

THE PURSUIT



FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES AND
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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**The Pursuit: A
Proposition/Runaway Train
Fusion Novel**

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Chapter One: Noah

The fasten seatbelt light lit up above me just as the captain's muffled voice warbled through my earbuds. Taking one out, I half-ass listened as I shoved my tray table back up and stuffed my water bottle into my carry-on at my feet. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. We're about to make our descent into Atlanta."

Home.

It didn't matter that I'd spent the last seven years predominantly away from the city except for holidays and breaks. Regardless of where I'd been in the country, or even the world for that matter, Atlanta would always be home to me. It's where I'd grown up—well at least in the burbs, that is. It's where my parents and siblings still lived along with my large extended family of aunts, uncles, and cousins. It's where I'd experienced the happiest memories of my life.

It was that intense love of family that was providing me a break from my rigorous training schedule as a competitive swimmer. When my cousin and best friend, Mason, had asked me to be the best man at his wedding, my coach grudgingly granted me two weeks away. I'd had to practically sign in blood that I would still be in the water every single day I was away. At twenty-five, I was nearing what was considered

somewhat middle-aged for competitive swimming, so I didn't want to do anything to screw up my chances of competing in another Olympics.

Putting my name alongside "Olympic swimmer" was still something that felt like a dream. All the years of crack-of-dawn practices and hours upon hours submerged in the water had culminated in earning a spot as an alternate on the US swim team. Of course, my real break came with a teammate's misfortune. Or I guess I should say idiocy considering he got blackout drunk celebrating after the Opening Ceremonies and fell down the stairs at the Olympic Village. That mishap resulted not only in a concussion, but a broken arm. Since I had the highest qualifying score of the alternates, I was the one who got moved into his spot.

As the plane skidded along the runway, I dug my phone out of my pocket. After powering it on, text messages dinged in rapid-fire succession. Fielding through them, I fought the urge to both roll my eyes and chuckle. Of course, the majority were from my mom.

Mom: *Hey sweetie, we're leaving now for the airport. Can't wait to see you!*

Mom: *I vetoed your dad's and Liam's idea to pick you up curbside. We'll be waiting for you inside.*

Jesus. Could my mom possibly be any more embarrassing? The thought of my family waiting for me at Arrivals and Departures like I was an unaccompanied minor home from his first flight was absurd.

Mom: *Let me know the instant your plane lands!!*

I'm not sure why Mom's texts even surprised me. As much as she aggravated me, deep down I knew I should be thankful

to have such an involved mom. She had sacrificed so much for not only my dreams, but my siblings as well. She always tried to argue that we'd made her dreams come true by allowing her to be a mother.

When the pilot's voice once again came over the intercom and everyone began scattering to gather their things, I quickly texted: *Just landed. See you in a few.*

And of course, I'd barely finished hitting send before Mom's swift reply came of *Love you bunches!* followed with five heart emoji. With a shake of my head, I pictured her sitting shotgun in Dad's Mercedes convertible—the one my siblings and I teased him with was a mid-life crisis car to which he had immediately clapped back with, “*Who's middle-aged?*”

Mom would be grinning from ear to ear as she texted me—her auburn hair blowing in the breeze from Dad's insistence of having the top down even in rush hour traffic. Meanwhile, Dad would be checking his reflection in the mirror as well as sharing eye-rolls with my younger brother, Liam.

Damn, I'd missed them.

A commotion to my left drew my attention from my phone. In an instant, my family was forgotten. Two college-aged girls held one of the Delta Sky magazines between them while gesturing wildly at me. I couldn't help the smirk that curved on my lips at their reaction.

I'd had an amused moment when I'd taken my seat after boarding and saw my grinning mug staring back out at me from the seat pocket. Being part of the US swim team that brought home the gold meant I'd been asked to be part of a celebratory press tour. One aspect of that was an interview with Sky Magazine. With Delta's hub in Atlanta, their angle

had been focusing on a hometown hero. I'd been more than happy to pose in my jammers—the replacement to the speedo—wearing the team medal.

By the time the photo landed on the cover, I'd been cropped from the waist up, conveniently obscuring my junk.

As I stepped into the aisle to retrieve my carry-on, the bustier of the two girls edged closer to me. “Aren't you Noah Fitzgerald?”

I flashed her a smile. “Yeah, I am.”

Turning to the girl beside her, she said, “Molly, didn't I tell you it was him?”

Appearing as the shyer of the two, Molly merely nodded while glancing up at me through her eyelashes. At my cocky wink, a flush crept from her cheeks down her neck.

Before I could pay any more attention to Molly, her friend thrust her hand in front of me, “I'm Angelica.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Are you here for training?”

I guess she hadn't bothered to read the article about me. “Actually, Atlanta is home for me.”

Angelica's eyes bulged. “No way. You're really from here?”

“Born and bred.”

“Same.”

“Guess you can't say you're my biggest fan if you didn't know that,” I countered.

Her ruby red lips curved into a seductive smile. “Now that I've had the chance to run into you, I guess I'll have to do my

homework better.”

“As long as it doesn’t turn into stalking,” I replied with a wink.

Someone cleared their voice behind us, indicating we needed to hurry up and get our asses down the aisle. “Well, it was nice meeting you guys.” I then turned and hustled down to the exit.

Just as I reached the door, Angelica grabbed me by the shoulder. “Wait, I can’t let you go without at least getting your autograph.”

“And I’d love to give it to you.”

After barely glancing in her purse, her lips turned down in a pout. “I don’t seem to have anything you could write on.”

“I think I have a notebook,” Molly piped up.

Narrowing her eyes, Angelica argued, “No, you *don’t*.”

Ducking her head, Molly replied, “Oh, I guess I don’t.”

Sliding her zipper down, Angelica then thrust open her hoodie. “I guess you’ll just have to sign me.”

I’d like to say it was the first time a potential groupie had asked me to sign her tits, but it wasn’t. Although she thought she was doing something incredibly flirty, over the years it had already become old hat.

But I didn’t let that show on my face as I uncapped the pen and reached over to ink my name on her cleavage. Instead, I kept a cheeky grin plastered on my face. Once I was done, I rewarded her efforts with a wink. “Take care.”

After blowing on her tits to dry the ink, she added, “I could take care of you while you’re home.”

Fucking hell. That was direct even for a manwhore like me. At the same time, I couldn't help being intrigued. "Maybe I'll take you up on that offer."

Taking my arm, she jerked up my sleeve before scribbling her number just above my wrist. "Call me anytime."

"Thanks." Knowing I didn't want to show up with two strange women in tow to meet my parents, I said, "Gotta go. My family is waiting on me."

Angelica looked slightly disappointed at the rebuff, but she recovered quickly. "Yeah, we have people waiting, too."

After a quick nod, I power-walked away, trying to put as much distance as I could between us. It was a fine line between a friendly phone number and a swim groupie stalking me home. *I much prefer the former.*

I hopped the train to departures. Thankfully, I'd packed light with just a small roller board and my backpack, so I didn't have to get any other luggage. As the escalator inched its way to the top of the landing, I started peering around the crowd gathered at the barrier. It didn't take me long to spot them.

My parents stood shoulder to shoulder. At the sight of me, their faces lit up. To my mother's side, Liam had even mustered a grin. Mainly it was because he was sporting a sign that read, *Welcome Home from Prison, Noah!* I could always count on my little brother to be a goofball. Absent was my sister, Caroline, who I imagined was back at the hotel with the bridal party since she was a bridesmaid.

With happy tears streaming down her cheeks, my mom threw her arms around me. "My baby's home!"

Dad grunted beside her. “Jesus, Em, you act like he’s been overseas with the Foreign Legion.”

“He might as well be considering how much we get to see him.”

Rolling my eyes, I replied, “We FaceTime like five times a week.”

Mom squeezed me harder. “It’s not the same.”

In a strangled gasp, I wheezed. “Jeez, Mom, have you been pumping iron?”

She released me with a giggle. “Just a little Pilates.”

Another grunt erupted from Dad. “She’s even dragged me along.”

“Working on flexibility is good at our age,” Mom argued.

With a mischievous wink, Dad replied, “We keep very flexible in the bedroom.”

As Liam and I groaned in a combination of both mortification and horror, Mom swatted Dad’s arm playfully. “Not in front of the kids,” she teasingly replied.

Dad swept his arms open and jerked his chin at me. “Come on, give your old man some love.”

“If you promise not to say anything else gross,” I countered with a grin.

“I’ll try,” he replied before pulling me to him. Thankfully, he didn’t squeeze me as tight as Mom had. “The pool is ready and waiting for you at home.”

“Thanks.”

“And I can totally work from home if you need me to time your drills.”

I smiled as I pulled away. “You’re the best.”

Winking, he replied, “I know.”

As we started toward the mechanized doors leading to the parking lot, Mom stopped me. “What’s that on your arm?”

“A fan’s number.”

Wrinkling her nose, she stated, “You let some strange girl write her number on you?”

With a shrug, I replied, “After she asked me to sign her boobs, I figured what was the harm.”

While Mom stared at me in utter disgust, Dad busted out laughing. “That’s my boy!”

* * *

After battling through rush-hour traffic, we finally arrived at the hotel. Considering Mom had rattled non-stop about all the wedding hoopla, I already felt the need for alcohol to ensure I would make it through the next forty-eight hours, but I’d unfortunately promised my coach to be good and abstain. Being away for swimming meant I’d missed Mason and Laurel’s engagement party, along with several other events. The only thing I actually hated missing was his Bachelor Party.

When I’d talked to Mason earlier in the week, he’d assured me that he was perfectly fine with me only showing up tonight and doing my part. From what Mason had described, tonight wasn’t going to be your usual go-through-the-motions rehearsal followed by a sit-down dinner. Instead, it would be merging a tradition known as the Sangeet, which meant sung together in Sanskrit, into a dinner theater. In my mind, his

description painted something of a Bollywood production with lots of singing, dancing, and intricate Hindu costumes.

It was all part of honoring Mason's adopted culture. When he was just three, Mason's dead-beat dad signed over his parental rights, and Alpesh, his stepdad, adopted him. He and his sisters had grown up not only with our Irish American traditions, but also with the somewhat Americanized Hindi traditions of Alpesh, or Pesh, as we all lovingly called him. Instead of the usual weeklong wedding with several events, Mason and Laurel had decided on an Indian Irish fusion wedding.

The moment my mother guided me into a suite on the 9th floor, my aunts, uncles, and cousins bombarded me. My dad came from a typical Irish Catholic family. He was the *very* spoiled only boy with four older sisters. Not only were they a large family, but they were also very loud. Okay, so maybe it would be better to call them boisterous. To say it could be overwhelming would be an understatement. At the same time, it was so good to be in their presence since I hadn't seen most of them in person since the summer.

As I tried to catch my breath, I kept a smile plastered on my face. After sufficiently greeting each and every one of them, I asked, "Where's Mason?"

"He and the other groomsmen are two doors down in Suite 9130," his mother, Megan, answered over the roar.

"Right. I better check in with him and get dressed," I replied before extricating myself from the crowd. It took a few more minutes for me to finally be free. I then scurried out the door and down the hall, sighing in relief at the silence greeting me when I reached 9130.

After knocking twice on the suite door, it flung open to reveal Mason's dad, Pesh. Instead of his usual scrubs and white doctor's jacket, he wore a traditional Hindu pajama kurta, which consisted of gold pants and a long purple shirt. The shirt gleamed with gold jewels.

At the sight of me, a beaming smile lit up his face. "Noah! Welcome home, my boy," he proclaimed, before drawing me into his arms.

"Thanks, Uncle Pesh." Even though he was my cousin-in-law and not really my uncle, I'd grown up calling him uncle as well as his wife, Megan, aunt.

"Did you have a good flight?"

"Yes, sir."

"How was the traffic?"

"The usual."

He chuckled. "I'm so glad your coach allowed you to come. Mason was worried there for a moment."

I chuckled. "So was I. But I've sworn on my life that I'd train every day and not indulge in alcohol and nutrition-less food."

Uncle Pesh laughed loudly at that. "Good luck with that. Has he met your mom?"

"Yes ... but he hasn't had her cooking." Mom's love language was feeding her family, and it was something she did very, very well. "I'll try my best."

"Of course you will."

Glancing around the room, I saw some of Pesh's relatives as well as my cousins who were in the wedding party. After

another round of handshakes and hugs, I felt a hand on my back.

When I threw a look over my shoulder, Uncle Pesh was smiling at me. “Time to get you ready.” He then guided me through the remaining crowd into the bedroom.

Surprisingly, I found Mason alone with whom I assumed was the tailor putting the final touches on his outfit. Before I could say hello, the shrill ring of a phone interrupted me.

Holding up his phone, Pesh eyed the caller ID. “It’s your mother,” he said to Mason.

Mason grunted. “Let me guess. She’s calling once again to tell us how late we are.”

With a grimace, Pesh replied, “I would imagine as much.”

“Go ahead and take it. I can get Noah into his pajama kurta.”

Nodding, Pesh answered the call. “Yes, my love, I’m very aware we are running late...” His voice then trailed off as he exited the bedroom.

“Looks good, Vishnu,” Mason said to the tailor.

“Let me know if you need anything else.”

After Vishnu left the bedroom, I finally found myself alone with Mason. With our blond hair and blue eyes, we could pass for brothers. Even though he was fourteen months older, I had a few inches on him. He felt just as much my brother as Liam did. We’d grown up that close. There was hardly a memory I had from my childhood that didn’t involve him.

Sweeping my hands out in front of me, I quipped, “There he is—the man of the hour.”

“Says the returning Olympic hero,” he replied with a grin.

“The team won, and I’m merely part of that team. It wasn’t like I got a medal of my own.”

Mason shook his head. “I never thought I’d see the day you’d be humble.”

“Har, fucking har,” I replied to which Mason laughed.

“Come on. Let’s get you ready, Golden Boy,” he mused.

As he went over to the closet, I jerked my shirt over my head. Reaching for the waistband of my pants, I asked, “So, you’re really doing this?”

He rolled his eyes as he returned with the garment bag. “Yes, I am.”

“You’re not answering under duress, are you?” Grabbing him by the shoulders, I peered into his blue eyes. “Like, blink once if you need help.”

After playfully shoving me, Mason grunted, “Bastard.”

“I’m serious.”

“Yeah, I know, which is what makes you a bastard.” After handing me my shirt, he cocked his head and countered, “What could you possibly not like about Laurel?”

I slid the shirt over my head. “Nothing, man. She’s a real sweetheart, not to mention she’s gorgeous as hell. She’s a total catch, and for reasons I can’t understand, she’s chosen you.”

“Thanks...I think,” he replied as he handed me my pants.

“I’m serious, man. You couldn’t have picked a better girl to get entangled with.”

“Damn straight.” Giving me a pointed look, he added, “There is no one in the entire world I would want to spend the

rest of my life with but Laurel.”

“If you say so,” I replied as I hopped into the silk pants.

“Come on, Noah. You really can’t imagine getting married and having a family?”

“Sure, I can.” With a wink, I added, “Just not anytime soon.”

“Just wait until some woman gets her hooks into you. Then you’ll be changing your tune.”

“I doubt that seriously.” After adjusting the collar of my shirt, I turned to Mason, “How do I look?”

“Stop fishing for compliments, Egomaniac.”

Shaking my head, I replied, “This isn’t about ego. It’s about representing your and Uncle Pesh’s culture to the best of my abilities.”

Mason snorted. “Oh, well, if you’re going to be all noble and considerate, then fine. You look good.”

“Just good?”

With an exasperated huff, Mason replied, “Fine. You look like a suitable young Hindi man.”

“Glad to hear it.”

A grin curved on Mason’s lips. “You know, you actually look good enough to be a very eligible bachelor on the marriage market.” Wagging his brows, he added, “I’m sure my bapa would be happy to arrange one for you.”

My eyes bulged at the prospect. “Absofuckinglutely not!”

Mason laughed. “Whatever, man.”

“So, tell me. What’s the meat market going to be like at this wedding?”

“Like I would know.”

“Fine. I’ll start with the bridal party and work my way down.”

Mason groaned. “Do me a favor and leave the bridesmaids alone.”

“Come on, man. You know, they’re the easiest targets.”

He shot me a disgusted look. “Our *sisters* are bridesmaids. Put the shoe on the other foot: would you want some douche groomsmen taking advantage of them?”

“Did you just call me a douche?”

“When you’re acting like a manwhore with no soul, yes.”

I gave him a playful shove. “What if I promise to be a perfect gentleman?”

“Yeah, I’ll believe that when I see it.”

“You’re probably right. I’d just be setting myself up for failure the moment I see some of those gorgeous girls shaking their tits and hips during the Sangeet dances.”

“You actually researched the Sangeet?”

I bobbed my head. “Imagine my surprise when I discovered how entertaining it was going to be.”

“You’re impossible.”

“But you love me.”

He laughed. “In spite of it all.”

I threw my arm around his shoulder. “Come on then. Let’s get this party started!”

Chapter Two: Gaby

“Ow!” I screeched as a needle pierced the sensitive skin above my breast. As I jerked away, my hand flew to rub my aching skin. “Are you trying to kill me?”

My tormentor and older sister, Bella, merely rolled her dark eyes at me. “Come on, Drama Queen, whoever heard of being offed by a sewing needle?”

“I’m sure it’s happened before. Maybe just one of the lesser-known true crime stories.”

Bella huffed out a frustrated breath. “Gaby, if you don’t get a grip and stand still, I’m never going to get the last of these jewels sewn on, and then we won’t make it to the rehearsal.”

Sweeping a hand to my hip, I countered, “Look, I’ll happily forgo the bling instead of you relentlessly stabbing me.”

“There you go being overdramatic again.”

“I’m not dramatic—I’m merely stating facts.”

Bella and her offending needle edged towards me. “Honestly, Gabs, if I put on the theatrics like you do, I’d never book another modeling job in my life.”

Some in the media loved to claim Bella's rise in the modeling world was because she was a Nepo Baby. That was the nickname given to kids born to rich and famous families. Because our father was a member of the Grammy Award-winning band, Runaway Train, that meant Bella, my younger brother, Alex, and I had a leg up in certain circles.

But while most model daughters of rock stars were waifish thin, Bella's frame was true to our Hispanic roots on our dad's side as well as the Sicilian ancestors of our mother. Thanks to changing attitudes in the size zero modeling world, she and her ample curves had more than her fair share of work. Knowing how fickle fame was Bella wasn't putting all her faith in the modeling world. Inspired by watching one of our dad's bandmates' wives, Allison, design clothes, Bella was following in her footsteps by getting a degree in Fashion Design and Marketing.

Achieving her degree was the main reason why she was poking me with the needle. For her capstone project, she had designed the Indian Saris she and I were wearing. Gazing down at the sumptuous purple and gold fabric glittering with hand-sewn jewels, I couldn't help being so proud of Bella.

Bringing me out of my thoughts, Bella said, "You know, I wouldn't have poked you if you were still."

"I *was* being still," I countered.

"No, you weren't." When I opened my mouth to protest, her dark eyes narrowed at me. "You're doing that sway thing you always do when you're really nervous."

I merely huffed out a breath mixed with both frustration and anxiety. I seriously couldn't imagine many people in my position not being on edge. Tomorrow I would stand beside my best friend as her maid of honor in a church with a guest

list of over three hundred people. The thoughts of those three hundred pairs of eyes staring at me was beyond unnerving. While Bella had inherited our father's outgoing personality, I was far more introverted like our mom. Just like our dad could work a stadium of thousands into a frenzy, Bella could charm the runway with just a smile and a swish of her jaunty walk. Meanwhile, Mom and I much preferred spending our time out of the limelight ... and with as few people as possible.

The thought of all eyes trained on me made my stomach churn. It wasn't so much that I lacked rhythm and was a shitty dancer. It was more about the curves that Bella and I both shared. For most of my childhood, I wasn't just curvy like she was—I was chunky. I carried that chunkiness into my teens. One magazine had crushed my remaining confidence when they labeled me the “fat Resendiz sister” in a column about Bella and me. Years had passed since that comment and the weight had eventually all come off in my late teens, but I still carried the emotional scars and the unwillingness to ever be the center of attention. Most days, I still saw myself with my younger body, and I wondered if I'd ever lose that lens.

While the wedding ceremony itself had cranked up my anxiety, tonight's party truly had me one step away from hyperventilating. Of course, I only had myself to blame since I'd been the one to bring the bride and groom together. After a little matchmaking during our Freshman year, my best friend from college, Laurel, was marrying one of my childhood best friends, Mason Nadeen.

Back in the day when my mother was in her nursing clinicals, she'd been supervised by Mason's adopted father, Alpesh. A deep friendship grew that continued even after they married other people and had children. Along with Mason, his twin sisters, Maya and Sara, had been some of Bella's and my

closest friends growing up. As children of a touring rock star, it wasn't always easy making friends outside of our world. Before van life became hip, we'd grown up on a tricked-out tour bus.

Whenever we came off the road and back to our house in the North Georgia mountains, it was almost considered a relief to be back with the Nadeens. *They* felt like coming home. I'd always loved the differences in their family's culture, too. The food, the sense of history, and of course the close connection our combined families had.

And as much as it was exciting to be part of tonight's cultural mashup, it was the choreographed dances that were the most traumatic. For me anyway ... as they were to be performed in front of *everyone*.

For someone who had never even heard the word *Sangeet* until a few months ago, it now ruled my life. The Sangeet was why I stood bedecked in a deep purple, jeweled sari enduring Bella's stabbings. The Sangeet was also why as maid of honor I would be leading the rest of the bridal party in a special dance to honor the happy couple. The Sangeet was why I fought the rising bile in my throat.

I shook my head as a shudder ran through me. "I can't help it. You know I hate performing."

"Everyone who knows you is well aware you hate performing."

"Do you remember what happened the last time I had to do anything choreographed?"

"When you tripped over your escort at my quinceañera and then mowed out one of the flower displays?"

With a groan, I started to bring my hands over my face to cover my humiliation when Bella grabbed them. “Stop! You’ll ruin your makeup.”

Since I didn’t dare want to face the wrath of our stylist, I grumbled, “Fine.”

Bella squeezed my hands in hers. “All joking aside, Gabs, you were doing an amazing job until that little mishap.”

“I suppose so. Of course, I could’ve done without the snickering.” With narrowed eyes, I added, “You’re trying hard not to laugh now.”

Sweeping the hand with the offending needle over her chest, Bella replied, “I would never.”

“You’re lying.”

“Okay, you got me. It’s not like it was the highlight of my quince,” she teasingly replied.

“No, I would think dancing with Jude was the best part,” I shot back before I thought better.

A wistful, yet sad look came over Bella’s face at the mention of Jude. Like Mason, we’d grown up with him since his father and our father were part of the same band. The older they’d gotten, the more that friendship had grown into something deeper. Because of the tight relationship between our families, Bella and Jude were at an impossible impasse, not to mention each of them was too stubborn to try to stick their necks out to take a risk.

Shaking her head, she replied, “We’re not talking about him, remember?”

I held up my hands. “Fine, fine. As long as we’re not also not talking about Ashton.”

Bella wrinkled her nose at the mention of my ex-boyfriend. “I have absolutely no desire whatsoever to talk about him. *Ever.*”

“That makes two of us.” *Liar.* While I might not be talking about him, I would unfortunately be thinking of him. It had only been a month since we broke up—*since he decided he didn’t love me anymore*—but the pain and hurt were still too fresh.

Ugh. If I let myself really go, I’d be tempted to request *Love Stinks* from the DJ and then proceed in bringing everyone down to my current level of suffering.

“Dammit, Gabs, you’re thinking about him, aren’t you?” Bella demanded, a disgusted look etched on her face.

“I was not.”

“Yeah, you were.”

“Fine. If you must know, I was more lamenting the fact I was doing the wedding solo than thinking about him.”

Bella’s expression turned sympathetic. “Oh Gabs, I hate it when you’re in pain. I will never understand why you haven’t found a man who appreciates the utterly fanfuckintastic girl that you are.”

I smiled at her. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

“And when it comes down to it, I know how hard it is going solo. I mean, I’m going solo myself.” I opened my mouth to protest that she could be going with Jude if she would just get over her stubbornness, but she cut me off. “Don’t even go there.”

“It’s not too late. There’s still time to invite him to the wedding. I’m sure he probably remembers Mason from our

quinces.”

Unable to form words, Bella just gave an emphatic shake of her head. “Fine. Just continue being an *idiota terca*,” I added.

She narrowed her dark eyes at me. “*La perra*.”

“I’m not a bitch; I’m just stating facts.”

Bella chose to ignore me. Instead, she refocused sewing the jewels. After a few moments of only the sound of ruffled fabric, I huffed out a breath. “Fine. You don’t have to talk to me, but you can’t keep ignoring your feelings for Jude.”

“We’re done,” Bella pronounced. Her expression told me she didn’t just mean she was finished with sewing—she was totally done addressing anything Jude related.

As I gazed upon the finished product of Bella’s labor, a sigh of appreciation escaped my lips. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so beautiful. “Holy shit, Bells. You really outdid yourself.”

With a beaming smile, she replied, “You’re welcome.”

Our moment was interrupted by the buzzing of my phone on the nearby table. “That’s probably the car,” Bella remarked as she put away the remaining supplies.

“Guess it’s officially time to get this show on the road,” I grumbled before grabbing my phone and purse.

After exiting Bella’s suite, I made my way down the marble-floored hallway. Treading carefully down the two flights of stairs in my heels, I then hustled across the foyer to open the front door. A groan escaped me at the sight before me.

At the sound of heels, I whirled around. “Seriously, Bella? A limo?”

Bella opened her mouth to protest, but a voice behind her interrupted her. “Don’t blame your sister, Gabriella.”

Glancing past Bella, I saw my father standing on the landing with an enormous grin stretched across his handsome face. Although he was in his early fifties, he still looked like the guy on the album covers from his twenties. Bella and I teased him about his vanity. Especially the way he kept the gray out of his hair with monthly salon visits as well as occasionally getting Botox. Of course, he always lied and said he was just taking Mom to get it. He still drove women to distraction, which in turn, caused my mother to curse him in Italian.

“I should’ve known it was you who ordered a limo,” I said as he made his way down the stairs.

With a wink, Dad said, “Oh yes, the blame lies entirely with your papi.”

I grinned. “My very *pretentious* papi.”

Throwing up his hands, he replied, “How else could I possibly have my daughters arrive if not in style?”

“Per the traditions of this Hindu Fusion wedding, it’s Mason and his groomsmen who are supposed to have the grand arrival at the Sangeet, *not* the bridal party,” I countered.

Dad cocked his brows. “Do you honestly think yours will be the only limousine?”

“Why do I get the sneaking suspicion this has more to do with you performing tonight than it does with Bella’s and my arrival?”

Dad had originally hoped that Mason and Laurel would ask him to perform at the wedding. However, Mason's aunt Emma had an amazing voice that would be better served singing *Ave Maria*. Thankfully, they had healed his slightly wounded feelings by asking him instead to perform at the Sangeet.

Sweeping a hand to his chest, Dad said, "Your insinuation about my inflated ego deeply wounds me."

After stepping out into the foyer, my mother countered, "Please, Amorcito Mio. You know it's the truth."

As Bella and I laughed, Dad groaned. "Where's Alex? I'm outnumbered by estrogen."

Mom playfully swatted his arm. "This has nothing to do with estrogen, and everything to do with your big head." Before Dad could argue with her anymore, Mom turned her attention to me and Bella. "Don't you two look stunning," she gushed.

"I could say the same about you," I replied. Just like Dad, Mom didn't look in her fifties. Her long dark hair fell in waves down her back while her dark eyes sparkled. While Bella and Alex were Dad's twins, I favored my mom. We had the same nose and lips, and our hair was slightly lighter than the others in our family.

Not only had she outfitted the bridal party, but Bella had designed saris for my mom along with pajama kurtas for my dad and brother. Although we were all outfitted in the same color, our saris were different.

"As usual the Resendiz clan is going to knock 'em dead," Dad mused. Nudging my shoulder, he added, "Right, Gaby?"

I swallowed hard. "Yeah," I squeaked.

As Mom shouted for Alex and Bella went in search of him, Dad cocked his brows at me. “That didn’t sound too convincing.”

“You know me and my stage fright.”

Shaking his head, Dad countered, “You were made for the stage.”

“That’s Bella and Alex, not me.”

“You have something neither of them do.”

“Wider hips?” I joked.

With a no-nonsense look, Dad said, “That is not it, and you know it.”

“Fine. Enlighten me.”

Dad pointed to the left side of my chest. “You have the heart.”

“And exactly how is that going to help me?”

“Because it means you feel more. You experience things more deeply.” He took me by the shoulders. “Tonight when it’s time for you to lead the dance, turn your brain off, and lead with your heart. Listen *only* to the beat of your heart.”

As corny as it sounds, Dad’s words and belief in me sent courage pulsing through my body. I could do this. I *would* do this. With Bella returning with Alex, I gave an emphatic shake of my head. “All right. Let’s do this!”

Chapter Three: Gaby

Just like Dad had anticipated, I was the Dancing Queen. Everything I had worried about evaporated the moment the music blared out of the speakers. With every swish of my hips and curl of my hands, I owned the moment. Of course, it hadn't hurt that I did exactly as Dad had instructed—I had tuned everything out and listened to the beat of my heart.

I finished to a round of applause erupting over the ballroom. After giving a dainty curtsy, I hurried off the front of the stage with the rest of the bridesmaids falling close behind. Mason and Laurel rose out of the ornate chairs they had been sitting in to meet me. “Gaby, that was breathtaking,” Laurel gushed.

“Really?”

As she nodded, Mason replied, “You truly captured the essence of the lyrics. I don't think I've ever seen it done better.”

My grin spread so wide it caused my cheeks to hurt. “Thank you. It means so much.”

He smiled. “No, thank you for honoring my dad's culture.”

After giving him a quick hug, I then made my way through the rest of the crowd gathered around the stage. Everyone was

so kind and complimentary. My face was literally aching from smiling when I finally made my way over to get a celebratory glass of champagne.

When I turned around, my heart shuddered in my chest. There he was—Mason's best man. Except to me, he was the epic douchelord who wounded me beyond repair when I was just an awkward teenage girl. As I watched him maneuver through the party guests, I became transported to another time and place.

It was Maya and Sara's Sweet Sixteen. It was in a ballroom like the one I currently found myself. It was the first time I'd seen Noah Fitzgerald in years. He'd stopped coming to the twins' birthday parties, so I had no way of seeing him outside of social media posts of the twins that he was tagged in. Somewhere along my 10th birthday, I'd gotten a humongous crush on him. Of course, he was absolutely clueless.

At almost fifteen, I wanted nothing more in the world than to have a boyfriend. But the guys my age never were interested. Neither were the guys older or younger than me. Somehow, Bella had managed to skip that awkward teenage phase that so many of us must endure before we escaped the cocoon to emerge a butterfly. She'd had a string of boyfriends even though her heart really only belonged to Jude. As for me, I was entrenched in braces, glasses, and twenty extra pounds. All night long I'd been on the sidelines watching the other girls my age dancing.

Even with my self-esteem holding on by a thread, I was bound and determined to ask Noah to dance. The fact that the only time he'd danced all evening was out of obligation with the birthday girls didn't matter. I just knew he would dance if I

asked him, and once he got to know me, he would totally fall for me.

If only I could've talked some sense into my younger self. But alas, I had to relive for years to come that painfully awkward moment of me crossing the room to my ultimate rejection. In spite of the time that had passed, I could still feel my palms sweating, my heartbeat thrumming wildly like a hummingbird's wings, and my knees knocking under my formal dress.

"Hey, Noah," I said.

He flicked a quick glance over his shoulder at me. "Hey, Bella."

"Um, no, that's my sister. I'm Gaby."

"Sorry. I'm always getting you two mixed up."

"You're not the only one." I mean, people usually mixed up our names. It certainly wasn't because I looked anything like my gorgeous sister.

Turning around, he gave me a smile. "What's up?"

Oh God, this was it. For a moment, I couldn't find my voice. I just stared into his beautiful blue eyes. It was the first time I noticed they had flecks of green in them.

Just as I was a few seconds away from being a full-on Gaby statue, I snapped out of it. "I, uh, was wondering if you wanted to dance." I swallowed hard. "You know, with me."

Noah's eyes popped wide. "You're asking me to dance?"

At his question, the guys around him snickered. I ducked my head. "Uh, yeah."

After glancing back at the guys, he chuckled. “Sorry, Bella, but I’m not dancing tonight.”

His words sliced through my chest to knife my heart. His rejection hurt that much. Not only could he not bring himself to dance with me, but he still couldn’t even get my name right. I escaped the ballroom and spent the rest of the night locked into a bathroom stall.

All these years later, the memory still stung.

As my mind shuddered back into the present, Noah’s eyes locked with mine. A cocky grin curved across his lips—one I was sure he had given hundreds of other girls. Dammit to hell. Why had time been so good to the bastard? Apparently, the universe loved to hate me since he was even more handsome than he was back in the day. From comments here and there from Maya or Sara, I knew he’d grown into an epic womanizer—the kind of man I loathed with a fiery passion.

After saying something to those he was standing with, he started making his way towards me. Although part of me wanted to bolt, I knew there was no escaping him. If I didn’t talk to him tonight, I would still have to see him tomorrow. After all, I had to walk down the freakin’ aisle with him. Ugh, the thought of him touching me made my skin crawl.

When he finally stood in front of me, I fought the urge to knee him in the balls. “Well, hello,” he drawled.

“Hello to you, too.”

“You’re the maid of honor, right?”

God help me if I don’t belt him right in the mouth. “Yep.”

“Being out of town, I’ve missed out on so many of the events with the wedding party.”

“That’s a real bummer,” I muttered.

Flashing a megawatt smile, he said, “I figured since I was the best man I should make nice with the maid of honor by introducing myself.”

Introduce himself? Was he high? I mean, he couldn’t be that big of an asshole to pretend he didn’t know me. Shooting him a withering look, I countered, “You’re kidding me, right?”

His brows furrowed. “No.”

I swept my hands to my hips. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, Noah. It’s me, Gaby Resendiz. We’ve known each other since we were kids.”

Noah’s eyes popped wide in shock. After momentarily recovering, his gaze swept over me from head to toe. “Gaby?”

“Yes,” I hissed.

“Holy shit. The last time I saw you was—”

“At Maya and Sara’s Sweet Sixteen.”

“Right. But you were just—”

“A fattie with braces and an astigmatism?” I prompted.

Noah jerked back like he had been slapped. “Excuse me?”

With a roll of my eyes, I replied, “You heard me.”

“Uh, yeah, I did, but I was hoping I misinterpreted what you said.”

Let’s add arrogant asshole to his multitude of sins. “Oh, was it a misinterpretation when I asked you to dance at the party, and you not only turned me down, but laughed in my face?”

His forehead crinkled, and I could tell he was trying hard to remember the details from that night. After a few moments, he said, “I don’t know what you think happened, but I didn’t tell you no because of what you believe you looked like.”

“Yeah, right.”

Throwing his hands up, Noah countered, “For fuck’s sake, you were like what? Twelve?”

“Almost fifteen.”

“Okay, fine, you were fifteen, and I was eighteen. Call me crazy that I didn’t want to get my ass kicked for dancing with some jailbait kid.”

I opened my mouth to annihilate his cocky ass once and for all, but then his words began to filter into my brain. *Oh my God. Was what he said true?* Had he really turned me down because of my age and not because of my appearance? Were all these years of loathing him based on a lie?

Noah swept his hand to his hips. “You still don’t believe me, do you?”

“No, I do.” I continued staring at him. Seconds ticked by before I swallowed hard. “It’s just hard realizing ...”

He cocked his brows at me. “That you were wrong?”

“Yes,” I reluctantly huffed.

“And I’m not the giant asshole you thought I was?” he teasingly prompted.

“Possibly.”

He laughed. “Guess I have my work cut out for me, huh?”

“Work?”

“To win you over.”

“Really, that won’t be necessary.”

“Now I can’t have you walking around hating my guts, can I?”

Well, forgiving you is going to be easier said than done. After all, I’d carried this hurt for eight long years. It wasn’t just going to go away overnight. But I couldn’t let him know how much he’d hurt me. “It’s really not a big deal,” I replied, trying to sound casual.

“It is to me. I couldn’t live with myself if you did.” Noah’s gaze then dipped from mine to trail down my body. The heat of his stare singed the exposed parts of my skin, especially the tops of my breasts that he seemed to linger on. “Now that I think about it, we could make your hate for me work to our advantage.”

“Excuse me?”

He wagged his brows. “Hate sex can be very hot.”

Wait, what? Had he seriously just made the leap from wanting me not to hate him to wanting to sleep with me? What an asshole. “You’re joking, right?”

“Not at all.”

I jabbed my finger at him. “You must be out of your fucking mind if you think I’m remotely interested in having sex with you.” Okay, so maybe that was a lie. I had never gotten tingly just from a man’s stare like I had from Noah’s. That fact made me hate not only myself, but him as well.

Licking his lips, he closed the gap between us. He stood so close I could feel the heat radiating off his body. It singed the bare skin of my abdomen, causing me to warm between my legs. “You obviously had a crush on me back in the day. Why not see if the fantasy lives up to the real thing?”

Damn him. How could he possibly know I fantasized about him when I was a teenager? Since I was only fourteen, the fantasies weren't too illicit, but he'd still left an impression. Was he right? Could hate sex actually be hot? I'd never partaken in anything like that. I'd never really gotten busy with anyone outside of a relationship. There was also the pesky fact I was in a sex drought after my breakup with Ashton. Perhaps, it made sense, considering hookups among members of a wedding party were notorious.

Before I could tell him maybe I might be down for some hate-filled horizontal action, a tall, willowy blonde appeared at our side. Ignoring me, she gave Noah a sexy smile. "Here's my number," she said before waving a slip of paper in front of his face.

Noah had the audacity not only not to tell her to get lost, but then he took the slip of paper from her. "Thanks..."

Of course, he hadn't been bothered to get her name. For reasons I couldn't understand, it didn't seem to bother the girl. "It's Emily."

Noah jerked his head. After giving him one last *come-fuck-me* grin, Emily gave me a disgusted look before walking off. Without breaking eye contact with me, Noah shoved the piece of paper in his pocket. "So, what's it going to be?"

My eyes narrowed at his continued audacity. "Are you seriously asking if I want to fuck you after you took some random chick's number right in front of me?"

He had the unmitigated gall not to appear even remotely embarrassed by his behavior. "Maybe."

I shook my head at him. "You know what? I was right to loathe you all these years. Your treatment of me and women in

general is seriously disgusting. Unlike that bimbo who slipped you her number, I'm not desperate enough to lower my standards to be treated as nothing more than a warm hole for you to put your dick in." Shoving him away, I added, "It would be a cold day in hell before I would ever let an asshole like you touch me."

And with Noah's utter and total disbelief at my words, I whirled around and started hightailing it away from him. When I got to the exit of the ballroom, I kept right on going. I couldn't bear to be anywhere close to that egotistical bastard.

I might have to walk down the aisle with the man, but so help me God, it would be the only interaction I would have with him this weekend.

Chapter Four: Noah

My mouth dropped open as I watched Gaby stalk away from me. What the hell had just happened? Even after I had set her straight about the past, she still hadn't wanted anything to do with me. That sure as hell was a first.

Everything I'd told her about my recollection of the party's events had been the truth. I didn't remember her being chunky or nerdy with glasses. Yeah, we'd known each other since we were kids, but I only knew her as a friend of Mason's kid sisters. I maybe saw her once a year at Maya and Sara's Birthday parties, and I sure as hell wasn't playing dolls or Barbies with them. I was off doing boy shit with Mason and my other cousins.

As for the night in question, I remembered being mortified that this kid was asking me to dance in front of some of my older cousins. They'd already snuck me a glass of champagne. I would've come off as an absolute lame ass if I'd gone and danced with Gaby. Not to mention getting ragged to no end about my new kiddie girlfriend. In hindsight, since they were all in their twenties, I guess I should be glad they weren't perverts who scammed underage girls.

And just what the hell was wrong with getting a woman's number? It wasn't like we were in a committed relationship or

anything. I barely knew her. She was obviously way too sensitive about that.

At the sound of a low whistle behind me, I jerked my gaze over my shoulder to see Liam grinning at me. “Damn, bro, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you get shot down so hard.”

“Fuck off,” I growled.

Chuckling, he came around to stand beside me. “Now that I think about it, I don’t think I’ve *ever* seen you get shot down.”

“Like I said, fuck off.”

“What hope is there for the rest of us when Mr. Gold Member himself crashes and burns?”

Although I was slightly shaken up from Gaby’s epic brushoff, I sure as hell wasn’t going to let my little brother get the best of me. “Who said I was out of the game?”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure Gaby did when she just verbally assaulted you.”

“And that’s where you show you’re truly not a master when it comes to the Pussy Game.”

“Is that right?”

I nodded. “I was just getting warmed up.” Cocking my head at him, I added, “I mean, what fun is it if they just fall down and spread their legs?”

With a shrug, he replied, “Easy ass is always good for me.”

“You have much to learn.”

“Okay, Master, what’s your next move?”

My gaze focused on Gaby in the crowd. She was making her way to the door. “Persistence.” After I watched her leave

the ballroom, I turned to Liam. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a gorgeous piece of ass to pursue.”

As I started walking to the exit, Liam called, “May the force be with you!”

Since Gaby had a lead on me, I rushed over to another set of doors leading out of the ballroom. I managed to cut around the hallway to come face-to-face with her. The moment her eyes locked on mine, she scowled. Her gaze quickly darted to the bank of elevators across from us. After she hopped on an empty one, I joined her.

“Jesus, are you stalking me!”

“No. I’m just trying to finish our conversation,” I replied as Gaby smacked a button on the panel, and the doors closed behind us.

The glare she shot me could’ve made paint curl. “Take the hint, Golden Boy, and get lost.”

“Not until you truly hear me out.”

Gaby opened her mouth to protest when the elevator shuddered to a stop. We both froze momentarily. Glancing up the ceiling, Gaby demanded, “What the hell was that?”

“Sounded like the elevator malfunctioned.” I tapped the open doors button but nothing happened. “Looks like we’re stuck.”

“Stop screwing with me.”

“That’s what we could’ve been doing if you hadn’t run away,” I teased.

After a massive eye roll, Gaby then shoved me away from the panel. As her fingers reached out to poke the buttons, I noticed they were trembling. “No, no, no!” Shaking her head

wildly back and forth, she shrieked, “This can’t be happening.”

“Calm down. We’re just stuck.” I then opened the emergency door on the panel. After pressing the button for help, I said, “Now it’s all reported, and we just have to wait.” When she didn’t respond, I glanced over my shoulder.

Gaby’s face had paled, and her shoulders rose and fell in harsh pants. “I can’t breathe!”

“Oh shit.”

With the wild look of a trapped animal, Gaby began to pace around the elevator car. In between heaving for breath, she wrung her hands wildly. At the sight of her panic, my mind spun with what to do. I thought about what the coaches used to say when someone was about to lose their shit before a competition.

Stepping in front of Gaby, I grabbed her by the shoulders. “Listen to me. Count to five as you breathe in, and then release on five.”

“Can’t.”

“Okay, count down backwards from ten.” At her continued heaving, I said, “Okay, close your eyes. Now picture yourself on a beach. Imagine the sounds around you: the crashing ocean waves, the sound of the seagulls, the laughter of people around you.”

“Isn’t working.”

Fuck me. I couldn’t imagine what I was going to do if she passed out. Like, would she need oxygen? We were both screwed if she did. No, I couldn’t let it come to that. Somehow, I had to get her mind off the panic attack.

Then an idea popped in my head, and I didn't stop to question it, which considering our history probably wasn't the best idea. Dipping my head, I crushed my lips to hers. In that instant, Gaby froze. Thankfully, she stopped wheezing. Seconds ticked by and then she began to breathe normally. Once I recognized she was doing better, another realization hit me.

Gaby was kissing me back.

Well, hello there. As my hands shifted from her shoulders to cup her cheeks. I brushed my thumbs against her jaw. As fiery as she was, it shouldn't have surprised me that Gaby was a good kisser. We continued staying lip-locked, and I couldn't help wanting more.

Just as my tongue slid into her mouth, Gaby jerked back. The next thing I knew a stinging slap reverberated against my cheek. "Fuck," I grunted.

After Gaby shoved me away, fury burned in her dark eyes. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Rubbing my cheek, I replied, "Normally I would call it kissing, but it usually doesn't end up so violent."

"Jesus, you're such an egotistical bastard to think you could just maul me like that."

"First of all, I wasn't mauling you. My hands and fingers weren't near any inappropriate parts." When she opened her mouth to protest, I shook my head. "Yes, I kissed you, but I did it to help you."

With an indignant huff, Gaby replied, "Give me a break. You were only thinking of yourself."

"It stopped your panic attack, didn't it?"

Gaby rose up on her heels to get in my face and really let me have it, but then she froze. I could see the wheels turning in her head. As much as she hated to admit it, she knew I was right. Shrinking back from me, she said, “Don’t expect me to say thanks.”

“If you won’t, I will.”

Her brows scrunched together. “What for?”

“That was one hell of a kiss.”

She glared at me. “I don’t know how I ever could’ve had a crush on you. Seriously, you are the most obnoxious jackass I’ve ever met.”

“As gorgeous as you are, I find that hard to believe.” And fuck me, was she gorgeous. I loved how her soulful, yet sinful brown eyes were staring daggers into me now. I desperately wanted to bury my fingers in her wavy chestnut hair that fell over her shoulders, cascading down her back. It went without saying what I wanted those same fingers to do with her Double D tits, not to mention what was between her long as hell legs.

Sweeping her hands to her hips, she countered, “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Just that I’m sure you’re constantly having guys come on to you, so I can’t possibly be the biggest jackass.” With a cocky smirk, I added, “Well, I am the biggest in the most important area.”

“You don’t stop, do you?”

Damn, she was making this too easy. “Nope. My stamina is pretty legendary.”

Gaby blinked at me. Not once but several times. Just as I prepared for her to truly rip me a new one, she busted out

laughing. Once she started, she didn't stop. Doubling over at the waist, her shoulders rose and fell.

"I'm so glad I could amuse you."

After righting herself, she swiped the tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry. It's just." She shook her head. "Jesus, you really are a piece of work, aren't you?"

"I can be."

"It's mind-blowing that your line of epic bullshit actually works with women."

"Most find it charming."

Tilting her head, Gaby replied, "I suppose some bimbos would be enthralled by it."

"It obviously had an effect on you."

Her dark eyes bulged. "It most certainly didn't."

As I closed the gap between us, Gaby backed up until she bumped into the elevator doors. Staring down at her, my gaze focused on her swollen lips. "You kissed me back."

"I-I did not."

"Yeah, babe, you most certainly did."

Jerking her chin at me indignantly, she countered, "Well, if I did, then it was under duress."

With a grin, I replied, "Keep telling yourself that."

After crossing her arms over her chest, she huffed, "Can we please change the subject?"

"Fine."

"Thank you."

"Have you always been claustrophobic?"

She bobbed her head. “Pretty much since I was five.”

Cocking my brows at her, I asked, “What happened?”

“You really want to know?”

“Why not.” With a wink, I added, “I’m kind of a captive audience at the moment.”

She laughed. “I guess so.”

“It didn’t have anything to do with growing up on a tour bus, did it?”

“Surprisingly not. Although sometimes it could be a tight squeeze, it wasn’t really that bad. It happened when I was five, and we were visiting my dad’s family in Mexico. Some of my older cousins thought it would be funny to lock me in this pitch-black closet. All the adults were upstairs on the roof with a Mariachi band, so no one could hear me screaming for help.” A shudder ran through her. “I don’t know how long I ended up being stuck in there. When my dad finally opened the door, I couldn’t even speak from screaming so much.”

“Jesus, that’s horrible.”

“It was.”

“I can see why you were freaking out today. Do elevators always get to you?”

Shaking her head, Gaby replied, “No, it’s not really small spaces that trigger me but more of being stuck in them.”

“I get it.”

Shifting on her feet, Gaby sighed. “Ugh, these heels are killing me.”

I eased down onto the floor. “Might as well take a load off. There’s no telling how long we might be stuck here.”

Gaby eyed the floor before wrinkling her nose. “It doesn’t look very clean.”

Since I didn’t have a suit jacket to give her, I reached behind my head to pull off the shirt of my Kurta Pajama. Once it was off, I laid it down on the ground across from me. “There. Now you don’t have to worry about it.”

“But you’ll ruin your outfit.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s nothing a little dry cleaning won’t help.”

Keeping her eyes on mine, Gaby eased down on the shirt. “That was very kind of you.”

“I have my moments.”

“They must be few and far between.”

I laughed. “Admit it. I’m growing on you.”

“Oh please. I gave you one measly compliment,” she grumbled.

Once Gaby was fully situated, we fell into an uneasy silence. When she continued shifting and flailing around on my shirt, I knew she needed to focus on something besides being stuck. Leaning forward, I tapped her leg. “Tell me something.”

Gaby eyed me warily. “What?”

“What’s it like being the daughter of a rock star?”

She shrugged. “For me, I don’t know anything different.”

“True. But when you came off the road and spent time with Maya and Sara, you had to notice a difference.”

“Sure, I did.”

“Obviously growing up with lots of money and traveling wasn’t too bad.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Wasn’t there a downside?”

Tilting her head in thought, she replied, “Probably the worst is when someone used me because of who my dad was.”

“I totally get that. I mean, I’m not even in the same stratosphere as your dad, but I hate when people kiss my ass because of who they think I am or what I might do for them.”

“Do you get recognized a lot?”

With a shrug, I replied, “Sometimes. It was way more intense during and after the Olympics.”

“I bet.”

“I’m pretty comfortable with my D-list celebrity status,” I joked.

Gaby laughed. “I bet. My dad was straight A-list for many years. As a kid, and especially as a teenager, I really wanted to be able to go places with him without flashbulbs blinding us. But he always did his best to protect us.”

“He seems like a pretty cool guy.”

She smiled. “He is truly the best.” Jerking her chin at me, “I haven’t been around him much, but your dad seems pretty cool, too.”

Chuckling, I replied, “He would agree with you.”

Gaby giggled. “It sounds like both our dads suffer from inflated egos”

“Oh yes. Exceptionally inflated.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s a VP at a marketing firm. He had to travel some when I was a kid, but most of the time, he was home with me and my siblings. He was also a collegiate swimmer back in the day.”

Gaby’s brows rose. “He didn’t want to compete at a higher level?”

“He tried and came close a few times, but he just didn’t have it in him.”

“Did he ever pressure you to follow in his footsteps?”

Shaking my head, I replied, “Not really. I think if I’d decided along the way to give it up, he would’ve been disappointed, but at the same time, he would’ve respected my decision.”

“It must be surreal for him to have a gold medal winner as a son.”

“The team won the gold, not me. I just got it by default for being a member of the team and then having a teammate get injured.”

“Wow, I think that’s the first time you’ve been modest.”

“It’s not so much modesty but the truth.”

She gave me a genuine smile. “I like modest Noah.”

“Thanks.”

After another awkward silence permeated the air, Gaby said, “Speaking of your medal, I’d love to see a picture of it.”

“Really?”

With an emphatic nod, she replied, “Of course.”

“Okay.” I reached into my pocket to retrieve my phone. As I searched through the pics, I came to one. “Oh fuck,” I muttered before quickly trying to shuffle away.

“Why not that one?”

“It’s just not a good angle.”

Before I could protest anymore, Gaby unceremoniously snatched my phone out of my hands. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

“Fuck,” I once again muttered.

After glancing down at the phone, Gaby’s eyes bulged. “You’re not wearing a swimsuit in this picture.”

“That’s exactly why I tried to skip it.”

She glanced up at me. “You’re completely naked with your medal covering your junk,” she stated.

“Well, it’s not completely covering my junk,” I countered. “I’ve got more girth than the medal’s circumference.”

Gaby rolled her eyes. “How quickly Modest Noah dies out to Douchelord Noah.”

I laughed. “I was just stating facts.”

“Can I ask *why* you’re covering your junk with your Olympic medal?”

“Let’s just say you’re not the first girl to request a picture of me with my medal.”

“Ugh, I regret asking,” she replied, thrusting my phone back at me.

As I shoved my phone back into my pocket, I realized we needed a subject change. “You know about my profession as a competitive swimmer, but I also have a degree in finance.”

“Good for you.” She shuddered. “I’m still trying to unsee that photo.”

“Like you’ve never sent any nudes before,” I countered. When Gaby nibbled on her lip, I replied, “Ha, I knew it.”

“But I’m not a public figure. Yours could’ve ended up plastered on the internet.”

“And you’re the daughter of a famous rock star who I’m sure lots of dudes would be jonesing to see naked.”

Panic flashed in her eyes. “Oh God.”

“Too bad I don’t have cell reception in here, or I’d do a quick Google search.”

“Ugh, you’re such an asshole,” she huffed.

God, I loved getting her riled. “Now that you know all about me professionally, what do you do when you’re not stuck in elevators with handsome men?”

Gaby’s lips quirked at my comment. “If you must know, I’m opening a music school for kids with physical and emotional disabilities.”

“Damn, Gaby, I’m seriously impressed.”

With a laugh, she replied, “You really mean that?”

“Totally.” And I wasn’t giving her a line. I had underestimated the depth of character Gaby possessed. Not only was she a stunner, but from wanting to help the disabled, she had a giving heart. It was a welcome change from a lot of the women I met.

“Thanks. It’s been a dream of mine since my second year of college. I mean, I always knew I wanted to go into a profession that helped people. At first, I thought I’d become a

nurse like my mom, but I'm not really a fan of blood and bodily fluids."

"Me either." I laughed. As the excited twinkle continued dancing in Gaby's dark eyes, I said, "Tell me more about your school."

"At the moment, it's a fiasco."

"Oh shit, I'm sorry I asked."

Grinning, Gaby replied, "No, I'm glad you did. It's really more the building housing for the school that's a fiasco. I'm so behind getting everything set up. It feels like it's going to take forever before I can actually get up and running with the classes." With a frustrated sigh, she added, "Since the very beginning, it's something I wanted to do all on my own without any help financially from my parents."

"That's a pretty lofty endeavor to do all on your own."

"I know. But I still want to do it my way."

"Okay, Sinatra, I get it."

She giggled. "You do?"

"It's very important for you to have successes away from your dad's, and this success is yours."

"Exactly," she replied.

"And before we talked, I thought you might want to be a rock star like your dad."

With a shudder, she replied, "God no. I hate performing."

"But you were amazing tonight."

A red flush tinged her cheeks. I couldn't help finding it adorable that the usual ball-busting Gaby was embarrassed. "You really thought I was good?"

“Hell yeah.”

“I was so nervous before the performance.”

“You didn’t look it. It was like you and the music were one.”

“Thanks.”

Electricity crackled in the air between us. Not wanting to let it die, I leaned over, gripping her chin with my fingers and tipping her gaze to meet mine. “You were so incredibly sexy when you danced.”

She stared into my eyes for a moment. “Was I?”

I nodded. “Of course, it wouldn’t take much for you to be sexy. You’re a man’s fantasy just breathing.”

Her expression slightly darkened. “How do I know you don’t say this to all the women you try to seduce?”

“What makes you think I’m not being sincere?”

“Because you’re a womanizer.”

“Maybe that’s true, but it doesn’t mean I don’t feel everything I just said.”

“For fuck’s sake, Noah, you took a woman’s phone number right in front of me. How the hell was that supposed to make me feel?” she challenged.

With a groan, I replied, “Fine. You’re right. In hindsight, I can see that was a total dick thing to do, and I’m really fucking sorry.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“Yeah, I really do.” And that was the truth. I wasn’t just shooting her a line. I really did think she was gorgeous and

sexy. More than anything, I wanted her to believe me. Quirking my brows at her, I replied, “Want me to prove it?”

“How?”

I reached into my pants and pulled out the piece of paper bearing Emily’s number. Holding it in front of her face, I ripped it into several small pieces. Gaby held my gaze as I threw them up and let them rain down on the elevator floor.

“How was that?”

“I’m impressed.”

“I’m a man of my word.”

As she continued staring at me, her gaze dropped from my eyes down to my mouth. When she licked her lips, I groaned. “I really want to kiss you for real.”

“Do you?”

“Hell, yes.” Peering into her dark eyes, I asked, “Can I kiss you for real, Gaby?”

After drawing in a deep breath, I waited anxiously for her response.

Chapter Five: Gaby

“**C**an I kiss you for real, Gaby?”

Noah’s plea echoed through my head. Oh God, was I really entertaining the thought of letting him? It was the last thing I needed. *He* was the last thing I needed. Not to mention I was still disgusted by him ... wasn’t I?

Despite all the alarms going off in my head, I couldn’t help wanting to say yes. A little wedding hookup couldn’t hurt. One night with a womanizer couldn’t be that detrimental to me emotionally ... could it?

As I stood at the edge of a metaphorical cliff, I decided to truly be spontaneous for once in my life. And then I jumped. “Kiss me,” I commanded in a whisper.

Noah didn’t have to be told twice. He instantly slanted his head. Instead of crushing his lips to mine like he had before, he came at me so sweetly. His velvet lips feathered against mine. It wasn’t what I was expecting, but I sure didn’t mind.

Gently, his tongue swept against my bottom lip. I slid mine across to meet his, and our tongues swirled against each other. Even with the sweetness of the kiss, I felt the heat begin burning between my legs. I wanted so much more than what he was giving me.

It was as if Noah sensed what I was feeling. And then something turned over in us both. It was like I couldn't get enough of him, and he couldn't get enough of me. Launching himself at me, Noah took us both down to the floor. With the feel of his tongue inside me and his hands on my body, I didn't give two shits about the dirty floor anymore. I just wanted him to keep doing what he was doing.

Noah broke his lips from mine, his tongue licking a trail along my jawline. As I dipped my head back, he started working his way down my neck. At the same time, his hand came to my breast, squeezing it between his fingers. "Oh God," I moaned, my eyes rolling upwards.

It was then I was distracted by the elevator's ceiling lights. "What if there's cameras?"

His chuckle feathered against my collarbone. "Then we'll give them a show."

"You are such a bad influence," I chided.

"So I've been told."

Before I could call him a smart-ass, Noah shifted his hips between my thighs. As he returned to kiss me, I widened my legs to give him more room. When he thrust his hips against mine, I gasped with pleasure at the feel of his hardness. There was something to be said for the silky material of his pants. Especially sliding against my equally silky pants. It almost felt like there wasn't a barrier between us. Tearing my lips from his, I couldn't help asking, "Are you not wearing underwear?"

With hooded eyes, he replied, "No. I'm commando. Why?"

"Because I feel so much of you."

Noah took my hand and guided it between his legs. “How does that feel?”

“Mm, amazing.”

“It would feel even more amazing inside you.”

“Are you carrying a condom in the pocket of those pants?”

He momentarily scowled at me. “Dammit, Gaby, I’m not that big of a manwhore.”

I laughed at him being offended. “That’s not what I was thinking.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“There’s no way in hell I’m fucking you on the floor of this elevator with a potential audience, least of all without a condom.”

“I guess we’ll have to find other ways to get off, now won’t we?”

“Yes, please.”

As Noah began to move faster against me, I brought my hips up to meet him. The friction felt incredible.

“Fuck,” Noah groaned.

“I know. It feels so good.”

“No, it’s the jewels on your sari. They’re like rocks banging into my skin.”

With a giggle, I replied, “Let’s change positions.”

“Thank you.” Noah then rolled us over to where I was riding him. As I ground my center against him, Noah rose up to tug at the front of my sari, desperately trying to free one of my breasts.

When his mouth licked at the top of my chest, I moaned.

And just as I was about to go over the edge in orgasmic bliss, a ding erupted over my head. I barely had time to register it before the doors to the elevator came sliding open. Noah's hips froze in mid-thrust at the sight of the throng of people staring at us. "Oh God!" I cried, not in pleasure but in absolute and complete horror.

It would be nice to say that was the worst part of it all, but no, we couldn't be that lucky. Standing at the front of the crowd with anxious-laden expressions were our dads. At the sight of our tangled arms and legs, Dad's eyes narrowed to fury-filled slits while Noah's dad, Aidan, hid his grin behind his hand.

After Noah sprang to his feet, he offered me his hand to help me up. I would've found it completely romantic if we hadn't just been caught dry-humping in an elevator by our fathers and a considerable crowd.

"Um, son," Aidan said before motioning below his waist.

At the sight of Noah's tented pants, Dad's eyes cracked wide. "Fucking hell!" he bellowed before pacing in front of the elevator.

Noah snatched his top off the floor and swept it in front of his crotch. Clearing his throat, he said, "Mr. Resendiz, I'm so very sorry."

"You don't need to apologize," I said to Noah.

Dad froze in his pacing to stare at me. "Excuse me?"

Aidan turned to the crowd. "All right, folks, the show is over. Go back to the party and give them some air. They've been through quite the ordeal being stuck the last hour." He lifted his hands and started shooing people away.

Once the crowd had dissipated, Dad shook his head at me. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Before I could answer, Mom came sprinting up. “AJ, would you please calm down,” she countered.

He turned his wrath from me to Mom. “How can you possibly be so calm when your daughter was just found in a compromising position with a strange man?”

“He’s not a stranger,” I protested at the same time Noah said, “We’ve actually known each other since we were kids.”

Rolling his eyes, Dad replied, “Like that really makes a fucking difference.”

Mom shook her head. “Gabriella is a grown woman. Last time I checked, grown women could make out in elevators if the mood struck them.”

“That’s bullshit.”

She turned away from Dad to give her attention to me. For the first time, I noticed she had my evening bag in her hand. After handing it to me, she pushed my hair out of my face, and then placed her hands on my shoulders. A concerned expression came over her face. “Are you okay?” I knew her question was directed not at being found making out with Noah, but about my claustrophobia.

I nodded. “It was pretty bad at first. Thankfully, Noah found a way to distract me.”

Dad grunted. “Is that what you call screwing around on an elevator floor? A distraction?”

Gritting my teeth, I replied, “Seriously, Dad, would you lighten up?”

Before Dad could reply, Mom said, “I’m just grateful you’re all right.” Mom glanced between me and Noah. “That you’re *both* all right.”

Dad crossed his arms over his chest. “He won’t be all right for long if he ever mauls my daughter like that again.”

When Noah paled slightly, I stepped between him and Dad. “That’s enough.”

After glancing between Noah and me, Dad pronounced, “I need a drink.”

“Then let’s get you one.” Mom then gave me a reassuring smile. “Text me when you get settled in your room. We’ll probably be heading home soon.”

“Okay. Thanks, Mom.” The one good thing about staying in the hotel tonight was that I wouldn’t have to ride home with my pissed-off papi.

Taking Dad by the hand, she led him back toward the ballroom. Once he was out of sight, I sighed in relief. My attention then turned to Aidan leaning against the wall next to the elevator. “Don’t tell me you’re going to go off on us now?”

He grinned. “Actually, I stayed just to make sure Noah didn’t need any protection.”

While I returned his smile, Noah puffed out his chest. “I’m pretty sure I could’ve taken him.”

“I still wanted to make sure you both were okay.”

“You’re not mortified by our brazen behavior?” I asked.

Aidan laughed. “I’m not such an old fart that I have forgotten what it’s like to be young.”

“I wish my dad could remember.”

Noah snorted. “Don’t let him fool you, Gaby. If that had been Caroline with some random dude, he’d be losing his shit right now.”

“Is that right?” I asked Aidan.

With a sheepish grin, he replied, “Yeah. There’s just something about a daughter that makes a dad crazy. I only have one to lose my mind over—your dad has two.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Trust me, it doesn’t matter how old you are, you’ll always be our little girls.” He patted my shoulder. “So go easy on him.”

“I won’t make any promises, but I’ll try.”

Nodding, Aidan said, “I’ll leave you two.”

Once we were finally alone, I buried my head in my hands. “I cannot believe that just happened.”

With a laugh, Noah replied, “Who would’ve thought the elevator working would’ve been a cock blocker?”

Peeking through my fingers at him, I groaned. “What are the odds that everyone at the party has heard about us?”

“Hmm, probably 95%.”

“This is a nightmare.”

“I wouldn’t say it was all bad.” He pulled my hands away from my face. “There were some really good parts.”

“Like when you almost came in your pants on the floor of an elevator?”

Noah barked a laugh. “Um, no, I was thinking more about getting to know you better.”

Okay, I wasn't exactly expecting that. Maybe there really was more than meets the eye with Noah Fitzgerald, after all. "Yeah, that was a good thing."

He reached out to rub his thumb over my bottom lip. "Kissing you for real was pretty epic too."

And that statement caused my heart to flutter. "I would have to agree."

"I'm going to take a wild guess that you don't want to go back to the party."

"No. I think I'm partied out."

"Can I walk you to your room?"

Tilting my head at him, I replied, "Before I say yes, I should tell you that Bella and I are sharing a room, so there's no way anything else is going to happen between us tonight."

Leaning closer to me, his breath fanned against my cheek. "You don't think we could manage a quickie before she came up?"

"Ew, no," I replied, shoving him back. I wasn't too surprised to hear his laughter.

"Just messing with you."

I grinned up at him. "You better be."

"Come on. Let's get you upstairs."

When we turned back to the elevator, we both froze. I motioned to the bank of elevators across from us. "On second thought, let's take one of those."

"Works for me."

Chapter Six: Gaby

After all the previous night's escapades, I fell asleep the moment my head hit the pillow. It felt like I'd barely been in bed before the alarm blared in my ear. With a groan, I reached over for my phone and debated hitting the snooze button. But then I realized there was way too much to get done before the wedding.

Once I was awake, it seemed like a frantic blur of activities from the time my feet hit the ground. After scarfing down a quick breakfast, Bella and I had hurried to the bridal suite where there were makeup and hair stylists. If I thought I was going to escape the gossip mill about what had happened with me and Noah, I was wrong.

Painfully wrong.

Everyone, especially Laurel, wanted all the details. While relating the events that had transpired in the elevator, a crippling anxiety took up in my stomach, and I worried about seeing Noah again.

It wasn't like I was embarrassed about what had happened. Well, except the part with our dads and all the other people seeing us. It was more about worrying about what he was feeling in the light of day. Did the make-out session between

us truly matter, or would I just be regulated to yet another conquest of his?

Thankfully, the talk of Noah ended once we were beautified. After slipping on our lavender bridesmaid's dresses, we helped Laurel into hers. I couldn't get over how stunning she looked in her billowing white gown. Her smile was radiant, and I knew she was about to experience one of the happiest days of her life.

That fact caused a little flicker in my chest about one day being a bride. Of course, I was only twenty-two and had plenty of time. After all, my mom was twenty-eight when she married my dad. There was just something about being part of a wedding that made you long for a fairy tale.

After pictures of the bridal party, we hid Laurel away to take pictures with Mason and the groomsmen. My heart shuddered and restarted at the sight of Noah in his tux. While he'd looked amazing in his kurta pajama the night before, there was something to be said for the sleek elegance of the black tux.

At the sight of me, his face lit up, and he gave me a beaming smile along with a wave. Okay, so he wasn't going to ghost me or pretend that nothing had happened last night. As I started walking up the aisle, Noah began weaving his way through the others to meet me. Once I stood before him, I couldn't help smiling. "Hey."

"Hey, beautiful," he replied.

"Hey yourself. I have to say that tux is really working."

He brought his hands down the lapels. "I always feel like James Bond in a tux."

"You make it look good that's for sure."

“Thanks.” Jerking his chin at me, he said, “Speaking of looking amazing, you’re stunning in that dress.”

My heart beat wildly at both his compliment and the way he was looking at me. “Thank you,” I breathlessly replied. Dammit, I hated the effect he had on me. Compliments from other men didn’t have me physically swooning, yet here I was with butterflies doing somersaults in my stomach just because Noah said I was stunning.

We were interrupted by the photographer calling for us. That was the last moment we had together before the ceremony. The rest of the time flew by, and then we were lining up together to walk down the aisle.

As Noah shifted back and forth on his feet, I cut my gaze over to him. “Let me guess. Your commitment-phobic side is all fidgety at the thought of walking down a wedding aisle.”

He snorted. “Ha, ha, smart-ass. That’s not it at all.”

“Then what’s up?”

“If you must know, I didn’t get to be here for the actual rehearsal, so I don’t want to do anything to fuck up Noah and Laurel’s day.” At what must’ve been my visible shock at his declaration, he rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I’m not a total self-absorbed asshole.”

“I know that.”

He popped his brows at me. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, I am. You showed me that last night.” When he opened his mouth to say what I imagined was something manwhorish, I elbowed him. “I meant helping me through the panic attack.”

He winked at me. “That’s what I was going to say.”

“Sure it was.” When the wedding coordinator motioned for us to start down the aisle, I drew myself closer to him. “Don’t worry. I will help make sure you do everything right during the ceremony so you won’t make an ass out of yourself.”

“Thanks,” he replied with a genuine smile.

With the strands of *Cannon in D* echoing around us, we started up the aisle. If Noah was still nervous, he didn’t look it. He wore a comfortable smile and walked with a determined step. As we neared the altar, I whispered, “You do have the rings, right?”

He stiffened next to me before cutting a horrified gaze over to me. Just as the panic washed through me, he snorted. “Gotcha.”

“Asshole!” I hissed under my breath. When my gaze met the priest’s, warmth flooded my cheeks at his appalled expression. “Sorry, Father,” I muttered before taking my place with the other bridesmaids.

After throwing Noah a drop-dead look, I turned my attention to the back of the church. As the Bridal Chorus started, the doors opened, and Laurel and her father started through them. At the tears sparkling in Mason’s eyes, I couldn’t stop the waterworks. They came and went through the ceremony. I even wept through Noah’s mom singing *Ave Maria*. It was all just so beautiful and perfect.

But most of all, it was full of love.

Before I knew it, Mason and Laurel had said their vows and shared their first kiss as man and wife. The processional began to play, and they linked arms to make their way back down the aisle.

When Noah met me at the top of the altar, I did a double take at the shimmer in his blue eyes. After slipping my arm through his, I couldn't help saying, "Do my eyes deceive me, or are those tears in your eyes, Mr. Fitzgerald?"

With a scowl, he replied, "Yeah, they are. Mason's like my brother, and I'm really fucking happy for him. Okay?"

"I didn't mean to give you shit. More than anything, I'm impressed."

"You are?"

"Yeah. The fact you're actually in tune with your emotions is very attractive."

His signature cocky smirk curved across his lips. "Is it?"

As we walked out of the church and into the sunshine, I waggled my brows at him. "Oh yeah."

* * *

After a pomp-filled ceremony, it was time to unwind at the reception. When the bridal party was announced, Noah and I once again walked together down an aisle. This time it was to a long row of tables where we would be seated with the other bridesmaids and groomsmen along with Mason and Laurel.

Dinner was served, and we all dug in. Then it was a free-for-all of dancing and free flowing alcohol. Although I normally wouldn't have wanted to eat in front of a guy, I was too starved to care about Noah seeing me scarf down my steak and vegetables. It didn't seem to faze him at all. He even buttered me an extra roll.

When it was time for Dad to serenade the happy couple for their first dance, I left the table and stood to the side of the

dancefloor. As always, Dad knocked it out of the park. I'd grown up listening to his voice on and off the stage. Hearing him express such emotion in the Hindi language was truly beautiful.

As I closed my eyes and swayed to the music, someone brushed against me. "He's amazing."

Popping my eyes open, I met Noah's astonished gaze. "He is, and more than that, he knows he is."

He chuckled. "Once again, our fathers are so alike."

"Speaking of killer voices, your mom's voice is spectacular."

"I like to think so."

"She could've totally been a professional singer."

Noah smiled as his gaze went to the table where his mother sat. "I agree. But more than she wanted a singing career, she wanted a family." Cutting his gaze back over to mine, he quickly added, "Not that she couldn't have done both. Your parents are certainly proof of that."

"True. But a mother is the true heart of the family. Mine kept it all together so my dad could keep being a rocker."

"My mom is certainly the beating heart of our family."

As the song came to an end, I clapped and whistled for Dad. Mason went to his mother for the next dance while Laurel went to her father. "Speaking of that beating heart, will you excuse me for a minute?"

"Sure."

Noah patted my arm before he made his way through the crowd. When he reached his mother's table, her eyes lit up at

his question. Popping out of her chair, she then put her hand in Noah's. He then led her onto the dance floor.

The sight of him showing so much love to his mother warmed me from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet. It proved to me yet again that he did have a heart somewhere in his manwhore chest.

When the dance ended, Noah kissed his mother's cheek before handing her off to his dad. I couldn't help giggling at the cocky smirk that was etched on Aidan's face. Like father, like son. Then Noah made his way back over to me.

He wore an almost sheepish expression. "Sorry. I felt I needed to do that."

Shaking my head, I replied, "Don't apologize for showing your mom love." I grinned at him. "It was so sweet." At the red flush tinging his cheeks, my mouth gaped open. "Noah Fitzgerald, are you blushing?"

"No."

"Yes, you are."

His hand came to stretch his collar. "It's just hot in here, that's all."

I reached up to pinch his cheek. "You're awfully cute when you blush."

Noah smacked my hand away. "I am not blushing."

Thankfully for Noah, Mason interrupted us. "Gaby, come dance with me," he suggested.

I smiled up at him. "Okay." Turning to Noah, I said, "Don't get into trouble while I'm gone."

He chuckled. "I'll do my best." With a pointed look at Mason, he said, "Don't keep her too long, cuz." His words and expression sent me spinning.

"I won't," Mason promised. He then led me out onto the dance floor. Once we were enveloped in the crowd, he pulled me close to him. "I can't believe we're dancing at my wedding."

"I can. You were always a hopeless romantic."

"You think so?"

"Yup. I do."

"In that respect, I take after my dad." His gaze went over to where his dad had his arms wrapped around his mom.

"I can totally see that. It sure as hell doesn't run on your mom's side."

His brows furrowed. "Noah?" At my nod, Mason shook his head. "Deep down, he really isn't a bad guy." Intensity shone in his baby blues. "He just hasn't met the right woman."

Glancing away from Mason's stare, I searched for Noah in the crowd. When I found him, I groaned.

"What's wrong?"

"My dad." Jerking my chin, I motioned to where Dad stood ridiculously close to Noah. At Noah's pale expression and tense frame, I could only imagine what he was saying.

Mason snorted. "I don't think I've ever seen Noah afraid of someone before."

"It's my dad who should be afraid. He's acting like a total idiot about what happened in the elevator."

“He’s just defending his little girl’s virtue.” He wagged his brows. “Or I suppose in this case, the lack thereof.”

Smacking his arm, I replied, “Hey now.”

Mason laughed. “Sorry. I had to go there.”

Tilting my head at him, I couldn’t help asking, “What do you think about what happened with Noah and me?”

“I’m not going to lie that I was pretty fucking shocked.”

“Because I’m not his type?” I questioned bitterly.

Mason stared at me in surprise. “No, it was more *he* wasn’t *your* type.”

“Maybe he’s growing on me.”

With a chuckle, Mason replied, “He is a charmer.”

“So you’re not going to caution me against him?”

“Knowing you as well as I do, I can say that I don’t worry about you starting something up with him.”

“Seriously?”

Bobbing his head, Mason replied, “You’re strong enough to guard your heart and put him in his place.”

“I hope so.”

As soon as the song ended, I smiled up at Mason. “I better go, and check on Noah.”

He nodded. “Thanks for the dance. But more importantly, thanks for helping bring me and Laurel together. I owe you.”

“You’re so welcome.”

After squeezing him tight and giving him kisses on both cheeks, my mood shifted as I stalked off the dance floor and

over to where Noah was standing. “Let me guess. My dad was giving you shit a minute ago?”

Without meeting my gaze, Noah replied, “Um, no.”

“Liar.” I tilted my head at him. “He totally was giving you shit because you got as pale as a sheet.”

Wincing, Noah replied, “Okay, fine. He might’ve said something to me.”

“Like what?”

“That you have uncles in Jersey who would be happy to make sure my dick sleeps with the fishes if he ever catches me disrespecting you like that in public.”

My eyes bulged in horror. “Oh no, he didn’t!”

“Yeah, he did.”

“I’m going to kill him,” I bit out through gritted teeth.

Noah laughed. “It’s okay.”

“It most certainly is *not* okay.”

“It was just an idle threat.” His amusement faded slightly. “Wait, you don’t really have uncles who would cut my dick off, do you?”

“No, I don’t have uncles.” At Noah’s relieved expression, I added, “I do have cousins in the mob though.”

“Fucking hell.”

I snorted. “My mom’s dad is Sicilian, remember?”

“But I was kinda hoping your family went against the stereotype of all Sicilians being mobsters.”

“Papa Duke isn’t, but I can’t say the same for some of his family.”

“Jesus,” he muttered.

“Don’t worry. You and your dick are perfectly safe.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Absolutely. Dad knows if he asks a favor of the mob, it means he’ll be indebted to them. He doesn’t ever want that.”

Noah wheezed out a breath. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Come on. Let’s get our mind off it and dance.” At his hesitation, I cocked my brows at him. “Don’t you want to dance with me?”

“No, I want to. It’s just I’m not that great a dancer. I mean, I can do the sway thing to slow music, but I have no idea how to waltz.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“How come?”

“You had great rhythm last night in the elevator.”

He threw his head back with a laugh. “While that might’ve been true, I don’t think that translates to dancing.”

“Actually, it does. You just have to follow the rhythm in the music.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You were born into a musical family.”

“I still had to learn.”

“Let me guess. You want to teach me.”

“If you’ll let me.”

After glancing around at the couples, Noah exhaled a ragged breath. “Okay fine.”

I grabbed his arm and dragged him onto the dance floor before he could change his mind. “We’ll just do the box step. It’s really easy.”

“Famous last words,” Noah grumbled.

“Okay, first, you go forward with your left foot.”

Once Noah answered my command, I nodded. “Next, bring your right foot to the side. Then bring it to your left one together.”

With a groan, Noah replied, “Come on, Gaby, I feel like an idiot.”

“Stop it. You’re doing great.”

Once Noah could do the box step, I said, “Okay, put one hand on my shoulder blade and take my hand in the other.”

After he followed my instructions, Noah huffed, “This blows.”

“Really you’re not that bad.”

“I mean, I’m not able to feel your hands around my neck or have mine on your waist.”

I laughed. “The waltz is about elegance, not dry-humping against each other.”

“You’re killing me.”

Although he rolled his eyes, Noah did manage to waltz me around for the remainder of the song. Even though he was a little stiff, he did a great job. When the music changed over, he dropped his arms from me. “Can we please dance normally now?”

“Fine. I suppose you earned it.”

We slow-danced through the rest of the song before a fast number came on. Noah surprised me at being pretty good at fast dances. When another slow song came on, Noah brought his arms around me.

Just as we were getting ridiculously close, Dad appeared before us. “May I cut in?”

While I scowled at him, Noah jerked away from me so fast you would’ve thought I was on fire. “Of course. My pleasure.” He grimaced. “I mean, your pleasure.” With a shake of his head, he mumbled, “Fuck it,” and then hightailed it off the dance floor.

“Strange young man,” Dad mused, as he drew me into his arms.

I poked my finger into his chest. “Oh no. Don’t you dare go there.”

He had the audacity to give me an innocent look. “What?”

“You know exactly what. You’re going out of your way to make Noah uncomfortable.”

“I can’t help if he’s threatened by me.”

“But you can help when you verbally threaten him with calling Lorenzo and Fabian.”

Dad grinned like a shark. “He needed to be aware of the consequences.”

“As both Mom and I pointed out last night, I’m a grown woman.”

“I don’t care if you’re ninety fucking years old—you’ll always be my little girl.”

“When I’m ninety, I can assume you’ll be dead, which is the only way I’ll ever get a man with how overprotective you’re acting.”

An agonized sigh rumbled through Dad. “You can’t possibly understand what it’s like, *mija*.”

“But if Mom is cool with it, why can’t you be?”

“Because your mother never was a vile, disgusting manwhore like I was. When I think about the women I defiled...” He shuddered. “They were someone’s little girl.”

“Once again, you’re overreacting. You never *defiled* anyone. Whoever you hooked up with came willingly, right?”

“Of course.”

“Then what’s the difference between you being willing or them?” When Dad didn’t respond, I countered, “It’s hypocritical to believe it’s not okay for a woman to express her sexuality the same as a man.”

Dad grunted. “Jesus, you’re as hardheaded as your mother.”

“And as my *father*.”

“Look, Gaby, here’s what it boils down to. I know Noah’s type. I *was* his type, and I don’t want that for you.”

“He’s really not a bad guy.” At Dad’s eye roll, I replied, “I mean it, and that’s saying a lot since I’ve hated him for years.”

Dad’s brows popped. “You did?” When I nodded, he replied, “Why the hell did you have to change your mind?”

A laugh bubbled from my lips. “Because I realized I was wrong about him.” I gave him a pointed look. “I’m pretty sure

I wouldn't be standing here today if Mom hadn't realized she was wrong about you."

"You just had to throw that in my face, didn't you?"

With a shrug, I replied, "Just stating facts. I mean, since you insist on playing this game, I feel the need to remind you that Mom was knocked up when you two married."

"That's not true." When I opened my mouth to argue that yes, she was very much knocked up, he scowled. "Not that it matters in the great scheme of things, but Bella was a year old at our wedding."

"It matters because Mom was a sexually liberated female, and you shouldn't expect anything less from your daughters. Especially since I know you don't give two shits about who Alex sleeps with."

Dad remained uncharacteristically silent for what felt like an eternity. Finally, a ragged sigh rumbled through his broad chest. "Will you at least promise me you'll be careful?"

"Of course. I always use protection."

Extreme horror etched across Dad's face. "Christ, that's not what I meant."

Warm embarrassment flooded my cheeks. "Oops. Sorry."

After taking a few calming breaths, Dad said, "I meant for you to be careful with your emotions." He then swallowed hard. "While I know I'm being a hard ass about the sexual stuff, it really boils down to the fact I don't want you getting hurt. My heart breaks when yours does."

His words and emotions melted my steely reserve. Squeezing him tight, I replied, "Aw, Papi, te quiero con todo mi corazon."

He smiled. “Te amo, mi nina hermosa.”

I leaned over to kiss his cheek. “Even though you can be a pain in the ass sometimes, you’re still the best dad in the whole wide world.”

“Damn straight.”

The song changed over, and Dad broke free of our embrace. “Go on, and have fun.”

“You mean it?”

“Not really, but being a parent is all about sacrifice,” he replied with a teasing smile.

After bestowing a kiss on his cheek, I said, “Thanks, Daddy.”

Even though it wasn’t entirely a blessing, I heeded Dad’s words and went in search of Noah. He sat alone at one of the tables, eyeing his phone. When I sat down next to him, he glanced up at me with a questioning expression. “Everything okay?”

“It’s fine.”

“I can’t help but ask if that means my dick is also fine.”

A snort escaped my lips. “Yes, for the moment, your dick is safe.”

“I’m so glad to hear it.”

“I mean, it would be a real tragedy for the both of us.”

His blond brows furrowed. “What are you trying to say?”

“I should at least get to see your dick in action before my cousins take it, don’t you think?”

“Well, you did *feel* it in action last night, didn’t you?” he asked with his cocky smile.

“True.”

With a wink, Noah took a swig of his longneck. I knew it was now or never. If I didn’t say what I needed to say, I was going to lose my nerve. “How about after you finish that Corona, we go upstairs, and you show me your dick in action while you fuck me.”

Beer spewed out of his mouth like a waterfall at my comment. After swiping his mouth, he turned with wide-eyes to me. “Jesus Christ, Gaby,” he muttered.

Giving him an innocent look, I replied, “What?”

“Did you actually just ask me to...” He glanced around us before leaning closer to me. “*fuck* you?”

With a grin, I replied, “Yes, I did.”

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered again.

“Is that a yes or a no?”

He fingered the neck of his collar, pulling it out and shaking his head. “Give me a minute.”

“Why, Noah Fitzgerald, don’t tell me I’ve shocked you? Especially after we were just talking about your dick.”

“Oh, you shocked me all right.”

“After our elevator romp last night, didn’t you think we’d be getting down and dirty after the reception?”

He grinned. “Maybe.”

“Come on, egomaniac. Don’t tell me you didn’t think I was a sure thing?”

“I thought you might’ve changed your mind after the trauma of being stuck in an elevator had passed.”

“Being in the elevator was what sold me on you, and before you think it was your masterful dry-humping skills that won me over, it was actually getting to know you better.”

“I’m so glad to hear it.” And he actually looked happy. As if I had seen past a persona he’d been projecting to the world. Sure, he was handsome as hell—okay, totally drop-dead sexy—but as I learned last night, he was also a tad protective. *Thoughtful.*

And ... I wanted him.

“Then take me upstairs and ravish me,” I instructed with a grin.

He threw his head back with a laugh. “I don’t think anyone has ever told me to do that.”

“I’m glad to be the first.”

Noah rose out of his chair. “Whose room?”

“Bella and I are still sharing a room.”

As we started across the ballroom, Noah replied, “I’m not quite kinky enough for an audience. Not to mention the incestuous overtones of it being your sister.”

In spite of wrinkling my nose, I still laughed. “Definitely not.”

“Then it’s my room.”

“How did you end up not sharing with your brother?”

“Because he didn’t want me waking him up at the crack of dawn to go swimming.” When I gave him an odd look, he

replied, “I promised my coach I’d be in the water every day. I talked the hotel into giving me an early morning pass.”

“Hmm, does that mean I might get to see you in your speedo?”

Wagging his brows, Noah replied, “You’ll get the pleasure of seeing me both in and out of it.”

“Lucky me.”

“Well, not entirely.”

“What do you mean?”

“The truth is I won’t be wearing a speedo. We wear jammers now to compete.”

“You wear what?”

He laughed. “They’re more like skin-tight briefs that come mid-thigh.”

“Bummer.”

Flashing me a wicked grin, Noah replied, “Maybe I can dig an old Speedo out just for you.”

“I’d like that.”

When we entered the elevator, Noah hit the button for the 10th floor. Once again, we found ourselves alone. The doors had barely shut before Noah pounced on me. As he crushed his lips against mine, I grabbed the lapels of his tux and jerked him even closer. We slammed back against one of the elevator’s walls. Noah’s hands came to the front of my dress. His hands cupped my breasts through the fabric. “I cannot wait to get my mouth on these,” he panted against my mouth.

A moan escaped my lips both at his words and the feel of his hands on my breasts. At the ding of the elevator, Noah

gripped me by the waist before dragging me out of the elevator. We stayed with our mouths and arms intertwined down the hallway—our tongues battling each other every step of the way.

When Noah pulled his mouth from mine, I moaned at the loss. “Sorry, babe, but I’ve got to pay attention to the room numbers, or I’ll end up fucking you right here in the hallway.”

With a laugh, I extricated myself from him. “What’s the number?” I panted.

“1092.”

Glancing at the numbers, I replied, “We’re close. Just three doors down.”

Nodding, Noah then jerked me back into his arms, and once again, his mouth assaulted mine. His hand was inching down the bodice of my dress when we reached the door. “Key. Left pocket,” he grunted as he finally squeezed my naked breast in his hand.

With the hand not gripping his ass, I felt along his pocket. When I brushed against his thick erection, Noah moaned. Although I felt the keycard almost immediately, I didn’t pull away. Instead, I let my fingers rub against his dick. “Oh fuck,” Noah gasped in a guttural tone.

“I just can’t seem to find the key. There’s something big and hard in the way,” I teased against his lips.

Thrusting his hips forward, Noah said, “Get the fucking card, Gaby.”

“Are you sure? I mean, you and Mr. Hard-On seem to be enjoying it.”

He stared at me through hooded eyes. “Did you actually just say ‘Mr. Hard-On’?” When I nodded, he shot me an exasperated look. “Please tell me you’re not going to say Miss Pussy wants to come out and play with Mr. Hard-On.”

Laughing, I replied, “Actually, I think it would be Mr. Hard-On wants to go inside to play with Miss Pussy, wouldn’t it?”

“You know, I’m into all kinds of dirty talk, but this isn’t what I had in mind,” he replied with a smirk.

“Okay, okay,” I replied, while taking the key card out.

“Thank fuck,” Noah muttered as I unlocked the door.

The moment I pushed the door open, Noah launched himself at me again. I had to say it was one hell of an ego-trip having a man so into me—who wanted me so much. *I could get used to this.*

After staggering into the hotel room, he kicked the door shut behind us. Whirling me around, his fingers went for the zipper on my dress. With one clean jerk, he unzipped me to the waist. He then turned me back around to tug the straps down over my arms.

“I’ll get this. You work on yourself,” I instructed.

With a nod, Noah jerked off his tux jacket. While he began unbuttoning his shirt, I shimmied the dress off my hips as fast as I could. Within seconds, it pooled in a heap at my feet leaving me in my bustier and stomach-flattening panties, which thank God were actually somewhat sexy with lace and a high cut.

At the sight of me in my underwear, Noah’s fingers froze unbuttoning his pants. While I should’ve enjoyed the intensity

of his stare, I shrunk back a little in my own insecurity. “What is it?” I finally asked.

“Your underwear is sexy as hell.”

“Even though they suck my ass and stomach in?”

He licked his lips. “You’re right. Lose them.”

I laughed. “I thought you said they were sexy.”

“Not as sexy as you being naked and being able to see your ass in all its glory.”

As my hands went around my back to pop the snaps on the bustier, Noah stripped out of his pants in almost record time. The bustier joined our pile of clothes along with his pants. My breasts barely had a moment to absorb the cold air before Noah’s hands came out to cup them. “Fuck, yes, I knew they were natural.”

“I’m glad you approve,” I mused.

Leaning forward, he dropped his head to bring his mouth to my chest. He kissed and licked down my breastbone and over to one breast. He sucked in my nipple, causing me to gasp. His tongue swirled around the tip before flicking quickly back and forth. The action caused wetness to pool between my legs.

As he kissed across to the other breast, I tugged at the strands of his hair. My hands trailed down the nape of his neck and across his broad back. “I could taste these all night,” he murmured against my nipple.

“You won’t get any complaints from me.”

“But I want to taste something else.”

As he sank to his knees before me, he kissed a trail from my breasts down across my abdomen. I sucked in a breath when he was almost right where I wanted him. He kissed my inner thighs before nudging my legs farther apart. He then licked his lips at the sight. “Damn, babe, you’re already drenched for me.”

I totally am. I couldn’t remember a time when I had been turned on so quickly. “Would you please just stop talking and start fucking me?”

With a chuckle, Noah dipped his head to lick up my seam. I sucked in a breath before arching my hips against his face. Staring up at me, Noah held my gaze as his tongue flicked across my folds. God, it was so hot. *He* was so hot. I sucked in a breath and let my head fall back against the wall as his warm tongue worked over me.

After a few teasing licks, he placed his mouth fully on my clit before sucking it into his mouth. He lapped and suckled my clit while I was soon rocking my hips against his mouth. He took one of my feet and pulled it up to rest on his shoulder giving him better access.

While one of my hands clutched at the wall to try and balance, the other came to Noah’s head. With each pull of his mouth, I yanked the strands of his hair, causing him to growl.

“Sorry,” I panted.

“Don’t stop. You’re making my dick throb,” he muttered against my center.

A shiver went through me at his words. I wasn’t used to a lot of dirty talk, but Noah apparently was a big fan. And he was ridiculously good at it.

One of Noah's hands slid over my ribcage and up to cup my breast. His other one went between my legs. While his mouth worked on my clit, he slid two fingers inside my wet walls. The feeling was phenomenal, and I shrieked in pleasure. Wanting even more from him, I began to move my hips furiously against his fingers and mouth. When he sped up the pace of his fingers plunging in and out of me, I murmured. "Noah, Oh God, Noah."

"Fuck, I love hearing my name coming off your lips."

"And I love what you're doing to me." Pinching my eyes closed, my head lolled back against the wall. "I'm close...so close."

As my hips kept up a frantic pace, Noah's thumb pressed down on my clit. It was just what I needed to send me spiraling over the edge. Calling out his name again, I tugged and jerked at the strands of his hair as I rode out the orgasm.

Once I came back to myself, I gazed down as he licked me off of his fingers. Cocking a brow at him, I said, "I'm sure your overinflated ego doesn't need the compliment, but that was amazing."

With a smirk, he replied, "Gold Medal orgasm giver, huh?"

"Absolutely."

After he eased my foot down from his shoulder, Noah slid up my body. When his dick reached my center, he groaned and bucked his hips against mine. I reached between us to cup his bulge. "I can see now why your medal didn't cover all of this."

"You say the nicest things when you're in a post-orgasm haze."

As I stroked my hand down his length, I asked, "Want me to repay the favor?"

“Next round. I wanted to be inside you like yesterday.”

He grabbed me by the waist and hoisted me up to wrap my legs around him. I circled my arms around his neck, drawing his head down to mine. Our lips met in a frenzied kiss as he stumbled away from the door. As I rubbed my soaked center against his dick, a groan rumbled through his chest. We collapsed onto the mattress of the bed in a tangled heap of arms and legs. Our tongues waged a full-on battle as his hips thrust against my core.

I tore my mouth away from his. “Condom?” I panted.

“Fuck,” he muttered, as he unhandled my breast. He rocked back onto his knees before hopping off the bed.

Turning onto my side, I propped my head on my arm. “You didn’t think I would honestly let you go bareback considering what a manwhore you are?”

He smirked at me. “While you think you’re insulting, I take it as a compliment.”

I rolled my eyes. “All hail the conquering douchelord.”

Snorting, he searched for the pants from his tux, which he found by the door. Once he snatched his wallet out, he returned to the bed. As he ripped open the wrapper with his teeth, I rolled onto my back. With my eyes on his, I brought my knees up before widening my legs in anticipation.

Moments later, condom on, Noah settled between my legs. Taking his dick in his hand, he guided it toward my core, then rubbed his length back and forth over my clit. *Oh God*. It felt so very, very good. *It isn’t enough*. With a frustrated shriek, my hands came to grip his shoulders. “Please, Noah.”

“I love hearing you beg,” he replied.

“Don’t get used to it. The only time you’ll hear it is in the bedroom.”

He grinned. “I can live with that.” His hips surged, urging him inside, and when he was halfway in, he glanced down to gauge my reaction.

“More,” I murmured. When he was buried fully inside me, we both moaned. My walls stretched with his size.

“Fuck me, you’re tight as hell,” he grunted.

I swiveled my hips, which caused him to groan against my ear. Noah began to move. First, his thrusts were slow and sensual. I gripped his shoulders, pulling him closer to me. I loved the feel of his weight on me, the way my nipples tweaked as his broad chest rubbed against them. We were only getting started, but it was one of the best sexual experiences of my life.

After a few minutes of slow, deep strokes, Noah picked up the pace. His hips drove faster and faster against mine. My moans and heavy breathing filled the air around us. But I wasn’t the only one expressing myself. Noah’s groans of pleasure were music to my ears.

Out of nowhere, he flipped us over so that I was riding him. His hands came to grip my ass to rock me harder on and off his dick, and the friction felt amazing. “Oh God, yes!” One hand snaked up my abdomen to pinch and tease my nipple while the other went between my legs to massage my clit.

“Fuck!” I shrieked, which caused me to grind against Noah’s hand.

“That’s it, babe. Take it,” he growled. Digging his heels into the mattress, Noah began raising his hips to meet mine,

pounding in and out. We both began to breathe heavier while sweat broke out along our bodies.

“You’re close?” Noah murmured.

I bit down on my lip and nodded. He leaned up to take one of my breasts into his mouth. As he sucked hard on my nipple, he sped the pace of his fingers against my clit. I cried out as the orgasm charged through me. “Noah!” I panted as I rode out the pleasure.

His response was to pound harder and harder in and out of me. As I came back to myself, I watched his brows furrow in concentration. God, his expression of extreme pleasure was so hot. It sent goosebumps over my arms and legs that I was the one giving it to him.

“Mm, Gaby,” he grunted. His head then kicked back as he started to come.

In that moment, I knew one night with him would never be enough.

Chapter Seven: Noah

As I collapsed back onto the mattress, I tried desperately to catch my breath. My chest rose and fell in harsh pants. When I turned my head on the pillow, Gaby appeared to be doing the same. I jerked a hand through my sweat-slickened hair before murmuring, “Damn.”

“I totally agree.”

I turned to meet her gaze. “That was...” I shook my head. “Wow.”

“Once again, I totally agree.”

“I never doubted it would be amazing, but that exceeded my expectations.”

“Really?” A shy smile curved on Gaby’s lips. It wasn’t one I was used to. She always seemed so sure of herself. Even though I liked ball-buster Gaby, I liked this softer side as well.

“Hell yeah.”

“Me too,” she replied before snuggling closer to my side. God, she felt good against me—the curve of her breast, the swell of her hips, and the thickness of her thighs. I wasn’t used to feeling this way after sex. After I came once or twice, I was ready to go or for the chick to go.

But I sure as hell didn't want Gaby to go.

Needing a reason for her to stay, I quickly announced, "Man, I'm starving."

"That's what happens when you work up an appetite," she teasingly replied.

I grinned. "Damn straight." I cocked my brows at her. "Are you hungry?"

"Maybe a little."

"Why don't we order some room service?"

She peered curiously at me. Like she couldn't believe I was wanting to prolong our time together, least of all to share a meal. "Really?"

"Why not?"

"Um, okay."

I rolled away from her before sliding off my condom and depositing it in the trash. Then I grabbed the menu off the nightstand. When I flipped on the light switch to read, I felt Gaby's warm stare on me. Cutting my eyes over to her, I watched her gaze trail over my arms, down my abs, past my dick, and to my thighs. "Enjoying the view?"

While I fully expected her to roll her eyes at my ego trip, she merely grinned. "I am." Tilting her head, she added, "I haven't seen you in the light."

"You bring up a good point."

Dropping the menu, I jerked the sheet away from her. "Noah!" she shrieked, her eyes widening in horror.

"So, it's all right for you to eye-fuck my hot bod, but I can't look at yours?"

“Give me the sheet back,” she demanded.

I licked my lips. “Not until I get a really good look.”

It shocked the hell out of me when an embarrassed flush colored Gaby’s cheeks. My shock grew when she shoved one of the pillows in front of her fabulous tits and gorgeous pussy. Furrowing my brows, I asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I just don’t want you looking at me in the light.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because,” she huffed. When I continued to stare at her, she rolled her eyes. “It’s just I don’t like my body, okay?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I’m sure for someone like you it’s hard to understand.”

“Someone like me?”

“You have an athlete’s physique with your muscular arms, washboard abs, and not an ounce of fat on you.”

“I’m not that built,” I protested.

The corners of Gaby’s lips quirked up. “Don’t tell me you’re actually being humble right now?”

“I’m serious. I’m really not.”

“Whatever. The point is you’ve never been fat and had to deal with other people’s opinions on how you look.”

“You mean guys’ opinions.”

“Exactly.”

“I didn’t realize you had dated someone with vision problems.”

“Huh?”

“I’m talking about the jackass who gave you grief about your body? Yeah, he must’ve been blind.”

A laugh bubbled from Gaby’s lips. “That has to be the corniest line I’ve ever heard.”

I grinned at her. “Hey, it made you laugh, didn’t it?”

“True.”

“Regardless of the line, I was serious about whoever did a number on your self-esteem to make you doubt yourself.”

She sighed. “I wish it was as easy to tune the voices out, but it’s not.”

I eased down beside her on the mattress. “Babe, you have a fabulous body.”

As she nibbled on her bottom lip, it seemed she was having a hard time putting her thoughts into words. “Hearing you say the words are nice, but it’s just I still see myself like I was when I was heavier. And there’s stretch marks...” She swallowed hard before shaking her head. “Jesus, this has to be *such* a mood killer for you. I mean, let’s just let my insecurity flag fly high.”

“I don’t care about you freaking out.”

With a roll of her dark eyes, she replied, “Sure, you don’t.”

“I’m serious. What I do care about is you feeling bad about yourself.”

“Can we just change the subject?” she questioned softly.

“Fine. If you won’t take my word for it, I guess I’ll have to show you how I feel.”

“What do you mean?”

I held up a finger before rising up off the mattress. I once again went to retrieve my wallet. While I didn't want Gaby to know I'd replenished my condom supply because I had hoped for a post-wedding hookup, I was glad I had come prepared. I planned to use most of the box on her if she would let me.

When I returned with a condom, Gaby's brows popped. "Noah, what are—"

"Trust me," I replied to Gaby's panicked expression. After tossing the gold foil wrapper on the bed, I turned my attention back to her. My fingers gripped the edge of the pillow that she covered herself with. Slowly, I began to pull it away from her. At first, I faced a little resistance, but then under my heated, appreciative gaze, she let me take it away.

After tossing the pillow to the floor, my gaze swept over her naked body. She surprised me by not clamping her thighs together. Instead, she remained with them parted, giving me an epic view of her pussy.

Taking in the sight of her full, round breasts, I drew in a breath. "Those are fucking stunning, and I loved every second that I had my hands and mouth on them."

"Really?" Gaby questioned softly.

"Hell yes. I'm a boob man, and you have quite a pair."

"Noah, you're such a charmer," she replied with a teasing smile.

Licking my lips, I replied, "I bet they'd look even hotter with my dick between them." Gaby gasped in surprise, causing her tits to bounce. "Would you like that?"

Without breaking eye contact with me, she slowly nodded her head. My gaze then dipped down from her breasts to

between her legs. “If I had to pick a favorite thing to look at, it would be your pussy.”

“And why is that?”

“Because not only is it sexy as hell, but it made me come so hard.”

Rising up on my knees, I loomed over her. “You know what else I like about your body?”

Gaby’s dark eyes glittered with lust. “What?”

My hands reached out to feather my fingers along her hips. “I like these. I liked gripping them as I fucked you hard.”

“Mm, hmm,” she whispered.

I dropped my hands. “And these luscious thighs are like heaven. I want my hands between them, I want my face between them, and I want them clutching my hips as I bury myself deep inside you.”

Just before I could tackle her down onto the mattress, I reached for Gaby’s hand. I jerked it forward to cup my dick. “Do you feel how hard I am?”

“Yes.”

“It’s just from looking at your body.”

Emotions churned in Gaby’s eyes. I knew there was so much she wanted to say, but she remained silent. Instead, she rose up to meet me on the bed. Placing both hands on my cheeks, she dipped her head to bring her lips to mine. And from the pressure, the irresistible determination of her kiss, it felt like she was pouring out her gratitude.

Pulling away, I stared into her dark eyes. “You don’t need to thank me. I meant every fucking word.”

“I know. But I want to.” With a coy grin, she reached between us to take my dick in her hand.

“Okay, forget that. You can thank me all you want to,” I panted as she started stroking my length.

She laughed before bringing her lips back to mine. With every thrust of her tongue, she tugged her hand up my shaft. I cupped her breasts, squeezing lightly. “Harder,” she murmured against my lips.

I squeezed the fullness of them before pinching her nipples. “Mm, don’t stop.”

“I could say the same thing myself.”

When my balls began tightening, I stopped her hand on my dick. “I want to come inside you.”

Gaby nodded. She grabbed the condom from beside us and opened the wrapper. Without taking her eyes off of mine, she eased it down my length. “Now take me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After turning her around, I pushed her down to where she was on all fours. Once she was in position, I smacked her ass. She responded by swishing her hips at me. I rewarded her with another slap.

My knees pushed her thighs farther apart. From her glistening pussy, I knew my words and the spanking had been enough foreplay. When I slammed into her, we both groaned with pleasure. As the sound of our skin slapping together filled the room, Gaby’s fingers gripped the sheets as she panted hard with pleasure. I loved the hell out of the position because it let me get so deep.

As I began toying with her clit, alternating between stroking and pinching it, Gaby buried her face in the mattress and shrieked with pleasure. “Yes, Noah, yes, yes!”

Her orgasm came hard and fast, and the squeezing of her walls around my dick sent a grunt of pleasure echoing through me. I kept thrusting into her, my fingers leaving red marks on her skin. “Gaby, oh, fuck,” I muttered when I began to come.

I fell over onto her back. When I came back to myself, I began kissing the space between her shoulder blades. A sigh escaped her lips before she turned back to smile at me. “I’d say that was solid gold again, wouldn’t you?”

I laughed. “Hell yeah.”

As she eased down onto her stomach, I pulled out of her and deposited the condom in the trash can. When Gaby turned her head to smile at me, a pang reverberated in my chest. *Whoa, what the hell was that?* This was just sex, so there was absolutely no reason to feel anything goofy in my chest.

With a shake of my head, I tried shaking the feeling away. “Now I’m really hungry.”

She laughed. “Me too. We better order something before we get carried away again.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Passing the menu over to her, I asked, “What are you in the mood for?”

After a quick glance, she replied, “Hmm, how about French toast?”

“That sounds good. I think I’ll have that, too.” Cocking my brows at her, I asked, “Anything else?”

“Water. Lots and lots of water.”

I grinned. “Dehydrated after working up a sweat?”

“Something like that.”

“French toast and a hella lot of water coming up.” I then used the hotel phone to call in our order. I made sure to get some eggs and bacon for us as well. I had a feeling we would need protein after our exertions.

When I was finished, Gaby unraveled herself from the tangled sheets. “I’m going to pee and then grab a quick shower.”

“Mind if I join you?”

With a shy smile, she replied, “Sure.”

When I started right behind her in the bathroom, she squeaked. “Can’t you let me pee in private?”

“After all that we just did, you actually give a shit about me seeing you take a piss?”

Wrinkling her nose, she replied, “Especially with you calling it that.”

“Fine. You don’t want me seeing you go tee-tee?”

Gaby snorted. “Don’t tell me you actually say that?”

“Not since I was a kid.” I laughed.

“Look, regardless of what you call it, I still don’t want you watching me.”

“Why the hell not?”

“It’s intimate.”

Sweeping my hands to my hips, I countered, “I’ve had my tongue and dick inside you.”

She squealed and put her hands over her eyes. “Just wait. Okay?”

“Fine,” I grunted as I let her close the door in my face. Jesus, women were weird. I didn’t give two shits about Gaby seeing me take a leak. At the sound of the toilet flushing, I sighed. “Can I come in now?”

“Yes.”

When I threw open the door, Gaby jumped, which caused me to chuckle. While I fooled around with the water temperature, Gaby went over to the sink. Glancing over my shoulder, I watched as she took off her makeup. I loved looking at the movements of her body in the light—the gentle shake of her ass, the subtle bounce of her tits. If I didn’t stop looking, she was going to have me hard again.

As she peeled off one of her fake eyelashes, she caught my gaze in the mirror. “Yes, I realize I look like a bedraggled raccoon.”

With a chuckle, I replied, “You do not.” I stepped away from the shower to join her at the sink. “I was just thinking how beautiful you look all natural.”

She snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious. I mean, you look gorgeous with or without makeup.”

She surveyed my words before reaching over to kiss my cheek. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Taking her hand, I jerked her towards me. “Come on and get your sexy ass in the shower.”

Once she was inside, I followed behind her. “How’s the water?”

“Fine.” She glanced over her shoulder at me. “Will you help me take the pins out of my hair?”

“Sure.”

Gently, I eased the bobby pins out of her hair, and when I finished, Gaby smiled at me. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

She reached over for the shampoo. “Ugh, I think I have about five pounds of product in my hair right now.”

“For what it’s worth, it looked amazing today.” I reached out to run my hand through the long, dark waves. I thought about what it would be like burying my fingers in it as Gaby blew me.

When I pressed my dick into her ass, Gaby squealed and whirled around. “Jesus, you’re hard *again*?”

I laughed. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“I’m just surprised that’s all.”

“I tried to tell you your sexy body makes me hard.”

She laughed. “I’m starting to believe you. It’s just not what I’m used to.”

Shit. I didn’t want her thinking I was just some insatiable sex fiend who only saw her as a hole to stick my dick in. “Look, if it’s too much for you, I can just jerk one out.”

She licked her lips. “Oh no. I’ll take care of it for you.”

“Does that mean what I think it means?”

Slowly, Gaby moved down my body until she was on her knees before me. “Is this what you wanted?” she asked.

“Fuck yes. In fact, it was thinking about you just like this that got me hard again.”

After she gripped my cock in her hand, she glanced up at me. “Is that right?”

“Yeah,” I croaked as she dipped her head. When she flicked her tongue against the tip, I groaned. “You’re torturing me.”

“Want me to stop?”

“Hell no.”

She grinned up at me. “Oh, I don’t plan on it.” She then continued mercilessly teasing me by licking my dick like it was a fucking popsicle. She’d flattened her tongue against the root and then lick up to the tip, swirling around the veins and sensitive skin.

“Fuuuuck,” I grunted, bucking my hips.

Pressing my erection against my stomach, she then nipped and sucked at my balls before alternating sucking them into her mouth.

“Damn, that’s hot.”

My legs began to tremble while my hips jerked, and she’d yet to even take me into her mouth. Of course, at the rate I was going, I might just blow my load the moment that happened. Thankfully, I focused on the warmth of her mouth. Slowly, she took me as far as she could before she slid me out. Then she began to bob up and down on my cock while working me with her hand.

“Oh fuck, Gaby,” I grunted. When she glanced up at me, the gleam in her eyes told me she loved every second of what she was doing to me.

After a few more pumps of her hand and mouth, I felt my balls tightening. Gritting my teeth, I muttered, “I’m going to

come.” At my words, Gaby started working her hand faster and sucking even harder.

Bending at the waist, I tried easing her away, but she remained firm. “You’ve got to stop.”

She gave a quick jerk of her head, signaling she was going to see this through. The fact she was willing to take all of me was my undoing.

And then I just let go. “Gaby!” I groaned before I came.

With my eyes pinched shut, my head fell back against the tile. When I dared to look down, she was licking me clean. “Fuck me.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied with a grin.

“Why did you do that?”

“Don’t tell me you’re complaining?”

With a lazy grin, I replied, “Never.”

As I helped her off her knees, she grinned. “After you went down on me and then made me feel so good about my body, I figured I owed you.”

“You sure as hell gave me some Gold medal head.”

“Ew,” she muttered.

“Just stating facts.”

“Come on. We better hurry up, or we’ll miss the room service.”

After quickly finishing a scrub down, I hurried out of the shower while Gaby finished washing her hair. Once I was done toweling off, I went into the bedroom to throw on a pair of running shorts and a T-shirt. Just as Gaby came out in the

hotel robe, a knock came at the door, which caused her to hop back in the bathroom.

I went over and let the room service in. Instead of the usual bag of food, he rolled in a table and went to work setting it up. Once he was finished, I signed the bill, left him a tip, and followed him back to the door.

“Thanks,” I called to his retreating form. I then knocked on the bathroom door. “The coast is clear.”

When Gaby eased the door open, I grinned, “You’re too funny.”

“I just didn’t want him seeing me and knowing what we were doing.”

I laughed. “Since he works in a hotel, I’m pretty sure he’s seen some crazy shit in his day.”

“Well, as long as he’s not seeing my shit, we’re good.”

With a grin, I said, “Come on. Let’s eat.”

Gaby followed me over to the table. It was then I realized there was a flower in a vase along with all of our food. “Did you do this?” she asked.

“Um, no. That was all on the room service dude.”

She snorted. “I should’ve known you wouldn’t do anything remotely romantic.”

I scowled. “I can be romantic.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, Gaby countered, “What was the last romantic thing you did for a woman?”

Fuck me. She was really putting me on the spot, especially since I hadn’t had a relationship that lasted over a weekend in the past three years. Gaby appeared to be enjoying my

squirming. Finally, I blurted, “Considering I don’t dance, it was pretty romantic that I allowed you to teach me how to waltz.”

With a roll of her eyes, Gaby said, “Let me sit down before I swoon.”

As she turned to sit down on the bed, I smacked her ass. “I guess I’ll just have to prove my romantic side to you.”

She stared at me in surprise at the implication. With a quick shake of her head, she turned her attention back to the table. After lifting the lid on her French toast, Gaby’s eyes closed in bliss. “Oh my God, this smells amazing.”

“I’m so hungry I wouldn’t care if it smelled like crap—I’d still eat it,” I mused as I brought a forkful of scrambled eggs to my mouth.

After a few silent minutes of us scarfing our food, I stared over at her. Even though I’d had last night and today with her, there was still so much I didn’t know about her. For so many years, she’d just been this girl at my cousins’ birthday parties. In later years, I’d heard her name floated around when Mason mentioned how he’d met Laurel. In some senses, it was strange we’d never really connected before, but I could understand why. Our lives never naturally intersected. *And I wanted that to change.* Her sense of humor was lit, not to mention she gave me sass like nobody’s business.

When Gaby met my intense gaze, pink tinged her cheeks. “What?”

“I was just thinking how there’s still so much I don’t know about you.”

“You’ve known me in the biblical sense. Isn’t that enough?”

“No, it’s not.”

Gaby shifted her fork through the rivulets of syrup on her plate. I couldn’t understand why she seemed to be avoiding my question. “What do you want to know?”

“Do you have a place around here?”

With a sheepish look, Gaby replied, “Actually, I still live at home.”

I furrowed my brows at her. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing I guess.”

“I bet your parents’ place is a mansion with plenty of room.”

She laughed at my assumption. “Yes, it’s pretty roomy.”

“Then I don’t blame you.”

“The real reason I’m still living at home is I’ve been saving all the money for my school.”

“And that’s not only financially responsible, but it’s very noble.”

“I just didn’t want you to think I was some trust fund twat living off my parents.”

I shook my head. “I would never think that.”

“What about you?”

“I have an apartment close to the swimming complex. Two other teammates and I share a three-bedroom.”

“Hmm, a swinging bachelor pad, right?”

With a waggle of my brows, I replied, “Oh yes.”

Wrinkling her nose, she replied, “Ugh, three manwhores in one place.”

“Yeah, it’s a lot of dick considering they’re both gay.”

“I guess it’s good for you because you don’t have to fight them over chicks.”

“Like I ever have to fight someone for a chick.”

Gaby groaned. “Of course, you would say that.”

Chuckling, I replied, “It’s the truth.”

“Sure it is, Douchelord.”

“Okay, we desperately need a subject change.”

“Fine. What else do you want to ask me?”

“What made you want to open a music school?”

Gaby’s brows popped in surprise. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s not something you often hear someone wanting to do.”

“Well, growing up, my dad’s bandmates’ kids were like extra siblings to us. One of my sisters, so to speak, was on the Autism spectrum. Being close with Lucy, I saw how people react to the world differently.”

“That’s true. I have two cousins on the spectrum.”

“Since my entire life has been centered around music, I saw how much that helped Lucy and others. I realized then I could help young kids navigate their different world easier through music.”

My jaw dropped. “Damn, babe, that’s deep. But more than anything, you’re deep.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“No, it really is.” And I meant what I said. I’d never really met a woman like Gaby. Someone who came from immense

wealth and privilege, yet she wanted to do something so honorable with her life and on her own terms. It was incredibly sexy and endearing. And even though I shouldn't have, I caught myself feeling more for her because of that.

After swiping her mouth with her napkin, Gaby said, "If anyone deserves praise, it's Lucy. She's the one who has to manage a world that isn't always kind to people who live it differently."

My chest ached at her words. "Jesus, why does it have to be so fucking hard for them?"

Gaby's surprised gaze bore into mine. "Your cousins?"

I nodded. "Grayer, was a few years older than me, but we ended up at the same high school. He got bullied so much for nothing. Well, he did until I got there."

"What did you do?"

"Beat the hell out of two of the guys giving him shit. I almost got expelled."

"You did?"

"Yeah. I remember being so afraid my parents were going to lose their shit. The minute they let them in the principal's office, my mom was grabbing me up in her arms while my dad was patting my back and saying he was proud of me."

Gaby smiled. "I don't blame them. You stood up for what was right."

"Yeah, my swim coach really didn't see it that way, especially since he had to bench me for two weeks."

"But look how far you have come. I mean, you're a gold medal winner with a heart of gold."

I laughed at her summation. “I don’t know about that.”

“I do. Most of all, I’m glad I’ve gotten to know you better.”

“So you could stop hating me?”

She snorted. “Yeah, I’m glad for that too.”

“I’m glad I got to know you, too, Gaby. Really glad.” I then leaned over and gave her a chaste kiss on the lips. Gaby’s eyes widened at my actions. With the intense conversation weighing heavily around us, I knew it was once again time for a subject change. “Want to see if there’s anything good on TV?”

“Uh...I guess so.”

Shooting her a cocky smirk, I replied, “I thought you might need a little rest from my insatiable dick.”

A laugh burst from her lips. “Whatever, Noah,” she muttered. While she worked at straightening the sheets, I cleaned up our trash and then pushed the cart out into the hallway. When I returned, Gaby looked like a goddess all laid back against the pillows. The sight literally stopped me in my tracks.

She’s so gorgeous. So ... real.

What if I couldn’t let her go? It felt like we’d barely scratched the surface in getting to know each other, but already I felt more connected with Gaby than I had with anyone else in a long time. *This can’t be all we get.* In the short thirty-six hours together, she had completely gotten under my skin. Meaningless flings, sex with strangers, being recognized for what I did and not for who I was ... it was no longer appealing. I wasn’t ready to “move on” as I heard so

often from others. It had been a hell of a long time since a woman had evoked that kind of response.

And I didn't know what the hell to do with that.

Chapter Eight: Gaby

As I started coming back into consciousness, I realized something warm and heavy was draped over me. Startled, I snapped my eyes open. Glancing down, a man's blond head came into view. It was then I registered the feel of his breath fanning across the skin above my breasts.

But just before panic overtook me at waking up with a strange man, I remembered he wasn't a stranger. The sandy-blond hair belonged to Noah.

Oh my God. I had slept with Noah. Okay, I had literally slept with Noah and screwed him too many times to keep up. I mean, did orgasms count or just full penetration?

With my bladder screaming for relief, I brought my hands to Noah's shoulders and gently eased him off my chest. With a sleepy grunt, he grabbed a pillow before burying his face in it. Desperate not to wake him, I edged across the bed before dipping off the side. Thankfully, Noah still snoozed peacefully.

After a quick dip into the bathroom, I peed before turning my attention to the mirror. "Jesus," I muttered at the sight of my thoroughly fucked hair that was sticking out everywhere. Running my fingers under the faucet, I tried patting the pieces

down. Eventually, I gave up and realized I needed the brush in my purse.

As I tiptoed back into the bedroom, I picked up the random pieces of my attire. While I slid on my panties, there was no way in hell I was wrestling myself back in the bustier. After I stepped back into my dress, I grunted and hissed as I fought with the zipper.

Once I was dressed, I searched the room for my purse. After I found it, I dug my phone out. I grimaced at the sight of ten missed texts. Bella had texted the most and informed me she had told Mom and Dad I had made it safe to our room and passed out. Man, I owed her one for that. I just hoped they bought the lie.

I shoved my phone back in the purse and took out my brush. “Morning, beautiful,” Noah said across from me.

His words caused me to jump. “You scared me. I thought you were still asleep.”

“I was, but I missed you in bed,” he replied with a crooked smile. As his eyes focused on my dress, he furrowed his brows. “You’re leaving?”

I nodded as I started running a brush through my bed hair. “If it gets any later, it’s just going to add to the embarrassment of my walk of shame.”

Noah chuckled. “True.” He scooted to the edge of the bed before reaching out to take my free hand. “Seriously, you don’t have to go. We could order in more room service, and you could call your sister or someone to bring you some clothes.”

I froze midway through brushing my hair. Was this really happening? Noah actually wanted me to stay? Mr. Manwhore with No Soul was trying to spend more time with me? Surely,

I was hallucinating. I mean, he hadn't kicked me to the curb last night after we'd finished screwing, but maybe that was because he'd wanted more sex from me.

Trying to put on a poker face, I pulled my hand away and turned toward the mirror. "While that sounds tempting, I better go ahead and rip off the Band Aid."

"What if I wasn't ready for you to go?"

I whirled around from the mirror to stare wide-eyed at Noah. My shock increased at the sight of his vulnerable expression. He really wanted to spend more time with me.

At the same time, I had to forget about him for a moment and ask myself if *I* was ready to leave. Besides the sex, I had a good time with him. I felt like I could be myself with him, which usually took weeks or months to achieve with a guy.

Shit. This wasn't supposed to be about anything deeper. It was just sex. Trying to lighten the heavy mood surrounding us, I quipped, "You or your dick?"

He grinned. "While I wouldn't say no to a screw for the road, I meant me."

"You?" I repeated lamely.

He once again reached out to grab my hands. As he ran his fingers over my skin, he said softly, "I want you to stay."

My heartbeat broke into a wild gallop at his admission. I fought the urge to pinch myself. Noah wanted to spend more time with me, and it wasn't just about sex. I had to pause to reflect on the momentousness of the situation. Like this had to be huge not just for me, but it had to be for him.

But just as my internal victory dance was winding down, Emily's face flashed before my eyes. I saw him taking her

number. One night hadn't changed Noah from what he was: a womanizer. While he might want to spend time with me today, who was to say that wouldn't change tomorrow or next week or next month? I wasn't emotionally strong enough to date someone like him.

At my silence, Noah eyed me curiously. "Is there something wrong with that?"

"No."

"Then what's the problem?"

You're a heartbreak, and I cannot emotionally handle another heartbreak. "Look, you really don't have to do this."

He furrowed his brows. "Do what?"

"Complicate things."

"Is that what I'm doing by wanting to spend a little more time with you?"

"Look. We both know what last night was." I gave him a pointed look. "Let's not make it into something it wasn't."

"I'm not sure exactly what last night was—"

"Just sex."

"Amazing sex."

"Yes," I hissed.

"Deep down, you know it was more than just amazing sex."

"If you say so."

"Hmm, since you're not convinced, we should probably see each other again." With a wink, he added, "Both in and out of the bedroom."

Damn him being all persistent. No, I couldn't let myself fall. I crossed my arms over my chest. "You're home for like what, a week?"

"Two."

"And then you go back to training thousands of miles away, and we'd never see each other."

"Man, if only we lived in a technological world where we could talk to each other over a video call, or even get on a big flying contraption that would take us quickly back and forth."

"Ha, ha."

"It could work. We just have to try."

As I stared into his deep blue eyes, I wanted more than anything to believe him. But I was far too much a relationship realist. "I'm sorry. I can't."

Noah's expression saddened. "Can't or won't?"

I shook my head. "I really like you, and I had a really good time with you. But the distance between us coupled with your ways..." I took my hands out of his. "Regardless of how much I like you, I like myself more, and I don't want to get hurt."

As I felt the tears rising in my throat, I grabbed my purse and hurried for the door. The last thing I wanted was Noah to see me cry. Once I was the door, I started sprinting down the hallway. For the second time in forty-eight hours, I wanted to put as much distance between Noah and me as possible.

Chapter Nine: Noah

After Gaby rushed out of the room, I remained motionless in the bed. I don't know how long I just sat there, staring at the door. Straining my ears, I hoped to hear a knock—one that meant Gaby had returned to say she'd changed her mind.

Normally, when a girl walked out on me after sex, I would've said fuck that and gone about my day. I would've chalked it up to her loss without any hurt to my ego, least of all my heart. But this was different.

She was different.

It didn't matter that we'd spent a mere thirty-six hours together. It was what transpired during our time together that truly mattered. It had been a long time since I'd wanted to pursue a girl, and I'd never found myself in my current situation where the girl didn't want to be pursued.

Fuck me, this sucked.

When my phone buzzed on the nightstand, I dove over to retrieve it. Unfortunately, it was my dad and not Gaby.

Meet me for breakfast?

Although I wasn't hungry, I didn't want to be alone right now.

Yeah. Give me five.

After receiving Dad's thumbs up text, I then threw on a pair of running shorts and a T-shirt. Just as I was stepping into my shoes, a knock came at my door.

When I answered it, Dad's brows shot up. "You look like hell."

"Thanks," I grumbled.

"I thought you promised your coach you wouldn't get shitfaced."

"I did, and I didn't." At Dad's skeptical look, I replied, "It's about a girl." I exhaled a painful breath. "It's about Gaby."

"You look that way because of Gaby?" When I nodded, he teasingly added, "Don't tell me she beat the shit out of you?"

I held my hands up. "Seriously, I can't deal with you right now."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made any jokes." Grabbing me by the arm, Dad said, "Come on, let's go have breakfast, and you can tell me all about it."

"What self-respecting man talks to his dad about his love life?"

"How about me?" At what must've been my questioning expression, Dad replied, "Your Pops got me through a lot of really tough romantic times."

"He did?"

“Totally.” Cocking his brows at me, he countered, “If a Marine could talk about love freely with me, what makes you think you can’t?”

As we stepped onto the elevator, I sighed, “I guess you’re right.”

“Of course, I am.” A sad smile curved on Dad’s lips. “If he was still with us, you better believe he’d be right in the thick of this conversation, dishing out advice left and right.”

Since he was already seventy-two when I was born, I’d been lucky to have my Pops for twenty years of my life. My parents had honored him by giving me his name, Patrick, for my middle name. My greatest regret was that he hadn’t lived to see me make it to the Olympics. He always believed in me, and as long as he was physically able, he never missed a single swim competition.

Five years ago, he’d passed away peacefully in his sleep. While it wasn’t totally shocking at his age, it still seemed to happen out of nowhere. But he’d always wanted to go quick, especially after seeing my grandmother suffer from cancer. “I miss him,” I murmured.

“Me too, son,” Dad replied. He reached over to ruffle my hair like he had when I was a kid, but then realized I wasn’t my previous size. “I never thought I would see the day you’d overtake me.”

I laughed. “Just living in my shadow now, huh?”

“Bullshit,” Dad grunted.

The elevator doors opened, and we then made our way to the hotel’s restaurant. I couldn’t help scanning the tables to see if Gaby might be there with her family. Unfortunately, I didn’t see her.

After the waitress took our orders, Dad leaned forward on his elbows. “Tell me everything.”

At that moment, I would’ve killed for a mimosa sans the orange juice or at least something stronger than champagne. Anything to numb my senses. But once again, I remembered my promise to my coach. As best I could sober, I filled Dad in on everything that had transpired between me and Gaby.

The angst that she’d had such a low opinion of herself. The joy of being with someone who didn’t take any of my shit.

“I really like you, and I had a really good time with you. But the distance between us coupled with your ways ... Regardless of how much I like you, I like myself more, and I don’t want to get hurt.”

The desperation of watching her walk out the door.

When I finished, a knowing smile appeared on his face. “Oh, son, just when I thought we couldn’t be any more alike, you go and catch the feels for an unattainable female.”

“Since when did you ever have an unattainable female?” Over the years when I’d reached adulthood, Dad had regaled me with some of the stories of him being a womanizer.

The waitress returned with our food. As he unrolled the silverware from his napkin, Dad replied, “There was only one.”

“If you couldn’t get her, how do you expect to help me?”

“Who said I didn’t?”

“Huh?”

“I married her.”

My mouth dropped to my chin. “*Mom* was your unattainable female?”

“I don’t think you know the whole story of how your mom and I got together.”

Grunting in frustration, I replied, “Seriously? I’ve heard this story like a thousand times from Mom.” I gave him a pointed look. “Although her version of the story is a lot more G-rated than what you’ve told me.”

Dad chuckled. “I would imagine as much.”

“So, what you’re trying to say is that after all this time there’s more to it than the ‘You and Mom weren’t dating, but since she wanted a baby and you were horny, you two decided to bang to get her pregnant’?”

“While that summation is true, it isn’t entirely what happened.”

Huffing out a frustrated breath, I replied, “Okay, fine. Enlighten me.”

“It all started with the company Christmas party and redhead in a sexy-as-sin green dress.” As Dad leaned back in his chair, a nostalgic look came over his face. The corners of his lips quirked up as he became enveloped in the memory.

Waving my hand in front of his face, I prompted, “Um, hello?”

“Oh right.” After slicing a bite of his omelet, Dad continued. What followed was a more detailed picture of the story of my conception than I had previously heard. It included Mom originally shooting Dad down in a blaze of glory at their company Christmas party, but then their paths reconnecting a few months later. Just when I thought the story couldn’t

possibly be that much different than what I'd heard, he unloaded something truly shocking on me.

As soon as Dad finished talking, I flagged down our waitress. "Can I get a vodka orange without the orange?"

Her brows furrowed. "You want just vodka, sir?"

"Yes, please."

"Jesus, Noah, remember what your coach requested," Dad protested.

"That story warrants copious amounts of alcohol."

The waitress's gaze pinged between Dad and me before she said, "I'll be right back with your order."

With a grin, Dad said, "If you're going to go back on your word, you could've at least been true to your Irish roots with some Jameson."

As I once again relived the story Dad had told, I shuddered in disgust. "I think I could've lived my whole life without knowing that before Uncle Pesh and Aunt Megan got together, he was hot for Mom and tried to steal her away from you."

"Trust me that it's a necessary detail to the overall story. Otherwise, I sure as hell wouldn't have brought it up."

"If you say so." The waitress returned with my vodka. After throwing back a sip, an unnerving thought entered my mind. "Wait, was Mom hot for him?"

An agonized look flashed in Dad's eyes. "I suppose you could say that."

I swallowed hard. "They didn't—"

"Hell, no!" Dad cried, causing the people at the other table to turn around.

Holding my hands up, I replied, “Okay, okay, I got it. Calm down.”

“Sorry. Just the thought of the two of them in that way and everything that went down makes me lose my shit even all these years later.”

“I can see your point.” Pushing my vodka away, I asked, “After all that, what did you do to win her over?”

He smiled. “I did a lot of groveling, a lot of begging, and a lot of pleading.”

“Oh Jesus,” I muttered.

“I never said it was going to be easy.”

“It sounds like hell.”

“But any woman worth having is hard work. Because they deserve the effort, son.”

Was that what I really wanted? More hard work in my already full life? *What’s the alternative? Going back to random hookups with women who I don’t truly connect with?* I shuddered with disgust. I couldn’t imagine not seeing Gaby again.

After rubbing my face, I exhaled a painful breath. “You’re right. There is just something special about her. I think Gaby is worth it.”

It was then Caroline and Liam appeared. “Where’s your mom?” Dad asked.

“Ordering room service in bed,” Caroline replied before bypassing us for the buffet.

Dad winked at me. “Totally wore her out.”

Groaning, I replied, “Would you please stop? There isn’t enough therapy in the world to get me through our last conversation, least of all more innuendo.”

As he held up his hands in surrender, Dad rose from his chair. “Fine. Since my work here seems to be finished, I’m going to go join your mother.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Liam replied as he eyed the menu.

Meeting Dad’s gaze, I said, “Thanks for breakfast.”

He smiled. “You’re welcome. Now get ready for battle.”

After watching Dad’s retreating form, Liam cocked his brows at me. “What was that all about?”

“I was just getting his input on something.”

“Like what?”

“If you must know, it was about a girl.”

Liam snorted. “Why the fuck would you ask Dad about love advice?”

“Because he’s a legend when it comes to women.”

“Yeah, like, a hundred years ago.” After snapping his menu shut, Liam added, “You should’ve come to me.”

“Dream on, buddy.”

“At least I’ve dated in the modern age.”

“Thanks, but I’m good.”

“Suit yourself. Next you’ll be telling me you want to get Caroline’s help.”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

Liam’s eyes bulged. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“I need to get inside a girl’s head. Last time I checked, Caroline fit the bill.”

The waitress interrupted us to take Liam’s order. As she was leaving, Caroline returned with a plate of food. She sat across from me, so I said, “Listen, I need your advice.”

Caroline’s auburn brows shot up. “Seriously?”

With a roll of my eyes, I replied, “Trust me, I wouldn’t be asking if it wasn’t balls to the wall.”

Her gaze bounced from Liam and then back over to me. “If it’s so important, why aren’t you asking him? You know Bro Code and all that bullshit.”

Snorting, Liam replied, “Because I don’t have a vagina.”

“That’s debatable,” I mused.

“Douchenozzle,” Liam challenged.

“Assmunch,” I countered.

Liam’s next reply came in the form of a wadded-up paper napkin to my face, which caused Caroline to lose her mind.

“Stop it,” she hissed. Shaking her head at the two of us, she said, “Would you please remember you’re in the restaurant of a five-star hotel and not around our kitchen table?”

“Yes, Mom,” Liam and I replied dutifully.

“Ugh, why is it the moment you two get together you act like repulsive teenagers instead of grown men?”

“Well, in Liam’s defense, he’s still somewhat of a teenager since I’m not quite sure his balls have dropped yet,” I teased.

“Oh my balls have dropped all right. They’ve also slapped against many female asses.”

Pinching her eyes shut, Caroline jerked her cloth napkin out of her lap and tossed it on the table. “That’s it. I’ll just order room service.”

As she rose out of her seat, I grabbed her arm. “Don’t go.”

“Excuse me for wanting my pancakes without a side of perversion.”

“We’ll cut out the immaturity.” I gave Liam a pointed look. “Won’t we?”

“I’ll try.”

After one final glare at Liam, Caroline eased back down. “For the record, it’s only sheer curiosity keeping me here.” She jerked her chin at me. “Go on. What is it you wanted to know?”

“There’s this girl—”

“You mean Gaby.”

My eyes bulged. “Wait, how did you know that?”

“Come on, Noah. I saw the two of you sprawled out on the elevator floor. Not to mention the way you guys looked at each other during the wedding.”

“And just how were we looking at each other?”

“Well, one minute you looked like you were madly in love with each other and the next you looked like you wanted to fuck each other’s brains out.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much the sentiment I was feeling.”

“Considering I didn’t see you around at the very end of the reception, I would imagine you at least fucked her brains out,” Liam said, which earned him a scowl from Caroline.

“Yes, that’s true.”

“If you already slept with her, what do you possibly need me for?” Caroline questioned.

“Because it’s not about sex.” I swallowed hard. “I really like her and want more with her.”

While Caroline’s mouth gaped open, Liam momentarily choked on his French toast. “You want more with Gaby?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but in the past, it’s always been the girl wanting more with you and not the other way around,” he answered.

With a shrug, I replied, “Things change.”

“I guess,” he replied before slurping a large gulp of orange juice.

When I glanced back at Caroline, she had recovered from her initial shock and was smiling at me. “I’m really impressed, Noah.”

“Thanks. But don’t give me too much credit yet. This is still a learning experience, and I’m totally clueless. I need to do something epic to get her to see I’m really serious about her.”

“Okay. Let me think.” As she twirled her fork on her plate, Caroline asked, “What’s something important to Gaby?”

“Her family.”

Caroline wrinkled her nose. “Hmm, that kinda gets into stalker territory. What else?”

“She’s opening a music school for kids with learning disabilities.”

“Wow, bro, you really got it bad,” Liam mused.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you actually listened to her when she talked. Half the time I’m zoning them out while thinking about all the positions I want to get them in.”

Jabbing her fork at Liam, Caroline said, “You’re a disgusting pig.” After shooting me an equally disgusted look, she said, “Jesus, how is it possible both my brothers are manwhores?”

“We’re cursed by our father’s DNA,” I replied with a grin.

With a groan, Caroline replied, “Don’t bring him into this.”

“Aw, is it hard for Daddy’s Girl to hear the sins of her father?” I teased.

“Daddy is a *reformed* manwhore. Just like him, it’s time you broke the cycle.”

“Then help me with Gaby.”

“Are you serious about her, Noah? Gaby is a really awesome girl, and I would hate to see her get hurt. She deserves—”

“She deserves someone to put the effort in, to show her that she is just as incredible as you say she is. And ... I want to be that man.” She studied me, which brought about a hell of a lot of self-doubt. *Fuck me. Did my own sister not think I was good enough for Gaby?*

After what felt like an eternity, she sat back in her seat. “Fine. Tell me more about the music school.”

“Well, it isn’t open yet. She’s been really stressed trying to get it set up to meet the opening day deadline.”

Tilting her head thoughtfully, Caroline said, “That could work.”

“How?” Liam asked.

With a roll of her eyes, Caroline replied, “Do you two ever think hard with the heads above your waists?”

When Liam opened his mouth to respond with something I could only imagine was X-rated, I shook my head. “You’re thinking I should offer to help work at the school.”

“Bingo,” Caroline replied.

Nodding, I replied, “I could totally do that.”

Leaning forward in his chair, Liam said, “Not only are you showing her you care about what she cares about, but manual labor gives you the perfect excuse to show off your physique.”

“Spare me,” Caroline muttered in exasperation.

“Wait, when did this turn into something physical? This is about her seeing me as more than the best sex of her life.”

Liam shrugged. “It couldn’t hurt, right?”

“Noah needs to leave the physical out of it. Gaby needs to see he has depth.”

Jerking my chin at Caroline, I asked, “Can you hook me up with her number?”

While Caroline’s brows shot up in surprise, Liam winced. “Damn, dude. She didn’t give you her digits after you banged her all night?”

“No, asshole, she didn’t.”

He leaned back in his chair. “It’s not looking good.”

“Shut up,” I grumbled.

“I don’t think I have her number, but I’m sure Maya or Sara does.”

“Okay,” I replied, as I picked up my phone.

Caroline reached over to squeeze my hand. “Good luck.”

“Thanks. Knowing Gaby, I’m really going to need it.”

Chapter Ten: Gaby

It had been five hours, thirty-three minutes, and twelve seconds since I'd left Noah. Considering how I'd run out on him, it felt like a prison bust. I felt like a fugitive on the run—a *fucking* fugitive since that's what had caused me to flee from him. After escaping back to Bella's and my room, I thankfully heard the sound of the shower. With my jangled emotions, the last thing in the world I wanted was to undergo Bella's interrogation about last night.

I'm not proud to admit it, but that's when my second escape of the morning happened. After stripping out of my bridesmaids dress at almost the same record speed I had with Noah, I threw on a pair of yoga pants and a T-shirt before stuffing my suitcase and sprinting out the door. Before streaking down the hall, I dug out a pair of sunglasses along with my baseball cap bearing the logo for CD Guadalajara—the soccer team from my abuelos' hometown. I mean, fugitives needed a disguise, right?

After Ubering back home, I made a beeline for the shower where I tried washing away last night's sins. Of course, as I scrubbed myself down, a movie reel of my sexcapades played in my mind. It didn't help that every time I shifted my legs I felt a delicious burn between them. Considering his size, no wonder Noah was so cocky.

“Fuck!” I grunted as I let my head fall back against the marble tile.

If I was honest with myself, it wasn't the sex that had me all wiggled out. It was the fact that even after the sex was over, Noah still wanted to see me. Mr. Golden Sex God, King of the Swim Groupies, actually wanted more.

With *me*.

But I'd turned him down. Why? Because I was a neurotic idiot who couldn't handle the thought of having to constantly worry if he was going to cheat on me with some swim slut when he was thousands of miles away. Yep, that was my story, and I was sticking to it.

The kinder side of my brain said I'd turned him down in an act of self-preservation. That past traumas, coupled with my raging insecurity, had caused me to react the way that I did. It really all boiled down to the fact that I liked Noah, but I liked my sanity more.

When Ashton and I broke up, it triggered a deeper fear that I hadn't realized had been lurking. *I didn't trust that who I was would make someone stay*. And given my distrust of Noah for so many years, it was truly hard to simply let that go when it came to trusting him with my heart. Especially with someone with Noah's charisma, sex appeal, and identity.

After my shower, I turned on the TV in my room and tried to get into the latest episode of True Crime. But no matter how hard I tried, I still couldn't get Noah off my mind. I knew I needed something to occupy my mind, so I grabbed my keys and decided to get the hell out of the house.

One Starbucks stop later and I was pulling into the complex where my school was. Each and every time I

unlocked the front door, a rush of pride entered my chest. It was the one place where I felt total and complete peace. It was somewhere that was just for me. I knew Bella felt the same way about her design studio.

I made my way to the back where I started trying to inventory some of the latest shipments. I'd made a little headway when a bang at the front door caused me to jump out of my skin. Rubbing my hair over my shirt, I started to make my way to the front. Another bang came followed by a persistent pounding. Considering the office was shrouded in darkness and I was alone, I couldn't help the apprehension that pricked up my spine.

“W-Who is i-it?”

“It's me, Noah.”

Holy shit! Noah was outside my office. After unlocking the door, I threw it open. At the mere sight of him, my heartbeat broke into a wild gallop “Um, hey.”

A cocky smirk spread across his lips. “Hey, beautiful.”

Furrowing my brows, I asked, “Wait, how did you—”

“Know you would be here?”

“Yeah.”

“Maya texted Bella for me.”

Ugh, I was going to have to kill them both. I crossed my arms over my chest. “After the way I left things, do you have one good reason for stalking me down to my music studio?”

The smirk disappeared from his face. “*Stalking* you? Is that what you think I've done?”

Ducking my head, I replied, “Not exactly.”

“I would hope not.”

“But what are you doing here?”

“I thought you could use some help.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know. Here at the school.” At what must’ve been my continued disbelief, he rubbed the back of his neck. “In the elevator, you told me you were running behind getting things ready for the opening, and since I was sitting around home doing nothing, I thought I would come help.”

Oh God. Was he for real? Ashton had never once offered to do anything career related. Most of the time, he couldn’t even feign interest when I talked about the school. Yet here was Noah, a man I wasn’t even in a relationship with, who was willing to give up his time just for me. “You’re really here to help me?” I lamely questioned.

He smiled hesitantly. “If you’ll let me.”

This time when my heart started beating wildly an ache burned its way below my waist. “Oh...wow,” I finally mustered.

“Is that a yes? I mean, I know you’re not one who likes to ask for help.”

With a laugh, I replied, “You’re right about my stubbornness. But in your case, I think I’ll make an exception.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” As he rubbed his hands together, Noah asked, “Where should I start?”

“How about with the desks?”

Nodding, Noah replied, “Just hit me up with a drill and point me in the right direction.”

I waved him to follow me to the room that I would be using as a classroom. Boxes upon boxes littered the space. At the expression on Noah’s face, I teasingly asked, “Are you still down to help?”

“Yep. I’m a man of my word.”

“Then have at it.”

While Noah got busy on the desks, I went across the hall to work on putting together music stands. Just as I reached for a box, I jumped at the sound of music. Glancing across the hall, I saw where Noah had set up his phone. At the moment, gangster rap filled the air between us. It gave me the push I needed to start making some serious headway.

When I finished with all the music stands, I stood back to admire my work. It was then I realized I wasn’t alone. I’d been so in the zone I’d forgotten that Noah was just a few feet away. I eased across the hall to see how he was coming along.

At the sight of him shirtless, I gasped. Somehow through the pulsing bass of the rap music, Noah heard me because he spun around. He glanced from me down to his naked chest. “Uh, sorry, I got really hot.”

For a moment, all I could do was stare at his chest. My mind reeled with a flashback of the feel of my hands on his skin, my nipples rubbing against the sparse spattering of his chest hair, my tongue encircling his nipples and the sound of his moan.

“Gaby?”

I snapped back into reality. “I’m sorry. What?”

Noah's signature cocky grin curved on his lips. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You looked like you spaced out there for a minute." Starting at his neck, he ran a hand down his chest to the waistband of his shorts. Winking, he said, "I'm sorry if my physique overwhelmed you."

Cocky bastard. "I think the heat has gotten to your brain if you thought that was what was wrong with me."

"You were staring at my chest. Like, I don't even think you blinked."

Scowling at him, I challenged, "I was lost in thought thinking that maybe the air wasn't working in this room."

Noah chuckled. "You're full of shit, Gaby."

Jerking my thumb, I said, "I think I'll go check the thermostat."

"Yeah, you do that."

Willing my feet to work, I hustled into the hallway and then to the thermostat. As I turned down the air, the sound of Noah's voice startled me. *Again.*

"Do you have anything to drink?"

I whirled around to look at him. "Like a beer?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of water."

Duh, Gaby. With all the unresolved sexual tension in the air, do you really think adding alcohol to the mix would be a good idea? "Yeah, there's some bottled water back in the fridge.. I'll grab you one."

"Thanks."

While I ducked down the hall, Noah waited for me. When I returned, I handed him a bottle. “Sorry. I should’ve offered you some earlier. I feel bad you’ve gotten so hot and sweaty. I shouldn’t have worked you so hard.”

Noah halted twisting the lid off the bottle. He stared up at me. With those words about working him hard, electricity crackled in the air between us. When I licked my lips in anticipation, Noah groaned. He unceremoniously tossed the water to the floor, reached out and grabbed me by the hips, jerking me against him.

“What are—”

He silenced me by slamming his lips against mine, causing me to moan. Fuck me. The man was always a Gold medal kisser. His kiss was a combination of tenderness and insistence. His mouth moved against mine almost with desperation.

Gripping me by the waist, Noah hoisted me up onto the counter, and then his hands moved from my waist to my breasts. *He really is a boob man.* My nipples weren’t complaining and hardened under his touch.

I grasped the hem of my T-shirt and quickly ripped it over my head then tossed it to the ground. Noah’s greedy hands jerked my bra straps down, freeing my breasts. He licked his lips before his mouth closed over one of my rock-hard nipples. “Mm, yes,” I muttered as I pinched my eyes shut.

Noah’s teeth grazed my nipple while his other hand came between my legs. Through my shorts, he rubbed the heel of his hand against me. I threw my head back with a moan. As much as I hated myself for it, his hands felt *so* good on me. Arching my hips, I tried getting more friction through my shorts. When it wasn’t enough, I murmured, “Noah, please.”

He replied by unbuttoning my shorts and jerking them down my thighs. After I widened my legs for him, Noah's hand dove into my panties. When his fingers touched my clit, I once again cried out.

out. Noah sucked one of my nipples into his mouth before thrusting one finger deep inside me. "Hmm, yes, more," I pleaded.

He obliged by adding a second finger. Biting down on my lip, I rocked against his hand. His expert fingers felt just as good as they had our first time together—maybe even better. When Noah pulled his fingers out of me, I groaned in frustration. "I want to fuck you with my tongue," he grunted in reply.

"Yeah, sure. No arguments from me," I panted. I had to give him credit for being all about going down on me. Most guys tended to shy away from it, or they only did it to reciprocate getting a blow job.

Not Noah.

He gave me a cocky grin before dipping his head. After his tongue traced in and out of my folds, he thrust it inside me. My moan echoed through the empty building. "Oh yeah, once again you get the gold medal on this one, too."

Noah's chuckle vibrated against my center. I began lifting my hips to work against his tongue. Sweat broke out along my forehead. "I'm close—oh, so close." I worked my hips even faster as Noah's tongue swirled and plunged. When Noah crooked his finger inside me, I started to tense. "No, no, don't make it stop." None of the lovers I'd had ever got me this hot or gave me so much pleasure.

The way he glanced up at me between my legs made me shiver. “Babe, you gotta come, or my dick is going to explode.”

I couldn’t help but giggle. “Okay, okay, I guess I can wait and come with you inside me.”

“Thank fuck,” he muttered before giving me one long, final lick.

After easing me down from the counter, my legs felt wobbly, and I almost pitched forward. Thankfully, Noah’s arms came around my waist to steady me. As his lips met mine, I tasted myself on them, which caused me to shudder. We started moving towards the main area where the couch and chairs were.

When we finally bumped into the couch, Noah eased me over the armrest onto my stomach. While my torso lay across the cushion, my ass stuck up in the air with my legs dangling above the floor. The air felt cool against my scorched center as Noah dug a condom out of his wallet.

After unwrapping and sliding it on, Noah then pushed my legs apart and brought his dick to my center.

With one harsh thrust, he buried himself balls deep inside me. “Fuck Gaby,” he moaned behind me. Neither of us knew how to take it slow, so instead, he pounded into me. His fingers dug into my hips as he used them for leverage to bring me harder back against him, sending his dick deeper and deeper inside me.

Between his thrusts and the friction from the couch arm, I came with a shriek. “Yes, Noah, yes!”

Noah began slamming harder and harder into me. Leaning over my back, his breath fanned against my ear. “Are you

okay?”

“Mm, don’t stop,” I panted.

“Fuck yeah,” he murmured as he continued pounding into me.

Placing my palms on the cushion, I pushed myself back against him in time to meet his thrusts. After a few moments, I started climbing to another orgasm. “Feels. So. Good.”

Noah’s reply came in the form of deep grunts and groans. It wasn’t long before the combination of our exertions caused me to come again. As I tensed, I felt Noah’s motion speed up before he cried out my name. *Holy shit. How is it possible to get better every time with this man?* I was breathless, sated, and in shock. And also ... mildly uncomfortable as my heart rate slowed.

He was still lying against my back, so I wiggled under him. “Babe, I’m starting to lose feeling in my feet.”

“Oh shit, I’m sorry.” He immediately pulled out of me. While he went to toss the condom, I stretched out on the couch, covering myself with a random blanket draped on the back. When Noah returned, sat down beside me.

We remained silent for a few minutes. “That shouldn’t have happened.”

With a frustrated grunt, Noah replied, “No, it sure as fuck shouldn’t have.”

Turning my head, I stared at him in surprise. “Really?”

He shook his head. “Any ulterior motives I had about coming over here was about getting to know you as a person better, and I don’t mean in the biblical sense.”

I snorted. “I think it’s safe to say we now have extensive biblical knowledge of each other.”

Noah grinned. “Totally.” As he gazed into my eyes, his expression grew serious. “I meant it when I said I really like you a lot, Gaby.”

“Are you sure that’s not just the sex haze talking?”

Chuckling he replied, “Trust me, I’ve never wanted to pursue a woman enough to spend a day doing manual labor.” He propped his head on his hand—his expression earnest. “What can I do to prove to you that I want to know you and not just your pussy?”

I wrinkled. “Ugh, I hate that word.”

“Fine. Your vagina? Hoohah? Honey-pot?”

I snorted. “Honey-pot?”

He laughed. “Yeah, my roommate is obsessed with this old show called *Outlander*.”

“Oh, I think I remember that one. It had a hot ginger guy in it.”

Noah rolled his eyes. “I don’t know about that. I just know about it because of my roommate. He kinda has a thing for the actor.”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“Hey now.”

With a giggle, I replied, “You know, if you dyed your hair the color of your mom’s, you could look a little like him. Well, at least your hair would be like his.”

He grimaced. “Up until ten years ago, I had strawberry-blond hair. For my teammates, that basically made me a

ginger, and they gave me relentless shit about it.”

“What happened?”

“Thankfully, the chlorine somehow turned it straight blond.”

“Pity. I sure could go for a ginger.”

“What if I went against my Irish heritage and wore a kilt? Would you go out on a date with me then?”

“No.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because at the sight of you in a kilt, I’d only be thinking with my honeypot.”

Noah chuckled. “I think I could live with that.”

“Is that really a bad thing?”

“It is if I’m going to try to get to know you better as a person outside of the bedroom.”

“How do you think we can do that? It’s like the moment I see you, I want you inside me.”

With a groan, Noah threw his head back. “Why did you have to say that?”

I laughed. “I’m sorry, but it’s the truth.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I like to hear it, but we’ve got to be stronger.”

“Okay, so what do you suggest?”

“We need to go on a date, but it needs to be nowhere remotely sexy.”

“I agree.”

“During that date, we do nothing but G-rated fun coupled with in-depth conversation about each other.”

“Oh wow, you really want us to communicate, huh?”

“I do.”

“You sure do drive a hard bargain.”

Noah’s brows popped wide. “So, does that mean you’ll go out with me?”

If I was going to take a chance on dating Noah, I still had no clue what that would entail, *nor if it was wise to attempt*. But I did know I needed him to answer a particular question before I could proceed any further. Of course, it wasn’t one I wanted to ask because of the pain surrounding it. “Out of all the women you could get with, why do you want to pursue me?”

“You’re joking, right?”

I shook my head. “You’re a somewhat famous athlete. I know there are countless groupies just dying to get into your Jammies.”

“Jammers,” he corrected.

“Whatever.”

Noah grinned. “You really think I have groupies?”

“Oh please. You’d have groupies even if you weren’t an athlete.” I exhaled noisily. “Because of all that, I guess I can’t help wondering with all those women, why me?”

Noah’s expression grew serious. “Jesus, Gaby, give me the name of the asshole who did such a number on you.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’m talking about the jackass who seriously fucked with your head since you can’t see what I do.”

My heartbeat accelerated at his words. “And what exactly is that?”

“A woman completely out of my league.”

“Yeah, right,” I scoffed.

“I mean it. It’s not every day you find a woman who is beautiful, sexy, and a fucking amazing lay, but at the same time is funny and caring and smart.”

Searching his eyes, I saw the sincerity in them. “Noah Fitzgerald, you’re going to make me lose my mind, aren’t you?”

“I sure as hell am.”

“First my panties and then my mind.”

With a wink, he added, “Last is your heart.”

Chapter Eleven: Gaby

At ten to six, I pulled into the parking lot of some bar and grill called O'Malley's. It was where Noah had asked to meet. After our last tango at my work, we'd both decided it would be best not to meet at my house or his parents' house. We didn't need anywhere that had easy sexual access. Although now that I thought about it, we could just as easily bang in one of our cars like two horny teenagers.

Always prompt and ready, Noah eased up next to my car just as I put my car in park. I couldn't help admiring the sleek, silver convertible. Of course, it totally went with his personality, especially since he had the top down.

With a grin, he jerked his chin at me. "Hop in."

Nodding in response, I grabbed my purse and then transferred over to his car. "Nice ride," I mused.

"Thanks. It's my dad's."

"Really?"

"Why are you so surprised?"

With a shrug, I replied, "I don't know. I guess it seemed to suit you."

He laughed. “Yeah, my old man and I are too much alike, I guess. My siblings and I call it his midlife crisis car.”

“If he’s anything like my dad, I’m sure he hates hearing that.”

“Oh yeah. He does.”

As Noah exited the parking lot, I asked, “So where are you’re taking me tonight?”

Tearing his gaze away from the road, Noah grinned. “It’s a surprise.”

“Seriously?”

“Totally.”

With a groan, I replied, “I hate surprises.”

“That doesn’t shock me at all,” Noah mused.

I sat up taller in my seat. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re not a spontaneous kind of woman.”

“I can be spontaneous,” I countered.

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“Um, no.”

“Come on, Gaby. Name the last time you did something totally off the cuff or went rogue on a set of plans.”

“One might make the argument that sleeping with you was pretty spontaneous.” I mean, I was still hella impressed that I had actually gotten the courage to ask him to fuck me.

“But you didn’t do that one alone.” He wagged his brows. “I contributed to that one.”

With a roll of my eyes, I replied, “Don’t even think you seduced me.”

“I *so* seduced you.”

“Please. I wanted to fuck you despite the fact you’re an egotistical douchelord.”

Noah threw his head back with a laugh. He turned to me with amusement twinkling in his eyes. “Man, Gaby, you don’t hold back, do you?”

“Nope.”

“Especially not with egotistical douchelords like me, right?”

“Exactly.”

“And don’t ever stop. It’s one of the things I like about you.”

“Just one?”

He grinned. “How about one of the G-rated things I like about you.”

I laughed as Noah turned into a parking lot. My gaze swept from his profile over to the building in front of me.

What the...hell?

Popping my brows, I turned in my seat towards Noah. “A bowling alley?”

He grinned. “Exactly.”

“You’re taking me bowling,” I said more for myself than Noah.

“I practically grew up here.”

“You’re joking.”

Noah shook his head. “When Mason and I were kids, our Pops would bring us bowling once a week. He was like a

legend here because he belonged to one of the leagues.”

“That’s cool.”

Cocking his head, Noah asked, “What’s the matter, Princess Gaby? Is a bowling alley too lowbrow for you to deign to hang around in?”

“No, it most certainly is not,” I huffed.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Nothing.” At his continued amusement, I rolled my eyes. “I was just surprised that’s all.”

“Didn’t we both agree we needed a dating locale that was completely and totally unsexy?”

“We did.”

“Can you possibly imagine anything less sexy than bowling shoes and stale beer?”

I laughed. “True.” With a teasing look, I mused, “Of course, there is the part where you fondle large balls.”

Noah snorted a laugh. “Fondle?”

“I’m sorry. Would you prefer caress?”

With a shudder, Noah replied, “Just the thought of some pervert allegedly caressing bowling balls is enough to turn me off.”

“Then this really is the perfect place.”

“Exactly.”

“So, let’s do this,” I said as I opened the car door. Noah did the same, and then we walked to the building. Always the gentleman, Noah held open the door for me. “Thanks,” I murmured as I entered the building. Immediately the smell of

leather intermingling with stale beer and hot dogs filled my nose. “Is there some unwritten rule that every bowling alley smells the same?”

“I think it’s in their bylaws,” Noah replied with a grin.

We made our way across the multicolored carpet, which appeared to have been around since the 90’s. When we reached the counter, a busty blonde with an insanely tight top and sprayed on jean shorts smiled at Noah. “Hey there, stranger,” she purred.

Noah grinned. “Hey, Tabby.”

Of course, she would be named after a cat since she was practically in heat over Noah. Just once I wanted to go somewhere that he didn’t have that effect on women. I thought we were safe at a bowling alley of all places.

Without even a glance in my direction, Tabby kept her horny gaze fixated on him. “You back for good now?”

With a shake of his head, Noah replied, “Just for a few weeks.”

“Pity,” Tabby mused. “We sure do miss you around here.”

Before Noah could reply, I plopped my purse on the counter. “Nine, please and thank you.”

Without taking her gaze from Noah, she asked, “Still a thirteen, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

A shudder rippled through her as she dipped her gaze below Noah’s waist. “That’s a big...shoe.”

At her continued sexualization of Noah, red flashed before my eyes. I blame my Hispanic and Sicilian roots for what I did

next. It's the only thing that could explain my next actions. I let my hand drop from the counter to grab Noah's crotch. The moment my fingers grazed his package Noah sucked in a sharp breath. "I can assure you he has a *really* big dick to go with that shoe."

Tabby's eyes momentarily bulged at my response before curling her lip in disgust at me. "This is a family establishment."

"Then maybe you shouldn't be dressing like the Happy Hooker?" I countered

"Okaaaay, then," Noah stated before removing my hand from his crotch. Jerking his chin at Tabby, he said, "We'll take the shoes and go."

Without another word to either of us, she made quick work of getting our shoes and shoving them onto the counter. "Thanks," he replied before dragging me and the shoes away.

As soon as we were out of Tabby's earshot, Noah busted out laughing. "I can't believe you just molested me in front of her."

"She started it," I protested.

Giving me that cocky smirk of his, he replied, "Maybe next time you could just piss on my leg to assert your claim on me?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

"Actually, you proved me wrong about something."

"That stinky shoes and stale beer can get someone's libido up and running?"

Noah snorted. "No. You grabbing my junk was pretty spontaneous."

I raised my fist victoriously in the air. “Booyah, I was right, and Noah was wrong.”

“Now don’t get cocky.”

“I believe I already did get cocky when I groped you,” I teased.

He laughed. “Yeah, you did.”

With a grin, I pushed him to get moving. “We better hurry up and get bowling, so I can get my mind off your dick.”

“I feel the same way.”

He then steered me over to an empty lane. After I sat my purse down, Noah asked, “Want a drink?”

“They have a bar?”

“Hell yeah.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “And pretty decent food.”

“I’ll take a Corona.”

“Sounds good. Anything else?”

“Nope. I’m good.”

While Noah took off for the bar, I searched for the perfect ball. After testing the weight of a few, I chose a swirly blue one. Noah returned with two Coronas with lime along with some nachos.

“You have to try these. They’re to die for.”

Wrinkling my nose, I replied, “As a self-respecting half Mexican, I’m going to take your word for it.”

Noah snorted. “Don’t be such a food snob.”

“I’m not. Surely there’s some food in your Irish and Southern heritage that you won’t accept anything but the very

best.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty particular about Shepherd’s pie as well as my fried chicken.” He held out the nachos to me. “Just try one.”

With a roll of my eyes, I reached over to take one of the chips. “You’re so stubborn,” I grumbled before I bit into the warm, cheese encrusted chip.

“I could say the same about you.”

Although I hated to admit it, they were ridiculously good, especially for a bowling alley. At what must’ve been my pleased expression, Noah bobbed his head. “They’re good, right?”

“Yeah,” I replied, before I snatched another one. After chewing on the chip, I motioned to the screen above us. “While you were gone, I got us set up.”

“Good deal.” He took a long swig of his Corona. “I have to say I’m impressed you know how to bowl.”

“Wait a minute. First you call me a food snob, and now you’re insinuating that my family is too highbrow for bowling?”

A sheepish expression came over Noah’s face. “It was more about you guys touring and being on the road.”

“On the road is where we did most of our bowling.”

“I stand corrected.”

I poked him in the chest. “Just wait until I wipe the floor with you, Fitzgerald.”

“Ooh, does that challenge include us fucking across the floor later tonight?”

“Would you stop mentioning sex since we can’t have any?” I hissed.

“Sorry. I love when you get all feisty.”

“Because your last statement wasn’t very gentlemanly, I’m calling ladies first.”

He winked. “Go for it.”

“With pleasure.”

At Noah’s groan, I swept my hands to my hips. “What is wrong now?”

“Can you please steer clear of any words that might pack innuendo?”

“I’ll try,” I replied as I grabbed my ball. As I started to the lane, I felt the heat of his stare on me. Just to torture him, I added a little more sway to my hips. When I lined up the ball, I intentionally poked my ass out further than I needed to. Stepping out, I then sent it careening down the floor. It cracked into the pins, swiping them all down.

“Yes! A strike!” I cried before whirling around.

Frustration echoed across Noah’s expression as he crossed his arms over his chest.

As I came back over to him, I asked, “What’s with the face, Fitzgerald? Realizing you made a mistake bringing me here?”

“Oh, I know it was a mistake, but it has nothing to do with your bowling.”

“What’s the problem?”

“The fact I have to sit back and watch you swish your ass back and forth.”

Bringing my hand over my heart, I innocently countered, “I’m not intentionally doing it.”

He cocked his brows at me. “Are you sure?”

“I just have a natural sway to my walk.”

“Bullshit.”

I laughed. “Okay, so maybe I added a little swagger.”

“To torture me?”

“Maybe.”

He quirked his brows at me. “I didn’t know you could be so cruel, Resendiz.”

“I’m cruel?”

“You sure as hell are. What else do you call someone who not only tortures a dude with a provocative walk, but also wears tight-as-hell leggings that accentuate her very curvy and voluptuous ass.”

I feigned innocence. “You told me to dress comfortably.”

“I imagined some baggy pants and a loose T-shirt.”

“It’s hard to find baggy pants with my—” I tilted my head at him. “What did you call my ass?”

“Curvy and voluptuous.”

“That’s right.”

He grinned. “Now that I think about it, those leggings really are more inspirational than bad.”

“You’re such a man.”

“I am. But right now I’m a tortured man since I can only look and not touch. Fuck, I’m wishing now I’d told you to wear a caftan.”

I laughed. “Like a muumuu?”

With a bob of his head, he replied, “But you’d probably make that look sexy, too.”

“I seriously doubt that.”

“I don’t. You drive me wild just breathing.”

Oh God. What was it with him taking my breath with the compliments? It wasn’t just my lungs freaking out. My heartbeat accelerated both at his words and the way his blue eyes no longer had their teasing glint. Instead, they had suddenly become hooded as he stared at me.

Trying to lighten the mood, I teasingly replied, “Aw, you say the sweetest things.”

Taking me by the hand, Noah tugged me against him. “I would’ve thought that was more of a hornier statement than sweet, but hey, I’ll take it.”

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing.” His gaze dropped from mine to my lips, which sent heat shooting straight to my core. Oh shit. If he kept looking at me like that, I was going to end up dragging him into the bathroom for a quickie, and that was such a bad idea on so many levels.

Wiggling against him, I tried to escape his arms. “Quit lying. You’re up to something.”

“If you don’t stop rubbing against me, my dick is going to be up.”

“You’re the one who pulled me over,” I protested.

“I couldn’t help it. I can’t keep my hands off of you when we’re together.”

“And that’s exactly the reason we’re supposed to be doing something non-sexual like bowling.” I gazed up at him with a pleading look. “I want to know without a doubt that there’s more than just the physical between us.”

With a frustrated grunt, he eased me away from him. “You’re right.”

“As usual,” I teased.

Jerking his chin at the lane, he said, “Hurry up and go again.”

“Let me get my blue ball.”

“Oh, it’s right here in my pants,” Noah replied with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes. “Enough. We’re having a G-rated date.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered before plopping back down in his seat.

Since I’d tortured him long enough, I walked normally to the top of lane before throwing back my arm and sending the ball careening down the floor. This time I ended up leaving a spare.

When I turned back, Noah cocked his brows at me. “Guess you needed to sway your ass at me to get a strike.”

I laughed. “I was trying to be good, and it made me be bad.”

“Whatever. It’s my time to shine.”

“Hit me with your best shot.”

“You bet,” he replied before picking a Pepto Bismol pink-colored ball. Instead of immediately putting his fingers in the

holes, he stroked the surface. I don't know how anyone could make stroking a bowling ball hot, but Noah could.

“Seriously?”

His brows shot up. “What can I say? I like pink.”

“Is that right?”

“Mm, hmm. Full pink lips, pink-tipped tits, and most of all a luscious pink pussy.”

My mouth gaped open at his words. After a shudder went through me, I protested, “I-I thought you s-said you were going to be good.”

“What's wrong with stating facts?”

“You know what I mean.” After glancing around us, I grimaced. “I mean, there's children three lanes down.”

“That didn't seem to stop you from swaying your ass.”

“I'm regretting my choices now.”

He grinned like wolf. “Okay, okay. I'll go bowl.”

With his pink ball in hand, Noah strode over to the lane. Sticking his ass out, he swished it back and forth. Throwing a glance over his shoulder at me, he had the audacity to wink.

“Spare me,” I grumbled.

“No spares. Just strikes, baby.” Then he threw the ball down the lane with perfect precision, resulting in a strike. “YES!” he bellowed while smacking his chest, causing the people next us to turn and stare.

He came back over to me and jerked a thumb at the screen. “Mark it.”

“I am, I am,” I muttered.

“Apparently, the ass swishing works for more than just you, huh?”

“You’re such an egomaniac.”

Noah dipped his head to where his breath fanned against my cheek. “Says the fellow egomaniac.”

“Whatever.” Planting my hands on his chest, I pushed him away. “You have to go again.”

“Go ahead and mark it as another strike.”

With a roll of my eyes, I replied, “Not until you actually make it, Douchelord.”

“I’m telling you. It’s a sure thing.” With a waggle of his brows, he added, “*I’m* a sure thing.”

I groaned. “Get over yourself.”

Chuckling, he took his pink ball and headed for the lane. Noah managed to get another strike again without swishing his ass at me. “Oh, it’s on, baby girl.”

Ignoring him, I rose out of my chair. With my blue ball in hand, I got into position at the lane. After adjusting myself into the exactly right position, I flung the ball down the floor. Somehow I misjudged the trajectory because it ended up leaving two pins. “Fuck,” I grunted in frustration.

A low whistle echoed behind me. “Not the dreaded splits, Resendiz,” Noah remarked.

Inhaling a ragged breath, I turned around to face him. “I’m aware of what it is.”

“I’m anxious to see how you handle it.” Motioning with his hands, he said, “Do you aim for the right or the left? Or do

you just say ‘fuck it all, I know Noah’s going to beat me’ and just let it slide down the middle?”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I asked, “Do you really need to run your mouth right now?”

He shrugged. “Just making conversation.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You’re playing games.”

He had the audacity to give me an innocent look. “Are you insinuating that I’m trying to get you flustered?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Look, babe, if you can’t handle the heat, just say it. Don’t try to make your splits my fault.”

With a growl, I snatched my ball and headed back to the lane. Focusing on the right pin, I launched the ball down the floor. To my utter horror, it curved and completely missed. “Tough break, kid,” Noah called.

Momentarily, I closed my eyes. Okay, if that’s the way he wanted to play it, then I was more than ready to play. But I was going to play exceptionally dirty.

Turning around, I shrugged. “Oh well. I’ll make it next time.”

When I came back the table, I didn’t go around the easy way to my seat like I had previously. Instead, this time I stepped between him and the table. In the tight space, I bent slightly at the waist to let my ass rub against his crotch. Although normally it would’ve been a slight graze, I tortured him by several seconds of practically lap dancing reverse cowgirl on him.

At the jerk of his dick beneath me, I knew my work was done, and I eased over into my seat. When I glanced up at him,

I said, “Oops, sorry about that.”

His jaw clenched before he huffed out a few breaths. “No problem.”

“Oh, you forgot to mark it. Here, let me.” I reached across him to enter the score, sending my boobs grazing across his arm propped on the table. I entered the numbers as forcefully as I could, which caused my boobs to jiggle against him.

Smirking up at him, I replied, “All done.”

He responded with a grunt. Before rising to his feet, he untucked his shirt, which I imagined was to cover his half-mast dick. At the sight of him lumbering over to the balls, I hid my laughter behind my hand.

When he sent the ball careening down the lane, I held my breath. At the crack of the strike, I slammed my hands down on the table. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Whirling around, he flashed his cocky grin at me. “Oh, I’m so sorry that your little cock-tease act didn’t work.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I huffed.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.” Once his shimmering pink ball came back up, he grabbed it in his hands. “Go ahead and mark another strike because it’s coming.”

I wasn’t ready to wave the white flag quite yet. Just as he started for the lane, I said, “Oh no, I spilled beer on my lap.” He ignored me just like I had hoped. Just as he flung his arm back to send the ball down the aisle, I moaned, and in my most porn queen voice I called, “Now I’m all wet.”

Noah’s body jerked and the ball went slamming into the gutter. Cupping my hands over my mouth, I bellowed,

“Gutterball!”

When he spun around, I muttered, “Oh shit.” With his blue eyes sparkling with anger, he stalked right over to me. Grabbing me by the waist, he hoisted me over his shoulder like I was a sack of potatoes. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I demanded.

“I’m taking my little beer wench to get cleaned up.”

Thankfully, he had taken us away from the crowd, and no one was watching me being manhandled. Leaning down his back, I smacked his ass. “Put me down now.”

“Not until you’re clean, you dirty girl.”

“Noah, stop. I didn’t really spill beer on me,” I protested.

He snorted. “I’m aware of that, cock-tease.”

“Then why aren’t you putting me down?”

Without another word, Noah spirited us away into a darkened alcove that led to a door with an “Employee’s Only” sign. After setting me on my feet, he pinned me against the wall with his hips. Placing his hands on either side of my head, he dipped his head to where our lips were almost touching. “Give me one reason not to spank you right now?”

My eyes bulged. “You wouldn’t dare!”

“Wouldn’t I?”

At the blistering lust gleaming in his eyes, heat shot straight between my legs. Fuck me, this was hot. How was it my panties were sopping wet while I was standing in stinky, ugly-as-hell bowling shoes not ten feet away from families bowling with their kids? I needed serious help, or more aptly some serious sexual healing.

Of course, I couldn't let Noah know that. Jerking my chin up at him, I countered, "I'd love to see you try."

"Okay, you leave me no choice."

When his hands came around my waist, I shrieked and fought against him. But his strong swimmer's muscles were no match to mine and he quickly hoisted me back up over his shoulder. A stinging smack cracked against my ass, causing me to jerk. I bit my lip to keep the moan of pleasure from escaping.

"That's for the lap dance that left me chubbed in the middle of a bowling alley."

"You asshole!"

SMACK. "And that's for completely fucking my game by announcing you were wet."

"Noah Fitzgerald, don't you spank my ass again!" *Please, please spank my ass again.*

He swept me back onto my feet with a smirk. "Don't worry I won't."

"Damn straight you won't."

"The next time I spank your ass you'll beg me too."

"Dream on, Fitzgerald," I spat.

With an infuriating falsetto, he mimicked what could only be my sex voice. "Oh, Noah, please spank my ass with your strong, manly hands. I need punishing for being such a bad girl and teasing you all night."

Shoving him, I challenged, "Never. Happening."

He then had the nerve to chuckle at me. "Jesus, you're sexy as fuck when you're pissed off. I'm still hard."

“And you’re a giant asshole for spanking me in a bowling alley.”

“You proved me wrong again.”

“Excuse me?”

“That bowling alleys do make people horny.”

“That’s all on you, horndog.”

He quirked his lips. “I was talking about you.”

My eyes bulged at his response. “I’m not the one with a hard-on—you are.”

“You’re the one with the wet panties.”

What the hell? How could he possibly know I was wet? He must’ve noticed the wheels furiously spinning in my head because he replied in a ragged breath, “I felt it when I spanked you that the last time. You must be fucking soaked, babe.”

Stupid leggings. I should’ve worn jeans, and then he wouldn’t get to be a smug bastard about him making me wet. Sweeping my hands to my hips, I countered, “So what if I am? What do you plan to do about it?”

Holy fucking shit at the lust glittering in his blue eyes. If I was soaked before, it felt like another deluge rained down just from his look and the tension in his body. “Not a damn thing.”

“Why not?”

“As much as I want to jerk those leggings down and fuck you against this wall, we can’t.”

“Because if we got caught, we’d end up getting arrested for public indecency?”

Noah laughed. “While that’s true, I was thinking more about the fact we promised each other to keep this date G-

rated.”

“Don’t you think we passed that when you spanked me?” I teased.

“It was a momentary lapse of judgement,” he replied with a grin.

“Then what now?”

“We go into our separate bathrooms, throw some cold water on some hard, aching parts, take some deep, cleansing breaths while thinking about puppies and rainbows, and then come back out to finish our game.”

“Puppies and rainbows?” I questioned with a snicker.

“Whatever floats your G-rated boat, babe.”

“I think I can handle that.”

Wagging a finger at me, Noah countered, “But no distracting each other this time, right?”

“Fine,” I muttered.

“You make it sound like you’re off to your execution.”

I laughed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it too.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing you play fair.”

“Me too.”

He held out his hand to me. “Truce?”

“Truce.”

As I followed him out of the alcove and over to the bathrooms, I wondered how in the hell I was going to make it the rest of the date without jumping him. What the hell was wrong with me? How could I possibly feel so turned on at a

bowling alley? I couldn't remember Ashton ever getting me so ... *amped up*. Or any guy for that matter.

Deep down in the part of me I showed so few men, I knew it was more than just sex. I liked being with Noah. I liked laughing with him and making him laugh. Our chemistry was just as hot outside the bedroom as in it.

As I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, I shook my head.

How could I possibly let him go in ten days?

Chapter Twelve: Noah

For my second actual date with Gaby, I decided once again to try to find the least sexiest activity possible. I don't know why I even bothered after the sexual debacle at the bowling alley. But in spite of a raging case of blue balls, I was more determined than ever to pursue something deeper with her. And to do that I had to stay out of her pants and the sexy-as-hell thong she usually wore.

Once again, I asked her to meet me at O'Malleys and to wear something casual. When she stepped out of her car in skin-tight jeans, and a form-fitting red top with a somewhat plunging neckline, I groaned and banged my head repeatedly against the steering wheel of the convertible.

"What's wrong?" she asked, as she slipped inside the car.

"I'm thinking we need to find a muumuu store."

She had the nerve to giggle at me. "A muumuu leaves way too much easy access."

With a ragged sigh, I replied, "You're probably right."

"What do you have on the agenda for tonight?"

"Dinner and a round or two at Top Golf followed by a chaste kiss goodnight."

Her brows quirked up in surprise. “What if I told you I hated golf?”

“I would be surprised considering how sporty you are, or I guess I should say how sporty you were in high school.”

Gaby gasped. “Were you stalking me?”

“Maybe just some of your old social media.”

With a grin, she replied, “Creep.”

“Trust me, it turned out to be a painful endeavor when I saw you in your short-ass volleyball shorts.”

“That was just one sport. Surely the softball pants were pretty tame,” she countered.

“Except for the way your ass looked in them.”

“Whatever,” she replied with a laugh.

Taking my eyes from the road, I pinned her with a stare. “It’s safe to say we’re going to forego the unnecessary competitiveness tonight, right?”

She flashed me a wicked grin that went straight to my dick. “I’m not making any promises.”

Fuck me. This was going to be a long night.

* * *

We ate our way through several orders of spicy wings along with downing a pitcher of beer before we hit the green. Just I had imagined, Gaby was once again competitive as hell. Conversation flowed as easily between us as well as the insults and jabs about our performances. There was never a dull moment with Gaby, and I found myself liking her more and more each minute.

It might've sounded lame as hell, but I found myself once again in awe that I had really never met a girl like Gaby. Even through the sex-haze and barely five days a week of reconnecting with her, I knew she was the only girl I could ever imagine being with. It also sent an ache through my chest at the thought of leaving her in a week. What was it going to be like not being able to see and touch her every single day?

Gaby's voice brought me out of my thoughts. "Huh?" I questioned.

She gave me a curious look. "I said we finished."

"Oh right," I replied absently.

Crossing her arms over her ample cleavage, Gaby said, "That's all you have to say about beating me *again*?"

"Yeah."

Closing the gap between us, she brought her hand to my forehead. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Checking to see if you have a fever."

"Why?"

"Because of how you're acting." At what must've been my continuing confused look, Gaby added, "You're not rubbing it in that you beat me."

At the realization of what she meant, I laughed. "It's more of a hollow victory considering how tipsy you were those first two rounds."

"Look at you being all humble."

"I have my moments." Drawing her against me, I said, "Come on, sore loser. Let's get you home."

“You’re ready to drop me off?” Gaby’s face fell, which caused my heartbeat to thrum wildly. She wasn’t ready to go home, but more than that, she wasn’t ready to leave me. After glancing at her watch, she widened her eyes. “I mean, it’s not even nine o’clock.”

“I’m sorry, but I have to get another hour or two in the water or my coach will have my ass.”

“You’re going to the gym tonight?”

“No. Back in high school, my parents changed over our pool to a heated one so I could swim all seasons.”

She smiled. “Aw, spoiling their golden child.”

“Says the girl who lives in a mansion.”

“Whatever.” Tilting her head, she peered curiously at me. “Can I come with you?”

Flashing her a cocky smile, I replied, “Can’t bear to let me go, huh?”

Rolling her eyes, Gaby huffed, “You and that fucking ego.”

I laughed. “I’m sorry.” I stared into her beautiful dark eyes. “The truth is I’m stoked as hell you want to spend more time with me.”

Wrinkling her nose, she countered, “I sound desperate and clingy.”

“Hey, I like that the tables have turned for a moment.” Grinning down at her, I said, “I’ve been desperate and clingy since the day you walked out of my hotel room.”

Pink tinged her cheeks. “Really?”

I nodded. “Come on. I’ll take you to my house and then we can get your car after I swim.”

“But you live out in East Cobb.”

“I don’t mind driving you back.”

“That’s like half an hour without traffic, Noah,” she argued.

“Once again, I’m desperate to spend as much time as possible with you.” Jesus, had I said that? Yeah, not only had I said it, I *felt* it. It sure as hell wasn’t something I’d ever experienced before. I had no idea you could get someone like Gaby and I got each other.

With a smile, she replied, “Okay, then.”

After a quick drive north, we made it home. When I pulled into the driveway, Gaby leaned forward in her seat. Even in the dark, I could see her taking everything in. Turning to me with a smile, she pronounced. “This is so beautiful.”

I couldn’t help feeling a sense of pride in my chest at her words. I knew my parents would be proud too. “Thanks. I’ve lived here since I was ten, and my parents decided we had outgrown the house where they first lived together.”

“Speaking of, where are you parents?”

“In the mountains.” At her continued questioning gaze, I replied, “They have a cabin there.”

“That’s nice.”

“Yeah, it’s in Ellijay where all my mom’s family is from.”

“I love the mountains. We visit my uncle Jake’s farm a lot in Ball Ground.”

“Yeah, I know where that is.” I then unlocked the front door and stepped inside. Once the alarm system was off, I motioned for Gaby to follow me inside. The downstairs was bathed in darkness, so I started flipping on some lights.

I started down the hallway to the kitchen, but then I realized Gaby was no longer at my side. “Oh my God,” she screeched.

Oh shit. Slowly, I pivoted to see where she was gazing up at the wall of me and my siblings’ childhood pictures. One thing my mom loved was decorating the house with her prized possessions aka her children.

Motioning to a picture of me in my Christening gown, she gushed, “Look at how cute you were.”

“Excuse me? How cute I *was*?” I protested with a smile.

She grinned. “You know what I mean.” As she eyed another picture of me as a toddler, she remarked, “You were a ginger.”

With a roll of my eyes, I replied, “Shut up.”

Nudging me with her hip, she replied, “I like it.”

“Maybe I’ll dye it for you.”

After kissing me on the cheek, she replied, “I like you just the way you are.”

“Right back at you, babe.” Glancing back at the kitchen, I asked, “Are you hungry?”

“Famished.”

I winced. “I wasn’t a very good date tonight by only feeding you wings and beer.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind.”

“Since I like to carb load a little before I swim, I can promise you a full meal.” I motioned for her to have a seat at the counter. “What sounds good?”

“What do you have?”

“Let me see.” After throwing open the fridge, I eyed some of the leftovers. “Hmm, there’s not much in here after the wedding this weekend and then my parents being gone. Liam and I tend to live off take-out when we’re on our own.” I took out a box of Chinese food and wrinkled my nose at the smell. “Looks like I’m making something.”

Cocking her head at me, Gaby teased, “Like a grilled cheese sandwich?”

“Give me a little more credit than that, smart-ass.”

She held up her hands. “My bad. I didn’t know along with your big-dick energy you were a chef as well.”

I laughed. “Do you like shrimp?”

“I do.”

“How about scampi?”

“I’m half Sicilian.”

I winced. “Shit. I forgot about that.”

“What’s the problem with that?” She laughed.

“You might think my shrimp scampi sucks.”

With a warm smile, she countered, “Nothing you prepared me could possibly suck.”

“You say that now, but now that memory serves me, your grandfather owns an Italian restaurant.”

“He does.”

“Double shit,” I groaned. Glancing at the fridge, I said, “I could make something else ... something not Italian.”

After hopping off her stool, Gaby came over to me. Wrapping her arms around my waist, she planted a kiss on my lips. “Stop getting your undies in a twist, Fitzgerald. I’ll love anything you make me because you’re cooking for me.”

Snorting, I then protested, “Goes to show how much you know.” I dipped my head to whisper into her ear. “I’m not wearing underwear.”

Her giggle echoed against my chest sending a warm tingle from the top of my head down to my toes. “That doesn’t surprise me,” she mused.

“How about an appetizer of Irish sausage?” I teased as my hands dipped to grab her ass.

“I think I’ll pass.”

“Your loss. I hear it’s thick and juicy.”

She rolled her eyes. “If you keep talking about it rather than cooking for me, I’m going to skewer it and roast it over a fire.”

I ducked out of her arms. “On that note, I think I’ll get started on the scampi.”

“I can help.”

“Nope. This is about serving you.” I then ushered her back to the stool at the counter. “Would you like some wine? I’m going to put some white in the sauce.”

“I’d love some.”

After grabbing a wineglass, I got a bottle of unopened wine from the pantry. At my ample pour, Gaby tilted her head

at me. “Are you trying to get me tipsy?”

I laughed. “Maybe.” With a wink, I added, “It’s more about your Sicilian side being a fan of wine.”

“How did you know that?”

“Lucky guess.”

“Wine for my Sicilian side and tequila for my Mexican side.”

“A potentially lethal combination.”

She laughed. “Just don’t drink them in the same night, and you’re fine.”

After I gathered the ingredients, I started working on the sauce. “Did your mom teach you to cook?” Gaby asked.

“Actually, this recipe is my dad’s.”

“Really?”

With a nod, I replied, “He and my mom didn’t get together until he was thirty-two, so he had to learn to cook for himself. His scampi has always been a favorite of hers. I think it has to do with the fact he made it for her when they first started dating.”

“Sounds romantic,” Gaby mused.

“Considering how they got together, it wasn’t exactly about romance.”

Her dark brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Well, this is how it went down. My mom was almost thirty and really wanted a baby, but she wasn’t dating anyone. She didn’t want to go to a sperm bank, and after her gay best friend backed out of donating, my dad rode in like Prince Charming to offer his jizz.”

The wine in Gaby's mouth spewed out at my summation.
"You're joking?"

"Nope. That's pretty much the story of my conception."

"That's wild."

"What about you? Do you have a crazy conception story?"

"Not mine, but Dad knocked my mom up with Bella after just two weeks of dating."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, but before my mom found out she was pregnant, they broke up because she couldn't handle his fame and all the women that came with it." Gaby appeared thoughtful for a moment. "I think there's more to the story, but they've never told me. Anyway, a few months passed with him missing her, so he came to see her at the hospital where she was working. Before she could tell him she was almost five months pregnant, he saw her bump." Gaby grinned. "He passed out and hit his head."

"Hell, I don't blame him. If I found out that way, I'd probably keel over too."

"But then they realized they loved each other more than anything and got married."

"And then they made you and Alex."

"Yep."

I shook my head. "After hearing that story, no wonder your dad hates me. He's probably worrying I'll knock you up."

"He knows I'm on birth control."

I paused in chopping the onions. "Does that mean I could ride bareback next time?"

Gaby rolled her eyes. “That’s what you took away from that conversation?”

With a shrug, I replied, “It couldn’t hurt to ask.”

“Just because I’m on birth control, it doesn’t mean we’re protected from anything else.”

“You didn’t seem too concerned when you let me come in your mouth,” I challenged with a smirk.

Gaby narrowed her eyes at me. “That was a momentary lapse in judgement.”

Coming around the side of the counter, I dipped my head to nuzzle her neck. “Then I want many, many more of your lapses in judgement. They make me come so hard.”

After running her fingers through my hair, Gaby jerked my head up to look at me. “You have such a filthy mouth.”

“And you like what my mouth does to you, don’t you?”

Glancing over my shoulder, Gaby said, “I think your pan is on fire.”

Licking my lips, I replied, “That’s because you get me so fucking hot.”

Gaby’s eyes crinkled with amusement. “Not you, your *pan*.”

Tearing my gaze from hers, I whirled around to see the acrid smoke coming from the burner. “Shit!” I raced over to the stove and jerked the pan off the heat. “My mom is going to kill to me. This is one of her favorites.”

Joining me at the stove, Gaby wrinkled her nose at the smell. “Maybe you can buy a replacement while she’s gone, and she’ll never know,” she suggested.

“Good idea.” I then stooped down to dig another pan out of the cabinet. “Thank God it was just oil and butter, and I didn’t ruin the entire sauce.” Taking her by the hand, I led her back to her seat. “Be a good girl and don’t distract me this time.”

Her dark eyes bulged. “You’re blaming me? It was you who started the sexy talk.”

I laughed at her outrage. “You’re right. It’s my fault.” Rubbing her cheek, I replied, “The truth is you distract me just breathing.”

“There you go redeeming yourself again, Lord Douchelord.” She pulled me to her before bestowing a gentle kiss. “Hurry up and finish dinner.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

With all the ingredients ready to go, this time I managed to prepare everything without burning up pans. After fixing her a heaping plate, I set it down in front of her. “It smells delicious,” she remarked.

“Thank you.”

As Gaby brought her fork to her lips, I leaned forward in my chair. Once the bite entered her mouth, I held my breath. After chewing thoughtfully for a few moments, her brows shot up. “Holy shit, this is really good.”

“Really.”

“Yes, really.”

Sliding onto the stool next to her, I cocked my brows at her. “You’re not saying that to spare my feelings?”

“Since when have I ever done that?”

With a laugh, I replied, “Never. But I was thinking maybe you were this time because you liked me.”

“I do like you, but I’d still tell you the truth if your scampi was shit.” With a smile, she added, “I can see why it won your mom over.”

“I think that had more to do with the hands that prepared it than it did with the recipe itself,” I argued.

“And how those hands were attached to an extremely handsome, yet incredibly arrogant man?” Gaby teased.

“Pretty much.”

“Like father, like son, huh?”

“Totally.”

As she laughed, the sound reverberated through me, filling me with a happiness I didn’t know I’d been missing. I shouldn’t have liked the feeling. I should’ve railed against it. But instead, I found myself welcoming it. More than anything, I didn’t want it to end. Not tonight. Not ... when I left. *Would she want things to continue after I left?*

In spite of everything going on in my life, there was nothing better than sitting in my parents’ kitchen eating and listening to Gaby’s laugh, especially when it was at my expense.

Fuck me. I was in way too deep and way too soon.

Chapter Thirteen: Gaby

Noah Fitzgerald was a serious triple threat. With his looks and athleticism, I had no idea he harbored any talent for cooking, but he did. He could've put the scampi at my grandfather's restaurant to shame. To prove to him just how good it was, I ate two heaping platefuls. When I was done, I might've felt like some overstuffed cannelloni, but it was worth it to see the look of pride and happiness on Noah's gorgeous face.

Once we were finished, Noah jerked his thumb at the back staircase. "I gotta go change."

I nodded. "While you do that, I'll clean up."

"You don't need to do that."

"After you cooked, it's the least I can do."

He smiled. "Okay. I'll be right back."

As he climbed the stairs, I got busy clearing out plates. Noah's mom had a pretty organized kitchen so it was easy to find the cleaning supplies, not to mention a bowl for the leftovers. I was just finishing washing up when Noah reappeared.

I tore my gaze from the sudsy water over to him. I cocked my brows at the sight of the long spandex-like swimming

trunks that came mid-way down his thigh. “No speedo?” I questioned with disappointment.

Noah chuckled. “Like I told you before, jammers are the preferred swimwear now.”

“How sad,” I mused with a smile.

With his signature smirk, Noah replied, “Babe, I can’t imagine the allure considering you’ve seen, touched, and sucked everything that would be in my speedo.”

I tossed the drying towel at him, smacking him in the face. “Once again, you have such a way with words.”

He chuckled as he handed me back the towel. “It’s the truth, isn’t it?”

I shook my head. “Think about everything you’ve done to my body—” His painful groan interrupted me. “Let me finish.”

“Fine.”

“In spite of all that, you’d still appreciate seeing me in some sexy lingerie, right?”

“Damn straight.”

“It’s all about presentation. And for me, the speedo was presentation.”

“I get it.”

Drawing my eyes down his body, I took in the second skin fitting of the jammer. It didn’t leave a lot to the imagination in his junk area. “Although on second glance, this isn’t too shabby.”

With another groan, Noah replied, “You’re killing me, Gaby. A slow, painful death of blue balls.”

“Then let’s take your mind off things and get you to your workout.”

Noah then led me out the door to the backyard. When he flipped on the lights, I gasped. The backyard was a true oasis with a large swimming pool along with an alcove with a jacuzzi. There was also an outdoor stone bar with a big screen TV. Glittering lights lit up the whole area.

“This is gorgeous.”

Cocking his head at me, Noah countered, “I’m sure it’s nothing compared to the setup at your place.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “It doesn’t mean it takes anything away from yours,” I snapped.

With a grin, he nipped my bottom lip. “I know. I just love seeing you get riled up.”

Shoving him away, I jabbed my finger at the pool. “Get to work, Fitzgerald.”

“I would love to honor your commands, but I have to stretch first,” he teasingly replied.

“Oh, okay.” Glancing around, I asked, “Should I sit over there?”

“I thought you might like an up-close-and-personal view.”

“I wouldn’t argue with that.”

Placing his hands on my waist, Noah steered me over to the deep end of the pool. He then eased me down into a sitting position at the edge. “How’s that?”

When I realized my face was practically crotch level with him, I quirked my brows as I stared up at him. “Just what kind of workout are you planning on?”

He threw his head back with a laugh. “I’m not going to be standing here the entire time.”

“Then I think we’re good.”

While Noah started stretching, I took my shoes and socks off. After pulling my jeans up my calves to my knees, I then dipped my feet into the water. “Oh, it is warm,” I remarked, as I swirled my toes around.

“I hope the rest of you doesn’t get too cold.”

“I think I’ll live.”

After he finished stretching, he walked over to the bar. When he returned, he had a swim cap and a pair of goggles in his hands. I watched as he slid his gorgeous blond hair into the cap. After donning his goggles, he then came back over to me. Without another word, he crouched into position before diving into the pool.

It was one thing seeing his perfect body standing beside me, but then it was quite another to see it slicing through the water with speed and precision. He was pure power.

And fuck me, if it wasn’t sexy as hell.

As an ache burned its way through my body, I debated hopping up and going back inside for more wine. Anything to extinguish the fire that had started building in me. Instead, I remained rooted to my spot.

“Get a grip, Gaby,” I muttered to myself.

Noah neared me on his return swim, and this time before he dipped and pushed off the wall, he tugged at my foot. It was meant to be an endearing gesture, but instead, it just got me more heated.

The more I watched Noah's fantastic body slice through the water, the more the ache between my legs grew. "Stop it." While I'd said the words aloud, they were more for my traitorous vagina than they were for me. With that in mind, I dipped my gaze to speak directly to her. "This isn't about you. This is about Noah working out and doing what he needs to do to be able to qualify for the Olympics the next time around. So, you need to get your mind off his perfect body ... his washboard abs ..." I swallowed hard as the image of water trickling down those washboard abs entered my mind. "Dammit!"

Okay, I seriously must've had too much wine at dinner. It was the only thing that could explain the fact I had just read the riot act to my vagina. That or I was officially losing my mind. I went with the first choice. It could also be the reason behind my sex-fueled thoughts.

Of course, with my underwear drenched, I knew I was a lost cause. I wanted—no, I *needed*—to have sex with Noah tonight. I'd already had a taste. How could I deny myself now? It wasn't fair. In a week, Noah would be returning to Colorado, and I'd no longer be able to reach out and touch him whenever I wanted.

As my eyes followed Noah's form, I realized it was now or never. I pulled my feet out of the water before rising to stand. Realizing I wasn't where I'd been, Noah's head popped out of the water. Gripping the edge of the pool, he asked, "What's up?"

"I'm getting a little cold."

"You're welcome to go back inside. Maybe find a movie or something on TV."

Jerking my thumb, I asked, “That’s sweet, but mind if I take a dip in the hot tub?”

“Sure. I could go inside for one of my mom’s or Caroline’s suits.”

“No, no. I don’t want to break the flow of your workout.” God, I was such a liar. Not to mention a selfish twat for wanting to take Noah away from his practice by seducing him.

Reaching for the hem of my shirt, I ripped it over my head before dropping it beside me. As my fingers came to the waistband of my jeans, a strangled grunt came from Noah. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Duh, I’m stripping.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“You didn’t think I’d actually go in the hot tub with my clothes, did you?”

“Uh, I ...” His voice trailed off as I dragged my jeans down my thighs. After stepping out of them, I reached around my back for the clasp of my bra. Once I undid it, I tossed it on top of my pants. Just as I went for the waistband of my thong, Noah shot out of the water.

I don’t know how he managed to get to me so quickly. One minute I was standing there and the next I was jerked against his wet body. After crashing his lips to mine, I wrapped my arms around his neck. From the bulge against my stomach, I knew my skills of seduction were surprisingly top-notch.

Pulling away, I stared up at him. “What about your workout?” I questioned breathlessly.

“Fuck my workout. I want to fuck you.”

“Works for me,” I replied with a smile.

Noah then slammed his lips against mine. God, how I loved the taste of him. His hands cupped my naked breasts. When he squeezed them, I moaned into his mouth. This time it was Noah's turn to jerk away. "Wait, what about our sex ban?"

"I think we could make an exception just this once. Don't you?"

His expression was contemplative. "Yeah, but—"

My eyes popped wide in surprise. "Don't tell me you've crossed over to the good side and are going to reject me?"

He shot me a wicked look before grinding his hardened dick against my core. At my gasp, he replied, "What do you think?"

"Then why the hesitation?"

After exhaling a ragged breath, Noah replied, "I just don't want to fuck things up by fucking you."

I laughed at his honesty. "I think we're passed that, don't you?"

He grinned. "I know I've had as much fun with you out of the bedroom as in it."

"I'm not sure what that says for my sexual abilities considering we've gone bowling and played Top Golf."

Noah smacked my ass playfully. "I'm talking about the conversation and being together."

"I know." I smiled up at him. "I feel the same way."

"So, if we've proven the point, I guess it can't hurt, right?"

"I don't think so."

"Thank fuck."

Laughing, I replied, "Let's go to the jacuzzi."

Noah nodded and followed me over. While I slid my thong down my thighs, he stripped out of his jammers. After we stepped down into the water, Noah's hands came around my waist, and he drew me against him.

When he covered my lips with his mouth, I reached between us to start stroking his rock-hard cock. Noah groaned into my mouth, which caused my clit to throb. I'd been an idiot to try and deny myself being with him. But I was glad we'd spent time getting to know each other more. I felt valued ... respected. And damn did it feel good.

Tearing away from his mouth, I cocked my brows at him. "Since I made you stop your workout, I think it's only fair to repay you with some oral attention."

He grinned at me through hooded eyes. "I'll be a good boy and not argue."

I gave him a coy grin. "I didn't think you'd put up much of a fight."

After I let go of his erection, Noah then hopped up to sit on the ledge. He spread his legs wide before grabbing my hand and tugging me towards him. I eased through the bubbling water to stand between his legs. I then sank down onto my knees on the stone bench, the water cascaded over my naked breasts.

Taking him in my hand, I then brought my lips to his tip. Glancing up at him, Noah's fiery gaze stayed on mine. With a wink, I then sent saliva down the sides of his dick.

"Fucking hell, Gaby, you're going to be the death of me," Noah murmured.

I merely grinned as I twisted my hand around his cock and sucked him in and out of my mouth, taking him deeper and deeper each time. With his dick still buried in my mouth, I pulled my hands away to rest on his thighs. I feathered my touch back and forth over his inner thighs, causing him to hiss.

As I continued bobbing my head up and down his erection, Noah leaned over, taking my hands in his. He brought them to rest on the top of his pecs. Flexing my fingers, I scraped my nails down his chest, leaving red marks in my wake.

Noah shuddered. “God, babe, that’s so good,” he grunted. He brought one of my hands to his lips and sucked my middle and ring finger deep into his mouth. When he began mimicking what I was doing to his dick on my fingers, I groaned around his cock.

I let him fall free of my mouth to lick from the root to the tip. Then I turned my attention to his balls, licking and sucking. Noah bent over to tangle his hands through my hair. After twisting his fingers through the strands, he brought me down harder on his dick. As I started bobbing faster, he flexed his hips to pump faster and faster in and out of my mouth.

“I’m going to come,” he grunted.

When I glanced back up at up, I gave permission with my eyes. With a quick jerk of his head, Noah then worked his hips deeper and harder until he groaned and came in my mouth. I licked and sucked him then swallowed before letting him fall free from my mouth.

Noah’s fingers left my hair to stroke my cheek. “That was amazing as always.”

“You’re very welcome.” And I wasn’t lying. I loved controlling him and his pleasure with my mouth. It was such a

turn on to see him come undone and to know I was the one who did it to him.

“Now I owe you big time,” he mused.

“An orgasm or two would be more than enough repayment.”

He grinned. “I’m happy to give them.”

Noah slid back down in the water before coming around behind me. He pushed me forward to where my knees bumped against the bench. Gripping my hips, he lifted me to where my knees rested on the stone. Cool air rushed around my core and ass. Sliding his hands from my hips, he spread my thighs far apart.

“Lean over, babe,” he murmured.

I placed my palms on the ledge of the jacuzzi before leaning forward. At that moment, one of the jacuzzi jets sprayed directly between my legs.

“Oh fuck,” I muttered as the water hit my clit.

Noah chuckled in my ear. “I thought you might enjoy that.”

Swiveling my hips, I gasped. “It’s like my first sexual awakening with a vibrating shower head,” I mused.

Noah groaned against my back. “Don’t say shit like that.”

“Why? Because I was underage and pleasuring myself?”

“It’s more like the mental image of you getting yourself off makes my dick want to explode.”

I laughed before throwing a look at him over my shoulder. “But I won’t need to get myself off with just the water, will I?”

His erotic gaze caused me to shiver. “Fuck, no.”

He then sank down on his knees to where his face was right at my ass. Noah's firm hands pulled my cheeks apart. My breath hitched as I braced for what was coming next. I cried out when his hot mouth slid down the crack of my ass to my pussy. He alternated sliding his wet tongue back and forth, causing my core to flood.

When his thumb circled my hole, I momentarily tensed. "Getting a little ahead of yourself there, aren't you, Fitzgerald?"

His chuckle fanned across my ass cheeks. "Too soon, huh?"

"I usually reserve that for very serious relationships only."

"Could I persuade you to let me cut the line if I make you come so hard you'll see stars?"

His thumb slowly entered me, causing me to suck in a breath. "I guess this one time." I twisted around to pin him with a hard stare. "But you better deliver what you promised."

"I'm a man of my word."

With his arm propped on one of my cheeks, he slid his thumb inside my ass while his other hand slipped two fingers into my core. My head dropped onto my arms that were braced on the ledge. "Oh God!" I cried as rocked my hips back against his hands.

The water smacked against my clit as his fingers pumped in and out of me. I alternated between harsh pants and moans as it was all just too much. I didn't even protest when two fingers replaced Noah's thumb. The overwhelming friction overtook me, and I tensed with a charging orgasm before I screamed in ecstasy. An incoherent string of cursing and praise tumbled from my lips as I rode the wave of pleasure.

When I came back to myself, Noah was kissing his way up my spine while his fingers remained inside me, lightly stroking. “Did I live up to my promise?” he breathed into my ear.

“Oh, yes. If I wasn’t kneeling on this bench, I would’ve fallen over it was so amazing.”

“The pleasure was all mine, babe.” Noah then gently eased his fingers out of me. His hands came to my waist before turning me to face him. “Now I want to fuck you with my dick.”

“After that orgasm, you’re going to have to do most of the work.”

He sat down on the stone bench before pulling me onto his lap. As Noah slid his dick back and forth across my slick folds, he cocked his head at me. “Are you going to let me bareback this time?”

“I would think so unless you plan on miraculously pulling a condom out of your jammers or one of the jets.”

“Nope. I’m lacking all forms of protection.” At my continued hesitation, he said, “Remember how I said I’m tested all the time, Gaby.”

“I know.”

“You know I would never, ever put you in harm’s way, right?”

As I stared into his eyes, I knew he was telling the truth. “Yes, I do.”

“At the same time, I won’t ask this of you if it makes you uncomfortable.”

In a way, it did. Not because I worried about him having an STD. It was more about me worrying I would get pregnant. While I wanted children, it was something I wanted in the future. Not now at twenty-two when I was about to get started in my career.

But more than my fear, I wanted to do it for him. “Then you can have me.”

With a gleam in his eyes, he took his cock in his hand and then pushed against my opening. Raising my hips, I then lowered myself slowly until I’d taken him all the way. “Fuck me, Gaby you feel so good.”

“Mm, I agree,” I murmured.

Since he knew I was tired, Noah’s hands dug into my ass cheeks as he pushed me slowly on and off of him. I slid my arms around his neck, drawing me closer to him. He latched on to one of my breasts, sucking the nipple deep inside his warm mouth, and I cried out as I arched my back. My nipple popped free of his mouth as he licked and sucked a warm trail over to my other breast. One of his hands came between my legs to stroke my clit.

“I seriously don’t think I can come again.”

“I bet I can make you.”

If anyone could, it was Noah. He bounced me harder and faster off of him to where he would almost slide out of me before I was impaled with all of him again. His thumb frantically rubbed against my clit, and I felt myself builder higher and higher. Gripping his shoulders, I chanted his name while Noah grunted and panted in my ear.

And just when I thought I couldn’t take anymore, I came hard, my walls clenching around Noah’s pumping dick. “Gaby,

oh fuck,” he grunted. His hips jerked and came hard, warm jets filling me.

As I tried catching my breath, I rested my head against his chest, listening to the rapid beating of his heart. “Do you think it’ll always be this amazing between us?”

His chuckle rumbled through his chest. “I don’t know. But it’s worth extensive fucking to find out.”

Raising my head, I smacked his chest playfully. “Bastard.”

He grinned. “I was just stating facts. I mean, we’ve only fucked like what? Five or six times now. I would think more extensive research is needed.”

“Oh, Noah, how poetic. Please whisper more sweet nothings in my ear.”

Noah opened his mouth to argue with me when music blared all around us. Apparently, the Fitzgeralds had an epic outdoor sound system because it felt like the bass was right next to us.

“Oh, my God,” I said before dissolving into laughter at the realization of what the song was.

“I can’t believe that fucker is playing *I Just Had Sex*,” Noah grunted.

“Your brother?” I snorted.

“Yes,” Noah hissed before untangling himself from me.

“Where are you going?”

“To kick his ass.”

“But you’re naked,” I protested.

“Like I give a fuck about that.” He jumped out of the jacuzzi and then started stalking across the patio. As I watched

his retreating form, I couldn't help appreciating his ass in the twinkling lights.

With my clothes too far away and probably in Liam's line of sight, I glanced around to see if I could find a towel. Eyeing the cabinet next to the jacuzzi, I opened it to find it stocked with towels. I grabbed two before pulling myself out of the water.

"Get your ass out here now!" Noah bellowed. Apparently, Liam was still inside the house. But I still wasn't taking any chances with him seeing me naked. I wrapped the towel around me before starting after Noah.

Liam came out on the patio just in time to start singing at the top of his lungs, "I just had sex. And it felt so good."

"Cut the shit, asshole."

"My bad. I forgot this is more your song." After fumbling with his phone, Liam grinned at Noah. The song then changed from Lonely Island over to Aerosmith's *Love in an Elevator*.

While I giggled, Noah knocked the phone out of Liam's hand. "Jackass. You sure as hell better not have been watching us."

"Please. Fetish sibling porn is not my thing." Liam's gaze bounced from Noah's over to mine, and I pulled the towel tighter against me. His cocky grin was pure Noah's as he said, "But I will say you make the absolute sexiest noises when you're fucking that I've ever heard."

My eyes bulged at the same moment Noah lunged at Liam. "Oh shit," I muttered as he took him down to the ground. They began rolling around on the stone patio floor.

"Don't you fucking dare say shit like that to Gaby!" Noah bellowed.

Laughing as Noah pummeled his stomach, Liam replied, “I got hard as a fucking rock.”

“You are *so* not disrespecting me like that!” I shouted before I reached down and grabbed Liam by the hair. Noah momentarily stopped hitting his brother to eye me with surprise.

“Ow!” Liam muttered.

“Tell me you’re sorry.”

“How did you know I like having my hair pulled?” Liam threw back with a grin.

I saw red, and before I could stop myself, I released his hair to give him my right hook. “Jesus, Gaby,” Noah murmured but a look of pure awe radiated in his eyes.

Liam rubbed his jaw. “You fucking hit me.”

“You disrespected me.”

Liam grinned. “I can see now why Noah is so crazy about you.”

“Because of my sex noises?” I asked with disgust.

“No, because you’re fucking amazing, that’s why.”

At the absurdity of the situation, I couldn’t help throwing my head back with a laugh. “Thanks ... I think.”

“And you’re right. I shouldn’t have said those things in front of you.”

“Let me guess. You still would’ve told him behind my back.”

“Maybe,” he replied with a wink.

“You’re a jackass just like my little brother.”

Shoving Noah away, Liam said, “Would you please get dressed? Being this close to your dick and ball sack is traumatizing.”

With a smirk, Noah replied, “I can’t help if you intimidated by my size with your micro penis.”

I rolled my eyes. “Would you two please stop?”

Noah nodded before rising to his feet. I held out the spare towel in my hand, and he slung it around his waist. Surprisingly, he held out his hand for Liam and helped him off the ground.

“With the backyard cameras, we’re going to have a hell of a story to tell Mom and Dad.”

My eyes bulged. “Please tell me there aren’t any cameras on the jacuzzi?”

Noah shook his head. “Trust me, I wouldn’t have let us have sex there if they did.”

I sucked in a horrified breath. “But I stripped out here.”

“Damn, I wish I’d gotten home earlier,” Liam mused.

“Watch it. Or I’ll give you my right hook again.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “My bad.”

After giving Liam one last look, Noah said, “I’ll grab our clothes.”

“Thanks.”

With a genuine smile, Liam said, “Are you hungry? I picked up some pizzas and wings.”

“Not really. Your brother made scampi.”

“Are you sure? I would’ve thought you worked up an appetite after all that time in the jacuzzi.”

I rolled my eyes. “You really are like your brother, aren’t you? One minute you’re redeeming yourself by offering me food, and then the next you’re acting like a disgusting douchelord.”

He grinned. “I guess it is hereditary.”

Noah appeared with our clothes. “What bullshit is he saying now?”

“I was just saying how much you two are alike.”

“In everything but looks since I’m way hotter,” Noah replied with a grin.

“Dream on,” Liam clapped back.

“Okay, you two can stay out here with your pissing contest. I’m going in to change.”

Without another word to them, I started in the house. To my surprise, they fell in step behind me. When I started into the bathroom off the kitchen, Noah followed me in. With a genuine look, he said, “I’m sorry about Liam.”

Grinning up at him, I replied, “It’s okay. I have an annoying little brother myself.”

Noah shook his head. “I don’t ever want him disrespecting you like that.”

I stepped closer to him, bringing my arms around his neck. “I know. You defended me well—my very own and very *naked* knight in shining armor.”

With a laugh, Noah replied, “Damn straight.”

Rising up on my tiptoes, I brought my lips to his. We were just getting hot and heavy when a bang came at the door. “Quit fucking around in there, or the food is going to get cold,” Liam’s voice boomed.

At Noah’s growl, I could only laugh. “Come on, Naked Knight. Let’s get you dressed before you have to defend my honor again.”

Chapter Fourteen: Noah

My last night in Atlanta had finally arrived. I'd spent each and every day since the wedding with Gaby. Besides the hours spent in the pool, the rest had been devoted to her. I had no fucking clue how I was going to get on a plane in the morning without her. Although we'd talked about every possible thing from our pasts and the present, we hadn't talked about me leaving. I didn't think either of us really wanted to think past tomorrow and what that would look like for us.

After our night in the jacuzzi, we'd thrown denying sex out the window. We just made sure we spent more time together out of the bed than in it. Of course, we didn't just regulate ourselves to the bed. We'd fucked in over half the rooms in my house. I was still too afraid of AJ to risk banging at Gaby's house.

Tonight we wouldn't have the chance to be alone for a while since we were dressing up for a night on the town to see her brother's new band. They were all sons of the members of her dad's band, Runaway Train. Thankfully, her dad had just left on the road for a run of charity shows, so I wouldn't have to see him.

After checking my phone to make sure I had the right address, I pulled to a stop in front of a gated mansion. I

punched the buzzer on the call box. “Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Noah Fitzgerald for Gaby.”

“Come right on through.”

Once the gate opened, I eased the car through. When I pulled to a stop in the circular driveway, I whistled at the sight before me. Whatever I had imagined Gaby’s house looking like paled in comparison to what I actually saw before me. Compared to what she grew up in, my parents’ very comfortable six-bedroom, five-bath house was practically a shack. I was thankful she wasn’t one who cared about a dude with money because I sure as hell couldn’t compete.

After ringing the doorbell, I expected a butler or maid to answer it. Instead, Bella threw open the door wearing a silk robe, her hair wrapped up in fuzzy curlers, and a green facemask on. “Hey, Noah,” she said cheerfully.

For a moment, I was too stunned to speak. “Um. Hey, Bella.”

She laughed. “Not what you were expecting, huh?”

“Not exactly. For starters, I thought a maid or butler might answer.”

“My parents aren’t that pretentious.”

“Good to know.”

She motioned for me to come inside. “I’m running just a tad bit late, but lucky for you, Gaby was almost ready when I came down to get the door.”

When I stepped into the foyer, my neck craned up to take in the enormous chandelier. “Holy shit,” I muttered under my breath.

“Mom’s a huge *Phantom of the Opera* fan, so she went for a replica.”

“So is my mom. A fan of the musical, not so much of chandeliers.”

Bella laughed. “With her amazing voice, I’m not surprised she’s a fan of musicals.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll finish getting ready.”

I nodded. “You’re coming to the gig tonight too, huh?”

“Gotta be a good big sister and support Alex.”

“I can’t wait to hear him play.”

My attention was drawn to a commotion on the second-floor landing. “I’m here! Sorry!” Gaby called as she skidded to a stop at the top of the stairs. My gaze followed her she started down the marble staircase. The instant my eyes drank in her appearance I felt a kick in the pants. She had a short-as-hell dress on with spaghetti straps and jacked-up cleavage. The red color went well with her dark hair and eyes.

Fuck me, she was stunning. Beautiful both inside and out.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, I sucked in a ragged breath. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” I muttered, which caused Gaby to laugh.

“Have I rattled the good Catholic boy?”

“Oh, I’m way past rattled. I’d say you in that dress is trying to send me to the ER for Uncle Pesh to have to resuscitate me.”

Gaby’s frowned as she glanced down at her dress. “I could change.”

I shook my head wildly back and forth. “No, no. It’s fine.”

With a smirk, Gaby replied, “I’m glad to see you passed that test.”

“And just what test was that?”

“I like to think of it as the ‘controlling douchebag who tells his girl what to wear’ test.”

Sweeping my hands to my hips, I countered, “Surely you know by now that’s not me.”

“I did. I just wanted to make sure.”

Leaning down, I whispered into her ear, “You in that dress is pure foreplay. I’m practically hard just looking at you in it.”

She eased away from me. “Wait a minute. I don’t want you getting any ideas that just because I’m wearing this dress, you’re guaranteed ass. Tonight is all about Alex and The Second Sons. I’m being nice by including you.”

“When did I say I was planning to leverage you wearing that dress to get you horizontal tonight?”

Gaby laughed. “You didn’t, but—”

“Fantasizing is what I meant.”

“If you’re satisfied that’s all you’re going to get, then it’s fine.”

“I understand the parameters of tonight and what it means to you and your family.” While that was the truth, it also fell in the realm of a lie. I appreciated Gaby inviting me to share in her brother’s night, but I also wasn’t planning on ending it not buried inside her.

I had a ton of ideas of ways to get up under that skirt, but I kept that to myself. The dirty bastard in me figured the sexier

Gaby felt about herself the likelier I was to peel her out of that dress at the end of the night. “As long as you’re wearing this dress for me and only me.”

“First of all, I’m wearing this dress for me,” she challenged.

“Good for you.”

“Who else would I be wearing it for?”

“Duh, the guys in the band.”

Gaby wrinkled her nose. “My *brother* is in that band.”

“Yeah, but the other dudes are young rockstars, and chicks cream their panties for hot rockers.”

“First of all, ew at the mention of creaming.” When I started to protest that I knew for a fact about her creaming, she placed her hand over my mouth. “Don’t even go there.”

“Whatever,” I muttered behind her fingers.

“Second, while the rest of those guys might not be my blood relations, trust me when I say they are my brothers, and I have never, ever thought of them that way.”

“Good to know,” I replied.

Gaby removed my hand from her mouth and replaced it with her warm lips. When she pulled away, she gave me a sexy little smile. “You’re right. I’m really wearing this dress for you.”

Rolling my eyes to the ceiling, I groaned. “You’re killing me.”

“A slow, horny death?”

I laughed. “Pretty much.”

She giggled. “Come on. Let’s get going before we miss the opening.”

“Should we wait for Bella?”

Shaking her head, Gaby replied, “She’s coming with some of the other sisters like Jules and Melody.”

I nodded as Gaby started for the front door. After we got to my car, I opened the door for her.

“Thanks.”

With a quick kiss, I replied, “You’re welcome.”

After I shut her door, I went around the hood of the car. Once I was inside, I cranked up and got us on the road. “Remind me again where the show is.”

“It’s a pub called Eastman’s.”

“Nice,” I replied.

“I assume that means you know where you’re going.”

“Yeah, I’ve caught a few shows there over the years.” Glancing over at her, I asked, “It’s kind of a small venue for them, isn’t it?”

“Yes and no. Even though their dads are famous, Second Sons is still a relatively unknown band. Jude’s probably the most well-known since he’s been playing with Runaway Train on and off for years.”

“I got ya.”

“And Eastman’s is an important place because it’s where Runaway Train did their first paying gig.”

“So, it’s like coming full circle.”

She smiled. “Yeah, it is.”

Thankfully, traffic wasn't too terrible for downtown, and we made to Eastman's with about ten minutes before the guys were supposed to go on. After I parked, I once again went to get Gaby out of the car. "I'm impressed," she mused.

"And I'm insulted that you didn't think I could be a gentleman."

With a laugh, Gaby said, "I'm sorry to wound your gigantic ego."

"It's not that big."

"Don't tell me you're being modest?"

"I'm just stating facts." With a pointed look, I added, "I'm not such a bastard that I don't know how to treat a woman."

Her amused expression faded and was replaced by an apologetic one. "You're not a bastard."

"I'm glad you can see that."

She placed her hands on my cheeks. "You really are decent."

"Just decent?"

"Amazingly and incredibly decent. A true gentleman."

"That's better." I dipped my head to kiss her gently. When I pulled away, I smiled at her. "You make me a better man."

Rubbing her thumbs along my jawline, Gaby returned my smile. "Smooth, Fitzgerald. Very smooth."

I laughed. "I have my moments." At Gaby's sudden shiver, I asked, "Are you cold?"

"A little. I should've brought a coat to wear with this dress."

“As hot as you look in it, it would’ve been a shame for you to cover up,” I teasingly replied.

“I’m sure I’ll warm up once I get inside.”

Since I couldn’t have her freezing her fine ass off, I shrugged out of my blazer. “Here.”

“Thanks, Noah.” Before she took it, she held out her purse to me. “Could you hold this?”

I took the tiny black thing in my hand. “I’m pretty sure holding it revokes my mancard.”

“Oh, please. It’s just a measly purse.”

“I think the size makes it worse.”

Ignoring me, she pulled my blazer on. “Mm,” she murmured as she closed her eyes in bliss.

“Feel warmer?”

Her eyes popped open to pin me with a stare. “It’s more that it smells like you.”

I licked my lips. “You like smelling like me?”

“Yes.”

“I like the smell of me on you. I like marking you.” My lips grazed against her ear. “Tonight I’d like to mark you in another way.”

When Gaby shivered this time, I knew it was from my words, not the cold. “You’re being a naughty boy,” she replied.

“I guess you’ll have to punish me.”

A nervous giggle escaped her lips. “Are you into ...” She swallowed hard. “You know, that?”

“If by *that*, you mean punishing by spanking, I like a good one every now and then.” Lowering my voice, I added, “Just like you did at bowling.”

I couldn't help laughing at her somewhat frightened expression. “Easy now. I'm not talking about whips and chains. Just a good, hard smack from time to time.”

“I knew what you meant.”

“Are you sure? Because you look like I just told you I wanted you covered in leather and wearing a ball gag while I lashed you with a whip.”

Gaby's dark eyes bulged at my comment. “I mean, to each his or her own, but—”

“That's not you.”

She furiously shook her head. “No, it's not.”

“Not to kink shame anyone, but it's not me either.”

A relieved breath whooshed out of her lips. “Thank God.”

“After all our times together, you could still think I was harboring a secret, S&M side?”

“You never know.”

“Well, now you do.” Wagging my brows, I said, “But I am a fan of battery-operated toys, flavored lube, and warming body oil.”

Pursing her lips at me, Gaby replied, “I like those as well.”

Fuck, yes. “What about lingerie?”

“I think you'd look really hot in some,” she countered.

I rolled my eyes. “Dream on, babe.”

She laughed. “I was joking, Noah.”

“You damn sure better be. A speedo is as far as I’m going when it comes to tight underwear, and I’m sure as hell never wearing a thong.”

“You’re in luck because I happen to like lingerie on myself.”

“I’m glad to hear it, and I’ll like it even more when I see it.”

“Be a good boy, and you will.”

Grumbling, I muttered, “You just love to torture me.”

With Gaby’s laughter trilling between us, we then hustled our way down the sidewalk to the front entrance of Eastman’s. When we got to the door, Gaby waved at the security guard. “Hey, Luca.”

He smiled broadly at her before drawing her into his very muscular arms. “Beautiful Gabriella, how the hell are you?”

At his summation of her, I stiffened slightly. After Luca released her, Gaby gave me a sly smile. “Noah, this is my cousin Luca.”

Relief flooded me that I wasn’t going to get my ass kicked trying to prove Gaby was mine. “Oh, he’s family.”

Luca nodded. “I owe my job to Gaby’s dad giving me a leg up. He’s an amazing man, isn’t he?”

I wished I could say the same. I mean, I agreed he was great father and exceptional musician. It was more about the fact he hated my guts for molesting his daughter in an elevator.

“Totally,” I lied.

Luca turned to one of the hostesses. “Show these two to the VIP section.”

A very busty blonde glanced from Luca over to Gaby and me. I guess I should say she focused a little more on me than she did Gaby. With a *I'd like to fuck you* smile, she said, "Follow me."

Sensing it was in more than just my best interest not to piss Gaby off, I didn't smile at the hostess. I just nodded and then pulled Gaby to my side. I also made sure not to stare at the hostess's ass as she walked us to the table.

"Nice save, Fitzgerald," Gaby murmured into my ear.

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

She rolled her eyes at me. "You know exactly what I'm talking about."

I flashed her grin. "You mean, the horny hostess who wanted a piece of me?"

"Exactly."

"Thank you. But you know, I was actually impressed with your response. After what happened with Tabby, I thought you might get territorial over me again."

"You're such an ass," she remarked as she took a seat in the VIP marked table.

After sitting down beside her, my hand ducked under the table to grip her bare thigh. Rubbing her silky-smooth skin, I said, "And your feisty mouth is such a turn-on. Of course, I don't just like the smart words that come out of it. I like it all over my body, especially my dick."

With her dark eyes on fire, Gaby leaned closer to me, giving me a fabulous view of her jacked up tits. "We're not doing sexy time right now. Tonight is about my brother's show."

“I’m sorry. I just can’t help myself.”

“Try harder.”

I squeezed her flesh. “Where’s the fun in that?”

“You know, I think it’s a good idea for you to order a pitcher of water to go with whatever alcohol you’re planning on drinking.”

“And why is that?”

“You obviously need to cool off.”

I slid my hand higher up her thigh. When it disappeared under her dress, Gaby sucked in a breath. I didn’t stop until my fingers brushed against her scorching hot core. At the feel of her slightly damp panties, I shot her a cocky grin. “Looks like I’m not the only one who needs cooling off.”

Just as I was contemplating slipping a finger inside her, an excited squeal erupted behind us, causing both Gaby and I to jump away from each other. When I whirled around, a tall, dark-haired girl stood grinning from ear to ear. “Gaby, it’s so good to see you,” she said before throwing her arms around Gaby’s neck.

“It’s so good to see you, too.” Gaby then motioned between us. “Noah, this is Charlie. Her brother, Linc, is in the band.”

I extended my hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Charlie let her eyes roam appreciatively over me before she shook my hand. “It’s very nice meeting you, too.” She glanced between Gaby and me. “How long have you two been together?”

“Ten days,” I quickly replied at the same time Gaby said, “Not long.”

Charlie's blue eyes widened. "Wait, you're Elevator Guy?"

At Gaby's shriek of horror, I merely smiled. "I've been called many things, but that's a first."

Gaby shook her head at me. "I'm sorry. Bella kinda ran her mouth in our group text."

With a shrug, I replied, "I don't care."

Charlie sat down across from us and waved one of the waitresses over for a drink. A few minutes later, the guys came out on stage just as Bella arrived with two other girls. Gaby quickly introduced them as Jax from the band's twin sister, Jules, and the lead singer, Jude's, younger sister, Melody. Thankfully, they both had guys with them, so I wasn't the odd man out in the middle of a sea of estrogen.

Jude strode confidently to the microphone. "Good evening. We're so excited to be here for our first performance at Eastman's. Without this bar, Runaway Train would've never gotten their start, and in turn, we wouldn't be standing before you today."

Clapping and whistles broke out around us, causing Jude to grin. "But enough with the sappy shit. Growing up, I was raised on the Beatles, so I wanted to start off tonight with a cover of *Come Together*."

Once they started playing, I couldn't believe how good they were. I mean, I didn't know music as well as Gaby did, but I had grown up with my mom singing at barn dances with her cousin's band. With Mom's singing aside, the Second Sons blew that band out of the water. Considering their fathers were talented, I guess I shouldn't have been too surprised.

After their set was over, the guys made their rounds through the bar, greeting fans and signing items. Of course,

some of the items they signed weren't always CDs or cocktail napkins. At the sight of their little brother signing the top of a partially exposed pair of breasts, both Gaby and Bella made gagging sounds.

With a laugh, I countered, "Come on, girls. He's nineteen, and the drummer in a rising rock band. I'm sure he's doing a lot more than signing random breasts."

While Bella pinched her eyes shut like she was in pain, Gaby shuddered. "I don't care how old he is—he'll always be our baby brother. The last thing on the face of the earth I want to see is him doing anything remotely sexual," she argued.

"That's the difference in girls and guys, I guess. I'd be high-fiving my brother for signing a pair of tits."

"That's because you're a pig," Gaby replied.

I playfully swatted her ass. "Easy now."

Finally, Alex made his way through the velvet ropes of the VIP section to his sisters' waiting arms. The poor guy was practically hugged and kissed to death by Gaby and Bella. When they finally let him go, Gaby pulled him over to me. "Noah, you remember my little brother, Alex."

"The rocking sex god," I mused as I threw out my hand. My remark earned me a scathing look from Gaby. Chuckling at her outrage, I said, "Nice to see you again, man."

With a grin, Alex shook hands with me. "Same, bro." A wicked gleam burned in his eyes. "Truth is after what happened in the elevator, I wasn't sure you'd live for us to meet again."

While I groaned, Gaby hissed before smacking Alex's arm. "I can't believe you brought that up."

The dark-haired guy beside Alex sucked in a breath. “Wait, this is the elevator guy?”

As Alex nodded, Gaby whirled around to smack him too. “That’s not his name, Jax!”

He snorted. “Sorry.”

After glaring between the two, Gaby said, “Noah, this jackass is Jax Slater.”

At the mention of his name, I recognized him. “Your mom is in Jacob’s Ladder.”

He grinned. “Usually I get the ‘your dad’s the lead singer of Runaway Train’, but yeah, that’s my mom.”

Gripping Jax’s cheek a little harder than necessary, Gaby said, “He looks just like her, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, he does. My mom loves country, so I grew up listening to the band.”

“Noah’s mom sings just as well as your mom does,” Gaby informed him.

Jax’s brows popped. “Cool. Do you sing?”

I shook my head. “Badly and only in the shower. All of Mom’s gift went to my sister.”

Gaby smiled up at me. “Noah’s just being modest about his gifts.”

“Ah, so he’s got out of elevator moves, too?” Alex questioned, his dark eyes dancing with amusement.

Although I shouldn’t have, I laughed at the expression of pure murder on Gaby’s face. She reminded me of Caroline whenever I aggravated the hell out of her. Holding his hands up in surrender, Alex said, “My bad. I won’t go there again.”

“You sure as hell better not.”

Alex turned to Jax. “What Gaby was alluding to is Noah is an Olympic swimmer.”

Jax’s eyes bulged. “No shit.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Now I know why you look familiar. I remember you from watching the games.”

“Considering I was an alternate, I’m not sure how much you saw of me.”

It was my turn for Gaby to pinch my cheek. “I love it when you’re modest.”

“Whatever,” I replied with a grin.

“I don’t think I’ve ever met a gold medal winner,” Jax remarked.

“And I’ve never met a bunch of rising superstars, so I guess we’re even.”

He grinned. “Totally.” At the arrival of two more dark-haired, blue-eyed rockers, Jax said, “Good show, cousins.”

Glancing between them, I asked, “So all of you guys do the band family thing like Gaby does?”

With a grin, Jax replied, “Ethan and Linc are actually my cousins. Ethan belongs to my mom’s brother, Eli, and Linc, belongs to Gabe.”

“Right. The twins from Jacob’s Ladder.”

Linc nodded. “You like the band?”

“I grew up on them.”

Ethan grinned. “So did we.” He shook my hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Once all the members of the Second Sons sat down, we ordered more drinks along with some pub food. Even though I’d never been around many musicians, I really liked the guys. Gaby was right about them being one big family. They joked and ragged on each other just like my cousins did.

After I’d made my way through way too many chicken wings and Corona, I eased back in my chair. At the sound of canned music echoing out of the speakers, Gaby stood up. She flicked her wrist at me. “Come on.”

“Are you about to take me to a backroom to ravish me?” I questioned hopefully.

Gaby threw back her head with a laugh. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“I thought it was *you* who always ravished *me*.”

“I’m an equally opportunity lover, not to mention horny as hell after what happened earlier between us.”

With a roll of her eyes, Gaby replied, “I wanted to dance with you, not screw you.”

At my grimace, Gaby wagged a finger at me. “Now listen here, Danny Boy, if you’re going to date a Latina/Italian mix, you’re going to have to get over this aversion to dancing.”

“Did you just call me Danny Boy?”

She grinned. “Yup.”

“That’s such a cliché.”

“Look, it’s pretty much all I know at the moment.”

“I guess I need to educate you more on my heritage.”

“Definitely the Irish side, but you don’t have to worry about your Southern side.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I know all about it because of my uncle Jake. He even lives in the boonies.”

I laughed. “Yeah, that’s where most of my mom’s family lives, too. Hell, we might even be related.”

“I’m pretty sure if you were related to Jake Slater you’d know.”

“Oh, so he’s not one of your blood family. He’s your dad’s band member.”

“Yep. That’s Jax’s dad.”

“I see now.”

“We call them aunt and uncle because they’re practically family. I’m closer to them than some of my family.”

“That’s like Mason’s parents. They’re my cousins, but I call them aunt and uncle because I’m so close to them.

A dreamy look came over Gaby’s face at the mention of Mason. “I wonder if Mason and Laurel are having a good time on their honeymoon.”

“If they’re fucking each other’s brains out, then I’m sure they are.”

She scowled at me. “A honeymoon is about more than just sex.”

“And what would that be?”

“It’s about love and romance and intimacy.”

“You sound like my sister after she’s read a book with some half-naked dude on the cover.”

Gaby laughed. “I guess she and I have a lot in common.”

Since I wanted to derail any more talk of love for the moment, I decided to somewhat change the subject. “Speaking of sisters, what’s the deal with Bella and Jude?” I asked.

Gaby’s gaze pinged between the two of them. “You noticed that?”

Snorting, I replied, “I’m pretty sure you could cut the unresolved sexual tension between them with a chainsaw.”

“That’s because they want to rip each other’s clothes off and bang each other.”

A smirk curved on my lips. “So, we have a lot in common with them?”

With an impish grin, she replied, “Yeah.”

“What’s stopping them?”

“Too much baggage.”

“Like what?”

“Well, there’s the fact they’ve been friends since we were kids.”

“So were we,” I countered.

Gaby shook her head. “We weren’t even in the same league. You were an acquaintance from my childhood that I maybe saw at yearly birthday parties. Bella and Jude were raised as part of an extended family because of the band.”

“Let me guess. Because of how they grew up, it’s kinda taboo for them to get together?”

“For Jude it definitely is. He struggles with seeing Bella as a little sister, especially since she’s five years younger than him.”

“Maybe she could just call him daddy in bed?” I suggested.

Gaby rolled her eyes but laughed in spite of herself. “I’m pretty sure that won’t help.”

“It’s worth a try.” Wagging my brows, I added, “Since I’m older, you could totally call me daddy.”

Wrinkling her nose, Gaby replied, “Ew, I don’t find that even remotely sexy.”

“Have you ever even tried?”

“No. And I’m not going to.”

“I’m totally going to get you to call me daddy.”

“Don’t count on it.”

“Are you challenging me?”

Her dark eyes flared defiantly. “You can take it how you want to, but I will never, *ever* call you daddy.”

“Challenge accepted.

“Dream on, Fitzgerald,” she mused, her breath fanning against my cheek.

Jesus. If we kept this up, I was going to throw a boner on the dance floor. “Back to Bella and Jude,” I suggested.

“What about them?”

“Besides the age thing, why can’t Bella and Jude be together?”

“I think it’s more the fact if they got together and things didn’t work out, it would ruin things for more than just them.”

“I see.”

“Because neither one of them is willing to stick their neck out, they’re trapped in this hellish limbo.”

“Jesus, that sucks.”

Gaby’s expression saddened. “I know. Since Bella turned eighteen, it’s been like this. It’s this vicious cycle where they both keep getting involved with other people, which always ends badly. Jude was even married for a couple of years.”

“Was he like cheating with Bella?”

Her eyes widened. “God no. It just didn’t work out.” She exhaled raggedly. “More than anything in the world, I want them to be happy, and deep down, I know that’s being together.”

“I can’t imagine having to be around forbidden fruit like that all that time and pretending like I’m not dying on the inside.”

“I know.” Suddenly Gaby jerked in my arms. “Oh my God.”

“Are you okay?”

“Maybe we can fan the fires a little between them.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I want you to dance with Bella.”

Oh hell no. Of all the things she had to ask me, why did it have to be that? “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“First of all, I suck at dancing.”

“You do not.” At my pointed look, she added, “While you’re not great at waltzing, you have a lot of potential.”

“Bullshit.”

“You do. You’ve been doing a great job dancing with me now.”

“Stop trying to suck up to me.”

“It’s the truth. And I’m not asking you to waltz with Gaby, just slow dance.”

“And that brings me to reason number two. I don’t think you’re really thinking it through about having me and your sister pressed up against each other.”

“While I’m certain there’s nothing on her end where you’re concerned, I’m pretty confident there’s nothing about her for you.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then what will it hurt?”

In the end, I really didn’t have an answer except to continue whining like a little bitch. At my continued silence, Gaby took my hand in hers. “Please do this for me?” After poking out her bottom lip, Gaby fluttered her lashes at me.

“You don’t play fair.”

“I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

“How?”

Without even missing a beat, Gaby replied, “A blow job in the location of your choice.”

Now that had my attention. “You mean if after I dance with Bella, I wanted to take you to the bathroom then you’d have to do it? Or maybe in the alley.”

Although I could tell both scenarios were disgusting to Gaby, she responded with an enthusiastic, “Yep.”

“Hmm, that’s very tempting.”

“Just dance with Bella, and the temptation can be a reality.”

One final look at Gaby’s red, full lips, and I was done for. I turned my attention to the end of the table. “Hey, Bella?”

She jerked her head up from her phone. “Yeah?”

“You look bored as hell.”

“And?”

“I think we should do something about that, don’t you?”

A grin curved on her lips. “What did you have in mind, Noah?”

“A dance.”

My question resulted in an epic WTF look from Bella and had Jude’s blue eyes narrowing on me. “You’re joking, right?” she asked.

“Absolutely not. There’s nothing else in the world I want to do than dance with you.”

Bella brows furrowed as she glanced between me and Gaby. At what must’ve been a look of “It’s all good,” from Gaby, she put her phone on the table. “But you can’t dance,” she teasingly replied.

Hearty laughter echoed around the table. “True. But I figured between you and Gaby, I might actually learn

something.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Jude staring at Bella. If she had merely looked over at him, she would’ve seen just how much he wanted her. It was written all over his face and in how tense his body was. Jesus, if he was getting this worked up over Bella’s sister’s boyfriend asking her to dance, what the hell was it like for him when it was an unattached dude scamming on her?

Rising out of her chair, she crooked her finger at me. “Let’s dance.”

“Hell, yeah.”

When I walked the length of the table to meet her, I knocked against Jude’s chair. “My bad, man,” I apologized.

He glared up at me. “No prob.”

Oh yeah, I was getting under his skin. I held my hand out to Gaby. After sliding her hand into mine, she followed me out onto the dance floor. When I drew her against me, Jude’s blue eyes tracked our every move. My gaze flicked from his over to Gaby. A satisfied smirk curved on her lips as she watched Jude’s expression.

When Bella cleared her throat, I turned my attention back to her. “I’m sorry.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why are you dancing with me?”

“Do I have to have a reason to want to dance with a beautiful woman?”

With a roll of her dark eyes, she replied, “That was such a line.”

“It was the absolute truth.”

“Be honest.”

“Fine. I’m dancing with you because Gaby asked me to.”

Her eyes widened. “How is it Gaby already has you so whipped?”

I laughed. “Being nice has nothing to do with being whipped.”

“I know. I’m just shocked since you’re a player.”

“For your information, I’m a *reformed* player.”

Bella snorted. “Is that right?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“No offense, but I don’t think enough time has passed for you to truly be reformed.”

“I’m a work in progress,” I replied with a wink. And that was the truth. At the same time, I did feel completely changed. I honestly had no desire to sleep with any other women. I’d seen the *come fuck me eyes* thrown my way over the last week when Gaby and I had been out, but it hadn’t done anything for me. I never thought I’d feel this way, but I was certain that Gaby was it for me. And fuck, yeah, it felt good.

She laughed. “For what it’s worth, I’m proud of you for trying.” With a genuine smile, she added, “Especially since you’re trying for Gaby, and there’s nothing in the world I want more than for her to be happy.”

“It must run in your family since that’s why Gaby asked me to dance with you.”

Her expression darkened. “This is about Jude, isn’t it?”

“Totally.” Jerking my chin over her shoulder, I replied, “And from the way he’s shooting daggers at me right now, I think it’s working.”

“It’s just because he’s being a big brother.”

“Unless you guys are living in Alabama, there’s no way he’s looking at you like a brother.”

Bella stared at me a moment before busting out laughing. “Whatever, Noah.”

“I’m serious. I know I don’t know him that well, but I am a man. I can read what another man is feeling.”

She sighed. “I wish I had yours and Gaby’s belief, but in the end, even if he was jealous about us dancing, it won’t matter.”

“Why don’t you make it matter?”

“And how would I do that?”

“First of all, the two of you need to stop acting like this is fucking high school and remember that you’re grown-ass men and women.”

“We’re not acting like high schoolers,” she protested.

I tilted my head at her. “Are you kidding me? I feel like I’m acting like one by asking you to dance to make him jealous.”

“Ugh, fine. Once again, you’re right.”

“Second, no one else matters except for the two of you. Stop worrying about what will happen with your families if things don’t work out. Life’s too fucking short.”

Bella slowly shook her head back and forth. “Wow, Noah, I never imagined you were so deep.”

“Thanks ... I think.”

“No, I mean it.”

“Does me having depth mean you’ll do something about Jude?”

After nibbling on her bottom lip, Bella finally bobbed her head. “Yes. I will.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear it.” Glancing over my shoulder, I called, “Gaby, I need you desperately.”

My remark was met with whistles as well as Gaby’s wide smile. “Do you?”

“Oh, yes.”

As Gaby rose out of her chair, I danced Bella and me closer to the table. “What are you doing?” Bella hissed.

Ignoring her, I focused on the delusional blond who was still shooting me *eat shit and die* looks. “Jude, my man, considering your mad musical skills, I’m sure you have exceptional rhythm.”

“Maybe,” he grunted.

“Then would you do me a favor and dance with Bella, so I can dance with my girl?”

He cocked his head at me before flicking his hungry gaze over to Bella. Thankfully, she rose to the occasion by holding out her hand to him. “Come on and dance with me for old time’s sake,” she urged, a ghost of a smile playing on her lips.

“I’d love to,” he replied.

More whistling went up around the table. As Jude stood beside me, I ducked my head to quickly whisper in his ear. “Dude, get your head out of your ass and realize the absolute queen right in front of you. It’s never, ever going to get any better than her.”

When I pulled away, he stared wide-eyed before giving a slight jerk of his head. Before I handed Bella off to him, I teasingly added, “Considering you’re thirty, you don’t have much time left.”

“Fuck you,” he muttered under his breath. He then turned his attention to Bella. He took her into his arms with utter and complete reverence. It made even my stone-cold, romance-resistant heart beat a little harder.

Jesus, what the hell was happening to me?

Shaking my head, I tried ridding myself of the thoughts. Instead, I focused on Gaby and her hot-as-fucking-sin dress. Jerking her against me, I danced us away from Jude and Bella. Part of me wished the music would change over to something faster so I could bump and grind on her.

As she watched the two of them dancing, a dreamy smile came over Gaby’s face. When she met my gaze, she reached up to kiss me. It was sweet and very tender. “Thank you, Noah.”

“While you’re very welcome, I do want you to know I plan on calling in your blow job offer ASAP.”

She rolled her eyes. “I would’ve been shocked if you didn’t.”

“You know, to offer that, you’re a good sister.”

“It’s kind of warped when you realize I offered you a blow job to dance with Bella.”

I chuckled. “I think it’s more you’re a people pleaser, and you want everyone to be happy.”

“We both know the road to your happiness lies with your dick.”

For reasons I didn’t understand, her comment wounded me. Once again, what the hell was happening to me? At my silence, she peered up at me. “Don’t tell me I’m wrong.”

With a shake of my head, I replied, “No. But more things make me happy than just my dick.”

Gaby’s dark eyes widened. “I hurt your feelings.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did.”

Gritting my teeth, I replied, “Only a pussy would get their feelings hurt over that statement, and I am most certainly not a pussy.”

“Noah, I’m sorry.”

“Oh fuck. Don’t make it worse by apologizing.”

“I am, and I mean it.” She stared up at me—her dark eyes pooling with emotion. “If there’s anything the last ten days has taught me is there is so much more to you than I ever imagined.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. You’re the total package.”

“Normally this is where I would say something about my package, but I’m not going to do that.”

Gaby laughed. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“You know what. Forget the blow job.”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t need it. It was enough just making you happy.”

Bringing her hand to her forehead, Gaby dramatically replied, “Oh stop. I’m going to swoon.”

“Smart-ass.”

With a grin, she replied, “Joking aside, you’ve been so sweet not just tonight but the last ten days. And because of that, I’m still going to blow you.”

“Damn, woman, you really make me happy.”

Chapter Fifteen: Gaby

When the song ended, Jude and Bella kept dancing. Even though this one was more upbeat, they still stayed pressed together, staring into each other's eyes. "I'd say your plan was a big success," Noah remarked with a grin.

I smiled up at him. "I couldn't have done it with you."

"Anytime, babe. I like helping you make others happy."

Jerking my chin at them, I said, "You're right about me wanting people to be happy. It's not just Bella's happiness that I was thinking of. Since he's like a brother to me, I want Jude to be happy too."

Noah grinned. "I get it. Even though I give them hell sometimes, I want Caroline and Liam to be in love." When my dark brows shot up in surprise, he countered, "What?"

"Nothing."

"Oh no. You're not getting off so easy."

With a shrug, I replied, "It's just surprising that all."

"That I'm not an utter asshole who wants to see his siblings suffer?" Noah countered.

"I meant, that for someone with your past to say something like that about love."

“Just because I was a player, I wasn’t against falling in love.”

I rolled my eyes. “Please.”

“I’m serious.”

“I would say your prior relationship statuses, or lack thereof, would say differently.”

“I’ve been in love before.”

“Have you?”

“Once or twice.”

“Do you even remember their names?”

Without missing a beat, Noah replied, “Elena Collins was my first love. I asked her to Homecoming in ninth grade.”

“Aw, you do remember her.”

With a wicked grin, Noah replied, “She also gave me my first hand job that night.”

Disgust flickered through me. “I should’ve known you’d find a way to make it something sexual.”

Noah laughed. “Hey, we dated for like six months before homecoming. I was due a little below-the-waist appreciation.”

“Once again, you’re a pig.”

“Aren’t all fifteen-year-old dudes?”

“I suppose so.” Cocking my brows at him, I asked, “And what about the second girl?”

“Madison Hunnely.”

“Let me guess. She was your first blow job?”

“Actually, Elena took care of both of those.”

“And Madison?” I prompted.

“I dated her my first year of college.”

My eyes popped wide at his admission. “You dated her a whole year?”

“Most of it.”

“I’m impressed you were actually committed that long.”

“She was a cool girl. She was on a track scholarship, so she totally got being a dedicated athlete.”

“Have you dated a lot of runners?”

“More than a few. I seemed to be really attracted to them.”

I stiffened in his arms. “Because of their build,” I stated more than questioned. As I stared into Noah’s eyes, I couldn’t hide the pain and doubt swirling in them.

“Don’t go there.” When I didn’t respond, Noah brought his hand to my chin, forcing me to look at me. “Do *not* go there,” he commanded again.

“Old habits.”

“You need to bury those old habits.”

“Easier said than done.”

Placing his hands on my cheeks, Noah said, “Hear me when I say this, Gaby. I wasn’t with those girls because of their build.”

I stared intently into his gorgeous blue eyes before finally bobbing my head. “Then what was it about them?”

“They understood competition and how I had to put swimming before anything else.”

“Before anything or *anyone*?”

“Both.”

Surprise filled me at his response. It certainly wasn't the one I was expecting. I'd thought he would have a much more flippant reply about what had attracted him. I wished more than anything he had. The truth was it was even worse.

“What's wrong?” Noah asked.

“I know your reason is supposed to make me feel better about myself, but it doesn't.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don't understand your mindset. I can't comprehend putting anything above the person I care about.”

“I don't know any other way to feel. Practically from the time I was in diapers, my entire life has revolved around swimming. If I want to make the Olympic team again, I have to put it first by continuing to rigorously train.”

“I understand having immense passion for what you do, but I can't imagine putting it before the people in your life.” I swallowed hard. “The one person you care about most of all.” While I'd wanted to say love, I knew it was far too early to be mentioning it even though I was pretty sure I'd fallen for him.

Noah's brows furrowed. “What about your dad? Surely, there's been times when he had to put the band first over your mom.”

I shook my head. “Not since he got with my mom. He knew to be with her, that she had to come first along with his kids.”

“That's not entirely true, is it? I mean, your mom obviously had to live on a tour bus most of the year to ensure

they were together. That alone makes it sound like she sacrificed more than he did.”

“Sure, she made sacrifices, but at the end of the day, she knew without a doubt that if she said it’s me and the kids or the band, it would’ve been her.”

“But it never came down to that, did it?” Noah challenged.

“No, it didn’t because Dad knew how much she’d given up for him: her career as a nurse, what she pictured her life looking like. He worked overtime to make sure Mom knew where she ranked in his life.”

“I wish I could say I’d be the same way.”

“But you can’t.”

He grimaced. “I don’t know. This is all so new.”

“I understand.” As crazy as it sounded, I did understand. It was one thing for him to embrace monogamy to become a reformed manwhore. It was quite another to give up on what had been the sole focus of his existence. And I wasn’t sure I was worth that. Not to someone like Noah, with so much capacity to excel in his sport.

“Fuck me.” Noah then jerked a hand through his hair. “It feels like I’m standing at the edge of a cliff about to be pushed off the side by feelings I’d never expected to have for a girl I’m just getting to know.”

“I’m sorry. I truly am. And I know it’s way too soon to be making any kind of claims of you. These past ten days were just seeing where the two of us together could go, not mapping a real future together.”

Shaking his head, Noah replied, “I know how I feel about you, Gaby. I wasn’t ready to let you go after our first night

together, and I'm still not ready."

"And I don't want to let you go either. But just like that day in your hotel room, I know myself and what I can take in a relationship." I exhaled a ragged breath. "Maybe it's better this came out now," I murmured.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It will make it easier for you to leave tomorrow."

Noah's expression darkened. "Don't think like that."

"How else can I? We're at an impasse—you can't put anyone above your swimming, and I can't date someone who couldn't put me and our relationship first. Where does that leave us?"

He winced as if in pain. "I don't know."

"Me either."

The song ended and switched over to a fast one. I didn't want to let him go, but I did. While Noah started back to the table, I didn't think I could bear sitting back down with the others and pretending like everything was okay. It sure as hell wasn't okay. One sentence had pierced the perfect image of the last ten days. I'd allowed my better judgement to be skewed.

Realizing I was no longer beside him, Noah whirled around to stare quizzically at me. Trying to put on a brave face, I jerked my thumb at the door. "I think I'm going to get to some air."

"Okay."

With tears pooling in my eyes, I pushed my way through the crowd. The closer I got to the door the more I hated myself. What the hell had I been thinking when I agreed to try

for more with Noah? How could I have not seen that his answer I hated had been staring me in the face this entire time? I'd been too preoccupied with the idea of him cheating not to see the bigger landmine. But what I was finally comprehending was worse than him cheating.

"They understood competition and how I had to put swimming before anything else."

There was a bigger claim in Noah's life. His sole focus. His goals. *His swimming.*

"Gaby, wait," Noah called.

I froze. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to turn around. Turning around meant facing him, and I knew if I looked at him, I'd lose my resolve. Instead, I kept my head down, my hair shrouding me.

Noah stepped around to stand in front of me. Pulling my chin up, he surveyed my face before wincing. "Fuck me, I've made you cry."

Swiping my cheeks, I countered, "You didn't mean to do it."

"The last thing in the world I want to do is hurt you."

"I know that."

"Please, Gaby, talk to me."

Peering up at him, I asked a question I shouldn't. "What do we look like when you go back to training?"

"We?"

"Us. As a couple or whatever the hell we are."

"Like I told you before, we live in a technological age where we can still see and talk to each other."

“Give me a more specific version.”

Noah’s brows popped questioningly. “Like how?”

“How would I fit into your life on a daily basis?” When he winced, an ache went through my chest. “Tell me what your day looks like, Noah.”

“I’m up at five to be in the pool for around two hours. After that, I’m go to the gym for an hour or two for strength training. Then I work remotely from nine to five. Once that’s done, it’s a quick dinner and then back to the pool for two hours. Then I have to be in bed by nine to get enough rest.” At what must’ve been the resigned anguish on my face, Noah argued, “But we can still Facetime every night and talk and text during the day. I still have to train on the weekends, but at least I don’t have to work. You could come visit on the weekends.”

More than anything, I wanted it to be enough for me. I already cared about him so much. A long- distance relationship was hard enough to make work, but then when you threw in the demands of his swimming, it was impossible. I couldn’t make it work with Ashton, and he lived in the same city.

Tears flooded my eyes. “I’m so selfish.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am. I’m angry at you for putting your dream and your ambition first. That’s ridiculously selfish. If I truly cared about you as much as I think I do, I should want to support you and be willing to take whatever you can give.”

“But you can’t.”

“At first, I didn’t think I could be with you because I couldn’t compete with your past with women. I know I can’t

compete with swimming.”

“Don’t do this, Gaby.”

“I’m sorry. I have to.”

“Look, up until ten days ago, my life made sense. I knew what I wanted when it came to women and relationships. But one night with you sent me spinning, and now I’m fucking clueless.” He took my face in his hands. “What I do know with absolute certainty is I really fucking like you, and I don’t want to think of not ever seeing you again.”

“Don’t you think I want the same?”

“Obviously not if you’re not willing to try.”

“Damn you, don’t you get it? I’m protecting myself.”

“I don’t know what else to say or do.”

I exhaled a ragged breath. Even though it was tearing me apart inside, I said, “Go back to Colorado. If your way of seeing things changes, then get in touch with me.”

“I can’t give up swimming.”

“You don’t have to give it up. You just have to realize that there’s something more important in your life.” I gripped the front of his shirt before leaning in to give him a kiss. “I’ll catch a ride home with Bella.”

Noah opened his mouth as if to argue with me, but then finally gave a quick jerk of his head. With my emotions spiraling so out of control, I feared I wouldn’t be able to walk away. But somehow, I put one foot in front of the other and made my way back into Eastman’s. I didn’t dare look over my shoulder to see if Noah was watching me.

I can’t look to see if he’s in as much pain as I am.

With Bella and Jude still dancing, I didn't want to interrupt them to take me home. Instead, I powerwalked as fast as I could away from the VIP section. I started down the hall to the bathrooms before bursting into the last door on the left. The familiar smell of the dressing room entered my nose. I'd been back here at ton of times over the years.

Taking my phone out of my pocket, I set up an Uber. As I waited, I paced around the room. The wait was excruciating. I knew that once I was home, though, all the agony would be unleashed. I'd be finding a bottle of tequila to drown my sorrows.

“Look, up until ten days ago, my life made sense. I knew what I wanted in life. But one night with you sent me spinning, and now I'm fucking clueless. What I do know with absolute certainty is I don't want to think of not ever seeing you again.”

That feeling was mutual.

I think I just walked away from the love of my life.

Chapter Sixteen: Noah

One Month Later

As my arms and legs sliced through the water, I tried focusing on the task before me. Drawing air into my lungs, exhaling it out, keeping my movements sleek. Although it was taxing, the physical side was easier than the emotional. As hard as I tried, I couldn't get Gaby out of my mind. It wasn't just when I was in the water. Thoughts of her filled my mind from the moment I woke up to the moment I laid my head on the pillow at night.

The rational side of me understood why she had cut things off. What woman would possibly want to be second best to anyone or anything? She deserved all of me, and I couldn't give that to her. If she'd only wanted a fuck buddy, we could've worked with that. But that wasn't who Gaby was. She was someone who wanted love, and she deserved it.

When my final lap was done and my muscles ached in agony, I pulled myself out of the pool. After peeling off my goggles and swim cap, I slung a towel around me. As I started to the locker room, my roommate, Craig, slung an arm around my shoulder. "Hey, Fitzzy, the gang is heading out to grab a quick bite. Wanna come?"

I shook my head. “I’m just going to grab a shower and then head home to crash.”

His dark brows slanted. “You haven’t been out with us in like weeks, Fitzzy.”

With a shrug, I replied, “Sorry, man. I just haven’t been in the mood.”

“What the hell are you going to eat? Last time I checked, we didn’t have much in the fridge except that scampi you made.”

At the mention of scampi, my stomach twisted at the thought of fixing it for Gaby. Fuck, that had been an incredible night. Cooking for her, having her there as I trained. *The hot tub*. She’d loved my food, and I’d fucking loved looking after her and feeding her. I’d never realized the satisfaction in cooking for someone you cared about.

Since then, food had lost its allure. I ate because I needed the fuel. “I’m not that hungry.”

After eyeing me curiously, he nodded. “Let me know if you want us to bring you anything back.”

“Thanks, man.”

Once I pulled off my jammers, I turned on the shower. With the steam radiating off the tile, I stepped under the stream. While I should’ve been stoked that I’d shaved a few seconds off my time in the last few weeks, it didn’t bring any happiness. Instead, I just felt like a zombie going through the motions.

It was when I was out of the shower and checked my phone that my heart skipped a beat. My breath hitched in my chest at the sight it was from Bella.

Just thought you'd like to know Gaby's birthday is this weekend.

I rubbed the damp area over my heart as images of Gaby flashed through my mind. I didn't know what the fuck to possibly reply. Finally, I settled on

Wish her Happy Birthday for me.

Bella:

We're having a party for her at our beach house in Puerto Vallarta on Saturday evening. My parents and I are flying down on Friday. Gaby's already there.

I frowned at the screen. Why the hell was she telling me about Gaby's party? It wasn't like I was invited or would be going. Just the thought of Gaby having fun with a new potential man made me want to puke.

Gritting my teeth, I replied,

Sounds fun.

Surprised flooded me when my phone rang. "Hey, Bella."

"Sounds fun"? That's all you have to say?" she demanded.

"Why are you even calling me?"

"Considering you and Gaby meddled in my love life, I feel it's only fair that I meddle in yours."

I couldn't help the laugh that bubbled from my lips. "You have a point."

Bella drew in a ragged breath. "She's miserable without you, Noah."

Doubling over, I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. "She is?"

"Worse than I've ever seen her."

"I know that feeling. The last month has been hell."

"Then what the fuck are you going to do about it?" Bella demanded.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"Yeah, I just wasn't expecting that tone."

"The time for subtlety has passed."

"Says the chick whose been hung up on a guy for practically a decade."

Silence came over the line. Fuck. I'd really screwed up mentioning Jude. "Sorry. I—"

"No. You're right. But maybe I don't want to see you and Gaby make the same mistakes that Jude and I did."

"What are you suggesting?"

"You could find a way to put her first in your life."

I groaned. "Don't you think I've been over this a thousand times? She and I both know I can't give up swimming."

"I didn't ask you to, did I?"

"Well, no, but—"

"You're a smart guy, Noah. Surely, there's a way for you to make Gaby feel first in your life."

"Like I haven't been trying to figure that out this past month," I growled.

“It’s hard when you have to think with the head above your waist, isn’t it?” Bella teased.

I barked out a laugh. “Epicly hard.” As I rubbed the water from my forehead, I thought about what Gaby had said that night at Eastman’s. “She said that if I went back home and changed my mind to let her know.”

“Have you?”

I thought about the past agonizing month. I thought about how I’d been happier the ten days I was with Gaby than the past couple of years. I didn’t know what my decision would mean to my swimming, but I knew I couldn’t stay feeling like I was.

If there was one thing that I’d gone over and over in my head during the last four weeks, was what Gaby had said about her dad. At first, I hadn’t really believed her. Surely he wouldn’t have given up his band, *his life’s passion*, for his wife and family. But as I looked at her dad with a different lens—one that saw love as his priority, his family as his number one—I saw that Gaby was right. *He’d made sure his family knew they were vital to him.* His family was his passion. Music still lived in his soul and directed part of his life, but his family? They determined his focus and trajectory. He’d had a career and love.

And I knew I wanted that for myself too. I was certain that I’d never meet anyone who came close to Gaby. “Yeah, I have,” I choked out.

“Good. Then meet us at the small plane hangar at Hartsfield Jackson on Friday night at five.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Do I sound like I’m joking?”

“Actually, you sound like if I don’t show up, you’re going to hunt me down and cut my balls off.”

“Tempting, but I think I’ll pass.”

The last thing on earth I needed to do was take time away from practice again. At the same time, there wasn’t anything more in the world I wanted than to see Gaby. After the last month of hell, I didn’t think I could bear another one.

“Fine. I’ll be there.”

Chapter Seventeen: Noah

“Holy shit,” I muttered, as I took in the inside of the jet. When Bella had told me to meet at the small plane hangar, I hadn’t quite comprehended that she was offering me to fly down with them on a private jet. Sure, it belonged to AJ’s band, but at the same time, it was still a very luxurious and very private jet. While I’d flown privately with the Olympic team, we’d never been in anything like this.

“First time?” Alex teasingly asked.

“While I haven’t heard that one since I was sixteen, yeah, it’s my first time,” I joked.

“I’m glad we could take your jet virginity.”

Glancing at Bella, I then lowered my voice. “Have you gone Mile High Club up in here?”

Before Alex could answer, Bella replied, “Only with his hand.”

I busted out laughing. “Damn, bro, she roasted you.”

With a grin, Bella patted her brother’s scowling cheek. “That’s what little brothers are for.”

“I have to agree. I give my little brother so much shit. Of course, he can serve it right back to me.”

“Yeah, so do I.” Jerking his chin at Bella, he replied, “So sleep with one eye open tonight.”

“Ooh, I’m so scared,” Bella replied.

I’d just flopped down in my seat when Gaby’s parents appeared in the jet’s doorway. At the sight of AJ, I shifted anxiously. After the elevator incident, I’d never been a favorite of his, but after Gaby and I had stopped seeing each other, I could only imagine his loathing for me had grown. Yep, my assumptions were right when his very disgusted gaze sharpened on me.

“What is *he* doing here?” AJ said *he* in the same tone as “piece of shit.”

“He’s coming with us to surprise Gaby and get her back.” Bella wagged a finger in front of her dad’s face. “I’m pretty sure you promised Gaby you’d be nice to him, didn’t you?” she countered.

“That was before she came home crying and didn’t stop for weeks.”

At my wince, Bella shook her head. “In Noah’s defense, that wasn’t his fault. It was Gaby’s decision to leave him, and he’s been miserable too.”

“Whatever,” AJ replied before collapsing into one of the leather seats. At his continued scowl, sweat broke out along my forehead. Fuck me, this was going to be a long plane ride.

Thankfully, Gaby’s mom, Mia, broke out into a wide smile at the sight of me. “Noah, it’s so good to see you again.”

After opening her arms, I rose out of my seat and walked into her embrace. When I glanced over her shoulder, AJ glowered at me. “It’s nice seeing you again, too, Mrs. Resendiz.”

She patted my back before pulling back to smile at me. “Oh God, you’re going to make me feel old calling me that.”

Winking, I replied, “As amazing as you look, there’s no way you could feel old. You look like Gaby and Bella’s older sister.”

Her dark eyes glittered with happiness. “I knew I liked you.”

With a grin, I replied, “You don’t know how glad I am to hear that.”

“Spare me,” AJ grumbled.

After shooting her husband a look, she said, “Please call me Mia.”

“Yes, ma’am. I mean, Mia.”

She patted my cheek with a smile. “You know it’s so sweet of you wanting to surprise Gaby like this.”

“I can’t take the credit. It was pretty much Bella’s idea.”

Mia laughed. “My daughters certainly inherited their father’s art of persuasion.”

“Even without Bella’s persuasion, I couldn’t bear the thought of not being there for Gaby’s birthday.

While a chorus of “Aww,” rang from Mia and Bella, AJ countered, “Trust me. She wasn’t going to be alone with all her family and friends there.”

My eyes bulged at my mistake. “Right. Um, I just meant that I didn’t want her to be missing me like I would be missing her.”

“And that’s exactly why you had to come along,” Bella said with a grin.

“Yes, we’re so glad you took Bella’s offer to fly and stay with us for free,” AJ mused through gritted teeth.

Jesus, there was no winning with this guy. Glancing between him and Mia, I swallowed hard. “I don’t want to impose. I’ll be happy to reimburse you for my flight and find somewhere else to stay.”

Both Mia and Bella turned wrathful expressions on AJ. “That is totally unnecessary. Right, Dad?” Bella questioned.

Mia patted my arm. “Excuse my husband. Sometimes he becomes an unimaginable stronzo.” After glaring at AJ, she smiled brightly at me. “Just so you know, stronzo means asshole in Italian.”

“I imagined as much,” I replied with a tentative smile.

“To which I then become a raging la cagna.”

“Let me guess. A bitch?”

She beamed. “Look at you. You’ll be cussing him in Italian before you know it.”

With a nervous laugh, I replied, “I don’t know about that.”

After shooting AJ one last murderous gaze, she then sat down in the row across from me. The pilot came over the intercom to inform us to buckle our seatbelts and prepare for takeoff. With one final smoldering look of disgust at me, AJ took a seat next to Mia. Before he could get his seatbelt on, she slammed her gigantic purse onto his lap, which caused me to wince in what I could only imagine was a set of wracked-up balls.

“Fuck,” he grunted before huffing and puffing out a few breaths.

“Oops, my bad. Would you stow that for me?” she replied, sweetly.

Without a word, he grabbed the purse and shoved it under his seat. When I met Mia’s gaze, she winked at me. Since I didn’t want to piss AJ off when his balls were in agony, I ducked my head where he couldn’t see my smile.

Focusing on my phone, I scrolled through social media as the jet taxied down the runway before taking off. Once we were cruising in the air, the seatbelts came off, and Bella rose out of her chair to get something out of the fridge. When she returned, she offered me a water.

“Thanks,” I replied, as I twisted open the cap.

“No problem.”

After sucking down a cold gulp, I eyed Bella curiously. “I think I need your help.”

“I already told you that the best present you could get Gaby would be you.”

With a chuckle, I replied, “No. It’s more about the fact I’ve never been to a Mexican birthday party. I wanted to know what I should expect, so I don’t make a fool out of myself and embarrass Gaby.”

Bella smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ve got you covered.” After putting her water down, she rose out of her chair again. “First off, you want to kiss on the right cheek, and say, ‘Mucho gusto.’” Bella motioned between us. “Here, you can practice on me.”

“I know we’re not officially together anymore, but I’m still sure your sister wouldn’t appreciate me kissing you.”

Bella laughed. “You’re not kissing me on the lips. It’s just a way to show hospitality in Mexico.”

Somehow, I still thought Gaby wouldn’t like me showing Bella any hospitality. Sure, I’d danced with her at the bar, but that had been Gaby’s suggestion. Besides Bella being off limits, I was pretty sure she wouldn’t want me kissing any semi attractive woman who she might construe as a threat. “I dunno,” I replied warily.

“Babe, let Noah practice on you,” Mia suggested.

Oh fuck me. What was Mia thinking suggesting the two of us kiss each other? At the sour expression on AJ’s face, Mia might as well have volunteered him for a colonoscopy. Quickly, I shook my head. “That’s not necessary. I think I have it.”

With amusement twinkling in Mia’s eyes, she shook her head. “AJ is happy to help.” Tilting her head at him, she asked, “Aren’t you, babe?”

I guess he was afraid of getting nailed in the balls with her purse again because he grumbled, “Whatever,” before rising to his feet. He then stared me down through hooded lids as if daring me to even go through with it.

It was at that moment that realized how far a man was willing to go for the woman he loved. Oh shit. Did I say love?

Do I love Gaby?

On the one hand, I knew it was way too fast, right? At the same time, thinking of loving her felt right, which also meant I was in a hell of a lot of trouble.

“What’s the problem?” AJ demanded, bringing me out of my thoughts.

“Right.” Leaning in, I brought my lips to AJ’s right cheek. The moment I felt his skin on my lips, I jerked away. “Mucho gusto,” I muttered.

“Your turn,” Mia instructed AJ.

“Amorcito Mio, you’re killing me.”

Mia shot AJ a sickeningly sweet smile. “Oh, you only think it’s bad now. Just wait until you sleep alone this entire trip.”

Grabbing me by the shoulders a little harder than he had to, AJ leaned in to kiss my cheek. “Mucho gusto,” he spat.

Yeah, I was *so* not feeling welcomed. “Thanks,” I muttered before I turned back to Bella. “What else do I need to know?” This time I was a lot less enthusiastic when I asked. Mainly it was out of fear of having to do anything else to AJ.

Bella must’ve picked up on my apprehension because she gave me a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, Noah. Just the fact you’re showing up for Gaby will make you the hero of the party.”

At AJ’s contemptuous snort, something turned over in me. Maybe it was the change of altitude.

As I sat there with a sheen of sweat popping out along my forehead, I realized I had two choices. I could continue to take the abuse from AJ because I believed in some way I deserved it for my past, or I could stand up to him. Apparently, my balls felt bigger over Mexico because I went with the second choice.

“AJ, I need to say something.”

He jerked his gaze from his phone. “And what is that?”

Oh shit. This was it. Now or never time. Rising out of my seat, I went over to stand in front of him. I couldn't help noticing the apprehensive looks Mia and Bella were throwing me.

“You've made it pretty apparent you hate my guts, and I can totally understand why. We didn't have the best reintroduction with what happened with Gaby and me in the elevator. I'm not a father yet, so I can only imagine how it made you feel to see your daughter like that. I apologized then, and I'm apologizing again now.”

When he opened his mouth, I held up my hand. “Please let me finish.”

AJ crossed his arms over his chest. “Continue.”

“It's no secret that before Gaby I had a bad reputation with women. It was the reason she initially didn't want to date me after we slept together after the reception—”

AJ's dark eyes popped wide. “You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

Realizing my mistake, I grimaced. “Shit, I really didn't mean to tell you that.”

“I sure as hell hope not.”

“Anyway, what I meant to say is that I pursued Gaby, so she could see there was more to me than just a—”

“Manwhoring player who broke women's hearts?” AJ suggested.

Both Mia and Bella gasped in horror, but I ignored them. “Yes, I suppose that would be a good description of me.” I swallowed hard. “Or at least my former self. Here's the thing. Being with Gaby those two days showed me she was just as

beautiful on the inside as she was the outside. There was so much to like about her that didn't pertain to sex—her humor, the way she always put me in my place, and the way I could be myself when I'm with her.”

With AJ's eyes narrowing on me, I shifted on my feet. “The main point of all of this is I really like your daughter. I was an idiot to let her go, and I'm going to do everything within my power to make sure she never leaves again. Trust me when I say I'm in for the long haul. Each and every day I'm going to try to be worthy of the woman she is. More than anything, I'd really like for you to be onboard with our relationship.”

“Is that right?”

I nodded. “But at the same time, the way you're treating me has to stop. I won't let you disrespect her by disrespecting me anymore.”

A low whistle came from three seats behind AJ. Alex had taken out his ear pods and apparently heard all of our conversation along with his mom and sister. I wanted to shoot him a *fuck off* look, but he raised his fist. “Well said, Noah.”

I flashed him a quick smile before focusing back on his dad. AJ remained stone-cold silent. When he rose out of his seat, I braced myself for him to punch me. Instead, he reached out his hand. My shocked gaze bobbed from it back to him.

“Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For putting me in my well-deserved place.”

Holy shit. “That wasn't what I intended.”

“I know. But I needed it. I've been a nasty son of a bitch.”

“You can say that again,” Mia remarked.

After shooting Mia a look, AJ focused back on me. “Once again, I’m sorry. No one gives you a manual on how to raise your young adult daughters.” He shook his head. “But that’s still no excuse for the way I’ve treated you, especially since you’ve been nothing but honorable towards Gaby.”

“Thank you.” Cocking my brows, I asked, “So, we’re cool now?”

“As long as you don’t break her heart, I won’t break your legs.”

“I thought you had people you could call to do that,” I countered with a laugh.

AJ flashed me a toothy grin. “Yeah, but where’s the fun in that?”

“Touché,” I replied.

“There is one thing Bella forgot to mention when it comes to a Mexican party.”

“Pin the Tail on the Gringo?” I suggested.

AJ laughed. “No, smart-ass. I’m talking about the dancing.”

With a groan, I buried my head in my hands. “Fuck me. Not dancing,” I muttered.

When I peeked through my fingers, AJ shot me an odd look. “I didn’t expect that reaction.”

“It’s just I’m not a big fan of it.”

Bella nodded. “He thinks he sucks at it.” She gave me a smile. “You’re really not bad.”

“Thanks,” I grumbled.

“I mean it.”

After clapping his hands together, AJ motioned for me to come with him. “Come on. Let me teach you a basic Cumbia, so you can wow Gaby.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

Cocking my brows at him, I countered, “Five minutes ago you hated me and now you want to teach me a dance to impress Gaby?”

He held out his hand to me. “Trust me. Any idiot can do a basic Cumbia.”

“I think there’s both an insult and a compliment in there.”

Chuckling, AJ replied, “I mean it as a compliment.”

“Yeah, it’s easy for you because you’re Mr. Latin Lover with the moves.”

He grinned. “See, I knew deep down I really liked you.”

Alex snorted. “Don’t stroke his ego, Noah.”

I laughed when AJ shot him a look. “Make yourself useful and put on some music,” he barked.

“Yeah, yeah,” Alex grunted before going over to the music system. Apparently, he knew just what AJ would want because when the beat echoed through the cabin, AJ nodded. “*Baila Este Cumbia*. Good choice, mijo.”

“You’re welcome,” Alex replied before sinking back down in his seat.

With a wink, he said, “Anything for Selenas.”

“Huh?” I asked.

“Sorry, it’s a line from a movie. I take it you don’t know the Tejano superstar that was Selena?”

“Not really,” I admitted.

AJ nodded. “I’ve got a lot to acquaint you with. Due to my immense love of her, my kids were raised on her, so you need your Selena schooling.”

“Good to know.”

“Once I teach you the dance, we’ll watch the movie as our inflight entertainment.”

“If you say so,” I mused.

Clapping his hands together, AJ said, “Okay, back to the Cumbia.” He motioned to my feet.

“First, the pattern starts with putting your right foot back and keeping your left in place. Then your left steps back and your right stays in place.” He did the motions as he said them. After doing them a few times, he jerked his chin at me. “Give it a try.”

“Will you do me a favor?”

AJ’s brows furrowed in confusion. “Yeah?”

“Will you tell Gaby how much she owes me for dancing with you like this?”

With a laugh, AJ replied, “Sure thing.”

I bit my tongue to keep from saying that Gaby was seriously going to owe me sexually for undergoing this humiliation. Like I deserved twice daily blow jobs. Maybe even us taking it to the next level with some backdoor action.

Drawing in a deep breath, I resigned myself to my fate and started moving my feet. AJ started counting, “One, two, three,

four, pause and then five, six, seven, eight.”

I didn't dare look up from my feet to see the expressions on the others' faces. It was all too mortifying. Give me a highly-charged swim trial any day over this. Maybe the military should think of instigating it as a form of torture over waterboarding.

“Don't dangle your arms.”

Jerking my gaze to AJ, I argued, “I wasn't.”

AJ shot me a look. “Bring them up, bend them at the elbow, and then keep small circles between your hips and your shoulders. Don't go outside of that range.”

“Like I know what the fuck that means,” I grunted. But I tried mimicking what he did.

He laughed. “You've got it.”

Holy shit. I actually did. Maybe he was right and any idiot could do it.

“Okay, let's do it together.”

My eyes popped wide at his statement. “You want me to dance ... with you?”

Crossing his arms over his chest, AJ challenged, “You got a problem dancing with me?”

Fuck me. How the hell was I supposed to get out of this? “Uh, well—”

“Give me your hand,” he commanded.

Oh shit, we were really doing this. My frantic gaze swung over to where Bella and Mia were sitting. “Wait a minute, Dad,” Bella said. Relief flooded me that she had saved me

from the hell of dancing with AJ. Since we'd danced together before, I hoped she was about to offer her services.

“What?” he demanded.

She waved her phone at him. “I just wanted you to give me a moment, so I could video this.”

“Oh come on!” I bellowed.

Giggling, she replied, “I'm sorry. I have to.”

With a glare, I countered, “The only reason I'm allowing this is so you can show Gaby in case she's determined not to take me back.”

Bella grinned. “After she sees this, I don't think you have anything to worry about ever again.”

As I took AJ's hands in mine and died a little death, I hoped and prayed she was right.

Chapter Eighteen: Gaby

As the foamy waves crashed along the shore, I fought the urge to cry for the millionth time in the last month. It amazed me I still had tears to shed, and that I hadn't somehow managed to dehydrate myself. It had also become evident that the only thing I was halfway decent at during the last thirty days was crying.

At first, I'd thrown myself into work. My literal blood, sweat, and tears had gone into getting my school ready. Once I'd taken care of the physical aspects—painting walls, unpacking boxes of equipment, and setting up the registration process—I started working on hiring my staff.

That only lasted one day.

On my second interview for a speech therapist, she mentioned how her work as a lifeguard with developmentally delayed kids had inspired her to develop speech lessons that could be done in a swimming pool.

If the situation hadn't been so dire, her expression at my weeping would've been comical. After assuring that it was about me and not her, I'd practically pushed her out the door while lying that I'd be in touch. With that fiasco fresh in my mind, I decided I needed a break.

I then got the bright idea that a change of scenery might help, so I'd come to Mexico. But I should've realized you can never run from heartache. Just like the broken organ in your chest remains beating, the pain follows you across time and distance.

I'd spent the last week taking long walks on the beach or going to mass at the church my abuelita had taken me to when I was a kid. Being there was both comforting and agonizing, considering she had passed when I was eight. After spending the last few days sitting on the cathedral benches, today I warily eyed the confessional. For reasons I couldn't imagine, I pushed myself to my feet and started inside the box.

Once I sat down, I bowed my head. The shade slid open, and a kind voice spoke to me in Spanish. "Yes, my child."

I replied back to him in Spanish. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been ..." I swallowed. "Obviously far too long since my last confession."

"What is on your heart, my child?"

A mirthless laugh bubbled from my lips. "My heart? It's broken."

"What has happened?"

Through my sobs, I told the priest about everything that had transpired between Noah and myself. Well, I did manage to keep it as G-rated as possible so as not to horrify him or potentially condemn me into reciting the rosary too many times. When I finished, tears dripped from my cheeks onto my lap.

"From what you describe, you come from a home where love has always been sacrificial. That is how it should be in marriage. It is the same with the love of Christ. You aren't

asking more than you should. If this isn't what the man is capable of giving, then it was best to cut things off between you. While it might cause heartache now, you are protecting yourself from more pain in the future.”

Although his words should've made me feel better, they didn't. Instead, I just cried harder. “Pray for the Lord to give you strength and direction. That's the only thing that will heal you.”

“Yes, Father,” I replied.

I was so sick of crying and took myself home. *When will I stop feeling so defeated? So alone?* I still couldn't understand how I could feel so incredibly bereft when I'd only known Noah *intimately* for such a short time. *Shouldn't I be over this loneliness by now?* How I wished my parents' and siblings' flight had been early. That was the thought that hit me when I arrived home to a silent house.

Tomorrow I would turn twenty-three. Like every year since I was born, I'd celebrate with my dad's extended family in Mexico. My abuelo had been a first-generation immigrant, so all of his family still resided in Guadalajara where he was from. Tomorrow evening there would be an enormous party with all my favorite foods. Since I was now of age, I also got to partake in my favorite alcohol, which was white tequila.

Turning my head, I eyed the two crates that had arrived yesterday. Tequila wasn't just my favorite alcohol—it was the drink of choice for most of my family. Although we might attend mass regularly, it never kept us from imbibing spirits.

It was then a thought echoed through me. There was only one thing that was going to get me through my birthday all alone.

And that was tequila.

Lots and lots of pure agave tequila. Lucky for me I found myself in the state of Jalisco, which housed the famous tequila fields. That meant I had the purest and best at my disposal. The kind that would obliterate your mind, body, and soul.

Glancing around the empty kitchen, I sighed. There was nothing more pathetic than getting shit-faced by yourself, but desperate times called for desperate measures. After grabbing a hammer out of the utility drawer, I went over to the crate, popped it open, and dug through the packing materials for a bottle. Once I had one in hand, I went to the cabinet and took out a shot glass.

I poured the tequila to the brim and then raised the glass to toast my imaginary guests. “This first shot is for being a dumb chick who caught feelings from what was supposed to be a one-night stand.”

Flipping my head back, I let the bitter gulp burn its way down my throat to where it radiated warmth through my stomach. “Oh yeah, that’s good stuff.” Grabbing the bottle, I poured another one. “And this one goes down for being betrayed by my vagina once again.” I stared contemptuously down at my crotch. “Without you leading me to make poor decisions, I would’ve never had a one-night stand in the first place.” *I wouldn’t have broken my heart.*

Another flick of my wrist, another scorching fiery gulp, another lamentation. “This shot is for being stupid enough to think after all my fucked-up history with men that Noah would actually put me first in his life.”

That one burned exceptionally hard.

The priest's words kept rattling around in my brain ... or was it the tequila. I was hopelessly aware that I came from an exceptional home. True love. Sacrificial. *It's why I want that for myself.* But was he right?

"You aren't asking more than you should. If this isn't what the man is capable of giving, then it was best to cut things off between you. While it might cause heartache now, you are protecting yourself from more pain in the future."

"Pray for the Lord to give you strength and direction. That's the only thing that will heal you," I muttered. "Well, not right now, Father. I'm still stuck in the heartache, and not quite ready to pray that. Tequila is my saving grace at the moment."

By the seventh shot, I'd not only started slurring, but my shaky hands would no longer allow me to pour. So, I merely tipped the bottle back and sucked it down.

Tequila didn't make my clothes fall off, but it did make me want to sing and dance. After turning on the stereo system, I flipped through the channels until I found a song I liked. I then proceeded to dance around the living room, spilling tequila in my wake along with singing off-key. Normally, I had a decent voice that I'd inherited from Dad, but it waned when I was drunk.

I don't know how long I'd been singing and dancing when a voice shouted at me. "Gaby!"

At the sound of my name, I startled, sending the tequila bottle to the floor, shattering. I spun around, which caused my head to swim. Since I didn't have my contacts in and had left my glasses in the car, I could barely make out the forms in front of me. But then realization hit me.

My parents and siblings stood in the doorway staring at me with a mixture of both shock and horror. My lips curved in a smile. “Ay dios mio, mi familia! You scared the shit out of me.” I giggled. “Like seriously, I almost pissed my pants.”

Mom and Dad exchanged worried glances. “Mija, are you plastered?” Dad asked.

I threw my head back with a laugh at him using that word to describe me. “Oh yeah, Papi. I’m big time plastered.”

When Alex snorted at my response, Bella smacked the back of his head. “Ow,” he muttered.

While Dad went over to turn the music off, Mom took a tentative step towards me. “Sweetheart, we have a surprise for your party tomorrow,” she began.

I shook my head furiously, which caused the room to spin. I momentarily staggered to the side before I gripped onto one of the bar stools to keep me from face-planting. It was then I decided it was safer to wag my finger. “Nope. No surprises.”

Mom smiled. “I think you’ll like this one.”

Since one wasn’t getting it done, I wagged both my fingers this time. “I don’t want any surprises. But most of all, I’ve decided I don’t want a party.”

“But you always love celebrating your birthday,” Mom protested.

“Not this year. Not when I’m in a living hell of my own making.” A burning hiccup escaped my lips. “I don’t want to see happy couples dancing when I’m all alone. Not to mention blowing out the candles on a wish that won’t come true.”

Mom and Dad once again exchanged a look. “It won’t just be couples. We’ve invited your friends. All your family from

Guadalajara will be there,” Dad said in a low voice.

My chin trembled as I fought not to cry. “Don’t you get it? The only person who matters and who I want to see won’t be there.” Tears pooled in my eyes. “Noah won’t be there.”

Dad winked at me. “You never know. Stranger things have happened.”

I threw my hands up in frustration. “Stop talking in fucking riddles!”

Mom reached for me. “Gaby, if you’ll—”

Jerking away from her, I shook my head. “It’s my fault my birthday is ruined. I asked too much of him. I was a fool who asked for him to put me first.” I hiccupped a cry. “But he couldn’t, and it broke my fucking heart.”

I knew I was headed for a drunk crying jag, so I started for the stairs. After tripping my way up them, I ran as best I could to my bedroom. When I got inside, I doubled over at the knees. For the next few minutes, I desperately tried to regulate my breathing.

Hands slid around my head to cover my eyes. “Guess who?”

Screaming, I whirled around. Without waiting a moment to process who the stranger was in front of me, I jerked my knee up, nailing him in the junk. *Hard.*

The dude immediately dropped to the floor, groaning in agony. A few seconds passed before a familiar voice moaned, “Fuck, Gaby!”

Squinting my eyes, I lurched forward. “Noah?”

Dad rushed into the room with Mom close on his heels. “Why the fuck were you screaming?”

“He snuck up behind me, and I didn’t have my contacts in, remember?”

Motioning to the floor, Dad asked, “Why is he writhing in pain?”

“I nailed him in the balls.”

Dad winced and brought his hands in front of his crotch. “Man, that’s got to hurt.”

“It does,” Noah grunted.

“Are you okay, Mija?” Dad asked.

“That’s a loaded question, don’t you think?”

He nodded. “I’ll go grab an ice pack for his dick.”

Mom must’ve sensed Noah and I needed to be alone because she left with Dad. I then clumsily dropped to the ground before crawling to sit beside Noah. “You’re going to hate me even more now, aren’t you?”

After a few heaving breaths, Noah replied, “I ... don’t ... hate you.”

“You should. I’ve been such a selfish bitch.”

He gave a quick jerk of his head. “No, you’re not.”

“I drove you away.”

“You needed to. I was wrong to not give you what you needed.”

Was he really saying this, or was I too blitzed and only hearing what I wanted to hear. “You mean that?”

With a painful wince, he drew himself into a sitting position next to me. “That’s why I came here to surprise you. I

wanted to tell you how wrong I was, and that I wanted to make you first.”

“Oh, Noah,” I murmured as tears flooded my eyes. Desperately wanting to feel his lips on mine, I leaned over to kiss him. But before I could bring my mouth to his, the world around me grew dark. The last thing I remembered before I passed out was seeing Noah’s expression so full of concern and care...and then I face-planted on the floor.

* * *

When I started coming back into consciousness, I realized I was thankfully no longer on the floor, but instead, I was cocooned in the sheets of my bed. My head thumped wildly when I shifted on the mattress.

“Hey, beautiful,” Noah murmured in my ear.

I snapped my eyes open only to screech and shut them back. Slowly, I fluttered them while adjusting to the light on my nightstand. Although he was slightly fuzzy, Noah lay beside me in bed. “You’re really here. I didn’t dream it?”

Noah smiled as he brushed his thumb across my cheek. “Yeah, gorgeous, I’m really here.”

My happiness was short-lived when I realized he had seen me blitzed out of my mind. “Oh God,” I groaned as I buried my aching head in my hands.

“Is your head hurting? Need me to get you some medicine?”

“While drugs would be nice, it’s less about the physical and more about my utter and complete mortification.”

Noah chuckled. “You put on quite an interesting show. I mean, one minute you were singing and dancing, the next crying, and then ass over tits in the floor.”

“Thanks for the recap,” I muttered. When I scooted closer to him, I recoiled at something cold and wet. “What’s that in the bed?”

“That would be the frozen peas your dad gave me to ice my junk.”

Mortification rocketed through me. “I nailed you in the balls, didn’t I?”

“Yep.”

I placed my hand on his chest. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“It’s okay. You were drunk and not processing that I wasn’t some weirdo intruder.”

“I hurt you pretty bad, huh?”

“While you really racked up the family jewels, I can probably still give you kids one day.”

“Jesus,” I muttered.

“Yeah, speaking of him, I thought about praying to make sure my dick still worked, but thankfully, the sight of your tits hanging out of your top while you were passed out had me rising to the occasion.”

I shoved him playfully. “Don’t be blasphemous.”

He chuckled. “I’ll try.”

Wrinkling my nose, I replied, “I don’t know what’s worse: you thinking about praying about your penis or the fact you were ogling me while I was passed out.”

With a roll of his eyes, he countered, “It’s been over a month since I’ve had sex. The wind blowing your hair would make me hard at this point.”

I eyed him curiously. “You haven’t had sex in a month?”

“Since I haven’t been with you, it’s just been me and my hand.” At my surprise, he cocked his brows. “Why does that shock you?”

“I guess I just thought you’d find someone else.”

Noah’s expression darkened. “There’s no one else in the world for me but you.”

My heartbeat thrummed wildly at his words and the intensity with which he’d said them. “I know what you mean.”

Staring intently at me, Noah asked, “What does mi cono mojado mean?”

I jerked back from him. “What?” I screeched.

He smiled. “You were mumbling it in your sleep.”

“Oh God, this isn’t happening,” I said before once again burying my head in my hands.

“Gaby, what’s wrong?”

“I can’t believe I said that.”

His voice became ridiculously tender. “Is it something about the way you feel for me?”

Once again, I could only peek at him through my hands. “It means my pussy is wet.”

Noah blue eyes bulged before he busted out laughing. The noise felt like spikes in my head. “Seriously?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

With a wicked smirk, he said, “That makes more sense considering you were rubbing your tits against me, which in turn made me hard.”

“Ugh. Please put me out of my misery and kill me now.”

“Nope. I traveled too far and went through too much just to off you for sharing what you truly felt.”

“There were so many ways I wanted to tell you how wrong I was and how much I cared. Better ways than being drunk out of my mind.”

“I’ve heard people say that no one speaks the truth better than a drunk man.” He winked at me. “Or in your case a drunk chick.”

“If I said how much I missed you and how I selfish I was, it was the truth.”

Shaking his head, Noah replied, “You weren’t wrong to ask that of me, Gaby. I was the bastard who couldn’t give you what you needed.”

“Even though I hear what you and the priest are saying, I just can’t believe it.”

“Wait, what priest?”

“The one I confessed to.”

With a smirk, Noah asked, “Please tell me you didn’t confess to everything in our relationship.”

“I kept it G-rated.”

“Thank God.”

Eyeing him curiously, I asked, “What did you mean when you said you went through too much to kill me?”

It was Noah’s turn to grimace. “I danced with your dad.”

My brows popped. “Wait, what?”

“You heard what I said.”

“Yeah, but I think I need clarification.”

Noah exhaled a ragged breath. “Trust me. It wasn’t my finest moment by a long shot.”

I rolled my eyes in exasperation. “Would you please just tell me what happened?”

“The good news is your dad doesn’t hate my guts anymore.”

“Wow, I’m impressed. Was it your dancing skills that won him over?” I teasingly asked.

With a scowl, Noah replied, “No, the dancing came after I told him I wasn’t going to let him disrespect you by disrespecting me.”

“You actually said that?”

“I sure as hell did.”

“And Dad didn’t punch you?”

“No, we shook hands and everything.”

“That’s amazing.”

“I know, right?”

“And then after that, you and my dad danced?”

“He wanted to teach me the cumbia, so I could surprise you at your party.”

Oh God, the man had learned a dance for me. Not only had he flown thousands of miles to see me and incurred the wrath of my father, but he had learned the cumbia to surprise me. “Wow,” I murmured.

“Don’t tell your dad I told you.”

I smiled. “I’ll pretend to be surprised when you bust out your moves tomorrow.”

He snorted. “As long as you’re not horrified, we’ll be good.”

“I’m pretty sure it won’t matter since I’ll be hungover as hell.”

“Not if I have anything to do with it.”

While I stared curiously at him, he reached over to take a bottle off the nightstand. “Your dad ran out to get this for you.”

I wrinkled my nose at the sight of the red Pedialyte. “This brings back memories of freshman year.”

“I hope you’re talking about college, you big boozier,” Noah teased.

“Yeah, smart-ass, I was.”

Once I took a swig, Noah handed me two pills. At what must’ve been my expectant look, he said, “It’s ginger, which also helps ward off a hangover.”

“Good to know,” I replied before swallowing the pills. After consuming half of the Pedialyte, I eased back down in bed. With a yawn, I asked, “What time is it?”

“A little before two.”

“You’ve almost been up twenty-four hours, haven’t you?”

Noah nodded. “But I dozed a little while you were out.”

“My knight in shining armor watching over me.”

“I felt an even bigger responsibility because I drove you to your drunken state.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry. I placed all the blame on myself for not being able to take what you could give me.”

Noah shook his head. “You aren’t the one at fault. I am.” He brushed the hair out of my face. “I plan on doing everything within my power to prove to you that you’re the most important thing in my life.”

I fought the urge to pinch myself to make sure I wasn’t hallucinating this in my drunken state. I’d asked him to come back to me if he ever changed his mind, and he had come all the way to Mexico to show me how much he cared. *That was sacrificial love. Wasn’t it?*

Noah wasn’t confessing his love for me, not in words anyway. But was that what I was supposed to glean from his actions? Noah’s smile then dimmed, and I realized that I hadn’t given him my own assurances. *But I think it’s too early, literally and figuratively, to express that.*

Smiling up at him, I replied, “You’re the most important thing in my life, too. You and only you.”

The next thing I knew Noah had his lips on mine. The kiss was sweet and reverent, which surprised me since we hadn’t been together in a month. When he pulled away, he grinned at what must’ve been my surprised expression.

“Like I’m going to deep-throat tongue you when your dad could bust in here at any moment.”

I snorted. “Good point.”

“Come on. Let’s get some sleep.”

While I burrowed deeper into the covers, Noah reached over and turned off the lamp. After he spooned behind me, he kissed my cheek. “Goodnight, Gaby.”

With my heart threatening to beat out of my chest, I whispered, “Goodnight, Noah.”

Chapter Nineteen: Noah

The cool sand slithered between my toes as Gaby and I made our way along the darkened beach. While the full moon sat high in the night's sky, it lit our way along the shore. It was a little after three a.m. The party had gone until after two, and as the last guests were trickling home, Gaby and I snuck away for some time alone.

As I stared at Gaby in the moonlight, I didn't think I'd ever seen her looking more beautiful. "Did you have a good birthday, baby?"

She gazed up me with such adoration that my heart shuddered and restarted. How could I have ever struggled with putting her above everything else in my life? She was the best thing that had ever happened to me. I'd never thought I'd ever experience anything remotely like what I felt for Gaby. While part of me worried it was too much, too soon, I tried to embrace the feelings coursing through me.

"It was the best birthday ever."

"I'm glad to hear that." Nudging her shoulder with mine, I asked, "Did you like your presents?"

With a grin, she replied, "I suppose I shouldn't have been too surprised by all the bra and panty sets you gave me."

Pursing her lips, she added, “Of course, I’m glad you managed to give me those in private, so my dad wouldn’t have had to threaten your dick again.”

“Hey now, I also got you two dresses,” I argued.

“Two incredibly short and revealing dresses,” she countered.

Sheepishly, I replied, “I’m a selfish bastard, getting you things that benefit me just as much as they do you.”

Gaby threw her arms around my neck. “There’s not a selfish bone in your body, Noah Fitzgerald.” When I opened my mouth to protest, she said, “Incredibly horny, yes, but selfish? No.”

I laughed. “You know me too well.”

“I loved everything you got me, but I loved being with you more.”

“It’s hard to know what to get the girl who has everything.” And that was the truth. At first, I’d really struggled about what to get her. She deserved only the very best, but my budget didn’t exactly allow for that.

To my surprise, Gaby grimaced. “Do you really think I’m that spoiled?”

Placing my hands on her face, I shook my head. “No. That’s not it at all. It was more about the fact I know that you can go out and buy whatever you want where I can’t.”

“I don’t care about how much you can give me in terms of money, Noah.”

“I know that. I just wish I could give you more.”

“All I wanted was you.”

I knew what she said was the truth, and she wasn't just trying to stroke my ego. I felt the same way. When my birthday rolled around, the greatest present I could possibly receive was Gaby by my side loving me. But at the same time, I worried I'd be enough.

Staring intently at me, Gaby asked, "Noah, what aren't you saying?"

Fuck, I'd forgotten how well she could see right through me. There was no hiding my emotions with Gaby. "Maybe you deserve more."

Her dark eyes widened. "How could you ever think that? If anything, you deserve better than me."

I shook my head. "I can't give you everything you deserve monetarily. Hell, I can't even give you all of myself because of my fucking swimming."

I fought the urge to try and run away from the emotions that were suffocating me. In the past, I'd never worried that I wasn't enough for a girl. My ego wouldn't have allowed it. I was Noah Fucking Fitzgerald. Instead of looking within myself to find something lacking, I always managed to find fault with a girl.

Gaby placed a hand on my cheek. "But you're giving me everything you can. You flew all this way just to be with me. You're trying and that's all that matters."

"It isn't enough."

"I promise that it is."

I jerked a hand through my hair. "I don't want to ever disappoint you again, Gaby. More than anything, I don't want to hurt you."

“I know you don’t. And you’ve given me your word, and I believe it.” She paused, perhaps wrestling with her words. “Noah, hear me when I say, there is nothing I could possibly want more than you. You are the greatest present I’ll ever receive.”

With the heaviness of the conversation weighing on me, I knew we desperately needed some levity. Giving her my cockiest grin, I said, “If I’d known that, I could’ve saved myself a lot of money by just showing up with a giant red bow wrapped around my dick.”

She rolled her eyes but laughed in spite of herself. “That’s not what I wanted.”

“I know. But he’s the gift that keeps on giving when it comes to orgasms.”

“I don’t know.” She flashed me a wicked grin. “Your fingers and tongue are pretty amazing.”

I laughed. “That is true.” Pulling her against me, I thrust my left hip against hers. “Hmm, speaking of presents, is that a gift box in my pocket, or am I just happy to see you?” I teased.

Gaby playfully shoved me back. “Seriously?”

“Reach in my pocket and see.”

Keeping her eyes on mine, Gaby’s hand darted into my pocket. “Lucky you. It’s a present *and* my hard-on.”

Gaby huffed out a breath as she took the box. “Way to ruin a moment, Fitzgerald.”

Ignoring her, I said, “Happy Birthday, beautiful.”

My breath hitched as she tore into the wrapping paper. Part of me wondered what the hell I thought I was doing. It wasn’t a big step—it was more of a colossal-sized step for me.

Regardless of all the arguments of why I shouldn't be giving it to her this soon, there was nothing more I wanted to do.

When she cracked open the box, Gaby gasped. Even in the weak lighting, the diamond chips encircling the small ruby sparkled. "You bought me a ring?"

"Actually, my cheap ass didn't even buy it."

Her brows furrowed. "You stole it?"

I threw my head back with a laugh. "Seriously, Gaby?"

"Well, what was I supposed to think?" she huffed.

"It was given to me by my Pops. It belonged to my grandmother Fitzgerald."

Gaby's eyes bulged before she started furiously shaking her head. "I can't accept this."

I fought not to feel wounded by her reaction. It certainly wasn't in the league of the types of rings she was used to, or what her parents could buy her. When I'd thought of giving it to her, I'd wanted her to appreciate that I was giving her something that meant a lot to me.

Clearing my throat, I replied, "Of course, you can. It's a gift."

"It's a family heirloom. You don't give family heirlooms to girlfriends."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because it means ..." She swallowed hard. "It means too much."

"It's hardly worth anything." I winced at my admission. *Jesus, Noah, way to ruin a moment.* "I didn't mean it to come

out that way. I just didn't want you to worry that I was giving you an expensive family jewel."

When Gaby still continued staring down at the ring, I jerked my hand through my hair. "Pops said she loved rubies, so he was always getting her ruby rings."

Tears streaked down Gaby's cheeks. "It's not about its monetary worth." She brought her hand to my heart. "It's about what it means in here."

Thank fuck, she got the meaning behind it. I placed my hand over hers. "I'm fully aware of that. It's why I wanted to give it to you."

"You're giving me a piece of your heart," Gaby murmured.

I nodded. "Pops gave me the ring a couple of years before he died. He told me to give it to a woman who meant as much to me as Grandmother did to him."

"I really mean that much to you?"

I drew in a deep breath. I'd never been good with sharing my emotions with women. Well, at least outside of sex. "You are everything to me."

"Oh God, Noah." She launched herself into my arms, wrapping her arms around my waist. She peppered my face with kisses while running her free hand through my hair.

"Does this mean you like it?"

"I love it." Her dark eyes bore into mine, and I felt she could see straight through to my soul. "I love you."

Holy shit. Although I was leaving it implied on my side, I hadn't expected to hear it on hers. "You do?"

"Of course, I do. How could I not?"

“Some would argue it’s been too soon?”

“Fuck them,” she replied with a grin.

I laughed. “Or that we don’t know each other well enough.”

“Fuck them, too.”

“What a filthy mouth you have, my love.”

“You like it.”

I shook my head. “No, I love it.” With a smirk, I added, “I especially love it when it’s crammed full of my dick.”

Gaby huffed and smacked my arm. “We just told each other we loved each other, and now you’re making it about sex.”

“I can’t help that I always want you. Not to mention it’s been a whole month since I’ve got to love that gorgeous body of yours.”

A shiver went through her body. “What did you have in mind?”

I stared down at her—my eyes hooded with my growing desire. “Are you up for a little skinny-dipping?”

Her brows popped. “Seriously?”

“This is your parent’s private beach, so we don’t have to worry about any strangers seeing us.”

“I was more worried about my parents.

While I should’ve been worried about the same thing, I was willing to risk it considering how much I wanted to be inside her. “I was thinking the only other thing I could give you for your birthday was an orgasm, and I don’t see that happening back at your house.”

“Good point.”

I jerked my chin at her. “Strip.”

Sweeping her hands to her hips, she countered, “Why do I have to go first?”

“Fine.” Grabbing the hem of my shirt, I tore it over my head before depositing it on the sand next to me. I made quick work of shedding my pants and underwear. Gaby’s gaze dropped from mine to take in my erection. When she licked her lips, I groaned. “Stop looking at my dick like that.”

“Don’t tell me you don’t want me to acknowledge the mastery that is your dick?” Gaby teased.

I laughed. “I’d rather you touch it, or it be inside you than for you to look at it.”

“Whatever.”

“Come on. Let me see that beautiful body of yours.”

With her eyes focused on mine, Gaby’s hands disappeared under her dress. After a shimmy of her hips, she pulled her thong down her thighs. “Unzip me,” she asked in a whisper.

“My pleasure.”

Pulling her hair up, she then turned her back to me. After I unzipped the dress, I slid my fingers down her bare back, which caused her to shiver. I bent over to kiss a trail from her neck down her spine. Gripping the sides of the dress, I then pushed it over her arms. Gaby’s fingers hooked into the waist before slipping it down her legs.

Taking her hand, I tugged her behind me as I led us into the water. Thank fuck it wasn’t freezing. The last thing I needed was for the cold to obliterate my dick. Once we’re waist deep, my hands went to her breasts, squeezing and

kneading the ample flesh. At her sharp intake of breath, my fingers twisted and tweaked her nipples. “Mm, Noah,” Gaby murmured as her hands tangled through my hair.

I hoisted her up to wrap her legs around me, and as I stared into her eyes, I reached between us and took my cock into my hand. Gaby slid her arms tighter around my neck, pulling me closer to her mouth. When I crashed my lips against hers, I thrust my dick deep inside her. She moaned against my lips.

My fingers dug into her ass cheeks as I began raising her on and off my dick. Her breasts bounced against my chest, her nipples pebbling. Angling her back, I dipped my head to suck one luscious globe into my mouth. My tongue twirled around the nipple before my teeth grazed it. I alternated between sucking and biting at her nipple, and thank fuck, I could tell Gaby’s was building fast to an orgasm.

Fuck, I’ve missed this.

Her.

Us.

Just as she was about to go over the edge, I whispered into her ear, “I love you, Gaby.”

She clung to my shoulders as she cried out. Her walls clenched around my dick, causing me to pump harder and faster in and out of her. After she collapsed her face against my shoulder, I continued jerking her on and off me. She began kissing a trail across my collarbone. When she tightened her walls around me, I groaned with pleasure before spilling inside her.

I pulled my face back to see her smiling at me. “Thanks for the birthday orgasm.”

I laughed. “You’re always welcome.”

Chapter Twenty: Gaby

One Week Later

“Goodnight!” I called to my staff members before locking the building.

It was T-minus two weeks before the opening of my school. Everyone from the speech pathologists to the music teachers to the clerical staff were working overtime to ensure everything was ready for our students. Many of us had been pulling twelve hour days for the last week. I had never felt more pleasantly exhausted in all my life.

As I hurried to my car, my phone vibrated in my pocket. At the sight of Noah’s name on the screen, I couldn’t keep a goofy grin from forming on my face. After I swiped to answer, I said, “Hey, baby!”

“Hey, beautiful. How was your day?”

“Crazy. How about yours?”

“The same. You tell me first, and then I’ll tell you.”

I grinned. “Okay.”

We then talked about our days for the ten minutes it took me to get home. While I drove, Noah fixed his dinner. After I

pulled in the garage, I made my way through the backdoor and then upstairs to my room. Once I was at my desk, I switched over to my computer so I could see him better while we talked.

At our first lull in conversation, I couldn't help sighing. "I miss you already."

"I know. I miss you, too."

"I don't think I can wait six weeks until I see you again," I lamented. On the flight home, Noah and I had tried planning out when we could see each other again. We'd decided I would fly out to see him in swimming action for one of his qualifying events. Unfortunately, that was six weeks away. With my school's official opening looming and his training schedule, we didn't see a way to make it work before then.

"Could you sneak away?" he asked.

With a grin, I replied, "That's a lot to ask."

"Me and my fabulous cock are worth it, right?"

Tilting my head, I tapped my chin with my finger. "Hmm, let me think."

With a growl, Noah demanded, "Do you want me to beg because I will?"

"Will you get on your knees when you do it?" I teased.

"If it'll make you get a fucking plane ticket, I will strip down naked and jerk off while I beg and plead," he replied.

"Jesus," I muttered as warmth rushed through me at his words.

He shot me his cocky grin. "Was that a yes or a no?"

"I'll get on Expedia the moment we hang up."

"You don't know how happy that makes me."

“You or your cock?”

He chuckled. “The both of us are super stoked.”

“You’re so bad.”

Lust glittered in his eyes. “We both could be bad.”

My breath hitched at his words and tone. “What did you have in mind?”

“Have you ever had video sex?”

A flush entered my cheeks. “Um, no.”

Noah’s eyes rolled back in bliss. “I get to take your video sex virginity?”

I laughed. “I guess so.” As I thought about his words, I countered, “Let me guess. I won’t be your first.”

His expression became sheepish. “Sorry, babe, but that ship sailed during college.”

“Of course, it did,” I grumbled.

“But I’m sure doing it with you will be like the first time.”

I laughed. “That is such a line.”

“Come on. Let me pop your video sex cherry.”

Wrinkling my nose, I replied, “That’s a line I could live a lifetime without ever having to hear again.”

He held up a hand. “Okay, okay, I won’t.”

As I nibbled my bottom lip, I regretted not having an apartment of my own. The last thing I needed was for Mom or Dad to catch me. I realized at twenty-three how ridiculous it was I was still worrying about my parents catching me doing something sexual.

“All right. I’m down.”

“Hmm, I’m so hard right now.”

I threw a wary glance over my shoulder. “One sec. Let me lock the door.”

“Please do. The last thing I need is your dad busting in and seeing my cock on the screen.”

With a shriek of horror, I hopped out of my desk chair. When I returned to the screen, Noah was already naked from the waist up. “Did you take all your clothes off?”

“Fuck yes.”

“You don’t waste any time, do you?” I teased.

“Not when I’m hard as a rock.”

“But what if I’d wanted you to strip for me?”

“Next time, babe. I’ll go nice and slow with my clothes. Maybe even shake my ass for you.”

With a laugh, I replied, “I can’t wait to see that.”

“I can’t wait to see *all* of you.”

“What do you want to see first?” I asked coyly.

“Ditch the shirt and show me those gorgeous tits of yours,” Noah commanded.

I couldn’t lie that the dirty talk was seriously getting to me. Like my thong was already soaked, and I hadn’t taken off one piece of clothing. After winking at Noah, I reached for the hem of my blouse before pulling it over my head.

He groaned. “Fuck me. I love the way your tits look in that bra.”

I smiled. “You should like this one since you gave me the set for my birthday.”

A wicked gleam burned in his eyes. “Even though I have good taste in lingerie, lose the bra.”

“Fine, Mr. Bossy,” I replied before I brought my hands around my back.

With one hand, I held the bra against my breasts. Using my other hand, I slowly tugged the strap down one arm. Keeping my eyes locked on Noah’s, I took my time doing the other one. After I was finished, I still didn’t remove the fabric to where he could see what he wanted.

“You’re killing me.”

“And you’re a little too cocky bossing me around. You know I don’t like taking orders.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to say please.”

A growl of frustration came from deep in the back of his throat. “*Please.*”

“Please what?”

“Please let me see your tits, Gaby,” he gritted out.

“Good boy.”

Noah grunted as he leaned forward in his chair. I grabbed the bra and tossed it at the camera. When it smacked into the screen, Noah jumped, causing me to giggle.

“You’re a cocktease and not in a good way.” He grinned.

I cupped my breasts in my hands before tweaking my nipples. “I miss your mouth on these.”

“I miss them too, babe. Pinch them harder for me.”

I did as I was told, which caused more wetness to pool between my legs. “Mm, they’re so hard.”

“Make them wet for me.”

His words caused me to momentarily freeze. “W-What?”

“Stick two of your fingers in your mouth and suck on them. Hard.”

After I obeyed his command, I brought the wet fingers to one nipple. It peaked harder when the cool air swirled around the wetness. “Oh God,” I murmured.

“That’s right, babe. Do the other one.”

The ache between my legs grew, and I pressed my thighs together, desperate for any friction. “Noah, I need to touch myself.”

“You are touching yourself.”

“I know. But I need to touch *there*.”

“Your pussy?”

I bit down on my lip. “Yes.”

“First, turn around and let me see that fabulous ass.”

I rose out of the chair and turned my back to the camera. Placing my palms on the seat of the chair, I swished my thong-clad ass at the screen. Sliding my hand down my waist, I smacked one of the cheeks. At Noah’s sharp intake of breath, I gazed at him over my shoulder. “Do you like that?”

“Baby, you know I do.”

“Do you wish it was your hand?”

“Fuck yes, I do.”

I grinned. “I wish it was too.”

“Spank the other cheek.”

“Naughty boy. I’m going to spank you the next time we’re together.”

An erotic chuckle came from his lips. “I sure as hell hope you do.”

When I obliged him by smacking my hand against my cheek, Noah grunted. I glanced over my shoulder, and his camera had lowered to where I had a view of him fisting his cock.

“That’s good. Now let me see that pretty pussy, so you can touch yourself.”

After sliding off my thong, I eased back down in the chair. Bringing my knees up, I then propped my feet on the edge of the desk. Slowly, I spread my legs apart. “Oh, fuck me, you, naughty girl. You’re already wet.”

I brought my hand between my legs and stroked the moisture there. “What do you want me to do now?”

“I want you to slide one finger inside you.”

“Just one?” I asked reluctantly.

“You need two?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Okay then.”

Widening my legs, I pumped two fingers in and out of my pussy, causing me to buck my hips. “Noah,” I panted.

“Faster,” he commanded.

As I plunged my fingers deeper and faster, my hips raised in time. My thumb slid around to rub my aching clit. Crying out, I pinched my eyes shut.

“Don’t close your eyes.”

“It feels too good.”

“I know. But I want to be looking in your eyes when you come just like if I was there.”

With the pleasure building, all I could do was shake my head. Opening my eyes, I locked my gaze with Noah’s. His chest rose and fell in harsh pants as his fist jerked and pumped his cock. The sight caused me to work my fingers even faster. “Oh, I’m going to come!” I cried.

“That’s it, baby. Give it up.”

With one hand squeezing my breast, the other stilled inside me as my walls clenched with my orgasm. As hard as it was, I kept my eyes on Noah’s as his hips thrust his cock harder in and out of his hand. When I started coming back down, his breath hitched, and he cried out my name as he came.

As our chests heaved, we sat there staring at each other. “Fuck, Gaby, that was intense.”

A nervous yet satisfied giggle tumbled from my lips. Who knew video sex could be such an amazing sexual experience? Or that I could come so hard without Noah’s masterful dick, tongue, and fingers. Just the thought of what we had done sent a flush of warmth between my legs.

When I could finally speak, I murmured, “I would have to agree.” It took us a few moments to regulate our breathing again, but strangely, it didn’t feel awkward facing Noah while that happened. I also didn’t possess my usual preoccupations with how my body looked in the light, especially considering the angle I was still sitting in.

I was then graced with one of his gorgeous smiles. “Can we make Facetime Fucks a nightly occurrence?”

I snorted. “Is that what we’re calling them?”

“Do you have a better name for them?”

“Considering my mind is fried right now after that orgasm, I can’t think of anything else.”

Noah laughed. “Then Facetime Fucks it is.”

Chapter Twenty One: Noah

One Month Later

After jerking my head out of the water, I narrowed my goggle-covered eyes on the massive clock on the wall. Shit. If I was going to make it back to my apartment for my scheduled eight o'clock Facetime with Gaby, I needed to get out and get going. I quickly finished my lap before pulling myself out of the water.

Since we'd gotten back from Mexico, I'd made a standing eight p.m. Facetime with Gaby. That gave both of us enough time to get home from work for her and swimming for me. I usually cooked dinner and ate while I talked to her. My usual nine p.m. bedtime had gotten shot to shit. I was getting in bed later and later, which was hell on my four thirty wakeup call.

This week, with qualifiers coming up, everyone was swimming longer and later, which threw a fucking wrench in my Gaby time. Normally, I would've just come clean and told Gaby I needed to push things back. But I was a total pussy because I was worried it would make her second-guess giving me another chance. She was supposed to be coming first in my life regardless of what was going on.

I slung a towel around my waist before pulling my hoodie over my wet body. I knew I was going to freeze my ass off when I got outside, but I didn't have enough time to fully dry off. After hopping into a pair of sweatpants, I pulled on my coat.

Just as I started to the door, a voice boomed behind me. "Fitzgerald, where the hell do you think you're going?"

FUCK. Slowly, I turned around to face Coach J's wrath-filled glare. I thought he was back in his office and wouldn't see me sneaking out. "I was just ducking out a little early for some extra sleep." He didn't have to know that I planned on talking to Gaby for what I hoped was another hot video sex session.

His expression told me he didn't believe a word I'd said. "In the last two months, you were gone two weeks and then another weekend. Now when you're here, you're practically phoning in a performance not to mention throwing in the towel half an hour early every night this week." He pinned me with a hard stare. "Once again, I'll ask. What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

I dragged my hand over my face. "I don't know." And that was the truth. Before Gaby, I would've never dreamed of cutting out of practice early for anything. Not even the promise of a waiting hookup would've torn me away from the water. But she was different, and it wasn't just about how I'd given my word to her that I would put her first.

After the last two months with Gaby, swimming just didn't hold the same allure it once had. It was the only reason I wasn't back home with Gaby full-time. Maybe somewhere along the way I'd started to resent what I'd formerly loved,

and it scared the hell out of me. Swimming was and always had been my life. Where would I even be without it?

During the times I thought about hanging up my metaphorical jammers, a voice of reason blared loudly within me. It argued that I'd been with Gaby only two months. While I knew I was in love with her and had been miserable without her, there were no guarantees we were in it for the long-haul.

At my hesitation, Coach J cleared his throat loudly. "I think I know." He tapped my forehead. "Your head hasn't been on right since you got back from Georgia, which I assume is when this girlfriend popped up."

Since I hadn't mentioned anything about a girlfriend, I could only imagine one of my dickhead roommates had let it slip. Coach wasn't big on relationships during competitive season times. You were either in one for years previously, or you waited for qualifiers to be over before you started one up. Over the years, I'd heard him bitch again and again about how it messed with our focus. I hated to admit that he was probably right.

"Come on. My time hasn't deviated that much."

"It's not just your time. Your focus is not the same."

"Nothing has changed," I argued. Sure, my time was down by a few seconds, but from the way Coach was acting, I'd been skipping practices and partying hard. At his continued expression, I said, "Look, I'll make up for my time tonight by coming in thirty minutes early and staying thirty minutes later for the next couple of weeks."

"I sure as hell hope so."

As unease pricked over me, I asked, "What is it you're not saying?"

“If you keep this up, I’m not sure your scores will be enough to qualify this time around.”

Dumbstruck, I could only watch his retreating form as he stalked back to his office. “Major buzzkill, Fitzzy,” Craig, remarked.

“You sure got your balls handed to you,” Sergio, teased.

Clapping me on the back, another teammate, Michael, joked, “That’s not a bad thing since I’m sure Gaby will be polishing them tonight via Facetime. Right, man?”

“Fuck you,” I grunted.

My other roommate, Kevin, made kissy noises. “You guys should hear him on the phone with her. It’s sickening.”

“Why don’t you all get off my dick about Gaby?” I countered.

“Ooh, somebody’s got it bad,” Sergio said.

“Leave him alone. I think it’s great you’re actually serious about someone,” Craig said.

Kevin snorted. “Says the guy who has a different dick every weekend.”

Craig shrugged. “Maybe it would be nice to be with someone long-term for once.”

Sergio stared horror-struck at him. “Okay, I’m getting back into the water before I catch whatever you two pussies have.”

“Fucker,” I muttered as I shoved him in the pool.

As I started for the door, Kevin said, “Here, man, I’ll walk you out.”

When we stepped out into the cold, I shivered before burrowing into my coat. After a few moments of silence, I

shook my head. “Can you fucking believe Coach going off on me like that?”

With a shrug, he replied, “He had a point though.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your time is off, man. There’s no way around that.”

“I can make it up before qualifiers,” I replied. The truth was I had said it more for me than him. When Kevin didn’t reply, I repeated, “I can make it up. I was up a few seconds before I went to Mexico.”

He swept his hands to his hips. “I don’t know, man.”

“Not you too,” I grunted.

“I’m just worried for you.”

“Don’t be. I’ll be fine.”

Pinning me with a hard look, Kevin said, “With your lagging time, maybe it’s time to cut things off with Gaby.”

My eyes bulged at his remark. “You’re full of shit.”

“I’m serious.”

“How can you possibly say that?”

“Because now is not the time to lose your focus. You and I both are cutting it close at our ages. We’re not one of the greats who can still pull this shit off in our thirties.” He shook his head. “This is probably our last shot at another games.”

His words, coupled with the cold, sent a shiver through me. Putting on a brave face, I argued, “I’m not breaking things off with Gaby. Jesus, I just flew thousands of miles to get her back five weeks ago.”

“Fine. The least you should do is cool things off a bit. Get your focus off Gaby and back on swimming until the first qualifiers are over. Then you can go back to being Mr. Romance.”

I shook my head. “You don’t get it. I swore to her I would always put her first.”

Kevin stared wide-eyed at me. “While I’m not a fan of pussy, she must have an amazing one for you to do that.”

Gritting my teeth, I challenged, “Don’t talk about her like that.”

He jabbed a finger at me. “See, that right there tells me your head is completely fucked where this girl is concerned. Never before have you ever gotten heated over a girl.”

“I love her.”

“And that’s fine. You can love her and love swimming too, right?”

I wanted to say yes. I wanted more than anything to be able to find a happy medium. But at this moment, I knew I had no clue how to do that. I didn’t have experience at juggling the two things, and for the first time, I was questioning whether this was something I would fail at. I had to find that happy medium where both my heart and my love were happy, and I wasn’t going to lose a spot on the team.

Rubbing my hand over my face, I sighed in defeat. “Fine. I’ll go back in and swim another half hour. And I’ll make up even more time for Coach.”

Kevin grinned. “That sounds like the old Fitzy.”

As I followed him back into the complex, I pulled my phone out of my hoodie. With an ache in my chest, I texted

Gaby.

Something has come up. Rain check for our Facetime?

Since she was expecting my call soon, it didn't take her too long to reply.

Gaby: Sure. Take care, and I miss you.

I miss you more.

With a resigned sigh and feeling like an utter bastard, I tore my hoodie over my head and trudged back over to the pool. My muscles would scream at me tomorrow for not cooling down properly and then re-entering the pool, but fuck, there was nothing I could do about it.

All I could hope was that Gaby understood.

But then Coach's words ran through my head again.

"Your head hasn't been on right since you got back from Georgia, which I assume is when this girlfriend popped up." And I needed to get my head back in the game to achieve my goals.

She'll understand that, right? Yes, she loved me.

"You can love her and love swimming too, right?"

Fuck, I hoped so.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Gaby

Over the years, I'd always found during times of immense happiness that a sickly feeling of dread would creep in. Like I was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Usually, when I got that feeling, something bad happened. I clung to this irrational fear that things weren't supposed to work out for me. Some form of heartbreak eventually had to pass.

With the success of my school and my loving relationship with Noah, it felt like I was too blessed. Something was going to have to give. I was going to have to pay the karmic piper. The thought scared the hell out of me.

And just when I thought I was overreacting, a shift occurred between Noah and me. It wasn't the seismic one I'd feared. At the same time, the subtlety was more unnerving.

While I tried to push the thoughts from my mind and the ache from my chest, I lounged on the couch watching a movie with Bella. After what must've been my tenth sigh of the evening, Bella paused the movie. Tilting her head, she eyed me curiously. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"That's not your nothing face, Gabs."

I sighed for the eleventh time. I should've known I couldn't keep anything from Bella. While we might've been two years apart, we were more like twins in the way we felt each other's intense emotions. "I'm worried about Noah."

Bella's dark brows rose. "Because of the qualifiers?"

Inwardly, I groaned that Bella immediately thought the best in me by thinking I was worried about Noah's competition. I wished I wasn't so set in my ways that I could be that type of girlfriend. No, I was more worried about the lingering silence between us than how he was going to nail the scores he needed to be considered for the Olympics.

"Yes and no," I finally replied.

Placing her hands on my shoulders, Bella pinned me with a hard stare. "All right, Gabs. Spit it out."

"He's different."

"Because he's stressed out?"

I shrugged. "Maybe."

"How is he different?"

"Well, for starters, we haven't had a Facetime Fuck in almost two weeks."

Bella snorted. "Excuse me?"

"That's what we call our video sex."

With a grin, Bella said, "Maybe that's what I'll ask Jude to call ours."

Her statement caused my mind to short-circuit. "Isabella Sofia! Are you having sexual relations with Jude?"

A wide grin stretched across her cheeks. "Yes, I am."

I shoved her playfully. “You sneaky little bitch! How could you not tell me?”

“Well, after that night at Eastman’s, we decided to take it slow.”

“How slow?”

Bella rolled her eyes. “It felt like a fucking snail’s pace.”

I snorted. “After the way you guys looked that night, I can’t believe he didn’t bang you then.”

“It wasn’t like we didn’t do *anything* that night.”

“So you did get a little dirty?”

She gave me that dreamy smile again. “Yeah, we did.”

Secretly? I was thrilled. Bella deserved everything good and wonderful.

“I can’t believe you did something as monumental as screwing around with Jude and you didn’t tell me!”

Bella’s smile faded. “I would’ve been a selfish jerk to rub my new relationship in your face when you were in so much pain over Noah.”

“Oh Bella,” I murmured. She’d been going through the happiest time of her life, but she hadn’t told me because I was broken-hearted. “You are seriously the best sister ever.”

“Ditto, Gabs.”

After I reached over and hugged her tight, I cocked my brows at her. “I need to know something.”

“What?”

“How was it?”

“Oh God, Gaby, it’s ...” She pinched her eyes shut before a pleased moan escaped her lips. “It’s everything I always dreamed and fantasized it would be.”

Happy tears filled my eyes. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Don’t tell me you’re getting teary-eyed over me having good sex with Jude?”

I laughed. “While I’m super stoked about the sex, it’s more about seeing you get something you’ve wanted for so long.”

“Thank you. And I really mean that. I don’t think without Noah’s and your push, it would have ever happened.”

“I’m so glad we could inspire you two to bang.”

Bella laughed. “That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“I know.” After hugging her tight, I said, “After all this time, I’m so glad you have a stress-free relationship. Enjoy it for the both of us.”

Bella’s brows furrowed. “I’m sure it’s just the stress of the competition. He’s giving everything he has to swimming.”

“Trust me, I *know* it’s just about swimming. That knowledge is the only thing keeping me from totally going off on him in a text or phone call. I’m trying to be understanding.”

I hated not being able to react. I’d never been someone to suffer in silence or the woman who took whatever crumbs a man gave her. It was only my love for Noah that reigned in my usual take-no-shit attitude.

Shaking my head, I exhaled a ragged breath. “But Noah needs to tell me that. Obviously, I would ease up a little bit on the promise he made about always making time for me. But he’s freezing me out. He has one- or two-word answers to texts. We haven’t talked on the phone in two days.”

“Gaby, you need to make him talk to you.”

“I will. After the competition.” I swallowed hard. “I’ve been getting that bad feeling.”

I didn’t have to elaborate for Bella. She knew all too well what I was talking about. “Don’t think about that. Noah loves you, Gaby,” she argued.

“I know he does...but even the deepest loves can be broken by outside forces. For Noah and me, it’s his swimming.”

“While his swimming is a roadblock, it isn’t a dead end. Once he’s done with the qualifiers, things should ease up, right?”

“That’s just the thing. From what I’ve come to understand, it will only get more and more intense as the time ticks down to the year before the games.” I played with the edge of the blanket. That was information I hadn’t learned from Noah and instead from a swim-fan website.

What it really all boiled down to wasn’t that we hadn’t spoken as often, as I knew his time was tight. It was more about the feeling of irrelevance. Even if you’re super busy, you can still check in with a “thinking of you” or a “miss you” text. Radio silence communicated volumes to me. It was important that both partners in a relationship put time and energy into the other.

“While it was never going to be ideal, I believed I could do it because we were communicating. Now, I just don’t know.”

“You need to have a talk with him this weekend when you see him at his qualifying event. He has to know he can’t freeze you out.”

Jerking my chin at the screen, I said, “Put the movie back on. I desperately need a distraction.”

Bella nodded. But instead of putting on the movie we were watching, she changed over to one of our favorite comedies. Before too long, I was truly laughing for the first time in days. And for a little while, I felt better.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Noah

It was official—I was an epic bastard.

While I'd shaved two seconds off my time, I'd slowly frozen the woman I loved out of my life. Every day I would type out a text telling her I was sorry and explaining why I was being an enormous asshole, but then I would erase it. All I did was swim, workout in the gym, and phone in performances at work.

I hated myself.

My parents flew in on Friday afternoon before the competition on Saturday, and as they usually did, they took me to a late dinner after my evening practice. With the world closing in on me, the last thing I wanted was to have to smile and joke my way through dinner. But I couldn't bring myself to disappoint and potentially hurt my parents. I didn't want to fuck over every important relationship in my life.

Dad chose a sports bar close to my apartment. While he and Mom caught me up about their work and what was going on in the family, I merely nodded and pushed my food around. When Dad kicked back and got engrossed in the Lakers game, I rose out of my chair. "I'm going to go get some fresh air."

“Sure, son,” Dad replied, not taking his eyes off the screen. Although he was clueless about my emotional conflict, I could feel Mom’s curious gaze on my back as I exited the restaurant.

Standing on the deck, I stared out at the water in the pond surrounding the bar. I don’t know how long I’d been outside when I heard Mom’s voice behind me. “Noah?”

I glanced at her over my shoulder. “Yeah?”

“You’ve been gone a long time.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just so loud in there.”

Her green eyes stared intently at me. “You were awfully quiet at dinner.”

With a shrug, I replied, “I have a lot on my mind.”

Mom’s gaze didn’t waver. “You didn’t eat much either.”

With a sigh, I demanded, “Just say what you came out here to say, okay?”

“I’m worried about you.”

“What else is new?”

Mom placed her hand on my shoulder, and I pinched my eyes shut. “Please tell me what’s wrong, Noah. It breaks my heart to see you this way.”

Although I could’ve bullshitted her by claiming I was just nervous about the qualifiers, I didn’t want to keep this bottled up inside me anymore. Mom was the only one I could talk to about the way I felt. With his background in swimming, Dad couldn’t possibly understand how I was feeling about competing.

“Everything,” I choked out.

“Talk to me.”

I ran my hand over my face. “I’m fucking everything up, Mom.”

Although I knew she wasn’t a fan of my cursing, she didn’t chastise me. Instead, her brows furrowed with concern. “How is that possible?”

“It’s such a mess. After I got back together with Gaby, my time went to hell. To get my time back, I’ve been pushing her away by only focusing on swimming.” I shook my head. “What kind of bastard am I to sacrifice our relationship just so I’ll have a better swim time?”

“You’re not a bastard, Noah.”

Shaking my head, I argued, “Yeah, I am. I’m hurting the woman I love more than anything in the world.”

“Why are you pushing Gaby away?”

I winced. “Because when I went to Mexico to get her back, I swore I would always put her first in my life. That was her condition of us being together. If I tell her, she’ll think I’ve betrayed her.”

“The only way you’re betraying her is by not being honest. You can’t have a relationship that isn’t built on trust and honesty.”

“I know that. I just don’t know how to make it right.”

Mom gave me a pointed look. “Sometimes I can’t believe how much you’re like your father.”

“What do you mean?”

“He froze me out once, and it almost cost him our relationship.”

“Is that when he had to work hard to win you back, and you dated Uncle Pesh?”

Mom’s hand flew to her mouth. “How do you know about me and Pesh?”

“Dad told me when I talked to him about wanting to pursue Gaby.”

“I’m going to kill him,” Mom huffed.

I laughed. “It’s okay. He explained everything, and I get it.”

“The only reason I remotely entertained the idea of Pesh was because your father couldn’t be honest with me. He couldn’t communicate his love or his fear. It caused both of us to go through hell before he could finally say what he needed to.” Mom placed her hand on my cheek. “I’m so thankful that you can acknowledge your love for Gaby both to yourself and others. But at the same time, I don’t want to see that fracture happen to you and Gaby. It was one of the worst periods of my life, and I’d hate for either of you to experience that.”

“I don’t want it to either.” *I doubt she’ll give me another chance if I screw this up.* As I leaned into the soft touch of her hand, I swallowed hard. “Can I tell you something, and you promise not to tell Dad?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t think I want to compete anymore.”

Mom’s eyes popped wide at my admission. It felt good to finally admit to someone other than myself. And after it had been eating away at me for the past few weeks, it was freeing to finally be honest with myself.

“Being in love has changed your focus,” Mom stated. I wasn’t surprised how well she understood me. She’d always known me better than I did myself.

I nodded. “If it weren’t for swimming, I could be back home with Gaby. We could really build a life together.” One where I managed to work with something related to swimming. That way I wouldn’t have to totally abandon the passion that had once meant so much to me. It would have to be a job where our lives more naturally—more consistently—intersected. Gaby was ultimately my future, and I didn’t want to wait to start that anymore.

“Then I think you have your answer.”

“You won’t be disappointed if I give up swimming?”

“Of course not. I only want you to be happy.” With a coy smile, she added, “I’m so thankful you fell in love with a girl in Atlanta. I’ve wanted you back home for so long.”

I laughed. “I’m glad it worked out for you.”

“More than anything, I wanted you to find happiness and love. I don’t like seeing you make some of the same mistakes your father did.”

With a wince, I replied, “Speaking of Dad, how do you think he’ll take it if I give swimming up?”

“It’s not about him, Noah. It’s about you.”

“But you know how much my swimming means to Dad.”

“Yes, your father has been able to live his dream vicariously through you. But you have to live your life for you.”

“I just hope he doesn’t disown me.”

Mom shook her head. “He loves you too much for that. You could never disappoint him by following your heart.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so.” She leaned up to kiss me on the cheek. “I’m going to go back inside now. You take all the time you need and know that you have our support.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I murmured.

As I stared back out at the water, I realized I was so much closer to making the decision I needed to make for both Gaby and me. I just hoped to have the courage to do what I needed to do.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Gaby

Although I'd originally planned on going to Colorado on my own, my parents decided last minute that they wanted to see Noah in action and came with me. I think Bella influenced their decision. I hoped she hadn't alluded to trouble in paradise because the last thing I needed was Dad threatening to call Fabian because Noah had hurt me.

We went straight from the airport to the aquatic center. I'd let Noah know when we landed. Surprisingly, he had quickly texted me back. I don't know how long I sat there just staring at the response on the screen.

I love you.

He hadn't said he was glad I was coming, or that he was looking forward to seeing me.

Just that he loved me.

I love you, too.

Noah: I can't say everything I need to say right now over a text, but just know how fucking sorry I am for the last two weeks. I swear to you I'm going to make it right.

Tears stung my eyes. There it was. The words I'd been desperate to hear. At the same time, I didn't know how he could possibly make it right. But I was going to trust him and give him a chance.

When we arrived at the aquatic center, we took a seat with Aidan and Emma. As I watched the other events, my leg bounced with nervous energy. Just when I thought I was going to combust, Noah's event was announced.

Leaning forward, I waited anxiously to see him come out of the locker room. As other swimmers stretched, I didn't see Noah among them. After a few minutes, I noticed a man who appeared to be a coach was pacing around and gesticulating with his arms as he talked to an official.

Aidan rose to his feet. "Where the hell is he?" he questioned.

Emma shook her head. "I don't know."

We watched as the swimmers got in position, leaving a lane empty where Noah should've been.

"Do you think something happened to him? Like he got sick or something?" I asked.

"He's not answering his phone," Aidan said as he texted furiously.

It was then I noticed that Emma didn't look as shocked or worried as Aidan did. Instead, she just wore a small smile.

"If he doesn't come out for the one hundred meter freestyle, he's done," Aidan growled.

At my gasp, Emma gave me a knowing look. I scooted closer to her. "Is he refusing to compete?" I whispered in her ear.

“I think so.”

“Why?”

She smiled. “Because he loves you and wants to be with you.”

Oh God. “I can’t let him do that.”

“I’m pretty sure his mind was made up.”

“He needs to know that I understand. That I’ll still love him if he has to put swimming first.” I shot out of my seat. “I’ve got to talk to him.”

When I bolted from the stands, Dad followed close on my heels. As I started over to the hallway where the athletes were coming in and out of, I dialed Noah’s phone. It rang and rang before it went to voicemail.

I hung up and then called back. “Pick up, pick up,” I muttered as I paced the floor. When my call once again went to voicemail, I pinched my eyes in frustration. “Shit. He’s not answering his phone for me either,” I said to Dad.

“There’s probably not a lot of room for one in a Speedo,” he mused.

With a glare, I countered, “Not helping. Besides he’ll be wearing a jammer, not a Speedo.”

“What the hell is a jammer?”

Throwing up my hands in frustration, I countered, “It doesn’t matter. I’ve got to talk to him before he throws his swimming career away.”

I started into the doorway where the athletes were when a man stopped me. “I’m sorry. But no one without a lanyard can come or go.”

“Look, I’ve got to talk to one of the athletes. It’s a live-or-die situation.”

He shook his head. “No lanyard, no admittance.”

“Shit!” I cried. How was I going to get back to see Noah? Momentarily, I debated stealing one from someone. But then the dude would probably realize I’d stolen it and have me hauled off. Maybe even arrested.

Nope. I needed an epic distraction. Slowly, I turned back to eye my dad. “I need your help.”

Dad crossed his arms over his chest. “Why do I not like the sound of this?”

“Haven’t you always said there isn’t anything you wouldn’t do for me?”

With a wince, Dad replied, “Oh, I’m *really* not liking this.”

“They’re not going to let me back to see Noah without a lanyard. I need you to cause some kind of distraction, so I can sneak in.”

Dad’s eyes bulged. “You’re joking, right?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

“Just what kind of distraction were you thinking about?”

“I don’t know. Think of something.”

“Why can’t you just wait to talk to Noah when he comes out?”

“Because I have to stop him before he completely messes up his swimming career because of me.”

Dad appeared to be weighing my words. Finally, he sighed. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

I leaped into his arms. “Thank you, Daddy.”

He rubbed his hand over my back. “Don’t thank me until you get back to see Noah.”

“Fingers crossed it works,” I replied before pulling away from him. While I moved over to hang back to the side of the doorway, Dad barreled forward. When he reached the security guard, he got an odd look on his face. He grabbed his chest and looked like he was about to fall to the ground with a fake heart attack. Just before his theatrics could go any further, the guard said, “Holy shit! Are you AJ Resendiz of Runway Train?”

Dad snatched his hand away from his chest. His grave expression was replaced by a beaming smile. “Why yes, I am.” He then thrust his hand out. As the guard stepped forward to shake Dad’s hand, I ducked through the doorway and started down the hall.

Thankfully, there weren’t anymore security guards outside what appeared to be the locker room door. After taking a deep breath, I hurried inside. Realizing what I was about to encounter, I shouted, “If you don’t want it seen, then you better cover it up!”

“Well, hello,” a buck-naked guy said. While I kept my gaze firmly on his face, his gaze trailed over all over me before coming back to rest on my breasts. “You’re a hell of an improvement on the last massage therapist.”

With a roll of my eyes, I replied, “I’m not here to massage anything of yours.”

“What if I promised to get you off once or twice?”

I shoved him away. “Fuck off.”

“Ooh, I love a feisty girl.”

Since I realized I wasn't getting anywhere with this horny asshole, I shouted, "Noah!" at the top of my lungs.

"Hey, baby, I'll be anyone you want me to be," a tall guy to my left said.

"Jesus, is every competing swimmer a lecherous asshole?" I muttered under my breath as I went farther into the room. "Noah!" I shouted again.

"You lookin' for Fitzzy?"

I whirled around. "Yes. Do you know him?"

He smiled. "I'm his roommate, Craig."

Hope rushed through me. "I'm—"

"Gaby. Yeah, I know. I've heard a lot about you."

My eyes popped wide. "You have?"

"Yeah, Fitzzy never shuts up about you." Dipping his head, he added, "My room is right next door to his and the walls are pretty thin, so I unfortunately hear a lot of your Facetimes."

When he waggled his brows, warmth rushed to my cheeks. "Next time I'll make sure he wears Earpods."

"I'd still have to hear him moaning your name."

I held my hand out in front of him. "Okay, I think that's more than enough getting to know each other. I've really got to talk to Noah. Can you take me to him?"

"Sure thing." As we started through the maze of rooms and athletes, Craig cocked his brows at me. "You know, I'm kinda surprised to see you here considering how you feel about his swimming."

"I swear, I never wanted him to give it up or be what came between him and his dream."

Craig grinned. “He said as much.”

“Trust me, I know it’s what he loves more than anything in the world.”

“Are you sure about that?” he asked with a smile.

My brows rose in surprise. “I didn’t know you were a romantic, Craig.”

He laughed. “I just call it as I see it.”

“Even if he loves me more, I don’t want him not competing today.”

“Regardless of how you and I feel, it’s up to Noah.”

“You’re right. But I still want to try and talk him out of it.”

“If anyone can talk him out of it, I’m sure it’s you.”

“Thanks.”

He motioned through a door. “He’s in there.”

I threw my arms around Craig. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“You’re welcome.”

Pulling my shoulders back, I then took a deep breath and barreled into the room.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Noah

Somewhere between last night's talk with my mom and my call time for the 200 freestyle, I received the answer I'd been waiting on. My life as a competitive swimmer was over. My heart was no longer in it—it beat only for Gaby.

At the sound of a woman's voice, I shot off the bench. *What the hell?* My heart shuddered to a stop before restarting. "What are you doing here?"

"You weren't answering your phone."

I quirked my brows at her. "You could've left a message."

"I needed to talk to you."

"But how did you manage to get back here without a lanyard?"

"I blew one of the security guards."

Fuck. Me. "You did what?"

She rolled her eyes. "Please tell me you don't actually think I'd do that?"

I chuckled. "It was more like the statement alone shocked the hell out of me." Crossing my arms over my chest, I countered, "How did you actually get in here?"

"Dad used his persuasive powers."

The corners of my lips quirked up. “I’m not sure I want to know.”

“Let’s just say the dude was a diehard Runaway Train fan, and Dad’s probably promised him VIP tickets to a show by now to keep him off my trail.”

“Not bad.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m sure with his ego you’ll have to hear all about it.”

I chuckled. “Probably so.”

We stood there for a few moments just staring at each other. Gaby broke the silence. “Why didn’t you show up for your event?”

“Because I didn’t want to compete. Not now and not again.”

Gaby shook her head furiously from side to side. “I can’t let you do this.”

“It’s not your decision.”

“I’m aware of that. At the same time, I feel like I’ve driven you to it by making you put me first.”

Of course, she would feel like it was all her fault. That was who she was. She always thought of others. “I’ve been fucked up about swimming for a while now.”

“But only after you met me, right?” When I didn’t respond, she countered tearfully, “See, it’s all my fault.”

“No, it isn’t.” I stepped forward to cup her face in my hands. “The only thing you’re at fault for is making me fall in love with you.”

She shook her head. “We can make this work. You just have to be open and honest with me about what’s going on.”

“Gaby, this is me being open and honest: I’ve lost my passion for competing.” At her shocked intake of breath, I continued on, “I’m also truly sorry for being an asshole these past two weeks and freezing you out. I was wrestling with what should take my energy. What I wanted to put my heart and soul into. And I’m so fucking sorry.”

“It’s okay. I understand why you did what you did.”

“While I appreciate you accepting my apology, I still shouldn’t have put you through that.”

Gaby took one of my hands in hers. “Look, we can talk about all of this later. You need to get out there for your next event.”

“Didn’t you hear what I just said? I’m done, Gaby.”

She pinched her eyes shut. “Don’t do this. Don’t make me be the reason why you give it up.”

“I love you, and I want to be with you. I can’t think of a better reason.”

“I’m afraid that our love won’t be enough.” She swiped her eyes. “I’m afraid *I* won’t be enough.”

“How could you ever say that?”

“Just listen to me for a minute, okay? Years and years from now, I feel like you’re going to snap out of it, and resent that I cost you your dream.”

“It *was* my dream. And I’m not totally giving up on it. I’ve had an amazing career. I came further than the vast majority of competitive swimmers. Hell, I even have a gold medal to show for it.”

“But you always say it’s just a team medal. Maybe if you really work hard, you could get an individual one this next time around.”

Gaby’s words were the same ones I’d argued to myself over the last few weeks. But then I’d been hit by the same realization Kevin had argued.

I *was* getting older.

“I’m not getting any younger, Gaby. By the time the next games roll around, I’ll be close to twenty-eight. The kids coming up the ranks are faster and more driven. They have their eye on the prize like I did years ago.”

With tears streaming down her cheeks, Gaby threw up her hands in frustration. As she paced around me, she argued, “Don’t you get it? I would rather you end it with me right now than worry you’ll have regrets.”

Agony ripped through my chest at the thought of losing her. “There isn’t any scenario I could ever imagine where I would resent you.”

“But there’s better women than me. Ones who could make you happier and support your swimming.”

“You are everything to me, Gaby. Your smile, your laugh, your sassy mouth, your incredible body. Your absolute loyalty. Your convictions. But it’s more than that, too. I honestly had no clue how lonely my life was. There was swimming. My family. My friends. But I hadn’t found *my person*. That’s you, beautiful girl. There is nothing better than you. I don’t want to do life without you by my side. Daily.”

She hiccupped a cry. “It’s your dream,” she protested meekly.

I smiled down at her. “It’s time for a new dream.”

“But I’m not a dream—I’m your reality.”

“I’m not just talking about you. There’s more to me than just swimming, you know.”

“Of course, I do. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. When we first met, I never would have imagined you could be the man that you are.”

“You are a dream come true, believe me.”

“I do. Because you’re mine.”

“Noah,” she sighed. I pulled her into my arms—*where she belonged*—and breathed deeply.

Home.

She was home.

“Love you, Gaby.”

“Love you too, Noah. So much.”

I leaned back after kissing her deeply. “You actually inspired what I want to do next. My next dream.”

Her brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been doing some research about water therapy for kids with physical and developmental disabilities. I was thinking we could merge our talents.”

“You would want to work with disabled kids?”

I smiled. “Yeah, this amazing woman I know inspired me.”

“Oh Noah,” Gaby murmured before she threw herself into my arms. “Just when I think I couldn’t love you more, you go and do something else amazing.”

“While I was waiting on the school to take off, I figured I could do some coaching.”

Gaby pulled back to smile at me through her tears. “I think you would be amazing as a swim coach.”

“Really?”

“You’re great with kids.”

“I have my moments.”

She grinned. “There’s that cocky guy I fell in love with.”

“That cocky guy’s cock has really missed you.”

Gaby snorted. “Why am I not surprised you’ve managed to turn this moment into something sexual?”

I quirked my brows at her. “I could lock the door, and you could give me a celebratory quickie.”

“But you didn’t win anything today,” she protested.

“Are you kidding? I won the best prize there is.” I pulled her into my arms. “You.”

“You just had to go and say that, didn’t you?” she questioned breathlessly.

“It’s the truth.”

When Gaby rolled her hips against the growing bulge in my pants, I groaned. “Lose the pants, Fitzgerald,” she commanded.

“My pleasure.”

While I tore off my warm-up pants and jammers, Gaby jerked down her leggings and thong. Once she was naked from the waist down, I gripped her by the hips and hoisted her up onto the massage table. As she widened her thighs, I couldn’t help the moan at the sight of her wet center. “Already ready for me, baby.”

“Always.”

I wrapped my arms around her hips and jerked her forward onto my dick. We both gasped. “God, I’ve missed you,” I murmured as I began pumping my hips

“I’ve missed you, too,” she panted, her hands gripping my shoulders.

When I brought my lips to hers, our tongues began tangling against each other. In that moment, I knew I’d made the right decision. There was nothing that could compare to being this close to Gaby. To feel her slick walls clamping around my dick. The sweet smell of her perfume filling my nose. The smooth velvet of her lips on mine.

As long as she was with me, I would die a happy man. Especially if I went when I was between her legs.

“Mm, I’m close,” Gaby moaned.

“Not yet. Just a little longer,” I gritted out.

Just as I buried my head in her shoulder, a voice appeared outside the door.

“Gaby?”

“Noah?”

My hips froze in mid-thrust. “This can’t be happening.” I jerked my head off Gaby’s shoulder. “Not again.”

“How did they get back here?” Gaby panted.

As our eyes met, I said, “Your dad,” as she replied, “My dad.”

When the door handle jiggled, both Gaby and I screamed, “Don’t open that door.”

Thankfully, it stopped. “Are you guys okay?” Dad asked.

“Fine,” we both answered as we scurried around trying to get our pants back on. I didn’t even bother with my jammers. I just jumped into my pants. Gaby did take time to put her thong back on.

As we were putting our shoes on, AJ asked, “Why aren’t you guys coming out?”

“Just a second,” I replied.

There was a pause before AJ replied, “Fucking hell.”

Once Gaby and I were clothed, I threw open the door. This time Dad appeared just as disgusted as AJ. But I had a feeling it was more about me not showing up to my events than the fact I was screwing in the massage therapy room.

“What the fuck is going on, Noah?”

“What does it look like, Aidan?” Mom’s voice asked from behind him.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath. It was one thing for Dad to catch me in a post-sex haze, but the last thing I wanted was for Mom to see.

Peering around Dad, I saw that Mom and Mia were standing in the archway of the locker room.

Dad huffed. “I’m aware of what was going on in the massage room. I was speaking about what was going on with him flushing his swimming career down the toilet.”

I stepped forward to stand in front of Dad. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I’ve decided to stop swim competitively.”

Dad stared at me with an anguished expression. “Why, son?”

Turning back, I smiled at Gaby. “I fell in love, and I want to make a life with Gaby.”

“Can’t you do both?” Dad argued.

“No, I can’t. I don’t want to spend a moment without her. I want her to be the first thing I see in the morning and the last at night. I want to give her everything I have.” I gave Dad a pointed look. “Because she’s worth the effort.”

His eyes widened in acknowledgement of what I’d said. With a quick nod, he then said, “Then I’m happy for your decision, son.”

My mouth dropped open in shock. “You are?”

“Of course, I am. All I’ve ever wanted for you is to be happy.” He glanced over my shoulder to smile at Gaby. “And I know she makes you very happy.”

“She does.”

“Then I say congratulations are in order.” He cocked his brows at AJ. “Don’t you?”

“I suppose so.” When Gaby elbowed him in the ribs, he sighed, but his expression softened. “I couldn’t be happier for the two of you.”

“Really?” I prompted.

Although AJ looked like he wanted to tell me fuck no, he smiled instead. “Yeah, I really am.”

I extended my hand. “I’m glad to hear it. When can I call you Dad?”

AJ’s eyes narrowed. “When you put a ring on her finger.”

I smiled at Gaby. “Don’t worry. I plan on doing that really soon.”

EPILOGUE: NOAH

T *hree Years Later*

“Noah Fitzgerald, if you *ever* think of touching me again, I will hack your dick off with a rusty knife!”

Fuck. Me. I’d never seen or heard Gaby so angry in all my life. I didn’t even know how to process what she’d just said let alone all the venom behind it. In the end, all I could do was croon, “Babe, I’m so, so sorry.”

“That’s all you can say after what you’ve done?” she shrieked.

“If I’d had any idea how much I’d hurt you, I would never, ever have done it.” At the smoldering rage burning in Gaby’s dark eyes, I fumbled for the call button with shaky hands. “Let me check with the nurse again to see where the anesthesiologist is.”

Instead of helping, my response pissed Gaby off even more. “Mom!”

“Yes, sweetheart,” Mia replied from the other side of the hospital bed.

“I want you to get Fabian on the phone.”

“Honey—”

Gaby’s furious gaze swung from her mother to mine. “I want him to cut Noah’s dick off for putting me through this much pain.”

As Mia shot me an apologetic look, I muttered, “Jesus Christ.”

A reassuring pat came at my back. When I threw a glance over my shoulder, Mom smiled up at me. “Don’t worry, sweetie. It’s the pain making her talk like that.”

“Did you act like that with me?” I motioned to Gaby’s red-faced, writhing body.

She laughed. “They described me as Reagan from *The Exorcist* before I got my epidural.”

“Oh fuck.”

“Just like me, she won’t remember saying any of this.”

“So, she *will* forgive me for this.”

“I forgave your dad, didn’t I?”

I nodded. “And she’ll let me touch her again?”

With a grin, Mom replied, “Yes, honey, she will.”

In spite of Mom’s reassurance, I didn’t feel much better. Since we’d arrived at the hospital eight hours ago, I’d been on an emotional rollercoaster of epic proportions. Regardless of how much preparation I’d done for the birth, I felt like a complete and total idiot. At the same time, I don’t think any of the Lamaze classes or *What to Expect* books had mentioned what to do when your wife of three years was threatening to cut off your manhood. My heart and soul were already in pieces from having to watch Gaby in such an excruciating

state. Throw in her volatile mood and threats and I was fucking on edge.

It had all started positively enough. When we'd first arrived after her water broke and we'd counted contractions, Gaby was all smiles, visiting with her parents and mine as well as our siblings. Then as the day wore on, her agony had sent everyone running for the hills except for Mom, Mia, and me. If things got any worse, I was seriously tempted to tuck my tail between my legs and get the hell out of Dodge.

Thankfully for all of us, but especially Gaby, the anesthesiologist appeared. My elation was short-lived when I saw him begin to unwrap a long needle. "You're going to put that in her spine?"

He nodded. "Then she's totally numb for the delivery."

"Do it now! Numb me the fuck out!" Gaby screeched, her dark eyes flashing with rage.

While I recoiled in horror at her words, the anesthesiologist seemed unfazed. I guessed he'd seen and heard it all. He just went about his business, which I decided not to focus on. I didn't have the strength left to watch him slip that long-ass needle into Gaby's spine. Instead, I stared down at the floor while fingering the rosary in my pocket that had belonged to my Pops. I prayed long and hard for the epidural to take and for Gaby to be out of pain.

Once the anesthesiologist left, the air around Gaby remained tense. Staying still with her eyes pinched shut, Gaby appeared to be focusing on riding out what was left of the pain. I eased back up to the bed to be ready when she needed me.

After a nail-biting period of time passed, Gaby's eyes popped open. Gazing up at me, she gave me a weak smile. "Hey."

"Hey, beautiful," I replied, as I pushed the dark strands of hair out of her face.

"I don't feel any more pain."

"Thank God."

She laughed hoarsely. "Is that because you genuinely want me out of pain, or because I was pretty scary when I was in pain?"

My breath hitched. "It killed me each and every second you were in such agony."

"Oh, Noah," she murmured.

"But truthfully, you also scared the hell out of me."

She grinned. "How bad was I?"

"You wanted to cut my dick off with a rusty knife."

A horrified expression came over her face. "I actually said that?"

I nodded. "You also asked your mom to call Fabian to cut my dick off."

"Oh Noah, I'm so very sorry."

With a laugh, I leaned over and kissed her. "It's all right."

"No. It's not. You've been so good to me the entire pregnancy."

"I don't know about that."

She nodded furiously. "You have. You went to the store or the drive-thru each and every time I had a pregnancy craving

regardless of what time it was. You always massaged my gross swollen feet without me even asking.”

I winked at her. “I’ll make sure to send in my nomination for sainthood after we leave here.”

“I’m serious.” When her chin quivered, I knew I was in trouble. “You’re the best husband in the whole world, and I fall more and more in love with you each and every day.”

My heart felt like it might explode right out of my chest. “Damn, babe, you really had to go all out, didn’t you?”

“I’m serious, Noah.”

“I know. I feel exactly the same way.” I pushed some of the dark hair out of her face. With tears stinging my eyes, I replied, “Eres la luz de mi vida.”

Oh yeah, I’d pulled out the big guns. Since we’d become engaged, I’d been working on learning Spanish. Although Gaby also spoke Italian, there was no way in hell I would be able to master two, so I went for the one that would impress AJ. Even after making up with him twice, I still wanted to stay on his good side.

Of course, the fact I spoke in Spanish sent Gaby right over the edge, and she started sobbing. “Was my pronunciation that bad?” I teasingly asked.

“No. It was beautiful.”

“You’re beautiful,” I murmured. Dipping my head, I gave her a lingering kiss. The last three years with Gaby had been the best of my life. Once I proposed, we didn’t want a long engagement. We’d already spent too much time apart.

We waited just long enough to throw together a beach-front wedding at her parents’ house in Mexico. After spending

a week in Hawaii, we came back to our permanent home in Atlanta, which was a condo that had belonged to AJ. I'd only accepted on the condition that he allow me to pay him for it.

The first year of marriage was busy with me starting my branch of Gaby's school. At our six-month anniversary, we broke ground on the aquatic center where I would be overseeing water therapy as well as dipping my feet into coaching competitive swimming.

By our second anniversary, Gaby's school was thriving, and I was happily settled in at the gym. It was around that time that I could tell Gaby was getting a little broody. Maybe it was working around so many children or maybe it was seeing Bella become a mother. Whatever fire was ignited in her soon made its way to me, and we officially had the "starting a family" talk, which led to Gaby tossing out her birth control.

In spite of being ready, it came as quite a shock when just six weeks after starting to try, I knocked her up. Gaby had merely grinned and cited the obvious fertility of our parents as the reason why. All I knew was when we were given the green light to have sex again, I would be suiting my dick up. With our fertility, I didn't want to risk Irish twins.

We were interrupted by a nurse coming in to once again do a below-the-waist check on Gaby.

With a smile, she stated, "You're at ten. It's time to push."

Although I'd watched deliveries in movies and television, it really was true how not one delivery was the same. On one side of the bed, I held Gaby's leg while across from me, Mia had the other. Mom stood behind me, lending moral support to both me and Gaby.

While we counted and Gaby pushed, medical terms flew around between the doctor and the nurse. One I recognized was crowning, and at the sight of the baby's head, I had to fight to keep my knees from buckling.

"Look at all that gorgeous hair," the doctor pronounced.

"Now I know why you had all that heartburn," I teased.

At Mia's snuffle, my gaze bounced from Gaby's to hers. She smiled at me before looking at Gaby. "Yours was just like that."

"Uh, oh, babe, sounds like the Hispanic/Italian DNA might be strong with this one," Gaby mused.

With a shake of my head, I replied, "I don't mind."

Gaby grinned. "I'm a little disappointed that he or she's not a ginger."

I barked out a laugh. "You wanted us to have a ginger?"

"More like your mom's hair. It's such a gorgeous color."

When I threw a glance over my shoulder, Mom beamed back at me. "Thank you, Gaby."

Dr. Brazelton ran his fingers through the silky strands of hair. "Pardon me for not remembering, but does this wonderful mane of hair belong to a boy or girl?"

Gaby smiled at me before answering. "We don't know."

"Yep, it's going to be a big surprise," I replied.

Before we'd even ever gotten pregnant, we'd talked about how when we did, we wanted the gender to be a surprise. Not only had we not found out what we were having, but we also hadn't discussed names with any of our family. We'd had a

generic shower like people did way back in the day and received a lot of neutral clothes and toys.

“Good for you guys.”

“Yeah, there’s so few real surprises in life,” I replied.

“It won’t be a surprise too much longer,” Dr. Brazelton mused before instructing Gaby to push again.

I don’t know how much time passed—sometimes it felt like minutes, other times hours. I kept holding Gaby’s leg and whispering words of encouragement in her ear. In between times, I wiped her brow and fed her ice chips.

And then shit got exceptionally real when Dr. Brazelton said, “One more push and your baby will be here.”

Gripping my hand tightly, Gaby pinched her eyes shut and then gave everything she had into the push. And then like the true miracle birth was, our baby appeared bloody and wailing in the doctor’s hands.

“It’s a boy!” she pronounced.

Tears stung my eyes. Holy shit, I had a son. During Gaby’s pregnancy, it hadn’t mattered to me what we had. All I wanted was a healthy kid. From his size and his hearty cries, I was pretty sure my prayers had come true.

“Oh, my God,” Gaby cried as she reached for our son. When they placed him on her chest, the waterworks began for us both. “My sweet boy, Mommy and Daddy have been waiting for you,” Gaby cooed.

I ducked over to kiss the baby before turning my attention to Gaby. I couldn’t imagine being any more in love with her than I was at this moment. Unable to voice my emotions, I kissed her forehead, her cheek, and then her lips.

When she smiled up at me through her tears, she said, “He’s amazing.”

I nodded. “You’re pretty fucking amazing, babe.”

Her hand came up to rub my cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you more.”

“Dad, would you like to cut to the cord?” one of the nurses asked.

“Sure,” I replied before taking the scissors from her.

Once the baby was cut from Gaby, they took him to get weighed and cleaned off. While Mia leaned in to hug and kiss Gaby, Mom’s arms came around me. “My beautiful son has a son of his own,” she murmured into my ear.

I tightened my arms around her, squeezing her tight. “I love you so much, Mom.”

She pulled her face away to smile up at me. “Now that your son is here, you’ll know just how much I’ve loved you all these years.”

I merely bobbed my head in agreement. Unable to speak, I feared breaking down into guttural sobs. After one last kiss on my cheek, Mom then left me to go to Gaby.

It was at that moment the nurse returned with our son, swaddled in a blanket with a cap pulled tight on his head. “Ready for him, Dad?”

Since I had no words, I merely held out my hands. The moment he was transferred into my waiting embrace was life-altering. I’d thought the day I’d received my gold medal was inspiring, but it had nothing on this. The only thing that remotely compared was the day I’d married Gaby. And she’d

been so worried she wouldn't be enough. As I said then in that locker room, she was my world. And she'd just grown it.

Fuck. How did I get so lucky?

As I stared down at his tiny features, I took in his button nose and full lips. I rubbed his cheek with my thumb. When his face started to scrunch up, I rocked him gently back and forth. "It's okay, little man. Your daddy's got you."

As I cradled my son to my chest, I knew there were two people missing from the moment. "Let me get our dads."

Gaby nodded. "Once I'm stitched up, they're welcome to come back in."

After I stepped outside, Dad and AJ hovered in the hallway. At the sight of me, they surged forward. Their gaze dropped from mine to the bundle in my arms. In almost perfect sync, both of their eyes welled up with tears, which in turn caused the waterworks to start back up for me.

"You have a grandson," I choked out.

While Dad let out an appreciative whoop, AJ closed his eyes before murmuring a few words in Spanish. When he opened his eyes, he wiped the tears away as he gave me a beaming smile.

"A boy, huh?"

While I nodded, Dad grinned at AJ. "You owe me fifty bucks."

AJ elbowed Dad. "Not in front of him."

"Did you two seriously have a bet going about what gender the baby was?"

"Maybe," Dad replied, with a sheepish grin.

“Incredible,” I muttered.

AJ’s gaze bounced from the baby to mine. “Did you name him Alejandro?”

With a laugh, I replied, “Not quite.”

Puffing his chest out, Dad said, “Let me guess. It’s Aidan.”

“That would also be a no.”

“Then what’s Little Man’s name?” AJ demanded.

Gaby and I knew we wanted to give our child a family name. Like her parents had anglicized AJ’s Alejandro into Alexander for Alex, we decided to go the same route. We also knew we didn’t want to give that as a first name since there was already a very important Alex in our lives. Instead, I had looked to the male who had been the most important in my life besides my dad.

With the grief of his absence overpowering me, moisture grew in my eyes again. Smiling through my tears, I replied, “It’s Patrick Alexander.”

While AJ beamed at his namesake, Dad’s expression swirled with both happiness and grief. “Good choice, son,” he choked.

“Thanks, Dad.”

Once he had recovered, a cocky smirk curved on his lips. “Since my middle name is Patrick, one could argue you did name him after me.”

AJ smacked his arm. “That would be for both of us. I am Alejandro Joaquin, you know.”

I shook my head. “Dear God, help us all if Patrick inherits any of the cockiness that oozes from the two of you.”

Dad and AJ laughed. “You call it cockiness—I call it being self-assured,” Dad replied.

“Keep telling yourself that.”

Clapping me on the back, AJ joked, “Since Patrick is a fine representation of your Irish roots, the next one can have a Spanish name, right?”

I laughed. “Considering what she went through to have this one, you’ll have to ask Gaby about when and *if* there’s another one.”

AJ’s happy expression was replaced with anxiety as he glanced past me into the hospital room. “How’s my baby?”

“She’s fine. Great in fact. They’re just getting her stitched up.”

Both AJ and Dad winced. “Childbirth is why women are the stronger sex,” Dad mused.

“You can say that again,” AJ replied.

Holding Patrick out, I asked, “Who’s holding him first?”

Dad and AJ eyeballed each other for a minute. “I’m older,” Dad remarked.

“Is that supposed to matter?” I questioned.

With a shrug, Dad replied, “I just thought we could go by birth order.”

AJ took a step towards Dad. “It’s my daughter who gave birth to him.”

“Yeah, well, my son helped make him.”

I rolled my eyes at them. “Would you two please get a grip?”

Their defiant expressions turned sheepish. “You go first, Aidan,” AJ offered.

“No, no. You should go first.”

Before I could argue that we were getting nowhere, Mom appeared in the doorway. “The doctor is finished, and Gaby is asking for her son.”

“Guess you guys will just have to wait,” I mused.

With curses under their breaths, they obediently followed me back into the room. Once I had deposited Patrick into Gaby’s eager arms, AJ appeared on the other side of the bed. Leaning in, he gave Gaby a lingering kiss on the top of the head while rubbing her cheek. “Estoy tan orgullosa de ti,” he murmured as tears glistened in his dark eyes.

“Gracias, Papi,” she replied with a smile.

After swiping his eyes, AJ said, “Not only am I proud of you for giving birth to such a beautiful son, I’m proud of you for naming him after your wonderful father.”

Gaby and I laughed. “I don’t want to burst your bubble, but it’s not just for you. It’s for Papa Joaquin as well. I mean, he was the original Alejandro,” she argued.

AJ waved a hand. “He doesn’t need to know that.”

With a roll of her eyes, Gaby said, “You’re such an egomaniac.”

“But you love me anyway, don’t you, mija?” AJ prompted with a wink.

“Very much.”

AJ turned his attention to Patrick. “What a lucky little man you are to have such a precious and beautiful mother.”

Patrick made a slight coo of approval, which of course melted everyone in the room. After tearing her gaze from Patrick, Gaby quirked her brows at me. “Besides the dark hair, I don’t think I see very much of me in him.”

I winced. “Considering what you went through with the labor, I wasn’t going to mention it. I didn’t want you making a last-minute call to Fabian.”

AJ’s brows furrowed. “Fabian?”

While Gaby’s face flushed, I chuckled. “Yeah, she threatened to have him cut my dick off for putting her through so much pain.”

As AJ laughed, Dad took Mom’s hand in his. “Sounds like your mother when you were born.”

“Yeah she told me.”

With a smile, Gaby said, “I really don’t mind that he looks so much like you. I know he’ll be a looker someday by looking like his dad.”

“And in turn his grandfather,” Dad replied, which earned him an elbow from Mom.

I rolled my eyes. “Once again, let’s hope for his sake he doesn’t inherit his grandfathers’ cockiness.”

“Um, I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t be just from his grandfathers,” Gaby countered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Seriously, Noah? You were a douchelord of cockiness when we first met.”

“Yeah, well, we wouldn’t be here today without it,” I argued.

“Please. We’re together because you wouldn’t stop pursuing my stubborn ass.”

As I stared into her dark eyes shining with love, I thought about that day when she’d first walked away from me and the advice Dad had given me. *Any woman worth having is hard work. Because they deserve the effort, son.*

“You deserved the effort,” I replied. When I glanced over at Dad, he nodded his head before drawing Mom closer to him. “You’ll always deserve the effort.”

And then I kissed the stubborn, feisty woman who had somehow become my wife and was now the mother of my son. One hell of a pursuit had turned into the greatest blessing of my life.

The Passion: Caroline's Story

All my life, I've been the good girl. With two strong-willed and mischievous brothers, I was my parents' angel who never dared to step one toe out of line. My entire focus in life was on growing my vocal abilities, so that one day I might sing with the Metropolitan Opera. Because of the devotion to my passion, I hadn't had much time for men or relationships....or sex.

At twenty-two, I received the chance for a prestigious summer internship at Oxford University. Since I now found myself thousands of miles away from home and my family, it only made sense to finally lose my virginity. What better way to do it than with a stranger who I'd never see again. Especially one with a sexy accent.

My choice came in the form of the hot-as-sin bartender of a pub I stumbled in. Since he had at least ten years on me, I knew he had the experience to make it worth my while. After he gave me the passionate and pleasurable first time that every girl dreams of, I slipped out at dawn with no regrets.

That was until I walked into the office of my vocal mentor for the summer and met the gaze of a familiar pair of eyes.

Coming Spring 2024

Tropes: Age Gap, Virgin Heroine, Professor/Student

The Proposition: Aidan & Emma's Story

Want to read about how Noah was conceived? Then check out Aidan and Emma's love story in *The Proposition*.

With her thirtieth birthday looming, Emma Harrison finds her biological clock clanging and the elusive knight in shining armor yet to appear. She's running out of options, especially after her gay best friend backs out from being her sperm donor. Of course, there's always a sperm bank, but Emma fears a donor mix-up might impregnate her with the spawn of Satan.

Resident company womanizer, Aidan Fitzgerald, is used to always getting what he wants, especially in the bedroom. When Emma spurns his advances at the company Christmas party, he's determined to have her no matter what it takes. After Aidan learns of Emma's predicament, he is quick to offer a proposition that will benefit them both. He will father Emma's child, but she must conceive it with him naturally. Not one for hook-ups or casual sex, Emma is reluctant to take him up on his offer, but his charm, coupled with her intense desire for motherhood, wins out. Soon their baby-making sessions become more than just physical.

Aidan can't seem to walk away from her while Emma begins to wonder if Aidan could be the one. But can Aidan leave his past behind to become the man Emma needs him to be?

Beat of the Heart: AJ and Mia's Story

Want to see how AJ and Mia's met? Then check out their love story in Beat of the Heart.

After years of bad relationships and a cheating ex-fiancé, twenty-eight-year-old Mia Martinelli prefers healing her patients' hearts on the Cardiac Care floor rather than risking having her heart broken again. But that all comes to a screeching halt when caring for the head roadie for Runaway Train puts her into the orbit of drummer and Latin Lover, AJ Resendiz. After a scorching weekend of steamy passion, Mia's intention of getting out with her heart unscathed is challenged by the stud with the wicked sense of humor, especially when he wants to continue seeing her. But when the harsh reality of AJ's hoard of female admirers sends her insecurities into overdrive, Mia bails, leaving him handcuffed to his bathroom shower.

AJ never imagined that after two weeks of the best sex and female companionship he'd ever experienced, he would need rescued by his band mates from his shower prison. Although he tries to forget the sensual brunette whose curves made his mouth water, AJ can't get her out of his mind...or his heart.

Months later when he finally seeks Mia for answers as to why she left, nothing could prepare him for their life-altering reunion.

Can AJ prove to Mia that regardless of the women after his body, his heart belongs only to her?