting on the edge of the other end of the pool in a thong and sports bra with her bare feet swinging idly in the water.

I couldn't help the way my eyes trailed slowly up the length of her, over her exposed thighs and abdomen, the lines of her collarbone, all the way up to her eyes that were watching me just as carefully. She held my gaze for a moment before quickly tying her hair up in a knot on top of her head, and then she pressed her palms into the tile on either side of her hips, carefully lifting.

And she slid inch by inch into the water.

I swallowed, watching her legs and waist disappear under the surface before she began walking toward me, her fingers skating along the top of the water as she did.

“How does your shoulder feel after that?”

I wiped a hand over my face, still holding on to the edge of the pool. “My shoulder isn't an issue anymore.”

“Oh?” she asked, pausing at the edge of the pool once the water hit the top of her chest. She stretched her arms out over the side. “So, what’s the issue, then? What has you swimming laps at almost five in the morning?”

I let out a breath of a laugh, looking away from her. “I think we both know the answer to that.”

She didn’t respond, but when I looked back at her, all hints of a smile were gone. She swallowed under the weight of my gaze, her eyes flicking between mine.

I took a breath, disappearing under the water and kicking off the wall. I swam toward her, her legs and hips a blurred vision through the chlorine that burned my eyes until I stopped just a few feet away from where she stood. I popped up, inhaling a breath and running my hand over my hair to get it out of my face.

She tilted her chin a little higher, like she was trying to prove something, but I didn’t miss how her breath caught in her throat for a moment before she was able to exhale.

“Why are *you* here?”

“I couldn’t sleep either,” she confessed, her voice as low as a whisper.

I slowly walked toward her, and again, she angled her jaw up, chest puffing, fingertips pressing into the tile where she had her arms outstretched like everything inside her wanted to flee and they were the only thing rooting her in place.

“Why couldn’t you sleep?”

My voice was low, husky, a question and a dare all in one.

Julep swallowed. “You know why.”

I pressed in closer, her chest heaving more and more as that distance between us vanished. I paused right in front of her, less than an inch between us under the water. Her eyes fell to my lips, and I swore I could hear her heart beating even over the pounding of my own.

“I’m tired of us asking questions we already know the answer to.”

She just watched me, waiting.

“Say it,” I demanded. “Tell me why you couldn’t sleep.”

Her eyelids fluttered, but she held strong, held them open, her mouth clamped shut like she refused to give me any satisfaction.

So, I pushed over that pencil-thin line between us, one hand under the water skating along the line of her bottom rib.

“Holden,” she breathed on a warning, but her eyes closed, her lips parting as chills raced over her skin.

“Tell me why you couldn’t sleep, Julep,” I said again, finger sliding up that rib to the bottom edge of her sports bra. I traced that, too, staring down at her chest as it swelled and deflated in rapid succession. The tip of my nose found the bridge of hers, but then I stilled, not moving another centimeter as I waited for her response.

Something like a whimper slipped out of her, like she’d die if I didn’t touch her fully, if I didn’t take her the way every cell in my body yearned to.

She swallowed, her eyes popping open and connecting with mine.

“I couldn’t sleep because when I undressed and crawled under those sheets, my body burned from the memory of your hand between my legs.”

She said the words so confidently, without an ounce of shame, the challenge in her eyes meeting my own.

Julep pressed into me, her chest touching the bottom of my ribs, and she lifted her chin so that her lips brushed against mine when she spoke again.

“And I couldn’t relieve that ache,” she confessed. “Not even when I slid my own fingers inside me to try.”

My next exhale shuttered out of me, and I closed my eyes as my cock hardened at the thought of the picture she’d painted.

“Did it feel like me?” I asked, dipping my head and running the tip of my nose along her jaw. “When you touched yourself, did it feel like when I touched you?”

“No.”

“And so, you couldn’t sleep.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“And here you are.”

“And here I am,” she echoed.

The corner of my mouth twitched up in a half-smile, and I shook my head, biting my lower lip and willing myself to find some kind of restraint, some kind of tether to reality that would pull me away from her and remind me I was playing with fire.

“The truth is, it was so brief...” she said when I was quiet too long, and I felt the feather-light touch of her fingertips under the water as they walked along the ridges of my abdomen. “When you touched me tonight.”

I closed my eyes on a breath.

“I couldn’t quite remember what it felt like at all...”

That sentence was a lie.

That lie was bait.

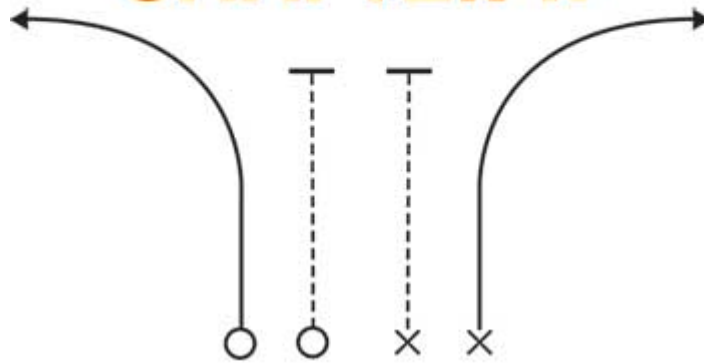
And like the writhing fool that she’d reduced me to, I took it.

“Let me remind you,” I rasped.

Her breath caught when I closed the sliver of distance between us, my hands framing her face, body pressing her against the edge of the pool so hard I knew it had to sting. But she pushed back just as much, chin lifting, eyes narrowing with a taunting malice.

And I kissed her.

CHAPTER 17



Julep

The hard edge of the pool bit into my back just as Holden's teeth bit into my flesh.

He tugged at my bottom lip, eliciting a moan I couldn't control from me before he kissed me silent. His hands held my face, thumbs lining my jaw as his fingers curled around my neck and held me to him.

It hurt. It hurt and yet I wanted more, *needed* more, and so I pushed back in equal measure.

I slid my hands under his arms, nails digging into his shoulders before I dragged them down the length of his back. He hissed, and then he kneed my legs apart, rolling the hard length of himself against my center.

My heart thundered in my ears, drowning out the sound of my desperate moan at the feeling of how much he wanted me. I didn't want to tease anymore. I didn't want to play.

I wanted all of him, inside me, *now*.

Frantically, I reached between us, dragging my nails down his abdomen as he thrashed beneath the touch. I used one hand to pull the tight band of his briefs away from his skin, and the other hand dived down, wrapping around his hard, thick shaft.

He groaned, and I gasped, both at the feel of him throbbing in my hand and the pain of his teeth sinking into my neck. He bit hard enough to leave a mark, sucking the skin there like he *wanted* to brand me.

And I let him.

I squeezed where I held him, rolling my hand from his base to the mushroom tip. I slid my hand over that sensitive area before fisting it back down, pushing with my hips behind it.

“*Fuck,*” Holden hissed, and he broke our kiss, pressing his forehead to mine as he stared down at where I touched him under the water. He flexed into my hand on the second pump, and I saw stars, body humming with the thought of what it would feel like to have him flexing inside me, instead.

Suddenly, Holden clamped his hands down on my wrists, hiking them up and out of the water. His mouth crashed against mine as soon as I released him, and then his thumbs slipped under the band of my thong on either side.

“Lift,” he demanded against my lips, and I barely had time to register what he meant, to put my hands on the hard tile and push as he roughly ripped my panties down. He tore them over my thighs, my knees, shedding them off one ankle and then the other as I lifted my hips above the water.

As soon as my thong was gone, his hands found my waist, and he helped me the rest of the way up, sitting me on the edge of the pool. He slid those hands along my inner thighs and pressed, opening me.

And there I was, splayed wide, the cool air washing over my scorching skin. Holden took his time, his gaze raking over every inch of where I was spread, like he was studying my pussy as if it were a playbook, instead. He tentatively ran his hands from my knees up my inner thighs again, pressing even more, stepping even closer.

I couldn't do anything other than rest my weight on my hands and hold myself upright to watch him, and every breath was harder than the last as he inched closer and closer.

His jaw ticked as he slid one hand up to hook around my hip, and the other teased the creases of my thighs. I squirmed, twisting my hips to try to get his hand where I really wanted him to touch, and with a smirk, he obliged.

Holden's fingers dipped between my legs, and he ran his hot palm against my sensitive bundle of nerves before sliding a finger along where I was wet and aching. He toyed with my entrance, just the tip of his finger pressing in before he slicked back up and I mewled at the loss.

"You feel so fucking good," he breathed, chest heaving. His eyes darted up to mine. "Let's see how you taste."

Something between a gasp and a moan ripped from my throat as his hands hooked at the top of my thighs, yanking me to the edge of the pool until my ass hung off it. He gave me a wicked grin before burying his face between my legs, and I felt the first lash of his tongue like a bolt of lightning straight to my core.

"Oh, *fuuu*—"

I held onto the tile as best I could, fingertips steepling a grip as stars invaded my vision. I leaned to one side, balancing my weight so I could use my free hand to rake through Holden's hair and shove it out of the way.

I wanted to see where he licked me, where he sucked me, to watch his dark green eyes as he swirled his tongue around my clit.

Pleasure sparked from the touch, and I relapsed back, arching my spine and letting my head fall lax so I could soak up every ounce of that feeling. My heart raced so fast I thought I'd pass out, blood boiling under my skin with my climax building more and more with each lick.

It was sinful, how expertly his tongue lashed against my clit before he'd run it flat and hot over the length of me. And just when I thought I'd combust, he focused on that bud of me, pinning me with one hand as the other slid under his chin.

Two fingers stretched me open as I muffled a cry.

“Fuck, *yes*,” I breathed, looking back down at him with hooded eyes. He kept his gaze on me as he worked, circling his tongue and curling those fingers inside me. He pumped them in, once, twice, and then held them there, wiggling them at the top like he was coaxing my orgasm from the very depth of my being.

My legs quaked on either side of him, the reflex too strong to overpower. And just as my climax began to roil through me, just as the fire began to catch...

The door opened.

“Shit,” Holden murmured, and in a feat of speed I didn’t know existed, he yanked me down into the water.

I almost cried at the loss of my release, but Holden held a fingertip to his lips to shush me, his eyes watching the older gentleman who’d just walked in. The man looked to be in his fifties, with salt and pepper hair and a black, furry chest. The man hummed to himself as he strode over to a chair and slung his towel over the edge of it. It was then that I saw the earbuds in his ears, and Holden released a breath.

Slowly, he dipped under the water. I wasn’t sure what for until he emerged and pressed my thong into my hands under the surface.

Wordlessly, I slipped them back on, all while Holden watched our new visitor. My pulse rang in my ears.

When the man stepped onto the first stair leading into the water, he finally looked up, and he seemed surprised to find us there. He lifted a hand in a friendly greeting, smiling like he was proud of us for being in the 5 AM club, and Holden nodded back.

We waited until he dove in and began to swim, and then Holden hoisted me up before lifting himself. He grabbed my hand, tugging me to my feet.

And then we were running as we tried not to laugh.

I scooped my towel and oversized t-shirt off one chair as he grabbed his shirt and towel off another, and then with our

wet feet padding along the tile, we ran toward the hallway that led to the hotel lobby.

But Holden slid to a stop at the sight of a couple of his teammates talking to the person at the front desk.

“Why the hell are so many people awake?” I hissed on a laugh.

Holden cursed, but he seemed to love the sight of me smiling, because he leaned toward me like he wanted to kiss me so bad he couldn’t resist. Somehow, he did, tugging me the opposite way before his teammates saw us. He ran straight for the door that led outside, the first bit of dawn turning the sky a dark purple as we slung out into the cold.

“Holy shit, it’s freezing!” I gasped, but I laughed even as the icy ground bit into my bare feet. Holden still held onto my hand as he looked around frantically, and then he scooped me into his arms.

My laughter was uncontrollable now as he juggled me and all our belongings in his arms, running around the back side of the hotel as quietly as he could.

“Would you be quiet,” he warned, straining his own laughter.

I tried and failed as he used his key to open the back door near the elevators, and then he scanned left, right, before shoving through a door marked *staff only*.

It was dark inside, and he dropped me to my feet before flicking on a light.

Housekeeping supply.

Both of us were breathing hard, and Holden watched me for one second before we burst into another fit of laughter.

The next second, he had me pinned against the door.

He kissed me, silencing my laugh and instantly lighting that flickering flame inside me. My orgasm that had been so close to catching fired up at the touch, so ready to combust I thought it might happen from the kiss alone.

“We should stop,” I breathed against his mouth.

“We should,” he breathed back, but he was already sliding my thong down my thighs, hands reaching for my sports bra next. He peeled it off me, the wet fabric landing on the ground with a *thwack*.

“Someone could walk in.”

“Any second,” he agreed, but he shoved his own briefs down, then, and I gaped at his hard length that sprang forward.

God, he had a beautiful cock.

It angled up toward his abs, and he was so well equipped that the tip of him touched his belly button. I licked my lips, reaching out.

We both moaned when I wrapped my hands around him, my eyes fluttering shut with him throbbing in my palms.

I didn't want to play anymore.

I turned, arching my ass and fitting him to my entrance. I slipped his crown into my wetness, biting my lip and feeling high at the thought of him filling me.

But it was like that was finally the zing of warning that brought Holden back to reality.

He stopped me, cursing and flipping me around to face him again as he tried to steady his breathing. His hands found my face, sliding up until they tangled in my hair. He pulled out my hair tie, rubbing my scalp with his fingertip as I sighed at the sensation.

“We can't...” He croaked, pressing his forehead to mine as his hands framed my head against the door. He muffled a curse. “I don't... I don't have a condom.”

Why did hearing him say the word *condom* make every nerve ending in my body tingle?

I resisted the urge to pout. “You don't?”

He chuckled a bit. “Well, I wasn't exactly expecting this.”

I bit my lip, trying to think, trying to find any way to not lose this fire that had been aching to burn for so long.

“I’m clean,” I told him, still stroking him slowly with my hands. “And on birth control.”

He shook his head, jaw tight with restraint.

“Don’t stop now,” I begged him, and I bit his chin before kissing him hard. “You know you want me, Holden. You want me so bad you can’t fucking sleep.”

I squeezed the tip of him, hiking my thigh up and tilting my pelvis forward to meet him with my own need.

“So, take me,” I dared. “Take me like this is the only time you ever could.”

I was answered with a growl of surrender, one I felt vibrating through me as I was lifted off the ground. There was no time for worship, no time for Holden to palm my breasts or cover my nipples with his warm, wet tongue. No time for me to take him into my mouth and savor the taste of him.

No time for anything but the primal need we both felt flowing through our veins.

Holden pinned me hard against the door, like we would be the lock that kept anyone from interrupting. One hand wrapped around my lower back as the other slipped between us, and he pressed his crown to my entrance before his hands found my hips again.

He flexed, just enough for one inch of his cock to press inside me, and I shuttered with a moan I couldn’t contain.

Holden clamped a hand over my mouth, muffling my next moan as he slid out just enough to coat himself and thrust back in. This time, he buried himself, and I bit down on his finger to keep from crying out and waking every person in that hotel.

“Fucking *Christ*, Julep.” Holden shook as he withdrew and flexed inside again, savoring every inch, his cock stretching me open for him. He removed his hand from my mouth and kissed me hard, instead — his tongue swirling with mine just as it had between my legs in the pool.

I gasped at the reminder, the memory fresh in my mind as he flexed into me again and again, a little faster now, harder. I hung onto him, nails ripping into his flesh as I bounced between the door and his cock. I rode him wildly, needing more, desperate for the release I'd been deprived of in the pool.

Holden pressed harder into me, holding me as steady as he could with my wild bouncing as one hand slipped between us. My face was red hot with the restraint of holding in my cries of pleasure as he rubbed his palm against me, working my clit in time with his pulses until I erupted.

My orgasm swept in like a tsunami, twice as powerful now that it had to build yet again. This time, though, it crested, swallowing me up in a rip tide that was impossible to escape. I rode it to the very end, kissing Holden hard enough to keep me from moaning too loud. I writhed against him, hips rolling, his cock so deep inside me I could feel every centimeter stretching me.

I was floating, in another universe, consumed by untouchable pleasure.

“Oh, fuck,” Holden uttered against my lips, and I knew by how frantically he thrust now that he was close, too. But he somehow managed to slow, to let me milk the last of my orgasm before he all but stopped moving.

I held onto him, panting. “Don't stop.”

“You said you don't get on your knees for anyone,” he teased, sliding the tip of his nose up the bridge of mine before kissing me hard. His thrusts slowed just as much, and I felt every centimeter of him searing into me as he said, “I want you on your knees *for me.*”

I refused to admit how hot that made me, the way his eyes sparked with the challenge even as the degradation of what he was asking sank its teeth into my soul.

“Drop me,” I said.

He did, releasing his grip on me and withdrawing his cock. I shuttered once again at the loss, falling to my knees

immediately.

But when I went to grab for him, he pulled back.

I narrowed my gaze up at him, but when I saw him — *really* saw him — my face went lax.

He was so fucking powerfully beautiful standing there, the shadows of his cheeks defined in the overhead light. His jaw clenched, and he ran his thumb along my bottom lip, pressing in until I opened my mouth.

“Beg for me.”

He withdrew his thumb as I sucked it on the way out, and against everything rational and feminist in my body, I looked up at him, tongue out, naked and on my knees.

“Please,” I whispered, reaching for him. When he let me wrap my hands around his shaft, I pressed the tip of it against my tongue, pumping him once, twice. “*Please, Holden.*”

Holden’s grin was salacious, and he fisted my hair in his hands, pulling my head back before he slid all the way inside. His eyes rolled back then, and he released me, letting me take control. I worked him with both hands in sync with my mouth, rolling my tongue over the tip of him and casing my hands in my saliva before twisting and rolling them over his shaft.

“Jesus, Julep,” he breathed, and then his hands splayed the door above me, abs contracting and face twisting.

His eyes closed just before he burst into my mouth.

I closed my lips over him, sucking him dry, savoring the taste of him on my tongue and gliding down my throat. I didn’t stop, not when he moaned my name or slammed a fist against the door, not until he shuttered and groaned and fell limp down to the ground with me.

And then, with his eyes locked on mine, I swallowed.

I fell back then, our eyes still connected in the dimly lit space between us. His back was against a shelf of towels, mine against the door, and we stared at each other, panting, naked and spent.

I felt it at the same time he did, the reality of what we'd just done, of where we were, of the danger we were in even still. My dad was in this hotel. He could be upstairs sleeping still, or he could be in the lobby. He could be exiting the elevators right outside this door.

Panic gripped me as fiercely as my orgasm had.

"I'll go first," I said, tearing my eyes away from Holden. I stood, pulling on my thong and bra before I draped my giant t-shirt over me.

"Julep, wait."

I froze, even though everything in my body told me to run.

Slowly, Holden got to his feet. He took enough time to pull on his wet briefs, wincing as he tucked his still-hard cock into the waistband. Then, he crossed the small room to where I stood, hands framing my arms. He bent until I looked him in the eyes.

I immediately wished I hadn't.

There was such tenderness there, such longing and relief — like we'd crossed some beaten-down hanging bridge and made it to safety on the other side.

He couldn't have been further from the truth.

"Let's talk when we get back," he said, his eyes still searching mine.

I swallowed, looking down at the ground. "I need to go."

"Promise me," he said, hands sliding up my arms to frame my face. He tilted my head until I looked at him. "Promise me we'll talk."

I bit my lip, but nodded, and then he pulled me in and kissed me on a deep inhale, and for that moment, I let myself succumb to that beautiful, contagious relief flowing off him.

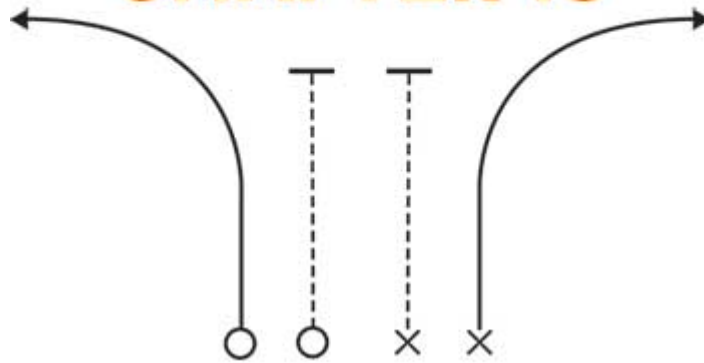
But the next, I broke away.

And I dipped out of the room quickly, skipping the elevator altogether and jogging up the stairs, instead.

Giana and Riley were sound asleep when I got back to the room, one of them softly snoring as I shut the door behind me as quietly as I could. I tiptoed into the bathroom, changing out of my wet clothes before I slipped into my own bed.

When the alarm went off an hour later, I pretended to wake, yawning and stretching like I'd had the best night's sleep of my life.

CHAPTER 18



Holden

“Moore.”

Coach Lee bellowed out my name in the locker room after practice on Monday, not even glancing up from his clipboard as he rounded into his office.

“See me when you’re dressed.”

He disappeared inside his office then, shutting the door behind him and sliding into his chair.

Zeke arched a brow at me. “What’d you do?”

I swallowed to avoid answering that, even though I knew he was teasing. Because ever since Julep and I fucked in the supply closet of the hotel, I’d felt like I was wearing a neon blinking sign that said GUILTY in all caps.

I sniffed. “I don’t know, but I’m guessing I’m about to find out.”

My heart raced, throat tight as I attempted a swallow. I thought through that night — or rather, *morning* — wondering if I’d missed him, if he’d seen us somehow. But the more I tracked through the memory, the more I was certain he couldn’t have.

We might not have been the most careful, but I knew he hadn't caught us.

My stomach still bottomed out, though, if not from Coach calling me into his office, then from the fact that I still had yet to hear from his daughter.

Julep had promised me we would talk when we got back, and yet, she'd avoided me like the fucking plague. I knew she was in her head. I knew she was solidifying all the reasons what happened between us couldn't happen again.

I ached to stop that train of thought so badly I could barely stand it.

But I left her alone, let her be, if only because I respected her enough to know that when she wanted to talk — *if* she wanted to talk — she'd come to me.

It was excruciating, knowing she was right across the street and not being able to reach her. What was *more* excruciating was that now that I'd had her, now that we'd given in...

I couldn't fathom going back to what we were before.

I wondered if she felt the same. I wondered if she'd fucked me right out of her system or if she burned for me the way I did for her.

"Ah, he's going to clear you to play. That's my bet," Leo said, clapping my shoulder and snapping me back to the present. "And it's about damn time. We need our cap on that field."

I ran a towel over my damp hair from the shower, pulling on my joggers and hoodie. Once I was dressed, I made my way into Coach's office with as steady of a heartbeat as I could manage.

Coach Lee glanced up at me when I swung through the door, and he just gestured to the seat across from him before getting back to whatever he was typing on his computer. When he was done, he sat back, steepling his fingers over the top of his stomach. He watched me for a long, weighted pause.

“I heard you went for an early morning swim at the hotel.”

My heart stopped beating, free-falling through my body as I stared at Coach and willed myself not to show an ounce of emotion.

“I did,” I answered carefully.

His eyes were hard on mine, his brow furrowed. “I also heard there was a girl with you.”

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I didn’t respond. I just swallowed, waiting to see what he’d say next. He said a girl, he didn’t say Julep. I held onto any fraction of hope that he didn’t know it was her.

He must have been friends with the older man who came to the pool, the one who saw us.

Coach blew out a breath, shaking his head. “Look, I was young once, too, okay? I know what it’s like to have... *urges.*”

I had to fight to keep the cringe off my face.

“But, when we travel as a team, you more than anyone else need to be setting the example for how everyone else should behave. Fucking a girl in the hotel pool at five in the morning is not the example I’m talking about.”

Relief spiraled through me, because by that sentence alone, I knew he *didn’t* know it was his daughter I had pinned against the edge of that pool.

“Yes, sir,” I said, hoping I looked like a dog with his tail between his legs. I didn’t even offer an argument or explanation. I wanted him to have the power, to feel like he was in full control.

Coach watched me a moment longer, then smirked, shaking his head as he leaned forward. “To be young again,” he said, then he smacked his hand on the desk. “You’re back in, Moore.”

I gaped at him. “Sir?”

“We’re putting you back in, full practice, starting tomorrow. And you’ll start this Saturday in the home game against Charlotte.”

I couldn’t hide my emotion any longer. A smile split my face, but before I could respond, Coach held up one thick finger and pointed it right at me.

“This is a probation period,” he warned. “If we see any signs of your shoulder injury flaring up, you’ll be out, and I don’t want any arguments over it.”

I nodded emphatically. “Yes, sir.”

“And I also don’t want any of that attitude you were throwing me at the beginning of the season,” he added. “Russo takes instruction. He learns quickly. And I hate to say it, son, but he’s shown he can step up and do the job in your absence.”

I couldn’t swallow down the knot in my throat.

“I know you’re a leader,” he continued. “And I like that about you, I do. The whole team looks to you, and that’s a sign of a good QB1.” He paused. “But that doesn’t mean you can override me as coach. There’s a level of respect I am due, and sometimes that means shutting up and doing what I tell you to do even if you think you know better. Understand?”

I nodded. “Yes, sir.” My voice was weaker this time.

“We did fine without you, and we can do it again,” he added, rubbing salt in the wound as he sat back. “So don’t push me.”

I sat there for a long moment, unsure of what to say, what to do.

“You’re dismissed,” he finally said. “Check in with the training staff in the morning to see what they want you working on before and after practices now that you’re full out.”

I cleared my throat, standing, and headed for the door. When my hand reached for the handle, Coach said, “And Moore?”

I turned.

“I’m not an idiot. I know you have feelings for Julep.”

Ice swam in my veins, but I managed to stay calm, to blink and neither confirm nor deny.

“Snuff them out now, son,” he warned. “Because if you think I won’t pull you off this team and blame your shoulder injury whether it’s acting up or not, you don’t know me at all.”

“Julep and I are just friends,” I said.

He set his jaw, giving me a pointed look. “And it better stay that way.”

Coach turned back to his computer, and I saw myself out, heart thumping in my ears as I did.



Julep

“God, I miss summer.”

Riley balanced her chin on the heel of her palm, eyes glossing where they stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows of the stadium cafeteria. It was sleeting, an ugly mix of snow and ice that I was not looking forward to driving in after my last class on campus.

“Not me,” Giana chimed in, cracking the top on her Mountain Dew. She opened her bag of Cheetos next, and I marveled at how someone as tiny as her could put away processed sugar and salt like that. “This is *perfect* reading weather. Just me, my book, maybe a crackling fireplace and some cozy socks.” She sighed happily, as if she could picture it all. “Heaven.”

“Where do I fit in this picture?” Clay teased, housing a bite of his chicken sandwich with a brow arched at her.

“You’re adding logs to the fire,” she said, as if it was obvious. “And then pulling me into your lap once you’re done.”

And then we're there cuddling as we both read."

"Clay, reading a book? That's rich." Leo snorted, and Clay smacked him upside the head with his napkin.

I smiled as they continued, but they no longer held my attention — because Holden had just taken the seat right next to Clay.

He sat down without looking at anyone in particular, his long legs straddling the bench before he turned toward the table fully. He wore dark gray joggers this time and a white hoodie, one that illustrated how ridiculously tan he was for this time of year. Days and days of working out in the sun were evidenced in the bronze glow of his face, his forearms where he'd shoved the sleeves of his hoodie up a bit. His jaw was set as he shrugged off his hood, his hair still damp from the showers.

He reached for his fork, and then his eyes shot up to mine.

A flash of that night at the pool struck me like lightning, the sound of his heavy breaths, the feel of his hands pinning me, of him burying himself inside me.

I tore my gaze away, looking down at my own plate as I reached for a French fry and popped it into my mouth. It was bland and hard to swallow with how dry my mouth was.

I didn't even recognize myself anymore, not since Saturday night. I didn't know the girl who'd danced with Holden Moore, who'd found him at the pool and — instead of turning around and going right back to her room — had stayed and watched him, instead.

Watched him, and then teased him, and then surrendered to him completely.

My cheeks flamed at the memory of his head between my legs, even more so at how I'd dropped to my knees and quite literally begged for him.

"What about you, Julep?"

I blinked, mouth hanging half open with another fry between my fingers. "What?"

Riley smirked. “Are you a crazy person who loves this weather like Giana and Zeke, or do you miss summer, too?”

I set the fry down, shrugging. “I don’t know, this isn’t so bad if you’re inside. I don’t necessarily want to be out driving in it later, though.”

“Ugh, driving in it is the *worst*,” Leo agreed.

“But I don’t much care for the heat of summer,” I admitted. “I think I like the spring the most, the in-between, when it’s warm but not hot, and the nights are still chilly, and you can enjoy the sunshine but not sweat your ass off.”

“That’s funny.”

All heads swung to Holden, who took a big gulp of his water without continuing.

“What’s funny?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I just would have pinned you as a summer girl,” he said, and his eyes zeroed in on me. “Since I know you love to swim so much.”

Flames licked along the skin of my neck, and when Holden’s mouth curled into a teasing grin, I tried my best to give him a warning glare without it being enough that anyone else would notice.

Giana turned to me, confused. “You swim, Julep?”

“Sometimes,” I lied, because if I said *no*, it’d just raise their suspicion more.

“That’s cool,” Riley said, smiling.

She carried on the conversation, talking about how her brother, Gavin, and she used to race each other to the swimming pool every summer. But I wasn’t listening anymore, I was staring at Holden, who just grinned right back at me as he cut a piece of his chicken breast and bit it off the end of his fork.

Clay narrowed his eyes at me first, then at Holden, and then I looked back down to my plate before he could try to put any other pieces together.

“I need to run,” I said suddenly. “I forgot about something JB needed me to work on.”

“Are we still on for studying on Sunday?” Giana asked as I stood.

“Yeah, sure,” I said without thinking, and then I bolted.

I knew he was following me before I even turned to confirm it, and I waited until I’d dumped my tray and swung into the hallway. Then, I glanced over my shoulder, and cut a hard left into the first room that was unlocked. It was primarily used for reviewing game film, and it was dark when Holden followed me inside.

I pulled the blinds closed as soon as he did and turned the lock.

“What the hell are you doing?” I hissed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I scoffed, folding my arms. I could only see a soft silhouette of him with the lone sliver of light beaming in-between the shade and the edge of the window.

“Are you *trying* to get us caught?”

“I’m trying to get you to talk to me. Like you promised.”

I clamped my mouth shut, ignoring the ache in my chest at his words. “Holden, we made a mistake.”

That word hung between us like a death sentence for a long, weighted pause.

“Is that what that was?” He tested the space between us, his hand just gently resting on my hip. He thumbed the skin there, and I closed my eyes before forcing myself to step back.

“Yes.”

“You sure about that?”

Once again, he stepped into me, this time both hands holding my waist as he backed me into the wall. I gasped at the feel of him pressing in on me, at the warmth of him

invading my space. He pressed a light kiss to my neck, his mouth hovering there as he spoke again.

“Didn’t feel like a mistake to me.”

I wet my lips, dizzy from his touch. “Then you’re blind. Or an idiot. Or both.”

“We didn’t get caught.”

I sobered, pressing my hands to his chest and separating us. “And yet here we are, testing the possibility of that yet again.”

Holden’s breath was labored, just like that night at the pool, and even though I couldn’t see him clearly, I knew the fire that lived inside me was burning in his eyes, too.

“Look...” I said, huffing. “I... I had fun. We both did. But...” I shook my head. “I’ve only just earned my dad’s trust. I don’t want to ruin that. And *you* were just cleared to play again,” I reminded him, knowing that my father had left the training room earlier to go tell Holden he was in for the game on Saturday. “Do you really want to throw that all away?”

He didn’t answer me.

I sighed, taking a step toward him. I reached out until I could touch his face, aching when he leaned into my palm.

“We can’t, Holden.” I shook my head. “We just... *can’t*.”

“What if no one had to know?”

I almost laughed. “Someone will find out.”

“No, they won’t.”

“They will.”

“How?”

I shook my head, grappling with words. “*Because*,” I said, floundering. “They just will.”

“We’re smart,” he said, stepping into me with more confidence. He backed me into the wall again, knee sliding between my legs and jolting the memory of the pool right back

to the surface of my mind. I inhaled a breath and held it when his lips brushed against mine. “We can keep it secret.”

“So, that’s what you want?” I asked, hating how my chest ached. “A secret?”

“I want you,” he shot back, and his hands pinned my hips then, palms roughly sliding up and over my rib cage. I let my eyes flutter shut when his thumbs brushed the bottom of my breasts. “And if quietly is the only way you’ll let me have you, I’ll take it.”

I swallowed, writhing under his touch as his palms slid up and cupped my breasts under my thin bralette. My nipples hardened of their own will, and I whimpered when Holden ran the pad of his thumb over where they peaked.

“I wasn’t so good at being quiet last time,” I breathed.

Holden grinned against my lips, his body sagging on a relieved breath at the tease like he’d won.

And maybe he had.

Maybe I *wanted* him to win this argument, to convince me we could do the impossible.

That I could have him, even if only behind closed doors.

“Let’s see if you can do better this time,” he husked.

Any argument I had left died on my lips when he covered them with his, kissing me hard and pressing me into the cold wall.

That connection was all I’d thought about since the last time I’d had it. I’d dreamed about his hands on me, about the way he tasted, about the groans he made when he touched me. But the fantasy was nowhere near the reality, nowhere near as potent or intoxicating. And now that I had him enveloping me again, I knew nothing could compare.

His hands found my ass, lifting, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. He trailed his kisses down my neck as I arched into him, hands tangling in his hair.

Then, he was carrying me.

Blindly, he ping-ponged between desks and chairs, weaving through the dark until we were in the far corner of the room away from the door. I couldn't see a thing back here, so I let out a little yelp of surprise when he lowered us both down to the ground.

"Shhh," he teased against my lips, and then he kissed me, and trailed lower and lower, lips tasting my skin all the way down.

His fingertips slid under the band of my leggings and my thong at once, and I lifted my hips in time for him to peel them down over my hips. My heart raced as the cool air washed over me, as he tore them off one leg and then the other.

"Come here," he husked, and then he was on his back, pulling me on top of him.

I reached for his joggers, but before I could strip him, he clamped his hands around my wrists.

"I didn't get to finish tasting you," he said, his voice low as he maneuvered lower underneath me. He released my wrists only to hike one thigh up and then the other, until I was straddling his shoulders, hovering just above his face. I felt the heat of his breath when he added, "Don't make a sound."

Holden wrapped his hands around the tops of my thighs, pulling me down until I sat on his mouth.

A gasp ripped from me at the first contact, but I cut it short, silencing myself as he flicked me with his tongue, testing the sensitivity. I was already so worked up just from the fact that I was half naked in a *very* public place, so much so that one lick had me ready to combust.

"So fucking sweet," he whispered, and then he sucked my clit, swirling his tongue around it with that added pressure.

I saw stars, thrusting my hips forward in my desperation for more. Holden answered by grabbing my ass and helping me rock against his mouth. He stuck his tongue out and dragged my pussy over it, back and forth, the firm, wet warmth of him tasting every inch.

I didn't know what to do with my hands, but I ached to have more contact, so I shoved my crop top and bralette up until I exposed my breasts to the cold air, too. My nipples pebbled beneath it, and I palmed myself, squeezing in sync with Holden's grip on my ass.

"Fuck yeah, touch yourself while I eat this perfect pussy," Holden breathed, and he targeted my clit again, tightening the tip of his tongue to circle it in quick bursts that made my legs quake around him. "I want you to come on my tongue."

I whimpered, squeezing my eyes shut as my face grew hotter and hotter from the restraint of holding in the cries I so desperately wanted to release. I loved how filthy those words were, how easily he said them.

Holden Moore was all stoic leadership for everyone else.

But for me, he came undone.

My breath grew shallower, pulse ringing in my ears as I chased the explosion rumbling to life inside me. I rolled my hips so wildly I wondered if it hurt him, but he only gripped my ass tighter, holding me against his mouth and giving me all the pressure I needed to find release.

The rough Berber carpet dug into my knees, but I ground and ground against him until a tingle shot up from my toes. I shuttered around him, my orgasm as incinerating as a nuclear bomb when it caught.

I couldn't help how hard I breathed, or the passionate cries that tore through my restraint. But Holden didn't stop, didn't try to quiet me — he just licked and sucked and held me against him as I rode out the longest orgasm of my life. It just kept going, kept rolling, and Holden lapped up every last drop of my release like it was the air he needed to breathe.

Slowly, the pleasure began to fade, and I noticed then how much I was trembling, how hard I'd been shaken when I collapsed. My hands flew forward, catching the floor above Holden's head, and I could only see the tiniest hint of a smile through the darkness as he pressed a soft kiss to my clit that made me shiver again.

I panted out a laugh, shaking my head and hissing as I carefully maneuvered off him. My legs already ached, heart still racing hard in my chest.

“I suck at being quiet,” I whispered.

Holden let out a rumble of a laugh, pulling me into his chest and kissing my forehead. For a brief, beautiful moment, he held me like that, his hand running through my hair while mine drew circles on his chest.

It almost felt normal.

It almost felt like we were right where we belonged.

Then, he cleared his throat. “We should...”

“Yeah,” I said before he could finish, and I jumped off him, patting the ground until I found my panties and leggings. I stood, pulling them on one by one. “You go first. We had a training meeting in here this morning. I can pretend I left something behind.”

I’d just pulled my leggings up and righted my bralette when Holden’s hands found my hips.

I looked up just in time for him to kiss me.

I tasted myself on his tongue, and that sent a shock of desire rippling through me as I exhaled against his kiss.

“Go,” I urged, even though my hands had wound into his hair now, holding him to me.

He kissed me harder, deeper, every inch of him wrapping up every inch of me like he couldn’t get close enough even if he could meld together and make us one being.

Suddenly, the doorknob jostled.

We broke the kiss, both of us wide-eyed as we looked at the door.

“Shit, do you have your key, Hoover?”

The voice was muffled.

But I knew without question that it was my dad’s.

Holden sprang into action before I could even process that I needed to inhale so I didn't pass out. He grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the door, shoving me behind where it opened. He held a finger to his lips, eyes panicked as he looked from the door to me and back again. Then, he pulled his hood over his head and slunk down in the first desk he saw, resting his head on his arms.

He'd barely stopped moving when the door swung open.

I stopped breathing, holding my hand out to halt the door before it could slam into where I was pressed up against the wall hiding. Dad flicked on the light, and then he saw Holden and cursed, turning it back off.

"Is that Moore?" Coach Hoover whispered behind him, still in the hallway.

Dad nodded, and I prayed he wouldn't move farther in, that he wouldn't shut the door and find me standing behind it.

"He's exhausted," Hoover said, keeping his voice low. "They've been putting him through hell in the training room. And now full-out practice."

"Let's let him sleep," Dad said, leading Hoover back out. "We can use the next room over."

I willed myself not to breathe until the door clicked shut, and then I let out a relieved sigh, covering my chest where my heart galloped so hard and fast, I thought it was about to give out.

Holden waited a moment longer before he peeked over his shoulder at the door first, then at me.

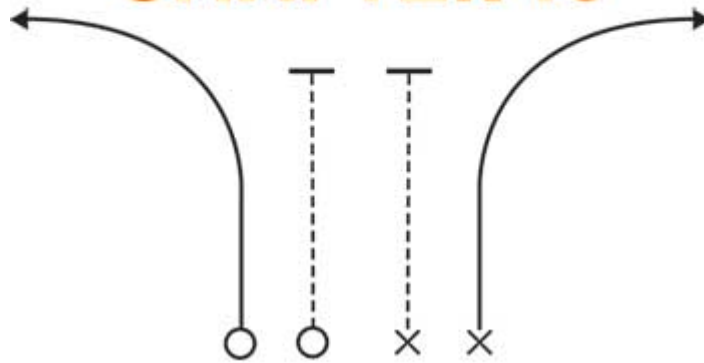
He crooked a smile, wagging his brows as if to say, *See? We got this.*

Even as I shook my head and rolled my eyes, I felt myself smile, too.

That smile was a surrender.

And the games began.

CHAPTER 19



Holden

I'd never been so unfocused in my entire life.

Fall was always a blur for me — a whirlwind of early morning weightlifting and practices that dripped from the morning into the early afternoon. When I wasn't in class, I was practicing or training or watching film. And every weekend, I led my team onto the field for a game.

Football consumed me from the moment I opened my eyes each morning until the very second my head hit the pillow each night. And even then, I *dreamed* about football, about passing routes and the feeling of turf under my cleats and jogging through the tunnel on a perfect, gray, cool day.

But this season?

I was consumed by Julep Lee.

She'd been distracting before. I'd loved any opportunity to get under her skin, to push her buttons, to tease her and see if I could earn myself a blush or an eyeroll or a snarky shot back at me.

Now, she wasn't just distracting. She was the center of my focus.

It was impossible to keep my hands off her once we'd made our little agreement, and any time I was alone, I was texting her.

Come over.

I'd sneak her through the back door, wait until my roommates were in their rooms so I could pull her back to mine. It would usually be morning by the time I let her go, let her peel herself out of my bed and leave me with nothing but a kiss to remember her by before she was gone.

And just when I thought I'd go insane if I didn't see her, I'd get the same text from her.

Mary just left for work.

Wherever we could sneak off to make it happen, we did — and though my career was still important to me, for the first time in my life, it wasn't everything.

That fact scared me more than I would ever let on.

Still, even with my focus off the field, I was performing *on* the field, too. I led us to a win in my first game back. It was a home game, which made it sweet, but the fact that we absolutely murdered them made it even sweeter.

Coach Lee still watched me carefully, like he wasn't sure he trusted me even after I proved myself time and time again. I followed his orders... albeit I *did* make some tiny amendments from time to time. But every change I made was for the greater good of the team, and it showed as we all gelled together better than we had all season.

We were on our way to the championship; I could feel it.

The draft did weigh heavy on me, though. Scouts didn't watch me as eagerly as before my injury. No doubt, they were worried it was one that would continue to flare up as I aged. It didn't matter that my shoulder had torn in a different place than before, or that it had been a *minuscule* tear that I quickly worked through.

Injuries were like termites in their mind — they never went away, and they would wear down the foundation of even

the strongest house over time.

It was maddening, to have something so out of my control dictating their thoughts about me, to have my own body breaking down on me when I felt so mentally strong and capable.

Those thoughts plagued me one night when Julep was in my bed, both of us sated and spent. She had her head on my chest, and I drew circles idly along her bare back. Most times, when we were done, we were in a hurry — she'd sneak off or I would before anyone could see us.

But my favorite times were the ones like this, when there was no real rush to move, when I could hold her for a brief moment in time and pretend she was really mine.

“You ready for the game this weekend?” she asked softly.

“Born ready.”

She smiled against my chest. “I’m impressed by how you’ve bounced back from this injury. You seem... I don’t know, maybe even stronger than before.”

“I hope the scouts see it that way.”

She leaned up, balancing her chin on my chest. “You’re worried they won’t?”

“I’m just realistic,” I told her. “I had a shot at the first round before this. But now, I’ll be lucky to be taken by the fifth.”

“Does it matter when you’re drafted?”

I considered. “I guess, not really. Plenty of late-round picks have gone on to be successful in pro ball. But...”

“But your ego is going to take a beating,” she teased me, poking my rib.

I rolled swiftly, pinning her into the sheets and tickling her as she laughed and pathetically attempted to push me off. Eventually, I stopped tickling, and she opened her legs, letting me settle between them.

“It’s just been a dream of mine,” I said. “But dreams change.”

“Mm,” she said, making a face like she knew that all too well. “That they do. And what’s your dream now?”

“Oh, it hasn’t changed *that* much,” I said, smirking. “I still plan on making millions of dollars and playing pro ball for life.”

“Is that all?” Julep teased. I loved how she looked in that moment, her dark hair splayed over my pillowcase, eyes tired from all the nights I’d kept her up late.

“Well, then there’s the wife and kids, of course. You, walking down the aisle to me in a long, silky white dress...”

She snorted, rolling her eyes so hard I thought they might get stuck in the back of her head. Again, she pathetically pushed at my chest. “Right. Us. Married.”

“Come on, you can’t see it?” I ignored the ache in my chest at how quickly she shrugged that off, reminding myself that I knew it was impossible, too. I was just joking. It was all fun and games.

“No, because if you so much as thought about proposing to me, my father would murder you.”

“Let’s pretend for a second that he wouldn’t.”

She gave me a look like that wasn’t something she was capable of.

“I can see you now, a veil flowing behind you, beautiful blushing bride...”

“Ew.”

I laughed at her immediate reaction.

“First of all, no veil. Ever,” she said, holding up a finger. I just smiled pulled that finger to my mouth, kissing it as she continued. “And I’ll wear a black dress, not a white one.”

“Scandalous.”

“Yeah, well, I’m no innocent virgin,” she said, something dark washing over her face before she shook it off. “And I don’t want kids.”

“Come on,” I begged, grinding my hips against her. She bit her lip when I ran the length of me slow and teasingly up her center. “We’d make really cute ones, I bet. *And* we’re really good at the things it takes to *make* babies.”

Julep’s eyes were heated when she wrapped her legs around my waist and kissed me, long and deep. “We can’t make a baby if I keep swallowing your cum.”

I groaned at how dirty it sounded coming off those beautiful lips of hers, and my cock hardened between us, already fired up and ready to go again.

“That can easily be rectified,” I said, nipping at her bottom lip.

“No babies until after we’re married.”

I laughed. “Wow, I’ve made great progress.”

“Two. *Max*.”

I kissed along her jaw. “I really like when I get my way with you.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

“I can see us now, me playing pro ball, you—”

“Excelling in my own career,” she finished for me with a pointed look.

“I was going to say that!” I defended. “You didn’t even give me a chance.”

She gave me a look like *yeah, right*.

“And when the kids are grown, and my old ass is retired, we’ll have a house in the mountains.”

“Aw, man,” she said, pouting. “I was really looking forward to causing trouble in a nursing home.”

“We’ll do that, too. Later.”

I chuckled, and she smiled, and even though it was all a joke, something like hope hollowed out my chest.

I watched her for a while, fingertips playing with her hair on my pillow as my eyes trailed over the worry lines on her face.

“And I get to die first,” she said after a while, softly. “That’s non-negotiable.”

I swallowed, frowning at the change in tone. “Why?”

Julep’s eyes flicked between mine, her answer hanging on the tip of her tongue but not daring to taste the air between us. She kept her mouth shut, but I saw what she couldn’t say.

She didn’t want to feel the pain of losing someone she loved again.

For a moment, for that brief, late-night, dream-like moment where time didn’t exist and anything was possible, I could actually see it. I could picture it all perfectly, the life where we worked out.

But my stomach bottomed out in the next breath as reality crashed in and reminded me it never could.

“I don’t want to talk anymore,” Julep whispered, and the way she looked, I felt the need to apologize.

Before I could, she kissed me, dragging her nails up into my hair and then raking them down my back.

We didn’t speak another word after that.



Julep

My sister’s birthday was something I always felt creeping in long before the day actually came.

Every year after she died, I found myself drinking more when November rolled around. I'd reach for any drug I could find, avoid all responsibilities, and spend my time with pathetic losers who were mediocre, at best, in bed.

Anything that could numb the pain.

But the truth was that nothing had been able to, no matter what I tried. There was no drug that existed, no sex good enough. Days bled into nights that led me closer and closer to a date I'd never escape, one that reminded me what had been lost.

Of what I'd done.

I could never outrun the emotions, never escape the pain of losing her. I'd drill myself with excruciating questions like: *Where would she be now, if she were alive? Would she be in college? Would she be traveling Europe with only a backpack and a notebook? Would she be in love?*

They'd pelt me even harder when I attempted to go out or have fun. I'd be at a concert and feel guilty that she would never have the chance. Even shopping in the grocery store would bring me to my knees sometimes, the realization that Abby couldn't be there doing the same.

Anxiety would spiral me deep, until I was in that bizarre state of awakening that you sometimes fall into when you realize that you're really going to die one day. Only this wasn't about me. It was about Abby, about how I'd never see her graduate high school, or college, or grad school. It was how I'd never know if she would have been married and had kids or if she would have lived a life of adventure.

I'd robbed her of it.

And her birthday served as a reminder every fall.

I could feel the weight of my dad's eyes on me more than ever. Even as Holden played in his first two games since his injury and led us to back-to-back blowout wins at our home stadium, my dad only barely smiled before he was watching me, wondering if I was two seconds away from going off the rails.

I wish I knew the answer.

I still felt it there, that familiar, looming depression, but it was muddied, fainter than usual.

And I knew it was because of Holden.

I didn't have time to think about Abby or anything else, not when all my thoughts were consumed with planning the next time I could sneak into his bed or him into mine.

It'd been two weeks now since the first time we gave in at the hotel, and I was deliciously sore from fucking every chance we'd had since then. In my bed when Mary was at work, in his shower late at night, in my car parked down a dark alley, against the back wall of the stadium when we couldn't bear even an hour of being around each other without touching...

It didn't matter how many times, how many places, or how many ways he took me.

I was insatiable when it came to Holden Moore.

I couldn't even remember what it had been like to be annoyed by him, couldn't reach far enough into my soul to find the shallow shell of a girl I'd been when I'd first come onto this campus.

He'd filled me with life, even when I hadn't asked for it.

The only sobering thought that had plagued me all week was the reminder that this was all we could have. We could have quiet nights losing ourselves in each other and quick fucks in dark closets where no one would ever find out.

But that was where we began and ended.

It didn't matter how Holden held me after, or how the baritone of his laugh rumbled through his chest where I laid my head as he told me about his childhood. It didn't matter that I lit up with a smile every time I saw him, a smile that had been so hard to come by before I met him, or that he made jokes about what our kids would look like one day.

We both knew, deep down, that this was it.

The biggest, most glaring issue was of course that my father had made it clear from the first time I walked into the locker room that I was off limits. He'd threatened Holden and every other teammate that their career would be over if they crossed that line.

I knew, maybe even more than Holden did, how true that was.

My father didn't sling threats without having the balls to back them up with action.

But while to Holden and every other guy on the team, they probably just saw it as a threat from an overbearing father, I knew better. I knew the real reason he drew those uncrossable lines.

It was because at the end of the day, he didn't trust *me*.

Letting me live on my own and assigning me with his quarterback's PT was one thing. A building block in trust, perhaps. But at the base of it all, he still worried I'd get caught up with a cocky athlete and lose myself again. He worried I'd fall off track, partying, cutting class, fucking every chance I got. In his mind, he'd already imagined a thousand ways that I would meet an early death just like Abby did.

And after all I'd put him through, I couldn't fault him for that.

I owed it to my father to stay on the straight and narrow, to not let him down, to not fall into any situation that would send him barreling toward a heart attack I knew I'd conjured up one too many times in my short life.

My father may have been stern, but he'd sacrificed for me.

It was my turn to do the same.

"You seriously *read* this stuff?" Mary asked, snapping me out of my thoughts as she let a book fall from her hands and onto our old, wooden dining room table.

Giana gasped and picked the book up, checking it for bruises before hugging it to her chest. "Of course, I do. And it's *good* — amazing, really. You just need to give it a try."

“Forgive me if I don’t get off on the idea of reading about some mafia lord kidnapping me and tying me up in his basement,” Mary said flatly before pouring herself more wine.

Riley shrugged. “I mean, that sounds pretty hot to me.”

“Thank you!” Giana said, thrusting an open palm toward her backup.

“What about the alien porn?” I chimed in.

Riley made a face while Giana held up a finger. “Listen, don’t knock it until you try it. It sounds insane, but—”

“Do you ready any *normal* books?” Mary asked.

Giana frowned, tapping her thumb against the edge of the book still cradled to her chest. “I like vanilla romance sometimes... a sweet friends-to-lovers, maybe a second-chance situation.”

“And those don’t have sex in them?”

Giana snorted. “Like I’d waste my time on a book without spice.”

“I’ll admit, the one you gave me about the high fae bat-winged dude was pretty hot,” I conceded.

Giana just gently set her book down before waving a hand over me like Vanna White. “Another example of me being right.”

“Tell you what, G,” Mary said, putting down her wine glass. “You play an hour of Red Dead Redemption with me, and I’ll read one of your books.”

“Deal,” Giana said, shaking Mary’s hand without thinking. Her little frown of determination slipped a little once the handshake was done. “Wait, what’s that game about again?”

“It’s an action-adventure western,” I answered for her. “Cowboys and guns and shit.”

Giana considered, and then smiled triumphantly. “Oh. Well, I like cowboys. Small-town romances are some of my favorites.”

Mary arched a brow at me like *should we tell her?* But I just shook my head and smiled, nodding toward where Riley was doodling on a notebook. “That’s cool.”

Her cheeks flamed when she looked up at me, and she covered the butterfly-looking thing with her palm. “I’m much more suited to curate the art than to make it.”

“I don’t know. That would make a pretty bad ass tattoo,” Mary said.

“Speaking of... how many do you have?” Giana asked, her eyes wide as they skated over all the black ink poking out from under the tank top Mary wore.

“I lost count somewhere around fifteen. They all just bleed together now.”

Giana leaned in closer. “Whoa. What do they all mean?”

“What do you mean *what do they mean?*” Mary laughed. “They’re just tattoos.”

“But they’re *permanent,*” Riley said.

Mary smiled, shaking her head and pointing to one above her elbow. She started explaining how her first handful had all this meaning and thought behind them, but then eventually, she just started getting things that looked cool or made her smile or just seemed like something fun to have on her body.

I listened quietly, babying my wine less because I didn’t want to drink, and more because I knew this close to Abby’s birthday, it was dangerous to toe the line of drinking *too much*. My phone buzzed on the table, and I picked it up, fighting a smile when I saw Holden’s name.

Holden: Come over.

I rolled my lips together, sneaking a picture of where the girls were now — Mary with her leg on the table while Riley and Giana peered over the table at the tattoo she was showing off on her calf.

Me: Can’t. Girls’ night.

Holden: Nice pic. You should send another one.

I frowned, but then the bouncing dots that told me he was texting more disappeared, and another text came through.

Holden: Of you.

I glanced at the girls, making sure they were still occupied before I flipped the camera around. I took a selfie with my tongue out and sent it to him.

Holden: You're beautiful.

My smile faded instantly, heat cascading down my neck before I sat up a little in my chair and typed back a joke to clear any sign of that sweet remark.

Me: You just like me with my tongue out.

Holden: Very true. On your knees with your tongue out is my preferred view.

That text sent a jolt of desire right between my thighs, and I glanced at the girls before clearing my throat and excusing myself from the table. I walked slowly down the hall to our guest bath, locking the door when I was inside.

Then, I fixed my hair in the mirror, took my shirt off and then my sweatpants. I shoved them both out of the way before dropping to my knees and holding the camera phone above me. I snapped a pic and sent it to Holden before I could overthink it.

Me: Like this?

Holden: Fuck.

I smiled in victory, already putting my clothes back on. I washed my hands just in case the girls were listening — though I doubted they were. Then, I texted him again.

Me: Wait up for me.

My phone didn't buzz again until I was back seated at the table, and now Mary had her ass out, showing an impressive floral tattoo that spanned her hip and outer upper thigh. I smiled, sipping from my wine before grabbing my phone and sliding my thumb to unlock it.

Holden: Oh, I'll wait UP for sure...

I frowned, but then a picture came through.

My heart jolted, a pang of something delicious and electric flowing through me at the sight.

It was Holden, completely naked, in his bed, with his thick, hard cock in his hand.

“Fuck...” I said under my breath, tapping on the picture to make it larger. He’d taken the photo from a downward angle, like he’d held the camera between his thighs for the shot. He was half-propped up against his headboard, his cock in his hand, and the view showed me his tight balls, his veiny shaft, the thick base of him wrapped in his fist, and that perfect mushroom tip above his fingers.

Behind his show-stealing cock was Holden’s glorious abs.

And a panty-melting grin.

“What are *you* so distracted by?” Mary asked, and before I could answer, before I could turn my screen black or shrug her off or do *anything*, she reached over the table and snatched my phone right out of my hand.

“Mary, don’t!”

But it was too late.

Her jaw hit the floor, eyes bulging out of her head. “Oh. My. *Cock.*”

“*What?!*” Riley and Giana said at the same time, and then they were crowding over her while I sank into my seat and covered my face with my hands.

Shrieks filled the house.

“Oh, my God. Is that a...?” Giana started.

“A near-perfect specimen holding his gigantic wang?” Mary finished for her on a laugh. “Sure is!”

“Give it back,” I hissed, uncovering my face and reaching across the table. But Mary angled herself away, standing as the girls followed behind her.

Riley pulled the phone from Mary's hand and looked closer.

Then her face went white.

"Wait... is that..."

Giana paled next. "Holy shit. That's Holden."

All their eyes widened as they pinned me, and I didn't know what to do, what to say.

So, I didn't say or do anything at all.

And it was confirmation enough.

Riley squealed at the same time Giana yanked her hands away from the phone like it was on fire. She shoved the heels of her palms into her eyes. "I'll never unsee that!" she screamed.

"I never *want* to unsee that," Mary said on a laugh, staring a little longer before finally handing me my phone back. I immediately locked it and shoved it in my pocket.

"Um..." Riley folded her arms, popping a hip as she stared at me. "I need details. Now."

"Same," Giana said, plopping down into her seat and moving it closer to mine. "You and... *Holden*?!"

I cringed, groaning as I dropped my head to the table.

"I called this shit," Mary said, unbothered as she topped off all our glasses of wine. "Just saying."

"Yeah, well, seeing his cock was your prize. You're welcome."

She smiled victoriously before leaning back in her seat, and then all their eyes were on me, waiting.

"Well?!" Giana probed.

I sighed. "There's nothing to tell. We're just... friends." I chewed the inside of my cheek. "Friends who fuck."

Riley blinked. Mary snorted. And Giana groaned.

“Oh, no. No, no, no. Didn’t you learn anything from the books I gave you? Have you never watched a single romantic comedy in your life? That *never* works out well.”

I sat up. “Yeah, well, it’s working fine for us.”

“But what if one of you develops more feelings?”

“We won’t,” I said, shifting in my seat. “We *can’t*.”

“Why not?” Riley asked.

“Have you forgotten who her dad is?” Mary held up her glass toward Riley before taking a sip, and her words silenced everyone as their eyes floated to me once again.

“Shit,” Riley said.

I shrugged. “It’s fine. Really. You guys are making a big deal out of nothing. Holden and I are very aware of what we’re doing. We... use each other,” I said, shifting. “To blow off steam. That’s it. No one knows.” I gave them all looks then. “And we need to keep it that way.”

Giana pretended to zip her lips closed. “I won’t say a word.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

“But,” she continued, cringing. “I just... I have to know. Do you... do you like him?”

“Yes,” Mary said at the same time I said, “No.”

I glared at her.

“Like I said, we’re friends. And he’s a great lay.”

Every single one of their faces had *this is a disaster waiting to happen* written all over them.

I rolled my eyes and waved them off, standing. “There’s nothing else to say, so just drop it. And I mean it,” I added, pointing a finger at each of them. “Not a word. Not to anyone — not each other, not me, and especially not your boyfriends.”

“No worries there,” Mary mumbled before draining the rest of her wine.

Riley and Giana nodded their promise, and then I walked over to the kitchen and yanked open the freezer. “Who wants pizza?”

I was answered with an enthusiastic chorus of *meeee* before Giana was trying to sell Mary on her books again and Riley was not-so-subtly watching the ESPN highlights that we’d muted to keep her from fixating on them all night. I took the escape to work on the pizza and sneak my phone out again.

Me: Sorry for the delay in response, you knocked me out with that photo.

Holden: Hurry up and get your sweet ass over here.

Me: Give me two hours.

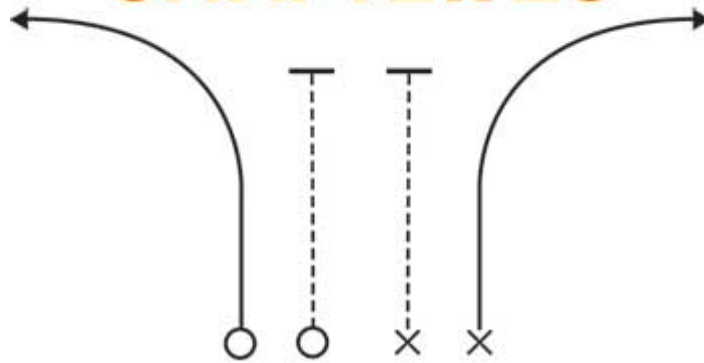
Holden: Two hours... and then, two orgasms.

I bit my lip against the jolt of pleasure that just that stupid dirty text could elicit from me as I tucked my phone away. Then, I tore open the plastic wrapping on the frozen pizza and flicked on the oven to pre-heat.

When I turned around, Riley and Giana were on the couch, trying to decide what we should watch.

Mary, on the other hand, was watching me.

CHAPTER 20



Holden

I knew something was off when I woke up that morning.

It was the week before Thanksgiving, and as if preparing for our game on Saturday wasn't high stress enough with a playoff chance on the line, the entire team was wound tight from tests and papers due before the holiday, too.

Every day presented me with new challenges as captain — from setting up non-optional study halls for the players I knew needed it, to talking down my best guys from panic attacks, I'd seen it all.

Fortunately, I was in a good headspace to handle it.

My grades were high, and I'd planned ahead to get any assignments done early that I could so that I was able to be available during this demanding week for my team. On the field, I was excelling, our win streak stacking up and putting us closer and closer to the playoff spot we aimed to clinch. If we won our game this weekend, we'd be a shoo-in.

And *off* the field, outside of the classroom...

I had Julep.

But on the morning of November 17th, I woke with a pit in my stomach for a reason I couldn't explain. The weather was

shit, my head was pounding, and when I texted Julep good morning, she didn't respond.

Normally, I wouldn't have worried. I would have assumed she was busy. But I'd felt her growing distant lately, something brewing in her that I couldn't put my finger on. The other night, she'd ripped at my clothes so frantically she'd nearly burst into tears. I'd stopped her, holding her, and for the first time, she slept in my bed without us fucking first.

She didn't say a word.

And she was stiff in my arms the entire night.

So, when she didn't answer my text two days later, I was immediately anxious. And I couldn't shake it — not with my morning run in the freezing mist covering Boston, not at practice — where Julep was uncharacteristically absent, and not as I turned in my last assignment before the holiday. I still had no text from her, and I tried calling, only for her to send me to voicemail.

So, I texted again.

Me: Hey, didn't see you at the stadium today... you okay?

I still hadn't heard from her when I made it back to the house and found my roommates setting up for a party.

"What's this?" I asked, tossing my bag against the bay window bench. Leo and Kyle were carrying a keg into the kitchen.

"What's it look like?" Kyle shot back like the smartass he was.

I glared at him, readying all the reasons why a party was the last thing we needed two days before a big game. But before I got the chance, they set the keg down and Leo walked over to me.

"The team is stressed, Cap," he said, no hint of his usual carefree smile. "Between the pressure of the game this weekend and all the tests... we all need a break."

"Most of us already finished our last classes before the holiday today, anyway," Kyle said. "And those who haven't

aren't going to pick up a textbook until after the game Saturday. We all know that."

He had a point.

I sighed, folding my arms as I considered.

"Low key," I told them, pointing a finger right at Kyle when he smiled victoriously. "I mean it. The team, whatever girls they want to invite, but that's it. Not an open house. I don't want to see a single player doing anything other than drinking beer. And we start kicking people out at two at the latest. We have practice tomorrow."

"It'll be a light one," Kyle argued. "It's the day before an away game."

"Take the party past two and I'll show you a *light practice*," I threatened.

Kyle rolled his eyes and waved me off but didn't push me — and I knew even if he was annoyed by my decision, he'd respect it.

No one wanted a grueling practice the day before we played.

Every bone in my body ached as I climbed the stairs to my room. All I wanted was to eat, shower, and crawl into bed. I was exhausted — mentally and physically.

But now, I had a party to host.

I flopped down face-first onto my mattress, heaving a sigh and allowing myself a moment of self-pity before I rolled over and stared up at the ceiling. My phone was practically burning in my pocket, so I pulled it out, stomach dropping when I still didn't see anything from Julep.

Me: If you're sick, I can bring you soup.

I wondered if that was too much, so I threw in a joke, too.

Me: Or I could come give you a massage... from the inside.

I could imagine her rolling her eyes at the text as I peeled myself out of bed and jumped in the shower. I had to move

before I could get too comfortable, otherwise I'd never get up.

There was still no response from her when I got out.

I tried one last time.

Me: I hope you're okay. I miss you.

I stared at the text, debated, and then deleted it all and tried again.

Me: Party at ours tonight. Team is stressed... me included. If you feel up to it, you should come.

I hadn't even put the phone down before I got a response.

Julep: I'll be there.



I chose not to drink — not because the thought of an ice-cold beer or two didn't sound appealing, but because I wanted to be in my best shape for practice tomorrow and the game this weekend.

I noticed I wasn't the only one on the team making good decisions, because the keg was lasting longer than it usually did, most of the guys nursing their beers and drinking water in-between.

We liked to party, and we clearly needed to cut loose. But we were still athletes, and performance on the field outweighed everything else.

I was honestly pleasantly surprised that my roommates had followed my wishes. It was a party, sure, but it was small, low key, and only about half as loud as our usual.

It was almost eleven and Julep hadn't shown yet.

I made the rounds, checking in with various pods of players scattered around the house before I found Zeke, Clay, and Leo in the kitchen.

“Hey, Cap,” Zeke greeted me, lifting his cup of water and tapping it against the side of mine.

“Boys,” I said in return, taking a sip before I sat my hip against the edge of the counter. We had a sweeping view of the house here, and we took in everything happening. “No girls tonight?”

“You know Riley,” Zeke said. “She’s serious when it comes to school. Her last test is on Monday, and she doesn’t want to have to study when we’re on the road.”

I nodded, my already high respect for her ticking up a notch. “And G?”

Clay smirked. “Reading dirty books and highlighting all the best parts for us to try after the win.”

I arched a brow. “You mean when we get back to campus, right? Since Coach has made it clear you two aren’t allowed to be in the same hotel room when we travel.”

“Of course,” Clay said, holding up his hands in mock surrender. His wink gave away that he was full of shit.

“You’re one to talk, Cap,” Leo said, pouring himself a shot of tequila. I grabbed it and poured it down the sink before he could take it, pointing at the keg. I meant what I said about nothing other than beer. Begrudgingly, he sighed and refilled his cup before adding, “We all heard about the girl in the pool.”

I’d become so good at covering for us now that my neck didn’t even heat as I blinked at him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure,” he said, wagging his brows. “You just don’t want to tell us who she is.”

“I bet I could guess,” Zeke said.

I took a drink of water, bored. “If you could, you’d know more than me. I didn’t even catch a name.”

Leo let out a shocked laugh as Clay covered his mouth with one fist and said *ohhh*.

“Damn, Cap,” Leo said, smacking my chest. “Ruthless. Even *I* get the name first.”

“What’s the point?” I said, hoping I sounded just a nonchalant as I did every season when I happened to let a girl take me home for a bit of stress relief.

“Yeah, yeah,” Clay said, smirking. “We all know. No time for anything but football for Holden Moore.”

Leo started in on telling us a story about some girl on the cheerleading squad who’d been playing hard to get, and I let my eyes wander the party, looking for Julep.

I felt Zeke watching me.

I glanced his way, and he just arched a brow, stepping a little closer to me and away from the other two. “Who ya looking for?”

“Just looking.”

“Ah,” he said, lips turning down as he nodded. “So... you wouldn’t want to know that Julep is here?”

I knew I did a shit job of covering the way my whole body stilled at the mention of her name. “Is she?”

Zeke’s lips flattened. “You suck at pretending you’re not into her.”

“Apparently not,” I said, glancing at Clay and Leo who I was fairly confident didn’t have a clue.

“She’s drunk,” Zeke said after a moment.

That made my grip on my cup tighten a bit, the plastic crunching.

“And I saw some kid I’ve never seen before offering her a Xan.”

That did it.

My façade cracked, and I tossed my cup in the trashcan before grabbing him by the shirt and dragging him away from Clay and Leo.

“Where is she?”

“Game room,” he answered, nodding toward the back hall. I turned, but he caught my sleeve. “She doesn’t seem herself,

man. Be careful.”

I shrugged him off, putting it out of my mind that he clearly saw right through our bullshit and knew more than he should. I could deal with that another time.

Right now, I had to find her.

Shoving through the building crowd, I tried not to let my thoughts spiral as I searched the house. She wasn't in the game room like Zeke had said, so I tried the bathroom, and then the living room.

No sign of her.

I climbed the stairs to my room, but she wasn't there either, and then I lost every fuck I had about staying calm and started beating open the other bedroom doors.

Leo's was empty. Braden had a girl half naked in his and was pissed I'd interrupted. I barely got an apology out before I left and stormed toward Kyle's. I kicked the door open.

And there she was.

Although, with just one look, I knew the real Julep wasn't really there at all.

Her body was there, sure — sweat glistening on her chest, hair matted to her slick neck and forehead, dark eyes nearly black where they were glazed and half-open. But there was barely any light beyond those eyes, barely any recognition of me towering in that doorway and Kyle jumping off the bed.

“What the fuck, bro?” he yelled, getting up in my face. “A little privacy, please?”

Julep's reaction was delayed, her body swaying a bit as she grabbed the strap of her tank top that had slipped down her arm and pushed it back up over her shoulder. Her hand slapped down to her lap afterward, head bobbing forward like she'd fall asleep at any second.

My jaw was so tight I swore I felt a tooth crack from the pressure, and I glared at Kyle, then at her, then back at him.

I knew my brother. I knew that, even though he pissed me off, he wouldn't do anything with Julep — or any girl — in a state like this. But the fact that he had her in his room *at all* pissed me off. He should have taken her home and put her straight to bed. He should have found *me*, because he knew even when I tried to hide it that there was something between us.

The one thing he *shouldn't* have done was take her up here to his room.

My hands tightened into fists, neck straining as I glared at him. “Get out.”

“It's my room.”

“I don't give shit.”

“I'm looking out for her just like you would.”

“SHE'S NOT YOURS TO LOOK OUT FOR!”

The possession that ripped through me in that moment surprised me even more than it did Kyle, who let his head snap back like he'd caught me red-handed in a crime he'd suspected me guilty of for years.

He scoffed, or laughed, maybe both as he shook his head. Then, a sneer found his stupid face. It was like he went from pissed off to amused in the span of two seconds.

“Hey, don't be jealous, Cap,” he said, standing and crossing the room. He threw his arm around me.

Julep only blinked, all coherence gone, and I kept my eyes on her as Kyle leaned in close where only I could hear him.

“I told you I'd have her in my bed by the end of the season,” he said.

It was a joke. I *knew* it was a joke, just something he said to rile me up and push my buttons. The problem was that it worked.

And he pushed the wrong fucking button.

I blacked out.

There was no other explanation.

Rage hit me so hard it took my vision and hearing and all good sense with it.

Control didn't exist in that moment, no reassuring, calm voice to tell me how to rationally handle the situation. All I knew was that Julep wasn't okay, that she hadn't been for some time now, and that she'd gotten too drunk, too messed up tonight. This wasn't just someone not knowing their limit and getting fucked up. This was someone who knew their limit and sped past it, anyway.

It was a desperate cry for help — one that Kyle was taking advantage of.

I felt my body moving, my fist connecting, my knuckles aching in pain, but I saw nothing but red.

Distantly, I heard Julep scream.

When I came to, I had Kyle pinned on the ground. His nose was bloody, eyes already bruising, and my fist was suspended by my face and ready to land another blow.

But I restrained, willing my breathing to calm as I kept that hand frozen in place.

“Jesus, Holden! What the fuck is wrong with you?” Kyle kicked me off him, scrambling to his feet and running to the mirror. He cursed when he saw himself. “I think you broke my fucking nose.”

“I'll break more if you say anything like that about her ever again.”

He spit out blood, shaking his head as his eyes found mine. “If you think Coach won't hear about this, then you don't know me.”

“If you go running to Coach with problems you have with me, then you'll prove I know *exactly* who you are.”

That quieted him, and he stormed toward me like he was ready to duke it out. I braced, but he stopped right in front of me, looking me up and down like I disgusted him.

“She’s not worth it,” he spat, shaking his head. “And neither are you, you washed up sonofabitch. We were better off with Russo.”

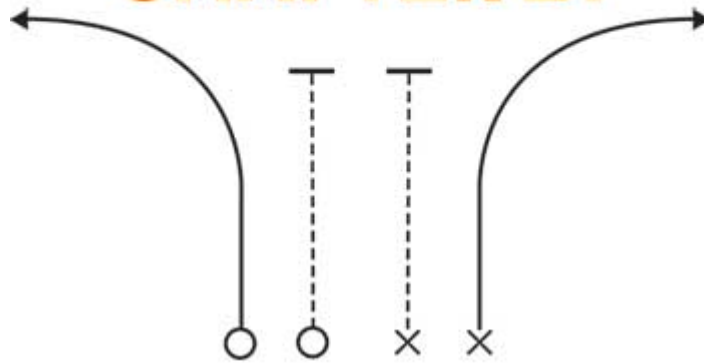
With that last dig, he brushed past me, knocking my chest hard with his shoulder. I rolled my eyes once he was gone, the anger I’d held turning into annoyance. I didn’t give a fuck what he said about me. That was just who he was. And by Saturday, he’d be acting like nothing happened at all.

Right now, the only thing that mattered was Julep.

“Oh, God, Holden,” she said, covering her mouth, her eyes shining. “I’m so sorry.”

Then, before she could cry, she vomited.

CHAPTER 21



Julep

I woke up in the middle of the night with the worst headache of my life.

I was in Holden's bed.

At first, I panicked, heart thundering faster and faster as I tried to make out what time it was, to make out *where* I was. Everything was foggy and in slow motion, like being in a dream. But when the familiar scent of him washed over me, when I realized it was his NBU football t-shirt I wore and his pillow I had drooled on, I calmed a bit.

Then, I remembered.

And I panicked all over again.

I remembered waking up on what would have been my little sister's twenty-first birthday, remembered putting a candle in one of the muffins I'd made the day before and singing a sad version of *happy birthday* before I blew it out and cried.

I remembered ditching my exam and calling in to work.

Calling in to *life*.

I remembered crawling into bed and staying there, ignoring every text and call that came through from Holden. I

laid there all day, letting my memory torture me, almost *savoring* every minute that I reminded myself what a piece of scum I was.

And then, at some point, I started drinking.

Mary was at work. Dad had flown Mom in and, though he'd invited me to dinner with them, I knew he didn't really mean it.

I knew *she* didn't want me there — especially not today.

So, I stayed home, and I drank half a bottle of wine and stared at the texts from Holden. I was still staring at the phone when his text about the party came through.

After that, I drank another bottle and a half.

And when I got to the Pit, some kid had offered me a Xanax.

I'd popped one without thinking twice.

Relapsing was easy. It was almost *too* easy on a day like today. All the reasons I had for staying relatively sober, for sticking to a glass of wine and maybe a joint now and then flew out the window. I couldn't remember why I didn't get obliterated every night when my brain was beating on me like that. In fact, it seemed like the only thing to do.

I was weak. And now, as I sobered, I was ashamed.

My head was still foggy as I groaned and tried to sit up in bed, my mouth as dry as the desert. I needed water. I needed Advil.

A flash of Holden punching Kyle sparked through the haze, and my eyes shot open wide.

Oh, God.

I started breathing hard, covering my mouth as more and more of the fuzzy memory came back to me. I remembered Kyle finding me with the group of kids who had given me a Xanax, remembered him saying he wanted to show me his room. I remembered following him, knowing it was a bad

idea, but having that same self-destructive *who the fuck cares* attitude that always found me on this day.

I remembered Holden bursting in.

I remembered not being able to speak, to move.

I remembered...

Wait, did I...

No, I didn't... God, please, I didn't, right?

I looked down at Holden's t-shirt I wore and knew even without confirmation that I had.

I'd thrown up.

He'd helped me. He'd undressed me and cleaned me. I knew from my breath alone that he'd had me brush my teeth, probably had me drink water, too.

He'd found me alone in his teammate's room, and instead of thinking the worst, instead of being pissed, instead of judging me... he'd helped me.

My chest burned, and I covered the spot where my heart ached against the bones trapping it in my body. It wanted out, and I didn't blame it.

I wanted to tear it out and set it free, too.

Holden stirred, his hand blindly reaching out like he wanted to pull me into him. When he felt the bed and I wasn't laying there, he sat up quickly, his hair mussed and eyes tired. He looked a little worried, but then he saw me, and a long exhale left his chest as if he was relieved I was still there.

"Hey, you okay?"

He started rubbing my back.

I'd been a monster — a drunk, drugged-up, disgusting monster, and here he was, consoling me, taking care of me, asking if I was okay. He'd been through his own tragedy, arguably worse than the one I faced, and yet he woke up and tackled every day like he was lucky to be alive.

He *lived* for the loved ones he'd lost.

I self-destructed for mine.

I looked at him like he was insane, like he was *blind* to not see me for who I really was.

He swallowed, shaking his head as if to tell me I was wrong before I could even speak the words out loud. “Come here.”

Then, he pulled me into his chest, and I broke.

I *shattered*, surrendering to every bit of the self-abuse I had stocked up and waiting to be released. I let it pour over me, taking every hit like I deserved every last one.

Because I did.

It was ugly, the way I sobbed as he held me, each breath sawing in and out of me with more and more effort. I kept wiping at my nose before it could drip onto his shirt, but he didn't pull away, didn't loosen his grip.

“I'm so sorry,” I whispered, my throat raw.

“It's okay.”

“No, it's not.”

I pulled back, swiping at my face like it was the tears fault I'd been such a disaster. Holden lessened his hold only enough for me to sit up, but he still held me, his hands on where my legs were crossed under me. He smoothed his thumbs over my skin, watching me, waiting, but not rushing.

For a long time, we just sat there in the dark. I had no idea what time it was. The house was quiet, so I figured it had to be late, but it wasn't quite early enough for the sun to greet us. I stared at where Holden's hands held my legs, tears continually building in my eyes before they'd slip silently down my cheeks and I'd wipe them away.

“You asked me why I do pole,” I finally said, my voice low and crackling. “Well, this is why.”

Holden didn't say a word, just kept smoothing his thumb over my skin.

“Because it’s the only thing that helps me cope with the fact that I’m the reason my sister is dead.”

“You’re not the—”

“Yes, I am,” I said before he could finish. “I am. I dragged her to a party. I teased her about being a good girl. I dared her to take molly, to try something new, to be a fucking kid for once instead of thinking about her future — which she did. All the time.” I shook my head, tears blurring my vision again. “I told her I’d stay sober, be her spirit guide. All I’d had was a little weed. But the guys who gave us the molly, I didn’t know them well. I... I just thought I could trust them.” I let out a sick, sarcastic laugh. It sounded even more stupid when I said it out loud, but when I was seventeen, I hadn’t thought twice about it. “Because I’d partied with them a few times,” I added flatly.

Holden’s thumb had stilled, and I could feel it, how ice was running in his veins just as it was in mine.

“I knew something was wrong. I knew...” Pain severed my chest, and I stopped, pressing a hand over my heart as if I could stop it. “She wasn’t acting right. I knew what it looked like when someone was rolling, and that wasn’t what was happening. And then the guys, they tried to... they...”

A sob ripped from my throat, and Holden pulled me into him — not just a hug, but fully into his lap, his massive arms wrapping me up as if he could shield me from the nightmare I relived every second of every day.

“They knew what they’d done. She was out of it, and they were taking off her clothes. She was barely even *awake*.” I sobbed. “I stopped them. I kicked and clawed until they were calling me a crazy bitch. They left us alone. But she was already... it was too late... I drove as fast as I could to the hospital, but I knew. I already knew before I got there that she was gone.”

“Shhh,” Holden said, rocking me, squeezing me tight.

“I killed her,” I choked. “I killed her, Holden, and I wish it was me who’d died, instead.”

He held me tighter, and I sobbed, emotion I thought I'd buried long ago exploding out of me like I was an erupting volcano. I couldn't breathe, couldn't calm down, couldn't do anything but fall completely apart.

It struck me that it was because, for the first time, I felt safe to do so.

"Every year on her birthday, I fall apart. But I've been so good this last year," I said pathetically. "I thought maybe this time..."

I sniffed, shaking my head.

"I tried not to. I tried to just stay home, to ride it out, to not drink... but I... I just..." I licked my lips, tasting the tears there. "I just wanted the pain to go away. I wanted to feel numb. I wanted to feel nothing at all."

He nodded, like he knew already, like he understood.

And he *should* have.

He'd lost his sister, too. Not just his sister, but his parents. He'd lost *everything*.

The fact that he could still go on living life made me feel even more like a monster, a failure, a coward.

My fists twisted in his shirt, clutching him to me as I cried and cried. But after a while, I found my breath again, and Holden pulled back, tilting my chin up to look at him.

"It's not your fault."

"It is," I argued, sniffing back more tears. "Even my mom knows it. You know, she hasn't said more than a few words to me since it happened?" I shook my head. "She blames me, even if she won't say it. And she thinks I'm next. She saw me going off the rails when Abby died and it was almost like... it was almost like she expected it, like she *wanted* it."

"That's not true."

I shook my head, unconvinced. "And Dad," I added, chest squeezing with pain. "When he looks at me? I don't see love,

or pride, or understanding. All I see is disappointment.” I hiccupped. “He wishes it was Abby who lived instead of me.”

“Your dad loves you,” Holden argued. “He loves you so much that it terrifies him. Why do you think he threatens all of us within an inch of our life for so much as looking at you?”

“Because he’s worried I’ll end up knocked up or in a viral gang-bang video online.”

Holden grabbed my face. “Because he cares about you, and it worries him sick to think about anything bad ever happening to you — even something as small as getting your heart broken by a stupid jock.”

I knew he was trying to lighten the mood, to make me smile, but I couldn’t. It was impossible. The only thing I could do was spiral.

“It’s not your fault that Abby is gone,” he said, forcing me to look at him. “Do you hear me? It’s not your fault. And the fact that you care so deeply for her that you help her live on through your own life proves that you’re not this evil monster you think you are.”

I shook my head, over and over.

“You are a great sister, and a great daughter, and a great person. Have you made some mistakes? Maybe. But we all do.” His eyes searched mine. “What matters is that you’re still here, and you’re trying. You are working on it.” He swallowed. “That’s all we can do.”

Something of a laugh came out of my nose, and I looked down, away from him, wanting so desperately to believe him even while everything inside of me pushed that sentiment away.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. *Nothing* matters. Want to know why?” I looked him right in the eye. “Because in the end, we all die. And to be honest, I can’t wait for my time to come. I can’t wait to be free.”

It was the only thing I’d said that night that made him crack.

I saw it the moment I said it, I saw how his breath hitched, how tears pricked his eyes, how his jaw tightened and his throat constricted. I waited for him to explode, to tell me I was selfish for thinking that way.

Instead, he slid his hands back, cradling my neck, his thumbs on my jaw and holding me still as his eyes bore into mine.

“It does matter,” he breathed. “*You* matter.”

I blinked, setting free two teardrops that went racing down each of my cheeks.

“You are enough, Julep,” he whispered, the words wrecking me and healing me all at once. “And you are needed. Most of all by me.”

He swallowed the cry that those words elicited from me, pulling me into him and kissing me as if to seal that sentiment inside of me until I believed it. He didn’t kiss me with the passion to take my clothes off, he kissed me with the desperation to save me.

And I was hanging on just enough to let him.

I melted, and he took my weight as he kissed one wet cheek and then the other, over and over, tracing the trails my tears had made before finding my lips again. I tasted my pain when he kissed me, felt myself trembling in his lap as he wrapped me in his arms and held me as tightly as he could.

He kissed me until my tears dried up. He kissed me until my lips were raw. He kissed me, and then I pulled him down onto me, tearing at his clothes until we were bare and pressed against each other.

I couldn’t get close enough, couldn’t satiate my need for him until he was inside me.

Once he was, everything slowed — my heart, his breath, my panic, his thrusts. His fingertips curled around my shoulders, and he held me there as he plunged into me, as I wrapped my arms and legs around him and pleaded for more.

This wasn't my thigh hiked up and him fucking me in a dark closet, it wasn't me bent over a desk with my pants around my ankles, it wasn't fast and furious and filthy like so many of our times together had been.

This was passion, pure and raw and soul deep.

This was Holden Moore seeing me for absolutely everything that I was — every chaotic, fucked-up, maimed piece of me.

And somehow finding it beautiful enough that he wanted to claim it.

So, I let him. I opened in every way that I could, invited him inside every dark crack of my being and asked him to fill it with his light.

I need you, I told him with every kiss.

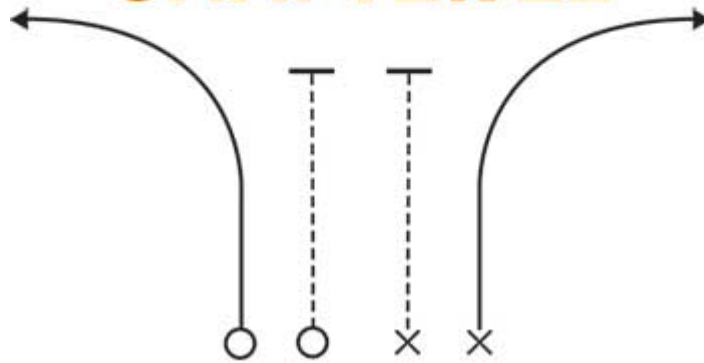
I'm here, he said back with every thrust of his hips.

Don't leave me, I begged with every bite of my nails into his back.

And when we finished, and he sat against the window, pulling me into his lap and kissing me hard and long and relentlessly until I was straddling him and we were connected again, I knew his answer without him uttering a single word.

I never could.

CHAPTER 22



Holden

Sunlight streamed in through my window too early that morning, the endless night blending into day as if it hadn't existed at all. In so many ways, it felt like a dream.

In so many others, it felt like an awakening.

I held Julep against me, both of us naked and wrapped up in my sheets and comforter, our body heat keeping one another warm. I had my arm under her and wrapped around her shoulder while the other held her waist. She had one leg threaded between mine, and she scrawled secret messages into my skin with a lazy fingertip.

If we'd slept, it hadn't been much. Neither of us had wanted to stop touching, to stop kissing and tasting and feeling every bit of connection humanly possible. My body hummed with a vibration I'd never felt — not like the usual sated buzz after a good fucking, but something deeper, something... *heavier*.

It had been the most sensual, erotic experience of my entire fucking life.

Julep rolled in my arms, turning until her back was pressed against my chest. I curled around her, fitting myself to her seamlessly and resting my chin in the crook of her neck. I

kissed the skin there, and a long, sweet sigh left her lips at the touch.

I knew I needed to get up soon. I didn't have to look at the time to know I probably had less than an hour before I needed to head to the stadium. But I held her tighter, closer, praying for time to hold still for just a few moments longer.

More than anything, I wanted her to know that she wasn't alone. I wanted to share something with her that I never shared with anyone, something that showed none of us react to death in "the right way."

There was no right way.

"I wanted to quit."

I said the words against the back of her neck, and Julep froze for a moment before she wiggled back against me, letting me know she was listening.

"When my mom..." Emotion strangled me, but I swallowed it down. "When she took her life, when she left me alone because she couldn't handle the pain of losing my dad and Hannah, I didn't see a point to football anymore. I didn't see a point to anything."

Julep squeezed where her hand rested on my forearm that held her to me.

"I was a ghost when my uncle Kevin came and got me, when he brought me here to New England. For months, I barely spoke to him, barely ate, barely showered. I didn't try out for the football team, no matter how he begged me. But one day, when it was the perfect kind of gray fall day for playing ball, he dragged me down to the park and made me play catch with him. He told me if I would just throw the ball for an hour, he'd leave me alone.

"I was annoyed at first. I dragged my feet on the way there and I threw the ball lopsidedly like a little kid having a hissy fit. But after a while... something came back to me. I found myself breathing easier for the first time since Mom left. I felt the closest thing to joy I could manage. Uncle Kevin didn't say a word, didn't try to talk to me or give me any kind of

therapy. But with that one simple hour in the park, he reminded me of something I'd forgotten."

Julep angled her head a bit toward me, like she wanted to know.

"That I love life. I love *my* life. I love my mom, even if she hurt me by leaving. And I love my dad and my sister. I loved having the family that I had, the life that I had — even if it was ripped from me too soon. I love my uncle. I love that despite everything he had going on in his own life, it wasn't too much for him to sacrifice a little more and do everything he could to help me. And what really hit me in that moment was that I remembered I love football. I *love* football. And just like pole saved you, it was the game that saved me."

I was quiet for a long while, and Julep turned in my arms until she was facing me again. She didn't have to say a word for me to see that she was thankful I'd shared that with her, that I'd shown that she wasn't alone in feeling the way she did.

My throat tightened the longer I looked into her eyes, the more my fingers trailed through her silky hair. And then my heart spoke before I could consider whether it was better or not to muzzle it.

"I want to be with you."

Julep's bottom lip trembled, and a tear leaked out of the corner of her eye and down over the pillowcase.

"I see you, everything that you are, and I've never needed anything more in my life. And don't say we can't," I warned her when she opened her mouth. "I know the risk. I know. But... maybe, if we can show him how good we are together, your dad will understand."

Julep's face lit up a little with an amused curl of her lips, the first I'd seen in twenty-four hours at least. "You don't know my father."

"I don't, that's true," I conceded. "But I'm starting to know you. And I want to know more."

Julep sighed.

“Please, just think ab—”

“Would you let me speak?”

She smiled a little with the question, shaking her head before she cuddled into me more.

“I want to be with you, too.”

Relief smacked into me, and I pulled her into me and kissed her while she laughed against my lips. But then she pressed her palm into my chest.

“But...”

I groaned. “No, no buts. Except this one,” I added, squeezing her ass.

She rolled her eyes. “*But* I want to wait until after the season to tell anyone. Especially my dad. He’s already stressed out enough as it is, and I think if we stand any chance of getting him to understand, to be okay with this... we need to wait until he’s in a better headspace. Until he’s not in Coach mode.”

I considered, chest tightening with how much I hated the thought of waiting at least another two months to claim Julep the way I really wanted to.

But she was saying yes.

She was saying she wanted me, too.

In the end, that was all that mattered to me.

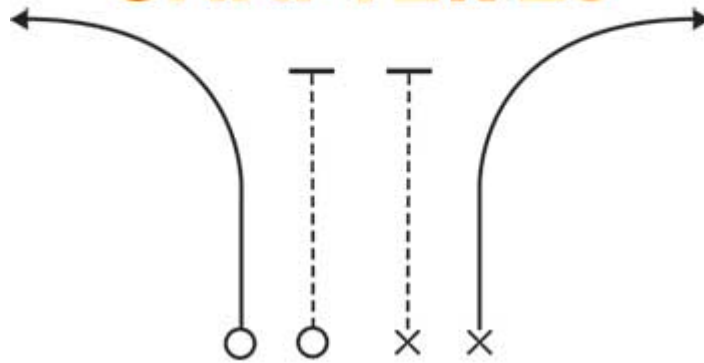
“Okay,” I conceded. “With one exception.”

Julep arched a brow. “Are we in negotiations now?”

I smiled, sweeping her hair behind her ear. I let my thumb rest there against her jaw, smoothing over the bone.

“I want you to meet my uncles.”

CHAPTER 23



Julep

“Julep, you tramp!”

I barked out a laugh at the exclamation, even more so when Nathan swatted Kevin for saying it.

“Don’t be a sore loser,” Nathan said, sliding a domino from his hand across the table. He played it where I had just played the one that had elicited the insult from his husband.

“I’ll be whatever kind of loser I want to be, thank you,” Kevin said, glaring at me as he took a domino from the draw pile. He pouted a little more when he had to draw another, but on the third one, he was able to play. “And I’m more salty than sore. It’s not fair that this girl is beating us this badly her first time in our home.”

He winked at me then, and I smiled, looking down at my hand as Holden debated where to play. Soft jazz music crooned from the speaker in the kitchen. We were in the final round of a heated game of chicken foot.

It was *safer* for me to look at my hand than it was to look across the table at Holden. Every time I did, my ovaries nearly exploded. We’d been at his uncles’ house for almost two hours now, and his baby cousin had been in his arms nearly the entire time. She was the size of *maybe* two footballs, and he

cradled her just the same — casually, effortlessly, as if she belonged there.

Seeing a hot, buff quarterback cuddling a tiny baby girl was the recipe for more than just a few disasters.

“You know, Unc,” Holden said as he played a domino, and then I immediately played the one in my hand. “You should really stay away from any jobs in war strategy.”

Kevin frowned, glaring at his husband as he played a domino and went down to only two left in his hand. I had three, and Kevin had at least six.

“Why, because I let my emotions get the best of me and call out ruthless players?” he asked, playing his domino.

“No,” Holden said, and then he moved where his arm had been holding Joanne, revealing that where we all thought he was hiding his dominoes was actually vacant. He played his final one on his line. “Because you’re too easily distracted by the decoy.”

“Noooo!” Uncle Kevin cried, and then he covered his chest like there had been an arrow shot through it, making a cinematic scene as he fell to the ground. Joanne had been dozing in Holden’s arms, but the commotion startled her, and she started crying.

“Oh, it’s okay, Jojo. That’s just your dad being dramatic. Can you say *dramatic*?” Holden teased, bouncing Joanne in his lap a little to try to soothe her.

“Can you say *hungry*, nephew?” Kevin joked as he used the back of the chair to help himself stand. “Because that’s what you’re going to be when I kick you out before dinner is served.”

“Like hell you will,” Nathan interjected. “This smoked pork butt has taken me all damn day, and every single one of you is going to stuff yourselves until you explode.”

“Speaking of exploding,” Holden said, grimacing as he held his cousin toward his uncle. “*Doodie* calls.”

Kevin lit up, the brightest smile on his face as he took his daughter from Holden's arms. "Did my princess make a poopy?"

Joanne cried as the rest of us laughed, and then Kevin winked at me and carried her back toward one of the bedrooms.

Nathan stood next. "I'm going to start prepping the sides. Why don't you two clear this up and set the table?" He paused, looking at me. "We're so happy to have you here, Julep."

My cheeks were warm when I replied, "I'm happy to be here, too."

Nathan turned his smile on Holden then, lingering for a moment before he left us.

When he did, Holden shook his head, grabbing the bag for the dominoes as I worked on collecting them off the table. "Well, I know I warned you it was a riot around here, but hopefully it hasn't been so much that you block my number when we get back to campus."

I smiled. "It's amazing."

"You have an interesting definition for that word."

"It's chaotic, yes," I agreed. "But... in the best way. It's warm. It's family." Something in my heart ached. "I haven't felt anything like this. At least, not for a long time."

Holden paused where he was cleaning up, watching me for a moment before he dropped the bag of dominoes and rounded the table. He swept me into his arms.

"They love you."

"Who?"

"My uncles."

I chuckled. "I think Kevin wants to murder me."

"Nah, it's me he's after now. Because in case you didn't calculate the score after that last round," he added, peeking over my shoulder at the score sheet. "You took *second*, sweetheart. No one is threatened by second place."

I smiled sweetly up at him, pressing onto my tiptoes like I was going to kiss that smug smile off his face. “You’re hot when you’re cocky.”

“That so?” he asked on a smirk, his hands finding my hips.

Right before our lips met, I punched him in the gut.

Holden let out an *oof* of a laugh as he doubled over, and I turned just in time to catch his uncle Kevin walking in with a freshly changed and smiling Joanne on his hip.

He pointed at me as he sat down with a wide grin. “I love this girl.”

Conversation was easy as Nathan served dinner and we all ate. There was melt-in-your mouth shredded pork butt that had bathed all day in a tangy mojo sauce, an out-of-this-world potato salad, handmade-from-scratch dinner rolls, and watermelon. It felt like summer in the middle of holiday season, and it was delicious — the best meal I’d had in months. I ate every last scrap of my first serving before going back for more.

“So, what made you pick athletic training, Julep?” Nathan asked me halfway through the meal.

I swallowed the food in my mouth and smiled. “Well, originally? I just did it to make my dad happy.”

He frowned. “I hate to hear that.”

“Trust me, I hated doing it,” I admitted. “But, at the time, I was kind of a mess. Still am some days. Dad thought if I had a major in something where he could work closely with me, he could help me. So... I decided to try, if even just to get him off my back a little.”

Nathan smiled like he understood.

“But,” I continued. “Shortly after I declared it my major, I found pole.”

“Pole?” Kevin inquired curiously.

“Pole fitness. Tricks, dancing, all of it,” I explained.

“Stop it!” Nathan’s eyes grew wide. “I watch videos of pole dancers all the time. I swear, it’s mesmerizing. I could watch for hours.”

Kevin cleared his throat with a perched brow. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, don’t worry, honey. They’re mostly females,” Nathan assured his husband. “Mostly,” he added, taking a sip of his wine and quickly steering the focus back to me. “Anyway, so you found pole.”

“I did,” I said on a smile. “And suddenly, I was really interested in my major. I loved learning about the way the body works, how it connects to different sports. There are certain injuries that flare up for every athlete, depending on what position or sport they play, and pole is no different. If we don’t work both sides, we can really mess up our spine, our neck, or develop muscles in a really unbalanced way. And so many of the tricks require an understanding of anatomy, of flexibility and mobility. So, what started as something I did for my dad turned into something I do for me.”

Holden grabbed my hand and squeezed. “I didn’t know that.”

“Well, now you do.”

He smiled. “I love learning new things about you.”

My cheeks flushed, and his uncles shared a knowing glance before turning the conversation to one in-between just the two of them so Holden and I could have a moment.

The sun set as Nathan and Kevin opened their second bottle of wine — though Holden and I opted for water — and when Joanne was tucked in for the night, we moved to the sitting room and gathered around the fireplace, talking and laughing until my voice was hoarse.

It was different, seeing Holden around his family. He didn’t take on the stern leadership role that I was so used to seeing him in with the team. Here, he was relaxed, comfortable. He laughed — a *lot*. He played with his niece and threw jabs at his uncle. Every ounce of stress had melted away

the moment we walked through the door. Even his *posture* showed he was at ease.

It was a nice change, seeing as how the last couple of weeks had been hard on him. He'd led the team to a win the weekend before Thanksgiving, which had secured them a bowl game. And now that they'd won another, all their focus was on waiting to hear the bowl announcements on Sunday, to see if they'd made the playoffs.

If the sports analysts were right, they were a shoo-in.

I knew that was all Holden wanted — the playoff bowl game, the championship win, and then, ultimately, to be drafted. But just because he was close to getting what he wanted didn't mean the pressure was off. If anything, it had doubled, and I'd felt his tension mounting.

Of course, helping him *relieve* said tension had become my favorite pastime.

In a lot of ways, not much had changed since that night at the Pit. We still snuck away every second we could get to be together, and we still kept it a secret. Well, *almost* a secret, anyway. Riley, Giana, and Mary knew — though they still thought we were just hooking up. And apparently, Zeke had his suspicions confirmed that night of the party. Holden's uncles were now also in that circle of trust, but that was exactly what it was — a tight, small ring of people we knew wouldn't put either of us in jeopardy.

It was my father we still needed to be wary of.

"You two should call it," Nathan said when I covered a yawn. "You've still got a bit of a drive back to campus, and traffic is always a nightmare heading into the city no matter what time it is."

Holden nodded, standing and helping Nathan clear glasses. "Yeah, Coach has us practicing early tomorrow. He wants us all to get some rest tomorrow night before the big announcement Sunday."

"We already booked our flights and hotel," Kevin said.

Holden paused. "We don't even know if we made it yet."

“Oh, we know just fine,” Nathan answered for him, then he and Holden disappeared into the kitchen as Kevin turned toward me.

“How’s your dad hanging on with all the bowl madness up in the air?”

I sighed, rubbing my palms down the length of my jeans. “He’s always a little crazy during the season, but I can tell he’s even more wound up than usual. He gets more controlling in these situations, kind of like a helicopter parent, but with the players instead of me.”

Kevin smiled.

“To be honest, I haven’t seen much of him outside of when our paths cross at the stadium.”

“What about Thanksgiving?”

I cleared my throat. Not even Holden knew that I’d spent that holiday alone. I told him I was with Mary and her family, but it had just been me, a bowl packed with marijuana, and a Christmas movie marathon.

“Uh, he flew down to see my mom.”

“Oh,” Kevin said. “I didn’t realize she wasn’t here with you.”

“She loves our home in Alabama too much to ever leave. She’s got all her church friends there, and her yoga groupies.” I smiled, but it fell a bit too quickly.

“You miss her?”

I shrugged. “I missed her long before I didn’t live under the same roof as her anymore.”

Kevin frowned, and when I saw his expression, I realized I’d said too much without giving context.

“We don’t exactly see eye to eye.”

“Ah,” he said, and then he leaned forward, balancing his elbows on his knees. “I know that feeling well.”

I nodded, staring at where my hands were folded in my lap.

“We don’t get to choose our parents, and sometimes, I think we forget they’re humans,” Kevin said. He looked a lot like Holden in that moment — same dimples, same sharp jaw line and bright green eyes. It made me wonder if he and Holden’s dad had been close to twins when they were younger. “But they have complex emotions just like we do, and sometimes, when they’re working through them, we’re collateral damage.”

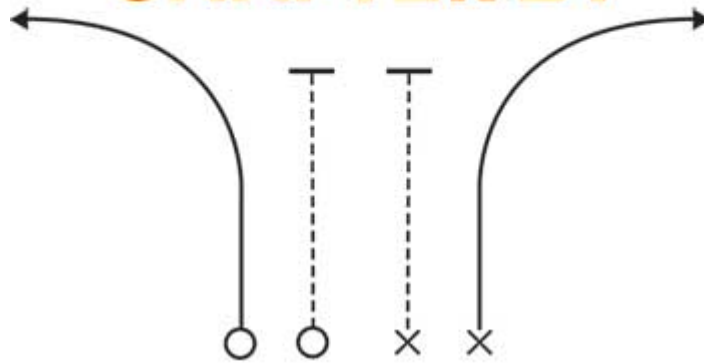
“I think she’s worked through her emotions just fine,” I said. “And decided in that process that she’d rather forget she has a screw-up daughter.”

“You’re not a screw up,” he said quickly. “I know that just from one night with you, and my bet is that she knows it, too. Give her time. Even if you’ve given her a lot of it already. She just might surprise you.”

I breathed a laugh through my nose. “And if she doesn’t?”

“Ah, well, then you do what I did,” he said, sitting back and spreading both arms over the back of the love seat. His hands gestured to his surroundings as he did. “You make a family of your own.”

CHAPTER 24



Holden

“*Goddamn*it, Moore!”

Coach blew the whistle before Leo could even finish the route and run the ball in for a touchdown — which is exactly what he would have done. I ground my teeth before turning to face him.

“Are you trying to piss me off today?”

“I don’t have to try very hard, do I?”

His head snapped back. “Excuse me?”

I bit my lip against the urge to push him more, to fight. He was being more of an asshole than usual, and I knew it was because it was the last practice we had before bowl reveal. He was wound tight, we all were, and tensions were high.

He glared at me for a long while, the rest of the team hanging their hands on their hips and catching their breath. I stared right back, waiting.

“I called a flat. Kyle was your man.”

“And defense was in the perfect position to sack me if I didn’t get the ball out quickly, so I called a slant instead and found Leo.”

“You don’t get to change my direction because of a hypothetical sack.”

“It wasn’t hypothetical. It would have happened. And this is my job as quarterback, to see everything and make changes when needed.”

Coach Lee’s jaw was tight, and every player on the field was tense where they watched us throw down.

“Run,” he said, and then he turned his back and walked to the sideline, knowing without having to watch that we would all do exactly as he commanded.

We ran until we nearly puked.

The rest of practice was brutal, and I was exhausted by the time I dragged my ass up my stairs to my room back at the Pit. A lot of the team was planning on going out, on closing down the bars and sleeping in until the bowl games were announced tomorrow at noon. My roommates were already in the shower. I had no plans of joining them, though. My only plans consisted of me and my bed.

That was, until I opened my bedroom door and found Julep in my sheets.

The sun was setting already, golden light showcasing flakes of dust that danced down to my hardwood floors as I shut the door behind me and dropped my bag. She was a vision in that light, one leg poking out from under the sheets, her head propped on her hand, hair down and a wavy mess as she watched me.

“How did you get in here?”

“That’s the wrong question.”

I smiled, inching toward her. “Mmm... and what is the right one?”

“Can I have one of my Christmas presents early?”

That made me chuckle, but before I could fall into bed with her, she lifted that bare foot of hers that was on top of the sheet and pressed it to my chest to stop me.

When she did, a flash of red silk contrasted with the white of my sheets.

I bit my lip on a groan, trailing one hand over her ankle, down her calf, her thigh, until I could skate a fingertip over that satin tease.

Julep smiled salaciously, and then she slowly peeled the sheets back, revealing herself inch by blissful inch. She kept her dark eyes locked on me, and my cock twitched to life as she spread out and let me take in the full view of her.

She was wrapped like a present, a giant red bow across her breasts and a sliver of fabric sufficing as a thong at the apex of her thighs.

“Merry Christmas, indeed,” I said, and Julep grinned more.

But again, when I reached for her, that damn foot came up to stop me.

“Ah-ah,” she said, and then she slowly climbed off the bed and stood in front of me. I let my eyes rake over her body as she pressed into me, and her hands slipped into the pockets of my joggers, the left one finding my phone and pulling it free. “I think this is a gift you’ll want to remember opening,” she said, tapping the phone screen a few times before she handed it to me.

When she did, the video recording screen was pulled up.

The camera pointed right at her.

I swallowed, trying to find reason through the spell she was weaving. “What are you asking me, Julep?”

She walked around me, fingertips gliding over my arms and back before she paused and reached over where I gripped the phone. She tapped the record button, and then stepped back into frame.

“I’m asking you to record me,” she breathed, pulling at the ribbon tied behind her back. It fluttered to the ground, revealing her swollen breasts. “Make a video of me on my knees for you.”

I hissed a curse as she dropped to her knees, one by one, and when I didn't follow her with the camera, she reached up and pointed it down at her.

“Focus, cameraman,” she teased. “Don't want to miss the shot.”

Her grin was playful and teasing as she unfastened the tie around my hips, tugging my joggers down until they hit my ankles. She ripped my briefs down next, and my cock sprang forward, already aching for her.

My breath hitched in my throat as she leaned forward, wrapping me in one hand and smoothing her palm up to my tip before she ran it down to the base. She squeezed with just the right pressure, months of fucking giving her the exact combination to make me groan for her. She smiled when I did, and then she brought my tip to her tongue.

And she looked up at me.

I watched in real time as well as on my phone, the image mirrored, her dark eyes heavy and heated as she swirled her tongue around the head of my cock.

“Fucking *Christ*, Julep,” I cursed, so turned on I could barely see straight as she flicked the tip of her tongue over me.

I had trouble keeping the phone steady, the camera angled right as she swirled her tongue again, this time sealing her lips over me and diving down until they met where her hand gripped my base.

I saw stars as the sensation rocked through me, and when I moaned, her nipples peaked more. It turned her on just as much as it did me, her on her knees, my cock in her mouth, her eyes locked up on the lens as I recorded her.

“You're a naughty fucking girl,” I husked as she bobbed up and then back down, taking more of me inside her this time.

“I've been *so* bad,” she agreed with a little whimper of a moan, and then she slicked me again, squeezing her hand in time with her mouth to create the most beautiful, torturous pleasure. She bobbed up, down, again and again, picking up

her speed until she released me with a pop and looked up at me while her slobber-covered hand pumped me. “I think I need to be punished.”

I slid my free hand into her hair, guiding her mouth to me again, and then I slammed into her mouth, making her gag.

She moaned even as the reflex took over, that sound enough to tell me that she wanted more. So, I rocked in again, holding her there this time until her eyes watered and she gagged once more. I let her pull back, groaning when I saw the saliva that dripped from her mouth. I ran my thumb over where it slicked her bottom lip.

“Up,” I demanded.

She stood immediately, and I knew she was on track to kiss me, but just like she had on the bed — I stopped her. I whipped her around, hand splaying the top of her back as I bent her over until her hands caught the mattress.

With one hand still holding my phone as it recorded, I ran the other down her back, over the shiny red strap of her thong, and along the plump swell of her ass. She waved it side to side a bit, like she loved the feel of my palm rubbing against it.

Then, I lifted my palm and brought it back down quick and hard, the smack of the hit ringing out in my room.

She gasped, back arching and ass poking out asking for more.

“It’s not punishment if you like it,” I mused, and I spanked her again, this time earning myself the sweetest moan of pleasure.

“Yes,” she begged.

I smoothed the red skin before smacking it again, and she moaned even louder.

Too loud.

I stilled, leaving her long enough to cross back to my door and lock it just in case. Then, I set my phone down, stripped off the rest of my clothes and walked back over to her with the camera still running.

“Quiet, baby,” I cooed as I bent over her, phone in one hand while the other slid down over her ass. I kissed her shoulder as I maneuvered a finger around her thong and pressed it deep inside her. She gasped and arched right into the touch. “Those moans are for me only.”

I stood then, taking my heat with me as I grabbed her thong in my free hand and ripped it over her ass, down her hips, dragging it roughly side by side until I had it around her ankles. Before she could even step out of the leg holes, I licked my hand and ran my wet palm over her, rubbing her clit and adding lubrication to her already dripping pussy.

She reached for me, pulling me to her and lining up my crown with her entrance. She pressed just the tip of me inside her before she released me on a moan, letting me take control. And I kept the camera rolling as I hooked my free hand in the crook of her hip and pulled her onto me, slicking myself with her, filling her all the way up in one brutal thrust.

We both moaned, and the camera shook in my hand as I withdrew and flexed in again. I didn't know what was sweeter, the feel of her squeezing around my shaft, or the view of me disappearing inside her again and again, the image somehow even filthier on that screen shining up at me.

“You look so fucking beautiful,” I praised, running my palm over her ass as I withdrew. I spanked her, diving back in and reveling in the moan she set free when I did. “So fucking perfect.”

“I want to see,” she pleaded, and slowly, she began to take control of the thrusts, moving her hips back and forth, her pussy swallowing me as her ass bounced against my pelvis. “I want to see you release. I want you to fuck me hard until you paint me with your cum.”

I bit back the curse that automatically ripped from me at the filthy words, at how they sparked the flames licking down my spine. She picked up her pace then, fucking me wildly as I let her take control and kept all my focus on holding the godforsaken camera still and in focus.

She was so wet, so turned on, so free and chaotic as she took exactly what she wanted from me. And it was too fucking hot for me to retain any control. My body shook, eyes fluttering shut before I willed them open again and grunted as my climax caught.

I pulled out at the last second, stroking my throbbing cock as I busted all over her ass, the small of her back, watching her body writhe under me the entire time as she moaned and reveled in earning just what she'd asked for. It was fucking sensational, how she moved for me, the way the last bit of light cast her in a golden glow on the screen, how my cum painted her ass and pooled in the crevice of her spine.

When I was spent, I shook like the biggest chill had just come over me, clicking off the camera and tossing my phone down to the mattress before I collapsed into it, too. I was breathing so hard I thought I might need an inhaler to regain composure, my entire body pulsing.

“Fucking hell, woman,” I breathed, rolling over as she climbed on top of me. She straddled me, reaching behind her and dragging a fingertip through my cum before sucking it right off her finger.

I shook my head, breathing out a laugh.

“My turn,” she said, and then she reached between her legs to where I was starting to soften, and she stroked me, slowly, rolling her body in time with her hands.

Like a puppet under her control, my cock grew hard again, even as I still struggled to catch my breath.

She sank down onto me as soon as I was erect, and we both hissed a moan that rippled through my body like an aftershock.

I held her hips while she rode me, steady at first, and then just as wildly as she had when I was behind her. Her tits bounced as her hands fisted in her hair, and I cursed myself for turning off the camera too early, for missing this view.

She came with a cry that was loud enough to warrant me covering her mouth with my hand. I flexed into her and held

her to me until she quivered out the last of her release, and then we both collapsed.

I didn't have to look to know we'd made a mess, that my sheets were fucked, that the release I'd painted with her had dripped down her back and over her ass and onto me and the bed and everything else as she found her own climax. But I didn't give a single fuck.

"That gift is for your eyes only," she said through her panting breaths as she sat up, carefully maneuvering herself off my lap before she reached down for my hand to help me up, too.

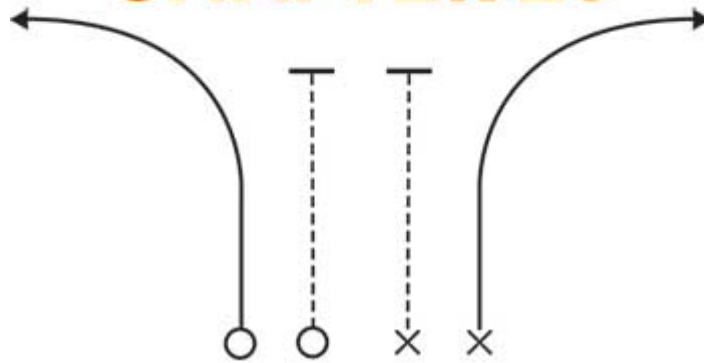
I pulled her into my arms when I was standing. "Are you kidding? I'd fucking murder someone before I'd let them see my girl like that."

"So possessive," she mused, wrapping her arms around my waist and kissing my chin.

"Admit it, you love that I am. You love that you're mine."

She leapt into my arms in answer, kissing me hard as I carried her toward the shower.

CHAPTER 25



Julep

“Girl, for the health and safety of your hair, I think I need to zip tie your hands behind your back.”

I smirked at Riley, who just blinked at me with her hair half-braided over her shoulder. This was at least the fiftieth time she’d unbraided it just to braid it again as we all waited for the bowl announcements.

Her little eyebrows tugged in together as she released her grip and let her brunette waves tumble free. “My stomach is in knots.”

“It’s going to be us,” Giana said reassuringly, smoothing a hand over Riley’s back. “We’re almost undefeated and have been in the top four for weeks.”

“We were number five before the game against Maine,” Riley argued.

Giana’s lips flattened. “For one week. One week, Riley. Just... breathe.”

Riley nodded and let out a sigh, her eyes flicking to the television screen that we were all gathered around. It was a mad house at the Pit, the entire team sardined into the living room. There were guys piled on the couch, the beanbags, and

all over the floor. My dad and the rest of the coaching staff stood along the back wall where I was with the girls.

Holden was in a recliner off to the left of the television, laughing at Leo as he did some sort of celebration dance with an invisible football tucked into his side. I couldn't make out what they were saying over the astronomical noise, but I loved how easily he smiled, how while Riley was nervous, Holden seemed to be nothing but confident and sure that they were about to be announced as one of the teams in a playoff bowl game.

He was still smiling at something when his eyes drifted to mine, and he winked, making me blush before I tucked my hair behind my ear and casually looked toward the television and then back to the girls.

We were almost *too* good at hiding now.

“Is Mary at work?” Giana asked.

I shook my head. “Nah, not today. She usually has Sundays off.”

“How come she didn't come with you?”

I snorted, folding my arms over my chest as I leaned against the wall. “I only got her over here for that party earlier this semester because I physically *dragged* her ass and promised tequila. No way would she come willingly during the daylight, sober.”

“What's her problem with the team, anyway?” Riley asked, almost like she was offended.

I shrugged. “All I know is she's made off-handed comments about Leo being an asshole. Maybe they have history and she's made up her mind about the rest of the squad based on his behavior.”

“Well, if Leo is our rep, then I can't say I'm surprised,” Giana teased. Then, her eyes darted to where she had one of the cameramen from the team set up near the front of the TV. She had him here to catch the team's reaction to the news. We were seconds away from announcements now, and he was

tapping away on his phone, not paying attention. “Excuse me,” she muttered, and then she weaved through the crowd.

“God, I’m going to be sick,” Riley said when she was gone.

I chuckled, rubbing her shoulder as the noise in the room died down a bit, everyone tuning in to the analysts on screen.

I glanced at Holden, who rocked slightly in the recliner like maybe he *was* a bit nervous. Maybe he was just so good at hiding it that he even had me fooled.

I kept my eyes on him, and right when Zeke stood up and hushed everyone, cranking up the volume on the television, Holden angled his head.

All the commotion faded to the background when that man looked at me.

There was playfulness in his gaze — a tease, a dare — but there was also something more. Something... weighted. My heart stopped in my chest before galloping back into rhythm, and Holden swallowed, as if he sensed my pulse even from across the room.

Cheers erupted in the house, but they were muted, distant. My eyes stayed locked on Holden as everyone jumped up from their seats around us, hugging and clapping and running around the room in a celebratory frenzy.

They’d made it.

They’d made it to the playoffs.

The corner of my mouth ticked up, and Holden’s mirrored it. It felt like hours that we watched each other across the room, though I knew it was only seconds, because in the next breath, Riley was hugging me, and Holden had been picked up onto two of his teammates’ shoulders.

Sound and sight rushed back to me at once, the level of it deafening as the team carried on. Riley ran from me to Zeke, crashing into him and nearly tackling him to the ground with a kiss that some of the other teammates booed and hissed at in jest. I laughed when Clay tried to one up him by dipping Giana

back in a dramatic fashion. She flushed so hard I thought her face would combust into flames, but she didn't push him away, didn't even pretend like she didn't want him all over her.

JB tapped me on the shoulder, and then we briefly hugged, his smile wide. "Looks like we're off to the races," he said.

"Looks like it."

Dad was right behind him, clapping Coach Hoover on the shoulder in a fierce hug. When they released, I held up my palm.

"Nice job, Pops," I said as he clapped his hand against mine.

"Not bad for my first year as coach, eh?"

"Not bad at all," I agreed.

He was pulled away by a member of the staff a second later, and I smiled, happier than I realized to see *him* so happy. After all we'd been through, he deserved it.

When the immediate people around me had gone on to other teammates to celebrate, I stood against the wall, watching Holden as he high-fived and hugged the entire team.

Clay jumped on top of the coffee table — which made a cracking sound that had everyone gasping and then laughing when he made a dramatic show of standing perfectly still as not to break it — then, he launched into a speech.

He held the team's full attention, and as he spoke, Holden looked at me again. This time, he nodded subtly toward the back door — the one that led to the garden. Slowly, he made his way out, and I waited a bit before doing the same.

My ears were ringing when I stepped into the chilly afternoon air, shoving my hands in the front pocket of my hoodie. I made sure no one inside was watching me before I rounded to the right of the house where the bench was.

Holden sat there waiting for me.

It was bright and sunny, but freezing, and his cheeks were already red as he grinned up at me. A puff of white came from

my lips when I sat down beside him and said, “Congratulations, Cap.”

“We did it.”

I chuckled. “You did.”

“No, *we*,” he corrected, pulling me into his arms. I was instantly warmer — body and soul. “I couldn’t have survived this season without you. I thought I was done when...”

He stopped, and I nodded. “I know.”

Holden shook his head, his eyes flicking between mine as he pulled me closer. “You were the last thing I expected this season.”

“Sorry to disrupt your plans.”

“Feel free to disrupt the rest of my life.”

A breath of a laugh found me as my cheeks heated, something about the permanence of that joke making my stomach erupt with butterflies.

“Come here,” Holden said, and he tilted my chin with his knuckles until I lifted my gaze to his. Those knuckles brushed against my cheek then, his green eyes a brilliant hue of emerald in the bright afternoon sun overhead. He swallowed, opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, and then closed it again.

“What?” I breathed.

His jaw was tight, but then he let out a little breath, shaking his head. Instead of saying another word, he lowered his mouth to mine, kissing me as his brows furrowed like it pained him to do so.

I didn’t know what he was going to say, but I felt it, too — whatever *it* was. The heaviness, the weight of something both of us were a little afraid of, just as much as we were enamored by it.

But it didn’t need to be put into words right now.

Instead, I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him in closer, my fingers tangling in the hair at his nape. He

crushed me to him, both of us sighing contently at the connection.

Kissing him felt natural, inevitable, like it was the one thing in this world I was always meant to do.

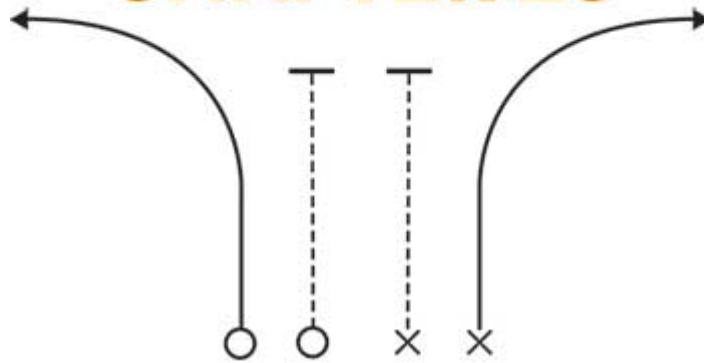
And on a freezing cold day in early December, on a little bench in a garden his hands built, Holden Moore claimed me in every way there was to be claimed. I melted into him, surrendering, letting the unfamiliar, all-encompassing joy wash over me and take me under.

My eyes fluttered shut, mind clearing and body desperate for the hour when the party would be over, and everyone would be gone, and I could sneak into his bedroom — the same way he had snuck into my heart.

For that moment in time, in Holden's arms, everything was perfect.

Until I opened my eyes and found my father standing behind him.

CHAPTER 26



Holden

I stared at my hands clasped between my knees and tried not to shit myself.

The house had been cleared, the team told enthusiastically by Coach to go out and celebrate. I knew without him having to say it that he meant everyone but me.

He'd held his smile, his composure, until the last teammate was out the door. Then, he'd told Julep to go home without so much as looking at her.

Clearly, he had intentions of dealing with me first.

Now, it was just the two of us in the living room, trash and food left everywhere from the team. The TV was still on, the analysts going on about their bowl predictions. Coach found the remote and muted it before he stood on the opposite side of the room from where I sat, his arms folded, jaw clenched shut.

I didn't know if he wanted me to speak first or wait to be spoken to. The latter seemed more probable, so I waited, trying to come up with a game plan. There was no use in lying, in trying to make excuses. He'd caught us red-handed.

At this point, the only thing I could do was apologize, ask for forgiveness, and explain the truth.

When another few minutes passed without him saying a word, I cleared my throat. “Sir, I—”

He held up a hand to silence me.

I swallowed, and another minute passed before he let out a long breath and finally looked at me. “I wish I could say I’m surprised.”

He let the weight of those words settle over us, his glare severe. He meant it as an insult and wanted to make sure it landed before he moved on.

“I had one rule,” Coach said. “*One*. I didn’t care if the team partied. I didn’t care if grades slipped a little, if we needed to pull some strings to keep the guys on the starting lineup. I knew coming in as a new coach that the team would be stressed out enough as it was, so I did everything I could to make the environment one where everyone could let loose a little, where they could focus on the task at hand. One rule,” he said again. “That was all I asked for.”

I knew better than to try to speak again, but I didn’t waver where I held his gaze. I fought the temptation to look back down at my hands.

Coach shook his head like I disgusted him.

“I don’t want to be in this house with you any longer than necessary,” he finally said. “So let me just tell you what’s going to happen next so we can both move on. You are going to leave Julep alone. You are going to call whatever this thing is off. And you’re going to do it today.”

“I can’t do that.”

His eyes widened, like he was shocked I had the balls to say even that much. “Oh, you can, and you will. My daughter has been through more shit than you could ever fully comprehend.”

I wanted to argue that, too, but I let him continue.

“She’s finally living on her own, making friends, holding good grades, staying out of trouble. She’s finally doing *okay*.”

And I don't need some hot shot athlete leaving for the NFL to come in, break her heart, and fuck all that up."

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe I'm part of the reason she's doing so good?"

He laughed. Not a subtle or amused laugh, but one that bellowed out of him loud and full of disdain. "The only thing *you're* responsible for is putting her on edge, for putting temptation too close. I know about this place," he said, gesturing to the house around us. "I know about the parties, the drugs. I know exactly what kind of *influence* you are," he added, taking a step toward me with his finger pointed at my chest. "And how you think you're better than everyone else, that you're smarter than even your coaches, that you don't need to follow directions or listen to anyone above you. You think you call your own shots, and that's fine, but I'm here to knock you down a peg or two and remind you that you don't know everything."

"I never claimed to."

"You're as blind as you are stubborn."

"Me? *I'm* the stubborn one?" I stood then, trying to keep my voice calm even as the level of it raised. "Coach, with all due respect, you have been on my ass all season long, ever since you showed up. It's like you made up your mind about me before you even knew who I was."

"I knew well enough after one practice."

"You haven't even given me a chance to—"

"What do you call this?" he interrupted, thrusting his hand toward me. "I gave you a chance to prove me wrong, Moore, and you didn't. You proved I knew *exactly* who you were and that I had every reason to be wary of you — not only as a quarterback and a captain, but as someone with too much time around my daughter. I should have never let her watch over your recovery."

I blew out a frustrated breath. "Look, I know I disobeyed your orders. But—"

"No, there shouldn't *be* a but after that sentence."

I ground my teeth, pissed off that he wouldn't even let me finish a goddamn sentence.

“Again, you are the quarterback. You are the *captain*. I shouldn't have to say anything more than those two facts for you to understand that out of *all* the players on the team, it's *you* I expect the most from. It's you who I don't blink at before demanding greatness. It's you I should be able to trust. And it's *not* you who I should have to worry about going against my orders — on or off the field.”

I scrubbed a hand over my jaw, shaking my head and biting my tongue. Clearly, it was useless to even attempt to argue.

Coach stared at me a long moment, and then said, “You're on probation.”

Fear sliced through me like an ice pick. “What does that mean?”

“It means leave her alone, or I play Russo in the playoffs and call every scout still interested in your sorry ass and tell them your shoulder injury flared up again.”

“You can't be fucking serious.” I gaped at him, incredulous, unable to believe what I was hearing. “If you would just let me talk—”

“I don't have to let you do anything, including play,” he roared, his face beet red. “Try me, Moore. I dare you. I dare you to call my bluff. If I so much as see you *look* at my daughter, your ass will be on that bench come bowl day.”

My nose flared, and I tongued the inside of my cheek as I shook my head in disbelief.

“Let. Her. Go,” Coach finished, swiping his jacket off the back of the couch. He shrugged one arm on and then the other as he headed for the door. “Or kiss your career goodbye.”



Julep

I was living my own worst nightmare.

Mary watched me like I was a wild animal as I paced the living room, hands tearing at my hair, thumbnails chewed to the nub, eyes constantly skating to the house across the street where I knew my father was ripping Holden a new asshole.

I wished with everything that I was that he would have talked to me first.

I wished I could explain. I wished I could take the heat, take the blame for *everything* and spare whatever discipline he was dishing out to his quarterback right now. Because I knew it would be severe. I knew this wasn't a crime that would go unpunished.

For either of us.

"Would you please just... sit down?" Mary pleaded. I'd put her on edge since I'd barged through the door. "Here, hit the bowl."

She offered the glass pipe packed with marijuana to me, but I shook my head and looked across the street again. "Bad idea. Especially right now."

"It would take the edge off."

"It's that edge that'll keep me alive when he comes over here ready to fight," I told her. Then I cursed and shook my head. "God, how could we be so *stupid*? We knew better. We *knew* he was inside. Why did we think we were so fucking sneaky that he wouldn't see us both walk out?"

"That boy has fried your brain," Mary mused, sparking her lighter and hitting the bowl. Smoke rolled out of her lips as she added, "I tried to tell you to stay away from that house."

"Not helping," I told her.

She shrugged. "I'm not trying to help. Maybe it's a good thing this happened."

“What the hell, Mary?”

“Look — that whole team is trouble. What did you honestly think was going to happen? Holden Moore is about to be drafted into the NFL. He’s going to have pussy coming at him from every direction.”

“He doesn’t care about that.”

“Like hell he doesn’t. He’s a man.” She laughed. “And I hate to break this to you, but before you showed up? Holden Moore had plenty of tail. He had a new girl in his bed every other week. I’m not denying that you two had fun while he was here, but did you ever stop to think that maybe you were a conquest for him?”

I stopped pacing.

“He couldn’t have you. He was told from the start that he couldn’t. But he went after you anyway, relentlessly. Who’s to say that come the end of the year, he wouldn’t just mark you off his to-do list and move on to the next in the league?”

“You don’t know anything about him if you think that is even a remote possibility.” I shook my head, even as my anxiety latched onto what she said like a life raft. Holden and I hadn’t talked about what comes next — mostly because we’d been too focused on keeping whatever we *did* have going on a secret. “Why do you hate them all so much, anyway? What happened with Leo?”

“It doesn’t matter.” She waved me off, and then sighed. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I don’t know Holden, and maybe I am judging him too harshly. But I also think *you* have been floating on a cloud and ignoring any and all risk ever since you two stopped playing games and gave into each other. You dropped your guard completely.”

I couldn’t argue that, and before I even had the chance to process what she was saying, our front door flew open, and my father blew in like a storm.

He looked at me, slammed the door behind him, then looked at Mary.

“Nice to see you, Mr. Lee,” she muttered, and then she hopped off the couch. “I’m just gonna...” She pointed at the stairs, then gave me a sympathetic look and bolted up them.

My heart was in my throat when I looked back at my father.

He pointed to the couch, telling me to sit without verbalizing, and then he took my place pacing the living room — though he was slower, his breathing more controlled than mine. My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I knew without looking that it was Holden. Everything in me burned to read the text, to see what he said, what had happened between them.

“It’s over, Julep.”

Dad’s words smacked into me. “What is?”

“You and Moore. Whatever has been going on, it stops. Right now.”

“Dad—”

“I have argued enough with him that I don’t have the energy to do it with you, too. You are my daughter. You know better — plain and simple.”

I swallowed.

“And as for Holden, he directly disobeyed me, and he’s paying the price for it.”

“What did you do?”

He looked right at me. “I put him on probation.”

“Probation,” I echoed, heart squeezing painfully in my chest. “Meaning...”

“He knows the terms. I don’t need to explain them to you.”

What he meant by that was that he assumed I was smart enough to already know — and he was right. I had hoped against all reason that my father might listen to him, that he might spare Holden. But of course, he hadn’t.

I didn't need verbal confirmation to know that he'd threatened to bench Holden during the playoffs if he didn't break it off with me.

Tears pricked my eyes, but I swallowed them back, held my chin higher. "I understand we went against your wishes, but—"

"You're on probation, too."

I scoffed. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that if you don't end this shit, I will check you into rehab."

My jaw hit the floor. "*Rehab?*" I laughed. "Dad—"

"I mean it, Julep. I'm not playing around."

"I'm sober."

That made him stop pacing, and his eyes were sad when he said, "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying. I mean, yeah, I drink every now and then, but it's a glass of wine. Maybe two."

"You think I don't know about that night at the Pit when you made a goddamn fool of yourself?"

My heart rate ticked up a notch, hairs on the back of my neck standing at attention.

"You weren't just drunk, you were a fucking train wreck. And I know it was more than just booze."

I swallowed, trying to think fast and cover my tracks. "It was just a little weed."

"It wasn't, and you fucking know it! Don't lie to me. Don't fucking *lie*—"

Dad broke then, fists tightening, his eyes wild as he rushed me. I cowered away from him instinctively, and that seemed to break him more.

He collapsed.

He fell into the couch beside me, sitting so hard it slid back against the wall. He folded, his head buried in his hands,

shoulders shaking.

I stared at him, blinking, heart hammering in my chest. “Dad?”

It was then I realized he was sobbing.

The last time I’d seen him cry was at Abby’s funeral.

The image, the sound, it all knocked me silent. And emotion strangled my own throat as I reached over and tentatively put a hand on his back. “I’m sorry,” I whispered.

He cried harder, shaking his head, rocking back and forth and grunting like he was frustrated that he was crying at all. After a while, he sniffed, swiping the tears from his face like it was then he was angry at before he lifted his head and looked at me.

His eyes were red, face completely broken.

“I have done everything I can to make life okay for you after...” His throat bobbed. “I can’t... I can’t lose you, too.”

My bottom lip quivered. “Dad...”

“Please,” he begged, swiping the fresh tears that crested with the word. “Please, Julep. Listen to me. Trust that I know what’s good for you. You are the only daughter I have left. Just... let me protect you. *Please.*”

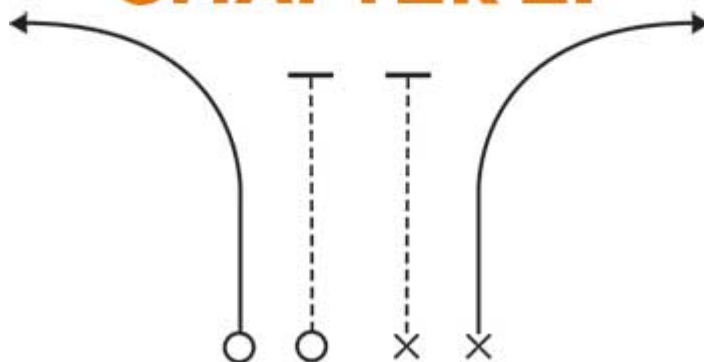
The desperation in his voice erased every other emotion I had, and I wrapped my arms around him. I hugged my dad like he was a little kid, feeling all the pain and stress that he’d endured since my sister died rolling off him like wisps of smoke that choked any arguments I still had left hanging on.

I hugged him and eventually he hugged me back, crushing me to him like I’d disappear before his very eyes if he didn’t save me first.

I’d done this to him.

And the weight of that truth held me as a silent captive of the mess I’d made.

CHAPTER 27



Holden

She didn't answer my text.

I watched her house until her dad finally left, climbing into his SUV he had parked on the street and driving off. I immediately called her, but she didn't answer.

I didn't give myself time to debate whether it was a good idea or not before I was bolting out our front door and across the street to hers. I lifted my fist to knock, but the door opened before I could.

Julep was a wreck.

Her hair was matted and tangled, her eyes puffy and red and swollen. She sniffed, wiping the back of her nose with her wrist.

The sight broke my fucking heart.

"Come here," I said, and then I pulled her into me as she started to cry again.

I held her there in the open doorway while she shook and clung to my hoodie like a lifeline. The last bit of good sense I had holding on urged me to scoot us inside and close the door, and once I had, I pulled back and framed her arms with my hands.

“He lost it, didn’t he?”

“DEFCON level one meltdown.”

“With me, too,” I said, and then I sighed, wiping her tears with my thumbs. “Come on, let me make us some tea.”

Julep let me slide my arm around the small of her back and guide her to the kitchen. She slid into a barstool at the small island while I opened cabinets until I found a box of herbal tea. I filled her electric kettle next, and once it was on to boil, I leaned a hip against the counter and turned back to her.

“He just doesn’t know us,” I said. “He doesn’t understand. Once we get him to see that we’re good for each other, he’ll re-evaluate.”

Julep didn’t look convinced.

She stared at a dark spot on the counter, not blinking.

It was too quiet, even as the water began to bubble and boil. I turned it off once it was ready, placing tea bags in two mugs and pouring the water over them. I handed one to Julep and kept one on the other side with me.

“Give it a few minutes to steep,” I said.

Julep wrapped her hands around the mug and nodded.

I had already been thinking of what we could do, trying to come up with a plan while he’d been over here with her. I saw it the same way I saw planting and tending to a new vegetable or flower. I knew it wouldn’t be easy, but I also knew nothing was impossible.

“I think we should invite him to dinner,” I finally said. “Maybe next weekend, with my uncles. Nathan can cook a big meal. He’ll see I’m from a good family, that I’m not just some punk trying to get in his daughter’s pants.”

“And find out I’ve already met your uncles behind his back?” Julep shook her head. “He’d feel duped.”

“Well, I’ll ask them to pretend like it’s their first time meeting you.”

“You’ll ask them to *lie*?”

“It’s not like that.”

“It is.”

“My uncles won’t care. They won’t see it like that,” I said. “They adore you, and they’ll want to help.”

Julep was silent.

I blew on my tea, dunking the bag a few times. “We don’t have to move so soon, if that’s what you’re afraid of. Let’s give him some time to cool off.”

“Holden—”

“Trust me, I know he’s pissed,” I said, a flash of his red face popping into the back of my mind. “But he was just caught off guard. We all were. Emotions are high.”

“I think we should call things off.”

I stilled, hand hovering with the string of the tea bag between my fingers as my eyes crawled up to meet hers. When I saw she was serious, panic seized my chest.

“We need to call it, Holden.”

She looked impossibly tired.

“Call it,” I echoed, not as a question but as a repetition to make sure I’d heard correctly. “I don’t want to call it. Is that what you want?”

“Of course not. But we don’t have a choice.”

“There’s always a choice.”

“Not this time, there isn’t.”

My heart thumped so loudly in my ears I could barely hear my own voice over it. “We’ll figure it out. Maybe not tonight, but we will.”

“There’s nothing to figure out. I mean... maybe...” She chewed her bottom lip. “Maybe it’s for the best.”

My ears started ringing then. “Don’t say that,” I whispered.

Her face warped a little, but she looked down at her hands, doing her best to control the emotion threatening to take her under. “You’re going into the NFL. What do we really expect to happen?”

“Julep, don’t.”

“It was nice, we had fun, but—”

I rounded the island and turned her in her barstool until she was facing me, my hands braced on either side of where she sat. I leaned down, waiting until her eyes met mine.

“Nice? It was *nice*?”

She tried to pull away, but I wouldn’t let her.

“Do not do this,” I begged her, my jaw set, nostrils flaring. “Do not push me away.”

“I don’t see any other way.”

“I do.”

“I know what he threatened you with,” she whispered, her eyes glossing.

I clamped my mouth shut, willing myself to breathe.

“He’s not bluffing,” she continued, her voice soft and resigned. “He will bench you. He will play Russo. You will lose everything that you’ve worked your entire life for.”

“I don’t care.”

“Well, that’s part of the issue, then,” she snapped back, and she shoved my arm out of her way before standing and crossing the living room, her back to me as she folded her arms.

I stood rooted in place, trying to calm myself, to think clearly and not panic.

I was failing.

“Look, we had something real, Holden,” she said, using her thumb to wipe one loan tear. “And I care about you. But that’s exactly *why* we have to stop. You have a future that you

dreamed of long before you even knew I existed. I don't want to ruin that for you."

"You're not ruining it. You're making it better."

Her little shoulders collapsed, and I wanted so badly to pull her into me, to hold her and force her to see things my way. But when I took a step toward her, she took a step back.

"It's not just you who has something to lose, okay?" She sniffed. "He threatened to send me to rehab."

My jaw tightened. "He *what?*"

"He won't," she said quickly. "He didn't mean it. I *know* he didn't mean it. But he said it because *that's* how scared he is. That's how much I have fucked him up with my actions over the last five years."

"But that's just it. You've turned a corner. He knows it, he said as much to me," I said, and this time when I moved toward her, she didn't back away. "We just have to get him to see that part of the reason is because *we are good together.*"

"It's not that simple."

I let out a long exhale, framing her arms with my hands. "Just trust me. Trust that I can make this right."

Her eyes welled with tears again, and this time she let them fall freely as she swallowed. "I need some space."

"Julep—"

"I need some space," she said again, pleading. "And you need to focus on the game."

"I don't want to focus on the game."

"Again, that's part of the problem," she said, exasperated.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to bang my fists against the wall and tell her not to do this, not to push me away when I was trying so desperately to hold onto her. But it seemed the tighter I held, the more she resisted *being* held.

"The Holden I know would *only* be focused on the game, on winning the championship with his team and securing his

spot in the draft. That's the man I met at the beginning of the season. That's the man I fell for. The one who was determined, who was a leader, who would never risk any of it for some girl."

"You're not just some girl and you fucking know it."

Her bottom lip quivered, and she looked away from me.

"I'm still that guy," I continued. "I am. I want the win. I want *all* of it. But I don't want to lose you in the process."

She quieted, fighting back more tears. "I don't see any other way."

I shook my head, eyes stinging, heart thrashing.

"Please," she begged. "I want you to leave. I *need* you to leave."

I was so fucking angry and desperate I felt like a mad man on the edge. But I could sense how precarious the situation was, how if I kept on in this moment, I'd only push her away. She was freaked out. She was scared. And I was making it worse by trying to rip away one last little bit of control she felt like she held onto.

I pulled her closer, tilting her chin until she looked at me.

"I will give you anything you need, Julep. Even this. But only on one condition. You have to promise me we will talk after you've taken some time, some space. You have to *promise me* that this isn't the end."

She swallowed, her glossy eyes flicking between mine.

"I am not walking away from you," I told her as my voice shook. "Do you understand me? I am not walking away."

I silenced the cry that came from her lips with a pained kiss, one she met just as desperately, her arms threading around the back of my neck and holding me to her. I kissed her long and deep, holding her tightly against me, praying with every bit of religion I still held onto that she believed me when I said that.

“Okay,” she breathed, pulling away, her forehead pressed to mine.

“You promise?”

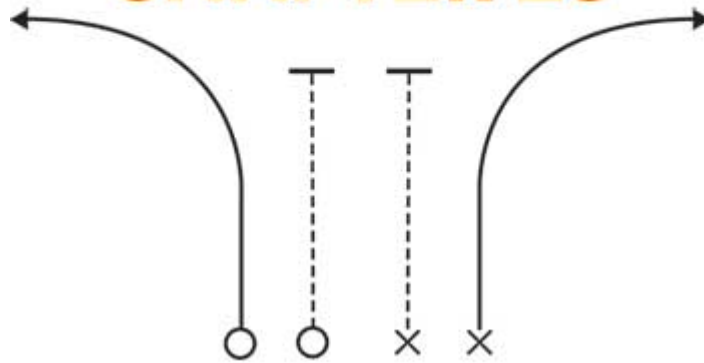
She nodded, and I pulled her back in, both of us trembling as I pressed my lips to hers.

Then, just like she asked, I left.

And even though she promised, my heart was swallowed by the black hole of grief when I shut the door behind me.

As if I’d never kiss her again.

CHAPTER 28



Julep

It became a ritual.

Every morning, I'd wake up to the sound of my phone pinging on my nightstand. Bleary-eyed from not sleeping, I'd reach for it and stare at the words waiting for me. They were different each time, but they came in like clockwork every single day.

Good morning.

I'm still here.

I hope you breathe a little easier today.

Don't give up on us.

You looked beautiful yesterday.

It will all be okay, Julep. Trust me.

Each time, no matter what the text said, it would elicit a sharp pain through my chest as I hugged the phone and closed my eyes. I'd hold it there like it was him, trying not to cry and usually failing.

I never answered.

"I feel stupid for ever thinking I could be happy," I admitted to Mary one night while we watched TV. "For ever

thinking what we were doing wouldn't have to end.”

“You can be happy, Julep.”

“Just not with him,” I said.

She frowned, leaning her head on my shoulder. “One day he will thank you for doing what he wasn't strong enough to do.”

That didn't make me feel any better.

Days swirled into weeks, the icy rain and snow battering New England making my body feel just as cold as my heart.

All the while, Holden respected my wish for space.

Other than those texts, he left me alone. He didn't sneak over when Mary was at work, and he didn't beg me to come over late at night. Even at the stadium, we avoided each other, not even sharing so much as a longing glance across the room.

My father was watching our every move.

He seemed satisfied, happy that we'd listened to him. He was even easing up on Holden a bit, handing him the reins on the field and letting him call the shots as the team got closer and closer to the bowl game.

And for me, to show that he was serious about what he said, he'd talked to my mom.

I *knew* he'd talked to her because one Saturday morning when I was trying to distract myself with a tough pole session, she called me.

I almost didn't believe it was real when I saw her name on my screen, an old photo of us when I was fourteen lighting up the room. I had braces and braided pigtails. She had her arm around me. We were both in swimsuits, the sprinklers going off behind us. We'd been running through them all morning.

“Mom?” I asked when I answered, and instinctively, I thought something was wrong. Why else would she call?

“Hi, Jujubee.”

The nickname warmed my heart as much as it sent a knife spiraling through it.

“Is everything alright?”

“Of course,” she answered, as if she was confused as to why I would think anything could possibly be wrong. She hadn’t called me since Dad and I moved here.

“Okay.”

Silence.

“Your father has been telling me how good you’re doing,” she said. “I... I’m really happy to hear that.”

“Thank you,” I said, but the words were shaky, my eyes glossing with tears just when I thought I couldn’t cry anymore.

I wasn’t doing *good* at all.

“I was thinking, and... what if you two came home for Christmas? Your dad will only come for a day or two I imagine, with the game coming up. But... you and I can spend a few days here before we meet him in Texas.”

Texas was where the playoff game was on New Year’s Eve.

“You want me to come?”

“I do,” she whispered. “And I... I’m sorry, Julep. For how I’ve handled... well, for how I’ve handled *life* since Abby died.”

“I made you this way.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I did,” I said, swallowing the knot in my throat. “I killed her. And then I turned into a monster. If I were my mother, I would have turned my back on me, too.”

“Oh, sweetheart...”

One lone tear rolled down my cheek, and I just let it fall.

“You didn’t kill her.”

“That’s not what you said before.”

“Well, I was wrong. I was hurting and wanted someone to blame when the truth is it was an accident.”

I shook my head. “It was my fault.”

Mom was silent for a moment, and then she said, “Did you know your dad and I used to do cocaine?”

I blanched. “You *what?*”

“We started dating in the late 80s,” she said, as if that explained it. “We would go to concerts all the time — Aerosmith, Kiss, Poison.” She laughed softly. “We were young. We felt invincible. Just like you and Abby did that night.”

Another tear slipped free.

“You were *kids*, Julep. Neither of you even considered the possibility of an overdose. And in a different situation, one where that drug hadn’t been laced? You both would have been fine. You would have had a great time and laughed about it for years to come.”

“But it *was* laced,” I croaked.

“It was. And it’s tragic that it was. But that doesn’t make it your fault, and it doesn’t make you a bad person. I know I didn’t help with making you see that,” she admitted. “I’ve been fighting through my own demons. I failed you as a mother, and for that, I’m sorry. But I’m here now. I’m here now, Julep, and I want to make things right.”

I thought of Holden’s uncle Kevin, how he’d talked to me when we were alone that night at his house. I heard his words echoing, his reminder that our parents are humans who make mistakes just like we do.

“I thought maybe we could do something for her,” she said after a moment. “A garden at the church, or a fountain, something to remember her by. Something you and I do together.”

I winced at the word *together*. It was so beautifully painful to hear.

“Come home for Christmas,” Mom said after a moment.

My heart warmed at the thought.

“Okay.”



Holden

It had been the most miserable holiday season of my life.

Every morning, I woke up with a pit in my gut and texted Julep, hoping this would be the day she answered.

She never did.

I could feel her giving up. I could feel her slipping away. And there was nothing I could do about it.

I promised her space, promised her time. And I held true to that. Even when everything in me begged me to break, I stayed strong. I resisted the urge to call her, to run to her, to so much as even look at her when we were at the stadium.

The only thing that saved me from depression was football.

I threw myself into preparing for the bowl game, waking up even earlier than usual and getting to sleep as early as I could each night. Even then, I'd usually lie awake tossing and turning and trying not to call Julep.

But at least I was trying.

I ran every morning. Then, I hit the weight room. Film came next, and by that time, we were going into practice. I focused on the team, on my players, ensuring each and every one of them was keeping a clear mind as we barreled toward the playoffs. I spent extra time after practice working with those who needed it, stuck around longer to make sure they all were passing their finals, and by the time classes ended, I was purely focused on the bowl.

We stayed on campus even after classes ended, practicing up until the day before Christmas Eve. It was only then that Coach released us for the holiday. We'd meet back here on the twenty-sixth.

And four days later, we'd fly as a team to Texas.

In a way, I was thankful for Christmas break, for getting away from the Pit for a few days and spending time with my uncles. It killed me being so close to Julep, right across the street, and yet feeling like she was on the other side of the world. I didn't know which tortured me most — the late nights of not sleeping and wanting to sneak in through her window, or the long days at the stadium where I had to physically fight from looking at her.

The only silver lining was that her dad had stayed true to his word.

He had no intention of benching me and playing Russo, not when he was satisfied that I'd left Julep alone like he'd asked. It was almost like he finally found an ounce of respect for me. He started letting me take control, started leaving it in my hands to call the plays as I saw fit. He let me step up with each player before and after practice, finally allowing me to act as the captain I'd been trying to be all season.

It killed me that I had to give up Julep for him to see me in this way.

"You look like you could use a little rum in that eggnog," my uncle Kevin said, nodding to the cup in my hands as he flopped down on the other end of the couch. The fire crackled under the mantel, stockings hung, and Nathan hummed along to "Merry Christmas Darling" by the Carpenters as he wrapped Joanne's gifts and put them under the tree.

"I probably could, but no alcohol until after we win the championship."

"Coach's orders?"

"My orders."

He smiled. "Sounds like the QB1 I know and love."

I tried to smile in return, but it was impossible. I pulled out my phone and stared at the text I'd sent Julep.

Merry Christmas, gorgeous. I miss you.

I'd written it out and deleted it at least eight times before finally sending it, deciding I didn't care if it was vulnerable. But now that it'd gone five hours without being answered, my stomach soured every time I glanced at the words.

I had no idea where her head was at or how she was feeling.

But something told me she was letting go.

"Staring at the text won't make her answer."

I sighed heavily, tossing my phone face down on the cushion between us. "I know."

"I'm sure she's thinking about you, too."

"Glad one of us is."

He nudged my knee with his fist. "Come on. That girl is just as crazy about you as you are her and you know it."

"I thought so, but... I don't know. She hasn't talked to me, not once, not even a single text since that night."

"She asked for space."

"And I'm giving it to her."

Uncle Kevin arched a brow.

"Mostly." I bristled. "All things considered, I think my willpower has been remarkable."

He chuckled then, sipping his hot cocoa and licking the leftover marshmallow it left on his top lip. "Just focus on the game, okay? On your team. That's what she would want."

"I am."

"And let *her* focus on her family."

I sighed, nodding. "I'm trying."

Uncle Kevin patted my leg, then moved down to the floor with Nathan to fix a bow he'd tied. Apparently, it wasn't good

enough, and he eyeballed Kevin as he fixed it — though not like he was annoyed. More like he thought it was adorable, like he knew his spouse well enough to know he'd be going behind his back fixing bows for the rest of their lives.

My chest ached because I could picture something similar with Julep.

Was I insane? It felt that way. It felt as if I was a madman. How was it possible that this time last year, the only thing on my mind, in my heart, was football? The only thing I could dream about was winning the championship and getting drafted into the NFL?

Now, every waking thought and every sleepless night was wrapped up in her.

The day after Christmas, I showed up bright and early for practice, and I wasn't the only one. Half the team was already there, and all of us felt the approaching bowl game like an earthquake rumbling in our bones.

We boarded the flight to Houston on December thirtieth with clear eyes, steadfast and ready.

On New Year's Eve, when we made our way onto the freshly painted field for warmups, we all buzzed with an uncontrollable energy.

This was it. This was our moment.

This was what we'd fought for all season long.

We were one win away from the championship game, two wins away from taking home the title. We'd come too far to let anyone take what was ours now, and I ran over my speech in my mind as we finished our warmups and jogged toward the locker room for pre-game.

Julep stepped in front of me before I made it to the tunnel.

I slowed my pace, stopping a few feet from where she stood. My stomach tightened, chest aching at the sight of her. She looked as strung out as I felt, and yet somehow more beautiful than I'd ever seen her before. The setting sun cast her

in a warm golden glow, one that sparked her brown eyes to life.

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know if she *wanted* me to speak at all. So, I just stood there, helmet in hand, wishing I could reach for her, and using all my strength in that moment not to.

For a long moment, she just stared at me, her eyes flicking between mine as she held her chin high. Then, she took one minuscule step toward me, sucking all the air out of the stadium when she did.

“Good morning. I'm still here, too. Every breath burns without you,” she said, her voice wavering a bit.

My throat tightened with pain, even as relief washed over me.

She was answering my texts.

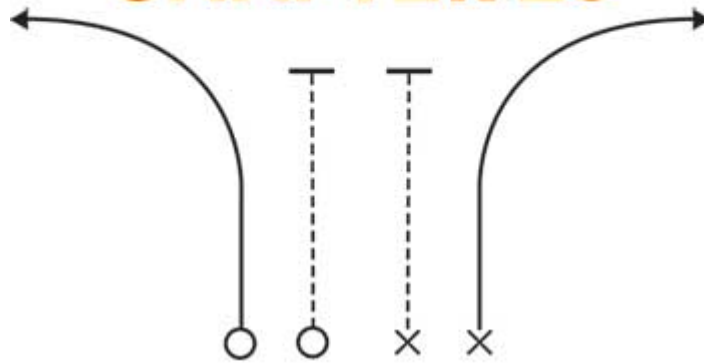
“I haven't given up on us. You're crazy if you think I've looked anything close to beautiful in this mess of a state I've been in. I *do* trust you.” She paused, smiling, and then whispered. “Merry Christmas.”

A breath of a laugh left my nose.

“This is your win,” she finished, letting those words hang heavy between us. “Go fucking get 'em, Cap.”

And then she jogged through the tunnel with my heart in her hands.

CHAPTER 29



Julep

“GO! GO! GO!”

I screamed along with the rest of the team as Leo zoomed down the field, the ball tucked into his side as he weaved through the defenders aiming to take him down. He was an animal and ran for nearly forty yards before he was finally dragged to the ground.

The crowd roared, and my heart was in my throat as I looked up at the time on the clock and the score shining back at me.

We were down by four with only twenty seconds left, and not a single timeout.

I thought my dad was going to chew his fingers off as he watched Holden and the rest of our offense scramble back to the line. Leo hadn't gotten out of bounds, so the clock was still running. As soon as they were lined up, the ball was snapped, and Holden spiked it down to the ground.

The whistle blew, the clock stopped, and now we had thirteen seconds.

“I can't fucking breathe,” Riley said, her hands clasped on top of her head as she paced next to me.

I felt the same way, but I stayed quiet, focusing on Holden.

“Come on, come on,” I muttered under my breath.

He huddled up the offense, talking through the route he had on his forearm play holder. He clapped, and they all hustled back to the line.

We were up against what the nation saw as the best team — the Central Louisiana University Beavers. And although the crowd was split about fifty-fifty, it sounded as if the whole stadium was a CLU fan as they roared for defense to hold us.

The ball was snapped, and it had no sooner landed in Holden’s hands before he had it sailing toward the left corner of the end zone where Kyle was waiting. But it was tipped, and it bobbed precariously in the air, almost snagged by a safety before it mercifully flew out of bounds.

Six seconds left.

“Fuck,” Zeke cursed under his steepled fingers where he stood next to me.

Clay shouted from beside him, “*Come on, boys! Let’s fucking go!*”

My stomach turned violently as I watched Holden through the huddle. He had black smeared under his eyes, sweat dripping off his nose, his green eyes severe through the metal slats of his helmet. He called what would likely be our last play, and then they all clapped and got back on the line.

We were only a few yards from the touchdown. Everyone expected us to run it now. It just made sense. But when the ball was snapped, our receivers zigged and zagged and tried to get open in the end zone.

Holden retreated deep in the pocket, eyes scanning, right arm locked back and ready to throw.

No one was open.

Kyle was completely covered, two defensive players making it impossible for him to be a clear throw. Braden had tripped over his own feet and was trying to scramble up.

We were out of time.

The clock ticked down, and I saw Holden looking left and right, all the while watching where his offensive line was struggling to hold the beastly men desperate to sack him.

It was all over.

I couldn't breathe, couldn't do anything but close my eyes and wait for the final whistle to blow. I couldn't watch him get sacked, couldn't watch his dream shatter in that fashion.

The crowd was already loud, but a second after my eyes closed, they turned deafening.

I creaked one eye open.

Just in time to see Holden find a hole.

My other eye popped open then, and I screamed, throwing my arms in the air and jumping up and down as he sprinted through the break in the defense on the far-left side of the field. The defenders caught on to his movement just a hair of a second too late, but one of them managed to wrap Holden up and sling him down to the ground with enough force to break bones.

Not that it mattered.

Because he was taken down in the end zone.

Touchdown.

I cried. Tears stung my eyes as I screamed and jumped with the rest of the team. They all poured onto the field, swallowing up our offensive players who were out there while the Beavers hung their heads in disbelief. Confetti rained down a second later, and Riley jumped out of Zeke's arms and wrapped me in a crushing hug. We jumped up and down together, hair bouncing, both of us screaming loud enough to burst the other's ear drums.

They'd done it.

They'd *won*.

We were going to the championship game.



Holden

It was absolute madness after the final whistle blew.

Confetti stuck to my sweaty face as I tore off my helmet just in time to be hoisted into the air. I threw my fists up in victory, chanting *NBU! NBU!* with the rest of my team as they paraded me around the field.

The second they dropped my feet to the ground, we were surrounded by reporters, all the while families poured onto the field, too. I answered questions as best I could through my excitement, though I was frequently interrupted by a teammate jumping on my back or scooping me up in their arms. We were chaotic, too ecstatic to even pretend to be professional for the cameras.

We were East Conference Champions.

And we had earned our chance to fight for the national championship title.

The trophy ceremony happened so fast it was a blur, each of us taking turns holding the shiny gold thing and kissing it like it was the love of our life as Coach Lee gave a little speech. When we were released, the reporters swarmed again.

I was doing my best to lean in and hear the questions a young male reporter from College Sports Network was screaming at me over the noise when I was yanked from behind. One hand on my shoulder whipped me around, and then I was crushed in a bear hug by my Uncle Kevin.

“You fucking did it!” he screamed, clapping me hard on the back. He released me only so Uncle Nathan could pull me in, too, and I felt the cameras all around us, knew they’d be showing this on TV and talking about my family’s backstory.

“Hell of a game!” Nathan yelled. They were both wearing my jersey number on handmade hoodies, their faces painted, a crumpled-up sign in Nathan’s hands that I was sure they held up the entire time.

Kevin turned me back toward him, framing my arms in his hands. He dropped his forehead to mine. “I’m damn proud of you, Holden. Damn proud.”

I brought him in for another crushing hug, mostly so I wouldn’t cry on national fucking television. Then, they released me and told me they’d see me back at the hotel.

We didn’t say a time because all three of us knew tonight would be a long one for me.

As soon as they were gone, I scanned the crowd for Julep.

She was the only person I wanted to see, and yet she was the only one I couldn’t find. I saw Coach as Clay and Zeke poured a giant container of ice-cold Gatorade over his head. I saw Leo making out with the cheerleader he’d been chasing after all season. I saw JB and the rest of the training staff, Coach Hoover and his family, even Kyle where he was holding up his phone — no doubt on Instagram Live.

But no Julep.

My heart sank, and I started shoving through the crowd, hoping I could find her in the locker room. Before I took two steps, Giana hooked me by the arm.

“I need you in the press room!”

“Okay, I just need to—”

“No, now!” She shook her head. “It’ll only be ten minutes max. Please, Holden. Wrangling these reporters is like herding cats, but they’ll go where the quarterback goes.”

Begrudgingly, I let her drag me off the field, and sure as shit, reporters followed us, allowing the rest of the team a bit of reprieve.

As soon as she had me set up a mic at the podium, Giana left — no doubt to go get the next players lined up and ready to answer questions. Her boss, Charlotte, watched me from the

side of the stage. She listened to whoever was in her earpiece and then gave me the thumbs up to start taking questions.

It was an out-of-body experience.

I'd see a hand shoot up, and I'd point at it, signaling for whoever the reporter was to fire off their question.

“How does it feel to win your first playoff bowl game?”

“It feels amazing, but I knew this win was ours. This team has been focused all season long. We're ready to take the championship.”

“At the end of the half, you were down by two touchdowns. How did you manage to rally the team and get them back in the game?”

“We never left it. CLU is tough, they're one of the best in the nation — we all know that. They gave us hell out of the gate, and we expected it. The key was just coming back in the second half and giving them hell right back. And that's what we did.”

“You've been battling an injury all season. Did it flare up at all in today's game?”

“I'm feeling one hundred and ten percent thanks to our training staff. My shoulder is better than it's ever been.”

Question after question pelted me, and after fifteen minutes or so, I was exhausted. That amount of time doing anything else would be nothing, but in this situation, it felt like an eternity.

I called on the next reporter, anxious for Giana to relieve me and send in the next player.

A woman in a bright orange blazer stood, a legal pad and pen in one hand as she yelled, “You've said in past interviews that your biggest goal is to win the championship and then be drafted into the NFL — which, at this point, I think we're all sure will happen. So, what happens next? If you win the big game and you get called up to play pro, what's next for Holden Moore?”

I opened my mouth to shoot back some generic answer, but before I could, a lifetime of possibility flashed before my eyes.

It was like her question had shocked me out of the present and into a future where everything I wanted came true.

I saw our team holding up the trophy, saw my uncles smiling when my name was called in the draft. I pictured signing on the dotted line, imagined what hat I'd slip on — maybe the Colts, staying on the East Coast, or maybe I'd go west with the Seahawks.

And through every step of my vision, there was Julep.

She was in my arms after the final whistle at the championship game, her legs wrapped around me as I kissed her, and confetti covered us both. She was holding my hand as we waited for the phone to ring on draft day. She was lugging boxes with me into our new place, kissing my sweaty cheek before pointing to where she wanted me to set up her pole.

And I realized in that moment, more than ever, that none of this mattered without her.

“I'm so sorry, I... excuse me.”

I didn't say anything more before I darted off the small stage, Charlotte calling my name as I whizzed by her. I knew Giana would be upset, but I'd make it up to her later.

Multiple people tried to stop me as I weaved through the hallway. Players wanted to celebrate, staff wanted to congratulate me, and I didn't miss the disappointment on a scout's face when he tried to stop me, and I apologized before running right past.

I aimed for the locker room, and when I made it, I stopped, trying to catch my breath as I looked for her.

“What's up, Cap?” Zeke asked.

“Have you seen Julep?”

He smirked, nodding toward the back where our training staff had set up camp.

I sprinted toward it, sliding through the door as my cleats tried and failed to find traction on the tile floor.

I came to a stop right in front of Coach Lee.

He frowned, catching me before I crashed right into him, but then I looked behind him and found Julep.

I reached back long enough to shut the door behind me, to make sure no one else on the team would butt in and ruin the only opportunity I had. I didn't know how this was going to go, but I knew I didn't want them hearing either way.

There was a window on the door with a shade above it. I pulled that down, and then it was just the three of us.

“Moore, what—”

“The deal is off.”

He frowned. “What in the hell are—”

I held up a finger as I struggled to catch my breath, sneaking a glance at where Julep stood behind him. She was folding up equipment and storing it in the giant duffle bags we brought with us, but right now, she was frozen, holding tight to a roll of sports tape and staring at me wide-eyed.

I turned my attention back to Coach, standing as tall as I could as I looked him right in the eye.

“Sir, I have thought about it for a month now. I have respected your wishes and I have left Julep alone.”

“And I—”

“No,” I said, cutting him off. “You didn't let me speak last time, but this time, you will hear me out.”

His jaw was tight as he shut his mouth, and I knew it wouldn't stay shut for long.

“I did as you asked. I have been nothing but focused on this team and this game. I have shown you in every way that I can that I am serious about football and about the responsibility you give me as quarterback and captain.” I paused. “But I can't do this anymore.”

I looked at Julep, at how her knuckles where white where she gripped the tape. She shook her head slightly like she was silently begging me not to do whatever I was about to do.

But there was nothing that could stop me now.

“Sir, with all due respect,” I said, turning back to Coach. “Bench me.”

His head snapped back like those words had slapped him across the face.

“Sit me in the championship game if that’s what you want to do. Call every scout you know and tell them I’m washed up and that they shouldn’t draft me. Blackball me in every way that you possibly can.”

I swallowed, my body revolting at the remote possibility of all of that truly happening, at the fact that it probably would.

But my heart beat strong.

“You can hold true on all your threats,” I continued. “You can take everything else away from me. But you can’t take her.”

I looked at Julep, and her eyes glossed over, the tape falling from her hands and rolling on the ground toward one of the tables.

“I love your daughter, Coach Lee,” I said, though my eyes didn’t leave her. “I love her, and I don’t care what you or anyone else thinks about it. My heart used to belong to football, but now it belongs to her. And none of this,” I added, throwing my hands up. “*None* of it means a damn thing without her.”

Coach swallowed, his brows furrowed as he watched me with his hands curling into fists at his sides. He opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but then a soft voice chimed behind him.

“You love me?”

My head snapped in her direction, and Julep stood there with her eyes glossed and hands trembling.

I rushed to her in the next breath, taking those shaking hands in mine and holding them steady. I curled my own hands around them, pulled them to my chest, and held her close.

“With every hopelessly optimistic beat of my heart.”

Something between a laugh and a sob broke through her, and she rolled her lips together, shaking her head.

“I will be here,” I said, tugging her hands to my chest again. “*Every* day. I’ll be right by your side reminding you that you matter, that you are needed, that there is a reason to have hope and a reason to live. I’ll be here reminding you that for me? *You* are that reason.”

She closed her eyes, freeing a silent tear that raced down to her chin before falling to the floor.

I still held her hand as I rotated, lacing my fingers with hers and turning back to her father.

“You can bench me if that’s what you feel you need to do, but I *love* this girl,” I said, squeezing her hand. “And I’m not backing down.”

Coach glared at me, then at where I held his daughter’s hand. “Even if it costs you everything?”

I stood taller. “Even then.”

Julep shook her head, stepping between me and her father. “You can’t do this,” she told me, sniffing. “You can’t throw everything away just because—”

I slid my hands up her arms to frame her face, holding her gaze steady with my own. “I have never seen more clearly than I do in this moment, Julep Lee. And I meant what I said. I am not walking away from you. I never could.”

She nodded, a sob breaking free as I pulled her into me and wrapped her in my arms. I hugged her tight as she cried, and in that moment, I truly didn’t care what happened next. Because I had her, and she had me, and everything else was second to that one, life-centering truth.

I held her for a long while before she finally pulled back, wiping her face before she turned toward her father. They were in a silent standoff.

Coach Lee looked at his daughter, then at me, and back again. He seemed to be fighting a million wars in his head as every emotion played out on his face.

After a moment, he sighed.

“I was wrong.”

I blinked, sure I’d misheard him, but he heaved another deep breath and sank down into one of the chairs against the wall.

“Something you won’t understand until you’re a father, Holden, is that when you’re trying to be a good dad, you will do anything to protect your baby girl.” He paused, looking at Julep. “Even if it hurts her in the process.”

Julep leaned into my side, more silent tears soaking the cuff of my jersey.

“I thought I knew what was best for her. And in many ways, I think I did. I knew moving her away from home would give her a fresh start. I knew if she could sober up and remember who she was before...”

He swallowed, shaking his head.

“I knew my little girl was still in there, under the scarred tissue that her sister’s death left behind. And when I started to see her coming back to life, I felt even more protective. I was ready to fight anyone who threatened that peace she’d worked so hard to get back.”

He looked at me then.

“But I was wrong to fight you, Holden. And for that, I’m sorry.”

He held my gaze for a long moment before he stood, rubbing his palms down the front of his pants as he did.

“I’m still not happy that both of you went against my orders,” he continued. “But... I can see now that you must

really care about each other. You showed me that this past month, because even though it must have hurt you both, you did what I asked of you. Julep, you've been straight as an arrow. And Holden... we wouldn't be standing here on the other side of this win without you. I'll be honest, I didn't expect it. I expected you to fight me, to try to sneak behind my back. I had a firm plan in place with Russo just waiting for the moment." He scrubbed his jaw. "You gained my respect when you proved me wrong. And even more so moments ago when you brought joy back to my daughter's face that I didn't know could even exist anymore."

Something in him broke a little with that, and he turned away briefly, sucking in a breath before he shook his head and faced us again. He took a few steps in our direction, pointing a finger at my chest.

"But if you even *think* about hurting her, I will murder you and go to jail for life. Don't make me do that to my wife, you understand me?"

I bit back a smile. "So... you're not going to bench me?"

He looked at Julep, then at me. "Not yet, anyway."

"I'll take it," I said.

He nodded, almost grinning, and then extended his hand for mine. "One shot, Moore. That's all you get. Ruin it, and I'll ruin you."

"Dad," Julep chastised with a roll of her eyes, but I reached for his hand and shook it firmly.

"One shot is all I'll need."

When he dropped my hand, Coach nodded to both of us before excusing himself. And then it was just me and Julep.

I swept her into my arms and kissed her without hesitation.

It was like breathing life back into a corpse, like every ounce of pain I had felt in the last month evaporated in that very moment. I felt it leaving my body like an exorcism, and the way Julep clung to me, her arms around my neck, eyes squeezed shut — I knew she was being washed clean, too.

“You stupid, stupid boy,” she whispered against my lips, crying as she did. “You could have lost it all.”

“I’d choose losing it all over losing you for a lifetime.”

She shoved me, but then pulled me back in for a kiss. “I don’t know if I want to kill you for giving me a heart attack with that speech, or tear your clothes off and show you how much I loved it.”

“I like the second option.”

She laughed against my lips, and then let me tuck her head under my chin as I hugged her and held her close, both of us sighing contently.

“Me, too, you know,” she said softly.

“You, too, what?”

She peeked up at me. “I love you.”

“Well, obviously.”

She poked me hard between the ribs, making me double over before I tickled her and pulled her squirming all the way back to me.

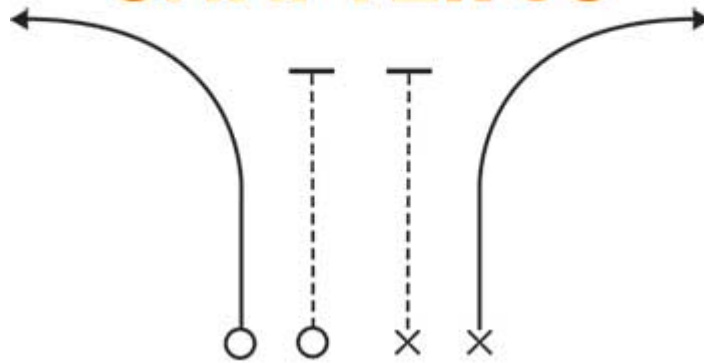
“Say it again,” I murmured along the skin behind her ear before I kissed the very spot my breath touched.

“I love you, you idiot.”

I laughed.

And then I framed her face and kissed her to show her I felt the same.

CHAPTER 30



Julep

A week and a half later, we carried the National Championship Trophy back to Boston.

In another grueling game against the Arizona Panthers, we clinched the win by a narrow three points. Riley had kicked a field goal with two-and-a-half minutes left to go, and our defense had held strong, keeping our opponents from getting into field goal position themselves. They tried, anyway, and failed the almost sixty-yard attempt. Possession had come back to us with less than a minute left to go, and Holden took a knee each time until the clock ran out.

Just like that, we were national champions.

The next two weeks were a chaotic, joyful blur. We flew back home and celebrated with our university in a parade that spanned the city. Two days later, we were on a flight down to Florida to spend three days celebrating our win at Disney World. The team couldn't wait to get their rings, but until then, they took the trophy out to as many parties and bars as they could before my dad put it under lock and key in a trophy case outside his office at the stadium.

It was the first one put there since the 90s.

All the while, there was a bittersweet scent in the air. As much as we celebrated, almost a quarter of the team was graduating — and that meant this was their last season as a Rebel.

Holden was on a rollercoaster of emotions, high off the win one second, devastated that his college career was over the next, and — most frequently — nervous about the draft.

But the night before classes started on our final spring semester of college, we laid on the couch at my house, both of us cozy in our hoodies and sweatpants with two blankets piled over us. We made out beneath them until we were both sweating and tossing them off, but even then, we stayed tangled together.

And for one blissful moment, neither of us worried about anything at all.

“You know, I feel a little cheated,” he said, running his fingers through my hair. “In all this time we spent sneaking around, you never teased me with another dance.”

“Dance?” I asked, confused. When his eyes landed on the pole set up in the middle of the living room behind me, I rolled my eyes and smacked him playfully. “Oh, my God, Holden.”

“What?! That was hot, and you know it was or you wouldn’t have left the windows open for me to see.”

“I didn’t realize they were open until I saw you creeping.”

“Mm-hmm, sure. You wanted me to watch, and you know it.”

I rolled my eyes, trying to stand, but he hugged me tight to him, wrapping his legs around me as I squirmed.

“I don’t dance for anyone but myself,” I told him.

“You also swore you’d never get on your knees for me, but we all see how that turned out...”

I tried to knee him in the stomach, but he had me tangled up so much that I couldn’t do much but wiggle while he laughed and held on tight.

I sighed, relenting. “Fine. You want me to dance for you?”

“Really?”

“If you let me go, you boa.”

“Boa, huh? Because my dick is so big.”

“Because you’re strangling me, you cocky jerk,” I said, finally wriggling free. When I did, I stood up and pulled him by the hand until he was sitting upright.

“You love when I’m cocky.”

“Shut up before I change my mind.”

He zipped his lips closed, sitting with his hands in his lap like a little kid waiting for his Christmas gift. I rolled my eyes again, but then grabbed my phone and turned on my playlist.

“Wicked Games” by The Weeknd started playing, and I closed my eyes, slipping into my body.

I faced the pole then, pulling my hair back and over my shoulders. Inhaling a breath, I slowly slinked toward it, reaching up to grab it with my right hand. I walked around, dragging my sock-covered feet behind me with each step before I did a dip and a goddess spin down to the floor just as the beat kicked in.

I landed on my knees, arching my back before I dove down onto the ground. I kept my back arched and my booty up, letting it fall to one side and bump against the floor before I took it the opposite way.

My eyes met Holden’s as I braced my hands on either side of my chest and pushed back, chest dragging along the floor with my ass in the air. I flicked my hair back when my chest met my thighs, coming to sit on my heels as I rolled my neck and let my hair fan out over me.

He was gaping.

I couldn’t help the smile that spread on my lips at his dumbfounded expression as I reached for the pole, doing a fireman spin up to standing again. I threaded through my arms

until my back was to the pole, and then I slowly rolled my hips as I stripped my hoodie overhead.

I let it fall to the ground, launching into a V spin before I landed on the ground behind the pole. I brought my legs up in the air, waving them as if I was swimming under water. Then, I propped my hips up in a candlestick pose, grabbing my sweatpants and slowly peeling them off my legs until I flung them across the room, too.

I was in my sports bra and thong now, and the socks on my feet, but with more skin exposed, I was able to launch myself into an invert. I hung by one leg and then the other, tracing my body the entire time as my hair flew around me and I moved slowly and sensually to the beat.

When my feet hit the floor again, I found Holden's eyes and held them as I did body waves, tilting my chest toward the pole and extending my back leg in a standing split that put my pussy right in his face.

That did it.

He groaned, reaching for me and pulling me into his lap so haphazardly I nearly fell. I laughed as I crashed into him, pressing my hands to his chest even as he fought against me and kissed me, anyway.

"I'm not finished," I murmured against his lips.

"You're about to make *me* finish."

I laughed as he lifted his hip with me in his lap, using one hand and then the other to slide his sweatpants and briefs down his thighs, over his knees, and down to his ankles. He kicked them off, groaning when I wrapped my hands around his shaft and slowly pumped him as he struggled with the clothes.

He'd no sooner had them kicked to the side when his hand slid down between my legs, friction catching my sensitive bud and making me shake before he roughly shoved my thong to the side. His fingers toyed with my entrance, his other hand coming to the back of my neck and pulling me to his mouth so hard our teeth clashed.

Desire sparked low and warm in my belly at how much he needed me in that moment.

He bit my bottom lip, holding it as he slid one finger inside me. I gasped both at the sensation of his digit and the realization that I was already soaked, aching, ready.

Holden felt it, too, and he moaned his satisfaction before removing his finger and wrapping his fist around his thick shaft. I pressed up onto my knees so he could fit himself at my entrance, and then I sank down, taking him as deep as I could as I sat fully back down in his lap.

“Holy fuck,” he groaned, hands gripping my hips so hard I winced — but I loved that little dig of pain, that little flash of hurt that rode on the tails of my pleasure. He used that impressive grip to lift me all the way up until he almost slipped out of me before he yanked me back down.

I hissed, digging my nails into his shoulder and savoring every last inch of him pressing inside me. That was the last sound I made before he crushed my mouth to him again, and he swallowed every moan I offered him like it was sweet dessert.

My hips rolled against him as he flexed and filled me over and over again, and each time, his pelvis rubbed against my clit and gave me the friction I needed to drive me closer to release. The more that flame tried to catch, the faster I rode, wilder and wilder until I was all but bouncing on his lap as I chased that flickering flame.

“Yes, yes, right there,” I told him, eyes squeezing shut as my orgasm began to catch. My legs went numb, toes curling.

And then, he ripped me off him.

I cried out at the loss, at how fast my climax skittered away from me like a scared animal. But I didn’t have time to process *anything* before I was flipped over and sitting against the cushion where Holden had just been.

“I was so close,” I whimpered.

He ignored me, dropping to his knees at the edge of the couch. Then, he gripped the tops of my thighs and roughly

dragged me toward him until my ass hung off the edge of the couch, my ankles on his shoulders.

And he began to feast.

My vision went black, eyes rolling as his hot tongue lashed my already-sensitive bud. He sucked on it violently, tearing my orgasm back to the surface like he'd physically reached a hand inside my soul and grabbed it by the neck.

My legs quaked hard around him. I couldn't control them, not even as I gripped the edge of the couch and tried to hold on for dear life as his tongue swirled and licked until I started to come again.

It was twice as intense this time after edging, and I cried out his name as my release rocked through me, taking all sense of reality with it. Through the mind-numbing, body-rocking haze of it, I heard Holden moaning, his grip tightening where he held me. I knew he was just making those noises for me, but *fuck* they were hot, and I savored them as I rode out the last of my orgasm before falling completely lax against the couch.

As soon as I had, Holden collapsed onto his back on the hardwood floor.

He was panting, chest heaving as he splayed his arms and legs out. "Holy fucking hell."

"I'll say," I chuckled, and then I winced as I closed my legs, hips on fire with the motion.

My gaze turned concern when I saw Holden clutching his heart.

"Oh God, are you having a heart attack?!" I dropped to the floor and crawled over to him.

"Maybe."

"Are you serious?!" Panic started to rise in my throat before he laughed and grabbed my hand, pulling it to his mouth for a tender kiss.

"I'm fine. I just... I've never done that before."

I frowned. “Make me cum with your mouth? Uh, I’m *pretty* sure that’s incorrect.”

“No,” he said, sitting up with a sheepish grin. “Made *me* cum like that.”

I blinked, and then I followed his gaze to the couch behind us.

To the semen dripping down the edge of it and onto the floor.

I gaped at it, then back at him. “Oh, my God, you... you... without even *touching* yourself?”

“I’m as surprised as you are.”

He laughed, and I straddled him before kissing him hard enough to knock him back down to the floor.

“That’s fucking *hot*.”

“I blame the dancing.”

“Looks like I need to buy a pole I can set up anywhere we go.”

Holden laughed again, pulling me down to meet his lips as he said, “No arguments here.”

After we cleaned up our mess, we showered and crawled into bed together, snuggling to keep each other warm as it began to snow outside my window. I wrapped my arms around him, and he thread his leg between mine, kissing my forehead.

“Sometimes when I hold you like this, I’m still not sure if it’s a dream or not,” I admitted.

“I feel that way sometimes, too.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “I was a fucking mess without you. I never want to feel that way again.”

“Me either,” I confessed. “There were so many times I wanted to call you, to share something with you. Like when I had Christmas with my mom.”

“I’m really glad you two are talking again.”

I snuggled into him. “Me, too. It’s kind of scary but... in a good way. I understand her more now. And I think she understands me, too.”

“I think she just loves *me*, and therefore you by proxy.”

I rolled my eyes. “She’s met you *one time*.”

“And she adored me. She hasn’t stopped talking about me to you since.”

“Jeez, am I going to have to watch my back for my mom stealing you away?”

“Your dad would *really* hate me then.”

I pinched his side, and he laughed, wiggling away from me before he rolled over and pinned me in the sheets.

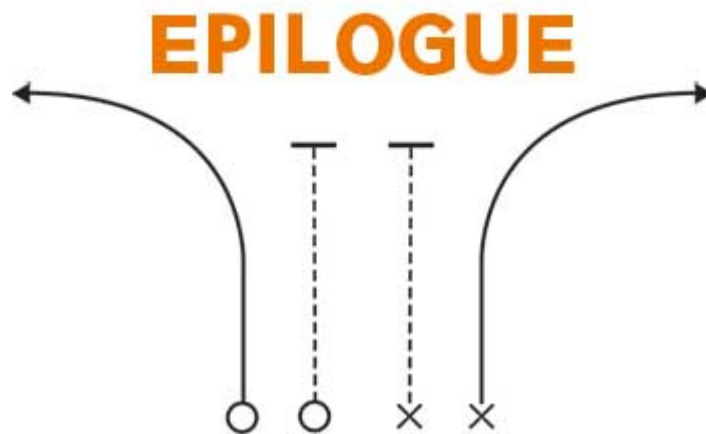
“You’re the only one for me and you know it.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t like to hear it.”

“I’ll tell you as many times as you want,” he promised. “Again and again until you’re sick of it. Until you’re sick of *me*.”

I just smiled and kissed him and laughed to myself.

Because I knew in my heart that day would never come.



Three Months Later

Holden

It was just barely beginning to warm up in Boston when draft day rolled around. Spring had come, but not barreling in as we'd all hoped. It was soft, quiet, but promising.

Even so, I'd stripped down to my athletic shorts and a t-shirt, and my Uncle Kevin watched me with an amused smile as I leaned against the edge of the kitchen island, pretending like I was calm. The Lions had just used their fifth pick on a defensive lineman from Hawaii.

I checked my phone just to make sure it was charged — it was, ninety-seven percent. I'd had it plugged in most of the day just in case. I'd also had Uncle Kevin do the same, since his was my backup number.

“Relax,” he told me as he passed by with a refreshed plate of artisanal cheese, meat, and bread. “You’ll get a call.”

“I know,” I said, but the truth was I *didn't* know — not for sure. I hoped. And if the analysts I'd been listening to for the past week and a half had any idea of what was going on, they assumed, too.

Everyone pegged me for a first-round pick.

We just didn't know *when* in the first round.

I already had a hunch that it wouldn't be in the first five. None of those teams needed a quarterback. But as we rounded toward the sixth pick, my palms started sweating. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers were in the market for a QB, and I swore my phone burned in my pocket as I willed it to ring.

"Hey there, brother."

I startled when Clay squeezed my shoulders with his massive hands, rounding the island to slide next to me. He offered me a beer, and even though I didn't really want it, I took it just so I'd have something to do.

"I can't believe you're going pro."

"We don't know that yet."

He gave me a look with flat lips. "Just promise me you'll come back for *my* senior year championship game."

"Back-to-back wins, huh?"

"You doubt us?"

I shrugged, tonguing my cheek. "I don't know. Without me?" I whistled through my teeth, and Leo socked me in the arm as he came up on the other side of where we stood.

"You forget that it's *me* who was your secret weapon these past few years," he teased.

"Neither of you would have even had a chance if it weren't for my returns," Zeke piped in, tapping his beer bottle against mine.

Riley came up right behind him rolling her eyes. "And you're all so modest, to boot."

Zeke smirked, tucking her under his arm and kissing her temple as they returned to the living room and plopped down on the couch right in front of the food. Giana was in the corner of the room beside the TV making sure her cameraman was set up with the proper angle to capture our celebration if a call came in.

When, I tried to chastise myself, but my stomach was tight even as I did.

Coach Lee and Coach Hoover were both in the living room, too. Even Julep's mom had flown out for the occasion, and the pair of them sat on the loveseat, each of them holding a glass of wine. They were laughing about something, and I didn't care what it was because all that mattered to me was that Julep and her mom were laughing at all.

On the television, the commissioner took the stage, and everyone quieted.

Not so subtly, eyes floated to me, for my reaction.

If it was me they had picked, I would have had a call. I casually checked my phone just to make sure I hadn't missed anything.

I hadn't.

“With the fifth pick in the NFL draft, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers select...” He paused for dramatic effect. “Bernie Hoffman, Iowa Central.”

The crowd in Vegas was a mix of cheers and boos, all in good fun as usual during the draft. I forced a smile as the quarterback out of Iowa Central took the stage. They'd asked me if I wanted to fly out to Vegas, too, just in case I was picked early on — but I'd elected to stay here in Boston with my team.

With my family.

“Ah, who wants to play for Tampa, anyway?” My uncle Nathan said, bouncing Joanne in his lap. “Too goddamn muggy in Florida.”

Everyone chuckled, but the energy had shifted with that pick. Slowly, conversation picked back up, everyone drinking and refilling their plates. The Giants were on the clock now, but I knew as well as the rest of the room that they weren't going to be calling me.

I tried to sneak outside without being seen — knowing even as I slid the sliding glass door open that I had failed. Still,

I breathed a little easier once I was on the back patio, a chilly wind sweeping through and cooling the sweat on the back of my neck.

I rested my forearms on the banister, breathing in deep. For a while, I just peered up at the few stars I could see, listening to the wind blowing through the trees.

“I wish you were here,” I said to the back yard, but I knew the message was heard by who I intended it for.

As if in answer, a gentle breeze rolled through the yard, rustling the leaves in the trees one by one. I heard it before I felt it wash over my face, and I closed my eyes and smiled when it did.

The sliding glass door opened and shut behind me, and after a few footsteps, Julep wrapped her arms around me from behind.

“Aren’t you freezing?” she asked, her chin balancing on the back of my shoulder as she wrapped me up tight.

I turned until I was facing her, and she chuckled at the sheen of sweat on my forehead.

“Apparently not,” she mused.

I tried to smile, but it was weak as I let my hands rest on her hips.

The real reason for my nerves stared back at me.

She’d walked into my trap just like I’d known she would. She saw I was anxious, saw I’d gone outside to get away from everyone. And now, I had her alone, just like I’d wanted.

“You okay?” she asked tenderly, playing with the hair at the nape of my neck.

“More than okay.”

“Oh, really? Because everyone inside that house thinks you’re going to run into traffic if the phone doesn’t ring.”

“I’m not worried about the draft.”

She snorted, shaking her head as she leaned in and pegged me with a brief kiss. “You know, you don’t have to act all macho with me. I’m your girlfriend, remember?”

“Yeah... about that.”

Her face sobered, smile washing away instantly.

“I’ve been thinking... you know, with the draft, and my future up in the air. Maybe I’ll get a call tonight. Maybe it won’t be until later this weekend. But I think it’s pretty safe to say I’m going pro. And that means I’ll be in a new city, who knows where, with a new team and all these new people in my life...”

Julep looked like a ghost as she released her hold around my neck and stepped back. “What... what are you saying, Holden?”

I swallowed, holding her gaze. “I’m saying... I don’t think I want a girlfriend through all that.”

Her face went ashen, her nose flaring as she blinked and stared at me in complete and total shock.

And I wanted to wait. I wanted to get a reaction out of her, to play along with the ruse a little longer, but I couldn’t stand even *pretending* to hurt her.

So, I moved closer, taking her hands in mine as I slowly dropped to one knee.

“I want a fiancée.”

Her next breath was a gasp, and she nearly burst into tears as she cursed my name. “Holden!”

I pulled the ring from my pocket, presenting it to her between my fingertips rather than in a box. The delicate gold band was weathered but freshly polished, and a lone, marquise-shaped diamond glittered in the porch light shining from above us.

“It was my mother’s,” I said, voice tight. “My father bought this for her as an upgrade once he had enough money to do so. I remember when she got it. Christmas of 2012. She’d cried so hard ugly snot came out of her nose.”

“I’m about to do the same,” Julep choked, and then she dropped to her knees with me, shaking her head as her eyes bounced between the diamond and me. “Are you... is this real?”

“The realest.”

She smiled, then bit her lip. “My dad is going to kill you for not asking him first.”

“Who said I didn’t ask him?”

Her eyebrows tugged inward, and then she glanced behind me at the house. When she covered her mouth and the laugh that bubbled out of her, too, I whipped around to find a dozen faces pressed against the window watching us. Giana was crying so hard you’d have thought it was *her* being proposed to.

I smiled, turning back to Julep. “I meant what I said after the bowl game that none of this means anything without you. I want you to know when I go into this that I don’t care about any of the girls who will follow us on the road, or about going out to strip clubs or whatever else might be presented to me.” I pulled her left hand into my right one and held the ring with my left. “I care about you. More than anything in this world. And I want every experience life has to offer with you by my side.”

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth as tears filled her eyes, and all the while she watched me.

“Marry me, Julep. Marry me, and I promise to take you to every yard sale we can find in every state we go to. Marry me, and I will grow a garden in your name. Marry me, and I promise to set up a chrome pole in the middle of every piece of property we own.”

She laughed, though it was garbled with tears.

“Marry me,” I repeated, swiping the fresh tears away. “And I will spend the rest of my life loving you. No matter how long that is. Every minute I am here on Earth is yours. And after that, too.”

Julep shook her head, glancing at the ring and then back up at me. “On one condition.”

“Anything.”

“When you win your first Super Bowl, you take me to the Exumas.”

I tilted my head back on a laugh that shook me from the inside out. “I’ll take you with my signing bonus, how about that?”

“Even better.”

“Is that a yes?”

She rolled her eyes. “Put the damn ring on my finger, Holden.”

So I did, and then I pulled her into my arms and kissed her.

Inside, cheers erupted, the sliding glass door flying open as everyone piled out onto the balcony. Even Giana’s cameraman followed. I was swarmed by my teammates first while the girls rushed Julep to see the ring. Coach Lee shook my hand and Mrs. Lee wrapped me in one of her fierce hugs. My uncles hugged me last, holding me a long time to really let their love sink in — like always.

“Welcome to the family,” Nathan said to Julep next, and he tucked her into his side. “We’re going to have *too* much fun with this motley crew.”

Coach Lee arched a brow. “And suddenly, I’m rethinking my blessing.”

That elicited a laugh from the crowd, but it was cut short.

By my phone ringing.

My heart stopped, everyone turning to stare at where I stood. I tried to glance at the TV through the sliding glass door, but I couldn’t see clearly enough to know who was picking. On the third ring Clay snapped me out of my haze.

“Answer it, bro!”

I fumbled with my phone as I pulled it from my pocket, and then I held it to my ear.

“Hello?” I asked.

“*Speakerphone*,” Giana mouthed, pointing at the camera.

I switched it over to speaker just in time for a booming voice to say, “Holden, this is Coach Nixon out in Charlotte. I’ve got team owner Michael Bradshaw here with me. Are you having a good night out there in Boston?”

A smile split my face as the rest of my family looked at each other with bright eyes, bouncing and hitting each other and making all kinds of muffled, high-pitched noises. I looked at Julep.

My fiancée.

“Yes, sir, I am,” I said.

“Well, I hope you enjoy it, because we’re going to get you on a flight to Charlotte in the morning. That is, if you’d like to come be a Panther.”

My friends couldn’t hold it in. Leo howled first, and then the rest of the guys joined in and so did my uncles. They were cheering so loud I didn’t know if coach could hear me when I said, “I’d like that very much, sir.”

“Good. Well, we’re going to run now, but someone from the front office will be calling you here in about ten minutes with more information, alright? And we’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Alright, son. Take care.”

The call ended, and the house went absolutely insane.

I was distantly aware of the camera light in my face as Julep jumped in my arms, kissing me hard as her legs wrapped around me. I hoped that diamond was shining on her finger when they showed this clip on television.

“We’re going to Charlotte, baby!” I said.

She just screamed and kissed me harder.

As soon as I set Julep back on the ground, I was enveloped in bone-crushing hugs from my uncles, and then from all my teammates, and finally, from my coaches. Coach Lee held my hand firmly, a soft smile on his lips.

“You proved me wrong,” he said. “I’m really glad you did.”

“Me, too, sir.”

We piled inside the house just in time to see the announcement, and even though we were set up for “live” reaction, it was a ten-second clip from outside that ran on the screen, all of us jumping up and down and screaming with the news.

Just like I’d hoped, Julep’s ring was flashing bright.

When they launched into my backstory, showing highlight reels and talking about my tragic past, I turned the TV off.

“Hey!” Riley protested.

“They’re going to have plenty to say about me for the rest of my life,” I told her and everyone else. Then, I reached for the nearest glass. “Tonight, I just want to be here, with my people, celebrating the best night of my life.” I paused, looking at Julep. “So far, anyway.”

She blushed and smiled as Uncle Kevin scrambled to the kitchen. “Wait! I have champagne!”

That made everyone laugh, and Uncle Nathan helped him distribute flutes until everyone had one in hand. Once they were full, we toasted them together in the middle of the silent living room.

“To Holden!” Uncle Kev said.

“To the Panthers!” Leo added.

“To dreams coming true,” Julep said, her eyes sparkling in the light as she smirked at me.

I looked around the room at the people I loved most, at the people who loved me. I was sad for this door closing. I was

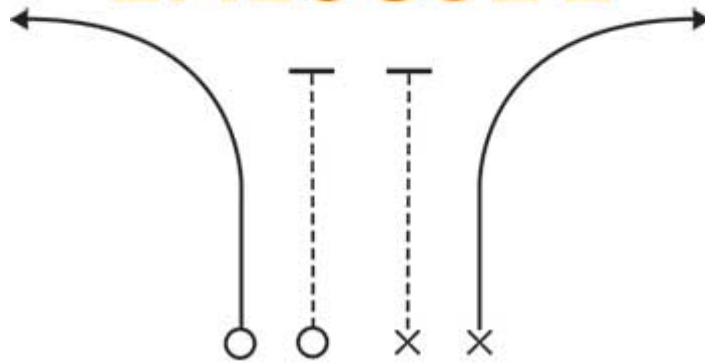
impossibly excited at the one that opened behind it. But as my eyes landed on Julep, I knew the emotion I felt more than anything was impatience.

I couldn't wait for her to be all the way mine.

And so, I lifted my glass last, and I held her gaze as I toasted.

“To my future wife.”

EPILOGUE 2



Mary

“Months?!”

I repeated the word back to the stout, almost *too* muscular man staring back at me with an expression like he was bored with my concern. He was chewing on some sort of seed, and he spit out a shell before nodding and looking back at the house with one hand on his hip and the other holding his clipboard.

“It’s very possible,” he said with a thick New England accent. “I know that’s not the news you or your landlord want to hear, but... the pipes are a mess.”

“Clearly,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose as I recalled the flood inside the house. I’d come home to it after a late night at the tattoo parlor and had spent most of the early morning hours mopping up what I could with every towel in the house.

“The good news is it’s fixable.”

“Right. You just need to gut the entire system.”

The man gave me an apologetic smile. “Ah, don’t beat yourself up. Happens all the time with old houses like this, especially with the summers getting hotter and hotter. These

pipes just can't take the expansion of the water when it gets hot like this."

I wanted to beat my head against the nearest brick wall.

"I spoke with your landlord, and she wants this resolved just as quickly as you do."

"Mm-hmm," I said flatly, trying not to laugh as I pictured Miss Margie doing *anything* quickly. She was a doll, and an absolute saint for renting the house to me for the low price she did. But she was also a nutcase and moved at the pace of a snail on vacation.

I'd been able to handle the rent on my own, even after Julep moved out. But it wasn't easy, and I had been actively looking for a roommate to help for a few weeks now.

So much for that.

Now, I was homeless with no money saved and a paycheck that just barely helped me scrape by as it was. And, unlike many of the college kids who lived in this old neighborhood, I couldn't just call up my mom or dad and ask for money.

I mean, I *could*. But I wouldn't.

I was still standing with my arms folded, subtly pinching the inside of my rib cage just in case this was a nightmare I could wake up from, when someone sidled up beside me and nearly made me jump out of my skin.

"What's the problem?"

I pressed a hand against my heart from the scare, eyes wide until I turned and found Leo Hernandez standing beside me with concern etched into his brow.

Leo fucking Hernandez — North Boston University's star running back, most unobtainable bachelor, and number one on my *people I would murder if I could get away with it* list.

Also, my neighbor.

He looked like he was fresh from summer practice, sweat soaking the edges of his hairline and making his gray NBU football t-shirt stick to his chest. His hair was boyish in its

length, messy and sticking up in a thousand different ways where it wasn't stuck to his forehead. His hazel eyes and warm brown skin were too much for most anyone attracted to males to resist, and when you combined it with a body built by years and years of football, it was the most unfortunately irresistible combination.

I'd used to think I loved him.

But that was before I hated him.

He folded his arms over his muscular chest, and it was then that I realized he'd ripped the sleeves off his shirt, showcasing his upper outer rib cage and every inch of his arms. I glanced at his bulging biceps for only a moment before I scoffed and rolled my eyes.

"Nothing that concerns you."

"As your neighbor, I beg to differ."

"This your boyfriend?" The man with the clipboard asked, pointing at Leo. "I can explain it to him, if you'd like."

I ground my teeth, both at the insinuation that I would ever date a pig-headed asshole like Leo Hernandez and that as a woman, I needed a man that the contractor could explain the pipe issue to in order for me to fully comprehend.

"He's no one," I grumbled, angling my body so that Leo was cut out of the circle that had somehow formed. "I'll speak with Margie about next steps. Thank you for your time."

The man looked between me and Leo a few times before shrugging. Then he ripped off a copy of the assessment from his clipboard and handed it to me. "I recommend getting anything you care about out of there."

"Right," I said, again annoyed that he even felt the need to say that, as if it wasn't common sense.

He left along with the small crew he'd brought with him.

Leo, however, was still standing behind me once the truck pulled away.

"Did a pipe burst or something?"

“Go away,” I clipped before heading for the house.

He was on my heels. “It sounds pretty serious.”

I ignored him, opening the front door of the house and attempting to slam it in his face. But he caught it, and then he dipped his head through and whistled at what he saw.

It was a fucking mess.

Not just one pipe had burst. It was as if one gave out and the rest of the pipes decided they were tired, too, so they threw in the towel and joined the first. There was a giant hole in the ceiling where water had built from the leak on the second floor and caused it to collapse, and if that were all I had to worry about, maybe I could have stayed. But the entire *system* had gone. Water was everywhere, and so was debris, and I just stared at it all with Leo at my side.

“You can’t stay here,” he said, assessing the damage with his thick brows bent together. His dark, messy hair was still half-stuck to his forehead, his lips a bit chapped from the sun as he looked around. How he made sweat and sun-damage so appealing was beyond me and I filed it as just another reason to hate him.

And I already had plenty.

“Wow, where would I be without you to point out the obvious?”

He shook his head. “Do you have a place to go? Need a ride or anything?”

I made an annoyed noise in my throat and pushed inside, not caring at this point that he was still standing in my doorway. “My car isn’t an issue, idiot. And I’m fine. You can leave now. Thank you for the neighborly concern.”

I shot each word out like pellets from a gun chamber, surveying the house and trying to decide where to start, what I needed to get out and what could possibly remain behind. The fact that I didn’t have anywhere to move any of it was an issue I would deal with once Leo got out of my hair.

“You can stay with us.”

I laughed — and not an amused laugh, but one that was laced with bitter anger and resentment.

“I’m serious,” Leo said, pushing inside and carefully side-stepping where the ceiling had collapsed. “You don’t even have to pay rent. Holden’s room is free now since he and Julep moved to Charlotte.”

I spun on my heels. “You really expect me to move in with you and two other football players?”

He shrugged, a cocky smirk playing on his lips. “What I *expect* is that you don’t have as many options as you’re acting like you do.”

I clamped my mouth shut, jaw aching with how hard I ground my teeth. He was right. I didn’t have a *single* option, really, other than stay a few nights at a hotel and try to find a cheap interim place on Craig’s List. And even those options meant I’d have limited funds for things like food and gas after the fact.

I didn’t think Margie would charge me rent while she fixed the place, but I also didn’t think she’d let me completely out of the lease I’d just re-signed.

Even if she did, I didn’t have anywhere to go. And with fall just around the corner, I’d be fighting against the rush of students trying to find places, too. I’d dealt with that nightmare time and time again already. The thought of having to face it again now made me want to fall into a heap on the floor and cry.

“Hear me out,” he said, approaching me slowly when I didn’t immediately respond. “You get to stay for free. It’s right across the street, so you don’t have to move all your stuff into a storage or across town. You don’t even have to change your mailing address. You have me and the other guys to *help* you move. You have your own room. We’re clean...” He paused. “Ish.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Did I mention it’s free?”

I chewed my lip, hating how many good points he had. It wasn't like I didn't know the guys, either. I'd spent enough time partying or hanging out at the Pit now, thanks to Julep, that I felt like an adopted little sister.

It would be nice to not have to worry about paying rent for a while, to possibly get some sort of savings started...

I shook my head for even considering it, mentally slapping myself. This was Leo Hernandez, for God's sake. This was the prick who'd made my entire high school existence absolutely miserable and then completely forgotten about it because *that* was how little it mattered to him.

How little *I* mattered to him.

"I'll be fine," I said, turning on my heels.

His hand shot out, catching me by the crook of my elbow. Heat shot through me just as much as revulsion as I pulled away from the touch.

"Come on. Let us help you out. You're Julep's friend, and therefore, a friend of ours."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Since when are you nice?"

He feigned offense, pressing a hand to his chest. "Me? I'm *always* nice. I'm the nicest guy you'll ever meet."

I blinked at him, ignoring the urge to refute that statement in a law-based manner complete with evidence and a jury of women I knew would find his ass guilty.

"Just... think about it. Here," he said, holding his hand out. "Give me your phone. I'll put my number in, and I promise not to say another word about it. But if you change your mind, one text and we'll be here helping you move everything out and across the street. We won't have anyone else in that room until fall, so you have at least a couple months, and it should all be fixed by then, right?"

I couldn't do anything but look at him and slowly blink again.

I loathed his existence, and yet in that moment, I saw a glimpse of the boy I used to know.

The boy I *thought* I knew, anyway — the one who was crushed under the pressure of what he thought he should be, who had deep thoughts and feelings that he didn't share with anyone but me.

“Phone,” he said, wiggling his fingers.

I blamed the lack of sleep and the supreme yearning to get him out of my house for my actions next. I dug my phone out of my pocket and handed it to him. He put his number in, sent a text to himself so he'd have my number, too, and then gave it back to me.

“One text,” he said, and then true to his word, he turned and left.

“Fucking shit hammock,” I muttered under my breath once he was gone.

I didn't care how desperate things were. No *way* was I moving into the Pit with a house full of disgusting football players, *especially* not with Leo Hernandez being one of them.

Three days later, I sent a text.

Don't make me regret this.

One minute later, Leo wrote back.

That's a weird way to say thank you.

And within the hour, my house was full of football players hauling my belongings across the street.

What happens when the take-no-shit tattoo apprentice has no choice but to room with the university's star running back who she's hated for years? Find out in *Hail Mary*, the final book in the Red Zone Rivals series, coming this winter. [Pre-order now!](#)

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Gemma

This is not the conversation we were supposed to have.

On the drive home, I saw every word that would form. I saw how they would be born, first in my mind and then in my mouth, each one standing strong and brave as it slipped from my lips and landed on his ears.

I knew what I'd say. I knew what he'd say. I had a *plan*.

My particular brand of anxiety was having an ungodly amount of stress over that which I could not control. It'd been this way since I was a young girl, and it'd only worsened with age. I made lists, and plans, and deadlines. I gave myself goals, and when I met them, I celebrated only long enough for me to decide what I would tackle next on the list.

It was all about being in control.

So, unlike a normal woman discovering her husband's infidelity, I did not cry or scream or throw objects across the room when I learned the truth. No, instead, when I found the first sign of his indiscretions, I made a check list. And I checked items off that list with a mixture of both dread and satisfaction.

Perfume that wasn't mine staining his shirt? Check.

Text messages from an unknown number, slipping through the cracks of my husband's technology-ignorant fingers onto

our shared computer, but missing from his phone? Check.

Hotel rooms booked on a card I shouldn't have known about, one I only discovered by receiving the statement in our teal mailbox? Check.

We painted that mailbox together, by the way. It was one of the first things on the list I'd made when we bought our house. We'd both been covered in that teal paint — the color I loved so much in the store, but actually rather hated once it was splashed on our mailbox.

But it didn't matter the day we painted that mailbox.

On that day, my husband kissed my paint-splattered lips and told me I was the only woman he would ever love.

And I believed him.

My husband was the kind of man who looked at me so adoringly, who said the sweetest things, that I was *certain* I could have tossed him into a pit of gorgeous super models and he wouldn't have so much as even looked at them, let alone touch them. In fact, he'd be searching for me, calling out my name, seeking me out.

My entire relationship with him, I'd believed every word he'd said — perhaps blindly, it would seem. I believed him when he cried the day he asked me to marry him, and when he told me over breakfast one morning that no one in this world made me happier than him. There was never any reason to suspect him. There was never any reason to not feel safe.

And yet...

The last little box on the list I made when I first suspected my husband was cheating on me was visual proof. I had the clues, the emails and texts, and late nights with no alibi. But it wasn't until I followed him, until I saw with my own eyes that his hands could hold another woman the way he held me, that his mouth could kiss hers, that his smile could beam for someone other than me.

And when that box was checked, I still didn't cry. Or scream. Or throw anything, though I did debate shoving my heel down on the gas pedal of my car and leaving it there as I

drove toward where they stood, kissing and laughing, pulling luggage out of my husband's car.

No, instead of letting emotion rule me, I did what I do best. Just like with the rest of my life, I made a plan.

I focused on what I could control.

I could control me, what I would say, what I would do. I could control who I told, how our families would find out, how we would go about the divorce. I could control who got what, how assets were split, and where we each would stay as the signatures were scrawled against cold, lifeless pieces of paper that would end our young marriage.

I could control how I would tell him that I knew, and could temper my emotions as I told him.

Perhaps all of this was why, sitting across the table from my husband, my heart was beating rapidly, loud and thunderous in my ears as it threatened to bang right out of my ribcage. It could have been why my breath was shallow, my eyes dry from not blinking, my mouth clamped shut without a single word to offer, though I had so many planned in my head.

I had a plan. I knew how this conversation would go. I had everything in control.

I know about her. I know what you've done. I'm leaving. We're done.

But my uncanny sense of control and my ability to make a checklist didn't matter once I actually sat down at our kitchen table across from the man who'd lied to me for years.

Because he spoke first.

And everything changed.

"Gem," he rasped, his voice broken under the weight of his words. "Gemma, did you hear me?"

"I heard you," I managed.

My own voice mirrored his, broken and raspy, laced with dread. Of course, he assumed it was because of the blow he'd

delivered. My sad-eyed, exhausted husband thought he'd broken my heart with his news. But the truth was my dread was born of a different source. It was simply me mourning the absolute conviction with which I'd believed in my plan and its certain success.

Now, I had no plan.

Now, my cheating husband and his secret lover were not the center of this conversation.

Now, my cheating husband had cancer.

The kind that couldn't be fought.

The kind that would end his life.

Soon.

It's okay, I tried to assure myself, pressing a hand to my chest so I could feel how fast my heart was beating beneath my ribcage. Just make a new plan.

But, as it went with my special brand of anxiety, my plans not working out the way I envisioned them often left me grappling. Suddenly, everything I thought I had on a leash was running wild, and no matter how I tried to talk myself down, I couldn't. Every time that happened — every time my plan went wrong — my emotions would win, all logic gone, all sense of what should be done lost like a whisper on a breeze.

“Please,” he whispered, grabbing the legs of my chair and pulling me toward him. The wood made a terrible noise as it rubbed against our kitchen floor, sparking a wave of chills from my ankles to the top of my spine. “Don't cry, my sweet gem. It will be okay. We'll be okay.”

He wrapped his arm around me, one hand cradling my head into his chest as the other caressed my back. Those hands had touched another woman, and they were now touching me, and I wanted to pull away just as much as I wanted to stay there forever.

He was going to leave me. He was going to leave this world.

My tears felt like they belonged to someone else as they soaked his sweater, and I tried to decipher where they came from. It didn't take long for me to realize they weren't born from one, singular source, but rather from all of them — like a waterfall made of glaciers melting all at once in the first warm wave of spring.

My husband was cheating on me.

He loved another woman — one who did not bear my name.

I would be alone, because I would lose him.

Only now, it wouldn't be because of his infidelity. The choice to be alone would not be made by me standing tall, demanding more, not accepting his affair.

Instead, he would fade from the Earth and I would remain, mourning him along with his other lover.

Maybe I cried because, though I had a plan, I secretly prayed he would thwart it. Perhaps I half-envisioned me leaving him, chin held high as I walked away, and half-envisioned him begging me to stay, promising to relinquish his love affair, for our marriage meant more to him than she ever could.

Regardless, it didn't matter now.

Now, I had a cheating husband who would never learn my knowledge of his infidelity.

Because now, I would never tell him I knew.

What would be the objective? With a blow as hard as terminal cancer, was there really any point to leaving him now, to letting him fight the final weeks of his life alone? Was there any point to telling him I knew about the other woman he touched, other than satisfying *my* need to feel in control, to shove my proof in his face and say *Ha! I know what you did!?*

Death has a funny way of putting life into perspective for us. And what had once been so important to me — that need for vindication I held so tightly on my drive home — didn't seem to matter now. There was really only *one* thing that did.

I loved him.

That emotion was easy to pin down.

And because it was the only thing I could truly grasp, I held onto it tightly, knuckles white and aching. Carlo Mancini was my husband, and I, his wife. He was my everything — and that was still true, regardless of who else he'd shared a bed with.

So, I pulled back from his embrace, and kissed his lips — lips I always thought would be *only* mine to kiss — and I told him I loved him. I told him I was there. I held his hand and told him that, come what may, he had me by his side.

And by his side I stayed, until the very day he died.

Somewhere in that warped, whirling span of time, I think a part of me died, too.

I watched cancer wither my strong, commanding husband into nothing but skin and bones. I watched his eyes grow hollow, his lips ashen, his hands weaken where I held them in mine. Every day that I looked in the mirror, I watched my own eyes change, a hardness settling in. I watched a twenty-nine-year-old girl become an old woman in just weeks — weeks that felt like years, but flew by like days.

And on the day of his funeral, I watched a girl younger and prettier than me mourn him from the back row of our church.

She cried the same tears that I did, though I swore her heart was in more pain than mine. Because she had the satisfaction of being the other woman, of being the one he couldn't live without — so much so that he was willing to risk his marriage, his reputation, his life that he had built. She knew without a doubt that she had been his world, that she had been the last face in his mind before the light was extinguished and he faded off into nothing.

I didn't have that same comfort.

I had casseroles from neighbors and life insurance policies from lawyers and a house full of things that smelled like him. I had a down payment on a condo downtown that I'd secured, thinking I would be walking away from him, away from his

infidelity. I had an empty hole in my chest where a young heart used to beat, where love used to grow like flowers, now turned to weeds.

I had a secret to keep, one that would eat me alive every second it dwelled in the dark, unspoken depths of my mind.

And I had a plan.

To preserve control over my future, over my heart, my soul, my well-being, over the life I would lead *after* my husband — I had to eliminate the factors that were uncontrollable. It was just that simple.

And right there, in that first-row pew, with my dead, cheating husband's mother's hand in mine, I made one simple plan, with one simple rule.

Never fall in love again.

It was more than just a plan, more than just a goal. It was a promise.

And it was one I vowed to keep.



Gemma

eight months later

“No.”

I only had one word for my best friend-slash-boss as we flowed with the crowd spilling out of Soldier Field, the warm, early-September air sweeping over us. Despite the fact that Belle and I had sweat through most of the Chicago Bears preseason game until the sun finally went down, I still smiled, reveling in the last few weeks of summer.

Soon, the heat would fade, and the Illinois winter would hit with all the subtlety of a Mack truck.

I was in no rush to be greeted with the kind of cold that hurts your face. Still, while I would miss summer, it was fall that was my favorite season. It had always held a special place in my heart for many reasons — my birthday, Halloween, pumpkin-spiced everything, and, most of all, football.

“Shut up. You don’t get to say no to me,” Belle snapped. She swept her long, strawberry-blonde hair off her shoulder before looping her arm through mine. “In our friendship, I’m always right. And trust me when I say I’m right about this.”

“I’m not ready to date, Belle. Drop it.”

“I didn’t say you had to *date*,” she stated, matter-of-factly, as she held up one black-lacquered fingernail. “I said you need to get laid. And this, my friend, is literally every man’s

fantasy.” She gestured to the stadium we had just walked out of. “Free tickets to a football game *and* a hot chick to bang at the end of the night — with no strings attached?” She shook her head. “Honestly, I wish I had thought of this first. It’s genius.”

“I didn’t think of anything,” I reminded her. “I bought season tickets for my husband to give to him on his thirty-fifth birthday.”

“Your *cheating* husband,” she reminded me, steering us left toward the street lined with sports bars. And though my face didn’t show a single sign of weakness at those words, my stomach tightened into a knot.

Belle was literally the only person who would ever know that Carlo was unfaithful, other than the woman he cheated on me *with* — and not even she knew that I knew. I’d only told Belle after Carlo had passed away, mainly because I knew she’d speed up the process of his death before the good Lord could take him if she found out about his infidelity.

Belle was the kind of best friend who loved fiercely. She was honest with me always — bluntly so — and she never let me get too comfortable in my little land of control. Just when she saw me slipping into any kind of complacency, she would challenge me.

I hated her as much as I loved her for that.

Still, while I knew I’d need *someone* to talk to about Carlo’s infidelity, someone who knew the whole story, sometimes I regretted telling her. Where I was all about suppressing, boxing difficult emotions away and focusing on tasks I could complete, Belle was a processor.

She was not the kind of girl to let something go.

Especially *this* kind of something.

“And I say this with the utmost respect for you and him and all of God’s creatures,” she continued, drawing a cross over her shoulders with her free hand. “But he’s not here anymore, Gemma. May he rest in peace.” She paused. “And also, be castrated in the name of Jesus, amen.”

“Belle.”

“I’m kidding.” She paused again. “Sort of.”

I was ashamed of the small smile climbing on my lips in that moment. If he was still here, if my original plan had actually come to fruition, these types of jokes would be fine to make. After all, what woman didn’t support her best friend after she was cheated on? Comments of castration and ill-bidding were welcome, and most certainly expected.

But when he was no longer breathing, when cancer had taken *his* life before I could take *my* life back from him, it wasn’t the same. It was cruel, and heartless, and it produced a type of guilt that sat low and unsettling in your stomach.

This was my entire existence, it seemed, for the past several months.

“While I appreciate the attempt to make me laugh, I’m not ready to make jokes about Carlo like that,” I said softly. “I probably won’t ever be.”

“I’m sorry,” Belle said on a sigh, squeezing my arm as we flowed with the crowd. “Really, I am. That was too far. You know me, I can’t help but make jokes, even when it’s wildly inappropriate. Remember when my cousin had a funeral for his cat?”

“And you made a cake that looked like a litter box with little pebbles of poop, and wrote *Sorry your cat hit the shitter, at least you don’t have to change any more litter* on it with hot pink frosting?”

Belle pointed at me. “Exactly. I’m awful at death, it makes me feel itchy and so I resort to humor. Apparently, very poorly placed humor. But,” she continued, taking that finger she had pointed at my face and re-directing it to point at my lady bits. “Let’s bring this back to the real subject at hand, which is that *that region* is about as dry as the Sahara Desert.”

I rolled my eyes, pulling my arm from where it was wrapped around hers to fish in my purse. I rummaged around for my lipstick as we made our way toward the South Loop bars.

Play the humor card, Gemma. You're good. Everything's okay.

“*This region* is just fine, thank you,” I told her, gesturing to my crotch as I finally found my lipstick. I rolled the burgundy tube up, pointing it directly at my best friend. “It gets plenty of action.”

Belle scoffed. “Oh, right. Forgive me for thinking a twenty-nine-year-old woman might want something more than a dildo with three vibration speeds.”

“Four,” I corrected, smoothing the deep burgundy cream over my top lip and blotting it together with the bottom. “And this twenty-nine year-old woman is perfectly content.”

Belle huffed, and for the rest of our walk to the strip of bars we frequented after games, she continued, on and on about the importance of my libido not going stale and my vagina getting action.

This was part of what infuriated me about Belle, and part of what I loved — she could argue a fish into buying an oxygen tank. In Belle’s mind, she always knew what was right and what was wrong, and she had all the right words to convince you, too.

It was one of the things that made her a successful entrepreneur.

Belle started her own interior design firm as soon as she graduated college. In fact, she already had clients lined up, thanks to outshining the full-time employees at her internships. And, luckily for me, she needed an assistant — AKA someone to run her life. Where she was great with the people, with the design, *I* was great with the numbers, with the organization, and together? We made the best team in Chicago.

She never crossed over — she hung her boss hat up in the office and wore her best friend hat, instead. But, regardless of if we were on the clock or not, Belle was just a boss kind of lady.

And she was adamant about this particular job.

By the time we finally hit the strip of bars we were aiming for, I was in desperate need of a drink, and for my best friend to drop the subject.

But she wasn't done yet.

“Ugh, you haven't said anything in like ten minutes,” she said, pulling me to a dead stop outside a bar packed with Chicagoans celebrating the Bears' win. It was the last preseason game, and the entire city was alive with the hope of a promising season — especially in the south side by the stadium. While most Bears fans went back to their tailgating spots or made the commute back into the heart of the city after the games, I was beginning to prefer the rowdiness of the sports bars in the South Loop.

Honestly, I preferred almost anything other than going back to my empty condo.

When Carlo was alive, we would usually watch the games at home with a group of our neighbors. I would cook, he would entertain, and it was everything I'd ever dreamed of having when I was a young girl.

When I bought him the season tickets, I envisioned more for us — tailgating, building a community in the seats around us, starting traditions...

Belle sighed, and I blinked away Carlo's memory.

“Look, I know I joke a lot,” Belle said, taking my shoulders in her hands. She lowered her gaze to mine, ensuring I was listening before she continued. “But I'm serious when I say that I love you and I know you've been through a lot in the past eight months.”

Her eyes softened, and I forced a swallow, warding off any emotions that might try to sneak in with her looking at me like that.

“I'm not saying you should date. Hell, if anyone is against love as much as you, it's me. Hello,” she said, sweeping the back of her hand over her lean body. “Single for life and loving it, okay? But, just because I don't *date* doesn't mean I

don't go out, have fun, *meet people*." She eyed me. "And get some."

I just stared at her, still not convinced.

"You have these tickets, right?" she continued. "And you *love* the Bears."

"*Da* Bears."

"I'm not saying it like that."

"Say it, or I'm not listening to the rest of this."

Belle rolled her eyes. "*Da* Bears."

I smiled. "Better."

"I hate you." She readjusted her grip on my shoulders. "*Anyway*, you're like an enigma to dudes. A girl who actually enjoys football? It's gold, Gemma. So, instead of forcing your fun-loving best friend who absolutely *loathes* sports of all kinds, to suffer through every home game with you, take a chance and meet some new people. Have fun with a few guys who have the same interest as you, and, who knows," she said, smirking. "Maybe a big wang to rock your world with at the end of every game. Now *that's* the definition of a win-win."

I couldn't help but smile at that. "I think you're the horniest woman to ever exist."

"Guilty as charged. Now," she said, holding out her hand. "Give me your phone, let me download this app, and just... trust me. For once. This doesn't go against any of your *plans*, right? There's no roses-and-chocolate dating, no Facebook-official relationship status updates, no love, no marriage or babies, or any of that."

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I debated her reasoning. In a way, she *did* have a fair point — I maybe did need a little affection. I was dead set on never trusting anyone again, never falling for those stupid puppy-dog eyes as they stared into mine and told me they loved me and only me. I was done with that.

But football, beer, and a little romp in the sack?

I wasn't *not* into that...

And, if I could be like anyone, it would be Belle. At thirty, she was happily single, successful in her career, and traveling like it was her only job. She'd never needed a man, never even given a guy more than a week to *try* to nail her down. She was my inspiration, my hope that there was a life to live after Carlo.

My heart sank when I thought of him again, because there was a time when all I wanted was everything that Belle just listed. The very things that now made me want to crawl into a ball and hide or start kicking the first man to approach me used to be the only things I desired. I wanted a husband, and a family, and a suburban life. I wanted a partner in life to grow old with, to laugh with, to lean on when life got hard.

Now, I only wanted to lean on myself, because I was the only one I could depend on to not let me fall.

So, instead of letting my emotions take over, I reverted to rule number one of my plan — the one I'd made on how to survive after he passed.

Don't mourn the man you thought you knew. Remember the man he really was.

"Fine," I conceded, shaking Carlo from my thoughts.

Belle did a little hop for joy, but I held up one finger to stop her celebration.

"But, it has to be in a way I can control. If I want to stop, if I never want to see the guy again or I feel icky at any point, I get to pull out. Deal?"

"Deal," she agreed, still doing grabby-hands for my phone. "And make sure he *pulls out*, too. AYOOO!"

I rolled my eyes.

Belle was still smiling at her brilliance, fingers wiggling and waiting for my phone. "It's perfect. Just only talk to them through the app, that way if you hate them after your date — er, after the *game*," she corrected. "You can just delete them.

Then, they can't talk to you anymore. And, honestly, I think you should just take a new guy every time."

I handed her my phone, making my way inside the bar as she followed behind, still bouncing like a little girl who was just given twenty bucks to go wild in the toy store with.

"Oh, a new guy every game," I echoed. "Okay, now *that* I could get down with. Then it's more of like a... hangout. A game with a friend."

"A friend who could, potentially, rail you into next year with his hammer cock."

The bartender's brows shot up at Belle's comment as we slid into two blessedly empty stools at the corner end of the bar. I laughed, shaking my head to signal that he shouldn't even ask.

"Titos and water with lime," I told him. "Two, please." Then, I turned back to my best friend, who was feverishly typing away on my phone. "I'm serious, Belle. If at any point I decide I hate this, I get to pull the plug. And," I said, pointing at her. "If that happens, then you're suckered into going to every remaining game with me. And you can't complain. Even if it's below fifty outside."

"Yeah, fine, whatever," she said, waving me off quickly before clicking through my phone more.

The bartender slid our drinks in front of us, and I smiled his way, handing him my card. When he smiled back, I faltered, eyes lingering on him a little longer than they should have. He turned so quickly, I didn't have time to stare the way I wanted to, but that brief smile alone had me clenching my thighs together under the bar.

Belle grabbed her drink and immediately started sipping from the straw, fingers still flying over my phone, but I just stared at the man with my card in his hand as he crossed to the other side of the bar to help the next person. His shoulders were broad and rounded, his waist narrow, t-shirt sitting on the belt of his jeans in a way that made my next swallow harder to accomplish. And when my eyes fell to his ass, perfectly

rounded in a pair of dark denim jeans that fell in just the right way off his hips, well...

Let's just say I wanted a better look at the front. And the side. And all angles.

Maybe I am ready to get laid.

"There!" Belle exclaimed proudly, holding my phone out a few inches as if to study her masterpiece. "Your bio is all set. I picked the best pictures, although we *do* need to get some updated ones where you're actually smiling," she said pointedly, her eyes flicking up to mine before landing on the phone again. "Wanna hear what I put?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Belle ignored me. "*Hot Italian chick who loves checking off to-do lists almost as much as watching football. Go Bears!*"

I laughed. "Oh, my God, Belle."

Again, she ignored me.

"Season ticket holder looking for a cool, DTF guy to use my other ticket at a home game," she continued. *"If you love football, beer, and good conversation, I'm your girl. Send me a message, and maybe, if you're lucky, you'll be sitting next to me at kick-off."*

"That's actually only fifty-percent cheesy and awful," I said, knowing there was little point in arguing any edits. I glanced at the photos she'd picked for me, staring at my phone over her shoulder. The default was a selfie I'd snapped just two weeks ago at the first home preseason game. I had my burnt-orange Bears jersey on, my long, dark brown hair pulled over one shoulder, and a sideways grin. My eyes looked even more intensely green than normal in the lighting I'd caught in my condo that afternoon, the sunlight streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Reading over the bio she'd written for me again, I frowned. "What does *DTF* mean?"

Belle sucked a large drink through her straw. "Oh, it means... dark, tall, and fun. Kind of like tall, dark, and

handsome. All the kids are saying it, kind of like how we used A/S/L back in the good ol' days of AOL messaging.”

“Oh...” I thought over her words, wondering when I'd missed that little piece of lingo. I was approaching thirty, but it wasn't like I was ancient. I still kept up with social media, after all.

“Gotta pee!” Belle said quickly, hopping down off her barstool. She popped my phone into my hand. “Here, start swiping. Right means you think they're hot, left means they don't have a chance in hell.”

I laughed. “This is absurd.”

She just shrugged. “Welcome to dating in the twenty-first century. Be right back.”

Once Belle was gone, I crinkled my nose at my phone, placing it on the bar with the app still up on the screen. I turned my attention to the television behind the bar, instead, watching the game that had just started in California. The San Francisco 49ers were up on the Denver Broncos by three, and I watched the next play, tossing my hands up with a dramatic groan when offsides was called on Denver's offense.

“Oh, come on, ref.” I sighed, sipping my vodka. “Idiots.”

“They've been calling shit this whole quarter,” an older guy huffed at me from down the bar. “You a Broncos fan, too?”

“Bears girl,” I answered, eyes still on the screen. “But that was just a terrible call, no matter which team you're rooting for.”

“Let's hope our refs just let the boys play this year,” the man's friend chimed in, and I noted he was wearing a Bears shirt.

“I'm more concerned about our O line. If we can't keep the quarterback safe, it won't matter what the refs call.”

They both grumbled and raised their beers to me at that, and I cheersed their direction, taking another sip before my eyes flashed over my phone.

I sighed, finally picking it up.

For a solid minute, I just stared at the first face on my screen. It was a blond guy with glasses, his face a little round, eyes soft. The photo he'd chosen for his default was him sitting in a lawn chair at what appeared to be a barbecue, a dog in his lap, beer in one hand. He looked fun, like a friend I could watch football with.

But I didn't want to have sex with him.

I swiped left.

Once that first decision was made, I filtered through the next ones a bit quicker. In all honesty, it felt like a game — like some sort of soft-core porn site that no one had to know I enjoyed browsing. The more I swiped, the more I smiled.

Hot lawyer with a cat? Swipe right.

Boating captain with a gaggle of girls in every single photo of his? No, thanks. Swipe left.

Self-proclaimed “rich stud” with a photo of him holding a stack of cash? *Hard left.*

Cute freelance writer with a love for all things Chicago, including the Bears? Yes, please.

This is fun, I thought.

Until the first message popped up.

Hey there, Gemma. How 'bout them Bears?

I stared at the message, thumbs hovering over the keyboard on my phone.

What do I say back? Do I wait to respond? What if he thinks I'm stupid? What if he sees me in person and makes up some lame excuse to leave, and then I'm just sitting at the game alone?

Actually, that might not be so bad.

“Down To Fuck?”

I balked, blinking with my eyes still on the unanswered message on my phone before I peered up at the man the voice belonged to.

The bartender.

“*Excuse me?*” I asked, sure I didn’t hear him correctly. But he made no move to correct himself. Instead, he just stood there, staring at me, a little smirk on his full lips as he glanced down at my phone and back up at me.

“Down. To. Fuck,” he repeated. “That’s what DTF means.”

My mouth popped open, eyes skirting to where Belle had disappeared into the bathroom. “No... she wouldn’t.”

The bartender chuckled, fishing a beer out of the cooler behind him and sliding it over to a group of guys down to my left. “I mean, from the first words I heard her say when you two walked in here?” He smirked again. “I think she would.”

My cheeks flushed with heat, fingers flying over my phone as I quickly exited the message and tried to find my profile. “Oh, my God. How do I edit this thing? How do I delete that? Ah!” I threw my phone on the bar when another message came in. “Jesus Christ.”

The bartender laughed, picking up my phone from where I’d tossed it like a detonating bomb. He thumbed through a few screens, typed something, and handed it back to me.

“There. I edited it.” He leaned over the bar. “But, from the sounds of it, you should have left it. I mean, you *are* looking for someone who’s down to fuck, right?”

I closed the app, shoving my phone inside my purse with heat still creeping over my neck. “Nosy, much?”

“Hard not to overhear two gorgeous women talking about getting *railed into next year by a hammer cock.*”

I laughed at that, taking a sip of my vodka as my eyes met his. I finally got my wish, a chance to stare at him a little longer, and *boy*, was he fun to stare at.

His square jaw was lined with a faint shadow of stubble, his dark eyes hooded in a mixture of lust and playfulness. The

way his jet-black hair sat in a styled wave reminded me of a Calvin Klein model, and I knew without a second thought that I wouldn't mind seeing his tan skin sporting nothing but a pair of white briefs on a giant billboard — *especially* after that brief glimpse I got of his ass.

Ha! Take that, Belle. My libido is far from broken.

He was the definition of what Belle had *said* DTF stood for — Dark, Tall, and Fun.

“So, which one are you taking first?” he asked, pushing back from where he'd leaned over the bar. He nodded to a woman at the opposite end, letting her know he saw her request for a refill. And as he made her margarita, I pulled my phone back from my purse, sighing.

“Truthfully? I have no idea. I have two messages already, but I have no idea what to say to them.”

“Maybe you should start with *hi*.”

“You know what I mean,” I shot back, rolling my eyes. I opened up the app, staring at the first unanswered message again. “I haven't talked to another man like this since...” My voice faded, heart slinking into my stomach with a mixture of guilt and loss. “Well, in a very long time.”

“You're nervous,” he stated plainly, walking the new drink down to the woman at the end of the bar before returning to me. “Why don't you ease into it, have a practice run before the real thing?”

I cocked a brow. “And how would I do that?”

He shrugged, those wicked lips cranking into a smirk yet again. “Take me.”

“You.” I deadpanned.

He nodded. “Yeah. Take me to the first game. I mean, look,” he gestured between us. “Obviously, we have chemistry. We could have a good time. I'll buy the pizza and beer.”

“Sounds like you're just looking for a free ticket to the first home game,” I said, leaning over the bar.

His eyes flashed down to my cleavage that I'd not-so-subtly pushed up with that movement, and when they flicked back to me, they were heated — darker, dusted with a lust-filled promise I somehow knew he could keep.

“Maybe.” He shrugged again. “Or maybe I want to be the first one to have the privilege of fulfilling your friend’s promise.”

“Her promise?” I asked, just as Belle slid into the bar seat next to me.

“What did I miss?”

The bartender tore his gaze from mine, smiling at Belle, instead. And that’s when I realized what her *promise* had been.

Getting me railed into next year.

I swallowed.

“Your friend here is nervous talking to guys she doesn’t know on the app,” the bartender said to Belle as I fought another blush. “So, she’s taking me to the first game, as a sort of practice run.”

“Oh!” Belle’s eyes lit up as she assessed me first, and then dragged her eyes over the bartender. A tinge of possessiveness touched my chest when she clearly liked what she saw. She chewed her thumbnail, nodding. “Oh, yes. I like this idea.”

“I didn’t agree yet,” I reminded him.

“Okay,” he challenged. “Then go ahead and respond to...” he peered over my phone screen. “Brad, there.”

He and Belle both watched me, Belle fighting a smile as one eyebrow rose on her perfectly symmetrical face. The bartender watched me with a satisfied smirk when my fingers didn’t move for the keys, and my jaw popped open, a laugh slipping through.

“Wow. You two just met and you’re already ganging up on me.”

“I like him,” Belle said easily. “And I like this plan.”

“You don’t even know him. Actually,” I said. “I don’t even know his name yet.”

“Zach Bowen,” he said, extending his hand for mine. “Pleasure to meet you.”

I let him take my hand in his, trying to ignore the warm, buzzing energy that transferred when our skin touched.

“She’s Gemma,” Belle answered for me, since apparently my sticky tongue was glued to the roof of my mouth. “Gemma Mancini.”

“So, Gemma Mancini,” he said, his hand still wrapped around mine, eyes hooded and sure. “What do you say? Let me be your practice round.”

“Say yes, *stupid*,” Belle whispered.

I nudged her with my elbow.

Zach held my gaze confidently, his dark eyes watching me like I really had no other choice. And in that moment, I couldn’t think of a reason not to say yes. He seemed fun. He was hot.

And it would save me from this stupid app for at least one more week.

“Fine,” I conceded, and Zach’s smirk turned into a full-blown smile, one that had a slight dimple popping under that delicious stubble.

He reached for my phone, the screen still on the unanswered message from Brad. He clicked out of it, typing his phone number into a new text message, instead, and sending himself an emoji.

“There. My number. And I have yours. See you for the game next weekend?”

“Looks like it.”

His eyes roamed over me once more, the corner of his mouth pulling up just slightly. “Can’t wait.”

Belle nudged me under the bar with her knee, her eyes wide in an *oh my God* fashion.

“For now, I should get back to work. I’ll check on you ladies in a bit.”

“Thank you, Zach,” Belle said, waving her fingers daintily as he made his way over to the other side of the bar.

She didn’t stop staring once he was gone, though.

“Damn,” she breathed, resting her chin on the hand she’d just used to wave him farewell. “Now I *really* hope you get railed into next year.”

I laughed, trying not to panic at the thought of another man touching me.

A man who wasn’t Carlo.

Shaking my head, I pulled the app back up on my phone, showing Belle the messages that had come through and letting her swipe through the pictures of guys for a while. As we talked, I reminded myself of the one thing I always needed to hear.

I am in control.

It’s just a football game. It’s just a night of sports and beer and hot dogs. If I want to have sex with him, I can. If I don’t, I can just go home alone. No harm, no foul. These are *my* tickets, and this is my plan, even if it was Belle’s idea.

There are eight home games this season. That’s eight different guys, eight new friends to make, and — *only* if I want — eight potential orgasms that don’t come from my trusty vibrator.

I am in control.

Maybe this will actually be fun, I thought, laughing as Belle swiped a hard left on a guy who stated in his bio that he was a “sex machine.” She seemed to be having more fun than I was going through the app, so I let her swipe away, content to just sip on my vodka and listen to her commentary.

Every now and then, I’d feel Zach watching me from wherever he was working behind the bar. And when our eyes met, my chest would squeeze, along with my thighs. There was something about his eyes, about the kind of heat that

swept over me with that gaze. The way he looked at me, it was as if he already had me in his bed, between his sheets, one hand on my hip and the other hiking my leg up as he settled between my thighs.

He'd only just learned my name, but the way he looked at me? It was as if he knew everything — maybe even more than I knew, myself.

A practice round...

Yeah. This could be fun.

*This has been a sneak peek inside *The Wrong Game!* [Continue reading here](#) (free in Kindle Unlimited).*

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Tanner and Kellee are perfect for each other. They frequent the same bars, love the same music, and have the same desire to rip each other’s clothes off. Only problem? Tanner is still in love with his best friend.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kandi Steiner is an Amazon Top 5 bestselling author and whiskey connoisseur living in Tampa, FL. Best known for writing “emotional rollercoaster” stories, she loves bringing flawed characters to life and writing about real, raw romance — in all its forms. No two Kandi Steiner books are the same, and if you’re a lover of angsty, emotional, and inspirational reads, she’s your gal.

An alumna of the University of Central Florida, Kandi graduated with a double major in Creative Writing and Advertising/PR with a minor in Women’s Studies. She started writing back in the 4th grade after reading the first Harry Potter installment. In 6th grade, she wrote and edited her own newspaper and distributed to her classmates. Eventually, the principal caught on and the newspaper was quickly halted, though Kandi tried fighting for her “freedom of press.”

She took particular interest in writing romance after college, as she has always been a die hard hopeless romantic,

and likes to highlight all the challenges of love as well as the triumphs.

When Kandi isn't writing, you can find her reading books of all kinds, planning her next adventure, or pole dancing (yes, you read that right). She enjoys live music, traveling, playing with her fur babies and soaking up the sweetness of life.

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